LESSONS FROM THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION OPERATIONS IN CYRENAICA

Preparations

A brief reference at the outset to the events leading up to the participation of the New Zealand Division in the campaign in Cyrenaica will serve to give background material for the report.

Despite the fact that the New Zealand report on which this article is based, is dated 4 January 1942, it is thought that its value, especially the lessons derived from the combat experiences of the Division, may be profitably reviewed at this time.

The Division had met with reverses in Greece and Crete. In September 1941, fully equipped and completely mobile, it had concentrated at Bagush to train for a role in the second Libyan offensive. There were six weeks in which to train for the specialized type of fighting in desert warfare.

Training methods were used for the most difficult operation to be undertaken. For example, an attack on a heavily defended fortress covered by wire and mines served to present the greatest difficulties. Two dummy fortresses were prepared, wired, and covered by mine fields. A series of exercises was then carried out to capture them. Each infantry regiment supported by the full divisional artillery and a "mock-up" of battalion of "I"* tanks did the attack. Also a night approach march of about 30 miles was carried out without any vehicle lights. The element of surprise was also sought. The attacking force deployed by dark and attacked as soon as possible after the artillery had registered at the first light. Infantry in personnel carriers supported by tanks advanced under cover of a barrage of high explosive and smoke. A point of entry was secured, engineers clearing a lane through the mine fields; tanks exploited the breakthrough while infantry, field, antitank and antiaircraft artillery followed rapidly to consolidate and prepare for the counterattack. These and other detailed preparations paid dividends later on under actual battle conditions.

Further measures taken to prepare the Division for combat eventualities are contained in the following extracts.

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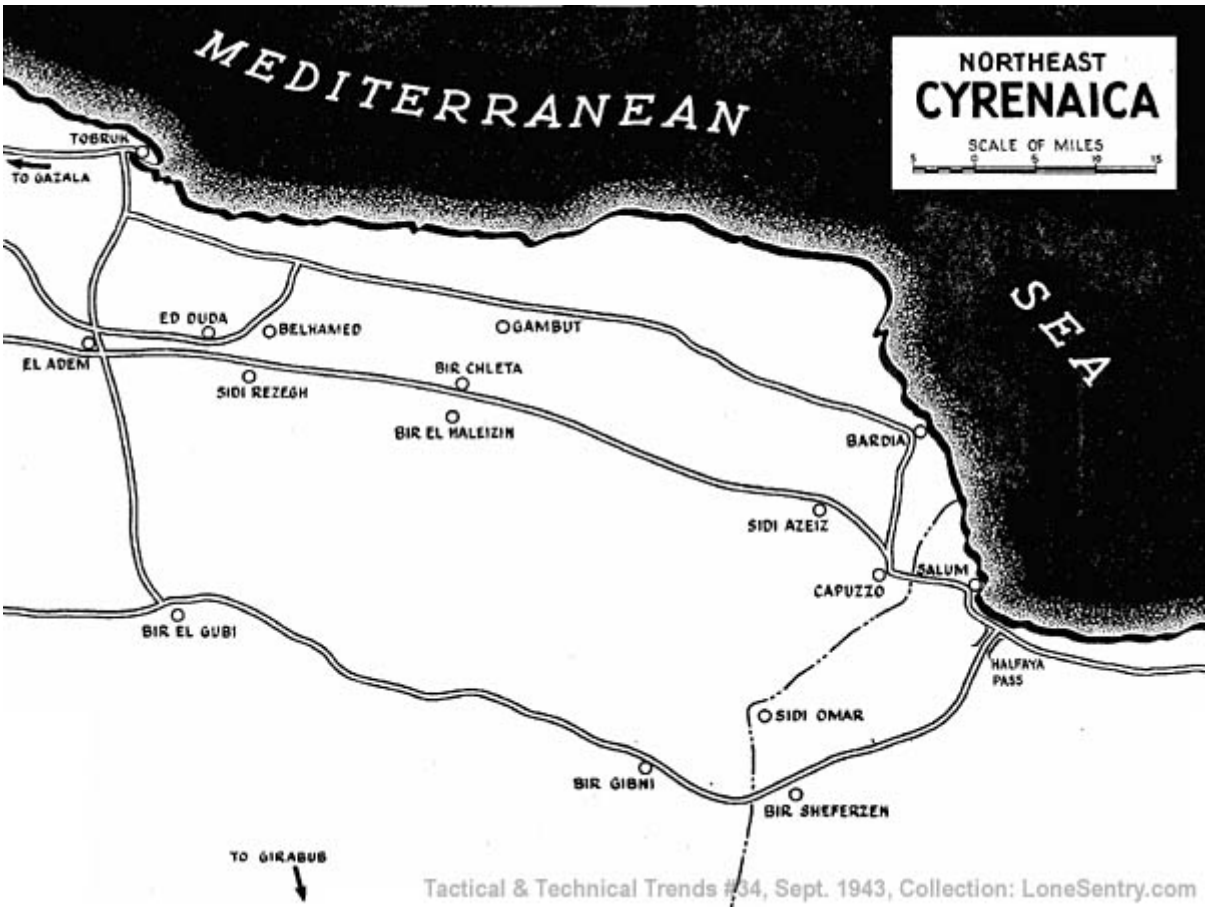
While we [the New Zealand Division] were busy with our training plans and running in our new equipment, detailed preparations for the operations were being dealt with by Corps and Army Headquarters. By 6 October, plans were made. The Army Commander held a conference and gave divisional commanders details of the outline plan. Briefly, Eighth Army were to take Cyrenaica, the immediate object being the destruction of the enemy's armored forces by our own armored forces. We were estimated to have a numerical superiority in tanks of five to four. The plan was that our Armored Division should threaten the enemy investing Tobruk and force them to fight a decisive battle on terms that favored us.

Plans for the relief of Tobruk depended on success in the armored encounter. The Eighth Army was divided into three groups, 30th Corps, 13th Corps, and the Oasis Group. 30th Corps consisted of the 7th Armored Division with the 22nd Armored Brigade [U.S. regiment] attached and the 22nd Guards Brigade [U.S. regiment] 1st South African Division (less one regiment), three battalions of artillery and one antitank battalion. Its role was to defeat the German armored forces as already mentioned and relieve Tobruk. 13th Corps, which comprised 4th Indian Division, New Zealand Division, 1st Army Tank Brigade, one

extra field battalion, and one antitank battalion, was to advance north and isolate the enemy's forward fortress line and later mop it up from the west. 13th Corps was not to be committed, however, until the armored forces came level with it on an east to west axis. 22nd Armored Brigade, detached from the Armored Division, had a dual role, viz., to protect the left flank of 13th Corps from armored attack and also to intervene if there was a general tank battle. The Oasis Group was a composite column which was to deceive the enemy by moving from Biarabub on D-1, fixed as 18 November.



The RAF plan for the period up to the beginning of the offensive was to restrict enemy reconnaissance and to interfere with the enemy supply system on land and sea. After the battle started, they employed strong fighter sweeps to protect advancing columns and escort our bombers in their role of bombing the enemy supply system and communications as well as participating directly in support of the land forces.

By the beginning of November, our preparations were as complete as we could make them. As many officers as possible had been forward to see the country we were to move and fight across, and a large-scale model of Cyrenaica from the Egyptian border to Tobruk had been utilized to give all officers as vivid a picture as possible of the country in which we were likely to operate. Detailed intelligence reports had been circulated. Air support control exercises had been carried out. The very difficult problems of supply had been carefully considered. Nothing appeared to have been left to chance in the preparations for the Second Battle of Cyrenaica.

It was considered certain that Rommel would fight for Tobruk but there was considerable doubt as to where he would fight. There were two courses open to the enemy. Withdrawal from the fortress line Bardia-Halfaya-Sidi Omar to a strong position based on El Adem covering Tobruk; or, to decide to hold the

fortress line on the preparation of which so much care had been lavished, concentrating their armored forces behind for a counterattack. Rommel was not, of course, an unknown quantity. Every bit of information about his record had been studied and we were quite ready for a war of rapid movement and bold tactics. Summing up the situation on 10 November there was still little evidence of any intention to withdraw from the frontier.

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The lessons themselves as derived from the operations of the New Zealand Division are given special emphasis in the report of this campaign. There are the general lessons which will apply to any fighting against the Germans, lessons which prove and give added force to well-known principles of war. Some of the lessons apply particularly to desert warfare. The effect that topography has on tactics should not be overlooked. As the report says, "Our next campaign may lie in closer country, where our methods will be different and where the infantry soldier and the field gunner will have more important roles than has been the case in the desert fighting. We must not become obsessed with desert warfare."

Some of the outstanding lessons of the Libyan campaign are contained in the following portions taken from the New Zealand Division report.

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a. Fitness, Efficiency and the Will to Win

The degree of success a unit or formation achieves in battle depends above all else upon the will to win. There is a time in all battles when the men on both sides are exhausted. It is the man who can hold on longest and who fights with the greatest determination who will win. The will to win requires constant attention. It is made up of many factors, two of the most important being physical fitness and confidence in the arms we use. In both of these we are superior at present to the German infantry.

Physical fitness is difficult to achieve. I can see no substitute for long marches and digging. Motorization is the enemy of physical fitness and the more we become motorized the more need there is for march training. Personnel must be trained to the standard we have always set of 40 miles in 24 hours.

During the recent operations the rifle and machine gun were relegated to a secondary role by the gun and the tank [at el Alamein they exercised a considerable influence on the course of the battle]. In our next campaign we may be fighting in mountainous or close country; the rifle and the machine gun as well as the field artillery, will then have added importance.

Wherever we may be destined to fight our training should be based on these two fundamental principles:

PHYSICAL FITNESS OF ALL PERSONNEL;

PROFICIENCY AND CONFIDENCE IN THE USE OF WEAPONS.

b. Surprise and Training

Surprise is still the outstanding factor in achieving success. This fact was proved on many occasions during the operations.

In Libya we started the campaign well aware of the maneuverability of a

mobile division and knowing that we could move 35 miles in the dark without lights, hit a given spot, deploy, shoot in our field guns, and two and a half hours after first light, stage a coordinated attack with "I" tanks under a full artillery plan.

In Crete we had already learned by experience that provided there were no wire entanglements, the enemy could be turned out of any position at night by attacking with the bayonet.

This knowledge that we could move long distances and fight at night proved to be of the greatest assistance in all our planning and gave us a great feeling of confidence when carrying out our operations.

In the move north to cut off the fortress line and in the battles around Tobruk, wherever we used our pace, combined with movement at night, we always caught the enemy unprepared. Success was immediate and casualties often extremely light.

As surprise is the most important element of success, we must consider how it is to be obtained in all our training schemes. There are many well-tried methods of achieving surprise. Night attacks and night advances often offer the best chances. It is also true that night operations require most careful training.

TRAINING, THEREFORE, IS THE FIRST STEP TO ACHIEVING SURPRISE.

c. Attack

The following are some of the lessons of the attack in desert warfare:

(1) Once again it was shown that the attack against a properly organized resistance must have either the cover of darkness or an adequate artillery support. This applies whether tanks are used or not. In every case where tanks or infantry were committed in daylight without sufficient covering fire, they had very heavy casualties. On the other hand the moonlight attacks on Belhamed, Sidi Rezegh and Ed Duda were all successful against superior enemy forces. The daylight attack in the area between Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh was also successful as it was possible to cover the attack with 25-pounder and machine gun concentrations fired ahead of the leading tanks.

(2) In an attack where an enemy counterattack with tanks may be expected our antitank guns must be brought well forward, manhandled if necessary, to protect our tanks during all stages of the attack. The Germans were skillful at this.

(3) Full use must be made of smoke to blind the enemy antitank guns in depth.

(4) On at least one occasion the Germans attacked with tanks on a different axis from their infantry. Although this type of attack is more difficult to stage and is therefore somewhat deprecated in the textbooks, it is much more difficult for the defenders to deal with and is worth studying.

(5) Motorized infantry can and should use the speed of their vehicles to the full in attack to gain surprise. An extreme example occurred on the Gazala Front against Italians where our infantry came up to within a hundred yards of the strong enemy position and captured it with slight casualties.

d. Defense

One of the lessons of our battles was that where the holding of ground was not important the best defense was undoubtedly to attack. Being tied to the ground in a fortress seems to have a paralysing effect upon the occupants. In Bardia and Halfaya 14,000 of the enemy were kept upon the defensive for a fortnight by three battalions of infantry and two batteries of artillery. Mobility and the power to attack are the best form of defense.

e. Air

The Libyan Campaign was our first experience of air and armored support on an adequate scale. With the former we need not concern ourselves here except to note that the impressive superiority of the RAF in Libya must be borne in mind when considering the lessons of the campaign. Our understanding of air support has, as a result of the experiences in Libya, advanced considerably and improvements in communications will enable air support to be speeded up.

f. Tanks

The tank is the German Army's primary weapon. With it the Germans are formidable, without it they are lost. In the recent fighting it was only by clever handling of their tanks that they escaped complete defeat. We must study methods of overcoming their tanks. We have much to learn from the Germans in handling tanks in battle and also from the German methods of coordination of tanks with artillery, antitank guns and infantry. Depending as they do on the tank, their policy aims at producing the largest number of effective tanks at the decisive moment in a campaign. They have produced a satisfactory tank from the mechanical point of view and they understand the value of gunpower. They have a most efficient organization for maintenance and quick recovery of tank casualties. Finally, they appear to avoid action unless the conditions are favorable, thus keeping their casualties much lower than ours.

We had many examples of the German use of tanks. They will not attack without close support of artillery, antitank guns, machine guns and infantry. In both attack and defense they have a very high proportion of antitank guns, around which the tanks maneuver. Even 88-mm antitank guns are brought forward by tractors with tanks. The whole tempo of the German tank attack is slow, the tanks moving from one hull-down position to another. The difficulties of our gunners were further added to by the direction of attack which was almost always with the sun behind the tanks. The enemy also took advantage of smoke and dust raised by artillery bombardments. In some cases antitank guns and machine guns were taken forward with the first wave to give close support. We can use these German tactics in our training. The following are some of the points which have arisen from our experience:

(1) We must always give the maximum supporting fire to armored fighting vehicles in attack.

(2) If, during an attack, antitank fire is very heavy the tanks should if possible occupy hull-down positions and the infantry should be prepared to go through the tanks to shoot up the antitank guns.

(3) In the desert tanks can and should be used in attacks at night, especially during moonlit nights. They were used most successfully in the moonlight attack on Ed Duda. The commander who loses tanks by bad tank tactics may capture the objective, but lose the whole battle for want of tanks later to repel enemy counter attacks.

(4) It will often be necessary to give active cover to the tank recovery

personnel on the battlefield.

(5) New Zealand Division was very inexperienced in the actual capabilities and handling of the army tanks as we had not been able to get tanks during the training exercises. Before any further operations are carried out tanks and infantry should train together.

g. Reserves

In desert warfare the demand to hold all the ground considered necessary for the security of a force frequently extends that force to the utmost, but one of the lessons of our fighting in the Sidi Rezegh-Belhamed area is that a commander must maintain an adequate reserve even at the expense of giving up ground which it is thought desirable to hold. During the critical days of that fighting the only divisional reserve was one squadron of army tanks and one squadron of divisional cavalry.

h. Dispersion

During training prior to the campaign the question of dispersion was discussed. Against air attack dispersion to 200 yards between vehicles was laid down as normal. Such a degree of dispersion produces a frontage in desert formation which cannot be adequately protected against tank attack. The two conflicting requirements of dispersion against air attack and concentration against tank attack must therefore be weighed up at all times, the decision depending upon the relative danger from each type of attack. During the approach march to the frontier a dispersion of 200 yards was maintained although no air attacks actually took place. Once the frontier was crossed distance was reduced to 100 yards as the enemy air force had been inactive and there was a possibility of tank attack. This degree of dispersion proved in part to be satisfactory against the only air bombing attack which took place.

While in defense in the Sidi Rezegh-Belhamed area distances between vehicles were still further reduced owing to the small amount of cover available and it was found that vehicles at 50 to 60 yards interval did not suffer undue casualties during artillery bombardment. No enemy air attacks took place during that period.

i. Night Moves

The three night moves during the approach to the frontier were all successfully carried out, using green lights at intervals of about 1,000 yards. Lights were placed by Provost Company in daylight, the line being reconnoitered and fixed by a small sapper party. It was found during the later operational moves that navigation by compass at night was carried out very accurately without vehicle lights of any description even when there were two or three changes of direction as in the move of 20th and 21st Battalions and Divisional Headquarters to Bir Chleta and the last move of the Division of over 40 miles to Bir Gibni. It is advisable, however, for the leader to have a light at the back of his car which can be seen.

j. Antitank Rifle

Although the antitank rifle still has its uses, it is no longer effective for the purpose for which it was designed and no case occurred of an antitank bullet putting out of action a German tank. It is essential that infantry should have a weapon of their own capable of penetrating modern tank armor at some distance (at least 500 yards). The weapon must be both mobile and inconspicuous and should be included in the battalion. No reduction should be made in the number of guns in the antitank regiment. The number of infantry antitank guns

required will depend to some extent on the performance of the weapon produced, but it is considered that a minimum of eight is required in each battalion.

k. The 25-Pounder (88-mm)

The 25-pounder is an excellent weapon and much superior in shell power to the German and Italian field guns encountered during the campaign. On occasions when troops were attacked by small groups of tanks, fire was withheld down to ranges of 800 to 1200 and very good results were achieved. Until we are provided with proper antitank guns we must speed up ammunition supply to our field regiments.

l. Intelligence

Within the Division the flow of information both upwards and downwards has greatly improved and it was found satisfactory, even under the worst conditions. However, during the battle period information regarding troops on our flanks was only satisfactory on the rare occasions when we were actually in touch with them.

m. Codes

The very elaborate and unwieldy code system, produced before the campaign, broke down partly under its own weight and partly because it was frequently compromised by capture. The two essentials appear to be the time code and the map reference code and the latter could be simplified by using only the daily adder.** Apart from these two codes it is considered that messages within the Division should be either in cipher or in clear.

n. Conclusion

"To sum up: This campaign has shown again that the well-established principles of war still apply. Of all the factors which contribute towards success, surprise is still the most important. To achieve surprise we must be highly trained. We must train to reach the highest standard of efficiency in movement, in the use of weapons, and in cooperation with other arms. Training now is more necessary than ever. Success depends on the will to win of a fully-trained force at the highest degree of physical fitness."

*Infantry tanks--slow-moving, 16-ton "Valentines" and 26-ton "Matildas."
**The meaning is not known exactly. Probably in U.S. usage it means daily additive"--a prearranged code number-change.