

DESIGN NOTES FOR ABU AGEILA 1967

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Having done the scenario for the battle of Abu Ageila in 1956, it seemed only natural to also do a scenario for the battle of Abu Ageila in 1967. This was easier said than done. For one thing this was a night battle which made things a little bit more complex. Another thing was that the opposing forces were larger this time on both sides, thus making this a bigger scenario. There was a lot of information on this battle, but the unit designations and, for the Egyptians the commanders' names, were very hard to obtain as both sides in this war are being very secretive about this matter, even to the present day 38 years later. Still I could not pass up the challenge of making this scenario.

The Mapsheet

Making the mapsheet was very easy. I merely took the mapsheet for the Abu Ageila 1956 scenario and used that for a basis. I did have to make some changes though. For one thing I had to extend the mapsheet four columns to the right (north). This was done to include the whole of Hill 181 as this was a major Egyptian position during the battle. Since the four extra columns consisted of sand and other barren desert terrain, it was very easy to fill in the new columns. There had been one major change in the area between the wars. The Batur Track, which ran from Umm Tarafa up north into the desert until it turned west towards Hill 181 and continues on until it meets up with the road to El Arish in two places, was constructed during this time. However, it was a desert track, just like the Turkish Track, and so warranted an unpaved road. Also two connecting unpaved roads were constructed between the Turkish Track and the Central Route and so they too were included on the map. Other than those changes the map is the same as the one for the Abu Ageila 1956 scenario. One thing that one will notice about Hill 181 and the Batur Track is that they are about three kilometers south of what they are on the more modern Middle East maps of the same area. This is because the map is based on the old maps of the British War Office series of 1960. As the maps of the north Sinai were done in a hurry during World War II, there were some errors on them that never got corrected. Ironically, both the Egyptians and the Israelis based their maps of the Sinai on this old series and at least the Israelis never got around to updating their maps until after the conquest of the Sinai in 1967.

The Opposing Forces

Egyptian

The main defending force at Abu Ageila was the 12th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division. The 2nd Infantry Division was given the responsibility of defending both the Abu Ageila and the Kusseima areas. Considering Abu Ageila to be a fortified strongpoint, the commander of the 2nd Infantry Division set up his headquarters down the

Kusseima, where he also stationed the 10th Infantry Brigade and 338th Artillery Battalion of the 51st Artillery Brigade. The rest of the division was stationed at Abu Ageila.

The 12th Infantry Brigade consisted of three organic infantry battalions, the 37th, 38th, and the 39th. In addition, it had the 352nd Reserve Infantry Battalion, which was the normal peacetime garrison of Abu Ageila, attached to it also. In addition, the 12th had an Anti-Tank Battery of six 85mm anti-tank guns, a battery of self-propelled Snapper ATGM vehicles, a company of 120mm mortars, and two companies of 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun systems.

Also at Abu Ageila was the 6th Armored Regiment (identified as the 6th Armored Brigade in some sources), which had two tank battalions (the 288th and 289th) equipped with T-34/85 tanks, a tank destroyer battalion (the 59th) equipped with SU-100 tank destroyers, a reconnaissance company and an anti-aircraft battery. Altogether this regiment totaled 66 tanks and 22 tank destroyers.

For artillery support the 12th had one brigade, plus two additional battalions of artillery, all equipped with 122mm howitzers. (Most of the old sources identify these howitzers as the old A-19 and M-30 howitzers, while some more modern sources identify them as the D-74 howitzers. I used what the majority of sources say.) The 52nd Artillery Brigade had three battalions, the 330th, 332nd, and 334th. The two additional battalions were the 299th and the 336th from the 51st Artillery Brigade.

There was a small possibility of reinforcement from Kusseima, though historically none came. For this reinforcement I have used the 28th Infantry Battalion from the 10th Infantry Brigade.

Israeli

The Israelis had an entire division size unit at Abu Ageila. Ugdah “Sharon”, named after its commander Brigadier General Ariel Sharon, had the 14th Armored Brigade, the 99th Infantry Brigade, the 80th Paratroop Brigade, an engineer battalion, the 147th Reconnaissance Battalion, and six battalions of artillery in the Abu Ageila area. It also had the 226th Armored Battalion that was located in the Kusseima area whose mission was to keep the Egyptian 10th Brigade tied down and thus played no part in the battle.

The 14th Armored Brigade, also known as the “Zippora” Brigade after its commander, consisted of two armored battalions (the 25th and the 96th), the 35th Armored Infantry Battalion, the 20th Artillery Battalion with self-propelled 155mm guns, and the 14th Scout Company. (Some sources claim that the brigade had a third armored battalion and second armored infantry battalion but this error comes from observers seeing the mixed battalion sized task forces that the brigade formed for the operation and assuming that there were more units involved.) The 25th battalion was equipped with about 50 Centurion Mk 5 tanks in three companies. The 96th battalion had about 50 Isherman tanks in three companies. The 35th battalion had three line companies and a support company.

The 99th Infantry Brigade, had three infantry battalions, listed as the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalions. The 1st and 2nd Battalions were regular army but the 3rd Battalion was composed entirely of reservists. The brigade also had the 7th Artillery Battalion equipped with 25-pounder howitzers, the 99th Mortar Battalion equipped with 120mm mortars, and the 99th Scout Company.

The 80th Paratroop Brigade consisted of three paratroop battalions (listed as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalions) and a scout company. The 3rd Battalion had been detached for service elsewhere and so it is not listed in the order of battle.

The 147th Reconnaissance Battalion had two squadrons, one which was composed of AMX-13 tanks, and the other composed of armored recon troops, plus some additional support platoons. The engineer battalion was a standard combat engineer battalion with three line companies and a support company.

As previously mentioned, Sharon had six battalions of artillery. These were composed of 25 Pounders, 105mm, and 155mm guns and howitzers, both towed and self-propelled. Two of the battalions were already assigned to the armored and infantry brigades but the other four were in the 214th Artillery Regiment, directly under the Ugdah headquarters. As the sources do not agree as to which battalions had which types of artillery or how much of each type of artillery were present, the artillery mix and make-up in this scenario is a best guess on my part. All sources do agree that the total number of artillery pieces present were 96 though.

One important note. The Israeli Army was using four and five tank platoons in their tank companies at this time. Which type was used in an armored brigade was up to the respective brigade commander. In the 14th Armored Brigade, the five tank platoon was standard. For the Centurion tanks this was not a problem as they come in platoons with a maximum of five strength points anyway. However the Isherman tank platoons only have a maximum strength point of three. Again like in the Abu Ageila 1956 scenario I merely placed the Isherman platoons in the order of battle then opened the order of battle file on MS Word and changed the strength points of the Isherman platoons from three to five. Again it worked like charm.

The Scenario Setup

Historically the battle of Abu Ageila lasted about 24 hours, from the 5th to the 6th of June, 1967. However most of the combat occurred at night after midnight on the 6th. It consisted of a series of coordinated attacks on various Egyptian positions in the area by Israeli units that had spent most of the previous day maneuvering up to the attack positions. In contrast to the battle in 1956, the battle in 1967 was a well executed affair with the Israelis well prepared and well rehearsed for the operation.

I set the scenario to begin after midnight, about the time the historical attack began. To begin it before would have led to a boring scenario with nothing happening as the various Israeli units move up to their attack positions.

The Egyptian units are set up where they were historically. The 37th and 39th Battalions were set up in the Umm Katef position along with most support elements of the 12th Brigade. In addition, they were also supported by two platoons of T-34/85's, one platoon apiece, from the 288th Tank Battalion. The Umm Katef position had been extensively improved since the 1956 battle. Instead of improved positions, there were two trench lines, one behind the other. (Note: Many histories state that there were three trench lines at Umm Katef. This was based on the Israeli assumption that the Egyptians, using Soviet defensive tactics, would have three trench lines. However, this proved to be false. The Egyptians were planning on constructing a third trench line in 1968 though.) Several of the original bunkers were replaced with concrete pillboxes. The minefield in front of the position was extensively wired with barb wire, thus making entry into it much more difficult. However they neglected to protect their left flank, falsely assuming that nothing to traverse the desert to the north except by desert track.

Behind the Umm Katef position was the artillery park where the 52nd Artillery Brigade had set up shop along with two of its artillery battalions. Further to the west behind the artillery park was the 288th Tank Battalion, minus two platoons, in a central position to either counterattack Israeli attacks against either Umm Katef or Ruafa Dam. At Ruafa Dam was the 12th Brigade headquarters, protected by the 352nd Reserve Infantry Battalion. There were also two battalions of artillery positioned there.

To the north at Position 181 was the 38th Battalion reinforced by a tank company from the 289th Tank Battalion and by a battalion of artillery. Its mission was to block the Batur Track, so as to prevent Israeli movement from that direction. The 38th was initially more spread out around Position 181, but an attack by the Israelis during the late afternoon of the 5th of June caused them to contract the defense to the top of the position.

Way off to the west on the road to El Arish was the remainder of the 6th Armored Regiment, poised to support either Position 181 to the east or Abu Ageila and Ruafa Dam to the south.

Although the Egyptian units seemed to be well positioned and capable of a credible defense, there were several flaws in the Egyptian set up. For one thing the Egyptian 12th Brigade had only arrived a few days before the battle and did not know the area all that well. Only the Umm Katef position was heavily fortified, all the other positions had no fortifications and the Egyptians had to make do with hastily constructed improved positions at all the other locations. Also the commander of the 12th Brigade, who was also the commander of the whole Egyptian force in the area, was inexperienced and got his command more by political connections than by actual experience. The troops were of low morale and were not expecting a war, thinking the whole operation there to be a result of political maneuvering on the Egyptian government's part against Israel (which it was). Still they could have performed well if they had been well led like they were in

1956, but the Egyptian Army officer corps had been slipping very badly in recent years in terms of proficiency and was not up to the task.

The Israelis after crossing the border on the morning of June 5th, Ugdah “Sharon” occupied Umm Tarafa by the early afternoon after pushing aside the outlying Egyptian outposts along the way. The main force at Umm Tarafa conducted a limited recon in force against the Umm Katef position, then spent the rest of the day preparing for the battle to come, making sure that they were seen by the Egyptians so as to keep their attention. Meanwhile two separate Israeli forces were making their way across the desert to the north, using the sand dunes to mask their movements from the Egyptians. One force was the 25th Armored Battalion under Lt Col Nir (also named Natke in many sources, it was in fact his first name). This battalion was reinforced by a line company and the support company of the 35th Battalion. This force while on its way to its attack position, ran into the right flank of the Egyptian 38th Infantry Battalion on Position 181 in the late afternoon and a fierce firefight broke out between the two forces. After having eight tanks knocked out, the Israelis broke off the engagement and pulled back a ways before doubling around to the south and resuming their movement to the attack position. As mentioned earlier, the Egyptians on their part contracted their defense of Position 181. The other force was the entire 99th Infantry Brigade, with most of its vehicles, artillery, and heavy mortars remaining behind at Umm Tarafa. It moved without incident and made it to its attack position after dark.

By late evening, both Israeli forces were in their attack positions, the 25th Battalion poised to attack Raufa Dam and the 99th Brigade poised to attack the trenchlines at Umm Katef. Late in the evening the Israelis transported by helicopter the 1st Battalion of the 80th Paratroop Brigade into the desert and landed it north of the Egyptian artillery positions behind Umm Katef. Due to harassing artillery fire only one company from the 1st Battalion was poised to attack, the others being spread out to the north in the desert. The paratroops were to attack the artillery park and keep it from supporting the forward trenchline.

Once the main attack had begun and the 99th Brigade was working its way through the trenches at Umm Katef, the main force at Umm Tarafa would then launch their attack on Umm Katef. The Israeli reconnaissance battalion had a special mission of guarding the southern approaches to the battlefield in case of the Egyptians launching an attack from the direction of Kusseima.

All Israeli forces in the scenario are in their historical positions at the start of the battle. The Egyptian forces are all frozen in place until Turn 10 to reflect the Egyptian commander’s indecision and confusion during the battle. Also starting on Turn 10, the Egyptians have a 10% chance of receiving as reinforcement, the 28th Infantry Battalion from Kusseima to reflect the small possibility of an attack from that direction. This gives the Israeli recon battalion a purpose for fulfilling its historical mission instead of joining in on the attack on Umm Katef.

Conclusion

I hope that these design notes give players a better understanding of the factors that went into the creation of this scenario. This scenario, together with the earlier Battle of Abu Ageila 1956 scenario, will show how much both sides changed between the wars, one side for the worst, the other side for the better.