

The 'Desert War' Of The British-Indian Army

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Abstract

Introduction

North Africa was an important theatre of operations during the Second World War where the Indian troops were called upon to fight with the Commonwealth forces. The struggle lasted for three years, over an area of two million square miles which in total came to be known as the North African Campaign. Military campaigns are strictly conditioned by the topography of a country in which they are fought. Battles tend to become a struggle against the physical features of a country as much against the personnel of an adversary's army. In the North African campaign, the participation of the Indian troops occurred in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia.[1] Geographically North Africa is a part of the African continent lying between Mediterranean Sea and 20th parallel north of the Equator. Bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on

the north, Suez Canal and Red Sea on the east, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and French West Africa on the south and North Atlantic Ocean. Egypt was divided into two divisions. Upper and Lower Egypt. One on the east of Alexandria and the other to the west. Lower Egypt became the base and line of communications area and the Western portion also known as the Western Desert was the operational area. In military communications, Lower Egypt was always referred to as the Delta. The Libyan Plateau also played a decisive role in the North African Campaign. Finally, the third unit of the theatre was Tunisia.

The Physical Geography Of North Africa

The climate of Africa is said to be uniformly hot throughout the year. The atmosphere is dry with because of prevailing moisture less winds accompanied by sandstorms named Khamsin, Sirocco and Harmattan. All these winds lose their moisture over the Sahara Desert causing excessive precipitation which lowers the temperature. Rainfall is very little. Rain seldom falls in Upper Egypt and in Lower Egypt it falls irregularly. It falls at long intervals, and it comes in bursts of storms. North Africa has a population of over thirty-three million inhabitants out of which nine-tenths are Muslims. The sand dunes, rocky soil and marshy lands alternating with deeply cut ravines called '*wadis*', together with normal desert conditions greatly influenced the fighting in North Africa which could be expressed only by the term 'desert warfare'. [2] They

are river channels or watercourses with very steep banks and affect military operations the same way as a river. The wells or '*birs*' had an importance of their own in the North African campaign. Besides being the coveted sources of water supply they were practically the only landmarks in the desert void of any other distinguishing feature. They guided the troops in their operational movements and were the only means of naming objectives.

The roads of North Africa fell into three conventional divisions named the main roads, secondary roads and the foot- tracks. The main roads were for the heavy motor traffic. The secondary tracks were narrow and incapable of taking heavy motor traffic. The foot tracks were good enough only for foot or animals and could be enlarged into secondary roads during emergency and served as linkages between the desert tracks and main roads. With no particular width the road bound vehicles, vast number of tracks, trucks and artillery vehicles could be seen moving all abreast in the interior of the desert on a stretch of three to five miles which later came to be known as 'desert formation'.^[3] Each road trip entailed a climb of more than 2000 feet under load and difficult track frequently, under considerable fire and later in complete darkness.^[4] Railways were necessary but inadequate and unsatisfactory. Other railway tracks in Egypt served as the base and lines of communication areas and were linked to the desert railways.

The Birth Of The 4th Indian Division

After since being colonised by Britain, India never had any relaxation for military preparedness. International situations were never easy. The 1935 plan led to considerable planning in India and a comprehensive project for sending troops overseas. It was finally executed in 1937 with modifications and additions consisted of four schemes under which troops were to be sent out of India. There were Scheme M for Singapore, Scheme R for Burma, Scheme P for Iran, and Scheme E for Egypt which also included Scheme A for Aden.[5] Thus to Scheme E was assigned the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade and to Scheme A the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment. These troops were to have a maximum state of readiness without exceeding the normal peacetime expenditure laid down for establishment control. In 1938, the obvious and transparent name Scheme E for Egypt was changed into the code-name Heron as a security precaution. Scheme A, which was to be a part of Heron, was renamed Scheme Hawk. The Army Headquarters of India accordingly had also prepared a second contingent of Force Heron which came to be known as Heron II or Heron two, the first being renamed as Heron I or Heron one.[6] The Heron II consisted of: HQ 4th Indian Infantry Division, 10th Indian Infantry Brigade, 6th Medium Regiment, 4th Field Regiment, 44th Divisional Headquarters Company Sappers and Miners, 24th Field Company Sappers and Miners, One Company 3rd divisional

Signals, One Indian General Hospital and other ancillary units. Heron and Hawk were put into operation from 1st October but halted on 3rd December. But the attempted implementation of Heron and Hawk proved to be a good rehearsal with several defects being discovered and rectified.[7] But with the war clouds darkening the international horizon 26th July 1939 was decided to be the date of embarkation of the Heron one scheme to be implemented. The troops consisted of the 11th Infantry Brigade and the 4th Field Regiment RA. The Brigade which was then commanded by Brigadier A.B McPherson, consisted of the 2nd Battalion the Cameron Highlanders, 1st Battalion the 6th Rajputana Rifles and the 4th Battalion the 7th Rajput Regiment. The force numbered a little over 5000 men. On 4th August Heron two was changed into the code-name Force K4. To Force K4 was allotted the 9th (Jhansi) Brigade which later came to be known as the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade. [8] With the approach of August 1939, the rumbles of the coming war began to grow louder, and India accelerated her pace of preparations. Cars, buses, and lorries were required for carrying the officers, personal kits, and equipment of troops. About 1,000 lorries were necessary to carry reserve rations for 150 days. All of these were sent in advance by the Red Sea. But all these arrangements had to be cancelled when the war broke out as the Red Sea had become very unsafe. On 5 October the Force Headquarters was reorganised and named

Headquarters 4th Indian Division. Thus the 4th Indian Division was born in the surroundings of the pyramids of Egypt. It came into existence because of the two merging forces—Heron one and K4. Major—General P.G.Scarlet became its first commander.

The March Begins

The 4th Indian Division which was then at Mena under Major- General Sir Philip Neame continued to train, reinforce, and equip itself, waiting for further orders. Even the cavalry regiment from India named the Central India Horse reached its destination Naghamish. The movement was carried out in groups. The desert, the road, and the rail. The desert group consisted of desert-worthy vehicles, which could endure the strain of a cross-desert journey. The road group contained the second-best vehicles, and the rail group had the chiefly tracked transport and motorcycles. The routes were marked out by placing empty tar- barrels at intervals. The Old Barrel route which started from Kilometre 42 on the road Mena-Alexandria, proceeded west, north-west, and then again north ending at Fuka was already in existence and the New Tar Barrel Route was marked out. It started from Kilometre 3 and ended at Garawla. The former lay to the north, north-west and west, while the latter lay to its south. The total cross desert distance involved in the march was 290 miles.[10] The column was divided into three groups, the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, the Divisional Headquarters and the 1st Field

Regiment RA. Throughout the march conditions were such as to demand a high standard of driving. No cover from air was possible. Owing to the ruggedness of the ground, frequent light repairs to vehicles were necessary on the way. In addition, orders had to be issued in advance and requisite arrangements made for the vehicle which had to be abandoned. Communication from the tail to the head of the march was always a slow affair whenever wireless silence was ordered. It could be done only by vehicles having messages overtaking the other vehicles. Strict march discipline was found to be essential to prevent vehicles wandering away from the column and getting lost. Rate of petrol consumption and expenditure for it was heavy owing to the use of low gear. Even consumption of water was very high for the vehicle radiators due to the hot winds following the convoy. About 10 gallons per vehicle for a forty-mile journey was needed.

On their arrival to the Naghamish Area all vehicles except those required forward were designated in the "waggon line". The rail parties arrived, and they carried half of the Bren guns of all infantry battalions. The other half were with the desert column. The Aircraft of the Royal Air Force was held in readiness to provide protection to the detraining parties in case there was bombing from the Italian Air Force.[12] Night journeys were not performed to avoid showing lights after dark. Co-ordination during the move was

ensured by ordering that a representative from each serial should liaise with the serial which preceded and followed its own. On arrival to the respective areas allotted to them, all units of the 4th Indian division started digging themselves in. The work of preparing the defensive positions continued until the end of the month. By that time the division was further strengthened by the arrival of several other units like 7th Medium Regiment RA, Headquarters 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, 2 Camerons, 1 Rajputana Rifles, one company 4 Rajput Regiment, 1 Northumberland Fusiliers and Headquarters Royal Engineers. There was no fighting in the area immediately ahead of the 4th Indian Division. It was then believed that the Italians would launch their attack at no distant date. Simultaneously, defensive preparations were ordered to be accelerated. Anti-tank mines were ordered to be drawn as rapidly as possible and stored under the brigade arrangements in the forward area. A demand for 20,000 mines had already been placed on the British authorities in Egypt.

The Italian Military Force In The Desert

While the 4th Indian Division was digging at Naghamish, the western frontier of Egypt about 150 miles away was guarded by the 7th Armoured Brigade and other tank and ancillary units. Its main task was to patrol the frontier and harass the Italians by attacking their outposts, convoys, and patrols. But these activities were causing a lot of damage

to the armoured vehicles. And the lack of spare parts to replace the damages resulted in a rapid deterioration in the tanks that were working. By the end of July 1940, only 200 out of 306 tanks were working. General Wavell concluded that if such a state continued most of his tanks would be out of order by the time the Italians would start advancing. The remedy for this problem was that the composition of force guarding the Egyptian Frontier had to be changed. Now there was only a Support Group doing the job with the skilful use of dummy tanks.

On the other hand, the Italian forces were growing in numbers and their artillery was more active than before. In six weeks, the Italians made their first major move and started the fighting in North Africa. They were instructed to listen to messages whenever required from the enemy signals.[15] The Italians had prepared their defences in three places. The first was Capuzzo, an old desert force with a water pipeline and an airfield in the neighbourhood. It was a focal point for several roads and tracks converging on it from all the points of the compass. Then there was Bardia, which had neither a fort nor an aerodrome, nor was it a junction of roads. Its importance lay in the fact that it served as an advanced base for the invasion of Egypt. The Italians had fortified the area around the town round to the depth of seven to eight miles, with wires, minefields, tank traps, machine gun posts, gun emplacements and the rest. Thereafter, 45 miles to the

south-west of Bardia, there lay the third Italian defensive position, Gabr Saleh. This was merely a camp and a defence post for the protection some Italian dumps.[16] In all these three localities, Capuzzo, Bardia and Gabr Saleh the defences were built on same pattern and were all designed to withstand tank and infantry attacks. At Capuzzo, defences took the form of an outer and inner line of trenches and dugouts, the outer line being at 500 yards and the inner 30 yards from the fort. This double line was protected by another line of anti-tank mines and ditches. Gaps were left in the western line of the defensive system somewhere in the centre of the aerodrome, to enable aircraft to land and take off. The dugouts were mostly small, with a capacity of one or two men and were possibly used to store ammunition and provisions. They were interspersed with gun-emplacements for anti-tank, anti-aircraft and machine guns and related to communicating trenches. The defences were strongest in the north-east, opposite to the line of the Allied artillery fire.

The Bardia defences had a fortified perimeter, about 17 miles in circumference. Each post was designed to hold two or more medium machine-guns and one or more anti-tank guns. Every post was surrounded by a circular, concreted, anti-tank ditch and a wire obstacle. The perimeter was also protected by a continuous wire-fencing and several anti-tank trenches, reinforced at weaker spots by mined patches. The forward posts were supported by another line of posts, 500

yards in the rear, unprotected by wire or anti-tank obstacles. The perimeter defences of Gabr Saleh were constructed in the same way as those at Capuzzo. All these defences, as believed, were constructed at a remarkable speed, but why did the Italians spend so much time and energy in building those hurried defences when they were to advance in the war shortly is not easy to understand. Probably they didn't intend to advance immediately and were waiting for the first move from the Allied side. Thus, for some time, there were only some mutual bombings from the air.

Some of the planes came into the notice of Allied observers as they were seen from the air, on the landing ground of Derna. They were reported to be very large bomber-transport, capable of carrying up to 50 lightly equipped men. But the Italian medium tanks of that time were not so effective. They were clumsy in their movement and had no wireless aerials, they were more heavily armoured in the front than at the sides and were therefore constantly obliged to turn to any gun that opened fired on them. Even this front armour was not sufficiently thick and could be penetrated by the British anti-tank guns from 400 yards. Even the Italian light tanks had difficulty in firing while on the move and were therefore obliged to halt to aim and became easy targets to the enemy firing range. Stones of more than nine inches diameter constituted a partial obstacle for any Italian tank. Therefore, larger boulders were scattered at intervals which

automatically slowed them down for side-tracking them into anti-tank positions. The Italians were also reported to have used a particular kind of missile called the “flaming onions”. They were luminous, spherical objects in red, green, and white colours. They travelled at a comparatively slower speed and appeared to cause no damage but when first seen they were quite unnerving. Later, they came to be regarded as harmless objects.

The 4th Indian Division received orders on the 11 September, to withdraw to Baqqush. The withdrawal was a practice move to be rehearsed for actual operations. Its intention was to put on the division the job of preparing and holding a rear position. The next few days witnessed two principal troop movements in Libya and Egypt: the forward move of Italy's North African Army better known as the Italian Tenth Army, towards Sidi Barrani, and the rearward move of the 4th Indian Division towards Baqqush.[19] Surprisingly, the Allied intelligence service didn't succeed in foreseeing or forecasting the Italian advance. The intelligence experts of the Allied forces evaluated the movement of mechanical transport as a signal indicating that the invasion of Egypt had commenced. They seemed to have overlooked the possibility that Italian formations might not be fully motorised, except some specially constituted mobile columns. Few vehicles moving indicated small units or columns moving which could involve one or more divisions.

The Italian Army stepped up with air attacks. It intensified its bombing of the Allied rail terminus at Matruh while they stuck harder at the Italian aerodromes and their seaplane bases. The aim of each side was to attack the supply bases and communications of the other. During the first half of September 1940, the Allied air activity was directed towards bombing the Italian aerodromes at Tmimi, Tobruk and Derna and the seaplane places at Bomba and Gazala. Strategic reconnaissance flights were undertaken to keep a watch on concentrations and movement of Italian troops and vehicles. These flights also tried to discover whether the Italian Tenth Army was making any move southwards to capture the Siwa Oasis – a position of tactical importance on the southern flank. The Italian Army on the other hand was confined to bombing attacks on Matruh with a view to damage the railhead. All attacks were on the same pattern, coming in waves at an elevation of 16,000 feet and causing some casualties and damage. The bombs dropped incendiary and came to be known as the Thermos bomb because of their resemblance in shape to a thermos flask. These bombs were small and had a delayed action, they would not explode on impact with ground but would go off if moved and blow up with fatal results. Their range of blast was for a hundred yards and could cause considerable nuisance. But once their nature was understood they could be destroyed from a distance by a rifle fire. So, they ceased to cause worry

to the troops after their nature and method of destruction was understood.

The Italian Attack

The war officially began with the Italians beginning shelling of the Allied positions on the frontier. The firing began from Capuzzo and Ramla at the Allied barracks and dumps in Sollum and Musaid. The weapons used were “Pompoms” and 105- and 152-mm guns. The tempo of their artillery increased after 4 September as a prelude to their advance towards Egypt. By 11 September a column of approximately 350 Italian vehicles had touched the frontier wire and the rest of the invading force was ranging all along the Egyptian Frontier in a north-south line. On the following day, the advanced elements crossed the border near Nazarin and reached the Egyptian territory.

The allied forces consisted of offensive patrols by a unit of the 3rd Coldstream guards and 2nd Rifle Brigade and a harassing fire unit by a unit of Royal Horse Artillery. When they evacuated Musaid and Sollum they were immediately occupied by the Italians being the first Egyptian towns captured by them. While the onward movement of the Tenth Italian Army continued, the 7th British Armoured Division was making attempts of making losses but were unable to halt or delay the advance. They also blocked the roads, destroyed, or mined them. Water wells were salted to accentuate the water scarcity. Meanwhile, the Italian columns while

continuing their move towards Sidi Barrani facing nothing more than resistance via artillery fire from a Battery of the Royal Horse Artillery while the Allies were themselves advancing towards Matruh. By 17 September, the Italian force reached and occupied Sidi Barrani.

The troops seemed to be well equipped with tanks, both light and medium and were making a liberal use of artillery. Their transport columns whether on the move or customary were protected by small field guns and anti-tank guns. Each group consisted of ten rows of five vehicles abreast and was led by a staff car 300 yards ahead. Screens of similar armed vehicles were used to provide flank protection up to 400 yards on each side. Not frequently the vehicles got separated from each other during the march but if so, one group waited for the other to join up before moving on again. Each column was self-contained as to defence being equipped with guns from 105-mm downwards. Heavy anti-aircraft guns were also found to be accompanying the column. Air protection by the fighters was also continuous during the move. But the weakness of this formation was that it presented an easy target for machine gun and artillery fire. During their move, 10 percent of the advancing vehicles were put out of action by the Allied gunners, also heavy casualties were inflicted in the infantry in the lorries. Even the armoured cars during the night halts were protected by being kept in a close league with the tanks along the perimeter. The forces

taking part in the Italian force were HQ XXI Corps which consisted of the 62nd Metropolitan Division, 63rd Metropolitan Division, 1st Blackshirt Division, 1st Libyan Division, 2nd Libyan Division, Maletti Mobile Group and the HQ XXII Corps which had the 4th Blackshirt Division and the Cantanzaro Division who were guarding the line of communication. The XXI Corps was Metropolitan Corps and consisted of the 62nd and 63rd Divisions which were all-white and motorised. The composition was a headquarters with signals, two infantry regiments of three battalions each, a medium machine gun battalion, a light tank battalion, a mechanical transport company, an anti-tank company and some other minor units. The establishment of each division totalled about 13,000 personnel. The Blackshirts did not have a divisional light tank battalion. They were a little inferior in equipment and training to the regular formations. Its artillery regiment had 36 guns. The withdrawal of the British troops were from those areas that were most stable and had least experience of trouble.

The Maletti Mobile Group which was a mobile column was to protect the Italian flank on the south of the advance. On the other side, the 4th Indian Division was to make a practice withdrawal to Baqqush, commencing on 14th September 1940. The first was always a night attack, silent without any artillery support, the second had to be a daylight attack with artillery support. Enemy losses amounted to 50 killed and 300 wounded whereas the Allied losses counted to 2 killed and 13

wounded.[26] This move was neither planned elaborately nor hedged with any precautions as experience said that was unnecessary. The only precaution taken was a blackout of vehicle headlights during the night march and a certain amount of dispersal throughout the day.[27] The workout of constructing the defences at Baqqush commenced immediately on the completion of the move. The Italian aircrafts kept track of the division and paid it occasional night-visits with the Thermos and High Explosive bombs. The total casualties out of these were only one officer, and about four other ranks of the division killed through the picking up of these bombs. The 4th Indian Division lacked anti-tank personnel and advantage was therefore taken of the presence of the New Zealand troops who gave them a tank hunting demonstration. As a result, two Indian Anti-tank companies became the first anti-tank units of the war to come into being. One for the 5th and the other for the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade.

The Allies decided to take a firm stand between Sidi Barrani and Alexandria. General Wavell ordered his forward troops to fall back fighting a delaying action, until the advancing force was drawn to an area favourable for attack. It was then to be engaged in a battle and destroyed on the spot Marshal Graziani decided to make a long halt at Sidi Barrani where he busied himself with constructing defence fortifications. What might have been a battle of Naghamish or

Baqqush ultimately became the Battle of Sidi Barrani. There was no indication of what the Italians intended to do, and so the 4th Indian Division speeded up its work of digging the defences expecting the Italians to reach that position in the next few days. Now the 4th Indian Division received orders from the Western Desert Force to move back to Naghamish by the 10th of October. This time the area was put under a sounder defensive footing. It was divided into two holding sections, namely the right and the left sectors. The 5th Indian Brigade was to defend the former and the 11th Infantry Brigade the latter. Until 20 October the division had no other activity other than reconnaissance, making practice moves over short distances and training. During that time there were three insignificant air raids over the divisional area.

On 21 October, the 4th Indian Division embarked on a journey which became the first operation in Cyrenaica. The operation consisted of a raid on the Italian camp undertaken by 2nd Cameron of the 11th Infantry Brigade, under orders from the 7th British Armoured Division. The raiding party which included a detachment of 'J' Battery 3rd Royal Horse Artillery set out on the 21 in transports provided by the 4th Indian Division and returned on 24th October. Its achievement consisted of eight Italian vehicles destroyed at the loss of 2 Cameron soldiers killed, 3 wounded and 3 missing. This was the first encounter of a unit of this division with the Italian troops on land. Before long, they discovered the the first clash

on air also. It happened on 31 October, when about 15 Italian aircraft bombed the divisional area of Naghamish, on their way to Matruh. They were at once engaged by the Royal Air Force fighters and there ensued the first aerial combat over the Divisional Headquarters resulting in a loss to the Italian air force of nine aircraft and to the Royal Air Force of Four. This bombing raid was the first serious notice taken by the Italians of the existence of the 4th Indian Division. By the last week of October, the fighting troops were switched from digging to active training. The mechanism was prone to breakdown and needed more training. "I" tanks were to be conserved as they were of priceless value in all operations co-operated with infantry. [29] Among the other things one thing that was really taken onto consideration was to get both the Allies and Italian troops so used to seeing training manoeuvres that when necessary, it would be possible to use training moves as a mask to conceal actual dispositions of the troops for battle. With that aim the training was made to approximate more closely than ever before to the actual fighting conditions. Realism was increased by occasional heavy dust storms which accompanied all practice moves.

Meanwhile, the 4th Indian Division decided to move forward, and the 7th Armoured Division decided to take rest and refit itself. The first unit to move forward was the divisional cavalry, the Central India Horse and took help of the Armoured Division to acquire knowledge and train on how to

face the Italians. The rapid rotation of beliefs was presumably designed to give practice to the units concerned as well as to accustom the Allied and Italian troops to regard those ceaseless movements having no regular particular significance.[31] It was fully realised that the Italians had the advantage of superiority in numbers both on the ground and in the air and there was in addition the supreme difficulty of maintaining a fighting force so far forward from the railhead at Matruh. It was hoped that these disadvantages would be overcome by the superior training, equipment, and mobility of the Allied troops. To minimise maintenance difficulties troops were to be prepared to live on limited quantities of food and water and undergo considerable hardships. The investigations were to be conducted in absolute secrecy. A period of moonlight nights was necessary since the final advance to the forming up positions could not safely be undertaken by day.

The Western Desert Force would carry out two training exercises, to be called Exercise No. 1 and Exercise No. 2. It was a secret known to only to the selected few that the Exercise 1 was to be the rehearsal for the attack, Exercise 2 was the attack itself. Both the artillery and the machine guns used live ammunition. This was further strengthened by the arrival of new enforcements to be able to take the offensive. The efforts to preserve secrecy to such an extent imposed no small strain on the senior commanders and officers who had to work out all the details personally and possibly had to

invent excuses to justify some of their activities. Copies of the defence notes were enclosed. Like, the formation of dumps in the forward area and the movements of certain units had to be put down to defensive measures against a possible Italian attack on Matruh; whereas in fact they were a part of the offensive operations. The Italian defences as already said, had two Metropolitan Divisions, two Libyan Divisions, one Blackshirt Division and a Mobile Group of tanks and armoured vehicles under General Maletti. The bulk was disposed in a series of fortified positions which made a defensive ring covering its line of communication. Nebeiwa contained more machine gun emplacements around its perimeter than any other Italian camp in the Sidi Barrani Group. It was this layout of the defences that had to be attacked, captured, and destroyed.

The Allied Counter-Attack

The overall Allied plan was to make the attack in three phases. The first phase was to consist of operations against Nebeiwa, the second against Tummar West, and the third was to be the exploitation. In the last stage, the advance was to be directed towards Sidi Barrani with the object of cutting the Italian line of communication to the east, and much depended upon the success of this vital phase. If the situation was favourable the operation was to be extended to raiding the administration of the Italians in the Buq Buq or the Sofafi areas as might appear feasible. The formations to be

employed were the 7th Armoured Division, the 4th Indian Infantry Division, the 7th Royal Tank Regiment and Selby Force, a mixed column under Brigadier Selby. The 4th Indian Division was to have under its command, the 7th Royal Tank Regiment as well as one Medium and three Field Regiments of artillery and three troop- carrying mechanised transport companies. In addition, all the three infantry brigades of the division were fully mobile.[36] The role of the 7th Armoured Division was to be protect the desert flank of the Indian Division and particularly to defend it against a possible flank attack of the Sofafi, exploiting later towards Buq Buq, should the tactical situations permit. The task of the Selby Force, which was based on Matruh, was to help the 4th Indian Division by attacking Meiktila and keeping that position engaged, so that its garrison might not rush to the assistance of the Tummar garrison. In executing their various parts, the ground formations were to receive assistance both from sea and air. The Royal Navy was to assist the project by bombarding the Maktila and Sidi Barrani camps on the coast, which could also help the Selby force. If feasible, the Navy was also to exploit its success by bombarding the Italian communications and aerodromes and that of the fighters to strafe Italian transports and protect Allied ground troops against dive-bombing attacks. The move to the further areas were to be concealed from the enemy air force. The sub-units were to take half an hour interval. The dump areas were to be

and camouflaged from the enemy ground and air action. Any written information on the documents going on rounds was to be protected. Wireless silence was to be maintained in times of emergency.

A careful analysis of the roles assigned to various fighting formations and services will make it clear that the general plan aimed at closing all avenues of escape to the Italian forces, and then attacking it with an enclosed area. There were various precautions taken which said the safety patrols would fire 2 Red Verrey Lights as a precaution for a call signal.[38] It was thought that, placed in that predicament, the Italian troops would react in any one or more of the ways which could be anticipated beforehand and provided against. For retreating, or receiving reinforcements, the Italian force would need to have its line of communication with Buq Buq intact. The Allied plan, therefore, provided for that line to be cut by naval and air bombardments and subsequently by the action of the 4th Indian Division in the last stage of its offensive.

The Battle Of Sidi Barrani

By the first week of December 1940, arrangements were in progress for launching the actual attack, the immediate aim of the offensive being to drive out the Italian force which had invaded Egypt, and which was then on the Egyptian soil, disposed in the triangle Maktila- Sofafi- Buq Buq. The final plan naturally had to take into consideration the

exact dispositions of the Italian troops. On 6th December 1940, three days before the launching of the attack, they were about 60,000 Italian and Libyan troops ranged against the Western Desert Force which besides other arms of service, comprised these formations of armour and infantry - 7th (British) Armoured Division, 7th Armoured Brigade, 4th Armoured Brigade, Support Group, 4th Indian Infantry Division, 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers, 3rd Battalion 1st Punjab Regiment, 4th Battalion 6th Rajputana Rifles, 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, 2nd Battalion QO Cameron Highlanders, 1st Battalion 6th Rajputana Rifles, 4th Battalion 7th Rajput Regiment, 16th (British) Infantry Brigade, 2nd Battalion Queens, 2nd Battalion Leicesters, 1st Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 7th Royal Tank Regiment and Selby Force. There was also the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade which had arrived at Baqqush and later replaced the 16th (British) Brigade as the third brigade of the 4th Indian Division. The operations of the 4th Indian Division was to be conducted on the west of north-west line passing through the centre of the Nebeiwa and Tummar camps. That area was selected with a view to avoid air action. The Italian bombers over that location would have difficulties distinguishing between friends and foes and therefore refrained from bombing through fear of hitting their own troops. The main striking arm for the attack on Nebeiwa was the 7th Royal Tank Regiment assisted by a brief artillery bombardment on the defences concerned. The attack

of Tummar West was to be on the same pattern as that on Nebeiwa. The 7th Royal Tank Regiment was once again to be the main striking force, supported by an artillery bombardment.[40] There was a Support Group to prevent any interference from Sofafi; the 4th Armoured Brigade was to protect the desert flank; and the Selby Force was to prevent any hostile interference from Meiktila; at the same time creating a diversion from the main attack.

Disposing the formations and units was no easy task. Divisional policies in the inter-fighting areas were difficult as enemies occupied the areas as quickly as possible and burst through the gun areas, so to fight them bursting through was equally necessary. The enemy had to be allowed to get through the hills to a considerable point to cut his retreat at vital points and disarrange his demolition programme.[41] Units had to be transported to the battle area and placed within the striking distance of their objectives. The approach march to the assembly point was approximately sixty miles, of which the last fifteen had to be covered in the moonlight, and the whole move had to be held back to the last possible moment as to maintain secrecy and produce surprise. The layout of the assembly area had to base on the intended tactical dispositions for the attack. Making all these arrangements called for a high degree of administrative co-ordination and precision in timing and imposed no small strain on the staff concerned. Maintaining observation towards

the enemy and providing warning of attack was necessary.[42] The weather was hazy and although something unusual was suspected by the Italian intelligence staff, the imminent possibility of a large- scale offensive was not even remotely considered by them. The attack happened in three phases.

The first offensive was Nebeiwa, to be attacked from the west by the 7th Royal Tank Regiment and the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade. Allied guns began registering their targets at 0700 hours on 9 December and followed it up at 0715 hours with a heavy artillery bombardment of the defences.[44] At 0735 hours, the “I” tanks reached the Nebeiwa perimeter and surprised the Italian M. II tanks, which due to the secrecy with which the various moves had been conducted were caught in the open, unmanned and formed up in close order on what was evidently their parade ground which was a principle of surprise. The “I” tanks then continued their advance towards the interior of the camp and for the first time met with a resistance from the Italian weapons which were of all – artillery, machine-guns, anti-tank guns, rifles and hand grenades and which were concentrated against them both with energy and determination. But none of the Italian weapons was able to produce any appreciable impression on their armour, and it soon became evident that the Italians had no missile capable of piercing the extra-thick armour plates of these British tanks. In fact, on finding the tanks impervious to their fire, the Italian and Libyan infantry became somewhat

bewildered and lost their morale, so the tanks were able to range freely. Moving methodically, they cleared up the areas allotted to their various sub-units. Doing this last lap of distance on foot, under the cover of the tanks, they commenced taking prisoners of which there were several hundreds. The whole of the Nebeiwa Camp gave in before 0830 hours. The first phase of the offensive was thus over in about an hour and a quarter and the second began at once.

The objective in the second case was Tummar West. This objective was to be attacked from the rear, that is, from the west of the Tummar camps; and so immediately after the success at Nebeiwa, at 0830 hours, the Commander of the 4th Indian Division called up the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade and ordered it to get to its position to the west of Tummar. The artillery concentration against the Tummar defences began at 1335 hours, and at 1350 hours, the "I" tanks, about twenty-two in number penetrated the camp from the north. The progress of the "I" tanks towards the interior of the camp was once again resisted by the Italian artillery with a heavy fire. But once again were the Italian and Libyan troops horrified and demoralised to find the British tanks immune to all attacks from the best of their weapons. The Divisional Commander praised the soldiery qualities and raised the spirit of all the ranks in the operation. The final break by the 7th Brigade was what he regarded to become a matter of history and indeed it became one. Then the Commander of the 4th Indian Division

proceeded to Tummar East and ordered an immediate attack on that encampment. Some 400 casualties were sustained by the Italian force in that action lasting barely ten minutes.

The third phase began on 10 December with the advance of the 16th (British) Infantry Brigade at 0555 hours and by 0700 hours the Brigade was 2,000 yards further north from its bivouac area of the preceding night. At 0730 hours, one of its battalions, the 2nd Battalion Leicestershire Regiment, got involved in a fierce clash with an Italian defended camp. But after a brisk fight it forced the camp to surrender, capturing 2000 prisoners of the 4th Blackshirt Division. Thereafter the task of capturing Sidi Barrani was assigned to the 16th (British) Infantry Brigade. But since two of its battalions had already had hard fighting that day and needed reorganisation, it was given two more battalions from the 4th Indian Division.[48] These were the 2nd Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlander and the 4th Battalion Rajputana Rifles. The attack on Sidi Barrani commenced at 1615 hours using artillery support assisted by some cruisers of the Royal Tanks, the 2nd Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders attacked from the north and the 2nd Queen's Royal Regiment from the south. The combined arm tactics of the "I" tanks, cruisers and artillery proved well-co-ordinated and efficient and the infantry had little difficulty in reaching the objective or in capturing the village which surrendered before dark, with a large number of prisoners, guns and other

equipment. [49]Thus, the first offensive in Africa was victorious. Prisoners were not searched nor were names taken. They were asked to give up their weapons and surrender their compasses.[50] The invasion of Egypt had been repulsed and the Italian aggression in Africa and elsewhere received a set-back from which it never recovered. The success of the Allied arms had exceeded the highest hopes of General Wavell. Such Italian troops inside the Egyptian borders were completely defeated and the capture of the war material was immense. General Wavell's plan of liquidating that part of the Italian Tenth Army which had established itself in the triangle Maktila- Sofafi- Buq Buq had been carried out to the letter.

The Italians held the triangle Bardia- Capuzzo- Sollum for two more days. But on 14 December, they voluntarily withdrew from Capuzzo, and vacated the neighbouring high ground that was overlooking Sollum. This last move was particularly an indiscreet step as it once opened the way for the 7th Armoured Division to contact the south-west defence of Bardia and to close the road Bardia- Tobruk. It also solved General Wavell's problems of a rapidly extending line of communication. The last of the fighting on the Egyptian soil took place on 16 December. On that day the 4th Armoured Brigade captured Sidi Omar with 700 prisoners, itself suffering no casualty, while the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division occupied Sollum and Musaid. After that there were

no Italian troops left on the Egyptian soil. The remaining were in Cyrenaica, and these were less than half of the force originally assembled for the invasion of Egypt. From the beginning of the offensive the Western Desert Force had taken over 38,000 Italian and Libyan soldiers and prisoners, together with large quantities of tanks, lorries, guns and ammunition and stores. Its casualties were less than a thousand men, majority of whom were only wounded. Marshall Graziani still had at his disposal of about 200,000 troops in Libya and enough war material, to return to the attack, given sufficient time to reorganise.

Advance To Bardia And Tobruk

With his decision to pursue the retreating Italians, General Wavell's operations now consisted of an attack on static defences. A new period was about to begin involving a more dynamic and mobile warfare and a continuous advance. Problems of supplies and maintenance became particularly difficult and imposed a great strain on the administrative units which managed to keep pace with the developments. The best way to obtain decisive results was to lay defences and withdraw to the stationing area and prepare a counter-offensive from there.[53]The pursuit was primarily the task of the 7th (British) Armoured Division for which it had been split into two main groups. One of these was the 4th Armoured Brigade with detachments from 2 Royal Tanks, the Royal Air Force Armoured Cars 11th Hussars and the Royal

Horse Artillery, while the other group consisted of only the 7th Armoured Brigade. The 4th Indian Division left for Sudan and there were no Indian troops in the operations from then onwards.[54] But knowing of these operations provided the necessary background to the later battles in which the Indian forces utilised their military knowledge.

This period led to the fighting in Cyrenaica in which the 4th Indian Division returned to North Africa to resume its position. The fighting for the struggles in the mastery of Cyrenaica is divided into four operations- (a) at Bardia, (b) at Tobruk, (c) on the line of Derna- Mekili and (d) on the north of Agedabia. [55] On 16 December 1940 the attack on Bardia was delayed for supplies and ammunition to be brought in from Matruh over 140 miles. Along with this, the designation of the Western Desert Force was changed into Headquarters XIII Corps. The forces at the disposal of the XIII Corps for the attack at Bardia consisted of the 7th (British) Armoured Division, the 6th Australian Infantry Division, the 7th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment with 26 tanks only, four field regiments, one Medium Artillery Regiment, one Machine-gun Battalion and any additional artillery that could be spared by the 7th Armoured Division. The composition of this force was not well suited to the task of attacking Bardia. The proportion of the infantry tanks was not adequate for the level, open ground inside the perimeter which called for infantry tanks as the main assaulting arm. The slow moving and unprotected

infantry, advancing over open ground, required a greater quantity of artillery ammunition for its protection than would be required to protect the tanks. However, the attack on the Bardia perimeter began at 0530 hours on 3 January 1941. The first day's objective was the bridgehead, which was formed by the 2/1st Australian Infantry Battalion after the capture of the five posts in the central sector. Next day, the 16th and 17th Australian Brigades began their thrusts against the central and southern sectors, and, by 1745 hours, their tanks and infantry had reached and entered the town of Bardia. Traffic incidents were to be reported to flight commanders giving details of time, place, speed, and damage. After that there remained only the troops in the south-east corner of the perimeter, the better fortified and the more resolute among the defenders of Bardia, who held out for a day longer. During the fighting and the end of the battle for Bardia, the Allied troops collected some 45,000 prisoners, with 462 guns including 262 field pieces, 129 tanks consisting of 12 medium and the rest light. Local commanders were to make every effort to assist the neighbouring posts and if necessary, kill or eject any enemy who may affect or enter the position. All appropriate information and instructions were to be passed down to all ranks be it dangers, antidotes, effective vigorous counter measures. Men were to be instructed about the type of attack to be expected and how to deal with them.

The next defensive position available to the Italians

after Bardia was Tobruk and they decided to make a stand at that point. Tobruk was only 76 miles from Bardia and 100 miles from Sollum, so an advance towards it could not complicate the line of communication problem for the Allies which on the other hand, would become greatly simplified if that excellent harbour could be captured. On 6th January, 1941, the very next day after the fall of Bardia, the 7th (British) Armoured Division had already cut the routes westwards to Tobruk, and on the following day, the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade was closing upon the eastern face of its perimeter; while the rest of the 6th Australian Division, with the 7th Royal Tanks, had also begun moving in the same direction.[59] The attacking force, which was under the command of Headquarters 6th Australian Division was as much the same as at Bardia with certain additions. These additional units were a second machine-gun battalion, one field artillery regiment and one medium battery. The force composed was hardly suited to the task of attacking and capturing Tobruk. The nature of the ground and the extensive area of defences called for a large-scale all armoured attack. But armour was the main deficiency. For seven weeks the regiments were continuously in action, entirely overlooked by the army. Casualties at the gun positions were not heavy due to digging, camouflage and frequent use of alternative positions. Gun pits were narrow and deep and usually sited against mounds or banks. Besides slit trenches, each man had to dig

himself a shallow trench to sleep in. Movements of the gun positions were restricted to minimum. This attack had to consider the lessons learned at Bardia. One of them were, the Italian forward and supporting posts were easily neutralised because of their distances from the anti-tank and wire obstacles and from one another. Another was that the Italian artillery, if left unengaged, was capable of causing very great damage. The D- day was 20 January 1941.

The air bombardment started three days before the D-day and pre-arranged targets were covered by the Royal Air Force for a few hours every day and every night. The most bombed of the targets were the harbour and the roads leading to it from the east and south. Two days before the D-day the Royal Navy also started shelling its own pre-assigned targets. The infantry assault commenced on the morning of 21st January. By noon, the 16th and the 19th Australian Infantry Brigades had captured their objectives, suffering only small losses. The night of 21/22 January there were fires and explosions in the Tobruk Harbour. The fighting soon came to an end and the Allies entered Tobruk, the next morning without operation. The number of prisoners taken amounted to 30,000 personnel about half of whom were the corps and the line of communication troops, including specialists of various branches.

From 6th February onwards, operations became stabilised, and arrival of the 5th Indian Division was

centralised. All ranks had to realise that they were facing enemy of a different calibre and possessed determination equal to their own. At the end, superior morale, training, and leadership was to decide the result. [65] The capture of Tobruk gave the Allies a good harbour, it also shortened the line of communication and eased the supply and transport position. It also brought about an increase in the Allied vehicles and fuel by the addition of captured vehicles and petrol dumps abandoned by the Italian troops. Italian forces on the other hand, had suffered such losses in men and material that the Italian Tenth Army in Cyrenaica was now no longer superior to the XIII Corps, whether in numbers, mobility, or offensive power. The Allied plan was to exploit the difficulty of the Italian Command and their tactics were framed accordingly. The bulk of the Italian armour in Cyrenaica which included 160 tanks of different marks, formed a part of the Mekili Force which if eliminated would give a straightway to Benghazi by the desert route. On 6th February, the 4th Armoured Brigade was at once moved up from Antelat to a place called Beda Fomm where a battle raged for a whole day as the blocking force checked and shelled the Italian column. Infantry in lorries, artillery and tanks all came under its heavy fire. Regular contact with the army was maintained where they concentrated their best troops for defence. In artillery guns always maintained superiority.

Conclusion

Simultaneously, the 4th Brigade attacked the eastern flank and forced the Italian artillery and tanks to be deployed eastward. Tanks of the 4th Armoured Brigade, despite being heavily committed, dominated the open country east of the motor road; while on the road it stood on the Italian column, virtually pinned to it in a long, unmanageable column of vehicles extending twenty miles back. On 7th February, the Italian force Commander, General Bergonzoli, offered his unconditional surrender and the fighting ceased, the capitulation marked the end of the Italian Tenth Army, who's Commander was himself killed during the action. This is sometimes known as the Libyan Campaign.[69] Hereafter, the Allies advanced the El Agheila, but they had to roll back due to some reasons. This phase was welcomed with the entry of the *Afrika Korps* in the War. This chapter speaks widely of the British-Indian Army fighting the Italian forces with its technical superiority and far better tactics, yielding them to give up their idea of fighting their opponents alone and seek help from another powerful nation. So much so, that Adolf Hitler decided to uphold the image of German superiority and help Italy in overcoming its shortcomings by overpowering the enemy with better power of weapons and ammunitions.

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