

DESIGN NOTES FOR ABU AGHEILA 1956

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Back when I first got Divided Ground, one of the first scenarios that interested me was “Adan Takes Abu Agheila...again”. To be honest the scenario was not very good. It only portrayed part of the battle. I wanted something bigger. I found in the game a bigger mapsheet for the whole Abu Agheila area, but no order of battle or scenario to go along with it. Obviously a bigger scenario was going to be done but was not before Talonsoft went out of business. Left with just a mapsheet, I took up the challenge and decided to make a scenario for the whole battle.

The Mapsheet

The mapsheet was based on the maps from the British War Office series of 1960. The maps of the northern Sinai were done during the Second World War and there were no updates to them in the post war years. Not only that, these maps were done in a hurry and so there were mistakes on them which were never corrected. The map that came in Divided Ground was based on these maps. Thus the first challenge was to correct the mapsheet. The main change was the main road that ran from the east to the west side of the map. This was labeled the Turkish Way but in fact it was the Central Route which ran through the center of the Sinai Peninsula. Research indicated that this was a paved hard surface road in 1956. Thus I had to change the road to hard surface for its length. The real Turkish Way, which was a desert track, was south of the Central Route and so I placed it on the map using the unpaved road for it. Next I changed the spelling of several of the names of the locations. In actuality, most of these names had several different spellings and any of them were acceptable. I just used the names for the main map that I was using. I also relocated some of the names to where they should be on the map.

The Opposing Forces

Egyptian

The main defending unit at Abu Agheila was the 6th Infantry Brigade of the Egyptian 3rd Infantry Division. The 6th Brigade had three infantry battalions, the 16th, 17th and the 18th. However, the 16th Infantry Battalion was detached for duty along the Suez Canal so it was replaced by the 289th Reserve Infantry Battalion. The 289th was not a complete battalion as two of its line companies, plus some anti-tank guns from its support company, were detached for service elsewhere. The 6th Brigade also had under its control two anti-tank batteries, the 78th and the 94th, which each had eleven Archer tank destroyers for a total of twenty-two. For reconnaissance duties the 6th had the 2nd Cavalry Troop which had four Staghound armored cars and the 34th Reconnaissance Company consisting of two platoons of reconnaissance jeeps. For anti-aircraft protection it had the 6th Anti-Aircraft Battery which had twelve 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns. Rounding out

the ensemble was the 3rd Artillery Regiment which had three under-strength artillery batteries with a total of sixteen “25-Pounder” Howitzers. The original commander of the 6th Brigade as Colonel Yassa, but when he became a casualty on the 30th of October he was replaced by Colonel Mutawalli.

The Egyptians were reinforced by two outside units. First was the 78th National Guard Infantry Battalion. This unit had been defending Kusseima to the south but when they were forced out of there by the Israeli 4th Infantry Brigade they retreated towards Abu Agheila and joined the 6th Brigade, as per their defense plans. The second unit was the 12th Infantry Battalion from the 4th Infantry Brigade at El Arish. It did not join the 6th Brigade but remained independent. It was reinforced by a company of T-34/85 tanks. (Different historical sources disagree as to the identity and composition of the reinforcing units from El Arish. Some Israeli sources claim that it was the 10th Infantry Battalion, not the 12th. Other Israeli sources claim that both the 10th and 12th Battalions were present. However, Egyptian sources all clearly insist that only the 12th Battalion was sent. Israeli sources state the reinforcing armored company consisted of Archer tank destroyers, not T-34/85's. However most Egyptian sources insist that they were T-34/85's, with a abstaining ones stating that there were no armored vehicles attached.)

Israeli

There were three Israeli brigades involved in the battle of Abu Agheila, the 7th Armored, the 37th Armored, and the 10th Infantry Brigades.

The 7th Armored Brigade was organized in the following manner. It had two armored battalions, the 9th which was equipped with AMX-13 tanks, and the 82nd which was equipped with Sherman tanks. Together these two battalions totaled six companies of about 96 tanks. It also had the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion which had three line companies and a support company, all halftrack mounted. It further had the 61st Motorized Infantry Battalion which had four line companies and one support company all truck mounted. Rounding things off was a mortar battalion of 120mm mortars, an artillery battalion of “25-Pounder” howitzers, and a scout company.

The 37th Armored Brigade was organized similar to the 7th with two exceptions, it had no mortar battalion and had only one armored battalion (the 31st) which was equipped with Sherman tanks, plus one additional armored company (the 247th) which was equipped with AMX-13 tanks, for total of four companies of about 64 tanks. Some historical sources identify the 37th as a mechanized brigade, not an armored one.

The 10th Infantry Brigade, which was a reserve unit, was not at full strength at the battle of Abu Agheila. It had three infantry battalions (the 103rd, 104th, and 105th), a mortar battalion of 120mm mortars, an artillery battalion of “25-Pounder” howitzers, and a scout company. Two of the infantry battalions (the 103rd and 104th) each only had two line companies and the other infantry battalion (the 105th) had three. This was due to the hasty mobilization of the brigade, as the remaining line companies were still in Israel being assembled. In fact, due to a shortage of transport, the 10th had to leave most of its light

mortars behind, using the personnel from the mortar sections to fill out its line platoons. The 10th Brigade was a provisional motorized infantry unit, meaning that it was normally a foot infantry outfit with occasional motorized support when it was available. This usually came in the way of whatever vehicles were available at the time, be they military or civilian vehicles. The 10th was mostly supported by civilian vehicles, which upon unloading them in the Abu Agheila area promptly made a beeline back to Israel. The 103rd Battalion was fortunate though. It was supplied with halftracks, enough to carry both of its line companies, which stayed with the unit throughout the campaign.

The 7th and 37th Armored Brigades were not present in their entirety. Of the 7th Armored, only the 61st Motorized Infantry and the 82nd Armored Battalions were present, the rest of the Brigade was off the map to the west, moving across the Sinai. The 61st was a pure unit but the 82nd was in a mixed combined arms configuration, consisting of two armored companies, with an armored infantry company, and a support company from the 52nd Armored Infantry Battalion attached. Of the 37th, which was being held in GHQ reserve in Israel, only the 31st Armored Battalion was present. It too had a mixed combined arms configuration, consisting of two armored companies, with two armored infantry companies from the 33rd Armored Infantry Battalion being attached.

One important note, the Israelis were using five tank platoons during this time. While the old Sherman M1 and M4A3E8 platoons have a maximum strength point of five, the Sherman Mk 50 platoons only have a maximum strength point of three. While I could have given those companies equipped with Sherman Mk 50's five platoons so that they would have the correct amount of tanks, I found that this gave them far too many firing opportunities per turn. So what I did was give those companies three platoons, saved the file, then opened the scenario file on MS Word and changed the strength points of each of those platoons from three to five, then saved the file. Worked like a charm in Divided Ground. In Middle East they do have five tank platoons so I don't have this problem there.

The Scenario Set Up

Historically the battle of Abu Agheila lasted four days, from the 30th of October to the 2nd of November, 1956. However most of the combat occurred on the 31st of October. During that day the four principle Israeli units involved in the battle, the 82nd Armored and 61st Motorized Infantry Battalions of the 7th Armored Brigade, the 31st Armored Battalion of the 37th Armored Brigade, and the 10th Infantry Brigade, made a total of six separate attacks against various defensive positions of the Egyptian 6th Infantry Brigade. Unfortunately all of these attacks were uncoordinated with each other and the Egyptians were able to defeat each one in turn. The Israelis were hampered by the lack of an overall commander of the operation. The various commanders of the major Israeli units were supposed to coordinate with each other, but they frequently did not. The 7th and 10th were under the 38th Ugdah, a divisional command unit, but this unit was more of an administration and logistics unit and did not really coordinate the actions of its brigades as it should of. To make matters worse, the Israeli Army's Chief of the General Staff

Moshe Dayan kept personally interfering with the operations of the 10th Brigade, ordering it to attack twice when it was not ready. The Israeli General Headquarters is also partially to blame as it promised the 31st Armored Battalion to the 10th Brigade in support of its attacks, yet repeatedly delayed its departure so it did not arrive in the area until nightfall, after the 10th had shot its bolt in two failed attacks. When it did arrive, it was ordered to make an attack from the march, with its vehicles headlights on since it was dark, in order to intimidate the Egyptians. However, all the headlights did was to provide the Egyptian gunners with convenient aiming points in the dark and the 31st was beaten back with heavy casualties. All in all it was a disappointing performance for the Israeli Army.

To make an historical scenario of 240 turns (24 hours), with most Israeli units either arriving on the map or being fixed in place until it was their historical time to attack, would make for a very boring scenario. Therefore this scenario is pseudo-historical in nature. To do this I made all Israeli units that were present, save the 61st Motorized Infantry Battalion, immediately available to the Israelis at the start of the game. This is certainly historically possible had the Israelis better coordinated their actions and the 31st Armored Battalion was allowed to depart when first requested. The 61st's arrival on Turn Four is also historically possible if it delayed its historical attack so it could attack the Egyptian right flank at Umm Qatef while the 10th Brigade and 31st Armored kept them occupied by a frontal assault. I set the scenario for late afternoon on the 31st when all of the Israeli units would have been ready for action.

The Egyptian units are set up where they were historically. A few comments about the Egyptian defensive positions, or the lack thereof in some cases. At Umm Qatef, the defensive positions seem weaker than many historical accounts make them out to be. In fact, a lot of historical accounts give them the trenchlines and pillboxes that they had in 1967. In truth the defensive positions at Umm Qatef consisted of a series of bunkers overlooking the Central Route and the Turkish Track. These bunkers were connected by a line of improved positions, both those preexisting and those constructed by the 6th Brigade when the unit occupied the area. The minefield in front of the defensive position was a standard one for the time period, with blocks on the roads to allow easy removal should the Egyptians have needed to use the roads.

Contrary to popular belief, the Egyptian position at Ruafa Dam had no defensive positions, save for those improved positions constructed by the 6th Brigade when it moved in. Also all other improved positions on the board were constructed by the occupying units before the start of the game.

The Egyptian 12th Infantry Battalion is fixed in place until Turn Ten to reflect its relative passivity during the battle. The commander of the 12th interpreted his orders to mean that he should block the route to El Arish, not attack in support of the 6th Brigade. The attached tank company was brand new, with the crews having just received their tanks before moving out with the 12th Infantry, so they were unfamiliar with their vehicles, hence the very low starting morale level.

The 78th National Guard Infantry Battalion does not start the game in any defensive positions, though they may construct improved positions during the game. The 78th only arrived during the night of 30-31 October and was placed on the right flank of the Umm Qatef position. However, its placement there proved to be beneficial historically as it ambushed the Israeli 61st Motorized Battalion as it assaulted Umm Qatef from the south.

The morale levels of the different units reflect their morale at the time of the battle. The Israeli 10th Brigade may seem slighted by only having a Morale Level of 4, but then this unit was composed of reservists, most of whom were over 40 years of age. Note only that, the hasty mobilization of the brigade caused many soldiers to be placed into units not their own because their own companies had not assembled yet. Thus they were working and fighting with people they did not know and train with, thus lowering morale. The Egyptian Reserve and National Guard units always had lower morale than their regular Army counter parts although the 78th got a slight raise in its Morale Level over what it had in the Kusseima scenario due to its successful retreat from there while managing to remain intact as a unit. In contrast, most of the units of the Egyptian 6th Infantry Brigade retained their full Morale Level of 6 to reflect that they were a well led by their leaders who knew what they were doing, a rare occurrence in the Egyptian Army at that time. In addition, the various Egyptian units start the game with lower morale levels than what their maximum levels are. This is to reflect the boredom that these units suffered by being stationed out in the desert for a long period of time, prior to the start of the hostilities.

Conclusion

I hope that these design notes give players a better understanding of the rationale of the many factors that influenced the making of this scenario.