

Chapter 6: Syrian Watershed and the breakout at Minqar Qaim

Minqar Qaim marked a positive milestone from which we never looked back.

Major General C. E. "Steve" Weir.¹

After its first "victory" of the war in Operation CRUSADER the New Zealand Division needed considerable time in which to recover from its very heavy losses. Considerable command changes were also needed because these losses had been particularly high amongst the division's senior officers with two battalion commanders killed in action, two brigadiers and three other battalion commanders taken prisoner and four more battalion commanders, including Kippenberger, wounded.²

Kippenberger promoted brigadier general, was given command of one of the three infantry brigades of 2 New Zealand Division. The rank of brigadier, while crucial to the success of any formation, is probably the most ignored of all the military ranks. Much has been written about the role of a battalion commander and about the role of Divisional and Army commanders. Very little has been written about the roles of those ranks in between, especially the role of Corps commanders and brigadiers.

A brigadier is one of the essential fighting levels of command. In the case of Kippenberger, his promotion meant he graduated from controlling one battalion, to having three and sometimes four battalions under command. With the brigade's "assets", such as field hospitals, mortars, headquarters, artillery support and so on, and with units at full strength, Kippenberger had some 5 000 men, one-third of the division's strength, under command. Kippenberger was now responsible for the efficiency of those battalions under command and for wielding them into an effective team. It was his task to select the battalion commanders and ensure that they had sufficient grip on their commands to be able to fulfil his intentions. Not only must he get to know his COs very well but he had to know and ultimately trust most of the officers and men in the brigade.

¹ Weir to Scoullar, letter, 9 June 1948, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

² J. L. Scoullar, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War. Battle For Egypt*, Wellington, 1955, pp.7 -8.

Kippenberger was also responsible for coordinating the assets of the brigade so that the men of the formation had the tools with which to complete their tasks. While trying to maintain an air of professional detachment — “a carapace” necessary “when giving orders that will lead to casualties and dead — its all part of the contract”³ — Kippenberger also had to impress his personality on 5 Brigade. To succeed at this level of command it was vitally important that he do this because: “personality is the vital spark that keeps men fighting”.⁴ For this to happen Kippenberger would have to visit the front line units as often as possible, get to know the men and officers under command, and be seen to share their dangers and privations. Even brigadiers (and major generals) must lead from the front and, as will be seen, Kippenberger readily accepted all of the risks associated with his new command.

Initially Kippenberger was not at all enthusiastic about his promotion and new command. He wrote his friend Ken Henderson in New Zealand from his hospital bed, “I feel rather fed up at present, very lonely and not at all keen to go to the 5th Brigade”.⁵ The send off arranged by Jim Burrows, now commanding 20 Battalion, was a “marvellous function” but a very poignant one; “All the surviving original 20th were there, about 150 of them, about a third still hospital patients, and said goodbye to me. It wasn’t very easy”.⁶ He later recalled that he had “never been sadder in my life than when I reviewed that battalion after this campaign”.⁷ 20 Battalion broke its regulations and presented Kippenberger a set of decanters and a shooting stick “suitably inscribed as token of esteem”.⁸ The inscription read: “To Brigadier Kippenberger, from those members of the 20th Battalion who were privileged to serve under him”.⁹ Kippenberger kept the shooting stick for the rest of his life, “treasured as a priceless memento”.¹⁰

Kippenberger’s reticence was caused by more than just the need to say goodbye to his old command, his beloved 20 Battalion. His new command, 5

³ Major General Julian Thompson, quoted in H. McManners, *The Scars of War*, London, 1993, p.229.

⁴ *ibid*, p.225.

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

⁶ Kippenberger to Jim Fraser, letter, 15 January 1942, Glue Papers.

⁷ “20th Reunion and Welcome Home to Major General H.K. Kippenberger, CB, CBE, DSO and Bar, Souvenir Booklet”, p.6.

⁸ 20 Bn WD, 14 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 50/1/25 NZNA.

⁹ Pringle and Glue, *op. cit*, p.216.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

Brigade, had been responsible for the loss of Maleme airfield which led to the subsequent loss of Crete. It was regarded by the other two brigades of the division as sub-standard. Kippenberger was scathing in his comments about the initial poor condition of the brigade and about those responsible:

When I took the Brigade in January 1942 I found a very bad Brigade Mess, a slovenly lot around Brigade Headquarters, the Battalions at odds with one another and Brigade saluting, except in the 22nd, almost abandoned, heavy gambling prevalent, guards uninstructed and badly turned out, close order work and arms drill disgraceful -- all shocking to my 4 Brigade primness. The new Brigadier was expected to lay on a cocktail party to make himself known and another for the nurses because it would be nice, neither of which he did. I don't think Hargest's influence was good, and rightly or wrongly I decided on taking command that my first business must be to eradicate it. I am still certain, as I was in June 1941, that neither of the other Brigades would have lost Maleme.¹¹

Kippenberger quickly asserted his authority. He brought in two new battalion commanders and built up his Brigade Headquarters from scratch, a necessity in any case since the entire Headquarters of 5 Brigade had been captured by the Afrika Korps in the previous campaign. He was also astute enough to address the brigade at its delayed Christmas party "and proposed the health of Brigadier HARGEST".¹² 21 Battalion's History recorded that Kippenberger "was not in accord with the nonconformist attitude" prevalent in the battalion and that this "came to a sudden halt" with many "red ears among the junior commanders".¹³ Although he had soon "gripped" his new command firmly, "the worst feature of the brigade", the hostility and rivalry that existed between its battalions, "was not eradicated for a long time to come".¹⁴

¹¹ Kippenberger to McClymont, letter, 6 March 1953, WA II 11/7, quoted in J. McLeod, *Myth and Reality: The New Zealand Soldier in World War II*, Auckland, 1986, p. 38.

¹² 5 Bde WD, 18 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/25 NZNA.

¹³ Cody, *21 Battalion*, p.143.

¹⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.113.

After CRUSADER, Freyberg was firmly convinced that the commanders of Eighth Army had no understanding of how to fight a modern war against a first-class enemy. He applied considerable political pressure to have his division leave Eighth Army, and despite three times having the decision deferred, two brigades of the New Zealand Division began the long move to Syria on 26 February 1942. Kippenberger's 5 Brigade was to join the division at a later date.

There were three tactical principles the violation of which deeply concerned Freyberg and the other dominion commanders. The first was the total lack of cooperation between infantry, armour and artillery on the desert battlefield. Lieutenant General Sir Leonard Thornton, at the time a young staff officer, has commented on this amazing doctrinal weakness:

Today no army would dream of sending in their infantry to fight alone while the tanks swanned off to do their own thing somewhere else, but back in 1941 [and 1942] that's exactly how the desert battles were being fought by the Allies. General Rommel knew the score and he always insisted on sending in his guns, his armour and his infantry together. At that time General Freyberg had no battle tanks under his command, we had to rely on British armour and unfortunately for the New Zealanders it took a long time for the British to get that message.¹⁵

It is evident from the "Battle of the Memoirs" after the war, that some senior British commanders had learned very little from their campaigning. Major General G. L. Verney of the Armoured Corps would still maintain after the war that:

Fighting in the Desert resembled in many respects Naval warfare. Attack from the flanks or rear could quickly be met by armoured vehicles that manoeuvred as easily as ships and the decision then rested with the side that had the better gun and the better armour.¹⁶

The belief that armour could win battles alone and unassisted by the other arms

¹⁵ Lieutenant General Sir Leonard Thornton, quoted in *Freyberg VC* Episode Three "The Salamander", Television New Zealand, 1984.

¹⁶ G. L. Verney, *The Desert Rats. The 7th Armoured Division in World War II* London, 1990, pp.55-6.

was very firmly rooted in the minds of the senior British commanders and was primarily responsible for their many defeats in the Western Desert. The situation did not alter until August 1942 when Montgomery took command.

Senior British commanders at this time also violated two other tactical principles — those of unity of command and of concentration of force. British commanders exhibited what the Australian commander General Thomas Blamey called the “British propensity to disperse organisations”¹⁷ — the cowpat syndrome covered in the previous chapter. The senior British commanders, and especially Auchinleck, still believed the divisional formation was the wrong one to operate effectively in the desert, as it was too large and cumbersome and could not be protected by its own firepower. The better formation they believed was the smaller and more mobile Brigade Group, Battle Group, Jock or Monthly column. This breakdown of formations was anathema to Dominion commanders and was always strongly resisted by them. The desire to split the divisions of the Dominions into smaller organisations persisted until the change of command in August 1942. Brigadier Inglis, commanding the New Zealand Division after Minqar Qaim, flatly refused to adopt the Battle Group organisation and on 7 July an angry Lieutenant General Morshead stated to Blamey in Australia, “Since joining Eighth Army have twice had to plainly insist 9 Australian Division be kept intact under my command”.¹⁸

A great deal of controversy has arisen over the use of brigade groups and boxes and this has been linked to the command qualities of General Auchinleck. Freyberg was uncompromising:

the responsibility for their use in 1941 and 1942 must rest with General Auchinleck who had no experience during World War I in fighting in France and did not realise the importance of concentrating his resources to beat the German.¹⁹

¹⁷ Blamey Papers, 1/2a iv - v. Greece GOC's Dispatches, p. 13, 3 DRL 663 AWM.

¹⁸ Lt. Gen. Morshead to Ausforce, message 7/7/42, Papers of Lt. Gen. Sir Leslie Morshead, A 27/46 Signals and Battle Reports to General Blamey, 10 July - 10 November 1942, 3 DRL 2632 AWM.

¹⁹ Freyberg to Kippenberger, letter, 5 November 1947, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

Freyberg regarded "Jock" columns and the brigade group system as "a menace and a danger both in attack and defence".²⁰

Auchinleck and the Brigade Group concept continued to find defenders after the war. Correlli Barnett was one and used Kippenberger's *Infantry Brigadier* to support his argument. Demonstrating dexterous sleight of hand Barnett quoted a half sentence from *Infantry Brigadier*, "The brigade group organisation had many advantages for desert warfare, particularly in mobility and quick readiness for action".²¹ The rest of the sentence, which Barnett has omitted, contains the main point and reads, "... so long as the groups kept in touch and combined to fight as a division with the guns a single fire unit".²² In the "battle" over brigade groups and columns Kippenberger always sided with Freyberg. Studying the maps for the Official History volume of the campaign after the war, the sight of the isolated boxes, units and brigades "fills me with horror" he wrote. These cowpats were simply inviting destruction:

Everywhere a waste and misdirection of power sufficient to explain the defeat of the stronger Eighth Army by a vigorously controlled and united Afrika Korps.²³

Kippenberger, a military historian, clearly understood that concentration of force, not dispersion, was one of the fundamental principles of war.

Even more tactical deficiencies were apparent in Eighth Army doctrine and Kippenberger, whose brigade unhappily remained under Eighth Army command while the rest of the division moved to Syria, was scathing in his comments on these deficiencies. Kippenberger noted that:

the attitude and mentality of the Eighth Army was distinctly defensive. The only army exercise we did was one of envisaging retreat to the frontiers; every unit or formation was busy shutting itself up inside a box

²⁰ Freyberg to Barrowclough, letter C2310, 4 August 1942, WA 8 Part II AA NZNA.

²¹ Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, London, 1983, p.198.

²² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.121. Emphasis added.

²³ Kippenberger to J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton, IA 181/3/6, letter, 14 February 1950, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

of some sort, out of supporting distance from its neighbour, huge minefields were laid, entirely uncovered by fire and we reconnoitred or prepared alternative positions to the rear.²⁴

5 Brigade was kept busy at El Adem preparing a brigade box, “an unhappy device fashionable at the time”, to shut itself into. Brigade boxes were the “typically British response”²⁵ for providing the infantry with some measure of protection against tanks. But while they offered some protection to the sheltering infantry, “the box system effectively locked them up, away from the main battle”.²⁶ 5 Brigade spent much energy digging, wiring, mining — removing some 19 000 mines from the Tobruk position — to prepare an overall perimeter of 14 000 yards against direct assault.²⁷ The preparing of these defensive positions, many of which would be turned over to the enemy in June 1942, kept the whole of the Eighth Army too busy to do any effective training.

As one of his tasks Kippenberger was ordered to organise and train a private mobile column consisting of a regiment of tanks, an artillery battery, a company of infantry and some Bren gun carriers and sappers. This “little force” was supposed to be very active once the brigade was besieged in its defensive position and would “cavort around outside, biting at the rear of our besiegers. I thought that war should be taken more seriously”.²⁸

Another task, one that caused Kippenberger a great deal of concern at the time, was training for an amphibious landing of one brigade in the Gulf Of Sirte behind Rommel’s front line. The training for this landing was described as “boy scout exercises” by many of the New Zealand troops²⁹ and Kippenberger from the outset was “deeply worried about the practicability of the plan”.³⁰ While Kippenberger stated that Freyberg would have probably blocked the use of 5 Brigade in such a hasty, ill-planned venture,³¹ he felt at the time that Freyberg

²⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.114-15.

²⁵ A. Gilbert (ed), *The Imperial War Museum Book of The Desert War 1940-1942* London 1992, p.116.

²⁶ *ibid*, p.95.

²⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.114.

²⁸ *ibid*, p.115.

²⁹ Henderson, *op. cit*, p.123.

³⁰ Cox, *op. cit*, p.212.

³¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.113.

was lax in his duty to even allow 5 Brigade to be considered for it.³² Rommel's advance to Gazala put an end to the project and later, during the pursuit of Rommel across North Africa, Kippenberger surveyed the proposed landing beaches, something not done during the planning phase. He discovered that the slope of the beaches did not allow the landing of heavy equipment and his brigade would have been massacred at the shoreline.³³

The time dragged for Kippenberger and the brigade as "we disliked being away from the Division, [and] felt no great confidence in the command".³⁴ Kippenberger was very relieved when the order finally arrived at the end of March 1942 for 5 Brigade to return to Maadi Camp outside Cairo en route to Syria. It is interesting to note that the El Adem Brigade Box was later described by the Indian Official History and by General Gott "as the best planned and constructed Box" in the Western Desert.³⁵

New Zealand Division's role in Syria really amounted to garrison duty as the rebellion in Syria had been crushed in the previous year. Its overall task, together with the other Allied divisions there, which included the Australian 9th Division, was to secure the north flank of Middle East command. This could be broken down into four sub-tasks: a demonstration of Allied strength; completion of strong points throughout Syria; preparation of demolitions along the frontier with Turkey; and the preparation for an advance should Turkey be invaded by Axis forces. To Freyberg, however, the stationing of the division in Syria provided him with a golden opportunity for much needed divisional training and to try out some important tactical modifications. It was an opportunity he did not let slip. More significantly it provided an opportunity to reject the notion so prominent back in Egypt that the Brigade Group was the logical tactical formation.

In May 1942 advanced training exercises were carried out in Syria, one brigade at a time, but always within an overall divisional plan. They were the

³² Cox, *op. cit.*, p.212.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p.123.

³⁵ Kippenberger, Minqar Qaim original notes and sketches, WA II 3/22 NZNA.

nearest thing to divisional training yet undertaken. Especially important was the time spent in practice in moving in formation across open spaces so important for manoeuvre in the desert. The Brigades practised all types of manoeuvres in Syria, advance, withdrawals, by day and night, wheels and turns on the move, until it became second nature to the units of each brigade.

Syria was also a watershed for the use of the artillery by the division. Instead of remaining at the regimental level, the field and medium guns were concentrated to fight as one divisional unit and this increased the firepower of the division almost tenfold. Each regiment became part of the divisional artillery fireplan and prearranged fire patterns were established. Especially important were the fire patterns code-named "stonk" and "murder". "Stonk" was a quick defensive artillery concentration according to a prearranged pattern whereby each gun in the division fired seven rounds in three minutes into a rectangular target area. "Murder" was massed artillery fire by the whole of the divisional artillery on a single pin-point target — 360 rounds falling on one point within two minutes.³⁶ The results of both fire patterns in the desert was "fairly devastating".³⁷ Major General C. E. "Steve" Weir, the officer largely responsible for these fire patterns, recalled after the war that Freyberg in Syria "took a decision to keep the Division together as a Division and fight as such. From that it follows of course that the Artillery had to be concentrated".³⁸ To counter the very fleeting targets experienced during CRUSADER, Weir devised "stonks" and "murder" as fire plans that could lay down a large volume of fire on a defined point very quickly. Both fire plans were practised in Syria and were first fired by the New Zealand Division on the Alamein position in July 1942. They were adopted by 30 Corps, then by Eighth Army, and eventually by the British War Office in August 1944. As Weir wrote "2 New Zealand Divisional Artillery were the first to experiment with these and the first to bring them to the battlefield".³⁹ Weir, who would control the New Zealand artillery for most of the war, was another outstanding New Zealand commander, who at one time commanded the New Zealand Division but finished the war in command of a British division, 46 Division — an extremely rare feat for a dominion military

³⁶ Weir to Scoullar, letter, 9 June 1948, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Weir to Kippenberger, letter, 3 September 1952, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

³⁹ *ibid.*

commander.

Kippenberger was kept busy in Syria and made himself thoroughly familiar with the frontier position he had taken over from the New Zealand 6 Brigade. There were many flag waving activities to take up the time including visits to the Governor, local sheiks and the Spring races. One such visit was to 9 Australian Division, then stationed on the Syrian coast, for the Duke of Gloucester parade. Kippenberger wrote of 9 Australian Division:

without exception they were the most beautiful troops I ever saw. Hardly a man appeared to be less than six feet and they drilled and marched superbly.⁴⁰

From the parochial Kippenberger this was high praise indeed!

Kippenberger was hospitalised on 6 May and would remain so for over a month. *Infantry Brigadier* gave the cause of the illness as shingles but the War Diary recorded that "Bde Commander was indisposed *owing to septic sore in the head inflicted at a barber shop*".⁴¹ An attempt has been made to scratch out the details of the illness in the War Diary.

Kippenberger rejoined 5 Brigade on 12 June 1942 sixty miles south-east of Aleppo to do some concentrated brigade training. He had learned, as had most of the division, that Rommel had opened a new desert offensive on 26 May but as all the reports received had been extremely optimistic about the prospects of stopping Rommel, Kippenberger did not expect the division or his own brigade to be involved at all in this latest clash of the two armies.

On 14 June, the oppressive heat, well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, began to take its toll on Kippenberger's brigade. The water in the men's water bottles had become too hot to bear on the hands and was certainly too hot to drink, many vehicles of the brigade had stopped as the petrol in their tanks vaporised and one truck had burst into flames from spontaneous combustion. Kippenberger, ever aware of the condition of the men under his command, "noticed how white and strained everyone looked and suddenly cancelled the whole affair and we all trundled off to the Euphrates to bathe".⁴² It was a feature

⁴⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.120.

⁴¹ 5 Bde WD, 6 May 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/29 NZNA. Emphasis added.

⁴² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.122.

of Kippenberger's command style not to push the men of his command unnecessarily and it certainly endeared him to those under him. The whole brigade, some five thousand men, lay in the shallows of the Euphrates up to their necks in the cool water until the worst of the heat had passed and then started to plan for a brigade night attack. While preparation for the mock attack was underway a signal arrived which cancelled all training and ordered the brigade to rejoin the division then in the process of returning to the Western Desert.

Despite a marked inferiority in numbers of men, tanks and guns, Rommel carried all before him in his May offensive and his aggressive dash and daring combined with his skilful military tactics left the British field commanders scratching their heads in bewilderment. In the summer of 1942 the serious deficiencies of British military command would be fully revealed. May was only the beginning. Because of poor leadership and faulty tactical doctrine the Eighth Army was decisively beaten in Cyrenaica, Rommel with an inferior force under his command realised his dream of capturing Tobruk within a month of the offensive and the Battle for Egypt soon carried a victorious Afrika Korps to the gates of Alexandria.

The New Zealanders' return to Egypt was made with all due haste and it is a tribute to the excellent staff work and training that the entire formation was able to travel the 1 200 miles against the continuous stream of a retreating army and be ready to concentrate on the Libyan border within ten days.

Kippenberger, Freyberg and the other New Zealand commanders were alarmed at the state of the Eighth Army upon their return to Egypt. Kippenberger later commented that:

Eighth Army poured back through us, not looking at all demoralised except for the black South African drivers, but thoroughly mixed up and disorganised. I did not see a single formed fighting unit, infantry, armour, or artillery.⁴³

⁴³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.127.

A junior officer recalled:

Traffic was streaming past us, nose to tail. It looked as if we would be in the picture very soon.⁴⁴

What alarmed Freyberg most of all was the lack of calm, collected leadership at the head of the army. The situation was not helped either when Freyberg received three contradictory sets of orders from the British commanders. As Freyberg reported to the New Zealand Government:

This continual vacillation shook me, but not nearly as much as the tempo of the troops coming down the Sidi Barrani road. ... What I was most anxious about was not to allow panic orders to put us in an impossible position. I was determined to appeal to the New Zealand Government if necessary and I went to see the Eighth Army Commander to protest against being shut up in Mersa Matruh. This could have ended in only one way. My next orders were to go into the Naghamish Wadi — almost an impossible position. Again I pointed out the inadvisability of committing a highly trained division to such a mission. Eventually I persuaded them to let us meet the full thrust of the German Army head on. We picked an area on high ground south of Mersa Matruh, where there was room to manoeuvre and to use our powerful guns to the full.⁴⁵

The area of high ground chosen by Freyberg was Minqar Qaim, some twenty-five miles south of the Mersa Matruh box, and it would be here that two brigades of the New Zealand Division would face alone the full fury of Afrika Korps.

The 2nd New Zealand Division was a unique formation in Eighth Army at this time. Freyberg, convinced that the battle group dispersion of force could only lead to disaster, had resisted the considerable pressure to split his division into these weak units so that in mid June 1942 Freyberg had the only complete division then in Egypt. The division, however, could not move to Minqar Qaim with its three brigades; to ensure total mobility 6 Brigade was stripped of its

⁴⁴ Captain A. E. Kernard, notes from Diary, McClymont Papers, Box a, WA II 3/16a NZNA.

⁴⁵ Freyberg to Prime Minister, letter, 14 October 1942, *Docs II, op. cit.*, No 163, p.129.

transport and sent further eastward to Amiriya. The New Zealand Division, as in CRUSADER, would fight with only two infantry brigades.

The New Zealanders had assumed that a large offensive battle was about to be fought at Mersa Matruh which would stop the Afrika Korps in its tracks. On 25 June, however, when Rommel was only one day away from Mersa Matruh and about to face a decisive battle, Auchinleck again sacked the Army commander in mid-battle and took personal control of the Army. His first action on assuming command was to reverse the decision to stand and fight at Mersa Matruh and he began to withdraw the main elements of the army to El Alamein. This change of plan at the very last moment "made a difficult situation still more confusing"; a confusion which was greatly compounded by the ambiguous new orders, Operations Instruction 83, which permitted three different courses of action. This confusing set of instructions was, according to Scoullar, "characteristic of Middle East and Eighth Army administration at this period. The vital necessity of checking and rechecking to ensure harmony of ideas and orders had still to be learned".⁴⁶ The role of the units and formations had now been changed from taking part in a decisive set piece defensive battle to one of imposing the maximum of delay on the advancing Afrika Korps. The New Zealand Division and many others were not aware of this vital change in plan until they were already engaged by the Afrika Korps.

On 26 June 1942 the two mobile brigades of the division moved from Mersa Matruh to Minqar Qaim carrying rations for three days, POL for 200 miles and front line ammunition. Freyberg had chosen Minqar Qaim because the escarpment there provided a natural obstacle for tanks, could be covered by mines and anti-tank guns, allowed some mobility, and above all else, it provided the divisional artillery with clear fields of fire. Kippenberger was not impressed with Freyberg's choice of ground and later wrote that "the Minqar Qaim position was a very odd one and I was greatly puzzled to know how to occupy my portion of it". The tank obstacle, the escarpment, ran east and west allowing the enemy to come along the top of it or along the northern plain "so as an obstacle it was of no great use". Kippenberger did admit, however, "I could see no great merits in the position we stood on though I knew of no better and could not see one".⁴⁷ Yet from the artillery point of view Minqar Qaim was perfect: "the first occasion

⁴⁶ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, pp.72-3.

⁴⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.128.

when the requirements of Artillery Control took a very high priority in the siting of the Division".⁴⁸ Weir was to regard the outcome of Minqar Qaim as a "modest success" for the the New Zealand artillery, and later thought it "marked a positive milestone from which we never looked back".⁴⁹

5 Brigade's War Diary recorded on 26 June that 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades were ahead of New Zealand Division" and that "a large number of tanks were coming to reinforce the British line".⁵⁰ At 1630 hrs 5 Brigade reached Minqar Qaim and "battle posns were immediately adopted, slit trenches dug and the business of preparing to engage the enemy began in earnest".⁵¹

By midnight the two brigades were in position at Minqar Qaim with 5 Brigade on the western flank, Divisional Headquarters and the Reserve Group in the centre and 4 Brigade on the eastern flank. The divisional position comprised of six mutually supporting positions and covered an area of five-and-a-half miles in length and some two miles in depth. In support of the New Zealand Division were the tanks of 1 Armoured Division, with 159 tanks of which sixty were the new Grant tank, to the south-west and 29 Indian Brigade to the north-east. Both of these formations melted away on the approach of the Afrika Korps. As the division settled into position on Minqar Qaim the sound of battle could be heard from Mersa Matruh and fighting patrols were sent out by the division to investigate. Dawn on 27 June saw 2 New Zealand Division ready to face the Afrika Korps and confident of success.

On the morning of 27 June, with a tank strength of only thirty-nine serviceable tanks, the Afrika Korps' advance eastward continued. At 0830 hrs the lead elements of 21 Panzer Division advanced across the northern face of the New Zealand positions at Minqar Qaim and were engaged by the concentrated New Zealand artillery. Exchanges of shell fire continued all day. General Gott, XIII Corps commander, visited the division that morning to coordinate the combined operations of the armour and the New Zealand infantry but such cooperation never eventuated.

That afternoon the situation deteriorated very quickly when 21 Panzer moved unmolested around the the eastern flank of the New Zealand positions

⁴⁸ Weir to Scoullar, letter, 9 June 1948, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ 5 Bde WD, 26 June 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/30 NZNA.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

and then wheeled south to envelop the whole Minqar Qaim position. 21 Panzer Division informed HQ Afrika Korps at 1215 hrs that there was “a large body of the enemy on the escarpment. ... Stuka target”. That afternoon a new message from 21 Panzer stated that it had “outflanked enemy on escarpment. Decided to surround force and destroy it”.⁵² The volume of artillery fire falling on Minqar Qaim increased and infantry troops could be seen debussing all along the New Zealand front. Many tanks and other armoured vehicles could be seen in every direction the New Zealanders turned.

With his division now engaged from three sides and with enemy tanks astride the line of retreat to the east Freyberg became extremely anxious about the safety of his command. Unable to contact XIII Corps and “astonished and alarmed”⁵³ when informed by 1 Armoured Division that they had no knowledge of the attack on 2 New Zealand Division and were withdrawing independently, despite his protests, Freyberg concluded that the division would have to break out of this encirclement by itself and he issued orders for such a break-out to occur that night. Fortunately some tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade did turn up to support the New Zealanders but: “owing to poorness of information and lack of suitable targets” they withdrew almost as soon as they arrived.⁵⁴ Their presence did convince the German tanks to withdraw out of range and a valuable breathing space was won.

Further disaster struck the New Zealanders that afternoon when Freyberg, while making a personal reconnaissance of the enemy threat developing in the south, was badly wounded in the neck by a shell splinter. The disaster was compounded by a “curious message” sent by XIII Corps to 1 Armoured Division which stated:

As far as I can see New Zealand Division has fallen out of bedstead. I advise you to Iodine as soon as possible at your discretion.

Major General Lumsden, GOC 1 Armoured Division, interpreted the message to

⁵² 21 Panzer to HQ AK, 27 June 1942, Afrika Korps Messages In 25 June — 2 August 1942, GMDS Files 22926/8 & 9, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

⁵³ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ 22 Armoured Brigade War Diary, quoted in *ibid.*, p.98.

mean "the battle was all over and that the New Zealand Division did not exist".⁵⁵ This statement by Lumsden is even more curious as he visited the New Zealand Division at 2115 hrs, an odd thing to do if he believed it no longer existed. Lumsden had appeared at Divisional HQ on a tank and Inglis explained the breakout plan suggesting armoured support. Lumsden stated that 1 Armoured Division was already withdrawing and had to move to Bir Khalda to refuel. No tanks could be spared to assist the New Zealand breakout.⁵⁶ Lumsden did point out, however, "that the German tanks some people had been shelling belonged to him".⁵⁷

The lack of armoured support at Minqar Qaim is very difficult to comprehend, but it seems likely that divisional rivalry between the two armoured formations was largely responsible for it. After the war H. B. Latham questioned General Lumsden closely about the lack of armoured support at Minqar Qaim. Lumsden explained that he had been in the process of withdrawing his battered 1 Armoured Division after the Gazala defeat when Gott had ordered him to relieve 7 Armoured Division at Mersa Matruh:

this must have made him mad with rage for it was just the sort of thing the 7th always managed to engineer. When he re-entered the fight therefore he was fed up and wasn't playing 100%. He was perhaps more set on saving what he could of his division so he could rebuild it quicker later.⁵⁸

For whatever reason, the British commanders had clearly written off the New Zealand Division and left them to their own resources.

That evening 21 Panzer reported to HQ Afrika Korps that:

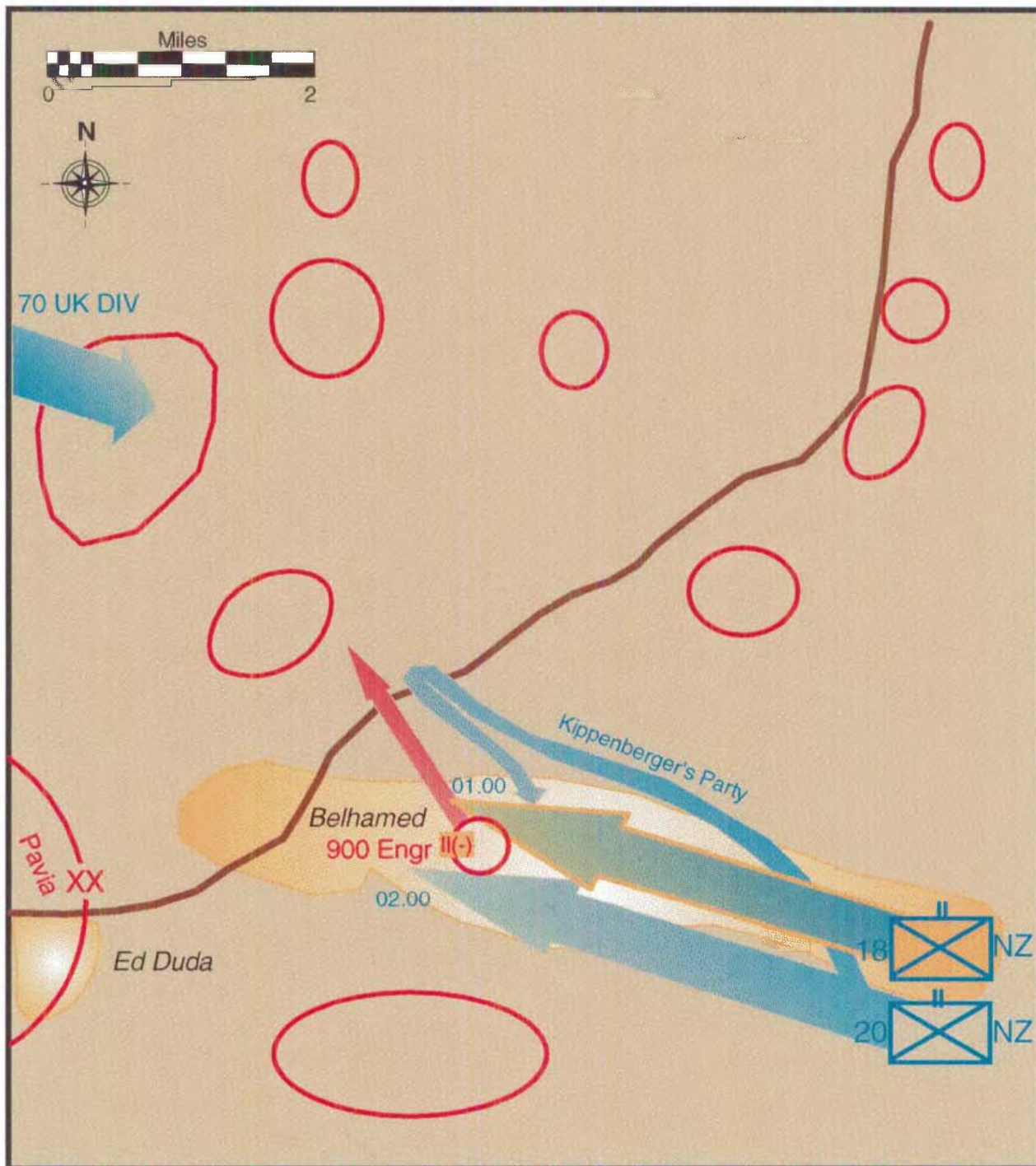
it was found that the enemy force was unusually strong, with about 40 tanks, many field, AA and ATK guns. ... 21 Panzer succeeded, however, in

⁵⁵ Lumsden, statement at Court of Inquiry, Volume II, pp. 328 -9, quoted in *ibid*, p.99.

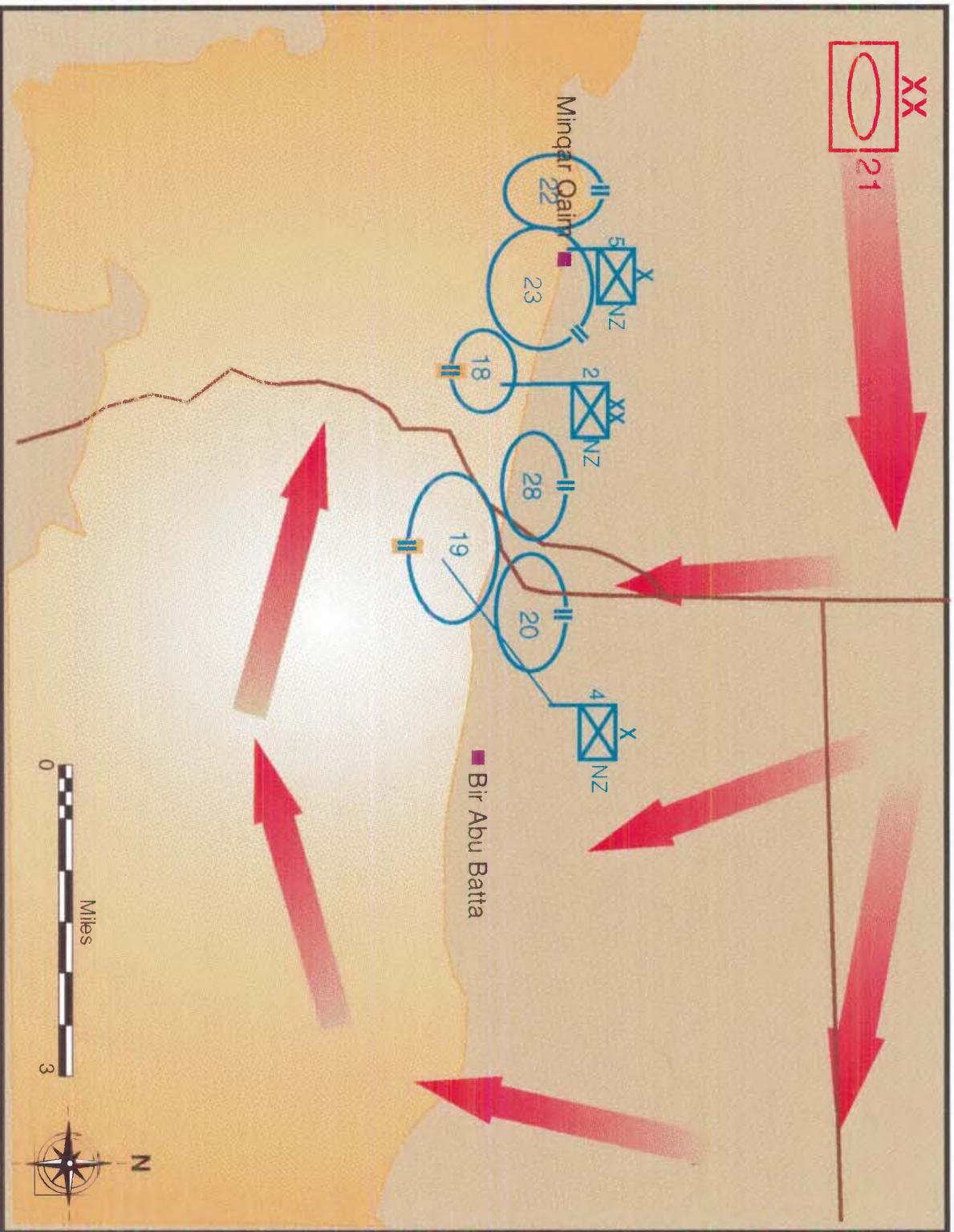
⁵⁶ Inglis Diary, 2115 hrs 27 June 1942, GOC's Diary 27 June - 6 August 1942, WA II 8/44 NZNA.

⁵⁷ E. Batty Diary, 27/28 June 1942, WA II 3/16a NZNA.

⁵⁸ Latham, comments to Kippenberger, copied in letter to Scoullar, 31 October 1950, WA II 11/6 NZNA.



Parallel Attack by 4 Brigade on Belhamed
Operation Crusader, 25-26 November 1941



21 Panzer Div encirclement of 2 NZ Div

Mingar Qaim, 27 June 1942

blocking the enemy's route east. ... It intends to renew the attack when 15 PZ Div arrives.⁵⁹

27 June had been a very trying day for Kippenberger in his first proper action as a brigade commander, excluding his makeshift experience on Crete. As the position his brigade had to occupy on Minqar Qaim was exposed to shell fire Kippenberger ordered his troop-carrying vehicles off the escarpment to shelter to the south-east of the position. His final instruction to the officer in charge of the departing transport was, "on no account ... get out of touch with me".⁶⁰ Unfortunately this happened the moment the transport departed, as the brigade's only battery charging set for the radio batteries was sent away with the trucks.

5 Brigade was shelled throughout the day but was never in any danger of being overrun. In fact 5 Brigade's only brush with the enemy at close quarters was when 22 Battalion's carriers had made first contact with the advancing enemy.⁶¹ Kippenberger watched the artillery duel with interest, "I could see shells bursting incessantly among our guns and I admired the way our gunners were standing to their work".⁶² One man in the brigade noted:

Brigadier Kippenberger used to go around all the men during the action at Minqar Qaim and inform them of all that was happening. That of course was a great boost for morale and was really appreciated by the men.⁶³

In the afternoon an agitated officer arrived with the news that tanks had driven the brigade's transport away and were wreaking havoc on the guns. Kippenberger "sent him back with a savage reprimand for spreading false and alarmist information".⁶⁴ Some of the officer's information had been correct, however, as 5 Brigade's transport had indeed been driven off by the tanks of 21 Panzer in their wheel southward. Kippenberger could not make contact with the

⁵⁹ 21 Panzer Evening Report, 27 June 1942, AK Messages In, GMDS Files 22966/8&9 WA II 11/22 NZNA.

⁶⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.128.

⁶¹ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p.149.

⁶² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.131.

⁶³ Henderson, *op. cit.*, footnote 13, p.155.

⁶⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.131-2.

transport and “then began a time of desperate anxiety”.⁶⁵

On the way to the divisional conference that evening Kippenberger remarked candidly to his driver, “We are in the tightest spot New Zealand troops have ever been in”. The driver replied with a calmness Kippenberger greatly admired, “Is that so, Sir?”⁶⁶ At the conference Inglis confirmed the division’s precarious position; all attacks by Afrika Korps during the day had been repulsed but the division was now surrounded and would attempt to breakout that night. 4 Brigade would make the breach in the encirclement and the rest of the division was to follow. A severe flaw in the plan was revealed when Kippenberger told a shocked Inglis that all of his brigade’s troop-carrying vehicles were missing. By cramming all of 5 Brigade onto any front-line vehicle that could move the brigade could be evacuated but could play no active role in the breakout.

When Kippenberger returned to Brigade Headquarters contact was at last established with the missing transport but the “over suspicious” signals officer refused to believe that the message to move to a rendezvous point was genuine and believed 5 Brigade had been coerced into sending the message by their German captors.⁶⁷ Recalling the event more than fifty years later, Kippenberger’s brigade major could still become heated about the incident: “That silly bugger of a signals officer, and he was a silly bugger of a signals officer!”⁶⁸

That night Kippenberger supervised the loading of his brigade onto the available fighting vehicles and checked that all his men had a place allocated, finding places for the twenty men he found without them. He was thoroughly dissatisfied with the situation and later recorded:

The position of 5 Brigade was therefore highly unsatisfactory, two battalions loaded anyhow on the first-line vehicles and guns and completely incapable of fighting, one out of touch altogether and about to be left isolated and unaware of our retreat, and our troop-carriers miles away and obstinately determined to remain in the danger area.⁶⁹

Once the brigade was loaded on to the available transport Kippenberger and the

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.132.

⁶⁶ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 30 September 1947, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp.132, 134.

⁶⁸ Monty Fairbrother, interview, Masterton, 16 January 1993.

⁶⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.134.

rest of the division could do little but wait for 4 Brigade to attempt the breakout of the encirclement.

For the attempted breakout Lieutenant Colonel Jim Burrows decided on a broad arrowhead formation with 19 Battalion at the point, 20 Battalion on the left and 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right. The advance of 4 Brigade commenced two hours late but was completely successful. 4 Brigade advanced across the open ground for 1000 yards before the enemy opened fire on them and then the whole brigade charged into the German defences catching them completely by surprise. The intensity of the firefight was extreme as 4 Brigade relied on its aggressive spirit and firepower to break the encirclement. In the confusion of a night attack the New Zealand infantry shot and bayoneted everything that stood in their path including surrendering or wounded Germans and one of the units in their direct path happened to be a German Advanced Dressing Station.⁷⁰ An urgent signal to HQ Afrika Korps reported: "The enemy attacks, which were thought to be feints, have developed into violent attacks on all parts of the front".⁷¹

A gap had been cut in the ring of encirclement by 4 Brigade who were able to mount their transports following immediately behind and drive away. The rest of the division, however, did not follow them. Inglis decided not to use the gap cut by 4 Brigade but rather to use the commotion as a diversion and lead the division two miles further south before turning east and running parallel to the gap created. Inglis recorded of the decision:

In order to ensure that the rear of both columns was clear of the enemy by daylight I decided to move Div Res and 5 Bde column round battle area to S[outh] while fight was still in progress. Head of column was turned due S[outh] and moved off.⁷²

It was a bold decision and one that very nearly caused disaster when this second group hit the laagered tanks of 21 Panzer Division after one-and-three-quarter miles. For a wild moment there was panic like "a cattle stampede in a corral".⁷³

⁷⁰ McLeod, *op. cit.*, p.87.

⁷¹ 21 Panzer, message to HQ AK, 0307 hrs 28 June 1942, AK Messages In, GMDS Files 22966/8&9 W/A II 11/22 NZNA.

⁷² Inglis, GOC's Diary 27 and 28 June 1942, Folder 46 WWII — Africa, MS Papers 0421, ATL.

⁷³ Henderson, *op. cit.*, p.157.

Inglis turned the division eastward earlier than he had anticipated and most of the vehicles and men followed and were away. Smaller groups dispersed and headed in the opposite direction but most found their way to the British positions at Alamein. Kippenberger later recorded of Inglis's change of plan:

I was with Inglis when he decided to move. He gave no order other than to move and said nothing about his intentions. ... He had been continually cursing 4 Bde for delay, but firing had started when he moved. Actually what he did was to *abandon the plan* — of driving through the hole made by 4 BDE. He abandoned it after the attack had started and without waiting to see whether it had succeeded. I surmise that the time before daylight was getting too short.⁷⁴

To abandon a plan in the middle of an action without telling anyone was a very dangerous practice for a military commander. In this case, too, Inglis might have done better to stick to the original plan, as 4 Brigade's night attack had been very effective and had destroyed any opposition in its path. On the lack of orders Inglis wrote:

Usually there would be no actual order to advance. The column would normally proceed on the 'follow the leader' principle — moving when the head of the column moved and halting when it halted. It would be the action of halting or moving rather than any order or signal which 'trickles down the column'.⁷⁵

The total unsuitability of this method of command to a night withdrawal needs no comment, but for those towards the rear of the column, not knowing what was happening ahead or why the long periods of waiting were necessary must have been infuriating. Unlike Inglis, it was always Kippenberger's policy to keep his troops as fully informed as possible about what was happening, as his actions at Minqar Qaim demonstrated. Having been a private soldier Kippenberger knew the intense frustrations of being kept in the dark.

⁷⁴ Kippenberger, Minqar Qaim original notes and sketches, WA II 3/22 NZNA. Kippenberger's emphasis.

⁷⁵ Inglis to Scoullar, letter, 13 February 1953, Folder 22 Outwards Correspondence 3 April 1950 — 18 August 1953, MS Papers 0421, ATL.

Kippenberger's account of the breakthrough of this second group is one of the most often-quoted passages in works on the New Zealand Division in the Second World War and it would be remiss not to quote it here. Kippenberger wrote of the breakthrough at Mir qar Qaim:

We had bumped into a laager of about a dozen tanks lying so closely together that there was no room to break through between them. Their fire simply hailed down on us. There were tank shells, 20 - mm shells and automatics, all firing tracer. A petrol truck was hit at once and exploded. An ammunition truck was hit and boxes of cartridges crackled and exploded in succession. The most dreadful sight was an ambulance a few yards away which blazed furiously, the wounded on stretchers writhing and struggling utterly beyond help.

My car was jammed on all sides and could not move. I told Ross and Joe to get out and for a moment we lay flat on the ground. Many others had done the same. A few seconds later I saw a truck ahead of us turning to the left, and beyond it quite clearly saw John Gray standing with his head through the roof of his car and pointing in the same direction. 'We'll give it a go, Ross,' I said. 'Very good, Sir,' he replied as polite as ever. We scrambled back and followed the trucks ahead, all bolting like wild elephants. For a few moments we ran on amid a pandemonium, overtaken and being overtaken by other frantic vehicles, dodging slit trenches, passing or crashing into men, amid shouts and screams. I recognised the men as Germans, pulled out my revolver and was eagerly looking out for a target when suddenly there was silence and we were out smoothly on level desert. We were through.⁷⁶

Angus Ross recalled:

We were not with the main body which went south and around. We went straight through. We went straight through, parallel to and later on the actual road. And in the morning Kip's staff car and I think one other and

⁷⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.135.

the truck I was in. We thought we were the only survivors. But the rest had gone south and around. I remember Kip being very concerned as to what had happened to the rest of the brigade.⁷⁷

Most of the New Zealand Division got through that night. Some 10 000 men escaped captivity at Minqar Qaim.

Minqar Qaim, for very obvious reasons, has become the stuff of legend in New Zealand military history and the words "glorious feat of arms" have been most often used of it.⁷⁸ Curiously it remains virtually unknown to most New Zealanders. Many writers have argued that Minqar Qaim imposed a crucial delay on Rommel and the Afrika Korps and this delay provided the Eighth Army with the breathing space so vitally needed to consolidate on the Alamein position. The New Zealand Official History of the campaign, however, presents a more balanced account of the effect of the action. The tank strength of 21 Panzer, the formation through which the division had fought in the night breakout, numbered twenty-three tanks on 27 June. The following day the tank strength of 21 Panzer was put at twenty tanks, four tanks had been put out of action but one had been quickly repaired and 21 Panzer arrived at the Alamein position days later with 26 tanks. The German cemetery at Minqar Qaim contains some 300 graves, mostly Panzer Grenadiers killed on the night of the breakout. These are significant losses but hardly earth-shattering. Scoullar aptly summed up the effect of Minqar Qaim on the Afrika Korps when he stated "it cannot be said that the Division's stand at Minqar Qaim mauled the enemy spearhead or that it went a long way in saving the situation".⁷⁹ According to Major General Sir William Gentry who was at Minqar Qaim, it "was not really a battle, it was a series of desperate running" that only ended on the Alamein position.⁸⁰

Minqar Qaim did, however, add considerably to the prestige of the New Zealand Division, and it was a very successfully implemented breakout. The time spent on training in Syria had paid handsome dividends as what had saved the division was the ability of the divisional artillery to keep the tanks of the Afrika Korps at bay on 27 June and the skill and discipline of the New Zealand

⁷⁷ Angus Ross, interview, Dunedin, 17 January 1995.

⁷⁸ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.127, Sandford, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁷⁹ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.132.

⁸⁰ Major General Sir William Gentry, interview with Chris Pugsley, Lower Hutt, 13 February 1991, transcript in author's possession.

transport drivers. The aggression and determination of the New Zealand infantry, had, of course, played a vital part in the breakout but their efforts would have been ineffective without the firepower of the artillery which prevented the division from being steamrollered by the Afrika Korps' tanks, or the discipline and skill of the vehicle drivers — all of which had been honed to a fine edge during the divisional training in Syria. The action at Minqar Qaim had been costly too, a fact often overlooked at the time in the euphoria of escaping from the Afrika Korps' clutches. In the ten day period from 20 to 30 June New Zealand casualties numbered 41 officers and 992 ORs nine-tenths of which had been suffered at Minqar Qaim.⁸¹ For a formation which did not receive any reinforcements for the whole year, this was a high price to pay.

One person very disappointed with the action at Minqar Qaim was the commander of the Afrika Korps. Writing to his wife two days after Minqar Qaim Rommel commented:

Unfortunately, the New Zealanders under Freyberg had escaped. This division, with which we had already become acquainted back in 1941- 42, was among the elite of the British Army, and I should have been very much happier if it had been safely tucked away in our prison camps instead of still facing us.⁸²

The key point about Mirqar Qaim is that while it was a very successful military action the New Zealand Division had escaped captivity by the narrowest of margins and had been left entirely to its own devices to do so. The thought of losing the entire New Zealand Division haunted Inglis at this time:

the bulk of our soldiers will have to fight in a single formation and will, therefore, always be subject to the hazard of being lost or destroyed together. I have never forgotten the headache that this thought gave me as the Divisional Commander at Minqar Qaim and during the critical weeks that followed it.⁸³

⁸¹ Scoullar, *op. cit.*, p.132.

⁸² Rommel to Lu, letter, 29 June 1942, *The Rommel Papers*, p.240.

⁸³ Inglis, "The Army New Zealand Needs", lecture to The Officers Club, Dunedin, 13 June 1951, Folder 64 Miscellaneous File, MS Papers 0421, ATL.

Minqar Qaim was not a very good start to the summer of 1942 and in the next two major actions the New Zealand Division would not escape so lightly.

Kippenberger's first action as 5 Brigade's commander had been a mixed success although most of the mistakes made by 5 Brigade were beyond his effective control. His action at Minqar Qaim and his successful extrication of 5 Brigade contributed to his next award — a bar to the DSO.⁸⁴ It was clear, however, that he had much to learn about commanding his brigade especially in relation to maintaining effective communications within the brigade and what to do with the brigade's non-fighting vehicles once battle had been joined. It was also clear that the New Zealand Division had a long, hard campaign ahead of it.

⁸⁴ Decorations, citation: Bar to DSO, Glue Papers.