

TAC NEWS

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From Battleaxe to Crusader North Africa - 1941



The second offensive against Irwin Rommel, "Operation Battleaxe" had been a great disappointment to the Allies. They knew "Brevity", their first attempt to relieve Tobruk, was doomed from the start, but expected more from this second attempt. On June 21st, 1941, General Wavell, the British commander in both Africa and the Middle East, was replaced by General Auchinleck. His masterly orchestration of the Commonwealth effort up to "Battleaxe" had obviously not been good enough. Churchill needed victories, and fast! Wavell took the dismissal with good grace and left for India (It would have been kinder to have allowed him a few weeks leave between assignments) without delay.

It's one thing to be beaten in the field. It's quite another to fail to learn from that beating. Churchill's constant nagging had driven Wavell to order the "Battleaxe" attack before his troops were properly trained and while the mechanical reliability of

their equipment still left a lot to be desired. British courage and determination were beyond question, but they were laboring under some very dangerous misconceptions. British tank losses in "Brevity" and "Battleaxe" were blamed on the superiority of German tanks. The fact that German anti-tank guns concealed in ambush had done the real damage had been missed. But this was not the complete answer either. The key to German success lay in the coordination and cohesion of their tactics. These were based on three principles:

- 1) Anti-tank guns kill tanks
- 2) Tanks kill infantry.
- 3) Artillery kills AT guns and infantry.

Whether on the attack or defense, German units were all-arms teams dedicated to implementing the dictated will of their commander. The British, on the other hand, exhibited an almost tribal attitude toward the various arms. Tankers, gunners, and infantrymen each saw themselves as

the primary arm. They sought to get the other arms to shut-up and let them "get on with it". When it came to force of will, there was no single will being exerted. Wavell was no dictator. The British command was used to reaching decisions by consensus. This may have been all right in small colonial military actions where communications were limited and personal initiative and resourcefulness were the keys to success. But, what they were fighting now was a world war, fought by vast forces led by ruthless and professional officers. British failure to adapt to this reality would often have tragic results. For the moment, however, both sides were exhausted and the summer and fall of 1941 would be spent training and rebuilding.

The advent of *Fall Barbarossa* (code name for the German invasion of the Soviet Union) in June, sent shock waves rolling through the command structure of every warring nation. The effect on the North African Theater was to be deep and

powerful. First, the invasion of the Soviet Union drew Axis attention away from the Mediterranean. Supplies, replacements and the allocation of forces were all seriously impacted. Rommel found himself increasingly forced to act on his own initiative. His superiors in both Rome and Berlin were becoming more and more irritated with his constant lobbying for more troops, more supplies, more air power, and more pressure on Malta. Second, the invasion had an electrifying effect on the Americans. Roosevelt used it to ram forward his "Lend-Lease" program, providing the British with U.S. trucks, tanks and airplanes. US oil began flowing into British engines. Churchill was delighted! He pressed for offensive action in Africa.

The successful conclusion of the Allied invasion of Syria (Operation Exporter) in early 1941 had allowed the transfer of some of these troops to Auchinleck. The arrival of American (Stuart) tanks and other lend-lease equipment around the same time, meant that (temporarily) Britain had won the race for supplies. By July, Churchill was ready to try

once more for the relief of Tobruk and the clearing of Cyrenaica. Auchinleck, however, would not be hurried!

There had been some major changes in the organization of both sides' since the arrival of the Germans in Africa. The British had attempted "Brevity" with not much more than a division. "Battleaxe" had been a Corps sized affair. Now "Eighth Army" had come into being, consisting of two corps, the 13th and the 30th. Each of these consisted of two to three divisions with all supporting arms and an immense supply and maintenance apparatus. These forces were now under the command of General Cunningham (a brother of the famous admiral). Cunningham came well recommended and had seen much success in East Africa.

The Axis forces were now organized as *Panzer Army Afrika*. This included the *Afrika Korps* under General Cruwell, consisting of 15th Panzer division, 21st Panzer division (the old 5th Light division), the Italian 20th Mobile Corps of two divisions under Gambarra, the *Ariete* armored division and the *Trieste* motorized division. There was also the 21st

Corps under Navarini of four infantry divisions of varying quality in the front line area. A new division, the *Afrika* division, had just been organized. This unit was made up of German infantry units flown in during the siege of Tobruk as replacements. Finally, the Bottcher Artillery Group, and the border garrisons (primarily the *Savona* division) dug in along the Libyan frontier rounded out the Axis order of battle.

Auchinleck put off the offensive until November when the first American (Stuart/Honey) light tanks became available. The timing of this was of great importance. *Obercommando die Wehrmacht* had been temporarily preoccupied with the desperate struggle for Leningrad and Moscow, which had drawn attention away from Africa. But deteriorating flying conditions during the Russian Winter would soon allow the transfer of German air assets there. November, therefore, would be the most opportune time to strike.

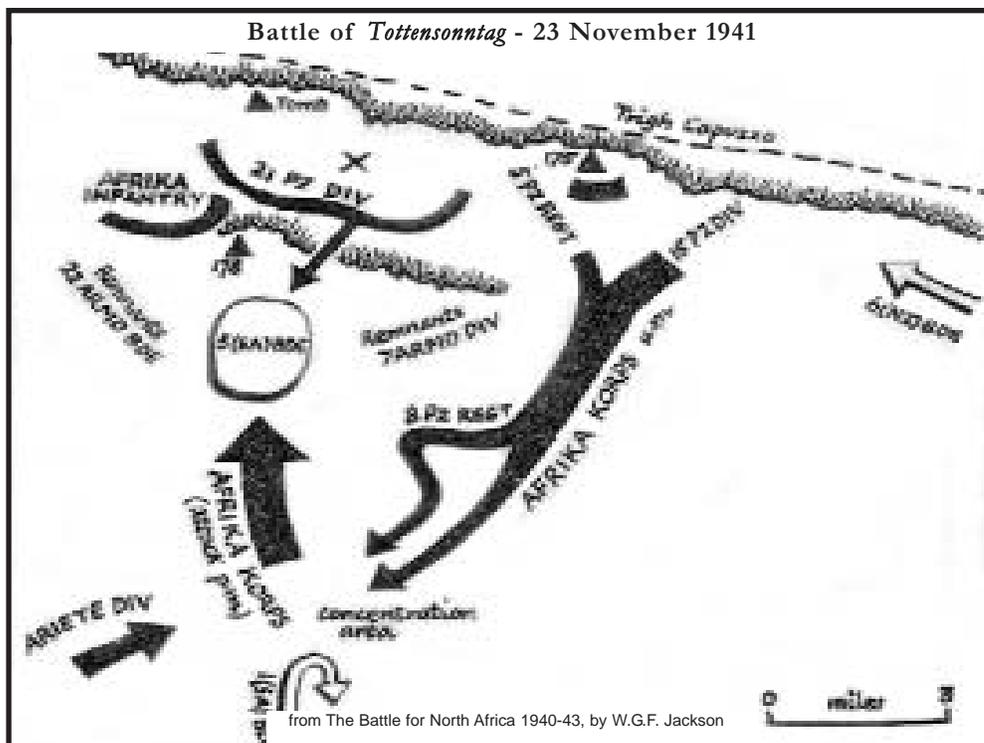
Operation "Crusader"

"Crusader" was a complicated, three week long, struggle full of seesawing fortunes and lost opportunities. It was an immense undertaking involving somewhere in the vicinity of 240,000 men, over 1,000 tanks, and 900 aircraft. The main British advantage lay in a two-to-one superiority in tanks, on which they pinned their hopes for success. The British began the offensive in the early hours of November 19th, 1941 with the standard one-two punch; infantry along the coastal strip, armor sweeping across the open desert farther inland, first to the West, then North toward Tobruk!

"The "Crusader" Battles:

Bir El Gubi - 11/18/41

Cruisers of the green 22nd Armored Brigade mixed it up with the "Ariete" division near Bir El Gubi and were driven back after a costly struggle



gle. The enthusiasm of the Yeomanry was no substitute for battle experience. They charged forward in a swirl of dust to be met by dug-in Italian anti-tank guns and supporting armor. But, they had blocked the Italians from interfering with the 1st South African division as it moved along behind them in the direction of Sidi Rezegh. *Editor's Note: You will find the Bir El Gubi Scenario on p. 122 of GHQ's Micro Armour®: The Game WWII.*

Gabr Saleh - 11/19/41

Brigadier Gatehouse, commanding 4th Armored Brigade Group drove toward Bardia scattering German recon units before it until, in the afternoon, it collided with Ravenstein's 5th Panzer Regiment near Gabr Saleh. This would be the first of a series of costly but inconclusive engagements between these two units.

Sidi Rezegh - 11/22/41

Two days of non-stop killing had turned the featureless plain around the Sidi Rezegh airfield into a dust choked, sand blown moonscape; pock-marked by shell craters and littered with the trash and debris of two modern armies in the throes of a fight to the finish. Wrecked vehicles were everywhere. The choking stench of cordite and the reek of burning petrol and lube-oil were inescapable. The same antagonists as before, 4th Armed Brigade and Support Group, under "Jock" Campbell and Panzer Regiment 5, were still tearing at one another like wolves in a pit. Campbell's tank losses had been higher than Ravenstein's, but the Germans did not have the luxury of replacements.

Tottensonntag 11/23/41

Brigadier Armstrong and the 5th South African Brigade were dug in facing North along the "Trigh Capuzzo". On their right were the

remnants of the 7th Armored division under General Gott, bloodied after four straight days of violent encounters with its nemesis, the 5th Panzer Regiment. On their left, the ragged (no longer green) survivors of 22nd Armored Brigade. "Operation Crusader" was reaching a veritable crescendo of violence. Neumann-Silkow, commanding the 15th Panzer division, was combining his tanks with those of 5th Panzer regiment, and was about to administer the killing blow. He lined up his forces in a parade-ground formation. The tanks and guns of two Panzer Regiments with their supporting arms lined up side by side, Their infantry entrucked in the rear in a second long wave. Cruwell then executed a "charge en masse".

The South Africans died hard, and the fight soon broke up into a multitude of individual actions. By the end of "*Tottensonntag*" (Sunday of the Dead) 5th South African Brigade had been reduced to huddled groups of beaten men lining up to be shipped off to German prison camps. The Commonwealth armoured units had been smashed and the situation looked profoundly bleak for the British. However, "*Tottensonntag*" had been a Pyrrhic victory. German losses had been high, especially in experienced officers. The heart of the *Afrika Korps* was literally being torn out.

Aftermath

Rommel had an inflated idea of British and Allied losses in "Crusader" and had underestimated their endurance. He was jubilant over Cruwell's success on "*Tottensonntag*" in spite of the casualties suffered. He now wanted to strike some sort of decisive blow with the aim of breaking what he believed to be shaky allied morale and pursue the defeated 8th Army to destruction. At a conference on the evening of November 23rd, Cruwell

expressed his opinion of the situation: "...The beaten enemy should be pursued, the area between the Trigh El Abd and the Trigh Capuzzo cleared, and the vast amount of captured material salvaged." Rommel issued the order to attack Sidi Omar and relieve the Sollum front. He directed "Infantry Regiment 155" and the "Afrika Regiment" to salvage captured equipment and motorize themselves from it. In his words: "21st Panzer Division will lead the advance (at 10.00 hours) followed by Africa Korps Headquarters and 15th Panzer Division..." Auchinleck's decision, in spite of the depressing reports from his subordinates, was characteristic of his personality. 13th Corps would take over operations for the relief of Tobruk. 30th Corps would retire to the South to reorganize and refit. In his words, 8th Army must: "...Continue to attack relentlessly using all your resources, even to the last tank..."

Summary

There were other battles after *Tottensonntag*, the "Dash to the Wire", the fight for the "Trigh Capuzzo", and the New Zealand rearguard action at "Zaafraan". But, this engagement represents the high-water mark of German tactical dominance in the "Crusader" campaign. "Crusader", after all, would be an allied victory. Tobruk would be relieved. Rommel's battered army would be driven into full retreat and would not stop until it reached its base at El Agheila. Soon, it would be back with a vengeance and the fight for Tobruk and the North African shore would go on for another year and a half. Hundreds of thousands would be made prisoner. Tens of thousands would die. The war would reach one of its dramatic turning points. Eighth Army and the *Afrika Korps* would both become legends. But that is another story...

by John Fernandes

Tottensonntag

Libya - 23 November 1941

One of the epic vistas of World War Two filled their eyes. From their prepared defensive positions atop the ridge of Trigh Capuzzo, the men of the 5th South African Infantry Division watched two full regiments of Nazi panzers rolling inexorably toward their lines. A great wall of tanks was aimed right at them. Occasionally, as gusts of wind swirled the panzer's dust, a second line of truckborne infantry was seen following the armor. Their time in hell was about to begin.

This scenario offers a classic frontal assault. The terrain is quite simple, and the action will be non-stop as the Germans slam their way into the South Africans.



Germans 15th Panzer Division +
5th Panzer Regiment

Cohesion
16

15th Panzer Division + 5th Panzer Regiment

- Headquarters 1xHeadquarters (GHQ+3), 2xPzIIF (HQ)
- Panzer Companies 12xPzIIIG, 9xPzIIJ, 4xPzIVE,
- Panzer Grenadiers 12xInfantry
- 3xSdKfz251/1, 1xSdKfz251/10, 9xLight Truck
- Heavy Weapons Companies 2x8cm Mortar(3), 2xLight Truck
- 2xInfantry Support, 1xSdKfz251/1
- PaK Companies 6x50mm ATG, 6xHeavy Truck,
- 3x88mm Flak-36, 3xHeavy Tractor
- Recon Company 3xSdKfz222[R], 1xSdKfz231[R]
- Artillery Battalion 3x105mm Howitzer(2)



Allies Elements: XXX Corps

Cohesion
14

5th South African Infantry Brigade (-)

- Headquarters 1xHeadquarters (GHQ+2)
- Infantry Companies 24xInfantry
- Heavy Weapons Companies 2x3" Mortar(3)
- 2xInfantry Support
- Anti-Tank Companies 10x2lbr ATG
- 4x25lbr (2), 4xLight Truck

British 22nd Armoured Brigade (-)

- Headquarters 1xCrusader-II CS (HQ), 1xCrusader-II/CS,
- Tank Companies 9xCrusader-II

British 7th Armoured Division (Remnants)

- 9xM-3 "Stuart" (Honey),
- 4xHumber Mk-II Armored Car[R]
- Any two (2) armed stands may contain attached FO's

INITIAL DEPLOYMENTS

- The Allied Player must deploy all forces North of the road and within twelve inches (12") of it.
- The German player must line up his forces along the Southern edge of the map, tanks in a single line abreast with other stands behind.

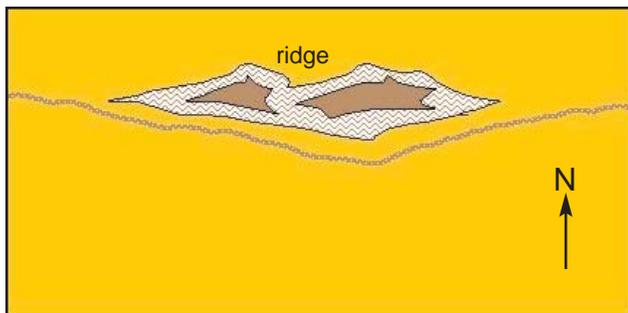
SPECIAL RULES

- All "Clear Terrain" is packed gravel and should be considered the equivalent of "Poor Road".
- Maximum sighting distance is twelve inches (12") due to swirling dust and smoke.

SCENARIO LENGTH: 15 TURNS

TERRAIN SUGGESTIONS:

- The map should be approximately 6' (E to W) x 3' (N to S)
- "Mixed" Desert with one poor road running East-to-West.



VICTORY CONDITIONS:

German Victory:
Destroy or disorganize all British units by the end of turn 15.

British Victory:
Prevent German victory.

SUGGESTED READING

The Battle for North Africa 1940-43, by General Sir William G. F. Jackson. Mason/Charter, New York, 1975.

This is, arguably, the finest single volumn history of the campaign.

Brazen Chariots, by Major Robert J.Crisp.

A really good read, by a participant in the 5th South African Brigade.