

Operation CRUSADER

18 November 1941

Lessons Learned



1. The British Army separated tanks and infantry – in thought, in organization, in doctrine, and in battle. The Germans recognized this weakness and exploited it.
 - a. 8th Army fought as separate Corps. XXX Corps' 7th Division, the main effort, fought as three separate armored brigades, advancing on three separate thrust lines.
 - b. XIII Corps complained, "We don't have enough tanks." XIII Corps was not the main effort. The Corps was equipped with an Army Tank Brigade, equipped to support infantry division operations.
 - c. XXX Corps complained, "Our tanks are divided." This was true. The plans for Crusader failed to mass armor at any decisive point. During the battle, leaders divided units even further. Brigades were sent in different directions with separate fragmented missions. This was a failure to concentrate combat power.
 - d. 4th Brigade was tasked by 7th Division, XXX Corps, and 8th Army. The Brigade was titled a "reserve" yet tasked by multiple echelons of command. During the battle, it was pulled to protect the east flank between XXX Corps and XIII Corps. In reality, had XXX Corps focused on seizing something the Germans valued, this would have done more to protect the flank of XIII Corps than anything 4th Brigade could do. Pulling 4th Brigade away from the main effort weakened the 7th Armoured Division effort by one third.
 - e. British leaders liked to fight as brigades. But British brigades were not as strong as the all-arms German formations they faced. The British brigades were defeated in detail because they were unbalanced organizations, dispersed across the battlefield, and unable to provide mutual support to each other.
2. The 8th Army goal was to destroy German armor capability. After that was accomplished, it was believed, all terrain objectives would fall into British hands. The mechanism to bring the German armor to battle was to seize Gabr Saleh and fight the German armored response.
 - a. The selection of Gabr Saleh was curious. XXX Corps voiced the concern that Gabr Saleh was meaningless, and that something of value should be the target.
 - b. The terrain at Gabr Saleh gave no benefit to the British tank forces. A defense of Gabr Saleh could not be prepared rapidly. Anti-tank screens, artillery, infantry, or any other arms would not be immediately present. The British tanks would fight alone.
 - c. Sidi Rezegh was a far better target – defensible, valuable, and near enough to Tobruk to threaten the German seize. In the event, when the British did seize Sidi Rezegh, the German response was quick and violent.

- d. A better course of action would have been to block Rommel's supply lines. This would have compelled him to attack the block. The village of Acroma was a possible target. If the Germans responded to a blocked supply line, the siege of Tobruk would be weakened without a direct fight.
3. The British could not quickly task-organize to respond to evolving battlefield events. The German Army concept of *Kampfgruppe*, or Battle Group, was well-practiced. A German commander could select four or five units, appoint a commander, give him a mission, and the Battle Group would be on the road, often in less than an hour. By comparison, British units were known to complain to London about changes to task organization. It often took days to attach units. Social, historical, and regional differences between units interfered with an effective all-arms doctrine.
4. The British Army was afflicted with a strong case of hippophilia – a love of horses. Although no horses were present, the cavalry mindset infected British leaders, organizations, doctrine, and practices. Tank squadrons charged fearlessly with pennants flying – and were shot to pieces. The German used anti-tank guns, artillery, engineers, and infantry to effectively fight their tank formations. The Panzer Division was a balanced combined-arms formation. The British were slow to learn that tanks were not horses and that unbalanced, single arm formations were fundamentally weak.
5. It was not true that German tanks were mechanically better than British tanks. The British did have some mechanical issues, especially with the Crusader tanks that were known for breaking down on long sweeps, but the true qualitative difference between the armies was in employment of forces, not their equipment.
 - a. Although the British fielded over 700 tanks of multiple types, they failed to concentrate them or employ them in combined-arms formations.
 - b. The Germans fielded less than 250 tanks: 70 PzKw II, 139 PzKw III, and 35 PzKw IV. The PzKw III had been recently upgunned to the 50mm long gun. If the ineffective PzKw II tanks are subtracted, the Germans could fight less than 175 main battle tanks.
 - c. The Italians fielded 146 light tanks of little value.
6. At the end of the battle, Sidi Rezegh remained in German hands. Tobruk was *not* relieved, but General Cunningham *was* relieved. 7th Armoured Division suffered grievously. 7th Armoured Brigade was reduced to ten tanks. 22nd Armoured Brigade withdrew with only thirty-four tanks. The 5th South African Brigade was overrun and lost 3,400 of their 5,700 soldiers.
7. At one point during the Battle, General Rommel commented to a captured British officer: “What difference does it make to me if you have two tanks to my one, if you send them out and let me smash them in detail? You presented me with three brigades in succession.” The lessons of Crusader served as a strong incentive for the British to work on their tank tactics, combined arms doctrine, and battlefield organizations.