

# Faid and Kasserine

by Kenneth C. Haydon

"On the fourteenth Rommel attacked and on the seventeenth we were running." These were the words of a veteran of the battle of Faid Pass. I heard this several times because that veteran was Carl G. Haydon, my father, in A Company, 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, 34th Infantry Division. Carl was at Faid, and was one of the few to make it back to American lines. He always called it the Battle of Faid Pass, as did some others I know, but the world usually calls it Kasserine Pass; the date was February 1943.

These words about the battle sound like a clear vindication of the usual verdict that the 'green' Americans were soundly trounced by the Germans. I have seen this kind of verdict often, especially as applied to the 34th Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division. I believe this verdict is too simple, too harsh, and misleading. Yes, of course, there were mistakes made, but the Americans were not the only ones making them. There were poor performances by some American troops, but there were also some good performances turned in by them. Some did turn and run and some fought well. While the Americans were still on a steep learning curve, they were not at the bottom of the ladder, and there were 'green' troops in other places than American units. The verdict passed on the GIs has been too harsh and too universal.

While I am most familiar with the 34th Infantry Division, much of what happened to them is essentially duplicated in the 1st Armored Division.

## Growing from 'Green'

'Green' seems to be a good thing in certain political circles, but it is not so when it comes to military troops or units. Unfortunately, it seems, there are a number of times the American troops are referred to as 'green' in a sense of all-or-nothing. You either are or are not as if experience were a thing you have or do not have. There are, of course, varying degrees and types of experience. To be sure the Afrika Korps had a great deal of experience in the desert, but imagine them suddenly dropped into the jungles of Burma – they would indeed be inexperienced in jungle warfare. On the other hand, the Afrika Korps had much longer time in theater and many more days of combat than the American and British forces coming from the west.

Rick Atkinson in *An Army At Dawn* goes into detail on experience, and lack thereof, for the troops and the commanders during this part of the African campaign. For details see his book. However, let it be noted that both the 1st Armored Division and 34th Infantry Division had been in the initial Operation Torch landings in Northwest Africa, and many of their units had seen combat. As noted before, they had not seen as much as the Afrika Korps or the British Eighth Army, but neither were they totally lacking in combat experience as is sometimes implied. While it is certainly true they had a long way to go, they had begun the journey and were progressing rapidly.

Rick Atkinson details inexperience problems among troops and in the high levels of command. That there were problems with the II Corps commander, Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredendall, is generally well known and Atkinson makes the point well that the problems run all the way to British Lt. Gen. Kenneth Anderson and even Lt. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower. But there is a problem not so often cited about Faid and Kasserine. This problem was about replacements. When there is combat there are also losses which require replacements. The American replacement program

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was just getting started and was turning out some very poorly trained and prepared men for replacement of losses. Some, it was reported, barely knew how to operate a weapon, much less did they know anything about how to properly employ it or how to participate in tactical operations. These could be called the greenest of the 'green'. This also meant that they would be the weak links in the chain. The 168th Infantry Regiment of the 34th Division had just recently absorbed about 450 of these replacements.

It can also be noted that the British in the western forces also had many units with little or no combat experience prior to North Africa. Many of the English seemed to feel that due to the much longer time England had been at war, this made all English troops superior to all American troops. Of course, there was also more than enough lack of respect for the English among the Americans, usually justified by the noting of the battles they had lost. Some of these problems would plague the war effort to the end. However, the point here is that there was inexperience among more than just the Americans and that there were varying levels of experience – many shades of 'green' if you will.

## Equipping the Forces

Rick Atkinson, in a piece entitled *Ten Things Every American Student Should Know About Our Army In WWII* [2] states in point five: "In the first couple years of American involvement in WWII the Army was burdened with equipment that in some cases was clearly inferior to the enemy's, tanks being a good example." In part this was due to the fact that American production was still in the process of gearing up. This was made worse for American troops since many modern weapons, e.g., Sherman tanks, had been sent to the British to help defend Egypt and to defeat Rommel. While this was a necessity of the strategic situation, it did make problems for the Americans.

Much of the American armor consisted of M-3 light and M-3 medium tanks. The M-3 medium tank was devastating to the Italian tanks (what wasn't?) and could easily cope with Panzer IIs and early Panzer IIIs and could do credibly against the short-barreled Panzer IV. However, the 'special' IIIs could give credible service and the 'special' IVs easily could best the M-3 medium. The 37mm cannon on the M-3s was next to useless against the better German Panzers. (note: the 37mm on M-3 mediums was intended to be the anti-tank weapon and the 75mm was to be for infantry support. Yet the 75mm was the only thing giving them a chance against the Panzers.) The 37mm was virtually the equivalent of the British 2-pounder. One English tanker (Eighth Army) said that shooting at the Panzers with the 2-pounder was "like throwing burnt crumpets at old Rommel."

It was also the 37mm cannon which was the main and virtually only anti-tank weapon for the 34th Infantry Division at this time. It is true that just a few days before the Germans attacked, some of the first 'bazookas' were issued to the 34th, but only a day or two before the German attack. While this would go on to do some good service and would be much more effective than the 37mm, it did not alleviate the problem at this time. When issued, there were no instructions provided on its use and no training had yet been provided. Many of the infantry who receive this Faid and Kasserine new 'wonder' weapon had no idea what it was for, much less knew how to use it.

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There were reports of shortages in heavy weapons and training for their use. This is not to say that all equipment was lacking or that they were woefully under equipped in all areas, but the time would come when things would be better. Weapon establishments at this time should not be confused with those of later in the war. While reliance on the 37mm for anti-tank was a serious problem, the other shortfalls were a contributing factor to what took place during the battle.

When considering equipment shortfalls, it should be noted that during these battles, especially early on, the German forces enjoyed nearly total air superiority in this area due to most air assets being assigned to the Eighth Army. Many of the veterans complained that during critical times, the only planes they saw were German. It is difficult to fully assess the importance of this factor although there should be no doubt it was significant in the early stages of the battle, the times in which our GIs take the most heat. The best antidote the Allies had for the German air superiority turned out to be bad weather, when it came.

Although only a few Panzer VI Tiger I (Panzerkampfwagen VI Tiger Ausf. E) tanks were used, they had an effect far out of proportion to their numbers. The Americans and British had nothing comparable, and little with which to stop them except terrain. Many Djebels (hills or mountains) were quite impassable to vehicles. The psychological effect on us should not be underestimated.

## **Intelligence?**

In modern times we have heard a lot about intelligence failures. It is not easy to guess the intentions of an enemy. Any familiarity with combat and warfare will show that such failures are common. We only recently know that the British were 'reading the mail' of the Germans with their breaking of the Enigma codes. But this could not and did not provide all the information needed; interpretation of information was still needed and that was not always 100%. This was one major factor that contributed to the problems of the Americans.

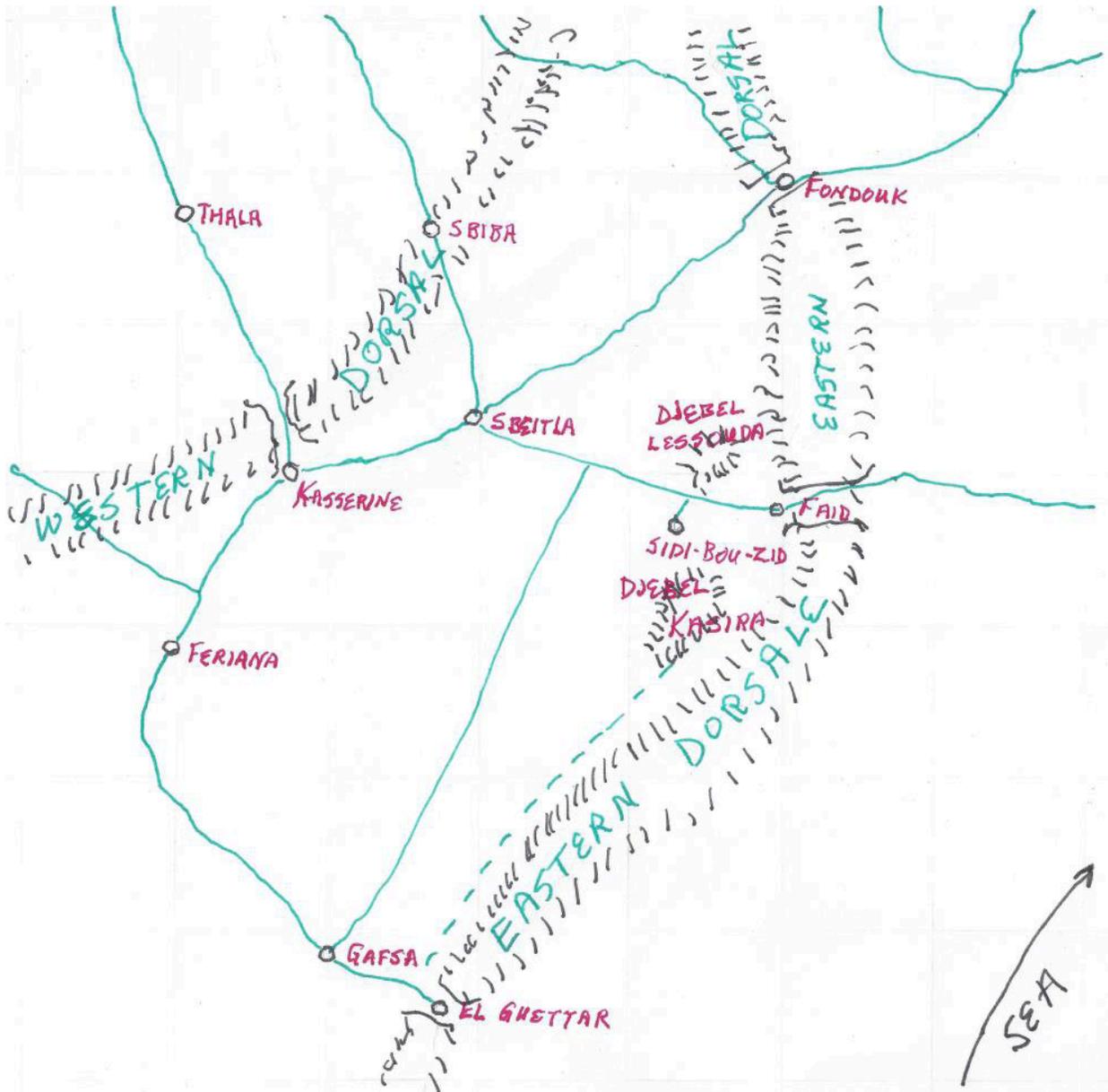
The British were certain that the Germans would attack the western forces. They were equally certain that the attack would come against their forces further to the north, which represented the most immediate threat to Tunis. The Americans were assured by British intelligence that they had nothing to fear but reconnaissance patrols and diversionary attacks. Naturally, reconnaissance patrols are a standard feature of military operations and were to be expected. As we consider deployments of American troops, these deployments may be seen as guarding against this threat, and being, perhaps, reasonable for that purpose. Being able to thwart reconnaissance and diversions is not the same as being in a position to defeat an attack, especially a major attack. Yet that is what the Americans were being asked to do in their deployments.

## **Terrain**

To the east of Tunis, the North African coast turns south. West of that coast there are two mountain chains: the Eastern Dorsal and the Western Dorsal. The Eastern Dorsal was of special importance to protect communication between Von Arnim's northern forces and Rommel's southern force. The Eastern Dorsal has limited access through it to the interior, or for the Allied forces to move toward the coast. The Eastern Dorsal runs from north to south and, in our area of concern, has passages at Fondouk, Faid, and Maknassy before bending westward to a pass at El

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Guettar/Gafsa. The Western Dorsal comes down and then turns westward with Kasserine Pass being roughly due west of Faid and offering the most direct route to Allied command and supply areas.



For perspective, we need to consider distances. From Faid to Kasserine in a straight line is a little over 50 miles. From Kasserine to Gafsa in the south is about 55 miles. From Gafsa back up to Faid to the northeast is about 65 miles. While Maknassy is south of Faid and east of Gafsa, the main road from Maknassy runs to Gafsa although a secondary track runs northward Djebel Ksaira. Because Faid was held by the Germans, a casual look at the map would seem to show that the pass could be controlled by two hills – Djebel Lessouda to the northwest and Djebel Ksaira to the southwest. A closer look at the terrain shows that Djebel Lessouda and Djebel

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Ksaira are each about six miles from Faid and there is a gap of some eight miles between the two Djebels. Hill top to hill top comes out to be about twelve miles.

## Troop Deployment

Before considering deployment, be aware that it is a general rule of thumb that a division can defend adequately a maximum front of about ten miles. If a major attack is expected, this density or more would be needed. Quiet fronts can have larger areas covered by a division. The front in Tunisia was far more than could be totally covered adequately by the Allied forces available at the time.

The Americans had taken Faid Pass and then the Germans took it back. Faid Pass was a main route through the Eastern Dorsal. Kasserine Pass was a principle path through the Western Dorsal and offered a way to the rear of the Allied forces. Thus Kasserine would be the most valuable route and would give its name to the battle. But getting to Kasserine, Faid Pass was a primary necessity. While there were other routes through the Eastern Dorsal, such as Fondouk, Maknassy, and El Guettar/Gafsa – which all saw use – Faid was the most direct. For a serious attack, it is no surprise that the Germans came through Faid.

The area to the north around Fondouk was covered by French forces. The major triangle of Kasserine-Faid-Gafsa was to be covered by the 168th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of the 34th Infantry Division, and elements of the 1st Armored Division, primarily Combat Command A (CCA). Since the main road from Maknassy ran to Gafsa, the triangle seems to be main concern. The infantry was to be deployed with the 1st Battalion of the 168th RCT at Gafsa and the remainder of the 168th RCT divided between Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira. 1st Armored forces were scattered around the area. If only reconnaissance or diversionary forces had been coming, this might have been a valid deployment with infantry spotting and delaying the enemy forces until more mechanized forces arrived to destroy or drive back the reconnaissance or diversion. However, the long Faid and Kasserine span of the triangle Faid-Gafsa-Kasserine was being held by about one-third of an infantry division and one-third of an armored division. The 168th 2nd Battalion had a front of fifteen miles, giving its companies a five-mile front. This scattered deployment was about to be attacked by two Panzer divisions and supporting forces.

Each of the Djebels guarding Faid was being held by roughly one reinforced battalion. The 2nd Bn was on Djebel Lessouda and the 3rd Bn on Djebel Ksaira. Again at first glance this seems strong, until due consideration is given to the distances. These positions were too far apart to be mutually supporting. They could be isolated and destroyed separately. They were.

## Attack

Details of the battle will not be provided here, there are adequate materials to detail the actions. What will be considered is the action as it pertains to the intention to show the American performance, good and bad.

What came through Faid Pass was not a reconnaissance force or even a diversionary attack, but the 10th Panzer Division. The 21st Panzer came through Maknassy, did not go toward Gafsa, but turned north to support the attack from Faid. Now two reinforced American battalions were facing two Panzer divisions. It is hard to imagine any two Infantry battalions of any nation

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having much of a chance against two Panzer divisions. The 10th Panzer Division reportedly had 110 tanks and the 21st Panzer Division had 91 not counting a Tiger I detachment.

But the armor was supposed to come to the rescue of the infantry. The first counter-attack by the Americans was launched by a company of M-3 light tanks. This should have been adequate to repulse a reconnaissance force, typically made up of some infantry in half-tracks and armored cars or light tanks. To the amazement of the Germans, the attack kicked off in perfect parade-ground formation. Terrain variations soon broke up the neat organization of the company, but it was fire from the German panzers and anti-tank guns that destroyed the company in short order. Whether it was being 'green', being proud and over-confident, or something else that impacted the initial deployment, that is not what destroyed the unit. This would not be the last piecemeal deployment of forces.

It would seem that people should have known better than to commit forces piecemeal since everyone seems to have doctrinal warnings against doing so. The British Eighth Army had, all too often, made this error against Rommel in the desert. And even now the British were no more immune than the Americans. On the 19 February, a troop of Valentine light tanks from the 16th/5th Lancers, British 6 Armoured Division, was sent against the German attack and was similarly destroyed by the superior German armored forces. It could be argued that the American attack was made out of ignorance of the true situation and the British was out of necessity of the situation, although at the time the American counter-attack seemed necessary. Nevertheless this was still piecemeal deployment by both the Americans and British which probably should be ultimately blamed on the faulty estimates of what the Germans would do – or not do.

The American forces on the Djebels put up a brief but spirited resistance. It soon became evident that the positions could not be held. Colonel Drake, commander of the 168th RCT, on the afternoon of 16 February ordered forces to begin retreating to Sbeitla when night came. Several parties, both large and small, set out but few were successful. Yes, there were those of the 34th Division who threw down their weapons and ran. Even some men from the Regular Army's 1st Infantry "Big Red One" Division broke later during the battle. Also a 'green' British battalion of the 2nd/5th Leicestershire, British 46 Infantry Division, when attacked by the Germans, saw some 500 quickly surrendering, completely overwhelmed. 'Green' could indeed be found outside American forces or the 34th.

Yet it was part of that 'green' American 168th RCT, its 1st Battalion, that pulled a highly successful withdrawal to join the 133rd Infantry Regiment's RCT of the 34th Division in the area of Sbiba where it was joined by those of the 168th who managed to escape the Djebels. These forces of the 34th played a significant role in holding the Allied left flank. The first attack on Kasserine on 19 February was halted by the 151st Field Artillery Battalion of the 34th when it shot up and destroyed a significant part of a company of Panzer IVs.

Colonel Drake leading a large party attempting to escape was surrounded and captured. In his own report of actions [2] he describes this event: "Colonel Drake was taken to [Generalmajor Joseph Schmid, Battle Group Commander] of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions at German Divisional Headquarters, where the German General immediately came forward to see him, drew up at attention, saluted and said, 'I want to compliment your command for the splendid fight they put up. It was a hopeless thing from the start, but they fought like real

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soldiers.'" There are other comments indicating that the 34th held out longer than the Germans expected. It seems that there were solid performances turned in by some Americans.

When considering the American performance, it is generally considered that a major factor in finally stopping the German attack was the performance of the artillery of the 9th Infantry Division. American artillery, including the 151st FA Bn of the 34th, was indeed a critical factor in the final outcome.

## Success or Failure

Yes, many American and Allied units suffered severe losses, but in the end the Germans lost considerable forces and did not accomplish their purposes. The initial plan was to capture supplies and drive the American/British forces back in disarray while destroying significant numbers of Allied troops. This was certainly not done, even when one considers the devastating losses to the 168th RCT. We must allow, however, that before the battle began the German goal was modified to 'knocking around' the American forces. While they did get knocked around, no division-level forces ultimately broke or were destroyed. The 168th took the worst of it and suffered the heaviest of the losses. The 168th started the battle with 189 officers and 3,728 men. It was reduced to 50 officers and about 1,000 men. It would be rebuilt and go on to distinguished service with the 34th Infantry Division. So just how successful was the attack? It can be said to have achieved minimal goals, but it also helped to season and harden the American forces, making them more deadly in the long run.

While we can argue levels of success and defeat, we cannot say it was all bad for the Americans nor all good for any other forces. Mixed performances were common by all sides of battle in most cases, yet in the battle for Faid and Kasserine it seems as if the Americans get all the bad and others get off too lightly. There have probably never been perfect performances and rarely totally disastrous performances.

Think about that German officer's assessment about the American situation. If indeed this was a "hopeless thing from the start" at Faid – I believe it was – then we should be more objective about performances. Remember the terrain, weapons, odds, faulty intelligence, air superiority, and the extended area covered by the relatively small forces. Give credit where it is due to the American GIs at Faid and Kasserine, don't paint everyone with the same brush, and note the good as well as the bad. The guys on the ground were victims of mistakes from higher up and paid the price of being left out on a limb, but overall did a relatively credible job for the situation they were in. The 1st Armored and 34th Infantry Divisions did go on to give very good account of themselves, both in Africa and in Italy.

## Final Thought

Isn't it odd that when two overstretched, under equipped, under supplied and under supported infantry battalions were overrun by two well equipped, well supplied, well supported Panzer divisions, an entire infantry division should be judged to be incompetent? Or when less than one third of a vastly overstretched armored division is mauled by the same two Panzer divisions, it also is maligned and judged to be unreliable? Thank you.

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## Citations:

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## Author's Notes:

A separate article by Kenneth Haydon on this topic was published as: "Green at Kasserine" in *World at War*, issue 22 (Feb/Mar 2012): pages 22-29. Further information on that issue can be found at Strategy and Tactics Press,

<<http://shop.strategyandtacticspress.com/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=WW22M>>.

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