

"Contact at Bardia": The Baptism of Fire of the Men of the 2nd South African Infantry Division, 31 December 1941 – 1 January 1942

By Jean-Pierre Scherman

Abstract: Following the German invasion of Poland on 3rd September 1939, the South African government declared war on Germany three days later after a tumultuous vote in parliament. The new South African Prime Minister, General Jan Smuts, knew that national conscription of citizens into the Union Defence Force of South Africa would be impossible due to the country's complicated past with Britain which had resulted in many citizens either favouring neutrality or openly supporting Germany. Consequently, and rather uniquely, South Africa was therefore forced to field completely volunteer based formations. One of these volunteer formations was the 2nd South African Infantry Division. Established on 23rd October 1940, the division's men would spend a year in South Africa training and preparing before being sent to the deserts of North Africa. After six months of further desert training, at the tail end of Operation Crusader, the men of the division would finally experience their first taste of combat, when they were ordered to assault and capture the Libyan port of Bardia, which was defended by a combined Italo-German force under the leadership of German Major General Artur Schmitt. This South African close encounter in war experience, derived from both private diaries, letters and reports, supplemented by official South African Department of Defence Documentation Centre (Military Archives) documents, is the focus of this research.

Keywords: *South Africa; Union Defence Force; 2nd South African Infantry Division; North Africa; Operation Crusader.*

Introduction

Following the German invasion of Poland on 3rd September 1939, South Africa's parliament met in an emergency session. For three days the country's politicians struggled to determine what course South Africa should take. After a tumultuous vote, South Africa's Prime Minister General J.B.M. Hertzog and his stance of neutrality was defeated by his deputy, General J.C. Smuts who had advocated for South Africa joining Britain in declaring war on Germany. Hertzog defeated resigned and Smuts took over the reins of power within the nation (Katz 2018, 11-14). One of the first tasks facing the new Prime Minister was to ascertain the status of the Union Defence Force (UDF), which unfortunately was found to be totally unprepared for combat operations, lacking almost every

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perceivable modern military equipment required to conduct military operations.¹ Additionally, due to South Africa's complicated history with Britain, two wars over the preceding half century, a fair percentage of public sentiment amongst European descendant South Africans favoured neutrality or even openly favoured Germany. This meant, that Smuts could never institute universal conscription amongst the population as was possible in the other dominions such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Katz 2018, 15). To get the UDF combat ready Smuts would thus have to rely on young volunteers with no prior military experience to fill the ranks of various new formations being established.

One of these new formations was the 2nd South African Infantry Division (2nd SA Inf Div), established on 23rd October 1940, at Voortrekkerhoogte Military Base in Pretoria, South Africa's administrative capital (Orpen 1971, 38), with an authorised personnel strength of 21 315.² These volunteers were all required to sign the Africa Oath, whereby they consented to fight anywhere in Africa, as a way of bypassing the 1912 South African Defence Act which stipulated that members of the UDF were only allowed to deploy in defence of South Africa (Orpen 1968, 6). After a year of extensive training inside the country, the division embarked on 10th June 1941 at the Indian Ocean port of Durban, with their destination the desert battlefields of North Africa. The men, the vast majority of whom had never experienced combat before, expected to go into combat soon after their arrival in Egypt. Unfortunately for them, they were to endure a further six months training in Egypt, before the men of the division were to experience their first encounter with war, when they were ordered to attack the Italo-German garrison defending the Libyan port of Bardia in late December 1941 (Orpen 1971, 38-139).

An examination of the historiography concerning this division reveals a unique situation. Unlike the other divisions raised by the UDF during the war, the 2nd SA Inf Div's combat record in North Africa only stretched for approximately a year before the division is destroyed with the divisional headquarters and two infantry brigades all captured at Tobruk in June 1942. Because of this surrender at Tobruk much of the divisions official documentation was lost or destroyed while the continued confiscation and/or destruction during their time spent as POWs in Africa, Italy, and Germany, has resulted in almost no firsthand diaries of members of the division having survived the war. This lack of primary evidence, coupled with the divisions relatively short combat service, as well as the stigma of defeat, which clung to the men, even after the war's end, meant that military historians have tended to avoid researching the division. However, remarkably, some primary sources do exist including personal

Close Encounters in War Journal – Issue n. 7 (2024): "Close Encounters in War and Personal Narratives"

soldier's tales such as diaries, often written by the men after the war from memory. It is from these primary sources combined with surviving archival sources held at the South African Department of Defence Documentation Centre (Military Archives) that this first encounter with war by soldiers of the 2nd SA Inf Div can now be reconstructed.

The attack on Bardia, Operation Crusader (31st December 1941 – 02nd January 1942)

It was bitterly cold in the North African desert that late December night as soldiers of the 2nd SA Inf Div made their final preparations before what was for almost the entire division, bar a handful of First World War veterans including the divisional commander Major General I.P. ("Issac") de Villiers, their first encounter with modern warfare. The division had already been in Egypt for four months busy with training and building defences at a small railway siding marked as El Alamein on their maps when orders were received for the Allied winter offensive codenamed Crusader, which was scheduled to begin in late November 1941 (Agar-Hamilton & Turner 1957, 8-14).

Initially the division had been designated as British 8th Army reserve, but by mid-December 1941 with the pendulum of war having swung in favour of the Allies, with the Axis forces being pushed further west and the garrison at Tobruk being relieved, the division was released from its reserve duties. With the withdrawal of the main Axis formations westwards, scattered Axis garrisons deployed along the Egyptian Libyan border had been cut-off and left behind. Generally, they would have simply been surrounded and forced to surrender when their food and water supplies became depleted. Unfortunately for the Allies, these enemy garrisons occupied strategic terrain, specifically the pass from the coast that snakes up the escarpment at the small village of Bardia. This Halfaya Pass was desperately needed by Allied logisticians to resupply their forces now fighting further to the west. The task of removing these Axis defenders, well entrenched in fortifications and supported by artillery and numerous machineguns, fell to the men of 2nd SA Inf Div. (Orpen 1971, 58-59, 75 and 81). For the men of the division who had endured months of training, their time for combat had finally arrived.

The South African intelligence concerning the enemy garrisons and especially those forces investing the fortress of Bardia was rudimentary. Command of the fortress had been entrusted since October 1941 to German Major General Artur Schmitt, the former Chief Administrative Staff Officer of *Panzergruppe Afrika*. His command designated *Kampfgruppe Ost* included all the Axis garrisons

stretching from Sidi Omar all along the escarpment through Halfaya Pass and Sollum up to and including Bardia. Most of these escarpment positions were held by soldiers of Italian Major General Fedele de Giorgis' 55^a *Divisione di fanteria "Savona"*, who had established his headquarters in the Halfaya sector where he was supported by approximately 2,100 Germans under the command of the highly decorated commander of the of 1st *Battalion Schützen-Regiment 104* (1st Battalion 104th Lorried Infantry Regiment), German Major Wilhelm Bach. According to an 8th Army's Intelligence Section report of 4th December 1941, the enemy garrison inside Bardia commanded by Schmitt was estimated to number approximately 3,000 Italian and between 1,500 to 2,200 German soldiers, albeit mostly supply personnel of the Afrika Korps (Orpen 1971, 76).

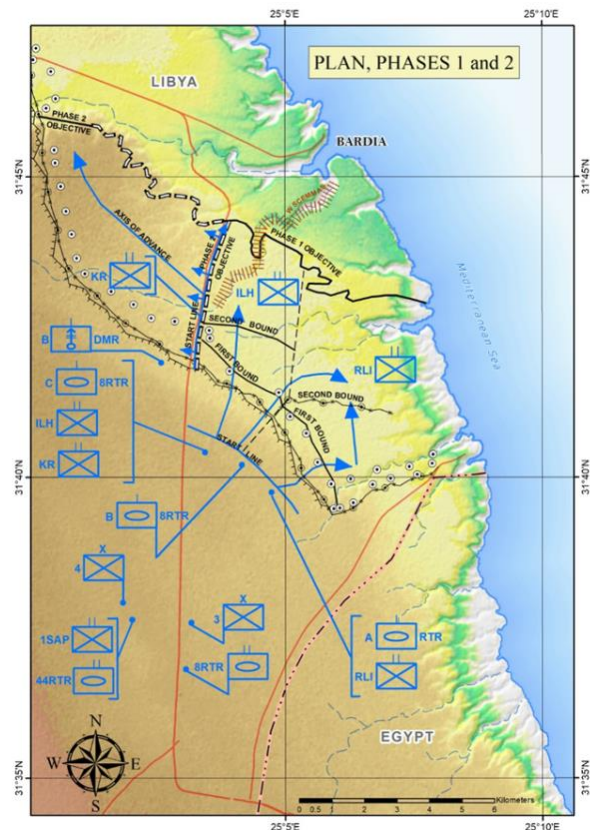
The fortifications that protected Bardia were formidable and had been constructed by Italian engineers in 1935. The main fortifications stretched along a rough semi-circle perimeter with a radius of approximately eight kilometres, covering more than thirty kilometres in all. Concrete Strong Points (SPs) were linked by barbed wire entanglements about 1.2 metres high and extending the full width of a shallow 45-centimetre trench about 3.6 metres wide, the whole way from the coast at the Wadi Maatered in the south and back again to the coast near Wadi Atiga in the north. About 137 metres outside the perimeter fence an anti-tank ditch some 1.5 metres deep had been dug, and six metres beyond that again ran a low tripwire from which empty shell-cases were hung to give early warning if anything contacted the wire. The main defensive positions consisted out of thirty-four strong points distributed along the outer perimeter, while in the vulnerable southern sector in the Wadi Maatered area, they were constructed in a mutual supporting double line. A typical SP, each of which was surrounded by its own barbed wire and anti-tank ditch, consisted of concrete underground quarters linked by covered trenches to a properly constructed concrete anti-tank gun position and two separate machinegun posts, both provided with ammunition storage areas (Orpen 1971, 84).

The South African battle plan for capturing the fortress provided for three holding forces, which were to "hold, demonstrate and contain" the enemy in their allocated sectors. The main attack was to be executed by the men of the 3rd South African Infantry Brigade (3rd SA Inf Bde) reinforced with two Royal Tank Regiments (RTR) from the British 1st Army Tank Brigade along with additional artillery (64th, 67th and 68th Medium Regiments Royal Artillery [RA], 7th Field Regiment, South African Artillery [SAA] and the 1st Carpathian (Polish) Field Regiment) (Martin 1969, 66).

This attack targeting Bardia's southern perimeter would be carried out in three phases. Phase 1 would consist of two infantry battalions, the 1st Battalion Imperial Light Horse (1ILH) on the left and the 1st Battalion Rand Light Infantry (1RLI) on the right, reinforced by the 8th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) equipped with Infantry Tank Mk III Valentines, attacking the enemy's southern defences, with the final objective being the high ground overlooking Bardia Harbour and the town. A third battalion, the Kaffrarian Rifles (KR), part of the 4th South African Infantry Brigade (4th SA Inf Bde), would cover the open western flank, left as the two leading battalions advanced into the fortress. The 1st Battalion South African Police (1SAP), from the 6th South African Infantry Brigade (6th SA Inf Bde) was designated Brigade Reserve for Phase 1. Phase 2 would entail 1SAP and KR striking westwards, preceded by two waves of 44th RTR Infantry Tank Mk II Matildas, to secure all the terrain left of 1ILH to immediately north of SP 51 on the western perimeter (Martin 1969, 66). 1SAP, who would have to deal with several SPs on the perimeter, were to be assisted by the tanks (Anon. 1941c). Phase 3 would entail mopping up of any remaining enemy positions by the infantry (Anon. 1941a and 1941b).

31st December 1941: the first encounter

Shortly after 04:00 on 31st December 1941 both the South African assaulting infantry battalions were at their start lines opposite a 5 kilometre stretch of the fortress's southern perimeter. At 04.15 104 South African and Polish 25-pounders and 32 British medium guns opened fire on various targets within Bardia. Despite this display of firepower, no one had any delusions about the comparatively limited effect it could have on the concrete SPs and the deeply dug-in shelters where the enemy waited. At 05:00 to the exact minute, the barrage suddenly lifted and the two leading infantry battalions, entered Bardia, via gaps blown by engineers through the perimeter barbed wire (Orpen 1965, 132).



Map 1: phase 1 and 2, South African assault on Bardia, 31st December 1941

The 1RLI attack on the right

The infantry of 1RLI had been allocated 3rd SA Inf Bde's right flank from where they were to attack SPs 1 to 14 and the switch positions R1 to R9, located to the rear (Simpkins 1965, 106). The men of "B" Company 1RLI, led by the diminutive Captain E.R. ("Ernest") Tickton, were under a surge of excitement for "After 18 months of training, the moment had come, and every man welcomed it. Closeness to death, the horror of war, all thought of the madness of our age, were forgotten." This was to be the men's night of action. Storming through the gaps blown by the engineers the company spread out into its platoons to begin attacking their various designated enemy SPs. At 06:30 the British tanks arrived and the advance towards the second line of fortified positions commenced. Despite heavy enemy fire which killed Lieutenant R.C. Cole-Willey, No. 8 Platoon commander, progress remained steady. When heavy fire from a particular SP halted their advance, a bayonet charge was ordered, which led to the surrender of its German garrison, but for the loss of four killed and fourteen wounded. Amongst the wounded was Corporal J.E. Petch, who was later singled out by his comrades for his display of courage and determination while leading his section. Before he was wounded, Petch had attended to some of the battalion wounded while under heavy artillery fire until the arrival of the stretcher-bearers (Tungay 1947, 90). Similarly, when his platoon commander was killed and the remaining platoon sergeant and two section commanders wounded, Corporal H.A. Proctor assumed leadership of the platoon and led it with exceptional courage throughout the remainder of the action. The citation for his Military Medal (MM) reads, "For outstanding qualities of leadership and exceptional courage during the attack on Bardia during 31 Dec./2 Jan."³

"C" Company, commanded by Captain G.R. ("George") Shipway also successfully crossed into the fortress and began assaulting their designated SPs. When a particular SP proved troublesome, Corporal J.W. Hemsted volunteered to clear it up. Under covering fire, Hemsted advanced to the SP and then began throwing in hand-grenades. For seventy minutes the rest of his platoon had to wait patiently while Hemstead subdued the SP. Eventually white flags appeared followed by the surrender of seventeen defenders (Tungay 1947, 90). Hemsted's citation for the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) exclaims that, "this N.C.O. displayed great bravery and magnificent leadership throughout the attack on Bardia."⁴

While both "B" and "C" Companies successfully penetrated the fortress' defences, albeit with casualties, "A" Company was experiencing much stronger

resistance in their sector. The trouble started at the perimeter anti-tank ditch, which in "A" Company's sector were 2.7 metres deep rather than the envisaged 1.2 metres. This forced "A" Company's supporting tanks to utilise an alternative gap which left the company unsupported and its attacking platoons vulnerable (Simpkins 1965, 106).

Case in point was Lieutenant R.Y. ("Robin") Hull's No. 4 Platoon which passed through the perimeter gap at 05:05. After advancing for fifteen minutes the platoon ran into heavy fire from SP 11 and was forced to withdraw. At 05:35 the platoon began to manoeuvre against the SP's left flank and was able to cut the wire entanglements surrounding it. However, enemy mortar and machine-gun fire kept the infantry pinned down in the open terrain. Corporal T.J. Callaghan, a Section Commander, suggested, "that the platoon withdraws to the road, await the tanks, and then attack the pillbox with their help." However, Lieutenant Hull, in his first major engagement refused, pointing out, "that our orders are to silence the strongpoint before the tanks arrived." With dawn breaking at 06:20, the accuracy of the defender's fire increased and soon both Lieutenant Hull and Corporal Callaghan were wounded. Despite their best efforts the SP refused to surrender, and the casualty list continued to grow. After almost five hours of battle the tanks finally arrived and quickly subdued the SP, but the butcher's bill amongst No. 4 Platoon was severe, with the Platoon Commander (Lieutenant Hull), Platoon Sergeant (Sergeant A.A. Riley), Section Commander (Corporal J.F. Scallan), along with three more NCOs and five privates killed and thirteen others all wounded. No. 4 Platoon had been destroyed (Simpkins 1965, 116 and 121-123).

No. 5 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant D.N. McCann had crossed into the fortress unsure what lay waiting for them as military intelligence was unsure if the machinegun posts in their sector were crewed or not. Enemy fire from various locations quickly answered that question, with the platoon rapidly seeking available cover. With the eventual arrival of the British tanks, the surviving infantry formed up behind them and began to penetrate deeper into the fortress. No. 5 Platoon had been tasked to clean up the very precipitous Wadi Maatered, with its mass of machineguns and mortar positions, many of them in concrete emplacements. In this extremely broken country, months spent learning the art of stalking, approach, and contact, proved invaluable. In this deadly operation, with both German and Italian defenders having to be forced out of their positions with bayonet and hand grenade, only a single 1RLI infantryman was wounded (Tungay 1947, 88-89).

Section Leader Corporal W. ("William") Hindshaw proved himself particularly skilled in this operation. His citation for the MM:

This N.C.O. showed outstanding ability and daring during the initial attack on Bardia defences on the morning of 31 December 41. During the attack, he led his section in assaulting one strongpoint after another, and throughout the action risked his own life to help his men until he himself was wounded [by a sniper] (Tungay 1947, 90). His outstanding leadership and courage was directly responsible for the fall of several strong points.⁵

After ten hours of fighting, 1RLI finally secured its objective along the high ground overlooking Bardia, for the loss of thirty men killed and ninety-seven wounded (Simpkins 1965, 123).

The 1ILH attack on the left

On 3rd SA Inf Bde's left flank, the 1ILH went in with Major S.B. Gedye's "A" Company on the right, Captain R.E. ("Ronald") Bodley's "B" Company in the centre and Major V.E. ("Victor") Wepener's "C" Company on the left (Martin 1969, 68). Corporal J.H. ("John") Smallwood of "A" Company records the opening of the battle: "Slowly we moved up to the starting line. Then suddenly, as if a switch had been pressed, the entire western horizon and round the south was lit up by dozens and dozens of gun flashes. It took several seconds before the noise reached us" (Klein 1969, 109-110). Under cover of this artillery barrage, the engineers breached the fort's outer perimeter wire (110). No. 4 Platoon of "A" Company, 1ILH, were first through the gap. When the platoon began overrunning trenches on their immediate front, they quickly realised that the gap had been blown in the wrong place and that instead of crossing the perimeter fence in between the SPs, they were assaulting directly towards SP 19. Fortunately for the platoon, the defending Italians inside the SP were taken by surprise, and it fell without any resistance. By 07:30 "A" Company had taken SPs 19, 16 and R11, suffering only two wounded. By 09:15 the company began assaulting towards a second line of resistance anchored around a network of sangers deeper within the fortress. Once these positions were overcome, "A" Company was able to resume its advance relatively unmolested until it reached its objective for the day, a ridge to their north (Tungay 1947, 68).

"B" Company was not so fortunate. Apart from some earlier skirmishing, none of the ninety-nine men of "B" Company, 1ILH, had been in action before. Once the engineers had blown a gap in the wire, Sergeant G.H.E. ("George")

Warren, commanding No. 8 Platoon, quickly advanced and captured his assigned target, SP 23 with only one man wounded. No. 9 Platoon, led by Lieutenant B.M.C. Stubbs, due to determined Italian resistance inside of their designated target, SP 20, where 'Grenades were coming over like hail', required the assistance of Warren's platoon, before this SP also finally surrendered (68).

At 07:10, with the first of the British tanks crossing into the fortress, Bodley prepared his two platoons to continue their advance deeper into Bardia. But what had happened to his third platoon from which he had received no news? Father B.A.H. Simpson, 3rd SA Inf Bde's Roman Catholic padre recalls: "I came across 16 bodies lying in a row. The men didn't look as if they were dead. They were terribly still and had their faces to the enemy. I spoke to the wounded and gave them absolution, and the last sacrament to those in a bad way" (65).

In their first battle of the war, No. 7 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant J.M.H. ("John") Griffiths, had all been wiped out, while attacking SP 21. The Italian defenders had held their fire until the platoon had cut their way through the wire. They then opened fire at point blank range. Within a few brief moments, Lieutenant Griffiths, his Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant C.P. Mellet, and thirteen of his men were killed and five others wounded. The surviving seven members of the platoon under the inspired leadership of Corporal G. ("Gerald") Goddard charged towards the SP with bayonets drawn. Despite losing another man killed in the charge and falling into a camouflaged anti-tank trap, the six survivors continued to attack, until the Italians surrendered (Klein 1969, 109-110; Martin 1969, 68). Corporal Goddard's citation for the awarding of an immediate DCM reads as follows:

For outstanding gallantry and inspiring leadership in the attack on Bardia on 31 Dec 1941. In an attack on an enemy strong point the platoon, in which Cpl. Goddard was a section commander, came under very heavy enemy M.G. fire with the result that 16 members of the platoon, including the Platoon Commander and the Platoon Sgt., were killed and 7 more wounded. Cpl. Goddard immediately took charge of the remaining 9 men and captured the position at the point of the bayonet. He then re-organised his men and led them on to the next objective which he captured. He remained in command throughout the rest of the day, at all times inspiring his men with his fearless leadership.⁶

What the South Africans lacked in experience they made up for in bravery. Ignorant of the fate that had befallen his No. 7 Platoon, Captain Bodley continued his advance with his remaining two platoons towards the high ground overlooking Bardia. Approximately forty minutes later, Sergeant Warren reported that his platoon was on position and that he had observation on Bardia's "white

Close Encounters in War Journal – Issue n. 7 (2024): "Close Encounters in War and Personal Narratives"

buildings" and that "its prominent church spire, perched on a promontory of rock looked wonderful." Lieutenant Stubbs' Platoon also continued its advance northwards behind some supporting tanks, but when Stubbs was wounded, command of the platoon fell upon the shoulders of Corporal B.M. Pleskus, who successfully led them to their objective for the day (Tungay 1947, 68-69).

On the battalion's far left flank, "C" Company, 1ILH found themselves under immense pressure as soon they crossed into the fortress via the engineer effected breach in the perimeter wire. Unknown to the company, their entry lay between SPs 25 and 27 and a third unnamed SP to the rear, which formed a deadly triangle of SPs nicknamed the "Apex". According to the initial battle plan, No. 10 Platoon was to attack left towards SP 27 while No. 11 Platoon attacked right towards SP 25 on the perimeter. No. 12 Platoon would then advance on the rear and switch positions of SP 22 and 25. However, under combat conditions, this plan soon unravelled. Once the engineers had successfully blown a gap in the perimeter wire, No. 10 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant E.F. ("Ted") Baxter stormed across and immediately assaulted a machinegun post. After hand grenades had been thrown into the post the Italian defenders surrendered. Despite being shot through the arm during the assault, Baxter refused to be evacuated. Instead, he ordered an attack against another SP, which was captured for the loss of two men killed and one wounded (55-56).

Baxter and his men continued advancing despite the enemy's liberal utilisation of flares to light up the still dark perimeter. Dashing forward the platoon successfully overcame another SP using bayonets, even though Baxter was wounded a second time in his ribs. He again chose to continue with his men. However, once the sun rose, the fire became so heavy that Baxter was forced to halt his continued assault on SP 27 and go back to the gap to ask for tank assistance. One tank was detached from "C" Squadron 8th RTR, which was just entering via Gap 5. While it kept the defenders' heads down, Baxter and his men then overran the SP (Coleman 1988, 176-178).

Lieutenant W.V. ("Mick") Goldby and No. 12 Platoon also entered Bardia and quickly crossed over the main road into the fortress from where they began assaulting an SP located to their left. After a few hand grenades had been thrown into the SP an officer and twelve other ranks (ORs) surrendered. When the tanks finally arrived at his position, Goldby and his men fell in behind three of them as they advanced deeper into the fortress. Suddenly a tank next to him exploded into fire, quickly followed by the two remaining tanks, all shot out by German 88mm guns situated within the "Apex" defensive complex. Enemy light and heavy machineguns located within SP 29 also opened on the support-

ing "C" Company infantrymen, with five men being wounded in quick succession. As more tanks came up from the rear, "C" Company continued advancing, passing underneath the telephone wires that crossed their front. A fifth tank was now also hit and as its ammunition exploded "dark smoke and flame shot out of the tank turret." Despite taking more casualties, mostly from sniper fire, the company continued to advance. After moving another 365 metres deeper into the fortress, word was received at 11:00 from Lieutenant Colonel E.J.R. ("Ernest") Blake that both "A" and "B" Companies on their left had overcome the SPs in their sectors and were already on the escarpment overlooking Bardia. "C" Company was ordered to link up with them (Tungay 1947, 56-57).

Wepener is his desire to follow the order given by his battalion commander made a fateful decision when his leading elements reported that their forward progress was being blocked by a deep wadi that cut across their line of advance. Despite his orders being to keep the main road into Bardia as his left border, Wepener decided not to cross and clear the wadi but rather to advance along its edge which meant he was funnelled to the northeast as the wadi ran diagonally across his area. This resulted in a gap forming between "C" Company and the KR companies following in their wake, who rightly assumed that the company had crossed and cleared the wadi as had been their instructions. Wepener and "C" Company took in their positions along the ridge overlooking Bardia shortly after noon believing that their day's work was complete (Klein 1969, 110; Martin 1969, 69).

In a letter home, Private Pieter Fraser who was a member of the Headquarters Company 1ILH, which consisted of various command and control elements within the battalion, describes his company's actions that morning:

Each company had two of these strong points to dispose of, one on the outer wire and one a few hundred yards further back. Such was the impetus of our rush that we were over our first strong point before the enemy knew it had visitors.... We captured the lot, 14 men and an officer without firing a shot. But now... the element of surprise is gone and the pillbox further in is wide awake. They open up with machine-guns and keep us pinned down... for 2½ hours. As dawn broke the tanks came rumbling in the gap. The Jerries turned their attention to the tanks. This diversion enabled us to crawl up and surround the other strong point without loss to ourselves.⁷

With the SP captured, Private Fraser and the rest of Headquarters Company also began advancing towards the high ground overlooking Bardia:

We spread out and with fixed bayonets advanced the 5 odd miles [8 kilometres] cleaning up the wadis of further little strong points. At 12 o'clock we made our objective, a high escarpment separated from the escarpment on which we could [see] Bardia, by a deep wide valley or wadi.⁸

Private Gilbert Algar was a crew member in a turretless Marmon Herrington armoured car, the top of which the crew had covered with their spare wheel to prevent enemy soldiers throwing hand grenades into the open turret. The armoured cars formed part of the battalion's support vehicles and had followed behind the attacking infantry and after being shown by Military Police which gap to take into Bardia:

Shells were exploding all around us, we were sitting ducks. Meanwhile we watched the infantry making their way forward under heavy fire from machine guns, and mortars as well as artillery shells. A shell burst a few yards away from us. I heard the shrapnel on the armoured plate which sounded like stones on a tin roof. Then the signal came for us to make a dash for it, just as we reached the other side a shell fell close to our front wheel which we were sure was blown off. To have to change a wheel in these conditions would be extremely risky. However, we were still mobile, so the driver was told to carry on. We discovered later that a chunk of rubber was sliced from the tyre but had remained fully inflated. (Algar, 23-24)

Venturing deeper into Bardia, Algar and his crew travelled over terrain "as flat as a billiard table." Suddenly, an armoured car to their right was hit by an 88mm shell. Algar, without thinking, jumped out and ran over to offer help. After opening the vehicles back doors he found that the crew of three were dead. Returning to his vehicle, they continued to advance until shell fire pinned them down. Here another armoured car was hit by a shell which killed Algar's close friend, Mike Pass, with rolls of blankets strapped on the outside of the car saving the lives of the other two crew members (Algar, 24).

Shortly after moving off again, heavy 88mm fire from their left flank again forced the crew to take cover behind a destroyed tank, using it as a shield for their vehicle. Forward progress from this location was impeded by the same deep wadi that had forced Wepener to alter his advance route. When the 88mm gun became silent the crew decided to "charge along the high ground parallel to [the wadi] in an attempt to skirt around it and catch up with the rest" of the battalion that by now was approaching the high ground overlooking Bardia. While executing this risky manoeuvre, the vehicle was hit by a shell, fired by an 88mm located on the far (western) side of the wadi. The shell's velocity was so

great that it punched right through the vehicle's armour, exiting on the other side. The shell missed Algar by inches but went through the crew's food cupboard spraying the inside with "marmalade, maize (mealie meal), condensed milk and biscuits" (Algar, 24-25; 28).

A short while later, Algar discovered that he was bleeding and that he could not stand. As no vehicle would be taken out of action for one casualty, the crew treated him with their field dressings before placing him at the nearest reasonably sheltered place. Marking his location by sticking his rifle by the bayonet into the ground with his helmet placed on the butt, the crew moved off again. Algar was soon joined by a padre who had spotted the marker and who offered him some coffee from a flask. Next to arrive were some African stretcher bearers who quickly carried him back to a South African Field Ambulance squad in the rear. Algar had to be sent to the 4th South African Military Hospital near Alexandria to recover from a piece of shrapnel that had penetrated right up to his thigh bone (Algar, 28-29).

Despite suffering some casualties, the 1ILH could report by midday to 3rd SA Inf Bde that all their companies were in their allocated positions overlooking Bardia, but the lapse by "C" Company on the left flank was about to be ruthlessly exploited by the Axis defenders.

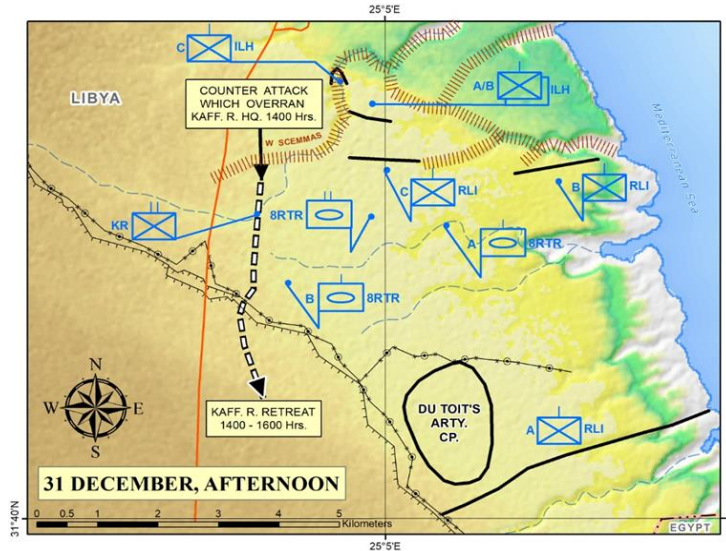
The Axis counter-attack

Shortly before noon Major Wepener and "C" Company were approaching their assigned positions along the ridge overlooking Bardia. The earlier failure of the infantry of KR to link up with them, however, made them vulnerable to a flanking assault. To counter this threat, Major Wepener had sent two of his platoons under Lieutenants Goldby and Baxter out as flank guards, while he continued to advance with his remaining platoon, commanded by Lieutenant C.D. ("Charles") Griffiths, towards the ridge (Tungay 1947, 54). Exploiting the gap left by the KR's absence, an Axis combat group, infiltrating via the uncleared Wadi Scemmas, proceeded to strike into the rear of the unsuspecting 1ILH Companies deployed along the high ground (Klein 1969, 110).

In his letter home to his parents, Private Fraser described the afternoon's battle in the most basic of terminology, possibly not wanting to alarm them, by telling them how close the 1ILH had come to being annihilated:

[Later the afternoon] our tanks rolled up and before long we found ourselves in the midst of a tank battle. I saw several of ours knocked out [but] when it all died away only our

tanks could be seen. We stayed there [on the escarpment] until nightfall and took up a defensive position in the wadi [for the night].⁹



Map 2: The Axis counter-attack, afternoon, 31st December 1941

The first that "A" Company knew of the Axis assault was when a party of their soldiers deployed along the edge of the Wadi Scemmas suddenly found itself under attack from German reinforcements that had emerged from within the wadi itself. This unexpected attack forced the men to withdraw towards the high ground and their comrades. The last two men of the party to leave were Privates N. ("Norman") Bank and H.M. Siegenberg, but after running about twenty metres Banks was hit by a projectile fired from an Italian 20mm machinegun mounted on a tractor lorry. Siegenberg went to ground and faked that he too had been hit. After two hours, with no sign of the enemy, Siegenberg, went back to Banks, who was still alive, but with a serious stomach wound. Even though Bank's bowels were protruding, and he had applied his own field dressing, with Seidenberg's aid they began to move back and both were able re-join their company in its new location. For assisting Bank and other exemplary actions that day, Siegenberg was mentioned in dispatches (Tungay 1947, 71).

When the enemy attack struck, realising the vulnerability of his battalion in the open, with its left flank still exposed, Blake ordered an immediate withdrawal to a stone wall 550 metres behind the escarpment. With only a handful of men still alive, the survivors successfully made the move under fire to the

stonewall. When British tanks appeared, the truck mounted 20mm engaged them but was soon destroyed by tank counter-fire. When the Germans counter-attacked the stonewall positions, three men of the company were killed but thanks to the gallantry and resourcefulness of Corporal Smallwood, who was mentioned in dispatches, the survivors who now only numbered nine continued to resist in position (74).

"B" Company had also taken up its positions along the ridge overlooking Bardia when the German attack struck. The truck mounting the 20mm immediately began to engage Sergeant Warren's platoon, which quickly had eight men killed, five wounded and three captured. Blake then ordered Bodley to withdraw his surviving men under cover of a stonewall 365 metres behind their positions, a move which resulted in another two men being killed. Only thirty-one men of the company eventually reached the wall and were able to continue fighting (64). That any survived at all was in part due to the leadership of Warren. His citation for the awarding of the MM reads as follows:

For conspicuous gallantry and resourcefulness when in command of his platoon in the attack on Bardia on 31 Dec 1941. After capturing an enemy strong point, he re-organised his platoon and led it in a successful bayonet charge against another enemy strong point that was pinning down the platoon on his flank. In the enemy counter-attack which followed he held his ground in spite of intense M.G. and artillery fire and only withdrew his platoon under orders of his Coy. Commander. That this withdrawal was successfully carried out in spite of heavy enfilading fire from his right flank was entirely due to the personal leadership and example of this N.C.O.¹⁰

The thirty-one men of "B" combined with the nine surviving men in "A" Company meant that Blake could only muster 40 fighting men from his position behind the stonewall (Tungay 1947, 64-65). But what of his "C" Company deployed on the far-left flank?

"C" Company was still advancing with two platoons as flank guards and one on the front when they suddenly also found themselves subjected to withering enfilade fire from the rear by German infantry supported by the armoured tractor mounting a quick-firing 20mm gun. When Blake ordered the battalion to seek cover behind the stonewall, only "A" and "B" Companies were able to execute the order, for "C" Company enfiladed on both sides, was completely pinned down. The situation was made worse by the swirling dust storm that rendered many weapons inoperable (Klein 1969, 110-11).

Fighting to prevent the Germans overrunning their positions, the two flanking platoons counter-attacked and successfully destroyed several machinegun positions. However, the company casualty list was rapidly growing, with Goldby being killed instantly by an 88mm shell that ricocheted off a tank that had come up to assist the company, while both Griffiths and Baxter were soon wounded. Wepener was also hit, suffering a serious leg wound and it was only the timely arrival of another three tanks that allowed the company to storm a ridge upon which the Germans had established themselves, that saved the company from annihilation. Despite now numbering less than fifty men fit for combat, the company continued to resist until nightfall where upon the orders of Wepener, who had by now been wounded for a second time, the company withdrew to their battalion headquarters positions (Klein 1969, 111).

Major Wepener's citation for the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) describes his valiant action that afternoon:

On 31 Dec., his Coy. had the difficult task of advancing on the left flank of the attack. When his final objective was reached, he hung tenaciously onto this position, although the force which was to have connected his left flank with the perimeter was unable to reach its objective. His posn. was heavily counter-attacked but he refused to be evacuated though severely wounded, with a compound fracture of the leg and a bullet wound in the head. His Coy. was reduced to less than fifty, but he continued to direct operations. His inspiring influence was such that the position was held until after dark.¹¹

In total the company had lost twenty-six men killed and twenty-four men wounded during its first major engagement of the war (Klein 1969, 111). Speaking from his hospital bed later, Wepener paid tribute to his men:

They were magnificent. They faced the onslaught unflinchingly and inflicted considerably more casualties on the enemy than the enemy on them. In all "C" Company cleaned up 30 machine-gun nests, captured more than 200 prisoners and actually gained its objective. From the high ground we could see Bardia with its white buildings and church spire. If my flank had been held, I think Bardia could have been captured that day. (Tungay, 55)

Not unsurprisingly none of the 1ILH sources makes mention of the fact that the 1ILH was itself a primary contributor to this near disaster, for it was the failure of "C" Company 1ILH to cross and clear the Wadi Scemmas, as was their task, that allowed the Axis force access into their rear areas. It was only the superb leadership of the officers and NCOs of the battalion, such as that of Lieutenant

Colonel Blake who was also awarded the DSO,¹² combined with the bravery of the men that averted this crisis. In total the battalion was to suffer seventy-one dead and seventy-nine wounded during the days fighting (Visser 1983, 122).

The battle of Old Year's Eve: 31st December 1941 – 1st January 1942

When news of the Axis counter-attack reached 3rd SA Inf Bde's Headquarters, Brigadier C.E. ("Clifford") Borain immediately activated his reserve, the fighting policemen of 1SAP and quickly ordered them to stabilise the brigade's open left flank. Lieutenant V.E. Garde, the second-in-command of 1SAP's Carrier Platoon equipped with British Bren Carriers describes his unit's actions that evening in their attempt to stabilise the brigade's open western flank. With the defenders of the three SPs within the "Apex" complex still resisting stoutly, the policemen advanced to contact:

The Carrier Platoon was divided into two, the first portion consisting out of 16 O/Rs under Captain Prinsloo, and the second consisting out of 16 O/Rs under Lieutenant Garde. Of these four O/Rs each were drivers who had to remain with the vehicles. The artillery barrage opened at about 21:30 hours and the troops moved to the attack in accordance with the set plan. Comparatively little opposition was encountered at any of the three SP's below the triangle, which was leap-frogged in due order.¹³

However, in the dark rather than leapfrogging past the "Apex" the policemen inadvertently blundered into the "Apex" SP's killing zone. Once this was discovered a hasty withdrawal was executed. With their position now confirmed, 1SAP launched a sustained assault on the "Apex" complex to finally overcome its dogged resistance. Garde continues:

The attack was continued along the line of the wire moving northwards towards the apex [of the triangle]. It was in this area that 1SAP sustained most casualties [...]. Five armoured cars were more or less put out of action. Following an anti-tank ditch that ran parallel to the road the attack reached the water point, whence it was delivered in rear of the apex SP. The apex SP was captured.¹⁴

With the first "Apex" SP finally captured, 1SAP continued its operation throughout the night and into the New Year capturing the various SPs of the "Apex" complex with the assistance of some British tanks. By sunrise on New Year's Day, 1SAP had succeeded in establishing a flank about 2.4 kilometres

east of the Sollum – Bardia road but could not reach the 1ILH company deployed to its front. However, by arrangement between the two battalion commanders, the 1ILH refused its left flank and contacted 1SAP to the south (Anon. 1941: n.p.).

Riding after dark into Bardia on the back of a troop-carrier, Private J. ("Jack") Mortlock, a machinegunner in the divisional machinegun battalion, Die Middellandse Regiment (DMR), vividly describes the Bardia battlefield, "I vaguely recollect passing overturned and burnt-out trucks, I also noticed the dim shadows of men stumbling past, probably wounded or prisoners." Desultory fire was still taking place across the front, with "balls of fire bouncing across the ground ahead of us, and different coloured Verey lights exploding in the sky." Exhausted and dirty, the DMR reached their new positions where they set up their guns and awaited the dawn of a new combat day (Mortlock 1956, 27-28).

As soon as it became light, "we discovered to our dismay that we had been given the wrong compass bearing, and that our guns were pointing in the wrong direction; also, that the enemy were much closer than anticipated." This was quickly rectified, with the men spending the rest of the day sheltering from, "a bitterly cold wind blowing, the sky completely overcast, and sleet pellets chased each other across the sand" (28).

Paul de Villiers, who was working in the Intelligence Section of 4th SA Inf Bde Headquarters, accompanied the brigade's Intelligence Officer, Captain D.G. Fannin "to where the troops had cut through the barbed wire." De Villiers and the rest of 4th SA Inf Bde's Headquarters finally entered Bardia, late on the afternoon of 1st January 1942, with de Villiers simply writing, "it was bitterly cold" (De Villiers, 40).

Warrant Officer Class 2 ("George") Newman, an infantryman in the Support Company KR wrote a letter to his father in which he continues to tell him of his New Year's Day:

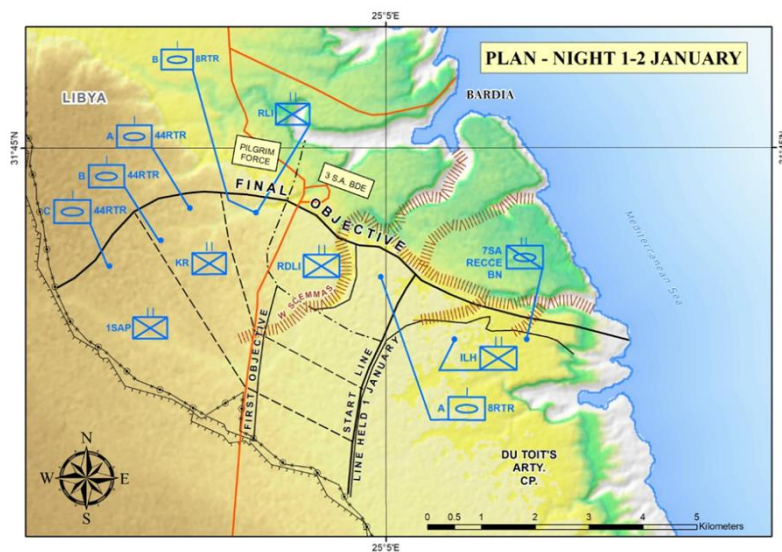
Next day was New Year's Day and it was the most miserable I have ever spent. The day was awful; dust – you couldn't see your hand in front of you, and then it finished up raining. I had just finished unpacking when news came that we were going in again with a great deal more help in men, tanks, and everything else, even the Navy.¹⁵

Newman explains how this news affected the men's morale:

Up to this time we were all physically tired and mentally miserable; however, this news changed the whole atmosphere and although we had been given such a doing and were so tired, we were all very pleased to go and have another crack at it; so everybody was busy getting ready and making new arrangements in the light of what we had learnt in our first action.¹⁶

The South Africans had decided to launch one last attack, scheduled for 22:00 that night, to overcome Bardia's stiff defences.

The night assault: 1st-2nd January 1942



Map 3: The South African night assault on Bardia, 1st- 2nd January 1942

The policemen of 1SAP deployed on the far-left flank of the attack, had reasons for concern, as their task during the night attack was a formidable one; subdue the 11 perimeter SPs including those remaining in the "Apex" defensive area (Tungay, 118). To assist in this regard, 44th RTR lent 1SAP 12 of their Bren machineguns along with turretless Mark II armoured cars (Orpen 1971, 127). Lieutenant Garde, in a personnel narrative to the UDF historical records officer explained the tactics devised by 1SAP and the British tankers who were to support the policemen in dealing with the enemy SPs along the perimeter:

Three Tanks, followed by infantry would advance in line ahead. On reaching the SP it would be their duty to search for a gap in the wire entanglements with which each SP was surrounded. If a suitable gap were found it would be the duty of the centre tank to remain

at that gap, covering the entry of the infantry, while the leading tank would proceed forward for a distance of approximately 200 yards [180 metres] in order to engage with its fire, the next SP in line, if fire should be opened there from on the infantry attacking the original SP. If, on the other hand no gap should be found, it would be the duty of the centre and rear tanks respectively to take up positions at the corners of the SP and give covering fire while a gap should either be blown by means of a Bangalore torpedo or be affected by hand cutting of the wire. Once penetration had been affected it would become the sole role of the Carrier Platoon to rush the defences under covering rifle fire. Once the infantry reached the SP it would become impossible for the tanks to continue their fire. Grenades would be thrown into gun positions [to take out the guns]. [Lastly] the position would then be taken with the bayonet.¹⁷

Private D.I.H. ("Dennis") Mugglestone had also accompanied 1SAP into Bardia. As the policemen were taking up their positions it began raining while a sharp breeze blew straight into their faces. As the time of attack drew nearer, Mugglestone noticed that "Every man was exceptionally quiet, and possibly harboured the same idea as myself – would I reach the other side alive? All kinds of thoughts, mostly black ones, passed through the minds." Mugglestone describes the actions around Zero Hour:

At exactly 10 p.m., the signal to advance was given, and every tank and man started moving like one huge mass, under the protective wing of a heavy artillery barrage. We had now reached the stage where our shells whined overhead from the rear and those of the enemy from the front. It was all one big whine. (10)

Lieutenant D. ("David") Ling, "A" Squadron 44th RTR, commanding a Matilda II tank troop recorded the night's assault in his diary as he experienced it:

Zero [hour] We got right under the barrage, which was plastering the road area, and waited. Crossed road after barrage lifted, on a very narrow front – wadi on right and wire on left leading us into a defile. On other side we try and shake into our open formation again covering the whole front. [A breakdown in communications forces him to climb out of his tank and tell each tank where to go]. We move off again and promptly lose "C" Squadron who disappear down Wadi Scemmas. Tom B. is hit and killed at 10 yards range, but we get the gun that did it [...]. Make contact with "C" by Verrey Light. Off we go again covering now only 1,000 yards between us. John Mosley [tank] hit and catches alight – he runs to the next tank for Pyrene which is also promptly hit – by mortar which is dropping all around us [...]. Mortars open up again and get direct hits on Bleaden's and Beasley's tanks. We arrive at objective at 02:30 hours. (Ling 1980, 272-275)

Private J.D. le Roux a Bren Gunner in 8th Platoon, "B" Company, 1SAP, under command of Lieutenant W. Visser describes the brutal battle waged by the South Africans that evening:

We were told that the second phase in the attack would commence at 21:50 with an Arty barrage in which 120 guns would participate, and that the first echelon of tanks, would start, one in front of each platoon. The barrage opened and the first echelon of tanks went through at top speed and firing everything they had. Then additional tanks, one per platoon, followed with the infantry.¹⁸

After travelling in the dark for about two and a half kilometres, the leading tanks were engaged from various SPs. These SPs were encircled by heavy barbed wire entanglements and had deep and formidable concrete anti-tank ditches all around inside the entanglements. The fortifications were all underground concreted and the automatic weapons were all just an inch above ground level. While no tanks were destroyed by these positions, they did halt their forward progress. Le Roux remarks that: "8th Platoon was ordered to attack one of these strong points which had not been reduced by the tanks. I was sent with a Bren Gun to give covering fire from the left in order to enable the twenty-eight infantrymen available to charge the position with the bayonet."¹⁹ The infantrymen cut through the wire surrounding the SP and began throwing grenades into the various subterranean structures. Eventually fifteen defenders surrendered while five lay dead inside.²⁰

Mugglestone's platoon was also "advancing slowly but surely", and taking cover every fifty to seventy metres. Without so much as a "pebble or bush behind which to take cover" the men advanced towards the SPs which were resisting fiercely. Mugglestone complains that "at some places, while taking cover, the sand and mud from the MG bullets, hit you in the face, and you trust to luck that you don't stop the next one" (Mugglestone, 10).

By midnight the tanks of "B" Squadron, 44th RTR supported by the 1SAP platoons had captured SPs 23, 20, 25 and 27 in that order. At 02:00 heavy defensive fire from SP 29 within the "Apex" defensive position however forced them back over the Capuzzo-Bardia Road 270 metres north of SP 29. By 04:00 both SP 29 along with another unknown SP, dubbed SP B, had been overcome. SP 31 fell just as dawn was breaking, with most of its thirty defenders wounded or killed, SP 28 fell a short while later. 1SAP commander, Lieutenant Colonel R.J. ("Bobby") Palmer decided to occupy this vital terrain, with "A" Company occupying the "Apex" SPs 29, 31 and B; "B" Company deployed along the road, "S" Com-

pany in the Wadi Scemmas and "C" Company in forward positions (Martin 1969, 72). Mugglestone in the thick of this fighting recalls in his memoir:

At about midnight, we were in the midst of a network of fire from the enemy, from all possible sides. Fortunately, about 90% were all misses. By now, we had reached a cemetery, from which a sniper was giving us a very hot time, from behind a tombstone. A tank eventually entered the cemetery and did its job with the sniper. About 50 yards [45 metres] from the cemetery was the enemy's strongest position, which we encountered, after having destroyed six similar ones previously. We were poking at a hornet's nest which ultimately kept us occupied for 1½ hours. At this stronghold we suffered the most casualties – ten in all, of which five were from my company, with three from my platoon. We also lost five tanks at this spot (Mugglestone, 11).

By 02:00 1SAP had managed to achieve the upper hand in the fighting, even though enemy snipers continued firing from distant hideouts. The policemen of 1SAP had proven themselves to be excellent infantrymen. Throughout the night's assault, the battalion had captured 103 enemy defenders, while killing and wounding many more, all for the loss of ten killed and thirty-five wounded (Martin 1969, 72). For his leadership throughout the night's hard fighting, Lieutenant Colonel Palmer was awarded the DSO.²¹

In the central sector of 4th SA Inf Bde's front, the infantrymen of the KR anxiously waited for the battle to begin. Advancing behind the opening artillery barrage "A" Company, KR found their forward progress blocked by five heavily defended SPs to the east of Wadi Scemmas. After successfully capturing these SPs via a bayonet charge, the company found the wadi itself strongly defended. The supporting tanks of "A" Squadron, 44th RTR could not cross the wadi and thus swung round to bypass it. Attacking without tank support, the KR successfully cleared the wadi, taking many prisoners in the process, until they bumped into an SP which held the 88mm anti-tank gun that had caused so much damage amongst the British tankers. Once this SP had also fallen, the battalion pushed forward another 250 metres where it halted to keep its alignment with 1SAP who were at that stage heavily engaged within the "Apex". With the approach of dawn, the acting battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel William ("Bill") Kingwell pulled the battalion back into the defensive positions located within the Wadi Scemmas. The evenings battle had cost the KR only three killed and fourteen wounded (Martin 1969, 72).

Newman, much like the rest of the battalion, was preparing for a tough night assault. In the letter to his father, he explains in detail his small part in KR's battle:

Close Encounters in War Journal – Issue n. 7 (2024): "Close Encounters in War and Personal Narratives"

After dark we got going again and formed up just inside one of the gaps in a little waddi (sic), or sluits, as we would call them, and waited for the time to be guided into position with the tanks. It was moonlight but a very watery moon with a fine sort of drizzle coming on in spasms and bitterly cold. Shortly afterwards we moved forward to take up positions between the tanks. Try and imagine tanks every few hundred yards from Uitenhage to Despatch, and between them soldiers every few yards with fixed bayonets, and an area in front of us of over 60 square miles of stretches of flat country with no cover for thousands of yards, and every now and again rocky "waddis" hundreds of feet deep, country similar to Carlitzdorp or Barrydale and alive with thousands of pillboxes and anti-tank guns and big guns. We moved forward across this large area, all South African Infantry Regiments [...]. The Arty. behind, from the side and all over giving it hell. The Navy from the sea, and with the clatter of tanks and all guns blazing, the night was hideous with sound and fire. The air was so full of stuff that shells from opposite met and crashed overhead. Demons of death passed a thousand times. Like every other man I had near squeaks, but I am thankful to say I came out unscathed. At 1.30 a.m. there was a slow down on our side for about 10-minutes whilst we marshalled the first big batches of prisoners [...] at 3.15 a.m. we were held up for a while on account of some strong-points not being cleared up on our left [...] stood behind a tank [...] a tank on our left burning out with its ammunition bursting out every few minutes [...] on top of the rise as dawn was beginning to break, and we all said [...] "Bardia or Burst".²²

Ling in his tank, ignorant of what was happening behind him, had bypassed the Wadi Scemmas before leading his tanks across the Capuzzo-Bardia Road at 00:30 and onto their night's objective, which was reached by 02:30 (Martin 1969, 72). In his diary Ling vents his frustration at what he considers the tardy movement of the South African infantry:

Unending dragging wait for 2nd [infantry] wave to reach [our positions]. At 06:00 when it is quite obvious the infantry WON'T reach us and when daylight is only 60 mins off the CO tells us to rally back to the Start Line. We go back line ahead [...] Squadron in a bad state – most of those tanks not knocked out are U/S [Un-Serviceable] for fighting – mine won't steer. (Ling 1980, 272-275).

As daylight approached, the tankers, vulnerable without any infantry support, withdrew into positions within the Wadi Scemmas and round Gap 2. Tank losses during the battle resulted in three killed, eleven wounded and twelve tanks damaged (Martin 1969, 72).

Mortlock, who had also spent the day shielding himself from the cold, explains how his machinegun platoon moved forward after dark to occupy enemy

positions captured during the day by the infantry in preparation for the coming assault. Just as he got himself comfortable in his new shell-hole:

I heard the unmistakable rattle and squeak of tanks approaching. It was not long before Matilda tanks, infantry and Lorries appeared on the scene [...] and it was not long before they moved off over the ridge into what seemed a hail of tracer bullets. Not more than half an hour elapsed before wounded, and prisoners were again passing through our positions to the rear. (Mortlock 1956, 29)

With the approach of dawn, Mortlock's group were redeployed by truck to a wadi near Bardia itself where they awaited further orders. Mortlock describes the scene of the aftermath of the battle: "I noticed a few corpses lying around, principally K.R.'s and also a German M.G. Detachment which had been wiped out by our tanks – a nasty mess it was." He then describes in detail a grisly discovery that he made:

I distinctly remember seeing the body of a South African who obviously had been badly wounded but continued crawling on all fours with a bayonet gripped in one hand, towards the enemy machine gun post. It was obvious that he had crawled a considerable distance after he had been wounded as he left a trail of blood in his tracks; he died not many yards from his objective. I have wondered ever since why he was so determined to reach the machine gun post armed only with a bayonet; was one of the corpses lying close by, a friend or relation and for which he was seeking revenge; was he racked with pain from his wound, and felt that he must keep going on, or did he know that he was dying and was determined to do what damage he could to those who had brought this upon him? My one hope is that his mother, or father, or wife know that he died determined to the end – a true hero's death. (29)

In the 4th SA Inf Bde's far-right sector, 1RLI advanced in a company two-up formation, with "A" Company to the left and "C" Company to the right and "B" Company in depth. Progress was slow but determined, for the enemy shelled the battalion continuously. Around midnight after a particularly stout enemy defensive position had stalled the battalion's advance, orders were given that the battalion was to fix bayonets and prepare to storm the offending sangars. Charging forward in full moonlight, the position was quickly overrun with the loss of only two wounded. The advance continued unchecked until dawn broke on 2nd January 1942 (Tungay, 96). The 1RLI was to suffer three killed and another 16 wounded during the night's assault (Martin 1969, 72).

Paul de Villiers, 4th SA Inf Bde's Intelligence Section, who spent the night sheltering in a shallow slit-trench writes that, "what I remember best of all is the sight of tracer bullets as they were fired at tanks, ricocheting off the steel armour." At about dawn de Villiers accompanied a liaison officer who had to report on the position along the front lines. Here he witnessed an attack first-hand:

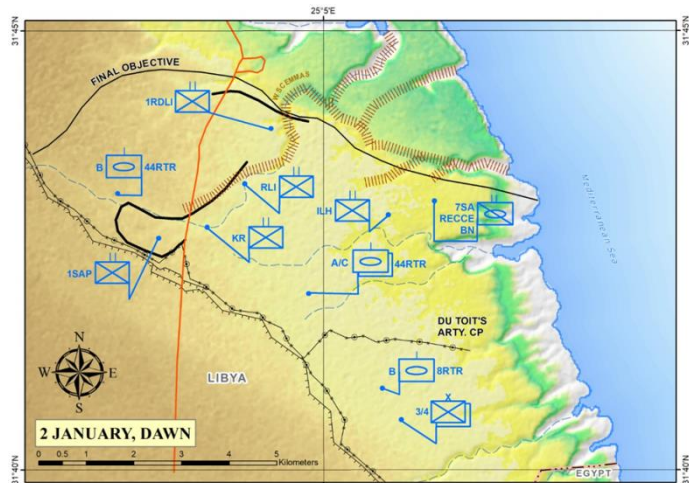
The troops were attacking a strong-hold, with a Matilda tank coming up, firing a shell or two and then reversing away as quickly as possible. Some of these strong-points were equipped with German 88mm anti-tank guns, one of the best guns used in the war. No tank could stand up against them at that time. (De Villiers, 40)

De Villiers also disgustedly describes the actions of the defending Italian Army:

The Italians tried to play a dirty game in some places: they would raise a white flag and then, when our troops got up and moved forward to take over, they would suddenly lower the white flag and start shooting. In one instance like this, one of our officers was shot dead. (40)

In response to this act, when the Commanding Officer was asked what the final result was simply answered, "we went in and finished the lot" (40).

By daybreak on 2nd January 1942, with his perimeter breached and the Allied forces occupying the escarpment overlooking the town itself, Schmitt was forced to surrender his command to De Villiers. This surrender of his command was the first by a German General during the Second World War,²³ but had cost the South Africans a further twenty-five killed and ninety-one wounded during the night assault (Martin 1969, 76).



Map 4: 2nd South African Infantry Division.

According to Gooler, the South Africans in total lost 160 all ranks killed and 250 all ranks wounded during the entire battle for Bardia (Anon. 1941, n.p.). Coleman puts the South African casualties at 132 dead and 270 wounded (1988, 212), while Martin places the division's losses at 139 killed and 295 wounded (Martin 1969, 76). Gilbert Algar's memoir recounts that 3rd SA Inf Bde suffered 353 casualties, of which 128 were killed (Algar, 35).

The British tankers had suffered three officers killed and twenty ORs killed or wounded during the battle. Of the 114 infantry tanks engaged, twenty-seven were casualties but twenty-four were recovered and repaired with only three being a total loss (burnt out). The attackers also freed 1,150 Allied POWs (1,171 according to Martin) (1969, 76) while simultaneously capturing approximately 8,500 Axis soldiers (Anon. 1941, n.p.). of which 7,775 were Italians and 2,120 German (Martin 1969, 76).

Conclusion

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, The Union Defence Force found itself totally unprepared to wage modern warfare. Besides not being equipped for such operations, internal political resistance to fighting on Britain's behest meant that the country would never be able to implement universal conscription. Rather the brunt of the burden of military duty would fall upon the shoulders of young volunteers, most of whom had no prior military experience. After a strenuous year of military training, the soldiers of the 2nd SA Inf Div sailed to the desert battlefields of North Africa. Here, despite the men anxiously yearning for a taste of combat, they were to endure a further six months training. Finally, in December 1941, when the Axis withdrawal westwards following the lifting of the siege at Tobruk, isolated the Axis forces dug in along the Egyptian Libyan Frontier, the South Africans were ordered into battle.

While the assault on Bardia by members of the 2nd SA Inf Div over the period 31 December 1941 to 2nd January 1942, resulted in the capture of the fortress, it was to cost the country over 150 dead and 250 wounded. Utilising the men's own words as contained in their diaries, letters and reports supplemented by official South African Department of Defence archival material a far sharper vision of this battle is now possible. Their excitement mingled with fear whilst waiting for the first day's assault to begin is juxtapositioned with the terror and despair experienced by the men when they were unexpectedly counter-attacked from the rear later the same day. Diaries and official documentation explain,

despite the inevitable fog of war, how the inexperienced South Africans continued to fight bravely during the rest of that first monumental day.

Learning from their previous mistakes, the men again attacked twenty-four hours later, in a violent and bloody night assault. The existing literary evidence is full of tales of bravery as the men fought in their first ever night action. By daybreak of 2nd January 1942 the stout Italo-German defenders were finally defeated. This defeat resulted in their commander, Major General Artur Schmitt, surrendering his command to the 2nd SA Inf Div Commander, Major General de Villiers, the first German General to do so during the war.

As a first encounter with war, the battle for Bardia proved to be a steep learning lesson for the inexperienced South Africans of 2nd SA Inf Div. But the lessons so hard learnt were invaluable as the division soon found itself again locked in combat along the Gazala Line before facing their greatest challenge – defending the port of Tobruk during May – June 1942.

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