

Battle Analysis: Crusader and Gazala (Why a Cohesive Hierarchy Matters)

by MAJ Thomas A. Rebuck

Reorganization efforts since the 1930s – in particular the pentomic restructuring of the 1950s, Reorganization Objective Army Division in the early 1960s and Modularity's current "brigade-centric" force structure – have completed the U.S. Army's rejection of proven organizational concepts. The first two initiatives were based on dubious theories regarding the need for building "organizational flexibility" into our force structure and modified tables of organization and equipment (MTOEs). The third sought to create self-contained "plug-and-play" units that were capable of rapid deployment without extensive task-organization and could operate across the full-spectrum of military operations.

Many applaud and promote such reforms as operationally, logistically and administratively logical. History, however, indicates that the resulting force structures encourage the incremental employment of units rather than the decisive application of force. In addition, by designing the brigade combat team (BCT) to handle every conceivable contingency outside of its core function as a fighting organization, Modularity has created unsustainable organizations at every echelon from battalion to division. This is exemplified by the expansion of the division headquarters into a battalion-sized element and the inclusion of an engineer battalion, field-artillery battalion and cavalry reconnaissance squadron into the "organic" composition of the BCT.

The psychological and mental paradigms conditioned by organization cannot be underestimated. The Army's current configuration is not optimized for waging mounted combined-arms warfare, nor for that matter, any other level, intensity or type of operation. Presupposing the need to organically organize according to "how we fight," these initiatives ignore the less conspicuous, but nevertheless critical, fact that units also fight the way they are organized. By adopting force structures and MTOEs that conform to scientific management methods (for example, organizational flexibility) rather than human psychology (cohesion and unity of effort), it has opted for a system proven deficient under the conditions of fast-paced, mounted, combined-arms warfare.

Reorganization since 1930s

In the late 1930s, the Field Artillery Branch developed new concepts in fire support that resulted in the creation of a division-artillery command (DIVARTY), the adoption of separate battalions and the elimination of the regiment as an operational entity. This structure was adopted by other branches as well. The cavalry transitioned to separate squadrons operating under cavalry groups. Armored infantry and armor regiments were broken up, formed into separate battalions and fought task-organized under combat commands. The exception to this trend was the Infantry Branch, which retained the regiment and used it as the basis for building combined-arms task forces, referring to them as regimental combat teams.

This force structure lasted until the late 1950s, when the Army reorganized under the pentomic concept. Underlying the premise of this reorganization was the theory that the atomic battlefield required units to be organized under a system of fives rather than threes. It was innovative-sounding and seriously flawed: "[GEN] Taylor and the President came up with the idea that, in nuclear warfare, the troops must be dispersed ... more widely than, in their view, [was] possible with the triangular concept," LTC Anthony Herbert reflected. "It was ridiculous. There would be no difference in a nuclear battle if troops were dispersed [20] yards or [1,000]. But it was a good-sounding name.

"What the pentomic concept produced was one of the chief evils in the U.S. Army," Herbert wrote. "It isolated the links in the command chain by enlarging the spaces between them. By eliminating the regiment as a unit, the Army ended up with very junior and very senior officers commanding at extremely close levels; the lines of communication [i.e., from company to battalion to regiment] were broken and the concept of 'cover your ass' was nourished."¹

Although it retained the armored cavalry regiment as a corps-level reconnaissance-and-security asset, the pentomic reorganization spelled the end of the regiment as a maneuver entity in the U.S. Army. When leaders

decided to abandon the pentomic structure, instead of returning to the regiment, the Army chose to adopt the separate battalion/brigade structure of the armored division's combat commands.

In theory, the purpose of the separate battalion/brigade structure was to facilitate task-organization by loosening the administrative and logistical ties that existed within the regiment. Under this system, the brigade should function as a tactical headquarters only, with no administrative or logistical responsibilities outside those required to support the headquarters. Not only has this scheme been invalidated by the fact that brigades have assumed the same level of administrative and logistical responsibilities as the regiment, it ignores practical wartime experience. As Armor Branch historian Dr. Robert S. Cameron said, "For most leaders, combat operations failed to validate the advantage of the extreme organizational flexibility embedded in the combat-command structure."²

Modularity failed to fix these mistakes. Not only did it retain the brigade, it exacerbated the situation by transitioning the Army to a brigade-centric force structure. In essence, it dumped assets into brigade MTOEs simply because they existed at division level – not because they directly supported the core function of the organization or justified the expense of making them organic to every brigade. One of the best examples of this was the replication of the DIVARTY at brigade level despite the fact that maneuver brigades would never control the number of fire-support assets available to pre-Modularity divisions. That this element has since been removed underscores its conceptual absurdity.

The only substantive effect of these reorganizations, in whole or in part, has been to fragment the Army's force structure and undermine the purpose of an echeloned hierarchy: cohesion and unity of effort.

Regiment vs. brigade

Our current brigade structure bears similarities to the British Army. Although known as a "regimental system"³ under the British system, the regiment operates as an administrative entity with no operational function. Its operational elements are comprised of affiliated but separate battalions brought together and task-organized under brigade headquarters. While this force structure produces resilient units at the battalion level and below, when maneuvering in larger formations against a peer or near-peer opponent, it has proven deficient. This is the result of a mental paradigm that views battalions, brigades and divisions as all-but-isolated links in the command chain and commits them to combat accordingly. Even though affiliated battalions are sometimes brigaded together, the lack of an organically cohesive relationship (as opposed to an administratively and titled association) encourages the incremental and piecemeal deployment of these formations into battle.

In contrast to this loose and "flexible" force structure, the Germans used the regiment as an operational echelon. Although based on a regional system of depots/home stations much like the British, the German regiment was both an administrative *and* operational unit. The Germans recognized the human dimensions of force structure and organization. Not only were cohesive teams built on the foundation of regimental identity, leaders were conditioned to conceptualize the maneuver of its various echelons as an integrated whole, not just as affiliated but separate entities.

In addition, the Germans retained their panzer and panzer-grenadier units as pure regiments, which had significant advantages for both training and maintenance: "You have to keep one thing in mind, which is repair and maintenance of modern weapons systems, and that can only be done in 'pure units.' The maintenance of the materiel is of paramount importance, and it is not possible to maintain the materiel in one unit where you have a conglomeration of different types of materiel."⁴

Yet these apparently rigid structures never inhibited the formation or operation of mounted, combined-arms task forces or decentralized operations. Why? Because the adaptability and proficiency of an army's leaders are far more important to task-force operations than the perceived advantages of organizational flexibility: "That is the art of leadership – that you can control the various forces but you still maintain the pureness of the unit."⁵

It is significant to note in the context of this article that Sir John Hackett, who commanded a British tank squadron (company) in North Africa and experienced firsthand the effects of German cohesion and operational philosophy, hinted at his belief in the superiority of their system. "I do not think we have ever made enough use in the British Army of the regiment as an operational entity," he wrote.⁶

While the U.S. Army displayed its own predilection for the piecemeal employment of its armored divisions and subordinate combat commands in Africa and Northwest Europe, nowhere was the disparity between German and Allied organizational and operational philosophy more evident than during the North African Campaign of 1941-42. Throughout this period, the Germans established tactical superiority over British and Commonwealth forces in the execution of mounted combined-arms warfare. Although a measure of this superiority was attributable to superior equipment, the decisive factor was the concentration of cohesive formations at the decisive point.

Operation Crusader

Operation Crusader was launched by the British Eighth Army Nov. 18, 1941. It had two objectives: "1) to trap and destroy the enemy forces in Eastern Cyrenaica, and 2) to occupy Tripolitania and drive the enemy out of Africa. This would also ensure the relief of Tobruk."⁷ The XIII Corps would hold and outflank Axis positions along the Halfaya Pass-Sidi Omar Line, while XXX Corps would pass to the south and advance into the Axis rear "either to destroy Rommel's armor or prevent it from interfering with the XIII Corps."⁸

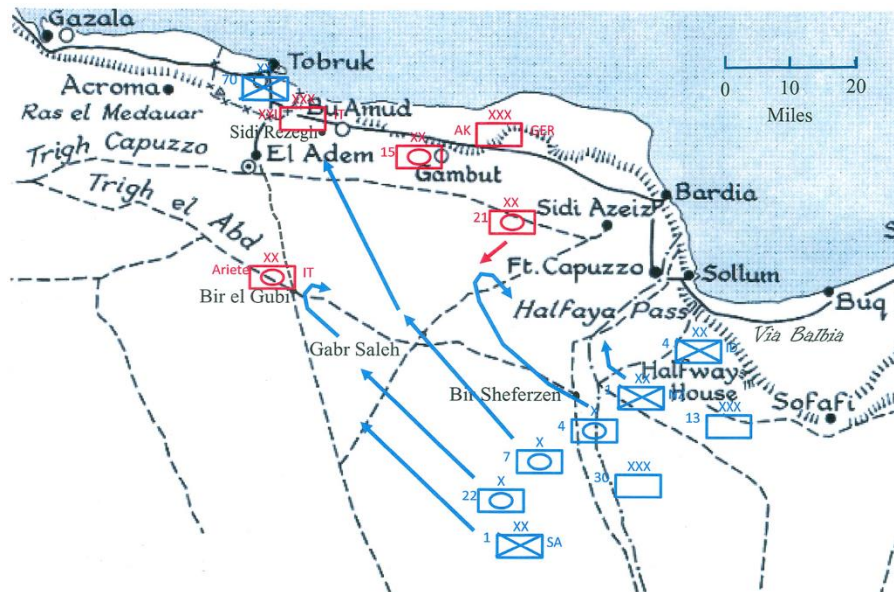


Figure 1. Operation Crusader opening Nov. 18-19, 1941. (Map by U.S. Marine Corps LTC Robert Lamont)

Although they outnumbered the British by three divisions, the bulk of the Axis units were non-motorized Italian divisions which, as German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel pointed out, "were as good as useless in the open desert."⁹ In addition, "such figures give a false impression. ... The British had five brigades of armor, while Rommel had the equivalent of two German and one Italian. In number of tanks, the British total was 724, with some 200 in reserve. ... Rommel's strength at the start was 414 (including 154 Italian). He had some [50] under repair but had no reserve of new tanks."¹⁰

Thus, 7th Armoured Division alone fielded more tanks than 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions combined, while the individual British armored brigades equaled or surpassed the number of tanks in each German division (4th Armoured Brigade: 166; 7th Armoured Brigade, 129; 22nd Armoured Brigade, 158).¹¹ In addition, this material overmatch was exacerbated by tactical surprise.¹²

Yet these advantages were wasted. Rather than concentrating 7th Armoured Division, its brigades were scattered across the desert against three widely separated objectives. The 22nd Armoured Brigade moved against the Ariete Armored Division at El Gubi. The 7th Armoured Brigade and 7th Support Group advanced to capture the airfield at Sidi Rezegh. The 4th Armoured Brigade remained in the Gabr El Selah area to maintain contact with XIII Corps during its attacks against the Sollum-Sidi Omar Line. This plan "broke up the armored concentration at a decisive time and split it into three separate parts, each part inferior to the opposing tank force and unable to give quick assistance to each other."¹³

As Rommel later reflected, “What is the use of having overall superiority if one allows one’s formations to be smashed piece by piece by an enemy who, in each separate action, is able to concentrate superior strength at the decisive point?”¹⁴



Figure 2. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel confers with an aide during the North Africa desert campaign, 1942.

Such dispersion was perpetuated at the brigade level as well. Battalions were committed piecemeal into the attack at El Gubi and by 7th Armoured Brigade in opposing the initial advance of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions against Sidi Rezegh. This diffusion of combat power was replicated by 4th Armoured Brigade, which sent its battalions in divergent directions to locate the German armor. In one case, 3rd Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) attacked a motorized column and pursued it across the Trigh Capuzzo 30-40 miles north of the brigade main body. In the ensuing fight, 3 RTR itself became so dispersed that its subordinate squadrons (companies) and troops (platoons) were still dribbling into the brigade laager the following day.¹⁵

Retribution for such dispersion came swiftly. The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions formed task forces built around their panzer regiments and struck the fragmented units with massed formations. “I could see the panzers clearly, coming down a broad depression in line abreast, 40 to 60 of them,” MAJ Robert Crisp wrote in *Brazen Chariots*.¹⁶ This was a common theme throughout the battle: “1,200 yards ahead of me stretched the array of dark brown shapes, 60 or 70 monsters in a solid line abreast.”¹⁷ These cohesive, massed attacks hammered British and Commonwealth units in succession.

First came the mauling of 7th Armoured Brigade and 7th Support Group at Sidi Rezegh. Next in line was 1st South African Infantry and its 5th Brigade, which by Nov. 24 had ceased to exist.¹⁸ After delivering more blows against XXX Corps, the Germans turned their attention to 6th New Zealand Brigade, which had advanced toward Sidi Rezegh; the 24th and 26th Battalions were overrun and the remnants of 25th Battalion were forced to withdraw. These running battles had also decimated British tank strength. By Dec. 4, 4th Armoured Brigade fielded 35 Stuarts and 22nd Armoured Brigade about 21 Cruisers. The 7th Armoured Brigade could only account for four tanks altogether.¹⁹

The turning point of the battle came when Rommel decided to make his ill-fated “dash to the wire.” Presuming that an attack into Eighth Army’s rear areas would cause the British to break and withdraw into Egypt, he launched a sweep with his panzer divisions toward the frontier. It almost succeeded.



Figure 3. A British Crusader tank passes a burning German Panzer IV tank during Operation Crusader Nov. 27, 1941. (Photo by Australian armed forces; Photograph E 6751 from collections of Imperial War Museums (Collection No. 4700-32))

“When a similar course was followed by panzer forces a year before against the Allied armies ... **under more precarious circumstances** [emphasis added], it had produced the greatest victory of modern times,” Rommel recalled. “Its miscarriage, this time in Africa, was due partly to ... human factors. ... [GEN Claude] Auchinleck [British commander in chief, Middle East] above all – but it was also a demonstration of the big part that chance plays in the issues of war.”²⁰

Auchinleck’s refusal to authorize a retreat, coupled with the release of pressure on 7th Armoured Division’s shattered brigades, allowed the British to reconstitute their forces and continue the fight. Eventually Rommel was forced to lift the siege of Tobruk and withdraw to the area of Agedabia. Nevertheless, with inferior numbers, the Germans had not only fought Eighth Army to a standstill but brought it to the brink of a decisive defeat, pummeling one British and Commonwealth formation after another and inflicting heavy casualties.

Gazala

Rommel spent little time licking his wounds after Crusader; on Jan. 21, 1942, after consolidating and reorganizing, he launched a counter-offensive against the British. Taken by surprise, the British withdrew and began fortifying the Gazala Line. This position was comprised of a string of fortified “boxes,” each manned by a brigade and surrounded by belts of wire and mines. Although these belts were continuous, the “boxes” themselves were too far apart to be mutually supporting, and patrols were required to maintain observation over the obstacles between the positions.

Once again the Axis forces were outnumbered in men and material, with seven tank battalions (three of them Italian) facing off against 14 British battalions.²¹ The disparity in hitting power between the two sides was also increased by the presence of American M3 medium tanks. The M3 was equipped with a more powerful gun (75mm) than the British two-pounder or the 37mm weapon found on the M3 Stuart Light Tank.

The German attack began May 27, 1942, swinging south of Bir Hakeim. Although the advance had been observed and continuously tracked, it was so rapid that it rolled over 8th Hussars of 4th Armoured Brigade and overran the 7th

Armoured Division headquarters by 8:30 a.m., dispersing 7th Motor Brigade in the process. The juggernaut rolled on: "By mid-afternoon on the 27th, the Germans had scattered 7th Armoured and were in position to assault the 201st Guards Brigade in the Knightsbridge Box," wrote Robin Neillands.²² One report described the German armor as "[a] black mass of tanks, beginning in the region of the Knightsbridge Box and stretching south, as far as the eye could see."²³

Despite its initial impetus, the attack failed to reach the coast road or Tobruk on May 27, and in the running fight, contact with 90th Light Division was lost. With his supply route around the southern end of the Gazala Line rendered impractical, Rommel drew his forces into a defensive position and began clearing paths through the British minefields.²⁴ It was in this area, subsequently known as "the Cauldron," that Axis forces consolidated, reorganized and resupplied. Once he had replenished his formations, Rommel began reducing the British boxes.

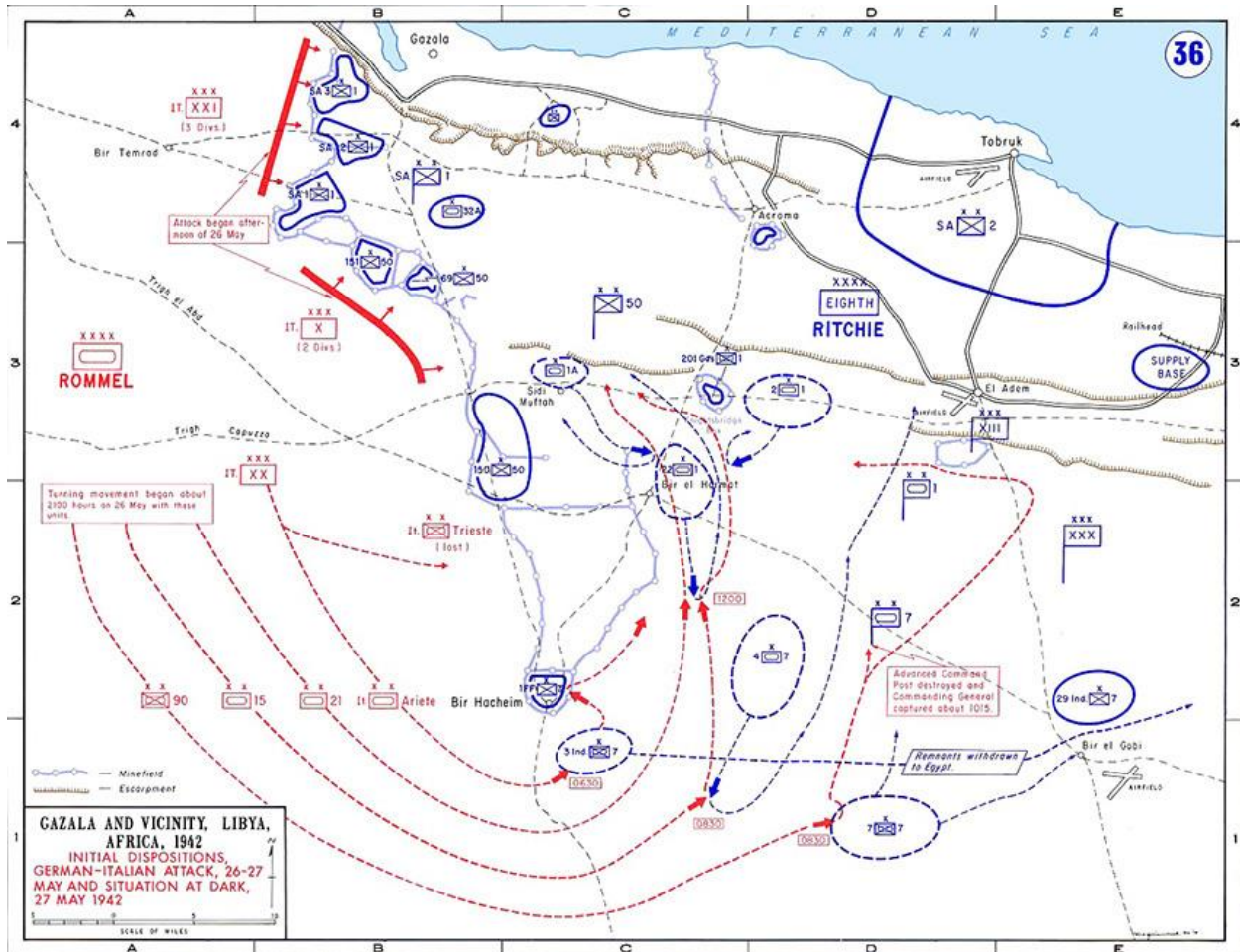


Figure 4. Situation in "the Cauldron," May 27, 1942. (Map by U.S. Military Academy's Department of History, <http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlas/ww2%20Europe/WWIIEuropeIndex.html> (Map 36). Libya, initial dispositions, German-Italian Attack, May 26-27, 1942)

While the Axis were expanding their position, Eighth Army was launching its own attacks. On June 2, it launched a major operation which "was marked by all the usual errors – it was too slow and too obvious, with ... **units attacking piecemeal and being repulsed in turn.**" [emphasis added]²⁵ As Rommel pointed out, "the Eighth Army commander had thrown his armor into the battle piecemeal and had thus given us the chance of engaging them on each separate occasion. ... **This dispersal of the British armored brigades was incomprehensible** [emphasis added]. ... The sacrifice of 7th Armoured Division south of Bir Harmit served no tactical purpose whatsoever, for it was all the same to the British whether my armor was engaged there or on the Trigh Capuzzo, where the rest of the British armor (1st Armoured Division) entered the battle."²⁶

On June 12, the Axis began a breakout, which led to the fall of Tobruk and forced the retreat of Eighth Army to the Alamein position.

While Eighth Army managed to eke out a victory with Operation Crusader, Gazala ended in disaster. Once again the margin of victory at Gazala was the German use of cohesive formations. Their success was facilitated by the British preference for fighting brigades and battalions as separate entities and not as cohesive teams, resulting in their piecemeal and incremental employment into battle.

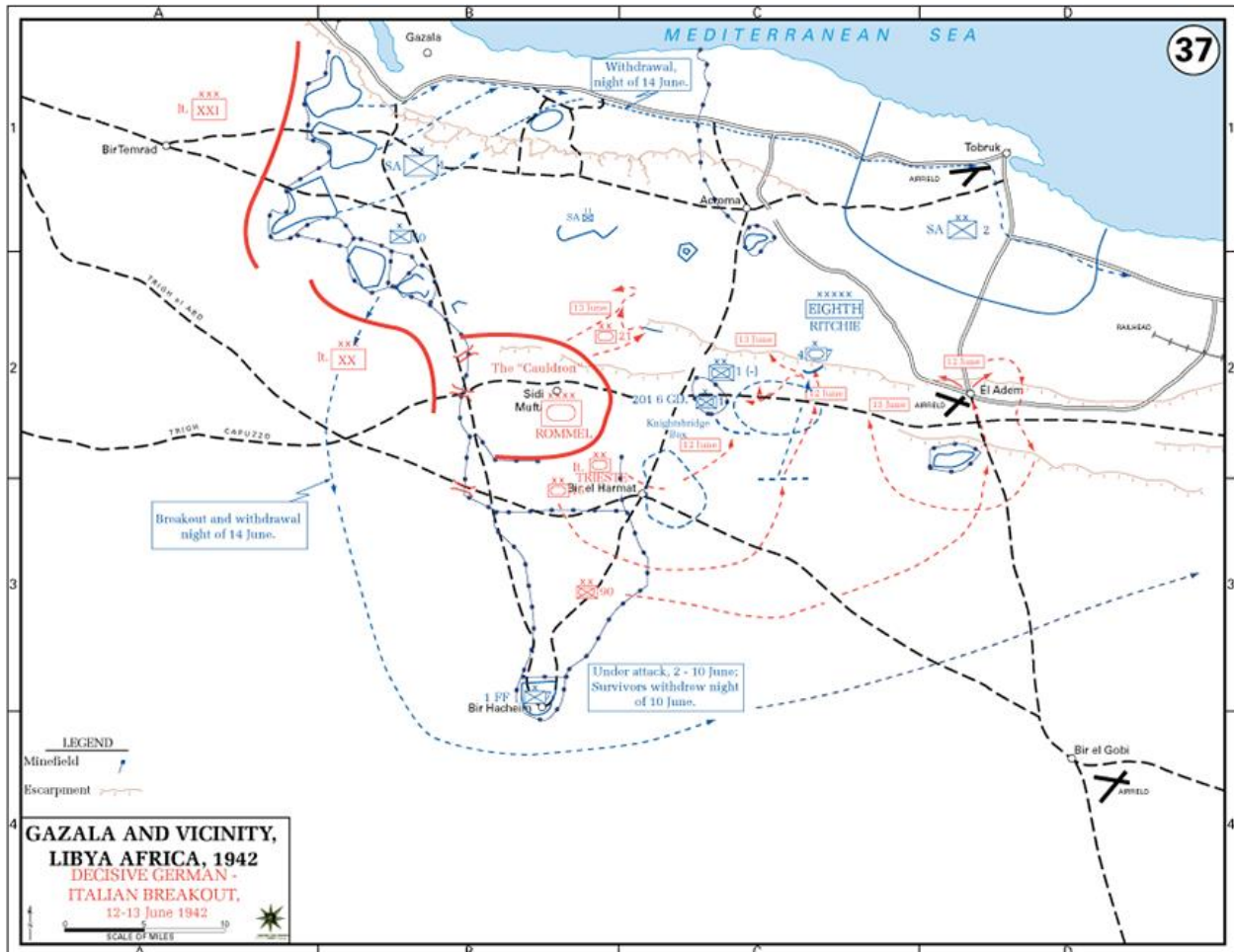


Figure 5. Rommel's breakthrough after the Battle of Gazala June 12-13, 1942. (Map by U.S. Military Academy's Department of History, <http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlases/ww2%20europe/EuropeanTheaterGIF/WWIIEurope37.gif>.)

Conclusion

Reorganization efforts in the U.S. Army since the 1930s have continually rejected proven organizational concepts. Rather than retaining the regiment, our system makes separate battalions and brigades the foundation of its force structure. The superiority of a true regimental organization fighting within a division structure was demonstrated during World War II, where panzer divisions operated as cohesive, integrated entities. The Allies, on the other hand, continually broke up their mounted formations and committed units incrementally. Subsequent post-war success of brigade-oriented armies has usually, if not universally, been against similar force structures (i.e., brigades vs. brigades). Significantly, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong used regiments effectively as part of their insurgent and conventional campaigns against South Vietnam.

This article does not endorse the Army's past or current divisional organization, which replicates the worst features of bureaucracy and inefficiency. Some people advocate flattening out echelons of command (in the form of a

brigade/battlegroup-centric Army) and eliminating the division to improve rapid decision-making and responsiveness. However, the problem is not an echeloned hierarchy incorporating the division but overstuffed headquarters and bloated MTOEs. This approach to force structure runs counter to combat experience, which indicates that although one should mass forces at the decisive point, “you should avoid big units. It does not matter if it is a company or an army corps or a division, it is easier to have small formations.”²⁷ Modularity and other proposed force-structure initiatives, however, continue to promote big and expansive organizations like the BCT.

Fragmentation of force structure for the purpose of facilitating organizational flexibility or creating organic, self-contained “plug-and-play” units is counter-productive. Not only does it undermine unit cohesion, it encourages the incremental employment of formations rather than the decisive application of force. In addition, effective employment of task forces rests more on the art of leadership than scientifically-engineered “flexible” MTOEs. This was demonstrated throughout the campaign for North Africa. The subsequent German defeat was not the result of inferior organization or operational concepts but the relegation of the theater to a subsidiary status by the high command, which allowed the British to outstrip the Axis in the buildup of forces and supplies.

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Notes

¹ LTC Anthony Herbert, *Soldier*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.

² Dr. Robert S. Cameron, *Mobility, Shock and Firepower: The Emergence of the U.S. Army’s Armor Branch, 1917-1945*, Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008.

³ <http://www.army.mod.uk/structure/structure.aspx>.

⁴ www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA097704.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sir John Hackett, introduction to *Rommel’s War in Africa* by Wolf Heckmann, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981.

⁷ Robin Neillands, *The Desert Rats: 7th Armoured Division, 1940-1945*, London: Orion Books, Ltd., 1991.

⁸ G.L. Verney, *The Desert Rats: The History of the 7th Armoured Division*, London: Hutchinson & Company Ltd., 1954.

⁹ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers* (Basil Liddell-Hart, editor), New York: Da Capo, 1953.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Verney.

¹² Rommel.

¹³ MAJ Robert Crisp, *Brazen Chariots*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1959.

¹⁴ Rommel.

¹⁵ Crisp.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Verney.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rommel.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Neillands.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rommel.

²⁷ www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA097704.

Acronym Quick-Scan

BCT – brigade combat team

DIVARTY – division artillery

MTOE – modified table of organization and equipment

RTR – royal tank regiment