Hitting the mark, Matthew Wright

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Desert War: The Battle of Sidi Rezegh
Peter Cox
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Mention Sidi Rezegh to most New Zealanders today and there is a good chance they will look at you strangely. A few, probably, will nod and perhaps name a relative who was lost there. This is predictable: in many ways, the New Zealand battle for that bleak North African ridge – part of the Crusader campaign of November-December 1941 – stands in the shadow of better known 20th-century battles such as Gallipoli, Passchendaele, Crete, El Alamein and Cassino. This status as poor cousin has been rectified in Peter Cox's *Desert War: The Battle of Sidi Rezegh*. The book emerged from his earlier work on his father's war experience at Sidi Rezegh, and covers the wider New Zealand experience in the Crusader operations of November-December 1941.

The Crusader battles were important for New Zealand in many ways. They marked the first time the Second New Zealand Division had been engaged since Crete, eight months before. They also provoked an astonishing loss rate – 4620, of whom 671 were killed outright and 208 died later from wounds. A total of 2042 New Zealanders, including some of the wounded, were made prisoner. The narrative detail was first covered in W E Murphy's official 1961 war history, *The Relief of Tobruk*. The availability of this immense work as a free online download, however, does not reduce the fact that it was an official account, written relatively soon after the battle at a time when participants were still active, when war secrets such as ULTRA at Bletchley Park remained hidden, and when many personal accounts remained to be told.

The original series editor, Howard Kippenberger, was well aware of the politics of writing contemporary history and sought to address the intellectual problems associated with it. The relevant files in Archives New Zealand – "meta history" – make fascinating reading. However, that did not reduce the practical limits of what followed. The time is therefore right, nearly 75 years after events, to retell the story of New Zealand's part in Crusader with the more dispassionate light of distance and the benefit of the information that has emerged since. Cox has done so with tremendous verve.

He has rightly eschewed any effort to engage with the contrived analytical frameworks that New Zealand's military-historical academics often exploit as devices to assert personal status. Instead, he has pitched his material at the general reader – the practical audience of any author – offering a clear, unpretentious and competent narrative with many new eyewitness accounts that he researched for the book. This is where his account shines, and my one criticism of his human-interest material is that he could have offered more.

Cox hits the mark with his breakdown of the battle. This is no mean feat. As historians have repeatedly observed – and had to tackle – the Crusader battles were complex. They were driven, from New Zealand's perspective, by the fact that the divisional commander, Major-General Bernard Freyberg, had priorities that clashed with those of Middle East command. These flowed from a difference of tactical thinking. Commanders on both sides wanted to avoid a WWI-style deadlock; but the British method – applying what amounted to naval tactics – broke large formations into small "Brigade Groups". In theory, these could be manoeuvred, like fleets, across the desert. In practice, they risked being picked off by a skilled and dynamic enemy tactician – which the Axis had in the form of General der Panzertruppe ("Lieutenant-General") Erwin Rommel.

Freyberg was determined to avoid the "Brigade Group" battle and keep his division together, in part because he knew it reduced the risk of losing a substantial part of the force in a single engagement – a worry of the New Zealand government, to which he felt obligated to pay attention – but more fundamentally because he felt it was the only way to defeat an enemy whose own tactics flowed around full divisions. Freyberg summed up the point to Ronald Walker in 1948, with classic hyperbole:

Auchinleck, Cunningham, and the Middle East staff ... believed the Germans could be beaten by clever schemes. They did not realise that the only way to defeat the Germans was to round them up and then smash them with artillery ....

The issue was compounded by British confusion over objectives. Technically, the Eighth Army was relieving Tobruk, which had been under siege; but there was also an idea that the battle should destroy the combined German-Italian army operating in North Africa and – theoretically – open the door to the Italian colonies in Tripolitania, a long-held British objective. The two aims were not entirely compatible, which was awkward because the stakes were higher than just results in the field. Middle East command was under heavy political pressure to win – Winston Churchill needed a victory to bolster his efforts to woo the United States.

The battle that followed was a broken and fragmented series of engagements that ranged from the Libyan border through to Tobruk. To describe this sort of sequence is the test of any writer. Unlike fiction, non-fiction supplies its plot ready-made. The skill demanded of an author is akin to that of a photographer, in many ways a deeper challenge than free creativity because the art rests on how documented events are framed and interpreted. Cox has done so in a way that draws in the reader immediately, giving us a good account of what happened. His descriptions are further illustrated with some excellent maps, creating a clear picture of the cut and thrust of these battles. Freyberg was ordered to leave 5 Brigade near the Libyan border, but managed to get 4 and 6 Brigade in position on Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed, where he expected the Axis would counter-attack.

It is in the chapters covering the dramatic events on Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed that Cox shines. His account of the pivotal New Zealand effort to hold the ridge – and keep the corridor to Tobruk open – is masterful. So, too, is Cox's account of Rommel's ill-starred effort to drive his Panzers – the Deutsche Afrika Korps – to the Egyptian frontier in an effort to cut off the British supply lines. This descended into a comedy of errors that left Rommel and his commanders personally hiding overnight in a captured British gun tractor.

The highlight of the book is the last chapter, discussing the human outcome of the campaign for New Zealand's forces. As Cox points out, this was a soldiers' battle, and he turns the account to that personal impact in full detail. This is important and superb historical writing by any measure. To be fair, the book has a few minor glitches. At times, it is not clear whether Cox's primary intent is to tell that personal story or to provide a battle narrative. The chapter on medical services, though interesting, presents structurally more like an insertion than an integral part of the story. This is not to diminish the approach; Cox has succeeded, admirably, in his intent of narrating a little-known battle for a new generation – and has done so in a way that is clear, accessible and effective. He offers the wider public an excellent account of a campaign that deserves higher profile than it has traditionally been given at a popular level. I certainly hope Cox will pursue his interest in the field, and that we will see more of his work in future.