

Operation Supercharge II
New Zealand 24 Battalion's Attack at Tebaga Gap
Tunisia, March 26, 1943
A Battlefield WWII Scenario by Bill Slavin



Scenario

The 8th Army's pursuit of the Axis forces into southern Tunisia has been brought up short by the stiff defences of the Mareth Line. Built by the French before the war the line is a heavily fortified position running from the sea inland to Tujane in the Matmata Hills.

Beyond the hills lies the Dahar, desert country considered impassable by the French at the time of the Mareth Line construction. But the advent of four wheel drive and tracked vehicles has put this surmise into question and both sides are well aware of the possibilities afforded by a flanking attack. To this end Montgomery develops Operation Pugilist, a two-pronged attack that will simultaneously renew the assault on the line while sending the newly formed New Zealand Corps in a left hook through the desert to attack to the north at Tebaga Gap.

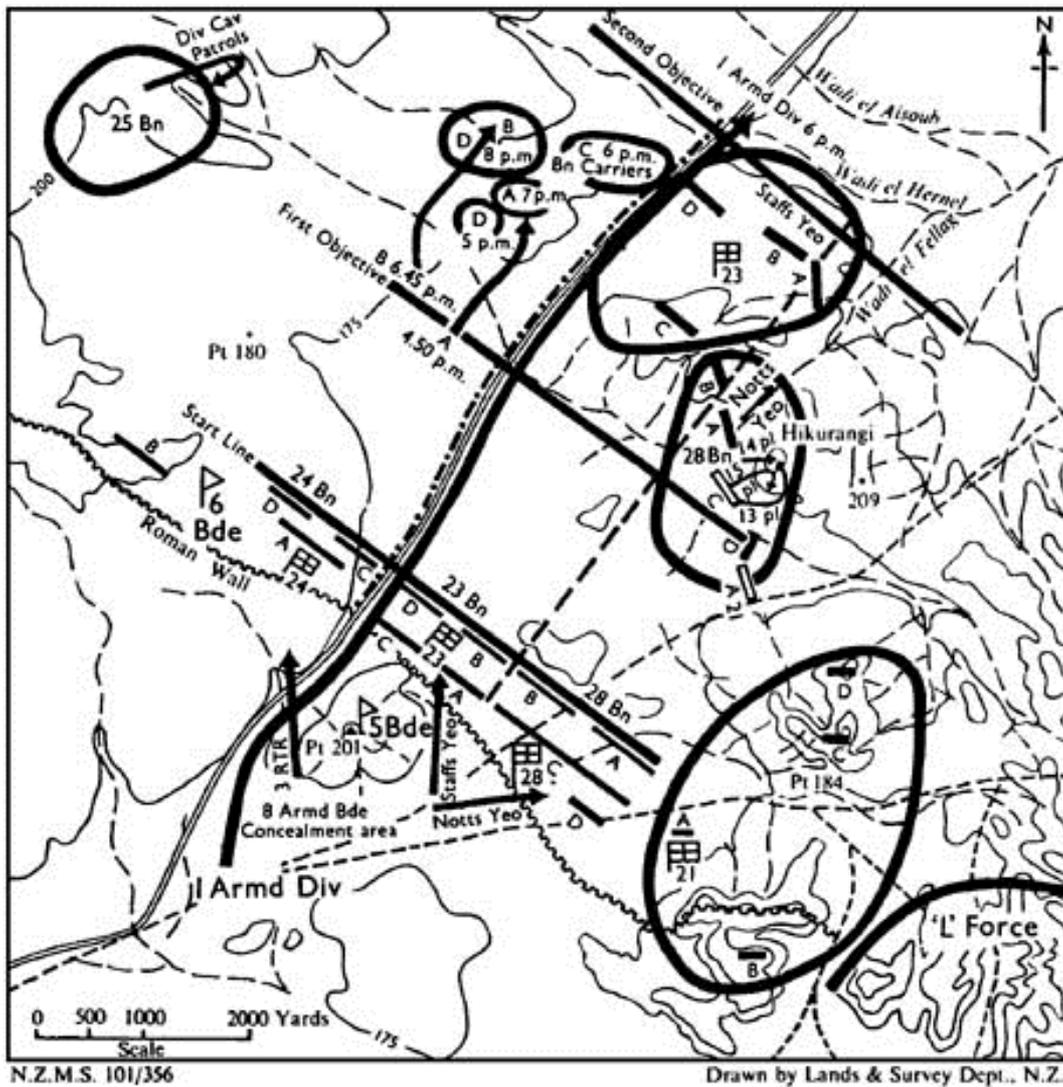
Three and a half miles wide at its narrowest and anchored between Djebel Tebaga on the south and Djebel Maleb to the north, Tebaga Gap lies just southwest of Gabes. Originally held by the Saharian Group, a disparate group of Italians commanded by General Mannerini, the launch of

Operation Pugilist on March 20 initiated a slow and incremental battering that has reduced the force to mere remnants. But as the New Zealand Corps consolidates its positions in and around the gap, the survivors of this force are now "reinforced" by the 21st Panzer and 164 Light Divisions, taking over the defensive line bridging the gap. On March 23 command for this sector passes over to Major-General von Liebenstein of 164 Light Division.

By March 24, Operation Pugilist has pretty well run its course, with XXX Corps failing to achieve a breakthrough to the south. Montgomery now switches the main offensive to the north, sending his reserve X Corps through the desert to join up with and absorb NZ Corps and support its attack.

By March 26 plans are in place for a Blitzkrieg-like operation, now dubbed Operation Supercharge II. With close cooperation between the Western Desert Air Force, artillery and ground forces the intention is to force a breakthrough at Tebaga Gap and allow 1st Armoured Division to exploit beyond towards El Hamma. This will be the first occasion in this war that Allied air support has worked in such direct support and close cooperation with ground forces in a combined attack.

This scenario covers the attack of 24 Battalion and 3RTR on the afternoon of March 26, 1943 west of the El Hamma road.



OPERATION SUPERCHARGE. THE BREAKTHROUGH AT TEBAGA GAP,
26 MARCH

Duration

20 Turns (first 3 turns air attacks only).

Scenario Specific Rules

Dust Clouds (Optional)

- Every moving vehicle moving trails a 1.5" X 1.5" dust cloud, which acts as smoke for spotting purposes.
- This is considered to originate halfway along the model, obscuring observation to the rear but not the vehicle's side aiming point.
- It is removed at the beginning of the subsequent movement phase if the vehicle remains stationary.
- Vehicles creating dust are spotted normally, but the dust cloud is visible anywhere within Line of

Sight and the center of the cloud may be targeted in any manner by indirect fire.

Turn Sequence

Turn 1

Kittyhawks appear, bomb and strafe enemy positions. Any marker may be targeted on the board and north of the rolling barrage line once that begins on Turn 4 (the barrage was used as a bomblines by the Kittyhawks).

Turn 2

Targeted artillery attacks begin. See "Artillery Tasks" below.

Turn 4

Creeping barrage enters south end of board. Barrage covers one foot of board per turn. See scenario specific "Barrage" below.

German armour reinforcements may start to arrive.

Turn 5

B and C Squadrons (Shermans and Grants) enter board

A Squadron (Crusaders) enters board along with 24 Battalion carrier platoon.

Turn 6

24 Battalion and any attached units may enter board on this or any following turn.

Turn 9

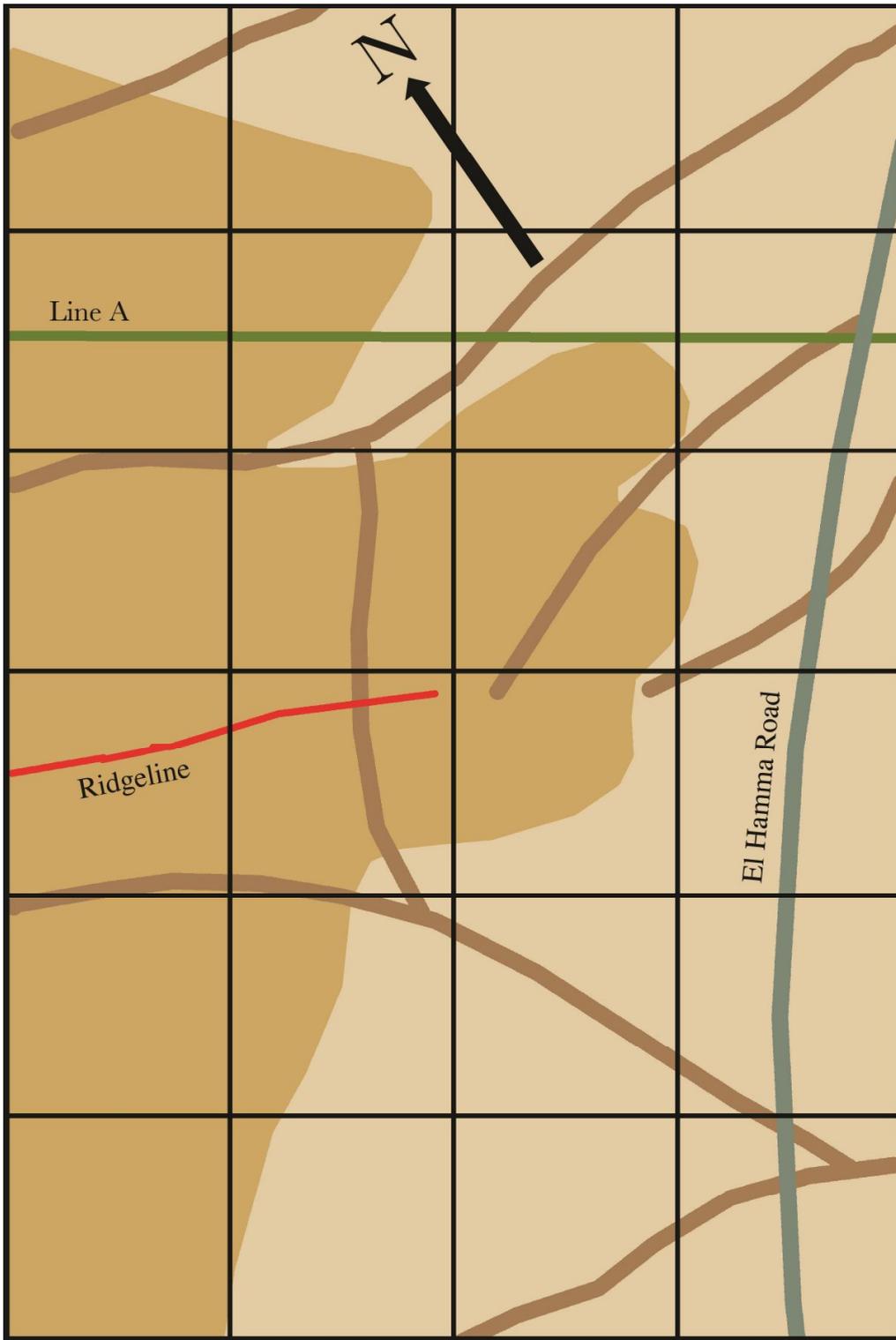
Air attacks end as barrage reaches north side of board.

Turn 10

Barrage and artillery tasks end this turn as barrage exits north end of board.

Turn 16

British armour must have exited north side of board by the end of this turn in order to fulfill winning victory conditions.



Terrain Notes

Ridgeline: Units within 2" of the ridgeline either side may spot over (and be spotted).

Wadis: (Brown lines) Treat wadis as "shallow ditch".

El Hamma road is treated the same as surrounding terrain (no road movement) but negates wadis.

Victory Conditions

Note – casualties and exited vehicles are calculated from the 3 RTR only. 24 Battalion casualties do not count toward victory conditions

Major New Zealand Victory

All surviving 3 RTR vehicles exited off north side of board, with total RTR losses less than 25% and no German armour left on the board by the end of Turn 16. No undisordered German or Italian units left on board by game's end.

Minor New Zealand Victory

All surviving 3 RTR vehicles exited off north side of board, with total RTR losses less than 50% and no German armour left on the board by the end of Turn 16. No undisordered German or Italian units left south of Line A.

Major Axis Victory

3 RTR fail to exit all of their vehicles off north end of board (regardless of losses) by Turn 16 and undisordered friendly units still occupy positions south of Line A by game's end.

Minor Axis Victory

Undisordered friendly units still occupy positions south of Line A by game's end.

Draw

Any other result is considered a draw.

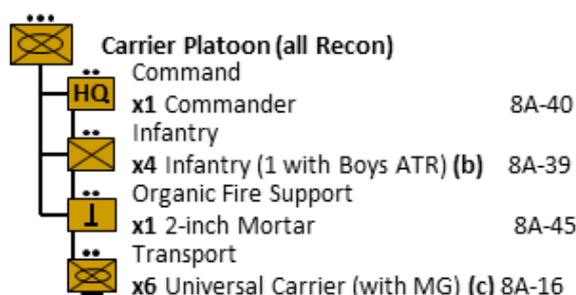
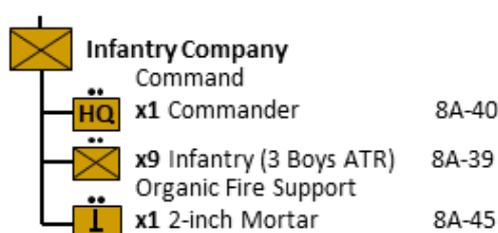
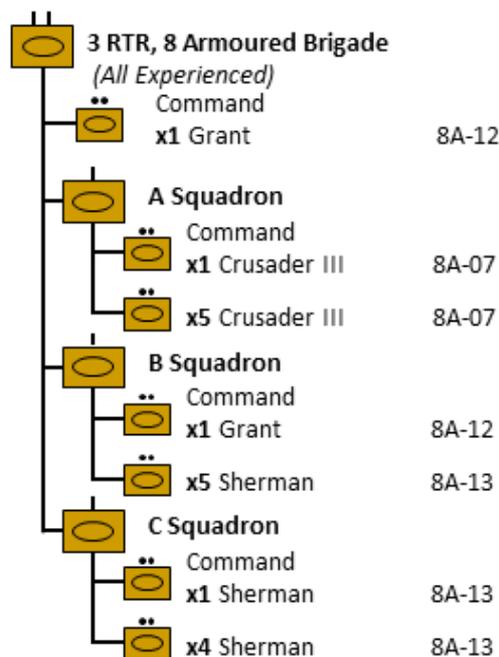
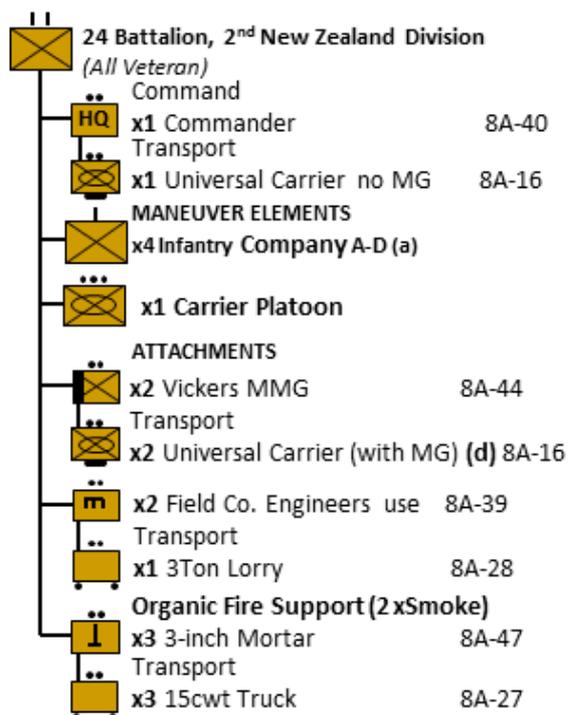
Briefing for New Zealand Commanding Officer, 24 Battalion

You are in command of the left flank of the two brigade attack Operation Supercharge II, designed to break the enemy defences in the Tebaga Gap in a Blitzkrieg-like attack. For the first time in this war Allied air, artillery and ground forces will be operating in close cooperation in the hope of creating a breach, allowing X Corps First Armoured Division to exploit beyond to El Hamma. Operating on your right is 5 Infantry Brigade's 23 Battalion and 28 (Maori) Battalion, and superimposed across your entire front will be the tanks of the 8th Armoured Brigade, with an entire regiment of tanks committed in support of each infantry battalion. You will be supported by the Shermans, Grants and Crusaders of the 3 Royal Tanks, but the task of taking and securing the high ground ahead of you will be yours and yours alone. Although the armour is in support, their orders are to press on to the second objective in order to achieve the desired breakthrough, and not to be held back in support of the infantry objectives.

Following initial low level bombing and strafing by the Western Desert Air Force all available guns will initiate a creeping barrage which will advance through the enemy positions. Ahead of the barrage air attacks will continue on enemy positions. After the armour has initiated its advance your troops are to follow, mopping up by-passed positions and securing the high ground that dominates the El Hamma Road before moving to consolidate on the second objective.

Deployment

All units enter anywhere on the south side of the board, as dictated by Turn Sequence above.



(a) As happened historically, up to 3 stands of C Company infantry may be committed in a tank rider role.

(b) The Carrier Infantry may alternatively dismount as:
Bren Light Machine Gun 8A-43

(c) Carriers fire without Machine Gun rating when infantry dismount as Bren LMGs.

(d) Carriers fire without Machine Gun rating when the MMG dismount

Artillery Support

(Pre-assigned fire only)

Battery, 2 Field Regiment

C x2 concentration templates (0V, +1TGsV)

Battery, 69 Medium Field Artillery Regiment

C x2 concentration templates (+1V, +2TGsV)

Barrage, 5 Field Regiment

C -2V, -1TGsV – see rules below

Air Support

K x2 Kittyhawk MkIIA P40L 8A-P01
2 aircraft/turn turns 1-8

Air Support

From Turn 1 until Turn 8 two Kittyhawks (rated experienced) each turn may attack any hidden unit marker(s) on the board. This can take place as a strafing or horizontal bombing attack, but no second pass is permitted. Attacks must be above (northeast) of the creeping barrage line once it begins on Turn 4.

Resolve air attacks and AA fire normally.

Barrage

A creeping barrage laid down by 25 pdrs. of the 5th Field Regiment enters the south edge of the table on Turn 4, 12" deep and spanning the table. It will advance 12" per turn, but results are calculated at an additional -1 (i.e. -2 for armour, -1 for troops and guns). This is to reflect the rapid pace of the barrage. Historically the barrage served as a bombing line for the Kittyhawks. Dust raised by the barrage will be treated as "smoke" (down 2 on spotting table).

Artillery Tasks

Beginning Turn 2, one battery from 2 Field Regiment may lay down one two template concentration per turn during the barrage centered on any hidden markers. Alternatively it may fire smoke (two templates) for two of those rounds.

Beginning Turn 2 one battery from 69 Medium Field Artillery Regiment may lay down one two template concentration *every other turn* during the barrage centered on any hidden markers (total of four missions). Alternatively they may fire smoke (two templates) for one of those rounds.

All the above missions must be mapped prior to the beginning of the game and after hidden unit markers are placed.

Following the barrage (turn 9) there is no off table fire support.

Note that the artillery concentrations, the barrage, and airstrikes do not receive a "blind fire" modifier when attacking hidden counters.

Briefing for Axis Commanding Officer

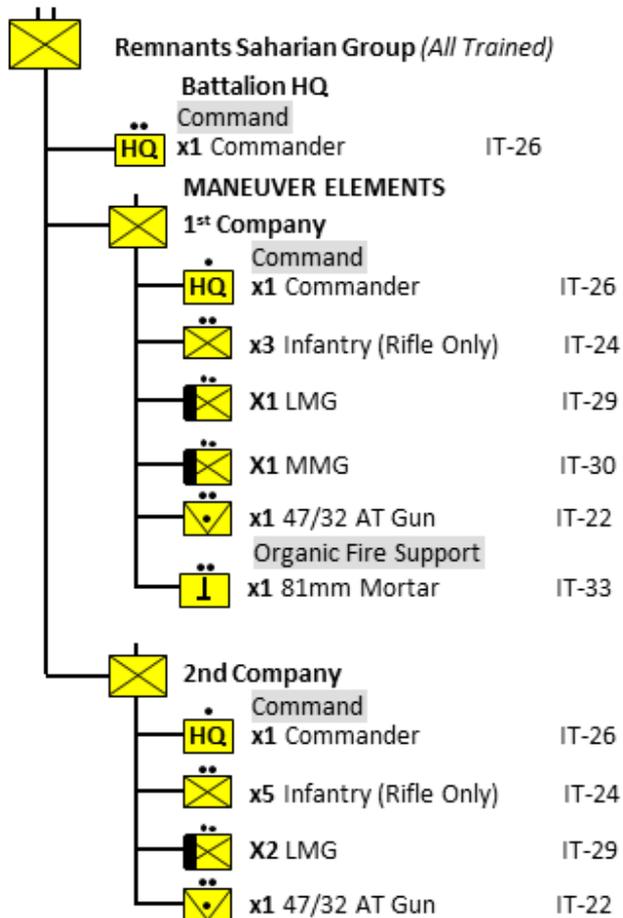
Over the past few days your forces have been re-positioning in order to confront the developing threat at the Tebaga Gap. All indications now are that the enemy is preparing for a major attempt to breach the gap's defences, and you have gone completely over to the defensive in this sector. Positions here are not as well-developed as you would have hoped, but your troops are nevertheless well dug in and prepared for the worst, as they "stiffen" the defence of the smattering of Italian troops still positioned here. All through the night and this morning you have been undergoing intense low level bombardment from the air, and half of your supporting artillery to the rear is reported knocked out. The tanks of the 21st Panzer Division, supporting across the front, are having difficulty moving forward as they are under continued attack by enemy aircraft, inflicting devastating losses.

Now, as you continue to be harassed by air, a creeping artillery barrage spanning the entire front has erupted and is moving through your positions. The dust thrown up by the barrage, the unrelenting air attacks, and the damned late afternoon sun shining directly in your eyes makes it difficult to determine the strength and location of the enemy, but without doubt there is an unbroken line of enemy armour advancing towards you.

You must hold the high ground west of the El Hamma road at all costs and prevent the enemy armour from passing through your positions in order to prevent an enemy breakthrough and encirclement to the rear of the Mareth Line.

Deployment

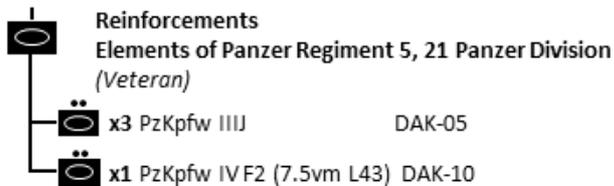
You may position your forces anywhere 6" from the south end of the table. All units begin dug in, employing hidden unit markers as usual.



Minefields and fortifications

In addition to dug in positions the Axis player may place the following:

1. Nine hidden minefields of 1" X 2" dimensions anywhere on the table, four mixed and five antitank. (These should only be known to the Axis commander).
2. 6 inches of barbed wire. This is spotted as "troops, dug in" and should be indicated by hidden unit markers.
3. One concrete pillbox, spotted as "troops, dug in".



Because of harassment by tank-busting Hurricanes of the Western Desert Air Force, the tanks of the 21 Panzer Division, spread over the entire Tebaga Gap front, had difficulties reaching the battle in appreciable numbers. To reflect this, each turn beginning Turn 4 through to Turn 12 there is a 20% chance elements of Pz. Regiment 5 will enter the board from the Axis side during the Axis maneuver phase (1 or 2 on D10).

If the die roll indicates their arrival, roll a second time on a D10 to see what arrives:

1-8 1-3 PzIII's (roll a D6, 1-2 1 tank, 3-4 2 tanks, 5-6 3 tanks)

9-10 1 PzIV

No more than four German tanks may arrive during the game. All are considered to be part of the same Maneuver Element. They determine their percentage of casualties for Maneuver check purposes as if all 4 were available (1 tank lost = 25%). While none are designated as command in the order of battle, one may take command after arrival, and will be considered to command the entire element. If subsequent die rolls indicate more tanks of that model than there are available, merely enter the remaining number of that type. If none are left of the designated type, enter one of the other type. Continue in this manner until all German tanks have arrived or the end of Turn 12 is reached. If any German tanks have not arrived by turn 12, they are lost, but do not count as casualties against the Maneuver Element.

German armour may not advance south of the ridge at any point during the game.



Historical Outcome

After stumbling onto a minefield strung out below the ridge on the high ground west of the El Hamma road, 3 RTR swung to the east, bunching up as they pushed on towards their second objective. The first objective (roughly corresponding with the bottom of the map) had been reached relatively easily, other than some sporadic shelling. But because the barrage was moving at such a quick pace, the following infantry found that a number of positions, previously overrun by the advancing armour, had been reoccupied by enemy troops.

Only C Company and the battalion carriers, advancing on the right flank behind the armour, reached their objectives more or less on schedule (1800 hours), suffering most of their casualties from enfilading fire from the high ground on their right flank still held by the enemy. Although the corridor along the El Hamma road was forced fairly quickly, it wasn't until after dark that 24 Battalion had finally cleared the ridge and surrounding area of the enemy.

However, Operation Supercharge was a resounding success, heralding in for the first time, close cooperation between Allied ground and air forces. 23 Battalion on the right of the El Hamma road, operating in flat country, achieved its objectives more or less on schedule, but it wasn't until the next day that the Maori Battalion (28th) was finally able to clear Hill 209.

24th Battalion's casualties numbered 52 killed and 62 wounded, with the high proportion of those killed attesting to the viciousness of the fighting. But as a result of the attacks on March 26 by the New Zealand Corps, 1st Armoured Division was able to exploit through the German defences at Tebaga Gap, finally breaking the deadlock at the Mareth Line.

Designer's Notes

I have taken some liberties with the historical record, filling in blanks as necessary with an eye on game balance. Probably more German armour is available as reinforcements here than there would have been historically. And although I couldn't find exact numbers or dispositions of the defending troops, the defenders certainly outnumbered the attackers, but clearly without the same advantages in armour, air and artillery support. Records identify them as the 1st Battalion, 125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 164 Light Division, supported by an unknown number of Italian troops, remnants of the Saharian Group.

Establishing victory conditions in this scenario presented a special problem, as historically the 3 RTR was directed to push ahead towards its second objective and not get bogged down in supporting the 24th Battalion's attack. But because of the increase I have allowed in German armour, it just didn't make sense that 3 RTR would exit and leave the Kiwis to fend for themselves, so I have tried to come up with a formula that reflects this while maintaining game balance.

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