

Chapter 7: "What Amateurs We Were": July 1942

At the very heart of war lies doctrine. It represents the central beliefs for waging war in order to achieve victory. Doctrine is of the mind, a network of faith and knowledge reinforced by experience which lays the pattern for the utilisation of men, equipment and tactics. It is fundamental to sound judgment.

General Curtis E. LeMay.¹

My wife could have run this battle [Ruweisat] better than the Corps Commander has.

Kippenberger.²

Freyberg's wounding at Minqar Qaim removed him from the division at a critical time in its history. For the first time Kippenberger was earmarked as a potential divisional commander when an anxious New Zealand Government cabled Freyberg in hospital that it was "concerned regarding the question of command especially in the event of further casualties to senior commanders". They asked whether General Barrowclough should return to the division.³ Freyberg replied:

Inglis must be left in command. In my opinion he is well fitted to command division. As second string I have full confidence in KIPPENBERGER. Action in battle shows other young Brigadiers are coming on such as GRAY and BURROWS and altogether situation is not

¹ General Curtis E. LeMay, quoted in R. W. Reading, "Could Iraq Have made Better Use of its Air Force and Missile Technology During the Air War?" *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 94 May/June 1992, p.53.

² Kippenberger, quoted in letter to Scoullar, 2 May 1951, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

³ Fraser to Freyberg, message No 7666, 30 June 1942, Minqar Qaim and Ruweisat Ridge, WA II 8/24 NZNA.

unfavourable.⁴

Commanding the division in Freyberg's absence was Major General Lindsay Meritt Inglis. Inglis, also a solicitor, had been Kippenberger's mentor in the pre-war TF days, but the two men had recently fallen out over Inglis's unwarranted criticism of 20 Battalion's performance at Belhamed. Kippenberger wrote of Inglis at this time that he "was extremely good, his one failing is his ungenerous attitude towards all other commanders".⁵ Inglis, universally known throughout the division as "Whisky Bill", was aloof, aggressive, secretive and had a serious drinking problem.⁶

An incident on 30 June 1942 reveals much about Inglis's character and command style. With "no prospect of action" on that day he headed off to Cairo, ostensibly to check how 2 NZEF was faring during the "Great Flap". He recorded in his diary that he lost his way in the desert when trying to return that night.⁷ Kippenberger recorded of the incident:

It was an extraordinary business. He did simply "disappear" and what he went to Cairo for we can't make out. Even if he did tell some duty officer, at Army, Corps or Division he has never said. What a thing to do!⁸

Brigadier Stevens, at HQ 2 NZEF in Cairo, recalled that on this visit Inglis made no attempt to contact the wounded Freyberg nor anyone else at 2 NZEF but left "a trail of alarm and despondency" behind him.⁹ The real purpose for Inglis's Cairo trip has been recorded on General Stevens's letter by one of the researchers of the New Zealand Official Histories:

⁴ Freyberg to Fraser, message Z80, 2 July 1942, *ibid*.

⁵ Kippenberger to Ken Henderson, letter, 29 December 1941, Glue Papers.

⁶ Dr N. E. Wickham (letter to author, 15 February 1992) tells a delightful story of Inglis as a magistrate in New Zealand. After sentencing a person on a charge of being drunk and disorderly, Inglis had commented that most heavy drinkers had red noses. When the whole courtroom fixed its gaze upon Inglis's huge red proboscis, he had quickly added, "Of course everyone knows I got my red nose chasing Rommel in the hot African sun".

⁷ Inglis, GOC's Diary 30 June 1941, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁸ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 4 October 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁹ W. Stevens to Kippenberger, letter, 18 September 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

He was seen in Cairo, rather high, in company of the “Lady in his Life” and there is indirect evidence he went to Ismailia to see the skin specialist at No. 4? Bs Gen Hosp. He was far from well.¹⁰

Where Freyberg would command a battle either from the very front --- and he was often criticised for being too far forward — or from his battle headquarters, Inglis was almost impossible to locate during a battle, as well as away from one, and this was to cause considerable problems during the next Ruweisat action. Once he had issued his orders and made the necessary preparations, Inglis left the running of the battle to his subordinates and removed himself from the area without telling them where he could be reached or checking on their progress. It is unthinkable that Freyberg, or Kippenberger, would ever have commanded in this way.

The correct positioning of a commander during an action is of crucial importance to its success. The solution for Kippenberger, and one which he had agonised over and only reached after Ruweisat and El Mreir, was for “Headquarters to be established as far forward as possible before the assault, and stay there, the Brigadier personally going forward to look at things when necessary”.¹¹ The Australian commander, Morshead, had arrived at the same conclusion as Kippenberger. As he wrote to his wife on the eve of the third Battle of Alamein only 2000 yards away from his division’s start line:

I have always been a firm believer in having Headquarters well forward --- it makes the job easier, saves a great deal of time, in fact it has every possible advantage and I know of no disadvantage.¹²

Freyberg would have echoed these sentiments to the full; Inglis, however, if he believed in them, certainly did not put them into practice.

It would seem then that Inglis was not “well fitted” to command the division in Freyberg’s absence and that the division might have been better served by Freyberg’s “second string” choice of Kippenberger. It was not to be,

¹⁰ R. W. D., Handwritten comment on *ibid.*

¹¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.210

¹² Morshead to Myrtle, letter, 23 October 1942, Personal Records, 3 DRL 2632 A1 File 3 AWM.

however, and Inglis's command style caused considerable problems in the next two major actions of the division. Freyberg's experienced, cool battle leadership and his presence on the battlefield would be sorely missed.

On reaching the Alamein position the New Zealand Division rested and regrouped and was used from 30 June onward to reinforce that position. The Alamein position was a unique one in the Western Desert in that it presented the defenders with a shortened line only forty miles long -- from the coast in the north to the impassible Qattara Depression in the south. This meant that the position could not be turned by a wide encircling movement on the open flank; it could only be taken by a direct assault and, because of this, it was the best defensive position available in Egypt. This also meant that any feature offering good observation for considerable distances, the ridges and lips of depressions, would become the key tactical features of the line and would be hotly contested in the three battles to be fought there.

On 27 June 1942 Rommel wrote to his wife, "We're still on the move and hope to keep it up until the final goal. It takes a lot out of one, of course, but its the chance of a life-time".¹³ On 1 July Rommel reached the Alamein position with only fifty-five serviceable tanks and his troops exhausted. Facing him was a greatly weakened Eighth Army down to one complete infantry division, a reduced division, a brigade group and many remnants of other divisions now dispersed into ineffective battle groups. Rommel's "chance of a life-time" was about to evaporate along with the morale and stamina of his troops. Instead of waiting until he was strong enough to penetrate the Alamein position, Rommel used his exhausted troops in a series of improvised and sporadic attacks. The state of his forces ensured that the attacks were feeble and that they made no impression on even the fragile defences of Eighth Army. After three days of such fighting Rommel realised:

things are not going as I should like them. Resistance is too great and our strength exhausted. However, I still hope to find a way to achieve our goal.

¹³ Rommel to Lu, letter, 27 June 1942, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 237.

I'm rather tired and fagged out.¹⁴

The fighting on the Alamein position continued for another three weeks as Rommel drove his troops and himself to deeper depths of exhaustion. He did not find a way to achieve his goal and his army was worn out in the process. An Afrika Korps medical report in July 1942 stated:

With the lull in the fighting the number of wounded has decreased, but the number of sick is increasing ... most noticeable are diarrhoea, skin diseases, influenza, angina and exhaustion.¹⁵

First Alamein, as the series of engagements became known, petered out at the end of July. It had been a confused series of engagements but they had been decisive in spite of the poor leadership and faulty doctrine of Eighth Army. Rommel was halted on the Alamein position, and for the moment could advance no further.

New Zealand Division and Kippenberger's 5 Brigade were actively involved in First Alamein. Two actions stand out in the early days of this battle as do the two disasters at Ruweisat Ridge and the El Mreir Depression in the later stages. The two early actions are the destruction of the Ariete Division by 4 Brigade and the failed raid by 5 Brigade on El Mreir.

On 3 July Afrika Korps with the Italian Ariete and Trieste Divisions, engaged 1 Armoured Division on the Alam Nayil feature. Ariete Division had advanced without a reconnaissance force or security screen and during the advance had allowed its infantry to become separated from its armoured protection. Brigadier Weir observed this separation from an advanced artillery observation post and immediately called in artillery fire on the isolated Ariete infantry and artillery units and advised the New Zealand Division to launch an infantry attack. 4 Brigade was moved rapidly forward and overran the entire infantry and artillery of this hapless division. An LO sent by 15 Panzer to find out

¹⁴ Rommel to Lu, letter, 4 July 1942, *ibid.*, pp. 249-50.

¹⁵ July 1942, Extracts Afrika Korps Medical Report, March - August 1942, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

where Ariete was and why it was not protecting Afrika Korps's southern flank reported:

Ariete has lost almost all its artillery this morning, and now has five tanks and two guns available for the attack. The rest of Ariete is either weaponless or unfit for action.¹⁶

Rommel described the attack as a "complete success" and noted that "This reverse took us completely by surprise".¹⁷ How Rommel must have rued the opportunity lost at Minqar Qaim to put the New Zealand Division away for good!

Following the destruction of Ariete, 5 Brigade under Kippenberger launched an attack on the El Mreir Depression in the enemy's rear. The depression proved, against all expectation, to be heavily occupied and the battalions could only secure its southern lip. Kippenberger made the decision not to launch an immediate assault into the depression in the growing darkness but to "maintain pressure with the two battalions in and look for a flank with the Twenty-third [Battalion] next night".¹⁸

This attack by 23 Battalion on the night of 4 July was a disaster. Kippenberger had ordered 23 Battalion to move well out to the west by truck, cross the depression and then wheel right and sweep in on the enemy's rear which rested on the northern lip. 23 Battalion did not use its trucks at all and, instead of crossing the depression, moved along over its floor straight into the enemy's defensive fire. The attack petered out, "nobody seemed to be in command", according to one eyewitness,¹⁹ and only two Italian prisoners were taken for a loss of three men killed, fifteen wounded and three missing — "light for the amount of fire which had been directed against them".²⁰

The real cause of the failure for the attack by 23 Battalion serves as a grim warning to military historians of the problems of relying on Official Histories and autobiographies of participants for an accurate account of what actually

¹⁶ 15 Pz to HQ AK, message, 1230 hrs 3 July 1942, GMDS File 22926/8&9, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

¹⁷ *The Rommel Papers*, 3 July 1942, p.249.

¹⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.143.

¹⁹ Ross interview, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Ross, *23 Battalion*, p.157.

transpires in battle. In *Infantry Brigadier*, Kippenberger, although pointing out that 23 Battalion did not follow his plan, characteristically accepted the blame for the failure of the raid stating "It was probably an over-elaborate plan and there was little time for preparation".²¹ The New Zealand Official History gave the following reasons for the failure:

Lack of time for preparation, particularly for reconnaissance of the going and plotting a secure route, prejudiced the enterprise. In the event, bad going proved the greatest obstacle to success.²²

The explanation given here is not very convincing and the same is true of the description given of the attack as it has the battalion reaching its final objective with relative ease and then turning back without any explanation. The battalion had, in fact, a whole day in which to prepare this flank attack and a "daring carrier reconnaissance" on the morning of the 4 July should have provided adequate information about the state of the hard going.²³ In any case, both Kippenberger and Scoullar knew the real explanation of the failure of 23 Battalion. In a letter written to the Official Historian, Kippenberger wrote:

The second affair at El Mreir on the night of 4/5 was entirely my own idea and I planned it as a raid. ... As it was of course, the affair was rather a fiasco, mainly due to the lack of nerve and resolution of the battalion commander. ... The full story of this incident has not yet been written, but the fact is the battalion commander lost his nerve when half way across the depression and that he was the first man back along the track, having deserted his battalion, or perhaps we can say having lost touch with it. He arrived ... in a panic stricken condition and by himself. I have always felt very surprised with myself that I did not supersede him on the spot but he had behaved well in Crete and I was too kind. I have accepted blame for the failure of this operation in "Infantry Brigadier". ... The real truth is as stated above, and I am convinced that with Romans, Russell or Allen [other battalion commanders] it would have been a first-class success. This

²¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.144.

²² Scoullar, *op. cit*, p.181.

²³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.144

is a little off the point and not for publication.²⁴

The battalion commander, Carl Watson, had won a Military Cross in the First World War and his failure of nerve on the night of 4 July, something that could happen to the bravest soldier at any time in battle, could in no way have been foreseen or prevented by Kippenberger. Memoirs, even Kippenberger's, need to be tested against other evidence.

The incident also shows how misleading some of the other evidence can be. 5 Brigade's War Diary, for example, described the El Mreir raid as a "successful attack" and Inglis wrote to Freyberg soon after that "Kip's night raid was a great success in spite of the fact that he had only Italians against him".²⁵ The men of the battalion were very uncomfortable with the division's Situation Report which described the raid as "completely successful" as most regarded it as a "perfect example of how an attack should not be mounted".²⁶ "I thought it was a bloody shambles and wasn't at all pleased", Angus Ross reflected fifty years later.²⁷

It also highlights one of Kippenberger's character defects. While he may have been "too kind" in this incident, Norman Dixon has written that it "requires greater moral courage to fire a congenial subordinate whom one knows personally" than almost any other military task.²⁸ Kippenberger, after this disaster, should have sacked the battalion commander responsible but lacked the moral courage to do so. It is significant, however, that he left a complete record of the event where he knew it would eventually come to light.

There now began a very testing period for both armies as each thrust and parried for position without ever striking a decisive blow. Conditions in the desert were dreadful at the height of summer with intense heat, plagues of flies, difficult manoeuvres and constant digging in and enemy shelling. The conditions sapped

²⁴ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 17 July 1951 IA 181/32/1, WA II, 11/6 NZNA.

²⁵ 5 Bde WD, 4 July 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/31, Inglis to Freyberg, letter, 6 July 1942, WA II 8/24 NZNA.

²⁶ Ross, *23 Battalion*, p.157.

²⁷ Ross interview, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Dixon, *op. cit.*, p.396.

the strength and morale of both armies but the mood of despair was intensified in Eighth Army by the prevailing attitude of the army commanders that the Alamein position was not a vital one and that further withdrawals eastward might even be necessary. Kippenberger neatly summed up the situation:

The whole attitude of Eighth army was that of having one foot in the stirrup, and it was evident that, for the time being, the initiative had passed to the enemy.²⁹

Kippenberger's daily routine began with breakfast before sunrise following which he would be violently sick "never omit[ting] this item until the cool weather".³⁰ Then Kippenberger would examine all the overnight reports before setting off to visit the battalions under his command. His "invariable rule" was to visit the the Headquarters and at least one company of each of the battalions and one of the artillery observation posts --- a very dangerous practice. This daily tour of the forward positions took Kippenberger several hours to complete as he always tried to talk with the men of each unit he visited. At the end of the tour Kippenberger would have "a very good idea of how everyone was shaping, what were their troubles and what could be done to help them".³¹ The afternoon period was given over to resting during the intense heat and in the late afternoon Kippenberger would visit the brigades on each flank. It was the routine of a brigadier constantly in touch with the men under his command, well forward with the action and aware of the trials and tribulations of desert warfare. The long, hard summer of 1942 took its toll on all involved in the campaign. Kippenberger wrote at the end of the year, "I hope we can finish the matter in Africa and not have to undergo a summer campaign again".³²

The next major action of the New Zealand Division was the disaster of Ruweisat Ridge. The ridge was long and narrow in the centre of the Alamein position, totally devoid of cover and with an average height of 180 feet (55

²⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.191.

³⁰ *ibid*, p.193.

³¹ *ibid*.

³² Kippenberger to James Fraser, letter, 27 December 1942, Clue Papers.

metres). J. F. Cody describes Ruweisat Ridge as “a ten-mile long dagger at the heart of the Alamein Line” which, because of its height, “dominated over a hundred square miles”.³³ The ridge was held by the Axis forces in July 1942 with the New Zealand Division encamped eight miles to the south and preparing to make an assault.

If ever a military operation stands alone as a model of poor planning and control with the inevitable, disastrous results that follow then it is the attack made by New Zealand Division on Ruweisat Ridge on 15 July 1942. The Corps Commander, “Strafer” Gott, had issued a different, often contradictory, set of orders to each formation. While New Zealand Division believed the seizure of Ruweisat would turn the tide of battle in North Africa firmly in favour of Eighth Army, the other formations to be involved in the attack, 1 Armoured Division and 5 Indian Division, did not share this sense of mission. 1 Armoured Division, whose use in the battle meant success or failure, had been “issued no operational order”.³⁴

The attack on Ruweisat was to be a coordinated effort of one armoured and two infantry divisions, yet there was no arrangement made for practical support, no clear chain of command, and no liaison between the two infantry divisions. Kippenberger later commented on these serious deficiencies:

I do not think anyone then realised how much training and care and forethought are required to get good co-operation between infantry and tanks. We merely cursed one another when it was not achieved.³⁵

Although this assault was to be a Corps operation of three divisions there was no Corps Conference for senior officers lower than divisional commanders so that the senior officers of each division had very little idea of what the other formations were required to do.

At the Corps Conference for the Major Generals and above on 12 July Inglis had pressed for armoured support for the advancing infantry from the moment they crossed their start lines, but both Gott and Lumsden (GOC 1 Armoured Division) had refused this request as the tanks would have to come

³³ Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.163.

³⁴ R Peake (G1 1 Armd Div) to Latham, letter, 8 December 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

³⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.159.

under infantry command, anathema to armoured commanders, and 1 Armoured Division “had not been trained in close tank-infantry co-operation”.³⁶ This was an extraordinary admission to make on the eve of a combined assault. Inglis then pressed for the armour to advance at first light with an armoured brigade to protect the left flank of New Zealand Division and for another to move forward and support the infantry astride the ridge. Lumsden was reluctant to offer even this amount of protection but Inglis insisted and Gott finally ordered it.

Information on the enemy forces defending Ruweisat was very poor and had failed to pinpoint the two Italian infantry divisions, a German infantry regiment and 15 Panzer Division in defensive positions about the feature. New Zealand intelligence officers had requested aerial photographs of the enemy positions at Ruweisat but these were not made available until 1900 hrs on the night of the attack and were so overexposed as to be virtually worthless.³⁷

Fault could even be found with the maps used by Eighth Army for the assault. Eighth Army possessed five different series of maps for the Ruweisat location and used at least two different series during the operation. Between these series there were considerable differences in the names and numbers given to the prominent features.³⁸

The New Zealand commanders were expecting their men to be able to dig in on reaching the Ruweisat objective and did not anticipate finding solid rock. The division had not been told that 18 Infantry Brigade had tried to occupy Ruweisat prior to Rommel’s arrival on the Alamein Line but had been forced to move to the lesser tactical feature of the Shein Depression because they had been unable to dig in on the ridge nor did they know that the enemy were not in position on the ridge but well forward of it for that very reason.³⁹ The ridge was totally devoid of the cover so necessary for the survival of infantry.

One other crucial mistake is worth noting. Those infantry battalions that were to assault Ruweisat Ridge would have to do so minus a quarter of their original strength. Eighth Army had “learned” an important lesson from its defeat by Rommel in the previous month: “a division had more infantry than its

³⁶ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.218.

³⁷ *ibid*, p.224.

³⁸ *ibid*, pp.224 -5.

³⁹ *ibid*, p.251.

field and anti-tank guns could adequately support".⁴⁰ Rather than increase the number of guns allocated to a division and thereby increase its firepower, the Eighth Army solution was to reduce infantry battalions from four companies to three and thereby considerably weaken those units. New Zealand Division had followed this directive after Minqar Qaim and had sent one company from each of its ten infantry battalions back to the base camp at Maadi. 5 Brigade, before Minqar Qaim, had sent 143 all ranks from each of its battalions.⁴¹ During the Ruweisat operation these companies would be "sorely missed ... but they did not return until just before Alamein".⁴²

Scoullar's conclusion of the planning for Ruweisat was that "the project was hastily conceived, loosely co-ordinated, and abounded in examples of poor staff work on matters which might be supposed to be within the knowledge and experience of those responsible".⁴³ Kippenberger has added that "the whole operation was typical of Eighth Army's methods and ideas while it was dominated by what I heard one very senior officer describe as 'the vested interests of the British cavalry' ".⁴⁴

Ruweisat Ridge was the first occasion of the war in which the New Zealand Division was actually used in the assault role as a division instead of in isolated brigade formations. It was not a complete divisional formation, however, as it still lacked the luxury of a third divisional brigade in reserve. On the left of the advance to Ruweisat 4 Brigade would assault parallel to 5 Brigade in the centre. An Indian Brigade was to advance parallel to the New Zealand Brigades on 5 Brigade's right flank. While 4 Brigade seized the western edge of Ruweisat Ridge, 5 Brigade was to seize the centre of the feature with 5 Indian Brigade to take the eastern portion of the ridge. The infantry brigades were to take the ridge in a silent, night attack after an advance of six miles (ten kilometres) and their support units, the artillery, medium machine guns, mortars and anti-tank guns would follow up the infantry advance and join them at first light. Both Brigadiers, Kippenberger and Burrows, requested Inglis to

⁴⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.126.

⁴¹ 5 Bde WD, 24 June 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/30 NZNA.

⁴² Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, IA 181/32/1, 30 September 1947, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁴³ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.221.

⁴⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.157.

permit an advance to Ruweisat in two stages, rather than the one long night advance of six miles.⁴⁵ Inglis took this request to Gott, but it was turned down “for fear of giving away our intentions”.⁴⁶ As Jim Henderson stated in the 22 Battalion Official History, a six-mile advance was “a long attack indeed, a task which would have taxed the strength of even fresh troops”.⁴⁷

Expected at first light were two armoured brigades, one to seal off the vulnerable left flank and one to protect the infantry on Ruweisat against the German counter-attack that always followed a successful assault. On the armoured brigades rested the success of the whole venture.

In his preparations for the attack, Kippenberger made two crucial mistakes for which his brigade was to pay dearly. The first was in the orders he gave to his battalion commanders. Kippenberger decided to advance with two battalions forward, the 23 Battalion on the right and the 21 on the left, with one battalion, the 22, in reserve. The total front for the advance was to be 1 000 yards but this was misunderstood by the commander of 21 Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Sam Allen, who believed that his battalion was expected to cover a front of 1 000 yards by itself.⁴⁸ As Inglis informed Scoullar, the “maximum battalion frontage ever used by 4 Brigade battalions in a night attack was 400 yards. 300 yards was normal; 1000 yards was regarded as quite out of the question”.⁴⁹ Yet 21 Battalion’s Operation Order No.1 stated that the battalion was to advance on a 1000 yard front and sections would be dispersed at 60 yard intervals. The order acknowledged that many strong points would inevitably be bypassed and Allen urged his battalion to deal only with the enemy directly to their front leaving the “mopping up” to 22 Battalion.⁵⁰

This misunderstanding had very serious consequences as 21 Battalion reached the objective as ten separate platoons “all searching for the objective and each other” so that once the objective was reached by these dispersed platoons 21

⁴⁵ 5 Bde WD, 1805 hrs 11 July 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/31 NZNA.

⁴⁶ Inglis, quoted in Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 2 July 1952, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁴⁷ Henderson, *22 Battalion*, p.171.

⁴⁸ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.228.

⁴⁹ Inglis to Scoullar, letter, May 1943, Folder 22 Outwards Correspondence 3 April 1950 — 18 August 1953, Inglis Papers MS 0421 ATL

⁵⁰ Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.170.

Battalion “as a unit was lost to 5 Brigade”.⁵¹ In fact, some of 21 Battalion’s platoons overshot the objective by two miles (three kilometres).⁵² Kippenberger later wrote that Allen, a signals officer, “knew extremely little about infantry work”. Allen, who was killed at Ruweisat:

was a fine commander and strict disciplinarian, but up to this date had never commanded infantry in action, and during the short opportunities that I had for training his bn in Syria I found him constantly surprisingly ignorant of infantry work.⁵³

If this was so, then Kippenberger should have taken extra care to ensure that Allen understood his orders and knew his commander’s intentions. Kippenberger reluctantly acknowledged this:

You will not find in later operations of 5 Bde mistakes and misunderstandings similar to those which marred the Ruweisat action. I suppose the Bde was not then the smooth running machine which it later became. ... It was never my practice — nor General Freyberg’s — to “follow up” an order by supervising its execution. Perhaps at this stage in the Bde’s life such supervision was needed.⁵⁴

Kippenberger’s style of command outlined in this letter follows the concept of Directive Control, now standard doctrine in most armies of the world and based on the German concept of *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics). Using Directive Control, the commander’s intent is specified and must be clearly understood by all subordinate commanders. Those subordinates are then free to choose the course of action that will fulfil their commander’s intent.⁵⁵ For Directive Control to work the commander must ensure that his intention is clearly understood

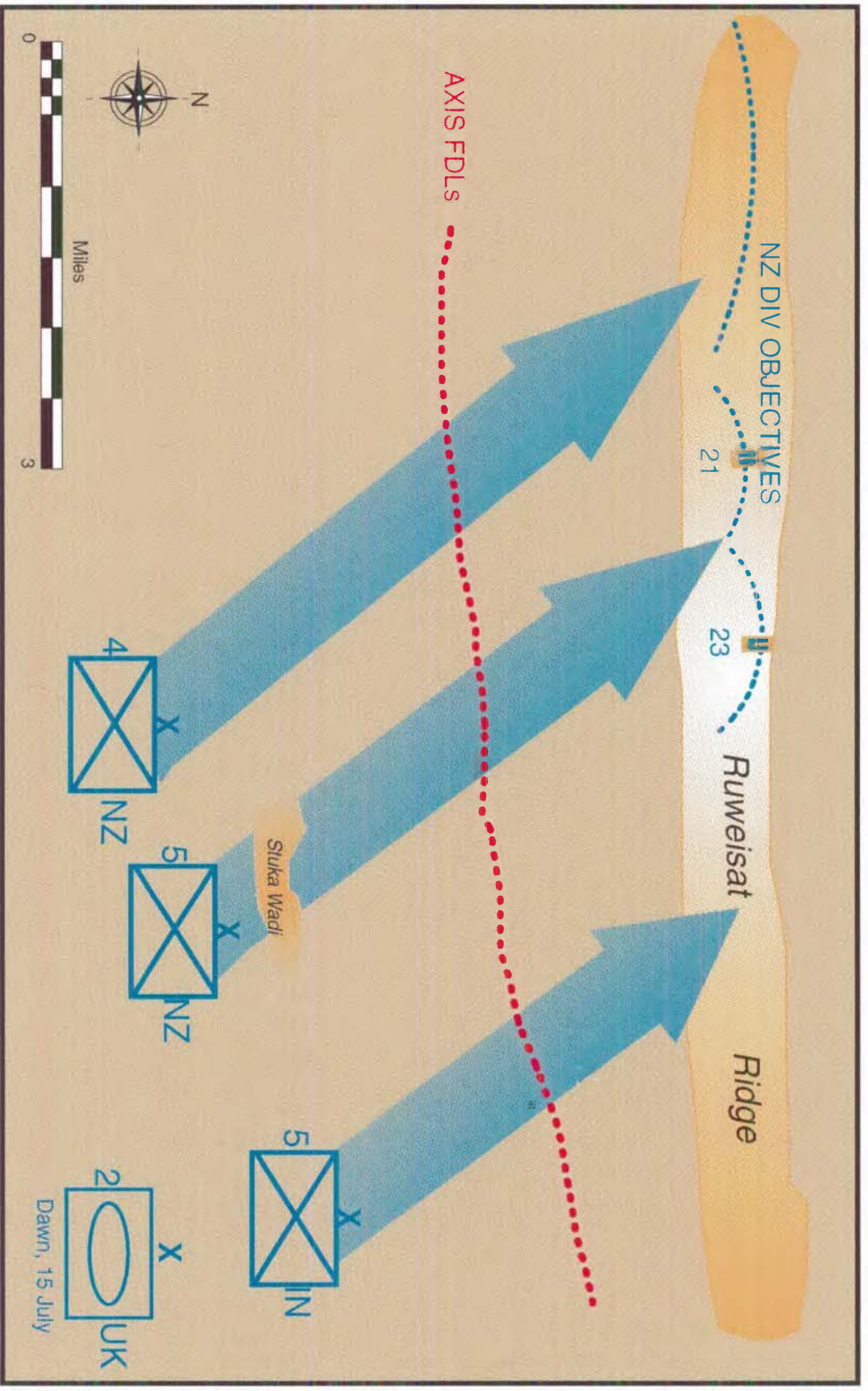
⁵¹ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.236.

⁵² Inglis, GOC’s Diary, 15 July 1942, Folder 46 WW II — Africa, MS 0421 ATL.

⁵³ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 13 August 1951 IA 181/32/1, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, Manual of Land Warfare Part 1 Volume 1, Number 1, Doctrine Headquarters Training Command, Sydney, 1993, pp.32, 103, also MLW 1.1.2 *Command and Control*, Sydney, 1992, pp. 1.5 -1.6.



Ruweisat Ridge

El Alamein, 14-15 July 1942

without confusion and must have absolute confidence in the ability of his subordinates to carry out his intentions. Clearly at Ruweisat, Kippenberger did not meet this criterion and the mistakes were to prove costly. At the bare minimum Kippenberger should have checked to ensure that his orders had been understood by all the senior officers of the brigade including those in 21 Battalion. Kippenberger learned from this mistake and did not repeat it.

Kippenberger's second mistake was his decision not to take the cumbersome but very reliable No. 11 radio sets with the advancing battalions but to rely on the No. 18 sets which had limited range and reliability. Furthermore, he adopted an intricate signals plan "which I could not understand and unwisely accepted".⁵⁶ Communications with the advancing battalions broke down almost as soon as the battalions left their start lines. The lack of communications with his forward units caused considerable problems for Kippenberger in this battle and in effect reduced him to a battlefield wanderer.

The initial attack on Ruweisat Ridge proceeded well and the advancing battalions cut a path through the forward defensive positions with relative ease and soon reached their objectives. What was not known at the time, however, was that these forward defensive positions through which the infantry battalions had so easily passed, were the main enemy lines of resistance and, despite Kippenberger's urging of his reserve battalion to mop up pockets of resistance thoroughly, these forward defensive lines were little damaged and still intact at first light.

Dawn on 15 July found both New Zealand Brigades on their objectives at Ruweisat but in a precarious situation. In the centre was 5 Brigade with 23 Battalion on the right flank holding the crest of the ridge on a 1 000-yard front with 22 Battalion to their south and just below the crest. The Indian Brigade had failed to reach the objective so that the Brigade's right flank was exposed. Between 22 Battalion and 4 Brigade was a gap of a mile which all commanders believed 21 Battalion was holding. 4 Brigade, fighting its last action in North Africa, had arrived on the objective in greater strength than 5 Brigade but were more exposed to enemy attack. 18 Battalion was on the right flank, 19 Battalion in the left rear and 20 Battalion in reserve behind 18 Battalion.

⁵⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.163.

All battalions were unaware that their support weapons could not reach the objective as they were unable to break through the intact enemy line to reach them on the ridge. There was no sign of the expected armoured support. Communications with Divisional Headquarters had broken down but both brigade commanders were optimistic at this stage and expected the arrival of the armour at any second. The battalion commanders were not happy though as they had discovered that the ridge was almost solid rock and totally devoid of cover .

Kippenberger visited his two battalions on the objective at first light. He passed through 22 Battalion on a carrier urging them to "Hurry up and dig in before first light, boys".⁵⁷ He was initially "very pleased with the situation" but his pleasure became abject horror when he saw in the half-light "five tanks, 300 yards away heading towards us and shooting hard, spitting flames like dragons".⁵⁸ Kippenberger realised the only way to save his brigade was to find the promised British armour. He jumped into his Bren gun carrier and ran the gauntlet of enemy tanks "praying that by some small miracle our tanks might be near enough to save the situation".⁵⁹

Kippenberger transferred to his staff car, frantic with anxiety; an anxiety which was greatly increased by the fact that the car was only running on three cylinders and reached a top speed of ten miles per hour. Instead of finding the British tanks Kippenberger found a breakfasting Inglis who asked for news of the attack. There is an implied criticism of Inglis in Kippenberger 's description of the meeting:

He explained that Headquarters had moved forward and, of course, it was no use his following till it was established. So he was having a quiet breakfast. What could I tell him? I thought both brigades were on their objectives but I was being attacked in the rear by tanks. Where was our armour? He was able to give me the direction and we crawled off at a maddening ten miles an hour.⁶⁰

Kippenberger did find the tanks, some four miles from Ruweisat Ridge, all

⁵⁷ Henderson, *22 Battalion*, p.171.

⁵⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.167.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.168.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p.169.

calmly watching the action unfold before their eyes. His reception by the Brigade commander was “enough to cause despondency”.⁶¹ As Kippenberger recorded of this unbelievable meeting:

In every turret some one was standing gazing through glasses at the smoke rising from Ruweisat Ridge four miles or more away. I found and spoke to a regimental commander, who referred me to his Brigadier. The Brigadier received me coolly. I did my best not to appear agitated, said I was Commander of 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade, that we were on Ruweisat Ridge and were being attacked in the rear by tanks when I left an hour before. Would he move up and help? He said he would send a reconnaissance tank. I said there was no time. Would he move his whole brigade? While he was patiently explaining some difficulty, General Lumsden drove up.⁶²

Lumsden, after taking great pains to kill a scorpion in the sand with a shovel from his car, ordered his tanks to Ruweisat Ridge but not before the 22 Battalion had been overwhelmed.

The Brigadier who had received Kippenberger “coolly”, Raymond Briggs, later wrote of this meeting:

I have no personal recollection of General Lumsden telling me that we should have been on Point 63 at first light. My own recollection is that a proper plan was never laid down, that I was given a vague instruction to watch the right flank of NZ Div and the left flank of 5 Ind Div and not move in any particular direction until I received orders from Div.⁶³

Briggs described the meeting between Kippenberger and Lumsden as “stormy” and that Kippenberger was in an “angry and excited state”.⁶⁴ Kippenberger denied this charge: “I was coldly angry and would have bearded the devil himself but I

⁶¹ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.258.

⁶² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.169.

⁶³ R. Briggs, comment on Ruweisat narrative, 13 November 1953, W A II 11/6 NZNA.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

didn't feel excited".⁶⁵ As far as Briggs was concerned watching 22 Battalion being overrun was simply following orders:

I am quite sure 2 Armd Bde were given a watching brief rather than an intimate support role. ... In any case we were quite untrained in "intimate co-operation" with a strange infantry formation.⁶⁶

Briggs's decision to follow orders strictly to the letter was endorsed by the G1 of the division. For an armoured unit or formation:

without orders to have left its parent formation at the request of infantry would, I still think, have been wrong at that time and in the circumstances in the desert ... one only has to imagine the chaos that would have resulted if such a principle had become practice in the one extant Armoured Division in the Eighth Army.⁶⁷

As a result of this correspondence Kippenberger believed that Briggs "seems absolved of all blame".⁶⁸ General Gentry, however, believed that the accounts of Briggs and Peake:

did not explain why the Division as such did so little when it must have known through its own wireless net of the parlous state of our own infantry. In any case surely troop and squadron commanders are entitled to disobey a standing instruction in some circumstances and in this case the circumstances amply warranted a lot of disobedience.⁶⁹

The concept of Directive Control, with its emphasis on initiative of junior commanders, while accepted British Army doctrine today, would have been anathema to the armoured commanders of the Eighth Army.

The tanks through which Kippenberger had passed closed on the rear of 22

⁶⁵ Kippenberger to Latham, letter, 11 December 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁶⁶ Briggs, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ Peake, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Kippenberger to Latham, letter, 11 December 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁶⁹ Gentry, notes on Peake's letter, WA II 11/7 NZNA.

Battalion and caught the battalion exposed and unprepared for an armoured counterattack. When K Troop, the only New Zealand anti-tank troop to reach Ruweisat with its four, six-pounder guns, had been put out of action the battalion had nothing with which to fight the tanks of 15 Panzer Division. 22 Battalion and the Headquarters of 23 Battalion were forced to surrender and a total of 21 officers and 334 ORs were captured.⁷⁰

The first detailed account of 22 Battalion's capture was given by a corporal and five stretcher bearers of the battalion — all that managed to escape. At first the men were not believed and were accused of deserting their posts. It was thought to be impossible for a whole battalion to be taken in one fell swoop. Kippenberger asked to see the men and hear their story and "he believed every word we said and thanked us. Unfortunately our officers never forgave us".⁷¹

Freyberg's Personal Assistant, (now Sir) John White, recalled how each morning, using information he would collect from HQ Middle East in Cairo, he would prepare a battle map for Freyberg recovering from his neck wound at the hospital in Helwan. White had marked on the positions of the two New Zealand Brigades at Ruweisat on the morning of 15 July and had asked the HQ staff: "Where is the British armour?" only to be met with a "deathly silence".⁷² The British armour were nowhere near where they should have been on that dawn, and had failed to get forward in time to prevent the 22 Battalion from being overrun. They also proved impotent in the next great tragedy of the day.

That afternoon 5 Indian Brigade cleared their portion of Ruweisat Ridge and the enemy positions to their front. This provided a roundabout route for the support elements of 5 New Zealand Brigade to reach 23 Battalion on the ridge and Kippenberger lost no time in sending a wireless set, anti-tank guns, carriers and mortars to the isolated 23 Battalion. The support weapons set off at 1600 hours and arrived just in time to beat off a renewed German counterattack.

Unfortunately only a small group of carriers with much needed ammunition reached 4 Brigade and it was more exposed than ever after the gap between the brigades had widened with the loss of 22 Battalion. At dusk two battalions of 4 Brigade were attacked and overwhelmed by the tanks of 15 Panzer Division and the armoured cars of a reconnaissance detachment. This time the

⁷⁰ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.254.

⁷¹ Ray Kennedy to author, letter, 14 February 1992.

⁷² Sir John White, interview, Melbourne, 7 July 1992.

tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade were less than a mile (one-and-a-half kilometres) away but did not move to assist the two beleaguered battalions as, according to the commander of the leading squadron, “although willing to help they had not received any orders to intervene in the battle”.⁷³ Inglis recorded that 2 Armoured Brigade’s support in the counterattack was “completely useless” and that it had “completely failed to carry out its orders”.⁷⁴ That evening Kippenberger informed Inglis that there was no “reasonable prospect” of holding his section of the ridge with only one battalion intact⁷⁵ and a much depleted 5 Brigade was withdrawn from the ridge and took up position a short distance from that tragic feature.

The assault on Ruweisat Ridge had been a disaster of great magnitude for the New Zealand Division which suffered casualties of 83 Officers and 1322 ORs in just one day of action — one of the heaviest casualty lists of the war. Of the six infantry battalions of the division that had gone into battle on the evening of 14 July, only one was fit for further action.⁷⁶ The failure of the division to take and hold Ruweisat had been caused by faulty planning and coordination at Corps level and by the inaction of the armoured brigades whose commanders did not deviate from set orders. Afterwards these armoured commanders were unfairly accused of “rank cowardice”.⁷⁷

The lack of action by the British armour greatly puzzled the Germans who had been alarmed by the capture of Ruweisat Ridge. After recapturing the ridge and 1 000 POWs from 4 Brigade in the process 15 Panzer’s Intelligence Diary recorded that it “was most astonishing that the enemy could not exploit his penetration to a breakthrough by pushing his tanks forward”,⁷⁸ and tried to guess the reason for this glaring omission. The reasons given by 15 Panzer —lack of accurate knowledge of the infantry success, the limited nature of the objective or the lack of troops to exploit — were all wide of the mark.⁷⁹ Faulty armoured doctrine had been primarily responsible for the Ruweisat debacle.

⁷³ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.295.

⁷⁴ Inglis, GOC’s Diary, 16 July 1942, Folder 46 WW II — Africa, MS 0421 ATL.

⁷⁵ Inglis, GOC’s Diary, 2030 hours 15 July 1942, Folder 46 WW II — Africa, MS 0421 ATL.

⁷⁶ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.299.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.300.

⁷⁸ 15 Pz Int Diary, 15 July 1942, 15 Panzer Intelligence Diary 7 July - 15 August 1942, GMDS File 24442/3, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

Nor had the New Zealand commanders been blameless. Their errors greatly compounded the disaster. The unit commanders had not paid sufficient attention to the mopping up of the main pockets of resistance in front of the ridge and this had prevented their support elements from reaching the brigades isolated on their objectives. Kippenberger's two serious errors have been mentioned. The first error meant that 21 Battalion, one-third of the brigade's strength, could not be used as a formed body in the assault and the faulty communication plan kept Brigade HQ "blind" for most of the operation. Kippenberger also accused himself of another: "Now I cannot understand why," he wrote after the war, "I did not ask for the Twenty-six [Battalion] from Divisional Reserve but it was not a good day for me and it was probably required to guard our left flank".⁸⁰ Kippenberger believed he could have used this uncommitted battalion to smash through the forward defence lines of the enemy and open a path to his brigade on the ridge, although the decision to commit the reserve should have been Inglis's. By midday, however, an extra battalion would not have made much difference to the situation and it was already too late to save his 22 Battalion. So Kippenberger is probably somewhat hard on himself in this instance. His prompt action had undoubtedly saved the rest of his brigade when the support weapons finally reached his isolated command. A brutal lesson emerges from Kippenberger's admission: when commanders have bad days, men under their command suffer.

Two key questions have never been asked about Ruweisat: Where was Inglis, the divisional commander, and what was he doing throughout the day? The Official History mentions Inglis' breakfast meeting with Kippenberger but the next mention of him is at 1730 hrs, although a summary of the battle has him considering sending in more infantry and states that he "brought to bear all the pressure he could on the armour to galvanise it into action".⁸¹ What Inglis did exactly and when is not mentioned. Kippenberger recorded another meeting with Inglis in the late morning; when Inglis criticised Kippenberger for having his Headquarters too far back from the action. Kippenberger commented that this "was true enough; but there was nowhere else to go".⁸² Kippenberger's HQ was at Stuka Wadi which offered the only protection against observation and fire. So

⁸⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.171.

⁸¹ Scoullar, *op. cit*, pp.297, 306.

⁸² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.171.

Inglis's exact movements and actions on 15 July remain a mystery. In an effort to pin down Inglis's movements on the day, Scoullar wrote to Kippenberger's Brigade Major and received the reply:

Yes, my recollection is that Div HQ was very inert that day. ... it seems to me quite clear that Div HQ did nothing about the situation which was revealed at daylight.⁸³

What is also clear is Inglis's failure to stamp his authority on the battle as the divisional commander or to lead his troops from the front and be seen to be sharing their dangers as General Freyberg would undoubtedly have done. Inglis's relative inaction on this day compounded the disaster. It is difficult not to believe that had Freyberg been in command, he would have been well forward at first light, not having breakfast to the rear, and he would clearly have seen the danger and either withdrawn his brigades from such a dangerous location or gone off personally to insure the British armour moved to the objective. He would not have expected Kippenberger to have to do this for him. It was Inglis's first experience as a divisional commander and he was a poor substitute for Freyberg. Kippenberger believed that Freyberg's presence at Ruweisat would have made a great difference. After examining the German records of the action he wrote:

It is heart-breaking to see how close we were to an overwhelming victory at Ruweisat. We felt that at the time, and if General Freyberg had been in command of the Division and dealing with Corps Commander I am certain victory would have been gained.⁸⁴

Kippenberger insisted, however, that Inglis be treated "rather gently" in the Official History confessing, "I am not sorry that I personally did not succeed to the command during this period".⁸⁵ Until Eighth Army adopted correct doctrine it would continue to be beaten no matter how good the troops and commanders and Kippenberger knew this to be so.

General Gott, demonstrating how out of touch he really was, wrote to

⁸³ M. Fairbrother to Scoullar, letter, 5 May 1952, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁸⁴ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 5 April 1950, Glue Papers.

⁸⁵ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 28 February 1952, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

Freyberg that Ruweisat had been “a hard knock but secured over 2 000 prisoners and ... a number of guns and some tanks without losing any of their own guns”. He assured Freyberg “we have great hopes of getting a more definite success soon”.⁸⁶

Kippenberger, one of the few Allied commanders to acknowledge the mistakes he made on that day, and they were mistakes he would not repeat, commented that there was “little recrimination” but “much discussion” about Ruweisat Ridge because “we have all felt that the fault largely lay with us”.⁸⁷ To some extent this is true but Kippenberger also agreed with the Official History conclusion that the fundamental fault and basic cause of defeat on Ruweisat Ridge was “the failure of the corps commander to coordinate the action of the infantry and armour”.⁸⁸

The battle left Kippenberger feeling very depressed, but as a field commander he had to conceal this behind his “mask” of command. His Brigade Major, Monty Fairbrother, recalled that Kippenberger remained “pretty steady” after the Ruweisat action.⁸⁹ But meeting Briggs after the battle he later recalled, “I was feeling pretty wretched still and was standing by myself thinking sourly ‘all these chaps are cheerful and I’ve lost half my brigade!’”.⁹⁰ As Kippenberger informed Scoullar after the war:

the battle was a tragedy of misdirection and mismanagement. We can’t say this in a New Zealand Official History. Too sweeping altogether. ‘The battle ended in disaster’ is as much as we are entitled to say.⁹¹

The tragedy would continue so long as Eighth Army fought their battles without a common doctrine, without coordination of arms, without adequate training and without effective planning. At Ruweisat Ridge:

the only people who came really well out of the operation ... were the NZ infantry during their assault. In short, the drive they must have displayed

⁸⁶ Gott to Freyberg, letter, 20 July 1942, WA II 8/24 NZNA.

⁸⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.173.

⁸⁸ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.303.

⁸⁹ Fairbrother interview, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ Kippenberger to Latham, letter, 11 December 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁹¹ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 10 November 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

and the good leadership by junior commanders, unfortunately really paved the way for subsequent disaster.⁹²

The experience was repeated by the only intact brigade of the division exactly one week later.

6 New Zealand Brigade was to capture the eastern end of the El Mreir Depression in a night attack and clear a gap through the minefields there to allow the armour to go forward and exploit. Flank protection was to be provided by 22 Armoured Brigade while 2 Armoured was to “be prepared” to provide protection for the infantry on their objectives. This attack was to be the first phase of a four phase operation that was to climax when the newly arrived 23 Armoured Brigade surged into the depression and exploited the advantages gained. Eighth Army did not even win the first phase of the battle but it still sent the 23 Armoured Brigade forward into the fourth phase.

The planning for the operation was to be more of “the same old story” . It envisaged close cooperation between arms corps without training for this or coordination of the operation in one overall plan.⁹³ While 6 Brigade made the main infantry assault on El Mreir, 5 Brigade provided supporting fire and was to be prepared to exploit any success gained by 6 Brigade, “the normal order to give when you cannot think of anything really useful”.⁹⁴ Once again there was no Corps Conference for the senior commanders despite this being another Corps operation. The “principal worry” naturally enough, was whether the armour would be up in time to support the infantry. The tank commanders assured the New Zealand Division this would happen but when pressed to move their tanks at night as the German tank commanders did, they adamantly refused to move before first light.⁹⁵ All the New Zealand commanders, including Kippenberger, expressed their misgivings about the British armour reaching the infantry on time but Inglis and the division were given an absolute guarantee that the armour would move on time. For Inglis, the decision to undertake this operation was inescapable, but Kippenberger returned to his brigade feeling

⁹² R. Peake, *op. cit.*

⁹³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.183.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.184, Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.328.

“profoundly uneasy”, ordered his caravan cleared of all staff except his Brigade Major and Intelligence Officer and had them write in the 5 Brigade’s War Diary, in a comment since expunged from the diary,⁹⁶ “the Brigadier says there will be another bloody disaster”.⁹⁷

And disaster it was. All three battalions of 6 Brigade reached their objectives on the southern lip of the depression. One battalion, the 26th, found German tanks immediately to its front and the battalion commander wisely withdrew from the objective before first light. The other two battalions stayed put and awaited the arrival of the promised armoured support. During the night and early dawn of 22 July senior officers from the New Zealand Division, including Inglis and Gentry the G1, contacted the British Armoured and Corps commanders on no fewer than five occasions to stress the importance of the British armour reaching the infantry at first light and each time were assured “that action had been taken, i.e. that the armour, without fail, would be at Mreir at first light”.⁹⁸

The only armour present at El Mreir on the dawn of 22 July were the tanks of 8 and 5 Panzer Regiments and they quickly rolled up the two battalions of 6 Brigade. The New Zealand Division lost another 69 Officers and 835 ORs from its only complete brigade.⁹⁹

Inglis, on learning at 0650 hours that the British armour had still not reached El Mreir, telephoned 1 Armoured Division and spoke to an officer whom he understood to be General Gatehouse now commanding that division. Inglis’s diary records the conversation:

informed him he had not supplied promised support and inquired why and what he proposed to do. He replied that we had not requested any support. I informed him of our conversations with his staff during the night and that I had records of them. He then said we had not requested support through correct channels which he alleged were his LOs. He said

⁹⁶ 5 Bde WD, 20 July 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/32 NZNA.

⁹⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 184, Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

⁹⁸ GOC’s Diary, 22 July 1942, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁹⁹ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.364.

he was ready to attack then.¹⁰⁰

The British armour had not begun to move until 0630 hrs, an hour-and-a-half after 6 Brigade had been overrun.

It was not only the New Zealand Division that suffered disaster at El Mreir on 22 July 1942. 40 and 46 Royal Tank Regiments of 23 Armoured Brigade were sent by General Gott in pursuit of the enemy even when it was clear that the first phase of the operation had failed. The regiments set off at 0800 hrs, on the wrong axis of advance, with 106 tanks in a Balaclava-like charge with Balaclava-like results. By 1100 only twelve serviceable tanks remained. 23 Armoured Brigade suffered a casualty rate of more than 90 per cent in its first action of the war and had accounted for some seven tanks of Afrika Korps. It had inflicted "a severe fright" on Afrika Korps but very little else.¹⁰¹ 15 Panzer's Intelligence Diary aptly summarised the battle:

The enemy lost heavily, and our defence held firm in most places, with the result that the enemy was thrown into some confusion ... and seemed to be fighting with no sure plan of action. ... the attack as a whole was shattered.¹⁰²

Gott's only comment after the disaster at El Mreir was that "the infantry must learn to look after themselves".¹⁰³

All three New Zealand Brigades had now suffered crippling losses in just on a month of fighting. Kippenberger's 5 Brigade had suffered less than the other two brigades, but it had still lost the equivalent of a whole battalion. The division's effective fighting strength was now the equivalent of only one infantry brigade.¹⁰⁴ The campaign left a legacy of bitterness among the New

¹⁰⁰ GOC's Diary, 0650 hrs, 22 July 1942, WA II 8/44 NZNA. Major General Gatehouse "stoutly denied" ever meeting or talking with Inglis. (Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 7/7/54, WA II 11/7 NZNA.)

¹⁰¹ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

¹⁰² 15 Pz Int Diary, 21-22 July 1942, GMDS File 24442/3 WA II 11/22 NZNA.

¹⁰³ Kippenberger to Freyberg, letter, 11 August 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

¹⁰⁴ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.364.

Zealanders about the senior British commanders and about the armoured corps in particular. As Kippenberger wrote of the effect of these operations:

At this time there was throughout Eighth Army, not only in the New Zealand Division, a most intense distrust, almost hatred, of our armour. Everywhere one heard tales of the other arms being let down; it was regarded as axiomatic that the tanks would not be where they were wanted in time.¹⁰⁵

Kippenberger could sympathise with the tank crews (heavy losses, inferior tanks, the dreadful experience of “brewing up” in a tank) and believed animosity towards the armoured corps to be “really dangerous and I did my best to check critics and put a strong curb on my own tongue”.¹⁰⁶ Many other officers and ORs could not forgive the failure of the armour. Inglis stated to Gott after El Mreir and wrote to Freyberg on 27 July, “I have flatly refused to do another operation of the same kind while I command. I have said that the *sine qua non* is my own armour under my own command”.¹⁰⁷ In his summary of the El Mreir operation Kippenberger, too, would be unable to keep the bitterness from his prose:

Two infantry and two armoured Brigades had been employed. They had made three unrelated attacks from different directions at different times. A single small Panzer Division of some twenty or thirty tanks and a fifth-rate Italian infantry division easily dealt with all three attacks in succession and inflicted crippling losses.¹⁰⁸

He wrote New Zealand shortly after the disasters:

It should not have happened — could not if our tanks had been up in support at first light as ordered. ... It is the failure of our tanks and infantry to combine properly that has brought us this far back into Egypt. Since then we have been consolidating, patrolling and shelling and rather

¹⁰⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.180.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Inglis, comment in GOC's Diary, 22 July 1942, WA II 8/44, letter to Freyberg, 27 July 1942, in WA II 8/24 and WA II 11/6 NZNA.

¹⁰⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.190.

surlily making it clear that we don't trust our armoured formations or their commanders and will make no more attacks except on our own terms.¹⁰⁹

Jim Henderson is correct when he states that Ruweisat and El Mreir were "the Division's darkest hour".¹¹⁰

Yet the Eighth Army commanders appeared to learn nothing from these failures. On 27 July, less than a week after El Mreir, the Australian 24 Brigade established its 2/28 Battalion on Miteiriya Ridge believing that 50 Royal Tank Regiment and 2/43 Battalion would exploit forward from this position. The battalion, left isolated on the ridge for more than seven hours, was easily overwhelmed in the armoured counterattack that followed. General Morshead recorded in his report on operations in July 1942, "The full story of 2/28 Battalion's resistance on the Ridge is not known for not one man who was with them when the counter-attacks began got back".¹¹¹ Australian casualties for the nineteen days from 10 to 29 July had been extremely heavy: 126 Officers and 2400 ORs. The loss of 2/28 Battalion had been another Ruweisat and El Mreir.

The tragedy of these disasters is that they were all avoidable; the price paid for bad planning, poor leadership, sloppy staff work and clinging to inadequate army doctrine for too long. That the wounds were ultimately self-inflicted was the conclusion of the New Zealand Official History of the campaign and the author was soon under attack for having been so openly critical of the performances of the commanders of the higher formations of the Eighth Army. Freyberg for one, believed the Official History of the campaign was in the "worst possible taste" and had "given great offence".¹¹²

The attack on the *Official History* of the campaign reached such an intensity that Kippenberger found himself having to defend publicly the work's integrity, an unprecedented measure as General Editor. As he stated in response

¹⁰⁹ *Kippenberger — Letters from a Soldier*, T 214, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, recorded 1959.

¹¹⁰ Henderson, *22 Battalion*, p.180.

¹¹¹ Lieutenant General Morshead, Report on Operations July 1942, Papers of Lt. Gen. Morshead, D 47, 3 DRL 2632 AWM.

¹¹² Freyberg to Kippenberger, cable, 4 August 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

to a most unfavourable review of the volume:

I concur with the opinion that battles went wrong because of bad planning and bad execution for which the 2nd New Zealand Division, the principal sufferer, was not responsible. In the 16 days between July 10 and 26 five offensive operations were staged. All followed exactly the same pattern, planning, execution and disaster. The conclusion is inescapable, though your reviewer seems to doubt it, that but for the arrival of Alexander and Montgomery the 8th Army would have suffered ignominious defeat.¹¹³

Support came from important quarters though. Latham, working on the British Official Histories and relying heavily on the New Zealand efforts, assured Kippenberger he should not have edited the volume more heavily and offered wise counsel:

No tale of unmitigated disaster is likely to be popular and I cannot believe that this volume will be the exception but that doesn't mean that it is a bad piece of work or badly written. Such a work has to be produced to complete the series if only to show how we all learnt the lessons such a story tells to win success and final victory in the end.¹¹⁴

From South Africa, Official Historian L. C. F. Turner assured Kippenberger:

I do not think you need worry about having been too severe on British generalship. Like Clive you can be astonished at your moderation.¹¹⁵

It is significant to note that the Official History campaign volumes published after Scoullar's carried the statement that the author and Editor-in-Chief "are responsible for the statements made and views expressed".

The only senior commanders to escape the direct criticism of the Official Historian were the New Zealanders and Australians. Certainly Inglis contributed

¹¹³ Kippenberger, Response to a Review by L.R.H. (Leslie Hobbs), *The Press*, 16 July 1955, Glue Papers.

¹¹⁴ Latham to Kippenberger, letter, 14 September 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

¹¹⁵ L.C.F. Turner to Kippenberger, letter, 6 September 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

to the disaster at Ruweisat Ridge by his aloof command style, but he then probably did all he could to get the British armour to El Mreir short of pushing them to the depression himself. Worth noting, however, is the fact that Inglis did not command the division again in action and was passed over for this task by Kippenberger and Weir. Inglis took the appointment of Weir as temporary commander of the division in 1944 as a personal insult, a vote of “no confidence in my capacity” and asked to be relieved of his command of 4 Armoured Brigade which duly occurred.¹¹⁶ As far as Inglis was concerned, the disasters could be laid entirely at the feet of the armoured formations:

All the armour had to do to protect the infantry was to move forward to positions where it could see the enemy within effective range and shoot. ... Even half a dozen Grants if they had had the guts and initiative to go up to the crest where they could see to shoot, would have seen the German armour off. That is how simple it was.¹¹⁷

Kippenberger’s performance during the disasters had not been flawless either. At Minqar Qaim the mistakes made by his brigade had been beyond his control but the two crucial mistakes he made at Ruweisat were his alone and they did contribute to the loss of 22 Battalion. As this was, in fact, Kippenberger’s first offensive action as a Brigadier perhaps it is only to be expected that he would make mistakes. The gap between commanding a battalion and a brigade, from unit to formation commander, is extremely wide. Unfortunately though, as stated before, when commanders have bad days in action, as Kippenberger admitted happened to him at Ruweisat, or when commanders make serious errors while adjusting to new commands, men under their command will become casualties and some will die. What is crucial to note here in Kippenberger’s case is that by his vigorous action during the day, as opposed to the elusive Inglis, he certainly helped retrieve the situation to some degree. It was only by Kippenberger’s prompt intervention that the British armour eventually moved forward to Ruweisat and that the supporting weapons were

¹¹⁶ Inglis to Freyberg letter, 5 September 1944, Folder 67 Correspondence with Freyberg re command of 2 NZEF during Freyberg’s Illness, September and October 1944, MS Paper 0421 ATL.

¹¹⁷ Inglis to Scoullar, letter, May 1953, Folder 22 Outwards Correspondence 3 April 1950 — 18 August 1953, MS Papers 0421 ATL.

able to reach his isolated brigade on the ridge which prevented his command from suffering the same fate as 4 Brigade. Again worth emphasising is that Kippenberger learnt from these mistakes and did not repeat them. For his actions at Ruweisat and Minqar Qaim Kippenberger was awarded a bar to his DSO.

The effect of the disasters in this campaign left a legacy of intense bitterness in the New Zealand Division and drained it of its once high morale. So bad did the disparaging remarks about the fighting qualities of the other units in Eighth Army and the leadership qualities of the army commanders become that both Brigadiers Kippenberger and Clifton had to take official action to dampen the groundswell of resentment.¹¹⁸ The conditions of a summer campaign, the heat, flies and dust, aggravated the bitterness.

The intense bitterness was very evident in the letters New Zealand soldiers sent home. All echoed the theme that "The German War Machine is just about perfect compared with the British Army Mess Up".¹¹⁹ HQ 2 NZEF indicated to Freyberg the tone of the letters and warned "if unchecked ... may possibly lead to the development of 'incidents' between New Zealand and British troops".¹²⁰ An incident soon occurred.

Kippenberger, unable to show his true feelings to those around him, revealed his frustrations when he wrote home at this time that "things are not being done right in Eighth Army", that "my wife could have run this battle [Ruweisat] better than the Corps Commander has" and that Auchinleck "is a Sergeant Major rather than a General".¹²¹ These comments were intercepted by the British censors and passed up the chain of command to Auchinleck. Kippenberger's two letters were then passed to Freyberg who was informed that Kippenberger "shows a complete disregard of censorship regulations and discloses information that might be of value to the enemy if it fell into the wrong hands".¹²² While the enemy undoubtedly had formed similar opinions,

¹¹⁸ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.370.

¹¹⁹ quotation from a censored letter, Stevens, to Freyberg, 25/3/1137, memo, 9 August 1942, General Papers 1942, WA II 8/26 NZNA.

¹²⁰ Stevens to Freyberg 25/3/1137, memo, 9 August 1942, General Papers 1942, WA II 8/26 NZNA.

¹²¹ Kippenberger, quoted in letter to Scoullar, 2 May 1951, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

¹²² DAG GHQ MEF to HQ NZEF CRME 62340/4/AG2(a), memo, 5 September 1942, WA II 8 AA NZNA.

except perhaps about Ruth Kippenberger's tactical skills, Freyberg was asked to take action on the matter and report back to Auchinleck. Freyberg, exercising great tact, replied that he was surprised that Kippenberger should have been the offender and he had now been counselled on the matter and had "expressed great regret". Freyberg proposed "to take no further action in his case".¹²³ That such an incident had arisen indicated the New Zealand depth of feeling against GHQ MEF and demonstrates how sensitive this organisation was to criticism of its performance.

Major General Sir William Gentry, looking back at this period nearly fifty years later, was struck by just how much the New Zealanders had to learn about modern warfare:

Reading Kip just now I realised again what amateurs we were. We hadn't gathered any of the policies that made the division famous. At Ruweisat Ridge was really a battle which was serious in itself but which was a comedy of errors. ... it wasn't controlled like it was later and I suppose we ourselves were fairly ignorant about how it should be done. when you come to look at all that war, Crete for example, was a series of errors starting from Maleme and going backwards. We were very amateurish really compared with what we became at the time of Alamein.¹²⁴

Ruweisat and El Mreir were very painful experiences for the New Zealanders. The learning curve of most involved in the disasters, however, was a very steep one as Kippenberger and other New Zealand commanders quickly mastered their dangerous trade throughout the long, hard summer of 1942.

¹²³ HQ 2 NZEF to DAG GHQ MEF C2563, message, 3 October 1942, WA II 8 AA NZNA.

¹²⁴ Major General Sir William Gentry, transcript of interview with Chris Pugsley, Lower Hutt, 13 February 1991.