

Running Head: U.S. Army Readiness: Kasserine Pass vs. Mogadishu

U.S. Army Readiness: Kasserine Pass vs. Mogadishu

SGM Theresa W. Dailey-Johnson

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Michael Hardin

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H100 Topic #5: The U.S. has been repeatedly unprepared to execute its primary mission at the outbreak of hostilities. Use two examples to identify the root factors affecting the U.S. military's readiness to perform its primary function during the initial stages of the conflicts under investigation. Include the role of the NCO in preparing Soldiers to conduct combat operations. In your conclusion, address whether or not the U.S. military has overcome the fundamental obstacles to achieve force readiness prior to the commencement of combat operations.

THESIS:

The U.S. pullout of Mogadishu was a humiliating defeat resulting from the failure of the military to accurately assess its adversary prior to engaging in hostilities; however, forces fighting in Kasserine Pass during World War II faced some of the same readiness issues.

OUTLINE:

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### Abstract

Good intelligence and communication, always being prepared, and never underestimating your enemy are crucial in winning any type of battle. American forces must always prep the battlefield with a thorough knowledge of their enemy and equipment technology and doctrine that is effective against an enemy that chooses not to fight in accordance with current American concepts of opposing forces doctrine. The lessons were difficult, but from the experiences at Kasserine Pass and later at Mogadishu and subsequent conflicts, the Army has gained a plethora of experience and many seasoned noncommissioned officers who form the core of an effective, combat-ready fighting force.

## U.S. Army Readiness: Kasserine Pass vs. Mogadishu

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### *Kasserine Pass*

In June 1942, as the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division made its final preparations for entry into World War II, it was not preparing to face German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps*. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division was preparing to participate in an invasion of Europe, aimed at liberating France, striking into Germany, and bringing an early end to the war. However, while President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to get American Soldiers into combat against the Germans as soon as possible, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill opposed making the initial thrust against Germany. He wanted to bolster British interests in the Mediterranean. The two leaders reached an agreement to send U.S. troops to invade North Africa and began planning the insertion of the U.S. Army into the Mediterranean area, to be called Operation *Torch*. The objective of Operation *Torch* was to gain complete control of North Africa from French Morocco to Tunisia, trapping Rommel's *Afrika Korps* between *Torch* and the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army to the east.

On November 8, 1942, 125,000 personnel from British, American, and Free French units invaded French North Africa under Gen. Eisenhower's command. Despite resistance by the French, all of North Africa west of Algiers was in Allied hands within three days. Following the end of Operation *Torch*, the Allied forces advanced eastward toward Tunisia to secure two important seaports there. If they could secure these primary ports, they would gain control of Tunisia before the Germans could send reinforcements.

While the Allied forces were relishing in their success of Operation *Torch* and predicting

an easy victory against their enemies, the Germans were racing to Tunisia and massively reinforcing and reorganizing their forces to counter the Allied advance. German Fifth Panzer Army air and ground forces tried to improve their positions in central Tunisia by hammering away at the Allied forces. In January 1943, the U.S. II Corps began sending additional troops into southern Tunisia to reinforce Allied forces there. While the British Eighth Army was delayed by lengthening supply lines, the inexperienced U.S. II Corps did not attack the Germans when they had the opportunity. Taking advantage of the pause, the German Fifth Panzer Army and the *Afrika Korps* combined to launch a heavy armored assault against the inexperienced and unprepared U.S. II Corps. Four days of fighting between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of February cost II Corps 2,546 missing, 103 tanks, 280 vehicles, 18 field guns, 3 antitank guns, and 1 antiaircraft battery. However, these humiliating losses were not the final blow. U.S. II Corps scrambled backward to establish a new defensive position, this time at Kasserine Pass, a two mile wide gap in the Dorsal Chain of the Atlas Mountains. If the Allies failed to hold the passes around Kasserine, Axis forces would be free to drive northward into the southern flank of the British First Army, forcing them to withdraw to the west and allowing the German bridgehead in northern Tunisia to expand dramatically. For Rommel, Kasserine Pass was the gateway to Algeria. With a series of forceful attacks on February 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, the Germans massed armor and infantry against the ineffectively dispersed U.S. II Corps, pushing the Americans back, seizing huge stocks of abandoned equipment, and breaking through the mountains at the Kasserine Pass into the valley beyond, a spectacular success. The Germans hardly paused as they ran over the American defenses. The disastrous series of February defeats was only ended by a shift in German priorities. With the 8th Army rapidly approaching from Libya, Rommel decided not to continue west so he turned his forces around and headed back to the east (Calhoun, 2003).

*Mogadishu*

In 1991, the former ruler of Somalia was overthrown by a coalition of clans. That coalition divided into two groups, one led by Ali Mahdi and the other by Mohammed Farah Aidid. These two clans used their control over the food supplies shipped into Somalia from international agencies as the source of their power. They would hijack the food to secure the loyalty of clan leaders and also use the food as barter for weapons. An estimated 300,000 Somalis were dying of starvation as these clans stole about 80 percent of the food shipped in.

In 1992, the United Nations began Operation *Provide Relief*, a humanitarian relief effort for the people of Somalia. However, this mission was unsuccessful because often, as soon as the relief flights full of food and supplies landed in Somalia, they were looted. As a result, the United Nations asked its member nations for assistance. President Bush told the UN the U.S. would lead an intervention force by deploying 25,000 combat troops to Somalia. This operation was called Operation *Restore Hope* with the objective of rapidly securing trade routes in Somalia so food could get to the people. When President Clinton came into office, he scaled the operation down to about 1,200 Soldiers. However, when 24 Pakistani troops who were a part of the UN forces were ambushed and killed, then 4 Western journalists were later beaten to death, 4 U.S. military police were killed by a land mine, and 6 more U.S. Soldiers were wounded a few weeks later, Task Force Ranger was deployed to Somalia under Operation *Gothic Serpent*.

Bowden (1999) noted that on October 3, 1993, as part of Task Force Ranger, the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR provides air support for the operation. Task Force Ranger infiltrates by fast roping from hovering Black Hawk helicopters and providing perimeter security on four corners of the main target building. The Delta Force Soldiers will insert on target building and capture Aidid's foreign minister and top military advisor and any other targets of interest. Once captured,

exfiltration would occur by loading everyone on a ground convoy and take them back to the U.S. compound. The 160<sup>th</sup> would provide escort security from the air. This operation would consist of 19 aircraft, 12 vehicles, and 160 men.

Complications arose almost from the beginning. A 5-ton truck, part of the ground convoy, was struck by a rocket propelled grenade. One Ranger fell about 70 feet from a helicopter while attempting to fast rope, seriously injuring himself. Then, a Black Hawk helicopter went down. To add to the confusion, the assault team and ground convoy team got their signals crossed and neither of them moved as planned—one team waiting for the other to react first. While all of this was happening, another Black Hawk was shot down. Most of the assault team went to the first crash site for a rescue operation, but when they got there, they ran into heavy militia fire. They could only get limited air support, so they were trapped overnight. Meanwhile, two Delta Force snipers repeatedly volunteered and were finally inserted by helicopter into the second crash site. Both of them were later killed by the mob, but a pilot they helped protect was taken hostage by Somali militiamen. The U.S. Soldiers, aided by U.S. aircraft, managed to fend off the Somali masses during the night. Early the next morning, reinforcements from the 10<sup>th</sup> MTN DIV and UN Forces arrived, evacuating the American forces back to the UN Pakistani base. They didn't come sooner because Task Force Ranger was acting under U.S. command, not UN command and the UN had no prior knowledge of the operation.

#### *Root Factors Affecting Readiness*

Many factors combined to result in the unpreparedness of the American Soldiers who participated in the action at Kasserine Pass. First, the military still fought using old doctrine from World War I instead of learning how to fight enemy tanks using German tactics. The military still had faith that basic marksmanship and the bayonet charge made the infantry the

predominant force in war. Secondly, by 1941, the total strength of U.S. forces had reached over 1.3 million, a fivefold increase in less than a year. No standardized Army-wide training plan existed to train and prepare this rapidly expanding force for combat. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had little time to develop its units into an effective fighting force. Furthermore, Soldiers were in poor physical fitness, had substandard individual soldier training, had outdated equipment or none at all, and possessed old and unserviceable field gear. There was also ineffective coordination of ground and air forces and problems regarding command and control of air assets. Finally, the division's lack of experience was readily apparent as soon as it encountered German forces. Throughout the fighting around Kasserine, the green American Soldiers demonstrated a lack of individual and small-unit proficiency. Replacements were routinely sent to the front lines unprepared, often not even qualified with their weapons. The total result was a lack of American discipline and basic soldiering skills that cost many lives.

Readiness issues also plagued the Soldiers at Mogadishu. First, they were ill-prepared for such intense fighting and they underestimated their enemy. A battle that was supposed to take an hour actually lasted about sixteen. The Soldiers did not take night vision devices or even a lot of water because they did not think they would be needed. The assault was launched into the most dangerous part of Mogadishu in daylight, even though the Ranger and Delta forces were trained and equipped primarily to work in darkness where their night vision devices could afford a decisive advantage. Secondly, the forces either had bad intelligence or a serious lack of it, believing that the Somalis did not have the capability to shoot down aircraft. The forces depended on aircraft for support. Additionally, the Soldiers were not trained for urban combat like what they encountered in Mogadishu. Streets there were tight and constricted and there were blinding alleys, dead ends, and debris-filled roads that hindered easy maneuvering. Further

complicating the issue, the Soldiers had a hard time distinguishing between enemy combatants and civilians since they all dressed alike and men, women, and children carried weapons.

Eighteen U.S. Soldiers were killed during the battle and 79 were injured. Two days after the battle, a mortar fell on the U.S. compound, killing a 19<sup>th</sup> Soldier and injuring another twelve.

### *Aftermath*

As witnessed in actions at Kasserine Pass and Mogadishu, American's fighting forces must always be prepared for combat. Tunisia was the first time American Soldiers confronted well-trained, battle-tested enemy units equipped with the most modern weapons and tactics. The result was painful: five months of almost continuous setbacks with unexpectedly high casualties. Although the cost had been high, much had been learned about use of armor, combined arms operations, and managing the command of Allied forces from different nations. To this end, NCOs have an extremely important role in preparing Soldiers for combat operations. They must ensure their Soldiers are physically fit, mentally ready, and properly trained for the pressures of battle. They have to ensure their Soldiers are disciplined and have basic soldiering skills, have the proper equipment, and effective weapons. NCOs must also be familiar with the enemy and its tactics so they can properly lead their Soldiers into battle.

### Conclusion

The military has learned to use its past failures and successes to draw upon when entering into subsequent battles. The disaster at Kasserine Pass showed the Allied commanders that drastic changes were needed so that Soldiers could acquire the skills necessary for modern warfare in the 1940s. They realized that poor training, critical shortages of weapons and equipment, lack of time to master the Army doctrine and operation of weapons and equipment put the American troops at a disadvantage at the onset of fighting. The fighting at Mogadishu

showed flaws in intelligence preparation of the battlefield and lack of training in urban combat. A false sense of American superiority also contributed to the defeat in Somalia.

As future leaders confront the issue of change in the Army, they must remember the lessons of Kasserine Pass and avoid the errors of the non-war years that sent countless young men to combat in World War II with inferior equipment and illogical doctrine. Readiness requires a rational doctrine that will enable our forces to fight effectively against any threat and equipment that is suitable to the execution of that doctrine and capable of defeating whatever enemy we might face in the future. American forces have learned their lesson well as evidenced by pre-combat training for Iraq—success in war depends upon preparation in peacetime.

References

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