

TAC NEWS

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THE GUNS AT "HELLFIRE" PASS

North Africa: 6/15/41

The Battle

On 15 June General Wavell ordered a second offensive to relieve Axis pressure on Tobruk, this one called "Operation Battleaxe". This time, 11th Indian Brigade, helped by Matildas from 4th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), would advance toward Halfaya Pass backed up by artillery support from Major General Messervy's 4th Indian Division. Meanwhile, a mixed force consisting of one armored and one infantry brigade, would attack Fort Capuzzo. Another reinforced armored brigade would swing northwest toward Sidi Azeiz. The plan was exactly the same as "Brevity" but with more troops involved. At Halfaya, Major Bach (a former Lutheran minister turned soldier) commanded a mixed German/Italian force including strongly dug-in "88s" (88mm Flak36).

The ground leading up to the pass was flat and featureless, and at 0600 hours Bach's men spotted six Matildas closing in at a distance of some two miles. As they came into range, these Matildas opened up with their 2 lbs, hoping for the German and Italian gunners to return fire at long distance, giving away their positions. Pastor Bach and Major Pardo, the Italian commander on the spot, held their men in check, however. Then, at 0915, British radios crackled with an ominous transmission, "Good God! They've got larger caliber guns dug in and they're tearing my tanks to pieces!" The leading tanks were wrecked in moments by twenty-two pound armor piercing shells from invisible "88s". The superb Indian infantry and remaining Matildas stormed the pass (now called Hellfire) five times that day, leaving it strewn with charred bodies and torn vehicles, to no avail.

On the plateau above, 2nd Battalion/Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders with twelve more Matildas tried

to flank the pass and relieve their comrades below. Here too, invisible "88s" did great execution among the leading armored vehicles (only one Matilda survived the battle) while German artillery pounded the redoubtable Highlanders to pulp. Some close in fighting occurred, but in the end, a counterattack by German mobile infantry and armored cars, drove them back to their start line. The final tally for Battleaxe was a depressing 1000 British dead, ninety tanks, and thirty aircraft lost.

The Guns

There were three vital factors involved in the ability of Majors Bach and Pardo to fight off the determined Commonwealth attack at Halfaya pass on 15 June. One was the fact that they were deeply entrenched. If there was one thing the Italian soldier did well, it was dig! The German and Italian positions were set quite low to the ground, both reducing their overall silhouette and taking advantage of the baffling visual distortion caused by the extreme heat and painful glare of the Sahara sun in high summer. Second, for once the Italians were commanded by effective officers, had a clear idea of their mission, and were situated where they could not be outmaneuvered. Third, the weapons they fought with were well suited to the role they played in this battle. A closer examination of these weapons will make that clear.

The first of these is the Italian 47mm Canone anticarro e d'Accompagnamento 47/32 Modello 35. Originally an Austrian weapon manufactured by "Böhler" of Vienna, it was built on license in Italy by "Terni-OTO". It was a light, mobile piece with a split trail and no splinter shield. In addition to being Italy's main antitank weapon, it was also used as an infantry support gun.

For ease of transport in rough terrain, it could be broken down into five "mule-loads". In addition to having a low silhouette to begin with, its wheels were removable, making it even harder to spot in open terrain (an important factor in the desert).

47mm Canone basic characteristics are as follows:

SHELL WEIGHT: 3.3 lbs, WEIGHT IN ACTION: 584 lbs, MAXIMUM RANGE: 7,655 yds (with HE ammo), MUZZLE VELOCITY: 2,070 FpSec., PENETRATION: 43mm or 1.9" of homogeneous steel plate (at 60 degrees) at 500 Meters/550 Yards.

Over a hundred captured Mo.35s were refurbished and issued to Allied troops during 1940 and 1941. However, the gun's performance in combat never lived up to the test ratings established for it before the war. This was a common problem with Italian equipment in general. Mussolini's regime was one of the most corrupt and venal in modern history. Sub-standard manufacturing procedures, war profiteering, and outright graft were rife at all levels of Italian industry. The ordinary Italian soldier was the beneficiary of these reprehensible practices.

The second antitank gun present at Halfaya Pass was the German 50mm PAK.38 (PanzerAbwehrKanone), a robust piece with a standard split trail carriage and a semi-automatic breech. This increased its rate of fire somewhat mitigating its considerable bulk, requiring a minimum of three crewman, rather than the two men needed to operate the earlier (and much less effective) 37mm PAK.35/36. Produced by Rheinmetall-Borsig beginning in 1938, the PAK.38s performance was impressive, especially when firing tungsten-core ammunition (the Panzergranate 40). Easy to handle and maintain, PAK.38s continued to soldier on well into the 1950s in several Eastern European armies, despite being largely outdated by 1943 (especially on the Eastern Front).

PAK.38 basic characteristics are as follows:

SHELL WEIGHT: 4.9 lbs, WEIGHT IN ACTION: 2,174 lbs, MAXIMUM RANGE: 2,900 yds (with HE ammo), MUZZLE VELOCITY: 2,700 FpSec (standard), 3930 FpSec (tungsten), PENETRATION: 78mm or 3.12" of homogeneous steel plate (at 60 degrees) at 500 Meters/550 Yards (standard), 120mm (tungsten).

Last, and most deadly was the German 88mm Flak.36/37 (FlugzeugAbwehrKannone). The original 88mm Flak (or anti-aircraft) gun was the model 18, the creation of a Krupp design team sent to Bofors of Sweden in the 1920s. Returning to Germany in 1931, they brought with

them the plans for an entirely new anti-aircraft gun (the Flak 18) that went into production in 1933. The revolutionary part of what was otherwise a conventional design was a remarkably effective semi-automatic breech that opened and closed by a spring activated by the gun's recoil, that greatly increased the weapon's rate of fire. This was followed by a later version of the same gun with several modifications. Some were aimed at simplifying the manufacturing process, i.e. the platform was made less complicated, and some to make it easier to operate. For instance, the carriage was modified so that the gun could be towed either forward or backward and need not be turned around to displace. The barrel of the piece was manufactured in three separate sections, held together by an encircling sleeve. This allowed for easy replacement of a worn section without the necessity of replacing the entire tube, which saved a lot of steel. This was the Flak.36.

In 1937, further changes were incorporated. The three-piece barrel went to two pieces; the gun layer's dials were simplified; and firing data was sent to the piece electrically from a central fire-control mechanism, allowing better coordination within a given battery. This became the Flak.37.

The Flak.37's basic characteristics are as follows:

SHELL WEIGHT: 20 lbs (HE) 22 lbs (AP), WEIGHT IN ACTION: 5,000 lbs (8,200 lbs in transport), MAXIMUM RANGE: 16,050 yds (HE) 8,700 yds (AP), MUZZLE VELOCITY: 2,700 FpSec (HE) - 2584 FpSec (AP), PENETRATION: 117mm or 4.7" of homogeneous steel plate (at 30 degrees) at 500 Meters/550 Yards (AP).

German manufacturing standards at this phase of the war were still quite high, so the figures above can be taken at face value. However, as the war went on, standards plummeted. The need to produce weapons in large numbers; shortages of vital materials; the widespread use of slave labor; fear of reprisals on the part of factory managers and workers who failed to meet production quotas; and simple greed inevitably reduced the reliability and effectiveness of German weapons to something like 80% what they were in 1939. In 1941, however, the Wehrmacht was still in its prime, and at Halfaya Pass, the men of Major Bach's command appear to have lent some of their determination and professionalism to the Major Pardo's Italians. The result was victory on that day, a feat mostly attributable to the simple courage of men who "stuck to their guns".

MICRO ARMOUR®: THE GAME - WWII

TAC NEWS SCENARIO

THE BATTLE FOR HALFAYA

Infantry of the Rajputana Rifles and Mahrattas, part of the illustrious 4th Indian Division, supported by Matilda II infantry tanks attack up Halfaya Pass, while the Cameron Highlanders and more Matildas attempt to flank the defenders from the east. Major Bach (a Lutheran minister cum Artillery officer) and major Pardo (one of the best Italian officers to serve in Africa) were determined to hold on to the last man.

VICTORY CONDITIONS

The Commonwealth Player wins if he can either destroy all three "88"s or occupy all of Halfaya Village by the end of turn 15. Otherwise, the Axis Player wins.

SPECIAL RULES

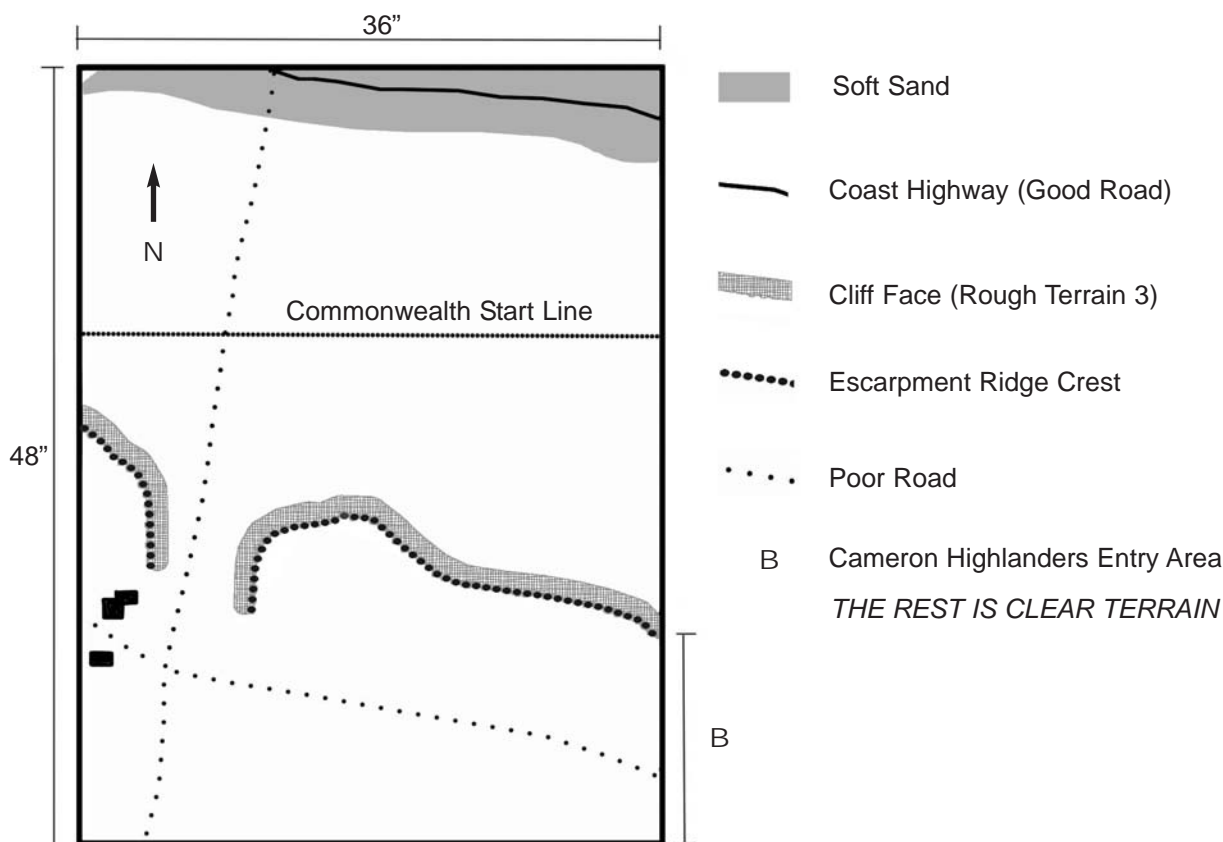
1. Gruppe Bach and Gruppo Pardo were dug in "deep" around Halfaya. This combined with the distortion effects on visibility caused by extreme heat meant that their positions were very hard to attack effectively.

The normal rules concerning Medium Improved Positions should be altered as follows for this scenario:

Both their Cohesion Effect and Defense Bonus are now +5 for all troops types, not just personnel. All other effects are unchanged.

2. The maximum sighting distance for this scenario is thirty-five inches (35"). You could see the enemy, but "heat shimmer" distorted both range and outline.

3. The "Cliff Face" is impassable to all vehicles.



AXIS FORCES

GERMANS Gruppe Bach

Base
Cohesion
17

Headquarters Troops: 1 x Inf. GHQ/Truck
Heavy Flak
Company(-): 3 x 88mm Flak.36
PzJäger Company: 3 x 50mm PAK.38
PzJäger Company: 2 x 50mm PAK.38
Field Works: 7 x Med. Improved Positions,
9 x "Standard" Minefields,
9 x "Dummy" Minefields
Artillery Support: 2 x 105mm leFH.18(2)
(OFF MAP)

ITALIANS Gruppo Pardo

Base
Cohesion
14

Headquarters Troops: 1 x Infantry HQ
Gruppo: 9 x Infantry, 2 x Medium MG,
4 x 47mm Canone Mo.35,
1 x 81mm Mortar(3)
Field Works: 16 x Med. Improved Positions,
18 x "Hasty" Minefields,
9 x Dummy Minefields

DEPLOYMENT

Gruppe Bach, Gruppo Pardo, and all German and Italian minefields must deploy anywhere south of the escarpment ridge crest or within twelve inches (12") of Halfayavillage. All unit stands must be in Improved Positions. (Axis forces deploy first.)

SCENARIO LENGTH: 15 TURNS

COMMONWEALTH FORCES

BRITISH 11th Indian Brigade(-)

Base
Cohesion
15

Headquarters Troops: 1 x inf. GHQ/Truck
4th RTR(-): 2 x A.12 "Matilda II"
1st Battalion/
6th Rajputna Rifles: 10 x Infantry '39,
1 x Medium MG,
1 x 3" Mk.1 Mortar(1)
2nd Battalion/
5th Mahrattas: 7 x Infantry '39,
1 x Medium Machine Gun,
1 x 3" Mk.1 Mortar(1)
J Battery/3rd RHA: 2 x 25 lbr Mk.2(2)/Truck

Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders

2nd Battalion: 1 x Infantry HQ,
8 x Infantry '39,
1 x Medium Machine Gun,
1 x 3" Mk.1 Mortar(1),
4 x Bren Carrier
4th RTR(-): 4 x A.12 "Matilda II"
25th Field
Regiment RHA(-): 2 x 25 lbr Mk.2/Truck

DEPLOYMENT

11th Indian Brigade(-) (4th RTR[-], 1st/ 6th Rajputana Rifles, and 2nd/5th Mahrattas) must deploy anywhere north of the Commonwealth "Start Line".

J Battery/3rd RHA must deploy somewhere on the "Coast Highway" near the north edge of the map.

Cameron Highlanders, 4th RTR(-), and 25th Field Artillery RHA(-) must enter the east edge of the map on turn three (3).



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