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[-1-]

The Role of Artillery in the Siege of TOBRUCHPart I: * Up to the Autumn Battle of 1941

October - November 1941

I. Reorganization for Service in Africa, and Transport to North Africa

At the end of August 1941 Special Artillery Headquarters 104, located in the northern part of the Eastern Front, received orders to withdraw in order to be transferred to the jurisdiction of the BERLIN Replacement Area Headquarters. There the unit was to undergo changes in personnel and equipment that would prepare it for service in North Africa as the artillery command of Panzer Group Africa. In passing through ANGERBURG the commander was to report to the Chief of Artillery, Army High Command. In ANGERBURG the commander was given verbal instructions by the Chief of Artillery, and was briefed on the artillery plan for the siege of TOBRUCH which that officer had drafted. The plan consisted of nothing more than theoretical considerations which at the scene of action proved to be without any real practical value.

The reorganization in itself progressed very slowly, for absolutely nothing was ready. The headquarters had to use its own trucks in order to bring the entire tropical issue of clothing, vehicles, tents, etc., from depots in COLOGNE and ULM. The organic signal platoon, which had been given nominal approval by the General Army Office, could not be activated for lack

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[-1-] of time; it would have been impossible to form such a platoon before the end of October. A chemical officer was attached to the headquarters. At the end of September the four-day rail journey to NAPLES took place. From there the headquarters proceeded by overland march to CATANIA by orders of

[-2-] the Commanding General in Italy, issued upon the urging of Panzer Group and Artillery Commander 104. In CATANIA the headquarters was split. A day or so later, an advance detachment consisting of the commanding officer, the G-3, two administrative officers, the chemical officer, and a few clerks and draftsmen (without any vehicles) boarded a transport plane and flew via TRIPOLI to BENGASI, and from there, by the shortest route, to DERNA. From DERNA they were driven to the command post of Panzer Group Africa (Casa near CAMBUT).

The rest of the staff, together with all of the vehicles and equipment, embarked in a port in northern Sicily a few weeks later. Ninety nautical miles north of TRIPOLI the vessel was attacked by British torpedo bombers, was torpedoed, and sank twelve hours later. The entire equipment was lost. The Italian escort vessels concerned themselves neither with the fate of the ship nor of the German personnel, who later were fished out of the water by a German ocean-going vessel. No lives were lost. (Concerning this incident, a report by the former adjutant, 1st Lt. Hald, will follow later; a trip to WUERZBURG is required for the compilation of that report.)

[-2-] II. Condition of the German Artillery, and its Activity prior to the Beginning of the Autumn Battle

1. Order of Battle

Upon his arrival, Artillery Commander 104 was given immediate command of all GHQ artillery then in North Africa; it consisted of the following units:

one artillery regimental headquarters (special purpose)
(Colonel Fuergbuth)

one battalion (three batteries) of 105-mm. guns (range: 18 km.)

one battalion (two batteries) of 210-mm. howitzers, 2d Bn,
115th Artillery Regiment (range: 14 km.)
(the 3d Battery was still in Italy. It was torpedoed during
the crossing)

two battalions of army coast artillery, each with three batteries
of French 150-mm. guns (range: approximately 16 km.)

the observation battery of the 15th Panzer Division.

The artillery battalions were committed on the eastern and southern fronts (see sketch); the 15th Panzer Observation Battery performed survey functions on the southeastern front.

Artillery Commander 104 was immediately subordinate to the Commanding General of Panzer Group Africa.

[-3-] For practical purposes, Artillery Commander 104 also exercised control over the commander of the Italian siege artillery, Brigadier General Nicolini, who commanded the artillery of the Italian encirclement divisions. The Italian pieces were mostly obsolete, and had an insufficient range.

The artillery of the three German divisions (15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, 90th Light Division) was located in the respective division areas (see sketch).

[-3-] Strength:

15th Panzer Division: one regimental headquarters (two light battalions, one heavy battalion)

21st Panzer Division: one regimental headquarters (one light battalion, possibly another unit)

90th Light Division: not known

2. Ammunition Supply

There were 1 to 1 1/2 basic loads on hand per battery. By the employment of all trains and of the unit combat vehicles, this supply had been increased to between 5 and 7 basic loads by the beginning of the autumn battle.

3. The following units were en route, and arrived in time to participate in the battle:

German artillery: one light observation battalion

one battalion of army coast artillery (French
15-mm. guns)

one battery of 170-mm. guns (range: 30 km.)

In addition, the material of two batteries of French 150-mm. howitzers (Rimailho) came from TUNIS. They were to be manned by supernumerary troops of the army coast artillery.

Italian artillery: several weak battalions.

4. Mission of Artillery Commander 104

Immediately after his arrival at the beginning of October, Artillery Commander 104 was given the following instructions by the Commanding General: submit a blueprint of the artillery plan for the capture of TOBRUCH, according to which the thrust of the attacking forces (15th and 21st Panzer Divisions,

- [-3-] 90th Light Division) from the southeast will be prepared, supported, and accompanied by artillery; plan the extensive use of smoke for deception on another front. The western front was originally contemplated for that deceptive maneuver, which was to be the special task of the chemical officer.
- [-4-] That plan, however, was abandoned because of the transportation difficulties involved in bringing up the equipment.

5. On the basis of reconnaissance -- which because of visibility conditions (clear visibility only for a short time immediately after sunrise and before sunset) required a long time (about two weeks) -- the following artillery plan was laid before the Commanding General about mid-October (approximate content):

(H = time of attack)

H minus 180 minutes

Destruction of installations 63 to 71 with 100 rounds from one howitzer per installation (nine howitzers were to be available);

Heavy

Howitzer Battalion

Secondary purpose: filling of the concrete antitank ditch (thus facilitating the work of the engineers.

Other

medium artillery

Counterbattery fire on enemy artillery as reconnoitered by the observation battalion and air observers. Harassing fire on command posts and identified enemy assembly areas and the harbor.

H to H plus 30 minutes

Heavy

howitzer battalion

Elimination of flanking threat from positions west and north of installations 58 to 60, 73 to 75.

[-4-]

Other
medium artillery

Continuation of counterbattery and harassing fire.

After H plus 30 minutes

The mobile heavy howitzer battalion and the 105-mm. gun battalion were attached to the Africa Corps for the follow-up. The rest of the artillery, according to range, was to neutralize enemy positions that continued to offer resistance.

In addition, numerous heavy attacks by Stukas were to be made from H minus 180 until H-hour on positions and objectives in the area of attack.

The commanding general, after initial objections in view of the absence of any element of surprise (three hours of artillery preparation!), gave his approval to the plan. The Commanding General of the Africa Corps, General der Panzertruppen Cruewell, also voiced opposition to the 3-hour artillery preparation.

[-5-]

Artillery Commander 104, on the other hand, pointed out that since we had the significant advantage of the heavy howitzers, it would be irresponsible -- from the point of view of the artillery -- not to use them.

Artillery Commander 104 particularly emphasized that no increased artillery activity (registration, counterbattery, etc.) was scheduled for the days preceding the attack, so that a certain element of surprise would be maintained. Moreover, he held that no decisive movement of enemy reserves and artillery from inactive sectors into the large fortified area could be effected within three hours.

[-5-]

6. Execution of the Plan

On the basis of the approved artillery plan, the light observation battalion, which had arrived in the meantime, was committed and charged with the execution of the necessary survey and artillery reconnaissance. By mid-November, artillery reconnaissance revealed in the fortress a probable maximum strength of 60 to 80 pieces over 75-mm. Additional advanced positions were reconnoitered and improved for the 105-mm. gun battalion, and for the army coast artillery which was in position farther south.

The newly arrived (beginning of November) army coast artillery battalion and 170-mm. gun battery were placed in the northeastern sector of the encirclement, so that they might be effective also against sea targets. The guns of the two French batteries from TUNIS arrived in EL ADEM before the beginning of the autumn battle.

The medium and heavy battalions were trained in their missions by means of map exercises, terrain studies, and fire-direction exercises. The CP of Artillery Commander 104 was moved to BEL HAMED at the beginning of November.

The signal communications (wire and radio) of the Artillery Headquarters were merely improvised, and suffered numerous breakdowns. (Reasons: Equipment and untrained personnel had been hastily thrown together. At the beginning of the autumn battle the signal organization was not fully ready for combat.)

[-6-]

In mid-November the rest of the staff of Artillery Commander 104 arrived. Except for one command car furnished by Panzer Group, the vehicles were not capable of cross-country travel.

[-6-]

Ammunition distribution was accomplished by mid-November. Activities were limited to harassing fire, aimed principally at the harbor area, and fire on targets of opportunity. In addition, the GHQ artillery participated in the reduction of two small British advanced positions (BIR BU ASATEN?), and in the tightening of the ring around TOBRUCH at certain points. Those operations had the primary purpose of improving possibilities for artillery observation.

The attack on TOBRUCH was supposed to begin on 21 November. The assault units were ready to occupy their jump-off positions. The details are no longer familiar to me.

[signed] Karl Boettcher