

Wrath of Achilles



Essays on Command in Battle

Editor

Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Jr.



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Foreword

“Sing Goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, Peleus’ son.” So begins the Iliad, the greatest war epic in western culture. Since the dawn of recorded history, the history of man has been nearly synonymous with the history of war, a history that begins with Homer and continues today. Then as now, war remains the ultimate arbiter of human affairs, an awful and ever-present reminder of humanity’s failure to escape its wrathful roots. Seemingly inescapable, war is supremely important because it is the great destroyer of states and populations and whole cultures. And so the question itself is crucial to the survival of the state. What matters most in battle?

There are many answers. Population, industrial capacity, economic power and the civil and military institutions of the state all play their roles. But in the end, leadership may loom largest. War is perhaps the most complicated and demanding of all human endeavors. Any junior leader who has attempted to move a small unit over rough terrain at night, avoiding enemy outposts, deploy into a combat formation and assault a position knows intuitively that fog and friction are masters of the battlefield. Multiply those problems a thousandfold and the challenges of battle command at higher levels begin to take shape. Throw in the emotional and psychic elements inherent in command during war and its daunting demands now appear in high relief.

Battle command, particularly of higher formations, is extraordinarily complex, like brain surgery under fire. In all of history, only a relative few have mastered it. Others have been skilled practitioners, though they may have lacked the spark of genius — what Napoleon called “coup d’oeil” — that marks the great captains. Only the chosen few will succeed. But they will make history.

This anthology was inspired by its authors and the Soldiers and Marines they lead. They have succeeded brilliantly in translating the reality of combat to a rising generation of combat leaders. Many were moved to delve deeply into military history as the wellspring of their profession, even as they fought America’s wars and half-wars and rose to command themselves. Their experiences and reflections appear in this volume, a collection of battle studies that focus on leadership success, and failure, in the great campaigns of the last 150 years. From brigade- to army-group level, these lessons in battle command speak across the decades to the key

questions of success in war. The authors are soldier-scholars of the first rank, some of whom are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan today and will rise to lead our military in tomorrow's battles and campaigns.

Here we see the Prussians, ably led by General von Alvensleben, attack a force five times their size to win the decisive battle of Mars-la-Tours, the "Death Ride" of the Prussian cavalry in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. In the opening days of the Great War, we see German Corps Commander Herman von Francois haughtily ignore the supreme command to make Tannenberg, the "modern Cannae," a reality against all odds. In command of the largest mounted force in British history, Australian Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel takes Beersheba, the "key to Jerusalem," in 1917 with a cavalry charge of bayonet wielding Aussies who must take the "Wells of Abraham" or see their horses die of thirst. The 1939 Winter War shows Finnish Colonel Hjalmer Siilasvuo, calmly annihilating two huge Russian divisions, juggling his slender forces with "Motti" tactics north of the Arctic Circle. In 1940, British Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor, undaunted by the huge Italian forces facing him, conducts a graduate seminar on deception and maneuver and scores one of the most decisive and glittering victories in the long history of the Commonwealth.

In other chapters, U.S. General Manton Eddy takes the measure of Rommel's matchless troopers at Bizerte in 1943 as his 9th Division, the "Old Reliables," comes of age. An old adage holds that more can be learned from defeat than from victory, as we see in Hitler's disastrous strategic fumbling during *Barbarossa*, the German invasion of Russia in 1941, which threw away a succession of brilliant tactical and operational victories and changed the course of world history for the next 50 years. Surrounded at Chip'yong-Ni in 1951, Colonel Paul L. Freeman's 23rd Regimental Combat Team fights an epic rear guard battle, saved at the last moment by the timely intervention of crusty, fifty-year-old Colonel Marcel Gustave Crombez, yellow scarf at his throat and the 5th Cavalry Regiment at his back. Israeli General "Bren" Adan battles both the Egyptians and Ariel Sharon to cross the Suez and end the war in the 1973 "War of Atonement." Brigadier Julian Thompson, 8,000 miles from home, leads his Royal Marines and Paras on an epic "yomp" of 70 miles in winter to attack and defeat the Argentines in the 1982 Falklands War, where 2 Para commander "H" Jones wins a posthumous Victoria Cross at Goose Green.

These battle studies reinforce a principle less often heard today in an age of high technology and "standoff precision strike." Former Army

Chief of Staff General Erik Shinseki, a badly wounded combat veteran, would often begin sessions with officers by asking “can you fight?” Today, in Afghanistan and Iraq, America is re-learning a central lesson: in the end, wars are fought and won on the ground, in the mud, not by superior machines but by tough Soldiers and Marines enabled by superior battle command. That is not likely to change. America’s military must always have a ready answer to the question “can you fight?” If this volume spurs any young commander to pick up his Homer and read about war, the labors of its authors will be amply rewarded.

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Chapter 1

When Mars Smiled: The Field of Mars-la-Tour

by

Lieutenant Colonel Antulio J. Echevarria II, USA (Retired)

“Courage,” Winston Churchill once said, “is the first of virtues, because it enables all the rest.” He was, of course, right. But as the following essay illustrates, blind courage, untempered by judgment or discretion, is often an absolute liability on the battlefield. At Mars-la-Tour the Prussians crashed unawares into a huge French force that should have swept the field. Instead the Prussians dealt a fatal blow to the Second Empire and birthed modern Germany. Students of the art of battle command will learn much from the cool and resolute leadership of von Alvensleben, whose sense of timing and unruffled confidence stood in sharp contrast to the emotional and erratic French commanders.

Of all the forms of warfare, the encounter battle is perhaps the most savage and confused. When large masses of men collide unawares, the gods of war smile on the bold and decisive, the odds notwithstanding. So it was on August 16, 1870, in a decisive battle between the French and Prussians known variously as Vionville, Rezonville, or Mars-la-Tour.¹

On that bloody day, the German III Corps under General von Alvensleben careened into a force over five times its size — Marshal Bazaine’s Army of the Rhine. Here a famous victory was won, not by the strongest side, but by the commander who combined bold, resolute action with cool judgment. Many weeks of fighting lay ahead, but on the field of Mars-la-Tour the Prussians laid a firm foundation for triumph and empire.

The Opposing Commanders

Lieutenant General Constantin von Alvensleben II, one of Moltke’s most talented corps commanders, possessed an admirable balance of boldness and discriminating judgment. In 1827, at the age of 18, he entered the Prussian army as an officer via one of Prussia’s many military academies. Twenty-three years later, he was seconded to the General

Staff, initially as a major and again as a lieutenant colonel. From 1861-64, he commanded an infantry regiment, rising to the rank of major general and serving on the General Staff during the 1864 war with Denmark. He commanded a division in the Prussian campaign against Austria in 1866. In 1870, at the age of 61, he was among the youngest officers to command a corps, and the only one to do so who had not yet received the rank of full general.²

Marshal François Achille Bazaine, his opposite number, was reputed to be France's bravest soldier. Yet he lacked the vision and feel of the battlefield — in French, "*coup d'oeil*" — necessary to command an army, and he knew it. He entered the army in 1831 as a mere fusilier in the 37th Regiment of the Line, and rose through the ranks to become Commander-in-Chief in 1870. He was considered proof of Napoleon's famous claim that every French soldier carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack. He was the veteran of four wars, the Carlist War (1835), Crimean War (1854-6), Italian War (1859), and the ill-fated Mexican Expedition (1862). Bazaine was at his best in the thick of a *mêlée* or at the point of a charge, inspiring or shaming men by his sheer presence. But he had never commanded a unit larger than a corps, nor developed the ability to divine an enemy's operational or strategic intentions. At Mars-la-Tour he would give ample proof both of his courage, and his incapacity to command an army.³

Setting for War

The Franco-German War began in mid-July 1870, when the French Emperor Napoleon III declared war on Prussia, ostensibly over the impertinent tone in the famous Ems dispatch. The dispatch, written by Otto von Bismarck, Prussia's foreign minister, warned the French not to meddle any further in the issue of Hohenzollern candidature to the Spanish throne. The ailing Napoleon III, a mere shadow of his famous uncle, feared losing face both domestically and abroad if he let the Prussian "insult" go unanswered. His resultant declaration of war provoked the northern and southern German states to enter the conflict on the side of Prussia, just as Bismarck desired.

In the weeks that followed, German mobilization proceeded with remarkable speed and thoroughness. Within a fortnight, the German states had 468,000 troops deployed along the French border. Under the direction of Count Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of Staff of the Great General

Staff, the German armies advanced into France along three parallel axes. The Second Army (III, X, Guard, IV, IX, and XII Corps) under Frederick Charles formed the main effort, advancing to seize the area between Metz and Nancy. The First Army (VII and VIII Corps) under the command of General Carl von Steinmetz, protected the Prussian right flank; its objective was the Moselle region below Metz. The Third Army (V, XI, I and II Bavarian, and a Baden/Württemberg corps) under the Prussian Crown Prince, guarded the left flank; its objective was Strasbourg and the Alsace region. As in the war against Austria in 1866, Moltke pushed his armies forward in a rough semi-circle, ready to exploit any errors on the part of his opponent.

By contrast, French mobilization was a ramshackle affair. When Moltke's armies advanced into France, the French had only 200,000 men to oppose them.⁴ Although outnumbered 2.5 to 1, French senior commanders wanted to launch an offensive deep into German territory. Unfortunately, the offensive never got underway as no one could agree upon a campaign plan. Even more unfortunately, Napoleon III possessed neither the physical nor psychological strength of his uncle. He soon relinquished his duties as supreme commander, blaming his failing health, and on August 12th appointed Bazaine Commander-in-Chief of all French forces. However, Bazaine received no additional staff support to manage the additional corps that now fell under his command. Worse, he truly had no desire to serve as commander-in-chief, though he would strive manfully to do his duty.

Despite the indisputable tenacity and fighting spirit of the French soldier, during the first few weeks of the war the army had done little more than lose battles and retreat. Marshal Patrice MacMahon's Army of Châlons, after a rough handling by the German Third Army, was in full retreat toward Châlons. Bazaine's Army of the Rhine — II, III, IV, and VI Corps, the Imperial Guard, and Forton's Reserve Cavalry Division had been forced back to the vicinity of Metz.⁵

On August 15th, Bazaine decided to retreat toward Verdun via Rezonville, Vionville, and Mars-la-Tour. At Verdun, he would regroup and then link up with MacMahon. However, an aggressive Prussian probe drew his III Corps and a division of his IV Corps into an unintended fight around the village of Borny (east of Metz), and he had to delay the withdrawal by 24 hours.⁶

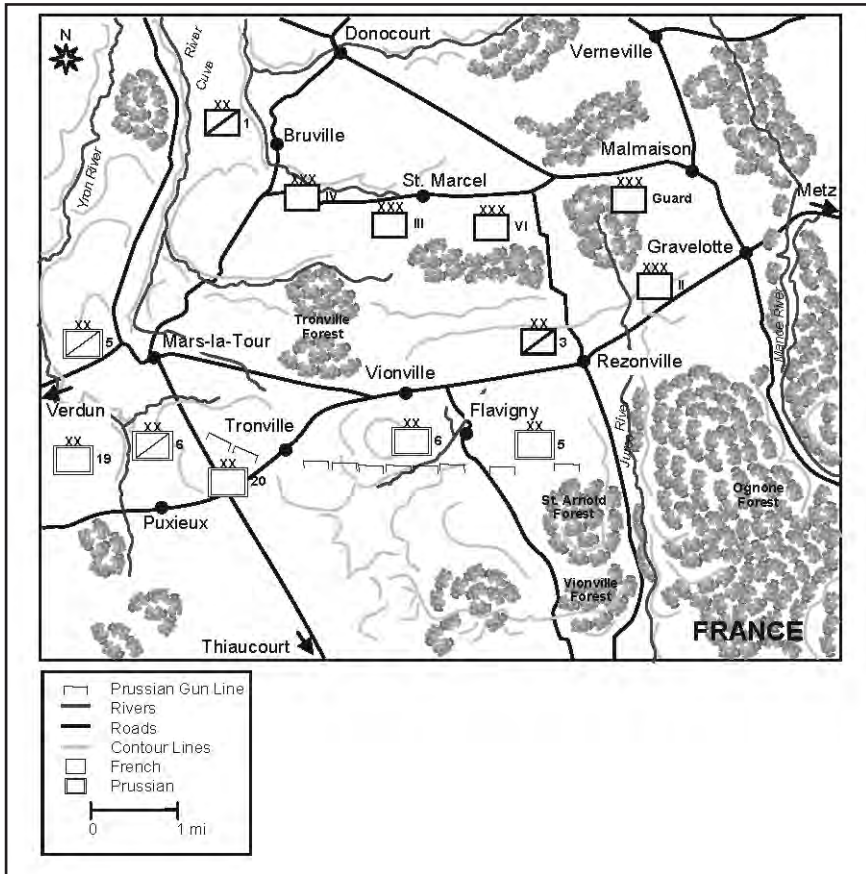
That night Bazaine issued orders that his army should be ready to move by 0430 hours. Presciently, he added that the II and VI Corps were “likely to have 30,000 men facing them; they must expect to be attacked tomorrow.”⁷ Later in the evening, Bazaine created a great deal of confusion by issuing a countermanding order that stated his army should rest and be ready to move on the afternoon of the 16th.⁸

For his part, Moltke saw in the situation an opportunity to intercept and destroy Bazaine’s army, or at least its rearguard, before it could close on Verdun. Accordingly, at 1630 hours on the 15th he instructed Frederick Charles to “reap the fruits of (yesterday’s) victory” by a “vigorous offensive” along the roads from Metz to Verdun.⁹

Eight hours later, Alvensleben received marching orders from Frederick Charles. He was to advance via the village of Gorze to the Gravelotte plateau. His orders also warned him that he might make contact with some retreating enemy by evening. The X Corps, under General Voigts-Rhetz, would push further west from Pont-à-Mousson through Thiaucourt toward Verdun to cover Alvensleben’s left. The 6th Cavalry Division would conduct a reconnaissance in force toward the area of Mars-la-Tour and Vionville.¹⁰ General von Rheinbaben’s 5th Cavalry Division, which spent the night a few miles south of Mars-la-Tour, would attack the French forces in and around Vionville at first light on the 16th.¹¹ Moltke’s plan was predicated on the belief that the French would continue to move with some urgency toward Verdun. As events were to prove, however, he had made the mistake of expecting his enemy to act as expected.

Opening Moves

Between 0400 and 0600 hours, the 6th Cavalry Division began its reconnaissance in force, followed by Alvensleben’s corps — the 5th and 6th Infantry Divisions, two regiments of cavalry, and 84 guns. In the pre-dawn darkness, Alvensleben’s men struggled through the steep ravines and wooded copses that marked the terrain along their axis of advance. When dawn finally broke over the village of Vionville, Rheinbaben began nervously wringing his hands. Reports from his scouts indicated that his squadrons faced not the French rearguard as expected, but the enemy’s main body. Large infantry and cavalry detachments lay bivouacked in neat rows of tents on either side of the road stretching from Vionville to Gravelotte. Rheinbaben opted not to attack as instructed. Instead he placed his 24 guns on the heights above Vionville, and waited for III Corps.



Map 1. Battle of Mars-la-Tour, France.

Although he would later receive much criticism for it, Rheinbaben's actions were probably correct. A dawn attack would merely have alerted French units in the vicinity, giving them two or three hours in which to counterattack or reposition. Even if he had succeeded in taking Vionville, he could not have held it for long without infantry support. At 0900 hours, Colonel Leo von Caprivi, chief of staff of X Corps, arrived at Rheinbaben's command post to ask why the attack against Vionville had not gone in.¹²

At first, Caprivi considered Rheinbaben's estimate of the situation fantastic. But, as the morning mists cleared to reveal the extent of the French dispositions, he grudgingly agreed with the cavalry commander. Caprivi then implored Rheinbaben to fire on Vionville with the artillery.

At 0915 hours, the Prussian horse guns opened fire on General Forton's unsuspecting cavalry division. The cannonade rudely interrupted the cavalymen at their breakfast and caused them to flee in confusion.

At about 0945 hours, Alvensleben's cavalry reported the presence of large enemy formations in the vicinity of Rezonville. Alvensleben took these to be the French rearguard — and the larger this force, he thought, the better. He now made the first of his bold decisions. He decided to attack to pin down as much of the enemy as possible. He instructed the 5th Division, under General von Stuelpnagel, to attack toward Flavigny. He then ordered the 6th Division, under General von Buddenbrock, to attack Mars-la-Tour as soon as possible to cut the route to Verdun. Next he carefully selected a position for his artillery — 15 batteries of Krupp steel breechloaders — on the heights south and southeast of Flavigny where it could support either attack.¹³

Though bold, Alvensleben was anything but rash, taking time to select and occupy key terrain and carefully employing his supporting arms. Unfortunately, Rheinbaben's cannonade had commenced about an hour too soon. The two divisions of General Frossard's II Corps deployed between Vionville and Flavigny, alerted and ready for Stuelpnagel's Brandenburgers as they emerged, company by company, from the thick undergrowth of the Gorze ravine.¹⁴

Frossard's troops greeted the Brandenburgers with a storm of withering fire from their *chassepot* rifles, far superior in range, accuracy, and rate of fire to the Prussian *Dreyse* needle gun.¹⁵ In this exchange one battalion of the 48th Regiment was annihilated, losing all its officers and over 600 men in less than fifteen minutes.¹⁶

The battle ebbed and flowed for nearly an hour; at length, Frossard's men drove the 5th Division back on itself, causing severe panic in the Prussian ranks. Only determined efforts by veteran NCOs and officers, and the moral and physical effect of Alvensleben's guns firing in support, kept the division from melting away. The superior range and accuracy of the excellent German artillery kept the French at arm's length — Alvensleben's decision to place his guns in position south of Flavigny had begun to bear fruit.

By 1100 hours, Alvensleben received news that Stuelpnagel's attack had failed. Indeed, the 5th Division had suffered heavy casualties

and had barely avoided a rout. Alvensleben now realized that he faced more than a French rearguard, an estimate confirmed by Rheinbaben. Instead of striking the flank of a retreating enemy as he had expected, he now found himself outnumbered by five to one, with his units scattered over six miles of rough terrain. The X Corps was still four or five hours away. A determined French attack might well crush him.

At this juncture Alvensleben made his second critical decision. Rather than falling back, a blameless decision under the circumstances, he decided to attack to create the impression of superior strength. If successful, the French might conclude that they faced not a single over-extended corps, but the vanguard of the entire Second Army. That, as he later wrote, “required using the moral force of the attack to make up for my deficiency in physical forces.”¹⁷

Accordingly, he ordered 6th Division, now in the vicinity of Tronville and approaching Mars-la-Tour, to turn east and attack Vionville. In addition, he sent the 11th Cavalry Brigade under General Barby (Rheinbaben’s Division) in a wide, sweeping move to the north of Mars-la-Tour to deceive the French into thinking they were up against a much larger force.

Attack on Vionville

Shortly after 1100 hours, General Buddenbrock wheeled his tired regiments east and began the attack against Vionville. Supported by the well-placed guns on the heights south of Flavigny, the 12th Brigade advanced toward the north of Vionville in something of a turning movement, while the 11th Brigade attacked toward the southwest of the town. Buddenbrock’s attack proved startlingly successful, for as luck would have it, Vionville was held only by a single battalion of light infantry. The village stood astride the boundary between Frossard’s II Corps and Canrobert’s VI Corps; each thought the other responsible for its defense. Even so, one Prussian battalion was destroyed in less than ten minutes to the chasseur’s devastating fire.

Again, Alvensleben’s guns — increased to a total of 105 with the addition of Buddenbrock’s batteries — decided the issue; the French fell back. In the meantime, the 11th Brigade, in conjunction with a well-timed assault from the southeast by the 52nd Regiment of Stuelpnagel’s Division, stormed and captured Flavigny. The Prussians continued to

suffer appalling losses (the 52nd alone lost 52 officers and 1,002 men killed and wounded), yet they continued to press the attack relentlessly.

After the Prussians captured Vionville, Canrobert moved his heavy artillery — over 100 guns — into position along the old Roman road to the north of the village and began to shell it. Under this punishing fire, Buddenbrock's men found that they had to advance beyond Vionville just to hold it. Here the combined fires from the French II and VI Corps stopped them about 1,000 meters east of the village. The Prussians, exhausted and badly hurt, went to ground.

Alvensleben now correctly determined that the critical point was the Tronville copse and sent two battalions of the 20th Regiment, his only reserve, to hold it. Mars again smiled on the Prussians, for help arrived unexpectedly in III Corps' sector. Colonel Lehman, commander of the 37th Brigade of the 19th Division (X Corps), having received an urgent message from Caprivi, had marched to the sound of the guns. He arrived at Alvensleben's headquarters and promptly placed himself at the disposal of the III Corps commander. Lehman had with him four infantry battalions, two squadrons of hussars, and a heavy artillery battery. Alvensleben wisely sent Lehman to reinforce the two battalions in the Tronville copse. His lines were clearly overextended, but he hoped that the timely arrival of these reinforcements would continue the illusion that the French faced a superior force.

In the meantime, Canrobert's pounding of the 6th Division continued to take its toll. From his position on the heights south of Vionville, Alvensleben could see dust clouds of French reinforcements approaching from the north and northeast. The French III Corps under General Leboeuf, the IV Corps under General Ladmirault, and the Guard Corps had begun, at last, to march toward the sound of the guns. Colonel Caprivi informed Alvensleben that the remainder of X Corps was on its way — could he but hold out a little longer? Alvensleben then made his third and boldest decision of the day. Playing his only remaining card, he ordered the bugles to sound the charge and threw in the last of his cavalry.

The French Counterattack

Meanwhile, on the other side of the hill, Frossard felt less than sanguine about his own situation. Pounded by Alvensleben's artillery for several hours, his right flank showed signs of collapse (the division

commander there had been mortally wounded and carried from the field). Frossard resolved upon a cavalry charge to restore his crumbling flank. He threw his own 3rd Lancers into a hasty charge, but at the first volley of Prussian rifle fire, the Lancers wheeled and galloped away.

Frossard then asked for and received a regiment of Guard Cuirassiers from Bazaine. Colonel de Preuil, the brigade commander, objected. Without heavy artillery support, he argued, the charge would fail, or accomplish nothing but the riding down of retreating French infantry. Bazaine replied, “it is vitally necessary to stop them: we must sacrifice a regiment!”¹⁸

Why Bazaine did not order Canrobert to launch an infantry attack remains a mystery. Apparently, he was convinced that the main German attack would come not against his right, but his left. De Preuil next objected to Frossard, who replied wildly, “attack at once or we are all lost!”¹⁹

The Guard Cavalry charged boldly, but their luck was out this day. For all his common sense, de Preuil conducted no reconnaissance nor established any objectives for his squadrons. Battlefield debris and patches of farmland broke his regiment’s perfect lines into clusters. When the cavalry came within 100 yards, two companies of the 52nd Brandenburg Infantry opened fire. The front rank folded and the others crashed into it. After a few moments of confusion, during which the Prussian infantry continued to fire, de Preuil sounded the recall and withdrew. Nearly 700 men strong at the start of its charge, the Guard Cuirassiers lost 22 officers and 208 men, to no effect.²⁰

The 11th and 17th Prussian Hussars from Rheinbaben’s division then gave chase to the survivors. Bazaine, who had witnessed the ill-fated charge, began to direct a battery of artillery to cover its retreat. The 17th Hussars immediately charged the battery and nearly succeeded in capturing Bazaine. A *mêlée* of flashing sabers and dust ensued; the battery commander was cut down and his cannoneers slashed and ridden over. Bazaine defended himself fiercely with his own saber; in the thick of the fight, he was at his best. Meanwhile, the Marshal’s aide-de-camp and nephew galloped off to find help. He returned shortly with several squadrons from the 5th Hussars and 3rd Lancers, who together drove off the offending Hussars.

Von Bredow's "Death Ride"

By 1330 hours, Alvensleben's order for a cavalry charge had reached General von Bredow's 12th Brigade, composed of Cuirassiers and Uhlans.²¹ Von Bredow was ordered to charge a mass of French infantry apparently forming for an attack against the 24th Brandenburgers, and beyond them, Canrobert's artillery. Despite the urgency of the situation, von Bredow took his time. Possibly, he hoped that if he delayed long enough the order to charge would be rescinded. In any case, he took a full thirty minutes to conduct a thorough reconnaissance, work through the various stages of his plan, and assign specific objectives to his squadron commanders.

Reconnaissance revealed undulations in the terrain which could be used to conceal von Bredow's men for most of the charge. He also noted that the Tronville copse appeared occupied by French skirmishers. He decided to mask the copse with a squadron each of Cuirassiers and Uhlans which he ordered to dismount and fight on foot if necessary. This left him with only six squadrons, some 800 men, to charge unshaken infantry and a strong artillery position.

At 1400 hours, von Bredow at last gave the command to charge. His brigade slowly gathered momentum under the protection of the undulating terrain and burst forth all at once onto the plateau near Vionville. Taken by surprise, French infantry and artillery scattered in all directions. Several French batteries were caught withdrawing to make room for fresh batteries. "Every one of the gunners of the first battery," according to one account, "was cut down or pierced."²²

Not a shot was fired at the Prussians. The charge continued past the Rezonville ridge to a second line of infantry and guns with the same amazing effect. Here the fire became intense. "In approaching the second battery my helmet was pierced by two bullets, and my orderly officer thrown from his horse, wounded in two places."²³

However, von Bredow's *Todtenritt* or "Death Ride" was only half over. General Forton, who had observed von Bredow's charge, immediately ordered his own cavalry division, reformed and recovered from Rheinbaben's earlier artillery attack, to counter-charge. Forton's four regiments of Dragoons and Cuirassiers enveloped the spent Prussians, now outnumbered 5 to 1, and began hacking and slashing away. Four regiments

of Chasseurs and Dragoons belonging to Valabrègue's cavalry division counter-charged as well. Von Bredow ordered the recall and attempted to lead his scattered, disorganized brigade back to safety. Wary of the deadly German artillery, the French chose not to pursue. Of von Bredow's original 804 men, only 421 returned. But the "Death Ride" had succeeded. By disorganizing the infantry and heavy artillery of Canrobert's 6th Corps, it prevented the almost certain collapse of III Corps.²⁴

The deadly struggle wore on and still the Prussian III Corps held its ground. The crisis had barely passed when Alvensleben found himself confronted by another one. Less than thirty minutes after von Bredow's charge, General Ladmirault's IV Corps and parts of General Lebeouf's III Corps began to advance against Alvensleben's exposed left flank. Meanwhile, General du Barail's cavalry division had driven Barby's Brigade from the field and advanced unopposed to the outskirts of Mars-la-Tour, which now lay burning and deserted.

General Grenier with his IV Corps now launched a successful counterattack against the Tronville copse and continued to press toward the village itself. Against odds greater than 10 to 1, Colonel Lehman's detachment fought valiantly, but had to fall back into Tronville. Of 4,000 effectives, it lost over 1,200 men, including most of its officers. Alvensleben himself moved to Tronville with whatever scattered remnants he could muster, determined to hold there or die in the attempt.

Here, victory within his grasp, Ladmirault now called a halt. Grenier had expressed concern over pushing through Tronville without support. Ladmirault agreed, and decided to wait for reinforcements to arrive. As they waited the crucial opportunity to sweep through Tronville and rout the III Corps would pass. At 1530 hours, the Prussian X Corps began to arrive in strength. Alvensleben's bluff, combined with the ever-present fog and friction of war, had caused the French to waver and hesitate throughout the day. Bazaine's lack of resolution would cost France dearly.

The X Corps' artillery moved briskly into position and opened fire in the direction of Grenier's troops. This aggressive move was enough to confirm Ladmirault's apprehensions and he promptly withdrew Grenier to the heights near Bruville. This move, in turn, induced General Aymard to withdraw his division, now exposed to X Corps' artillery fire and to fire from its lead elements. These belonged to the 39th Brigade of 20th Division. Three infantry battalions were sent to fill the gap between III

Corps' 5th and 6th Divisions. The Tronville copse was retaken. The 40th Brigade soon closed in on the 39th; and the 20th Division stood strong, if a bit weary, at the decisive point in III Corps' line. Alvensleben could breathe a little easier.

Seizing the Moment

In the meantime, General von Schwartzkoppen, commander of the 19th Division of X Corps, arrived just south of Mars-la-Tour with his 38th Brigade. Eager to exploit what he perceived as a general French retreat, Voigts-Rhetz ordered a two-pronged attack against Bruville by the 19th and 20th Divisions. However, the 20th Division never received its orders, and so Schwartzkoppen alone launched a hasty attack from Mars-la-Tour toward Bruville at about 1700 hours. His troops, five Westphalian battalions with 4,641 officers and men, had marched for twenty-seven hours, were hungry and thirsty, and heavily weighted down with full-field packs and extra ammunition.

Nonetheless, the 38th obeyed. The Westphalians crossed the grassy plain that extended northeast from Mars-la-Tour and headed straight into the center of Ladmirault's IV Corps. Caught in front and flank by chassepot and mitrailleuse (gatling gun) fire, and tangled in a steep ravine that marked the edge of the French position, the 38th was shattered and broke.²⁵

First, individuals ran, then small groups, and finally whole battalions took to their heels. Grenier's and Cissey's Divisions left their positions and gave chase. The 38th fled headlong into Mars-la-Tour. It had lost over 2,600 officers and men. At this reverse, even the usually cool-headed Caprivi lost his nerve. He ordered all X Corps documents burned and its headquarters evacuated at once. Thus, just when Alvensleben should have been able to pour himself a glass of wine and relax after a hard day's fight, another crisis threatened the German left wing. Fortunately for the Prussians, Ladmirault, still convinced that he confronted a much larger force, did not exploit this opportunity.

To cover the retreat of the 38th and, he hoped, to stave off disaster, Voigts-Rhetz ordered General von Brandenburg's cavalry brigade to charge. Dutifully, the cavalry, five squadrons of Cuirassiers and Guard Dragoons, moved into position. As the French infantry closed in, the Cuirassiers and Dragoons launched their charge over terrain broken with

hedges and ditches. The French infantry, taken by surprise, fell back initially. As Brandenburg's troopers closed, however, the French opened fire with their excellent rifles and broke up the charge. Brandenburg withdrew. The charge had cost him 231 officers and men, nearly half his strength. But it caused Ladmiraault to recall his divisions back behind the ravine. Mars-la-Tour remained in German hands.

At the other end of the battlefield, lead elements of the Prussian VIII and IX Corps now appeared on the scene to reinforce Stuplnagel. Just before 1700 hours, he unwisely launched them against Rezonville. Here again the devastating long-range fire of the chasseur drove them back with heavy losses — 119 officers and 2,466 men, over half their strength.

The Last Mêlée

At about 1830 hours, Ladmiraault decided to launch General Legrand's cavalry division in a charge to roll up the German left wing. Ironically, at about the same time, Voigts-Rhetz ordered Rheinbaben's Division — Barby and the 13th Dragoons — to advance and roll up the French right. Thus, two cavalry masses advanced toward each other west and north of Mars-la-Tour. However, The French cavalry became winded and disorganized before it crossed the 800 yards of broken battlefield to meet Rheinbaben's cavalry, who thus gained the upper hand. Du Barail's 2nd Regiment of Chasseurs d'Afrique then charged into the flank of Prussians, and began to drive them back.

At this point Rheinbaben then threw in his last reserves—the 10th Hussars and 16th Dragoons. Desvaux's Division of Guard Lancers, Dragoons, and Carabiniers then entered the fray. A swirling mass of flashing sabers and thundering hooves — the last great cavalry mêlée — ensued, involving some forty-nine squadrons, over 8,000 men. In the resulting dust and confusion, friend became indistinguishable from foe. The French, who outnumbered the Germans 5 to 3, had greater difficulty avoiding fratricide. A regiment of French Lancers wearing light-blue uniforms was mistaken for Germans and was attacked and nearly destroyed by another French unit. In another instance, a French regiment fired its carbines point-blank at a friendly unit it took for the enemy. Inexplicably, General Clérambault's cavalry division, which might have tipped the scales irreversibly in favor of the French, hung back near Bruville and did not enter the battle. The mêlée lasted a mere fifteen minutes. The French sounded the recall and fell back toward Bruville, while the Germans withdrew toward Mars-la-Tour.

Final German Attack

As the cavalry retired Prince Frederick Charles, eager to reap some credit for the day's action, ordered a final attack on Rezonville. He intended to launch Alvensleben's and Voigts-Rhetz's corps simultaneously. The X Corps, spent and disorganized, could not comply. Thus, Buddenbrock's tired Brandenburgers, with part of the 10th Brigade from Stuelpnagel's division, advanced one more time against Rezonville. While they made some initial progress against the divisions of Lafont (VI Corps) and Picard (Imperial Guard), the attack was broken up by artillery and mitrailleuse fire from the batteries of the Guard.

Frederick Charles then launched his 6th Cavalry Division in a dubious night attack against the French center. The horsemen caused the French outposts to flee in panic into Rezonville, but rifle fire from the village quickly broke the Prussian charge, mauling the attackers.²⁶ At 2100 hours, as horses and riders picked their way back across a darkened battlefield, the Battle of Mars-la-Tour finally ended.

Denouement

In the course of the battle, the Germans had suffered 15,780 casualties, the French 13,761.²⁷ The III Corps alone lost 307 officers and 6,300 men, or 22 percent of its initial combat strength.²⁸ Not surprisingly, each side claimed victory. Although the French gave as good as they got tactically, at the end of the day the Germans held Mars-la-Tour and could threaten the northern routes to Verdun. Bazaine's attempt to concentrate his forces with MacMahon at Verdun was thwarted, with fatal consequences for Napoleon's regime.

By battle's end, French units were hopelessly intermixed. Bazaine's supply columns, some 5,000 wagons, had panicked at the intensity of the fighting and had either turned back, dumped their cargo, or abandoned their carts along the roads in the French rear. It thus took Bazaine's army all day and most of the next night to move less than four miles to its new positions. His units, hungry and frustrated, raided their own supply convoys and angrily burned whatever they could not carry. His corps commanders consequently reported critical shortages of ammunition, food, and transport, as well as a marked increase in incidents of vandalism, looting, and insubordination. If that were not enough, Bazaine positioned his army poorly the next day. He assigned too much of his force to his

left flank, which was already strong with numerous steep, thickly wooded ravines. Only the weak VI Corps, lacking its artillery, held his right flank. Though a tactical draw, the German victory had thus transformed the French Army of the Rhine from a confident force to a badly shaken one that doubted itself and its commanders.²⁹

To be sure, confusion reigned on the German side, too. Alvensleben's and Voigts-Rhetz's Corps lay exhausted on the field of battle. Second Army Headquarters could not paint a clear picture of the situation. Only Moltke's perceptive eye grasped the golden opportunity to push Bazaine further away from Paris and ultimately to seal him up in Metz.³⁰ But, more importantly, the Germans scored a decisive psychological victory against the French, a victory that made the ultimate German triumph appear only a matter of time. As one correspondent wrote the day after the battle:

*The Prussians are resolved to conquer or die. Theirs is not a passing excitement, stirring the blood for a day, but the long-pondered determination of an earnest people. They have lost frightfully in these last battles. Thousands of German soldiers have been killed or wounded. Yet in the end of each fight they have pushed back the desperate Frenchmen, and have carried out their generals' plans with admirable devotion.*³¹

Full credit for the victory, a moral victory as much as a physical one, must go to Alvensleben. His decision to fight outnumbered rather than withdraw reverberates as one of military history's most striking examples of boldness. Yet his was a daring based not on emotion, but on a lifetime of experience and a sure grasp of terrain, tactics, and timing — and above all, of clear orders given calmly amid chaos.

In future battles we can be sure that commanders will face a similar stern choice. Almost certainly, Alvensleben knew that his decision to attack at such odds would exact a fearful price on his command. U.S. commanders may flinch in the face of heavy casualties, no matter what the prize. But, Alvensleben's readiness to "face the arithmetic" undoubtedly saved lives over the course of the campaign by preventing the junction of the French armies. The face of battle has changed since the field of Mars-la-Tour, but not so much that qualities like these have lost their place. In the next century, Mars will still smile at boldness and punish impetuosity.

Notes

1 English writers, particularly the correspondents of the day, referred to the battle as Mars-la-Tour, the site of history's last great cavalry melee. German historians called it Vionville, since that was where the Germans enjoyed the most success. The French refer to it as the battle of Rezonville because they successfully held that village throughout the battle.

2 Alvensleben's elder brother, Gustav, commanded the IV Corps. Theodor Fontane, *Der Krieg gegen Frankreich* 1870, 71, 4 Vols., 2d Ed., (Zurich: Manesse, 1988), 1, 302-3. David Ascoli, *A Day of Battle: Mars la Tour, August 16, 1870* (London: Harrap, 1987), 62. Fontane's work remains the best firsthand account of the war. A young writer and correspondent, Fontane reported on all of Germany's wars of unification; he was captured by the French and held prisoner. He conducted interviews after each war to recount events he did not personally witness. His works are in the process of being translated and edited by several individuals including this author and historian Dennis Showalter.

3 Theodor Fontane, *Der Krieg gegen Frankreich* 1870, 71, 4 Vols., 2d Ed., (Zurich: Manesse, 1988), 1, 378.

4 French mobilization depots were not co-located with their regiments, which caused innumerable delays. Zouave reservists, for example, had to report first to the depot in Oran, Algeria, before joining their regiment stationed in Alsace. Many regiments were destroyed while their reservists were still enroute. Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-71* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 68-9. Howard's book remains the best operational and strategic treatment of the war.

5 French divisions were commonly known by the name of their commander.

6 The action involved the German I and VII Corps, spearheaded by the soon-to-be famous General Colmar van der Goltz, then commander of the 26th Infantry Brigade, 13th Division, VII Corps. Goltz saw the unmistakable signs of French retreat and launched his brigade against the entire French Corps in a desperate spoiling attack.

7 Ascoli, 109.

8 The order resulted from incomplete reconnaissance, of which the French army was guilty throughout the war. Bazaine had little idea of German dispositions on the 15th.

9 Spencer Wilkinson, ed., *Moltke's Military Correspondence 1870-71* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 95.

10 This force (18 squadrons) formed one third of the Second Army's cavalry reserve.

11 This force (36 squadrons) constituted the remaining two thirds of the Second Army's cavalry reserve. The other corps of the Second Army, east of the

Moselle, were to cross the river and proceed west-northwest.

12 Caprivi would succeed Bismarck as Chancellor of Germany from 1890-94. Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

13 The Germans had breechloading, rifled artillery, superior to that of the French, who still possessed smooth-bore muzzle loaders. At 2,500 paces, a German 6-pounder gun could hit “an infantry battalion in mass with half its shots;” and it could hit larger targets, such as a village, at 5,000 paces. A pace was 1.25 meters. Major General Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe Ingelfingen, *Employment of Field Artillery in Combination with Other Arms*, trans. by F.C.H. Clarke (London: W. Mitchell & Co., 1872), 7.

14 A full strength Prussian infantry company typically consisted of three platoons of 80 men each and a small headquarters section of four or five men, including the commander and his orderly, in total approximately 250 men. A battalion normally had four companies or 1,000 men; and a regiment usually consisted of three battalions, or 3,000 men. By contrast, a cavalry squadron usually numbered 120 men with horses. A cavalry regiment might have from two to eight squadrons.

15 The Chassepot outranged the Dreyse needle gun by 1,000 yards. One of the first German military writers to analyze the Franco-German War, Captain Albrecht von Boguslawski, reported “the Chassepot showed itself superior to the needle gun in rapidity of fire, in lowness of trajectory, in portability, in its smaller caliber, in penetration, finally in lightness and handiness. The needle gun has the advantage of simple lock construction and better sighting, it makes fewer misfires and fouls little.” Albrecht von Boguslawski, *Tactical Deductions from the War of 1870-71*, trans. by Col. Graham (London: Henry S. King, 1872, Reprinted 1996, Absinthe Press), 150.

16 Ascoli, 138.

17 Howard, 154, note 1.

18 Howard, 156.

19 James D. Hunt, “Mars la Tour, August 16, 1870,” in *Charge to Glory* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 144.

20 Lunt.

21 The 13th Dragoons, also part of the brigade, had been detached to support the 11th Cavalry Brigade (Barby) north of Mars.

22 The famous and oft-quoted account of Count von Schmitten. See Henry Bowles Franklin, *The Great Battles of 1870 and the Blockade of Metz* (London: Trubner, 1887), 73.

23 Franklin, 73.

24 For many, the success of von Bredow’s charge would serve as evidence

that modern fire arms had not rendered the cavalry charge obsolete. Yet others, such as Boguslawski and Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, warned that the charge “represented only one of a handful of like incidents, most of which were not nearly as successful, and it did not in itself decide the outcome of the battle.” Boguslawski, *Tactical Deductions*, 75-6. “The times of gigantic cavalry successes, such as those at Rossbach, Leuthen and Zorndorf, are forever past.” Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, *Letters on Cavalry*, trans. by N. L. Walford (Leavenworth, Kansas: Spooner, 1892), Letter Vie, 84.

25 The French mitrailleuse, similar to the Gatling gun, was designed to protect artillery by augmenting with rapid, direct fire. By the battle of Vionville, the French had discovered its value as an infantry weapon.

26 Frederick Charles’ attack was severely criticized by Moltke, who considered it an arrogant waste of men.

27 Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, 161; German account puts French casualties at 11,487 killed and wounded, 5,472 missing. Fontane lists French casualties at 17,007 killed and wounded, and German casualties at 15,810. *Krieg gegen Frankreich*, I, 380.

28 Fontane, I, 380.

29 See the author’s “Optimizing Chaos on the Nonlinear Battlefield,” *Military Review* (September-October 1997), 26.

30 *Molke’s Correspondence*, 97.

31 *The Daily News Correspondence of the War between Germany and France 1870-71* (London: Macmillan, 1871), 56.

Chapter 2

Ghosts of Tannenberg

German I Corps in East Prussia, August 1914

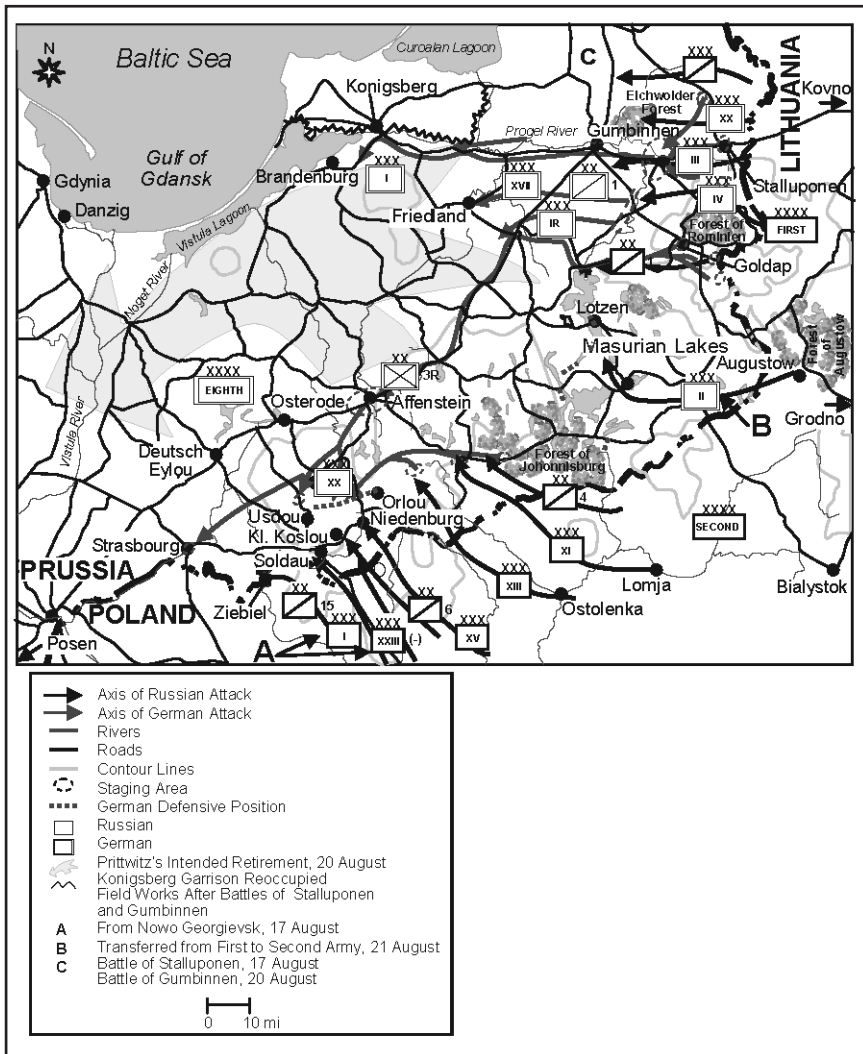
by

Colonel David R. Gray, USA (Retired)

A fiercely independent temperament is not often appreciated in professional armies. But sometimes it is an indispensable virtue. In the opening campaign in East Prussia in 1914, Lieutenant General Herman von Francois made it a habit to infuriate his superiors. He survived in command for only one reason — because he consistently succeeded against all odds. History justly credits Hindenburg and Ludendorff with the victor's laurels at Tannenberg — the most famous battle of annihilation since Cannae. But von Francois deserves more than a footnote, as the operational commander who, more than any other, set the conditions for strategic success.

At the outbreak of war in August 1914, Germany struck violently in the West, hoping to knock France out of the war quickly. In the East, the German Eighth Army was ordered to defend the Prussian frontier against the First and Second Russian Armies, attacking astride separate but converging routes. The High Command expected Eighth Army to hold off the Russians for six to eight weeks before victorious German troops could be transferred from France to assume the offensive. In a famous campaign, Eighth Army masterfully exploited the advantages of interior lines to annihilate an entire Russian field army and drive a second headlong from Prussian soil.

Throughout the campaign, the German I Corps spearheaded German operations under its fiery and aggressive commander, Lieutenant General Herman von Francois. One of four corps that formed the Eighth Army, I Corps headed four major assaults that led directly to the Russian collapse. The corps' skillful use of terrain, rapid thrusts directed at enemy weak points, and well-timed attacks paralyzed its Russian opponents in one of military history's most striking examples of victory against the odds.



Map 2. East Prussia: Battle of Tannenberg, 1914.

In the German army, a corps of 40,000 troops represented the largest all arms formation capable of independent action along a single axis of advance.¹ The corps' main combat elements consisted of two infantry divisions formed around some of the oldest and most distinguished regiments of the old Prussian Army, an artillery battalion of sixteen 150mm howitzers, and a squadron of six aircraft. During peacetime, the corps garrisoned several small towns along the East Prussian border. The corps exploited local loyalties and enhanced unit cohesion by

recruiting extensively from districts surrounding its bases. Despite its best recruiting efforts, the unit still had to rely on the more populous regions of Brandenburg and Westphalia to the west for over 60 percent of its men. All ranks lacked relevant combat experience, but practical field training firmly grounded in the latest doctrine prepared I Corps' officers and soldiers for battle.

Since the 1870s the German Army diligently adjusted its doctrine to keep pace with the changing conditions of industrial warfare. Like all other major armies of the time, German pre-war doctrine emphasized rapid, offensive action as the decisive means to victory. But the Germans also recognized that the lethality of modern weapons had rendered frontal attacks an increasingly suicidal proposition. To minimize casualties, the Germans adapted the Napoleonic precepts of prompt decision through decisive battle into a doctrine that stressed strategic, operational, and tactical envelopment. The Germans intended to encircle and destroy their enemies in battles of annihilation (*Vernichtungschlachten*) by concentrating overwhelming firepower, superior numbers, and moral superiority at the decisive place and time. Officers were especially expected to exercise their own tactical judgment, even if it differed from that of a superior. Although the officer corps prized this freedom, the line separating individual initiative from disobedience to orders was a thin one that could potentially undermine unity of effort during combat operations.²

By both training and inclination, General von Francois appeared to be just the type of commander prescribed by evolving doctrine. Fifty-eight years old, Francois was the descendent of a Huguenot family that had immigrated to Prussia in the seventeenth century. He began military service in 1875 as a lieutenant in the 3rd Guards Regiment. Showing promise in succeeding assignments, Francois earned the crimson trouser stripes of a General Staff Officer upon graduation from the *Kriegsakademie* (War College) in 1887. He commanded a battalion in 1898 and served as General Paul von Hindenburg's Chief of Staff in IV Corps in 1905, before assuming command of I Corps in 1913. By the war's start, Francois had firmly established his reputation as a strong and competent commander of larger formations. More important to unfolding events, however, was his reputation as a prickly, independent-minded maverick and difficult subordinate.³

Headstrong and arrogant at times, Francois quickly clashed with Eighth Army's commander over the planned defensive strategy for the

East Prussian frontier. General Max von Prittwitz keyed his operational plans to defensible terrain and timing. The Masurian Lakes, a 50 mile long, north-south chain of marshes, small lakes, and thick forests, posed a major obstacle to invading enemy forces from the east. This rugged terrain was likely to split the invaders between the Insterburg Gap in the north and a more southern approach around the lakes, severely restricting lateral communications. Pre-war staff rides by the General Staff determined that the region's natural shield would permit the Germans to exploit the advantage of interior lines. Sited in interior positions connected by road and rail, the mass of the German army could concentrate and destroy the most threatening enemy force, then use interior lines to strike the second. Prior to 1914 Germany extended railways, improved roads, and fortified gaps between the lakes to translate this strategy from theory to reality during wartime.⁴

Prittwitz generally deployed his forces consistent with pre-war assessments, modified to fit actual tactical circumstances. When intelligence indicated that the Russian main attack would come north of the lakes, he ordered his troops to occupy defenses behind the Angerapp River's west bank, where they would await further enemy developments. Prittwitz posted Francois' I Corps, with the 1st Cavalry Division under command, to guard the Insterburg Gap, the most favorable northern approach into East Prussia. Francois' men were to remain in the vicinity of Insterburg-Gumbinnen while the cavalry screened east of the river. Major General August von Mackensen's XVII Corps, General Otto von Below's I Reserve Corps, and III Reserve Division occupied a central position west of the lakes. The XX Corps under General von Scholtz protected the southern flank around Allenstein. Prittwitz's positioning of units provided Eighth Army with flexibility to maneuver in either direction and followed higher headquarters' guidance for "not defense only, but offensive, offensive, offensive."⁵

But Francois had his own thoughts about the proper way to organize the frontier defenses. Objecting to Eighth Army's plan, Francois argued strenuously for a defense forward of the border. In his view, a series of limited, cross-border spoiling attacks — led by I Corps and supported by the rest of Eighth Army — would thoroughly disrupt the enemy's troop concentrations and invasion time table. Unable to persuade Von Prittwitz and his staff to take a more aggressive stance, Francois decided to take matters in his own hands to protect "sacred" Prussian territory.

Francois ignored Pritwitz's orders to defend from the vicinity of Gumbinen and instead pushed his forces closer to the Prussian border. By August 16, the corps' 1st Division occupied Stalluponen, about twenty miles east of the Angerapp. Meanwhile, his 2nd Division split its two brigades between the towns of Goldap and Tollmingkehmen. The cavalry and the corps aero-scout squadron patrolled the border to warn of the enemy's approach. Francois set up a forward command post in Stalluponen to direct the corps actions. To prevent possible interference from Von Prittiwitz's staff, the wily former cavalryman ordered his chief of staff to remain with the corps main headquarters at Insterburg to cover his forward dispositions.⁶

While the Germans prepared for an invasion, the Russians mobilized and marched toward Prussia. Pressured by France to take the offensive into Germany as soon as war erupted, the Russian government quickly mustered its immense ground forces and, despite tremendous logistical difficulties, its First and Second Armies were on the march by August 13th. Like Germany, Russia relied on its existing war plans for its initial strategic framework. The Russian High Command intended to launch a converging attack into East Prussia to trap and destroy the Germans in a giant pincer movement. General Paul von Rennenkempf (a descendent of German colonists in Russia) commanded the Russian First Army, which attacked along an axis through the Insterburg Gap north of the Masurian lakes, while General Alexander V. Samsonov's Second Army advanced south of the lakes. The movement was poorly coordinated, and neither commander made a concerted effort to use available cavalry to find German troop concentrations.⁷

Call to Battle

Just as Francois intended, the Germans initially encountered General Rennenkempf's First Army when the Russian "steam roller" crossed the German frontier. After a series of inconclusive cavalry and infantry skirmishes in preceding days, the Germans' first major clash occurred just south of Stalluponen with the advance elements of the Russian III Corps on August 17th. The engagement sparked a fierce, day-long fight. Lacking any prior knowledge of German positions, the Russians attacked tenaciously, threatening to envelop Francois' defenses around Stalluponen. Major General Richard Von Conta, 1st Division's commander, maneuvered his regiments to plug gaps and reinforce his defenses against assaults by three enemy divisions. In late afternoon

Major General von Falk of the 2nd Division and the brigade guarding Tollmingkehmen marched to the sound of the fighting. Von Falk's troops struck the Russian left flank at the same time 1st Division launched a counterattack to its front. The Russian 27th Division dissolved under the combined pressure, allowing the Germans to capture over 3,000 prisoners. Another 3,000 or so dead and wounded littered the battlefield. At that point the Russian advance stalled, as an exhilarated Francois claimed victory.

While fighting was still underway, Francois received abrupt orders to withdraw to Gumbinnen. General Von Prittwitz had discovered Francois' forward deployment charade on August 15th, which had forced him to alter his original plans for the corps. Prittwitz immediately wrote out new instructions that ordered the I Corps Commander to outpost his forward-most positions and fall back to Gumbinnen. Outraged over his subordinate's disobedience, Prittwitz dispatched a staff officer to Stalluponen to deliver the new orders personally. The impetuous I Corps Commander had already decided to withdraw as the situation allowed, but when confronted by the staff officer, he contemptuously retorted, "Inform General von Prittwitz that General von Francois will break off the battle when the Russians are beaten."⁸ Fortunately for Francois, the staff officer softened the general's official response to higher headquarters. In the battle's aftermath, Francois telephoned von Prittwitz and boasted that his corps had defeated two enemy corps, which quickly retreated back across the frontier. That evening I Corps retired to Gumbinnen.

Victory saved Francois from disciplinary action or relief. The corps commander could justify his disobedience on the doctrinal latitude allowed by German doctrine. Von Prittwitz undoubtedly found his subordinate's success hard to dispute, but Francois' actions had two unintended consequences. First, they jeopardized the overall plan, which allowed about five days time to defeat the Russian First Army, before having to turn to deal with the Russian Second Army. If Rennenkampf slowed his troops' advance, Eighth Army would be drawn out of its Angerapp defenses and eastward into battle, exposing its rear to attack from Samsonov's Second Army. Second, the action earned Francois a reputation as a fighter, but also reinforced the widespread belief that he was an eccentric maverick. The High Command could legitimately question whether Francois' disobedience might well encourage future, more risky actions at the army's expense.

While Francois' troops prepared defenses at Gumbinnen, the Russians resumed their westward advance toward Insterburg. First Army moved forward at a slow pace, neglecting again to use its cavalry for reconnaissance. Repeated Russian and German cavalry skirmishes went unheeded in First Army's headquarters during the next two days. By the afternoon of the 19th the Russians, beset by straggling and enormous logistical difficulties, approached Gumbinnen, where Rennenkampf ordered a halt for August 20. The Russian commander's message was transmitted uncoded over the radio. A German radio operator promptly intercepted the message and passed the contents to Prittwitz's staff.

To forestall the expected attack, Francois urged aggressive action for the next morning, proposing to outflank the Russians from the north and pressuring Prittwitz to commit XVII Corps and I Reserve Corps to the spoiling attack. Prittwitz initially postponed a decision, but other Russian developments and time pressures forced a quick decision.

Shortly after his subordinate's call, Prittwitz learned that the Second Russian Army was across the frontier and on the move toward Allenstein. If they intended to destroy Rennenkampf's forces before Samsonov reached Eighth Army's rear, the Germans could not afford to waste time waiting for the Russian 1st Army to reach the Angerapp. Prittwitz therefore authorized the attack and employment of the other corps over the objections of his highly capable operations officer, *Oberstleutnant* (Lieutenant Colonel) Max Hoffman. "This joyful message," Francois remarked, "took a weight from my soul."⁹

Francois' plan of attack combined daring and sound doctrine. 1st Division would remain in its current positions as a fixing force. Francois ordered 2nd Division to withdraw from I Corps' right flank, conduct a night march across 1st Division's rear, and envelop the Russians' exposed northern flank. Surprise and shock were essential elements of the plan. A short, sharp, artillery barrage followed by a violent pre-dawn attack would enable 2nd Division to roll up the enemy's exposed flank. Those Russians not killed in General von Falk's initial hammer blows would be driven into a cauldron of fires in front of the 1st Division. Properly executed and boldly led, Francois believed the assault would result in a decisive battle of annihilation.

Following a thirty minute artillery bombardment, the 2nd Division's troops stormed across broken fields toward Russian lines at

0400 hours, August 20th. General Von Falk's attack caught the Russians completely by surprise; many in the Russian XX Corps, for example, were still asleep when the battle began. The hail of high explosives and the rush of German infantry attacks achieved initial success, but by 0800 hours the Russians formed stout defenses, especially inside the village of Uzballen. Volleys of Russian artillery fire mowed down advancing lines of Falk's infantry, which had temporarily out-run the support of its guns. Wave after wave of Germans advanced under heavy fire, until the Russians finally ran out of ammunition, and the attack regained momentum. Fighting at close quarters inside Uzballen, German troopers relied on rifle butts, bayonets, and small arms fire to root out enemy resistance. By noon the village had fallen.

General Conta and his soldiers also encountered stiff resistance as they attacked through the misty dawn around 0530 hours. Fighting degenerated into a series of regimental and battalion engagements as 1st Division pushed through a system of fortified farms and villages. By 1100 hours the Germans, after vicious fighting, had routed the Russian 28th Division and seized the key village of Brakuponen, east of Gumbinnen. The Germans captured 5,000 prisoners and left 7,000 enemy casualties on the field of battle.

The I Corps had achieved its initial objectives but was too disorganized and exhausted to exploit its success for very long. Francois pushed the attack for several more hours, driving the Russians back five miles. The 1st Cavalry Division followed the corps' attack, raiding the Russian transport at Schwirgallen, ten miles to First Army's rear. Without any reserves and with no sign of the German XVII Corps, Francois ordered his units to halt late in the afternoon.

While Francois' troops hammered the Russian northern flank, the remainder of the battle confirmed Hoffman's worst fears. Exhausting night marches, lack of lateral coordination between the corps, and poorly timed assaults doomed the attack along the rest of the Gumbinnen front. Numbed by fatigue and damp from the night's cold rain, General Mackensen's formations mounted a fierce frontal attack in the center of the German position at dawn — without the benefit of artillery support. The enemy was not so charitable. Russian artillery mercilessly raked Mackensen's green troops, inflicting heavy casualties and sparking a general panic in some units. XVII Corps' attacks stalled, and Mackensen withdrew his demoralized units with great difficulty under withering fire. I Reserve

Corps did not reach the battlefield until noon, too late for a coordinated assault with the other corps. The Reserve Corps attacked on the German right flank into the stout defenses of the Russian XX Corps. The Russians resisted tenaciously and fought the Germans to a standstill. Despite I Corps' success, the Germans failed to deliver a knockout blow to Rennenkampf's army.

Hindenburg's Call to Glory

In late afternoon Francois, with only partial knowledge of the setbacks in the XVII and I Reserve Corps sectors, pressed headquarters for reinforcements to follow-up his success. Instead, he was shocked to learn that Prittwitz intended to retreat; reports that Samsonov had penetrated East Prussia had so unnerved Prittwitz that he ordered a general retreat behind the Vistula River. Disgusted by his commander's timidity, Francois joined Max Hoffman in urging Prittwitz to reconsider. The commander rejected both officers' advice. Without notifying his staff, Prittwitz glumly called General Helmuth von Moltke (Chief of the General Staff and the nephew of the great von Moltke the Elder) to inform him of Eighth Army's retreat, expressing strong doubts whether he could stop the Russians at the Vistula River. The news so stunned Moltke that he decided to replace the Eighth Army commander as soon as possible.

At this critical juncture, Hoffman convinced Prittwitz that Eighth Army could not withdraw without fighting the Russian Second Army, as this formation was closer by 80 miles to the Vistula than the Germans. Reconsidering, Prittwitz cancelled his orders and approved a daring attack against the Second Army.

Leaving one cavalry division to delay Rennenkampf, the bulk of the army would switch fronts by rail and footmarch to concentrate against Samsonov. Prittwitz issued instructions for the movement on August 22nd, but failed to inform Moltke of his change of mind. Still assuming that the Eighth Army commander had lost his nerve, the German Chief of Staff relieved Prittwitz and his chief of staff that same day. In their place, Moltke appointed as commander sixty-seven year old Paul von Hindenburg, a veteran of the Austro-Prussian (1866) and Franco-Prussian (1870-71) Wars. So unexpected was the call that Hindenburg boarded the train wearing the blue uniform of a Prussian general rather than the field gray that now clothed the Imperial German army. The new Eighth Army Chief of Staff was Erich Ludendorff, a brilliant but relatively junior general

and General Staff Officer, recently awarded the *Pour le Merite*, Germany's highest decoration, for his role in storming the Belgian forts which barred the way into France. The two arrived at Eighth Army's headquarters on August 23rd and approved the measures Hoffman had already taken to attack Samsonov.

The I Corps figured prominently in Eighth Army's new plan of attack. Francois' troops were to move by train and foot over 90 miles to Deutsch-Eylau where they would form on the right flank of the German XX Corps. Hindenburg and Luddendorff planned to use I Corps as a striking force to envelop the Russian left flank. Francois' attack would be supported by XVII and I Reserve Corps, which had been ordered to march quickly south to attack the exposed Russian right, or northern, flank. Radio intercepts and reconnaissance further aided German battle preparations by providing the exact location and battle plans of Second Army.

While the Germans repositioned forces, the Russians blindly marched westward to disaster. Rennenkampf informed the Russian High Command of his "victory" at Gumbinnen and reported that the defeated Germans were in full retreat toward the Vistula River. Instead of initiating a hot pursuit, Rennenkampf rested for two days before marching ponderously westward to lay siege to the fortress city of Konigsberg. Pressed by higher headquarters, Samsonov pushed northwest to cut off the German retreat. Neither Russian commander effectively deployed their cavalry to find and maintain contact with the enemy, which allowed the Germans to concentrate undetected around Tannenberg.

Battle of Annihilation

On August 24th Hindenburg and Ludendorff used their knowledge of Samsonov's plans to adjust Eighth Army's operational dispositions. The High Command now planned to trap and destroy the Russians using a double envelopment — a near simultaneous attack against both enemy flanks. Eighth Army ordered XX Corps and 3rd Reserve Division in the German center to withdraw to the northeast upon contact with the Russians. This deliberately planned maneuver would further draw the Russians into a giant pocket, where they would be completely encircled. Ludendorff scheduled the attack for dawn on August 26th.

Ordered to spearhead the attack as the army's main effort, Francois delayed the advance to allow the corps artillery to come up. The

previous day (August 25) he had vehemently protested against the timing of the attack because only twenty of his thirty-two artillery batteries were available. Two weeks of combat had taught Francois that infantry could not advance against prepared defensive positions without supporting artillery fires. To reach the corps objective at the village of Usdau, I Corps would have to fight across open fields stretching before enemy entrenchments on top of the Seeben Heights to their immediate front. "If I am ordered to attack," Francois heatedly informed Ludendorff, "of course my troops will do so, but it will mean they have to attack with the bayonet."¹⁰

Though a genuine concern, the artillery issue was also a foil for a substitute proposal to avoid Usdau altogether in favor of a deeper flanking attack against the Russian I Corps at Soldau further south. The army staff rejected outright the plan for very good reasons.¹¹ After a heated exchange with Ludendorff that nearly resulted in Francois' relief, the I Corps Commander reluctantly, and belatedly, ordered the attack. His orders intentionally did not leave his subordinate commanders enough time to move into positions by dawn.

Francois' foot-dragging, however, bought his command valuable time to concentrate before the attack started. Sufficient artillery and ammunition arrived during the morning so that I Corps' 1st Division was able to seize the Seeben Heights by 1230 hours. Meanwhile, fires from Russian snipers and machineguns halted General Falk's 2nd Division south of Usdau. In mid-afternoon, Francois conferred with General Scholtz about the situation in front of his XX Corps. Scholtz's corps had inflicted heavy casualties on the Russians, and he had decided to hold his position for the day. Based on this information and the condition of his own troops, Francois decided to stop for the day, in deliberate contravention of higher headquarters' orders.¹²

The following day, however, Francois energetically engaged the enemy. I Corps attacked Usdau at dawn on August 26th. Artillery pounded Russian defenses surrounding the village for an hour before German infantry kicked off their assault. General Contra's 1st Division attacked from the northwest, while Falk's 2nd Division stormed the town from the south. The Germans achieved initial surprise, but the Russians recovered quickly enough to concentrate a strong counterattack that routed one of the 1st Division's brigades. In bitter fighting, the division drove the Russians from the town, securing it by 1130 hours. Francois later recalled that Usdau was "one of the most tragic sights of the war...trenches two meters deep...

were piled up with dead and seriously wounded Russians.”¹³ Following up the day’s success, I Corps’ cavalry vigorously pursued and punished Russian formations for several hours as they retreated toward Soldau, nine miles to the south.

According to Max Hoffman, I Corps’ breakthrough around Usdau was “the decisive point of the whole battle.”¹⁴ The Germans had now penetrated the Russian Second Army’s left flank and created a gap between the Russian I Corps and XXIII Corps, its adjacent unit to the south. Having divided the enemy formations, the hard-fighting I Corps was ready to conquer them. With the town secure, Francois ordered his troops to continue to attack to the south and southwest, a move supported by higher headquarters.

The I Corps’ operations the next day proved even more decisive. Early on the 28th, air patrols informed Francois that the Russian XXIII Corps to his south appeared disorganized and incapable of launching a counterattack against the I Corps. Francois maneuvered his corps to outflank the Russians around Frankenau. The German attack pounded the Russians, who retreated to the southeast in disorder. Francois then ordered the I Corps to continue its movement towards Neidenburg to the east.

The audacious I Corps Commander now saw a golden opportunity to conduct a turning movement deep in the Russian rear, cutting off Second Army’s route of retreat. In the interval, Francois received orders redirecting his movement northward to assist the German XX Corps, which was desperately fighting off a Russian attack around Walpitz. Instead of executing a turning movement, the high command wanted I Corps to make a shallow envelopment into the Russian XIII Corps’ open flank. Francois evaluated the situation and based on his understanding of events, judged the orders to be wrong. Believing that XX Corps could handle the action around Walpitz, he ignored Ludendorff’s instructions and kept his corps focused on developing a deeper trap for the Russians.

By the evening of August 29th, I Corps had completed its turning movement and severed the last remaining enemy escape routes to the south and east. I Corps held a thin string of widely dispersed positions — 25 battalions stretched over a 30 mile distance — that controlled all possible avenues of retreat. Backed by powerful artillery barrages, Francois troops held out against the Russians’ disorganized attempts to break through the lightly defended ring. Meanwhile the German I Reserve

and XVII Corps continued to attack from north to south. The two hard-marching German corps ended up behind the Russian XIII Corps, which had successfully attacked the Germans the previous day. The Germans' fierce assaults shattered the Russian corps. Late the same day, cavalry from Von Mackensen's XVII Corps established contact with elements of I Corps, completing the encirclement of the Second Army.

The I Corps spent the next two days beating off Russian breakout attempts while the remainder of Eighth Army continued its hammer blows from multiple directions. Concentric attacks by German forces from the north, south, and west tightened the vise. As whole Russian divisions came apart, the distraught army commander, Samsonov, committed suicide when surrounded by German patrols in the deep woods. From August 30-31, the Germans eliminated isolated pockets of Russian resistance and rounded up demoralized prisoners. The prize was a glittering one: 125,000 Russian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured and an entire Russian field army was written off the order of battle, at the price of 15,000 German casualties. I Corps and their indomitable commander had beaten long odds to achieve victory, pulling along the rest of the army by sheer force of will. To revenge a remembered humiliation — the Polish and Lithuanian success against the Teutonic knights in 1410, on the same battleground — the Germans called their victory “the Battle of Tannenberg.” It was the largest and most successful battle of annihilation in a century.

Battle of the Masurian Lakes

The Germans had little time to celebrate, however, as events elsewhere further threatened their eastern frontier. Along the southern sector of the Eastern Front, the Russians had routed Austria's offensive into Galicia. General Conrad von Hotzendorf, the Austrian Army's Chief of Staff, wanted Eighth Army to attack the Russian right flank around Warsaw to take the pressure off the Austro-Hungarian Army. Such action, however, would expose the Germans to a possible flank attack from General Rennenkampf's 1st Army. Rennenkampf's slow westward movements had allowed the Germans to attack Samsonov, but now the huge Russian force was within 40 miles of Danzig. Hindenburg and Ludendorff decided first to strike Rennenkampf, the most dangerous threat, then deal with the situation further south.

In the Russian sector, Rennenkampf received word of Samsonov's disaster on 30 August and immediately recognized that his army was now

the Germans' main target. General Yakov Zhilinski, commander of the Russian Northwest Front, ordered Rennenkampf to hold his position at all costs.¹⁵ Rennenkampf expected the Germans to attack from Königsburg — an assumption based on false radio intercepts planted by German intelligence — and quickly adjusted his positions to meet such a contingency.¹⁶ To consolidate his forces, the Russian commander ordered his forward units to fall back to more defensible positions near the Masurian Lakes.

By 2 September, the 300,000 man Russian army occupied a strong north-south defensive line centered around the Insterburg Gap and behind the Pregel, Dieme, Aile, and Omet Rivers. Three strong corps-constructed formidable entrenchments lie inside the Gap. The corps guarding Rennenkampf's right flank stretched from the Baltic Sea to the fortress city of Königsburg, where it kept a watchful eye on the German garrison. II Corps, protecting the defiles through the lakes on the Russian left flank, was thinly spread and somewhat isolated from the main defenses by the rugged terrain. One second-line division, some cavalry, and a few battalions from the newly constituted Russian 10th Army shielded 1st Army's open flank on the extreme left. Over nine hundred guns protected key points along the front. Rennenkampf retained two divisions as a reserve, but repeated earlier mistakes by once again failing to deploy his cavalry to make contact with the German army. The Russians would again pay dearly for their ignorance of the enemy's location and dispositions.

While the Russians fortified the Insterburg Gap, the German Eighth Army regrouped and concentrated its units opposite enemy lines. Two army corps, XI and Guard Reserve, and VIII Cavalry Division arrived from the Western Front as reinforcements.¹⁷ German forces now numbered six corps of seventeen divisions, two cavalry divisions, and 1,212 artillery pieces. On face value, the Germans and Russians were roughly on par, with approximately the same manpower (300,000 each) and guns (1,212 vs. 924). Nevertheless, well-defended fortifications protected by integrated machine-gun and artillery fires gave the Russians the overall tactical advantage against any frontal assault.

Russian operational security remained poor, and the Germans quickly learned of Rennenkampf's preparations. Radio intercepts of uncoded transmissions and air reconnaissance revealed much about the Russians' troop emplacements and tactical intentions. Having pieced together a reasonably accurate picture of the battle ground, Hindenburg

and Ludendorff aimed to trap and destroy Rennenkampf's army before it could escape back to Russia.

The High Command's plan was similar in concept to that used at Tannenberg. With its left flank protected by the Baltic Sea, Eighth Army's operational scheme involved a fixing attack into the Insterburg Gap and a turning movement to encircle the Russians from the southwest. Ludendorff assigned four corps — XXth, XIth, 1st Reserve, and Guard Reserve — to make the frontal attack into the Insterburg Gap. Despite Francois' haughtiness and previous record of disobedience, the High Command designated him to lead the main effort in attacking the Russians' exposed left flank, which might lead to Russian paralysis and mass surrenders as had occurred at Tannenberg. Ludendorff ordered Francois' own I Corps, along with General August von Mackensen's XVII Corps, the 3d Reserve Division, and two cavalry divisions to conduct the turning movement. I Corps was to maneuver south through the defiles of the southern lakes to strike northeast, while XVII Corps and the cavalry attacked through the mile-wide Lotzen Gap. Ludendorff assigned a third force of two and a half divisions under command of General Baron Colmar von der Goltz, a renowned military theorist, to guard Francois' flank and prevent Russian interference from the south.

As on many previous occasions, Francois and Ludendorff quarreled vehemently over the plan. This time the two argued over the size of the two main assault forces. Because rugged terrain would separate the two wings, Francois complained that his force should be stronger if it were to deliver the decisive blow. But Ludendorff overruled his subordinate's objections, because he had concluded that the narrow defiles around the lakes would restrict movements of a large mass of troops. A stronger holding force was also necessary to protect Eastern Prussia if the Russians struck east before Francois' maneuvers were complete. Francois could not persuade the chief of staff to change his mind, and left headquarters unsatisfied but determined to make the best use of his forces.

The Germans hoped for a speedy defeat of Rennenkampf's forces before the Russians could reinforce their front or reconstitute Second Army. Eighth Army marched from the Tannenberg area beginning on August 29 and concentrated at the Insterburg Gap and Masurian Lakes. After four days of reorganization in forward assembly areas, the army thrust eastward on September 5th. In two days' time the four corps assigned to the fixing attack had drawn opposite the Russians north of the Masurian Lakes.

On the southern flank, Francois quickly maneuvered his forces through the Johannesburg Forest and pushed toward the central region of the Masurian Lakes. On September 7th, Major General Curt von Morgen's veteran 3rd Reserve Division, covered by sharp artillery barrages, dispersed two Finnish rifle regiments guarding the village of Bialla. Francois pressed his forces forward and by late evening, I Corps' 1st and 2nd Divisions had arrived in the vicinity of Arys, 15 miles northeast of Bialla. At dawn on September 8th, I Corps attacked the town. Artillery pounded enemy positions as 2nd Division struck the town from the west. Advancing over its peacetime training grounds, 1st Division assailed the Russian flank from the south. By mid-morning Francois' troops had routed six Russian battalions and captured 1,000 prisoners. I Corps scarcely paused after the battle before marching northward.¹⁸

Francois next directed Morgen's men to capture the town of Lyck, 20 miles northeast of Bialla, to widen further the envelopment. III Reserve Division repeatedly assaulted the Russians' flanks on September 9th, but could not dislodge the defenders. The Germans renewed their onslaught at dawn the following morning; the combination of artillery and fierce infantry attacks drove the enemy from the town. Morgen's victory cleared the German right flank and allowed the aggressive Francois to turn his attack northeastward toward the Russians' exposed wing in the central Masurian Lake region.

On Francois' left flank, General Mackensen's XVII Corps surged through the Lotzen Gap but was stopped cold in front of the Russian II Corps' trenches. The Germans attacked repeatedly throughout the day but made no headway. Lack of maneuver space between the lakes prevented Mackensen from using his two cavalry divisions to probe for and attack weak spots in the Russian defenses. The fighting died down for the night, but Mackensen planned to renew his offensive the following morning, once Francois' corps came up to support the action.

News of the fighting in the south had a sobering effect on Rennenkampf's headquarters. The location of the attacks raised the very real prospect that the Germans intended to envelop First Army's left flank. Rennenkampf had not prepared any detailed contingency plans to face such a situation. Moreover, both the Army Commander and his superior at Northwest Front continued to believe enemy deception broadcasts describing plans to attack through the Insterburg Gap. General Rennenkampf, however, lacked the means to verify actual

enemy dispositions around Lotzen because the Army's cavalry division, originally posted on the Russian far left flank as a screening force, had been reassigned earlier that day.

Unable to ignore the risks posed by a sizable enemy force on his flank, Rennenkampf prematurely committed his two reserve divisions to reinforce the troops around Lotzen. By nightfall, the strengthened Russian line still held the Germans at bay. But without cavalry to warn them, the Russian II Corps could not know that a second German force was about to strike them from an unexpected direction.¹⁹

Attacking just prior to dawn on the 9th, Francois' I Corps surprised and routed the Russian divisions facing XVII Corps. In what was quickly becoming standard procedure in I Corps, artillery pummeled Russian entrenchments while the infantry enveloped the enemy's open left flank and rear. The shock and weight of I Corps' attack demoralized the four defending Russian divisions, which quickly broke and fled in great disorder. Francois' men captured 5,000 prisoners and 60 artillery pieces. Over four days, Francois' turning force had marched 77 miles, fought on two of those days, and succeeded in turning the Russian left flank. With his right flank secure and the road clear for the XVII Corps, Francois maneuvered his troops to cut off the Russian First Army from home.²⁰

With its forces fully concentrated and Francois' sweep north beginning to pick up steam, Eighth Army launched a full scale assault across Rennenkampf's entire front. Preceded by heavy artillery barrages, three German corps stormed Russian fortifications inside the Insterburg Gap. The Russians withstood the bombardments and repulsed successive German attacks. Fighting lasted past nightfall, but the Russian line remained solid. While the battle raged in the Insterburg Gap, I and XVII Corps vigorously pursued the remnants of the Russian II Corps in the south. I Corps rapidly pressed north to seal off the enemy from its base at Kovno, deep in the Russian rear. I and VIII Cavalry Divisions preceded the Corps' advance to cut the road to Kovno.

The Russians Break

Although his forces still held firm at Insterburg, Rennenkampf lacked any troops to meet Francois' thrust from the south. Under enormous pressure to avoid another military debacle, he ordered a general retreat for early on September 10th. Under cover of darkness each Russian corps

withdrew from its positions and began forced marches toward Kovno. Fighting in the south had pushed the Russian defensive front into a rough semi-circle. Ironically, this disposition actually aided the retreat as the Russians extracted their soldiers faster along interior lines than the Germans could maneuver to attack on the perimeter's exterior.²¹

The German high command received its first reports of the Russian retreat the same morning. An air reconnaissance plane flew over the main defensive area and reported that "the principal Russian positions were only feebly occupied or not occupied at all." Elated by the news, Hoffman and Ludendorff concluded that "Rennenkampf did not mean to resist the attack" nor "even intended (to make) a serious stand." The German high command, however, had underestimated Rennenkampf, who had no intention of letting his enemies pull off another Tannenberg. The Russian commander ordered a counterattack to slow the German advance and allow for the extraction of his troops. Two divisions, one each from the Russian IV Corps and II Corps, struck the center of the German line between Nordenburg-Augerburg. The unexpected blow staggered German XX Corps. Heavy losses forced the corps to assume the defensive for the next two days.²²

The Russian counter-attack changed the battle's tempo and caused the Germans to alter their tactical plans. Despite wireless intercepts, the German high command allowed itself to be "misled" about the nature of the counterattack. Failing to recognize the attack as a cover for the Russian withdrawal, Ludendorff worried about a gap that had developed between XX and IX Corps in the German front. Just as he had following I Corps' assault on Usdau, Ludendorff became overcautious and altered the path of Francois' turning movement. Instead of a deep penetration to cut Russian lines of communications, the German high command opted for a more shallow envelopment of the enemy's two counterattacking divisions.

For once Francois chose to obey his orders without a confrontation and redirected the bulk of his command toward the Russian flanks. I Corps and XVII Corps turned north and west of the Rominten Forest and prepared to attack.²³ The German attack slammed into the Russian flank. Outnumbered and out-flanked, the counter-attacking Russians fought desperately to gain time for the Army to escape. Fighting seesawed along the northern edge of Rominten Forest and degenerated into a series of small unit engagements. Although shattered by the fighting, the Russian division had successfully covered the withdrawal of the main body. During the next

forty-eight hours, vigorous German assaults annihilated the remainder of the Russian counter-attack force.²⁴

Late on September 12th, the Germans began their pursuit of Rennenkampf's main body, but by that time the opportunity had passed. Francois' I Corps spearheaded Eighth Army's pursuit of the Russians for the next week. Plagued by losses, supply problems, and sheer exhaustion, Francois' divisions could not maintain the momentum of the pursuit. By the 13th, the Russians had crossed to the safety of a fortified line behind the Nieman River.²⁵

Fruits of Victory

Ludendorff later judged the first battle of Masurian Lakes to be a "decisive engagement."²⁶ Operational and tactical results were indeed impressive. The Eighth Army had driven a second enemy army from its territory. Russian losses amounted to 125,000 men (including 45,000 prisoners), 150 artillery pieces, and over half of First Army's transportation assets. (At war's end, in 1918, Rennenkampf would be executed by the Bolsheviks.) More importantly, the double battles of Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes established the framework for subsequent operations on the Eastern Front. Unlike the stagnant trench warfare of the Western Front, combat in the East involved mobile maneuver against enemy flanks, just the sort of operations underwritten by German doctrine and leadership practices. Led by audacious combat leaders like Francois, the Germans excelled at this type of warfare.

The I Corps' operations during the East Prussian campaign played a decisive role in the outstanding success of Eighth Army – a success that laid the foundation for Hindenburg and Ludendorff's later rise to power as de facto leaders of the German state. Fiercely determined to seize and hold the initiative, the corps achieved both physical and moral superiority by capitalizing on Russian lapses, notably poor security and lack of mutual support between their armies. Using information gained from uncoded Russian radio transmissions, the Germans attacked along the line of least expectation. The timing, tempo, and surprise of continuous attacks from unexpected directions demoralized the Russian command, leading to the destruction of Second Army at Tannenberg and First Army's retreat back into Lithuania.

Besides serious Russian operational and tactical errors, two other factors contributed to I Corps' success. The first was doctrine. Doctrine provided the corps' leaders with an intellectual framework from which to evaluate situations, make decisions, and take action. German doctrine was opportunistic in its emphasis on finding and attacking enemy vulnerabilities. Francois' operational turning movements and the numerous occasions where subordinate division commanders used tactical envelopments to strike exposed Russian flanks underscore this point. Mission oriented orders further encouraged tactical flexibility and local leader initiative.

A doctrine that encouraged independent judgment underwrote General Francois' command style, the second factor in German success. Francois remained the unsung hero of both Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. His aggressive leadership played a key role in closing the ring of iron around Samsonov's army at Tannenberg and forcing the Russian First Army to abandon its positions around the Masurian Lakes. Despite his qualities as a combat leader, however, he did not last long on the Eastern Front. Francois' antagonistic personality proved to be his undoing. Besides his haughty attitude, Francois' repeated disagreements and disobedience of orders during the campaign had first undermined the high command's confidence in his judgment. Shortly after Masurian Lakes, he quarreled again with Ludendorff, who could no longer tolerate the corps commander's habitually confrontational behavior. Francois was transferred to another corps on the Western Front, where he served until retirement in 1918. Unfortunately, Francois never truly understood that all leaders must also follow — especially in wartime.

I Corps' operations directly influenced the outcome of the campaign by achieving physical and psychological effects out of proportion to size. As Napoleon, a true maestro of decisive maneuver, aptly observed, "Moral force, rather than numbers, decides victory."²⁷ I Corps operations during the Tannenberg campaign are worth serious study for those military professionals interested in how an outnumbered force can achieve decisive results, not through massive firepower but through decisive maneuver.

In the double battles of Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes the Germans successfully drove the Russians from East Prussia, its operational objective. And yet for all its tactical and operational merits, the German victory was in the final analysis incomplete. German casualties were very heavy — 100,000 out of the 250,000 actually engaged. At the strategic level the Russian offensives successfully caused the Germans to draw

off forces that might have played a decisive role in the west. Nor did German operations force the Russians to capitulate. Achieving a decision in neither the East nor the West in 1914, doomed Germany to fight a two-front war that it could ill afford. Thus, the central lesson of the campaign, which was not appreciated at the time, appeared to be about the linkages between strategy-operational art and tactics. While operational and tactical virtuosity may win battles, they cannot substitute for sound strategy. The Germans would learn and relearn this lesson again throughout the First and Second World Wars.

Notes

1 Dennis Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1991), 117-121. The Germans originally calculated the strength of a corps based on the number of men that could move along a single route and fight in the same day: approximately 30,000 men. Acquisition of modern weapons and ammunition, especially in the artillery arm, led to an increase in size of over 40,000 men in 1914, a force too large to move over a single road.

2 Showalter, 121-123; Martin Samuels, *Doctrine and Dogma: German and British Infantry Tactics in the First World War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 59-72, 83-96; Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 17-26.

3 Showalter, 155; Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 271.

4 Jehuda L. Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on German Conduct of the Two World Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 153-156.

5 Helmuth von Moltke, Jr, quoted in W. Bruce Lincoln, *Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution, 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986), 66.

6 Showalter, 153-162; Vincent J. Esposito, ed., *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, Vol II (New York: Praeger, 1959), 15-18.

7 T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent J. Esposito, *A Short History of World War I* (West Point, NY: USMA, 1954), 8-9, 15-23, 100-101.

8 Hermann Von Francois quoted in Lincoln, *Armageddon*, 66.

9 Hoffman accepted the idea of a spoiling attack but objected to its timing. Prittwitz's operations officer believed that XVII and I Reserve Corps would not be able to move forward fast enough to make a coordinated assault with Francois' troops. Esposito, *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, 16; Showalter, 169-170.

10 Francois quoted in Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon*, 74-75.

11 Erich von Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1929), 59-60; Hoffman, *War of Lost Opportunities*, 28-29.

12 Showalter, 237-238.

13 Francois quoted in Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon*, 74-75.

14 Hoffman, 29.

15 Winston S. Churchill, *The Unknown War: The Eastern Front* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1931), 210.

16 Stone, *The Eastern Front*, 68.

17 Helmuth von Moltke (the younger), Chief of the German General Staff, had withdrawn these units from the German right wing when it appeared the Russians would push the 8th Army across the Vistula River during the war's opening days. The Chief feared that 8th Army would not be able to stop the Russian offensive before the war in the West was won, making forces available for the East. In retrospect, Moltke's actions appear premature and rash. Both Ludendorff and Hoffman criticized Moltke's decision and at one point indicated the troops were unneeded. Despite their feeble protestations to the contrary, Ludendorff and Hoffman put the troops to good use during the battle around the Masurian Lakes. On Moltke's decision and 8th Army's reactions see: Hoffman, *Lost Victories*, 34-35; Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1991), 78-79; Ludendorff, 69.

18 Edmund Ironside, *Tannenberg: The First Thirty Days in East Prussia* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and sons, 1925), 233-236.

19 Stone, 67-68; Girard L. McEntee, *Military History of the World War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 107-108.

20 Churchill, 212-213; Stamps and Esposito, 106-107.

21 Stone, 68.

22 Hoffman, 37-38; Ludendorff, 77-78; Stamp and Esposito, 106-107.

23 Hoffman, 39; Ludendorff, 77.

24 Ironside, 245-248.

25 Stone, 68-69; Churchill, 215-216; Asprey, 89.

26 Ludendorff, 78-79.

27 David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1966), 155.

Chapter 3

“Lighthorse!” The Australians Take Beersheba

by

Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Sr., USA (Retired)

Few now remember Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel GCMG KCB, the first colonial officer ever to command a British Army Corps. A native Australian and career officer in the tiny Australian defense force, Chauvel commanded mounted troops in the Boer War and an infantry division at Gallipoli. After Gallipoli he commanded the Anzac Mounted Division. In 1917, under General Sir Henry Hyman Allenby, he was promoted to command the Desert Mounted Corps — the largest mounted force ever fielded in British history. A master of mobile warfare, Chauvel combined a careful husbanding of men and horses with the ability to stake all for victory. At Beersheba he took and passed his toughest test in a career filled with success in battle command.

If 1916 had been a bad year for the Allied forces on the Western Front, 1917 had been no better. Now, in the early summer of 1917, the French Army lay exhausted and mutinous, the Russians stood on the brink of collapse, and a crippled British army huddled in its trenches with little hope for victory on the 400-mile-long Western Front. The British government required some success, some victory, to sustain the Commonwealth through the difficult times that lay ahead. Before the year was out, Britain would score a glittering victory in Palestine, led by a gruff commander named “Bull” Allenby and by the dashing Australian Light Horse. The battlefield was named Beersheba, and the stakes were nothing less than control of the entire Middle East.

A Failed Beginning

To date, the Middle East had reprised the failures on the Western Front. The defeat at Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915 loomed large in the minds of the British War Cabinet. Here the Turks, inspired by the redoubtable Mustafa Kemal and commanded by the brilliant German General Liman von

Sanders, inflicted a crushing defeat.¹ In Mesopotamia as well, a promising campaign had given way to disaster when General Townshend's campaign to take Baghdad ended in surrender for 9,000 troops at Kut el Amara in April 1916. Although General Maude eventually captured Baghdad in March 1917, the memory of the surrender at Kut was not forgotten by the British Army, which viewed it as a blot on their military record, and the event gave immense prestige to the Turks amongst neighboring Arab countries.

Palestine was a region then belonging to the Ottoman Empire. To the north was Syria, to the east and southeast the vast deserts of the Nejd and Hejaz, home to Prince Faisal's Arab army and his British adviser, T.E. Lawrence. To the south the Sinai desert lay between Palestine and Egypt, another large, almost waterless tract. The frontier ran from Rafah inland from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Akaba, on the Red Sea. The region inland from the coast was uninhabited except by desert Bedouin.

In early 1917, things were not going well for the British on the Palestine front. General Sir Archibald Murray, the Commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), was headquartered in Cairo's Savoy Hotel, 300 miles west of his combat force, the Eastern Force Command on the Egyptian-Palestinian frontier. After a notable success in halting the Turks at Romani, just short of the Suez Canal, Murray's forces had inched forward into Sinai, building a railroad as they went to supply the water without which campaigning in Sinai was virtually impossible. Tasked by London to drive the Turks to the north, he ordered his Eastern Force Commander, Lieutenant General Sir C. M. Dobell, to attack the Turkish line, now established along a 35-mile front from Gaza on the coast to Beersheba, a desert oasis to the east, just south of the Judean foothills.

Murray had been a capable peacetime staff general, but he would be found wanting in the drive to take Gaza. Though an excellent administrator and logistician like Ian Hamilton in Gallipoli he would reveal fatal flaws as a combat general. Murray saw the capture of Gaza as the first objective, followed (it was hoped) by an eastward thrust to roll up the Turkish line ending at Beersheba. Then the advance northward would continue. Gaza itself, on the main coastal road, was well-fortified by the Turkish Eighth Army, commanded by the German Lieutenant General Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein. In May of 1917 Murray's force consisted of only three territorial (reserve or home guard) infantry divisions of indifferent quality, and the Desert Mounted Corps (DMC), consisting

of Australian “light horse” or mounted infantry, New Zealand Mounted Rifles, and British Yeomanry (territorial cavalry).² The Turkish-German force at the same time included three divisions in southern Palestine and some 4,000 Bedouin irregulars, armed with modern rifles. Though slightly outnumbered, with their defenses only partially completed, the Turks and their German advisers were formidable opponents in static defense.³ Most importantly, they controlled the only large water supplies between the Suez Canal and Jerusalem.

Murray failed badly in the First Battle of Gaza but his bulletins to the Imperial General Staff sounded more like a victory than a defeat, and he was therefore instructed by London to try again. A second attack in April failed again, a bitter setback which cost 6,000 men while inflicting only 2,000 Turkish casualties. As at Gallipoli, the Turks in defense were resolute opponents, British generalship was sadly lacking, and the troops, who fought well, were required to pay a painfully high price for little gain.

Clearly it was time for Murray to go. Searching about for a general with drive and initiative, the War Cabinet selected General Edmund Allenby, the Third Army commander in France. Known in army circles as a bluff, strict disciplinarian, Allenby got on poorly with Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the British Commander-in-Chief in France, but had shown dash and flexibility at Arras in the spring of 1917.⁴ Haig did not hide his dislike of Allenby, considering him unfit for high command, and routinely did his best to ignore him in the company of other army commanders and more favored generals. When advised that he was being relieved of his command and would return to England, Allenby was convinced that Haig’s antipathy had just ended his army career. He could not know that glory lay just ahead.

In England Allenby was summoned to meet first with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Robertson, and then with the Prime Minister, who informed him of his selection as commander of the EEF. His orders were brief and direct: take Jerusalem by Christmas as a “present to the British nation.”⁵ Denied a short leave in England, Allenby departed in late June 1917 for Egypt.

Allenby, in his late fifties, was noted for his size, physical strength and courage, but it was his short temper that had made him famous. Known throughout the army as “Bull,” he often exploded when things were not to his liking, which was often. Minor infractions (i.e.,

not fastening a chinstrap, not wearing socks) were a sure invitation to corrective action. This habit worsened, along with his temper, as he rose in rank. There was considerable apprehension in army circles, therefore, that his appointment would not sit well with the famously casual Australians and New Zealanders. The apprehension was misplaced. Bull Allenby was a hard driver and a tireless man, but he was also intelligent, willing to take chances, and now able to run his own show without Haig looking over his shoulder. The unimpressive EEF of the spring of 1917 would be transformed into his instrument of victory before the end of the year, and the Anzacs would be his primary weapons.

Allenby inherited Murray's original force, but also brought reinforcements which raised his command to a field army of three corps: the XX Corps, the XXI Corps, and the romantically-styled DMC, plus supporting arms and services, including better aircraft and more heavy artillery.⁶ The DMC, his mobile force, included the Australian Mounted Division (formerly the Imperial Mounted Division), the Anzac Mounted Division (which included the large New Zealand Mounted Rifles brigade), and the Yeomanry Division. A colorful but important unit was the Imperial Camel Corps, a brigade-sized force of four battalions mounted on camels. The Anzac and Australian Mounted Divisions were essentially mounted riflemen, trained to move on horseback but generally fighting dismounted, while the Yeomanry Division was true British cavalry armed with swords.

Though tough and experienced, the Australians and New Zealanders had known plenty of defeat and disappointment at Gallipoli before returning to Egypt to be reunited with their beloved horses. As mounted troops, they excelled in desert campaigning. Romani had given a foretaste of what they could do. Pitched battles at Magdhaba and Rafah leading up to Gaza had also shown their worth. It now remained to be seen what might be accomplished with a full corps of mounted troops in the great gamble to take Gaza.

Jerusalem was the "prize," but how to get there? Gaza had now twice rebuffed attempts to take it frontally. There had to be another way. Lieutenant General (later Field Marshal) Sir Philip Chetwode, the commander of XX Corps and a brilliant planner, now created in concert with Brigadier Guy Dawnay (who had also planned the Gallipoli operation), a plan which turned the original conception into something quite different. The previous Gaza attacks had been frontal assaults up the coastal highway, aiming to turn the Turkish positions to take Beersheba,

with its invaluable wells, from the west. Chetwode and Dawnay turned the plan around. Gaza would be threatened first, with a prolonged and heavy bombardment.

But this time Beersheba would be the main effort, with the infantry divisions from XXI Corps holding the Gaza Turkish forces in place, XX Corps pinning the Beersheba defenders in place, and the DMC swinging around and behind the Turk's left flank, seizing Beersheba and its wells.⁷ It was all a question of wells, since the mounted force would have to move from its assembly areas, cross many miles of desert at nightfall, and then fight at dawn. The attack on Beersheba would mean up to 36 hours without water for the DMC and its thousands of horses — a challenging feat. Then, with little rest, the force would drive westward behind the Turkish lines towards the coast to cut the line of retreat from Gaza as the Turkish defense crumbled.

If Jerusalem was the prize, then Gaza was the gate through which the EEF must pass to get there, and Beersheba the key to the gate. Allenby approved the plan almost as soon as he digested it, for it fit his conception of mobile warfare in a way foreign to the high command in France. Now on his own, Allenby was to show that he was a formidable and adaptable soldier in independent command.⁸

A major problem, however, was the poor condition of Allenby's force. Headquartered in Cairo, the EEF under Murray was despised by the Eastern Force Command and vice versa. Allenby immediately saw that attempting to do anything from hundreds of miles away was impossible. He soon transferred his headquarters to the Palestinian front, put it in tents, deactivated the Eastern Force Command headquarters, and began a whirlwind schedule of visiting units and staffs. The effect was electric, the troops transformed into soldiers sure they were at last on a winning team.

Throughout the summer Allenby worked to rebuild his staff with officers previously known to him in France. One great asset was a brilliant intelligence officer with the very Teutonic name of Meinertzhagen. Major Richard Meinertzhagen (actually of Danish extraction) came from the War Office to Egypt while Murray was still in command. His disenchantment with Murray and the whole EEF enterprise hardly made him unique. Dawnay, who was to play the key planning role as Allenby's Deputy Chief of Staff, was bitter about the senior leadership prior to Allenby's arrival as

well. Meinertzhagen, upon meeting Allenby (who made it his practice to visit every office and every officer in his headquarters), observed:

“Was introduced to Allenby, to whom I talked on intelligence matters for a while. My word, he is a different man to Murray...His manner is brusque almost to the point of rudeness, but I prefer it to the oil and butter of the society soldier...the Egyptian Expeditionary Force is already awakening from its lethargic sleep under Murray, and I am happy to say that GHQ will shortly move into Palestine....”⁹

Meinertzhagen, a renowned ornithologist with long military service in East Africa before the war serving with the King's African Rifles, determined that absolute surprise was out of the question. Obvious logistics preparations — ammunition dumps, water lines — could not be hidden from the Turko-German forces, which at this point still possessed capable reconnaissance aircraft, command of the air, and Arab spies in considerable numbers. The problem was how to mislead the enemy as to the timing and direction of the main attack. It would be necessary to convince von Kressenstein that the opening attack on Beersheba was only a feint, and that the British would once again attempt to batter down the Gaza gate before seriously threatening Beersheba. As events would show, the eccentric Major Meinertzhagen was equal to the task.

Preparing an elaborate deception plan, Meinertzhagen's intelligence staff worked hard to persuade the Turks (who were providing the fighting men and most of the junior officers) and Germans that there was going to be another frontal attack on Gaza. Beersheba would be threatened, but not by major forces. Intercepted British signals in the weeks prior to the offensive, now planned for late October, clearly indicated another Murray-type push. In the latter stages of preparations, forces being repositioned away from Gaza for the Beersheba effort left their tents in position and their lines lightly manned, barbed wire in place, fires lit at night — all the apparent evidence of forces remaining in position for a major attack up the coastal road. German aircraft were carefully allowed only to fly into areas that Allenby wanted them to see. Now that the British had control of the air (Allenby had obtained new aircraft that outperformed the old German airframes) this task was not difficult.

Now Meinertzhagen carried out his most masterful ploy. He put together some false papers, quite authentic-looking, indicating the wrong positions for Allenby's main formations, the wrong direction for the main attack, and a date somewhat later than the one finally chosen. This information was transmitted to other units in code (which Meniertzhagen knew the Turks could read), and when he knew the Turks had the information (carefully correlated with other messages) he was ready for the main intelligence stroke. He had his sister Mary (in England) write a letter to an imaginary husband, serving on Allenby's staff, announcing the birth of their child. He then constructed the imagined persona by means of forged documents including a notebook containing observations and messages, an agenda for a meeting at Allenby's headquarters, cryptic notes about a code, and a fake order for an attack on Gaza. He stuffed all the papers in a haversack, which he carried on an apparent mounted reconnaissance of Turkish positions near Beersheba.

Nearing Turkish lines, he contrived to be spotted by a Turkish patrol, which gave chase, but then stopped. Meinertzhagen wheeled around, fired a couple of shots at them, insuring they would resume the chase, and then succeeded in dropping his rifle, other equipment and the haversack of documents — quite authentic-looking, spattered with blood (not his, but his horse's), which taken together clearly indicated that the impending attack was going after Gaza and any operations in the Beersheba area were to be a feint. The Turko-German leadership was convinced. The reserves behind Gaza remained in place and Turkish preparations moved towards the coast, but with less urgency.¹⁰

Now the plan began to take on its final form: first, a preliminary bombardment followed by a feint at Gaza by XXI Corps (under Lieutenant General E.S. Bulfin)¹¹ to fix the Turks' attention there; second, the assault on Beersheba by XX Corps (with Chetwode again in command) and the DMC (Australian Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel Commanding); third, the rapid thrust westward behind the Turkish line to seize Gaza from the rear. In the final phase of the battle, the horsemen of the DMC would attack behind the enemy's left flank in the Judean foothills, aiming for the higher ground at Hureira and Tel es Sheria. From there, as XXI Corps assaulted Gaza from the south, the Mounted Corps would ride straight for the coastal road and cut off the Turks as they attempted to fall back.¹²

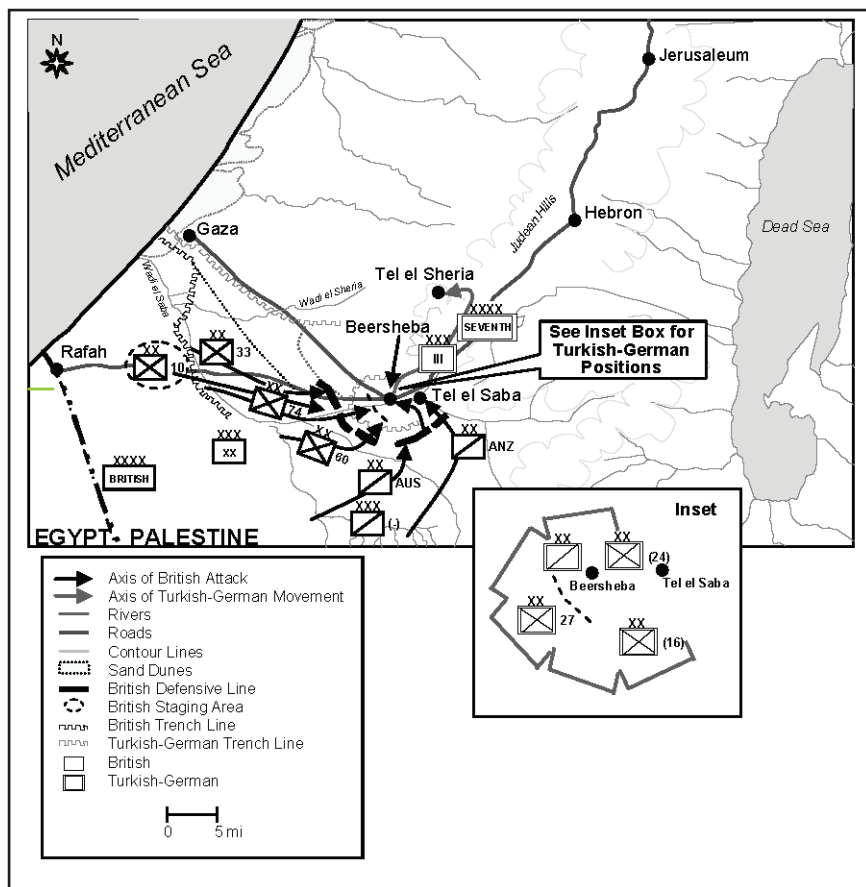
Though simple in concept, the plan was maddeningly complex organizationally, logistically, and tactically, requiring seamless coordination, flawless navigation across the desert at night — and a fair amount of luck. The Turks and von Kressenstein were not the only enemies; the desert and the lack of water for the DMC were, as everyone knew, a huge gamble. If Beersheba and its wells were not taken quickly the Mounted Corps would in a matter of hours be the Walking Corps, for the distance to be covered in the approach to Beersheba would test the Australian horses as never before. Unless the wells were taken at the first go, the horses would have to be withdrawn at once or face death from dehydration, followed shortly thereafter by the troops.

Desert transportation in 1917 did not mean, except in rare instances, vehicle transportation. It meant camels and horses. The horses of the Australians were unique. They were bred in New South Wales (hence the name “Walers”) from exported English racehorses which had failed in racing competition in England. The breeding stock was therefore acquired very cheaply, but their offspring was ideal for the brutal conditions in the desert. They were compact, courageous, and had astonishing endurance, existing on less than 10 pounds of grain a day and watering only once in 36 hours.¹³ Some could double this watering period and still perform adequately as mounts. Thus, for what was to come in the planned operation against Beersheba, the Australians were mounted on the finest animal transportation of the time.

On October 26th, Meinertzhagen’s deception having apparently succeeded, the troops moved into their assembly areas by night, leaving their former camps and bivouacs with enough activity, lights, and dummy figures to simulate continued occupation. A reconnaissance screen was pushed forward to push back enemy patrols and allow engineers to do their vital work of extending the railhead from Rafa to Karm. Although some bitter local engagements resulted, these patrols maintained security and the impending attack on Beersheba was not revealed.

On the 27th, XXI Corps and naval forces offshore began the artillery bombardment of Gaza. It was to continue for five days, while XX Corps and the DMC began to edge towards Beersheba in a series of night marches. Element by element, the 40,000 man formation pressed forward, halting each day in oven-hot, fly-blown *wadis* for night to fall before moving again. Just before daylight on the 31st, the bombardment of Beersheba began. Allenby had succeeded in repositioning the entire

DMC from the left to the right of his extended line without the enemy knowing it. The failure to keep track of the horsemen, always the EEF's main striking force, would spell defeat on a grand scale for the unlucky Turks and their German masters.



Map 3. Beersheba: Third Battle of Gaza, 31 October 1917.

The general plan for the Battle of Beersheba was for the divisions of XX Corps to draw off the main strength of the defenders by attacking west of the city against its outlying defenses. Then, the DMC would attack from the southeast and east to crush the defenders and seize the town. The four divisions of the corps¹⁴ stepped off at first light following the bombardment, but progress was slow in the stifling heat and rocky *wadis*. The leading battalions of the 60th Division¹⁵ advanced about 0830 hours from the south of the town. The DMC, less the Yeomanry Mounted

Division screening between the two infantry corps, had moved up from Asluj (the last position with water, about 26 miles from the attack positions east of Beersheba) the night before and began its advance from the east and southeast under artillery airbursts shortly after 0900 hours. It was to be a long day.

The two mounted divisions present that day, the Australian and Anzac Mounted Divisions, were extremely mobile but weak in firepower. A brigade of Light Horsemen, for example, could put only 800 rifles in the firing line¹⁶ and possessed only a single battery of horse artillery (firing shrapnel only, not high explosive).¹⁷ Though each brigade also boasted a machine gun squadron of 12 guns (mounted for movement and capable of very rapid emplacement on the ground), the power of the Australian Light Horse and New Zealand Mounted Rifles lay in their superior mobility, outstanding marksmanship, and experienced troopers and leaders. The Anzac Mounted Division was formed from the 1st and 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigades and the New Zealand Brigade. Its sister formation, the Australian Mounted Division, was composed of the 3rd and 4th Australian Light Horse Brigades and a brigade of British Yeomanry, the 5th Mounted Brigade.

Throughout the long morning the Turks and their German advisers resisted stubbornly. The defense centered on the Turkish 27th Division, reinforced by elements of the 16th and 24th Divisions. Buoyed by the belief that the British attack was little more than a ruse, the Turks fought confidently and British progress was slow. At 1215 hours General Chetwode launched his main attack with four brigades and by early afternoon the western approaches were in British hands. The infantry had done its job. Now all eyes turned to Chauvel's mounted troopers.

Key to the eastern approaches to Beersheba was the dominating height of Tel el Saba. Garrisoned by a strong advanced detachment of 250 infantry and 12 machine guns, well supported by artillery, it commanded the plain leading to the town from the east and southeast. At midmorning the Anzac Division's New Zealand Brigade of Mounted Rifles (the Wellington, Auckland, and Canterbury Mounted Rifle Regiments) advanced on the Tel, unaware of the strength of the dug-in defender. Approaching along the Wadi el Saba from the east, they crept to within 600 meters of the Tel when a bend in the *wadi* exposed them to a withering fire. Soon the New Zealanders were in trouble and at 1300 hours, Chaytor, the division commander, sent in the 1st Light Horse Brigade. Riding fast, the light

horsemen dismounted only 1500 meters south of the Tel and began to attack on foot from the south, but they too stalled under the sharp fire of the Turkish machine guns. To the north, the remaining Anzac brigade had ridden to take Tel el Sakety, another elevation controlling the Hebron road leading to Jerusalem. It had succeeded brilliantly, but now Chaytor was out of troops and Tel el Saba still barred the way.

Faced with this delay, Chauvel released the 3rd Light Horse Brigade from the Australian Mounted Division (reserved for the assault on the town proper) to assist in taking Tel el Saba. At 1500 hours, the New Zealanders, badly hurt but still very game, made a bayonet charge up the hill, and they and the 3rd Light Horse seized the objective. The way was clear to attack Beersheba. It was now 1600 hours. Ominously, however, little time remained for the dismounted assault that had been planned as the sun dipped low towards Gaza.¹⁸

Chauvel now faced a hard decision. Watching the day's action from a superb command post about four miles east of the town, he had been shelled by artillery, strafed by low flying aircraft, and most unpleasantly of all, put well behind schedule by the obstinate resistance at Tel el Saba. Some miles to the rear, the 5th Mounted Brigade, true British cavalry, lay waiting, but it would be dark before they could get into action. The only force ready to hand was Brigadier General Grant's 4th Light Horse Brigade. Doctrine for light horse units expressly forbade cavalry shock action; troopers were not even armed with sword or lance and were untrained in mounted combat. A mounted charge against entrenched infantry with machine guns and field howitzers seemed desperate indeed. But was there a choice?

Chauvel, famous throughout the campaign for his careful expenditure of the lives of his troopers and their horses, now issued his most famous order. Turning to Major General Hodgson, the commander of the Australian Mounted Division, he directed the 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade, comprising the 4th (Victorian) and 12th (New South Wales) regiments, to charge the Turkish line. His terse order was characteristic of the man and the troopers he led: "put Grant straight at it." Although the mission seemed desperate, Grant and his troopers joyfully mounted and moved out.

A Desperate Endeavor

“The lighthorsemen drove in their spurs; they rode for victory and they rode for Australia.”

Australian Official History

It was easy to see Beersheba. What lay between was a long slope — almost four miles — with no cover. Turkish artillery and machine guns waited in long trench lines before the town. Perhaps 1,200 Turks, supported by German machine gunners and Austrian artillerymen, lay waiting in trenches, sure that as always the Australians would dismount and come in on foot. The two regiments prepared to advance. Each formed into squadron frontages — three lines each in depth, the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments in front, the 11th in reserve. Now it was all or nothing. Grant ordered the charge. There was no question of dismounting, as was the usual practice; this had to be done at a gallop. As the official history puts it: “The 4th and 12th Light Horse gathered behind a ridge. From the crest Beersheba was in full view. Between the Light Horse and the town were the Turkish lines. The Lighthorsemen drove in their spurs; they rode for victory and they rode for Australia.”¹⁹

At 1630 hours, Grant signaled his regiments to advance at the trot. Nightfall loomed only 30 minutes away. German observers looked on in disbelief; sure the charge was pure bluff:

*We did not believe that the charge would be pushed home. That seemed an impossible intention. I have heard a great deal of the fighting quality of Australian soldiers. They are not soldiers at all. They are madmen.*²⁰

The troopers, riding under artillery airbursts a good portion of the way and braving heavy machinegun fire, left their rifles slung over their shoulders and charged with bayonet in hand as short swords. The brigade crested the ridgeline, with Grant and his regimental commanders (Lieutenant Colonels Bouchier and Cameron) leading. Very soon the horsemen urged their mounts to a gallop, and the commanders fell back to the second line to better control the charge. As the light horsemen came into full view, the Turks opened fire and horses began to fall. Streaming far ahead rode the ground scouts, charged to look for dangerous obstacles. Troopers O’Leary and Healey, both of whom survived unscathed, led the way. (O’Leary personally captured an artillery piece and its entire crew,

while Healey was officially recognized as the first man into the trenches).²¹ A Turkish machine gun detachment, posted on Hill 1180 to the west, fired with great effect until silenced by the horse artillery gunners of the Essex Battery, who put the offending guns out of action in minutes.

So quickly did the Australians close the range that the Turkish rifle fire soon became ineffective (panicked by the charge, Turkish riflemen failed to adjust their long range sights). At half a mile, the defenders realized that, unlike past practice, the Australians did not intend to dismount and attack on foot. It was then that the moral effect of massed cavalry, charging at speed and in mass for perhaps the final time in Imperial military history, paralyzed the defenders.

Miraculously, the charging Australians encountered no wire. Vaulting the trenches, the light horsemen were in among the Turks, stabbing and trampling them with their chargers. For a few brief moments a melee ensued, and here the Australians suffered most of their casualties. Lieutenants Burton and Meredith of the 4th Light Horse were killed leading their troops over the trenches as Captain Reid, commanding a squadron of the same regiment, dismounted his men and began to clear the trenches.

Riding alongside, the 12th Light Horse Regiment pressed its attack. Some elements were able to pass through a gap in the trench line and enter the town itself, where one squadron led by Captain Davies charged straight down the main street. Major Hyman, commanding a squadron but fighting with only his small headquarters element, killed sixty Turks in a savage trench fight while shouldering his way through to the town. Major Fetherstonhaugh, a brother squadron commander close by, had his horse killed within thirty yards of the trenches and was shot through the legs as he assaulted on foot.²²

As the light horsemen passed the trenches and penetrated the town, organized resistance collapsed. Everywhere the defenders ran, scrambling into the hills to the north. Although nine artillery pieces were taken, the pursuit came to a halt when the riders were engaged by dug-in riflemen and machineguns in the fading light. By dark the battle was over.²³

Although the Turks attempted to destroy the wells, their efforts were hurried and ineffective, and Beersheba's water was saved for the

horses. Unfortunately, it was not enough, and the careful planning which, up to this point had worked against all odds, began to unravel. British engineers determined that it would take several days before the pumps on the Beersheba wells could raise enough water for more than two divisions, crucially limiting the scope of the intended operations north and westward from Beersheba in the race towards the coast.²⁴

Denouement

Allenby, upon hearing the news that Beersheba was taken, had ordered Bulfin and his XXI Corps to mount the main attack on Gaza on the night of 1-2 November. Kressenstein must be made to hold his forces on the coast so that the Allied mounted forces could carry out their flank and turning movements westwards from the Judean hills and cut off the Turkish forces. Now, with the water supply in doubt, he was faced with staff recommendations that the attack be delayed until the flanking movement could be carried out with the forces originally intended. Although, the attack into the Turkish flank and rear was postponed for four days,²⁵ the frontal attack against Gaza went in on schedule at 0300 hours on the 2nd of November.

The XXI Corps lurched forward against the stout Gaza defenses, supported by massed artillery and naval gunfire which had been pounding the Turks for days. This attack coincided with a fateful decision by von Kressenstein to redeploy three divisions to the east to forestall an expected attack up the Hebron road towards Jerusalem.²⁶

Allenby thought he was still facing only Kress von Kressenstein, but overall command of the Turko-German forces had passed to the former Chief of the German General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn. Falkenhayn had control of Army Group F, German and Turkish forces originally intended for use against the British in Mesopotamia (British intelligence had picked up references to the force, code-named *Yilderim*, Arabic for “lightning”).²⁷ Hearing of the loss of Beersheba and the road to Jerusalem, he now decided to commit his *Yilderim* force southward into Palestine to block a thrust towards Jerusalem.

Now Allenby's forces faced mounting difficulties. The XX Corps and the DMC worked their way northwards against increasing resistance. Logistics began to break down. Chauvel and Chetwode, expected to attack Hureira and Tel es Sheria on November 4th, could not do so until the 6th.

On December 8th, Major General John Shea, GOC 60th Division, accepted the keys to the city of Jerusalem from the Mayor. Lloyd George had his victory and England had its Christmas present. Three days later, General Sir Edmund Henry Hyman Allenby entered the Jaffa Gate of the city of Jerusalem on foot, wearing a dusty field uniform, carrying a walking-stick, and accompanied by a number of British and allied officers. Among them was Major T.E. Lawrence, who had come to GHQ to report on Faisal's operations. It can be assumed with some certainty that Major Meinertzhagen was there as well.

Retrospective

It was, as they say, a famous battle. Jerusalem had been the prize. Gaza had, indeed, been the gate. And Beersheba, the key, was turned in the lock in the fading light of the late afternoon of October 31, 1917, by the mounted charge of the 4th Brigade, Australian Light Horse, with Brigadier General Grant Commanding. It was to be the last great mounted charge in British Army history.

To be sure, mistakes had been made. The decision to send the New Zealanders alone against Tel el Saba, which ultimately required a division, reveals an absence of reconnaissance puzzling in a mounted force. In retrospect, Chauvel may have waited too long to launch his attack on Beersheba proper. With two brigades "fixing" the Tel, it was probably an excess of caution to delay through the day. An earlier assault by Hodgson's division would probably not have been affected by the harried Turkish defenders struggling to hold on to their hill. The uncommitted brigades of the Australian Mounted Division might more usefully have been moved up for instant use as opportunity offered. The massed artillery of XX Corps, silent from noon onwards, might have assisted the under-gunned horsemen if some prior arrangements had been made for fire support.

Nevertheless, it is easy to second guess. Through a long and difficult day, with much at stake, an imperturbable Sir Harry Chauvel calmly fought his battle. At its climax he made a difficult choice — choosing the only option left that offered a chance of victory. At war's end, he would enter history as commander of the largest and most successful mounted force in the history of the British Empire. It goes too far to say that it began at Beersheba, for the unsung battles of Romani, Magdhaba, and Rafah — and even the nightmare of Gallipoli — had come first. Beersheba, however, covered the Australians and their New Zealand brothers in glory. They

never looked back. In the months to come they would fight with an élan and confidence that would take them to Damascus itself, altering forever the history of the Middle East.

Notes

1 Von Sanders' memoirs are a minor military classic, today almost unknown. See General of Cavalry Liman von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey* (Nashville: Battery Press, 1928).

2 Australian "Light Horse" and New Zealand "Mounted Rifles" units were essentially mounted infantry, lacking sabers or lances and moving mounted but fighting on foot. However, as mounted troops mixed with true British cavalry they were generally referred to by the enemy, and by senior British officers, as cavalry formations. Late in the war, all mounted formations in Palestine were issued sabers and trained on shock tactics, becoming "true" cavalry. See H.S. Gullett, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume VII Sinai and Palestine* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Ltd., 1923), 29.

3 The Marquess of Anglesey, *History of the British Cavalry, Vol. V Egypt, Palestine and Syria* (Trowbridge UK: 1994), 24.

4 General Sir Archibald Wavell, KCB, CMG, MC, *Allenby: A Study in Greatness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 63.

5 Wavell, 186.

6 Lieutenant Colonel The Honorable R.M.P. Preston DSO, *The Desert Mounted Corps: An Account of the Cavalry Operations in Palestine and Syria 1917-1918* (London: Constable and Co., 1921), 9.

7 Gullett, 348-350.

8 Allenby is often remembered not as a thinking soldier but as a bluff disciplinarian with an explosive temper. He was in fact the first officer of his regiment (the Inniskilling Dragoons, an old and storied cavalry regiment) to ever attend the elite Staff College at Camberly, and if not considered brilliant, was certainly widely read, highly intelligent, and perceptive. His biographer relates one anecdote when Allenby cited to his staff an ancient account of historical invasion routes through Sinai. "Allenby suggested reference to a passage in Strabo ... extracts from his works were obtained from Cairo in the original Greek, which Allenby translated without difficulty." Wavell, 17-18, 195.

9 From the diary of Major Richard Meinertzhagen, cited in Major General Anthony Farrar-Hockley, "Field Marshal The Viscount Allenby," *The War Lords*, ed. Field Marshal Sir Michael Carver (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1976), 149.

10 *Official History of the Great War, Military Operations in Egypt and Palestine*, ed. Captain Cyril Falls (London: Imperial War Museum, 1930), 31. See also Anglesey, 134. Some critics, long after the war, discounted this story, but it appears in the Official History and in numerous accounts of the time.

11 52nd (Scottish Lowland), 54th (East Anglian), and 75th (Territorial and Indian) Divisions.

12 Total Commonwealth forces totaled 76,000 troops, of whom 20,000 were mounted, and 550 artillery pieces. The Turks and their German and Austrian advis-

ers and support units numbered 49,000 with 360 guns. Allenby's numerical advantage was none too great considering that Turkish forces fought on the defense, in prepared terrain well known to them, following two great victories in the battles for Gaza and in possession of ample water supplies. Preston, 9.

13 More than 30,000 camels were used to carry water for Allenby's army in the Jerusalem campaign, in addition to railroads, specialized engineer units to recondition wells, and water carried on the soldier. At least until clear of Sinai, water was the overriding consideration for all planning. Wavell, 201. According to Preston, in the pursuit following the battle for Beersheba, some units of the Australian Mounted Division went *three days and four nights* without water for the horses. Frequent dehydration, as well as sand in the horses' grain ration, killed many horses and wore down the health of almost all. See Preston, 61.

14 60th (London), 74th (Dismounted Yeomanry), 10th (Irish), and 53rd (Welsh Territorial).

15 The 60th Division was commanded by Major General John Shea, who had served under Allenby in France but was relieved for criticizing him. In Palestine he rose to become perhaps Allenby's most trusted infantry division commander. Wavell, 187.

16 Gullett, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, 140.

17 Each mounted brigade was accompanied by a four-gun battery of 13 pounders. These were properly speaking guns, not howitzers, firing direct fire over open sights. The standard engagement range was 2,500 yards. Even in Australian and New Zealand brigades, the artillery units were British; at Beersheba, the charge was supported by "A" Battery of the Honourable Artillery Company and the Essex and Notts Batteries, Royal Horse Artillery. See Anglesey, 153 and Preston, 303.

18 Throughout the afternoon, German airmen made determined attacks upon the Australians and New Zealanders, strafing Chauvel's headquarters repeatedly and killing Lieutenant Colonel L.C. Maygar VC DSO, the commander of the 8th Lighthorse Regiment. Gullett, 406.

19 Gullett, 397.

20 Gullett, 404.

21 Anglesey, 156.

22 Anglesey, 157.

23 The charge and entry into Beersheba is described in detail in the Australian Official History. The 4th Australian Lighthorse Brigade charged with 800 riders from its 4th and 12th Regiments (its third, the 11th, was not available), resulting in 31 killed and 36 wounded. See Gullett, 399-402. 1,100 prisoners and ten guns from the Turkish 27th Division were taken. See Lieutenant Colonel Alexander H. Kearsey, *A Summary of the Strategy and Tactics of the Egypt and Palestine Campaign* (Aldershot: Imperial War Commission, 1931), 20-23.

24 Official sources disagree on the number of wells in Beersheba. Preston says seven, of which five were captured intact. Kearsey says 17.

25 A “particularly intense Khamsin” or sandstorm blew in for three days commencing on 1 November, greatly impeding efforts to develop the water supply. Beersheba did not achieve its maximum rate of 390,000 gallons per day until 5 November. Anglesey, 165-166.

26 Until very late in the day, Turkish and German intelligence officers continued to see the attack on Beersheba as a feint. The fall of the town, and exaggerated reports of a mounted force making for Jerusalem, led Kressenstein to redeploy three divisions to block the move. In fact, only a small raiding force of Arab irregulars and a few British machine gunners, led by Lieutenant Colonel H. W. Newcome RE, comprised the force. Newcome’s party was attacked by a full six battalions, and after a gallant resistance was captured or dispersed. Kressenstein’s decision unhinged the Gaza position in the face of XXI Corps’ strong attack, but may have saved his army, as delay would have seen him cut off and destroyed. The Gaza position fell on November 7. Gullet, 408, 429.

27 In late summer of 1917, the Turkish order of battle on the Palestine front included the 7th and 53rd divisions in the vicinity of Gaza; to the east in the area of Tel Sheria, the 54th and 16th divisions; at Beersheba the 27th and 3rd Cavalry divisions; and the 3rd Division in reserve. British strength at this time was estimated by German staff officers at eight divisions. Reinforcements in corps strength were sent in the fall, which succeeded in stabilizing the front but arrived too late to prevent the fall of Jerusalem. Sanders, 183.

28 In this pursuit and exploitation phase, Lieutenant Colonel A.D. Burton of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd London Regiment (60th Division), was awarded the Victoria Cross for actions at the Wadi esh Sheria. The breakthrough in the center of the Gaza-Beersheba line is described in Falls, 107.

Chapter 4

White Death Coming: The Battle of Suomussalmi

by

Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Jr., USA (Retired)

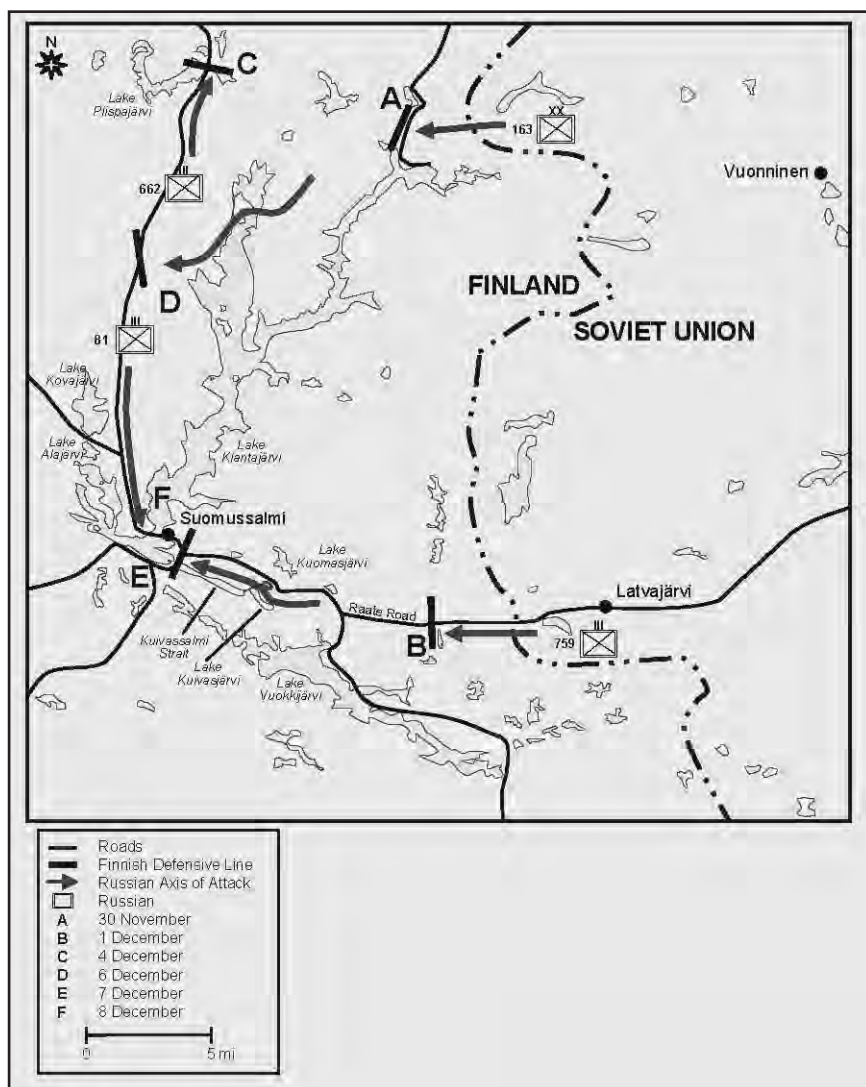
Few now remember the Winter War, when Finland's tiny army stopped a massive Soviet invasion in its tracks. With almost no tanks, artillery, vehicles or aircraft, the Finns possessed some of the toughest soldiers in Europe and one additional precious resource: a small cadre of professional officers, bloodied in the First World War, to lead their handful of brigades and divisions. Commanded by the legendary Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim, the Finns astonished the world with their obstinate defiance of the largest army in the world. At Suomussalmi, a shining chapter was written in military history when the doughty Colonel Hjalmer Siilasvuo's 9,000-man division wiped out more than 50,000 Russian troops.

On 30 November 1939, the Red Army, with half a million troops, crossed into Finland for a war of conquest expected to last a few weeks at most. Almost one million Russian soldiers would eventually fight in the bitter war, sustaining horrific losses and, by their inept performance, encouraging Hitler's later invasion of Russia. As one of the harshest winters in a hundred years shook Northern Europe in an icy grip, the Soviet 163rd and 44th Divisions struggled through heavy snows towards utter destruction. The Finns would later remember Suomussalmi as the most decisive division-level action of the war, a smashing victory enabled by superior battle command. The Russians would remember it as "Belaya Smert" — White Death.

The Strategic Setting

With a distinct culture and ethnic identity for more than 2,000 years, the Finns did not achieve nationhood until 1920 in the War of Liberation against the Bolsheviks. Sparsely inhabited and remote, tiny Finland posed little threat to the Soviet Union. But as world war loomed, Stalin and his generals looked to the Finnish border — scarcely over the

horizon from Leningrad, their western capital, and decided to crush the Finns to secure their western borders.



Map 5. Suomussalmi: 30 November - 8 December 1939.

The Red Army General Staff had every reason for optimism. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would initially commit 46 divisions to battle in Finland, a large part of the Red Army west of the Urals, supported by 2,500 planes and 3,000 tanks — half the tank strength

in their inventory. A Finnish force of 12 poorly armed light divisions, six regular army units, and six reserves opposed the Soviet juggernaut.¹ With a crushing superiority in the air and on the ground, the Red Army moved with assurance toward the quiet border.²

Overwhelming strength and recent successes at Kholkin Gol in Manchuria and in the waning stages of the German invasion of Poland fed Russian confidence, but it was a misplaced confidence all the same. Soviet commanders at regimental level and above were generally mediocre at best, the most talented and innovative having been murdered during Stalin's purge of the military several years before. Many of the troops earmarked for combat in Finland were poorly trained conscripts, unmotivated, and unable to function in sub-arctic terrain and weather. Soviet armored doctrine, at its zenith in the mid-30s under Marshal Tukhachevsky, had regressed to a point where tanks served primarily as infantry auxiliaries. Finally, the communist *zampolit* system divided command between unit commanders and political officers beholden only to the Party. By the end of World War II, the Red Army would address and correct all of these shortcomings. The Winter War would teach them their first hard lessons.

Organized in four field armies, Soviet forces concentrated their strength in the south. The General Staff ordered 7th Army, with 14 divisions and 1,000 tanks, to attack northwest from Leningrad to overrun the Karelian Isthmus before heading for Helsinki. (After failing to penetrate the Finnish defenses, this force would later be expanded to 26 divisions, a mechanized corps, and three pure tank brigades). The 8th Army to the north of Lake Ladoga would attack on the flank with seven divisions and two tank brigades to complete the conquest of the populated southern regions. In the far north, 14th Army with three divisions and one tank brigade would strike south from Petsamo and the Murmansk area to occupy the empty northern reaches of Finland.

In the center, the five divisions and two armored brigades of 9th Army would strike swiftly to the west to cut Finland in half at her narrow waist. The 9th Army's advance would be led by 163rd Rifle Division and the elite 44th Motorized Division. Here, barely 20 miles inside the Finnish border near a small village called Suomussalmi, they would meet destruction.

A glance at the map shows clearly why the bulk of forces from both sides were deployed in the southern regions. The Karelian Isthmus,

an historical invasion route used by Russia and Sweden in former times, is the key to St. Petersburg as well as the most direct path to Finland's key roads and cities — all located in the more temperate south. On this 60 mile front the Marshal of Finland, the legendary Carl Gustav Mannerheim, deployed the bulk of Finland's small army, some nine divisions, anchored on the Mannerheim Line.³ From the northern shores of Lake Ladoga to the arctic coast, a distance of 600 miles, incomplete regiments and battalions, totaling less than four divisions and largely manned by home guards and reservists, faced the Soviet colossus.

In the first days of December, reports reached Mannerheim of the halting advance of 9th Army even as the main battles raged in Karelia. The Army's first operational echelon, 163rd and 44th Divisions, advanced towards Suomussalmi on unimproved roads leading westward from the frontier. The 163rd Division, commanded by Major General Selendsev, was manned chiefly with Mongolian recruits, but Major General Vinogradov's 44th Motorized Division, a highly trained Ukrainian formation assigned to the Moscow Military District, was one of the best in the Red Army. Between them, they boasted 48,000 troops, 335 artillery pieces, over 100 tanks, and 50 armored cars.⁴ Detraining at the Murmansk railhead, both divisions road marched 200 miles to the front in eleven days, a grueling ordeal that dampened much of their offensive spirit in the early days of the war.

Hampered by poor roads, fatigue, the winter weather, and harassed by roving Finnish border guards and partisans, the two divisions approached sluggishly, moving at a rate of less than four miles per day. Deep snow drifts forced Soviet commanders to form details, sometimes hundreds of men strong, to shovel the snow aside or tramp it down for the heavy vehicles which followed. The Russian troops, lacking skis, tents and stoves, suffered cruelly as the temperatures dropped, averaging 30 to 40 degrees below zero.

The 163rd Division advanced on Suomussalmi along two routes. The 662nd and 81st Infantry regiments, accompanied by a battalion of tanks, approached from the northeast. The divisional reconnaissance battalion, followed by the 759th Infantry Regiment, moved up from the southeast, reaching the small village on December 5.⁵ They found it burned to the ground, its 4,000 inhabitants gone.⁶

For seven days a single Finnish reserve battalion contested the Soviet advance. Here occurred examples of some of the most extreme heroism in a war marked by outstanding courage. In one episode of the bitter battle for the town, a Finnish lieutenant repeatedly charged Russian tanks, alternately firing his pistol at their vision slits and crawling toward the enemy vehicles to throw a bundle of grenades, taped together to form a crude antitank weapon. The lifeless body of a brother officer, sent to the aid station with a hand wound, was found the next day surrounded by six dead Russian soldiers.⁷ In perhaps the most tragic episode of the battle, an exhausted reserve platoon leader, despondent after five days and nights of continuous combat, committed suicide rather than fall captive to the communists — only hours before help arrived.

Despite such stubborn resistance, the two advancing Soviet columns met on December 7 to take control of the ruined town. On that day, Mannerheim made the difficult decision to deploy a substantial part of his meager reserves to the scene.

The Finns Seize the Initiative

On 9 December, Jaeger Regiment 27 was detached from the Army general reserve and moved by train to the Suomussalmi area under the command of Colonel Hjalmer Siilasvuo, a tough veteran of the famed Finnish 27th Jaeger Battalion which had fought with the German Army in WWI.⁸ That night the regiment moved 30km to its attack positions near the village, leaving its vehicles at the railhead to ensure secrecy and moving entirely by skis.⁹ By early morning on the 10th, the regiment had closed into the battle area, linking up with the original defenders to form a brigade of 4,200 troops. They arrived only just in time. Despite a magnificent resistance, the original defenders were on the point of disintegration after a week of relentless combat against far larger forces. Though greatly outnumbered and without artillery or antitank guns, Siilasvuo ordered a counterattack by the entire brigade for the next day.

Outmatched in every class of arms and weaponry, the Finns possessed some strengths they could turn to advantage. In terms of terrain and weather, the Soviet decision to attack in winter proved disastrous. Deep snows hindered tank mobility off the road and prevented cross-country wheeled movement altogether. Deployment of towed artillery from march column into firing positions was often impossible. Soviet infantry, unable to move without skis and winter clothing, could not secure the tanks or

traverse the difficult terrain. Poor flying weather hampered effective use of the Red Army's huge advantage in tactical air power. Finally, the sparse road net and deep woods of central Finland did much to negate Soviet firepower and mobility.

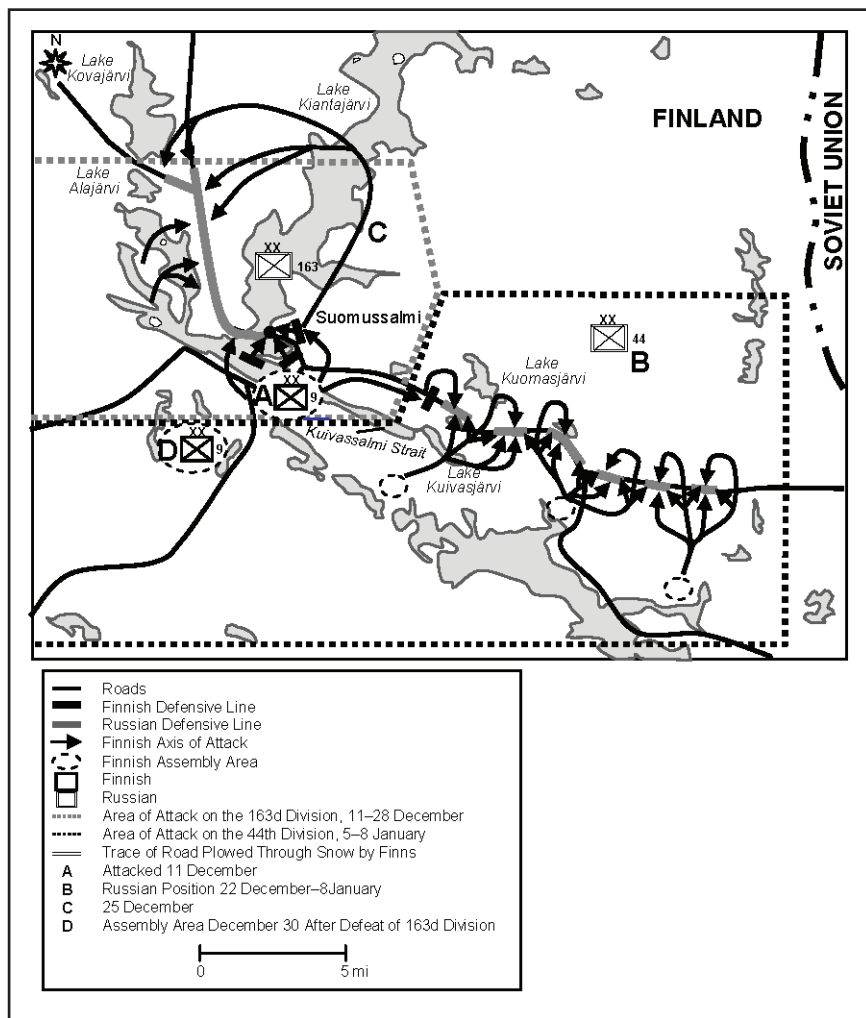
Tactically, the Finns enjoyed a detailed knowledge of the battlefield and, although hardly a professional army, took pride in the woodcraft, toughness and fighting spirit of the individual Finish soldier. Fighting for their homes and families, highly mobile and fit, the Finns exacted every possible ounce of combat power from the human factors which can loom so large in war. At the onset of the conflict they lacked weapons, training, and experience. They would soon get plenty of each.

On the morning of December 11, the Finns attacked in brigade strength to cut the Ratte Road running southeast from Suomussalmi. Piercing the Russian columns stretched out on the road, Colonel Siilasvuo detailed two companies to hold the Soviets to the east and turned westward with the remainder of the brigade to advance on the village itself. On the same day a Finnish ski battalion attacked and interdicted the northern road leading toward the village. Although not cut off, the Soviets ability to resupply on the northern route was gravely compromised for the next two weeks.

For fifteen days the Finnish Jaegers attacked the entrenched Soviets, slowly gaining control of the village and surrounding areas. The arrival on Christmas day of five battalions and ten vintage artillery pieces increased Siilasvuo's assigned strength to 11,500 troops, upgrading his command to divisional status. Though not a cohesive regular division, Siilasvuo's command was led by rugged men of proven valor. The three regimental commanders, Lieutenant Colonels Johan Makiniemi (JR27), Karl Mandelin (JR65), and Frans Fagernas (JR64), all knew each other and the doughty Siilasvuo well. All had fought the Russians together as young Jaegers in the Great War, and again in the War of Independence.¹⁰ A true band of brothers, they would lead the division with drive and intensity.

As Finnish partisan and guerrilla units harassed Soviet independent units attempting to reinforce Suomussalmi, the newly reformed 9th Division closed the ring. Now cut off from regular supply for over two weeks, unable to light fires in the severe cold, the soldiers of the 163rd Division began to panic as reinforcements failed to arrive. On Christmas Day a sharp assault on the northern route by fresh units severed the only

remaining Soviet line of communication. The 163rd was now completely cut off.¹¹



Map 6. Suomussalmi: 11 December 1939-8 January 1940.

Advancing timidly, the 44th “Elite” Motorized Division, moving along the Ratte Road, made no serious attempt to relieve its sister division until the 24th, when its lead regiment, the 25th Infantry, launched a heavy attack at first light. Fighting in hasty entrenchments behind felled trees, the two companies posted in the entrenchments reeled under violent artillery fire but managed to hold their ground after help arrived in the form of a

battalion from 27 Jaeger Regiment. Though defended by a small force the position was a strong one, emplaced behind a stream which traversed the roadbed and flanked by frozen lakes which offered open fields of fire.¹² A weaker attack the next day made even less of an impression on the defenders. Now fully aware that strong Soviet reinforcements were only six miles away, Colonel Siilasvuo's hardy ski troopers launched a concentric assault at dawn on the 26th to complete the destruction of the Mongolian Division.

Supported by a handful of obsolete artillery pieces and two 37mm anti-tank guns, the Finns had difficulty coping with the numerous tanks encountered throughout the strongly fortified defense. The principal anti-tank weapon was a large liquor bottle filled with thickened fuel, soon to become famous as the "Molotov cocktail," tens of thousands of which were provided by the national liquor board! Battle raged until the morning of the 28th when the Soviets suddenly collapsed, running wildly onto the frozen lakes near the village in a mad attempt at escape. A dramatic event occurred when the division command group was cut down by rifle fire attempting to escape on foot in the deep snow. By noon the following day the Finns had contained all organized efforts to break out and the 163rd Division ceased to exist. Though scattered survivors managed to regain Soviet lines, every major divisional unit disintegrated and virtually all equipment was destroyed or captured and put to use by the poorly equipped Finns.

As Finnish and British newspapers trumpeted the "wholesale destruction of a Red Division," Colonel Siilasvuo turned his attention to the 44th Division. Stretched out for many miles along the Ratte Road, its advance elements blocked outside Suomussalmi, the division dug in and waited passively for orders from above. Though very strong in tanks and artillery, the 44th had almost no ability to maneuver off the road in the forested landscape and deep snow and ice of the Finnish winter. Behind it, 9th Army lay inert, unable to advance. Emboldened by success, the Finns set about the destruction of the proud Ukrainians.

"Motti" Tactics

The 9th Division now faced a new and different tactical problem. In its previous operations it had encircled a superior force in Suomussalmi village and been forced to attack head on. Now the enemy lay trapped in a long, undulating column reaching back to the frontier, unable to advance

and forbidden to retreat. Strong in tanks and artillery, the Ukrainians established hasty defenses and waited for the Finns to break themselves on the Russian tanks and wire.

With typical initiative, 9th Division combat engineers set about constructing a series of ice roads running parallel to the Ratte Road on both sides. Truck-mounted snow plows, or heavy sledges drawn by large draft horses, proved effective in making serviceable supply routes even in deep ice and snow. Trunk roads branched off at right angles, terminating 3-4km from the enemy and secured at the terminus by platoon-sized security elements. While partisans and guerrillas kept constant watch on the enemy, camouflaged assembly areas were established along these routes with heated tents and mobile field kitchens. Though located quite close to the Russian positions, these staging areas remained undetected throughout the battle.

From these bases, hidden in the deep woods, Finnish ski troops raided the Soviet positions to shoot up every field kitchen and campfire, returning for rest and hot food as their companions kept up a constant pressure. Without fire and hot food, Soviet cold weather injuries soared as morale and fighting spirit plummeted. As temperatures continued to drop, the Finns used primitive but effective horse-drawn sleds and hand-drawn akhio sleds to bring up food and ammunition and evacuate casualties. The Soviets could do neither as they watched more soldiers freeze each day, enduring slow starvation by degrees.

Soviet intelligence problems proved to be even worse than their logistical troubles. Immobile off the roads, they could not conduct reconnaissance, nor could they counter Finnish probes and scouting parties.¹³ Tactically blind, their dispositions revealed to the Finns in every detail, they waited passively to be attacked.

Though only a handful of regular officers served in the 9th Division, Finnish leaders at every level grasped the basic tactical challenges of winter warfare and showed high levels of initiative and energy throughout the battle. They approached the problem of how to tackle the 44th Division with “Motti” tactics¹⁴, designed to cut the lengthy division column in several places for subsequent destruction in detail. Although the Russians attempted to patrol their flanks with heavy tanks, fortifying where they could, the task of constructing prepared positions all along the route of march proved impossible.

Moving along the ice roads, the division's three regiments deployed along the length of the Russian column, with Makiniemi's JR27 on the left, nearest Suomussalmi; Mandelin's recently formed JR65 in the center and Fagernas' JR64 on the right to the east. The first blow came on New Year's Day when the reinforced 1st Battalion from 27 Jaeger Regiment, consisting of some 1,000 troops, attacked to cut the Russian column along the road a few miles to the east of Lake Kuivasjarvi. Moving along the ice road, the battalion turned to the north to follow a horse trail intersecting the main Ratte Road. After thorough daylight reconnaissance and a hot meal in their attack positions, the battalion struck just after midnight.

Moving with two companies abreast mounted on skis, and overwatched by the machine gun company on the ridge a few hundred yards to the south, the battalion approached to within 60 yards without being detected and quickly overran an artillery unit deployed on the road. Engineers following close behind immediately felled trees and sowed mines, creating stout roadblocks facing both ways to prevent cooperation between the wings of the now severed column.¹⁵

Just after first light an antitank section of two 37mm guns arrived, going into action almost immediately to repel an armored counterattack from the east. Seven Soviet tanks were destroyed near the roadblocks as the Finns beat off desperate attempts to reopen the road. Throughout the day the Finns worked to improve their positions, rotating troops back behind the ridge for hot food and rest in warming tents. A second counterattack in the afternoon, this time from the west, was easily dealt with by the reserve company.

The next day a sister battalion, the 27th Regiment's 3rd Battalion, attacked farther to the west, but was repulsed by infantry and tanks deployed in a hedgehog position around a farmhouse. Though unable to break through and cut the road, the Finns kept it under fire to prevent movement and deny the Russian soldiers any chance at campfires and hot food. Throughout the first week of January, Colonel Siilasvuo launched constant attacks to pierce the 44th Division all along its length, in one case penetrating the road only a mile from the Soviet border.

The 44th Division's resistance peaked on the 5th when divisional scale attacks all along the column were beaten back. In many places the Soviets resisted fiercely, inflicting serious casualties on some Finnish companies and battalions attempting to close with the enemy to wipe

them out. One attack by 1/27 JR on 5 January to reduce a Soviet pocket caused so many casualties that its commander, Captain Lassila, requested permission to give up the roadblock while retaining control of the road by fire. The regimental commander replied grimly that he would have Lassila — the hero of the first successful attack on the huge Soviet division and a future American Army colonel — executed first.¹⁶

Despite painful losses, the 9th Division commander remained determined to finish the Ukrainians. The Finns scored a major success on the night of 5-6 January when a combat group from Task Force Fagernas, operating to the southeast, blew up the vital Purasjoki Bridge about five miles from the Soviet border. Caught in the pocket was the 3rd Infantry Regiment, sent in by the Soviet Ninth Army at the last minute to reinforce the beleaguered 44th Division. News of this attack rippled quickly through the units of the 44th Division with devastating effect. Now cut off from the outside world, General Vinogradov's proud division began to crumble.

Hemming in the Soviets from both sides of the road, the Finns increased the pressure with continuous attacks against the principal units in the northern sector. Here the fighting was desperate and savage, with Soviet artillery firing over open sights and Finnish infantrymen charging tanks with hand held Molotov cocktails. Conscious that time was running out, Red infantrymen hurled themselves desperately against the main roadblocks, only to be stopped by minefields and dense abatis and then destroyed by rifle and machine gun fire. By sundown on 6 January, it became clear, even to Vinogradov, that the end had come.

That night the defeated commander ordered a general retreat. Now without rations for five days, the troops of the 44th and their comrades from the 3rd Regiment abandoned their vehicles and heavy weapons and made for the border. In the ensuing panic the division, like its sister unit at Suomussalmi, literally came apart. Local defense units swept the forests and logging trails, killing and capturing broken fragments of retreating units. Regular units of the 9th Division set to work mopping up isolated pockets of resistance. General Vinogradov and a handful of staff officers managed to escape in tanks, only to be executed later by Soviet commissars. Finnish ordnance officers were astounded at the totals of captured equipment, which included 44 intact tanks, 70 artillery pieces, and almost 1,200 horses. Every Soviet field kitchen, some 55 in all, was destroyed or captured in the battle. Total Russian casualties were 27,500 killed and 1,500 wounded, with the Finns suffering 900 killed, 1,700

wounded, and 30 missing, for an exchange of more than 10:1 in favor of the Finns.¹⁷

Reviewing the Battle

The Battle of Suomussalmi ended the threat to central Finland for the remainder of the war. Following the battle, Colonel Siilasvuo, now promoted to *Kenraalimajorii* (roughly equivalent to a US brigadier general), was sent south to Kuhmo where he stopped and encircled the 54th Division (he later commanded a corps with distinction in the “Continuation War” of 1940-1944). After an operational pause in January, when regular divisions were brought up in great numbers, the Soviets attacked on the decisive Karelian sector in the south, where the terrain was more open and a better road net existed. After heavy fighting they broke the Mannerheim Line and overran the peninsula, forcing the Finns to sue for peace.

Despite the forced settlement which ended this phase of the Soviet-Finnish conflict, the accomplishments of Finland’s tough little army have few rivals in 20th Century warfare. Russian casualties totaled some 500,000, including 200,000 dead, against 23,000 Finnish dead and 45,000 wounded. Everywhere except in Karelia, Soviet forces were stopped and forced back, with eight entire divisions suffering total destruction.

The operational significance of the Suomussalmi battles was, moreover, immediate and far reaching. For the price of a single division, Marshal Mannerheim was able to parry a deadly thrust which, if successful, would have seized Finland’s only rail link to Sweden and taken her out of the war. The annihilation of two strong divisions convinced the Soviets that their original campaign plan could not succeed, and all attempts to push through in the center were abandoned. The time needed to adjust the campaign plan and shift reserves bought valuable breathing room for the Finnish government to negotiate for the outside help that alone could save Finland. That this help never came was a function of the great power politics of that era, when France, Britain, and the Scandinavian countries had more to fear from German or Russian enmity than they stood to gain from Finnish gratitude.

Nevertheless, the Finn’s overwhelming victory at Suomussalmi astonished the Soviets and the world. Though great battles have their own context and unique circumstances, Suomussalmi still has lessons to teach for serious students of the military art.

Perhaps the most striking lesson is that, even more than mobility, the *mobility differential* between two forces is all-important. How quickly a force can move on the battlefield is important; how much faster it can move in relation to its opponent is much more so. At Suomussalmi, the Finns' ability to move in daunting terrain and weather when the Soviets could not, stands out as the single most important factor in their ability to achieve dominant maneuver.

That advantage enabled all others. It allowed the Finns to build an accurate picture of the battlefield and denied it to the Soviets. It offset the huge Soviet advantage in artillery and tactical air power, because the Finns presented few stationary targets and could not be fixed. Resupply, casualty evacuation and replacement of battle losses was viable for the Finns, but virtually impossible for the doomed Soviet divisions.

Most importantly, the Finns possessed the ability to mass their limited combat power at decisive points. Despite their small numbers and inferior firepower, they struck again and again at the cooking fires and field kitchens that represented the Soviet's only means to combat the cold. Using the environment itself as a deadly weapon, the Finnish jaegers waged war against Soviet morale and the will to resist and crushed it absolutely. Thus it was not the loss of materiel that ultimately led to defeat; most Soviet equipment was lost only after their units had capitulated. Loss of confidence and the will to fight were the true harbingers of disaster.

An interesting dimension to the battle is the psychological advantage the Finns derived from their emphasis on close combat. Lacking heavy weapons and wary of Soviet artillery, 9th Division troopers sought at all times to attack and engage their opponents at very close ranges, usually at night or in bad weather. These tactics prevented the defenders from employing their combined arms doctrine, but more importantly, they gave the Finns a moral dominance that would prove to be decisive. The best example is the holding action conducted along the Ratte Road, which permitted the destruction of the 163rd Division. The aggressive tactics employed there convinced Soviet commanders that a powerful force opposed them, inducing a passive defense that ultimately proved fatal.

The Finns' careful preparation for winter warfare also paid rich dividends. Though a poor and ill-equipped force, the Finnish army had thought carefully about campaigning in bitter arctic weather and was determined to conserve the soldiers who were its most precious resource.

As one example, each Finnish platoon was provided with two 20-man sleeping tents, transported on akhios or snow sleds drawn by hand or by reindeer. To increase mobility, no sleeping bags or even blankets were issued; the warmth of the soldiers' bodies and small heating stoves sufficed even in bitterly cold weather.¹⁸ Machine guns, mortars, and ammunition were moved on akhios as well, with all motor vehicles consolidated at division level. Finnish troops were well equipped with warm winter clothing and whiteovers, and small unit leaders checked religiously to ensure that wet socks were exchanged regularly.

During operations, Finnish troops could count on hot food, prompt medical attention, and regular if not lavish resupply. The primitive nature of their logistical system was itself a positive strength, since it depended not on machines, but on over-snow transport drawn by the combat troops themselves. Though much credit falls to the determination and hardiness of the individual Finnish *jaeger*, it would be a mistake to ignore the careful planning that went into equipping and sustaining him in some of the toughest weather and terrain in the world.

Tactically, few battles in this century offer a more stirring picture. Though one is impossible without the other, the high maneuver/low firepower content of the Finnish army clashes sharply with the high firepower but relative immobility of the Red Army in Finland. What can we learn about dominant maneuver from this epic confrontation in the far north?

By its very nature, fighting outnumbered against the enemy demands combat leadership of a high order. Hjalmer Siilasvuo set the tone with battle command that accepted nothing less than victory. Speed and fluidity, the hallmarks of 9th Division operations, could only be achieved through rapid decisive leadership far forward in the battle area with the details left to junior commanders. Generally not professional officers, Finnish commanders nevertheless took pains to learn the terrain and led from the front, not from command posts in the rear. And they were men of iron character. Though not abusive toward subordinates, they accepted few excuses and displayed a granite resolution and will to victory. They set an example of courage-under-fire that inspired respect and emulation from their men.

The Battle of Suomussalmi teaches that numbers and fire alone are not decisive in battles and engagements. Victory depends, not just

on greater mobility, but also on more rapid decision/action cycles that confer an ability to focus battlefield effects against key nerve centers or pressure points. General Siilasvuo understood that he could not take on two mammoth Soviet divisions simultaneously. But by massing his limited troops at decisive points he was able to bring about the collapse and disintegration of far larger forces, not through grinding attrition but through dominant maneuver.

History has all but forgotten the man and his matchless soldiers. Yet their heroism and battlefield exploits still yield powerful lessons — smaller forces will often fight outnumbered, but they can fight with confidence and dominate the battlefield. The men who fought at Suomussalmi show us how.

Notes

1 The Russian division totaled 17,500 troops and included one field artillery and one howitzer regiment in addition to its three infantry regiments. Strong armor and artillery units were found at echelons above division. The Finnish division had one artillery regiment, generally equipped with obsolete weapons, and three infantry regiments for a total of 14,200 men. With a 2:1 superiority in small arms firepower and a 3:1 edge in artillery at the division level, supported by thousands of tanks and aircraft, the Soviets enjoyed an advantage in terms of combat power on the order of 15:1. Eloise Engel and Lauri Paananen, *The Winter War* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1973), 158.

2 Russian overconfidence is shown in a field order captured in the first days of the war, cautioning Soviet units not to violate the Swedish frontier! Carl Gustav Mannerheim, *Memoirs of Marshal Mannerheim* (NY: E.P. Dutton, 1954), 328.

3 Despite Russian propaganda describing it as the most extensive fortification system in the world; the Mannerheim Line was little more than a temporary set of field fortifications, not constructed in depth, built around timber and earth bunkers and trenchlines. Mannerheim, 371.

4 Engle and Paananen, 95.

5 Victor Suomalainen, "The Battle of Suomussalmi," *Military Review* (December 1949), 55.

6 Throughout Finland, all towns, villages, even individual dwellings in the path of the Russian advance were systematically set on fire to deny the Soviets shelter from the elements.

7 Engle and Paananen, 97.

8 Jaeger Battalion 27 was formed in 1917 exclusively of Finns drawn from all classes of Finnish society. Trained in Germany, it saw service on the Eastern Front and later in the War of Liberation. Officers and men from the battalion formed the nucleus of the later Finnish officer corps. Mannerheim, 131.

9 *Northern Operations Under Winter Conditions: The Battle of Suomussalmi-Kuhmo 1939-1940*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Lesson R6480-6, 1943, p. B-7.

10 Allen Chew, *Fighting the Russians in Winter: Three Case Studies* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1981), 18.

11 Suomalainen, 58.

12 Suomalainen.

13 Allen F. Chew, *The White Death: The Epic of the Soviet-Finish Winter War*, (Michigan State University Press, 1971), 110.

14 "Motti" is the Finnish word for firewood, stacked and ready to be split into kindling for the fire.

15 The battalion commander, Captain Eino Lassila, later immigrated to the United States and enlisted in the US Army, where he became a full colonel! Chew, *Three Case Studies*, 48.

16 Chew, *The White Death*, 117.

17 R6480-6, B-10.

18 Chew, *Three Case Studies*, 23.

Chapter 5

“Stout Hearts and a Worthy Cause” The Battle of Sidi Barrani

by

Colonel Arthur W. Connor, USA (Retired)

For the British, victories were hard to come by in 1940. Embarrassed in Norway, humiliated in France, teetering on the brink through the Battle of Britain, the United Kingdom stood almost alone against the Axis juggernaut as 1940 ground to a close. In the Western Desert, Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor calmly prepared to attack an Italian force many times his size. His charm and diffidence belied a superior mind and a fixed determination to annihilate his opponent. And so he did, winning one of the most complete battles of the Desert War.

In the long history of its island race, Britain has faced few hours more dark than those of late 1940. Everywhere the mighty Wehrmacht and its allies ran wild. In whirlwind fashion Poland, Denmark, Norway, and France had fallen; the British army had been pushed off the continent in a humiliating debacle, and Hitler stood poised to overrun the Balkans and invade Russia. Yet even in extremity, Britain and its doughty Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, looked for opportunities to strike a blow against the formidable Axis. Though overshadowed by later events, the Battle of Sidi Barrani in December 1940 stands out as a striking example of courage and victory against all odds.

On 13 September 1940, with the Battle of Britain raging in all its fury a continent away, the Italian invasion of Egypt began. A spectacular artillery barrage fell on the old Egyptian barracks at Musaid, followed by a similar barrage on Sollum and its airfield. As the dust and smoke of the second barrage drifted off in the sudden morning stillness, the Italian XXI Corps started its advance along the coastal road, motorcycles leading long lines of light tanks and trucks, advancing as if on the parade ground.¹ A mixed British force consisting of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, 11th Hussars, and Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) contested the Italian advance, inflicting heavy casualties. The sheer weight of the five Italian divisions

overwhelmed the three battalions of infantrymen, gunners and troopers of 59 59 the British force, forcing them back all along the front.

The gunners of the RHA withdrew skillfully through the infantrymen of the Coldstream Guards, took up new firing positions, and continued to fire into the dense ranks of the enemy. For four days the pattern was the same: the Italians would advance during daylight, while the British retired skillfully towards Maktila and their final defenses at Mersa Matruh. On 16 September, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani halted the Italian advance at Sidi Barrani, sixty miles into Egypt.² There the Italians remained for nearly two months, erecting a monument to their victory, and building fortified camps for their soldiers, until a brilliant counterstroke by the British Western Desert Force destroyed the vastly superior enemy force, chasing it back into Libya in December. During Operation *Compass*, as the offensive was known, the Western Desert Force dominated the vastly superior Italian forces in the Battle of Sidi Barrani from 9-11 December 1940, routing them utterly and forcing the Germans to intervene in the desert war.

The Italian Tenth Army rested on the laurels of its four day offensive into Egypt, building a series of eight fortified camps between Maktila and Sidi Barrani on the coast, and Sofafi to the south. In this semi-circle of defenses, the Italian XXI Corps placed five divisions plus a motorized group under General Pietro Maletti. Tenth Army placed three additional divisions between the Corps headquarters at Bardia and Halfaya Pass, nearly 80,000 troops total, supported by 200 tanks of all types, and several hundred guns.³ From the end of September through December, the Italians improved their positions. The camps were roughly rectangular in shape with low walls protected by minefields and tank ditches. The camp at Nibiewa containing General Maletti was typical of all eight forts, measuring 2,400 yards by 1,800 yards.⁴

The terrain in this part of the desert is marked by a steep escarpment running from the coast at Sollum, southeast to Rabia and Sofafi. A barrier to vehicular movement, the escarpment decreases in size to the east of Rabia. South and west of the escarpment the desert plateau is trafficable for all vehicles, but the coastal sector to the north is filled with low bushes and rock outcroppings that tend to restrict movement to the coastal road. In 1940, the single coastal road was paved from Matruh to Sidi Barrani, but just a dirt track from there to the frontier. A barbed wire fence defined the border between Egypt and Libya, with the coast road climbing the

escarpment through a series of hairpin turns, with another way through the escarpment at Halfaya Pass, four miles to the southeast.⁵ The Italians placed their defenses to the north and south of the escarpment, leaving a gap near the village of Bir Enba.

Facing the Italian fortresses, Lieutenant General Richard O'Connor's Western Desert Force mustered only 36,000 men in two divisions, the 4th Indian and the 7th Armored, plus Corps troops. The 7th Armored fielded 200 light tanks of all types and 75 cruiser (medium) tanks, but only two battalions of motorized infantry.⁶ The 4th Indian Division contained only two brigades of infantry, but the separate 16th Infantry Brigade would be attached for *Compass*, bringing it up to strength. Corps troops consisted of five battalions of artillery, with a disparate grouping of units garrisoning Mersa Matruh, completing the ground forces available to O'Connor. At the time of the Italian declaration of war, the commander of Air Headquarters, Middle East, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Longmore, had only 300 aircraft in the entire Middle Eastern theater. Half of these were based in Egypt, but all of the aircraft were older designs, with the fighter squadrons equipped with the obsolete Gladiator biplane. The Italians had 282 aircraft in Libya, and another 150 in East Africa.⁷ Responsibility for supporting O'Connor fell to No. 202 Group, RAF, under the command of Air Commodore Raymond Collishaw. Collishaw controlled eighty-one aircraft at the start of the war, but he was an aggressive leader who had served in the Middle East in the 1920s and 1930s.⁸

What they lacked in men and material, however, the British made up in other areas. First and foremost was the superior leadership of O'Connor, and his immediate superiors Lieutenant General Henry Maitland Wilson, Commander of British troops in Egypt, and General Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief, Middle East. As early as 11 September, two days before the Italian advance began, Wavell ordered his chief of staff to study the possibility of attacking the Italian positions in Libya. Wavell wrote:

In planning the operation, let us avoid as far as we can the slow ponderosity which is apt to characterize British operations. At the time that we shall be in position to take the offensive, we shall presumably have established a strong enough naval position in the Mediterranean to prevent Libya from receiving much in the way of supplies.

*We may, therefore, hope to be dealing with a somewhat dispirited and not very formidable Italian, and to be able to take a certain degree of risk.*⁹

Wavell understood clearly that attacking the numerically superior Italian forces would entail great risk, and that the operation would have to be swift and decisive. His tactical commander also understood these parameters. O'Connor was anything but ponderous. A small, self-effacing man with a reputation for boldness and unorthodoxy, he came to the Western Desert Force from Palestine where he commanded the southern district. A soldier of immense intellect and talent, O'Connor commanded a battalion in WWI, a brigade in India in 1935, and a division in 1938, gaining a reputation as an energetic and skillful leader and trainer. Taking command of the Western Desert Force on 8 June 1940, he was on the move constantly, visiting the units of his command and preparing himself for combat in the desert by studying the terrain. At one point he even outdistanced the forward outposts of the 11th Hussars, passing one of the patrols while traveling from the enemy's direction.¹⁰

At the end of September it was obvious the Italians were not going to move from their frontier fortresses in the near future. Sensing an opportunity, Wavell once again set himself to the task of attacking the Italians. On 20 October he wrote Wilson ordering him to examine the possibility of an attack in the Sofafi-Sidi Barrani-Buqbuq area, an operation that was to be "a short and swift one, lasting four or five days at most."¹¹ Before any plan could be executed, however, the British had to determine the disposition and composition of the Italian forces before them, while denying the Italians the same information on their own forces.

Preparing the Battlefield

To attack such a strong force, the British had to dominate the information war in the theater. At the onset of the war, the British Military Intelligence branch of the War Office had broken the Italian Air Force high-grade cipher codes. Eighty percent of these ciphers were readable and yielded a wealth of information on the effects of RAF bombing raids, and the results of Italian reconnaissance missions over British lines.¹² Additionally, the same high-grade Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), known as ULTRA, allowed the British leadership in London to discount the sudden and unexpected appearance of German Army units in the desert for the immediate future. Finally, SIGINT yielded the details of the Italian

dispositions in their camps facing the Western Desert Force, especially after the Army's crypto-analytic section in Cairo broke the cipher used by all Italian formations down to brigade level.¹³ Wavell, however, would find himself at odds with the General Staff and Churchill over the strategic importance of the upcoming battle, because he was not privy to ULTRA intercepts until March 1941.¹⁴ All this information could not fully meet O'Connor's needs. Aggressive patrolling, aerial reconnaissance, and innovation were needed to complete the intelligence picture.

Ground reconnaissance was the forte of the 11th Hussars. On 11 June 1940, the day after Mussolini declared war on Great Britain, the Rolls Royce armored cars of the regiment crossed the frontier wire into Libya and attacked the outposts of the Italian Army near Sidi Omar.¹⁵ With his B Squadron¹⁶ reconnoitering Italian positions around Fort Capuzzo, Major Geoffrey Miller positioned his headquarters troop to guard the gap in the wire that delineated the border between British Egypt and Italian Libya. As Miller waited in the cool night air for his troops to report, he spotted headlights approaching from the south. Scrambling onto both sides of the track, the crews of the two armored cars waited for four trucks, headlights blazing, to come into range. The Hussars opened up with every weapon they could muster, stopping the trucks and drawing cries of terror and panic from their occupants. Only a few shots were fired by the Italians in return, and angry Italian voices screamed for a cease-fire. As the Hussars rushed forward to take control of their newfound booty of prisoners, the two indignant Italian officers in charge of the hapless soldiers were astonished to learn they were at war! It seems someone forgot to tell the Italian soldiers at the front that Mussolini had declared war.¹⁷ If Operation *Compass* was to be successful, the same aggressive reconnaissance was needed in October and November. The final plan would depend on the skill and quality of the reconnaissance effort.

The 11th Hussars set about the task of determining Italian intentions as soon as the advance stopped on 16 September. The continual grind of patrolling, coupled with the wearing effects of the desert and combat losses, sapped the strength of the Hussars. They needed rest and maintenance, but given the odds, O'Connor simply could not afford to pull the Hussars and their armored cars out of the line. He had to know the strength and disposition of Italian forces in each of the camps. How many tanks and artillery pieces were in each? Where were the minefields and anti-tank obstacles? Were the camps mutually supporting, and were there mobile groups of tanks and infantry that could strike the British

flanks as they attacked? O'Connor could not, and would not, concede the reconnaissance fight to the Italians. In a meeting with his commanders, O'Connor created a new organization to fight the reconnaissance battle — the "Jock Column."¹⁸

The Jock Column was named after Lieutenant Colonel J.C. (Jock) Campbell, 4th RHA, and consisted of small combined arms formations. The armored cars of the 11th Hussars were supplemented by a battery of 25-pound artillery, an infantry company for protection and close-in patrolling, and anti-tank guns for countering Italian armor, all under the command of Campbell. The mission of the Jock Column was to dominate the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance fight in the area separating the two armies. Several Jock Columns were in action by the end of October, "establish[ing] the moral superiority over the Italians which was to assist so greatly in the gaining of the victories of the next few months."¹⁹ As the Jock Columns blinded the Italians to the disposition of the British troops, Wavell, Wilson, and O'Connor pondered the details of *Compass*.

In his 20 October letter to Wilson, Wavell went into great detail as to how to conduct the attack. He proposed a two-pronged effort against both flanks of the enemy line, with the two divisions of the Western Desert Force attacking abreast, meeting in an envelopment that would off the Nibeiwa and Tummar camps.²⁰ All troops could be used for the offensive including the garrison at Mersa Matruh under Brigadier A.R. Selby (approximately 1,800 strong and called Selby Force), and the newly arrived 7th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) and its fifty heavy "I" (Infantry) tanks.²¹ Secrecy was of the utmost importance to Wavell. To be successful, the Western Desert Force had to deceive the Italians as to their true intentions. He closed his letter to Wilson with the following warning: "I do not wish the contents of this note disclosed or the plan discussed with anyone except your Brigadier General Staff, General O'Connor and General Creagh (commander 7th Armored Division)."²²

Wilson sent a copy of the letter to O'Connor and went forward to discuss the idea with his tactical commander. Neither man liked the plan. Attacking Sofafi from the south would add more than fifty miles to the approach march, stretching communications systems of two widely dispersed wings to the breaking point.²³ Additionally, air support, which was already desperately thin in the Middle East, was barely sufficient to cover only one battle area. General O'Connor digested the Commander in Chief's letter and conceived an imaginative plan that was daring in its

boldness. He proposed to attack into the gap between Sofafi and Nibeiwa camps cutting the Italian forces in two, screen Italian forces to the south, and then drive north to the coast behind Maktilla and Tummar, oriented on Buqbuq.²⁴ Wavell approved the plan on 2 November, accepting the risks involved. The quantity of the Italian Tenth Army was to be met with the quality of the Western Desert Force.

While the British generals formulated *Compass*, Mussolini seethed at the lack of inaction of his army in North Africa, and of the condescending nature of the treatment Hitler afforded his Italian ally. In a memorandum to Graziani at the end of October, Mussolini railed at the inactivity since the initial advance into Egypt. He asked his general, “Will it have been worth sixteen months at war to bring home just Sidi Barrani?”²⁵ As he tried to goad Graziani into action, Mussolini decided on a course of action that threatened *Compass* before the Western Desert Force crossed their starting points; on 28 October, Italy invaded Greece.

Predictably, Prime Minister Winston Churchill offered troops and aircraft to Greece, forces that could only come from Wavell’s command. The Greek government had no desire for British soldiers unless a substantial number were committed, but the aircraft were welcomed.²⁶ Vital to the success of *Compass*, however, was the ability of the RAF to keep the *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Air Force) from discovering preparations for the attack, and to provide close air support and interdiction. Just as the aggressive actions of the 11th Hussars pushed the Italians onto the defensive until September, RAF No. 202 Group and its commander, Air Commodore R. Collishaw, kept the enemy off balance through a combination of fighter patrols, bombing raids, daring, and bluff. The single Hurricane fighter in the theater moved continually around various airfields to deceive the Italians as to the number of modern fighters actually opposing them.²⁷

In response to Churchill’s desire to aid Greece, five squadrons of aircraft moved to airfields in Greece in November, with only three squadrons arriving in the Middle East from England to take their place. Despite the impact of these losses on the Desert Air Force, many of the aircraft replacements were newer, modern types including Hurricane fighters and Wellington bombers.²⁸ From the moment Italy declared war, however, Collishaw did not hesitate to use his aircraft, whatever the vintage. As the fight in Europe transitioned from the green fields of France to the blue skies over Britain with the danger of German invasion imminent, repair parts and replacement aircraft could not be spared for the

Middle East. From Cairo, Longmore drove this point home to Collishaw at the end of July: "We are rapidly consuming available resources of all types of aircraft in the Command, and must in consequence exercise still greater economy in their employment."²⁹ Collishaw decreased his activity and husbanded his resources, but he never relinquished the skies over the western desert to the Italians.

The Royal Navy and Admiral Andrew B. Cunningham, Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, faced conditions that were similar to their RAF counterparts. Throughout the opening months of the war with Italy, the Royal Navy and the Italian Fleet skirmished many times, including actions at Calabria on 9 July, and off Cape Spada on 19 July. On the whole, however, the Italian Navy seemed as reluctant as their Army to fight the British. Although the Italians added the 15-inch gun battleships *Littorio* and *Vittorio* to the fleet in August, few surface actions were fought. The primary menace to British shipping was from the air. Italian aircraft ranged nearly the entire breadth of the Mediterranean, attacking Alexandria on nine separate occasions in July and August and raiding the canal area on 28 August.³⁰ In September, the aircraft carrier *HMS Illustrious* with its modern radar and fighters joined Cunningham's fleet, serving to balance the advantages of the Italian land-based air power.³¹

Despite the number of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers of both Navies in the Mediterranean, it was the newly arrived *Illustrious* and her complement of Swordfish biplanes that struck the greatest blow against the Italian fleet. On the night of 11 November, Lieutenant Commander Kenneth Williamson led his obsolete, under-powered torpedo planes into the teeth of the defenses at Taranto. Braving the fire of 21 batteries of four-inch guns, nearly 200 machine guns, searchlights, and numerous barrage balloons, the Swordfish put torpedoes into the battleships *Littorio*, *Duilio*, and *Cavour*. The audacity and bravery of Williamson's pilots shifted the balance of naval power in the theater to the British for many crucial months, eased supply problems for the Middle East, and dealt yet another blow to Italian morale.³² It was now up to O'Connor and the Western Desert Force to dispense the fatal blow to the Italian forces in North Africa.

As the concept for *Compass* matured, O'Connor realized the coming battle depended on his control of the gap that existed between the Nibeiwa and Rabia camps in the center of the Italian line. Italian reconnaissance units could easily discern his intentions and derail *Compass* if they were allowed to patrol the vital Bir Enba area. Accordingly, O'Connor

pushed the two battalions of infantry and the artillery of Brigadier W.H.E. "Strafer" Gott's Support Group³³ of the 7th Armored Division into the gap on 19 November.³⁴ Fighting a tough counter-reconnaissance fight would keep the Italians blinded tactically, furthering O'Connor's deception and security efforts.

As they moved into the gap, Gott's infantry clashed with a strong Italian force of tanks and truck-borne infantry. The Italian force was led by General Maletti out of the Nibeiwa camp, including twenty-seven M11/39 tanks of the 4th Tank Regiment and elements of the 2nd Libyan Division. The southern Jock Column of the support group engaged Maletti's force and mauled them, destroying five tanks, inflicting over 100 casualties, and taking 11 prisoners. British losses were three killed and two wounded. Following this engagement, the Italians stayed in their camps and ceded control of the area to the British.³⁵ Gradually, reconnaissance elements of the 4th Indian Division moved into the area to scout the Italian positions under the pretext of relieving the Support Group. Coupled with the aerial reconnaissance of the RAF, O'Connor gained an accurate picture of Italian dispositions in the area, while maintaining tactical surprise.

In the quest for secrecy, however, Wavell chose not to inform his superiors in London of his plans for an attack, including Prime Minister Winston Churchill. As the conflict in Greece gained momentum, Churchill demanded Wavell send more and more of his force to Greece. Fortunately, Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War, was visiting Wavell at the moment, allowing Wavell to brief him in person on the details of *Compass*. Cairo was full of Italian sympathizers and Wavell did not want to tell anyone about the attack until the plan was finalized, but he "realized Winston's sanguine temperament and desire to have at least one finger in any military pie."³⁶ Wavell was fearful that any leak would forewarn the numerically superior Italian forces and doom *Compass* to failure. Once apprised of Wavell's intentions by Eden, Churchill gave his wholehearted support to the venture.

For Wavell, the whole Greek affair afforded an opportunity to further his deception efforts. With Italian attention focused on Greece and only a handful of individuals on his own staff even aware of his intentions, the impression was created in Cairo that the Western Desert Force was weakened seriously by the siphoning of troops to bolster the Greeks. Written instructions were kept to a minimum, and administrative services were given no prior information of the attack.³⁷ As the Support Group

and the 11th Hussars dominated the reconnaissance fight, Western Desert Force trained for the coming clash. A full-scale rehearsal was needed, but a rehearsal itself might betray British intentions. O'Connor solved this problem and contributed to the deception effort by calling the rehearsal for the opening battles of *Compass* Training Exercise No. 1. Training Exercise No. 2, scheduled in the second week of December, would serve as the deception story for the approach marches necessary to move Western Desert Force into position to launch *Compass*. The fighting units would not be told of their real purpose until the approach marches were underway. Leaves would not be stopped until three days prior to the start of the operation, and the necessary forward supply dumps were explained as essential for defensive operations.³⁸

Training Exercise No. 1 began on the evening of 25 November 1940 with the arrangements for the night approach march tested. At daylight, O'Connor conducted the exercise along orthodox lines. The Matilda tanks of 7 RTR led the assault of the 4th Indian Division, with the troops waiting more than two hours in their attack positions in broad daylight, while the artillery registered on replicas of the Italian camps at Nibeiwa and Tummar that were constructed from information provided by aerial photographs. The exercise showed that the standard infantry attack on a wide front with the artillery registering prior to the assault entailed intolerable delays and negated surprise.³⁹ O'Connor, Wilson, and three key staff officers studied the training exercise and decided on a bold course of action. Aerial and ground reconnaissance showed that vehicles entered and left the camps from the western side. The Matildas would lead the attack into these entrances at first light, after only a short artillery preparation. A brigade of truck-borne infantry from the 4th Indian Division would follow the tanks and dismount as close as possible behind them, as another battalion attacked the camp from the eastern side to divert attention.⁴⁰

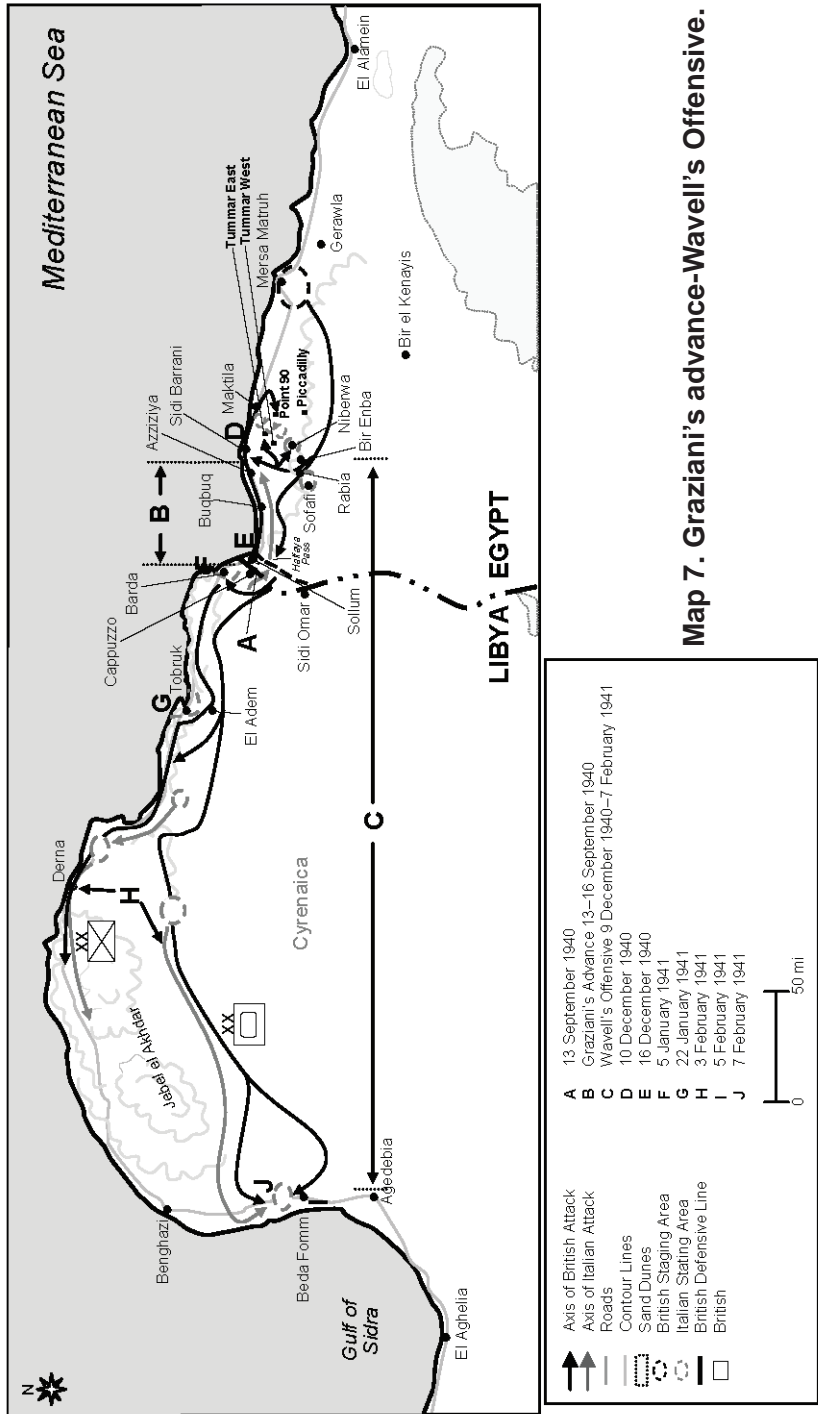
The 7th RTR and its Matilda I tanks were vital to the success of *Compass*. The 26.5-ton Matilda sported 78mm thick armor and was impervious to all Italian anti-tank guns and artillery at the time. Although twin 87 horsepower engines could power it at speeds up to 15mph, its cross country speed was only 8mph, ungainly but fast enough for its task in *Compass*. Armed with a 2-pound (40mm) main gun and a coaxially mounted machine gun, the Matilda and 7 RTR performed well in France in May 1940 against the *Wehrmacht*.⁴¹ The tanks of the regiment left England on 21 August along with the 3rd Hussars (light tanks) and 2nd RTR (Cruiser t 59 anks), arriving in Port Said in mid-October, joining

the Western Desert Force as a Corps unit.⁴² Their main armor opponents consisted of the Italian M11/39 medium tank, and a light tank, the L3.

The M11/39 weighed eleven tons and had a 37mm main gun mounted in the hull and two machine guns in a turret. With a crew of three, it was under-powered and its armor was riveted and thin (30mm maximum), making it susceptible even to the fire of British anti-tank rifles. The M11/39 was originally designed as an infantry support tank, but mounting the main gun in a limited traverse mount in the hull made it a poor main battle tank. Only seventy M11/39 tanks were produced, and all were in the two battalions of the 4th Tank Regiment in the desert at the start of *Compass*. A few M13/40 medium tanks, mounting a 47mm cannon in a turret, made it to the desert by December 1940. The L3 light tank barely weighed three tons, with twin 6.5-mm machine guns in the turret. It was by far the most numerous Italian tanks in the desert, making up the bulk of the Italian armored strength. The L3 propelled its two crewmen at 25mph on roads and 9mph cross country, but had only 13mm of frontal armor protection.⁴³

Even though his armor seemed superior, O'Connor could not afford to lose the element of surprise. The stocking of the forward supply depots, vital to the sustainment of *Compass*, was nearing completion. Since 11 November, three motor transport companies churned through the desert stocking two forward supply depots with five day's rations, two day's supply of water, and enough ammunition and fuel for five days. The depots themselves were established 40 miles to the west of Matruh, about 14 miles apart, one each for the 4th Indian and 7th Armored Division.⁴⁴ O'Connor risked the discovery of the depots, but relied on camouflage and the aggressive counter-reconnaissance of the Support Group to protect the depots and the secret of *Compass*.

With no tank transporters or recovery vehicles in the Western Desert Force, O'Connor restricted the movement of tanks and armored vehicles at the end of Training Exercise No. 1, but the infantry and battle staffs continued to train for the coming fight. On 28 November, Wavell began considering the possibility that *Compass* could be more than just a five day raid. He wrote Wilson in Cairo, assuring him "that the boldest action, whatever its results, will have the support not only of myself, but of the C.I.G.S. and of the War Cabinet at home."⁴⁵



A final meeting took place in Cairo on 4 December between Wavell, Wilson, and O'Connor. Following the meeting, O'Connor moved to his forward headquarters at Maaten Buggush with his Navy and RAF liaison officers to monitor the movement to the forward positions.

The important approach march would be made by the Western Desert Force in two stages. 7th RTR was the first unit to move, the Matildas lumbering along the desert floor at 8mph, arriving north of Supply Depot No. 4 on 5 December. After 36 hours of maintenance, the regiment moved to rendezvous with the 11th Indian Brigade of the 4th Indian Division at Bir el Kenayis. The 4th Indian Division started its movement on 6 December, moving from its assembly areas near Gerawla to Bir el Kenayis on a cold and overcast day. The movement lasted all day, 5,000 vehicles of the division going unnoticed by the Italians, scattered over an area of thirty square miles on the desert floor.⁴⁶

For weeks, 7th Armored Division's base camp was just south of the laager of 4th Indian Division's vehicles. On 7 December the infantry of the Support Group and the armored cars of the 11th Hussars led the divisional move toward the Enba Gap, with the soldiers still unaware that Training Exercise No. 2 was actually the beginning of Operation *Compass* and the Battle of Sidi Barrani (Graziani's advance and Wavell's offensive). The day was cold and hazy, with visibility worsening as the day wore on. Lieutenant Cyril Joly's squadron followed in the wake of the Support Group:

*I noticed with no particular interest that the Support Group had moved out earlier across our front and were now some miles ahead. Behind us I could see the dust raised by more vehicles. But soon a mist settled over the desert which shrouded all but the nearest vehicles and hid the country over which we were moving, so that I could not even occupy my time by surveying the scenes around me. The mist was thick enough to prevent any accurate reading of a sun compass and so, to my annoyance, I could not follow the course of our move. In wireless silence, shrouded in mist and resigned to another period of boredom, I spent a lonely and dispiriting day perched in the cupola of the turret, in discomfort and chilled by the cold winter wind.*⁴⁷

Although the lieutenant cursed the mist and dust, it served to conceal the movement of the division toward a point that was just a scant 15 miles from the Italian camp at Nibeiwa. O'Connor moved his headquarters forward on the same day Lieutenant Joly and his fellow tankers lurched through the desert, moving to the high ground south and east of his forces. This forward assembly area of the Western Desert Force took on the cheeky sobriquet of "Piccadilly Circus."⁴⁸

The 4th Indian Division conducted their final move before dawn on the morning of 8 December, traveling over 60 miles to positions in Piccadilly Circus. The speed of the move was a mere 8mph, and once again a ground haze and overcast skies shrouded the movement of the bold attackers. The daylight move was necessary, however, despite the risk of discovery. The superb counter-reconnaissance efforts of the past two months by the Support Group's infantry and artillery and the armored cars of the 11th Hussars now paid off, as no Italian forces patrolled outside the walls of their camps for fear of clashing with the tenacious British. A lone enemy aircraft appeared overhead around noon, but O'Connor counted on lethargy in the Italian command to slow any report, and even if the pilot was fastidious in his reporting, "no action would result for another 48 hours. This actually was the case."⁴⁹ By 1600 hours the move was complete and the waiting began.

A big reason for the dearth of Italian air reconnaissance was the work of the RAF as it covered the movement of the Western Desert Force. By stripping the rest of the theater of aircraft, Air Marshall Longmore provided No. 202 Group with two squadrons of Hurricanes, one Gladiator squadron (48 fighters total) and 116 bombers. Air Commodore Collishaw put the aircraft to good use, attacking the Italians over a wide area, forcing them to disperse their fighters and keep them on the defensive. On 4 December Blenheim bombers of 202 Group attacked El Adem, the main Italian air base in Libya, followed three days later by an attack on the air base at Bernina, outside Benghazi. Wellington bombers from Malta joined the fray by attacking the base at Castel Benito that same night. As the soldiers of the Western Desert Force rumbled toward their assembly areas in Piccadilly Circus, the Hurricanes and Gladiators of the Group swept the forward area.⁵⁰ Under the drone of aircraft engines and the crash of bombs dropped on the camps, the final night movement began toward attack positions.

A Prudent Risk

With all the pieces in place, O'Connor signaled the Western Desert Force to begin the attack against the much larger Italian army. As darkness descended on the desert and a full moon filled the sky, the 11th Indian Brigade and the 7th RTR moved forward another thirteen miles toward the rear of Nibeiwa. Overhead the fighters and bombers of the RAF continued to harass the Italian defenders and drown out the noise of the approaching tanks with their engines and bombs. Along the coast the 1,800 man strong Matruh garrison under Brigadier A.R. Selby (Selby Force) moved toward Maktila with the mission of preventing that garrison from reinforcing the Tummar Camps. Selby left a brigade's worth of dummy tanks in his rear to give the Italian Air Force something to shoot at should they decide to enter the fray. The Royal Navy joined the fight with the gunboat *Aphis* and the monitor *Terror* and her twin 15-inch guns shelling Maktila during the approaching march of Selby Force. The gunboat, *Ladybird*, added to the Italian discomfort by shelling Sidi Barrani at the same time.⁵¹

As the Italians were discomfited by the attacks of the RAF and Royal Navy, the 4th Battalion, 7th Rajput Regiment, dismounted from their trucks only three miles from the eastern edge of Nibeiwa Camp. Brushing aside Italian listening posts, the battalion launched a diversionary attack against the southeastern face of the camp at 0500 hours on 9 December. Firing every weapon they had, the Indians kept the Italians busy while the 11th Brigade and the 45 Matildas of 7th RTR moved to within four miles of the western approach to the camp.⁵² Flares and tracers danced through the cold night air illuminating the camp. After nearly an hour, the firing died out with silence once again claiming the night. General Maletti surveyed the scene and retired to his tent after a nip of cognac; breakfast would be served promptly at 0730 hours. It was a breakfast he would never get to eat.

At 0715 hours the 72 guns of the 4th Indian Division opened fire on the Nibeiwa Camp. Sixty-pound and 25-pound shells crashed among the tents and buildings of the camp, sending the defenders scurrying for cover. Ten minutes later, Major Henry Rew led A Squadron, 7 RTR, across the start line with his troops abreast, 1,500 meters from the back gate of the camp, followed by B Squadron, with D in reserve.⁵³ Bren gun carriers carrying the 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, and the 1st Battalion, 6th Rajput Regiment, moved on the flanks of the Matildas, while the gunners of 31st Field Battery Royal Artillery slammed 25-pound

shells into the defenders. Rew's tankers covered nearly 800 meters before the first Italian artillery shell fell among his troops. The western approach to the camp was indeed devoid of mines just as the reconnaissance had shown. The Matildas pressed on through the gap in the minefield as the Italian gunners fired desperately over open sites at the British tanks.

General Maletti was not completely unprepared, however. He had the twenty-three M11/39 tanks of the 4th Tank Regiment positioned astride the track leading into the camp. As the Matildas of A Squadron closed the range between themselves and the camp, they started firing at the Italian tanks and their crews. The 2-pound shot of the Matilda penetrated the M11s easily, while machine guns raked the crews that did not react fast enough to get aboard their tanks. The Italian tank crews "were in all states of dress and were darting about attempting to start their engines," as the Matildas ground inexorably forward.⁵⁴ Fire engulfed several M11s, with only a few getting their engines started before they too were penetrated by the fire from the Matildas. In ten minutes every Italian tank was destroyed and Rew's squadron entered the camp.

The Italian artillerymen gallantly manned their guns in the face of a relentless advance. One by one they were mowed down with 2-pound shells and machine gun fire, as their own shells burst harmlessly against the thick armor protecting the crews inside the Matildas. Desperate, a few brave Italian infantrymen broke from their bunkers and attacked the I tanks with bundles of grenades, only to be shot down. B Squadron followed A Squadron through the opening into the camp, fanning out and destroying everything in their path. Machine guns, artillery pieces, and their crews were destroyed by the volume of fire from the tanks, with several guns crushed beneath the tracks of the Matildas. Artillery continued to rain down on the camp's defenders as the tankers did their deadly work, adding more steel and death to the carnage. Smoke, fire, and bursting shells allowed no one unprotected by armor to live long within the confines of Nibeiwa Camp.⁵⁵

Fifteen minutes after Rew's tanks entered the camp, the truck mounted infantry of the 11th Indian Brigade crossed the start line and dismounted 700 meters from the perimeter. They moved in behind B Squadron, 7 RTR, and began reducing the pockets of resistance left among the ruined guns and shattered bodies of the defenders. The shrill notes of a bagpiper announced the entrance of the Highlanders to the camp, bayonets fixed, as hundreds of enemy soldiers tried to escape or surrender.

The Matildas moved methodically from pocket of resistance to pocket of resistance, flushing into the open the few remaining Italian defenders willing to continue the fight. A bewildered but game General Maletti emerged from his dugout, firing a light machine gun, only to be cut down instantly by a quick burst of machine gun fire from a nearby tank.⁵⁶

By 1040 hours, the resistance in Nibeiwa ended. Hundreds of dead Italian and Libyan soldiers, destroyed tanks, artillery pieces, and machine guns littered the confines of the camp. Nearly 2,000 prisoners were rounded up including 80 officers. British casualties were light, totaling fifty-six men killed and wounded, with one of the dead being Major Rew.⁵⁷ The commander of 7 RTR, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Jerram, struggled to disentangle his A and B Squadrons from the wreckage of Nibeiwa, while D Squadron moved to link up with 5th Indian Brigade in order to spearhead the attack into Tummar West. In the confusion, dust, and smoke cloaking Nibeiwa, six Matildas of A Squadron were disabled when they ran into a minefield outside the camp as they hurried to rearm and refuel. Rising wind and a growing haze added to the confusion and reduced visibility even more, but Lieutenant Colonel Jerram managed to push 22 tanks forward to lead the assault on Tummar West.⁵⁸

While the fight for Nibeiwa raged, 7th Armored Division protected the left flank of the attacking 4th Indian Division. The infantrymen of the Support Group moved to blocking positions around the enemy camps at Rabia and Sofafi to keep them from reinforcing their unfortunate comrades to the north, while 4th Armored Brigade and the 11th Hussars moved west of the fighting at Nibeiwa, and then due north to cut the coast road at Sidi Barrani. Moving through Azziziya, the tankers accepted the surrender of the garrison of 400 men without a fight. The brigade continued moving, with the light tanks of the 7th Hussars moving astride the coast road and patrols of the 11th Hussars probing west toward Buqbuq. Telegraph lines were cut and several small columns of Italian transport, oblivious to the fighting, were captured. The 7th Armored Brigade remained in reserve, while Selby Force advanced slowly against the 1st Libyan Division in Maktila.⁵⁹

Major General N. M. de la P. Beresford-Pierse, commander of the 4th Indian Division, watched the fight for Nibeiwa from a small rise, and ordered the attack on Tummar West to begin at 1100 hours, but it was not until 1350 hours that D Squadron, 7 RTR, crossed the start line. There was no hope of surprise as the 22 Matildas ground methodically through

the sand and wind to deliver their blow to the defenders. The sequence of the attack used at Nibeiwa was repeated here, as artillery crashed among the defenders while the tankers drove through the unmined northwestern approach to Tummar West. Once again the Italian artillerymen worked their guns, only to watch their shells smack harmlessly against the sides of the tanks. Once again the 2-pound shells and machine guns found their marks in yielding flesh and brittle metal, maiming and killing anything that dared contest their advance. After 20 minutes of carnage, the infantry of 5th Indian Brigade moved to within 150 meters of the camp in their trucks and joined the fray. By 1600 hours the camp was subdued, yielding another 2,000 prisoners and several hundred Italian dead.⁶⁰

Watching the destruction of his comrades was more than the commander of Tummar East could stomach. He launched his two M11 tanks, infantry on foot, and six trucks filled with infantry to the aid of the Tummar West garrison. They met a grisly fate at the hands of the 4th Battalion Rajput Rifles, who were placed between the two Tummar camps by the 5th Brigade commander to forestall just such an event. Rifle and machine gun fire from the *Sepoys* raked the Italians, while Boyes anti-tank rifle fire penetrated the M11s, causing them to flee back into Tummar East. The remaining infantry quickly broke and fled the scene, leaving over 400 killed and wounded without inflicting a single casualty on the Indians.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Colonel Jerram struggled to reform his regiment and get it moving toward Tummar East before darkness swallowed the battlefield.

Jerram was distressed to learn the 5th Indian Brigade commander was keeping several Matildas in Tummar West to forestall any further counterattacks. Mechanical difficulties reduced the number of Matildas mission capable even further, leaving only nine tanks to mount the attack on Tummar East. The turrets on three of the tanks were jammed from the cumulative effect of Italian hits, but Jerram “thought it justifiable to send them in because of their moral effect.” Formed into three composite troops of three tanks each, the Matildas rumbled toward Tummar East, with the infantry following in their wake. The murk created by the approach of dusk and the continuing sandstorm caused the infantry and tanks to become separated. One of the troops of Matildas veered away from the main attack and ran into the enemy defending Point 90. The other six tanks attacked Tummar East completely unsupported by infantry. The tankers started their attack on the camp, but the gathering gloom caused Beresford-Pierce to recall the attackers into a night *laager* between the East and West Tummar camps.⁶²

As his soldiers and tanks shredded the Italian defenses, General O'Connor moved forward to see the battlefield.

I remained in my headquarters until I got some information in, and then went off and saw the commanders, bringing a small staff with me. I always found this method paid me well. I left my Brigadier General Staff [Chief of Staff] at my headquarters if I was out, and he knew my plans, and could prepare the administrative side.⁶³

Indeed, every commander in the Western Desert Force knew and understood O'Connor's intent. Unencumbered by a huge headquarters, his tactical command post for the entire corps consisted only of one truck and his staff car. O'Connor visited the critical points of the battlefield inspiring his subordinate commanders. Visiting the 7th Armored Division, he ordered patrols to the west of the Sofafi Camps to keep the Italians from escaping, and suggested a staff officer report to 4th Indian Division Headquarters to arrange the contact points between the divisions. At 1700 hours, he joined Beresford-Pierce in Tummar West and ordered the cheroot-smoking commander to take Sidi Barrani the next morning.⁶⁴

The Fall of Sidi-Barrani

It had been a fantastic first day of *Compass*. Surprise, realistic training, superior equipment, and inspiring leadership coalesced to gouge a huge hole in the Italian defenses. O'Connor did not intend to allow the reeling Italian commanders time to recover their balance. Even though the Italian Air Force made brief appearances over the battlefield on 9 December, the Hurricanes and Gladiators of No. 202 Group flew as many as four sorties each, establishing local air superiority over the attackers.⁶⁵ The uncommitted 16th Infantry Brigade moved during the night of 9/10 December to get into position to assault Sidi Barrani at first light, while Jerram and his squadron commanders worked feverishly to get the Matildas of 7 RTR back into fighting shape.

The 16th Infantry Brigade was in position at dawn to attack Sidi Barrani, but the tanks of 7 RTR and the divisional artillery had not linked up for the attack. A bitter wind continued unabated on the morning of 10 December, and intermittent fog covered large portions of the battlefield. Brigadier C.E.N. Lomax, commander of the brigade, decided not to wait for the tanks and artillery to find him, launching an attack on the south and

western approaches to Sidi Barrani at 0600 hours. As his truck-mounted infantry fought the blowing sand and the fog, they moved to within two miles of the enemy positions. Suddenly, the capricious fog lifted and the efficient Italian artillery began pummeling the brigade. Infantrymen tumbled onto the desert floor, while anti-tank guns were brought into action against the artillery gun line. The attack faltered as the exposed brigade lay pinned to the ground.

Marching to the sound of the guns through the swirl of sand and smoke, ten Matildas of 7 RTR, led by Jerram himself, moved on the left flank of the brigade and crashed into the Italian artillery. The Italian gunners fought bravely, only to be shot down by 2-pound shells and machine gun fire from the marauding tanks. Advancing through the Italian gun line, Jerram's tankers destroyed seven batteries of artillery, allowing the entire brigade to move forward and capture the western and southern defenses around the village. By 1000 hours the fighting slackened as another severe sandstorm engulfed the combatants, providing the British a chance to regroup and redirect their efforts to capture Sidi Barrani.⁶⁶

To the east of Sidi Barrani, the 1st Libyan Division moved out of Maktila at dawn eluding Selby Force, while the Italian garrison at Tummar East surrendered at first light without a shot being fired. It was obvious to O'Connor and his commanders that the bulk of Italian forces on the coast were concentrated between Sidi Barrani and Maktila, with no relief column coming from the west. With the Italian 63rd Division bottled up in the Rabia and Sofafi camps by the infantry of the Support Group, the 5th and 11th Indian Brigades cleaning up Tummar East and Point 90, and 7th Armored Brigade in reserve covering the Enba Gap, O'Connor ordered the 4th Armored Brigade to send 6th RTR back to the east to spearhead Selby Force's destruction of the 1st Libyan Division. The 2 RTR would join the 16th Brigade in a renewed attack on Sidi Barrani later that evening.⁶⁷

The 6 RTR transited the length of the Italian defenses in the midst of a violent sandstorm that continued to blow most of the day on 10 December. Visibility was so low that the regiment moved "in close formation as for a night march."⁶⁸ With the sandstorm abating, the regiment closed on the 1st Libyan Division, now in position among the sand dunes halfway between Maktila and Sidi Barrani. At 1715 hours, the cruiser tanks of C Squadron smashed into the hasty Italian defenses, attacking through the enemy and linking up with Selby Force. At midnight, Selby Force and 6 RTR administered a final concerted attack on the 1st Libyan Division, causing it to surrender nearly 5,000 soldiers.⁶⁹

At 1600 hours that same day, 16th Infantry Brigade, now reinforced by 2 RTR and the entire divisional artillery, attacked the Sidi Barrani defenses once again. Attacking from west to east, the brigade passed through the entire Italian defenses in thirty minutes, pushing the remnants of the 2nd Libyan and 4th Blackshirt Division toward the positions of the 1st Libyan Division. Caught between the pincers of Selby Force and 16th Brigade, the Italians surrendered on the morning of 11 December. By the early morning hours of 11 December, more than 20,000 prisoners swamped the British rear areas.⁷⁰ With everything between Nibiewa and Sidi Barrani in British hands, only the Rabia and Sofafi camps remained.

During the evening of 10 December it was clear to everyone involved that the Western Desert Force was nearing the completion of a brilliant victory. The five-day raid was turning into a rout, with O'Connor eager to continue the attack. He ordered 7th Armored Brigade out of reserve in order to attack the enemy forces at Buqbuq, while Gott's infantry-heavy Support Group was to destroy the enemy in the camps at Rabia and Sofafi. The light tanks of the 8th Hussars moved on the evening of 10 December to cut off any Italian attempt at escape. The 63rd (Cirene) Division evacuated their positions on the evening of 10/11 December, eluding the 8th Hussars by moving along the top of the escarpment toward the frontier outpost at Halfaya Pass.⁷¹ Dawn on the morning of 11 December presented the Support Group with empty camps at Rabia and Sofafi. O'Connor was annoyed that the 63rd Division escaped, but the greatest blow to the Western Desert Force and O'Connor came not from the Italians, but from Wavell himself.

As Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East, Wavell faced a growing problem in East Africa. Within the Italian held territories of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland, the Duke of Aosta commanded an army of 250,000 that threatened British positions in Sudan and Kenya. The success at Sidi Barrani presented Wavell with the opportunity to strike a similar blow against the Italians in East Africa. On the morning of 11 December, O'Connor received a message from Wavell ordering the 4th Indian Division withdrawn from the battle and shipped eastward for use in the Sudan. O'Connor was stunned:

I had received no warning of this whatever, and consequently had made no plans to meet such a contingency. Its withdrawal at this juncture would produce a difficult situation...The situation was further

*greatly complicated by the large number of prisoners captured, now amounting to 20,000 who had all to be fed, watered, and guarded, and eventually brought back to Matruh....transport was required simultaneously for carrying back the 4th Indian Division, and the prisoners, and for carrying forward the 6th Australian Division. The situation, without a relief impending, from the administrative point of view was extremely difficult.*⁷²

The Australians were in reserve in Alexandria, but Wavell wanted the battle-hardened Indians for operations in east Africa. The bulk of O'Connor's infantry had to pull out of the line and move east, while the untried Australians were moved forward. Additionally, Wavell was taking all of the transport and field artillery supporting 4th Indian Division, with the Australian Division having few trucks and only two regiments of artillery equipped with guns from World War I.⁷³ The move was dependent on the success of *Compass*, and the availability of shipping. A convoy was in Suez on 11 December that could carry the troops to Port Sudan, and Wavell was worried that "the people at home" were nervous about Italian control of Sudan.⁷⁴ Western Desert Force would be without vital infantry and artillery support for the next several weeks.

O'Connor showed no outward signs of discouragement to his subordinates and resolutely decided to continue the attack. He told Brigadier Caunter of the 7th Armored Division "that he was determined to pursue the enemy with the forces he had left to him."⁷⁵ The Western Desert Force reflected the confidence of its commander and continued the attack. As the 63rd Division moved along the escarpment toward Halfaya Pass and Sollom, the unrelenting 11th Hussars dogged their steps. Around noon, however, Italian fighters came to the aid of their harried brethren, strafing the aggressive Hussars and destroying two armored cars, allowing the retreat to continue unopposed for the remainder of the day.⁷⁶

As the 3rd Hussars continued their move west, they found the entire 64th (Catanzaro) Division and the survivors of the previous two days fighting in defensive positions among the sand dunes and mud flats on the outskirts of Buqbuq. The last act of the Battle of Sidi Barrani was about to begin. With the 7th Armored Brigade commander unable to reach the fight because his tank was broken down, Lieutenant Colonel John Combe of 11th Hussars took charge of the force and formulated a hasty attack

plan. The cruiser tanks of the 8th Hussars would attack frontally, while the light tanks of 3rd Hussars attacked the Italian flank, with a battery of RHA supporting the attack. The initial charge of 3rd Hussars was made across a dried salt marsh and met with the massed fires of thirty guns.

As the tanks slowed to maneuver, they broke through the thin crust of the salt-pan, with many becoming stuck. Devoid of infantry support, the tankers returned fire furiously, until one by one the Italian gunners destroyed thirteen of their number. The 8th Hussars managed to avoid the fate of their brother regiment and moved along firm ground on the seaward flank, penetrating the Italian gun line, destroying twenty-four guns in routing the enemy. As in the previous day's fighting, the infantry quickly lost any taste for the battle once its artillery was silenced. Over 14,000 soldiers surrendered to the 7th Armored Brigade.⁷⁷ At the end of the day on 11 December, only a smattering of Italian troops were left in Egypt, with the survivors of the fighting taking refuge in Sidi Omar and Fort Capuzzo across the border in Libya.

The Taste of Victory

For Britain, battered by one disaster after another, the Battle of Sidi Barrani was an electrifying event. From 9 to 11 December, the Western Desert Force captured 38,000 Italian and Libyan prisoners, 73 light and medium tanks, 237 artillery pieces, and more than 1,000 vehicles of all types. While inflicting terrible casualties on the enemy, British casualties totaled 624 killed, wounded, and missing.⁷⁸ Five divisions had been smashed, four generals taken prisoner, and Italian confidence crushed beneath the superior maneuver, firepower, and leadership of the Western Desert Force. The number of Italian prisoners alone out-numbered the entire strength of the Western Desert Force!

As the evening darkness and cold enveloped O'Connor's headquarters on 11 December, the commander faced mounting problems. His only division now operated more than 60 miles from its forward supply depot. His tanks were in dire need of maintenance, his infantry was being withdrawn; the first Australian brigade would not reach him until 19 December. O'Connor took his great victory quietly and pondered his options. No one would have faulted him for stopping and cleaning up his rear area and bringing the 6th Australian Division forward. An operational pause was natural. O'Connor, however, chose to pursue.

The next day, the 7th Armored Division drove the Italians into the defenses of Bardia. By 5 January 1941, Bardia had fallen and Western Desert Force, now renamed XIII Corps, drove its quarry into Tobruk. Tobruk succumbed on 22 January yielding another 22,000 prisoners, but O'Connor continued the pursuit, cutting off the retreating Italian Army at Beda Fomm on 6 February. Tenth Italian Army finally surrendered the next day. In a period of two months, Western Desert Force, never more than two divisions strong, advanced 500 miles, destroyed an army, captured 130,000 Italian soldiers, 400 tanks, and 845 guns at the cost of 500 killed, 1373 wounded, and 55 missing.⁷⁹ Few British generals had ever gained so great a victory.

O'Connor's brilliant success had its beginnings in the reconnaissance efforts of the 11th Hussars in the months prior to the Battle of Sidi Barrani and Operation *Compass*. The tactical innovation of the Jock Column gave the British not only physical, but also moral dominance, over the Italians as well as access to the critical Enba Gap, allowing O'Connor to move unseen into the Italian rear. By attacking from unexpected directions into seemingly secure defenses with superior equipment, the British created an image in the mind of the Italian commanders at all levels that they were facing an unstoppable force. From Sidi Barrani on 9 December 1940, *Generale di Divisione* Gallina, signaled Graziani that the area under his command was "infested by a mechanized army against which I have no adequate means."⁸⁰

The victory was by no means the army's alone. The RAF fought masterfully to gain local air superiority over the critical battle areas, while the Royal Navy dominated the seaward approaches to the African coast. Interception and decryption of Italian high level codes and ciphers provided unparalleled intelligence on strengths and disposition of enemy forces. But above all, the great victory at Sidi Barrani would never have come to fruition without the indispensable and exceptional leadership of Richard O'Connor. He inspired and trained his soldiers; he infused his leaders with confidence; he dared; he won. Even when confronted with the loss of 4th Indian Division, O'Connor completed the Battle of Sidi Barrani and maintained pressure on the retreating Italians.

Ironically, O'Connor's superb success doomed the effort to drive the Italians completely from North Africa. With the situation well in hand, and the Italian Army on the verge of collapse, O'Connor was stopped by Wavell and Churchill on 11 February 1941. The Prime Minister was

now more interested in events on the other side of the Mediterranean. Accordingly, O'Connor's force was broken up and most of it shipped to Greece where it met an ignominious fate. On 12 February 1941, Erwin Rommel arrived in Tripoli, followed three days later by the first tank of the Africa Korps. The victories of O'Connor and the Western Desert Force were soon forgotten, as the war in the desert entered a new phase.

Notes

- 1 I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol. 1, *The Early Success Against Italy (to May 1941)* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954), 209.
- 2 Barrie Pitt, *The Crucible of War: Western Desert 1941* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), 52-54; Playfair, 210.
- 3 Wilson, 50; Playfair, 265-266; Pitt, 86. A typical Blackshirt (Fascist) Division consisted of approximately 8,000 soldiers, with the 62d, 63d, and 64th Divisions at approximately 13,000 soldiers apiece.
- 4 George Forty, *Tank Action: From the Great War to the Gulf* (London: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited), 67; Playfair, 267.
- 5 B.H.Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (New York: Praeger, 1959), 40-41.
- 6 Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 29; Pitt, 86-87. The Western Desert Force was a Corps size headquarters that was renamed XIII Corps on 1 January 1941.
- 7 Denis Richards, *Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, Volume 1, *The Fight at Odds* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953), 241-242
- 8 Richard Townshend Bickers, *The Desert Air War, 1939-1945* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991), 14-16.
- 9 John Connell, *Wavell: Soldier and Scholar* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), 273.
- 10 John Baynes, *The Forgotten Victor: General Sir Richard O'Connor* (London: Brassey's, 1989), 64-67.
- 11 Connell, 278.
- 12 F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. One (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 375.
- 13 F.H. Hinsley, 377-378.
- 14 Harold E. Raugh, Jr, *Wavell in the Middle East, 1939-1941: A Study in Generalship* (London: Brassey's, 1993), 110-111.
- 15 Playfair, 118.
- 16 In the British Army, a squadron equals an American company or troop, a British troop equals a platoon, with most regiments of battalion size.
- 17 Pitt, 31-32.
- 18 Pitt, 69.
- 19 Major General G.L. Verney, *The Desert Rats: The History of the 7th Armoured Division, 1938-1945* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), 25.

- 20 Baynes, 73.
- 21 Playfair, 259.
- 22 Connell, 278.
- 23 Wilson, 47.
- 24 Barnett, 31.
- 25 Pitt, 72.
- 26 Playfair, 229-231; Pitt, 73.
- 27 Playfair, 247.
- 28 Playfair, 251.
- 29 Richards, 246.
- 30 Playfair, 163-164.
- 31 Winston S. Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 533.
- 32 Pitt, 79-81.
- 33 The Support Group of the 7th Armored Division contained all of the infantry (2 battalions) in the division plus two battalions of artillery. The 4th and 7th Armored Brigades were pure tank formations.
- 34 Barnett, 33.
- 35 Bryan Perrett, *Desert Warfare: From its Roman Origins to the Gulf Conflict* (Northamptonshire: Patrick Stephens Limited, 1988), 87.
- 36 Connell, 277.
- 37 Connell, 284.
- 38 Baynes, 74-75; Connell, 284; Playfair, 265.
- 39 Ronald Lewin, *The Chief: Field Marshal Lord Wavell, Commander-In-Chief and Viceroy, 1939-1947* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 66.
- 40 Connell, 285.
- 41 Forty, 67-68.
- 42 Liddell Hart, 41.
- 43 John J.T. Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 164-179.
- 44 Playfair, 262-263.
- 45 Connell, 286.
- 46 Pitt, 92-93.
- 47 Pitt, 94.

- 48 Baynes, 98.
- 49 O'Connor as quoted in Baynes, 97.
- 50 Richards, 270.
- 51 Playfair, 266.
- 52 Forty, 70.
- 53 There was no C Squadron in 7 RTR; the three squadrons were designated A, B, and D by longstanding tradition. See Liddell Hart, 35.
- 54 Liddell Hart, 45.
- 55 Pitt, 102-103.
- 56 Liddell Hart, 45; Playfair, 268.
- 57 Playfair, 268.
- 58 Liddell Hart, 46.
- 59 Playfair, 269.
- 60 Pitt, 106; Playfair, 269; Liddell Hart, 46.
- 61 Pitt, 107-108.
- 62 Playfair, 268, Pitt, 108.
- 63 Barnett, 37.
- 64 Baynes, 98.
- 65 Richards, 271-272.
- 66 Playfair, 296; Pitt, 112.
- 67 Baynes, 98; Pitt, 114; Playfair, 270.
- 68 Liddell Hart, 48.
- 69 Hart, 49.
- 70 Playfair, 270; Pitt, 116.
- 71 Playfair, 271; Pitt, 119.
- 72 Baynes, 101-102.
- 73 Lewin, 69. The third battalion of artillery assigned to the division would not arrive in theater until January 1941.
- 74 Lewin, 70.
- 75 Barnett, 40.
- 76 Pitt, 119.
- 77 Verney, 30-31.
- 78 Playfair, 273.

79 Baynes, 91; Perrett, 104.

80 Pitt, 115.

Chapter 6

The Road to Bizerte: The 9th Division Comes of Age

by

Colonel Peter R. Mansoor, USA (Retired)

Outstanding combat leaders are not always handsome, impetuous, bold risk takers. As the US Army bloodied itself in North Africa in 1943, Major General Manton S. Eddy, commander of the US 9th Infantry Division, recovered from early setbacks to achieve a dazzling success in the Sedjenane Valley. A combat veteran of the Great War, Eddy provided mature, decisive leadership in battle to a green, untested division that went on to become one of the best in the European theater. Steady and unspectacular, he would be rated at war's end as one of America's best senior commanders.

Badly in need of a victory after the debacle at Kasserine Pass and the indecisive action which followed at El Guettar, the United States II Corps faced a determined and capable enemy in northern Tunisia. Roughly handled in the preceding actions, the corps badly needed a success to restore the flagging confidence of its green soldiers. The US 9th Infantry Division, led by Major General Manton S. Eddy, gave it one with its determined attack through the Sedjenane Valley, a victory that forced the Germans to withdraw from their heavily fortified positions and opened the road to Bizerte. The seizure of Bizerte heralded the end of the Tunisian campaign and gave a much needed boost to American morale. For the soldiers of the 9th Infantry Division, the maneuver through the Sedjenane Valley marked their transformation from inexperienced soldiers to seasoned veterans.

Ante Bellum

The 9th Infantry Division was activated on August 1, 1940, as part of the expansion of the Regular Army following the fall of France. The newly created division received a strong group of Regular Army cadre who formed a solid basis upon which to build a quality unit. Draftees composed

less than half of the division's personnel.¹ After the untimely death of the division's first commander, Brigadier General Francis W. Honeycutt, in an airplane crash, the War Department assigned Major General Jacob L. Devers to command the division.² Devers would remain with the division for about a year. Under his strong leadership the division received a good start in its formative months.

The 9th Infantry Division finished its mobilization training by participating in the Carolina maneuvers, one of the two great General Headquarters (GHQ) maneuvers held in the summer and fall of 1941. Practicing with simulated artillery fire, flour sack bombs, broomstick guns, and beer-can mortar shells, the soldiers received little useful training. More important was the staff practice gained in the coordination of larger combat units in battle.³

GHQ planned to use the 9th Infantry Division as one of the first assault elements in future expeditionary force operations, so it assigned the division to the Amphibious Force, Atlantic, for amphibious assault training. Despite this vital mission, the division gave up thousands of experienced soldiers and noncommissioned officers to form cadres for the 78th, 82nd, and 88th Infantry Divisions, all of which would later establish distinguished combat records in Italy, France, and Germany. By September 1942 the division was once again at full strength in preparation for its participation in Operation TORCH, the invasion of North Africa, but the readiness of units varied considerably as many of the soldiers had only recently been assigned.

On 24 July 1942, Brigadier General Manton S. Eddy assumed command of the division. Eddy received a direct commission into the Army in 1916 and fought with the 39th Infantry Regiment, then part of the 4th Division, in France during World War I, where he served with a machine gun detachment and was wounded. During the interwar years, Eddy served in various assignments as a ROTC instructor, assistant operations officer in the Hawaiian Department, and (for six years) a student and instructor at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. He had been assigned to the 9th Infantry Division since 16 March 1942 as the assistant division commander. Ernie Pyle got to know Eddy in Normandy and commented that he "looked more like a schoolteacher than a soldier."⁴ Despite his scholarly appearance, Eddy proved to be an outstanding commander during the war, his strong and decisive leadership a key factor in the success of the 9th Infantry Division in combat.

The plan for Operation TORCH, the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, mandated the use of the 9th Infantry Division in three separate locations: the 39th Infantry Regiment (the “Falcons”) at Algiers (Algeria), the 47th Infantry Regiment (the “Raiders”) at Safi (French Morocco), and the 60th Infantry Regiment (the “Go-Devils”) at Port Lyautey (French Morocco). Though considered a success, the invasion uncovered serious weaknesses in joint and combined operations, combined arms training, and small unit leadership. Fortunately, French resistance was for the most part light and an armistice quickly achieved. For the men of the 9th Infantry Division, the operation provided valuable if limited experience and engendered some confidence in their abilities. Nevertheless, the operation hardly went smoothly for the American forces, whose weaknesses became all too apparent in Tunisia several months later.

Introduction to Combat

The first battles waged by the Army of the United States during World War II were traumatic affairs. Hastily mobilized, inadequately trained units fared poorly when they met the combat experienced forces of the *Wehrmacht* for the first time in Tunisia in 1943. Near disaster at Kasserine Pass in February led to the relief of the United States II Corps commander, Major General Lloyd R. Fredendall. Under the leadership of the charismatic and forceful Lieutenant General George S. Patton, Jr., American forces performed only slightly better in the next encounter a month later at El Guettar. Unimaginative planning and poor execution characterized these engagements, which were decided more by mass and firepower than by skill and maneuver.

The Battle of El Guettar was a wake-up call for the 9th Infantry Division. Moved to Tunisia in the wake of the embarrassing defeat at Kasserine Pass, the division (minus the 60th RCT, which was detached to the 1st Armored Division) began operations in corps reserve. The mission of II Corps was to attack German positions near El Guettar in conjunction with an assault by the British Eighth Army against the Mareth Line. When the 1st Infantry Division ran into stiff resistance along the high ground east of El Guettar, Patton committed the 9th Infantry Division to the attack on 28 March 1943. For the next 10 days the division fought for control of the high ground against a well-fortified enemy. Only the success of the British Eighth Army finally forced the Germans to retreat from their positions.⁵

The division's performance at El Guettar left much to be desired. On the first morning of the attack the lead battalion of the 47th Infantry Regiment reported inaccurately that it had reached its objective.⁶ When the Germans there halted its progress, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions maneuvered to envelop the enemy. The 3rd Battalion seized a key ridge, but elements of the 10th Panzer Division caught the 2nd Battalion in an engagement area and destroyed E Company. The remainder of the battalion lost contact with the division for 36 hours. When Major General Eddy committed the 1st Battalion, 39th Infantry to extend the envelopment further to the south, it too became lost.⁷

The next day the situation got worse before it got better. The Germans ambushed the 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry as it moved forward along the El Guettar-Gabes road in trucks. The battalion sustained heavy losses and became badly demoralized. The 1st and 3rd Battalions, 47th Infantry could not dislodge the German defenders from their positions. The 1st Battalion, 39th Infantry and the 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry remained out of contact. The division regrouped during the night and finally reestablished contact with the two "lost" battalions.

For the next two days, the division made little progress. II Corps was out of touch with the situation, for on April 1st Patton ordered into execution the second phase of the corps plan, which called for the 1st Armored Division to pass through the 9th Infantry Division after it had opened a hole wide enough for the armor to begin exploitation. But until American infantrymen controlled the dominating high ground around Hills 369 and 772, the armor would go nowhere.⁸

On April 3rd, the entire corps artillery was placed under Eddy's control. A massive barrage hit the German positions, but the 47th Infantry Regiment was slow to follow the preparation and failed to seize its objective. The next day the 47th Infantry tried to infiltrate German positions under cover of darkness, but again failed to dislodge the defenders. Only after the Germans withdrew from their positions on April 6th did the division make progress. On April 7th, the 9th Infantry Division was ordered to retire to an assembly area to the west, where it received replacements of men and equipment in preparation for a move to the north for the next operation, an attack towards Bizerte.⁹

The 9th Infantry Division's introduction to combat near El Guettar was neither easy nor cheap. Its two engaged regiments lost 120 killed,

872 wounded, 316 missing, 186 injured, 111 non-battle casualties, and 207 exhaustion cases in just 10 days of combat. Five out of six infantry battalion commanders were out of action. Of the 207 cases of combat fatigue, only 40 percent returned to their units after the battle.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the division acquired basic, crucial skills which it put to good use in its next operation in northern Tunisia. Commanders learned to perform reconnaissance early and then take the time to perfect their plans and issue orders. II Corps had rushed the 9th Infantry Division into battle, which meant that the division had to rely on the intelligence gathered by the 1st Infantry Division, most of which was incorrect. During its attack the 9th Infantry Division failed to seize the dominating high ground. As a result, German artillery observers poured fire onto the attackers and the division ended up assaulting enemy positions frontally. Artillery fire alone could not dislodge the defenders from their well-fortified positions, some of which had been blasted into solid rock. The infantry mastered the technique of following closely behind its artillery preparation, a basic lesson from World War I that American soldiers regrettably had to relearn in World War II.

Despite its apparent shortcomings, the division sounded a positive note at the end of its after-action report: "Opposing crafty and veteran soldiers, our troops showed courage and ability. With one battle behind them, they were now ready to enter the next operation a wiser and more able fighting unit."¹¹ For the 9th Infantry Division, El Guettar was a costly lesson in the basics of modern warfare.

After El Guettar, II Corps (under the command of Major General Omar N. Bradley as of 15 April 1943) received two weeks to regroup and prepare for the next attack. Severely tested in its initial combat operations, the 9th Infantry Division would use the time to assess its shortcomings, train, and properly plan the next action. The result of its efforts was an astonishing triumph as the division maneuvered through seemingly impassable terrain in the Sedjenane Valley to envelop German forces in northern Tunisia and seize the port city of Bizerte.

The 9th Division Rebounds

The II Corps' plan was to conduct the main attack with the 1st Infantry Division (reinforced) in the south along the road that ran from Sidi Nsir to Mateur. The 9th Infantry Division (reinforced) was to conduct

a supporting attack in the north to seize the high ground in the vicinity of Jefna and then exploit toward Mateur on the left flank of the main effort. The 1st Armored Division was positioned behind the 1st Infantry Division, ready to exploit any penetration of the enemy defenses. The 34th Infantry Division remained in corps reserve, but its positioning virtually precluded its use in the north. In short, the 9th Infantry Division was on its own.

In addition to its core units the division had a number of reinforcement units to augment its organic fighting strength. The division itself was organized in a triangular structure, with three infantry regiments, division-sized artillery of three 105mm howitzer battalions and one 155mm howitzer battalion, an engineer battalion, a medical battalion, and division troops consisting of a headquarters company, reconnaissance troop, signal company, quartermaster company, ordnance company, and a military police platoon. Each infantry regiment consisted of three infantry battalions, a cannon company (six 75mm self-propelled howitzers and two 105mm self-propelled howitzers), an anti-tank company (twelve 37mm anti-tank guns), a service company, and a headquarters company. The 27 rifle companies in the division had a combat strength of 5,184 men and formed the foundation around which the remainder of the division was structured.¹²

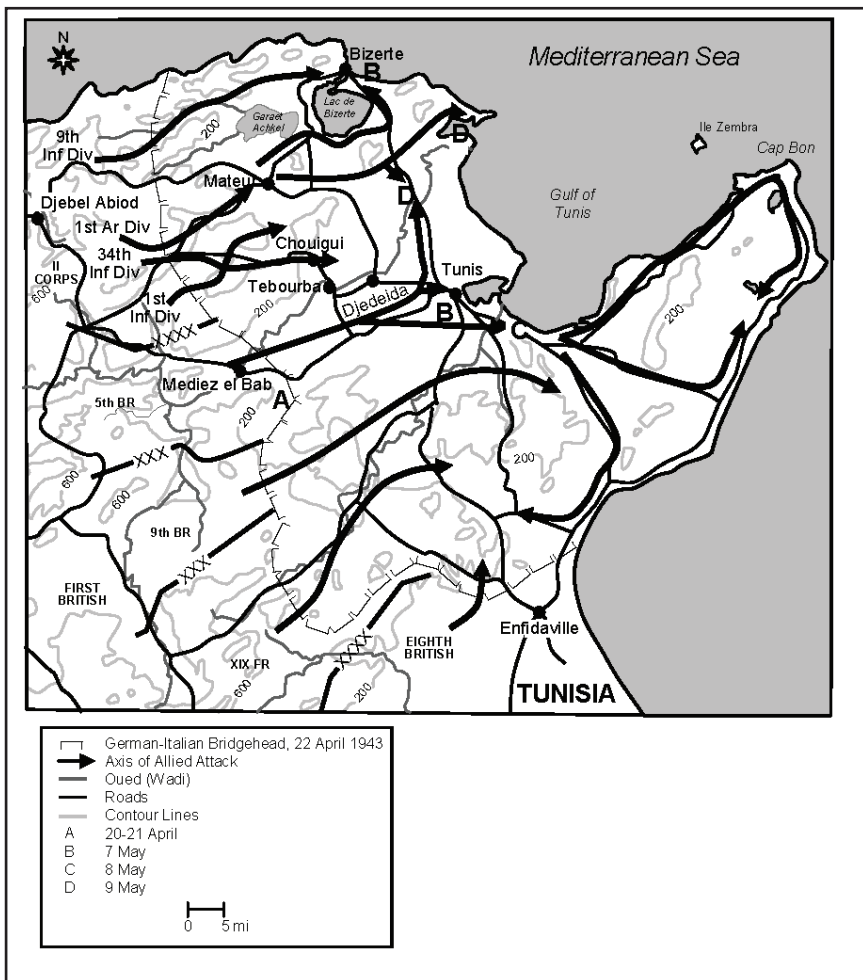
A fourth ground maneuver element, the Corps Franc d'Afrique (CFA), was also attached. The CFA was a composite force of approximately 4,000 men, indifferently equipped, consisting of an assorted collection of Free French expatriates, Vichy political prisoners, Jewish refugees, Spanish Loyalists, and Berber tribesmen. Although the CFA provided additional combat power, it came with virtually no support units, and thus taxed an already strained divisional support structure. Other reinforcements consisted of the 91st Reconnaissance Squadron, 601st and 895th Tank Destroyer Battalions, 185th Field Artillery Battalion (155m howitzers), 62nd Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105mm self-propelled howitzers), Battery C/36th Field Artillery (155mm rifled guns), and the 434th Coast Artillery Battalion (Anti-Aircraft).¹³

In mid-April the 9th Infantry Division relieved the British 46th Infantry Division in its new zone of operations in northern Tunisia adjacent to the Mediterranean coast. The area was drained by two streams, the Oued Sedjenane and the Oued Malah, which flow generally west to east. Neither was a significant obstacle, but the principal ridge lines running between them were. The terrain was mountainous and badly broken, with numerous

cross-compartments. The Djebel (Mount) Dardyss controlled the entrance to the Sedjenane Valley, while the massive Key en Nsour controlled its exit. An excellent improved road ran from Sedjenane through Jefna to Mateur, then north and east along the shore of Garaet (Lake) Achkel until it came to Bizerte. Unimproved tracks in poor condition ran through the Sedjenane Valley and in the mountains parallel to the coast. There were no north-south routes in the area, which would seriously hinder Eddy's ability to move his forces laterally. Most of the terrain was covered with extremely dense brush rising to a height of 6-8 feet.¹⁴

Fortified enemy positions on two hill masses, Green Hill (Djebel Azag) and Bald Hill (Djebel El Ajred), dominated the road running through the town of Jefna to Mateur and Bizerte and made a frontal attack unfeasible. The British had three times unsuccessfully attempted to assault these formidable positions. The Germans had taken months to develop them, excavating entrenchments and weapons emplacements with pneumatic drills and strengthening them with concrete. Antipersonnel mines littered the area, especially the likely dismounted avenues of approach up draws and gullies.¹⁵

The German *Division von Manteuffel* barred the way to Bizerte. The 962nd Infantry Regiment, with four battalions, defended the sector from the coast to the southern edge of the Sedjenane Valley. From there to the southern edge of the Bald-Green Hill positions, the 160th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, with three battalions, blocked the major avenue of approach to Mateur. Later reinforcement by two Italian units and two German reconnaissance battalions brought the enemy total to nine battalions with an effective strength of approximately 5,000 men.¹⁶ This figure roughly matched the infantry strength available to the 9th Infantry Division. Where the Americans had unquestioned superiority was in the supporting arms and services. German artillery amounted to two 170mm guns, a battery of 150mm guns, two batteries of 105mm howitzers, eight self-propelled 75mm howitzers, and a battery of 88mm dual-purpose anti-aircraft guns, less than a third of the artillery support available to the 9th Infantry Division and its attached forces.¹⁷ Nevertheless, given the natural defensive advantages of the extremely rugged terrain, the normal requirement for an attacking force to attain a three-to-one superiority over a fortified enemy to ensure success, and the experience of the German and Italian forces, the odds seemed to be decidedly stacked against Eddy and his men.



Map 8. Bizerte: Taking the Bridgehead, 20 April-13 May 1943.

Major General Eddy had learned enough from El Guettar not to make another effort to attack the German positions frontally. Instead, he planned to fix the enemy in place with the 47th Infantry Regiment, while maneuvering the 39th and 60th Infantry Regiments and the CFA through the extremely rugged terrain of the Sedjenane Valley to the north in an envelopment of the German positions along the direct road to Mateur. Eddy decided that the potential benefits of the operation were worth the risk of moving the division out of communications with its supply and service organizations. He felt that the division could surprise the German defenders with an unexpected maneuver through “impassable” terrain.

The key was to move the division without alerting the Germans to the impending envelopment.¹⁸

The 9th Infantry Division and its commander had learned their lessons well. The division made a meticulous study of the terrain and the enemy, and then completed a comprehensive plan which commanders thoroughly briefed to their men. Although the division frontage was 28 miles wide, Eddy focused over two-thirds of his available combat power in the main effort in the northern part of his zone. The CFA and the 60th Infantry Regiment would attack along the ridges and mountains on the north side of the Sedjenane Valley and the 39th Infantry Regiment would attack to seize the Djebel Ainchouna along the ridge on the south side. While the French and the Go-Devils moved up the valley in a wide envelopment, the Falcons would turn southeast in a shorter envelopment of the enemy positions along the main road to Mateur.

The operation was planned for a period of five days, at the end of which the CFA and the two American regiments would be in possession of the decisive terrain overlooking the main enemy supply route. Further south, the 47th Infantry Regiment would fix German forces in the Green and Bald Hill positions astride the main road. The 91st Reconnaissance Squadron maintained contact in the 6.5-mile gap between the Raiders and the 1st Infantry Division to the south. The division obtained three hundred mules for supply and evacuation in the mountainous terrain. Units were moved into attack positions during hours of darkness over a period of three days, unobserved by German forces.¹⁹

Artillery support would be crucial to the ultimate success of the operation, but the wide zone of attack threatened to disperse the available assets and prevent the massing of fires on critical targets.

The Division Artillery Commander, Brigadier General S. LeRoy Irwin, solved this by assigning each infantry regiment a 105mm artillery battalion in direct support. He divided the remainder of the medium and heavy artillery into two groups: the 34th FA (155mm howitzers) and the 62nd FA (105mm self-propelled howitzers) reinforced the main attack, and the 185th FA (155mm howitzers) and C Battery, 36th FA (155mm rifled guns) would reinforce the supporting attack.²⁰ Artillery control was centralized until the pursuit phase of the operation began. Eddy attached the 9th Reconnaissance Troop, the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 610th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and the 434th Coast Artillery (AA) Battalion to

the Division Artillery to protect it as the infantry moved forward along the ridgelines.²¹

Moving through the Sedjenane Valley would be no easy task. The terrain featured steep mountain ridges, heavy and thick underbrush with little overhead cover, and a near complete absence of roads. Mules were assigned to carry casualties and supplies. The method was manpower intensive, since one medic had to accompany every two mules in order to prevent accidents. The collecting companies in the two regiments in the Sedjenane Valley were supplemented with 100 extra litter bearers each. These personnel came from the divisional band and non-essential staff personnel.²²

The attack began on 23 April. The 47th and 60th Infantry Regiments reached their initial objectives with little opposition, but the 39th Infantry Regiment met stiff resistance. In front of the Falcons, the enemy was entrenched on the 1,500 foot high Djebel Ainchouna, Objective Cadillac, with cleared engagement areas protected by mines and covered with automatic weapons. Taking the mountain would prove expensive indeed. While the 1st and 3rd Battalions clawed their way up the mountain, Colonel J. Trimble Brown and his regimental command group were surrounded and captured by a German infantry company. Captain Felix P. Settlemyre escaped and contacted the 2nd Battalion, which attacked the force, killed 45 enemy soldiers, and rescued the command group.²³ Unfortunately, a complete set of the regiment's plans fell into enemy hands and were not recovered.

On the lower slopes of Djebel Ainchouna, confusion reigned. Given the situation and the disappointing results of the first day of battle, Eddy decided to relieve Brown. Brigadier General Donald A. Stroh, the assistant division commander, temporarily assumed command of the regiment.²⁴

The regiments astride the Sedjenane Valley continued to advance to the east, slowed by steep hills, thick vegetation, and enemy resistance. In the zone of the 60th Infantry Regiment, the terrain was so severe that the soldiers had to crawl on their hands and knees at times to continue their movement. The 2nd Battalion, under the command of Major "Black Mike" Kauffman, led the advance onto Djebel Dardys, the key terrain overlooking the entrance to the valley. On the morning of 24 April, two German battalions counterattacked for four hours, but were beaten off with

the loss of 116 dead and scores of wounded. One of the primary reasons for their defeat were the actions of Sergeant William L. Nelson, a mortar section leader who crawled to an observation post under intense enemy fire to direct mortar concentrations on the enemy. The mortar fire brought the German counterattack to a halt. The enemy mortally wounded Nelson with hand grenades, but before the sergeant died he crawled to an even better vantage point and continued to direct the fire of his section until the enemy was driven off. For his heroic actions, Sergeant Nelson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.²⁵ Although the 2nd Battalion lost 21 Soldiers (killed in action) and had 111 wounded, it held its ground. For its courageous stand, the battalion received the Distinguished Unit Citation.²⁶

The 39th Infantry Regiment fought through small arms, machine gun, and mortar fire. The Falcons received heavy enemy fire and the 1st Battalion suffered casualties to its commander, executive officer, S-2, and the heavy weapons company commander. Only the superior leadership of a junior captain, Conrad V. Anderson, kept the battalion functioning and able to maintain its precarious hold on the slopes of Djebel Ainchouna. Supply difficulties were acute.²⁷

On April 25th, Eddy gave the Falcons the support of nearly the entire divisional artillery, which enabled the regiment to complete the seizure of Djebel Ainchouna. The seizure of this key piece of terrain deprived the enemy of much of their observation over the Sedjenane Valley. The Americans took advantage of this situation by pushing mechanized elements up the valley to the east.²⁸

The next day Eddy changed the direction of the 60th Infantry's advance to assist the stalled CFA. It was hacking its way with machetes through the thick, rugged cork forests along the Mediterranean coast to the north of the Sedjenane Valley and had halted in front of enemy positions on Hill 107, about three miles north of Djebel Dardyss. The Go-Devils attacked northeast to envelop the enemy positions barring the CFA's advance, while the 39th Infantry continued its advance to the east. A gap resulted between the two regiments, but Eddy felt that the terrain was such that the Germans could not exploit it even had they known it was there.

The gap was guarded by elements of the 9th Reconnaissance Troop and the 894th Tank Destroyer battalion attached to the division

artillery, which pushed slowly up the Sedjenane Valley to the east as the infantry cleared the heights above.

“We learned that to live we must take to the ridges and advance along them, avoiding the natural avenues of approach up the valleys...Taking to the ridges was tedious, strenuous business but it saved hundreds of lives and gave physical possession of the high ground.”²⁹

Colonel William L. Ritter took command of the 39th Infantry Regiment on 26 April and Brigadier General Stroh resumed his duties as the assistant division commander. The 2nd Battalion seized Hills 498 and 513 before it was pinned down on by German forces entrenched on the reverse slope of Hill 382. Ritter next sent the 1st Battalion in a wide sweep to the northeast to seize Hill 164, then pivoted it southeast to take Hills 336 and 377. The moves put the regiment in position to assault the key terrain on the flank of German forces along the main road to the south.³⁰

For three days, the two regiments astride the Sedjenane Valley continued to advance slowly, hampered by the extremely severe terrain and acute supply shortages. Nature was the greatest enemy. The division historian relates, “tightly-packed jungle brush sometimes rose for eight feet or more in height. It was as if the South Pacific campaign suddenly had been transplanted atop the mountainous areas of Northern Tunisia.”³¹ During this period the 60th Infantry Regiment advanced at a rate of a mile every two days. Getting supplies to the lead battalions was a huge undertaking which required extreme exertions by man and mules, energized by liberal doses of GI invective.³²

The payoff came on April 30th — a week after the attack had begun — when the 39th Infantry Regiment took Hill 406 and Spur 299, which commanded the terrain to the south and the main road running through Jefna to Mateur. The sight that greeted the regiment was sweet justice for the soldiers who had toiled for a week across the tortuous ridges. Before them lay acres of German supply dumps and command and control installations behind the fortified enemy positions astride the main road. The 26th Field Artillery Battalion fired over four thousand rounds in a single day with devastating effect on the enemy rear area.

Enveloped, the Germans pulled off the Green-Bald Hill positions and began to retreat to the northeast.³³ With a great expenditure of sweat

but minimal losses of blood, the 9th Infantry Division had succeeded in forcing the Germans off of the ground of their choosing and into a mobile battle for which they were ill-prepared.

Pursuit and Exploitation

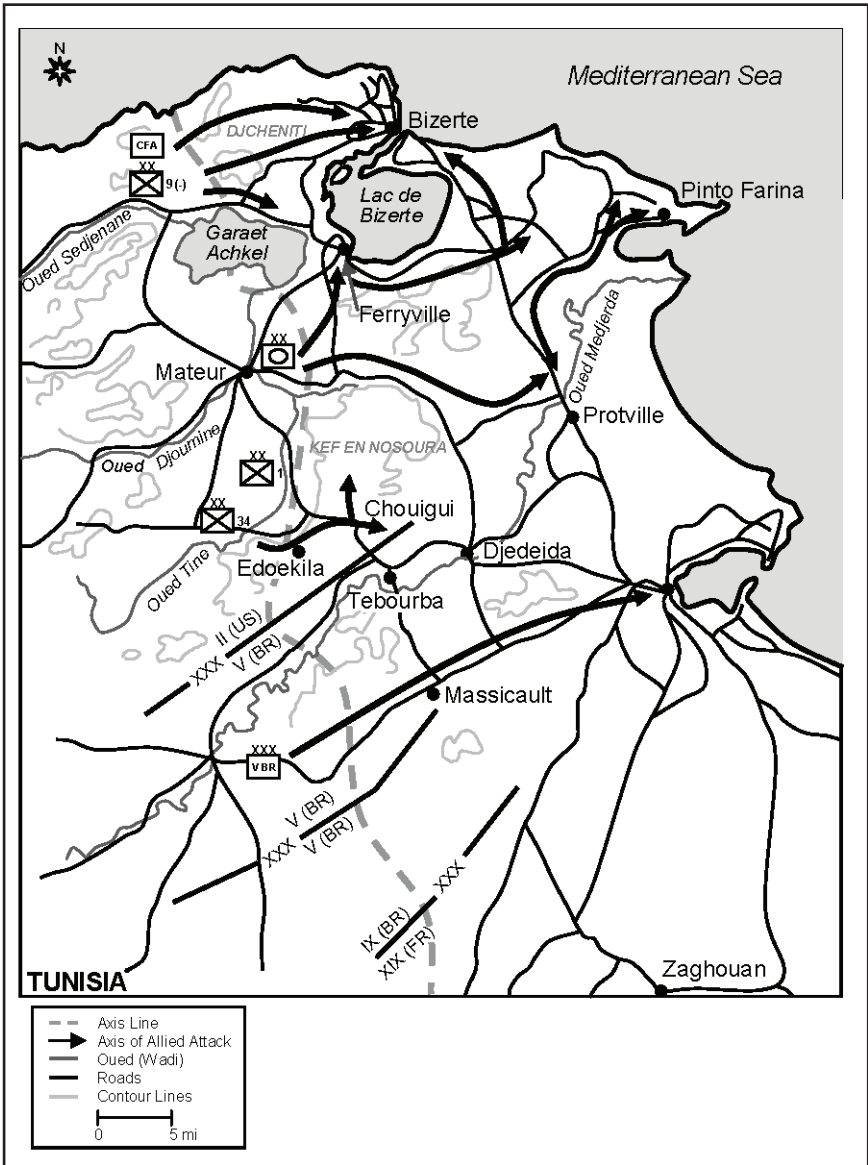
During the next several days the division pursued the withdrawing enemy to reach the final German positions in the hills west of Bizerte. The precipitous nature of the enemy retreat was clear as patrols discovered large amounts of abandoned equipment. The 3rd Battalion, 60th Infantry finally reached the crest of the Kef en Nsour on May 2nd, giving American forces control of every piece of key terrain west of Mateur. The division had advanced 12 miles in 13 days, captured 815 prisoners, seized a large amount of abandoned supplies and equipment, and had forced the enemy off of his prepared positions.³⁴ The enemy conducted a skillful withdrawal, but was not prepared to defend-in-depth. To complete the victory, the 9th Infantry Division now had to fight its way east through the final series of hills to reach Bizerte.

Only one road led east to Bizerte. The marshy expanse of the Garaet Ichkel made movement south of the road impossible, and the Germans held the hills north of the road in strength. Furthermore, while the division artillery and supply columns could finally move east of the Sedjenane Valley, they could go no further due to a blown bridge under constant enemy observation. One mile north of the Garaet Ichkel, Djebel Cheniti dominated the road to Bizerte and it was held in strength by enemy forces.

Faced with another difficult situation, Eddy ordered the 47th Infantry Regiment to penetrate enemy positions to the north of Djebel Cheniti. Once this was done, a battalion from the 60th Infantry Regiment would seize Djebel Cheniti from the northwest. To make this plan work, division engineers constructed a new road to support the attack to the northeast. The critical part of the plan was the seizure of the Djebel Cheniti. The German defenders on this decisive terrain had held the CFA at bay for several days. Failure to possess this high ground would close the only road in the area to traffic and doom any advance on Bizerte.

On May 5th the Raiders attacked and by nightfall had penetrated enemy positions far enough to provide space for the attack on Djebel Cheniti. The 1st Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment was given the mission

of seizing the hill. The battalion relieved the French forces in place that night and conducted a reconnaissance of the enemy positions.



Map 9. Bizerte: Operations, Phase II, 4-9 May 1943.

At 1300 hours the next day, the Go-Devils forced the Germans off Djebel Cheniti by attacking with bayonets fixed, one hundred meters

behind a rolling artillery barrage in the best tradition of the Great War. This courageous action destroyed the German defenders on the hill and opened the way to Bizerte. On May 7th, exactly one month after the conclusion of the bitter action at El Guettar, the first American units entered Bizerte, only to withdraw to allow the CFA to claim the liberation of the city the next day in a nod to French pride.³⁵ For the 9th Infantry Division, the seizure of Bizerte brought the North African campaign to a close.

The attack through the Sedjenane Valley was a brilliant success for the 9th Infantry Division. The division suffered a net loss of 1,114 men, fewer than at El Guettar, and accomplished all of its missions in outstanding fashion. The division used ample amounts of firepower; the artillery expended a total of 47,000 rounds of 105mm and 155mm artillery shells during the operation. But the firepower was not used as a panacea for poor maneuver. Rather, the firepower complemented a superb plan of operations which placed American forces on the key terrain in a position of relative advantage over the enemy. Fires were used to destroy enemy forces that had already been outmaneuvered and forced to withdraw from their prepared positions.

Staff sections improvised as necessary to make the plan work. The quartermaster foraged for 22,977 pounds of hay and 85,416 pounds of barley for the mules. The signal battalion laid huge amounts of wire, which was essential because radio communications were spotty at best due to the broken nature of the terrain. At one point, the circuit from the division headquarters to the 60th Infantry Regiment in the far north was 32 miles long, while the circuit to the 47th Infantry Regiment in the south was 26 miles long. At times there were 1,200 miles of wire on the ground. Engineers built seventy miles of roads for the artillery and supply vehicles. The medical battalion used mules to evacuate casualties and improvised a "casualty train" along a railroad track by removing the tires from a truck and placing it on the rails. The medical battalion also began to use combat fatigue cases for limited duty in the division area as stretcher bearers or truck drivers, and found that 80 to 90 percent of these men could return to duty within five days.³⁶ Instead of putting up obstacles to a difficult mission, the staff found a way to realize the commander's intent within existing constraints.

In a report prepared at the conclusion of the North African campaign on the orders of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Allied Force Commander, the 9th Infantry Division analyzed its recent actions for

future training and operations lessons.³⁷ Conclusions the division drew are as pertinent today in assessing the requirements for dominant dismounted maneuver as they were when they were written over 65 years ago.

The most important lesson learned was that dominant observation must be seized. High ground afforded observation for the artillery observers of the side which possessed it, a huge advantage in dismounted operations where artillery is the primary killing instrument.

Other lessons were equally valid. The commander must have accurate intelligence to make sound plans and decisions. The G-2 and G-3 must co-locate and work closely together. The division command post must be capable of rapid movement and set-up. Infantry must use their organic weapons and capabilities and request artillery support only when resistance cannot be overcome. When fired on, infantry units from squad to battalion must advance by fire and movement, using enveloping tactics whenever possible. Finally, in combat there is no substitute for good leadership.

Although the report was highly critical of the poor coordination between ground forces and close air support, the drafters failed to remark on the most important contribution of the air forces to victory. By April 23, 1943, the opening date of the final offensive in Tunisia, the Allies had gained air supremacy over North Africa. This mastery of the skies enabled Eddy to maneuver his regiments over difficult terrain without fear of detection and attack from the air. Had the *Luftwaffe* been present in strength, the maneuver through the Sedjenane Valley would have been risky at best.

In analyzing the operations of the 9th Infantry Division in North Africa, one must recognize the key role played by the capable leadership of Major General Manton Eddy. In his memoirs, General of the Army Omar Bradley showered praise on Eddy, who served under him as both a division and corps commander:

...there are few distinguishing characteristics of a successful division commander. Success comes instead from a well-balanced combination of good judgment, self-confidence, leadership, and boldness...of all these commanders, none was better balanced nor more cooperative than Manton Eddy. Tactically he performed

*with classical maneuvers such as the one he employed at Jefna [the Sedjenane Valley operation]. Yet though not timid, neither was he bold; Manton liked to count his steps carefully before he took them.*³⁸

Eddy did not hesitate to act when necessary, as his relief of the commander of the 39th Infantry Regiment demonstrates. His success depended as much on his ability as a trainer and administrator as it did on his competence as a tactician, which was considerable. Eddy was a well-balanced general officer, the perfect choice to lead a division in combat.

Since Eddy played such a large role in the victory at Bizerte, perhaps it is appropriate to allow him the final word in assessing the performance of the 9th Infantry Division during the campaign:

*The 9th Infantry Division had entered its first engagement with the enemy, the Battle of El Guettar; greatly handicapped in not having had time for sufficient reconnaissance and in not having all of the units of the Division under Division control. Going through this battle, however, they had learned lesson after lesson, learning them the hard way. At Sedjenane and all the way to Bizerte, they demonstrated conclusively that they could profit by their former mistakes and take full advantage of the lessons which they had learned. This they did. Time after time they maneuvered the Germans out of strong positions. They continually seized points of observation held by the enemy and, having deprived him of this [sic], continued to drive him back. They followed artillery concentrations closely, with devastating results to the enemy. The individual soldier had proved that he was capable. Commanders of all echelons had proved the same. The 9th Division had definitely become a capable combat unit.*³⁹

In the hard test of war, the 9th Infantry Division — the “Old Reliables” — had proven itself and come of age. On a hundred future battlefields, large and small, they would show their valor and skill at arms. But it was on the road to Bizerte that they first earned their spurs.

Notes

1 The 60th Infantry Regiment, for example, trained 1,800 volunteer recruits and 1,807 draftees. *Regimental History, Sixtieth Infantry, 1940-1942*, 309-INF(60)-0.1, Box 7535, Record Group 407, National Archives II.

2 Devers would go on to command the 6th Army Group in France in 1944-1945.

3 Christopher R. Gabel, *The US Army GHQ Maneuvers of 1941* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1991).

4 Joseph B. Mittelman, *Hold Fast!* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1946.

5 George F. Howe, *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1957), 574-577.

6 The commander of the 47th Infantry Regiment at the time was Colonel Edwin H. Randle, who later became assistant division commander of the 77th Infantry Division. The first commander of the 47th Infantry Regiment upon the activation of the 9th Infantry Division was Colonel Alexander M. Patch, who later became the Commander of the Seventh US Army in France and Germany in 1944-1945.

7 HQ, 9th Infantry Division, *Report of Operations, 26 March – 8 April 1943*, 309-0.3, Box 7326, Record Group 407, National Archives II.

8 HQ, 9th Infantry Division, *Report of Operations*.

9 HQ, 9th Infantry Division, *Report of Operations*.

10 HQ, 9th Infantry Division, *Report of Operations*. The medics treated the cases of combat fatigue with heavy sedation, a practice contrary to modern techniques of treating combat exhaustion. This probably accounts for the low return to duty rate.

11 HQ, 9th Infantry Division, *Report of Operations*.

12 Kent Roberts Greenfield, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Wiley, *The Organization of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington: Historical Division, United States Army, 1947), 301.

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Chapter 7

“Hang On! We Are Coming!” The Relief of Chipyeong-Ni

by

Colonel John F. Antal, USA (Retired)

Optimism. Cheerfulness. Confidence. Determination in the face of adversity. More than food and ammunition, soldiers looking defeat in the face need inspired leadership. At Chipyeong-Ni the men of the surrounded 23rd Regimental Combat Team (RCT), and the 5th Cavalry troopers dashing to relieve them, never despaired because their commanders refused to. Colonel Paul L. Freeman, CO of the 23rd RCT, and Colonel Marcel Gustave Crombez, CO of the 5th Cavalry Regiment, never became household words. But their courage and tenacity saved their commands and won a famous victory at a time when victories were few.

On the 25th of June in 1950, Americans at home enjoyed their Sunday, gathering in churches, reading the paper, and listening to the heroics of their favorite baseball players on the radio — unaware that half a world away the Cold War had suddenly flamed white hot. On the Korean peninsula, US advisers sent frantic radio calls, reporting a massive assault across the 38th Parallel by the North Korean army. Flowing over the ridgelines and down the valleys, the *Inmun Gun*, well-equipped and Russian-trained, surprised and overwhelmed a disorganized South Korean Army, lunging toward the capital city of Seoul which fell only two days later. As the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces fell back, President Harry Truman suddenly reversed his administration's policy and decided to commit the full weight of the American military to stop communist aggression in Korea.

The first US units to respond came from occupation duty in Japan. Arriving without effective antitank weapons, they were quickly routed with high casualties. On July 5th the *Inmun Gun* cut through the hasty defense set up by Task Force Smith near Osan and encircled elements

of the 24th Division (US), capturing Taejon — 200 miles south of Seoul — on July 20th. Falling back in disarray, United Nations (UN) forces headed south toward the port of Pusan, the sole remaining port of entry for reinforcements arriving from the United States. By the end of August, US and ROK forces were penned into a small perimeter north of Pusan.

The fighting, however, was far from over. Reinforced with tanks and artillery the Pusan Perimeter defense held. General MacArthur, the Commander in Chief of the UN forces, looked for a place to counterattack and launched his masterstroke by invading at Inchon, southwest of Seoul. This brilliant amphibious operation cut the North Korean line of supply and communication. Exhausted after four months of full-tilt offensive drives and smashed from front and rear by superior UN units, the *Inmun Gun* melted away. UN forces moved north and crossed the 38th Parallel. Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, was captured on 19 October. Flush with victory, the UN forces raced north to the Yalu, expecting to end the war by Christmas.

Communist China, however, had other ideas. Unwilling to see their North Korean ally destroyed, the Chinese intervened in force on 26 November 1950. The war entered a new phase. The United States found itself fighting a new war against a sea of fresh manpower from Communist China. The Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) were rugged peasant fighters, inured to hardship, battle-tested in the Chinese civil war, but poorly equipped. In spite of their lack of modern equipment they surprised the UN forces and sent them once again running south in confusion.

In spite of tremendous technological and organizational advantages — modern weapons, excellent supply, and complete air and sea power — the entire UN ground force found itself on unequal terms against an extremely capable foe. Fearing encirclement, some UN units panicked when they discovered their routes of withdrawal closed by Chinese roadblocks. Road-bound and imbued with a “tactical and psychological dependence on continuous battle lines, such has been known in Europe,”¹ UN battalions were cut off and chopped up in one battle after another. By the end of January 1951 the Chinese had earned a tremendous victory, recapturing Seoul and pushing forty miles south of the South Korean capital. Unsure of its ability to stop the victorious CCF, Washington planned secretly to withdraw US forces from Korea.

With casualties mounting, and the political will for the war waning, Eighth Army commander Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway desperately needed a way to turn the tide. Burning with a desire to regain the initiative, Ridgway knew that after the bloody and demoralizing retreat down the peninsula, only counterattack could restore his army's fighting spirit. On the 5th of January, Eighth Army launched a counteroffensive all along the line. The CCF, veteran and still flush with victory, counterattacked fiercely and blunted Ridgway's offensive. By February 11th the Chinese launched a full-scale offensive of their own. Two powerful Chinese attacks drove south to secure the towns of Hoengsong and Wonju. As the battle lines ebbed south, Ridgway decided to make a stand where several roads converged at a small Korean village called Chipyeong-ni. Ridgway ordered the 2nd Infantry Division to send a regimental combat team to the village — and to stay and fight there even if they became surrounded.

Circle the Wagons

Elated at its tactical success over the vaunted Americans, the CCF came on, confident of victory. While roadbound UN units struggled along one lane, unimproved routes over mountainous terrain, North Korean and Chinese commanders moved whole armies across the same rugged moonscape with decisive effect. "In attack, the Chinese usually made one or more frontal assaults and sent a sizable force around a flank to cut the main exit road behind those they were attacking. They were adept at picking ridgelines or hills close to the road, overlooking the point where they put their fire and roadblocks."² Forced to travel and resupply their forces on Korea's narrow roads, the Americans could be held up by a single position for hours. Since close air support was only effective during daylight, the Chinese usually attacked during periods of limited visibility. At night the Chinese would infiltrate squads, platoons, or whole companies into the American positions. These tactics usually unnerved their enemies and led to the quick collapse of the defender.

All along the front, UN forces withdrew almost 20 miles under the pressure of the mounting Chinese attacks. Staring into the abyss was Colonel Paul L. Freeman's 23rd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of the 2nd Infantry Division. The 23rd RCT arrived at Chipyeong-ni on 3 February. "Before the Chinese attack, the front lines of X Corps were well ahead of Colonel Freeman's Chipyeong-ni perimeter, but as UN units went south, sometimes fighting through Chinese roadblocks, Chipyeong-ni became a conspicuous bulge on the left of the corps' line."³

The 23rd RCT consisted of approximately 6,000 troops; four battalions of infantry (one of these was the famed French Battalion; French soldiers using American equipment and under the command of the 23rd RCT commander), a Ranger Infantry company, one tank company of fourteen M4 Sherman tanks (dispersed among the infantry battalions), one battalion of towed 105mm artillery, one battery of towed 155mm artillery, one air defense battery (six M16 and four M19 self propelled anti-aircraft machine gun carriers), and an engineer company.

The Americans in Chipyeong-ni had some advantages over other units in Korea. First, the 23rd RCT counted many veterans in its ranks. They knew the Chinese were worthy foes but they were sure of themselves and their tough, no-nonsense commander. Colonel Freeman was an “old China hand,” having served in China and Burma in World War II. Those who knew him considered him a gifted tactician as well as a courageous commander. Ill-considered orders infuriated Freeman and he made no effort to hide his displeasure with higher-level interference or incompetence. His men respected this, although this quality did not endear him to the top brass, particularly his Corps Commander, the acerbic Lieutenant General Ned Almond. Second, and most importantly, the 23rd RCT was a well-trained team with a proud reputation for getting the most out of its infantry, tanks, and artillery.

Earlier fighting at the end of January at a place called “Twin Tunnels” confirmed the 23rd’s reputation. Here Freeman’s companies attacked, held their ground against ferocious counterattacks, broke, fixed bayonets, and retook their positions. The courage of the regiment’s troopers, veteran and virgin, made the difference at Twin Tunnels, but so did Freeman’s effective use of massed artillery and armor. The butcher’s bill there for the CCF was 1,600 dead Chinese.

At Chipyeong-ni Colonel Freeman positioned his forces in a tight rectangular perimeter 4,000 yards east and west and 2,000 yards north to south on lower ground. The village itself was half a mile long and several blocks wide, situated at a crossroads. A single-track railroad ran through the town. Several brick buildings, including the railway station, occupied the center of the town. Most of the other buildings were mud-and-straw farmer’s huts. Previous fighting had destroyed most of the ramshackle buildings. Surrounding the town were eight distinct hills, at an average height of 850 feet above the valley. The twelve miles of surrounding ridgelines offered an excellent defensive position, but Freeman lacked the

manpower to hold a 3-to-4 mile diameter defensive perimeter. A close-in defense would have to do.

Ordering his battalions to set up on the small hills and rice paddies surrounding the town, Freeman arrayed his 1st Battalion from 12:00 to 1:00 o'clock (Charlie, Able, and Love Companies); 3rd Battalion from 2:00 to 5:00 o'clock (Item and King Companies); 2nd Battalion from 5:00 to 7:00 o'clock (Easy, Fox, and George Companies); and the French Battalion from 7:00 to 11:00 o'clock, in the west. Baker Company and one French company formed the battalion reserves. The Ranger company and the engineers were the regimental reserve.

For ten full days the regiment dug-in and prepared its positions, positioned its artillery, and cached weapons and ammunition. Freeman's men used the time to their advantage:

*"The infantry companies dug in their machine guns, registered their mortars, sowed antipersonnel mines, and operated daily patrols to the encompassing high ground. The regimental Heavy Mortar Company divided the fires of its platoons and sections among the sectors of the perimeter; the artillery registered on all probable avenues of approach, and all units established good communications lines. There was time to coordinate the infantry, artillery, and air support into an effective combat team."*⁴

Chinese patrol activity increased in the Chipyeong-ni area on 13 February. Observation posts within the perimeter could see the Chinese to the south and determined that Route 24A, the only road leading to friendly lines, was blocked. Chipyeong-ni was now surrounded by the Chinese. On the evening of 13 February Colonel Freeman called an orders group meeting of his subordinate commanders and informed them that their position was surrounded by Chinese. "We'll stay and fight it out," he said,⁵ confident in the ability of his troops and the strength of his position.

On the night of 13-14 February the CCF finally came calling. The first infiltration attacks began shortly after dark. The bright light of trip flares, set off by advancing Chinese squads, lit up the American kill zones as the Chinese blew bugles and rattled noisemakers, trying to draw fire to determine the location of the defenders. For the most part, Freeman's

men held their fire against these probes. As soon as the enemy appeared in strength the 23rd RCT opened fire with all weapons. Freeman's attached Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) worked frantically, calling in 40 flights of fighter-bombers against the Chinese. Artillery from within the perimeter fired on the advancing communist columns, causing heavy casualties. Sometime between 2200 and 2300 hours, CCF mortar shells landed inside the Chipyong-ni perimeter. The night would be a long one, as most nights are for the combat soldier.

The battle began in earnest during the early hours of February 14th. Heavy mortar and artillery fire preceded the next Chinese attack, striking the Northwest (French Battalion), North (1st Battalion) and Southeast (2nd Battalion and French Battalion) seams of the perimeter. By 0100 hours, the Chinese had launched strong attacks on the 1st and French battalions. At 0215 hours, the attacks switched to the southwest and southeast to focus on the 2nd Battalion. The Chinese attacked in platoon and company strength searching for gaps, but none were found. The American perimeter held, but the stubborn Chinese kept up the pressure until about 0730 hours when the battle suddenly tapered off.

Just after dawn, the Chinese quietly withdrew, leaving dozens of dead in front of the 23rd RCT's positions. Intermittent mortar shelling by Chinese 120mm mortars covered the communist withdrawal. Although the Chinese considered the night action merely a probing attack, they were surprised at the stubbornness of the American defense. The Chinese regrouped and prepared a more deliberate attack. Mortars and pack howitzers were moved forward and positioned for firing. Ammunition was brought up and cached near the guns. Unable to penetrate the perimeter in their first, hasty attack, the Chinese planned to launch a major attack on the night of the 14th to wipe out the Americans and their French allies.

During the day the infantrymen, tankers and gunners of the 23rd RCT rebuilt their defenses. The defenders redistributed ammunition and prepared for another onslaught. The artillery inside the perimeter fired at observed enemy positions in the surrounding hills throughout the day. On the afternoon of February 14th, the TACP brought in three air strikes to the South and the 23rd RCT received twenty-four air drops of ammunition.⁶ Except for a continuous shelling by Chinese mortar and artillery ranging from 60mm to 105mm, the 14th was a "quiet day" for the 6,000 soldiers of the besieged and surrounded 23rd Regimental Combat Team. The men joked nervously about the battle being known to history as "Freeman's Last

Stand” as they filled sandbags and reinforced their bunkers with additional overhead cover. Chinese prisoners captured by Freeman’s men told the Americans that the CCF would attack in force on the night of the 14th.

As the sun went down on 14 February, Saint Valentine’s Day, the Chinese moved to their line of departure to conduct the decisive attack. At 2000 hours, flares suddenly appeared in the sky. The sound of bugles, whistles, and yells filled the cold night air. The Chinese attacked in the north, hitting C Company of the 1st Battalion in force. Colonel Freeman described the Chinese attack of his prepared defenses with satisfaction:

*“The Chinese assault wave bungled into the trip flares, anti-personnel mines and booby traps in front of C Company. With the resultant confusion in enemy ranks, down came the artillery and mortar barrages and the terrified enemy recoiled...Despite his initial clobbering the fanatical enemy came back for more. Not a small arms was fired until he hit the barbed wire in front of the main positions. Then, in the light of 155mm illuminating shells, the machine guns cut loose. At the same time ‘meat choppers’ (M-16’s – quad .50 caliber machine guns mounted on armored tracks) and tanks near the road between the French and 1st Battalion contributed their heavy volume of fire.”*⁷

The Chinese came in waves, their attacks melting like snow in front of the 23rd RCT’s coordinated defense. Overwhelming fire from the defender’s tanks, howitzers, machine guns, rifles, and grenades turned back each assault. King Company in the east beat back a determined Chinese attack that got within fifteen feet of its foxholes. The French, in the west, were blasted from their positions, only to fix bayonets and retake them again with their reserve company.

Repulsed in the north, but sensing that the Americans had committed most of their reserves, the Chinese main effort shifted to the south. The main attack started at midnight with an intense mortar barrage directed against George Company, 2nd Battalion. The Chinese pressed their attacks rushing forward in platoon and company groups. Flares lit up the night sky.

“Chinese infiltrators began to infiltrate over the low hills, carrying pole and satchel charges. The Chinese poured into George Company, killing many men by dropping explosives into the foxholes. George was piling up the dead by the hundreds, but too many of the enemy were getting close...fighting a determined battle for each foxhole.”⁸

George Company’s furious defense was eventually overwhelmed and the American survivors moved down the hill to the center of the defensive perimeter.

The Chinese realized that their attacks had ruptured the American defense and knew that the George Company position was the key to the defensive perimeter. Official Chinese reports, captured weeks after the battle, stated that “nearly a hundred enemy were killed and five captured... information was received from the interrogation of the prisoners that the enemy forces were highly concentrated and had constructed strong field works.”⁹ Using torches to light their way, the Chinese rushed reinforcements into the breach. If the Chinese pressed their attack through the gap created by George Company’s withdrawal, the 23rd RCT’s perimeter would surely collapse.

Colonel Freeman, with his forces hotly engaged all along the perimeter, reacted to the penetration in the south. He ordered his Ranger company to attack. Several hasty counterattacks with the Ranger Company and tanks stunned the Chinese, but the American counterattacks were poorly coordinated and were repulsed with heavy casualties. Poor tank-infantry-artillery communications and the lack of counterattack planning and rehearsals caused the American attacks to fail. Piecemeal counterattacks were not enough to dislodge the determined Chinese, who now dug into George Company’s positions. Fresh Chinese forces moved forward under the eerie light of exploding shells and flickering illumination shells to widen the breach and wipe out the Americans. “The enemy attack continued without let-up. It was not one calculated to overrun the entire hill but a persistent, gnawing assault that progressed from one hole to the next.”¹⁰

Though they had gained a precious foothold, the Chinese assault began to lose momentum as the night wore on, a phenomenon that would be seen time and again throughout the war: “they could crack a line, but

a force lacking mechanization, air power, and rapid communications could not exploit against a force possessing all three.”¹¹ Unfamiliar with the ground and the enemy defenses, Chinese reinforcements got lost in the dark. Chinese fire support, consisting of 76mm howitzers and 120mm mortars, was inaccurate and uncoordinated with their ground attacks. In addition, Chinese command and control was disjointed. Attacks were sent in piecemeal. Bugles and horns did not transmit orders in time to move forces forward to take advantage of local gains. The Chinese admitted that their failure on the night of the 14th was a failure of coordination. “Our firepower was not adequately organized because of the enemy’s superior firepower and the open terrain. For this reason we failed each of the three times we attacked, with our troops suffering heavy casualties.”¹² Chipping away at the American positions, the Chinese did not have the mobility to break through before daylight, while the “Chinese had not been able to move swiftly enough during the crucial hours of darkness.”¹³

As the sun rose, the air was clear. Freeman’s TACP coordinated concentrated air attacks against the Chinese that stubbornly clung to the George Company hill. The aircraft rocked the hill with earth shattering high explosives and fearsome canisters of fiery napalm. The Chinese “went to ground” and then began to withdraw to avoid the terrifying air attacks. Colonel Freeman, seizing the moment, launched a new attack to seize George Company’s positions. Baker Company, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry led the way, aggressively moving forward under murderous Chinese fire. Both sides knew that a critical point in the battle had arrived. “B Company was unsuccessful in their counterattacks until 1400 hours, when air strikes and napalm drops routed the enemy from his position.”¹⁴ Colonel Freeman’s counterattack, this time composed of coordinated infantry, armor, and artillery, recovered most of George Company’s position and slaughtered the Chinese that were left.

For now, the threat of an imminent Chinese breakthrough was over, at least for the day. Although the regiment’s counterattacks had been flawed, the fire of machine guns, tanks, air defense guns, artillery, and close air support drove the enemy back into the hills with tremendous casualties. Hundreds of Chinese bodies lay on the hills and in the paddies. Still, though bloodied, they held the high ground surrounding Chipyeong-ni and they were determined to finish off the stubborn Americans. Cut off and isolated, the 23rd RCT badly needed rescue by a strong force.¹⁵

5th Cavalry to the Rescue

Fortunately, the cavalry was on the way. The 5th Cavalry Regiment, led by fifty-year-old Colonel Marcel Gustave Crombez,¹⁶ was sent to break through to Chipyeong-ni. The regiment, part of the 1st Cavalry Division, was ordered by Ridgway to penetrate the enemy lines along a single narrow south-north road. Crombez had received an aerial reconnaissance report that described Route 24A as capable of supporting tank movement. The enemy was everywhere, but the road was not blocked with obstacles or mines.

At 0700 hours, on 15 February Crombez's 5th Cavalry Regiment kicked off its attack to rescue the besieged defenders of Chipyeong-ni. The column was a mile long and composed of both heavily armored M26 Pershing tanks and the thinly armored, but more reliable, M4 Sherman tanks. In typical cavalry style, the 5th Cavalry charged up Route 24A, determined to break through, until it reached Hup-o-ri, where Crombez's combat engineers constructed a bypass around a blown bridge. After only an hour the regiment was back on the road, fighting its way north along Route 24A against heavy Chinese opposition.

All went well until the 5th Cavalry reached the village of Koksū, where it ran into a solid Chinese defense. There the enemy was deeply dug in on Hill 152, bordering route 24A on the east. Forced to deploy his infantry to clear the high ground, Crombez's attack slowed to a crawl. Six miles to the north, the Chinese rained mortar and machine gun fire into Colonel Freeman's Chipyeong-ni perimeter.

With night approaching, Crombez knew he couldn't wait much longer to clear the high ground. Thinking quickly, Crombez changed his plan. He stripped down his attack column to an armored task force of only 23 tanks; with the heavier M26 Pershing tanks with 90mm guns in the front and M4AE8 "Easy Eights" in the rear. He intended to break through first and then send for his trucks with fuel, ammunition, and medical teams later. To increase the power of the attacking force, Crombez ordered the infantrymen of L Company of 3/5th Cavalry, led by Captain John C. Barrett, to ride on top of the tanks. Artillery fire was not planned, for fear of hitting the infantry and due to the haste in the change of plans, but planes were expected to bomb and strafe ahead of the column. Crombez radioed Freeman that he was on his way, without his supply trains. Freeman radioed back, "Come on, trains or no trains!"¹⁷

Task Force Crombez renewed the attack at 1545 hours, meeting intense small arms fire from the village. The enemy fire raked the sides of the tanks, wounding many of the infantrymen on top of the tanks. When the tanks stopped to return fire, the infantrymen jumped off to find cover. Without warning, the tanks moved out of the gauntlet of Chinese fire to continue the attack. Some infantrymen scrambled back to the tanks, but many more were left behind. Poor tank-infantry cooperation — due to the lack of training and coordination of signals between the infantry riding on top of tanks and the tankers — left groups of infantrymen stranded and surrounded by the Chinese. This tragic event was repeated several times as the tanks continued the attack along the direction of attack. Some of the abandoned infantrymen were able to fight their way south, back to friendly lines. Others were surrounded, killed, or captured. Of the original 160 infantrymen of L Company that rode on top of the tanks, 12 were killed, 40 wounded, and 19 missing in action. Only 23 made it to Chipyeong-ni.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the tank column smashed on, unstoppable, peppering the Chinese with machine gun and cannon fire, blasting through every Chinese roadblock.

Just south of Chipyeong-ni, at a narrow cut constricting the passage to a single lane, the Chinese made an all-out effort to stop the American tanks. Chinese anti-tank gunners, positioned on the top of steep embankments on both sides of the narrow cut, fired rocket launchers in salvos at the American tanks. Other Chinese lined the gauntlet, firing small arms and throwing explosive satchel charges. The lead tank charged forward, ramming into the cut. A Chinese anti-tank gunner firing a captured 3.5-inch American-made bazooka struck the lead tank in the turret. The tank, commanded by Captain Johnnie M. Hiers, burst into flames, killing everyone inside the fighting compartment. The tank kept moving under intense enemy fire. The driver of Hiers' burning tank was severely burned. He heroically drove through the narrow cut, keeping the road clear for the rest of the tank column. If his tank had blocked the cut, the relief column would never have made it to Chipyeong-ni. Without stopping, the remaining tanks sprinted through the gap, machinegunning the Chinese defenders on either side.

The enemy was now caught between the 23rd RCT and Task Force Crombez. The lead tanks of the task force, with "tigers painted on their turrets and their guns roaring...came upon the little hill from the rear and blasted it."¹⁹

Simultaneously, the 23rd RCT launched a four-tank counterattack to the south, with Captain Sherman Pratt's Baker Company, 23rd infantry securing the hill on the southern edge of the perimeter.

*"The picture could hardly have been more grim. The platoons reported that each time they rose to charge over the crest, enemy gunfire could cut them down in their tracks. The platoon leaders insisted that further efforts were suicidal, and wanted to know what to do. 'Hang on in place,' I instructed the platoons...Just as the sun was setting, we looked out and could see the leading elements of the 5th Cavalry Task Force about a thousand yards away."*²⁰

Captain Sherman W. Pratt

As the tanks surged forward, the Chinese ran away.²¹ Some of the defenders of Chipyeong-ni were so happy to see Task Force Crombez that they ran up and kissed the front slopes of the tanks. At 1757 hours, on February 15th, Colonel Crombez, a yellow scarf at his throat, walked into the regimental command post. The siege was broken.

In summarizing the battle, the official CCF report clearly expressed the terrific shock of the armored spearhead which battered its way into Chipyeong-Ni:

*The tanks surprised us and arrived almost at the door of the Regimental Command Post before they were discovered, seriously threatening the flanks and rear of the 2nd Battalion (Chinese). The Regiment immediately ordered the displacement of the 2nd Battalion...we have underestimated the enemy. In view of their past characteristics in battle, we expected them to flee at Chipyeong-ni...we have been taught a lesson at the expense of bloodshed.*²²

Now short of supplies, their road blocks penetrated, and their casualties mounting, the attacking Chinese withdrew to the north. The CCF lost approximately 4,946 men to the 23rd Regimental Combat Team and an additional 500 to Task Force Crombez. The 23rd RCT lost 52 Killed, 259 wounded, and 42 missing. Task Force Crombez had 12 killed,

40 wounded, and 19 missing from L Company (the infantry who rode on top of the tanks). Three tanks were damaged penetrating Chinese defenses along Route 24A and only one tank, Captain Hiers', was destroyed.

With the relief of the defensive perimeter by Task Force Crombez the CCF reached a high-water mark they would never reach again. Chipyeong-ni, coupled with other counterattacks along the front — like the I Corps drive to the Han and the pitched battle at Wonju — formed a major turning point in the Korean War. General Ridgway said: "Task Force Crombez, in its relief role, epitomized the offensive spirit. Colonel Crombez's decision to advance with armor when his infantry moved too slowly was one of the best local decisions of the war."²³ Buoyed by the success of the Battle of Chipyeong-ni, Ridgway's tanks, infantry and artillery, supported by close air support, drove the Chinese north and recaptured Seoul in late February 1951.

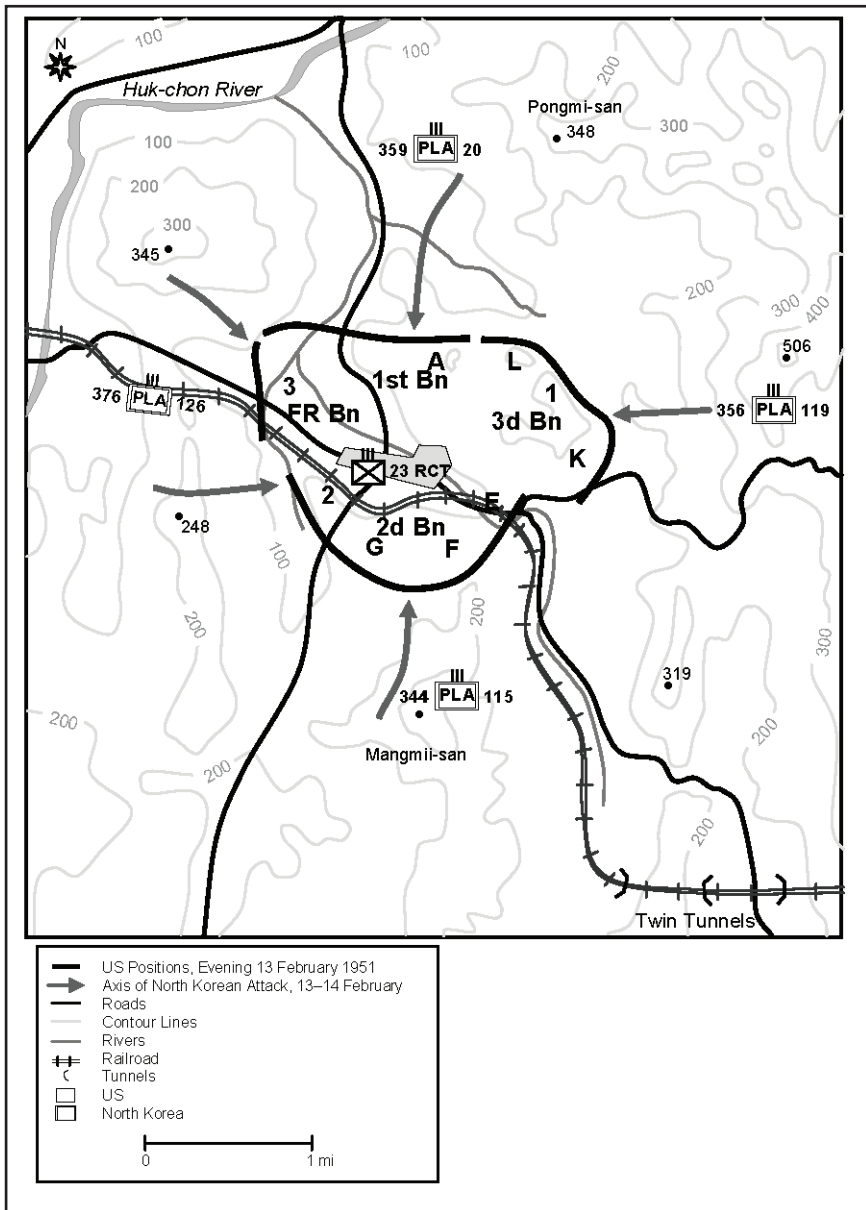
Lessons of Victory

Until the battle of Chipyeong-ni, the Chinese had swept all before them with their bold infiltration tactics. The Americans, however, were quick to respond with tactics of their own. Some veteran soldiers, like Captain Sam Freedman of the famed 72nd Tank Battalion, believed that the solution to winning in Korea lay in the use of tanks as part of a combined arms team.²⁴ Freedman believed that "tanks can be employed in many spectacular and highly effectual ways...the ingenuity of planners who won't take 'no' for an answer has resulted in the discovery of means to bring up tanks for swift and telling strokes that have broken the back of enemy resistance."²⁵ Tankers like Freedman looked for ways to adapt tactics, techniques, and procedures to apply the advantages of battlefield mobility, protection, and firepower of tanks to mountainous terrain. Training, combined arms, and ingenious planning was the key. General Ridgway, a firm believer in seizing the initiative by any means possible, agreed. Aggressive tank operations in the Korean War demonstrated that armor "could operate effectively in terrain that doctrinally was considered completely unsuitable for tanks."²⁶

Chinese forces fighting at Chipyeong-Ni were devastated in the battle, suffering 66-times more casualties than they inflicted. Freeman's intrepid defense would later be studied as a model for defense while encircled. Task Force Crombez, in penetrating the enemy's defenses and relieving the defenders, came to epitomize the offensive spirit so badly

needed to reenergize UN forces and end the war. “The Eighth Army had risen from its own bitter ashes. It would not fall again.”²⁷

Many battles would follow the bloody clash at Chipyeong-ni, but this determined stand marked a turning point in the “Forgotten War.” In the best traditions of the US Army, the cavalry rode to the rescue, and the infantry, with its armor, artillery, and engineer brethren and plenty of close air support, took the measure of a determined, hard-fighting opponent and shown that he could be beaten and beaten badly. Therein lies a tale worth remembering for commanders in the next century. For them, and for all who admire courage and skill at arms, the deeds of the men who fought at Chipyeong-ni linger still.



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8 Fehrenbach, 392.

9 Chinese Communist Forces, Headquarters XIX Army Group, "A Collection of Combat Experience," (29 March 1951 Critique of Tactics Employed in the First Encounter with the Enemy at Chipyeong-ni, Annex Number 1 to Periodic Intelligence Report Number 271, 2nd Infantry Division, translated by ATIS, 29 June 1951), 1 (hereafter cited as HQ Chinese XIX Army Group).

10 Gugeler, 115.

11 Fehrenbach, 394.

12 Headquarters XIX Chinese Army Group, 2.

13 Fehrenbach, 266.

14 Captain Donald T. Murphy, "Allied Cooperation in a Combined Arms Battle: The French Battalion at Chipyeong-ni, Korea, February 1951," (Fort Leavenworth: Command and General Staff College, MMAS thesis, 1976), 7.

15 Edwin Hoyt, *The Bloody Road to Panmunjom*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), 181.

16 The controversial Colonel Marcel Gustave Crombez earned the distinction of commanding a regiment in Korea longer than any other officer. Born in Belgium, Crombez enlisted in the US Army as a private, gaining an appointment to West Point. Crombez was promoted to Brigadier General before his retirement in 1956.

17 Guegler, 129.

18 Gugeler, 134. "Hindsight clearly indicates in this instance not one soldier should have ridden on top of the tanks. Friendly artillery and the tanks with their own machine guns could have provided adequate close-in protection for the armored column. No engineers were necessary to remove mines."

19 Harold H. Martin, "The Two Terrible Nights of the 23rd," in *The Saturday Evening Post*, (19 May 1951), 158.

20 LTC Sherman W. Pratt (US Army, Ret.), "Decisive Battles of the Korean War, An Infantry Company Commander's View of the War's Most Critical Engagements," in *Battle of Chipyong-ni* (13-15 February 1951), (Seoul Korea: United States Forces/Eighth United States Army Staff Ride Read Ahead Packet, 30 August 1992), 169 - 171.

21 Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War, America in Korea 1950-1953*, (New York: Times Books, 1987), 708.

22 Chinese Communist Forces, Headquarters XIX Army Group, "A Collection of Combat Experiences," (29 March 1951 Critique of Tactics Employed in the First Encounter with the Enemy at Chipyong-ni, Annex Number 1 to Periodic Intelligence Report Number 271, 2nd Infantry Division, translated by ATIS, 29 June 1951), 2-4.

23 Billy C. Mossman, Ebb and Flow, November 1950 -- July 1951, (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1992), 300. After the war the decision to place infantry on top of tanks in this situation was rightfully criticized as the improper application of combined arms. Without armored infantry carriers, the tanks should have attempted the penetration attack without infantry support. The need for an armored infantry carrier became a goal of the US Army, largely from bloody lessons like this one.

24 Mary Lee Stubbs and Stanley Russell Connor, *Armor-Cavalry Part II: Army National Guard*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1972), 77. Note: "Although the rugged terrain in Korea had been considered generally unsuitable for tank employment, Russian-made T-34s were used with success by the North Koreans during the early days of the war. American tanks were rushed to the scene in support of the United Nations and engaged in their first combat on 10 July. For several weeks they were outnumbered, and it was not until late August that the tank balance in Korea was tipped in favor of the United Nations. By then more than 500 US tanks were in the Pusan Perimeter, outnumbering the enemy's there by over five to one. For the remainder of the war, tank units of battalion size and smaller were in most combat actions." 77.

25 Captain Sam Freedman, "Tankers at Heartbreak," in *Armor; the Magazine of Mobile Warfare*, (Fort Knox, KY: US Armor Association, September-October 1952), 24.

26 David A. Niedringhaus, "US Army Armor in Limited War: Armor Employment Techniques in Korea and Vietnam," (Masters Degree Thesis: Ohio State University, 1987), 27.

Chapter 8

“We Are Crossing Into Africa” Adan’s Division Triumphs in Sinai

by

Major General John W. Nicholson, Jr., USA

Since the dawn of recorded history more than thirty armies have crossed Sinai on wars of conquest or liberation, but none fought more dramatically than the small Israeli force which resisted the storming of the Suez Canal by Egyptian forces at the outbreak of the 1973 War of Atonement. Within hours Major General Bren Adan’s reserve armored division was on the move, arriving piecemeal to halt the Egyptian onslaught. Attacking with reckless courage the division was badly hurt, but recovered quickly to blunt the Arab push east of the Canal. Adan’s grim resolve and mastery of battle command evened the odds and set the stage for a shattering Israeli victory — even as Major General Arik Sharon battled for the lime-light and the lion’s share of the glory.

Brutal, sudden war came without warning on the 6th of October 1973, as more than 300 batteries of artillery opened fire along the mighty Suez Canal. Soon thousands of Egyptian soldiers carrying rubber boats rushed into the water, followed by engineers laying assault bridges and hundreds of tanks. To the handfuls of shocked reservists scattered up and down the length of the canal, the panorama unfolding before them seemed surreal, a nightmare that could not be true. In the days that followed, the Israeli units which fought in Sinai would be badly bloodied before taking the measure of a resurgent Egyptian army. One of them, the armored division led by Avraham “Bren” Adan, would rebound from its early defeat to win great glory in the most intense armored action since the Second World War.

Bren Adan, a retired general and former commander of the Israeli armored corps, was slated to command one of the three Israeli divisions on the Sinai front in the event of war. Seventeen hours after being alerted, Adan’s Division was in action counterattacking the Egyptian bridgehead.

Badly hurt in that initial action, his division successfully stopped repeated Egyptian assaults, crossed the Suez into Egypt and ultimately led the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) encirclement of the Egyptian 3rd Army. Adan's story is one of triumph against more than the odds. In overcoming the shock and humiliation of early defeat, Adan and his iron soldiers wrote a memorable chapter in the history of modern war — a chapter worth reading for all who would challenge the odds on the battlefields of a new century.

A Dangerous Complacency

In the years which followed the 1967 “Six Day War,” the IDF counted on four major military strengths that had never failed them in the past. First, they assumed that their intelligence services would provide a minimum of two weeks warning before any Arab attack. Second, the IDF relied on a reserve system that could mobilize up to 300,000 reservists, many of whom were combat veterans, within 72 hours.¹ Third, Israel possessed the finest air force in the Middle East, one that could win air supremacy early and provide flying artillery in support of ground forces. Fourth, the IDF counted on its armored force, the heart and soul of the Israeli army, confident, highly trained, and courageously led.

These strengths and unbroken battlefield success would lead the IDF to dangerously underestimate its Egyptian opponents when war came unexpectedly at Yom Kippur in 1973. By assuming their enemy would not learn from his mistakes, the Israelis became victims of their own success. In the sands of Sinai, rivers of blood would soon flow, the awful price of learning in an unforgiving school of war.

In the days before the war began, Egyptian forces arrayed along the Suez consisted of five infantry divisions, three mechanized divisions, two tank divisions, numerous independent brigades, 28 commando battalions, engineer, artillery, and air defense units. The five infantry divisions that were to make the initial assault each possessed 120 tanks, hundreds of anti-tank systems (SAGGER ATGMs and RPG7s), and more than 2,300 artillery pieces and mortars across the front. Egyptian infantrymen were highly trained on the SAGGER through the use of simulators; some gunners reportedly fired 30,000 simulated engagements in preparation for the war.²

The Soviets had gone to great lengths to rebuild the shattered Egyptian Army after their 1967 debacle, providing substantial quanti-

ties of weaponry. From 1967 to 1973, the Soviets built the Egyptian tank fleet from 370 to 2,350. While these were principally the T54/55 variant, they also possessed 100 of the most modern Soviet armored vehicles, the T62. Over 1,500 heavy artillery pieces and 150 surface-to-surface missiles were provided in addition to 150 self-propelled guns. The provision of 30 SCUD missiles to Egypt in 1973 gave the Egyptians an offensive capability to strike Israeli cities, an important deterrent against Israeli air strikes targeted at Egyptian cities.³ While Egyptian tactical proficiency grew through intense training with these new systems, their adoption of Soviet tactics did not prepare them well for the flexibility and initiative demanded of offensive maneuver warfare. On the other hand, Soviet set-piece tactics greatly enhanced their ability to execute the very complex cross-canal assault as well as the establishment of static, but lethal, combined arms defenses to protect their bridgeheads.

But defeating Israeli counterattacks east of the Suez could not occur unless the Egyptians successfully pushed massive combat power across the waterway in the first 24 hours of the attack. While a successful deception plan would hopefully delay the mobilization and arrival of Israeli reserve divisions, the combat assault across the Suez required engineering expertise and equipment the Egyptians did not possess. The tasks assigned to the engineers were therefore significant: to open 70 passages in the Israeli sand berm on the east side of the canal, operate 50 ferries, construct 25 assault bridges, pilot 1,000 rubber boats across the Suez in the initial assault, breach Israeli obstacles, reduce the Bar Lev line fortifications, and emplace minefields in support of Egyptian defenses on the east bank. In addition, they built more than 2,000 kilometers of roads and numerous staging areas in support of the deception plan.

In order to accomplish these tasks, the Egyptians organized 15,000 men into 35 various engineer battalions. Beginning in the summer of 1970, the Soviets began delivery of the most modern bridging assets in their inventory, along with other amphibious landing equipment and tactical planning support. They experimented with various techniques in search of the fastest means to breach the ten-meter high berm on the Israeli side of the Canal. This task was arguably the most critical of all, for without well prepared banks, bridges, and ferries, they would be unable to deliver tanks and other heavy equipment across the canal before the arrival of Israel's reserve armor divisions. In late 1971, a young Egyptian officer suggested the use of commercial water pumps to wash away the 1,500 cubic meters of sand required to open each passage. By the summer of 1972, the Egyptians acquired sufficient numbers of British and German pumps to enable them

to open the required breaches in three hours time.⁴ Coupled with the rapid assembly time of the latest Soviet bridging equipment, the Egyptians were now capable of erecting operational bridges within nine hours.⁵

Despite the inevitable signs of the extensive Egyptian engineer training effort (in some cases conducting exercises along uncovered stretches of the Suez), the Israelis stuck to their intelligence estimate that the Egyptians would only be capable of establishing one bridge across the Suez in the first 24 hours of an attack. During the actual assault, the Egyptians constructed ten heavy bridges and fifty ferries in nine hours, a feat that enabled them to cross 80,000 troops, 500 tanks, and a complete missile defense system in the first ten hours of the war. While Soviet equipment and advice was a key factor in this effort, it was Egyptian ingenuity that created the rapid breaching capability. From July of 1972 until the start of the war, Egyptian engineers (without Soviet advisors) refined and rehearsed their plans until they were capable of successfully executing one of the most complex and difficult engineering feats imaginable against one of the world's finest armies.

Detailed planning and extensive rehearsals were essential, but also telegraphed Egyptian intentions. Therefore, an effective deception effort had to precede execution. The Egyptians conducted numerous exercises designed not only to train their troops dozens of times on required tasks, but to desensitize the Israelis as to Egyptian intentions. They built berms up to 75 meters high on the west bank of the canal to impede Israeli observation of their activities and to enable observation and fire into each of the Israeli strongpoints. They conducted major exercises that involved the mobilization of reserves, deployment of thousands of troops to the canal, movement of armor and bridging equipment to staging areas along the waterway, and extensive media coverage predicting war. These major demonstrations began in late 1971 and were repeated in December of 1972 and April of 1973. They successfully desensitized Israeli intelligence to the possibility that such exercises were actually a precursor to war. When the Egyptians began yet another similar exercise in September of 1973, Israeli intelligence dismissed indications that this was different.⁶ Thus, Egyptian deception successfully reduced Israeli strategic warning from weeks to mere hours. The resulting strategic surprise meant that the Israeli mobilization call was almost fatally late, leaving the small IDF regular forces to absorb the full weight of the Egyptian onslaught.

By strategically synchronizing their attack with Syria, the Egyptians denied the Israelis the option of massing air and ground forces

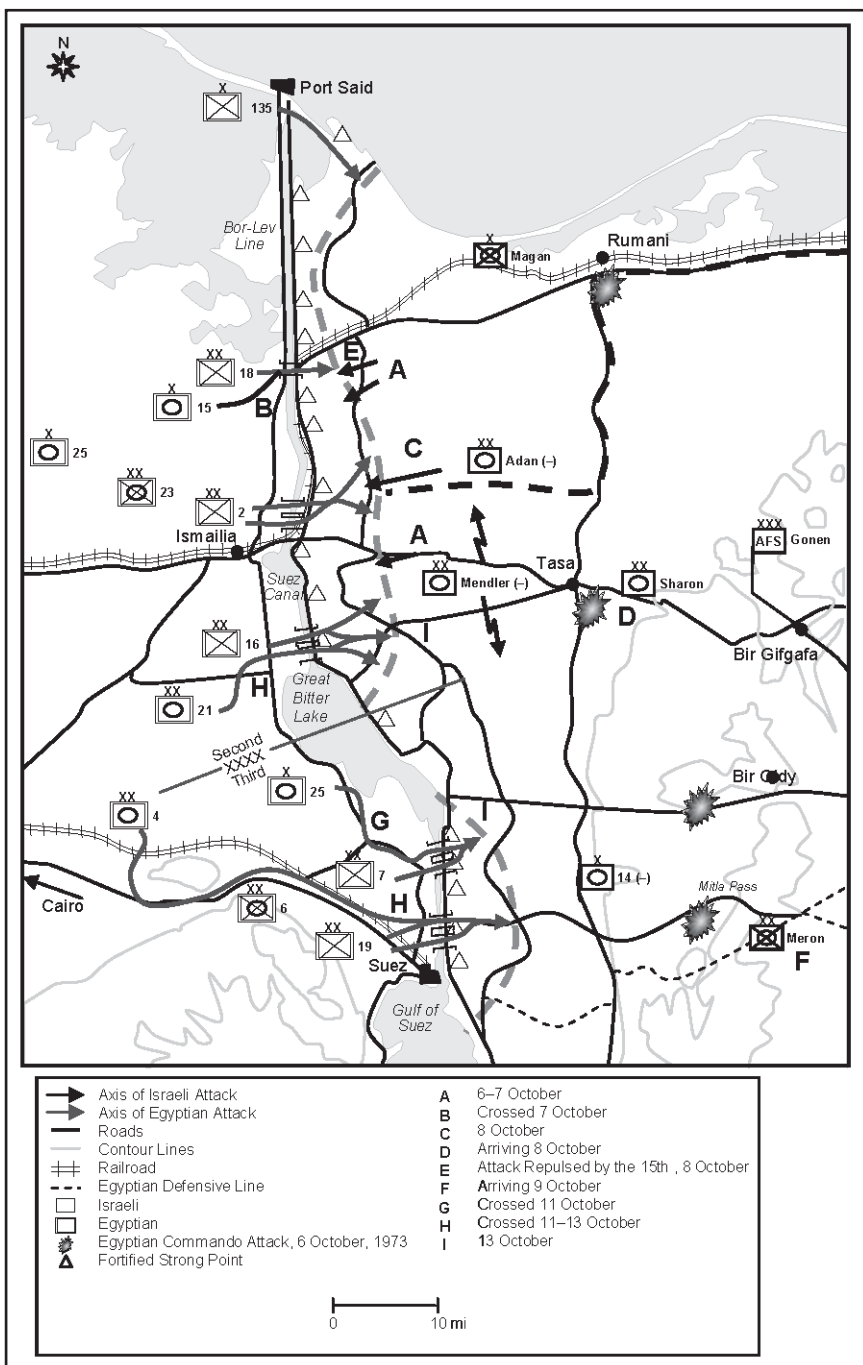
against one opponent at a time. The Israelis chose to send the IAF against the geographically closer Syrian threat to the Golan Heights, leaving the Israeli forces in the Sinai without the air cover to which they had grown accustomed. Those Israeli pilots that did fly against the Egyptians on the first day of the war faced the densest array of air defense systems ever deployed. Even the infantrymen on the east bank of the canal were armed with the SA7 shoulder-fired SAMs. Ironically, the success of Israeli air attacks during the War of Attrition from 1967 to 1970 was the primary reason that the Soviets invested so heavily in Egypt's air defenses. From mid-1969 through 1973, the Soviets provided over 720 SA2, SA3, and SA6 launchers to the Egyptians, increasing their inventory of missile systems by a factor of five.⁷ The combination of mobile SA6s, ZSU 23-4s, and SA7s was particularly effective in providing mobile air defense to supplement the coverage from fixed SA2/3 missile sites on the west bank for Egyptian units that were to cross the canal. When concentrated along the relatively narrow Israeli front, the resulting air defense screen was denser than that faced by NATO pilots in Europe or by US pilots over North Vietnam. The employment of large quantities of SAMs was yet another example of an extremely effective counter to an Israeli strength, in this case, air superiority.

The use of asymmetric means to marginalize Israeli strengths was indicative of the candid self-assessment conducted by the Egyptians after the 1967 War. Realizing that they could not create an armor corps that would defeat the IDF in mobile warfare or an air force that could down significant numbers of IAF pilots in aerial combat, the Egyptians endeavored to defeat them in other ways. Since Israeli tankers were expert at killing other tanks in the open, Egyptian tanks would fire from dug-in positions as part of a cohesive defense with ATGMs, artillery and obstacles situated around the Israeli objectives — the Egyptian bridgeheads. Since Israeli pilots were superb in aerial combat and close air support, they would not be countered with planes, rather with unprecedented quantities of surface to air missiles arrayed around the targets that the Israelis had to attack — the bridges across the Suez.

A Day of Reckoning

This was no longer the same Egyptian Army we had crushed in four days in 1967. We were now dealing with a well-trained enemy fighting with skill and determination.⁸

Bren Adan, 8 October 1973



Map 11. Campaign in Sinai, 6-13 October 1973.

It was not until 0600 hours on the day of the attack that Israeli intelligence finally predicted the Egyptian action. At 0700 hours they alerted the General Staff that the offensive would begin that evening at 1800 hours. Barely had this word reached the Sinai Division (the lone regular army division defending the canal) when the Egyptian onslaught began at 1400 hours. Two-hundred-forty aircraft struck targets throughout the depth of the Israeli defense in the Sinai, destroying 40-percent of the IDF's local artillery and damaging air defense sites, command centers, airfields, and logistics sites. Two-thousand artillery tubes fired 10,500 shells at Israeli defensive positions in the first minute of the attack. Over 3,000 tons of explosives landed on Israeli positions within the first hour. Fifteen minutes after the bombardment commenced, the 8,000 infantrymen in the first Egyptian wave crossed the canal in rubber boats and quickly moved inland.⁹ Their job was to set up the anti-armor defenses that would defeat the initial Israeli counterattacks from the Sinai Division, commanded by Major General Albert Mandler. Subsequent waves of infantry isolated and assaulted the 17-manned fortifications, while Egyptian armor took up firing positions on the west bank to pummel the Bar Lev forts and engage reinforcing Israeli armor.

At the outbreak of war, the Bar Lev line was manned by a grand total of 436 reservists and three tanks.¹⁰ The soldiers were mostly middle-aged businessmen and new immigrants from the Jerusalem Brigade serving their annual reserve duty. Few were combat veterans. In the days to come, the resistance from these by-passed posts would astonish the Egyptian units ordered to take them. In one case, a single Israeli tank continued to fight long after its defenders were killed or captured, attacked by dozens of Egyptian soldiers armed with rocket launchers. Finally it fell silent, after numerous missile hits. Inside, a single surviving crewman, burned and bleeding, was lifted from the turret. As he was carried away on a stretcher he saluted the Egyptian general commanding the assault troops. While no garrison surrendered without permission, their fates were sealed as thousands of Egyptians swarmed past them in the first hour of the conflict.

Not knowing the Egyptian main effort or intended crossing sites, General Mandler pushed his tanks forward. The Egyptians had observed Israeli rehearsals of these counterattacks and sited weapons systems along the Israeli routes. As Mandler's tanks raced along their pre-rehearsed routes, they were badly mauled, falling to the RPGs, ATGMs, land mines, and Egyptian tank fires from the opposite side of the canal. The experience of one Israeli tank gunner was typical. Rushing towards the Suez in the lead

tank of his unit, his crew was hit by an Egyptian tank firing from the west bank. Escaping his destroyed vehicle, he replaced a wounded crewman in another tank, which was immediately struck by three missiles. Badly burned, he barely escaped this tank before the ammunition exploded. As Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan admitted after the war, "Our effort to bring up tanks to the canal to prevent the erection of the bridges cost us very dear. We hadn't anticipated that." By 0630 hours on 7 October, the Sinai Division had only 180 operational tanks left of the 290 the division had entered combat with, sixteen hours earlier.

At this moment Bren Adan arrived on the battlefield with the lead elements of his reserve division. Alerted less than a day earlier, his rapid deployment to the battlefield was itself a minor miracle. Given the dire situation along the canal, Adan had ordered his units to self-deploy rather than wait for tank transporters to move them. Leaving his deputy to push the three tank brigades out from their stations in the Negev, he personally moved forward to assess the situation on the northern portion of the Sinai front. Adan's arrival at the head of his division was an enormous relief for General Scmuluk Gonen, the Sinai front commander, who immediately placed Adan in command of the northern portion of the line. While this might have unnerved a lesser commander, it was a familiar role for Adan. He had commanded the Sinai front immediately following the 1967 War, building the Bar Lev Line in the late 1960s. He had commanded the entire Armored Corps for the previous five years and, in that capacity, had been Gonen's boss.

Adan's available forces at this point consisted of the troops in the remaining strongpoints in his sector, all surrounded and desperately short of ammo and medical supplies, and the remnants of the Gabi Brigade of the Sinai division — a total of nine tanks. The remainder of that Brigade was killed, cut off, or mired in the deep dunes and impassable marshes prevalent in the area. Complicating matters further, the lead brigade of Adan's division was ambushed by an Egyptian Commando battalion at its debarkation point. Twenty men and two tanks were lost as the unit attempted to unload vehicles from heavy equipment transporters under fire. As the brigade recovered and turned to attack the ambushers, the Egyptians fought tenaciously — commandos against tanks. It dawned on Adan's division that these were not the same opponents that they had defeated so easily in 1967.

The surprise at Egyptian determination was compounded by the psychological shock of the effectiveness of the Egyptian SAGGER missiles against Israeli tanks. "You are rolling along feeling invulnerable and suddenly you see a single man holding onto a stick standing 2,000 yards ahead of you. You cannot believe that this single man has the power to destroy the huge tank, but in a few seconds the tank is a wreck,"¹¹ related one Israeli tank commander. Unfortunately, this lesson was learned anew by each of Adan's units as they engaged in close combat with the Egyptians for the first time.

To make matters worse, the Israeli Air Force failed to materialize in significant numbers over the crossing sites. With priority going to the Golan Heights, and after serious losses in the first sorties over Sinai, General Headquarters (GHQ) in Tel Aviv shifted the main effort of the IAF to the Syrian front. The denseness of the Egyptian air defenses was having the desired effect. "It was like flying through hail," reported one Israeli pilot, "the skies suddenly filled with SAMs and it required every bit of concentration to avoid being hit and still execute your mission."¹² Adan was not to see any significant air support for the next eight days, an unusual condition for an Israeli commander to face.

Fire support from field artillery was similarly unavailable. The reliance of the IDF on close air support had resulted in a relative neglect of their artillery arm. Only ten artillery pieces were available in Adan's sector and his division artillery was last in the order of movement from their mobilization stations. Only pure armor faced the masses of Egyptians striving to break out from their bridgeheads across the canal. And as the Israelis were learning, the Egyptians had found an answer to tank-only attacks.

At this point, only Israeli crews and platoon-sized elements stood between the Egyptian Army and the Israeli homeland. Fighting in small units, in most cases isolated and surrounded, these IDF soldiers demonstrated the resolve, tenacity, and tactical skill that have characterized Israeli troopers for decades. Small-unit leaders were a key factor to success, as their actions delayed and disrupted the Egyptians ability to establish and widen their bridgeheads. The intensity of combat is illustrated by the after action report of a three tank platoon of Israeli armor fighting to reach a besieged Bar Lev fort. An RPG hit the lead tank, but its commander, a lieutenant, managed to extinguish the fire. He identified the Egyptians, a company-sized element in low sand dunes about 300 meters away, and

opened fire. As his second tank drew up beside him, he switched tanks and charged the Egyptians. Upon reaching the enemy line, his tank was hit simultaneously by four RPGs. Fighting from the open hatch position (as all Israeli tank commanders are taught to do), the officer was wounded, but as he fell inside the tank, he ordered his driver to wheel left along the enemy line and crush them.

The valor, competence, and determination of these small Israeli units bought time for Adan's division to arrive on the battlefield. His ability to influence the fight was essentially limited to hastening the buildup of combat power and reorganizing Gabi's mauled brigade. But conditions along the one main route into the sector significantly slowed the arrival of his units. On the afternoon of October 7th, traffic was barely moving and the trail elements of his last armored brigade were still over 70 kilometers away. Adan's only foot troops, Fedale's attached brigade of armored infantry, was behind the armor and not expected to arrive until noon on the 8th. His division artillery, three battalions of self-propelled 155mm howitzers, was behind the infantry and moving on its own tracks as insufficient transporters were available. These guns would not arrive before the evening of the 8th and Adan would have to fight with the ten guns of the Sinai division in his sector. These ten guns, coupled with his 89 operational tanks, constituted the only combat systems he had available to pit against the full weight of the Egyptian Second Army.

The Egyptians had hundreds of tanks crossing on 12 established bridges along the length of the canal by the night of the 7th. There were two major force concentrations in Adan's vicinity but no main effort had yet emerged. This apparent lack of a main effort was intentionally planned to confuse Israeli planning and delay their counterattacks. Egyptian planners had studied Israeli doctrine as practiced in previous wars and correctly assumed the IDF would seek to identify and attack their main effort. By initially attacking across a broad front, the Egyptians hoped to delay effective counterattacks long enough to establish a 10-12km-deep continuous bridgehead on the east bank of the canal.

Shortly after taking charge of the northern sector, Adan was called to a meeting at IDF GHQ to discuss the situation and decide on a course of action. At this session, Adan met with his commander, General Gonen, and the IDF Chief of Staff, General Dado. The other reserve division commander along the Sinai front, Major General Ariel (Arik) Sharon, was not present. Dado decided to start the meeting without Sharon. When asked

for his recommendations, Gonen suggested an immediate counterattack to seize Egyptian bridges and establish an Israeli bridgehead on the western bank of the Suez. To Adan, Gonen's approach revealed an unwarranted optimism given the grave situation on the ground.

When asked for his assessment, Adan pointed out that any cross-canal attack conducted before noon on the 8th would be executed without his infantry and artillery and into the very effective anti-tank defenses of the Egyptians. He recommended a limited counterattack to halt the enemy advance and regain the initiative for the Israelis. Dado agreed with Adan and issued instructions for a limited counterattack. "We will not initiate a crossing operation."¹³ Adan was to do his best to evacuate the remaining strongpoints under cover of darkness before starting the attack the next morning. Another important caveat was that the attack was not to proceed until Gonen's divisions had adequate combat power. In Adan's case, he estimated that he would have 200 tanks by 0800 hours and that this would be the minimum required to successfully execute the attack. As the meeting broke up, Sharon arrived and differed with the plan. Gonen stayed behind to explain things to Sharon, but Adan returned to his division.

The Counterattack Fails

At 2200 hours on the 7th, Adan returned to his command post and drafted his plan based on the verbal guidance he had received from Dado and Gonen. He had no written orders from Southern Command, but believed that he clearly understood the intent of the next day's operation. By 0300 hours, he had convened his brigade commanders, issued his orders and released them to begin moving their brigades for an attack at approximately 0800 hours.

Meanwhile, Gonen's staff drafted an order that differed significantly from Dado's guidance. Rather than fly to his division commanders and deliver these new instructions in person, Gonen attempted to issue the order via radio. He was unable to reach Adan and so passed his instructions to the senior officer in Adan's CP in Baluza. Amazingly enough, Gonen issued orders for a crossing of the Suez. When informed that Adan had already issued instructions for the limited counterattack directed by Dado, Gonen told Magen just to "call the brigade commander who will cross the canal and brief him."¹⁴

These conflicting orders further complicated an already confused and difficult situation. When Adan and Gonen finally were able to

establish radio contact at 0430 hours, Adan reminded Gonen that he had neither the air nor artillery support to conduct anything other than a limited counterattack. Gonen relented and approved Adan's plan. This inauspicious start did not bode well for the future. Both Gonen's personal inadequacies and the system which placed him in nominal control of generals far senior to him would obstruct the conduct of operations for many days.

By that morning the Egyptians had two infantry divisions and 600 tanks in their bridgeheads. Adan's plan was to move west towards the canal, then turn south in order to take the bridgeheads from their northern flank, thus avoiding the Egyptian defenses oriented to the east. He attacked with two understrengthened brigades forward and one in reserve. By 0900 hours, his units had completed their western movement without major contact and turned south. Failing to make enemy contact because they were too far to the east, Adan's brigades turned west and unwittingly drove directly into the Egyptian's well-prepared defenses.

Then began a series of communications between Adan and Gonen that had serious tactical implications. Based on the lack of significant contact during Adan's initial movement, Gonen resumed his calls for a crossing of the canal. Just as Adan received these instructions, his units encountered serious resistance from the numerically superior Egyptian forces. Overhearing these instructions on the division command frequency when his brigade net went down, one of Adan's battalion commanders from the reserve brigade used his initiative and charged headlong towards what he thought was a lightly defended bridge. Within minutes, 18 of the battalion's 25 tanks were knocked out. The resulting casualties included the battalion commander, two company commanders, two platoon leaders, and dozens of others.

Meanwhile, both of the lead brigades were engaged in serious fights. Unsupported by air and receiving only limited artillery support, Adan considered calling off the attack. But based on the promise of impending air support from Gonen, he directed his commanders to continue slowly and deliberately. By 1415 hours, the air support had failed to materialize. As the northern of his two brigades continued its attack; its battalions became separated. The lead battalion under LTC Yagouri ran directly into an Egyptian fire sack, facing the full effects of a combined arms defense — artillery, tanks, ATGMs, and RPGs. Within minutes, the unit was in retreat with only nine operational tanks and its battalion commander a prisoner of the Egyptians. The Egyptian commander, BG

Hasan Abu Saada, described the action: “The enemy opened his attack moving forward at a speed of 40kph. As soon as the Israeli tanks crossed the camouflaged infantry trenches, the infantry jumped out of the trenches like devils and began to attack. Our tanks and all of the antitank concentrated in the area destroyed (the enemy) within three minutes.” Moving with the other battalion, Natke, the brigade commander, advanced to within 800 meters of the canal before he also came under intense attack. Again, the Israeli unit absorbed the full effects of a combined arms antitank defense and was destroyed in minutes, escaping with only four operational tanks.

Just as Adan received this news, his own command post was shelled, killing his communications officer and disabling one of his command post Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs), forcing him to displace at one of the most critical points in the battle. Given his ensuing communications problems, Adan called his two brigade commanders for a face to face meeting close behind the front lines. No sooner had they dismounted their vehicles to begin their meeting, and then word came of an Egyptian counterattack from the very bridgeheads that the Israelis had been assaulting. Adan thought “just what we needed...the enemy attacks and both brigade commanders are with me.”¹⁵

Upon returning to their brigades, Adan’s commanders found a desperate situation. Natke reported, “This is a serious attack, one hundred tanks at least...” Gabi cut in, “They are coming on a very broad front at (Natke) and us in huge numbers... Give us air support, because we don’t have enough forces.”¹⁶ By 1700 hours, Adan was facing the worst crisis he’d experienced in four wars. With three battalions nearly wiped out, his artillery and infantry yet to arrive, and with no air support, he was under attack by two Egyptian divisions of the most well trained and equipped troops that his foe had ever fielded. Physically fatigued (he hadn’t slept in almost three days), Adan gave an order that ran counter to the ethos of the IDF. He ordered a retreat. Almost as soon as he had given the order, he reconsidered.

“A thought crossed my mind that situations of near collapse frequently come up on the battlefield simultaneously for both sides and the force that finds the inner strength to hold out just a little longer can sometimes alter the course of a campaign.”¹⁷

He called his brigade commanders and asked if they could hold on until help arrived from Sharon's division to the south. Even though Adan called numerous times to Gonen and Sharon for help throughout the day, reinforcement never arrived. Sharon's forces were never engaged that day, and even when in position to assist, did not do so. Gonen never developed an appreciation for the actual situation on the ground and continually issued conflicting orders for a crossing of the canal. These leadership failures eventually resulted in Gonen's replacement as Sinai Front Commander and a recommendation that Sharon be relieved. With increasing desperation, Adan's soldiers fought on and eventually held off the Egyptian counterattack.

Adan's success in holding against the Egyptian onslaught hinged on the gunnery skills of a few tank crews led by courageous and skilled leaders. Gabi's deputy brigade commander led a composite group of six tanks that fought alongside the nine tanks left of one of Gabi's battalions. The one surviving company commander in the battalion led this latter group. To their right were the 20 tanks of Natke's battalion of Gabi's brigade. With the setting sun at their backs, the attacking Egyptians enjoyed some initial success. However, as soon as darkness fell, superior Israeli gunnery stopped the lead Egyptian tanks. After this repulse, the Egyptians renewed their attack with infantry, but effective use of illumination and fires from the arriving artillery halted these attacks.

During the subsequent lull in the fighting, Adan addressed the problem of how best to reorganize his battered division while in contact with the enemy. He sensed that the enemy would require recovery time as well, so he assumed the risk of establishing a light screen line with his reconnaissance units while withdrawing his brigades behind the first defensible terrain to their rear. As the brigades pulled back behind a ridgeline 5km to the east, the division staff moved their support teams (maintenance, medical, and resupply units) forward. The division was down to 100 tanks, less than 50-percent strength, with three battalions down to a third of their strength. Leader losses had been particularly heavy.

While Adan believed the decision to attack was sound, he acknowledged that his execution was weak. He faulted his own command and control, especially in allowing uncoordinated and unsupported brigade attacks. Likewise, each of his brigade commanders allowed uncoordinated battalion assaults which uniformly met with disaster.¹⁸ Despite Adan's willingness to accept responsibility for his division's performance, Gonen's

poor front-level leadership set the conditions for the division's ultimate failure. Even though he had two other divisions and dozens of air sorties, Gonen never reinforced his understrengthened main-effort division with any additional assets. While Adan attacked the Egyptian Second Army with fewer than 200 tanks (the minimum force he deemed necessary), with only ten tubes of artillery and no infantry; Sharon's division spent most of the day moving unengaged around the battlefield. Most disturbing was Gonen's misuse of his air sorties, sending the vast majority far to the south against the Egyptian Third Army while his main thrust attacked unsupported into a well-established defense. While the disjointed nature of Southern Front actions on the 8th of October was due in part to their desperate situation, it was also a consequence of the overconfidence that permeated the entire IDF.

A Hasty Defense

Following this failure, GHQ directed Southern Command to go over to the defense to allow a buildup of forces needed to conduct a proper offensive. The former defense minister, General Bar Lev, moved to the Southern Front headquarters to personally oversee Gonen. To mask the disarray in Israeli command at the front, Gonen remained in nominal command, but Bar Lev assumed direct control as the senior man on the scene. The Egyptians retained the initiative and vigorously tried to expand their bridgeheads with daily attacks across the front.

Adan's division skillfully fought off at least three determined Egyptian attacks per day over the next four days. The Egyptian pattern was to infiltrate infantry close to the Israeli positions at night. Thirty minutes of concentrated artillery and rocket fire would precede an assault by Egyptian tanks and infantry in APCs. As they closed on the Israeli positions, the infiltrated infantry would stand and accompany the tanks in the assault. SAGGER missile units fired from the flanks. Adan's men gradually took the measure of their Egyptian foes, even though they were very impressed with the valor and determination of the Egyptian infantry. Adan skillfully maneuvered his brigades and massed his artillery to bring the full combat power of the division to bear on any Egyptian attack. On the 9th, the Egyptians succeeded in penetrating through Gabi's brigade, but Adan defeated the assault by massing his two other brigades onto the flanks of the penetration. On the 10th of October, Egyptian efforts seemed to reach a zenith with five attacks in a single day. After inflicting heavy losses on the enemy, Adan's division sensed the initiative shifting their

way. As their combat power and confidence continued to grow, Adan and the other general officers on the Southern Front realized that now was the time to consider a shift to the offensive.

In preparation for the upcoming cross canal attack, Adan's division pulled back from the line on Friday, October 12th. A brigade from the Sinai division occupied his entire sector in an economy of force role, while Adan's unit prepared for the crossing. No sooner had they completed their withdrawal then the Egyptians began moving their two reserve armor divisions across the Suez in preparation for an all-out offensive against to reach the Sinai passes and relieve pressure on the Syrians. One of Adan's brigades was positioned opposite Refidim, an anticipated Egyptian objective, but the remainder of the division was held in reserve to counterattack against any Egyptian penetration.

On the 14th, the Egyptians launched their long awaited attack. The battle involved over a 1,000 Egyptian tanks, 600 Israeli tanks, and 1,000 other armored vehicles, making this the largest armor clash since the Battle of Kursk in the Second World War. Now it was the Israeli's turn to demonstrate their mastery of armored warfare. Utilizing multiple, hull-down firing positions, disciplined fire control, local flanking attacks, massed artillery, and effective close air support, the Israelis crushed the Egyptian attack.¹⁹ By attempting offensive operations against prepared Israeli defenses, the Egyptians deviated from their successful formula of the war's early days. They paid dearly for it. By the day's end, 264 Egyptian tanks lay burning in front of the Israeli positions. More importantly, the Egyptians had committed the bulk of their remaining armor to the effort, thus removing the primary threat to any Israeli force that crossed the canal. Realizing their opportunity, GHQ ordered Southern Command to cross the Suez the following night.

Operation GAZELLE

The crossing site selected lay at the northern end of the Great Bitter Lake along the boundary between Egypt's Second and Third Armies. During the interwar years, the Israelis had identified this as a potential crossing location and had built a marshalling yard, prepared the banks for bridging, and constructed roads to move the prefabricated bridging and ferries from storage locations deeper in the Sinai. Southern Command's plan called for Sharon's division, reinforced by a brigade of paratroopers, to attack on the night of the 15th to clear the primary route (codenamed: *Akavish*), secure both banks of the Suez at the crossing point, cross the

canal, and expand the bridgehead three miles north along the Suez by the following morning. Sharon would then attempt to eliminate local Egyptian artillery and air defense positions, allowing unfettered IAF support to the bridgehead. Adan's division would begin crossing on the morning of the 16th and attack south out of the bridgehead in order to cut off the Egyptian Third Army.

The plan did not survive the first shot. While the lead units of Sharon's division successfully reached the crossing site, trailing units were unable to clear route *Akavish* along which the bridge and all other units were to travel. In a ferocious fight around an experimental agricultural site nicknamed the "Chinese Farm," Sharon's force battled elements of two Egyptian divisions that had been severely battered during the attack of the 14th. As the fight raged for *Akavish*, Sharon was able to push a brigade of paratroopers across the Suez in rubber boats. By noon on the 16th, 27 tanks had been ferried across to reinforce the paratroopers, but there was still no bridge. In contrast to the savage fight raging around the Chinese Farm, this small force on the west bank encountered no concerted Egyptian counterattack. Sharon directed them to form raiding parties to destroy SAM sites, artillery, and logistics dumps on the west bank. With the subsequent destruction of four SAM sites, the IAF was able to begin operating over the bridgehead. Amazingly enough, the Egyptians failed to realize the threat posed by the crossing for another 36 hours, granting the Israelis precious time in which to secure their tenuous hold on the west bank.

Given Sharon's failure to secure *Akavish*, Adan now had to fight his way to the Suez and assist in getting the bridge across before executing his primary task of isolating the Third Army. Except for the small force on the west bank, Sharon's division was fighting from west to east in an attempt to secure the eastern bank and clear the primary road to the canal. On the 16th and 17th, Adan's division fought its way to the Chinese Farm, opening a corridor for pontoon bridging and other engineering equipment needed to establish a bona fide crossing. The primary bridge, a heavy-duty roller bridge, was being laboriously towed by a dozen tanks to the crossing point and was far behind schedule. As the Egyptians began to appreciate the gravity of the Israeli threat, their response became more focused as their GHQ ordered both the Second and Third Armies to close the gap on the east bank.

In the midst of fighting off heavy attacks from the north by the Egyptian Second Army's 16th and 21st divisions along *Akavish*, Adan received word that the Egyptian Third Army was counterattacking from the south with their 25th Separate Armored Brigade of T62 tanks. Adan quickly organized a divisional ambush designed to catch the Egyptian unit in column as it advanced north towards the bridgehead. The kill zone was between the Bar Lev forts of "Lakekan" and "Botzer" along route Lexicon, the north-south road which parallels the Suez. A company of tanks in the vicinity of the Lakekan fort blocked the northern end of the kill zone. The western edge of the kill zone was the Great Bitter Lake and the pre-war minefields along its shore. The ambushing force was formed from Natke's brigade positioned in the hills east of the Great Bitter Lake. Adan requested Aryeh's brigade be released from Southern Command reserve duty to extend the ambush line further south and seal their escape route. From their concealed positions in the hills east of the lake, these two units could fire from east to west into the flank of the enemy as they advanced northward in their 15km-long column.

At 1230 hours, the Egyptian's 25th Brigade scout company engaged the Israeli tanks at Lakekan, but Natke's brigade held its fire until the main body entered the kill zone. By 1445 hours, when the head of the Egyptian column reached the Israeli position at Lakekan, Natke began his attack. As his tanks moved forward from hide positions to engage the enemy from the flank, the enemy column froze, then began to counterattack. As Aryeh was still racing to the battlefield, Adan ordered him to send one of his battalions south to seal off the escape route. By 1600 hours, the enemy brigade had been devastated, but the remnants were attempting to retreat. Only ten vehicles escaped Aryeh's blocking force as he engaged them with the help of artillery fire from the southernmost Israeli division. Adan's losses in the entire fight were one tank hit by a SAGGER missile and two disabled by mines as they chased the fleeing Egyptians. The Egyptians lost 50-60 of their most modern T62 tanks as well as all of the brigade's APCs, artillery, and other vehicles. By 1700 hours, Natke's brigade was moving to restock with fuel and ammunition in preparation for the crossing and Aryeh's unit returned to Southern Command reserve.²⁰

Meanwhile, Israeli engineers were working feverishly to assemble the pontoon bridge and get it across the Suez. Despite intense shelling from 28 Egyptian artillery batteries, the engineers managed to get the bridge across by 1730 hours. Just as Adan was completing the destruction of the Egyptian 25th Armored brigade, he began receiving urgent calls

from Gonen to immediately cross the canal. To his credit, Adan resisted the pressure to rush unprepared units across the Suez. "The real problem was not to get tanks across quickly, but to transfer formations ready for prolonged combat in order to launch an offensive and penetrate deep into the other side."²¹

Adan's other brigade, commanded by Gabi, was supposed to have been released from Sharon's control around 1200 hours, but was still in the line along the *Akavish* road. Gonen finally interceded to order the transfer at 1745 hours. Adan pulled his two brigades out of direct combat only long enough to conduct the minimum essential rearming, refueling, and reorganizing prior to crossing the Suez. At 2130 hours, Adan halted their resupply operations and began movement to the bridge. His division consisted of Gabi and Natke's brigades with 70 tanks each, as well as one battalion of artillery and other divisional units. Aryeh's brigade was still under control of Southern Command as its reserve.

At 2240 hours, Adan reached the bridge and began to cross. Less than an hour into the crossing, they came under heavy artillery fire that broke the pontoon bridge and forced Gabi's brigade to continue crossing on ferries. Under an increasingly intense barrage, one of the ferries was sunk. Using a bridge-laying tank, Adan's deputy was able to restore use of the pontoon bridge and Gabi's brigade completed its crossing by both ferry and bridge. Crossing with his lead units, an ebullient Adan announced over the division command net "we are crossing into Africa!" Natke's brigade began their crossing at 0315 hours and within two hours, Adan's entire division was across. In a 48-hour period, they had opened the corridor to the bridgehead, pushed pontoon bridging equipment forward to the crossing site, repulsed Egyptian counterattacks from both north and south, inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy, and crossed the Suez. Now they were poised to breakout to the west and encircle the Egyptian Third Army.

Breakout from the Bridgehead

At 0545 hours on the 18th, Adan's two brigades attacked west out of the bridgehead. While Sharon's force had conducted a raid into this area on the 16th, there had been no reconnaissance or disruption of the enemy since. The enemy had taken advantage of this lull to deploy infantry into the restrictive terrain along the Great Bitter Lake through which Adan would advance. Laced with lush vegetation, small buildings, canals, rail lines and minefields, the area favored infantry anti-tank defenses. Almost

immediately, Adan's men encountered stubborn resistance from Egyptian infantry armed with RPGs and SAGGERs. After one of his battalions lost nine tanks and two APCs, Adan requested additional infantry support. Receiving two companies of paratroopers, he committed these troops alongside his organic armored infantry into the bitter close quarters fighting to clear the division's main supply route. By nightfall, the Egyptians fled and the route was clear, but not before Adan's infantry suffered heavy casualties.²²

After a day of heavy fighting, Adan's units had advanced less than ten kilometers from the bridgehead, but were through the worst of the restrictive terrain. They were now in position to move through more open terrain to the west of the Great Bitter Lake. In preparation for that advance, Southern Command returned Aryeh's brigade to Adan's command that night. By the morning of the 19th, Adan had a three-brigade division (albeit only 170 tanks) with which to encircle the Third Army. At Sharon's urging, Southern Command decided to leave his division at the bridgehead to advance north while Magen moved on Adan's right.²³

Resupply operations proved especially difficult because of the intense Egyptian shelling amid the heavy traffic along the one route across the Canal. All but one of the ferries were sunk by artillery and traffic jams grew worse as Adan's supply columns competed with Aryeh's brigade and Magen's division for priority on the bridge. The prefabricated roller bridge finally arrived at the crossing, but required hours to emplace. Until this bridge was operational, the IDF remained dependent on one route across the Suez. Whenever shells landed near fuel and ammunition trucks waiting to cross, drivers abandoned their vehicles. Despite great efforts by Adan's logistics officers, they were unable to meet his ambitious timelines.²⁴ Expecting to advance at dawn the following morning, Adan was angry to learn that his units were not refueled and rearmed. His solution was to have his brigades replenish one battalion at a time, so that each brigade could maintain forward momentum with at least one unit as they awaited supplies for the others.²⁵ Supply difficulties continued to plague Adan until IDF engineers established a third bridge across the Suez on the 21st. The Egyptians continued to attack the crossing site, losing 18 planes and seven helicopters on the 19th. High casualties among Adan's engineers, with 35 killed-in-action and over 150 wounded, revealed the ferocity of Egyptian attempts to cut this tenuous lifeline.²⁶ They never succeeded.

Rapid advances and sharp fights marked Adan's move south as his force overran SAM sites, artillery units, command posts, and hastily

established Egyptian defenses. The presence of the IDF in the Egyptian rear soon unhinged the Egyptian air defense network. Destroying eleven fixed SAM sites in two days, Adan's division opened a gaping hole in the Egyptian air defense network.²⁷ The Israeli Air Force, which had shifted its main effort from the Golan Heights to the Southern Front, exploited this opening in order to attack the remainder of Egypt's 61 fixed-SAM sites, eventually destroying all but eight.²⁸ The destruction of Egyptian air defenses allowed the return of the highly effective Israeli armor/air team that had proven so successful in the past. Thus, the successful crossing and breakout not only wrested the initiative from the Egyptians, it also set the conditions for a return to the open maneuver warfare at which the Israelis excelled.

Moving swiftly, Adan advanced 35km on the 19th and 20 more kilometers on the 20th, but the fighting got harder the further south they advanced. The Egyptians now sought to contain the Israeli bridgehead with three armor divisions and one infantry division deployed in an arc around the IDF forces on the west bank. By noon on the 20th, Adan was forced to halt due to the stiffening Egyptian resistance and his own logistical problems. Each of his brigades were down to only 50 operational tanks. No paved road existed for resupply and aerial medical evacuation of casualties was impossible given Egyptian air defense artillery, SA7s, and small arms.²⁹

That night, Southern Command reinforced Adan with additional engineers, artillery, and infantry for a renewal of the drive south. One of his reinforcing infantry units was the "Marak" paratroop battalion, transferred from the Northern Front. The unit had been deployed in Golan Heights strongpoints as the Syrians attacked, and despite being cutoff, had defeated numerous Syrian infantry assaults until relieved by the counter-attacking IDF units. They arrived on the afternoon of the 21st and immediately joined Gabi's brigade for its attack to secure the Tavish corridor. Heavy artillery was moved close to the eastern shore of the Great Bitter Lake where it could fire in support of Adan's movement. Finally, Adan was promised air support as the last four SAM sites near Suez City were reduced.

While the possibility of a US-brokered cease fire increased the IDF sense of urgency to close the ring around the Third Army, Adan could no longer ignore his logistical situation. On the 21st, he focused his division's efforts on the seizure of a paved road for his main supply route while consolidating their gains to date. In a daylong operation, Gabi's brigade

succeeded in opening the Tavish Road. Meanwhile, Aryeh's and Natke's brigades held against determined attacks from two different Egyptian divisions. By day's end, Adan's men had broken the two counterattacks, destroyed 50 Egyptian tanks, eliminated several artillery batteries, and opened a paved supply route. They prepared to attack south on the 22nd to close the ring around the Third Army.

Adan's division raced south on the 22nd, but failed to completely cutoff the Egyptians before the cease-fire took effect at 1852 hours. Almost as soon as it went into effect, violations began to occur. IDF and Egyptian units were intermixed across the battlefield. Eliashiv's battalion of Aryeh's brigade moved into a nighttime bivouac only to find itself in the midst of an Egyptian divisional position. The Egyptians opened fire, knocking out nine tanks, and causing many casualties before the Israelis withdrew with their wounded and dead. Adan's main CP was hit with artillery fire and suffered many casualties. Firefights broke out at several other points throughout the night. By midnight, Adan concluded that since the cease-fire was not being observed, it was very possible that the division would continue the attack the next day. Accordingly, he disseminated plans for a continuation of the advance on Suez City to complete the encirclement of the Third Army, to be executed on order if the cease-fire failed."³⁰

By 0620 hours, the cease-fire had broken down and both Adan and Magen moved to complete the cutoff of the Third Army. Adan's units broke up seven Egyptian attempts to establish bridges across the Suez from east to west.³¹ Ironically, the Israelis fired on the Egyptians from the same ramparts used by the Egyptians to pummel the Bar Lev forts on the first day of the war. Two of Adan's brigades swung wide to envelop Suez City and completed the movement shortly after nightfall. Another division swung even further to the south protecting Adan's western flank. The isolation of the Third Army was now complete.

Adan's orders for the 24th of October included "capture Suez City, provided it is empty."³² Adan's units fired into the city and, receiving no return fire, reported that there did not appear to be organized enemy resistance. Based on that report, Adan prepared to seize the built-up area with a two-brigade attack the next day. The initial stages of the movement went smoothly as Gabi's brigade made good progress into the industrial area of the city. However, as the other brigade's lead battalion moved in column into the city, the Egyptians sprung their ambush. Within minutes, all but four officers were killed in a withering fire from concealed tanks, antitank guns, RPGs, grenades, and small arms fire. Control of the battal-

ion was lost as most of its leaders lay dead or wounded in vehicle turrets. A paratroop battalion trailing the lead armor battalion was loaded in APCs and buses. As they attempted to catch up with the retreating tankers, a 400-meter gap developed between the units. The paratroop commander dismounted his battalion and attempted to exfiltrate on foot. While some of the unit made it out fairly quickly, two groups of paratroops were trapped in the city, unable to move because of effective Egyptian fire. After numerous failed rescue attempts, one group made it out on their own. The last group, led by a lieutenant and including the badly wounded battalion commander, was finally coaxed out by Gonen himself, who personally persuaded the captain to attempt the exfiltration. The Suez City operation cost eighty lives and achieved nothing.

Despite the debacle at Suez City, Adan's force had successfully cutoff the Egyptian Third Army, trapping over 20,000 troops and 300 tanks in the pocket on the east bank. The subsequent cease fire of October 24th held and UN monitors eventually established the demarcation line between the two forces.

The Fight in Sinai: Assessing the Battle

In its immediate aftermath, western soldiers examined the Yom Kippur war in great detail, hoping to glean insights that could assist them in any future conflict with the Soviet Union. The synergistic effects of combined arms tactics against armor-pure formations was demonstrated with incontrovertible results. To some, the devastation wrought by ATGMs in the hands of Egyptian infantrymen seemed a harbinger of the tank's demise on the modern battlefield. To others, the lethality of contemporary weaponry in the tactical defense revealed a way for western armies to "fight outnumbered and win" against Soviet mass. The ability of well-trained infantry to defeat armor in urban areas and other restrictive terrain was demonstrated yet again. Von Clausewitz's adage that the defense is the stronger form of war, but the offense is the decisive form of war, was reinforced by Adan's experience. Many of these lessons found their way into American Army doctrine.

Among many lessons, the danger in discounting a thinking enemy looms large. Far from adopting a defeatist attitude following their 1967 loss, the Egyptians made a significant intellectual investment in their study of their defeat and the challenges posed by the Israeli defenses in the Sinai. Using the latest in civilian and military technologies they developed innovative solutions to the complex problems of crossing the Suez and

defeating Israeli air and armored forces. They achieved nothing less than a renaissance within their armed forces, creating new capabilities from the ground up (such as commando battalions, missile infantry, and assault bridging) within a few short years. Israeli pilots and tank commanders were faced with unanticipated and devastatingly effective Egyptian tactics for the first time in combat.

In a striking reversal of history the Egyptian military struck without warning through one of the most effective deception operations in modern military history, robbing the IDF of the strategic warning time upon which a timely reserve mobilization depended.³³ Strategically synchronizing their operations with Syria they almost succeeded in overwhelming the regular IDF forces along their borders. The net effect of all of this was the achievement of strategic and tactical surprise by the Egyptians, resulting in early Israeli defeats that shook the confidence and sense of superiority upon which Israel depended.

This lesson is particularly relevant for today's western armed forces that, like the Israelis in 1967, are considered the best in the world. Military professionals must assume that potential adversaries are "thinking enemies" who closely study western vulnerabilities to devise asymmetric counters to western strengths. Universally available information technologies and contemporary media reporting make the "thinking enemy's" job even easier by allowing unprecedented access to great amounts of potentially useful information. These same information technologies can also help them to exploit non-military capabilities, in the telecommunications arena for example, for military advantage. This is not to suggest that proven doctrine, tactics, and procedures should be arbitrarily abandoned; rather, there must be an increased emphasis on a detailed analysis of likely opponents.

Resting on their laurels following the 1967 war, the IDF failed to adequately gauge the potential of missile technologies both in the air and on the ground. While aware of the numbers and types of air defense and anti-tank systems being provided to the Egyptians by the Soviets, the IDF did not fully appreciate the potential of the new weapons. The IDF's confidence in the techniques that had won the last war inhibited the introspection and innovation necessary to prepare for the new conditions that they would face in the next war. This misplaced faith in 1967-era tactics and organization meant a continuation of non-combined arms formations below division level. The resulting emphasis on the tank led to a relative neglect of artillery and armored infantry during the inter-war years. The

armor corps' belief in the shock effect of the charge led to inadequate reconnaissance by ground or air to identify enemy dispositions. This had disastrous consequences time and again on the Southern Front. Whenever the armored force stalled in restrictive terrain, Adan found himself calling for paratroopers from outside of his command. Rushed into unfamiliar conditions, the paratroops almost always accomplished their missions, but suffered heavy casualties in the process.

This "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality encouraged the Israeli army to send men into combat expecting to refight the last war. When these men encountered the unexpected in the form of disciplined Egyptian soldiers with the latest in weapons technology, they were both tactically and psychologically surprised. That surprise led to defeat and higher casualties on the battlefield. The lesson for western armies is to guard against undue confidence by placing a high value on institutional introspection, innovation, and constructive self-criticism. These values will enable a force to evolve with potential threats rather than rest on its laurels.

Like many of today's western societies, the Israeli nation was accustomed to relatively bloodless victories by their armed forces. The "Lightening War" of 1967 saw the IAF and IDF inflict a crushing defeat on multiple Arab opponents in six days. Since the end of the Cold War, western uses of force, with the exception of the 3rd of October 1993 battle in Mogadishu, have been characterized by similarly low casualties and positive outcomes. The Yom Kippur War exacted the highest casualty rates ever experienced by the IDF. Adan's unit suffered its heaviest losses in the early days of the war, but the cumulative impact of those losses had "a definite effect on decisions at the front... We considered and reconsidered each step in terms of how many losses it was liable to cause."³⁴ The Yom Kippur War was one of national survival for the Israelis, whereas western militaries may face limited uses of force for limited objectives. While most western commanders will seek the tactical solution that minimizes casualties and accomplishes the mission, the lethality of conventional combat makes casualties inevitable. High casualties can impact public opinion, which can force political decisionmakers to change policy overnight.³⁵

As in most battles against the odds, Adan's fight in the Yom Kippur War illuminates the overriding importance of human factors in war. Underestimating the Egyptians and blinded by their own overconfidence, Adan and his unit found themselves fighting for their lives against a highly trained and professional foe. Most units would have crumbled under the shock and psychological dislocation of such blows, but his unit

persevered because of the valor, cohesion, morale, and high professional standards of its leaders and men. After their initial defeat, they developed a healthy respect for their enemy and discarded their dysfunctional overconfidence. Routinely outnumbered, often operating with scant supplies, Adan's Division prevailed in some of the toughest fighting ever conducted by the IDF. They made mistakes, but these were usually the result of seeking to "jump even higher" as Adan put it.³⁶

Also noteworthy is that the division fought well regardless of its composition. In its 18 days of combat there were seldom two days in a row in which the division task organization remained constant. That these cross-attached units were able to integrate and fight well together is indicative of a high degree of cohesion across the entire IDF. Problems of cooperation on the Southern Front can often be traced to Sharon, a gifted but impetuous commander who often ignored both higher command and the needs of his brother commanders.³⁷ Sharon's refusal to help during the 8 October fight and again during the Suez crossing can be contrasted with the excellent cooperation with Magen's division during the encirclement of the Third Army.

Without question it was belief in each other, trust in their commanders, and determination to prevail or perish that sustained Adan's men when defeat and death stared them in the face. Western commanders must never lose sight of the personal, human side of war, or become so transfixed by technology that they remain tied to their command posts, in J.F.C. Fuller's savage words "talking, talking, talking instead of leading, leading, leading." Finally, the true test of military greatness may well be how an army handles adversity rather than how quickly it achieves success. By this test, Bren Adan and his undaunted band of brothers stand out. Perhaps Adan said it best in the closing words of his memoirs:

*"Caught by surprise, we were punished and badly mauled; but in lightning-fast time, and despite the difficult conditions, we recovered and moved to counterattack... Many of our comrades in arms fell in the fighting, and we who saw them fall grieve at the terrible finality of their deaths. And we who survived, what could we do but go on fighting with an even greater will — for them too? The division excelled in its fighting and wrote some magnificent pages in the annals of Israel's armored divisions. How fortunate I was to have the privilege of commanding such a division."*³⁸

Notes

- 1 Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (NY: Random House, 1982), 231.
- 2 Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 129.
- 3 Glassman, 104-108.
- 4 These pumps cost \$12,500 each and had been in use by the Suez Canal Administration for their sand removal work.
- 5 George W. Gawrych, "Combat Engineering, Egyptian Engineers in the Crossing of 1973" in *Combined Arms in Battle Since 1939*, (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC Press, 1992), 42-49.
- 6 Herzog, 236.
- 7 Glassman, 104-107.
- 8 Avraham (Bren) Adan, *On the Banks of the Suez* (Novato CA: Presidio Press, 1980), 95.
- 9 Herzog, 241.
- 10 Herzog, 243.
- 11 Glassman, 129.
- 12 Glassman, 127.
- 13 Adan, 99.
- 14 Adan, 113.
- 15 Adan, 144.
- 16 Adan, 144.
- 17 Adan, 145.
- 18 Adan, 163.
- 19 *Selected Readings in Tactics: The 1973 Middle East War*, (Ft. Leavenworth KS: USACGSC, 1976), 4-12.
- 20 Adan, 295-303.
- 21 Adan, 307.
- 22 Adan, 320-323.
- 23 Magen replaced Mandler, killed by artillery fire in the first week of the war. Initially, Southern Command decided to hold Magen as a reserve and to have Sharon advance to the right of Adan, but Sharon convinced them otherwise. Adan, 345.
- 24 Adan, 329.

25 Adan, 345.

26 *Selected Readings in Tactics*, 4-15.

27 Adan, 356-359.

28 *Selected Readings in Tactics*, 4-15.

29 Adan, 360.

30 Adan, 402.

31 *Selected Readings in Tactics*, 4-16.

32 Adan, 409.

33 Chaim Herzog, former president of Israel, refers to the Egyptian deception effort as “one of the outstanding plans of deception mounted in the course of military history.” Herzog, *Arab-Israeli Wars*, 316.

34 Adan, 368.

35 Public reaction at the heavy losses sustained by TF Ranger in Mogadishu, Somalia, October 3, 1993, prompted political decisionmakers to change national policy overnight. The following day, the NCA declared an end to the policy of seeking to apprehend Mohamed Aideed.

36 Adan, 470.

37 Sharon’s unwillingness to support Adan, despite knowledge of his desperate situation on 8 October is documented in the transcripts of radio traffic between Sharon and Gonen. Adan, 148-151.

38 Adan, 471.

Chapter 9

Setting Sun of Empire

by

Colonel Steve Zotti, USMC

In the trenches of France, an observer once remarked at the absence of British officers. "Don't worry, sir," a laconic British sergeant remarked. "When the time for dyin' comes, they'll be here!" Much has changed since Britain's matchless blue jackets and redcoats exercised military mastery over much of the world, but the courage of the British regimental officer remains, undiluted by the passage of time. Always supported by an equally dauntless corps of noncommissioned officers, the British infantry which fought in the Falklands equaled any that stood in stolid ranks at Minden or on the Peninsula. Then, as now, they stand in the first rank of the world's soldiers, led by perhaps the finest small unit leaders in the world.

On May 21, 1982, the 3rd Commando Brigade, Royal Marines, landed at San Carlos in the Falkland Islands after an 8,000 mile sea voyage. The vanguard of the British effort to retake the islands, the Royal Marines faced long odds. Argentine forces on the island were three times larger; their air forces were large, modern, and aggressive; and the terrain and weather strongly favored the defense. Just three weeks later, British forces accepted the surrender of over 13,000 Argentine soldiers, airmen, and Marines.¹ The cost was high, for one in ten of the committed British forces became a casualty. Though the glory days of British arms lay for the most part in a storied imperial past, the Royal Marines and their paratroop comrades-in-arms wrote a shining page in British military history.

Operational Setting

The treeless Falkland Islands are a group of 200 islands located 300 miles east of the southern tip of South America. The climate and terrain are severe. The islands offer little vegetation; the primary industry is sheepherding and visitors are few. The Falklands are characteristically

low, hilly, barren lands with rocky outcrops and wet marshland over rocky soil. The summers are mild and cool, while the winters, April through June, are wet and cold with low cloud ceilings, high winds, and reduced visibility.²

The Falkland island crisis erupted after a failed ‘seventeen-year war of diplomacy’ between 1965 and 1982 in which successive British governments denied Argentine claims of sovereignty over the islands, called the Malvinas by Argentina.³ In early April, Argentine Marines seized both East and West Falklands, having previously occupied the empty island of South Georgia.⁴ The Argentine military junta apparently acted to divert attention from the nation’s severe economic problems, hoping to whip up nationalistic fervor.⁵ Despite extensive diplomacy by the UN and other major powers, by early May the opposing countries found themselves face-to-face in a shooting war.

Immediately after the Argentine seizure of East Falklands on April 3rd, the British Ministry of Defense ordered the jump jet carriers HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Invincible* to sail for the Falklands. The remainder of the British armada gathered at a frantic pace in Plymouth and other ports with orders to sail by April 9th. A day before the Argentine invasion, Brigadier Julian Thompson was roused from his sleep at 0300 hours and ordered to prepare his 3rd Commando Brigade for embarkation and deployment to the South Atlantic.⁶

The 3rd Commando Brigade was composed of a brigade headquarters and three Royal Marine battalions or “commandos” of 645 men each, plus Army and Royal Marine support units. Wearing distinctive green berets, the Royal Marines were and are elite troops with a reputation for physical fitness, aggressiveness, and toughness.⁷ The Falklands mission seemed ideal for the Royal Marines due to their extensive cold weather training and constant rotation through Northern Ireland (45 Commando had recently left Belfast in December of 1981).

Slated to reinforce the Royal Marines was the Parachute Regiment’s 3rd Battalion (“3 Para”). Brigadier Thompson was very happy to get, in his words, this “tough, well-trained battalion” although he realized that there might be friction due to the natural rivalry which existed between the two elite formations.⁸ Normal supporting attachments, including an artillery battery, engineers, signal troops, a logistical support element, and a small detachment of light scout vehicles from the Household Cavalry

rounded out the brigade. The 3rd Commando Brigade with its attached paratroopers and support personnel departed Plymouth on April 9 before an exuberant British crowd. The amphibious task force, with many troops embarked aboard the converted liner *Canberra*, took four weeks to transit the 8,000 miles to the Falklands. The cruise was broken by a two week stopover at Ascension Island, halfway to the Falklands, where all units were disembarked and given additional training ashore.⁹

It was not until April 26th that British intelligence determined that at least nine Argentine battalion-sized units had reinforced the initial Argentine assault force. Their source was islander Eileen Vidal, who via her short wave radio reported the actual size of the Argentine reinforcements to HMS *Endurance*, patrolling off the Falklands. The British could not risk an amphibious assault with greater than three to one odds in favor of the Argentines. At this point the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment (“2 Para”) was alerted and set sail for the Falklands. The 2 Para’s selection was largely due to the lobbying of its charismatic battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Hew “H” Jones. Immediately after 3 Para sailed he had rushed home from a ski vacation to badger government and Ministry of Defense officials to send his battalion.¹⁰ The intense, driven Jones would be heard from again once battle was joined in the South Atlantic.

The second major ground unit designated for the Falklands Campaign was the British Army’s 5th Infantry Brigade. Its three maneuver battalions were the 2nd Battalion Scots Guards, 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, and the 1st Battalion (The Duke of Edinburgh’s Own Gurkha Rifles). Both Guards’ battalions, though composed of the cream of the British army, emphasized ceremonial duties and were trained as mechanized infantry, not hard-marching light infantry.¹¹ The 5th Infantry Brigade of 3,500 soldiers sailed on the resort liner *Queen Elizabeth 2* (QE2) on May 12th and were scheduled to arrive off the Falklands on June 3rd.¹²

Concept of Operations

Commanding the overall operation was Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse who remained in Northwood, England, throughout the war. Rear Admiral Sandy Woodward commanded the Carrier Battle Group while Major General Jeremy Moore, Royal Marines, would be deputy task force commander on the scene and overall land commander once he arrived with 5th Infantry Brigade in early June.¹³

Commodore Mike C. Clapp, commander of the amphibious task force, and Brigadier Julian Thompson, initial commander of the landing force, shouldered the primary responsibility for planning the amphibious assault and subsequent operations ashore. Both agreed that the landing areas should be well away from the bulk of the Argentine defenses at Port Stanley to permit an orderly build-up of the logistical infrastructure needed to support 5th Infantry Brigade when it arrived in early June.

General Moore finally approved Port Stanley Water as the primary landing site, since it provided numerous landing areas for operational flexibility, was largely undefended, was a safe but manageable fifty miles from Stanley and featured surrounding steep terrain which severely restricted the flight paths which could be used by Argentine pilots to attack the anchorage.¹⁴ Both the British ships and the Royal Marines and Paras ashore would be highly vulnerable to land-based Argentine air strikes coming in from the mainland.

A Measured Risk

Though confident in their professionalism and training, the British had not conducted an amphibious assault since the Suez Canal landings in 1956. Additionally, they had only 12 amphibious ships available, while the Argentines possessed the excellent *Exocet* anti-ship missile as well as a very dangerous air force. Since the bulk of the British forces were embarked on just two ships, the *Canberra* and *QE2*, the loss of either would have crippled and possibly defeated British efforts. To further complicate matters, the task force included only minimal wheeled transport and lift helicopters. The resulting requirement to move men and supplies almost exclusively by foot, in foul winter weather over daunting terrain, would dominate the entire campaign.

Adding to British concerns was the fact that the two carriers, *Hermes* and *Invincible*, needed maneuver room at sea to launch and recover their Harrier jets and to avoid the *Exocet* anti-ship missiles. Forced to stay 100 miles to seaward,¹⁵ their helicopters could not loiter for long over land. Throughout the campaign, helicopter support would be in short supply.

British air forces in the Falklands consisted of 55 fixed-wing aircraft, mostly AV-8 Sea Harriers and Vulcan bombers flying from Ascension. Though Admiral Woodward's carrier task force was well supplied with naval helicopters, the amphibious group only had 11 Sea

Kings and 5 Wessex helicopters, plus 5 CH47 Chinooks embarked on *Atlantic Conveyor*.

Argentine air forces were much stronger with a total of 216 aircraft, including 60 American A-4 Skyhawks, 10 French Super Etendards, and 60 Mirage III and IVs. The theater naval balance was initially in favor of the Argentines with an overall quantitative advantage of two to one. However, after the May 2nd sinking of the *Belgrano* by a British submarine, the 110-ship Argentine Navy never again ventured into the Falkland waters to challenge the vulnerable British armada of 45 ships.¹⁶

The Argentine invasion force that occupied the Falklands on April 2nd originally totaled 2,000 soldiers. They were primarily from the 35th Infantry Regiment supported by artillery and anti-aircraft support.¹⁷ Once the British intent to retake the islands was clear the Argentines reinforced the Falklands with seven battalions for a total defense force of approximately 14,000 soldiers, Marines, and airmen. The Argentine commander, Brigadier General Menendez, deployed one battalion each to Goose Green and Darwin, one to Port Howard, and two to Fox Bay while the remaining six encircled Port Stanley.¹⁸ Prior to the arrival of the 5th Infantry Brigade in early June, Argentine ground forces outnumbered the British force by three to one. After the 5th Infantry Brigade arrived, the odds shifted to 2:1 in favor of the Argentines.¹⁹

Though outnumbered on the ground, the qualitative advantage was clearly in favor of the British who had better trained and more experienced forces. The Argentines, in comparison, fielded an inexperienced force of which seventy-five percent were one-year conscripts with an average of only forty-five days of active service.²⁰

The critical problem for both the Argentines and the British was a lack of tactical mobility. The British would only have six Sea King and five Wessex transport helicopters available for initial troop transport, equipment movement, and logistical sustainment. This lift equated to one company lift a day. The eighteen armored personnel carriers could only lift a company. The Marine Brigade's sixty-six vehicles remained behind in England. Planners calculated the average rate of movement on foot at no more than one kilometer per hour due to the terrain, weather, and heavy winter packs.²¹

The Battle Begins

On the evening of May 20th and 21st, British raiding forces, supported by Harrier strikes and naval bombardments, attacked Goose Green, Port Louis and Fox Bay to mask the main effort at San Carlos. A platoon-sized force of forty Argentines occupied the critical positions overlooking the inlet to San Carlos port. A 25-man raid by special operations forces (SOF) on the first night eliminated the Argentine position. In the south, at Darwin, other SOF units supported by HMS *Ardent* simulated landings to divert attention away from the main effort at San Carlos. The deception raid at Goose Green was so effective that the Argentines reported to Menendez at Stanley that a battalion-sized force was attacking them.²²

At 0325 hours on May 21st, the landings began in San Carlos waters. Amphibious assault conditions were ideal with no moonlight, but with adequate bright starlight to silhouette the surrounding hills.²³ First, 2 Para and 40 Commando attacked south and secured San Carlos Settlement, liberating thirty-one settlers, while 45 Commando secured Ajax Bay.²⁴ LTC Jones' 2 Para landed at San Carlos Settlement and had to maneuver four miles south and scale a 700-900 foot high ridgeline, Sussex Mountain, to block any Argentine threat from Goose Green. The 2 Para was the main D-Day effort.²⁵ The 3 Para and 42 Commando seized Port San Carlos Settlement and Fanning Head.

By 1030 hours, all initial assault troops, 2,500 in number, were ashore. Brigadier Thompson came ashore in mid-afternoon and established his brigade headquarters at San Carlos Settlement. Throughout the day Thompson focused efforts on landing the heavy equipment of 29th Commando Brigade, Royal Artillery, which included 105-millimeter howitzers. Additional top priorities were Rapier air defense missile systems, and Scimitar and Scorpion armored fighting vehicles. The 42 Commando went ashore last at San Carlos as the landing force reserve and to perform rear area operations. The Argentines did not react or counter-attack on May 21st because they had determined that the San Carlos landings were a deliberate diversion. Their operational analysis had selected the beaches southeast of Port Stanley, near Port Harriet and Phillips Point, as the primary landing areas. Total British D-Day casualties were 27 killed and 25 wounded.²⁶

The only Argentine success of the day came to Lieutenant Carlos Estabon of J Company, 25th Regiment. Estabon commanded a 41-man combat outpost position at Port San Carlos. The 3 Para landed at 0730 hours, but did not seize their objectives until 1130 hours.²⁷ Esoban's unit left their outpost positions and initially delayed the 3 Para landing and successfully shot down three British helicopters. Despite constant heavy indirect fires and attempts to fix and overwhelm his company, he managed to evade numerous 3 Para units. He led his unit's successful escape and eluded the British on a hard four-mile foot march east to Douglas Settlement, eventually escaping to Goose Green.²⁸

Out at sea, a British picket line of destroyers and frigates protected the remainder of the British fleet with their on-board air defense systems. Though the British expected the Argentine pilots to focus on the vulnerable troop transports, the Argentine air forces concentrated their attacks on the warships instead, hoping to defeat the air defense umbrella and then attack the troop transports. At all levels of war, this was a missed opportunity. During May 21st, 72 sorties flew against the British task force with the loss of the HMS *Ardent* and significant damage to several other ships.²⁹ Lady luck was on the side of the English. The loss of a carrier or large troop transport ship might have caused the cancellation of the whole operation.³⁰

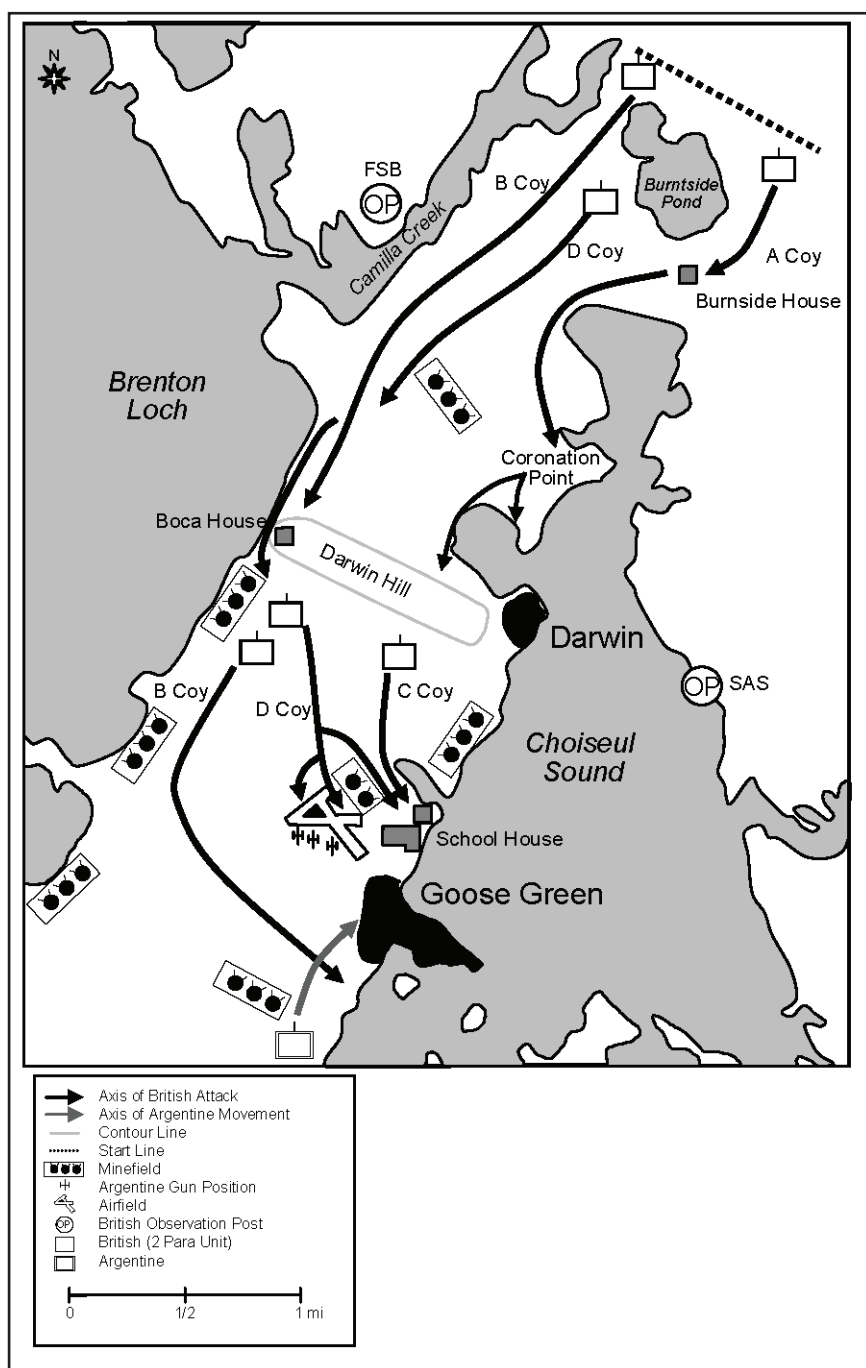
Fifty miles away, in a lookout position north of Port Stanley, a four-man Special Air Service (SAS) team monitored Argentine air and sea movement. Captain Aldwin Wright of Golf Company, SAS, commanded the team that reported on the arrival and departure of Argentine fixed-wing and rotary-wing helicopters. At times his men took exceptional risks to gain better vantage points to direct retaliatory British air attacks into Port Stanley. For his heroic efforts over a twenty-six day period, Wright would later receive the Military Cross (equivalent to the US Silver Star).

Back in Port Stanley, Brigadier General Menendez aggressively petitioned the Argentine Ministry of Defense for reinforcements from the mainland from May 21st to May 27th. Specifically, Menendez requested the air insertion of the elite Cordoba Air Transportable Brigade to Goose Green. General Galtieri, leader of the military junta, refused Menendez's request, fearful that British Harriers would shoot down the transport aircraft.³¹

By May 26th, over 5,000 British troops, with 32,000 tons of supplies and ammunition, were ashore occupying a ten-mile square area.³² They had accomplished their initial mission to secure a beachhead in East Falkland for the protection of 3rd Commando Brigade and the reinforcement of 5th Infantry Brigade expected ten days later. Nevertheless, Thompson came under increasing pressure from the British government to achieve a decisive success that would bolster public support for the campaign. The fleet had already endured over 130 air attacks, losing three ships and suffering damage to six others.³³ The British government, fearing a UN cease-fire resolution that would leave the British forces stranded far from their Port Stanley objective,³⁴ needed a victory and they needed it quickly. Reluctantly, Thompson ordered 2 Para to seize Goose Green, 15 miles to the south. As the battalion moved out, 3 Para and 45 Commando began an epic 70-mile march or ‘yomp’ along the northern third of the island towards Stanley.³⁵

Goose Green: The Stuff of Instant Legend

The Goose Green settlement lay on the eastern shore of a five-mile long, north-south isthmus. The 2 Para, 450 strong, was supported by a three-gun battery of 105mm howitzers with 320 rounds each, and by HMS *Arrow*, an Amazon Class Frigate, with close air support from sea-based AV-8 Sea Harriers.³⁶ HMS *Arrow* would support 2 Para until first light, at approximately 0520 hours, when it would have to return to the air-defense umbrella in the San Carlos area.³⁷ Intelligence sources reported a battalion-sized enemy force in and around the settlement, organized in three defensive lines. The first was a combat outpost at Burnside House. The second stretched across the top of the isthmus from Darwin in the east to Boca House in the west. The third line extended west out of Goose Green.³⁸ Cover and concealment for the attacking paratroops was almost non-existent. Once 2 Para crossed the line of departure, they would be moving in open ground against dug-in defenders with clear fields of fire.



Map 12. The Battle of Goose Green.

By last light on the 26th, 2 Para had moved ten miles from positions along Sussex Mountain and were in their pre-dawn attack positions at Camila House, five miles north of the first defensive lines. Jones was determined to attack without preparatory artillery fires to achieve maximum surprise. Poised in their attack positions in the late evening, 2 Para troopers were shocked to hear the BBC report their exact whereabouts and indicate that they were prepared to assault the Darwin-Goose Green complex by noon on May 27th. Enraged, LTC Jones swore he would kill those in parliament — actually it was the Ministry of Defense — who had leaked the story.³⁹ The battalion dispersed into the open to avoid air attack, spending a miserable night in wet and cold.

The 2 Para opened the battle at 0430 hours with three companies attacking on line with one following to reinforce or bypass the lead companies if they became bogged down. The initial attacks by Bravo Company in the west against Boca House had bogged down by 0600 hours due to suppressive automatic weapons and mortar fires. The trail company, Delta, tried to outflank the position and attack east towards the southern half of Goose Green, but they were also pinned down by heavy Argentine fires.⁴⁰

On the east flank, Alpha Company seized Burnside House and pushed south towards Darwin Hill, the second defensive line. Argentine positions were stronger than expected at Darwin and Headquarters Company moved forward to reinforce Alpha Company while Charlie Company maneuvered to the west to unhinge the Darwin Hill position. After initial success at Burnside House, on the east flank, Alpha Company's attack stalled before the unexpected and significant Argentine positions stretching west from Darwin Hill. Several companies, including one commanded by the young Argentine Lieutenant Roberto Estevez who would die later that day, had reinforced this main defensive position. Estevez was wounded three times in action in the leg, arm, and eye before a last mortal wound. He would receive Argentina's highest award for bravery in action.

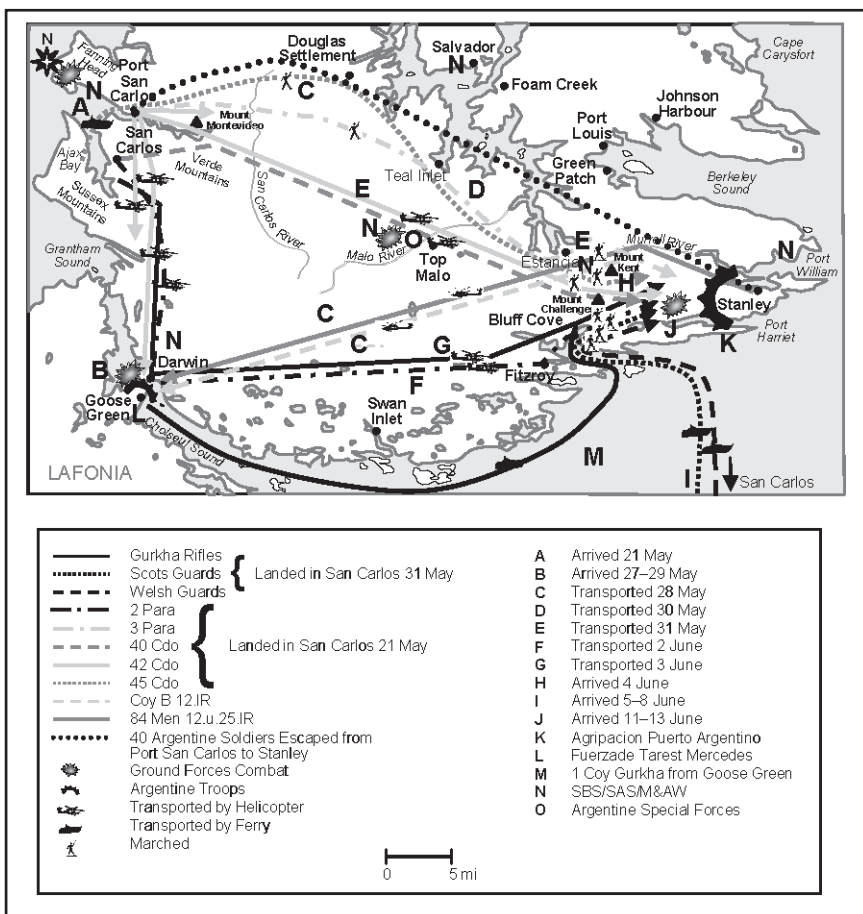
Overhead, overcast skies prevented the British Harriers from supporting the attack, which was clearly in danger of stalling. Sensing that decisive leadership was required, Jones ordered a platoon of Alpha Company to accompany him and with his command group attacked west around the Darwin position, hoping to outflank the line of bunkers tying down his three lead companies.⁴¹ While charging a bunker position Jones

was hit and mortally wounded, as was his adjutant. Despite his severe wounds he lifted himself and repeatedly pressed the attack to break the defensive line. Reinforcing Argentine fire from the far west position at Boca House finally killed him. For his gallant actions he would be posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.⁴²

Major (MAJ) Chris Keeble, the executive officer, now assumed command. Until now, 2 Para had only the three-gun battery of 105mm howitzers and the supporting naval fires of HMS *Arrow* to suppress the Argentine defenses. Major Keeble detached most of the heavy machine-guns from Bravo and Alpha Companies and sent them to reinforce Delta Company on the far western flank. Delta Company found a small ridgeline on the seaward side of Boca House that provided cover and concealment. Supported by heavy machinegun fires, Delta Company outflanked the position and suppressed the remainder of the Argentine line. The Darwin position and Boca House fell simultaneously and Delta Company attacked to secure the airstrip west of Goose Green, freeing the 112 civilians held hostage there.⁴³ For his heroic efforts and calm leadership under fire, MAJ Keeble was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, the second highest British award for bravery.⁴⁴

Bravo Company moved southwest of Delta and secured Goose Green itself while Alpha and Support Company maintained their positions at Darwin by sunset. However, both sides collapsed from exhaustion where they were and waited for first light to resume the action. With no more than 200 meters between each other, the sides did not move. The Argentines finally surrendered at 1000 hours on May 28.⁴⁵

The first decisive combat of the war, the Battle of Goose Green set the tone for the rest of the war. The British lost 18 men, who were killed-in-action and sustained 34 wounded in the 15-hour fight while the Argentines had 250 killed and 120 wounded. More than 1,500 Argentines surrendered.⁴⁶ The 2 Para had in fact defeated a defending force three times larger than itself. Although the impetus to attack was primarily political, the victories at Darwin and Goose Green had several military advantages; three in particular stood out. One, it secured the British southern flank for the attack east towards Port Stanley. Two, it provided the British an ability to assess the Argentine forces. Three, and most importantly, the outstanding performance of 2 Para against a vastly numerically superior enemy established a “psychological ascendancy over the Argentines,” which the British never lost.⁴⁷



Map 13. Falklands Landings, 1982.

The Move on Port Stanley

Argentine forces in and around Port Stanley had eight weeks to prepare their defensive positions for the inevitable British attacks from the west and south. The Argentine forces were deployed in a linear defense in a ring around the city. The 7th Regiment was in the north defending Mount Longdon, with the 4th to the southwest occupying Two Sisters and Mount Harriet. The 5th Marine Battalion was also posted to the southwest defending Tumbledown, Mount William, and Sapper Hill. Directly south was the 3rd Regiment on the east flank of 5th Battalion. Further southeast General Menendez deployed the 6th and 25th Regiments.⁴⁸

While 2 Para was earning glory and fame at Goose Green, 3 Para and 45 Commando pressed forward across East Falkland.⁴⁹ Carrying incredible loads across tortuous terrain in filthy weather, even the tough, hardy Marines and paratroopers suffered cruelly on the 70-mile march. The 3 Para's initial objective was Teal Inlet, 25 miles east of San Carlos, but still 20 miles west of Stanley.⁵⁰ Both the maroon-bereted Paras and green-bereted Marines wanted badly to outdo the other, 45 Commando even dropping their heavy bergen rucksacks at one point to increase their rate of march. However, 45 Commando arrived at Teal Inlet on 30 May, two nights after 3 Para, who would have bragging rights for years to come.

As 5th Infantry Brigade arrived and deployed around San Carlos Water, 3 Para suffered another media gaff that could have easily cost many lives. On June 4th, the BBC reported 3rd Commando Brigade's HQ at Teal Inlet. The BBC breach of security further angered Thompson, Moore, and Whitehall who feared an imminent Argentine air attack. Luckily, the Argentines did not take advantage of the information.⁵¹ The Argentines heard the BBC reports, but thought it was a British deception effort to draw their attention away from what they still believed to be the main effort from the south or southeast.

In order to blind the Port Stanley garrison, Brigadier Thompson ordered 42 Commando to seize Mount Kent in the north and Mount Challenger in the south, which was accomplished by heliborne assault on May 31st and June 5th, respectively.⁵² These hills guarded the western approaches to Port Stanley. In these operations Thompson boldly used his few helicopters to slingload howitzers from 29 Commando artillery to support 42 Commando raids since the objectives were beyond the range of naval gunfire.⁵³ Mount Kent in particular overlooked all the defenses of Stanley and was the key piece of terrain from which to control the remainder of the campaign.

By June 1st elements of 3rd Commando Brigade occupied a seven-mile front from Mount Estancia in the north to Mount Challenger in the south. Its positions overlooked a vast open plain to the east, with no cover or concealment for infantry units maneuvering to close on Port Stanley. Two Sisters in the north and Tumbledown Mountain in the south dominated the western most chain of hills.⁵⁴ The 3rd Commando Brigade would maneuver east to capture Stanley in conjunction with 5th Infantry Brigade's efforts behind them from the south.

On May 31st, 5th Infantry Brigade arrived in San Carlos waters on the QE2. General Moore, Deputy British Task Force Commander, had assumed command of all ground forces on May 30th. He immediately ordered elements of 5th Infantry Brigade to land at San Carlos and Goose Green and begin offensive operations in the south towards Fitzroy and north towards Tumbledown, Mount William, and Sapper Hill. Their operations were to be in coordination with Thompson's 3rd Commando Brigade's eastward maneuver.

General Moore and Brigadier Wilson, the 5th Infantry Brigade Commander, had thoroughly discussed operations once ashore during the long transit from Britain. Wilson had successfully persuaded Moore to give 5th Infantry Brigade missions that put them on equal priority footing with 3rd Commando Brigade. The 2 Para at Goose Green was reassigned to 5th Infantry Brigade, for what turned out to be a brief period, and 40 Commando was ordered to continue rear area security operations in San Carlos in support of 5th Infantry Brigade. The 1st Welsh and the 2nd Scots Guards partially disembarked at San Carlos and Goose Green and marched south and east, respectively, towards Fitzroy and Bluff Cove on June 2nd. Moore did not want to risk further amphibious movements due to Argentine air and Exocet threats. However, the Guards' units made poor progress on foot and were re-embarked after 36 hours and sailed southeast around southern Falklands between June 2nd and 5th towards their objectives.⁵⁵

Tumbledown Mountain and Sapper Hill

SAS patrols in the south Falklands had determined that the Argentines had abandoned Fitzroy Settlement, 15 miles to the south of Port Stanley, and elements of 2 Para were therefore sent by foot to secure Fitzroy and Bluff Cove. General Wilson immediately ordered the remainder of 2 Para and the Gurkhas to move by air and sea to secure Bluff Cove. The Gurkha's Delta Company lost the helicopters for its move from San Carlos to Goose Green for embarkation, so the Nepalese Gurkhas force-marched 30 miles in 36 hours with their 120-pound packs to make the rendezvous with the remainder of 5th Infantry Brigade.⁵⁶

Wilson's orders placed 2 Para 15 miles forward of any other 5th Infantry Brigade elements and a mountain range away from 3rd Commando Brigade, out of mutual support and out of range of air defense or naval gunfire. The remainder of 5th Infantry Brigade had to embark and

conduct an amphibious movement to establish a supportable brigade front, a decision that would ultimately lead to disaster.⁵⁷

The 5th Infantry Brigade's main body, with the 2nd Scots Guards, elements of 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, and logistics support units, embarked on the *Intrepid* and *Fearless* on the nights of June 5th and 6th for the water movement towards Port Stanley. The remainder of the Welsh Guards embarked on *Sir Galahad*. Argentine units in positions on Mount Harriet, 10 miles to the northeast, watched as *Sir Galahad* and *Tristen* entered Fitzroy waters. Shortly afterwards, Argentine aircraft, armed with Exocet missiles, attacked *Sir Galahad* and *Tristen*.

In the biggest British tragedy of the war, both ships were hit and had to be abandoned, while British helicopter pilots and rescue crews repeatedly risked their lives to save fellow servicemen. Over 350 Welsh Guards and the crews of the two crippled ships were evacuated in less than 45 minutes.⁵⁸ More than 40 men were killed and 150 wounded, some burned severely.⁵⁹ To replace these losses, 40 Commando was flown from its rear area security mission around the San Carlos beachhead to Fitzroy to reinforce 5th Infantry Brigade.⁶⁰

Unbelievably, throughout this period, there was not a division-level plan of attack. The 5th Infantry Brigade and General Moore's HQ on HMS *Fearless* were barely able to sort themselves out during their first week in the Falklands. Although Moore wanted to give 5th Infantry Brigade an equal part, there was no overall concept of operations. In fact, when the *Sir Galahad* and *Tristen* were attacked, the two brigade staffs were on the *Fearless* trying to develop a viable, coordinated division attack plan. Thompson's staff left the *Fearless* immediately after the Argentine attacks and began passing orders for a two-phased 3rd Commando Brigade attack on Port Stanley, which 5th Infantry Brigade would come to support.⁶¹

As late as June 8th, Menendez sent his Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Daher, back to the Argentine mainland to beg Galtieri to attack from the mainland against the British rear area at San Carlos. Galtieri refused to risk further loss of Argentine life. Additionally, he refused to accept UN Resolution 502, which would have given Menendez's forces an honorable means to withdraw. Back in Port Stanley, Menendez resigned himself to his fate and refused to dispatch any regiments to counter-attack the 5th Infantry Brigade buildup at Fitzroy and Bluff Cove, assuming a passive-defensive posture.⁶² Menendez seemed to personify Marine

General Alexander Vandergrift's quote, "Positions are seldom lost because they have been destroyed, but almost invariably because the leader has decided in his own mind that the position cannot be held."

Collapse and Surrender

Despite the losses at Fitzroy, the combined attacks by the 3rd Commando and 5th Infantry Brigades kicked off on the night of June 11th and 12th. In the north, 3rd Commando Brigade conducted a magnificently executed three-battalion night attack. Although the British Marines were growing confident in their abilities to overwhelm what they thought to be poorly trained Argentines, they realized that the defenses would harden as they closed on Stanley. Detailed patrol reports from the previous week indicated that the Argentines were deployed in reverse slope positions on Mount Longdon and Two Sisters.⁶³ Available fire support provided by 29th Commando (the Royal Marines' supporting artillery) exceeded 11,000 rounds and each battalion was given a dedicated naval gunfire ship.⁶⁴ The 3 Para would seize Mount Longdon in the north. The 45 Commando would seize Two Sisters in the center, and 42 Commando Mount Harriet in the south.

The 3 Para's attack to clear Mount Longdon was a difficult night battle that characterized the remaining hard fought battles of the last two nights of the Falklands Campaign. The Argentine 7th Regiment, primarily a conscript unit, defended the position. The 3 Para planned to clear the one-mile ridge from west to east with Bravo Company while Alpha Company established a support by fire position in the north. As the attack progressed, Bravo Company's 4th, 5th, and 6th Platoons stalled before the Argentine bunkers. As the company's casualties approached 50-percent the 4th Platoon commander was severely wounded. He immediately passed command to his platoon sergeant, Ian McKay. McKay formed an assault section from survivors of 4th and 5th Platoons and led an assault that destroyed several Argentine bunkers before the entire assault section became casualties. He was last seen single-handedly clearing a bunker, which broke the western Argentine defenses and thus allowed 3 Para to clear the remainder of Mount Longdon. Sergeant McKay was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his decisive leadership and self-sacrifice.⁶⁵

The 45 Commando's subsequent attacks on Two Sisters, defended by the Argentine 7th and 4th Regiments, went somewhat better. The 45

Commando conducted a two-company assault from north to south with Yankee and Zulu Companies while X-Ray Company established a support by fire position on the west flank of Two Sisters. At one point in Zulu's assault, heavy fires pinned down the unit. A young Welshman, Lieutenant Clive Dyter, seized the moment and single-handedly led the remainder of the company in a frenzied bayonet charge, later dubbed "Dyter's Charge." Seemingly impervious to the Argentine fire, Dyter survived the 500-meter charge to overrun the defensive positions on the objective. He was later awarded the Military Cross.⁶⁶

Later in the night, 42 Commando conducted an infiltration attack to seize Mount Harriet in an eight-hour battle, defeating a numerically equal enemy force.⁶⁷ Cumulative British casualties in the north were twenty-four killed and forty-four wounded, with the British taking over 400 Argentine prisoners.⁶⁸ In the south both the Welsh and Scots Guards fell well behind schedule as they attacked at night over tortuous terrain. Subsequently, the southern attacks from Bluff Cove were delayed twenty-four hours. Throughout the next morning the British occupied their northern positions despite heavy artillery and air bombardment, which lasted for the next 48 hours. However, 3rd Commando Brigade suffered in style, relishing the captured provisions found in the abandoned Argentine positions. The Marines and Paras particularly enjoyed the twenty cigarettes and a shot of whiskey contained in each ration.⁶⁹

In the south the Scots Guards fought a determined Argentine 5th Marine Battalion to seize Mount Tumbledown, with the Argentines making good use of their heavy machineguns to make the fight a costly affair. The defenders considered Mount Tumbledown the key to their Port Stanley defenses and positioned their best unit, the 5th Marine Regiment, on its slopes. In forming their attack plan, the Scots Guards made the critical mistake of attacking the ridgeline without establishing heavy overwatching fires to suppress the Argentine trenches and bunkers. At one point the left flank company was pinned down for three hours without relief, effectively shutting down the battalion's attack.⁷⁰ Slowly, the companies regained momentum as each company relearned the use of platoon support-by-fire units. In an 11-hour running battle, Mount Tumbledown was eventually cleared from west to east, opening the way into Port Stanley itself.

Farther south the Gurkhas, moving on the Scots Guards' right flank, secured Mount William while the Welsh Guards secured Sapper Hill.⁷¹ The Gurkhas' reputation had preceded them. Three-hundred Argentines

retreating from the Mount Tumbledown fight ran into the lead Gurkha patrols and reversed course to surrender to the Scots Guards, rather than fall into the hands of the *kukri*-wielding Gurkhas.⁷²

To the north, 2 Para stood poised to make its final contribution to victory in the Falklands. Because 3 Para had lost heavily in the fight for Mount Longdon, 2 Para was committed to continue the attack to clear Wireless Ridge, the last defensive position west of Stanley. Wireless Ridge was a series of two parallel, one-mile long ridges that ran from east to west.

In order to take the position rapidly, 2 Para was given the light armored vehicles of the Blues and Royals. The attack commenced with an artillery preparatory fire followed by a three-company assault. Delta Company attacked in the west while Alpha and Bravo Companies went in on the eastern part of the northern ridgeline. Delta Company went on to seize the second southern ridgeline after successfully breaking through in the north. Argentine 7th Regiment positions were soon overrun and the unit disintegrated as the elated Paras raced from position to position. Tragically, the battalion's Sergeant Major, Gordon Findley, was mortally wounded. Thus, 2 Para suffered the emotional shock of losing both its battalion commander and sergeant major during the Falklands Campaign.

With every piece of key terrain now in British hands and the loss of Port Stanley a foregone conclusion, a dispirited Menendez surrendered the 13,000 defenders at 2100 hours on June 14th. His men were quickly returned to Argentina, where the military junta soon fell from power. The British task force steamed home to a jubilant reception in England, leaving the Falklands to its lonely islanders and thousands of sheep.

Final Reckoning

The Falklands campaign was a costly affair for both sides. The British counted 256 killed-in-action, 777 wounded, and 80 captured (these last were the Royal Marine garrison, taken when the Argentines invaded; in a bit of final irony they were repatriated in time to participate in the final assaults and were present at the Argentine surrender). Ship losses were severe, including two destroyers, two frigates, one assault ship, and one container ship. In the air, ten Harriers and twenty-seven helicopters were lost. The Argentine forces suffered 746 killed and 1,336 wounded and the capture of 13,000 men. They lost one heavy cruiser, one submarine, one

patrol vessel, 45 A-4 Skyhawks, 27 Mirage III/IVs, 21 IA-58 Pucarás, and 24 other assorted aircraft.⁷³

Although defeated, the Argentine soldiers fought creditably given their inexperience, lack of support from the mainland, and generally poor leadership. Neglect by their officers and poor training resulted in “malnutrition, exposure, hypothermia, trench foot, scabies, lack of pure water, minimal clothing and field sanitation facilities.”⁷⁴ It is interesting to speculate on the outcome had Argentina’s best units, supported by the full weight of the junta, fought in the Falklands. As it was, when faced by some of the best light infantry in the world, the Argentine conscripts held out little hope for victory. Expecting defeat, they tasted it in full measure.

Perhaps the greatest lessons to be learned from the Falklands War are not the most obvious. Clearly training, leadership, professionalism, and sheer pugnacity were on the side of the British, whose success against serious odds was thereby ensured. But, in after action critiques, serious flaws emerged.

The command and control arrangements, which decreed strategic command by remote control from Northwood, were recognized after the fact as unsatisfactory, as they should have been before the war. On the scene, neither Moore, the putative land commander, nor Woodward, the naval commander, could do much more than request assistance from his counterpart. The lack of an on-scene commander was felt most seriously in the inability to establish priorities for logistics and fire support in a fast-moving campaign. Current American doctrine — perhaps partly in response to the Falklands experience — stresses the need for an on-scene joint force commander empowered to control all military units and assets.

Command arrangements at the tactical level were not much better. Rather than deploy a trained division headquarters, the British attempted to control two maneuver brigades with an ad hoc headquarters that did not arrive until well into the operation. Lacking a trained battle staff or standard operating procedures, General Moore could do little more than improvise for the duration of the fighting ashore. Operating at the end of an 8,000 mile line of communications, and constrained by service politics to showcase his Guards units, Moore played a bad hand well.

The political conduct of the war must also be questioned in light of the intelligence failures which preceded the invasion (three days before

the Argentine landings, Brigadier Thompson was told to stand down his brigade!) and the intelligence leaks which put British troops in critical danger. The self-sacrifice of 2 Para at Goose Green had little relevance to the overall campaign, the attack itself being mounted for largely political reasons. While it is undeniably true that politics will always shape battles and campaigns, this does not excuse the culpability of politicians when they confuse the interests of the state with their own political fortunes. On balance, the men who fought in the Falklands cannot claim to have been well served by their political masters.

Clearly the Falklands Campaign reflects the complex nature of 21st Century conflict. As the American Armed Forces move towards the next century, the Falklands War can only reinforce the need for both forward deployed and rapidly deployable air, ground, and maritime forces. As the British found, they will not always fight when and where they expect to, with ample logistics in permissive scenarios. Any military worth their name must be ready to fight and win on a shoestring, against the unexpected, with confidence and determination to win against the odds. In the Falklands, those qualities abounded in every soldier and Royal Marine. Because they did, the “soldiers of the Queen” earned yet another famous victory for the British nation and its redoubtable people.

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Glossary

ACRONYMS

APC	armored personnel carrier
ATGM	anti-tank guided missile
CCF	Chinese Communist Forces
C.I.G.S.	Chief of the Imperial General Staff (WWII British)
CP	command post
DMC	Desert Mounted Corps
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
FA	field artillery
G-2	Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence
G-3	Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations and Plans
GCMG	Grand Cross of St. Michael and St. George (Knighthood designation)
GHQ	General Headquarters
IAF	Israeli Air Force
IDF	Israeli Defense Force
JR	Jaeger Regiment
KCB	Knight Commander of the Bath (British award)
kph	kilometers per hour
km	kilometers
mm	millimeter
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
QE2	Queen Elizabeth 2 (British ocean liner)

RAF	Royal Air Force (British)
RCT	Regimental Combat Team
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery (British)
ROK	Republic of Korea
ROTC	Reserve Officer Training Corps
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment (British)
S-2	Intelligence Staff Officer
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SAS	Special Air Service
SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TACP	Tactical Air Control Party
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (now referred to as the Commonwealth of Independent States)
WWI	World War I

TERMS

akhio	Snow sleds drawn by hand or reindeer.
anathema	Vigorous denunciation.
Axis	The three powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan engaged against the Allied Nations during World War II.
Belaya Smert	White Death (Russian).

CFA	Corps Franc d'Afrique (a composite force of approximately 4,000 men consisting of Free French expatriates, Vichy political prisoners, Jewish refugees, Spanish Loyalists, and Berber tribesmen).
cheroot	A cigar cut square at both ends.
djebel	Mount/hill.
feint	A mock attack in order to distract attention from the intended target.
feldgrau	Field gray (German).
garaet	Lake.
Gotterdamerung	The total collapse of a society/regime (German mythology).
infanterie	Infantry (German).
jaeger	Hunter/soldier (German).
junta	A council for governmental purposes; usually established after a revolutionary seizure of power.
kesselschlacht	A decisive maneuver to envelop the enemy on all sides and annihilate; literal translation: cauldron battle (German).
Kukri	A curved short sword with a broad blade used by Gurkhas (Hindu).
laager vehicles.	Encampment protected by circle of armored
mitrailleuse	French concept of the gatling gun.
motti	Firewood, stacked and ready to be split into kindling for the fire (Finnish).
rasputitsa	Weather conditions that drastically change the look/lay of the land; literally translated meaning "time without roads" (Russian).

Sepoy	A native of India employed as a soldier by a European power.
tel	Mountain; hill.
wadi	The valley of a stream that is usually dry; gully.
Wehrmacht	Armed Forces (German).
yilderim	Lightning (Arabic).
Zampolit	Supervisory political officer responsible for political education, organization, and loyalty to the Government of the Soviet Army.

About the Editor

Colonel Richard D. Hooker, Jr., USA (Retired) is the Deputy Commandant and Dean of the NATO Defense College in Rome and former Chief of Staff of the Army Chair at the National War College. He commanded a parachute brigade in Iraq and a parachute battalion in Kosovo and is a Distinguished Graduate of the National War College. A former enlisted paratrooper, he was commissioned in 1981 from the US Military Academy at West Point and served six tours with parachute units in the U.S. and Europe. He fought in Grenada, Somalia, and Afghanistan as well as Iraq, and also participated in operational deployments to Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Sinai. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Institute of Strategic Studies and a former White House Fellow, Colonel Hooker served with the National Security Council Staff, the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, as Aide de Camp to the Secretary of the Army, and as Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in International Relations from the University of Virginia and taught at West Point. He is the editor and co-author of *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* (Presidio Press, 1993) and *By Their Deeds Alone* (Random House/Ballantine Books, 2003).

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