

Chapter 8: Turning Points: Alam Halfa and Alamein

At long last the British were learning how to make war --- which is not the same thing as fighting!

Alexander McKee

The period August—November 1942 was a turning point in Kippenberger's military career. Until now, he had been serving his apprenticeship as a military commander and the high point to date had occurred during the Crete campaign in the retaking of Galatos. From now on Kip would blossom as a military commander in North Africa, making few mistakes and commanding with great decision, vigour and success. Those under his command greatly benefited from Kip's long apprenticeship and came to regard him with a great deal of affection; even reverence. Kip's star had started to rise on Crete, had experienced a few wobbles at Minqar Qaim and Ruweisat Ridge, but was now back on an ascendant path. Over the next six months Kip "would prove himself the most talented senior New Zealand brigadier in the Mediterranean theatre"² and "the greatest soldier the division had".³ Evidence of this ascendancy came in Kip's next major action — the battle of Alam Halfa.

In August 1942, two changes of command occurred in the Eighth Army which had an immense impact on the army, its chances of victory in the North African campaign and on Kippenberger. Back to command the New Zealand Division on 10 August came Freyberg, now recovered from his wounding at Minqar Qaim. The more significant change of command, however, was at the head of the army. Almost by accident, with the death of General Gott, command of Eighth Army had fallen on 15 August to Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery and he immediately made his presence felt. Kippenberger recalled when he first learned of Montgomery's appointment:

No New Zealanders had heard of him and our English friends were

¹ Alexander McKee, *El Alamein, Ultra and the Three Battles*, London, 1991, p.112.

² Barber and Tonkin-Covell, *op. cit*, p. 26.

³ Norman H. Jones, *Jonesy*, Invercargill, 1981, p.177.

unenthusiastic. One English Brigadier told me he was understood to be mad and, more cheerfully, that he would certainly get rid of some of the dead wood.⁴

The “mad” new commander assumed command two days ahead of time and visited Freyberg and other commanders on that day. He arrived at Kip’s headquarters unannounced, spoke “sharply and curtly, without any soft words, asked some searching questions, met the battalion commanders and left me feeling very much stimulated”.⁵

Freyberg had also found the new commander stimulating. Upon their first meeting Freyberg outlined to Montgomery the independence permitted by his charter and had stressed his determination to keep New Zealand Division together and not be part of the British “mania for breaking up military organisations”.⁶ Montgomery was in complete agreement and Freyberg never had to refer to his charter for the rest of the North African campaign. A very relieved Freyberg cabled to the New Zealand Government:

It makes position here much easier as for two-and-a-half years I have striven to prevent New Zealand Division being divided into Brigade Groups, being convinced that by fighting as a Division maximum power is developed.⁷

The era of “cowpat” battles was over.

One of Montgomery’s immediate actions was to send the troop carrying vehicles seventy miles to the rear of the Alamein position to stress that there was to be no withdrawal from where the army now stood. Freyberg passed on Montgomery’s message to the New Zealand COs and informed them of a “completely new outlook. ... This looking over your shoulder and cranking up to

⁴ Kippenberger, Draft of New Zealand *Listener* Article, July 1947, Glue Papers.

⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.196.

⁶ Freyberg to War History Branch, letter, 5 November 1957, quoted in Ronald Walker, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: Alam Halfa and Alamein*, Wellington, 1967, p.230.

⁷ Freyberg to Fraser, cipher message p.130, 3 October 1942, GOC’s Papers “Lightfoot” and “Supercharge”, WA II 8/25A NZNA.



The new Eighth Army Commander inspects 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade, 21 August 1942. Montgomery is on the left, Kippenberger on the right. Behind them Freyberg and Horrocks confer.

(G.H. Levien)

get back to the position in the rear is to cease".⁸ It was a refreshing change and one that had a huge impact on the Eighth Army. "We were delighted", recalled Kip, "and the morale of the whole Army went up incredibly".⁹

The New Zealand Division moved to the south of the Alamein line after El Mreir and prepared a fortified position at the southern end of the line which became known as the New Zealand Box. The position was prepared for defence in depth and reinforced by the arrival of 132 Brigade from 44 Division. The box was so strengthened as to resist attacks from all directions. Kip commented:

By the end of August our positions were so solidly dug, the spirit of the men so high, our preparations so promising that I was almost sorry that the expected blow was never delivered.¹⁰

The open ground south of the New Zealand Box was covered by light tanks and mobile columns of 7 Armoured Division who were to delay the enemy's advance across the minefields and then draw them onto the New Zealand Box.

The New Zealand Division's patrolling of and raids across No Man's Land was very unsatisfactory at this location providing little useful information and few POWs. The recall and sense of location of patrol leaders was so poor that a special proforma had to be devised to aid patrol leaders in recalling and recording essential points of time and distance.¹¹ Both activities were important, as during August 1942 it was the only way "to train 'new boys' in battle experience. We had scraped the Maadi-Cairo pot for reinforcements and they were poorly trained".¹² Kip was so concerned about this lack of success that, following a request on 24 August to stage a major raid on the enemy's forward lines, he decided to experiment with a method he had tried earlier, "a sweep along the enemy's front

⁸ Freyberg, notes of GOC's address to CO's, 16 August 1942, W/A II 11/6 NZNA.

⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.196.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.200.

¹¹ Walker, *op. cit*, p.67.

¹² Brigadier George Clifton, comments attached to letter, Kippenberger to Scoullar, 8 May 1953, W/A II 11/6 NZNA.

instead of a head on assault".¹³ In support of the raid Kip would have one-hundred and fifty field and medium guns.

At the request of the Maori Battalion, the battalion chosen to undertake the raid, Kip and his Brigade Major spent the afternoon of 25 August, preparing a plan. They decided to have two companies of the battalion follow an artillery barrage along a salient of the front line taking as many prisoners as possible before returning to the 5 Brigade sector.

The raid went ahead on the evening of 26 August and Kip was on the start-line to see the Maori Battalion off. Kip was "amazed and amused by the number of weapons they were carrying". A Maori padre said a prayer ("very moving in the utter silence") then Kip spoke briefly to the men warning them he wanted "prisoners and not scalps" and the two companies set off.¹⁴

The raid went like clockwork with forty-one POWs taken, the first clinging to Kip "gibbering with terror", and two companies of the Italian Bologna Division destroyed.¹⁵ Kip was disappointed with the number of Maori casualties, however, over thirty, most from "our own artillery fire, either from shorts or through over-eagerness in pressing on".¹⁶ This, unfortunately, was to be a common feature of the Maori Battalion's casualties.

This raid in force was the first offensive operation undertaken by Eighth Army under Montgomery's command and "was considered a model on which future operations of this sort should be based" by the division. It was also the first time the Maori Battalion fought under Kip's command and they were impressed with his leadership abilities.¹⁷ The raid had brought in "many more prisoners than all the small patrols together had managed to collect".¹⁸ Both Montgomery and Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, the new Corps commander, sent "warm messages of congratulations".¹⁹ The Division's "G" Diary recorded:

The enemy were completely surprised by the direction of the attack and

¹³ Walker, *op. cit*, p. 59.

¹⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.202.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.203.

¹⁶ *ibid*.

¹⁷ J. F. Cody, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War. 1939- 45. 28 (Maori) Battalion*, Wellington, 1956, p.208.

¹⁸ Walker, *op. cit*, pp. 62, 67.

¹⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 203.

suffered heavy casualties, both from the shelling and from the attacking Maoris who left the area clear. ... It was the Maoris' first major engagement since the death in action of their CO, Lt-Col Tui Love, and they were undoubtedly in a spirit of revenge.²⁰

There was a less fortunate side to the operation. The raid by the two companies was more successful than first anticipated and inflicted many casualties on the front line positions evidenced by the number of ambulances seen moving in and out of the salient that morning. The salient appeared to be unmanned and Kip was ordered to take possession of its eastern tip. As Kip admitted, "I should have foreseen this, but I had thought of the operation as a raid only and was not prepared either mentally or with troops".²¹ A patrol of 21 Battalion probing tentatively towards the salient set off "just too late" and was forced to retire when it came under enemy fire from the now reoccupied salient. "No doubt we missed an opportunity" reflected Kip.²²

This is certainly true, but as usual, Kip remained his harshest critic. Kip was also responsible for capturing the first POWs in a fortnight and for planning and implementing the most successful limited offensive operation of the army since July. He had also helped the New Zealand Division to rediscover the lost art of raiding a static enemy position. The successes of the operation clearly outweighed any disappointments.

Rommel knew that his next offensive operation was likely to be his last in North Africa and that it had to be launched soon. Accordingly, his plan was both simple and bold. Rommel planned to cross the start line on his side of the minefields at 2200 hours on the night of 30 August, head south-east, pass the New Zealand Box which was the southernmost extremity of the British line and then swing north-east to a new assembly point. This first phase of the operation was to take five hours to complete and would cover a distance of twenty miles. At 0500 hrs on 31 August the Afrika Korps would line up facing north on a fifteen mile front and drive northward to the coast behind the Eighth Army's front so that it would be

²⁰ WD HQ 2 NZ Div G Staff, 25-26 August 1942, WA II 1 DA 21.1/1/32 Micro R3830 NZNA.

²¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.203-4.

²² *ibid*, p.204.

“bottled up against the sea with strong enemy forces on all three landward sides”.²³ In the final phase of the operation 90 Light Division and 15 Panzer were to drive south-east directly for Cairo with 90 Light continuing on to Suez. 21 Panzer was to deal with Alexandria. Despite their numerical inferiority, Rommel and his troops were confident of success. Afrika Korps’s War Diary recorded on the eve of the battle:

After a pause of about three weeks Afrika Korps once more advanced to the attack. During this time the strength of the corps had considerably increased. Morale was good and confident. The Pz Regts had a total of 237 runners. The infantry regiments, which had had heavy casualties were not yet up to full strength again.²⁴

Rommel’s plan was certainly ambitious but it was one which had been known to the Eighth Army commanders for some time. Another right hook by Rommel in the southern sector of the line had been long anticipated by Auchinleck and his Chief of Staff (COS) had prepared a defensive plan to block the move using the Alam Halfa feature which dominated any southern route chosen by Rommel and was the perfect site to block any eastern movement. Montgomery used a variation of Dorman-Smith’s plan modified in two significant ways: he had tanks dug in along the Alam Halfa ridge and he had an extra infantry division, 44 Division, placed in reserve.

Alam Halfa actually gave Eighth Army “an easy task”²⁵ as along this superb defensive position Eighth Army could muster 767 tanks (including 164 Grants) compared with the 237 German tanks then available to Rommel. The crucial factor though, and the one which cost Rommel the battle, was the Afrika Korps’ fuel situation. Rommel had been starved of this precious liquid and received only 1 800 tons of the necessary 6 000 tons needed to commence the operation.²⁶ Little wonder that L. C. F. Turner referred to the Malta factor (British raids from that base on Rommel’s fuel convoys) as “the most important single factor

²³ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.89.

²⁴ AK WD, 2200 hrs 30 August 1942, Records of German-Italian Forces, Vol I, Afrika Korps War Diary 3 August — 22 November 1942, WA II 11/22 GMDS File 2586/1 NZNA.

²⁵ Barnett, *op. cit.*, p.263.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.261.

affecting the desert campaigns',²⁷ although Martin Van Creveld believes the effects of the Malta raids to be "grossly exaggerated" instead placing the greatest significance on the vast distances that had to be travelled inside North Africa to reach the battlefields.²⁸ Finally, Rommel was a sick man throughout the Alam Halfa offensive suffering from a nose infection and, more seriously, a swollen liver. According to Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, at Alam Halfa Rommel was:

no longer the bold leader of old; the long period, almost two years, of uninterrupted fighting in the hot climate, with the incessant friction from co-operation with the Italians, and the disappointment of the failure of the advance to Cairo had seriously upset his health and above all his nerves. Rommel needed a rest.²⁹

During the offensive, the German attacks would "not be pressed with the old skill and resolution".³⁰

Radio intercepts (Ultra) confirmed Rommel's intentions and Montgomery used this information to keep his subordinate commanders fully informed without revealing the source. Kip recorded:

The whole plan for the battle was thoroughly explained to us and I liked it more than that for any action I had taken part in. More pleasing even than the plan was the ready, balanced feeling that we all had; and that feeling undoubtedly came down from Army Headquarters. It was the first and typical Montgomery battle. All our preparatory moves were made unhurriedly and in plenty of time, and we were completely ready when the blow fell.³¹

²⁷ Turner, *loc. cit.*

²⁸ M. Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, Cambridge, 1977, p.199.

²⁹ Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, "The War in the Mediterranean Part I", p.35, A Study for the US Historical Division May 1948 G289326/JW/1/51/50, Translated by Air Ministry February 1951, Air Historical Branch, Translations of German and Italian Documents, WA II 11/20 NZNA.

³⁰ Barnett, *op. cit.*, p.263.

³¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.206.

Still, Rommel's advance on 30 August caught Montgomery by surprise as by 29 August he had concluded that Rommel had postponed the attack indefinitely. In fact, Rommel had delayed his attack waiting for more fuel to arrive. Montgomery was caught in the process of relieving 5 Brigade with 132 Brigade of 44 Division but immediately cancelled the relief and rushed Kip's brigade back to the southern front of the New Zealand Box. The "G" Diary recorded:

Arrangements for the NZ Div-44 Div changeover were cancelled by prearranged codeword. The expected big party was on!³²

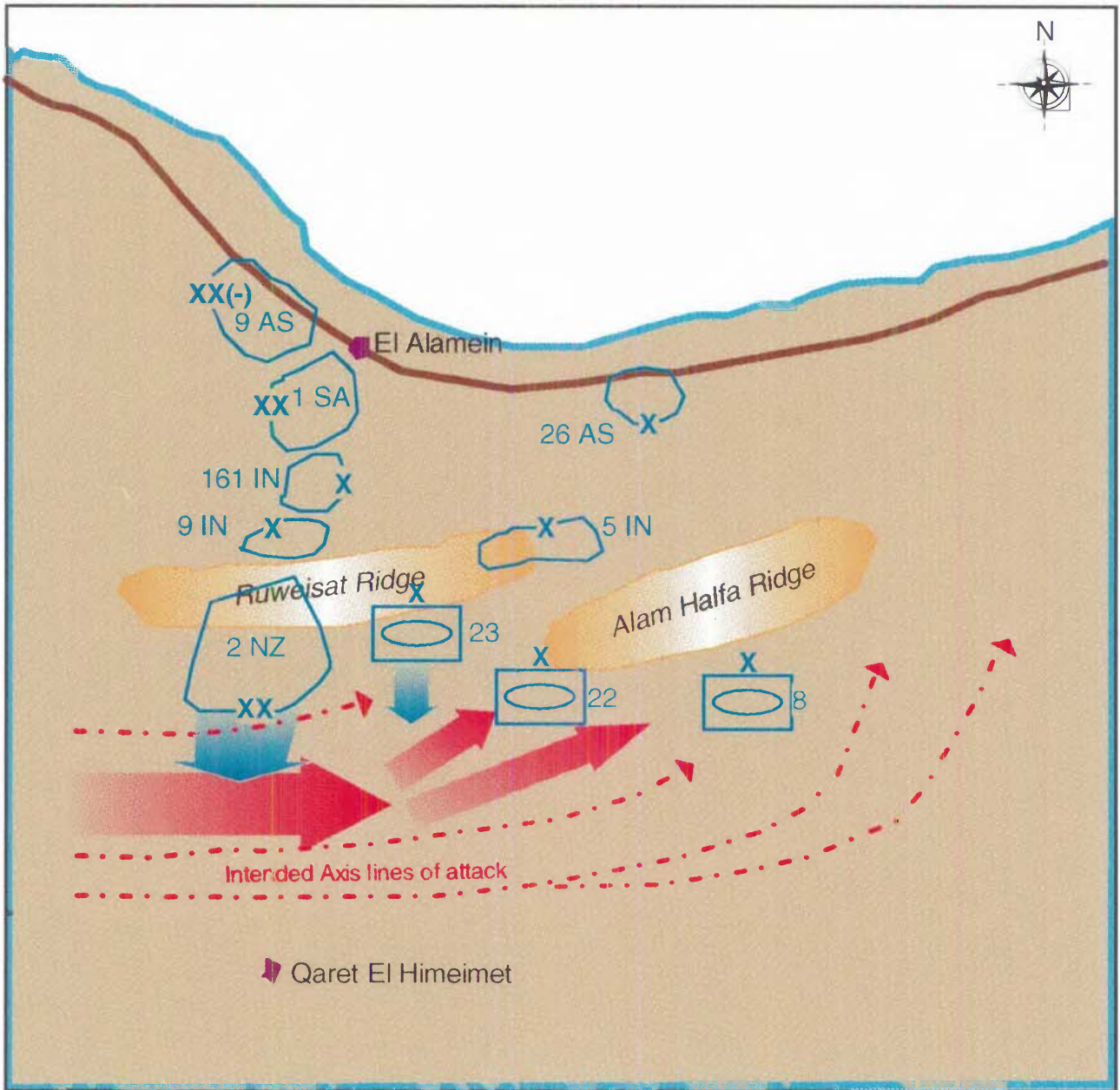
Despite this initial minor setback, all else went according to plan for Eighth Army until the counterattack on 3 September. Afrika Korps experienced unexpected difficulty in penetrating the minefields and the movement to its startline was detected by the Desert Air Force (DAF). For the rest of the operation Afrika Korps was bombarded with flares and bombs without respite. This was the first time in the course of the war that the Allies demonstrated their air superiority over the Axis in a theatre of war and combined air power effectively with their own ground operations. Upon reaching the minefields Afrika Korps was pounded mercilessly from the air, heavily shelled by the concentrated firepower of Eighth Army's artillery and subjected to harassing fire from 7 Armoured Division. It was not a very good start to the operation and Afrika Korps' high morale plummeted. As early as 0230 hrs Rommel had sent a curt message to his COS, Bayerlein, who was directing the attack:

Your progress up to now has been too slow. Only a speedy advance and breakthrough will ensure success.³³

Rommel's advance never recovered from its shaky start and by dawn on 31 August all his formations were scattered far and wide and well short of their first objectives. Bayerlein reported to Rommel that "Our plan to surprise the enemy by getting opposite his deep flank and rear by first light and then swinging

³² HQ 2 NZ Div G Staff WD, 0119 hrs 31 August 1942, WA II 1 DA 21.1/1/32 Micro 3830 NZNA.

³³ C-in-C to AK, 0230 hrs 31 August 1942, AK Messages In 23 August — 8 September 1942, GMDS File 25869/4 &5, WA II 11/22 NZNA.



The Battle of Alam Halfa

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north had not succeeded" and Rommel ordered Bayerlein "to continue the attack and change direction" when he had enough fuel to do so.³⁴ Rommel later wrote that Eighth Army "had defended their strong positions with extraordinary stubbornness and had thereby delayed our advance". The loss of surprise was "of immense value" to his enemy who were now free to organise a counterattack.³⁵ Owing to the bad going and the delay imposed by this and enemy action Afrika Korps' fuel stocks "were soon badly depleted".³⁶ Rommel tried to get the flagging offensive moving again but without much success and only 15 Panzer Division responded with any degree of alacrity.

By 1 September Rommel succeeded in lining his panzer divisions south of Alam Halfa ready to swing north-east to the coast but his fuel situation was critical. He had barely enough left for a withdrawal let alone to attempt a huge encirclement which would require a considerable degree of mobility. That evening Rommel took the decision to withdraw to the start line, defeated by this lack of fuel. Only the arrival of vast quantities of petrol in the front line could have persuaded Rommel to carry on the offensive. With the combination of Malta and Ultra there was absolutely no possibility of this happening.

It had been relatively quiet in the New Zealand Box since the start of Rommel's attack but this was about to change. Rommel's withdrawal so early into the offensive had taken the Eighth Army by surprise so that it was not until 3 September that Montgomery ordered an infantry counterattack: Operation BERESFORD. Afrika Korps found the lack of vigorous pursuit strange and recorded in its War Diary that "The enemy pursued Afrika Korps half-heartedly during the day".³⁷ Despite his objections Freyberg was ordered to undertake the counterattack with only two brigades. Two infantry brigades could do very little but probe the enemy's defences when a hammer blow by at least two divisions seemed warranted. Once again, and for the last time, the infantry advance was to be a silent, night attack, although each infantry brigade would be supported by a squadron of tanks — the only assistance received from the armoured corps. Once again there was no effective liaison with the other formations of Eighth Army.

³⁴ AK WD, 31 August 1942, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

³⁵ *The Rommel Papers*, p.276.

³⁶ *ibid*, p.278.

³⁷ AK WD, 3 September 1942, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

2 New Zealand Division and Kip had learned much since Ruweisat, however, and this was very evident in the progress made by the two infantry brigades used in the counterattack — Kip's 5 Brigade and 132 Brigade of the inexperienced British 44 Division.

Kip's brigade was to attack down a narrow corridor between two minefields and secure the northern ridge of the Munassib depression. This final objective was to be taken by 28 (Maori) Battalion with 21 Battalion holding the northern and western edge of a smaller depression immediately behind 28 Battalion. One battalion, the 22nd, was held in reserve. Kip later commented:

We were learning by experience and there were several differences between our plans for Ruweisat and for this battle. All the preparations were made without hitch or misunderstanding, with very minor exceptions.³⁸

Even so, things still went seriously wrong during the attack. Signals broke down, companies got lost and were late moving off, the gap between the minefields was shelled heavily, and, most seriously of all, the lead battalion did not follow orders and effective control was lost. As Kip learnt from the Battalion CO:

It appeared that the objective had been reached after violent and most bloody fighting. Most of the two companies had then carried on into the Munassib depression directly contrary to their orders and were slaughtering the transport drivers and burning the trucks there.³⁹

The dispersal and withdrawal of most the Maori Battalion left Kip with no choice but to withdraw it from the depression next morning and bring forward his reserve battalion to link up with 21 Battalion so that most of the ground taken could be held. To ward off the inevitable German counterattack Kip had the front of both battalions bristling with anti-tank weapons —six and two pounders — and covered by the New Zealand artillery so that when the counterattacks came at midday on 4 September they were easily beaten off.

³⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.209.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.213.

The experience of Kip and of his command was very evident in this assault. 21 Battalion had accomplished its relatively easy task “neatly and efficiently” while 22 Battalion had been “quick and businesslike”. The Maori Battalion, which had suffered most of the Brigade’s 120 casualties, had made “a brilliantly successful attack” and, according to Kip, had inflicted over 500 casualties. Kip’s claim of 500 casualties as recorded in the Brigade’s War Diary⁴⁰ is disputed by other historians⁴¹ and the Afrika Korps’ War Diary does not support it. Afrika Korps recorded:

Our casualties were 38 officers and 533 [ORs], and 145 MT and 9 guns were total losses. Our heavy casualties were mainly caused by the enemy air force.⁴²

Kip was not happy with the Maoris’ “fit of over-enthusiasm”⁴³ and wrote, somewhat gently, in *Infantry Brigadier*:

They had, however, got badly out of control and were lucky to have got out without disaster. Splendid troops as they were and easy for a hard commander to handle, the Maoris needed an iron hand. It was the stern George Dittmer, their original commander, who made them a battalion, and throughout the war, the sterner and firmer their commander, the better they responded.⁴⁴

At the time of Operation BERESFORD Kip was furious with the Maori Battalion and their loss of control and remarked to an officer who just managed to prevent Kip from driving through a mine-field in his search for the battalion HQ: “Why did they have to withdraw? They should have held that ground!”⁴⁵ Noel Gardiner’s original account of this meeting with Kip, an account directly contradicted in his second publication, stated that Kip “was too agitated to thank

⁴⁰ 5 Bde WD list the casualties inflicted by 28 Bn as 475 Germans and 40 Italians killed and 108 POWs, WA II 1 DA 52/1/33 NZNA.

⁴¹ See, for example, Michael Carver, *El Alamein*, London, 1976, p.71.

⁴² AK WD, 4 September 1942, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

⁴³ Carver, *op. cit.*, p.70.

⁴⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.217-18.

⁴⁵ N. Gardiner, *Bringing Up the Rear*, Auckland, 1983, p.57.

us; all he kept on about was that all the ground should have been held, a statement he would hardly have been able to make had his jeep gone on fifty more metres or so".⁴⁶ The failure of the Maoris at Alam Halfa explains why they were allocated a "mopping up" role in the next large battle, a decision that still puzzles Maori historians⁴⁷ despite its being described in the battalion history as "the important task".⁴⁸ For propaganda purposes the Maori attack on 3-4 September was transformed into a great victory and widely publicised in New Zealand. The attack was so effective "that they swept all before them at the point of the bayonet right past the objective set for them into the enemy B echelon". The Axis casualties were inflated to 600 killed and 150 POWs.⁴⁹

The experience of Kip's brigade was especially evident when its achievements were compared with the disastrous advance of 132 Brigade on 5 Brigade's right flank. The commander of 132 Brigade, Brigadier Robertson, rejected Kip's sound advice to establish a Tactical Headquarters well forward with good communications and reserves and support weapons close at hand. Instead, Robertson moved his HQ up too close behind his lead infantry battalions and was one of the first people wounded by enemy shell fire. The New Zealand writer John Mulgan, an officer in 132 Brigade, recalled prior to Operation BERESFORD:

Nobody in the battalion felt very comfortable about this attack. We were all of us too new to desert fighting to have any confidence or exact knowledge as to what we should do, and everything was very hurried. There was very little time for preparation and our commander had always believed that fighting spirit can redeem any lack of minute planning.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ N. Gardiner, *Freyberg's Circus: Reminiscences of a Kiwi Soldier in the North African Campaign of World War II*, Auckland, 1981, p.73. For the revised version of this incident see N. Gardiner, *Bringing Up the Rear*, Appendix V.

⁴⁷ W. Gardiner, *Te Mura O Te Ahi: The Story of the Maori Battalion*, Auckland, 1992, p.103.

⁴⁸ Cody, *28 (Maori) Battalion*, p.230.

⁴⁹ *The Dominion*, Wellington 16 October 1942, Interviews and Speeches November 1939 — December 1944, WA II 2/16 NZNA.

⁵⁰ J. Mulgan, *Report on Experience*, Auckland, 1967, pp.57-8.

132 Brigade suffered that night from enemy bombing, stumbled onto one of their own minefields and set off an hour late, out of contact with their armoured support squadron and completely bunched up to make the night travelling easier. A half hour after midnight heavy enemy artillery fire rained down on the compact units of the brigade wounding the Brigadier and stopping the advance of the brigade in its tracks. The brigade did not penetrate beyond the line on which it came under fire. Rather it halted on a forward slope of a ridge totally exposed to the enemy fire from three sides; “long enough to collect a bitter quota of casualties”.⁵¹

The next morning only one battalion of 132 Brigade was intact and near its final objective. The other two battalions were thoroughly disorganised and completely disorientated. Mulgan wrote of moving forward at dawn on 4 September to locate the brigade and observed the Brigade major trying to reorganise the shambles — “the only coherent man we met all that day”.⁵²

Operation BERESFORD ended on the morning of 5 September when the New Zealand Battalions were withdrawn into the New Zealand Box and the gaps in the minefields closed. 132 Brigade had suffered more than 700 casualties during its brief advance and Freyberg felt himself to be very much responsible for the disaster because he had used such an inexperienced brigade for this type of operation.⁵³ The Corps commander, Horrocks, experiencing “the most difficult time I had in the whole war” because of Freyberg’s ungenerous behaviour towards him,⁵⁴ was “pierced with remorse” after the war over the use of 132 Brigade.⁵⁵ The fault though really rested with 132 Brigade and more particularly with its commanders. The commanders of the brigade rejected all of the sound advice offered by the New Zealanders as “there was a resistance to suggestions that the brigade was inexperienced in anything except the terrain”.⁵⁶ The tactics used by 132 Brigade were totally inadequate for desert fighting and the brigade seemed determined to learn by its mistakes rather than from the experience of other formations.

⁵¹ *ibid*, p.59.

⁵² *ibid*, p.61.

⁵³ Walker, *op. cit*, p.165.

⁵⁴ Hamilton, *Monty: the Making of a General 1887-1942*, London, 1981, p.643.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.693.

⁵⁶ Walker, *op. cit*, pp.165-66.

The New Zealanders, and Freyberg in particular, have been accused of being primarily responsible for the failure of Montgomery's counterattack at Alam Halfa. This is especially true of British writers. Lord Carver, for example, wrote of Montgomery's plans:

He had planned to cut off Rommel's thrust with a counter-attack by Freyberg's New Zealanders, reinforced by brigades of the 44th, and then launch Lumsden's *corps de chasse* in a wide sweep round Rommel's rear; but the New Zealand attack petered out ineffectively and Montgomery, the realist, saw that his army needed more thorough training before it would be able to respond to his demands.⁵⁷

Nigel Hamilton, Montgomery's sympathetic biographer, is probably the most damning of the British writers. To him, Operation BERESFORD was "the New Zealand Division's failure",⁵⁸ a failure which provided "an illuminating insight into the still disastrous lack of offensive skills in the 8th Army".⁵⁹ Not only does Hamilton mistake which New Zealand brigade was used in the attack, but all the disasters are laid entirely at the feet of the New Zealand brigade while any success obtained is credited to 132 Brigade; hardly an accurate description of the action. One British writer, however, has hit upon the real reason for the failure of Operation BERESFORD. Barnett believed that Rommel's withdrawal should have been met with "an annihilating counter-stroke in the grand style". Such a decisive knock-out blow did not fit in with Montgomery's plans or his cautious command style in which "unexpected opportunities, however great, were embarrassing". The counterattack when it was made was "a half-hearted attempt, carried out by the New Zealand Division alone, and it was too late".⁶⁰

The failure of the counterattack at Alam Halfa then can be put down to two factors: the cautious command style of Montgomery who let the opportunity pass and the total inexperience and inflexibility of one of the two infantry brigades used in the limited counterattack that was launched. Kip, however, was pleased that a larger counterattack had not been attempted. He

⁵⁷ in John Keegan (ed), *Churchill's Generals* London, 1991, p.154.

⁵⁸ Hamilton, *Monty: the Making of a General 1887-1942*, p.714.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.688.

⁶⁰ Barnett, *op. cit*, pp.265-6.

wrote in 1955:

My own feeling is that battle was never really joined. Montgomery was rightly determined not to be defeated and Rommel's plan had become impracticable and he only half-heartedly attempted a modification of it within a few hours. I remember quite clearly that Horrocks told us that the main object was not to be beaten, and that I was delighted that the Army Commander had not been tempted into launching a general counter-attack.⁶¹

With Eighth Army recovering from a state of despair in August 1942, and still poorly trained and lacking adequate doctrine, Montgomery's decision not to launch a massive counterattack was probably the correct one.

Alam Halfa had been a costly action for both sides. German and Italian losses numbered 2910 men, 48 planes and 49 tanks so badly damaged that they had to be left behind on the battlefield. Eighth Army lost over 100 tanks, half of which were totally destroyed, 50 planes and suffered 1 800 casualties including 275 New Zealanders and 697 from 132 Brigade. Montgomery, as might be expected, claimed his first great victory but the reality was that Alam Halfa resembled a draw more than a win. Rommel had been defeated, but by logistics and airpower rather than by tactics or leadership. As Afrika Korps' War Diary stated on 2 September, "The enemy's air superiority and the petrol shortage and that of other supplies compel us to cancel the offensive".⁶² Montgomery always maintained that victory was achieved because Eighth Army fought to "his" plan, maintained balance throughout, and air power was "properly used" for the first time in North Africa.⁶³

The New Zealand Division had now been in the front line constantly since their recall from Syria in June. They had also been engaged in more than half a dozen major actions since that time and the strain was very evident. Although Kip realised "how near exhaustion the men were while I watched them dragging themselves wearily along", when pressed by Freyberg he said he

⁶¹ Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 6 October 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁶² AK WD, 1230 hrs 2 September 1942, WA 11/22 NZNA.

⁶³ Summary of a Report by GOC-in-C Eighth Army, on Battle of Alamein, 30 Aug -7 Sept '42, in WA I 11/6 NZNA.

believed “that they were capable of another effort if it was wanted”.⁶⁴ Freyberg, however, believed his division was near to exhaustion and the division was withdrawn for a period of rest before beginning intensive training for their forthcoming role in the battle of Alamein.

Kip had had enough too. He was shocked by the deaths of Peart and Russell, two battalion commanders who were also close personal friends, and he left for Cairo early on 8 September “sad beyond words ... I felt that I had all I wanted”.⁶⁵ Kip needed a break from the killing zone as much as others did.

After a very eventful fortnight of leave, which saw “a record number of cases of bad behaviour”⁶⁶ reported, 2 New Zealand Division moved twenty miles south of the Burg el Arab rest area to begin an intensive period of hard training. The division was now reinforced by the inclusion of 9 Armoured Brigade and by additional regiments of field and medium artillery. Training was very tough with live firing exercises used on many occasions which resulted in some casualties. As Kip commented on this period of training:

It was not going to be easy and we spared no pains. I have never worked or thought harder than in these weeks, nor have I ever worked troops so hard; and all commanders and staff did the same.⁶⁷

Freyberg recorded:

Time being short, we started our training with a full scale Divisional rehearsal under conditions as similar as possible to the actual attack we were to carry out later to capture Miteiriya Ridge. Complete plans and preparations were made for the “attack” which we carried out by moonlight on 26 September.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp.218-19.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, p.220.

⁶⁶ Walker, *op. cit*, p.190.

⁶⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.222.

⁶⁸ Freyberg, “The New Zealand Division in Egypt and Libya: Operations ‘Lightfoot’ and ‘Supercharge’”, Part I Narrative and Lessons, p.2, Freyberg’s Secret After-action Report, collection of I. McL Wards, copy in author’s possession.

The simulated attack involved the infantry brigades "laying up" during the day and crossing live minefields under an artillery barrage in conditions as close to the reality of battle as possible. At long last the New Zealand Division (and Eighth Army) was fully tailoring their training exercises to the plan of attack.

More occurred than just training. Freyberg took every effort to see that the British 9 Armoured Brigade, with its new Sherman and its obsolete Crusader tanks, was fully integrated with the New Zealand Division. Each infantry brigade carried out brigade and battalion exercises with the armoured regiments and social events were held wherein officers of all brigades mixed freely. The regiments of 9 Armoured Brigade put the New Zealand Division's distinctive fern-leaf emblem on their tanks (and it is still used by some of the regiments), mixed ceremonial parades were held and joint exercises and TEWTS conducted so that members of all the formations got to know one another well. As Kip recorded:

Both they and we were resolved that there was going to be no more nonsense about tanks and infantry failing to cooperate. ... The result was that throughout the battle 9 Armoured Brigade gave us magnificent support regardless of their terrible losses. No formation can have made greater sacrifices for the victory.⁶⁹

In fact 9 Armoured Brigade was the only armoured formation consistently to follow directives in the forthcoming battle and take all its stated objectives throughout. Before the battle commenced Freyberg assured the New Zealand Government that the New Zealand Division with its three tank regiments was now "more powerful than a Panzer Division" and commented further that the days of New Zealand infantry being overrun by enemy armour "are I hope past".⁷⁰ Kip recalled after the war that while the New Zealanders were "moderately confident of much better things" from the British armour before El Alamein, in 9 Armoured Brigade they had "complete and justified confidence".⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.223.

⁷⁰ Freyberg to Fraser, cipher message p.130, 3 October 1942, WA II 8/25A NZNA.

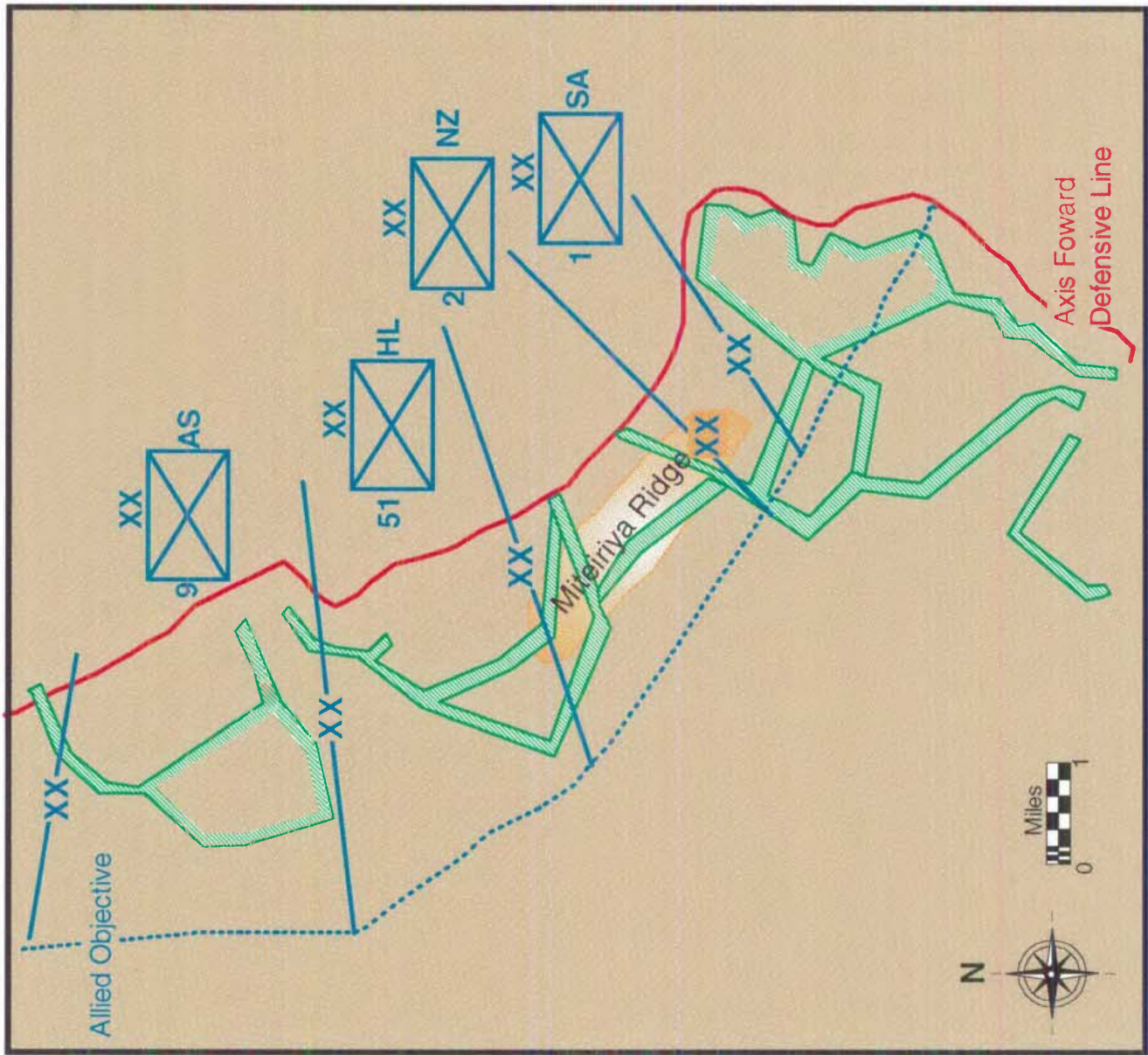
⁷¹ Kippenberger to Latham letter, 24 May 1949, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

Montgomery was determined to end the pattern of advances and withdrawals across the desert by beating the Afrika Korps decisively at Alamein. To do this he prepared for a battle of attrition knowing full well that, as he possessed the deepest purse, he must win in the long run. At the start of the battle Montgomery had 1348 tanks and 220 476 men. These were organised into three corps, two of which were infantry — XXX Corps in the north and XIII in the south — and one armoured Corps — X Corps, the prized *corps de chasse*. Four hundred and thirty of his tanks were Grants and Shermans. Eighth Army artillery amounted to 900 medium and field guns, 800 six pounders and 550 two pounders making a grand total of 3050 guns of all types.

Opposing Montgomery were Rommel's 600 tanks which included 129 "heavies" — the German Mark III Special, Mark IV and Mark IV Special. Rommel had 110 000 men on the front line at Alamein, about 50 per cent of them German. The *Panzer Armee* also possessed twenty-six heavy guns for which the Eighth Army had no equal, 500 medium and field weapons, and 1000 anti-tank guns of which only 50-60 were the notorious 88-mm dual purpose gun.⁷² During the battle it was the German and Italian artillery which caused most of Montgomery's problems and the gun lines of Afrika Korps were not penetrated during the offensive by the British armour. In terms of men, armour and artillery Eighth Army enjoyed a crushing superiority and it is somewhat surprising that Afrika Korps managed to stave off defeat for as long as they did. Eighth Army, however, had often enjoyed this numerical advantage before and had still not been able to defeat Rommel decisively.

Montgomery's plans were relatively simple. He divided the battle neatly into four phases. In the north the cream of Eighth Army's infantry was concentrated in XXX Corps and the five infantry divisions of the corps were to achieve the break-in and then engage with Afrika Korps during the dogfight phase. Following this phase a break out would be achieved and the two armoured divisions of X Corps would pass through the XXX Corps' positions and deploy immediately to their front. This would draw out Rommel's armour and in the pitched armoured battle that followed Rommel's armour would be defeated. Then the exploitation/pursuit phase could begin. Meanwhile, in the southern part of the line, XIII Corps under Horrocks would carry out

⁷² Walker, *op. cit.*, p.249.



30 Corps at El Alamein
 The plan of Attack 23 October 1942*

* The fifth division of the corps, 4 Indian Division, is not shown, as it was on Ruweisat Ridge to the immediate south.

diversionary attacks in the hope of pinning down one of Rommel's armoured divisions in this sector.

Rommel was under no illusion about what lay ahead and he expected the Australians and New Zealanders to play a key role. He wrote prior to El Alamein:

the British would first have to try for a break-through. We had no doubts about the suitability of the British Army for such a task, for its entire training had been based on the lessons learnt in the battles of material of the First World War. ... In this form of action the full value of the excellent Australian and New Zealand infantry would be realised and the British artillery would have its effect.⁷³

As early as 1 October 1942 a German Intelligence Officer had predicted that the reinforced Eighth Army "will launch an offensive in mid Oct" and that "the main weight of the offensive will come between the coast and Ruweisat".⁷⁴ Despite this, the British Official History of deception operations claimed that "there can be no doubt of the success" of British deception measures prior to Alamein and that "tactical surprise was complete".⁷⁵

The New Zealand Division had been allocated key roles in the Alamein offensive and was taxed to the limits to achieve them all. Montgomery demanded almost too much of the understrength 2 New Zealand Division which had not received reinforcements from New Zealand since November 1941 and was "incapable of fighting a sustained action".⁷⁶ Freyberg noted in his diary, "men in good form — our trouble is we are short of men now — weapons all

⁷³ "The Defence Plan", *The Rommel Papers*, pp.298-9.

⁷⁴ Capt Kircher, 15 Pz IO, "Probable Tactics of the British Eighth Army in the Offensive against the Alamein Front", GMDS File 26421/3, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

⁷⁵ Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War*, London, 1992, pp.66,67.

⁷⁶ General Oliver Leese, "Impressions of the part of 30 Corps in the 'Battle of Egypt', attached to letter to Scoullar, 30 April 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

right — guns and tanks must do what infantry have done before”.⁷⁷ Despite their numerical weakness the New Zealand Division was the only infantry division allocated a dual role in the attack — part of XXX Corps in the initial attack before transferring to X Corps to play a key role in the break out and exploitation phases. The requirement to come under the operational command of two different corps meant that Freyberg, his subordinates and their staffs had to attend numerous planning conferences prior to the attack. Not only was New Zealand Division allocated this dual role but it was the only infantry division in the initial assault to have its own armour under command and it was expected to use it to achieve a significant break-in of the enemy defences and also exploit any success this might gain.

The objective the New Zealanders were expected to seize was Miteiriya Ridge, scene of the Australian disaster the previous July and a key feature of the Alamein position. Freyberg believed that this battle, unlike previous ones during the desert campaign “approximates the battles fought in 1918”⁷⁸ and turned to the techniques developed in that year to plan the New Zealand attack. Of the assaulting infantry divisions on the night of 23 October 1942, 2 New Zealand Division was alone in using a quarter of its 104 guns to provide a standard creeping barrage for the infantry to “lean on” during their advance while the rest of its artillery fired concentrations on known strong points.⁷⁹ The CRA, Weir, had previously been informed by the Chief Instructor of the School of Artillery in North Africa that while a creeping barrage offered good, close support for advancing infantry “a creeping barrage would never be used in this war”,⁸⁰ which ignored the fact that the 7th Australian Division had already used two creeping barrages during the Syrian campaign.⁸¹ When asked by Freyberg if such a barrage was possible for Alamein Weir had replied that one was ideally suited for the

⁷⁷ Freyberg’s Diary, 20 October 1942, from collection of Sir John White, copy of El Alamein section in author’s possession. I have used Sir John’s copy of this record for the El Alamein battle as it is more complete than the NZNA version. WA II 8/45 has large sections of material, especially the records of conversation of senior commanders, omitted.

⁷⁸ Freyberg, comments on conference regarding LIGHTFOOT, 21 September 1942, WA II 8/25A NZNA.

⁷⁹ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.234.

⁸⁰ Weir to Scoullar, letter, 9 June 1948, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁸¹ See J. McAllester and S. Trigellis-Smith, *Largely A Gamble: Australians in Syria June-July 1941*, Sydney, 1995.

Alamein front. The two infantry brigadiers, Kip and Gentry, when consulted, had "readily assented".⁸² To aid direction, Bofors guns firing tracer marked the divisional and brigade boundaries.

None of the New Zealand commanders expected an easy battle. A conversation recorded in Freyberg's diary makes this clear:

- Freyberg: It is difficult but you must get your stuff through. It is a difficult operation. There is no room for a slip up.
- Gentry: Even if the thing goes like an exercise the thing is virtually impossible!
- Kippenberger: We will put up with a lot however to see tanks going through to the final objective!⁸³

For Kippenberger, the Ruweisat and El Mreir disasters were powerful memories.

On the right of the New Zealand sector 5 Brigade was to advance 7 000 yards while 6 Brigade on their left advanced 5 000 yards. This would bring both brigades to their final objective the Miteiriya Ridge, which both brigades were to hold in equal portions. Once the two brigades were established on their final objectives the support weapons were to move forward to join them as was 9 Armoured Brigade, which was expected to take up defensive positions in front of the infantry.

As the two New Zealand Brigades moved forward under the heaviest artillery barrage yet seen in North Africa, Freyberg reflected to his G1:

If ever there was justice in a cause this is it. I don't think the Itys will stick it and I don't think the Boche will either — they didn't in the last war. ... Auchinleck could have won the war by putting in Blamey instead of Ritchie. Mind you this is going to be a stiff fight.⁸⁴

⁸² Weir to Scoullar, letter, 9 June 1948, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁸³ conversation, conference of Brigadiers, 1100 hrs 23 October 1942, recorded in Freyberg's Diary, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, Freyberg to G1, conversation 2200 hrs 23 October 1942. Freyberg maintained throughout the war, a very high opinion of Blamey and believed him to be the right person to take over Eighth Army after Cunningham's dismissal.

Each brigade had decided to take its first objective with only one battalion and Kippenberger, fighting in his twenty-fourth action, allocated his “most fiery commander”, Reg Romans of 23 Battalion, to this task. The other two battalion commanders “were equally determined and skilful and likely to keep better control in the long advance to the final objective”.⁸⁵ Kip’s address to 23 Battalion on the eve of the attack was a stirring piece of oratory for men keyed up for action. It was Kip at his inspirational best and his address “put the finishing touch to the raising of spirits”.⁸⁶ An NCO present recorded in his diary that Kip’s address was “one of the most serious and impressive speeches I have ever heard”.⁸⁷

As he toured the Brigade’s front-line minutes before Zero hour Kip was assured by the men of the 23rd “ ‘We’ll do it, Sir’; “We won’t let you down, Sir’; ‘The Twenty-third will do it, Sir’ ”⁸⁸ He spoke at length with the battalion’s adjutant:

‘You know Angus, when the history of this war comes to be written, this night of 23-4 October 1942 will be seen as the very beginning of the turning of the tide. We are privileged people to be here tonight’. Well of course I was thinking of other things than post-war writing of history and in addition I wasn’t too sure in view of the possibilities that lay ahead of being so terribly privileged going into the attack at El Alamein. But that was what Kip said and it has stuck in my mind ever since that he, even when we were facing a crucially important battle, he was thinking of post-war history.⁸⁹

That night the men of 23 Battalion fought for “Kip” and for “Reggie” Romans, their outstanding CO, as much as they did for New Zealand or the Allied cause.

The decision to use the “fiery” Romans and his most reliable battalion in the initial advance nearly caused disaster. Romans’ battalion easily carried the first objective, but, dissatisfied at the scanty resistance, they foolishly carried on and fought their way to the foot of Miteiriya Ridge without artillery assistance.

⁸⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.225.

⁸⁶ Ross, *23 Battalion*, p.196.

⁸⁷ SGT Ray Minson, quoted in *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.228.

⁸⁹ Ross interview, *op. cit.*

When the creeping barrage rolled forward it fell amongst the men of 23 Battalion luckily causing no casualties before Romans recovered his senses and led his battalion back to the first objective. The Battalion's history, while admitting that Romans' actions were a "serious if gallant Blunder", attempts to justify it as genuine mistake caused by a the fog of war.⁹⁰ Angus Ross, the battalion's adjutant is adamant that Romans' had made a genuine mistake:

There was no standing barrage! Now get that clear. ... It switched off to our amazement having been told in his [Kip's] address to the troops ... that there would be one to secure our safety. We were astounded. We had expected this standing barrage and then it was all silence. ... But there was no standing barrage. ... Reg and I discussed it and we agreed that we hadn't seen anything like the fighting that the break-in battalion had every right to expect. ... Reg said "Push on! Push on!" and so we went on to take what we thought was our objective.⁹¹

It was, in fact, Miteiriya Ridge, the brigade's final objective.

Meanwhile Kip and Brigade HQ had been driven frantic in trying to locate or contact 23 Battalion. The brigade's War Diary contains repeated references to the battalion's disappearance — "Still *NO* report from 23 Bn". An entry as late as 0115 hrs on 24 October recorded:

Capt Coop ... reported he had been right up to barrage and could NOT find 23 Bn. Presumed 23 BN ahead of the barrage.⁹²

Word was finally received of the battalion's actions at 0235 hrs on 24 October when the battalion Adjutant reported to Brigade HQ.⁹³ Little wonder that he received "a rather frosty reception" from Kippenberger and the blunt instruction: "You go back and tell Reg to pull back to his proper, initial objective".⁹⁴ Fits of over-enthusiasm, it seems, were not confined to the Maori Battalion.

On meeting Kip the next day Romans explained: "I won't let you speak to

⁹⁰ Ross, *23 Battalion*, pp.204-5.

⁹¹ Ross interview, *op. cit.*

⁹² WD 5 NZ Inf Bde, 23-4 October 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/34 NZNA.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Ross interview, *op. cit.*

my men again before a battle". Blaming Kip's oratory for the loss of control, Romans

frankly admitted that he had been carried away by the fiery enthusiasm of the men. I knew that his own and Angus's [Ross - the battalion adjutant] ferocious ardour had had something to do with the matter but decided no action was necessary. The battalion had about 170 casualties.⁹⁵

Kip's brigade had easily secured all its objectives and he wrote proudly back to New Zealand:

Very hard fighting in this attack, but the troops were simply magnificent and my Bde got the whole of its objective on the first night. We lost a lot of good chaps though.⁹⁶

On the left the two battalions of 6 Brigade had pulled up 500-800 yards (460-730 metres) short of its final objective — the result of faulty map reading rather than enemy resistance. The rest of the ground was taken in another night assault on 26/27 October. New Zealand Division's assault had been the most successful of all the infantry divisions used in the opening night and this success was due to a combination of experience in night fighting in the desert, and the "new" creeping barrage. To have made such a dent in terrain so well suited for defence, through a belt of densely sown minefields and to have the infantry, armour and support weapons in position by dawn on Miteiriya, according to Nigel Hamilton, had been "inconceivable to Rommel" and was "a magnificent infantry performance".⁹⁷ Losses in both brigades had been heavy.

At 0612 hrs on 24 October the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade were reported "coming through on 5 Brigade front" and "taking up battle positions forward of the FDLs".⁹⁸ One of its regiments, the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, was the only armoured unit to breakout of the infantry final objective and it was reported to be "hotly engaged with enemy A/TK guns" almost immediately.⁹⁹ At dawn this

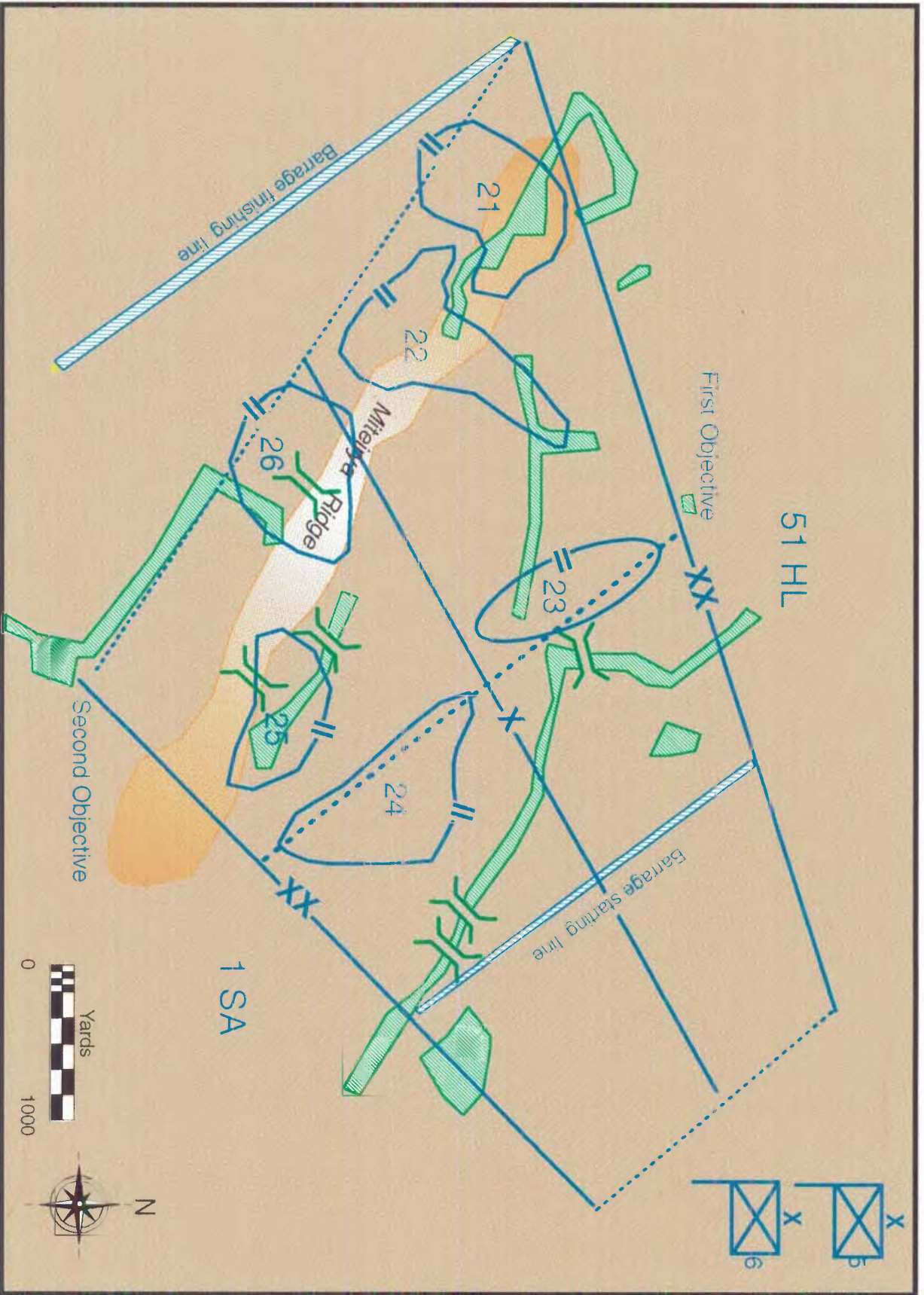
⁹⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.234.

⁹⁶ Kippenberger to Jim Fraser, letter, 31 October 1942, Glue Papers.

⁹⁷ Hamilton, *Monty: the Making of a General 1887-1942*, p.777.

⁹⁸ 0612 hrs 24 October 1942, Freyberg Diary, *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 0650 hrs.



Situation at first light on the New Zealand Sector

El Alamein, 24 October 1942

lone regiment returned to the infantry positions and took up hull down positions in the 5 Brigade sector.

Although Kip's brigade was securely on its final objective on the morning of 24 October, most of the other infantry formations had not been as successful. 9 Australian Division was only about half way to its final objective, while the 51st Highlanders on Kip's right flank, though well forward, were short of theirs. The armoured corps had made the least progress of all and had advanced at a snail's pace. The heart of Operation LIGHTFOOT, the mass break out of the armour beyond the infantry objectives, had not occurred as not one armoured formation, except 9 Armoured Brigade under New Zealand command, had reached its final objective. The results left Montgomery very disappointed and he had to fall back on his infantry stalwarts.

There was still much hard fighting to do before Alamein was won but little of it was carried out by 2. New Zealand Division. At one point it was planned to put in another large infantry assault along the whole front, a move strongly supported by Freyberg who believed that "it would be better to stage another attack on whole front instead of trying to push armour out from present front".¹⁰⁰ Both New Zealand brigadiers, however, were opposed to another attack:

Kip: Another infantry attack means 5000 yds at least — very hard to do. Must be regarded as serious as we can't pin his positions as before. It is not a soft spot opposite us.

Gentry: Have we not to consider very carefully this further attack. Bns after similar casualties in another attack will be little more than coys. If we take them in again and lose 50% it would take a very long time to build up.

Kip: The 5000 reinforcements on the water are not the men to fill the gaps. I have had 11 Officers killed and they are all old hands. We have only 1200 bayonets left.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 26 October 1942.

Gentry:They are the survivors of God knows how many battles.¹⁰¹

Freyberg overruled his brigadiers, disproving the idea that Freyberg “would never make a decision without the advice of his brigadiers, especially Kippenberger”.¹⁰² He proposed to Montgomery to launch another New Zealand infantry attack 4 000 yards (3656 metres) beyond Miteiriya but Montgomery turned the proposal down aware that another such attack would so seriously weaken the New Zealand Division as to make it incapable of further action.¹⁰³ After 6 Brigade reached its final objective on the night of 26/27 October, the next evening both New Zealand brigades moved into reserve in anticipation of the pursuit phase. From 26 October 1942 the bulk of the infantry fighting was done by 9 Australian Division in its “crumbling” operations in the north.

The Australian crumbling operations served their purpose with the Australian battalions making small advances in ground, but, more importantly, drawing in Rommel to make heavy and very costly counterattacks on 26, 27, 28 and 31 October and the last at dusk on 1 November. These counterattacks by Rommel were done to curb the Australian attacks but also because captured British papers convinced Rommel that the next main attack by Montgomery would be made in the north.¹⁰⁴ Rommel’s counterattacks were costly, fruitless and militarily pointless. The Crete campaign had shown how foolish it was to attempt an advance in daylight against prepared defensive positions when the enemy had total air superiority. Added to this, Eighth Army’s artillery was concentrated in the north and saturated the ground across which the attempted Axis counterattacks had to come. The disastrous counterattacks wasted Rommel’s precious resources, forced him to bring his reserves north from the centre and south of the line, and gave Montgomery the time and space needed to prepare and deliver his *coup de grace* — Operation SUPERCHARGE in the centre of the Alamein position.

Operation SUPERCHARGE took Rommel by surprise as he had been expecting the counterattack to be launched from the Australians’ sector in the

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² Hamilton, *Monty: the Making of a General 1887-1942*, p.785.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.804.

¹⁰⁴ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.357.

north. The operation, although a limited success, served its purpose and broke Afrika Korps's and Rommel's will to resist. At 0327 hrs on 2 November 15 Panzer's War Diary had recorded that the "new enemy penetration had given rise to a very dangerous situation. ... The enemy threatened to break through".¹⁰⁵ A counterattack on this new breach in the line failed and left 8 Panzer Regiment with only eight tanks and no CO. As 15 Panzer's War Diary lamented; "The division's backbone for future operations had thus been broken".¹⁰⁶ Down to just thirty-five German and twenty Italian tanks at the end of the day Rommel was left with no choice but to withdraw. On 3 November he wrote a very gloomy letter to his wife:

The battle is going heavily against us. We're simply being crushed by the enemy weight. I've made an attempt to salvage part of the army. I wonder if it will succeed. At night I lie open-eyed, racking my brains for a way out of this plight for my poor troops.¹⁰⁷

That evening Rommel gave the orders for Afrika Korps to withdraw from the Alamein positions, orders he was delayed from implementing for another twenty-four hours because of the intervention of Hitler who at first refused permission for a withdrawal to occur.

Mistakenly, Montgomery still believed that Afrika Korps possessed eighty tanks with a further 160 for the Italians and was for some time unaware of the effects of SUPERCHARGE. Freyberg, however, was aware of the damage inflicted by the new assault and on the evening of 2 November met Kip and the other Brigadiers and informed them that "the enemy were cracking and warned us to have our transport ready for the break-through. No one else that we met had the same optimism".¹⁰⁸ Freyberg firmly believed that "the war is over in Africa and there will be no more decent battles here".¹⁰⁹

Afrika Korps' withdrawal presented Montgomery with a priceless opportunity

¹⁰⁵ 15 PZ WD, 2 November 1942, WA II 11/22 GMDS File 24902 NZNA.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Rommel to Lu, letter, 3 November 1942, *Rommel Papers*, p.320.

¹⁰⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.237.

¹⁰⁹ 2 November 1942, Freyberg's Diary, *op. cit.*

because, according to the German sources, it was poorly conducted. Afrika Korps' War Diary reported:

Officers of all ranks had lost their heads and were making hasty and ill considered decisions, with the result that confidence had been lost, in some places panic had broken out. Some vehicles were set on fire on or beside the road, and guns were abandoned or destroyed because there were no tractors for them. A large number of vehicles had left their units and were streaming back without orders.¹¹⁰

90 Light's War Diary was very critical of the "very little discipline during the withdrawal" and spoke of whole units "fleeing in wild panic".¹¹¹

The pursuit phase of the Alamein battle has been strongly criticised by many writers who believe that Montgomery acted with undue caution. McKee has accurately stated that "There was no pursuit, merely a follow up".¹¹² Barnett has been most critical of Montgomery's performance believing that he "signally fail[ed] to take advantage of this astonishing flow of precisely accurate intelligence, which removed all guesswork from generalship" and that his failure to destroy Afrika Korps at Alamein "calls in question Montgomery's generalship at this stage of his career".¹¹³ As early as the evening of 3 November Freyberg had warned Lumsden that Rommel "will slip away if they are not careful".¹¹⁴ The cautious pursuit ensured that this happened.

There was one overriding factor, however, which explains and perhaps excuses Montgomery's caution during the pursuit phase and this was the state of his armoured corps: his prized *corps de chasse*. So far in the Alamein battle X Corps had failed in every task allocated it and had demonstrated excessive caution and an inability to follow even the simplest directives. As it was this corps that would be unleashed during the pursuit it was only natural that Montgomery would want to keep it on as tight a leash as possible to ensure that it did in fact accomplish even the most limited of tasks assigned to it.

¹¹⁰ AK WD, 6 November 1942, WA II 11/22 GMDS File 2586/1 NZNA.

¹¹¹ 90 Light WD, 11 November 1942, WA II 11/23 GMDS File 288761 NZNA.

¹¹² McKee, *op. cit.*, p.176.

¹¹³ Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp.312, 310.

¹¹⁴ Freyberg, conversation with Corps Commander 2130 hrs 3 November 1942, Freyberg's Diary, *op. cit.*

Montgomery planned to use New Zealand Division, augmented by an armoured brigade, as the main pursuit force and directed them to the Fuka escarpment some forty-five miles to the west while the British armour of X Corps made a series of shorter wheels to the coast of some ten to fifteen miles. Just after 1000 hrs on 3 November Kip had been told to prepare his brigade for a rapid pursuit but it was not until 1430 hrs the next day that the brigade began to move slowly forward.¹¹⁵ As Freyberg commented about the delay, "the congestion of vehicles in the forward area would have done credit to Piccadilly. Fortunately the RAF ruled the skies".¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, too, the Armoured Corps had sprung to life and were now anxious to be involved. Montgomery's fears were well justified as the armour "swanned" about the desert out of co-ordinated control in several fruitless encircling movements.¹¹⁷

Nor did the New Zealand Division, the only substantial infantry force used in the pursuit, demonstrate much dash or daring. Freyberg was especially concerned not to let his division get mauled by the Afrika Korps for the fourth time and still erroneously estimated Rommel to have a powerful armoured force under command. He warned his subordinate commanders not to get heavily involved with the German armour and told Lumsden on 3 November:

We may have to fight to get out. We are not going to take casualties as that would knock us out. His [Rommel's] difficulties are enormous. We know. We have done it often!¹¹⁸

To his subordinate commanders Freyberg had stated that "the policy is not to fight but to position our force to bottle him",¹¹⁹ a policy that anticipated Freyberg's later concept of the "left hooks" described in the next chapter.

An example of this caution was exhibited by Kip on the evening of 5 November when 4 Light Armoured Brigade had passed through a dummy minefield on the Fuka escarpment. The day had started badly for Kip when 23 Battalion came under fire from a German rearguard and 4 Light Armoured

¹¹⁵ 5 Bde WD, 3 & 4 November 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/35 NZNA.

¹¹⁶ 4 November 1942, Freyberg's Diary, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁷ Walker, *op. cit.*, p.425.

¹¹⁸ 3 November 1942, Freyberg's Diary, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 6 November 1942, G Staff WD 5 November 1942, WA II 1 DA 21.1/1/35 NZNA.

Brigade, assisting Kip's battalion, opened fire on some 5 Brigade vehicles near Kip's HQ causing casualties.¹²⁰ 5 Brigade passed through the 'minefield' under enemy fire and formed up for a night advance to a northern road they were to block. After going only a few miles and still ten short of the road, Kip halted the brigade. He was out of touch with the armoured brigade and decided that even if they found the road in the dark it would be impossible to mount an effective block. Only the day before Kip had told Freyberg that "We must be careful moving at night or you will be hopelessly confused by morning".¹²¹ He wrote, somewhat defensively, that halting 5 Brigade short of the road "was a difficult decision to make and I do not know whether it was right, but no comment was made to me about it."¹²² He had certainly heeded Freyberg's call for caution.

On 10 November New Zealand Division found itself below the Sollum escarpment at the foot of the Halfaya Pass. Freyberg accepted an assurance from Brigadier Roddick of 4 Light Armoured Brigade that his brigade would clear the pass that night and attempt an ascent. Freyberg did not disperse the division at the foot of the pass nor deploy his artillery. Defending Halfaya Pass were troops of 90 Light Division and two battalions of the Italian Pistoia Infantry Division who together formed a very strong rearguard with excellent observation. 90 Light's War Diary stated that Halfaya Pass was "naturally strong, Weisshih Battalion and the Army artillery sited there were strong enough to hold the escarpment, in conjunction with the engineers detailed to make obstacles and blow the roads".¹²³

At 0200 hrs on 11 November, Kip was awakened by an officer sent by Roddick requesting assistance to clear the pass. Kip's brigade was widely scattered and the only force he could muster at short notice was two companies of 21 Battalion and their CO, Lieutenant Colonel Ralf Harding — 110 men in all. Kip and Harding quickly worked out a plan of attack "with a vanguard and point as in the pre-war text-books, to deploy on either side of the road as soon as he met opposition, and go straight in with the bayonet".¹²⁴ Kip was well aware of the need for speed and surprise if the attack was to be successful and was also aware

¹²⁰ 5 Bde WD, 0130 hrs 5 November 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/35 NZNA.

¹²¹ Kippenberger, conversation with Freyberg, 4 November 1942, Freyberg's Diary *op. cit.*

¹²² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.242.

¹²³ 90 Light WD, 10 November 1942, WA II 11/23 GMDS File 288761 NZNA.

¹²⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.244.

of the fate that awaited the division if it was caught in the open by the enemy artillery. Kip's reply to Harding's question about what to expect at the top of the pass betrays his anxiety and a hint of impatience. "Fight and find out", Kip had replied.¹²⁵

Harding's attack went in at 0400 hrs, was pressed with great vigour and killed 60-70 Italians and took 612 POWs for losses of one man killed and another wounded. The number of POWs taken was staggering and Kip had refused to accept it until he counted them.¹²⁶ Kip's decisive action, in the face of opposition from Roddick, who had thought the assaulting force too small, had saved the division from many casualties at the hands of the enemy artillery and had opened up a direct route into Libya. It was an important minor victory, because Kip's quick attack "captured this very formidable defensive position from its most difficult approach".¹²⁷ One of the best delaying positions along the Axis line of retreat had fallen easily and quickly before a determined and well-led assault. Hamilton describes Kip's taking of Halfaya Pass as "a model night attack".¹²⁸

The Halfaya Pass action was the last of the El Alamein battle. 2 New Zealand Division halted on the high ground above Bardia where they remained for the next month to rest and recover for further operations in North Africa.

There were many reasons for the defeat of Afrika Korps at Alamein, not the least important being logistics and firepower. 15 Panzer was emphatic about the cause of their defeat:

The English did not win the battle of Alamein by superior leadership or dash. On the contrary, after their original plan of attack failed they worked their way systematically forward, always probing ahead with the greatest care choosing limited objectives. Often, particularly after our withdrawal from the Alamein line, the enemy failed to perceive or take advantage of

¹²⁵ Cody, *21 Battalion, op. cit.*, p.213.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p.218.

¹²⁷ Freyberg's Secret Report, *op. cit.*, p.22.

¹²⁸ N. Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944*, London, 1985, p.43.

good opportunities to destroy German troops.¹²⁹

There is little doubt, though, that the primary responsibility for breaking the Alamein line had been with the experienced infantry divisions backed by heavy artillery support. Freyberg's report stated that the "value of well-trained infantry, capable of attacking by night with the bayonet against any form of defence, was fully proved".¹³⁰ For Freyberg, this was what separated the two sides as the German infantry, by virtue of their blitzkrieg success, had become "weapon holders" and "tank followers by daylight".¹³¹ 15 Panzer admitted as much when it stated that one of the reasons for Eighth Army's success had been because its infantry were "superior to the Germans, and still more to the Italians in night fighting" and had made "skilful use of darkness, artificial smoke and creeping barrages".¹³²

Alamein could not have been won without the contributions of the two elite infantry divisions in Eighth Army — 9 Australian Division operating in the north and two brigades of New Zealand infantry plus supporting units operating in the centre, and later in the pursuit. That the New Zealanders played a vital role was uncharacteristically recognised by Montgomery who acknowledged his debt to the New Zealand Division:

The Battle of Egypt was won by the good fighting qualities of the soldiers of the Empire. Of all these soldiers none were finer than the fighting men from New Zealand. ... Possibly I myself am the only one who really knows the extent to which the action of the New Zealand Division contributed towards the victory.¹³³

New Zealand losses had been heavy. Among the 7350 graves of Allied servicemen in the Alamein cemetery are those of 1049 known and 56 unknown New Zealanders.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ 15 Pz WD, Preliminary Remarks, WA II 11/22 GMDS File 24902 NZNA.

¹³⁰ Freyberg's secret report, *op. cit.*, p.27.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² 15 Pz WD, Preliminary Remarks, WA II 11/22 GMDS File 24902 NZNA.

¹³³ Montgomery, Foreword to Freyberg's Secret Report, December 1942, *op. cit.*

¹³⁴ Walker, *op. cit.*, "Appendix III", p.481.

The battles of Alam Halfa and Alamein marked a turning point for Kip. He had become a very experienced and reliable brigadier and was now thoroughly competent at handling his command. The difference in the performance of the two brigades used in Operation BERESFORD clearly indicated the difference between an experienced and competent commander and one with much to learn. The success of 5 Brigade during Alamein was not because Miteiriya Ridge was a “soft” objective, quite the opposite. What had made 5 Brigade successful on the night of 23 October, one of only two infantry brigades in Eighth Army to take all its allocated objectives, was the quality of the troops and the outstanding leadership skills displayed by the commanders of the brigade — especially the battalion commanders and the brigadier. As a school or business derives its character and ethos from its head, an infantry brigade is dependent on its head for the same. Throughout Alam Halfa and El Alamein Kip’s leadership of 5 Brigade was not just thoroughly competent, it was inspirational. At his own level of command Kip was now the equal of Freyberg and the logical officer to command the New Zealand Division should Freyberg be promoted or become a casualty. Further victories and successes and one more disaster lay ahead in the pursuit of Afrika Korps across North Africa.