

KASSERINE PASS

North Africa Campaign Pits Inexperienced Antiaircraft Artillery Units Against Rommel's Vaunted Afrika Corps

by John Hamilton

In the winter of 1943, U.S. Army Antiaircraft Artillery (AAA) units experienced their baptism of fire against the German Army in the North African desert. They discovered, as Patriot battalions were to rediscover six decades later in the deserts of Iraq, weapon system expertise isn't enough to succeed on a modern battlefield—you must train with maneuver forces to master the art of maneuver warfare. A lack of experience in maneuver warfare and combined arms training cost the Army's AAA units dearly at Kasserine Pass in 1943.

The series of engagements around Kasserine Pass in Tunisia, pitting the U.S. Army II Corps against a blooded, experienced, and well-trained Axis force, would provide the first wartime test of Army organization and tactical training. The German and Italian forces were also very well led by the Desert Fox himself, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. All of the training and preparation of II Corps would be sorely tested in this battle, including forces of the Antiaircraft Command. Well after the battle, Kasserine Pass would form the basis for future studies in lack of preparedness of U.S. forces for battle.

The U.S. Army landed its first expeditionary force on North African soil in 1943 in Operation Torch. Under the command of GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Western Task Force landed at three different points in French Morocco. An American and British task force landed at Oran and Algiers in Algeria. Despite some resistance by French troops loyal to the Vichy government in France, the invasion forces established their beachheads and moved inland to their objectives. The victory was somewhat hollow, however, as the opposing forces were poorly armed and equipped as a result of the French treaty with the Germans in 1940. This limited the French on what weapons and equipment they could possess. The invasion could be termed a walkover.

The AAA units participated in this assault with the intent of establishing air defense of fixed installations, such as ports, supply depots, and airfields. To backtrack, the AAA had undergone rapid expansion as part of the mobilization for war. In 1939, the Army had only nine AAA regiments, falling under the Coast Artillery. A regiment was composed of two battalions organized to provide protection from both low- and high-altitude threats. Despite the success of German close air support in Germany's recent conquest of the European continent, the chief of Army Ground Forces, GEN

Leslie J. McNair, termed the antiaircraft gun a defensive weapon. As such, placing the antiaircraft gun in the division ran counter to GEN McNair's desire to encourage aggressiveness and offensive spirit in the division. He felt the appropriate place for antiaircraft battalions were in regiments or groups under corps-level control. That way, they could be concentrated on the battlefield where they were needed and focused on the massed air threat that was perceived to exist.

The Antiaircraft Command established a training structure in accordance with the directions from the Army Ground Forces Command. It had its own officer candidate school and training camps in Illinois, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Texas (including Fort Bliss), and California. These camps trained battalions. The command trained its officers in the technical aspects of the branch, with almost no tactical or maneuver training.

The major antiaircraft weapon systems were the 37mm gun; the 40mm gun, which was derived from a Swedish Bofors design; and the 90mm gun. These were towed weapons for the most part. Units also had .50-caliber machineguns for close-in defense. The 37mm gun was mounted on a half-track vehicle, combined with two .50-caliber machineguns on either side of the gun. The Army also experimented with mounting two and four .50-caliber machine guns on half-tracks, which would make a difference at Kasserine. With the rapid mobilization of the Army, there were shortages of all manner of equipment and ammunition. With the focus on the technical rather than the tactical, there was no maneuver training, little attention to aircraft identification skills, and no real doctrine for integrating antiaircraft fires with maneuver forces at the line of contact or with friendly close air support. The 105th Coast Artillery (AA) Battalion, trained at Camp Hulen, Texas, with only four 37mm guns for the entire battalion and used boxes mounted on trailers with sticks to simulate antiaircraft guns for training basic drills. Training ammunition was short, and they did not have the M5 Gun Director until they arrived in England in 1942. The battalion went to the field by itself, conducting no combined arms training. In fact, the 105th trained in the desert at Camp Young, Calif., (now part of Fort Irwin) within sight of units of the 2nd Armored Division, but without ever participating as part of the combined arms team.



A U.S. 40mm Bofors gun crew "covers all bets" outside the Municipal Casino in Algiers.

To set the stage for the battle, we should look at the terrain. The area in southern Tunisia is characterized by two dorsal mountain ranges, the Eastern Dorsal and the Western Dorsal. They overlook broad flat areas, and travel between the open areas is canalized through ravines and canyons. At the time there were several dirt roads, but these were subject to flooding during the winter's rainy season. Three critical defiles, which facilitated movement, were at Sbiba, Dernaia, and Kasserine.

The German command was subordinate to the Italian Commando Supremo in Rome, in deference to Italy's colonial interests in North Africa. In northern Tunisia, the 5th Panzer Army was under the command of Field Marshal Juergen Von Arnim. In southern Tunisia, the Afrika Corps, commanded by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, had established a defensive line south of Mareth to confront the British Eighth Army, commanded by GEN Bernard L. Montgomery. Both Von Arnim and Rommel fell under the command of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring in Rome. Their line of communication stretched across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. After being forced out of Libya, Rommel saw an opportunity to regain the offensive. He proposed attacking through the passes of the Eastern Dorsal to the

northwest, with the intent of breaking up the American forces confronting him, seizing airfields and supply dumps, and ultimately enveloping the Allied First Army before having to turn and face Montgomery moving in from the east.

Arrayed against Rommel in the south was the II-Corps, commanded by LTG Lloyd Fredendall, and part of the French XIX Corps. Under the II Corps were the 1st Armored Division, the 34th Infantry Division, the 1st Infantry Division, and the 9th Infantry Division. The intent of the Allied command was to press the Axis forces against the Mediterranean and force their surrender. The II Corps had moved east very quickly, outrunning its lines of supply. Only the 1st Armored Division and the 34th Division were in a position to confront Rommel, and no division possessed antiaircraft units to provide air defense. Only the 105th Coast Artillery (AA) Automatic Weapons Battalion, part of the 106th Coast Artillery (AA) Automatic Weapons Battalion, the 443rd CA (AA) AW (SP) Battalion, and part of the 213th CA (AA) Regiment, were available to provide air defense.

Rommel would not sit still and wait for developments. In February 1943, elements of the Afrika Corps attempted to seize Kasserine Pass by a sudden, swift attack. Arrayed against them was Task Force Stark, composed of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry; the 33rd Field Artillery; and the 19th

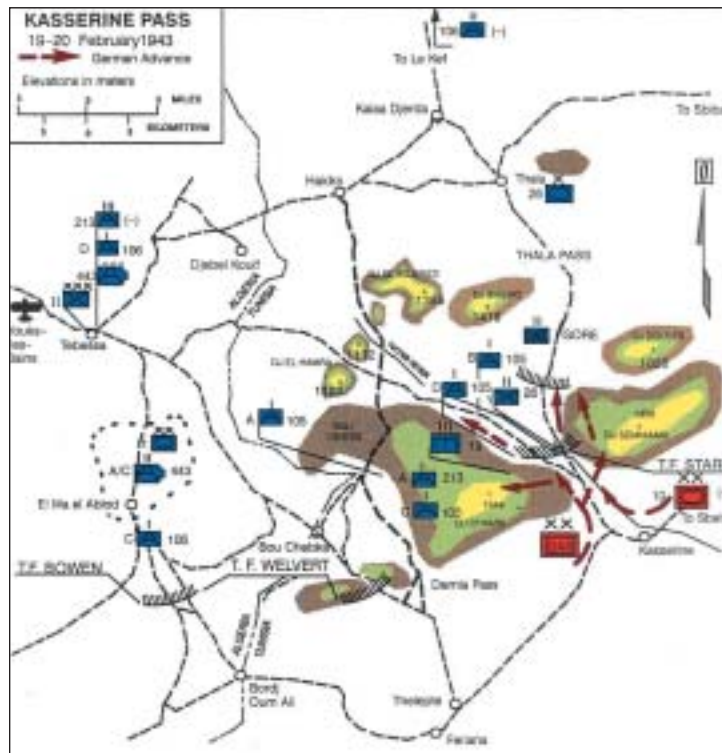
Engineers. The engineers had the mission to sow land mines at the entrance to the pass, which was about 700 yards from the south side to the north. They were then to defend the pass as infantry. Assigned to provide air defense was the 105th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion, composed of 90mm and 40mm Bofors guns. Battery D, with eight Bofors guns, moved into the pass to provide support. Commanding two guns was 1LT Kenneth Madden, with the remaining six guns under CPT George Zorini covering the Tebessa Road two miles to the southwest.

Lieutenant Madden supported a hodge-podge of units in the pass. On the evening of 18 February, 1st battalion, 26th Infantry; the 19th Engineer Regiment; two batteries of the 33rd Field Artillery Battalion; one battery of French 75mm howitzers; and the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion were arrayed forward of the pass. There was no reserve for this organization. Zorini and Madden were not attached to anyone. They were to provide direct antiaircraft support for the force defending the pass but the commander of the task force issued no orders to Zorini and Madden. Captain Zorini decided to defend the field artillery, as they were most likely to be attacked by air. Madden sited his guns in the pass to engage the Luftwaffe, but the engineers around him thought he was there

to cover the minefields. Madden posted observers around the gun positions, but the battery had to round up radios and binoculars from the gun crews to equip them.

Friday morning, 19 February saw an attempt by the Afrika Corps to assault the pass. German artillery fire struck the engineers and infantry covering the pass, and German infantry infiltrated around the defenders by climbing the heights on either side of the pass. Checking on his other gun position, 1LT Madden found them frightened by the closeness of the artillery fire and prepared to move to the rear. Madden put them back into position and returned to his gun. As the fires and enemy movement increased, COL Alexander Stark, the task force commander, placed two more infantry battalions along the Thala road. That afternoon, despite Stark's preparations, German infiltrators managed to machine-gun his headquarters. As the Germans closed in and enemy artillery intensified, the Americans began to abandon their positions and stream toward the rear. At the same time one of the battalion headquarters was overrun, and the confusion continued to mount. During the night of the 19th, Madden watched many soldiers move past his position, each group saying they were the last. Madden decided to stand fast.

The next morning, the Germans fired a heavy artillery



At Kasserine Pass, U.S. antiaircraft artillery units went into battle against Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's vaunted Afrika Corps with little or no tactical or maneuver training.

concentration into the pass, the rounds impacting around Madden's position. Madden requested to move to the rear, and was ordered to stand fast. Soon the commander of the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion passed Madden, telling him that his last tank destroyer had been destroyed. Enough was enough; Madden picked up his other gun crew and shifted to the rear. He soon joined Zorini, who ordered him to set up behind the artillery. At noon on the 20th, 200 Germans wearing captured American uniforms assaulted them. Working to within hand grenade range, the Germans put pressure on Madden and his crews. Under cover of their anti-aircraft machine guns, the anti-aircraft artillery crews were again forced to withdraw.

The Kasserine Pass defenses were falling to pieces, the withdrawal turning into a disorganized rout. Seeking to plug the rapidly widening hole, Fredendall pushed Combat Command B of the 1st Armored Division into the breach. The British shoved their 26th Armored Brigade into position to cover Thala. As the weather cleared, Rommel continued to attack. Stuka dive-bombers, escorted by Messerschmitt Me-109 fighters, appeared to strike the American artillery. The 105th AAA and the 443rd AAA responded to the attacks and shot down a number of Stukas. In fact, this event represented the death knell for the Stuka, which could not stand up to .50-caliber fire when it executed its classic attack dive. As the German airplanes departed, two flights of American aircraft appeared. The AAA gunners, in the heat of battle, engaged them, too. Seven friendly aircraft were damaged beyond repair. The commander of CCB was furious, and henceforth forbade any anti-aircraft fire on any aircraft unless the unit was under direct attack.

The German attack up the Thala road rapidly became a melee. Using a captured British tank to get close, the German armor penetrated the British and Americans and began to kill friendly tanks. Madden, watching from a high ground position, was horrified to see that 37mm guns had absolutely no effect on German tanks. As the Germans continued their effort to push the Americans back on the morning of 22 February, they ran into concentrated artillery fire from the 9th Division artillery, rushed forward during the night. This held up the 10th Panzer Division. Despite furious Luftwaffe air attacks, the Bofors and .50-caliber gunners kept the attackers at bay. And, despite the distinctive twin tail of the American P-38 fighter, friendly gunners shot down several. These fires reportedly came from infantry gunners, however, as the AAA gunners had complied with their orders not to fire unless directly attacked. That afternoon, the 1st Infantry Division counterattacked, recapturing three Bofors guns abandoned by D/105th AAA as well as howitzers left behind by the 33rd Field Artillery. Among the missing from Madden's platoon was his platoon sergeant, who would march into a German prisoner of war cage and remain there for the rest of the war. On 23 February, the Americans cautiously advanced to discover the Germans had withdrawn and the battle was over.

The Army Ground Forces quickly published a pamphlet on lessons learned in October 1943. They learned that air attack on maneuver elements had to be countered and in one division alone, 95 percent of all air attacks were on the field artillery. Units had to prepare effective camouflage of their positions, and friendly air reconnaissance should be used to assess its effectiveness. Hostile aircraft were to be engaged only when the aircraft's hostile intent was clear or it attacked, and when the aircraft were in range. Anti-aircraft weapons had to be manned at all times. Road convoys had to be well dispersed, covered with air lookouts, and the .50 caliber

machinegun had to be positioned throughout the defense, as this weapon had proven to be most effective against hostile aircraft.

We examine history through a lens of current doctrine and experience. Our Army and the threat today are much different than it was in 1943. We are undergoing a significant transformation in order to cope with the threat we face now. As maneuver air defense moves out of the division structure, we should bear in mind the need for combined arms training does not go away. Enemies can still employ air attacks in various forms on maneuver forces, so we should continue to participate in joint and combined arms training operations whenever we have the opportunity. Soldiers require tough, realistic training under conditions as tough as or tougher than actual combat. We must be prepared for combat on short notice. Air defenders must all be trained infantrymen as well as highly specialized Soldiers. We owe that to them, and we owe it to the Soldiers who fought at Kasserine Pass.



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To learn more about the U.S. Army's baptism of fire in the North African Campaign read *An Army At Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* by Rick Atkinson.

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