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A Battle to Win:
An analysis of Combat Effectiveness
through the Second World War experience
of the
21st (Auckland) Battalion

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the Second World War experience of the 21st (Auckland) Battalion to create a combat effectiveness model of unit-level ground combat for modern application. Most of the literature concerning combat effectiveness of land forces, and why combatants win or lose, has analysed very large military organisations, often of American, British or German origin. Little analysis has been set at battalion level or lower, and none on New Zealand troops. Much of the most important research has emphasised formulae, factors and coefficients to construct a mathematical model of combat to either account for victory in past battles, or to predict it for those in the future. This approach provides realism to computer-based simulations and games and is of assistance to Operations researchers, but it does not help historians or the general reader account for victory, nor does it help soldiers prepare for combat in the future.

This research uses combat analysis methodology to examine eight battles fought by the 21st (Auckland) Battalion in Egypt, North Africa and Italy between April 1941 and December 1943. It found that the 21st (Auckland) Battalion was raised specifically for war service, and was prepared for combat largely by its own men, some of whom had a modicum of inter-war Territorial army service, and a very few had First World War combat experience. It found that the battalion was ineffective in its earlier battles, but as it gained in experience, its combat effectiveness improved, despite changes in personnel due to casualties and furlough drafts. The research shows that novice Italian and German infantry units exhibited the same lack of combat effectiveness as the 21st (Auckland) Battalion did in its initial battles.

The study found that no battle examined was alike. Each was a battle to win, despite the odds. Superior strength was found to be a reasonable determinant of victory, but leadership and will to fight, along with the tactics employed and the terrain over which the battle was fought, all impacted significantly on the outcome of the battles analysed. The study found that the 21st (Auckland) Battalion, as a microcosm of all of the 2nd New Zealand Divisions infantry units, evolved towards a preference for night operations as a means of reducing vulnerability to enemy small arms fire, and as a way of achieving surprise over the enemy. It discovered that the willingness of New Zealand infantrymen to take over, rather than take cover, once their leaders had become casualties, was also a significant contributor to combat effectiveness.

DEDICATION

For Allan, Bill, Brian, Bryan, Clem, Don, Gordon and Jack and to all those who served in the
21st (Auckland) Battalion,

and

for all the other “PBI” of the 2nd New Zealand Division.

“Lest we forget”

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Glossary of Abbreviations, Tactical Terms and Axis Regimental Nomenclature

Abbreviations

Adv	Advance
Anzac	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
Armd	Armoured
Arty	Artillery
A TK	Anti- Tank
BDE/ Bde	Brigade
BGS	Brigadier General Staff. An officer, of Brigadier rank, who was the senior operations staff officer on a corps headquarters.
BM	The Brigade Major. This senior major was the operations officer at brigade headquarters.
BN/ Bn	Battalion
Brig	Brigadier
BTY/ Bty	Artillery battery (six guns usually). The artillery equivalent of an infantry company.
CAPT/ Capt	Captain
CO	Commanding Officer
COL/ Col	Colonel
COMD/Comd	Command or Commander
COY/Coy	Company (as in A Coy, B Coy etc)
CPL/ Cpl	Corporal
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery. The senior artillery commander within division headquarters.
DIV/ Div	Division
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
DOW	Died of Wounds
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
Fd Regt	Field Regiment (an artillery regiment of field guns)
FDL	Forward Defence Line. The most forward defensive positions.
GOC	General Officer Commanding (Divisional Commander). 'The GOC' is assumed to mean General Freyberg unless otherwise stated.
Gp	Group
Gren	Grenadier (German organisation such as Panzer Grenadier)
GSO	General Staff Officer (A staff officer at brigade, division or corps headquarters). A GSO1 was a staff officer of Lieutenant Colonel rank, a GSO2 a Major and a GSO3 a Captain.
Hrs	Hours (as in 0900 hrs)
Inf	Infantry
IO	Intelligence Officer
KIA	Killed in Action
LOB	Left out of battle
LTCOL/ Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
MAJ/ Maj	Major
MC	Military Cross

Med Regt	Medium Regiment (of artillery)
MG	Machinegun
MM	Military Medal
Mor	Mortar
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
OC	Officer Commanding. Usually refers to the commander of a company sized organisation.
OP	Observation Post
OR	Other Ranks. Referring to all personnel from Private to Warrant Officer Class One/ Regimental Sergeant Major as a group, as distinct from the commissioned officers.
PBI	Poor Blood Infantry
Pdr	Pounder. Usually in relation to the 6 pdr anti-tank gun or 25 pdr field gun.
PIAT	Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank.
Pl	Platoon
Posn	position
POW	Prisoner of War
Pte	Private
PW	Prisoner of War
Pz	Panzer
Regt	Regiment
Rft	Reinforcement
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major. The senior Warrant Officer within a unit.
SA	Small Arms (pistol, rifles etc)
Sec	Section, as in a rifle section
SGT/ Sgt/Sjt	Sergeant
Sp/ Spt	Support
Str	Strength
SQN/ Sqn	Squadron. Tank or cavalry equivalent of an infantry company.
TF	Territorial Force
Tk(s)	Tank(s)
WIA	Wounded in Action
W/T	Wireless/ telegraph- often refers to a wireless set or message.

Tactical Terms¹

Combined Arms	The synchronized or simultaneous application of several arms- such as infantry, armour and artillery to achieve an effect on the enemy that is greater than if each were used in isolation or in sequence.
Decisively engaged	An engagement where a unit is considered fully committed and cannot manoeuvre to extricate itself. As a result, the action must be fought to a conclusion and either won or lost with the forces at hand.

¹ All definitions quoted are based closely or entirely on Headquarters Department of Army FM 1-02 *Operational Graphics and Terms*, September 2004, pp. 1-37, 1-53, 1-54, 1-61, 1-97, 1-108, 1-126, 1-130 and 1-135.

Defeat in detail	Concentrating overwhelming combat power against separate parts of a force in sequence rather than defeating the entire force at once.
Direct Fire	Gunfire directed on a target using the target itself as the point of aim.
Indirect Fire	Fire delivered on a target that is not itself used as the point of aim.
Key Terrain	Any locality or area, the seizure or retention of which, affords a marked advantage to either combatant.
Mission	The task that clearly indicates the action that is to be taken. In the modern context, the mission would also indicate the reason for the action.
Mutual support	That support which units (or positions) render each other against an enemy because of their positions relative to each other.
Objective	The specific target of the action taken. For example, a definite terrain feature, the seizing or holding of which is essential to achieving the mission.

Axis Regimental Nomenclature

German infantry and panzer regiments (roughly equivalent to Commonwealth brigades) contained three infantry (or panzer) battalions. These were designated using Roman numerals as the I, II and III battalions of whichever regiment they were from.

At Platamon for example, 21 Battalion was attacked by the *I Battalion of 304 Infantry Regiment* and the *I Battalion of 3 Panzer Regiment*. These are identified in the narrative and maps within this study as I/304 Inf Regt and I/ 3 Pz Regt.

The Italian forces had a similar system. At Miteiriya Ridge, 21 Battalion attacked *II/ 62 Battalion* of the *Trento Division*.