THE GREATEST MILITARY REVERSAL OF SOUTH AFRICAN ARMS: THE FALL OF TOBRUK 1942, AN AVOIDABLE BLUNDER OR AN INEVITABLE DISASTER?

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Abstract

The surrender of Tobruk 70 years ago was a major catastrophe for the Allied war effort, considerably weakening their military position in North Africa, as well as causing political embarrassment to the leaders of South Africa and the United Kingdom. This article re-examines the circumstances surrounding and leading to the surrender of Tobruk in June 1942, in what amounted to the largest reversal of arms suffered by South Africa in its military history. By making use of primary documents and secondary sources as evidence, the article seeks a better understanding of the events that surrounded this tragedy. A brief background is given in the form of a chronological synopsis of the battles and manoeuvres leading up to the investment of Tobruk, followed by a detailed account of the offensive launched on 20 June 1942 by the Germans on the hapless defenders. The sudden and unexpected surrender of the garrison is examined and an explanation for the rapid collapse offered, as well as considering what may have transpired had the garrison been better prepared and led.

Keywords: South Africa; HB Klopper; Union War Histories; Freeborn; Gazala; Eighth Army; 1st South African Division; Court of Enquiry; North Africa.

Sleutelwoorde: Suid-Afrika; HB Klopper; Uniale oorlogsgeskiedenis; Vrygebore; Gazala; Agste Landmag; Eerste Suid-Afrikaanse Bataljon; Hof van Ondersoek; Noord-Afrika.

1. INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the fall of Tobruk, the largest reversal of arms suffered by South Africa in its military history. The surrender at Paardeburg in 1900 where Boer General Piet Cronjé capitulated with some 4 019 men, or Delville Wood where the South African 1st Brigade suffered huge casualties in what has been described as the bloodiest battle of 1916, or even the loss of the South African 5th Brigade at SidiRezegh in November 1941, pale when measured against the 12 000 South Africans and 22 000 Allied troops who marched into captivity under the command of the South African Major General HB Klopper. However the imprint of the fall of Tobruk on the South African memory is incongruent with the

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size of the disaster, being largely relegated when compared to these other lesser military events that form a persistent part of our national memory, perpetuated in annual parades and commemorations and is the subject of numerous books.

There was a time when the surrender of Tobruk resonated loudly around the world and embarrassed the prime ministers of South Africa and the United Kingdom creating difficulties on their home fronts. The fall of Tobruk was greeted with disbelief bordering on outrage within the Allied camp, while the conquering Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel was lauded by an eager Nazi regime that awarded him the field marshals baton. Yet within four months, Rommel suffered a major reversal at El Alamein, sending him scuttling all the way back to Tunisia, abandoning Tobruk once again to the victorious British Eighth Army. In the blinding light of a string of victories, the ignominious defeat at Tobruk began to fade from memory. In 1948, Klopper attempted to clear his tarnished name and in so doing gave brief impetus to the memory of Tobruk. In 1950, the Union War Histories Section under JAI Agar-Hamilton published the first volume of the South African Official History in a competent endeavour to explain the facts behind the fall of Tobruk. Publications thereafter, on the subject, were sporadic and exacerbated by a newly-elected Nationalist Party government, unsympathetic to the military exploits of the Union Defence Force in the Second World War. Tobruk seemed to be consigned to the general national amnesia.

Anthony Heckstall-Smith, an erstwhile flotilla officer of the famous "A Lighters" that sustained Tobruk during the first siege of 1941, published an inflammatory book in 1959, accusing Klopper and his staff of being "blind drunk" when surrendering to Rommel and maintaining that there were desertions by company commanders in the face of the enemy.[2] The opinions expressed in the book, although patently unfair and having little regard to the complex facts of the siege, unfortunately reflected the views of a large proportion of those who remembered Tobruk, especially in inevitable comparisons to the heroic stand made by the Australians in 1941.[3] In an attempt to set the record straight some 18 years after the event and clearly stung by the accusations of treachery and ineptitude contained in the Heckstall-Smith book, Eric Hartshorn published his reply.[4] Hartshorn claimed access to the elusive and secret Tobruk Court of Enquiry findings, quotes freely and unfortunately selectively from this hitherto inaccessible source. The book's unabashed purpose was to remove the "shame of the surrender",

2 A Heckstall-Smith, *Tobruk:The story of a siege* (London, 1959).

3 There is a plethora of anecdotal material from that time alluding to the cowardice of the South Africans and the possibilities of the work of a fifth column. Criticism of the South Africans occurred in the POW camps, reported fist fights in Cairo pubs, and incidents of bald insults being delivered at genteel dinner parties.

4 E Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town, 1960). The author was a well-known volunteer soldier with the Transvaal Scottish.

based, according to the author, on "rumour and distortion", rather than an academic pursuit seeking out the underlying facts and allowing the truth to emerge in whatever direction it took.

The historic community would have to wait some 50 years for new material on Tobruk to emerge. This took the form of two academic articles published by Andrew Stewart. The first article examines the shenanigans of Klopper versus Field Marshal C Auchinleck[5] when they locked horns over the publication of Auchinleck's despatch dealing with the campaign in the western desert. Klopper vigorously looked to clear his name and sought alterations to the despatch that Auchinleck wished to present in its original form as constructed in 1942[6]. The second article dealt with the effect that the surrender of Tobruk had on South Africa and Great Britain and investigates the lengths that both governments took to safeguard delicate relations.[7] Both articles use Tobruk as a backdrop to explore fragile relations between the United Kingdom and South Africa and the vulnerability of Prime Minister Jan Smuts to a tense domestic situation, exacerbated by a nation divided along ethnic and language lines. These well-researched articles, being focused more on the social and political aspects of the history, add little to the knowledge of the military aspects surrounding the fall of Tobruk. Karen Horn has produced an interesting paper on the fate of the prisoners of war captured at Tobruk. Although not the main theme of her study, some of the last hours of Tobruk are brought to light through personal accounts of South Africans who surrendered.[8] Despite these recent academic articles, the underlying reasons for the fall of Tobruk remain largely unattended to and perhaps a mystery to those with more than a passing interest.

The aim of this article is to re-examine the circumstances surrounding and leading to the surrender of Tobruk in June 1942, using primary documents and a range of pertinent secondary sources as evidence, in order to gain a better understanding of the apparent suddenness of the surrender and in the process dispel some persistent myths.

A brief background will be given in the form of a chronological synopsis of the battles and manoeuvres leading up to the investment of Tobruk followed thereafter by a detailed account of the offensive launched by Rommel on 20 June 1942 on the southeastern perimeter of the fortress. The events leading to the final surrender of the garrison will then be examined by referring to a number

5 The erstwhile officer in command, Middle East.

6 A Stewart, "The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African relations and the surrender of the Tobruk Garrison", *Twentieth Century British History* 17(4), 2006.

7 A Stewart, "The 'Atomic' Despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the fall of the Tobruk Garrison and post-war Anglo-South African relations", *Scientia Militaria* 36(1), 2008, pp. 78-94.

8 K Horn, "Narratives from North Africa: South African prisoner-of-war experience following the fall of Tobruk, June 1942", *Historia* 56(2), 2011, p. 97.

of personal accounts and narratives. An explanation for the rapid collapse of the garrison will be offered as well as an examination of what may have transpired had the garrison been better prepared and indeed better led against the German assault. In conclusion, the findings of the article will be summarised offering reasons for the rapid fall ofTobruk.

2. THE ROAD TO TOBRUK

On 26 May 1942, after both Axis and Allied forces had enjoyed four months of respite and replenished their strength, Rommel unleashed his Afrika Korps on the Eighth Army. The British, being fortunate recipients of high grade intelligence, became aware that the German offensive was imminent, decided to assume the defensive being confident behind their extensive fortifications and all-round dispositions. Rommel launched a diversionary attack on the northern section of the Gazala line while sending the bulk of his mobile forces around the southernmost point of the Eighth Army line at an oasis fortified by the Free French at BirHacheim. Rommel's thrust behind the defences of the Eighth Army placed him in a position that became known infamously as the Cauldron. Here Rommel's forces, after having stalled due to British defences and poor logistics, regrouped and formed a defensive position isolated behind the British lines. All these strenuous efforts by the Eighth Army to destroy or dislodge this incursion met with high casualties and little success as the British, once again in a desert campaign, failed to concentrate their superior forces and committed their armour brigades in a piece-meal fashion. These poorly-coordinated and uncombined attacks were devoured by the concentrated Axis forces skilfully placed behind the British minefields and protected by their lethal anti-tank artillery. On 1 June 1942, Rommel eliminated the British 150th Brigade's position, thus creating a supply route through the minefields and effectively ending his encirclement by the Eighth Army. On 3 June 1942, with his supply route to his armoured force now secure, Rommel launched an offensive on the southernmost Eighth Army position of BirHacheim and in a hard fought battle overran the garrison on 10 June 1942.[9] Following another major defeat

9 The Eighth Army resistance at Bir Hacheim was conducted by a brigade of the 1st Free French Division commanded by *Général De Brigade* Marie Pierre Kœnig. Kœnig had the luxury of three months to prepare for the forthcoming battle, which he used for digging trenches, setting up machine gun nests as well as spreading a vast amount of land mines around the fortress. The brigade was able to conduct a successful evacuation from a hopeless situation on 10 June 1942 after suffering and withstanding heavy attacks by the Afrika Korps for 15 days. It is interesting to contrast this tenacious performance in the preparation, battle and later evacuation phases with the later unsuccessful defence of Tobruk some 11 days later. Major General ISO Playfair delivered generous praise for the conduct of the Free French defence of BirHacheim against overwhelming odds and its role in contributing to the recovery of the Eighth Army after the Cauldron defeat.

of British armour at Knightsbridge on 12 June 1942, the Eighth Army began an eastward retreat to the Egyptian border effectively abandoning the Gazala line and leaving Tobruk to be surrounded again by the Axis forces on 17 June 1942.

The besieged garrison of Tobruk fielded the South African 2nd Division, amongst other Commonwealth elements, commanded by a South African, Major General Hendrik Balzazar Klopper.[10] Klopper now found himself in the unenviable position of having to defend Tobruk against a foe flushed with victory and high morale and led by a wily and capable commander. The fact that defending Tobruk was a last minute decision and a reversal of a firm resolution not to defend it in the event of any possible isolation, exacerbated what was becoming a rapidly confused situation in the wake of an Eighth Army on the verge of collapse. Adding to the thickening fog of war enveloping the Allies was perhaps the rendering of one of the most astounding feints in history when Rommel bypassed Tobruk in an attempt to fool the defenders that they were to be left for later treatment.[11] On 20 June 1942, Rommel swung his entire force around in an incredible manoeuvre attacking the somewhat surprised defenders of Tobruk and laying in a concentrated attack supported by every available air asset on the southeastern perimeter of the fortress. The defenders transfixed, and having no answer to the sheer audacity of the offensive, put up very little resistance and on 21 June 1942 a triumphant Rommel received the surrender of Tobruk and its garrison of 34 000 defenders, yielding up a colossal haul of booty in the form of fuel, rations and transport fundamental to the sustenance of the Afrika Korps in the weeks to come.

The surrender of Tobruk was greeted by an incredulous Winston Churchill, who was served the news in front of none other than the president of the United States of America, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke who, as chief of the Imperial General Staff accompanied Churchill, states in his diary that neither he nor Churchill contemplated such an eventuality and he described it as a staggering blow.[12] Churchill in his memoirs, perhaps expressing his true feelings about this grievous moment, described the surrender as a disgrace.[13]

I Playfair, *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* 3 (Uckfield, 2004), pp. 235-237.

10 Klopper was installed as the Tobruk garrison commander prior to its investment on 14 May 1942.

11 A classic manoeuvre coined by the famous strategist Basil Henry Liddell Hart as the "Indirect Approach". It is unfortunate that this excellent example of the "indirect approach" executed so ably by Rommel at Tobruk seems to have been overlooked as such by Liddell Hart in his history of the North African Campaign. B Liddell Hart, *The North African Campaign 1940-43* (Dehradun,1983), p. 157.

12 A Danchev and D Todman (eds), *War diaries 1939-1945. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (Los Angeles, 2001), p. 269.

13 W Churchill, *The Second World War: The hinge of fate* 4 (Middlesex, 1985), pp. 344. The words he uses are "Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another".

Back in London dissatisfaction as to the conduct of the war was growing in the House of Commons and Churchill faced a motion of no confidence. The daily press was vociferous in its criticism of the surrender of Tobruk and called for an inquiry into the conduct of operations in the Middle East and described events there as a major and humiliating disaster and drew parallels to the first successful defence of Tobruk.[14] The fall of Tobruk was a serious matter in South Africa with Prime Minister Jan Smuts fearing "widespread political repercussions".[15]

3. TOBRUK IS NOT TO BE INVESTED AGAIN!

The fact that Tobruk was invested on 18 June 1942 was not entirely due to the reversals suffered by the Eighth Army at the hands of Rommel and his Afrika Korps. There is no doubt that Tobruk could have been successfully evacuated prior to being encircled, had the British chosen this course of action. The decision to hold Tobruk was in fact made at the eleventh hour and went against the British policy of not allowing Tobruk to be invested for a second time. The resolute defence offered by the Australians in the first siege lasting 242 days, was a major hindrance to Rommel's drive into Egypt, due to its position astride a major artery of Axis supply, and the denial of its port facilities to the Axis. Rommel was preoccupied with the siege of Tobruk and this distraction, while it remained unconquered, precluded a drive into the heart of Egypt. However, the survival of the fortress of Tobruk was achieved at a great price to the Royal Navy, who remained reluctant to suffer such losses again. Consequently, in February 1942, it was decided Tobruk would not be defended, but rather abandoned in the event it was threatened by the prospect of being surrounded by enemy forces.[16]It can be seen that the withdrawal to the

14 "Tobruk Disaster: Demand for inquiry by British press", *The Mercury*, 23 June 1942, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/25932389>, accessed 2 August 2012. This Tasmanian newspaper article gives a summary and an insight of the general feelings of the British press.

15 Lord Harlech, the high commissioner to South Africa 1941-1944, after a visit to Gen. Smuts, offered his impressions on the impact of the surrender of Tobruk, describing it as "a grievous blow" to the South African leader who anticipated "widespread political repercussions" in the Union as a result. WO106/4946, 22 June 1942, National Archives, United Kingdom.

16 In February 1942 Auchinleck had informed London that in the event of an enemy offensive: "I was determined not to allow Tobruk to be besieged for a second time… I did not consider that I could afford to lock up one and a half divisions in a fortress." Admiral Cunningham agreed, particularly since the siege had proved so costly in ships, and so did Air Chief Marshal Tedder, who doubted if he had sufficient aircraft to provide air cover. C Auchinleck, "Operations In the Middle East from Ist November 1941 to 15th August 1942", *The London Gazette*, 15 January 1948, p. 318, and again in "Note on the Western Front by the Commander-in-Chief, MEF" (For Middle East Defence Committee), dated 4th February 1942. "If, for any reason, we should be forced at some future date to withdraw from our present forward positions, every effort will still be made to prevent Tobruk being lost to the enemy; but it is not my intention to continue to hold it once the enemy is in a position to invest it effectively. Should this appear inevitable,

Egyptian border ordered by Ritchie was not some hastily ill-conceived plan thought up on the spur of the moment in the face of a relentless enemy, but rather in terms of an operational order to XIII Corps dated 10 May 1942, which clearly states that should the defence of the Gazala line become untenable, then the facilities at Tobruk were to be demolished and abandoned and the entire corps withdrawn to the Egyptian frontier. [17]

When the defence of the forward positions in the Gazala line indeed became untenable, after the costly battles of 13 June, Auchinleck intervened and proposed that the withdrawal of the Eighth Army would be to the line Acroma-El Adem and southwards.[18] This was a clear change of plan and not in accordance with Operation Freeborn. Auchinleck perceived the circumstances surrounding the triggering of the implementation of Operation Freeborn were different from what he originally envisaged. He felt that the Eighth Army was far from being beaten and that the infantry divisions were largely intact. Auchinleck reasoned: "The Eighth Army was still strong enough to provide an adequate garrison for Tobruk and to maintain a mobile field force to the east and south capable of preventing the fortress being permanently besieged."[19]

Thus there existed, at the time of withdrawing the 1st South African and 50th divisions, an unfortunate difference of understanding between Auchinleck and Ritchie. Auchinleck believing that the line Acroma – El Adem – Bir Gubi would be defended with the two retreating divisions taking up positions on that line and Ritchie, clearly following the directives of Operation Freeborn, ordering the two divisions to the Egyptian frontier. Ritchie failed to inform Auchinleck of his true intentions and it is clear that, at this stage, Ritchie was intent on withdrawing to the Egyptian frontier whether Tobruk was to be held in isolation or abandoned.

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the place will be evacuated, and the maximum amount of destruction carried out in it, so as to make it useless to the enemy as a supply base. In this eventuality the enemy's advance will be stopped on the general line Sollum-Maddalena – Giarabub, as laid down in Operation Instruction 110, 19 January 1942." Auchinleck , "Operations in the Middle East...", p. 380. This viewpoint became Eighth Army Operational Instruction 46, dated 16 February 1942, in which this paragraph was repeated verbatim. Tobruk Court of Enquiry, "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May - 2 July" (Court of Enquiry, 1942), volume I, p. 14.

17 Operational Order 23 codenamed "Freeborn", dated 10 May 1942, states in the opening paragraph, that should the defence of the Gazala line become untenable the entire corps was to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. Further on in paragraph 4(d) it emphasis that the "thorough demolition of Tobruk is an essential part of the scheme". Allowance was made for the withdrawal of the Tobruk garrison to Bir El Hariga close to the Egyptian frontier. Tobruk Court of Enquiry, "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May-2 July" (Court of Enquiry, 1942), Part III, p. 31.

18 In Auchinleck's own words as per his despatch, "I was determined that the Eighth Army should not yield more ground than was absolutely necessary. I therefore ordered General Ritchie not to allow Tobruk to become besieged but to hold a line through Acroma and El Adem and hence southwards." Auchinleck, "Operations In the Middle East ...", p. 360.

19 Auchinleck, "Operations In the Middle East ...", p. 360.

However, when corresponding with Auchinleck, his intentions were couched in less definite terms and he spoke of the possibility of Tobruk being cut off for a time. Simultaneously, furthering the state of confusion, Churchill sought assurance that Tobruk was not to be abandoned. It seems as if Ritchie, in the face of being pressed by Churchill and Auchinleck to hold Tobruk, decided to allow the garrison there to be temporarily besieged, providing enough provisions to withstand encirclement for three months. In the meantime the Eighth Army would be rebuilt behind the infantry divisions manning prepared positions on the Egyptian border.[20] Ritchie secured an agreement from Auchinleck that Tobruk may be temporarily invested but failed to inform him that he had ordered the withdrawal of the 1st South African and 50th divisions to the Egyptian frontier. Auchinleck now envisaged that Tobruk would be held as part of a defensive line manned by relatively unscathed troops. He was not being aware that what remained was a thin veneer, the relatively unscathed divisions having withdrawn to the Egyptian frontier.[21]

On 14 June the 1st South African and 50th divisions successfully withdrew from the Gazala line and made for the Egyptian border, contrary to what Auchinleck had planned.[22] These two divisions, by not taking up defensive positions on the line Acroma – El Adem – Bir Gubi were in effect allowing for the isolation and investment of Tobruk. Those now expected to hold a rampant Afrika Korps at bay were but a thin screening force made up of the remnants of infantry brigades and a much weakened 4th Armoured Brigade recently mauled in the battles of the Cauldron.

On 15 June, the Panzer divisions were ordered forward to attack Belhamed and El Adem, positions effectively screening the vulnerable southeast corner of the Tobruk perimeter. The initial German attacks were repulsed, but success was short lived when Rommel, not to be denied, forced the defenders of El Adem to abandon their position on 16/17 June, thus finally exposing the cornerstone of the outward defences of Tobruk. Klopper, inexplicably, was not informed of the

20 Ritchie who was prone to be guided by Lt Gen. William Gott, commander of XIII Corps, was influenced by the latter's confidence that Tobruk was capable of withstanding a siege for at least two months. Gott was also in favour of withdrawing behind the frontier and the building of the Eighth Army. L Turner and J Agar-Hamilton, *Crisis in the desert: May-July 1942* (London, 1952), p. 107.

21 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 72.

22 The South African Division under Gen. Pienaar retreated through Tobruk. Pienaar paid a visit to Klopper on his way en-route to the Egyptian border. It is impossible to imagine that Klopper was left under any illusion that Pienaar's division was to play any part in a defensive line with Tobruk. The 50th Division had a far more hazardous time in retreating to the frontier. The division had to fight its way through surrounding Italian forces and make a large detour through the desert behind enemy lines as far south as Bir Hacheim, reaching the frontier virtually intact. As in the case of Bir Hacheim this is another example of a successful evacuation proving the difficulty of watertight encirclement in the desert.

abandonment of El Adem and only became aware of the grave situation when his reconnaissance units of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles discovered it to be in enemy hands on 17 June.[23] Simultaneously the British forward air strips were captured, severely hampering future air support for the Tobruk garrison. Rommel was able to report triumphantly back to Berlin on 18 June that he surrounded the port of Tobruk and that the nearest enemy force of any consequence, beside those invested in Tobruk, where 64 kilometres away on the Egyptian frontier.[24]

4. INTRODUCING MAJOR GENERAL HENDRIK BALSAZER KLOPPER

In so much as a commander has a decisive influence on the outcome of a battle, it is instructive to evaluate those who faced each other on the perimeter of Tobruk on the morning of 20 June 1942. Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel (1891-1944) needs little introduction, his reputation as a fierce proponent of manoeuvre warfare and his audacious tactics bordering on the reckless at times, are the subject matter of multiple books and common knowledge. His standing remains largely intact even after the passage of time and a plethora of the inevitable revisionist material that have seen the reputations of men such as Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, Gen. George Patton and Gen. Douglas MacArthur diminish under incessant attack.[25] When one strips away the myth, Rommel remains one of the more competent German generals, but nevertheless only one of many German officers who were merely the product of superior German doctrine that found its roots a century and a half prior to the Second World War.

Like Rommel, so too was Major General Hendrik Balsazer Klopper (1902–1978) a product of his nation's military schooling, largely borrowed from a ponderous and under-developed British way of war.[26] This disparity between Allied and German doctrine was to cost the British, and later the United States of America,

23 Klopper was only informed officially on 18 June that El Adem had been abandoned, which can be considered extremely tardy as the defence of the position was key to the manner in which the defence of Tobruk would be conducted. Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 148.

24 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 125.

25 Corelli Barnett is an example of a revisionist author. He sought to resuscitate the tarnished reputation and generalship of Ritchie at the expense of Auchinleck and then later in a similar exercise that of Auchinleck over Field Marshal Montgomery. Barnett attempts to redress some of the patently unfair criticism they both received at the hands of historians and especially in the case of Auchinleck, Field Marshal Montgomery. C Barnett, *The Desert generals* (New York, 1961).

26 Ian van der Waag puts it as follows, "…Smuts's generals on the eve of the Second World War had little education, little real training, and no experience beyond minor pacification operations. Moreover, an emphasis on management and the good execution of clerical and desk tasks induced intellectual stagnation." I van der Waag, "Smuts's generals: Towards a first portrait of the South African High Command,1912–1948", *War in History* 18(1), 2011, p. 60.

dearly in North Africa. Unlike Rommel, very little is known about Klopper and his career prior to the Second World War, an unfortunate historiographical situation affecting all but a few of South Africa's generals in both World Wars.[27] One has to be cautious in evaluating Klopper, that the stigma of having surrendered the garrison of Tobruk, after what was apparently a particularly poor effort, does not obliterate the facts. It is interesting that, despite this stigma that was to continually haunt him and despite his largely unsuccessful efforts to reverse adverse perceptions,[28] Klopper went on to enjoy a successful army career serving as Army Chief of Staff from 1951 to 1953, as inspector general (1953–1956), and as commandant general, head of the Union Defence Forces (1956–1958).

Figure 1. Major General HB Klopper.
A picture taken somewhere in Tobruk

27 One of the few good biographies written on a UDF general is C Birkby, *Uncle George: The Boer boyhood, letters and battles of Lieutenant General George Edwin Brink* (Johannesburg, 1987). Another, although less satisfactory, on Major General DH Pienaar. A Pollock, *Pienaar of Alamein* (Cape Town, 1943). The lack of biographical material has been addressed by Ian van der Waag, who, using a prosopographical approach, analysed 61 men who held general or flagrank in the Union Defence Force (UDF). Van der Waag, *op. cit*.

28 One of his first efforts to do so was in a letter he addressed to Major General Beyers on 17 April 1944 after his escape from captivity in 1943, requesting that he be put on active service as he felt he was subject to "severe criticism in staying in the Union when other ex P.O.W.'s are being sent on active service". "Personal records HB Klopper" (SANDF Archives, Pretoria, Department of Defence Archives, 1944). His post-war efforts to clear his name took the form of a series of articles in the 1950 *Huisgenoot* magazine, various interviews with the Union War Histories Section, giving his version of events and a behind the scenes attempt backed by the South African government to alter a 1942 despatch authored by Field Marshal Auchinlek. A Stewart, "The 'Atomic' Despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck. The fall of the Tobruk Garrison and post-war Anglo-South African relations", *Scientia Militaria* 36(1), 2008.

Klopper was born on 25 September 1902 in Somerset West and once he had finished his studies and a short stint as a primary school teacher, joined the Union Defence Force (UDF) on 5 August 1924.[29] In order to gain access to the permanent force he was obliged to undergo a program of amphigarious training that, due to its rigorous nature, attracted a high failure rate.[30] Receiving a commission and his pilot wings in September 1926, Klopper seemed to struggle with the more theoretical aspects of his course, failing some of his subjects in Military Law and Staff Duties.[31] He was married on 22 December 1928 and had a son. Notwithstanding a somewhat mediocre academic career in the UDF, he was described by his immediate superiors as having a strong personality, outstanding ability and tact, a person to be relied upon in all circumstances possessing a high sense of honour and devotion. Klopper was hardworking, able and conscientious, and a good disciplinarian, being a man popular with all ranks.[32] Perhaps these accolades are more an indicator of what was considered important in the UDF in peacetime, rather than a real assessment of the capabilities that would be demanded of Klopper when placed in a difficult situation in wartime.

One of the few reports found containing anything negative about Klopper's personality indicated a need to develop his personality. This report describes Klopper as being "a little too inclined to find excuses for things done and left undone". Klopper is described as being about average for his newly-acquired rank of captain in 1933[33]. In that same year, Klopper remained attached to the College Staff of the SA Military College. In June 1934 Klopper was promoted to a substantive major and, in February 1935, he moved from the Staff of Officer Commanding OFS Command to assume command of the Pioneer Battalion. In June 1937 Klopper was appointed commanding officer of OFS Command Training Depot. In October 1939 Lt Col Klopper relinquished his post as commander of 1 Special Services Battalion and took up his post as the deputy director of Infantry Training. In November 1940 he was appointed to act as officer in command of SA Instructional Corps as vice to Maj. Gen. GE Brink. Klopper then assumed the duties of General Staff Officer for the 2ndSAI Division, a post he retained up to

29 "Personal records HB Klopper" (SANDF Archives, Pretoria, Department of Defence Archives, 1933).

30 S Monick, "A man who knew men: The memoirs of Major MG Ind", *Scientia Militaria* 20(1), 1990. Monick, in describing the term amphigarious, states, "In December 1930 the first 6 'amphigarious' officers had been commissioned as airmen- artillerymen – infantrymen." Greek gave the amphigarious officers their "earth-and-air-together-in-one" title, and those who survived the wastage rate of 50% wore the coveted badge of eagle and gun. Economic depression made it necessary for cadets to qualify both as army and air force officers in order to enter the Permanent Force.

31 "Personal records HB Klopper" (SANDF Archives, Pretoria, Department of Defence Archives, 1933).

32 *Ibid*.

33 *Ibid*.

January 1942 when he was made commander of 3 SAI Brigade and was promoted to brigadier. The fact that Klopper's wife took ill and passed away in October 1941, leaving their son to be cared for by his brother-in-law and his wife, may have had an adverse impact on Klopper's performance a mere eight months on at Tobruk in June 1942.[34]

On 15th May 1942 a newly-promoted Maj. Gen. Klopper took over command of the 2nd SAI Division from Maj. Gen. IP de Villiers, who was then 11 years his senior and had seen service in World War One, South West Africa (now Namibia) and France. Thus Klopper experienced a somewhat meteoric rise to become a divisional commander some 15 years after his attestation, becoming a general before his fortieth birthday. This was unfortunately his first combat command, never having commanded a regiment or a brigade in the heat of war and being too young to have seen any First World War service.[35] The division that Klopper commanded was similarly inexperienced, having seen little action since it left South Africa on 20 April 1941, and having arrived in Egypt on 6 June 1941. During the Crusader Operation, 2nd SAI Division was held in reserve due to a lack of transport. The command structures of 2nd Division were filled with newly-promoted officers, the more seasoned ones having departed with Gen. De Villiers creating what must have been an unsettling situation.[36]

Thus we have a picture of a very young, inexperienced commander, assisted by an inexperienced staff and commanding a division that had seen very little action. If there was any combat depth to be found in Tobruk it was to be found in Brig. LF Thompson, a veteran of the first siege, who was to be appointed as Klopper's second-in-command; however, his influence on the battle, if any, is obscure. Colonel Bastin, the quartermaster general of XIII corps, was left behind in Tobruk to assist coordination between the rear area and garrison headquarters.[37] The battle hardened commanders of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and the 201st Mechanised Brigade may have been able to add considerable experience to the defence, had Klopper been able to provide leadership and seize control over his seasoned brigade commanders. The question remains as to why so complicated a

34 *Ibid*., 1941.

35 His short duty as Brigade Commander of 3rd Brigade from January to May 1942 took place in a relatively quiet period of the Desert War where both sides where building up their combat strength.

36 Klopper's inexperience was matched by that of his chief of staff Lt Col Kriek, who lacked in operational experience and in high grade staff training. Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

37 Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

task as defending Tobruk in the face of difficult circumstances was left in the hands of a relatively inexperienced leader group.[38]

The qualities that make for a dynamic commander are best summed up by Rommel himself, who saw that superb leadership was more a function of having a driving desire to achieve a goal against insurmountable odds than an intellectual pursuit where one's intellectualism may actually hinder the achieving of results. In the final analysis there is a huge divergence between the more academic and organisational approach of a staff officer to the dynamic calculated risk-taking personality of a leader of men who takes his division into combat.[39]

5. TOBRUK BESEIGED

If there is agreement to be found in the secondary sources then all concur that the defences of Tobruk, in June 1942, were in a poor state of repair compared to the first siege in 1941 when the garrison was commanded by Lt Gen LJ Morshead who withstood two serious attacks and many more minor ones in a brilliantly-coordinated defence. There is little dispute too that the defenders of Tobruk in 1941 did not have to face as concentrated nor as powerful an offensive as that delivered by Rommel on 20 June 1942, and that if they indeed had, then it is doubtful they would have prevailed. The fortress consisted of a double line of prepared strongpoints consisting of concrete dugouts and wire defences along a 33 mile perimeter that was enclosed by a double line of wire, anti-tank ditch and perimeter minefield. The inner defences, much strengthened by Morshead, consisted of strongpoints at strategic positions and internal minefields coordinated into an internal line of defence known as the blue line.[40]

The South African Official History describes the deterioration in the Tobruk defences, claiming that the anti-tank ditch long neglected, had begun to silt up having been filled in at point X and Y facilitating an easy evacuation. There appears, according to the official history, little knowledge of the composition or layout of minefields on the southeastern corner of the fortress, sown by successive defenders of varying nationality over the previous two years.[41] The most vulnerable sector of the fortress remained the southeast corner where large quantities of mines had

38 There was talk of giving the position to the previous siege commander Gen. Morsehead and even Gen. Gott was touted for the position giving an indication that Ritchie had concerns about the leadership.

39 "It has frequently happened in the past that a General of high intellectual powers has been defeated by a less intelligent but stronger willed adversary." B Liddel Hart, *The Rommel papers* (New York, 1953), p. 96. Again on p. 119: "A commanders drive and energy often count more than his intellectual powers."

40 These defences are explained in the South African Official History. Cf. Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 112.

41 *Ibid*., p. 114.

supposedly been lifted "and were never replaced" during the Crusader operations in November 1941, once again, to facilitate the planned breakout from Tobruk.[42] More than a few sources mention that the perimeter defences had been rather denuded of wire and mines in an effort to strengthen the Gazala positions.[43] Most secondary sources paint a picture of neglect, lamenting the cannibalisation of large sections of the defences stripped to reinforce the Gazala positions. What remained was poorly maintained due to the general understanding that in the event of the Gazala position not being held, Tobruk would be evacuated.[44]

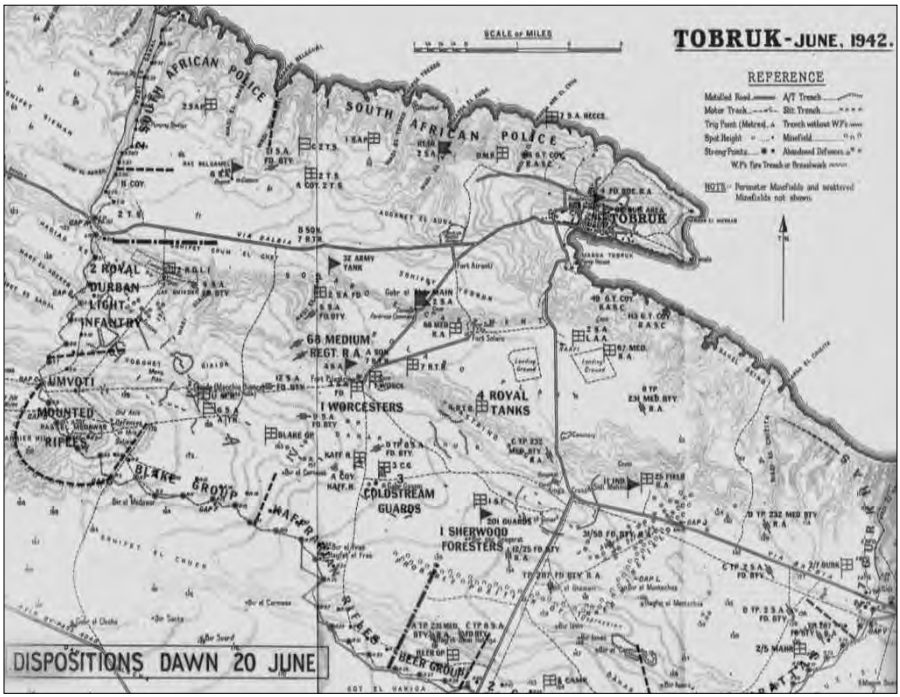

Figure 2. Force dispositions at Tobruk on the morning of 20 June 1942[45]

42 *Ibid*., p. 130.

43 E Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town, 1960), p. 101 and again in the Ofiicial British History, although here the author allows for less certainty as to the extent of the disrepair. I Playfair, *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* 3 (Uckfield, 2004), p. 261, and again in Barnett, p.159. A dissenting source as to the state of the Tobruk defences is A Heckstall-Smith, *Tobruk: The story of a siege* (Essex, 1959), pp. 217-218 who raises doubt that the defences were in as bad a state of repair as "legend" has it.

44 Hartshorn, pp. 112-114. The description of the run down nature of defences of the fortress portrayed by the author is typical.

45 *Ibid*.

However, this dismal picture of neglect flies in the face of the evidence presented at the Court of Enquiry by Brig. C de L Gaussen who, being the chief engineer of XIII Corps, stated that "it was not the policy to touch any of the perimeter defences at all" and that very little dismantling was undertaken.[46] Brigadier FH Kisch, the chief engineer Eighth Army and giving evidence at the same enquiry, felt that the defences of Tobruk had definitely deteriorated and that extensive use had been made of mines and wire for the Gazala defences. However, in discussions reported by Kischwith the South African chief engineer of 2nd Division, Col. Henderson, the South African engineer felt that he had made good any deficiencies in the defences by laying new mines to close the gaps.[47] Klopper himself states that indeed there were whole minefields lifted for use at Gazala and Knightsbridge, but said that they had been replaced, denying that the minefields were in a poor condition at the outset of the siege.[48] Thus, the witness reports as to the state of the defences on the eve of the siege, especially concerning the state of the minefields, are conflicting and do not warrant the certainty as to their state of disrepair as reported in most secondary sources.[49]

The relative inexperience of the leader group commanding 2nd South Africa Infantry Division and the inexperience of the division itself has already been discussed – however, despite this handicap in combat experience the morale of the commander at Tobruk seems to have been high. Klopper clearly stated his confidence and described a "general feeling of optimism" in Tobruk in a letter to Maj. Gen. FH Theron dated 16 June 1942. It has to be noted that at the time of the writing of the letter, Klopper believed that Tobruk was part of a defensive line

46 Tobruk Court of Enquiry, "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May - 2 July" (Court of Enquiry, 1942), Part II, p. 56. However in Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 141, the South African Official History disagrees with these comments and finds them "surprising in view of the common knowledge that the Tobruk minefileds were regarded as a legitimate source of mines".

47 Tobruk Court of Enquiry, "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May - 2 July" (Court of Enquiry, 1942), Part II, p. 50.

48 He attributes the German breakthrough largely to the detonation of the minefields by German bombing, a position not agreed to by the official historians of the UWHS. "Notes on Maj. Turner's interview with Brig. HB Klopper, 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

49 Auchinleck in his despatch and obviously basing his evidence on the Court of Enquiry states: "The defences are believed to be in better state than when Tobruk was first invested. A certain amount of wire had been removed from inside the perimeter but not to the extent of weakening the defences." He goes on to concede that there may have been a deterioration in the minefields in certain areas but he draws attention to the fact that there were 40 000 anti-tank mines available within the fortress. This contrasts with Brig. Anderson who says, "On inspection being made it was found that portions of the minefields were non-existant. Mines which had been lifted and taken forward to the Gazala position had never been replaced." Records of lifted minefields were not available. Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

and would not be left isolated, having been assured by the Eighth Army that El Adem and Belhamed, both key to the Tobruk defences on the southeastern front, would be held. This general feeling of optimism was again confirmed in a meeting held in Tobruk on 16 June 1942, attended by Ritchie, Gott and Klopper, where Klopper agreed that he was able to hold the fortress for at least 90 days.[50] Whether the same confidence permeated down to the lower command structures is less certain, keeping in mind the series of unbroken reversals suffered by the Eighth Army and experienced first-hand by a significant number of troops now manning the Tobruk defences. A good proportion of the garrison consisted of disparate units, some of whom experienced rough treatment at the hands of the Afrika Korps in the Cauldron battles, and others being stragglers from retreating units passing through the fortress on their way to the Egyptian frontier. The point is made that Klopper remained an unknown entity to most of those in Tobruk, including his own South African Division, and that this fact combined with the inevitable confusion due to a rapidly developing situation was not conducive to a state of high morale.[51]

The South African contingent at Tobruk consisted of two South African brigades, the 4th and the 6th SA Infantry Brigades, together with a battalion from 1st SA Division, left behind by General Pienaar as he retreated through Tobruk some days earlier. The South Africans manned the perimeter defences from the coast to the southwest corner of the fortress. The vulnerable southeast corner of the remaining 13 mile perimeter was manned by the 11th Indian Brigade under the command of the experienced Brig. A Anderson and a composite South African battalion called the Beer group. The mobile element of the defences consisted of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade under command of the much-experienced Brig. AC Willison, the brigade having seen extensive action and suffered hard blows in the Gazala battles, and 201st Guards Brigade, under the newly appointed Brig. HF Johnson, which was in fact a hastily put together composite unit. The mobile forces possessed 54 operational Infantry tanks and a number of the newly-issued highly-effective six-pounder anti-tank guns. The mobile forces took up positions in the Fort Pilistrano area, which was almost central in the Tobruk fortress. The important crossroads of Kings Cross were devoid of units manning permanent positions and in fact the only force covering this area was an artillery regiment and the reaction force of 201st Guards Battalion.[52]

50 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 129. This is not the only reference to Klopper's enthusiasm for the task. The UWHS describes Klopper and his divisional staff as being most enthusiastic about holding Tobruk and that Auchinleck's decision to hold Tobruk may have been influenced by the optimism and assururances of Klopper. Union War Histories Section, "Preliminaries of the siege: Extracts from original sources" (SANDF Archives,Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

51 Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

52 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, pp. 132-133.

The South African official history describes the field artillery as being formidable in quantity and well-provided with ammunition; however, it was scattered among the entire defence and not homogenous in organisation or structure. Although similar in quantity and quality and enjoying luxurious amounts of ammunition compared to that of the first siege, it was uncoordinated and unable to bring down concentrated "fire on any spot within the perimeter … at a moment's notice", as had been the case when the garrison was commanded by Morshead. The artillery fire plans, as well as the communication systems, were inferior and, together with a poor chain of command, it all amounted to negating an important element in repelling and axis penetration of the perimeter defences. [53]

The anti-tank defences of Tobruk, consisting of approximately 69 guns, were similarly dispersed amongst the various battalions with little coordination or concentration. The anti-aircraft defences had eighteen 3,7-inch guns, roughly equivalent to the deadly German 88mm, and there was authorisation to use these in an anti-tank role if necessary.[54]

The Tobruk Court of Inquiry gives a comparative strength analysis of the Tobruk garrison as at 1 May 1941 and 18 June 1942 as follows:[55]

The defenders of Tobruk in June 1942 enjoyed a significant superiority in nearly every area when compared to the previous garrison. Klopper fielded a far superior armoured component having access to heavy infantry tanks rather than the obsolete lighter cruiser tanks, and having a good number of armoured cars at his disposal. In the all-important area of anti-tank weaponry, Klopper enjoyed significant advantages over his predecessor. He deployed more anti-tank guns and, significantly, 23 of them consisted of the new powerful six-pounder weapons, which, if deployed correctly, had the potential to wreak havoc on an enemy armoured penetration of the perimeter. There was no reason for Klopper to be embarrassed when it came to artillery or anti-aircraft artillery, as here too, his strengths compared favourably with those of his predecessor. There seems to have been an ample supply of ammunition for all weapons, which is not surprising, given that Tobruk was a designated supply base for the Gazala positions enjoying stores and provisions in abundance. Adequate provision was made for transport in the form of three Royal Armoured Service Corps companies left in the fortress to facilitate withdrawing the garrison should that eventuality arise.[56]

53 *Ibid*., pp. 133-134. This is based on the evidence of Maj. Tower, a battery commander of 25th Field Regiment.

54 *Ibid*., p. 135.

55 "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May 1942 -2 July 1942". Report of Court of Enquiry, 1942, Part II, p. 25.

56 Union War Histories Section, "Provisional narrative of the fall of Tobruk 1942" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

FIGURE 3: COMPARATIVE STRENGTH ANALYSIS OF THE TOBRUK GARRISON AS AT 1 MAY 1941 AND 18 JUNE 1942.[59]

	01 May 1941	**18 June 1942**
INFANTRY		
Infantry battalions	11	14
Motorised battalions	1	2
MG battalions	1	1
	13	17
ARMOURED FIGHTING VEHICLES		
Infantry	16	77
Cruiser	28	
Light	33	
Armoured cars	31	Unknown[57]
	108	77[58]
ARTILLERY		
Field	72	72
Medium		29
	72	101
Anti-tank two-pounder	16	41
Anti-tank six-pounder	0	23
Anti-tank 3,7mm	25	
	41	64
AA ARTILLERY		
Heavy	16	16
Light	53	60
	69	76

57 According to Brig. Willison there were twice as many armoured cars in Tobruk in June 1942 than in the previous siege and these were contained in 7th SA Reconnaissance Battalion and distributed within the perimeter. Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 138.

58 The Afrika Korps Tank State for 18 June 1942 shows the number of German medium tanks deployed in the assault of Tobruk at 94. This is not an overwhelming advantage in pure numbers when the anti-tank weapons are added to the defence. The German force multiplier was gained by superior operational ability rather than any numerical superiority.

59 Tobruk Court of Enquiry, "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May-2 July". Court of Enquiry, 1942, Part II, p. 25.

6. THE ORGINISATION OF THE DEFENCE AND COUNTER-ATTACK FORCE OF TOBRUK

Early indicators of a dysfunctional command structure in Tobruk were reported by Lt Col M Gooler, the official United States military observer. Gooler took note that there appeared to be a decided lack of co-operation between Klopper, his chief of staff, and the heads of the various staff sections, in particular Operations and Intelligence. In addition to the inexperience of the leader group there seemed to be an air of poor co-operation.[60] On 15 June at 1400 hours Klopper called a meeting of his brigade commanders and explained that Tobruk was to be held for a minimum of three months. Apparently no tactical questions were discussed at this conference, which is surprising given the gravity of the situation and the altered role that the garrison was now expected to perform. [61]

It was only after the meeting that Brig. Willison, a veteran of the previous siege, approached Klopper and expressed his concern as to the dispositions of the forces defending Tobruk. Willison requested that all armoured cars and tanks be placed under his command and he be given the responsibility for any enemy attacks in the coastal area. This would free up all the brigades to man the perimeter of Tobruk as had been the case in the previous siege.[62] Willison critisised the gun emplacements as being positioned too far forward and too far back and suggested that they rather occupy a central and concentrated position on the Pilastrino Ridge. Klopper, while politely listening to Willison's views, made little effort to define or clarify his role or his command. An administrative conference the same day, confirmed that the supply situation appeared to be adequate; however, according to the official history, there appeared an alarming shortage of medium ammunition, at only 450 rounds per gun.[63] Klopper himself, in an interview after the war, confirmed the shortage of artillery

60 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 137. The official history omits the next few lines of Goolers report. "The staff openly complained that General Klopper did not have the correct picture of the enemy situation or realised its serious potentialities. And what was more serious, apparantly did not trust his chiefs of sections. In my opinion, he was not in touch with the situation, and during the major portion of the afternoon of the 19th, to the best of my knowledge, neither he nor his Chief of Staff visited the Staff Sections referred to above, although they were set up only a short distance from the Divisional Commander's CP." Union War Histories Section, "Correspondence file Agar-Hamilton–Captain Fennin, 13 October 1949" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

61 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 137.

62 The 6th SA Brigade manned the coast to prevent a seaward attack. This was considered a real threat throughout the battle. This area was manned by a small screening force in the previous siege.

63 It seems that this translated into a ration of five rounds per day based on a three month siege. The arithmetic approach seems inexplicable as the need to expend ammunition should accord with enemy activity and threat levels rather than be based on an arbitrary and arithmetic formula.

ammunition saying it was far below requirements and on 20 June 1942 there were E-boats bringing in additional artillery ammunition.[64]

On 16 June Ritchie paid a visit to the fortress, arriving in a captured Fiesler-Storch and holding a conference with Generals Gott and Klopper. The conference is described as hitting an optimistic note, with Klopper confidently undertaking to hold the fort for a period of three months.[65] On the same day Klopper gave his agreement to a provisional plan drawn up by Brig. Johnson to co-ordinate the artillery, armoured force and infantry as a reaction and counterattack force by means of a combined battle headquarters. Unfortunately, at his own conference to implement the plans, it appears that neither the commander nor his representative of the Army Tank Brigade nor the commander of the Royal Artillery bothered to attend the meeting.[66]

17 June was spent attending to the physical defences of the fortress, consisting of digging, wiring, mine-laying and reconnoitring in certain areas. Any attempt at the vital task of co-ordinating the reserves to form a combined arms counterattack force would have to wait for the next day, 18 June, when Klopper held yet another conference. There it was decided that the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and 201st Guards Battalion would form the reserve of the garrison. Klopper conceded to send the Commander of the Artillery, Col. Richards, to see Brig. Willison about artillery support, an arrangement decisively different from that of the first siege where the counterattack force, consisting of all the armoured vehicles, a full infantry brigade and a regiment of guns with a troop of anti-tank guns, was placed under the command of Willison. Therefore, rather than create a reserve of combined arms under the command of one man, Klopper had chosen Brig. Johnson's proposal to rather establish a combined battle headquarters when the need arose. It is patently obvious that Klopper and his staff neither produced a detailed counterattack plan nor organised the defences on any type of a dynamic basis, which resulted in what turned out to be

64 "Notes on Major Turner's interview with Brigadier HB Klopper, 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk. On the other hand Capt. Fannin stated during an interview in 1946 that "there was plenty of ammunition in Tobruk, the only serious shortage was in shells for the medium artillery". This view is supported by Maj. N Wessels, Commander of the 6th South African Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, who said in his interview in 1946 that the ammunition supply was adequate. Colonel H McA Richards, Commander of the Divisional Artillery, told of one officer who was responsible for issuing ammunition who insisted on authority to do so from headquarters, even though the German tanks were already visible and approaching fast at the time. K Horn, "Narratives from North Africa: South African prisoner-of-war experience following the fall of Tobruk, June 1942", *Historia* 56(2), 2011, p. 97.

65 This undertaking was made despite some misgivings by the Klopper staff and on the basis that El Adem and Belhamed would be held protecting the southeastern perimeter of the fortress. Union War Histories Section, "Provisional Narrative of the Fall of Tobruk 1942" (SANDF Archives, Directorate of Defence), Box 366, Tobruk.

66 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 129.

a static defence spread evenly along the perimeter. The arrangements to organise the artillery, infantry, and armour reserve into a combined dynamic counterattack force were inadequate at best and resulted in a piecemeal and uncoordinated application of the reserves to the breach.[67]

7. THE ATTACK

When it became apparent that the noose was steadily tightening around Tobruk on 18 and 19 June, Johnson proposed to counter the enemy threat forming up in the El Adem area by launching a bold pre-emptive counterattack. This was soon reconsidered and then reformulated as a concentrated artillery barrage, designed to disperse the enemy gathering in the area. This shoot has been singled out by the official South African history as the reason for the ammunition rationing, as the artillery exceeded its daily allowance and had difficulty in securing more ammunition.[68] However, the artillery barrage seemed to have little effect in diverting the efforts of the Afrika Korps who where now preparing to launch a massive offensive on the fortress of Tobruk.

It is debatable whether the offensive launched by the Germans on the morning of 20 June came as a surprise to the Eighth Army or indeed the garrison.[69] What is certain is that the German manoeuvre of bypassing the garrison in an eastward drive to the Egyptian border and then leaving a screening force to deal with the Eighth Army while turning the Afrika Korps 180 degrees to drive westwards to the southeastern perimeter of Tobruk, is a remarkable achievement.[70] The fact that

67 The counterattack force was fundamental to the successful defence of the fortress. The perimeter defences, rather than providing an impregnable wall against attack, fulfilled the role of an early warning system that would reveal the direction of an enemy attack and thereafter delay its progress long enough to assemble and unleash a counterattack to reseal the defence. So too the minefields were to act as a mechanism to delay and then channel the enemy onto the waiting counterattack forces. The failure to strike back at a penetration with all the forces at hand and in good time would almost certainly spell the doom of the fortress in modern war.

68 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 150. There is conflicting evidence about the ammunition situation in the garrison. General Moorehead, the commander of the first siege who passed through Tobruk on 17 June, reports an abundance of ammunition. Sergeant AN Goldman of the 2nd Royal Durban Light Infantry talks of vast ammo dumps according to the UWHS (Union War Histories Section), "Preliminaries of the siege: Extracts from original sources" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

69 Auchinleck, in his despatch, says that once Tobruk had been invested, it was only to be expected that the German attack would closely follow the original and elaborate plan of the previous November for attacking the garrison in the southeast. General Ritchie, on realising this, sent details of this plan by wireless to Gen. Klopper's HQ. The UWHS consider that Auchinleck's comments are most unfair to Klopper and give a misleading impression in that there is no evidence when this plan was signalled to Klopper. Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

70 R Citino, *Death of the Wermacht: The German campaigns of 1942* (Kansas, 2007), p. 147.

this movement took place at night on 19/20 June and required a massive effort of coordination to ensure the assault troops and artillery were ready in their exact jump off points before the assault, goes a long way to demonstrating how far ahead the Germans were at this stage in the art of mobile warfare.[71] Rommel's complicated attempt at subterfuge seems not to have fooled Ritchie, who communicated with Auchinleck on the night of 19 June that he believed that the Germans were going to attack Tobruk rather than the frontier.[72] On the battlefield at Tobruk the 11th Indian Brigade, manning the exact sector that was to be attacked, realised, that after sending out patrols, an attack was imminent.[73]

Meanwhile Johnson of the 201st Guards Brigade had not been idle and he now attempted to set up a combined headquarters at Kings Cross in accordance with the arrangements agreed to for a counterattack. At this crucial moment Willison declined to leave his headquarters, while Johnson busied himself with setting up headquarters and appropriate communications.[74] Klopper now intervened and issued orders for Willison to take command of a combined force and launch a counterattack in co-operation with the Indian Brigade.[75] Anderson sent a liaison officer to the combined headquarters at Kings Cross at 0700 hours in anticipation of the arrival of Willison and the 32 Army Tank Brigade. At 0745 the artillery of

71 It is interesting to draw a contrast to numerous examples of the Allied forces being incapable or unprepared to perform simple manoeuvres at night.

72 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 158. Neither was Auchinleck fooled and he sent a signal to Eighth Army, "Enemy movement yesterday showed intention launch early attack Tobruk from the East."

73 Colonel Max H Gooler, the official United States military observer, reports that during the afternoon of 19 June a South African armoured car unit commander reported a concentration of German armour and artillery in the southeast of Tobruk to the intelligence section, pointing out on the maps almost the exact location as to where the final German assault was proposed in the previous siege. One of the staff had a copy of a captured German map from that operation and Gooler reported that an attack along similar line could be expected. Union War Histories Section, "Preliminaries of the siege: Extracts from original sources" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk. This incident is acknowledged in the South African Official History but goes on to elaborately paint a picture of confusing and obscure orders and the fact that a search was being conducted for the original orders that already seemed to be in the hands of the intlligence section at Tobruk. Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 157.

74 The South African Official History suggests that the reason for Willison declining to leave his headquarters was due to the fact that Gen. Klopper wished that his senior tank officer should be close to him. If this were indeed the case it spelt the doom of a combined operation before it was started. See Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 163. Klopper in an interview with the UWHS describes Willison as a defeated man, although Klopper did not really realise this at the time. Union War Histories Section, "Notes on Major Turner's interview with Brig. HB Klopper 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Directorate of Defence), Box 363, Tobruk.

75 This was perhaps a fatal flaw, as the formation formed up under Willison was not part of the plan agreed to at the conference beforehand, where a joint headquarters was to be set up and the composition and delivery of the blow was to be left up to the brigade commanders. Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

the 25th Field Regiment opened fire, holding out until then, so as not to disclose their position which would compromise their anti-tank role once their position was revealed.[76] Speed, at this point, was of the essence, as the tanks needed to be thrown into the fray before the Germans had a chance to set up their anti-tank defences. The crucial objective should have been to seal off the attack and immediately throw the German offensive back to its starting lines.

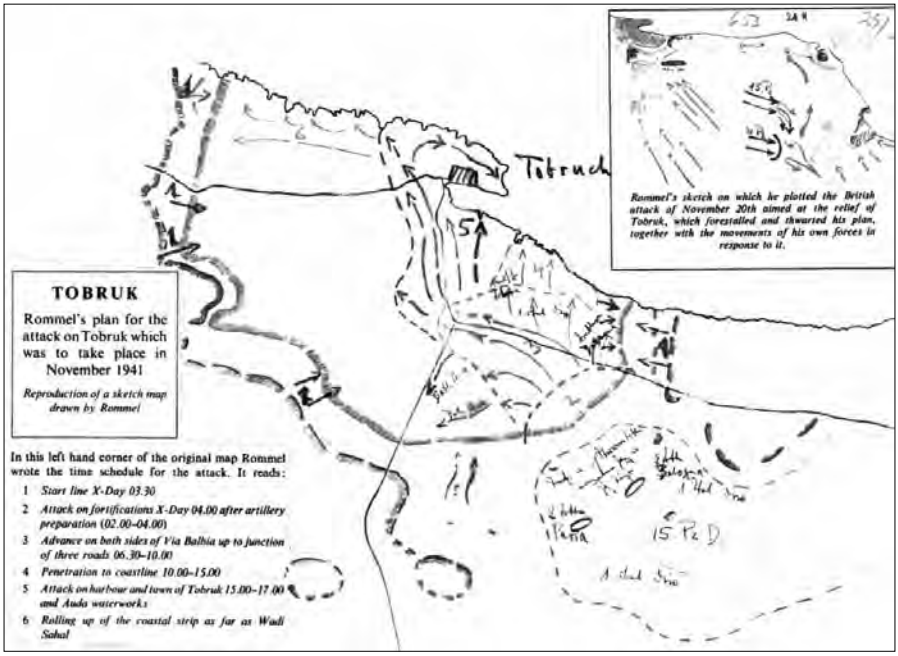

Figure 4: Rommel's November 1941 plan for the attack on Tobruk on the southeast corner. The offensive on 21 June 1942 followed almost the exact lines of attack and battle plan.[77]

Willison ordered Lt Col B Reeves of the 4 Royal Tank Regiment, being the closest tank regiment near the action, to send his battalion against the German penetration at 0800 hours. In an inexplicable display of sluggishness, the two squadrons of tanks of 4 Royal Tank Regiment arrived at Kings Cross by 0930 hours.[78] An opportunity

76 There were apparently 36 guns available to bring down fire on the gap, but they appeared to have done little damage to the attacking force. Union War Histories Section, "Artillery Narrative Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

77 B Liddel-Hart, *The Rommel papers* (New York, 1953).

78 This draft narrative identifies the failure of 32nd Tank Brigade to arrive in time as being the fundamental cause of the failure of the counterattack and the single most important cause of the

to marry up with the infantry component of the counterattack force was lost when Reeves, on receiving a party of officers from the Coldstream Guards, denied all knowledge of, or responsibility for, co-operation with any infantry force. The Coldstream Guards received no instructions from headquarters and as a result stayed put while the group of liaison officers made their way to Kings Cross and languished there.[79] At the insistence of Anderson, who was growing more desperate as his situation deteriorated, the Coldstream Guards were ordered forward to Kings Cross to join their officers at 1000 hours. Upon arrival they remained there, never forming part of an essential combined arms counterattack reserve. They failed to leave the Kings Cross area and counterattack on the insistence of their commander Johnson, who would only commit them to exploit the successes gained or make good any ground recovered by the tanks. The tanks failing in this impossible endeavour ensured that the Infantry never ventured forth.[80]

Two and a half hours had now lapsed since the order had been given to Willison to send his tanks into the fray and to add to the general tardiness of the operation thus far, Reeves proceeded to commit his tanks to the battle without bothering to either liaise with the headquarters of the Indian Brigade or with the combined headquarters.[81] The artillery also failed to come in at the crucial early stage of the attack and the Afrika Korps reported that the fire of the Allied artillery only increased noticeably after 0850 hours, which up to then had been essentially weak and ineffective. [82]

The picture on the German side looked decidedly different with the penetrating forces being led by none other than the commander in chief with Gen. Walther Nehring[83] not far behind in the advance headquarters of the 15th Panzer Division. The Germans overran the Mahrattas headquarters and eliminated a troop of South African artillery at 1000 hours. At the same time, the 4 Royal Tank Regiment had made slow progress along the Bardia road and arrived in the inner minefield gap. The 7 Royal Tank Regiment was ordered to form up to the west of Kings Cross and their

fall of Tobruk that day. The narrative uses strong language such as "since Longstreet marked time at Gettysburg, no such inexplicable delay has occurred in military history". Union War Histories Section, "Crisis at Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

79 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 169.

80 *Ibid*., p. 168.

81 According to an eyewitness report by Maj. Morris the commander of 2 SA Field Battery the tanks were not even seen to fire as they moved up to 500 yards from the enemy tanks who put them out of action one at a time, the whole affair being over in less than 15 minutes. Union War Histories Section, "Artillery Narrative Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

82 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 169.

83 Gen. Walther Nehring became Rommel's effective second in command after Gen. Cruewell was captured. S Mitcham Jr, *Rommel's desert commanders: The men who served the Desert Fox, North Africa, 1941-42* (Mechanicsburg, 2007), p. 87.

commander, Lt Col Foote, after conferring with Reeves, decided to deploy Foote's regiment to the right of 4 Royal Tank Regiment at L Gap, thus forming a defensive line behind the inner minefield. It is here that the two tank regiments, unsupported by infantry and anti-tank weapons, began to take steady losses. With the greater part of their strength destroyed for little profit the survivors withdrew to Kings Cross. Their commander, Reeves, bumped into the immobile Coldstream Guards at 1300 hours and reported that his command had all but been destroyed and all that remained of it was six tanks.[84]

Information was slow to reach Fortress Command who remained dependent on the 11th Indian Brigade for all their information and, who in turn, were dependent on the Mahrattas as to an understanding of the extent of the perimeter breach. Unfortunately, the 11th Indian Brigade were struggling to gain a clear picture of what was happening on the ground as the initial German bombardment had wrecked communications in the sector. The sole remaining source of information, especially after the Mahrattas destroyed their wireless sets at 1000 hours as they were being overrun, fell on the Forward Observation Officer of the 2nd South African Field Battery. A further issue adding to the descending fog of war was that the intermittent communication system lagged substantially behind the events developing rapidly at the front, leaving the garrison headquarters unperplexed and seemingly lulled into a false sense of security. As far as Fortress Command was concerned, the counterattack had been ordered in good time and the Indian Brigade had reported that the situation was in hand. Furthermore, Willison's non-communication was taken as an indicator that all was well. At 1100 hours, in a reversal of mood and now clearly perplexed, Klopper complained that he "was completely in the dark" as to what the situation was and he proposed that he proceed personally to Kings Cross to assess the situation for himself. He unfortunately allowed himself to be dissuaded by Col. Bastin and his chief of staff, Lt Col Kriek, who advised him that his correct place was at the headquarters.[85] At 1300 hours, as they were finishing lunch, the last vestiges of complacency were shattered as news of the impending disaster reached Fortress Headquarters. Willison reported the destruction of 4th Tank Regiment to Klopper and at 1440 hours, reports came in that the enemy had penetrated the inner minefield. At 1525 hours it was reported that 60 enemy tanks had penetrated the inner defences and were approaching Kings Cross which had now become effectively indefensible.[86] Somewhere between 1500 and 1600 Willison reported the total destruction in detail of his command, consisting of seven

84 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 169.

85 *Ibid*., p. 180.

86 Rommel arrived at Kings Cross at about this time in his Mercedes with field glasses in hand, getting there at the front of his army, co-ordinating the attack while cajoling his forces to greater efforts. Union War Histories Section, "Provisional Narrative of the Fall of Tobruk 1942" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

Royal Tank and four Royal Tank Regiments, thus signalling the demise of the entire armoured reserve force. The Germans, after a lightning assault were in possession of Kings Cross, defeating the British armour and overrunning the Indian Brigade as well as the 25th Field Regiment. Rommel was now in a position to deliver the final blow to the fortress.

Klopper, learning of the proximity of the German offensive to Kings Cross and seemingly spurred on by the destruction of 4 Royal Tank Regiment with the greater part of his reserve force, did not remain idle. He set about organising a new defensive line to protect the cross roads at Pilastrino that ran roughly along the El Adem road. A company each was ordered to detach from the 4th and 6th South African Brigades to form a counterattack force near the new line.[87]

When Kings Cross fell to the Germans the defences of the Tobruk Fortress became fragmented and uncoordinated, with units fighting where they stood, constituting individual actions, uncoordinated and without central direction from Fortress headquarters. It was a simple matter for the Germans to proceed from Kings Cross virtually unopposed and enter the harbour of Tobruk at nightfall. The Fortress headquarters in the meantime destroyed wireless sets and moved office to the headquarters of 6th South African Brigade.[88] A pall of smoke rose into the sky from Tobruk harbour signalling the partial and unofficial demolition of supplies and vehicles, the capture of Tobruk having been achieved with such speed, that no official orders were given for the destruction of supplies to prevent it falling into German hands.[89]

By nightfall the German forces were in possession of Tobruk and a considerable salient in the eastern half of the fortress. The two South African brigades remained unscathed and unaffected by the day's events. Klopper was able to re-establish contact with the Eighth Army at 2000 hours where he reported the desperate plight of his forces and requested permission to break out that night. He sought clarity as to whether the promised relieving force was about to counterattack the enemy. Brig.Whiteley, standing in for Ritchie, who was away with XXX

87 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 181.

88 The destruction of the headquarter equipment at 1600 hours was premature and unfortunate, in that the Germans bypassed the position to move on supply dumps in the vicinity. The destruction of the signals equipment left most formations unaware that the headquarters had relocated to 6 Brigade. Union War Histories Section, "Provisional Narrative of the Fall of Tobruk 1942" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

89 All the dumps had been prepared for demolition and Maj. Grant, in charge of the demolition team, knew the Germans were only 200 yards away from his supply dump. He and his staff sat in his office for the entire night vainly waiting for the instruction that never came to destroy the dumps. He did not destroy the dumps on his own responsibility as he realised there would be many prisoners who would require provisions. "Written comments by lieutenant colonel Thompson 2nd Battalion TVL Scottish 4 December 1945" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

Corps gave his permission for a break-out signalling: "Come out tomorrow night preferably if not tonight." He repeated at the end of his transmission: "Tomorrow night preferred."[90] Klopper was dissatisfied with the inconclusive conversation with Whiteley and requested his signaller to maintain contact with the Eighth Army and try and locate Gen. Ritchie.[91]

In the aftermath of a series of informal discussions between Klopper and several battalion commanders Klopper issued a warning order for a break-out at 2200 hours. An opposing plan, mainly propagated by Brig. Hayton and the leader group of the 4th Brigade, and seemingly motivated by the fact that the brigade had lost most of its transport, which precluded a breakout, suggested forming a redoubt in the southwest corner of the fortress.[92] Klopper seemingly swayed by the promise of a relieving force and not being able to get hold of Ritchie, together with what seemed to be a request by Whiteley to hold on for one more day, countermanded the breakout order and instead preparations began for a last stand based on the 4th Brigade proposal.[93] In the meantime, Gen. Ritchie, who had returned to his headquarters at 0330 hours, signalled detailed instructions approving a breakout.[94]

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90 It is not known if Whiteley appreciated the extent of the German successes or the dire straits of the remaining garrison in the aftermath of a decisive German victory.

91 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 208.

92 The UWHS describes this as "pis-aller" with little hope of the defenders being able to hold out for longer than a day, but that at least it would satisfy some quarters by doing something to save honour. Union War Histories Section, "Provisional Narrative of the Fall of Tobruk 1942" (SANDF Archives, Directorate of Defence), Box 366, Tobruk. Agar-Hamilton in a letter to Capt. Fennin on 13 October 1939 gives a rare insight into his understanding of the effects the 4th Brigade proposal had on Klopper. The 4th Brigade had effectively challanged an accepted policy to breakout and this threw Klopper off balance and led him to a course of action he did not wholly believe in. Within one hour of Klopper accepting the 4th Brigade proposal they then told him that it was impractical to resist. Union War Histories Section, "Correspondence file Agar-Hamilton to Captain Fennin 13 October 1949" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

93 The proponents of the breakout group put forward an argument that a last minute futile stand would achieve far less than bringing out vital equipment and personnel that could be used in the battles to come by the Eighth Army. In a letter sent to the UWHS on 18 October 1949 Capt. DG Fannin, Int. officer, 4th SA Brigade, states that on his arrival at 6 Brigade headquarters that night there was no accepted policy but merely a collection of "harassed individuals" who had before them a message from the Commander Eighth Army saying, "Break out preferably tomorrow night." According to Fannin no-one present had any "stomach for a fight" except for Brig. Hayton of 4th South African Infantry Brigade. Hayton, according to Fannin, believed that the garrison had not yet dispensed of its burden to stand and fight. Fannin believes that Klopper was converted to this point of view only to be persuaded to surrender by his chief of staff and signals officer once Hayton had departed. Union War Histories Section, "Correspondence File Fannin 18 October 1949" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

94 There is considerable debate as to whether Gen. Klopper did indeed receive permission to breakout from Gen. Ritchie. On Ritchie's own evidence, in his statement to Gen. Auchinleck read into evidence at the Court of Enquiry, he did give permission. What the UWHS finds as con-

In a curious twist Hayton returned to his headquarters at 0330 and met with Lt Col Blake of the Blake group who vigorously denounced the absurdity of the defensive plan proposed by Hayton. Hayton then telephoned Klopper to tell him that his battalion commanders did not wish to fight.[95] Klopper insisted that this change of heart would put him in "a hell of a jam" and convinced the commanders once again to resist. However, soon after speaking to Hayton again, Klopper had yet another change of heart, believing that a stand was futile in that little advantage would be gained for the Eighth Army while many casualties would inevitably be incurred.[96]

At 0630 hours, after Klopper had famously signalled Ritchie that he was "doing the worst", he sent a parlementaire to the Germans to offer capitulation. An anxious Ritchie enquired as to whether the petrol and water installations had been destroyed. Klopper answered in the affirmative, which was partly true in the current positions held, but not the case in the areas already under German control. At 0745 hours the German officers, tasked with receiving the surrender, arrived at headquarters and with the last wireless set destroyed, 10 722 South Africans as part of the garrison totalling 33 000, marched into captivity.[97] A great bounty fell into German hands consisting of arms, ammunition, fuel, foodstuffs and clothing as well as 30 tanks.[98]

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clusive proof that permission for a breakout was granted is contained in a signal sent by Ritchie to Auchinleck at 2200 hours on 20 June 1942 stating: "He (Klopper) requests authority to fight his way out as apparently he feels he cannot hold out. I have authorised him to do so." In what form Klopper received permission and couched in what terms is uncertain. On Klopper's own evidence given to the UWHS on 22 October 1945 he states: "It was quite apparent to me that there were no relief troops within striking distance of the forces (fortress?)." He goes on to say: "I asked permission to try and fight my way out. The reply was to the effect that it was not advisable or desirable that I should withdraw at that stage but I had to wait until the following evening." Union War Histories Section, "Eighth Army and the Surrender of Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 366, Tobruk.

95 Union War Histories Section, "Correspondence file 4 SA Inf Bde HQ on 20 June 1942" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk. They also cited as a reason that there was not enough time to set up effective defences as the conference at Kloppers HQ had gone on until the early hours of the morning.

96 Turner and Agar-Hamilton, p. 213.

97 This number includes one general and seven brigadiers and what has been described as large deposits of arms, munitions, materials and foodstuffs. Gen. Klopper said that his orders were for the troops to surrender on fronts where the Germans were attacking, but all men who wished to escape should be given every facility. He said it was a great shock to him that so few men attempted to escape. On the other hand he deplored the conduct of the Coldstream Guards in passing out of the perimeter of Tobruk at 1600 on 20 June, without orders and without authority, taking with them some of the precious anti-tank guns. Union War Histories Section, "Notes on Major Turner's interview with Brigadier HB Klopper, 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Directorate of Defence), Box 363, Tobruk. Michael Carver is more specific putting a figure of 2 000 tons of petrol, 2 000 servicible vehicles, 5 000 tons of food and large quantities of ammunition. M Carver, *Tobruk* (London, 1964), p. 248.

98 Rahn, *et al*., p. 698.

Figure 5: An Italian propaganda poster celebrating the re-conquest of Tobruk on 21 June 1942. Relief that the South Africans were not mentioned in the poster was expressed in a memorandum sent via the Union Defence Force Administrative HQ to the Chief of the General Staff.[99]

99 Poster collection housed at the SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives.

8. WAS THE SURRENDER OF TOBRUK AN AVOIDABLE BLUNDER OR AN INEVITABLE DISASTER?

The seeds of Tobruk's capture were sown many weeks, if not months, prior to its fall on 20 June 1942. It was not the Eighth Army's intention to hold the fortress if it where once again threatened with encirclement. This firm position was reversed at the last minute by Auchinleck, who did not grasp the extent of the Eighth Army's defeat at Gazala and believed that there was enough residual strength to man a defensive line incorporating Tobruk, thereby avoiding encirclement. Just as Auchinleck seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation, Churchill insisted on Tobruk being defended, leaving the fortress to its inevitable fate as the screening forces were thrown back to the frontier, leaving Klopper unaware that he was isolated until the last minute. The final verdict of the Court of Enquiry into the fall of Tobruk exonerates Klopper stating: "It is questionable whether even the most experienced commander with a highly trained staff could have grappled with the problems in the time available." It goes on to say: "The fact that Tobruk fell must undoubtedly be attributed to the eleventh hour reversal of policy leading to the decision to hold the fortress."[100] The question of whether the fortress could have been successfully held by a more experienced leader group in the face of a rampant Afrika Korps, that had nearly destroyed the Eighth Army, can safely be discarded and the verdict of the court accepted at face value. It seems that on the strategic level Tobruk was destined to fall in the face of overwhelming odds.

Matters are less certain at the operational and tactical level, where the Court of Enquiry has far less to say. It is at the operational and tactical level that more could have been done.Vigorous and forceful leadership could have made better use of the considerable manpower and equipment at their disposal for the defence of Tobruk. A far higher price should have been extracted from the attacking force whose final casualties where light by all accounts. The intensity of the defence is reflected in the relatively low number of South Africans killed in action on 20/21 June.[101]

No matter what the state of the perimeter defences, the survival of the fortress depended on the ability to quickly mount an effective counterattack with all available reserves, in a coordinated and combined manner, once the perimeter was breached. The seeds of failure were sown when during the conferences prior to the German offensive, an adequate plan of action was not developed, nor was a command structure conducive to combined operations set in place. It has been argued in literature that although the garrison possessed a formidable artillery asset,

100 Tobruk Court of Enquiry, "Operations in the Western Desert 27 May-2 July" (Court of Enquiry, 1942), Part I, pp. 22-23.

101 The CGS file on Tobruk has a document on file that shows six South Africans killed out of a force of 12 395. Chief of general staff (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 47.

this was made up from a number of disparate units. The same can be said of the anti-tank weapons, of which there were a significant amount, amongst which a considerable number were the new powerful six-pounders and a number of 3,5 anti-aircraft guns, both devastating in the anti-tank role. A proactive leader would have been able to assemble these into a homogenous structure to form a powerful tool to be used in the counterattack.

When Klopper ordered a counterattack it differed substantially to that agreed to at the conference and was delivered piecemeal and without support. Not only was the counterattack delivered in a haphazard manner, but the fact that it was some two and a half hours in arriving signalled its inevitable failure by allowing the Germans a good deal of time to establish themselves in the territory they had occupied. The point here is not whether the garrison would have survived for any length of time, but certainly they would have been able to deal the Germans crippling losses had they launched an effective counterattack.

The effectiveness of the eventual counterattack ordered by Klopper was further compromised by failing to use a combined-arms approach, by incorporating his artillery, tank and infantry reserve into a mutually supporting combined force. At variance with accepted practises of sound command, Klopper failed to concentrate his reserves by placing it under the command of one person. The counterattack broke down almost immediately, with the armour attacking unsupported and in piecemeal fashion, by now an unfortunate trademark of the Eighth Army.

Once the German offensive had developed and the situation on the ground appeared confused at divisional headquarters, it was incumbent on Klopper to go to Kings Cross to access the situation and perhaps temporarily take command of the counterforce to ensure coordination and effectiveness. He was too easily persuaded by those at headquarters to stay put, and although unfair to compare him to his famous adversary, who made a habit of leading from the front, there comes a time in a battle when the man-in-command may have to descend and deal with the crisis hands on.[102] If ever a situation called for personal intervention, it was when Klopper felt the urge to "go and see for himself" and he should have given in to that urge.

There is little doubt that the top leadership of the garrison was inexperienced and unsuited for the task at hand. Klopper himself had very little combat experience in a leadership role, having spent the major part of his active service in a staff and administrative position. His chief of staff was in a similar position, being new on the job and hopelessly out of his depth. When one looks at the brigade

102 On this point it would seem that Gen. Klopper would concur having expressed regret that he did not go to Kings Cross himself to organise the counterattack having been "prevented" from doing so by Col. Bastin. Union War Histories Section, "Notes on Major Turner's interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

commanders, especially those involved in the fighting on 20 June, there was no lack of experience, some of the commanders having been present in the previous siege. The problem was that Klopper was unable to, or incapable of, stamping his authority and taking charge of those subordinate to him and acting in a decisive manner.[103] This was not a dissimilar situation than that faced by Ritchie who too was inexperienced compared to those he commanded.

The same lack of leadership and indecisiveness and failing to take effective command of the garrison, resulted in the bulk of the vehicles, ammunition and stores falling into the hands of the Germans when they should have been destroyed. A competent plan of action would have triggered the demolition and destruction of equipment and stores so as to deny them to the Germans who were operating on a logistic shoestring. This windfall provided Rommel with the logistic impetus to thrust his Afrika Korps well beyond the Egyptian border right up to the approaches of El Alamein.

Klopper was placed in an unfortunate position not entirely of his own making, but, faced with this *fait accompli*, he had a number of areas where he was obligated to perform. When he decided to defend the fortress of Tobruk, a task that he accepted with some confidence, he failed to set about the task, neither taking command effectively nor developing a sound defensive plan. Once the perimeter was breached and the battle obviously lost with his counterattack force in tatters, he failed to demolish and destroy the abundance of material stockpiled and coveted by the Germans.[104] Having failed to deny vital supplies to the Germans, he then vacillated once more and failed to evacuate the garrison on the evening of 20 June, allowing the almost intact forces there to humiliatingly walk into captivity. There was a shortage of transport due to the Germans capturing a good deal of it during the day,[105] however a good proportion of the garrison could have gotten away, while the remainder, with no transport, could have fought a rearguard action.[106]

103 General Klopper complained that orders from higher command were never definite, he never knew what he was supposed to do, or what troops were under his command, and as a result he and his staff never got any rest. Union War Histories Section, "Notes on Major Turner's interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

104 Tobruk was designated as one of the forward supply bases where a considerable stockpile of material was accumulated to facilitate the planned Allied attack on the German positions at Gazala. This planned attack was thwarted by the Germans who beat the Allies in attacking first. A considerable amount of munitions, rations and fuel where stockpiled for the purpose of the planned Allied attack.

105 General Klopper blames this situation on the lack of initiative of those in charge of the Corps transport for allowing it to be destroyed or captured instead of driving it off to a safer place.

106 Here Agar-Hamilton offers his opinion in one of his letters and states "All troops who could possibly be moved should have been taken out of the perimeter, with every scrap of artillery and equipment they could take with them. At least one third would have had a reasonable chance of getting through." The experience of 50th Division, the Free French, 29 Indian Brigade and Mersa

In mitigation, there is evidence that Klopper believed that a relief column was earmarked for the relief of Tobruk. There is evidence of his repeated request for information on the progress of the relief column during the course of 20 June. His belief that the British would rescue him via a counterattack was in terms of XIII Corps Operational Order 36, dated 16 June 1942, in which it was stated that if Belhamed fell, a combined operation would be undertaken to reopen the line of communication with the fortress.[107] The possibility of the arrival of a relieving force may have influenced Klopper's decision not to break out on the night of 20 June 1942.[108]

9. CONCLUSION

The fall of Tobruk enjoyed centre stage for a short while in 1942, much to the embarrassment of the British and South African governments. However, this major military event steadily receded from the public interest as the disastrous defeat was soon replaced by a string of Allied victories banishing Tobruk from South African memory. In contrast, many less significant military events continue to be commemorated up to the present day. The issue of the surrender of Tobruk briefly resurfaced when Klopper attempted to clear his name by influencing the publication of the Auchinleck despatch in 1948. The surrender of Tobruk was dealt with in depth by the Union War Histories Section and a comprehensive analysis was published by them in 1950 in the form of the first book in a series on the war. Except for a few non-academic works, the history of Tobruk lay dormant for nearly 60 years, until a few articles on non-military issues surrounding Tobruk were published. Despite these recent articles, the reasons for the fall of Tobruk from a military perspective remain largely unattended to.

Matruh shows it might well have been more. The remainder should have been thrown suddenly and vigorously in a night attack against the German leaguers inside the fortress. We know now that the Germans were so exhausted that they might quite easily have been thrown off their balance and driven out in confusion. In that case 2nd South African Division would have made an immense reputation. Union War Histories Section, "Correspondence file Agar-Hamilton–Captain Fennin, 13 October 1949" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

107 Union War Histories Section, "Eighth Army and the Surrender of Tobruk" (SANDF Archives, Directorate of Defence), Box 366, Tobruk.

108 It is interesting that Klopper does not mention the relieving force in his interview with Turner. He confirms receiving permission to break out at midnight on 20 June and he conferred with his brigadiers until 0100 hours. He proposed a breakout directly through the enemy lines through the eastern sector as he considered they must be exhausted by the battle and would be hamstrung by the darkness. The brigadiers however were opposed to any attempt to breakout. Klopper finally accepted the view that there was insufficient transport to make the attempt. Union War Histories Section, "Notes on Major Turner's interview with Brigadier H.B. Klopper 21 April 1950" (SANDF Archives, Department of Defence Archives), Box 363, Tobruk.

This article re-examines the circumstances surrounding and leading to the surrender of Tobruk, using primary and secondary sources as evidence in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the sudden surrender. The primary sources have indeed provided new insights, allowing for new interpretations and a fuller understanding of the actual events.

Klopper was placed in an extremely difficult position and there was little hope for a successful defence of Tobruk. This concurs with the findings of the Court of Enquiry which *prima facia* exonerates Klopper for the loss of Tobruk. However, when examining primary documents crucial shortcomings come to light when evaluating the leadership of Klopper and his staff at an operational and tactical level. He failed in essential areas where he could have reasonably been expected to perform more effectively. Klopper failed to galvanise the fortress under his leadership, and failed to seize control of all the forces under his control. He again failed to devise a plan to defend the fortress and this manifested itself in an uncoordinated badly led counterattack against the German penetration of the perimeter on 20 June 1942. Here again he had the opportunity to provide personal leadership and assess the situation for himself or perhaps lead the counterattack, but he chose to be dissuaded from venturing forth and remained at his headquarters while his defences crumbled. It is Klopper alone who must take responsibility for allowing a treasure of supplies to fall into German hands, by not ensuring their demolition once the battle was lost.

When the final moments dawned and an opportunity presented itself to partially redeem what was becoming a massive military disaster, Klopper once again was found lacking. Demonstrating weak leadership, precious hours were lost, when Klopper argued with his subordinates over the best course of action. The general was left with two desperate choices, to stand and put up a fight to save honour, or to order a breakout so as to rescue a good portion of the troops from captivity. In a final failure, due to endless vacillation and changing of heart, a third option was found that resulted in the ignominious surrender of the entire garrison.