

# **Why was General Richard O'Connor's Command in Northwest Europe Less Effective than Expected?**

**A Monograph  
by  
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## **Abstract**

**WHY WAS GENERAL RICHARD N. O'CONNOR'S COMMAND OF THE BRITISH VIII CORPS IN NORTH WEST EUROPE 1944 LESS EFFECTIVE THAN EXPECTED?**

MAJOR Sam E. A. Cates, RIFLES, British Army, 81 pages.

General Richard O'Connor was the British VIII Corps commander in Normandy 1944. Previously he forged an outstanding reputation as a large unit commander in the desert of North Africa and this form suggests his command in Northwest Europe would be faultless. However, this was not the case. Some historians explain his pedestrian performance in Normandy by pointing to his two and a half years as a prisoner of war in Italy. This monograph challenges this narrative suggesting instead that O'Connor's command style was not suited to the context of war in Normandy. General O'Connor had a wealth of relevant military experience. The crucible of World War and his experiences commanding the Western Desert Force in North Africa created in him a style of command that was best suited to independent operations, on ground that facilitated effective maneuver, and with conditions that enable the achievement of the element of surprise. Yet in Normandy 1944, the context in which General O'Connor commanded did not allow for any of these conditions. Rather, a constrictive chain of command, narrow fronts, restrictive terrain, and the difficulty of achieving surprise all combined to provide a context in which General O'Connor was a less effective corps commander than expected.

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## Introduction

Sick and tired Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor collapsed into the back of his staff car for a long ride across the desert to join up with the XIII Corps headquarters at Tmimi. It had been another long day racing about the desert trying to instill a degree of order in Lieutenant General Sir Philip Neame's corps, which was by now in full retreat. General Neame's driver had almost collapsed with fatigue so the general had taken the wheel in order to allow him some rest. He drove fast and dangerously, overtaking vehicles withdrawing along the Barce to Derna main road. It was night and although the moon shone brightly, the air was thick with dust, kicked up by the eastbound retreating force.

Soon the convoy of two staff vehicles turned off the Derna road onto a cross-country track bound for Martuba. As the vehicle bumped along the road, O'Connor and the other passengers drifted in and out of sleep. The recently promoted Brigadier General John Combe, also in the car with Neame and O'Connor, soon became concerned that they had taken a wrong turn. There was no traffic and they appeared, from the location of the moon, to be heading too far to the north. Yet Neame insisted that he knew the way and that they were making good progress. He claimed that the absence of traffic was because he had overtaken it all! On three occasions O'Connor suggested that they were going the wrong way, yet he was too exhausted to argue with Neame, who was convinced he knew their location. It was a decision he later came to regret. By now, Neame had returned to the passenger seat and allowed his driver to re-take the wheel and all three passengers fell asleep. Some time later they approached another convoy and again started passing the slower moving vehicles. For some unknown reason the convoy came to a halt with the two staff cars stuck in the middle of it. Suddenly the occupants of both vehicles found

themselves abruptly awakened by German soldiers armed with submachine guns. The enemy had captured O'Connor.<sup>1</sup>

Only two months earlier O'Connor had crossed this ground with his Western Desert Force during his magnificent defeat of the Italian Tenth Army. However, the arrival of German forces in Tripoli under the command of General Erwin Rommel had marked the start of a British withdrawal under General Neame, O'Connor's successor as the XIII corps commander. General Sir Archibald Wavell, the Allied Commander in Chief Middle East, believed that Neame had lost control and in his opinion was unable to regain it.<sup>2</sup> O'Connor's former chief of staff was now Neame's and at his request Wavell sent a message to O'Connor to come forward to take command; it was not good news: "I cannot pretend I was happy at the thought of taking over command in the middle of a battle, which was already lost."<sup>3</sup>

Richard O'Connor was, in April 1941, considered one of the best generals in the British Army. He was a hero both in England and in the press in the United States of America, having just delivered the first major allied victory against the Axis powers by commanding the Western Desert Force in their total destruction of the Italian Tenth Army.<sup>4</sup> Yet a few weeks later, the Germans captured him and sent him to a prisoner of war camp in Italy. After two and a half years as a prisoner of war, he escaped and returned to Britain, where Field Marshall Alan Brooke gave

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<sup>1</sup> Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London, *Papers of General Sir Richard O'Connor KT, GCB, DSO, MC (1889-1981)*, Box 4, File 4/3/2. Typescript Copy of the first Libyan Campaign – December 1940 – April 1941, with a personal account of capture and removal to a prisoner of war camp, 41-42. Hereafter referred to as O'Connor Papers.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. M. Baynes, *The Forgotten Victor* (London: Brassey's, 1989), 133.

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4, File 4/3/2. Typescript Copy of the first Libyan Campaign – December 1940 – April 1941, with a personal account of capture and removal to a prisoner of war camp, 36.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4, File 4/2/23. Newspaper cuttings referring to the advances in the Western Desert including those from *The Daily Express*, *The New York Herald Tribune* and *The Sunday Times*, and photographs taken in Derna and the Western Desert.



him command of the VIII Corps, destined for the Normandy Campaign. However, his ability to command in Normandy was not nearly as assured as it had previously been and he did not achieve the outstanding victories that he was previously associated with. This work seeks to answer the question why O'Connor in 1944 was less decisive than he had been prior to his captivity.

Several historians suggest that the reason for the change in O'Connor's fortunes is a result of his time spent in captivity as a prisoner of war in Italy.<sup>5</sup> Although there may be a degree of truth in this assertion, it is based largely on conjecture and has little empirical evidence to support it. This monograph will demonstrate that O'Connor's successes, prior to his capture, had been a result of the circumstances in which he commanded. When commanding a force independent of others and unfettered by boundaries O'Connor proved to be an outstanding commander; yet when constrained, fighting as part of a larger organization, he was less capable in command.

This paper will identify how O'Connor's experiences in the First World War and the Western Desert influenced and shaped his command style, and it will demonstrate the conditions that allowed O'Connor to develop into an outstanding commander with an excellent reputation.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently it will examine the differences that came to bear during his command in Normandy, in order to articulate why his command in Normandy failed to be as decisive as it had previously been. However, first it is worth unpacking his life.

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<sup>5</sup> Baynes, 178-183; and Stephen Ashley Hart, *Montgomery and "Colossal Cracks": The 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (London: Praeger, 2000), 136.

<sup>6</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Liddell Hart Memoires, Vol I* (London: Cassell, 1965), 50, 63. Liddell Hart, when asked to provide a list of generals with outstanding potential to the Secretary of War, included O'Connor's name in the eight that he submitted, out of one hundred and ten generals serving at that time. Also found in O'Connor Papers, Box 4/2/1-70, File 4/2/50.

Richard O'Connor was born in India to Major Maurice O'Connor and his wife Lillian. They were a typically middle class family of the time and were not of great wealth or social station. Even though his maternal grandparents were titled and owned a significant estate in Argyllshire, Scotland, "the family found shortage of money a constant problem."<sup>7</sup> His father, soon after his son's birth, left the army as a result of an injury from an accident. His continued poor health meant that O'Connor's mother was the influential parent in his early years. She imbued in him three lessons that shaped his life: the importance of his Christian faith, the principle of integrity, and value of duty above all else.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his career, there are many examples of these principles shaping his actions.

Educated in England at Tonbridge Castle Preparatory School and subsequently at Wellington College, O'Connor did not excel academically, in fact upon his departure from Wellington a member of staff sarcastically asked him to write when he promoted to the rank of general. O'Connor though had the last laugh in 1938 when he sent the letter upon his promotion as one of the youngest major generals of his peer group.<sup>9</sup> He commissioned in 1909 into the Second Battalion The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) and spent two years in Aldershot, Surrey and a further three years in Malta at regimental duty.<sup>10</sup> In these formative years O'Connor was educated by both fellow officers and senior non-commissioned officers as is the British model and he developed into a particularly conscientious and professional young officer; traits that he continued to develop throughout his career.

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<sup>7</sup> Baynes, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> The War Office, "Regular Forces," *The London Gazette* 28289 (September 17, 1909), 6962. <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/28289/pages/6962> (accessed 23 October 2010).

During the First World War O'Connor served with great distinction and as a result of his actions was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Bar, the Military Cross and the Italian Silver Medal for Valor. In August 1914 he joined the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the newly formed 7<sup>th</sup> Division and saw action notably at Ypres, Neuve Chapelle, Fromelles, Givanchy and Loos.<sup>11</sup> Upon promotion to captain he assumed command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division Signal Company and then, in 1916, he was appointed as Chief of Staff of the 91<sup>st</sup> Brigade and in 1917, the 185<sup>th</sup> Brigade. In June of the same year, he promoted to temporary lieutenant colonel and achieved his wish of command when appointed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, the Honourable Artillery Company (HAC) as commanding officer. During his tenure, he led his battalion in the bitter fighting at Passchendaele, and soon after, in November 1917, the battalion moved to the Italian Front where it fought most notably at the Battle of Papadopoli. O'Connor's outstanding leadership in this particular battle resulted in the awards of the Italian Silver Medal, a bar to his DSO, commentary on his leadership in the national press, and marked his emergence as one of the most talented officers of his generation.<sup>12</sup>

During the inter war years, 1919 to 1935, O'Connor's career continued apace and he developed very much in the mould of historian Brian Linn's conceptual 'hero'.<sup>13</sup> After losing his brevet rank he reverted to the rank of captain and served as adjutant in his parent battalion, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Cameronians, before being sent to the "proving ground" of the Northwest Frontier

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<sup>11</sup> Baynes, 15.

<sup>12</sup> O'Connor Papers. Box2/2, File 2/2/7. This file contains several clippings from *The Times* and *The London Gazette* relating to operations on the Italian Front.

<sup>13</sup> Brian MacAllister Linn, *The Echo Of Battle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5-8. Linn categories three intellectual types of leader: heroes, guardians and managers. Heroes believe that war is more of an art than science because it is dependent on "will", both personal and national, than on science.

in India; a choice posting which would see him return to the country of his birth.<sup>14</sup> His time in India was cut short after he was selected to attend the Staff College at Camberley, directly as a result of his outstanding record in the First World War.<sup>15</sup> O'Connor enjoyed his year of education and, of note, he was a peer of Major Bernard Montgomery; thus a friendship was born that was to last many years. After his training, O'Connor served in several staff and command appointments both in the United Kingdom and abroad before, in 1935, attending the Imperial Defence College. Whilst on the course he heard that his next appointment would be in command of the Peshawar Brigade in India's northwestern Frontier.<sup>16</sup> This promotion marked him out as a man whose "star was well on the ascendant in the Army" as it was unusual to command a brigade before a forty-seventh birthday.<sup>17</sup>

Three years later O'Connor took command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Palestine where he again commanded superbly, handling the Arab Revolt with an iron fist and a velvet glove. The outbreak of the Second World War effectively ended the problems in Palestine as the Zionists fell into line behind the British and the fight against the Nazi enemy. General O'Connor remained in the Middle East first in command of his, now renamed, division, and subsequently in command of the Western Desert Force: a corps composed of two divisions. Shortly after delivering a decisive defeat upon the Italian Tenth Army, he drove into an enemy column at night and the Germans

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth M. Startup, *General Sir Richard O'Connor, A Profile of His Life and Career*, (masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1977), 24, British officers regarded the Northwest Frontier Territory as a choice posting due to the nature of operations conducted there. Many thought of it in terms of a proving ground.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 25. Startup quotes A. R. Goodwin-Austin, who explains in *The Staff and the Staff Colleges (London 1927)* that for the 1920 and 1921 intakes, all student selection was based solely on senior officers recommendations from the First World War.

<sup>16</sup> Baynes, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 46.

captured the victorious general. The Italians, to whom the Germans hand him, held him as a prisoner of war for two and a half years. Eventually, after the agreement of the Italian Armistice, his Italian captors facilitated his escape and he slowly made his way back to Britain where he arrived on Christmas Day, 1943. Three weeks later, he took command of the VIII Corps.

His command of the VIII Corps was “thoroughly competent rather than brilliant” and, perhaps as a result, Montgomery released him in December 1944, soon after the ‘break out’ from Normandy, for the War Office to appoint him as General Officer Commanding in Chief Eastern Command, India.<sup>18</sup> He served in India for two years, during which time he promoted to general, before returning, in June 1946, to the United Kingdom as the Adjutant General: a post he held for a year before his retirement, aged fifty-eight years old.

Retirement from the military brought no let up in terms of the pace of life that O’Connor led. He maintained strong links to the military in his capacity as Commandant of the Army Cadet Force and Colonel of The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), as well as becoming involved in ceremonial roles as Lord Lieutenant for Ross and Cromarty, and in 1964 Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In 1971 he was created a Knight of the Thistle, the second highest order of chivalry.<sup>19</sup> O’Connor’s exceptional life ended as the result of a stroke in June 1981, a few weeks before his ninety-second birthday.

This monograph will focus on three specific periods of O’Connor’s life in order to identify why O’Connor’s command of the British Eighth Corps in Normandy 1944 was less assured than in his previous commands. Clearly, it is possible to study many periods of such a rich and diverse life; however, for the purposes of this paper it is necessary to be selective whilst

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 275.

also including the full breadth of O'Connor's different experiences. Therefore, this monograph will specifically address his experiences in the First World War, as a corps commander of the Western Desert Force in North Africa, including his time as a prisoner of war in Italy, and his command of VIII Corps in Normandy, 1944.

O'Connor's experience of the First World War in many ways shaped the rest of his career. As a young officer living and breathing trench warfare, fighting a war of attrition at places like Bullecourt during the Battle of Arras, he witnessed waste of life and human suffering on a scale that is genuinely incomprehensible today. These experiences created a genuine desire to create the conditions for imaginative maneuver in order to avoid attritional frontal battles and, in many ways, were the crucible from which O'Connor's command style emerged. Furthermore, his experience as commanding officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, the Honourable Artillery Company at the Battle of Papadopoli in Italy was important, for this battle provides the first opportunity for O'Connor to demonstrate his significant command potential, when fighting independently of others on unrestricted terrain and able to achieve surprise.

In North Africa O'Connor delivered the first British success of note in the Second World War. Although some have attempted to undermine his success by suggesting that the result of the campaign may have been different had he not been fighting Italians this is a somewhat puerile argument when the numbers involved are considered.<sup>20</sup> O'Connor demonstrated real flair for senior command in his battle against the Italians, which Correlli Barnett calls, "the most daring and brilliant of all British operations in North Africa."<sup>21</sup> A study of the campaign will show again

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Doherty, *Irish Generals: Irish Generals in the British Army in the Second World War* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>21</sup> Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 8.

how O'Connor displayed his brilliance when operating in an independent command, on suitable terrain, and when able to achieve surprise.

General O'Connor rarely talked about his personal experience in captivity. It is therefore mostly conjecture, but it is highly improbable that this time did not influence him.<sup>22</sup> However to suggest that his captivity had a significant effect on him and that it left him aged and a more cautious commander than he was before captivity is overstated. The general was interviewed extensively post captivity to determine his suitability for continued command and both political and military senior leadership approved his continued employment.<sup>23</sup> His captivity does not offer a complete explanation for his less effective command in Normandy 1944.

The final section of this monograph considers O'Connor's command in Normandy 1944, and specifically the three major battles his corps fought: Operations EPSOM, GOODWOOD, and BLUECOAT. O'Connor's command was less effective than had been the case at Papadopoli and in the Western Desert. It will identify that this was because in Normandy in 1944 O'Connor was not able to operate as independently, that the terrain, combined with restrictive inter-formation boundaries did not allow audacious maneuver, and finally that O'Connor could not achieve surprise to the same degree as had previously been the case.

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<sup>22</sup> Baynes, 183. Baynes quotes Field Marshall the Lord John Harding, O'Connor's chief of staff in North Africa, from an interview he conducted with him. Lord Harding believed it to be highly improbable that anyone could survive a period of two and a half years in captivity and remain unaffected.

<sup>23</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/4 -4/5, File 4/5/1. O'Connor's Escape Narrative, 18-20; and Baynes, 175-177, 182.

## The First World War

O'Connor spent the First World War in near constant combat and he considered his survival, without serious injury, extremely fortunate.<sup>24</sup> The manifestation of his survival was an extremely rare level of experience based on four years of combat. He learned a great deal throughout this period fighting in many battles, including Ypres, Neuve Chapelle, Passchendaele, and the Somme. Obviously, the First World War was a formative period for O'Connor. With too many experiences to draw on in this monograph, this section will focus on his appointment as a brigade major of the 185<sup>th</sup> Brigade in the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division and as Commanding Officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, HAC Company in the 7<sup>th</sup> Division. His experiences and the lessons he took from these two appointments significantly shaped his understanding of warfare and the way he sought to command in subsequent years. The Battle of Arras provides a microcosm for O'Connor's service on the Western Front and demonstrates how this experience engendered in him a desire to avoid frontal assaults and the importance of flank protection, both a reaction to massive loss of life.

In March 1917, O'Connor became the brigade major of the 185<sup>th</sup> Brigade in the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division. His previous appointment was the same position in the 91<sup>st</sup> Brigade and O'Connor was unhappy with the move between formations as he had forged a strong relationship with the brigade commander; additionally he "regarded his replacement at the 91<sup>st</sup> Brigade with contempt and dislike."<sup>25</sup> Regardless, he did not have time to dwell on this perceived feeling of injustice as the spring of 1917 saw the start of a new offensive and the Battle of Arras.

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<sup>24</sup> Doherty, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Baynes, 17.



This battle was a bloody affair that resulted in the loss of 158,660 Allied lives.<sup>26</sup> The strategic purpose of the battle was to break through the German Hindenburg Line, which Allied commanders believed to be weakening, in order to produce a final breakthrough. The offensive called for a simultaneous attack by British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) infantry and armor in the north around Arras, creating a diversion thereby setting the conditions for the French, a week later, to break through the German main defensive lines near Aisne. Studies from the previous year's attacks at the Somme and Verdun led to changes in doctrine and therefore rather than attack across a broad front the Allies selected a relatively narrow twenty-four mile wide front. Furthermore, the Allies mitigated against the previously unreliable use of creeping barrage by adopting both technological improvements and better coordination and scheduling of troop movement in concert with the barrage.<sup>27</sup> The plan called for the Canadians to attack to Vimy Ridge while the British and ANZAC troops would attack towards Scarpe and Bullecourt to the east and south of Arras.<sup>28</sup> O'Connor's brigade were part of the force attacking Bullecourt on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1917 and the men were "elated by the news that Vimy Ridge had been taken [by the Canadians]" on the 9<sup>th</sup> April.<sup>29</sup> The Fifth Army headquarters issued orders for the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division to advance in conjunction with the ANZAC 4<sup>th</sup> Division to move the Germans out of their fortified positions on 10<sup>th</sup> April.<sup>30</sup> For several reasons the 4<sup>th</sup> Division failed to advance which exposed the flank of the 185<sup>th</sup> brigade and resulted in significant casualties and a failure to

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathon Nicholls, *Cheerful Sacrifice: The Battle of Arras 1917* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2005), 210. Nicholls quotes the number of killed from Lieutenant General Sir George Fowke's papers.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Oldham, *The Hindenburg Line* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), 66.

<sup>29</sup> Baynes, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Oldman, 66.

reach their objectives. O'Connor was incandescent with rage and wrote in his diary, "Poor wretches, they didn't have a chance and got about seventy casualties. When it was too late to stop them we found out that the ANZACs had not attacked at all... This is just the sort of thing that they do in this damned army. Everyone was of course very sorry about it but that of course does not bring good men back to live again. I did not get to sleep at all."<sup>31</sup> As a result the importance of flank protection became a key tenet of O'Connor's command and decision making process.

The loss of his men dismayed O'Connor, not only those from the battle of Arras, but throughout the war. He believed that the strategic situation on the Western Front completely precluded the use of "flanking and surprise movements, which compelled officers to send their men against prepared defensive positions in murderous and archaic frontal assaults."<sup>32</sup> It was clearly, therefore, his experience on the Western Front that predicated in him an urgency to find an enemy flank around which he could maneuver when in subsequent command positions. German counter-attacks across the entire front eventually halted the Allied offensive on April 14, which the British considered a success solely in terms of the relatively large territorial gains made on the first day.<sup>33</sup> Yet the offensive had failed to achieve the breakthrough that it sought. A subsequent operational pause was conducted in order to allow the logistical tail to catch up with the new forward positions and during this time the 185<sup>th</sup> conducted a relief in place to move two thousand yards back from the front line to recuperate, train and refit.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box2/2, File 2/2/3. O'Connor Diary entry – 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

<sup>32</sup> Startup, 11. From an interview with General O'Connor.

<sup>33</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Random House, 1998), 325-326.

<sup>34</sup> Baynes, 20.

A second phase of the Battle of Arras commenced on May 3, 1917 for 185<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The aim was once again to capture the village of Bullecourt. After a significant artillery barrage on 20<sup>th</sup> April, which to all intents and purposes rubbleized the village, and nearly two weeks of delays the 185<sup>th</sup> eventually crossed the line of departure.<sup>35</sup> Although the village was occupied by elements of the 185<sup>th</sup> brigade, German resistance remained fierce and once again the division failed to link up with the ANZAC 4<sup>th</sup> Division on their flank. As a result, the 185<sup>th</sup> suffered significant levels of casualties, which led to the brigade needing reinforcement from other units from other formations.<sup>36</sup> This action cemented in O'Connor's mind the importance of flank protection when conducting deliberate frontal assaults as part of a larger organization and would prove to significantly influence his decision making when fighting in France twenty-seven years later commanding the Eighth Corps.

Over the course of the next two weeks, O'Connor's frustration rose because of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division's tendency to send out orders for attacks at short notice.<sup>37</sup> It was a characteristic of this particular headquarters that had first irritated him before the initial attack at Arras. On April 8, 1917 he comments in his diary that, "I have become like the French, who on principal never pay attention to the first order, but always wait until the counter-order to move!"<sup>38</sup> In his opinion, these late orders led to incomplete planning and unnecessary loss of life. This was a lesson that characterized the way he ensured his staffs worked when in subsequent command positions.

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<sup>35</sup> Oldman, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Baynes, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>38</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box2/2, File 2/2/3. O'Connor Diary entry – 8<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

Although not specifically related to the Battle of Arras, O'Connor made two further observations from his experience in France on the Western Front that significantly influenced his later command. The first was the importance of achieving surprise. He learned that it was extremely difficult, in the context of trench warfare, to achieve surprise but he always ensured that all units made efforts both to achieve surprise, and importantly to avoid being surprised. His letter to Major General R.K. Ross, commanding the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Division, on July 7, 1944 which offers advice on trench warfare, demonstrates the importance of this lesson: "Lastly the question of alertness, so that it is impossible for the enemy to surprise us. Listening posts at night and recee posts by day, well away from the actual trenches. At night to listen, by day to observe. Connect them up by telephone direct to the Commanding Officer".<sup>39</sup> The importance of the principle of surprise was critical to O'Connor's command philosophy.

The second lesson, which permeated all his future commands, was the importance of thorough reconnaissance. He spent a great deal of time at the front ensuring that his situational understanding was as accurate as possible. On April 5, 1917, during the preparations for the Battle of Arras, he commented in his diary that he wished to accompany the brigade's forward patrols, yet the brigade commander would not allow it, much to his annoyance.<sup>40</sup> "He reconnoitered the front whenever possible. Arriving back in the middle of the night, muddy and drenched from such excursions, he was ever grateful to find Wyatt [his batman] waiting with a hot drink and food. A couple of hours sleep and the process was repeated."<sup>41</sup> Clearly he believed

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<sup>39</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 5/1 – 5/4, File 5/3/13. A letter from General O'Connor to Major General R. K. Ross, commanding 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Division referring to the need for adequate defences including trenches, mines, wiring and anti-tank defences. Also in Box 5/1 – 5/4, found on the *Points for 2<sup>nd</sup> Lecture* O'Connor has hand written six key points of which the first is surprise and secrecy.

<sup>40</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box2/2, File 2/2/3. O'Connor Diary entry – 5<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

<sup>41</sup> Baynes, 20.

in the maxim that time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted. However, by mid May the constant stress of life on the front was exhausting him; the effect of seemingly endless combat and planning was taking its toll. His brigade commander awarded him leave and a pass to return home to the United Kingdom on May 19. It could not have come at a better time.

Shortly after his return from leave, on June 1, 1917 O'Connor heard the news he had long hoped for. He had been selected for promotion to temporary lieutenant colonel and would take command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, HAC.<sup>42</sup> The next day, having also heard of his award of the DSO, he left 185<sup>th</sup> Brigade to assume command of his new battalion in his old division, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division. It was not in good shape when O'Connor took command, according to his obituary in 1981:

Lt-Colonel O'Connor was faced with problems which would have appalled an older and more experienced officer. The unit's strength was under 300 [It should have been in excess of 600], there was a shortage of every kind of specialist and the Battalion had just come through the trying experience of Bullecourt when all that had been left of it was 4 officers and 94 men.<sup>43</sup>

The unit's poor condition did not faze him in any sense and he set about re-organizing, re-training, and re-instilling ruthless discipline into the unit with a renewed sense of purpose.<sup>44</sup>

O'Connor had to implement much of this new command environment in battle, for in June he led his battalion back into the line. For the next four months, his unit was constantly in and out of the line. October saw him return to the same place as he had started his war with the 7<sup>th</sup> Division in 1914; the Battle of Broodseinde, which is described in the official history as, "the

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<sup>42</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box1/1-8 – 5/4, File 1/5. O'Connor's written answers to questions from Major J. K. Nairne, O'Connor's archivist.

<sup>43</sup> Baynes, 21. Baynes quotes from O'Connor's obituary in the Honourable Artillery Company Journal.

<sup>44</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box1/1-8 – 5/4, File 1/5. O'Connor's written answers to questions from Major J. K. Nairne, O'Connor's archivist.

battle of First Ypres...being fought in reverse.”<sup>45</sup> Although his battalion captured its objective at Reutel, it was at significant cost with eight officers, and forty-nine men killed, 189 wounded, and a further forty-nine reported missing in action. Again, this massive loss of life reminded O’Connor of the cost of a frontal assault and as a result, “when in action again would always look for a way in from the flank against an enemy position.”<sup>46</sup>

In November 1917 Fifth Army headquarters issued orders for the 7<sup>th</sup> Division to move out of the line on the Western Front and redeploy to northern Italy. The Italians had entered the war in 1915 and fought bravely against the Austrians, at significant human cost for little territorial gain, in the Eleven Battles of the Isonzo.<sup>47</sup> The Germans, due to their commitment to two established fronts chose not to reinforce their Austrian allies until the summer of 1917. Then the combined German Austrian offensive of October 1917 drove the Italian army back to the Piave River and made it evident to the French and British political leadership that more than just materiel support was required to support the Italians. As a result, the French pulled six divisions from the Western Front and the British five.<sup>48</sup>

On October 17, 1918, after several months of conducting limited raids, XIV Corps ordered Major General Shoubridge, commanding 7<sup>th</sup> Division, to conduct a river crossing operation across the River Piave to set the conditions for subsequent corps operations against the Austro-German forces.<sup>49</sup> The Island of Papadopoli provided the best fording site and intelligence

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<sup>45</sup> Sir John Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1917*, Volume II (HMSO, 1948), 312.

<sup>46</sup> Baynes, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 23, the Italians suffered in excess of 500,000 casualties.

<sup>48</sup> Cyril Falls, *The Battle of Caporetto* (New York: Lippincott, 1966), 88.

<sup>49</sup> C. T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division 1914-1914* (London: John Murray, 1927), 461-462.

reports suggested that a force of approximately three companies of Austrians were in the defense.<sup>50</sup> It was essential that 7<sup>th</sup> Division forces secured the north half of the island to ensure the subsequent river crossing could be conducted without interference.

O'Connor, upon his arrival in the Piave area on January 13, 1918, was delighted to observe that the ground, characterized by broken woods, ravines and streams, was highly suited to aggressive, offensive operations.<sup>51</sup> "The hills and forests would provide ample cover for flanking movements, whilst [the] rivers and ravines would serve as an impediment to any retreating force."<sup>52</sup> The commander had two days to prepare for the deliberate attack of Papadopoli and he searched for a flank from which it would be possible to gain an advantage over the Austrian trench system. He demanded a sound reconnaissance effort and spent nearly two days examining the area with his acting intelligence officer Captain Grand.<sup>53</sup> They identified that an attack from the northwest would offer the most favorable option,<sup>54</sup> and in his diary he humbly states, "It was a great bit of luck going as far to the left as we did, as by taking the enemy in the flank certainly helped tremendously."<sup>55</sup>

Finding a flank was one thing but more would be required to win the battle. O'Connor relied on achieving surprise to further set the conditions for success. In an affront to the normal conduct of battle on the Western Front, he decided to launch a silent attack with no artillery fires

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<sup>50</sup> G. Goold Walker, *The Honourable Artillery Company in the Great War* (London, Seeley, Service & Co, 1930), 346. The actual number of Austrian forces on the island proved entirely different. Rather than the anticipated three companies, there were fifteen.

<sup>51</sup> Goold Walker, 331.

<sup>52</sup> Startup, 14.

<sup>53</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 2/2, File 2/2/4. O'Connor diary entry for 23-24 October 1918.

<sup>54</sup> Atkinson, 464.

<sup>55</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 2/2, File 2/2/4. O'Connor diary entry for 23-24 October 1918.

prior to H-hour. Furthermore, he attacked after dark and the battalion silently crossed to the island using large flat-bottomed boats with Italians at the helm. The plan was successful and first assault wave was able to land undetected by the Austrian sentries and easily destroyed the security outposts along the shore. Although the enemy quickly responded with well-adjusted artillery fire, it failed to deter the assault.<sup>56</sup> The attack proceeded well and within a few hours, the north half of the island was largely under O'Connor's control.

The battalion spent October 25 consolidating its hold on the north end of the island and preparing to extend their line 400 to 500 yards south that evening. Yet the divisional commander, impressed with O'Connor's action, issued orders for the HAC to take the whole island by dawn on October 26 and offered two more infantry battalions to support the effort with O'Connor in overall command; it was clear that there were rather more enemy on the island than had been planned for.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Brigadier General Heather, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Commander, gave O'Connor a free rein to plan and conduct the attack as he saw fit. This freedom of command was another key to his success. He was clearly at his best in command when given complete freedom of action, when able to achieve surprise, and able, through sound reconnaissance, to find and develop a flanking attack.

The attack to clear the south of the island was a tougher affair than the previous night since the Austrians knew the British were there. Yet, in order to maximize the opportunity for achieving surprise, O'Connor conducted another night attack. Although the enemy provided a stout defense and even attempted two simultaneous counter-attacks, he pressed home his victory and by dawn, a lone redoubt of approximately two hundred Austrians remained in the very south

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<sup>56</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 2/2, File 2/2/4. O'Connor diary entry for 23-24 October 1918.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



of the island. They refused to surrender and even taunted the British with calls for them to surrender.<sup>58</sup> The commanding officer therefore once more worked a flank by sending two Lewis machine guns to engage the enemy from a defiled position. This had the desired effect and the island quickly succumbed to British control.

Finally, O'Connor learned the importance of battlefield circulation for the commander at the Battle of Papadopoli. This is the final key to understanding why his command was so effective in the fighting there. O'Connor had a knack for being in the right place at the right time and he, with his intelligence officer and a few others, patrolled the battlefield tirelessly, ensuring that the attack maintained momentum and coordination.<sup>59</sup> As he explained to Kenneth Startup in an interview, he would listen to the attack, trying to identify clues that might indicate a problem: perhaps a change in rates of fire, or a decrease in the amount of radio traffic from a particular subordinate.<sup>60</sup> His tireless search for information ensured that he not only maintained situational understanding but also enabled him to impose his personality on the battlefield whenever it was required.

Operationally, the seizure of Papadopoli was critical to success in the Italian theatre of operations. It opened up a river crossing and ultimately allowed the entire corps to cross the River Piave.<sup>61</sup> As historian C. J. Atkinson states, “the capture of Papadopoli set in motion the final offensive on the Italian Front which resulted in Austria’s capitulation on November 3, 1918.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Goold Walker, 358.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>60</sup> Startup, 22.

<sup>61</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 1/1-8, File 1-5. O'Connor's written answers to questions from Major J. K. Nairne, O'Connor's archivist.

<sup>62</sup> Atkinson, 468-469.

O'Connor's flame shone bright and senior commanders took notice of this twenty-eight year old commanding officer; he was marked out as an officer with extraordinary potential.<sup>63</sup> The citation for the bar to his DSO clearly demonstrates how highly senior leaders regarded his outstanding success.

To conclude, O'Connor's First World War experiences were formative for him in several ways. The Battle of Arras in 1917 provides a snap shot of the lessons he learned in the abject horror of the Western Front. In many ways, these experiences shaped exactly how he did not want to command in future appointments. Seeing the human cost of the frontal assault ensured he would subsequently always seek a flank in the attack. He would also attempt to achieve surprise in order to gain both the initiative and the early momentum. Furthermore, he learned the importance of thorough reconnaissance and battlefield circulation. The Battle of Papadopoli offered O'Connor the opportunity to demonstrate not only that he had learned these lessons but also that they had matured inextricably as part of his command style. It shows that given freedom of command, terrain across which maneuver was possible to exploit a flank, and the ability to use his imagination to achieve surprise he could be combat commander without peer. This was a fact that would become evident when he took command of XIII Corps in North Africa in 1941, this time fighting against, rather than with, the Italians.

## **The Desert General**

O'Connor's conduct of his campaign in the Western Desert against the Tenth Italian Army was one of the finest moments of twentieth century British military history. He commanded an inferior armored force to an outstanding success, one that he himself would call a

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<sup>63</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 1/1-8, File 1/1/19. O'Connor's confidential reports.

“complete victory;” a considerable claim, considering his almost introverted modesty.<sup>64</sup> As General Archibald Wavell, the Commander in Chief Middle East, announced in a *Special Order of the Day* dated December 1940, “[T]he result of the fighting in the Western Desert will be one of the decisive events of the war. A single and crushing defeat of the Italian forces will have an incalculable effect not only on the whole position in the Middle East...but throughout the world.”<sup>65</sup> O’Connor delivered the single and crushing defeat that Wavell called for, however, the effect was somewhat undermined by Churchill’s subsequent strategic choices and the decision to arrest the campaign in favor of supporting operations in Greece.

Strategically the Middle East was critical to the British war effort. The British armed forces, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, and Army, used oil in prodigious amounts in 1941. It was the fuel that fed the increasingly technological formations. This thirst for oil provides the strategic background to the British deployment to the Western Desert. The Italian Army, with their force of in excess of a quarter of a million men based in Libya, presented the left flank to the Middle East and the vulnerable Iraqi oil fields. Without this source of oil the British war effort would quickly grind to a halt. The region gained further importance because of the advantage it offered Mediterranean military operations: it was central to the support both the Turks and the Russians, and because it provided access, via the Suez Canal, to India. Furthermore, the fall of France enabled the Italians to focus completely on the British.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. In his personal narrative of the Libyan Campaign O’Connor claims, “I think this may be termed a complete victory, as none of the enemy escaped.”

<sup>65</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/2/1-70, File 4/2/22. Unfortunately, the exact date of this order is not specified.

<sup>66</sup> Barnett, 24.

On June 7, 1940 General O'Connor received unexpected orders from Lieutenant General Maitland 'Jumbo' Wilson, Commanding Headquarters British Troops in Egypt, to travel to Egypt from Palestine, where he was commanding 7<sup>th</sup> Division, for an interview. At their meeting, Wilson informed O'Connor of his appointment as Commander of the Western Desert Force, and ordered him to protect Egypt from an attack by the Italians.<sup>67</sup> When O'Connor inquired about the existing plans, he was surprised to hear that there were none. In fact the direction O'Connor was given was fraught with ambiguity. Yet he was comfortable with the situation, as he commented to Corelli Barnett, "I was given very sketchy instructions as to policy, which had its advantages, [so] I did not object really as I don't mind being left on my own."<sup>68</sup>

The Italians declared war on June 11, 1940 and for the first few months of his command O'Connor contented himself with conducting small harassing operations against the Italians to disrupt their lines of communications. He also busied himself with personal reconnaissance of the desert that reflects his desire to see everything himself, a lesson he learned the importance of on the battlefields of the First World War. The expected Italian offensive eventually started on September 13, 1940 but was not nearly as bold as O'Connor had hoped for. After advancing sixty miles across the desert the Italians stopped, well before the ground he had chosen to defeat them, and established a number of fortified camps suggesting that a period of consolidation had begun. Not patient enough to wait for the next Italian offensive O'Connor decided to take the initiative.

O'Connor's request to General Wilson for permission to conduct an attack against the Italians coincided with the arrival of a directive from General Wavell, ordering a five-day raid.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 22. From an interview with General O'Connor conducted by Corelli Barnett.

<sup>69</sup> Startup, 86.

Wavell proposed a course of action attacking on two flanks with a direct approach on the coastal flank and an envelopment in the desert.<sup>70</sup> O'Connor was anxious to take the fight to the enemy, yet he spent some time planning the raid. After three weeks, he rejected Wavell's plan and proposed his own. Unorthodox in its conception, it clearly demonstrates his desire to achieve surprise. As historian Cyril Barclay said of the plan, "Any student who had produced such a solution at a Staff College exercise in peace would have been ridiculed by his fellows and very roughly handled by the Directing Staff. Yet it was the only method of obtaining the high degree of surprise if the offensive were to succeed."<sup>71</sup>

The Western Desert Force had been put together by General Wilson with great ingenuity as he had taken whatever "military flotsam that Wavell could spare him" and organized it into a fighting army.<sup>72</sup> The command received additional armored troops in October 1940, which meant O'Connor's force now consisted of two divisions. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, consisting of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars, an armored car regiment, two armored brigades of three regiments each, and a support group; and the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, with two Indian brigades, two Royal Artillery field regiments, and the 16<sup>th</sup> British Brigade attached.<sup>73</sup> The corps never totaled more than 32,000 men. The Italian Tenth Army opposing them consisted of over nine divisions, a superior air force, which O'Connor believed to have a five to one advantage, and totaled approximately 250,000 men.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Baynes, 73.

<sup>71</sup> Cyril N. Barclay, *Against Great Odds: The Story of the First Offensive in Libya in 1940-41, The First British Victory in the Second World War* (London: Sifton Praed, 1955), 27.

<sup>72</sup> Barnett, 25.

<sup>73</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

O'Connor recognized, in the face of the numerically superior enemy, that surprise was the "essential element for success," and he therefore sought to achieve surprise at every turn.<sup>75</sup> His reconnaissance had identified a gap between two of the Italian camps at Enba through which O'Connor proposed to infiltrate his two divisions (see map at Annex B). Once through the gap the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division would re-orientate themselves to the east and attack the Nibeiba and Tummar Camps from the rear, a completely unexpected direction, before driving north to secure Sidi Barrani on the coast. Simultaneously the 7<sup>th</sup> Division would fix the enemy in the southern Sofafi Camps and prevent them from escaping and also push to the northwest to the city of Buq Buq, to cut the Italian lines of communication. Finally, a small composite force, named Selby Force, would drive up the coast road to capture Maktala in order to prevent reinforcement of Sidi Barrani from the east.<sup>76</sup>

This plan was a bold one but was fraught with difficulties. First, he recognized that the approach, over sixty miles of open desert, and subsequent attack would place a considerable strain on the ability to resupply the corps. He therefore decided to establish two unguarded resupply dumps in the open desert that he could use during the operation. Furthermore, he believed that the Italian Air Force was likely to identify and attack his advancing corps in the open desert. He therefore planned to conduct the march over the course of two nights with the divisions in lying up positions through the day; this would further facilitate surprise through the launch of a dawn attack. Due to the difficulty of moving in a controlled way at night, he decided to conduct a full rehearsal.

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<sup>75</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 3

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 3.

O'Connor was also hugely concerned with secrecy as a necessary precursor to surprise. A rehearsal on the scale of which he envisioned might give away the scheme of maneuver. Furthermore, soldiers on leave might compromise the plan through loose talk in Cairo, a city beset with Italian agents. To mitigate this risk the commander directed that only a very limited number of people were to know about the planning for offensive operations, in both superior and subordinate headquarters, furthermore he issued no written orders, refused to cancel leave, and ordered that the fighting troops not be told of the plan until three days before the operation commenced.<sup>77</sup> Last, he named the rehearsal 'Training Exercise No.1' and the actual operation 'Training Exercise No.2'.<sup>78</sup> The rehearsal was successful and resulted in only minor changes to the plan, specifically regarding the final assault of the enemy positions. Most importantly, the element of surprise remained uncompromised. The Western Desert Force was poised at the brink of a turning point in the war.

The course of action, unorthodox in its conception, was a masterstroke. O'Connor's imaginative use of the terrain allowed the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division to exploit both surprise and a flank after crossing the start line on December 9, 1940. The division captured its first objective, the camp at Nibeia within two hours, at great cost to the enemy, but very light losses itself. The first phase complete, the division re-embussed its transport and drove the thirteen kilometers north to attack the camps at Tunmar. The attack recommenced in the afternoon and again O'Connor

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<sup>77</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 4.

achieved surprise by attacking from the west, this time though, the enemy was expecting an attack and after several hours of hard fighting, the Tunmar Camps eventually fell.<sup>79</sup>

The 7<sup>th</sup> Division were also doing well having successfully isolated the enemy camps in Safafi, so O'Connor ordered an element to push to the west to ensure that none escaped. Furthermore, the division had successfully protected the western flank of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division and was now exploiting to the northwest towards Buq Buq. By the close of the first day the commander was delighted with the progress of his corps; things were going to plan. He had fully surprised the enemy not only by his creative use of the ground in turning a flank but he also ensured that the two major attacks came from the opposite direction to that which was expected. This completely dislocated the enemy, both physically and morally. The subsequent two days, involved some fierce fighting, particularly between the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and an Italian Black Shirt Division south of Sidi Barrani but ultimately, by the afternoon of December 11, Italians were surrendering in both Sidi Barrani and Maktila. Meanwhile the 7<sup>th</sup> Division captured Buq Buq at 11 o'clock in the morning on December 12. The Western Desert Force successfully achieved the objectives of the raid in little over three days; it was a result that O'Connor would not have dared hope for.<sup>80</sup> The corps had captured "37,000 prisoners, nearly two hundred guns, and considerable numbers of tanks and lorries were amongst the War Material captured."<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the British losses were light. O'Connor had the taste of victory and was hungry for more.

His great satisfaction at his corps success was somewhat tainted by the news he received on December 11 from General Wavell's staff. The 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division were detached from the

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<sup>79</sup>O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 4-8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 10.



order of battle in order to be transported to Sudan.<sup>82</sup> Although O'Connor recognized the logic of the decision, it was no less frustrating. Although Wavell offered the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division in return there would be no relief in place since the Australians were not yet ready, equipped and trained to deploy into the desert. In fact initial planning informed the corps commander that they would not be complete in the field until the end of December at the earliest.<sup>83</sup> The movement east of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division also presented significant logistical difficulties, especially in light of the huge numbers of prisoners the corps was dealing with. Regardless of these challenges O'Connor sought, and received permission, to push west in pursuit of the Italians using 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division. He was determined not to lose the initiative and ordered the division west to attack Sollum, and isolate Bardia by cutting the road to Tobruk, on December 14. After fighting at Sidi Omar, Sollum and Fort Capuzzo the division completed its investment of Bardia and awaited the arrival of the Australians.<sup>84</sup>

The Battle of Bardia, from January 3 to January 5, 1941 and subsequently the Battle of Tobruk, from January 6 to January 22 were both similar in conduct (see map at Annex B). O'Connor was now planning and executing operations simultaneously and in both battles he gave orders for the subsequent objective, prior to the start of the next phase. The purpose being to ensure that the armored brigades, who he dispatched early, were able to ensure that the minimum number of enemy were able to flee west. Furthermore, both Bardia and Tobruk were classic siege type operations, which saw a rapid investment of the towns followed by a kinetic conventional attack. Large artillery preparations were required followed by combined infantry and armored

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>84</sup> Baynes, 82.

combinations breaking in and exploiting a rapid defeat of the enemy. Although O'Connor states in his narrative, "At Bardia however, surprise except in the method of attack did not come into it," it is clear that both surprise and effective maneuver around an enemy flank were necessary to trap the enemy and set the conditions for subsequent operations. O'Connor continued to exploit the opportunity he had to use the ground to his advantage with bold flanking maneuvers, unconstrained by boundaries with other formations. Both battles were outstanding successes with 32,000 men, over 200 guns, many tanks and nearly 1000 lorries captured at Bardia and a further 22,000 men, 150 guns and several tanks captured at Tobruk.<sup>85</sup> However, these huge numbers did not make for easy logistics. The capture of Tobruk was therefore a relief as it offered a significantly better port facility than had previously been available in Bardia or Sollum.

In late January, it became apparent that the Italians were attempting to effect a complete withdrawal from Cyrenaica.<sup>86</sup> Something extraordinary would be required to stop them, and the finale of O'Connor's campaign, proved just that. Assuming great risk in his pursuit, driving his corps to its limit of endurance and logistical capacity he progressed, "cannibalising truck parts, stealing tanks from one unit to make up another; and at last flinging the remnants of his armour across uncharted country on the last few gallons of petrol and the last few miles of life left in the tank tracks. One of the epic marches of history was about to begin."<sup>87</sup> It was the start of the march that would define him. Again, bold maneuver around the enemy's flanks and surprise would underpin his success.

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<sup>85</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 15, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Baynes, 87.

<sup>87</sup> Barnett, 50.

On January 21, 1941 Wavell received permission from the War Office to allow O'Connor to continue to exploit west with the objective being the capture of Benghazi. By now, the effect of the fighting was starting to tell; what had started as a five-day raid had developed into a campaign now in its seventh week. Nevertheless, O'Connor would not slow down. Imagination on the part of the staff and flexibility on the part of subordinate commanders ensured that stores and equipment arrived in the right place at the right time.

The Western Desert Force, renamed XIII Corps on January 1, 1941 had now reached the Jebel Akhdar, a fertile, hilly area rising 2000 feet out of the desert. The next objectives were clear: Derna to the north and Mechili to the south, as O'Connor planned to capture Benghazi with a double envelopment. The 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division were tasked with the objective of Derna with an axis along the coast road to the north of the Jebel while 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division would approach via Mechili through uncharted territory, previously considered impassable to armored formations.<sup>88</sup>

After heavy fighting on ground that suited a dismounted infantry defense, the Australian Division successfully captured Derna on January 28. Meanwhile the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division had a set back at Mechili. General O'Connor had impressed upon General 'Dickie' O'Moore Creagh, the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division commander, the importance of not allowing any enemy to escape Mechili, yet that is exactly what happened. O'Connor was both furious and embarrassed. He "felt that the complete defeat of the flank guard would have shaken the morale of the whole defence to the core."<sup>89</sup> Such was his embarrassment that he sent General Wavell's liaison officer back to

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<sup>88</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 22.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 20.

Cairo with an apologetic message. Wavell's response demonstrates his light touch, "Tell General O'Connor not to fret. It is contretemps like these that add interest to that very dull business, war."<sup>90</sup> After the 7<sup>th</sup> Division secured Mechili on January 27, O'Connor had to wait for eight days to continue his advance on the southern axis. The force was near its culmination point, and an operational pause allowed for re-supply, much-needed repairs, and for the arrival of two more armored regiments. O'Connor continued to push the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division hard in the north to create the impression to the enemy, that they were on the main effort.<sup>91</sup>

Eventually, on February 4, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division restarted their march west. The obvious route to Benghazi was the direct one, yet O'Connor was again determined to achieve surprise and develop a flank. "An advance south westwards to Zmus, on the other hand would have many advantages. It would come as a surprise, and our forces would be so placed to take full advantage from it, depending on the situation."<sup>92</sup> The lead elements of Combe's Force arrived at Zmus that afternoon and subsequently pushed on to Antelat.<sup>93</sup> The main body however was moving more slowly and did not arrive at Antelat until early morning on February 5. Once the whole force had linked up it moved west to cut the main coastal road thirty miles south of Benghazi. Combe Force was in position by one o'clock in the afternoon, just in time to meet the

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<sup>90</sup> Barnett, 54.

<sup>91</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 21-22.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>93</sup> Combe's Force was an armored task force established by Headquarters 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division. It was composed of a cavalry squadron from the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars, a cavalry squadron from the King's Dragoon Guards, an anti-tank battery, three anti-aircraft guns, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade, a motorized infantry battalion. The force was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Combe, of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars.

retreating Italian Tenth Army.<sup>94</sup> At half past two o'clock, when Combe's Force engaged the enemy lead elements, surprise was total. The Italians, confused by O'Connor's unexpected maneuver, were unable to mount any significant counter-attacks that afternoon, which preserved Combe's thinly stretched line. The arrival of the remainder of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade three hours later provided much needed relief for Combe's Force. The next day and night saw increasingly fierce fighting as the XIII Corps slowly destroyed the Tenth Army. The final act of the battle was a desperate Italian counter attack on the morning of February 7, 1941. Beaten off by the Second Battalion the Rifle Brigade, the Italians at last surrendered.

Clearly, O'Connor executed operations designed to turn an enemy flank and in everything he did, he tried to achieve surprise. Yet there are two other themes, which echo his command at Papadopoli, and explain his success as a commander. First is his thirst for reconnaissance. Throughout the operation, O'Connor developed in his subordinates the understanding of the necessity for sound reconnaissance. When Major General I. G. Mackay, commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, arrived at his headquarters to receive orders for the attack of Bardia his new corps commander informed him that although the corps already had a significant amount of information he should endeavor to establish his own.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, O'Connor was always seeking the opportunity to conduct reconnaissance of his own and before the campaign started was often forward of British troops, much to the annoyance of some of his subordinate commanders.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 25.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>96</sup> Barnett, 26-27.

The second theme of O'Connor's command, which helps explain his success as a field commander, is his battlefield circulation. Like at Papadopoli, he had an uncanny ability to be at the right place at the right time to cajole or direct his subordinates on to great things. From the first day of the campaign, he was tireless in his travel of the battlefield. His battlefield circulation allowed him to read the battle, understand the context, visualize solutions, issue timely orders, and make sound decisions, all of which facilitated his ability to influence the battlefield and drive operations in the direction he thought necessary. Effectively he was conducting what we today call 'Battle Command.'<sup>97</sup> As Startup correctly states, "O'Connor did not sit idly by in his headquarters."<sup>98</sup>

The final similarity drawn with O'Connor's experience at Papadopoli, that is key to explaining his success, regards the command and control structure established by his superiors, Generals Wilson and Wavell. Initially O'Connor felt that the command structure was inefficient. General 'Jumbo' Wilson was his immediate operational commander and General Wavell his '2 up'. However, O'Connor frequently received orders from both them and sometimes these orders were contradictory.<sup>99</sup> This irritated him and he believed the situation to be completely unsatisfactory. In late January 1941, he took the matter up with Wavell who, as a result of their discussion, changed the command and control arrangements to better suit O'Connor. From that point onwards the XIII Corps would report directly to General Wavell and the Commander in

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<sup>97</sup> US Department of the Army, Field Manual 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, March 2010), 1-7.

<sup>98</sup> Startup, 82.

<sup>99</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/3, File 4/3/2. O'Connor's Personal Account of the Libyan Campaign, 12, 16.

Chief's General Headquarters (GHQ).<sup>100</sup> Once again, O'Connor was operating independently of others, unfettered by boundaries, unconstrained by flanking forces. This situation allowed him to be creative in the use of his armored formations and the terrain across which they maneuvered.

O'Connor's victory in the desert marked his emergence as one of the British Army's most capable senior leaders, it sealed his already outstanding reputation. Field Marshall Sir John Harding, O'Connor's Chief of Staff and good friend comments on his commander's capacity and genius:

The plan of the battle was hatched in General O'Connor's brain, the tactical decisions on which success or failure depended were his, the grim determination that inspired all our troops stemmed from his heart; it was his skill in calculating the risks, and his daring in accepting them, that turned what might have been merely a limited success into a victorious campaign with far reaching effects on the future course of the war.<sup>101</sup>

O'Connor's execution of operations in North Africa was largely faultless. The environment suited his command and the context in which he found himself facilitated this expression of his brilliance. The situation undoubtedly worked to his advantage: operating in the open expanse of desert, unrestricted by boundaries and his superior command he was able to conduct bold and daring maneuver to achieve surprise. He was also able to circulate the battlefield in order to take the temperature of his force and issue direction based on what he found. This coalescing of factors, that suited him perfectly, allows Corelli Barnett's claim that "it was a model campaign, opening with a set-piece battle of great originality and faultless execution, continuing with a relentless pursuit with improvised supply services, and ending with a daring

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>101</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4/2/1-70, File 4/2/61. A review, written by Arthur Byrant, of *Against Great Odds*, in The Sunday Times, 1956 quotes Field Marshall Sir John Harding, O'Connor's Chief of Staff in XIII Corps.

strategic march and a battle of annihilation. Sidi Barrani, Bardia, Tobruk and Beda Form – their brilliance sparkles against the darkest setting of the war; hardly rivaled, never surpassed.”<sup>102</sup>

## Capture!

On April 6, 1941, German soldiers from Ponath’s Detachment of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Corps captured General O’Connor as previously described.<sup>103</sup> The Germans quickly flew him to Tripoli and subsequently on to Italy where he spent the first six months of his captivity in Sulmona with other senior Allied officers. In September 1941, their Italian guards moved a selection of the senior officers to Florence and imprisoned them in Vincigliata Castle.<sup>104</sup> Although he wrote an extensive narrative about his time as a prisoner of war, his three failed escape attempts, and the eventual successful escape to return to England on Christmas Day, 1943 O’Connor never mentions the psychological and emotional effects his two and a half years as a prisoner had on him. In fact, his only comment alluding to any degree of stress is in relation to “nerve strain” associated with these escape attempts.<sup>105</sup>

Nonetheless, it is possible to piece together a general indication of his mood and ability to cope with the circumstances of his situation. Brigadier Carton de Wiart, a fellow British prisoner, and General O’Connor forged a very close relationship during their shared captivity and on May 23, 1941, de Wiart wrote to O’Connor’s wife. He informed her that O’Connor was initially, “very down – small wonder when you consider the cruel luck of the whole business...but he is a

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<sup>102</sup> Barnett, 64.

<sup>103</sup> Ian S. O. Playfair, *The History of the Second World War, The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol II* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1954), 29.

<sup>104</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/4-4/5, File 4/5/1. O’Connor’s Escape Narrative, 2.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



different man now – he looks first class and has brightened up no end.”<sup>106</sup> Two months later he wrote again, “I am happy to say that your husband is now as fit as a man can be and is much better morally too – an occasional bad day we all have – but that is nothing. He really looks like a boy now – in spite of some grey hair! Getting letters and parcels from you has made all the difference to him.”<sup>107</sup> It is no great surprise that he was initially so down; the shock of capture is notoriously difficult to come to terms with. O’Connor, in particular, had much to reflect on; his significant victory in North Africa had put him on a path to rapid promotion and great success. Now however his outlook was very different. Moreover, he would have felt some degree of responsibility for the turn of events in Cyrenaica, as the German Army forced the disorganized British withdrawal.

Like Field Marshall William Slim, who wrote about his difficulties in coming to terms with his defeat as a corps commander in Burma, O’Connor recognized the dangers of wallowing in pity and “not allowing the gnawing self doubt to shatter confidence in leadership and manhood.”<sup>108</sup> He used two mechanisms to achieve this. The first was planning for his escape. Sometime after the end of the war, his Aide de Camp Simon Phipps asked him how he had overcome the strain of captivity. O’Connor answered that he knew “he had to overcome his dejection at all costs, and that the way he gave all his mind to planning escapes was his main way of fighting depression.”<sup>109</sup> He also kept himself extremely fit and took daily exercise to ensure that his physical fitness helped maintained his mental well-being. In addition, O’Connor’s was

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<sup>106</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/4 -4/5, File 4/5/3. A letter from Brigadier General Carton de Wiart to Lady O’Connor dated May 23, 1941.

<sup>107</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/4 -4/5, File 4/5/3. A letter from Brigadier General Carton de Wiart to Lady O’Connor dated July 15, 1941.

<sup>108</sup> Field Marshal Viscount W. Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 121.

<sup>109</sup> Baynes, 178.

the type of character who was very comfortable in his own company. In a letter to his mother, dated September 18, 1942 he wrote, “don’t think that I am sad or morose. I am happy in a way and oddly enough happier here in solitude than at any time since my capture. In certain ways I enjoy being alone very much.”<sup>110</sup> Although this comment may be questioned because of whom the letter was written to, it resonates with an earlier comment O’Connor makes in his escape narrative regarding a previous period of solitary confinement as a result of a failed escape attempt.<sup>111</sup>

It is clear then that after the first few months in captivity O’Connor adjusted well to the trials it presented. Planning and executing escape attempts kept him occupied and engaged in life and the periods spent in solitary confinement presented no significant problems for him, the series of interviews that he conducted after his successful escape further supports this view. Within three days of arriving in Egypt he had met, either socially or more formally, General Harold Alexander, the Commander in Chief Middle Eastern Command; General Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander; Air Chief Marshall Arthur Tedder, Eisenhower’s deputy; the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and upon his return to England the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Alan Brooke.<sup>112</sup> The fact that he took command of the VIII Corps so soon after his return clearly indicates that the senior leadership believed that he had emerged from captivity unscathed and ready to continue in high command.

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<sup>110</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/4 -4/5, File 4/5/3. A letter from O’Connor to his mother dated September 18, 1942.

<sup>111</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 4/4 -4/5, File 4/5/1. O’Connor’s Escape Narrative, 11.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-20; and Baynes, 175-177, 182.

## Normandy and VIII Corps

By June 1944, the British Army was a shadow of its previous capability. Five years of hard fighting in the European Theatre had reduced the pool of manpower that sustained British forces dramatically.<sup>113</sup> The nation was weary and the cupboard was bare. Furthermore, the British political leadership were conscious that the British Army must survive the war in such a way as to not, “diminish British Imperial influence on the postwar world and especially postwar Europe. It was not enough for the British Empire to have won the war – it had to win the peace as well.”<sup>114</sup> This manpower shortage did not just apply to soldiers and non commissioned officers, it was equally true for the officer corps. This explains why the senior leadership appointed General O’Connor back to a command appointment so soon after his escape from captivity. Furthermore, this strategic situation also had a significant bearing on the British operational conduct of the war and it was this backdrop that confronted O’Connor on his return to active duty.

General O’Connor officially took command of VIII Corps on January 21, 1944, less than a month after his return to England. From the moment he took command, he was extremely busy as he learned the strengths and weaknesses of both his staff and his subordinate units. More importantly perhaps the period before deployment to France gave him the opportunity to refresh himself in the art of command and acquaint himself with the new technologies and techniques associated with armored warfare that had developed while he was in captivity. Exercise Eagle, a corps exercise conducted in February, provided an opportunity not only for O’Connor to run out his corps but also for senior leadership to see him. A letter from Major General Horatio Berney-

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<sup>113</sup> Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: Norton and Company, 1997), 167.

<sup>114</sup> Hart, 62.

Ficklin, the chief observer for the exercise, to O'Connor clearly indicates that O'Connor was still an extremely capable commander and that he was commanding a well-oiled staff and competent subordinate units.<sup>115</sup> To many this was not a surprise; even the national press shared this opinion.<sup>116</sup>

VIII Corps started arriving in Normandy on June 11, 1944 to the news that the Second Army had failed to seize Caen as planned. This significantly disrupted anticipated movement of units in the corps and problems were further compounded by terrible weather, which forced the navy to remain out at sea unable to deliver critical manpower, equipment, and stores. General Montgomery, now commanding 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, and General 'Bimbo' Dempsey, commander of the British Second Army, recognized the urgent need to maintain the momentum of the invasion. Planning therefore started for Operation EPSOM and the launch of VIII Corps' first major operation of the Normandy Campaign.

Strategically Caen represented vital ground for the allies and the initial post D-Day objectives. It not only provided the German enemy with a fulcrum for their defenses in eastern Normandy but also offered critical airfields that would allow the Allied air forces to base operations in France and significantly reduce issues associated with operational reach.<sup>117</sup> In addition, the allies' bridgehead was increasingly congested and they needed more space to

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<sup>115</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 5-5/3, File 5/2/10. A letter from Maj General H P M Bearney-Ficklin to O'Connor, dated 26 February 1944, containing the VIII Corps evaluation from Exercise Eagle.

<sup>116</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 4, File 4/5/3. An article in "The Daily Record" dated September 10, 1943, stated that "During the two years in which General O'Connor has been in captivity, the weapons and tactics of Western Warfare have altered almost out of recognition. It has generally been the case that prisoners in captivity age considerably both physically and mentally. I shall be very surprised though if Gen O'Connor does not prove to be an exception."

<sup>117</sup> US Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, September 2008), 6-15. FM 3-0 defines operational reach as the distance and duration across which a unit can successfully employ military capabilities.

operate.<sup>118</sup> Finally, in line with Montgomery's overarching operational goal, the British Second Army was to pull the preponderance of German forces on to its own front in order to allow increasing freedom of movement for the Americans forces further to the west. "The declared Allied strategy was, however, to attract as much German strength as possible, particularly in armour, to the British sector."<sup>119</sup> A great deal of controversy has arisen regarding the initial plans for the Normandy invasion, mainly associated with what was planned, what occurred and what Montgomery claimed in the period after the war. The D-Day plan was for the British Second Army to capture Caen within forty-eight hours of the invasion. Yet the situation precluded this from occurring and as a result Caen did not fully fall under Allied control until after Operation GOODWOOD, several weeks after the launch of Operation OVERLORD. Montgomery's evolving plans to capture the city were what author Henry Mintzberg calls "emergent strategy."<sup>120</sup> Regardless of the success of the capture of Caen the overriding Allied strategy remained to use the Commonwealth forces in the east to attract the bulk of the German armor.<sup>121</sup>

As Carlo D'Este identifies, Montgomery and O'Connor were friends who had, until O'Connor's capture, similar career paths.<sup>122</sup> Their friendship had developed at Staff College

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<sup>118</sup> Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 238.

<sup>119</sup> G S Jackson, *Operations of Eighth Corps: Account of Operations from Normandy to the River Rhine* (London: St. Clements Press Ltd, 1948), 22. Jackson's account of operations is used extensively in its capacity as the official VIII Corps military history.

<sup>120</sup> Henry Mintzberg, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 23-26.

<sup>121</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 5/1-5/4, File 5/4/21. Letter from O'Connor to General de Wiart dated September 17, 1944; file 5/4/22, a letter from O'Connor to General Neame dated August 19; Bradley, Omar, N., *A Soldier's Story* (New York: Holt, 1951), 325-326; and Eisenhower Library, Kansas State Historical Society, *Walter Beddell Smith Collection: Collection of World War II Documents, 1941-1945*, Box 37: Report on Operations in Northwest Europe, June 6, 1944 – May 8, 1945 by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, 33.

<sup>122</sup> D'Este, 236-237.

where they were both students and subsequently instructors. They also both served in India together as brigade commanders and then in Palestine as divisional commanders. The result was a mutual respect between the two and Montgomery therefore trusted O'Connor's judgment, and listened to him, when O'Connor suggested that his initial plans for the VIII Corps attack on the city of Caen from the northeast were flawed.<sup>123</sup> Subsequently, and in line with O'Connor's suggestions VIII Corps received orders to attack south from the northwest of Caen. Operation EPSOM was born.

On June 19, General Dempsey outlined his scheme of maneuver to his corps commanders. All three corps, VIII Corps, XXX Corps and I Corps, were to be involved. XXX Corps and I Corps would conduct shaping operations "designed both to help the main effort [VIII Corps], and to divert the enemy's attention from it."<sup>124</sup> The XXX Corps was to launch a preliminary operation to capture Rauray, a village on high ground that dominates the area of VIII Corps subsequent advance south thereby securing the right flank of VIII Corps. I Corps was to secure VIII Corps left flank.

The weather remained dreadful and as a result, significant elements of VIII Corps still had not landed in Normandy. As Montgomery wrote to his friend and former chief of staff General Frank Simpson, "The weather is the very devil. A gale all day yesterday; the same today. Nothing can be unloaded."<sup>125</sup> Accordingly, Dempsey postponed the operation from June 23 to June 26 and amended the VIII Corps task organization. For the operation O'Connor had 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Infantry Division, 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Brigade and some enablers

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<sup>123</sup> O'Connor Papers, Box 5/1 -5/4, File 5/4/84. A letter from Montgomery to O'Connor dated June 19, 1944.

<sup>124</sup> Jackson, 22.

<sup>125</sup> D'Este, 237.

placed under his command in addition to his organic 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Infantry Division. Dempsey also allocated the corps additional artillery assets from XXX and I Corps, naval gunfire from three Royal Navy cruisers and also a significant apportionment of air support.

The ground over which the corps was to advance was difficult. Ernst Streng, a tank commander in the 9<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division describes it as:

A cruel area. Every road, every little field and meadow, was surrounded by thick hedges two or three meters in height. It was full of frightening opportunity for tanks and anti-tank guns to hide in ambush. The fighting was confused and difficult: each crew member had to react in a flash to any threat of danger. Tank clashes at short range, sometimes only a few meters, were not unusual.<sup>126</sup>

VIII Corps were about to enter combat for the first time in some of the most difficult terrain in Europe.

O'Connor's plan was flexible, but it was also complicated (see map at Annex B). He intended to conduct a penetration of the German defenses. 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division was to conduct a forward passage of lines through the line held by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division and advance five miles to cross the River Odon. 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division would then pass through 15<sup>th</sup> Division and exploit southeast to establish a river crossing over the River Orne and establish itself to the east of the river. 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Division would establish a firm base for the corps and subsequently take responsibility for a portion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Division area of operations.<sup>127</sup>

The VIII Corps encountered problems before it had even crossed the line of departure. On his right XXX Corps had failed to take the village of Rauray. This meant that the right flank was not secure and that the Germans in defense of that village could successfully engage the 15<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Major J. J. How, *Normandy: the British Breakout* (London: William Kimber, 1981), 86.

<sup>127</sup> Jackson, 29-30.

Division as it advanced south. The weather further compounded the situation as the Air Forces assigned to support the operation from England could not take off. As a result, the Air Force only delivered a fraction of the planned aerial bombardment.<sup>128</sup> In the face of stiff opposition, 15<sup>th</sup> Division crossed the line of departure at 0730 on June 26. By midday, the corps had made only modest progress and so O'Connor decided to pass the 11<sup>th</sup> Division through the 15<sup>th</sup> Division early in order to establish the Odon river crossing. In the face of the opposing German 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division, the 11<sup>th</sup> Division gamely pushed forward but at nothing like the expected rate of advance. "The first day of Epsom ended in a sea of rain and mud, a mile short of the River Odon."<sup>129</sup> The corps had only advanced four miles on a narrow front.<sup>130</sup>

The nature of the narrow front allowed the Germans the opportunity to harass the corps throughout the operation and the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division, along with reinforcements from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division, pressed a vigorous counter-attack on the morning of June 27. Once the attack was defeated O'Connor ordered the 15<sup>th</sup> Division to continue their drive south and the division eventually crossed the River Odon that evening at 1900.<sup>131</sup> He then reinserted the 11<sup>th</sup> Division into the fight and throughout the night the division poured across the small bridgehead and on towards the River Orne.<sup>132</sup> Although progress was slower than anticipated the corps was moving towards its objectives.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>129</sup> D'Este, 240.

<sup>130</sup> Major L. F. Ellis, *Victory in the West, Vol I: The Battle of Normandy* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1962), 279.

<sup>131</sup> G. S. Jackson, 39.

<sup>132</sup> Ellis, 281.



However, ULTRA intercepts suggested that two more Panzer divisions were approaching the area to reinforce the 12<sup>th</sup> SS and 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Divisions.<sup>133</sup> Generals Dempsey and O'Connor were both anxious to avoid becoming over extended. The pressure on the VIII Corps salient was already significant and progressing further towards the River Orne would stretch the corps too thinly and potentially unbalance the force. O'Connor therefore, at a meeting with his divisional commanders at 15<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters, directed the 11<sup>th</sup> Division to stop their advance south and strengthen the bridgehead while the 15<sup>th</sup> Division and 43<sup>rd</sup> Division would clear the area within the bridgehead north of the Odon of 12<sup>th</sup> SS Division units, which had infiltrated the area. During June 29, elements of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division fought a violent action for Hill 112, which they carried by late morning. However, although the 11<sup>th</sup> Division was still in good condition and fighting hard, O'Connor, under pressure from Dempsey, withdrew the division into reserve, ready to counter the anticipated German attack.<sup>134</sup> This decision marked the end of Operation EPSOM for VIII Corps although it was not until the next day, June 30, that Montgomery officially called off the offensive.

Assessments of EPSOM vary enormously from Ellis' "major victory" and Jackson's "very fine performance" to D'Este's "dismal failure." The truth lies somewhere in between the two. Tactically VIII Corps only achieved one of their stated objectives: crossing the River Odon, and fell well short of the planned envelopment to outflank Caen from the west. Yet strategically the operation had achieved the Second Army objective of attracting the German armored

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<sup>133</sup> D'Este, 241.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 242.

divisions to its front.<sup>135</sup> However, unlike in O'Connor's previous commands, there was no decisive victory; EPSOM by comparison was relatively pedestrian.

O'Connor's style always tended towards aggressive action against the enemy yet at EPSOM he was constrained by his chain of command. General Dempsey, concerned by the reports of two additional German divisions in the area instructed O'Connor to withdraw the 11<sup>th</sup> Division into reserve at a time when perhaps he may have tried to press home his advantage. However there is no evidence to suggest that the VIII Corps commander tried to change Dempsey's mind, which suggests his agreement with the decision. His experience of the First World War and the painful lessons he learned in France regarding flank protection and the cost of attritional warfare goes some way to explaining his acceptance of Dempsey's decision. Furthermore, General Montgomery was becoming increasingly concerned at the rate of attrition in VIII Corps and as Stephen Hart suggests he had a "desire to attain victory with tolerable casualties."<sup>136</sup> It is therefore obvious that his two senior commanders significantly influenced O'Connor's decision-making.

O'Connor was also significantly constrained by the area of operations General Dempsey apportioned him. VIII Corps' line of departure was only three miles wide and the area of operations was at its widest only 10 miles across. This clearly precluded any form of corps level maneuver and forced his scheme of maneuver to center on the echeloning of divisions and a penetration rather than allowing him to attempt to turn a flank. Furthermore, O'Connor's western

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<sup>135</sup> Jackson, 52. Jackson suggests that, "eight of the nine German panzer divisions in France had been hurled against the British Second Army and of these, elements of no less than seven had been identified on the 8 Corps front during 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> June."

<sup>136</sup> Hart, 50. Hart identifies four motivations for Montgomery's casualty aversion: first to protect morale in the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, second because of a chronic manpower shortage in the United Kingdom, third as a result of the profound influence the first World War had on him, and fourth because he understood the importance of the army's size at the end of the war.

boundary, which allocated Rauray to XXX Corps, further constrained his actions. XXX Corps did not successfully secure Rauray until June 28, and 15<sup>th</sup> Division suffered significant casualties as a result. General Gerald C. Bucknall, commander XXX Corps, proved indecisive and unable to drive his corps on to this objective. Second Army headquarters should have allocated the objective of Rauray to VIII Corps to secure.

Finally, the very nature of the ground, the small fields, high hedges, and narrow tracks of the bocage country further hampered O'Connor's corps. The ground certainly favored the defense and formations clearing enemy from the area had to do so methodically in order to avoid the risk of ambush at short range. This significantly affected the tempo of operations and the weather exacerbated the problem. Incessant rain turned the unpaved tracks into muddy streams and made them unsuitable for anything but tracked vehicles. The weather played one other key role. It caused the grounding of the Air Force in England, which ultimately meant that only a fraction of the anticipated air support materialized. All these factors coalesced into a rather disappointing start to operations in Normandy for VIII Corps, and especially the corps commander, from whom so much was expected.

After EPSOM, VIII Corps withdrew and became the Second Army reserve. Although involved in two smaller operations local to Caen the corps headquarters soon found itself immersed in more planning for the next major army operation: Operation GOODWOOD. On July 10, Montgomery issued a directive, ordering Dempsey to create an armored corps, something that he had previously said he would never do, and plan to conduct operations on the east bank of the River Orne.<sup>137</sup> However, Operation GOODWOOD was General Dempsey's brainchild.<sup>138</sup> He

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<sup>137</sup> Jackson, 72.

<sup>138</sup> D'Este, 353.

recognized that the strength of the Second Army lay in its preponderance of armor, especially since within Normandy there was a growing redundancy of armored vehicles in relation to manpower.<sup>139</sup> Dempsey briefed O'Connor at VIII Corps headquarters on the July 13, and handed over a copy of Montgomery's "Notes on Second Army Operations 16-18 July 1944" two days later on July 15. These notes identify three objectives, "to engage German armor and write it down...to gain a good bridgehead over the Orne through Caen...and to generally destroy German equipment and personnel."<sup>140</sup> Clearly, this direction fits within Montgomery's operation vision of fixing the Germans in the east to allow a subsequent exploitation in the west by U.S. First Army: Operation COBRA was due to start two days later. However, in the same notes, Montgomery also directed that VIII Corps should "push far to the south towards Falaise." This caused a great deal of excitement in the SHAPE headquarters where General Eisenhower and his staff believed the Second Army were going to attempt to break out.<sup>141</sup> Subsequently a great deal of controversy arose because assets were allocated for the attack by SHAPE based on their faulty understanding of the British concept, which was to a large degree, created by Montgomery and his apparent dishonesty.

Dempsey planned to use all of his corps in GOODWOOD. XII Corps and XXX Corps would attempt to create a diversion to the west of Caen, whilst to the east, I Corps would secure a base from which VIII Corps three armored divisions could attack south. Simultaneously the II Canadian Corps would attack the southern half of Caen from their well-established positions in the north of the city. The end state of the operation would therefore see Caen completely secured

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<sup>139</sup> HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division, *Battlefield Tour: Operation Goodwood* (Germany, 1947), 7.

<sup>140</sup> Jackson, 78.

<sup>141</sup> Russell Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants, The Campaign of France and Germany 1944-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 144.

and elements of VIII Corps patrolling and exploiting “south in the direction of Falaise and in the south west as far as the River Orne at Thury Harcourt.”<sup>142</sup> There is therefore no doubt that, at least in General Dempsey’s mind, the purpose of creating an armored corps was to break out and exploit to the south through the German defenses.

The ground to the east of Caen was very different from the west. Bocage country essentially starts on the west bank of the River Orne while on the east bank the ground is largely agricultural and characterized by large fields with few hedges and woods. To the untrained eye, it looks like perfect ground for an armored attack. Yet these wide-open fields, with their crops fully-grown and ready for harvest, were punctuated with small stone villages, often only a mile apart, which afforded perfect defensive positions with interlocking and overlapping mutually supportive arcs of fire. Furthermore, the ground rises from north to south and the Bourguebus Ridge, approximately six miles south of Caen, completely dominates the area, as did the large factory chimneys at Colombelles. Both locations perfect for observing and directing artillery fires. The River Orne and the Caen Canal also presented two obstacles, which VIII Corps would need to cross before crossing their line of departure.<sup>143</sup>

O’Connor’s superior officers both had a good understanding of what the enemy consisted of in terms of units, yet their collective appreciation of the actual enemy organization tied to the ground was poor. There was no understanding that, by the time VIII Corps crossed the line of departure, the Germans had arrayed their forces of, I SS Panzer Corps and LXXXVI Corps in a

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<sup>142</sup> Jackson, 81. Jackson includes a copy of General Dempsey’s summary of GOODWOOD dated July 17, 1944.

<sup>143</sup> Ellis, 335-336.

deep defensive belt, nearly ten miles deep with five lines of defensive positions.<sup>144</sup> Regardless, “O’Connor understood that the ultimate success of GOODWOOD lay in the speed and shock which the mass of armor would have on the demoralized Germans.”<sup>145</sup> Tempo, momentum and surprise were key.

The ground and the size of the allied bridgehead again determined O’Connor’s plan. He was limited to conducting an attack similar to EPSOM: a penetration with divisions advancing in echelon. In order to avoid the problems of EPSOM however O’Connor determined objectives for each of the divisions from west to east. This would ensure that once through the restricted line of departure the divisions could diverge away from the central axis. The VIII Corps scheme of maneuver was therefore for a massive artillery and Air Force preparation, followed by 11<sup>th</sup> Division advancing towards Bras, Rocquancourt and Fontenay in the southwest. The Guards Armoured Division, prepared to assist 11<sup>th</sup> Division if required, would subsequently advance to the southeast towards objectives centered on Mezidon. Finally, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division would advance south towards objectives centered on Cintheaux. Once established on these objectives, and only upon General Dempsey’s order, would the corps continue the advance south towards Falaise.<sup>146</sup>

One of O’Connor’s division commanders, Major General ‘Pip’ Roberts, dissented with O’Connor’s orders. He believed that his 11<sup>th</sup> Division should not secure two villages Cuverville and Demouville, only a mile after crossing the line of departure. He suggested that this would tie up his infantry brigade, which he could use to better effect later in the operation, clearing villages

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<sup>144</sup> Overy, 168.

<sup>145</sup> D’Este, 377.

<sup>146</sup> HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division, 15 and 46-47, this second reference directly quotes the VIII Corps Operational Instruction No 4, dated July 16, 1944.

and enemy strong points.<sup>147</sup> He recommended that the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division clear and hold these objectives. O'Connor, who clearly demonstrated in North Africa his sound understanding of infantry and armor cooperation, refused to change his plan. He had orders from both Dempsey and Montgomery to maintain the "firm bastion" which Montgomery articulated in his 'Notes' for Dempsey.<sup>148</sup>

The initial bombardment, which started at 0545 on July 18, only two hours before 'H' Hour, was unprecedented in scale.<sup>149</sup> Over two thousand aircraft flew and delivered thousands of bombs across the German defenses.<sup>150</sup> The bombing had the required effect: "as leading elements of 11<sup>th</sup> Division advanced for the first two miles they found Germans totally dazed and in some cases driven insane."<sup>151</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> Division crossed over the line of departure at 0730 and rapidly advanced the four miles to Cagney. Yet by 1100hrs, the attack was starting to falter. The Germans, now recovered from Baynes 'daze' were starting to mount a coherent defense; this in the face of an incoherent British attack. Held up at Cagney, Roberts handed over the objective to the Guards Division at midday grossly inflating the size of the enemy on the objective.<sup>152</sup> This caused unnecessary caution on the part of the Guards who eventually secured the village at 1600. Meanwhile Roberts' division attempted to continue southwest toward Bourguebous Ridge. With the 11<sup>th</sup> Division unable to make significant progress, O'Connor held a short conference at 1350

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<sup>147</sup> Ian Daglish, *Goodwood: The British Offensive in Normandy, July 1944* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009), 20-21.

<sup>148</sup> D'Este, 373-374.

<sup>149</sup> HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division, 17.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. Quotes from the Second Army Summary of Operations, 0001-1200, 18 July 1944.

<sup>151</sup> Baynes, 206.

<sup>152</sup> Major General G. P. B Roberts, *From the Desert to the Baltic* (London: William Kimber, 1987), 175.

with the commanders of 11<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions. He briefed a plan for a hasty attack onto the Bourguebous Ridge with 11<sup>th</sup> Division in the west and a brigade from 7<sup>th</sup> Division to the east.<sup>153</sup> The attack failed. Largely because the 7<sup>th</sup> Division could not advance quickly enough through the congested battlefield.<sup>154</sup>

The VIII Corps tanks and infantry continued to slug out the battle in an attritional manner with the German enemy. It soon developed into “the biggest tank battle of the entire campaign, a virtual shootout between the outnumbered but superior German Tigers and Panthers and the massed but more vulnerable British Shermans and Cromwells.”<sup>155</sup> Tactically, it was not what the British commanders had visualized. O’Connor held another conference with his divisional commanders at midday on July 19. This time he directed a less ambitious concept, with the divisions advancing on their original axis but to foreshortened objectives.<sup>156</sup> Over the course of July 19 to July 20 these objectives were successfully achieved. Torrential rainfall started on the afternoon of July 20 and “quickly turned the hitherto dusty arena into a swampy morass, completely halting all movement, except on metalled roads.”<sup>157</sup>

Rather like Operation EPSOM, GOODWOOD was a tactical failure since it failed to reach its tactical objectives. Even if, as some have suggested, the plan was not to break out towards Falaise, the corps should have been in a position to do so if Dempsey ordered it. Yet, as Dempsey said, “the attack we put in on July 18 was not a very good operation of war tactically,

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<sup>153</sup> Daghish, 185. Daghish quotes Major General Roberts from a lecture he delivered to the British Staff College in 1979.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>155</sup> D’Este, 379.

<sup>156</sup> Daghish, 196.

<sup>157</sup> Jackson, 110.



but strategically it was a great success, even though we did get a bloody nose.”<sup>158</sup> Again the leadership attempted to balance a tactical failure with the message that the operation was primarily designed to ‘write’ the enemy down.

The single biggest failure of Operation GOODWOOD was a failure of detailed planning. Even though O’Connor seemed to be “more concerned with the mechanics of GOODWOOD than the philosophy of it” the plan was undermined by a flawed plan for the preliminary moves.<sup>159</sup> Prior to crossing the line of departure, the corps had to move from the west to the east of Caen, position in assembly areas, and cross a river, a canal and a minefield. Furthermore, the corps conducted this movement at night in an attempt to achieve the element of surprise. O’Connor understood that the basis for an armored operation of this nature was surprise and speed and he therefore determined to persuade the Germans that the main attack would come from the west of Caen; this he did successfully. Although the staff issued a detailed plan for this movement, the assumptions it used as a basis for planning were poor. The plan stated that the entire corps would be at or beyond Cagny by 1400 hours.<sup>160</sup> In reality, at that time, elements of the corps were still in their assembly areas and traffic clogged the roads. Subsequently, when O’Connor and Roberts tasked 7<sup>th</sup> Division to move up to support the attack on Bourgebous Ridge that afternoon, 7<sup>th</sup> Division was not able to do so and the momentum was lost.<sup>161</sup> This failure of detailed planning therefore undermined General O’Connor’s vision for the entire operation.

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<sup>158</sup> D’Este, 379. Quotes General Dempsey from an interview conducted by Chester Wilmot.

<sup>159</sup> Baynes, 201.

<sup>160</sup> Jackson, 84.

<sup>161</sup> Lieutenant Colonel G. S. Jackson, and Lieutenant Colonel W. B. R. Neave-Hill, *Liberation Campaign North West Europe 1944-1945, Phase 4: The “Break Out” and the Advance to the Seine, 16<sup>th</sup> June to 29<sup>th</sup> August 1944*, Historical Section of the Cabinet (London: Wt and Sons Ltd), 159.

General Dempsey had a great deal invested in this operation. Hart describes him as “Dempsey the Cipher” in *Montgomery and Colossal Cracks*, yet as D’Este identifies he was largely responsible for the concept of an armored attack.<sup>162</sup> Considering Montgomery had previously announced at staff conference that, “I will never employ an armoured corps” both Dempsey and Montgomery would have both shown particular interest in the operation.<sup>163</sup> This interest is evident in the orders that they produced. Montgomery, initially so taken with Dempsey’s idea suggested a bold operation that caused significant excitement in SHAEF as it inferred an attempt at breakout from the British sector. However, over the course of the period July 13 to 17, the aims of the operation evolved and became somewhat diluted and the need for security of the current area invested reinforced. Not only did this not suit the VIII Corps commanders command style, his superior’s never “grasped the conflicting position in which they had placed O’Connor:” stuck between achieving a decisive breakout and defending the current front lines.<sup>164</sup>

Linked to this lack of understanding on the part of Dempsey and Montgomery was a failure to learn from one of the key experiences from Operation EPSOM. The size of the corps boundaries, especially at the line of departure, significantly restricted the ability of the VIII Corps to conduct any sort of maneuver other than an attack by penetration. The same was true at GOODWOOD where the ground and the inter unit boundaries shaped the operation in such a way that at the start of the advance, “it was quite impossible to produce more than one armoured

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<sup>162</sup> Hart, 354.

<sup>163</sup> D’Este, 356.

<sup>164</sup> D’Este, 388.

brigade on the start line at H-hour.”<sup>165</sup> The corps area of operations was initially only two miles wide and therefore had room for only three river crossings, and two minefield breaches and one metalled road available for the first two miles of the advance. This was a significant failure of operational intelligence preparation of the battlefield. Not only did this axis of advance limit the type of maneuver to be used, it also forced O’Connor to deploy his divisions in echelon. The restrictive nature of the boundaries allocated to him again significantly limited his ability to conduct bold maneuver.<sup>166</sup>

A second effect of the restricted boundaries and the associated prioritization of movement of forces relates to artillery support. The VIII Corps commander, in order to achieve a rapid offensive, prioritized the movement of his armored divisions ahead of his artillery. This meant that as his corps advanced, if there was any delay in the movement tables, his forward echelon would lose the mass of indirect fire support they had enjoyed as they crossed the bridgehead. Also, before they reached the critical defensive position arrayed along the Bourguebus Ridge, unless the artillery could move forward, they would be out of range of the fires. O’Connor hoped to mitigate this risk with a second Air Force bombardment later in the afternoon but the air planners forbade it. As a result, as the 11<sup>th</sup> Division attempted to assault the extremely well defended German position they did so without artillery support; it was sitting in traffic jams somewhere north of the line of departure.<sup>167</sup>

Finally, the ground proved a significant contributor to the undoing of the operation. Although it appeared that the ground suited the employment of an armored corps with wide-open

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<sup>165</sup> Jackson and Neave-Hill, 158.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 158-160.

<sup>167</sup> HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division, 59.

fields to maneuver across, it in many ways favored the defense. The crops, in full growth, provided ample cover from view for dismounted infantry. The small stone farm buildings and villages dotted across the countryside provided ideal defensive positions in which to site tanks, anti-tank weapon systems and infantry platoons.<sup>168</sup> For example, the enemy defensive position at Cagny, which held up VIII Corps for most of July 18, consisted of only four anti tank weapons, which successfully defeated sixteen British tanks.<sup>169</sup> Behind the forward elements, significant traffic problems led to an extremely congested battlefield, and as units tried to maneuver to support the attack, this traffic significantly impeded their movement.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, the Allied bombing prior to 'H' hour also had a significant effect on the terrain and further slowed the advance. In places, advancing troops found craters up to forty feet across and twelve feet deep proving difficult for anything but tracked vehicles to traverse.<sup>171</sup> Montgomery's "firepower-laden approach...devastated the area over which the troops were to advance. The resulting cratered terrain hampered enormously the movement of motorized transport."<sup>172</sup> All of these factors combined to slow significantly the VIII Corps advance south, an advance that depended on speed and momentum to achieve success.

With Operation COBRA, the operation that would start the successful Allied breakout of Normandy, scheduled to begin on July 24, 1944 General Montgomery was determined to keep the preponderance of the German armored divisions fixed in front of the British Second Army in the East. GOODWOOD had achieved this, but a delay to the start of COBRA required further

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<sup>168</sup> Daghish, 207-209.

<sup>169</sup> D'Este, 374.

<sup>170</sup> Hart, 91.

<sup>171</sup> Stephen Badsey, *Normandy 1944: Allied landings and breakout* (London: Osprey, 1990), 67.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

Second Army operations. The result was Operation BLUECOAT. Montgomery therefore ordered the First Canadian Army to attack the Germans to the east of the River Orne while simultaneously launching the Second Army in an attack, consisting of no less than six divisions, at the extreme west of the Second Army's position. For here, there was no German armor in the German defensive line.<sup>173</sup> General Eisenhower, enthused by Montgomery's plan, urged him to launch earlier.<sup>174</sup> In his reply Montgomery wrote, "I have ordered Dempsey to throw all caution overboard and to take any risks he likes, and to accept any casualties, and to step on the gas for Vire."<sup>175</sup>

Cognizant of Montgomery's imperative, Dempsey's intent was for VIII Corps and XXX Corps to strike south from Caumont with the objective of seizing two key areas of high ground: Mount Picon and Hill 309 in order to stop the Germans hinging their defense on these locations as the Americans advanced from the west.<sup>176</sup> O'Connor, with his corps on the extreme right, was to seize Hill 309 and then posture for subsequent exploitation to the south. The ground over which VIII Corps would attack was similar to that which it had experienced during Operation EPSOM. The Guards Armoured Division history describes it as, "Bocage at its best, an area of many small woods interspersed with very small fields. The fields are separated by high banks, six foot and more, on top of which are high hedges. There is but one road running south, not

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<sup>173</sup> Field Marshall The Viscount Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic* (London: Hutchinson), 87.

<sup>174</sup> Ellis, 386.

<sup>175</sup> Eisenhower Library, Kansas State Historical Society, *Walter Bedell Smith Collection: Collection of World War II Documents, 1941-1945*, Box 36, Memo, General Smith to Historical Section, SHAEF, on SAC's Decisions on Overlord, Feb 22 1945, hereafter referred to as Bedell Smith Collection.

<sup>176</sup> Lieutenant Colonel W. B. R. Neave-Hill, *Liberation Campaign North West Europe 1944-1945, Phase 4: The "Break Out" and the Advance to the Seine, 16<sup>th</sup> June to 29<sup>th</sup> August 1944*, Historical Section of the Cabinet Book III, (London: Wt and Sons Ltd), 2.

metalled, and in many places not wide enough for two vehicles.”<sup>177</sup> The operation, planned in haste, commenced on the morning of July 30, 1944.

O’Connor intended to, for the first time in Normandy, advance with two divisions forward. The 11<sup>th</sup> Division would advance along the right flank, along the boundary with United States V Corps, to capture Saint Martin de Besaces. Simultaneously the 15<sup>th</sup> Division would attack to seize Hill 309.<sup>178</sup> He decided to keep a strong reserve, consisting of the Guards Armoured Division, to enable a rapid exploitation should the opportunity arise. The corps also needed to conduct a rapid preliminary operation to move the fifty miles from the east of Caen to Caumont in order to position for the attack. Such was the urgency to press on that elements of the corps were over fifty miles away as the lead elements crossed the line of departure.<sup>179</sup>

The operation started without any artillery preparation or Air Force bombing in order to achieve surprise.<sup>180</sup> However, once the attack began artillery support and seven sequential Air Force bombing runs commenced. VIII Corps quickly gained the initiative from the Germans and by mid afternoon had reached the slopes of Hill 309.<sup>181</sup> XXX Corps to the left of VIII Corps however were advancing slowly and as a result, the 15<sup>th</sup> Division had to secure its left flank. After another Air Force bombardment on the hill and in order to ensure that the corps maintained its momentum O’Connor ordered Major General G.H.A. MacMillan, the 15<sup>th</sup> Division commander to rapidly assault the hill with his tanks and allow his infantry units to follow up the attack more

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<sup>177</sup> G. L. Verney, *History of the Guards Armoured Division* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), 50.

<sup>178</sup> Headquarters British Army of the Rhine, *Battlefield Tour: Operation Bluecoat, Directing Staff Edition*, (Germany, 1947), 8. Hereafter referred to as ‘HQ BAOR, Bluecoat.’

<sup>179</sup> Baynes, 221.

<sup>180</sup> Neave-Hill, 15.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

methodically. The division carried off the attack with great success and O'Connor, two days later, wrote to congratulate the battalion commander, "No tank unit has ever been handled with greater dash and determination."<sup>182</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup> Division, on the corps right, reached Saint Martin des Besaces in the morning of 31 July, and as the battle for possession of the village took place a reconnaissance unit pushed south and located the seam between the German Seventh Army and Panzer Group West. This fortuitous patrol established a covered route to an undefended bridge across the River Souleuvre, which they seized.<sup>183</sup> O'Connor was ecstatic and issued hasty orders for 11<sup>th</sup> Division to exploit the success that night. The division continued their advance south capturing Pont Auray and several other crossings over the river. In order to ensure the security of his flanks O'Connor deployed part of his reserve, the Guards Division, to protect the left flank of 11<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>184</sup> Over the next few days, the enemy resistance increased from the units of the Seventh Army opposing them, and the Germans reinforced these units with elements from three other Panzer Divisions from II SS Panzer Corps.<sup>185</sup> Nonetheless, by August 4, the 11<sup>th</sup> Division had advanced another six miles south, capturing Le Beny Bocage and Perrier Ridge en route to the outskirts of Vire, which lay over the American boundary. With this high ground in his possession, O'Connor decided to halt the advance, transition to the defense, and wait for the German counter.

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<sup>182</sup> Major General G. L. Verney, *History of the Guards Armoured Division* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), 50.

<sup>183</sup> HQ BAOR, Bluecoat, 21.

<sup>184</sup> Neave-Hill, 22.

<sup>185</sup> Ellis, 395.

Operation BLUECOAT was a genuine tactical and operational success for VIII Corps and O'Connor considered it to be his corps best action of the campaign.<sup>186</sup> The whole corps had learned from its painful experiences of EPSOM and GOODWOOD and was functioning efficiently. Operationally it fully achieved the intent of Dempsey and Montgomery in that it fixed the German armor to the east of the advancing American army. Furthermore, it predicated the commitment of the German army commander's reserve and "forced hurried and disordered withdrawals on the wings of both of the German armies."<sup>187</sup>

The success of BLUECOAT is due, to a large degree, to an increase in confidence on the part of O'Connor. Some of the traits of his outstanding leadership in North Africa emerge in the analysis. Many of his previous successes had started with him achieving tactical surprise. This was the case in BLUECOAT. He refused to let the speed with which the operation commenced unbalance him and he saw the potential for opportunity rather than threat. Even though his corps was some fifty miles away from the line of departure and some units did not receive their orders until less than thirty-six hours remained until H-hour, he rapidly planned the attack, issued verbal orders, and did all he could to ensure the success of his corps. The dominance of the Allied Air Forces allowed the corps to move, undetected by both day and night. Furthermore, in a letter to Major General Allan Adair, the Guards Division commander, O'Connor addresses the issue of secrecy and surprise and instructs him to "leave physical infrastructure in place whilst the corps

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<sup>186</sup> Baynes, 218.

<sup>187</sup> How, 221.



and divisions move” to help deceive the enemy.<sup>188</sup> Combined, these factors coalesced to help VIII Corps achieve surprise.

Commander VIII Corps also determined not to use fires to support his attack before “H” hour, a throwback to both his attack at Papadopoli and his initial raid in North Africa. Rather the attack started silently at first light at 0655. However, once the corps had crossed the line of departure and the attack had started, a significant Air Force bombardment commenced with nine hundred planes supporting the operation.<sup>189</sup> This contributed immensely to the initial success of both advancing divisions. In addition, for the first time, the Air Force allocated VIII Corps a second bombing run in the afternoon; this was a significant combat multiplier which further helped ensure that the corps was able to maintain its momentum throughout the day.

General O’Connor also demonstrates his increasing confidence in the use of his imagination regarding the deployment of his corps at the start of the attack. His line of departure, only three miles wide, was not significantly different to those used in the two previous operations, yet he chose to start the corps attack with two divisions forward rather than the echeloned attacks he had conducted previously in Normandy. To avoid unnecessary complication he imposed strict control measures and used time to enable a separation.<sup>190</sup> To the west 11<sup>th</sup> Division started their attack one hour after the 15<sup>th</sup> Division to the east. This course of action allowed him to reinforce success as it offered more options as his corps advanced; moreover, it subsequently allowed him to rapidly exploit success as the corps advanced south.

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<sup>188</sup> O’Connor Papers, Box 5-5/3, File 5/3/24. A letter from O’Connor to General Adair, dated July 27, 1944.

<sup>189</sup> Jackson, 126.

<sup>190</sup> Jackson, 128.

General O'Connor also engendered a change in the task organization of the divisions within his corps. Struck by the lessons of GOODWOOD and freed from the constraining influence of Montgomery and Dempsey, who had now thrown caution to the wind, O'Connor was able to fully integrate his armor and infantry to create combined arms units at the brigade level. This was something he had unsuccessfully tried to address with Dempsey, especially in relation to adopting some sort of armored transport for his infantry, for some time. Now though, he charged his subordinates with arranging themselves for the fight in the bocage. General Roberts, commanding 11<sup>th</sup> Division remembered his commander telling him, "You must be prepared for the very closest of tank-infantry cooperation, even at platoon and troop basis."<sup>191</sup> At O'Connor's insistence, the corps restructured itself for the fight in the bocage.

## Conclusions

As this paper has identified, some commentators argue that Richard O'Connor was not an effective commander in Normandy 1944 because of his experience in captivity. This is not the case, not only is there no empirical evidence to prove this assertion the evidence from his meetings with senior leadership after his escape suggests that he was remarkably unaffected by his experiences. What emerges from this study of Richard O'Connor is an understanding that there are three factors, which allowed him to shine as a brilliant commander: independence of command, ground that suits effective maneuver, and the ability to achieve surprise. He needed these conditions to be in place to command at his best. What we see is that if these conditions were present he was a brilliant commander; when they were not, as in Normandy, he was more pedestrian. The first and most important condition he required for successful command is

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<sup>191</sup> Roberts, 257.

independence. He was not a good team player. This does not suggest for one moment that he was selfish, egocentric or engaged in one-upmanship. Rather, that he was a commander who was at his best when unconstrained by the actions of others. At Papadopoli, he conducted an independent attack, unconstrained by his superior commanders. In fact, after the success of the first night his brigade commander instructed him to complete the seizure of the island by any means. Clearly understanding his commander's intent, and resourced sufficiently, O'Connor delivered the decisive victory that was required.

Similarly, in North Africa he again commanded independently of others and achieved a decisive victory over the Italian Tenth Army. Through his command of the XIII Corps he reveals himself as an exceptional operational artist. He was successfully able to match ways and means to achieve the strategic end of defeating the Italians. Furthermore, he also sequenced and integrated battles to develop a campaign that efficiently achieved this defeat. Again, he understood what was required and unconstrained by actions of other around him, delivered victory.

Yet in Normandy O'Connor did not have the luxury of operating independently. He was very much part of a ridged structured Army Group with two commanders above him who did not allow the freedom of action that he had previously enjoyed and reveled in. Particularly in Operations EPSOM and GOODWOOD O'Connor's senior commanders significantly influenced his actions. As a result, his performance in command was less assured, and certainly not as effective as was seen to be the case in Italy and North Africa. It is only during Operation BLUECOAT that we witness a better operation on the part of VIII Corps and it is of note that this operation saw Montgomery tear up the 'rulebook' thereby granting O'Connor much more freedom of action than had previously been the case.

O'Connor also needed ground that enabled effective maneuver to be decisive. During the fighting in France during the First World War, he witnessed first-hand the horrors of the frontal attack. As a result, he always sought to develop and attack the enemy's flank. At Papadopoli, he exploited the flank of the enemy's defensive positions by attacking from the northwest, and in

North Africa he constantly sought to attack from the flank, most notably at Beda Form. Yet in Normandy he faced conditions similar to those of France in the First World War and his operations were shaped by the constrained nature of the ground and the boundaries within which he had to operate. For all three of his major operations his ability to maneuver was constrained to a frontal attack or penetration. This did not match his style of command and, to a degree, prevented him from achieving the tactical results that he hoped for at the start of each operation.

The third factor that O'Connor required to achieve success was the element of surprise. Again, his experience of trench warfare clearly demonstrated to him the importance of this principle of war. At Papadopoli he achieved surprise and with it he gained the momentum which carried his battalion through its attack. He leveraged surprise in a similar manner against the Italians in North Africa. Through his imaginative use of the ground and by attacking from an unexpected direction, he completely dislocated the Italian enemy. Notably at Sidi Barrani and Beda Form he achieved 'fundamental' surprise, gained the initiative and then relentlessly attacked his enemy until his defeat.<sup>192</sup> O'Connor's battles in Normandy again have significant similarities with those he fought in the First World War. Although he always attempted to achieve surprise, his operations at EPSOM and GOODWOOD failed to do so. It was only in his attack during Operation BLUECOAT that he was able to surprise the Germans. Once he had done so he was able to ruthlessly exploit the advantage. As a result, his corps achieved their greatest success of the Normandy Campaign.

It is therefore clearly the case that O'Connor was less decisive in Normandy 1944 than he had been prior to his captivity, because these factors were not in his favor. It was not, as has been

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<sup>192</sup> Zvi Lanir, "Fundamental Surprise" (monograph, University of Tel Aviv, Center for Strategic Studies), 25

claimed, a result of his time spent in captivity in Castello Vinciglita. What does this mean to the modern military practitioner? The most important lesson pertains to command and the importance of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of subordinates. Understanding what situations best suit the abilities of those under command will enable a commander to get the most out of them. Moreover, it will ensure that a commander gets the most out of his force through the intelligent employment of his forces. Understanding the conditions in which a subordinate will fulfill his potential and produce his best will also enable a commander to go to lengths to create those conditions, therefore positioning his force with the best chance of achieving success. For the same reasons it is also critical for a leader to understand the conditions that constitute the most favorable environment for himself. Perhaps Montgomery understood this when he asked the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, to appoint Major General Oliver Leese to command of VIII Corps rather than O'Connor?

## ANNEX A

### General Sir Richard O'Conner KT, GCB, DSO, MC: A Chronology:

#### Early Life:

August 21, 1889 – born in Srinagar, Kashmir, India  
September 1903 to December 1907 – educated at Wellington College, England  
January 1908 – June 1909 – attends the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, 38<sup>th</sup> in order of merit  
October 1909 – joins his regiment the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)

#### World War I:

Until Aug 1914– serves at regimental duty in England and Malta as a rifle and then signal platoon commander  
August 1914 – appointed as the signals officer of 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 7<sup>th</sup> Division  
October 6, 1914 – deploys to France via Zeebrugge, Belgium, then on to Roulers, France and finally on to Ypres, France  
October 30/31, 1914 – leads attacks at Ypres resulting in the award of the Military Cross  
1915 - remains with 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade and fights at Neuve Chapelle, Fromelles, Givenchy and the Battle of Loos  
November 1915 – promotes to Captain and command of 7<sup>th</sup> Division Signals Company  
1916 - remains with 7<sup>th</sup> Division and fights at the Somme. Later promoted to acting Major and appointed Brigade Major 91<sup>st</sup> Brigade in 7<sup>th</sup> Division  
March 1917 – appointed Brigade Major of 185<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 62<sup>nd</sup> Division  
April 9 to May 19, 1917 – fights at the Battle of Arras  
June 2, 1917 – appointed to command of 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion the HAC in 7<sup>th</sup> Division  
June to October 1917: in and out of the line and training his battalion and fights at Passchendale  
November 20, 1917 – 7<sup>th</sup> Division moved to the Italian front  
October 24, 1918 – commands his battalion at the Battle of Papadopoli and is recognized with the award of a bar to his Distinguished Service Order and the Italian Silver Medal.

#### Interwar Period:

January 1920 – attends Staff College, Camberley  
May 1934 – selected to attend the Imperial Defence College in Jan 1935  
June 1935 – selected to command the Secunderabad Brigade in India  
December 21, 1935 – Marries Jean  
March 1936 - deploys to Peshwar, India and the NW Frontier

#### World War II:

1938 – promotes to major general and is one of the youngest generals in the army at that time  
Summer 1938 – appointed to command of 7<sup>th</sup> Division in Palestine Rebellion  
August 1939 – 7<sup>th</sup> Division deploys to Egypt  
June 17, 1940 – promotes to lieutenant general and appointed commander of the Western Desert Force  
October 20, 1940 – Operation COMPASS  
April 6, 1941 - 8 September 1943 – prisoner of war  
December 25, 1943 – arrives back in England post captivity

January 21, 1944 – assumes command of VIII Corps. Commands the corps in the following major operations: EPSOM, GOODWOOD, BLUECOAT, MARKET GARDEN, CONSTELLATION, NUT CRACKER

November 30, 1944 – hands over command of VIII Corps to Lieutenant General Sir Evelyn Barker

January 1945 – appointed to be the General Officer Commanding in Chief Eastern Command based in Calcutta, India

April 17, 1945 – promotes to General

November 1, 1945 – appointed to command of the Northern Command in Rawalpindi, India

Post War:

May 15, 1946 – appointed as the Adjutant General

August 19, 1947 – resigns his commission

June 17, 1981 – dies from a stroke

Mapping:<sup>193</sup>

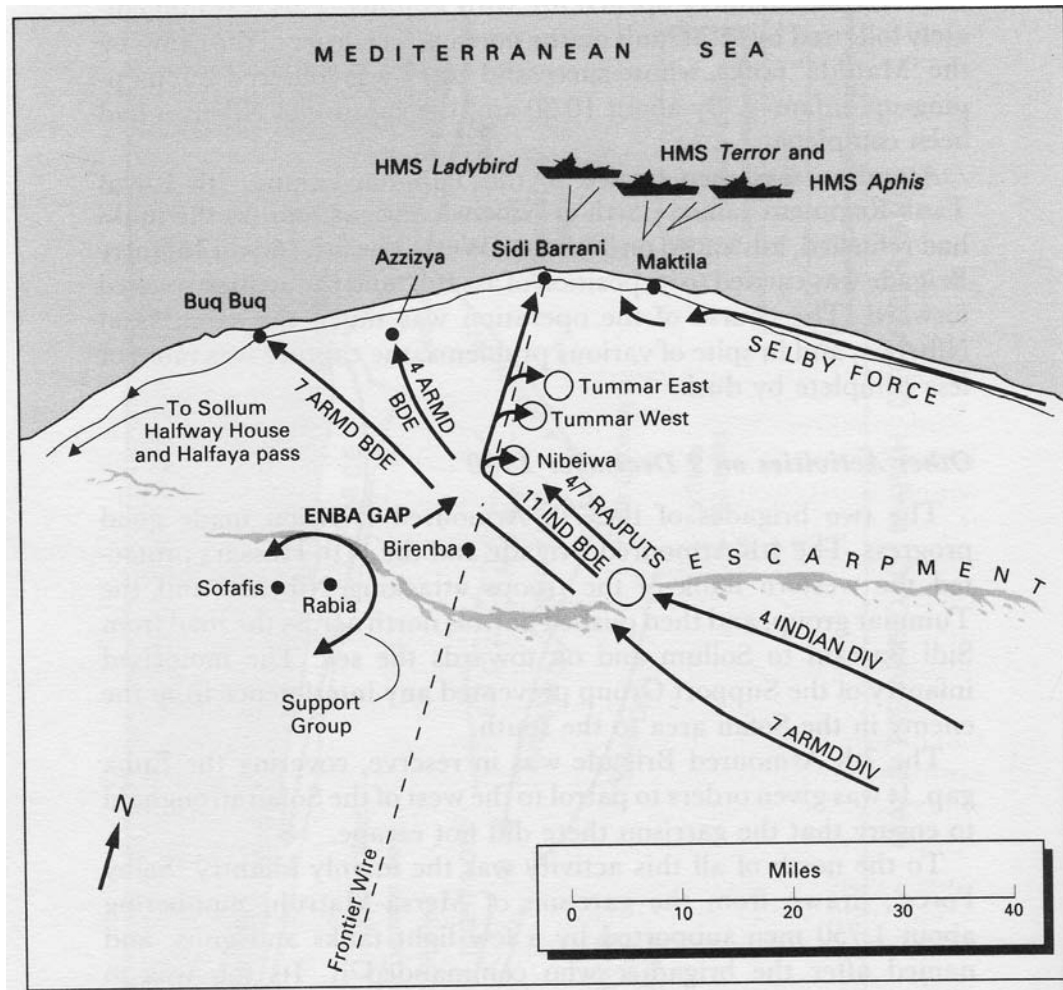


Figure 1: Battle of Sidi Barrani

<sup>193</sup> All maps in this Annex are taken from John Baynes, *The Forgotten Victor* (London: Basseys Ltd, 1989).



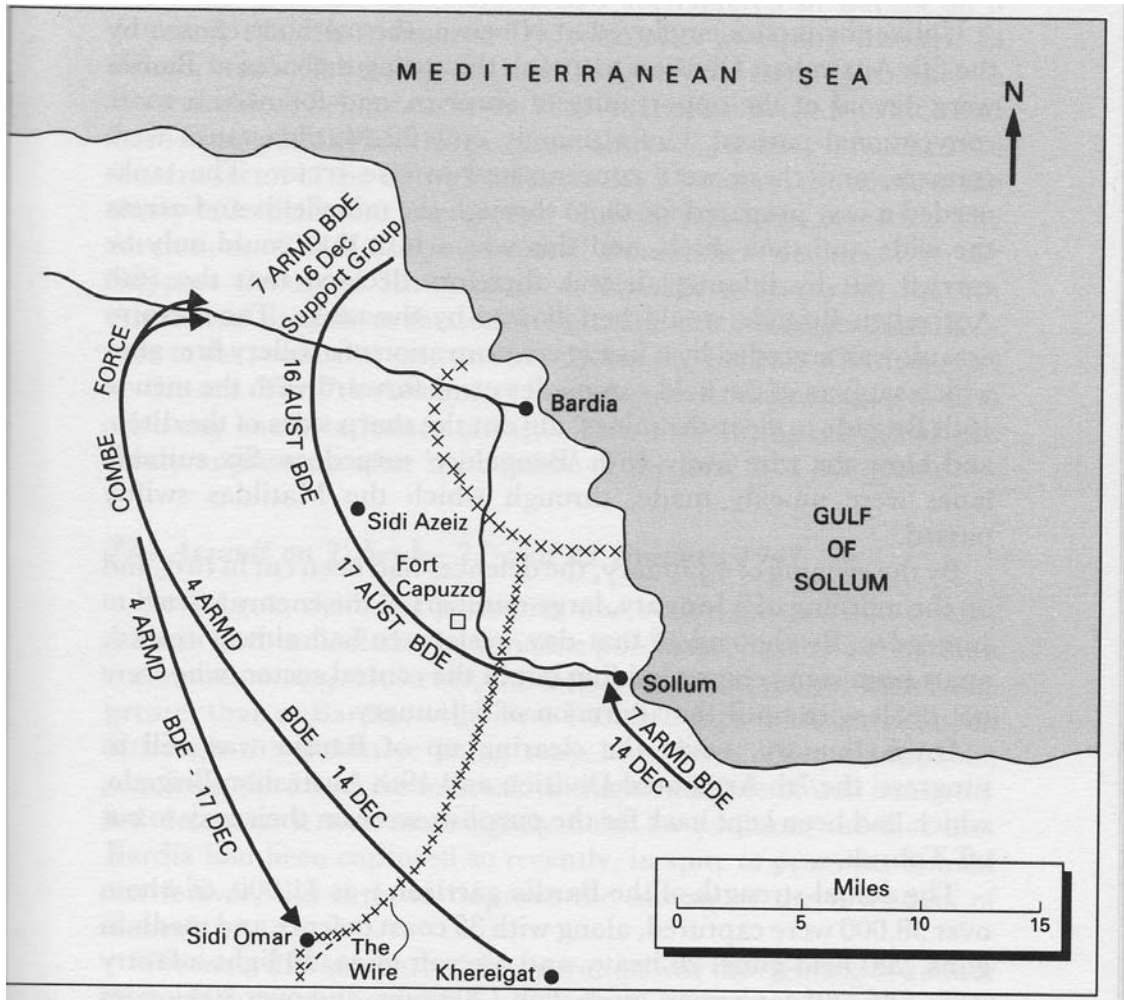


Figure 2: Battle of Bardia

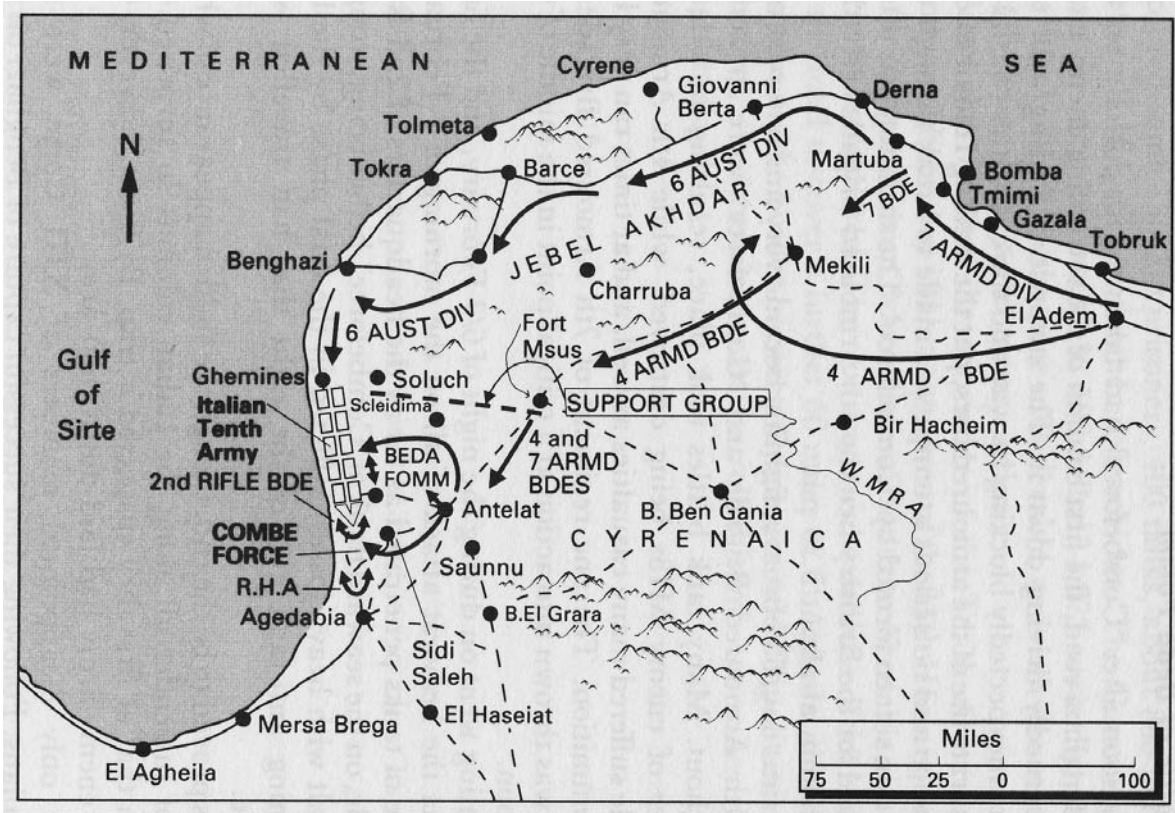


Figure 3: Battle of Beda Form

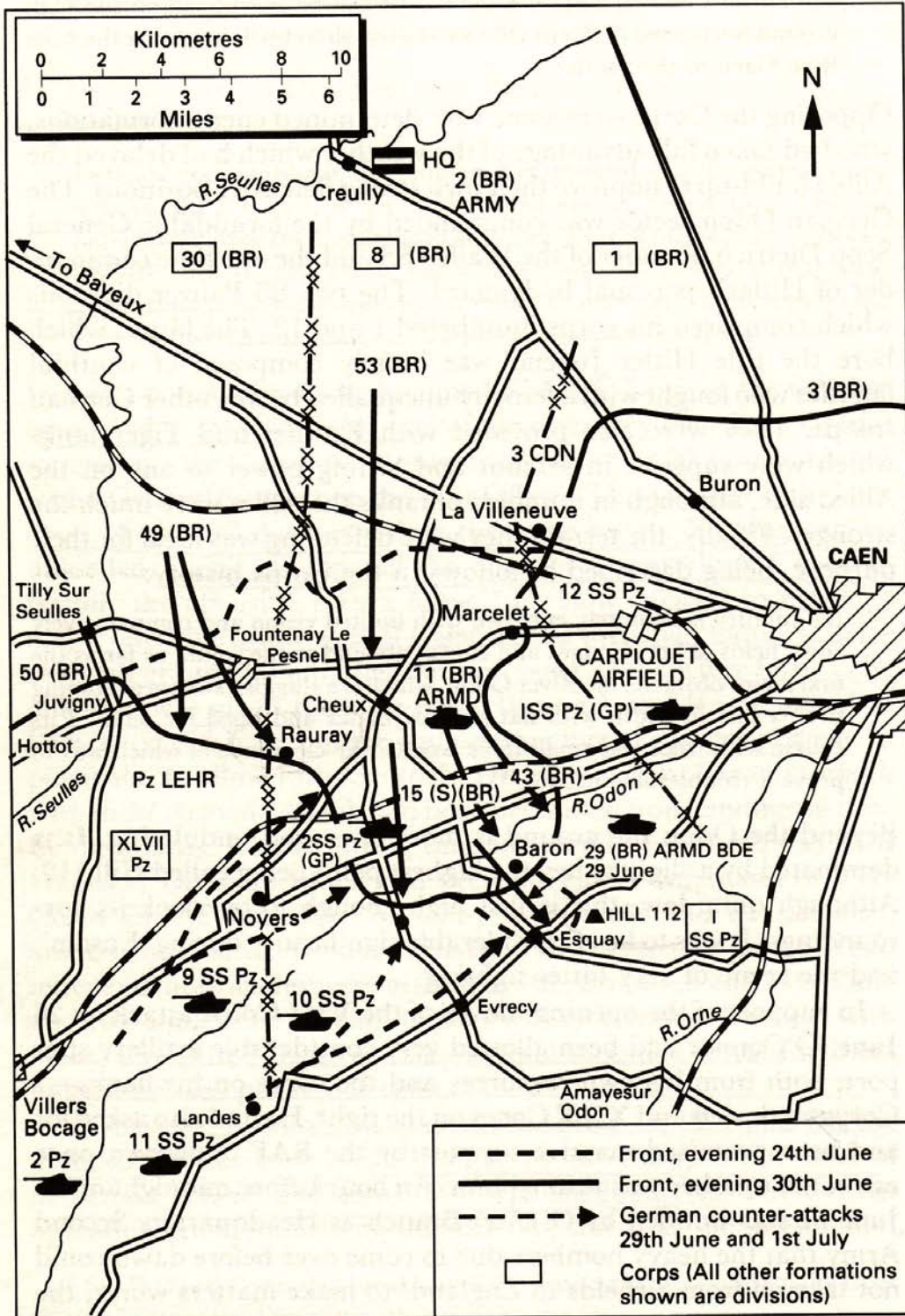


Figure 4: Operation Epsom



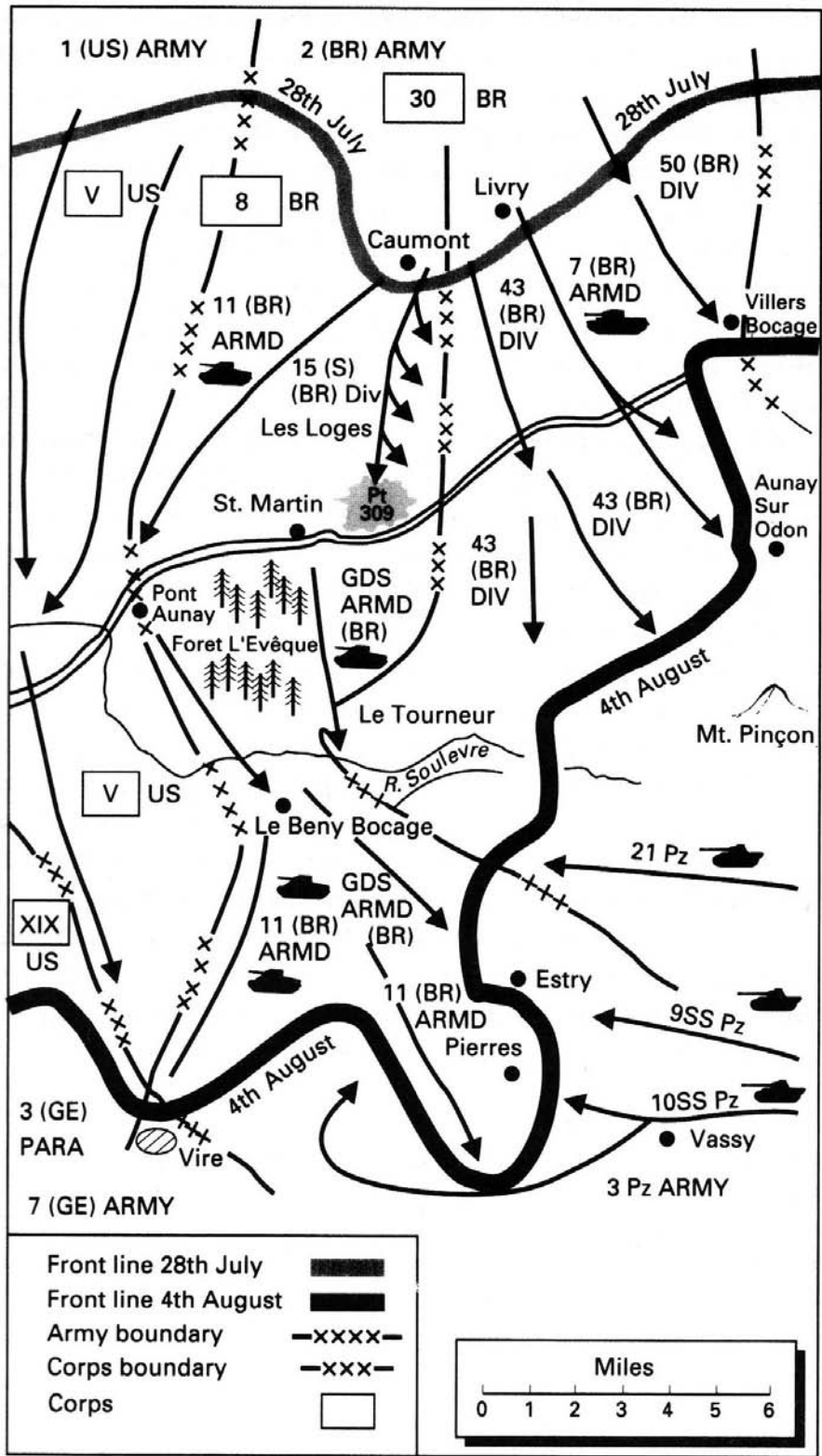


Figure 6: Operation Bluecoat

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