

Extract from Rommel's

Papers.

THE RULES OF DESERT WARFARE.

Of all the theatres of operations, North Africa was probably the one where the war took on its most modern shape. Here were opposed fully motorised formations for whose employment the flat desert, free of obstructions, offered hitherto unforeseen possibilities. Here only could the principles of motorised and tank warfare, as they had been taught before 1939, be fully applied and, what was more important, further developed. Here only did the pure tank battle between large armoured formations actually occur. Even though the struggle may have occasionally hardened into static warfare, in its more important stages, in 1941/42 during the Cunningham-Ritchie offensive and in the summer of 1942 up to the capture of Tobruk, it remained based on the principle of complete mobility.

Militarily, this was entirely new ground, for our offensive in Poland and the West had been against opponents who, in their operations, had constantly to consider their non-motorised infantry divisions and whose freedom of decision was thus disastrously limited, particularly in retreat. They were, indeed, often obliged by this preoccupation to adopt measures which were quite unsuitable for holding up our advance. After our break-through in France, the enemy infantry divisions were overrun and outflanked by our motorised forces. When this happened, the enemy operational reserves had to allow themselves to be ground to pieces by our attacking forces, often in tactically unfavourable positions, in an endeavour to gain time for the retreat of the infantry.

Against a motorised and armoured enemy, non-motorised infantry divisions are of value only in prepared positions. Once such positions have been pierced or outflanked and they are forced to retreat from them, they become helpless victims of the motorised enemy. In extreme cases they can do no more than hold on in their positions to the last round. In retreat they cause tremendous embarrassment since, as mentioned above, motorised formations have to be employed to gain time (to extricate them). I myself had to submit to this experience during the retreat of the Axis forces from Cyrenaica in the winter of 1941/42 because the whole of the Italian and a large part of the German infantry, including the majority of what was to become the 90th Light Division, had no vehicles. Parts of them had to be carried by a shuttle service of supply columns, parts had to march. It was only thanks to the prowess of my armoured formations that the retreat of the Italo-German infantry could be covered, for the fully motorised British were in hot pursuit. Similarly, Graziani's failure can be attributed mainly to the fact that the Italian army, the greater part of it not motorised, was helpless in the open desert against the weak but nevertheless fully motorised British forces, while the Italian armour, though too weak to oppose the British with any hope of success, was compelled to accept battle and allow itself to be destroyed in defence of the infantry.

Out of the purely motorised form of warfare which developed in Libya and Egypt there arose certain laws, fundamentally different from those (applicable) in other theatres. They will be the standard for the future, which will belong to fully motorised formations.

In the flat desert country, so well suited to motor transport, the encirclement of a fully motorised enemy produces the following results:

- (a) The enemy is placed in the worst tactical situation imaginable, since fire can be brought to bear on him from all sides. Even when he is enveloped only on three sides his position is tactically untenable.

- (b) When the envelopment is completed, he is tactically compelled to evacuate the area which he occupies.

The encirclement of the enemy and his subsequent destruction in the pocket can, however, seldom be the primary aim of an operation but is usually only an indirect object, for a fully motorised force whose organisational structure is intact will normally and in suitable country be able to break out at any time through an improvised defensive ring. Thanks to motorisation, the commander of the encircled force will be in a position to concentrate his main effort unexpectedly against a favourable point and force his way through. Time and time again this was demonstrated in the desert.

It follows, then, that encircled enemy forces can only be destroyed:

- (a) When they are not motorised or have been rendered immobile by lack of petrol or when they include non-mobile elements which have to be considered.
- (b) When they are badly led or are deliberately sacrificed to save other formations.
- (c) When their fighting strength is already broken and signs of disintegration are evident.

With the exception of cases (a) and (b), which occurred very frequently in other theatres of war, the encirclement of the enemy and his subsequent destruction in the pocket can be attempted only if he has first been so heavily engaged in open battle that the organic cohesion of the forces has been lost. Battles which aim at the destruction of the enemy power of resistance should be conceived as battles of attrition. In motorised warfare, material attrition and the disruption of the organic cohesion of the opposing army must be the direct aim of the planning.

Tactically, the battle of attrition is fought with the highest possible measure of mobility. The following points require particular attention:

- (a) One should endeavour to concentrate one's own forces both in space and time, while at the same time seeking to split the opposing forces and to destroy them at different times.
- (b) Supply lines are particularly vulnerable as all petrol and ammunition, essential requirements for the battle, must pass along them. Hence, one should protect one's own by all possible means and seek to confuse, or better still, to cut the enemy's. Operations in the opposing supply area will cause the enemy immediately to break off the battle elsewhere, since, as already shown, supplies are the basis of the battle and thus must be given priority of protection.
- (c) The tank force is the backbone of the motorised army. Everything turns on the tanks, the other formations are mere ancillaries. War of attrition against the enemy tank units must, therefore, be carried on as far as possible by one's own tank destruction units. One's own tank forces must deal the last blow.
- (d) Results of reconnaissance must reach the Commander in the shortest possible time and he must then take immediate decisions and put them into effect as quickly as possible. Speed of reaction in Command decisions decides the battle. It is, therefore, essential that commanders of motorised forces should be as near as possible to their troops and in the closest signal communication with them.
- (e) Speed of one's own movement and organisational cohesion of the forces are decisive factors and require particular attention. Any sign of confusion must be dealt with as quickly as possible by reorganisation.

TACTICAL
BATTLE
OF
ATTRITION

CLASSIC
DOCTRINE

(f) Concealment of one's own intentions is of the greatest importance, in order to provide conditions of surprise for one's own operations and thus enable one to exploit the time required by the enemy command to react. Deception measures of all kinds should be encouraged, not least to make the enemy commander uncertain and compel him to move with hesitation and caution.

(g) Not until the enemy has been thoroughly beaten should one attempt to exploit success by overrunning and destroying large parts of his disorganised forces. Here again speed is everything. The enemy must never be allowed time to reorganise. The fastest possible regrouping for the pursuit, the fastest possible organisation of supply is essential for the attacking forces.

In the technical and organisational fields the following points must be given particular consideration in desert warfare :-

(a) From the tank one must demand, above all, manoeuvrability, speed and a long-range gun, for the side which has the more powerful gun has the longer arm and can the earlier engage the enemy. Weight of armour cannot make up for lack of gun-power, since it can only be provided at the expense of manoeuvrability and speed, both of which are indispensable tactical requirements.

(b) The artillery, too, must have great range and, above all, be mobile in the highest degree, including its ammunition in large quantities.

(c) The infantry serves only to occupy and hold positions designed to prevent the enemy from particular operations or to force him into them. Once this object is attained it must be possible to move the infantry quickly and employ them elsewhere. They must, therefore, be mobile and be provided with equipment which enables them to take up defensive positions as quickly as possible at tactically important points of the battlefield.

It is my experience that bold decisions give the best promise of success. One must differentiate between operational and tactical boldness and a military gamble. A bold operation is one which has no more than a chance of success but which, in case of failure, leaves one with sufficient forces in hand to be able to cope with any situation. A gamble, on the other hand, is an operation which can lead either to victory or to the destruction of one's own forces. Situations can arise where even a gamble may be justified, as when, in the normal course of events, defeat would be merely a question of time, when the gaining of time is pointless and the only chance lies in an operation of great risk. The only time that a commander can calculate the course of a battle in advance is when his forces are so superior to the enemy's that his victory is self-evident from the start. Then the problem is no longer one of "what with" but only of "how". But even in such situations I think it is better to operate on the grand scale rather than to creep about the battlefield anxiously taking all conceivable security measures against possible and impossible enemy operations.

Normally there is no ideal solution but each possible course has its advantages and disadvantages. One must select that which seems the best from the widest point of view and then pursue it and accept the consequences. Any compromise is bad.

One of the first lessons which I drew from my experience of motorised warfare was that speed of operation and quick reaction of the Command were the decisive factors. The troops must be able to operate at the highest speed and in complete co-ordination. One must not be satisfied here with any normal average but must always endeavour to obtain the maximum performance, for the side which makes the greater effort is the faster and the faster side wins the battle. Officers and N.C.O.s must, therefore, constantly train their troops with this in view.

In my opinion the duties of a Commander-in-Chief are not limited to his staff work. He must also take an interest in the details of command and frequently busy himself in the front line, for the following reasons:

- (a) Exact execution of the plans of the Commander-in-Chief and his staff is of the greatest importance. It is a mistake to assume that every local commander will make as much of a situation as there is to be made out of it. Most of them soon succumb to a certain need for rest. Then it is simply reported that this or that can't be done for some reason or another - such reasons are always easy enough to think up. People of this kind must be made to feel the authority of the Commander-in-Chief and be shaken out of their apathy by him. The Commander-in-Chief must be the driving motor of the battle. One must always have to reckon with his appearance in personal control.
- (b) The Commander-in-Chief must continually endeavour to keep his troops acquainted with the latest tactical knowledge and experience and ensure that they are acted upon. He must see to it that his subordinates are trained according to the most modern developments. The best form of "welfare" for the troops is a superlative state of training, for this saves unnecessary casualties.
- (c) For the Commander-in-Chief, too, it is a great advantage to know the front and to have a detailed knowledge of the problems of his subordinates. Only in this way can he keep his ideas permanently up-to-date and adapt them to the conditions of the moment. If, on the other hand, he conducts the battle as though he were playing chess, he will inevitably become inflexible in his theories. The best results are obtained by the Commander whose ideas develop freely from the conditions around him and have not previously been channelled into any fixed pattern.
- (d) The Commander-in-Chief must have contact with his troops. He must be able to feel and think with them. The soldier must have confidence in him. In this connection there is one cardinal principle to remember: one must never simulate a feeling for the troops which in fact one does not have. The ordinary soldier has a surprisingly good nose for what is genuine and what is fake.