

Chapter 5 Operation CRUSADER: the Battle of the Cowpats

The battle reflected what [General] Willoughby Norrie called the cowpat theory of war; where your troop dispositions are widely spread like cowpats in a paddock, one here, one there.

W. E. Murphy¹

I reflected that my hobby of soldiering had got me into a serious position.

Kippenberger²

Kippenberger's next action, his last as a battalion commander, was one of the most confusing of all the desert battles. It was not a single battle either but a "long series of interlocking battles"³ lasting three weeks and with the result constantly in doubt. As David Irving has written, "It was not an easy battle for even the commanders themselves to follow".⁴ To understand Kippenberger's place in Operation CRUSADER the battle plan needs to be explained in some detail as does the place of the New Zealand Division within those plans. Only then can Kippenberger's role and performance be fully assessed.

For Kippenberger, the immediate task after Crete was to rebuild his battalion and restore its self confidence. On 4 June he addressed the whole battalion on parade explaining how, despite the loss of Crete, the individual New Zealand soldier had performed well there. Whatever he said on that parade worked: "At the close of the lecture the general feeling was, 'Well, we didn't so badly after all'". Resentment about Crete very soon faded in 20 Battalion.⁵

Kippenberger, busy rebuilding and training 20 Battalion in the hot desert

¹ Murphy interview, *op. cit.*

² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.96.

³ Irving, *op. cit.*, p.120.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.152.

weather, regarded these months as “a happy fruitful period”.⁶ Now the battalion was experienced, its Official History recorded, that “it might have been difficult to stimulate interest in training had not the Colonel conceived the idea of platoon competitions, judged by officers of the battalion”.⁷ The platoons were tested and judged on all forms of infantry training — tactics, inspections, weapons handling, drill, military knowledge and so on. The competition culminated in each platoon carrying out an attack which was also judged for its effectiveness. The competition provided a great incentive for the men to take training seriously. Kippenberger had found a creative solution to that most difficult problem faced all COs.

It was not a completely happy time for Kippenberger. The 20th Battalion’s War Diary recorded on 7 July at 1315 hrs “Lt.Col. Kippenberger evacuated to hospital”.⁸ Kippenberger described the illness as a “recurrence of malaria” but gave no indication when it was first contracted.⁹ Two weeks later his 2IC, Major Burrows, was also “evacuated to hospital” in this case with jaundice.¹⁰

On 19 September, it was announced that Kippenberger had been awarded the DSO for his performance on Crete and the “battalion was delighted”.¹¹ The decoration was presented to him by General Sir Claude Auchinleck on 4 November, the same ceremony at which Charles Upham received his Victoria Cross.

Kippenberger was in no doubt of the end product of his work and believed that the morale of 20 Battalion was “terrific” and reached its peak prior to this campaign: “we felt like runners, tense for the pistol”.¹² He recalled after the war:

Old hands have always thought that the morale of the Division was at its peak in this campaign — Libya 1941. This lad’s letter revives vivid memories of the atmosphere of that time, gallant, confident and daring. It

⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.80.

⁷ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit*, p.162.

⁸ 20 Bn WD, 7 July 1941, WA 1 DA 50/1/19, NZNA.

⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.79.

¹⁰ 20 Bn WD, 21 July 1941, WA 1 DA 50/1/19, NZNA.

¹¹ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit*, p.158.

¹² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.81.



"Kip"

"He was a comparatively small man, you wouldn't say good looking; he was wiry- he carried very little weight and during the war mostly he was very thin. He had a keen alert look about him and was a quick mover at all times. He looked like a man who would have made a good rugby half back."

- Charles Upham

From T214 *Letters from a Soldier*, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives.

(Margaret Denham)

did me good to read it".¹³

Freyberg's immediate task, like Kippenberger's, but at a higher level, was to rebuild the division after its recent disasters. After surviving the criticism of his performance in Crete, Freyberg set out to make the New Zealand Division, once again, an efficient fighting force. In this Freyberg was very fortunate that the losses in Greece and Crete had not sapped the morale of the division but according to the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, the men of the division were "convinced of superiority man for man over the Germans given equal weapons and equal air support".¹⁴ The losses of the division were made up by the men of the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Reinforcements — each of 4 000 men — who were rapidly absorbed by the units of the division. The division was now ready for its next action, which for Freyberg's sake, if not for the division's very existence, had to be seen as a success.¹⁵ To ensure this happened, 2 New Zealand Division, unlike other units in the Eighth Army, underwent intensive training for desert operations. New tactics were devised and tested and those officers and NCOs who had "been tried in battle and failed" were sent back to New Zealand "so that those who remained commanded respect".¹⁶

The terrain that was to be the New Zealand Division's battleground for the next two years was unique among the battlefields of the Second World War. In the land between El Alamein and El Agheila, the scene of most of the fighting of

¹³ Kippenberger to Sir Joseph Heenan, letter returning Fox's letter, 16 January 1947, Glue Papers.

¹⁴ Fraser to Acting PM, 24 June 1941, quoted in W. E. Murphy, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War. The Relief of Tobruk*, Wellington, 1961, p.v.

¹⁵ As Freyberg wrote after the campaign: "one factor that came into our thoughts was the desire to justify ourselves in the eyes of the New Zealand people. We had taken part in two forlorn hopes. ... It was most important that we did not have another failure. It is a fact in war that troops can have heavy casualties, so long as the heavy casualties are not linked with failure. ... What we wanted most was a success, but it was important that we were not sent upon another costly failure". Comments on Second Libyan Campaign 1941 narrative, 15 May 1950 Vol I Planning and Preparation, Correspondence Libya, WA II 11/5 NZNA.

¹⁶ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.29.

Eighth Army and Afrika Korps, there was always an open landward flank with reasonably good going for mechanised vehicles. This created what one German General described as “a tactician’s paradise and a quartermaster’s nightmare”.¹⁷ The vital ground of this flat desert terrain was the escarpments and ridges which rose from the desert floor and often continued for many miles. They were to be hotly contested during the desert campaigns and names such as Sidi Rezegh, Belhamed, and Ruweisat and Miteiriya Ridges occur time and again in the war narratives.

The ebb and flow of battle across these wide open spaces and the increased tempo of mobile warfare greatly added to the natural confusion war generated. W. E. Murphy began his Official History volume of the CRUSADER campaign with an appropriate warning: “A play with a cast of 250 000, a setting the size of Italy, and a plot like a pot of eels, twisting and turning in all directions”.¹⁸

After the failure of Operation BATTLEAXE in June 1941, Wavell was replaced by Auchinleck who arrived in Cairo on 30 June 1941. Auchinleck was immediately subjected to the same intense pressure from Churchill to renew the offensive. This he resisted, demonstrating considerable courage and determination in doing so. Churchill was informed unequivocally that the Desert Army (renamed the Eighth Army on 27 September) would not be ready to launch an offensive until November 1941 at the earliest. Churchill had to acquiesce and the starting date of the CRUSADER operation was set for 1 November. Meanwhile, the Eighth Army would undergo intense preparation for the forthcoming operation.

The New Zealand Division commenced six weeks of specialist desert training on 13 September. Although basic military skills had been honed to a fine edge, it was not until 8 October that a full scale brigade exercise was carried out — a simulated brigade attack on “Sidi Clif” and “Bir Stella”; two dummy fortresses modelled on Sidi Omar. The exercise lasted for only half a day “and the large gallery of ‘brasshats’ was suitably impressed”.¹⁹ One “brass hat” was not impressed

¹⁷ General von Ravenstein, GOC 21 Panzer Division, quoted in L. C. F. Turner, “Problems of Desert Warfare”, Paper prepared for CGS Union South Africa Defence Forces by South African War Histories, PM’s Office, Pretoria, May 1955, WA II 2/4 NZNA.

¹⁸ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.v.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.34.

when he watched a repeat of the exercise on 20 October. Freyberg wrote, "Consider attack on Sidi Clif would have failed. Infantry debussed too far back".²⁰ While the exercise was repeated with all three brigades the complete division did not exercise or train as a complete force before CRUSADER began. No brigade level night attack was conducted although individual units did conduct night exercises. The main defect of the training program, however, was the fact that not one unit trained with armour in support. Murphy has commented that this apparent lack of reality in the division's training "focussed attention on a hypothetical attack of a kind which the Division was not in fact called on to carry out in earnest to the detriment of more general lessons".²¹

It is doubtful if any type of training would have prepared the division adequately for the immense tasks they would face in this campaign and one wonders how much our recognition of these problems, so obvious now, is the product of hindsight. Training, no matter how well-planned or how realistic it is, cannot replace the hard lessons learned from experience and Freyberg was probably correct when he wrote that "By the beginning of November, our preparations were as complete as we could make them" and that "Nothing appeared to have been left to chance in the preparations for the Second Battle of Cyrenaica".²²

Even if faulty, the New Zealand Division, unlike many of the other formations of Eighth Army, did go into the campaign with some training experience. Many other divisions had spent the precious time between BATTLEAXE and CRUSADER unloading ships, digging trenches, carting supplies and a myriad of other tasks necessary to prepare an army for combat. Unfortunately HQ ME tended to view formations out of the line as a pool of unskilled labour.

1 South African Division at Matruh, for example, was kept so busy with menial defence tasks about Matruh that they were able to do no training at all until 11 October, only weeks before the start of the CRUSADER operation. Allocated a leading role in the forthcoming operation, 1 South African Division

²⁰ Freyberg Diary, 20 October 1941, WA II 8/44. NZNA.

²¹ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, pp.35-6.

²² Freyberg, Secret Report, "The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica and Lessons of the Campaign" Part I Narrative and Lessons, p.3, from the private collection of Ian McL Wards, copy in author's possession.

had not conducted a single battalion exercise in the five months prior to CRUSADER.

Before the move to the battlefield, 2 NZEF implemented a policy whereby 10 per cent of the Divisional Cavalry and Infantry Battalions were to be designated Left Out Of Battle (LOBs) to preserve a core of experience for rebuilding should disaster befall a unit. This meant that in each infantry battalion, 2-3 officers and 60 ORs were designated LOB. In 20 Battalion one such officer, infuriated at attracting this classification, was the recent VC winner, Charles Upham, designated so by Kippenberger because:

He was really too anxious to get to the enemy again, I thought his mood was too dangerous, I left him out because I thought he would get himself killed too quickly.²³

Upham's reaction was understandable but according to his biographer:

Kippenberger ... judged his man right. ... Kippenberger 's wisdom was manifested in fighting that came later, when Charles emerged as a leader of shrewdness as well as fiery courage.²⁴

On 14 November 1941 all units of the division were in the Divisional Assembly Area thirty miles west of Matruh. It was the first time, and the only time in North Africa, that the division had assembled as a complete entity and it included nearly 20 000 men and over 2 800 vehicles.²⁵ The full division consisted of three brigades containing ten infantry battalions; the additional battalion being 28 (Maori) Battalion which tended to float between 5 and 6 Brigade as required. Two days later the vehicles with the men aboard, accompanied by a vast array of tanks, guns, carriers and supply vehicles, moved off in what must have been a very impressive sight indeed. The New Zealand Division marched towards the sound of the guns.

²³ Kippenberger, quoted in K. Sandford, *op. cit.*, p.121.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.69.

Before looking at Operation CRUSADER, broken down into its four phases, an outline of the plan is needed. It is very easy to criticise a battle plan in hindsight especially one that failed as dismally as CRUSADER. Yet the plan devised was so full of anomalies and assumptions which, at times, defied all the principles of military logic and past experience that criticisms made of this particular plan are thoroughly warranted. The Eighth Army in this battle was to consist of two Corps — 13 Corps which contained the New Zealand and 4 Indian Division and 1 (Army) Tank Brigade, and 30 Corps, which contained the bulk of the Army's armour in 7 Armoured Division and 22 Armoured Brigade. It would also include 1 South African Division (less a brigade) and the 22 Guards Brigade. 13 Corps, the bulk of Eighth Army's infantry, was to drive behind the frontier strong points and isolate them from the main battle while 30 Corps would drive towards Tobruk, not to relieve the besieged garrison but to attract the armoured divisions of the Afrika Korps which would then be destroyed in the clash of armour that followed because of the superiority of numbers of tanks in the Eighth Army.

In this brief outline of the CRUSADER plan it is already possible to identify a number of serious tactical blunders. Not only was the concept of seizing and holding vital ground ignored, the initiative was also placed plainly with the opposing side. Only after the enemy reacted to the moves of the British armour could the main objective of the plan be reached so the last thing required was the obtaining of a tactical surprise. If the enemy chose to ignore the move of the British armour, the plan had failed.

The most serious problem, however, was the dispersion of effort dictated by the plan, a situation seriously aggravated by the readiness of the Army commanders to break up fighting formations into their smaller brigade groups and then commit them to the battle as single entities — the cowpat syndrome — which was a concept rigorously opposed by Freyberg. This dispersion of effort, in contradiction of the most basic principle of warfare, was initially caused by the sixty mile gap between the two Corps which meant that they would be fighting entirely different battles. Coupled with the readiness of the senior commanders to use brigade groups as complete formations, "dispersion was to be the order of the day".²⁶ This dispersion of effort is very well reflected in Kippenberger's opening account of the CRUSADER battle:

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.40.

Then, just as we were rejoicing in the conception of a massive move on Tobruk, disregarding the immobile frontier garrisons and crushing everything in our path, the whole Army broke up and departed different ways. This was the era of the Brigade Group and the “Jock” Column. It has been said that at the Somme in 1916 British tactical doctrines reached their lowest depths, and it seemed to me that Libya ‘41 ... was fought with an equally total disregard of what one had understood to be the principles of war.²⁷

It was a “totally misleading concept” according to Murphy, “to fight a major battle with penny packets”. This was “a serious military misjudgment which the British army didn’t shake off for a long time”.²⁸

30 Corps, the main strike force in the forthcoming battle, consisted of three armoured brigades (7, 4 and 22) each with different types of tanks. This also encouraged dispersion. Also attached to the division was a Support Group of infantry and artillery. The three armoured brigades and Support Group were meant to fight largely independent actions.

Another important planning mistake was the total underestimation of enemy forces in this operation. It was assumed that the British armour would be much stronger than the two panzer divisions and the Italian armoured divisions, which had been dismissed as inferior to the British, did not enter the equation. Also ignored were the other arms — artillery, engineers and infantry, which were integral parts of the panzer divisions. The whole plan rested on the assumption that the enemy’s armoured forces would be decisively beaten in the opening stages of the battle and no other part of the plan could proceed unless this happened. As the German armoured forces had not yet suffered a decisive defeat in the war this was an amazingly bold assumption on which to base an entire battle plan.

In looking at the opening phase of the battle it is necessary to detail the operations of both corps separately as the distance between the two meant that in

²⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.81-2.

²⁸ Murphy interview, *op. cit.*

reality two entirely different battles were fought by the one army and each had an entirely different outcome.

The main strike element of the battle — 30 Corps, containing 500 tanks, most of the armour of Eighth Army — crossed into Libya on 18 November to “seek out and destroy” the armour of the Afrika Korps. Even after an advance of ninety miles at the end of the first day the enemy had not reacted and the CRUSADER plan started to flounder. The sudden advance of 30 Corps had achieved the element of surprise, but this was the last thing the Eighth Army had wanted.

On 19 November the three armoured brigades moved off in different directions, aimlessly meandering about the desert. A clash with Ariete Division resulted in heavy losses for 22 Armoured Brigade. 7 Armoured Brigade was engaged by a German Battlegroup and lost twenty-three of its new Stuart tanks. On 20 November the isolated 4 Armoured Brigade was attacked by 15 Panzer Division and lost forty tanks without accounting for a single German tank. In just two days 4 Armoured Brigade had lost sixty-seven tanks.

The first two days set the pattern for 30 Corps’ battle. Rommel was able to tackle each isolated British cowpat and decisively beat each one. On the evening of 21 November, for example, 7 Armoured Brigade had just twenty-eight of the 160 tanks with which it had started the day. Eighth Army losses for the day numbered 180 compared with the Afrika Korps’ twenty.²⁹

At the end of 22 November Eighth Army’s losses had climbed to 530 tanks while Afrika Korps’ were about 100.³⁰ 30 Corps had clearly lost the clash of armour. Apart from a solitary action on 27 November it was now a Left Out of Battle too. Eighth Army was now relying on the artillery, infantry and two brigades of I tanks of 13 Corps to achieve victory.

The German commanders had used the panzer division as a combined force of tanks, gunners, engineers and infantry working closely together. The British armoured formations, acting on their own and in dispersed brigades — large cowpats — paid the price for their “lone wolf” mentality and were easy targets for the combined efforts of the panzer divisions whose own casualties were relatively light.

²⁹ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, p.101.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.108.

Meanwhile 13 Corps was fighting a separate and successful battle on the frontier. On 18 November the corps had crossed into Libya to hem in the frontier garrisons in the belief that the armour of Afrika Korps was about to be destroyed by 30 Corps further west of their own positions. In one of the great spectacles of desert warfare the New Zealand Division moved as one.

It was the responsibility of the CO of the leading battalion to navigate for the rest of the brigade. On the night of 18 November this was Kippenberger's task and he led 4 Brigade more than ninety degrees off its intended course until halted by Brigadier Inglis. As Kippenberger recalled, the move into Libya "remains in memory as a nightmare of anxiety".³¹ Navigation in the desert was to be the bane of Kippenberger's campaigning there.

On 21 November, the day Rommel's armour was heading for Tobruk, the campaign began in earnest for the New Zealand Division when all three brigades were ordered to move off suddenly, each in a different direction. They split up into brigade formations to Kippenberger's "keen and doubtless ill-informed disappointment".³² 6 Brigade was ordered to advance westward "with all due haste to relieve Support Group of Armoured Corps who are surrounded at Sidi Rezegh".³³ The next day command of 6 Brigade was passed to 30 Corps. 5 Brigade was ordered to mask the garrisons of Fort Capuzzo and Sollum which it easily did, capturing Fort Capuzzo in the process and cutting the Bardia/Sollum waterline. 4 Brigade was to proceed past the Trigh Capuzzo to an escarpment west of Bardia and cut the Via Balbia — the main road link between Tobruk and Bardia.

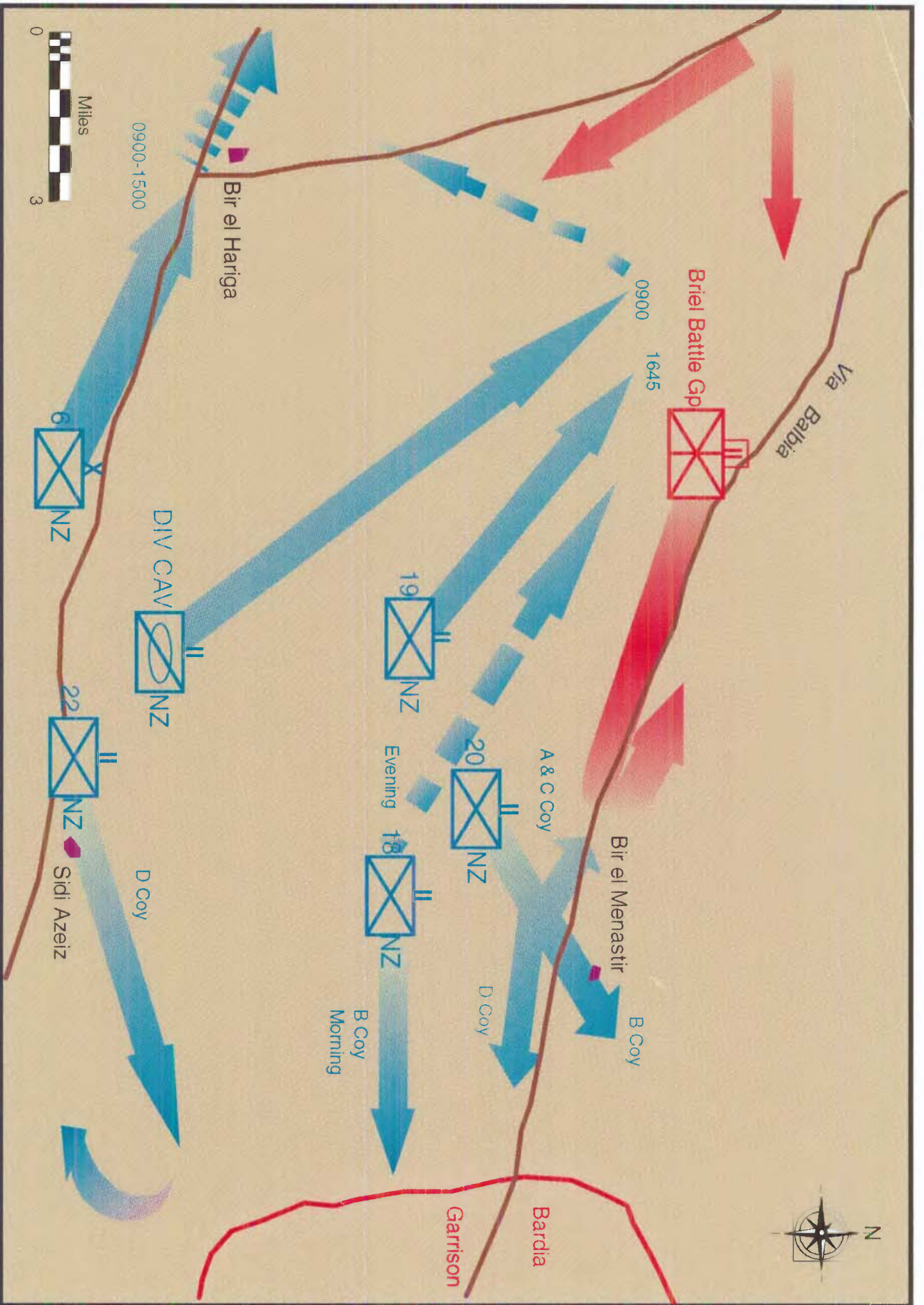
Despite a very difficult march of seventeen hours 4 Brigade made good progress and secured its objective with 20 Battalion cutting the Via Balbia at 0500 hours on the morning of 22 November. On hitting the road Kippenberger immediately attacked the supply and service units of 21 Panzer Division he found encamped there. Kippenberger later recalled the scene that greeted him at dawn:

As the light grew I could see the road a mile below, saw grenades bursting

³¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.84,85.

³² *ibid.*, p.85.

³³ NZ Div, most immediate cipher message to 6 Inf Bde, 1615 hrs 22 November 1941, WA II 8/18 NZNA.



Blocking the Via Balbia

Operation Crusader, 22 November

round the first car stopped by A Coy, other transport approaching unwitting and some further back halting and staring, many men coming out of bivvies on the plain and in the wadis below and a mile along the escarpment to the east a camp of some sixty tents beginning to stir. It was no time to hesitate and I at once ordered Agar to attack with B Coy, advancing to the road E of A Coy. They moved with alacrity and their rifles were crackling merrily when Manchester and Fountaine arrived breathlessly, their lorries halted a few hundred yards back. I sent Manchester to move his lorries to the camp and attack *toute de suite* and kept Fountaine in reserve. The Bren Carriers were told to find a way down and help generally. Mortars bustled up and in a minute were coughing and blasting steadily. Signallers set up HQ and followed the Coys with wireless sets, all was gaiety and spirit.

One carrier was blown up on a stray mine, one man hurt, but everything went perfectly. The surprise was complete; prisoners said they thought us 100 miles away and resistance was variable, mostly slight and quite ineffective.³⁴

The skirmish lasted an hour and 200 POWs were taken. 20 Battalion had suffered only one casualty.

This was an excellent start to the campaign but 20 Battalion was to have a very busy morning. Kippenberger had sent a company out to mop up after this skirmish and this company ran into a force of German armoured cars and self-propelled guns on half-tracks which were mistaken for tanks at the time and "scores of infantry" which closed in rapidly on the lone company.³⁵ The gunners of 4 Field Regiment opened fire immediately enabling C Company to withdraw in good order with one man killed and three wounded. Kippenberger noted that the men in C Company looked "a bit dejected and were all muddy and breakfastless". He ordered the company OC to have the men rest and eat, "tidied up the position" and reported to Inglis. He later recorded that he "was in a very

³⁴ Kippenberger, notes on operations 21-5 November 1941, copied by W. E. Murphy, Glue Papers.

³⁵ Kippenberger, letter home, 28 February 1942, quoted in Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.132.

bad temper, but thankful that the consequences of my carelessness had not been worse".³⁶

This new enemy force did not withdraw but halted a mile west of the battalion roadblock and commenced to shell it. Further action was required and Kippenberger proposed a battalion attack with I tanks in support. Inglis approved and Kippenberger launched the attack with A Squadron of 8 Royal Tank Regiment with C Company in support while he personally led B Company along the escarpment to clear the wadis of German forces. Despite Kippenberger's company being fired on by the tanks of A Squadron, the German armoured cars and guns were driven off while the German infantry was overrun. The battalion's War Diary recorded:

Attack successful and enemy routed and approximately 230 prisoners taken. Great disappointment shown by all ranks D Coy through not being in attack.³⁷

Two men of 20 Battalion were killed and five wounded in this short action.

Although this action appeared to have been a great success for 20 Battalion and Kippenberger did everything a battalion commander could be expected to do, the German unit, 606 AA Battalion, had in reality been fighting a successful delaying action while the supply dumps of 21 Panzer Division were evacuated. This was a considerable achievement and the course of the campaign may have been different had 4 Brigade captured these supplies.³⁸

By the end of 22 November 1941, operations had gone very well for 13 Corps. 7 Indian Division had been able to take the strong fortified positions of Sidi Omar and Sidi Omar Niova taking 1500 POWs. 5 Brigade, despite suffering initial heavy losses at Bir Ghirba, captured Fort Capuzzo and Sollum Barracks and had cut all traffic on the Sollum/ Bardia road and secured Sollum Pass. 4 Brigade had cut the Via Balbia and isolated Bardia. The success of 13 Corps in the frontier operations gave "rise to acute anxiety" in Rommel's mind and in the next phase of the battle would "provoke a reaction of such unreasoning violence

³⁶ Kippenberger, notes on operations 21-5 November 1941, *op. cit.*

³⁷ 20 Bn WD, 22 November 1941, WA I DA 50/1/23 NZNA.

³⁸ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.132.

that it robbed Rommel of the fruits of victory at Sidi Rezegh".³⁹

At 1400 hrs on 22 November Freyberg received the "extraordinary message" from 13 Corps HQ to "leave minimum troops to observe enemy Bardia and send remainder your troops to clear up North Bardia-Tobruk road".⁴⁰ Freyberg was forced to split the division even further as 6 Brigade advanced to join 30 Corps at Sidi Rezegh, with 5 Brigade left "masking" the fortresses of Capuzzo and Upper Sollum. 4 Brigade followed 6 Brigade and advanced first to Gambut and then on to Tobruk. Thus the second stage of the battle saw the New Zealand Division as widely dispersed as the rest of Eighth Army. Meanwhile Kippenberger's battalion remained where it was, continuing to clear pockets of resistance and following 4 Brigade when relieved by a 5 Brigade battalion.

While the two brigades of the New Zealand Division advanced towards 30 Corps, Rommel on 23 November attacked the remnants of the Corps about Sidi Rezegh and inflicted what he felt to be a crushing defeat on the British armour. Rommel attacked at 1500 hours on this Totensonntag — the Lutheran Sunday of the dead — with 15 Panzer Division in three armoured formations on an eighteen mile front. Losses on both sides were heavy.

For the New Zealand Division 23 November was an exceptionally eventful day. A note in Freyberg's diary recorded, "Day has been so full it has been impossible to keep hour to hour accounts".⁴¹ 6 Brigade advanced towards the Sidi Rezegh battlefield and learned for the first time the true situation of the battle. Freyberg learned this day too that 6 Brigade was desperately needed at Sidi Rezegh and was so shocked at the news received from a Liaison Officer of 30 Corps "that his first impulse was to arrest the man as a spy".⁴² Only the previous day the division's Intelligence Summary had stated that it was "known that the enemy were in very sore straits as is apparent by the fact they had split into small columns".⁴³ Exactly the reverse had happened.

It had now become clear to the senior British commanders that there was not enough infantry at Sidi Rezegh to hold that vital position and they were now desperately needed. With this in mind, Freyberg ordered 6 Brigade to proceed

³⁹ *ibid*, p.127.

⁴⁰ Freyberg Diary, 22 November 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁴¹ Chronicler's note, Freyberg Dairy, 23 November 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁴² Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.139.

⁴³ NZ Div Intelligence Summary No.17, 22 November 1941, G5/4, WA II 8/18 NZNA.

immediately to that feature and 4 Brigade to follow to Gambut and secure the airfield there. 6 Brigade began the morning of 23 November with a major skirmish at Bir-el Chleta in which it took 200 POWs and scattered the HQ of the Afrika Korps. The brigade continued westward and reached Sidi Rezegh as the huge tank battle was underway. It was heavily engaged for the rest of the day; total losses for 6 Brigade were 420, very severe for half a day's fighting.

On 24 November the battle plans of both sides changed considerably. The senior British commanders met and Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham, the Army Commander, recommended calling off the operation completely because of the terrible pounding the British armour had taken. Auchinleck was opposed to this and ordered the offensive to continue but now relied almost solely on 13 Corps to continue the fight. At 2230 hours a new set of orders was issued which placed the GOC 13 Corps, Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen, in command of all troops about Tobruk and he was ordered to "recapture" Sidi Rezegh and Ed Duda and exploit towards El Adem. Lieutenant-General Norrie, GOC 30 Corps, was to carry on as before and attempt to destroy the enemy armour but at the same time had to protect the New Zealand and South African brigades against tank attack. The role of 30 Corps had actually been increased while its strength had been drastically curtailed by its heavy losses.

This change of plan by the British commanders in mid battle reflected their distance from operations, their limited knowledge of armoured tactics and their faulty military intelligence. The decision to push the brigades of the New Zealand Division westward "to the area then dominated by the undefeated enemy armour in the full knowledge that 30 Corps was powerless to intervene effectively was courting further disaster".⁴⁴ Eighth Army now expected Freyberg, with two brigades of New Zealand infantry, to achieve what a whole armoured corps had failed to do: face and defeat two panzer divisions and Italian armoured forces as well. What saved the two brigades from certain annihilation was Rommel's decision to abandon his gains about Tobruk and "drive to the wire" — an act of military folly worthy of his British counterparts and "the most controversial act in the whole of his military career".⁴⁵

Rommel had overestimated the defeat of the British forces at Sidi Rezegh

⁴⁴ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, p.200.

⁴⁵ Richard D. Law and Craig W.H. Luther, *Rommel. A Narrative and Pictorial History*, San Jose, Ca., 1980, p.106.

while trivialising his own losses. In the tank battle of 23 November the Afrika Korps' strength in tanks had been halved in the space of three hours and the battle had cost it more than seventy tanks. With its armoured spearhead considerably blunted Rommel embarked on an extremely ambitious project to relieve the frontier garrisons, a manoeuvre that put to flight all British units in his line of advance but one that puzzled those he left behind at Sidi Rezegh who were now free to operate against the siege troops at Tobruk unmolested by the German armour. One of Rommel's generals called the decision "an evil dream".⁴⁶ According to a German officer:

In the next two days he changed his views four times and finally on Westphal's entreaty returned to attack the rear of 2 NZ Div. ... It is quite clear that this is where the battle was decided.⁴⁷

On 23 November 4 Brigade reached Gambut airfield, easily drove off the enemy forces there and captured the supplies of the two panzer divisions. 23 November had been another busy morning for Kippenberger's battalion. In the process of handing over his blocking role to 22 Battalion Kippenberger's battalion was attacked by thirteen AFVs — half-tracked carriers with a 20 mm dual purpose gun — and fifteen lorries of infantry. The attack lasted three hours before an impatient Kippenberger committed his armour. He had been reluctant to do so because:

I hadn't wanted to put them down on the flat as it took so long to rally and get them back again, but they raced gaily down the tracks, the Germans bolted and were chased for three miles and it took a long time to get the tanks back and I might as well have used them at once.⁴⁸

Kippenberger summed up the attack as "a noisy affair, anxious for a time" but doubted "if anyone was hurt on either side".⁴⁹

Delayed by this attack along the Via Balbia, 20 Battalion linked up with

⁴⁶ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, p.212.

⁴⁷ Colonel R. Kreibel, comments to Kippenberger, in Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 19 March 1953, WA II 11/7 NZNA.

⁴⁸ Kippenberger, notes on operations 21-5 November, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

Divisional HQ who were anxious to reach Bir-el Chleta. For Kippenberger it was “another hard night ... all the time carefully checking mileages and bearings with the map” by torchlight under a blanket in the back of a car.⁵⁰ The task was made much harder for Kippenberger because he had to navigate around the German positions still barring the way to Tobruk and then swing back onto the correct course. 20 Battalion and Divisional Headquarters reached Bir-el Chleta at midnight in front of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and at the same location where 6 Brigade had started the day with its early morning skirmish.

On 24 November 20 Battalion, still with a squadron of I tanks and a platoon of machine guns under Kippenberger’s command, was ordered to clear a strong pocket of resistance around Point 172, an escarpment overlooking Gambut. Kippenberger went forward to inspect, spotted a large enemy force and decided to launch a quick attack. This attack began at 1120 hours with A and C Companies of 20 Battalion on the left, B and D Companies in the centre and A Squadron of 8 Royal Tanks on the right flank with the battalion mortars and carriers. Kippenberger had stressed that speed and violence were essential with the infantry staying on their lorries until the last possible moment. The battalion’s Official History wryly commented that “speed and violence” was now Kippenberger’s “favourite phrase”.⁵¹ A problem occurred with the supporting tanks, which went off on a wrong bearing and opened fire on the battalion’s right flank. Several of the tanks were hit by enemy fire and then all halted. Kippenberger raced forward to get an explanation for this sudden stop and, according to the Official Historian, the tank commander, Major O’Neill, told Kippenberger, “Seven of my tanks are hit and I’m rallying” to which Kippenberger made “a forceful reply”.⁵² What Kippenberger had actually said to O’Neill was, “The infantry are attacking, go on or I’ll courtmartial you”. Kippenberger later admitted that this was “unfair to a very gallant officer, killed a few days later, but it was no time for politeness”.⁵³

Kippenberger then headed off to intercept A and C Companies and direct them to the left of B and D Companies “so that all four companies finally

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.175.

⁵² Kippenberger, letter home, 28 February 1942, quoted in Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, p.229.

⁵³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.92.

advanced in line".⁵⁴ As the battalion neared the objective the enemy broke and ran. The action had lasted for a brief twenty-five minutes and the battalion captured a dozen trucks, three 88-mm guns and 260 German POWs of 361 German Infantry Regiment. Its own losses were two men killed and nineteen wounded, and seven tanks most of which were quickly repaired. J. A. Macpherson later recalled that this assault was the first occasion that tanks and infantry of 20 Battalion had fought a combined assault and that:

We were impressed I remember, by the fact that the whole show, laid on at short notice, was perfectly synchronised, more than can be said for some others.⁵⁵

Kippenberger's verdict was somewhat different — "speed and violence all right but a lot unintentional".⁵⁶ Only his tight control, obtained by being well forward with the action, had produced the synchronisation required for success. Freyberg noted:

20 Bn carried out successful attack at midday on Sidi Clif style which eliminated nuisance pockets between 20 Bn and rest of 4 Bde.⁵⁷

Kippenberger was elated with this success and "still excited" asked the G1, Colonel Gentry, to tell Freyberg that "my infantry are beautiful".⁵⁸ Gentry patted Kippenberger's arm and replied "Good show".⁵⁹ No mention of "beautiful" infantry appears in Freyberg's diary, however. Geoffrey Cox at Div HQ recalled seeing "Kip's usually reserved face was lit with satisfaction, so I knew in a flash that all had gone well".⁶⁰ The battalion rejoined 4 Brigade at 1630 hours and advanced seven miles to halt at rightfall when Kippenberger was able to get "the first real sleep since the campaign had opened".⁶¹

⁵⁴ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, p.229.

⁵⁵ J. A. Macpherson to Murphy, letter, 17 July 1951, WA II 3/19 NZNA.

⁵⁶ Kippenberger, notes on operations 21-5 November, *op. cit.*, p.26.

⁵⁷ Freyberg Diary, 24 November 1941, WA II 8/44.

⁵⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.92.

⁵⁹ Kippenberger, notes on operations 21-5 November, *op. cit.*, p.26.

⁶⁰ Cox, *op. cit.*, p.168.

⁶¹ Kippenberger, notes on operations 21-5 November, *op. cit.*, p.26.

Freyberg now had his two brigades in line and that night made a decision that spelled disaster for Kippenberger's battalion and ended this picnic atmosphere. His diary recorded:

Finally decided that 6 Bde should just enlarge their show without worrying about timing of attack while 4 Bde should advance to overlook country up to Bir Hamed.

Freyberg added, "Turned in for some sleep feeling *sure* the Boche had gone".⁶² The German armour had gone on Rommel's "evil dream" but it was only a temporary departure.

On 25 November 4 Brigade moved level with 6 Brigade at Sidi Rezegh and after an advance of four miles attracted heavy fire from that feature so that the brigade dug in on the dead, flat ground between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed. During the day Kippenberger received orders to prepare a night attack on Belhamed using 18 and 20 Battalions. Kippenberger was to assume command of both battalions once they were established on the escarpment. The attack was to coincide with a similar attack by 6 Brigade on Sidi Rezegh which would leave only Ed Duda as the last escarpment outside of Tobruk not taken by Eighth Army. As Kippenberger wrote later about the attack on Belhamed, "There was to be no artillery support; it was to be a straightforward night attack with the bayonet".⁶³ This was to be the first use in the desert of night attack with fixed bayonets, a tactic which was to become "the hallmark of the Division".⁶⁴

Belhamed Ridge has a very steep escarpment on its northern side, and slopes gently for four miles to the foot of Sidi Rezegh. To take the feature that night 18 and 20 Battalions would have to advance for 6000 yards across a wadi and up the moderate slope. Kippenberger decided to attack with the two battalions side by side; 18 Battalion on the right flank. Each battalion was to have two companies of infantry forward and another two 300 yards behind.

Before setting out Kippenberger gave a stirring oration to the men of 20

⁶² Freyberg Diary, 24 November 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁶³ Kippenberger, letter home, 15 January 1942, quoted in Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.250 and *Infantry Brigadier*, p.94.

⁶⁴ Cox, *op. cit*, p.174.

Battalion, an occasion he later described as “one of the moments of my life”:⁶⁵

I went into the middle of the two columns and said to the men, silent and almost invisible:

“Men, we are going forward tonight to take Belhamed and open the way to Tobruk. This is the crisis of the battle. We have 6 000 yards to go (there were some gasps) and after 4 000 yards we will have to fight our way. We will go straight in with the bayonet and bomb and nothing will stop us. I know you will keep high the name of the 20th. And men, I wish you all Good Luck, every man of you”.

I could hear my voice catch a little, there was the smallest pause, and every man of those faithful five hundred, answered:

“And Good Luck to you Sir”.⁶⁶

In his memoir Kippenberger added:

Some of us can never forget that moment, poignant in memory for not one of us all came back unhurt and nearly a hundred died very soon.⁶⁷

Eric Townley, more than fifty years later recalled that part of Kippenberger’s speech deeply affected him:

He said Gentlemen, don’t be frightened of feeling afraid. And those were great words just before an attack. That’s the kind of man Kip was.⁶⁸

Kippenberger, as a private on the Somme and about to go “over the top”, must have experienced similar feelings as the men of 20 Battalion before this attack. He was able to draw on this experience and offer the right words of reassurance.

According to two other sources Kippenberger also said in this address that

⁶⁵ Kippenberger, “Storm of Belhamed”, notes, copied by W. E. Murphy, Glue Papers.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Townley interview, *op. cit.*

no prisoners were to be taken.⁶⁹ In the event, however, over 700 POWs were taken by 20 Battalion in this action some eighty by Kippenberger's own HQ.⁷⁰

At 2200 hrs the two battalions were underway and had to advance 6 000 yards before fighting their way forward for another 4000 yards, somewhat further than Kippenberger had indicated in his speech. Kippenberger watched the men go forward "in a steady way that stirred my heart" and exchanged greetings with a young cousin whom he "watch[ed] ... go to his death" and then reflected "that my hobby of soldiering had got me into a serious position".⁷¹ A soldier who took part in the attack described it as a classic bayonet charge. He did not

blame the enemy for running — two full battalions of Kiwis in full war-cry in the moonlight takes some beating especially when there's no barrage to drown the war-cries and screams we used.⁷²

As he followed the infantry Kippenberger realised that he had made a serious mistake in his planning by forgetting to say where his HQ would be on Belhamed, a mistake that "was mortifying and might cause serious trouble". The failure of his junior officers not to correct Kippenberger on this mistake was an indication to him "that something [was] wrong with my training".⁷³

To make matters worse, Kippenberger's navigation was again faulty this night. After losing touch with those forward "a very odd thing happened".⁷⁴ He confused the fighting on Belhamed with that on Sidi Rezegh before hitting the Tobruk by-pass road. Kippenberger's party had deviated from the correct bearing, swung too far right, passing that flank of Belhamed, and were now 1 200 yards inside the German positions and North-west of Belhamed. They had to retrace their steps to Belhamed and became involved in a brief skirmish taking captive 80 POWs. This serious navigational error soon exacted a very heavy toll on

⁶⁹ G. E. Lusk to Murphy, letter, 25 June 1951, WA II 3/19, E. Wilson, account of Belhamed, WA II 3/16b, McClymont Papers, NZNA.

⁷⁰ 20 Bn WD, 25 November 1941, WA II 1 DA 50/1/23 NZNA.

⁷¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.95-6.

⁷² J. I. Andrews to Murphy, letter, 25 August 1951, Operation Crusader A-E, WA II 3/18 NZNA.

⁷³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.96.

⁷⁴ Kippenberger, notes "Storm of Belhamed", *op. cit.*

Kippenberger and 20 Battalion.

While climbing the steep side of Belhamed Kippenberger realised that he had made yet another mistake and one made painfully obvious to him when he reached the lines of 18 Battalion. As Kippenberger later recalled:

We walked towards the sound and then I went ahead with my hands up and called out 'New Zealand here', thinking gloomily that another omission from my orders had been a password. The picking and shovelling stopped and was ordered to advance and keep my bloody hands up. I did so and was sharply examined by a soldier, one of three who kept me closely covered. At first he refused to send for an officer, one of his mates recommended shooting the bastard. I protested and said who I was. He knew of me but did not think I looked like the chap. My knowledge of his Colonel's name only tended to confirm his suspicions. Then he said: 'Well, if you are a New Zealander, who won the Melbourne Cup?' 'Damned if I know!' I replied. This satisfied him. 'You sound like a New Zealander', he said' and called for his officer.⁷⁵

Both battalions had taken their objectives easily and with light casualties. However Kippenberger soon made another basic error. When inspecting the battalion positions the next morning, he carelessly silhouetted himself on the Belhamed Ridge in the growing light of dawn and became an early casualty. His party was fired on from a concealed machine-gun post and Kippenberger was hit through the left thigh. This ended Kippenberger's role at Belhamed and left his battalion without adequate leadership for the crisis ahead, especially after the next two senior officers of the battalion were also wounded. Kippenberger's wounding, caused by the navigational error, reversed the fortunes of his battalion and led, as we shall see, to its annihilation on Belhamed. He later wrote:

We had a wonderful run until I was hit on the 26th, 7 successful fights in 4 days and a night and then a hoodoo came over the battalion. I was hit at 7

⁷⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.98.

a.m., Mitchell at 9, Fountaine at 10, Agar took over.⁷⁶

Inglis commented that Kippenberger's wounding "was a blow not only to his own battalion but to the whole brigade. He was by far the most experienced battalion commander".⁷⁷

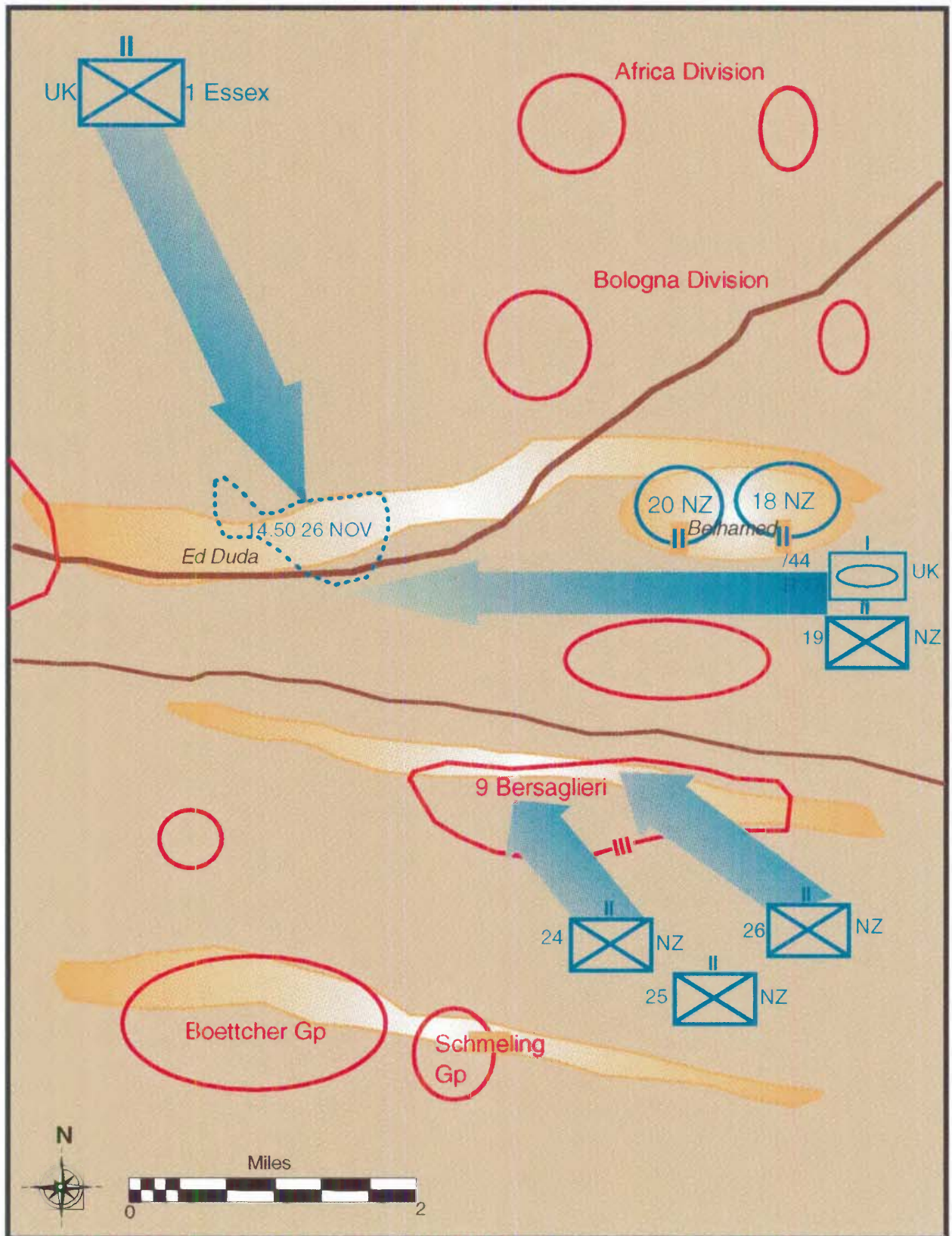
On the same night as this attack on Belhamed 6 Brigade's assault on Sidi Rezegh had been a costly failure. Success had been obtained on Belhamed relatively easily despite some serious errors made by Kippenberger but on Sidi Rezegh the result had been entirely different. From 26 November both New Zealand brigades were heavily engaged on Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh and suffered greatly holding these key features.

On the night of 26 November, 19 Battalion of 4 Brigade accompanied by a squadron of 44 Royal Tanks set off at 2130 hrs to attempt to reach Tobruk. Driving between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed the leading tanks reached Ed Duda within an hour and a half and the whole Battalion was at Ed Duda by 0100 hrs on 27 November without suffering a single casualty. It was a historic moment and a considerable achievement for 19 Battalion to advance 10 000 yards over unfamiliar and uneven ground in the dead of night and not lose a single man or vehicle. This completed the first relief of Tobruk. That night two battalions of 6 Brigade finally cleared the Sidi Rezegh escarpment.

While the link up with Tobruk had been established the situation of the New Zealand Division on 27 November was precarious. The New Zealand brigades about Tobruk needed urgent reinforcement and the unit allocated this task was Brigadier Pienaar's 1 South African Brigade. This brigade to date had been reluctant to engage the enemy and was supposed to have reached Sidi Rezegh at the same time as 6 Brigade. As this brigade was the only concentrated force of infantry left of 30 Corps it was essential that it should reach Sidi Rezegh before Rommel awoke from his "evil dream" and returned to the Tobruk front with his armoured force. Through faulty leadership, confused command structures and unclear orders, the reinforcement of the New Zealanders did not occur before Rommel's return from the frontier and he fell on the two isolated brigades with a vengeance.

⁷⁶ Kippenberger to Henderson, letter, 29 December 194, Glue Papers.

⁷⁷ Inglis, comment on narrative Second Libyan Campaign, March 1952, WΛ II 11/5 NZNA.



Linking up with Tobruk

Operation Crusader, 26-27 November 1941

On 29 November, the Italian Ariete Division, the elite division of the Italian forces, mistaken for 1 South African Brigade, wrested Point 175 from 6 NZ Brigade. Two whole companies of 6 Brigade were lost, 140 men in all.

The New Zealand Division's precarious position had deteriorated and Inglis pressured Freyberg to abandon the corridor and face the division about to meet the threat from the east. Freyberg refused, insisting the corridor remain open and that it could be held with the help of the South Africans. Inglis was skeptical and later recounted:

I felt that it was foolish to stay strung out for miles along the so-called corridor, about which I recollect expressing the view that, if it was a corridor at all, it was a damn thin and draughty one and I couldn't see what the hell there was left to come through it anyway.⁷⁸

Freyberg recorded that he could not agree with Inglis' suggestion and that his "only chance of holding Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed depended on co-ordination of plans with SA Bde Grp". He also noted that NZ Division was "virtually temporarily surrounded. The barometer of success and failure continues to rise and fall".⁷⁹

On the afternoon of 30 November 6 Brigade was attacked by a force of sixty tanks and a mass of artillery and infantry. While the depleted brigade was able to hold its own against the advancing infantry the tanks "broke the back of the defence" and took most of Sidi Rezegh by 1715 hours.⁸⁰ Two battalions were overrun and Barrowclough wanted to withdraw the survivors of the brigade to Tobruk but was ordered to stay put and, with the South African Brigade and British armour, was ordered to retake Sidi Rezegh at dawn. Barrowclough knew that success in this was most unlikely and he prepared for the disaster that must take place the next morning.

Freyberg now faced the heavy burden of command. With Sidi Rezegh lost, the division was surrounded. The Corps commander had ordered him to hold both Sidi Rezegh and Belhamec at all costs but now "only decisive intervention

⁷⁸ Inglis, comments on draft narrative, WA II 11/5 NZNA.

⁷⁹ Freyberg Diary, 29 November 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁸⁰ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.419.

by the British armour and the South African brigade next day could avert disaster".⁸¹ Freyberg was not inactive and was well aware of the danger to his division and sent Brigadier Miles into Tobruk to brief the Corps commander and he urged Pienaar by R/T to "push on, push on with the bayonet" ⁸² — an invitation hardly to Pienaar's liking. Freyberg also dispatched two officers with a written message for Pienaar expressing the urgency of the situation. One of these officers, Major Ian Bonifant, had been briefed by Freyberg, "I don't care how rude you are to him, we want him here in the morning".⁸³ Bonifant found the South African brigade twenty-five miles away but was dismissed by Pienaar as "a cheeky young bugger" and marched before the Corps commander Willoughby Norrie. General Norrie, however, fully supported "the rude young bastard" and ordered Pienaar to comply with Freyberg's request.⁸⁴ Having done what he could to alert those responsible to the dangers now facing the New Zealand Division, Freyberg anxiously awaited the morning knowing that his division was again in deadly peril.

At 0630 hrs on the morning of 1 December, 15 Panzer Division, using a panzer regiment and two Machine Gun Battalions, attacked the Belhamed position under the cover of a thick mist and swept onto the positions of 20 Battalion in a well-coordinated attack. The battalion, "strained almost to the limit of endurance" by constant shelling and living six days in damp slit trenches⁸⁵, was overwhelmed and the losses of the artillery in support, 6 Field Regiment, were the heaviest artillery losses of the war. Miles, the CRA, was among the 100-odd POWs of the regiment. The entire 20 Battalion was lost in this action. Eight miles away at the Main Dressing Station where he was now a POW, Kippenberger watched through his field glasses the dust and smoke on Belhamed as his beloved battalion was overrun:

Never shall I forget watching the avalanche rolling slowly in from where I sat near Wadi Sciomar. I don't think I've ever fully recovered from those agonising hours.⁸⁶

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.426.

⁸² Freyberg Diary, 30 November 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁸³ Bonifant interview, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, p.196.

⁸⁶ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 19 March 1953, WA II 11/7 NZNA.

As Kippenberger wrote soon after the tragedy on Belhamed: "It is the end of as good a battalion as was ever in the King's service ... may I never pass through such an hour again".⁸⁷

It was certainly the presence of the experienced Colonel Jan Peart that saved 18 Battalion from the same fate. Peart had seen some men of his battalion stand up from their trenches ready to surrender. He stood up from his own shelter and shouted in his headmaster's voice which reached above din of artillery and machine gun fire: "Get down you Bastards. If you have to die, die like men!"⁸⁸ This prevented the surrender of 18 Battalion.

When he realised that the battalion was surrounded on three sides and up against a panzer regiment unsupported, Peart ordered 18 Battalion to withdraw from Belhamed into the Tobruk perimeter and took "great pains to see that it was carried out in orderly fashion".⁸⁹ The withdrawal was carried out without panic and with officers and NCOs "in full command at all times".⁹⁰ For a loss of two carriers and sixty casualties the battalion lived to fight another day and was used immediately to bolster the front line of the Tobruk perimeter. Belhamed, however, was lost.

One is left to wonder whether Kippenberger's presence might have made a difference. Certainly Inglis, who knew Kippenberger's abilities better than any body at this stage of his career, believed that Kippenberger's "ready grasp of a situation and his tactical flair would have got the battalion out of trouble that morning".⁹¹ If Peart had the ability to save his battalion from annihilation, Kippenberger, with a great tactical ability based on long years of preparation would surely have done the same if he was still in command. Kippenberger believed that his presence would have made a difference:

Everything else, Japan, the battles we fought, my wound, captivity for six

⁸⁷ Kippenberger, transcript of excerpts from letter home, 17 December 1941, Glue Papers, quoted in Pringle and Glue, *op. cit.*, pp.208-9.

⁸⁸ E. H. J. Fairley to Kippenberger, letter, 27 October 1949, Files F — Mac Crusader, WA II 3/19 NZNA.

⁸⁹ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, p.442.

⁹⁰ 18 Bn WD, quoted in *ibid*

⁹¹ Inglis, comment on draft narrative, WA II 11/5 NZNA.

days, escape ... is overshadowed by the destruction of the 20th Battalion after I had been hit. I am sure I could have saved some part.⁹²

From his years of preparation one point Kippenberger would readily have understood: unsupported infantry when their anti-tank weapons are destroyed, are helpless against an armoured attack.

While this attack on Belhamed had been happening, 6 Brigade, still clinging to a small section of Sidi Rezegh, again anxiously awaited the arrival of the South Africans. An early exchange of fire convinced Barrowclough that his brigade would be destroyed very soon. The arrival of 4 Armoured Brigade saved the immediate situation and Barrowclough planned to retake Sidi Rezegh using the newly arrived tanks which now greatly outnumbered the panzers at Sidi Rezegh by at least nine-to-one. Barrowclough was dismayed when this tank force indicated that it intended to withdraw. Barrowclough urged Brigadier Gatehouse, the commander of 4 Armoured Brigade, to support 6 Brigade and retake Sidi Rezegh but Gatehouse, who emphatically denied ever meeting Barrowclough, refused, stating that he had orders to cover a withdrawal and not take on the Afrika Korps.⁹³ This left Barrowclough with no option but to withdraw with the tanks to Zaafran and link up with Divisional HQ. The men of 6 Brigade were very angry on learning of the withdrawal and were heart broken that a German tank battalion was able to turn away a whole tank brigade at Sidi Rezegh. Sidi Rezegh was now lost too.

The New Zealand Division, now down to about 3 000 men, assembled at Zaafran where Freyberg was now convinced he had permission to withdraw the division and he decided to do so that evening. Late morning of 1 December he sent a message to 30 Corps:

We hung on in the hope the South Africans would attack and recapture Point 175 and Sidi Rezegh before dawn without which our position was

⁹² *Kippenberger — Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

⁹³ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk* p.451.

untenable. This they have failed to do. Enemy has attacked and captured our HQ, half our artillery and divided our force in two. ... In view of your 4 of 1st Dec obvious you anticipated withdrawal of remnants which in my opinion inevitable.⁹⁴

Freyberg recorded that it was a 'great disappointment to have to leave the area so hardly won but the position had become untenable'.⁹⁵ He had borne a heavy responsibility in this campaign. Determined to achieve a victory he had fought his division to the point of exhaustion and near disaster. It had achieved remarkable results under his inspiring leadership but these achievements were frittered away by the decisions of senior field commanders and the inaction of other formations. As a British historian later stated about Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed: "There the sword of the mighty was vilely cast away".⁹⁶ Freyberg withdrew what remained of his division that evening.

Meanwhile what of the wounded Kippenberger? Not being seriously wounded, Kippenberger was able to give aid and comfort to those who were in worse condition in the MDS and visited as many as he could. Private Ashley-Jones, an orderly at the MDS recorded the fate of the wounded on 28 November:

A tank battle has been raging all round us quite close all day. Too close, for just before dusk Jerry surrounded our MDS and came in on us. They potted a few shots around to make us realise it was serious, then took our Colonel.⁹⁷

For the next three days the MDS was in the middle of a battlefield and exposed to artillery and tank fire. Ashley-Jones reflected in this hostile environment that "The futility of this whole business strikes one very forcibly. ... It is just hell".⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Freyberg, most immediate cipher message 30 Corps, late morning 1 December 1941, WA II 8/ 8 NZNA.

⁹⁵ Freyberg Diary, 1 December 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁹⁶ Brigadier H. B. Latham to Kippenberger, letter, 19 August 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁹⁷ A. Ashley-Jones Diary, 28 November 1941, p.7, 6 Field Ambulance MDS Private Diary Extracts 18 June 1941- 18 September 1943, WA II 3/32 NZNA.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.8.

On 1 December Kippenberger “watched sadly and anxiously” as 20 Battalion were overwhelmed on Belhamed.⁹⁹ Alarmed that many of the senior officers were being sent to Italy, he began planning his escape on 30 November and was very disappointed when “a surprising number of those approached were not willing to take the risk”.¹⁰⁰ He put together a party of twenty that included some of the medical orderlies whom Kippenberger was reluctant to take because many “had behaved badly when we were captured and under the shelling, but there no other fit candidates”.¹⁰¹ After five attempts by others to secure a vehicle in which to escape Kippenberger:

said that I was fed up with this messing round and promises about trucks and would take sole charge of the enterprise. This was agreed to and I warned the 19 now in the party to be ready from daylight and we went to bed.¹⁰²

On 4 December the party boarded a truck but had to dismount hurriedly when an Italian staff officer and mechanics arrived checking on the serviceable trucks. The Italian officer approached Kippenberger:

Took no notice of him till he saluted. Felt pretty hopeless and got right to my hind feet. He was mad about the rotor arms, said no water unless replaced, telling me as senior officer. Told him, after asking, getting and noting name, that I would report him to Gnl. Rommel and further would make certain he was shot after the war. He didn't like one or other of these promises, and went off with an unfriendly look.¹⁰³

When Kippenberger's party reboarded the truck, they found that its battery was flat

A British three-tonner arrived and two Germans got out and began to check the captured trucks of the ADS for serviceability. Within five minutes

⁹⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.103.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, p.104.

¹⁰² Kippenberger, excerpts from letter home, 17 December 1941, p.2, Glue Papers.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, p.3.

Kippenberger's party were aboard the German truck and drove out of the camp and past the two Italian guards. Kippenberger, with a pistol ready to shoot any enemy attempting to block the escape, threatened to shoot the driver if he stalled the truck on one of the steep slopes of the wadi but adds "I do not think Robinson needed this encouragement".¹⁰⁴ The truck ran into some German tanks and skirted around them but was then chased and fired on by two armoured cars which hit it forcing it to stop. The "ugly looking bastard" whom Kippenberger approached with raised hands turned out to be a South African and not German.¹⁰⁵

After a two day journey to Baggush Kippenberger discovered Corps HQ and persuaded them to rescue the rest of the wounded at the MDS and this was successfully accomplished. He also received confirmation of the fate of 20 Battalion and met up with Freyberg whose diary recorded:

VERY pleasant surprise when Kip turned up. Made him a Brigadier on the spot and sent him back to hospital. He will take over 5 Bde later on.¹⁰⁶

The 20 Battalion was reformed with the pitifully few remnants, the LOBs and a new draft of reinforcements. While Kippenberger was in hospital in Gerawla an incident occurred that "left a good deal of bitterness". Inglis at a parade of the new 20 Battalion had stated that the battalion "had surrendered too easily at Belhamed". These comments infuriated Kippenberger who confronted Inglis on this issue. While they amicably "agreed to differ" a breakdown in their relationship can be traced from this time on.¹⁰⁷

The charge was obviously deeply felt by Kippenberger who visited Belhamed a few months later and found it "a sombre and unforgettable scene".¹⁰⁸ He pursued the matter after the war being especially upset at Inglis' treatment of Captain R. Agar whom Inglis had recommended be returned to New Zealand for his alleged poor performance on Belhamed. In February 1949 Kippenberger received a letter from L. M. Uttley, 20 Battalion's mortar officer, stating that Agar

¹⁰⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.105.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.106.

¹⁰⁶ Freyberg Diary, 6 December 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

¹⁰⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.111.

¹⁰⁸ Kippenberger, Foreword to W. W. Mason, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War Prisoners of War*, Wellington, 1954, p.vi.

had done all he possibly could and had been made the scapegoat for the Belhamed disaster.¹⁰⁹ Kippenberger sent the letter on to the 20 Battalion's Official Historians and replied to Uttley:

I have always been determined to get a full account of this affair if possible. Unfortunately Brian Bassett is dead and Inglis is most unlikely to answer any questions. I thought Agar was going very well up to the time I was hit and expected him to do well, and when Inglis put an adverse report in consequence of which he was sent home I put in a protest and a favourable report.¹¹⁰

Kippenberger's investigations convinced him that when 20 Battalion surrendered it had "no possibility of continuing effective resistance or of running away".¹¹¹ In his defence of the battalion Kippenberger overstated the number of tanks involved at forty-eight.¹¹² A letter from a member of the battalion corrected his error: "There were no more than eight tanks in the attack and certainly they didn't get the Battalion without a fight. Rifles against tanks are never successful".¹¹³

On 7 December Afrika Korps clashed with the remaining British armour of 4 Armoured Corps and as a result of the subsequent heavy losses, low morale and poor supply position, Rommel decided to abandon the Tobruk front for the Gazala position. It was an ironic situation as on 2 December after the New Zealand Division had withdrawn from the battlefield Rommel had claimed victory in a signal sent to Rome and Berlin and now days later he was in full retreat. The "sinews of war" had finally caught up with Rommel and his panzer troops were exhausted. Rommel withdrew his army first to Gazala and then to El Agheila. He advanced again to Gazala in a "spoiling assault" in January 1942.

¹⁰⁹ L. M. Uttley to Kippenberger, letter, 17 February 1949, Correspondence Libya, WA II 11/5 NZNA.

¹¹⁰ Kippenberger to Uttley, letter, 22 February 1949, Crusader Correspondence L-Z, DA 50/10/18, WA II 3/20 NZNA.

¹¹¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.111.

¹¹² *ibid.*, p.108.

¹¹³ F. J. Laird to Kippenberger, letter, 24 September 1949, WA II 3/19 NZNA.

So ended Operation CRUSADER, an operation that fully revealed the command and tactical inadequacies of Eighth Army. The battle had been won at great cost not by any superior leadership, strategy or performance, but because of the mistakes made by Rommel in which he had gravely aggravated his supply difficulties and strained his meagre resources. As long as Eighth Army continued to think of military formations in terms of brigade groups or jock columns — large and small cowpats — it would never gain tactical ascendancy over the Afrika Korps.

In striving for mobility and independence of action armoured corps doctrine ensured the continual dispersal of effort of Eighth Army and delayed its ultimate victory in North Africa. The key to victory in North Africa lay with the correct use of the tank as the British had learned in 1918 — en masse and supported by all arms in close cooperation and all under tight control of the field commander. In 1941 there was no method of concentrating the full strength of the Eighth Army even if a commander had been astute enough to suggest it. The tactical doctrine of concentration and cooperation of all arms was a long way off and would only come as the result of bitter experience and a change of several senior commanders.

Operation CRUSADER had been Auchinleck's first major battle as an Army commander and he remained convinced of the viability of the large cowpat — the brigade group — as the ideal formation for a modern battle. He had earlier informed Freyberg that World War II was "a Brigade Group War" to which Freyberg had replied "Since when?"¹¹⁴ Freyberg's conclusion from his first desert battle was the opposite of Auchinleck's in that he believed that a "two Bde Division is a failure. ... Absence of reserve Bde more than halved strength of Division".¹¹⁵ His conclusion of the whole campaign was remarkably lucid and apposite:

This campaign has shown again that the well-established principles of War still apply. Of all the factors which contribute towards success, surprise is still the most important. To achieve surprise we must be highly trained.

¹¹⁴ Freyberg Diary, 22 November 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

¹¹⁵ Freyberg to Puttick, message C430, 13 December 1941, Miscellaneous CGS WA II 8 Part II 0 NZNA.

We must train to reach the highest standard of efficiency in movement, in the use of weapons, and in the co-operation with other arms. Training now is more necessary than ever.¹¹⁶

Unfortunately Auchinleck was to prove a much slower learner than Freyberg and maintained dispersion of effort and the cowpat theory of battle throughout the first half of 1942.

It was during the relief of Tobruk that the New Zealand Division first began to distinguish itself. According to Laurie Barber and John Tonkin-Covell the CRUSADER operation “witnessed the emergence of a superior division on the desert scene ... 2 New Zealand Division”.¹¹⁷ Kippenberger wrote soon after the fighting ended:

Don't think New Zealand Troops ever fought quite so well. Auchinleck came to see me in hospital and said we'd done the finest fighting he'd ever known and he meant it.¹¹⁸

Yet the division also revealed itself to be an inexperienced fighting unit, unused to the desert terrain and uncertain in many of its own tactical doctrines. Potential had been revealed but it needed experience to bring it to fruition.

Freyberg freely admitted on the first page of his secret report that “enemy tactics are different from ours and it is quite clear we have much to learn”.¹¹⁹ His inexperience of command was especially evident in his stubborn, in Kippenberger's view “senseless”,¹²⁰ refusal to abandon the Tobruk corridor when it was clear to most New Zealand commanders that it could not be held. He had also shown just how cool and level-headed he could be during a crisis and his performance during the campaign and the knighthood which followed went some way to restoring a tarnished reputation. If Operation CRUSADER was a

¹¹⁶ Freyberg, Secret Report “The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica”, *op. cit.*, p.30.

¹¹⁷ Barber and Tonkin-Covell, *op. cit.*, pp.124-5.

¹¹⁸ Kippenberger, excerpts from letter, 17 December 1941, *op. cit.*, p.4.

¹¹⁹ Freyberg, Secret Report “The New Zealand Division in Cyrenaica”, *op. cit.*, p.1.

¹²⁰ Kippenberger to Stewart, letter, 25 February 1954, IA 181/32/6, Glue Papers.

success, as many claimed, most of the credit for this must go to Freyberg. Certainly the Germans knew this. Rommel's PA, Heinz Werner Schmidt, recorded that "the November battle was won largely by the New Zealanders".¹²¹

Despite his errors, Kipperberger too enhanced his own reputation during the campaign and he was awarded a Mention in Despatches — the single bronze oak leaf — for his work in CRUSADER. But, like Freyberg, he had made serious and costly mistakes at Belhamed. A mistake in navigation had exacted a very heavy price, a price of which Kipperberger was all too painfully aware. From now on Kipperberger would always include the location of his HQ after the attack in his planning. He would also always include a password. The greatest lesson revealed at Belhamed, however, was that unsupported infantry attacks requiring the troops to march long distances across ground without a prior reconnaissance, are fraught with risk. It was even more risky to leave the infantry on the objective without adequate anti-tank defence or armoured protection. Unfortunately, while Kipperberger readily grasped these lessons, it would take another two disasters to drive them home to some of the higher commanders.

The battle also reaffirmed Kipperberger's firm belief in the principles of war most of which had been abandoned during CRUSADER.¹²² Surprise had been achieved but any advantages from this were wasted. There was an economy of effort and "a most obstinate maintenance of the objective".¹²³ But the principles of concentration of force, cooperation, security, offensive action, flexibility, administration and maintenance of morale had been so effectively violated that Kipperberger regarded CRUSADER as the period in this war when "British tactical doctrines reached their lowest depths".¹²⁴

Having revealed his potential during the Crete campaign and during most of CRUSADER, Kipperberger was promoted to Brigadier and in the next two years developed his full potential as a military commander while commanding 5 Brigade in the desert campaigns of 1942 and 1943.

The total of British casualties for Crusader was 17 700 of which over 30 per cent, some 4 620, were from the New Zealand Division. The 4 620 included 879

¹²¹ Heinz Werner Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, London, 1960, p.90.

¹²² *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.81-2.

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p.81.

killed, 1 699 wounded and 2 042 missing.¹²⁵ The New Zealand losses were more than those of any other division in Eighth Army and were 1000 more than the losses on Crete, twice that of the losses on Greece and three times more than would be lost in the Cassino battles. There was scarcely a community in New Zealand left untouched by the terrible cost of this campaign.

Operation CRUSADER did end in victory despite Eighth Army's tactics even if it was a victory by default. Officially, Murphy was in no doubt of this and he wrote that because it relieved Tobruk, saved Egypt and Malta and gave time for Britain to redeploy against Japan, the campaign is described as "a vital success".¹²⁶ Privately though, Murphy was not so confident. He wrote to Kippenberger:

The high level story is in any case depressing — poor planning and bad generalship on both sides. The only general who comes out uniformly well, I suppose is Neumann-Silkow — and it cost him his life. We won the campaign, after a fashion, but certainly not by generalship.¹²⁷

Ronald Lewin in his assessment believed that CRUSADER was "a battle which both sides deserved to lose".¹²⁸

Operation CRUSADER was the New Zealand Division's first military success of the war, though the words of Pyrrhus about such victories must have echoed in the minds of many of those who took part. This especially applies to Kippenberger who had commanded seven successful actions in four days and had been promoted after the battle. He had also been wounded and captured, and, most painful of all, his beloved 20 Battalion had been annihilated on Belhamed. It is somewhat ironic that the first success of the division had cost it more in casualties than the previous two military disasters. If further such successes were in store, the New Zealand Division would soon cease to exist.

¹²⁵ Murphy, *The Relief of Tobruk*, Appendix 1, p.524.

¹²⁶ *ibid*, p.523.

¹²⁷ Murphy to Kippenberger, memo, 23 May 1956, WA II 11/4 NZNA.

¹²⁸ R. Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps*, London, 1979, p.102.