

INDIAN RIFLES at "Hellfire Pass"

OPERATION CRUSADER - November, 1941

I. SITUATION

- a. **General.** 8th Army attacks and destroys Axis forces in North Africa to defend Egypt and to secure the North African coast for an invasion of Europe.
- b. **Enemy.** The Italian 55th Infantry Division defends the frontier from SIDI OMAR to HALFAYA PASS occupying a series of battalion-sized outposts. An unidentified reinforced German infantry battalion holds HALFAYA PASS.
- c. **Friendly.** XIII Corps - 4th Indian Division, 2nd New Zealand Division, 1st Army Tank Brigade

II. MISSION At H-Hour, XIII Corps attacks Axis defenses in the SIDI OMAR to SOLLUM area and destroys enemy units to clear a coastal route to TOBRUK.

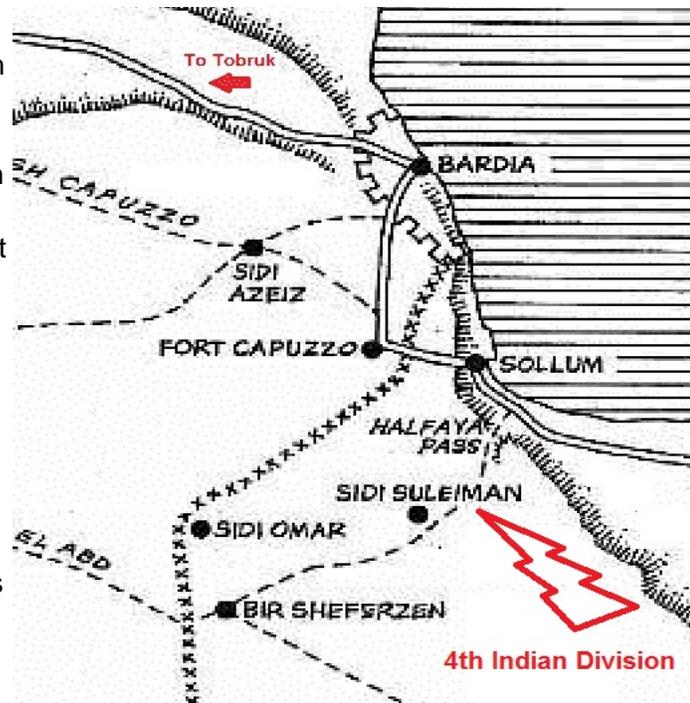
III. EXECUTION

a. Concept of Operation 4th Indian Division seizes HALFAYA PASS. 2nd New Zealand Division attacks North to seize FORT CAPUZZO. XIII Corps then consolidates at FORT CAPUZZO, seizes SOLLUM and BARDIA, and advances West to clear the enemy from their positions between BARDIA and our garrison under siege at TOBRUK.

b. Unit Tasks

4th Indian Division - Clears a coastal route to support follow-on operations.

1st Army Tank Brigade - Provides Infantry Tank support to attacking units.



Area of Operations - 4th Indian Division 0400 hrs, 18 November 1941



"India Pattern" Carrier

At Halfaya Pass, Major Wilhelm Bach (a former Lutheran minister turned soldier) commanded a mixed German and Italian force including dug-in "88s" (88mm Flak36) and 5cm PaK 38 AT guns.

The ground leading up to the pass was flat and featureless, and at 0600 hours Bach's men spotted Indian recon patrols and six British Infantry Tanks closing at a distance of two miles.

As they came into range, the British tanks opened fire hoping that the German and Italian gunners would return fire at long range and give away their positions. "Papa" Bach and Major Pardo, the Italian commander, held their men in check and they were not spotted by the tankers or by the Indian's recon carrier patrol screen.



Valentine crews scan ahead

Then, at 0915 hours, British radios crackled with the ominous transmission "**Good God! They have large caliber guns dug in and they're tearing my tanks to pieces!**" as the leading Valentines were wrecked by accurate volleys of twenty-two pound armor piercing shells from Bach's nearly invisible "88s".



Sikhs with Bren Gun & Light Mortar

The superb Indian infantry and the remaining Valentine Tanks stormed the pass (now called **Hellfire**) five times. Each time the well dug in DAK and Italian forces were savaged but remained unbroken. Under a relentless sun, the rocky desert battlefield became strewn with torn bodies and burning vehicles to no avail. "**Hellfire Pass**" was Axis territory.

Halfaya Pass exchanged hands many times during the grueling North African campaign as Allied and Axis armies swept back and forth across Cyrenaica and the Egyptian frontier. When the **Panzerarmee Afrika** retreated through the pass one last time after their defeat at El Alamein, the Indian Rifle troops of the British 8th Army claimed the prize.

