

German Desert Defensive Tactics: The Gazala Battles, May & June 1941

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The German Army's sound defensive system, developed during the latter half of the First World War, was modified to meet the special conditions of desert warfare. "Fine tuned" would be a better term, because the basic principals of the 1918 doctrine remained intact.

1. Effective fire is more important than cover.
2. The defense is to wear down an attack before launching a counterattack.
3. Aggressive and effective reconnaissance must be used to discover enemy intentions and screen one's own positions.
4. A mutually supporting fire plan must cover the entire front.
5. Most covering fire should be concentrated on the *Stützpunkt* [strongpoint], positioned in favorable terrain along a likely axis of enemy attack.

In the African Campaign's early slash and dash stages, the Germans gave virtually no thought to prepared defensive positions. During rest stops, each unit erected its own temporary laager ringed with a single linear perimeter. This sufficed as long as the Germans held the strategic initiative, but the failure to reduce Tobruk swung the tide to the British. Thus, the Germans were forced to address the measures necessary for a prolonged period of defensive warfare.

On 7 May, the commander of the 15th Panzer Division issued a back-to-basics directive for defensive preparations. Because of the vast area assigned to 15th Panzer Division, the usual line of *Vorgeschobene Stellungen* (advanced positions) were placed only where the enemy could approach undetected. The first defensive zone extended to a depth of 550 yards, flanked by heavy machine guns with echeloned antitank guns. Behind this zone stood the reserve formations - one or two sections to each company, one company to each battalion. To camouflage the work, dummy positions were erected, landmarks were removed or shuffled, and radio masts were cut to one or two yards to conceal headquarters.

During the nights of 8/9 May, the Meduaaur salient was fortified in depth with heavy weapons support. The salient's garrison consisted of one infantry battalion, with two companies in reserve. The British probed Meduaaur on 17 May, attacking a *Stützpunkt* on the German left flank. Two German companies, falling back to their antitank ditches after the perimeter was pierced by enemy armor, managed to repulse the British. The British rallied for a second attack, but were defeated by a counterattacking tank company from the armored reserve.

In the days following, further orders, emanating from corps-level, directed 15th Panzer Division to prepare for "a long peri-



BA Photograph



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od of defense." Immediately a reconnaissance headquarters of four officers was tasked to scout and select suitable ground for fortification around Fort Capuzzo. On 20 May construction of two *Stützpunkte* supporting Fort Capuzzo commenced, one at Point 206 and another at Point 196. The garrisons considered necessary to hold the *Stützpunkte* were:

Point 206:

- Two infantry companies.
- One heavy machine gun platoon.

- One heavy mortar section.
- Three 37mm and One 50mm antitank guns.
- Three 20mm and One 88mm antiaircraft guns.
- One artillery observation post and an alternative OP.

Point 196:

- One infantry company.
- One heavy machine gun platoon.
- One heavy mortar section.
- One light infantry gun battery.
- Thirteen 37mm and One 50mm antitank guns.
- Three 20-mm antiaircraft guns.

- Several artillery observation posts.
- Gun positions for one or two artillery batteries.
- Advanced point.
- One reconnaissance section in foxholes.

In the following weeks fortification efforts escalated. Reconnaissance and localized attacks consolidated and conformed the front to the most favorable terrain possible. This rendered some strongpoint points redundant, but others were considerably strengthened. Positions previously defended by platoons and companies, became battalion and even regimental strongpoints. Promised reinforcements, particularly artillery and antiaircraft artillery began to arrive.

During this period two seminal aspects of German desert defense emerged. First, battalion fortifications were anchored by groups or batteries of high-velocity dual-purpose guns, such as the famous "88" or Italian 75mm and 90mm anti-aircraft guns. (It is interesting to note that all vehicle parks were ordered placed a mile to the rear, with the exception being prime movers for the guns. These were dug-in within the gun emplacements.) Secondly, on the squad and platoon level, trenches and strongpoints were built as "triplices." The term first appears in a report detailing the works of Machine Gun Battalion 8. All weapons, stated the commanding officer, are placed in half-moon triplices, with one heavy machine gun in the center with two light machine guns connected by crawl trenches 33 yards away. This principle was seized upon by corps command. Orders were issued to modify existing positions, with very specific standards. The squad position, designed in part by Rommel himself, consisted of a triangular arrangement of three foxholes with a 50-meter front. One of the foxholes housed a heavy weapon such as an antitank rifle, heavy machine gun, or an 81mm mortar. Flanking the heavy weapons pit and connected to it by communication trenches, were two pits housing light machine guns. Each pit had a 360° arc of fire. The "Rommel Triangle" was then expanded into a "trefoil" concept of platoon, company and battalion *Stützpunkte*, with three squad triplices form-

ing a platoon triplice, three platoons to a company, and so on up the organizational chain. In larger *Stützpunkte*, the command posts of the infantry, field artillery, and 88mm guns were close together because long communication trenches tended to weaken a position by thinning out the defending troops. Furthermore, long undefended trenches provided handy cover for enemy troops.

In accordance to these new orders, Engineer Battalion 33 set to work on 19 May on the Meduaur salient. Besides taking part in several firefights the battalion finished its work on 1 June. In the process it removed 3,000 British and 800 Italian mines, laid 5,185 sandbags, and strung 3,170-yards of a double barbed wire fence. Rimming the wire, the engineers planted a minefield consisting of 674 S-mines and 1,674 T-mines. Thirty-three *Stützpunkte* were built along with 10 special positions housing two anti-tank guns and one machine gun each. In addition, after the local commander determined that the south-eastern bulge in the salient unnecessarily stretched the defenses, the bulge was given up, but not before 2,300 T-mines, 159 booby traps, 1,560 pressure mines, and 139 trip-wire mines were sown into it.

By now the Meduaur salient was the responsibility of the 15th *Schutzen* Brigade. The brigade's elements were disposed into three sectors - one battalion of *Schutzen* Regiment 104 (left), one battalion of *Schutzen* Regiment 115 (center), and one battalion of *Schutzen* Regiment 115 (right). The other companies were held in reserve, as was one battalion of Panzer Antitank Regiment 5, which was south of brigade headquarters. The Antitank Battalion 39, one company of the Antitank Battalion 33, and one company of the Antitank Battalion 605 - a total of 50 antitank guns - were allotted to the salient, in addition to an artillery regiment and an engineer battalion.

Under the new plan, each battalion had two rifle companies forward, the heavy weapons company halfway back to battalion headquarters, the heavy machine gun company somewhat farther forward, and the third rifle company in battalion reserve. The great bulk of the light machine guns were deployed up against the wire in pairs. Half of the antitank guns were in the front line. Company frontages were about 830 yards, and positions were between 445 to 500 yards deep. The average front of a light machine gun was 55 yards. There were a total of six antitank guns for each company front, or two to every 280 yards.

As usual, defense plans involved the preparation of a counterattack, this time on the right flank with two rifle companies, tanks, antitank guns, and the usual reserve company. Flanking the salient on the right, was the Italian Armored Division *Ariete*.

Apparently the Germans were dissatisfied salient on 20 June. There were groups of weapons extending all the way back to battalion headquarters; the light machine guns were thinned out in the front line until there was only one each 110 yards; the antitank guns were placed at 330-yard intervals; company frontage was 990 yards; and company depth (to battalion headquarters) was 1,100 yards.

Although the brigade's antitank gun was considerably reduced, it still had its full compliment of machine guns. There were so many machine guns, it was difficult to find sufficient fields of fire. A battalion sector in the Meduaur salient was about 1,780 yards, and, on the basis of a two-company front, each company with eighteen light machine guns, there were only 50 yards for each weapon. It therefore decided to withdraw the heavy weapons to where they could fire indirectly over the forward lines. It was easy to cover every point with fire with the 80 heavy and light weapons in a motorized infantry battalion. Long-range





Imperial War Museum Photograph

indirect machine gun barrages were largely ineffective, however, because troop training in fire accuracy and correction had been neglected. Because of their limited effectiveness, and to save ammunition, machine gun barrages were kept to a fifteen or thirty second duration.

There was only one complete after action report of a company-sized *Stützpunkte* resisting a British attack. Lieutenant Schon, commander of the 12th Oasis Company held out at Libyan Omar from 18 to 30 November, when due to lack of supplies and equipment losses, he was forced to retire to Got Adhidiba with 80 survivors from his original 150-man muster

From Schon's report, he deployed his men in the following manner:

The *Vorgeschobener Stützpunkte* (advance post) was commanded by a noncommissioned officer with 11 men, one antitank gun, one light mortar, two light machine guns, rations for five days, and emergency rations. Its mission was to observe, not to draw fire. There were three telephone wires running to Oasis Company 12, the Italian battalion, and the Italian artillery (attached to the Oasis Company for the defense of Libyan Omar). This post remained unspotted from 18 to 23 November, and only withdrew on the main position a day after the main battle started. The post was able to observe behind British lines.

Oasis Company 12, consisting of four officers, 24 noncommissioned officers and 112 enlisted men, disposed in ten positions - one for each section and one for headquarters, manned the main *Stützpunkte*. The supporting arms, some placed with the neighboring Italian battalion, was strong: six 75mm field guns; two or three 88-mm guns and two 75mm antiaircraft guns; three 37mm anti-tank guns; and four heavy machine guns and ten light machine guns. There was ammunition for three days and food and water for eight days.

The envelopment of Libyan Omar began on 20 November. On that day, an 88mm gun destroyed a British observation post at a range of 3-1/2 miles. On 22 November, the main British attack began. Omar Nuovo fell in the morning, and the British tanks came over to Libyan Omar. Three of the four Italian companies supporting Schon surrendered with little resistance. The assault on the German positions began late in the afternoon, with the 88-mm guns knocking out 17 infantry tanks. As usual, the 88-mm guns were vulnerable to counterbattery fire and a combination of artillery shells and tank shot silenced them just before nightfall. The surviving smaller German antitank guns took up the fight, but their shells simply bounced off the infantry tanks. Inexplicably, the British did not press their advantage and withdrew as night fell. Given a welcomed reprieve, the

Germans repaired one 88-mm and two 75-mm guns during the night. The next morning the position was battle ready, with a bayonet strength of 100 German infantrymen, 38 anti-aircraft personnel, and 130 Italians.

To pump-up the troops, reports from the Army News Services (*Wehrmachtbericht*) was taken regularly on the radio and distributed among the men. German successes in other areas of the front mitigated the feeling of helplessness before British tanks which Schon noticed among Germans as well as Italians. Nevertheless, the troops expected to be relieved; there was confidence that counterattacking German tanks would settle the battle. Spirits soared on 20 November when German tanks appeared on the horizon. Morale plummeted, however, when the panzers failed to move in and relieve the position.

With the last antiaircraft positions knocked out, Schon requested permission to withdraw. Instead he was ordered to hold out. Relief was promised and he was told to expect resupply by air. There was no relief force or airdrop forthcoming, just a renewed British attack.

Conditions in the *Stützpunkte* grew increasingly worse. During the day, the men were forced to stay in their foxholes, because any outside movement drew immediate sniper fire. At night, hunkered in and on constant alert status, they become cramped and stiff as the cold settled into their joints and limbs. Rations and water ran short. In their weakened state, the Germans were unable to repulse a pair of unsupported infantry tanks, which eventually overran and smashed every heavy weapon. Had the British supported these tanks with infantry, the battle at this point would have been lost. Armed now with only rifles and light automatic weapons, Schon finally got permission to retire. He slipped out under the cover of darkness and, after an all-night forced march, reached the garrison at Got Adhidiba.

by Edward Morris