

Chapter 9: The Left Hooks

You have one or two tricky questions to deal with in this volume, particularly the conduct of the three "Left Hooks" which seem to me to have been clumsily and rather timidly executed. I thought so at the time and am inclined to the same opinion still.

Kippenberger to J. L. Scoullar, author chosen for *Official History* of the "Left Hooks", 7 June 1955.¹

The taking of Halfaya Pass by 21 Battalion on 11 November 1942 was the last action by the New Zealand Division in Egypt. Kippenberger and the New Zealanders entered Libya again exactly a year after the disastrous Operation CRUSADER, their first desert campaign. It was a very different division that crossed the border on this occasion. It had not received reinforcements from New Zealand for all of 1942, and was below strength by 3 600 men,² a deficiency felt especially keenly in the infantry, the artillery and the engineer corps. But, to compensate, the New Zealand Division was now battle-hardened. Kippenberger commented:

All the battalions were now very fine, hardened, smooth-running machines. Every man had been frequently in action and all the officers and NCOs were experienced in war and often tested under fire.³

The brigades too were the equal of their battalions and the brigadiers, Kip and Gentry, were experienced, hardened and trusted commanders. Kip's command skills were at their peak.

After his defeat at Alamein, Rommel, his army living "in the truest sense

¹ WA II 11/6 K.C. NZNA.

² W. G. Stevens, *Official History of New Zealand In the Second World War 1939-45: Bardia to Entfideville*, Wellington, 1962, p.6.

³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 248.

of the word, from hand to mouth”,⁴ was convinced that the situation in North Afrika was hopeless. As he explained forthrightly to Hitler, “If the army remained in North Africa, it would be destroyed”. Rommel argued instead that the best option was to withdraw the Axis forces to the Gabes Gap in Tunisia (also called Wadi Akarit) so it could not be outflanked. Further, it would take Montgomery several months to transport the essential material needed to mount a large frontal attack on the position. The aim of this delaying battle was “to gain as much time as possible and get out as many of our battle-tried veterans for use in Europe”. The Allies would then be “robbed of the fruits of their victory, just as we had been at Dunkirk”.⁵ However, Hitler did not allow Rommel to implement this sensible course of action and Rommel was forced to undergo a series of costly delaying actions starting at El Agheila and ending in Tunisia.

Rommel was allowed to retire virtually unmolested to El Agheila, which he reached on 24 November. When Montgomery felt his army was ready and had the “balance” needed, he knew that his next task would be to eject Rommel from the El Agheila position and that he would need to use a “left hook” to do so. The left hook was a variation of Rommel’s own wide outflanking tactic and required two forces to be used in a single action. A frontal attack would be launched on the enemy’s main line and this was usually undertaken by 51 (Highland) Division in Eighth Army. This attack was to be combined with a wide outflanking manoeuvre designed to turn the enemy’s flank and strike behind his front forcing him to abandon the line of resistance or face encirclement. It also aimed to block the enemy’s path of retreat. In the Eighth Army this difficult manoeuvre was always carried out by the New Zealand Division augmented with British armoured units under command.

The tactic of pinning an enemy frontally while hitting him hard on an exposed flank or rear is as old as war itself. General George Patton stated that this manoeuvre was at the heart of all successful tactics and expressed the concept in usual graphic terms:

Have been giving everyone a simplified directive of war. Use steamroller strategy; that is, make up your mind on course and direction of action, and stick to it. But in tactics, do not steamroller. Attack weakness. Hold them

⁴ *Rommel Papers*, p.359.

⁵ *ibid*, pp.362.

by the nose and kick them in the pants".⁶

Freyberg, the commander of the three left hooks carried out by the New Zealand Division, was in no doubt as to the purpose of a left hook and tended to view it as a substitute for fighting; a way of achieving a victory with minimal casualties. The left hook was:

Simply an outflanking operation on a bold scale adapted to desert conditions. Its object is to turn the enemy out of a strong position by outflanking him to the left: and so attacking him by surprise from the left flank or in the the rear.⁷

In a letter to the New Zealand CGS, Lieutenant General Edward Puttick, Freyberg stated that the objective of a left hook was "accomplished by manoeuvre rather than attack".⁸ This attitude is confirmed by Freyberg's Personal Assistant, Sir John White:

The left hooks were only expected to turn a retreat, not cut it off entirely. It couldn't be done with only one armoured brigade in any case.⁹

What will become readily apparent throughout this chapter is that Freyberg's concept of the left hook was not shared by many other commanders, among them Kippenberger and Montgomery. Freyberg's excessive caution in implementing the left hooks would see opportunities to capture the majority of Afrika Korps missed on at least two significant occasions. These lost opportunities frustrated his infantry brigadiers, Kippenberger and Gentry, and later foiled Montgomery's plan for a swift penetration of the formidable Mareth Line to the point where an exasperated Montgomery effectively replaced Freyberg as the commander on the spot. For Kippenberger, the left hooks were a frustrating period. Playing a minor role in most of the actions, Kippenberger

⁶ George S. Patton, *War As I Knew It*, London, 1947, p.5.

⁷ Left Hook, p.2. WA II 8/4J, WA II Series 8, Freyberg Papers, NZNA.

⁸ Freyberg to Puttick, letter 16 March 1943, Miscellaneous Personal Correspondence WA II 8, V NZNA.

⁹ Sir John White interview, *op. cit.*

fought them in his mind as they unfolded, and did so many times after the war, using tactics and making bold decisions totally at odds with those used by Freyberg.

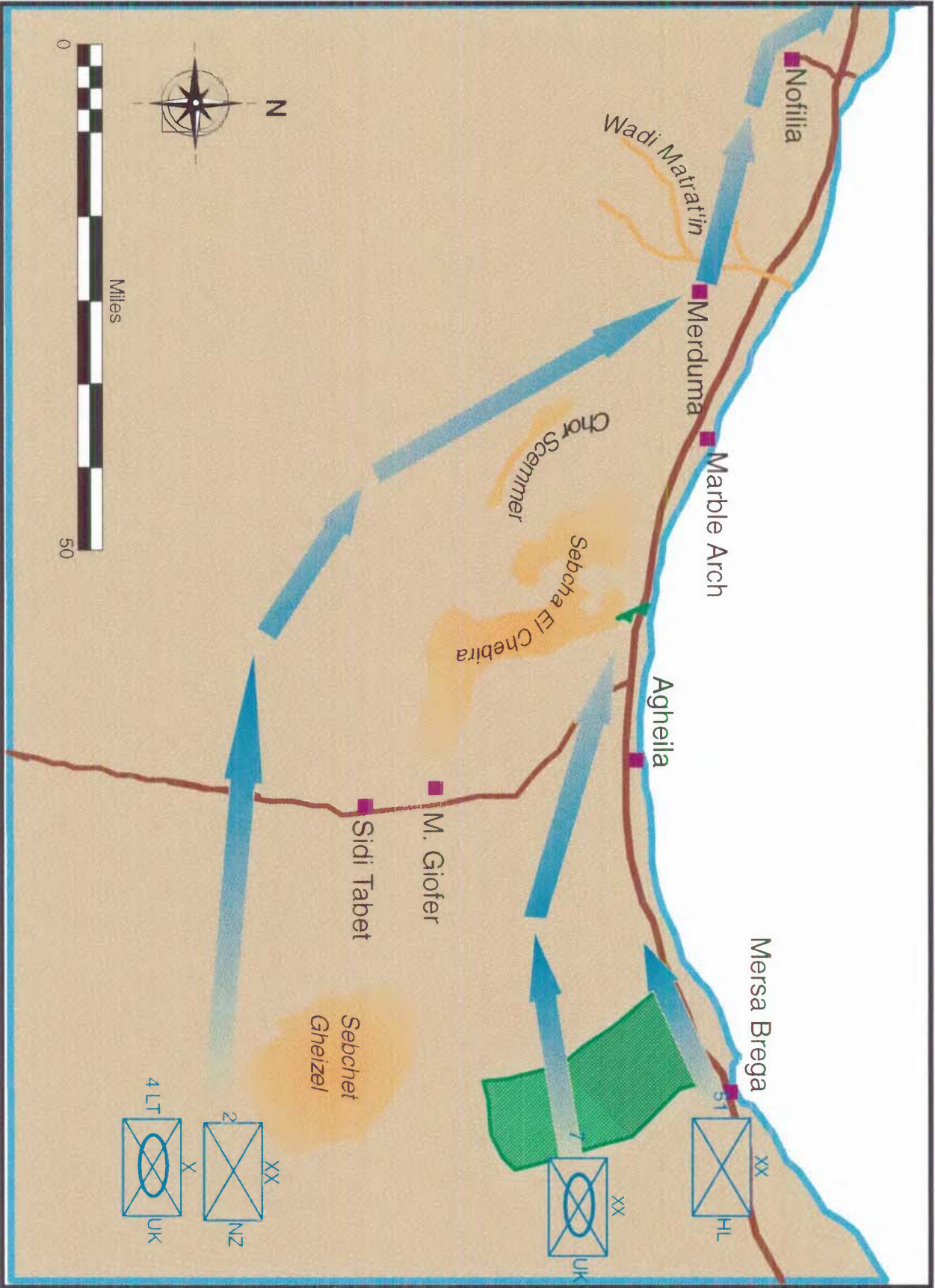
The first left hook was the attempt to outflank the El Agheila position before Rommel could complete a successful withdrawal. It was the first of the lost opportunities. El Agheila marked the division between the two Libyan provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. A strong defensive position with difficult approach marches from all directions except from the west, it was also “a considerable stumbling block in psychological terms”,¹⁰ as the Eighth Army had not gone beyond this position to date. El Agheila could, however, be outflanked by a wide sweep to the south across the open desert, a fact of which both sides were only too aware.

Montgomery prepared his plan for the assault on El Agheila with the utmost of care, labouring under the handicap of a 400 mile supply line. He planned to use only one corps of three divisions in Operation GUILLOTINE, the number of formations used very much dictated by the supply situation. 51 (H) Division was to attack astride the coast road and capture Marsa Brega while 7 Armoured Division attacked in the centre of the line with the object of punching a gap in the defences and passing the bulk of their armour through. Meanwhile the New Zealand Division was to advance on a left hook via El Haseiat, take Marada and swing around to the north to reach Marble Arch and Zella behind the Agheila defences. The operation was to commence on 16 December.

Rommel, however, determined not to be outflanked and caught like a rat in a trap, began “thinning” the Agheila defences in early December 1942 by sending all non-motorised troops further west. The pace of this “thinning” process so alarmed Montgomery that he launched GUILLOTINE on 12 December, four days earlier than originally intended. Once it became apparent a full offensive was in operation with a combination frontal attack and left hook, Rommel gave the order to evacuate the Agheila defences that evening:

There was no hope of opposing a British outflanking thrust with motorised forces; we had too little petrol. It would therefore have been

¹⁰ Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944*, p.92.



The Battle of Agheilla

14-17 December 1942

suicide to have remained in the position any longer.¹¹

The New Zealand Division moved from El Hasciat on 11 December and covered the forty miles south to Stage 1 of their planned march. Under command was 4 Light Armoured Brigade which included the heavy tanks of the Royal Scots Greys supplemented by one squadron of tanks from 7 Armoured Division. Total heavy tanks under command amounted to only 26 Sherman and 4 Grant tanks. The left hook, in fact, commenced without the heavy tanks of the Scots Greys who received their Sherman tanks too late for them to be used. Instead Freyberg's armour actually consisted largely of the armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards (KDG) and the Divisional Cavalry. Freyberg blamed the failure of the left hook at Agheila on the lack of sufficient armour. Afrika Korps at this time was down to 48 heavy tanks with petrol for only 20 -30 miles.¹²

The fact that Rommel was known to be withdrawing from the Agheila defences makes a mockery of Freyberg's claim that the left hooks were manoeuvres to turn an enemy flank. This is supported by the orders issued at the time and by Freyberg's own diary. On 13 December Operation Order 28 stated:

The enemy is believed to be making all preparations for, and to have already started evacuating the AGHEILA position. ...

2 New Zealand Division ... will

- (a) Block MARADA Track south SIDI TABET B2422
- (b) Occupy the high ground west of Salt Marsh ... to prevent enemy withdrawing from the AGHEILA position.¹³

Later in the day the order was amended; the destinations were changed to Marble Arch and Merduma, with No'ilia given as the final objective. Freyberg's diary confirms the intention of the outflanking movement. On Sunday 13 December he recorded "told Gentry and Weir we would bash the Hun by a series of left

¹¹ Rommel to Lu, letter, 11 December 1942, *The Rommel Papers* p.372.

¹² Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.30.

¹³ 2 NZ DIV Operation Order No. 28 13 December 1942, Turning Agheila Position, WA II 8/27, NZNA.

hooks".¹⁴ On 14 December Freyberg received a short message from T AC 30 Corps which clearly stated the intention of the Agheila left hook: "Delighted your progress. You will catch them yet".¹⁵

And catch them they almost did, but for a crucial mistake of Freyberg's. On 13 December New Zealand Division, carrying enough petrol for 400 miles and rations and water for six days, set out from Stage 1 and covered 56 miles of difficult going to reach Stage 2. On 14 December the division marched 32 miles to cut the Agheila-Marada track. The march continued into the night so that at the halt at 2330 hrs a total of 90 miles had been covered.

On 15 December the Greys finally reached the head of the division but "a most unfortunate delay" occurred as they required refuelling and could not move before mid morning.¹⁶ The delay was to cause problems as the KDGs at the head of the division reached the divisional objective to find it occupied by 15 Panzer Division. Being too weak to drive the enemy off, the KDG veered away from the objective and reached Merduma where they laagered for the night. In the meantime 6 Brigade passed Merduma and crossed the Wadi er Rigel, a march of fifty miles. The New Zealand Division was now running parallel to the retreating enemy and this reduced the chance of interception.

At 1700 hrs on 15 December Freyberg instructed Gentry to turn his brigade north and cut the coast road. After an extremely difficult night march 6 Brigade struck an enemy flank guard at 0030 hrs two miles from the road. A quick attack cleared the ridges south of the road but it remained uncut and enemy transport could be heard escaping along the road to all night.

Kippenberger, in the meantime, followed 6 Brigade and covered about sixty miles on that day. Towards evening Kip went forward to Div HQ and was informed "that Afrika Korps was 'in the bag': the rest had gone, but we had the Afrika Korps, 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, and 90th Light, the elite of the German Army".¹⁷

When 5 Brigade reached Kippenberger he briefed his officers of his clear intention of closing up to the rear of 6 Brigade and digging in there. It was then that Freyberg appeared on the scene and made a crucial decision. Freyberg halted

¹⁴ Freyberg Diary, 13 December 1942, GOC's Diary Part III, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

¹⁵ TAC 30 Corps to NZ Div, secret cipher T16, 14 December 1942, WA II 8/27 NZNA.

¹⁶ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.41.

¹⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.250.

Kip's brigade and "then told me to get into position where we were. Feeling very disappointed I gave my orders".⁸

Kippenberger and Freyberg knew of the gap between the two infantry brigades now well dug in on the morning of the 16 December but there is doubt as to the awareness of its extent. As the *Official History* records: "It was not until after dark that the extent of the gap – at least six miles – was known" and Freyberg's diary expresses great surprise when at 0810 hrs "Distance between 6 and 5 Brigades found to be 10.5 miles".⁹

The inevitable happened on the morning of the 16 December. Kippenberger's brigade engaged all types of enemy vehicles against its line in the first two hours of daylight. At this stage Kip was "highly elated and telling everyone that we had the Afrika Korps in the bag and would have the fight of our lives".²⁰ The New Zealand artillery engaged what targets it could, but very few hits were scored upon the retreating enemy. It had been impossible to register the guns during the hours of darkness. The experienced Afrika Korps probed Kip's defences, discovered the gap between the brigades and slipped away. The Brigade's War Diary recorded with great disappointment that it "now became evident that the bulk of the enemy force had got through gap North of Bde positions".²¹ A mobile pursuit force organised by Kippenberger could not get within range of the retreating enemy. 4 Light Armoured Brigade rejoined the division and managed to intercept part of the enemy column claiming two tanks for the loss of one of its own. The Afrika Korps armour had cleared the encirclement and both panzer divisions reached Nofilia safely, ran out of petrol and halted.

Meanwhile 6 Brigade had discovered a smaller ridge in front of them and launched a dawn attack to secure it and bring the road, the Via Balbia, under small arms fire. While this action was taking place 90 Light escaped down the Via Balbia, although 6 Brigade did take 34 POWs of the flank guard. The Afrika Korps had slipped away.

The result of the first left hook then was "bitterly disappointing".²² The

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p. 51, Freyberg Diary, Wednesday 16 December 1942, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

²⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.251.

²¹ 5 Bde WD, 1120 hrs 16 December 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/36 NZNA.

²² Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.55.

Official History blamed the failure of the left hook on the bad going, the well seasoned and disciplined enemy and the lack of sufficient armour.²³ Freyberg recorded:

We very nearly caught the whole of the DAK when we did the "left hook" round Agheila, but with only nineteen heavy tanks we were not in a position to go out and attack him. We had to put out a gun line ourselves and the groups of Panzer Army then avoided us without difficulty. We had many problems in planning and execution of these long outflanking moves across country which was largely unknown.²⁴

In *Infantry Brigadier* Kippenberger was magnanimous:

It was profoundly disappointing, but it was nobody's fault. If 5 and 6 Brigades had linked up, Afrika Korps would have simply slipped around our southern flank instead of between us, and our supply columns would have suffered. We needed several hours of daylight to get into position and a full armoured brigade to grip and hold with.²⁵

In private though Kip was not so generous: "I pleaded during the move that the march should be so staged that we arrived within striking distance of the coast just before dawn". This would have necessitated a night march on 14-15 December but instead the division moved during the day of 15 December, open to observation and neared its encirclement at dusk and was not able to tighten the noose. Kip continued:

I pleaded hard and so far as I can remember was supported by Gentry, but General Freyberg, whose last wish was to get engaged in a severe action, would not change the staging.²⁶

Although still not enough to contain the Afrika Korps the move would have

²³ *ibid*, p.57.

²⁴ Freyberg to Puttick, letter, 16 March 1943, PERS Puttick 5/2 NZNA.

²⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.251.

²⁶ Kippenberger to Scoullar, "Very Personal" letter, 21 June 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

severed the Via Balbia and cut the two panzer divisions off from their petrol supplies. Little wonder that Hamilton has called the El Agheila left hook "one of the most tantalising episodes of the entire desert campaign"²⁷ or that David Irving lamented that "Never did the two panzer divisions bringing up the rear of Rommel's retreat ... come closer to annihilation than on the afternoon of 15 December".²⁸ According to Kip. "It was sheer bad luck that I saw General Freyberg watching our move from half a mile away and ran across to speak to him".²⁹

On 16 December for some "inexplicable reason"³⁰ there was no follow up of the Afrika Korps, the bulk of which was now stranded at Nofilia, apart from 4 Light Armoured Brigade which had halted a few miles short. On that day Freyberg carried out "a strange manoeuvre", withdrawing 6 Brigade some ten miles so that 5 Brigade could take over the lead when the advance began.³¹

On 17 December at 0700 the division moved off with the intention of carrying out a smaller left hook: to entrap a strong enemy rearguard reported at Nofilia. Around midday the Greys, now down to 5 Grants and 10 Shermans, with the Divisional Cavalry, stormed an enemy outpost west of Nofilia and captured 250 POWs from 15 Panzer Division. Both sides lost 4 tanks. This attack brought out the entire tank force of Afrika Korps, some 53 tanks, while the rest of the division slipped around to the south of Nofilia. Kip, ordered by Freyberg to drive west for some distance and form a gun line on the road from Nofilia, was in the process of doing so when once again Freyberg intervened and caused a second missed opportunity. Seven miles west of Nofilia Kip met Freyberg on a small knoll with the result that "GOC ordered Bde Grp to swing due North immediately".³² This was some considerable distance before Kip had intended to make the northward turn.

Kip did as ordered, raced to the head of his brigade and wheeled it to the north with 23 Battalion in the lead, 21 on the left and 28 on the right. Kip's instructions on the move to the battalions, were given "quickly, but without fuss

²⁷ Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944*, p.86.

²⁸ D. Irving, *The Trail of the Fox: The Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel*, London, 1985, p.229.

²⁹ Kippenberger to Scoullar, "Very Personal" letter, 21 June 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

³⁰ 15 Panzer Division War Diary, 16 December 1942, quoted in Stevens, *Bardia to Entidaville*, p.58.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² 5 Bde WD, 1430 hrs 17 December 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/36 NZNA.

or apparent hurry".³³ The brigade travelled north for three miles when they hit Rommel's flank guard, 33 Reconnaissance Unit, protecting a mass of German transport withdrawing down the road in a very orderly manner. Kip put in an instant attack using all three battalions:

I decided to attack at once with the object of getting astride the road and without waiting for reconnaissance or giving any time for preparation, which is against all the rules and is usually wrong.³⁴

The heavy sand on the escarpment leading to the road, the lack of armour, the fading light and the well disciplined German defence, especially that of the German gunners, saw Kip's attempt to cut the road fail. Not one battalion could reach the road and an order by Kip for the Maori Battalion to lay mines on the road under cover of darkness went disastrously wrong:

This was an unfortunate order: the Germans had thickly mined the road and then gone and Logan's company lost several men on mines.³⁵

Despite Kip's best efforts the road from Nofilia remained uncut and the Afrika Korps escaped again. The Brigade's War Diary recorded that "a stream of steady transport ... estimated at 200/300 vehicles per hour" used the uncut road to escape.³⁶ Once again Kip was noncommittal in his public account of the action:

We were all very disappointed; but it was ill luck that we ran into the only flank guard of which we found any trace.³⁷

It was not ill luck at all but Freyberg's personal intervention that had forced the move some miles short of Kip's intended turning point. As he stated in private,

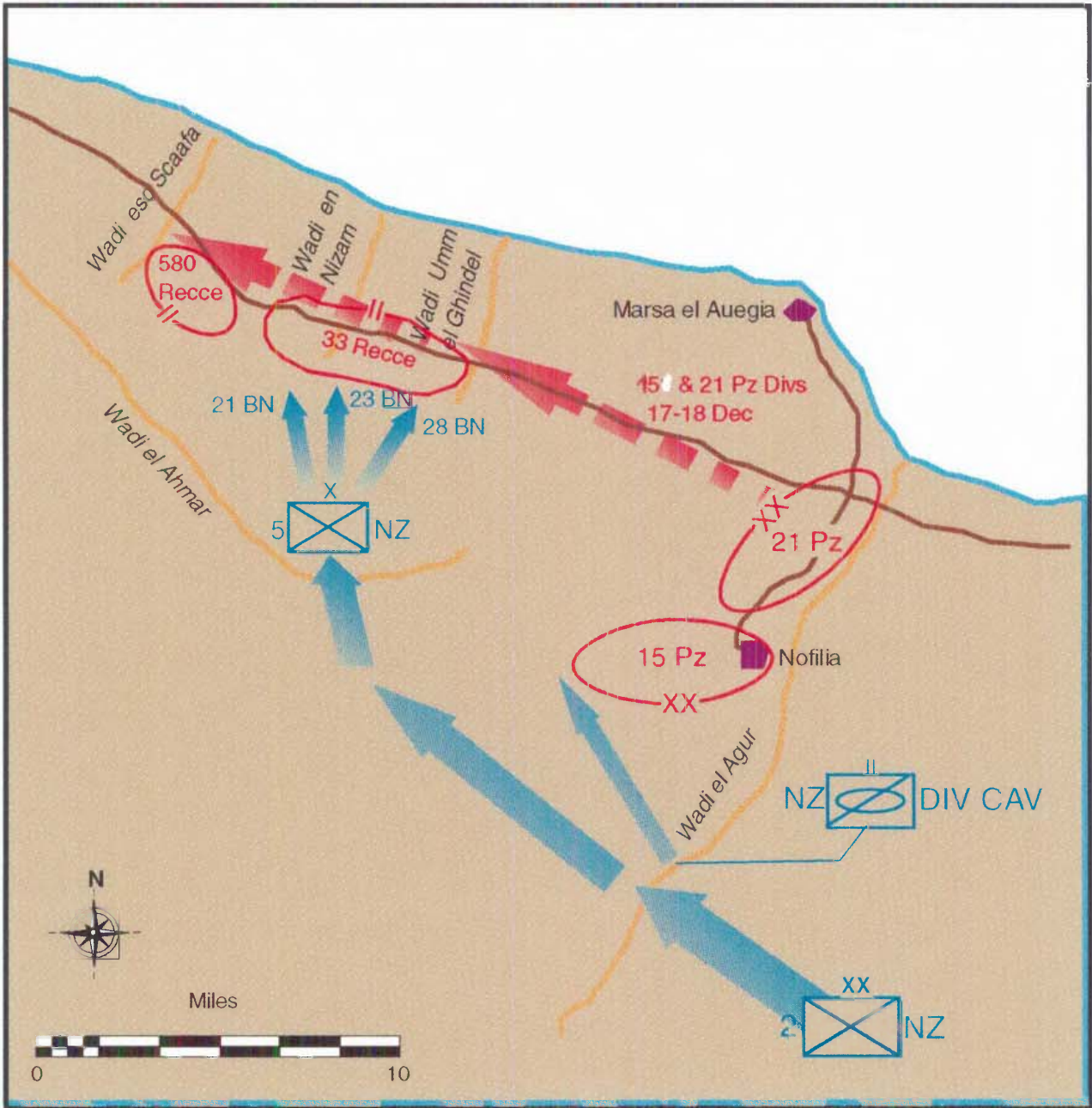
³³ Ross, *23 Battalion*, p.220.

³⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.254.

³⁵ *ibid*, p.257.

³⁶ 5 Bde WD, 1600 and 1752 hrs 17 December 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/36 NZNA.

³⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.258.



Outflanking Nofilia

17-18 December 1942

at Nofilia “we missed a great opportunity”.³⁸

The messages received by New Zealand Division and those sent by Freyberg to New Zealand conceal this disappointment. Freyberg recorded: “Corps apparently very pleased with the operations. Also Army Command. Thought they had set us a task we could not carry out”.³⁹ General Leese, the Corps commander, commented:

It was a fine effort by the New Zealand Division and if it had been possible to maintain, across the desert, a complete Armoured Division in addition to their own Division, they might have inflicted a decisive defeat on the Deutschland Afrika Korps.⁴⁰

In what was to become a recurring theme with the left hooks, Freyberg signalled to New Zealand:

Operations foreshadowed in earlier cables are now over. These resulted in turning strong enemy positions at Agheila and in driving Axis forces back nearly 200 miles. Our casualties I am thankful to say were comparatively light.⁴¹

In private Freyberg was more open about the failure of the left hooks. Acknowledging that they had dislodged Afrika Korps from a position in record time and with minimum casualties Freyberg admitted “he [the enemy] still has to be caned to get his morale down. He has not really fought since 4 November”.⁴² At the divisional conference to discuss future plans on 19 December the *Official History* records that there was “some soul searching” about the left hooks at Agheila and Nofilia. Freyberg freely admitted that the technique of the left hooks had been faulty but in future operations “if we do it quickly enough and differently from the way we have carried out the last two,

³⁸ Kippenberger to Scoullar, “Very Personal” letter, 21 June 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

³⁹ Freyberg Diary, 18 December 1942, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

⁴⁰ Leese’s Impressions 30 Corps in Battle of Egypt p. 4, Kippenberger to Scoullar, letter, 30 September 1953, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

⁴¹ Freyberg to Premier, cipher message, 22 December 1942, WA II 8/27 NZNA.

⁴² Freyberg Diary, 18 December 1942, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

that is with greater punch, we may be able to bottle a certain number of troops". Kippenberger must have felt some vindication at these frank admissions. Freyberg also told Montgomery and Leese that on future such operations he would need many more tanks: "two full regiments".⁴³ Tanks or no tanks, Kippenberger as GOC would not have permitted the gap between the brigades in its first left hook nor would he have allowed the Afrika Korps a day's respite at Nofilia.

The New Zealand Division remained for the next ten days at Nofilia and celebrated the fourth Christmas of the war there. 5 Brigade's first task for 1943 was to build a landing strip for light bombers some sixty miles west of Nofilia at Wadi Tamet. It was backbreaking, dangerous work and involved 5 Brigade removing millions of stones from a bulldozed area some 1 200 yards square. What made the work exceptionally dangerous was the frequency of the hit-and-run raids on the airfield by the Luftwaffe despite RAF and Bofors protection. The worst day was 5 January 1942 when nine men of the brigade were killed and another twenty-six wounded.⁴⁴ Kip recalled:

The men understood the importance of the work and stuck to it pluckily, but it was a hard test of discipline. Company officers worked with the men and senior officers were expected to be on the field as much as possible and were.⁴⁵

This certainly reveals much about what Kip expected of commanding officers and it goes without saying that one of the senior officers constantly on the air field was Kippenberger himself. Each day Kip visited the airfield before work commenced to ensure that "adequate fighter protection was arranged".⁴⁶ With the monotony of the work, the dusty, cold, working conditions and the sixty casualties inflicted by the Luftwaffe, it is hardly surprising that the brigade were "heartily glad" when the job was finally completed on 10 January nor that Kip should regard it as "one of the most unpleasant jobs 5 Brigade ever had to do".⁴⁷

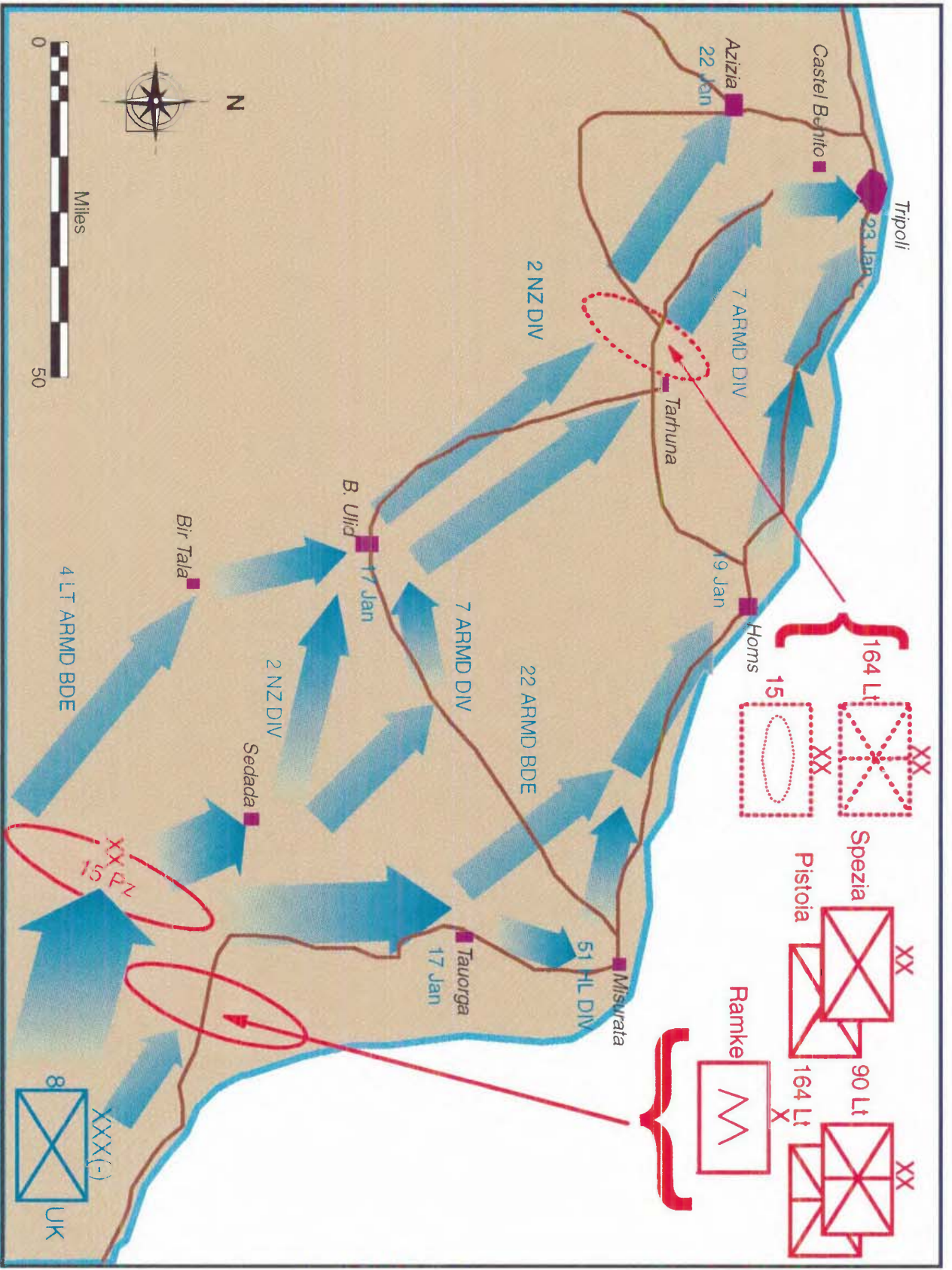
⁴³ Stevens, *Bardia to Entidaville*, pp.72, 71.

⁴⁴ 5 Bde WD, 5 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/37 NZNA.

⁴⁵ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.260.

⁴⁶ 5 Bde WD, 6 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/37 NZNA.

⁴⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.260.



The Battle of Tripoli

14-23 January 1943

On 10 January 1943, Kip and the other senior officers of the New Zealand Division attended a briefing by Montgomery who outlined his plan for the advance to Tripoli — Operation FIRE-EATER. Montgomery's main aim in the operation was the capture of the port of Tripoli "before the enemy can do any great damage to it".⁴⁸

Once again 51 (H) Division was to make the frontal attack at Buerat while 2 New Zealand Division carried out a shallow left hook around the enemy's defences. Under command were the Royal Scots Greys with 25 Sherman tanks, 4 Grants and 20 Stuarts. However, New Zealand Division would also have on their right flank 7 Armoured Division.

Operation FIRE-EATER commenced on schedule with the New Zealanders little involved in the action. Rommel decided to abandon Buerat and only the advanced troops of the division and the armour under command saw anything of the enemy during the first few days of the left hook. As Kip recorded, "We expected stubborn resistance. There was little. ... We plodded monotonously along, sometimes over very rough country".⁴⁹

When the division emerged from the very high plateau (the Gebel) over which they had been travelling onto the Tripoli plain on 22 January the division became involved in some fighting around the town of Azizia and Kip was in the thick of it. Rommel had decided to make a brief stand on the south road at Azizia using tanks and guns of a 15 Panzer Division rearguard. On 22 January the New Zealand Division was held up outside of the town by this rearguard which was engaged by the New Zealand artillery with probes by the Greys. At the end of the day the Greys were down to just 14 heavy tanks, 16 lost to engine trouble alone. In the late afternoon of 22 January, Freyberg called Kippenberger forward.

The account of Kip's visit with Freyberg reveals much about Kip's notions of command. Freyberg, as always, was at the front of the division in the midst of the action. Kip "walked as calmly as I could across an open stretch to the ridge where, under fire from 88's, he was with his four Stuarts". Freyberg informed Kip that the enemy would retire that evening and that he should get his brigade on the road and drive for Tripoli. Kip's walk back from this meeting is revealing:

⁴⁸ "FIRE-EATER" General Plan of Eighth Army 28 December 1942, Nofilia to Tripoli WA II 8/28 NZNA.

⁴⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.261.

Shells clearing the ridge were pitching in the open stretch and I had an uneasy walk back to the cars. With only broad accuracy the General had remarked: 'Shelling doesn't hurt anybody.' There was a squadron of cavalry sitting behind the ridge and my own C.O.s were watching as spectators. So I had to take it with a casualness that was entirely affected. I remember this little incident with uncommon clarity. I badly wanted to take cover behind my far too conspicuous map board and did in fact carry it on the weather side.⁵⁰

Having conquered his own fear of death or injury and kept it hidden, Kippenberger came to expect his officers to do likewise.

The drive to Tripoli was not as easy as Freyberg expected and Kip's brigade encountered heavy opposition outside of the town from an enemy still in position with well coordinated defences and at least twelve tanks. Kip called off the advance deciding not to put in an impromptu night attack against such a well defended position. He ran into Freyberg and explained "there was a bit too much opposition and he agreed".⁵¹ The War Diary recorded:

In view of the fact that the GOC did not want to incur casualties at this stage, this was plainly too strong a force to engage.⁵²

15 Panzer did not leave Azizia until 0100 of the next morning. A few days later Kip examined the Azizia defences very carefully and "felt very thankful that we had got off so lightly".⁵³ Intelligence sources confirmed that the opposition at Azizia consisted of at least 500 infantry, eight 105-mm guns and at least sixteen, but more likely twenty-six, heavy tanks.⁵⁴ It also confirmed that he had made the right decision not to press ahead and risk lives unnecessarily.

At 0500 hrs on 23 January 1943, exactly three months after the start of Alamein and some 1 400 miles later, 11 Hussars from 7 Armoured Division entered Tripoli. One hour later 51 (H) Division arrived and the first New

⁵⁰ *ibid*, p.263.

⁵¹ *ibid*, p.264.

⁵² 5 Bde WD, 22 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/37 NZNA.

⁵³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.264.

⁵⁴ 5 Bde WD, 22 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/37 NZNA.

Zealanders, a company of machine gunners attached to Kip's brigade, arrived at 1030 hrs. When Kip arrived 51 (H) Division were well entrenched in the city. The Brigade's War Diary recorded:

So ended 5 NZ INF BDE's great desert trek from EL ALAMEIN to TRIPOLI, a total distance of 1400 miles, covered in 80 days.⁵⁵

The journey to Tripoli was a considerable achievement and had provided invaluable experience for its next left hook.

In the advance to Tripoli the New Zealand Division had done very little fighting. The fighting, apart from Kip's attempts to gate-crash Azizia, had been in the main restricted to the Divisional Cavalry, the engineers and artillery, and the Scots Greys. The New Zealand infantry had had to endure an uncomfortable journey but for them the Nofilia—Tripoli left hook had been easy. Freyberg could again relay to the New Zealand Government:

I am glad to say casualties have been light 12 killed and 64 wounded. Men in excellent health and spirits.⁵⁶

The New Zealanders spent the next six weeks in Tripoli and several significant events are worth mentioning. The first is that Kip now thought "it was time we had a little real soldiering and laid emphasis on 'spit and polish' in the training programme".⁵⁷ He established guards for Brigade HQ and the battalions and "I enjoyed inspecting them every morning". The "very ragged" initial guards soon became "very smart indeed".⁵⁸ Kippenberger well appreciated the importance of "spit and polish" to a formation's morale and also recognised that it helped to alleviate boredom.

It was as well Kippenberger insisted on maintaining these high standards because "the great event" of the division's time in Tripoli was the Churchill

⁵⁵ 5 Bde WD, 23 January 1942, WA II 1 DA 52/1/37 NZNA.

⁵⁶ Freyberg to NZ Premier, cipher message p139, 25 January 1943, WA II 8/28 NZNA.

⁵⁷ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.265.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

parade on 4 February 1943 — very much a spit and polish affair.⁵⁹ Kip later wrote of Tripoli: “From the publicity and propaganda point of view it was desirable that we should have some part in the actual occupation of the city”.⁶⁰ The fact that New Zealand was seriously considering withdrawing its division from the Middle East at this time⁶¹ made it highly desirable from the point of view of the British authorities to give the New Zealand Division as much of the lime-light as possible.

Kippenberger encountered Montgomery’s sting during the stay at Tripoli. Freyberg had gone to Cairo for a few days leaving Kip in command of the division. An explosion occurred on an ammunition barge being unloaded by the Maori Battalion and Kippenberger was called before Montgomery like an errant school boy to be told his men had been smoking on the docks which was against all orders. Kip denied that they were. Montgomery replied:

Yes they were. Three men were killed and what is worse five hundred tons of ammunition was lost. ... When I say your men were smoking they were smoking!

Kip very boldly replied that the evidence was inconclusive. The whole affair left Kip “feeling very thankful that I was not in the British service”.⁶² It had taken considerable courage to stand up to a bad tempered Montgomery. The subsequent Court of Inquiry proved inconclusive. However, the spat with Montgomery did not prevent Kip from receiving a bar to his DSO for his services at Alamein and beyond in January 1943.

After leaving Tripoli Rommel withdrew his troops to the formidable Mareth Line across the Tunisian border. The Mareth Line had been built by the French to

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.266.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p. 264.

⁶¹ See *Docs II* pp.141-55. On 24 November 1942, for example, Churchill had informed Fraser that “It would cause me much regret to see the NZ Division quit the scene of its glories” but understood “how embarrassing the withdrawal of the 9th Australian Division would be to you”. (Doc. 177, p.145).

⁶² *Infantry Brigadier*, p.269.

resist a possible invasion from Italian forces in Libya during the 1930s. The line made use of a two major natural obstacles: it followed the path of the steep-banked Wadi Zigzaou with its right flank resting on the supposedly impassable Matmata Mountains (also called the Monts des Ksour). Kippenberger stated that "Modernised and strongly held, it looked like being a hard nut to crack".⁶³ Major General Verney of 7 Armoured Division described it as "a sort of minor Maginot Line ... the most formidable defensive position encountered since El Alamein".⁶⁴ A French tactical exercise conducted in 1938 had concluded that the Mareth Line, resting on the Matmata Mountains, was impervious to an outflanking manoeuvre.⁶⁵ Yet, Montgomery planned to break through the Mareth positions using a frontal attack combined with a giant left hook.⁶⁶

After Tripoli Montgomery committed his own cardinal sin and allowed his army to become unbalanced. He had followed up Rommel's withdrawal with only two, relatively weak, divisions — the 51 (H) Division and 7 Armoured. Both divisions had halted at Medenine, a few miles east of the Mareth Line. Medenine provided the divisions with good observation over the enemy positions but was 170 miles (274 kilometres) from Tripoli where, in early March 1943, the bulk of Eighth Army remained. Montgomery had far too few troops in the forward area and his positions there lacked depth or reserves. Ultra intelligence sources confirmed that Rommel, after his successes against the newly arrived US forces at Kasserine and Sbiba, planned to attack Montgomery's small force at Medenine on 3 March with the bulk of his armour — three armoured divisions.⁶⁷ Little wonder that the period 28 February - 4 March 1943 has been described as one of "great anxiety" for Montgomery.⁶⁸ On 28 February he ordered Freyberg to move his division to Medenine with all due haste. The same order was given to the armoured formations of Eighth Army.

On 1 March Kip received orders from Freyberg to move to Medenine

⁶³ *ibid*, p.270.

⁶⁴ G. L. Verney, *op. cit*, p.152.

⁶⁵ Stevens, *Bardia to Entidaville*, p 155.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, p.170.

⁶⁷ M. Carver, "Montgomery", in Keegan (ed). *Churchill's Generals* p.156.

⁶⁸ Stevens, *Bardia to Entidaville*, p.132.

“with the utmost dispatch”.⁶⁹ Within an hour his brigade was on the road to Medenine which it reached fifteen hours later. 5 Brigade took up defensive positions on the left flank of the the Eighth Army’s line. Holding a line west of Medenine village was 51 (H) Division in the north, 201 Guards Brigade in the centre, and 5 Brigade on the southern section of the line. 7 Armoured Brigade was in reserve as was the rest of the New Zealand Division when it reached Medenine. Montgomery had restored some balance to his army in its forward positions.

There now occurred an unbelievable stroke of luck for Montgomery. Ultra had given the date of Rommel’s attack as 3 March. The War Diary of the Afrika Korps recorded that, at a conference attended by Generals Rommel and Messe and the GOCs of 10, 15, and 21 Panzer Divisions, an attack would be made against Eighth Army on 4 March 1943 from the Mareth defences using all three panzer divisions and a Reconnaissance Group “with the object of destroying the enemy forces west of Medenine”.⁷⁰ But Rommel chose to delay his attack at Medenine until 6 March 1943 to allow time to replace casualties and regroup his forces. The extra three days of preparation made all the difference in Montgomery’s defensive preparations.

Kip immediately set his brigade to work the day after arriving at Medenine. He had responsibility for 17 000 yards of the front line, some 4 000 yards for each battalion. Over the next three days he created a model defensive position:

Each battalion position had a depth of about a mile, with three rifle companies forward, and six-pounders echeloned in depth. The men were dug into single rifle pits seven or eight yards apart so that each section was on a front of about sixty yards and no amount of shelling would do much harm. The greatest possible emphasis was placed on concealment — I preached that a post spotted is a post destroyed, and hardly one was visible from any distance in front.⁷¹

Kip regarded his work at Medenine as “our masterpiece in the art of laying out a

⁶⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.270.

⁷⁰ Afrika Korps War Diary, 28 February 1943, Afrika Korps Records, GMDS File 33136/, WA II 11/22 NZNA.

⁷¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.271.

defensive position under desert conditions".⁷² Every section of the brigade line could be supported by artillery of the New Zealand Division as well as several British regiments of artillery and the brigade position offered excellent observation. As early as 3 March the date of the expected attack, Kip had assured Freyberg "that he could take on anything that came along and they are very pleased with their anti-tank defence".⁷³ In fact, the division was now over-supplied with anti-tank weapons; which caused some minor problems. Freyberg wryly commented:

You would have smiled, as I did, when at a conference the CRA said he had so many anti-tank guns he was having difficulty in siting them -- how times change!⁷⁴

On 6 March 1943 came a message from Montgomery to be read to all troops. It mentioned that Rommel was now attacking Eighth Army:

This is because he is caught like a rat in a trap and he is hitting out in every direction trying to gain time and to stave off the day of final defeat in North Africa. This is the very opportunity we want. ... Good luck to each of you, and good hunting.⁷⁵

Rommel's attack, the last he made in North Africa, was an unmitigated disaster. He struck all along the line with 124 tanks divided into three groups and supported by sixteen battalions of infantry. The attack was poorly coordinated and lacked direction. Kippenberger, watching the advance of 10 Panzer from the Maori Battalion's position, thought the attack "very badly coordinated" and that the commanders of the lead tanks looked "almost comically undecided".⁷⁶ The 5 Brigade positions had only one thrust made against them on the Maori Battalion in the north of their sector. The battalion's anti-tank weapons drove off the tank probe with four tanks destroyed by anti-tank fire, one more by mortar fire and

⁷² *ibid*, p.272.

⁷³ Freyberg Diary, Wednesday 3 March 1943, 1430 hrs, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

⁷⁴ Freyberg to Puttick, letter, 6 March 1943, PERS Puttick 5/2 NZNA.

⁷⁵ Personal Message From the Army Commander, 6 March 1943, WA II 8/29 NZNA.

⁷⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.273.

another capsizing down a bank in its haste to withdraw. Other pending attacks during the day were driven off decisively by concentrated artillery fire.

The main weight of Rommel's attack fell further north of 5 Brigade with the attacks by 15 and 21 Panzer. Only at one point in the line was a breakthrough made, but the breach was quickly sealed by the tanks of 7 Armoured Brigade — the only time during the day the tanks of Eighth Army or any part of the reserve were used. Rommel called off the attack that evening after losing of 52 tanks.⁷⁷ No British tanks had been lost.

Rommel was very conscious that the attack had been a disaster and of its significance:

The attack had bogged down in the break-in stage and the action never had a chance of becoming fluid. The British commander had grouped his forces extremely well and had completed his preparations with remarkable speed. In fact, the attack had been launched about a week too late. The operation had lost all point the moment it became obvious that the British were prepared for us. ... But the cruelest blow was the knowledge that we had been unable to interfere with Montgomery's preparations. A great gloom settled over us all. The Eighth Army's attack was now imminent and we had to face it. For the Army Group to remain longer in Africa was now plain suicide.⁷⁸

Rommel's attack at Medenine had been poorly prepared and badly coordinated. Weir, the CRA, believed that this attack was "a good example of German stereotyped methods" where Rommel simply repeated the tactics used so successfully in Libya in 1941, and at Gazala and Tobruk.⁷⁹ The difference now was that Eighth Army had learned how to counter Rommel's tactics and had at last learned that tanks could not penetrate a strong, well-sited gunline. The correct use of Ultra was finally paying handsome dividends.

⁷⁷ I. McL. Wards, "Operation Pugilist and Supercharge II: A Study of Command", unpublished MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1946.

⁷⁸ "Between Two Fires", *Rommel Papers*, pp.415-16.

⁷⁹ C. E. Weir, comments on Tunisian narrative, p.38, para 3, Campaign Narrative 2 NZ Division Vol IX The Tunisian Campaign, Part I Operations 1-26 March 1943, completed December 1948, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

Following the battle there were “scores of visitors to look at our little bag of tanks and, on General Leese’s orders, at our dispositions”.⁸⁰ One of the first such visitors to 5 Brigade was Montgomery who toured the 5 Brigade defences and asked Kip what principles of defence he had followed. Kip was reluctant to say but when pressed by Montgomery explained the eight principles he always implemented in a defensive position. This included such principles as concealment, having the whole front covered by fire, having depth and so on. The next day Montgomery took a party of senior commanders over the 5 Brigade positions and warned them that as further defensive battles were ahead, never to forget *his* eight principles of defence that could be seen in the 5 Brigade layout.⁸¹ If it had been a university essay Montgomery had been required to write, he would have been accused of plagiarism!

Medenine had been a model defensive battle very similar to Alam Halfa and, like that battle, it had paved the way for Montgomery to renew the offensive against the Axis forces in North Africa. Once again Freyberg could inform the New Zealand Government that he was “glad to say New Zealand casualties in this operation were light”, with 6 killed and forty three wounded.⁸² Freyberg’s concern to limit New Zealand casualties in the next operation of Eighth Army, however, would spell disaster and wreck Montgomery’s plan to breach the Mareth Line.

After Medenine Montgomery continued planning Operation PUGILIST — his assault on the Mareth Line. The key to PUGILIST was again the combination of a frontal assault with a left hook, but this time one of giant proportions. While the Mareth Line was considered impregnable this was not the conclusion reached by Rommel in 1943 and explains his preference for withdrawal to the Gabes Gap. Nor did Montgomery believe the line to be impervious as he dispatched two separate units of the LRDG to conduct a reconnaissance of the mountains with the object of finding a route suitable for the passage of a combined force through to the Tebaga Gap. The Gap, a low salt marsh and pass in the mountain range, made it possible to reach Gabes and the coastal plain. Both reconnaissance units

⁸⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.274.

⁸¹ D. Blundell, “Qualities That Made ‘Kip’ A Great Commander”, *Review*, June 1957, p. 20, Glue Papers.

⁸² Freyberg to Premier, cable, 10 March 1943, WA II 8/29 NZNA.

confirmed that such an outflanking move was feasible given the vehicles and experienced forces available.⁸³

Convinced it was possible, Montgomery planned to coordinate a left hook of approximately 300 miles, much of it across trackless desert and mountains, with a frontal attack on the Mareth Line. 50 (N) Division would undertake the frontal assault and a reinforced New Zealand Division the left hook. At Tebaga Gap the New Zealand Division was to carry out an assault on the enemy positions there timed to coincide with 50 (N) Division's frontal assault. 10 Corps, containing 1 Armoured Division, in reserve was to provide flank protection initially, and then exploit the success obtained by driving on Gabes and Sfax. Threatening the enemy in the front and rear of the Mareth Line prevented them from concentrating their reserves against one of the two attacking forces. Success by one, and preferably both groups, would make the enemy position untenable and force a withdrawal from the Mareth Line.

The New Zealand Corps was formed at midnight on 11/12 March 1943 and was a formidable fighting force. Under Freyberg's command for the left hook were 2 New Zealand Division, 8 Armoured Brigade, consisting of three regiments of heavy tanks, the armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards, a medium regiment of Royal Artillery, a Free French column and sundry other units — all told some 25 600 men, 112 pieces of field, medium and Anti-Aircraft artillery, 172 anti-tank guns and 150 tanks the bulk of which were Grants and Shermans.⁸⁴ The corps was assured of adequate air cover throughout the left hook and could call on combat air protection at a moment's notice.

Freyberg's force was certainly more than a match for Afrika Korps (estimated to be down to 70 such tanks) and his orders were clear. He was to advance in three stages, refuelling and replenishing at each stage, and reach Tebaga Gap (PLUM) on the 21 March, launch an assault on PLUM that day and drive through to El Hamma (PEACH) and Gabes (GRAPE) to secure the landing grounds west of Sfax, the final objective. Freyberg's diary makes it clear he was well aware of his orders and Montgomery's intentions. He explained to a large planning conference on 17 March:

It is a fast moving operation, a surprise appearance on the battlefield or we

⁸³ Stevens, *Bardia to Entfidaville*, p.157.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.159.

hope it will be a surprise appearance to a certain extent. ... Our particular task is to turn the flank and advance to capture the airdromes West of SFAX.⁸⁵

It is a measure of the esteem in which Kip was now held that he was to assume command of this massive venture should anything happen to Freyberg.⁸⁶

From the beginning of the operation Freyberg was unhappy with the planning in regard to the force allocated to the frontal assault. Freyberg believed that 30 Corps, responsible for making the frontal breach, had allocated insufficient force for this task: — just one infantry division and an armoured brigade. He was extremely doubtful this attack would succeed against the formidable Mareth defences and this accounts in part for the excessive caution that Freyberg demonstrated during the left hook, caution that would ultimately doom PUGILIST to failure.

New Zealand Corps set off for Tebaga Gap on the night of 19 March. Progress was good — “the only obstacle ... was bad going which seemed to be worse than the going maps indicated”⁸⁷ — so that by last light on 20 March the Corps was in sight of Tebaga Gap ready to attempt to outflank the Mareth Line. That night was meant to see both corps attack the Mareth Line as the frontal and the outflanking attacks were meant to be two parts of the one combined assault. PUGILIST could only succeed if they were executed simultaneously. But only one corps attacked on the night of 20/21 March and it was not Freyberg's. While one corps attacked and was only partially successful, the other dithered and worried about the risks it was taking.

Facing Freyberg at Tebaga Gap on this night were about 6 000 German troops of 164 Light Division with only one battery of artillery. Italian forces consisted of the odds and sods of Mannerini Group: about ten companies of infantry and eight batteries of artillery, some 2 500 men.⁸⁸ The Italian troops at Tebaga were poorly organised and disciplined and were derisively labelled by the New Zealanders as “Mannerini's manikins”.⁸⁹ However, in the early hours of 21

⁸⁵ Freyberg Diary, 17 March 1943, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

⁸⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.277.

⁸⁷ Freyberg Diary, 20 March 1943, WA II 8/45 NZNA.

⁸⁸ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, pp.173-74.

⁸⁹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.276.

March Freyberg received word from Army HQ that:

Appreciate 21 Pz Div with 70 tanks, likely to hold the funnel at El Hamma against us. May be joined by 15 Pz Div with 50 tanks if attack at Mareth not considered a draw demanding immediate counter-attack.

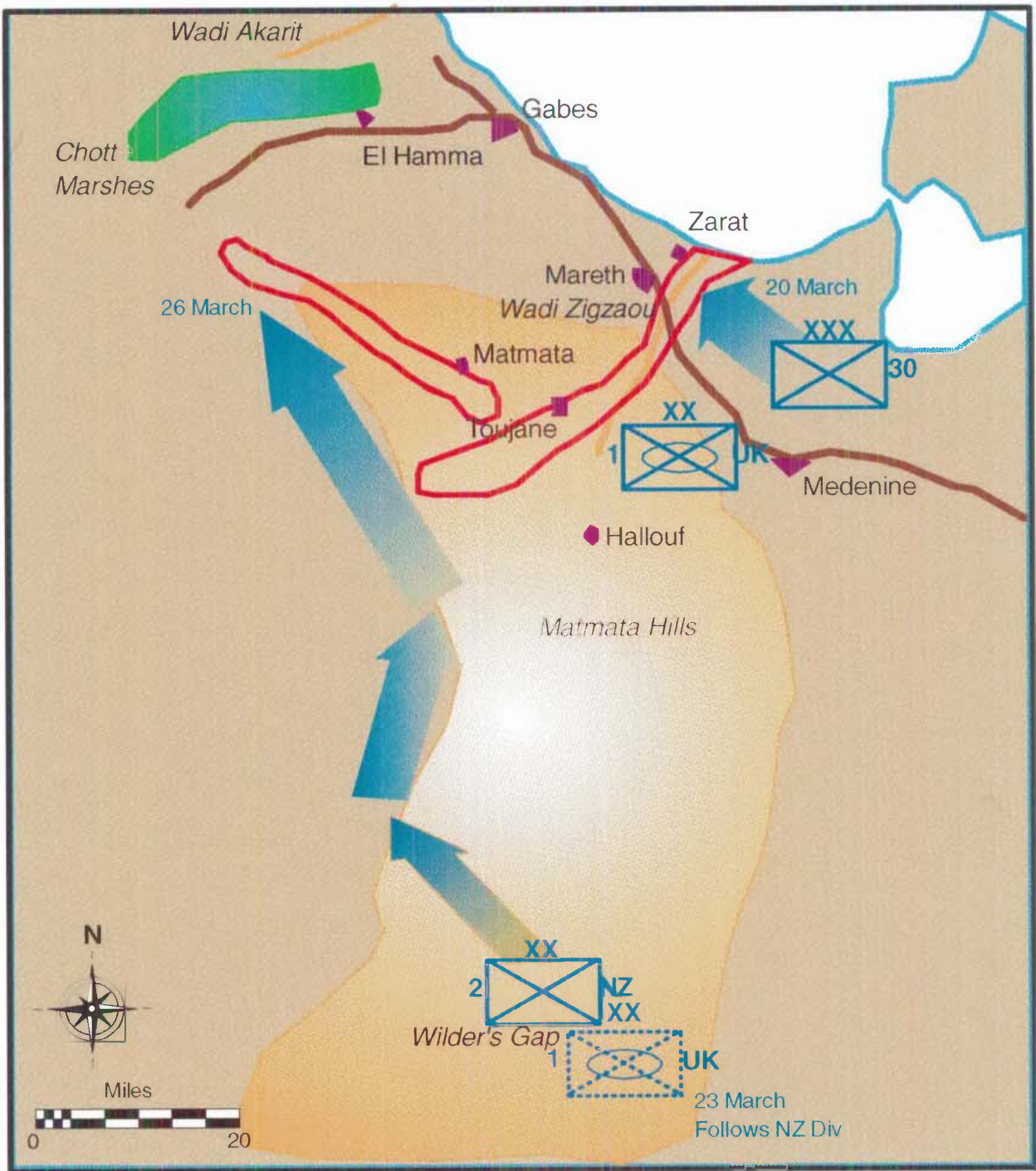
Montgomery still urged Freyberg to pull out all stops to get to GRAPE.⁹⁰

The receipt of this message cannot have been welcomed by Freyberg but its impact needs careful interpretation. Firstly, it cannot be held responsible for Freyberg's lack of action on the night of 20 March. Freyberg made no attempt to probe the enemy line and thus threw away any element of surprise gained. He planned instead to launch an attack at dawn the next day. Secondly, while not welcoming the prospect of meeting a German thrust of 120 tanks, Freyberg was still in a very strong position. He had more tanks under command than the two panzer divisions, but, what is more important, he also had an overwhelming superiority of artillery firepower that would have made an attack by the German armour against a well-established New Zealand Corps gunline suicidal. And Freyberg had Montgomery's assurance of maximum air support. Yet Freyberg ignored his strengths at Tebaga and exaggerated those of the enemy.

In any event the attack at dawn never went ahead. A reconnaissance by the KDG revealed an extensive minefield in the centre of Tebaga Gap and a high feature at the southern end of the gap, Point 201, held in strength by enemy infantry. Also revealed was an anti-tank ditch across the gap and barbed wire and minefields running along an old Roman wall which formed the enemy's main line of resistance. Tebaga Gap was bombed from the air at 0800 hrs, but the rest of the day was taken up with deploying and registering the artillery, with local reconnaissance and little else. The infantry battalion commanders had expected an infantry attack to follow the aerial bombing and were stunned by the inactivity on that day. The total result of 21 March must have greatly disappointed Montgomery who badly needed as much pressure as possible lifted from his frontal assault then floundering on the coastal sector. Freyberg, however, did promise to attack PLUM that night and to exploit towards PEACH.

Freyberg only half kept this promise. He planned to use 6 Brigade under Gentry to take Point 201 in a night attack and to exploit this success with a dawn

⁹⁰ Freyberg Diary, Sunday 21 March 1943, WA II 8/45 NZNA.



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surge by 8 Armoured Brigade. On the night of 21 March Gentry, after a short artillery barrage, used two infantry battalions to carry out what Kip called a “brilliantly handled action”⁹¹ that took the feature within two hours. Eight hundred and forty-nine Italian POWs were taken for a loss of sixty-five casualties. Gentry believed that this attack was “my best and most successful effort” of the war.⁹² By 0200 hrs on 22 March the engineers following 6 Brigade had cleared two lanes through the minefields. A wedge had been driven clean through PLUM and the road to PEACH lay open. Gentry contacted Freyberg with the news that “We are right through, we can do anything we like now”⁹³ requesting Freyberg send 8 Armoured Brigade through the gap before daylight. Freyberg demurred and gave permission for the armour to try if their commander wished to do so. This effectively killed off any notion of exploiting Gentry’s success. The *Official History* is clear on this lost opportunity and states that if 8 Armoured Brigade had gone through the gap punched by 6 Brigade at 0300 it would have penetrated to a distance of at least four miles before striking any opposition.⁹⁴ This is confirmed by the German records of 164 Light Division, the only German formation then at Tebaga Gap, which stated:

An immediate breakthrough after the capture of Point 201 would have met little opposition from 164 Lt Div which was not in position until the morning of 23 March.⁹⁵

The 6 Brigade victory was the single achievement of New Zealand Corps that day.

Later that night Freyberg received an intelligence report, I 138, which effectively ended PUGILIST. He was informed that three troops of 88-mm guns had been moved to PEACH. The guns belonged to 25 Flak Regiment, a unit of 21 Panzer which always travelled with its parent formation. Following this message Freyberg must have felt that he had even more reason for caution.

8 Armoured Brigade did not surge forward on the road to GRAPE on the

⁹¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.280.

⁹² Gentry, transcript of interview with Chris Pugsley, 23 February 1991.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.183.

⁹⁵ Points from 164 Light Division Reports on Mareth Line 1/3/51, Editor in Chief Tunisia, WA II 3/23 NZNA.

morning of 22 March. Instead Freyberg directed it to a ridge 3 000 yards in front of Point 201 and it failed to reach it. At noon the tanks of 21 Panzer arrived and any chance of a quick breakthrough vanished. The puny gains of 22 March set the pattern of activity for the next three days — moving forward by inches in the centre and flanks, with some reconnaissance on each flank. The total advance for the four days to 25 March was a paltry 1 500 yards, painfully slow progress to those on the spot. And the enemy still held ground on the flanks of the gap with total observation over the entire feature.

22 March had not been a good day on the 30 Corps front either. An attempt to extend the bridgehead over the Wadi Zigzaou failed when the enemy launched a counterattack at midday. A renewed enemy counterattack that night took most of the original bridgehead and all troops were withdrawn across the wadi the next day. To cap off the bad news Montgomery learned during the day that 10 Panzer Division had moved to Gabes ready to reinforce 21 Panzer Division at Tebaga Gap. It was readily apparent to Montgomery that PUGILIST had fallen apart and just for a moment his iron composure slipped: 'What am I to do Freddie?', he asked his chief of staff.⁹⁶

To his credit Montgomery recognised this failure and came up with a new plan. He decided to reinforce a limited success and ordered 1 Armoured Division to join the New Zealand Corps at Tebaga Gap and deliver the decisive blow there. 30 Corps's role now would be a holding and diversionary one. Montgomery also took steps to ensure that his orders would be followed. At 0400 hrs, Freyberg was informed by Montgomery that not only was 1 Armoured Division on the way but that:

For maintenance and other reasons essential have Corps HQ on your flank and am sending Horrocks to take charge. Am sure you understand. You and he will work well together and should achieve decisive results.⁹⁷

PUGILIST had clearly failed; why it did so has been a matter of some debate. Had the frontal attack been too weak as Freyberg suggested or did the failure rest with Freyberg's use of the forces under his command? The latter is the conclusion

⁹⁶ Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944*, p.192.

⁹⁷ TAC 8 Army to NZ Corps, cipher message 0379, 23 March 1943, Turning of Mareth, WA II 8/30 NZNA.

reached by Ian Wards whose 1954 MA thesis is still the most thorough analysis available. Wards was given access to all the classified documents held by the New Zealand War Archives, but his completed thesis was classified secret and access to it restricted. Kippenberger was very impressed with Wards' thesis and often expressed that he would have liked to have it available at the time of his writing of *Infantry Brigadier*.⁹⁸ Wards's conclusion is that the failure of PUGILIST rested firmly on the shoulders of Freyberg. PUGILIST was "checked by the lack of full cooperation on the flank". To succeed, the left hook depended on speed and surprise which "does not seem to have been appreciated by General Freyberg". There was "no reasonable doubt", according to Wards, that NZ Corps could have burst through the flimsy defences at Tebaga Gap on the night of 21-22 March and pushed on to Gabes forcing the Axis forces to abandon the Mareth defences. PUGILIST failed because Freyberg "failed to take what to him must have appeared an unjustifiable risk -- the complete left hook".⁹⁹ The very essence of PUGILIST, a hard-hitting left hook driven home with confidence was denied to Montgomery on the left flank and this ruined his plan. This was also Kip's private opinion:

There is not only the very tough Freyberg-Horrocks business, but the miserable way in which we messed about in front of the Gap five days before being goaded by Monty into doing what we should have done in the first place. The Army orders were perfectly clear.¹⁰⁰

In fact, as Kip was to write to Freyberg after the war, Montgomery's decision to send Horrocks to take command at Tebaga Gap was "inexplicable on military grounds".¹⁰¹ Inexplicable that is unless Montgomery had lost faith in Freyberg's ability to carry out the task allocated him at Tebaga Gap. After five days of dithering at that location Montgomery was clearly entitled to have some doubts about his favourite divisional commander.

The plan for the breakthrough produced by Freyberg and Horrocks was simple and uncomplicated. Phase 1 of Operation SUPERCHARGE II would begin

⁹⁸ Wards, interview 2, Wellington, 10 January 1993.

⁹⁹ Wards, *op. cit.*, pp.86,87, 90).

¹⁰⁰ Kippenberger to Scoullar, "Very Personal" letter, 21 June 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

¹⁰¹ Kippenberger to Freyberg, letter, 17 July 1950, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

on the night of 25 March when 5 Brigade captured Point 184 which overlooked the start line for the operation. Two platoons from D Company 26 Battalion had tried to take this important feature on the night of 24-25 March but had been driven back by heavy opposition and the steep slopes. It was clear to all the New Zealand commanders after this attack that Point 184 could not be taken by only two platoons. Kippenberger in fact allocated a whole battalion to this task. Once this feature was secured the infantry could then move to the start line where they would lie "doggo" for most of 26 March.

In Phase 2 of the operation, two battalions from 5 Brigade and one from 6 Brigade, each supported with a regiment of tanks from 8 Armoured Brigade, would advance from the startline under cover of a creeping barrage to the final objective; a wadi 3 000 yards yards yards north of the ridge across the front of Tebaga Gap which was the infantry's first objective and 1 000 yards from their start line. The infantry Brigades and 8 Armoured had been allocated two hours to reach this final objective.

At 1800 hrs, regardless of whether the infantry secured the final objective, 1 Armoured Brigade was to surge forward in the third phase of the operation. It would halt an hour and half later some five miles from their start line, wait until moonrise (2300 hrs) and then drive on to El Hamma. At the second planning conference on 25 March, Freyberg pressed for an assurance that 1 Armoured Division would pass through the gap punched which reflected his old distrust of armoured formations. Horrocks replied emphatically "They will go through and I am going with them".¹⁰²

What made SUPERCHARGE II different from any previous assaults of Eighth Army was that the attack was to be preceded by a very heavy low-flying blitz of the enemy positions by twenty squadrons of Spitfires, Kittyhawks and Hurricane "Tankbusters". This was close air support on a scale never before experienced by 2 New Zealand Division and it was to prove decisive.

The success of SUPERCHARGE II rested on Kippenberger's ability to capture Point 184, a sizable hill overlooking the Tebaga Gap. On the morning of 25 March, Kip and the three battalion CO's surveyed the ground over which they would fight that night. Kip believed this reconnaissance to have been "most

¹⁰² Horrocks to Stevens, letter, 3 September 1958, *ibid.*

important. We got the best view of an enemy position I have ever had".¹⁰³ Aware of the failure of two previous attacks on Point 184, the result of taking German troops "a little too lightly"¹⁰⁴, Kippenberger allocated the capture of Point 184 to a whole battalion — the 21st. The use of a battalion on Point 184 with concentrated artillery support was a case of 'brute force' and Kip readily acknowledged this:

I used a battalion and heavy artillery support for what had been attempted by a company — and was little more than a company objective.¹⁰⁵

Aware of the importance of the feature to the success of the operation Kip made no apology for this overkill. He outlined to the Battalion commander, Ralf Harding, what was required and left him to do the planning for his battalion's attack. Harding carried out a personal reconnaissance, developed a plan and informed Kippenberger who approved the plan and arranged artillery support.

At 0100 Kip was on the startline when 21 Battalion moved forward to attack Point 184. Enemy artillery opened up on the ground to the front of the position but failed to catch 21 Battalion who were assaulting the position from the rear along the German supply lines. Unfortunately, though, Kip had to pass through the shellfire on the way back to Brigade HQ. At 0250 hrs on 26 March 21 Battalion reported that they had taken the whole feature after some heavy fighting and for a loss of twenty casualties. They had also taken twenty-two German POWs. It was a very satisfactory result and allowed sufficient time for the other infantry battalions to move forward to their start lines, dig in and camouflage their positions before dawn. The success of this action laid the foundation for the whole operation.

Operation SUPERCHARGE II was a great success except for two minor setbacks. At 1530 the twenty squadrons of fighter-bombers appeared and their assault turned "the enemy position into pandemonium".¹⁰⁶ The aerial assault on the Germans at Tebaga Gap was devastating. 164 Light Division's War Diary confirmed that the divisional artillery "had lost more than half its guns in the

¹⁰³ Kippenberger, comments on Tunisian narrative p.141, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

¹⁰⁴ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.281.

¹⁰⁵ Kippenberger, comments on Tunisian narrative p.137, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

¹⁰⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.284.

fighter-bomber raids".¹⁰⁷ A German officer described the artillery barrage and the air attacks as "inhuman".¹⁰⁸ At 1600 hrs the artillery opened up on the German positions, the tanks of 8 Armoured surged forward with the infantry advancing some 200 yards behind them. The Germans were taken by surprise by this daylight assault and the firepower of the New Zealand Corps was overwhelming. The close air support turned the operation into "perfect blitzkrieg".¹⁰⁹ As Kip stated: "The German defence was determined and soldierly, but we had the weight. Both tanks and infantry meant business and knew their trade".¹¹⁰

Only on the right flank was any serious trouble encountered where 28 Battalion failed to take Point 209, a hill on the brigade's right flank. The other two battalions reached their objectives and their supporting tanks settled down to their front. Angus Ross, with TAC HQ of 23 Battalion described tank and infantry cooperation as "rarely if ever better in the history of the 23rd on that occasion".¹¹¹ This successful collaboration with the armour was a first and according to Ross:

Above all, and this is the most important point, we established such a close and satisfactory relationship with the British armour that it convinced me that there had been no real need to send back the 4th Brigade which saw nothing post Alamein. I felt keenly, strongly, whatever, that this was proved to be unnecessary. That the failure at Ruweisat Ridge and elsewhere was due to two things — bad staff work, poor communications — and these were rectified to a marked degree. We collaborated extremely well and I was convinced we could have done without 4 Brigade going out and leaving an increasingly, if not emaciated division, a reduced 5 and 6 Brigades to carry the banner for New Zealand throughout North Africa.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Diary Entry for 26 March 1943, GMDS 30271/2, Records of 90th Light and 164 Light Divisions, WA II 11/23 NZNA.

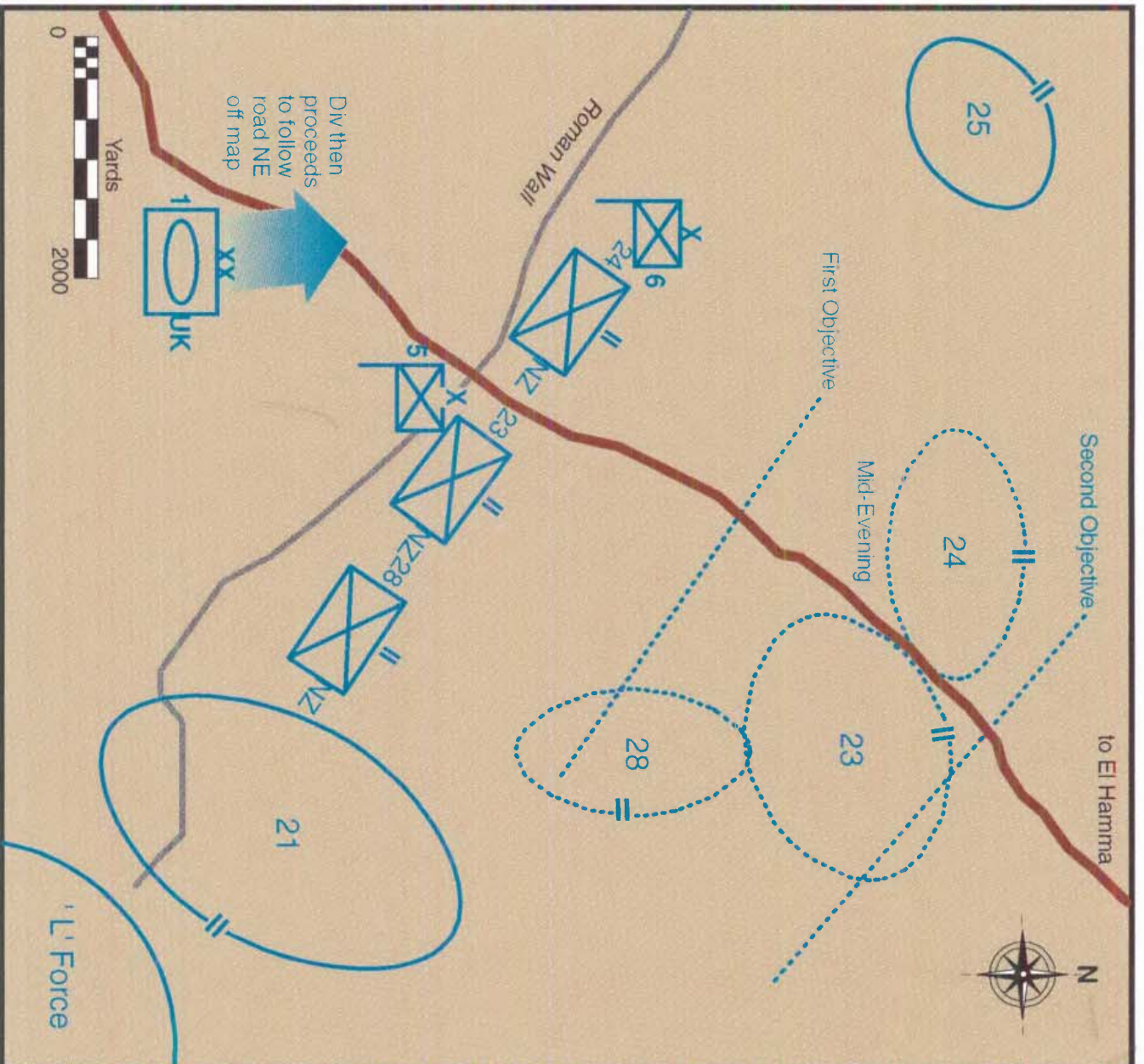
¹⁰⁸ Comment by an artillery major, "The War Day by Day: Part of NZEF in Famous 'Left Hook' ", *Christchurch Star Sun*, 29 June 1943, WA II 2/16 NZNA. The major thought this comment was "a bit rich coming as it did from a Hun".

¹⁰⁹ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.217.

¹¹⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.285.

¹¹¹ Angus Ross to Wards, letter, 19 May 1947, WA II 3/24 NZNA.

¹¹² Ross interview, *op. cit.*



Breakthrough at Tebaga Gap

Operation Supercharge, 26 March 1943

At 1800 hrs the tanks of 1 Armoured Division, some 67 Shermans, 11 Grants and 60 Crusaders, moved through the forward infantry positions and by last light of 26 March were four miles beyond the final infantry objective. The Mareth Line was broken.

Kip visited all his battalions on the morning of 27 March and was later alarmed when the *Official History* narrative omitted one of these visits. His comment reveals much about his thoughts on command and also his pride in his own reputation as a commander:

As it stands the picture is: of a Brigadier doing 2/3rds of his job — visit all forward Bns and take all action possible to complete the Bde task. In this case (26 March) I did actually do 3/3rds of that job. In *Infantry Brigadier* I think I've got the times and order of visit muddled through forgetting that I went to 21 Bn first and not mentioning my visit there at all.¹¹³

Meanwhile a fierce battle still raged around Point 209, which the Maori Battalion had failed to take. They had been allocated the toughest feature as it had been relatively untouched during the aerial bombardment. Also their armoured support had sheared away from the feature after losing five tanks to a concealed 88-mm gun. 5 Brigade remained at Tebaga while the Maori Battalion spent the night of 26 March and the next day trying to reduce Point 209. On his morning visit Kip stressed “the importance of 28 Bn not losing the initiative, saying that every opportunity for aggressive action should be taken”.¹¹⁴ Despite spirited attacks by the Maoris, which saw the first Maori VC awarded, and despite being plastered by the Corps artillery and under fire from all sides, the Germans clung stubbornly to Point 209. A break in the fighting occurred following a German request for assistance with their wounded and Kip gave permission “for all possible assistance to be rendered”.¹¹⁵ The Germans on Point 209 were given medical supplies and food while the badly wounded were escorted to the New Zealand field hospital. The final attack was made by a company of the Maori Battalion at about 1500 hrs and resulted in a German surrender with 231 POWs

¹¹³ Kippenberger, comment on Tunisian narrative p.192, Part II Operations 26-31 March 1943, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Cody, *28 Battalion*, p.275

taken, more than 50 of that number wounded.

Once more Kip had been required to demonstrate his courage under fire. Visiting the lower slopes of Point 209 which were under enemy fire, Kip was about to make a ten-yard dash to his Armoured Command Vehicle when a Maori Sergeant arrived in a Bren-gun carrier and:

in the most casual manner, walked across to us and opened up a conversation quite oblivious of the whistling bullets. I told him to take my place but was left with no option but to walk equally casually to my Dingo and clamber deliberately in. It was a relief to get my head inside.¹¹⁶

Kip was magnanimous in victory, inviting the only two unwounded German officers to breakfast and allowing the senior officer to say goodbye to his troops. Kip then toured Point 209 with the 28 Battalion commander and saw:

a most horrible scene of slaughter. There were dead and mangled Germans everywhere, more than I had seen in a small area since the Somme in 1916.¹¹⁷

The capture of Point 209 finished the action at Tebaga Gap and Kip received orders from Freyberg to act as a right flank guard for NZ Corps then moving towards Hamma. 5 Brigade moved off on a parallel course to the New Zealand Corps at noon on 28 March.

New Zealand Corps experienced rough going and struck some enemy opposition. 5 Brigade's advance initially started badly by heading off on a wrong axis but Kip soon detected this and swung the Brigade onto its correct bearing. The advance of the brigade proceeded smoothly so that by the end of the day it was level with its parent formation on the left. That evening the enemy abandoned El Hamma and withdrew to Gabes.

On 29 March it was evident to that the Mareth Line was broken and nearly every formation in the Eighth Army was directed on Gabes. Kip's brigade though had stolen the march on the whole army and on NZ Division. 5 Brigade set off at 0630 hrs and covered fifteen miles before meeting any opposition. This was a

¹¹⁶ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.287.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, p.291.

flank guard of only two tanks and they were quickly overcome. A few miles south of Gabes the brigade came across a group of pill-box defences on a ridge blocking the road and Kip stopped to subdue them. As he recounted:

It was a day for taking risks so I lined up my six-pounders and machine-guns on a parallel ridge 1,000 yards away, just as if it was the battle of Waterloo. ... The pill-boxes were easy targets, the six-pounders scoring hits with every shot. ... The crews of the two pill-boxes tried to bolt but at once were shot down by the machine-guns. A shell burst a few yards away from me and I began to wonder if I was conducting the action too rashly.¹¹⁸

Kip then took another risk. The pill-boxes subdued, he ignored Freyberg's order to by-pass Gabes and directed the squadron of KDGs under command and 23 Battalion to enter the village. He later justified the decision:

I decided not to comply on the grounds
(1) that the pill-box line looked like collapsing when the way to Gabes would be clear and I still expected to intercept troops retiring from Mareth. Therefore the situation was not as supposed by NZ Corps and by pushing on I would be acting as General Freyberg would expect if he was with me.

(2) That it was damned near impossible to comply. Very broken ground West of Gabes could not be traversed without bulldozers which were with the main column.¹¹⁹

Kip had applied the principles of Directive Control mentioned in the previous chapter and believed his actions met the requirements of his commander's intentions. The 5 Brigade units arrived just as the road bridge across the Gabes wadi was blown but managed to catch three members of the demolition team. As the population of Gabes was mainly French "we had perhaps the first experience of any British troops of being liberators".¹²⁰ Meanwhile Kip's Brigade Major was having a less pleasant experience of "explaining to the GOC why 5 Brigade had

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p.292.

¹¹⁹ Kippenberger, comment on Tunisian narrative p.221, Part II Operations 26-31 March 1943, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

¹²⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.292.

blocked the New Zealand Corps axis by moving directly on Gabes".¹²¹

The capture of Gabes marked the end of the Tebaga Gap left hook -- the greatest and final operation of its kind in North Africa. While the Axis forces were in full retreat on 27 March 1943, Freyberg had shown himself strangely hesitant throughout the operation, a hesitancy that frustrated his infantry brigadiers and left them straining at the leash in their desire to get on with the overall task allocated the NZ Corps. There seems little doubt that a quick thrust delivered with force and determination would have burst through the Tebaga Gap on 20 March and was still possible on the following evening. As the Official Historian has acknowledged, "it is probable that this victory could have been achieved more swiftly and could have been even more damaging to the enemy".¹²²

It had been a repeat of the Alamein battle for Montgomery. Faced with the failure of the direct frontal assault and with the prospect of defeat, Montgomery again took the bold decision to switch the direction to a successful flank where a reorganised formation would deliver the knockout blow. Even the code names for this second operation were the same. Horrocks was unequivocal as to who was largely responsible for the Tebaga Gap success:

The credit for this attack must go to Field Marshal [sic] Montgomery as he selected Course 3, although we both preferred Course 2. ... Incidentally, I have no doubt at all as to who would have received a bowler hat if it had gone wrong.¹²³

Fortunately for Horrocks, the attack at Tebaga Gap, when it was finally made, was a stunning success and his bowler hat could remain on the shelf.

Throughout the left hooks Freyberg had demonstrated extreme caution and lost many opportunities. The reason for this caution was Freyberg's desire to avoid heavy casualties and he saw the left hooks as the means to achieve this.

¹²¹ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.244.

¹²² *ibid*, p.249.

¹²³ Horrocks, comment on Tunisian narrative p.123, Part II Operations 26-31 March 1943, WA II 3/48 Acc 2452 NZNA.

This is certainly the view of the Official Historian who stated that Freyberg's chief concern, still being 2 400 men short even after the absorption of the Eighth Reinforcement at Tripoli, was to limit his casualties as much as possible.¹²⁴ This view is shared by Freyberg's staff officers. Lieutenant General Sir Leonard Thornton has acknowledged the caution shown by Freyberg during these operations but sees its cause in the disasters of June—July 1942:

But we had all had so much experience of being exposed to German armour, of getting our formations overrun that we were all very cautious. This went on for a long time. It takes a long time to get that sort of apprehension out of the system.¹²⁵

Sir John White's explanation is a little different. He believes that Freyberg's caution was based on sound tactical knowledge. Freyberg, according to White, had seen first-hand at Alamein that the era of the tank was finished. Tanks could no longer advance into the unknown unsupported nor could they take on an artillery gunline without infantry and artillery of their own. Freyberg, therefore, could not risk sending armour forward on the night of 21/22 March as, if they had encountered an 88-mm gunline, and the probability was high that they would do so, then Freyberg's armoured brigade would have been destroyed.¹²⁶

Kip's private opinion — one he never publicly stated — gives another reason for Freyberg's caution and one probably nearer the mark. Kip wrote to Scoullar, his close friend and the person originally chosen to write the *Official History* about these left hooks:

The trouble was that General Freyberg was naturally an extremely cautious general, and that all the time he had the business of the Charter in his mind. It was the same trouble in Crete which we should have held against the first attack if vigorously commanded. Always he had in mind that New Zealand Division must not be risked. ... It is heresy to talk like this ... and you cannot write it. ... the only sort of battle in which General Freyberg was any good was the encadred set-piece battle, on which he was a master.

¹²⁴ Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*, p.249.

¹²⁵ Sir Leonard Thornton, interview, Wellington, 25 January 1993.

¹²⁶ Sir John White interview, *op. cit.*

... these are candid opinions ... which you will keep to yourself, but should have in the background.¹²⁷

To Alister McIntosh Kip stated a similar view:

our famous Left Hooks were about the most timidly executed outflanking movements in history ... The General was supremely good in the set-piece battle like Alamein or Tebaga Gap or the Senio, but not in mobile operations or when in solitary command. And of course he was always obsessed with his responsibility to the NZ Government. If we had been a British division of equal quality we would have held Crete, really stopped Rommel at Minqar Qaim and destroyed the Axis Army on the Mareth Line.¹²⁸

There is much to Kip's "candid opinions". Freyberg was an old warhorse very much at home with the set-piece battles of his apprenticeship in the Great War. The breakthrough at El Alamein owed much to his leadership and ability. But when in the active pursuit of a fast-moving enemy, or commanding anything above the size of a division, Freyberg often appeared out of his depth. He certainly acted with an extreme caution which ironically was to prove more costly in the long run. As Rommel pointed out, if Montgomery had abandoned his caution after Alamein, it "would have cost him far fewer losses in the long run than his methodical insistence on overwhelming superiority in each tactical action, which he could only obtain at the cost of his speed".¹²⁹ This comment could equally apply to Freyberg in his conduct of the left hooks.

There is no doubt of Freyberg's many personal qualities: his courage, his friendliness, the ability to inspire those around him. What is at question though is his ability as a general to command this type of operation. The left hook was more than just a manoeuvre; it needed to pose a real threat to an enemy in order to dislodge them from a set position. There comes a time when any threat has to be implemented, to be driven home with all the force then available to a

¹²⁷ Kippenberger to Scoullar, "Very Personal" letter, 21 June 1955, WA II 11/6 NZNA.

¹²⁸ Kippenberger to A. D. McIntosh, letter, 29 August 1955, IA 181/53/8, Glue Papers.

¹²⁹ *The Rommel Papers*, pp.360-1.

commander and there has to be considerable power applied in the kick to the enemy's pants. This Freyberg seemed most reluctant to do and it was a dereliction of duty on his part. As Wards has stated regarding the failure of PUGILIST, a failure he clearly lays at the feet of Freyberg: once given the task of a left hook it was "his duty to do all in his power to carry it out".¹³⁰ This Freyberg did not do on any of the left hooks in North Africa, and on at least two occasions, a priceless opportunity to capture the bulk of the Rommel's Axis forces went begging. They were to prove costly mistakes as the New Zealand Division, and Eighth Army, had much hard fighting ahead of them in Tunisia. Kippenberger, who would be in the thick of it, was able enough to perceive the problem at the time but was too junior to do anything about it. He had demonstrated throughout this frustrating period considerable tactical flair when left to command his brigade without interference as at Medenine and Tebaga Gap. During the left hooks Kip had not really put a foot wrong in the command of his brigade. This was about to change though in his last battle in North Africa.

¹³⁰ Wards, *op. cit.*, p.92.