

Operation COMPASS: the Australian Army's first experience of manoeuvre warfare in World War 2

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Introduction

Operation COMPASS was the first successful offensive made by British, Australian and Commonwealth forces in the Western Desert during the Second World War. Although the opposing Italian force was comprehensively beaten, the operation has been overshadowed in history by Rommel's subsequent counter-offensives and Australian actions at Tobruk in 1941 and El-Alamein in 1942. Yet the operation's effective employment of a joint approach, better logistics and superior doctrine by a resource-constrained mechanised land force makes it a very relevant case study.

Indeed, the ADF's contemporary approach to manoeuvre warfare is heavily shaped by the lessons learnt from Operation COMPASS, particularly given it was the first successful Allied ground offensive of the war. Like all operations in the desert, it was won by the side best able to concentrate combat power against its

adversary's weaknesses. The decisive actions were made by a small but mobile land force that continually outmanoeuvred its opponents, pitting British strengths against Italian vulnerabilities.¹ Lacking the doctrine and mobility to counter this approach, the Italians used defensive actions that only served to isolate and weaken their forces before their eventual rout.

This article contends that the decisive victory of Western Desert Force over the Italian Tenth Army can be explained by the superior ability of its commander, Lieutenant General Richard Nugent O'Connor, to concentrate combat power, as enabled by fundamental factors including joint operations, logistics, manoeuvre and command.

The article will explore these factors by examining their influence on the actions of both sides, and identifying where O'Connor's forces were superior, or the Italians deficient, in their approach. It posits that O'Connor achieved his

decisive victory by adapting his methods of warfare to the desert conditions better than the Italians, and by gaining and retaining the initiative through consistently bold action. The study of this seminal Anglo-Australian feat of arms provides useful lessons for contemporary military leaders.

Operation COMPASS

In December 1940, the British seemed to be on the defensive on a number of fronts. The Battle of Britain had prevented the invasion of the homeland but had left Axis forces free to act elsewhere. In the Western Desert, Italian forces had advanced 60 miles into British-administered Egypt from Libya. However, beset by problems, the Italian Army had halted and established expedient fortifications around Sidi Barrani to prepare to drive on Cairo.

At that point, British and Commonwealth forces under General O'Connor were tasked to conduct a five-day raid to cut the Italian supply lines and force them back behind the Libyan border. However, O'Connor and his higher commander, General Archibald Wavell, harboured greater ambitions. Suspecting the vulnerability of the Italians to a more mobile and armoured force, they had developed plans for a longer offensive that might defeat the Italian threat to Egypt permanently.² To achieve this, the experienced and mechanised 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divisions, and later the 6th Australian Division, would be pitted against a much larger enemy force.

When Operation COMPASS was launched on 9 December 1940, the British forces were able to continually out-maneuvre and defeat the slow-moving Italian formations, successively overwhelming their prepared defensive positions in eastern Libya.³ Then, after a hurried advance on two axes, a small British armoured force blocked the Italian Army's retreat south of Benghazi. Following a frantic and close-run battle, the remnants of an entire Italian Corps surrendered, having lost 130,000 soldiers, nearly 400 tanks and 845 artillery pieces. British and Commonwealth forces suffered 500 dead and just over 1400 wounded or missing. A series of fundamental factors underpinned this British triumph.

British strategy: joint operations before COMPASS

The geography of the Western Desert is well suited to the conduct of joint and combined warfare. Most actions occurred within a relatively narrow coastal strip, which could be influenced from the sea by indirect fire, and control of this zone belonged to the side which commanded the adjacent sea. The British rapidly dominated the coastal strip through a 'coordinated and complementary' joint campaign executed by all three British Services in the theatre.⁴

The Royal Navy in the Mediterranean consisted of some of the oldest and least capable vessels in the fleet and, on paper, it was considerably outclassed by the strength of the *Regia Marina* (Italian Navy). The Mediterranean Fleet might, therefore, have been expected to surrender control of the central Mediterranean Sea to the Axis. Instead, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, the Fleet's Commander-in-Chief, adopted an offensive approach and actively sought to engage the *Regia Marina* close to their bases on the Italian mainland.

After a bruising but indecisive encounter at the Battle of Calabria in July 1940, and a strike on the Italian base at Taranto in November, the *Regia Marina* refrained from actively engaging the Royal Navy in force.⁵ The consequent control of the sea permitted the British and Commonwealth forces to operate off the Egyptian and Libyan coasts in support of the land forces involved in Operation COMPASS.

Like the navy, the Royal Air Force in Egypt was significantly outnumbered by the *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Air Force). Both sides initially depended largely on biplane fighters and older bomber designs, which were obsolete but relatively evenly matched on paper. This meant the tactics and techniques for employing these forces were a decisive factor, and even small numbers of more advanced aircraft could have a disproportionate effect. The Royal Air Force (RAF) devoted the early phases of Operation COMPASS to destroying the *Regia Aeronautica* on the ground, then pushed forward more fighter aircraft, including the new Hurricane, to prevent their opponents striking back.

As a result, the Italians effectively ceded control of the air within a week, with only limited air-to-air engagements occurring thereafter.⁶ The scale of the area of operations meant that some *Regia Aeronautica* ground-attack operations continued but these were spasmodic and largely ineffective.⁷ Italian air-ground coordination was also limited by the continuous withdrawal rearwards of air assets in the face of the advancing ground forces. Moreover, Italian aircraft were based so far rearwards they could not respond to support requests in a timely manner, and had limited fuel to loiter over potential targets. By the start of Operation COMPASS, Italian forces had effectively lost control of the sea and air, and conditions were right for the Army to force the Italians from eastern Libya.

Joint operations during COMPASS

Operation COMPASS planners used joint operations from the very start. On the first night, an allied force under the command of Brigadier General Arthur Selby advanced on the coastal town of Maktilla, which was covered by a bombardment from the 15-inch guns aboard three naval gun boats, supported by naval spotter aircraft. Inland, the noise of the 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divisions' approach march was concealed from the Italian camps by RAF bombing raids.⁸ This pattern of activity would continue throughout the operation, with the gun boats supporting most of the land forces' deliberate attacks.

In the air, the RAF and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) conducted frequent 'softening-up' and ground-attack sorties on Italian forces with a collection of Gladiator and Hurricane fighters and Blenheim light bombers. Once air superiority had been achieved, slow-moving and normally vulnerable Lysander spotter aircraft reconnoitred enemy positions and coordinated attacks by accompanying Hurricane fighters and artillery. Deliberate attacks were often supported by Wellington medium-bombers, whose noise was also used to mask the final advance of attacking troops.⁹

The effect was decisive: defensive positions were generally effectively suppressed and yielded quickly to combined arms assaults

by infantry and tanks, while Italian freedom of movement was severely constrained. It was not a one-sided battle but the RAF had superior techniques for establishing control of the air, gained from their recent experience in the Battle of Britain. By mid-January, the *Regia Aeronautica* was a spent and ineffective force, and was unable to prevent armoured columns from advancing deep into the Italian rear, nor disrupt continual allied ground attacks on Italian forces lying exposed in the near-featureless desert.

At nearly every stage, the Italians were harassed by RAF and RAAF aircraft ranging hundreds of miles forward of their bases, including on their rapid retreat to Benghazi.¹⁰ These were not the integrated close air support operations of later in the war—ground attacks were generally conducted in the enemy's rear and not in direct support of ground units—but they were nonetheless effective. The Italian commander, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, despaired of these attacks, noting they caused 'grievous losses ... [and] severe strain on morale' to an already demoralised force.¹¹ Of course, the RAF could not seize or hold ground but the land force could not move without its protection. It might be said that with control of the air, the British could not achieve everything but without it they could achieve nothing.

The Royal Navy's dominance of the Mediterranean meant that Axis supplies and reinforcements could only be safely moved from Italy to Tripoli.¹² From there to Bardia, along the coast road, was a journey of some 1000 miles which tied up already scarce motor transport vehicles, and consumed many of the supplies during transit. Close to the front line, the convoys were extremely vulnerable to interdiction from the air, further disrupting their progress. The Italians were not safe even within their fortified positions at Tobruk and Bardia, with frequent air and sea raids disrupting their operations and denying the use of the very air and sea ports these positions protected.

Ironically, the Italians had the decisive advantage on land of possessing a sea port (at Tobruk) to supply their forces but could not use it due to naval action. This created a serious dilemma for the Italians: their forces went largely unreinforced during Operation COMPASS and were forced to fight with what weapons and supplies they had available. Conversely, the

British superiority of supply allowed their rapid manoeuvre and advance, and was another key contributor to their victory. This joint approach not only increased the combat power available to O'Connor but improved his ability to concentrate that power at the point where it had the greatest effect.

Logistics

Superior logistics does not win battles but it does place forces in the best position to prevail. The sheer distances of the desert and the minimal road and rail networks meant logistical considerations dominated O'Connor's plans. Every gallon of petrol, every bullet and tin of bully beef needed by the British forces had to be moved all the way from Egypt to the rapidly advancing frontline. Further, materiel reinforcement from other theatres was almost impossible due to the inability of either side to move convoys through the central Mediterranean. As George Forty has noted, it was 'an unbelievably difficult place to wage war and battles were to a large degree dictated by supply considerations'.¹³ Australia's Colonel George Vasey summarised it succinctly: 'this is a "Q" war'.¹⁴

British situation reports of the time and the official histories are dominated by discussions of how best to amass sufficient supplies to mount the next advance or assault.¹⁵ Indeed, after the initial breakthrough at Sidi Barrani, O'Connor's operational plans were largely based on capturing logistics nodes: Halfaya Pass for its access to the coast road; the two tiny jetties at Sollum; Bardia and Tobruk for their harbours; and Benghazi for its port facilities. Consequently, Italian plans were based around defending these locations and denying them to the British. Logistics, therefore, did not just influence the campaign, it dictated when and where the decisive battles would be fought.

The disparity in the logistical capacity of the opposing forces was evident in the movements of the campaign. Graziani's advance into Egypt in September 1940 had been halted after just 60 miles not by any substantial British opposition but by his infantry's inability to march any further on foot. Even after consolidating his positions, he was unable to resume the advance because his scarce motor transport was unable to move

sufficient supplies forward from depots at Bardia and Tobruk.

Conversely, the British fell back on their railhead at Matruh, and built up forces and supplies to counter Graziani's advance. O'Connor might only have had two divisions of fighting troops but they were highly mechanised and had a comparatively large logistics support element. In preparation for the British offensive, two large forward supply dumps were secretly established in the no-man's land between the Italian and British frontlines. These supplied the initial assault and breakthrough at Sidi Barrani, while the subsequent advance to Bardia was supported by two small piers captured at Sollum. The British surrounded and then captured Bardia, needing its port to support the subsequent assault on Tobruk.¹⁶ The British thus maintained their supply lines, while the Italians lack of motorised transport to supply or move counter-attack forces forced them to retreat to defensive strongpoints and try to withstand a siege.¹⁷ Through lack of supply, an otherwise modern army was compelled to adopt medieval tactics.

The investment of and assaults on Bardia and Tobruk further demonstrated the importance of logistics. Needed in the Sudan, the 4th Indian Division was withdrawn and replaced by the inexperienced 6th Australian Division, while O'Connor tried to build up sufficient combat power to penetrate Bardia's considerable defences. The result was an unavoidable operational pause. Again, the joint approach provided an advantage: supplies and reinforcements could be brought up by ship, and bombardment by naval vessels significantly reduced the artillery and shells needed to be amassed to support the assault on the fortress.¹⁸

Bardia fell to an Australian assault just after Christmas, and O'Connor immediately invested Tobruk, requiring the port infrastructure there to supply his planned advance on Benghazi. Further evidence of the dominance of supply on O'Connor's plans was his decision to pause and conduct a deliberate attack on Tobruk, expressly to reduce the time the Italians had to destroy the much-needed docks and warehouses.¹⁹ He was successful: the docks were repaired in two days, and enough supplies were accrued over the following fortnight to permit the final pursuit of the Italians to their destruction at Beda Fomm.²⁰

Manoeuvre: mechanisation and doctrine

While the preceding factors gave O'Connor freedom of action, it was through manoeuvre that he was able to concentrate his combat power at the decisive point. Outnumbered by five-to-one in men and guns, O'Connor consistently used his forces' superior mobility to avoid areas of enemy strength and instead exploit their vulnerabilities. In so doing, he prevented the Italians from being able to use the advantages of their prepared defensive positions or superior weight of artillery. The inability of the Italians to counter this movement has already been discussed.

O'Connor's approach was made possible by the inherent mobility of his small mechanised forces, underpinned by the freedom of action gained from joint operations with sound logistics support. The combat power of these small forces was greatly enhanced by organising combined arms brigades of tanks, infantry and anti-tank guns, screened by light armoured vehicles and supported by towed artillery.²¹ A regiment (battalion) of tanks was allocated to most infantry brigades, and squadrons of heavier Cruiser and light Vickers tanks were swapped between regiments to balance mobility and firepower. The heavily armoured but slow 'I' tanks (also called Matildas) were specially designed to accompany infantry in the assault, and were attached to infantry battalions for specific attacks.²²

The opposing Italians had numerous light and medium tanks, some which outgunned their British equivalents, but tended to employ them in smaller groups in direct support of their infantry. With the infantry largely employed in static defences, the tanks could not exploit their advantage of mobility. Consequently, the only Italian offensive manoeuvres employed in the entire campaign were local counter-penetration or spoiling actions against British advances. Counter-attacks on British units larger than a battalion were almost non-existent.

Even at Mechilli, where two opposing armoured brigades clashed on 24 January 1941, with the British force being driven off, the Italians withdrew instead of exploiting their success.²³ Much of this timidity can be attributed to the Italians' assignment of their armour to the lowest levels of

command and a consequent lack of mass. With their tanks usually deployed in 'penny packets' of six or seven, they were able to be easily countered by the embedded anti-tank guns and medium tanks within British formations.²⁴ Conversely, the Italians' control of their artillery was held at the highest level, reducing its ability to quickly support troops in local contacts.

These issues were a direct result of the Italians' continued use of First World War-era 'motorisation' doctrine which promoted the primacy of artillery, and in which armour was to operate in support of the infantry.²⁵ Despite the numerical superiority of their infantry forces, these troops were 'of little value against a smaller number of highly mobile armoured and mechanised formations'.²⁶ The resulting vulnerability of the Italian forces made it almost impossible to counter British manoeuvres. This was not necessarily the commander's fault: Graziani had identified the need for mobile, mechanised and armoured formations before his advance into Egypt but could not obtain them. Only the under-strength Special Armoured Brigade was assigned to him. In 1938, Italian Army doctrine had belatedly embraced the doctrine of 'mechanisation' and adopted a theory of massed armour, mobile artillery and an indirect approach to attack an enemy's flanks. This doctrine had even been tested in Libya using First World War-vintage tanks and equipment.²⁷

Unfortunately for the Italians, they did not possess the industrial capacity or the money to re-equip their forces in time for their offensive in the Western Desert. Those mechanised forces which did exist were retained in Italy for the defence of the mainland.²⁸ As a consequence, Graziani's forces continued to use the obsolete 'motorisation' doctrine, a factor which one of the Italian General Staff called "a canker" ... [which] lay at the heart of very painful losses'.²⁹ The Italians were a First World War-force in their doctrine and mobility—and they paid dearly for it.³⁰ There is evidence the Italians recognised these failings: after Operation COMPASS, they doubled the number of artillery weapons in each division, changed their command arrangements, and fielded heavier and more capable tanks.³¹ They also deployed their only armoured division (the Trieste Division) to Libya alongside Rommel's Afrika Korps.³²

The relative impotence of the Italian Army is evident in Graziani's inability to move beyond Sidi

Barrani in September 1940, and his incapacity to withdraw his forces effectively from Benghazi in February 1941. As has been noted, Graziani was forced to employ his large infantry force in powerful but immobile defensive positions like Bardia and Tobruk.³³ This could have significantly constrained the British advance—Tobruk certainly limited Rommel's options when he failed to capture it later in 1941—but without the capacity to counter-attack, the Italians could only react to British movements. As would be shown throughout the following Western Desert campaigns, fighting an opponent to a stalemate was a temporary solution but forcing a decision required mobility. It was the British who possessed the advantage of mobility, and they exploited it from the very start.

In the opening battle at Sidi Barrani, British armoured forces had advanced through a gap between fortified camps which was not covered by obstacles or fire. A direct attack on the rear of the Italians' Nibeiva camp by infantry and Matilda tanks followed, pushed through a poorly concealed gap in the perimeter minefield.³⁴ This started a pattern: O'Connor and his subordinates Major Generals Michael Creagh (7th Armoured Division) and Iven Mackay (6th Australian Division) would continually use their light armour and wheeled-reconnaissance columns to seek out gaps which they could move their forces through.

Where gaps did not exist, such as on the defensive perimeters at Bardia and Tobruk, a small force would penetrate the defensive line and a following combined arms team would move through the breach to roll up the defences from the flanks and rear. Well-defended surfaces were avoided in favour of exploiting empty spaces between units or through turning a flank. Thus, the Italians were largely prevented from fighting where they intended to fight, and the British forces avoided the engagement areas where the Italians' superior artillery could be brought to bear. In so doing, the advantages of the defender were largely negated: choice of terrain, shorter lines of communication, and the layering of direct and indirect fires were unable to be used.

The most spectacular and successful exploitation of a gap was in the culmination of Operation COMPASS at the battle of Beda Fomm. Several weeks after the capture of Tobruk,

O'Connor pushed the remains of the exhausted 7th Armoured Division through 150 miles of un-reconnoitred desert at night across the base of the Cyrenaican bulge to Beda Fomm. The lead elements of the armoured division took up a block position astride the coast road just ahead of the Italian force fleeing from an Australian divisional advance on Benghazi. A furious 48 hours of combat followed, as an Italian force of some 25,000 soldiers, 100 artillery pieces and 100 tanks tried to break through the blocking position and its flank guards.

Critically, the Italians did not coordinate their attack and committed their armour piecemeal to the battle as it arrived. These small groups of tanks proved no match for the equally small numbers of dug-in anti-tank guns and hull-down medium tanks of the blocking force which occupied the high ground. Trapped, the Italian Tenth Army surrendered on 7 February 1941.³⁵ In the final battle, as in the rest of the campaign, the Italians had been unable to concentrate their superior numbers against a smaller opponent, instead attacking without coordination and frittering away their combat power.

Command

Ultimately, the British victory was decisive because their superior command and control allowed them to concentrate their combat power where it would do most harm. This superiority can be assigned to technological, organisational and human factors. Unlike the Italians, the British pursued their joint approach by linking the air commander with O'Connor's headquarters, and giving O'Connor direct command of some reconnaissance and fighter aircraft.³⁶ With full knowledge of each other's plans, the air forces coordinated their operations to achieve O'Connor's intent, changing between control of the air and ground-attack missions as the situation required.

O'Connor also benefited from having comparatively experienced and motivated subordinates. The 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divisions had nearly two years of experience in mechanised operations in the desert, while the otherwise-inexperienced 6th Australian Division benefited from the presence of some of Australia's best commanders with experience from the First World War.³⁷ The British forces had better

communication networks at lower levels (including between individual tanks and aircraft) than the Italians but this was only part of their ability to react faster.³⁸ The rapid evolution of events inherent in mobile warfare also required commanders who were comfortable with ambiguity and could achieve their commander's intent in rapidly changing circumstances. This relied not just on procedures and technology but also on the trust between commanders at different levels.

The British commanders were more experienced, audacious and motivated than their opponents. O'Connor knew his units and his commanders well, and was allowed considerable latitude by Wavell in planning and executing Operation COMPASS. As a consequence, he was able to display considerable initiative in planning operations, and daring in executing them. While O'Connor was required to back-brief his operational plans to Wavell, he was given a relatively free hand and was encouraged to take bold and decisive manoeuvres by both Cairo and London.³⁹

Neither Wavell nor O'Connor sought undue credit for success and they were effusive in praising their subordinates. As a consequence, their subordinates were more prepared to take calculated risks. With the support of his superiors, O'Connor's known boldness, highly trained mind and extensive wartime experience was able to be translated into decisive tactics, as demonstrated by his audacious and risky interception of the Italians at Beda Fomm.⁴⁰

Reflection

A number of other factors have been put forward by other authors for O'Connor's victory but they are not as influential as is often made out. The Italian equipment was not, as is often claimed, dramatically inferior to that of the British. Certainly, they had no tanks to match the British Matildas, nor sufficient anti-tank guns that could defeat the Matildas front-on. But the Matildas were a scarce, temperamental and carefully used asset—there were only 50 at the operation's start—and they rarely participated in tank-on-tank battles.⁴¹ They were also not present at the later battles of Mechilli, Derna or Beda Fomm.

Contradicting the myth of inferior armour, the Italian light and medium tanks proved more than

capable of holding their own against their British counterparts at the engagements at Mechilli on 24 January 1941. There, the Italian Special Armoured Brigade held its ground to defeat a British advance and subsequent counter-attack. O'Connor was sufficiently concerned that he waited a week-and-a-half to bring up reinforcements before advancing to and capturing Mechilli.⁴² Italian armour had proved equal to the British when employed effectively. Similarly, if British troops were truly so much better equipped, their advance should have slowed following the replacement of the experienced and mechanised 4th Indian Division with the unblooded and poorly equipped 6th Australian Division in mid-December.⁴³ However, it did not.

Much has been written about the moral superiority of the British and Commonwealth troops over demoralised Italians who viewed the conflict as Mussolini's war but this is perhaps an over-simplification.⁴⁴ Certainly, morale was a key factor in the susceptibility of the Italian defences to crumble once outflanked—and the Italians often surrendered in droves.⁴⁵ But equally, there are many accounts of when the Italians 'fought like hell', particularly their artillery teams, and many of their formations were well-trained and well-equipped for defensive operations.⁴⁶

Knowing the propensity for the Italians to surrender when they felt all was lost, O'Connor designed his operations around creating the feeling of impotence by using encirclement, penetration and fire support to shatter their will to resist.⁴⁷ O'Connor simply attempted to avoid pitting strength against strength, exploiting one of his enemy's key weaknesses.

Had the Italians been more tenacious, the British force would probably have suffered more serious casualties and may not have been able to advance so far or so fast. But several months later, British forces were defeated with even greater speed during Operation CRUSADER by Rommel using the same tactics as O'Connor. Similarly, in 1942, the British adopted isolated but strong defensive positions at Gazala that were very similar to Italian dispositions at Sidi Barrani in 1940, and they were overwhelmed just as quickly. While the fighting spirit of the Italians was certainly lacking, it does not wholly explain O'Connor's success.

Conclusion

While O'Connor's tactical nous and the capabilities of his Western Desert Force were key to victory, they were not the only factors. O'Connor entered Operation COMPASS at a significant numerical disadvantage but with a more capable force and a favourable strategic situation. His success is explained by the effective synchronisation and coordination of all elements of his military power, using sound military strategy and a joint plan for waging war. He was thus able to strike when and where the conditions suited his forces, and with the weight of air and sea power supporting his small land force.

The failures of the Italians were also instrumental in allowing O'Connor to use his limited resources to best effect, and cannot be ignored. Ultimately, O'Connor won a decisive victory by using these advantages to focus his combat power against Italian weakness time and time again. In the difficult conditions of the Western Desert, his opposition had no effective response.

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Notes

- 1 For simplicity, in this paper 'British' encompasses British and Commonwealth forces.
- 2 Orders from Wavell to Wilson, 28 November 1940, quoted in Gavin Long, *The Six Years War: a concise history of Australia in the 1939-45 war*, Australian War Memorial: Canberra, 1973, p. 132.
- 3 Ian Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East: the early successes against Italy (to May 1941)*, Vol. 2, HM Stationery Office: London, 1954, pp. 257-359.
- 4 Niall Barr, *Pendulum of war: three battles at El Alamein*, Random House: London, 2004, p. 3.
- 5 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 238.
- 6 John Baynes, *The Forgotten Victor – General Sir Richard O'Connor*, Brassey's Publishing: London, 1989, p. 114.
- 7 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, pp. 261-2.
- 8 Jon Latimer, *Operation COMPASS 1940: Wavell's whirlwind offensive*, Osprey: Oxford, 2000, p. 32.
- 9 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, pp. 262-98.

- 10 Telegram Wavell to War Office, 4 February 1941, in 'Operation "COMPASS": situation and operational reports, 1940 December-1941 March', folio 158A, WO 106/2136, British National Archives.
- 11 Quoted in Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 357.
- 12 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, pp. 241-56.
- 13 George Forty, *The Desert War*, Sutton Publishing Limited: Stroud, 2002, p. 14.
- 14 Quoted in Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 161.
- 15 See 'Situation reports on current operations: Operation "COMPASS", 1940 December-1941 January', WO 201/349, British National Archives; 'Reports on lessons of operations, accounts of engagements, December 1940-September 1941', WO 201/352, British National Archives; and 'Operation "COMPASS": situation and operational reports, 1940 December-1941 March', WO 106/2136, British National Archives.
- 16 Latimer, *Operation COMPASS 1940*, p. 38.
- 17 Craig Stockings, 'The Anzac legend and the Battle of Bardia', *War in History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2010, p. 98.
- 18 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 290.
- 19 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 290.
- 20 Forty, *The Desert War*, p. 30.
- 21 'Reports on lessons of operations, accounts of engagements, December 1940-September 1941'.
- 22 'Reports on lessons of operations, accounts of engagements, December 1940-September 1941', p. 12.
- 23 Latimer, *Operation COMPASS 1940*, p. 66.
- 24 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, pp. 284, 293, 358-62 and 364; and Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 139.
- 25 John Sweet, *Iron Arm: the mechanization of Mussolini's army, 1920-1940*, Stackpole Books: London, 1985, p. 115.
- 26 Barr, *Pendulum of war*, p. 8.
- 27 Sweet, *Iron Arm*, pp. 124-8.
- 28 Sweet, *Iron Arm*, pp. 186-9.
- 29 Barrie Pitt, *The Crucible of War: year of Alamein 1942*, Vol. 2, Jonathan Cape: London, 1982, p. 23.
- 30 Craig Stockings, 'Something is wrong with our army ... : command, leadership and Italian military failure in the First Libyan Campaign, 1940-41', *Defence Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2013, p. 128.
- 31 James Sadkovich, 'Of myths and men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942', *The International History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1991, p. 289.
- 32 Sweet, *Iron Arm*, pp. 186-9; and Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 290.
- 33 Sadkovich, 'Of myths and men', p. 291.
- 34 Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 135.
- 35 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, pp. 356-62.
- 36 Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, p. 262.
- 37 Sweet, *Iron Arm*, p. 148. The Australian official history refers them as being of 'exceptional quality': Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 84.
- 38 The Italians had no inter-tank radios, instead relying on semaphore: Stockings, 'The Anzac legend and the Battle of Bardia', p. 104.

- 39 Latimer, *Operation COMPASS 1940*, pp. 68-9.
- 40 Baynes, *The Forgotten Victor*, pp. 92-4.
- 41 'Reports on lessons of operations, accounts of engagements, December 1940-September 1941', p. 15.
- 42 Sadkovich, 'Of myths and men', p. 292.
- 43 The Division arrived missing significant artillery, machine guns and anti-tank guns: Long, *The Six Years War*, pp. 145-6.
- 44 Stockings, 'The Anzac legend and the Battle of Bardia', p. 104.
- 45 For example, rear echelon troops at Bardia: Long, *The Six Years War*, pp. 163-204.
- 46 Latimer, *Operation COMPASS 1940*, p. 33; also concluding note to 'Reports on lessons of operations, accounts of engagements, December 1940-September 1941', p. 31; and Long, *The Six Years War*, pp. 165-9.
- 47 Stockings, 'Something is wrong with our army ...', p. 129.

Additional reading

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