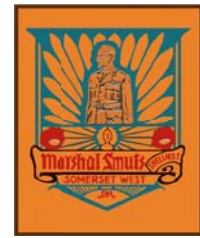




Marshal Smuts Shellhole

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BULLSHEET

February 2012

Editorial

This is to be my last Bullsheat as editor and I would like to thank all those who contributed to this newsletter over the past 20 months. At the January Monthly meeting, Dirk Kotzè, Joe van Niekerk and Stuart Smal were inducted into the Order and together with Rob Harding who was inducted during November; we would like to welcome them to Marshal Smuts and the Order. At the February Monthly meeting Dirk Conradie and Jason Grobler will be inducted and waiting in the wings, in need of gentle persuasion are Pieter Fick, John Fitz Henry, Gary Golding,

Garth Hamilton and Roger Smith. Furthermore Jumbo Smythe has indicated that he would like to transfer from Pip-Ack Shellhole and Harry Bent will be taking up dual membership at the Shellhole. Also at the January meeting, Moth Malcolm Boucher received the Certificate of Comradeship as well as his 60 Year MOTH tie. Malcolm has been a Moth since March 1946 and has served at Marshal Smuts since July 1965, truly a remarkable record and a worthy recipient of the C-badge!

This month we are concentrating on history with an article each from the First and Second World Wars. 2012 is a leap year so how about some numbers. In general terms the algorithm for calculating a leap year is as follows: A year will be a leap year if it is divisible by 4 but not by 100. If a year is divisible by 4 and by 100, it is not a leap year unless it is also divisible by 400. Thus years such as 2004, 1996, 1992, and so on are leap years because they are divisible by 4 but not by 100. For century years, the 400 rule is important. Thus, century years, 1900, 1800 and 1700 while all still divisible by 4 are also exactly divisible by 100. As they are not further divisible by 400, they are not leap years but as the year 2000 was also divisible by 400 it was a leap year.

It is said that woman may propose marriage on 29 February. Apparently this tradition was started in 5th century Ireland when St. Bridget complained to St. Patrick about women having to wait for so long for a man to propose. According to legend, St. Patrick said the yearning females could propose on this one day in February during the leap year. Also apparently according to English law, February 29th was ignored and had no legal status. Folks assumed that traditions would also have no status on that day. It was also reasoned that since the leap year day existed to fix a problem in the calendar, it could also be used to fix an old and unjust custom that only let men propose marriage.

The first documentation of this practice dates back to 1288, when Scotland supposedly passed a law that allowed women to propose marriage to the man of their choice in that year. Tradition states they also made it law that any man who declined a proposal in a leap year must pay a fine. The fine could range from a kiss to payment for a silk dress or a pair of gloves.

Shellhole Calendar

5 February – Border Boys Parade at Dawn
Patrol Shellhole: 10:30

17 February – Shellhole Monthly Meeting at 18:10

Dugout News: letter from Dugout Paybill

Good Day All - The next quarterly Commanders' Meeting will be held on Sunday, 26 February 2012, when the National Treasurer, Moth Mike Adrain will be visiting us. A number of you have indicated that you would like to discuss matters with him. He has requested that we forward him a list of queries in order for him to prepare, as time would be limited and we obviously want to resolve as many issues as possible. Also, if you want to go solo, let's register you beforehand. I envisage the meeting to be on-line and inter-active.

Moth Mike Adrain is a great example of a good Moth, always patient with the most menial of questions and responding remarkably quick to inquiries, considering the number of Paybills in the Order - the least we can do is to make his visit worthwhile and to not embarrass the POB and Dugout who sponsor this visit. I therefore request that ALL Shellholes submit the following before noon on Tuesday, 14 February 2012 so that I can prepare these in Smartedge:

1. Financials - complete from 1 July - 31 December 2011
2. Copies of ALL bank statements (1 July - 31 December 2011) If you are not sure about which accounts are registered on Smartedge - let me know.

I'd like to thank the following Shellholes who regularly submit their financials (WITH bank statements). Battledress, Dawn Patrol, Marshal Smuts and Weskus Quartel

YUTTH

Daphne Moreira Provincial Pay Bill-

PS - Guys, take note: this is a MONUMENTALLY important visit. Capitation Fees will go through the roof if we do not get rebates on our property rates; we may lose our "cash income" - the Bakoven Cottages as a result, etc., etc., etc. - YOU SIMPLY CANNOT BE COMPLACENT ON THIS ONE!!!

GHQ News

2012-01-31 The Full National Executive, all Provincial Dugouts, all District Dugouts and all Shellholes – **MOTH 85th Anniversary**

The MOTH 85th Anniversary will be held at ATKV Natalia Holiday Resort from 1st to 6th May 2012 and all Moths are urged to do their utmost to attend all the festivities during this period. Accommodation is available at Natalia at reasonable rates, for Moths who are coming from afar.

The main parade will take place on **Sunday 6th May 2012** at Warriors Gate and as many Moths as possible should please make the effort to attend this important parade. Seating will be arranged for those Moths who cannot walk or stand at the Gunner's Memorial in the Old Fort grounds where the main wreath will be laid and a short remembrance service will be held.

Dress for the parade will consist of black blazer, grey trousers, white shirt, MOTH tie, with medals worn above the left blazer pocket. No regimental badges on MOTH blazers please. Those Moths who wish to wear head dress – only black berets with embroidered MOTH emblem thereon, or the MOTH metal beret badge may be worn. No other head gear will be allowed, such as golf caps, regimental caps, berets or regimental badges on MOTH berets. We are Moths and proud of our own uniform and insignia as an Ex-Servicemen's Organisation.

All Moths are urged to refrain from drinking on the parade (this includes forming up). Moths that are drunk and/or disorderly will be removed from the parade.

Yours in True Comradeship – Moth Cas Aucamp – National Chairman

The Battle of Verdun, 1916 – Source: www.firstworldwar.com

The German siege of Verdun and its ring of forts, which comprised the longest battle of the First World War, have its roots in a letter sent by the German Chief of Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, to the Kaiser, Wilhelm II, on Christmas Day 1915.

In his letter to the Kaiser, Falkenhayn argued that the key to winning the war lay not on the Eastern Front, against Russia - whom he believed was on the point of revolution and subsequent withdrawal from the war - but on the Western Front. He reasoned that if France could be defeated in a major set-piece battle Britain would in all likelihood seek terms with Germany, or else be defeated in turn.

In his letter to Wilhelm Falkenhayn believed that Britain formed the foundation of the Allied effort ranged against Germany and that she must be removed from the war. To that end he recommended implementation of a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant shipping, a policy directed squarely at starving Britain. This combined with a knock-out block to France would, he believed, bring about a successful conclusion to hostilities.



The Kaiser acted upon Falkenhayn's recommendations, agreeing to the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, dangerous as it was in running the risk of bringing the U.S. into the war. He also sanctioned implementation of a set-piece siege against Verdun, Falkenhayn's choice of French target, starting in February 1916.

In so doing he agreed to switch focus from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. This latter strategy was not without its critics: in particular Paul von Hindenburg argued that the opportunity was lost to capture the bulk of the Russian army. Ultimately the failure of Falkenhayn's recommendations cost him his position.

Falkenhayn's choice of Verdun as the focus of the German offensive was shrewd. Although relegated by France to the status of a minor fortress during the early stages of the war, France having lost faith in the value of fortress defenses, Verdun maintained a great psychological hold in the minds of the French people. On a practical level the woods immediately behind Verdun would have proved far easier to defend than the Verdun forts.

The last fortress town to fall to the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, Verdun's fortifications had been significantly boosted in the 1880s to withstand further attacks. In addition its status as an important fortress since Roman times guaranteed recognition of the name 'Verdun' to most Frenchmen. In short, it was of greater value symbolically than strategically. Falkenhayn counted upon this.



His plan was to subject Verdun to intense bombardment, thus drawing in and diverting French troops from all over the Western Front to the eight mile wide front around Verdun.

Falkenhayn's stated aim was to "bleed France white" in its defense of the ancient fortress

town. The fact that Verdun formed a French salient into German lines only served to help Falkenhayn, since it meant that it was open to attack from three sides at once.

The task of besieging Verdun fell to the German Fifth Army under Crown Prince Wilhelm. He planned to assault the town from both sides of the surrounding Meuse River, a plan vetoed by Falkenhayn, who, cautious by nature, feared heavy losses, ordered the attack to be confined to the east bank of the river.



Originally scheduled to start on 12 February the offensive was postponed to 21 February on account of poor weather, preceded by a 21 hour preliminary bombardment.

In the interim between the planned and actual start date French Commander-in-Chief Joffre received intelligence of the imminent attack, hastily deploying reinforcements to the French Second Army. Meanwhile the fortress commander, Lieutenant Colonel Emile Driant, also a politician and published author, vainly attempted to improve Verdun's trench systems in time.

Driant prepared for the onslaught by posting two battalions, led by himself, at the tip of the Verdun salient on the east bank of the Meuse River. He faced formidable opposition: one million German troops against 200,000 defenders.

The attack finally began at 07:15 on 21 February, Crown Prince Wilhelm opening the battle with 1,400 guns packed along the eight-mile front, the guns well served by good nearby railway facilities. 100,000 shells poured into Verdun every hour, Wilhelm's intention being to kill the majority of the French defenders before

the infantry even started their advance into the fortress.

An optimistic assessment, a German scouting party sent in following the initial bombardment later that day reported half of the French fighting force remained to meet the planned attack.



It is arguable that had Wilhelm chosen to attack at this point the fortress might still have been taken. Instead, daunted by the apparently formidable defenses, Wilhelm chose to renew the bombardment.

By the close of the day the German forces had succeeded only in capturing the French front line trenches, much less than planned, although Driant himself had been killed during the battle, and his two battalions demolished.

Wilhelm withdrew his forward infantry in preparation for a further artillery bombardment, thus taking the sting out of the momentum that had been generated. More importantly it allowed the French defenders to position themselves such that they were able to enfilade the advancing German troops from across the river.



Verdun remained in French hands, although the defensive situation was dire. A message was sent to French headquarters on 23 February reporting that Driant had been lost, as had all

company commanders, and that the battalion had been reduced from 600 to around 180 men.

The following day, 24 February, German troops succeeded in over-running the French second line of trenches, forcing the defenders to within 8 kilometers of Verdun itself. Nevertheless, two outer forts, Vaux and Douaumont, continued to hold out.

A French division sent in piecemeal that same day was dispersed under heavy German artillery fire. The next day Douaumont fell to the 24th Brandenburg Infantry Regiment. The effect on French morale of the loss of Douaumont was marked, both upon the remaining defenders and the reinforcements freshly arrived. Popular French sentiment within the country demanded its recapture: withdrawal from Verdun was therefore politically impossible.

The French Commander-in-Chief, Joffre, remained unflappable. He issued a statement noting that any commander who gave ground to the advancing Germans would be court-martialled. He summarily dismissed General Langle de Cary, who was responsible for the defense of Verdun, for deciding to evacuate Woevre plain and the east bank of the Meuse River.

In Langle de Cary's place Joffre promoted Henri-Philippe Petain, a talented officer whose progress through the French army had been slowed on account of his defiance of the prevailing motto of 'attack at all costs', believing that this was a recipe for disaster, defensive technology being so much greater advanced than offensive technology.

Nevertheless, his own imperturbability in the face of adversity, somewhat similar to Joffre's, had led to his advancement to command of the French Second Army by the time he was appointed to the defense of Verdun.

Pledging to Joffre, "*Ils ne passeront pas*" - literally "*They shall not pass*" - Petain

telephoned the commander of the Verdun front line and instructed him to hold fast. In a sense Petain's appointment could hardly have better-suited Falkenhayn.



His stated aim of the campaign was to bleed the French army at Verdun. A quick German victory at Verdun would hardly meet these criteria, whereas Petain's dogged determination to hold out suited his intentions perfectly. However he could hardly have determined just how effective Petain's defensive strategies turned out to be.

Petain understood that the defense of Verdun would result in many French casualties: the nature of the terrain made this inevitable. However he was determined to inflict the maximum damage to the German invaders in the course of these losses. Hence he effectively re-organised French use of artillery, personally taking command of this aspect of the defense.

He also took action to ensure that an effective supply route to Verdun was maintained, designating a single artery road leading to a depot 50 miles to the west, Bar-le-Duc, and ensuring constant access by assigning columns of troops whose sole duty it was to maintain clearance of the road and to perform repairs as necessary. The road was christened '*Voie Sacree*' - the 'Sacred Road'.

On 6 March the Germans began a fresh offensive after receiving fresh artillery supplies, at first making great progress until French counter-attacks pushed back the advancing German infantry.

For the remainder of the month Wilhelm launched repeated attacks against the French

reinforcements constantly pouring into the fortress. Of the 330 infantry regiments of the French army, 259 eventually fought at Verdun.

Falkenhayn reluctantly committed another corps of men to an attack up the left bank of the Meuse River towards a small ridge named Le Morte-homme (the 'Dead Man'), a battle that raged continuously without conclusion.

Meanwhile the casualties were mounting rapidly on both sides. The French were certainly losing huge numbers of men, as were their German opposition. By the time the battle ended almost one million casualties had been incurred in roughly equal numbers on either side.

April 9 saw the third major German offensive launched, this time on both sides of the salient. Again Petain's defenses held, the attacks and counter-attacks continuing until the close of May, the German forces inching ever closer to the remaining forts. During this period Petain received a promotion and was replaced at Verdun by the aggressive Robert Nivelle.



Mort Homme Hill was secured by the Germans on 29 May and finally, on 7 June, Fort Vaux fell. Situated on the east bank of the Meuse River, the fort had held out against constant bombardment since the start of the battle in February. However, by now out of reserves of water and the fort itself lying in ruins, its French defenders could hold out no longer. With the capture of the fort Wilhelm offered his congratulations to the fort commander, Major Raynal, for holding out so long.

Encouraged by the success in capturing Fort Vaux; German troops almost succeeded in breaking through the French line at the close of June and into early July. It was at this stage that the latest form of chemical warfare was

unveiled by Germany: phosgene gas, which acted by forming as hydrochloric acid once inhaled into the lungs.

Joffre, meanwhile, pressed the British government to stage a major diversionary offensive elsewhere on the Western Front to serve as a drain on German manpower. Originally scheduled for 1 August, the Battle of the Somme was brought forward to 1 July upon the insistence of the French.

Petain, against Nivelle's recommendation, recommended a withdrawal from the western Meuse line. Joffre, however, supported Nivelle in dismissing the suggestion, a decision that was fortunately vindicated by a sudden drain upon German resources as a result of a Russian offensive on the Eastern Front, which meant that fifteen German divisions had to be withdrawn from Verdun to aid in the defense on the east.

By this stage the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, was scathing in his condemnation of Falkenhayn's lack of success in Verdun, which was proving as costly in terms of manpower to Germany as it was to France. Falkenhayn was consequently dismissed by the Kaiser and dispatched to the Transylvanian Front on 29 August to command Ninth Army. Falkenhayn's arch critic, Paul von Hindenburg, replaced him as Chief of Staff, buoyed by his successes in the east.

A new French commander of the Verdun forts, Third Army's General Charles Mangin, was also appointed, reporting to Nivelle. Taking the offensive Mangin managed to retake Douaumont on 24 October, followed by Fort Vaux on 2 November. Following a rest pause, Mangin renewed his offensive, retaking ground lost since the start of the German attack. (Between 15-18 December when the battle ended, the French captured 11,000 prisoners and with them 115 heavy

guns) Simply put, Hindenburg saw no point in continuing Falkenhayn's pointless attacks. French casualties during the battle were estimated at 550,000 with German losses set at 434,000, half of the total being fatalities. The

only real effect of the battle was the irrevocable wounding of both armies. No tactical or strategic advantage had been gained by either side.

Battle of Gazala and the fall of Tobruk – SA Military History Journal

The war in Africa was to play a key role in the overall success of the Allies in World War Two. The Battle of Britain gave British people hope after the despair of Dunkirk, but the first real *'taste'* of success was to come in Africa with Montgomery's victory over Rommel's Afrika Korps. The British Army was in Egypt to protect the Suez Canal. The use of this canal allowed a vast amount of time to be cut for journeys taken from Europe to the Far East. If Britain controlled the Suez then Nazi Germany and the other Axis powers could not use it. Also if the Allies could build up bases in North Africa there was always the potential to launch an attack on what Churchill called the *"soft underbelly of Europe"* - Italy or Yugoslavia. Hitler also feared this.

The Battle of Gazala was fought in May 1942 and culminated with the Allies losing Tobruk – a defeat Winston Churchill called a *"disgrace"*. The Battle of Gazala came after there had been a lull in the war in North Africa from February to mid-May 1942. Erwin Rommel was keen to continue his campaign in the region while Churchill wanted his military commanders to show a more offensive approach. The loss of Tobruk was a huge blow to the morale of the Allies and seemed to typify the different strategies shown in North Africa – Rommel's willingness to go on the offensive and improvise his plans, compared to the conservative strategy adopted by Lieutenant-General Ritchie, commander of the Eighth Army.

The war in the desert had been ongoing since June 1940 with neither side able to deliver a knockout blow. The terrain made a cohesive strategy nearly impossible as a victory was difficult to follow up. The sheer distance between each side's headquarters in North Africa – 1300 miles – gives some indication that communication was also a major issue. A campaign in the desert tended to go in fits and starts. The Afrika Korps was a poor cousin to the forces being readied for Operation Barbarossa in terms of the equipment they were given. Rommel had a constant battle getting OKW to supply him with enough fuel and modern equipment despite his apparent success. In late-January 1942, Rommel had re-captured western Cyrenaica and had advanced his two divisions to within 26 miles of Gazala and 64 miles from Tobruk; then came a lull in fighting during which both sides reorganised their men and equipment.

Rommel's attack on Gazala came at an interesting time during the war. To all intents the Axis forces were doing well in mid-1942; most of Europe was under Axis control, the Germans seemed to have recovered from their failure to capture Moscow and were developing their forces for a massive attack on Stalingrad. In the Far East, British and Indian forces were in retreat in Burma while the Japanese were consolidating their power in the huge region they had conquered. The success of the Axis forces may well have led their leaders to become overconfident. OKW believed that Rommel had the necessary forces to take Egypt and the Suez Canal. The value of the capture of such a target for the Germans was massive. The lull between January and May allowed for both forces to regroup. Churchill became a major critic of General Auchinleck (C-in-C of the Middle East) for his failure to be more aggressive. Churchill had his reasons for taking this stand. The Allies

were not doing well against the Axis forces - and he needed a victory or at least signs of an aggressive campaign - to bolster Allied morale. There was also a real fear that Malta would be invaded.

Malta was a serious problem for the Germans. Their air force and U-boats were dominant in the western Mediterranean but the RAF bases in Malta and the naval force stationed there did a great amount of damage to the Germans attempt to supply the Afrika Korps in North Africa. Malta took a pounding from the air and was awarded the George Cross by George VI for the heroism shown by the whole population. However, by late spring 1942, there was a real fear that the island would be invaded and that the Germans would have a near free-hand with regards to supplying the Afrika Korps; hence why Churchill wanted Auchinleck to be more aggressive with regards to his strategy. In particular, Churchill wanted Cyrenaica retaken as planes from the RAF could use the air bases there to attack Axis shipping if Malta did fall.

Auchinleck did not share Churchill's viewpoint - and many senior commanders in North Africa agreed with the '*Auk*'. If any Allied attack was to take place, Auchinleck believed that it should be well planned and the force involved well equipped for the attack. Such an attack would need time to prepare. This attitude put him on a collision course with Churchill who sent him a '*comply or resign*' telegram. Auchinleck promised an offensive in June. Ironically, Rommel faced a different problem. His superiors wanted him to be more cautious in his approach. OKW's mind was no doubt on Barbarossa but on May 1st they did give Rommel permission to attack Tobruk when they realised that success here would greatly help '*Operation Hercules*' - the planned invasion of Malta. By the middle of May both sides were planning an offensive campaign - the British to recapture Cyrenaica and the Germans to capture Tobruk.

British forces in the region known as the Gazala Line numbered 100000 men. The Eighth Army was led by Lieutenant-General Ritchie and was made up of the XIII Corps, led by Lt-General Gott, and the XXX Corps led by Lt-General Norrie. The Eighth Army was served by 849 tanks, made up of Grants, Stuarts, Crusaders, Valentines and Matildas. Of 320 planes in the region, only 190 were in service. British forces in Gazala and Tobruk were protected by the Gazala Line - a massive defensive barrier that consisted of huge minefields (one extended for 43 miles inland from the coast) and a series of inland '*keeps*' which housed a complete brigade. '*Keeps*' or '*boxes*' were designed to house a large number of men and equipment - the most important were at Bir Hakeim, which housed the Free French, and at Knightsbridge, which housed the 150th Brigade of the 50th (Northumberland) Division. On paper, the Gazala Line was a formidable defensive barrier. However, it had serious weaknesses. British planners assumed that Rommel would attack along the coast road; therefore a disproportionate amount of men and equipment was held in the coastal region, at the expense of inland positions. The '*keeps*' in particular had less artillery ammunition than they wanted. When some was '*acquired*' from Tobruk for the '*keeps*', senior officers ordered its immediate return to Tobruk. Rommel's intelligence suggested quite clearly that the British strength in the south of the Gazala Line was not as strong as the British wanted to portray.

Rommel's forces numbered 90000 men. He had access to 560 tanks of which 332 were German and 228 were Italian. He also had available 497 serviceable planes. Rommel attacked on May 26th 1942. He sent a decoy attack along the coastal route while he planned to send the majority of his force, his famed Panzer units, in a sweeping arc south and attack the Gazala Line primarily from the south and drive north to Tobruk. So confident was Rommel of success that he only gave his armoured units food, water and fuel for four days - as he assumed that the battle would be over by the end of May 30th. Rommel's initial success nearly overwhelmed the British forces behind the Gazala Line.

However, the Afrika Korps' success had one major problem – Rommel's armoured columns were so successful that they moved too far from their supply lines – primarily fuel (whereas the British forces were in close proximity to their supplies). The superior armour that Rommel had access to (in terms of quality) could not work without fuel. The British M3 General Grant tank was well suited to the desert but inferior to the Panzer Mark III's and VI's, especially the III and VI Specials. However, in the second phase of the battle, these tanks had fuel supply problems whereas this was less of a problem for the Grants.

By May 28th, Rommel's success was almost his downfall. His armoured units had moved too far from his fuel supplies. British Intelligence had also concluded that Rommel only had 250 tanks at his disposal to Ritchie's 330 - quite a disparity. On the night of May 28th, Rommel himself searched for his supply convoy. After he found it, he personally guided it to where his Panzer divisions were. Critics of Ritchie claim that if he had been more aggressive in his strategy he could have taken great advantage of Rommel's precarious position. However, by the 29th, the time had passed. Rommel was, by this time, in a better position in terms of supplies but he was not in a position to do what he wanted to do – attack and take Tobruk. Therefore, after a series of inconclusive battles on the 29th, Rommel decided to go on the defensive. He placed his armoured divisions within a formidable defensive barrier surrounded by feared 88-artillery. However, he had placed his forces near a huge British minefield and near the 150th Brigade Box – one of the heavily armed 'keeps' placed away from the coast that gave Ritchie a major military presence inland. By any standards, Rommel's tactics were unconventional. The area in which he had placed his troops and vehicles was to be called the 'Cauldron' for very good reasons.

German sappers worked tirelessly from May 29th to the 30th to clear a path through the minefield. Their success meant that Rommel could at least have a clear line with the Italian forces supporting him. Though Rommel appeared to be in a better position, he himself recognised the fact that they were still in danger. When a POW, Major Archer-Shee complained to Rommel about water rations for POW's, Rommel stated that POW's were getting the same ration of water as men in the Afrika Korps – half-a-cup a day. Archer-Shee later stated that Rommel said: *"But I agree that we cannot go on like this. If we don't get a convoy through tonight I shall have to ask General Ritchie for terms."*

The Eighth Army did not exploit this vulnerability and only launched a major attack on Rommel on June 3rd, thus allowing the 'Desert Fox' to reorganise his forces. It was this perceived hesitancy by Ritchie that was to induce the anger of Winston Churchill. In later years the Afrika Korps' General Bayerlein claimed: *"We were in a really desperate situation, our backs against a minefield, no food, no water, no petrol, very little ammunition, no way through the mines for our convoys; Bir Hakeim still holding out and preventing our supplies from the south. We were being attacked all the time from the air."*

While Ritchie decided on what the Eighth Army should do, Rommel used the full might of the Afrika Korps to attack the 150th Brigade Box commanded by Brigadier Haydon based at Got-el-Ualeb. The 150th held out for 72 hours but finally succumbed on June 1st. The attack on the 150th Brigade Box was all-or-nothing for Rommel. If he lost the battle, he would have had little choice but to retreat. General Bayerlein admitted after the war: *"It all turned on the 150th Box Brigade at Got-el-Ualeb. If we had not taken it on June 1st, you would have captured the whole of the Afrika Korps."*

The attack on the 150th was important because victory meant that Rommel had secure supply lines for the first time in months. Fully equipped, he could select when to attack the Eighth Army.

Auchinleck advised Ritchie to launch an attack on Rommel's position with due speed after June 1st, if only to let the Afrika Korps know that the Eighth Army was still a formidable fighting force. Auchinleck was also concerned that no action would allow Rommel too much time to consolidate his position: *"I view the destruction of the 150th Brigade Box and the consolidation by the enemy of a broad and deep wedge in the middle of your position with some misgiving."* Severe desert sand storms meant that the Eighth Army could do little on June 1st and 2nd.

However, patrols sent out to hinder the Afrika Korps were successful. Sergeant Q Smythe of the 1st South African Division won the Victoria Cross for action against the Germans in one such patrol. A major attack by the Eighth Army against Rommel started on June 5th - *'Operation Aberdeen'*. Unfortunately it was poorly managed and coordinated and led to large scale losses in the Eighth Army - 6000 killed or wounded, 150 tanks lost and 4000 POW's. Tank units felt the full force of expertly placed German 88's and without proper armoured cover, the infantry units that followed on suffered accordingly. Rommel next turned his attention to the French based at Bir Hakeim. Short of supplies and attacked from the air by Stuka's, the French, on the orders of Ritchie, withdrew on June 10th. With this success, Rommel had destroyed 50% of the Gazala Line. Just two days later, XXX Corps, with just 70 tanks remaining, was on the verge of collapse after being attacked by the Afrika Korps.

With total control of the *'Cauldron'* to the south of Tobruk, Rommel had control of the coastal road that led to Tobruk. By June 14th, Ritchie contemplated withdrawing to the Egyptian frontier to give the Eighth Army time to reorganise. However, such a move would have made Tobruk very vulnerable. Auchinleck sent out an order from Cairo - *"Tobruk must be held"*. Ritchie decided to withdraw to a position that was meant to have protected Tobruk and the withdrawal started on June 14th. Rommel was so confident of success as a result of the seeming disarray within the Eighth Army that on June 15th he signalled: *"The battle has been won and the foe is breaking up."*

Ritchie ordered that a defensive perimeter was to be put around Tobruk which extended out to 30km from the city. *'Fortress Tobruk'* was placed under the command of Major-General Hendrik Klopper, commander of the 2nd South African Division. Klopper had at his disposal about 35000 men and a total of 2000 military vehicles of various types. Supplies of all sorts were designed to last for three months. However, Klopper also faced a number of serious problems.

The Desert Air Force had moved to bases that were too far away from Tobruk to give it any form of air cover when the attack was to come from Rommel. Secondly, he had no modern anti-tank weapons at his disposal as he was primarily equipped with about 40 outclassed 2-pounders against Rommel's tank force. His third serious problem was that there were very large gaps in the mine fields that surrounded Tobruk.

At 08:00 on June 20th, Rommel attacked Tobruk. By 10:00, the Afrika Korps had penetrated nearly 3km into the 30km perimeter put around Tobruk. Defensive positions crumpled and by 19:00 the XXI Panzers were actually in Tobruk. The capture of Tobruk had taken less than one day. Klopper formally surrendered to Rommel on the morning of June 21st and all fighting had ended by the end of that day.

Why did *'Fortress Tobruk'* fall so quickly? The initial air onslaught followed by a massive mechanised attack did a great deal of damage in a very short space of time. News of the Afrika Korps success led to Klopper ordering the destruction of all the signalling equipment in his headquarters. Without this equipment, Klopper could not communicate with his subordinates. The breakdown in the chain of command was an undoubted assist to Rommel's victory.

The capture of such a major North African base was a great psychological blow to the Allies. Rommel captured 2000 tons of petrol, 5000 tons of supplies and 2000 serviceable military vehicles. He also had to take care of 33000 POW's. According to German records, the Afrika Korps lost 3360 men but 300 of these were officers (70% of the officers who fought in the attack on Tobruk). Rommel himself was made a Field-Marshal by a delighted Hitler. Churchill was later to write: *"This was one of the heaviest blows I can recall during the war. Not only were the military effects grim, but it affected the reputation of British arms.....Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another."* Ironically, the defeat did have some positives. It was to propel into the limelight Bernard Montgomery. The defeat also led to Roosevelt sending 250 new Sherman tanks to help out in the desert war.

Interesting reads on the Internet:

www.samilitaryhistory.org

www.secondworldwar.com

www.redsockfriday.com

www.ninefoxtrot.org

www.dod.mil.za

www.raf.mod.uk

www.30degreessouth.co.za

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