

Chapter 4

TAKING TOBRUK

The British-held fortress of Tobruk is a thorn in the side of the German and Italian forces in North Africa. Supplied by sea and garrisoned by a reinforced infantry division, it blocks the coastal highway (*Via Balbia*) that serves as the main land transport route in Libya and, in particular. It also poses a threat the rear areas of any German or Italian formations operating in the vicinity of the border that separates Italian-held Libya from British-occupied Egypt. Worst of all, possession of a protected beachhead on the Libyan littoral makes it possible for the British to land substantial forces behind the Axis defenses along the Libyan-Egyptian frontier. For these reasons, the chief operational imperative of German and Italian forces in North Africa is the capture of the fortress of Tobruk.



British Empire infantry in forward trenches of the fortress of Tobruk

Ammunition Supplies

General Rommel regarded it as essential that not only the troops earmarked for the attack on Tobruk but the entire *Panzergruppe Afrika* be liberally provided with supplies. Being so near to the front the *Panzergruppe* had to have enough ammunition, fuel, and rations to be able to carry out the attack and immediately afterwards to turn and fight the enemy who was expected to launch an offensive with his main force. For this purpose seven ammunition units and five units of fire were regarded as the minimum requirement. However, at the beginning of October there were no more than one to one and a half units of ammunition available. This was not nearly enough. During early November supplies of ammunition had risen to five units which might have been just enough.

The slow arrival of reinforcements for German troops and supplies which were deemed essential for the success of the assault made it necessary to postpone the attack several times. Originally it had been planned for the end of September, then it was postponed until October, again until the beginning of November and later even until the beginning of December. After his visit to Rome in the middle of November, Rommel decided however to launch the attack on 21 November. And this decision was final.

The Plan for the Attack

Originally the attack was to be carried out by the entire *Afrika Korps* and the division *z.b.V. Afrika*. The fact that the attack had been postponed until November made it very timely that the enemy in Western Egypt would be able to conclude preparations for his offensive and that he would be in a position to open up his offensive immediately after we had launched our attack. Rommel decided to have the *21st Panzer Division* standing by north-east of Gambut to halt the first onslaught of the enemy if the offensive did occur. This meant that (apart from two Italian divisions) there were only the *15th Panzer Division* and *Division z.b.V. Afrika* available for the attack. Even *15th Panzer Division* had to make its plans for the attack in a way that it could be withdrawn to support *21st Panzer Division* in defensive operations.

Should the enemy start his offensive before we launched our attack against Tobruk, areas for the rapid assembly of the *Afrika Korps*, south-east and south-west of Gambut were reconnoitred and preliminary orders were prepared. The Italian *Motorized Corps* was not under Rommel's command and was still back in the Mechili area. It was therefore not possible to move the corps up to assist in the operation. However, Rommel did succeed, with the greatest difficulty, in obtaining permission for the the Italian *Motorized Corps* to move into the area of Bir El Gubi (*Armored Division Ariete*) and Bir Hacheim (*Motorized Infantry Division Trieste*), which meant that it would

play its part covering the siege front against interference from the south.

In spite of all of these difficulties Rommel stuck to his decision to attack Tobruk. All units earmarked for the attack received intensive training and the commanders of the various formations and units were prepared for the task in several sand-table exercises.

The Order for the Attack

In contrast to the attempts made so far on Tobruk, this attack was to be launched by day. The plan of the attack provided for the breakthrough of the bunker line by the *Division z.b.V. Afrika*. The *15th Panzer Division* immediately afterwards was to proceed along Via Balbia to Fort Solaro and from thence to the coast west of Tobruk with a view to cutting off the town of Tobruk and the harbor from the other parts of the fortress. An unarmored battle-group of the division, supported by artillery, was to advance to the harbor inlet south of Tobruk and to neutralize the harbor by artillery fire as soon as possible. *Division z.b.V. Afrika* was to cover the flank of the attack against interference from the north-east sector of the fortress and then to mop up this northeastern sector.

Infantry Division Pavia and *Infantry Division Bologna* of the Italian *XXI. Corps* were to attack on the left wing of the *Afrika Korps* with a view to broadening the breach. *XXI. Corps* was then to advance in a northwesterly direction abreast of the *15th Panzer Division*, covering the latter's western flank, and cut off the remaining fortress area.

Artillery was to play a main role in the attack. *Artillery Command 104* had been made responsible for operations carried out by the army artillery battalions and the artillery of the attacking divisions in preparation for the attack. The artillery preparation proper was to last three hours. During this period the howitzer batteries were to shatter the fortifications in the sector of the attack proper. The remaining heavy batteries were to shell the fortress artillery and also to keep the command posts of the fortress under fire. The artillery of the assaulting division was to smash the infantry lines and installations.

After the attack had actually begun, the division artillery was again to be at the disposal of the various divisions, whilst army artillery was to protect the flanks with the mobile units of army artillery following the division into the fortress.

Luftwaffe formations of considerable strength were to support the attack with *Stukas* operating against the fortifications, en-

emy artillery, command posts, and against the town and harbor of Tobruk.

Extensive deceptive measures were taken to keep the time and place of the attack a secret. The artillery was not allowed any ranging on the days before the attack. On the western and southern sectors of the fortress local attacks were to be launched with the support of *Stuka* attacks and rocket firing. These local attacks were to be continued before the main assault and even on the day of the attack.

New Tactics for Armored Formations

The operational lull during summer and autumn 1941 had been used by the German divisions for all sorts of preparations and for intensive training. The units in position around Tobruk were chiefly busy with the war against Tobruk, but the *Panzer* divisions were applying the lessons of the spring to bring up their training in mobile warfare to the desired standard. During summer and during the battle in autumn two divisions, but chiefly the *15th Panzer Division*, had developed battle tactics of a new kind.

Unlike the European war theater, desert terrain almost everywhere allowed the use of vehicles of every imaginable kind. In the desert it was not necessary to have large formations

moving in columns which, when time came, would have to adopt battle formation, with consequent delay. It was advisable to adopt a kind of formation whilst still on the move which allowed the full fighting strength of a division to be brought to bear immediately. Where there were no roads which justified a move in columns at the high speed obtainable on these roads, the divisions moved in *Flächenmarsch*, with the battle groups one behind the other. It must be understood that on such a move the depth of each battle group was no more than about four times its width.

Cooperation of Weapons

In desert warfare operations against armored units were more frequent than operations against entrenched infantry. It was therefore advisable to have the most important arm of the division, i.e., the *Panzer* regiment, supported by all other units of the division, even if it was a question of operations against enemy armor. This kind of tactics, it is realised, was thus far customary only in operations against mixed formations of all weapons.

The most important support weapon was the heavy anti-aircraft battery of 8.8 cm guns. This gun was able to pierce the armor of even heavy enemy tanks at a long range. The guns were therefore placed in the march column of the *Panzer* regiment, when the division was on the move. These 8.8 cm

guns together with elements of the *Panzer* regiment fought the enemy armored formations, whilst the bulk of the *Panzer* regiment approached the enemy armor at top speed until they had reached the distance favourable to the armament they then carried.

Motorized artillery also proved a very valuable support weapon for armored operations. It was the task of motorized artillery to take over fire protection for their own armor as it attacked, to hold down enemy anti-tank artillery and armored artillery observers and also to lend flanking protection to attacking forces by fire. It became evident that enemy tanks were extremely vulnerable to concentrated artillery fire. It was frequently possible to disperse a concentration of enemy tanks which had been assembling for the attack or at least to delay the attack. For this purpose the artillery in question moved dispersed at intervals through the *Panzer* regiment. The armored artillery observation vehicles travelled with the leading tanks. The staffs of artillery units usually travelled with the commanders of the armored units. With the rear battle-groups of the division on the move, there was usually only one artillery unit which was responsible for flank protection.

The artillery soon learned to take up positions and open fire so rapidly that the tank attack suffered practically no delay at all. It very soon became clear that enemy armored formations frequently avoided the attack of a well-led and powerful

German *Panzer* division. Taking advantage of the higher speed of their tanks they tried to bring their armor to bear against the unprotected flanks and rear of the *Panzer* division. For this reason the *Panzerjägerabteilung* (anti-tank battalion) was charged with covering the flank of the division most open to enemy attacks, and also with anti-tank operations in the vicinity of the soft-skinned parts of the division. There were, however, occasions when the anti-tank battalions were used in pursuit operations and also to strengthen and to broaden the attack of their own armor.

The *Schützen* of the division, organized in one or two battle groups, were kept as near to the armored battle groups as they could, so that as far as possible they were covered against direct fire from enemy tanks. Thus they were rapidly available for the exploitation of any success achieved by the armor, to mop up or clean out infantry and artillery positions overrun by the armor, and to build up a front, thus freeing the armor for operations elsewhere.

The engineers usually traveled with the *Schützen*. But they had reconnaissance sections travelling with the armored regiments to be at hand for lifting mines or for laying mine obstacles at short notice.

Command

These new tactics offered great difficulties as far as the conduct of operations and the leaders responsible therefor were concerned. Even in a European war theater it is extremely difficult to issue orders in time for the swift changes to be expected in armored warfare. It is more difficult to give such orders from a headquarters well behind the actual fighting line. In desert warfare this is quite impossible. The uniform terrain and the particularly poor quality of the Italian maps were responsible for the fact that useful reports regarding locations and situations were hardly ever available at headquarters. Hence it became absolutely essential, not only for the divisional commanders, but also for the whole divisional tactical headquarters to travel to the immediate vicinity of the armored formations, where they could see what was going on, and where they could direct the battle and give orders as the actual situation required. Inevitably this meant a terrific strain on the staff as they were exposed not only to the moral but also to the physical effects of enemy fire. For this reason a division had to be led from armored vehicles.

The logical consequence was a simplification of the signal system. As had been tried out in other war theatres, the command vehicles of the divisional commander and of the operations officer (Ia) were equipped with ultra-shortwave sets which allowed them to listen in to the wireless traffic of the *Panzer* regiment. This did away with the latter sending re-

ports. The remaining battle groups of the division were contacted on the medium wave network from the same vehicle. An armored signals vehicle travelling immediately behind the divisional command tank was responsible for wireless traffic with corps and also the reconnaissance units. Another advantage of this system was the fact that the officers commanding the *Panzer* regiment and the artillery regiment were usually very near and could be given verbal [i.e. face to face] orders. Conduct of operations was therefore most simple and orders could be given and were given over the air like simple commands.

Telephones were only used at night. On such occasions the headquarters of the various battle groups inside the hedgehog leaguer of a division were placed as near to each other as advisable.

Reconnaissance

The tactics of reconnaissance units hardly differed from those used in Europe. On the move in the vicinity of the enemy it was usual to make use of the Mark II tank as mobile cover for front and flanks. This tank was still available at the end of 1941 and could not be used in battle. They usually travelled at the outer fringe of their ultra-shortwave wireless, that is, at a distance of about 10 kilometers.

Wireless reconnaissance played a most important part during operations. The inter-tank traffic of the enemy intercepted on the battlefield was immediately exploited and the results acted upon. This gave us the opportunity of countering actions and measures of the enemy which the latter had not even begun.

Supplies

In the desert war supply was rendered difficult, as the enemy had a vastly superior number of armored reconnaissance units, which harassed the supply routes of the divisions. For this reason supplies had often to be moved up under escort. The Ib (second general staff officer) of the division controlled supply from the rear with a deputy attached to the tactical headquarters, who was in contact with him by wireless.

During an armored operation it sometimes happens that the tanks were immobilized quite long periods, which was tactically undesirable, since the armored units had to bring up their supply vehicles for replenishing fuel and ammunition. In order to make such stops as short as possible it was arranged that the *Panzer* regiment at least would be accompanied by its supply unit. Even in battle, but particularly during the pursuit, the supply units travelled in the immediate vicinity of the *Panzer* regiment. Later on, even divisional supply columns were sometimes ordered to accompany the division during operations. Such were the tactical principles. They were developed and improved during the first days of the British autumn offensive and proved very useful indeed. As from January, 1942, they were made compulsory with all armored formations of the *Afrika Korps*.

The Situation in the Air

After the second Sollum battle there was a comparative lull in operations in the North African war theatre, as a result of the increasing heat and very frequent sand storms. The main purpose of air reconnaissance, short range or long range, was the supervision of enemy ground forces. Sea traffic supplying Tobruk was watched with particular care. Apart from this limited activity the air force developed its ground organization and anti-aircraft defense, reorganizing the latter with the help of anti-aircraft formations newly arrived from home.

Closer cooperation was established with that part of the *5th Italian Air Fleet* which operated in the eastern sector. The operations of the Italian and of the German air formations were already coordinated, which made them much more effective. German and Italian *Stuka* formations flew together protected by Italian fighters. This cooperation strengthened the fighting power and raised the morale of the Italians to a remarkable degree.

In those days *Stuka* formations found it impossible to operate without strong fighter escort. For this reason attempts were made to take advantage of the African summer nights, which were never quite dark, for *Stuka* attacks. The pilots were trained for night operations and the training proved a great success. From then on, frequent night attacks were made

against Tobruk and against the supply convoys arriving in the Tobruk harbor by night. Destroyer aircraft (*Zerstörer*) with their greater range were also employed to harass supply columns which used to arrive with great regularity. On such occasions numerous dog fights took place.

On the 15th of July, four out of five transport ships were sunk by our air force in the Bardia area. One of the ships was a tanker. The fighters accompanying the *Stukas* succeeded in shooting down several enemy fighters of the ship's escort.

The rearward supply installations and supply traffic of the enemy were frequently attacked, particularly by ME110 "destroyers." On 11 August 50 lorries were set alight. Bombers from Crete were also active. Of the enemy attacks which were spread over the entire summer and which were directed against supply bases and airfields the operations deserve special mention. The bomber operations against the Fayum road near Cairo and a combined bomber and "destroyer" operation against the airfield of Giarabub where two enemy aircraft were destroyed on the ground apart from much damage to other equipment. In the latter case the surprise had been complete.

The R.A.F. continued to be very active. When convoys arrived in Tobruk a great many British fighters were sent up as escort and cover. The British know very well that the German and Italian airmen would come up in strength to harass their convoys and the loading and off-loading activities in the Tobruk harbor. It was only natural that during the summer many air fights took place over Tobruk; the German fighters scored many successes shooting down a tidy number of their opponents. It was however impossible to stop convoys from bringing supplies to Tobruk; one of the reasons was that later on they sailed by night.

As from summer 1941 it became clear that the R.A.F. in western Egypt had been considerably strengthened. This had become apparent for the first time during the German reconnaissance operations carried out in the middle of September and directed against Egypt. The full significance and volume of reinforcements was however, not understood until a little time after the beginning of the British autumn offensive.

As mentioned above, it had been planned that our air force formation would take part in the attack on Tobruk. On the other hand the possibility of a renewal enemy attack on the Sollum front could not be overlooked. Our forces were not strong enough to provide the necessary air formation for each of the two possible fronts. It was decided that the more important battle would be fought at Tobruk and that it was on this front that the force would have to operate. It was how-

ever arranged to have some air formations on the Sollum front and airfields were laid out at the El Adem and Gambut for that purpose. The supply problem was just as problematic with the air force as it was with the army. However, ample use was made of air transport and of the continuous air traffic to Greece so that at least the food situation was adequate. Fuel and ammunition arrived in sufficient quantities to make good daily consumption, which was not much, in view of the minor operations carried out by our scanty forces; but it was quite impossible to build up a stock for operations or a larger scale. On 16 November Cyrenaica and Marmarica were soaked by a pouring rain of unheard-of intensity. Bridges were carried away, roads became rivers and all the German and Italian airfields were under water, a field of quagmire and quite unusable; for days it was impossible for any aircraft to take off, and if there were exceptions they were far and far between.

Reconnaissance activity, of course was reduced to practically nothing. The consequences proved to be very grave, if not decisive. The enemy, on the other hand, was able to fly all the sorties because there was no rain in his area to wash out the airfields.

The Supply Position in Summer and Autumn, 1941

When *Panzergruppe Afrika* took over all the German and most of the Italian troops in North Africa during August 1941, the entire supply organization was reorganized and put on a new basis. The staff of *Panzergruppe Afrika* was given a fully-equipped Quartermaster-General's Branch which was in a better position to tackle the complicated tasks connected with supplying troops in the North African war theatre. This Quartermaster-General's Branch had under its command the staff of a commander rearward areas (*Koriück*). This latter staff was responsible for the rearward army areas and the field commandant Tripoli was placed under its jurisdiction.

The main task of the Quartermaster-General during summer and autumn, 1941, was two-fold: providing the current supplies for the *Panzergruppe* and secondly stock-piling for the autumn offensive. As the first part of the second task, supplies had to be accumulated for the attack on Tobruk; the most important item was ammunition for the attacking troops and for army artillery taking part in the attack. Over and above this task the *Panzergruppe* was intent on building up sufficient stocks, particularly of fuel, to allow for a campaign of longer duration and if supply by sea became more difficult or stopped entirely. An important part of this task was the moving up of supplies to the strongpoints or the Sollum front, as these strongpoints had to be provided with enough ammunition, rations and water to last them, even if they

were cut off for a lengthy period from the supplies of the *Panzergruppe*.

The divisions of the *Afrika Korps* were the first to have their stocks of ammunition and fuel replenished. They built up their dumps on both sides of the Via Balbia in the area between Bardia and Tobruk. In addition there were huge supply centres around the harbor of Benghazi and that of Tripoli from which the army dumps were continuously replenished.

The supplying of the *Panzergruppe* which should have been completed in September, 1941, suffered more and more delays, because the ships bringing supplies from overseas suffered heavy losses; in October no supplies arrived at all. After 18 October no ships carrying German supply goods reached the African coast. Simultaneously ammunition and fuel dumps received more attention from the enemy air forces and the attacks on these dumps became frequent. The main target of the attacks was the dumps to the west of Bardia; heavy damage was caused.

In spite of all these obstacles ammunition and fuel stocks, which were regarded as sufficient for the attack on Tobruk and for subsequent defence against the probable counter-offensive by British Eighth Army, had been accumulated in the front area by the beginning of November. Had that not

been the case it would have been impossible to last through the heavy fighting of the autumn with all overseas supplies cut off.

The motor vehicle position deteriorated continuously during the summer; the motor vehicles were subjected to continuous wear and tear, as they were all constantly in operation, chiefly the supply vehicles of the *Panzergruppe* or the divisions, even the operational vehicles of the troop units had to be used on many occasions to secure the supplies necessary for the front lines. By the end of July the construction of the Axis Road had been completed so that it was no longer necessary for the vehicles to travel on the very bad desert track south and east of Tobruk which had been responsible for very many breakdowns. The *Division z.b.v. Afrika*, which had been flown over and for which no motor transport was yet available, presented new transport problems which had to be overcome with the vehicles at hand. The engines of the tanks showed less wear and tear after the introduction of improved air filters. Tank maintenance installations were also improved.

The Italian formations of the *Panzergruppe* more similarly busy reorganizing and replenishing. A certain rivalry between the German and the Italian supply authorities and keen competition for available shipping space was inevitable. The inadequate equipment of the Italian troops in motor ve-

hicles, which were moreover of poor quality, caused great anxiety.

This is how *Panzergruppe Afrika* made use of the lull in fighting during the summer. At the commencement of the enemy autumn offensive *Panzergruppe* had all the reserves and supplies necessary to sustain battles of a longer duration.

During the summer and autumn, 1941, the German leadership in Africa had defined its task as the recapture of the fortress of Tobruk and the simultaneous creation of favourable conditions for the repulse of the expected large-scale British offensive. Naturally General Rommel aimed at taking Tobruk before the British attack started. But even in the most favourable circumstances, i.e. if Tobruk fell into our hands before the British offensive materialized, it was to be expected that the British would take very strong action to relieve the fortress as soon as our attack had started. For this reason the attack had to be planned in such a way that success would come soon, that is to say inside of two days, before the British counter-offensive could approach Tobruk. On the other hand, casualties as heavy as those incurred by our forces during the spring must be avoided at all costs, as they would jeopardize the chance of repulsing the British offensive from Egypt.