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**Courage, Cowardice and Combat Performance:  
Eighth Army and the Crisis in North Africa, 1942.**

I have to say something which is not easy to say from the touch line. In the armies of the democracies . . . there are sometimes soft spots and we have been told there is evidence that in the case of some of the troops at . . . Tobruk the enemy found some of these spots. (Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*)<sup>1</sup>

By 1942, the situation facing Eighth Army in the desert in North Africa had become so serious that the Commander-in-Chief Middle Eastern Forces (MEF), Sir Claude Auchinleck, with the unanimous agreement of his army commanders, forwarded to the War Office a recommendation for the reintroduction of the death penalty (which had been abolished in 1930) for ‘desertion in the field’ and for ‘misbehaving in the face of the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice.’ This request raised serious questions about the conduct and courage of the men who were serving in Eighth Army. Auchinleck contended that the death penalty would act as a ‘salutary deterrent’ to cowards and those men who would desert in action or surrender unnecessarily.<sup>2</sup>

Auchinleck first raised the issue in April 1942 after the disappointment of the German counter offensive in early February. To back up his request, he presented evidence that since April 1941 there had been 291 convictions for desertion and 19 convictions for cowardice in the Middle Eastern theatre.<sup>3</sup> Auchinleck, at the time, felt the situation was so serious that, while waiting for a response, he took matters into his own hands and ordered that senior officers were to ‘take the strongest possible action against any

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London, 1945), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives (NA) WO 32/15773 Auchinleck to the Under Secretary of State, the War Office, 7 April 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

individual of whatever rank who refuse[d] to conform to orders. If necessary in order to stop panic, there must be no hesitation in resorting to extreme measures, such as shooting an individual who cannot otherwise be stopped.’<sup>4</sup>

Following the fall of Tobruk and the retreat from the Gazala line, Auchinleck once again cabled London demanding the return of the death penalty. He provided yet more statistics to lend weight to his argument, reporting that 63 absentees had been apprehended at Matruh in a single day during the ‘Knightsbridge’ fighting along the Gazala line in June 1942. During the 27 days of battle ending 13 July 1942, 907 absentees had been reported to the Corps of Military Police of whom 430 were subsequently apprehended. The total number of unapprehended British and Colonial absentees was still 1,728 at the time of writing. The average monthly number of soldiers sentenced for desertion in the five months from February to June 1942 was 34. There were over 120 soldiers awaiting trial by courts martial in Cairo and in one high category unit (it is apparent that this was the Guards Brigade), 18 cases of desertion in the face of the enemy had been reported during the recent fighting.<sup>5</sup> He later amended this figure to 23 desertions during and immediately after the ‘Knightsbridge’ fighting. ‘In view of the high quality personnel of this unit’, Auchinleck found this figure ‘most striking.’<sup>6</sup>

Historians have queried the accuracy of the picture portrayed by Auchinleck.<sup>7</sup> David French, in particular, has argued that the statistics used reveal little about the state of

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<sup>4</sup> NA WO 201/538 Corbett to 8, 9 and 10 Armies, 24 May 1942.

<sup>5</sup> NA WO 32/15773 C-in-C Middle East to the War Office, 24 July 1942.

<sup>6</sup> NA WO 32/15773 C-in-C Middle East to the War Office, 9 August 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Desmond Young, *Rommel* (London, 1950), p. 162; Jon Latimer, *Alamein* (London, 2002), pp. 97-8; Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War: Waging World War II in North Africa, 1941-1943* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 287.

Eighth Army in the summer of 1942.<sup>8</sup> The case can certainly be made that Auchinleck drew attention to the problem of absenteeism in Eighth Army as a way of shifting blame for his own shortcomings onto the frontline troops. Auchinleck, and his Army Commander Lieutenant-General Sir Neil Ritchie, made significant errors during the operations around the Gazala line. Both commanders' preference for 'Jock columns' and 'brigade groups' prevented Eighth Army from massing sufficient firepower at the decisive point. Auchinleck's failure either to take complete control of Eighth Army or to let Ritchie do his job unfettered as Army Commander meant that there was a lack of clear direction and vital decisions were often delayed because 'two hands were on the helm.'<sup>9</sup> These deficiencies undoubtedly had a negative effect on the manner in which the battle was directed, but, and perhaps more importantly, they also had a direct effect on the conduct of the troops.

I have argued elsewhere, that the rates of desertion and surrender during the summer of 1942, especially when taken together, were a major factor in Eighth Army's poor combat performance.<sup>10</sup> The question, however, of whether and to what extent desertion and surrender were symptomatic of a lack of courage or even the result of cowardice has not been directly addressed.

The conceptualisation of courage and cowardice can be divided into two broad strands. One strand emphasises the willingness of the courageous person to engage in

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<sup>8</sup> David French, 'Discipline and the Death Penalty in the British Army in the War against Germany during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 33, no. 4, October, 1998, p. 541.

<sup>9</sup> NA WO 236/1 Lieut. Gen. Sir George Erskine, HQ British Troops in Egypt, Middle East Land Forces, 5 September 1950 to J.A.J. Agar-Hamilton, Union War History Section of the Prime Minister's Office, 724, Government Avenue, Pretoria.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 34-46.

certain acts and, conversely, the reluctance of the coward to engage in such acts. In the fourth century BC, Plato insisted that ‘whoever is willing to fight the enemy staying in his rank and does not flee, he, certainly, is courageous.’<sup>11</sup> In the *Iliad*, Homer described cowards as those that were ‘unwilling’ to fight.<sup>12</sup> He had Odysseus say that ‘it is the cowards who walk out of the fighting, but if one is to be preeminent in battle, he must by all means stand his ground strongly, whether he be struck or strike down another.’<sup>13</sup> The act of leaving one’s place in battle and throwing away one’s shield was, in Athens and Sparta, the epitome of cowardice; hence ‘the famous instruction of the Spartan mother to her warrior son, to return “with your shield or on it”.’<sup>14</sup> More recently, the British Army Act laid down ‘that a man is guilty of cowardice when he displays “an unsoldierlike regard for his personal safety in the presence of the enemy” by shamefully deserting his post or laying down his arms.’<sup>15</sup>

Another strand of usages is less concerned with the courageous or cowardly actions in themselves and puts more emphasis on how these actions express an individual’s ability to cope with fear. Where a person acts in spite of fear his behaviour can be labelled courageous. Where an individual fails to act due to fear his behaviour can be labelled cowardly. Thus, the courageous person copes with fear, the coward does not. Aristotle said that ‘it is characteristic of the courageous person to endure what is – and appears – fearful for a human being, because it is noble to do so and shameful not to.’<sup>16</sup> According to The Oxford English Dictionary courage is ‘the ability to do

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<sup>11</sup> J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (Yale, 2005), p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, 2000), Book 3 Chapter viii.

something that frightens one.’ Cowardice, is ‘a lack of bravery’ or courage.<sup>17</sup> Anthony Kellett, in *Combat Motivation*, said that courage could be defined as the ‘triumph of willpower over fear’.<sup>18</sup> Richard Holmes, in *Acts of War*, has similarly defined courage as the soldier’s ability to master fear.<sup>19</sup> Cowardice, conversely, is the inability to act because of fear.

Drawing on research on the North African campaign and the broad historiography on combat performance, this article explores the relationship between courage, cowardice and combat performance. It analyses the various factors that influence courageous and cowardly acts on the battlefield and investigates to what extent these played a role in determining Eighth Army’s combat performance in the summer of 1942.

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The question of whether Auchinleck’s characterisation of the problem facing Eighth Army was accurate must first be addressed.<sup>20</sup> The 1,728 absentees reported by Auchinleck in July 1942 represented around 0.9 per cent of the c.191,000 men who were engaged in operations in the desert in the summer of 1942. This was equivalent to about 3.6 per cent of those who were likely to have been fighting on the front line, between 27 May and 24 July 1942.<sup>21</sup> Taken at face value, these raw figures do not

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<sup>17</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behaviour of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston, 1982), p. 300.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London, 2004), p. 213. First published in 1985 under the title *Firing Line*.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the death penalty was not reintroduced. This was due to political expediency rather than operational realities. See NA WO 32/15773 Death Penalty for Desertion in the Field: Reintroduction, 1942.

<sup>21</sup> NA WO 163/51 The Army Council, Death Penalty in Relation to Offences Committed on Active Service, 11 August 1942; Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, p. 248-57. An infantry division at this time, when at full establishment, comprised of around 757 officers and 16,764 enlisted men. Only a small proportion of these men, however, were usually involved in heavy fighting,

appear unduly high. However, cognizance must be taken of two points if the full significance of the reported crisis is to be understood. First, the figures suggest that one man from every rifle platoon (consisting of an officer and 36 enlisted men) may have gone absent if anywhere near 3.6 per cent of front line troops absconded during the summer fighting. Such a reality would have had a considerable effect on primary group cohesion and discipline in Eighth Army. Second, the seriousness of the issue may be better understood when the pace at which the problem was developing is taken into account. Auchinleck reported, in the first of his two telegrams to the War Office, that there had been 310 convictions for desertion and cowardice in the 12 months from April 1941 to February 1942, that is an average of about 26 convictions per month. The average monthly number of soldiers sentenced for desertion in the five months from February to June 1942, as reported in his second telegram, had grown to 34, a 31 per cent increase. Between 16 June and 13 July 1942, however, 907 absentees were reported to the Corps of Military Police of whom 430 were subsequently apprehended. Mark Connelly and Walter Miller have pointed out that the majority of those accused of desertion or cowardice in battle were usually convicted at courts martial. They estimated that the ratio of convictions to acquittals was about six or seven to one. As Connelly and Miller put it, 'the odds against acquittal were . . . high' due to the 'High Command's desire to provide examples to stiffen discipline and morale'.<sup>22</sup> This would suggest that of the 430 absentees who, at the time of writing, had been apprehended, at least around 370 would have been convicted. In other words, it is highly likely that there was a minimum of a tenfold

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normally the four rifle companies that made up each of the nine infantry battalions in a division (c.4,464 men or 25.5 per cent of the total). This reality constantly vexed Churchill who complained about the poor tail to teeth ratio in the British Army.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Connelly and Walter Miller, 'British Courts Martial in North Africa, 1940-3', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2004, pp. 231-2.

increase in monthly convictions for desertion from the February to June period to the June/July period.

Auchinleck's steps to address the crisis must be understood in this light; he was trying to stop and reverse a growth in the incidence of desertion that was so high that it posed a direct risk to operations. This growth may indeed have been to a large extent the result of his policies and management of the battle, but it would have been an unforgivable oversight not to address the significant problem that was unfolding in the desert. Whether or not the reintroduction of the death penalty was the appropriate measure to take, there was clearly a crisis to address. It was certainly the perception of commanders on the ground that 'numerous cases of AWOL [Absence Without Leave] from the front line' were taking place and that this was undermining operations.<sup>23</sup>

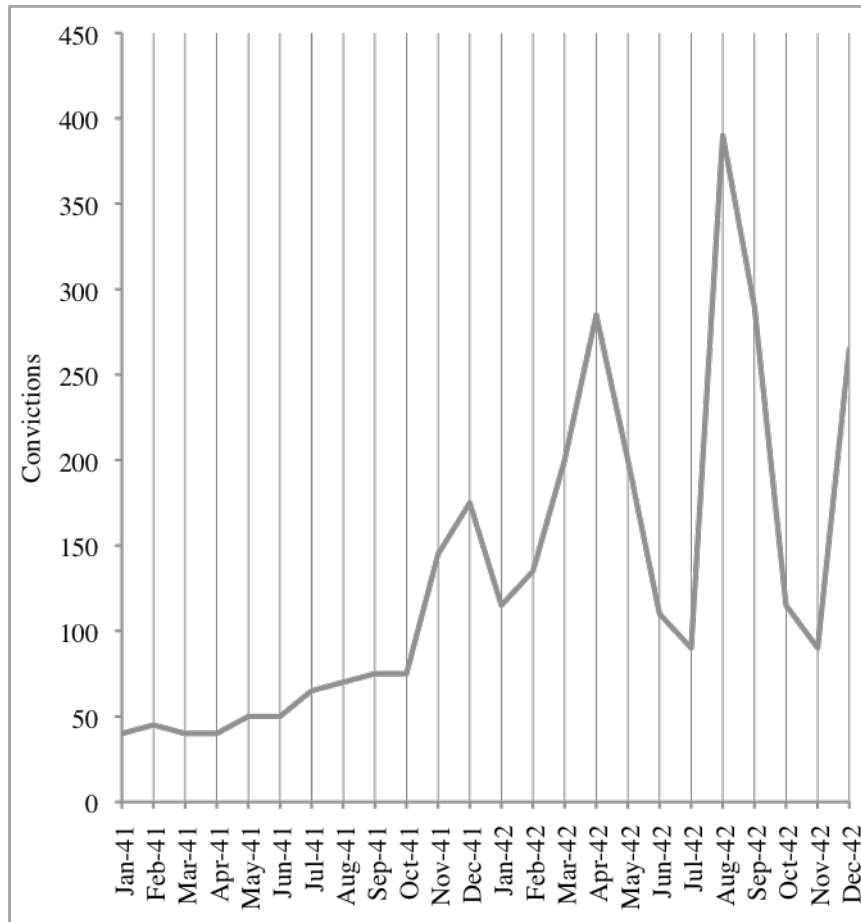
Other statistics for courts martial convictions in British overseas commands in 1941 and 1942 support this contention. They show that there was a peak during August/September 1942, the time when courts martial proceedings, against those who had gone absent or deserted during the summer fighting, would have been taking place.

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<sup>23</sup> South African Military Archives Depot (SAMAD) Divisional Documents Box 119 Union Defence Force Adm. HQ Middle East Forces to Comd. SA Base, 'Illegal Absentees', 8 August 1942.



Figure One: Courts Martial Convictions for Absence and Desertion Overseas Commands, 1941-42.<sup>24</sup>



These figures, it must be accepted, are not a perfect guide to what was happening in the desert. For instance, the peak in August and September 1942 could have been caused by men deserting in other theatres, such as in the Far East. Unfortunately, records relating solely to desertion in the Middle East have generally not survived.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, taking into account the fact that these figures correspond quite closely to the estimates presented above and the reality that no major actions were taking place in other theatres at this time, it does seem highly likely that this peak was

<sup>24</sup> Chart derived from NA WO 277/7 Comparative Chart of 'Absence' and 'Desertion' Home Forces and Overseas Commands from 1 September 1939 to 31 August 1945.

<sup>25</sup> Connelly and Miller, 'British Courts Martial in North Africa, 1940-3', p. 235.

caused by the crisis in the desert. Another set of figures support this contention. Numbers in detention barracks in the Middle East increased very sharply around this time, with those in No. 50 Detention Barracks in Egypt, for instance, increasing from sixty-six in April 1940 to 600 in September 1942,<sup>26</sup> a nine-fold increase.<sup>27</sup>

It should also be noted that the overall problem facing Auchinleck and Eighth Army was much greater than that posed solely by the sudden growth in the rate of desertions. In his July cable, Auchinleck presented another set of figures to the War Office to support his request for a reintroduction of the death penalty. These statistics showed an alarming ratio of 'missing' to overall casualties. Between the beginning of Rommel's offensive at the end of May and late July, Eighth Army lost 1,700 killed and 6,000 wounded, but had 57,000 categorized as missing, 'of whom the great majority must be assumed to be prisoners of war.'<sup>28</sup>

These figures equate to an overall missing/surrender rate for Eighth Army of about 88 per cent of casualties and tally with other reports sent to the War Office in August 1942.<sup>29</sup> Around 82 to 86 per cent of United Kingdom casualties were classified as missing/surrender during the Gazala, Tobruk and July battles. The Australian missing/surrender rate was about 34 per cent, that of the New Zealanders was 42 per

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>27</sup> Part of this increase could, to some extent, be attributed to the rise in the number of troops in the Middle East, but there was only a four times increase in the size of the MEF in the roughly corresponding period, increasing from 211,000 in November 1940 to 864,000 in August 1942.

<sup>28</sup> NA WO 32/15773 The Army Council, Death Penalty in Relation to Offences Committed on Active Duty, 31 July 1942, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA) Adam Papers, Box 2, Notes on A.C.S. Paper Comparison of Casualties, Libya, AG Stats, 6 August 1942; NA WO 163/51 The Army Council, Death Penalty in Relation to Offences Committed on Active Service, 11 August 1942.

cent while the South African and Indian rate was 90 per cent.<sup>30</sup> The total number of POW and missing soldiers reported by the British Army during the Second World War amounted to 185,847; this was 32.6 per cent of total casualties. The statistics from the desert in the summer of 1942 were clearly out of line with the general picture and required an explanation.<sup>31</sup>

Both General Sir Ronald Adam, the Adjutant General of the British Army, and Sir P. J. Grigg, the Secretary of State for War, agreed with this assessment. They accepted that these figures showed that the British soldier was ‘inclined to surrender rather than to fight it out,’ and therefore agreed to re-open the death penalty issue as demanded by Auchinleck.<sup>32</sup> The Army Council similarly concluded that ‘the capitulation at Singapore, the fall of Tobruk and the large proportion of unwounded prisoners in the operations in Cyrenaica [the Western Desert], are pointers to a condition existing in the Army which does not appear to accord with its old traditions.’<sup>33</sup> Auchinleck’s concerns, judging by this evidence, would appear therefore to have been well founded.

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There are difficulties for the historian in attempting to apply the label of cowardice or courage to troops in action, whichever one of the two broad approaches to

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<sup>30</sup> NA WO 32/10810 Battle Casualties (Exclusive of Deaths from Natural Causes) Incurred by Forces Under British Empire Control as Reported by “Hot Spot” cables from 3 September 1939 to 28 June 1946.

<sup>31</sup> LHCMA Adam Papers, Box 2, White Paper, Strengths and Casualties of the Armed Forces and Auxiliary Services of the United Kingdom 1939 to 1945 (London, His Majesty’s Stationery Office), p.8.

<sup>32</sup> NA WO 163/89 Executive Committee of the Army Council, The Death Penalty for Offences Committed on Active Service, 21 July 1942.

<sup>33</sup> NA WO 32/15773 The Army Council, Death Penalty in Relation to Offences Committed on Active Duty, 31 July 1942, p. 3.

conceptualising courage and cowardice, already outlined, is used. The first approach clearly suggests that desertion and surrender, behaviours that demonstrate a lack of willingness to fight, can be labelled as cowardice. This is certainly what Auchinleck was alluding to in his cables to the War Office. But soldiers are liable to desert or surrender for a multitude of reasons, many of which are entirely understandable and should not be characterised in a pejorative fashion. It can be argued, for instance, that the high proportion of prisoners to killed and wounded in the North African battles of the summer of 1942 proved little about the courage of Eighth Army. High numbers of surrenders often occurred in cases where un-armoured troops, surrounded by enemy tanks and bereft of anti-tank weapons, had little chance of fighting on and defeating the enemy. Referring to such cases of surrender as instances of cowardice suggests that their behaviour was unjustifiably deficient when one can certainly argue that it was not the soldiers' fault that they were placed in a poor tactical situation with inadequate weaponry.

Connelly and Miller have reached similar conclusions regarding surrender in the British Army in France in 1940. They argued that:

Surrender was often not the final act of disillusioned, broken men, but the final gesture of disciplined, but pragmatic, soldiers. Soldiers, especially middle-ranking and junior officers, appear to have reached the conclusion that further resistance would merely increase casualties to little effect and so ordered their men to lay down their arms.<sup>34</sup>

Irrespective of arguments such as these, a case can be made that the behaviour of these troops was deficient and that it was not acceptable for British servicemen to act

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Connelly and Walter Miller, 'The BEF and the Issue of Surrender on the Western Front in 1940', *War in History*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2004, pp. 436.

in this manner, irrespective of how rational such behaviour may appear to have been. British doctrine stipulated that every soldier was required to fight even when the situation appeared hopeless or the soldier might realistically expect to die or suffer wounds as a result. In such circumstances, the military deemed it inexcusable to surrender or desert. The 1929 Field Service Regulations (FSR) explained that ‘there is only one degree of resistance for troops . . . that is to the last round and the last man, unless definite orders to the contrary are received by the commander of those troops.’<sup>35</sup> The Manual for Military Law stipulated that surrender

. . . can only be committed by the person in charge of the garrison, post, etc, and not by the subordinate under his command. The surrender of a place by an officer charged with its defence can only be justified by the utmost necessity, such as want of provisions or water, the absence of hope of further relief, and the certainty or extreme probability that no further efforts could prevent the place with its garrison, their arms and munitions, falling into the hands of the enemy. Unless the necessity is shown, the conclusion must be that the surrender or abandonment was shameful, and therefore an offence under this section.<sup>36</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that commanders in France or in the desert considered their troops exempt from the requirements as set out in the FSR and the Manual of Military Law. Under these conditions, it is arguable that many of those soldiers who surrendered in France and in North Africa were acting outside of a strict interpretation of military expectations.

Commanders in the desert certainly saw the matter in this light. Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead, the commander of 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, wrote to his men after the summer fighting, outlining what was expected of them in future battles.

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<sup>35</sup> War Office, *Field Service Regulations* (FSR) Chap. VII Sec. 77 (1929).

<sup>36</sup> War Office, *Manual of Military Law* (London, 1939), p. 427. First published in 1929.

In the war there have been far too many unwounded prisoners taken. The modern term 'in the bag' is too excusable, it is not harsh enough, and it seems to mitigate having failed to make a proper stand and even to having just merely surrendered. We must make it unfashionable. I have closely questioned escaped prisoners and I know what actually happened in some instances, I am sure that those who did not put up a fight must often ruminate over it in their prison camps especially in the winter months.

You must impress on your officers, NCOs and men that when they are cut off or surrounded and there appears no hope of survival they must organise themselves into a defensive locality and hold out. They must be a good staunch Australian and not emulate the Italians. By so doing they will add enormously to the enemy's difficulties and will assist materially the development of our own operations. And they will live to have pride and satisfaction in themselves instead of spending the rest of the war and a long time afterwards in prison camps. Nothing is ever hopeless so long as troops have stout hearts, and have weapons and ammunition. In this too is the test of real leadership and manhood.<sup>37</sup>

There are thus some compelling reasons to conclude that the crisis in the desert in 1942 may have been, at least to some degree, a result of a lack of willingness to fight among the troops. If courage is primarily a willingness to fight, and the behaviour of troops did not exhibit that willingness, it appears justifiable to characterise the behaviour of Eighth Army during the summer battles as cowardly.

Focusing on a definition that relates courage and cowardice to fear also raises issues for the historian. 'Fear is a normal, inevitable, useful reaction to danger . . . produced in a man's body by his awareness of signs of danger in the world around him.'<sup>38</sup> Some people claim that they do not experience fear in battle, but such people are, in reality, rare,<sup>39</sup> or even nonexistent. During the Second World War, the army accepted that all soldiers would experience fear. As Ronald Adam, the Adjutant General, explained in a letter to senior officers in December 1943,

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<sup>37</sup> Australian War Memorial (AWM) 3 DRL 2632 Morshead Papers, El Alamein, 10 October 1942.

<sup>38</sup> John Dollard, *Fear in Battle* (New Haven, 1943), p. 70.

<sup>39</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 204-5.

Fear is a universal emotion. Like jealousy, hatred or love, it is experienced by every normal human being under conditions which are conducive to it . . . A brave man and a coward have this in common. They both feel fear – one controls it, the other collapses under it.<sup>40</sup>

With reference to the levels of fear felt by soldiers under fire, the British General and theorist J. F. C. Fuller argued that ‘in an attack half the men on a firing line are in terror and the other half are unnerved.’<sup>41</sup> Samuel A. Stouffer has outlined why the environment of battle is so stressful:

The intense emotional strains of actual battle are to a large extent rooted in the inescapable fear and anxiety reactions continually aroused by ever-present stimuli which signify objective threats of danger. The threats of being maimed, of undergoing unbearable pain, and of being completely annihilated elicit intense fear reactions which may severely interfere with successful performance.<sup>42</sup>

In his study of 300 American veterans from the Spanish Civil War, John Dollard showed that 74 per cent of men had experienced fear when going into their first combat action while as many as 91 per cent of men who had been in combat on more than one occasion had experienced fear. Fifty-nine per cent of the veterans questioned by Dollard said that there were ‘occasions when they were too cautious and had their efficiency reduced by fear.’<sup>43</sup> In his study of over 12,000 American soldiers in both the Pacific and European theatres of operations in the Second World War, moreover, Stouffer demonstrated that a majority of men were willing to admit that they experienced fear and anxiety in combat.<sup>44</sup> In a survey carried out in the European theatre of operations in August 1944, two hundred and seventy-seven wounded

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<sup>40</sup> LHCMA Adam V/6, Adam to Corps District, District, Divisional and Area Commanders, December 1943.

<sup>41</sup> Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* (London, 2003), p. 230.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath, vol. II* (Princeton, 1949), p. 192.

<sup>43</sup> Dollard, *Fear in Battle*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>44</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, p. 200.

combat veterans were asked about their experiences. The results were startling. Sixty-five per cent of the men questioned admitted having had at least one experience in combat in which they were unable to perform adequately because of intense fear. Forty-two per cent said that they had not been able to perform in combat 'once or twice' or 'a few times' because of fear. Twenty-three per cent reported that they had not been able to perform because of fear 'several times' or 'many times' in combat.<sup>45</sup> As S.L.A. Marshall put it, fear was 'ever present' on the battlefield, and 'uncontrolled fear' was ultimately the 'enemy of successful operations.'<sup>46</sup>

Fear could indeed have been a major factor in the large increase in rates of desertion and surrender in Eighth Army during the summer of 1942. The bulk of the soldiers who made up the desert army after 1941 were conscripts, volunteers and territorials. These men, unaccustomed to the noise of battle, and unused to the threat of injury and death, were faced with a traumatic and profoundly unfamiliar environment. Sir Richard O'Connor, who commanded the Western Desert Force until his capture in 1941 and later commanded VIII Corps in Normandy, agreed with this general assertion. He believed that 'the great majority' of desertions in the British Army were committed by men who were 'frightened of shelling, & wanted an excuse to get out of it.' But, he said, 'if people were allowed to leave the battlefield every time they were frightened the army would have disintegrated in no time.' For this reason, 'horrible as it is,' he was 'in favour of the death penalty in certain cases,' as he believed it acted as an effective deterrent to such behaviours.<sup>47</sup> This is a crucial point. The army could

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 201-2. The sample taken was not a cross section of all troops, but rather a random selection of wounded combat veterans in army hospitals.

<sup>46</sup> S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, 1978), p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> French, 'Discipline and the Death Penalty', p. 538. O'Connor after being captured by the Germans was turned over to the Italians. He escaped at the time of the Italian surrender in 1943.



limit the detrimental effect of having men who would not fight when out-gunned and placed in a poor tactical position. If battle was managed effectively, such scenarios would occur rarely. It could not, however, afford to have men who would not fight when faced with fear, due to the inescapable fact that fear was ever present on the battlefield. This again suggests that it may be justifiable to label the men of Eighth Army as cowards.

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Whether one takes the view that courage is primarily willingness to fight or primarily the ability to deal with fear, it would appear, at the very least, that there are serious questions regarding the lack of courage or even the cowardice of Eighth Army at this time. If troops are to be labelled cowards, however, one might ask, to what purpose? The psychological rationale of emotive words, such as courage and cowardice, 'is to make people act effectively.'<sup>48</sup> Field Marshal Lord Slim commented after the Second World War that 'I don't believe there's any man who, in his heart of hearts, wouldn't rather be called brave than have any other virtue attributed to him.'<sup>49</sup> The opposite could be said for cowardice. Usage of such words plays an important part in inculcating and encouraging positive battlefield behaviours.<sup>50</sup> But they have little place in critical analysis of the past. As Richard Holmes has argued, 'we must be remorselessly objective in our approach' to issues as complex as courage and cowardice.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Robert H. Thouless, *Straight and Crooked Thinking* (London, 1977), p. 21. First published in 1930.

<sup>49</sup> General Sir Peter de la Billière, *Supreme Courage: Heroic Stories from 150 Years of the Victoria Cross* (London, 2004), p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> See Connelly and Miller, 'British Courts Martial in North Africa, 1940-3', pp. 217-42 for a description of how courts martial were used to encourage positive battlefield behaviours.

<sup>51</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, p. 224.

Courage is very much an attribute of an individual and is often described as one of the key moral virtues. Any judgment of an historian about the personal character of an individual, or a group of combatants, would be overwhelmingly subjective. Courage, however, emanates not only from individual qualities of character but also from external influences, such as factors relating to the military institution or combat environment.<sup>52</sup> An historian can realistically assess these external influences that impact on individuals and build their willingness to fight or allow them to manage their fear.

The external factors that affect a soldier's willingness to fight are better understood today than ever before.<sup>53</sup> However, historians have not grappled to the same degree with the specific question of how the soldier can overcome fear in battle. According to Dollard, a social anthropologist, the objective of good 'fear policy' was to manage it by giving the soldier those tools that he needed to overcome his fear.<sup>54</sup> Dollard asked his veterans the following question in an attempt to identify how this can be done: 'What would you say are the most important things that help a man overcome fear in battle?'

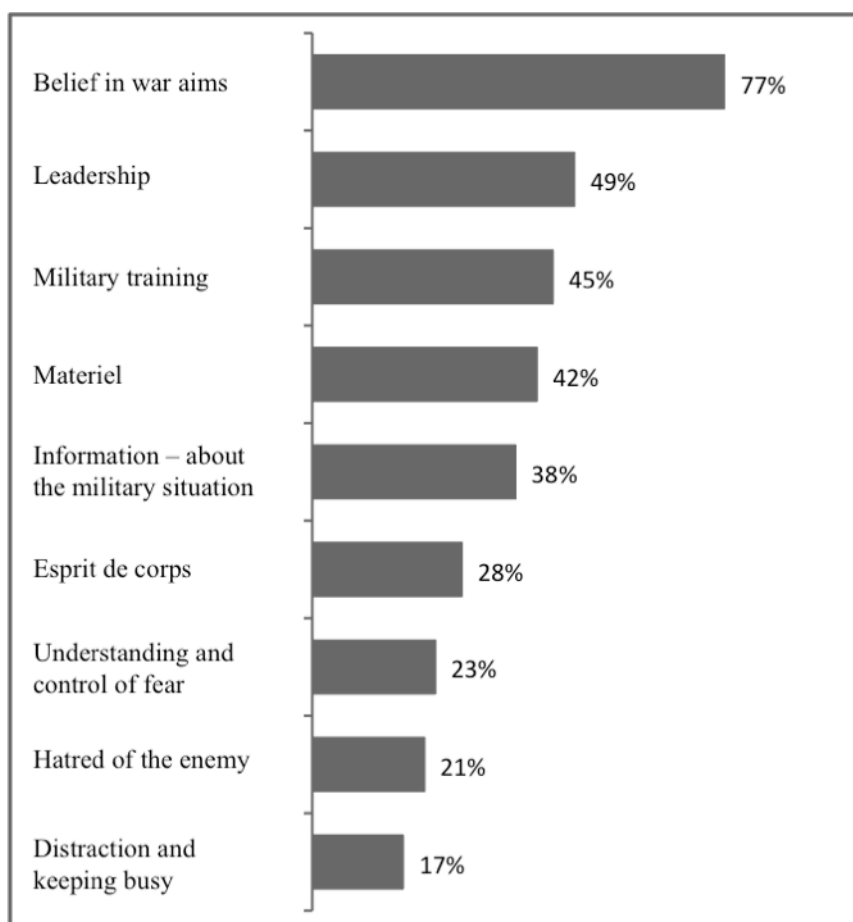
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<sup>52</sup> Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, pp. 110-12; Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 222-3. The influences of the culture and geographic surroundings in which one grows up are not addressed here.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, M. Janowitz and E. Shils, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12 (Summer 1948); Samuel Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1965); S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York, 1966); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976); John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (London, 1986); John McLeod, *Myth and Reality: The New Zealand Soldier in World War II* (Auckland, 1986); John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London, 1993); Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Kentucky, 1995); Mark Johnston, *At the Front Line: Experiences of Australian Soldiers in World War II* (Cambridge, 1996); Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (London, 1997); Peter Schrijvers, *The Crash of Ruin: American Combat Soldiers in Europe during World War II* (London, 1998); Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London, 2004); Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: The Red Army 1939-45* (London, 2005); Roger R. Ressa, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought: The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Dollard, *Fear in Battle*, p. 70.

Figure Two: What would you say are the most important things that help a man overcome fear in battle?<sup>55</sup>



Dollard's respondents were all volunteers for a conflict infused with ideological motives and their responses reflected this reality, i.e. the response for 'belief in war aims' got an extremely high score. However, the relative importance accorded the various factors is less relevant to this study than the actual factors selected by the respondents. They can be broadly categorised as follows:

- Belief in a cause (incorporating 'belief in war aims' and 'hatred of enemy')

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 55. Percentages total more than 100 per cent since many respondents mentioned several items.

- Leadership (incorporating ‘leadership’, ‘information on military situation’ and ‘distractions’)
- Training (incorporating ‘training’, ‘control of fear’)
- Quality of weapons (‘materiel’)
- Primary group (‘esprit de corps’)

In fact, these are some of the factors that can also be identified as being the mainstays of an army’s willingness to fight and its morale. This raises some interesting questions regarding the relationship between courage, cowardice and morale, which can be defined as the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for and engage in an action required by an authority or institution.<sup>56</sup>

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The nineteenth century French strategist, Charles Ardant Du Picq, argued that there were only a ‘few really brave’ or courageous men in an army. Gideon, he pointed out, ‘was lucky to find three hundred in thirty thousand.’<sup>57</sup> Effective battlefield performance, he postulated, was contingent instead on the military’s ability to inculcate morale in the army. High morale, he argued, motivated the soldier to fight and shielded the ordinary recruit from his fear and prevented it from overcoming him in battle. The soldier’s willingness to fight, engendered either by desire or by discipline,<sup>58</sup> could thus trump his fear of annihilation, disfigurement or pain.<sup>59</sup> Where

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<sup>56</sup> Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>57</sup> Ardant Du Picq, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle* (Charleston, 2006), p. 111.

<sup>58</sup> Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Du Picq, *Battle Studies*, pp. 112-4.

morale failed, in what Bruce Allen Watson referred to as the ‘crisis’ point,<sup>60</sup> the soldier was left de-motivated and burdened with his terror and, therefore, inevitably ran away, deserted or surrendered. Dollard argued that ‘fear, fused with hunger and fatigue,’ tended to drive men out of battle. ‘Other stronger forces’, therefore, ‘must be pitted against fear to drive men in.’ Fear is thus ‘controlled by making other forces stronger than it. The whole organization of an efficient army helps to control fear.’<sup>61</sup>

It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that soldiers are liable to succumb to de-motivation and fear in battle if the external forces that help them strengthen motivation and overcome fear are deficient or lacking to a critical degree. This contention is broadly accepted in the secondary literature today.<sup>62</sup> ‘Modern history’, as Du Picq points out, ‘furnishes us with no examples of stonewall troops who can neither be shaken nor driven back.’<sup>63</sup> Even in the ancient world, where the courageous were honour bound to hold their positions in the line, major heroes were ‘constantly shrinking back into the mass behind them or fleeing wholesale along with their followers.’<sup>64</sup>

Lord Moran built his own theory on courage on a similar observation. He argued that all soldiers have what he referred to as a limited stock of courage. ‘A man’s courage is his capital,’ he wrote, ‘and he is always spending. The call on the bank may be only the daily drain of the front line or it may be a sudden draft which threatens to close the account.’<sup>65</sup> R. Swank and W. Marchand put a figure of 60 days on the soldier’s

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<sup>60</sup> Bruce Allen Watson, *When Soldiers Quit: Studies in Military Disintegration* (Westport, 1997), p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Dollard, *Fear in Battle*, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 213-4.

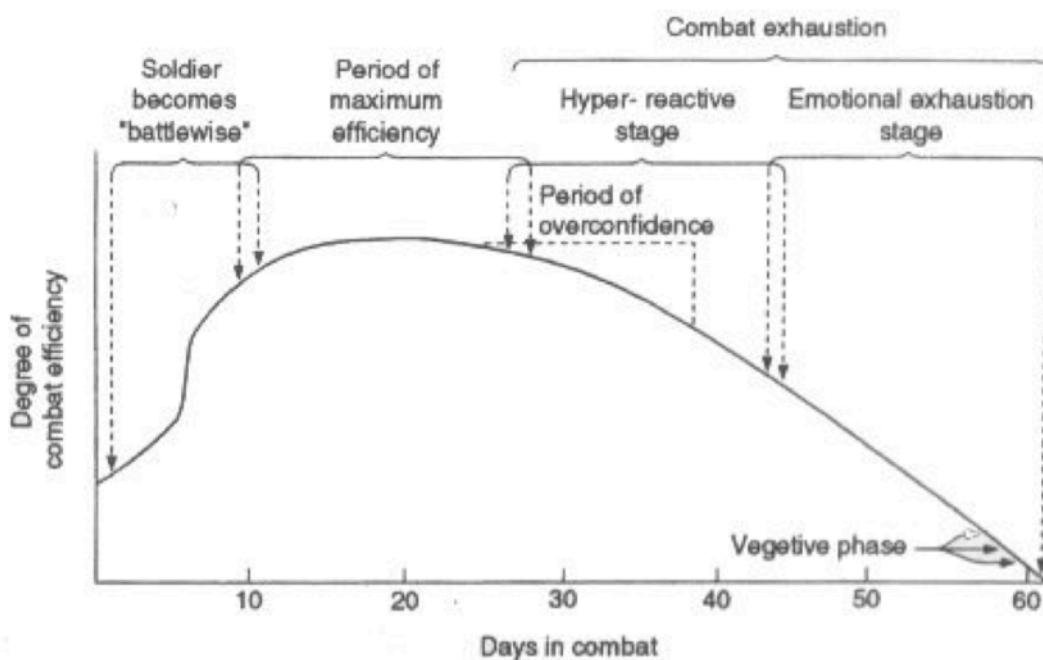
<sup>63</sup> Du Picq, *Battle Studies*, p. 117.

<sup>64</sup> Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, p. 35.

<sup>65</sup> Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, p. 67.

stock of courage when describing combat in Normandy in 1944. According to Richard Holmes, this figure was very low and reflected the intensity of the combat in the *Bocage* of Normandy. Holmes argued that, in general, the British estimated that a rifleman could last for about 400 combat days while the Americans reckoned that soldiers would keep going for about 200 to 240 combat days.<sup>66</sup>

Figure Three: Degree of Combat Efficiency in Relation to Days Spent in Combat.<sup>67</sup>



The undoubtedly negative connotations attached to cowardice in battle and the positive ones attached to courage are therefore arguably unhelpful in understanding the human dimension in warfare. The nature of warfare guarantees that the factors that maintain morale in battle will gradually be worn away. Belief in a cause will be tested by setbacks. Good leaders will be killed or replaced by poor ones. Training and

<sup>66</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, pp. 214-5. Holmes attributes the greater number of days for British troops to the fact that British units were given more regular rest periods while in combat.

<sup>67</sup> R. Swank and W. Marchand, 'Combat Neuroses: The Development of Combat Exhaustion', *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*, vol. 55, no. 3, 1946, p. 238.

materiel will sometimes be inadequate for the job at hand. The bonds of the primary group will be broken by casualties and the fog of war will twist and distort the information available to the man on the front line. It is extremely difficult in an environment governed by chance and managed by humans to continuously maintain at a high level those factors (morale) that encourage willingness to fight and support the soldier in the struggle against fear. Emotive terms should thus be avoided when attempting to describe inescapable and rationally explainable outcomes.

In addition, an emphasis on courage and cowardice, both of which focus primarily on the individual, obfuscates the state and military's responsibility to foster, generate and train for morale. It unbalances requirements away from the state and organisation to the individual.<sup>68</sup> As John Baynes has argued 'courage' can only be 'found in a unit in which morale is at its peak.'<sup>69</sup> Therefore, as Du Picq pointed out, the primary role of the army must be to organize its men so as to best inculcate morale.<sup>70</sup> All soldiers will eventually become cowards if we adhere to strict definitions of the term. At the same time all soldiers can be labeled courageous if they are properly motivated to fight and prepared by the state and military to deal with the unavoidable fear of combat. This is not in any way to absolve the individual soldier from his responsibility to act courageously but it realistically places this obligation in its appropriate institutional and martial context. Responsibility and blame for courageous and cowardly actions must, therefore, fall mainly on the state and military establishment. It holds, as a result, that if an historian wants to study courage, he must first study and understand morale.

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<sup>68</sup> Du Picq, *Battle Studies*, p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of Men and Courage, The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 1915* (London, 1967), p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Du Picq, *Battle Studies*, pp. 103-13.

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The many factors that engendered and supported morale (and therefore courage) in Eighth Army were noticeably undermined during the critical fighting around Tobruk and on the Gazala and El Alamein lines in the summer of 1942. A brief appraisal of the five broad categories of factors that influence a soldier's ability to overcome fear in battle derived from Dollard's questionnaire (Figure Two) illustrates this point.

In the early years of the war, the War Office attached no great importance to ideological motives and made little effort to inculcate the men in the desert with ideological fervour.<sup>71</sup> The available evidence suggests that, partly as a result of this, many of the factors that influenced the soldier's relationship with the cause he was fighting for were undermined during the critical battles of the summer of 1942. News from home and about the war generally was noticeably lacking, while formalised army education was only beginning to take root in Eighth Army and would not pay dividends until October/November 1942.

Of perhaps greatest significance during this period was the maintenance of the soldiers' relationships with their loved ones. Citizen-soldiers left families, businesses, and farms at home. Nevertheless, they fought to preserve these bastions of peaceful existence from the enemy. As Hew Strachan has argued, 'the soldier may excoriate

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<sup>71</sup> David French, "'You Cannot Hate the Bastard Who is Trying to Kill You...'" *Combat and Ideology in the British Army in the War Against Germany, 1939-1945*, *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2000, p. 5; Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, pp. 174-87.



the politician and the war profiteer, but he still fights for home and hearth – for mother, wife, and children.<sup>72</sup>

The length of separation, combined with the irregularity and slowness of mail, put tremendous strain on many of the soldiers' relationships. No news or bad news could cause misunderstandings or jealousies, which were a real and substantial danger to morale. These trends were exacerbated by the presence of large numbers of foreign Allied troops in the British, New Zealand, Australian and South African homelands. All this drove the soldiers of Eighth Army to such levels of jealousy and worry about the fidelity of their wives and girlfriends that the problem almost became an epidemic. The censorship summary for Eighth Army for 27 May to 2 June, right at the start of the Axis summer offensive, commented that 'there appears to be no slackening of mail from home relating to domestic tragedies and this type of news seems to have an increasingly adverse effect on the morale of the troops. The hatred the troops show for overseas troops in Britain is very real and finds a great deal of expression throughout the mail.'<sup>73</sup> In July 1942, one man wrote to his wife, 'I tell you what our tent is called now, love, it is called the "Jilted Lovers Tent," because there are four chaps in this tent who were engaged, but now their girls have broken it off and in three cases the girls have married Canadians.' Another stated, 'unfortunately the women of England are not playing the game, we have just had another chap whose wife has been put in the family way by another man – that makes 15 out of 160

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<sup>72</sup> Hew Strachan, 'The Soldier's Experience in Two World Wars: Some Historiographical Comparisons', in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945* (London, 1997), p. 376.

<sup>73</sup> AWM 54 883/2/97 Middle East Field Censorship Weekly Summary (MEFCWS), No. XXIX (27 May to 2 June 1942), p. 2.

of us [c. 9 per cent], good going eh?’<sup>74</sup> The censor described these examples as ‘by no means being isolated case[s]’ and pointed out that ‘this subject, apart from the ebb and flow of the battle itself, has a greater effect on the men’s morale than any other single factor.’<sup>75</sup> By August 1942, newspapers were reporting that Free French, Czech and Polish troops in the UK were marrying on average 600 English girls a month. The censor stated that these reports were ‘doing more harm among our men than anything Dr. Goebbels can produce.’<sup>76</sup>

The introduction of army education and more enlightened welfare policies later in the campaign eventually made a big difference in combating such problems. Nevertheless, the evidence from the desert suggests that many of the drivers that reinforced the soldier’s connection with the causes he was fighting for were fundamentally undermined during the summer of 1942. Furthermore, the legend that both sides took part in a ‘war without hate’ suggests that ideological motivations were of no great importance to combat morale in Eighth Army. The remarkable respect that Eighth Army held for its German enemy during much of the desert fighting was a matter the censorship reports consistently commented upon and led, according to the censors, to increased rates of surrender among the troops.<sup>77</sup> The morale report for May to July 1942 clearly related the problem of increased rates of surrender to the fact that ‘many of the troops still want to know what we are fighting for.’<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Archives New Zealand (ANZ) WAI/1/DA508/1 Vol. 1, MEFCWS, No. XXXIV (1 to 7 July 1942), pp. 7-8.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> ANZ WAI/1/DA508 Vol. 1, Middle East Military Censorship Weekly Summary (MEMCWS), No. XXXVIII (29 July to 4 August 1942), p. 3. It is perhaps of interest that there is little or no comment in the censorship summaries on the effect on relationships of reports of infidelity on the part of troops on leave in Cairo and Alexandria.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 2; ANZ WAI/1/DA508 Vol. 1, MEMCWS, No. XL (12 to 18 August 1942), p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> NA WO 193/453 Draft Morale Report, May to July 1942; ANZ WAI/1/DA508 Vol. 3, MEMCWS, No. XL (12 to 18 August 1942), pp. 2-3.

The contribution of Eighth Army's leadership to morale was also undermined during the summer battles. This was especially notable when Eighth Army compared its own leadership to that of Rommel on the Axis side. The censorship summary for 1 to 7 July stated that 'the Eighth Army is without doubt a very angry army . . . Our reverse in Libya is attributed by a number of writers from Field Rank to Trooper to the fact that "Rommel seems to be a better General."' It was commonly believed that under the right leadership, 'we would prove more than a match for the Axis forces.'<sup>79</sup> The summary for 8 to 14 July concluded that 'the outstanding criticism was undoubtedly that of leadership; the opinion that we have been out-generalled is unfortunately widely held.'<sup>80</sup>

The men's criticisms were clearly targeted at Auchinleck and Ritchie.<sup>81</sup> It was Auchinleck's attempts to reinstate the death penalty that perhaps said most about leadership in Eighth Army and its effect on morale in the summer of 1942. As Gary Sheffield has argued, 'the ideal leader is one who relies mainly on personal and expert power. A poor leader is one who relies mainly on institutional and coercive power.'<sup>82</sup> Auchinleck had clearly failed to maintain morale by power of his leadership and command style. Instead, he was forced to turn to policies of coercion to maintain his troops' willingness and discipline to fight. By 23 June his relationship with his troops had deteriorated to such an extent that he felt that he had no choice but to tender his resignation. He wrote to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, in London, accepting full responsibility for all that had occurred in the desert. He offered to vacate the post of Commander-in-Chief admitting to a 'loss of

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<sup>79</sup> ANZ WAI/1/DA/508/1 Vol. 1, MEFCWS, No. XXXIV (1 to 7 July 1942), p. 3-5.

<sup>80</sup> ANZ WAI/1/DA/508/1 Vol. 1, MEMCWS, No. XXXV (8 to 14 July 1942), p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Auchinleck sacked Ritchie and took overall control of the MEF and Eighth Army on 25 June 1942.

<sup>82</sup> Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London, 2000), p. 42.

influence' with the troops 'due to lack of success, absence of luck and all other things which affect the morale of an army.'<sup>83</sup>

The quality of more junior officers within Eighth Army was also a problem during the summer of 1942. The censorship summary for 8 to 14 July pointed out that 'many officers fail to inspire confidence in their men.'<sup>84</sup> A 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division memorandum, written in August 1942, on the 'Morale of South African Troops in the Middle East', emphasised that the problem of inefficient officers was a 'theme of endless discussion' among the men. The memorandum stated that it was generally felt that officers 'of proved incompetence should be demoted and replaced much more often than actually happens.' It was equally believed that successful officers should be promoted. A frequent statement among the troops was that the 'Russians would have shot an officer for this or that.'<sup>85</sup> The Commander-in-Chief Home Forces probably captured the character of the problem most accurately when referring to the death penalty debate in August 1942. He reiterated that the solution to the surrender problem in the desert lay principally 'in the training of a corps of officers, whose efficiency, example and instinctive interest in their work and the troops would compel the respect of the men.'<sup>86</sup> The suggestion was that this was not the case in the desert in the summer of 1942.

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<sup>83</sup> Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London, 1983), pp. 180-1. First published 1960.

<sup>84</sup> ANZ WAI/1/DA 508/1 Vol. 1 MEFCWS, No. XXXV (8 to 14 July 1942), p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> SAMAD Divisional Documents, Group 1, Box 1, Memorandum on Morale of South African Troops in the Middle East, 8 August 1942, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> NA WO 32/15773 The Army Council, Minutes of the Fourteenth Meeting, 11 August 1942. Army Morale: The Death Penalty in Relation to Offences Committed on Active Service, p. 4.

Training also played a hugely important role in inculcating morale.<sup>87</sup> For most of 1941 and 1942 the troops who fought in the desert were handicapped by a training regime that was doctrinally and operationally unprepared for war.<sup>88</sup> The British Army, as a whole, increased its numbers on an enormous scale following the declaration of war in September 1939.<sup>89</sup> By June 1941, its fully trained cadre of regular soldiers made up at most just over 10 per cent of the forces available.<sup>90</sup> The situation in North Africa was similar. From the beginning of the desert campaign to the vital battle of El Alamein 1942, the MEF more than quadrupled in size.<sup>91</sup> The desert army was, with the exception of the Western Desert Force that fought against the Italians in 1940/1, a citizen army.

It was close to impossible to turn these newly raised forces into a confident, highly trained army overnight.<sup>92</sup> Niall Barr has pointed out that there was a general perception in North Africa that the level of training received by units was insufficient and inappropriate for desert conditions.<sup>93</sup> Although many of these shortcomings were understandable, the costs to Eighth Army were substantial.<sup>94</sup> The court of inquiry set up by Auchinleck, following the Tobruk disaster, ruled that 'not only must troops be adequately armed but also they must be given sufficient opportunity to train in the

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<sup>87</sup> Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, p. 216.

<sup>88</sup> Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944* (London, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> NA WO 277/12 *War Office Historical Monographs: Manpower Problems 1939-1945*, p. 80.

<sup>90</sup> NA WO 163/50 Use of Manpower in the Army, Part Two, Appendix A, Notes on the Growth of the Army, 21 November 1941.

<sup>91</sup> It must be noted that Middle East Command had responsibility at various times for areas as far ranging as Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Iraq, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya and Greece.

<sup>92</sup> NA WO 260/16 DSD to C-in-C Home Forces, 9 March 1942.

<sup>93</sup> Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London, 2005), p. 157.

<sup>94</sup> David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford, 2000), p. 211.

technical and tactical use of those arms before going into action.’<sup>95</sup> Lieutenant-General William ‘Straffer’ Gott pointed out on 12 July that ‘training demands time, and that time has seldom been forthcoming in the Middle East.’<sup>96</sup> Gott strongly believed that, ‘unseasoned, inexperienced and poorly trained troops’ had ‘no place on any battlefield, but there were some who came under this category in the recent fighting [around Tobruk].’<sup>97</sup>

The blame for allowing untrained units into combat in the desert in May, June and July 1942 does not rest entirely at the door of the commanders in North Africa. Churchill put an enormous amount of pressure on Auchinleck to begin operations before he felt he was entirely ready.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, Auchinleck admitted, in a letter to Brooke on 25 July 1942, that perhaps he had ‘asked too much of [the troops].’<sup>99</sup> By the end of July, Auchinleck was well aware that his army needed significant training. He wrote, in an appreciation of the situation in the Western Desert, on 27 July, that ‘none of the formations in Eighth Army is now sufficiently trained for offensive operations. The Army badly needs either a reinforcement of well trained formations or a quiet period in which to train.’<sup>100</sup> Auchinleck believed that this lack of training, in addition to casualties and the frequent changes of commanding officers, had contributed to the ‘deterioration’ in the army’s ‘standard of discipline’ as reflected in the high rates of desertion and surrender suffered during the summer fighting.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> SAMAD Union War Histories (UWH) Published Books, Box 368, Court of Inquiry, Tobruk. Report of a Court of Inquiry Assembled by Order of the C-in-C, 8 July 1942, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> NA WO 216/85 GHQ MEF for CGS, 12 July 1942, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> Stephen Bungay, *Alamein* (London, 2002), p. 223.

<sup>99</sup> LHCMA Alanbrooke Papers, Auchinleck to Brooke, 25 July 1942.

<sup>100</sup> John Connell, *Auchinleck: A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck* (London, 1959), p. 938.

<sup>101</sup> SAMAD Divisional Documents Box 119 Memorandum on Discipline by C-in-C Eighth Army, 15 July 1942, p. 3.

Eighth Army possessed a numerical advantage in weapons and manpower throughout the summer of 1942 that rarely converted into strategic or tactical success. Instead, the confidence, or lack of it, that soldiers had in their own weapons, as compared with those of their enemy, played a fundamentally important role in convincing them whether to risk their lives or not. The censorship summary for the week 17 to 23 June reported that the mail did show that the 'morale of the troops had suffered a set back' and that there were many references to the 'superior armament of the enemy.'<sup>102</sup> Robin Dunn, a regular gunner officer whose battery formed part of the Second Armoured Brigade, recalled, 'when I am asked why the great tank battle on June 12<sup>th</sup> was lost I say because . . . our tank crews were fighting an enemy better equipped than themselves, in tanks better armoured and more important with longer range guns.' Dunn recounted how 'this inequality was too much for even the finest units' to bear. 'The first time they met the Germans they would go in with tremendous dash and courage, and very few of them would come out. One by one the morale of these proud regiments was broken . . . It was more than flesh and blood and nerves could stand always to be asked to fight at such fearful odds.'<sup>103</sup> Gott noted, in a report he wrote on the operation, that 'in the first onslaught on May 26/27, armoured regiments had very heavy casualties, and it follows one cannot expect the same high standard of fighting in the second and subsequent battles.'<sup>104</sup>

A study carried out in 1943 on the reasons why soldiers disliked particular weapons gives further insight into the relationship between morale and materiel in battle. The report pointed to a 'notable demoralising effect' when troops compared their own

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<sup>102</sup> AWM 54 883/2/97 MEFCWS, No. XXXII (17 to 23 June 1942), p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Imperial War Museum (IWM) 94/41/1, Sir Robin Dunn.

<sup>104</sup> NA WO 216/85 Some Notes on Operations, 26 May to 8 July. GHQ MEF for CGS, 12 July 1942, p. 12.

weapons disadvantageously with those of the enemy. ‘The feeling of inequality – almost of injustice’, the report concluded, ‘appears to be very important.’<sup>105</sup> The psychological supremacy enjoyed by the Axis, due to the powerful effect of their firepower, could in some way explain the surrender statistics that drove Auchinleck to demand a reintroduction of the death penalty. The desert environment meant that there was little scope for ambush and surprise, the natural ally of a poorly armed force.<sup>106</sup> It was often possible to weigh up the odds of success or defeat miles away by identifying numbers and types of armoured vehicles and comparing them with one’s own. Throughout the desert war, surrenders made up a large proportion of British casualties, while it was comparatively rare for defenders to fight to the last man and the last round. Opposing forces would size each other up and decide on merit whether an engagement might produce a fruitful or futile outcome. In such circumstances, the attitude of each side to their own and the enemy’s weapons was crucial. More often than not, the Germans were able to win this psychological battle during the summer months of 1942, due to Eighth Army’s lack of confidence in its own equipment. Once a perfunctory effort to retaliate had been made, satisfying the defenders’ own conscience, if not the requirement of the FSR and Manual of Military Law, groups of men would surrender if they felt the fight could not be won.

The inquiry following Tobruk found that inadequate weapons had played a major role in deflating the morale of the troops. It reported that, ‘to put infantry in battle against tanks without adequate means of defending themselves is not only useless but unfair

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<sup>105</sup> NA WO 222/124 The Moral Effect of Weapons, Investigation into Reactions of Group of 300 Wounded Men in North Africa, 1943, p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, 2005), p. 16. First published 2002.



to the troops and exceedingly bad for their morale.’<sup>107</sup> Not only did the defenders of Tobruk have few adequate means of defending themselves from armour, but they had endured the psychological blow of ‘witness[ing] the decisive defeat of our armour’, their only potential protectors in the open spaces of the Gazala line.<sup>108</sup> Significantly, the report recommended that the capabilities of forces arrayed against each other in the desert should not be calculated by numbers of tanks and guns alone. Instead, it advised that ‘the fighting capacity of formations and units must be measured . . . also by their morale and the state of their equipment.’<sup>109</sup> Thus, the morale crisis that began to rear its head in the summer of 1942 can to some extent be attributed to the perceived quality of Eighth Army’s weapons. Indeed Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley have blamed ‘a loss of faith in equipment’ as one of the key reasons for the crisis in the desert in 1942.<sup>110</sup>

It is generally recognized today that the best bulwark to morale in battle is the primary group.<sup>111</sup> Primary group theory stresses ‘that men fight not for a higher cause but for their “mates” and “buddies”.’<sup>112</sup> The British Army unquestionably saw the primary group as the mainstay of morale in combat during the Second World War.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, there is much evidence to suggest that the primary group might not have functioned effectively during the critical months of fighting in the summer of 1942. It would seem reasonable that the relevance of primary group theory, as it is

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<sup>107</sup> SAMAD UWH, Published Books, Box 368, Court of Inquiry, Tobruk. Report of a Court of Inquiry Assembled by Order of the C-in-C, 8 July 1942, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> SAMAD UWH, Draft Narratives, Box 364, Tobruk, Accounts from British Sources. Some personal opinions on the fall of Tobruk 1942, Brigadier L.F. Thompson, Comd. 88 Area Tobruk, June 1942.

<sup>109</sup> SAMAD UWH, Published Books, Box 368, Court of Inquiry, Tobruk. Report of a Court of Inquiry Assembled by Order of the C-in-C, 8 July 1942, p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley, *Alamein: The Australian Story* (Oxford, 2002), p. 22.

<sup>111</sup> Holmes, *Acts of War*, p 228.

<sup>112</sup> Hew Strachan, ‘The Morale of the German Army 1917-18’, in Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle, *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London, 1996), p. 388.

<sup>113</sup> NA WO 277/7 War Office Historical Monographs: Discipline 1939-1945, pp. 6-7.

generally understood, should be limited by the extent to which there are factors militating against the primary group operating as a positive motivating force in a given conflict situation.

One of these limitations is the effect of either high casualties or replacements on group cohesion and integrity.<sup>114</sup> Heavy casualties sustained over a brief period made it especially difficult to sustain such relationships.<sup>115</sup> An analysis of casualty figures from the summer battles in 1942 illustrates the extent of this problem. Around thirty-six per cent of the total forces engaged became casualties,<sup>116</sup> compared with fifteen per cent in Operation 'Crusader', in November/December 1941 and January 1942, and six per cent at El Alamein, in October and November 1942.<sup>117</sup> The majority of these casualties were suffered by the infantry battalions that carried out much of the fighting during the summer battles. Figure Four gives an example of the percentage casualties suffered by some of the worst hit battalions.

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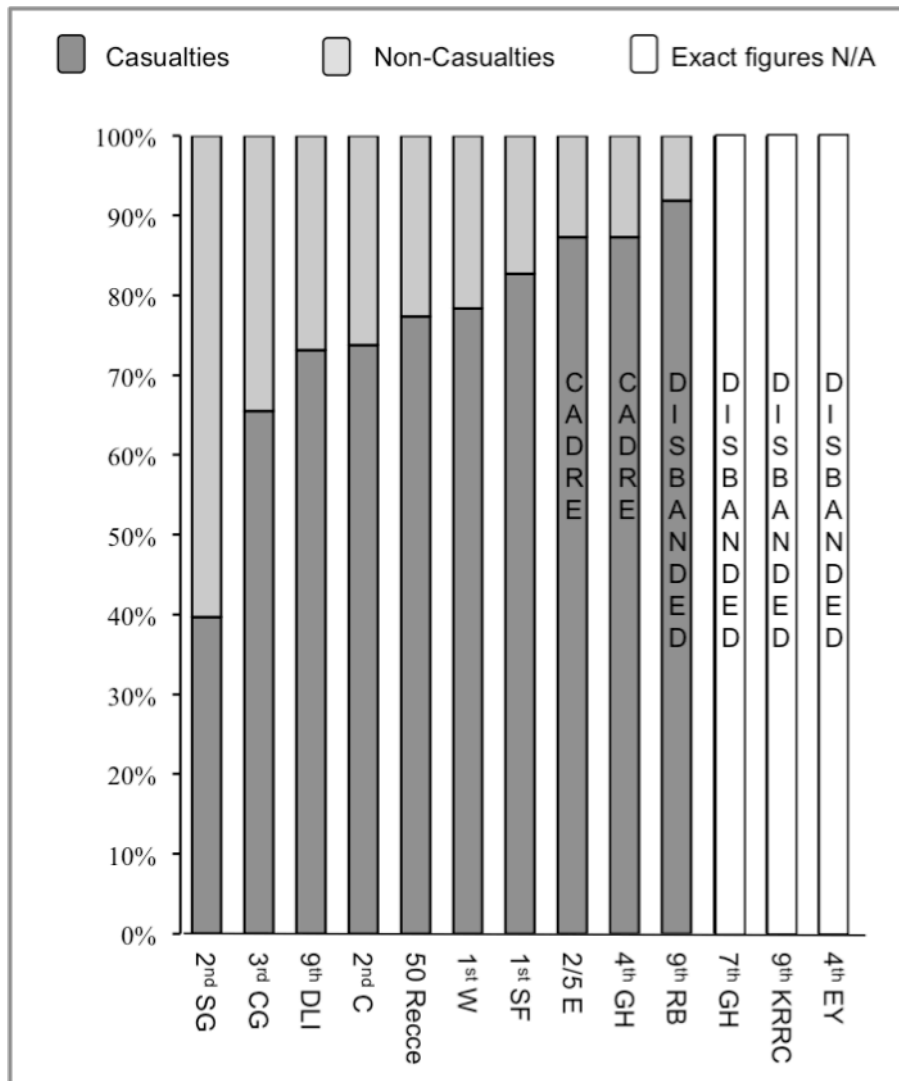
<sup>114</sup> Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, p. 138, Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, p. 242.

<sup>115</sup> French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p.147.

<sup>116</sup> NA WO 163/51 The Army Council, Death Penalty in Relation to Offences Committed on Active Service, 11 August 1942.

<sup>117</sup> Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, pp. 246-52.

Figure Four: Example of Infantry and Motor Battalion Casualties, Gazala 1942.<sup>118</sup>



The armoured regiments suffered catastrophic casualties as well. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiments were lost at Tobruk and needed to be reconstituted in the UK. Almost all the rest of the Royal Armoured Corps units involved in the summer battles needed reforming.<sup>119</sup> Eighth Army began the Gazala battles with 849 tanks.<sup>120</sup> Niall

<sup>118</sup> Chart derived from LHCMA Adam (Box 2), C-in-C Middle East to War Office, 27 July 1942. SG = Scot's Guards; CG = Coldstream Guards; DLI = Durham Light Infantry; C = Camerons; W = Worcesters; SF = Sherwood Foresters; E = Essex; GH = Green Howards; RB = Rifle Brigade; KRRC = King's Royal Rifle Corps; EY = East Yorkshires. 2/5 Essex and 4<sup>th</sup> Green Howards were reduced to cadre strength.

<sup>119</sup> LHCMA Adam (Box 2), C.-in-C. Middle East to War Office, 27 July 1942.

<sup>120</sup> Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 13.

Barr has estimated that, over the 17 days of fighting, Eighth Army suffered 1,188 tanks damaged or destroyed.<sup>121</sup> Figure Five demonstrates how these casualties were broken down. It shows that 1,093 tanks (140 per cent of the 849 tanks Eighth Army began the battle with) were knocked out either by tank and anti-tank guns or mines. Such tank losses would normally have resulted in some kind of disruption to the primary group due to the injury or death of one or more crew members. It was quite usual for a crew to suffer casualties or the loss of a tank, jump into a new tank with some replacement men, and then re-enter combat, only to be 'knocked out' again.<sup>122</sup> In fact, the figures suggest that as many as 40 per cent of crews may have suffered casualties on more than one occasion, disrupting whatever bonds might have developed over a short time in combat.<sup>123</sup> In addition, it must be noted, that these figures only include casualties from the 17 days of fighting on the Gazala line and do not account for further attrition suffered during the July battles on the El Alamein line.

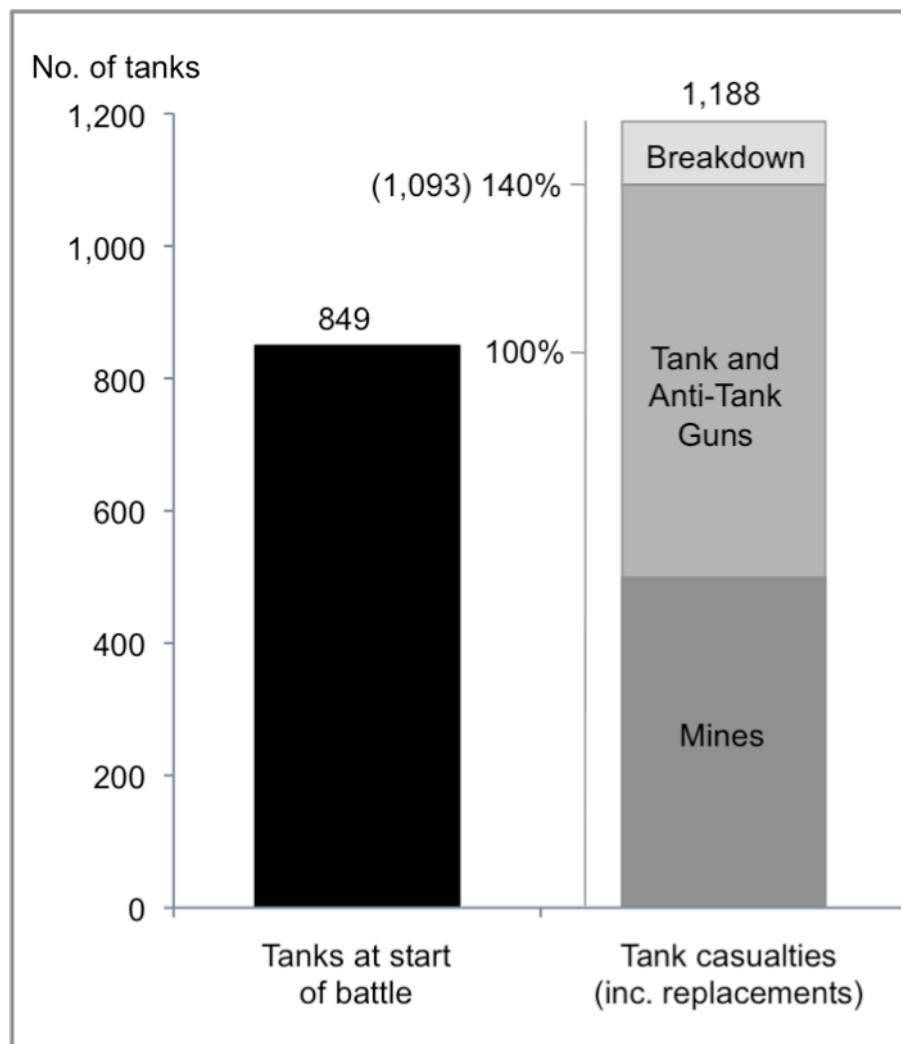
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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 39. This would include replacements and those tanks that were quickly returned to battle after repair.

<sup>122</sup> Cyril Joly, *Take These Men* (London, 1955), p. 219.

<sup>123</sup> This figure would clearly be lower if replacement tanks with their own crews entered battle rather than depleted crews being given new tanks and replacements to allow them to continue fighting.

Figure Five: Tank Casualties, Gazala 1942.<sup>124</sup>



It appears, therefore, that the large number of casualties in Eighth Army during the summer of 1942 would have reduced the integrity of the primary group and thus limited its ability to act as a positive force for morale.

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It is apparent from the evidence adduced in this article that a number of the external influences that foster morale, and thus encourage the soldier to fight and bolster his

<sup>124</sup> Chart derived from Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, pp. 251-2.

ability to cope with fear, were undermined during the battles at Gazala, Tobruk and on the El Alamein line in May, June and July 1942. The outcome of this crisis in morale was that many of the soldiers of Eighth Army deserted and surrendered in the face of the enemy. Using the commonly accepted conceptualisations of courage and cowardice outlined in this article, it is plausible, therefore, to refer to the behaviour of Eighth Army, during the fighting in the summer of 1942, as cowardly. This label, however, would grossly misrepresent the conduct of Eighth Army and falsely lay the blame for the setbacks that befell it on the shoulders of the troops.

To suggest that the troops were cowards implies that the obvious deficiencies in Eighth Army were attributable in the main to the individual soldiers concerned. But the army that fought in the desert in the summer of 1942 was averagely led, inadequately trained, poorly equipped, uncertain of the cause it was fighting for and deprived of the effective support of sustainable primary groups. These deficiencies, along with many others, led to a crisis of morale that dramatically reduced the soldiers' willingness to fight and their ability to combat the inevitable stresses and fears of the battlefield. Factors such as leadership and command, quality of weapons and manpower, training, the primary group, discipline, belief in a cause, and success in battle, all play a role in developing morale. These factors are all controllable by the state and the military. Therefore, the state and the military's efforts to influence them deserve serious study and attention. The failure of troops should rarely, or perhaps never be attributed to cowardice. Rather the blame should fall where it deserves to fall, at the door of the political and military establishments whose job it is to inculcate that important factor in war: morale.