

# **Road to Ruin: The 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division and the First Battle of El Alamein, July 1942.**

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## **Abstract**

Throughout July 1942, the Allies made numerous attempts to break through the Axis lines at El Alamein, however, these operations were largely unsuccessful and failed to achieve a decisive victory. On 27 July, a final assault against enemy lines was launched with the aim of capturing the key feature of Miteiriya Ridge, commonly referred to as Ruin Ridge. Although the operation met with initial success, the operation ended in complete disaster as the British and Australian infantry involved were surrounded by German tanks and forced to surrender. During this single operation, over 1000 men were lost. The 2/28th Australian Infantry Battalion was virtually wiped out whilst the British 69th Brigade suffered casualties of more than 600 men. Using archival sources held by the Australian War Memorial, this paper analyses the disaster at Ruin Ridge to determine what went wrong. It will be argued that the failure of the operation was due largely to poor operational planning and the failure of armoured support to materialise as planned.

## **Introduction**

A seemingly innocuous railway siding located approximately 100 kilometres west of the key port city of Alexandria on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, El Alamein was the site of three key battles between July and November 1942. The 9th Australian Division played a significant role in each of the three battles, suffering particularly heavy casualties in both the first and third battles. Though the third and final battle (which the Allies would call the second battle of El Alamein) would live on in memory as the most significant, with the battle consistently heralded as a major turning point in the Mediterranean theatre, the July operations under Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck were equally significant. Encompassing a series of operations of both great

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success and devastating failure, the First Battle of Alamein halted the German advance into Egypt and laid the ground work for the decisive victory gained by Auchinleck's successor, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery, three months later.

This paper will examine the disastrous final engagement of 27th July which aimed to capture Miteiriya Ridge, commonly referred to as Ruin Ridge, and break through the enemy lines in the northern sector of the El Alamein frontline. This assault was a complete failure and resulted in the loss of three battalions, including most of the Australian 2/28th Battalion. Using archival and official records held by the Australian War Memorial, it will be argued that the primary causes of the failure of the operation and the heavy losses sustained by the British Eighth Army during the assault were the result of poor operational planning and the failure of armoured support to materialise as planned.

### **Historical context: The Battle for Egypt**

On the eve of the First Battle of Alamein, the Allies had yet to achieve a decisive victory over the Axis forces. Though the Allied war effort was not entirely victory-free prior to July 1942, the war from the Allied perspective was, in the words of Peter Bates, "characterised by failure".<sup>1</sup> As Winston Churchill would later assert, at this point the Allies had yet to attain a decisive victory over Axis forces; Hitler and his allies had by that time occupied much of Europe, while the invasion of Russia, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, had been launched only a few weeks earlier.<sup>2</sup> In the air, Bomber Command was losing men and aircraft at an exponentially high rate and, at sea, the Allies were tied up in the Battle of the Atlantic where German U-boats were creating havoc in the seas between North America and Europe. Major Donald Robert Jackson of the Australian 24th Brigade, noted in his field message book that there was "little doubt there is a great strategic emergency in the Middle East with a real risk of loss of Egypt and all we have fought for over many months."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bates, *Dance of War: The story of the Battle of Egypt*, London, Leo Cooper, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*, London, Cassell, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Robert Jackson, *Autobiography*, AWM, MSS1193, vol. 1, p. 237.

Although the Desert War has long been considered secondary to the greater war in Europe, control of Egypt was critical to maintaining a chance at victory. For this reason, the battles of Alamein have been rightly referred to as the 'Battle for Egypt' by both historians and veterans of Alamein, including Auchinleck himself.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of failing to halt Rommel's advance into Egypt would have been two-fold. Firstly, ultimate victory heavily relied on maintaining naval power in the Mediterranean, with the Sea centrally located within the European theatre. In turn, British naval power and capabilities in the Mediterranean relied upon access to and control of the port city of Alexandria in Egypt. If the port was lost, the naval support for all Middle Eastern and North African campaigns would also be crippled.

Access to the Suez Canal was also integral to the British war effort. Running from the far north east of Egypt to the Red Sea, the Suez Canal was a direct line of communication and key transport route used by the Allies to move troops and materiel between Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific theatres. Without the Suez Canal, Britain would lose the ability to connect with its Commonwealth nations and military interests and resources in India, Asia and the Pacific within a relatively short period of time. The loss of access to the Suez Canal would force the Allies to travel exceedingly longer distances; for example, transport by sea from London to the Middle East base would be forced to divert around the southern tip of Africa on a journey of 6 - 13 weeks.

The Allies also feared a two-pronged attack against British forces based in the Middle East and the Levant. Although hindsight tells us Hitler's 'great pincer movement' to seize control of the Middle East and its oil fields was never a serious plan of action but rather a mere 'consideration,' the threat was all too real for the Allies. A paper submitted by Field Marshal Auchinleck's Middle East Joint Planning Staff warned that, should such an attack eventuate and the Axis forces break through from the north, the Eighth Army would neither the manpower nor the resources to

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<sup>4</sup> Bates, *Dance of War*, p. 6.

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defend both the Suez Canal and Persian oil fields.<sup>5</sup> Given the highly mechanised nature of the Second World War, access to oil reserves was critical to the global war effort, thereby making control of Egypt, the “gateway to the Middle East and its oil fields,” strategically important.<sup>6</sup> As Matthew F. Holland has asserted, the stakes were high and Britain’s “survival” was on the line.<sup>7</sup>

### **Defending the Alamein Line**

In his memoir, *Taradale to Tarakan*, Sergeant Joseph Stokes, 2/7th Australian Field Regiment, wrote of Alamein: “we must have passed through it without noticing it. No wonder ... there was nothing there.”<sup>8</sup> Major Jackson echoed this sentiment, noting that the area to be defended was “an undistinguished and almost featureless piece of Egyptian coastline.”<sup>9</sup> A small railway siding located approximately 100 kilometres west of Alexandria, Egypt, Alamein would indeed appear inconspicuous, however, the strategic potential of the position made it stand out to Allied strategists.

As early as 1939, the Allies acknowledged the Alamein line as a prime position from which to defend Egypt from western invasions and began fortifying the area. Situated along the coastline, Alamein was bordered to the north by the Mediterranean Sea, and the impassable Qattara Depression to the south. Though large in scale at a length of approximately 60 kilometres, this position provided a geographically suitable position from which the Eighth Army could halt the Axis advance. In his previous engagements with the Eighth Army in the Western Desert, flanking manoeuvres were a mainstay in Rommel’s tactical repertoire. The Qattara Depression was characterised by quicksand making it impassable unless Rommel diverted to the south around the Depression and through the Sahara Desert, an unviable manoeuvre given the time and resources required to do so. As such, the battlefield was naturally

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley, *Alamein: The Australian Story*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew F. Holland, *America and Egypt: From Roosevelt to Eisenhower*, Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1996, p. xix.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Placid Stokes, *Taradale to Tarakan*, AWM, MSS1120, 1 of 2, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 240.

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protected from the flanking tactics which Rommel had previously employed to secure victory over the Allies and created a bottleneck which would force the advancing Axis troops to face the Allied army head on if they wanted to open the way to Cairo and the Suez Canal beyond.

### **Arrival at the front**

Australian involvement at El Alamein spanned almost the entirety of the July operations. In the final days of June, 9th Division received orders to move out and head south. Australian involvement was a closely guarded secret and all efforts were made to keep their movement to the front under wraps: division insignias and badges were obscured with oil and dust and non-identifiable uniforms worn, communications were continued in Syria to signal the Division was still in place, an indirect route along the inland road was taken and main towns bypassed, where possible.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, as a number of soldier accounts testify, this was all spoiled by the one thing that gave away their Australian identity to all who saw the column pass: their characteristic tan boots.<sup>11</sup>

9th Division arrived at El Alamein on 5th July and were promptly directed to take up position at the El Alamein Box in the front's northern sector. Within days of arriving, the Division found itself preparing for its first assault on the enemy lines at Tel el Eisa. The assault on Tel el Eisa was the greatest success of the July operations for both the Australians and the Eighth Army. It would also be the last operational victory in July, with each subsequent operation failing to capture and hold its objectives and resulting in high casualties.

### **Ruin Ridge**

This series of failed operations culminated in the final operation of the month, Operation Manhood, which was arguably the most disastrous and costly July

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<sup>10</sup> David Coombes, *The Greatest Rat: A biography of Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead*, AWM, MSS1795, p. 263; Morshead Papers, Operations orders 9 Div June-September 1942, AWM, 3DRL/2632, 6/23.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 236.

operation for 9th Division. Manhood aimed to capture Ruin Ridge, a particularly important feature in the northern sector. The ridge provided a clear view over the otherwise featureless expanse of the Western Desert, making it a key point to capture. Ruin Ridge had been the target of previous assaults and Manhood was the third attempt to capture the ridge.

The plan of attack called for the participation of not only the Australian 24th Brigade, but also the 1st South African Division, the British 69th Brigade, and the 2nd Armoured Brigade. The capture of Ruin Ridge itself was given to the 9th Australian Division who tasked the 2/28th Battalion with capturing the easternmost point of the ridge. The 69th Brigade was ordered to capture and consolidate along a stretch of the Qattara Road to the south of the Australian objective. Once these objectives were secured, the 2/43rd Battalion who would move in on the right flank of the 2/28th Battalion and consolidate westwards along the ridge. The 1st Armoured Division were then to push through the 69th's position and exploit further west into the rear areas of the German line where they would 'do the dirty on the enemy's armour and L of C [Line of Communication].'<sup>12</sup> The 1st South African Division was responsible for clearing gaps in the minefields for the advance of each of the other units.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the operation was flawed from the beginning and unsurprisingly ended in disaster. Major Jackson noted that "part of the key to Australian successful operations has always been careful preparation, study of the arena, and if possible, a little rehearsal."<sup>14</sup> This statement was validated by the successful capture of Tel el Eisa which epitomised a well-planned attack and involved careful planning, reconnaissance and preparation. In the case of the Tel el Eisa operation launched on 10 July, the participating units had fully prepared in the day leading up to the attack. In the 2/48th Battalion's unit war diary, the Battalion's

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<sup>12</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> War diary, 2/43rd Infantry Battalion, AWM52, 8/3/35/21.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 245.

commanding officer, Major General H.H. Hammer, wrote of the preparations for the assault:

As far as possible the attack was made to resemble what the Bn would actually do and a close check was kept on times and distances. Coys assume the same places as they will in the attack and the ground chosen was similar to the ground to be captured. Much was learned from the exercise and it will prove invaluable for the real attack.<sup>15</sup>

In comparison, little time was given to prepare for the assault on Ruin Ridge. Orders were initially given to launch the attack on the evening of 24 July but, given the tiredness of South African and British troops involved, the decision was made to postpone the attack to the night of the 26 July.<sup>16</sup> Having known for the better part of 48 hours that they would have the leading role in the assault, the Australian contingent had made the most of the time available by rehearsing their night attack procedures. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the British and South African units. The British brigade was only included in the assault upon insistence from Morshead who challenged Auchinleck and Lieutenant-General William Ramsden, commander of 30 Corps to whom 9th Division reported, arguing that the plan of attack endangered his men if the armour failed to materialise.<sup>17</sup> The participating units were also repeatedly altered, particularly in the case of the 69th Brigade who constituted a last-minute addition to the order of battle. As a result, any previous co-ordination was rendered null and void.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless, the assault moved ahead as planned and just after midnight on 27 July the 2/28th Battalion moved out and headed south for Ruin Ridge. Stripped of the element of surprise by previous attempts to capture their objective and exposed under the illumination of the bright moonlight, the advancing battalion came under heavy

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<sup>15</sup> War diary, 2/48th Infantry Battalion, 7th July 1942, AWM52, 8/3/36/29.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 257; Stanley and Johnston, *Alamein*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley and Johnston, *Alamein*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

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fire from German positions which “enfiladed the field from both flanks” before covering artillery fire could be laid down.<sup>19</sup> In comparison to the still asleep and entirely unprepared Italian *Sabratha* Division the Australians had faced earlier in the month at Tel el Eisa, the enemy on Ruin Ridge was entirely prepared for a renewed assault on their positions. The German defenders had laced the area with minefields and strengthened their defences with numerous gun emplacements.<sup>20</sup> 800 yards out from their objective, 2/28 Battalion encountered one of these newly laid minefields. Leaving sappers behind to clear a gap for their support vehicles, 2/28 Battalion pressed forward to their objective where they broke through the defences of the German 361st Infantry Regiment, all but one company of whom were taken prisoner, wounded or killed in the action.<sup>21</sup> While the Battalion consolidated their position on the objective, the sappers worked on clearing a gap for the supporting arms and transport to pass through.

With a gap cleared in the minefield, the Battalion’s supporting transport began to make their way to the battalion and the slow-moving transport became a prime target for the enemy posts. As hard as the supporting artillery and battalion tried, they could not silence the enemy guns. According to the 24th Brigade’s after action report, “repeated efforts” made by Forward Observation Officers with 2/32nd and 2/43rd Battalions, by mortar detachments from 2/43rd Battalion, by a party from 2/28 Battalion and even by lone men failed to silence these posts.<sup>22</sup> In a stroke of misfortune for the 2/28th and its transport, an ammunition truck attempting to pass through the gap in the minefield took a direct hit from German guns and exploded. This blocked the gap for the vehicles behind the ammunition truck and also provided a beacon for the German anti-tank gun emplacements which, “aided by its light,” were “able to

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<sup>19</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM54, 527/6/6.

<sup>20</sup> Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War*, London, Jonathon Cape, 2004, p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> Horst Boog, Werner Rahn, Reinhard Stumpf and Bernd Wegner, *Germany and the Second World War, Volume 6, The Global War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, part V.

<sup>22</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM, AWM54, 527/6/6.

knock out almost every other vehicle and finally close the gap by intense and accurate fire.”<sup>23</sup> Sergeant Stokes recalled the moment the truck was hit:

Like giant beacons the burning vehicles lit up the scene. What a picnic the German anti-tank gunners had. The following vehicles clearly silhouetted behind the conflagration made superb targets. As more vehicles exploded in flames ... the confusion was absolute.<sup>24</sup>

While most of advancing transport was decimated by the German guns and the remainder were forced to return to the assembly area, approximately six anti-tank guns managed to pass through the minefield and reach the 2/28th Battalion, which had by 2.42 am restored communication with Brigade Headquarters and transmitted the success signal. The Australians had secured their objective within less than an hour, however, they now found themselves “completely cut off at the most critical period” without any support.<sup>25</sup> Though the 2/28th Battalion endured a night of heavy shelling from the German artillery, which “had their position ranged to a tee,” according to Private R.J. Sharp, ‘the chaps were not perturbed as it was also heard that our tanks and another infantry Bn were arriving in the morning [to reinforce the unit]’.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, the British 69th Brigade moved out to secure their objective only 30 minutes after the 2/28th. Alerted to the assault by the preceding Australian attack, the German defenders were prepared for the 69th Brigade who met heavy resistance as they approached the section of the Qattara Road that was their target. Like their Australian counterparts, the British brigade encountered an extensive minefield which they were forced to cross without thought of whether or not the field was ‘live’

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<sup>23</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM, AWM54, 527/6/6.

<sup>24</sup> Stokes, *Taradale to Tarakan*, AWM, MSS1120, 1 of 2, p. 215.

<sup>25</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM, AWM54, 527/6/6.

<sup>26</sup> Leslie W. Watkins, *As I remember it*, AWM, MSS1587, p. 55; Statement by Pte R.J. Sharp – captured El Alamein July 1942, AWM, AWM54, 627/1/3.

or not.<sup>27</sup> In what Niall Barr refers to as a “tragic repetition” of 2/28 Battalion’s predicament on Ruin Ridge, the two battalions of 69th Brigade lost communications while their supporting arms also failed to arrive.<sup>28</sup> Although an Australian liaison party attached to the 69th Brigade from the 2/28th Battalion described the Brigade’s advance as “disorganised” from the beginning, with men from each company interspersing so that there was little semblance of the ordered formation in which they had crossed the start line, the 69th Brigade was eventually successful in securing its objective, albeit tentatively.<sup>29</sup>

In a fatal blow to both the 2/28th Battalion and the 69th Brigade, the 2nd Armoured Brigade, which was meant to support their consolidation at first light, failed to press forward. Having moved to its concentration area at midnight, the 2nd Armoured Brigade was in position to provide support to the struggling Australian and British troops. However, due to the loss of communication with the 69th Brigade, there was confusion as to the exact location of the Brigade and whether it was on objective and whether a gap in the minefields had been cleared. Although zero hour for 2nd Armoured Brigade was set at dawn, the armour postponed its advance as they were not ‘satisfied’ that gaps in the minefield had been sufficiently cleared.<sup>30</sup> According to a report by the Chief Engineer for the Eighth Army, Brigadier Kisch, 1st Armoured Division had abjectly refused to order the advance of its Brigade until they were “100% certain” the minefields in their path had been cleared.<sup>31</sup> With the failure of the 2nd Armoured Brigade to move forward, the 2/28th was left to face the enemy counterattack alone.

As the 2/28th attempted to dig in and consolidate along their position in the face of overwhelming enemy forces, the 24th Brigade tried in vain to get aid to their

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<sup>27</sup> P.J. Lewis and I.R. English, *Into Battle with the Durhams: 8DLI in World War II*, Unknown, London Stamp Exchange, 1990, p. 129, as quoted by, Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> HQ 9th Division – Report on Operations, 24 Bde, 3 July – Nov 1942, AWM, AWM54, 526/6/5.

<sup>30</sup> Secret and personal messages sent to Blamey by Morshead during El Alamein operations, AWM, AWM54, 527/6/7.

<sup>31</sup> Brig Kisch, Mine Clearance – Operation Night 26/27 Jul., TNA(UK), WO201/679A, as quoted by, Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 181.

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beset battalion. By now, the 2/28th was cut off and increasingly becoming encircled by the enemy tanks and infantry. Back at the assembly area, the Australian troops left behind watched as their comrades in 2/28 Battalion found themselves in an increasingly fraught position. Private Leslie Watkins of the 2/13th Battalion, which did not participate in the assault, recounted how his Commanding Officer had approached Morshead “to offer the Battalion’s willingness to try and extricate the doomed unit from its position.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, the offer was refused. By 0900, the 2/28th had re-established communication with HQ and soon after transmitted a call for armoured reinforcement and increased supporting artillery fire using Morse code. Major Jackson recalled the moment patchy communication was restored: “the first intelligible message put a band round my heart: ‘we are in trouble’.”<sup>33</sup> Artillery support was provided by three field regiments, a total of 72 guns, in an intense five minute bombardment but was largely ineffective.<sup>34</sup> At points, the artillery barrage was halted due to uncertainty surrounding whether the targeted tanks were British, whilst artillery effectiveness was limited by the fact that the enemy tanks were “amongst” the Australian battalion; the Brigade could not lay down a barrage on the marauding tanks without bombing their own battalion in the process.<sup>35</sup>

Morshead was not prepared to commit another infantry battalion to the assault given the heavy German defences and lack of armoured support. Wont to risk losing more men, Morshead made the decision to send in armoured reinforcement in the form of Valentine tanks from the 50th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR). Whilst the Valentines were eventually successful in reaching the ridge to the west of 2/28th Battalion’s position, “no trace” of the battalion was to be found. As a result of this relief effort, 50 RTR came under heavy fire from a ring of German anti-tank gun emplacements and were subsequently forced to return to the assembly area having

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<sup>32</sup> Watkins, *As I remember it*, AWM, MSS1587, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 260.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Watkins, *As I remember it*, AWM, MSS1587, p. 55.

lost 22 tanks in the process.<sup>36</sup> From their position outside the operational area, the 2/13th Battalion found themselves little more than “helpless spectators of this debacle ... tormented by a sense of frustration.”<sup>37</sup> As Private Watkins wrote, “all we could do was watch the 2/28 being taken into captivity.”<sup>38</sup> Surrounded by enemy tanks and without any hope of support, Private R.J. Sharp recalled how the men of the 2/28th ‘held their position until the tanks were practically on top of them, many being crushed by the tanks rolling over their weapon pits’.<sup>39</sup> The final transmission received from the doomed Battalion by to Brigade Headquarters was simple and resigned: “We have got to give in.”<sup>40</sup> By 10.05 am, in the words of Major Jackson, “the battalion was gone”.<sup>41</sup>

Until the 2/28th Battalion was forced to surrender, the 69th Brigade had managed to fend off German counterattacks against its positions however, now that the 2/28th Battalion’s position had been overrun and captured, the 69th Brigade met with the full force of the German counterattack. The panzer groups which had overrun the Australian contingent on Ruin Ridge now turned south towards Qattara Road where they proceeded to cut off the 69th Brigade’s Durham and East Yorks Battalions. Just as their Australian comrades had been forced to give in less than an hour earlier, the 69th Brigade, encircled and under intense enemy fire, was forced to surrender.

With all three battalions now out of action, the situation on the ground took another fateful turn. Only a few days earlier, in an earlier attempt by New Zealand units and the Indian 161st Brigade to capture the nearby Ruweisat Ridge, the 23rd Armoured Brigade mounted a “bold and reckless” headlong charge against enemy positions.<sup>42</sup> With the infantry pinned down by heavy counterattacks and lacking

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<sup>36</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM, AWM54, 527/6/6; Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> Lt G.H. Fearnside, *Bayonets Abroad: A History of the 2/13th Battalion A.I.F. in the Second World War*, Sydney, Waite & Bull, 1953, p. 222.

<sup>38</sup> Watkins, *As I remember it*, AWM, MSS1587, p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> AWM, AWM54, 627/1/3.

<sup>40</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM54, 527/6/6.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 261

<sup>42</sup> Craig Tibbitts, ‘Australians in the First Battle of El Alamein, July 1942,’ *Sabretache XLV*, no. 1, 2004, p. 17.

support, the 23rd Armoured Brigade found itself at the mercy of anti-tank guns and German tanks which “shot them to pieces” and the Brigade found itself virtually wiped out.<sup>43</sup> The Eighth Army was yet to learn from its mistakes and, in a case of *déjà-vu*, the 2nd Armoured Brigade which was by now fully aware of the fate of the infantry failed to call off their attack and instead made a similarly doomed charge against the German defenders along the ridge and the Qattara Road. Without the support of the infantry, the 2nd Armoured Brigade found itself taking heavy fire from German anti-tank guns from multiple directions and under threat from the panzers which had earlier overrun the infantry. Though the Grant tanks were not decimated to the same degree as those at Ruweisat Ridge, it would take the 2nd Armoured Brigade nearly 8 hours to extricate themselves from the battle.

The 2nd Armoured Brigade’s retreat marked the end of the disastrous operation and by the end of the day over 1000 men from the three infantry battalions involved in the operation were missing, dead, wounded or taken prisoner of war. Staff Sergeant Frank Perversi reflected on the gravity of the situation for the Australians in his memoir with incredulity: “On 27 July 42 you see the 2/28th virtually annihilated with the loss of five hundred men --- on ONE day.”<sup>44</sup> Though the operation started successfully with the 2/28th Battalion taking its given objective on time, by the end of the day over 1,000 men from the three infantry battalions involved had been killed or wounded, taken prisoner, or listed as missing in action. The operation was in the end a complete disaster.

### **The blame game: what went wrong**

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, several factors were acknowledged as being directly contributory to the failure of the assault. Following the end of the war, Auchinleck stated that the “fundamental cause” of the disaster at Ruin Ridge was the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> S/Sgt Frank Perversi, *Mirror of Time, 1939-1945*, AWM, MSS1605, p. 66.

lack of enough fresh and well-trained troops.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, it must be said that by the time of the final assault on Ruin Ridge, the troops were war weary and, in many cases, far from full strength. The 69th Brigade, for example, was less a brigade and more a scratch amalgamation of the remnants of the 50th Division.<sup>46</sup> However, it must be noted that the lack of men was partly self-inflicted. In addition to being weary after weeks spent in battle, the Eighth Army had suffered from a Higher Command practice of denuding formations of a large portion of their infantry. Throughout the July campaign, Higher Command had detached large sections of infantry deemed “superfluous” by Auchinleck and sent them to the rear in case the El Alamein position was lost and it became necessary to fight on the Delta.<sup>47</sup> This did not affect the Australian forces directly as Morshead had refused to divide his division and brought forward all of the 9th Division’s infantry, despite Auchinleck’s best attempts to dissuade him from doing so.<sup>48</sup> The various other Commonwealth and British units which comprised the Eighth Army were, however, left far from full strength. In a letter to Australian official historian, Gavin Long, Morshead remarked that Major-General Dan Pienaar, commander of the 1st South African Division, was particularly unhappy when he discovered the Australians had not been prevented from bringing forward the entirety of their infantry as the South African division had been.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, a history of the South Africans’ role at El Alamein wrote of the expectation of 1st South African Brigade to hold a 12 km long front with 1100 infantry, whilst 18 Indian Bde was in the process of despatching two thirds of its men to the Delta Force when it was attacked earlier in the month.<sup>50</sup>

The failure of this final assault on Ruin Ridge was however, a direct result of poor operational planning and the failure of armoured support to materialise. In his

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<sup>45</sup> Gen Sir Claude Auchinleck, *Supplement to The London Gazette*, 15 January 1948, no. 38177, p. 365.

<sup>46</sup> Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 177.

<sup>47</sup> [Operations in the Alamein Position - Reports:] Hard pounding at El Alamein, AWM, AWM54, 526/6/19 PART 1, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Lt Gen Sir Leslie Morshead to Gavin Long, AWM, AWM67, 3/276.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> [Operations in the Alamein Position - Reports:] Hard pounding at El Alamein, AWM, AWM54, 526/6/19 PART 1, p. 12.

after-action report, Brigadier A.H.L. Godfrey, Australian 24th Brigade, attributed the operation's failure largely to issues of operational planning. Firstly, the initial attack made by the 2/28th Battalion and 69th Brigade was made on too narrow a frontage. Rather than subjecting the Germans to a sustained breakthrough, the plan of attack called for two smaller breaches. Coupled with divergent axes of advance, which prevented the troops from maintaining a mutually supportive advance, the Australian and British infantry were susceptible to being flanked and encircled by enemy counter-attack.<sup>51</sup>

Adding to this susceptibility to counterattack was the dependence on the success of other units for the launching of succeeding phases inherent in the plan of attack. In his after action report, Godfrey noted:

Enemy resistance can be broken by the combined action of our art[illery], inf[antry] and t[anks], all working in one coordinated attack, but the isolated actions so dependent on other actions, employed to date, have not met with the success which the forceful, stubborn and gallant fighting of t[roops] of this Bde deserves.<sup>52</sup>

The employment of so many different units in the operation was problematic due to the lack of a central headquarters through which all information was routed. The participating units operated independently rather than as a group, which led to a general lack of cohesion in the assault and manifested in confusion as to the movements and actions of each of the units. As a telling example, the armoured support halted their advance at one point because they saw South African engineers removing mines from the field and assumed that they had failed to clear the minefield; the engineers were merely widening the gap.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Report of the attack on Ruin Ridge by 24 Bde, AWM, AWM54, 527/6/6.

<sup>52</sup> HQ 9th Division – Report on Operations, 24 Bde, 3 July – Nov 1942, AWM, AWM54, 526/6/5.

<sup>53</sup> Barr, *Pendulum of War*, 180.

Given the inherent operational flaws in the assault, the success of the planned armoured breakthrough was necessary to ensure a successful operation. The failure of armoured support to materialise was cited by all levels of the Eighth Army as the direct cause of the operation's failure. Brigadier A.H.L. Godfrey asserted that the cancellation of the armoured breakthrough "led to 2/28 Battalion being exposed on all sides and was mainly responsible for the overrunning of that battalion" whilst Morshead had repeatedly made known his lack of faith in the armour.<sup>54</sup> The Chief Engineer of the Eighth Army, Brigadier Kisch, was particularly scornful of the armoured support in his after action report, noting that 100% certainty in relation to the clearing of minefields was impossible to assure and argued that in the future they should be responsible for clearing its own gaps with its own sappers if they wouldn't trust the minefields to be cleared.<sup>55</sup> Even General Auchinleck himself acknowledged that the "the immediate cause of the failure of this operation was the delay in getting the tanks forward to support" the infantry.<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, it was not simply the failure of the armoured support to move forward as planned which resulted in the heavy casualties, but the failure of 1st Armoured Division to alert the infantry to the extensive delays in their approach. As the 9th Division after action report noted:

Action to notify this Brigade that this exploitation would not take place would have enabled a plan to be put into execution to extricate the battalion from the exposed position in which the failure of other units to make good their objectives had placed it.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Brig A.H.L. Godfrey, HQ 9th Division – Report on Operations, 24 Bde, 3 July – Nov 1942, AWM, AWM54, 526/6/5; Stanley and Johnston, *Alamein*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>55</sup> Brig Kisch, Mine Clearance – Operation Night 26/27 Jul, TNA(UK), WO201/679A, as quoted by Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 181.

<sup>56</sup> Gen Sir Claude Auchinleck, *Supplement to The London Gazette*, 15 January 1948, no. 38177, p. 365.

<sup>57</sup> Brig A.H.L. Godfrey, HQ 9th Division – Report on Operations, 24 Bde, 3 July – Nov 1942, AWM, AWM54, 526/6/5.

Although the operation was predisposed to failure, the disastrous casualties sustained by the attacking force could have been limited if the armour had communicated effectively with the other participating units.

It is important to note that these factors are not unique to Ruin Ridge and may be identified in many of the failed operations during the July campaign. Complaints of insufficient time to prepare for operations and hastily prepared battle plans were exclusive to neither Ruin Ridge specifically, nor the front's northern sector generally. In the southern sector, the New Zealanders echoed the Australian discontent, with Major General Stephen Weir writing that there always appeared to be "a dreadful hurry to stage each of the operations" as if it was "thought that the Germans would take the initiative if [the Allies] didn't."<sup>58</sup> Operational planning was regularly questioned by several officers throughout the July operations. Speaking of the earlier 22nd July attack on Ruin Ridge, Major Jackson commented on the apparent over-extension of forces in his memoir, remarking that "the Corps plan for [the Australian] part is ambitious and smacks a little of someone with a small map and large chinagraph pencil."<sup>59</sup> Likewise, on a number of occasions Morshead had questioned plans of attack noting that they were often "ambitious" and left his troops "dangerously vulnerable."<sup>60</sup> The disaster at Ruin Ridge was evidence that these concerns were well-founded.

## Conclusion

Following this disastrous final attempt to break through in the northern, both Auchinleck and Rommel halted offensive action and moved to a defense standing to prepare for a major counter-offensive. The Allied casualty list for this final assault on Ruin Ridge was a set of "savage and unhappy figures": from the officer class, 10 were

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<sup>58</sup> Letter, Weir to Kippenberger, 20 June 1949, quoted in, Pugsley, *A bloody road home*, Auckland, New Zealand Penguin, 2014, p. 295.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p.255.

<sup>60</sup> Tibbitts, 'Australians in the First Battle of El Alamein, July 1942,' p. 17.

killed, 22 wounded and 25 listed as missing, whilst 109 men were killed, 490 wounded, and 672 listed as missing from the other ranks.<sup>61</sup>

Responsibility for the failure of the July campaign to achieve a decisive victory has often been attributed to Auchinleck personally, and numerous historians have described his command of the Eighth Army at El Alamein as inept. While there were several issues that contributed to the failure of the operation, some of which may be directly tied to Auchinleck's command, it was poor operational planning and the failure of armoured support that ultimately resulted in the disaster at Ruin Ridge. Importantly, these issues were not unique to the Ruin Ridge assault and may be identified throughout the July campaign as a whole.

Although the July operations were largely characterised by failure, it is important to note that, although Auchinleck and his army failed to defeat their enemy, they were successful in halting the Axis advance and inflicting crippling casualties on Rommel's army, particularly within the ranks of its Italian units. Though the July operations at El Alamein were hit and miss in terms of success, the ultimate objective of halting the advance of the Rommel's forces into Egypt was met. Over the course of July, the groundwork was laid for the Allied victory that occurred three months later, with Auchinleck's successor, General Bernard Montgomery, who had learnt from the mistakes that handicapped earlier operations.

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<sup>61</sup> Jackson, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 262.