

SIDI REZEGH AND TOBRUK


TWO SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY DISASTERS REVISITED

1941 - 1942

by

DAVID BROCK KATZ

Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Military Science (Military History) in the Faculty of Military Science
at
Stellenbosch University.



Supervisor: Prof I.J. van der Waag

Co-Supervisor: Prof G.E. Visser

December 2014

“Declaration”

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 12 November 2014

ABSTRACT

Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk are the largest disasters suffered by South Africa in its military history. Yet, despite their enormity, Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk are little understood and hardly remembered. South Africa declared war on Germany on the 6 September 1939, after a bitter internal debate, amounting to a conflict between Afrikaner nationalists and those who supported the British Empire. South Africa's political ambivalence and disunity ran parallel to her unpreparedness for war in every important department from the lack of vital coastal defences to the miniscule size of her army and air force and complete lack of a navy. The first six months of 1941 saw the South Africans play a significant part in completely defeating the Italian colonial forces in East Africa. However, the campaign was poor preparation for what the South Africans were to encounter in the North African Desert months later. South African troops spent their time rebuilding fortifications in Egypt rather than in essential training to acclimatise this "bush war" army to harsh desert conditions. In a reluctant political decision, the unprepared South Africans were committed to Operation Crusader. The inexperienced South Africans met up with the battle hardened Afrika Korps at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941 and were annihilated in the face of overwhelming odds. In revisiting this forgotten battle, it has been found, using primary and secondary sources, that the South Africans extracted an enormous price on the German armour in what may have been the true turning point of Operation Crusader. In May 1942, Rommel's Afrika Korps sallied forth in a series of lightning moves that demonstrated the Axis grip on combined operations and managed to isolate the vital port of Tobruk commanded by an inexperienced South African, Major General H. B. Klopper. His surrender in one day is often compared to the previous siege endured under similar circumstances, where the Australians managed to hold Rommel at bay for 244 days until the siege was lifted. Klopper's surrender of Tobruk resulted in a political crisis for Winston Churchill and for Jan Smuts, as the fiasco caused considerable tension within the Allied camp and within South Africa. On re-examination, interesting facts have emerged from the primary source material, as to the state of the Tobruk defences and of its unfortunate commander and how the United Kingdom, acting in concert with South Africa, sought to suppress the true facts. Immediate post-war memory has been shaped and distorted by sensitive political considerations that affected relations between South Africa and the United Kingdom. Thereafter, the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk was relegated first by a nationalistic Afrikaner government and then since by a democratically elected government, both of which have seen very little use in incorporating these two milestones into the national memory.

OPSOMMING

Sidi Rezegh en Tobruk is die grootste nederlae wat Suid-Afrika in sy militêre geskiedenis ervaar het. Ten spyte van hul omvang, word daar min van Sidi Rezegh en Tobruk verstaan of onthou. Na 'n hewige interne debat wat tot konflik tussen Afrikanernasionaliste en pro-Britse Suid-Afrikaners gelei het, het Suid-Afrika op 6 September 1939 oorlog teen Duitsland verklaar. Suid-Afrika se politieke verdeeldheid het saamgeval met die Unie se totale onvoorbereidheid vir oorlog, wat gestrek het van kritieke tekortkominge in kusverdediging, tot die ontoereikende grootte van die leër en lugmag en die totale afwesigheid van 'n vloot. Gedurende die eerste ses maande van 1941 het Suid-Afrika 'n beduidende rol gespeel om die Italiaanse koloniale magte in Oos-Afrika te verslaan. Dié veldtog was egter nie effektiewe voorbereiding vir die uitdagings waarteen die Suid-Afrikaners kort daarna in Noord-Afrika te staan sou kom nie. Die Suid-Afrikaanse troepe het daarby hul tyd daaraan bestee om vestings in Egipte te herbou in plaas daarvan om noodsaaklike opleiding te ondergaan om hul "bosoorlog"-leër vir ruwe woestynoorlogvoering voor te berei. 'n Huiwerige, teensinnige politieke besluit het die onvoorbereide Suid-Afrikaners tot Operasie Crusader verbind. Die onervare Suid-Afrikaners het op 23 November 1941 by Sidi Rezegh teen die geharde Afrika Korps te staan gekom, waar oorweldigende magte hulle verpletter het. 'n Heroorweging van hierdie vergete veldslag aan die hand van primêre en sekondêre bronne het aan die lig gebring dat die Suid-Afrikaners 'n hoë tol van die Duitse pantser geëis het, wat besmoontlik die ware keerpunt in Operasie Crusader gebring het. In Mei 1942 het Rommel se Afrika Korps deur 'n reeks blitsige bewegings wat die greep van die Spilmagte op gekombineerde operasies gedemonstreer het, daarin geslaag om die kritiese hawe van Tobruk, waar die onervare Suid Afrikaanse generaal-majoor H.B. Klopper in bevel was, te isoleer. Sy oorgawe binne 'n enkele dag word dikwels vergelyk met die vorige beleg van Tobruk toe die Australianers Rommel onder vergelykbare omstandighede vir 244 dae teruggehou het totdat die beleg opgehef is. Klopper se oorgawe het 'n politieke krisis vir Winston Churchill en Jan Smuts geskep, deurdat dit aansienlike spanning binne sowel die Geallieerde kamp as Suid-Afrika veroorsaak het. Die herevaluering van die gebeure het interessante feite uit die primêre bronne na vore gebring ten opsigte van die toestand van Tobruk se verdedigingstellings, die ongelukkige bevelvoerder, en hoe die Verenigde Koninkryk in samewerking met Suid-Afrika die ware feite wou toesmeer. Die onmiddellike naoorlogse geheuebeeld van die gebeure by Sidi Rezegh en Tobruk is geskep en verwring deur sensitiewe politieke oorwegings wat die verhouding tussen Suid-Afrika en die Verenigde Koninkryk beïnvloed het. Sedertdien het 'n nasionalistiese Afrikaner-regering en daarna ook die demokraties-verkose, post-apartheid-regering die herinneringe aan Sidi Rezegh en Tobruk tot die vergetelheid verdoem; nie een van die twee het die nut daarvan gesien om dié twee mylpale in die nasionale geheue te verewig nie.

CONTENTS

	Page
Abbreviations	iii
Maps	v
Illustrations	vi
Introduction	viii
Acknowledgments	xviii
Chapter I	
South Africa and the Geo-Political and Operational Environment	1
1.1 South Africa's Strategic Role in the Empire	3
1.2 The Union Defence Force in the Interwar Period and Its Preparations for War	10
1.3 South Africa's Political Situation on the Home Front and Her Entry into the War	15
1.4 South Africa Mobilises Its Military Force and War Economy	21
1.5 The East African Campaign 1940: The 1st South African Infantry Division's First Battle	25
1.6 German Military Doctrine versus British Military Doctrine	28
1.7 The Desert and Mobile Warfare	36
1.6 Conclusion	41
Chapter II	
The Destruction of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade at Sidi Rezegh - 23 November 1941	43
2.1 Background to Operation Crusader	46
2.2 The Battle Begins: The Launch Of Operation Crusader - 18 and 19 November 1941	59
2.3 Rommel Realizes That Crusader Is Not a Diversion - 20 November 1941	64
2.4 The Approach of the South Africans to Sidi Rezegh, the Attempted Break-Out of Tobruk and the Near Annihilation of 7th Armoured Brigade – 21 November.	69
2.5 The 5th Brigade Attacks and is Repulsed by the Germans Holding	

	Point 178 on the Sidi Rezegh Escarpment - 22 November	72
2.6	The Annihilation of 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh - 23 November	77
2.7	The Lessons Learned by the South Africans from Operation Crusader	88
2.8	Conclusion	92
Chapter III	The Surrender of Tobruk 1942	96
3.1	The Road to Tobruk: The 2nd South African Infantry Division captures Bardia - 2 January 1942	101
3.2	The Race to Launch an Offensive - The Opposing Plans	104
3.3	Rommel Attacks - The Cauldron and Abandonment of the Gazala Line - 26 May – 14 June 1942	111
3.4	Tobruk Is Not To Be Invested Again!	119
3.5	Introducing Major-General Hendrik Balsazer Klopper	121
3.6	Tobruk Besieged -18 June 1942	125
3.7	The Organisation of The Defence and Counter-attack Force of Tobruk	131
3.8	The Germans Attack Tobruk - 20 June 1942	133
3.9	The Surrender of Tobruk, an Avoidable Blunder or an Inevitable Disaster?	141
3.10	Conclusion	145
Chapter IV	Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk: Forgotten Events in South African Memory	147
4.1	The Memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in the Aftermath of Defeat, the Long War, Politics and the Unpopularity of Military History	148
4.2	The Aftermath of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk and Their Establishment in South African Memory	154
4.3	After Officialdom and Journalism - New Memory Custodians and Memory Activists	166
4.4	Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in Popular Memory – The Participants Speak	166
4.5	The Afrikaner Nationalist Assault on Memory 1948 - 1966	173
4.6	Memory Revitalised In the Age of Afrikaner and English Reconciliation 1966 -1990	175
4.7	Memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in the Age of Democracy	176
4.8	Conclusion	178
Chapter V	Conclusion	180
	Sources	195

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anti-Aircraft
ACF	Active Citizen Force
AFV's	Armoured Fighting Vehicles
AP	Armour piercing or anti-personnel
APC	Armour Personnel Carrier
AT	Anti-Tank
ATM	Anti-Tank Mine
Bde	Brigade
Brig	Brigadier
Brig-Gen	Brigadier General
Bty	Battery
Capt	Captain
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel
Coy	Company
DAK	Deutches Afrika Korps
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
DG	Director General
DHQ	Divisional Headquarters
DHQ	Defence Head Quarters
Div	Division
DOCD	SANDF Documentation Centre (Military Archives)
DOD	Department of Defence
DRA	Defence Rifle Association
DSM	Distinguished Service Medal
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
FDL	Forward defence location
Gen	General

GOC	General Officer in Command
HQ	Headquarters
JSP	Jan Smuts Papers
KIA	Killed in Action
LMG	Light machine gun
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt-Col	Lieutenant-colonel
Maj-Gen	Major-general
MIA	Missing in Action
NAAFI	Navy Army and Air Force Institute
NAP	National Archives Pretoria
TNA	National Archives United Kingdom
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
OB	Ossewa Brandwag
PF	Permanent Force
PI	Platoon
POW	Prisoner of War
QMG	Quarter Master General
RAF	Royal Air Force
RB	Regiment Botha
Rgt	Regiment
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAIR	South African Irish Regiment
SANDF	South African national Defence Force
SSB	Special Service Battalion
THA	Transvaal Horse Artillery
TS	Transvaal Scottish
UDF	Union Defence Force

MAPS

<u>Map</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Page</u>
1	The Planned First Phase of Operation Crusader, 18 November 1941	52
2	The rebuff of the 22 nd Armoured Brigade by <i>Ariete</i> , 19 November 1941	63
3	The 5 th Brigade prepares to make its way to Sidi Rezegh, 20 November 1941	66
4	The 5 th Brigade begins its hesitant move up to Sidi Rezegh	71
5	The German Panzer divisions inflict a major defeat on the remaining British armour on 22 November 1941	75
6	The end of the 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941	80
7	The end of the 5 th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh from the Afrika Corps war diary	87
8	The Battle of Gazala Showing Allied Disposition 26 May 1942	106
9	Rommel's opening moves and outflanking attack on the Gazala line	112
10	The Cauldron Battles and the elimination of the 150th Infantry Brigade	116
11	The Cauldron 5 June 1942 and the failure of Operation Aberdeen	117
12	Force Dispositions at Tobruk on the morning of 20 June 1942	126
13	Rommel's November 1941 plan for the attack on Tobruk	135

ILLUSTRATIONS

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Page</u>
1A	A David Low cartoon published in the <i>Evening Standard</i>	7
1B	Fougasse cartoon in Punch magazine	7
2	The Oswald Pirow Bush Cart	13
3	Pirow in Berlin with soldiers from the Luftwaffe	13
4	South Africans "Pulling together"	21
5	An example of a Union Defence Force soldier circa 1939	23
6	Eighth Army Order of Battle Operation Crusader	48
7	1st South African Infantry Division Order of Battle Operation Crusader	48
8	7th Armoured Division Order of Battle Operation Crusader	49
9	Axis Order of Battle Operation Crusader	50
10	Comparison of Armoured Forces at the Inception of Operation Crusader	56
11A	Brigadier B. F. Armstrong, and Major Harry Klein	68
11B	Newspaper cutting announcing the escape of Brigadier Armstrong	68
12A	Tank Losses Per Day 18-22 November 1941	75
12B	Tank Strengths Per Day 18-22 November 1941	76
13	Artillery dispositions of 5th Brigade per defensive sector 23 November	82
14A	Schematic of the German attack on 5 th Brigade on a broad front	84
14B	Schematic of the German attack on 5 th Brigade on a narrow front	85
15	Disabled German tanks by F. Krige	88
16	Field of Sidi Rezegh by G. Long	92

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Page</u>
17	Comparative tank strength of the opposing forces on the eve of the battle 27 May	109
18	A confident looking Major-General H. B. Klopper	122
19	Comparative strength analysis of the Tobruk garrison as at 1 May 1941 and 18 June 1942	129
20	A view of Tobruk by G. Long	141
21A	An Italian propaganda poster celebrating the re-conquest of Tobruk	162
21B	A translation of the poster ordered by an anxious South African Hierarchy	163
22	The Tomb of Sidi Rezegh by F. Krige	169
23	“Staging out” near Tobruk by G. Long	170
24	Black trainees of the Native Labour Corps armed with spears	172
25	Corporal Job Masego of the Native Military Corps by Neville Lewis	173

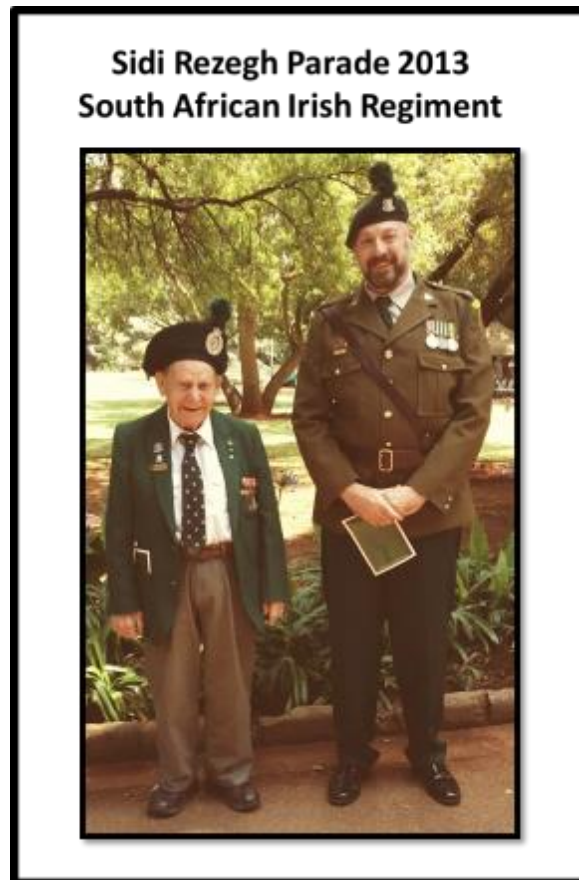
INTRODUCTION

The annual Sidi Rezegh memorial parade took place in November 2013 as it has for many decades following the Second World War. The South African Irish Pipes and Drums readied itself to lead the procession of the four South African regiments that fought and perished so many years ago in an almost forgotten dusty desert battle near the tomb of an unknown prophet. This would in all likelihood mark the last year that a living veteran of the battle would be honoured on the parade. It is a bitter irony that in a year marking the 100th anniversary of the formation South African Irish Regiment, and with pressure to effect a name change that has more relevance in a new South Africa, the annual parade could be the regiment's last.

In choosing to examine a subject that is over 70 years old, I am confronted with questions as to its relevance and importance. As a member of the South African Irish Regiment, I have an interest in the military affairs of the South African National Defence Force, its predecessors and the history of my regiment. The South African Irish Regiment was annihilated at the battle of Sidi Rezegh on the 23 November 1941, and despite its near demise in the desert all those years ago, it survived to serve in the South African Defence Force, and after 1994 in the South African National Defence Force. I personally have had on occasion, the honour of commanding the annual parade commemorating the battle of Sidi Rezegh. This I have done unfortunately having little knowledge of the events surrounding, or of the role that the South African Irish Regiment played in the battle. Intuitively I have always felt that the enormity of these military disasters must have relevance beyond mere regimental history.

What can one profit from re-examining a seventy year old campaign? The sheer magnitude of the tragedy that befell the Union Defence Force may be reason enough for a South African to show more than a passing interest. Copious amounts of Second World War books are published yearly in an effort to sate the seemingly ever increasing appetite of those seeking knowledge of all aspects of the war. The plethora of books produced in ever increasing amounts after the war, describe in magnificent detail, most aspects of Operation Crusader. Attention is given to the day-to-day events, even down to minute details of the uniforms and the equipment of the belligerents. Unfortunately the role and demise of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade has, with the exception of the South African official

history¹, been largely ignored by the majority of Eurocentric secondary sources and warranting no more than a passing mention.



The Author together with Mr Sid Gibson, the last surviving South African Irish veteran of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh. Mr Gibson turned 90 years old in 2013. Born in Benoni in Gauteng province, Mr Gibson enlisted in the South African Irish Regiment early in the war. He survived Sid Rezegh only to be wounded at El Alamein in 1942.

I found re-examination of the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk worthwhile, to seek an understanding of the myriad of unanswered questions surrounding South Africa's two greatest military defeats. Why was a brigade of South Africans, with little training in desert war, devoid of armoured support, left alone to fend for themselves against the might of two German armoured divisions and one Italian armoured division? How was it possible for a small force of inexperienced, ill-equipped and isolated South Africans, to exact such a high price in terms of Axis casualties, the highest that far in

¹ J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957) and J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert: May-July 1942* (London: Oxford, 1952).

Operation Crusader? Why was an inexperienced young South African given the task of defending Tobruk when others infinitely more experienced and willing, were at hand? How was it possible that the Tobruk fortress was defended for one day only, surrendering ignominiously before a South African had fired a shot in anger?

In 1941, Tobruk was manned by the Australians under ostensibly similar circumstances and with similar forces involved, and they managed to hold out heroically for a period of nine months before the siege was lifted. These questions and more had aroused my curiosity surrounding these events and motivated me to find the answers. The passage of time facilitates a re-examination with a view to gaining a greater understanding of the events that took place and reassessing the role of the South Africans at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk. The historian's task is not merely one of describing events, but also one of providing explanations for and behind the events.

In 1939, South Africa was woefully unprepared to fight a modern conventional war and the fighting power of her armed forces was considerably diminished. This was partly due to deep political and racial divisions, the adoption of outmoded and outclassed battle doctrine, and an inadequately qualified General Staff and leader group. Severe manpower shortages and a lack of appropriate training and battle experience were some of the other factors. These unique South African shortcomings combined with the inept manner with which the British conducted the strategic and tactical aspects of the desert campaign, conspired in the loss of a significant portion of the South African forces put at the British disposal. These facts have lain hidden and forgotten for decades.

As part of the acceptance process for my thesis proposal, I had the opportunity to present my topic before a colloquium held at the Saldanha Military Academy in December 2011. One of the first questions asked was to provide my motivation for wanting to research the topic. Another question asked in a casuist vein, but perhaps revealing more of the general feeling toward the topic, was the relevance of the subject considering that the whole affair was really a British rather than a South African matter. My intent on researching the military disasters of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk was to gain an understanding of why the South Africans suffered their greatest defeats in their military history. Given the magnitude and significance of these military disasters, it was anomalous that beside the annual regimental parade, such significant events had all but been forgotten? I was also keen to discover,

despite the national amnesia, the inevitable but forgotten impact that these events have had on shaping our society, our defence force, and indeed our military role in Africa today.

The difficulty in researching the topic is that South Africa's participation in the Second World War has been largely neglected and ignored since the Nationalists took control of the government in 1948. As a result of general disinterest in the Second World War and insidious political coercion, a national amnesia gripped the nation. This resulted in a glaring hiatus within the historiography. Other participant countries were quite different from South Africa. There, an insatiable appetite for knowledge of the war, coupled with the growing number of those interested, ensured that the increasing amounts of material being produced on nearly every aspect of the Second World War were hungrily devoured. This same enthusiasm had not found a home in South Africa. Most of the better material available for research on South Africa's participation in the Second World War took the form of official and semi-official histories produced in the 1950s and 1960s. The intention of these histories was to provide a foundation for further research. Unfortunately in South Africa, these official histories have become the last word on the matter instead of the first. It is being left largely to the academic community to provide the little research that has appeared on the matter in the last decade. There are however, tentative signs of a rekindling in interest in South Africa's participation in the Second World War.

The second part of the research question, which contributed greatly to the difficulty of solving the first part, was why these significant military events are almost forgotten in South African memory? South Africa has an interesting and chequered history, and it is unfortunate that, on more than one occasion, sectors of our diverse population have been marginalised at one time or another. This has left South Africans with many different versions of their history, or indeed with large sections of the history ignored. The history of the Union Defence Force is no exception, and the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have been largely forgotten. The South Africans who took part in these battles, both black and white, are almost no longer with us, and besides an annual remembrance, little remains of the memory of those who fought and died.

It is puzzling that these important events, involving South Africans from different racial groups, have ceased to be an important feature of our national memory. Although not the main emphasis of this thesis, I endeavoured to answer this question by delving into some of the reasons why the Second World War was not embraced by the Nationalist government that took over in 1948, and the

democratically elected government that came to power in 1994. South Africans share a common history and although certain sections have discarded portions of our history as not being their own, the Union of South Africa and its exploits, including its military adventures, form the foundation of the democratic South Africa that we live in today.

It is no small irony that during the course of writing this thesis, the autocratic regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown by his long-suffering subjects. Once again the very same names that filled the newspapers across the world during the Second World War, such as Tripoli, Bardia, and indeed Tobruk found a way back into the headlines after a long hiatus. In some ways, the movement of government and rebel forces back and forth along the same coastal roads used by the Eighth Army and the Deutches Afrika Corps bore an uncanny resemblance to the manoeuvre warfare carried out by different adversaries over the same terrain 70 years ago. It was a well-known journalist, Robert Fisk, who in an article titled 'Let the Images of War Speak for Themselves' for *The Independent*, published 2 April 2011 wrote, "Bays himself is now covering the rebel advance and constant retreat from western Libya - more retreating, I suspect, than Generals Wavell and Klopper (yes, James, look him up) - did in the Libyan desert in the 1940s...". The possibility exists, that Libyan generals on either side of the conflict may have grabbed and digested for inspiration, some of the history books that recorded the battles fought over the same ground in the Second World War. This in similar vein as Wehrmacht and Soviet generals, suffering the appalling winter in Russia, devoured history books on Napoleon's exploits at the gates of Moscow in 1812. The recent war in Libya is a particularly pertinent example of the fact that history repeats itself, and although no war is fought exactly the same of the last one, many lessons can be learned studying history.

Since 1994, the natural heir to the Union Defence Force, the South African National Defence Force, has taken on peacekeeping and peace enforcement roles in Africa. The United Nations and African Union place certain reliance on South Africa as a regional power, to provide military assistance in Africa where it is needed, in the same way that the British relied on South Africa to provide valuable assistance in Africa to protect the Empire. South Africa in its role of fulfilling its mandate as a regional superpower may very well find itself fighting battles in the very same territories that the Union Defence Force campaigned in, in the Second World War. There is a reluctance, which is certainly justified, for military historians to see the study of military history in purely didactic terms. One has to be extremely careful when studying military history, to realise that the next war will not be fought in the same way as

the last. However certain important “lessons” can be learnt from the study of historic military campaigns, especially in the avoidance of some of the mistakes committed.

Research Methodology

The sources relating to South African participation in the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk can be subdivided into primary and secondary sources. The most readily available and comprehensive collection of primary and secondary sources available locally are those archived and produced by the Union War Histories Section (UWHS). The UWHS published one of the most comprehensive secondary sources available in the form of official histories dealing with the two battles.²

Most of the South African secondary sources as well as the British, New Zealand, Australian, German and Italian official histories have made extensive use of the works of the UWHS when dealing with Sidi Rezegh and the surrender of Tobruk. Ideally the primary purpose of official histories is to offer an unbiased treatise of the events that took place in order to provide a platform on which subsequent historians might build. However, much of official history is also produced for nation building purposes. It will be seen that the official histories of the UWHS remain the last word on Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk with a general failure by historians to investigate historical matters further and come up with up-to-date accounts based on new evidence and ideas.

John Keegan held that the worst types of official history are peculiarly desiccated and didactic, while the best are conscientious and inspired. It would seem that the efforts of the UWHS fall into the latter category.³ The Union War Histories Section was headed up by the much-underrated Professor J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton, a professional historian with links to the Universities of Pretoria and South Africa.⁴ The motivation behind the formation of the UWHS was to ensure that the country’s war efforts should be documented properly, to facilitate the formulation of a serious historical account after the war.⁵ Armed with a team of highly qualified academics and appropriate government funding, the UWHS managed to collect an abundance of official and unofficial documents, together with translated documents from the

² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* and Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*.

³ J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Pimlico, 1995) (p. 23).

⁴ N. Southey and F.A. Mouton, 'A Volksvremde Historian: J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and the Production of History in an Alien Environment', *South African Historical Journal*, 44 (2001) (p. 72).

⁵ J. Grey, 'Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clío: the rise and fall of Union War Histories', *Scientia Militaria*, 30 (2000) (p. 255).

Axis forces.⁶ The trilogy of published work⁷ and unpublished manuscripts together with extensive accumulated documents, form a rich seam of historiographical material that can be drawn upon.

The first book produced by the UWHS covers the fall of Tobruk and the First Battle of Alamein,⁸ where Agar-Hamilton deals with the reasons for the fall of Tobruk and the resulting surrender of the South Africans. The book most probably has a twofold purpose in that a proper academic explanation was needed in the light of the Australian success in holding the fortress the year before, and it offers something in the way of lessons learned.⁹ The second book deals in great depth with Operation Crusader and the destruction of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade.¹⁰ It seeks to resolve the controversy around the destruction of 5th Brigade and the issues surrounding the Crusader battles.¹¹

The official histories published by the UWHS provide a rich source of research material on Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk as far as providing a detailed campaign history of the events leading to the destruction of 5th Brigade and the 2nd Division. However the histories have disclosed little in the way of insight into the various political forces at play that had a role in the demise of these South African formations. They were also subject to the same political constraints that stymied the official board of enquiry into the surrender of Tobruk, as well as the sensitivity and classification of certain documents when the books were written.

More extensive, and perhaps subject to less political influences, are the vast unpublished manuscripts and documents of the UWHS housed at the SANDF Documentation Centre (Military Archives) in Pretoria. These deal with issues of the history of South Africa in the Second World War beyond the published works. It is a fruitful source of information readily available for research purposes, comprising first class, primary and secondary material.¹² The extensive collection consists of three-hundred-and-ninety-one boxes of narratives and reports, grouped under twenty-four headings. There are fifty-four boxes containing narrations and documents pertaining to the campaigns in East Africa,

⁶ I. van der Waag, 'Contested histories: official history and the South African military in the 20th century', in *The Last Word? Essays on Official History, in the United States and British Commonwealth*, ed. by J. Grey (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003) (p. 37).

⁷ L. Turner, H. Gordon-Cumming and J. Betzler, *War in the Southern Oceans 1939-1945* (Cape town: Oxford University Press, 1961). This is the third and final volume in the official history series.

⁸ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*.

⁹ Van der Waag, 'Contested Histories', 37.

¹⁰ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles*.

¹¹ Van der Waag, 'Contested Histories', 37.

¹² In fact, two examples of these unpublished manuscripts have been published in *Militaria* since the demise of the UWHS. J.W. North, 'South African Army Postal Services, 1940-1946', *Militaria*, 2(6) (1970) and F.J. Jacobs and R. Bouch, '6 Armoured Division Italy', *Militaria*, 4(2) and 4(3) (1974).

Madagascar, the Middle East and Italy.¹³ The narratives and documents dealing with the Middle East campaign include personal eyewitness reports, regimental histories, important documents, and narratives on all aspects of the war in the desert undertaken by the South African forces.¹⁴ This section has seen the most amount of fruitful publication and it forms a good part of the source material for the two books published by the UWHS on the Desert War.¹⁵

There have been a small number of published journal articles and dissertations in the last decade that deal either directly or indirectly with the subject matter. These too have been profitably consulted in gaining insight into research and conclusions reached by the researchers. Extensive use has also been made of further secondary sources including the semi-official histories, regimental histories, and a number of biographies and campaign histories on the subject, produced both locally and overseas. British accounts of the early desert battles of Crusader in 1941 and Gazala in 1942, published some two decades after the war, had as their main objective the protection or boosting of individual reputations rather than dealing with the details of the battle or the real reasons for the Eighth Army's setbacks. Adding to the general dearth of information, was the fact that important military figures were barred from rendering their accounts as they were serving officers and the fact those most military records were not available for consultation. By the time official records were available for research purposes some of the myths that had been born in the years after the war were firmly entrenched, and aspects pertaining to early defeats involving South African forces ignored or glossed over.¹⁶

Contributing to the reasons for the dearth of information is the fact that the destruction of the South African 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh and the surrender of Tobruk were shrouded somewhat by the eventual victory achieved in the overall Crusader Operation. The South African losses were to some extent vindicated and ameliorated as having had a significant role in grinding down the irreplaceable tank forces of the Deutches Afrika Korps. Therefore in what amounted to a major catastrophe for South Africa together with the lessons that should have been learned was almost forgotten in the far bigger picture of Crusader battles, the celebrated victory at Alamein and the successful conclusion Desert War as a whole.

¹³ 'Narratives and Reports Middle East' (Narratives and Reports, South African National Defence Force Documentation Centre (DOCD), Union War Histories Section (UWHS) Box 119 to 173).

¹⁴ DOCD, UWHS, Box 127 to 139.

¹⁵ DOCD, UWHS, Box 127 to 139.

¹⁶ A. Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army: Crusader to the Alamein Line, 1941-42* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002) (p. 7).

The historiographical hiatus regarding Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk has come about due to a lack of research on the subject by historians in the years following the closure of the UWHS 1961. There has been a general failure to build on the foundation of official histories and take the pool of knowledge on the subject further. Historical works on the subject in the intervening years, including the South African semi-official histories have tended either to rehash the available secondary sources or ignore the events totally. Most overseas publications, including the official histories of the Allies and those of Germany and Italy have also placed a heavy reliance on the work of the UWHS when referring to these two battles. The void has not been substantially filled despite a late spike in historical work produced by way of a few dissertations and journal articles in the first decade of the 21st century.

Fortunately the primary sources available for research purposes are vast and there has been a need to identify those that are pertinent to the study at an early stage. Extensive use has been made of the Brigade and Divisional War Diaries housed at the South African Defence Force Documentation Centre. Further important primary sources consulted, supplementing the official sources and involving archival work has been the examination of the George Brink papers, the personal file of H.B. Klopper, and certain items in the Smuts papers. In addition documents have been accessed from the United Kingdom National Archives as well as the illusive Board of Enquiry document on the surrender of Tobruk of which there were only seven copies made. Further primary sources are found in collections of private papers, and the Brigade and Divisional war diaries and other pertinent documents held in local and overseas archives.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to filling the gap in the historical knowledge of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk through a re-examination of the battles using the available secondary and primary sources, thereby building on the foundation of knowledge provided for by the official South African histories. Furthermore explanations will be sought for the national amnesia surrounding these two battlefield disasters, and the reasons why such significant military events in our national history have failed to become part of our common national heritage.

Chapter Layout

In Chapter 1, the geographic as well as the strategic considerations of the theatre of battle are examined in so far as they affected the Union Defence force and the outcome of the battles. A background is given of South Africa and the Union Defence Force in particular together with the United Kingdom and the other Commonwealth forces in general. This is to highlight how that the nation's particular doctrine,

logistics, generalship, force structure, preparedness, equipment and political position affected the battle. Special consideration will be given to the Union Defence Force by examining South Africa's entry into the war, the East African campaign, an assessment of South Africa's force capability, South Africa's Relationship with the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth and the Political Situation on the Home Front.

Chapter 2 and 3 consist of a description of the events leading up to and surrounding the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk as well as a detailed account of the actual battles from the perspective of the different participants. The view taken will be through a strategic and operational lens, rather than from first person accounts. Extensive use is made of new sources and new insights so as to cast fresh light on the events as they took place. The two chapters read together will constitute a narrative covering eight months of the most disastrous period in South Africa's military history.

Chapter 4 will deal with the impact of these events and their impression or lack of, on the South African national memory. South African memory will be compared to that of some of the other major participants where differences and similarities will be highlighted, in a quest to provide an insight into the national amnesia. Reasons will be sought and offered as to why Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have not been incorporated into our national heritage to the extent that other disasters such as Dunkirk and Gallipoli have come to form an important part of the national memory of the United Kingdom and Australia respectively. The thesis concludes with chapter 5 where a brief synopsis will be offered on the preceding chapters followed by a summary of the main findings uncovered by the research into the topic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In completing this thesis, I have been fortunate to meet many kind individuals who have been generous with their time and knowledge. A large proportion of the research was undertaken using primary documents contained at the South African National Defence Force Documentation Centre (Military Archives) (DOCD) in Pretoria. Deputy Director Louise Jooste heads-up the archive and her kindness and generosity even extended to being lavished with tea and biscuits on many occasions. Ms Jooste regularly enquired as to the progress I was making and whether her staff assistance was satisfactory. Steve de Agreila was always available and offered invaluable advice as to where the more elusive documents could be found. His banter and command of many languages and general accommodating demeanour makes a visit to the reading room at the documentation room a pleasure. Gerald Prinsloo, the custodian of a wonderful collection of unpublished photographs, too was unstinting with his time. Ms M. Borain, who mans the library, is another example of the friendly and helpful manner that can be expected on a visit to the Documentation Centre. My fellow student and staff member at the Documentation Centre, Lt Evert Kleynhans kindly furnished me with titbits he had come across in his own research that were relevant to my topic. Our friendship has been forged in the flames of completing our Masters and I look forward to many years of studying together towards our next goal. I was indeed fortunate to meet Dr. Anne Samson at the Documentation Centre, who was also undertaking research. Since then, Anne has generously provided archival material pertinent to my topic whenever she comes across something that she believes will be of interest. The staffs at the South African National Archives in Pretoria, The Stellenbosch Uys Krige Archive and the National Archives of the United Kingdom were equally helpful.

Outside of the Documentation Centre I came across more individuals who were equally generous. Hamish Patterson of the Johannesburg War Museum was most helpful in allowing me extensive use of their Sidi Rezegh archive. Lt. Jacobus van Aarde helped me with translating certain texts from English into Afrikaans. Prof Deon Fourie, took time out of his busy schedule to offer invaluable insight and guidance. Prof Paul Harris of the Department of War Studies at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst sent me his only copy of a rare out of print book that he had authored. He did this, although I was a perfect stranger from a foreign country, fully trusting that I would return the book when I was finished. Needless to say, that I continued to take advantage of his generosity, and he has read a number of my articles, once again offering important insight and guidance. My gratitude goes to the commanding officer of the South African Irish Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel Marius Bennett who

made this opportunity possible and trusted in my ability to study at the Saldanha Military Academy and not shame the Regiment.

The Dean of the Military Academy at Saldanha, Prof Sam Tshehla believed in my commitment and generously opened the door to my academic pursuit making good the one force principle and affording me the same opportunity as my permanent force colleagues. Andries Fokkens, ensured my smooth yearly registration and tackled his administrative task with humour and with vigour beyond that demanded by his scope of work. Lieutenant Herman Warden, took care of all the administrative tasks during my residential visits.

Prof Andre Wessels of *The Journal of Contemporary History* afforded me the opportunity to publish a piece on Tobruk.¹⁷ Prof Abel Esterhuise took a keen interest in my article pertaining to South African Second World War Historiography for inclusion in *Scientia Militaria*.¹⁸ In June 2012 Prof Karen Harris of the Historical Association of South Africa approved my presentation paper on the Union War Histories Section as a historical source and in April 2014 Dr Simon Trew (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst) and Dr Marcus Faullam (Kings College) approved my presentation paper on South African War policy in 1944. The South African Military History Society are also to be thanked for providing me with an opportunity to present a paper on the fall of Tobruk in 1942.

It is with good reason that I availed myself of the opportunity to appoint two supervisors instead of one. Lieutenant-Colonel Deon Visser and Lieutenant-Colonel Ian van der Waag are the two finest military historians in South Africa. Together with Dr. Frankie Monama, the two professors guided me through a rigorous bridging program converting me from a chartered accountant into a military historian. There was little chance of completing my thesis without the many hours of mentoring via copious amounts of e-mails, telephone calls and face-to-face residential weeks that I looked forward to with keen anticipation. I have been privileged to be tutored and encouraged by these gentlemen. Colonel van der Waag ensured that my education was more than the production of a thesis. Through his untiring efforts, I was able to produce three published academic articles and three presentations, one of which was at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in April 2014. If ever the word “inspiration” was appropriate, then it certainly not out of place when mentioning Lt. Colonel van der Waag.

¹⁷ D. Katz, 'The Greatest military Reversal of South African Arms: The Fall of Tobruk 1942, an Avoidable Blunder or an Inevitable Disaster?', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 37(2) (2012), 71-104.

¹⁸ D.B. Katz, 'A Case of Arrested Development: The Historiography Relating to South Africa's Participation in the Second World War', *Scientia Militaria*, 40(3) (2012), 280-317.

My dear mother passed away before seeing me graduate. She was immensely proud of me and the fact that I had finally been put in a position to fulfil a lifelong dream. It is a dearest wish that she would have been with me and my family on occasion of my graduation. In honour of the memory of my late mother Miriam, I dedicate this work to her. It is a pleasing coincidence that my daughter Jacqueline Katz is a fellow Masters student at the Witwatersrand University. She too has encouraged me and I hope that when she has the time to read this thesis and perhaps show it to her children and grandchildren, she will come to know me better and gain an insight into some of my thoughts and reasoning.

My wife Adina, not only chose to encourage me to undertake a task that was all-consuming and onerous at times, but happily became part of the whole process. She endured my endless daily diatribes as I used her as a sounding board on issues that I had difficulty coming to grips with. Adina tirelessly proof read reams of my unedited work, corrected spelling, questioned my thinking, tested my logic, and even offered alternative explanations, as she too had inadvertently become familiar with the subject matter. I could not have asked for a better partner with the full knowledge that, without her I could never succeed, and with her, I have every chance to excel.

Chapter I

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE GEO-POLITICAL AND OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

South Africa on the declaration of the war on 6 September 1939, due to an ambiguous defence policy and financial stringency, found itself in possession of a military force poorly suited to the tasks now set for it by the new Prime Minister Jan Smuts.¹ In September 1939, the core of the two divisions eventually sent up to meet the Axis in the Western Desert, existed largely on paper. An indicator of the neglect members of the UDF suffered was the abandoning of physical training in 1923. It was not until General George Brink Director of Army Training at Defence Headquarters, released a report born out of his study tour to Europe, where he observed the strenuous physical training regime in Germany and other European armies, that physical training was partially reintroduced in 1937 and fully in 1939 a mere few months prior to the outbreak of the war.² The country went to war with a Permanent Force of 352 officers and 5033 other ranks together with an Active Citizen Force of 13490 members, largely untrained, unequipped, short of modern arms, and possessing mostly obsolete equipment.³

The military was not able to conduct anything more than a low-level internal security operation and adding to these woes, were deep-seated internal political divisions. These divisions militated against the formation of a military force capable of meeting the Axis on anything close to equal terms. South Africa was unique among the Allies in having an official opposition, not only totally opposed to the country's participation in the war, but also obstructive to the war effort through the press and subversive organisations. Afrikaners who joined the UDF were seen as traitors and reverses experienced by the Allies on the battlefield were often celebrated.⁴ That South Africa was able to eventually field two divisions in North Africa, and build a mighty war economy from extremely humble beginnings within the space of two years, was testament to the unbending determination of Jan Smuts and his supporters and their unmitigated enthusiasm for the British Empire.⁵ Despite this remarkable effort in building a war economy, the somewhat belated formation of the South African forces, riven

¹ The effect of Jan Smuts taking over the premiership of the government on the declaration of war actually resulted in a sudden change of policy, from one of vying for neutrality, to active participation in a European war and support of the Allies.

² C. Birkby, *Uncle George: The Boer Boyhood, Letters and Battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1987) (p. 71).

³ NAP, JSP, Box 132, f.66, *Brigadier-General J.J. Collyer on the Union Defence Force*, September 1939. See also H.J. Martin and N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War II- South Africa at War: Preparations and Operations on the Home Front, 1939/45* (CapeTown: Purnell, 1979), VII (p. 27).

⁴ E.G. Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1981) (p. 213).

⁵ A. Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17(4) (2006) (p. 525). The British held great store in Smuts as the Union leader being essential for good relations between the two countries and for the contribution that South Africa could make to the Allied cause.

with deep-seated political issues, went to reduce the Union Defence Force's (UDF) effective fighting power beyond the effects of poor military and tactical skill. When the South Africans met more formidable foes than the Italians they first encountered in East Africa, these deficiencies were exposed.

Despite a somewhat hesitant and reluctant beginning, South Africa became an integral component in the Empire's war effort against the Axis powers, assuming the important strategic role of supporting the efforts to evict the Axis forces first from East Africa and then later from North Africa. South Africa was also the only industrialised power on the African continent, achieving self-sufficiency in feeding its population and in equipping its army. South Africa also occupied a strategic position in being able to safeguard the empire's trade routes to the Middle East and Asia. The fact that South Africa was a dominion different to the other dominions, in its political and racial makeup and its less than enthusiastic support of the Empire, did nothing to diminish the crucial role it played in defending the Empire.⁶

South Africa became progressively more independent from the United Kingdom during the inter-war years. The declaration of war went against an increasingly strong tendency towards neutrality that had developed ever since the National Party under Hertzog assumed power in 1924. Smuts and his followers believed South Africa's security and expansionist aims were best fulfilled by loyalty to the United Kingdom and remaining within the Empire. The Afrikaner nationalists, who held the reins of power from 1924 believed in an independent South Africa that would remain neutral in the event of a European war. In a close run battle between the Smuts and the nationalists, Smuts prevailed, and South Africa joined the Empire in the Second World War.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the political, geographic and strategic considerations of the theatre of battle, as far as they affected the performance and fighting power of the Union Defence force. A background will be given to South Africa and the Union Defence Force in particular and the United Kingdom and the other Commonwealth forces in general, so as to highlight the way that the nation's doctrine, logistics, generalship, force structure, preparedness, equipment and political position affected the battle. Special consideration will be given to the Union Defence Force by examining South Africa's entry into the war, the East African campaign, an assessment of South Africa's force capability, South Africa's Relationship with the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth as well as the political Situation on the Home Front.

⁶ NAP, JSP, Box 95-1, f.6, Smuts to Churchill, *Empire Defence in New Situation after France collapse and Strategic Role in Africa*, 22 June 1940. See also NAP, JSP, Box 95-1, f.7, Churchill to Smuts, *British Defence Priorities*, 27 June 1940.

1.1 South Africa's Strategic Role in the Empire

South Africa and Great Britain enjoyed an uneasy relationship, emerging out of the carnage of the South African War of 1899-1902. A growing Afrikaner nationalist movement increasingly challenged relations thereafter. Afrikaners had sought to escape from a heavy handed British government with its unacceptable racial policies that contradicted, "proper relations between master and servant" ever since the Great Trek in 1838.⁷ Jan Smuts himself, summed up how British rule was perceived by Afrikaners "... As a perfidious record of duplicity and fraud, violence and vacillation, by an alien, remote, and, in its 'native policy', quite possibly hypocritical...".⁸ Jan Smuts would move on to eventually champion South Africa's relationship with Britain, becoming with Churchill, a leading proponent of the concept of a commonwealth of nations, while many Afrikaners maintained a deep distrust of the British and yearned for independence.⁹

Great Britain's interest in South Africa was firstly one of geography. That the British found themselves there in the first place was due to its geographic positioning, which intercepted major global sea routes commanding access to the Atlantic and Indian oceans. South Africa's positioning on the tip of the continent and its relatively advanced communications structure, made it a vital support base for military and economic operations into the rest of southern Africa. Her geographical positioning would make her an essential link in the British Empire's defensive structure. South Africa's importance in this regard bore direct correlation to technological advances in the military sphere, especially regarding capability advancements in the range and payload of airplanes and lethality of U-boats. To counteract threats to Imperial shipping routes running past the southern tip of Africa, the British maintained a naval base at Simonstown.¹⁰

Britain's second area of interest was economic, initially residing in South Africa's rich mineral wealth. Britain committed itself to a large and destructive war in South Africa in 1899 in order to secure the Transvaal minefields for the Empire.¹¹ Beside South Africa's abundance in mineral wealth, her burgeoning industrial base began to take root in the early 20th century, making her the sole industrial power on the continent at the outbreak of the Second World War. Resulting from many years of British investment, South Africa was home to millions of pounds of British assets.¹² Being many miles away

⁷ R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) (p. 1).

⁸ Hyam, *The Lion and the Springbok* (p. 2).

⁹ H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003) (p. 361). There was little space between advancing Afrikaner nationalism and retreating British Imperialism.

¹⁰ A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006) (p. 240).

¹¹ B. Nasson, *South Africa at War 1939-1945* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2012) (p. 21).

¹² Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 239).

from the European battlefields, South Africa enjoyed an economy that would remain unmolested by the ravages of war, enabling it to become an important producer of much needed foodstuffs and war material, for its own use, and that of the Empire.¹³ Britain and South Africa were important trading partners, with South Africa sending large quantities of foodstuffs and minerals besides gold to Britain, and in return receiving technology and manufactured goods.

Britain and South Africa enjoyed strong cultural links, with almost 50% of the white South African population were English-speaking and of British descent. A large proportion of these English-speaking South Africans considered themselves British, strong supporters of the concept of Empire and more than willing to take up arms in its defence. English-speaking South Africans dominated the economy in most areas and enjoyed considerable influence over the military, government policy, and culture of South Africa.¹⁴ Where South Africa differed from the other dominions was in its political and demographic make-up. Of a population of 11 million 25% were of European origin of which less than half were English-speaking, unlike Australia and New Zealand where 90% of the population was of British descent. Thus in South Africa the British connection was indeed very tenuous relying on a very small minority who felt some connection to the motherland.¹⁵

Hertzog's election in 1924 ushered in a new dimension into Anglo-South African relations. The British found Hertzog's nationalist leanings, lack of finesse, and generally unpleasant modus operandi to be distasteful. Britain met South Africa's move toward Afrikaner nationalism with distrust, forcing them to seek to protect black interests from this new wave of republicanism.¹⁶ Captain Bede Clifford, imperial secretary to the South African high commission from 1924 to 1931 saw blacks as "...one of our biggest allies in the country." He believed that everything possible should be done to retain their loyalty and confidence, "as a buffer against the process of secession by attrition which is going on now."¹⁷

The 1926 Imperial Conference resulting in the Balfour Declaration, repositioned the dominions together with the United Kingdom as autonomous communities within the British Empire, united by common allegiance to the Crown, but freely associated and equal in status to one another in all matters domestic and external. The Balfour Declaration was given effect by the Statute of Westminster in 1931.

¹³ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 141). South African armoured cars were exported as far afield as Singapore.

¹⁴ Hyam, *The Lion and the Springbok* (p. 14).

¹⁵ C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 1970) (p. 5). In Quebec, there was massive opposition to a war in defence of the British Empire. Resentment was still fierce against Ottawa's imposition of conscription in World War One, which had led to massive demonstrations, pitched battles with police, and widespread acts of resistance across Quebec. The Canadian government, headed by Mackenzie King, secured Parliament's adoption of a declaration of war on September 8, 1939, through a promise not to conscript men for overseas service.

¹⁶ Britain's concern for black interests was not completely altruistic, but rather more of a political expediency to counterbalance the threat of Afrikaner nationalism.

¹⁷ Hyam, *The Lion and the Springbok* (p. 112).

British world power was largely dependent on the economic resources, manpower reserves and political fidelity of the dominions, while commerce, migration, and common ideals kept the dominions bound to Britain.¹⁸ The conference effectively placed Great Britain and the dominions on an equal footing, within the empire, with each dominium having independent control over its foreign policy especially in the event of war. Britain could no longer expect of her dominions an automatic declaration of war in sympathy with herself, and indeed the expectation was that Canada and South Africa would remain neutral in any future European war.¹⁹ The Canadians were extremely cautious and adopted a policy of "no commitments", to protect the unity of a seriously divided country. In 1936 Mr. W. L. Mackenzie King, prime minister of Canada, declared in Parliament, "Our country is being drawn into international situations to a degree that I myself think is alarming."²⁰

In purely military terms, South Africa's participation in the First and Second World Wars was of significant benefit to the British war effort. In the First World War, Germany's serious threat to British lines of communication in Africa were neutralised when South Africa invaded German South-West Africa and formed the major component of the military contingent sent to German East Africa. South Africa benefited from this relationship by administering the much coveted German South West Africa, making it effectively a fifth province although it was never formally incorporated. South Africa sought to benefit further from the Imperial relationship through the acquisition of the British High Commission territories, building on Smuts' vision of a Greater South Africa that extended to most of southern Africa.²¹ South Africa played a crucial role in the Second World War in evicting the Italians from East Africa and in helping the British to overcome the peril of the *Deutches Afrika Korps* in North Africa. At sea the German presence in southern African waters posed a threat to allied trade and sea communication in the form of enemy raiders and minelayers in both world wars,²² and Britain looked to South Africa to assist in neutralising this threat.

¹⁸ A. Stewart, *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2008) (p. 9).

¹⁹ O. Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (Cape town: Howard Timmins, 1958) (p. 109). Up to the signing of the Versailles treaty in 1919 it was generally accepted that the Dominions, despite enjoying self-government, were subordinate to Great Britain and had little say in matters affecting foreign policy. Hertzog was at the forefront in acquiring equal status for South Africa within the Empire and control over its foreign policy.

²⁰ C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 1970) (p. 2).

²¹ J.C. Smuts, *Greater South Africa: Plans for a Better World*, ed. by E.B. Robertson, T.C. Dawson (Johannesburg: Truth Legion, 1940) (p. 19). "... the time is coming when it will be almost a misnomer to speak of "South" Africa, because the northern limits of our civilisation will have gone so far that it will be almost impossible to use the "South" any more except in reminder of our original starting-point."

²² I. van der Waag, "The Thin Edge of the Wedge': Anglo-South African Relations, Dominion Nationalism and the Formation of a Seaward Defence Force in 1939-1940', *Contemporary British History*, 24: 4 (2010) (p. 434).

At the outbreak of the Second World War South Africa's role was limited and most valuable in providing moral support to the British war effort and presenting a united front rather than any significant military contribution. These humble beginnings were to change dramatically when South Africa's strategic importance was significantly upgraded, once France had surrendered to Germany and effectively became a minor Axis ally and Italy had entered the war in June 1940. Great Britain had counted on France as an essential military partner not only in Europe but also in Africa. Britain did not envisage, by any stretch of the imagination, fighting a war against Germany or Italy without the aid of the substantial French military.²³ The sudden demise of France and her substantial military power, placed Great Britain in a precarious position creating a great lacuna in her defence policy, rendering the British increasingly reliant on the considerable resources in the form of economic, manpower and military support from the dominions. The fall of France together with Italy entering the war, immediately placed British colonies in East Africa and its presence in North Africa in a precarious position by exposing a large proportion of the African Empire to the significantly larger Italian and Vichy French colonial forces.²⁴

The fall of France had an immediate effect on South Africa besides placing it in a strategically important position. The Union that had been largely dependent on Britain for her military needs, would now have to become self-sufficient as Britain had to reequip her devastated army evacuated from Dunkirk. South Africa not only achieved self-sufficiency militarily but was able to become an important producer of arms and munitions for the Allies.²⁵ Churchill often took Jan Smuts into his confidence, unlike his treatment of the other dominion leaders. Smuts became politically indispensable to Britain, being a great supporter and friend to Winston Churchill and somewhat of a military expert, becoming a Field Marshal in the British Army, and sharing a common belief in the concept of Empire. The dominions took on a fundamental role in Britain's survival once France had fallen, and the mythical image of a courageous Britain facing the might of the rampant Axis powers alone was very far from the truth, the Empire having access to massive manpower and economic resources. (See Figure 1A and Figure 1B)

²³ NAP, JSP, Box 95-1, f.6, Smuts to Churchill, *Empire Defence in New Situation after France collapse and Strategic Role in Africa*, 22 June 1940. See also NAP, JSP, Box 95-1, f.7, Churchill to Smuts, *British Defence Priorities*, 27 June 1940. and I.S.O. Playfair, *History of the Second World War: Mediterranean and the Middle East*, ed. by J.R.M. Butler (Uckfield: Naval and Military Press, 2004), I (p. 127).

²⁴ Playfair, *History of the Second World War: Mediterranean...*, I (pp. 166,168). The British were hopelessly outnumbered by the Italians in terms of manpower and fighting equipment in North and East Africa. Although mere numbers were not the only factor in determining fighting power, there was no reason for the British to feel complacent.

²⁵ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (pp. 84, 94,95).



Figure 1A A David Low cartoon published in the *Evening Standard* depicting a defiant Britain facing the might of the Axis alone. This was a situation far from the truth, with Britain backed by the millions of people and vast resources of the Empire including South Africa.²⁶

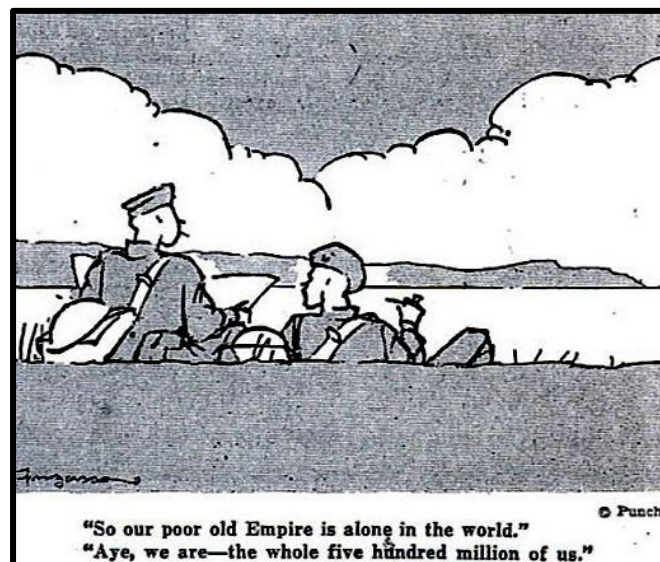


Figure 1B Fougasse cartoon in *Punch* magazine on 17 July – This was perhaps a better reflection of the true situation.²⁷

The strategic threats to the British Empire and the threats facing South Africa did not necessarily coincide, although when it came to Africa and South Africa's interest in a greater South Africa, there was a close strategic congruency. South Africans in general regarded East Africa and especially Kenya as being in their backyard. Jan Smuts amongst others had great imperial designs of

²⁶ David Low, 'Guardian Unlimited', in *David Low Cartoon Exhibition* <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/pictures/image/0,8543,-10904410005,00.html>> [accessed 10 March 2013]

²⁷ 'Euroreferendum.com' <<http://euroreferendum.blogspot.com/2011/12/it-must-be-true.html>> [accessed 10 March 2013]

incorporating much of East Africa into a greater South African State.²⁸ When war was declared, Smuts sought once again to revive his expansionist policy in Africa²⁹, and with embarrassing alacrity, tried unsuccessfully to acquire the territory Swaziland from the British.³⁰ At the heart of British-South African relations, lay the general expansionist aims of the various South African governments who coveted the British High Commission Territories, and other territories further to the north.³¹ The British in turn were reluctant to feed these expansionist aims and turn over the High Commission Territories due mainly to the blatant racist attitude of the successive South African governments and Afrikaner nationalist aspirations for an independent South Africa. This denial of expansionist aims was a major cause of political conflict between South Africa and Britain in the run up to the Second World War.³²

After the First World War South Africa faced three potential military threats that posed a challenge to her integrity. Some aspects of these threats, which had existed since before the First World War, had considerably receded due to South Africa's seizing of German South West Africa and Germany's eviction from her African colonies. The first threat that of a seaborne invasion, was hardly credible in the light of the British control of the Southern Oceans and the absence of another sea-power to challenge the British in this part of the world. The second threat of a landward invasion was no less remote and with the exception of Portugal, no European power controlled colonies in close proximity to South Africa. The strong relationship enjoyed by Britain and Portugal demonstrated by the oldest alliance in the world dating back to 1373 ensured that a threat to South Africa from this direction through the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique were highly unlikely.³³

²⁸ Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (p. 203). Hertzog was no less anxious than Smuts to incorporate the three protectorates of Swaziland, Basutoland, and Bechuanaland into the Union.

²⁹ NAP, JSP, Box 95-1, f.153, *Policy Towards Portugal and Portuguese Possessions*, 7 December 1940.

³⁰ A Eden, 'Union Defence Requirements' (Memorandum Eden, TNA, DO 35-1003/WG3/4/11/2, 23 October 1939) and Hyam, *The Lion and the Springbok* (p. 28). Smuts tried to take advantage of Britain's preoccupation with the war, to secure the transfer of Swaziland in order to strengthen his hand against the Afrikaner nationalists. See also TNA, CAB, Series 116-7, f.110, *High Commissioner on Denys Reitz Request for transfer of High Commission Territories*, 12 October 1939. and TNA, CAB, Series 116-7, f.113, *Reaction to Smuts' Request for transfer of High Commission Territories*, 18 October 1939. and TNA, CAB, Series 116-7, f.114, *Extract of Discussion Eden - Denys Reitz High Commission Territories*, 23 October 1939.

³¹ Hyam, *The Lion and the Springbok* (p. 102). Smuts sought to form a united state stretching possibly to the equator, including South-West Africa and southern Mozambique. Pretoria would be the true geographical capital of the greater South Africa. Smuts saw this expansion as part of an Imperial plan, whereas Hertzog and most Nationalists shared the same objectives more as an Afrikaner right. Therefore the differences lay in their motives and not their objectives.

³² Hyam, *The Lion and the Springbok* (p. 32). "... Every Prime Minister from Botha in 1911 to Vervoerd In 1961 pestered Britain for the transfer of the High Commission Territories".

³³ W. Churchill, 'Agreement with Portugal', Hansard, vol 392 cc716 (1943) <<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/oct/12/agreement-with-portugal>> [accessed 7 July 2013]. Despite Portugal's long alliance with the United Kingdom and the unlikelihood of Portugal posing a threat to South Africa, in 1935 the Chief of General Staff van Ryneveld seemed to think that Portugal would launch an invasion of the Union through Lourenco Marques with a modern expeditionary force. Birkby, *Uncle George* (p. 95).

The European power that posed the greatest threat to South Africa was Italy with her colonial possessions of Abyssinia and Somalia. South Africa found rare political unity around the issue of Italy and the mischief she had caused by invading and conquering Abyssinia in 1935. South Africa was one of the louder voices calling for hard hitting sanctions against Italy in the wake of her aggressive grab for Abyssinia, and while ambivalent in supporting the United Kingdom against Germany, took a much harsher view regarding Italy and its threat to peace.³⁴ The Italian air force had the capability to reach targets in the north of South Africa with some of its long-range bombers magnifying South Africa's insecurity in this regard.³⁵ The poor to non-existent infrastructure north of South Africa's border lent little to support a major landward invasion giving further impetus to those that made light of this possible threat.

It is the third threat, that of internal unrest, which was perceived as the major threat to South African stability and which dominated and shaped the preparation of the South African military between the two world wars. The threat came from both black and white disaffected communities, and if combined with an invasion from an enemy, had the potential of posing a serious challenge to the UDF.³⁶

Beside these direct threats to the security of South Africa, segments of the population mainly from the English-speaking community, foresaw a role for the Union Defence Force beyond that of merely policing South Africa's borders and countering internal uprisings. These parties envisaged that South Africa could deploy beyond its borders in Africa together with commonwealth forces to meet a European enemy threatening the Empire. This possibility was introduced in the 1912 defence bill that underlined the importance of defence as being an imperial matter. The interwar period was dominated by forces that moved for the greater independence of South Africa and sought to ease ties with Britain

³⁴ *The Cambridge History of Africa 1905-1940*, ed. by J.D. Fage and R A Oliver (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), VII (p. 597). Smuts was determined that letting 'Italy getting away with it', would lead to a continental war within 3 years. *Selections From the Smuts Papers December 1934 - August 1945*, ed. by J. van der Poel (London: Cambridge University, 1973), VI (p. 34).

³⁵ Nasson, *South Africa at War...* (pp. 70,71). There was also a considerable submarine threat posed by the Italian navy operating from East Africa. Oswald Pirow was concerned with Italian bomber aircraft whose speed out performed fighters of the South African Air Force. Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 9).

³⁶ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 10). Sir Pierre van Ryneveld the UDF Chief of the General Staff reiterated in 1936 that all thinking, plans, organization, equipment, and training must be directed towards the highest possible efficiency in a campaign in tropical bush country. This policy he issued in the absence of a clear directive from government and DOCD, DGI Group, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, *Defence Policy of the Union*.

and those that felt an obligation to Britain and an imperial duty, desirous to remain 'faithful to the vision' of a united and a free South Africa within the Commonwealth.³⁷

1.2. The Union Defence Force in the Interwar Period and Its Preparations for War

South Africa's effort in the First World War involved more than a quarter of a million South Africans serving on the different fronts amounting to 10% of the total white population. The 1914 Rebellion that split the nation after all the tentative steps towards conciliation combined with the horrors of trench warfare, conspired to unite most South African politicians in ensuring that military support of the Empire would be confined to the continent of Africa. After the war, Major General J.J. Collyer, Chief of the General Staff in 1920, and much of the general staff, did not foresee the eventuality of South Africans fighting in the European theatre again.³⁸ The UDF geared itself for a possible conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, and an indicator of its intent to steer clear of a European conflict can be found in the didactic official history of the conflict in East Africa published by Collyer in 1939. His work highlighted the disadvantages of mechanization and almost dismissed the role of the tank and airplane in any future sub-Saharan war.³⁹ The identified threat facing the UDF was that of internal unrest, which took the form of sporadic black uprisings, and industrial action for which there was no need of a sophisticated mechanized army.

The 1921 Imperial Conference gave the question of Imperial defence high priority and sought yet again to install an Imperial Defence Council unsuccessfully and to standardise establishments, equipment, military thought and intelligence. The South Africans were unable to maintain the quotas for training courses in the United Kingdom due to the inability to pass physical and literacy tests. Two future generals that were able to take advantage of these training programs were Lieutenant General George Brink who was to command the 1st Division at Sidi Rezegh and Major General Dan Pienaar who commanded the 2nd Brigade under Brink in the same battle.⁴⁰ Brink attended a staff course at Camberley in 1920, having as his chief instructor, Brigadier-General John Dill, and classmates the future field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein and Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Conner. Brink considered that Camberley had been of estimable value to him, and there is no doubt that had more

³⁷ I. van der Waag, 'The Thin Edge of the Wedge': Anglo-South African Relations, Dominion Nationalism and the Formation of a Seaward Defence Force in 1939-1940', *Contemporary British History*, 24: 4 (2010) (p. 429).

³⁸ I. van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940', *Scientia Militaria*, 30(2) (2000) (p. 186).

³⁹ J.J. Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa 1916* (London: Imperial War Museum and Battery Press, 2004) (p. xv).

⁴⁰ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (pp. 192,193).

South Africans been availed of the opportunity, their knowledge would have been put to good use in East and North Africa during the Second World War.⁴¹

The lack of general staff training negatively influenced the UDF's fighting power, an early practical example being the campaign in East Africa where South African forces initially struggled to coordinate their attacks effectively on enemy objectives. Staff training in the German Armed Forces was of the highest priority and most of their early victories can be attributed to the excellent staff work enjoyed by the German army.⁴²

The Imperial Conference had tasked South Africa with the entire defence of the Union, and the suppression of any 'native insurrections' in the Portuguese colonies, Matebeleland, Mashonaland and in the High Commission territories of southern and central Africa - Swaziland, Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Barotseland. This was to be accomplished despite the lack of an Intelligence arm (subsequently re-established in 1923), the lack of decent maps, non-existence of brigade headquarters and a defence force that had dwindled in numbers from its peak in World War One of 254 666 to 39 667.⁴³

After Smuts lost the election in 1924, the National Party in coalition with the Labour Party came to power under the new Prime Minister General J.B.M. Hertzog. The Pact government followed by the Fusion government in 1934, ensured that the next fifteen years up to the outbreak of the war were relatively calm with little or no industrial or black unrest.⁴⁴ Under the National Party the UDF was designed to protect South Africa's neutrality. At the 1926 Imperial Conference Colonel F.H.P. Cresswell, the new Minister of Defence, plainly stated South Africa's role in Imperial defence.⁴⁵ The UDF was structured to defend South Africa in any part of southern Africa. Provision was not made for deployment outside southern Africa, and no South African citizen other than a volunteer would be sent to aid the Empire. In the event of South Africa's involvement in a war outside the Union special units would be recruited and trained intensively prior to deployment as had been the case in 1914.⁴⁶ The policy of restricting the South African Permanent and Citizen Force to internal duties and a volunteer force for duties outside of the Union ensured that the different equipment requirements for the two

⁴¹ Birkby, *Uncle George* (pp. 65,66).

⁴² W. Goerlitz, *The German General Staff 1657-1945* (New York: Praeger, 1959) (p. 127). General von Seeckt described the task of the General Staff as not being to produce geniuses but to concentrate on the training of ordinary men who could display efficiency and common sense. The German General Staff sought to create a core of leaders were able to ascribe to a common set of principles of operational thought.

⁴³ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (pp. 192,193). (p. 199).

⁴⁴ Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (p. 180).

⁴⁵ J. Ellis, 'Oswald Pirow's Five Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939', *Scientia Militaria*, 30(2) (2000) (p. 222). The prevention and suppression of internal unrest was the priority of the Union Defence Policy formulated in 1926.

⁴⁶ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (pp. 192,193). (p. 203).

types of force caused a long-term lack of modern equipment and consequently a hiatus in training with modern equipment.

Adding to the general political lethargy towards the UDF, the great depression played a further role in decimating the UDF when 49 Active Citizen Force units and a multitude of Defence Rifle Associations were closed down. Between July 1930 and June 1934 all continuous training for the Citizen Force ceased.⁴⁷ These rationalisations of manpower were accompanied by drastic cuts in defence expenditure which precluded the acquisition of even basic equipment let alone much needed modern weapon systems and had a negative impact on training.⁴⁸ It was only in 1934 that a significant increase was voted in the defence budget and the dire situation began to reverse.⁴⁹

In 1934 the Fusion government of Hertzog and Smuts appointed Oswald Pirow, a pro-German son of German immigrants, as the Minister of Defence, an appointment that aided and abetted South Africa's rather lackadaisical military posture.⁵⁰ Indicators of his pro-Nazi fascist leanings included a visit to General Franco's Headquarters during the Spanish Civil War and a later confidential meeting with Hitler who he declared was "perhaps the greatest man of the last thousand years."⁵¹ (See Figure 3) The attitude prevalent in the highest echelons of the UDF was infamously manifest in the procurement of bush-carts drawn by Malgache oxen. (See Figure 2) This anachronism was at the behest Pirow, who supposedly relied on the advice of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and no less a figure than General von Lettow-Vorbeck, the legendary master of bush-warfare.⁵² The proposed expansion of the UDF took the form of a five-year plan propounded by Pirow, which envisaged among other things, an air force of three squadrons, a reserve of 100,000 men, and a mechanised battalion.⁵³ It was also

⁴⁷ A.C. Lillie, 'The Origin and Development of the South African Army', *Scientia Militaria*, 12(2) (1982) (p. 13).

⁴⁸ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (pp. 192,193). (p. 204).

⁴⁹ Lillie, 'The Origin and Development ...' (p. 13).

⁵⁰ According to Brian Bunting, "Pirow's daughter Else caused some consternation on her arrival in England on 6 June 1939, when she was interviewed by the Daily Express: '... my father was a boy in Germany, my grandparents on both sides are German. I have heaps of relatives there. At home we speak German . . . though I have never been there I feel Germany is "home".' Miss Pirow was on her way to train in a German women's camp. 'I am going to try my best to be a good German - for a year at least,' she said." B. Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (London: Penguin Books, 1969) (p. 57).

⁵¹ J. Crwys-Williams, *A Country at War 1939-1945: The Mood of a Nation* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992) (p. xix).

⁵² van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (pp. 192,193). (p. 186). The issue of the infamous bush carts receives kinder treatment by G. Bentz who offers up two reasons for procuring the bush cart as a question of reliability in a country lacking infrastructure for a mechanized war and economic necessity in a country recovering from the depression. G. Bentz, 'From El Wak to Sidi Rezegh: The Union Defence Force's First Experience of Battle in East and North Africa, 1940-1941', *Scientia Militaria*, 40(3) (2012) (p. 181). Simpson is scathing in his attack on Bush cart episode calling it a product of some non-military brain. He cites the first trial of the Bush cart on manoeuvres where the oxen strayed during the night, the native drivers themselves being lost in any endeavour to find the oxen. "They reduced the whole Army the pace of an ox." J.S.M. Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1941) (p. 62). and DOCD, DGTS Group, Box 35, File 5/20, *Reports on Exercise with Bush Cart*.

⁵³ Lillie, 'The Origin and Development ...' (p. 15).

proposed that a census be undertaken to determine which armaments could be produced locally.⁵⁴ The formulation of this five-year plan unfortunately did not translate into any meaningful procurement of modern equipment due to the reluctance of the government to procure arms before the declaration of war, in an exercise to avoid obsolescence.⁵⁵ When war was declared, the Allies had few armaments to spare for South Africa, after equipping their own forces. The situation was exacerbated after France's defeat in 1940 with the evacuation of the British forces at Dunkirk leaving behind a considerable proportion of their transport and heavy equipment.⁵⁶



Figure 2 The Oswald Pirow Bush Cart favoured by Pirow and the General Staff to meet the difficult terrain features of a sub-Saharan campaign.⁵⁷



Figure 3 November 1938: Pirow in Berlin with soldiers from the Luftwaffe, to his left Wilhelm Canaris, to his right Ernst Seifert.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (p. 59).

⁵⁵ Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (p. 60).

⁵⁶ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (pp. 48,49).

⁵⁷ 'Pirow Bush Cart', in SA Navy Museum Simon's Town <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/dvdmerwe/5991743884/in/set-72157627317108244>> [accessed 15 March 2013]

The expansion of the UDF did not include the formation of an expeditionary force and Pirow remained adamant that under no circumstances would the UDF be available for service outside of Africa. Pirow was also not prepared to commit the UDF in advance, refusing to bind South Africa in any war that was not directly in her interests.⁵⁹ Although representing a concession by the government, in moving the wartime frontier beyond South Africa's borders, it did not result in the formation of an expeditionary force. The government policy towards defence at this time favoured an expansion of the UDF for the purposes of her own defence and not that of the British Empire.⁶⁰

Contrary to Smuts, who believed South Africa's first line of defence lay outside the country, elements within the government and especially the opposition parties felt that the main role of the UDF was to protect South Africa's neutrality.⁶¹ The Chief of General Staff, Van Ryneveld, was concerned about the possibility of an invasion by the black masses to the north of the Union, expressing his apprehension about what he referred to as the policies of France, Belgium and Portugal to arm blacks in their colonies in an attempt to strengthen their own military capabilities in Africa. The most sensible way of protecting South Africa from this scenario, was to assist Britain in North Africa, in the event of a European war where a European power to open an additional front in southern Africa.⁶²

The UDF, up to the outbreak of the Second World War, in accordance with the policies of the Fusion government, was built around the premise that in the event of a European conflict, South Africa would remain neutral. This would certainly be the case should the United Kingdom initiate a declaration of war, however South Africa would come to their aid if the Axis were to declare war. It seems that Jan Smuts supported this view prior to the Munich crisis in 1938 and it is only after these events that Smuts changed his mind and saw the Axis as a threat to world peace.⁶³ Therefore, the role

⁵⁸ Wikipedia, 'Oswald Pirow', in *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_Pirow> [accessed 6 January 2013]

⁵⁹ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (p. 210).

⁶⁰ Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair' (p. 518). South Africa's re-examination of defence policy was more due concerns at Italy's bellicosity in invading Abyssinia than with any desire to coordinate defence policy with the United Kingdom.

⁶¹ It is interesting to note that on one issue there seemed to be general consensus and that was the feeling that Italy posed a major threat to South African interest in Africa. South Africa was at the forefront in pressing for sanctions against Italy in 1936 on the occasion of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Hertzog is quoted as saying, "I contend that never before in the last 50 years have we become faced with such a menace to the freedom of Africa." Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (pp. 67,68).

⁶² Ellis, 'Oswald Pirow's Five Year Plan...' (p. 225).

⁶³ The eventual rejection of neutrality by Smuts on the eve of the war was seen as a betrayal by Hertzog and a breach of a cabinet agreement dated 1 September 1938. A general policy of neutrality was denied by Smuts on 1 April 1940 in a house debate, in which he said any agreement reached, pertained to the Czechoslovakian situation in 1938 and had no bearing on the situation in 1 September 1939, when Germany had invaded Poland. *Selections From the Smuts Papers December 1934 - August 1945*, ed. by J. van der Poel (London: Cambridge University, 1973), VI (pp. 190,191).

envisaged for the UDF by the Fusion government was that of protecting South Africa against internal threats and other threats emanating within Southern Africa.⁶⁴

Post 1924 governments considered sub-Saharan Africa as being within the area that South Africa was prepared to defend and the only theatre outside of South Africa which the government would be prepared to send South African troops. There was also a reluctance by South African politicians to subject their citizens to the “horror” of trench warfare as experienced by 30 000 South African troops in World War One.⁶⁵ This limited role envisaged for the UDF also shaped the extent to which it was modernized and mechanized in accordance with developments in Europe. Poor infrastructure, inaccessible terrain and budgetary constraints, together with the nature of a potential enemy precluded the development of a modern mechanized army despite South Africa possessing the industrial capacity to do so.⁶⁶ In addition to the limited role envisaged that South Africa would be required to play in the event of a European war, the severe worldwide economic crisis caused by the economic depression of the 1930's ensured that military expenditure was low down in the list of priorities.⁶⁷

1.3. South Africa's Political Situation on the Home Front and Her Entry into the War

South Africa's entry into the war was not greeted with uniform enthusiasm by the politically and racially segregated segments of society. The internecine conflict between Nationalist Afrikaner and those mainly English-speaking South Africans, who supported the Empire, had been buried in the inter-war period and a coalition government of the opposing sides had busied itself with building a South African nation and forgetting the past.⁶⁸

The war had once again rent open the old animosities in a large section of the white population.⁶⁹ In the first instance, those who had political power fractured almost immediately along

⁶⁴ Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 20). According to Jackson it is doubtful that the dominions would have gone to war over Czechoslovakia in 1938. Therefore at that date South Africa was not alone in its reluctance to join a European war. With the exception of South Africa and Canada who remained noncommittal, in the period after the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, the dominions had concluded that Germany posed a threat to world peace and the Empire and were quite prepared to throw their lot in with Britain.

⁶⁵ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (p. 184).

⁶⁶ van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force ...' (p. 183).

⁶⁷ O. Pirow, 'Oswald Pirow's Five Year ...' (p. 226).

⁶⁸ Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (p. 180). Pirow describes the period 1933 to 1939 as the “... happiest time South Africa has experienced since Union.”

⁶⁹ A significant proportion of the Afrikaner nationalist movement was influenced by Nazi ideology that opposed similar adversaries to that of the Afrikaners being amongst others, the British Empire, Jews, and capitalism. Radical right ideas appealed to the Afrikaner nationalists such as Oswald Pirow, and JBM Hertzog. Support for Nazi Germany was at its strongest in the early parts of the war and waned with the

language lines when deciding to remain neutral or go to war.⁷⁰ In the main, English-speaking white South Africans saw it as their duty to support Britain and the Empire wholeheartedly in its hour of need while a significant portion of Afrikaners were indifferent or opposed to entering the war.⁷¹

The divisions in white society that had been the cause of an ambiguous defence policy in the preceding decades, was now to play out in the house parliament. Hertzog had for a long time prior to the war taken the stance that South Africa would only participate in a European war if its interests were at stake.⁷² Now that war had arrived, Hertzog and a significant portion of the South African population did not consider the invasion of Poland by Germany nor the steady rise in Axis power and bellicosity, to be a direct threat to South Africa.⁷³ This sector of the population viewed Germany's actions as an attempt to right the injustices imposed on Germany by the Versailles treaty.⁷⁴ Hertzog saw no difference between the situation now and that of the Munich crisis of 1938 where South Africa signalled its intention to remain neutral, and based on this he expected his cabinet to adopt the same position.⁷⁵ The British security guarantee to Poland was offered without genuine consultation with the Dominions, causing deep unhappiness amongst them.⁷⁶ At a cabinet meeting on 2 September 1939 it was obvious that the issue of neutrality had divided the government, and Hertzog had no option but to

decreasing fortunes of the Third Reich. S. Dubow, 'Introduction', in *South Africa's 1940's: World of Possibilities.*, ed. by A. Jeeves S. Dubow (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005) (pp. 5,6). Bill Nasson describes it thus, "a large portion of the dominant white minority was vigorously anti-war." The anti-war lobby was made up of those who were pacifist, those who were anti-British and those who were pro-German. Nasson, *South Africa at War...* (p. 15).

⁷⁰ TNA, DO, Class 35, P1003, File WG/3/4/1, *Union Cooperation - Entry of Union into the War*, 12 September 1939. Hertzog has evolved a policy of "compromise neutrality" in which he planned to keep the Union out of the war and subject to the discharge of South Africa's obligations regarding Simonstown.

⁷¹ D. Visser, 'Anglo-South African Relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939', *Scientia Militaria*, 35(1) (2007), 68-98. Visser, in his article, highlights the political divisions in South African society over participation in a 'British' war using the *Erebus Scheme* as a lens with which to examine differing South African attitudes towards the war, and South Africa's fragile relationship with United Kingdom and Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (p. 12). Simpson refers to two groups of Afrikaners other than those supporting the United Kingdom as isolationists and republicans.

⁷² Stewart, *Empire Lost* (p. 22). Hertzog had stated his position clearly and publicly at the 1937 Imperial Conference where he rejected his country's involvement in any future European war.

⁷³ Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair' (p. 517). Stewart puts it less kindly, stating that, "...many within the large Nationalist Afrikaans speaking community, of which the country leader General J.B.M. Hertzog was one of the more moderate members, held sympathy for Germany and its actions in Europe."

⁷⁴ TNA, DO, Class 35, P1003, File WG/3/4/1, *Union Cooperation - Entry of Union into the War*, 12 September 1939. and W.K. Hancock, *Smuts: The Sanguine Years 1870 - 1919* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962) (p. 510). Smuts himself had urged moderation in the terms imposed on Germany in 1919 and predicted that, "... and Europe will know no peace hereafter. And in the coming storms these new States will be the first to go under."

⁷⁵ D.W. Kruger, *The Making of a Nation* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1977) (pp. 195,196).

⁷⁶ Stewart, *Empire Lost* (p. 19). Jan Smuts who was the deputy prime minister at the time was one of the Dominion leaders who were deeply unhappy with Britain's unilateral issue of a guarantee to Poland.

place the matter before parliament on 4 September so that the elected representatives could decide between neutrality and joining the war as proposed by Smuts.⁷⁷

Hertzog, committing a tactical error, attempted to justify Hitler's actions in making his case for neutrality. This immediately opened him up to the accusation of being pro-German and anti-British and did harm to his appeal for neutrality that would have stood on firmer ground had it been based on pure constitutional considerations.⁷⁸ Smuts took the opportunity to dismiss the call for neutrality as unsustainable with little chance of friend or foe honouring it.⁷⁹ The dissention in the United Party cabinet reflected in the party itself resulting in a split between those seeking neutrality, and those favouring war. After a heated debate lasting the whole day the Smuts faction triumphed with a majority of 80 to 67 when Hertzog's motion of neutrality was defeated. Hertzog had no option but to resign in what amounted to a motion of no confidence, leaving Smuts to take over as Prime Minister. It is debatable whether South Africa would have gone to war had the Governor General granted Hertzog's wish to dissolve parliament and call for a general election. In any event, this was not put to the test as the Governor-General, Sir Patrick Duncan, asked Smuts to form a government.⁸⁰

The declaration of war split the white population and drove many Afrikaners into the Nationalist camp who found it "despicable" to fight for the British, many having sympathy for the German cause.⁸¹ Many Afrikaners admired Germany for its racial and anti-Communist stance.⁸² This split in the white community would certainly diminish the fighting power of the UDF, the loyalty of a significant number of volunteers being rooted in a less than enthusiastic solidarity towards the British

⁷⁷ N.M. Stultz, *The Nationalists in Opposition 1934-1948* (Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 1974) (p. 60). There were 13 members of the Cabinet in all, seven of which opted for declaring war on Germany, and the other six wished to remain neutral.

⁷⁸ Kruger, *The Making of a Nation* (p. 197).

⁷⁹ A. Stewart, 'The 'Atomic' Despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the Fall of the Tobruk Garrison and Post-War Anglo-South African Relations', *Scientia Militaria*, 36 (1) (2008) (p. 79). Churchill and Smuts enjoyed a special bond that was based mainly on their common belief in Empire. The two countries enjoyed excellent relations while under the premiership of both leaders, but this was not to survive once Churchill left office in July 1945, the advent of which marked a steady decline in the relations. Stewart goes further in suggesting that the Anglo-South African alliance was based on the personal and respectful relationship between Smuts and Churchill. Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair' (p. 527).

⁸⁰ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (p. 440). Giliomee draws attention to an authoritative journal *Round Table* that considered it likely that the anti-war faction would have won an election, and Stewart agrees with this viewpoint concluding that if the Governor-General, Sir Patrick Duncan, had granted Hertzog a dissolution and a chance of a new election in which he may have won resulting in South Africa's neutrality. Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair' (p. 519).

⁸¹ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (p. 440). N.P. van Wyk Louw, thought it despicable to fight "for those who have conquered your own people." In another example of Afrikaner resistance to participation in the war is where some Dutch reformed Church ministers refused to allow soldiers in uniform to attend services. Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 242).

⁸² Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 239).

cause.⁸³ Approximately half of the volunteers in the UDF were Afrikaners, a significant number of whom had joined up for pure pecuniary reasons rather than any sense of duty to the defence of the British Empire.⁸⁴ The UDF provided a source of income for Afrikaners, who as a group had been especially hard hit by the economic depression. As Grundlingh puts it, “their political convictions took second place to their material wants.”⁸⁵ The government policy of identifying volunteers for duty outside of South Africa with red tabs on their uniforms immediately and conversely made those opposed to the war easily identifiable and their life within the military extremely difficult, with very little prospects of employment if they resigned.⁸⁶ The fear of negative consequences as a result of being identified as “anti-war” must have provided an added negative incentive for many Afrikaners to take the “oath of loyalty”. Afrikaners were not homogenous in their political viewpoints but the motives of a significant number of those who eventually joined the UDF, were unlike most of their English-speaking comrades, who considered it their duty to assist the British Empire.⁸⁷

If Afrikaners had dubious reasons to support the Allied war effort then that reluctance was exacerbated when it came to the black population of South Africa. Denuded of political representation and treated everywhere as third class citizens, blacks had little lofty ideological incentive to participate in the war. Those blacks who eventually joined the UDF did so mainly for economic reasons, such as an opportunity to earn money and perhaps acquire a skill, their situation being direr than those of the Afrikaner.⁸⁸ Loyalty and support for the war at the grass root level did not match that expressed by black leadership including the ANC, traditional chiefs, and church groups, who perhaps saw the war as an opportunity for blacks to gain equal rights and ease racial policies by squeezing concessions from the government during wartime.⁸⁹

Black attitudes towards the war were not helped by the experience of participating in the First World War in which they gained very little. The government was initially reluctant to recruit any blacks

⁸³ P.J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Movement in the Fascist Era* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1991) (p. 117). Refers to Alan Paton’s biography on J.H. Hofmeyr where he noted that in 1938 one-third of Afrikaners were for Hertzog, one third for Malan and one-third for Smuts. The implication is that up to two thirds of Afrikaners did not support a war against Germany, and many of those who supported Malan and even Hertzog were pro-German.

⁸⁴ A. Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939-45', *The Journal of African History*, 40(3) (1999) (p. 354). E. G. Malherbe, Director of Military Intelligence, suggest that Afrikaans-speakers constituted at least 50% of the force.

⁸⁵ Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners?' (p. 361).

⁸⁶ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (p. 443).

⁸⁷ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (p. 441).

⁸⁸ A.M. Grundlingh, 'South Africa and the Second World War', in *South Africa in the 20th Century*, ed. by S.B.Spies B.J. Liebenberg (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik Academic, 1993) (p. 290). Nearly 80% of the black recruits came from “ravaged rural areas” affected by a devastating drought during 1941 -1943.

⁸⁹ F.L. Monama, 'The Second World War and South African Society', in *Reflections on War*, ed. by I. Liebenberg T. Potgieter (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2012) (p. 54).

for fear of antagonising the strong anti-war Afrikaner community. When recruitment of blacks became unavoidable due to the demands of the war, those enlisted were excluded from fighting duties and restricted to unarmed support services, such as drivers, stretcher-bearers, cooks, clerks and orderlies.⁹⁰ Blacks did serve with distinction in the Second World War in spite of the extremely adverse conditions under which they served.

Once hesitantly recruited, the conditions under which blacks served bordered on the appalling in many instances.⁹¹ Blacks received different rations and less of it, to that of their white comrades, housed in appallingly poor accommodation, and when it came to uniform issue, here too, they received less than their white compatriots, on the excuse that their needs were less. In May 1941 black NCO's were ordered to wear their badges of rank inverted so as to avoid friction with their white NCO's of the same rank. Initially blacks received 12 days annual leave compared to the 30 days for white soldiers. The highest rank that a black soldier was allowed to hold was that of a Staff-Sergeant the rank having worth only in the command of black troops and having no authority over "European" members of the Forces. When it came to remuneration, the situation was no different, with blacks receiving a fraction of what a white member earned with a similar job description.⁹² Political considerations took precedence in ensuring that blacks were denied a true combat role in the face of tremendous manpower shortages. These shortages manifested in the South Africans being able to field only two brigades instead of three at Sidi Rezegh which was a major contributor to the overrunning of the 5th Brigade on 23 November 1941.⁹³

⁹⁰ The reluctance to arm and therefore relegate "native" troops to support duties has precedence in the First World War and found legal roots in the Defence Act (Act 13 of 1912). It was Article 7 of the Act that limited the participation of "non-Europeans" to non-combatant roles. I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1994) (p. 9). Jan Smuts a minister of defence at the time of the First World War turned down an offer to raise a Corps of "Coloured Boys" to fight against the Turks, as he could see no military value in the offer. This reluctance on the part of Smuts proved unfounded as Coloured soldiers did eventually serve in the First World War in a combatant role with distinction. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force* (p. 12).

⁹¹ There is an interesting account of the conditions encountered by Private Dick West on his induction into the UDF indicating that blacks were not alone in having to face appalling conditions in their training phase. Many White South Africans endured as bleak and as unhealthy conditions as their black compatriots, in an ill prepared UDF overwhelmed with the task of raising a large army. Crwys-Williams, *A Country at War* (pp. 74-80).

⁹² L. Grundlingh, 'The Participation of South African Blacks in the Second World War' (Doctoral Thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, Arts/Humanities, 1986), pp. 111-48. Grundlingh has produced a monumental work and his chapter on Conditions of Service provides detailed and excruciating testimony to the appalling and discriminatory conditions suffered by blacks in rendering service to South Africa. On the question of the food ration, the Army authorities saw fit to differentiate between the different racial groups, having different rations scales for whites, coloureds and blacks. This was justified by drawing attention to the different standards of living of the different population groups. Furthermore, "... it is inadvisable to inculcate more than is necessary, habits which the individual may be unable to satisfy on his return to civil life."

⁹³ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 84,85). Many well-qualified and white volunteers had been recruited into the air force, engineers and armoured car units at the expense of the established

Unlike the other dominions, South Africa would not only have to face an enemy beyond its borders, but due to Afrikaner nationalism and disaffection amongst a large percentage of blacks, there existed a real threat from significant sectors of the population within the country's borders. The majority of South Africans being other than white and largely marginalised in the political process and relegated to a non-combatant role, had very little real enthusiasm for the war. In addition, South Africa's military preparedness lagged for the task she now had to endure. South Africa's ambiguous defence policy and its ambivalent attitude towards the Empire at the highest levels of government, together with the neglect of the military due to financial considerations during the depression, left the country with a token defence force and in a precarious military situation.

Fankie Monama highlights the fundamental importance of a nation united behind its government in the successful execution of war. He quotes Carl von Clausewitz, the military philosopher, who identified as a critical dimension in warfare, the "mobilization and commitment of the people."⁹⁴ This view finds resonance in all the great military theorists, such as Jomini, Sun Tzu, Fuller⁹⁵ and Liddell Hart. South Africa's entry into the war did not receive wholehearted public endorsement, a prerequisite to ensuring maximum morale and hence effective fighting power on the battlefield.⁹⁶

1.4. South Africa Mobilises Its Military Force and War Economy

It was fortunate for South Africa that Italian neutrality at the outset of the war, and the remoteness of the European battlefields afforded the UDF approximately 10 months in which to prepare for their first campaign in East Africa.⁹⁷ The Union now set about a rapid mobilization of the population, together with an overhauling of the country's industrial infrastructure in an effort to enhance the military capacity of the UDF. (See Figure 4) South Africa immediately began a manufacturing program to meet

regiments. Qualified partisans were being weeded from the infantry regiments to fill positions in the development of the engineering and ammunition industries. 1000 blacks had been posted to the 1st Infantry Division on the eve of the Crusader battles to replace white drivers and for some of the non-combatant roles. General Brink was not happy with their quality and was unable to train in time for the operation. Due to manpower constraints South Africa was only able to field a two brigade division which severely curtailed its fighting power.

⁹⁴ F.L. Monama, 'The Second World War and South African Society', in *Reflections on War*, ed. by I. Liebenberg T. Potgieter (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2012) (p. 47).

⁹⁵ J.F.C. Fuller, *The Reformation of War* (London: Hutchinson, 1923) (p. 39). Fuller speaks of eight fundamental principles of war. The one pertinent here is the principle of cooperation. Fuller speaks of fusing the body and soul of a nation into one intricate self-supporting organism. He goes on to say, "If there be friction in the government, there is friction not only throughout the nation but throughout the army."

⁹⁶ Nasson, *South Africa at War...*, (p. 18). Nasson concludes that in South Africa there was no popular mandate for war in September 1939.

⁹⁷ Italy declared war belatedly in June 1940 and with the fall of France and the establishment of a pro-Axis Vichy French regime in its African colonies, the British situation in Africa was at once precarious, necessitating the immediate deployment of South African and Empire forces to meet the threat.

the demands of the war and equip the rapidly expanding military. Many factories that had been established to manufacture peacetime implements now changed their structure to manufacture equipment for war. So successful was the transition to a war footing, that South Africa was able to equip its own units and even export some of the military material.⁹⁸



Figure 4 “We must give it our all for a total victory.” South Africans, “Pulling together”. The man at the end of the rope looks suspiciously like Jan Smuts.⁹⁹

The Military Secretary, Brigadier-General Jack Collyer, soon after the declaration of war, furnished the Prime Minister Jan Smuts with a full report on the general conditions of the UDF. In every respect, the fighting power of the UDF had fallen to abysmal levels. The most serious issue, and one that was perhaps unique amongst the Allies, was that South Africa had no defence plan in existence. The lack of a defence plan meant that there was no coherent basis for calculating manpower, logistic, or equipment needs for a given course of action they may have been chosen. There were only four fully trained staff officers in the UDF and 11 partially trained and a further 14 who had received elementary training.¹⁰⁰ South Africa did not possess a navy and in artillery, the UDF could deploy fewer guns than

⁹⁸ Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 239). South Africa besides becoming fully self-sufficient managed to contribute supplies to other parts of the Empire and was especially important in the role as an arms exporter before American and Canadian production came fully online in 1941.

⁹⁹ Part of the poster collection housed at the SANDF Documentation Centre Pretoria.

¹⁰⁰ TNA, DO, Class 35, P1003/6, File WG3/4/32, *South African Field Army - Notes on Lt. Col. Bishops visit to South Africa*, January 1940. Bishop on a visit to South Africa in early 1940 identified the lack of leadership

the Boers were able to field in 1899 with trained field artillery officers a scarce commodity.¹⁰¹ Equipment to fight a modern mobile war, in the form of mechanized components, such as tanks and armoured cars, were negligible or non-existent. The Air force possessed no more than six modern machines.¹⁰²

In mobilising South Africa's military, Smuts faced a difficult dilemma and giving way to political expediency, decided to recruit purely on a volunteer basis rather than rely on the Defence Act that provided for conscription of all able-bodied men below 45 years of age.¹⁰³ Volunteers were required to sign a special attestation and in order to distinguish them from other soldiers who refused to serve beyond the borders; they were required to wear a red tab on their shoulder strap. (See figure 5) These distinguishing red flashes would enable an onlooker to easily discern those who supported the war from those who did not. This same insecurity translated into a reluctance to recruit and arm black soldiers so as not to further offend those who were against the war.¹⁰⁴ Despite deep-seated reservations in certain quarters of the Afrikaner community and driven by necessity due to a limited white population, the Cape Corps was reformed on 8 May 1940.¹⁰⁵ The formation of the Native Labour Corps on 1 June 1940 soon followed, providing essential non-combatant services for the UDF. Initially there was no shortage of volunteers, but South Africa's inability to resort to conscription and restrictions in arming black troops would result in severe manpower shortages in the later stages of the desert war.¹⁰⁶

as acute and suggested filling the gaps with suitable British candidates. See also Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 25). In contrast to the lack of staff officer training, a policy was established in 1926 that all would be officers in the UDF had to initially qualify as pilots and then go on to be trained in artillery and becoming "amphigamous" officers. Birkby, *Uncle George* (p. 70).

¹⁰¹ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 31).

¹⁰² NAP, JSP, Box 132, f.66, *Brigadier-General J.J. Collyer on the Union Defence Force*, September 1939. Smuts requested that Collyer submit a report as to the state of the UDF shortly after the declaration of war. Collyer submitted a damning report stating that, "...the Union military forces are far less able to cope with conditions they may have to meet than they were 25 years ago." He drew attention to the poor levels of staffing, non-existent command in training, little coordination or cohesion leading him to conclude that, "it is not an exaggeration to say that the army which South Africa would rely upon in the field is today practically quite untrained."

¹⁰³ Smuts had assumed the premiership without a general election and had no indication as to the extent of his political support, given that a large proportion of the country was resolutely against the war. This left him with little other option than to build a pure volunteer force.

¹⁰⁴ Kruger, *The Making of a Nation* (p. 200).

¹⁰⁵ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 72). The Coloured community preferred to serve as combatants as intimated to General Collyer the Director-General of Reserves by the chairman of the Association. The Minister of Defence was approached by the Coloured Welfare Association, which desired establishment of a battalion for service anywhere. The Cape Corps saw service in East Africa and Palestine as combatants in the First World War.

¹⁰⁶ I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1994) (p. 106). The Italians had little compunction in recruiting black troops for combatant duties deploying 160 000 of them Abyssinia and Somaliland.



Figure 5 An example of a Union Defence Force soldier circa 1939, with distinctive red shoulder tabs, that distinguished him as a volunteer for service beyond the borders of South Africa.¹⁰⁷

South Africa was better prepared on the economic front and, with rare foresight, the Department of Commerce and Industries had constructed plans and formulations to impose official controls to protect economic assets in the event of war. The National Supplies Control Board extended its control over imports and exports, wastage management, raw material management, price control, rationing, labour, production, distribution and other critical economic factors. The Union Treasury introduced a wartime monetary policy that would ensure that the flow of vital war goods and essential services would remain uninterrupted.¹⁰⁸

The mobilisation of South Africa war economy stands out as a great success and at its peak it was able to supply both its own armed forces with a good proportion of the essential materials needed to conduct the war, and some of the essential items needed throughout the Empire. The surrender of France in June 1940 and the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk with the consequential loss of huge amounts of equipment together with the declaration of war by Italy ensured that South Africa would have to rely largely on its own resources to pursue the war.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Michael Skriletz, 'Welcom to militarysunhelmets.com', in *The South African Soldier (Circa 1940) Recreated* <<http://www.militarysunhelmets.com/2012/the-south-african-soldier-circa-1940-recreated>> [accessed 7 July 2013]

¹⁰⁸ Nasson, *South Africa at War...* (pp. 51,52).

¹⁰⁹ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 48).

South Africa faced with few options to import military necessities, decided to undertake the manufacture of artillery pieces locally. The situation with small arms was equally disturbing with the UDF being short of 833 Bren Guns, 548 mortars, and 780 anti-tank rifles,¹¹⁰ Collyer stating in his memorandum that, "War material, arms and ammunition are scarce in every direction."¹¹¹ South Africa was fortunate in having a relatively well-developed mining and explosives industry that redirected its efforts into producing items such as mortar bombs, hand grenades, shells and mines. The production of TNT increased sevenfold and innovations in the explosive manufacture produced new efficiencies.

South Africa possessed vast quantities of the purest iron ore, with a well-established iron and steel industry and an abundance of coal and electrical power. Other items manufactured by a growing wartime industry included boots, socks, uniforms, blankets, beds, mattresses, medical supplies and much more. The Army was largely equipped from South African resources. Active Citizen Force units busied themselves with accepting volunteers and training 137 000 of them at various camps throughout the country.¹¹² In order to meet the huge demands for training, instructor courses were cut in half and officer cadets were prematurely commissioned. Therefore, with a combination of innovation, skillful mobilisation of scarce resources, improvisation and sheer determination, South Africa was able to build her military from scratch.

In an almost miraculous fashion, under the implacable leadership of Smuts, South Africa mobilised its economy and manpower and managed to place the country on a war footing from a state of unpreparedness in a relatively short period. Within two years, the UDF was able to deploy two divisions to North Africa in time for the battle of Sidi Rezegh after a successful campaign in ousting the Italians from East Africa. South Africa was able to overcome her military unpreparedness through dogged determination and industrial sophistication. What would prove to be more difficult to overcome was the insidious division in its society, and more than any other factor perhaps, it was these political rumblings that were to have the most negative influence on its fighting ability.

Smuts faced a smouldering political situation fraught with uncertainties. Some past members of the Fusion Government, such as Oswald Pirow and Hertzog, began to agitate against the government by using a variety of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary methods. Disapproval of the war effort would take many forms, from benign critical comments in Parliament, to open hostility. Increasing incidents of antagonism to "red tab" members of the UDF occurred, and even some desperate

¹¹⁰ Martin, *...Operations on the Home Front*, VII (p. 32).

¹¹¹ NAP, JSP, Box 132, f.66, *Brigadier-General J.J. Collyer on the Union Defence Force*, September 1939.

¹¹² Kruger, *The Making of a Nation* (p. 204).

attempts at sabotage took place, as well as other treasonable activity by some members belonging to the disaffected rump of anti-war Afrikaners. Smuts took the precaution of ordering all rifles in private position handed over to the government, thus reducing the chances of a rebellion. Enemy aliens were interned together with Union citizens who were suspected of acting suspiciously or who were suspected of unlawful actions against the state.¹¹³ Whatever the form of anti-war activity and the measures taken against it, from the more serious to the nonthreatening, the general disgruntled attitude coming from a significant portion of the population, would contribute in no small measure to reducing the effectiveness of the fighting power of the UDF.

South Africa entered the war politically divided, with an economy unprepared, inflicted with an ambiguous defence policy and an ill-suited defence force, more designed to suppress local uprisings or conduct internal policing than to and ill-equipped to conduct a campaign against a first class European power. When the UDF was pitted against a first class opponent at Sidi Rezegh some 27 months after entering the war, some of these deficiencies had been overcome, through the mobilising of the economy and armed forces and resorting to a volunteer system. The South Africans were now set to conduct a successful campaign against the Italians in East Africa, gaining valuable combat experience albeit against a rather lacklustre and demoralized Italian army.

1.5. The East African Campaign 1940: The 1st South African Infantry Division's First Battle

Once France had surrendered on 22 June 1940, and Italy had belatedly entered into the war, the British possessions in Africa became immediately vulnerable. British military war planning in Europe and Africa was largely based on a military partnership that incorporated the substantial French army. The British never envisaged conducting a war in Europe or Africa without the aid of the French, whom the British had relied upon as their fundamental partner in defending their African positions against the Italians.¹¹⁴ Up until the surrender of France, the dominions had played a minor military role, secondary in importance to the moral support they offered in defence of the Empire. The surrender of France

¹¹³ E.G. Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1981) (p. 215). Although some of the worst offenders were interned, the greater majority of those who sympathised with the Nazis were left at large because Smuts was reluctant to make martyrs of them, leaving military security to err on the side of leniency. South Africa was left literally waging a war on two fronts, one being a conventional one to the north of the border, and the other on the home front combating subversive activities and attempts to derail the war effort.

¹¹⁴ C. Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic: September March 1943* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), I (p. 21). Britain never envisaged waging a war bereft of allies, and in addition to not foreseeing the collapse of France in 1940, she did not foresee the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. Box-Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 173) and I Playfair, *History of the Second World War: Mediterranean...*, I (p. 125).

immediately changed the importance of the dominions to Britain on a pure military and economic front, South Africa becoming essential to British survival in East Africa.¹¹⁵

With East Africa now under immediate threat, South Africa sent her 1st Division, under the command of Major-General G. E. "George" Brink, a veteran of the First World War having seen service in German East Africa. This consisted of three brigades being the 1st South African Infantry Brigade (1st Brigade) under the command of Brigadier D. H. "Dan" Pienaar, the 2nd and 5th South African Infantry Brigades commanded by Brigadier B.F. Armstrong.¹¹⁶ (See Figures 11A and 11B) The arrival of 27000 South Africans of the 1st Division in Kenya bolstered the meagre 8500 existing defenders, facing a numerically overwhelming Italian enemy as well as having to defend a frontier of nearly 1600 kilometres.¹¹⁷ The British having no more than 30 000 men in total in Kenya, Sudan and Somalia, faced the Duke of Aosta (Prince Amedeo of Savoy-Aosta), the Viceroy and Governor-General of Italian East Africa, who had at his disposal 291176 Italian troops, 39 light tanks and 126 armoured cars.¹¹⁸

Most of the Italian troops in East Africa were local East African askaris, the majority of which were of marginal quality being recruited, trained, and equipped to do no more than police and maintain order in the colony rather than fight a European army. The best of the Italian force were the regular units of the Savoy Grenadier Division, Alpini Regiment and a Black-shirt Legion who gave a magnificent account of themselves at the battle of Keren some months later.¹¹⁹ Fortunately for the South Africans none of these elite units were to be found on the Kenyan border.¹²⁰ The Italian forces facing the British had further problems, lacking medical facilities to treat diseases, especially malaria,

¹¹⁵ Jackson, *The British Empire* (p. 32) and Stewart, *Empire Lost* (p. 27). The Dominions had little to offer militarily at the outbreak of the war.

¹¹⁶ N. Orpen, *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1968), I (p. 15).

¹¹⁷ By December 1940 Lieutenant-General A.G. Cunningham commander of the East Africa Force in Kenya had a force at his disposal of 77000 of which 27000 were South Africans, 6000 Europeans, 33000 Black East African troops and 9000 West Africans. Playfair, *History of the Second World War: Mediterranean...*, I (p. 407).

¹¹⁸ Orpen, *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns*, I (pp. 19,342,343). Close to 70% of the troops and paramilitary forces deployed by the Italians in East Africa were colonial troops. These colonial troops varied greatly in quality, the vast majority being of a regular nature and having no stomach for the conventional war about to descend on them. Large parts of the colonial army deserted at the first sign of the approaching enemy, while some fought bitterly and bravely in isolated actions.

¹¹⁹ The South Africans were essentially absent from this battle, in which the Italians acquitted themselves with honour. Compton Mackenzie describes the battle, "The unfortunate license of wartime propaganda allowed the British press to represent the Italians almost as comic warriors, but except for the German parachute division in Italy and the Japanese in Burma no enemy with whom the British and Indian troops were matched put up a finer fight than those Savoia battalions at Keren". Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*, I (p. 64).

¹²⁰ Orpen, *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns*, I (p. 19).

which were endemic to that part of Africa. The majority of casualties, inflicted on both sides, came not from the clash of belligerents, but rather from a neutral third party in the form of disease.¹²¹

South Africa's chance to prove its military worth came about with its deployment to East Africa in support of British forces heavily outnumbered by a huge Italian army. South Africa's support in this campaign was crucial to a successful outcome, its contribution not being restricted to the provision of infantry, but also in the major contribution of supporting forces such as engineers, artillery, medical services and air support. It was indeed fortunate for South Africa that the Italian army, although large in size, was made up of a majority of second-rate colonial troops, who were neither trained for, nor motivated to fight a conventional war. The South Africans were at home in the rough and underdeveloped terrain they encountered, it being very similar to the bush war they had trained for. The greatest challenges in the East African campaign had come from the terrain, difficult weather conditions in the form of torrential rain, and the poor road infrastructure, rather than resistance offered by the Italians, who theoretically outnumbered the attackers. South Africa's first success was registered by the 1st South African Infantry Brigade against the Italians at the El Wak border post on 16 December 1940. This was followed by an attack on the string of wells at El Yibo and El Sardu in the Kenyan Northern Frontier District. After three days of fighting, supported by the South African Air Force, the enemy withdrew on the night of 17 January 1941. On the 22 February the South Africans overwhelmed the defenders of Mega after battling against poor weather and poor navigation. In these battles the South Africans had managed to overwhelm their demotivated opponents quickly, with relatively little fighting and few casualties. However, in victory, numerous shortcomings became apparent in the inexperienced UDF. At times there was a lack of coordination, inter-service cooperation, esprit de corps, and skilled staff work.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, South Africa did emerge victorious and far more confident in its abilities to fight a modern war. The campaign against the Italians had been a useful exercise in forging the abilities of the army under realistic combat circumstances, despite weak enemy resistance having never seriously tested their fighting abilities. North Africa would be a different experience where the UDF would face an unfamiliar desert environment and engage with the most modern, highly motivated, dynamically led, and well-trained exponents of mobile warfare. The 1st South African Division, which had already served under Cunningham in East Africa, would once again be under his command in North Africa. Theoretically the South Africans all well suited for operating in

¹²¹ According to Simpson, the most common ailments were bites by snakes and scorpions. Many soldiers carried small containers of permanganate of potash instantly treat bite wounds. Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (p. 184).

conjunction with armoured forces in a fast moving battle. However the lorries that had borne them into battle in East Africa were not desert worthy, and the South Africans would languish for many months without the necessary desert training waiting for replacements. The desert demanded an entirely new skill set and the South Africans had little chance of learning these whilst busying themselves with providing labour, and strengthening the defences of Matruh.¹²²

1.6. German Military Doctrine versus British Military Doctrine

A further problem, over and above the general military neglect pervasive amongst all the dominions and Britain, was the adoption of a military doctrine that was deeply flawed and significantly outmoded in an era where modern warfare favoured armies that embraced the newfound mobility brought about by mechanisation. In order to gain insight into the military disasters that overtook the South Africans in North Africa, there is a need to look beyond the political and economic reasons that led to poor force preparation. The South Africans who spilt their blood in the desert at Sidi Rezegh or surrendered ignominiously at Tobruk, where as much victims of poor force preparation as they were of British armoured doctrine adopted in the inter-war period.

The South African official history draws insightful attention to this fact early in their monumental work on Sidi Rezegh. It describes British military thinking as underdeveloped and harking back to the tactics of the First World War.¹²³ Due to British abhorrence of the sheer magnitude of waste of life due to trench warfare, post-war British intellectuals led by J. F. C. Fuller and Basil Henry Liddell Hart, sought technological answers to alleviate the carnage brought about by static war and the power of the defence. Some saw the tank as the war-winning weapon, which would restore mobility to the battlefield and bring to an end the senseless human loss of attrition warfare. It was envisaged that the tank would dominate the battlefield, largely unsupported (unhindered!) by infantry or artillery, their main aim to seek out other armoured formations and destroy them.¹²⁴ The trend in British intellectual military thinking emerging after the First World War stressed the independent action of armoured fighting vehicles, downplaying the need for inter arm co-operation.¹²⁵ Fuller the leading and influential

¹²² W. Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, ed. by M. Fairbrother (Wellington : Historical Publications Branch, 1961) (p. 41).

¹²³ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 33,34).

¹²⁴ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 33). Perhaps indicating a little less insight, the official history contains a footnote on page 33 that absolves Liddell Hart of contributing to an "all tank" concept when clearly he together with Fuller were major sponsors of just such an idea. The note goes onto acknowledge General Heinz Guderian's tribute to Liddell Hart who is described by Guderian as being highly influential in Germany, a myth since debunked as Liddell Hart has been exposed as cajoling Guderian, as well as other high profile Germans, into falsely acknowledging his contribution. J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (London: Cornell University, 1988).

¹²⁵ J.Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military thought and armoured forces 1903-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1995) (p. 8). When Fuller is looked at on the subject of the role of the tank in future war, his sentiments seem to be exactly mirrored in the objectives set for Operation Crusader. '...by the time the two armies are within striking distance, the infantry will be in rear of the tanks and the

British military intellectual went to the extent of calling for the abolition of the traditional arms.¹²⁶ In contrast, German doctrine, remaining little changed from that of the First World War, demanded close cooperation and mutual support of all the arms of service, as a method to restore mobility to the battlefield. The influence of British military thinkers, especially that of Fuller and Liddell Hart, in the inter war years on German military thought and the so-called “Blitzkrieg doctrine”, has been grossly exaggerated and overrated.¹²⁷

In the early 1930's, Great Britain was regarded as the world leader on mechanized warfare doctrine. This doctrine was heavily influenced by the so called “tank radicals” such as Fuller and Liddell Hart, some of whose ideas, accepted as dogma within the Royal Tank Regiment (RTC), were distinctly unsound.¹²⁸ That the British saw the tank as a war winning weapon to the exclusion of the artillery and infantry can be directly attributed the thinking of Fuller. In his award winning RUSI¹²⁹ paper entitled “New Model Army” saw the tank playing the central role and downplaying the other arms, insisted that all arms would be built around the capabilities of the tank.¹³⁰ His proposal was for a tank heavy division incorporating elements of other arms as an interim measure to be eventually replaced by an all tank army.¹³¹ Liddell Hart similarly in a RUSI essay competition entry in 1922 titled, “*The Development of the New Model Army*”, suggested that ‘The tank is likely to swallow the infantryman...’ He goes on ‘...The logical sequence points to the land or rather overland forces being comprised primarily of tanks and

artillery in rear of the infantry. Tank will, consequently, engage tank, and a battle for tank supremacy will result.’ Fuller, *The Reformation of War* (p. 157).

¹²⁶ R.M. Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-39* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1999) (p. 10).

¹²⁷ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (p. 201). There are those who hold the opposite view, believing that the Germans owed much of their armoured doctrine to the thinking of British intellectuals and theorists. One of the latest authors, attempting to resurrect the reputation of the Liddell Hart, as well as define the debt owed by German mechanised doctrine to the British is Azar Gat. A. Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Rise of the Panzer Arm: Revising the Revisionists* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000). Vardi believes that the German doctrine in the early and mid-1930s shows very little indication of British influence. There was a greater chance of a mutual learning process between the Soviets and Germany due to the joint training camp operated at Kazan before 1933. Gil-li Vardi, ‘The Enigma of German Operational Theory: The Evolution of Military Thought in Germany, 1919-1938’ (Doctoral Thesis, The London School of Economics, Philosophy, 2008), p. 192.

¹²⁸ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (pp. 201,202).

¹²⁹ The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), is a British defence and security think tank founded in 1831 by the Duke of Wellington. RUSI describes itself as “the leading forum in the UK for national and international Defence and Security”

¹³⁰ Fuller, *The Reformation of War* (p. 158). Fuller explains the lack of role for the infantry and artillery thus. ‘The question now arises, what can the infantry do? These troops can do nothing outside playing the part of interested spectators. What can the gunners do? They can do next to nothing, for, being distant from the field of action, upon which in a minute a tank may have changed its position by a quarter of a mile, they dare not promiscuously bombard any area; besides, in order to fire at all, they will generally have to employ direct laying, which, in most cases, will require them to be either with, or in advance of, the infantry. In such positions, as the gunners, in order to protect themselves, cannot lie flat like infantry, their pieces will soon be silenced by hostile machine gun fire.

¹³¹ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (p. 206).

aircraft, with a small force of siege artillery for the reduction and defence of the fortified tank and airfield bases, and of mechanical borne infantry for use as land marines.¹³²

The Germans diverged from this radical new British line of thinking. Under the tutelage of Hans von Seeckt, responsible for building the new 100 000 man Reichswehr out of the ashes of the old Imperial Army, stressed combined arms warfare in a war of manoeuvre, in which the tank and other arms were merely a component of a combined arms group.¹³³ The Germans, unlike the British, did not invent a novel armoured doctrine, but rather fused the wisdom gleaned from past battles especially those of the last year of World War One, with the current philosophy and knowledge prevailing at that time.¹³⁴ The German doctrine united that which was formulated by Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke (the elder),¹³⁵ who introduced the concepts of *schwerpunkt* (point of concentration) and *auftragstaktik* (mission command tactics), with *stosstrupp* (storm-troop) tactics developed in World War One, and finally incorporating Seeckt's *bewegungskrieg* (war of movement) developed in the Reichswehr.¹³⁶

German armoured doctrine found its roots in far older traditional ground, than the British, who came to see the tank as a war-winning weapon to the exclusion of the other arms of service. The Germans came to view the tank as merely a component of a balanced all arms force, using combined arms tactics that could be traced all the way back to the reign of Fredrick the Great in the late 1700's.¹³⁷ The German tradition, usually in the face of overwhelming odds, favoured fighting a war of movement (*bewegungskrieg*) rather than positional warfare (*stellungskrieg*). in order to gain an advantage over a foe that invariably enjoyed superior numbers, the Germans used manoeuvre tactics that sought to bring the enemy to battle at a place and time of their choosing, and allowing them to

¹³² Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (pp. 207,208). Both Fuller and Liddell Hart envisaged a much reduced role for the infantry such as mopping up and policing conquered areas. It is only after the war that Liddell Hart attempted to find distance between his visions of infantry as opposed to Fuller. The fact remains that he was a faithful disciple of Fullers during the inter war period.

¹³³ Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 12). Seeckt's ideas on manoeuvre warfare and combined arms leadership was expounded in a tactical manual issued to the Reichswehr in 1921 titled *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*. H. von Seeckt, *Command and Combat use of Combined Arms*, ed. by P.B. Harm (USA: Army War College, 1925). See also *On the German Art of War Truppenführung: German Army Manual for Unit Command in World War II*, ed. by B. Condell and D. Zabecki (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2009). The 1934/1935 edition that includes armoured warfare.

¹³⁴ Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 35).

¹³⁵ Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke was chief of staff of the Prussian army for thirty years.

¹³⁶ Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 43). *Bewegungskrieg* being a war of movement incorporating manoeuvrability with inter-arm combined warfare tactics.

¹³⁷ The Germans viewed the advent of new technology differently from the British. According to Vardi, the German approach to technology was "...practical and utilitarian: how can technology serve the Army in realising its current doctrinal goals?' New technology fitted in with the existing military doctrine rather than changing it. Vardi, 'The Enigma of German Operational Theory...'

gain local superiority in numbers through concentration at the chosen point of attack (*schwerpunkt*).¹³⁸ In conformity with Clausewitz, and embraced by Helmut Count von Moltke (the elder), German doctrine encouraged a battle of annihilation (*vernichtungsschlacht*) best achieved by adopting a strategy of envelopment or encirclement (*kesselschlacht*).¹³⁹

The Germans had a unique way of dealing with the inevitable fog of war as well as what Clausewitz refers to as 'friction'¹⁴⁰. This differed substantially from that which the British devised to combat the confusion and stress of battle. Contrary to the British, who sought to manage all aspects of the battle in elaborate pre-arranged written orders, the Germans acknowledged that most plans dissolved into disarray after the first shot had been fired.¹⁴¹ In preference to the British system of directive type command, the Germans established a command concept in which even the most junior officers were required to make far-reaching decisions.¹⁴² German commanders, down to the lowest ranks, were given objectives, then left unhindered to make on the spot decisions subject to changing circumstances on the battlefield. Commanders would limit orders to general instructions outlining overall objectives and timeframes, leaving the tactical conduct of the operation in achieving those objectives entirely to the subordinate tasked with the mission. Mission command tactics were far from easy to achieve, requiring all the echelons and components of the army to be thoroughly familiar and comply with the operational goal.¹⁴³ The devolving of authority and encouragement of initiative to obtain objectives was enshrined in German doctrine and became known as mission command tactics

¹³⁸ J. House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th-Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization*. (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 1984) (pp. 52,53). German emphasis on combined arms warfare is embodied in their 1921 *Regulation on Command and Combat of the Combined Arm*. German doctrine allowed for technological advances to be incorporated and a freedom to develop doctrine based on their experiences.

¹³⁹ Vardi, 'The Enigma of German Operational Theory...' p. 29.

¹⁴⁰ 'Friction' is defined by Carl von Clausewitz as 'The intangible force that makes the apparently easy task so difficult.' Clausewitz acknowledges that friction creates enormous difficulties for the realization of any plan, and the *fog of war* hinders commanders from knowing what is happening. He went on to say that 'nothing is simply war, the simplest thing is difficult'. Friction is the element that distinguishes real war from the war of the planners. C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. by M Howard and P Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1976) (p. 119).

¹⁴¹ Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 45). Seeckt found that written orders were too long and complicate, and thought that formations up to battalion could function on nothing more than a short oral description of what was required.

¹⁴² Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 57). An insightful comment from Seeckt in his *1925 Observations* illuminates German thinking on empowering the individual soldier and thus enhancing *auftragstaktik*. "The principal thing now is to increase the responsibilities of the individual man, particularly his independence of action, and thereby to increase the efficiency of the entire army.... The limitations imposed by exterior circumstances cause us to give the mind more freedom of activity, with the profitable result of increasing the ability of the individual."

¹⁴³ Vardi, 'The Enigma of German Operational Theory...' p. 31.

(*auftragstaktiek*).¹⁴⁴ The German doctrine of manoeuvre warfare in itself demanded a high degree of initiative at all command levels.¹⁴⁵

The German philosophy of *bewegungskrieg* and *auftragstaktiek* demanded an aggressive spirit within the German armed forces. German doctrine encouraged commanders to seize the initiative by resorting to the offensive, even when the situation was in doubt, rather than assume the defensive and surrender the initiative. It is worth bearing this in mind when analysing some of the decisions made by German commanders, and especially in this case, Rommel.

World War One served to further condition and build German doctrine especially in the development of combined arms warfare which had always been a cornerstone of German tactics.¹⁴⁶ In response to massive Allied attacks accompanied by huge artillery barrages on the German static defensives, the Germans resorted to a doctrine of flexible defence calling on the local commander to withdraw his main forces out of harm's way and thus absorb any allied attack by giving up ground. It was then left to the local commander to initiate a counter-attack at the time and place of his choosing in a classic demonstration of *auftragstaktiek*. German combined arms doctrine reached its pinnacle when expressed in their infiltration tactics that so nearly won them the war on the Western front in 1918. The Germans nearly defeated the Allied forces in France by using the tactics of bypassing points of resistance, thus following the lines of least resistance, and then reducing enemy strongpoints with a

¹⁴⁴ British military intellectuals of the period seemed to have little regard for the German doctrine of *auftragstaktiek*. An example of British difficulty in grasping the concept of mission command tactics is none other than J.F.C. Fuller, who in describing what he felt were defects in the Prussian staff system, writes, 'Whereas Napoleon I led and controlled throughout, Moltke brought his armies to their starting points and then abdicated his command and unleashed them. ...He never issued an order except for a few suggestions to General Blumenthal.' J.F.C. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World: From the American Civil War to the End of World War II* (New York: Da Capo, 1957), III (p. 134). In more modern times the situation has changed somewhat, with the United States and the United Kingdom endeavouring to incorporate *auftragstaktiek* into their military doctrine in an effort to capture what they believe is the essence of the excellent German command of tactics. The adoption of *auftragstaktiek* in Germany's former enemies has proved to be more difficult than first envisaged because this doctrine was deeply ingrained for centuries in German military culture. A further complication is that *auftragstaktiek* is merely one component of the many that make up German doctrine that has as its centrepiece the achievement of combined operations warfare.

¹⁴⁵ Vardi, 'The Enigma of German Operational Theory...' p. 31. Quoting Moltke the elder, 'no plan of operations can extend with any prospect of certainty beyond the first clash with the hostile main force. Only a layman can pretend to trace throughout the course of a campaign the prosecution of a rigid plan, arranged beforehand in all its details and adhered to the last. All successive acts of war are therefore not premeditated executions but spontaneous acts guided by military tact'.

¹⁴⁶ The combined arms approach to warfare can be explained simply by equating it to the well-known game of roshambo (rock-paper-scissors). In this game rock smashes scissors, scissors cuts paper, and paper defeats rock. So too in warfare Infantry are vulnerable to artillery, tanks are vulnerable to anti-tank weapons and in turn, anti-tank weapons are vulnerable to artillery and infantry. Therefore, success is achieved on the battlefield by applying the most appropriate weapon system in a combined arms force to defeat a particular type of threat. Jackson describes the fundamental German philosophy as 'antitank guns to kill tanks, tanks to kill infantry, and artillery to kill antitank guns and infantry. W. Jackson, *The Battle for North Africa 1940-1943* (Mason/Charter: New York, 1975).

combination of infantry artillery, and airpower, enabled by the initiative of subordinate commanders on the battlefield. All this achieved without the aid of tanks.¹⁴⁷

When tanks became available to the German army, long denied in terms of the onerous Versailles treaty conditions, they were slotted into the German combined arms doctrine to serve alongside the other arms of service. The Germans sought to enhance their doctrine with new technology, rather than allow new technology to alter their doctrine. The effect that the tank did have on German doctrine was an attempt by the Germans to ensure that the other traditional arms were mechanised as far as possible in order to keep up with the tank and match its superior manoeuvrability.¹⁴⁸ The Germans soon realized that the tank was most effective when used en masse instead of penny packets tied down to the speed of the infantry. The most effective way of gathering tanks was in a combined arms Panzer division, unlike the British practice of fielding a practically all tank brigade.¹⁴⁹ What was later to become famously known as 'blitzkrieg' was really nothing more than the evolution of centuries old Prussian military thought¹⁵⁰ refined through 'flexible defence' and 'infiltration tactics' in World War One, and finally enhanced with the introduction of the tank as a potent addition to a balanced all arms concept of warfare.

The British sought salvation from the battlefield carnage of the First World War by using technical innovation and began to experiment with the tank. The establishment of the Experimental Mechanical Force in 1927, which would have been headed up by Fuller, had he not inexplicably resigned from the position, signalled the British army's acceptance of new and innovative ideas and its receptiveness to the radical thoughts of Fuller and Liddell Hart.¹⁵¹ The concept of an all arms combined force was generally lost in an underestimation of the role infantry and the over estimation of what unsupported armoured forces could achieve on their own.¹⁵² Thus the final composition of the Experimental Mechanical Force reflects the influence that Fuller and Liddell Hart had on the British

¹⁴⁷ L.H. Addington, *The Blitzkrieg Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971) (p. 26).

¹⁴⁸ Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 204).

¹⁴⁹ The British tank brigade fielded almost the same amount of tanks as a German Panzer division the difference being that the German Panzer division had a strong component of infantry and artillery, lacking in the British version.

¹⁵⁰ L. Deighton, *Blitzkrieg* (London: Triad/Granada, 1980) (p. 173).

¹⁵¹ This viewpoint is of course contentious. Many researchers believe that the German panzer forces owed much in their creation to the British. W. Murray and A. R. Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York: Cambridge University, 2008) (p. 24). The authors give the reason for Fuller refusing to command the initial experimental force, "...because he disapproved of the decision to operate the experimental force in conjunction with the more traditional branches, the artillery and the infantry." In this refusal is the essence of the difference between British and German doctrine. The British scorning combined arms warfare and the Germans embracing it.

¹⁵² Vardi, 'The Enigma of German Operational Theory...' p. 249. A German study from the late 1928 compared the 'extreme wing' represented by Fuller and Liddell Hart to French armoured doctrine, heavily criticised the British concept of pure armoured formations containing no infantry, and favoured the French doctrine to a great extent

military establishment in the inter war years.¹⁵³ The lessons learned from this experiment, now endorsed by the Royal Tank Corps spokesman, Liddell Hart, were a movement toward an all tank army rather than balanced all arms formations.¹⁵⁴ Contrary to his post war claims of identifying the need of close co-operation between all arms, Liddell Hart rejected the inclusion, except for a small component of land marines, of any infantry in a future armoured force.¹⁵⁵

Fuller in his *Lectures on FSR III* did not envisage a role for the indirect fire of the artillery seeing it as impractical in a fast moving tank melee. He did not foresee the co-operative role between tanks and anti-tank weapons that formed the backbone of German tactics in the Western Desert.¹⁵⁶ Fuller shared some basic assumptions with the other radical tank advocates, namely: that armies would get smaller; all armoured formations were necessary for mobile operations; the integration of infantry into a mobile armoured battle was problematic, even impossible; and conventional artillery has very little place in an armoured battle.¹⁵⁷ There is little doubt that the influence of these assumptions is reflected in the British doctrine applied to the Western Desert in the Second World War.¹⁵⁸

The British envisaged that the main role of the tank was to seek combat with other tanks and eliminate them as a first step to the battle. The Germans, on the other hand, considered anti-tank weapons to be an indispensable component of the mechanized combined arms team. In the early part of the war, tanks carried small calibre guns, relatively inaccurate compared to towed anti-tank guns, with large-calibre high-velocity guns. Anti-tank guns proved lethal against armour at ranges more than double that of a tank. The German armoured units, unlike the British, trained to avoid fighting other tanks or anti-

¹⁵³ The force consisted of a medium tank battalion, an armoured car and tankette battalion, a motorised machine gun battalion, an artillery brigade, a light artillery battery, and a field engineering company. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (p. 217).

¹⁵⁴ J.F.C. Fuller, *Lectures on FSR III* (London: Sifton Praed & Co., 1932) (pp. 15,16,95). See also Fuller in his *Lectures on FSR III* in 1932 stated that 'To combine tanks and infantry is tantamount to yoking a tractor to a draft horse. To ask them to operate together under fire is equally absurd.'

¹⁵⁵ The Germans obviously watched these innovative developments very closely, and although influenced by the British to a certain extent, drew conclusions from the British tank exercises different to that drawn by the British, having viewed the proceedings through German doctrinal lenses.

¹⁵⁶ Fuller, *Lectures on FSR III* (pp. 15,16,95) and Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (pp. 226,227).

¹⁵⁷ Fuller, *The Reformation of War* (p. 157). British radical thought can be gauged by the following quote from Fuller written by him at the height of his influence. 'I will, therefore, in order to supply the reader with the ammunition of argument, consider the power of tanks against the traditional arms, and the restriction of their power when attached to them. I will now show that the tank of the near future is likely to be as superior to the traditional arms as a modern destroyer is to a British coracle, and that to link the traditional arms to tanks will be as uneconomical as linking sailing frigates to a squadron of battle cruisers.' There are differences in opinion as just how influential this train of thought was in shaping British armoured doctrine, but without a doubt there are strong traces of it long after these sentiments were made and certainly this line of thinking is manifest in the British conduct of the war in North Africa.

¹⁵⁸ Lord Wilson of Libya in describing his efforts to train the 7th Armoured Division in Egypt in 1939-40, 'One had to check a pernicious doctrine which had grown up in recent years, aided by certain civilian writers that tank units were capable of winning an action without the assistance of the other arms. ...The chief agents in debunking this and many other fallacies of our pre-war pundits were the Germans.' F. Von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (London: Futura, 1979) (p. xv).

tank guns, and instead true to their doctrine were designed for exploitation of areas of little or no resistance. Where tank-versus-tank combat became unavoidable, the German preferred to withdraw their armour behind an anti-tank screen in an attempt to entice the British tanks to attack.¹⁵⁹ J. Harris brings attention to an important doctrinal difference between the German and British tactical doctrine. The British due to thinking of their mechanised forces as akin to naval warfare put great store into the ability to fire on the move. The Germans has adopted the opposite doctrine, as firing on the move was seriously detrimental to accuracy.¹⁶⁰

The anti-tank gun enjoyed a relatively small silhouette making it extremely difficult to detect and engage, rendering the tank particularly ineffective with its restricted view when deployed against this weapon. The anti-tank weapon was extremely vulnerable to artillery fire and infantry attack. The Germans were able to deploy their vulnerable anti-tank weapons with such good effect against the British armour, due to a general unawareness amongst the British as to the fundamental role the anti-tank weapon had in destroying the major part of the British armour. The British failed, on most occasions, to concentrate their artillery effectively against the German anti-tank weapons. A further hindrance, brought about by British doctrine that viewed the tank as a weapon to be deployed primarily against other tanks, was the failure to arm their tanks with high explosive rounds that were effective against infantry and anti-tank weapons. British tanks armed exclusively with solid shot were at a disadvantage against all but other tanks, compared with their German counterparts whose tanks possessed the capability of using both solid shot and high explosive rounds.¹⁶¹

Major-General F.W. von Mellenthin provides an excellent insight into the differences between German and British thinking regarding armoured warfare doctrine. He acknowledges that British experts did appreciate that tanks had a great part to play in a future conflict. What they failed to identify, with the same vigour and depth of understanding as their German counterparts, was the

¹⁵⁹ House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare* (p. 54). The Germans used the antitank weapon in an offensive role often deploying them upfront to spearhead an attack against armour.

¹⁶⁰ Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks* (p. 204). Harris believes that this practise was carried through to the Second World War and owed much to J.F.C. Fuller's influence and his analogies with naval warfare. One of his lecture titles in the 1920 was *The Development of Sea warfare on Land* which drew strong analogies to naval warfare.

¹⁶¹ W. Jackson, *The Battle for North Africa 1940-1943* (Mason/Charter: New York, 1975) (pp. 159,160). The German Mark IV had a close support 75mm gun that could fire a high explosive shell out to a range of 3000m that was lethal to both tank and antitank gun. The British had nothing similar either by way of tank armament or artillery that could deploy at even half this range. The British 3,7 inch Anti-Aircraft gun although possessing similar ballistics to the German 88mm was not deployed in anything other than its intended role against aircraft to the detriment of the 8th Army.

importance of co-operation of all arms in the armoured division.¹⁶² Von Mellenthin placed the British ten years behind the Germans in combined arms doctrine.¹⁶³

The British doctrine favouring tank-heavy divisions to the exclusion of other arms carried would have negative implications for the motorised South African and dominion infantry brigades placed at the disposal of the British Eighth Army.¹⁶⁴ The British had very little use for these pure infantry brigades, beyond that of occupying territory conquered by the tanks and providing a safe refuge for the tanks to withdraw towards to replenish and refit. The British saw their primary task as the destruction of the opposing tank force with their own tank forces, and until this had been achieved; the infantry brigades were to remain very much in the background. It was indeed unfortunate that the reverse was achieved in the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk, where it was the British tanks that were destroyed by the German combined arms forces, leaving the infantry brigades having to defend themselves against the German Panzer divisions.

1.7 The Desert and Mobile Warfare

The South Africans performed adequately in East Africa, and constituted a fundamental part of the victorious British forces, although the main adversary proved to be the formidable terrain and climate, rather than the Italians. The UDF suffered surprisingly few casualties in what amounted to a test of endurance that did not really test their fighting abilities. The South Africans had gained valuable, if not entirely appropriate, experience, which bolstered their organisational capabilities more so than forging their fighting abilities. They were now destined to encounter a more capable enemy in North Africa, who used the unique desert conditions to exploit their highly developed tactical skills in mobile warfare, and their mastery of combined arms warfare.

The South Africans, destined to partake in the Crusader operation, were veterans in the sense that they had fought against the Italians in East Africa. Much of the experience garnered in fighting the Italians, especially regarding the terrain effects of the battlefield, would have little application in desert conditions and against the superior fighting power of the Germans. Desert conditions were vastly different from those encountered in the normal European battlefield and in East Africa. The desert

¹⁶² Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg* (p. 44). The Germans went to great lengths in their training to achieve a proficiency in combined arms warfare. In exercises representatives from the different arms would be attached to units of a different formation in order to ensure that, "the various branches of the service must become acquainted with each other."

¹⁶³ F. Von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (London: Futura, 1979) (p. xv).

¹⁶⁴ It is interesting that in the early stages of the war in North Africa, tank brigades were the exclusive domain of the British. Dominion brigades made up the backbone of the British infantry component to the 8th Army.

presented a special set of circumstances and both sides evolved an art of war suited to the unique terrain and topography of North Africa, giving consideration to its effect on equipment, mobility, the art of manoeuvre, the defence and the offence amongst other aspects.

Desert warfare was pure mechanised warfare, unlike the vast horse and mule drawn armies fighting in Europe. Due to the high degree of mechanization achieved by both sides, the campaign would provide an “ideal” testing ground for the futuristic theories and doctrines devised in the inter-war period. The desert war was also one of logistics, with the harsh conditions and lack of any local resources and extremely long lines of communication playing havoc with the battle readiness of the fighting forces.

Desert warfare can be likened to naval warfare in a number of important aspects. Just as at sea, and unlike fighting in Europe, there are no major terrain features that serve to act as defence multipliers.¹⁶⁵ In the absence of natural defensive terrain both sides made extensive use of mines to slow down and channel enemy advances. The desert offers very little in the way of tactical concealment and even less in the way of cover. Concealment, however, is obtainable due to the vastness of the terrain being fought over. Infantry are unable to “dig in” or fortify defensive positions as effectively under European conditions. Natural defensive obstacles such as rivers, mountains and forests are non-existent. Another aspect of desert warfare was that it often proved impossible to man a continuous defensive line as in Europe, and therefore it was nearly always possible to outflank an enemy line. This fact necessitated units manning static positions to adopt an all-round defence, as the enemy could be expected in any direction.¹⁶⁶ The art of manoeuvre remained the best defence in a highly fluid war, where a unit’s survival depended on not being overwhelmed by a superior force while defending a static position. Mobility enabled a unit to remove itself from danger or add its strength to a gathering mass. In the desert, the side that managed to mass the bigger force in the shortest time at the focal point usually managed to overwhelm the enemy by overrunning opposition in a piecemeal fashion.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (London: Cornell University, 1988) (p. 33). J.F.C. Fuller in an article submitted to the *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution* in 1920, proposed that highly mobile tanks would dominate future battlefields to the extent that land warfare would approximate naval warfare, with tanks fighting each other in the same manner as ships fight at sea.

¹⁶⁶ The British attempted to construct a static defence later in the campaign at Gazala in May 1942 by laying an extensive belt of mines along a static line reaching far south into the desert and manning this line with a series of brigade size ‘boxes’ that adopted an all-round defence. The mobile armour was kept in the rear as a reserve for the purposes of counteracting any German forays through or around the static line. This type of deployment harked back to World War One tactics, doctrine which the British were far more comfortable with. The Gazala line was an interesting if unsuccessful attempt by the British to impose their static way of war on the Germans.

¹⁶⁷ A quote erroneously attributed to Lieutenant-General in the Confederate Army, Nathan Bedford Forrest, by the New York Times in 1918 as, “Getting there firstest with the mostest.”, sums up the doctrine succinctly. 'Nathan Bedford Forrest', in *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_Bedford_Forrest> [accessed 11 August 2013]

Desert warfare requires, as does naval warfare, the swift location of the enemy, followed by a rapid concentration of one's forces, so as to overwhelm the enemy. The British were keen to use a naval analogy when it came to desert warfare, but in their case they compared the tank to land ships¹⁶⁸, and unlike the Germans saw very little role for Infantry or Artillery. The Germans were of course masters of combined arms warfare, and made use of a balanced fighting force made up of tanks, infantry and artillery combined in a mutually supportive role. That the vast majority of their tanks were being lost to the German anti-tank guns, rather than in tank on tank engagements, was lost on the British.¹⁶⁹

The British tended to believe that their tanks were substantially outclassed by the German tanks in hitting power and in defensive armour, where in reality, especially in Crusader, they were quite evenly matched.¹⁷⁰ It is significant that most of the British manufactured tanks equipped with the 2 pounder main armament carried solid shot exclusively, which was useful only in an anti-tank role, and ineffective against personnel and soft skinned targets. German tanks on the other hand carried equal amounts of solid shot and high explosive ammunition, giving them a capability beyond a pure anti-tank role. This anomaly was a result of British doctrine that saw the tank's main role as that of destroying enemy tanks.¹⁷¹

Where the British suffered a distinct disadvantage was in the area of anti-tank weapons. Not only was the German proportion of anti-tank weapons to infantry considerably higher than the British, but they also enjoyed a qualitative superiority in the 88mm anti-tank gun¹⁷² although these were not available in large numbers for Crusader. The main German advantage came through their bold doctrine of deploying anti-tank weapons well forward and using them offensively. The British tended to deploy

¹⁶⁸ In World War One tanks were initially termed "land ships" by the Landships Committee, production vehicles were named "tanks", to preserve secrecy. The Landships Committee was a small British war cabinet committee established in February 1915 to deal with the design and construction of what would turn out to be tanks during the First World War. Headed by First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, the Landships Committee was composed mainly of naval officers, politicians and engineers.

¹⁶⁹ M. Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War: A New Look at the Libyan Campaign 1940-1942* (London: B.T. Barsford, 1986) (p. 52).

¹⁷⁰ A. Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army: Crusader to the Alamein Line, 1941-42* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002) (p. 18). See also B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks: The History of the Royal Tank Regiment* (London: Cassel, 1959) (p. 94).

¹⁷¹ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 52) and P. Griffith, *World War II Desert Tactics* (Oxford: Osprey, 2008) (pp. 24,26) and Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 59).

¹⁷² Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (pp. 94,95). The 88mm proved the ultimate tank killer, able to knock out British tanks 3000 meters away, while the British 2 pounder primary armament for the tanks and antitank guns, was effective out to a maximum of 500 meters.

their 25 pounder artillery in an anti-tank role to make up for the deficit in their anti-tank assets, to the detriment of the substantial fighting power of their artillery.¹⁷³

Desert warfare had a Napoleonic feel to it in certain key aspects. Napoleon enjoyed an advantage in his early career by having had the ability to move his armies in a dispersed fashion, and then quickly concentrate his forces at the chosen point of engagement. Although not wholly conceived by Napoleon, the French army of that time was organised into divisions and corps and like the German panzer divisions were all arms balanced and self-sufficient. A division was able to hold its own against a larger enemy and pin them down for a period of time, allowing a larger force to concentrate and overwhelm the enemy elsewhere.¹⁷⁴ Desert conditions were similar to 19th century warfare in some important aspects, in that it was impossible to form a continuous linear defence as had developed in France in the First World War.

In the desert, denuded of the normal means of concealment, the employment of dust to disguise military intentions was used with good effect by both sides. Rommel especially, made use of dust as a form of subterfuge on many occasions, either creating his own dust clouds or using the opportunities that the prolific dust storms that occurred naturally in the desert, offered. The Germans often used their transports to create dust and to give the illusion of the proximity of his forces. This was accomplished initially by dragging tarpaulins behind trucks but soon graduated in sophistication by fitting propellers behind the trucks.¹⁷⁵ The sudden appearance of dust was a sure sign of a significant movement of the enemy and this was true throughout the ages of desert warfare. It was certain that once battle was joined and a melee ensued, it was not long before the whole scene was shrouded in dust, obscuring friend from foe and adding greatly to the general confusion. Dust was a major factor in substantially reducing mechanical reliability and thus putting a further strain on an already taxed logistical system.¹⁷⁶

Another method of achieving tactical surprise and concealment was the use of night-time to move and mass forces making use of the limited visibility.¹⁷⁷ The Germans also made good use of the

¹⁷³ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 52) and I.S.O. Playfair, *A History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*, ed. by J. Butler (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2004), III (p. 100) and S. Bidwell, 'Indirect Fire Artillery as a Battle Winner/Loser', in *Old Battles and New Defences* (Oxford: Brassey's Defence Publisher, 1986) (p. 123). The tendency of the British infantry to rely on the 25 pounder artillery in the antitank role was at the expense of the artillery effort, arguably the strongest arm the British had.

¹⁷⁴ B.H. Liddel Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: De Capo Press, 1953) (p. 199). Eloquently put by Rommel himself as, "The main endeavour should be to concentrate one's own forces in space and time, while at the same time seeking to split the enemy forces spatially and destroy them at different times."

¹⁷⁵ E. Echols, 'Military Dust', *The Classical Journal*, 47,7 (1952) (p. 285).

¹⁷⁶ A. Toppe, 'Desert Warfare: German Experiences in World War II' (Report Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute, 1952), pp. 59-61.

¹⁷⁷ *FM 90-3: Desert Operations* (Washington: US Marine Corps, 1993) (pp. 3-2).

night hours to recover and repair disabled tanks from the previous day's battle, a practice not employed by the British to the same extent. Both sides made use of the hours of darkness to manoeuvre their forces, but it was the Germans who seem to have best mastered the art of moving and massing their forces at night. The opening move by Rommel in the Gazala battle 26 May 1942 occurred at night, when he skilfully maneuvered his forces in a wide outflanking movement, placing them behind the British lines at dawn. In a later phase of the battle Rommel once again used a night move when he turned his armoured forces around from the Egyptian frontier and in a 180 degree change of direction assembled them ready for an attack on the south east corner of Tobruk at dawn. The South Africans were reluctant to move at night and continually bemoaned the fact that they had not been afforded the time to practise their night navigation, an essential skill in terrain largely devoid of any landmarks.¹⁷⁸

If desert warfare is unique, then this is especially so when considering logistics in the harsh desert conditions. The desert offers little in the way of sustenance for a huge mechanised army. In Europe resources could be found locally thereby partially sustaining an army. It is no exaggeration that the Axis forces procured every ton of supply via an extremely long supply route that was initiated in Italy and shipped over the Mediterranean to ports in Libya and then had to be transported hundreds of kilometres to the front-line.¹⁷⁹ The British were slightly better off in having their main supply depot in Cairo. The distances involved were enormous and dwarfed those that the belligerents had to contend with in Europe or even in the USSR. Harsh desert conditions had an adverse effect on both man and machine, with the Germans believing that a soldier could serve no more than two years in such conditions before permanent damage was inflicted. Engine lives were halved and quartered as the heat and the dust wreaked havoc on machinery designed for European conditions. Fuel and water consumption per mile were close to double that found in European conditions.¹⁸⁰ The small size of the armies deployed on both sides reflected the logistic impossibility of sustaining larger forces, given the difficulties in the supply chain.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ TNA, WO 32/10160/337, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942. and DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.14,15, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Brink states in his debrief, "... night moves, unless of vital importance to achieve a most important object, should not be carried out over difficult and unknown terrain."

¹⁷⁹ M. Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*. (New York: Cambridge University, 2009) (p. 182).

¹⁸⁰ Van Creveld, *Supplying War* (p. 183). and P. Griffith, *World War II Desert Tactics* (Oxford: Osprey, 2008) (p. 4).

¹⁸¹ Liddel Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (p. 328). Rommel's observations on the fundamental importance of supply are instructive. 'The first condition for an army to be able to stand the strain of battle is an adequate stock of weapons, petrol, and ammunition. In fact, the battle is fought and decided by the Quartermaster before the shooting begins. The bravest men can do nothing without guns, the guns nothing without plenty of ammunition, and neither guns nor ammunition are of much use in mobile warfare unless there are vehicles with sufficient petrol to haul them around

1.8. Conclusion

South Africa's entry into the Second World War was a divisive experience politically, the population deeply divided over the issue of supporting the United Kingdom, with opinion not fully recovered from the effects of the Second Anglo-Boer war and the First World War. The period between The First and Second World Wars ushered in a series of leaders that were determined not to subject South Africa to the same internal acrimony in the event of another European war. They envisaged that South Africa would remain neutral or only enter a war should the country be directly threatened. The likelihood of this threat remained remote and consequently South Africa prepared its defence force to meet an internal threat rather than an external threat. Defence expenditure and military preparation became a low priority in the face of tough economic times and a very remote external threat. Jan Smuts' coming to power and declaration of war was in fact a reversal of a government policy of neutrality that had been in effect for many years. This policy of neutrality left South Africa ill prepared to face of modern European army. South Africa's entry into the Second World War, although rebellion was avoided, proved to be no less divisive than its entry into the First World War.

South Africa was able to mobilise considerable forces and equip them through a modern industrialised economy. This remarkable achievement took enormous skill and determination in placing its resources on a war footing. Despite these enormous achievements in building a credible army, the forces fielded by the Union Defence Force remained a product of an ambiguous and divisive political system from which they were born. The two divisions eventually fielded, were essentially light motorised infantry, highly vulnerable to the mechanised and armoured might of the Axis forces. Their training, because of the years of lacking modern mechanised equipment, was deficient, and their experience in handling brigade or divisional size units was negligible.

South African doctrine was based on, and more suited to bush warfare and suppressing internal unrest. The morale and fighting efficiency of the Union Defence Force was questionable due to the background of political divisiveness and lack of enthusiasm amongst those who volunteered for duty. A political structure that precluded blacks from participating as combatants was a further contributing factor that ensured the Union Defence Force was always short of frontline manpower.

The final factor that conspired to diminish the Union Defence Force's fighting power was a situation not unique to South Africa, but one that affected all the dominions including the United Kingdom. The British in the interwar period, sensitive to the massive human cost of the First World War, sought a technological solution in the form of the tank, to reduce losses in any future war. British doctrine relegated the role of the infantry in any future battlefield, and placed tanks at the centrepiece,

viewing them as a war-winning weapon. It was indeed unfortunate that the main fighting force supplied by South Africa took the form of motorised infantry divisions, the very type that the British had relegated.

What was more fortunate for the South Africans was that their first combat experience was destined to be in East Africa against the Italians. The Italians would prove to be far less formidable than the Germans the South Africans would later meet in North Africa. The terrain in East Africa although extremely difficult, was closer to the bush type warfare that the South Africans were familiar with.

CHAPTER II

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE 5TH SOUTH AFRICAN INFANTRY BRIGADE AT SIDI REZEGH - 23 NOVEMBER 1941

After winding up a successful campaign ousting the Italians from their East African colonies, the South Africans began to redeploy to North Africa at the end of May 1941. The Union Defence Force (UDF), formed the major component of a hugely outnumbered British contingent, overwhelmed the Italians with relative ease and minimal casualties. Flushed with victory and new battle honours, South Africa prepared to take on a formidable enemy in North Africa in the form of the highly professional *Deutches Afrika Korps (DAK)* led by *General der Panzertruppe* E.J.E (Erwin) Rommel.

Operation Crusader (Crusader), with all its complexity, is a particularly intriguing campaign to study, especially from a South African perspective. The enormous casualties suffered, made it the single most expensive military operation ever undertaken by South Africans in their military history to that date. Approximately 3800 men were killed, wounded or taken prisoner in the battle, surpassing the military calamity of Delville Wood in 1916 (1709 wounded and 763 killed.) This tragic distinction was soon to be dwarfed by an even greater calamity in June 1942 with the ignoble surrender of the 2nd South African Infantry Division manning the defences of Tobruk, an event that no doubt helped consign Sidi Rezegh to the general South African amnesia.

Crusader took place in the wide open expanses of the North African desert, for all intents and purposes devoid of population or distinctive terrain features, making conditions, other than major logistical challenges, ideal for mobile and manoeuvre warfare in its purest form. In Crusader, the armoured theories and doctrine of the British, the inventors of the tank, were pitted against the Germans whose doctrines origin and practice were of a somewhat older lineage. Both armies had enjoyed periods of enormous military success thus far in the war, the British by defeating the Italians in East and North Africa using highly mobile forces, and the Germans conquering all comers in Europe.¹⁸² Crusader was the first large-scale British-Axis armoured encounter thus far in the war, and owing to the 'uncluttered' nature of the battlefield, would provide a unique testing ground into mobile warfare doctrine providing insights that persist to the present day. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr. commander of the U.S. Forces and of Desert Storm fame, read Rommel's book *Infantry Attacks* as a source of inspiration prior to the operation, and it can be safely assumed that he was not alone in

¹⁸²

The early British successes against the Italians would seem to vindicate the British doctrine on armoured warfare. The truth was that the Italian army was large but relatively immobile due to the majority Italian forces being non-motorised and was no match for the highly mechanised and professional British Army.

considering the Second World War exploits in the desert to be instructive as to the conduct of Desert Storm in 1991.¹⁸³

Crusader was the first time in the Second World War that the British, at campaign level, had managed to defeat the Germans. This was after a string of defeats at the hands of the Wehrmacht in Norway, France, Greece and North Africa. This honour of a first victory over German-led forces is usually and incorrectly ascribed to El Alamein, a battle that occurred many months later.¹⁸⁴ Crusader was a significant victory for the British, in that it resulted in the relief of Tobruk and the expulsion of the Axis from Cyrenaica, and provided access to airfields that enabled air cover to convoys from Malta. However, although Crusader was undoubtedly an Allied strategic victory, it did not feel like one because the British were outclassed by the Germans at the tactical level.¹⁸⁵ For this reason the Allied victory enjoyed in Crusader has been overlooked, and as a result the memory of the battle of Sidi Rezegh contained within Crusader has suffered accordingly.

Another aspect of the campaign often overlooked, is the crucial role played by the Italians, especially in the early stages of Crusader. The Italian contribution is somewhat obscure due to the fact that few English speakers read Italian publications and few Italian publications are translated into English.¹⁸⁶ Both during and after the war, it seems that those who fought against the Axis in North Africa preferred to think they were fighting against the Germans rather than the Italians especially when defeated at the hands of the Italians.¹⁸⁷ This theme comes across strongly in the narrative that follows; the South Africans identifying their adversary as German instead of Italian on a number of occasions. In an effort to redress the lack of accessible Italian sources and obtain a more balanced picture of the events, use has been made of the Italian official histories.¹⁸⁸

The South African official history remains the best secondary source on the subject of the South Africans at Sidi Rezegh, if not the best source for the entire Crusader.¹⁸⁹ Beside the official histories of

¹⁸³ C. Leroux, 'Chicago Tribune', in *Rommel May Guide U.S. In Desert Warfare* <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-02-19/news/9101160457_1_desert-warfare-military-history-petrol> [accessed 19 March 2013]

¹⁸⁴ Churchill himself proclaimed, "Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat". Thus he ignored the fact that Operation Crusader was a clear cut British victory although not as notable as O'Connor's campaign against the Italians the previous year. Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 51).

¹⁸⁵ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 51).

¹⁸⁶ J.J. Sadkovich, 'Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24(1) (1989) (p. 28).

¹⁸⁷ Sadkovich, 'Understanding Defeat' (p. 43).

¹⁸⁸ M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale (Marzo 1941 - Gennaio 1942)* (Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1993), II. The relevant portions of the Italian official history have been translated using an internet resource, Google Translate located at <http://translate.google.co.za/>.

¹⁸⁹ J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957).

the participants, very few secondary sources exist that deal with Crusader exclusively. Two books dedicated to the study of Crusader are *Crusader*¹⁹⁰ which seems little more than a rehash of secondary sources and *Inside the Afrika Korps*¹⁹¹, being an interesting account from the German point of view by the chief of staff of one of Rommel's panzer divisions. One of the more recent books on the subject produced by Orprey is *Crusader 1941* which is concise and adds little new to the existing pool of knowledge.¹⁹² There are published personal memoirs of the battle from both sides that are useful in giving a first-hand account of the events; two of these are *Brazen Chariots*¹⁹³ giving the British point of view and *With Rommel in the Desert*¹⁹⁴, giving a German point of view. Michael Carver's interpretation of the desert war is particularly instructive being largely a first-hand account as well as an incisive analysis of the strategy and tactics employed by both sides in the conflict.¹⁹⁵ There are many secondary sources that deal with Crusader in passing and two of the better ones are *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army*¹⁹⁶ and *The Desert Generals* which are both refreshingly revisionist in nature.

By far the most rewarding source of information on Crusader is to be found in the unpublished narratives and primary documents contained in the files of the Union War Histories Section housed at the Defence Force archives in Pretoria. Extensive use of these has been made in re-examining and re-evaluating the events leading up to and including the destruction of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade at Sidi Rezegh. Included in the collection are the important first-hand accounts of Major-General G. E. "George" Brink and Brigadier B.F. Armstrong giving a unique South African perspective of the battle often lacking in the secondary sources.

The aim of this chapter is to re-examine the battle of Sidi Rezegh and gain a better understanding from a South African perspective, of the events surrounding the battle and the actions that took place that day leading to the demise of the South African 5th Infantry Brigade. The action involving the South Africans at Sidi Rezegh will be reassessed in terms of its significance to the eventual outcome of operation Crusader.

The conditions of desert warfare and its effect on the participants have been discussed in Chapter I, highlighting the uniqueness of a battlefield arena that offered advantages to quick thinking commanders and highly mobile forces. In this chapter, Crusader is then followed on a day to day basis for five days ending on the 23 November 1941 with the annihilation of the 5th Brigade in a bloody battle

¹⁹⁰ R. Humble, *Crusader: The Eighth Army's Forgotten Victory November 1941 - January 1942* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987).

¹⁹¹ R. Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps*, ed. by B.I. Gudmundsson (London: Greenhill, 1999).

¹⁹² K. Ford, *Operation Crusader 1941: Rommel in Retreat* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010).

¹⁹³ R. Crisp, *Brazen Chariots* (London: Frederick Muller, 1959).

¹⁹⁴ H.W. Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert* (Costa Mesa: The Noontide Press, 1991).

¹⁹⁵ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War*,

¹⁹⁶ A. Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army: Crusader to the Alamein Line, 1941-42* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002).

at Sidi Rezegh. The steadily deteriorating situation, in which the South Africans found themselves, due both to circumstances within and beyond their control, is highlighted as events moved inexorably closer to the disaster. Although the chapter ends with the demise of the 5th Brigade on 23 November, the campaign did continue for a further sixteen days in which the British were eventually victorious in a close run campaign. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and reasons for the demise of the 5th Brigade.

2.1 Background to Crusader

The defeat of the British Expeditionary Force and its retreat through Dunkirk in June 1940 signalled the end of any British major operation in Europe for three years until the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. North Africa became the main focus of the British landward effort in that period prior to the invasion of Europe. The North African theatre of war would become a truly international effort, seeing contingents from the U.S.A. Australia, New Zealand, Poland, India, Czechoslovakia and of course South Africa. The forces opposing each other in North Africa were miniscule compared to the hundreds of divisions deployed by each side on the Eastern Front and later the Western Front in 1944, but nevertheless represented the most technological advanced campaign of the entire war.¹⁹⁷

The first British efforts in the campaign were against a poorly trained Italian army. The Italians, although many times larger than the British forces, were made up of mainly non-motorised infantry divisions that were helpless against the small but efficient highly mechanised British force. The British trounced the Italians in a series of famous victories resulting in the capture of Tobruk followed by Bardia, and reaching as far as El Agheila in February 1941. The British halted there, while most of the Western Desert Force was moved to deal with the Axis's invasion of Greece. The ease of the British victory over the Italians had the unfortunate effect of validating British doctrine and they went on confident in their belief of the supremacy of the tank, to the exclusion of combined arms warfare.¹⁹⁸

The Germans, in an effort to bolster the Italians, sent reinforcements under the command of Rommel, with the aim of halting the Allied advance. Rommel was unwilling to adopt a passive defensive posture and attack the British in March 1941 that drove the British all the way back to Tobruk and

¹⁹⁷ M. Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*. (New York: Cambridge University, 2009) (p. 184.185). The relative small sizes of the forces deployed to North Africa were a function of limitations due to logistical requirements that precluded larger forces.

¹⁹⁸ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 99). Liddell Hart joined the long list of those under-estimating the Italian military prowess in Crusader stating, "... their obsolete equipment, shaky morale, and lack of mechanical vehicles largely nullified their value as an asset, while making them an actual handicap for mobile operations." See also P. Griffith, *World War II Desert Tactics* (Oxford: Osprey, 2008) (pp. 16,17).

finally Egyptian frontier. The isolated Tobruk garrison continued to receive supplies and support at great cost to the Royal Navy and bravely withstood Rommel's obsession to capture it.

The British attempted to relieve Tobruk in mid-May 1941 with a small scale operation named Brevity, where General A.P. Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East. The attack was both ill-planned and premature and achieved none of its objectives.¹⁹⁹ On 15 June 1941 Operation Battleaxe was launched, in a second attempt on a much larger scale, with equally dismal results. The British again drew incorrect lessons from these defeats and ascribed them to a qualitative superiority enjoyed by German tanks.²⁰⁰ Churchill sacked Wavell and replaced him with General Sir Claude Auchinleck who was appointed Commander-in-Chief Middle East in his place on 21 June 1941.

The Eighth Army²⁰¹ consisted of two Corps and a garrison of approximately a division in the Tobruk Fortress. The South African 1st Infantry Division was part of 30th Corps and due to persistent manpower shortages, consisted of two instead of the usual three brigades, being 1st and 5th Brigades. Lieutenant-General Alan Cunningham was appointed to command the Eighth Army. (See Figure 6 and 7)

¹⁹⁹ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 23).

²⁰⁰ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 102). The Germans deployed the new long-barrelled 50 mm PaK 38 that was superior to the British two pounder antitank guns. The British did have an answer to the powerful German 88 mm and in fact possessed three times as many of a similar weapon used exclusively in the anti-aircraft role designated the 3.7 inch. Despite the availability of a weapon equal to or superior to the German 88 mm, and despite the urgings in certain sectors to use this weapon as an antitank gun, this was only done so on the few occasions to the detriment of the British forces.

²⁰¹ Previously known as the Western Desert Force, the name was changed to the Eighth Army at midnight 26/27 September 1941. DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)21 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941.

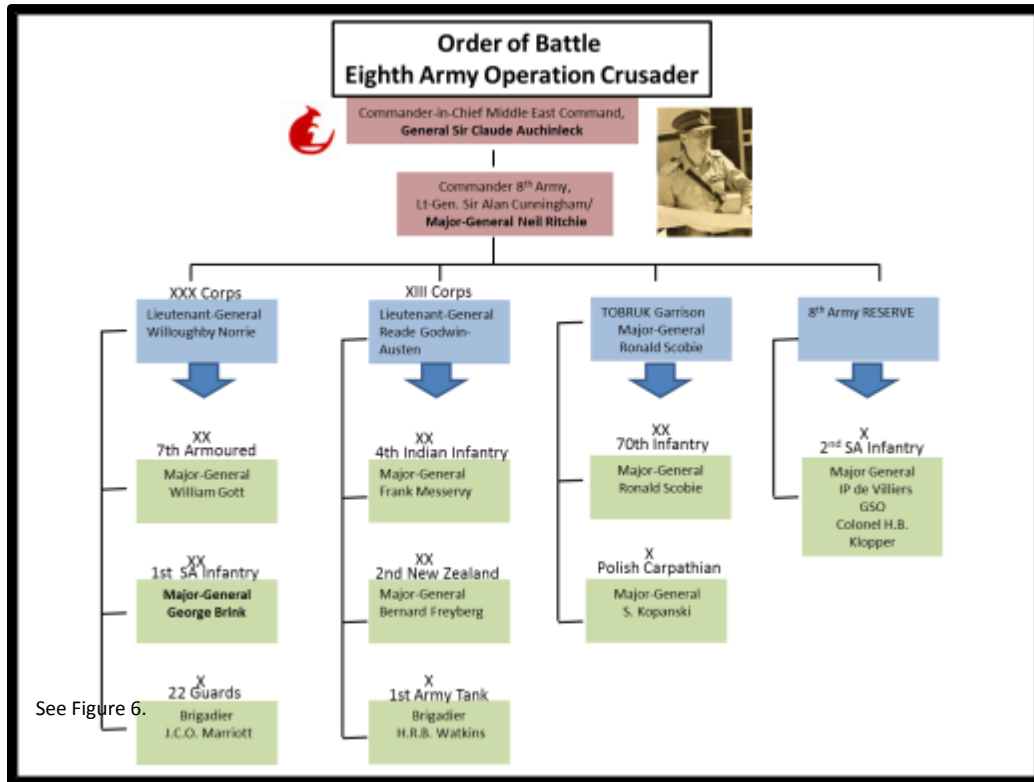


Figure 6 Eighth Army Order of Battle Crusader 18 November 1941.

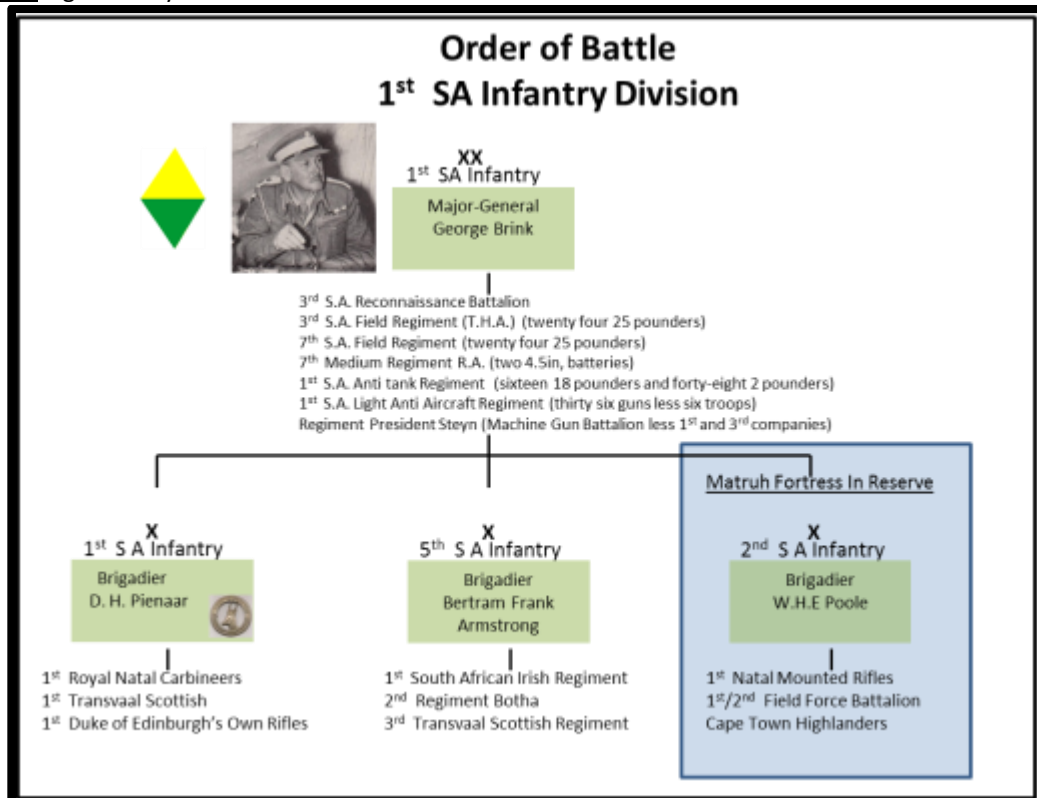


Figure 7 1st South African Infantry Division Order of Battle Crusader 18 November 1941.

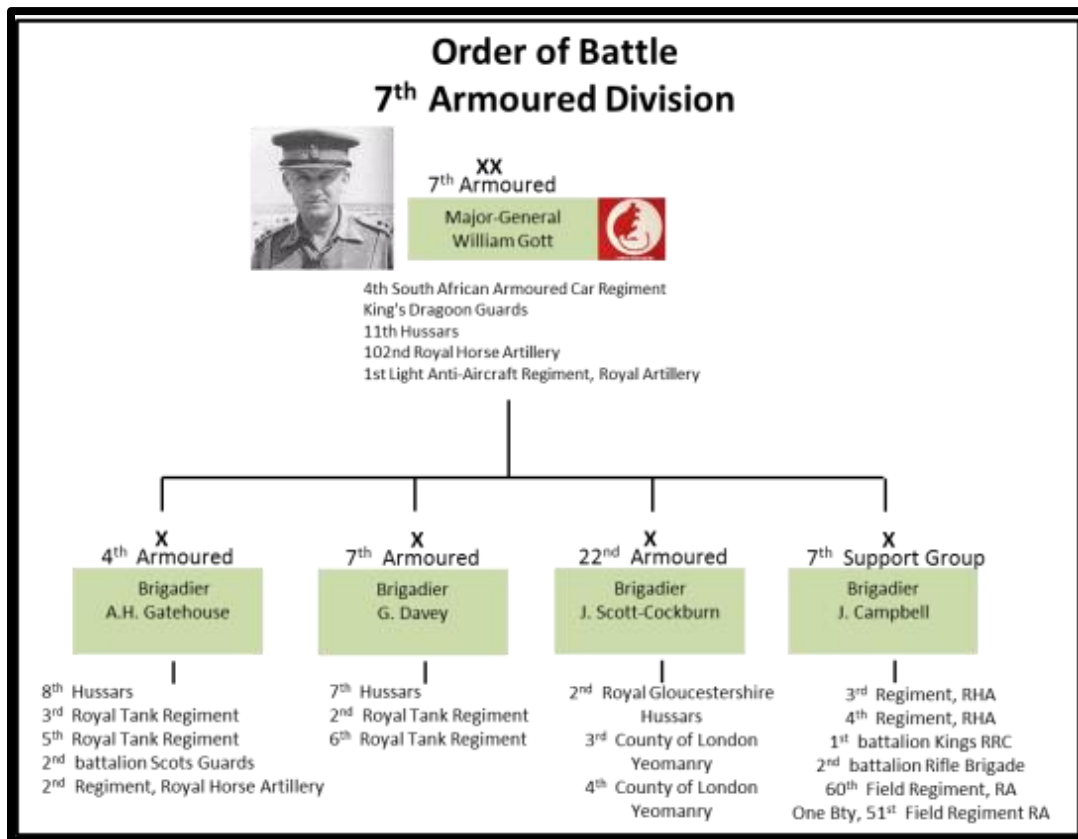


Figure 8 7th Armoured Division Order of Battle Crusader 18 November 1941. This Division would fight and almost perish side by side with the South Africans.

The Italian component of the Axis Forces consisted of the Italian Mobile Army XX Corps commanded by Lieutenant-General Gastone Gambara made up of two divisions being the 132nd Armoured Division *Ariete* commanded by General Mario Balotta and the 101st Motorised Division Trieste. These two divisions remained under Italian control for the duration of Crusader having been excluded from Rommel's command mainly for the purpose of Italian pride. Panzer Group Afrika was commanded by Rommel and consisted of the *DAK* commanded by Generalleutnant Ludwig Crüwell and an Italian Infantry component, XXI Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Enea Navarrini and made up of four infantry divisions. The *DAK* was made up of the 15th Panzer Division commanded by Generalmajor Walter Neumann-Silkow, the 21st Panzer Division commanded by Generalmajor Johann von Ravenstein, and the 90th Light Africa Division commanded by Generalmajor Max Sümmermann. (See Figure 9)

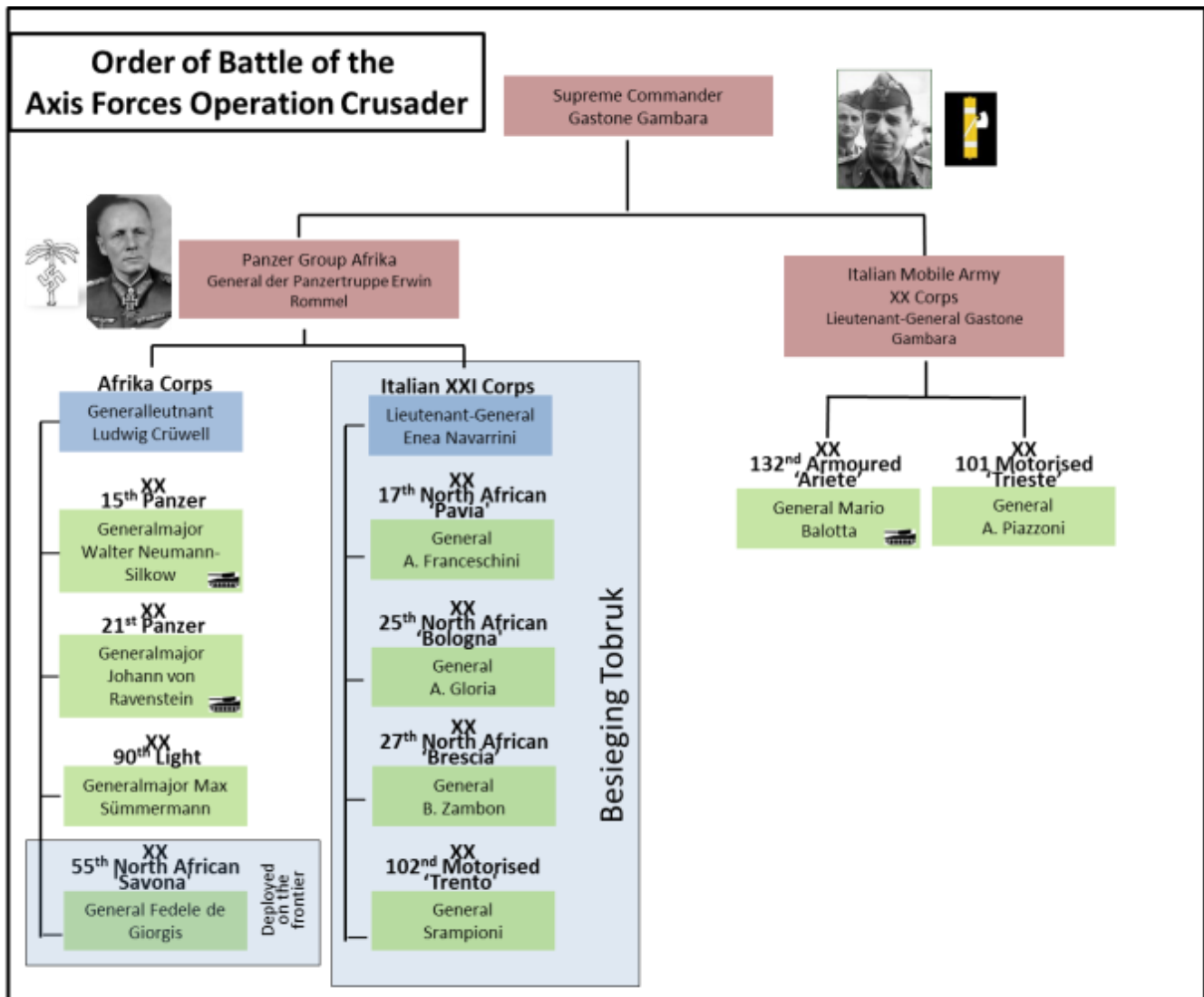


Figure 9 Axis Order of Battle Crusader 18 November 1941.

The Eighth Army, beside the handicap of outmoded doctrine, lacked experience in modern warfare. Auchinleck, Cunningham and the two Corps commanders, Godwin Austin and Norrie were devoid of desert war experience and none had ever fought with armoured formations. The Axis commanders on the other hand, shared a wealth of experience, most having fought in tough desert conditions for many months, acquiring extensive armoured warfare experience from the campaigns in Europe. Rommel, as the head of the *DAK*, was a masterful tactician and since arriving in Africa had inflicted successive defeats on the British chasing them all the way back to the Egyptian Frontier. The Axis forces were well led, flushed with victory, and had supreme confidence in the superiority of their fighting ability.²⁰²

²⁰²

C. Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (New York: Viking Press, 1961) (pp. 81,82). See also K. Ford, *Operation Crusader 1941: Rommel in Retreat* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010) (pp. 12-15).

Crusader was born out of the necessity to relieve Tobruk which was besieged since 11 April 1941. The relief of Tobruk would allow the establishment of airfields which would cover the convoys between Alexandria and Malta.²⁰³ The timing of Crusader was also considered to be opportune, due to Germany's preoccupation with the invasion of Russia.²⁰⁴ When the Tobruk siege was lifted on 27 November 1941 the garrison had endured 240 days in isolation behind the Axis lines making it one of the longest sieges of the war beside that of Leningrad which endured 872 days. The Crusader plan called for great secrecy and huge efforts were made to ensure that it came as a complete surprise to the Axis.²⁰⁵

The primary objective and the first phase of the operation was designed to lure the enemy armoured forces to Gabr Saleh, a central position, into a pitched battle with the British armour, which due to their superior numbers and concentration would defeat the Axis tanks in detail. In Auchinleck's words "The German armoured divisions were the backbone of the enemy's army, and to destroy them was our principal object. The three armoured brigades were concentrated in the 30th Corps and commanded by Lieutenant-General Willoughby Norrie who was instructed to use them to seek out and destroy the enemy's armour. When the Panzer divisions had been well and truly dealt with, the rest of our forces would carry out their parts in the operation."²⁰⁶ Therefore the first phase of Crusader was nothing less than the destruction of Rommel's armour using the superior British numbers in a pitched tank versus tank battle.²⁰⁷

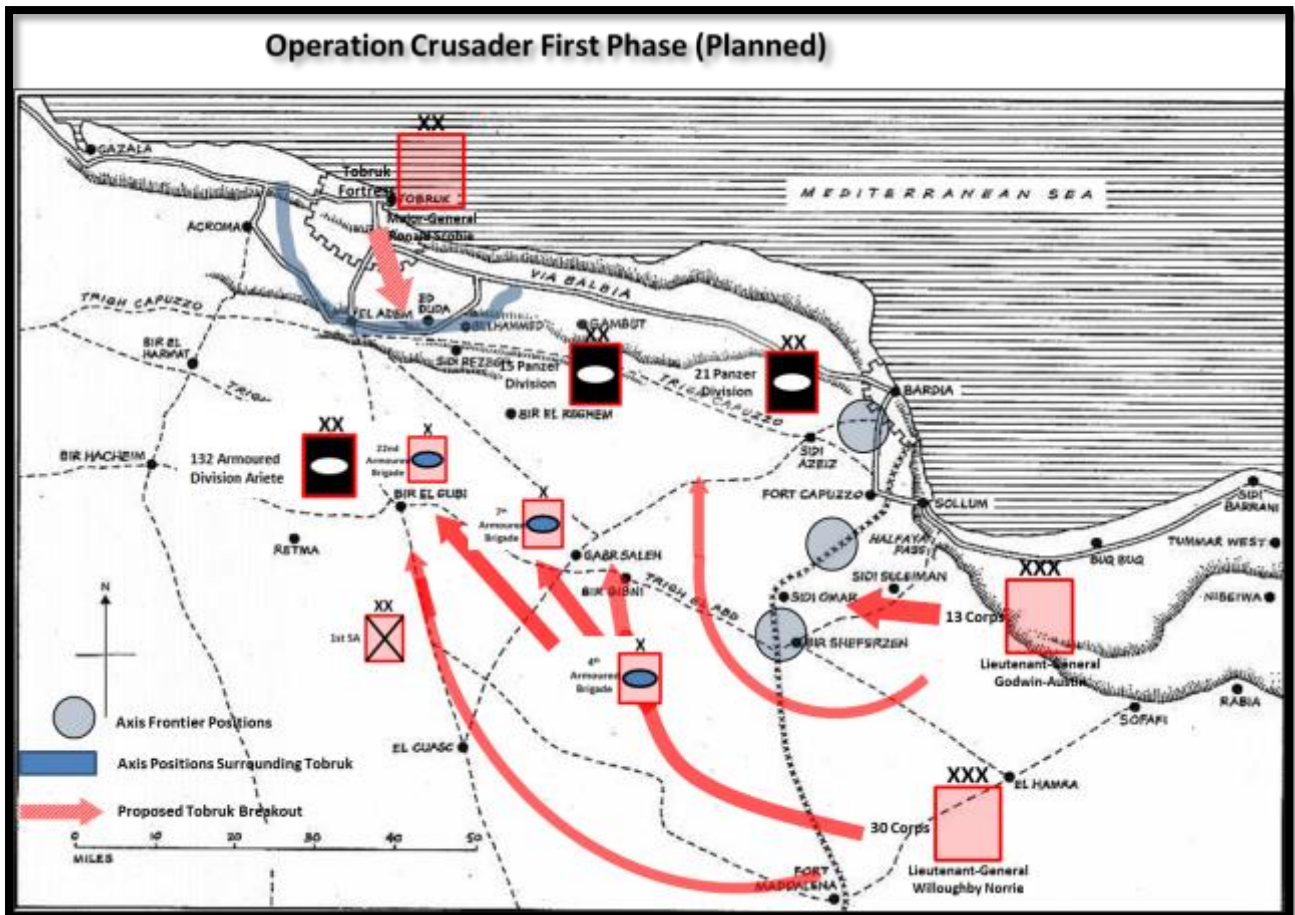
²⁰³ DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)8 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941.

²⁰⁴ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 27). The Germans invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 in Operation Barbarossa deploying hundreds of divisions the size of which dwarfed the North African campaign, rendering it effectively as a sideshow.

²⁰⁵ DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)23,30, Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. and Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 115,116).

²⁰⁶ TNA, WO 32/10160/312, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

²⁰⁷ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War*, (p. 33). and DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)19,44, Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. and TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942.



Map 1 The Planned First Phase of Crusader 18 November 1941.²⁰⁸

The secondary objective and second phase of the operation involved the infantry divisions of the South Africans and New Zealanders linking up with the garrison of Tobruk, who on a given signal would break-out of the fortress to meet the relieving troops. The initial objective for the South Africans was to man the extreme left wing of 30th Corps so that 'The first task of the 1st South African Infantry Division was to protect the western and south-western flanks of the communications of the Armoured Division.'²⁰⁹ Once the Axis tanks had been destroyed, the Infantry divisions would be unleashed to relieve the siege of Tobruk and cut off the enemy forces occupying the frontier.²¹⁰

The 13th Corps, reinforced with the 1st Army Tank Brigade, commanded by Lieutenant-General A.R. Godwin Austin, was tasked was to pin down the Axis frontier positions while flanking those same

²⁰⁸ *The West Point Military History Series: Atlas For the Second World War*, ed. by T.E. Griess (New Jersey: Avery, [n.d.]). The depiction of opposing forces and their movement has been constructed by the author.
²⁰⁹ TNA, WO 32/10160/312,335, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

²¹⁰ DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)30 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. and TNA, WO 32/10160/335,336, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

positions on the southern flank and appearing in the rear of the enemy defences. The offensive ability of 13th Corps was strengthened with the inclusion of 1st Army Tank Brigade.

The 30th Corps, whose duty it was to destroy Rommel's tanks, contained the bulk of Eighth Armies tank assets in the form of three armoured brigades the 4th, 7th, and 22nd Armoured Brigade. 30th Corps also contained the 1st Division whose 1st and 5th Infantry Brigade were to advance and capture Bir El Gubi and mask 132^a Divisione Corazzata 'Ariete' (*Ariete*), the Italian armoured division that occupied defensive positions in the area. The Tobruk garrison was suitably reinforced with the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and tasked with breaking out of the fortress to meet the relief force when ordered to once the enemy armoured force had been defeated.²¹¹

The strategic plan seemed sound, given the overall superiority the British enjoyed in manpower and material. It was at the operational level that Crusader contained the seeds of the destruction of the 5th Brigade. The whole operation, in deference to British doctrine, was pinned on the destruction of the enemy tank forces relegating the Infantry to a secondary role and vulnerable to attacks by Axis armour. Auchinleck in a signal to Churchill, two days after assuming command, eloquently summed up his feelings as to the role of the infantry brigades in the coming battle. "It is quite clear to me that infantry divisions, however well trained and equipped, are no good for offensive operations in this terrain against enemy armoured forces. Infantry divisions are and will be needed to hold defended localities after enemy armoured forces have been neutralised and destroyed."²¹²

The lack of combined arms doctrine resulted in a failure to produce a balanced fighting formation which meant that British armoured formations often lacked an infantry and artillery component. On the other hand, precious armour resources were assigned in a constant endeavour to ensure the safety, and on occasion to rescue, vulnerable infantry brigades.²¹³ The dual function of the armour to destroy enemy tanks and at the same time protect the infantry was not conducive to a concentration of the British armoured forces against the Axis armour. The 4th Armoured Brigade was assigned the task of keeping watch of 13th Corps left flank as it swung around the Axis defensive line. This role ensured that 4th and 7th Armoured Brigade would be separated by up to 20 kilometres instead

²¹¹ TNA, WO 32/10160/335, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

²¹² Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War*, (p. 27).

²¹³ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War*, (p. 33). Liddell Hart quotes Carver, "The Crusader operation was fought to an and ending accompaniment of screams from one infantry division headquarters, or field maintenance centre, after another for tanks to come and protect them against the presence or threat of enemy tanks." Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 105).

of concentrating into one force in the drive to Gabr Saleh.²¹⁴ The 22nd Armoured Brigade, whose job it was to screen the South Africans from *Ariete*, would also find itself many kilometres from Gabr Saleh. Concentration of the armour was essential if the British were to avoid committing to battle in a piecemeal fashion. This allowed the Axis to engage each brigade separately instead of presenting an overwhelming concentrated force.²¹⁵

The third flaw of the operational plan was the choice of a point on the map of no real consequence at Gabr Saleh, to lure the German armour into a destructive tank battle on British terms.²¹⁶ Gabr Saleh proved to be so inconsequential that Rommel failed to take the bait. Had the British chosen a more strategic objective, such as Sidi Rezegh or even Tobruk, and seized the initiative, it would have forced Rommel to take decisive action. One of the cornerstones of *The Nine Principles of War* authored by J.F.C. Fuller relates to the seizing, retaining, and exploiting the initiative. Fuller maintains that, 'Maintaining the initiative does not necessarily mean attacking and advancing. If the reserves be strong, it may frequently mean defending and retiring in order to create a situation in which their use may lead to decisive victory.'²¹⁷

The British significantly outnumbered the Germans in the crucial area of tank numbers at the outset of Crusader. (See Figure 10) British tank superiority in numbers was close to a 2-to-1 ratio, and despite many texts that offer the opposite view, the Germans did not enjoy a significant qualitative superiority. In most areas, including armour and armament, British tanks were on an equal footing, if not superior to their German counterparts.²¹⁸ Under-estimation of Italian fighting power was to cost the British grievously in the opening days of Crusader, when the inexperienced 22nd Armoured Brigade was decimated at the hands of the Italian *Ariete* Division. An insight into this mind-set appears in Auchinleck's despatch, where he states, "To give a reasonable chance of our offensive succeeding, we

²¹⁴ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 103). Liddell Hart describes it as, "the advantage gained by the strategical outflanking manoeuvre, which had placed the enemy in a very awkward in danger situation, was forfeited in the tactical execution." The Germans had concentrated their forces into one compact force while the British introduced their armour Brigades one at a time into the battle.

²¹⁵ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, (p. 105).and Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 33). and DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)34 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. and TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942.

²¹⁶ DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)36 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. Norrie was keen to aim the 7th Armoured Division directly at Tobruk but was turned down by Cunningham at a conference held on 29 October. and TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942.

²¹⁷ J. Fuller, *The foundations of the Science of War* (Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff Colledge Press, 1993) (p. 257). See also Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 103). and Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 17).

²¹⁸ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War*, (pp. 51,52). Carver denies German technological superiority as being a major factor.

should have about 50 per cent, numerical superiority over the German armoured forces, though we can accept equality with the Italians.”²¹⁹

The British also enjoyed the luxury of a large number of tank reserves, unlike the Germans who had very little in the way of a credible reserve.²²⁰ The Axis did enjoy a significant advantage in anti-tank weapons, due to their tactical superiority. The British were forced to fall back on their 25 pounder artillery and use them in the anti-tank role in an attempt to redress their deficiencies in this area. On the occasions that they were able to bring this powerful and versatile weapon to bear, they extracted a grievous tally on the Axis armour. However the use of the 25 pounder artillery weapon in the anti-tank role detracted from their intended purpose of providing the infantry with all important artillery cover.²²¹ (See Figure 10)

The first formations of South Africans to arrive in Egypt were the headquarters of the 1st Division on 4 May 1941. The South Africans took over the fortress of Mersa Matruh, eventually manning it with 5th Brigade which arrived on 14 June, followed by 2nd Brigade on 30 June, both of which had seen active service in East Africa.²²² The 1st Division then proceeded to busy themselves with the repair and enhancement of the Mersa Matruh fortifications while acclimatising themselves to the harsh desert conditions and the different military atmosphere under the auspices of British overall command. The fact that the South Africans spent more time building the defences of Matruh rather than embarking on essential desert training is bitterly referred to in the divisional report authored Brink.²²³

²¹⁹ TNA, WO 32/10160/384, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

²²⁰ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 102). Liddell Hart estimates that the British had 259 tanks in reserve with a further 96 in shipment together with a further 231 tanks with armoured divisions not deployed for the operation. The Germans had 50 tanks in total held in reserve or under repair.

²²¹ DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (1)37 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. and Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 52). See also W. Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, ed. by M. Fairbrother (Wellington : Historical Publications Branch, 1961) (pp. 59,60).

²²² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 74,75).

²²³ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.2, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. and Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 31). See also Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles*, (p. 90).

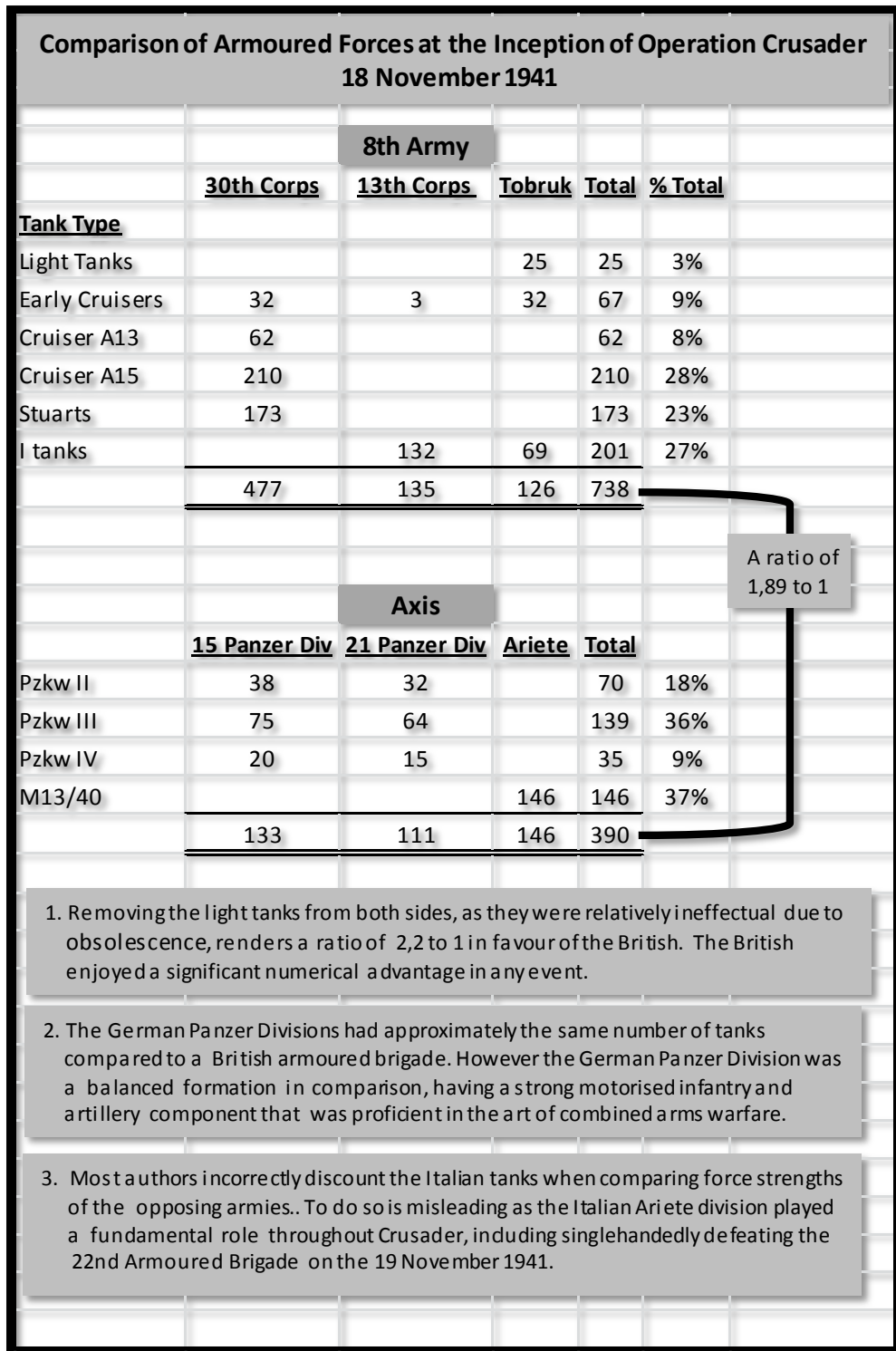


Figure 10 Comparison of Armoured Forces at the Inception of Crusader 18 November 1941.²²⁴

The New Zealand 2nd Division, in contrast to their South African counterparts, seemed to have received adequate training, despite being assigned similar duties in strengthening the Baggush defences. The New Zealand official history stresses that unlike the South Africans, training came first,

²²⁴ I.S.O. Playfair, *A History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*, ed. by J. Butler (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2004), III (p. 30).

due to the resolve of Freyburg, who would have put up stern opposition should the British have insisted otherwise. To the increasing anxiety of their senior officers, the South Africans were unable to conduct even a battalion size exercise for the five months up to 11 October, being preoccupied with the defences of Matruh.²²⁵

The role of the South Africans in Crusader was explained to Brink at a conference held on 6 October. Once the Axis armour had been neutralised then the South Africans would complete the second phase which was to advance on Tobruk and meet the forces breaking out there. At a further conference on 15 October Brink requested tank support for his division, and it was agreed to provide 'some cruisers' from Tobruk once 1st Division linked up with the garrison there. Smuts ever the visionary, had told Cunningham weeks before Crusader that he wanted the South African units to be "infused" with "armoured weapons" so as to achieve a balanced formation of all arms.²²⁶ Furthermore it was laid down at that conference that the 1st Division would not be brought up until either the tank battle was over, or the enemy armoured forces had been effectively hemmed in.²²⁷ Brink was not overly concerned with the threat of tanks as he felt that the main tank concentration and battles would take place away from the 1st Division locality due to the enemy having to respond to the threat caused by 'the concentration of 7th Armoured Division.'²²⁸ Interestingly the tanks of the Italian *Ariete* Division, a later cause of anxiety to the South Africans, did not seem bother Brink at this stage.²²⁹

What did concern Brink was that his division would field only two brigades instead of the normal three called for in the order of battle. The absence of a third brigade in the division would curtail the full fighting and defensive power of the formation. Brink's request for a third brigade to fill

²²⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 32).

²²⁶ NAP, JSP Box 137, f.10, Smuts to Auchinleck, *Armoured Car Output*, 17 October 1942.

²²⁷ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.3, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Brink was assured at the same conference that every effort would be made to prevent the enemy armoured force from attacking the 1st Division, 'the Div(ision) would have to be prepared to fight tanks if necessary.' An additional antitank regiment would be placed under command for this purpose. This promise, according to Brink, was never fulfilled with Cunningham going back on his word and allotting the antitank regiment to XXX Corps.

²²⁸ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.4, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Brink states, 'By occupying well organized defended localities, tanks could be fought off.'

²²⁹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.4, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Brink was not alone in underestimating the worth of the Italian forces. Liddell Hart does the same in his monumental work on the history of the Royal Tank Regiment. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, (p. 99). and Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 112). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, "That an Italian armoured division might also have to be dealt with was scarcely considered; its tanks, the minutes broadly hinted, were inferior."

his ranks and a request for additional artillery in the form of two batteries where denied for administrative and infrastructure reasons.²³⁰ Brink went on to say,

This decision had to be accepted as inevitable but left me with the uncomfortable feeling that I would have to engage in serious operations with a weak Division and that I would be faced with the same problems that faced me in Abyssinia of having little in hand with which to influence a battle or cope with any unexpected situation that might arise.²³¹

Brink was growing increasingly concerned with the slow rate of arrival of desert worthy motorised transport meant to replace the worn-out transport brought with the division from the East African campaign. Adding to the transport woes were the substantial amount of drivers on loan to the forward dumping program.²³² This shortage of transport seriously impinged on the required desert training of the division.²³³ On 2 November Brink was still not in possession of his transport despite assurances from the Divisional Quarter Master General in Cairo that he would receive them by the end of October. Brink placed his position in writing, stating that due to the delays in receiving his transport, he was unable to undertake the required desert training and would therefore not be ready for any deployment until 21 November.²³⁴

Cunningham threatened to reassign the South Africans to a semi-defensive role forcing Brink to relent and moved the date to the 18 November. Brink was clearly unhappy with the situation and succumbed to the ultimatum offered to him in order to save honour and maintain the reputation of the South African contingent.²³⁵ The fact that Brink was uncomfortable with the role assigned to his inexperienced Division is reflected in his own words written in his diary.

There was no time to ponder or argue. The army commander was applying the acid test. I was not happy about the state of training of my division and in my heart I felt it was not in a fit state, tactically, and did not possess the hitting power to engage in serious operations.²³⁶

During the period 3 – 13 November, the 1st and 5th Brigades carried out training exercises although the scope of these were limited due to petrol rationing. The brigades carried out a night move

²³⁰ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 41). The third brigade languished in Matruh, as the British could not support a larger force that far west.

²³¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.5, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²³² A large portion of the South African drivers were assigned to transporting supplies ahead of the offensive to dumps along the path of the proposed path of attack.

²³³ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.9, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. and Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 40).

²³⁴ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 89,90). Brink originally requested 21 clear days once his transport was in hand in which to get ready for the operation. and TNA, WO 32/10160/311,335, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

²³⁵ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 32). Carver describes Brink relenting as a "pity" for all concerned.

²³⁶ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 92).

on the evening of 16 November despite representations from Brink that these would prove to be “expensive in vehicles, water, petrol and efficiency and that the brigades should rather undertake a day move.” The importance on the ability to move at night cannot be overemphasized. The South Africans showed a great reluctance to do so throughout Crusader, and thus disposed of the best method of concealment in desert warfare conditions.²³⁷ It is interesting to contrast these belated brigade exercises with those conducted by the New Zealanders, who launched a full scale brigade exercise on the 8 October a month earlier. By early October, all battalions and exercised with anti-tank and Vickers guns which were to be attached to them. The New Zealanders busied themselves with navigation skills, especially at night, improvement in marksmanship with small arms and mortars. Significantly night marches and patrols were part of an extensive curriculum.²³⁸

Brink, in his report, brings to attention the considerable problems that “B” echelon posed, which consisted of thousands of soft-skinned vehicles needed to transport and supply the division, when the formation found itself in a combat situation. It seems as if the South Africans struggled to find suitable doctrine for dispersing and protecting motorised transport during movement phases and disposal when hastily attacking or defending a position. It was through the soft underbelly of B echelon that the Germans would strike and destroy the 5th Brigade.²³⁹

2.2 The Battle Begins: The Launch Of Crusader 18 and 19 November 1941.

Crusader coincided with a massive thunderstorm, making for heightened levels of discomfort amongst the troops, and rendering all air operations on both sides near impossible. The soggy conditions impeded non-tracked vehicle movement for days to come, and the low cloud conditions, which persisted until the end of the month, ensured that air reconnaissance was severely hampered.²⁴⁰ Ironically, the Allied efforts at subterfuge aided by the foul weather and Rommel’s preoccupation with his own imminent attack on the fortress of Tobruk, had an unexpected adverse effect on the plan to entice the German armour into a tank battle. The British had achieved complete surprise which was

²³⁷ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.15, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Brink reported that indeed the night move did prove to be ‘expensive’ and he concluded that, ‘...night moves, unless of vital importance to achieve a most important objective, should not be carried out over difficult and unknown terrain.’ and Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 120).

²³⁸ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (pp. 34,35).

²³⁹ The South African official history refers to provision being made to incorporate the “B” Echelon within the brigade perimeter in a diagram supposedly issued to units of 1 Brigade. Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 118). The 1st South African Infantry Division Order of Movement diagram also incorporates the “B” Echelon within the divisional perimeter. DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Appendix B, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941..

²⁴⁰ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 21).

desirable at the strategic level, but less welcome at the tactical level. The Germans unaware of the developing British threat at Gabr Saleh failed to fall in with the British plan, leaving the British armoured brigades gathering there, to languish. The non-appearance of the German armoured forces indicated that the choice of Gabr Saleh as a point on the map in which to entice the Germans was fallacious.

There was now a subtle change in plan which required 7th Armoured Brigade to proceed to Sidi Rezegh thus threatening the opening of a corridor to Tobruk. This they would have to accomplish alone as Lieutenant-General William H. E. "Strafer" Gott, commander of 7th Armoured Division decided that the Italian *Ariete* at Bir El Gubi must be dislodged by 22nd Brigade. The 4th Brigade was left with the task of guarding the flank of 13th Corps. Therefore in a single stroke the British armoured forces were now split in three.²⁴¹

Despite the poor weather conditions the 1st Division together with the remainder of 30th Corps led by elements of the 4th South African Armoured Car Regiment, made good progress over the flat terrain, devoid of the enemy except for a few German reconnaissance units. By evening the South African 1st Brigade had advanced 144 kilometres covering the west flank of 30th Corps reaching its objective at El Cuasc with the 5th Brigade just 32 kilometres to the south.²⁴² It is here that they received their orders for the next day which entailed the occupation of Bir El Gubi by 1st Brigade and Gueret Hamza 16 kilometres to the south by 5th Brigade. The task of dislodging *Ariete*, based at Bir El Gubi, was left to the 22nd Armoured Brigade. The South African official history identifies the attack on Bir El Gubi by the 22nd Armoured Brigade as the first in a series of events that deviated from the original plan and had the effect of breaking the cohesion of the 7th Armoured Division. The attack by one of the three armoured brigades on *Ariete* was not anticipated in the original plan, which in fact discouraged pursuit of *Ariete* and earmarked the German armour as the main target.²⁴³

The second day of Crusader started uneventfully for the South Africans who took the opportunity to take care of administrative and logistical matters. At noon, Brink received orders to move his 1st Brigade to Gueret Hamza and 5th Brigade to El Cuasc, and there to await news and developments of the armoured attack on *Ariete* at Bir El Gubi. That afternoon, during the advance, both brigades were the subject of heavy air attacks that resulted in 1st Brigade suffering 19 casualties. At 1600 hours Brink received orders from 30th Corps to occupy Bir El Gubi by 1800 hours, and on his enquiry as to the situation there he was told that 22nd Armoured Brigade had destroyed 45 tanks and captured 200 enemy personnel. It seems that the British felt that *Ariete* had suffered a decisive blow

²⁴¹ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 81).

²⁴² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 128).

²⁴³ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 82). See also Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles*, (pp. 133,134).

and that the South Africans would have little trouble in occupying Bir El Gubi in the face of weak Italian opposition remaining.²⁴⁴

At 1715 hours Brink received an immediate halt order based on the fact that the position at Bir El Gubi was now unknown signalling that the attack there may not have been successful. The fact that *Ariete* held the position in strength was confirmed by a liaison officer from 22nd Armoured Brigade a while later. At 2045 hours Brink was informed that 22nd Armoured Brigade would proceed to Sidi Rezegh in the morning and that he must make plans to occupy the position and be prepared later in the day to send a brigade to Sidi Rezegh to support 7th Armoured Division. The occupation of Bir El Gubi by 1st Brigade was later watered down to the task of “masking” *Ariete*, a more achievable task given that 22nd Brigade with its tanks had already failed against the Italians. The necessity for the South Africans to mask Bir El Gubi and relieve 22nd Armoured Brigade, came about due to a steady change in the original plan to concentrate armoured forces at Gabr Saleh and await a German reaction to their presence. Due to the fact that 7th Armoured Brigade had seized the important airfield of Sidi Rezegh earlier that day, the British now opted for a much bolder plan of shifting the emphasis and concentration of forces there.²⁴⁵

There were a number of issues that conspired to imbue this new plan with complications that would erode its intention of concentrating all available armoured forces and then seeking a decisive battle with the German tanks. The first of these complications arose from an unlikely source, being the Italian armoured division, *Ariete*, holding defensive positions at Bir El Gubi. The inexperienced but well equipped 22nd Armoured Brigade had in fact failed in its ill-conceived attack against the Italians earlier that day. The armoured brigade, unsupported by infantry and lacking adequate artillery charged headlong into the well prepared Italian positions and suffered accordingly.²⁴⁶ The Italian official history describes the British tank attack as being similar to a cavalry charge. The British charged into well prepared Italian defensive positions protected by anti-tank guns of varying calibre that extracted a fearful toll.²⁴⁷ At one stage some members of the Bersaglieri were overwhelmed by the weight of the British attack and attempted to surrender, but soon realized that the British tanks were unaccompanied

²⁴⁴ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 150).

²⁴⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 89).

²⁴⁶ I. Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts: Mussolini's Elite Armoured Divisions in North Africa* (Ramsbury: Crowood Press, 2006) (p. 86). The Italian armoured division *Ariete* was equivalent to a British armoured brigade in tank strength. The difference was that the Italians were able to build a more balanced division that contained integral infantry and artillery unlike the British Brigade that was essentially a pure tank force. M Knox, *Military Effectiveness: The Second World War*, ed. by A.R. Millet and M. Williamson (New York: Cambridge, 2010), III (p. 151). Italian doctrine was surprisingly predisposed to an all arms concept of warfare, having not been largely exposed to British “all tank” theorists. The Italians favoured all-arms cooperation. The few mobile Italian units apparently learned more quickly than the British, the lesson that armour, artillery, and infantry must of necessity function as a team

²⁴⁷ M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale...* (p. 450).

by infantry and they were able to pick up their weapons and re-man the defences.²⁴⁸ The final moments of the battle culminated in an armoured battle when 100 tanks of *Ariete* counter-attacked the heavily engaged British thrust and the British then withdrew at 1630 in considerable disarray according to the Italian official history.²⁴⁹

Sources vary in exact casualty figures but the inexperienced British suffered a severe and unexpected reversal at the hands of a supposedly inept enemy.²⁵⁰ The disbelief in Italian ability to “put up a decent fight” is demonstrated strikingly in Brinks divisional after battle report, where he incorrectly ascribes the surprisingly good Italian performance in Crusader down to the fact that the Italian tanks were partially crewed and hence stiffened by German personnel.²⁵¹ This failure to defeat the Italians ensured that they were a constant threat to the British flank in succeeding days, and their presence intimidated the South African brigades to the extent that their ability to manoeuvre decisively in the forthcoming battles was severely curtailed.²⁵²

The second issue that worked against the British concentrating their armour for a powerful knock-out blow was the need for the British to protect the vulnerable infantry brigades. The 4th Armoured Brigade had the dual purpose of guarding the New Zealand Infantry division and providing a component of the concentrated armour at Gabr Saleh. The fact that the new concentration point had

²⁴⁸ Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts* (p. 83). *Ariete* had the advantage over the British 22nd Armoured Brigade, having a similar amount of tanks to the British, but unlike them, having a balanced component of infantry and artillery in a combined arms division.

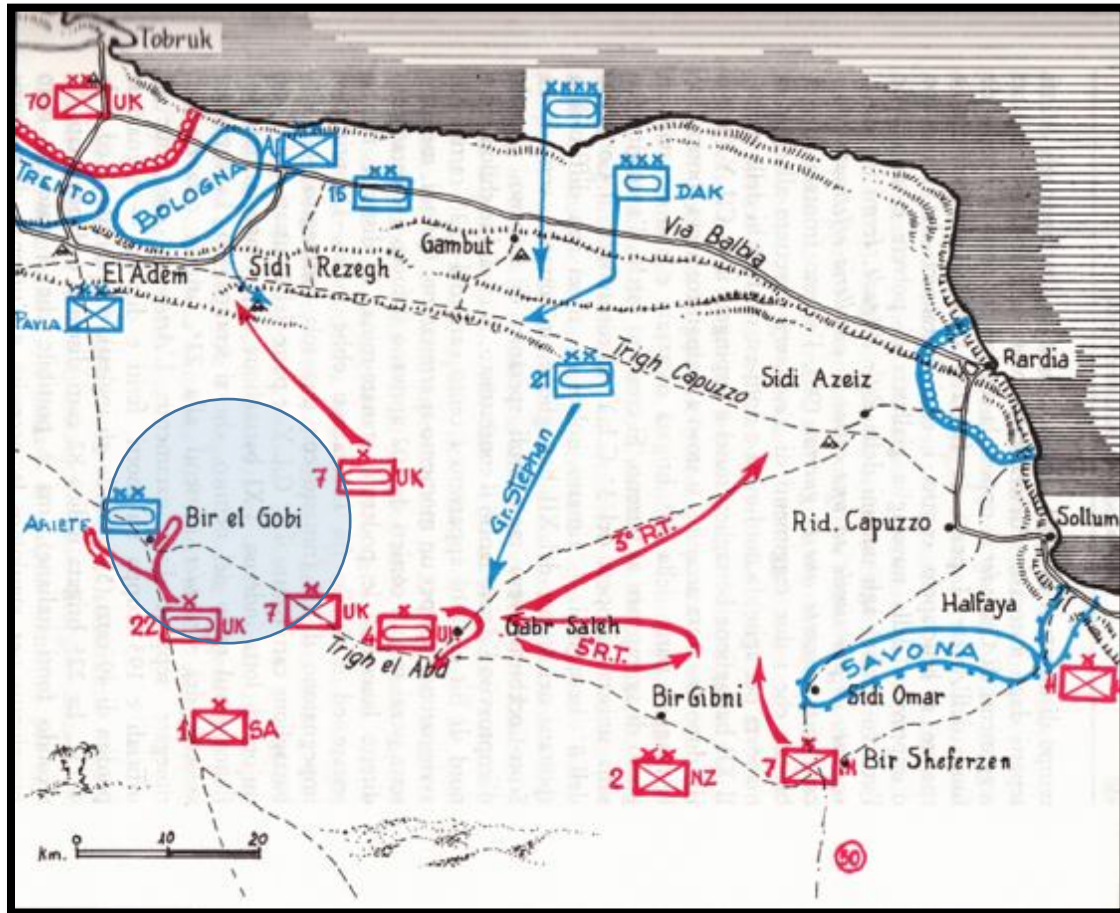
²⁴⁹ M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale...* (p. 450).

²⁵⁰ Italian sources admit to the loss of 34 tanks and claim to have destroyed 50 British tanks. The British in turn admit to the loss of 25 tanks which seems to be a low estimate. Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts* (p. 84). The Italian official history admits to 49 tanks lost (of which 15 were repairable) as against 57 British tanks. M. M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale...* (p. 450). Richard Humble gives further perspective to the British defeat at the hands of *Ariete*, stating that a further 45 tanks had been immobilized by battle damage or breakdowns. This meant that 22nd Armoured Brigade was down to 50% of its fighting strength after its clash with the Italians. Richard Humble, *Crusader: The Eighth Army's Forgotten Victory November 1941 - January 1942* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987) (p. 98). Liddell Hart in his history of the Royal tank Regiment devotes but one sentence to the rebuff suffered by 22nd Armoured Brigade describing it as a “series of gallant charges” that drove back the Italian tanks. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 106).

²⁵¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.4, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Brink writes, ‘I did not know at the time that the Italian tanks carried mixed German and Italian crews and were to put up such good fights.’ This was patently not true as the tanks in question were manned exclusively by Italians. Auchinleck is more generous to the Italians in his despatch TNA, WO 32/10160/3327, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942. ‘We counted on being able to oppose between 450 and 500 cruiser and American tanks to the enemy's 250. This latter figure did not include the 138 tanks of the Italian *Ariete* Division, which, although it lay to the south of Tobruk on the flank of our proposed line of advance, was believed to be not very formidable. This estimate of its value, based on the experience of General Wavell's campaign of the previous winter, proved to be somewhat erroneous. British reports spoke of Italian tanks being reinforced by German tanks DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (2)30 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941.

²⁵² TNA, WO 32/10160/312, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

been moved further north to Sidi Rezegh increased the distance between the brigades conflicting objectives and thus worked against the intention to consolidate all available armour against a German attack.²⁵³



Map 2 Movements and events on the 19th November, depicting the rebuf of the 22nd Armoured Brigade by *Ariete*, and the spread of the British Armoured Brigades with the 22nd and 4th "looking after the infantry."²⁵⁴

Nevertheless the British 7th Armoured Brigade succeeded in capturing the airfield at Sidi Rezegh, thus threatening the Axis forces holding the corridor between Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh. (Map 2.) Rommel had been in denial that the British advance was anything more than a diversion to distract his forces from their main objective of attacking Tobruk. The British arrival at Sidi Rezegh forced him to reconsider their true intentions and he authorised an attack to be launched by *Kampfgruppe* Stephan on 4th Brigade near Gabr Saleh.²⁵⁵ In what was the first large scale clash of armour in desert warfare, the two sides crashed into each other in an increasingly confusing battle. The battle ended at dusk with

²⁵³ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 85).

²⁵⁴ M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale...*, (p. 448).

²⁵⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (pp. 85,86). *Kampfgruppe* Stephan consisted of 85 tanks, 12 105mm howitzers, and 4 88mm antitank guns. The two sides were evenly matched in material.

the British forces, unsupported by artillery, and therefore unable to harass the Germans who were resupplying on the battlefield behind an anti-tank screen. Importantly, the British retired from the battlefield leaving the Germans to recover and repair their damaged tanks and denying the same opportunity to the British. The toll for the day's battle amounted to 24 British tanks destroyed against 3 destroyed and 3 damaged for the Germans. The British claimed to have knocked out 24 enemy tanks, which was the beginning of a trend of gross overestimation of enemy losses inflicted, that was to mislead the British and influence their decisions over the next few days of the campaign.²⁵⁶

2.3 Rommel Realizes That Crusader Is Not a Diversion - 20 November 1941

Rommel was now convinced of the seriousness of the British intentions, and realized that Crusader was more than a diversion to distract his planned attack on Tobruk, scheduled for the next morning. Rommel ordered Crüwell to seek and destroy the British armour in an attempt to keep the attack on Tobruk on track. Crüwell ordered his two scattered tank divisions to advance and concentrate on Gabr Saleh and attack the British 4th Armoured division using overwhelming force. Fortunately for the British, the German plan was revealed through intelligence intercepts. This prompted Norrie to order 22nd Brigade to disengage with *Ariete* and move across from Bir El Gubi to Gabr Saleh to support 4th Brigade.²⁵⁷

The British at last achieving their desire for a tank on tank battle at Gabr Saleh had to be satisfied with pitting two armoured brigades against the two German panzer divisions, which fell short of the concentration of British armoured forces envisaged in the original plan. In the event when the clash did occur at 1630 hours, it took place between 4th Armoured Brigade and 15th Panzer-Division as 22nd Armoured Brigade and 21st Panzer Division had not yet arrived on the battle field. The British, who had assumed a strong defensive position, were steadily forced backward, once again leaving control of the battlefield to the Germans at dusk. (Map 2) This enabled the Germans to recover and repair their damaged vehicles while the British tanks damaged in the battle were permanently lost.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 88).

²⁵⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 153). See also Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army*, (p. 20). Rommel's awareness of the British intentions was no doubt heightened by a BBC broadcast at 2100 announcing a major British offensive in the Western Desert.

²⁵⁸ The German war diary for the 15th Panzer-Division shows no losses in tanks for the day while the 4th Armoured Brigade had suffered a total of 68 tanks lost in three days. Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 159). Richard Humble estimates 4th Armoured Brigade losses in the encounter with 15th Panzer Division as 26 tanks lost. The British claimed a further 30 German tanks destroyed once again seriously over estimating the damage they had inflicted. Humble, *Crusader* (p. 108). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 88). The official history estimated the 4th Brigade losses for the day at more than 40.

During the day the 7th Armoured Brigade now defending Sidi Rezegh and doing a job better suited to an infantry division, came under attack by the German 90 *Leichte*-Division reinforced with heavy artillery. Despite a concerted effort, the British easily retained their positions without the Germans being able to dislodge them. Gott decided to replace the 7th Armoured Brigade with the Support Group, commanded by Major-General J. C. "Jock" Campbell, which due to its infantry and artillery component was better suited to defend and exploit the gains made thus far at Sidi Rezegh. At the same time the 5th South African Infantry Brigade was ordered up to, and expected to arrive late afternoon at Sidi Rezegh to give much needed infantry support there.²⁵⁹ (Map 3)

The impression was gained by Gott that the enemy forces manning the escarpment in front of 7th Armoured Brigade were weak.²⁶⁰ He suggested that the Support Group together with 5th Brigade, be used to clear the escarpment overlooking Sidi Rezegh at 0700 on the 21 November. The 7th Armoured Brigade was then to make contact with the Tobruk garrison at dawn on the 21 November, by meeting elements of the 70th Division ordered to break out of the encirclement.²⁶¹ Cunningham agreed that Major-General R.M. Scobie, commander of the 70th Division ensconced in Tobruk would attack out of the Tobruk perimeter towards El Duda at dawn on 21 November, while the Support Group assisted by the 5th Brigade would drive north-west simultaneously joining up with it. The 1st Brigade would remain at Bir El Gubi screening *Ariete*. The linking up with Tobruk marked another departure point from the original plan which called for the destruction or neutralisation of the enemy armour before a breakout from Tobruk would be attempted.²⁶² The poise now displayed by the British, in invoking the link up with Tobruk before the German tanks had been decisively defeated, was brought about by British overconfidence in the results of the impending tank battle.²⁶³

That morning the South Africans received orders to move 1 Brigade up to Bir El Gubi, either capture the point if it was not too heavily defended, or mask it if it was felt that an attack would draw unnecessary casualties. The British obviously felt that the 22nd Armoured Brigade had dealt *Ariete* a sharp blow and that the South Africans would be able to dislodge the supposedly weakened Italians from Bir El Gubi with ease. The 5th Brigade was to move up to the vicinity of Sidi Rezegh in support of 7th Armoured Brigade and to meet the sortie that was being sent forth from Tobruk. The South Africans

²⁵⁹ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 162).

²⁶⁰ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 42).

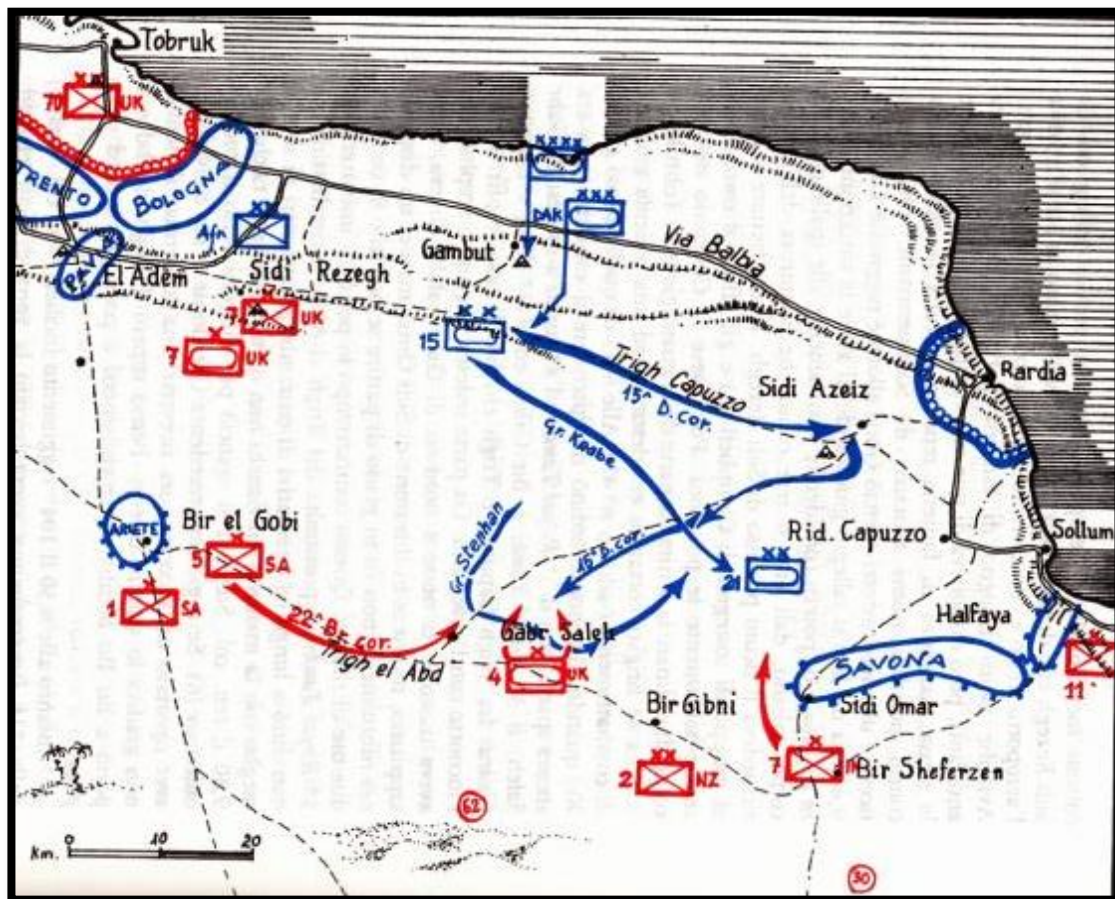
²⁶¹ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 163).

²⁶² Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 90). This has been described by the official New Zealand history as being a "haphazard" way of conducting the operation in the light of identifying, in the planning phase, that the neutralization of the Axis armour was a prerequisite to any breakout attempt by the Tobruk garrison.

²⁶³ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 42).

were to provide 7th Armoured Brigade with valuable infantry support by seizing and holding the raised rim of the escarpment to the north allowing observation to be gained as far as El Duda.²⁶⁴

As discussed above, the 22nd Armoured Brigade had been rushed to Gabr Saleh, in order to bolster the 4th Armoured Brigade for the much anticipated tank clash. This exposed the South Africans to the Italian armoured formation at Bir El Gubi, leaving them decidedly edgy at their prospects of an infantry brigade being pitted against a tank formation, albeit Italian.²⁶⁵ Pienaar was hesitant and lacked precise information as to the strength and disposition of *Ariete*. At 0900, while advancing cautiously, the lead elements of 1st Brigade came under Italian artillery fire and the South Africans halted and entered into an artillery duel with *Ariete* which lasted the whole day.²⁶⁶



Map 3 The situation on 20th November, with the 1st SA Brigade taking over from the 22nd Armoured Brigade and masking a very much intact *Ariete*. The 5th Brigade prepares to make its way to Sidi Rezegh to join the 7th Armoured Brigade. The 4th Armoured Brigade survives an attack by the German 15th Panzer-Division.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 89). See also Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 164).

²⁶⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 89). Described by the official history as being a "curious" role for infantry.

²⁶⁶ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 166).

²⁶⁷ M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale...* (p. 473).

At 1138 orders were received that Sidi Rezegh had been captured by 7th Armoured Brigade and that 5th Brigade must advance to Sidi Rezegh and make ready to advance the next day to El Duda linking up with the Australians breaking out of Tobruk.²⁶⁸ At 1400 Brink received a message from Brigadier Dan Pienaar the commander of 1st Brigade that 22nd Armoured Brigade had departed and that he felt that an attack on *Ariete* at Bir El Gubi by infantry would be a useless waste of lives.²⁶⁹ Brink fully concurred with Pienaar and instructed him to take up defensive positions effectively masking *Ariete*. At 1600 30 Corps confirmed that Brigadier B. Armstrong commander of 5th brigade was to advance on Sidi Rezegh, and in response, at 1630, 5th Brigade made a somewhat cautious move toward the objective. Brink was concerned that a night move may have to take place, and he received permission from Gott to halt 5th Brigade as soon as night fell and then resume the advance at dawn. The South Africans were reluctant to move at night having had an adverse experience on their approach march at the beginning of Crusader. Night moves were essential in desert warfare being one of only a few methods available for concealment in a desert bereft of foliage and terrain features. The South Africans placed themselves at an acute disadvantage compared with the enemy who made good use of darkness to manoeuvre their forces.²⁷⁰ The advance was eventually halted at 1805, a mere 20 kilometres short of Sidi Rezegh, after being delayed by three low flying attacks that resulted in a number of casualties.²⁷¹

At day close, The British has managed to concentrate two of their armoured brigades the 4th and 22nd at Gabr Saleh both having suffered grievous losses while inflicting very little damage on the core of the Axis armoured formations. 7th Armoured Brigade held the important landmark of Sidi Rezegh leaving the British confident that the forces in front of them were weak, and buoyed in the belief that they had destroyed approximately 100 Axis tanks to date which supposedly amounted to a substantial percentage of the forces facing them. In fact the Axis had suffered relatively little, managing to inflict substantially more damage than they had received. (See Figure 12A and 12B) It was due to the mistaken assessment of the damage inflicted on the Axis armoured forces that the British ordered the

²⁶⁸ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.27,28 *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²⁶⁹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.30, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²⁷⁰ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 169). The official history describes Brink's reluctance to move at night as an honest recognition of the low standard of training throughout the division. BoxPlayfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 43).

²⁷¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.34, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. and Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 167,169). Auchinleck in his despatch incorrectly cites Armstrong as seeking permission to halt his brigade at nightfall, when in fact this was as per his instructions from Brink. and TNA, WO 32/10160/337, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942. Armstrong protested against this in a letter to Auchinleck where he attempted to put the record straight. and TNA, CAB 106/638, Letter Armstrong to Deputy CGS, *Objection to Field-Marshal Auchinleck's Despatch*, 1948.

70th Division holding Tobruk to undertake their breakout the next day. Originally this was only to be undertaken once Axis armoured forces had been effectively neutralised. The British now earmarked the 5th Brigade and the 7th Support Group Brigade link with elements of the 70th Division breaking out of Tobruk.



Figure 11A Enjoying a mug of tea after capturing Hobok are (l. to r.) Lieut.-Colonel W. Kirby, Commanding Officer of 3rd Transvaal Scottish (who was later killed in action at Sidi Rezeg), Brigadier B. F. Armstrong, and Major Harry Klein, Commanding Officer of No. 1 S.A. Armoured Car Company.²⁷²



Figure 11B Newspaper cutting announcing the escape of Brigadier Armstrong from a POW camp during the Italian Armistice in September 1943.²⁷³

²⁷²

Orpen, *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns*, I (p. 163).

2.4 The Approach of the South Africans to Sidi Rezegh, the Attempted Break-Out of Tobruk and the Near Annihilation of 7th Armoured Brigade – 21 November.

During the evening of the 20/21 November, Rommel realised the British forces gathering at Sidi Rezegh were poised to relieve Tobruk. As a result he encouraged Crüwell to mobilise the DAK in the vicinity of Sidi Rezegh and to neutralise the threat. At dawn, after much preparation, the 70th Division launched an attack toward Sidi Rezegh a mere 18 kilometres away and after some hard fighting against resilient Italians and Germans from the 90th Light division, belatedly inserted by Rommel at the last minute, managed to penetrate within 6 kilometres of El Duda. The 70th Division suffered a loss of 60 of their compliment of 109 tanks. A testimony to the tough defence put up by the Italians and Germans.²⁷⁴ See (Figure 12A and 12B).

The southern pincer was to be formed by 7th Armoured Brigade, but instead of launching an attack to meet the forces breaking out from Tobruk, it instead found itself fighting for its life, when a half hour before the attack was to be launched, news arrived of the arrival of both German Panzer Divisions. The Germans crashed into the British armour at Sidi Rezegh and all but annihilated the 7th Armoured Brigade, reducing it to 28 tanks out of an original strength of 141 tanks at the start of the day. The obvious question is why the 7th Armoured Brigade was left alone to fend off the entire German armour force. Norrie had seen the German disengagement from the 4th and 22nd brigades incorrectly as a retreat, and although they followed in hot pursuit, they were no match for the German pace. They were delayed in closing the gap by a fuel stop and a skilful rear-guard consisting of a few German anti-tank guns and were never able to regain contact, leaving 7th brigade to its own devices.²⁷⁵ Furthermore Norrie had misinterpreted the relocation of the two Panzer divisions to Sidi Rezegh as a general withdrawal by the Axis from the frontier positions, and in response, unleashed the 13th Corps. This was earmarked to encircle the Axis positions on the frontier and cut off the “retreat”. By nightfall 13th Corps had succeeded in isolating the Axis forces holding the frontier at Halfaya, Sidi Omar and Bardia, although at a cost of 35 tanks in a hard fought series of battles.²⁷⁶

The New Zealand official history states, “in four days Eighth Army had lost some 530 tanks while the enemy lost about 100. Of 500 cruisers 7th Armoured Division retained fewer than 90, whereas the three enemy armoured divisions still had 250 tanks (170 of them German) of the 356 with which they had started the battle.” (See Figure 12A and 12B)The official history explains the disparity in losses as, “... against the panzer divisions the British tank units were outclassed in a way that defies

²⁷³ Source unknown.

²⁷⁴ Humble, *Crusader* (p. 111). BoxMurphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 92). Provides an insight into the tough resistance put up by the Axis defenders.

²⁷⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 99).

²⁷⁶ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 46).

explanation in terms of personalities or of relative armour and armament, the terms chiefly considered in the Middle East at the time.” The official history offers up as an explanation, “The essential difference was not of equipment, but of method. The Germans were favoured by a tactical doctrine, inspired by British prophets unhonoured in their own country, which had been refined by years of close study and experiment.”²⁷⁷

The South Africans represented by 1st Brigade maintained their screening duties of *Ariete* in the Bir El Gubi area for the 21 November, enduring a continual artillery duel that took place the whole day between these two formations. The South Africans were also subject to two heavy air attacks that caused very little damage. The situation in front of 1st Brigade was described as “obscure” as no prisoners had been captured and no information was received from 30th Corps.²⁷⁸ The South Africans received messages throughout the day alluding to the large numbers of enemy tanks ‘knocked out’ by 7th Armoured Division and the fact that the German panzer seemed to be withdrawing. The 5th Brigade had reached a point 22 kilometres south of Sidi Rezegh the previous day before stopping as night approached. Auchinleck in his despatch, although treading carefully, throws some light on the excruciating slowness of the South African efforts to close up on Sidi Rezegh. It basically boiled down to two words, inexperience and the Italians. His words are, “The 5th South African Infantry Brigade, which was expected to reach the scene before the development of the enemy attack, failed to do so, partly owing to the opposition of the *Ariete* Armoured Division and partly because of inexperience in handling the very large number of vehicles with which it took the field.”²⁷⁹

The revised orders from the previous day had instructed the 5th brigade to arrive in Sidi Rezegh by 0815 on the 21 November. The 5th Brigade set out later than required the next morning and had only covered 7 kilometres toward their objective when they were stopped by Gott who instructed them to halt and form a defensive posture until the tank battles raging to the north had been resolved.²⁸⁰ Brink had instructed Armstrong to leave all his non-essential B Echelon vehicles behind in the staging area before departing to Sidi Rezegh. In fact, contrary to the instruction given by Brink, the brigade was accompanied by the entire B Echelon.²⁸¹ During the course of the day elements of *Ariete* attacked 5th

²⁷⁷ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 108). Once again the influence of ‘British prophets’, on German doctrine has been grossly exaggerated in no less a publication as an official history. BoxPlayfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 45).

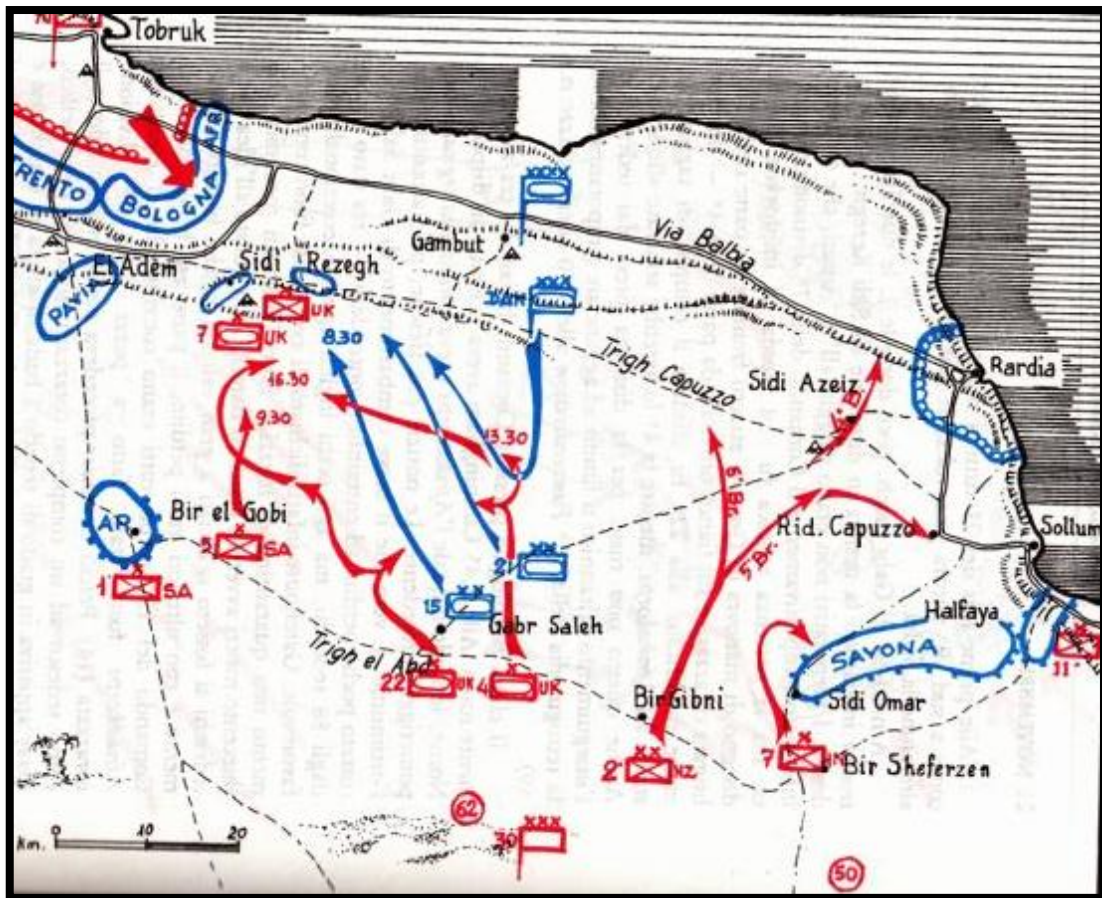
²⁷⁸ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p34, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²⁷⁹ TNA, WO 32/10160/313, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

²⁸⁰ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 37).

²⁸¹ NAP, JSP Box 137, f.32, Auchinleck to Smuts, ‘*B Echelon*’ at Sidi Rezegh 4 December 1941). South African Divisions were ordered to reduce transport to British War Establishments. and Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 168).

Brigade and suffered the loss of 8 tanks and 21 prisoners while inflicting 4 killed and 13 wounded on the South Africans.²⁸²



Map 4 The 5th Brigade begins its hesitant move up to Sidi Rezegh. The threat of *Ariete* to the South African flank can quite plainly be seen, with the South Africans moving forward with one eye cast to the left flank at all times. The Tobruk garrison begins its breakout!²⁸³

Ignorant of the fact that the armour balance had tipped in the favour of the Germans, the British plan was to get both South African brigades if possible to link up with the 70th Division breaking out of Tobruk the next day. The 22nd Guards Brigade was earmarked to relieve the 1st Brigade from its masking duties of *Ariete* at Bir El Gubi. According to the British, there was good reason for optimism and a Corps situation report issued at 2010 estimated that the Axis had lost 170 tanks, many vehicles and guns disabled or captured, and the Italians were rapidly withdrawing 'true to form'.²⁸⁴ The reality was different; the British had lost close to 180 tanks for the day managing to inflict a relative paltry 12 tank

²⁸² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 189). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 99). See also TNA, CAB 106/638, Letter Armstrong to Deputy CGS, *Objection to Field-Marshal Auchinleck's Despatch*, 1948. See also DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.37, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²⁸³ M. Montanari, *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale...* (p. 476).

²⁸⁴ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 100).

casualties on the Germans with the South Africans knocking out a further 8 Italian tanks. (See Figure 12A and 12B) British decision making throughout Crusader would be adversely affected by the vast overestimation of the damage they had inflicted on German armour. British intentions to destroy the Axis armour in detail had not materialized and their overwhelming superiority in tanks was rapidly diminishing with their failure to concentrate their armour assets against the Axis.

Fortunately for the British, the Germans were equally unaware of the extent of the damage that they had inflicted on the British armour formations. Rommel was anxious to maintain the siege on Tobruk and eventually through economy of his resources, launch an attack to breach its defences. Crüwell, on the other hand, was intent on reducing the British armour through a battle of manoeuvre using superior German battle skills. The consequence was a compromise between Rommel and Crüwell which had the result of dividing the panzer divisions instead of concentrating them.²⁸⁵

2.5 The 5th Brigade Attacks and is Repulsed by the Germans Holding Point 178 on the Sidi Rezegh Escarpment - 22 November

Dawn began with the tactical withdrawal of the two victorious panzer divisions, the 21st assembling at Belhamed assuming a blocking role on any further British advance to Tobruk, and the 15th driving back east and assembling at Gasr el Arid to allow room to manoeuvre and maintain a flanking threat to the British positions at Sidi Rezegh.²⁸⁶ The de-concentration and withdrawal of the panzer divisions presented the British with a fleeting opportunity to concentrate the remnants of 7th Armoured Division against the 15th Panzer Division and push through to Tobruk. The German disengagement was misconstrued by the British as the retreat of an enemy that had been defeated. The British had the advantage of superior numbers and holding better ground. That the British did not avail themselves of the opportunity was largely due to the ruinous tank losses suffered the previous day that invited a note of caution despite the gross overestimates of tank losses inflicted on the Germans.²⁸⁷

The resultant lull afforded by the German withdrawal from the battlefield encouraged Gott to order the South African 1st Brigade to move up to Sidi Rezegh at 1330 to establish a firm base for the intended thrust toward Tobruk earmarked for the next morning.²⁸⁸ In response Brink ordered Pienaar to move up to Sidi Rezegh as the 22nd Guards Brigade would be taking over the masking duties of *Ariete* from the 1st Brigade. Pienaar replied to Brink that he would not be able to comply immediately but

²⁸⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 101).

²⁸⁶ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 38). Crüwell was under the false impression that his panzers were surrounded by the British tank brigades and hence the withdrawal to allow more room.

²⁸⁷ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 101).

²⁸⁸ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War*, (p. 38).

would begin the manoeuvre at 1630. Pienaar was reluctant to move until he had been fully relieved by the 22nd Guards Brigade. Just before the designated time to begin his move to Sidi Rezegh, Pienaar signalled to Brink, that due to his motorised transport being dispersed and his artillery deployed on a wide front and in-depth, he would be unable to undertake the operation before 1730. The continued presence of *Ariete* on the South African flank invoked hesitancy in Armstrong and especially Pienaar, who continued to cast a wary eye towards *Ariete*.²⁸⁹

The South African 5th Brigade, although only a few kilometres from the epic tank battles taking place, maneuvered up to the edge of the southern escarpment where Gott ordered them to attack point 178 and occupy the positions held there by the German 155 Infantry Regiment. At 1330 Armstrong sent in the 3 Transvaal Scottish supported by 8 25-pounder guns. The Germans occupied positions on the reverse slope and little was known of their dispositions and due to the lack of effective reconnaissance, the artillery was not able to engage the enemy as targets had not been identified.²⁹⁰ The attack by the Transvaal Scottish was pinned down by accurate and heavy enemy firepower supported by enemy artillery and airpower. The lack of adequate reconnaissance and too little artillery support resulted in the loss of Lieutenant-Colonel Kirby the commanding officer, with 25 men killed and 92 wounded or missing without making an impression on the enemy.²⁹¹ (Map 5)

Norrie had envisaged that the South Africans would combine both of their brigades on the southern escarpment, after the 1st Brigade was relieved from its masking duties at Bir El Gubi by the 22nd Guards Brigade. After numerous delays by Pienaar and with Brink supporting the strenuous objections of Pienaar of undertaking a night march, it was decided that Pienaar would consolidate his position at Bir El Gubi, and then make ready to move up to Sidi Rezegh at first light. The New Zealand official history sees no reason why this link up could not be put into effect the way Norrie wanted. Pienaar was to prove a short while later in the Crusader campaign that he was well capable of undertaking a night move under more precarious conditions. This occurred on the 25 November when the Brigade under Pienaar retreated 29 kilometres with precision at night.²⁹²

The fact that Pienaar only started to move at 1730 despite being asked to do so many hours before and being warned of the possibility early in the afternoon, necessitated a night move. This hesitancy and what has been described as obduracy in the Transvaal Scottish Regimental History, has

²⁸⁹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p39, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²⁹⁰ C. Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932-1950* (Cape Town: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950) (p. 318).

²⁹¹ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 107).

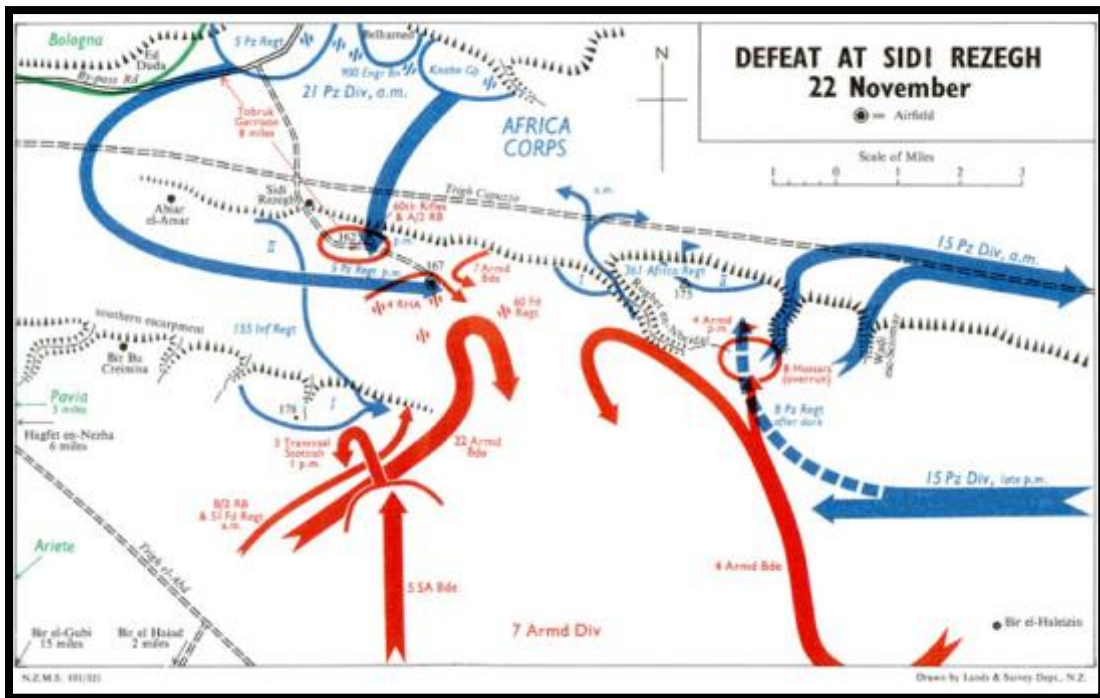
²⁹² Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish...* (p. 351). Movement at night is an essential part of desert warfare, and certainly the Germans had no qualms of using the concealment offered by darkness to maneuver their forces to best advantage. Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 107).

led some critics to believe that Pienaar, due to his excessive caution, had abandoned the 5th Brigade to its fate. British unit staffs and the New Zealanders expressed bitterness at Pienaar's 'insubordination' and 'dereliction of duty'. According to *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish*, Pienaar offered up the belief that his Brigade would have made very little difference in the absence of armoured support to the destruction of 5th Brigade and that his first duty was to preserve his own brigade.²⁹³ Pienaar's seemingly excessive concern for the wellbeing of his brigade impacted negatively on the British views of his abilities. His cautious approach and sensitivity to casualties persisted throughout the Crusader operation, it infuriated the British once again during the Gazala battles and reached a boiling point at Alamein.

Rommel and Crüwell became concerned with the British concentration of forces now developing to the south and independently ordered the 21 and 15th Panzer divisions to attack the concentration. (See Map 5) 21st Panzer Division attacked soon after at 1420 in what amounted to a lone effort without the support of 15th Panzer Division. Nevertheless, despite being the weaker of the two divisions, 21st Panzer Division managed to inflict a resounding defeat on the British forces in general and to the armour in particular and capturing the positions at Sidi Rezegh in the process. This crushing defeat was delivered by 57 German tanks as part of a combined arms team that reduced the 7th Armoured Division to 149 tanks. The 22nd, 7th and 4th Armoured Brigades had 34, 15 and 100 tanks remaining. The Germans had lost 19 tanks from 15th Panzer Division and 17 tanks from 21st Panzer Division.²⁹⁴ (See Figures 12A and 12B)

²⁹³ Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish...* (p. 339).

²⁹⁴ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 103).



Map 5. The German Panzer divisions inflict a major defeat on the remaining British armour on 22 November 1941²⁹⁵

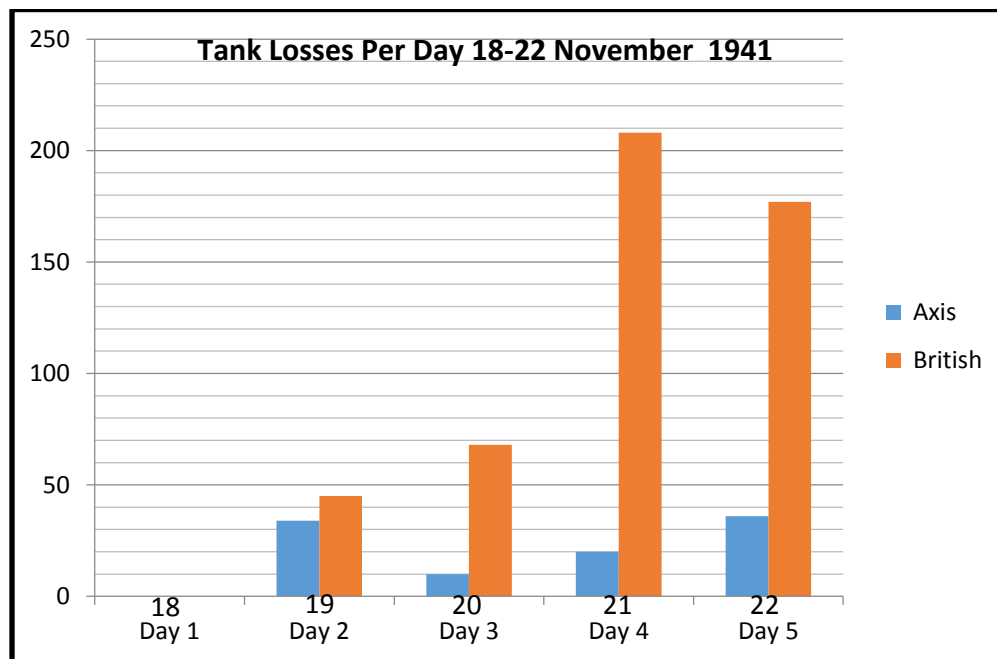


Figure 12A. British tank losses per day far outnumbered those of the Axis. By the end of the 22 November the British had lost 498 tanks in total compared to 100 Axis tanks.

²⁹⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 84).

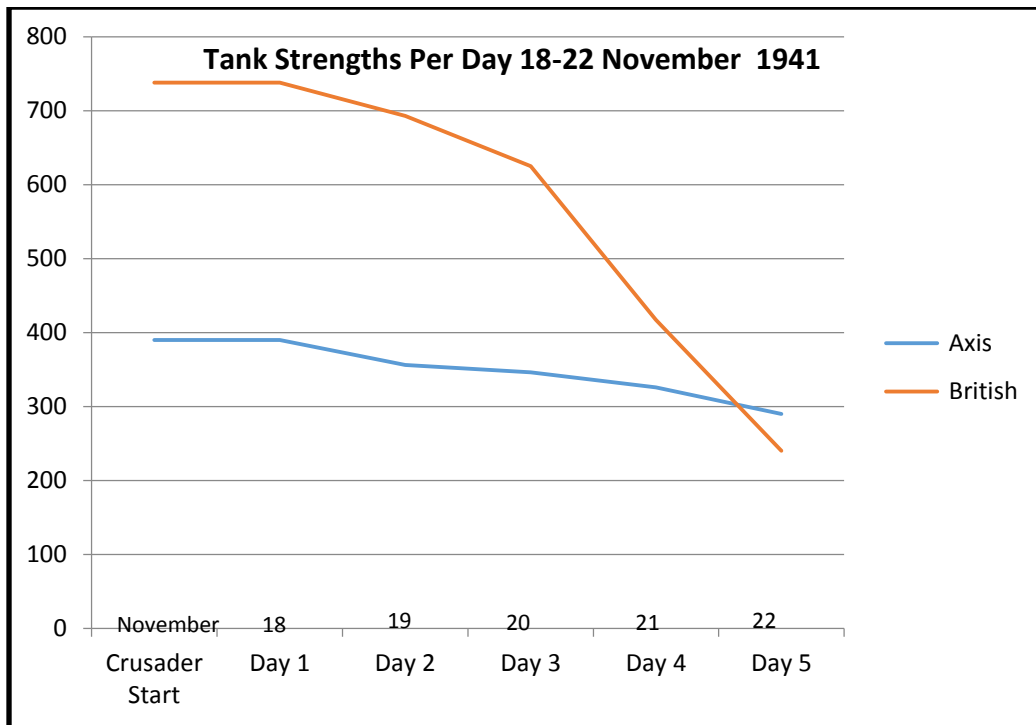


Figure 12B By the end of the fifth day of combat the Germans had managed to destroy the larger part of the British tank force and reverse the British overwhelming numerical superiority. The British had 240 tanks remaining including 126 "I" tanks against a total of 290 Axis tanks.²⁹⁶

This magnificent feat of arms was testimony to the German superiority in tactical doctrine and combined arms warfare. When 15th Panzer Division did attack it occurred at nightfall and resulted in the capture of the 4th Armoured Brigade headquarters, 17 officers and 150 other together with 35 tanks. More importantly it put the 4th Brigade out of action for at least 24 hours due to the paralysis inflicted due to the loss of the headquarters.²⁹⁷ The Germans triumphant defeat of the British armour signaled an effective end to the 7th Armoured Division's contribution to the campaign. It was the Infantry, gunners and the tanks of the two army tank brigades with their Infantry tanks that would bear the brunt of reducing the German armour over the remaining days and eventually wresting victory from a very close run battle.

²⁹⁶ The graphs have been created using figures from different sources, which must be noted, vary greatly in the numbers reported. The graphs are meant as an illustration to aid in better understanding the disproportionate attrition rate suffered by the British in the face of superior German tactics, as well as the state of the British armour just prior to the South African 5th Brigade being overrun on the 23 November 1941.

²⁹⁷ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 39).

The British now had little prospect of forcing a corridor to Tobruk. Due to being comprehensively defeated in a number of battles in the preceding days, they had lost their numerical advantage in tanks and were now in fact outnumbered by the Axis forces, which had recaptured the airfield at Sidi Rezegh. Despite receiving a report at 2330 that Sidi Rezegh airfield had fallen and many German tanks were in the vicinity, Brink remained optimistic that the situation remained well in hand.²⁹⁸ Brink's optimism was no doubt fed by his ignorance of the fact that the British tank brigades had effectively been defeated by the Axis armour and buoyed by the advance of the New Zealand Brigade towards Tobruk. He was not alone in the British camp - they too having been misinformed by believing in overinflated enemy tank losses since the beginning of the campaign.

The day's events had almost sealed the fate of the South African 5th Brigade. It was left isolated by the tardiness of its sister unit, the 1st Brigade which remained languishing kilometres to the south. The 5th Brigade was now effectively bereft of tank support due to the near destruction of British armour, and an inability to coordinate a defence with the remaining tanks in the vicinity.

2.6 The Annihilation of 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh - 23 November

The scene was now set for the disaster that was to befall the 5th South African Brigade. The Axis had taken advantage of the British failure to concentrate their forces with the result that the British advantage in tank numbers of some 738 to 390; had been whittled away to 240 opposing 290 German tanks by the end of the 22 November. The Axis for the first time in the battle, not only enjoyed a slight numerical superiority in armour, but had achieved a measure of concentration, unlike the British, whose tanks were scattered amongst the various brigades.²⁹⁹ (See Figures 12A and 12B) Rommel now sought to eliminate the entire 7th Armoured Division and the 1st South African Division in a final assault, by concentrating most of his tank assets in a final assault.³⁰⁰

In possession of a dissipated and scattered armoured force, and facing a rampant enemy, Norrie had little choice in what was amounting to a bleak situation. His intention was to build a strong infantry position around 5th Brigade and use the remaining British armour to hold off attacks by the "depleted" enemy armour. The remnants of 22nd Armoured Brigade with 30 tanks held positions to the west of 5th brigade and the remnants of the 7th Support Group manned positions to the east. (See Map 6) Brink was urged to expedite the joining of his 1st Brigade with the 5th Brigade. Brink had little sense

²⁹⁸ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.45, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

²⁹⁹ The remaining British tanks is estimated to consist of 126 "I" tanks and 114 Cruiser tanks with the armoured divisions, of which the great majority belonged to the 4th Brigade which was effectively out of operation due to the loss of their headquarters the previous day.

³⁰⁰ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 39). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 156).

of foreboding and incorrectly evaluated that the “situation was in hand”. He thought that 7th Armoured Division was largely intact, when in reality it fielded only 10 tanks remaining, and incorrectly surmised that it was capable of dealing with any possible tank threat. Bolstering Brinks optimism further, was the expectation of the imminent arrival of the rapidly approaching New Zealand Division which would add its “I” tanks to the armoured strength of the British forces south of Sidi Rezegh.³⁰¹

The South African 5th Brigade occupied a position some 3 kilometres short of point 178, a position that they had unsuccessfully attacked the previous day, in an attempt to dislodge the Germans from the escarpment. The brigade was arranged in a 3 kilometre defensive box with the 3 Transvaal Scottish facing north, and the 1st South African Irish and Regiment Botha manning the west and east side of the box respectively. The southern portion of the box consisted mainly of the B Echelon elements dispersed at the required 100 meters apart stretching many kilometres into the desert. The 22nd Armoured Brigade was deployed 1,6 kilometres to the west of the 5th Brigade. To the east lay the Support Group together with a small remnant of the 7th Armoured Brigade these having both borne the brunt of the German attack on the Sidi Rezegh airfield the previous day. The largely intact 4th Armoured Brigade would play no role on the day having been incapacitated with the capture of its Headquarters the previous day.³⁰² The British dispositions around Sidi Rezegh were not concentrated and formed three distinct formations, a situation not conducive to meeting the impending Axis onslaught. Furthermore there was no means of direct communication between Armstrong’s headquarters and the British forces to the east and west of the South African laager, making a coordinated concentrated defence impossible.³⁰³

Both Rommel and Crüwell intended crushing the British in an overwhelming attack, but differed in their idea of implementation. Rommel favoured a northerly attack with the panzer divisions driving south to meet *Ariete* and destroying everything in between. Crüwell, had other ideas, and doubting *Ariete’s* capability of holding the south, he decided rather on sending his 15th Panzer Division with the tank regiment of 21st Panzer Division around the eastern flank of the 5th Brigade to link up with *Ariete*. He intended then to launch an attack northwards towards Sidi Rezegh. The Panzer divisions in the south would now be the hammer that drove towards the German infantry anvil manning the escarpment in front of the South Africans.³⁰⁴ Crüwell’s plan was not without merit but entailed splitting off half his infantry and artillery to man the northern escarpment, and sending the remainder with all his tanks to join *Ariete*. Apparently the Germans had no idea that their drive south would place them in

³⁰¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p46, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. and Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 156).

³⁰² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 231). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 156).

³⁰³ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 249).

³⁰⁴ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 158).

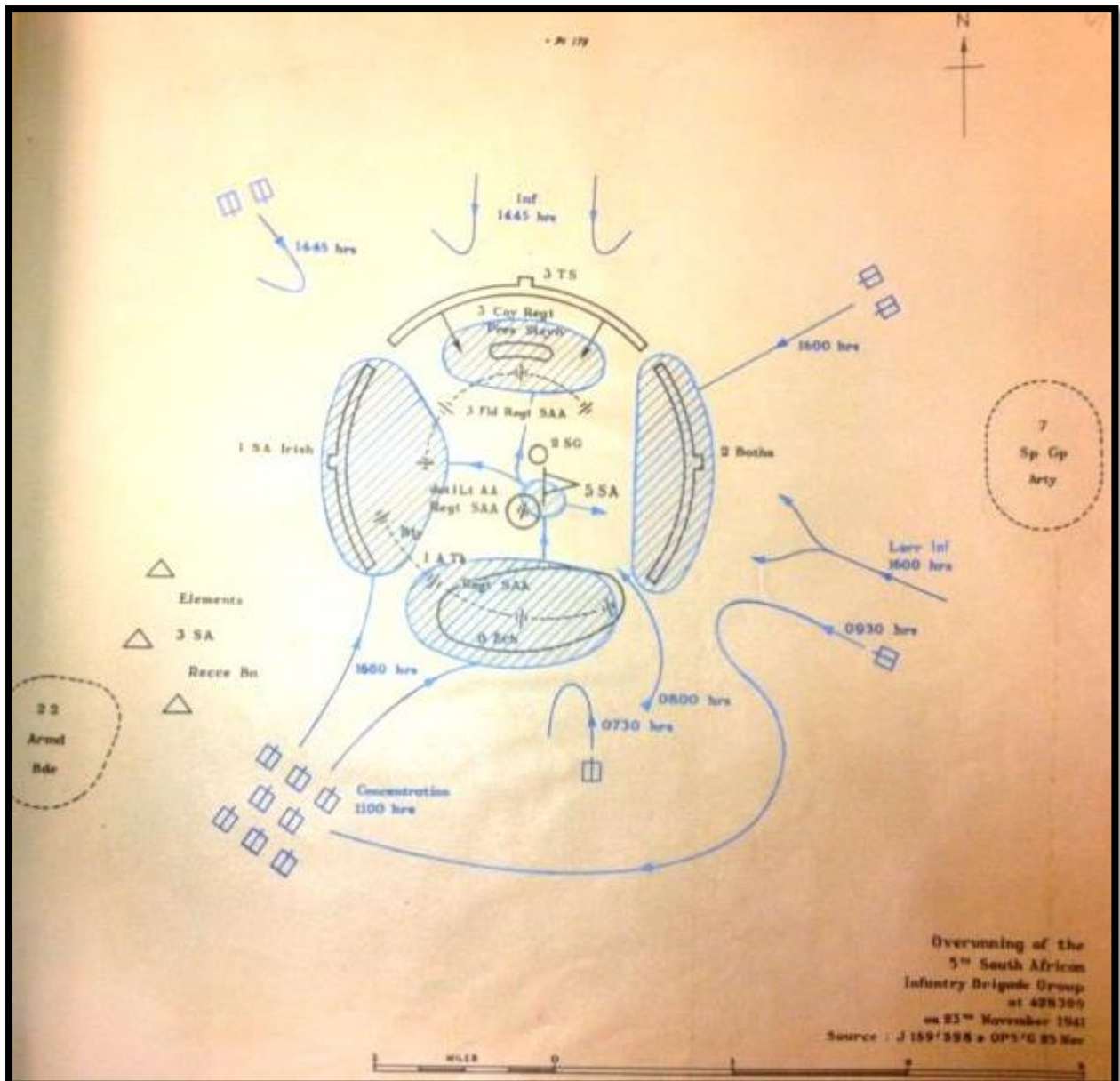
between the 5th and the 1st Brigades as their intention was to be south of the entire 30th Corps.³⁰⁵ The success or otherwise of Crüwell's bold outflanking manoeuvre would be largely determined by whether an attack from the south would catch the British by surprise, and whether Gott was able to coordinate and reorientate the defenders to face the new threat from the south as opposed to the north.³⁰⁶

Pienaar and his 1st Brigade had declined to undertake a night march and close the southern flank of the 5th Brigade, leaving it vulnerable and undefended with the entire B Echelon exposed. The failure of Pienaar to undertake a night march meant that an opportunity was lost to combine the strength of the South African Brigades under concealment. The fact that some support echelons of the 1st Brigade went ahead at night and effectively linked up with the 5th Brigade is indicative of the ease that this manoeuvre could have been completed.³⁰⁷ All chances of linking up had begun to disappear by daybreak as the Axis armour gathered in the south and effectively drove a wedge between the two brigades. It was ironic that Pienaar's B Echelon, field company, and ambulances had in fact outstripped the fighting units of 1st Division in the night approach march and were now ahead of them. However this mass of transport found in front of Pienaar at daybreak seemed to slow his progress north yet again.

³⁰⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 160).

³⁰⁶ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 233,234).

³⁰⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 239).



Map 6 The end of the 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941. Known as *Totensontag* by the Germans.³⁰⁸

Belated attempts by Pienaar to advance north and link up with 5th Brigade were now disturbed by the Germans as Crüwell drove his panzer regiments southwards towards to join up with *Ariete* at Bir el Gubi, which he largely accomplished at 1235.³⁰⁹ With this growing armour threat directly in his path to the north Pienaar had to abandon all hope of joining with the 5th Brigade.³¹⁰ The German move

³⁰⁸ DOCD, UWS Box 321, p. (2)107 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941.

³⁰⁹ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 242).

³¹⁰ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.49,50, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. Despite the receding possibility of 1st Brigade linking up with 5th Brigade due to the

southward had completely surprised the British as some German forces brushed against the eastern outposts of the South African defensive box. As the Germans wheeled west en-route to *Ariete* they crashed through the tail of B-Echelon strung out for kilometres to the undefended south side of the defensive box, creating panic and putting them to flight in all directions. By 1430 the Germans had completed their assembly and reorientation to face north together with *Ariete* and were now disposed facing the weak southern flank of 5th Brigade.

Gott who had spent the night with the 5th Brigade leaguer, now advised Armstrong to strengthen the southern flank of his position and after regrouping and shuffling of the anti-tank weapons the southern flank of the defensive box was considerably strengthened.³¹¹ (See Map 6) Due to the timely intervention of Gott, the southern sector now contained 50% of the brigade's available artillery to meet the German attack. The German official history describes the positions of the 5th Brigade as being thoroughly prepared and being 10 kilometres wide and 8 kilometres deep with over 100 artillery pieces and numerous anti-tank guns.³¹² Gott did remark that the South African 2 pounder anti-tank guns remained on their portees and that they should rather have been taken off the trucks and dug in as many were lost immediately and this was a contributing factor to the German success.³¹³

The dispositions around the Sidi Rezegh battlefield were perhaps the most complex to be found in the history of warfare, and emphasise the complicated nature of mobile warfare. The British and German dispositions are best described as resembling a layer cake. The British forces were besieged in Tobruk and faced mainly Italian forces that were back to back with mainly German forces facing those British forces who occupied the Sidi Rezegh location. In turn those defending Sidi Rezegh including the South Africans faced in two directions to meet the threat both to the north and south of their positions. The German armour that had gathered to the south of the 5th Brigade had the South Africans to their north and the South African 1st Brigade to their south. The battlefield therefore consisted of no less than seven "lines" facing in different directions.³¹⁴

growing presence of enemy tanks between the two Brigades, Brink felt confident enough to signal Armstrong at 1230, "Ons is naby en ons kom. Ander mense kom ook van ander kant hou vas."

³¹¹ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 244,245). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 163).

³¹² B. Stegemann, Detlef Vogel G. Schreiber, *Germany and the Second World War: The Mediterranean, South-east Europe, and North Africa 1939-1941* (Oxford: Oxford, 1995), III (p. 738).

³¹³ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 245). The official history offers that the situation was fluid with Gott himself warning the South Africans of an attack from the north. Rommel himself had favoured a north attack and Crüwell's outflanking manoeuvre may well have been a feint. The feasibility of digging in on the rock hard terrain is also moot.

³¹⁴ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 46).

Artillery dispositions 5 th Brigade per defensive sector 23 November				
	25 Pounder	18 pounder	2 Pounder	Total
Northern Sector	8			8
Western Sector	10		2	12
Eastern Sector	16		1	17
Southern Sector	12	2	21	35
Total	46	2	24	72

Figure 13 Artillery dispositions of 5th Brigade per defensive sector 23 November after Gott's timely intervention. Over 50% of the 5th Brigade anti-tank assets faced south and were to cause havoc on the German armour.³¹⁵

Little had been done by the South Africans in the way of artillery fire, to disrupt the concentration of enemy forces taking place to the south east corner of the defensive box. There is a case to be made for the conservation of ammunition due to the fact that the brigade was now effectively cut off and did not have an excess of ammunition. A further reason for the supposed lack of interdicting artillery fire was that the status of the forces to the south was not certain, given that the 5th Brigade expected the imminent arrival of the 1st Brigade throughout the day.³¹⁶ A further reason, was once the 25 pounder artillery had been deployed in a dispersed anti-tank role, its effectiveness in the normal role of concentrated artillery was somewhat negated.³¹⁷ On the other hand the Germans have described their efforts to deploy their forces as being hindered by the South African artillery which far outnumbered the weak German artillery available.³¹⁸ South African reconnaissance units who accurately reported on the composition of the gathering enemy forces to Brigade headquarters were dismissed with an attitude bordering on contempt.³¹⁹ However the anti-tank dispositions seem to indicate that the defences of the brigade had accurately assessed as to where the most likely path of the danger was coming from. (See Map 6)

³¹⁵ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 245). See also Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 163). New Zealand official history estimates 16 instead of 12 25 pounders in the southern sector.

³¹⁶ At 1215 Brink sent a message to Armstrong that 1st Brigade was near and that they were coming. In the absence of any other indication and due to the proximity of 1st Brigade to the south sector of 5th Brigade, the expectation that the arrival of 1st Brigade was imminent is not unfair. Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 252).

³¹⁷ S. Bidwell, 'Indirect Fire Artillery as a Battle Winner/Loser', in *Old Battles and New Defences* (Oxford: Brassey's Defence Publisher, 1986) (p. 123).

³¹⁸ Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps* (p. 88).

³¹⁹ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 246,247).

At midday the Germans began to shell the northern sector which encouraged a strengthening of the line and the reallocation of two anti-tank weapons from the south sector. At approximately 1400 hours the South African reconnaissance of 4th South African Armoured Cars confirmed that a concentration of Germans, 'had formed up almost in line abreast and facing north'.³²⁰ At 1555 wireless contact between 1st Division and 5th Brigade suddenly broke off with the last word, "wait" being uttered by the brigade radio operator.³²¹ At 1700 Brink decided that due to the obscurity of the situation in front of 1st Brigade there was no possibility of it moving up to offer assistance to 5th Brigade.³²²

The Axis having assembled all their armoured forces, began their attack at 1600 hours in what has been described by the New Zealand official history as, "...a radical departure not only from accepted panzer tactics but from the fundamentals of their trade".³²³ The German attack faced an extremely deep position, and under normal circumstances would have required the Germans to deploy their forces in depth rather than the 16 kilometer breadth that their three armoured formations now found themselves.³²⁴ (See Figure 14A and 14B) Crüwell's decision to leave half his infantry and artillery to man the northern escarpment meant that the remaining infantry and artillery component of the panzer divisions were covering double the normal frontage. The effect was that once the attack got underway, only the central portion managed to solidly engage the 5th Brigade, while the two wings, *Ariete* on the left and 5 Panzer Regiment and the 200th Infantry regiment on the right flank, initially brushed past the 5th Brigade's flanks. The Germans had failed to concentrate their forces effectively, and this was to cost them dearly.³²⁵

The Germans offered a number of reasons for their decision to attack on a broad rather than a narrow front. For strategic reasons, the attack was launched on a wide front to prevent the enemy from escaping east. There was also no time to arrange a careful infantry attack using tried and tested infantry tactics and therefore they decided on the riskier venture of remaining in their vehicles and charging at the enemy in the wake of the tanks. Lastly, the concentration of forces to the rear was

³²⁰ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 249). Gott greeted this news with this surprising comment. 'Your South African Brigade seems stuck down with gum-they won't move and they won't turn their artillery round and they are not dug in- I am sorry for them'. The comment seems out of place in view of the artillery dispositions concentrated in the south to meet the German attack. The reference may refer to the inertia displayed by 1st Brigade.

³²¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.52, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³²² DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.52, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³²³ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, (p. 162).

³²⁴ Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps* (p. 93). The Germans describe their normal methods as, detailed reconnaissance, thorough preparation for an attack against prepared positions using narrow sectors and organisation in depth and advancing by bounds (fire and movement) of debussed infantry supported by tanks and especially strong formations of the Luftwaffe to paralyze the superior artillery and anti-tank guns.

³²⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 162).

inhibited by a non-negotiable swamp that lay to the south of the German formations and furthermore, the area was raked by the artillery of Pienaar's and Armstrong's brigades that sandwiched the Germans in a narrow corridor.³²⁶

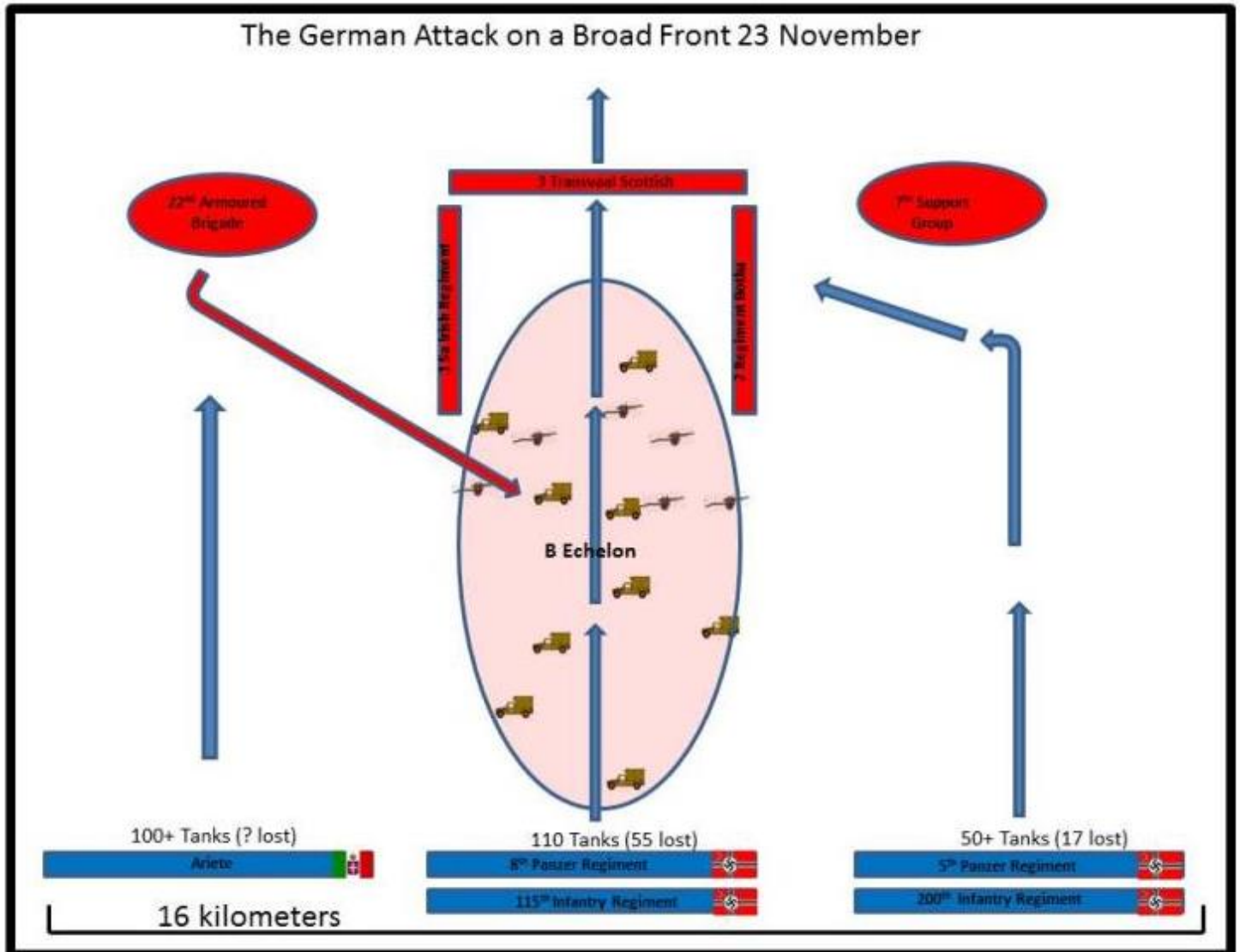


Figure 14A Schematic of the German attack on 5th Brigade showing how the Germans were deployed on a broad front, with the result that the flanking regiments brushed passed the South Africans while the 8th Panzer and 115th Infantry Regiments bore the brunt of the attack.

³²⁶

Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps* (pp. 87,88).

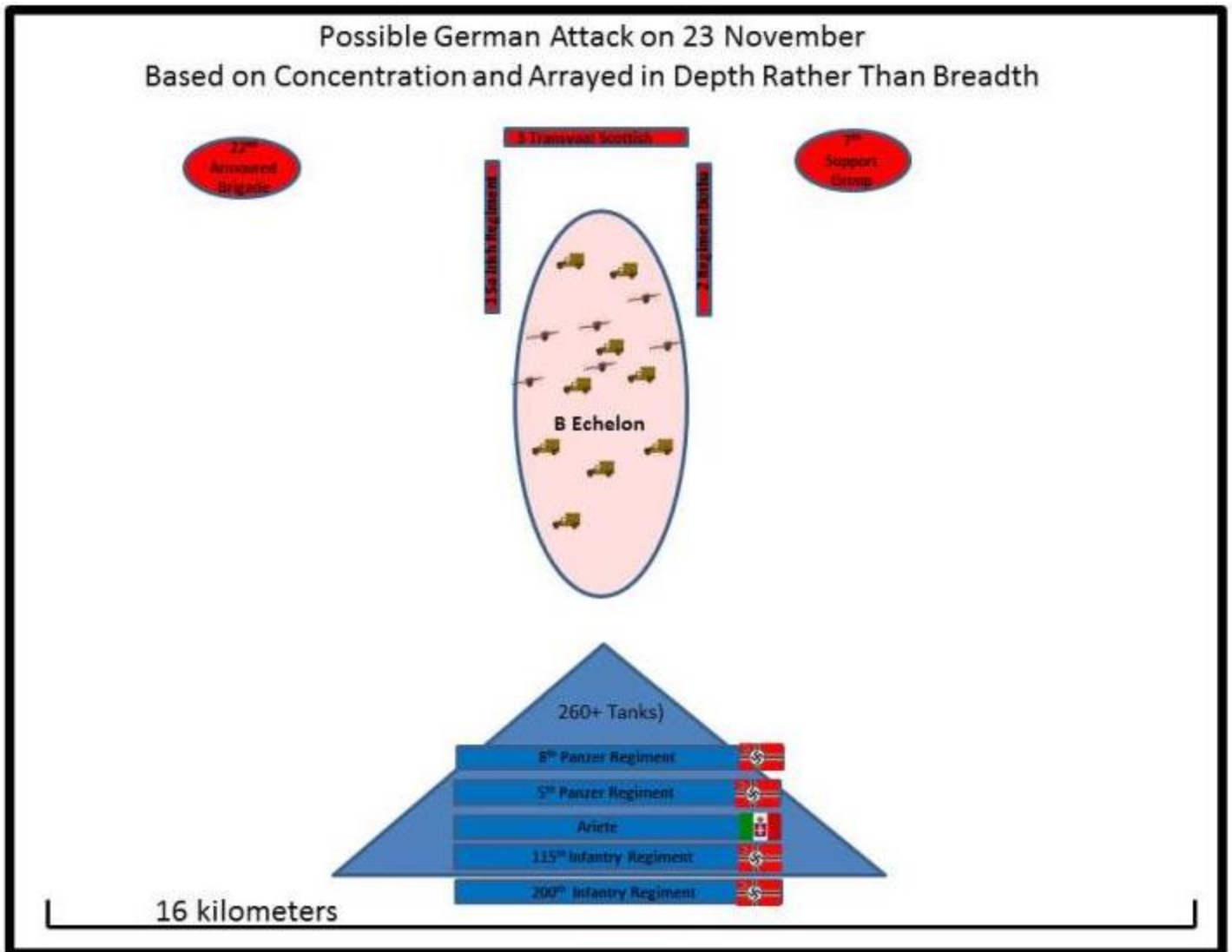


Figure 14B Schematic of the German attack on 5th Brigade showing how the Germans missed an opportunity to concentrate their forces in depth rather than breadth to meet the elements of 30th Corps including the 5th Brigade who were deployed in great depth.

In what was one of the largest tank attacks of the desert war, the Germans charged at the South Africans with 110 tanks of the 8 Panzer Regiment followed closely by two infantry battalions of the 115 Infantry Regiment who were carried forward in their vulnerable lorries. They were met with a hail of fire by the South African gunners lurking amongst the lorries of the B Echelon. The German infantry following the tanks tried to stay in their vehicle for as long as possible but were met with withering fire that claimed many killed and wounded.³²⁷ The South Africans continued to fight in small pockets and opposed the German infantry vigorously.³²⁸ Assistance for the South Africans came in the

³²⁷ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert* (pp. 108-10). Schmidt gives a graphic account of the German headlong charge into the withering fire of the South Africans. See also Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 255).

³²⁸ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 165).

form of a counter-attack by the remnants of the 22nd Armoured Brigade who fought a “solid and skillfull” action falling back by degrees through the huge South African laager.³²⁹ The South Africans, although extracting a fearsome toll on the advancing Germans, were being steadily overrun and Armstrong together with his headquarters was made prisoner and carried into captivity on top of a German tank, in a battlefield that was becoming extremely confused. Scattered remnants of 5th Brigade that had not been killed or captured made their way east to the British lines, one of whom was Major Cochran the acting commanding officer of the South African Irish who escaped with four 25 pounders and some men.³³⁰

At 1930 Brink received a message that “Armstrong’s boys” were being heavily attacked by tanks on both sides and that he was in a very delicate position having suffered heavy casualties. At 1945 Brink received a final indication that Armstrong had been overrun by “over 100 tanks” and that a large number of 5th Brigade were prisoners and the realization finally dawned on Brink that the British had indeed lost the tank battle leaving his Brigade to the mercy of the German tanks.³³¹ In the process the 5th Brigade was annihilated suffering 224 killed, 379 wounded and approximately 2800 captured. The Germans, suffering grievously, lost 72 out of 162 tanks deployed in the attack, as well as severe casualties amongst their commissioned and non-commissioned officers.³³² The 15th Panzer Division had lost both its battalion commanders, five of its six company commanders and the majority of troop carriers.³³³ By all accounts the South Africans had fought bravely inflicting significant losses in the face of overwhelming German superiority. The 5th Brigade had “cut the heart out” of Crüwell’s command.³³⁴ The South Africans gunners had obviously played a major role in German tank casualties and one source describes their efforts “magnificent.”³³⁵ An American correspondent and eyewitness described the day’s events, stating in his letter,

³²⁹ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (p. 166).

³³⁰ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* (pp. 168,169).

³³¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p53, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³³² Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 40). See also Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 255). See also Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 50).

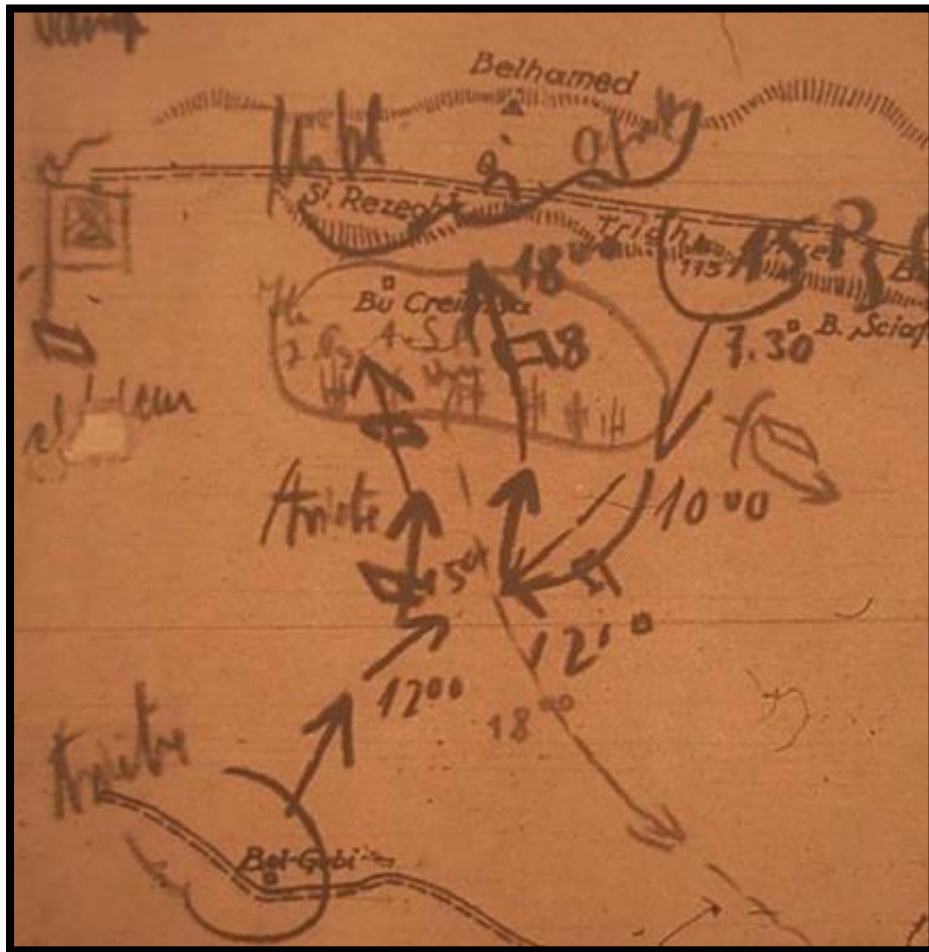
³³³ Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps* (p. 92).

³³⁴ Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army*, (p. 25). Ronald Lewin in *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* describes it as “Crüwell cut the heart out of his command.”

³³⁵ TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942. and DOCD, UWHS Box 321, p. (2)109, Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet, *General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk - The Planning Period*, June - November 1941. “The South African gunners had been magnificent.”

... the South African Brigade (I forget its numeral but its Brigadier was Armstrong) fought with the utmost bravery and devotion and willing sacrifice of its own lives, but was simply overwhelmed. Infantry of course is as helpless as a troop of boy scouts against tanks in the open desert.³³⁶

General Auchinleck was unstinting in his praise in a personal letter to Smuts and expressed his regret that, "Union troops should have suffered so heavily in their first major engagement in Libya". He described the South Africans as "gallant" and that they had fought to the last round against a tank and lorry-borne infantry.³³⁷ These accolades were largely missing in the battle to come for Tobruk.



Map 7 The end of the 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941. From the *DAK* war diary, giving the German point of view as to the last moments of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade.³³⁸

³³⁶ Hal Denny was an American citizen and correspondent with the *New York Times*, captured on 23 November by the Germans with other correspondents and members of the 5th Brigade, and was witness to the events of that day. Hal Denny, 'Performance SA 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh' (Letter Denny to Colonel Phillip Astley, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 40 Folder 15, 1942).

³³⁷ C Auchinleck, 'South Africans at Sidi Rezegh' (Personal Memorandum Auchinleck to Smuts, National Archives Pretoria, Smuts Papers Box 137/22, 25 November 1941).

³³⁸ 'Ariete's Contribution to Sidi Rezegh', in *The Crusader Project* <<http://crusaderproject.wordpress.com/2013/08/10/arietes-contribution-to-sidi-rezegh-di-nisio-column/>> [accessed 18 August 2013]

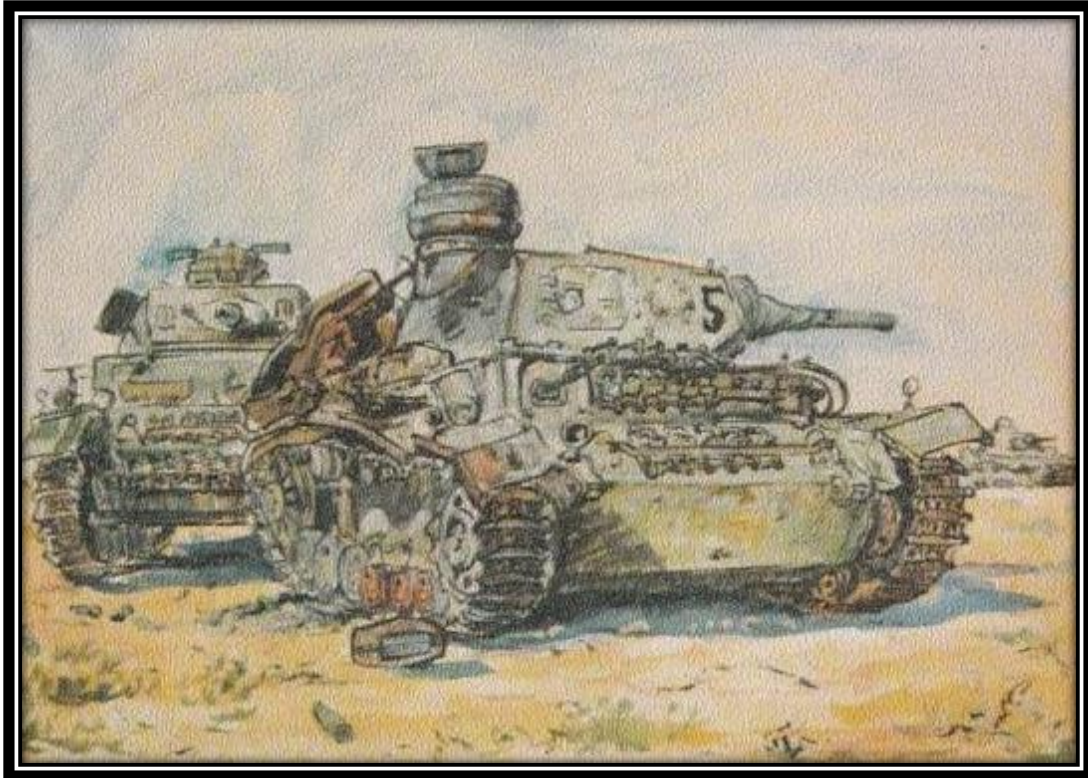


Figure 15 Disabled German tanks by F. Krige. The painting describes the destruction of three German tanks, giving a clue as to the ferocity of the battle and the losses inflicted on the Germans. The painting is close up and two of the tanks all but obliterate the view of the battlefield, leaving one to guess at the inevitable scene of death and destruction that lies beyond and behind. Krige's paintings are beautifully complimented by the work of Geoffrey Long who paints the battlefield using a wider lens, in which we now see some of the destruction to both sides lying strewn amongst the anonymous debris of war. The frantic pace and movement of the battle is given life by the numerous tracks etched onto the desert sand. The smoking hulk in the distance gives immediacy to a battle freshly fought. (See Figure 16.)

2.7 The Lessons Learned by the South Africans from Crusader

In the immediate aftermath of battle, the South Africans, who had suffered grievously at the hands of the Axis forces, attempted to identify the reasons for the defeat, and offer solutions so as to avoid the same tragedy occurring again. These recommendations or 'lessons learned' formed part of the operational report constructed by Brink.³³⁹ The British also conducted some research after Crusader in the form of the Martel Report authored by Lieutenant-General G. LeQ. Martel, the General Officer Commanding the Royal Armoured Corps.³⁴⁰

In one of Brink's first recommendations, he calls for the establishment of a firm base from which the infantry and armour can conduct subsequent operations. These firm bases would provide harbours for

³³⁹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁴⁰ TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942.

the armoured formations to effect repairs and salvage. Here Brink tries to impose a static type of warfare, which was a form of warfare that conformed more to the British World War One doctrine. The next area of concern addressed by Brink, was to disallow the transport formations from accompanying the fighting formations into battle. The presence of thousands of vehicles of B echelon on the southern front of the 5th Brigade had unnecessarily complicated the formulation of an all-round defence, and was instrumental in the ultimate demise of the brigade. Brink goes on to recommend the essentialness of an all-round defence in mobile warfare, combined with mutually supporting anti-tank weapons, a situation clearly lacking in the defences of 5th Brigade whose southern flank was largely bereft of infantry, but filled with the elements of B echelon.³⁴¹

The issue of navigation skills is raised but significantly Brink discourages night moves and ability to conduct manoeuvres under the cover of darkness.³⁴² The South Africans inability or unwillingness to move at night put them at a severe disadvantage and cost them dearly when the two Brigades were unable to combine to offer a common defence.

The South African inability to communicate effectively with other units in close proximity including those of the armoured formations was also a severe disadvantage in coordinating a common defence. This shortcoming is also partially addressed by Brink.³⁴³ The 5th Brigade, unable to communicate directly with British units, failed to coordinate its defences effectively with the units that had deployed in close proximity on the 23 November.

The South Africans, in a similar fashion to the British, preferred to conduct the operations at a brigade level, unlike the Germans comfortably conducted the armoured formations at a divisional level. The operation of mobile warfare at a divisional level facilitates the essential concentration of forces at the decisive point and allows the division to concentrate all the divisional assets.³⁴⁴ This level of concentration is not achievable at brigade level. To his credit Brink realising these shortcomings, calls for a greater level of combined training at the divisional level.³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,1, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁴² DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,2, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941. "Night moves by big formations should be avoided at all costs except for urgent and immediate tactical necessity"

³⁴³ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,1, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁴⁴ S. Bidwell, 'Indirect Fire Artillery as a Battle Winner/Loser', in *Old Battles and New Defences* (Oxford: Brassey's Defence Publisher, 1986). The artillery being the greatest beneficiary of concentration at divisional level, and conversely, being less effective if parcelled out at brigade level.

³⁴⁵ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,2, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

Brink highlighted the South African's lack of trained staff officers and called for an ample supply to be appointed and also to serve with units. South Africa's lack of trained staff officers had hampered operations in East Africa, and once again in Crusader.³⁴⁶

Brink suggests that when infantry were forced to defend themselves against tanks, everything was to be subordinated to the anti-tank defence and all weapons that could be employed against tanks must be placed at the disposal of the artillery commander. The artillery units were to be protected from infantry infiltration by the placement of infantry sections amongst the artillery. Brink also spoke of infantry tank hunting squads who would be dug in where the ammunition and fighting vehicles are parked and would deal with any tanks that had infiltrated the defences. The New Zealanders talk of placing the anti-tank weapons well forward in the German fashion.³⁴⁷ The greater proportion of anti-tank weapons was to be dug in, which was not the case at Sidi Rezegh, while the remainder was to remain mobile to meet any infiltration.³⁴⁸ This contrasts with the German doctrine of using their anti-tank weapons in a highly mobile role, often accompanying the tanks into a fluid battle situation.³⁴⁹

Brink was confident that had the 5th Brigade possessed an additional artillery regiment and a squadron of infantry tanks that they would have beaten off the attacks that finally overwhelmed the brigade. He recommended that commanders of infantry formations should have tanks under command, which would facilitate allowing the pure armoured formations to deal with the enemy tanks without having to worry about protecting the infantry.³⁵⁰ This reference to the detaching of infantry tanks to the infantry formations and further reference to pure tank formations is indicative of the British doctrine of the period which contrasted with the Germans practice of combined arms warfare and using anti-tank weapons as the primary weapon against tanks.³⁵¹

Brink does make passing reference, in identifying a need for ample training, in the necessity for training to include co-operation with other arms particularly with armoured formations. The New Zealanders correctly identify the German ability to co-ordinate their tanks with artillery and anti-tank guns with

³⁴⁶ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,2, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁴⁷ B.C. Freyberg, 'The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica and Lessons of the Campaign' (Report, Headquarters New Zealand Division, 1942), p. 27.

³⁴⁸ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,4, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁴⁹ TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942. Martel believed in a similar fashion to Brink that Infantry armed with suitable antitank weapons were a formidable obstacle to German armour.

³⁵⁰ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,14,15, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁵¹ TNA, WO 201, File 2870, *Martel Report on Aftermath of Crusader*, 26 January 1942. Martel on the other hand concedes a need for combined operations of all arms.

infantry as something to emulate.³⁵² The fact that the South Africans had very little time to train in desert conditions and the fact that they were employed in a static operational role for the months prior to Crusader is bemoaned by Brink.³⁵³

The fact that the South Africans had to operate two brigades division rather than the normal three brigades was a detrimental to the fighting power that they were able to bring to bear. Brink correctly identifies that this was a major shortcoming for the South Africans in Crusader. The point is also made that it was disastrous for units and formations to be handed over from one formation to another during the course of operations as troops preferred and fight better and more efficiently when serving under their own commanders.³⁵⁴

Brink stresses the need for accurate intelligence. He cites the fact that the incorrect estimates of the number of enemy tanks destroyed was a major factor responsible for the decision to move the 5th Brigade to the Sidi Rezegh area at too early a stage. This was done before the main objective had been achieved namely: 'to destroy the enemy's armoured formations before operations for the relief of Tobruk were undertaken'.³⁵⁵

When one examines these recommendations it becomes apparent that the South Africans mirroring the British, had little inkling as to what made the Germans such a formidable enemy. The important role of recovering damaged tanks immediately after the battle was perfected by the Germans and gave them an edge in mitigating tank losses.³⁵⁶ The German aggressive and offensive use of anti-tank weapons was also not fully grasped in Brink's report. Brink also came to no conclusions that the use of the 25 pounder in an anti-tank role weakened the fighting power of the artillery as an indirect support weapon.³⁵⁷ Most of the recommendations disregard the requirements for a mobile war based on manoeuvre and consist of measures designed to safeguard a pure infantry brigade in the event of meeting up against powerful armoured forces. Brink hardly envisages a balance combined arms force but rather harks back to defensive measures and seeking refuge in static prepared defences that were rather anachronistic in modern manoeuvre warfare.

³⁵² B.C. Freyberg, 'The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica and Lessons of the Campaign' (Report, Headquarters New Zealand Division, 1942), p. 28.

³⁵³ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,13, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁵⁴ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,16, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁵⁵ DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, Part III,17, *1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.

³⁵⁶ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 99).

³⁵⁷ S. Bidwell, 'Indirect Fire Artillery as a Battle Winner/Loser', in *Old Battles and New Defences* (Oxford: Brassey's Defence Publisher, 1986) (p. 123).



Figure 16 Field of Sidi Rezegh by G. Long. It is interesting to compare this with Krige's work (See Figure 15)

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has sought and found explanations by combining insights derived from a reading of primary and secondary sources, as to the destruction of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade at Sidi Rezegh. The South Africans managed to inflict significant losses on the German armoured formations before their destruction, a fact underplayed or ignored in most of the secondary sources on the subject. There is no single reason as to why the 5th Brigade was shattered at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941, but rather it owed its demise to a series of factors. Poor preparation on behalf of the South Africans coupled with an inferior battle doctrine combined with the poor execution of an over complicated plan, conspired to tip the balance against the 5th Brigade's survival.

The British and South Africans at Sidi Rezegh succumbed to the superior battle tactics of the Germans. The British failed to adopt a combined arms approach and relied on their tanks to force the issue largely disregarding the other supporting arms. Their emphasis of basing their structure on brigades rather than divisions made it difficult to concentrate their efforts at the *schwerpunkt* and resulted in their brigades often being committed piecemeal to the battle. British doctrine was responsible for the greater part of the British armour being destroyed for little in return. Once the British armour strength was dissipated, it left the South African infantry brigades exposed and vulnerable to attack by the combined forces of the Axis. British doctrine also ensured that instead of the South Africans fighting as part of a combined team, they would have to face the German armour relatively unsupported. On the 23 November 1941, the South African Brigade although flanked by the

remnants of two tank brigades and a support brigade had no way of coordinating the defence with their nearby comrades.

The Germans made use of their anti-tank guns as the primary weapon against tanks and used them in an aggressive manner often placing them upfront in an attack against armour. The British tended to use their anti-tank weapons in a more passive and static role in support of the infantry, and believed the primary weapon against tanks was another tank. Furthermore the British tended to use their field artillery piece, the 25 pounder, as a stop gap anti-tank weapon. This had the undesirable effect of weakening their best arm of service, the artillery, which if concentrated and deployed in its original role would have caused considerable damage to the German vulnerable anti-tank guns.

The seeds of destruction of the 5th Brigade were also sown in the numerous planning problems that afflicted Crusader, at the strategic level. The primary objective of destroying the Axis tank force in a massive tank on tank battle was unsound and the selection of Gabr Saleh, a non-strategic dot on the map, to lure forth the German armour, was a poor choice of bait. The objective surrendered the initiative to the Germans, when they failed to oblige the British by taking the bait. The British plan conspired against the concentration of their tank forces by assigning the armoured brigades two conflicting objectives, being the dual mission of defeating the German armour and at the same time shielding the vulnerable infantry. This planning dilemma ensured that the British were never able to concentrate their tanks against the Germans, leaving them to deal with the British one brigade at a time instead of having to fight the entire British armour combined. The failure to concentrate the armoured forces combined with faulty doctrine that denied the armour of artillery and infantry support, left the British tanks vulnerable to German anti-tank guns. Once the British armour had been effectively destroyed, it left the vulnerable infantry to the mercy of the rampaging German Panzer divisions.

A further factor was the dismal performance of the intelligence service that produced grossly exaggerated figures as to the amount of German tanks the British had destroyed. This over estimation of enemy tank losses was a problem that in fact plagued both sides and contributed mightily to the fog of war. The fact that the British had grossly overestimated German tank losses by a factor of five certainly left them more complacent than they should have been. The first victim of the destruction of the British armour was the South Africans, who were ordered to move at Sidi Rezegh prematurely, and contrary to the original plan, before the main objective of the campaign had been achieved, namely the neutralisation of the German armour.

Operation Crusader although “a close run thing”, resulted ultimately in a British victory but due to the poor tactical performance of the British forces it did not feel like one. The operation had revealed deep flaws not only in the tactical abilities of the British but a worrying clumsiness bordering on ineptitude in the command structure. The command structure had hampered the British efforts and resulted at times in an uncoordinated effort with brigade commanders often acting out of their own will rather than adhering to the bigger plan. Auchinleck dismissed Cunningham halfway through Operation Crusader as he was by then a spent man unable to make on the spot decisions with any resolution.

Many poor decisions were made at the operational level of Crusader. The decision to attack *Ariete* was born out of misguided contempt for the prowess of the Italians, and resulted in a loss of tanks as well as working against the concentration of forces. Early on, The Italian 132nd Armoured Division *Ariete* dealt a severe blow to the British 22nd Brigade, effectively diminishing its fighting power for the rest of the campaign. The early British failure to dislodge the Italians from their positions at Bir El Gubi ensured that they posed a threat to the South Africans, who as a result became increasingly reluctant and hesitant to manoeuvre as ordered. The unexpectedly strong showing by *Ariete* effectively split the British armoured brigades and played a vital role in militating against the British attempts to consolidate their tank force.

It was largely due to the menacing Italian presence in the form of *Ariete* that the 1st Brigade failed to close up with the 5th Brigade ensuring that Armstrong and his troops would face the might of the German armour alone. The importance of the Italian contribution to the battle is unfortunately poorly matched in the number of accessible Italian sources, with only a few works having been translated into English. The Italians were a constant thorn in the side of the South Africans and their resolute performance against the British ensured that the South Africans were always casting one eye toward them for the entire campaign. The role of the Italians in this campaign and their excellent performance in the initial stages of Crusader are also in need of a reassessment, their contribution being almost totally overshadowed by their German allies.

The South Africans too, must share responsibility for the tragic demise of the 5th Brigade. The South Africans, veterans of the East African campaign, were poorly trained in desert warfare and reluctant to conduct night maneuvers, which is an essential part of being able to be effective against a well-trained and highly motivated enemy. They were further hamstrung by fielding only two brigades instead of the normal three for a division, a fact that would have severely hampered their offensive and

defensive strength. Brink was caught on the horns of dilemma and had to choose between withdrawing his poorly trained forces from Crusader, or risking them to maintain the good name of South Africa. He chose the latter, and his decision to commit an undertrained and understrength division into the teeth of battle is a questionable at best and reckless at worst. Once the South Africans were committed to Crusader, they behaved tentatively throughout the campaign. This accusation can be levelled more vigorously in the case of Pienaar, whose obstinate refusal to close up his 1st Brigade with the 5th Brigade severely weakened the fighting power of the South African division at the critical moment.

The South Africans adopted a static defensive posture that is often fatal in mobile warfare. The South Africans would have fared better if they would have used their mobility to evade the German attack instead of meeting it head-on. When the Germans launched the final attack on the South African positions it can be argued that more could have been done on the defences and that Armstrong should have taken more heed of the reconnaissance reporting the imminence of the German attack and its direction. As it turns out the South Africans did indeed take measures to fortify their southern flank with half the artillery at their disposal and in so doing inflicted grievous damage on the Germans. That more could have been done given the very real threats on other fronts and the thick fog of war is a moot point. However there is little doubt that the presence of B echelon, and the lack of infantry, weakened and confused the defences on the southern front of the 5th Brigade box.

Despite all the flaws and mistakes surrounding the final disaster, it was the Germans, who mimicking the wild cavalry charges of the British, suffered their single biggest tank losses of the campaign in their attack on the South Africans. The Germans failed to prepare their attack in depth and due to their dispositions in breadth were unable to concentrate the full might of their forces on the South Africans. The German attack amounted to a hasty charge rather than their usual careful combined arms preparation against a well-defended target. Perhaps carried away with their previous successes, they threw caution to the winds and charged onto the South African guns and suffered grievously. The South African infantry had succeeded where British tanks had failed, proving that it was concentrated artillery supported by infantry that was the true killer of the tank.

Yet surprisingly, it was in the destruction of the 5th Brigade by the full might of the Axis armoured forces, that the Germans suffered their first grievous tank losses of the campaign. Up to that time, it had been a one sided affair, with the British suffering five tanks destroyed for every one of the Axis. The supposedly vulnerable infantry brigades had been kept out of the battle, until such time as the British were meant to overwhelm the German tank forces. In a strange turn of events, it was the relatively 'helpless' infantry brigades, bolstered by artillery, that broke the back of the *DAK*.

CHAPTER III

THE SURRENDER OF TOBRUK 1942

*Yearly we've ridden the Djebel Stakes,
Yearly fought back on our course,
Yearly we've made the same silly mistakes,
Over-ridden a failing horse,
At a fence too stiff for his strength to leap,
With a rotten take-off, unfirm, too steep,
Heavily breasted the top of the bank,
Pawed, grasped and struggled, then hopelessly sank,
Shocked, hurt and surprised at the toss we took-
Rolling back adown the ditch at Tobruk.
(Major General Francis Tucker)³⁵⁸*

The surrender of Tobruk, some seventy years ago, reverberated amongst the belligerents causing acute embarrassment to the prime ministers of South Africa and the United Kingdom. The disaster was grist to the mill for those in South Africa increasingly disaffected with the war effort, and placed further strain on an already tense home front. Churchill fended off a motion of no confidence put forward by disgruntled MP's who had no confidence in the central direction of the war, after the reverses in Greece and the fall of Singapore. The loss of Tobruk, greeted with general disbelief bordering on outrage, placed the Allied positions in North Africa in a perilous situation. On the other side of the hill, Germany rewarded the conqueror of Tobruk, *Generaloberst* Erwin Rommel, with a Field Marshals baton. The fall of Tobruk was a grievous blow, earning its place in history as the largest military reversal suffered by South Africa. The magnitude of the disaster supplanted the annihilation of the 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh, the surrender at Paardeburg in 1900 where Boer General Piet Cronjé capitulated with some 4,019 men, and even Delville Wood, where the South African 1st Brigade suffered huge casualties, in what has been described as the bloodiest battle of 1916.³⁵⁹

Such a significant event, the surrender of 12 000 South Africans and 22 000 Allied troops, under the command of a South African Major-General, should be better remembered. Similar disasters, such as the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940 and the surrender of the British paratroopers at Arnhem in 1944 are not only remembered but celebrated with pride. However the imprint of the fall of Tobruk on South African memory is incongruent with the magnitude of the disaster. It has been relegated compared with lesser military events that form a persistent part of South African national memory.

³⁵⁸ A. Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army: Crusader to the Alamein Line, 1941-42* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002) (p. 50).

³⁵⁹ Paardeburg was more of a battle in South African history than a South African battle. When comparing the magnitude of these South African defeats, one has to take note of the context that these battles took place. One of the important considerations is the strategic impact of such a reverse in judging the scale of defeat. I am grateful to Lt. Col (Prof) D. Visser for giving me clarity on this issue.

Within four months of Tobruk's surrender, Rommel suffered a major reversal at El Alamein, forcing him to skilfully retreat back to Tunisia, abandoning Tobruk once again to the victorious British Eighth Army. In the blinding light of a string of Allied victories, the ignominious defeat at Tobruk began to fade from memory. Not only did the change of fortunes ensure that Tobruk receded from memory, but both the British and South Africans had a vested interest in downplaying the defeat and the role of the garrison's commander, Major-General H. B. Klopper. Sensitive political relations between the countries, and possible repercussions on the home-front, especially that of South Africa, where Jan Smuts was walking a political tightrope, ensured that a lid was kept on excessive criticism. The findings of the Board of Enquiry³⁶⁰, convened shortly after the event, were made secret and remained so for many years after the war, having regard for the increasingly delicate political relationship between South Africa and the United Kingdom. Although the findings of the board of Enquiry did offer a general exoneration of Klopper's conduct, it left much unanswered when dealing with his inexperience and inept handling of the defence on a tactical level. Neither Klopper's rather alacritous surrender without much of a fight, nor his failure to attempt a break-out, were dealt with in the enquiry.

Matters threatened to flare up once again on the planned publication of Field-Marshal C. Auchinleck's despatch after the war³⁶¹. Auchinleck, after much to and fro activity between the two governments, was forced to make a number of amendments prior to publication. The amendments were a reluctant compromise, in an attempt to soothe the South Africans and especially Klopper, who felt that the original despatch failed to adequately clear him of blame. The despatch had in fact been drafted shortly after the events had taken place leading to the surrender of Tobruk and they were meant to reflect the immediate thinking of Auchinleck close to the actual events ("produced in good faith and in the knowledge available at the time") and were not meant to benefit from hindsight, nor be adjusted to suite current political thinking. When the purpose of the despatch is viewed in this light, it is understandable that Auchinleck was suitably irritated at having been "persuaded" to amend his recollections.³⁶²

In 1948, Klopper's attempt to clear his tarnished name, gave new but brief impetus to the memory of Tobruk. Klopper not content with the extent that the amendments to Auchinleck's despatch exonerated him from any blame, went ahead and published a series of reminiscences of the events leading up to and the surrender of Tobruk in a local popular magazine in 1950. The series of articles gave little in the way of new insight as to the reasons for the poor tactical showing of the South Africans

³⁶⁰ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July.

³⁶¹ TNA, WO 32/10160, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

³⁶² A. Stewart, 'The 'Atomic' Despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the Fall of the Tobruk Garrison and Post-War Anglo-South African Relations', *Scientia Militaria*, 36 (1) (2008) (p. 81).

at Tobruk, and placed the blame for the indefensible position that the South Africans found themselves in, squarely on the British. Klopper having been “abandoned” to his fate by the British had surrendered in order to prevent a “massacre” and a needless loss of life in what was clearly an untenable position.³⁶³

In 1952, the Union War Histories Section under J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton published the first volume of the South African Official History in a competent and well balanced endeavour to explain the facts behind the fall of Tobruk. It is significant, that the first book published by the Union War Histories was that of Tobruk, which was chronologically out of sequence to their later publications, alluding to the importance of the subject early after the end of the Second World War.³⁶⁴ The work soon assumed the status of ‘locus classicus’, not only of South Africa’s participation in the Gazala battles, but indeed for the whole campaign, and is often cited copiously in all the other official histories covering the campaign. Publications thereafter, on the topic, were sporadic, the waning interest most likely exacerbated by a newly-elected Nationalist government largely unsympathetic to the military exploits of the Union Defence Force in the Second World War. As a result of general public apathy and an unsympathetic government, the surrender of Tobruk was consigned to the general national amnesia.

More than a decade would pass before a blip of interest once again appeared on the radar, when Anthony Heckstall-Smith, an erstwhile flotilla officer of the famous ‘A Lighters’ that sustained Tobruk during the first siege of 1941, published an inflammatory book in 1959. Klopper and his staff were accused of being ‘blind drunk’ when surrendering to Rommel and Heckstall-Smith insisted that there were desertions by company commanders in the face of the enemy.³⁶⁵ These were but a few of the insinuations made alluding to the cowardice of Klopper and the South Africans at Tobruk. The opinions expressed in the book although patently unfair, and having little regard to the complex facts of the siege, unfortunately reflected the views of a large proportion of those who remembered Tobruk, especially in inevitable comparisons to the heroic stand made by the Australians in 1941. There is a plethora of anecdotal material from that time alluding to the cowardice of the South Africans and the possibilities of the work of a fifth column. Criticism of the South Africans occurred in the POW camps, reported fist fights in Cairo pubs, and incidents of bald insults being delivered at genteel dinner parties. The book delivered very little in the way of a competent well researched explanation, or an in-depth analysis of the surrender of the fortress, and gave way to an emotional subjective account of the events.

Eric Hartshorn, incensed by the accusations of treachery and ineptitude contained in the Heckstall-Smith book, attempted to set the record straight a year later and some eighteen years after

³⁶³ H.B. Klopper, 'Voorsmaak van die Stryd!', *Huisgenoot*, June 1950.

³⁶⁴ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert: May- July 1942* (London: Oxford, 1952).

³⁶⁵ A. Heckstall-Smith, *Tobruk: The Story of a Siege* (Essex: Anthony Blond, 1959).

the fall of Tobruk.³⁶⁶ The author was a well-known volunteer soldier commanding first the Transvaal Scottish and later the 1st Brigade, seeing much action in the war and ending it as a Brigadier. Hartshorn claimed access to the elusive and secret Tobruk Court of Enquiry findings, quoted freely and unfortunately selectively from this hitherto inaccessible source.³⁶⁷ The centrepiece of his argument was the courts finding that, “The fact that Tobruk fell must undoubtedly be attributed to the eleventh hour reversal of policy leading to the decision to hold the Fortress, regardless of the fact that Eighth Army was then in full retreat in the face of an enemy who had been uniformly successful and whose morale must in consequence have been high”.³⁶⁸ Hartshorn goes on to quote from the findings of the Court of Enquiry, “In view of the difficulties involved it is questionable whether even the most experienced commander with a highly trained staff could have grappled with the problems in the time available”.³⁶⁹ The book’s unabashed purpose was to remove the “shame of the surrender”, based, according to the author, on “rumour and distortion”, rather than an academic pursuit seeking out the underlying facts and allowing the truth to emerge in whatever direction it took.

The historic community would have to wait a further fifty years for new material on Tobruk to emerge. This took the form of two academic articles published by Andrew Stewart. The first article examines the shenanigans of Klopper versus Auchinleck, as described briefly above, when the two locked horns over the publication of Auchinleck’s despatch.³⁷⁰ Stewart uses the fencing match between the two as a lens to examine sensitive relations between South Africa and the United Kingdom. The second article dealt with the effect that the surrender of Tobruk had on South Africa and Great Britain and investigates the lengths that both governments took to safeguard delicate relations.³⁷¹ Both articles use Tobruk as a backdrop to explore fragile relations between the United Kingdom and South Africa and the vulnerability of Prime Minister Jan Smuts to a tense domestic situation, exacerbated by a nation divided along ethnic and language lines. These well-researched articles, being focused on the social and political aspects, unfortunately add little to existing knowledge of the military events surrounding the fall of Tobruk.

³⁶⁶ E. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1960).

³⁶⁷ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July. The court of Enquiry document is lodged at the SANDF Archives in Pretoria and bears the same famous ink stain referred to by Hartshorn in his book.

³⁶⁸ Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (p. 138).

³⁶⁹ Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (p. 144).

³⁷⁰ A. Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17(4) (2006). (pp. 516-44).

³⁷¹ Stewart, 'The 'Atomic' Despatch' (pp. 78-94).

Karen Horn has produced an interesting paper on the fate of the prisoners of war captured at Tobruk.³⁷² Although not the main theme of her article, some of the last hours of Tobruk are brought to light through personal accounts of South Africans who surrendered. Her abstract clarifies the article's intention as "not to explain the events that led to the fall of Tobruk or to lay blame with any specific leader or Allied nation involved in the Western Desert Campaign. The focus is rather on the events during and following the battle, specifically the experiences of the South Africans who were captured and became prisoners of war."³⁷³ By their very nature, personal accounts are notoriously imprecise and narrow, the individual being in the epicentre of the densest clouds generated by the fog of war, and thus throw very little light on the nature of events beyond those immediately surrounding the individual.

Despite these recent academic articles, and some of the early attempts by the official histories, the underlying reasons for the fall of Tobruk remain largely unattended to and perhaps a mystery to those with more than a passing interest. The surrender of Tobruk has been discounted, first falling victim to the sensitive politics of the day, and then relegated by subsequent allied victories shortly thereafter. In South Africa, the memory of Tobruk was side-lined by an unsympathetic Nationalist government and thereafter suffered further obscurity by being considered irrelevant to a large proportion of the population after the democratic elections of 1994.

The aim of this chapter is to re-examine the circumstances surrounding and leading to the surrender of Tobruk in June 1942. Use is made of primary documents and a range of pertinent secondary sources to gain a better understanding of the apparent suddenness of the surrender and to dispel some of the persistent myths surrounding the disaster.

3.1 The Road to Tobruk: The 2nd South African Infantry Division Captures Bardia - 2 January 1942

January 1942 marked the third calendar year of the war in the North African desert. The British in Operation Crusader had pushed Rommel all the way back from the Egyptian border to El Agheila, which was his point of advance in March 1941. The Eighth Army, by removing the Axis from the Cyrenaica, had also relieved Tobruk from its 241 day siege. During the latter stages of Operation Crusader, the South African 2nd Division was involved in mopping-up operations of the Axis forces cut off in the Bardia

³⁷² K. Horn, 'Narratives from North Africa: South African prisoner-of-war experience following the fall of Tobruk, June 1942', *Historia*, 56,2 (2011) (pp. 94-112).

³⁷³ Horn, 'Narratives from North Africa' (p. 94).

sector during Rommel's general retreat.³⁷⁴ The 2nd South African Division was held in reserve in the initial stages of Operation Crusader and had experienced very little combat in North Africa.³⁷⁵

On 5 December 1941 the 3rd Brigade advanced towards Bardia, occupied by approximately 8800 Axis troops and commanded by Major-General Artur Schmitt who was a veteran of World War I. The 2200 Germans manning the Bardia defences were mostly of the administrative services. The remaining 6600 troops were Italian possessing very little in the way of artillery.³⁷⁶ On 7 December Rommel requested that the Italians should evacuate the garrison of a Bardia, a task the Italians considered impossible. The South Africans proceeded with cautious mopping-up operations and by December 14 the Germans and Italians had been successfully hemmed in at Bardia, Halfaya, and Sollum. The South African 3rd Brigade was now tasked in reducing the garrison at Bardia, having only the vaguest idea of the nature of the defences or the strength of the garrison. The South Africans pitted a brigade against a force that they believed total no more than 4840 men. Thus the attackers were outnumbered by 2 to 1. Mere numbers are not a true reflection of the strength of the Axis garrison, their composition being mainly German and Italian stragglers of varying fighting quality.³⁷⁷ The Brigade attack, which drastically underestimated the enemy strength, and whose objective of capturing the port was ambiguous, was doomed to failure and was called off on 17 December.³⁷⁸ The South African brigade suffered heavy casualties for very little gain in this their first ill-conceived operation. General Schmitt, who commanded the garrison, was determined to make a stand despite the fact that he was surrounded and subject to a precarious logistic situation being cut off from his overland supply lines.³⁷⁹

The next attack was scheduled for 29 December and the instruction given by the divisional commander General I.P. de Villiers, was that the attack be conducted with the least possible loss of life. The attack on Bardia was to be a carefully prepared operation carried out in three phases, by the South African 2nd Division with close coordination of artillery and tanks of the 1st Army Tank Brigade. The artillery support for the operation was the greatest concentration yet seen in the Middle East. The considerable artillery barrage was to be conducted by 150 guns, a formidable array of weapons at this

³⁷⁴ The 2nd Division consisted of three brigades, being the 2nd, 3rd and 6th Brigades. The composition of the 2nd Division was somewhat different when it was besieged at Tobruk, consisting of the 4th and 6th Brigades.

³⁷⁵ R.J.M. Loughnan, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Divisional Cavalry* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1963) (p. 160). See also Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish...* (p. 371).

³⁷⁶ I.S.O. Playfair, *A History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*, ed. by J. Butler (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2004), III (p. 94).

³⁷⁷ N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War II: War in the Desert* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1971), III (pp. 76,102).

³⁷⁸ R.J.M. Loughnan, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Divisional Cavalry* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1963) (p. 162).

³⁷⁹ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 92).

stage of the campaign.³⁸⁰ It is said that the operational order and instructions for the South African contingent exceeded 100 pages of single-spaced typing and covered nearly every conceivable contingency. These orders were drawn up under the guidance of none other than Colonel H.B. Klopper, “who was left much to his own devices”.³⁸¹ The attack was prepared using strict timetables and well-defined objectives mimicking the set piece battles that were to become the hallmark of trench warfare in World War I. A full-scale rehearsal of the attack was undertaken on 29 December much to the impatience of Winston Churchill who wanted the pockets cleared up as soon as possible, demonstrating less sensitivity than General Ritchie to possible South African casualties.³⁸² It is tempting to immediately draw comparisons between the preparations for the siege of Bardia compared with the later siege of Tobruk. The South African preparation took many weeks and was detailed in extensive written orders. Rommel's attack on the other hand was almost spontaneous being prepared in under 24 hours in the absence of written orders excepting for a sketch map. This is an exemplary example of the difference between German and British doctrine regarding their attitude to written orders.

The attack was eventually launched after dark on 30 December in cold and windy conditions. At 0400 the heaviest artillery barrage yet seen Africa began, only to be eclipsed some 10 months later at Alamein.³⁸³ The infantry units attacked soon thereafter clearing paths for the tanks to follow and after some hard-fought battles began to achieve the first objectives. The garrison had only two 88 mm anti-tank weapons at their disposal, but they exacted a heavy toll on the advancing British tanks.³⁸⁴ The tough resistance put up by the enemy together with the inexperience of the attacking troops ensured that the high hopes of catching Bardia that day had all but evaporated. Priority was now given to consolidating the positions gained and regrouping the forces within the perimeter. During the night the Germans and Italians took the opportunity to re-occupy four of the strongpoints overrun by the South Africans the previous day.³⁸⁵

By midday on 1 January sandstorm had brought further operations to a halt, while the new plans were drawn up for phase 2 of the operation. The attack was to be launched at 2200 on the night of 1 January preceded by a heavy artillery barrage, with waves of tanks preceding the infantry. Interestingly there was no time available for the Brigades to issue extensive written orders as had been

³⁸⁰ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 105).

³⁸¹ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 106).

³⁸² Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish...* (p. 374). Ritchie directed that the task was to be carried out with the minimum of casualties, “in view of the difficulty of providing reinforcements to replace wastage in the infantry of the Union Defence Forces”. See also Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 108).

³⁸³ R.J.M. Loughnan, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Divisional Cavalry* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1963) (p. 164). See also Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 107).

³⁸⁴ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 107).

³⁸⁵ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 125).

done for phase 1 and in contrast instructions were now issued verbally allowing for greater flexibility.³⁸⁶ The South African attack steadily gained ground leading to the capture of the garrison's last remaining 88 mm anti-tank weapon. By 1300 on 2 January, General Schmitt signalled to Rommel that the German and Italian soldiers had done their duty and he intended to surrender, after the South Africans had penetrated into the interior of the fortress capturing ammunition dumps and provision depots. General Schmitt was the first German general in World War II to surrender to the Allies and signalled a successful end to the 2nd South African Divisions first major operation.³⁸⁷ The South Africans suffered hundred and 132 killed and 270 wounded taking some 8000 German and Italian prisoners.³⁸⁸ In a little over six months' time, with some irony, Colonel H.B. Klopper newly promoted to general commanding the 2nd Division and appointed as the garrison commander of Tobruk would again face the Germans and Italians under similar circumstances excepting for the fact that he would be the one besieged. The Axis positions at Halfaya and Sollum were soon cleared by the South African 6th Brigade and with their capture the entire Axis presence in Cyrenaica ended.

The Axis forces, forced to abandon some of their units cut-off at the frontier, retreated all the way back to El Agheila. Rommel after the retreat enjoyed the benefits of shortened supply lines and the Axis forces were able to replenish and rebuild quite rapidly. On 5 January 1942 a convoy safely delivered 54 German tanks and 20 armoured cars as well as good number of anti-aircraft and artillery guns.³⁸⁹ Rommel, boosted with these supplies, felt strong enough to launch an attack against the thinly held British outposts facing him.³⁹⁰ When Rommel launched the attack on 21 January it came as a complete surprise to the British coming just 16 days after the last of Rommel's rear-guard and retired behind the El Agheila defences.³⁹¹ Within eight days Rommel reconquered Benghazi and the British avoided complete destruction only by hastily withdrawing. Once again logistics had come to the rescue of the British and Rommel came to a halt having advanced some 560 km in just over two weeks, reconquering much of the territory lost in the Crusader operation.

The British retreat finally came to rest on the partially complete Gazala line some 64 km to the west of Tobruk. The South African 1st Division, recently devastated at Sidi Rezegh losing its fifth brigade, was now newly reconstituted and consisted of the 1st and 2nd and 3rd Brigades and occupied the far northern position on the Gazala line. It was under the command of Major-General Dan Pienaar who

³⁸⁶ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 127).

³⁸⁷ The official New Zealand History claims that the New Zealanders were in fact the unofficial captors at Bardia and that the Divisional Cavalry, "...stole the South Africans' thunder." R.J.M. Loughnan, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Divisional Cavalry* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1963) (p. 167).

³⁸⁸ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 135).

³⁸⁹ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 139).

³⁹⁰ Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps* (p. 223).

³⁹¹ Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps* (p. 226).

had replaced Brink, who injured his back on 10 March 1942.³⁹² The 1st South African Infantry Brigade had by now earned the distinction of being the most experienced of the South African contingents in desert and mobile warfare. Its casualties in the Crusader Operation had been very light having lost only 40 white and six black soldiers in action, with a further 150 white and 37 black soldiers and wounded with 156 missing believed prisoners of war. Of all the casualties suffered, only 51 were attributed to ground attack the remainder being the victims of air attack. The brigade had captured 138 enemy soldiers, and claimed destroyed 12 enemy tanks, and 15 aircraft.³⁹³ The 2nd Brigade in comparison had little experience and was barely trained. The 2nd Division under General Klopper occupied Tobruk, directly behind the 1st Division.

Both sides now used the opportunity to rest, build up their forces, train the men, and prepare to launch an offensive. In what amounted to a race against time both sides endeavoured to be the first to launch an attack. On the 26 May 1942, after both Axis and Allied forces had enjoyed four months of respite and replenished their strength, Rommel unleashed his *DAK* on the Eighth Army.

3.2 The Race to Launch an Offensive - The Opposing Plans

Churchill's overriding concern over the prospects of Malta, brought about increasing pressure on Auchinleck to launch an attack against the Axis forces. Auchinleck was summoned to London in March 1942 to discuss the precarious situation Malta found itself in, due to recent Axis successes both at sea and in Libya.³⁹⁴ Realising the inordinate pressure he would be subjected to, he refused to go, but conceded in an unsatisfactory compromise to launch an attack by mid-May. He was also quite aware that the chances were that the enemy would attack first and that he would have to commit to a battle in any event. On 8 May Auchinleck received what amounted to an ultimatum to launch an attack by the beginning of June the latest, or be relieved of his command.³⁹⁵ Auchinleck reluctantly agreed to launch an attack in mid-May and put into effect preparations for an offensive.³⁹⁶

Before Auchinleck was able to complete the preparations for an offensive, Ultra Intelligence disclosed that Rommel was about to launch an attack on 26 May. Auchinleck had now no other option

³⁹² Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (p. 187). Brink wrote of Pienaar, "He is to my mind the only other potential South African divisional commander we have in this theatre..."

³⁹³ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, III (pp. 73,74).

³⁹⁴ Churchill W, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), IV (p. 260). Churchill was also suitably distressed at the British overall contribution to the general war effort, stating, " ...It was lamentable that the British and Imperial armies ... should stand idle for so long a period ... while the Russians were fighting desperately and valiantly along their whole vast front."

³⁹⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks: The History of the Royal Tank Regiment* (London: Cassel, 1959) (p. 153).

³⁹⁶ M. Carver, *Tobruk* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1964) (pp. 162,163).

but to go on to the defensive thus once again losing the initiative to the enemy.³⁹⁷ The preparations for an offensive by the British resulted in a huge buildup of stores well forward at Belhamed and the constant need to protect it once Rommel's attack got under way.³⁹⁸ The dispositions of the Eighth Army designed to facilitate an offensive was less than optimal for a defensive posture with the start lines being well forward had they been designed purely for defensive purposes. The system of defence was compromised by the opposite desire to launch an attack at the soonest possible occasion.³⁹⁹ The reasons that the Eighth Army defensive line stretched so far south to Bir Hacheim was the need to keep Rommel at arm's length away from the supply dumps at Belhamed. Of more serious consideration to the Eighth Army's freedom, was the forward disposition of an immense supply dump at Belhamed, built up in preparation for the offensive now delayed, and requiring protection from any of Rommel's forces being able to penetrate the Gazala line.⁴⁰⁰

It is useful to examine the German plans and the Allied dispositions on the eve of the German offensive on the 26 May 1942 in order to better understand the initial role of the fortress at Tobruk. Tobruk was part of a logistical hub for the Gazala line, and was also an important part of the defence of that line, being the rear area of a defence in depth. It can be seen clearly that Allied order of battle consisted of seven infantry brigades holding a line stretching from the coast of Mediterranean sea at Gazala, to the southern fortress of Bir Hacheim held by the Free French Brigade. (Map 8) This was known as the Gazala line. The infantry brigades were positioned behind an extensive belt of mines that served to close the gaps between the brigades and also enhance the ability of the defenders to resist attack. The Infantry brigades were also placed in defensive boxes affording all round protection.⁴⁰¹

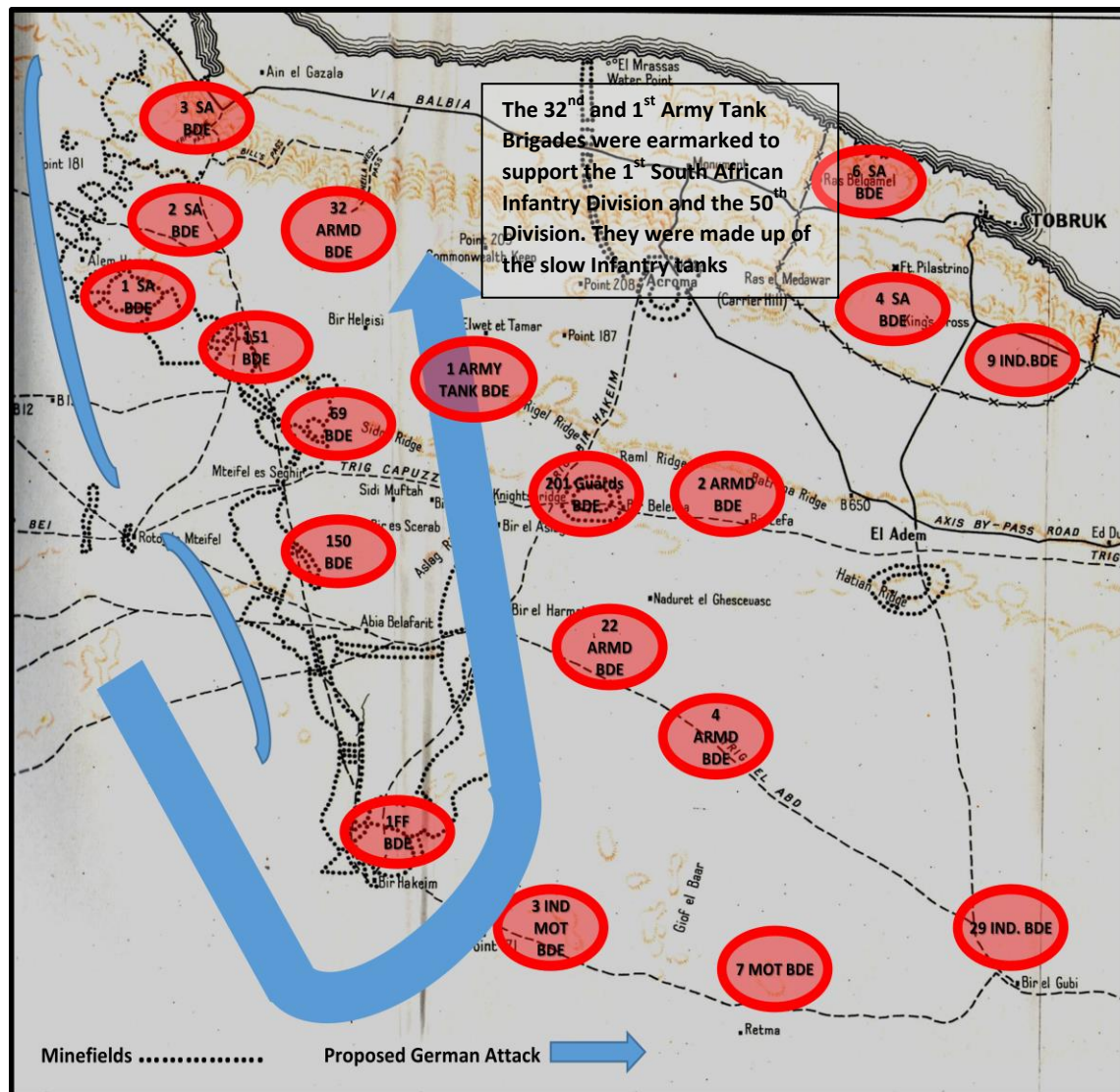
³⁹⁷ NAP, JSP Box 95-1, f.112, Churchill to Smuts, *Churchill encourages initiative on eve of German attack*, 17 June 1942. Churchill and Smuts were in agreement in their concern for the prevailing defensive spirit in the higher command.

³⁹⁸ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, (p. 152).

³⁹⁹ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, (p. 152).

⁴⁰⁰ Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 58). See also Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 164).

⁴⁰¹ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 216). See also Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 63).



Map 8 The Battle of Gazala Showing Allied Disposition 26 May 1942 and the Proposed German Attack.⁴⁰²

There were two immediate problems with this infantry brigade disposition. The first problem was that the defensive positions were not mutually supportive, the distance between them being too great for there to be any defensive overlap.⁴⁰³ The survival of the infantry brigades would then be dependent on the British being able to bring up their mobile armoured brigades to support the infantry boxes and destroy the enemy armour. The destruction or substantial weakening of the British armour or failure of the British armour to concentrate their fighting power would leave the infantry brigades extremely vulnerable and liable to be knocked off piecemeal by the concentrated Axis armour divisions. Secondly, the defensive posture of the brigade “boxes” militated against their mobility, to the extent

⁴⁰² Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*.

⁴⁰³ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 216).

that even the mechanised and motorised brigades sent their vulnerable transport away from the box ensuring immobility should they be under attack.⁴⁰⁴

A further problem was that the British decided to fall back on a brigade structure as opposed to a divisional structure due to the “unwieldiness” of a division. It is significant that the Germans operated from a divisional basis and as such were able to concentrate the divisional assets at the “schwerpunkt” or decisive point. The British divisional assets such as the artillery and anti-tank guns, crucial to the survival of the brigade against rampaging German armour, were now divided up amongst the brigades in an exercise contrary to concentration of forces.⁴⁰⁵

The bulk of the armour was formed up behind the Gazala line in six armoured brigades and two motorised brigades. As discussed above the two motorised brigades were rendered immobile due to their transport being sent to the rear to protect them. When the attack began they remained fixed in their positions. It appears from the map that at the outset Allied armour was dispersed along the length of the Gazala line rather than concentrated at a point thus facilitating a counter-attack on a divisional level. Ritchie, by not concentrating his armour, had committed a cardinal sin. He exposed his forces to a piecemeal engagement in the event of a concentrated attack allowing the enemy to plough through each scattered brigade successively. Auchinleck expressed his concerns to Ritchie on the 20 May 1942 stating: “They (the armoured brigades) have been trained to fight as divisions, I hope, and fight as divisions they should”.⁴⁰⁶ Part of the reason for dispersing the tank brigades was once again the necessity to protect the vulnerable infantry brigades, who felt an intense insecurity if the tank brigades were not close at hand. Another reason offered is that had the British concentrated their armour at any one point, this would have enticed Rommel to attack the point where the concentration did not occur. However, to argue for or against concentration seems to be spurious. Rommel himself dispersed his forces on many occasion. The test seems to be how fast a dispersed force was able to concentrate and cooperate with the other arms of service to form a combined operations force at the crucial time and crucial point.⁴⁰⁷

The fortress of Tobruk, manned by two South African infantry brigades, the 4th and 6th and an Indian brigade the 9th, and commanded by Klopper, formed the north-eastern edge of an Allied defensive system arranged in depth.⁴⁰⁸ (Map 8) Tobruk was crucial as a logistical hub as well as a centre where ordinance could be repaired and units replenished. Tobruk was a crucial forward staging point

⁴⁰⁴ Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 63).

⁴⁰⁵ Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 63). Auchinleck felt that the brigade would be more flexible, although conceding its vulnerability.

⁴⁰⁶ C. Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (New York: Viking Press, 1961) (pp. 135,136).

⁴⁰⁷ Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 168).

⁴⁰⁸ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 217).

for any British offensive but would prove to be a liability when the British were placed on the defensive, and it shall be seen that when the time came, the decision to defend Tobruk was decided rather belatedly.

Auchinleck had instituted two important changes in the organisation of the Eighth Army as a result of the experiences and “lessons learned” from Operation Crusader. An attempt was made to facilitate a greater cooperation between the various arms of service in achieving a combined arms approach. The armoured divisions were reformed to consist of one armoured brigade and one motorised brigade thus reducing armour and increasing the infantry component. Both brigade types were assigned a regiment of artillery and anti-tank guns and other supporting arms. The infantry division was organised around three brigades, each brigade being a self-contained unit containing artillery and anti-tank guns and other supporting units, thus spreading the divisional assets down to brigade level. As a result the basic infantry formation became the brigade instead of the division in an endeavour for more flexibility but at the cost of rendering the brigade more vulnerable.⁴⁰⁹

Again, as in Crusader, the British enjoyed an overwhelming numerical advantage in tanks of almost two to one. (See figure 17) If the German Mark II tanks are discounted, due to the fact that they were worth no more than a contribution to the reconnaissance role, then the advantage to the British is even greater.⁴¹⁰ Some authors tend to discount the contribution of the Italian tanks forces and this is clearly a mistake as has been demonstrated in the early stages of the Crusader battles and again in the early battles of Gazala where they managed to overrun the Indian brigade very early in the campaign.⁴¹¹ The Italians, especially their mobile forces, under guidance of Rommel, proved to be a hardy and formidable foe most of the time, unlike their previous showing in the early stages of the desert campaign and in East Africa.

Both sides fielded new equipment the more significant on the German side was the Panzer III Special that mounted a long 50mm gun, giving the same performance as their 50mm anti-tank gun. Significantly only 19 of these were available compared to the 242 new American Grant tanks armed with a 75mm sponson gun that was arguably superior to that that fielded in any Axis tank of the period. The British were also equipped with the new 6 pounder anti-tank gun that was superior to the German 50mm although any advantage was offset by insufficient time for training on the new weapon. The German pre-eminent tank killer remained the 88mm anti-tank gun of which he only had 48 available.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 213). See also Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 63).

⁴¹⁰ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 214).

⁴¹¹ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 154). “Only the 280 German medium tanks were of serious importance.”

⁴¹² Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (pp. 154-57).

Fall Of Tobruk				
Opposing Tank Strength on 27 May 1942 on the eve of battle				
British	On Hand	In Reserve¹	Total	
Valentines	166		166	
Matildas	110		110	
Grant ⁴	167	75	242	
Stuart	149	70	219	
Crusader	257		257	
	<u>849</u>	<u>145</u>	<u>994</u>	
German				
Mark III(H)	223			
Mark III(J) ²	19			
Mark IV	40			
Mark II	50			
Italian M13/40 ³	228			
	<u>560⁵</u>			
<p>¹ The 1st Armoured Brigade was on its way to join the 8th Army.</p> <p>² The III(J) was armed with the formidable long 50mm gun.</p> <p>³ The Italian tanks are seldom taken into account, a practise which is clearly erroneous considering their significant contribution to the Cauldron battles.</p> <p>⁴ The Grant was a recent addition from the USA and arguably the best tank on the battlefield out-gunning and out-armouring all the Axis machines.</p> <p>⁵ The Germans had 77 tanks in reserve of all kinds.</p>				

Figure 17 Comparative tank strength of the opposing forces on the eve of the battle 27 May 1942.⁴¹³

In attacking the Allied positions Rommel had a number of options. The first was a direct attack along the coast to Tobruk. The second option was to attack the Gazala line in the centre and punch a way through the defences using overwhelming force at the point of attack. In choosing to attack through the centre of the British line, Rommel would have had to negotiate extensive minefields which would have caused considerable delay thus allowing the British ample time to concentrate the armoured forces for a counter-attack. The third option which was the one chosen upon by Rommel was to outflank the Gazala line using the Axis mobile forces to move around the southern point of the line by passing Bir Hacheim and installing these powerful armoured forces deep in the rear of the Gazala line.⁴¹⁴ The British armour was then to be engaged and defeated in detail allowing Rommel's armour to

⁴¹³ Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 166). See also Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 60). See also Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 220).

⁴¹⁴ Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (pp. 135,136).

cut off the infantry brigades manning the Gazala line. Once these brigades had been eliminated then Tobruk would be captured.⁴¹⁵ The timing for the capture of Tobruk was the third day of the offensive.⁴¹⁶ This outflanking option involved the German and Italian armour moving a great distance to outflank the British line and would involve the necessity to refuel at least once thus allowing for a reasonable time for the British to detect him, and arrange for a counter-attack in strength.⁴¹⁷

The initial Eighth army deployment had the dual purpose of providing a defensive position together with a springboard for a possible attack. However it seems that a defensive mentality finally overtook the final dispositions and mobility gave way to extensive fortifications and minefields. Ritchie having received intelligence reports in May 1942 of an imminent Axis attack abandoned any offensive plans he may have had.⁴¹⁸ It is interesting to compare the defensive doctrine of Ritchie to that of his predecessor Lieutenant-General O’Conner, who grasping the principles of mobile mechanised desert warfare in facing the Italians at Mersa Matruth in 1940 held his main forces sixty miles behind a line thinly manned by forward patrols, thus removing them from the shock of a surprise action, and by keeping all his units mobile and on wheels ensured that they could move freely in any direction. This is not a point of view shared by Lord Michael Carver who thinks Barnett viewpoint naïve and points out that if Ritchie pulled his forces back by 100 kilometres, then Tobruk would only have been covered by a thin screening force and would have been exposed to capture without a preliminary fight behind a solid defence.⁴¹⁹ The Gazala line was a regression in tactics resorting to erroneous British doctrine of separating the infantry from the mechanised forces and attempting to build a solid line of defence in a theatre where it was impossible to secure both flanks at once.⁴²⁰

The British armoured brigade dispositions were designed to meet two eventualities, either an attack by Rommel through the middle of the Gazala defensive positions, or an outflanking manoeuvre around the southern flank of the Gazala line, both lines of attack aimed at capturing Tobruk. Auchinleck was inclined to believe that the German attack would punch through the centre of the Gazala line, and Ritchie believed, correctly so as it turned out, that Rommel would try and outflank the Gazala line.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁵ Mitcham Jr S, *Rommel's Greatest Victory: The Desert fox and the Fall of Tobruk, Spring 1942* (Novato: Presidio, 2001) (p. 61).

⁴¹⁶ H.W. Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert* (Durban: Albatross, 1950) (p. 149). The author served as Rommel's aide-de-camp from March 1941. Tobruk was the core target of the offensive launched by Rommel on the 26 May 1942.

⁴¹⁷ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 216).

⁴¹⁸ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 216).

⁴¹⁹ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 64).

⁴²⁰ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, (p. 134). It is interesting to contrast this with the German Official History which describes the Gazala defences as nothing less than a ‘complete innovation in desert warfare.....Here in the desert the British had sought to construct a fortified line.....’. H. Rahn, W. Stumpf, R. Wegner, B. Boog, *Germany and the Second World War: The Global War*, ed. by Militargeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), VI (p. 672).

⁴²¹ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 218).

The disagreement between Auchinleck and Ritchie, as to where the Axis would deliver the final attack, had the effect of dispersing the efforts of the armoured brigades. No matter where the brigades were initially stationed, they had the ability due to their mobility to meet Rommel's forces in time whether they arrived in the center or the south. What was damaging to their ability to react quickly and concentrate at one point was that there was a diverging view amongst the Corps commanders that reflected the same divergence between Ritchie and Auchinleck.⁴²² There seems little doubt that Auchinleck's expectation of an attack through the centre of the Gazala line had permeated the depths of the Eighth Army and influenced many of the commanders to believe that any outflanking manoeuvre from the south was most probably a feint or subsidiary action. This led commanders to be cautious about committing the armoured brigades until such time as they were certain of where the enemy's main effort was.⁴²³

3.3 Rommel Attacks - The Cauldron and Abandonment of the Gazala Line: 26 May – 14 June 1942

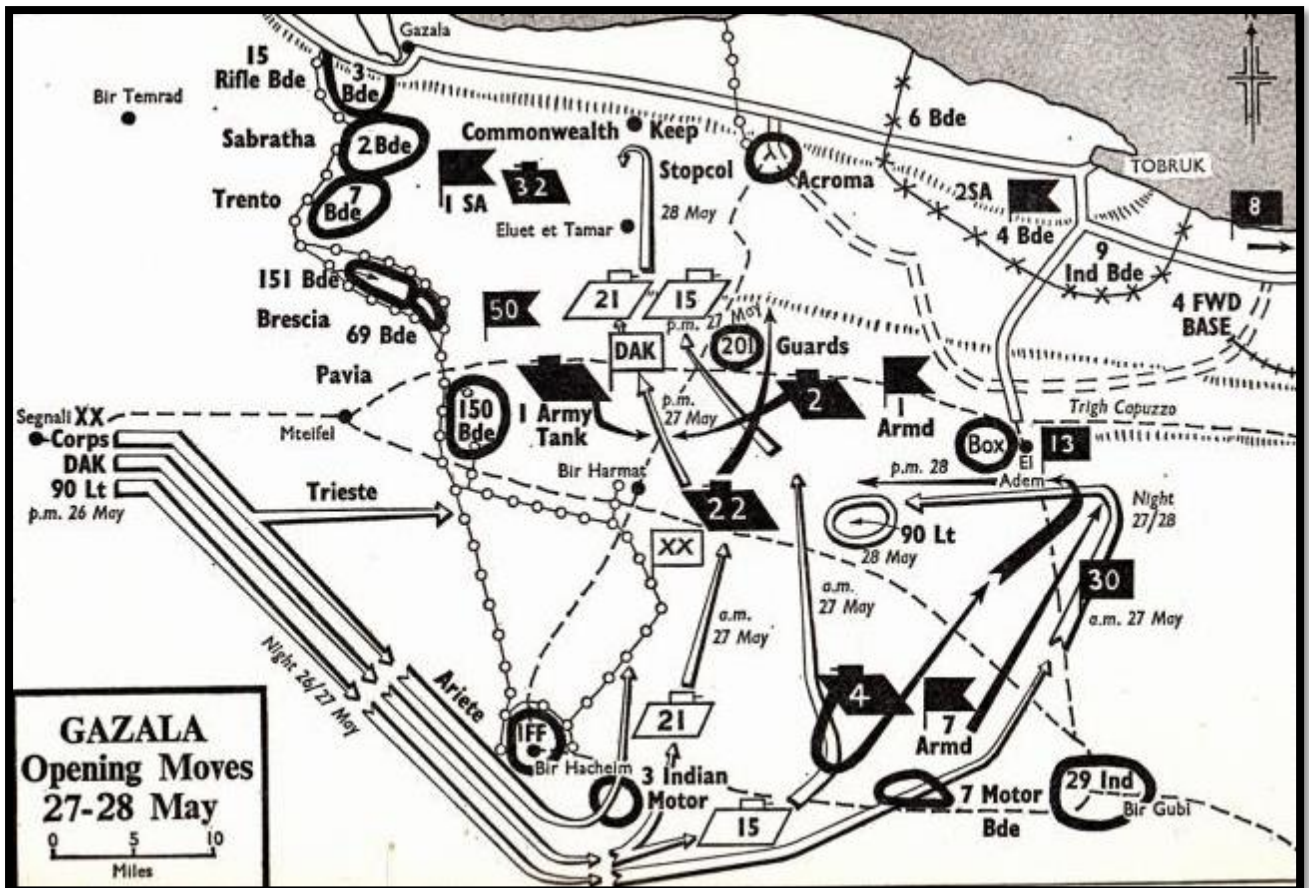
The Axis offensive began on the 26 May 1942 at 1400 with a diversionary attack in the north of the Gazala line by the Italians. At 2230 in a night move, the main Axis forces launched their attack, choosing to take the indirect approach and making a flanking movement around Bir Hacheim, optimistically targeting Tobruk's capture by the third day of the offensive. Rommel's approach march took place at night on a front of nearly 50 kilometres.⁴²⁴ The British decision in attempting to build a formidable line of defence based on infantry brigades in all-round defensive boxes, depended for success on their ability to be able to concentrate their mobile armoured forces and meet Rommel's attack head on with a numerical advantage. A failure to identify the main axis of attack and concentrate fighting power would condemn the infantry brigades to be overwhelmed one at a time, and the armoured brigades to suffer the same fate if fed into the battle in a piecemeal fashion.⁴²⁵

⁴²² Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 71).

⁴²³ Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (p. 75).

⁴²⁴ The German Official History describes this as being something quite new in the history of warfare. Rahn, *Germany and the Second World War*, VI (p. 672).

⁴²⁵ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 160).



Map 9 Rommel's opening moves and outflanking attack on the Gazala line. *Ariete's* overrunning of the 3rd Indian Brigade can be clearly seen as well the *DAK's* overrunning of the 7th Motorised Brigade and the attack on the isolated 4th Armoured Brigade.⁴²⁶

The British did not expect a night attack, and opinion was divided amongst the commanders as to the direction of the final attack. As a result the British hesitated when they should have concentrated their forces and immediately counter-attacked. It was not until 0600 27 May that air reconnaissance confirmed the presence of large Axis forces to the south of Bir Hacheim and substantially convinced the British that this was the main attack.⁴²⁷ Rommel's concentrated mechanised force swept away the two British motorised brigades, the 3rd Indian and the 7th. It was the Italian *Ariete* who overran the Indian 3rd Brigade causing 41 officers and 453 men killed with 600 prisoners taken suffering 76 casualties and the loss of 25 tanks. This short and sharp battle led to a considerable victory early on in the campaign.⁴²⁸ Next to be attacked were the unprepared 4th Armoured Brigade, who even at this late stage, had

⁴²⁶ Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 176).

⁴²⁷ Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (pp. 68,69).

⁴²⁸ Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts* (p. 114). Carver mistakenly refers to a mixture of German and Italian forces that overran the 3rd Brigade which is incorrect according to the Italian war diaries. Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 177).

doubts as to the true intentions of the enemy.⁴²⁹ However it was not a one sided engagement and the new Grant tanks outgunned the Axis armour and extracted a high toll before being put out of action.⁴³⁰ Not for the first time in the desert war, the Germans had accomplished pitting a concentrated force of armour against scattered British formations offered up vainly in a piecemeal fashion in the hope of slowing the determined Axis advance. This splitting up of the British armoured brigades and introducing them in a piecemeal manner to the battle was incomprehensible to Rommel.⁴³¹ (See Map 9)

At 0900 The 21st Panzer Division ran into the 22nd Armoured Brigade who, although ordered into the fray to assist the 4th Armoured Brigade, had not yet conformed to that instruction. Unbeknown to the British, the 4th Armoured Brigade had been roughly dealt suffering heavy casualties with the commander of the 7th Armoured Division Major General Frank Messervy becoming a prisoner of war in the confused melee. The 22nd Brigade met the full brunt of the Axis attack and it too retreated in some disorder, for the loss of thirty tanks, all the way back to the Knightsbridge box although managing to put up a feisty performance that began to slow the impetus of Rommel's rampant forces.⁴³² Finally at 0945, the 2nd Armoured Division was ordered to attack south and only at 1400 after a false start were they able to launch a coordinated assault on the Germans. The attack launched by 2nd Armoured Brigade into the exposed flank of the Axis attack managed to extract a heavy price and assisted in bringing the Axis armoured divisions to a halt short of their objectives, one of which was the capture of Bir Hacheim.⁴³³

The British had suffered grievous losses, losing much of the defensive system in the south, with two brigades being overrun, and their mobile forces failing to launch a concentrated attack against the German armour. Notwithstanding this early success, Rommel had underestimated the strength of the British forces. The Germans had lost over a third of their tanks and were strung out from the coast to being deep behind enemy positions leaving the supply route in a precarious position.⁴³⁴ The German dispersion behind enemy lines presented a rare opportunity for the British to launch a consolidated armoured strike. According to Rommel, his plan to overrun the British forces behind the Gazala line had not succeeded. The principal cause of this failure was the underestimation of the strength of the British

⁴²⁹ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 160).

⁴³⁰ Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 69).

⁴³¹ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 160).

⁴³² Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 70).

⁴³³ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III. See also Stewart, *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army* (p. 71).

⁴³⁴ Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 186).

armoured divisions. The advent of the Grant tank with its 75mm gun had unnerved Rommel to a certain extent. "Our entire force now stood in heavy and destructive combat with a superior force".⁴³⁵

Rommel's advance behind the Gazala line opened up a direct threat to Tobruk keeping in mind that the occupation of the fortified port remained the most important target of any Axis offensive. The question is asked as to what event should have triggered the Tobruk garrison to prepare its defences to meet a direct Axis thrust and it is suggested that the proximity of powerful enemy forces a mere 20km away could be expected to act as an incentive for the purpose. It can also be argued that the British in preparing their brigade positions into all round defensive boxes would naturally have afforded the Tobruk enclave with the same type of all-round defence. The desert war had already demonstrated that fixed positions and continuous lines were unworkable against a doctrine calling for mobility and agility. This point is brought up here as it has been offered by a large proportion of the available history on the subject, that the first indication that the garrison of Tobruk had that they were required to offer an all-round defence, was when the Axis forces surrounded and isolated them on the 18 of June 1942.

28 May brought further confusion to the battlefield. Rommel's forces lay scattered over a wide area behind the Gazala line short of essential supplies and looking to a conservative eye decidedly vulnerable and isolated from their own front lines. Rommel had underestimated the strength of the British forces. The Germans had lost over a third of their tanks⁴³⁶ and were strung out from the coast to being deep behind enemy positions leaving the supply route in a precarious position. This was the opportunity for a concentrated British force to launch a decisive counter-attack against a weakened and disorganised enemy.⁴³⁷ The British disorganisation and lack of initiative proved to be greater than that of the scattered immobile Axis forces who managed to beat off uncoordinated British attacks using superior defensive tactics. Rommel's hopes of a quick decisive victory had not materialised according to plan and although he had dealt a powerful blow to the British, a large proportion of their armoured force remained intact. Despite a clear opportunity the British forces remained mainly on the defensive for the whole day and by the time they had gained a clearer picture it was already mid-day. In the late afternoon the British attempted to cut off the Germans by attacking Arieta who were holding the Bir Harmat area in a pincer movement. The Italian 88mm and 90mm anti-tank fire extracted a fearful toll on the attacking British who had little to show in return.⁴³⁸ In a further successful action by the Italians,

⁴³⁵ B.H. Liddel-Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: De Capo Press, 1953) (p. 207). See also Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 225).

⁴³⁶ Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 186). See also Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 225).

⁴³⁷ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 166).

⁴³⁸ Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts*, (p. 118).

an alternative line of supply was opened up by clearing the minefields south of the hundred 150th Brigade position, effectively cutting of the brigade.

During the 29 May 1942 a combination of British ineffectiveness together with the personal intervention of Rommel brought success in finding routes for the Axis supply behind the Gazala lines.⁴³⁹ This is but one example of Rommel placing himself at the head of the lowest levels of a command chain in order to achieve a desired result. It is interesting to contrast this style of leadership with that of the garrison commander of Tobruk, who we shall see, was discouraged from doing a personal reconnaissance of an area under attack because of the danger of the situation. Rommel, now resupplied and replenished and in possession of 150 German and 90 Italian tanks against the 420 tanks on hand for the British, decided to break off his drive to the coast in favour of consolidating his forces behind the Gazala line using the British minefields to protect his western flank and throwing up a powerful anti-tank screen on the eastern front.⁴⁴⁰

Rommel now safely ensconced between mines and anti-tank weapons and resupplied through cleared paths through the British minefields, hoped to consolidate his forces for a further attack and at the same time provided enticing bait for further British attacks that he hoped would batter themselves up against the formidable protective anti-tank net. At first glance Rommel's resorting to a defensive stance may seem to fly in the face of a German doctrine that encourages offensive action above all else. However German doctrine makes provision for defensive action as long as it is combined with offensive action. "Any position is of value, only when it forces the enemy to attack and, during the enemy's attempt at envelopment procures for the defender the necessary time or favorable conditions for his offensive action".⁴⁴¹

Rommel did not have to wait long as Lieutenant-General Charles Norrie the commander of XXX Corps⁴⁴² obliged by launching what was supposed to have been a concentrated attack of all of his armour against an encircled and immobile enemy, but this show of force soon degenerated into an uncoordinated piecemeal attack resulting in heavy casualties of precious British armour.

The British defensive box held by the 150th Brigade now became the centre of the German attack over the next few days in an area dubbed by the British as the 'Cauldron'. Rommel fended off

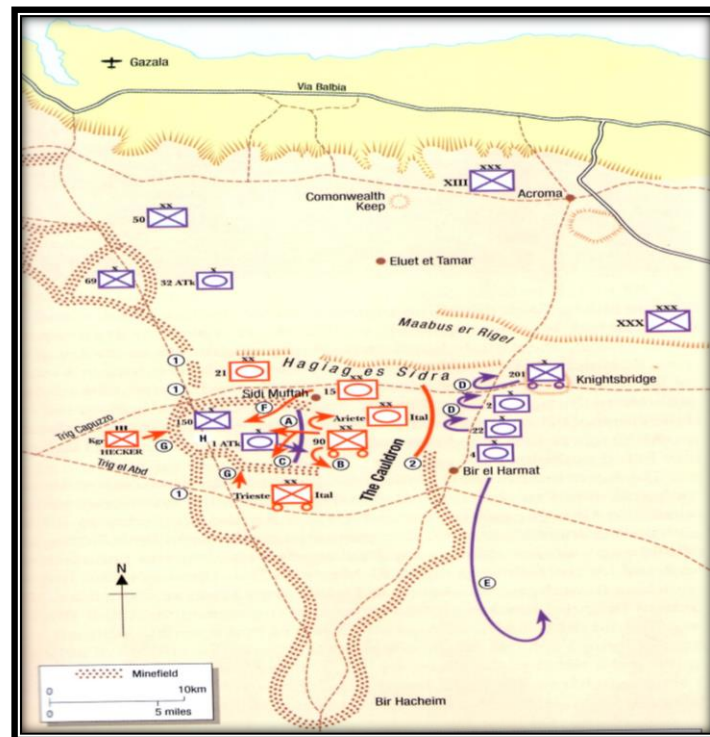
⁴³⁹ Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 226). See also Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, (p. 166).

⁴⁴⁰ Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (p. 166).

⁴⁴¹ H. von Seeckt, *Command and Combat Use of Combined Arms (German Field Service Regulations)*, trans. by Capt. P. B. Harm. (Germany: United States of America Army War College, 1921). More often than not Rommel was a product of a rigorous German culture and training and his actions conformed closely to German doctrine, although it may be said that he applied it with extraordinary vigour and élan.

⁴⁴² XXX Corps consisted of the 1st and 7th Armour divisions containing all but two of the armoured brigades the 1st and 32 Army tank Brigades.

the British mechanised attacks on his eastern flank with his anti-tank screen while concentrating his forces against the 150th Brigade which stood little chance against overwhelming odds and finally succumbed on the 1st of June after putting up a spirited defence that saw the death of its commander Brigadier C.W. Haydon.⁴⁴³ The demise of the 150th Brigade now opened up a clear and uninterrupted route for the Axis supply columns to resupply Rommel's armoured forces in the Cauldron. It is worthwhile taking a moment to reflect on how truly remarkable the actual German manoeuvre was in outflanking the British Gazala line, then inserting the forces between the British defences and essentially driving backwards towards the German lines to re-establish lines of communication. This bold manoeuvre is a first in military history and exemplifies the German art of 'Bewegungskrieg' and the pinnacle of the art reached by Rommel in the desert of North Africa.⁴⁴⁴ Rommel commanded a strong concentrated position that was easily supplied and defended and could sally forth at his will threatening multiple targets in the Allied rear including the biggest prize Tobruk.



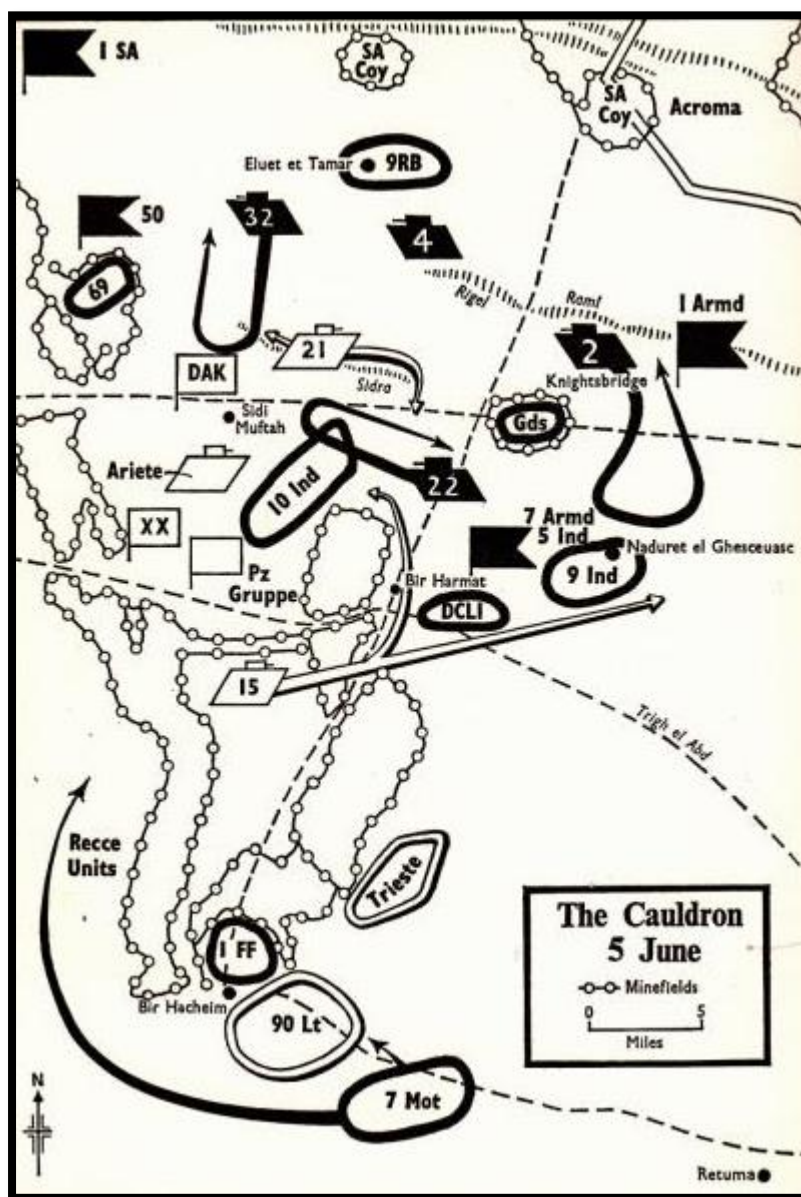
Map 10 The Cauldron Battles and the elimination of the 150th Infantry Brigade 30 May – 1 June 1942⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Rommel took personal control of one of the leading platoons in the final attack against the 150th Infantry Brigade demonstrating once again his hands on approach to warfare. Rommel himself commented on the stubborn defence demonstrating the effectiveness of an infantry brigade against tanks if its defences were prepared properly. Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 38). The South Africans too extracted a heavy toll on German armour at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941 where the South African 5th Brigade was overrun by concentrated German forces in Operation Crusader.

⁴⁴⁴ R.M. Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007) (p. 144).

⁴⁴⁵ Ford K, *Gazala 1942: Rommel's Greatest Victory*. (Oxford: Osprey, 2009) (p. 49).

The British launched a massive attack on the Cauldron on the 5 June 1942 using first infantry and artillery to penetrate the minefields and then armour to exploit the gains. The artillery barrages fell on largely empty desert as the *DAK* had withdrawn the front slightly. The largely uncoordinated British attack suffered severely at the hands of Rommel's anti-tank screen losing up to seventy tanks by the end of the day in a fruitless attempt to dislodge the *DAK* from their positions in the Cauldron. Rommel then launched a limited counter-attack that wrought more losses and confusion on the retreating British forces. With the British licking their wounds Rommel was now free to concentrate on eliminating the troublesome Free French box at Bir Hacheim.



Map 11 The Cauldron 5 June 1942 and the failure of Operation Aberdeen launched as a joint infantry and tank assault to evict the Germans from the Cauldron.

Rommel was determined to eliminate the Free French Brigade commanded by General Marie-Pierre Koenig in the extreme south of his lines at Bir Hacheim that to date had offered stubborn resistance. The French had carved out a defensive system in a featureless desert using ingenuity and largely obsolete armaments. The Italians had been assaulting the defensive box with heavy casualties and very little effect. Leaving a screening force to mark the British Rommel launched a concerted assault on Bir Hacheim on the 7 June and despite heavy air assaults by the Luftwaffe in support the garrison withheld all the Axis attempts to overrun them. The garrison held on bravely through the 8 and the 9 June despite repeated air and ground assaults by vastly superior forces. The position inside the box was becoming critical and a decision to withdraw was made on the evening of the 10 June where 2600 men out of an original garrison of 3700 eventually made it back to British lines.⁴⁴⁶

The fall of Bir Hacheim signalled the end of the Gazala line and left the British manning positions that ran lengthways along the coast from the original position at Gazala in the west to Tobruk in the east. Rommel was poised to the south of these positions having concentrated all his armour and having the ability now to strike in any direction. The time bought at Bir Hacheim by the stubborn French resistance had been used with very little effect by the British who were content to withdraw behind their defensive boxes and hand the initiative over to the Axis. On the 11 June Rommel struck out at Tobruk and the supply centre of Belhamed in a two pronged attack. A hasty British counter-attack on the 12 and 13 June that witnessed little coordination between the British divisional and brigade commanders suffered crippling losses of tanks against the Axis mechanised forces, with 138 tanks being lost in one afternoon alone. The British position at the Knightsbridge box was abandoned in the face of the defeat of the British mechanised forces and with that the last positions held on the Gazala line became untenable and faced being cut off. On the 14 June Ritchie ordered the 1st South African and 50th divisions withdraw from the Gazala line.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁶ The Free French Box at Bir Hacheim measured 16.5 km along its triangular perimeter manned by a mixed force of Free French units of approximately 3700 men. By all accounts the French positions were skilfully placed surrounded by minefields and well placed anti-tank guns and importantly well camouflaged. See Bimberg E, *Tricolor Over the Sahara: The Desert battles of the Free french 1940-1942* (Westport: Greenwood, 2002) (p. 103). It is once again tempting although spurious to draw obvious parallels with the state of readiness and resistance offered and succesful evacuation of Bir Hacheim to the much larger forces of the Tobruk garrison.

⁴⁴⁷ NAP, JSP Box 137, f.125, Auchinleck to Smuts, *Addressing Smuts' Concern for Union Forces*, 14 June 1942. Auchinleck saw the situation as, "serious but by no means irretrievable." This was in response to the growing alarm in the South African camp.

3.4 Tobruk Is Not To Be Invested Again!

The fact that Tobruk was invested on 18 June 1942 was not entirely due to the reversals suffered by the Eighth Army at the hands of Rommel and his *DAK*. There is no doubt that Tobruk could have been successfully evacuated prior to being encircled, had the British chosen this course of action. The decision to hold Tobruk was in fact made at the eleventh hour and went against the British policy of not allowing Tobruk to be invested for a second time. It seems that Smuts himself was not averse to Tobruk being held. On 18 June, on learning that Tobruk was isolated, he suggested to Auchinleck that Tobruk be held "...both to save it also to bring (the) enemy to (a) decisive battle."⁴⁴⁸ The resolute defence offered by the Australians in the first siege lasting 242 days, was a major hindrance to Rommel's drive into Egypt, due to its position astride a major artery of Axis supply, and the denial of its port facilities to the Axis. Rommel was preoccupied with the siege of Tobruk and this distraction, while it remained unconquered, precluded a drive into the heart of Egypt. However the survival of the fortress of Tobruk was achieved at a great price to the Royal Navy, who remained reluctant to suffer such losses again. Consequently, in February 1942, it was decided Tobruk would not be defended, but rather abandoned in the event it was threatened by the prospect of being surrounded by enemy forces.⁴⁴⁹ It can be seen that the withdrawal to the Egyptian border ordered by Ritchie was not some hastily ill-conceived plan thought up on the spur of the moment in the face of a relentless enemy, but rather in terms of an operational order to XIII Corps dated 10 May 1942 which clearly states that should the defence of the Gazala line become untenable, then the facilities at Tobruk were to be demolished and abandoned and the entire Corps withdrawn to the Egyptian frontier.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁸ NAP, JSP Box 137, f.132, Smuts to Auchinleck, *Smuts encourages Auchinleck to hold Tobruk*, 18 June 1942).

⁴⁴⁹ In February 1942 Auchinleck had informed London that in the event of an enemy offensive: 'I was determined not to allow Tobruk to be besieged for a second time... I did not consider that I could afford to lock up one and a half divisions in a fortress. Admiral Cunningham agreed, particularly since the siege had proved so costly in ships, and so did Air Chief Marshal Tedder, who doubted if he had sufficient aircraft to provide air cover TNA, WO 32/10160/318, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942. and again in Note on the Western Front by the Commander in-Chief, M. E. F. (For Middle East Defence Committee.) dated 4th February, 1942, 'If, for any reason, we should be forced at some future date to withdraw from our present forward positions, every effort will still be made to prevent Tobruk being lost to the enemy; but it is not my intention to' continue to hold it once the enemy is in a position to invest it effectively. Should this appear inevitable, the place will be evacuated, and the maximum amount of destruction carried out in it, so as to make it useless to the enemy as a supply base. In this eventuality the enemy's advance will be stopped on the general line Sollum-Maddalena -Giarabub, as laid down in Operation Instruction No. 110. 19 January 1942.' TNA, WO 32/10160/380, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942. This viewpoint became Eighth Army Operational Instruction No.46 dated 16 February 1942 in which this paragraph was repeated verbatim. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part I, p.14, Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry, 27 May - 2 July.

⁴⁵⁰ Operational Order No. 23 codenamed 'Freeborn' dated 10 May 1942, states in the opening paragraph, that should the defence of Gazala line become untenable the entire Corps was to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. Further on in paragraph 4(d) it emphasizes that the 'thorough demolition of Tobruk is an

When the defence of the forward positions in the Gazala line indeed became untenable, after the costly battles of 13 June, Auchinleck intervened and proposed that the withdrawal of the Eighth Army would be to the line Acroma-El Adem and southwards.⁴⁵¹ This was a clear change of plan and not in accordance with Operation Freeborn. Auchinleck perceived the circumstances surrounding the triggering of the implementation of Operation Freeborn were different from what he originally envisaged. He felt that the Eighth Army was far from being beaten and that the infantry divisions were largely intact. Auchinleck reasoned that, 'The Eighth Army was still strong enough to provide an adequate garrison for Tobruk and to maintain a mobile field force to the east and south capable of preventing the fortress being permanently besieged.'⁴⁵²

Thus there existed, at the time of withdrawing the 1st South African and 50th divisions, an unfortunate difference of understanding between Auchinleck and Ritchie. Auchinleck believing that the line Acroma - El Adem – Bir Gubi would be defended with the two retreating divisions taking up positions on that line and Ritchie, clearly following the directives of Operation Freeborn, ordering the two divisions to the Egyptian frontier. Ritchie failed to inform Auchinleck of his true intentions and it is clear that, at this stage, Ritchie was intent on withdrawing to the Egyptian frontier whether Tobruk was to be held in isolation or abandoned. However, when corresponding with Auchinleck, his intentions were couched in less definite terms and he spoke of the possibility of Tobruk being cut off for a time. Simultaneously, furthering the state of confusion, Churchill sought assurance that Tobruk was not to be abandoned.⁴⁵³ It seems as if Ritchie, in the face of being pressed by Churchill and Auchinleck to hold Tobruk, decided to allow the garrison there to be temporarily besieged, providing enough provisions to withstand encirclement for three months. In the meantime Eighth Army would be rebuilt behind the infantry divisions manning prepared positions on the Egyptian border.⁴⁵⁴ Ritchie secured an agreement from Auchinleck that Tobruk may be temporarily invested but failed to inform him that he had ordered the withdrawal of the 1st South African and 50th divisions to the Egyptian frontier. Auchinleck now

essential part of the scheme'. Allowance was made for the withdrawal of the Tobruk garrison to Bir El Hariga close to the Egyptian frontier. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part III, p.31, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July.

⁴⁵¹ In Auchinleck's own words as per his despatch, '..... I was determined that the Eighth Army should not yield more ground than was absolutely necessary. I therefore ordered General Ritchie not to allow Tobruk to become besieged but to hold a line through Acroma and El Adem and thence southwards' TNA, WO 32/10160/360, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

⁴⁵² TNA, WO 32/10160/360, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

⁴⁵³ NAP, JSP Box 137, f.132, Smuts to Auchinleck, *Smuts encourages Auchinleck to hold Tobruk*, 18 June 1942). As has been pointed out it seems that this was a position that Smuts encouraged.

⁴⁵⁴ Ritchie who was prone to be guided by Lieutenant-General William Gott commander of XIII Corps was influenced by the latter's confidence that Tobruk was capable of withstanding a siege for at least two months. Gott was also in favour of withdrawing behind the frontier and the building the Eighth Army. Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 107).

envisaged that Tobruk would be held as part of a defensive line manned by relatively unscathed troops. He was not being aware that what remained was a thin veneer, the relatively unscathed divisions having withdrawn to the Egyptian frontier.⁴⁵⁵

On 14 June the 1st South African and 50th divisions successfully withdrew from the Gazala line and make for the Egyptian border contrary to what Auchinleck had planned.⁴⁵⁶ These two divisions, by not taking up defensive positions on the line Acroma - El Adem – Bir Gubi were in effect allowing for the isolation and investment of Tobruk. Those now expected to hold a rampant *DAK* at bay were but a thin screening force made up of the remnants of infantry brigades and a much weakened 4th Armoured Brigade recently mauled in the battles of the Cauldron.

On 15 June, the Panzer divisions were ordered forward to attack Belhamed and El Adem, positions effectively screening the vulnerable south east corner of the Tobruk perimeter. The initial German attacks were repulsed, but success was short lived when Rommel, not to be denied, forced the defenders of El Adem to abandon their position on 16/17 June, thus finally exposing the cornerstone of the outward defences of Tobruk. Klopper, inexplicably, was not informed of the abandonment of El Adem and only became aware of the grave situation when his reconnaissance units of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, discovered it to be in enemy hands on 17 June.⁴⁵⁷ Simultaneously the British forward air strips were captured, severely hampering future air support for the Tobruk garrison. Rommel was able to report triumphantly back to Berlin on 18 June that he surrounded the port of Tobruk and that the nearest enemy force of any consequence, beside those invested in Tobruk, where sixty-four kilometres away on the Egyptian frontier.⁴⁵⁸

3.5 Introducing Major-General Hendrik Balsazer Klopper

In so much as a commander has a decisive influence on the outcome of a battle, it is instructive to evaluate those who faced each other on the perimeter of Tobruk on the morning of 20 June 1942. *Generaloberst* Erwin Rommel (1891-1944) needs little introduction, his reputation as a fierce

⁴⁵⁵ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 72).

⁴⁵⁶ The South African Division under General Pienaar retreated through Tobruk. Pienaar paid a visit to Klopper on his way through en-route to the Egyptian border. It is impossible to imagine that Klopper was left under any illusion that Pienaar's Division was to play any part in a defensive line with Tobruk. The 50th Division had a far more hazardous time in retreating to the frontier. The Division had to fight its way through surrounding Italian Forces and make a large detour through the desert behind enemy lines as far south as Bir Hacheim, reaching the frontier virtually intact. As in the case of Bir Hacheim this is another example of a successful evacuation proving the difficulty of watertight encirclement in the desert.

⁴⁵⁷ Klopper was only informed officially on the 18 June that El Adem had been abandoned which can be considered extremely tardy as the defence of the position was key to the manner in which the defence of Tobruk would be conducted. Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 148).

⁴⁵⁸ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 125).

proponent of manoeuvre warfare and his audacious tactics bordering on the reckless at times, are the subject matter multiple books and common knowledge. His standing remains largely intact even after the passage of time and a plethora of the inevitable revisionist material that have seen the reputations of men such as Field-Marshal Bernard Montgomery, General George Patton and General Douglas MacArthur diminish under incessant attack.⁴⁵⁹ When one strips away the myth, Rommel remains one of the more competent German generals, but nevertheless only one of many German officers who were merely the product of superior German doctrine that found its roots a century and a half prior to the Second World War.



Figure 18 A confident looking Major-General H.B. Klopper. A picture taken somewhere in Tobruk⁴⁶⁰

Like Rommel, so too was Major-General Hendrik Balsazer Klopper (1902–1978) a product of his nation's military schooling, largely borrowed from a ponderous and under-developed British way of war.⁴⁶¹ This disparity between Allied and German doctrine was to cost the British, and later the United

⁴⁵⁹ Corelli Barnett is an example of a revisionist author. He sought to resuscitate the tarnished reputation and generalship of Ritchie at the expense of Auchinleck and then later in a similar exercise that of Auchinleck over Field-Marshal Montgomery. Barnett attempts to redress some of the patently unfair criticism they both received at the hands of historians and especially in the case of Auchinleck, Field-Marshal Montgomery. Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, DOCD photograph collection.

⁴⁶⁰ Ian van der Waag puts it as follows, '...Smuts's generals on the eve of the Second World War had little education, little real training, and no experience beyond minor pacification operations. Moreover, an emphasis on management and the good execution of clerical and desk tasks induced intellectual stagnation. I. van der Waag, 'Smuts's Generals: Towards a First Portrait of the South African High Command, 1912–1948', *War in History*, 18(1) (2011), 33-61 (p. 60).

States of America, dearly in North Africa. Unlike Rommel, very little is known about Klopper and his career prior to the Second World War, an unfortunate historiographical situation affecting all but a few of South Africa's Generals in both World Wars.⁴⁶² One has to be cautious in evaluating Klopper, that the stigma of having surrendered the garrison of Tobruk, after what was apparently a particularly poor effort, does not obliterate the facts. It is interesting that, despite this stigma that was to continually haunt him and despite his largely unsuccessful efforts to reverse adverse perceptions,⁴⁶³ Klopper went on to enjoy a successful army career serving as Army Chief of Staff from 1951 to 1953, as Inspector-General (1953 – 1956), and as Commandant-General, head of the Union Defence Forces, (1956 – 1958). The subsequent resuscitation of his career may have owed something to the ascendancy of the Nationalist after their 1948 election victory.

Klopper was born on 25 September 1902 in Somerset-West and once he had finished his studies and a short stint as a primary school teacher, joined the Union Defence Force on the 5 August 1924.⁴⁶⁴ In order to gain access to the permanent force he was obliged to undergo a program of amphigiarious training that due to its rigorous nature attracted a high failure rate.⁴⁶⁵ Receiving a commission and his pilot wings in September 1926, Klopper seemed to struggle with the more theoretical aspects of his course, failing some of his subjects in Military Law and Staff Duties.⁴⁶⁶ He was married on 22 December 1928 and had a son. Notwithstanding a somewhat mediocre academic career in the UDF, he was described by his immediate superiors as having a strong personality, outstanding ability and tact, a person to be relied upon in all circumstances possessing a higher sense of honour and devotion. Klopper was found to be hardworking, able and conscientious, and a good disciplinarian

⁴⁶² One of the few good biographies written on a UDF General is C. Birkby, *Uncle George: The Boer Boyhood, Letters and Battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1987). Another, although less satisfactory, on Major-General D.H. Pienaar. A. Pollock, *Pienaar of Alamein* (Cape Town: Cape times, 1943). The lack of biographical material has been addressed by Ian van der Waag, who using a prosopographical approach analysed 61 men who held general or flagrank in the Union Defence Force (UDF). van der Waag, 'Smuts's Generals...', 33-61.

⁴⁶³ One of his first efforts to do so was in a letter he addressed to Major-General Beyers on the 17 April 1944 after his escape from captivity in 1943, requesting that he be put on active service as he felt he was subject to 'severe criticism in staying in the Union when other ex P.O.W.'s are being sent on active service.' 'Plea for Active Service' (Memorandum Klopper to Beyers, DOCD, Personal Records H.B.Klopper, 1944). His post war efforts to clear his name took the form of a series of articles in the 1950 Huisgenoot magazine, various interviews with the Union War Histories Section giving his version of events and a behind the scenes attempt backed by the South African Government to alter a 1942 despatch authored by Field-Marshal Auchinlek. Stewart, 'The 'Atomic' Despatch',

⁴⁶⁴ DOCD, Personal Records, *Record of Sevice H.B.Klopper* (1926 - 1945).

⁴⁶⁵ Monick S, 'A Man Who Knew Men: The Memoirs of Major M.G. Ind', *Scientia Militaria*, (20)1 (1990). Monick in describing the term amphigiarious states, 'In December 1930 the first 6 'amphigiarious' officers had been commissioned as airmen - artillerymen - infantrymen. Greek gave the amphigiarious officers their 'earth-and-air-together-in-one' title and those who survived the wastage rate of 50% wore the coveted badge of eagle and gun. Economic depression made it necessary for cadets to qualify both as army and air force officers in order to enter the Permanent Force.

⁴⁶⁶ DOCD, Personal Records, *Record of Sevice H.B.Klopper* (1926 - 1945).

being a man popular with all ranks.⁴⁶⁷ Perhaps these accolades are more an indicator of what was considered important in the UDF in peacetime, rather than a real assessment of the capabilities that would be demanded of Klopper when placed in a difficult situation in wartime.

One of the few reports found containing anything negative about Klopper's personality indicated a need to develop his personality. This report describes Klopper as being 'a little too inclined to find excuses for things done and left undone.' Klopper is described as being about average for his newly-acquired rank of Captain in 1933⁴⁶⁸. In that same year, Klopper remained attached to the College Staff of the S.A. Military College. In June 1934 Klopper was promoted to a substantive Major and, in February 1935, he moved from the Staff of Officer Commanding O.F.S. Command and assumed command of the Pioneer Battalion. In June 1937, Klopper was appointed Officer Commanding O.F.S. Command Training Depot. In October 1939 Lieutenant-Colonel Klopper relinquished his post as commander of 1 Special Services Battalion and took up his post as the Deputy Director of Infantry Training. In November 1940 he was appointed to act as Officer in Command S.A. Instructional Corps as vice to Major-General G.E Brink. Klopper then assumed the duties of General Staff Officer for the 2nd S.A.I. Division, a post he retained up to January 1942 when he was made commander of 3 S.A.I. Brigade and was promoted to Brigadier. The fact that Klopper's wife took ill and passed away in October 1941, leaving their son to be cared for by his brother-in-law and his wife, may have had an adverse impact on Klopper's performance a mere eight months on at Tobruk in June 1942.⁴⁶⁹

On 15th May 1942 a newly-promoted Major-General Klopper took over command of the 2nd S.A.I. Division from Major-General I.P. de Villiers, who was then eleven years his senior and had seen service in World War One, South West Africa and France. Thus Klopper experienced a somewhat meteoric rise to become a divisional commander some fifteen years after his attestation, becoming a General before his fortieth birthday. This was unfortunately his first combat command, never having commanded a regiment or a brigade in the heat of war and being too young to have seen any First World War service.⁴⁷⁰ The division that Klopper commanded was similarly inexperienced, having seen little action since it left South Africa on 20 April 1941, and having arrived in Egypt on 6 June 1941. During the Crusader Operation, 2nd S.A.I. Division was held in reserve due to a lack of transport. The

⁴⁶⁷ DOCD, Personal Records, *Record of Service H.B.Klopper (1926 - 1945)*.

⁴⁶⁸ DOCD, Personal Records, *Record of Service H.B.Klopper (1926 - 1945)*.

⁴⁶⁹ 'Klopper's Wife Deceased' (Memorandum Personal Records, DOCD, Personal Records H.B.Klopper, 1941).

⁴⁷⁰ His short duty as Brigade commander of 3rd Brigade from January to May 1942 took place in a relatively quiet period of the Desert War where both sides were building up their combat strength.

command structures of 2nd Division were filled with newly-promoted officers, the more seasoned ones having departed with General de Villiers creating what must have been an unsettling situation.⁴⁷¹

Thus we have a picture of a very young, inexperienced commander, assisted by an inexperienced staff and commanding a division that had seen very little action. If there was any combat depth to be found in Tobruk it was to be found in Brigadier L.F. Thompson a veteran of the first siege, who was to be appointed as Klopper's Second-in Command; however, his influence on the battle, if any, is obscure. Colonel Bastin the Quartermaster General of XIII Corps was left behind in Tobruk to assist coordination between the rear area and garrison headquarters.⁴⁷² The battle hardened commanders of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and the 201st Mechanised Brigade may have been able to add considerable experience to the defence, had Klopper been able to provide leadership and seize control over his seasoned brigade commanders. The question remains as to why so complicated a task as defending Tobruk in the face of difficult circumstances was left in the hands of a relatively inexperienced leader group.⁴⁷³

The qualities that make for a dynamic commander are best summed up by Rommel himself, who saw that superb leadership was more a function of having a driving desire to achieve a goal against insurmountable odds than an intellectual pursuit where one's intellectualism may actually hinder the achieving of results. In the final analysis there is a huge divergence between the more academic and organisational approach of a staff officer to the dynamic calculated risk-taking personality of a leader of men who takes his division into combat.⁴⁷⁴

3.6 Tobruk Besieged - 18 June 1942

If there is agreement to be found in the secondary sources then all concur that the defences of Tobruk, in June 1942, were in a poor state of repair compared to the first siege in 1941 when the garrison was commanded by Lieutenant-General L. J. Morshead who withstood two serious attacks and many more minor ones in a brilliantly-coordinated defence. There is little dispute too that the defenders of Tobruk in 1941 did not have to face as concentrated or as powerful an offensive as that delivered by Rommel on 20 June 1942, and that if they indeed had, then it is doubtful they would have prevailed. The fortress

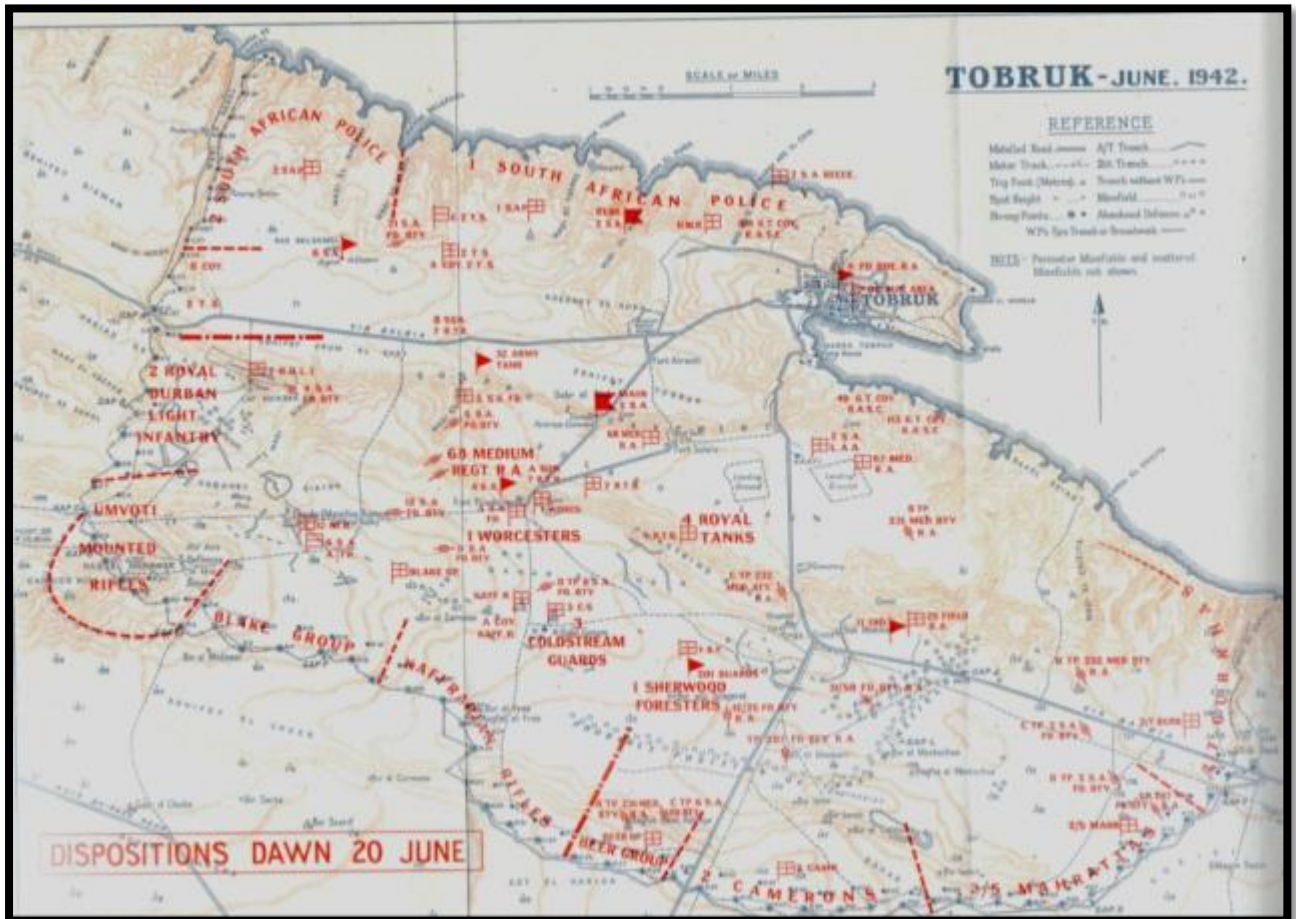
⁴⁷¹ Klopper's inexperience was matched by that of his Chief of Staff Lieutenant-Colonel Kriek who lacked in operational experience and in high grade staff training. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁴⁷² DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁴⁷³ There was talk of giving the position to the previous siege commander General Morshead and even General Gott was touted for the position giving an indication that Ritchie had concerns about the leadership.

⁴⁷⁴ '.....it has frequently happened in the past that a General of high intellectual powers has been defeated by a less intelligent but stronger willed adversary.' Liddel Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (p. 96). Again on page 119 'A commanders drive and energy often count more than his intellectual powers.'

consisted of a double line of prepared strongpoints consisting of concrete dugouts and wire defences along a 33 mile perimeter that was enclosed by a double line of wire, anti-tank ditch and perimeter minefield. The inner defences, much strengthened by Morshead, consisted of strongpoints at strategic positions and internal minefields coordinated into an internal line of defence known as the blue line.⁴⁷⁵



Map 12 Force Dispositions at Tobruk on the morning of 20 June 1942⁴⁷⁶

The South African official history describes the deterioration in the Tobruk defences, claiming that the anti-tank ditch long neglected, had begun to silt up having been filled in at point X and Y facilitating an easy evacuation. There appears, according to the official history, little knowledge of the composition or layout of minefields on the south eastern corner of the fortress, sown by successive defenders of varying nationality over the previous two years.⁴⁷⁷ The most vulnerable sector of the fortress remained the south east corner where large quantities of mines had supposedly been lifted

⁴⁷⁵ These defences are explained in the South African Official History Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 112).

⁴⁷⁶ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*.

⁴⁷⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 114).

‘and were never replaced’ during the Crusader operations in November 1941, once again, to facilitate the planned breakout from Tobruk.⁴⁷⁸ More than a few sources mention that the perimeter defences had been rather denuded of wire and mines in an effort to strengthen the Gazala positions.⁴⁷⁹ Most secondary sources paint a picture of neglect, lamenting the cannibalisation of large sections of the defences stripped to reinforce the Gazala positions. What remained was poorly maintained due to the general understanding that in the event of the Gazala position not being held, Tobruk would be evacuated.⁴⁸⁰

However, this dismal picture of neglect flies in the face of the evidence presented at the Court of Enquiry by Brigadier C.de L Gaussen who, being the Chief Engineer of XIII Corps, stated that ‘it was not the policy to touch any of the perimeter defences at all’ and that very little dismantling was undertaken.⁴⁸¹ Brigadier F.H. Kisch, the Chief Engineer Eighth Army and giving evidence at the same enquiry, felt that the defences of Tobruk had definitely deteriorated and that extensive use had been made of mines and wire for the Gazala defences. However in discussions reported by Kisch with the South African Chief Engineer of 2nd Division, Colonel Henderson, the South African Engineer felt that he had made good any deficiencies in the defences by laying new mines to close the gaps.⁴⁸² Klopper himself states that indeed there were whole minefields lifted for use at Gazala and Knightsbridge, but said that they had been replaced, denying that the minefields were in a poor condition at the outset of the siege.⁴⁸³ Thus the witness reports as to the state of the defences on the eve of the siege, especially concerning the state of the minefields, are conflicting and do not warrant the certainty as to their state of disrepair as reported in most secondary sources.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁷⁸ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 130).

⁴⁷⁹ Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (p. 101). and again in the Official British History although here the author allows for less certainty as to the extent of the disrepair. Playfair, *A History of the Second World War, Mediterranean...*, III (p. 261)., and again in Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (p. 159). A dissenting source as to the state of the Tobruk defences is, Heckstall-Smith, *Tobruk: The Story of a Siege* (pp. 217,218)., who raises doubt that the defences were in as bad a state of repair as ‘legend’ has it.

⁴⁸⁰ Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (pp. 112-14). The description of the run down nature of defences of the fortress portrayed by the author is typical.

⁴⁸¹ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part II, p.56, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July. However in Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 141). The South African Official History disagrees with these comments and finds them ‘...surprising in view of the common knowledge that the Tobruk minefields were regarded as a legitimate source of mines.’

⁴⁸² DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part II, p.50, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July.

⁴⁸³ He attributes the German breakthrough largely to the detonation of the minefields by German bombing. A position not agreed to by the official historians of the UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946.

⁴⁸⁴ Auchinleck in his despatch and obviously basing his evidence on the Court of Enquiry states that, ‘The defences are believed to be in better state than when Tobruk was first invested. A certain amount of wire had been removed from inside the perimeter but not to the extent of weakening the defences’. He goes on to concede that there may have been a deterioration in the minefields in certain areas but he draws

The relative inexperience of the leader group commanding 2nd South Africa Infantry Division and the inexperience of the Division itself has already been discussed, however, despite this handicap in combat experience the morale of the commander at Tobruk seems to have been high.⁴⁸⁵ Klopper clearly stated his confidence and described a 'general feeling of optimism' in Tobruk in a letter to Major-General F. H. Theron dated 16 June 1942.⁴⁸⁶ It has to be noted, that at the time of writing the letter, Klopper believed that Tobruk was part of a defensive line and would not be left isolated, having been assured by Eighth Army that El Adem and Belhamed, both key to the Tobruk defences on the south eastern front, would be held.⁴⁸⁷ This general feeling of optimism was again confirmed in a meeting held in Tobruk on the 16 June 1942 attended by Ritchie, Gott and Klopper, where Klopper agreed that he was able to hold the fortress for at least ninety days.⁴⁸⁸ Whether the same confidence permeated down to the lower command structures is less certain, keeping in mind the series of unbroken reversals suffered by the Eighth Army and experienced first-hand by a significant number of troops now manning the Tobruk defences. A good proportion of the garrison consisted of disparate units, some of whom experienced rough treatment at the hands of the *DAK* in the Cauldron battles, and others being stragglers from retreating units passing through the fortress on their way to the Egyptian Frontier. The point is made that Klopper remained an unknown entity to most of those in Tobruk, including his own South African Division, and that this fact combined with the inevitable confusion due to a rapidly developing situation was not conducive to a state of high morale.⁴⁸⁹

The South African contingent at Tobruk consisted of two South African Brigades the 4th and the 6th S.A. Infantry Brigades together with a battalion from 1st S.A. Division, left behind by General Pienaar

attention to the fact that there were 40000 Ant-tank mines available within the fortress. TNA, WO 32/10160, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942. This contrasts with Brigadier Anderson who says, 'On inspection being made it was found that portions of the minefields were non-existent. Mines which had been lifted and taken forward to the Gazala position had never been replaced. Records of lifted minefields were not available. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁴⁸⁵ NAP, JSP, Box 138, f.173, Theron to Smuts, *Reports High UDF Morale amongst 1st and 2nd Divisions at Tobruk*, 30 May 1942. Theron on visiting Tobruk on 30 May found both Pienaar and Klopper determined and in good spirits

⁴⁸⁶ NAP, JSP, Box 138, f.200, Theron to van Ryneveld, *Report on Klopper's High Morale*, 19 June 1942. Pienaar reported that the fighting spirit and morale were high following a visit to Klopper on his retreat through Tobruk eastwards towards the Egyptian frontier.

⁴⁸⁷ NAP, JSP Box 138, f.206, Theron to van Ryneveld, *Klopper Looked Forward to Support of British Troops*, 23 June 1942. Theron stresses that Klopper was optimistic but qualified his optimism by writing, "We are all looking forward to a good stand and we are supported by the very best of British troops". (Authors emphasis.)

⁴⁸⁸ NAP, JSP Box 138, f.199, Lewis to van Ryneveld, *Klopper Upbeat Letter to Theron on Morale*, 18 June 1942). See also Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 129). This is not the only reference to Klopper's enthusiasm for the task. The UWHS describes Klopper and his divisional staff as being most enthusiastic about holding Tobruk and that Auchinleck's decision to hold Tobruk may have been influenced by the optimism and assurances of Klopper. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/1, *Narrative on the Decision to hold Tobruk*.

⁴⁸⁹ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

as he retreated through Tobruk some days earlier. The South Africans manned the perimeter defences from the coast to the south west corner of the fortress. The vulnerable south east corner of the remaining thirteen mile perimeter was manned by the 11th Indian Brigade under the command of the experienced Brigadier A. Anderson and a composite South African battalion called the Beer group. The mobile element of the defences consisted of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade under command of the much-experienced Brigadier A.C. Willison, the brigade having seen extensive action and suffered hard blows in the Gazala battles, and 201st Guards Brigade, under the newly appointed Brigadier H.F. Johnson, which was in fact a hastily put together composite unit. The mobile forces possessed fifty-four operational Infantry tanks and a number of the newly-issued highly-effective six-pounder anti-tank guns. The mobile forces took up positions in the Fort Pilistrano area, which was almost central in the Tobruk fortress. The important crossroads of Kings Cross were devoid of units manning permanent positions and in fact the only force covering this area was an artillery regiment and the reaction force of 201st Guards Battalion.⁴⁹⁰ The Tobruk Court of Enquiry gives comparative strength analysis of the Tobruk garrison as at 1 May 1941 and 18 June 1942 as follows:⁴⁹¹ (See Figure 19)

	1-May-41	18-Jun-42
INFANTRY		
Infantry Battalions	11	14
Motorised Battalions	1	2
MG Battalions	1	1
	<u>13</u>	<u>17</u>
ARMoured FIGHTING VEHICLES		
Infantry	16	77
Cruiser	28	
Light	33	
Armoured Cars	31	N/A
	<u>108</u>	<u>77</u>
ARTILLERY		
Field	72	72
Medium		29
	<u>72</u>	<u>101</u>
ANTITANK GUNS		
Antitank two-pounder	16	41
Antitank six-pounder	0	23
Antitank 3,7mm	25	
	<u>41</u>	<u>64</u>
AA ARTILLERY		
Heavy	16	16
Light	53	60
	<u>69</u>	<u>76</u>

Figure 19 Comparative strength analysis of the Tobruk garrison as at 1 May 1941 and 18 June 1942.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (pp. 132,133).

⁴⁹¹ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part II, p25, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry, 27 May - 2 July.*

⁴⁹² DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part II, p.25, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry, 27 May - 2 July.*

According to Brigadier Willison there were twice as many armoured cars in Tobruk in June 1942 than in the previous siege and these were contained in 7th S.A. Reconnaissance Battalion and these were distributed within the perimeter.⁴⁹³ The *DAK Tank State* for 18 June 1942 shows the number of German medium tanks deployed in the assault of Tobruk at ninety-four. This is not an overwhelming advantage in pure numbers when the anti-tank weapons are added to the defence. The German force multiplier was gained by superior operational ability rather than any numerical superiority

The defenders of Tobruk in June 1942 enjoyed a significant superiority in nearly every area when compared to the previous garrison. Klopper fielded a far superior armoured component having access to heavy infantry tanks rather than the obsolete lighter cruiser tanks, and having a good number of armoured cars at his disposal. In the all-important area of anti-tank weaponry, Klopper enjoyed significant advantages over his predecessor. He deployed more anti-tank guns and significantly, twenty-three of them consisted of the new powerful six-pounder weapons, which if deployed correctly, had the potential to wreak havoc on an enemy armoured penetration of the perimeter. There was no reason for Klopper to be embarrassed when it came to artillery or anti-aircraft artillery, as here too, his strengths compared favourably with those of his predecessor. There seems to have been an ample supply of ammunition for all weapons, which is not surprising, given that Tobruk was a designated supply base for the Gazala positions enjoying stores and provisions in abundance. Adequate provision was made for transport in the form of three Royal Armoured Service Corps companies left in the fortress to facilitate withdrawing the garrison should that eventuality arise.⁴⁹⁴

The South African official history describes the field artillery as being formidable in quantity and well-provided with ammunition; however, it was scattered among the entire defence and not homogenous in organisation or structure. Although similar in quantity and quality and enjoying luxurious amounts of ammunition compared to that of the first siege, it was uncoordinated and unable to bring down concentrated 'fire on any spot within the perimeter ... at a moment's notice', as had been the case when the garrison was commanded by Morshead. The Artillery fire plans, as well as the communication systems, were inferior and, together with a poor chain of command, it all amounted to negating an important element in repelling and Axis penetration of the perimeter defences.⁴⁹⁵ The anti-tank defences of Tobruk, consisting of approximately sixty-nine guns, were similarly dispersed amongst the various battalions with little coordination or concentration. The anti-aircraft defences had

⁴⁹³ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 138).

⁴⁹⁴ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁴⁹⁵ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (pp. 133,134). This is based on the evidence of Major Tower a battery commander of 25th Field Regiment,

18 3,7-inch guns, roughly equivalent to the deadly German 88mm, and there was authorisation to use these in an anti-tank role if necessary.⁴⁹⁶

3.7 The Organisation of the Defence and Counter-attack Force of Tobruk

Early indicators of a dysfunctional command structure in Tobruk were reported by Lieutenant-Colonel M. Gooler, the official United States Military Observer. Gooler took note that there appeared to be a decided lack of co-operation between Klopper, his Chief of Staff, and the heads of the various Staff Sections, in particular Operations and Intelligence.⁴⁹⁷ On 15 June at 1400 hours Klopper called a meeting of his brigade commanders and explained that Tobruk was to be held for a minimum of three months. Apparently no tactical questions were discussed at this conference, which is surprising given the gravity of the situation and the altered role that the garrison was now expected to perform.⁴⁹⁸

It was only after the meeting that Brigadier Willison, a veteran of the previous siege, approached Klopper and expressed his concern as to the dispositions of the forces defending Tobruk. Willison requested that all armoured cars and tanks be placed under his command and he be given the responsibility for any enemy attacks in the coastal area. This would free up all the brigades to man the perimeter of Tobruk as had been the case in the previous siege.⁴⁹⁹ Willison criticised the gun emplacements as being positioned too far forward and too far back and suggested that they rather occupy a central and concentrated position on the Pilastrino Ridge. Klopper, while politely listening to Willison's views, made little effort to define or clarify his role or his command. An administrative conference the same day, confirmed that the supply situation appeared to be adequate, however according to the official history, there appeared an alarming shortage of medium ammunition, at only 450 rounds per gun.⁵⁰⁰ Klopper himself, in an interview after the war, confirmed the shortage of

⁴⁹⁶ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 135).

⁴⁹⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 137). The Official History omits the next few lines of Gooler's report. 'The staff openly complained that General Klopper did not have the correct picture of the enemy situation or realise its serious potentialities. And what was more serious, apparently did not trust his chiefs of sections. In my opinion, he was not in touch with the situation, and during the major portion of the afternoon of the 19th, to the best of my knowledge, neither he nor his Chief of Staff visited the Staff Sections referred to above, although they were set up only a short distance from the Divisional Commander's CP.' DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363 Tobruk Correspondence 1948-1950, Fannin to Agar-Hamilton, *Fannin on Klopper*, 11 December 1948

⁴⁹⁸ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 137).

⁴⁹⁹ The 6th S.A. Brigade manned the coast to prevent a seaward attack. This was considered a real threat throughout the battle. This area was manned by a small screening force in the previous siege.

⁵⁰⁰ It seems that this translated into a ration of 5 rounds per day based on a three month siege. The arithmetic approach seems inexplicable as the need to expend ammunition should accord with enemy activity and threat levels rather than be based on an arbitrary arithmetic formula.

artillery ammunition saying it was far below requirements and on 20 June 1942 there were E Boats bringing in additional artillery ammunition.⁵⁰¹

On 16 June Ritchie paid a visit to the fortress, arriving in a captured Fiesler-Storch and holding a conference with General Gott and Klopper. The conference is described as hitting an optimistic note, with Klopper confidently undertaking to hold the fort for a period of three months.⁵⁰² On the same day Klopper gave his agreement to a provisional plan drawn up by Brigadier Johnson to co-ordinate the artillery, armoured force and infantry as a reaction and counter-attack force by means of a combined battle Headquarters. Unfortunately at his own conference to implement the plans, it appears that neither the commander nor his representative of the Army Tank Brigade nor the Commander of the Royal Artillery bothered to attend the meeting.⁵⁰³

17 June was spent attending to the physical defences of the fortress, consisting of digging, wiring, mine-laying and reconnoitring in certain areas. Any attempt at the vital task of co-ordinating the reserves to form a combined arms counter-attack force would have to wait for the next day, 18 June when Klopper held yet another conference. There it was decided that the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and 201st Guards Battalion would form the reserve of the garrison. Klopper conceded to send the Commander of the Artillery, Colonel Richards, to see Brigadier Willison about artillery support an arrangement decisively different from that of the first siege where the counter-attack force, consisting of all the armoured vehicles, a full infantry brigade and a regiment of guns with a troop of anti-tank guns, was placed under the command of Willison. Therefore, rather than create a reserve of combined arms under the command of one man, Klopper had chosen Brigadier Johnson's proposal to rather establish a combined Battle Headquarters when the need arose. It is patently obvious that Klopper and his staff neither produced a detailed counter-attack plan nor organised the defences on any type of a dynamic basis, which resulted in what turned out to be a static defence spread evenly along the perimeter. The arrangements to organise the artillery, infantry, and armour reserve into a combined

⁵⁰¹ UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946. On the other hand Captain Fannin stated during an interview in 1946 that "there was plenty of ammunition in Tobruk, the only serious shortage was in shells for the medium artillery. This view is supported by Major N. Wessels, Commander of the 6th South African Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, who said in his interview in 1946 that the ammunition supply was adequate. Colonel H. McA. Richards, Commander of the Divisional Artillery, who told of one officer who was responsible for issuing ammunition who insisted on authority to do so from Headquarters, even though the German tanks were already visible and approaching fast at the time. Horn, 'Narratives from North Africa' (p. 97).

⁵⁰² This undertaking was made despite some misgivings by Klopper staff and on the basis that El Adem and Belhamed would be held protecting the south eastern perimeter of the fortress. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/1, *Narrative on the Decision to hold Tobruk*.

⁵⁰³ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 129).L.

dynamic counter-attack force were inadequate at best and resulted in a piecemeal and uncoordinated application of the reserves to the breach.⁵⁰⁴

3.8 The Germans Attack Tobruk - 20 June 1942

When it became apparent that the noose was steadily tightening around Tobruk on 18 and 19 June, Johnson proposed to counter the enemy threat forming up in the El Adem area by launching a bold pre-emptive counter-attack. This was soon reconsidered and then reformulated as a concentrated artillery barrage, designed to disperse the enemy gathering in the area. This shoot has been singled out by the official South African history as the reason for the ammunition rationing, as the artillery exceeded its daily allowance and had difficulty in securing more ammunition.⁵⁰⁵ However, the artillery barrage seemed to have little effect in diverting the efforts of the *DAK* who were now preparing to launch a massive offensive on the fortress of Tobruk.

It is debatable whether the offensive launched by the Germans on the morning of 20 June came as a surprise to the Eighth Army or indeed the garrison.⁵⁰⁶ What is certain is that the German manoeuvre of bypassing the garrison in an eastward drive to the Egyptian border and then leaving a screening force to deal with Eighth Army while turning the *DAK* 180 degrees to drive westwards to the south eastern perimeter of Tobruk, was a remarkable achievement.⁵⁰⁷ The fact that this movement took place at night on the 19/20 June and required a massive effort of coordination to ensure the assault troops and artillery were ready in their exact jump off points before the assault, goes a long way

⁵⁰⁴ The counterattack force was fundamental to the successful defence of the fortress. The perimeter defences, rather than providing an impregnable wall against attack, fulfilled the role of an early warning system that would reveal the direction of an enemy attack and thereafter delay its progress long enough to assemble and unleash a counterattack to reseal the defence. So too the minefields were to act as a mechanism to delay and then channel the enemy onto the waiting counterattack forces. The failure to strike back at a penetration with all the forces at hand and in good time would almost certainly spell the doom of the fortress in modern war.

⁵⁰⁵ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 150). There is conflicting evidence about the ammunition situation in the garrison. General Moorehead the commander of the first siege who passed through Tobruk on the 17th June reports an abundance of ammunition. Sergeant A.N. Goldman of the 2 Royal Durban Light Infantry talks of vast ammo dumps according to the UWHS. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/1, *Narrative on the Decision to hold Tobruk*.

⁵⁰⁶ Auchinleck, in his despatch, says that once Tobruk had been invested, then it was only to be expected that the German attack would closely follow the original and elaborate plan of the previous November for attacking the garrison in the south-east. General Ritchie, on realising this, sent details of this plan by wireless to General Klopper's HQ. The UWHS consider that Auchinleck's comments are most unfair to General Klopper and give a misleading impression in that there is no evidence when this plan was signalled to Klopper. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁵⁰⁷ Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht* (p. 147).

to demonstrating how far ahead the Germans were at this stage in the art of mobile warfare.⁵⁰⁸ Rommel's complicated attempt at subterfuge seems not to have fooled Ritchie, who communicated with Auchinleck on the night of 19 June that he believed that the Germans were going to attack Tobruk rather than the frontier.⁵⁰⁹ On the battlefield at Tobruk the 11th Indian Brigade, manning the exact sector that was to be attacked, realised that after sending out patrols, an attack was imminent.⁵¹⁰

As dawn broke the German forces preparing to attack came into full view of the garrison. The South African Battery commenced fire on the German concentration, and the Germans replied in kind with artillery and air attacks, mainly concentrated on strongpoint 63.⁵¹¹ Eyewitness accounts, including Rommel, describe how effective this massive air and artillery assault was on the defences and the morale of the defenders.⁵¹² When the preparatory bombardment lifted the infantry assault troops moved up to the defences through the lanes cleared in the minefields the night before.⁵¹³ It took two hours to drive a wedge into the defences and by 0800 hours the anti-tank ditch was bridged, making it possible for the armour to be released to penetrate into the heart of the garrison.⁵¹⁴ Thus far the defenders had put up little resistance to the attack and the Germans were surprised at how weak the

⁵⁰⁸ It is interesting to draw a contrast to numerous examples of the Allied forces being incapable or unprepared to perform simple manoeuvres at night.

⁵⁰⁹ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 158). Neither was Auchinleck fooled and he sent a signal to Eighth Army, 'Enemy movement yesterday showed intention launch early attack Tobruk from the East.'

⁵¹⁰ Colonel Max H. Gooler the official United States Military Observer reports that during the afternoon of the 19th June a South African armoured car unit commander reported a concentration of German armour and artillery in the South East of Tobruk to the Intelligence Section, pointing out on the maps almost the exact location as to where the final German assault was proposed in the previous siege. One of the staff had a copy of a captured German map from that operation and Gooler reported that an attack along similar line could be expected. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/1, *Narrative on the Decision to hold Tobruk*. This incident is acknowledged in the South African Official History but goes on to elaborately paint a picture of confusing and obscure orders and the fact that a search was being conducted for the original orders that already seemed to be in the hands of the Intelligence Section at Tobruk. Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*, (p. 157).

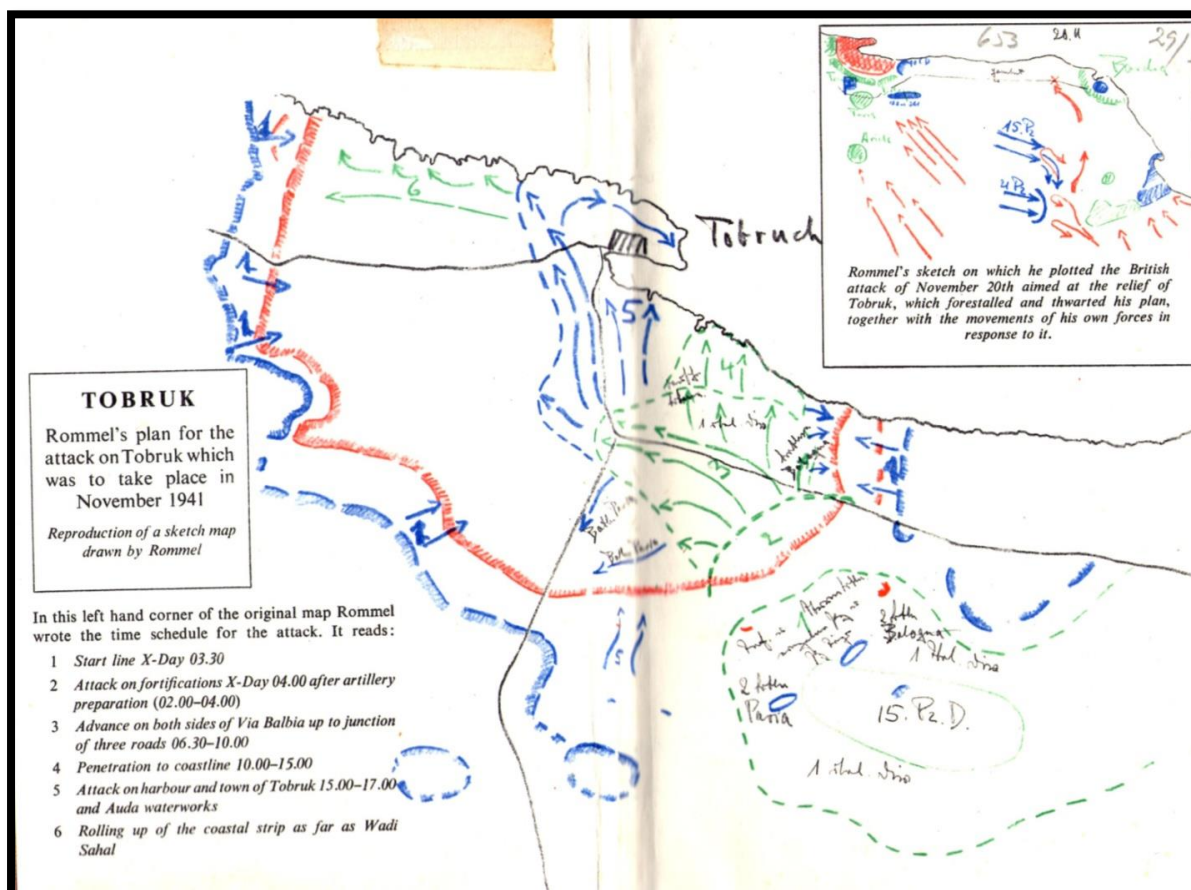
⁵¹¹ The German Official Histories describe the attack on the 20 June as 'a prime example of co-ordination between air force and army formations.' One can only contrast this feat of combined arms with the unsuccessful counterattack launched a few hours later by the defenders. Rahn, *Germany and the Second World War*, VI (p. 698).

⁵¹² Liddel Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, (p. 230).

⁵¹³ The South African Official History would have one believe that the minefields existed in name only. This despite Rommel's assertion as to the efforts to clear them the night before, and despite the evidence led by Brigadier Gausson who was the Chief Engineer of XIII Corps that the policy was not to interfere with the perimeter minefields. Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*, (p. 161). General Klopper himself described how the preparatory German aerial and artillery bombardment detonated a good percentage of the defenders mines. This possibility was dismissed by the UWHS as highly unlikely but yet the same observation is described in the Transvaal Scottish regimental history as, 'The bombs that did not burst harmlessly in the sand thundered in doubled and redoubled explosions as whole chains of mines erupted.' C. Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932-1950* (Cape Town: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950) (p. 513).

⁵¹⁴ When Major Pope of the 25th Field regiment asked the Commander of the artillery for support he replied that the headquarters were by no means certain that this was the main attack. It was only at 0800 hours that reinforcements were allocated to this sector. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, *Tobruk Artillery Narrative*.

initial resistance was with perimeter strongpoints R58 to R69 falling into German hands in quick succession in the zone of attack. The poor defensive efforts cannot be put down to the element of surprise as Anderson of the 11th Indian Brigade had anticipated the German attack and promptly threw in his reserve company and platoon into the fray.⁵¹⁵ (See Map 13)



Map 13 Rommel's November 1941 plan for the attack on Tobruk on the south-east corner. The offensive on the 21 June 1942 followed almost the exact lines of attack and battle plan.⁵¹⁶

Meanwhile Johnson of the 201st Guards Brigade had not been idle and he now attempted to set up a Combined Headquarters at Kings Cross in accordance with the arrangements agreed to for a counter-attack. At this crucial moment Willison declined to leave his headquarters, while Johnson busied himself with setting up headquarters and appropriate communications.⁵¹⁷ Klopper now

⁵¹⁵ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 163).

⁵¹⁶ Liddel Hart, *The Rommel Papers*.

⁵¹⁷ The South African Official History suggests that the reason for Willison declining to leave his headquarters was due to the fact that General Klopper wished that his senior tank officer should be close to him. If this were indeed the case it spelt the doom of a combined operation before it was started. See: Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*, (p. 163). Klopper in an interview with the UWHS describes Willison as a defeated man although klopper did not really realise this at the time. UWHS,

intervened and issued orders for Willison to take command of a combined force and launch a counter-attack in co-operation with the Indian Brigade.⁵¹⁸ Anderson sent a liaison officer to the Combined Headquarters at Kings Cross at 0700 hours in anticipation of the arrival of Willison and the 32 Army Tank Brigade. At 0745 the artillery of the 25th Field Regiment opened fire, holding out until then, so as not to disclose their position which would compromise their anti-tank role once their position was revealed.⁵¹⁹ Speed, at this point was of the essence, as the tanks needed to be thrown into the fray before the Germans had a chance to set up their anti-tank defences. The crucial objective should have been to seal off the attack and immediately throw the German offensive back to its start lines.

Willison ordered Lieutenant-Colonel B. Reeves of the 4 Royal Tank Regiment, being the closest tank regiment near the action, to send his battalion against the German penetration at 0800 hours. In an inexplicable display of sluggishness, the two squadrons of tanks of 4 Royal Tank Regiment arrived at Kings Cross by 0930 hours.⁵²⁰ An opportunity to marry up with the infantry component of the counter-attack force was lost when Reeves, on receiving a party of officers from the Coldstream Guards, denied all knowledge of, or responsibility for, co-operation with any infantry force. The Coldstream Guards received no instructions from headquarters and as a result stayed put while the group of liaison officers made their way to Kings Cross and languished there.⁵²¹ At the insistence of Anderson, who was growing more desperate as his situation deteriorated, the Coldstream Guards were ordered forward to Kings Cross to join their officers at 1000 hours. Upon arrival they remained there, never forming part of an essential combined arms counter-attack reserve. They failed to leave the Kings Cross area and counter-attack on the insistence of their commander Johnson, who would only commit them to exploit the successes gained or make good any ground recovered by the tanks. The tanks failing in this impossible endeavour ensured that the Infantry never ventured forth.⁵²²

Two and a half hours had now lapsed since the order had been given to Willison to send his tanks into the fray and to add to the general tardiness of the operation thus far, Reeves proceeded to

DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946.

⁵¹⁸ This was perhaps a fatal flaw, as the formation formed up under Willison was not part of the plan agreed to at the conference beforehand, where a joint headquarters was to be set up and the composition and delivery of the blow was to be left up to the Brigade commanders. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁵¹⁹ There were apparently 36 guns available to bring down fire on the gap, but they appeared to have done little damage to the attacking force. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, *Tobruk Artillery Narrative*.

⁵²⁰ This draft narrative identifies the failure of 32nd Tank Brigade to arrive in time as being the fundamental cause of the failure of the counterattack and the single most important cause of the fall of Tobruk that day. The narrative uses strong language such as 'since Longstreet marked time at Gettysburg, no such inexplicable delay has occurred in military history.' DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁵²¹ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 169).

⁵²² Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 168).

commit his tanks to the battle without bothering to either liaise with the headquarters of the Indian Brigade or with the combined headquarters.⁵²³ The artillery also failed to come in at the crucial early stage of the attack and the *DAK* reported that the fire of the Allied artillery only increased noticeably after 0850 hours, which up to then had been essentially weak and ineffective.⁵²⁴

The picture on the German side looked decidedly different with the penetrating forces being led by none other than the Commander-in-Chief with General Walther Nehring⁵²⁵ not far behind in the advance headquarters of the 15th Panzer Division. The Germans overran the Mahrattas headquarters and eliminated a troop of South African artillery at 1000 hours. At the same time, the 4 Royal Tank Regiment had made slow progress along the Bardia road and arrived in the inner minefield gap. The 7 Royal Tank Regiment was ordered to form up to the west of Kings Cross and their commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Foote, after conferring with Reeves, decided to deploy Foote's regiment to the right of 4 Royal Tank Regiment at L Gap, thus forming a defensive line behind the inner minefield. It is here that the two tank regiments, unsupported by infantry and anti-tank weapons, began to take steady losses. With the greater part of their strength destroyed for little profit the survivors withdrew to Kings Cross. Their commander, Reeves, bumped into the immobile Coldstream Guards at 1300 hours and reported that his command had all but been destroyed and all that remained of it was six tanks.⁵²⁶

Information was slow to reach Fortress Command who remained dependent on 11th Indian Brigade for all their information and, who in turn, were dependent on the Mahrattas as to an understanding of the extent of the perimeter breach. Unfortunately, the 11th Indian Brigade were struggling to gain a clear picture of what was happening on the ground as the initial German bombardment had wrecked communications in the sector. The sole remaining source of information, especially after the Mahrattas destroyed their wireless sets at 1000 hours as they were being overrun, fell on the Forward Observation Officer of the 2nd South African Field Battery. A further issue adding to the descending fog of war was that the intermittent communication system lagged substantially behind the events developing rapidly at the front, leaving the garrison headquarters unperplexed and seemingly lulled into a false sense of security. As far as Fortress Command was concerned, the counter-attack had been ordered in good time and the Indian Brigade had reported that the situation was in hand. Furthermore, Willison's non-communication was taken as an indicator that all was well. At 1100

⁵²³ According to an eye witness report by Major Morris the commander of 2 SA Field Battery the tanks were not even seen to fire as they moved up to 500 yards from the enemy tanks who put them out of action one at a time, the whole affair being over in less than fifteen minutes. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, *Tobruk Artillery Narrative*.

⁵²⁴ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 169).

⁵²⁵ General Walther Nehring became Rommel's effective second in command after General Crüwell was captured. S Mitcham Jr, *Rommel's Desert Commanders: The men who served the Desert Fox, North Africa, 1941-42* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2007) (p. 87).

⁵²⁶ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 169).

hours, in a reversal of mood and now clearly perplexed, Klopper complained that he 'was in completely in the dark' as to what the situation was and he proposed that he proceed personally to Kings Cross to assess the situation for himself. He unfortunately allowed himself to be dissuaded by Colonel Bastin and his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Kriek, who advised him that his correct place was at the Headquarters.⁵²⁷ At 1300 hours, as they were finishing lunch, the last vestiges of complacency were shattered as news of the impending disaster reached Fortress Headquarters. Willison reported the destruction of 4th Tank Regiment to Klopper and at 1440 hours, reports came in that the enemy had penetrated the inner minefield. At 1525 hours it was reported that sixty enemy tanks had penetrated the inner defences and were approaching Kings Cross which had now become effectively indefensible.⁵²⁸ Somewhere between 1500 and 1600 Willison reported the total destruction in detail of his command consisting of 7 Royal Tank and 4 Royal Tank Regiments thus signalling the demise of the entire armoured reserve force. The Germans after a lightning assault were in possession of Kings Cross, defeating the British armour and overrunning the Indian Brigade as well as the 25th Field Regiment. Rommel was now in a position to deliver the final blow to the fortress.

Klopper, learning of the proximity of the German offensive to Kings Cross and seemingly spurred on by the destruction of 4 Royal Tank Regiment with the greater part of his reserve force, did not remain idle. He set about organising a new defensive line to protect the cross roads at Pilastrino that ran roughly along the El Adem road. A company each was ordered to detach from the 4th and 6th South African Brigades to form a counter-attack force near the new line.⁵²⁹

When Kings Cross fell to the Germans the defences of the Tobruk Fortress became fragmented and uncoordinated, with units fighting where they stood, constituting individual actions, uncoordinated and without central direction from Fortress Headquarters. It was a simple matter for the Germans to proceed from Kings Cross virtually unopposed and enter the harbour of Tobruk at nightfall. The Fortress Headquarters, in the meantime, destroyed wireless sets and moved office to the Headquarters of 6th South African Brigade.⁵³⁰ A pall of smoke rose into the sky from Tobruk harbour signalling the partial and unofficial demolition of supplies and vehicles, the capture of Tobruk having been achieved with

⁵²⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 180).

⁵²⁸ Rommel arrived at Kings Cross at about this time in his Mercedes with field glasses in hand, getting there at the front of his army co-ordinating the attack while cajoling his forces to greater efforts. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

⁵²⁹ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 181).

⁵³⁰ The destruction of the Headquarter equipment at 1600 hours was premature and unfortunate, in that the Germans bypassed the position to move on supply dumps in the vicinity. The destruction of the signals equipment left most formations unaware that the Headquarters had relocated to 6 Brigade. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 366, File PMH62N/3, *Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk*.

such speed, that no official orders were given for the destruction of supplies to prevent it falling into German hands.⁵³¹

By nightfall the German forces were in possession of Tobruk and a considerable salient in the eastern half of the fortress. The two South African Brigades remained unscathed and unaffected by the day's events. Klopper was able to re-establish contact with the Eighth Army at 2000 hours where he reported the desperate plight of his forces and requested permission to break out that night. He sought clarity as to whether the promised relieving force was about to counter-attack the enemy. Brigadier Whiteley standing in for Ritchie, who was away with XXX Corps gave his permission for a break-out signalling: 'Come out tomorrow night preferably if not tonight'. He repeated at the end of his transmission: 'Tomorrow night preferred'.⁵³² Klopper was dissatisfied with the inconclusive conversation with Whiteley and requested his signaller to maintain contact with Eighth Army and try and locate General Ritchie.⁵³³

In the aftermath of a series of informal discussions between Klopper and several battalion commanders Klopper issued a warning order for a break-out at 2200 hours. An opposing plan, mainly propagated by Brigadier Hayton and the leader group of 4th Brigade, and seemingly motivated by the fact that the Brigade had lost most of its transport, which precluded a breakout, suggested forming a redoubt in the south-west corner of the fortress.⁵³⁴ Klopper seemingly swayed by the promise of a relieving force and not being able to get hold of Ritchie, together with what seemed to be a request by Whiteley to hold on for one more day, countermanded the breakout order and instead preparations

⁵³¹ All the dumps had been prepared for demolition and Major Grant, in charge of the demolition team, knew the Germans were only 200 yards away from his supply dump. He and his staff sat in his office for the entire night vainly waiting for the instruction that never came to destroy the dumps. He did not destroy the dumps on his own responsibility as he realised there would be many prisoners who would require provisions. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363 Reports of South African Officers, File PMH62C, *Written Comments of Lieutenant-Colonel Thompson 2nd Battalion TVL Scottish*, 4 December 1945.

⁵³² It is not known if Whiteley appreciated the extent of the German successes or the dire straits of the remaining garrison in the aftermath of a decisive German victory.

⁵³³ NAP, JSP Box 137, f.139, Auchinleck to Smuts, *Debrief on Fall of Tobruk*, 22 June 1942. Auchinleck in a telegram to Smuts stresses that Klopper received immediate permission from Ritchie to breakout. This again was repeated in Auchinleck's despatch and became, post-war, a point of major contention for Klopper. See also Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*, (p. 208).

⁵³⁴ The UWHS describes this as 'pis-aller' with little hope of the defenders being able to hold out for longer than a day but that at least it would satisfy some quarters by doing something to save honour. DOCD, UWHS- Civil, Box 366 File PMH62N/4, *Narrative of the Eighth Army and the Surrender of Tobruk*. Agar-Hamilton in a letter to Captain Fennin on the 13 October 1939 gives a rare insight into his understanding of the effects the 4th Brigade proposal had on Klopper. The 4th Brigade had effectively challenged an accepted policy to breakout and this threw Klopper off balance and led him to a course of action he did not wholly believe in. Within one hour of Klopper accepting the 4th Brigade proposal they then told him that it was impracticable to resist. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363 Tobruk Correspondence 1948-1950, Agar-Hamilton to Fennin, *Fennin on Klopper*, 18 November 1948.

began for a last stand based on the 4th Brigade proposal.⁵³⁵ In the meantime, General Ritchie who had returned to his headquarters at 0330 signalled detailed instructions approving a breakout.⁵³⁶

In a curious twist Hayton returned to his headquarters at 0330 and met with Lieutenant-Colonel Blake of the Blake group who vigorously denounced the absurdity of the defensive plan proposed by Hayton. Hayton then telephoned Klopper to tell him that his battalion commanders did not wish to fight.⁵³⁷ Klopper insisted that this change of heart would put him in 'a hell of a jam' and convinced the commanders once again to resist. However, soon after speaking to Hayton again, Klopper had yet another change of heart, believing that a stand was futile in that little advantage would be gained for the Eighth Army while many casualties would inevitably be incurred.⁵³⁸

At 0630 hours, after Klopper famously signalled Ritchie that he was, 'doing the worst' sent a parlementaire to the Germans to offer capitulation. An anxious Ritchie enquired as to whether the petrol and water installations had been destroyed. Klopper answered in the affirmative which was partly true in the current positions held, but not the case in the areas already under German control. At 0745 hours the German officers tasked with receiving the surrender arrived at headquarters and with the last wireless set destroyed, 10722 South Africans as part of the garrison totalling 33000

⁵³⁵ The proponents of the breakout group put forward an argument that a last minute futile stand would achieve far less than bringing out vital equipment and personnel that could be used in the battles to come by the Eighth Army. In a letter sent to the UWHS on 18 October 1949 Capt D.G. Fannin, Int. officer, 4th SA Brigade states that on his arrival at 6 Brigade Headquarters that night there was no accepted policy but merely a collection of 'harassed individuals' who had before them a message from Commander Eighth Army saying, Break out preferably tomorrow night.' According to Fennin no-one present had any 'stomach for a fight' except for Brigadier Hayton of 4th South African Infantry Brigade. Hayton according to Fannin believed that the garrison had not yet dispensed of its burden to stand and fight. Fennin believes that Klopper was converted to this point of view only to be persuaded to surrender by his Chief of Staff and Signals Officer once Hayton had departed. Union War Histories Section, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363 Tobruk Correspondence 1948-1950, Fannin to Agar-Hamilton, *Fannin on Klopper*, 11 December 1948.

⁵³⁶ There is considerable debate as to whether General Klopper did indeed receive permission to breakout from General Ritchie. On General Ritchie's own evidence, in his statement to General Auchinleck read into evidence at the Court of Enquiry, he did give permission. What the UWHS finds as conclusive proof that permission for a breakout was granted is contained in a signal sent by Ritchie to Auchinleck at 2200 hours on the 20 June 1942 stating that, 'He (Klopper) requests authority to fight his way out as apparently he feels he cannot hold out. I have authorised him to do so.' In what from Klopper received permission and couched in what terms is uncertain. On Klopper's own evidence given to the UWHS on the 22 October 1945 he states, '...It was quite apparent to me that there were no relief troops within striking distance of the forces. (fortress?) He goes on to say that, '...I asked permission to try and fight my way out. The reply was to the effect that it was not advisable or desirable that I should withdraw at that stage but I had to wait until the following evening.' DOCD, UWHS- Civil, Box 366 File PMH62N/4, *Narrative of the Eighth Army and the Surrender of Tobruk*.

⁵³⁷ Union War Histories Section, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, *Correspondence file 4 SA Inf Bde HQ*, 20 June 1942 They also cited as a reason that there was not enough time to set up effective defences as the conference at Kloppers HQ had gone on until the early hours of the morning.

⁵³⁸ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 213).

marched into captivity.⁵³⁹ A great bounty fell into German hands consisting of arms, ammunition, fuel, foodstuffs, and clothing including thirty undamaged tanks.⁵⁴⁰



Figure 20 A view of Tobruk by G. Long. A magnificent panorama that captures the scale of the German aerial bombardment of the Tobruk harbour. There is a dense formation of flak clouds suggesting a robust defence by the anti-aircraft gunners. Burning boats and plumes of water attest to the ferocity of the German attack, but only a few planes can actually be seen. The breadth and depth of the assault seems to describe the overwhelming nature of the attack that Tobruk had to face. In the absence of any real fighting by the South African contingent, the painting conveys the extent of the disaster without alluding to the ease with which the Germans overcame the defences.

3.9 The Surrender of Tobruk, an Avoidable Blunder or an Inevitable Disaster?

The seeds of Tobruk's capture were sown many weeks if not months prior to its fall on the 20 June 1942. It was not the Eighth Army's intention to hold the fortress if it were once again threatened with encirclement. This firm position was reversed at the last minute by Auchinleck, who did not grasp the extent of the Eighth Army's defeat at Gazala and believed that there was enough residual strength to man a defensive line incorporating Tobruk thereby avoiding encirclement. Just as Auchinleck seemed to

⁵³⁹ This number includes one General and seven Brigadiers and what has been described as large deposits of arms, munitions, materials and foodstuffs. General Klopper said that his orders were for the troops to surrender on fronts where the Germans were attacking, but all men who wished to escape should be given every facility. He said it was a great shock to him that so few men attempted to escape. On the other hand he deplored the conduct of the Coldstream Guards in passing out of the perimeter of Tobruk at 1600 on the 20 June, without orders and without authority, taking with them some of the precious antitank guns. UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946. Michael Carver is more specific putting a figure of 2000 tons of petrol, 2000 servicable vehicles, 5000 tons of food and large quantities of ammunition. Carver, *Tobruk*, (p. 248).

⁵⁴⁰ Rahn, *Germany and the Second World War*, VI (p. 698).

grasp the gravity of the situation, he allowed Churchill's persistent and unwavering insistence on Tobruk being defended to sway him from his sound military assessment, leaving the fortress to its inevitable fate as the screening forces were thrown back to the frontier. The final verdict of the Court of Enquiry into the fall of Tobruk exonerates Klopper stating '... It is questionable whether even the most experienced commander with a highly trained staff could have grappled with the problems in the time available.' It goes on to say, 'The fact that Tobruk fell must undoubtedly be attributed to the eleventh hour reversal of policy leading to the decision to hold the fortress...'.⁵⁴¹ The question of whether the fortress could have been successfully held by a more experienced leader group in the face of a rampant *DAK*, that had nearly destroyed the Eighth Army, can safely be discarded and the verdict of the court accepted at face value. It seems that on the strategic level Tobruk was destined to fall in the face of overwhelming odds.

Matters are less certain at the operational and tactical level, where the Court of Enquiry has far less to say. It is at the operational and tactical level that more could have been done. Vigorous and forceful leadership could have made better use of the considerable manpower and equipment at their disposal for the defence of Tobruk. A far higher price should have been extracted from the attacking force whose final casualties were light by all accounts. The intensity of the defence is reflected in the relatively low number of South Africans killed in action on the 20/21 June.⁵⁴²

No matter what the state of the perimeter defences, the survival of the fortress depended on the ability to quickly mount an effective counter-attack with all available reserves, in a coordinated and combined manner, once the perimeter was breached. The seeds of failure were sown when during the conferences prior to the German offensive; an adequate plan of action was not developed, nor was a command structure conducive to combined operations set in place. It has been argued in literature that although the garrison possessed a formidable artillery asset, this was made up from a number of disparate units. The same can be said of the anti-tank weapons, of which there were a significant amount, amongst which a considerable number were the new powerful six-pounders and a number of 3, 5" anti-aircraft guns, both devastating in the anti-tank role. A proactive leader would have been able to assemble these into a homogenous structure to form a powerful tool to be used in the counter-attack.

When Klopper ordered a counter-attack it differed substantially to that agreed at the conference and was delivered piecemeal and without support. Not only was the counter-attack

⁵⁴¹ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part I, p.22,23, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July.

⁵⁴² The CGS file on Tobruk has a document on file that shows 6 South Africans killed out of a force of 12395. DOCD, CGS War, Box 47 Tobruk Enquiry, File 10/11, Casualties of South African Forces at Tobruk, 19 November 1942.

delivered in a haphazard manner but the fact that it was some two and a half hours in arriving signalled its inevitable failure by allowing the Germans a good deal of time to establish themselves in the territory they had occupied. The point here is not whether the garrison would have survived for any length of time but certainly they would have been able to deal the Germans crippling losses had they launched an effective counter-attack. An effective counter-attack may also have slowed the pace and tempo of Rommel's assault sufficiently to allow time for a relieving force from the east to bring some relief.

The effectiveness of the eventual counter-attack ordered by Klopper was further compromised by failing to use a combined-arms approach, by incorporating his artillery, tank and infantry reserve into a mutually supporting combined force. At variance with accepted practises of sound command, Klopper failed to concentrate his reserves by placing it under the command of one person. The counter-attack broke down almost immediately, with the armour attacking unsupported and in piecemeal fashion, by now an unfortunate trademark of the Eighth Army.

Once the German offensive had developed and the situation on the ground appeared confused at divisional headquarters, it was incumbent on Klopper to go to Kings Cross to assess the situation and perhaps temporarily take command of the counter force to ensure coordination and effectiveness. He was too easily persuaded by those at headquarters to stay put, and although unfair to compare him to his famous adversary, who made a habit of leading from the front, there comes a time in a battle when the man-in-command may have to descend and deal with the crisis hands on.⁵⁴³ If ever a situation called for personal intervention, it was when Klopper felt the urge to 'go and see for himself' and he should have given into that urge.

There is little doubt that the top leadership of the garrison was inexperienced and unsuited for the task at hand. Klopper himself had very little combat experience in a leadership role, having spent the major part of his active service in a staff and administrative position. His Chief of Staff was in a similar position, being new on the job and hopelessly out of his depth. When one looks at the Brigade commanders especially those involved in the fighting on 20 June there was no lack of experience, some of the commanders having been present in the previous siege. The problem was that Klopper was unable to, or incapable of, stamping his authority and taking charge of those subordinate to him and

⁵⁴³

On this point it would seem that General Klopper would concur having expressed regret that he did not go to Kings Cross himself to organise the counter-attack having been 'prevented' from doing so by Colonel Bastin. UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946.

acting in a decisive manner.⁵⁴⁴ This was not a dissimilar situation than that faced by Ritchie who too was inexperienced compared to those he commanded.

The same lack of leadership and indecisiveness and failing to take effective command of the garrison, resulted in the bulk of the vehicles, ammunition and stores falling into the hands of the Germans when they should have been destroyed. A competent plan of action would have triggered the demolition and destruction of equipment and stores so as to deny them to the Germans who were operating on a logistic shoestring. This windfall provided Rommel with the logistic impetus to thrust his *DAK* well beyond the Egyptian border right up to the approaches of El Alamein.

Klopper was placed in an unfortunate position not entirely of his own making, but, faced with this *fait accompli*; he had a number of areas where he was obligated to perform. When he decided to defend the fortress of Tobruk, a task that he accepted with some confidence, he failed to set about the task, neither taking command effectively nor developing a sound defensive plan. Once the perimeter was breached and the battle obviously lost with his counter-attack force in tatters, he failed to demolish and destroy the abundance of material stockpiled and coveted by the Germans.⁵⁴⁵ Having failed to deny vital supplies to the Germans, he then vacillated once more and failed to evacuate the garrison on the evening of 20 June, allowing the almost intact forces there to humiliatingly walk into captivity. There was a shortage of transport due to the Germans capturing a good deal of it during the day,⁵⁴⁶ however a good proportion of the garrison could have got away, while the remainder with no transport could have fought a rearguard action.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁴ General Klopper complained that orders from higher command were never definite, he never knew what he was supposed to do, or what troops were under his command, and as a result he and his staff never got any rest. UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946.

⁵⁴⁵ Tobruk was designated as one of the forward supply bases where a considerable stockpile of material was accumulated to facilitate the planned Allied attack on the German positions at Gazala. This planned attack was thwarted by the Germans who beat the Allies in attacking first. A considerable amount of munitions, rations and fuel were stockpiled for the purpose of the planned Allied attack.

⁵⁴⁶ General Klopper blames this situation on the lack of initiative of those in charge of the Corps transport for allowing it to be destroyed or captured instead of driving it off to a safer place. UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946.

⁵⁴⁷ Here Agar-Hamilton offers his opinion in one of his letters and states, 'All troops who could possibly be moved should have been taken out of the perimeter, with every scrap of artillery and equipment they could take with them. At least one third would have had a reasonable chance of getting through. The experience of 50th Division, the Free French, 29 Indian Brigade and Mersa Matruh shows it might well have been more. The remainder should have been thrown suddenly and vigorously in a night attack against the German leaguers inside the fortress. We know now that the Germans were so exhausted that they might quite easily have been thrown off their balance and driven out in confusion. In that case 2nd South African Division would have made an immense reputation. DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363 Tobruk Correspondence 1948-1950, Agar-Hamilton to Fannin, *Fannin on Klopper*, 18 November 1948.

In mitigation, there is evidence that Klopper believed that a relief column was earmarked for the relief of Tobruk. There is evidence of his repeated request for information on the progress of the relief column during the course of the 20th June. His belief that the British would rescue him via a counter-attack was in terms of XIII Corps Operational Order No. 36 dated the 16 June 1942 in which it was stated that if Belhamed fell then a combined operation would be undertaken to reopen the line of communication with the fortress.⁵⁴⁸ The possibility of the arrival of a relieving force may have influenced Klopper's decision not to break out on the night of the 20 June 1942.⁵⁴⁹

3.10 Conclusion

The fall of Tobruk enjoyed centre stage for a short while in 1942, much to the embarrassment of the British and South African governments. However, this major military event steadily receded from the public interest as the disastrous defeat was soon replaced by a string of Allied victories banishing Tobruk from South African memory. In contrast, many less significant military events continue to be commemorated up to the present day. The issue of the surrender of Tobruk briefly resurfaced when Klopper attempted to clear his name by influencing the publication of the Auchinleck despatch in 1948. The surrender of Tobruk was dealt with in depth by the Union War Histories section and a comprehensive analysis was published by them in 1950 in the form of the first book in a series on the war. Excepting for a few non-academic works, the history of Tobruk lay dormant for nearly sixty years until a few articles on non-military issues surrounding Tobruk were published. Despite these recent articles, the reasons for the fall of Tobruk from a military perspective remain largely unattended to.

This chapter re-examines the circumstances surrounding and leading to the surrender of Tobruk using primary and secondary sources as evidence in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the sudden surrender. The primary sources have indeed provided new insights allowing for new interpretations and a fuller understanding of the actual events.

Klopper was placed in an extremely difficult position and that there was little hope for a successful defence of Tobruk. This concurs with the findings of the Court of Enquiry which prima facie exonerates Klopper for the loss of Tobruk. However when examining primary documents crucial

⁵⁴⁸ DOCD, UWHS- Civil, Box 366 File PMH62N/4, *Narrative of the Eighth Army and the Surrender of Tobruk*.

⁵⁴⁹ It is interesting that Klopper does not mention the relieving force in his interview with Turner. He confirms receiving permission to breakout at midnight on the 20 June and he conferred with his brigadiers until 0100 hours. He proposed a breakout directly through the enemy lines through the eastern sector as he considered they must be exhausted by the battle and would be hamstrung by the darkness. The Brigadiers however were opposed to any attempt to break-out. He finally accepted the view that there was insufficient transport to make the attempt. UWHS, DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 363, File PMH62C, Reports of South African Officers, *Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper (Notes on Major Turner's Interview)*, 6 May 1946.

shortcomings come to light when evaluating the leadership of Klopper and his staff at an operational and tactical level. Klopper failed in essential areas where he could have reasonably been expected to perform more effectively. Klopper failed to galvanise the fortress under his leadership, and failed to seize control of all the forces under his control. He again failed to devise a plan to defend the fortress and this manifested itself in an uncoordinated badly led counter-attack against the German penetration of the perimeter on the 20 June 1942. Here again he had the opportunity to provide personal leadership and assess the situation for himself or perhaps lead the counter-attack but he chose to be dissuaded from venturing forth and remained at his headquarters while his defences crumbled. It is Klopper alone who must take responsibility for allowing a treasure of supplies to fall into German hands, by not ensuring their demolition once the battle was lost.

When the final moments dawned and an opportunity presented itself to partially redeem what was becoming a massive military disaster, Klopper once again was found lacking. Demonstrating weak leadership, precious hours were lost, when Klopper argued with his subordinates over the best course of action. The General was left with two desperate choices, to stand and put up a fight to save honour, or to order a breakout so as to rescue a good portion of the troops from captivity. In a final failure, due to endless vacillation and changing of heart, a third option was found that resulted in the ignominious surrender of the entire garrison.

CHAPTER IV

SIDI REZEGH AND TOBRUK: FORGOTTEN EVENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN MEMORY

*Are these the old voices
muted, meaningless,
long since bereft of sensuous lip or tongue, life's warming tides,
the ebb and flow of breath,
muttering, muttering interminably of death
and deeper than dark death itself, that dim decay
which wears even the hard strong bone away?*⁵⁵⁰

The preceding chapters deal with the two significant defeats suffered by South Africa during the Second World War. A military lens has been used to reassess the reasons for the defeats. This military approach has served as a tool to re-examine the events and the inevitable chain of blunders and miscalculations and the consequences thereof on the battlefield. The memory of defeat provides a powerful prism through which to view these military events and is a methodology seldom used.⁵⁵¹ This chapter, in a departure from a more traditional military approach, examines how these momentous defeats were dealt with, recorded, perceived and remembered through the decades after 1942 by South Africans. Reasons are explored and offered as to why these events have failed to become integral to modern South African national memory. The endeavours are highlighted, of some of the organisations and individuals that have managed to keep the memory alive, albeit with varying degrees of success and for differing motives.

A thematic within a chronological approach is used in tracing the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk from its foundation soon after the battles took place, to the present time. It will be demonstrated that the disintegration of the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk began soon after 1942. On the international front, Smuts and the British attempted to minimise the negative impact of these defeats on fragile South African-British relations and the details of both battles were cloaked in secrecy and disinformation for many years. On the home front the facts were suppressed in deference to a country politically divided.

The submerged details of these battles began to emerge soon after the war, mainly due to the efforts of the Union War History Section. However, the two magnificent volumes produced, did little to

⁵⁵⁰ C. Heywood, *A History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004) (p. 52). A poem by Uys Krige titled "Before Sidi Rezegh"

⁵⁵¹ J. Macleod, 'Introduction', in *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, ed. by J. Macleod (Hampshire: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2008) (p. 1).

stem the tide of disinterest brought about in part by the 1948 nationalist victory.⁵⁵² The nationalist taboo on South Africa's participation in the Second World War enjoyed a brief respite in the 1970s and 1980s and again in the run up to the democratic elections of 1994. These allusions to a war contribution long ignored, amounted to a cynical attempt at garnering first white and then international support for a government rapidly approaching its sell-by date. However the work of a few memory activists, such as military history societies and the citizen force regiments and associations, ensured that the memories of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk were never completely extinguished. Their contributions, as well as those coming from a small group of scholars through their publication in academic journals, will be examined. Researchers, once again, have ensured that the memory of these two battles has been kept on the burner into the 21st century.

4.1 The Memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in the Aftermath of Defeat, the Long War, Politics and the Unpopularity of Military History

South African memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk has suffered wartime censorship during and immediately after the war. This was followed by Afrikaner domination from the 1950s to the late 1970s and then manipulation for political purposes, in the 1980s and 1990s. Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have essentially been ignored in the new millennium. In the face of this national amnesia, some of the important components that help nourish historical memory are missing. Emily Rosenberg, in identifying these components of memory, speaks of a tripartite matrix of familiarity, promotion through memory activists and inter-textual repetition through print, film, other media and commemorative sources.⁵⁵³ Some of these memory components will be examined in the context of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk.

Nations experiencing defeat have seen the memory of these unfortunate events manifest differently. Memory, or the lack thereof, is often determined by circumstances surrounding the defeat and the type of defeat suffered. Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk amount to temporary setbacks within a campaign that was ultimately successful. Sidi Rezegh was a heroic defence in the face of insurmountable odds; while Tobruk was a humiliating route, leading to the ignominious capture of over 10 000 South Africans without the benefit of a real fight. Both events, heroic and ignominious, have fallen victim to collective amnesia, with the exception of a number of veteran organisations and traditional regimental associations.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵² J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (Cape Town: Oxford, 1957).

⁵⁵³ R.M. Citino, 'Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction', *American Historical Review*, 2007 (p. 1084).

⁵⁵⁴ *D-Day in History and Memory: The Normandy landings in International Remembrance and Commemoration*, ed. by M Dolski, S Edwards and J Buckley (Denton: University of north Texas, 2014). The

Collective amnesia is not unique to South Africa. France and Italy have almost discarded the memory of their defeats on the battlefields of World War Two, preferring to favour largely mythical memories of resistance.⁵⁵⁵ Jenny Macleod posits that amnesia in the face of profound trauma can be healthy for National unity and for the individual. This contrasts with the desires of historians who find this untenable and seek instinctively to fill the lacuna.⁵⁵⁶ Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk would have overburdened the national trauma of a divided South Africa, had the full extent of the defeat been revealed immediately after the battles. By the time the general public had gained access to the details of these events, their impact had substantially diminished in the face of subsequent victories. These memories enjoyed an exceedingly short shelf-life in a nationalist and then a modern democratic South Africa. Simply put, they no longer served as a useable past. Even relegated to the national amnesia, these memories have left traces and impacted on South African society and international relations.

Giving substance to a general lack of interest is that the 70th anniversaries of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have passed with little fanfare or recognition. In modern democratic South Africa, the history of the Union is despised and virtually disregarded. Evidence the words of the Deputy President of South Africa in 2010, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary on the founding of the Union of South Africa.

The coming into being of the Union of South Africa represented the culmination of systematic and institutional racial oppression in our country. It was a historical stage that anticipated grand Apartheid 38 years later.⁵⁵⁷

The Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, Malusi Gigaba, took a more balanced approach in stating that,

Those of us lucky to be alive today are accorded that precious moment to look back and really appreciate what it was about. We carry with us the responsibility to find what was positive in that act, if any, and yet to negate through our present-day deeds its destructive legacy of exclusion, racism, class oppression and gender discrimination.⁵⁵⁸

editors quoting the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, describe collective memory as the product and construction of social groups, inextricably tied to the opinions, preoccupations, attitudes, and beliefs prevalent in that group at that particular moment of time. Collective amnesia would be the rejection of a social group of a particular set of memories.

⁵⁵⁵ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War 1945-1990* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) (p. 100).

⁵⁵⁶ J. Macleod, 'Introduction', in *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, ed. by J. Macleod (Hampshire: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2008) (p. 8).

⁵⁵⁷ K. Motlanthe, 'SA: Motlanthe: Address by the Deputy President of South Africa, during the 1860 Legacy Foundation Gala Dinner, Cape Town (15/11/2010)', in *Polityorg.za* <<http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-motlanthe-address-by-the-deputy-president-of-south-africa-during-the-1860-legacy-foundation-gala-dinner-cape-town-15112010-2010-11-15>> [accessed 6 May 2013]

⁵⁵⁸ M. Gigaba, 'South African Government Information', in *Address by Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba during the National Assembly Debate on the Centenary of the Union of South Africa* <<http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=11015&tid=11032>> [accessed 8 May 2013]

The Union of South Africa has come to represent the culmination of racial oppression and a country other than the one we live in today. Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk are unfortunately and inexorably tied up with those sentiments.

Historical amnesia is not the preserve of the commanding heights of power alone. It extends to the majority of ordinary citizens, and is pervasive amongst our “memory custodians” or “memory activists”. These memory custodians are supposedly the last line of defence in protecting our history from total oblivion. Even they seem to have succumbed as witnessed in a recent meeting of the Johannesburg chapter of the South African Military History Society. The chairlady, Marjorie Dean, tasked with the introduction of guest speakers, one of whom was to deliver a topic on the war in North Africa 1940-1943, commented on how significant the month of June seemed to be in the history of warfare. In order to bolster her point, she proceeded to name such battles as Waterloo, the D-Day landings, Midway and other equally epic military events. That she failed to mention the surrender of Tobruk in June 1942 cannot be put down to a mere oversight, but is indicative of a general degradation in memory.⁵⁵⁹

The amnesia of our recent military past is most prevalent to the military enterprise of the Union of South Africa. The memory of the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War, all fought in the name of the Union have received far less attention than the ever popular Anglo - Boer or Anglo - Zulu wars. Recently South Africa has experienced a spate of publications concerning the Border War, fuelled by a myriad of campaign histories and personal memoirs. These are mostly written by veterans anxious to tell their story to a public equally anxious to devour them as they emerge. This different treatment cannot be solely attributed to the fact that the Border, Anglo - Boer and Anglo - Zulu wars were fought closer to home and involved South Africans more “directly” and not for some “foreign” cause.

South African amnesia is more akin to those nations who suffered total defeat in a total war. For the most part, victorious Allied nations have incorporated their participation in the Second World War, including their battle defeats, as a fundamental part of their national memory. Successive South African governments have sought either to dismantle or ignore the memory, only to resuscitate it on occasion for political convenience. It amounts to a cynical exercise of culling what is usable from the past. Finally the advent of democracy in 1994 has ushered in an environment in which it is

⁵⁵⁹ The author attended a meeting of the Military History Society on 13 June 2013, and to be fair, neither was Operation Bagration mentioned, the largest Allied operation of the Second World War, namely the Soviet spring offensive of 1944. That campaign dwarfed the D-Day landings in extent and military consequences.

inappropriate to commemorate Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in what Ian van der Waag describes as a “contested” history lost amidst the politics of a new national memory.⁵⁶⁰

South Africa has similarities to France and Italy, in that it was not readily apparent whether these countries belonged to the victors or losers. The national traumas suffered through defeat, resulted in treating the Second World War differently from the other participants. In France and Italy, the collaborationist aspects of the war were largely ignored or written off as mere aberrations against a general trend of resistance to fascism. This amounted to an intellectual repression of a national trauma. Unlike Italy and France, where the post-war regimes did their utmost to identify with the victors and stress their “resistance”, the South African nationalist government set about dismantling their links to the United Kingdom and the Second World War.⁵⁶¹ Van der Waag describes this dismantling process by the Afrikaner nationalists after 1948 as a “reshaping” towards a more nationalist outlook in the wake of an “Anglophone sojourn in the jungles and deserts of the two world wars.”⁵⁶²

Bosworth’s *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima* sheds further light on South African “otherness” and its tendency for a short memory, as opposed to the longevity and centrality of memory in most of the other belligerents.⁵⁶³ Bosworth identifies the phenomenon of the “long Second World War” encompassing its immediate prehistory and aftermath. For most, the war officially ended in 1945 with the surrender of Japan. In reality the Second World War continued right up to 1989, only ending with the fall of the Berlin Wall which signalled an end to the Cold War. For Italy, the logical starting point of the war was 1922 with the rise of Mussolini. As for Germany, it is the year the Nazis came to power in 1933. For England and France, it is the Munich Agreement that signals their entry into the war.⁵⁶⁴ Arguably the Afrikaner nationalists’ war began against the British Empire in 1806 with the takeover of the Cape from the Dutch and ended triumphantly with their election to power in 1948. South Africa’s “long Second World War” came to an abrupt end in 1948, whereas it persisted with others, for many more decades.⁵⁶⁵ The Second World War was a “good war” for the victors and

⁵⁶⁰ I. van der Waag and D. Visser, 'Between history, amnesia and selective memory: The South African armed forces, a century's perspective', *Scientia Militaria*, 40(3) (2012) (p. 2). See also I. van der Waag, 'Contested histories: official history and the South African military in the 20th century', in *The Last Word? Essays on Official History, in the United States and British Commonwealth*, ed. by J. Grey (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003).

⁵⁶¹ Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz...* (pp. 128,129). Bosworth describes almost a civil war in these two countries.

⁵⁶² van der Waag, 'Between history, amnesia ...' (p. 3).

⁵⁶³ Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz...*,

⁵⁶⁴ Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz...*, In a comparative study of several nations that partook in the Second World War, Bosworth examines the different ways that these nations internalized the war, identifying a different start and an end point to the war.

⁵⁶⁵ Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz...* (p. 6). Bosworth identifies the advent of the, “long Second World War” as being the time when various states required that “liberties be subordinate(d) to... nationality”. In South Africa a reversal of this situation occurred in 1948.

consequently the memory of it was handed down to succeeding generations. The defeated experienced a "bad war" and a painful memory to be avoided. The situation in South Africa manifested itself somewhat differently, in that the war was seen by the Afrikaner nationalists as largely irrelevant, and therefore ignored in the context of the struggle for Afrikaner nationhood.⁵⁶⁶

Most of the participants in the Second World War lived in the shadow of the war for decades after it ended, making the memory of that war immediate and integral to their daily existence. Germans lived with a divided nation; the Berlin wall serving as a constant reminder of a Nazi past and its consequences. The memory of the Russian victory over fascism served as the single biggest national unifier in the Soviet Union and a bolster to the communist system. It was only once the Berlin Wall fell and Germany was reunited and communism rejected in Eastern Europe and Russia, that the Second World War finally ended and ceased to be central for most of the participants. Prior to that, it could be argued that, these nations viewed the world through the "prism of their wartime experience."⁵⁶⁷

South Africa was far removed both physically and mentally from the worst ravages of the Second World War. The country was relatively unscathed compared to a devastated Europe, and was more concerned with domestic issues that threatened Afrikaner nationalism. In an extreme irony, the lessons of the Second World War, and the unity brought about by the common desire of the democracies to overturn the evil of Nazism and fascism was turned topsy-turvy in South Africa. Here the victors had to endure in their midst's, a regime that had been largely pro-German during the war and now adopted many of its racial policies in dealing with the black indigenous population.⁵⁶⁸ The memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk was stifled in the incongruous situation that presented itself in South Africa after 1948.⁵⁶⁹

The memory of the Second World War barely survived half a century of Afrikaner nationalism. Commemoration in the age of Afrikaner nationalism was difficult if not hazardous, in a system that was politically intolerant.⁵⁷⁰ The memory of the Second World War faced a different challenge in a

⁵⁶⁶ H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003) (p. 446). Giliomee identifies the single most important factor for the Nationalists coming to power in 1948 was the Afrikaner nationalist's outrage over the country being taken into the war on a split vote, confirming South Africa's subordination to British interests.

⁵⁶⁷ Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz...* (p. 142).

⁵⁶⁸ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (p. 469). A point disputed by Giliomee who maintains that National Socialism had few adherents amongst the intelligentsia. See also B. Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (London: Penguin Books, 1969) (p. 54). Bunting has no qualms in drawing a strong influence by National Socialism on National Party leaders and Afrikaner people in general.

⁵⁶⁹ Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz...* (p. 193). According to Bosworth, the United States of America was, like South Africa, not a participant in the Second World War to the degree that other societies examined in his book were. The Vietnam War was a far more visceral experience for Americans, as was the border war and Boer war for South Africa.

⁵⁷⁰ The Nationalist government went about banning and censoring and placing under house arrest, organisations, publications and individuals who contested or protested the Afrikaner nationalist vision of

democratic South Africa.⁵⁷¹ Are Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk relevant in the national fabric of a modern South Africa? Jeffrey Olick points out that the memory of individuals is influenced by the groups to which they belong and collective memory is the active past that forms our identities.⁵⁷² It can be argued that the memory of the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk essentially belong to an erstwhile group of Anglophile and Imperialistic South Africans, and indeed to a South Africa that for a long time now, has essentially ceased to exist. In other words, South Africans who chose to fight in the Second World War, were not representative of the South African nation then and certainly not representative of the South African nation in its present democratic incarnation. The South Africa of 1939 to 1945, although sharing common borders with modern-day South Africa, was essentially not the same country as it is today.

Since 1994, there has been a tendency to rather forget the unpleasant past, and move on to build a new democratic South Africa, inclusive of the aspirations of all its population groups. It is expedient to select a useable memory to endorse the new identity of the modern nation. South Africans have been highly selective in choosing what is remembered, alternating at different times between rejection and acceptance, suppression and elaboration. However, the incorporation or taking ownership of unpopular history, however painful, facilitates perspective of where the nation is now, how it got there, and what is in fact possible in the future, and lastly, what should be avoided. This concept was eloquently stated by Motlanthe:

In embracing the past, especially its negative and unappealing aspects, such as those resulting from land dispossession, we do not, by any stretch of the imagination, intend to rub it in among certain sections of our population. What we need is an all-inclusive process that involves the participation of all communities and social groups in determining our collective history and shared destiny. This is what would happen if we remain silent about our history and select to focus instead on episodes favourable to our purposes. Only this time, those condemning history to the bin of forgetfulness will not be agents of oppression, but all of us through our silence and selective amnesia. As it is commonly said, there is no silence without a language to make it so. Instead, it is our duty to betray silence since there is no sorrow as deep as a sorrow of the unknown and what is denied.”⁵⁷³

⁵⁷¹ South Africa. Anyone who spoke out against government policy even to the extent of offering a different viewpoint was subject to a range of measures from incarceration, banning or even ridicule.

The main difference in the treatment of memory by the Nationalist as opposed to the democratic government was the employment by the nationalist of state machinery to rid society of certain alternative viewpoints. Under democracy, South Africa enjoys a free press and no political organisations are banned.

⁵⁷² J. Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory*, 17(3) (1999).

⁵⁷³ K. Motlanthe, 'SA: Motlanthe: Address by the Deputy President of South Africa, during the 1860 Legacy Foundation Gala Dinner, Cape Town (15/11/2010)', in *Polityorg.za* <<http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-motlanthe-address-by-the-deputy-president-of-south-africa-during-the-1860-legacy-foundation-gala-dinner-cape-town-15112010-2010-11-15>> [accessed 6 May 2013]

Not only has the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk been relegated through selective amnesia on the homefront, but it has also suffered the worldwide phenomenon, where pure operational history has become increasingly unpopular in academic circles. There has been a tendency to dismiss military history and military developments as irrelevant to an understanding of World civilization. Military historians often face an antagonistic reception from their fellow academics and the discipline has acquired a marginal status in some academic circles.⁵⁷⁴ This phenomenon contrasts to the growth in interest for this very type of history in the popular market and indeed this demand, due to abdication from operational history by academics, has been met by a growing supply in non-academic work. South Africa has followed the international trend of favouring “war and society” or “new military history” over the traditional “drum and trumpet” but differs from the international trend in that non-academic historians have not produced work on operational history anywhere near the quantities that their overseas counterparts have done.⁵⁷⁵

The problem of leaving operational history to be written by non-academics is, that often, these works lack, in the words of Jeremy Black, “new insights or analysis...”. These works centre on making the campaigns more accessible, or of making “established knowledge accessible anew”, and lack scholarly scrutiny and are based on a synthesis of secondary material rather than an enquiry into archival sources.⁵⁷⁶ Much of the military history produced currently is in response to market opportunities. In South Africa there is little demand for the type of military history consumed overseas, in what seems to be an ever expanding market. Therefore South African memory has been deprived of academic work due to the unpopularity of military history within academic circles. It has been deprived of popular history due to the vagaries of the South African market which has all but forgotten South Africa’s participation in the Second World War in a collapse of collective memory.

4.2 The Aftermath of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk and Their Establishment in South African Memory

Jenny Macleod in *Reconsidering Gallipoli*⁵⁷⁷ traces the memory of the campaign through its different phases up to the present day where it has become very much part of the Australian national fabric. John Howard, the Australian prime minister in 2007, is quoted as saying, “[Gallipoli] has helped to

⁵⁷⁴ J.C. Bradford, 'A Companion to American Military History' (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), II (pp. 518,519).

⁵⁷⁵ J. Black, *Rethinking Military History* (New York: Routledge, 2004) (pp. 26,27).

⁵⁷⁶ Black, *Rethinking Military History* (pp. 27,28).

⁵⁷⁷ J. Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2004).

define what it means to be Australian.”⁵⁷⁸ What follows, using a similar thematic arrangement, within a chronological structure, is the journey of the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk through officialdom, journalists, the reaction of those who commanded, the participants in battle and finally memory activists in modern day South Africa. The final results, although following a similar path have different outcomes. Gallipoli became seminal to Australian nationhood as a symbol of the birth of the nation through its first baptism of fire; while Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk were banished to the national amnesia.⁵⁷⁹

The seeds of national amnesia were sown soon after the last shots were heard on the battlefields of Sidi Rezegh. South African could draw some comfort in the knowledge that in being overrun by superior forces, they had extracted an enormous price in German tanks and personnel. Brink had received, amongst many condolences, as many compliments on South Africa’s fine effort. In a homogenous and united society, the heroic circumstances, and temporary nature of the defeat should have provided South Africa with a useable memory with which to inspire their war effort and build the national character. However, back on the home front, the loss of so many South Africans at Sidi Rezegh was greeted with some trepidation. Smuts had an eye to the possible exacerbation of the unpopularity of the war amongst nationalist circles. Carel Birkby’s early release of an account on the battle managed to evade the censors, much to the chagrin of Smuts. Shortly before its publication Smuts had released a version of the battle which minimised the magnitude of the losses suffered.⁵⁸⁰

Those South Africans opposed to the war effort may have considered that the South Africans were sacrificed needlessly due to the seemingly incompetence with which the British conducted Operation Crusader. The reaction of the New Zealanders who suffered similarly in the campaign is insightful. The New Zealand official history describes the New Zealand Division as; “...injured, puzzled, and to some extent ill-used...” in the aftermath of Crusader. Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, who commanded the 2nd New Zealand Division in North Africa, was influenced by his experience with the British in previous campaigns. Coupled with their conduct of Crusader, he was convinced that it was in New Zealand’s interest to get its forces out of the desert campaign altogether.⁵⁸¹ Freyberg was not alone in disagreeing with British methods of dividing divisions into brigade groups, a view shared by Brink, who he describes as “...in despair over dissipation of his forces and manner in which his brigades are employed even without reference to him.” As a result of British “faulty” ideas, Freyberg had his division transferred to Syria to “... safeguard the interests of New Zealand and of the Division”.⁵⁸² The

⁵⁷⁸ Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, (p. 1).

⁵⁷⁹ Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, (p. 5).

⁵⁸⁰ Birkby, *Uncle George* (p. 243). Birkby was a correspondent with the South African Press Association's war correspondent in East Africa and later, the Western Desert.

⁵⁸¹ J.L. Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt : The Summer of 1942*, ed. by H. Kippenberger (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1955) (pp. 1,2).

⁵⁸² Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt* (p. 5).

South Africans, who did not have the luxury of the New Zealand “Charter”, that reserved the rights of the government of New Zealand concerning the use of the division, had no option but to remain under the desert command.⁵⁸³

Brink’s conduct in Crusader too, came under some scrutiny. There was an impression in Pretoria at that time, of moves afoot to recall him, or even demote him. General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, the South African Chief of the General Staff, may have lost confidence in Brink as a divisional commander.⁵⁸⁴ Criticism of Brink after the war took the form of whether he was right to have committed his division to the battle, despite their unpreparedness and lack of training. In the face of such criticism, he was unwavering in his answer that South Africa’s honour was at stake, and, “It was the hardest decision of my life but I agreed to the division playing an important offensive role. Even knowing as I do now what followed, I would make the same decision today.”⁵⁸⁵ Undoubtedly Brink felt that the South African forces would lose face within the Union and with the Eighth Army, should he have decided not to take a main role in Operation Crusader.⁵⁸⁶ The occasion of this debate was the release of the second in the series of books, produced by the Union War Histories Section (UWHS) in 1957 appropriately titled *The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941*.⁵⁸⁷ It was in fact a prelude to the first release by the UWHS that dealt with the surrender of Tobruk.⁵⁸⁸ The release of the book caused a minor stir in the local South African press with references to a “blunderbuss” campaign in which the basic lessons learned is that, “...no troops should be committed to battle before they are properly trained from the commander-in-chief to the lowest formation.”⁵⁸⁹ The UWHS produced a monumental work on Operation Crusader in general, and a detailed account of the demise of the 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh. Their careful research had in fact revealed that the 5th Brigade, in succumbing to the might of the German attack, had exacted a fearful toll on the German armour, perhaps signalling a turning point in Operation Crusader.⁵⁹⁰ The South Africans had certainly put up a brave fight by all accounts in what Colonel Rainer Kriebel describes as, “... the most difficult (attack) which tanks and Rifleman were called upon to carry out in the course of this campaign”.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸³ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert: May-July 1942* (London: Oxford, 1952) (p. 81). The Australians and New Zealanders were organised as expeditionary forces. The commanders were given “special and far reaching” powers by their governments.

⁵⁸⁴ Birkby, *Uncle George* (pp. 251,252).

⁵⁸⁵ 'Gen. Brink on Sidi Rezegh', *Sunday Times*, 10 November 1957. and DOCD, Brink Papers, Box 55, p.37, 1 *SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica 1942*, 18 November - 2 December 1941.p. 37.

⁵⁸⁶ S. Monick and O. E. F. Baker, *Clear the Way ('Faugh-A-Ballagh')*. *The Military Heritage of the South African Irish 1880-1990* (Johannesburg: South African Irish Regimental Association, 1991) (p. 258).

⁵⁸⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles*,

⁵⁸⁸ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert: May-July 1942* (London: Oxford, 1952).

⁵⁸⁹ 'The Sidi Rezegh Battles - An official history', *The Natal Daily News*, 8 November 1957.

⁵⁹⁰ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 271).

⁵⁹¹ R. Kriebel, *Inside the Afrika Korps*, ed. by B.I. Gudmundsson (London: Greenhill, 1999) (p. 94).

The first book produced by the UWHS covers the fall of Tobruk and the First Battle of Alamein.⁵⁹² Here Agar-Hamilton deals with the reasons for the fall of Tobruk and the resulting surrender of the South Africans. The book most probably has a twofold purpose in that a proper academic explanation was needed for the fall of Tobruk in the light of the Australian success in holding the fortress the year before, and it offers something in the way of lessons learned.⁵⁹³ The second book deals in great depth with Operation Crusader and the destruction of the 5th South African Infantry Brigade at Sidi Rezegh.⁵⁹⁴ It seeks to resolve the controversy regarding the destruction of 5th Brigade and the Crusader battles. Using documents and extensive research from London and Germany and including input from the South African Air Force, resulted in perhaps the best official history ever produced in South Africa.⁵⁹⁵

With the passing in 1958 of Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom, an unlikely protector of the UWHS, any real prospect of completing the official histories also waned. There is little doubt that Agar-Hamilton and the UWHS suffered under a nationalist government and must have treaded very carefully when examining such issues as the surrender of Tobruk in the light of the prominent position given to Klopper by the Nationalists in 1952. It is significant that none of these volumes were ever translated into Afrikaans despite the fact that over half the participants in the UDF were Afrikaners. The efforts of Agar-Hamilton were finally extinguished in 1962 when all pretences of government interest in producing an official history of the war ended in the premature closure of the UWHS.⁵⁹⁶ In a final irony, good second hand copies of these monumental works, when they do come up for sale on the odd occasion, can be had in exchange for relatively hefty sums of money.

The regimental historian of the Transvaal Scottish described the destruction of the 5th Brigade as inevitable, once the protective British armour had been destroyed by the Germans in the days preceding the battle. Unlike the official history, the regimental history bemoans the fact that, “the heavy outlay in precious lives was not offset by a tangible return...”.⁵⁹⁷ The South African Irish regimental historian describes the German triumph as a Pyrrhic victory, and sees the sacrifice of the 5th Brigade as the initiator of a chain of events that would eventually lead to the Axis withdrawal within three weeks from Cyrenaica. The failure of the 1st Brigade to close up with the 5th Brigade on the Sidi Rezegh escarpment, and the general hesitancy of Pienaar in the days preceding the 5th Brigade’s destruction is discussed in the regimental history. However the discussion is made without the authors

⁵⁹² Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert*,

⁵⁹³ van der Waag, 'Contested histories...' (p. 37).

⁵⁹⁴ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles*,

⁵⁹⁵ van der Waag, 'Contested histories...' (p. 37).

⁵⁹⁶ J. Grey, 'Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clio: the rise and fall of Union War Histories', *Scientia Militaria*, 30 (2000) (p. 263).

⁵⁹⁷ Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish...*,

offering a strong viewpoint either way, citing the point as moot, highly contentious, and purely academic.⁵⁹⁸ The reluctance of the authors to render an opinion by interrogating and interpreting the facts is perhaps understandable given the reverence with which Pienaar was held in South Africa. This is despite the fact that the South African Irish regimental history was published in 1991 a half a century after the event.

It is interesting that Pienaar received some scathing criticism for his conduct in Operation Crusader both from the official and the Transvaal Scottish regimental histories. That he did so, is even more remarkable in the light of the fact that Pienaar had achieved close to hero status in South Africa, a situation no doubt propelled by his untimely death in an aeroplane accident aged 49 on 19 December 1942. Pienaar at the time of his death had become one of South Africa's most charismatic and popular military commanders. Some, including his close subordinates and even influential people in the United Kingdom High Commission in Pretoria, had thought of Pienaar as a potential successor to Prime Minister Jan Smuts—a victorious Afrikaner general who could have held back the reactionary forces of Afrikaner nationalism. Ironically it was in Operation Crusader at the battle of Taieb el Essem on the 25 November 1941, a few short days after the loss of the 5th Brigade that Pienaar's reputation as a gifted and courageous general began to take root.

The battle of Taib el Esem has been described in *Pienaar of Alamein* as his greatest achievement, where he demonstrated, "... for the first time that infantry and guns, properly handled and disposed, were a match for the dreaded German panzers". It was at Taib el Esem, that Pienaar and his 1st Brigade took on the 21st Panzer Division, allowing the Eighth Army to regroup and deliver a thrust which eventually relieved the Tobruk garrison.⁵⁹⁹ The legend of this epic battle against the German armour is repeated by Eric Rosenthal in his book on Pienaar, thus adding, at the time, to the myth surrounding these events.⁶⁰⁰ The official history encases the word battle in 'The battle of Taieb el Esem' in inverted commas for in fact, for all intents and purposes, the battle as described in legend, never took place. The attack on Pienaar's 1st Brigade was delivered half-heartedly by elements of *Ariete*. The 21st Panzer Division had no part in the action. Thus the official history describes that a legend grew – not discouraged – by its members – that the, "1st SA Brigade held off the German armour when 5th Brigade collapsed."⁶⁰¹ Throughout the so-called battle, Pienaar insisted that he was heavily engaged and called for armoured support. Brink remembering the fate of the 5th Brigade, and believing Pienaar, pressured 30 Corps to supply armoured support and even bomber support. Gatehouse writing in 1954,

⁵⁹⁸ S. Monick and O. E. F. Baker, *Clear the Way ('Faugh-A-Ballagh')*. *The Military Heritage of the South African Irish 1880-1990* (Johannesburg: South African Irish Regimental Association, 1991) (pp. 270,283).

⁵⁹⁹ A. Pollock, *Pienaar of Alamein* (Cape Town: Cape times, 1943) (p. 84).

⁶⁰⁰ E. Rosenthal, *General Dan Pienaar: His Life and His Battles* (Cape Town: Unie Volkspers, 1943).

⁶⁰¹ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 327). See also J.A. Brown, *Retreat to Victory: A Springboks diary in North Africa* (Cape Town: Ashanti, 1991) (pp. 40,41).

said that on his arrival at the 1st Brigade positions, he could see no sign of the supposed attack, and Pienaar was in an excitable state.⁶⁰² The final indignity took the form of Pienaar rather disingenuously withdrawing from his position, against the wishes of 30th Corps and to the severe embarrassment of Brink.⁶⁰³ The withdrawal was effected at night, and carried out with some precision showing that the brigade was fully capable of making night marches, provoking a bitter comment in the Transvaal Scottish regimental history referring to Pienaar's hesitancy to move swiftly by night when so required.⁶⁰⁴

The official history, by highlighting Pienaar's hesitancy and insubordination, seem to have little impact on this "famed and fabulous" general. Despite being difficult, obstinate and temperamental, flouting orders or just disobeying them, or being lethargic in obeying orders, the popular press had no doubts as to his ability.⁶⁰⁵ A fellow South African, Robert Crisp, who served as a tank commander with the British, overheard a staff officer saying, "Uncle George is all right, and Uncle George's boys are all right; but Uncle George's nephew is just bloody awkward. We can't get him to fight a battle, or even to move to a place where he might have to fight a battle."⁶⁰⁶

If Pienaar's obduracy was not enough to dent his reputation with the men that served under his command, or diminish his popularity in South Africa, it certainly had a negative effect on the British who commanded him. Pienaar's hesitancy was again highlighted in the second battle of Sidi Rezegh on the 29 and 30 November when General Norrie took it upon himself to shake the 1st Brigade out of its "South African huddle" and "apply ginger", after repeated delays by Pienaar to advance. It allegedly took all of Norrie's patient determination and persistence to get Pienaar to move. With Norrie personally leading from the front, the South Africans reached the escarpment, but once there, they would move no further. The official history refers to Pienaar's lethargy, and seeks to abrogate it by reminding the reader that Pienaar had witnessed the overrunning of the 5th Brigade a week earlier.⁶⁰⁷

Brink has the distinction of being one of two South Africans in Second World War to have a published biography; the other is Major-General Dan Pienaar.⁶⁰⁸ Unlike Pienaar, whose biographies were published soon after his accidental death during the war and thus took on a more eulogical role, Brink's biography was well researched. Birkby was able to exploit his close friendship with Lieutenant-

⁶⁰² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 332).

⁶⁰³ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (pp. 327-35).

⁶⁰⁴ C. Birkby, *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932-1950* (Cape Town: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950).

⁶⁰⁵ 'War History says Gen. Pienaar flouted orders', *Sunday Express*, 11 November 1957.

⁶⁰⁶ R. Crisp, *Brazen Chariots* (London: Frederick Muller, 1959) (p. 143).

⁶⁰⁷ Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 393). See also J.A. Brown, *Retreat to Victory: A Springboks diary in North Africa* (Cape Town: Ashanti, 1991) (p. 41).

⁶⁰⁸ Pollock, *Pienaar of Alamein*, See also E. Rosenthal, *General Dan Pienaar: His Life and His Battles* (Cape Town: Unie Volkspers, 1943).

General George E. Brink⁶⁰⁹ and in 1987 publish one of the few and certainly the best biography of a Second World War South African General.⁶¹⁰ His biography of Brink makes use of declassified documentation in the form of an illuminating personal report to Jan Smuts on the disaster of Sidi Rezegh and the loss of the South African 5th Brigade in Operation Crusader, which was to that date the largest South African defeat, eclipsing that of Delville Wood in the First World War. South African historians, perhaps with the exception of Birkby have been unable to produce any worthwhile biographies of those who led South African Forces in the Second World War.⁶¹¹

It would seem that the South Africans emerged from their first major engagement in North Africa with mixed results, and a confused memory. From the outset, the battle at Sidi Rezegh and the destruction of the 5th Brigade were relegated, in deference to Smut's sensitivity to public opinion on the homefront. The memory of Sidi Rezegh fell victim to an attempt to downplay the losses suffered by the South Africans. The contribution the South Africans had made in wearing down the German fighting power, through their sacrifice, remained largely unknown, until revealed by the UWHS through the publication of *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* in 1957. In the immediate aftermath of Sidi Rezegh, and on the occasion of Pienaar's untimely death, it was the "non-battle" of Taieb el Esem that was hailed, in which Pienaar's casualty list amounted to three slightly wounded, amongst whom was Pienaar himself.⁶¹²

The memory of Sidi Rezegh has been submerged through a combination of political expediency, misinformation, and sensitivity to international relations. This was part and parcel of the propaganda directed as normal wartime practise for morale, diplomatic and intelligence purposes aimed at the troops on the front line, the home front and United Kingdom–South Africa alliance. Smuts viewed the annihilation of the 5th Brigade in terms of the divisive political situation on the home front. The United Kingdom and South Africa sought to protect their strained relations even at the cost of the truth surrounding the events of Sidi Rezegh. Finally it will be seen that the true heroism of Sidi Rezegh was replaced by a "non- battle" in an attempt to deflect public attention away from the demise of the 5th Brigade, and later on to build the reputation of Dan Pienaar.

If Pienaar's soaring reputation in Operation Crusader had somewhat submerged the memory of Sidi Rezegh, then the opposite was true in the disaster that befell the South Africans in the fall of Tobruk. Here Pienaar's penchant for disobeying orders and then lethargy when following them was

⁶⁰⁹ It is worth noting that the personal papers of Brink are housed at the SANDF archives in Pretoria.

⁶¹⁰ Birkby, *Uncle George*,

⁶¹¹ Another biography of a South African general is Pollock, *Pienaar of Alamein*, This work, appearing in both official languages in 1943, was hurriedly produced and had definite political and nation-building objectives.

⁶¹² Agar-Hamilton, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles* (p. 331).

largely overshadowed by the seemingly abysmal performance of the South Africans defending Tobruk. Pienaar emerged from the Tobruk fiasco praised for his skill in extricating his forces from a difficult situation. Less publicised was Pienaar's whittling down of what was supposed to be a full scale attack by the South African 1st Division ordered to penetrate deep into the Italian defences, and relieve the pressure in the "Cauldron". As it turned out, Pienaar had no desire to imperil his division and the attack eventually launched on the 7 June 1942 was a very much scaled down version, and resulted in humiliating failure. Gott, who had ordered the attack, was embittered by the whole affair and accused Pienaar of half-heartedness and non-cooperation. His belief that Pienaar could have broken through and turned the enemy's position, was arguably borne out on the 15 June, when the 50th Division broke through the same Italian lines, having suffered relatively few casualties in its successful escape from impending encirclement.⁶¹³

The fall of Tobruk removed the spotlight on Pienaar's less than credible performance, and caused consternation in the Allied camp. The news was greeted with disbelief by Churchill and Smuts who feared the consequences that the surrender would have on British-South African relations and more importantly on their respective homefronts. Within days of the surrender allegations began to emerge in South Africa and Britain of the cowardice and treachery of the garrison.⁶¹⁴ The British press were vociferous in their condemnation of the surrender of Tobruk as a fiasco and a humiliating disaster but fortunately for South Africa made little reference to the fact that the garrison was commanded by a South African and contained a large proportion of South African troops.⁶¹⁵ When the fact that Tobruk was commanded by a South African general at the time of surrender was revealed by Churchill, it caused consternation in the South African camp that saw this as an indictment and a "significant imputation of blame". Significantly the rumours of fifth columnists and defeatism surrounding the surrender prompted the reaction that, "... timely action [be taken] to controvert libels which may stick to South Africa through history."⁶¹⁶

It seems fortunate that the enemy too, took little advantage of pursuing this fact and exploiting the fissures in Anglo-South African relations. Very few British or South Africans were aware that the Tobruk fortress had been commanded and surrendered by a South African. An exception to this was an interesting broadcast by the German Propaganda Radio station on 20 July 1942 in which Klopper allegedly took exception to the British Radio Daventry report that Tobruk was of no importance. He found this to be an insult on the honour of those who defended Tobruk and folly to say

⁶¹³ Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the Desert* (p. 55).

⁶¹⁴ A. Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17(4) (2006) (p. 517).

⁶¹⁵ Stewart, 'The Klopper Affair' (p. 532.533).

⁶¹⁶ DOCD, CGS WAR 47 File 12/6 Theron to van Ryneveld, *Impact of tobruk Surrender*, 1942.

that the defenders were sacrificed for nothing.⁶¹⁷ This message of a callous British disregard for the life of Dominion troops must have resonated with a large proportion of the Radio Zeesen listeners, who were predisposed to opposing the war effort.⁶¹⁸

An interesting example of the Axis failure to exploit this opportunity can be found in a propaganda poster of the time that fell into the hands of the South Africans. (See Figure 21A) The poster much to the relief of the Chief of General Staff, van Ryneveld, made no reference to the South Africans, and refers to the circumstances surrounding Klopper as “an English envoy presented himself to the commander of the 21st Army Corps and offered surrender in the name of the fortress commander.”⁶¹⁹ Giving insight into Smut’s opinion of the whole matter is found in (Figure 21B) where Smuts has penned defiantly under the English translation of the poster “Tobruk Reconquered” the words, “Now avenged!”



Figure 21A An Italian propaganda poster celebrating the re-conquest of Tobruk on 21 June 1942. Relief that the South Africans were not mentioned in the poster was expressed in a memorandum sent via the Union Defence Force Administrative HQ to the Chief of the General Staff⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁷ *Radio Zeesen transcript* (Pretoria: Department of Defence Documentation Centre, 1942), CGS WAR47 22.

⁶¹⁸ C. Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewa Brandweg* (Essen: LIT Verlag, 2008) (p. 518). Radio Zeesen was a German broadcasting station operating from Germany that recruited a number of South African Afrikaaners who edited and broadcast, amongst other topics, pro-German and anti-Smut propaganda.

⁶¹⁹ *Tobruk Enquiry*, Poster (Pretoria: Department of Defence Documentation Centre, 1942), CGS WAR 47 12/6.

⁶²⁰ DOCD, CGS War, Box 47, File 12/6, *Tobruk Poster*, 1942

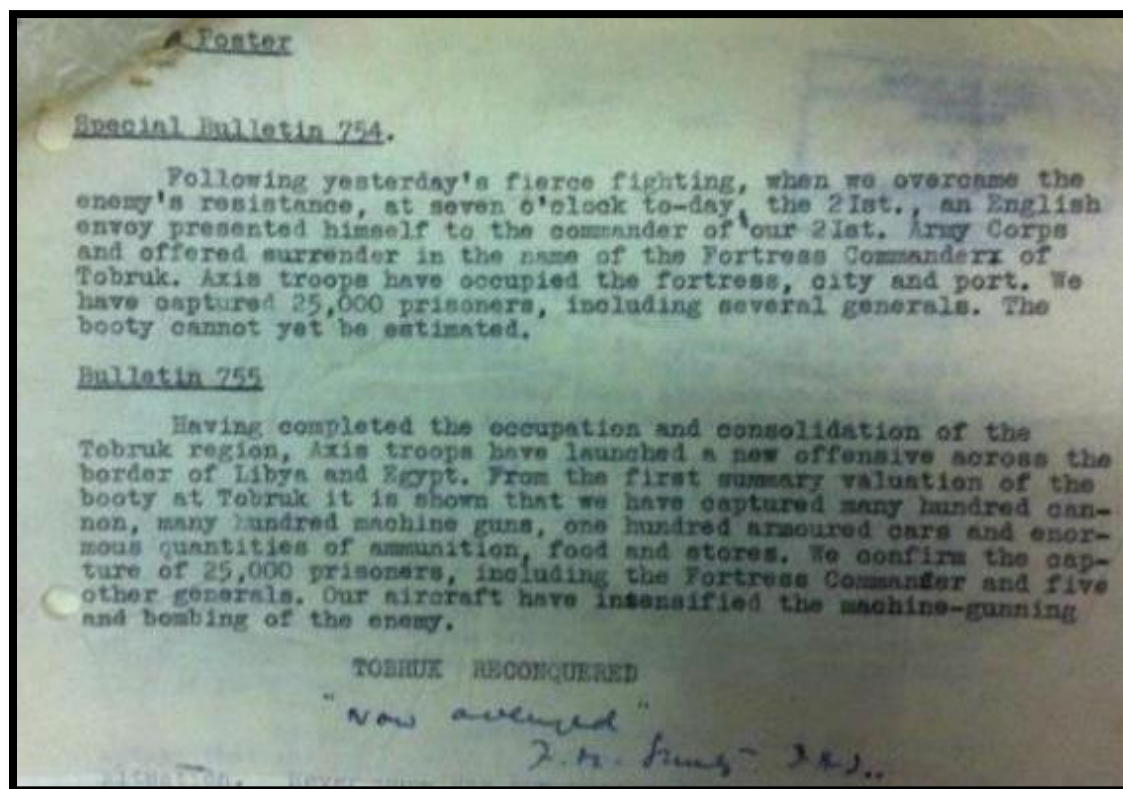


Figure 21B A translation of the poster ordered by an anxious South African Hierarchy, and to their relief, South Africa was not mentioned in the script. Interestingly the translation of "Tobruk Reconquered" is answered in pen by Jan Smuts as "Now avenged".⁶²¹

A number of pro-war supporters in South Africa judged Klopper harshly, with suggestions in certain quarters that he was not loyal. Major George Bastin, who served with Klopper up to the last moments before Tobruk's surrender, found it necessary to address a letter to van Ryneveld defending Klopper's honour and expressing anguish at the malicious gossip circulating in South Africa. None other than Klopper's brother, who was a preacher in George, apparently felt the contempt of the local jingoes.⁶²² The surrender of Tobruk took on divergent meanings amongst the different sectors of the population. The anti-war lobby felt that the South Africans had been needlessly sacrificed by the British, while some of the pro-war lobby were suspicious that Klopper was disloyal to the cause and that he handed over Tobruk without a fight. Bitterness was rife amongst the troops who had surrendered with Klopper and many believed that he had betrayed them. Their hostility was demonstrated when shortly

⁶²¹ DOCD, CGS War, Box 47, File 12/6, *Tobruk Poster*, 1942

⁶²² DOCD, CGS War, Box 47, File 4038, 1942, Bastin to van Ryneveld, *In Defence of Klopper's Honour*, 1942

after arriving at the Derna POW camp, Klopper attempted to address the prisoners, but was greeted with “boos and hisses”. Klopper retreated without saying one word.⁶²³

Perhaps Rex Woods the author of *Night Train to Innsbruck*⁶²⁴ sums up the feeling amongst those captured at Tobruk as well as other South Africans:

“To their everlasting indignation, the flower of South Africa’s volunteer army, many of whom had distinguished themselves in action in Abyssinia during the capture of Addis Ababa from the Italians and, more recently, at the capture of Bardia and in the Gazala line in the Libyan desert, now found themselves inexplicably ordered to lay down their arms at Tobruk without, in most cases, being allowed to fire a shot. Their previous good record made this a particularly bitter pill for them to swallow - the taste of which was bound to linger, despite the subsequent distinction with which their more fortunate compatriots fought at El Alamein and then in the battles of the fierce and a protracted campaign in Italy.”⁶²⁵

The Tobruk Court of Enquiry convened a few short months after the surrender, although exonerating Klopper from some of the worst accusations levelled at him, played no role in influencing public opinion at home or abroad as its contents remained secret for decades after the war.⁶²⁶ In the absence of any official statement regarding Klopper, the South African High Commissioner felt it appropriate that authentic accounts of survivors be made public only if they exonerated Klopper.⁶²⁷ The act of clearing his name and explaining the circumstances of the disaster would be largely left to Klopper himself. This process was begun by Klopper immediately after gaining freedom from an Italian prisoner of war camp in 1943 some one and a half years after his ignominious capture. His rescuer was none other than Lieutenant-Colonel Vladimir Peniakoff better known as “Popski” of Popski’s Private Army. When Klopper introduced himself as the commander of the South African Division and general in command of Tobruk, Popski replied, “I have heard a lot of gossip, mostly malicious. You will soon realise that many uninformed people like me are under the impression that you surrendered too easily.”⁶²⁸ Klopper replied that he knew and wanted to get back to South Africa as soon as possible to face a court of enquiry, indicating a burning desire to clear his name.⁶²⁹

⁶²³ I. Rosmarin, *Inside Story* (Cape town: W.J. Flesch & Partners, 1990) (p. 17). See also K. Horn, 'Narratives from North Africa: South African prisoner-of-war experience following the fall of Tobruk, June 1942', *Historia*, 56,2 (2011) (p. 100).

⁶²⁴ R. Woods, *Night Train to Innsbruck: A Commando's Escape to Freedom* (London: William Kimber & Co Ltd, 1983).

⁶²⁵ Quoted in M. Leigh, *Captives Courageous* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992) (p. 3).

⁶²⁶ DOCD, UWHS – Civil, Box 371 Operations in the Western Desert, Part II, p.23, *Report of Tobruk Court of Enquiry*, 27 May - 2 July. “The fact that Tobruk fell must undoubtedly be attributed to the eleventh hour reversal of policy leading to the decision to hold the fortress...”

⁶²⁷ Horn, 'Narratives from North Africa' (p. 99).

⁶²⁸ V. Peniakoff, *Private Army* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950) (pp. 393,394).

⁶²⁹ V. Peniakoff, *Private Army* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950) (pp. 393,394).

In April 1944 Klopper expressed his desire for a command, explaining that, “I am open to severe criticism in staying in the Union when other ex-POW are being sent on active service again.”⁶³⁰ Klopper’s opportunity to redeem his reputation via the battlefield was turned down by the Chief of General Staff who confirmed his appointment as temporary commandant of the college.⁶³¹ A final fleeting opportunity for redemption presented itself when Smuts grudgingly agreed to form A Cape Corps infantry brigade for duty in Italy, where he envisaged that the somewhat disgraced former commander of Tobruk would take charge. The idea was scuppered by Smuts’ cabinet when it failed to pass muster for political reasons.⁶³² Klopper’s opportunity to present his version of events would come in the form of a request by the British War Office for any information from the South Africans that would enlighten them as to what transpired at Tobruk. This request was for the purposes of publishing the long delayed Auchinleck despatch⁶³³, about which it was admitted that it was based on incomplete evidence, and as a result, without real conviction.⁶³⁴

The gist of Klopper’s five page submission shifted the blame for the fiasco squarely onto the British, who had withdrawn unexpectedly thereby exposing his vulnerable south-eastern flank and failed to deliver their promised counter-attack. The despatch was intended as a commander’s personal account in good faith, written with the knowledge on hand at the time, and not a historical record, and as such Auchinleck was reluctant to make any changes, but in order to prevent any injustice he suggested that Klopper’s account be included as an appendix. Van Ryneveld wishing to avoid public controversy that would arise on the publication of an “erroneous and incomplete” document wanted the despatch to be amended. The issue was again escalated when Klopper submitted a 15 page document drawing extensively from the Court of Enquiry. After much bantering between the parties, and in an exercise of political expediency, it was decided to amend the despatch in accordance with the South African requirements, thereby eliminating the necessity for including Klopper’s account via an appendix. With both Auchinleck and Klopper battered into submission by their respective governments, the inoffensive despatch, offering no real insight into the surrender of Tobruk was published on the 15 January 1948.⁶³⁵

It was reported that Klopper was on his way to see Smuts to demand that his reputation be exonerated, failing which, he would resign his command of Northern Command. Klopper was

⁶³⁰ DOCD, Personal Records, *Record of Service H.B.Klopper (1926 - 1945)*.

⁶³¹ DOCD, Personal Records, *Record of Service H.B.Klopper (1926 - 1945)*.

⁶³² B. Nasson, *South Africa at War 1939-1945* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2012) (p. 110).

⁶³³ TNA, WO 32/10160, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

⁶³⁴ A. Stewart, 'The 'Atomic' Despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the Fall of the Tobruk Garrison and Post-War Anglo-South African Relations', *Scientia Militaria*, 36 (1) (2008) (p. 80).

⁶³⁵ TNA, WO 32/10160, *Auchinleck Despatch on Operations in the Middle East*, 1 November 1941 to 15 August 1942.

apparently upset with Auchinleck's assertion that he had been given permission to withdraw his forces from Tobruk, but had not availed himself of the opportunity. Klopper again threatened to produce his account of the final days of the garrison, but this notion was effectively quashed by Smuts who was satisfied that South Africa's reputation was intact. When Klopper finally had his say it would be via a popular Afrikaans family periodical, *Huisgenoot*, delivered as a five part series starting in June 1950. In a final act of indignity, the first detailed account of South Africa's biggest military disaster was carried in a featherweight Afrikaner nationalist populist magazine.⁶³⁶ Fortunately for all concerned, justice would be done to the memory of Tobruk and to Sidi Rezegh in 1952 and in 1957 via the expert hands of the UWHS.

4.3 After Officialdom and Journalism - New Memory Custodians and Memory Activists

The memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk was initially shaped by the first acts of officialdom soon after the battles took place. The facts surrounding the disasters were suppressed due to political sensitivity on the homefront and a concern for the fragile South African-United Kingdom relations. It has been seen that journalists, starved of facts and eager to report a victory, latched onto the charismatic figure of General Dan Pienaar, and widely reported and even invented some of his exploits on the battlefield. The official reports and the details of the Tobruk Commission of Enquiry were kept under wraps and cloaked in secrecy, once again casting an eye on political sensitivities. Attempts by Klopper to respond after his escape from a POW camp in 1943 and shortly after the war were also stifled by officialdom. The full story of these South African disasters would be left to be told elsewhere.

It was indeed fortunate that the prevailing view on the outbreak of the Second World War was that the country's war efforts should be documented properly to facilitate the formulation of a serious historical account after the war. This instance of foresight resulted in the creation of the single most important source for researchers, and reservoir of memory of the South African participation in the Second World War. If it were not for the efforts of Agar Hamilton and the UWHS the memory of Tobruk may have been defined by a popular Afrikaans periodical.

4.4 Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in Popular Memory – The Participants Speak

With few exceptions, nations that fought in the Second World War have produced countless scholarly works, and a myriad of novels, films and documentaries about the war. South Africa can be counted amongst the exceptions in having produced relatively few scholarly accounts and even less in the way

⁶³⁶ H.B. Klopper, 'Voorsmaak van die Stryd!', *Huisgenoot*, June 1950.

of popular accounts. The historian Emily Rosenberg draws a distinction between scholarly accounts that produce history, while popular accounts generate memory, the two interacting rather than opposing.⁶³⁷ A healthy memory of the events depends on the availability of quality historical accounts together with popular accounts. South Africa is fortunate in having a good supply of first rate authors, poets, artists and other memory activists; few have been motivated to produce popular accounts of what was an epic period in South Africa's history. What follows is a brief examination of some of those memory activists and their work produced during and shortly after the Second World War.

James Ambrose Brown is better known for his scholarly work in producing two volumes for the semi-official *South African Forces World War II* series. He also produced two volumes for the semi-official Ashanti series of which one volume *Retreat to Victory* was based on his personal experiences in the war in the form of a personal diary from November 1941 to November 1942.⁶³⁸ Ambrose Brown was a sergeant serving with the Transvaal Scottish in North Africa. The diary offers interesting anecdotes as well as rare criticism of Pienaar giving an insight into the feelings of an ordinary soldier of the time. Firsthand accounts, although providing a measure of immediacy of the event, are seen through a keyhole and have little comprehension of the larger canvas of the operation.

In direct contrast to this, is a monumental work in the form of the regimental history of The Transvaal Scottish titled *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish* by Carel Birkby.⁶³⁹ Birkby was a journalist by trade spending much of his time in the field with the South African Forces in East Africa and the Western Desert. Birkby wrote the regimental history of the Transvaal Scottish prior to any publication or definitive work by the UWHS. He was however allowed access to the draft narratives of the UWHS and was able to submit his own drafts for revision by the UWHS. As a result of his close cooperation with the UWHS and a somewhat pleasing writing style he was able to produce what amounted to a ground-breaking history that examined the East African and North African campaigns through the eyes of the Transvaal Scottish. His narrative deals with the events surrounding Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in great depth and from the perspective of the Scottish regiment. Some of his observations are surprisingly frank and refreshing in the light of the sanitised versions of these battles portrayed in subsequent works.

⁶³⁷ R.M. Citino, 'Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction', *American Historical Review*, 2007 (p. 1083).

⁶³⁸ J.A. Brown, *Eagles Strike* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1974). and J.A. Brown, *A Gathering of Eagles* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1970). and J.A. Brown, *Retreat to Victory: A Springboks diary in North Africa* (Cape Town: Ashanti, 1991). and J.A. Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-1941* (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1990).

⁶³⁹ C. Birkby, *'The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish 1932 – 1950'* (Transvaal Scottish Regimental History Committee: Johannesburg, 1950)

An example of a South African author, who produced novels and poetry amongst his other work, was Uys Krige, who was captured at Tobruk in 1941 serving as a war correspondent. His collection of war poetry included a collection titled *Oorlogsgedigte* published in 1942 and a play *The Sniper* (1962), telling a tale of a young South African soldier shot by German sniper. The memory of Sidi Rezegh and the desert war has been beautifully preserved in the works of Uys Krige who was a correspondent with the South African forces, taken prisoner near Tobruk during Operation Crusader. He captures the desolation of the aftermath of the battle of Sidi Rezegh in his short story, *Death of a Zulu*.⁶⁴⁰ Here a captured white South African soldier finds commonality with a grievously wounded Zulu soldier, who pleads for a mercy killing due to the serious nature of his wounds. His poem *Before Sidi Rezegh* reveals the depths of anxiety of the South African contingent on the eve of their defeat.

Very few films deal specifically with the fall of Tobruk. An exception to this is a British film produced in 1958 titled *Ice Cold in Alex*⁶⁴¹ which describes the exploits of a group of army personnel and nurses who attempt a dangerous and arduous trek across the deserts of North Africa during the Second World War, escaping the siege of Tobruk in 1942. The escaping team meets up with a burly South African soldier who later turns out to be a German spy. The film is significant, not for its portrayal of the surrender of Tobruk, but rather for its sidestepping of the whole issue of the fall of Tobruk and the role of South African soldiers in that siege. The single South African soldier presented in the entire film, is portrayed as an obnoxious and overbearing character, almost crass in his mannerisms and dismissive of British genteel behavior. The fact that he eventually turns out to be a German spy, sends a subliminal message of the similarities between Afrikaner and German and their shared common heritage and Germanic idiosyncrasies. The film covertly depicts British distrust of Afrikaner intentions casting a shadow on the resolve of the South Africans to defend Tobruk or the interests of the British Empire.⁶⁴²

There are very few popular accounts in the way of literature and film of South African origin dealing specifically with Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk. Most deal with South Africa issues obiter dicta, and thus an important component of memory is missing leaving South Africans languishing when compared to other participants of the war, whose memory activists have produced a myriad of novels, plays, films, poetry and literature on a yearly basis since the end of the Second World War.

⁶⁴⁰ R. Warwick, 'The Witness', in *Gallant WW2 effort ignored by politics* <http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global%5B_id%5D=72466> [accessed 11 November 2013]

⁶⁴¹ *Ice Cold in Alex*, dir. by J.L. Thompson (1958).

⁶⁴² *Ice Cold in Alex*, dir. by J.L. Thompson (1958).

South Africa was no exception to an age-old tradition that artists should accompany the fighting men into battle to record their exploits and experiences for posterity. The advent of photography has not replaced the war artist as a drawing, painting or sculpture can convey a meaning beyond that of a mere photograph. A total of eight officially appointed artists produced approximately 850 art works, many of which are now housed at the Military History Museum at Saxonwold Johannesburg.⁶⁴³

A more fruitful area specifically devoted to the battles of Sidi Rezegh can be found in the artwork of Francois Krige who was the brother of Uys Krige. In 1941, at the beginning of the Second World War, Krige became an official wartime artist, together with South African artists Neville Lewis and Geoffrey Long. He travelled with the South African forces, recording scenes in Libya, Egypt, Syria and Italy reflecting the destruction and suffering that surrounded him. Krige was discharged from his duties after writing a letter to the Director of Military Intelligence stating, "I long ago reached a stage where I cannot assimilate my experiences any longer. Should I continue, it could only result in a reduction in the quality of my work"⁶⁴⁴

Krige has produced a haunting painting of gravediggers at the Tomb of Sidi Rezegh one of the few landmarks marking the last moments of the 5th Brigade. The after battle depiction features the debris of war strewn around the tomb of an obscure Muslim prophet. (See Figure 22)

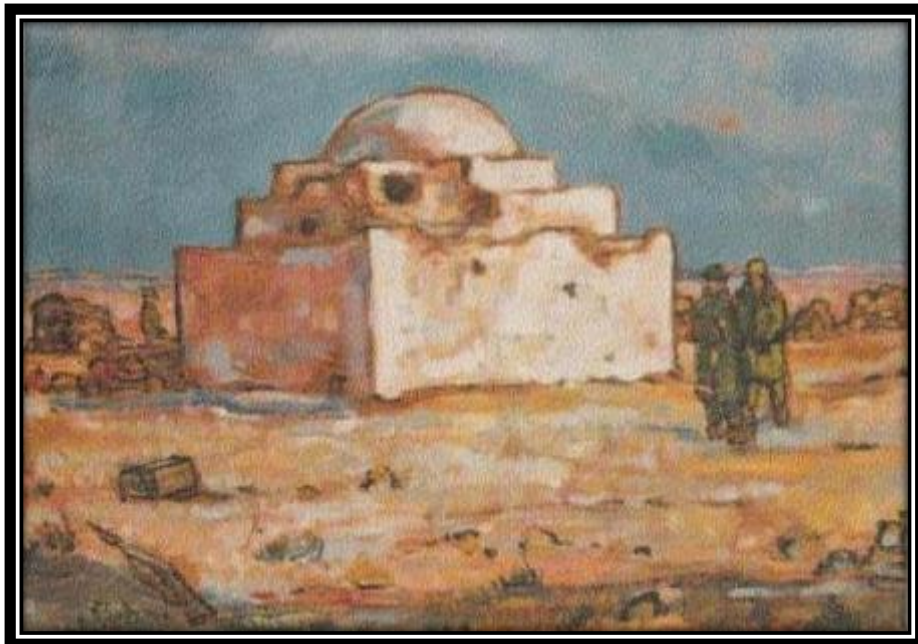


Figure 22. The Tomb of Sidi Rezegh by F. Krige

⁶⁴³ *South African Military History Society Newsletter*, November 2001.

⁶⁴⁴ J. Fox, *The Life and Art of François Krige* (Vlaeberg: Fernwood Press, 2000) (p. 59).

Geoffrey Long was an established artist even before his appointment as an official war artist in 1941. Long was commissioned by Dr. H I van der Bijl, the Director-General of War Supplies, to undertake a series of drawings of the ISCOR steelworks.⁶⁴⁵ Long's portrayal of the fall of Tobruk, captures the feeling of the South Africans as helpless observers to the events unfolding in front of them. The three figures point and watch the German bombardment from a distance, two sitting and one recently reclining in a work appropriately titles "staging out". One almost feels the excruciating dilemma of the artist in depicting a battle lost, in which there were few heroics unlike Sidi Rezegh. (See Figure 23)

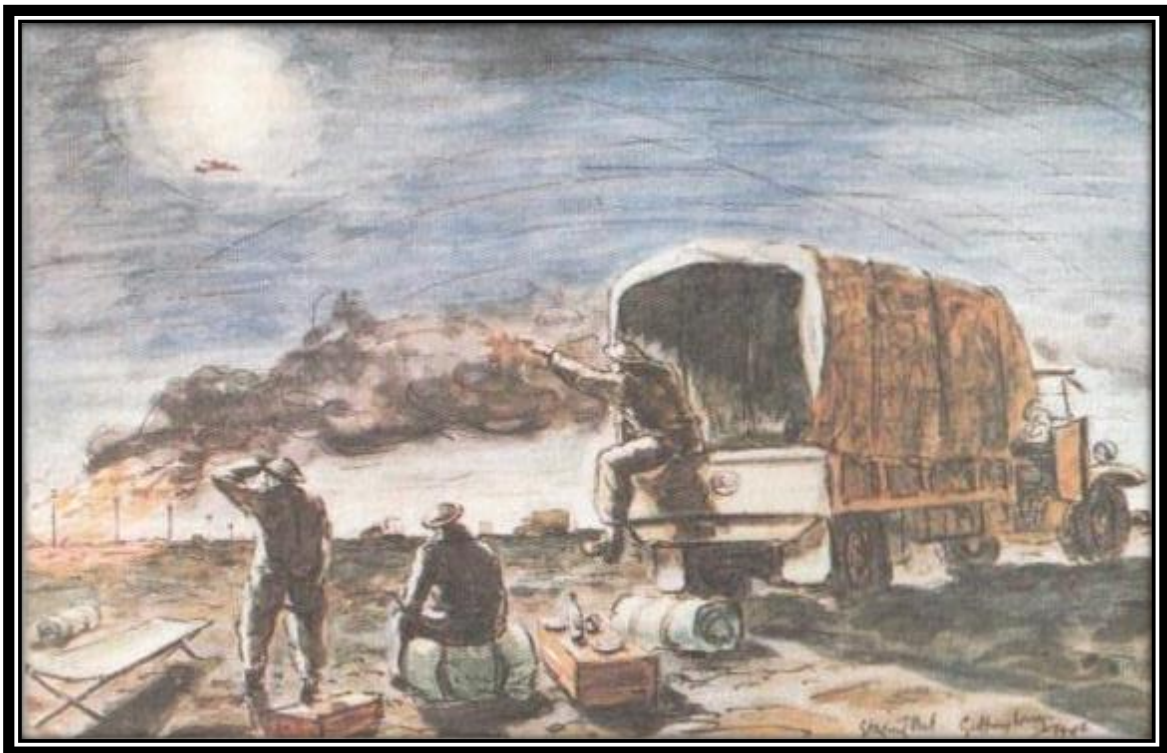


Figure 23. "Staging out" near Tobruk by G. Long

In the absence of any real heroism during the battle for Tobruk, heroes came from an unlikely source. Corporal Job Masego of the Native Military Corps was captured at Tobruk. He was quickly employed by his captors and worked there on ships. Not content with his lot as a prisoner, he began to sabotage vehicles by putting sugar in petrol tanks. His defiance to his circumstances culminated in an act of bravery when he made a jam tin bomb, using gunpowder from cartridges. Masego detonated the bomb on a petrol-loaded ferry by using a 12 foot fuse and burning cigarette, sinking the vessel. Masego

⁶⁴⁵

A. Sinclair, 'Geoffrey Long's artistic impressions of South Africa's industrialisation process during the Second World War', *Military History Journal*, 2000.

escaped and walked 500 km along the coastal road to El Alamein which he reached 23 days later.⁶⁴⁶ A portrait of Masego hangs at the South African Museum of Military History and its citation reads, "Corporal Masego who was captured with the Second Division in Tobruk was awarded the Military Medal for his ingenuity, determination and complete disregard of personal danger when he sank a fully-laden enemy steamer in Tobruk Harbour in which he and other prisoners had been put to work." (See Figure 25) According to Neville Lewis the artist of the portrait, Masego was considered for the Victoria Cross, but being black he was awarded the Military Medal instead. In 1997 the strike craft SAS Kobie Coetsee was renamed SAS Job Masego in his honour and in 2005, after this ship was disposed of, the Navy kept the name going by naming the Naval Base Simon's Town Wardroom in his honour. The township of KwaThema near Springs has a primary school named after him, as well as the main road linking Springs to KwaThema⁶⁴⁷

The saga of Masego is an example of how an event is used and manipulated to suite the political purposes of the time. During the war his exploits were propagated in order to bolster the stalled recruitment program of blacks into the UDF. The nationalist government would find the history of black participation in the South African army useful for once again finding black volunteers to assist the South African Defence Force in the border wars in the 1960s to the 1980s. In the democratic South Africa, Masego's exploits are seen as another component in the history of black exploitation at the hands of a white minority government.⁶⁴⁸

An Interesting dramatized documentary titled *A Pair of Boots and a Bicycle* created by Vincent Moloi was released on SABC 2 in 2008. The documentary deals with black South African veterans of World War II who personally tell the stories of their lives and experiences in the war. The documentary centers around the experience of Job Masego. Moloi unearths the significant contribution of South Africa's black soldiers to the Allies' North Africa campaign, for so long lying dormant in the works of Grundlingh and Gleeson and the unattended graveyards of North Africa.

In the film Moloi tries to unravel the mysteries of the life of mineworker Masego who became a hero at only to return to South Africa to face a life of relative poverty and eventually a lonely death. Moloi gives a voice to those that have remained silent for decades by using the veterans' oral histories to paint a vivid picture of what it was like to be a black serviceman. He explores the ironies of the fact

⁶⁴⁶ R. Webster, *The Illustrated at the Fireside: True Southern African Stories* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2012) (pp. 67-69).

⁶⁴⁷ C. Bennet, 'Corporal Masego', in *Go South Online* <<http://gosouthonline.co.za/corporal-masego-replied-oh-i-sank-a-steamer/>> [accessed 11 November 2013]

⁶⁴⁸ I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1994) (pp. 100-03).

that although oppressed at home, blacks volunteered to fight the war of their colonial oppressors, only to return to face even more discrimination under apartheid in 1948. The impression of Masego, perhaps depicted in the minds of some whites as a modern version of 'noble savage', had rather more mundane reasons for joining the army. His was a tragic life story, and Moloï reveals his true motivation as one of love for a woman he wished to marry. His paltry payment as a lance corporal in the Union Defence Force was earmarked by Masego to secure the lobola for the woman he planned to marry. As too often happens in the long absence enforced by war, the object of his love had found another man, leaving Masego destitute and heartbroken and with that the South Africa's hero threw himself under a passing train.



Figure 24 Black trainees of the Native Labour Corps armed with spears instead of rifles to allay Afrikaner nationalist fears perform a "bayonet charge".⁶⁴⁹ A scene from the documentary, *A Pair of Boots and a Bicycle*.

⁶⁴⁹ 'TVSA', in *A Pair of Boots and a Bicycle* <<http://www.tvsa.co.za/showinfo.asp?showid=1947>> [accessed 20 December 2013]



Figure 25 Corporal Job Masego of the Native Military Corps by Neville Lewis

4.5 The Afrikaner Nationalist War on Memory 1948 – 1966

The manner in which South Africa entered the Second World War in September 1939 was unique amongst the dominions. The politics behind her declaration of war were extremely divisive, and the divisions in her society played a substantial role in South Africa's conduct of the war. South Africa's immediate post-war experience was also unique amongst the victors of the Second World War. Jan Smuts was ousted at the polls in 1948, and a new nationalist government took the reins of power in an election result that was unexpected in most quarters. Six long years of war had crushed and discredited fascism as a form of government, and excepting for some long existing fascist regimes such as Spain and Portugal and some South American countries, it had been eradicated from the mainstream of world politics.

The election of the National Party in 1948, presented the world with a unique situation, where the United Kingdom and its empire would have in its fold a former enemy of the war effort. The uniqueness of this event was the fact that many nationalists who now held the reins of power had been vociferous in their virulent opposition to the war. Many nationalists were in fact pro-German,

sympathetic to the Nazi doctrine, and at times openly supported a German victory. The people who are now in power, had very little interest or sympathy for the role that South Africa had played in the Allied victory. In fact the nationalist government set about dismantling and devaluing the memory of that conflict.⁶⁵⁰

The Allied nations saw the fight against the Axis as a noble cause, no less than a modern-day crusade against the evil of Nazism, democracy against totalitarianism, freedom against subjugation, exceedingly proud of their efforts to bring freedom and democracy to Europe and the world. The Nationalist government of 1948 in South Africa, for all intents and purposes, was on the other side, if not in kind, then at least in sentiment.⁶⁵¹ Afrikaner nationalists saw the South African war effort in the context of an Imperial struggle against a fascist system that they held sympathy for. For them, the war effort was diametrically opposed to their aims and fought against a power that they had no axe to grind with. The mere fact that blacks were members of the Union Defence Force albeit in a non-combatant capacity annoyed many Afrikaners.⁶⁵²

There was a natural ideological bond between Nazism and Afrikaner nationalism both sharing many of the ideals of white superiority. Many of the Afrikaners, who harboured nationalistic ideals, hated the United Kingdom and saw them as the oppressors and were naturally inclined to side with Nazi Germany.⁶⁵³ The Allied victory over the Axis powers did not have the same meaning for the Afrikaner nationalists who assumed power in 1948, than other participants on the Allied side, or even other South Africans. It is little wonder that 46 years of Afrikaner nationalist reign, had all but destroyed the memory of Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh.⁶⁵⁴

South Africa's war effort did very little to endear Smuts either to the Afrikaner nationalists or to the blacks, who gained very little despite their participation in the war. Giliomee describes the feelings

⁶⁵⁰ P.J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Movement in the Fascist Era* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1991) (p. 244). The new Nationalist Party Cabinet under Malan forgave such personalities as the German secret agent Robey Leibbrandt and the man behind Zeesen radio, Eric Holm soon after coming to power. The new cabinet was a mixture of right wing hardliners and wartime fascist followers.

⁶⁵¹ There was a certain amount of active military support for Germany and its war aims in the form of sabotage by those supporting the National Party. It is fair to say that most of the saboteurs support of the National Party, but that the National Party did not officially support the violent actions of the saboteurs.

⁶⁵² L. Grundlingh, 'The Participation of South African Blacks in the Second World War' (Doctoral Thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, Arts/Humanities, 1986), p. 18. Afrikaners were not alone in being sensitive to the militarisation of blacks. However the Nationalists were openly opposed to any black involvement in the UDF.

⁶⁵³ Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (p. 54).

⁶⁵⁴ Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (p. 223). Bunting's chapter titled *The Control of Ideas*, deals with the draconian censorship measures installed by the Nationalists after 1948 and their intolerance to ideas that opposed their views. The Nationalist were determined to shape opinion and history through control of information.

of Afrikaner nationalists as one of outrage over the country been taken into the Second World War, which confirmed South Africa's continuing subordination to British interests.⁶⁵⁵ Afrikaners associated the war effort with this subordination, and hence the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk are accordingly associated, resulting in their memory being dismissed together with the war effort.

One of the first victims of the new Afrikaner Nationalist government was the Union Defence Force in which it was felt that many Afrikaners who had refused to fight in the Second World War were unfairly victimised. The new Minister of Defence, Frans Erasmus, set about the radical Afrikanerisation of the Union Defence Force which included the closure of English medium regiments, the dismissal or side-lining of senior officers sympathetic to the war and the breaking of regimental ties with their British counterparts. New uniforms were introduced together with a new rank structure that had the intention of reducing the British influence on the armed forces. Erasmus discontinued the exchange of military instructors between Britain and the Union thus ending decades of training links with Britain within two weeks of him assuming office.⁶⁵⁶

In an effort to sever ties with the memory of service in the Second World War, Erasmus ordered the removal of the "red tabs" as from 1 December 1949. His clear aim was to remove the British orientation in the Defence Force by creating a "national" defence force, in which Afrikaners would feel at home. Erasmus's feelings towards the Second World War and the Defence Forces participation in it can be summed up by his own words in a 1943 parliamentary debate, "we're making Britishers of our men and British officers of our officers" and "it is against that phenomena (sic) in our defence force that I severely object". By 1959 the nationalist government had installed a malleable mostly Afrikaner military leadership, that was nationalistic in outlook and had abandoned, to a large extent, the old British traditions.⁶⁵⁷

4.6 Memory Revitalised In the Age of Afrikaner and English Reconciliation 1966 -1990

The advent of the Border war in 1966 and the growing isolation of South Africa in a world that refused to condone the apartheid policies of the nationalist government, marked the beginning of government attempts to reconcile the differences of English and Afrikaans speaking white South Africans. One of the approaches by the government was to rekindle the memory of past conflicts where Afrikaner and Englishmen fought together against a common foe. Therefore after many decades, and being the main instrument in the dismantling of the memory of South Africa's participation in the Second World War,

⁶⁵⁵ H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003) (p. 446).

⁶⁵⁶ R.S. Boulter, 'F.C. Erasmus and the Politics of South African Defence 1948-1959' (Doctoral Thesis, Rhodes University, Philosophy, 1997), p. 73.

⁶⁵⁷ Boulter, 'F.C. Erasmus and the Politics of South African Defence...', pp. 3.42,46,92.

the government became the main initiator in re-invoking South Africa's Second World War military history.

The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 signalled the beginning of the demise of the apartheid nationalist regime and a period of intense negotiation by all parties in the democratic process. Again the South African government looked to the memory of the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War to illicit sympathy for the South African contribution in risking "... the ultimate sacrifice for their country, the British Empire and the freedom of mankind."⁶⁵⁸

With the above objective in mind, the military establishment funded the publication of a twelve book series by Ashanti publications titled *South Africans at War*.⁶⁵⁹ These books appeared between 1990 and 1994 reintroducing South Africa's role in the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War hoping to demonstrate the keen support of the West in a common struggle.⁶⁶⁰ The books are unfortunately of varying quality, relying on secondary sources such as the semi-official Purnell series and the regimental histories. The series breaks little new ground and one would find more reward sidestepping the Ashanti series and referring to the official and semi-official works discussed previously.

4.7 Memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk in the Age of Democracy

There is little incentive for post-apartheid South Africans to incorporate Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk into their collective memory. A large factor contributing to the national amnesia is a general feeling amongst the majority of the population that the South Africa of the Second World War was a different country to the democratic one now, in which blacks were exploited and had little stake in a "white

⁶⁵⁸ This appears on the dust cover of the first volume of the series *South Africans at War* and sums up the aim of the series adequately. J.A. Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-1941* (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1990).

⁶⁵⁹ The eight books in this Ashanti series of twelve pertaining to the Second World War are, P. Bagshaw, *Warriors of the Sky, Springbok Air Heroes in Combat* (Ashanti Publishing: Rivonia, 1991), J. Brown, *War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia, 1940-41* (Ashanti: Johannesburg, 1990), J. Brown, *Retreat to Victory, A Springbok Diary in North Africa: Gazala to El Alamein 1942* (Ashanti Publishing: Rivonia, 1991), J. Crwys-Williams, *Country at War 1939-1945: The Mood of a Nation* (Ashanti Publishing: Rivonia, 1992), I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars* (Ashanti Publishing: Rivonia, 1994), C. Harris, *War at Sea: South African Maritime Operations during World War II* (Ashanti: Johannesburg, 1991), J. Kros, *War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps* (Ashanti: Johannesburg, 1992), M. Leigh, *Captives Courageous; South African Prisoners of War - World War II* (Ashanti Publishing: Rivonia, 1992).

⁶⁶⁰ I. van der Waag, 'Contested histories: official history and the South African military in the 20th century', in *The Last Word? Essays on Official History, in the United States and British Commonwealth*, ed. by J. Grey (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003) (p. 41)..

man's war". Those who wish to revitalize the memory of these battles would have to do so by highlighting a common history of black and white fighting together in the war.

A much overlooked and often-ignored area in the historiography of the UDF is the role of its black members who took part in the Second World War in considerable numbers mainly in a support role. This significant participation in the war is made known by retired general, Ian Gleeson, in his book *The Unknown Force*.⁶⁶¹ Predating this book and surpassing it in scholarly endeavour, is the groundbreaking doctoral dissertation of Louis Grundlingh that deals in depth with the participation of the 76000 South African blacks who enlisted in the Second World War.⁶⁶² In this enormous and well researched study the black involvement in the war is explored, from their guarded support of the declaration of war, to their recruitment, training, conditions of service, experiences, discipline, intergroup relations and finally their demobilisation and impact of the war on their political and economic future.

It is an enormous and important work and had it been published in a more accessible format catering to a mainstream audience, it would have made a significant contribution to the non-existent black South African memory of their participation in the Second World War. In its present format, unavailable electronically, and very few copies available at a few university libraries, it is destined to remain an academic curiosity when it should have formed the foundation of a solid memory. In the light of the treatment metered out to black volunteers during and after the war, it is perhaps asking too much of the present government to incorporate the South Africans of all races who fought in the Second World War as part of the new national memory.

There are those who lament the fact that the significance of the Second World War for South Africans has faded away over the decades. One of these is Rodney Warwick, a historian, who used the 70th anniversary of Sidi Rezegh as an opportunity to plead a case for its incorporation to national memory. He takes pains to identify a role for the sacrifices made at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk and offers a reason for the new democratic South Africa to incorporate these events into its national memory. Warwick argues that despite the government of the day and school history textbooks being preoccupied with the Union government's disinclination for black and coloured troops to bear arms,

⁶⁶¹ Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1994). Although it must be noted that Grundlingh's thesis not only predates Gleeson but is significantly more comprehensive and in fact Gleeson appears to make extensive use of the thesis.

⁶⁶² L. Grundlingh, 'The Participation of South African Blacks in the Second World War' (Doctoral Thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, Arts/Humanities, 1986).

the fact is that South Africans of all colours fought and died together in these battles. He, in contrast to Moloji, emphasises aspects which demonstrate non-racial service and sacrifice under daunting odds.⁶⁶³

4.8 Conclusion

The examination of defeat and its role on collective and individual memory is a new and somewhat unique way of looking at the reverses suffered by the South Africans at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk. In what amounts to a departure from the normal military historical approach, this chapter uses defeat as a prism to discover how these momentous setbacks have been dealt with, recorded, perceived and remembered by South Africa. The differing treatment of memory, by different interest groups, through the decades has been identified. The institutions and individuals, who have attacked, defended or ultimately ignored the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have been highlighted.

The impact that the defeats of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have had on South African memory have been explored together with the reasons that these events have failed to become an integral part of the modern South African national memory. Unsurprisingly, it has been found that the nationalist Afrikaner government of 1948 had a decisive role to play in effectively dismantling institutions such as the UWHS and putting pressure on individuals such as Agar-Hamilton, who may have had a role in forming Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk as part of the national memory. As expected, the new democratic South Africa has done little to incorporate this era of South African military history and these events since 1994 have formed part of the national amnesia. What is more surprising is that the seeds of amnesia were sown soon after the battles took place in 1941 and 1942. The memory of a heroic and then an ignominious defeat were sacrificed in order to safeguard a precarious political situation on the South African homefront, and to protect somewhat fragile relations between the United Kingdom and South Africa.

When the true facts were uncovered after the war, largely through the efforts of the UWHS via the official histories, the revelations they brought forth had lost their significance being bathed in a political climate antagonistic to the entire war effort, and to relations with the United Kingdom. When memories of the war were invoked on the odd occasion by a cynical officialdom, it was purely to serve as a political tool to advance the interests of the national government. In a climate hostile to the

⁶⁶³ R. Warwick, 'SA's forgotten fight against fascism', in *Politics Web* <<http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71639?oid=273680&sn=Detail&pid=71639>> [accessed 25 November 2013]

memory of the war, very few were able, or had any desire, to swim against the tide and thus little emerged via the arts, literature or film to commemorate Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk.

Since 1994 activity surrounding the memory of the Second World War has been confined to academic world. It is destined to remain there as long as there is a reluctance to acknowledge that there was a true meaning to the sacrifices suffered by both blacks and whites on the battlefields they shared at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk. The injustices meted out to the black volunteers in the Union Defence Force has to be acknowledged as well as the fact that all who partook and spilt blood in the desert did so in the name of freedom. It matters little that 70 years ago each individual, black and white had a different perspective on what that freedom meant. For some it was economic freedom, or to fight fascism, or an adventure. For others it was to secure a better life or through self-sacrifice, bring about a political change on the home front. Job Masego performed feats of extreme heroism in order to secure the woman he loved. Their stories are a national treasure, belong to every South African and deserve to be heard. Remember them or not, Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk are integral to our national fibre and it is because of them, that we are South African today.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

The eight months from the battle of Sidi Rezegh in November 1941 to the fall of Tobruk in June 1942 represents the most harrowing period in South African military history. Each disaster taken alone was of enormous magnitude. Taken together, their impact was even more devastating. The disasters rocked South Africa's already fragile relations with the United Kingdom, and the reversals were pounced upon by the opposition in both countries. The Tobruk debacle threatened to topple Churchill and Smuts from power and required deft political treatment from both leaders. The political pressure, as a result of a string of setbacks, only waned on news of the victory at Alamein.

A war weary South Africa withdrew from the North African theatre after Alamein not wanting to risk further losses that would no doubt prove fatal to Smuts' political career. South Africa absented herself from the land-war for the next 18 months only to re-enter the fray in Italy in 1943 as a reconstituted armoured division. The legacy of the desert defeats no doubt gave impetus for South Africa's desire to field an armoured division. Neither the unsuitability of an armoured division in the mountainous Italian terrain, nor British protestations discouraged Smuts, who coveted South Africa's participation in the closing stages of the war. South Africa took refuge behind the relative safety of thick steel and the less onerous manpower demands of a tank division.

South Africa's fighting power and prestige were irreparably eroded by the relatively huge manpower losses suffered in this period.⁶⁶⁴ When the Axis was finally expelled from Africa, in the absence of the bulk of the UDF component, South Africa's strategic value began to diminish. She was never able to fully recover her position as her fighting contribution and strategic value to the allied cause diminished. Much of the cream of the South African army had to suffer the indignity of incarceration in Italian prisoner of war camps where, according to many of them, they endured the taunts of fellow prisoners who resented their capitulation without a real fight. In metering out disrespect, no distinction was made for the South African prisoners of the 5th Brigade, who by all accounts deserved recognition for a brave defence against great odds. The humiliation of defeat and the chides of fellow Commonwealth soldiers filtered downwards to the enlisted men resulting in a dangerous loss of morale in the South African soldier for months and years afterwards.

⁶⁶⁴ The Union Defence Force had suffered over 3000 casualties at Sidi Rezegh and close to 11000 casualties at Tobruk alone. This translated to three full brigades which made up to 50% of the total brigades deployed.

Humiliation was not the preserve of the ordinary soldier alone, and those that led them into these disastrous battles also had to bear the indignity of tarnished reputations. The heavy personal cost can be viewed using General Klopper as an example. Although Klopper managed to regain some of his stature by clawing his way up the ranks again to become Commandant-General of the Union Defence Force from 1956-1958 he was haunted by the tragedy of Tobruk. He escaped from his Italian POW camp in 1943 determined to clear his name at the Tobruk Board of Enquiry. He was never asked to provide evidence or give his version of events. He then demanded to be given the opportunity to serve at the front in any capacity only to be denied this last opportunity to regain his pride when his command of a "coloured" brigade for active service in Italy was cancelled. After the war he was again denied an opportunity to give his version of events and was not satisfied with Auchinleck's slightly modified despatch that failed to grant him the absolution he sought. There was no prestigious despatch for Klopper and his version of events was eventually presented in a popular housewives magazine in 1950. This was a desperate measure and a poor substitute for a man clearly disturbed by his tainted legacy. Auchinleck and Ritchie, as commanders, did not survive Klopper long, having been removed by an angry Churchill shortly after Tobruk.

The disasters of Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh were swept under the carpet in the interests of South African and United Kingdom relations. Although there was a board of enquiry into the surrender of Tobruk a short time after the event, the details of its findings were kept secret. The enquiry also had to produce its findings in the absence Klopper, who was languishing at the time in a POW camp together with 10 000 of his fellow soldiers. Expediency ensured that British sentiments of South Africans having given up without a real fight and endangering the whole Allied position, were never officially brought to the public attention. The same pragmatism warranted that the sentiment that the British sacrificed the lives of commonwealth soldiers needlessly and with less care than soldiers of the United Kingdom, never found its way into official utterances. However such sentiments existed, even though one has to read between the lines of Churchill's dismay on receiving news of the surrender or read General Freyberg's disgust on British contempt for New Zealanders lives. The preceding chapters have explored these eight months of military disaster seeking to contextualise and find reasons for South Africa's military failure.

In chapter one, a background is provided for the battles of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk. The chapter examines the factors that made up and inhibited South African fighting power and were to influence her performance on campaign in North Africa. The factors examined ranged from political divisiveness, inter war neglect, somewhat irrelevant experience gained in an easy campaign in East Africa, and a faulty doctrine regarding mobile desert warfare. The scene is set for the twin tragedies of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk.

The scene is set by exploring South Africa's somewhat hesitant and divisive entry into the Second World War. The unwillingness to join in the defence of the empire by large sectors of the Afrikaner nationalist community was exacerbated with a military force poorly suited to the tasks set for it by Jan Smuts. Years of neglect and preparation for a "bush war" or an internal police action, were not the necessary skill set required when meeting up with a first class European enemy. Despite these obvious shortcomings, South Africa, as the only industrialised power on the continent, went about building a war economy and a military machine from a very low base. In a period just short of two years, the South Africans had built their miniscule army up to a level that allowed them to deploy a fully equipped infantry division to East Africa. In what was a remarkable achievement, South Africa had become self-sufficient in most types of military small-arms and indeed was even supplying the empire forces with some of the production coming out of the new war supply factories that had sprung up all over the Union.

Less easily dealt with were the fragile relations between South Africa and the United Kingdom. A large proportion of Afrikaner nationalists were vehemently opposed to South Africa's participation in the Second World War. Smuts continually cast an eye back on the homefront when making military decisions. The discordant politics back home had implications on some of the strategic and even operational decisions made on the battlefield. Smuts' sensitivity to nationalist racial policy hampered efforts to alleviate manpower shortages by recruiting more blacks, especially in a fighting role. This significantly contributed to fielding understrength divisions at crucial times in the battle. South African commanders, ever sensitive to the fickle support of some sectors of the population of their enterprise, were at times reticent to risk lives unnecessarily.

South Africa's chance to prove her fighting ability came about in June 1940 with a change in her strategic position, once Italy entered the war and France surrendered. South Africa became the United Kingdom's foremost military partner in Africa by replacing the French. Her initial limited role of providing Britain with moral support was upgraded to one of a fully-fledged military partner. Fortunately South Africa passed her first military test by ousting the Italians in East Africa in a campaign that essentially ended for the South Africans in May 1941. South Africa's support in this campaign was crucial to a successful outcome, its contribution not being restricted to the provision of infantry, but also in the major contribution of supporting forces such as engineers, artillery, medical services and air support. The South Africans were able to overcome their demotivated opponents quickly, with relatively little fighting and few casualties. However some disturbing harbingers of future defeat at the hands of the more skilled Germans in North Africa became apparent. On the battlefields of East Africa these took the form of an alarming lack of coordination and inter-service cooperation, esprit de corps, and at times essential skilled staff work.

Chapter one concludes by examining opposing German and British military doctrines and the special conditions pertinent to desert warfare. This completes the background leading up to the battle of Sidi Rezegh, and provides insight as to the tactical advantages the Germans enjoyed. The survivability of the South Africans could have been enhanced had the British embraced a combined arms doctrine that incorporated infantry and artillery into a balanced mechanised division. Rommel was one of the leading exponents of mobile warfare and the combined arms approach, and in the unobstructed conditions of the North African desert, he was able to wield his often outnumbered forces with devastating effect. The desert presented an ideal battleground arena, uninhibited by civilian population and European terrain features, in which the doctrine of mobile warfare and combined arms operations could be applied with full devastating effect. Unfortunately for the South Africans, this mobile combined arms approach doctrine, so foreign to British, was the stock-in-trade of the German army under Rommel.

Chapter two examines the battle of Sidi Rezegh as part of Operation Crusader in November 1941 through a military history lens. The account dissects some of the strategic but mainly the operational and tactical events that surround the battle, with a view to uncovering fresh evidence and providing new insights into the events. The methodology adopted was to read widely and deeply and encounter as many perspectives on the battle as possible from a variety of sources. By interrogating the primary and secondary accounts from opposing sides, it was possible to achieve a significant depth in the research.

The South Africans were veterans flushed by the success of their recent campaign against the Italians in East Africa. Unfortunately the experience gained in East Africa would have little application in the harsh desert conditions that favoured mobile mechanised warfare. Furthermore, the South Africans did little to add to the thin veneer of their battlefield experience on arriving in North Africa in June 1941. They busied themselves with improving their base fortifications many kilometres behind the lines at the expense of engaging in vital desert training. Exercises in navigation and movement at night were neglected, both essential skills in a desert bereft of traditional means of cover and concealment. Delays in promised transport hampered brigade level movement exercises right up to the day Operation Crusader was launched on the 18 November 1941.

The South Africans were well aware of their shortcomings on the eve of one of the largest tank battles of the war to that date. Brink was deeply troubled by his division's failure to gain the necessary desert training in the five month window prior to the launch of Crusader. Brink protested in vain for more time to prepare, but his requests for a delay in the launch of Crusader, were met with a British ultimatum to deliver or face the indignity of being replaced by the Indian division. Brink was suitably stung by the prospect of the South Africans being reduced to a secondary role and in the interests of

national pride and against his better judgement; he made a political decision and allowed his inexperienced division to be flung into the maelstrom.

Adding to the eventual South African misfortune were the strategic and operational flaws inherent in the Crusader plan. Central to the British plan was the decision to lure the enemy armoured divisions into a decisive battle and destroy them in detail. British optimism was bolstered by the numerical superiority of 2:1 that they enjoyed in tanks at the outset of Crusader. The prerequisite to success for this strategy of annihilation was the ability to concentrate the three British armour brigades in a massive telling blow. The bait for the lure in the form of a non-descript point of the map called Gabr Saleh, was not of sufficient importance to entice the Germans from their preoccupation of capturing Tobruk. In desperation the British changed the objective to Sidi Rezegh leading to the de-concentration of their armoured brigades. British doctrine allied with a faulty objective conspired further in scattering the British armoured brigades. The Germans fielded balanced armoured divisions unlike the British who saw little role for the infantry in mobile warfare and failed to integrate the infantry into their armoured brigades. The British tank heavy brigades would now be double tasked with not only having to deal with their primary objective of destroying German armour, but having to guard the vulnerable infantry brigades. The necessity of serving two often conflicting objectives, worked against the concentration of the British armour.

The British advantage in tank numbers was steadily eroded over the first five days of Crusader in a series of battles which highlighted the British failure to concentrate their armour decisively. An intelligence failure led to the gross overestimation of German tank losses which combined with the fog of war to obscure the fact that by this stage of the conflict the British tanks were in fact outnumbered by the Germans. This placed the vulnerable South Africans in grave danger, as they were ordered up to Sidi Rezegh in the false belief that the main objective of Crusader had been met in the destruction of the German tank forces. Further isolation of the South African 5th Brigade occurred when Brigadier Pienaar allowed the Italian *Ariete* division to intimidate him. His concern for the Italians on his flank permitted a gap to develop between his 1st Brigade and Brigadier Armstrong's 5th Brigade moving up to Sidi Rezegh. A combination of petulance, gingerliness and eventually the strong presence of the enemy ensured that Pienaar was never able to close up with Armstrong's brigade. Abandoned by Pienaar and unsupported by the British recently bereft of their armour, the 5th Brigade was left to face the combined might of the entire Axis armoured divisions.

The 5th Brigades subsequent destruction on the 23 November 1941 was not a one-sided affair and the South Africans were able to destroy a significant amount of German tanks before being overrun. The Germans lost more tanks in this single action than in other actions in Crusader. German losses that day went some way to redressing the balance of forces back in favour of the British. By all

accounts, including those of the Germans, the South Africans put up fearsome resistance in the face of overwhelming odds. The battle continued for many days after Sidi Rezegh and finally the British were able to claim a close run victory. Crusader was an operational victory gained at the expense of very heavy tactical defeats, leaving the British justifiably dissatisfied with their performance. The victory came at great cost in men and material and highlighted the tactical ineptitude of the Eighth army. Victory extracted such a toll that their denuded army was eventually chased back to the Gazala line denying the British any strategic gain.

The chapter closes by examining the lessons learned as stated by General Brink after the battle. In a final irony, Brink's "lessons learned" address some of the tactical issues but go a long way in reinforcing the fact that the South Africans had little idea as to the operational requirements of mobile war. The British may have had a better idea of what was required, but were inexorably hampered by an outmoded doctrine and an echelon of officers unable to grasp the concepts of combined arms operations. The harsh lessons learned at the disaster of Sidi Rezegh would unfortunately pay very little dividends in the forthcoming battle for Tobruk.

Chapter three deals with the fall of Tobruk and starts with the opening of the German offensive on the British Gazala line. Both armies had taken the opportunity in the respite after Crusader, to build up their forces with the intention of being the first to launch a new attack. The British had tried to rectify some of their shortcomings in combined arms by adding a stronger infantry component to their armoured brigades. The concept of concentrating all arms in a combined manner at the focal point of the action was also stressed and the armoured brigades were encouraged to perform as a division. However what was natural and easy practice to the Germans was foreign to most on the British side. Operational doctrine and expertise at this level had not developed much since the Crusader battles

Rommel launched his attack on 26 May 1942, before Auchinleck was able to complete the preparations for an offensive. Auchinleck, by being forced onto the defensive, lost the initiative to Rommel. Furthermore, the dispositions of the Eighth Army, designed to facilitate an offensive, were less than optimal for the defensive posture now forced by the German attack. The British defences on the Gazala line were designed to try and impose a static type of warfare on a highly mobile enemy. The infantry brigades were positioned behind an extensive belt of mines that served to close the gaps between the brigades and also enhance the ability of the defenders to resist attack. The Infantry brigades were also placed in defensive boxes affording all round protection. The defensive posture of the brigade "boxes" militated against their mobility, to the extent that even the mechanised and motorised brigades sent their vulnerable transport away from the box ensuring immobility should they be under attack. The survival of the infantry brigades, which were too far apart for mutual support, was dependent on the ability to bring up the mobile armoured brigades in a concentrated format to support

the infantry boxes and destroy the enemy armour attacking them. There was an element of unfounded optimism in British plans judging by the British inability on previous occasions to react quickly to changing circumstances and concentrate their forces.

Indicators abounded demonstrating the British inability to command, control and establish effective communication that would enable the management of large concentrated combined arms formations. In effectively admitting to this inability, the British decided to fall back on a brigade structure as opposed to a divisional structure due to the “unwieldiness” of a division. This was an exercise that worked against the concentration of forces, and contrary to the German practise of operating by using a balanced all-arms divisional structure. Again, as in Crusader, tank brigades were dispersed to protect the vulnerable infantry brigades. The Gazala line was a regression in tactics resorting to erroneous British doctrine of separating the infantry from the mechanised forces and attempting to build a solid line of defence in a theatre where it was impossible to secure both flanks at once. As a hangover from Crusader, there remained a yawning doctrinal gap at the operational and tactical level.

As in Crusader, the British, once again, enjoyed an overwhelming numerical advantage in tanks approaching two to one. Their hope, in building a formidable line of defence based on infantry brigades in all-round defensive boxes, was to be able to identify Rommel’s main thrust and reply with a concentrated mobile armoured force that enjoyed a numerical advantage. The risk was a failure to identify the main Axis of attack in time and thereby condemn the infantry brigades to be overwhelmed one at a time. It was also imperative to concentrate the armoured brigades and not feed them into the battle in a piecemeal fashion. The British were ultimately to fail on both counts when they failed to identify the direction of the attack in time, and allowed their forces to be committed to the battle piecemeal and overrun.

The South Africans fielded two divisions, one manning the northern most sector of the Gazala line and the second division under General Klopper manning Tobruk which was behind the frontline. Tobruk had become the forward logistical staging area for the massive offensive intended by the British. Tobruk was crucial as a logistical hub and forward staging point for any British offensive, but would prove to be a liability on the defensive. The decision to defend Tobruk was in fact decided rather belatedly, and contrary to an earlier decision not to defend the fortress should it once again be placed in a position of encirclement. Therefore even before the outset of the battle it had been decided well in advance, that Tobruk would not be defended should the British lines at Gazala become untenable.

Rommel launched his attack unexpectedly at night on the 26 May 1942, and at the outset the British failed to identify the direction of the main thrust, resulting in a disastrous hesitation in

immediately counter-attacking with the full might of a concentrated force. The German armoured thrust had enveloped the left flank of the Gazala line and placed German forces deep behind the British defences. Rommel was allowed to attack and overwhelm the immobile British brigades one by one. However, it was not a completely one sided affair due to the fact that the British enjoyed a qualitative superiority in the form of the new American Grant tanks, which outgunned the Axis armour and extracted a high toll. Rommel had also underestimated the strength of the British forces and before long his over optimistic plan began to unravel. The Germans had lost over a third of their tanks and were strung out from the coast to being deep behind enemy positions leaving the supply route in a precarious position. Had the British handled the situation more adroitly, they would have been able to concentrate a counter-attack against Rommel's strung out forces far behind the lines.

Rommel, demonstrating his flexibility and superior grasp of the tenets of mobile warfare, went over to the tactical defensive and allowed the British to batter themselves up against his formidable anti-tank defences. In a series of ill-coordinated actions that were a failure of combined arms operations, the British managed to dissipate their tank strength and once again as in Crusader, steadily erode their numerical superiority. Rommel had daringly ensconced himself behind the British lines and by temporarily adopting a defensive posture, enticed the British to attack. It was an ironic reversal of the situation in Crusader. As the British advantage in tank numbers began to erode, so grew the threat to the awaiting South Africans in Tobruk. Again, as in Crusader German tank losses were grossly exaggerated giving a false picture as to the danger posed to the South Africans in Tobruk.

Once British fighting power had been diminished by these futile attacks on Rommel's defences, Rommel once again went over to the attack, seizing the southern tip of the Gazala line with the fall of Bir Hacheim. This effectively signalled the end of the Gazala line and left the British manning positions that ran lengthways along the coast from the original position at Gazala in the west to Tobruk in the east. The destruction of the Gazala line should have triggered the pre-arranged abandonment of Tobruk and a general withdrawal to the Egyptian frontier. This may well have happened and a catastrophe averted, had the political forces not come into play. Not for the first time political considerations overrode good military practice. The decision to hold Tobruk, due to pressure from Churchill, was in fact made at the eleventh hour and went against the British policy of not allowing Tobruk to be invested for a second time. The withdrawal to the Egyptian border ordered by Ritchie was not some hastily ill-conceived plan thought up on the spur of the moment, but in terms of an operational order dated 10 May 1942 which clearly stated that should the defence of the Gazala line become untenable, the facilities at Tobruk were to be demolished and abandoned and the entire Corps withdrawn to the Egyptian frontier.

Auchinleck proposed that the withdrawal of the Eighth Army would be to the line Acroma-El Adem and southwards. Ritchie was intent on withdrawing to the Egyptian frontier whether Tobruk was to be held in isolation or abandoned. Ritchie, in the face of being pressed by Churchill and Auchinleck to hold Tobruk, decided to allow the garrison there to be temporarily besieged, providing enough provisions to withstand encirclement for three months. Klopper, inexplicably, was not informed of his abandonment and only became aware of the grave situation on 17 June. On 18 June Tobruk was surrounded and the nearest British force of any consequence was 64 kilometres away on the Egyptian frontier. The fate of Tobruk was now left in the hands of a very young, inexperienced commander, assisted by an inexperienced staff who commanded a division that had seen very little action against a resourceful, victorious enemy.

Many historians have been tempted into making the inevitable comparison between the first siege of Tobruk, where the Australian garrison withstood the Germans for 242 days, to the South African effort that barely lasted one day. There is little dispute that the defenders of Tobruk in 1941 did not have to face as concentrated or as powerful an offensive as that delivered by Rommel on 20 June 1942. There also seems to be little dispute as to the state of defences of the fortress compared to the first siege. There is an almost universal consensus amongst historians that the Tobruk defences of 1942 were in a poor state of repair having been severely neglected and extensively cannibalised in building the Gazala defences. Most agree that the minefields surrounding Tobruk had been all but removed in certain sectors to augment those in the Gazala line. However, this dismal picture of neglect flies in the face of the evidence presented at the Court of Enquiry and Klopper himself. Witness reports as to the state of the defences on the eve of the siege, especially concerning the state of the minefields, are conflicting and do not warrant the certainty as to their state of disrepair as reported in the historiography. Simple assumptions as to the state of the Tobruk defences do not stand up to the evidence that has been discovered on deeper investigation into the records.

Further examination of the historiography reveals some more misconceptions and oversights that have become “common knowledge”. Contrary to prevailing perceptions, the defenders of Tobruk in June 1942 enjoyed a significant superiority in nearly every area when compared to the previous garrison. Klopper fielded a far superior armoured component than in the previous siege. He also possessed a good number of armoured cars. Significantly Klopper enjoyed advantages over his predecessor in the all-important area of anti-tank weapons. Again, when it came to artillery or anti-aircraft artillery his strengths compared favourably with those of his predecessor. There was an ample supply of ammunition for all weapons, which is not surprising, given that Tobruk was a designated supply base for the Gazala positions. Therefore in terms of equipment and the state of defences it

appears that Klopper was not at a distinct disadvantage compared to his predecessor, and answers for the collapse of the fortress would have to be sought elsewhere.

There is definite evidence of a dysfunctional command structure in Tobruk manifesting in a decided lack of co-operation between Klopper, his Chief of Staff, and the heads of the various Staff Sections, in particular operations and intelligence. Little attention was given to the tactical considerations despite concerns being raised as to the disposition of the garrison. The armour, artillery and anti-tank guns were not placed under centralised command, a condition essential if a successful coordinated counter-attack was going to be launched against an inevitable German incursion of the defence perimeter. Klopper failed to produce a detailed counter-attack plan or organise the defences on any type of a dynamic basis, which resulted in what turned out to be a static defence spread evenly along the perimeter. The arrangements to organise the artillery, infantry, and armour reserve into a combined dynamic counter-attack force were inadequate at best and resulted in a piecemeal and uncoordinated application of the reserves to the breach. As an indicator of his naivety Klopper remained optimistic and felt confident that he could hold out for three months. Optimism was to prove a poor substitute for dynamic and coordinated leadership when the German attack was launched. To add weight to the argument was the fact that at the height of the attack, Rommel was to be found in the thick of the front-line action, while his opponent Klopper was ensconced in a dug-out many miles from the front.

The German attack on Tobruk was launched at dawn on the 20 June, on the south-east corner of the fortress. Despite intricate manoeuvres by Rommel there is some doubt that the attack came as a total surprise. The attack was accompanied by a massive air and artillery assault and was by all accounts devastating on the defences and the morale of the defenders. The defenders put up little resistance and the Germans were surprised at how weak the initial defence was. To his credit Klopper ordered a counter-attack by a combined force. It took some two and a half hours for the tanks of the counter-attack force to arrive in a piecemeal fashion, unsupported by infantry or artillery. After sustaining steady losses and with the greater part of their strength destroyed for little profit, the survivors withdrew. Due to the heavy fog of war descending on the battlefield, Klopper was not in the least perplexed and seemingly lulled into a false sense of security. He believed that the counter-attack had been ordered in good time and the situation was in hand. His grip on the true battlefield situation was not enhanced by the fact that he remained many miles behind the front and had no first-hand knowledge of the situation on the ground. News of the destruction of the counter-attacking forces only reached Klopper many hours later, after he allowed himself to be dissuaded from making a personal assessment of the situation with a long overdue visit to the front.

What now remained of the defences became extremely fragmented and uncoordinated and Rommel was able to enter the Tobruk harbour at nightfall. The capture of Tobruk had been achieved with such speed that no official orders were given for the destruction of supplies to prevent it falling into German hands. The two South African Brigades remained unscathed and unaffected by the day's events with hardly a shot fired. With the harbour of Tobruk lost all that remained now was to decide how best to extricate the remainder of the garrison from the grip of the German encirclement. Klopper was able to re-establish contact with the Eighth Army that night where he reported the desperate plight of his forces and sensibly requested permission to break out that night.

However the last chance to save the South Africans began to be frittered away in a series of vacillating decisions made by Klopper where firm decisive leadership was called for. In the aftermath of a series of informal discussions between Klopper and several battalion commanders, a breakout order was issued. At the same time an opposing plan to form a redoubt began to take root, seemingly motivated by the fact that the one brigade had lost most of its transport, which supposedly precluded a breakout attempt. Klopper, canvassed by his brigade commanders, reversed his decision to breakout. He was seemingly swayed by an empty promise of a relieving force and feverish preparations were now begun for a last stand. Soon afterwards it was announced to Klopper that the battalion commanders did not wish to fight. Klopper insisted that this change of heart would put him in 'a hell of a jam' and convinced the commanders once again to resist. Klopper, now unaided, had yet another change of heart, believing that a stand was futile in that little advantage would be gained for the Eighth Army while many casualties would inevitably be incurred. That morning, after he famously signalled Ritchie that he was, 'doing the worst', Klopper sent a parlementaire to the Germans to offer capitulation. Into the "cage" went 10722 South Africans as part of the garrison totalling 33000, in a magnificent German victory. A great bounty fell into German hands consisting of arms, ammunition, fuel, foodstuffs, and clothing including thirty undamaged tanks and a Field Marshal baton for Rommel.

Klopper was no doubt placed in an unenviable position not entirely of his own making. However he failed to perform adequately in a number of areas that were within his control. He accepted the task of defending the fortress of Tobruk, with some confidence, but failed to take command effectively or develop a sound defensive plan. He also failed to place the counter-attack resources under one command so as to concentrate his forces when the time to attack came about. When his defences were breached and the battle obviously lost with his counter-attack force in tatters, he failed to demolish and destroy the abundance of material stockpiled and coveted by the Germans. He vacillated once again and failed to evacuate the garrison on the evening of 20 June, allowing their humiliating capture. His efforts to place the blame squarely on the British for abandoning him to his own devices ring hollow, and nowhere in his writings does he accept responsibility for the capture of

his men. His conduct, although saving many lives has left South Africa with an enduring uncomfortable legacy. The final chapter deals with some of the aspects of how this legacy has been dealt with in South African memory.

Chapter four explores the impact of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk on South African memory through the decades following the battles. Reasons are explored and offered as to why these events have failed to become integral to modern South African national memory. Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk amount to temporary setbacks within a campaign that was ultimately successful. Sidi Rezegh was a heroic defence in the face of insurmountable odds; while Tobruk was a humiliating route, leading to the ignominious capture of over 10 000 South Africans without the benefit of a real fight. Both events, heroic and ignominious, have effectively fallen victim to collective amnesia. Some of the answer lies in the fact that Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk would have overburdened the national trauma of a divided South Africa, had the full extent of the defeat been revealed immediately after the battles. When the immediacy of the disaster had passed and by the time the general public had gained access to the details of these events, their impact had substantially diminished in the face of subsequent victories. Under a nationalist and then a democratic government, they finally lost their meaning as a useable past.

The seeds of national amnesia were sown soon after the last shots were heard on the battlefields of Sidi Rezegh. The heroic circumstances, and temporary nature of the defeat, should have provided South Africa with a useable memory with which to inspire their war effort and build the national character. However, back on the homefront, the loss of so many South Africans at Sidi Rezegh was dangerous grist to the mill of the nationalists and in an effort to deprive them of a propaganda coup, there was a natural tendency to suppress the facts. With an eye to the sentiment on the homefront, it was the battle of Taieb el Essem instead of Sidi Rezegh that received attention. It took place a few days after the loss of the 5th Brigade and built Pienaar's reputation as a gifted and courageous general. The fact that the battle of Taieb el Essem was largely a myth and that there were serious doubts in the British camp as to Pienaar's ability, did little to slow the suppressing of the memory of Sidi Rezegh beneath the rising reputation of Pienaar. The memory of Sidi Rezegh has been submerged through a combination of political expediency, misinformation, and sensitivity to international relations. It would seem that the South Africans emerged from their first major engagement in North Africa with mixed results, and a confused memory.

The fall of Tobruk caused consternation in the Allied camp. The news was greeted with disbelief by Churchill and Smuts who feared the consequences that the surrender would have on British-South African relations and more importantly on their respective homefronts. Within days of the surrender allegations began to emerge in South Africa and Britain of the cowardice and treachery of the garrison. The British press were vociferous in their condemnation of the surrender of Tobruk and presented it as

a fiasco and a humiliating disaster. Fortunately for South Africa, little reference was made to the fact that the garrison was commanded by a South African and contained a large proportion of South African troops. The enemy too in a surprising missed opportunity took little advantage of pursuing this fact and exploiting the fissures in Anglo-South African relations.

The anti-war lobby felt that the South Africans had been needlessly sacrificed by the British, while some of the pro-war lobby were suspicious that Klopper was disloyal to the cause and that he handed over Tobruk without a fight. Bitterness was rife amongst the troops who had surrendered with Klopper and many believed that he had betrayed them. The Tobruk Court of Enquiry convened a few short months after the surrender, although exonerating Klopper from some of the worst accusations levelled at him, played no role in influencing public opinion at home or abroad as its contents remained secret for decades after the war. Klopper's attempts to clear his name after the war were only partially successful and he was pressured into accepting a compromise on the publication of the Auchinleck despatch, which he felt, pointed a finger at him for not breaking out of the siege when this was still possible. The memory of the war would now be passed on from the journalists and those who had experienced the events first-hand.

It would take the work of the UWHS to restore a measure of the truth of what happened in both battles in the guise of an official history. No longer bound by wartime secrecy or the same political sensitivities or constraints the new memory activists set about their task. The first book produced by the UWHS covered the fall of Tobruk and the second book dealt in great depth with Operation Crusader and the destruction of the 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh. Beside the work of the UWHS South Africa can be counted amongst the exceptions in having produced relatively few scholarly accounts. The post war period in South Africa was not a conducive period for researchers to build on the official histories and add to the historiography of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk. The chapter reveals that although South Africa was fortunate in having had a good supply of first rate authors, poets, artists and other memory activists, few have been motivated to produce popular accounts of what was an epic period in South Africa's history. The chapter then proceeds to cover some of the work produced by the few memory activists who have explored Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk, especially in the area of battlefield art and poetry.

In the absence of any real heroism during the battle for Tobruk, heroes came from an unlikely source. Corporal Job Masego of the Native Military Corps was captured at Tobruk. He was quickly employed by his captors and worked there on ships. Not content with his lot as a prisoner, he began to sabotage vehicles by putting sugar in petrol tanks. His defiance to his circumstances culminated in an act of bravery when he made a jam tin bomb, using gunpowder from cartridges. Masego detonated the bomb on a petrol-loaded ferry by using a 12 foot fuse and burning cigarette, sinking the vessel. The

saga of Masego is given as an example of how an event has been used and manipulated to suite the political purposes of the time.

The path of the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk is then traced from its suppression during the Second World War to its irrelevance during the era of nationalist rule from 1948. Reasons are offered as to why these events did not form part of a usable memory in this period and remained outside the collective memory. Some of the reason could be found in the fact that many nationalists who now held the reins of power, had been vociferous in opposing the war. Many nationalists were pro-German, sympathetic to the Nazi doctrine, and at times openly supported a German victory. In post war South Africa, the nationalist set about weakening the links with the United Kingdom and proceeding with the Afrikanerisation of the Union Defence Force. The advent of the Border War in 1966 and the growing isolation of South Africa, marked the beginning of government attempts to reconcile the differences of English and Afrikaans speaking white South Africans. In what amounted to a reversal of policy, the government became the main initiator in re-invoking South Africa's Second World War military history. This was a cynical effort to rekindle the memory of past conflicts where Afrikaner and Englishmen fought together against a common foe. On the eve of democratic elections in 1994, the nationalist government once again saw fit to bring to the attention of the world the memory of the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War in order to illicit sympathy for the South African contribution.

In the new South Africa efforts by a few authors pleading a case for Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk to be incorporated into national memory have fallen largely on deaf ears. Some of the reasons offered are the fact that South Africans of all colours fought and died together in these battles, and therefore share a common history. This competes with the view that black members of the UDF were largely exploited in a war that was irrelevant to the plight of blacks in South Africa. The treatment metered out to the memory of Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk amounts to a near rejection of a past that many South Africans do not identify with. This gives credence to the idea that the South Africa we live in today, although sharing common borders with the South Africa in the Second World War, is effectively not the same country.

I have emerged from the other side of a journey that began some four years ago, in which I sought to understand the role that the South African Irish Regiment played in the battle of Sidi Rezegh, and why this obscure event is commemorated annually. My intuition that the enormous disasters at Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk have relevance beyond that of a mere regimental history has been borne out in the course of undertaking this journey. In seeking out the reasons behind these military disasters, the far-reaching national and international implications of these events have emerged, pointing to their contribution in shaping the modern South Africa. The conflict and disparity within our society has

ensured that the memory of these events have not been uniformly internalised. Despite suppression and manipulation followed by a measure of rejection, these memories form an undeniable part of the genetic makeup of modern South African society.

SOURCES

1. BOOKS

- Addington, L.H. *The Blitzkrieg Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971.
- Axelson, E. *A Year in Italy*. Port Elizabeth, n.d.
- Barnett, C. *The Desert Generals*. New York: Viking Press, 1961.
- Barr, N. *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of EL Alamein*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2004.
- Battistelli, P. P. *Rommel's Afrika Korps Tobruk to El Alamein*. London: Osprey publishing, 2006.
- Bimberg E. *Tricolor Over the Sahara: The Desert battles of the Free French 1940-1942*. Westport: Greenwood, 2002.
- Birkby, C. *It's a Long Way to Addis*. London: Frederick Muller, 1943.
- Black, J. *Rethinking Military History*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Bosworth, R.J.B. *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War 1945-1990*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Bourhill, J. *Come back to Portofino*. Johannesburg: 30 degrees South, 2011.
- Bradford, J.C. *A Companion to American Military History*. Vol. II. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Bunting, B. *The Rise of the South African Reich*. London: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Carver, M. *Dilemmas of the Desert War: A New Look at the Libyan Campaign 1940-1942*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1986.
- Carver, M. *Tobruk*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1964.
- Churchill W. *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*. Vol. 4. Middlesex: Penguin, 1985.
- Citino, R.M. *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007.
- Citino, R.M. *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-39*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1999.
- Condell, B., and D. Zabecki, . *On the German Art of War Truppenfuhrung: German Army Manual for Unit Command in World War II*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2009.
- Creveld, M. Van. *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*. New York: Cambridge University, 2009.
- Crisp, R. *Brazen Chariots*. London: Frederick Muller, 1959.
- Danchev A, Todman D, (eds). *War Diaries 1939-1945 Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke*. Los Angeles: University of California, 2001.
- Deighton, L. *Blitzkrieg*. London: Triad/Granada, 1980.
- Dubow, S. "Introduction." In *South Africa's 1940's: World of Possibilities.*, edited by A. Jeeves S. Dubow. Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005.
- Dugard, J., ed. *The South West Africa / Namibia Dispute: Documents and Scholarly Writings on the Controversy Between South Africa and the United Nations*. Los Angeles: University of California, 1973.

- Fage, J.D., and R A Oliver,. *The Cambridge History of Africa 1905-1940*. Vol. 7. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001.
- FM 90-3: Desert Operations*. Washington: US Marine Corps, 1993.
- Ford K. *Gazala 1942: Rommel's Greatest Victory*. Oxford: Osprey, 2009.
- Ford, K. *Operation Crusader 1941: Rommel in Retreat*. Oxford: Osprey, 2010.
- Fox, J. *The Life and Art of François Krige*. Vlaeberg: Fernwood Press, 2000.
- Fuller, J.F.C *Lectures on FSR III*. London: Sifton Praed & Co., 1932.
- Fuller, J.F.C *On Future Warfare*. London: Sifton Praed, 1928.
- Fuller, J.F.C *The foundations of the Science of War*. Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff Colledge Press, 1993.
- Fuller, J.F.C. *A Military History of the Western World: From the American Civil War to the End of World War II*. Vol. III. New York: Da Capo, 1957.
- Fuller, J.F.C. *The Reformation of War*. London: Hutchinson, 1923.
- Furlong, P.J. *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Movement in the Fascist Era*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1991.
- Gat, A. *British Armour Theory and the Rise of the Panzer Arm: Revising the Revisionists*. London: MacMillan Press, 2000.
- Giliomee, H. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003.
- Goerrlitz, W. *The German General Staff 1657-1945*. New York: Praeger, 1959.
- Griess, T.E., ed. *The West Point Military History Series: Atlas For the Second World War*. New Jersey: Avery, n.d.
- Griffith, P. *World War II Desert Tactics*. Oxford: Osprey, 2008.
- Grundlingh, A.M. "South Africa and the Second World War." In *South Africa in the 20th Century*, edited by S.B.Spies B.J. Liebenberg. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik Academic, 1993.
- Hammond, B. *El Alamein: The Battle that Turned the Tide of the Second World War*. Oxford: Osprey, 2012.
- Harris, J. *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military thought and armoured forces 1903-1939*. Manchester: Manchester University, 1995.
- Hart, B H Liddell. *History Of The Second World War*. London: Pan Books Ltd, 1974.
- Hart, B. Liddell. *The North African Campaign 1940-43*. Dehradun: Natraj, 1983.
- Hartshorn, E. *Avenge Tobruk*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1960.
- Heckstall-Smith, A. *Tobruk: The Story of a Siege*. Essex: Anthony Blond, 1959.
- Heywood, C. *A History of South African Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004.
- House, J. *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th-Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization*. Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 1984.
- Humble, R. *Crusader: The Eighth Army's Forgotten Victory November 1941 - January 1942*. London: Leo Cooper, 1987.

- Hyam, R. *The Failure of South African Expansion, 1908-1948*. London: Macmillan, 1972.
- Hyam, R. *Understanding the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Hyam, R., and P. Henshaw. *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Jackson, A. *The British Empire and the Second World War*. London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006.
- Jackson, W. *The Battle for North Africa 1940-1943*. Mason/Charter: New York, 1975.
- Katzenellenbogen, S. *South Africa and Southern Mozambique: Labour, Railways, and Trade in the Making of a Relationship*. Manchester: Manchester University, 1982.
- Keegan, J. *The Face of Battle*. London: Pimlico, 1995.
- Klein, H. *Springboks in Armour*. Capetown: Purnell, 1965.
- Knox, M. *Military Effectiveness: The Second World War*. Edited by A.R. Millet and M. Williamson. Vol. 3. New York: Cambridge, 2010.
- Kriebel, R. *Inside the Afrika Korps*. Edited by B.I. Gudmundsson. London: Greenhill, 1999.
- Kros, J. *War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps*. Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992.
- Kruger, D.W. *The Making of a Nation*. Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1977.
- Macleod, J. "Introduction." In *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, edited by J. Macleod. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Macleod, J. *Reconsidering Gallipoli*. Manchester: Manchester University, 2004.
- Malherbe, E.G. *Never a Dull Moment*. Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1981.
- Martin, H.J., and N. Orpen. *South African Forces World War II- South Africa at War: Preparations and Operations on the Home Front, 1939/45*. Vol. 7. CapeTown: Purnell, 1979.
- Mearsheimer, J. *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*. London: Cornell University, 1988.
- Mitcham Jr S. *Rommel's Greatest Victory: The Desert fox and the Fall of Tobruk, Spring 1942*. Novato: Presidio, 2001.
- Mitcham Jr, S. *Rommel's Desert Commanders: The men who served the Desert Fox, North Africa, 1941-42*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2007.
- Moreman, Tim. *Desert Rats: British 8th Army in North Africa 1941-1943*. London: Osprey Publishing, 2007.
- Murphy, W. *The Relief of Tobruk*. Edited by M. Fairbrother. Wellington : Historical Publications Branch, 1961.
- Murray, W., and A. R. Millet. *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*. New York: Cambridge University, 2008.
- Nasson, B. *South Africa at War 1939 -1945*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012.
- Pakenham, T. *The Scramble for Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1997.
- Roos, N. *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939-1961*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.
- Samson, A. *Britain, South Africa and the East Africa Campaign, 1914-1918*. London: Tauris, 2006.

- Samson, A. *World War I in Africa*. London: Tauris, 2013.
- Simpson, J.S.M. *South Africa Fights*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1941.
- Smith, W. *Power of the Sword*. London: Heinemann, 1986.
- Smuts, J.C. *Greater South Africa: Plans for a Better World*. Edited by E.B. Robertson, T.C. Dawson. Johannesburg: Truth Legion, 1940.
- Spies, S.B. "South Africa and the First World War." In *South Africa in the 20th Century*, edited by B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies. Pretoria: van Schaik, 1993.
- Stacey, C.P. *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945*. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 1970.
- Stewart, A. *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War*. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Stewart, A. *The Early Battles of the Eighth Army: Crusader to the Alamein Line, 1941-42*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2002.
- Stone, G. "No way to treat an ancient ally: Britain and the Portuguese connection, 1919-1933." In *Peacemaking, Peacemakers and Diplomacy, 1880-1939: Essays in Honour of Professor Alan Sharp.*, edited by K. Hamilton and P. Salmon. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publications, 2010.
- Strachan, H. *The First World War in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004.
- Stultz, N.M. *The Nationalists in Opposition 1934-1948*. Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 1974.
- Toppe, A. *Desert Warfare: German Experiences in World War II*. Report Paper, Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Kansas: Fort Leavenworth, 1952.
- van der Waag, I. "Contested histories: official history and the South African military in the 20th century." In *The Last Word? Essays on Official History, in the United States and British Commonwealth*, edited by J. Grey. Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003.
- Verwy, E.J. *New Dictionary of South African Biography*. Pretoria: HSRC, 1995.
- von Clausewitz, C. *On War*. Edited by M Howard and P Paret. New Jersey: Princeton University, 1976.
- von Mellenthin, F. *Panzer Battles*. London: Futura, 1979.
- von Seeckt, H. *Command and Combat Use of Combined Arms (German Field Service Regulations)*. Translated by Capt. P. B. Harm. Germany: United States of America Army War College, 1921.
- von Seeckt, H. *Command and Combat use of Combined Arms*. Edited by P.B. Harm. USA: Army War College, 1925.
- Walker, I. *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts: Mussolini's Elite Armoured Divisions in North Africa*. Ramsbury: Crowood Press, 2006.
- Warhurst, P.R. *Anglo-Portuguese Relations in South-Central Africa 1890-1900*. London: Longmans, 1962.
- Webster, R. *The Illustrated at the Fireside: True Southern African Stories*. Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2012.
- Willmott, H. *The Second World War in The East*. Edited by J. Keegan. London: Cassel, 1999.
- Willmuth, T. J. *The study of military history through commercial war games: A look at Operation Crusader with the Operational Art of War*. Kansas: Fort Leavenworth, 2001.

2. OFFICIAL AND SEMI-OFFICIAL HISTORIES

Agar-Hamilton, J.A.I., and L.C.F. Turner. *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941*. Cape Town: Oxford, 1957.

Agar-Hamilton, J.A.I., and L.C.F. Turner. *Crisis in the Desert: May-July 1942*. London: Oxford, 1952.

Birkby, C. *The Saga of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment 1932-1950*. Cape Town: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950.

Boog H, Rahn W, Stumpf R, Wegner B,. *Germany and the Second World War: The Global War*. Edited by Militargeschichtliches Forschungsamt. Vol. VI. Oxford: Claredon Press, 2001.

Brown, J.A. *A Gathering of Eagles*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1970.

Brown, J.A. *Eagles Strike*. Cape Town: Purnell, 1974.

Brown, J.A. *Retreat to Victory: A Springboks diary in North Africa*. Cape Town: Ashanti, 1991.

Brown, J.A. *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-1941*. Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1990.

Collyer, J.J. *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa 1916*. London: Imperial War Museum and Battery Press, 2004.

Crwys-Williams. *A Country at War 1939-1945: The Mood of a Nation*. Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1992.

Gleeson, I. *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars*. Rivonia: Ashanti, 1994.

Leigh, M. *Captives Courageous*. Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992.

Liddell Hart, B.H. *The Tanks: The History of the Royal Tank Regiment*. London: Cassel, 1959.

Loughnan, R.J.M. *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Divisional Cavalry*. Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1963.

MacDonald, J.F. *The War History of Southern Rhodesia*. Vol. II. Salisbury: Rhodesian Government Printers, 1950.

Mackenzie, C. *Eastern Epic: September March 1943*. Vol. I. London: Chatto & Windus, 1951.

Monick, S., and O. E. F. Baker. *Clear the Way ('Faugh-A-Ballagh')*. *The Military Heritage of the South African Irish 1880-1990*. Johannesburg: South African Irish Regimental Association, 1991.

Montanari, M. *Le Operazioni In Africa Settentrionale (Marzo 1941 - Gennaio 1942)*. Vol. II. Rome: Ufficio Storico, 1993.

Orpen, N. *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns*. Vol. I. Cape Town: Purnell, 1968.

Orpen, N. *South African Forces World War II: Victory in Italy*. Vol. 5. Cape Town: Purnell, 1975.

Orpen, N. *South African Forces World War II: War in the Desert*. Vol. III. Cape Town: Purnell, 1971.

Playfair, I.S.O. *A History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*. Edited by J. Butler. Vol. III. Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2004.

Playfair, I.S.O. *History of the Second World War: Mediterranean and the Middle East*. Edited by J.R.M. Butler. Vol. I. Uckfield: Naval and Military Press, 2004.

Scoullar, J.L. *Battle for Egypt: The Summer of 1942*. Edited by H. Kippenberger. Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1955.

Stegemann, B, G Schreiber, and D Vogel. *Germany and the Second World War: The Mediterranean, South-east Europe, and North Africa 1939-1941*. Vol. III. Oxford: Oxford, 1995.

3. BIOGRAPHIES

Armstrong, H.C. *Grey Steel*. London: Methuen, 1941.

Birkby, C. *Uncle George: The Boer Boyhood, Letters and Battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1987.

Hancock, W.K. *Smuts: The Fields of Force 1919-1950*. Vol. 2. London: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Hancock, W.K. *Smuts: The Sanguine Years 1870 - 1919*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1962.

Hastings, M. *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord 1940-45*. London: Harper Press, 2009.

Liddel Hart, B.H. *The Rommel Papers*. New York: De Capo Press, 1953.

Peniakoff, V. *Private Army*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1950.

Pirow, O. *James Barry Munnik Hertzog*. Cape town: Howard Timmins, 1958.

Pollock, A. *Pienaar of Alamein*. Cape Town: Cape times, 1943.

Rosenthal, E. *General Dan Pienaar: His Life and His Battles*. Cape Town: Unie Volkspers, 1943.

Schmidt, H.W. *With Rommel in the Desert*. Durban: Albatross, 1950.

Smuts, J.C. (Japie). *Jan Chritian Smuts*. London: Cassell, 1952.

4. THESES

Boulter, R.S. "F.C. Erasmus and the Politics of South African Defence 1948-1959." Doctoral Thesis, Philosophy, Rhodes University, 1997.

Du Plessis, T.A.P. "Die Geskiedenis van Regiment Botha 1934 -1946." Masters Thesis, Arts/Humanities, University of Pretoria, 1983.

Garson, G. "The Swaziland Question and a Road to the Sea 1887-1895." Masters Thesis, Master of Arts, University of Witwatersrand, 1955.

Groenewald, A.J. "'n Krtitiese ontleding van die faktore wat gelei het tot die oorgawe van die Suid-Afrikaanse magte by die slag van Tobruk." Doctoral Thesis, Arts/Humanities, University of the Orange Free State, 1991.

Grundlingh, L. "The Participation of South African Blacks in the Second World War." Doctoral Thesis, Arts/Humanities, Rand Afrikaans University, 1986.

Jacobs, C.J. "'n Evaluering van die rol van die Eerste Suid-Afrikaanse Infanteriedivisie tydens die eerste slag van El Alamein 1-10July 1942." Masters Thesis, Arts/Humanities, Stellenbosch University, 1988.

Vardi, Gil-li. "The Enigma of German Operational Theory: The Evolution of Military Thought in

Germany, 1919-1938." Doctoral Thesis, Philosophy, The London School of Economics, London, 2008.

Visser, G.E. "Die Geskiedenis van die Middelandse Regiment 1934-1943." Masters Thesis, Arts/Humanities, University of South Africa, 1983.

Winslett, M. "The Nadir of Alliance: The British Ultimatum of 1890 and its Place in Anglo-Portuguese Relations, 1147 -1945." Thesis, Master of Arts in History, University of Texas at Arlington, 2008.

5. JOURNAL ARTICLES AND BOOK CHAPTERS

Baker, O E F. *The South African Irish Regiment: An Exemplar of the Military Traditions of the Irish in South Africa*. The South African Military History Society, Johannesburg: Military History Journal - Vol 6 No 1, n.d.

Bentz, G. "From El Wak to Sidi Rezegh: The Union Defence Force's First Experience of Battle in East and North Africa, 1940-1941." *Scientia Militaria* 40(3) (2012).

Bidwell, S. "Indirect Fire Artillery as a Battle Winner/Loser." In *Old Battles and New Defences*. Oxford: Brassey's Defence Publisher, 1986.

Citino, R.M. "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction." *American Historical Review*, 2007.

Dederling, T. "South Africa and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-6." *The International History Review*, 2013.

Echols, E. "Military Dust." *The Classical Journal* 47,7, no. 7 (1952).

Ellis, J. "Oswald Pirow's Five- Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939." *Scientia Militaria* 30(2) (2000).

Fennel, J. "'Steel my soldier's hearts': El Alamein Reappraised." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 2011.

Garson, N.G. "South Africa and World War I." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 8(1) (1979).

Grey, J. "Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clio: the rise and fall of Union War Histories." *Scientia Militaria* 30 (2000).

Grundlingh, A. "The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939-45." *The Journal of African History* 40(3) (1999).

Henshaw, P. "South African Territorial Expansion and the International Reaction to South African Racial Policies, 1939 to 1948." *South African Historical Journal* 50(1) (2009).

Henshaw, P. "The Key to South Africa in the 1890's: Deleogoa Bay and the origins of the South African War." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 3 (1988).

Horn, K. "Narratives from North Africa: South African prisoner-of-war experience following the fall of Tobruk, June 1942." *Historia* 56,2 (2011).

Jacobs, F.J., and R. Bouch. "6 Armoured Division Italy." *Militaria* 4(2) and 4(3) (1974).

Katz, D.B. "A Case of Arrested Development: The Historiography Relating to South Africa's Participation in the Second World War." *Scientia Militaria* 40(3) (2012): 280-317.

Katz, D.B. "The Greatest Military Reversal of South African Arms: The Fall of Tobruk 1942, an Avoidable

- Blunder or an Inevitable Disaster?" *Journal for Contemporary History* 37(2) (2012): 71-104.
- Keogh, E. G. "Allied Strategy in World War II —A Rejoinder." *The Australian Quarterly* 21(1) (1949): 12-18.
- Kleynhans, E. "The First South African Armoured Battle in Italy during the Second World War: The Battle of Celleno – 10 June 1944." *Scientia Militaria* 40(3) (2012).
- Klopper, H.B. "Voorsmaak van die Stryd!" *Huisgenoot*, June 1950.
- Langhorne, R. "Anglo-German Negotiations Concerning the Future of the Portuguese Colonies, 1911-1914." *The Historical Journal* 16(2) (1973).
- Leigh, M. *Captives Courageous*. Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992.
- Lillie, A.C. "The Origin and Development of the South African Army." *Scientia Militaria* 12(2) (1982).
- Mather, D. C. M. "A Journey Through the Qattara Depression." *The Geographical Journal* 103(4) (n.d.): 152-160.
- McCormack, R.L. "Man with a Mission: Oswald Pirow and South African Airways, 1933-1939." *The Journal of African History* 20(4) (1979).
- Miller, W. A. "The 9th Australian Division Versus the Africa Corps: An Infantry Division Against Tanks--Tobruk, Lybia, 1941." Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1986.
- Monama, F.L. "The Second World War and South African Society." In *Reflections on War*, edited by I. Liebenberg T. Potgieter. Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2012.
- Monick S. "A Man Who Knew Men: The Memoirs of Major M.G. Ind." *Scientia Militaria* (20)1 (1990).
- Nasson, B. "War Opinion in South Africa, 1914." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23 (1995).
- North, J.W. "South African Army Postal Services, 1940-1946." *Militaria* 2(6) (1970).
- Olick, J. "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures." *Sociological Theory* 17(3) (1999).
- Pan, C. L. "The Population of Libya." *Population Studies* 3(1) (1949): 100-125.
- Pirow, O. "How Far Is the Union Interested in the Continent of Africa?" *Journal of the Royal African Society* 36(144) (1937).
- Sadkovich, J. J. "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942." *The International History Review* 13(2) (1991): 248-313.
- Sadkovich, J.J. "Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II." *Journal of Contemporary History* 24(1) (1989).
- Sandford, K. S. "Libyan Frontiers." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 96, No. 6 (Dec., 1940), pp. 96(6) (1940): 377-388.
- Schanzer, C. "Italian Colonial Policy in Northern Africa." *Foreign Affairs* 2(3) (1924): 446-456.
- Sinclair, A. "Geoffrey Long's artistic impressions of South Africa's industrialisation process during the Second World War." *Military History Journal*, 2000.
- Southy, N., and F.A. Mouton. "A Volksvreemde Historian: J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and the Production of History in an Alien Environment." *South African Historical Journal* 44 (2001).

Spies, S.B. "The Outbreak of the First World War and the Botha Government." *South African Historical Journal* 1 (1969).

Stewart, A. "The 'Atomic' Despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the Fall of the Tobruk Garrison and Post-War Anglo-South African Relations." *Scientia Militaria* 36 (1) (2008).

Stewart, A. "The British Government and the South African Neutrality Crisis, 1938-39." *English Historical Review* 123 (2008): 947-72.

Stewart, A. "The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison." *Twentieth Century British History* 17(4), no. 4 (2006).

Theunissen, A.B. "Major -General W.H. Evered Poole, CB, CBE, DSO: 1902-1969 Personal Retrospects." *Military History Journal* 9 (June 1994).

van der Waag, I. "All splendid, but horrible: The Politics of South Africa's Second "Little Bit" and the War on the Western Front, 1915-1918." *Scientia Militaria* 40(3) (2012).

van der Waag, I. "Major J.G.W. Leipoldt, D.S.O. : A Portrait of a South African Surveyor and Intelligence Officer, 1912-1923." *Scientia Militaria* 25, no. 1 (1995): 12-34.

van der Waag, I. "Smuts's Generals: Towards a First Portrait of the South African High Command, 1912-1948." *War in History* 18(1) (2011): 33-61.

van der Waag, I. "'The Thin Edge of the Wedge': Anglo-South African Relations, Dominion Nationalism and the Formation of a Seaward Defence Force in 1939-1940." *Contemporary British History* 24: 4 (2010).

van der Waag, I. "The Union Defence Force Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940." *Scientia Militaria* 30(2) (2000).

van der Waag, I., and D. Visser. "Between history, amnesia and selective memory: The South African armed forces, a century's perspective." *Scientia Militaria* 40(3) (2012).

van der Waag, I.A., and D Visser, . *The South African Armed Forces 2012: A Century's Perspective*. 3. Vol. 40. Saldanha: Stellenbosch University, 2013.

Visser, D. "Accolades and Albatrosses: The South African National Defence Force's Centenary and the Commemoration of Milestones in South African Military History." *Scientia Militaria* 40(3) (2013).

Visser, D. "Anglo-South African Relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939." *Scientia Militaria* 35(1) (2007): 68-98.

Warhurst, P.R. "Smuts and Africa: a Study in Sub-Imperialism." *South African Historical Journal* 16,1, no. 1 (1984).

Weddell, J. M. "Surgery In Tunisia: November, 1942, To May, 1943,." *The British Medical Journal* 2(4370) (1944): 459-462.

Yearwood, P.J. "Great Britain and the Repartition of Africa, 1914 -19*." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 18(3) (1990).

6. NEWSPAPERS AND MEDIA

Greater South Africa: Plans for a Better World. Johannesburg: Truth Legion, 1940.

Ice Cold in Alex. Directed by J.L. Thompson. 1958.

Klopper, H.B. "Voorsmaak van die Stryd!" *Huisgenoot*, June 1950.

Long, G. *Field of Sidi Rezegh*. South African Military History Museum , Saxonwold Johannesburg.

Seven Against the Sun . Directed by D. Millin. 1964.

South African Military History Society Newsletter. November 2001.

Sunday Express. "War History says Gen. Pienaar flouted orders." November 11, 1957.

Sunday Times. "Gen. Brink on Sidi Rezegh." November 10, 1957.

The Natal Daily News. "The Sidi Rezegh Battles - An official history." November 8, 1957.

7. INTERNET RESOURCES

Ariete's Contribution to Sidi Rezegh. n.d. <http://crusaderproject.wordpress.com/2013/08/10/Arietes-contribution-to-sidi-rezegh-di-nisio-column/> (accessed August 18, 2013).

Bennet, C. "Corporal Masego." *Go South Online*. n.d. <http://gosouthonline.co.za/corporal-masego-replied-oh-i-sank-a-steamer/> (accessed November 11, 2013).

Carro Veloce CV-35 . n.d. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L3/35> (accessed February 10, 2013).

Euroreferendum.com. n.d. <http://eureferendum.blogspot.com/2011/12/it-must-be-true.html> (accessed March 10, 2013).

Forsyth, D. "About the South African Military History Society." *The South African*. n.d. <localhost/C:/Users/Dave/Desktop/South%20African%20Military%20History%20Society%20-%20History%20of%20the%20Society%20-%20The%20early%20years%201965-1968.mht> (accessed June 14, 2013).

Gigaba, M. *South African Government Information*. n.d. <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=11015&tid=11032> (accessed May 8, 2013).

Journal, Le Petit. n.d. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k717516r.image> (accessed May 25, 2013).

Leroux, C. *Chicago Tribune*. February 1991, 1991. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-02-19/news/9101160457_1_desert-warfare-military-history-petrol (accessed March 19, 2013).

Low, David. *Guardian Unlimited*. n.d. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/pictures/image/0,8543,-10904410005,00.html> (accessed March 10, 2013).

Macmillan Dictionary. n.d. <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/the-Dunkirk-spirit> (accessed July 4, 2013).

Millar, J. *Sounding Taps: Why Military History is Being Retired*. 2006. <http://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/article/?q=YTdiMDkzZDJjYTYwOWM4YmlyMmE4N2IwODFINWU0MjE=> (accessed September 10, 2012).

Motlanthe, K. *Address by The Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, at the Parliamentary debate on the centenary of the union of South Africa* . n.d. <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=12785&tid=17442> (accessed May 8, 2013).

Motlanthe, K. *SA: Motlanthe: Address by the Deputy President of South Africa, during the 1860 Legacy Foundation Gala Dinner, Cape Town (15/11/2010)*. November 15, 2010. <http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-motlanthe-address-by-the-deputy-president-of-south-africa-during-the-1860-legacy-foundation-gala-dinner-cape-town-15112010-2010-11-15> (accessed May 6, 2013).

Nathan Bedford Forrest. n.d. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_Bedford_Forrest (accessed August 11, 2013).

PIENAAR Daniel Hermanus 1893-1942. n.d. http://www.eggsa.org/library/main.php?g2_itemId=1375638 (accessed July 2, 2013).

Pirow Bush Cart. n.d. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dvdmerwe/5991743884/in/set-72157627317108244> (accessed March 15, 2013).

Skriletz, Michael. *Welcom to militarysunhelmets.com*. n.d. <http://www.militarysunhelmets.com/2012/the-south-african-soldier-circa-1940-recreated> (accessed July 7, 2013).

Stanley, P. *Why does Gallipoli mean so much?* n.d. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-04-25/why-does-gallipoli-mean-so-much/2416166> (accessed July 4, 2013).

TVSA. n.d. <http://www.tvsa.co.za/showinfo.asp?showid=1947> (accessed December 20, 2013).

Warwick, R. "Politicsweb." *Dan Pienaar and El Alamein*. n.d. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71639?oid=334732&sn=Detail> (accessed October 31, 2013).

Warwick, R. "SA's forgotten fight against fascism." *Politics Web*. n.d. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71639?oid=273680&sn=Detail&pid=71639> (accessed November 25, 2013).

Warwick, R. *The Witness*. n.d. http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global%5B_id%5D=72466 (accessed November 11, 2013).

Wikipedia. n.d. http://af.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torch_Commando (accessed June 30, 2013).

Wikipedia. n.d. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Vereeniging2.jpg> (accessed May 7, 2013).

Wikipedia. *Oswald Pirow*. n.d. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_Pirow (accessed January 6, 2013).

8. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

Churchill, W. "Agreement with Portugal." *Hansard*. Vol. 392, cc716, 1943.

9. PUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES

Hancock, W.K., and J van der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers June 1902 - May 1910*. Vol. II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

Hancock, W.K., and J. van der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers November 1918 - August 1919*. Vol. IV. London: Cambridge, 1966.

Lewsen, P., ed. *Selections from the Correspondence of John X. Merriman 1905-1924*. Vol. 50. Cape Town: Van Riebeck Society, 1969.

van der Poel, J, and W.K. Hancock, *Selections from the Smuts Papers June 1910 - November 1918*. Vol. III. London: Cambridge, 1966.

van der Poel, J., ed. *Selections from the Smuts Papers September 1919 - November 1934*. Vol. V. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

van der Poel, J., and W.K. Hancock, *Selections from the Smuts Papers December 1934 - August 1945*. Vol. VI. London: Cambridge University, 1973.

10. ARCHIVAL SOURCES

10.1 ARCHIVE REPOSITORY FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCE (DOCD)

10.1.1 Personal Records

Record of Service, H.B. Klopper 1933-1944

10.1.2 Union War Histories Section – Civil (UWHS - Civil)

Box 321 Narrative prepared for UK Cabinet	General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief Of Tobruk	June – November 1941
Box 363, Tobruk Correspondence 1948-1950	Agar-Hamilton on Klopper. Letter Agar-Hamilton to Capt. Fannin.	18 November 1948
Box 363, PMH62C Reports of South African Officers	Interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper. Notes on Major Turner's Interview.	6 May 1946
Box 363, PMH62C Reports of South African Officers	Written Comments of Lieutenant-Colonel Thompson 2 nd Battalion TVL Scottish	4 December 1945
Box 363, Tobruk Correspondence 1948-1950	Letter Captain Fannin to Agar-Hamilton on Klopper.	11 December 1948
Box 366 Tobruk Studies	Tobruk Artillery Narrative.	
Box 366, File PMH62N/1 Tobruk Studies	Narrative on the Decision to hold Tobruk.	
Box 366, File PMH62N/2 Tobruk Studies	Narrative on the Fall of El Adem.	
Box 366, File PMH62N/3 Tobruk Studies	Narrative on the Crisis at Tobruk.	
Box 366, File PMH62N/4 Tobruk Studies	Narrative on The Eighth Army and the Surrender of Tobruk.	

Box 371 File Operations in the Western Desert	Tobruk Court of Enquiry	25 September 1942
---	-------------------------	-------------------

10.1.3 Chief of General Staff War (CGS War)

Box 6, File 2/8 SAAC	Armoured Corps Conference.	25 March 1943
Box 47, File 10/11 Tobruk Enquiry	Casualties South African Forces.	19 November 1942
Box47, File 12/6 TE	Telegram Theron to van Ryneveld.	10 June 1946
Box 47, File 12/6	Tobruk Poster	1942
Box 47, File 22	Radio Zeesen transcript.	20 July 1942
Box 47, File 4038	Bastin Letter in Defence of Klopper's Honour	1942
Box 173, File 25	Conversion to Armoured Division.	1942

10.1.4 Chief of General Staff Group 2 (CGS GP 2)

Box 589, File 1019/0/24	Notes on Desert Campaigning.	19 March 1942 - 21 August 1942
-------------------------	------------------------------	-----------------------------------

10.1.5 Diverse Archive Group I (DGI)

Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1	Defence Policy of the Union.
-------------------------	------------------------------

10.1.6 Director General Technical Services (DGTS)

Box 35, File 5/20	Report on Exercise with Bush Cart.
-------------------	------------------------------------

10.1.7 War Diaries (WD)

Box 21, File A1-4	5 th South African Infantry Brigade	Jun - Oct 1940
Box 85, File B2-3	1 Regiment Botha	Jul, Aug 1941
Box 90, File B1-5	1 st South African Irish Regiment	Jun - Oct 1940
Box 168, File B1	1 st South African Infantry Division	Dec 1942 - Jan 1943
Box 198, File A1-5	1 st South African Infantry Division HQ	Jan - Mar 1941

Box 199, File B1-5	1 st South African Infantry Division	Jan - Mar 1941
Box 199, File C1	1 st South African Infantry Division	Nov 1940 - Apr 1941
Box 220, File B1-5	1 st South African Irish Regiment	Jan - Mar 1941
Box 348, File A1-2	1 st South African Infantry Division Intelligence Section	May – Jun 1942
Box 351, File A1-2	2 nd South African Infantry Division HQ	May – Jun 1942
Box 359, File A1-6	2 nd South African Infantry Brigade	May – Oct 1942
Box 363, File A1-5	5 th South African Infantry Brigade	Apr - Aug 1941
Box 363, File A6-9	5 th South African Infantry Brigade	Sep - Dec 1941
Box 364, File A1-6	5 th South African Infantry Brigade	Jan - Jun 1942
Box 396, File A1-8	2 nd Regiment Botha	May - Dec 1941
Box 397, File A1-13	2 nd Regiment Botha	Jan - Dec 1942
Box 406, File A1-13	1 st South African Irish Regiment	Apr - Dec 1941
Box 411, File A1-6	3 Transvaal Scottish Regiment	May - Oct 1941
Box 412, File A1-7	3 Transvaal Scottish Regiment	Jun - Dec 1942
Box 486, File A1-3	1 st South African Infantry Division Signals HQ	May – Jul 1942
Box 493, File A1-7	5 th South African Infantry Brigade Signals Company	Jun - Nov 1941

10.1.8 Secretary for Defence (DC)

Box 356	Intelligence Report Mozambique
---------	--------------------------------

10.1.9 Operation Z Group (OZG)

Box 1, File A	The Z Plan – Narrative by the UWHS
---------------	------------------------------------

10.1.10 Acquisitions Group

Box 46, Brink Papers	1 SA Division Middle East. Arrival of leading
----------------------	---

	elements	
Box 48, Brink Papers	Brink's address to the Gunners Association	July 1966
Box 49, Brink Papers	1 SA Division Middle East Cyrenaica Operations	
Box 52, Brink Papers	1 SA Division fighting efficiency prior to occupation of Gazala line	Jun - Oct 1940
Box 55, Brink Papers	1 SA Division Operations Report Cyrenaica	18 November - 2 December 1941

10.2 NATIONAL ARCHIVES PRETORIA (NAP)

10.2.1 Jan Smuts Papers (JSP)

Box 94, f.153	Policy towards Portugal and Portuguese Possessions.	7 December 1940
Box 95-1, f.6	Smuts to Churchill, Empire Defence in New Situation After France Collapse and Strategic Role of Africa.	22 June 1940
Box 95-1, f.7	Churchill to Smuts, British Defence Priorities.	27 June 1940
Box 95-1, f.21	Churchill to Smuts, Operation Shrapnel and Brisk.	18 December 1940
Box 95-1, f.22	Smuts to Churchill, Strategy in the Wake of Wavell Victories.	8 January 1941
Box 95-1, f.23	Churchill to Smuts, Greece and Balkans	January 1941
Box 95-1, f.26	Smuts to Churchill, Ethiopia and Recognition of Selassie	28 January 1941
Box 95-1, f.28	Smuts to Churchill, Ethiopian Independence	31 January 1941
Box 95-1, f.35	Smuts to Churchill, Four Possible Fronts.	4 May 1941
Box 95-1, f.112	Churchill to Smuts, Churchill Encourages Initiative on eve of German attack.	17 June 1942
Box 95-1, f.114	Smuts to Churchill, Smuts Criticises Defensive Spirit of Allied Commanders	18 June 1942
Box 95-1, f.120	Smuts to Churchill, Conversion to Armour	6 July 1942

Box 95-1, f.145A	Churchill to Smuts, 1 st Division Withdrawal from Egypt.	2 December 1942
Box 95-1, f.145B	Smuts to Churchill, Explanation of 1 st Division Withdrawal from Egypt.	8 December 1942
Box 95-1, f.146	Smuts to Churchill, Service Beyond Africa	December 1942
Box 95-1, f.151	Smuts to Churchill, Preference for A Mediterranean Strategy	
Box 95-1, f.152	Smuts to Churchill, Elections 1943.	January 1942
Box 95-1, f.163	Smuts to Churchill, Capture of Rome.	July 1943
Box 95-1, f.164	Churchill to Smuts, Mediterranean theatre.	16 July 1943
Box 95-1, f.166	Smuts to Churchill, Washington - Mediterranean.	17 July 1943
Box 95-1, f.169	Churchill to Smuts, Election Congratulations.	4 August 1943
Box 95-1, f.174	Smuts to Churchill, Frustration at slow pace and Russian Dominance.	31 August 1943
Box 95-1, f.176	Smuts to Churchill, Invasion Italy and Balkans.	3 September 1943
Box 95-1, f.178	Smuts to Churchill, Italian Surrender and Balkan Front.	7 September 1943
Box 95-1, f.182	Churchill to Smuts, Commitment to Overlord.	11 September 1943
Box 95-1, f.191	Smuts to Churchill, Overlord and the Mediterranean Operations.	14 November 1943
Box 95-1, f.202	Smuts to Churchill, 6 th Division Ready to deploy.	23 February 1944
Box 95-1, f.203	Churchill to Smuts, 6 th Division Surplus to Requirements	28 February 1944
Box 95-1, f.206	Churchill to Smuts, Request for 6 th Division to Deploy Italy.	10 March 1944
Box 95-1, f.207	Smuts to Churchill, Gratitude for Deployment of 6 th Division	11 March 1944
Box 95-1, f.216	Smuts to Churchill, Objection to Operation Anvil.	4 July 1944
Box 95-1, f.222	Churchill to Smuts, Assessment	25 August 1944

	Operation Dragoon.	
Box 95-1, f.223	Smuts to Churchill, Assessment Operation Dragoon.	30 August 1944
Box 95-1, f.226	Smuts to Churchill, Strategic Assessment and Post War Considerations.	26 September 1944
Box 132, f.66	Brigadier-General J.J. Collyer on the Union Defence Force 1939.	September 1939
Box 137, f.10	Smuts to Auchinleck, Armoured Car Output.	17 October 1941
Box 137, f.22	Auchinleck to Smuts, South Africans at Sidi Rezegh.	28 November 1941
Box 137, f.32	Auchinleck to Smuts, B Echelon at Sidi Rezegh	4 December 1941
Box 137, f.125	Auchinleck to Smuts, Addressing Smuts' Concern for Union Forces.	14 June 1942
Box 137, f.126	Auchinleck to Smuts, Informs Smuts of Withdrawal of 1 st Division	15 June 1942
Box 137, f.128	Auchinleck to Smuts, Informs Smuts of Withdrawal of 1 st Division to Egyptian Frontier	16 June 1942
Box 137, f.132	Smuts to Auchinleck, Encourages Auchinleck to Hold Tobruk.	18 June 1942
Box 137, f.133	Auchinleck to Smuts, Expresses confidence in Klopper.	19 June 1942
Box 137, f.138	Ritchie to Smuts, Condolences to Smuts on the loss of 2 nd Division and praises Klopper.	21 June 1942
Box 137, f.139	Auchinleck to Smuts, Debrief on Fall of Tobruk.	22 June 1942
Box 138, f.173	Theron to Smuts, Reports High UDF Morale amongst 1 st and 2 nd Division Tobruk.	30 May 1942
Box 138, f.199	Lewis to van Ryneveld, Klopper Upbeat Letter to Theron on Morale.	18 June 1942
Box 138, f.200	Theron to van Ryneveld, Report on Klopper's High Morale.	19 June 1942
Box 138, f.206	Theron to van Ryneveld, Klopper Looked Forward to Support of British Troops.	23 June 1942

Box 260, f.24	Thoughts on the New World. Address by Smuts to Empire Parliamentary Association.	25 November 1943
---------------	--	------------------

Box 260, f.31	Japie Smuts on UDF Morale	12 July 1943
---------------	---------------------------	--------------

10.3 SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY HISTORY MUSEUM SAXONWOLD

S. Monick Collection	Report by Lt. Maunsell regarding the events at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941.	1942
----------------------	---	------

10.4 AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

EF 940.5423BY N532 PT.1-2	The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica and Lessons of the Campaign.	
---------------------------	--	--

10.5 HOOVER INSTITUTION ARCHIVES

Box 40, Folder 15	Performance SA 5th Brigade at Sidi Rezegh.	1942
-------------------	--	------

10.6 NATIONAL ARCHIVES UNITED KINGDOM (TNA)

10.6.1 Cabinet Papers (CAB)

Box 106/547	Wavell Despatch Somaliland.	1940
-------------	-----------------------------	------

Box 106/638	Letter Armstrong to Deputy CGS, Brig. Armstrong objection to Auchinleck's Despatch.	1948
-------------	---	------

Box 80/106/15	Future Plans - Operation Menace.	13 October 1940
---------------	----------------------------------	-----------------

10.6.2 War Office (WO)

Box 32, File 10160	Auchinleck Despatch on Operations In The Middle East	1 November 1941 - 15 August 1942
--------------------	--	----------------------------------

Box 201, File 311	Wavell Despatch East Africa	May 1942
-------------------	-----------------------------	----------

Box 201, File 2870	Martel Report on aftermath of Crusader	26 January 1942
--------------------	--	-----------------

10.6.3 Dominion Office (DO)

Series 116-1, f.8	HCT - Botha to Gladstone on Bechuanaland	12 March 1913
Series 116-1, f.9	HCT - Harcourt on Bechuanaland	2 May 1913
Series 116-1, f.10	Botha on Swaziland	
Series 116-1, f.17,18	HCT - Herzog on Bechuanaland and Swaziland.	June 1919
Series 116-1, f.22	HCT - The Earl of Athlone on Herzog	20 October 1924
Series 116-1, f.35	HCT - Precis of conversation with Herzog	24 February 1925
Series 116-1, f.45	HCT - Athlone to Secretary of State	25 January 1926
Series 116-1, f.60	HCT - Athlone to Herzog on transfer of High Commission Territories	14 July 1926
Series 116-3, f.7	HCT - Buxton and others to Lord Passfield	8 November 1929
Series 116-5, f.3	HCT - Dominions Office Memorandum	July 1932
Series 116-5, f.7	HCT - Hertzog to Dominions Office	20 November 1932
Series 116-5, f.9	HCT - Smuts High Commission Territories	28 July 1933
Series 116-5, f.10	HCT - Thomas to Smuts	4 August 1933
Series 116-7, f.110	HCT - High Commissioner on Denys Reitz request for early transfer of HCT	12 October 1939
Series 116-7, f.113	HCT - Reaction to Smuts' request for transfer of HCT	18 October 1939
Series 116-7, f.114	HCT – Extract of discussion Eden/Reitz	23 October 1939

Class 35, P 1003/6, File WG3/4/1	Union Cooperation - Entry of Union into the War	12 September 1939
Class 35, P 1003/6, File WG3/4/11	Union Cooperation - Union Defence Requirements	December 1939
Class 35, P 1003/6, File WG3/4/32	Union Cooperation – Union Air Training Scheme	February 1940
Class 35, P 1003/6, File WG3/4/66	Union Cooperation – Future role of UDF	1 December 1942