

'Something is wrong with our army...'
*Command, Leadership & Italian Military Failure in the First
Libyan Campaign, 1940-41.*

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There is no question that the First Libyan Campaign of 1940-41 was an Italian military disaster of the highest order. Within hours of Mussolini's declaration of war British troops began launching a series of very successful raids by air, sea and land in the North African theatre. Despite such early setbacks a long-anticipated Italian invasion of Egypt began on 13 September 1940. After three days of ponderous and costly advance, elements of the Italian 10th Army halted 95 kilometres into Egyptian territory and dug into a series of fortified camps southwest of the small coastal village of Sidi Barrani. From 9-11 December, these camps were attacked by Western Desert Force (WDF) in the opening stages of *Operation Compass* – the British counter-offensive against the Italian invasion. Italian troops not killed or captured in the rout that followed began a desperate and disjointed withdrawal back over the Libyan border, with the British in pursuit. The next significant engagement of the campaign was at the port-village Bardia, 30 kilometres inside Libya, in the first week of 1941. There the Australian 6 Division, having recently replaced 4 Indian Division as the infantry component of WDF (now renamed 13 Corps), broke the Italian fortress and its 40,000 defenders with few casualties. The feat was repeated at the port of Tobruk, deeper into Libya, when another 27,000 Italian prisoners were taken. After further success at Derna, 6 Division entered Benghazi on 7 February 1941, while 7 Armoured Division blocked and destroyed the remnants of the 10th Army trying to flee Cyrenaica at Beda Fomm.

The campaign was over. After ten weeks, 13 Corps had advanced 800 km, destroyed or captured about 400 tanks and around 1,300 artillery pieces, and captured 130,000 Italian prisoners (including 22 generals), along with a vast quantity of war material. This was accomplished at a cost of only 494 killed. It was a distinctly one-sided affair. The question, however, is why?

For all of the ethnic slurs and cultural stereotyping levelled at Italian military performance in North Africa by historians and popular authors, the last 70 years has seen relatively little research effort invested into identifying the real military disadvantages under which Mussolini's soldiers in this theatre fought. Notable exceptions in this regard include the work of historians like MacGregor Knox and James Sadkovich. Even these authors, however, along with the biographers and political historians of the Fascist regime at war, have tended to focus their attention at a strategic and institutional level. This paper takes an opposite approach by looking from the bottom up rather than from the top down. More specifically, it will attempt to help contextualise poor Italian battlefield performance in the First Libyan Campaign. Contrary to a dominant but misguided tradition, explanations based on ethnicity or 'national character' are not required. The old tune that somewhere – somehow – Italian military culture was to blame, is insufficient. Rather, the rout of the 10th Army is best understood as a consequence of clear, measurable, objective, military factors. In this regard, a comparative analysis, on a tactical and operational level, especially of the key issue of command and leadership, forms a far more objective base upon which to build an understanding of Italian military failure in Libya. In making such comparisons, from an Allied perspective, I will focus specifically on 6 Division, as this formation was much closer in form and structure to its Italian counterparts than was 7 Armoured Division.

Let us be clear from the outset. In terms of command function, the Australians enjoyed a clear and significant advantage which had a material effect on the outcome of the campaign. Italian leadership at all levels in North Africa *was* exposed as faulty compared to their adversaries and this mismatch *was* an important influence on the battlefield. At the same time, as we shall see, there were reasons behind it, or an

explanation of it, which had little to do with innate Italian ethnicity or “military culture”.¹

Well before the outbreak of war in North Africa, Italian strategic-level leadership had already shown itself to be fundamentally flawed. From the very top the sudden, rash and grand speculations of what Douglas Porch called Mussolini’s “strategic attention deficit disorder”, and subsequent entry into the war with all the “spectacular but uncontrolled trajectory of a bottle rocket”, set the scene for future problems.² The Mediterranean could, and always should, have been the centre of gravity for the Italian military effort, but in 1940–41 Mussolini quickly diluted what strength Italy possessed by multiple commitments in France, East Africa, the Battle of Britain, in preparations to attack southern Switzerland, and for a massive proposed drive on Yugoslavia. This did not include subsequent misadventures in Greece or naval commitments to the Battle of the Atlantic. Mussolini’s constant vacillation, scatter-gun approach to campaign planning, and vague platitudes that the British were no longer “the stuff of Sir Francis Drake” revealed a remarkable level of strategic ineptitude at the most senior level.³

Lacking Mussolini’s faith or trust, and generally kept as uninformed as the Germans about his strategic intentions, senior Italian officers quickly proved themselves incapable of high-level command. They were, as a group, too often over-age and lacking in physical robustness, initiative, self-confidence, professional curiosity and basic competence. They did not know the true military capability of their army and proved difficult to shake into reform, even by failure. Even after 1940, the army tended not to remove incompetents, as it had done in the previous war. A system of rewarding Fascist fervour, patronage, social connection and favour saw commanders who actually fled from battle redeployed to high command. At the same time rivals were often cut down for non-military reasons. Mistrust, rivalry, personal feuding and intrigue abounded. With the exception of those killed or captured, the overwhelming majority of incompetent senior Italian commanders who began the war finished it in the same or higher positions. In December 1940, WDF Headquarters specifically identified the fact that four senior

¹ Very little academic or analytical work has been done in English on the factors behind ineffective Italian leadership at all levels of command. What has been produced is generally descriptive and narrative. Authors seem to have a good understanding of the problems but far less as to what was behind them. Far more work is yet to be done.

² D. Porch, *Hitler’s Mediterranean Gamble: the North African and the Mediterranean Campaigns in World War II* (Cassell: London, 2005), pp. 71 & 72.

³ ‘Axis Plans and Operations in the Mediterranean, September 1939–February 1941’, Enemy Documents Section, Historical Branch, Cabinet Office, March 1950, The National Archives (UK) (TNA), CAB146/1; Knox, M., *Hitler’s Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 73–78.

Italian officers in North Africa held command as a political reward – not as a consequence of tactical acumen or proven ability.⁴ Throughout the war high-level promotion in the Italian Army remained based on seniority, not combat proficiency. As late as September 1942, Marshal Ugo Cavallero, Chief of the Supreme General Staff, had to direct that general officer replacements be considered ‘proficient’ rather than be automatically selected from the most senior (on paper) candidates.⁵

Serious personal friction within the senior Italian officer corps also had real operational implications in North Africa. At the highest level Mussolini, apprehensive of the popularity of the Chief of the Italian Supreme General Staff, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, actively undercut his authority and in December 1940 forced his resignation as the scapegoat for failure in Albania and Greece. His replacement by Marshal Ugo Cavallero, considered unjust by the wider senior officer corps, increased dissatisfaction within the armed forces.⁶ It also effectively removed any chance of unified or centralised tri-service command. For his part, before he was removed Badoglio had consistently sought to undermine Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, the most senior Italian general and in overall command in North Africa. At the same time General Ubaldo Soddu, Badoglio’s deputy, plotted his superior’s downfall while feuding with Major General Giacomo Carboni of military intelligence.⁷ Soddu went on to scheme against and supplant General Sebastiano Prasca, commander of Italian forces in Albania, and was derided by Count

⁴ In 1940 there were Italian colonels aged in their early 50s, divisional commanders in their late 50s and higher commanders in their 60s. ‘Bardia: Account of Operations of 13 Corps, December 1940–January 1941’, TNA, CAB106/383; A. Kesselring, ‘Italy as a Military Ally’, D.S. Detwiler, (et al.), *World War II German Military Studies: A Collection of 213 Special Reports on the Second World War prepared by Former Officers of the Wehrmacht for the United States Army*, Vol. 14 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), p. 13; Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, pp. 29 & 119–20; Knox, ‘Expansionist zeal, fighting power and staying power in the Italian and German dictatorships’, R. Bessel, (ed.), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 126.

⁵ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, p. 121.

⁶ For a substantial period of his career Cavallero was concerned entirely with business rather than with soldiering. He was never liked or admired by those with whom he served. In February 1940, the Duke of Aosta (Viceroy in Ethiopia) was happy to be rid of him and described Cavallero as pig-headed, stupid, and ignorant of military matters. In reality, Cavallero was more of a civilian than a soldier and before the war unfavourably compared to Graziani in Italian circles. When appointed as Chief of the Supreme General Staff the rumour circulated that his married daughter was Ciano’s mistress, thus assisting the appointment. Cavallero was also involved in a scandal regarding the Ansaldo Company where he was accused of profiting from the supply of inferior military goods. Report, ‘Personalities of Leading Italian Generals, 28 November 1942’, TNA, WO208/4699; H. Greiner, ‘Support of Italy in Fall and Winter 1940–1941’, Detwiler, (et al.), *World War II German Military Studies*, Vol. 7, p. 29.

⁷ US Military Intelligence Report (Italy), No. 17 965, 10 June 1941, Microfilm 798, Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) Library, Canberra; Porch, *Hitler’s Mediterranean Gamble*, p. 80; Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, p. 117.

Ciano in that “for him the important strategy is not the one directed at the Greeks but the one directed at the Palazzo Venezia”.⁸ The situation was all but untenable. With their fates bound up in webs of patronage and reputation, many senior officers shied away from reporting military facts accurately. Too often the “object of each commander’s reports was not to tell the truth but to advance himself and belittle his rivals in the eyes of the Duce”.⁹ At the very beginning of the Libyan Campaign the disastrous defeat at Sidi Barrani and the intrigue it spawned widened the many fractures within the upper levels of the army.

In addition, for the duration of the war neither the Italian service chiefs nor the Supreme General Staff ever actually planned a campaign in the sense of defining a set of coherent operational steps designed to lead to the achievement of an attainable end. At the outbreak of hostilities, Italian senior officers responded to Mussolini’s misguided energy with inertia and fatalism. Only in the wake of Hitler’s success in Western Europe was Mussolini able to force action from men more eager to wait for the Germans to defeat Britain before becoming involved in any conflict. Even after the fall of France, senior command incompetence and passive dissent against the Fascist government ensured no real operational plans were formed. Certainly no coordinated strategy for operations in North Africa was crafted despite a clear direction from Mussolini in 1936 for his military chiefs to prepare for a possible war to secure access to the oceans through Africa – which would inevitably require capturing Egypt. The Italian high command neither stood in Mussolini’s way nor supported his decisions with realistic preparations. When at last pushed to action in North Africa, rather than accept responsibility for the strategic morass they had helped to create, the Italian high command indulged in wishful thinking. Graziani’s fateful advance was the result and Italian soldiers paid the price.¹⁰

There were some deep-rooted explanations for such high level command dysfunction in 1940–41. First, military service in Italy was never considered a prestigious career. As a result the Italian officer corps did not have the social standing of its German or British equivalents. This often meant, in the words of Italian politician Giovanni Giolitti, that the army got “the stupidest son of the family”.¹¹ Despite the centrality of concepts such as citizen soldiery and compulsory military service to the philosophy of the Fascist state, Mussolini was unable to reverse such

⁸ H. Gibson, (ed.) *The Ciano Diaries: the Complete Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1936–1943* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973), p. 325.

⁹ G. Long, *To Benghazi* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1952), p. 118.

¹⁰ Rintelen, ‘The German – Italian Cooperation During World War II’, Detwiler, (et al.), *World War II German Military Studies*, Vol. 14, p. 18; Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, pp. 70, 89–90 & 112.

¹¹ Knox, ‘Expansionist zeal, fighting power and staying power in the Italian and German dictatorships’, p. 119.

social perceptions to any significant degree. In this regard, his regime's reach never matched its rhetoric. The army's resultant inability to attract talent from the upper-middle classes, combined with widespread exemptions and evasion of service by educated elites, robbed the force of much-needed leadership and drive. On top of this, Mussolini's original compromises with the military, while helping him into power, curtailed his ability to interfere with how the armed forces were structured and run as war approached. No amount of Fascist propaganda could hide these essential truths.¹²

Problems with high-level command in the interwar period contributed directly to a failure to embed modern war fighting doctrine within the Italian Army. Divergent conceptual frameworks soon became important contributors to Italian difficulties and British/Australian success throughout *Operation Compass*. By 1941, most extant Italian Army operational theory had not evolved significantly from the early stages of World War I. In a strange sort of reversal, after 1918 Italian military leadership returned to pre-war fighting concepts. The emerging idea of the combat group, for example, was repudiated as the basic infantry unit. Instead Italian policymakers wound the clock back to focus once again on a cult of the offensive, with a renewed concentration on attacking speed and élan. The presence of *Arditi*, Italian assault troops used in World War I to penetrate trench systems using grenades and hand-to-hand combat, during 10th Army's initial invasion of Egypt was clear evidence of such backward-looking philosophies. There was a consistent tendency between the wars to downplay the importance of firepower over mass, a lesson hard won and deeply impressed upon other European armies. Perhaps as a consequence of the Italian front being twice ruptured, at Caporetto and Vittorio Veneto, the emphasis was on men (and to a lesser degree movement) rather than fire. This, of course, ignored the fact that it was firepower that enabled German and Austrian breaches of the Italian defensive line in both cases. In a defensive context, the trench-born concept of preventing any breakthrough, (the overall plan at Bardia and Tobruk), held firm sway over any emerging ideas of defensive elasticity. Such thinking was a return to the ideas to which European armies ascribed in 1914, but not by 1940.¹³ In the lead up to World War II, Italy had the choice to create a small, mobile and professional force or to spread resources across a large poorly equipped and infantry-based organisation. It chose the latter – to quote Macgregor Knox – “a First World War army for a war of machines”.¹⁴ Italy's “eight million

¹² R. Trye, *Mussolini's Soldiers* (Shrewsbury: Airline, 1995), p. 16; Porch, *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble*, pp. 80–81.

¹³ 'A French View of Italian Infantry', October 1928, US Military Intelligence Report (Italy), No. 11 219, 12 November 1928, Microfilm 798, ADFA Library, Canberra.

¹⁴ Knox, 'The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43', A.R. Millett, & W. Murray, (eds.), *Military Effectiveness, Vol 3: The Second World War* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1982), p. 154.

bayonets” were seen by Mussolini and his generals as its strength. The concentration on mass was, in fact, a portent of considerable weakness.

The misguided Italian faith in numbers endured well into the war despite the examples set in Poland and France. Such a principle proved inflexible in application and suffocating of necessary innovation. The theory behind new Italian “binary” divisions (themselves spawned in a drive for numbers), for example, was that they should *only* be deployed in frontal attacks. Italian military theorists considered flanking manoeuvres to be the purview of corps-level operations. Associated with the doctrine of mass was the idea of the primacy of the infantry. Armour, by consequence, was seen predominantly as an infantry support weapon which retarded the development of effective tank doctrine and vehicles in the interwar period.¹⁵ Senior Italian generals warned against “idolising” the tank at the expense of the “infantryman and the mule”.¹⁶ Even after the war began Marshal Badoglio’s response to German mechanised methods in mid-1940 was to quip that “we’ll study it when the war is over”.¹⁷ Only after Bardia fell did Cavallero recognise the importance of quality over sheer numbers.¹⁸ By then, of course, it was far too late for the 10th Army in Libya.

The impact of such infantry-centric Italian doctrine in the Western Desert was profound. A fundamental corollary of this line of thought was the idea that headquarters, administrative, service and support personnel were not supposed to fight – that was the role of the infantry and its supporting arms. This was a deeply-held conviction and a standard operating principle. It was also completely at odds with prevailing Australian, British and German practice. On the eve of battle at Bardia, for example, Lieutenant Colonel Viv England, commanding the Australian 2/4 Battalion, reminded his administrative troops that ‘every man, no matter how specialised his job, must be prepared to take his place as a fighter and be able to use the various infantry weapons effectively’.¹⁹ Their Italian equivalents were neither prepared to fight, nor did they consider combat as their responsibility. At many points of battle during the campaign there was never any attempt at all-around defence at Italian depth positions because there was no expectation that these areas could or would offer sustained resistance. This is the basic reason why once the Australians were inside the Italian perimeters at Bardia and Tobruk so many defenders surrendered without firing a shot. A high proportion of Italians encountered in

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 151–59.

¹⁶ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, pp. 54–55.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁹ Instruction, ‘2/3 Battalion Training of Specialist Personnel’, 9 November 1940, 2/3 Battalion War Diary, Australian War Memorial (AWM), Series 52, Item 8/3/3.

such areas were base and technical troops. Combat was not their job. This was not cowardice, nor was it, as some authors would have us believe, anything to do with a reputation for hand-to-hand fighting won by the Australians in the last war. Rather, it was the product of accepted and institutionalised thinking on the part of, and about, such soldiers. Nor was North Africa the only example of the consequences of such a philosophy. On a much larger scale it was repeated, for instance, in the rout of Italian forces along the Don on the Eastern Front in early 1943.²⁰

A second serious Italian doctrinal shortcoming exposed in the Western Desert was a complete lack of tri-service integration or cooperation. There was simply no effective organisational framework linking the three Italian services and no force structures to implement joint operations even had there been a desire to do so. Until 1941, and in part thereafter, Italian air staffs devoted as little thought as possible to the conduct and coordination of ground support, air transport, supply drops or paratrooper operations. Across North Africa, the three services fought essentially separate campaigns. The air force, in particular, rejected the idea of ground support for it seemed to imply subordination to the army.²¹ This is not to suggest that the RAF or Royal Navy were integrated fully with ground forces at every level in 1941, or that British air commanders did not conceive of a separate air role. Indeed, the lack of British “jointness” compared to the Germans was subsequently exploited by Rommel, but during the Libyan Campaign the doctrinal gap was clear. Indeed, official Australian and British post-battle analysis specifically identified ‘joint operations’ as a key determinant of victory.²²

It would be misleading to suggest that there was a complete absence of doctrinal innovation in the Italian Army in the interwar period. To the contrary, there were certain elements of high-level Italian Army policy developed that seemed to suit a modern conflict in the Western Desert. In particular, the concept of *la guerra di rapido corso* [war of rapid decision] appeared to offer what was required. This notion involved mechanisation, speed and manoeuvre, with a focus on surprise and flexibility in planning. It led to the creation in Italy before the war of an armoured corps, two motorised divisions and other ‘mobile’ formations. The problem was that intellectual awareness in some quarters was not enough. Such doctrine was meaningless without the equipment, technical and industrial support to back it up. It was also one thing for a small proportion of senior officers to come up with such ideas, but gaining their acceptance with more than “lip-service” and, more importantly, putting them into

²⁰ R. Griffiths-Marsh, *The Sixpenny Soldier* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1990), p. 112; P. Charlton, *The Thirty-Niners* (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1981), p. 115; Knox, ‘The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43’, p. 166; Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, p. 151.

²¹ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, p. 114; Knox, ‘The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43’, pp. 151 & 156.

²² Southern Command Training Memorandum No. 1/1941, ‘Tactical Lessons from the Battle of Bardia’, AWM 54, 521/2/4; *The Destruction of an Army*, p. 40.

practice, was something else entirely. The biggest obstacle in this regard was the conservative, narrow-minded and conventional attitudes of the bulk of the Italian officer corps which passively impeded the implementation of such innovations, so clearly at odds with traditional procedures. Nor could modern operational concepts hope to find real traction when even basic military principles such as “concentration of force” or “surprise” were neither grasped nor implemented by Italian field commanders in North Africa. Moreover, any attempt to engender speedy decision-making was undermined by command arrangements that encouraged sluggish, static procedures. The point was well made at Tobruk, for example, where the absence of sufficient communications rendered links to subordinate units precarious at best. The consequence was that Italian commanders at all levels within the fortress were poorly informed about tactical situations and had little capacity to react.²³ What was left was what was remembered from the last war – ponderous movement, a desire to “occupy” ground, and an unhealthy fixation with fortifications.

Misplaced Italian faith in numbers and outdated doctrine, combined with a general inability to accept or implement any innovative ideas that did emerge, encouraged Lieutenant General Henry “Jumbo” Wilson, commanding British troops in Egypt, to describe his foe as a predictable and “stereotyped” sort of enemy.²⁴ By contrast, the Italians faced an adversary with no such impediments. General Archibald Wavell, British commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, was not only conscious of the latest British doctrinal developments but had himself authored new British Field Service Regulations in 1935. Massed infantrymen were not seen by the British in 1940 as a panacea. British experience on the Western Front resulted in interwar military thought which urged commanders to plan in terms of firepower rather than manpower, especially in the desert. So too, the importance of all-arms cooperation was stressed. Basil Liddell Hart was to some significant degree quite justified in describing British armoured operations in early stages of Operation *Compass*, as a “reproduction in war of the Salisbury Plain exercises”.²⁵ Where Italian procedures demanded large and unwieldy infantry formations, Wavell advocated an approach that was “[q]uick-footed, quick minded and, as far as possible, light hearted”.²⁶

In the North African theatre, broad Italian high-level leadership problems and doctrinal shortcomings were exacerbated by a set of unconstructive or unhelpful battlefield experiences

²³ J.J.T. Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920–1940* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 175 & 189; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, p. 112; Knox, ‘The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43’, p. 152.

²⁴ ‘Notes of Conference at Headquarters 6 Australian Division, 28 September 1940’, AWM 3DRL6850, [85].

²⁵ B.H.Liddell Hart, *The North African Campaign, 1940–43* (Dehra Dun: Natraj Publishers, 1978), p. 11.

²⁶ B. Pitt, *The Crucible of War: Western Desert 1941* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 4.

leading up to 1941. The Italian Army had been struggling in Africa for more than forty years in Libya, Eritrea, Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia, but in terms of fighting a modern war in the desert not much of value had been gained. Operations against ill-armed and ill-organised East Africans, or the overwhelming force that was brought to bear against the Ethiopians in 1936, if anything, left misleading impressions regarding future requirements in a high intensity conflict against a European foe. Nor, given the considerable geographic and strategic differences between the two theatres, was the Spanish Civil War an overly useful template for operations in the Western Desert. Such military expeditions left the Italian army exhausted but without an appropriate experience base to underpin operations against a modern opponent in North Africa.

Marshal Graziani had gained little of benefit from his previous military experiences to prepare him for war in North Africa in 1940-41. In late 1940 Graziani, at 59, was considered to be among the best Italian generals and a pre-eminent expert in desert warfare. Appearances, however, proved to be misleading. With a “fair” record in World War I, Graziani’s reputation had been built on colonial service from 1919 including a ruthless crushing of a revolt in Tripolitania and the suppression of Senussi tribesmen in Cyrenaica. In such campaigns Graziani had the luxury of employing the instruments of modern war, en masse, against pre-modern opponents. Further success in Ethiopia enhanced his reputation for boldness, although given the circumstances victory ought not to have been too difficult to attain. As Chief of the Italian General Staff, Graziani also presided over the bungled invasion of France in June 1940. All such actions left him with little worthwhile experience of war against a modern enemy in desert terrain under difficult circumstances.²⁷

As a consequence Graziani responded poorly to the pressure of *Operation Compass*. On 12 December, the day after Sidi Barrani, he sent a telegram with a “mixture of excitement, rhetoric and concern”, to Rome proposing to abandon Cyrenaica and move into Tripolitania “in order to keep the flag flying on that fortress at least”.²⁸ Three days later he despatched his wife in Italy to plead for a mass intervention of German airpower. Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, knew what Graziani’s mental state portended - particularly in his reporting of “the spirit and decision of the enemy”, while saying “nothing about what he can do to parry the blow”.²⁹ Graziani was upset and unable to make decisions. “He pins his hopes on the possible

²⁷ G. Wahlert, *The Western Desert Campaign 1940-41* (Canberra: Army History Unit, 2006), p. 10; *Destruction of an Army: The First Campaign in Libya September 1940 – February 1941* (London: HMSO, 1941), p. 14; I.S.O Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol 1 (London: HMSO, 1954), p. 207.

²⁸ H. Gibson, H (ed.) *The Ciano Diaries: the Complete Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1936-1943* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973), p. 322.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-22.

exhaustion of the adversary, and not on his own strength”, noted Ciano, a “bad sign” if there ever was one.³⁰ Mussolini’s response to the defeat at Sidi Barrani and the panic that followed was scathing. “Five generals are prisoners and one is dead”, he reflected, “[t]his is the percentage of Italians who have military characteristics and those who have none”.³¹ Of Graziani specifically Mussolini claimed that “here is another man with whom I cannot get angry, because I despise him”.³² By Christmas Eve, as the Australians gathered outside the wire at Bardia, Graziani’s accusations, particularly against Badoglio, grew wilder and he spoke of suicide. This was far from the ideal state of mind for the commander of all Italian forces in North Africa at the beginning of the British offensive, especially given his well-established tendency to micro-manage. At this crucial juncture, when his subordinates were used to his presence and interference, Graziani fell well short of the task.³³

Of course, Graziani was not the only ineffectual Italian commander in North Africa. Following a pattern set in Rome, senior officers in Libya were equally unprepared and uninterested in offensive action. The first Libyan Campaign was fought by Graziani’s generals without any clearly defined series of aims or comprehensive operational plan. The command apparatus in Libya, reflecting a wider pattern, was doctrinaire, sluggish, schematic and imprecise. Lieutenant General Annibale Bergonzoli, commanding the defence of Bardia, sent telegrams conveying his resolve and confidence echoed the same empty bravado characteristic of the higher levels of command. Unproductive personal feuds which mirrored those in Rome, like those between General Mario Berti, commanding 10th Army, and one of his corps commanders, Lieutenant General Lorenzo Dalmazzo, concerning the original invasion of Egypt, were commonplace.³⁴ Nor was personal bravery, devotion to duty, or to their commands, an overriding concern for field commanders in this theatre. Before the Italian advance to Sidi Barrani, Brigadier Pietro Maletti wrote to his commanding officers seeking to remedy an “undignified hunting for safe positions” where too many officers sought to abandon combat units claiming they would be more usefully employed at headquarters locations.³⁵

Overall, however, perhaps the most damaging weakness in Italian command in North Africa up to and including Bardia concerned an institutionalised tradition of avoiding

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 322–23.

³² Ibid., p. 323.

³³ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, p. 117.

³⁴ Translation of Captured Italian Document, 22 June 1940, TNA, WO106/2129; Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 201; Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, p. 115; Palsokar, *North African Campaign*, p. 30.

³⁵ Advance 13 Corps Intelligence Summary No. 4, 11 January 1941, 6 Australian Division ‘GS’ Branch War Diary, AWM 52, 1/5/12.

responsibility by unloading accountability for difficult issues onto subordinates or superiors while collecting evidence with which to blame either in case of a disaster. Graziani, for example, sought to reduce his own culpability for not advancing sooner into Egypt by sending the minutes of his command conferences back to Rome. The natural result was the avoidance of situations where a mistake could be made and blame apportioned. This also fed a tendency to exaggerate success and strength and to deny setbacks. Commanders chose not to use their initiative as to do so always bore an attendant risk. Instead, they asked for guidance on matters within their purview while restricting subordinates and checking their orders. This destructive custom permeated all levels of leadership. Again, it encouraged lethargy, passivity and led to missed opportunities in an environment that demanded flexibility and rapidity in decision and action. The potential effect of this corrosive dogma on the battlefield was well-known to Italy's German allies. From the humiliating Prussian defeat at Jena in 1806, the Germans learned that rigid discipline, drill and obedience were not enough. In its place were substituted modern philosophies of individual creativity, responsibility and flexibility. German commanders were expected to achieve their commander's intent often without detailed instructions as to "how" this might be done. They were supposed to improvise and exploit unexpected opportunities. This was the very antithesis of extant Italian practice in North Africa. Along with disastrous Italian defeats, Rommel's initial results in North Africa were solid evidence of which approach worked best.³⁶

In stark contrast to their Italian equivalents, despite some problematic relationships such as that between Winston Churchill and Wavell, British higher command arrangements in North Africa functioned well. Perhaps the only real upper-level inefficiency – the need for Lieutenant General Richard O'Connor, commanding WDF, to report simultaneously to Lieutenant General Wilson as commander of British troops in Egypt, and to Wavell – drew no specific complaint from O'Connor until well after Bardia, whereupon it was remedied with little fuss. Beyond this, higher command problems were rare. Wavell's quiet determination and strategic oversight were complemented by regular visits to the front and honest care for his troops which gave his field commanders "great confidence".³⁷ At an operational level O'Connor was energetic, led from the front, and grasped the key elements of mobility and firepower needed to fight the Italians in the Western Desert. The staff work of their respective headquarters matched the

³⁶ 'Axis Plans and Operations in the Mediterranean, September 1939–February 1941', Enemy Documents Section, Historical Branch, Cabinet Office, March 1950, TNA CAB146/1; Knox, 'Expansionist zeal, fighting power and staying power in the Italian and German dictatorships', p. 119; Trye, *Mussolini's Soldiers*, p. 32; Knox, 'The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43', p. 171.

³⁷ Letter, O'Connor to Galloway, 19 January 1941, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London (LHA), O'Connor Papers, Item 4/3/1.

quality of their commanders and was, overall, of a standard not again approached until the battle of El Alamein towards the end of 1942.³⁸

The quality of Australian command at a divisional level throughout the Libyan Campaign also outperformed its Italian counterpart. The skill of Major General Iven Mackay's headquarters staff was well-recognised, even at the time. Indeed, O'Connor was "much struck" by their "excellence".³⁹ Brigadier Harding, chief operations officer for 13 Corps, "found the staff of 6 Australian Division as good to work with as any I came across in that war, and highly efficient".⁴⁰ From a bottom-up perspective, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Jerram, commanding 7 RTR and a British regular with broad experience, described Mackay's headquarters as the best he ever served with.⁴¹ This is not to suggest that 6 Division's staff work, and the battle plans it produced, were flawless. The important point, however, was that such plans followed classic lines of military wisdom in attacking defensive sector boundaries, exploiting to high ground, using surprise, concentrating force, and so forth. Any shortcomings that revealed themselves proved inconsequential compared to clear Italian command dysfunction.

One key point of difference for British/Australian senior officers in North Africa was that their previous military experiences stood them in good stead. During World War I General Wavell joined the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in the conquest of Palestine and Syria in 1917–18. He entered Jerusalem, joined Colonel T.E. Lawrence (also known as Lawrence of Arabia) and participated in the advance to Damascus. Wavell ended the war with a "clear understanding of the qualities of generalship which had enabled Allenby to win one of the most notable victories of that war".⁴² After interwar service with Britain's new armoured force, he was appointed General Officer Commanding Palestine and Transjordan 1937, and was made Commander-in-Chief Middle East in 1939. A keen student of history and strategy with a practical outlook, Wavell's experiences in the Middle East were a much more solid foundation than Graziani's quashing of colonial rebellions. At an operational level, Lieutenant General O'Connor had an equally impressive pedigree. During World War I he earned a reputation as battalion commander in Italy and was awarded a Military Cross, Distinguished Service Order, and even an Italian Silver Star for courage. Between the wars O'Connor commanded the

³⁸ Porch, *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble*, p. 117.

³⁹ R.N. O'Connor 'Report on Operations in Libya from September 1940–April 1941, TNA, CAB106/380; Letter, O'Connor to Latham re: Australian Official History, 23 November 1950, TNA, CAB106/727.

⁴⁰ Letter, Harding to Chapman, 9 April 1970, AWM 3DRL6433, [1].

⁴¹ Letter, Jerram to Chapman, undated (March 1968), AWM 3DRL6433, [1]; D.M. Horner, *Blamey, The Commander-in-Chief* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p. 163.

⁴² Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, p. 2.

Peshawar Brigade in northwest India and served as the military governor of Jerusalem from 1936–38.⁴³

All senior officers within 6 Division were veterans and, crucially, their past military experiences prepared them well for the style of set-piece, deliberate attacks that characterised 6 Division's experiences in the campaign. Major General Mackay was a regimental officer at Gallipoli in 1915, a battalion commander in France in 1916–17, and ended the war, in his mid-thirties, leading an infantry brigade against the Hindenburg Line. He was named by Australia's Official Historian of World War I, Charles Bean, as among the most outstanding Australian officers of that war. During the interwar years Mackay commanded three separate militia brigades and a division from March 1937 to April 1940. Two of Mackay's brigadiers in 1940-41 had also earned distinction as infantry commanders in World War I. The third was a regular soldier who had won high praise as a light horse officer in the Sinai and Palestine. The division's senior artillery officer also saw service as artilleryman on the Western Front and in the Balkans from 1914–18.⁴⁴

Importantly, the senior officers of 6 Division were supported, in the main, by well-trained and capable regular staff officers. Most brigade staff officers, including two out of three Brigade Majors, were regulars, as were a high proportion of battalion Adjutants.⁴⁵ The two most senior regular officers in the division, Colonels Frank Berryman and George Vasey, were forceful, qualified, driven, and destined for greater things. Both had been among the earliest Royal Military College, Duntroon, graduates and both had served in as artillerymen and Brigade Majors in World War I. Mackay was consistently impressed by the way his regular officers, by virtue of their professional experiences and attendance at British staff colleges, seemed always to know someone on superior British staffs. These relationships never seemed to fail to make planning and liaison work smoothly. Berryman called such connections "the cement that binds the parts of the army into a homogenous whole", "the axle on which the

⁴³ B. Perrett, *Armour in Battle: Wavell's Offensive* (London: Ian Allen Ltd., 1979), p. 13.

⁴⁴ Long Papers, AWM PR88/72, [6]; 'Iven Giffard Mackay', *Stand-to*, Vol. 10, No. 6, October–December, 1966. pp. 7–12; J.P. Buckley, 'Great Soldier – Great Christian: Lieutenant General The Honourable Sir Edmund Herring', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 34 (May–June 1982): pp. 5–7.

⁴⁵ Major Campbell of 16 Brigade was one such example. Before the war he had spent considerable time with the British Army in India and in staff appointments in Australia. He was also a Camberley graduate. Interestingly, 17 Brigade, criticised for poor planning and staff duties at Bardia, was without a senior regular staff officer during the battle. G. Keating, *The Right Man for the Right Job: Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Savige as a Military Commander* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 52; A.J. Sweeting, 'Ian Campbell', *Stand-to*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (July–August, 1956): pp. 28–29.

machine functions”, and even the “secret number one reason for the success of Bardia”.⁴⁶ The sentiment was shared by British staff officers within WDF Headquarters.

Mirroring the low standard set at a senior level, Italian regimental leadership in North Africa also proved ineffective. There were a number of reasons for this – none of which involve any innate, ethnically-based lack of officer qualities or potential. Here it is appropriate to begin by debunking an over-used cliché. The issue of personal comforts, often put forward as a cause or evidence of ineffective Italian regimental leadership in the Western Desert, is misleading. It was true that Italian officers were often distant and aloof, which precluded their forming relationships with the men they led. Few experiences were shared. There were entirely different rations, for example, for officers, NCOs and soldiers. Officers ate, according to their rank, reasonably well on a diet which included tinned hams and Frascati wines. Soldiers ate frugally if at all. Officers had servants, furniture, superior and often ornate uniforms, knee boots, ceremonial swords, were often clean shaven and scented. The embossed stationery and glasses, enamel baths and alcohol captured by the Australians were all testament to a lifestyle far removed from the men they led. Indeed, at one point some of Mackay’s men stumbled upon “Graziani’s Caravan” – a trailer containing a bed, wine, silk and linen cloths and cologne. The immediate reaction on the part of Australian soldiers was to link this situation directly to poor Italian military performance. Private Griffiths-Marsh of 2/8 Battalion, for example, “could not help but chuckle at the comic opera of the posturing officers and their bedraggled troops”.⁴⁷ The tradition was embraced by subsequent writers. However, such interpretations were culturally-based, biased and provincial. They were built on existing Australian social mores of 1941 concerning idealised masculinity. It is hardly surprising, in this context, that cologne and fine uniforms were connected to effeminacy and cowardice. Such a perceived association on the part of the Australians, however, did not make it so. By comparison, Australian junior middle-ranking officers, commanding volunteer troops imbued with ideas of soldierly democracy, *had* to be accepted by their men or they would fail. This was not even a matter of “choosing” to be close. Australian regimental officers could not rely on authority of their rank alone. From both sides of the equation imagery and practice were shaped by tradition and cultural attitudes.

There were, in fact, perfectly valid reasons why Italian regimental officers behaved in this manner. First, the carefully inculcated cohesion of Australian units and sub-units was not

⁴⁶ Berrymann and the two principal staff officers on headquarters 13 Corps were all students at Camberley at the same time. All three were taught by O’Connor, then on staff as an instructor. Letter, Berrymann to (Brigadier) E.A. Wisdom, 14 February 1941, AWM 54, 521/2/9; Letter, Harding to Chapman, 9 April 1970, AWM 3DRL6433, [1].

⁴⁷ Griffiths-Marsh, *The Sixpenny Soldier*, p. 108.

present within their Italian equivalents. Indeed, most Italian conscript regiments were recruited from several areas to offset regionally-based concentrations and resultant insubordination towards “foreign” officers.⁴⁸ A palpable north/south divide also split units. Soldiers from Milan did not mix easily with troops from Sicily. As a result, Italian officers saw visible distinctions as necessary to preserve their dignity, officer comradeship and authority of command within naturally non-cohesive units. The need for official distinction also belied serious doubts, based on real deficiencies in training and confidence, as to their ability to lead their men on equal terms.⁴⁹ Their precarious professional position encouraged officers not to mix with their soldiers and to strive unrelentingly to avoid “excessive familiarity and consequent loss of prestige”.⁵⁰ There was universal concern about the diminution of the already tenuous authority of regimental officers that might come with any suppression of formal differences. Without the luxury of proper preparation and relevant experience, many Italian officers were right to be afraid. The trappings of their rank were all the legitimacy they had.

The serious deficiencies shown by Italian regimental officers in North Africa were a consequence of far more objective factors than cologne. A spirit of “corporate self-defence” in the interwar period meant that the Italian officer corps was never overly interested in opening military careers to young men of obvious ability. Neither, thanks to the state of Italian industry and education standards, did Italy possess the pool of technically skilled potential leaders socially excluded from commissions during peacetime as was the case elsewhere. Limited economic development, a weak sense of nationalism and incomplete regional integration contributed to keeping the pool of potential officers shallow and at the same time retarded Fascist recruiting appeals once the fighting began. This state of affairs stood in contrast to the situation within 6 Division. Due primarily to the circumstances of the recruitment process, Australian officers volunteering to fight were as a rule middle class, skilled and successful in civilian life. Within 2/11 Battalion, for example, six of its officers were peace-time lawyers, including its commanding officer.⁵¹

Furthermore, given the structural and institutionalised shortcomings of their superiors, it was hardly surprising that Italian regimental leadership was ineffective. Across the board, junior and middle ranking officers flocked to the staff jobs that the binary division system created, as bureaucratic rather than command appointments were the path to career

⁴⁸ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, p. 144.

⁴⁹ Trye, *Mussolini's Soldiers*, p. 25; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, p. 148.

⁵⁰ Knox, 'The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43', p. 164.

⁵¹ Draft Chapters of 2/11 Battalion Unit History, AWM MSS0958; Knox, 'Expansionist zeal, fighting power and staying power in the Italian and German dictatorships', p. 130; Knox, 'The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43', p. 171.

progression. Field leadership was left, as a lowest priority, to half-trained new appointments or reservists, or else overage veterans who succumbed regularly to the physical and mental demands of the desert and of combat.⁵² Many ambitious Italian battalion commanders, majors in the last war, quite deliberately chose to avoid operational postings in the interwar period. They were as a group, according to the diary of one subordinate,

[c]overed with medal ribbons...their heads crammed with texts and the tactics of Hannibal and old Prussia...[doomed to] fall back on the experiences of the war in 1914, re-hashing it and dishing it up ad nauseam without remembering that time has overtaken them and tactics and the principles of war have passed them by.⁵³

Within most Italian units, as a consequence of a pre-war policy to restrict numbers in order to guarantee promotion, in 1940–41 there were very few regular regimental officers available to serve. Furthermore, reflecting the attitudes of the upper echelons, no real attempt was made to select newly commissioned officers on the basis of military aptitude over educational attainments or social connections. The commissioning courses that were run for these men on the eve of war gave inadequate procedural and schematic instruction and were considered unsatisfactory, even to the Italians. Many new subalterns openly criticised their inept instructors and the training they received.⁵⁴ The majority of captains and majors in North Africa were survivors of the last war with “even less training in modern warfare than the green lieutenants”.⁵⁵

The subsequent lack of professional competence at a regimental level was the foundation of Italian indecision and hesitation during the Libyan Campaign. Such officers could not adjust, mentally or physically, to the pace of battle. Nor could they adapt their dispositions and actions to the changing situation. Once defensive plans were upset, Italian units became confused. Key opportunities for counter-attack, for example, were too often missed. Due to poor selection procedures and inadequate training Italian regimental commanders displayed an almost universal paucity of knowledge regarding small group infantry tactics, communications, navigation, friendly and enemy weapons capabilities, and even the effective siting or preparing of elementary field defences. Nor were they assisted by a competent cadre of NCOs. There were just not enough of them. The total number in the whole Italian Army in mid-1940 was only 41,200, compared to 56,500 officers. In addition, most regular and experienced NCOs served

⁵² Porch, *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble*, p. 81; Trye, *Mussolini's Soldiers*, p. 31.

⁵³ Diary of Lieutenant Talpo, 12 Battalion, 8 Bersaglieri Regiment, 17 December 1940, AWM 3DRL/6643.

⁵⁴ Rintelen, 'The German – Italian Cooperation During World War II', Detwiler, (et al.), *World War II German Military Studies*, Vol. 14, p. 4; Knox, 'The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–43', p. 165.

⁵⁵ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, pp. 145–46.

mostly in administrative jobs, not within front-line combat units. Those present, therefore, were invariably conscripts whose military education was superficial compared to their Australian equivalents.⁵⁶ The combination of inadequate training, higher command disorganisation, and an active discouragement of individual ingenuity produced a “junior officer corps with insufficient capacity to command and non-commissioned officers with an almost total absence of initiative”.⁵⁷ The key point here is that inadequate preparation, rather than any intrinsic or inherited lack of leadership potential, accounted for the poor performance of Italian regimental officers in North Africa.

By contrast, despite the fact that the Australian army in the interwar period was not involved in combat, 6 Division’s regimental leaders had various forms of military and non-military experience of far greater value than Italian adventurism in Africa, Ethiopia or Spain. To begin, Mackay’s formation was raised in Australia at a time when general enthusiasm for the war was subdued. It, therefore, attracted motivated volunteers who joined often in spite of political indecision, public indifference and obstacles such as reserved occupations. These men wanted to be there from the start. Hence, in terms of attitude, they were poles apart from Italian conscripts. These men were also, on average, older than those who enlisted in subsequent Australian formations. With the war still a long way from home, large sections of Australian youth held back. As a result, almost a third of 6 Division was over 30 years of age. In addition, by deliberate design many of these more seasoned volunteers already possessed military experience in the peacetime militia. Half the soldiers of 16 Brigade, for example, joined with prior military service of some type. It is also important to note that by the time of the campaign 6 Division was integrated within 13 Corps, a predominantly regular and highly experienced formation. Many British units had operated against Arab insurgents in Palestine since 1936 and 7 Armoured Division had been in combat on the Libyan frontier since June 1940. Even relative newcomers, such as 1 Battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and 7 Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, had seen combat either on the north-west Indian frontier or in France.⁵⁸

As was the case for their senior officers, the experience of the Western Desert for many Australian regimental leaders closely resembled the shared 1918 memory of set-piece attacks against fortified defensive positions. In this regard, many simply picked up where they left off

⁵⁶ F. Berryman, ‘The Battle of Bardia: The AIF’s First Battle in World War II’, AWM PR84/370; ‘A French View of Italian Infantry’, October 1928, US Military Intelligence Report (Italy), No. 11 219, (12 November 1928), Microfilm 798, ADFA Library, Canberra; Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, pp. 149–50; Trye, *Mussolini’s Soldiers*, p. 29.

⁵⁷ Knox, ‘Expansionist zeal, fighting power and staying power in the Italian and German dictatorships’, p. 120.

⁵⁸ Long, *To Benghazi*, pp. 58, 61 & 204; Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, p. 9.

against various German fortifications in 1918. Even those officers not old enough for the last war had spent their time in the militia studying its battles in excruciating detail. They were all comfortable with the theory and practice of the types of methodical deliberate attacks against static strong points which characterised the Libyan Campaign. This type of battle did not extend the Australians beyond their experiential comfort zones. Mackay himself admitted that during the campaign his officers were able to apply, “for perhaps the first and only time...the lessons they had learned in the previous war”.⁵⁹

Unit commanders within 6 Division were also chosen with a clear emphasis on proven competence and experience. A low-risk policy of dependability was the guiding principle, and preference was given to veterans with a demonstrated ability to command. Sixteen Brigade, for example, included three of the longest serving militia battalion commanders in New South Wales. One was an overweight 46 year-old Duntroon graduate and distinguished World War I veteran - a clear signpost of the perceived importance of experience. The pattern was repeated throughout 6 Division.⁶⁰ The long-term price of the emphasis on experience was unit commanders who later proved too old to bear the pressure of modern war and many were replaced in the months after the Libyan Campaign. For the purposes of this campaign, however, this was not a shortcoming. Such men were still fresh, well-prepared, and the rapid campaign did not generally extend them beyond their physical limits. Unlike their adversaries they were not already strained and suffering from earlier defeats.⁶¹

That its regimental officers were an integral part of 6 Division’s success in North Africa was also not surprising given the depth of available talent in Mackay’s formation. Many of its middle and junior officers in 1941 went on to provide much of the leadership of the Australian Army for the remainder of the war. In 2/2 Battalion alone, the original Commanding Officer went on to lead 9 Division. By 1943 three of the battalion’s original majors were each

⁵⁹ I. Mackay, ‘Australians in Battle – Into the Desert’, AWM 3DRL6850, [100].

⁶⁰ The eldest Commanding Officer was originally selected in 6 Division was Lieutenant Colonel John Mitchell, 2/8 Battalion, at 48. He had commanded 8 Battalion in France in 1917–18 at 26 years of age. The youngest was Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Dougherty of 2/4 Battalion at 35. G. Pratten, ‘The “Old Man”’: Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War’, PhD Thesis, Deakin University, 2005, pp. 93–98.

⁶¹ Pratten further contends that many of the original Commanding Officers were chosen as ‘watch keepers’. They were there to raise and train units until new crop of younger commanders like Dougherty and Chilton ‘trained in the tactics and procedures of modern warfare, blooded in battle, and fit enough to resist its physical and mental strains’ was ready to take over. This may well have been the case, but while it mattered for the AIF in the long term, such a policy had no ill-effect at Bardia. Pratten, ‘The “Old Man”’, pp. 160–65.

commanding brigades. From 2/6 Battalion no fewer than seven junior officers in 1941 later led battalions in combat.⁶² Other key 6 Division veterans gained reputations as being among the most outstanding Australian officers of the war. Such a high concentration of leadership potential was not a product of chance. In 1939 the AIF had had a free hand in choosing the best militia candidates for commissioned appointments. It also got its pick of the regulars. Furthermore, given that 6 Division's Commanding Officers were allocated a geographic area from which to select subordinate commanders, in many cases successful command relationships were already in place well before the formation left Australian shores.⁶³

In addition, Mackay's senior staff had ample time and training opportunity to cull regimental officers deemed physically or psychologically unsuitable. Not even unit commanders escaped assessment. By the end of 1940, for example, the Commanding Officer of 2/4 Battalion had been removed and re-posted as an inspector of canteens. As late as December 1940, 2/5 Battalion's commander was sacked after a series of poor tactical showings in divisional exercises. Another was removed from 2/2 Battalion to oversee training for Australian reinforcements, in this case due more due to his girth than lack of leadership skill or tactical expertise. Those appointed to replace them were younger, more dynamic and probably better trained.⁶⁴ The Italians did not have the luxury of this type of choice. For 6 Division, the net result in North Africa was effective and efficient unit command. Its officers were thorough, meticulous and reliable in their application of doctrine and tactical principles.⁶⁵ There were mistakes – but overall Australian battalions were reliably led by experienced and competent officers.

Standards of Australian junior leadership matched that set by their seniors. After losing two-thirds of his platoon commanders killed or wounded at Bardia, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Chilton concluded that displays of outstanding leadership and physical courage by junior leaders in his unit had been the "rule rather than the exception".⁶⁶ Again, this was no product of chance. Six Division deployed to the Middle East with vacancies deliberately kept open in junior regimental positions to allow for promotion from the ranks. Without the social rifts that

⁶² Major Smith (2/24 Battalion), Major McKinna (2/25 Battalion), Captain Piken (2/27 Battalion), Captain Norman (2/28 Battalion), Lieutenant Robson (2/31 Battalion), Lieutenant Warfe (2/58 Battalion), and Lieutenant Dexter (2/61 Battalion). Notebook of Gavin Long, Official Historian, AWM 67, 2/19; 'Brigadier F.O. Chilton, D.S.O.', *Stand-to*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (December 1950): p. 15.

⁶³ Letter, Squires to Wavell, 18 December 1939, National Archives of Australian (NAA), Series MP729/7, Item 51/421/2 [Part 1]; Pratten, 'The "Old Man"', pp. 92–93 & 113; Long Papers, AWM PR88/72, [6].

⁶⁴ Pratten, 'The "Old Man"', p. 120.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146; S. Wick, *Purple Over Green: The History of the 2/2 Australian Infantry Battalion, 1939–1945* (Sydney: Printcraft Press for 2/2 Australian Infantry Battalion Association, 1977), p. 58.

⁶⁶ 2/2 Battalion War Diary, AWM 52, 8/3/2.

divided Italian formations, an individual's occupation in peacetime was little guide to his position or future rank. In one day, in July 1940 some 47 NCOs were commissioned within the division.⁶⁷ Such men brought demonstrated competence, credibility, and a fresh outlook to 6 Division's core of regimental officers.⁶⁸ The barriers constructed between officers and men on the Italian side, as necessary as they were seen to be (and were), ruled out any possibility of commissioning from the ranks. In doing so the shallow pool of gifted junior leaders available was made shallower still. In the main, better prepared and more effective Australian junior leadership, compared to their counterparts, was an important determinant of battlefield success.

Brigadier John "Blood" Caunter, of 7 Armoured Division, described the Italians in the first Libyan campaign as "not so cowardly as our press stated, but poor soldiers very badly commanded".⁶⁹ There is truth and depth in such a sentiment. The fact was that, in North Africa, Italian military leadership at all levels was relatively ineffectual. When contrasted to generally effective British and Australian leadership principles and practice the battlefield consequences were significant. It would be misleading, however, to infer that the presence, or lack, of effective military leadership qualities was a product of ethnicity or national character. There were deep-seated historical, institutional and experiential reasons behind inferior Italian command and the comparative superiority of British/Australian leadership at all levels. The problem of command and leadership was, of course, also mirrored by a range of other serious relative inferiorities. Such issues include the inferiority of Italian weapons and equipment, broken logistics chains, inadequate training, and tangible mismatches in terms of airpower, sea power and intelligence.

In truth, in North Africa during the First Libyan Campaign at every point of meaningful military comparison the Italians were brought to battle on grossly unequal terms. When understood as a product of measurable and objective military factors, like the issue of leadership for example, the rout of the 10th Army takes on an entirely new complexion. The subsequent reputation of Italian soldiers as embarrassing battlefield liabilities in the Western Desert in this period is unfair. This overlooks the handicaps they fought under, and often ignores the bravery displayed in spite of them all. Like the Australians, the Italians in the Western Desert were ordinary men, no more and no less. In truth, it is singularly unsurprising

⁶⁷ List of Appointments, Commissions and Promotions, issued with General Routine Order No. 22 of 1940, 20 July 1940, NAA A828, 1; Long Papers, AWM PR88/72, [6].

⁶⁸ D.M. Horner, 'Staff Corps Versus Militia: The Australian Experience in World War II', *Defence Force Journal*, No 26 (January/February 1981): p. 14.

⁶⁹ G. Forty, *The First Victory: General O'Connor's Desert Triumph* (Tunbridge Wells: Nutshell Publishing, 1990), p. 73.

that so many were killed or surrendered without putting up much real resistance. They faced challenges and conditions that would have handicapped troops from any country.