INTRODUCTION TO BATTLE ANALYSIS

Key Points

1. Battle Analysis Checklist
2. The Staff Ride
3. Abbreviated Case Study: The Battle of Kasserine Pass

Training and leader development must include a historical perspective—especially of the conduct of battle.

GEN Frederick M. Franks Jr.
Introduction

As an MSL II Cadet, you were introduced to the principles of war. As an MSL III Cadet, you applied those principles to the Civil War Battle of Chancellorsville. The method you used in that case study can be described as an abbreviated application of battle analysis that focused on the principles of war. The US Army Command and General Staff College developed the battle analysis method to help students structure their studies of battles and campaigns. Any military professional seeking insight from historical battles and campaigns can easily apply the format to help deepen his or her understanding of warfare and the profession of arms.

This section will review the battle analysis method and then present a partial case study of the Battle of Kasserine Pass in Tunisia during World War II.

Soldiers engaged in battle in World War II
Battle Analysis Checklist

The battle analysis process is a checklist that ensures that you examine all the critical aspects of the battle or the campaign in question. The checklist is divided into four sections:

- Define the subject
- Set the stage (strategic, operational, and tactical settings)
- Describe the action
- Draw lessons learned.

First you decide which battle to study. Once you’ve chosen a battle, you gather the information necessary for a thorough and balanced study and organize it logically so you can analyze it. Then you perform the analysis and list the lessons learned.

You don’t have to follow the checklist to the letter, or even use every part of it in your study. Don’t let the format’s order disrupt the flow of your study, either—but be sure at least to consider all the elements.

Define the Subject

Like any military operation, your study of military history needs a clear, obtainable objective. So you should begin by defining what you will study. Determine what, where, when, who, and why. Frame your study by determining the date of the battle or campaign, its location, and the adversaries involved.

Next look for good sources that will help you make a systematic and balanced study. You can use books, articles, the Internet, video, audio, and other electronic means.

Look for a variety of books to get a balanced account of the battle. You should consult memoirs, biographies, operational histories, and institutional histories for information on your subject. Don’t overlook general histories, which can help provide the battle’s strategic setting.

Articles from professional military publications and historical journals can also be excellent sources of information. Video and film documentaries containing footage of actual events or interviews with people who took part in a battle can add to your understanding of the events. Check to see if transcribed oral history interviews with battle participants are available. In addition, check the Internet for electronic documents on more recent military operations as well as historical campaigns.

Regardless of what you’re researching, it’s always useful to evaluate your sources. Despite the large volume of published material and the enormous amount of raw information available on the Internet, finding good sources is not always easy. As you gather your research material, you should consider each potential source in terms of its content and bias. What information can the source give you? Is it relevant? Will it help you complete the study? Is there a clear bias, and if so, what is it? Does the bias interfere with your use of the source? Some sources are so biased that their credibility is suspect. However, a source can be extremely biased yet still contain useful information or observations.

Set the Stage

You need a good understanding of the strategic, operational, and tactical situations before you can analyze the battle. The amount of detail you go into depends on the purpose of your study and the audience you’re addressing. If everyone knows the causes of the war and the opponents, for example, you may not need to describe these in much detail. A few paragraphs may be enough to place the battle in its proper context. For example, you probably don’t need an abundance of detail on the causes of World War II to analyze the Battle of Okinawa. But you will need a thorough knowledge of the campaign in the Pacific.
First you should consider the strategic factors: What caused the war? Who were the opponents? What were their war aims? What armed forces did the adversaries possess? How well trained, equipped, and armed were they? Which significant social, political, economic, or religious factors influenced the armies?

Next describe the operational settings: What campaign was the battle part of? What were the campaign’s objectives? Did any military factors—alliances, tactics, doctrine, or personality traits—affect the campaign? How did the battle fit into the overall campaign?

Then review the tactical situation: Since these factors have a direct effect on the operation, this part of the format will often answer why a commander took or didn’t take a particular action. You study the area of operations much as you have learned to do as a platoon leader. What was the weather like in the area of operations? How did it affect the operation? Use OAKOC (observation and fields of fire, avenues of approach, key and decisive terrain, obstacles, cover and concealment) factors to describe the terrain in the area of operations. What advantages did it give to the attackers or to the defenders?

Compare the opposing forces: In many ways, this is the heart of your study. Describe and analyze the forces involved using the following terms:

- **Size and composition.** Which principal combat and supporting units were involved in the operation? What were their numerical strengths in troops and key weapons systems? How did the commanders organize them?

- **Technology.** What were the battlefield technologies—such as tanks, small arms, close air support aircraft—of the opposing forces? Did one side have a technological advantage over the other?

- **Logistical systems.** How did logistics affect the battle? Did one side have an advantage in available supplies or transportation?

- **Command, control, and communications (C3).** What kind of C3 systems did the opposing forces employ? Were these systems under centralized or decentralized control? How were the staffs organized, and how effective were they?

- **Intelligence.** What intelligence was available to the opposing forces? How well was it used? What were the major sources of intelligence? Did one side have an advantage over the other in intelligence resources?

- **Doctrine and training.** What was the tactical doctrine of the opposing forces, and how did they use it? What was the level of training in the opposing forces? Were some troops experienced veterans, some not, and some in-between?

- **Condition and morale.** What was the morale of the troops before the fighting, and did it change after the fighting began? How long had the troops been committed, and how did weather and terrain affect them? Did specific leaders affect morale?

- **Leadership.** Who were the leaders, and how effective had they been in past actions? What was their training and level of experience?

You won’t always be able to answer all these questions. But you should go through the list to determine what information you have and where you may need to do more research.
Describe the Action

Describing the battle itself is what most people consider to be real military history. The format below takes a chronological approach to studying a battle. But you shouldn’t feel locked into it. If you need to skip a phase in order to examine a specific topic—such as maneuver or logistics—because it is more important to your overall objective, feel free to do so.

1. State the opposing forces’ missions: What were their objectives? What missions did the commanders develop to achieve the objectives? Were there other options—such as attacking, defending, or withdrawing—open to the two sides? Were those options feasible?
2. Describe the initial disposition of forces: What were the locations of the opposing forces’ units? How were the units deployed tactically?
3. Describe the opening moves of the battle: Examine each side’s initial actions. Did one side gain an advantage over the other in the opening phase of the battle?
4. Detail the battle’s major phases: Establish a chronology for the battle while examining the actions after the opening moves. Look for key events or decisions that turned the battle toward one side or the other.
5. State the outcome: Who (if anyone) won the battle? Did either side achieve its objectives? Did the battle provide an advantage to the winning side, and what was it? Did the battle have any long-term effects, and, if so, what were they?

Draw Lessons Learned

This is the most important part of battle analysis. In this step, you turn the historical facts of the battle into finished analysis, with lessons to learn and apply today. In trying to distill lessons from the study of any battle, it’s important to look at why something happened. To do so, you will look at what caused the outcome. Look for those essential elements that determined the victory or defeat.

The insights, or “constants of war,” gained from the study should transcend time, place, and doctrine.

To be a successful Soldier, you must know history.

LTG George S. Patton Jr.

The only right way of learning the science of war is to read and reread the campaigns of the great captains.

Napoleon
The Staff Ride

An excellent method of studying battles and drawing lessons from them is the staff ride. Different from battlefield tours, staff rides combine a rigorous course of historical preparation with an examination of the terrain on which an actual battle occurred. The idea behind the staff ride is that you study the battle thoroughly before arriving at the battlefield site—this guarantees thought, analysis, and discussion. A staff ride links a historical event, a systematic preliminary study, and a visit to the actual terrain to produce a three-dimensional battle analysis. You will participate in a staff ride later in the semester; this section gives you the tools to make the most of the experience.

Abbreviated Case Study: The Battle of Kasserine Pass

Many important elements of Army doctrine grew out of lessons learned at the Battle of Kasserine Pass. Those lessons would prove crucial to the Allied invasion of France that began on the Normandy beaches in June 1944. The following section focuses briefly on the unity of command and strategic vision, tactics and maneuver, and leadership of the forces that met there.

T3 tank in the Battle of Kasserine Pass
The US Army that invaded North Africa during World War II, with its British allies in November 1942, was inadequately equipped, under-trained, and inexperienced. Its leaders were not all of the highest quality, and command arrangements proved unequal to the task. Despite heavy losses in Soldiers and equipment, the Allies managed to hold on and turn back a powerful and determined Axis counterattack—those engagements in February 1943 that became known as the Battle of Kasserine Pass.

One historian of that battle has called it a “disaster for the US Army”:

About 30,000 Americans engaged in the Kasserine fighting under II Corps, and probably 300 were killed, almost 3,000 wounded, nearly 3,000 missing. It would take 7,000 replacements to bring the units to authorized strengths. The 34th Division under the French XIX Corps at Sibba sustained approximately 50 men killed, 200 wounded, and 250 missing. II Corps lost 183 tanks, 104 half-tracks, 208 artillery pieces, and 512 trucks and jeeps, plus large amounts of supplies—more than the combined stocks in American depots in Algeria and Morocco (Blumenson, 1986).

Collision in Tunisia

The French authorities in North Africa, after agreeing to a truce, joined the British and Americans who, by then, in accordance with prior plans, had turned eastward from Algeria and entered Tunisia, and were driving toward Bizerte and Tunis, their ultimate objectives. On the way they quickly ran into opposition. Axis troops had entered Tunisia from Italy shortly after [Operation] Torch [the code name of the Allied invasion of North Africa], and eventually a field-army-size force, under General Juergen von Arnim, built up an extended bridgehead covering Bizerte and Tunis in the northeastern corner. Von Arnim sought to prevent the Allies from overrunning Tunisia and also to permit [German GEN Erwin] Rommel’s army to finish withdrawing from Libya into southern Tunisia. The Axis would then hold the eastern seaboard of the country. To guarantee their security on the eastern coastal plain, von Arnim and Rommel needed to control the passes in the Eastern Dorsale, a mountain range running generally north and south. Through that chain were four major openings—Pichon and Fondouk in the north and Faid and Rebaou in the south. Von Arnim seized Pichon in mid-December 1942. Toward the end of January 1943, as Rommel settled into the Mareth Line in southern Tunisia, the Axis desire for the other passes initially spurred what developed into the Battle of Kasserine Pass.

Figure 2.1  Northern Tunisia, Showing the Eastern and Western Dorsale Mountains
Taken from America’s First Battles, 1776–1965, Blumenson (1986).
Unity of Command and Strategic Vision

In the battle, both sides suffered from divided command arrangements that interfered with the ability of maneuver commanders to carry out operations successfully.

Phase I—Assault on the Eastern Dorsale Begins

Allied command lines were less than firm. General Sir Kenneth A.N. Anderson, at the head of the British First Army—with the British V Corps, several British divisions, and some American and French units in the north—was the overall tactical commander in Tunisia, but Americans found him difficult to work with. [MG Lloyd R.] Fredendall [commander of one of three Allied task forces in North Africa] exacerbated the problem because he saw his role as autonomous. The French, who had General Louis-Marie Koeltz’s XIX Corps in the center, a division in the north, another in the south, and miscellaneous detachments scattered virtually everywhere, refused to serve under direct British command. As a consequence, General Alphonse Juin, commander of the French land and air forces in French Northwest Africa, exercised loose direction and provided liaison and guidance to all French formations.

Fredendall had small packets of troops dispersed over a very large area—one battalion of the 1st Infantry Division at Gafsa, another blocking the Fondouk road to Sbeitla, Combat Command A (CCA) of the 1st Armored Division at Sbeitla, Combat Command B (CCB) near Tebessa. He could bolster the French garrisons holding the Faid and Rebaou Passes, keep his forces concentrated in a central location and ready to counterattack, or strike toward the east coast to sever the contact between von Arnim’s and Rommel’s armies. He sought to do the latter by raiding a small Italian detachment at Sened on 24 January. The action was highly successful as a morale builder but had no real result except to squander Fredendall’s meager resources.

The Axis command correctly read the situation and continued planning to take control of the Eastern Dorsale. Rommel established his headquarters in southern Tunisia on 26 January, and two days later Comando Supremo in Rome approved a cautious push to take the Fondouk and Faid Passes and to advance on Gafsa. With Rommel’s 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions temporarily under von Arnim’s control, von Arnim attacked on 30 January to open the Battle of Kasserine Pass. Just before dawn, thirty tanks struck 1,000 French troops in the Faid Pass while another contingent of German tanks, infantry, and artillery drove through the Rebaou defile ten miles to the south, overran several hundred French defenders, and came up behind the French holding Faid. Encircled and outnumbered, the French fought gallantly for more than twenty-four hours until they were overwhelmed.
Figure 2.2 Battle of Kasserine Pass, 14–18 February 1943
Five hours after the German attack started, Anderson instructed Fredendall rather vaguely to restore the situation at Faid. Because [American MG Orlando] Ward, the 1st Armored Division commander, was at Gafsa supervising the Sened raid and other useless actions, Fredendall communicated directly with the CCA commander at Sbeitla, Brig. Gen. Raymond McQuillin, who was old in appearance, mild in manner, and cautious in outlook. McQuillin sent out two small reconnaissance units toward the Faid and Rebaou Passes to determine what was happening. At noontime, even though the French at Faid were still resisting, the reconnaissance elements erroneously reported the Germans in control at both passes. McQuillin decided to counterattack. As he moved his assault forces forward, German planes bombed and attacked his units and disrupted the advance. American aircraft dispatched to intercept the Germans dropped bombs on the CCA command post by mistake, and American antiaircraft gunners shot down an American plane. McQuillin then waited for nightfall. During the hours of darkness, he pushed his forces about halfway to Faid and Rebaou.

On the morning of 31 January, more than twenty-four hours after the German attack, McQuillin committed a small-tank infantry force under Col. Alexander N. Stark, Jr., to strike to Faid and another such force under Col. William B. Kern to go for Rebaou. Late getting under way, the effort was badly coordinated and too weak to attain the objectives. Heavy German defensive fires, together with effective bombing and strafing from the air, knocked out several tanks and induced terror, indecision, and paralysis among the American units. McQuillin’s effort petered out. As Fredendall, the II Corps commander, was thinking on 1 February of moving CCB from Tebessa to Sbeitla, Anderson, the First British Army commander, instructed him to dispatch CCB toward Fondouk, where von Arnim had struck Koeltz’s French elements, seized the pass, and threatened a serious penetration.

Fredendall complied. McQuillin tried again that day to reach Faid but failed because, he said, of the disgraceful performance of Stark's infantry. Von Arnim, now in control of the four major passes, called off further endeavor. With the 10th Panzer Division at Fondouk and the 21st at Faid and Rebaou, von Arnim, instead of returning both divisions to Rommel, hoped to keep them for use in the north. The front in Tunisia now became quiet, and the first or preliminary phase of what would develop into the Battle of Kasserine Pass ended.

On the Allied side, [Supreme Allied Commander GEN Dwight D.] Eisenhower questioned Fredendall’s competence, Anderson doubted the battleworthiness of American troops, Fredendall wondered whether Ward was proficient, McQuillin castigated Stark, and so it went down the line. American ineptitude and failure to rescue the French defenders at Faid had shocked the French.
Additional American units—parts of Maj. Gen. Terry Allen’s 1st Infantry Division and of [US MG Charles W.] Ryder’s 34th Division—moved into southern Tunisia but they were split into small parcels and physically separated.


The Axis suffered from similar problems, only to a worse degree. The Germans and Italians didn’t trust each other. The Axis effort was technically under command of the Comando Supremo in Rome, which had to authorize all actions. The two German commanders on the scene, von Arnim and Rommel, nursed petty jealousies and struggled over command of the two panzer (tank) divisions.

Tactics and Maneuver

During the North African invasion, American forces in particular demonstrated serious shortcomings in training, tactics, maneuver, and skill in using their equipment. Some of that equipment, notably American light tanks, was clearly no match for the heavy German Tiger tanks. These problems gave the German-Italian forces—who were battle-hardened and well-trained, and enjoyed close coordination between infantry, tanks, artillery, and close air support—a distinct tactical advantage in the battle.

Phase II—Defeat and Retreat

The second phase of the Kasserine battle started very early on the morning of 14 February, before [COL Thomas D.] Drake could institute his bazooka-firing training program on Djebel Ksaira. [His troops had just received the antitank weapons and did not know how to use them.] During a raging sandstorm, more than 200 German tanks, half-tracks, and guns of both panzer divisions came through Faid. One task force swung around the northern side of Lessouda and encircled the hill; another swung around the southern side of Ksaira and surrounded the height. [LTC John K.] Waters’ and Drake’s forces, Fredendall’s blocking positions, were thus marooned. A series of American mishaps, due largely to inexperience, then permitted the Germans rather easy and quick success. The bad weather relaxed the Americans’ security arrangements, and they were unable to react quickly and firmly. Until the storm lifted, men on the hill had difficulty identifying the German elements and held their fire. At 0730, as the weather cleared, McQuillin initiated planned countermeasures. He limply told [US LTC Louis] Hightower to clear up the situation. As Hightower prepared to drive to Djebel Lessouda and relieve the American defenders, enemy aircraft struck Sidi bou Zid and temporarily disrupted McQuillin’s command post and Hightower’s preparations. Throughout the rest of the day, German planes harassed the Americans. Despite repeated requests for air support, only one flight of four American aircraft appeared briefly over the battlefield.
Hightower went into action with forty-seven tanks. Although outnumbered, he fought bravely against the more effective German tanks. By midafternoon, all but seven of his tanks had been destroyed. During the engagement, some American artillerymen panicked and abandoned their guns. The 1st Armored Division Reconnaissance Battalion, ready to rescue Drake’s men on Djebel Ksaira, was unable to even start its counterattack because some of the German tanks surrounding Drake had thrust forward toward Sidi bou Zid and captured a reconnaissance company. The rest of the American reconnaissance units then pulled out and headed for Sbeitla.

With his command post in Sidi bou Zid directly threatened, McQuillin, covered by Hightower’s engagement, decided to withdraw to Sbeitla. He phoned and asked Ward to provide a shield by blocking the main road from Faid to Sbeitla. Ward sent Kern and his infantry battalion to take up defensive positions eleven miles east of the town at a road intersection that became known as Kern’s Crossroads. Around noon, McQuillin started to move his artillery units and command post out of Sidi bou Zid. German dive bombers attacked them and prompted confusion. As a consequence, for several hours McQuillin lost communications with his subordinate units. That afternoon a swirling mass of American troops—McQuillin’s command post, miscellaneous elements, Hightower’s remnants, artillery pieces, tank destroyers, engineer trucks, and foot soldiers—fled toward Sbeitla. McQuillin reestablished his command post there and began to assemble and reorganize his units. Initial estimates of losses on that day were shocking: 52 officers and more than 1,500 men missing. The final numbers of casualties on 14 February were much smaller: 6 killed, 32 wounded, and 134 missing. But between Faid and Kern’s Crossroads on the Sbeitla plain, forty-four tanks, fifty-nine half-tracks, twenty-six artillery pieces, and at least two dozen trucks were wrecked, burning, or abandoned. An artillery commander, Charles P. Summerall, Jr., took his men out during the night to recover guns, trucks, and ambulances; on the following morning, he had eight instead of his normal twenty-four pieces—the others were lost—backing the troops at Kern’s Crossroads.

In Algiers, Eisenhower ordered American units in Algeria to start for Kasserine Pass, a movement requiring several days’ travel. News of their departure, he surmised, would perhaps hearten the troops in Tunisia. While Eisenhower, Anderson, and Fredendall prepared to withdraw to the Western Dorsale, Ward looked forward confidently to his counterattack on 15 February. [COL Robert I.] Stack’s infantry and [LTC James D.] Alger’s tanks were to marry up at Kern’s Crossroads, drive to Sidi bou Zid, then rescue the troops on the heights of Lessouda and Ksaira. While Alger, who had yet to lead his troops in combat,
studied the terrain from a hill on the morning of 15 February and Stack readied his infantry for the advance, a flight of German bombers struck their formations and prompted enormous confusion. The counterattack finally started at 1240 in great precision across the Sbeitla plain. Alger’s tank battalion led, his three tank companies advancing in parallel columns with a company of tank destroyers, half-tracks mounting 75-mm guns, flaring out on the flanks and protecting two batteries of artillery. Behind rode Stack’s infantry in trucks and half-tracks with several antiaircraft weapons as protection. Unfortunately, steep-sided wadis—dry stream beds—crossed the plain irregularly and disturbed the careful spacing of the attacking troops. As the tanks crossed the first ditch, German dive bombers jumped them. They bombed and strafed again at the second gully. At the third depression, German artillery began firing. Finally, German tanks emerged from hiding and started to encircle the entire American force. The Americans, fighting bravely and desperately against superior German weapons and experienced German troops, tried to beat back the German wings threatening to surround them. At 1800, Stack ordered all units to disengage and return to Kern’s Crossroads. The infantry and artillery escaped relatively unscathed. The tanks were completely destroyed. Alger was taken prisoner, 15 of his officers and 298 enlisted men were missing, and 50 of his tanks had been knocked out. In two days of battle, the 1st Armored Division lost ninety-eight tanks, fifty-seven half-tracks, and twenty-nine artillery pieces.

Just before darkness, a pilot dropped a message from Ward to the troops on Lessouda. They were to get out during the night. Waters having been captured, Maj. Robert R. Moore, who had taken command of the 2d Battalion, 168th Infantry, fewer than two weeks earlier, displayed magnificent leadership and marched out about one-third of the 900 troops on Lessouda to Kern’s Crossroads. The other men, together with vehicles and equipment, fell into German hands. Drake on Djebel Ksaira received a message from McQuillin on the afternoon of the following day, 16 February, to fight his way out. That night, Drake led his men off the hill and across the plain. German troops intercepted them and captured almost all. Only a handful reached safety. The two battalions of the 168th Infantry involved on Lessouda and Ksaira sustained losses of about 2,200 men. Two hundred of the Soldiers reported missing were from the southwestern Iowa National Guard units. Meanwhile, when Rommel’s attack forces, an Italo-German group of 160 tanks, half-tracks, and guns, learned on the afternoon of 15 February that the Allies had abandoned Gafsa, they advanced to the town, entered, and patrolled toward Feriana. That brought the second phase of the battle to a close.
That evening, Comando Supremo gave von Arnim permission to attack Sbeitla, and he jumped off at once. After nightfall, preceded by reconnaissance units, German tanks approached Sbeitla in three columns, firing as they advanced. Shells dropping into Sbeitla prompted McQuillin to shift his CCA headquarters to a location west of the town. Many American troops misinterpreted the movement and believed a wholesale evacuation was in progress. A good part of the CCA defenders panicked and fled. Why?

Night fighting was a new and terrifying experience for most of the men. The solidity of the defensive line was more apparent on a map than on the ground. Because of the darkness, the troops were not well placed. Because of the haste of the withdrawal, they were not well dug in. The harrowing events of three days of defeat had exhausted many Soldiers, morally and physically. Uncertain and nervous, fatigued and confused, hemmed in by widespread firing that seemed to be all around them, believing that the Germans were already in Sbeitla, demoralized by the piecemeal commitment and intermingling of small units, no longer possessing a firm sense of belonging to a strong and self-contained organization, and numbed by a pervading attitude of weariness and bewilderment, many men lost their confidence and self-discipline.

A churning mass of vehicles surged through the town and departed. When engineers demolished an ammunition dump, they intensified fear and prompted additional departures. Around midnight, concerned over his ability to hold Sbeitla, Ward telephoned Fredendall and suggested reinforcing Kasserine in strength.


Leadership

As the battle progressed, it became clear to the Allies that stronger command was required. The British general in charge of Allied forces in Tunisia and deputy Allied commander, British MG Harold Alexander, conferred with Eisenhower and visited the Allied sectors. On the Axis side, Rommel, a leader of strong will and highly respected by his troops, moved to the front to command his forces directly. But in the end, his indecisiveness in choosing a point of attack, his own fatigue and that of his soldiers (Rommel still had to worry about British GEN Bernard Montgomery’s Eighth Army approaching from the east), and an inability to coordinate with von Arnim led the German-Italian troops to break off the attack and withdraw.
Phase III—The Line Holds

On the Allied side on 18 February, the shock of defeat was visible among the troops. Everyone was tired. Units were mauled, dispersed, and mixed; had no specific missions; lacked knowledge of adjacent formations. The troops seemed to be slipping out of control. Eisenhower sent artillery and tank destroyers from Algeria to Tunisia. A shipment of 295 new Sherman tanks had just arrived, but unwilling to risk losing them all, he released 30 to the British and 30 to the 1st Armored Division. Alexander had come to Algiers on 15 February in accordance with agreements reached at the Allied Casablanca Conference in January and prepared to take command of the ground forces in Tunisia—Anderson’s First Army and Montgomery’s Eighth—which were approaching the Mareth Line. Alexander conferred with Eisenhower, then toured the British front on 16 February, visited the French sector on 17 February, and traveled on 18 February to the II Corps area. He was horrified to see the state of confusion and uncertainty and was upset by the absence of a coordinated plan of defense. Instead of waiting to take command of the ground forces on 20 February, he assumed command on the nineteenth and ordered everyone to hold in place. There was to be no withdrawal from the Western Dorsale.

[US COL] Anderson Moore’s 19th Engineers had been laying mines between the village of Kasserine and the pass, five miles beyond. On 18 February, having covered the withdrawal of CCB through the village and the pass, Moore moved his men through the pass and organized defensive positions. Just beyond the pass, on the western side, the road splits: one route leads to the west toward Tebessa; the other, the main road, goes north to Thala. Moore, with about 200 engineers and infantrymen armed with small arms and automatic weapons and supported by two batteries of US 105-mm howitzers, a battery of French 75s, and a battalion of tank destroyers in the rear, covered the road to Tebessa. An infantry battalion defended the road to Thala. Most of the troops were inexperienced and nervous. On the evening of 18 February, Anderson instructed Koeltz to dispatch a brigade of [British MG Sir Charles] Keightley’s 6th Armored Division from Sbiba to Thala. [French] Brig. Charles A.L. Dunphie’s 26th Armored Brigade moved. He was thus in place to help the American battalion defending the road from Kasserine to Thala. Or he could move back to Sbiba if the main German threat developed there.
Meanwhile, CCA of the 1st Armored Division, having given Keightley’s and Ryder’s forces, as well as the French, time to set up defensive positions at the Sbiba Pass, drove through Sbiba to Tebessa. On 19 February, CCA arrived at the three minor passes south and west of Kasserine to bolster remnants of a French division, two American battalions (one of Rangers, the other of infantry), the Derbyshire Yeomanry, and CCB. When German reconnaissance units probed the Kasserine Pass on the evening of 18 February, some of Moore’s engineers fled. That night Fredendall put Stark in command of all the units defending the pass. Stark arrived on the morning of 19 February as the Germans attacked in earnest.
Seeking surprise, an infantry battalion of the Afrika Korps [Germany’s veteran forces in North Africa, under Rommel’s command] advanced through Kasserine Pass without artillery preparation. When the troops met opposition, a panzer grenadier battalion backed by an 88-mm cannon reinforced them. A unit of British mortars and some reconnaissance elements had just arrived at the Kasserine Pass, and they helped the Americans hold off the Germans. When Moore asked for more infantry to support his engineers, Stark seized on a battalion of the 9th US Infantry Division that had just arrived from Algeria. Stark sent two rifle companies to Moore—one for each flank of Moore’s defenses—and kept one for the Thala road, thereby splitting the battalion.

Rommel himself came to Kasserine, was impressed by the opposition, and decided to take his main effort toward Sbiba. But he wished the attack at Kasserine to continue. After clearing the pass, his troops were to strike westward toward Tebessa in order to stretch the Allied defenses. The 21st Panzer Division had attacked Sbiba that morning, but Koeltz, Keightley, and Ryder had stopped the thrust. Rommel then changed his mind and decided to concentrate in the Kasserine area. He ordered the 10th Panzer Division, which was on its way to Sbeitla, to continue on to the Kasserine Pass. The division was at half strength, for von Arnim had refused to release some units, particularly the heavy panzer battalion, which had about two dozen enormous Tiger tanks. Because the 10th was moving slowly, an impatient Rommel brought up the [Italian] Centauro Division. He now wished the Afrika Korps to open the pass and to drive westward toward Tebessa. The 10th Panzer Division, after going through the Kasserine Pass, was to strike at Thala. That evening, the 16th Infantry of the 1st Division marched from the Sbiba area to the Kasserine area. Fredendall sent it to bolster the minor passes south and west of Kasserine. He gave General Allen, the 1st Division commander who was with the regiment, the job of coordinating the defenses of these passes. Fredendall then ordered CCB of the 1st Armored Division to back up the engineers on the Tebessa road at Kasserine Pass where the defenses seemed on the verge of collapse. Dunphie, commander of the 26th Armored Brigade at Thala, asked permission to reinforce Stark, but Keightley wanted him to be on hand if he was needed at Sbiba. Dunphie nonetheless sent eleven of his tanks from Thala to buttress Stark’s positions that night.

On 20 February, the 21st Panzer Division attacked Sbiba again and made no progress. But at Kasserine, the shrieks of the nebelwerfer, multiple rocket launchers that had been recently introduced by the Germans, unnerved Moore’s engineers holding the Tebessa road. They fell apart, and by afternoon—having lost eleven men killed, twenty-eight wounded, and eighty-nine missing in three days (and many more had temporarily vanished)—they no longer existed as a coherent force. Fortunately, [BG Paul] Robinett’s CCB arrived and blocked the road.
On the main route to Thala, although jittery, the defenders held. Rommel then became even more impatient for a quick victory at Sbiba and Kasserine. He was apprehensive over the Mareth Line positions, for Montgomery had just that day attacked his outposts in southern Tunisia. Late in the afternoon, on Anderson’s order, Keightley dispatched Brig. Cameron Nicholson, his assistant division commander, from Sbiba to Thala with miscellaneous troops. No longer confident of Fredendall’s ability, Anderson wished Nicholson to command, as Fredendall’s representative, all the British, American, and French fighting on the west side of Kasserine Pass. What actually developed was that Fredendall and Robinett commanded the forces blocking the Tebessa road, and Nicholson and Dunphie took control of the units defending the Thala road.

On 21 February, Rommel let the attacks in the Sbiba area continue but looked for decisive success at Kasserine. He decided to make his main effort to Thala and to head for Le Kef beyond. Furious fighting on both the Tebessa and Thala roads resulted in a slight German advance toward Tebessa and the prospect of German tactical success at Thala. By now, Stark’s force on the Thala road had virtually evaporated, and Dunphie emerged as the chief Allied protagonist. Committing his tanks and infantry against a strong thrust directed by Rommel himself, who took control of the battle for several hours, Dunphie lost the bulk of his armor and had to withdraw to the final line of defense before Thala. The Germans followed, and fierce combat erupted after darkness and ended in a draw. Both sides retired 1,000 yards—Dunphie to the north, the Germans to the south. The final defensive line was virtually uncovered, and Rommel seemed about to enter Thala. Expecting just that, Anderson asked Koeltz, who had again stopped the Germans at Sbiba, to send a battalion of infantry and whatever else he could to Thala. Because Ryder was making some local adjustments, Koeltz requested Keightley to dispatch elements. That night, a battalion of British infantry and some tanks traveled along a mountain trail to reinforce Nicholson and Dunphie.

Meanwhile, Allied units were coming from Algeria. A battalion of French infantry moved from Constantine and arrived at Sbiba. Fifty-two Sherman tanks and crews were en route to Tebessa. A provisional British unit with twenty-five new Churchill tanks reached Sbiba. The 47th Infantry of the 9th US Division was on the way from Oran to Tebessa. Most important, Brig. Gen. S. LeRoy Irwin’s 9th Division Artillery, with three artillery battalions and two cannon companies, traveling from western Algeria, got to Tebessa on the afternoon of 21 February. Ordered to Thala at once, Irwin’s guns were in position by midnight. Nicholson placed Irwin in charge of all the artillery at Thala, and Irwin sited his forty-eight pieces, plus thirty-six other guns of various calibers, to cover the all-but-abandoned final line of defense, manned now by British infantry reinforced by stragglers.
rounded up by Stark, about twenty tanks of Dunphie’s brigade, plus the British infantry battalion and a few tanks, some of them new Shermans released by Eisenhower, coming from Sbiba. Less than a mile away were at least 50 German tanks, 2,500 infantry, 30 artillery pieces, and other weapons, including the notorious nebelwerfer.

The 10th Panzer Division was ready to start what Rommel expected would be the advance into Thala on the morning of 22 February, when Irwin’s guns opened up. Expecting a counterattack, the Germans postponed their effort. Nicholson launched a foray and, although he lost five tanks, bluffed the Germans. Rommel came up the Thala road, noted the increased volume of Allied shelling, and gave permission to delay the offensive. Now Robinett and his CCB seemed about to be overwhelmed. During the previous night, approximately a battalion of German and Italian troops had infiltrated the American positions. Intending to strike toward Tebessa, they became lost. On the morning of 22 February, they arrived in the rear of the miscellaneous Allied troops—American, French, and British—guarding the Bou Chebka Pass, one of the minor defiles south and west of Tebessa. The Axis force captured several American howitzers and antiaircraft guns and prompted considerable anxiety over the security of that pass and two others nearby. It took most of the day to track down, disperse, and capture the Italo-German unit. Under the impression that Allied defenses were caving in, Fredendall went to the commander of the under-strength French division in the area and asked him to defend Tebessa. While Fredendall was gone, someone at the II Corps headquarters decided to move the corps command post to avoid being overrun. When Fredendall returned, he found his headquarters half abandoned; many clerks and radio operators were on the way to Le Kef and Constantine. Feeling unable to maintain control, Fredendall, having already passed responsibility to Allen for the minor passes, now instructed Ward to coordinate the defenses on the Tebessa road. Learning that the 47th Infantry of the 9th Division was about thirty miles south of Constantine, Fredendall asked the regiment to remain where it was in order to protect Constantine in case the Axis forces broke through Thala and Tebessa.

During the night of 22 February, Anderson, whose British First Army headquarters was nine miles north of Sbiba, shifted his command post behind Le Kef. Koeltz almost pulled his headquarters back too, for von Arnim had attacked half-heartedly in the Pichon area. But Koeltz drew Keightley’s and Ryder’s divisions out of Sbiba and faced them toward Thala to meet the expected breakthrough there. Sbiba lay open to German entry. However, nothing happened at Sbiba or at Kasserine. After conferring with [German Field Marshal Albert] Kesselring, who came to Tunisia on the afternoon of 22 February, Rommel
called off his attack. [Kesselring, stationed in Rome, was the de facto German theater commander for the Mediterranean.] He [Rommel] had been unable to secure von Arnim’s cooperation. He thought it impossible to obtain a decisive victory before Montgomery attacked the Mareth Line. His units were fatigued, and Rommel himself was extremely tired and discouraged. That night, Rommel ordered his forces to withdraw to the Eastern Dorsale and the east coast. They did so early on the morning of 23 February, leaving a profusion of mines and destroyed bridges in their wake. There was no Allied pursuit of the departing enemy. According to Koeltz, the Allied units “were in such disorder and their commanders so shaken” that no immediate reaction was possible. The Battle of Kasserine Pass was over.


Lessons Learned

The significant losses in men and materiel during the Battle of Kasserine Pass led to a harsh reappraisal by US commanders of American training, tactics, and equipment, which resulted in significant changes in Army doctrine and field manuals. But the battle also exposed serious Axis weakness as well.

In the areas of unity of command and strategic vision, the lack of trust between the Germans and the Italians, who were unable to work as effectively in coalition as the British, Americans, and French, impeded operations. Technically fighting under Italian command, Rommel and von Arnim had to get Comando Supremo approval for their overall plans. The disputes and rivalries between the two German generals only made matters worse. “Had Axis forces been closely coordinated by an overall commander in pursuit of bold objectives enunciated by a self-confident coalition, the Axis would, no doubt, have attained a strategic victory instead of merely a tactical success” (Blumenson, 1986).

The Allies had their own disputes, of course. The French still deeply resented the British destruction of their fleet in Algeria after the fall of France in 1940 and quarreled among themselves. For their part, the British were not impressed by the American performance on the battlefield, or by the leadership of generals such as Fredendall. Command lines between and among the Allied forces were fuzzy at best. Nevertheless, the Allies were able to work together well enough to blunt a determined Axis offensive; the command team of Eisenhower and Alexander (who would later become a field marshal) proved particularly effective in appraising the situation and providing the necessary support.

In tactics and maneuver, the veteran German and Italian forces’ experience, coupled with their superior equipment (especially in tanks and rockets) clearly gave them the edge in the battle. They also demonstrated the effectiveness of tactical air support of ground operations, and they benefited from a numerical advantage of two armies to one on the battlefield (before Montgomery’s Eighth Army arrived from the east).
The Americans, on the other hand, demonstrated inexperience with their equipment, some of which—many tanks, for example—was seriously inferior to the Germans’. US Soldiers often could not distinguish enemy from friendly equipment on the battlefield. The Americans received little direct support from their armor or friendly aircraft (which also caused numerous Allied casualties). Too many US planes bombed their own forces—if their own forces didn’t shoot them down first. Not until after the Normandy invasion the following year would Allied pilots be able to talk directly to the ground units they were supporting or would tactical air commands work closely with field armies. Likewise, infantry and armored units would not train together until late in 1943.

Allied commanders lacked the ability to coordinate units in battle, set unit boundaries, mass their fires, and handle traffic on the roads or prisoners of war. They dispersed units and tanks and employed them piecemeal rather than concentrating their firepower. The defensive attitude American Soldiers adopted undermined “the offensive spirit by which alone we can win battles,” in one general’s informed opinion. Allied forces were so shaken by the battle that it took them two days to figure out that Rommel had withdrawn from the battlefield. America had been unprepared for war when war came, and Americans at Kasserine “paid in blood the price of battlefield experience.”

The battle likewise taught grim lessons regarding leadership. The Allied commanders’ orders were vague and imprecise. Fredendall was arrogant, opinionated, and “perhaps less than stable,” while McQuillin and Stark’s reactions were “slow, cautious, and characteristic of World War I operations.” On several occasions, senior US generals lost contact with subordinate units or their own headquarters. Commanders at the front had to relay too many questions to higher headquarters, with decisions often coming back after it was too late. Despite these shortcomings, however, several individuals—Ward, Robinett, Hightower, and others—demonstrated solid leadership ability.

The two sides studied the results of this first contact between US and German forces carefully. Rommel developed a low opinion of US tactics and equipment—an appraisal that would serve him poorly a year later in France. For in the face of a tactical defeat, the American forces recovered and showed they could learn from their mistakes. After Kasserine, their competence and confidence grew, they received better equipment and used it more effectively, and they developed a better ability to work with their allies (Blumenson, 1986).

The Americans made many mistakes in this first large-scale engagement of the war in Europe, but they learned from their errors and made adjustments that enabled them to go on to victory in Tunisia and beyond. The defeat at Kasserine showed the Army what troops had to learn and to do. That they quickly became proficient in the warfare of the 1940s confirmed their spirit, their flexibility, their strong sense of purpose—their will to win (Blumenson, 1986).

**Critical Thinking**

Which factor do you think played the biggest role in the Axis’ initial victory at Kasserine Pass—unity of command and strategic vision, tactics and maneuver, or leadership? Which factors later allowed Allied powers there to check the German advance? With all the challenges they faced, why did the Allies succeed in later turning defeat into victory in North Africa?
The purpose of battle analysis and the study of military history—in war and in peace—is to learn the important lessons the past has to teach today’s Soldiers. The study of military history also allows you to understand military concepts, study the lives of Soldiers in the past, understand how doctrine has evolved, broaden your military knowledge, understand leadership issues, and learn about strategy and tactics.

The study of military history should be an integral part of your career as an Army officer, regardless of rank or years of service. You’ll find that as you grow in experience, your study of military history and your skill at battle analysis will become more and more relevant to the challenges you and the Army face.

Key Words

battle analysis
staff ride

Learning Assessment

1. Describe the four steps of battle analysis.
2. Explain the purpose of battle analysis.
References


