

ROMMEL'S FIRST OFFENSIVE

31 March – 11 April, 1941

-- Frank Chadwick

Following publication of **BENGAZI HANDICAP**, at least one forum-rat has asked for the detailed Italian order of battle in Rommel's first offensive. I mentioned in the forum that – if you dig a bit – it's mostly there in the division histories. I'd have liked to include this sort of detailed OOB by battle for each of the major actions, but the book was pretty big already. I decided to simply have the outline formation OOBs for the battles, and then use the detailed division histories to provide the nitty-gritty details of attachments and what-not. It was more space-efficient, but still...

So what I decided was to throw everything I'd been able to figure out about the orders of battle in that first offensive in one web article and post it here. It is fairly complicated, and there are lingering questions concerning the exact weapons used to outfit the various British and Australian anti-tank units, but other than that it's fairly complete. This is the sort of detailed stuff which you will either eat up with a spoon or will make your eyes glaze over and roll back in your head. You have been warned.

PART I: BRITISH AND COMMONWEALTH FORCES

The British and Commonwealth forces involved in the defense of Cyrenaica were all subordinated to Cyrenaica Command, under the command of Lieutenant-General Phillip Neame, VC. XIII Corps headquarters had been withdrawn, and Cyrenaica Command did not have the command and control assets needed to control a mobile battle spread across a 200-mile battlefield, which partly explains the sluggish British handling of this campaign.

British 2nd Armoured Division

The division had arrived in January and February of 1941, but had been cannibalized to bring 7th Armoured up to strength, and then cannibalized again to outfit an armored brigade group for service in Greece. What was left was a shadow division. When Rommel's offensive began, the following units were under the command of the division.

Division Troops

- 4th Field Squadron, RE (*attached from 7th Armoured Division*)
- 143rd Field Park Troop, RE (*attached from 7th Armoured Division*)
- 1st King's Dragoon Guards (Marmon-Herrington II armored cars)

3rd Armoured Brigade

- 3rd Hussars
- 5th Royal Tank Regiment
- 6th Royal Tank Regiment
- 1st Royal Horse Artillery (2 batteries, each with 8 x 25-pounders)
- 16th Australian Brigade Anti-tank Company (attached) (9 x 2-pounders)

The brigade never fought as a unified formation; each battalion fought its own separate war, and gradually lost its tanks to lack of fuel, mechanical failure, or (occasionally) enemy action. In addition, its tank strength at the start of the campaign is complicated to follow, due to the expedients used to equip the unit and the squadron swapping which went on.

3rd Hussars had originally been a light tank battalion with 7th Armoured Division and fought in Operation Compass. It was assigned to 2nd Armoured Division to bring it up to strength, and was given all remaining operational Mark VIB light tanks in 7th Armoured Division, a total of 32 tanks, of which six were soon sent to rear for mechanical work. The remaining 26 light tanks were divided into two squadrons worth, with 13 going to A squadron and the remaining 13 being transferred to 6th RTR's B squadron. This left both B and C squadrons of the 3rd Hussars temporarily dismounted. B squadron joined the 6th RTR to draw refurbished M13/40 tanks, and the plan was for C squadron to do the same, but the Axis attack came before this was possible, and C squadron crews were evacuated by truck.

When the offensive began, the regiment was at Mersa Brega with its own A squadron (13 Mark VIB light), A squadron, 6th RTR (19 M13/40 mediums), and B squadron, 6th RTR (13 Mark VIB lights), as well as its own dismounted C squadron. The armor was reinforced by one 25-pounder battery of 1st RHA as well as a platoon of the attached Australian antitank company. The regiment was not heavily engaged in the initial attacks, and when the division began to withdraw it began losing tanks immediately to breakdown. The M13/40s went almost immediately. By April 4 the light tanks had been reduced from 26 to 14, and the last one was abandoned on the 7th, the crews continuing to Tobruk by truck.

5th Royal Tank Regiment came to Cyrenaica with its full complement of 44 A13 cruisers and 9 A9 close support tanks. Unfortunately, they were well past the end of their reliable engine and track lives, and so the regiment experienced considerable attrition simply making the road march from Tobruk to the Agedabia area. Once there, A and B squadrons were combined and most of the close support tanks (which had broken down) were turned over to 6th RTR. When the Axis offensive began, there were only 27 serviceable cruisers with the regiment. The regiment was reinforced with a 25-pounder battery of 1st RHA.

When the initial Axis attacks forced Support Group to withdraw, 3rd Armoured Brigade did as well on April 2, with 5th RTR covering the retreat. A German panzer battalion

attacked the rearguard squadron and knocked out five British cruisers for a loss of 3 panzers. This left 22 cruisers by nightfall, but the withdrawal to Msus over the next two days caused a steady stream of breakdowns, so that by nightfall on April 4 there were only 8 Cruisers left running. Six of these managed to get to Derna, where two of them gave up the ghost, unable to climb the steep road out of Wadi Derna. The four remaining cruisers were lost in action spearheading the breakout through the German troops of the Ponath group, allowing many of the British and Australian rearguard infantry to make it into Tobruk.

6th Royal Tank Regiment had fought with 7th Armoured Division during the early stages of Compass, but had turned its remaining serviceable tanks over to other regiments in January and withdrawn to the Canal zone to reorganize. In February it was sent forward to join 3rd Armoured Brigade and equip itself with Italian M13/40 tanks captured at Beda Fomm. Although most of these tanks had been knocked out by antitank fire, the solid 2-pounder shots had not started fires – most Italian tanks were stopped by causing crew casualties from spalling when the armor was penetrated. They were still serviceable, although the lack of spare parts meant that mechanical reliability was a problem. At the start of the Axis offensive, the regiment was still at Beda Fomm recovering tanks. It had already equipped its own A squadron and sent it off to reinforce the 3rd Hussars, and its B squadron (equipped with light tanks) was with the Hussars as well. The regiment had its headquarters and C squadron at Beda Fomm, along with B squadron of the 3rd Hussars, equipped with a total of 40 M13/40s between them (probably 19 tanks in each squadron and 2 with RHQ).

When the division began its retreat, the 6th RTR suffered as much from mechanical breakdown as the other regiments, but had the added difficulty that its tanks burned diesel instead of the petrol burned by British tanks and lorries, and so fuel shortages were nearly insurmountable. As the regiment retreated it siphoned fuel from the less reliable vehicles into the mechanically better ones, but by the 5th of April the regiment was down to just 2 runners, and the last one was abandoned a few days later, without having fired a shot in anger.

2nd Support Group

9th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade (Formerly 1st Tower Hamlet Rifles, and still called that throughout the battle) (motor battalion)

104th (Essex Yeomanry) Royal Horse Artillery (2 batteries, each with 8 x 25-pounders)

C Company, 2nd Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (machine gun company) (12 x MMG)

J Battery, 3rd Royal Horse Artillery (anti-tank) (9 x 2-pounder AT guns, 3 x 37L45 Bofors AT *portees*)

1^{er} Compagnie, 1^{er} Batallion d'Infanterie de Marin (Free French motor marine company)

The brigade held the defensive positions at the narrows at Mersa Brega with the forces listed above. The German attack of march 31st was contained with difficulty, and requests

for a counterattack by 3rd Armoured Brigade were rejected. In danger of being enveloped from both flanks, the support group was forced to withdraw. In fighting over the next several days, the sole motor battalion present suffered about 50% casualties and the support group was given permission to withdraw to the northwest to avoid being overrun – thus uncovering the road north to Benghazi. At this point the withdrawal became general, and the support group conducted a confused fighting retreat through Derna and back to Tobruk. By the time the group reached Tobruk, 9th Rifle Brigade (Tower Hamlet Rifles) had been reduced in strength to a strong company, which joined the 7th Support Group on the Egyptian frontier as part of the mobile force under Brigadier Gott. The French Marines were sent to Mersa Matruh, but the other elements of the group joined the Tobruk Garrison. The group headquarters was disbanded.

3rd Indian Motor Brigade (attached)

18th King Edward VII's Own Cavalry (motor battalion)

2nd Royal Lancers (Gardner's Horse) (motor battalion)

Prince Albert Victor's Own Cavalry (motor battalion)

35th Field Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners

2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment (less 9 and 12 batteries) (24 x 37L45 Bofors

AT *portees*)

The brigade was a new arrival to the desert, arriving at about the same time as the Axis offensive began. Nominally it was an independent motorized cavalry brigade, but was attached to 2nd Armoured Division in an effort to strengthen it. The brigade had no antitank guns, no carriers, and few radios, but morale was high and it was tactically mobile. It was initially deployed at El Adem, but was sent forward to Mechili on April 3rd. One regiment (18th Cavalry) remained at El Adem, but the brigade was joined at Mechili by M Battery, 3rd RHA (anti-tank), which had just arrived from Egypt, as well as by the headquarters of 2nd Armoured Division. This gave the brigade two light motorized infantry battalions and three anti-tank batteries (36 guns total), but no field artillery. On the 5th the first Axis troops arrived near the fort – mostly infantry of *Colonna Santamaria* and German antitank guns of *Vorausabteilung Schwerin* – but the initial attack was easily driven off.

More Axis troops arrived on following days and the encirclement tightened. As it became clear that no friendly troops would be available to extricate the brigade, and that the plan to concentrate the armored division at Mechili had gone completely off the rails, the division commander decided to break out on the morning of the 8th. The forward troops managed to break out and make their way back to Tobruk, but the brigade and division headquarters, along with eight of the antitank guns and many of the troops, were captured. The remaining troops of the brigade which had been at Mechili were sent back to Egypt to regroup. The 18th Cavalry remained in Tobruk as part of the garrison, and the two batteries of 2/3 Australian Anti-Tank regiment along with M Battery, 3rd RHA did so as well.

Australian 9th Division

The division took over from 6th Australian Division in February, and suffered from having been hastily assembled from the least combat-ready Australian brigades in the Middle East, and from having no division artillery of its own. You would never suspect this, however, from its combat performance, which was outstanding.

20th Australian Brigade

2/13th Australian Infantry Battalion
2/15th Australian Infantry Battalion
2/17th Australian Infantry Battalion
20th Australian Brigade Anti-tank Company (attached) (9 x 47L32 *portees* Later 2-pounders)
2/7 Field Company, RAE
One battery, 51st Field Regt (6 x 18-pounders, 6 x 4.5" howitzers)

At the start of the Axis offensive, the brigade was deployed in the Jebel Akhdar region, near Er Regima guarding the southern pass up the escarpment from Benghazi. The brigade received the order to withdraw to Derna on the 4th, and did so by stages through the 7th, repulsing several German/Italian attacks. On the 8th it withdrew to Acroma and held the division's southern flank until withdrawn into Tobruk fortress.

24th Australian Brigade

2/28th Australian Infantry Battalion
2/43rd Australian Infantry Battalion
24th Australian Brigade Anti-tank Company (attached) (9 x 47L32 *portees*? Later 2-pounders)

The brigade was deployed at Tobruk and remained there throughout the offensive, although it sent its anti-tank company to the Jebel Akhdar to support the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers at Bir es Sultan.

26th Australian Brigade

2/23rd Australian Infantry Battalion
2/24th Australian Infantry Battalion
2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion
26th Australian Brigade Anti-tank Company (attached) (9 x 47L32 *portees*. Later 2-pounders)
2/13 Field Company, RAE
One battery, 51st Field Regt (6 x 18-pounders, 6 x 4.5" howitzers)

At the start of the Axis offensive, the brigade was deployed in the Jebel Akhdar region, near Tocra guarding the northern pass up the escarpment from Benghazi. The 2/48th Battalion, however, was in deep reserve at Gazala. The brigade received the order to withdraw to Derna on the 4th, and did so by stages through the 7th, repulsing several German/Italian attacks. On the 8th it withdrew to Acroma and held the division's northern flank until withdrawn into Tobruk fortress.

Division Troops

9 Battery, 2/3 Australian Anti-tank Regiment (12 x AT *portees*, either 2-pounders or 47L32 Bredas – perhaps 47s later replaced by 2-pounders)

2/3 Field Company, RAE

2/4 Field Park Company, RAE

2/1 Australian Pioneer Battalion

The pioneers and engineers were engaged in road clearing (at first) and demolition work (shortly thereafter) in the Jebel Akhdar, but withdrew into Tobruk. The single anti-tank battery remained in Tobruk throughout.

Attached Troops

1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (machine gun) (less C Company) (36 x MMG) at Bir es Sultan, in the Jebel Akhdar, reinforced by 24th anti-tank company.

51st Field Regiment, RA (2 batteries, each with 6 x 18-pounder guns and 6 x 4.5” howitzers)

The attached British machine gun battalion, reinforced with the 24th brigade Anti-Tank Company, held the southern flank of Jebel Akhdar position, and also withdrew safely into Tobruk. The two field batteries were attached to the two forward brigades, as noted above.

CYRENAICA COMMAND TROOPS

There were very few corps-level troops available to Cyrenaica Command as reserves. The following units, however, were sent to Tobruk once Rommel’s offensive got under weigh. The 1st KRRC and 3rd RHA moved forward immediately while the balance came forward starting on April 4th.

12 Battery, 2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment remained at Mersa Matruh until after the main body of 9th Division was isolated at Tobruk, at which time the battery was assigned to the 7th Support Group and had many adventures along the frontier throughout the summer.

British Troops Egypt

11th Hussars (32 armored cars)

107th Royal Horse Artillery (two batteries, each with 8 x 25-pounders)

The 11th Hussars joined the 7th Support Group on the Egyptian frontier. The 107th RHA entered Tobruk and became part of the fortress artillery.

Elements, 7th Armoured Division (in Egypt)

1st Royal Tank Regiment (33 tanks) [11 cruisers, 15]

Headquarters, 7th Support Group

1st Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps (motor battalion)

3rd Royal Horse Artillery (anti-tank) (less J Battery)

M Battery (12 x 37L45 Bofors AT *portees*)

D Battery (8 x 2-pounder AT guns, 4 x 47L32 Breda AT *portees*)

4th Royal Horse Artillery (field) (12 batteries, each with 8 x 25-pounders)

1st RTR entered Tobruk and became the fortresses armored reserve (later reinforced with additional units). The units of 7th Support Group were, at various times, attached to 2nd Armoured and/or 9th Australian Division. 1st KRRC, 4th RHA, and D/3rd RHA eventually fought on the frontier with Gott's mobile force, while Regimental HQ and M/3rd RHA joined the Tobruk garrison

Elements, 7th Australian Division (At Mersa Matruh)

18th Australian Brigade

2/9th Australian Infantry Battalion

2/10th Australian Infantry Battalion

2/12th Australian Infantry Battalion

2/4th Field Company, RAE

The brigade moved to Tobruk and joined the fortress garrison as a separate brigade. It had no brigade anti-tank company of its own, but took under command the 16th Australian Brigade Anti-Tank Company.

Elements, 9th Australian Division (At Mersa Matruh)

12 Battery, 2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment (12 x 47L32 AT *portees*)

The battery moved to Sollum and was then incorporated in Brigadier Gott's 7th Support Group force.

A NOTE ON ANTI-TANK WEAPONS

One thing which **Command Decision** does not do is penalize the speed of vehicles for towing things. Perhaps it should – but it doesn't and isn't about to start now. Mostly it is not that important, but it is at least marginally so early in the desert war.

The British were short of 3-ton trucks in 1940 and early 1941, and so anti-tank batteries were mostly moved by 15 cwt Morris light trucks. The Fordson could carry the 37mm Bofors gun in its read bed, but could not manage the much heavier 2-pounder. As a result, the 2-pounders were towed behind the trucks, but at a lower speed. It is sometimes claimed that Royal Horse Artillery anti-tank batteries were equipped with the 37mm Bofors due to a shortage of 2-pounders; actually it was more due to the shortage of 3-ton trucks, coupled with the need for mobility.

For example, at the start of the war, two batteries of 3rd RHA were equipped with 37mm *portees* and two with towed 2-pounders. In October, however, a month after the start of the war, the two towed batteries exchanged their 2-pounders for 37mm *portees*. As more 3-ton trucks became available, some batteries converted to a mixed organization, and J Battery, 3rd RHA was apparently still on this organization when the Axis offensive opened. As the mixed organization called for a battery total of nine 2-pounders and three 37mm Bofors divided among three four-gun troops, each troop almost certainly had three 2-pounders and a Bofors. In game terms, you may just want to show this as three 2-pounder troops.

The equipment of the antitank units of 9th Australian Division are something of mystery. At least one reliable source lists all of the batteries and brigade companies as having 2-pounders, but that is almost certainly wrong. The Australian Official History lists the equipment of the 20th and 26th Brigade Anti-Tank Companies as nine 47mm Bredas (47L32) *portees* each, but makes no mention of the 24th Company's guns. Other sources mention that the 2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment was equipped with 37mm Bofors, as well as captured Italian 47mm Bredas (47L32) and 20mm Solothurns (20mm ATR). 9 Battery's weapons are not known, but 10 and 11 Batteries (which fought at Mechili with 3rd Indian Brigade) were – from various anecdotal references to abandoned Bofors guns and shortages of 37mm ammunition limiting their fire – equipped with 37L45 Bofors guns. 12 Battery was certainly equipped with captured 47mm Breda *portees* (47L32). It may be that, at one point, 9 Battery had been equipped with 20mm Solothurn AT rifles, but it is probably safe to assume that by April they had been replaced, either by 37mm Bofors or 2-pounders.

Throughout April a number of units traded in their older guns for 2-pounders, and 3rd RHA was completely re-equipped as a 2-pounder regiment fairly early. The fact that these anti-tank units fought as 2-pounder companies and batteries through most of the siege – combined with the frantic nature of the initial campaign and retreat to Tobruk – probably account for the considerable confusion concerning their original armament.

PART II: AXIS FORCES

The Axis forces involved in the advance across Cyrenaica were all subordinated to the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (DAK) under the command of *Generalleutnant* Irwin Rommel. Additional troops were available in Tripoli, under the control of the overall theater commander, General Gariboldi, but they did not participate in this offensive, mostly due to a lack of motor transport.

Italian 27th Brescia Infantry Division

The division had suffered considerable losses during the British Compass offensive. Although the main body of the division had remained in Tripoli, the division's artillery regiment and antitank company, as well as the infantry gun batteries of the two infantry

regiments, had been sent to Cyrenaica as reinforcements and lost, leaving the division with little more than infantry.

In January and February, the division had been reinforced with arriving units and had moved the better-equipped elements forward in March. The units under command of the division in the forward area at the end of March, and which took part in the offensive, are listed below. In addition to these troops, two infantry battalions (II/19 and III/20) were in Tripoli, grounded for lack of transport and heavy weapons.

19th Brescia Infantry Regiment (-)

19th Mortar Company

I Infantry Battalion

III Infantry Battalion

20th Brescia Infantry Regiment (-)

20th Mortar Company

I Infantry Battalion

II Infantry Battalion

1st Articolere Regiment (assigned to replace lost division artillery regiment)

II *Gruppo* (2 batteries, each with 4 x 75/27 field guns)

III *Gruppo* (2 batteries, each with 4 x 75/27 field guns)

Two light AA batteries (each with 8 x 20L65 AA guns)

Attached Units

XV *Gruppo*, XVI Corps Artillery *Raggruppamento* (3 batteries, each with 4 x 105/28 field guns)

5th, 71st, 101st, 105th Anti-tank Companies (each with 8 x 47/32 AT guns)

IV *Monti* (or II/32nd) Light Tank Battalion (from *Ariete*)

The division was employed in two combat groups, each consisting of an infantry regiment reinforced with a 75/27 field gun battalion, two companies of AT guns, a battery of light AA guns, a battery or two of 105/28 guns, and a company of light tanks.

Each infantry battalion had one antitank company attached, and was further reinforced with three German-manufactured 37L45 AT guns (a total of twelve with the division). Each combat group had sufficient transport to move only one of its two infantry battalions at a time, so the group tended to advance in stages, leapfrogging its infantry battalions.

For reasons which are not clear, the two combat groups of *Brescia* were placed under the command of the German General Kirckheim for the advance across Cyrenaica. The division advanced up the coast road to Benghazi, reaching in on April 4th, then split with the two combat groups taking the two branches of the main road through the Jebel Achdar, with 9th Australian Division withdrawing ahead of them. By the 8th they were at Derna and had closed on the western face of the Tobruk perimeter by April 11th.

Italian 132nd Ariete Armored Division

The division arrived in Tripoli in February of 1941, but was weak in armor. Most of the medium tank battalions which had been formed for the division had been sent over earlier and were lost at Beda Fomm. As a result, the division fought with its original three light tank battalions, each with only two companies, and a new VII Medium Tank Battalion equipped with M13/40s. Of these, one light battalion was detached to the *Brescia* division and the medium battalion was detached to *Kampfgruppe* Olbrich of the German 5th Light Division. Including these two battalions, the units under command of the division in the forward area at the end of March, and which took part in the offensive, are listed below.

32nd Armored Regiment

- I Battalion (II *Berardi* Light Tank Battalion)
- II Battalion (IV *Monti* Light Tank Battalion) (detached to *Brescia* Division)
- III Battalion (XI *Gregorutti* Light Tank Battalion)
- VII Medium Tank Battalion (detached to German 5th Light Division)
- Regimental Anti-tank Company (10 x 37/45 AT guns)

8th Bersaglieri Regiment

- III Motorcycle Battalion
- V Motorized Battalion
- XII Motorized Battalion
- 132nd and 142nd Anti-tank Companies

132nd Artillery Regiment

- I *Gruppo* (3 batteries, each with 4 x 75/27 field guns)
- II *Gruppo* (3 batteries, each with 4 x 75/27 field guns)
- Two light AA batteries (each with 8 x 20L65 AA guns)

Division Troops

- CXXXII Mixed Engineer battalion

Attached Troops

- 72nd Antitank Company
- I *Gruppo*, XXIV Corps Artillery *Raggruppamento* (3 batteries, each with 4 x 105/28 field guns)

The division formed four mobile columns of Bersaglieri as well as a division main body. One of the Bersaglieri columns apparently remained with the main body of the division, while the remaining three (Santamaria, Fabris, and Montemurro) took the lead in the advance up the southern track. The smallest of these, Santamaria, formed the main body of *Vorausabteilung* Schwerin (see below), with Fabris following close behind it and Montemurro behind Fabris.

Colonna Santmaria consisted of about a reinforced company, partly drawn from V *Bersaglieri* Motorized Battalion. Its subunits were a machine gun platoon, a motorized infantry platoon, a light AA section (2 x 20/65 AA guns), a light tank platoon (4 or 5 x L3/35), and a field gun battery (4 x 75/27, although two of the guns may have been 77/28s). As part of *Vorausabteilung* Schwerin, it was the advanced guard for the southern-most arm of the advance across the desert, moving past Maaten el Grara on the 4th, past Bir Ben Gania and to Tengeder on the 5th, and to Mechili on the 6th. In that day

the 3rd Indian Brigade reported a probe against its eastern perimeter which resulted in the destruction of two Italian trucks, the capture of twenty Italian soldiers, one 47/32 anti-tank gun, and one German officer, almost certainly from the *Colonna Santmaria* (and a German liaison officer). By the end of the fighting at Mechili the column had suffered heavy casualties and its components were absorbed by *Colonna Fabris* and later by their parent units in *Ariete*.

Colonna Fabris consisted of the III *Bersaglieri* Motorcycle Battalion, reinforced with one antitank company (believed to be the 72nd), as well as other assets, possibly including a 75/27 field gun battery and a half-battery of light AA guns. The three motorcycle infantry companies of the battalion each had one 3-gun platoon of German-built 37L45 anti-tank guns. The column followed *Vorausabteilung Schwerin*, arriving at Mechili on the 7th, absorbed the survivors of *Colonna Santmaria*, and playing a key role in thwarting the breakout of the Indian 3rd Motor Brigade, as it was positioned virtually astride the proposed escape corridor. Following the battle at Mechili, the column moved to Tobruk.

Colonna Montemurro consisted of the XII *Bersaglieri* Motorized Battalion, reinforced with the 132nd Anti-tank Company, as well as other assets, possibly including a 75/27 field gun battery, a half-battery of light AA guns, and/or a light tank company. The two motorcycle infantry companies of the battalion each had one 3-gun platoon of German-built 37L45 anti-tank guns. The column followed *Colonna Fabris* and arrived at Mechili on the morning of the 8th, just as the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade began its breakout. Its arrival and immediate counterattack against the breakout trapped most of the Indian force, and General Gambier-Perry, commander of 2nd Armoured Division, surrendered to Colonel Montemurro. Following the battle at Mechili, the column moved past Tobruk to the Bardia-Sollum-Halfaya area.

Colonna Brunetti consisted of the V *Bersaglieri* Motorized Battalion, reinforced with one antitank company (believed to be the 142nd), as well as other assets, possibly including a 75/27 field gun battery, a half-battery of light AA guns, and/or a light tank company. The two motorcycle infantry companies of the battalion each had one 3-gun platoon of German-built 37L45 anti-tank guns. The column apparently accompanies the main body of the division. (see below.)

Division Main Body consisted of the division headquarters along with the 32nd Armored Regiment and 132nd Artillery Regiment, both having given up considerable detachments to the advanced columns and to other divisions. After those detachments are subtracted, it probably consisted of no more than a single light tank battalion, a single 75/27 battalion, the divisional engineers, and the attached 105/28 battalion. The main body followed behind *Kampfgruppe Streich* (see below). When the division main body reached Tengeder, south of Mechili, it did not proceed north, but instead eventually made its way due east from there to the Tobruk perimeter.

German 5th Light Division

This was the principal striking force in Rommel's offensive, not only due to its excellent firepower, but also because of its superior mobility. The units available to the division in the offensive are listed below.

5th Panzer Regiment

I Battalion

II Battalion

Regiment z.b.V. 200

2nd Machinegun Battalion

8th Machinegun Battalion

Division Troops

3rd Reconnaissance Battalion

39th Anti-tank Battalion (3 companies, each with 8 x 37L45, 3 x 50L60 AT guns)

200th Engineer Battalion

II Battalion, 75th Artillery Regiment (3 batteries, each with 4 x 105L28 howitzers)

The division spearheaded the attack into the Agedabia area and was immobilized there for lack of fuel until April 4th. It then truck out across the Cyrenaican bulge in five combat teams of varying strength: 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion (reinforced), *Vorausabteilung* Schwerin, *Kampfgruppe* Ponath, *Kampfgruppe* Streich, and *Kampfgruppe* Olbrich.

3rd Reconnaissance Battalion (reinforced) consisted of the entire 3rd Recon, less one recon platoon detached to *Kampfgruppe* Streich, and reinforced with one of the two light tank companies of I Battalion, 5th Panzer Regiment. This group entered Benghazi on April 4th, but as elements of the *Brescia* came forward later that day, it began moving toward Mechili by way of Er Regima and Charruba. After reaching Mechili on the 7th, it was sent north, reaching Derna on the 8th, and then raced on ahead, skirting Tobruk to the south, and was east of the fortress by the 11th.

Vorausabteilung (advanced guard detachment) Schwerin consisted of the Italian *Colonna Santamaria* reinforced with an antitank company of the German 39th Anti-Tank Battalion, and commanded by *Oberstleutnant* Graf Schwerin. It was the advanced guard for the southern-most arm of the advance across the desert, moving past Maaten el Grara on the 4th, past Bir Ben Gania and to Tengeder on the 5th, to Mechili on the 6th, after which the *Colonna Santamaria* was absorbed back into its parent units in *Ariete* due to losses suffered in the fighting at Mechili. The Italian motorized troops may have been replaced by German reconnaissance troops, because on the 8th Schwerin's *Vorausabteilung* moved on Derna ahead of *Kampfgruppe* Olbrich. After linking up with *Brescia* and 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion at Derna, Schwerin advanced behind 3rd Reconnaissance battalion to the Tobruk perimeter on the 10th and 11th.

Kampfgruppe Ponath consisted of the 8th Machinegun Battalion. It was nominally part of *Kampfgruppe* Streich, but outdistanced the main body of that group by the 5th of April, was sent ahead to Mechili on the 6th, and then north to cut the coast road at Derna

on the 7th. The battalion commander arrived there with perhaps a company under command, but managed to knock out the last four operational tanks of British 3rd Armoured Brigade, and then captured Lieutenant-General Neame (Commander, Cyrenaica Command), Lieutenant-General O'Connor (commander of XIII Corps during Operation Compass and now advising Neame), and Brigadier Combe (former commander of Combeforece, the blocking detachment which had cut off the retreat of Italian 10th Army at Beda Fomm). The group moved west after the arrival of the *Brescia* Division, reaching the Tobruk perimeter on the 10th or 11th.

Kampfgruppe Streich was supposedly the main body of the 5th Leicht Division, although most of the division's tanks and all its infantry were detached to other battle groups. 8th Machinegun Battalion was to form part of the group, but very early on was sent ahead on its own. The component units of **Kampfgruppe Streich** were:

- Headquarters, 5th Light Division
- I Battalion, 5th Panzer Regiment (less one light tank company attached to 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion)
- One company, 39th Anti-tank Battalion
- One company, 200th Engineer Battalion
- One battery, II Battalion, 75th Artillery Regiment
- One platoon from 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion

The group followed the southern desert route in the tracks of ***Vorasubteilung Schwerin***, suffering considerably from mechanical losses due to the poor state of the road as well as inadequate air filters on the tanks. The group's panzer battalion, after the detachment of a light company, would have had about 50 tanks (of which about 30 per Panzer III or IV), although there were probably no more than 40 operational with the unit when it started out. A steady trickle of tanks were lost during the advance, with 15 tanks (and most of the panzer battalion headquarters troops) left behind at Ben Gania on the 6th of April. When Streich finally got to Mechili on the 8th, I/5th Panzer had only 8 operational tanks forward, although there were additional operational tanks with the trailing units. After the fall of Mechili, the group moved due east and reached the Tobruk perimeter on the 11th.

Kampfgruppe Olbrich was the principal armored striking force, although it did little actual "striking" during the advance. It consisted of the 5th Panzer Regiment (less I Battalion), plus 2nd Machinegun Battalion, one company of 39th Anti-tank Battalion, one battery of I Battalion, 75th Artillery Regiment, and the Italian VII Medium Tank Battalion. Not all of these forces began together, however. 2nd Machinegun Battalion had driven north along the coast road to Soluch before being subordinated to Olbrich, who was at Antelat well to the southeast. The *kampfgruppe's* initial objective, Msus, was northeast of Olbrich's armor and due east of the machine gunners, and so the initial advance was a converging approach, with Italian VII Medium Tank Battalion catching up from behind. Olbrich's group united at Msus on the 6th, and was about half-way between Msus and Mechili on the 7th, but did not reach Mechili in time to participate in the fighting there the next morning.

After reaching Mechili later on the 8th, the group advanced north to Derna, and reached the Tobruk perimeter on the 11th, having suffered crippling losses from mechanical breakdowns. The II Battalion, 5th Panzer had started the march with 64 operational tanks and reached Mechili with only 8 runners. The attached Italian VII Medium Tank Battalion had started the march with 40 tanks and arrived with 14 runners.

Deutsches Afrika Korps Corps Troops

The following troops were not assigned to any division, but rather were German corps-level assets. It is harder to trace their movements during the offensive, but one company of the 605th Battalion was involved in the March 31st attack at Mersa Brega, while the II/33rd Flak accompanied **Kampfgruppe Streich** in the advance across Cyrenaica.

Corps Troops

- 605th Anti-Tank Battalion (SP) (3 companies, each with 9 x *Panzerjaeger* Ib)
- 606th Light Antiaircraft Battalion (SP) (2 batteries, each with 12 x SdKfz 10/4)
- II Battalion, 33rd Antiaircraft (Flak) Regiment (*Luftwaffe*) (3 heavy batteries, each with 4 x 88L56; 2 light batteries, each with 8 x 20L113)