

DESIGN NOTES FOR THE BATTLE OF RAFAH JUNCTION 1967

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If Divided Ground can be faulted (and it certainly has for many things) it is for its absence of a scenario for the battle of Rafah Junction in 1967. This was a critical battle at the beginning of the Six Day War and the Israelis needed to win it and win it fast if they wanted to carry the war to its conclusion. One would think that its inclusion in the game would have been mandatory and it probably would have been if the game's development had not been cut abruptly short. Still there was a need for this scenario and I finally got around to doing it.

The Map

As there was no extra mapsheet for the Rafah area around 1967 in the Divided Ground game, I had to make one. I started with the map from the "Hasten Thou and Kill Him" scenario which portrays the battle of Rafah in 1956. This map was based on the maps from the British War Office series of 1960. Although most of the maps of that series were done during World War II, the ones for the Rafah area seem to have been done post war. This is because they include the coastal railroad which was laid down after the war. I expanded the map to the west and south and filled it in with appropriate terrain features for 1967. I increased the size of the town of Rafah itself to reflect its population growth between 1956 and 1967. One will notice that there are more sandy areas on the map in 1967 than in 1956. This shows the gradual encroachment of the desert into the Rafah area that had been occurring in the Twentieth Century. This is probably best showed in the example of the big wadi that is near the western edge of the mapsheet of the scenario "Bloody Epiphany" which portrays the Rafah area in 1949. In 1967 it is shown just as terrain of a lower elevation. (The wadi had been slowly filling up with sand and dirt that had been blown in by the wind over the decades.) Another good example of the passage of time is the increase of cultivation as the Egyptians make use of what good land they have left before the desert eventually consumes it. Still it is a pretty good map for the scenario.

Order of Battle

Such a big battle deserves a pretty big order of battle for both sides. I shall describe each side in detail. Note that not all numerical designations of the battalions for both sides where list can be considered 100% accurate. The Israelis had the habit of changing the numerical designations of their battalions from time to time to confound enemy intelligence efforts and frequently historians use the post-war designations of some of the battalions when describing them in the war. The Egyptians, on their part, have just refused to release any of the designations of their brigades and battalions from that war to anybody, a policy that they have maintain to the present day and the numerical

designations of their units, where known, have come from the Israelis. The Egyptians will not even let the soldiers and commanders of their forces of that war even be interviewed by historians and the like, although they will let their memoirs (no doubt heavily edited) be used as source materials as well as their official history of the conflict..

The Israelis

The Israelis had the 84th Armored Division, better known as Ugdah Tal, as its main unit in the battle. It had two armored brigades (the 7th and the 60th) a mechanized paratroop brigade (the 202nd), an artillery regiment (the 215th), and two independent armored forces of large battalion sizes (Baron and Granit Forces).

7th Armored Brigade: The 7th Armored Brigade had two armored battalions (the 79th and the 82nd), one armored infantry battalion (the 75th), a self-propelled mortar battalion (the 7th) and an armored scout company (the 7th). The 79th Armored Battalion is frequently referred to as the 77th Armored Battalion in several histories about the war. This was because it had its numerical designation changed shortly after the war. It was equipped with M-48A2 Patton tanks. It was missing its third tank company during the entire battle because it was attached to the 202nd Paratroop Brigade. The 79th was unique because it still had five-tank sized platoons, whereas the other tank battalions in the Israeli Army had gone over to three and four tank sized platoons. The 82nd Armored Battalion was a Centurion tank equipped unit with four tank companies. Two of its companies had the Ben Gurion models of the Centurion tank with 105mm guns while the other two still had the old Mk III Centurions with the 20 Pdr gun. The 7th Scout Company was unusual in that it had a platoon of tanks assigned directly to it.

60th Armored Brigade: The 60th Armored Brigade had two armored battalions (the 19th and 42nd), one armored infantry battalion (the 29th), a self-propelled mortar battalion (the 60th), and a scout company (the 60th). The 19th Armored Battalion was equipped with AMX-13 tanks and the 42nd Armored Battalion was equipped with M-51 Isherman tanks.

202nd Paratroop Brigade: The 202nd Paratroop Brigade had two paratroop battalions (the 88th and 202nd), a tank company from the 79th Armored Battalion (C Company), and the 202nd Scout Company. The brigade had a third paratroop battalion but this was detached just before the start of the war and assigned to a force tasked with capturing Sharm el-Sheikh at the southern most point of the Sinai peninsula. The paratroop battalions were unusual in that they were mounted on halftracks. Normally they would mounted in trucks, but because they were supporting the armor of Ugdah Tal, it was felt that it would be better if they mounted in halftracks in order to keep up with them. There was no self-propelled mortar battalion in the brigade but each paratroop battalion had a battery of 120mm self-propelled mortars in their respective weapons companies, in place of their regular 81mm mortars.

215th Artillery Regiment: The 215th Artillery Regiment had two self-propelled artillery battalions (the 19th and the 27th) assigned to it. Each of these had four batteries of AMX 105/50 Self-Propelled guns. Note that the Israeli Army at the time was just going over to three battery artillery battalions but most of the artillery battalions still had four batteries.

Baron Force: Baron Force consisted of an armored battalion (the 46th) and an armored recon company. Both of these came from the Israeli Army's Armor School and were composed of both students and instructors mobilized for the war. The 46th Armored

Battalion was equipped with M-48A2 Patton tanks and was unique in that one of its companies was equipped with Patton tanks recently up-gunned with 105mm guns. The Armored Recon Company was equipped with AMX-13 tanks.

Granit Force: Granit Force consisted of an armored battalion (the 45th) and a scout company (numerical designation unknown). The armored battalion was equipped with AMX-13 tanks. It would be interesting to note here that Israeli armored battalions equipped with the AMX-13 used four-tank platoons while the armored recon companies that used them only had three-tank platoons. The scout company used jeeps that mounted 106mm Recoilless Rifles instead of machine guns.

The Egyptians

The Egyptians had the 7th Infantry Division as its main force in the battle. The 7th had three infantry brigades (the 9th, 11th, and 16th), one National Guard brigade (the 112th), one armored brigade (the 14th), two artillery brigades (the 49th and 57th), a heavy tank battalion (the 1st) and numerous support battalions, including multiple anti-tank battalions. It had only been recently formed about a month earlier and originally had the 11th and 16th Infantry Brigades. However, as the month wore on, more and more units got added to it and made it into an oversize division. Despite its large size, the 7th was a poor quality division. Most of the brigades were missing their original battalions as they were down in Yemen fighting in the civil war down there. Therefore units from other brigades were added to the 7th Infantry's brigades when it was formed up. The brigades never had a chance to train up as a unit and the division as a whole never had a chance to train up since it was formed.

9th Infantry Brigade: The 9th Infantry Brigade was a recent addition to the division and for a long time was thought to be part of the 11th Infantry Brigade by many historians. It was a standard infantry brigade although it was missing one of its infantry battalions. This missing infantry battalion (the 27th) was at Khan Yunis to the northeast as part of the 108th Palestinian Infantry Brigade. It seems that the 7th Infantry and 20th Palestinian Infantry Divisions traded infantry battalions as a sign of Arab solidarity just prior to the war. The 9th defended Rafah and the Army Camp next to it during the battle. However, the Israelis bypassed both of these places initially and so the 9th was left out of the fighting at the beginning of the battle. Only its tank battalion got into the fighting by falling back and supporting the 11th Infantry Brigade. After the initial battle was over did the Israelis started mopping up the 9th Infantry Brigade which by that time was cut off and demoralized and its soldiers were surrendering in droves as the Israelis advanced into the Army Camp and Rafah.

11th Infantry Brigade: The 11th Infantry Brigade was one of the original brigades in the division. It was a standard infantry brigade but was missing its tank and one of its assigned infantry battalions, both of which were defending Jiradi Pass. To replace the missing infantry battalion, the 86th Palestinian Infantry Battalion was assigned to it (received from the previously mentioned 7th Infantry-20th Palestinian trade-off). The 11th was positioned north of Rafah Junction, west of Rafah, at the start of the battle.

16th Infantry Brigade: The 16th Infantry Brigade was the other original brigade in the division. It was one of the Egyptian Army's semi-mechanized brigades, meaning that one of its infantry battalions was in fact a mechanized battalion. (This explains why many

historians have listed it was a mechanized brigade.) The brigade was positioned south of Rafah junction at the beginning of the battle, though its tank battalion (the 213th) was positioned back at the town of Kafr Shan, acting as a divisional operational reserve.

14th Armored Brigade: The 14th Armored Brigade was assigned to the 7th Infantry Division about a week before the war and was stationed at El Arish. It was equipped with T-54/55 tanks and one of the best independent armored brigades in the Egyptian Army, bearing the nick-name “Presidential Guards”. It was originally supposed to be the 7th Infantry Division’s strategic reserve. However, a couple days before the war started it was temporarily detached and sent down to the Egyptian 3rd Infantry Division where it ended up fighting during the war.

112th National Guard Brigade: The 112th National Guard Brigade was the largest National Guard unit attached to the 7th Infantry Division. It was not in the Rafah area at the beginning of the war, but instead had its main body located at Bir Lahfan. However it had company and battalion size detachments spread out all over that area defending the various approaches. This included a battalion that was stationed in El Arish. It never figured into the battle of Rafah Junction.

49th Artillery Brigade: The 49th Artillery Brigade was located west of Rafah, north of the main coastal road. It had two or three battalions of artillery present at the battle. (Israeli sources disagree on the number.) All of the battalions were equipped with 122mm howitzer, except one which was equipped with 122mm guns which allowed it to cover the town of Khan Yunis to the northeast as well as the Rafah area. It is also possible that there was another 122mm artillery battalion assigned to the 49th located all the way back in El Arish, but it is uncertain whether this was part of the brigade or a recently added extra artillery battalion to the division. For scenario purposes I am assuming that all three battalions were present on the map and that the extra battalion at El Arish was totally separate.

57th Artillery Brigade: The 57th Artillery Brigade was located southwest of Rafah, south of the coastal road, and in the rear of the 16th Infantry Brigade’s operating area. It had three artillery battalions, each equipped with 122mm howitzers. It was present in its entirety in the battle.

1st Heavy Tank Battalion: The 1st Heavy Tank Battalion was deployed within the 16th Infantry Brigades area, south of the coastal road. It was equipped with JS-III “Stalin” tanks. It was one of two or three heavy tank battalions in the Sinai. (Another battalion was located in the 125th Armored Brigade in the 6th Mechanized Division to the south. A third battalion was never positively identified and it is possible that it is an invention of many military historians who may have lumped together the various JSU-152 batteries that were spread out across the Sinai into this third “battalion”, due to the fact that the Egyptian Army classified both the JS-III and the JSU-152 as “artillery tanks”.)

47th Tank Destroyer Battalion: The 47th Tank Destroyer Battalion was a self-propelled tank destroyer battalion equipped with SU-100s. Two of its companies were located in the 16th Infantry Brigade’s area and the other was located in the 11th Infantry Brigade’s area.

79th Anti-Tank Battalion: The 79th Anti-Tank Battalion was a towed anti-tank battalion equipped with the modern T-12 100mm guns. It was located in the 16th Infantry Brigade’s area.

143rd Anti-Tank Battalion: The 143rd Anti-Tank Battalion was an independent towed anti-tank battalion, recently attached to the 7th Infantry Division. It was equipped with the older D-10 100mm guns of World War 2 fame. It was located around the town of Kafr Shan during the battle.

The 7th Infantry Division had other support units such as an engineer battalion (which was located in El Arish) and at least two air defense battalions (which deployed defending various airfields in the division's operating area), but as these took no part in the battle I do not list them.

The Scenario

The scenario is set up so that the various units on both sides are set up in their historically correct areas, if not their exact positions, at the beginning of the battle. The Israeli 7th Armored Brigade enters the map somewhat reduced to reflect the losses it suffered in Khan Yunis just prior to the battle. The Egyptian defense certainly looks formidable and it is in the scenario, despite the low morale of its units, and will certainly give a better account of itself than it did in the historical battle. Ironically, General Soliman did have a small opportunity in the few weeks before the war to get some training in for his division but he squandered it as he knew that the whole operation was nothing more than a saber rattling exercise by President Nasser against the Israelis. To his credit though he did keep his troops busy digging defensive positions which is why there are a lot of improved positions and trenches on the board on the Egyptian side. For the record, the Israelis had about 50 of the 300 tanks in Ugdah Tal knocked out during the battle. The challenge for the Egyptian player would be to exceed this amount of Israeli tanks destroyed, whereas the challenge for the Israeli player is to keep his tank losses below the historical result.

Conclusion

It is my hope that Divided Ground players find this to be an exciting scenario. It may have taken a long time to come about but a critical battle in the 1967 war is finally getting the coverage that it deserves.

Errata

Included with this scenario are the corrected organizational and scenario files for the scenario Bir Gifgafa. It seems that I missed a couple of errors in the Israeli order of battle. One was that the 19th Armored Battalion had a mortar track attached to it from the 60th Armored Brigade's armored infantry battalion. The other error was that A and B Company of the 82nd Armored Battalion, of the 7th Armored Brigade, were equipped with Ben Gurion tanks, not Centurion Mk III's as I had them. Both errors have now been corrected. Also I changed the names of the Israeli leader to their historical counterparts and improved the command rating of one of them.

