

Sunday of the Dead
The Battle for Point 175, Libyan Desert,
November 23, 1941
A Battlefield WWII Scenario by Bill Slavin



Pt. 175 as seen from the Allied start line - a seemingly flat stretch of ground.

Scenario

On the 18th of November the British 8th Army launched Operation Crusader, in an attempt to relieve Allied troops besieged by Axis forces in the Libyan port of Tobruk.

On November 23, the same day that Rommel's armour sallies forth to defeat the British 7th Armoured Division at nearby Sidi Rezegh, the recently arrived 25th Battalion of the New Zealand 6th Brigade prepares to take Pt. 175 in its first attack of the war. Marked only by a cairn of stones, Pt. 175 is simply a trig point in the relatively flat and featureless Libyan desert. But as a slightly elevated feature in that endless expanse it is valuable ground, and ground that has to be taken and held at all costs.

The area is defended by the "Afrika" Regiment 361, largely made up of former French Foreign Legion soldiers, repatriated but still suspect as not necessarily being "good Germans". They are canny fighters, however, long used to the vagaries of desert warfare and a fair match for the relatively inexperienced but eager New Zealand troops that face them. Suffering from a dearth of heavy weapons and with virtually no artillery support (all engaged in the developing offensive at Sidi Rezegh) their defences have been bolstered by an "88" assigned from 21 Panzer as well as an ad hoc group of armour. Originally cued up as an infantry-only attack, a revised plan has hastily been developed to now incorporate C Squadron of the 8 Royal Tank Regiment upon learning that enemy armour may be in the area. As the guns of 29 Battery open up the attack goes in.

Duration

12 turns. The Allies move first.

Scenario specific rules

1. Surrender

Historically in this battle large numbers of troops from both sides surrendered when faced with attacking tanks and little or no tank support themselves. Therefore, in addition to the Battlefront conditions for surrender, any manoeuvre check indicating panic for troop type units (even on the first round of panic) will lead to surrender if there is no friendly undisordered armour or AT guns within 10" and LOS and its line of retreat passes within 5 inches of and through the LOS of undisordered enemy tanks.

2. Tank Cover

Troop units conformed to armour will receive +1 hard cover modifier if line of fire to closest aiming point passes through any part of the vehicle (even if a second aiming point on the target is visible). In addition, these units will be considered to have benefit of this cover the entire manoeuvre phase if they move in tandem with the armour, regardless of separation resulting from ME's moving at different times. Knocked out armour will offer the same cover, but only if they are not burning.

3. Sangars

Although the sangars are treated as basic improved positions, they do not disappear when a unit leaves them and may be occupied by enemy units. As they were typically shallow scrapes ringed all around with stone, they also provide side and rear cover of +1 against direct fire.

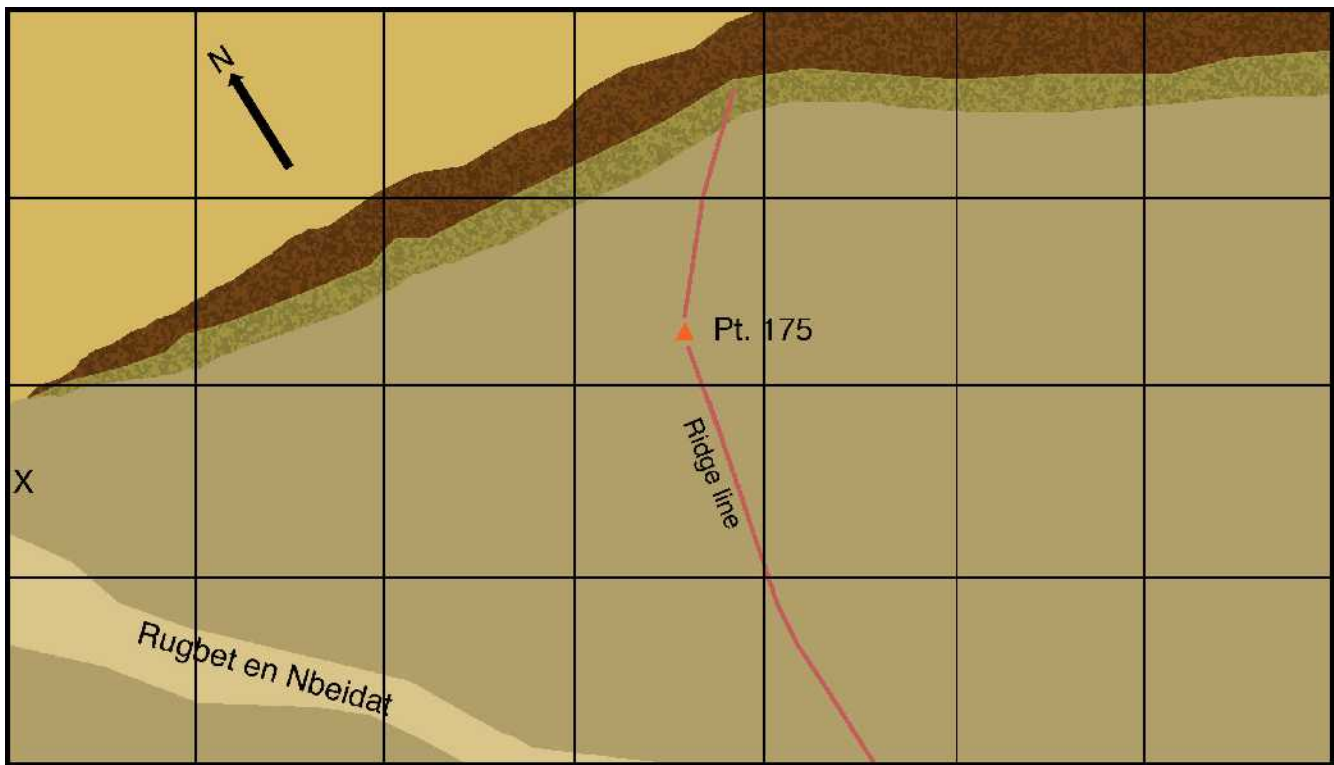
4. Machine gun grazing fire






Rules found here: <http://www.fireandfury.com/extra/mggrazing.shtml>

with the addition that the template needs to be centred on a spotted or suspected target and only "cover" modifiers apply (i.e. suspected target status and smoke do not).



New Zealand reinforcements move up on east side of Pt. 175.



-  Level 1
-  Level 2 (Wadi, treat north edge as Dense Linear - see terrain notes)
-  Level 3
-  Sheer Slope
-  Rocky Ground

Terrain notes

1. The area bordering the escarpment was punctuated by a series of wadis and denser ground cover. Treat this entire area as rocky ground and German positions in this area as dug in.
2. Although the terrain looked deceptively flat, in reality there was a slight rise up east and west to Pt. 175 (a trig point, not an actual peak). Therefore the ridge line blocks LOS unless units are within 5" of either side, in which case they may spot (and be spotted) by units from either side. The gully edge blocks spotting from this level into the gully unless conformed to edge.
3. The Rugbet en Nbeidat is a shallow wadi, but during the battle German units were able to move up it unobserved. Treat the edges of the wadi as "dense linear/soft cover", meaning that units need to be conformed to the wadi's edge to spot in or out. There is no movement penalty for moving in, out or along the wadi.
4. The escarpment is treated as a "sheer slope". This means only troops may negotiate it, and to scale it takes one move (bog down check) and is the only move allowed for that turn. Treat as breach. Units conformed to the bottom of the escarpment are considered to be in that terrain feature. Lateral movement along the feature is at half speed with bog down checks every inch.

Turn Sequence

New Zealand FOO and Battalion Commander may enter at any time.

Turn 1

Half of C Squadron, RTR (3 tanks), carrier platoon and B and D Cos. enter east side of board (south of escarpment).

Turn 3

Second half of C Squadron, portees and C Company enter from east side of board (south of escarpment).

Turn 5

German armour and reinforcements enter from west side of board. Captured Honeys cannot be fired at on the first round spotted because of the confusion Allied forces had in identifying them as enemy armour!

NZ A Company enters east side of board (south of escarpment).

Victory Conditions

Allied Victory

Total

No undisordered German troop units left on board.

Tactical

No undisordered German troop units (and at least one NZ troop unit) within 5" of Pt. 175 and ridge line.

German Victory

Total

No undisordered NZ troop units left on board.

Tactical

No undisordered NZ troop units (and at least one German troop unit) within 5" of Pt. 175 and ridge line.

Any other result is considered a draw.

Briefing for New Zealand Commanding Officer, Lt.-Col. G.J. McNaught, 25th Battalion

The last minute change of plans have left you little time to prepare a co-ordinated attack on this height of land, designated Pt. 175 on your map. Originally thought lightly defended it was to be an infantry-only show, but last minute concerns that substantial German forces and enemy armour are present has resulted in C Squadron, 8 RTR now being put under your command. No enemy positions are visible in the seemingly flat expanse of land that slopes very gently to the cairn of rocks marking the high ground, but you are certain that they are there.

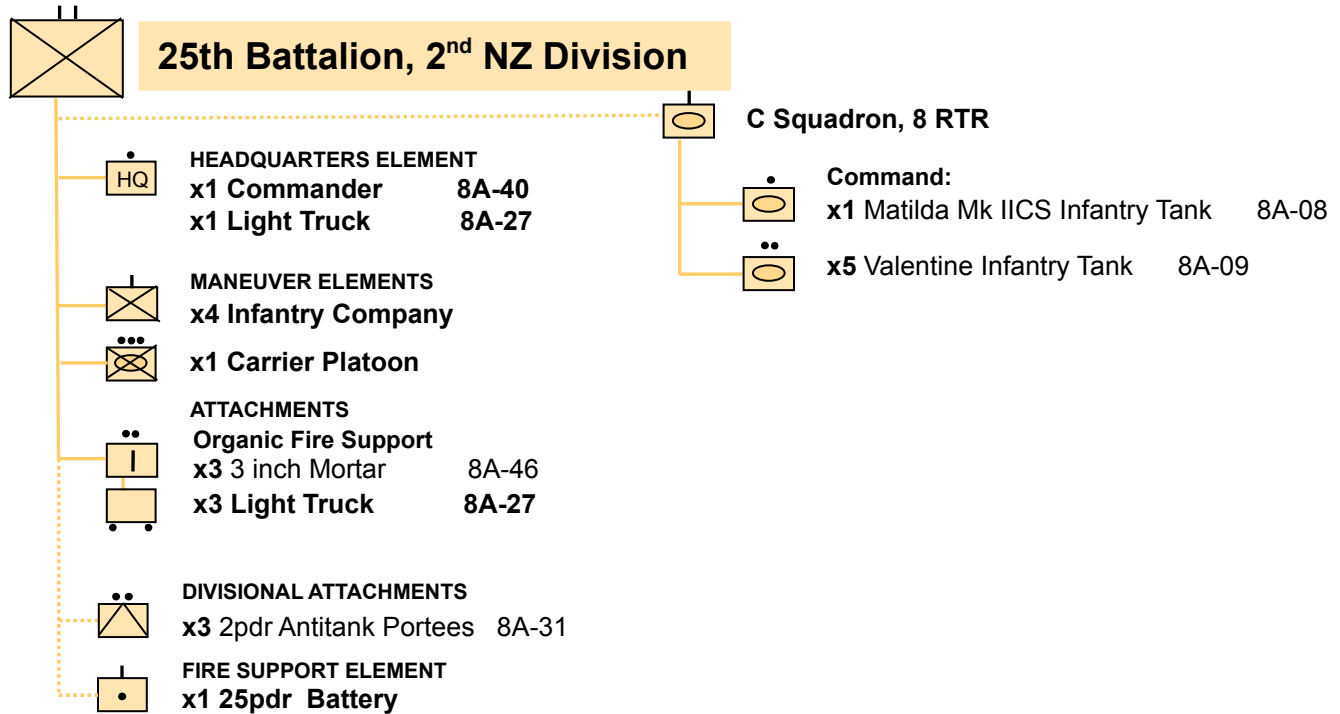
You decide to divide your attack into two waves, leading with half of the C Squadron Valentines, your carrier platoon and B and D Companies. C Company will follow with the remainder of the tanks and the 2 lbr. portees. A Company is currently investigating enemy fire coming from the escarpment to the rear, but will be available to join in the attack shortly.

Your orders, which you have passed on to your company commanders and Major Velae of C Squadron are simple. "To capture and hold at all costs Hill 175".

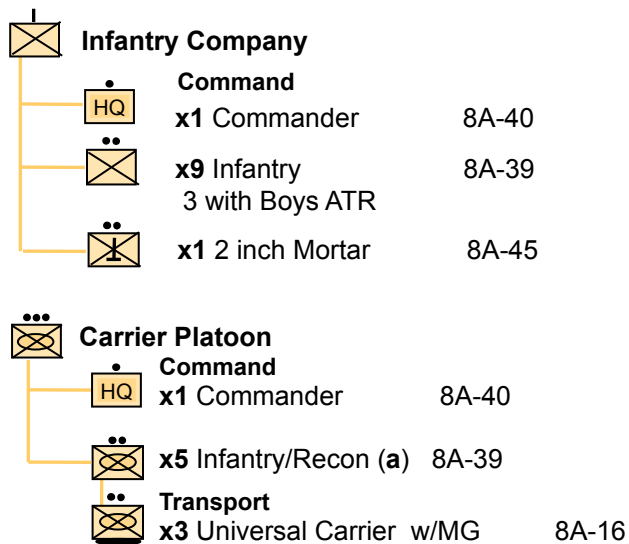
Deployment

All initial allied forces enter the board from the east side of the table.

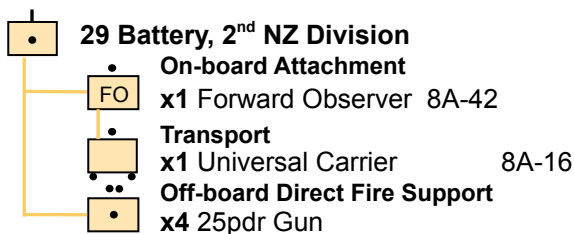
Allied Forces (all Experienced)



Maneuver Element Details



(a) May replace any or all with LMG; may replace one with Boys ATR, and/or 2 inch mortar when dismounting.



Briefing for German Commanding Commander, Oberstleutnant Harder, 361 Afrika Regiment

Recently withdrawn from the Tobruk front where your regiment was involved in the siege of that city, you have now been ordered to stem the advance of the Allied forces that are attempting to link up in their drive from the Egyptian border. Your soldiers have dug in as best they can in the hard stoney ground of this god-forsaken desert and now wait for the enemy advance.

You have been provided with no artillery to help hold this ground and will have to depend upon your own battalion mortars. Armour waits nearby, along with elements of your sister battalion, which defends the ground further west around an Arab rest station, to aid in any counterattack if the enemy successfully seizes the high ground you currently defend.

Word has reached your ear that General Suemmerman has snidely suggested that this battle will give your men, many former French Foreign Legion soldiers, the opportunity to regain "the name of good Germans". By God, you will show him how they can fight!

Deployment

Initial German forces (II Battalion) deploy anywhere west of ridge line, and begin in improved positions (see scenario specific rules regarding sangars.) Any units in the rocky ground adjacent to the escarpment are considered dug in.

88 Battery

This unit may be placed on board if desired at Point X, but is actually well to the west of this point, located adjacent to the rest house (designated "blockhouse" by the New Zealanders) beyond the Rugbet en Nbeidat wadi. The following special provisions will be in play for this unit.

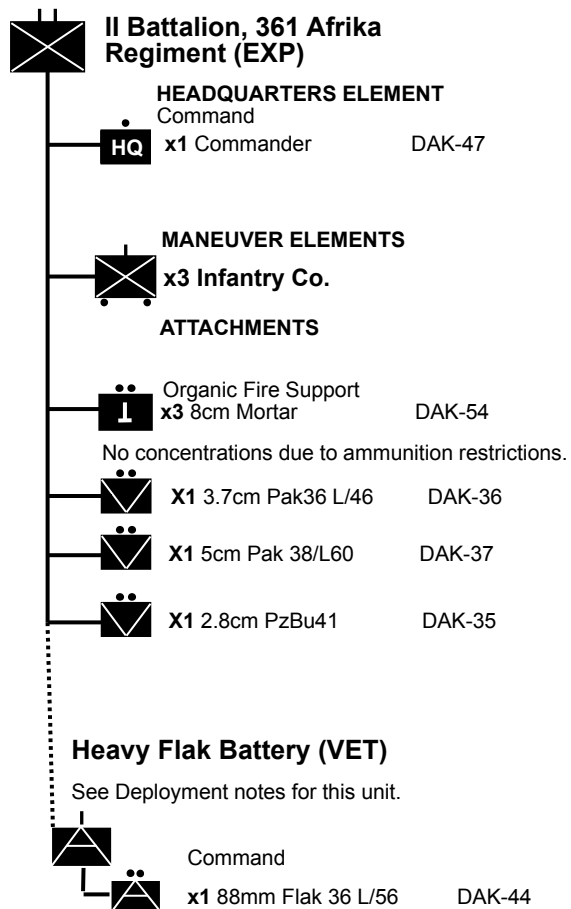
1. All fire directed at this battery will be at a suspected target in improved position, and must originate within 5" or west of the ridge line, using "X" as the LOS.
2. As the rest house is actually well to the west of "X", 10" will be added to all fire from or to the 88.
3. The 88 may be targeted by indirect fire once it has fired.

Reinforcing armour

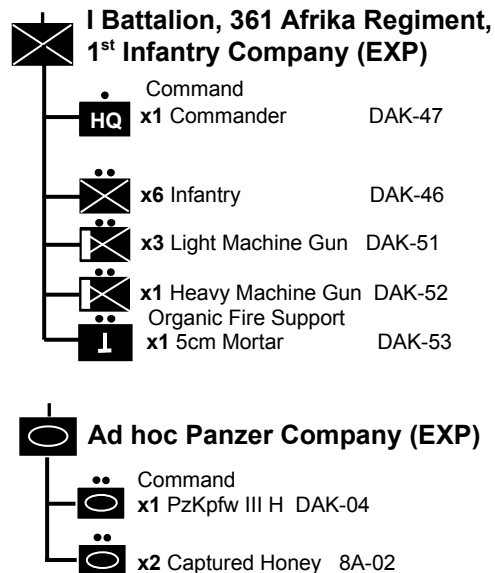
Captured Honeyes cannot be fired at or close assaulted for one complete turn after the point at which they are spotted, unless the Honeyes fire at an enemy unit, commit an overrun or initiate close combat (i.e. if spotted on the German player's maneuver phase, the Allied player will not be able to fire during that defensive fire phase or the following offensive fire phase). This is because to the confusion created by the arrival of captured tanks still flying friendly colours.



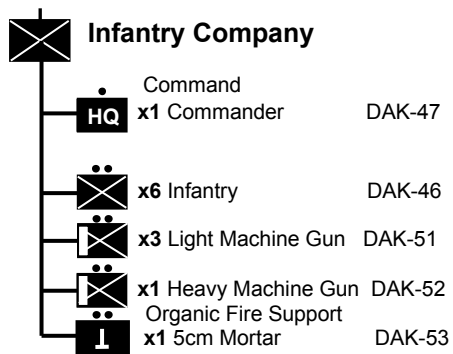
German Forces



German Forces Reinforcements



Maneuver Element Details



Historical Outcome

This scenario is based upon the initial New Zealand attack, prior to the reinforcement by two companies of 24th Battalion later in the day.

The New Zealand attack proceeded as planned, in two waves with the second following the first at about 800 yards. Initially the attack met with success, with the forces quickly securing the high ground and causing the surrender of around 200 Germans dug in in that area. But antitank fire quickly started to take its toll on the Valentines now exposed on the western slope of Pt. 175 and as the supporting infantry began to consolidate the recently won ground, German counterattacks supported by armour began to drive the 25th Battalion back. The hastily prepared plan of attack had completely failed to take into account the Rugbet en Nbeidat, a large wadi that unknown to McNaught ran in enfilade south and west of the battlefield, and this feature now allowed the enemy to infiltrate troops and armour around to attack the New Zealand flank.

By mid-afternoon most of the British tanks had been knocked out, and with no supporting armour C and D Companies were forced to surrender. McNaught had moved his command post well forward, and this too came under direct attack.

With McNaught severely wounded, help was requested from Brigade. Brigadier Barrowclough ordered in D Company of the 24th Battalion, which drove as close to the battle as possible via the foot of the escarpment, debussed and climbed the slope.

With McNaught no longer able to carry on, Lieut. Col. Shuttleworth of the 24th took over command late in the afternoon, bringing along a second company of reinforcements, C Company, to try to firm up the ground still held.

By the end of the day, less than half the hill remained in New Zealand hands. Both sides had lost heavily, with approximately eight German tanks knocked out while C Squadron only had two of its original 16 still fit for action.

On this Sunday of the Dead the 25th's casualties exceeded 350, with over 100 killed. In their first attack of the war, the battalion had lost more men in a single day than would any other New Zealand unit for the remainder of WWII.

Designer's Notes

In designing this scenario I had to, in the end, make a few “best guess” decisions around the composition of the German forces. Primarily, this was in regard to the armour that made itself present part way through the battle. In various accounts it has been identified by New Zealand troops as Panzer III's, Panzer IV's, Italian light tanks and/or captured British Valentines.

I was unable to come up with any definitive answer as to what was present on that day. 15th and 21st Panzer were both in lager in the immediate area on the night of the 22nd/23rd, but moved off to do battle at Sidi Rezegh that morning before the New Zealand attack commenced. Prior to the attack the New Zealand commanders were expecting to encounter captured British tanks, quite possibly Honeys ambushed and captured nearby the night before. Others have surmised that the armour was misidentified Panzerjaeger I's of Pz.Jg.Abt. 605, a company of which was supposedly attached to Regiment 361 at this time.

In the end I opted for an ad hoc armour group composed of Pz. III's and captured Honeys, trying to strike a balance that reflected the nature of the battle on that day and closest to the eye witness accounts.

Many thanks to Phil Callcott and others on the Battlefront forum who, as always, have offered important bits of information that have helped me puzzle out this scenario.

Bibliography

There is a plethora of good accounts for this battle on the invaluable site, NZETC.org, from the view point of almost all of the NZ participants.

Point 175, The Battle of Sunday of the Dead by W.E Murphy

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The Relief of Tobruk by W.E. Murphy

<http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Tobr.html>

2nd New Zealand Divisional Artillery by W.E. Murphy

<http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Arti.html>

25 Battalion by Lieut. General Sir Edward Puttick

<http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2-25Ba.html>

Other web references include:

The Crusader Project

<http://crusaderproject.wordpress.com/>

The New Zealanders at Sidi Rezegh

<http://www.sidirezegh.com/Menus/Home.php>

Information on the 361 Afrika Regiment

<http://www.feldgrau.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=24&t=32295&p=233610&hilit=361#p233610>

Das Afrika Korps by Franz Kurowski

