



# THE DESERT WAR

GEORGE FORTY

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*Endpapers. Front:* A PzKpfw III Ausf G parades through Tripoli early in 1942. Rommel made them go round the circuit more than once, to make everyone think he had more tanks than had actually landed! (IWM – HU 5608)  
*Back:* A Grant tank of the victorious Eighth Army moves through Gabes, where it was warmly welcomed by the local population. (IWM – BNA 1830)

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# CHRONOLOGY OF IMPORTANT DATES

1940		19–29 August	Operation 'Crusader' planning begins
10 June	Italy enters the war	2 September	Preliminary orders for 'Crusader' issued
13–18 September	Italians invade Egypt	14–15 September	German raid on Sofafi fails
16 October	Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden begins tour of Middle East	18 September	Eighth Army formed
	Italians enter Sidi Barrani	9 October	Western Desert Air Force formed
9 December	Gen O'Connor's Western Desert Force (WDF) begins Operation 'Compass'	15 November	Botched raid to kill Rommel
	Battle of Sidi Barrani begins	16 November	Operation 'Crusader' begins
11 December	Sidi Barrani captured by WDF	21 November	Sidi Rezegh battle starts
1941		7–8 December	German withdrawal commences
4 January	Bardia captured by WDF (now called XIII Corps)	10 December	Tobruk relieved
22 January	Tobruk captured by XIII Corps	15 December	Germans withdraw from Gazala
6 February	Benghazi captured by XIII Corps	25 December	British take Benghazi
5–7 February	Battle of Beda Fomm/Sidi Saleh and surrender of 10th Italian Army	1942	
	Rommel arrives in Tripoli	2 January	Bardia surrenders to British
12 February	Axis forces occupy El Agheila	16 January	Convoys arrive with materiel for Rommel
24 March	Rommel's first advance begins – Mersa Brega captured	17 January	Sollum and Halfaya garrisons surrender to British
1 April	Rommel takes Benghazi	21 January	Rommel advances from Mersa Brega
3 April	Generals O'Connor and Neame taken prisoner	28 January	British evacuate Benghazi and withdraw to Gazala Line
7 April	Rommel takes Mechili	2 February	Eighth Army manages to stabilise line at Gazala–Bir Hacheim
8 April	Rommel reaches Bardia, then Sollum, and starts attacks on Tobruk, which was besieged from 10 April to 10 December (242 days)	March–April	Lull as both sides build up strength
10–11 April	Attacks on Tobruk fail	10 May	Auchinleck ordered to attack
4 May	Op 'Brevity' - British attack Halfaya Pass-Sollum-Fort Capuzzo	26 May	Rommel beats them to the punch and attacks the British line
15–17 May	Germans retake Halfaya	5–6 June	Cauldron battle
27 May	Operation 'Battleaxe' assault on Halfaya–Sollum–Capuzzo fails	10 June	French position at Bir Hacheim falls
15–17 June	Gen Auchinleck replaces Gen Wavell	11–12 June	DAK armour defeats British armour
5 July	Marshal Bastico replaces Marshal Gariboldi	14 June	Decision made to withdraw from Gazala Line
	Auchinleck and Tedder to London for discussions	21 June	Tobruk falls to Axis, Rommel promoted to Field Marshal
29 July	Panzergruppe Afrika formed	25 June	Auchinleck takes over command of Eighth Army from Ritchie
31 July		1–5 July	Rommel tries to break through at El Alamein but fails

10–26 July	British attacks end indecisively – both sides exhausted	24–30 November	First Army advances, taking Medjez el Bab and Tebourba
4–10 August	Churchill in Cairo en route to Russia	1 December	German counter-attack
13 August	Gen Montgomery takes over command of Eighth Army	10/11 December	First Army withdraws
15 August	Gen Alexander succeeds Gen Auchinleck as C-in-C MELF	12 December	Eighth Army reaches El Agheila
20 August	Churchill visits HQ MELF in Cairo and at HQ Eighth Army at Burg el Arab and is impressed by ‘Monty’s Magic’	17 December	Eighth Army reaches Nofilia
		25 December	Eighth Army reaches Sirte
		1943	
30/31 August	Rommel’s forces attack Alam el Halfa positions but cannot break through and suffer heavy casualties	14 January	Casablanca Conference unifying Allied command under Eisenhower
2 September	Axis forces start to withdraw	18 January	Axis launch Operation ‘Eilboete’
3 September	Limited British counter-attacks	3 February	First British ship enters Tripoli harbour
7 September	Monty decides to call off battle	4 February	Eighth Army crosses frontier into Tunisia
September–October	Eighth Army prepares for battle, Axis forces dig in	14 February	Axis launch Operation ‘Frülingswind’
22 September	Rommel hands over to Gen Stumme and flies home to visit Hitler, receive his field marshal’s baton and take some sick leave	16 February	Axis launch Operation ‘Morgenluft’
6 October	Monty revises his plans	16 February	Eighth Army reaches Ben Gardane
22 October	Battle of El Alamein begins, Gen Stumme has heart attack and dies	17 February	Eighth Army takes Medinine
		19–22 February	Battle of Kasserine Pass
23–24 October	The Break-in battle	6 March	Axis counter-attack on Medinine
25 October	Rommel returns and takes command	9 March	Rommel leaves North Africa for good
25 October – 1 November	The ‘Dogfight’	26 February–19 March	Operation ‘Ochsenkopf’ launched
2 November onwards	Operation ‘Supercharge’	17 March	II US Corps launches Operation ‘Wop’
4 November	Axis withdrawal begins – it will continue until they are forced out of Tripolitania	20 March	Battle of Mareth begins
8 November	Operation ‘Torch’ – landing of US and UK troops in French North Africa	23 March	Eighth Army left ‘hook’
10 November	French ceasefire effective	27 March	Eighth Army reaches El Hamma
24 November	Kesselring and Rommel meet at ‘Marble Arch’	6 April	Eighth Army troops penetrate Gabes Gap and reach Wadi Akarit
November	First Army advances into Tunisia	7 April	First and Eighth Armies linkup
		19/20 April	Eighth Army reaches Enfidaville
16/17 November	First contact with the enemy in Tunisia	22 April	First Army launches Operation ‘Vulcan’
		7 May	First Army enters Tunis
		12 May	Axis capitulation, end of the campaign



Marching together. These two tough-looking soldiers represent 'two peoples but one victory' — though they would both be disappointed eventually. (Author's Collection)



General map of the battle area

# INTRODUCTION

## RULE BRITANNIA!

Despite the fact that between September 1939 and September 1940 Britain was far more concerned militarily in Europe, the Middle East still loomed large in British strategic policy. Not only was it the main source of its oil, but also the location of that most important of all links in the trade routes between Britain and the Commonwealth, namely the Suez Canal.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the Canal increased even more as Britain's European allies were one after another invaded and conquered by the seemingly unstoppable German 'Blitzkrieg'. After the fall of France, Britain was saved from invasion by the narrowest of margins, when the RAF won the 'Battle of Britain'. This led Hitler to change his plans and he decided to adopt a policy aimed at starving the British into submission by cutting them off from their sources of food and raw materials. The Suez Canal was Britain's link to India, the Far East and Australasia, as well as to East, South and West Africa, but it also provided an alternative, safer – albeit longer – route to the Americas. Thus its protection was of paramount importance.

However, although he planned his strategy globally, Hitler clearly did not immediately recognise the full importance of the Eastern Mediterranean, deciding initially to leave the area to his Axis partner, Italy, who had entered the war on 10 June 1940, and whose dictator, Benito Mussolini, had long boasted that it was an 'Italian lake'. The Führer took this decision primarily so that he could devote all his time and effort towards planning the invasion of his current ally the Soviet Union. Clearly he

1. As French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan had remarked in 1884, when the builder of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps, was elected to the French Academy: 'Hitherto the Bosphorous has provided the world with embarrassment enough; now you have created a second, more serious, source of anxiety. For this defile not only connects two inland seas, but it acts as a channel of communication to the oceans of the world. So great is its importance that in a maritime war everyone will strive to occupy it. You have thus marked the site of a future great battlefield.'





Mussolini visiting Tripoli in 1937 is greeted by an apparently enthusiastic crowd of inhabitants. He is accompanied by the Governor of Libya, Maresciallo dell'Aria Italo Balbo. (Author's Collection)

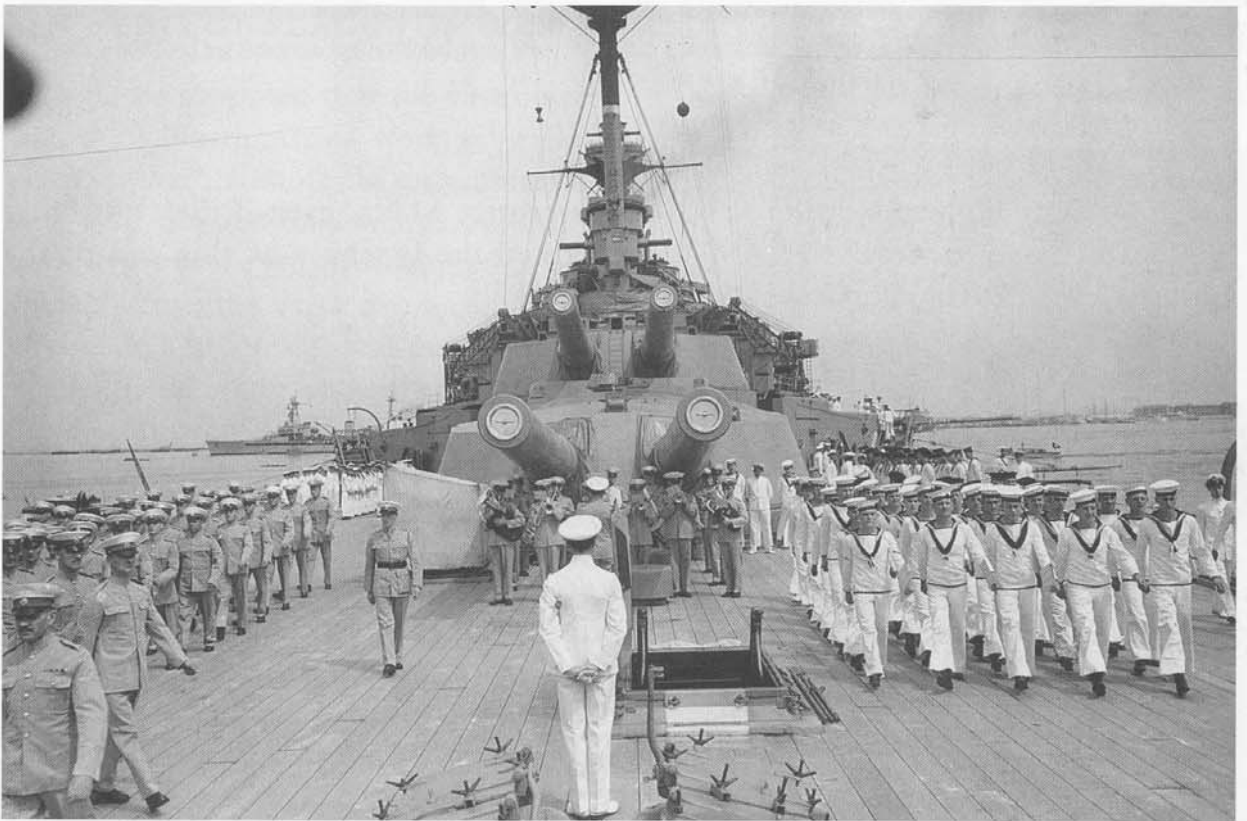
underestimated the importance of controlling the Mediterranean sea lanes and the skies above them, not apparently realising that whoever held Malta, Egypt and the northern shores of North Africa could also control all the seas around them. Perhaps he was lulled into this state of mind by the bellicose boasts of his inept fellow dictator, who, despite having more modern ships and aircraft than the British, together with much larger ground forces actually in situ in North Africa, would quickly prove that the Italian armed forces were, like their leader, to put it crudely, 'all piss and wind'!



This way 'Up the Blue!' (Author's Collection)

## THE ROYAL NAVY

To make matters even worse for Britain, she was also of course now without any French assistance from either the Vichy-controlled French colonies of Algeria and Syria, or her navy, which had been put out of action in the harbours of Oran and Alexandria. Britain would have to 'go it alone' here as well as in Europe. However, events would prove her forces were up to it on the land, on the sea and in the air. Britain's overall policy was never to lose control of the sea lanes, but in order to achieve this all three armed forces were at times stretched almost to breaking point. While this book deals primarily with the Army's land battles in North Africa, it is important from the beginning to emphasise the immense contribution made by the other two services. The Royal Navy, for example, had from the outset to deal with the large and powerful Italian Navy. Its main tasks included the supply and protection of Malta; the safeguarding of convoys through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea; the attacking of enemy convoys and supply lines; and the giving of support to the Army wherever it was needed. In fulfilling these tasks they suffered grievous losses. However, as their C-in-C, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, often remarked: 'It takes the Navy three years to build a ship, it takes three hundred to rebuild a reputation.' Therefore they would, whenever possible and no matter the odds, take the battle to the enemy and, although they might lose control of the seas from time to time, they would always



'Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves!' With the Royal Navy in Alexandria harbour, 21 May 1940. (IWM – E 84E)

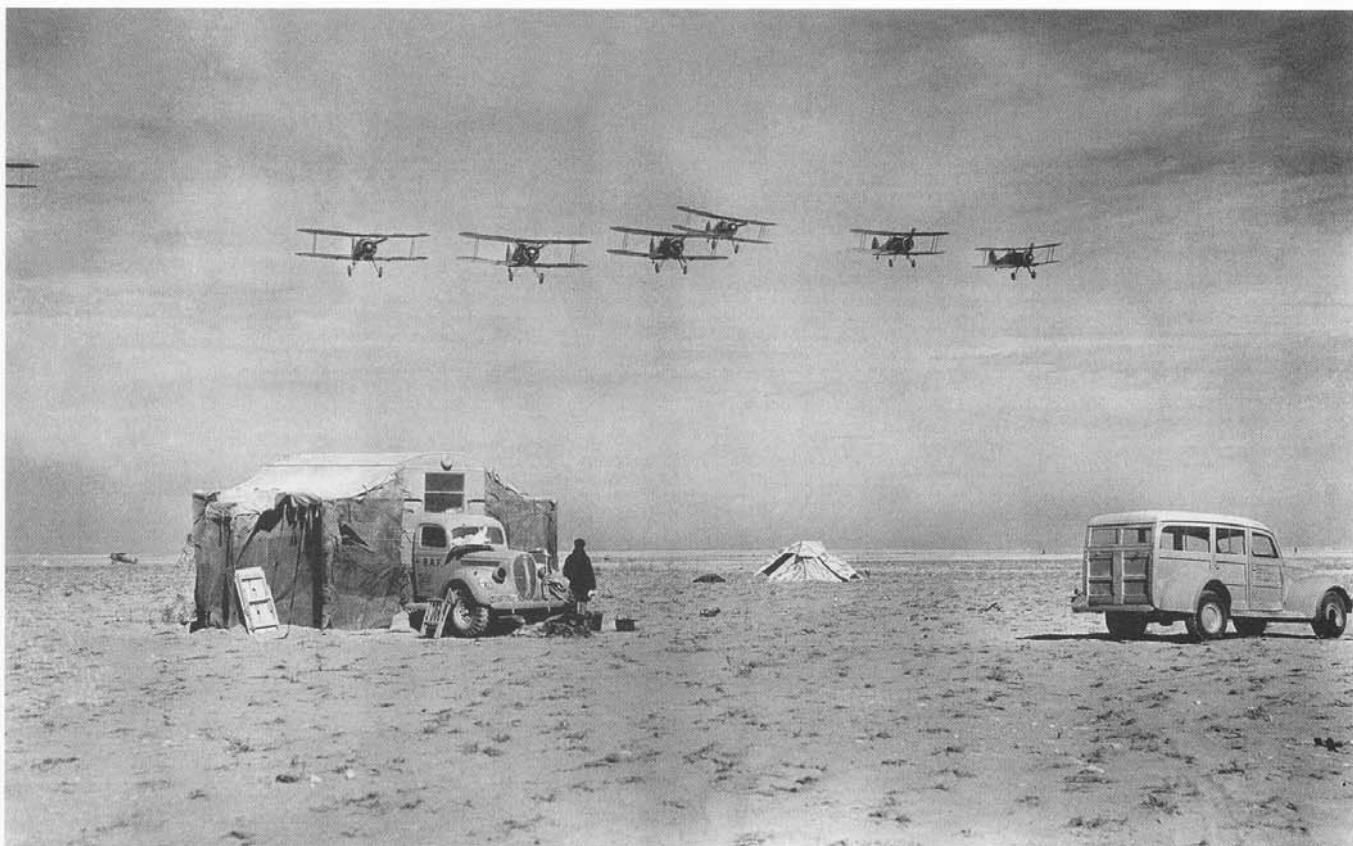


Aircraft carriers of the Mediterranean Fleet made up for the lack of airfields, but were of course very vulnerable to both submarines and land-based enemy aircraft flying from Italy, Sicily, etc. (IWM – A 15961)

regain it. In addition they would at all costs protect Malta, even if they lost other important bases such as Crete. Malta remained the lynchpin at this end of the Mediterranean, as Gibraltar did at the other.

### THE ROYAL AIR FORCE

One should also not underestimate the part played by the RAF. It began the conflict weak and outnumbered, with mainly outdated, obsolete aircraft and a vast area to cover – in total Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore's 'parish' encompassed four and a half million square miles and to protect this area he had just twenty-nine squadrons, a total of some three hundred aircraft, half of which were based in Egypt, with the rest spread between Palestine, the Sudan, Kenya, Aden and Gibraltar! Nevertheless, they would more than hold their own until the Luftwaffe appeared on the scene, their skill and determination overcoming the Italian Air Force, which had 140 modern bombers and 101 modern fighters stationed in North Africa alone, and ample opportunity to reinforce from mainland Italy.



### ‘A PERFECT PLACE FOR WAR’

It might be supposed that the vast desert wastes of North Africa were a ‘perfect place for war’, without the encumbrances of a civil population or large conurbations to get in the way. Although this was perfectly true, the harsh living conditions of climate and terrain, and the shortages of life-giving water and other essentials made it an unbelievably difficult place to wage war, and battles were dictated to a great degree by supply considerations. One side or the other would advance until it had reached the limit of its tenuous supply lines, then it would be forced to halt and go on to the defensive until it had built up its strength, or had been forced ignominiously to withdraw, often with great loss of men and materiel. Some hated the desert and never came to

A patrol of Gloster Gladiator fighters returning to their desert airstrip. The Gladiator carried the major fighter workload in the early days of the war in the Middle East. (IWM – CM 354)



War Imminent! 1 RTC on manoeuvres near Cairo in January 1939. (Author's Collection)



These light tank crewmen are suitably dressed against the bitter early morning desert chill in the winter of 1940, as they have a breakfast 'brew'. (IWM – 1501)

terms with its harshness; others loved it from the outset and were able to use it to the best advantage. All were touched in some way by it, and I am reminded of some words written by the great desert explorer Wilfred Thesiger, in his prologue to *Arabian Sands*: 'No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand that marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell no temperate clime can match.'

This book will rely very heavily on visual images to tell the story of the campaigns that took place in North Africa between September 1940, when the Italians invaded Egypt, and 12 May 1943 when Panzerarmee Afrika surrendered in Tunisia. By then the troops on both sides had earned a formidable reputation as hard yet chivalrous desert fighters, with now world-famous generals such as Montgomery and Rommel coming to the fore in the bitter hard-fought struggle that raged back and forth across the desert sands. Space does not allow me to write a detailed account of every battle, but I hope that the combination of text and photograph will serve to whet the appetites of those who are reading about the Desert War for the very first time.

Floreat Jerboa! Heia Safari!

George Forty  
Bryantspuddle, 1 October 2002

# ONE

## THE ITALIAN EPISODE

### MUSSOLINI SPEAKS

'If we have decided to face the risks and sacrifices of war, it is because the honour and interest requires it of us.' It was at 7pm on 10 June 1940 that the citizens of Rome dutifully listened to their self-styled 'Duce' making another of his bombastic speeches. In it he declared war on Great Britain and France, but was careful to promise that he would respect his neighbours – Switzerland, Greece, Turkey and Egypt, although he did add, rather ominously, that the strict application of these words depended upon them. Those close to Mussolini knew that he had been trying for days to decide what he should do, whether to remain neutral, to throw his lot in with Germany or, highly unlikely, to come in on the side of the Allies as Italy had done in the First World War. Eventually, not wishing to lose the chance of suitable 'spoils of war' he opted for the Axis camp. Having declared war, however, the Italians waited for a further ten days before launching their attack on France, invading the Alpine front and the Côte d'Azur, with some thirty divisions. The French were hopelessly outnumbered everywhere, but nevertheless still managed to make a fight of it and at one stage just one NCO and seven men held up the entire Italian invasion force at Menton!

The Egyptians were extremely worried, especially because of the presence of a large Italian army just over their border in Libya, while there were plenty of Italians living within the borders of Egypt. These had included the pompous Italian envoy HE Nobile Serafine dei Conti Mazzolini, who was well known for his views about the: 'Glorious



Mussolini speaks to the Italian people. Like Adolf Hitler, Il Duce was a gifted orator, actor and exhibitionist and could effortlessly change his manner to suit the occasion. (IWM – FLM 1506)



'This way to Mersa Matruh, Alexandria and the Suez Canal.' A stylised M11/39 Italian tank starts off on a mission which it fortunately never completed. (Author's Collection)

Imperial Destiny of Italy in Africa', and habitually wore the haughty air of a prospective Viceroy'. When he was sent packing on the 11th, Mazzolini left behind his car and his entire wardrobe, saying with a knowing look: 'We shall be back in a fortnight!'<sup>1</sup>

### OPPOSING FORCES

On 10 June 1940 there were two massive Italian armies in Libya – the 5th and the 10th, the former on the western frontier with Tunisia, covering against possible hostile action from French North Africa, whilst the latter was in the east opposite Egypt. The combined total of both armies was a staggering 221,530 Italian and colonial troops, all of which were available for operations against Egypt once the French had surrendered. The fighting ability of the majority of these troops was, to put it bluntly, suspect, and very few of them shared their Duce's supposed taste for combat – he had once told the Italian Crown Princess that war was 'the only truly beautiful action that made life worth living'. In charge of the repressive government in Cyrenaica and in command of the Italian forces in North Africa was the brutal, cowardly and inept Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, 'The Butcher of the Desert', who was eventually brought to trial by the Italian government after the war and sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment. They were short of modern equipment and supporting arms, but still represented a significant threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal, especially having received from their bellicose leader their marching orders to start advancing – although those on the ground sensibly tried every way they could to stay where they were!

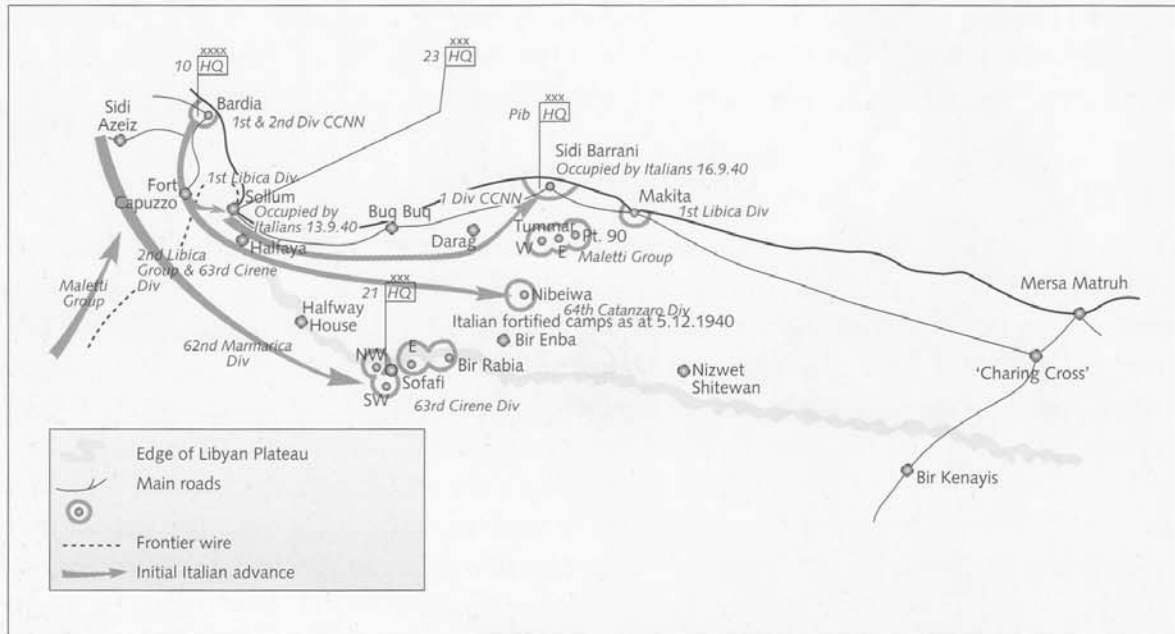
Opposing them was a mere handful of British and Commonwealth troops – 36,000 troops in Egypt and a further fourteen infantry battalions scattered about in the rest of the Middle East. Although there was a general shortage of guns, tanks, ammunition and transport, they were among the finest troops Britain had ever assembled and their battlefield prowess would soon prove to be unbeatable. C-in-C Middle East was General Sir Archibald Wavell, a soldier with a vast wealth of experience in both the Boer War and the First World War; 'The Chief', as he was called, was a brilliant commander although he was noted for his general inarticulacy. Under him was the GOC Troops in Egypt, Lt Gen Sir Henry Maitland 'Jumbo' Wilson, although the focus of operations would be the GOC Western Desert Force, Lt Gen



'The Chief', as the initial C-in-C Middle East was known by his staff. Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell at his desk. (IWM – TR 841)

1. John Lugol, *Egypt and World War II*.



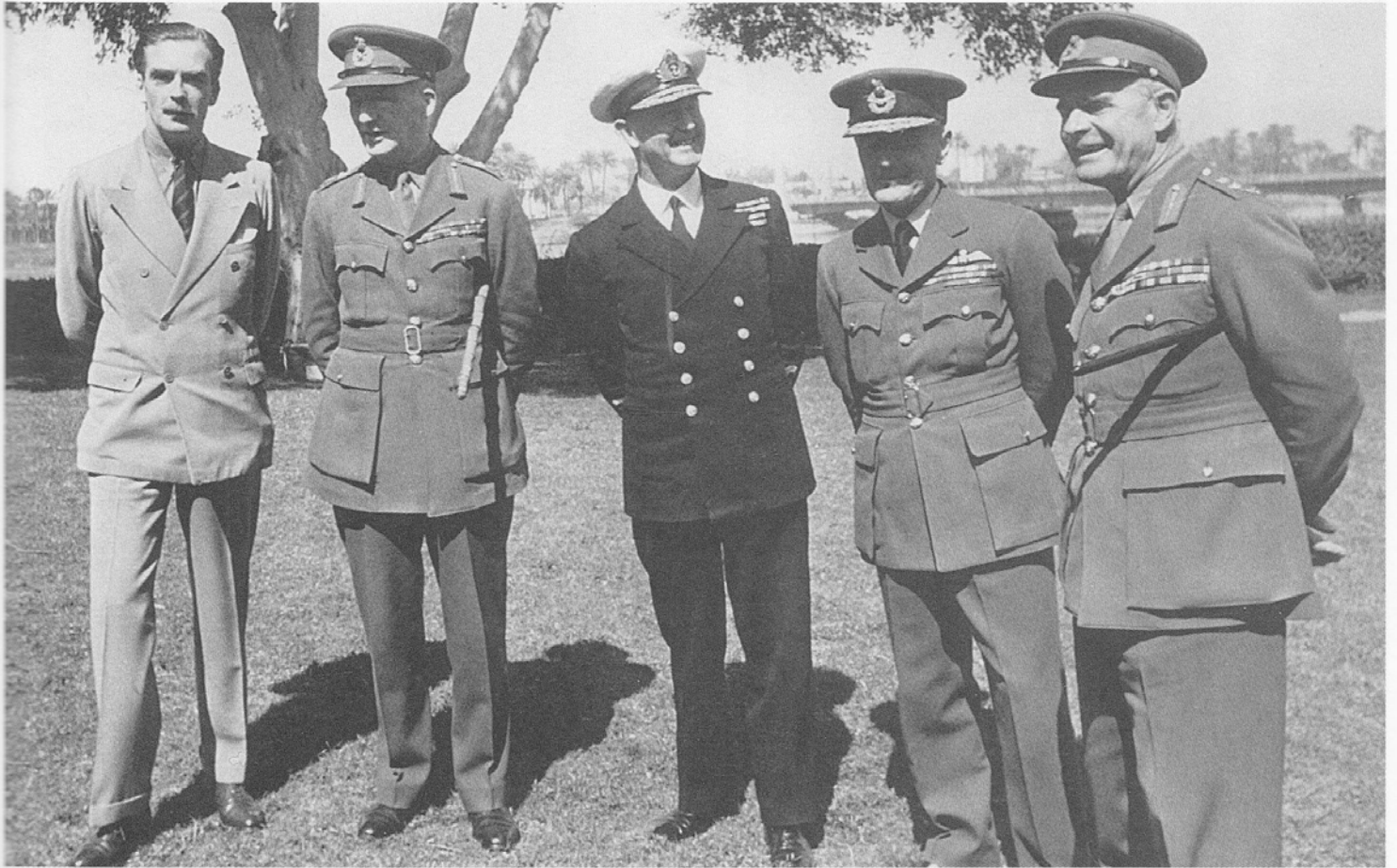


The Italian advance into Egypt, 13–20 September 1940

Richard O'Connor. Small of stature, yet lion-hearted, this remarkable officer had won a DSO and Bar, an MC, nine Mentions in Dispatches and even the Italian Silver Medal for Valour in the First World War. Intelligent and highly professional, yet with an almost shy manner, he inspired trust and confidence in subordinates and superiors alike. As we shall see, he would be the prime mover in the planning and execution of the operation which started as 'Wavell's Five-Day Raid' and developed into a major offensive with spectacular results.

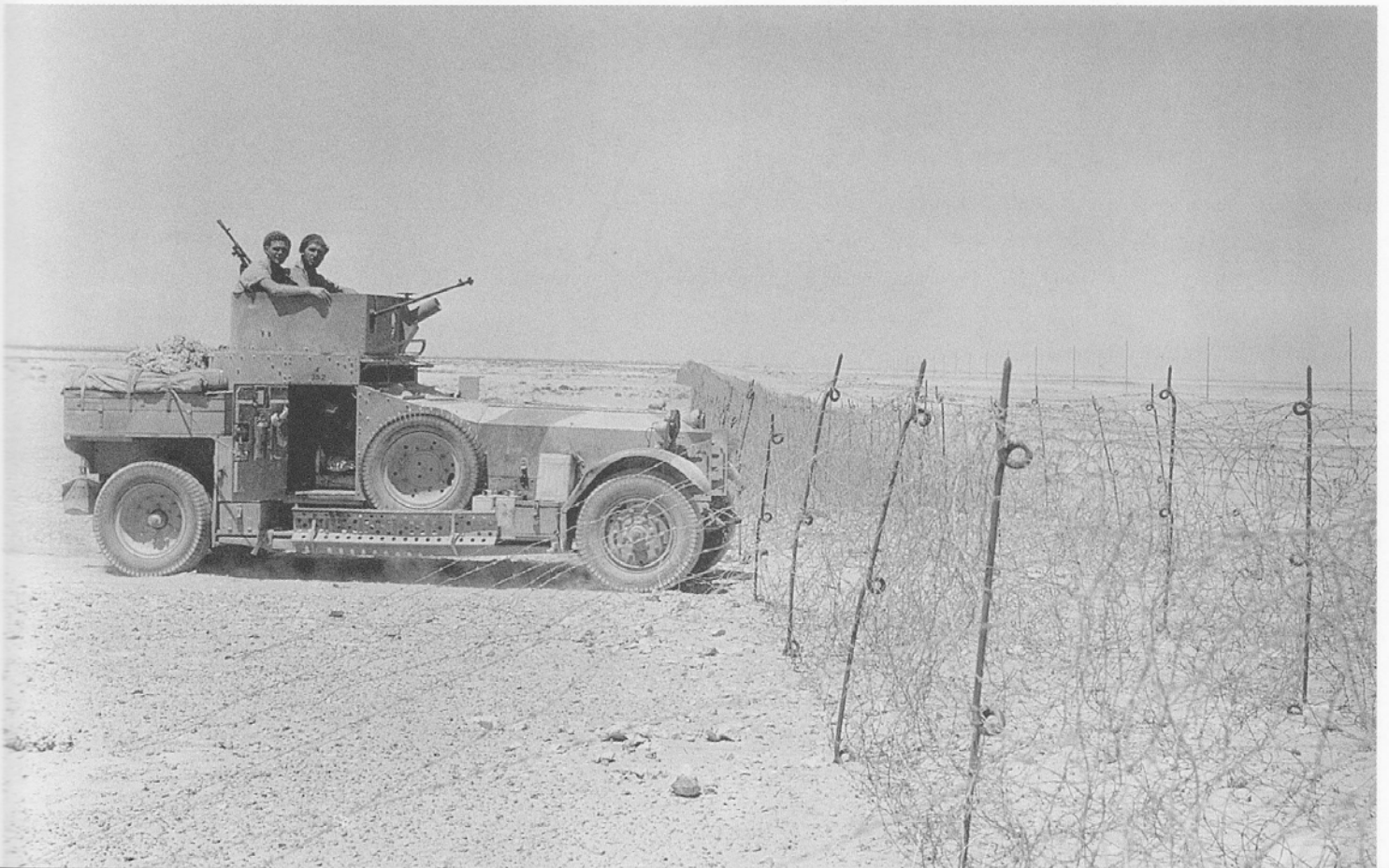
## EARLY OPERATIONS

As soon as the Italians had declared war the light British forces – mainly armoured cars – swiftly began to patrol the frontier, known as 'The Wire'. Patrols were sent out to cut telephone lines, set up ambushes, harass the Italians and obtain as much information as possible. They took possession, temporarily, of Italian desert forts such as Fort Capuzzo and Fort Maddalena and generally made a nuisance of themselves, setting the pattern for an aggressive period of patrolling which gave the Italians little respite. All the time Mussolini was urging his generals to advance and eventually on 7 September he issued his final warning that the advance *must* begin in two days time – or else! Five days later early on the 13th, the attack began with a tremendous artillery barrage on to the deserted village of Musaid, which was then occupied. The process was repeated with the equally empty village of Sollum, watched by a single British infantry battalion – 3 Coldstream Guards – plus a battery of guns, some MMGs, a French motor marine company and the ever-present armoured cars of the



British 'Top Brass' in the Middle East. From left to right: Anthony Eden (Foreign Secretary); Gen Sir John Dill (CIGS); Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham; Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore; and Gen Sir Archibald Wavell. Eden and Dill were visiting Cairo. (IWM - E 378)

British armoured car patrols often went through the frontier wire to harass the Italians. This 11th Hussars Rolls-Royce at 'The Wire' is the old 1924 pattern which has been modernised by fitting an open-topped turret complete with Boys anti-tank rifle. (IWM - E 378)





The fort at Sidi Barrani. It follows very closely the style of the desert forts built when the Italians entered Egypt, although Sidi Barrani fort was in existence before the Italian advance. (Maggiore Dell'Esercito)

Smoke and dust clouds form a dramatic backdrop to this Matilda Mk II belonging to the Commanding Officer of 4 RTR and the heavy utility staff car pulled up alongside. (Author's Collection)



ubiquitous 11th Hussars. Harassed by this tiny force, the Italians moved ponderously forward, reaching Sidi Barrani on 16 September, an event heralded proudly by Italian radio stations. And there they remained, having covered some 60 miles for the loss of 3,500 casualties – the British lost just 160. The next step was to construct a series of fortified camps, eight in total: Maktala and Sidi Barrani on the coast; Tummar West, Tummar East and Point 90 to the south of Sidi Barrani; Nibeiba to the south of the Tummars; and Sofafi and Rabia to the south-west of Nibeiba. These camps were well constructed and heavily fortified with mines and wire *et al.*, and the large garrisons lived an almost captive life, never venturing outside unless they had to, and keeping well away from the nasty British!

#### PLANNING THE OFFENSIVE

Mussolini was highly delighted with the Italian advance, taking all the credit for winning for Italy, ‘the glory she had been vainly seeking for three centuries’, and commenting that he was sorry that the war would soon be over before he had a chance of winning further victories. What he and his generals did not know was that ‘The Chief’ and the ‘Little White Terrier’ – as the Italians had called O’Connor in the First World War – were busy planning a riposte. It was to be in four stages: the recapture of Sidi Barrani; the build-up of sufficient forces on the frontier; the occupation of Bardia and the Jarabub Oasis at the southern end of the frontier; the capture of Tobruk. If everything went well they would then move on to take Derna, but that was looking too far ahead. To complete the first three stages Wavell reckoned that he would need two armoured divisions, a brigade of ‘I’ tanks<sup>2</sup> and two mobile divisions, well gunned and with air support including dive-



Mussolini points the way forward for his attacking aircraft and soldiers, with mechanised forces well to the fore. This propaganda poster was ‘liberated’ from Giarabub, an oasis on the edge of the great sand sea, 150 miles from Bardia. (Author’s Collection)

2. Foremost of the British ‘I’ (Infantry) tanks was the Matilda Mark II, a 26.5 tonner, with a crew of four, a maximum speed of just 15mph and a two-pounder main armament, but with armour up to 78mm thick, making it practically impervious to Italian tank guns. It would earn the title ‘Queen of the Desert’.

### Order of Battle for Operation Compass

HQ Western Desert Force<sup>a</sup>

#### Corps Troops

7th Royal Tank Regt – Matilda Mk II infantry (I) tanks  
 1st Royal Horse Artillery – 25 pdrs  
 3rd Royal Horse Artillery – (less two batteries) – 2 pdr anti-tank guns  
 104th Royal Horse Artillery – 25 pdrs  
 51st Field Regt, RA – 25 pdrs  
 7th Medium Regt, RA – 6 inch howitzers and 6 inch guns  
 64th Medium Regt, RA – 4.5 inch guns

#### 7th Armoured Division

4th Armoured Bde – 7th Hussars, 2nd RTR and 6th RTR  
 7th Armoured Bde – 3rd Hussars, 8th Hussars and 1st RTR  
 Support Group – 1st KRRC and 2nd RB  
 Div Troops – 11th Hussars, 'M' Bty 3rd RHA, 2nd Fd Sqn, RE and 141st Fd Pk Sqn, RE  
 Admin Units – 5, 58, 65 and 550 Coys RASC, 4th NZ Reserve MT Coy, 1st Supply  
 Issue Sect, RIASC, 2/3rd and 3/3rd Cavalry Fd Amb

#### 4th Indian Division<sup>b</sup>

5th Indian Infantry Bde – 1st RF, 3/1st Punjab Regt and 4/6th Rajputana Rifles  
 11th Indian Infantry Bde – 2nd Cameron Highlanders, 1/6th Rajputana Rifles and  
 4/7th Rajput Regt  
 16th British Infantry Bde – 1st Queen's, 2nd Leicesters and 1st A and SH,  
 Div Troops – Central India Horse, bty 3rd RHA, 1st, 25th and 31st Fd Regt RA, 1st RNF  
 (MG Bn), 4th, 12th, 18th and 21st Field Coys and 11th Fd Park Coy  
 Admin Units – 4th Indian Div Troops Tpt Coy RIASC, 5th, 7th and 11th Indian Inf Bde  
 Tpt Coys RIASC, 14th, 17th and 19th Indian Fd Amb

#### Mersa Matruh Garrison

3rd Coldstream  
 1st South Staffs  
 1st DLI  
 1st Lt AA Bty, RA  
 A Coy, 1st Bn Cheshires

- a. The total strength of O'Connor's force during the entire operation was never more than 32,000 men.
- b. Later in the operation, 4th Indian Div was replaced by 6th Australian Div which was composed of:

HQ 6th Australian Div  
 16th Australian Infantry Bde – 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/3rd Battalion  
 17th Australian Infantry Bde – 2/5th, 2/6th, and 2/7th Battalion  
 19th Australian Infantry Bde – 2/4th, 2/8th and 2/11th Battalion  
 Div Troops – 6th Cav Regt, 1st RNF (MG Bn) (transferred from 4th Indian Div), 2/1st,  
 2/2nd and 2/3rd Fd Regt, RAA, three Lt AA btys RAA, 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/8th Fd Coys  
 Admin Units – 2/1st and 2/2nd Fd Amb

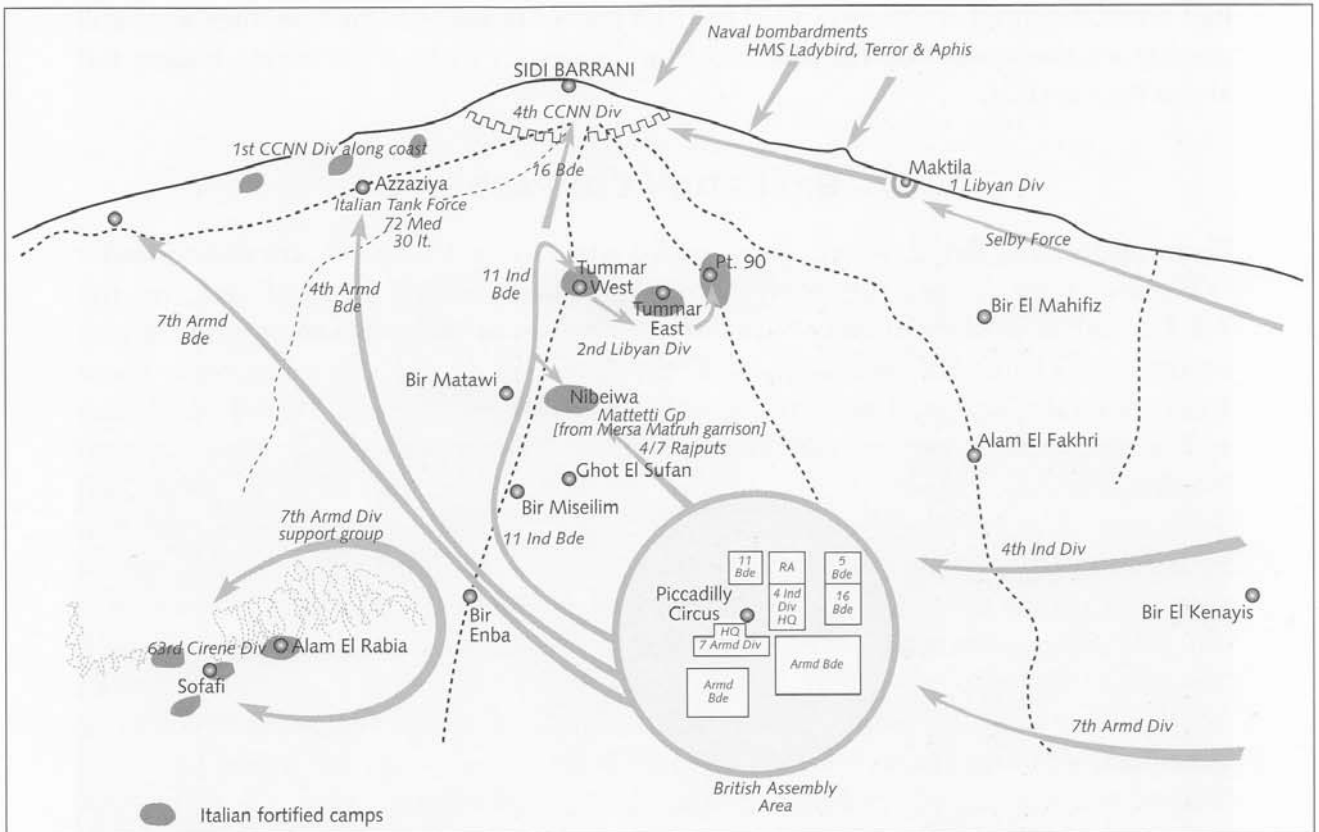
#### Italian forces

On 6th December, just three days before the attack was launched, the Italian forces manning their forward positions were known to be as follows:

Location	Major Formation/Unit	Approximate Strength
Maktila	1st Libyan Div	5,000 Libyans
Sidi Barrani	4th Blackshirt Div	15,000 Libyans
Tummar West & Tummar East	2nd Libyan Div	6,000 Libyans
Point 90	Part of 1st Libyan Div	1,000 Libyans
Nibweia	Maletti Group	2,500 Libyans
Sofafi	Part of 63rd Div	3,000 Italians
Rabia	Part of 63rd Div	7,000 Italians
Along coast from Sidi Barrani to Buq Buq	Blackshirt Div	10,000 Italians
Along the Escarpment	Remainder of 63rd Div	10,000 Italians

In total, these forces amounted to some 60,000 Italian and Libyan troops.

Source: Middle East Training Pamphlet No 10, as quoted in the Indian Official History of WW2, *The North African Campaign 1940-43*.



The capture of Sidi Barrani, 9–11 December 1940

bombers. He enjoined the planners to avoid the ‘slow ponderosity which is apt to cloak British operations’.

#### THE ‘APOLOGY’ CONVOY

One of the most important elements to ensure success was the safe arrival of this ‘fast’ convoy from the UK, carrying fifty precious Matilda Mk IIs (nearly half the available Matildas in the UK at the time). Despite the fears of a German invasion, Churchill had been prepared to risk the tanks in the Mediterranean and fortunately the convoy arrived without loss on 5 September. The tanks were manned by 7th Royal Tank Regiment, who had already fought in France and with 4 RTR had given the German armour a ‘bloody nose’ at Arras, in the process holding them up long enough for the BEF to get away at Dunkirk<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the first two rail flat cars broke in

3. Liddell Hart wrote of 4 and 7 RTR: ‘It may well be asked whether two battalions have ever had such a tremendous effect on history as the 4th and 7th RTR achieved by their action at Arras. Their effect in saving the British Army from being cut off from its escape port provides ample justification for the view that if two well-equipped armoured divisions had been available the Battle of France might also have been saved.’

half when the ship's cranes deposited the first pair of tanks over the side, they were still quickly whisked away 'Up the Blue' (ie: into the desert) without the enemy finding out about their arrival.

### OPERATION COMPASS

Planning for the 'five-day raid', now called Operation 'Compass', continued under O'Connor's guidance, the preliminary approach march being fixed for the 7/8 December. While O'Connor was able to get on with his planning unhindered, unfortunately Churchill took a great interest in everything that was going on in Cairo and continually badgered the unfortunate Wavell for information. Wavell's laid-back and at times almost too cautious and pessimistic attitude was bound to get him into trouble with the PM eventually; indeed, the CIGS (Field Marshal Sir John Dill) deliberately kept some of the messages away from Churchill in order to protect Wavell. Fortunately 'Up the Blue' there were no such problems. O'Connor had decided that, in view of the complexity and strength of the Italian defences, they would have to carry out full-scale rehearsals. Thus 'Training Exercise No. 1' was arranged for 26 November, with a follow-up 'Training Exercise No. 2' scheduled for the second week in December. No one would realise that the latter was the real assault. 'In early December, we moved to an area SW of Matruh for training with 4th Indian Division,' recalled one member of 7 RTR, 2Lt (later Colonel) Tom Craig, who told me he took part in 'set-piece attacks against mock-up Italian camps, which were laid out with tapes, hessian targets, etc, more or less as they were in reality although we knew nothing about it at the time. Then we motored on slowly westwards for three or four days and on the 5th and 6th were rested and briefed.' To the side of each troop leader's tank was fitted a fascine (a large bundle of brushwood) to enable the tanks to cross the anticipated anti-tank ditches – fortunately for Craig his fell off as he bumped across the desert – 'fortunately' because to release it required the tank to be turned broadside towards point-blank enemy fire! At the briefing they were told that the operation was to begin the following day. 'This brought us down to earth with a bang,' recalled Tom Craig, 'especially when my driver [LCpl Griffin MM] made his usual pre-battle remark, echoed by many others – "Oh, me Gawd, we'll all be dead tomorrow!"'

The opening phase of 'Compass' was designed to deal with the forts of Nibeiwa and East and West Tummar, then to advance towards Sidi Barrani and Buq Buq, to isolate the enemy at Maktila and Sidi Barrani. It would be a tri-service operation, with the Royal Navy bombarding Maktila and the RAF bombing the enemy airfields on the night before the battle started, then intercepting enemy aircraft to protect the advancing ground troops, then finally bombing the Italians during the last part of the approach march so as to cover the noise of the advancing tanks. O'Connor would control the battle from his advanced headquarters at 'Piccadilly Circus' – a home-made statue of Eros that had been set up on the top of the escarpment about 50 miles west of the Matruh–Siwa road. He kept his little HQ mobile, so that he could move



Excellent side shot of a Matilda Mk II, nicknamed the 'Queen of the Desert' in the early days. Note the white/red/white vertical bars painted prominently as a quick recognition sign in battle. The triangle on the turret denotes that the tank belongs to 'A' Squadron. (Author's Collection)

forward quickly and keep in touch with his leading troops.

Leading the assault was the 11th Brigade Group of 4th Indian Division – 2 Camerons, 1/6 Rajputana Rifles and 7 RTR, and, despite moving in complete darkness over previously unreconnoitred ground, they reached their RV without a hitch. At the same time the 4/7 Rajputs had a different task. They had moved by lorry to within 3 miles of the east of Nibeiwa, dismounted, then worked their way forward on foot. At about 0300, the enemy listening posts were encountered and the Italians opened fire along the entire eastern side of the camp. It was an incredible sight, with tracers, starshells, 'flaming footballs', flares and indiscriminate artillery fire bursting everywhere, as small parties of the Rajputs goaded the enemy into expending large quantities of ammunition – and at the same time – drowned out the noise of the tanks getting round the other side. Just as the Matildas were preparing to break into the camp their crews realised that, without their prior knowledge, some twenty-three Italian M11 tanks had moved into the gap through which they intended to assault. However, at least it showed that the area was not mined! The Matildas made short work of the enemy tanks – knocking out all of them before their crews could crawl out of their blankets. Then, led by Maj Henry Rew, pre-war Army and England rugger





A large proportion of the Italian troops in North Africa were colonial militia, who were generally poorly armed and of doubtful quality. (Stato Maggiore Dell'Esercito)

Like the Germans, the Italians employed motor-cycle troops. These were members of the famous elite infantry, the Bersaglieri — they always wore plumes in their headgear, even in steel helmets. (Stato Maggiore Dell'Esercito)



forward, the Matildas rampaged through the camp. Some of the garrison fought bravely, including Gen Pietro Maletti, who was killed emerging from his tent, but most surrendered almost at once. 'The nearest thing to Hell I ever saw' was how one Italian doctor described the scene of carnage in the fort. By 1000 hours it was all over. Some 2–3,000 prisoners had been seized, plus large quantities of guns, ammunition, vehicles and supplies. The Italians had lived in deep dug-outs and many officers had been killed while still in their pyjamas.

Following on from this success, the force moved immediately on to Tummar West and East, then to Point 90, with much the same results – thousands of frightened enemy troops only too delighted to surrender to the handful of British and Indians. There was no retaliatory bombing that evening, probably because the enemy did not know the true situation and did not want to hit their own troops. Maktila was bombarded by the Royal Navy during the night, which proved too much for the garrison, who abandoned their positions the following day. Casualties were not all one-sided, however, the Italian artillery generally fighting bravely. Dotted all over the the desert were thirty-five of the 7 RTR Matildas, which had been stopped by enemy fire or through breakdowns. The fitters and tank crews worked on them throughout the night and by morning there were eleven fit for action. Lt Col Roy Jerram, CO 7 RTR, then led his much-depleted regiment across the plain to join 16 (British) Inf Bde to capture Sidi Barrani. The assault force was strengthened by replacing two of the battalions which had been fighting all the previous day, while the cruiser tanks of 2 RTR from 4th Armd Bde, 7th Armd Div, were attached to protect the northern flank. The attack began at 1615 hours, with the Camerons and the Rajputanas attacking from the north, while the Queen's and the Leicesters came in from the south, both attacks supported by artillery, by the remaining eleven 'I' tanks and by the 2 RTR cruisers. It was all over before dark, the almost flattened village surrendering another large number of prisoners, including the Italian corps commander, Gen Gallini, and his entire staff.



The British Western Desert Force was very much a Commonwealth formation and some of the toughest fighters were from the 4th Indian Division. (IWM – E 7266)



The Matilda Mark IIs of 7 RTR rapidly earned their reputation as 'Queens of the Desert' after their success in helping 4th Indian Division to take all the Italian forts, such as Nibeiva. Their armour was thick enough to withstand most Italian anti-tank guns. (IWM - 1207-09)

All did not go entirely 'according to plan', 7th Armd Div being unable to block the escape routes of the garrisons of Sofafi and Rabia camps, which did not please O'Connor. Nevertheless, the final count at the end of three days of battle showed that the Western Desert Force had captured 38,000 Italian and Libyan soldiers, 237 guns, 73 tanks and mountains of ammunition, stores and supplies, for the loss of just 624 killed, wounded and missing.

### A CHANGE OF DIVISIONS

On 11 January 1941 Gen O'Connor and the commander of 4th Indian Division, Maj Gen N. de la Beresford Pierse, received some disquieting news, namely that 4th Indian Division, plus all its artillery and transport, but less 16 (British) Infantry Brigade, was to be withdrawn from the battle and sent to the Sudan, their place to be taken in the desert by the 6th Australian Division. Wavell had decided upon this switch some time previously, but had told no-one, not even Churchill. The most important factor was the availability of shipping and this entirely influenced the date on which the Indians would have to leave. He did not reveal his reasoning to O'Connor until after the war, when he wrote to him, explaining about the shipping problems and how he had decided to accept any delay in pursuing the Italians caused by the divisional exchange.



The second contingent of the Australian Imperial Force arrived in Egypt in May 1940. Once acclimatised, they moved 'Up the Blue' to replace 4th Indian Division. (IWM — E 66)



A prayer before the battle. A group of Australian soldiers attend Mass at sunrise before moving up to the front line and into action during the battle for Bardia. (IWM — E 1483)

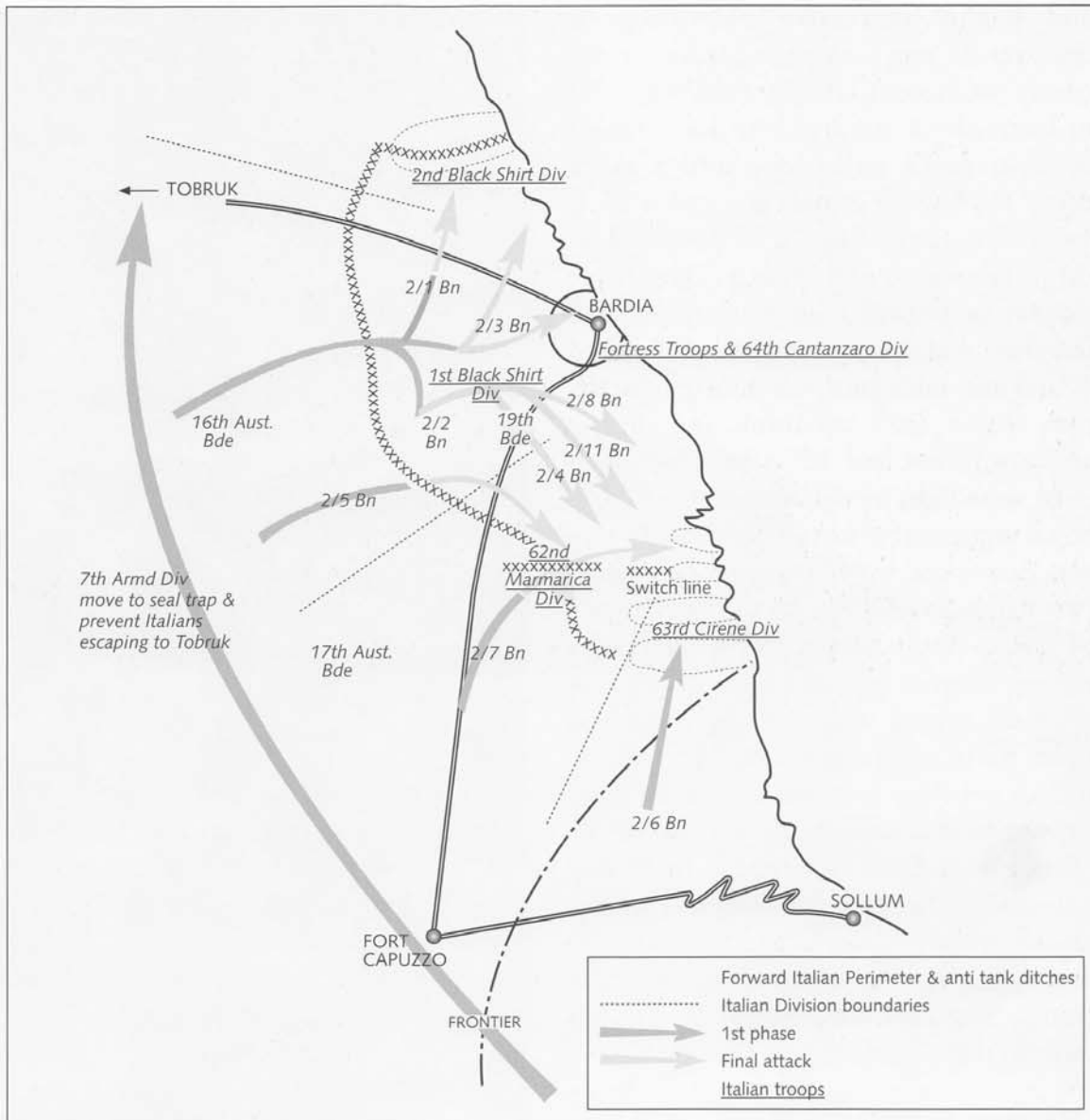


Aussies in the front pits before they advance on Bardia, 3 January 1941. This was their very first action, so it represented 'the start-line of the Australian soldier in the war'. (IWM – E 1493)

Despite the fact that only 7th Armd Div was able to continue the advance, 16 Inf Bde being far too busy dealing with thousands of prisoners, O'Connor was still determined to continue to press the Italians as hard as possible. The enemy did not make a determined stand until falling back to the Sollum–Capuzzo–Halfaya Pass area, when even their air force became more active. However, it was not for long. By the 16th the British forces had occupied Sollum, taken Fort Capuzzo and driven the Italians out of Egypt. Thus the 'five-day raid' had fulfilled all Wavell and O'Connor's expectations; the invading army had been comprehensively destroyed in a brilliant operation which had gone almost like clockwork. But there would be no respite for XIII Corps – as the Western Desert Force had been renamed on 1 January. There were even greater prizes to be won and, besides, the Aussies were desperately anxious to show their prowess, so there would be no quarter given to the already demoralised Italians.

### THE CAPTURE OF BARDIA

'I have given you a difficult task, but one suited to your courage and experience as an old intrepid soldier; the task of defending the fortress of Bardia to the last. I am certain that "Electric Beard" and his brave soldiers will stand, at whatever the cost, faithful to the last.' So wrote Mussolini to Generale Annibale Bergonzoli, commander of the Bardia garrison, who was known by his troops as 'Barba Ellectrica' – or rather more



The capture of Bardia, 3 January 1941

irreverently as 'Old Electric Whiskers' by the British! 'Barba Ellectrica' replied: 'I am aware of the honour and have repeated to my troops your message. In Bardia we are and here we will stay.' How prophetic his words turned out to be!

The first Australian troops began to move up to the battle area on 16 December. Young, tough and 'raring to go', their youthful enthusiasm was, however, tempered by their divisional, brigade and most of their unit commanders, who were experienced officers from the First World War – a perfect mixture and truly a force that could perform miracles! Despite a bitterly cold wind and a hard stony desert which made digging in a nightmare, the Aussies swiftly took over from the withdrawing Indians

and began aggressive patrolling to discover as much as possible about the enemy positions. Certainly there was a lot to learn about Bardia, with its defences being over 11 miles long and 5 miles deep. There were minefields, and a 15 ft wide anti-tank ditch which varied in depth between 6 and 10 feet. There were masses of concrete emplacements and trenches, with quantities of carefully sited 47mm anti-tank guns, machine-gun nests, plus some 300 medium and heavy artillery pieces and 127 tanks, although most were light models. Bardia seemed to be an impregnable fortress, especially as it was garrisoned by 45,000 men, including two Blackshirt divisions and the elements of three more, plus fortress garrison troops, frontier guards and so on. In the southern area a strong 'switch' line had been built where the majority of the Italian artillery was located (see map). The nearest relief forces were some 75 miles away in Tobruk, where there was believed to be a garrison of another 16,000 troops. It would be a tough nut to crack, especially as only twenty-five Matilda Mk IIs were fit for battle and most of these needed some repairs.

#### *OUTLINE PLAN*

In Phase 1, 16 Australian Infantry Brigade, supported by the Matilda Mk IIs of 7 RTR, the light tanks and carriers of A Sqn, 6 Australian Cavalry and the medium machine-guns of one company of the Northumberland Fusiliers, would assault the western perimeter at 0600 on 3 January, while 17 Aus Inf Bde carried out vigorous patrolling to the south, to attract the enemy's attention and draw him away from the western front. At the same time 7 Armd Div would make a feint against the northern sector and prevent any enemy from relieving Bardia from Tobruk. The Royal Navy would carry out preliminary bombardments and the RAF would bomb sectors of the defences. In Phase 2, 17 Aus Inf Bde would resume the assault at 1130 hours on the same day, with 7 RTR and A Sqn 6 Aus Cav (less one troop) against the southern sector.





A desert casualty. This Matilda Mk II has had a track broken by enemy fire. Part of it is laid out in front of the tank which has some lumps of stone underneath to raise it off the ground. Behind is what appears to be a German heavy 4x4 cross-country car, which tends to suggest that the tank was captured while repairs were in progress. (Author's Collection)

The troops were in great heart and soon after 0400 hours the leading battalion began silently to make their way to the white-taped start line just 1,000 yards from the enemy forward positions. Then at 0530 hours the barrage commenced, lifting just 25 minutes later as the first wave reached the enemy wire. Engineers hurried forward to blow gaps in the wire with 12ft-long Bangalore torpedoes, while other sappers worked at the edges of the anti-tank ditch, trying to break it down so that the tanks would be



able to get across. After some hesitation the Italian artillery began to engage targets and was joined by the machine-guns of the forward posts. But there was no stopping the Aussies. The row of defensive posts immediately behind the wire proved ineffective and were quickly taken, their dazed occupants surrendering without much of a fight. Now the Matildas were pouring through, supporting the follow-up companies, and, although many of the Italian artillery crews fought to the bitter end, the assault generally went like clockwork and soon a deep wedge had been driven into the Italian positions. The Matildas had taken a hammering – for example, they counted forty-six direct hits on Tom Craig's tank before he was badly wounded and evacuated – but the first phase was soon over. The second phase was less spectacular in its immediate results. They reached the 'switch line' but were then pinned down by heavy artillery fire in some of the fiercest fighting of the day, so that by last light, although the western defences had been breached in many places and the leading Australian patrols were within sight of Bardia town itself, the situation in the south was still confused. The two brigades spent the night consolidating and sorting themselves out, while 19 Inf Bde moved up in close support.

Next morning the situation was much better. 16 Bde continued the advance and soon reached the coast both north and south of the town, where the garrison had started to surrender in droves – in fact there was soon a mile-long column of prisoners streaming back behind the British lines! It was led by dapper, shaven and scented Italian officers, wearing swords, pith helmets or 'Mussolini caps', and knee boots, guarded by a handful of weary, dusty, unwashed Australians. A typical guard was a member of 4 RMT: 'he wasn't carrying a rifle but had an unsheathed bayonet, with which he occasionally flicked the tops of the camel-thorn bushes. "Everything OK Aussie?" I asked. The Australian spat. "I joined the army", he drawled, "because I was tired of my old job and wanted a change, but here I am bloody droving again!"'<sup>4</sup>

By the end of the second day it was all over. The Aussies had done well and O'Connor was delighted. He was particularly struck by the excellence of the GOC, Maj Gen Iven Mackay and his staff, while the battered old 'I' tanks had once again proved themselves 'Queens of the Desert'. With their help, plus the artillery and MMGs, the Australians had won a remarkable victory, capturing a seemingly impregnable fortress, taking over 40,000 prisoners and killing another thousand or so, all for the loss of 130 men killed and 326 wounded. Bergonzoli's men certainly stayed in Tobruk, although not quite as Mussolini had wished – but 'Old Electric Whiskers' managed to escape instead of staying to the bitter end. 'Five generals are prisoners and one is dead,' exclaimed Il Duce to Count Ciano. 'This is the percentage of Italians who have military characteristics. In the future we shall select an army of professionals, from the 12 to 13 million Italians in the valley of the Po and in part of central Italy. All the others will be put to work to make arms for the warrior aristocracy.'

And there was worse still to come.

4. As quoted in George Forty, *Desert Rats at War*, vol. 1.

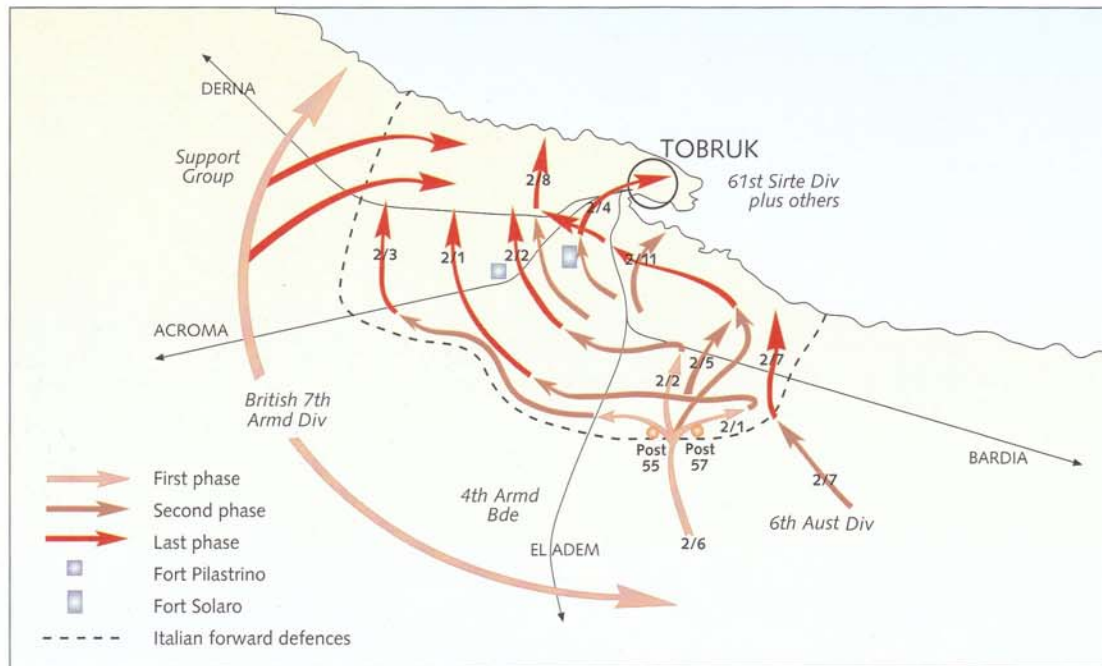


Pounding Tobruk. A British 25-pdr about to fire at the start of the assault on Tobruk, 21 January 1941. The 25-pdr was widely used throughout the Second World War and afterwards. It had a range of some 12,000 yards. (IWM – E1795)

### TOBRUK AND ON TO DERNA

‘Salutations and congratulations upon the victory of Bardia! If I may debase a golden phrase: “never has so much been surrendered by so many to so few.”’ That was how Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden celebrated the victory. However, despite O’Connor’s tiny force having taken over 100,000 prisoners since 9 December and him still being: ‘. . . bristling with energy and crisp decision’, there were other factors which would materially affect forward progress. Principally, of course there was the need to help Greece. ‘I cannot look beyond Benghazi at the present time’, Churchill told the Chiefs of Staff Committee, ‘and if Tobruk is taken there will be very few Italian troops, and by no means their best, east of Benghazi.’ Four days later he confirmed Wavell’s worst fears in a signal which contained such phrases as: ‘You must now therefore conform your plans to larger interests at stake . . . Nothing must hamper the capture of Tobruk, but thereafter all operations in Libya must be subordinated to aiding Greece . . . We expect and require prompt and active compliance with our decisions, for which we bear full responsibility.’

Notwithstanding this disappointing news, XIII Corps pressed on with their operations against Tobruk, where the Italians had a garrison of some 25,000 men



The capture of Tobruk, 21-22 January 1941

under Gen Pitassi Mannella, the commander of XXII Corps. Its main elements were the units of 61 Sirte Division, plus 200 artillery guns, medium and light tanks, and some 7,000 garrison and depot troops. The nearest relief forces were those of XX Corps, which included 60 Sabratha Div at Derna, newly arrived from Tripoli and an armoured brigade under Gen Babini near Mechili. There were two main routes to Tobruk from Bardia – one along the coast and the other running parallel to it some 10 miles inland (joining Fort Capuzzo to El Adem airfield). O'Connor's plan was for 7 Armd Div to advance along the Capuzzo track, while 6 Aus Inf Div used the coast road. Even before Bardia had surrendered the leading elements of the armoured brigades were moving westwards, followed shortly by 19 Aus Bde Gp. By 9 January the entire 30-mile defensive perimeter was surrounded, with two armoured brigades to the south, south-west and west, while 7th Armd Bde's Support Group had moved to cut the coast road. Enemy defences were on a par with those at Bardia, with a semi-circle of concrete posts, barbed wire over 5ft high and a partly completed anti-tank ditch. In the harbour was the cruiser *San Giorgio*, aground but still able to fire its guns in support.

O'Connor's overall plan was much the same as at Bardia. 7 Armd Div would distract the enemy along the perimeter, while the Australians broke through in the south-east, on a narrow (800 yard) front. The attack was fixed for 0540 on 21 January, the delay between 15 and 19 January having been caused by dust storms. 16 Aus Bde would make the initial assault, while 17 Bde carried out a 'demonstration



Infantry in front of Tobruk waiting to advance into the burning dock area of the town. (IWM – BM 1496)

British howitzers softening up Derna, before the infantry and tanks attack. (IWM – E 1831)





An artillery Forward Observation Officer (FOO) uses a convenient shell-hole to direct the fire of his field batteries on to Derna. (IWM – E 1851)

by fire' in the east to confuse the defenders. Once the breach was made, 19 Bde would then deepen the penetration, supported by the divisional cavalry squadron.<sup>5</sup> As in previous attacks, the enemy positions were raided by the RAF and shelled by the Royal Navy prior to the assault, which began on time in perfect weather conditions, the initial posts being quickly captured. One of the main problems was to find a way through for the twelve remaining Matildas, which once again had a major effect upon the battle. By midday it was all over. Tobruk had been captured, together with 25,000 prisoners, 208 guns and 87 tanks. XIII Corps had lost just 400 men. Fortunately the harbour had not been badly damaged and two days later was ready to receive the first supply ships. Spoils of war included 10,000 tons of water, 4,000 tons of coal and a power station. As before, there was no respite for the victors, and on the 22nd the British armour pushed on towards Mechili to take on the Italian armour, while the Aussies continued along the coast road with the aim of capturing Derna. Once both had been taken then a 'pincer movement' would be mounted against Benghazi. However, once it was realised that the enemy was bent upon a complete withdrawal from Cyrenaica, an even more daring plan was forged – to destroy the enemy army.

### THE DESTRUCTION OF AN ARMY

O'Connor's daring plan was to send a major part of his armour across uncharted desert to cut off the Italians, while the infantry pressed on along the coast, eventually taking Benghazi. When Brig 'Chink' Dorman-Smith, who had flown back to Cairo as O'Connor's personal representative, explained the plan, all expression drained from Wavell's countenance. He doodled with his pencils for a while, then he observed: 'Yes,

5. The squadron was now partially re-equipped with sixteen captured Italian medium (M11 and M13) tanks, which had large white kangaroos painted on them to prevent them being engaged by friendly forces!



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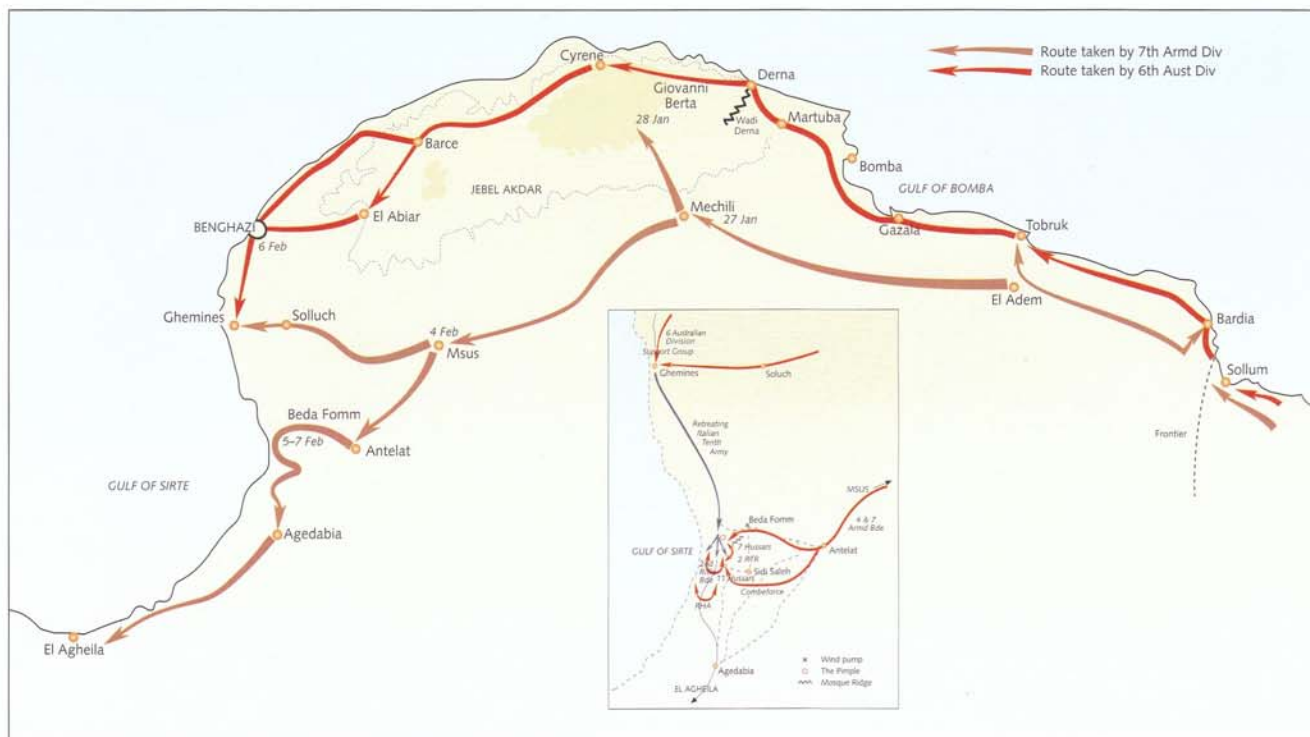
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Italian prisoners herded together inside Derna fort after its fall on 30 January 1941. Vast numbers of Italians were taken prisoner in the short campaign. (IWM — E 1841)



Australian soldiers looking at Il Duce's propaganda poster in Derna. (Remember the same poster on the wall in pre-war Tripoli? See page 2.) (IWM — E 1871)



The advance to Benghazi and beyond, 12 December 1940 to 8 February 1941. Inset: The Battle of Bada Fomm/Sidi Saleh 5-7 February 1941

Eric, I see.' Finally he looked up. 'Tell Dick he can go on,' he said, 'and wish him luck from me. He has done well.'

Dorman-Smith arrived back on 2 February at O'Connor's tactical HQ, which had now moved to Mechili. That day the Aussies reached Giovanni Berta in the Jebel Akhdar and found that the Italians had simply melted away. Graziani had decided it was time to move out with all possible speed, so O'Connor needed to move fast. 7 Armd Div was therefore sent directly across the desert, from Mechili to the Gulf of Sirte, via Msus and Antelat, to set up a blocking position in the area of Bada Fomm/Sidi Saleh, well below Benghazi. At the same time the Australians would continue to follow the enemy along the coastal road via Barce and Benghazi, keeping them moving and thinking that this was still the main thrust.

Now the cruiser tanks – the A 9, A 10 and A 13s – would come into their own. Despite shortages of petrol, which limited the number of tanks that could be sent (cramped with ammunition as they did not know when they would be resupplied), they set off across the rough uncharted desert over a mixture of sand, stones and loose slab rock. It was a nightmare journey, by noon the following day the advance guard, under command of Lt Col John Combe, CO 11H, had arrived at Sidi Saleh and taken up position astride the coast road. First contact came at 1430 hours when the head of a large convoy appeared on the road – some 20,000 men with tanks and guns, ten times the size of 'Combe Force' with its 2,000 men and twenty guns. The tanks of 4th Armd



A group of British cruisers and light tanks, all with very prominent white/red/white recognition bands. The light tanks are Vickers Light Mk VI and the cruisers (A13 Mk IIs). Both tanks were fast, but thinly armoured and undergunned. (Author's Collection)

Bde were not expected to arrive for at least three hours. Nevertheless the tiny blocking force was determined to stand and fight. As the Rifle Brigade's historian put it: 'The enemy were the leading elements of an army which was making its way out of Tripolitania, all unconscious that its way was blocked. The infantry never really knew what hit them. It was a feature of the battle that the Italians never caught up with what was happening. They had imagined the British were some 150 miles away. Now that their way of escape was closed, they simply piled up on the roadblock . . . and delivered a series of uncoordinated attacks straight down the road.' Just as things were getting a little stretched for the gallant British force, the leading tanks of 4th Armd Bde hove into view over the horizon, taking up fire positions in the Beda Fomm area. From then on the outcome was never in doubt. One of 2 RTR's gunners, for example, told me how he alone had knocked out nineteen tanks that day (the regimental total was 79!).

Everywhere on the battlefield the Italians began surrendering: '150 surrendered to Cpl Ashbrooke, who was armed only with a jammed Bren Gun,' records the KDG history, 'then a further 40 Italian officers gave themselves up to Lt Taylor'. Gen Bergonzoli himself surrendered to Capt Tom Pearson, who was commanding 2 RB.





A column of prisoners nearing the massive walls of the Citadel of Cairo — built by Saladin with the Mohamed Ali and Sultan Hassan Mosques behind. (IWM — BM 7440)



The destruction of an army. Newly dug graves and knocked-out vehicles are a grim reminder of the Beda Fomm/Sidi Saleh battle, when the 10th Italian Army was completely defeated. (IWM – E 2047)

In all, some 25,000 officers and men, including six generals, 216 guns, 112 tanks, around 1,500 lorries and an immense quantity of stores and equipment of all kinds was taken. 15,000 Italians surrendered to 2 RB, whose casualties in the entire action were three killed and four wounded. 7 Armd Div's total casualties were just nine killed and fifteen wounded. 'Fox killed in the open' is how O'Connor began his signal to Wavell, a hunting phrase Wavell no doubt appreciated. 'One of the most daring ventures and breathless races in the annals of the British Army' is how historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart described it.

### INTO BENGHAZI AND ON TO TRIPOLI

While the final eventful day was in progress at Beda Fomm/Sidi Saleh, the Aussies were ploughing on steadily through the winter rain to Benghazi. It was soon clear that there was no organised enemy force between Cyrenaica and Tripoli, so there was seemingly no reason why the victorious troops should not press on. O'Connor sent Dorman-Smith back to Cairo and he went to see Wavell on the 12th, only to find that the maps of the desert war were gone from the C-in-C's walls. Maps of Greece hung in their place. Whether Wavell and O'Connor liked it or not, Churchill had decided to give as much assistance to Greece as he could, and their campaign in North Africa was at an end: 'You see, Eric,' said Wavell to Dorman-Smith as they stood together in his office looking at the Greek maps, 'I am planning my spring campaign.'

Things would sadly never be the same again in North Africa, because when battle recommenced there would be another 'player' and another very different army to deal with.



'We'll be back!' This stirring propaganda poster, which refers to the Italian defeat in East Africa, promises that they will return — but they didn't get anywhere for very long! (Author's Collection)

## TWO

# ENTER ROMMEL AND HIS 'AFRIKANERS'

### 'CAN YOU OBTAIN SOME MAGNIFICENT GERMAN TANKS?'

Even as early as June 1940 Air Marshal Italo Balbo, then Governor of Libya, had asked the Chief of the Italian Supreme General Staff, Marshal Badoglio, if he could get some German assistance. 'Now that the French campaign is going to end,' he wrote on 20 June, 'could you obtain from the Germans about fifty of their magnificent tanks, plus the same number of armoured cars for Libya?' Balbo was killed a few days later, his aircraft being shot down by his own AA gunners when it came into land at Tobruk. Some say it was an accident, others murder (on the orders of Mussolini, as he was greatly respected by the RAF who dropped a wreath and a note of condolence).



Two Italian Autoblinda AB 41 armoured cars on patrol in the desert. The main difference from the earlier AB 40 was the 20mm gun and coaxially mounted machine-gun in the turret in place of twin 8mm machine-guns. It was the most widely used Italian armoured car of the war. (Author's Collection)



General Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel, known by both sides as the Desert Fox. He wears a pair of 'looted' British anti-gas goggles, which were ideal for keeping the sand out of his eyes. However, they were quite flimsy, so he must have 'obtained' a fair number of pairs as they became almost a trademark. (Rommel Museum Herrlingen via Author's Collection)

Anyway, his request was never followed up, but Hitler, when he saw what a shambles the inept Italians were making in North Africa, decided of his own volition to send in German armoured forces to assist. Operation 'Sunflower' (Sonnenblume) was therefore put into action, much to the delight of one of the Wehrmacht's rising stars, Generalmajor Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel, a charismatic Swabian, who had commanded 7th Panzer Division so brilliantly during the Blitzkrieg in France. Born in 1891, and holder of the coveted Pour le Mérite, Germany's highest decoration in the First World War, he had risen to prominence between the wars as the commander of the Führerbegleitbataillon (Hitler's field HQ escort battalion), after which service Hitler had personally promoted him to major general and given him the battlefield command of 7th Panzer Division, which he had led with skill and panache throughout the campaign in France. Now Hitler promoted him again to Generalleutnant and put him in command of this new force of two divisions – one panzer and one light (leichte) – to go to the help of the Italians. Rommel had been able to let his wife into the secret by telling her that it was 'one way of him getting his rheumatism treatment', because some time previously he had been advised to take a cure in

Egypt! So began Rommel's love affair with North Africa and especially the Western Desert. Ruthless, impatient and single-minded, the 'Desert Fox' (as he was nicknamed by the British) was also a brave, decent and honourable foe, who would create such a reputation as to be hero-worshipped by friend and foe alike.

### ARRIVAL

Rommel, accompanied by his reconnaissance staff and Col (later Maj Gen) Rudolf Schmundt, Hitler's Chief Adjutant, had left Sicily by air on 12 February 1941, landing at Castel Benito airfield near Tripoli at about midday. Having reported to the Italian commander, Gen Italo Gariboldi, for an up-to-date briefing, he proceeded to put the Italian general 'into the picture' by outlining how he intended to defend Tripolitania. Gariboldi showed minimal enthusiasm for Rommel's aggressive intentions, having already been at the receiving end of Wavell and O'Connor's Operation 'Compass'! Rommel did not stay still for long and was soon airborne again, carrying out his first aerial desert recce – something that he would do a great deal in the next few days, as he

rapidly got to know the unfamiliar landscape. While airborne, he saw the leading ships of the first convoy from Italy arriving at the docks in Tripoli, so he landed, sped to the quayside and gathered all the new arrivals for an impromptu parade. It is said that he drove the small number of newly arrived armoured vehicles several times around the town, to bolster morale and give any British spies the wrong impression of his strength from the outset. Indeed, he further deliberately tried to mislead Allied air reconnaissance, by ordering one of the workshops just south of Tripoli to build a large number of dummy tanks – made out of wood, blankets and hessian – mounted on the little Volkswagen staff cars. Maj Baron von Wechmar's Reconnaissance Battalion (Aufklärungsabteilung 3 (mot)) was the first combat unit to arrive, on



Men of the Deutsches Afrikakorps resting on the dockside of an Italian port (probably Naples) before embarking. Note the anti-tank guns near the side of the ship and the SdKfz 251/7 half-track being lifted on board. (IWM – MH 5842)



Rommel watches as a PzKpfw II Ausf C light tank is unloaded in Tripoli docks. (Author's Collection)



Rommel inspecting the first contingent of the DAK to arrive, 27 February 1941. He is accompanied by Italian Generale Italo Gariboldi, who was then C-in-C North Africa. (IWM – HU 5632)

14 February, the transport ships unloading throughout the night despite the danger of enemy aircraft. This was a record for Tripoli! Next morning the troops donned their tropical uniforms, then assembled in the main square for Rommel to inspect them, followed by a march-past and parade through the town. Then it was off down the coast road to Sirte, to be held behind the Italian positions as a mobile reserve.

Rommel flew down to Sirte to visit the Italian troops there and was somewhat alarmed to discover that there was only about an infantry regiment. However, he was favourably impressed with the Italians and formally took over the front that day, sending down Maj Gen Johannes Streich (Commander 5 leichte) to represent him. Col Schmundt returned to Germany to pass on Rommel's first situation report. Hitler was pleased with Rommel's initiative, promising that 15 Pz Div would soon be on the way and saying that he had chosen a name for the new formation – Deutsches Afrikakorps (Rommel's HQ became StabDAK on 21 February 1941).

#### FIRST ACTION

On 24 February a small force of German armoured cars and motorcycles made contact with a patrol of the King's Dragoon Guards, supported by some Australian anti-tank guns. In the skirmish that followed the Germans came off best, taking an officer and two soldiers prisoner and destroying four vehicles – 'A good omen' commented Rommel in a letter to his wife Lucie. Clearly Rommel was surprised that the British were not showing more signs of activity, but of course he was unaware that his enemy had been decimated by having to send troops to Greece. And while the experienced



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A PzKpfw III Ausf G drives slowly through Tripoli. Rommel made them go round the circuit more than once, to make everyone think he had more tanks than had actually landed! (IWM – HU 5608)



He also used dummy tanks, with bodies made of wood and hessian, mounted on wheeled vehicles (such as the Volkswagen car), to fool the British into believing his tank force was much stronger than it actually was. (Author's Collection)





The Desert Fox dines. Rommel always ate sparingly, living on the same rations as his soldiers and almost always eating on the move. He had a remarkable constitution, but towards the end of his North African service was in poor health. (Author's Collection)

7th Armd Div was resting and refitting in Egypt, its place had been taken by the newly arrived and inexperienced 2nd Armd Div. In addition, the brilliant Gen O'Connor had also gone back to Egypt, his place being taken by Gen Sir Philip Neame, who had no previous experience of mechanised desert warfare. Meanwhile the Germans advanced up to the defile at Mugata on 4 March and laid a minefield to close it, while the British withdrew eastwards.

Next to arrive at the now busy port of Tripoli was Panzer Regiment 5, completing its disembarkation on 8–10 March. Some of its tanks had been destroyed in a fire at Naples while loading, but nevertheless a grand total of 155 tanks were unloaded. These comprised: 25 x PzKpfw I Ausf A, 45 x PzKpfw II, 61 x PzKpfw III, and 17 x

PzKpfw IV, plus 7 command tanks. As the tables in Appendix 2 show, the real 'punch' was provided by the larger, better armed Mk IIIs and Mk IVs, which easily outclassed the firepower of the in service British tanks. No longer would the old Matilda Mk II with its two-pounder gun be the 'Queen of the Desert'. Initially it was the Panzer III which mounted the more useful anti-tank weapon, while the larger Panzer IV was equipped with a medium support weapon, albeit of larger calibre. Nevertheless both outclassed the British firepower. Later Allied armour would be even more hopelessly outgunned by the introduction of more heavily armed German 'Specials', the basic problem being that the size of the British tanks' turret ring was just not large enough to allow for upgunning, while the German IIIs and IVs could go on and on being upgunned throughout the war, so that even when the Panther and Tiger appeared on the scene, the IIIs and IVs still remained the core strength of the panzer division. Rommel was well served by his tanks, which proved to be extremely robust and reliable, despite the inevitable problems caused by the desert conditions.

As soon as they had been unloaded, Rommel paraded them through Tripoli, then drove eastwards along the coast road to Sirte. Two days later, at the request of the Italian High Command, he sent a mixed force of Germans and Italians towards Murzuk, to protect the flank against activity from the Free French. It also gave them a good opportunity to test their vehicles and equipment in desert conditions. Soon afterwards, he moved the complete Italian Bresica Inf Div into the line at Mugata, thus freeing 5 leichte for 'mobile employment'.



Panzers roll! German armour on its way to Mersa el Brega, 31 March 1941. Rommel was in his element right in the thick of the fighting. He decided to press on to Agedabia, disregarding his orders not to attempt such a manoeuvre until the end of May. (IWM – MH 5552)

### VISITING HITLER

On 19 March Rommel flew to Hitler's HQ, to discuss the situation and receive fresh orders. He also was presented with the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross,<sup>1</sup> but that honour received personally from the hands of his Führer did not entirely cheer him up. This was because Rommel had had an argument with Feldmarschall von Brauchitsch, the Army C-in-C, about what he could and could not do in North Africa. Von Brauchitsch told Rommel that he would not be permitted to strike a significant blow against the British. His force was merely a Sperrverband (a blocking force), there to bolster up the Italians in Tripolitania and raise their morale. There would be no further reinforcements once the complete agreed DAK had arrived, and, while Rommel could attack as soon as 15 Pz Div was complete (ie: the end of May), he should only go as far as Benghazi. Of course Rommel had been thirsting to advance at El Agheila just as soon as his leading troops had arrived, especially when he realised that the British were more likely to fall back than to stand and fight.

1. Rommel had won the Knight's Cross during the Blitzkrieg in France, being decorated on 2 May 1940 by Lt Hanke (Rommel's second ADC who represented the Nazi Party) on Hitler's personal orders.



AA machine-gunners on board one of the troop transports. (Balkan Kreuz über Wüstensand (BKUW) – page 28)



On board a troop transport on the way to North Africa. (BKUW – page 32)



A convoy in progress in the Mediterranean, bound for Tripoli. (BKUW – page 33)

### ROMMEL ADVANCES

On 24 March, acting on Rommel's orders, AA3 (the reconnaissance battalion) took El Agheila with ease. Rommel then decided to press on to Mersa el Brega because it was both an ideal location from which to defend against any possible British counter-attack, and also an ideal 'jumping-off' place for an assault on Cyrenaica. 5 leichte began its advance on the British position on 31 March and there was a fierce reaction, the British cruiser tanks engaging and holding the mix of German and Italian armour. Rommel was now in his element, right up in the thick of the fighting, with just a tiny HQ comprising his ADC, Capt Hermann Aldinger, and his Chief of Staff, Lt Col von Dem Borne. They personally reconnoitred a route to the north of the coast road, outflanking the British position, and when this proved successful, MG Battalion 8 put in a 'dashing attack' through the rolling sandhills, capturing the Mersa el Brega defile. The British had to withdraw in a hurry, having to leave some thirty lorries and fifty Bren gun carriers behind, while six British cruiser tanks and three German Mk IIIs and IVs were knocked out.

Having had confirmation from air and ground recce that the British were continuing to withdraw, Rommel decided to press on and try to take Agedabia, completely disregarding his orders not to attempt such a manoeuvre until the end of May! On 2 April 5 leichte



Support from the Luftwaffe. Messerschmitt Bf 109s on standby at a forward desert airstrip, while two members of their groundcrews have a quick meal. The Me 109 single-seat fighter was widely used throughout the war. (IWM – MH 5854)

began to advance astride the Via Balbia and that afternoon not only took Agedabia but also pushed on to the Zuetina area. Rommel's plan was to divide his forces into three columns: on the left the Brescia Div led by AA3 would advance along the coast towards Benghazi; on the right part of 5 leichte plus the reconnaissance battalion of the Ariete Div would strike across to Cyrenaica via Ben Gania and Bir Tengeder, then turn northwards towards El Mechili and Derna, to cut off the British escape route; between these two prongs an armour-heavy force consisting of Pz Regt 5 plus various units of the Ariete Div and 5 leichte would make for Msus and El Mechili. Rommel, who was constantly driving his forces onwards, must have been a little surprised at the British lack of aggression, the result of Wavell's rather negative orders to Neame, saying that he must, if pressed, give up Benghazi and withdraw so as to keep his forces intact. As the German and Italian pressure increased the British forces simply disintegrated in front of them and the withdrawal became an undignified rout. Wavell probably thought he was safe because, thanks to the British having cracked the secrets of the German Enigma code machine, he knew exactly what Rommel's orders were regarding his blocking role. However, he could not read the mind of the Desert Fox!

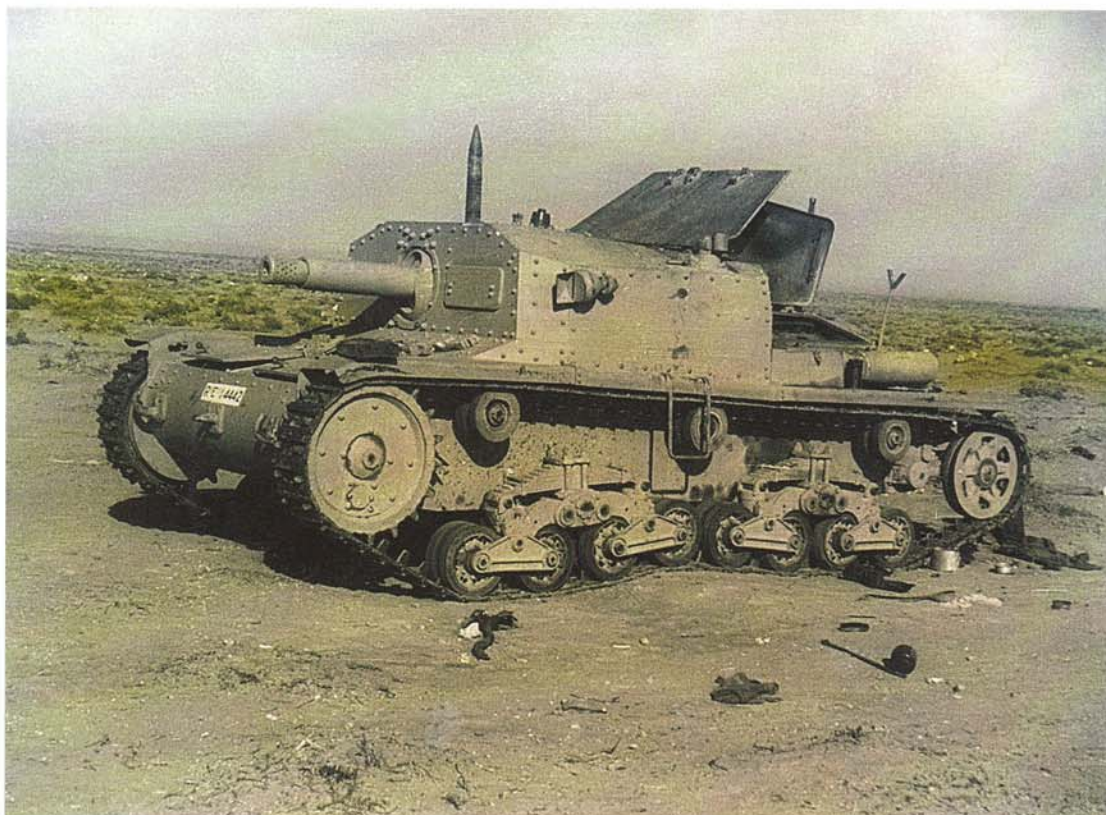
This phase of operations began on 2 April, Rommel moving forward of Agedabia the following day, maintaining constant pressure on the enemy and on his own troops. On



A battle in progress as the DAK advances. Rommel normally used his armour concentrated, so as to get the maximum 'Blitzkrieg' effect. (Author's Collection)

Rommel often took to the air in a small recon aircraft — a Fiesler Storch (Stork) — flying above his leading troops and dropping down messages to them — such as: 'There are no enemy to your front. If you do not move on at once, I shall come down. Rommel.' The wrath of their commander was far more alarming than any enemy! (IWM —HU 5635)





This Semovente 75/18, which mounted a 75mm howitzer, was the main fire support self-propelled gun for the Italian armoured divisions.  
(Author's Collection)

numerous occasions it was Rommel or one of his ADCs who found routes around obstacles. At one stage Gen Streich, Commander 5 leichte, said that he needed a four-day halt to replenish fuel and ammunition – one can imagine Rommel's reaction! He ordered them to unload all their lorries in the desert and send them back immediately to the divisional stores dump at Arco dei Fileni ('Marble Arch' to the British – a large white triumphal arch built by Mussolini on the frontier between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica), taking with them all their spare tank crews, for a 'round the clock' refuelling marathon trip. Rommel waved aside Streich's protests (just one of the many black marks against the unfortunate Streich which would later lead to him being sacked).<sup>2</sup>

Having taken Agedabia, the left-hand column then pushed on to Benghazi (4 April), then to Barce (5 April) and Derna (7 April). In the centre, the tank column captured the important fuel dumps at Msus and Mechili on 6 April and reached the coastal plain at Gazala the following day. They were now only 40 miles west of the port of Tobruk.

2. Rommel constantly urged his forces onwards, flying over them in his little Storch recon aircraft. Regularly he would be ahead of everyone else, dropping little notes to those who he considered were perhaps a little too slow.

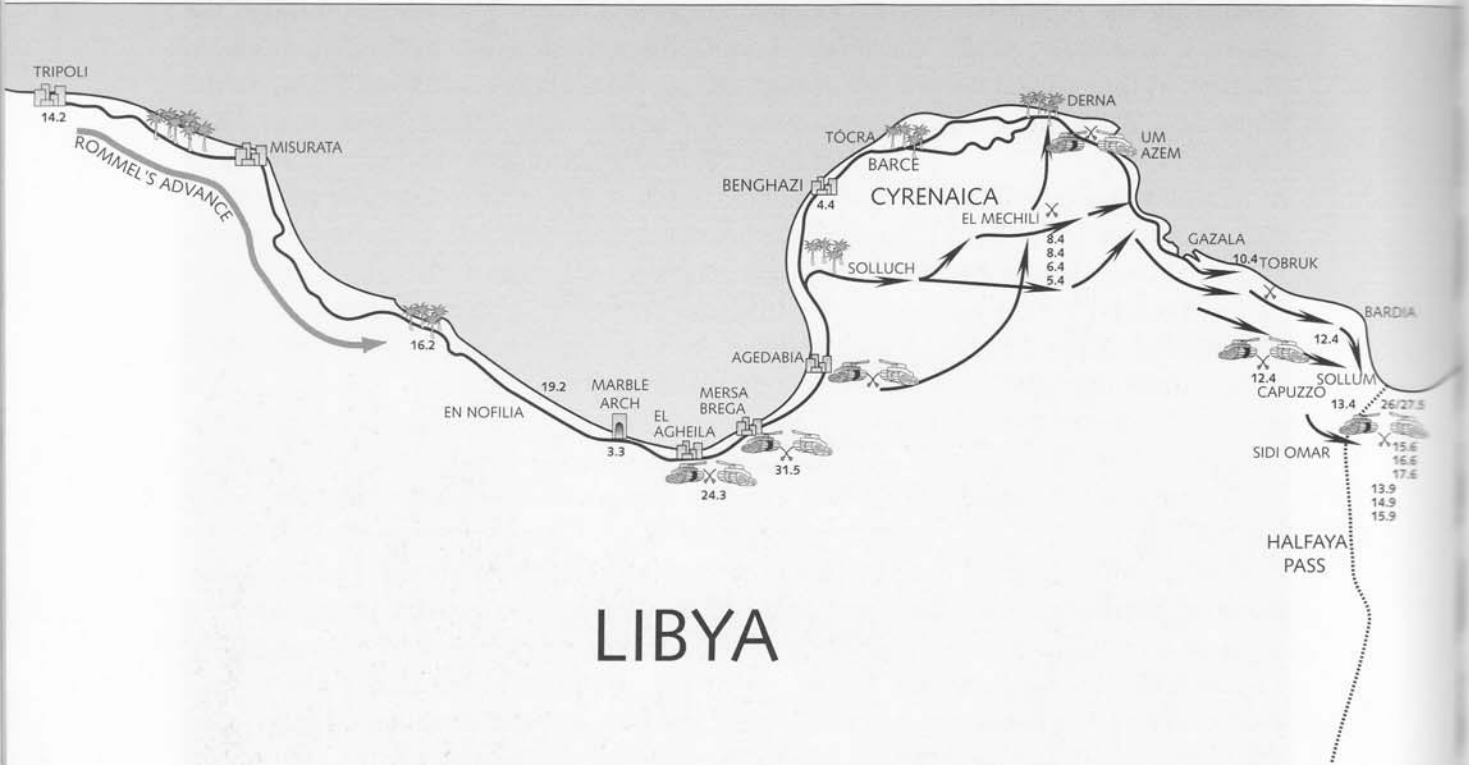
Meanwhile the right-hand column carried out a wide flanking movement through the desert, a manoeuvre which the British never expected the newly arrived Germans to attempt, as they lacked knowledge of both the terrain and the conditions. Then, on the night of 6 April, the DAK had the most extraordinary piece of good luck. They captured Generals O'Connor and Neame. The former, probably the most experienced of Wavell's commanders, had been sent up by 'The Chief' to advise the newcomer Neame on how to fight the battle. That evening they had been travelling back to Corps HQ at Timimi, after a day reconnoitring in the Maturba area. In the dark their driver had missed a turning and drove on towards Derna in 'no-man's-land', the two generals fast asleep in the back of the car. As they had no proper escort they were easily captured by an enemy motorcycle patrol after a brief exchange of fire. As if that wasn't disaster enough, a third British general, Gambier-Parry, had been taken the same day, at Mechili, together with his entire headquarters.

Not only had Rommel's whirlwind advance thrown his enemies into confusion, it had also upset both the German and Italian High Commands – both Keitel and Gariboldi sending signals that he had exceeded his orders and should go no further. Rommel somehow persuaded the Italians to think that he had been given complete freedom of action, and, ignoring the protests, continued to urge his men onwards. By 11 April the British had been swept out of the whole of Cyrenaica, with the one exception of a small, beleaguered force in Tobruk, where two Australian brigades, plus the remnants of 3rd Armoured Brigade, were holed up, determined to take on all comers. The leading DAK troops reached the fortress on 10/11 April but their hurried attack was beaten off. 5 leichte tried again on 14 April but although they made some initial gains, they were once again, pushed back and both sides settled down to a lengthy siege. The Germans had by now closed right up to the frontier and, on 25 April, struck at Halfaya Pass, pushing the British back once again, to a line from Buq Buq on the coast to Sofafi. Rommel tried yet another major assault on Tobruk on 30 April but the attack had to be called off after four days of heavy fighting. The importance of Tobruk cannot be overstressed and it was a continual thorn in Rommel's side. Also, despite being only a small port of some 4,000 inhabitants, it was the only safe, accessible port apart from Benghazi between Sfax in Tunisia and Alexandria in Egypt, so its capture would have immeasurably



The other way in which reinforcements arrived in North Africa was by air, using the ever-reliable Junkers Ju 52, which looked as though they had been made out of sheets of corrugated iron. (IWM – MH 5852)





# LIBYA

Rommel's initial advance 24 March–25 April 1941



Some of Rommel's forces were of course Italian, like these lorried infantry taking up position during the fighting for Tobruk. (Author's Collection)



Red Flag Corner was at the junction of the Tobruk, Derna and Bardia tracks. The flag was hoisted during air raids to warn MT drivers who could not hear the noise of aircraft over their own engines. (Author's Collection)

shortened Rommel's supply lines – a vitally important factor in desert conditions. Added to this, its continued defiance was a tremendous morale boost at a time when the British were very short of morale-boosting victories.

Despite this one setback, Rommel was naturally estatic. In just over half a month he had recaptured all the territory the British had taken from the Italians. 'You will understand that I can't sleep with happiness,' he wrote home to Lucie, 'it's wonderful to have pulled this off against the British. . . . The lads stuck it magnificently and came through the battle both with the enemy and nature very well.' As far as 'his lads' were concerned, Rommel could now do no wrong. The men of the DAK were, just like the soldiers of his previous commands, totally under the spell of his magnetic personality. They knew that he was enduring the same harsh conditions as they were, eating the same food, roughing it day and night in just the same way, pushing himself even harder than he pushed them. They also knew that he loved every one of his 'Afrikaners', as he called them, and they in turn would willingly do anything or go anywhere for him. More surprisingly perhaps, his growing reputation was also having an effect upon the enemy, especially as they were now sadly short of heroes.



'Pulling John Bull's teeth.' An early propaganda poster shows an Italian soldier pulling the teeth, while a German soldier holds John Bull. (Author's Collection)

## THREE

# 'BREVITY', 'BATTLEAXE' AND 'CRUSADER'

### ROMMEL ON TOP

There were now some 164,000 Italian and German troops in North Africa, with over 15,000 vehicles and 5,000-plus horses and mules.<sup>1</sup> These needed a regular 70–80,000 tons of supplies a month – or to put it another way, thirty complete shiploads, which would far exceed the capacity of the port of Tripoli. Even the forward troops needed some 1,500 tons daily just to exist. This meant that the Axis ports of Benghazi and Tripoli had to be improved and provided with adequate AA protection. 'Rommel makes preposterous demands,' commented Chief of the German General Staff Fritz Halder in his diary, 'his wishes can only be satisfied in so far as preparations for "Barbarossa" [the assault on the USSR] permit'. Later he went so far as to say: 'by overstepping his orders Rommel has brought about a situation for which our present supply capabilities are insufficient.' While it goes without saying that Rommel was always trying to do his best for his 'Afrikaners', it is important to point out at an early stage in this narrative just how entirely dependent both sides were upon their supply lines. There could be no 'living off the land' as in more temperate, more developed and inhabited climes; even that most precious commodity – drinking water – had to be constantly provided. Therefore one can almost visualise both armies as being attached to supply lines made of rubber bands – once these became overstretched, then the army inevitably went 'twanging back', being unable to sustain itself for long at full stretch. This again emphasises the importance of a little port like Tobruk, which would have made all the difference to Rommel's forward troops' supply lines.

Halder became so worried about the situation that he sent out his deputy von Paulus to make an on-the-spot report and to pass on instructions which were that Rommel should consider the holding of Cyrenaica – even without Tobruk – as his primary concern. For the time being, however, the Desert Fox could do no wrong and his enemies were still reeling not only from his whirlwind attack, but also from the start of

1. The aura of the 'Blitzkrieg' has always disguised the fact that the German Army was still very dependent upon animals and 'shank's pony' to get around. The normal infantry division had fewer than 1,000 vehicles but nearly 5,400 horses requiring 50 tons of wheat and oats *daily*, as well as constant looking after, grooming, exercising and a sophisticated veterinary service to cater for their health.



One of the most fought-over places in the Western Desert was Fort Capuzzo, west of Sollum. It changed hands many times, such as during Operation 'Brevity'. Here, two British Bren carriers drive up to its battered walls. (IWM – E 1433)

their grievous reverses in Greece, which would soon be made even worse by the loss of Crete. Meanwhile Axis forces now had garrisons astride the Egyptian frontier at Sollum, Halfaya Pass, Musadi, Fort Capuzzo (including Points 206 and 208) and Sidi Omar, with reserves at Bardia. Their purpose was, in Rommel's words, 'to deny certain operations to the enemy', while his own mobile forces 'provided adequate opposition to any enemy offensive concentration against our Tobruk front'. At the same time they were ready to beat off an attack by British motorised forces located east of Sollum. The DAK and their Italian allies had only just begun to lay out minefields and put up wire, so that by mid-May their defences were still at a fairly rudimentary stage. Rommel then gave orders that another defence line should be constructed at Gazala.

#### *OPERATION 'BREVITY'*

On the other side of the frontier Wavell was being constantly pressed by Churchill to retake Cyrenaica and relieve Tobruk. On hearing that the 'Tiger' Convoy<sup>2</sup> was on its way, he launched Operation 'Brevity' early on 15 May, to recapture Halfaya Pass, Fort Capuzzo and Sollum, then if possible to go on and relieve Tobruk. Halfaya Pass was

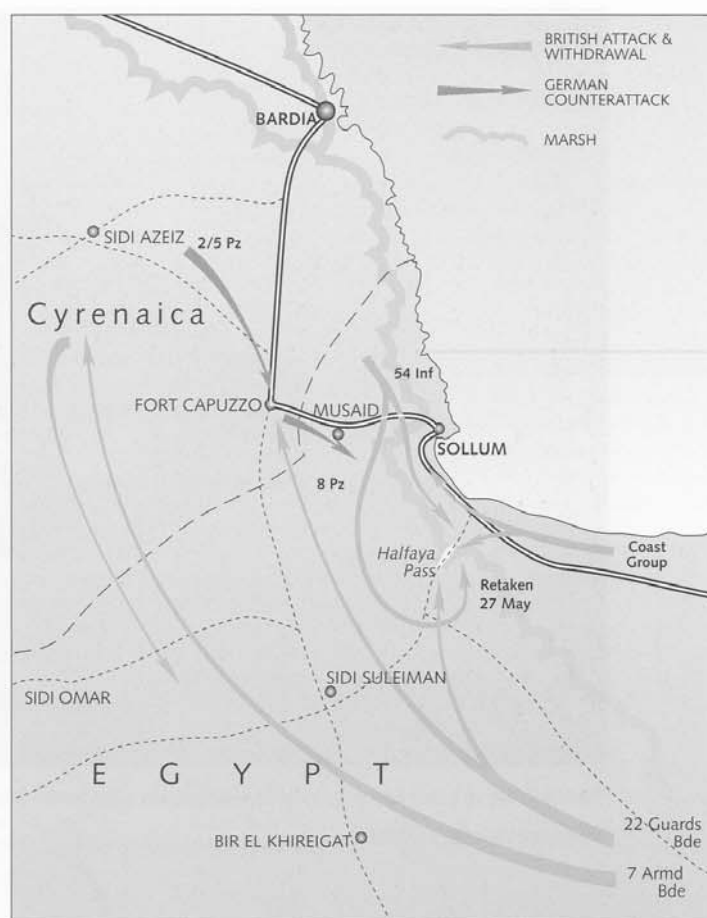
2. This was one of the most important convoys to reach North Africa at this time. Sent from the UK in May 1941, it was a 'fast' convoy, bringing nearly 400 tanks (half cruisers, half Matilda Mk IIs) and 50 Hawker Hurricane fighters.

swiftly taken, then Fort Capuzzo after some very heavy fighting. Rommel thought this was the start of a major British assault, so brought up reinforcements and retook both Fort Capuzzo and the Pass on 27 May, the British withdrawing in some confusion. Rommel re-garrisoned the Pass, putting in command the remarkable soldier Captain (ex-pastor) Wilhelm Bach, who would defend it against all comers, winning the Knight's Cross for his bravery.

#### OPERATION 'BATTLEAXE'

Despite the failure of 'Brevity', Wavell was not discouraged. The 'Tiger' convoy had arrived – one ship containing sixty tanks and ten aircraft had been sunk by a mine, but the rest had reached Egypt safely. 'The Tiger now only needs to grow claws,' signalled Wavell to the Prime Minister on 25 May, and just three days later he confirmed that he was ready to attack. However, the Germans had also

received reinforcements – three convoys, arriving on 24 April, 2 and 6 May, had brought 15th Panzer Division, which contained Panzer Regiment 8 – a total of 146 tanks (45 x PzKpfw II, 71 x PzKpfw III, 20 x PzKpfw IV and 10 command tanks). At Halfaya Pass the garrison comprised some 500 German and 400 Italian troops, with a number of anti-tank and artillery guns, which included five of the formidable 8.8cm AA/atk guns and a battery of ex-French 155mms. The '88s' had already gained a fearsome reputation and Rommel ensured that they were well dug-in, so that as little as possible of the gun could be seen above ground level. He had plenty of Italian infantry at his disposal, so could re-garrison Fort Capuzzo, Points 206 and 208, Sollum and Musaid, with a local reserve at Bardia. Enigma might have kept the British up to date on the German and Italian dispositions, but Rommel's own radio intercept kept him equally well informed. The aim of Operation 'Battleaxe' was to break through the Axis defences on the border, drive on to Tobruk, relieve it and then press on to Derna and Mechili. It involved making another major frontal attack at Halfaya Pass, using the newly arrived Matilda Mk 2s, plus part of 4th Ind Inf Div, while 7th Armd Div, together with the rest of the Indian Division, swept around the desert flank.



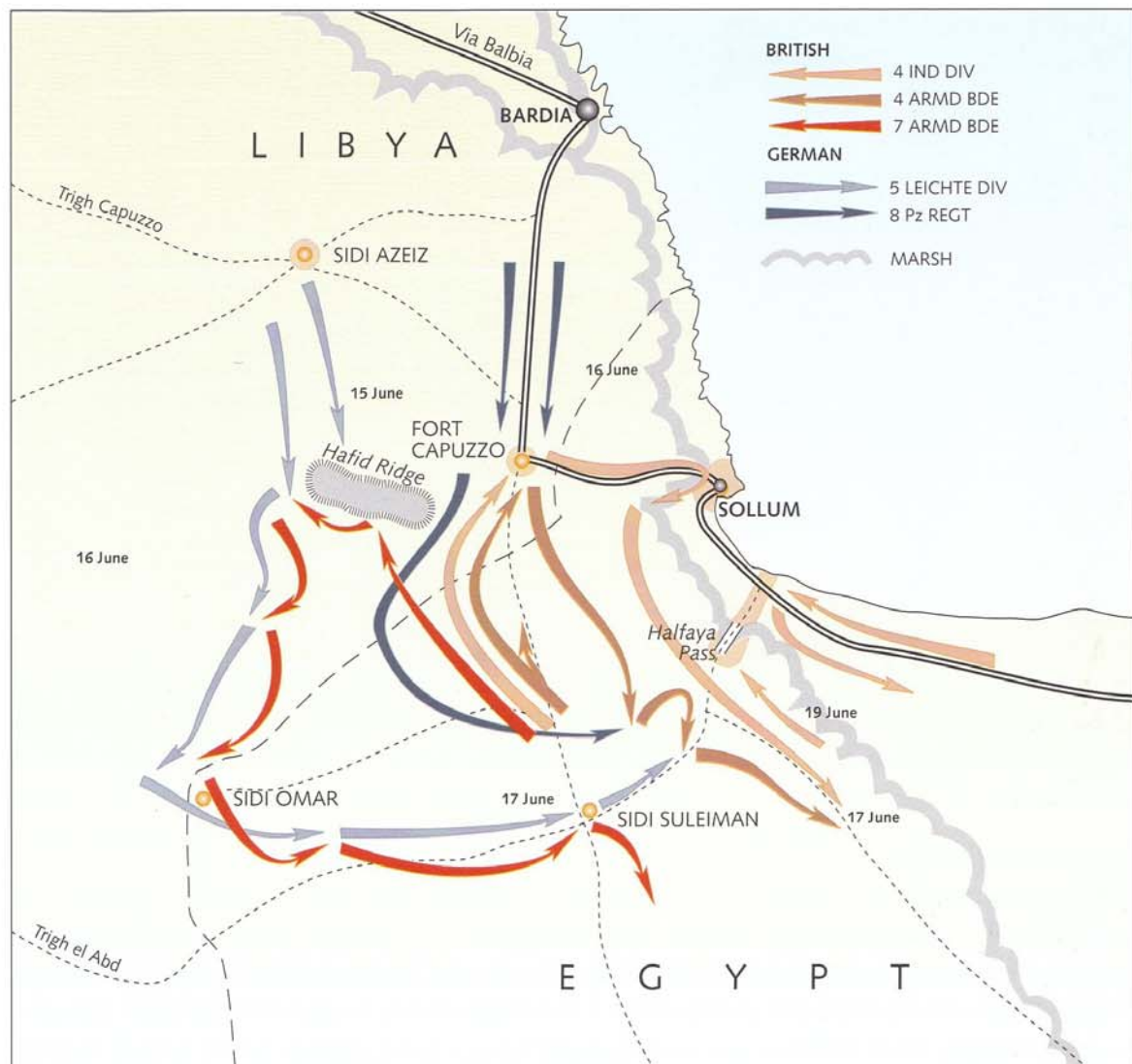
Operation 'Brevity', 15–27 May 1941



Churning its way up a sand dune and pursued by a laden donkey is this German PzKpfw IV, belonging to the Deutsches Afrikakorps. (Balkan Kreuz über Wüstensand via Author's Collection)

Their objectives were: 7th Armd Bde – Halfid Ridge (Point 208); 4th Armd Bde together with 4th Indian Div units – Fort Capuzzo and Point 206. Phase 2 would see the British and Indians moving on to Sollum on the coast. Rommel, however, was well prepared for this scenario and had already moved up his newly arrived tanks as well as those of 5 leichte.

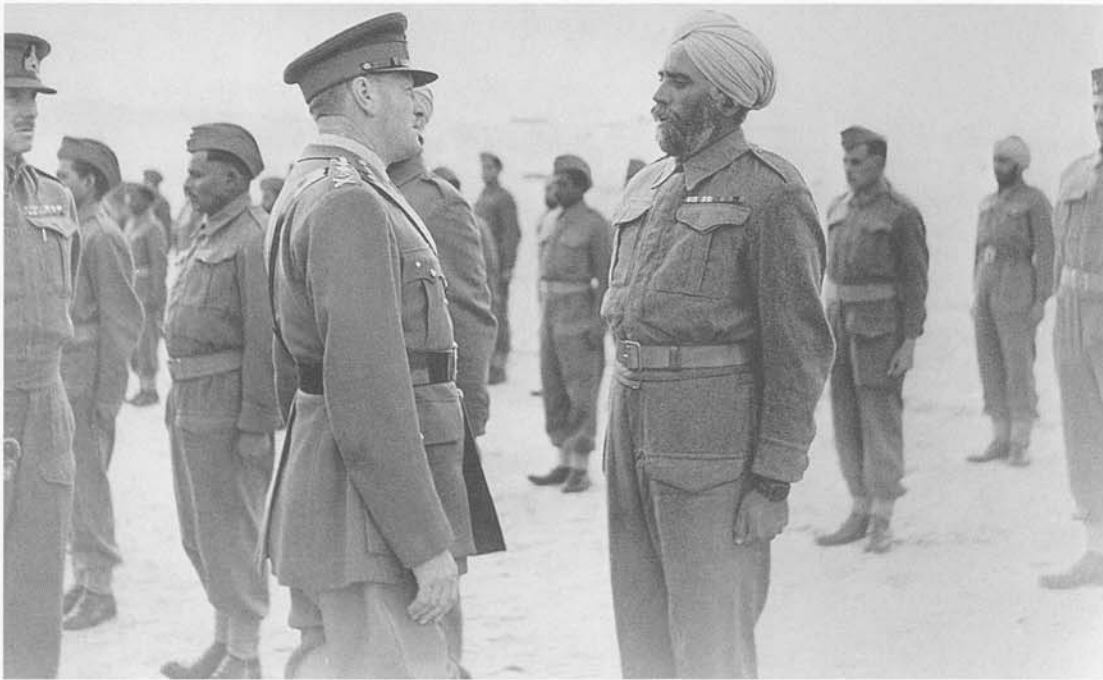
Heavy fighting followed, with the Germans eventually coming out on top. Bach's garrison at Halfaya Pass did particularly well, on the first day (15 June) knocking out eleven of the new Matildas. Both Point 206 and Fort Capuzzo were initially captured by 4th Armd Bde, while 7th Armd gained a foothold on the Halfid Ridge, but the German defensive positions held. When they had blunted the British attacks, Rommel moved 5 leichte in a wide right hook towards Sidi Omar, where it fought a violent tank battle with 7th Armd Bde. This continued on the 16th, by which time most of the British tanks had either been knocked out or broken down. Meanwhile 4th Armd Bde, which had been withdrawn to conform with the 7th, was in heavy combat with the tanks of Panzer Regt 8, 15 Panzer Division. 'This operation has obviously taken the British completely by surprise,' commented Rommel, going on to say that they had intercepted a message from the GOC 7th Armd Div asking the C-in-C of the desert force to come to his HQ, presumably to take control. Rommel decided to try to close the net around the British forces and ordered both 5 leichte and 15 Panzer Div to press



Operation 'Battleaxe', 15–19 June 1941

on towards Halfaya Pass, which they reached at about 1600 hours on the 17th. They found that the bulk of the British forces had managed to escape but nevertheless had lost more than 220 tanks (only 87 were complete write-offs eventually, the rest being recovered and repaired). The British claimed that they had knocked out a hundred German tanks – but Rommel put his eventual losses at twenty-five. The Desert Fox was triumphant: 'I have been on the road for three days,' he wrote to Lucie on the 23rd, 'going round the battlefield. The joy of the Afrika troops over this latest victory is tremendous. The British thought they could overwhelm us with their 400 tanks . . . but our grouping and the stubborn resistance of the German and Italian troops who were surrounded for days together, enabled us to make the decisive operation . . . Now the enemy can come, he'll get an even bigger beating.'





The outcome of the failure of 'Brevity' and 'Battleaxe' was the replacement of Wavell with Gen Sir Claude Auchinleck. This picture, taken in May 1942, shows the latter presenting medals to men of the 7th Indian Brigade who had escaped from Benghazi. (IWM – E 9189)

#### WAVELL DEPARTS

The outcome of the 'Brevity' and 'Battleaxe' defeats was that Churchill decided to move Wavell on to India and replace him with Gen Sir Claude Auchinleck. Wavell had failed to fulfil his true greatness because he simply did not have the necessary decisive ruthlessness – as he once put it (much to Churchill's fury!) he did not consider that the 'size of the butcher's bill was necessarily evidence of good tactics'. 'The Chief' moved on to another disaster-laden scenario where he would get just as much criticism from the PM. His successor – known as the 'Auk' – was another distinguished commander and had served during the First World War in the Indian Army, then risen to the rank of lieutenant general by 1939. After the abortive Norwegian campaign in 1940 he returned to India as C-in-C, until he 'swapped' with Wavell in June 1941. He would be given an equally rough ride by Churchill, and his time in the Middle East was especially difficult. Rommel had a high regard for Wavell: 'the only British general who showed a touch of genius was Wavell,' he wrote later. General der Panzertruppe Rommel, as he was from 1 July, clearly made a rapid and abiding impression on Auchinleck, causing him to issue a special order to all his commanders and chiefs of staff. It read:

There exists a real danger that our friend Rommel is becoming a kind of magician or bogeyman to our troops, who are talking far too much about him. He is by no

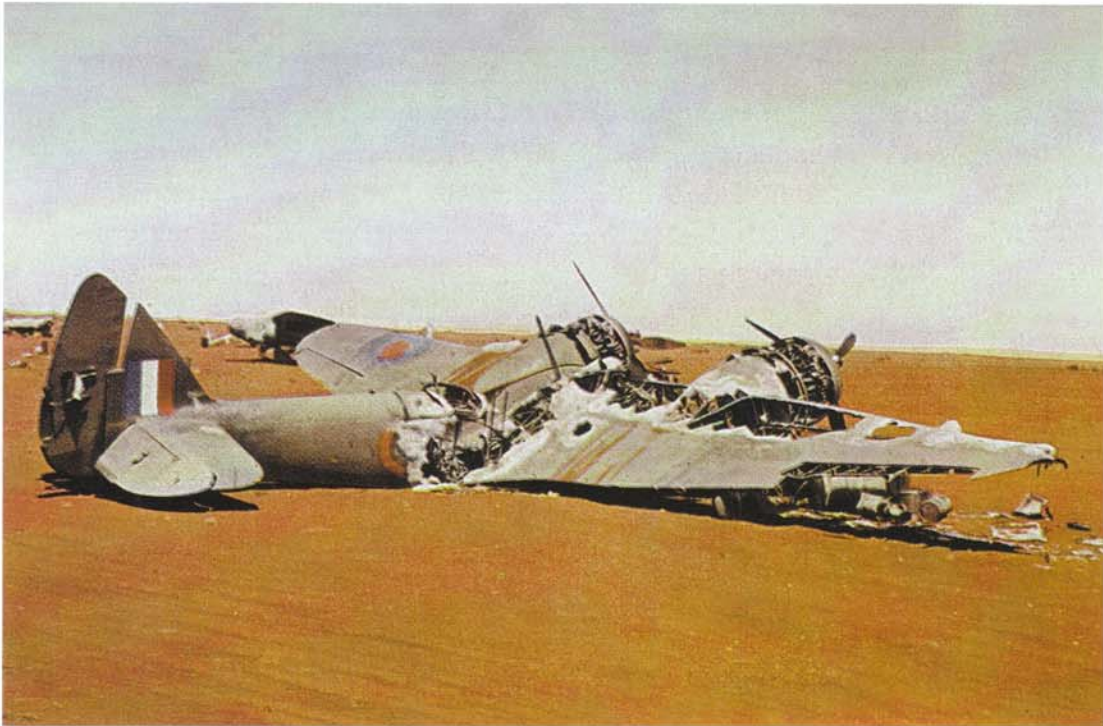


The desert sands were a continual problem to both sides. Here some Italian soldiers struggle with a small lorry stuck in soft sand. They do not appear to be using sand channels, which were essential equipment for every wheeled vehicle. (Officio Storico, Rome, via Philip Jowett)

means a superman, although he is undoubtedly very energetic and able. . . . I wish you to dispel by all possible means the idea that Rommel represents something more than an ordinary German general . . . We must refer to 'the Germans', or 'the Axis powers', or 'the enemy' and not keep harping on Rommel.

#### *OPERATION 'SOMMERNACHTSRAUM'*

Rommel was now commanding Panzergruppe Afrika, which would later become known as Panzerarmee Afrika. It gave him control over part of the Italian forces in North Africa, which inevitably produced some problems in command and control. Rommel – and some Italians – rightly considered that there should be just one overall commander – but from Rommel's point of view that was naturally to be himself and not an Italian! From the Italian point of view, however, Rommel was an 'upstart' who had arrived in Africa just six months previously in charge of an enlarged light division, supposedly put at the disposal of the local Italian HQ to bolster up their anti-tank defence and to do nothing more. Now he was firmly established as the commander of a large army containing both German and Italian troops, with the power either to ignore his supposed Italian chief or to treat him with studied insolence, thus making for himself a virtually independent command. The first operation to be undertaken by



A crashed Blenheim Bristol bomber. (BKUW – page 77)

the new Panzergruppe was a limited attack in early September 1941, codenamed 'Midsummer Night's Dream', the objective being what Rommel mistakenly believed were large British fuel and supply dumps at Bir Khirreigat, some 15 miles inside Egypt. Rommel saw it as an essential preliminary to another assault on Tobruk. Luckily for the British, they got wind of his intentions and withdrew. The Germans captured some codes and cipher material but otherwise the raid was a failure and almost led to Rommel's capture – he was leading (as always) when they ran out of fuel and were attacked by South African aircraft. A bomb hit his command vehicle and Rommel's driver<sup>3</sup> was wounded. He had to call off the raid and beat a hasty retreat!

### OPERATION 'CRUSADER'

It could well have been that the captured cipher material was actually 'planted', because it led Rommel to believe that the British were not planning any further attacks, so that he could devote all his energies towards taking Tobruk. In fact they had also been

3. Rommel had two British AEC 4x4 Mk 1 ACVs (captured when the British generals were taken in his first attack), which he called 'Mammuten' (Mammoths) and gave them personal names – 'Max' and 'Moritz' – from an old German children's story. When his driver was wounded, Rommel took over and drove for the rest of the night.



Knocked-out British armoured car. (BKUW – page 145)

building up their forces, forming the new Eighth Army, under the command of Gen Sir Alan Cunningham, who had done so well in East Africa. The new Army was very much a Commonwealth force, with strong contingents from Australia, India, New Zealand and South Africa, as well as British – the official history records that 95,000 of the 239,000 troops landed in Egypt between January and July 1941 were from the Commonwealth. The Eighth Army contained seven divisions, all of which were bursting with new equipment such as: 300 cruiser tanks, 170 'I' tanks and 300 of the new American lend-lease M3 light tanks (called 'Stuarts' officially by the British and 'Honeys' by the crews<sup>4</sup>); 34,000 lorries; 600 artillery guns, 240 AA guns, 200 anti-tank

4. The first shipment of 84 Honeys – so-called as they were so well-made and reliable – arrived in July 1941 and first saw action at Gabr Saleh on 18 November 1941.



guns and 900 mortars. The German spy network did eventually take notice of the massive preparations being made and then had a hard time convincing the Italian High Command that it would be much more difficult to hold off such a major assault if Tobruk was still in enemy hands. Indeed, Rommel had to guarantee that 21 Panzer Division would be able to hold off the British while Tobruk was being dealt with (the German attack was scheduled for 23 November).

*KILL ROMMEL!*

While Rommel was in Rome convincing the Italians about the need to take Tobruk – he had flown there with Gen

Rommel, this time wearing tropical uniform, briefs one of his staff officers. The ubiquitous goggles are still on his cap (compare them with those on the other officer's cap which are standard German issue). (IWM – HU 5625)

A pair of truck-mounted 2cm dual purpose Flak light anti-aircraft guns, advancing at speed over the desert in their anti-tank role. (Rommel Museum Herrlingen via Author's Collection)



von Ravenstein and they had been met by their wives as it was Rommel's 50th birthday on the 15th – British commandos made a daring attempt on his life. Led by Maj Geoffrey Keyes, the party landed by submarine not far from Beda Littoria, where they mistakenly thought Rommel had his HQ. Actually he had rejected that location as being too far behind the lines, choosing instead to go forward to Cantoniera Gambut, between Tobruk and Bardia. The requisitioned buildings at Beda Littoria still had plates on the door suggesting that the Panzergruppe HQ was in fact in residence, but actually they were occupied by Rommel's chief supply officers, Maj Schleusner and Capt Otto. However, even they were away, both of them being in hospital at Apollonia, the former with dysentery, the latter with inflammation of the lungs. Dogged by disaster, Keyes was killed during the assault, together with four Germans, and was buried by the Germans with full military honours. Apart from a sergeant and two men, all the rest of the commando were captured. The gallant Keyes was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

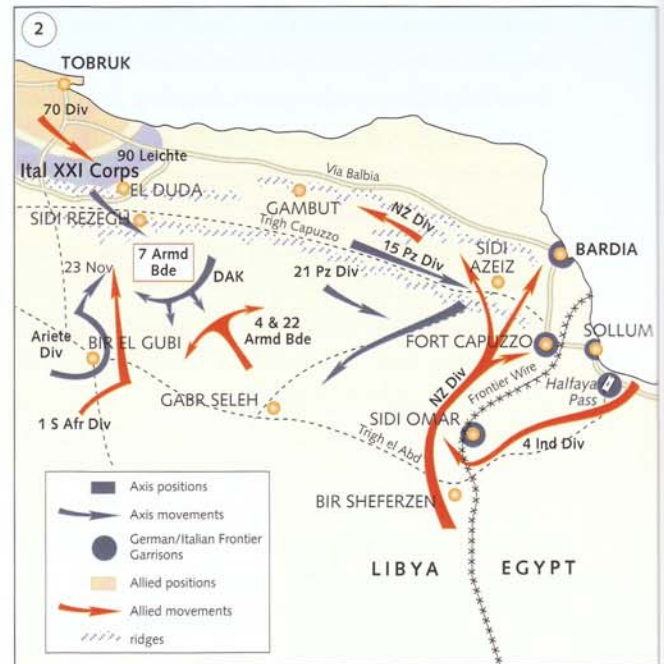
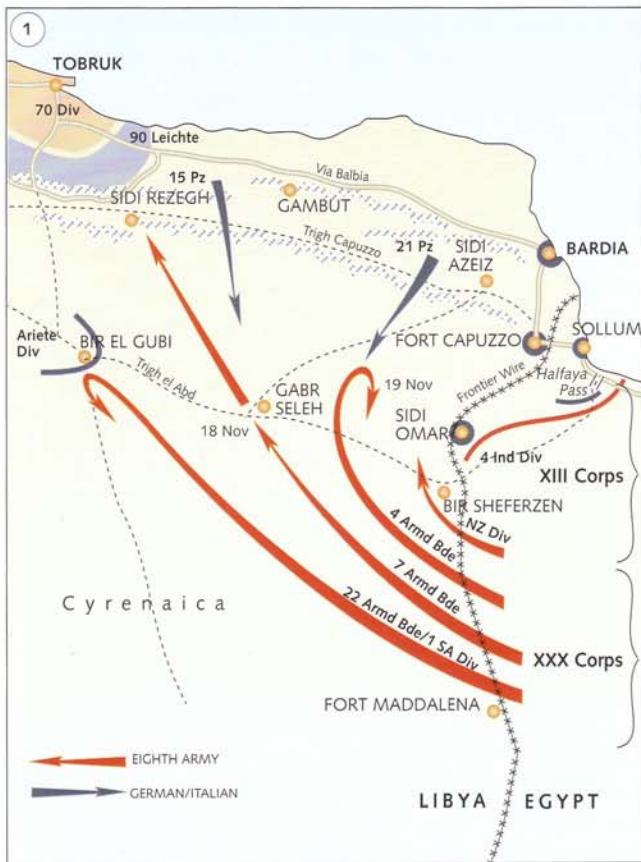
The main aim of the British Operation 'Crusader' was to destroy as much enemy armour as possible, this becoming almost as much of a fixation with the British as the need to take Tobruk was with Rommel. However, Rommel not only had a sound and well-balanced plan to storm Tobruk, he had also been training his troops all the summer to fight a coordinated action against any would-be relieving enemy forces. He was, in addition, brilliant at the use of armour, while on the other side Gen Cunningham was inexperienced in the use of armoured

forces and was thus entirely in the hands of his so-called 'armoured advisers'. The outline plan was for Allied XIII Corps to contain the Halfaya Pass position, while outflanking it towards Fort Capuzzo; XXX Corps would then swing wide to the south between Bir Sherferzen and Fort Maddelena, then strike north-west towards Gabr Saleh, to take on the enemy armour, defeat it and then move on NW to relieve Tobruk. All began well for the British on the 18th, with 7th Armd Div reaching Gabr Saleh virtually undetected and thus unopposed, thanks to the strict observance of radio silence and the fact that unexpected, very heavy rain fell severely limiting both air and ground recce.<sup>5</sup> Cunningham's forces did not meet any real resistance until they reached

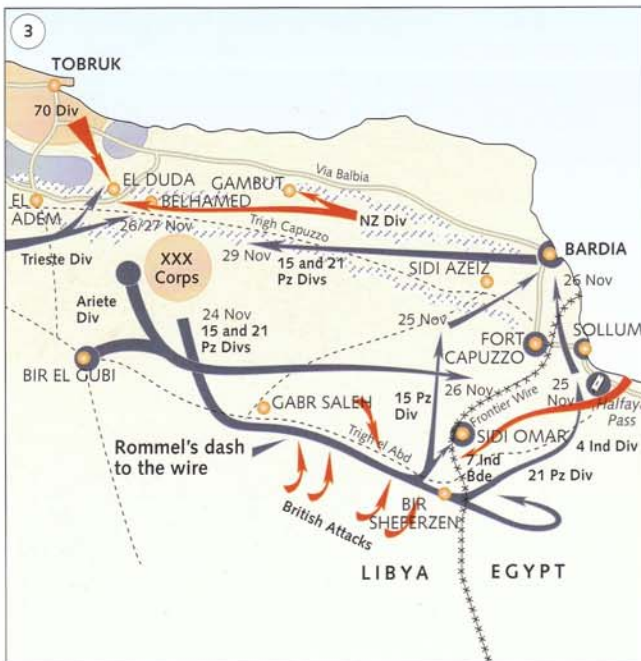


The sign was originally headed 'AXIS STREET' but this was changed to 'DEMOCRACY LANE'. It was located on the bypass road around Tobruk, and is being inspected by a crew of a 7 RTR Matilda Mk II. (Author's Collection)

5. By chance the Germans had selected as codewords for enemy attacks 'High Water' and 'Deluge', so there was some confusion when real downpours had to be reported!

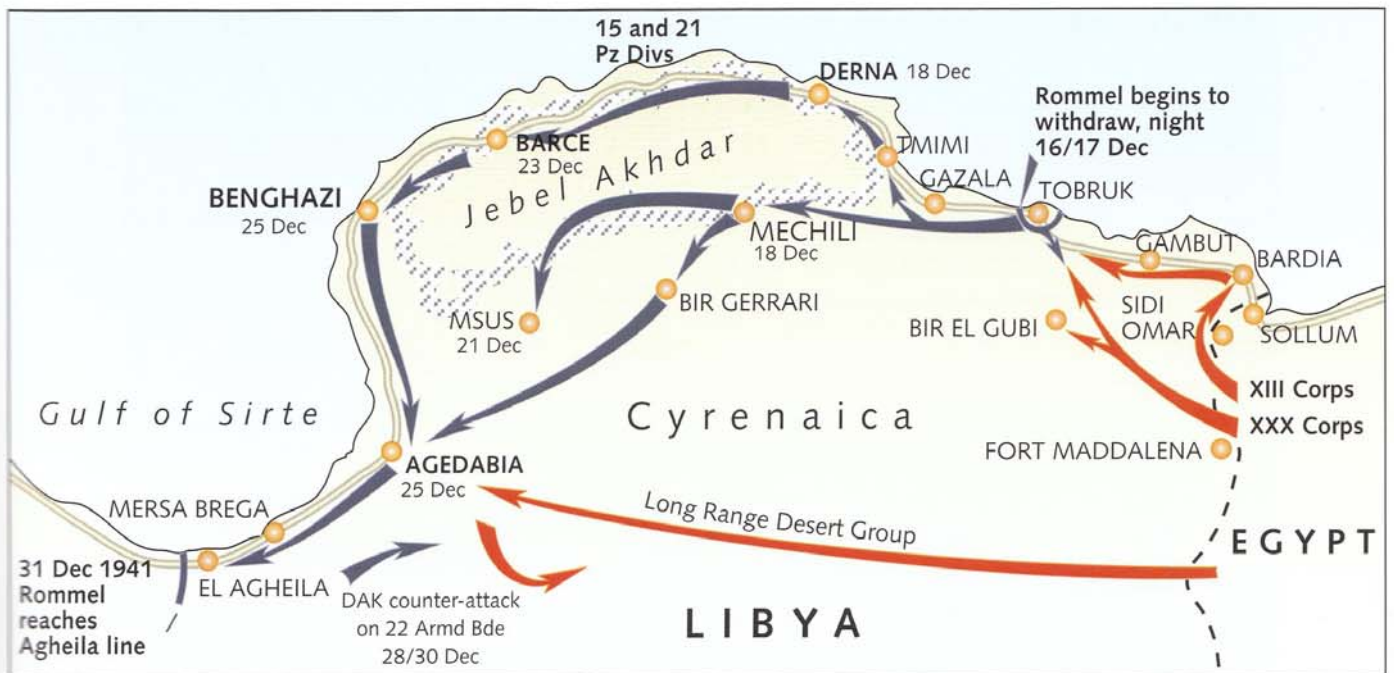


Maps 1, 2, 3: Operation 'Crusader', 18 November 1941



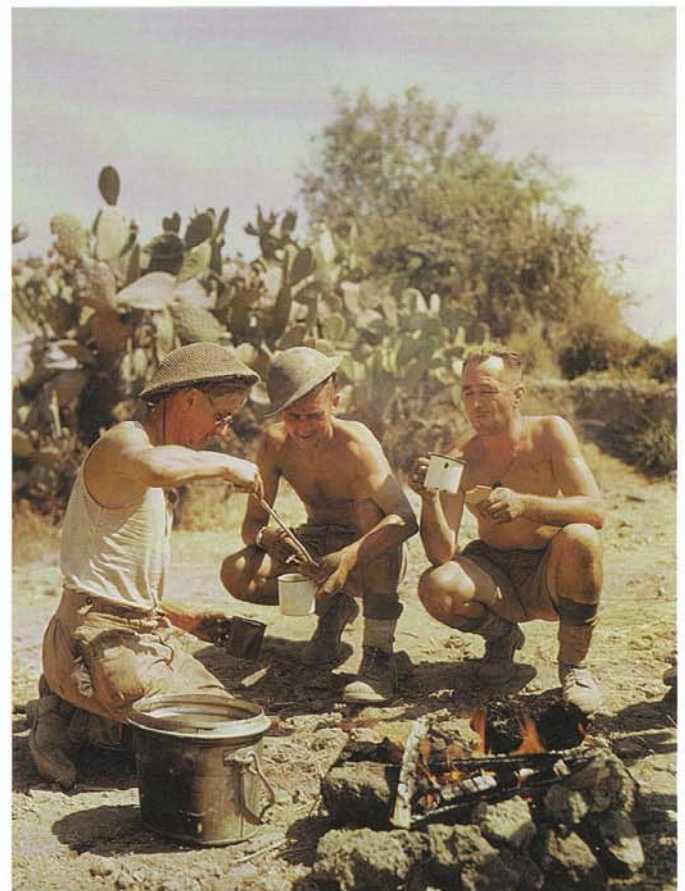
Sidi Rezegh on the 19th, although there was some determined opposition on the flanks, especially from the Ariete Division around Bir el Gubi, and from the 21st Pz Div on the other flank. At Sidi Rezegh the newly arrived 22nd Armd Bde was lured into making a head-on assault, without adequate artillery and infantry support, on to well dug-in anti-tank guns, losing a major proportion of their brand-new Crusader cruiser tanks.<sup>6</sup> At first Rommel thought that the British attack was only limited, but then, once the extent of the operation was appreciated, the 21st Pz Div retaliated, first striking eastwards towards Sidi Azeiz on the 19th, then turning south-west on the following day towards Gabr Saleh, where they inflicted heavy losses on 4th Armd Bde.

6. The Cruiser tank Mk IV, Crusader (A15), was initially armed with a two-pounder – the six-pounder model did not appear until mid-1942. Thus, although it was the best of the early cruisers, it was still not on a par with its German contemporaries.



Rommel's withdrawal after 'Crusader'

On the morning of the 21st Rommel ordered the DAK to attack towards Sidi Rezegh, where 7th Armd Bde had overrun the airfield (destroying nineteen Axis aircraft). The 7th Armd Bde was now making towards Tobruk, where the garrison was getting ready to break out and link up with them, but they had to turn and face the DAK, losing some two-thirds of their tanks in the ensuing battle on the 22nd. Rommel invariably kept his tanks together, hurling them at the scattered enemy units and making the most of their mobility and firepower. 'What does it matter if you have two tanks to my one,' Rommel later commented to a captured British officer, 'when you spread them out and let me smash them in detail?' On the left of XIII Corps, the 2nd NZ Division managed to get behind the German/Italian positions and moved up towards Sidi Azeiz. Bitter fighting continued around Sidi Rezegh and both sides suffered heavily. That night 15 Pz Div, which was on its way to support



'When in doubt brew up!' (IWM - TR 1404)



21 Pz Div, ran into 4th Armd Bde and inflicted heavy casualties. The 23rd was Totensonntag ('Sunday of the Dead'), the day on which all Germans honour their fallen of the First World War; the fighting that day was at its most confused and both sides suffered heavily. The serious British losses convinced Rommel that he should now make a determined effort to get to the frontier as quickly as possible with the bulk of the DAK, so as to cut off and destroy as much of the Eighth Army as possible. This was undoubtedly one of his most controversial decisions and, ignoring the advice of his senior staff officers who counselled caution, he sent out the necessary orders for the DAK to concentrate and advance with him. He also ignored reports of a strong NZ force moving on Tobruk from Bardia – this would achieve only a short-lived link up with the Tobruk garrison at El Duda, but nevertheless presented a major threat.

Leaving his staff to cope with the battle that was still raging around Sidi Rezegh, Rommel was soon at the head of the hastily gathered DAK, speeding along the Trigh el Abd, causing consternation to friend and foe alike. Gen Cunningham was almost



Standing on top of a knocked-out PzKpfw IV Ausf C, these Tommies proudly display a captured swastika. Note the DAK symbol of a palm tree and swastika on the side of the tank chassis. (IWM – E 6740)



A prize capture. This PzKpfw III Ausf J was known as a 'Special' because its usual 5cm KwK L/42 gun had been replaced with a long-barrelled 5cm KwK 39 L/60, which gave it far greater range and hitting power. (IWM – BM 18476)

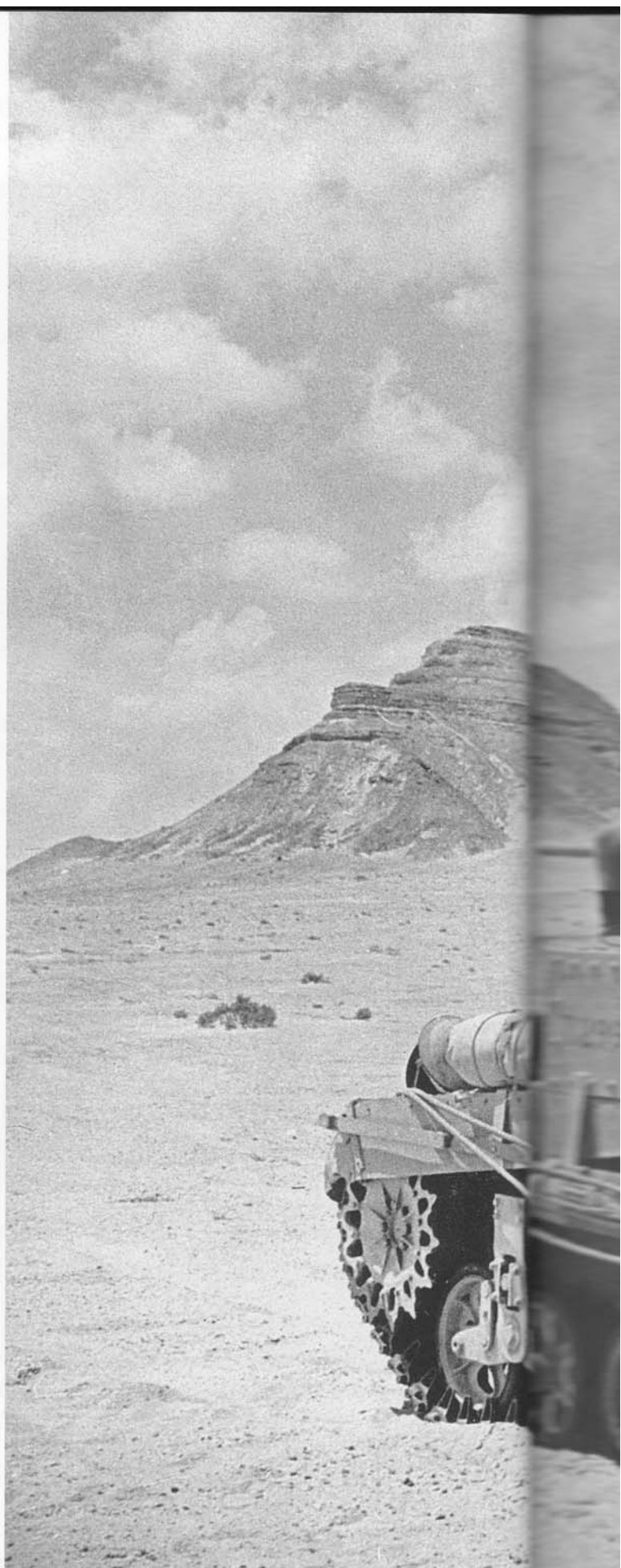
captured when the Blenheim fighter bomber he had just boarded was shelled as it was taking off, while Rommel also had a narrow escape when the steering column of his staff car snapped, leaving him and two staff officers stranded and alone. Their escort armoured car was far behind them and the vehicles in front were fast disappearing. They managed a few more miles, then the engine gave up completely. Fortunately, as they stood shivering in the gathering evening gloom, they were spotted by Gen Cruewell (comd DAK) and his chief of staff, Col Fritz Bayerlein, in their 'Mammoth' ACV. They were on their way back to their HQ at Gasr el Abid, but were well inside Egypt and could not find a gap through 'The Wire'. Even with Rommel driving they remained hopelessly lost and eventually had to leaguer up for the night, until they could find a gap in the daylight. Throughout the night enemy vehicles came close by but fortunately for them they were never challenged. They eventually found the gap and reached DAK HQ a few hours later.

Meanwhile Rommel's Panzergruppe HQ staff had been getting more and more worried. Rommel was out of radio touch, so was Cruewell. Eventually, Siegfried Westphal decided to act on his own initiative and recalled 21 Pz Div. Rommel was not best pleased when he found out, but having slept on it he had the good grace to admit

Near Mt Himeimat. This American M3 light tank was in British service. Known in British parlance as the 'Stuart', it was also called the 'Honey' by its crews, who loved its robust simplicity and reliability. (IWM — BM 17696)

that the enemy still presented a severe threat and that Westphal had made the correct decision. However, Rommel's daring advance, together with his overall successes during the early phases of 'Crusader', had convinced Cunningham that there was nothing for it but to order a full-scale withdrawal, to prevent his army from being annihilated. He was only prevented from doing so by Auchinleck, who flew forward and forbade him to take any such retrograde action, but instead to continue with the offensive. This convinced the 'Auk' that Cunningham had lost heart, so he swiftly replaced him with Gen Sir Neil Ritchie, his deputy chief of staff, through whom he could exercise firm control.

This positive action led to increased British pressure, while the link-up at El Duda with the Tobruk garrison indicated that the Axis forces were reaching the end of their tether. Although they had probably won the battle 'on paper', the Panzergruppe were now so weak on the ground and so short of supplies that it was not long before Rommel came to the inevitable conclusion that he might well have to leave Cyrenaica completely. What he didn't know was just how close he had come to discovering two enormous British supply dumps (set up to maintain 'Crusader') during his 'frontier gallop' — each was some 6 square miles in area, located only a few miles south of Gabr Saleh and guarded by just one brigade. Some DAK troops actually drove through







Direct hit! The German gun crew of a Russian 76.2mm field gun Model 1936 engage and hit their target on the horizon. Many of these captured field guns taken into German service were among the most powerful anti-tank weapons in the German armoury. (IWM – MH 5862)

a water point on the edge of one of the dumps without realising it was there! Only about a third of the required 120,000 tons of Axis supplies had reached the ports, thanks to the Royal Navy, and in early December Rommel was told categorically by Rome that he could not expect to receive any further reinforcements until January 1942. Nevertheless, in a proclamation to his troops, Rommel called on them for one last effort, detailing Allied casualties as being 814 tanks and armoured cars, 127 aircraft shot down and over 9,000 prisoners taken; on the debit side they had lost 4,000 men. What he didn't tell them was that they were down to forty battleworthy tanks in the DAK and thirty in the Ariete Div. His 'last effort', despite some protests from his senior officers, was to send out two mobile battle groups, each based upon an infantry battalion, with artillery and anti-tank support, one down the coast road (Via Balbia), the other down the Trigh Capuzzo. The plan was designed to take the pressure off the frontier garrisons. Neither did well; the northern group was ambushed and almost totally destroyed near Bardia, while the other clashed with 4th Ind Div, being heavily attacked from the air at the same time, and was forced to withdraw. To make matters even worse, the British managed to put together a relief force and to lift the siege of Tobruk (after 242 days). The opposing sides met for the last time at Bir el Gobi on 5 December and for the next few days the battle raged. Rommel had expected support for his Afrikaners from the Italian general Gambara's mobile corps but it never arrived. To make matters worse, the commander of 15 Pz Div, Gen Neumann-

Silkow, was killed on 7 December. The overall Axis commander, Marshal Ettore Bastico (whom Rommel called 'Bombastico'), heard that Rommel was planning to withdraw and, after trying unsuccessfully to get Rommel to visit him, went up to the Front himself and said that he would not authorise a retreat. There was a furious verbal exchange, Rommel refusing to amend his decision and telling Bastico that it was all his fault as the Italians had let him down. The westerly withdrawal began on 7/8 December. 'We are pulling out,' Rommel wrote to his wife on 20 December, 'I hope we manage to get back to the line we have chosen.' He went on to tell her that he had at last been able to change his clothes, having slept in his coat for the last few weeks.

Fortunately for Rommel, the Allied advance behind him was very hesitant and made no attempt to try to outflank the withdrawing Axis troops. There wasn't a great deal of



Meeting at El Duda. Crews of 4 RTR and 4 South African Armd Car Regt met at El Duda, between Sidi Rezegh and the Tobruk perimeter. But it proved to be an abortive link-up when the battle around Sidi Rezegh began on 27 November 1941. (IWM – E 6899)



Honours even. After the last of the fierce battles of 1941, a wounded British soldier gets a light from a wounded German soldier. (IWM – NA 1344)

action because by that time the 'elastic' on the Allied side was becoming too stretched and they had outrun their supply lines. The only Axis forces that could not withdraw were the frontier garrisons which held out until January, Bardia falling on the 2nd while Bach's heroic little force at Halfaya Pass stuck it out until the 17th. And as if to make amends for his quarrels with the Italians, Rommel made a special point of praising the bravery and skill of Generale di Georgis, who had commanded the mixed German and Italian frontier garrisons. However, their loss had to be added to the overall losses, so that by mid-January 1942 the total number of Axis prisoners taken since 'Crusader' began was over 33,000. More importantly, although the Allies had lost far more tanks than had the Axis powers, replacements for them would be forthcoming, thanks to generous American assistance, while the Germans would not be so fortunate. In addition of course, despite everything, the Allies had driven the Desert Fox and his Afrikaners right back to where they had started from the previous March. No wonder Winston Churchill wrote that it was 'a moment of relief and indeed of rejoicing'.

## FOUR

# ROMMEL AN DER SPITZE! (ROMMEL LEADING!)

### THE END OF 'CRUSADER'

The frontier battles were now finally over, 'Crusader' having ended by the third week of January. Cyrenaica was clear of Axis troops, but the British Eighth Army was worn out after two months of hard fighting and their supply lines were dangerously stretched. It was Rommel and his army who were now in a much improved administrative situation,



A flight of RCAF Spitfire Mk Vs, Britain's famous single-seat fighters, airborne over the desert sands. The red propeller spinner was the theatre marking for daylight flying aircraft. (IWM — TR 826)



despite the fact that he had suffered over 30 per cent casualties, compared with the Eighth Army's 15 per cent. In the air the RAF had also done well, while the part played by the Royal Navy had been equally important. Just keeping Tobruk open and supplied had required constant naval protection and Admiral Cunningham had been doubly hard pressed because of the need to send a number of warships to the Far East (the war with Japan having begun on 7 December) and also having to deal with the increased numbers of German U-boats now operating in the Mediterranean.

Despite the undoubted abilities of the 'Auk' as a commander, his choice of Cunningham to command the Eighth Army had been a mistake. Cunningham had done well in the small arena of East Africa, where he had been managing just four brigade groups, but now in the Western Desert, with a large army to command, the scope had become much greater. He had also lacked the armoured experience of some of his juniors. However, his replacement by Maj Gen Neil Ritchie had undoubtedly shaken British morale, and although Auchinleck was able



The end at Sidi Rezegh. Both sides lost heavily in men and materiel during this terrible battle, one of the bloodiest of the Desert War. The photograph shows the old Arab tomb at Sidi Rezegh and a recent German grave of someone who fell in the battle. (Col W.M.S. Jeffery via Author's Collection.)



On the road again. Part of Rommel's column, including an eight-wheeled Panzer Spahwagen (Funkstelle) — that is, a radio vehicle, moves across scrub and rock on the desert edge. (Author's Collection)

to exercise better direct command through Ritchie, the new commander was in fact junior to both of the Corps commanders, Norrie (XXX Corps) and Godwin Austen (XIII), which irked them. None of this can have helped stabilise command and control matters on the Allied side.

### AXIS REINFORCEMENTS

On 5 January 1942 the Axis forces received their first sizeable convoy of reinforcements – 54 tanks, 20 armoured cars, numerous anti-aircraft and artillery guns and a significant quantity of fuel and ammunition. ‘As good as a victory in battle’ is how Rommel described their safe arrival. It was also remarkable what an effect a few days rest made upon his Afrikaners’ morale, especially with the new equipment, fuel and supplies: ‘The quiet days are doing us a power of good,’ wrote one of Rommel’s junior commanders, ‘one can sleep a bit by day and have time for oneself. Military things also look a bit rosier. There is now enough fuel, and, due to the containment of Malta by our fliers, the convoys are again arriving in Tripoli.’ Rommel as always, could hardly contain himself with no action and on 21 January 1942 he issued a Special Order of the Day to his troops: ‘German and Italian soldiers!’ it read. ‘You have fought hard battles against an enemy [of] superior numbers, however, your morale is unbroken. At the moment we outnumber the enemy immediately in front of us. The Panzergruppe will therefore launch an attack to defeat them. I expect every



On the Via Balbia Rommel watches his troops go by. These are clearly Italian trucks manned by the Bersaglieri – note the feathered headgear. (Author’s Collection)

soldier to give of his best during these decisive days. Long live Italy! Long live the great German Reich! Long live the Führer!’

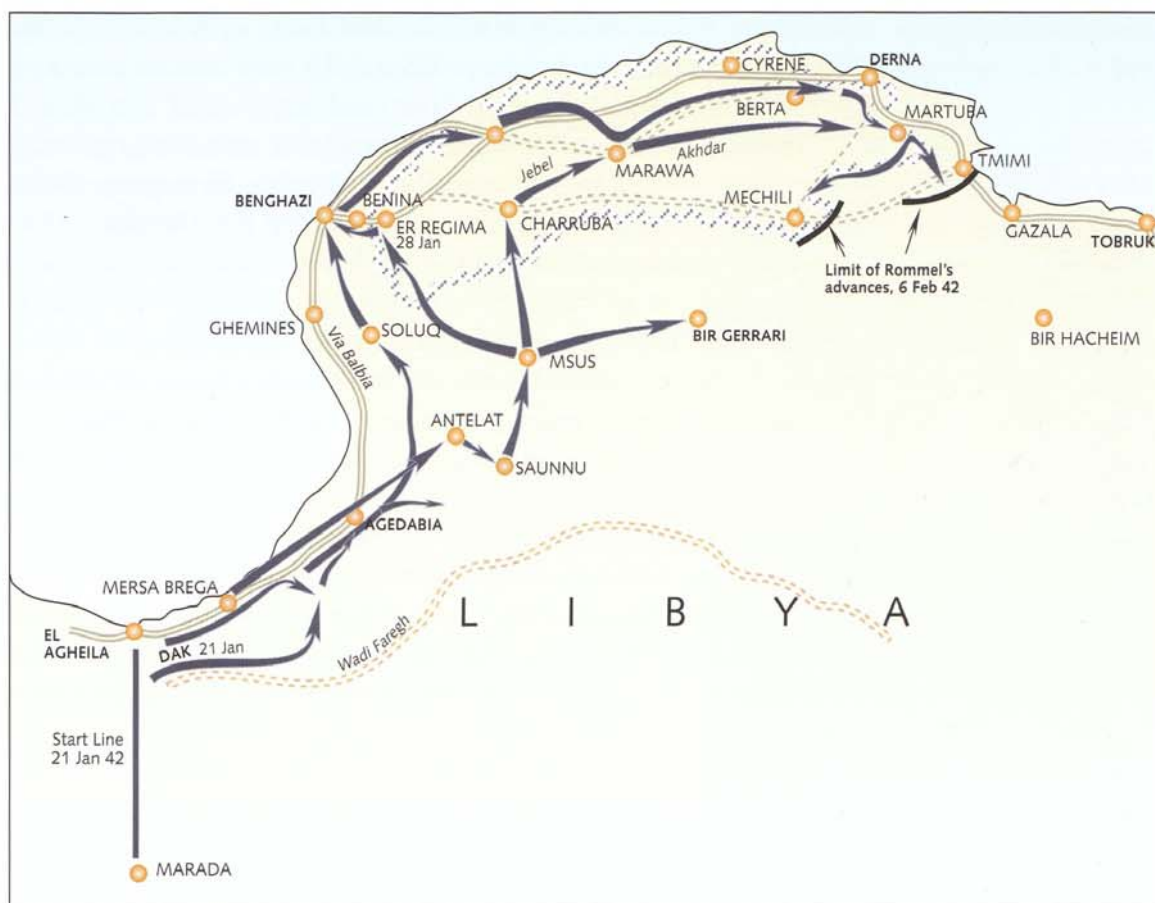
#### *ROMMEL ADVANCES*

The Desert Fox advanced on the 21st from his base at El Agheila, taking the British by surprise and quickly recaptured Agedabia and Beda Fomm. He had originally intended his attack to be merely a spoiling action to dissuade the British from advancing, but, when he heard that the enemy was having considerable logistic problems, he decided to turn it into a major assault. Clearly he felt that his star was in the ascendancy, for he had just been awarded the Swords to his Knight's Cross for his brilliantly executed withdrawal from Cyrenaica. It was the same with his enemies, who were apparently also falling even further under Rommel's spell: 'We have a very daring and skilful opponent against us, and may I say across the havoc of war, a great General,' commented Churchill in the House of Commons.

The German and Italian force which Rommel commanded and which had been raised to the level of a Panzerarmee on 30 January was now advancing in three columns: in the north, on or north of the Via Balbia, was a mixed group of mobile infantry and artillery from 21 Pz Div and 90 leichte Div, under the command of Oberst Marcks (Inf Regt 104), with Rommel's command group in close attendance; in the centre was Gen Gambarara's Italian XX Mobile Corps; and to the south, in the desert some 20 miles south of the Via Balbia, was the rest of the DAK under Cruewell.

During the first day of the advance they succeeded in pushing the British back through a number of their pre-planned delaying positions and the next day the Marcks column reached Agedabia. The advance continued to Antelat and then on to Msus, from where Rommel sent part of his force forward to cut off the British 1st Armd Div. However, he was only partly successful. The British lost many of their tanks and other weapons, but the DAK had also suffered heavy casualties. The Germans captured Benghazi on the 29th, then continued to push forward for the next few days, until the Eighth Army units had withdrawn to the Gazala Line. This comprised a series of brigade-sized defensive 'boxes', linked and protected by extensive minefields, running down from Gazala in the north to Bir Hacheim in the desert well to the south. The 'boxes' were surrounded by wire, mines, slit-trenches and pillboxes, and contained seven days' worth of ammunition and supplies.

The British had continual command problems during this period, which led, for example, to Gen Godwin-Austen resigning after being overruled by Ritchie over the evacuation of Benghazi. The 'Auk' thought long and hard about sacking Ritchie, who by now had undoubtedly lost the confidence of his corps commanders, but decided against it, despite being 'prodded' by London. 'The British High Command in Cairo and the Western Desert remained a well-meaning democracy', wrote Gen Sir William Jackson knowingly, in his history of the North African campaign, 'in which senior commanders continued to treat orders as a basis for discussion.' This was clearly no way to run a war against someone like Rommel. Nevertheless, Rommel still had his



Rommel's advance to Gazala, 21 January–February 1942

own command problems, especially with the Italians, who saw the defence of Tripolitania as their primary task – especially as no further supplies were expected to arrive in Tripoli in the foreseeable future. Despite this, Rommel had undoubtedly won a major tactical victory, having, in just two weeks, pushed the British back some 350 miles from the Tripolitanian border, with considerable loss to the enemy and not much to his own forces.

### THE LULL

The front then stabilised along the Gazala Line as both sides endeavoured to build up their strength again and resume the offensive. While the capture of the vital port of Tripoli remained Auchinleck's long-term objective, it was still more important for the British to retake the airfields in Western Cyrenaica (at Derna, Mechili and Matuba), because without them it was exceptionally difficult – indeed well-nigh impossible – to properly protect the continued resupply by sea of Malta, the loss of which would have

had a major adverse effect upon Allied strategy in the Middle East. So Auchinleck, like his predecessor, was continually under pressure from Churchill, who needed success in North Africa if he was to maintain American interest and support in the area. It certainly appeared to be the one place where some success was possible, especially after the reverses in the Far East, where the Japanese had now taken Singapore, and in Russia, where the Red Army was being equally hard pressed by the Germans. At a lower level, Ritchie was more interested in improving his Gazala Line defences, although he was still thinking about preparing for the major attack that would be necessary if they were to fulfil the Prime Minister's strategic goal. Shortage of decent armour was the main bugbear. Battle experience had shown time and time again that, on the whole, British armour was inferior to German, and not just in the basic characteristics of firepower, protection and mobility, but also – with the exception of the vastly experienced 7th Arm'd Div – in crew training and operating experience. The only way to counter this was by having a considerable superiority in tank numbers, although some real progress was in fact being made, both in tank and anti-tank design and production. As far as tanks were concerned, the appearance of the American M3 medium (known by the British as the 'Grant'), with its powerful 75mm dual-purpose (AP and HE) gun was significant, despite the fact that the gun was in a side sponson



This was the spartan accommodation in which Rommel normally lived – how very different from that of most field marshals! (IWM – RML 16)

with limited traverse (less, in fact than the sponsons on the first British heavy tanks of the First World War). Nevertheless this was the first occasion since that conflict that British armour had firepower of equivalent calibre to their old six-pounder. And it had made quite an impression upon the Germans when it first saw action, Rommel noting in his diary that the new American tank had 'torn great holes in our ranks'. 'The new tanks are arriving now and they are super,' wrote one British tank man when some of the first Grants arrived in 5 RTR, '... the finest things we had ever seen. They have a nine-cylinder radial engine and are quite fast.' On the German side the Panzer III and IV 'Specials' with their longer-barrelled, more powerful guns helped to even up the score, but very few arrived in time to take part in the early Gazala battles.

As far as anti-tank guns were concerned, at long last the British two-pounder was beginning to be replaced by the six-pounder. The first guns were delivered in September 1941, although still initially had difficulty in penetrating the frontal armour of the heavier German tanks, while the dreaded 88mm weapon could deal effectively with any British armour, as could the 7.5cm Pak 40.

#### *PRESSURE FROM THE PM*

Churchill continued to exert pressure on Gen Auchinleck, endeavouring by all available means to get him to begin an assault on Western Cyrenaica, because he feared that Malta might fall if the pressure on it was not relieved. The 'Auk' however, was adamant that if he did attack before he was ready the result might be a ghastly failure, leaving the way open for the Axis forces to advance into Egypt and reach Alexandria, Cairo and the Canal. They continued to argue and Churchill even asked him to fly home to discuss the matter, but the 'Auk' refused, saying that he could not leave the Middle East and in any case his opinions were widely known! One can imagine what effect this had on Churchill! 'The Chiefs of Staff, Defence Committee and War Cabinet have all earnestly considered your telegram in relation to the whole war situation,' he signalled Auchinleck. 'We are agreed that in spite of the risks you mention you would be right to attack the enemy and fight a major battle, if possible during May, and the sooner the better.' In the end the argument would become irrelevant as the Desert Fox would himself seize the initiative once again.



Waiting for Zero Hour. This German infantry NCO looks at his watch, while keeping hold of his MP 40 submachine gun. He has a stick grenade stuffed in his belt and a makeshift cloth cover on his steel helmet, as does his companion. (IWM - HU 5624)

### OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

Rommel had been over in Germany in late March and returned on the 29th, with the Führer's qualified agreement that he could resume the offensive again in May to break through the Gazala Line and take Tobruk, but then he *must* go on to the defensive. Rommel's plan was to make a strong feint attack on the centre of the Gazala positions, to look as though he was trying to break through the minefields towards Tobruk, via the shortest, most obvious route. While his enemies were looking in the wrong direction he would then lead his mobile troops around the southernmost 'Box' at Bir Hacheim and drive north-eastwards to Acroma and El Adem, to take on and rout the British mobile forces in the open desert, before attacking the heart of the British positions from the east. Then he would move on to Tobruk and deal with anyone trying to join the garrison or escaping eastwards back to Egypt.

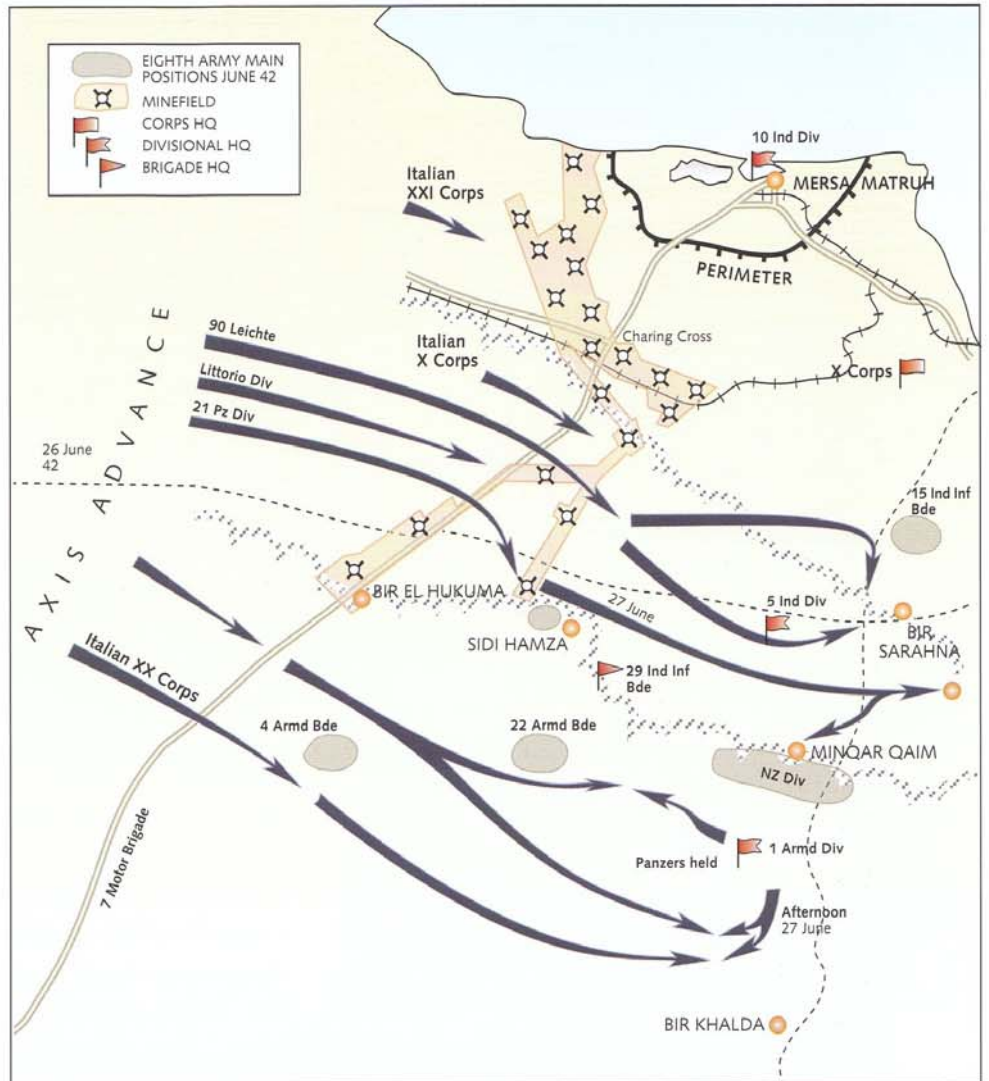
For this attack he divided his forces as follows: for the northern feint attack (under Cruewell), two Italian corps (X and XXI), 15 inf rifle bde (the two rifle regt groups of 90 leichte Div) and Armee artillery; for the southern sweep force (codenamed 'Venezia') under Rommel himself, the DAK (now under Nehring) comprising 15 and 21 Pz Divs plus 90 leichte (less its infantry with the northern force), the Ariete Armd Div and the Trieste Mot Div.

Opposing them, the Allies had a wide mix of tanks, but nearly 300 more than the Germans/Italians. It is perhaps worth looking at the numerical balance of tanks in some detail:

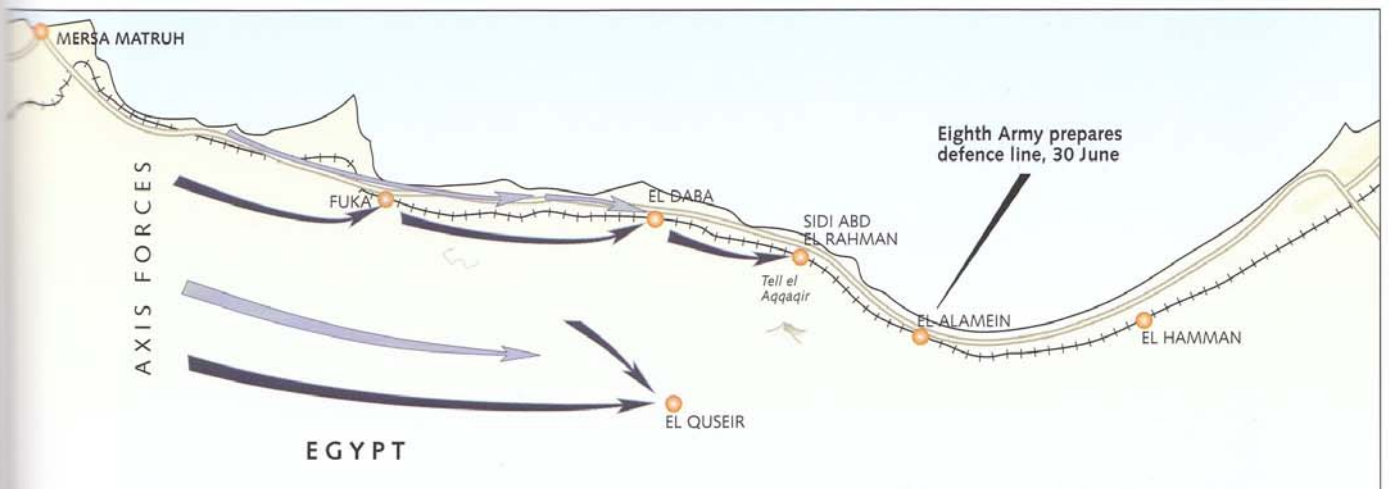
Tanks		Allied	
Axis			
Medium PzKpfw II	50	Stuarts	149
PzKpfw III	242	Grants	167
(including 19 'Specials')		Crusaders	257
PzKpfw IV	40	Valentines	166
		Matilda II	110
TOTALS	332		849
Italian M13/40 and M14/41	228		
<b>Reserves</b>			
PzKpfw II	10	Stuarts	70
PzKpfw III	38	Grants	75
'Specials'	19		
PzKpfw IV	1		
'Specials'	9		
TOTALS	77		145
GRAND TOTALS	637		994

(Source: *British Official History*, Vol. III, p. 220)

The Gazala battles



Rommel's advance to El Alamein





Anstalt:		Datum:	
Gericht Nr.	Befehlet am	19	Uhr durch
	Aufgenommen am	19	Uhr durch
	Erhalten am	19	Uhr
Fern- Sprech- Blatt:		Sprach Nr.	
		von	
		an	
Anmerkung:			
Verbleibende Stelle:	in Verbindung	Ort	Zeit Wochen
	Abgegangen		Gründe Bemerkungen
	Angelommen		
	in		
<p>In die Truppen von Bir Hacheim.</p> <p>Wichtiger Entscheidend bedeutet unmittelbares Blutvergießen. Ihr werdet dasselbe Schicksal erleiden, wie die anderen ausgehenden Brigaden, die gut dabei, die vorgetrennt vernichtet wurden.</p> <p>Wir stellen den Kampf ein, wenn ihr unsere Flaggen seht und ohne Waffen zu uns über den Fluss kommt.</p> <p>Rommel Kommandant</p> <p>19. 12. 41</p>			

Rommel's ultimatum to the Free French garrison at Bir Hacheim — but they held out. (Author's Collection)

Such bald figures, however, give a totally wrong impression of comparative tank strengths as all the Allied medium tanks except for the Grants were obsolescent, underarmoured and undergunned when compared with the German PzKpfw IIIs and IVs, while the light tanks on both sides were little better than 'cannon fodder'.

### ROMMEL AN DER SPITZE!

Despite the Allies' numerical advantage and the fact that they were in strong defensive positions, Rommel held the initiative and had supreme confidence in his own abilities and those of his troops. The British had appreciated that the Axis might well try a southern loop, but when it came they thought it was the feint and that the main attack was going to be through the minefields in the centre. So they were

Two of Rommel's PzKpfw IIIs make their way across a stony desert area. These are Ausf Gs, which were armed with a 5cm KwK L/42 gun in place of the 3.7cm KwK L/46.5 gun. (Author's Collection)

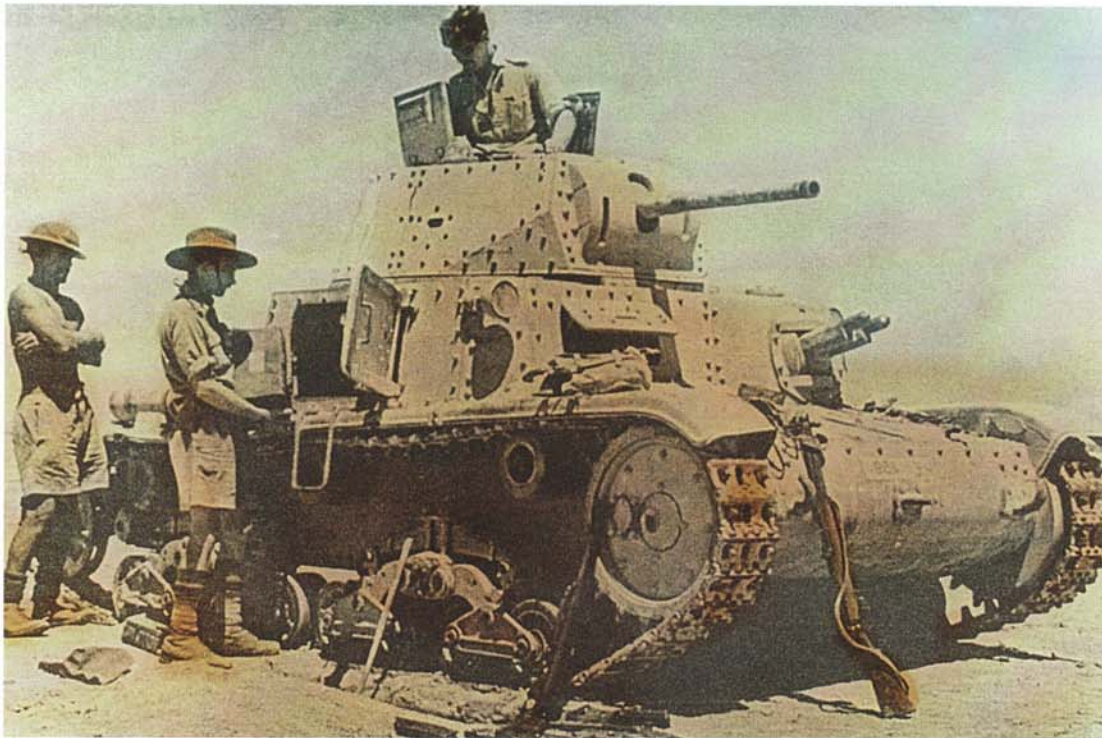




A Grant at speed. This was the American M3 medium tank, which was armed with a 75mm gun in a side sponson and a 37mm gun in the small turret on top. It created quite a stir when it first came into service in the desert. (IWM – E 18684)

Getting tanks off the battlefield and back to forward workshops was essential when on-the-spot repairs were impossible or the tank was too badly damaged. Here a Matilda Mk II climbs on to the transporter under its own power, but 'dead' vehicles could be winched on board. (IWM – BM 11537)





Three British soldiers inspect a knocked-out Italian M13/40 medium tank which had a 47mm gun and weighed 14 tons. It was the best Italian tank to be used in action. (Author's Collection)

completely thrown off balance when they heard at first light on 27 May that the Desert Fox was leading his panzers around the Free French 'box' at Bir Hacheim. Apart from the Free French 'box' the rest of the southern defensive positions were quickly all pushed back and everything seemed to be going according to plan for Rommel. However, when his 'Venezia' force turned north-east and made to cross the Sidra Ridge it found itself heavily engaged on both sides and lost many tanks. It could also not be resupplied and for two days was held in an area south of Sidi Mufta which came to be called 'The Cauldron' (Hexenkessel) because of the heavy and confused fighting there. The main Axis forces were now concentrated in this area, with the British minefield behind them (through which they were still trying to bring resupply, but without success), whilst endeavouring to prepare themselves for the British counter-attack which they knew was coming. In fact it did not come until 5/6 June and was then easily beaten off with heavy losses. Five days later the gallant garrison at Bir Hacheim was finally forced to withdraw, but not before the Axis forces had expended considerable effort against them. On 12 June the panzers burst out of the 'Cauldron', striking both south and east and beating off a number of uncoordinated and hasty Allied counter-attacks. This pressure forced the Eighth Army to withdraw from their Gazala Line positions and fall back, first on Tobruk, then further to the east – just as Rommel had anticipated.

By 18 June Rommel was once again besieging Tobruk and two days later, began a blistering attack on the fortress. This time the garrison was unable to withstand the pressure – especially after heavy dive-bombing attacks. By 1600 hours most of the main defences had been overrun and the airfield taken. Next day, at 0800 hours, Maj Gen Klopper, the South African garrison commander, surrendered formally. It was the high spot of Rommel's career. Hitler promoted him to Field Marshal – the youngest in the German Army. Nevertheless, the victory did not come lightly, as he had lost a major portion of his armour and a number of his most senior and able commanders killed and wounded. However, overall casualties and prisoners were fewer than 3,500, compared with over 50,000 on the Allied side.

### STRIKE FOR THE DELTA!

This was not the end of Rommel's advance. The Eighth Army had lost much of its armour and was in considerable disarray. Auchinleck gave permission for Ritchie to withdraw to Mersa Matruh, but then summarily relieved him of his command, taking personal charge in his place. He rapidly appreciated that his forces were too dispersed and not in a position to hold a line that far forward. Therefore he decided that when the enemy attacked he would fall back to the more easily defensible positions around



Tobruk is finally taken! On 20 June 1942 Rommel's forces began a blistering attack on the fortress, which was taken by 1600 hours. This medical vehicle was among the first into Tobruk. Hitler promoted Rommel to the rank of field marshal for his success, the youngest in the German Army. (IWM – MH 5856)



A new C-in-C for the Middle East to replace the 'Auk'. Gen Sir Harold Alexander was able, charming, suave and experienced — an ideal choice and a stabilising influence on the more flamboyant Montgomery. (IWM)

El Alamein. He did not have long to wait as Rommel, even though he was now down to fewer than sixty operational tanks, was determined to keep on attacking. On 26 June the Axis forces attacked astride the southern escarpment, swiftly surrounding Mersa Matruh. Next day the garrison split up into small parties and broke out, while the British armour fell back eastwards in front of the advancing panzers. 2nd New Zealand Div was heavily involved with 21 Pz Div and 1st British Arm'd Div struggled to hold 15 Pz Div. Then 90 leichte cut the coast road at Sidi Abd el Rahman on the 29th and the scattered units of the Eighth Army fell back to El Alamein.

If they, or for that matter the opposing German panzers, thought they would now get a breathing space, then they were mistaken! Rommel could see all the glittering prizes of Alexandria, Cairo and the Suez Canal almost in his grasp.<sup>1</sup> He had also captured large stocks of enemy supplies and would use them to replenish his troops and to send the DAK and the Italian Mobile Corps on at full speed towards the wire, after just one-day break for rest and reorganisation! 'I was determined at all costs, to avoid giving the British any opportunity of creating another front,' he wrote in his diary, 'and of occupying it with fresh formations from the north-east.' Rommel then

persuaded Kesselring<sup>2</sup> to agree to his pursuit of the enemy east of the Egyptian frontier. This was undoubtedly made easier by the fact that many of the vehicles now used by the DAK (and even the uniforms the drivers wore) were captured, so they were able to 'mingle' with the retreating Eighth Army troops and get on faster at every opportunity.

### NEW COMMANDERS ARRIVE

By 1 July the Axis forces had closed up on a line from El Alamein via Ruweisat Ridge to Deir el Munassib, but this was to be the limit of their success. During the next four

1. One can imagine the panic that the proximity of Rommel's forces caused in Cairo, with many people desperately trying to escape to Palestine, while masses of secret documents were being burned in the British Embassy and GHQ.
2. Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring was C-in-C South (Italy) and nominally responsible for the German forces in North Africa. An extremely able officer, he did not always see eye to eye with Rommel. He was most anxious to mount a major offensive on Malta.

days Rommel mounted a number of attacks, but all were repulsed with considerable losses. Then, on the night of 10/11 July, the newly arrived 9th Australian Div attacked Italian XXI Corps positions on Tel el Eisa (north-west of El Alamein) and routed the Sabratha Division. Rommel had to send in some of his last remaining German reserves to plug the gap. The next day it was the Trieste Div that was routed and the situation this time was only rectified by units of 164 leichte Div, who had just arrived by air from Crete. British counter-attacks along the Ruweisat Ridge on 14–15 and 21–22 July made limited progress, but they were sufficient to convince Rommel that a stalemate had been reached. This was probably true on the other side as well, Auchinleck steadfastly refusing to consider any further attacks, despite continual pressure from Churchill. He chose instead to stand fast and to endeavour to build up his forces. Inevitably Churchill ‘blew his top’ and Auchinleck was replaced by Gen Sir Harold Alexander as C-in-C Middle East. Like Wavell before him, Auchinleck had not been prepared to put up with the size of the ‘butcher’s bills’ any longer.

At the same time a new GOC-in-C for the Eighth Army was brought in from England, namely Lt Gen Bernard Law Montgomery.<sup>3</sup> Here was a very different commander to any of his predecessors. As supremely confident in his own abilities as his opponent the Desert Fox, he was also a born showman and had long appreciated the importance of ‘PR’ in relation to the morale of his troops. Soon nicknamed ‘Monty’, he quickly appreciated that he must inject some pride and a sense of purpose into the demoralised troops of the Eighth Army (‘Brave but Baffled’ is how he described them). He had to give them a task which was for once within their capabilities and one which suited the British characteristic of dogged determination against all odds. The charismatic, down to earth Monty was ideally balanced by the charming, suave ‘Alex’ Alexander, who was perfectly suited to the political intrigues of Cairo, yet was no stranger to the battlefield. Together, they would form an unbeatable team. They were perhaps fortunate to have arrived at a time when, administratively, things were beginning to go right for the British, while for the Axis forces the problems seemed to mount daily.

3. Montgomery might never have been sent out had not Lt Gen ‘Strafer’ Gott, who had just taken over command of the Eighth Army, been killed in an aircrash. Gott, who had commanded both 7th Armd Div and later XIII Corps, was an admired and trusted commander of considerable ability, but he lacked Monty’s charisma.



The British now had a new commander for the Eighth Army – Lt Gen Bernard Law Montgomery. Note his interesting headgear, which he would soon exchange for a black RTR beret. (IWM – 481578)



Victor of El Alamein and commander of an invigorated Eighth Army, Gen (later Field Marshal) Bernard Law Montgomery. (IWM — TR 1035)

Undoubtedly supply was at the root of the difficulties, even with Tobruk, Bardia and Mersa Matruh in their hands, but none of these small ports could properly handle the large cargoes required to keep up with Rommel's demands. There was also a lack of transport to bring supplies forward and the transport that was available was under constant attack from the ever-increasing Desert Air Force. Rommel, with justification, blamed the inept Italians for the parlous state of the administrative 'tail'. True, the Italian Army 'Supremo' Marshal Ugo Cavallero did carry out a major reorganisation, but it would not be properly up and running before major events changed the situation for ever.



No more retreating! British infantry dig in and get ready to meet the coming German assault. (IWM — E 13945)

#### *NO MORE RETREATING!*

Montgomery's first action was to let it be known that there would be no more retreats. He also laid down that such desert innovations as 'Jock Columns'<sup>4</sup> would be a thing of the past and that the normal division and brigade organisation would be the standard formations. Monty made a series of whirlwind visits to units in the front line — standing up on top of his jeep and talking to the men in a language which they understood. He was so successful that in a very short time the whole of the Eighth Army seemed to be filled with a new optimism and sense of purpose. Sensibly he also chose to co-locate his HQ alongside that of the Desert Air Force, so that from now on they would work in close harmony. The future began to look brighter than it had done for some time. Nevertheless, there was still another major battle to fight and it was one that they could not afford to lose.

4. 'Jock Columns', named after their 'inventor' Brig (later Maj Gen) 'Jock' Campbell VC, a charismatic gunner who was killed at Sidi Rezegh, comprised small all arms teams whose task was to provide a swift defensive screen in the vast desert areas of no-man's-land. However, they were not strong enough to hold ground against a determined enemy attack nor to do more than raid or ambush on a small scale.



## FIVE

# THEY SHALL NOT PASS!

### CHURCHILL AND MONTGOMERY

As if to emphasise the importance of the moment, Prime Minister Winston Churchill visited Egypt twice soon after the new duo of commanders had arrived, on his way to and from an important meeting in Moscow with Stalin, at which he told the Russian leader about the decision to mount Operation 'Torch' – the Allied invasion of French North Africa – instead of a cross-Channel invasion. The first visit to Cairo was on his way to Moscow, when he had been accompanied by the CIGS (Gen Alan Brooke). Before leaving on 10 August, he had written a short, succinct directive for Alexander. It read:

1. Your prime and main duty will be to take on and destroy at the earliest opportunity the German-Italian Army commanded by Field Marshal Rommel together with all its supplies and establishments in Egypt and Libya.
2. You will discharge or cause to be discharged such other duties as pertain to your Command without prejudice to the task described in paragraph 1 which must be considered paramount in His Majesty's interests.

(Source: *British Official History of the Second World War*, Vol. III, page 369)

On his return some days later he was undoubtedly impressed with what he saw, especially in the improved morale which Montgomery had achieved so quickly at HQ Eighth Army. As historian Nigel Hamilton says in his biography *Monty*: 'There could be no doubt about Churchill's genuine submission to the "Montgomery-magic" that evening.' Here, after a succession of pessimists, was at long last someone who was as confidently assured of victory as the PM himself. When Churchill left Monty's HQ at Burg-el-Arab on 20 August, he wrote in the visitors' book: 'May the anniversary of Blenheim which marks the opening of the new Command bring to the Commander in Chief of the Eighth Army and his troops the fame and fortune they will surely deserve.' Monty had the experience and the ability, and was far-sighted enough to be able to visualise the forthcoming operation in its entirety, even before it had begun, but would he be able to 'stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood' among his soldiers, as Shakespeare's Henry V had managed to do so effectively at Harfleur?



Backs to the wall. The Eighth Army now had to dig in and prepare for the inevitable attack which Rommel launched in the Battle of Alam el Halfa. It was Monty's first battle and he won it conclusively. (Author's Collection)

### *IN POSITION*

The British and Commonwealth forces now held strong defensive positions on the features Ruweisat Ridge, Alam Nayil and Alam el Halfa, in considerable strength (see map, p. 101). Invigorated by their new commanders, they were determined not to budge and not to allow Rommel through to claim his ultimate prizes. To further stiffen their resolve both Alexander and Montgomery issued Special Orders of the day. At GHQ Middle East, Alexander's read:

The German/Italian Forces are trying to force their way into the Delta to capture Cairo and Alexandria and drive us from Egypt.

It is the duty of every officer and soldier to stand firm and fight the enemy wherever he may find him, regardless of the cost.

The results of the whole war may well depend on how we conduct ourselves in this great battle. As brothers in arms we must have confidence in ourselves, in each other, and in our weapons and determination to win or die. This is the fighting spirit which will give us victory.

SOLDIERS! DO YOUR DUTY.  
 H.R. ALEXANDER General  
 Commander-in-Chief  
 Middle East Forces

Monty's, which was the first in what became a regular, and now famous, series of 'Orders of the Day' was a similar clarion call to his troops. He had shown a draft copy to Churchill before he left, and no doubt the PM had approved of every word:

The enemy is now attempting to break through our positions in order to reach CAIRO, SUEZ & ALEXANDRIA, and to drive us from EGYPT.

The Eighth Army bars the way. It carries a great responsibility and the whole future of the war will depend upon how we carry out our task.

We will fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be NO WITHDRAWAL and NO SURRENDER. Every officer and man must continue to do his duty as long as he has breath in his body.

If each one of us does his duty, we cannot fail; the opportunity will then occur to take the offensive ourselves and to destroy once and for all the enemy forces now in EGYPT.

Into battle then, with stout hearts and with the determination to do our duty.  
 And may God give us the victory.

#### NO WITHDRAWAL

Monty was so determined that there should be no withdrawal that he moved up to the front line everything that he could prise out of GHQ Cairo, so as to strengthen his positions to the maximum. 'Evacuation transport' was sent to the rear, while every position was stocked with as much ammunition, fuel, water and rations as possible. He also passed the word to all his troops that there would be no more 'swanning around' and definitely no more 'cavalry charges'! Divisions would fight as divisions and they would wait in their well-prepared defensive positions for the enemy to come to them and then defeat him from these positions, with fire from well dug-in anti-tank guns and hull-down tanks. And most important of all, in future 'orders would be orders' and not merely a basis for discussion! 'The reaction within the Eighth Army to the measures I have described was electric,' Montgomery wrote later. 'The morale of the troops was in the ascendant and their confidence was becoming re-established.'<sup>1</sup>

It was Rommel's intention to attack the British positions as soon as he had received enough supplies of all types, but he knew that his enemies had an even better chance of receiving more men and materiel than he could, so every day he waited might prove to be an even bigger bonus for them. Eventually he decided that the optimum date to attack would be at the next full moon – on the night of 30/31 August. His final

1. *El Alamein to the River Sangro.*



Rommel as always  
 (WWII – E 4062)

Monty speaks to  
 to a group of Br





Rommel as always was well forward with his troops, exhorting them to greater heights as they were so close to the glittering prizes of Cairo, Alexandria and the Suez Canal. (IWM — E 4062E)

Monty speaks to his troops. Montgomery always made it a rule to go around to his units and personally explain to the more senior members how he saw the battle progressing. Here he talks to a group of British and New Zealand officers and NCOs. (IWM — BNA 1683)





Camouflage was important, especially in the areas of stony scrub on the edges of the sand sea. Here the crew of a well-concealed British two-pounder anti-tank gun crew wait for the enemy to approach. (IWM – E 1668)

exhortation to his troops on the 29th spoke of annihilating the enemy and confidently promised them that they would be in Alexandria in two or three days. But despite his outward display of confidence, the Desert Fox was far from well. He had been out in the desert, living his spartan, hectic life, far longer than any of his younger commanders and soldiers. The climate and conditions were now taking their toll and his personal physician was extremely worried about his state of health. He had chronic gastric problems and suffered fainting fits, accompanied by inflamed eyes, a nose infection and a swollen liver. He was a shadow of his normal robust self and eventually had to admit that he was ill. He therefore proposed that another brilliant panzer commander, General ‘Schnelle Heinz’ Guderian, should come out to help him. However, Guderian was, as so often, in trouble with both Hitler and the OKW for being too outspoken, so the proposal was turned down and Rommel, ill as he was, had to continue alone.

#### *ROMMEL'S BATTLE PLAN*

Rommel had appreciated that the northern half of the British/Commonwealth position was too strong for him to break through, so, while the newly arrived 164 leichte Division, supported by the Ramcke Parachute Brigade<sup>2</sup> and some Italian infantry

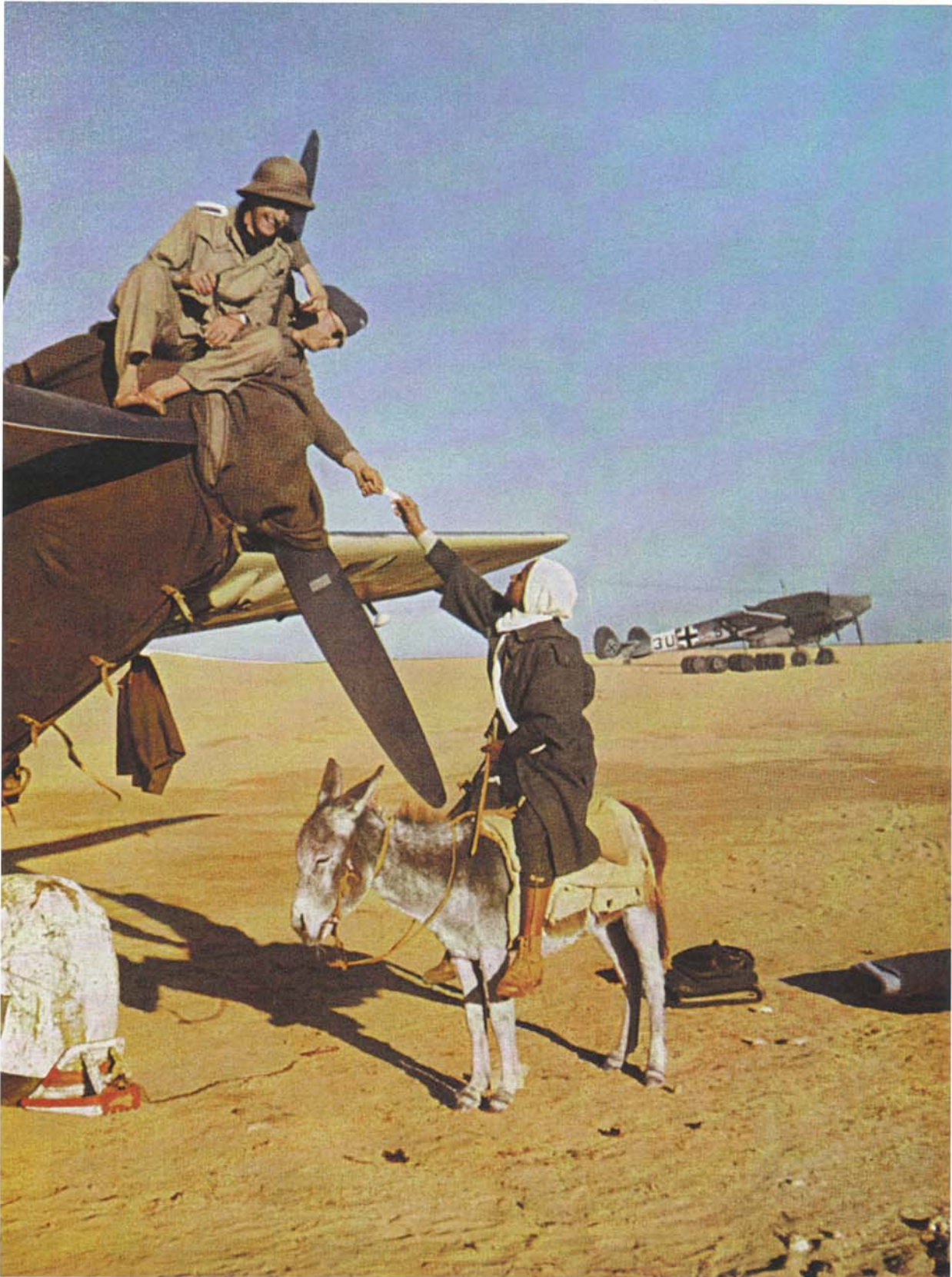
2. Gen Hermann Ramcke, a tough and pugnacious paratrooper, was a veteran of Crete and one of the Luftwaffe's most highly decorated officers. He and his paras could always be relied upon in a battle.



Heavy pounding. The 10.5cm le FH 18 was the standard light field howitzer used by the DAK. It was fitted with a muzzle brake when using more powerful propellant loads. (IWM — MH 5568)

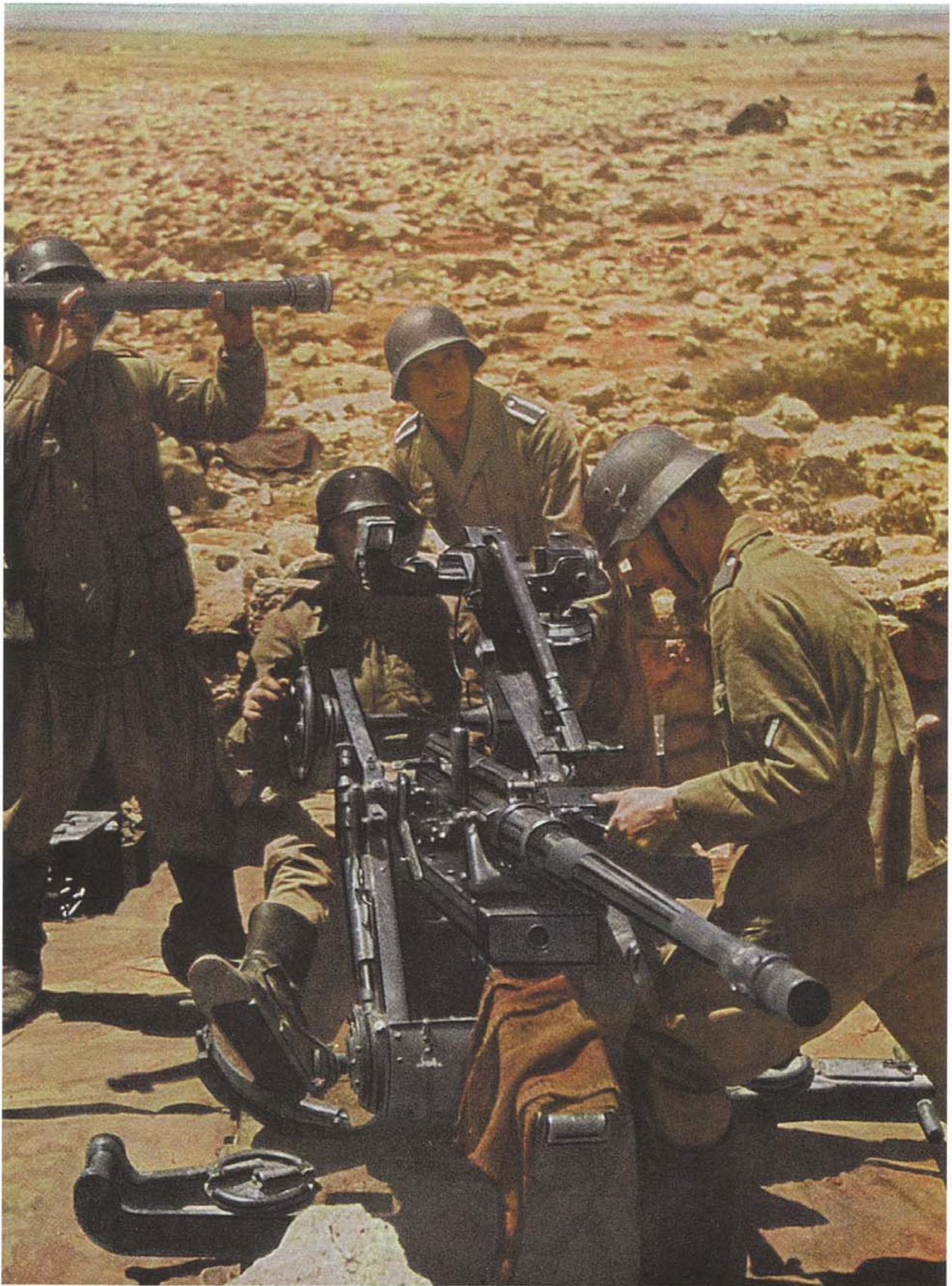


Probably the most feared anti-tank gun in the desert was the German 8.8cm AA/anti-tank gun, seen here being towed by a Sd Kfz 251/7 halftrack. The dreaded '88' could easily penetrate any Allied tank at considerable distances. (IWM — MH 181)



Luftwaffe personnel perch on the wing of an aircraft and talk with local Bedu whose way of life was turned upside down by the war. (BKUW — page 60)

An A  
range



An AA gun crew in action. The six-man crew of the 2cm Flak 30/38 comprised a detachment commander, a layer, a range setter, a loader, an ammunition number and a range taker. (BUKW — Page 76)



divisions, pinned down the enemy there with a series of limited attacks on the coastal area, his main mobile forces would be assembled in the south, down towards the Qattara Depression. Here, 90 leichte would be in the north, and the Italian XX Mobile Corps (Ariete and Littorio Armd Divs) in the centre, and then finally, on the southern flank, the DAK with its recce units on the extreme southern edge. Having forced their way through the enemy minefields, they would wheel north-eastwards, past the main British forward positions, aiming directly at the Alam el Halfa Ridge, in order to cut off the enemy from their supply depots. Then they would turn westwards and annihilate the British, leaving the way clear for a final triumphal march eastwards to the Delta.

Rommel's main striking force was, as always, the tanks of the DAK, and this time he had some 200 available, of which just under half were the upgunned 'Specials',



In defence tanks were often used static, firing from hull-down positions, but a proportion were always kept back for counter-attack purposes. Whatever their use, crews still had work to do. Here a crewman tries to prise twisted metal away from the track of his Crusader, after it has received a direct hit – fortunately not from a very powerful gun or it would have penetrated. (IWM – E 18690)



A GI teacher. When the new M3 medium Grant tanks arrived, American tank instructors came as well to explain the intricacies of the new AFVs.  
(IWM - E 8493)

including twenty-six of the more powerful PzKpfw IVs, at that time the best-armed tank in the desert. The PzKpfw IV 'Special' mounted the new long-barrelled 7.5cm KwK40 L/48 gun, which improved its main armament dramatically; from its old close-support role, the 'Special' became a main battle tank with a powerful anti-tank gun. They would be facing a mixture of light and medium, old and new Allied tanks, including some 210 mediums belonging to the 8th and 22nd Armd Bdes. These included only seventy-one of the newly arrived American M3 Grants, which had already had quite a decisive impact on the battle. Even though the rest were obsolescent Matildas, Valentines and Crusaders, the fact that they would be engaging the enemy from dug-in fire positions, increased their chances of survival in what was, for the British, to be mainly a defensive battle. On balance, this evened up the odds

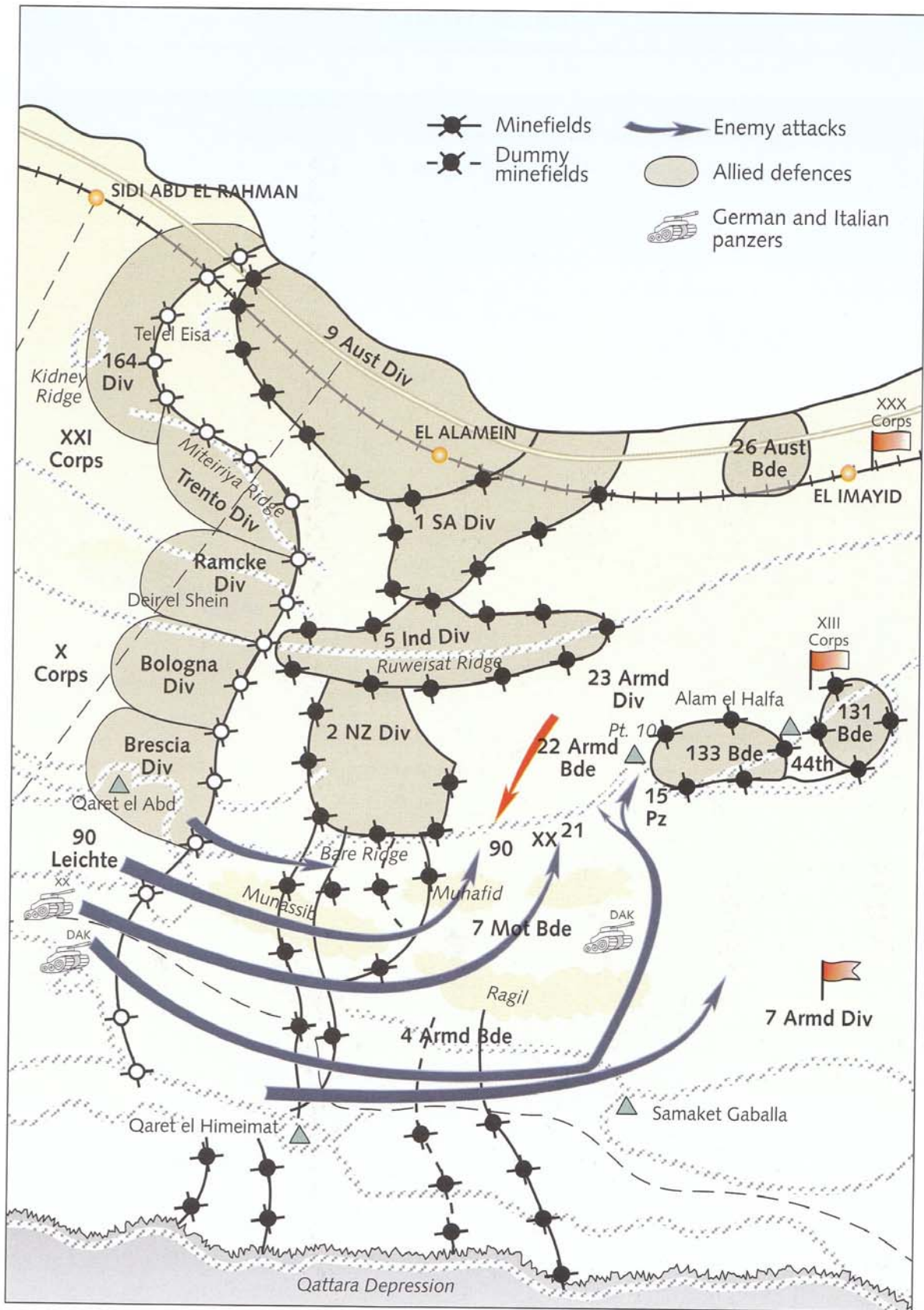
somewhat, but the 'edge' was still with the Germans, causing even the ever more confident Churchill some real moments of concern.

#### *LOSS OF INTELLIGENCE GATHERING FORCE*

On the debit side, Rommel had recently lost the services of one of his most important intelligence units – his intercept company. While the Allies still had ULTRA, which brought them continual intelligence information, Rommel was without his radio intercept company which had been captured during the summer campaign. Its brilliant commander, Lt Alfred Seebohm had been killed. Of course, ULTRA intelligence material had always been readily available to the Allies, but in the desert fighting this had been partly balanced by Rommel's tactical level sources of information. Rommel did have another source of battlefield information: the 'Kondor' mission. This comprised two young German spies in their twenties and a string of sub-agents, based in Egypt. The mission was headed by John Eppler, a young man born of German parents in Alexandria. The other main agent was Peter Monkaster, a German oil mechanic who had spent much of his pre-war life in East Africa. They were both captured and their spy ring broken in the summer of 1942, but Rommel did not find out. The British then impersonated Kondor, sending Rommel false information which he continued to trust. This was particularly important just before the Alam el Halfa battle, when Kondor sent the following message: 'Have confirmed message from reliablest source, Eighth Army plan to make final stand in battle for Egypt at Alam Halfa. They are still awaiting reinforcements and are not yet ready for more than makeshift defence.' Then came some information about reinforcements and supplies arriving at Port Said. It is known that Rommel did receive and read this message, as a copy with his mark on it was later captured, so undoubtedly he was partly influenced by this double-cross. Indeed, he later called Kondor the 'greatest hero of all' and requested OKW to award him with an Iron Cross.

#### *THE ATTACK BEGINS*

The German attack was launched at 2300 hours on the night of 30/31 August. The German and Italian troops had first to get through a series of minefields, which were covered by sustained and accurate fire from the tanks of 7th Armd Div. Surprise had been impossible to achieve – indeed, the Desert Air Force had been bombing and strafing the Panzerarmee units ever since they had entered their concentration areas some days earlier. The ground and air bombardment would continue virtually unabated until severe dust storms blew up which hindered both ground and air visibility, preventing most of the Allied air activity. They were a blessing in disguise for the Axis troops. On the Alam el Halfa position 22nd Armd Bde tanks were in such well-concealed positions that they even had to expose themselves deliberately in order to draw the enemy armour northwards. The most northerly of the thrusts was easily held by the 9th Australian Div, but, as will be remembered from Rommel's plan, this was only meant to be a feint anyway. In the centre, a heavier holding attack partly lost



Battle of Alam Halfa, 30 August – 7 September 1942



Stone sangars provided some protection in places where digging was impossible. Here burning German vehicles can be seen — the nearest is a Kettenkrad, which was a small tracked motor-cycle. (IWM — E 16691)

direction but nevertheless achieved some success on the right of the 5th Indian Div, but was finally ejected from the Ruweisat Ridge by a strong counter-attack at first light on the 31st. The major attack was, of course, in the south, on the left flank of the New Zealand Div. As planned, the 7th Armd Div mobile forces withdrew in front of the Axis troops, thus preventing themselves from being pinned down, although they did sustain casualties. There were in fact heavy casualties on both sides and in the DAK these included both Gen Walther Nehring (then commanding the DAK), who was wounded in the arm during an air attack on his HQ while negotiating the minefields, and Gen von Bismarck (comd 21st Pz Div), who was killed by enemy mortar fire on the 31st near El Alamein.

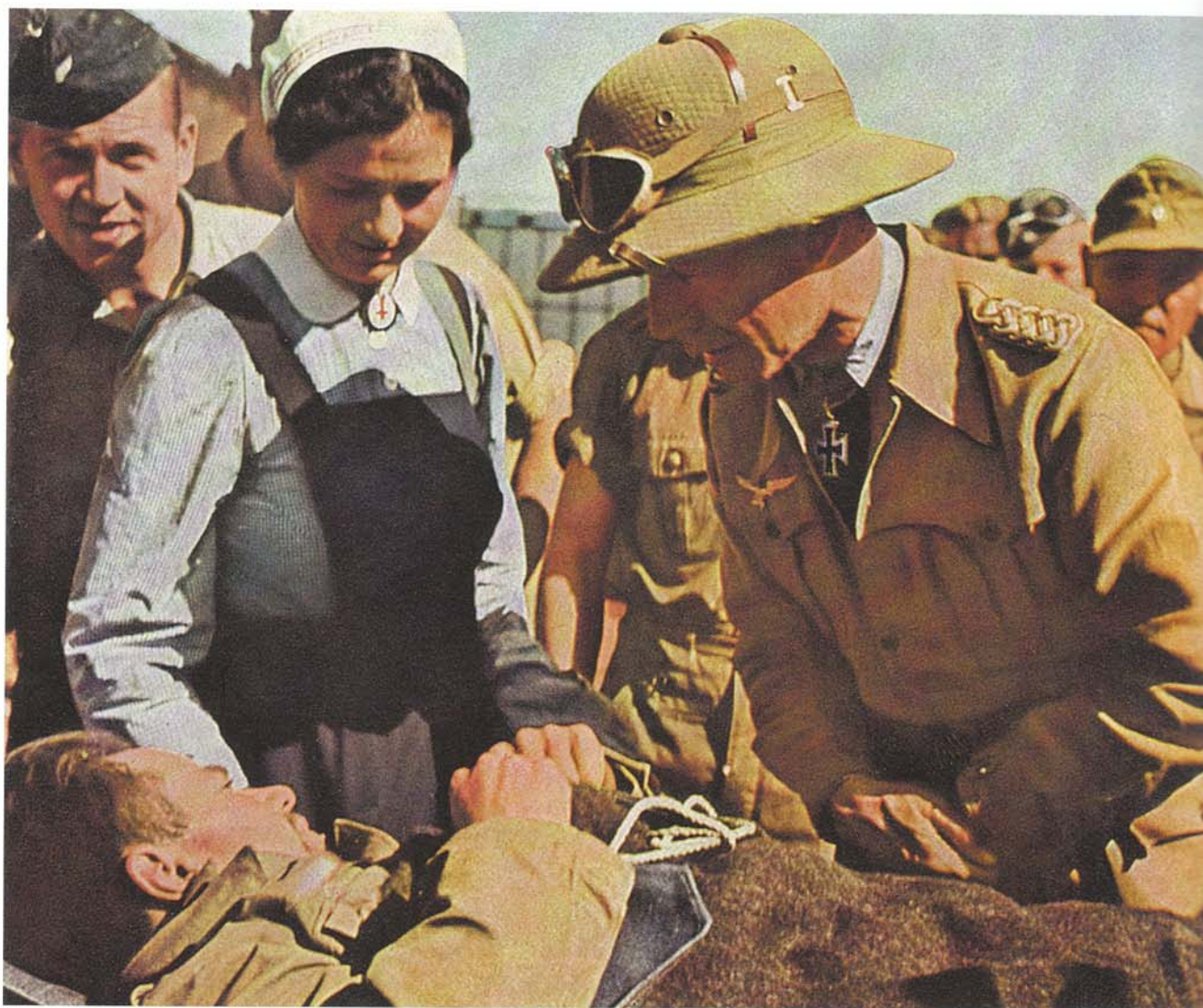
On the 31st Montgomery deliberated for some time, trying to work out the exact direction of the main enemy thrust, so he was relieved to find that they wheeled tightly to the north towards Alam el Halfa, just where he had anticipated they would turn, and, as he said in his memoirs, 'moved directly towards the area for which the Eighth Army layout had been designed'. As last light approached, the dust storms eased and the night bombers were able to fly, bombing the Panzerarmee throughout the night and the next day. It was now clear to Monty that the main enemy thrust was aimed

from south to north – first at the Alam el Halfa Ridge, then on to the Ruweisat Ridge. Now that he appreciated what Rommel was trying to do – namely roll up the British positions from south to north – Monty was in a position to switch his armoured reserves between the 44 Inf Div position on the Alam el Halfa Ridge (see map) and the 2 NZ Inf Div position in the El Alamein line. 10th Armd Div had already reconnoitred this ground very carefully some days before the battle, so knew exactly the best positions from which to inflict maximum damage on the enemy armour. By midday on the 31st there were some 400 British tanks in this vital area, and Montgomery had also reinforced the Ruweisat Ridge. He was now ready and waiting for Rommel's panzers – and inflicted heavy casualties on them when they advanced on the morning of the 1st – one of the main destroyers being the new Grant tank. Heinz Werner Schmidt, who had been Rommel's ADC but was now back with an infantry company in 15 Pz Div, vividly remembers seeing his 50mm Pak anti-tank gun shells bouncing harmlessly off the Grants, while their return fire caused him many casualties.

Rommel returned to the attack in the afternoon but without making any headway, then all through the night of 1/2 September the Germans and Italians were subjected

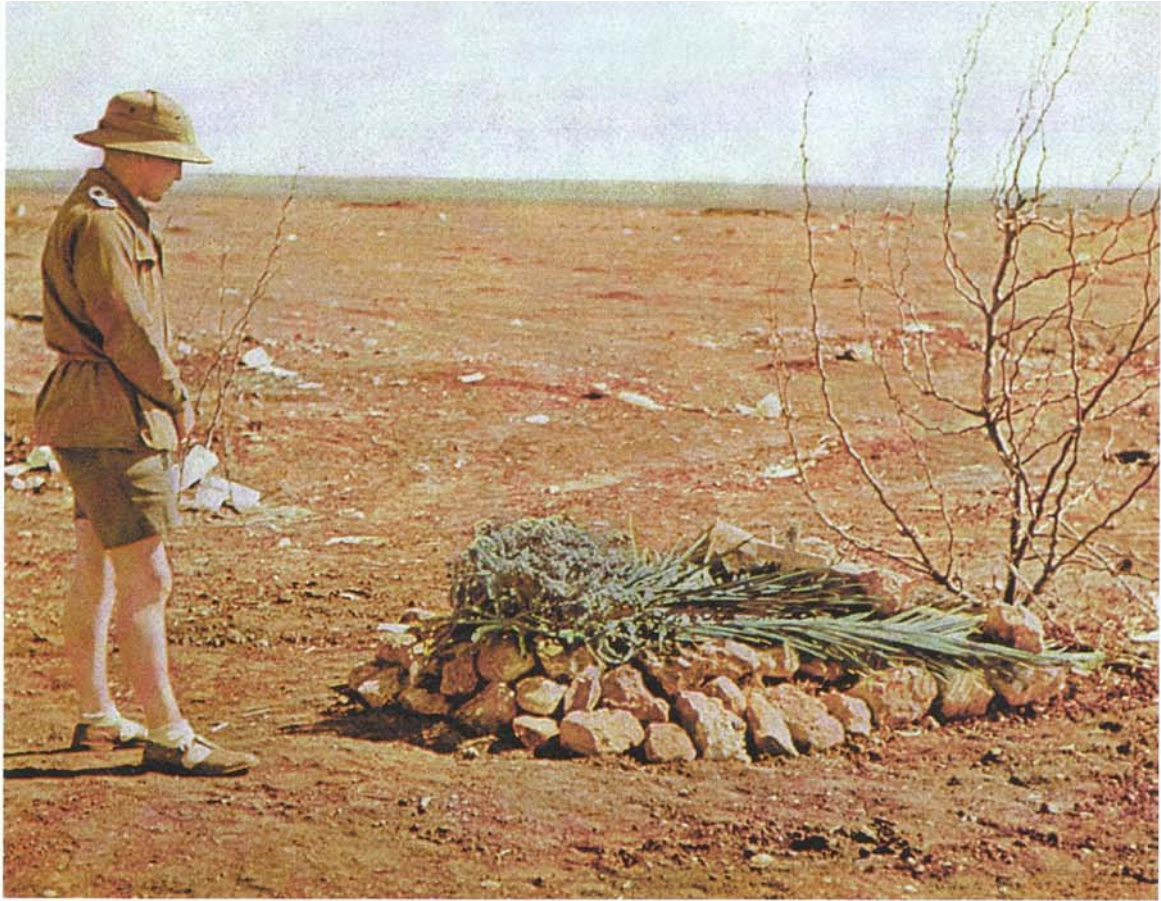


Stopped in their tracks. German tanks and lorries on fire on the battlefield. (Author's Collection)



Gen Maj Stefan talks with wounded. Romanian-born Frölich had served thirty years in the Austrian armed forces before being incorporated into the Luftwaffe in 1938. His aircraft were in direct support of the DAK. (BKUW – page 153)

to almost continuous bombing and shelling. By dawn on the 2nd it was clear that the attack had failed and that there was nothing left but to carry out an orderly withdrawal. Montgomery put in a limited counter-attack on the 3rd and another on the 4th, trying to cut off the enemy. This proved impossible, although he did succeed in driving them back through the minefields. Montgomery decided to call off the battle at 0700 hours on 7 September, even though that meant Rommel's forces remained in possession of the western edge of the British minefields. In fact this gave Monty the advantage of not letting Rommel pull back to the more easily defensible positions further to the west.



A desert grave. One of the many soldiers who still lie buried in the sands of the North African desert. (BKUW – Page 156).



In the end there was nothing for the Germans to do but to carry out an orderly withdrawal back to El Alamein and establish their own defensive positions there. Here a mixed convoy of vehicles heads back across the desert along a well-worn track. (IWM – MH 5828)





Monty and some of his senior officers inspect the battlefield and examine a knocked-out German tank at close quarters. On his right is Lt Gen Herbert Lumsden, a cavalryman who commanded X Corps. (IWM – BM 20023)

### *HEAVY LOSSES*

It had been a hard-fought battle and one in which both sides had suffered heavy casualties, but it had been particularly hard on the Panzerarmee, which had lost some 3,000 killed and wounded (in a ratio 2 Germans to 1 Italian). They had also lost 50 tanks, 50 artillery pieces and some 400 lorries. The British and Commonwealth forces had lost just over 1,700 killed and wounded, plus some 70 tanks and 20 anti-tank guns destroyed. Most importantly, however, the Eighth Army had at last shown that, under its new commander, it was capable of beating the hitherto unbeatable Desert Fox. Undoubtedly it was a major turning-point in the war in the desert. It would also mark the most easterly point that Rommel would ever reach. Victory at Alam el Halfa had an amazing effect on the morale of the Eighth Army, which was now at a level which their new commander described as 'outstanding'.

Now it was time for them, as their victorious commander would have so expressively put it 'to knock the enemy for six!'

## SIX

# THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

### MONTGOMERY PREPARES

'My policy at this stage', wrote Montgomery in the first volume of his autobiography *El Alamein to the Sangro* when discussing his preparations for the coming battle, 'was to build up the Army on three basic fundamentals: leadership, equipment and training.' He goes on to explain that by early October he was satisfied that his subordinate commanders were sound and that he had complete confidence in them. As the chart overleaf shows, the Eighth Army now consisted of three Corps – X, XIII and XXX – containing eleven divisions, of which four were armoured. In addition to British formations there were Australian, Indian, New Zealand and South African units, as well as Free French, so it truly was now an Allied army of considerable strength. The equipment situation had also improved, especially with the arrival of the latest American tanks – the 30-ton M4 medium Shermans. Next in the US medium tank series after the Grant, the Sherman was also armed with a 75mm main gun, but this time it was mounted on top of the tank in a fully rotating turret. The Sherman would go on to become the most widely used Allied tank of the war, a staggering 49,234 Sherman gun tanks of all types being produced in American tank factories. This was more than half of the entire American wartime tank output, and equal to the total tank production of Great Britain and Germany put together. President Roosevelt had initially offered to send the American 2nd Armored Division to fight in support of the British in the desert, but when Gen Marshall, Chief of Staff of the US Army, looked at the situation more closely it was clear that it would take at least four or five months for the division to complete its training, 'saddle up' and reach Egypt, therefore he offered instead to withdraw 300 of the Shermans that had been issued to units for training and to send them immediately to the Mediterranean. This generous offer was accepted with alacrity and the convoy carrying the Shermans, plus a hundred new M7 self-propelled 105mm howitzers (known to the British as 'Priests' and based upon the M3/M4 chassis), left the USA on 15 July. En route one of the ships was sunk by enemy submarines, but a special fast replacement ship was immediately dispatched with a further fifty-two Shermans on board. By 11 September a total of 318 Shermans had arrived in Egypt. They were mainly M4A1s, but included some M4A2s. To give some idea of the generosity of the USA at that time, it has been estimated that the tank strength of the Eighth Army just before the battle of El Alamein included 698

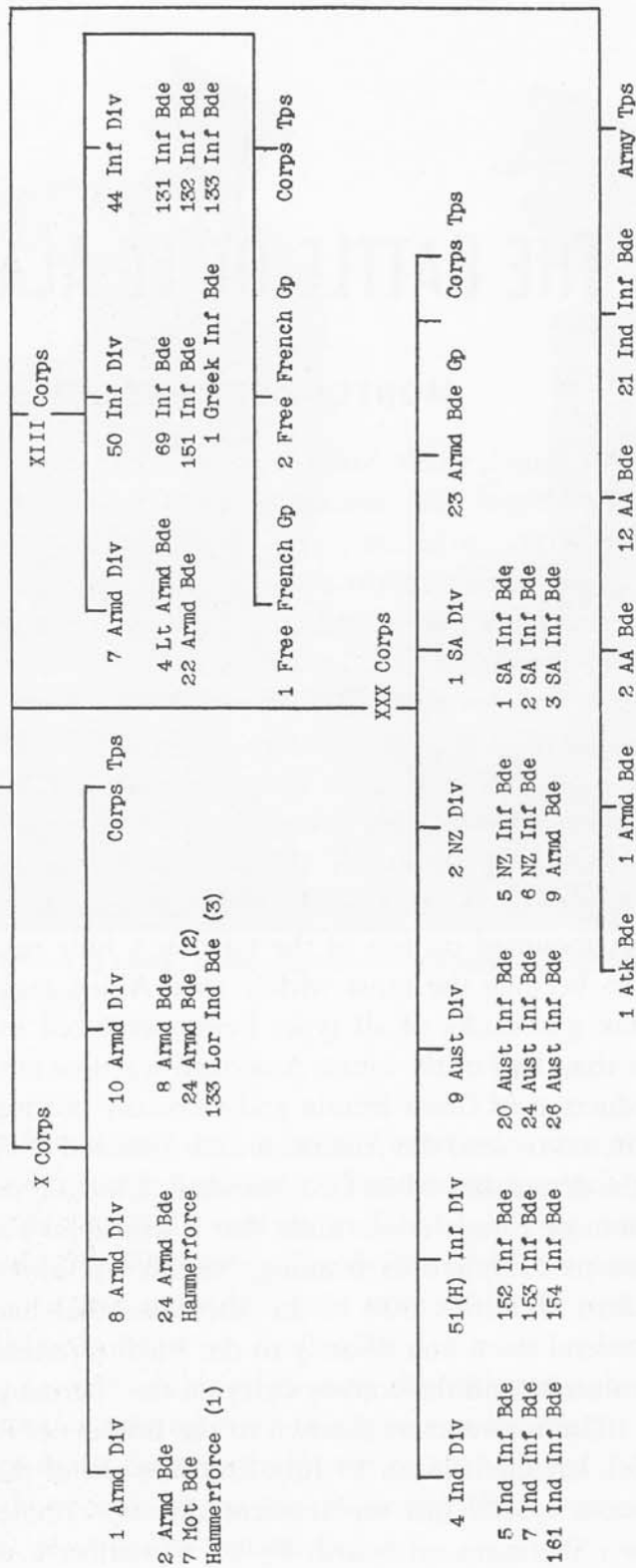
# BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

Order of Battle  
Eighth Army

2200 hrs 23 October 1942

Forward Area Only

HQ Eighth Army



Notes: (1) Attached from 8 Armd Div.

(2) Attached from 8 Armd Div.

(3) Attached from 44 Inf Div.

American tanks (285 Shermans, 246 Grants and 167 Stuarts) out of a total of 1,351 – in other words just over 50 per cent were American tanks in British hands. Monty also comments that he had ‘a great weight of artillery and plenty of ammunition’.

#### *DECEPTION CONTINUES*

The dummy spy link ‘Kondor’ would continue to play an important role in the preparations for Operation ‘Lightfoot’, as Montgomery’s offensive was now codenamed. Maximum effort was made to persuade Rommel and the OKW that the Eighth Army would not be in a position to mount a major offensive before mid-November at the earliest. In addition, important steps were taken with camouflage and deception to ensure that the Germans did not discover that Monty’s massive army and all its provisions were being moved slowly forward so that they would be ready for 23 October. This was the job of ‘A-Force’, under Brig Dudley Clarke, which comprised a motley crew of artists, film technicians and the like who worked miracles in camouflaging vehicles and stores, under a deception plan known as Operation ‘Bertram’. Its undoubted success led to even more elaborate deception plans being thought up for future operations such as ‘Overlord’.

While Allied plans were thus protected, ULTRA’s steady stream of information was a continual blessing to Montgomery



Rommel plans. Now it was the Desert Foxes’ turn to plan defensive positions. He knew that his enemy was building up for a major assault and was receiving large amounts of new equipment, while he was at the end of a long and hazardous supply line from Benghazi and Tripoli. (Author’s Collection)



Some armour, like this PzKpfw IV, was put into defensive positions, but Rommel liked to keep as much as possible free in reserve, ready to counter-attack. (Author’s Collection)



Digging in. It was also now the turn of the Germans to dig in – this infantryman uses his personal entrenching tool (kleiner spaten), which was carried on the left hip. As can be seen, the desert could be stony in places. (IWM – MH 5834)

and his planners as it illuminated everything Rommel was trying to keep secret. It proved especially useful in regard to their tenuous supply line to Italy. Monty asked for – and received – an unprecedented level of naval and air strikes directed against Axis shipping. Figures show that in both August and September 1942 30 per cent of supplies destined for Rommel's army were sunk, while in October the figure rose to 40 per cent. Mussolini, who was ultimately responsible for maintaining Rommel's supplies, is said to have commented that if the sinkings continued at the same rate, the only merchant ships which Italy would have left in six months time would be her fishing fleet!

#### TRAINING

As far as other matters were concerned, however, above everything the state of training of his troops worried Monty considerably and he felt that he must 'stage-manage' the coming battle, to ensure that the troops were not given tasks beyond their capabilities, especially as it would be well-nigh impossible to inject any element of surprise into the attack. Just as Rommel had done at Alam el Halfa, Monty decided upon a night assault, for which a full moon was essential, so that his troops would

be able to see to make gaps in the minefields.<sup>1</sup> The earliest, therefore, that an attack could be mounted was the night of 23/24 October (full moon being on the 24th).

### ROMMEL PREPARES

On the other side of the battlefield Rommel was also preparing for the assault which he knew would come. He was still a sick man, but would be unable to take any leave until the end of September.<sup>2</sup> However, sick or not, there was a great deal to be done.

1. Montgomery fully appreciated that there would be many minefields to gap, so he had his engineers set up the 'Eighth Army School of Mine Clearance', to work out and then teach the best and simplest way to gap them (for example, the first 'Flail' tanks used were based upon the Matilda Mk II). A 'Lane Group' comprised about a dozen Sappers, plus a radio vehicle (Bren Carrier) and a Flail tank. It was the task of the Sappers to mark the routes with white tapes, but if/when the Flail tank broke down, then they would clear the mines by hand, initially using hand-operated mine detectors or even their bayonets to find them.
2. Rommel did finally manage to go on sick leave when Gen Georg Stumme arrived on 16 September, to become his deputy. A first-class panzer commander, Stumme certainly appeared robust and healthy, but looks can be – and were to prove – deceptive.



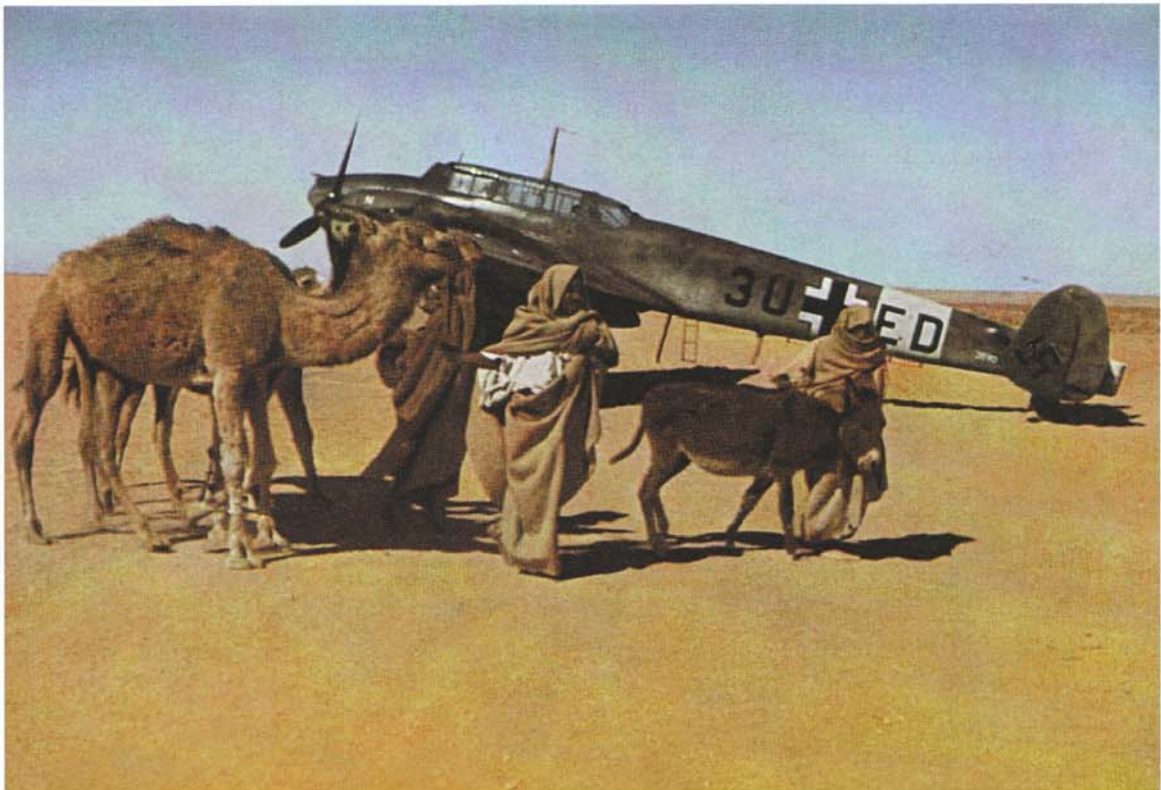
Italian infantry also had to dig in. Their battalions formed much of the static defence line, but were 'stiffened' with German units. (Author's Collection)

As well as trenches there were sandbagged foxholes; this one is a forward observation post. (IWM - MH 6329)





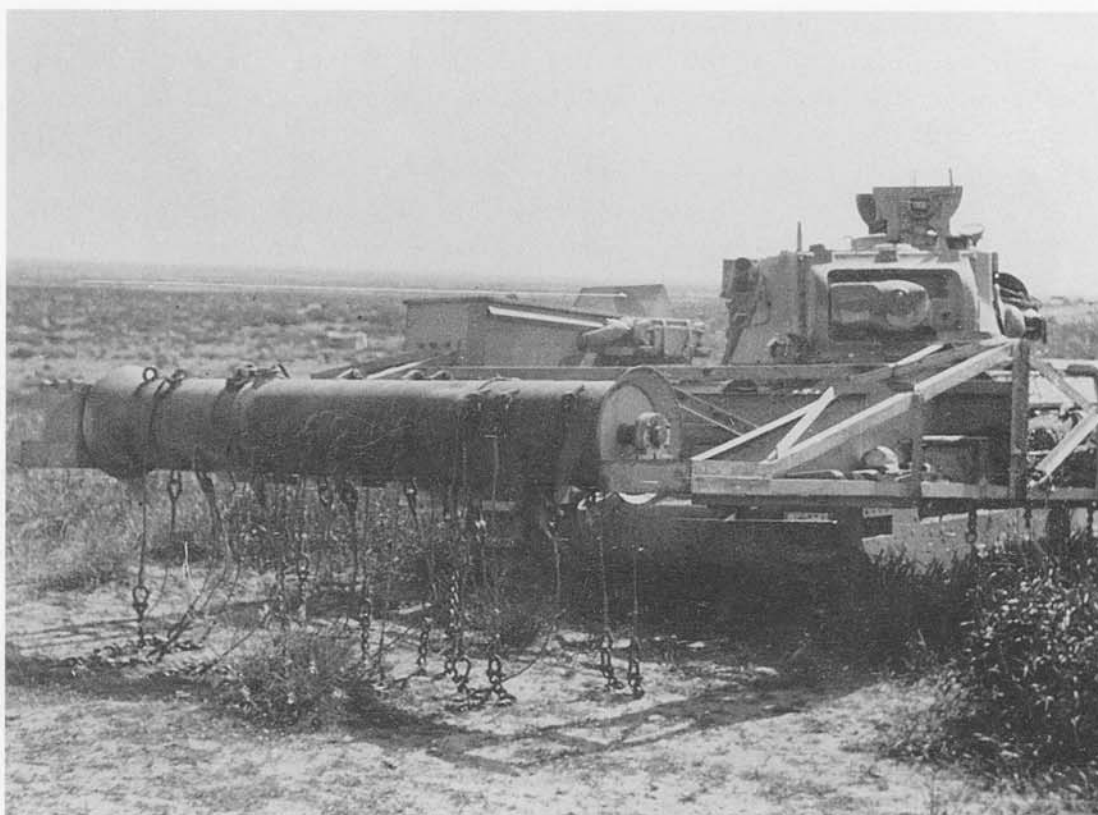
Luftwaffe personnel sitting in front of a Messerschmitt Bf 110 fighter bomber built in large numbers early in the war (102 a month in 1940). (BKUW — page 1)



Messerschmitt Me 110s and camels. The fighter bombers's good weapons load was used to good effect against British forces, offsetting its vulnerability to single-engined fighters. (BKUW – page 56)

A formidable defensive line had to be built up, and in this Rommel was aided by the fact that, unlike the position at Gazala, the Qattara Depression prevented the attacker from making a wide sweep around the southern flank. This also shortened his defensive line – all to the good in view of his numerical inferiority. His basic principles were to construct defence in depth, using his infantry to hold the line and keeping his armour uncommitted and ready to counter-attack. The main defensive line was based upon his 'Devil's Gardens' – extensive minefields – adjoining no-man's-land. Inside there were thousands of captured enemy bombs and shells (suitably wired up), plus all the available anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. Captured British minefields were incorporated into the system – so that British, Egyptian, French, German and Italian mines were all present, some even laid in tiers of up to three high. In all there were some half a million mines, the most lethal to the individual soldier being the deadly 'S' (Shuh) mines, which scattered steel pellets at chest height, after 'jumping' in the air when trodden on or set off by a trip-wire. Covering the minefields were small outposts, in which dogs were kept to give warning of intruders. The main defensive positions were some 1,000 to 3,000 metres in depth and located anything up to 2,000 metres behind the minefields. In depth, but not too far back, were the panzers, positioned to bring their fire to bear or to carry out a swift counter-attack.





Lanes through enemy minefields were swept by hand or cleared by using early mine clearing devices, like this Matilda Scorpion, which had a rotary flail device mounted on the front of the tank, driven by an auxiliary 30hp engine mounted externally on the right hand side of the tank. (Author's Collection)

From north to south, the battle line comprised:

- a. from the sea to the railway line: two battalions of Ramcke's paratroopers and some Italian Bersaglieri<sup>3</sup>
  - b. from the railway to Kidney Ridge: 164 leichte Div
  - c. opposite Miteiriya Ridge and down to Ruweisat Ridge: Trento Div, plus one of Ramcke's paratroop battalions; the Bologna Division with two more paratroop battalions on their flank
  - d. down to Munassib: Brescia Div plus two more paratroop battalions (ex-Crete)
  - e. Munassib to Himeimat: Folgore Parachute Div
  - f. south of the Himeimat in no-man's-land down to just east of the Qattara Depression: Recce Bn 33 and the Kiehl Combat Group
3. These were elite Italian infantrymen who wore cockerel feathers in their hats. They were either mounted on motor-cycles or lorry-borne and usually formed part of an armoured division.

As can be seen from the above dispositions, Rommel worked on the principle of bolstering up his Italian troops by inserting German formations between them. This unfortunately made for difficult relationships between the Axis partners, as it showed only too clearly that he didn't trust the Italians to fight with the same tenacity as his 'Afrikaners'!

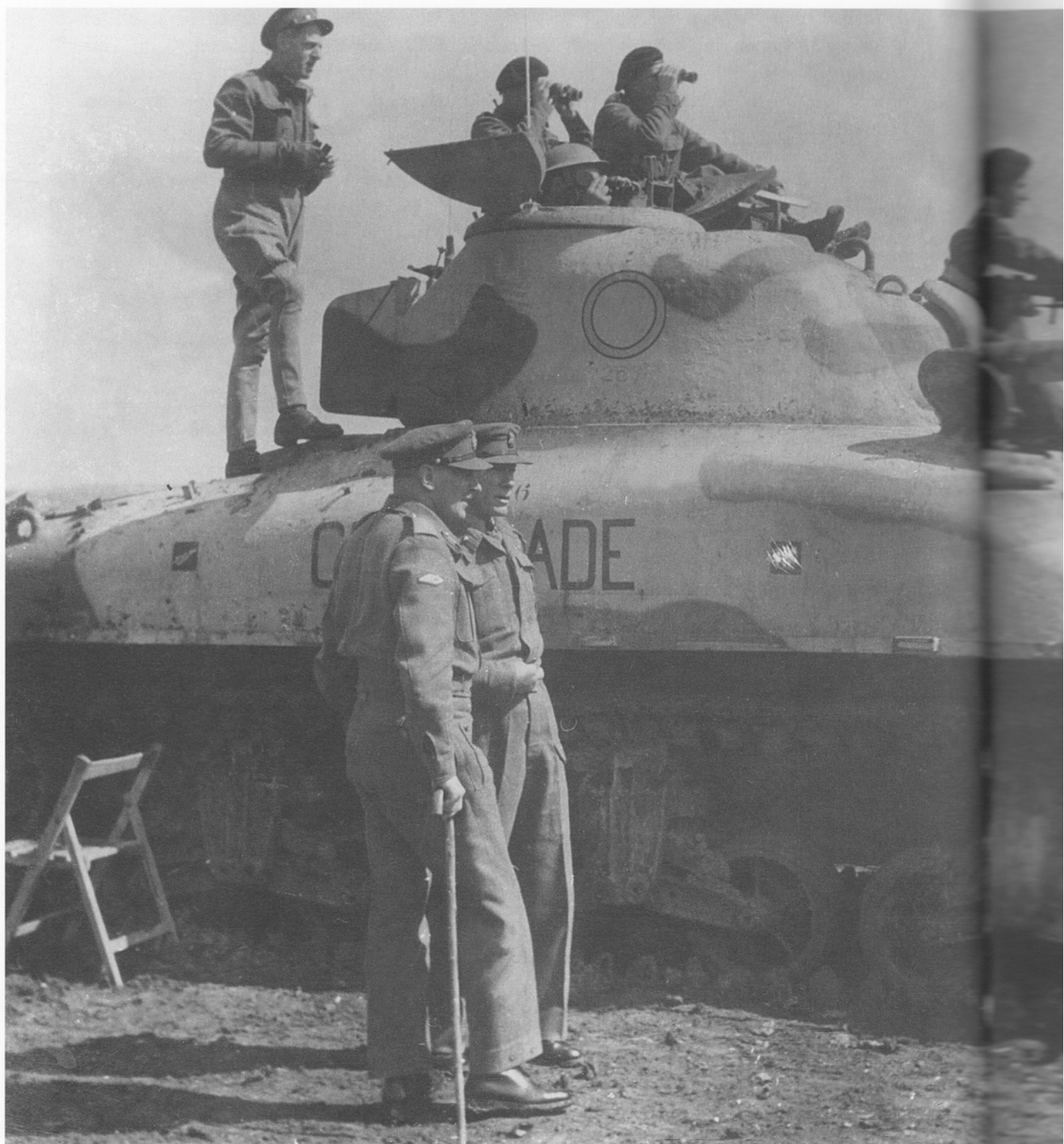
Behind these static defensive positions were his mobile troops in three groups. 15 Pz Div and the Littorio Armd Div were 'paired' in the north (6 miles south-south-west of Sidi Abd el Rahman), while in the south were 21 Pz Div and the Ariete Armd Div (north-west of Gebel Kalkh). In both cases the pairs of divisions were grouped as three mixed battle-groups with their HQs located behind. To their rear were 90 leichte and the Trieste Div, these being Rommel's only reserve, also grouped together and guarding the coast at El Daba against amphibious landings.

Although Rommel knew that his armoured forces were at their best when operating in the open desert, and that in such operations they were superior to the Allied armoured formation, he could not risk putting the main weight of his defence on such operations for several reasons. He was short of fuel for both AFVs and soft-skinned vehicles, despite continual promises from 'over the water'. In fact, when Rommel was on his way back from his sickleave, he discovered to his great annoyance that they had enough fuel for only three days' fighting. Secondly, the Desert Air Force now had air superiority, which put a severe strain upon both the tactical use of tanks and soft-skinned vehicles in the desert, and upon the tenuous lines of supply which stretched back far further than those of his enemies. Thirdly, the balance between mechanised and non-mechanised elements of the opposing forces had swung very definitely in favour of the Allies. Such reinforcements as he was able to obtain – and these were few and far between – were mainly non-mechanised and so of little use in mobile warfare.

### MONTGOMERY'S PLAN

Monty's general plan was to attack the enemy simultaneously on both flanks, the main assault being in the north by Gen Oliver Leese's XXX Corps, which would puncture two gaps through the enemy defences. Gen Herbert Lumsden's X Corps would then pass through and occupy a position astride the enemy supply routes on ground of its own choosing. This would cause the enemy armour to counter-attack X Corps and it could then be destroyed piecemeal. In the south Gen Brian Horrocks's XIII Corps would mount diversionary operations in order to draw off enemy armour to that flank, thus weakening the opposition against X Corps. Horrocks was to hold 7th Armd Div ready to be unleashed in 'destructive pursuit'.

Monty decided to discard this plan on 6 October, because he felt it was too ambitious for his only partly trained troops. Instead he formulated a second plan on which the battle was fought. It relied upon being able to deceive the enemy into believing that the major attack would be made in the south by XIII Corps, while XXX Corps drove its two corridors through the northern enemy positions, X Corps then





Monty had some surprises in store for the DAK, including the newly arrived American Sherman M4 medium tanks. In all, 285 of them were with units that would fight in the coming battle. Here crewmen get a chance to see the accuracy and potential firepower of the tank's 75mm gun. (What the chap with the Bren gun is doing remains a mystery!) (IWM – STT 3366)

moving through them to establish a position from which they could protect XXX Corps's infantry as they methodically destroyed the enemy infantry positions – a process Monty called 'crumbling'. The most vital part of the plan was to get X Corps quickly into the open country beyond Rommel's minefields to a position where it could protect XXX Corps and at the same time deal with any enemy counter-attacks.

His orders for the battle, which were issued on 6 October, therefore covered the following main points:

- a. The preliminary counter-battery bombardment by about a thousand guns would begin at 2140 hours, lifting at 2200 hours on to the enemy forward positions as the four divisions of XXX Corps began their advance.
- b. XXX Corps's main thrust in the north would be made on a four-divisional front, with the job of forcing two corridors through the enemy minefields along which X Corps would then pass.
- c. Meanwhile in the south XIII Corps would mount two operations, one into the east of the Gebel Kalakh and Qaret el Khadim, the other further to the south directed on Himeimat and the Taqa feature.

Having broken through the enemy positions, XIII and XXX Corps would then take on the methodical destruction of the enemy who were holding the forward positions – Monty's 'crumbling' – while X Corps held off the enemy armour to prevent them from interfering.

As already explained, the southern attacks by XIII Corps were primarily intended to make the enemy think that the main Allied thrust was in the south and to contain the enemy forces there, in particular 21 Pz Div. Monty re-emphasised his orders that 7th Arm'd Div was to be kept complete in the south, so as to maintain a balance. It was available to be passed through the minefield gaps, but only if this did not result in heavy casualties. He also emphasised that it was essential to retain the initiative and not allow the enemy a chance to recover his balance.

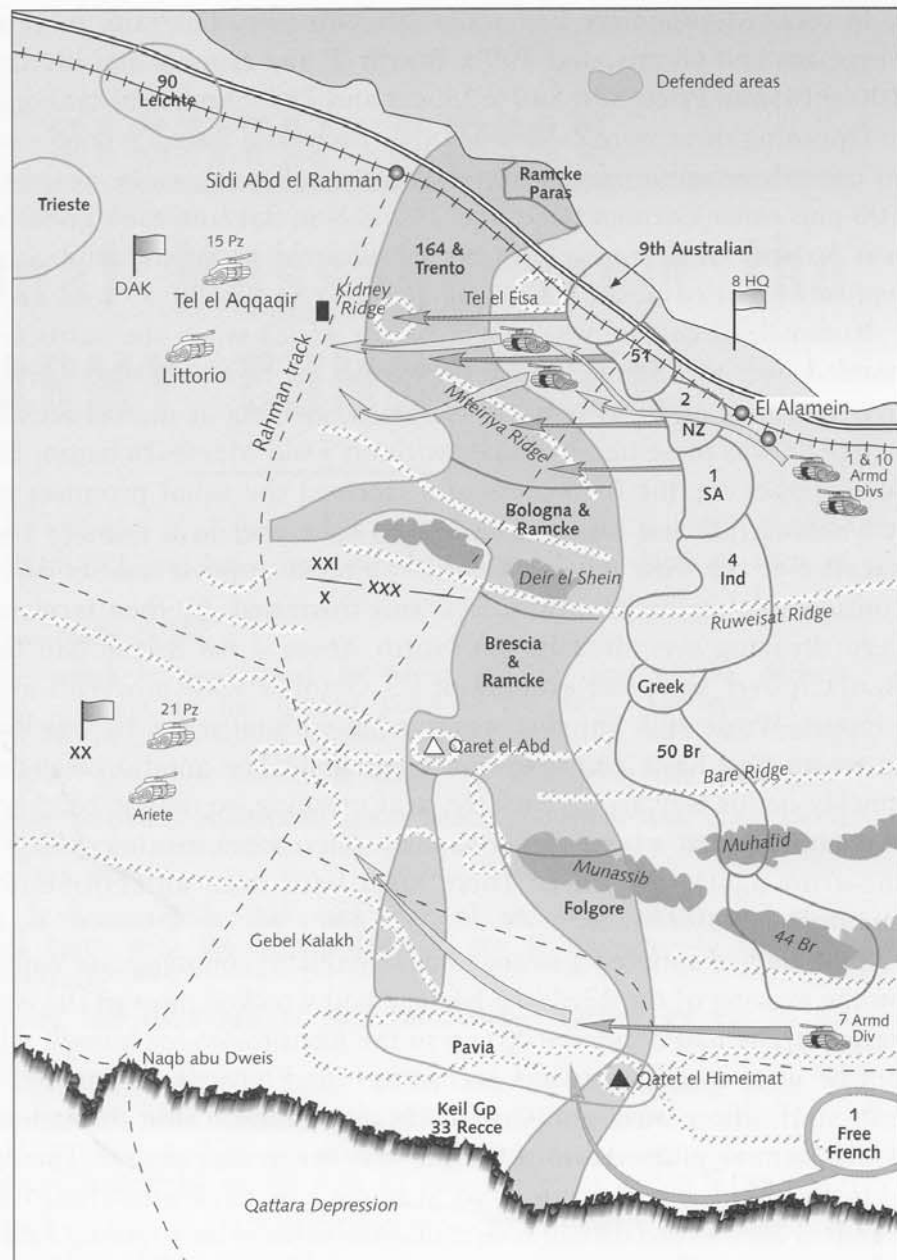
Supporting the initial break-in operation was to be the very heavy counter-battery programme, together with the maximum bomber effort by the Desert Air Force; this would then be switched on to the enemy artillery lines once the battle started. It was also essential that the RAF secured air superiority before the battle commenced, so that they could give close ground support during the land battle. This was in fact achieved by heavy and sustained air attacks which reached a crescendo on the 22nd and ensured air superiority for the attack.

Montgomery appreciated that the battle would be continuous 'hard pounding', but he was confident that he had the wherewithal to withstand the pressure, always provided the Allied forces retained the initiative. He considered it vital that the details of his plan and the way in which he intended to fight the battle were known personally by all his formation and unit commanders, down to lieutenant-colonel rank, so he toured his army addressing all his officers (and some specialised units), completing this process by 20 October. Over the next two days the battle plans were explained to the troops en masse by their individual commanders.

One of those who heard Monty talk was Sapper Sydney Morgan of 4 Field Squadron RE, who was a member of a Lane Clearing Group. He told me: 'Shortly before the attack Monty gave us a "pep" talk. The details have gone but memories of the general informality and relaxed atmosphere remain. He spoke to us as he might have done at an officers' briefing session: he gave an assessment of the enemy strength and quoted figures of our own resources. One got the impression that he had calculated everything, including the inevitable losses. Monty stood on top of a tank (I think) to reach his hearers, who leaned against vehicles or sat on the ground. There was nothing of a "Parade" about it.'

#### *MOVING UP*

The move to the assembly areas was completed during the night 22/23 October, so that by first light all the attacking formations were dug in and camouflaged. They were able to spend the day of the 23rd relaxing (as far as they could) unobserved in their slit-trenches, and as there was no enemy interference whatsoever it was clear that their move up had been unobserved, so a degree of tactical surprise would be possible.



British dispositions before the battle

### DISPOSITIONS

When the barrage commenced, the Eighth Army was disposed as follows: on the right: XXX Corps (Leese) with five infantry divisions (9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand, 1st South African and 4th Indian); on the left: XXX Corps (Horrocks) with three divisions – two infantry (50th and 44th) and 7th Armd Div; and in the rear (waiting the order to move): X Corps (Lumsden) with three armoured divisions (1st, 10th and the 8th (in reserve)). Also available two additional armoured brigades and three Allied infantry brigades.

In total Montgomery had some 200,000 men. His tank force consisted of 470 x Shermans and Grants, and 700 x British 'I' and cruisers and his artillery comprised of 100 x 105mm Priest SPs, 830 x 25pdrs and 750 x 6pdr anti-tank guns.

Opposing them were some 90,000 German and Italian troops – so Monty had a two to one advantage in manpower – with the following main weapons: 118 x 'Specials', 100 plus other German tanks and 24 x 8.8cm flak/anti-tank guns. Most of his artillery was Italian, with brave crews but obsolescent weapons, while his 300 Italian tanks were all virtually useless.<sup>4</sup>

Rommel, of course, was not in North Africa when the battle commenced. Having handed over to Stumme on 22 September, he flew to Derna early on the 23rd, then over to Rome and finally on to Germany, arriving at the Führer's HQ in East Prussia where he was presented by Hitler with his Field Marshal's baton. He once again asked for supplies for his Afrikaners and received the usual promises in return<sup>5</sup> His 'sick leave' was rather a joke, as he had to take part in a number of 'PR spectaculars', because at the time he was Germany's most popular soldier and thus the focus of considerable media attention. Sick and frustrated, he then received the news he had been dreading ever since he left North Africa – the British had been attacking at El Alamein ever since the evening of 23 October with powerful artillery and bomber support. Worse still, Stumme was missing without trace, so was Rommel well enough to return post haste and take over command? The question was unnecessary. He was quickly on his way, flying back the next morning, so that at 2325 hours on the 25th he was able to send a terse signal to his soldiers from his desert HQ: 'I have taken over the army again. Rommel.' There must have been an enormous concerted sigh of among the Panzerarmee.

Stumme had suffered a strange fate. Unable to communicate with his forward troops on the evening of the 23rd (the barrage had wrecked most of the Axis communications network), he had decided to go up to the front to see for himself what was happening. But he went too far forward and soon found himself surrounded by the enemy. The only staff officer with him (Col Buechting) had been shot through the head and killed, while Stumme jumped out of the car in order to seek shelter. The driver, however, was able to turn the car around, so Stumme ran back and clung to the outside as it bumped across the difficult terrain. Somewhere en route to safety, he had a heart attack and fell off. He was later found dead at the side of the track. Gen Ritter von Thoma took over until Rommel returned. Rommel paid a fulsome tribute to the unlucky Stumme, who had acted very bravely, despite his admitted lack of expertise in desert warfare. He should never have been sent out to North Africa in the first place, as it was known that he suffered from high blood pressure.

4. Figures taken from D.W. Braddock, *The Campaigns in Egypt & Libya 1940–42*.

5. Hitler would eventually send him some supplies, including new weapons such as the formidable 56-ton PzKpfw VI Tiger tank with its deadly 8.8cm gun but that would not be for several months, so they were far too late.

## **EIGHTH ARMY**

# **Personal Message from the ARMY COMMANDER**

1—When I assumed command of the Eighth Army I said that the mandate was to destroy ROMMEL and his Army, and that it would be done as soon as we were ready.

2—We are ready NOW.

The battle which is now about to begin will be one of the decisive battles of history. It will be the turning point of the war. The eyes of the whole world will be on us, watching anxiously which way the battle will swing.

We can give them their answer at once, "It will swing our way."

3—We have first-class equipment; good tanks; good anti-tank guns; plenty of artillery and plenty of ammunition; and we are backed up by the finest air striking force in the world.

All that is necessary is that each one of us, every officer and man, should enter this battle with the determination to see it through—to fight and to kill—and finally, to win.

If we all do this there can be only one result—together we will hit the enemy for "six," right out of North Africa.

4—The sooner we win this battle, which will be the turning point of this war, the sooner we shall all get back home to our families.

5—Therefore, let every officer and man enter the battle with a stout heart, and with the determination to do his duty so long as he has breath in his body.

**AND LET NO MAN SURRENDER SO LONG AS HE IS UNWOUNDED AND CAN FIGHT.**

Let us all pray that "the Lord mighty in battle" will give us the victory.

**B. L. MONTGOMERY,**

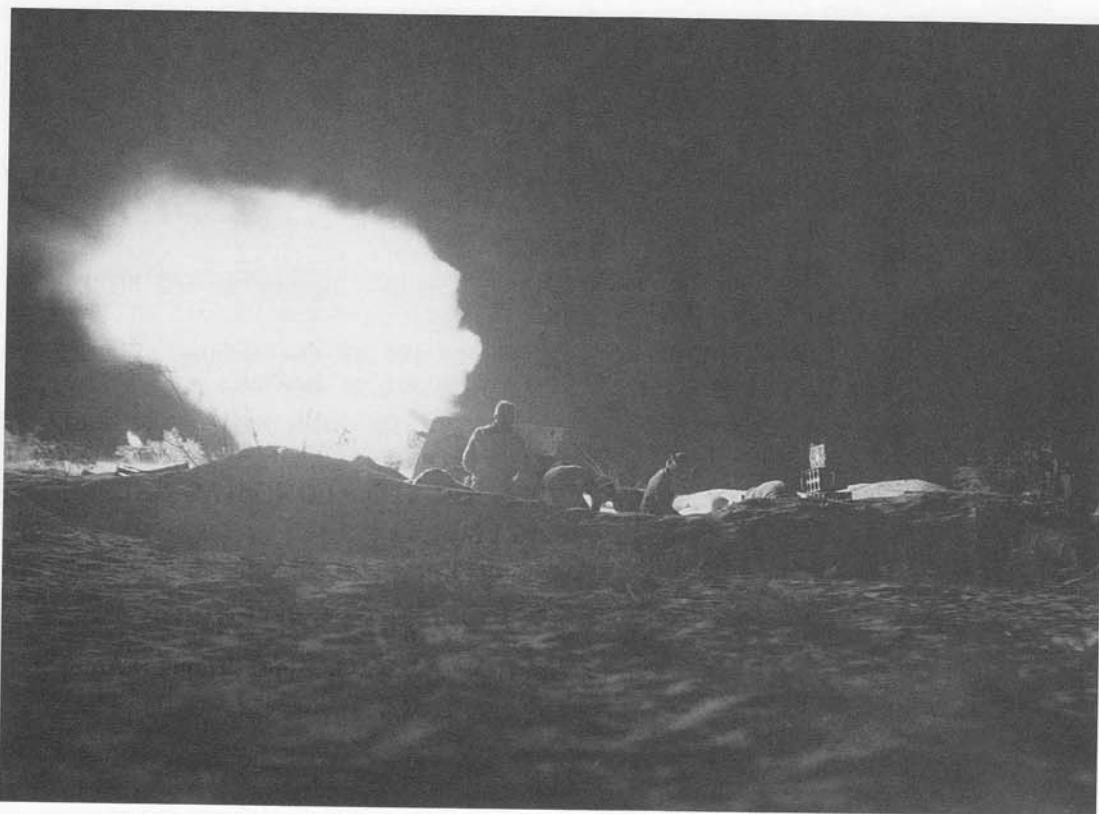
Lieutenant-General, G.O.C.-in-C., Eighth Army.

MIDDLE EAST FORCES,  
23-10-42.





On, on to Tripoli!  
Eventually the 'hard  
pounding' paid off, the  
German defences broke  
and the tanks were able  
to advance. Here Lt Ted  
Phelan of Streatham is  
seen in the turret of his  
M4 Sherman medium  
tank, during the long  
desert march that would  
take him all the way to  
Tripoli. (IWM — BM  
23979)



The barrage begins. The preliminary bombardment involved about a thousand guns, heavy, medium and field guns like this 25pdr. Their explosions lit up the night sky all along the Alamein line. (IWM — E18470)

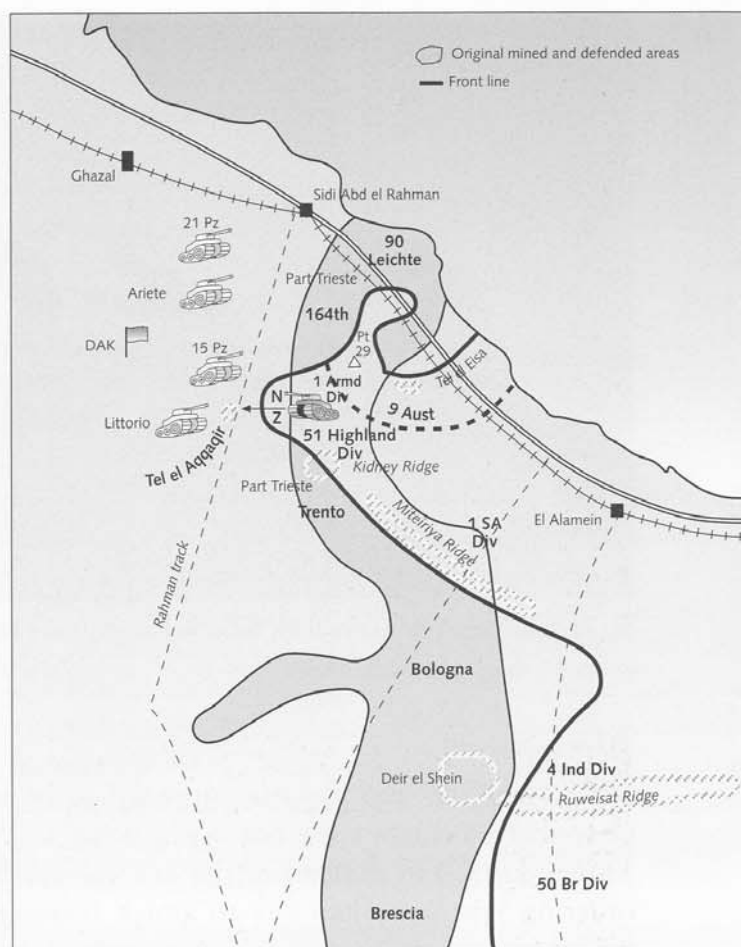
## THE BATTLE BEGINS

The Battle of El Alamein can be divided into three distinct battles: the break in (23–24 October); The Dog-fight (25 Oct–1 Nov); and Operation ‘Supercharge’ (2 November onwards).

### BREAK-IN

The 9th Australian and 51st Highland Divisions, attacking towards Kidney Ridge, rapidly opened a gap just north of Miteiriya, while 2 miles to their south the 2nd New Zealanders (with 9th Armd Bde under command) and the 1st South Africans did likewise (see map). There were also ‘feint attacks’ by 4th Indian Division on the northern end of the Ruweisat Ridge and by an Australian brigade north of Tel el Eisa. The main diversionary attack was, however, by XIII Corps, which was trying to make two gaps in the minefields north of the Himeimat. Initially all went well

in all areas and first objectives were reached, but then enemy resistance stiffened everywhere, so that when first light came the minefields were still not completely gapped and a mass of armour and infantry was packed into the two corridors, under heavy fire and unable to move. Clearly the enemy defensive position was going to be more difficult to crack than Monty had imagined. However, his orders to Lumsden on the morning of the 24th were for X Corps to continue to fight its way forward and, despite there being some ‘differences of opinion’ between Monty and Lumsden – mainly about the scale of casualties that would be incurred if they did press ahead – this Lumsden did, although not without considerable loss. It was undoubtedly a good example of Monty’s decisiveness and strength of character as a commander – qualities that had been missing for some time in the Eighth Army before he took command. Meanwhile Horrocks’ XXX Corps was in much the same position – achieving local penetrations only and suffering heavy casualties as they held off 21 Pz Div. Montgomery eventually had to halt them on the 25th rather than accept even heavier losses.



Battle of El Alamein, Operation ‘Supercharge’, 2–4 November 1942

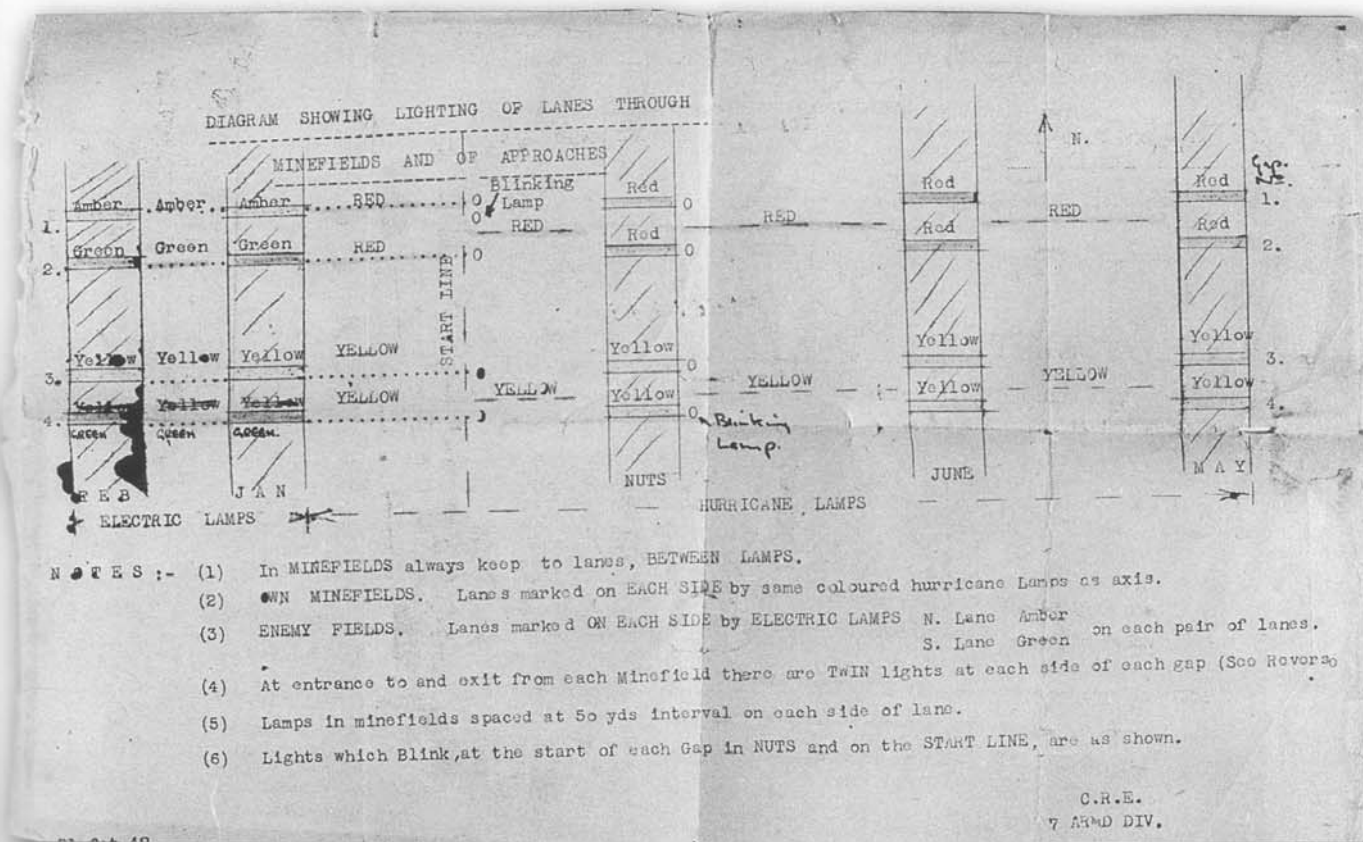


Then the infantry advanced. The densely exploding shells of the barrage kept enemy heads down, so that the infantry could get into the forward enemy positions. The leading troops advanced initially in the dark and had a very hard battle to break through. (IWM – E 18547)

#### *DOG-FIGHT*

The 'crumbling' process was supposed to be in progress by the 25th, but, as it was clear that advances were not being made at Munassib and in the southern corridor, Monty decided to shift the centre of these operations to the northern part of the front, ordering 9th Australian Div to attack between the coast and the northern corridor, while 1st Armd Div moved westwards in order to get astride Rommel's lines of communication which stretched rearwards from Sidi Rahman. The Aussies attacked on the night of the 25th/26th with some success, as did the New Zealanders and South Africans to their south, in front of Miteiriya Ridge, advancing some 1,000 yards. The 7th Motor Brigade managed to establish itself on Kidney Ridge, but the rest of 1st Armd Div was pinned down and unable to advance. Throughout the 26th Monty was closeted in his caravan wrestling with the situation and deciding what he should do next. Although things were not going badly, he did feel that XXX Corps in particular needed a pause for reorganisation<sup>6</sup> so that evening he withdrew the New Zealanders to prepare them for the third phase of the battle (Operation 'Supercharge').

6. Rumours about this halt for reorganisation reached Churchill's ears in London and he was supposedly furious as he thought the battle was lost. Fortunately the CIGS, Field Marshal Alan Brooke, was able to convince him that his informant (Anthony Eden) was wildly exaggerating the situation, and prevented the PM from sending off a highly critical telegram to the Middle East, which would undoubtedly have really 'upset the applecart'. As it was, Monty outwardly radiated confidence to his staff and his commanders, even though inside he was probably very worried about the way the battle was going. And unbeknown to him, his redoubtable opponent was just as worried, especially when he discovered on his return that his panzers were almost out of fuel.



It was the task of the sappers with mine detectors and mine-clearing tanks to clear safe lanes through the enemy minefields. This is the actual lane chart as issued by the Commander Royal Engineers of 7th Arm'd Div, showing which lanes had been allocated to the division. (Author's Collection)

Once through the minefields the advancing tanks had to deal with enemy anti-tank guns. This graphic drawing by German war artist Kurt Caesar shows British tanks advancing out of the swirling sand and smoke. (Author's Collection)





Casualties on both sides were often treated in the same ad hoc aid posts on or near the battlefield. Here a piper plays, while a mixture of British and German casualties wait to be treated by German medical orderlies. (IWM – E6797)

On the 26th the now-returned Rommel ordered up 21 Pz Div to attack the Kidney Ridge area, which it did on the 27th with a force of some 150 tanks. Their attack was beaten off by a spirited defence with the loss of fifty panzers, which they could ill afford to lose. Then on the 28th, as they were preparing for another attack, the Desert Air Force located their assembly area and destroyed the entire tank concentration. With the DAK busy on Kidney Ridge and that part of the front, Monty decided to switch his current attack route from the northern corridor area further north to where the Australians were fighting near the coast. XXX Corps would attack using the road and railway as axes, aiming towards Sidi Rahman, while X Corps guarded their left flank and XIII Corps went on to the defensive to their south, but continued to pressurise the enemy by active patrolling. XXX Corps was also bolstered by the transfer of 7th Armd Div, plus three infantry brigades. However, Rommel had worked out what precisely was in his opponent's mind, and accordingly moved 90 leichte to Sidi Rahman, to forestall the Australian attack. This meant, however, that all the reliable German armour was now in the northern sector of the front, leaving the rest without tanks

(apart from the obsolescent Italian ones) and thus vulnerable – especially the Italian positions. On the 29th Monty ordered Operation ‘Supercharge’, the break-out attack, to go into action. The centre line would be just to the north of the original northern corridor, a position where the front was held by Italian troops alone.

#### *OPERATION ‘SUPERCHARGE’*

Monty’s plan for Supercharge was that, while the Australians continued their attacks near the coast in order to keep 164 leichte, 90 leichte and 21 Pz Divs busy, the 2nd New Zealand Division, with 9th Armd, 151st and 152nd Inf Bdes under command, would break in on the night of 31 October/1 November to open a path through the enemy lines along which 1st, 7th and 10th Armd Divs could advance into the open desert to do battle with the DAK. The Australian night attack was most successful, reaching the coast behind 164 leichte and cutting them off. The Australians were then counter-attacked by the DAK, which managed to free 164 leichte but this action fully occupied the other two now understrength divisions (90 leichte and 21Pz). Thus, when ‘Supercharge’ advanced at 0100 hours on 2 November (it had had to be postponed for twenty-four hours because X and XXX Corps were in such a disorganised state), they did not immediately meet any enemy tanks. By first light they had opened up a 12-mile gap in the enemy defences. X Corps was clear of the minefields at long last, but not yet out in the open. The break-in had not been achieved without heavy casualties: 9th Armd Bde lost nearly 90 tanks getting through the enemy anti-tank gun screen. Now they had to hold the gap open so that 1st Armd Div could deploy. Later that day 1st and 10th Armd Divs met the DAK panzers near Tel el Aqqagir, where Rommel and his ninety tanks, fighting against seemingly impossible odds, brought the British tanks to a disorganised halt. Further north, however, 51st Highland Division, with tank support, had broken through in a south-westerly direction, reaching the Sidi Raham track by last light.

On 3 November the attackers tried again to break through but without success. However, the armoured car regiments, operating well ahead as usual, were causing chaos in the enemy’s rear areas, especially to any retreating columns (mainly Italians). Rommel had now to begin withdrawing, under cover of the DAK’s highly effective defence at Tel el Aqqagir. He hoped to disengage and then establish a proper delaying position at Fuka, but Hitler refused to allow him to make an orderly withdrawal, issuing one of his stupid ‘No Withdrawal’ orders on 3 November. Rommel commented: ‘Arms, petrol and aircraft could have helped us, but not orders.’ From then on Rommel was forced to ‘circumvent’ such orders from both Hitler and Mussolini in order to save his Panzerarmee from complete destruction. The order was rescinded two days later, but only after Rommel had sent Lt Berndt<sup>7</sup> to Hitler’s HQ to explain what would happen if he did not withdraw. In fact, of course, Rommel had

7. When he took over the DAK Rommel had been allotted a Nazi aide, Lt (later Captain) Alfred Ingemar Berndt. Tough and ambitious, he proved to be a brave and resourceful soldier, who did all he could to protect Rommel and to see that he got enough nutritious food to eat.



The effectiveness of the special desert camouflage is highlighted by this low-flying Me 109E. (BKUW)

The dust created on take off was both a hazard and a giveaway. (BKUW)





The Victor of El Alamein. Monty poses after the breakthrough, leaning on the front of his M3 Grant tank, which he used as a 'runabout' — he appears quite unconcerned by the enemy machine just to his rear. The original caption explained how, after twelve days and nights of relentless pressure by the Eighth Army, Rommel's lines were 'cracking, his troops fleeing westwards, leaving thousands of prisoners and dead, hundreds of guns and tanks and great supplies of other war material'. (IWM — BM 20753)





Rommel was away when the battle started and his Panzerarmee was under the command of Gen Stumme, who died of a heart attack. His place was taken by Gen Ritter von Thoma until Rommel returned. Von Thoma was subsequently captured when his tank was knocked out. Here he talks with Monty. (IWM – E 19129)

Members of 90 leichte Division, captured by the Australians, wait by a most appropriate sign to be taken back to a POW camp. (Author's Collection)



consideration in my plans to ensure that there would never be another Axis recovery and re-entry into Egypt.<sup>8</sup> In England they rang the church bells in celebration – the first time this had been done since the dark days of Dunkirk, because they had always been an integral part of the invasion warning system. Churchill himself would later write: ‘Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat,’ – a measure of how important a victory he considered it to have been.

8. Lord Montgomery of Alamein, *El Alamein to the Sangro*.

already been forced to withdraw, losing among others the highly experienced DAK commander Gen Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma who had been captured. The Desert Fox had given the order to withdraw at 1530 hours on 4 November, but the British pursuit did not get under way until the 5th – by which time Rommel’s disengagement was going well and any hope that Monty might have entertained of cutting off a large slice of the German forces was now dashed. Nevertheless, Monty and his Eighth Army had won a great victory and the Axis forces in North Africa had sustained a crushing defeat – four German and eight Italian divisions had virtually ceased to exist as effective fighting formations and would now be harried westwards over the entire breadth of North Africa. It was indeed the turning-point in the battles in North Africa and one of the milestones of the Second World War.

### THE BELLS RING OUT

As Monty commented: ‘In the previous desert campaigns, Rommel had never been decisively defeated in battle; he had been forced to withdraw, but not because of a decisive defeat. There was now a fundamental difference in the problem of the future conduct of the desert war. To this I will refer again, because it was a basic

## SEVEN

# A FIGHTING WITHDRAWAL

### FORWARD TO VICTORY!

General Montgomery had planned to cut off Rommel's retreating Panzerarmee by swinging his forces northwards to bisect the coast road at both Mersa Matruh and Fuka, and had ordered X Corps to the former location and 2 NZ Div to the latter. In the meantime, further to the south, XIII Corps had formed mobile columns which then sped westwards to round up various Italian formations which had been left – without transport, food or water – to fend for themselves. The Desert Air Force also continued to harry the enemy, engaging 'targets of opportunity' whenever they presented themselves.



Rommel looks tired, dispirited and somewhat dishevelled as he stands in his Horch staff car. He still wears the anti-gas goggles and his tartan scarf. (Author's Collection)

EIGHTH



ARMY

## PERSONAL MESSAGE

from the

## ARMY COMMANDER

*(To be read out to all Troops)*

1. When we began the Battle of Egypt, on 23rd October, I said that together we would hit the Germans and Italians for six right out of North Africa.

We have made a very good start and to-day, 12th November, there are no German and Italian soldiers on Egyptian territory except as prisoners.

In three weeks we have completely smashed the German and Italian Army, and pushed the fleeing remnants out of Egypt, having advanced ourselves nearly 300 miles up to and beyond the frontier.

2. The following enemy formations have ceased to exist as effective fighting formations:

Panzer Army — 15 Panzer Div.	20 Italian Corps — Ariete Armd
21 Panzer Div.	Littorio
90 Light Div.	Armd. Div.
164 Light Div.	Trieste Div.

10 Italian Corps — Brescia Div.	21 Italian Corps — Trento Div.
Pavia Div.	Bologna Div.
Folgore Div.	

The prisoners captured number 30,000, including nine Generals.

The amount of tanks, artillery, anti-tank guns, transport, aircraft, etc., destroyed or captured is so great that the enemy is completely crippled.

3. This is a very fine performance and I want, first, to thank you all for the way you responded to my call and rallied to the task. I feel that our great victory was brought about by the good fighting qualities of the soldiers of the Empire rather than by anything I may have been able to do myself.
4. Secondly, I know you will all realise how greatly we were helped in our task by the R.A.F. We could not have done it without their splendid help and co-operation. I have thanked the R.A.F. warmly on your behalf.
5. Our task is not finished yet; the Germans are out of Egypt, but there are still some left in North Africa. There is some good hunting to be had further to the West, in Libya; and our leading troops are now in Libya ready to begin. **AND THIS TIME, HAVING REACHED BENGHASI AND BEYOND, WE SHALL NOT COME BACK.**
6. On with the task, and good hunting to you all. As in all pursuits some have to remain behind to start with; but we shall all be in it before the finish.

*B. L. Montgomery*

12-11-42

General, G.O.C.-in-C., Eighth Army.



Ground crews working on the Allison engine of a Tomahawk fighter aircraft of the Desert Air Force inside a makeshift hangar. (IWM – TR 824)

Then on 5 November Monty regrouped his 'Corps de Chasse' – that is to say, X Corps (1st and 7th Armoured and 2nd NZ Divisions) ready to give chase, with XXX Corps ready to follow on behind while XIII Corps cleared up the El Alamein battlefield. By last light on the 6th the leading troops of XIII Corps were nearing the Matruh–'Charing Cross'<sup>1</sup> area and Monty had great hopes that they would be able to cut off quite a considerable number of enemy. However, this did not happen. A period of heavy rain interfered with his plans and the force was bogged down, while 1st Armd Div also failed to reach 'Charing Cross'. So the enemy escaped to fight another day.

The German withdrawal, which never became a rout thanks to Rommel's expert handling (although he did himself call it 'The Great Retreat'), would last right up to the fall of Tripoli on 23 January 1943 and beyond. Fighting doggedly, the Panzerarmee fell back gradually through Cyrenaica, from one position to the next. Behind them came the Eighth Army, initially quite slowly – it took them, for example, until

1. Like 'Piccadilly Circus', this was the nickname given by the British to a place which was often visited/passed through in the Western Desert, thus becoming an important landmark. This one was a major cross tracks in the desert, to the south-west of Mersa Matruh.



Although the DAK infantry in this photograph look somewhat ragtag, they carried out a masterly withdrawal, delaying the advancing Eighth Army whenever they could and leaving all sorts of booby traps to catch the unwary. (IWM — HU 5591)



Tobruk recaptured. Men of the 1/6th Queens enter the town on 6 November 1942 on their way to Tripoli — but it's a heck of a long walk! (Author's Collection)

12 December to reach the Mersa el Brega/El Agheila position, although the first of Rommel's withdrawing troops had arrived there exactly a month earlier. Everywhere possible the Germans left cunningly positioned mines and booby-traps, many of which were created by the new Panzerarmee engineer officer, Maj Gen Karl Bülowius. Small and bespectacled, he was rated as one of the best engineers in the German Army. The bustling little pioneer would go on to command the Division von Manteuffel in March 1943; taken prisoner in Tunisia, he finally committed suicide in an American POW camp in March 1945. The blocking position at Mersa el Brega/El Agheila was a strong one, which covered the area of desert between Mersa el Brega on the coast and Wadi Fareg, the latter being a difficult natural obstacle which ran east-west, drastically reducing the area available for manoeuvres and making a wide detour southwards necessary if one wanted to outflank the position. The Axis defence line here, which was already held by two 'Young Fascist' Divisions (Pistoia and Spezia), plus part of the Centauro Armoured Division as a mobile reserve, was to be strengthened by Rommel's forces. Thus Rommel and his Panzerarmee, to their chagrin, found themselves supposedly under the command of the bombastic Marshal Ettore Bastico, and ordered to hold the 100-mile long line at all costs by both Hitler and Mussolini. Rommel was most unhappy because it had not been his intention to defend there; rather he wanted to fall back all the way to Tunisia, where the 12-mile wide Gabes Gap was bounded on



The desert 'Piccadilly Circus' — complete with a wonderful statue of Eros, made out of empty petrol cans. (Author's Collection)



Allied advance/Axis withdrawal to Tripoli, 5 November 1942 to 23 January 1943

one side by the sea and on the other by a series of virtually impenetrable salt lakes and marshes, making it a perfect defensive position.

On 24 November Rommel had been summoned to attend a conference at the Arco del Fileni<sup>2</sup> with Kesselring, the Italian 'Comando Supremo' Marshal Ugo Cavallero and Bastico. Rommel was his usual blunt, realistic self, stating that if the Mersa el Brega line was to be held then he needed at least 50 new PzKpfw IV 'Specials', 50 75mm PaK anti-tank guns and 80 larger calibre artillery pieces, plus gun towers and ammunition. His guaranteed ammunition requirement was 4,000 tons, with the same amount of fuel, plus reinforcements for the now depleted Luftwaffe. And unless these could be delivered within a week, he could not guarantee to hold the line against a determined assault by Montgomery. The conference ended in disaster, the others all accusing Rommel of being 'prey to despair and defeat'. They were unable to reach a sensible compromise, and Rommel was told by Bastico a few days later that Mussolini wished him to attack the British advance guards and under no circumstances to withdraw any further without permission from the Italian High Command!

As always Rommel took no notice of these 'orders'. Instead he told Generale Navarrini to prepare the army to withdraw to a defensive line through Buerat, some 250 miles into Tripolitania, between Sirte and Misurata. Having given this order, he decided that the only sensible thing he could do was to go to the Führer, explain the situation and get his support. So he flew directly to Rastenburg<sup>3</sup> on the 28th and asked to see Hitler. He later noted that there was a 'distinct chill in the air' when he arrived but nevertheless he bravely persisted, and was relieved when the Führer accepted his explanation and he was able to obtain approval for his short-term proposals. However, when he tried to broach the subject of longer-term strategy – such as the lack of arms and ammunition and the distinct possibility that the Panzerarmee might have to

2. Known to the British as 'Marble Arch', this was a large white triumphal arch built by Mussolini on the border between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.
3. Location of Hitler's HQ at which the nearly successful attempt on his life would be made on 20 July 1944.

Mechanics working on a Bristol Beaufighter's Hercules engine at Magrun. Nearly 6,000 Beaufighters were built, mainly in the UK, but some 364 were completed in Australia. (IWM - TR 901)



A flight of Curtiss Kittyhawk IIs of 12 Squadron taxis through the scrub. The ground crewman on the wing directs the pilot whose view ahead is hindered by the aircraft's nose when the tail is down. (IWM - 978)



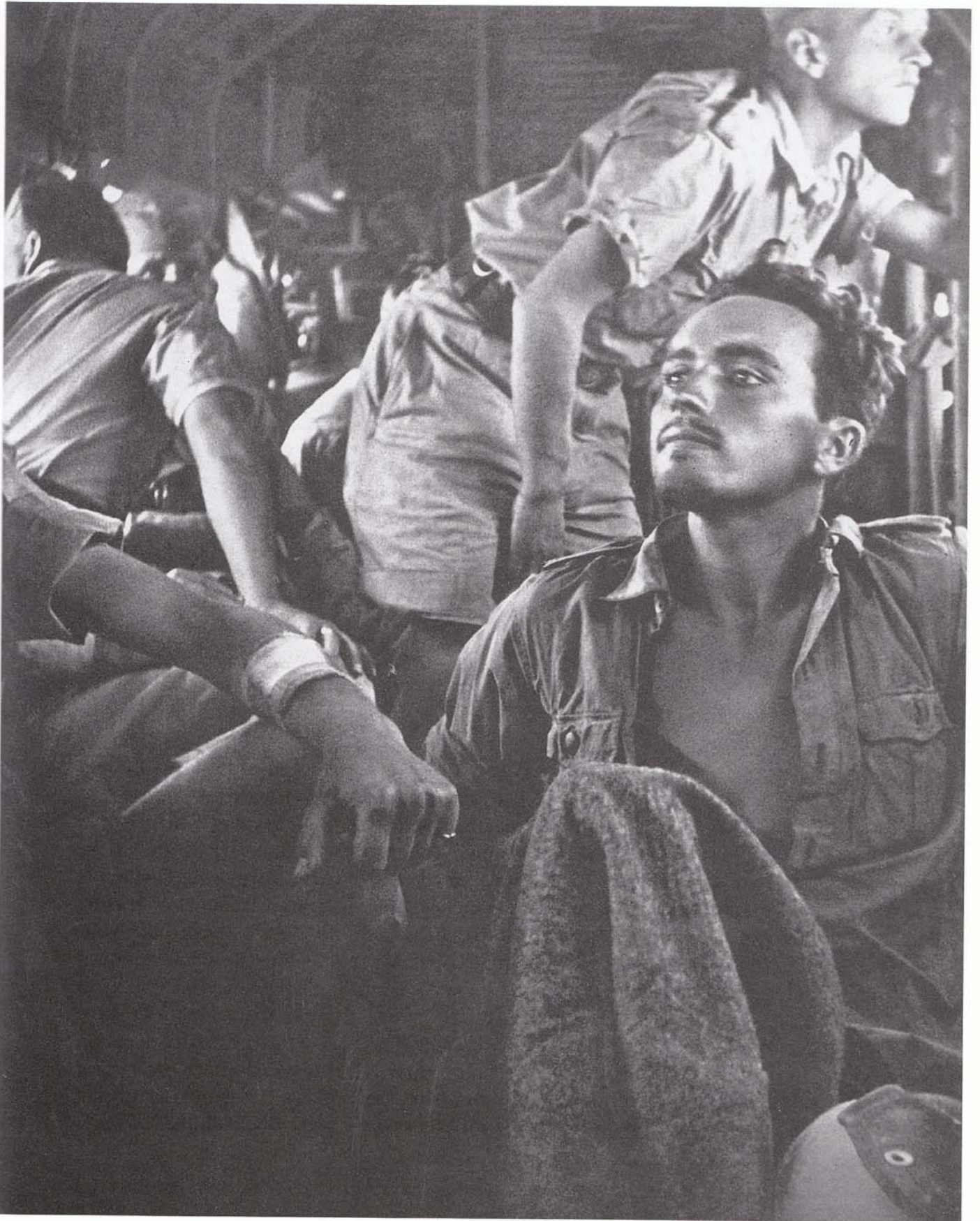




Along the way there were the inevitable skirmishes which led to casualties on both sides. Here a British Tommy escorts some walking wounded eastwards. (IWM – BM 7310)

withdraw from North Africa altogether – his words merely infuriated Hitler and his staff. When, for example, Rommel told them that only about one third of the fighting troops in the DAK had working tanks and guns to fight with, he and his soldiers were accused of throwing their weapons away! The Desert Fox strongly rebutted these allegations, explaining how the constant attacks from the Desert Air Force had ‘battered them to pieces’ and describing how his weary troops were performing miracles daily in their fighting withdrawal, despite being desperately short of ammunition and fuel. However, it was all in vain. Hitler was far more concerned with the campaign in Russia and the reverses German forces were suffering there. Rommel was brusquely told that he must maintain the vital bridgehead in Africa, so the Mersa el Brega/El Agheila line must be held. However, Hitler did promise that he would do all he could to ensure supplies for the Panzerarmee, and that, in order to facilitate this, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring would accompany Rommel to Italy as he was such a marvellous negotiator.

Rommel did not enjoy the journey, having to watch and listen to the antics of Göring, whom he disliked intensely. He also suspected him of trying to hand control in North Africa over to the Luftwaffe. ‘My bitterest enemy’ is how Rommel described him, as Göring vetoed every idea Rommel put forward and substituted his own ridiculous schemes. So the Desert Fox had to resort to cunning, getting his ADC, the staunch Nazi Lt Alfred Berndt, to make his plans for a withdrawal to the Gabes Gap



Some of the lucky wounded were not captured but rather were evacuated via the medical 'chain' and finally flown back to hospitals in Italy and Germany. (*Signal*, via Author's Collection)



Flt Lt W.H. Pentland of 417 Squadron, RCAF, awaiting 'start up' in his Spitfire Mk V. (IWM – TR 872)

'palatable' to Göring. Berndt, who was very persuasive, managed to do just this, and soon had Göring beaming with approval. Unfortunately, Kesselring then poured cold water on the plan when they all met together with Mussolini, arguing that it would drastically increase the air threat to Tunisia (one must remember that, as will be explained in the next chapter, Operation 'Torch' had now taken place). This made Göring change his mind. Also at this conference Göring accused Rommel of leaving the Italians in the lurch, which caused Mussolini to interject: 'That's news to me; your retreat was a masterpiece, Marshal Rommel!' Indeed, at that time Rommel reckoned he was getting far more support from the Italians than from the Germans, especially as all the Axis shipping space was now being used by Kesselring to carry supplies for the Fifth Panzer Army in Tunisia.<sup>4</sup> His feelings, as he flew back to join his Afrikaners on 2 December, are encapsulated in this diary entry: 'I realised that we were now completely thrown back on our own resources and that to keep the Army from being destroyed as the result of some crazy order or other would need all our skill.'

4. Rommel gives examples of such important items as the latest type of 8.8cm anti-tank gun being diverted to Tunis. Such actions made him more and more embittered.

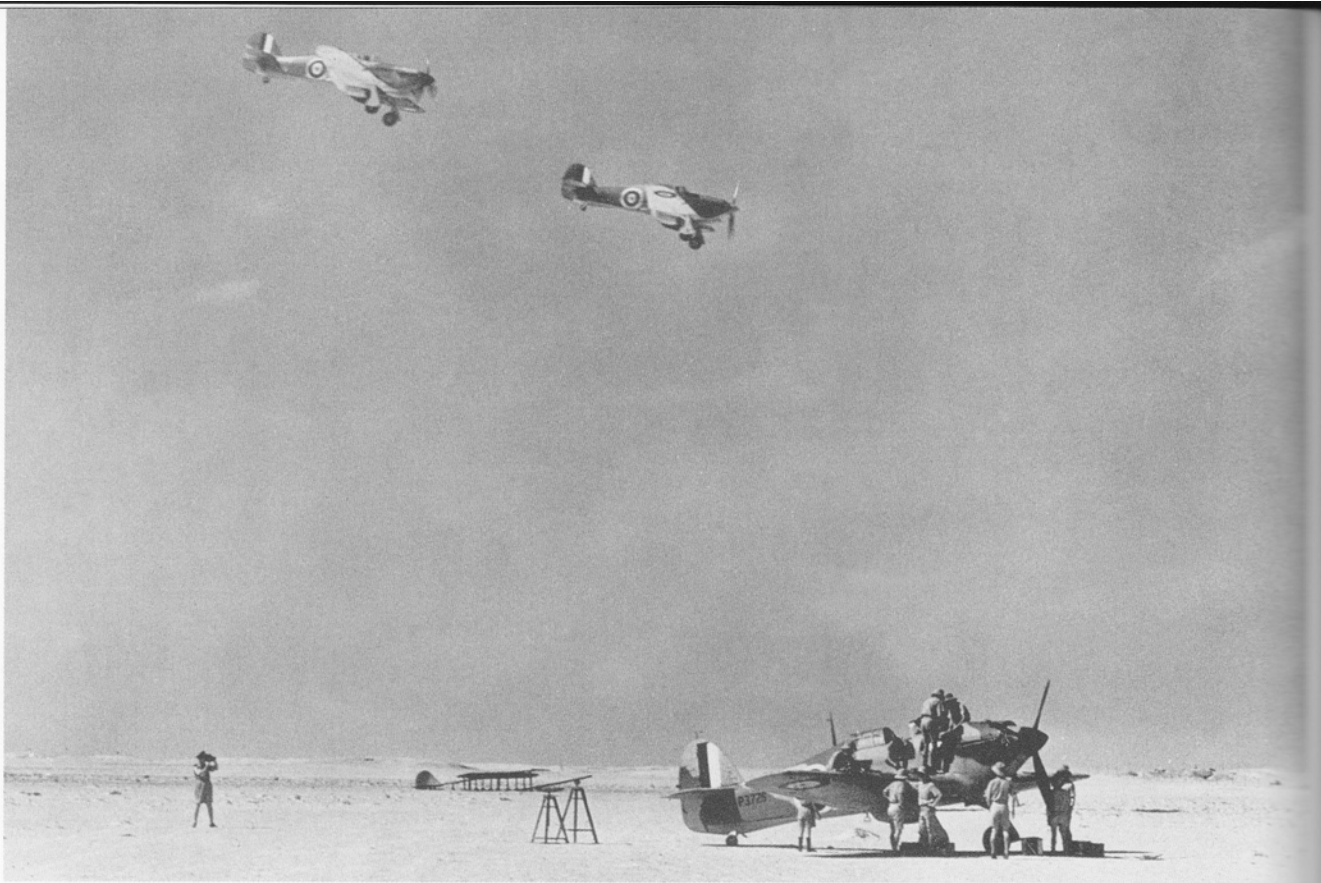


'Come to the Cookhouse Door, Boys!' Air and ground crews of 417 Squadron, RCAF, line up for bully and char at their desert airfield. (IWM – TR 879)

### MEANWHILE, ON THE OTHER SIDE

Meanwhile, Monty was not without his problems as the troops of the Eighth Army got their great pursuit into gear, driving as hard as they could in pursuit of their elusive enemy. He was determined not to give Rommel any respite and to limit his enemy's opportunities to organise delaying positions. However, there were two major problems, namely the organising of continuous air cover for the armoured cars and other light forces spearheading the advance, and the perennial problem of supply. The Desert Air Force could not function without forward airfields in Cyrenaica, from where they could dominate not only the immediate battlefield area but also Rommel's lines of communication and the ports such as Tripoli. Most important were the Maturba group of airfields in the Jebel el Akdar. The 'overstretched elastic' problem increasingly affected the Eighth Army supply chain as they moved further and further westwards and away from their main bases. It was essential, therefore, for example, to get the port of Tobruk functioning properly as quickly as possible.

Montgomery was determined to take the Mersa el Brega/El Agheila position as soon as he could. He estimated that the line was being held in considerable force, with infantry supported by some 100-plus tanks, a large number of anti-tank guns and 'immense' minefields. His plan involved finding a suitable southerly route around the



All the time Rommel's withdrawing troops were harassed from the air by the Desert Air Force. (IWM - CM 95)

Rommel with Gen Siegfried Westphal, who was probably the most able of his Chiefs of Staff. Aristocratic and highly intelligent, he would rise to the rank of General der Kavallerie. (Author's Collection)





Grant tanks move through the main street of Tarhuna – not so far to Tripoli now! (IWM – BM 34446)

position, to be taken by 2nd NZ Div, with the aim of looping around the enemy's rear, then turning northwards to cut the coast road well to the west. Meanwhile, 51st Inf Div would attack astride the coast road, while 7th Armd Div would be positioned centrally, with its lorried infantry brigade leading to carry out probing raids. The attack was scheduled for 14 December, with artillery and air bombardment starting a couple of days earlier and large-scale probing raids commencing on the 11th. Monty did not, of course, know that Rommel was intending to withdraw anyway and assumed that the enemy had mistaken these raids for the main attack and had begun to withdraw for that reason. However, planned or not, the Panzerarmee did begin to withdraw just before first light on the 13th, under cover of rearguards from 90 leichte. Monty comments that his leading troops had then to exercise great caution because of the large numbers of mines and booby traps left behind. Nevertheless, good progress was made, especially when 7th Armd Div took the lead on the following day. 'The Desert Air Force also did great execution of the coast road' comments Monty in his memoirs.<sup>5</sup>

5. Undoubtedly his experiences of having to move under enemy air superiority coloured Rommel's tactical thoughts from then on – especially causing him to advocate strongly, contrary to other opinions, the need to have the bulk of German forces located well forward when preparing for the Normandy invasion. He saw the main battle as taking place at the beachheads, as he knew how difficult subsequent movement would be. Events would, of course, prove him correct.



An infantry reconnaissance unit in Bren gun carriers, belonging to the 78th Inf Div, of XIII Corps, 1st Army, shelter under a line of trees, in Tunisia, January 1943. The Bren carrier was widely used and there were many varieties of this excellent little 3.5-ton vehicle. (IWM – TR 631)

### *BUERAT*

The advance continued on the 17th, and on the 18th the New Zealanders fought a sharp engagement at Nofilia on the coast road. Then 7th Armd Div took up the advance but with light forces only, because their tanks and heavy vehicles were desperately short of maintenance, having covered well over 1,000 miles since 23 October. Meanwhile Rommel was strengthening his next major delaying position at Buerat, once again laying masses of mines (mainly anti-personnel this time, because there was already a formidable anti-tank ditch there). The Eighth Army pressed on, taking Sirte on Christmas Day and by the 27th their patrols had crossed the Wadi Tamet. Two days later they had reached the Buerat line. Their patrols discovered that it was nowhere as strong as the previous position had been, but that there were additional natural obstacles, such as the Wadi Zem Zem. Monty began to prepare to assault the enemy positions, having decided to attack with four divisions; carefully estimating that the battle could last for at least ten days of heavy fighting, he reckoned that the necessary bringing forward and dumping of supplies would take some three weeks to complete. Therefore he decided that he would not be in a position to resume



Army/air cooperation was essential if the Desert Air Force were to give the enemy a hard time on the ground as well as in the air. Here an RAF liaison officer (nearest the camera) receives a call from a Spitfire about a target. He will pass the information on to the Royal Artillery FOO behind him in the pit. (IWM – TR 1024)

Briefing for a mission on the tailboard of a lorry. The OC of 417 Squadron, RCAF, works out his plans in his open-air 'Operations Room' at Goubrine, Tunisia, May 1943. (IWM – TR 829)





the offensive until mid-January 1943. This would actually not prove necessary, as Rommel had already decided to begin moving his infantry back to the Homs–Tarhuna line, despite signals from Mussolini ordering him to hold the enemy on the Buerat line for at least six weeks. Rommel, who knew the situation far better than anyone on the ‘other side of the water’, was determined to save his men rather than sacrifice them in such empty gestures. Monty’s troops pressed forward as the Axis forces withdrew, the

‘mines and very skilful demolitions’ (Monty’s own words) which they had left behind causing the British considerable delay. But nothing was going to stop the Eighth Army’s progress, the Battle of Buerat being all over bar the shouting by the 15th. By the 19th 51st Inf Div’s leading elements had entered Homs and Monty was poised to release his armour against Tripoli via Castelverde.



Tanks of 7th Armd Div, lined up in Tripoli square. First into the city was an armoured car belonging to the 11th Hussars, the division’s armoured car regiment, which had been first into Benghazi and Tobruk. (IWM)

#### ON TO TRIPOLI

On the 22 January 22 Armd Bde, which had been brought up to the west of Homs, was passed through the infantry and told to force its way forward and press on to Tripoli. This it did, once Castelverde had been taken in a night attack, with the armour following through in the moonlight. The city of Tripoli was entered from both the east and south in the early hours of the 23rd.

It had taken the Eighth Army three

months exactly to reach Tripoli, having travelled some 1,400 miles across the deserts of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. The city was not badly damaged, although the port facilities had been largely demolished and the harbour entrance blocked. It was essential to get the port operating as quickly as possible and this was achieved in a remarkably short time, the first ship entering the harbour on 3 February. A full convoy was able to berth there just three days later, and by the 10th the port was handling 2,000 tons daily – a very considerable achievement by all concerned.

After his remarkable advance Monty was not about to move on hastily. He must have appreciated that the enemy was going to have to withdraw out of Libya and into Tunisia, where they would be able to occupy much more suitable defensive positions, such as those at Medinine and Mareth. However, at this moment it was far more important for the Eighth Army to build up its supplies in a forward location before moving on. After all, from Cairo to Tripoli was roughly 1,600 miles by road – Monty



Churchill inspects his Desert Rats. Winston Churchill flew from Cairo to Tripoli on 3 February 1943 and personally thanked the Eighth Army for all they had achieved. He was accompanied by Gen Alexander and Gen Alanbrooke. (IWM – BM 24466)

likens it to having the stores depots in London and the leading troops in Moscow, with just one road connecting them! He established his Army HQ in the field, some miles outside the city limits. Typically he comments in his memoirs that although there were plenty of palaces, villas and buildings galore they would not be used because he could not have his soldiers 'getting soft. It was necessary to safeguard their hardness and efficiency for the tasks that lay ahead'. During this lull Winston Churchill himself visited the triumphant Eighth Army – his 'Dear Desert Rats' as he later called them.

### ROMMEL IN TROUBLE

The Desert Fox drove across the Tunisian border in the early hours of 26 January, making for the new Panzerarmee HQ just west of Ben Gardane. Here he would soon receive a signal relieving him of his command. His continued bad health would be given as the reason for his dismissal, but it was clear that those in the higher command who hated him were not prepared to put up with his continued disobedience of their orders any longer. The actual date of relief was left up to him, but he would have to hand over to an Italian – Generale di Armate Giovanni Messe, one of the most



This dispirited-looking German prisoner says it all. However, there were still some months of hard fighting before the struggle in North Africa would end. (IWM – NA 2303)

experienced and able of the senior Italian generals. Messe had taken part in the campaign in Greece and commanded the Italian Expeditionary Force in Russia. He was, of course, extremely proud to have been selected for the appointment and, although Rommel felt it was uncalled-for and that they should at least have found a German general to replace him, Messe made an extremely good first impression on him. Rommel decided that he would not hand over command immediately and that the Italian, who had arrived in North Africa in early February, would have to wait his turn. 'I am deeply sorry for my men. They are very dear to me,' wrote Rommel to his wife on the 28th, but in the same letter he told her that he was not feeling at all well and that he was having to take sleeping draughts. However, despite this apparent setback, this part of Rommel's career was far from over. He had got wind of the impending sacking some days earlier and sent the ever-reliable Berndt over to see the Führer and to find out the true situation. Hitler had by then recovered from his fit of anger with his favourite field marshal and told Berndt that he had decided to give Rommel supreme command in Tunisia –

always assuming that he was fit enough. This would elevate him to commander of the Heeresgruppe Afrika, of which the Panzerarmee was but a part. There would be more battles for the Desert Fox before he could shake the sand out of his shoes.

## EIGHT

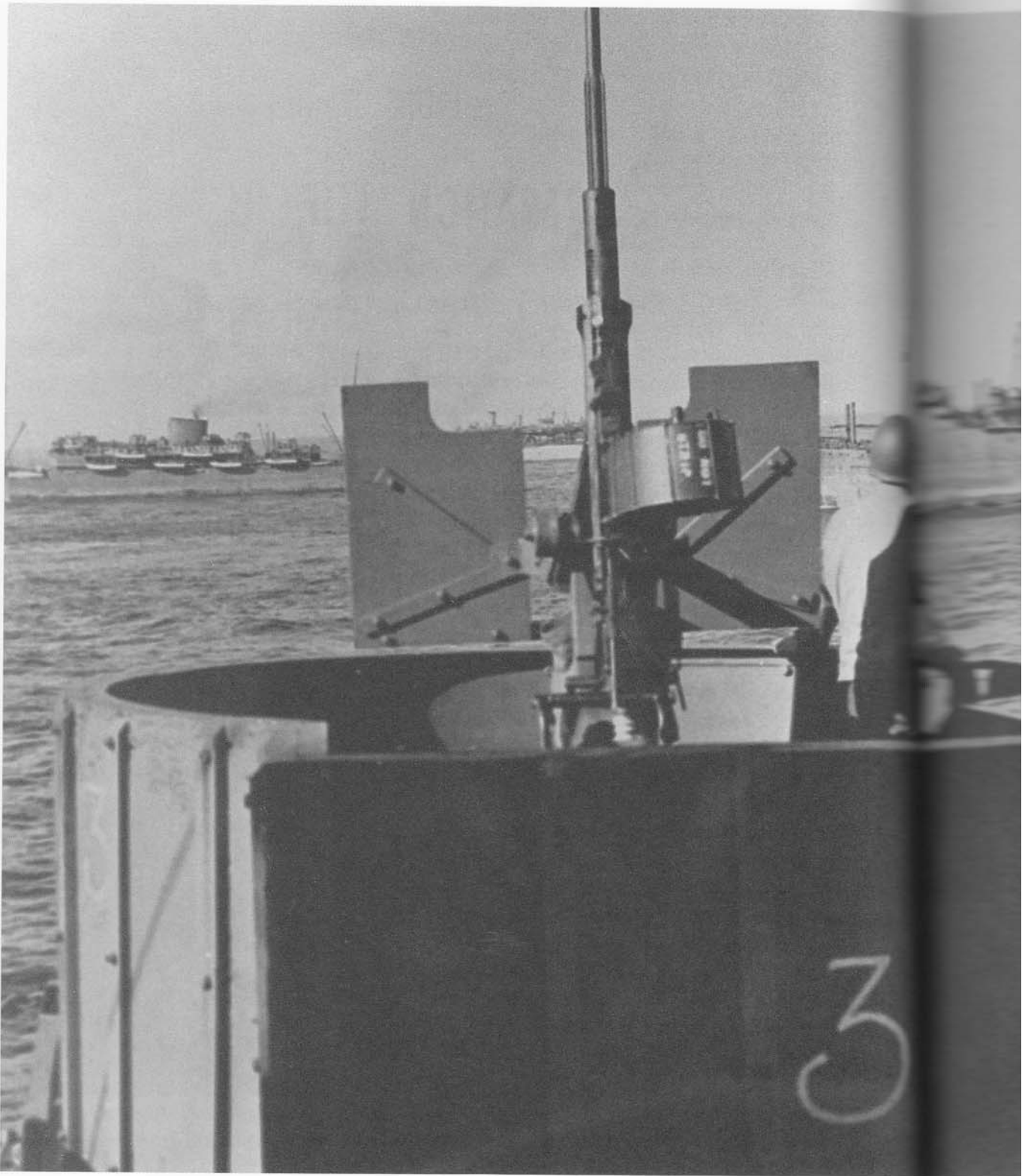
# OPERATION 'TORCH'

### 'COMPLETE CONTROL OF NORTH AFRICA'

On 13 August 1942 Lt Gen Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was at the time in Great Britain, organising the American build-up there, received a directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordering him to 'gain, in conjunction with Allied forces in the Middle East, complete control of North Africa, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea'. He was also given an outline plan of how he was to achieve this momentous task. First he was to establish mutually supporting bases around Casablanca in Morocco, Oran and Algiers in Algeria and Tunis in Tunisia, all of which were currently under the control of Vichy France. This was a considerable task, the distance from Casablanca to Tunis being some 1,300 miles by road – not much less than the distance Montgomery's Eighth Army would have to travel to reach the Tunisian border from El Alamein. The terrain was not easy either – true, there was, as in most of North Africa, a narrow coastal plain, but much of the rest of the countryside was mountainous, while the beaches in the west were plagued by heavy surf and those in the east were invariably rocky or cliff-lined. This meant that in any amphibious operation ports would have to be seized from the outset, rather than as a follow-up to a more secluded beach landing. It was estimated that a total of 65–70,000 assault troops would be needed for the operation.



Excellent shot of a Grumman Wildcat on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier HMS *Formidable*, November 1942. One of the *Illustrious* class carriers, it could carry over sixty aircraft and was built in 1937. (IWM – TR 284)





Invasion North Africa, 1942. Ships of the Western Task Force en route from USA. Note the 37mm Browning anti-aircraft gun on one of the escort ships. (Real War Photos – A 1157A)

Before dealing with Operation 'Torch' in any detail, we must go back to the 'Arcadia' conference, which was the first of the historic wartime meetings between Churchill and Roosevelt after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was held at the White House between late December 1941 and 22 January 1942, and Eisenhower had actually attended, but largely as a spectator. At this meeting it was finally decided that, although a cross-Channel attack (then codenamed 'Round-up') was still vitally important, it would be preceded by an Allied landing in North Africa (initially codenamed 'Gymnast', then 'Super-gymnast' and finally 'Torch'). This decision was not an easy one as such 'peripheral strategy' hindered the real aim of the Allied leaders, which was trying to take the pressure off Russia, as it was vital to keep them 'up and running' in the war.

### WOULD THE FRENCH FIGHT?

One of the imponderables facing the Allies was the question of whether the Vichy French troops who garrisoned French North Africa would oppose the landings. There were, of course, a fair number of French servicemen in North Africa, both the Free French fighting with Monty's Eighth Army (witness their heroic stand at Bir Hacheim – see chapter 4) and the Vichy-French garrisoning the French colonial empire. The Franco-German Armistice had limited the

number of French troops in North Africa to 120,000, with 55,000 in Morocco, 50,000 in Algeria and 15,000 in Tunisia. These were mainly native troops with French officers and in general their arms and equipment were obsolescent, but their fighting spirit was extremely high, so they represented a definite threat to the landings. In addition, there were about 500 aircraft of the French Air Force which, despite their age, were all capable of interfering with and causing damage to the Allied landings. Finally there were a number of French warships in various ports whose crews probably had less sympathy with the Allied cause than any of the other French servicemen. This dated back to early July 1940, when the British attacked part of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir (the military port of Oran) after an ultimatum had been issued by Admiral Somerville to come out and join the British fleet or agree to sail to British-held ports and be disarmed, or else to stay where they were and face the consequences. They chose to stay and most of them were sunk, with the loss of over a thousand French



Loading a shipborne AA gun. The threat from the Luftwaffe was always a hazard in the Mediterranean, but the convoys had to get through no matter what. (IWM - TR 1418)



Firing the close-range AA pom-poms. These were 2pdr AA guns which could be fitted in single, four and eight barrel mountings. It was also known as the 'Chicago Piano'! (IWM - TR 1420)

seamen. Admiral Jean Darlan, who was commander of all Vichy French armed forces, visited French North Africa in October 1942 and exhorted all officers to resist the expected invasion. However, privately he had already let the Allies know that he was prepared to negotiate with them, so the US State Department had authorised Robert Murphy, formerly the American Consular-General in French North Africa, to start a secret dialogue with him which might help facilitate military operations. There was also a potential military commander for any breakaway French forces in French North Africa in the shape of General Henri Giraud. On 17 April 1942 he had engineered an amazing escape from a prison near Dresden where he had been incarcerated for almost two years by the Germans, and since then had lived openly in Lyons.



*'THE AMERICAN EAGLE'*

While the invasion planning was under way Maj Gen Mark Wayne Clark, who would eventually be intimately involved, was commanding II US Corps in England. It is not



The 'American Eagle'. Maj Gen Mark Wayne Clark carried out a daring lone liaison visit to North Africa prior to the 'Torch' operation to gain French support and help coordinate the landings. Here he is enjoying an Arab feast in Morocco. (US Army)

often that a general has the opportunity of landing on the invasion beaches ahead of his troops, but that is exactly what Mark Clark did in October 1942. After flying to Gibraltar in a B-17 bomber, he made a dramatic, hazardous but successful trip in HM Submarine *Seraph*, to North Africa, for a secret rendezvous with a group of French officers in order to help gain their support in coordinating the 'Torch' landings. He landed at Cherchell, some 90 miles from Algiers, on 21 October. This secret, very dangerous mission clearly tested the courage of 'The American Eagle' as he was called (because of his large hooked nose). Clark, by then Ike's deputy for 'Torch', met with the commander of the French Algerian division, Gen Charles Mast, who guaranteed to arrange that there would be no opposition to the landings by French sea, land or air forces. This was something of a tall order for him to enforce, especially in view of the distances involved and the disparate mixture of the French forces. However, it was clearly a most important mission and Mark Clark did all that was asked of him, even if Mast did not ultimately contact all the French forces in time. In some cases also, premature action by those who supported the Allies led to the pro-Vichy factions regaining control of certain areas – such as Algiers and Casablanca, before the landings began.

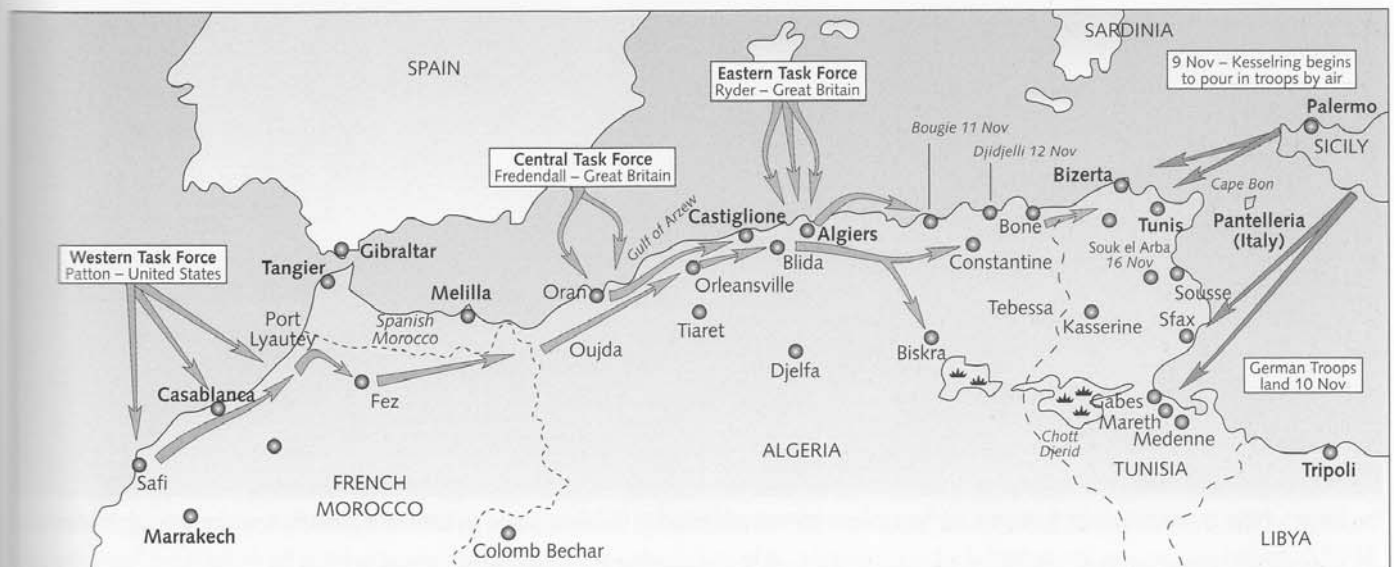
## OPERATION 'TORCH'

## BREAKDOWN OF FORCES

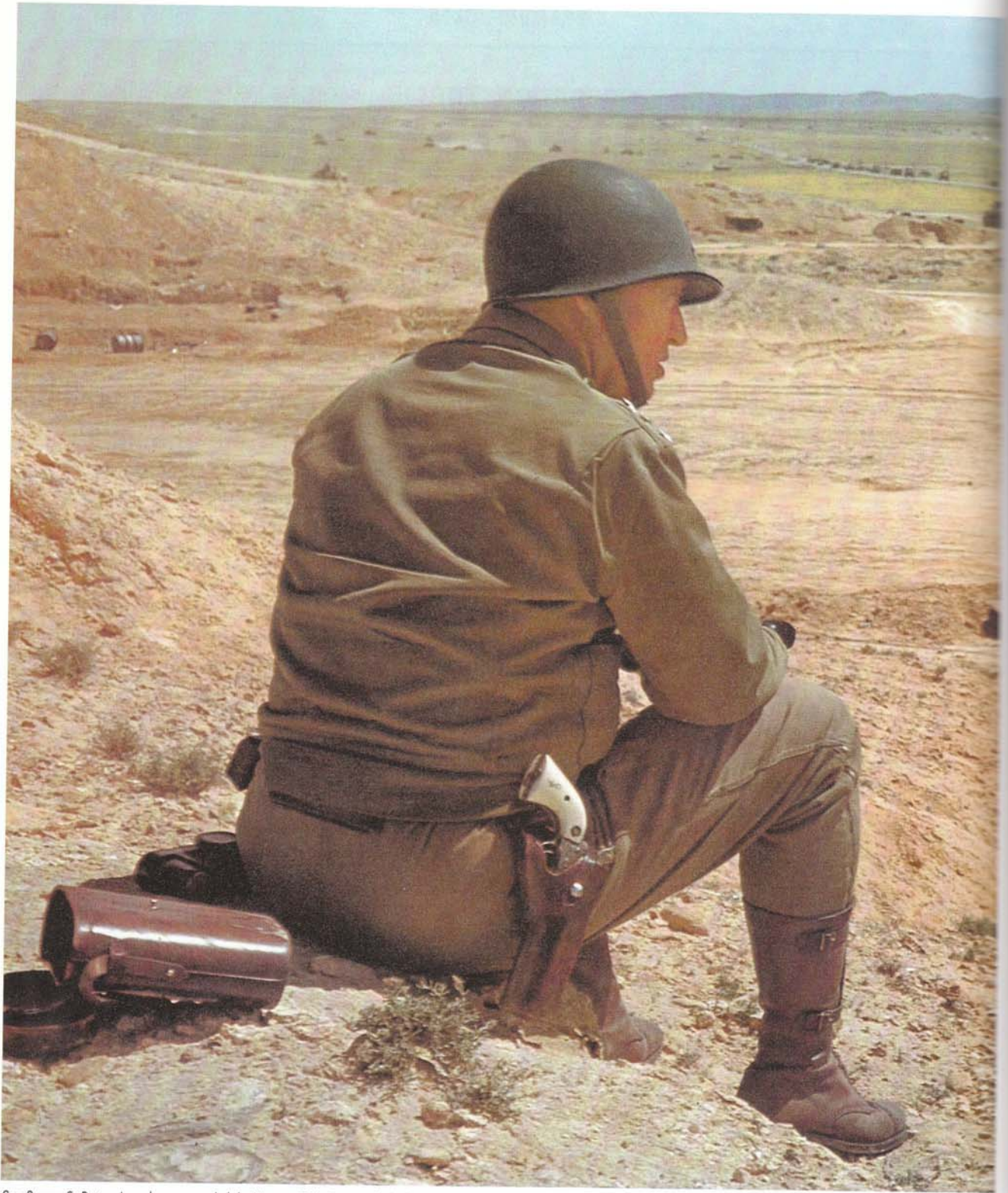
- a. Casablanca. 7th, 15th, 30th, 47th and 60th Combat Teams – 22,500 men  
 One armoured combat command – 4,500  
 One regiment – 2,000  
 One armoured combat team – 2,000  
 TOTAL 31,000
  
- b. Oran. 16th, 18th and 26th Combat Teams – 13,500  
 One armoured combat command (with 180 tanks) – 4,500  
 1st Ranger Battalion 500  
 TOTAL 18,500
  
- c. Algiers. 39th and 168th Combat Teams (US) – 9,000  
 11th and 36th Inf Bdes (BR) – 9,000  
 1st and 6th Commandos (Allied) – 2,000  
 TOTAL 20,000

(Source: SWC Pack, *Invasion North Africa 1942*)

As the map shows, three landing areas were chosen for the assault on Sunday 8 November 1942, with three Task Forces – Western, Central and Eastern, landing at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers respectively. At Casablanca there would be some 31,000



Operation 'Torch' landings, 8 November 1942



Gen George S. Patton Jr, who commanded the Western Task Force and who later replaced Fredenall as CG II Corps, surveys the battlefield in Tunisia. He is wearing his ivory-handled pistol (a .45 Colt Peacemaker) which was often wrongly described as being 'pearl-handled'. In his usual colourful way GSP is said to have remarked on hearing this description that: 'only a pimp in a New Orleans whorehouse would have pearl grips!' (Time Life)

A well-known U...  
them in the d...  
its main arma...



Well-Hoden US light tank moves across the desert. The Americans called them the M3 light tank series, the British named them 'Stuart', however, the British crews who were the first to use them in the desert just called the little tank 'Honey' because they were mechanically reliable and easy to crew. Weighing some 12.7 tons, the M3A1, for example, mounted a 37mm gun as its main armament and had a top speed of 36mph. (Time Life)



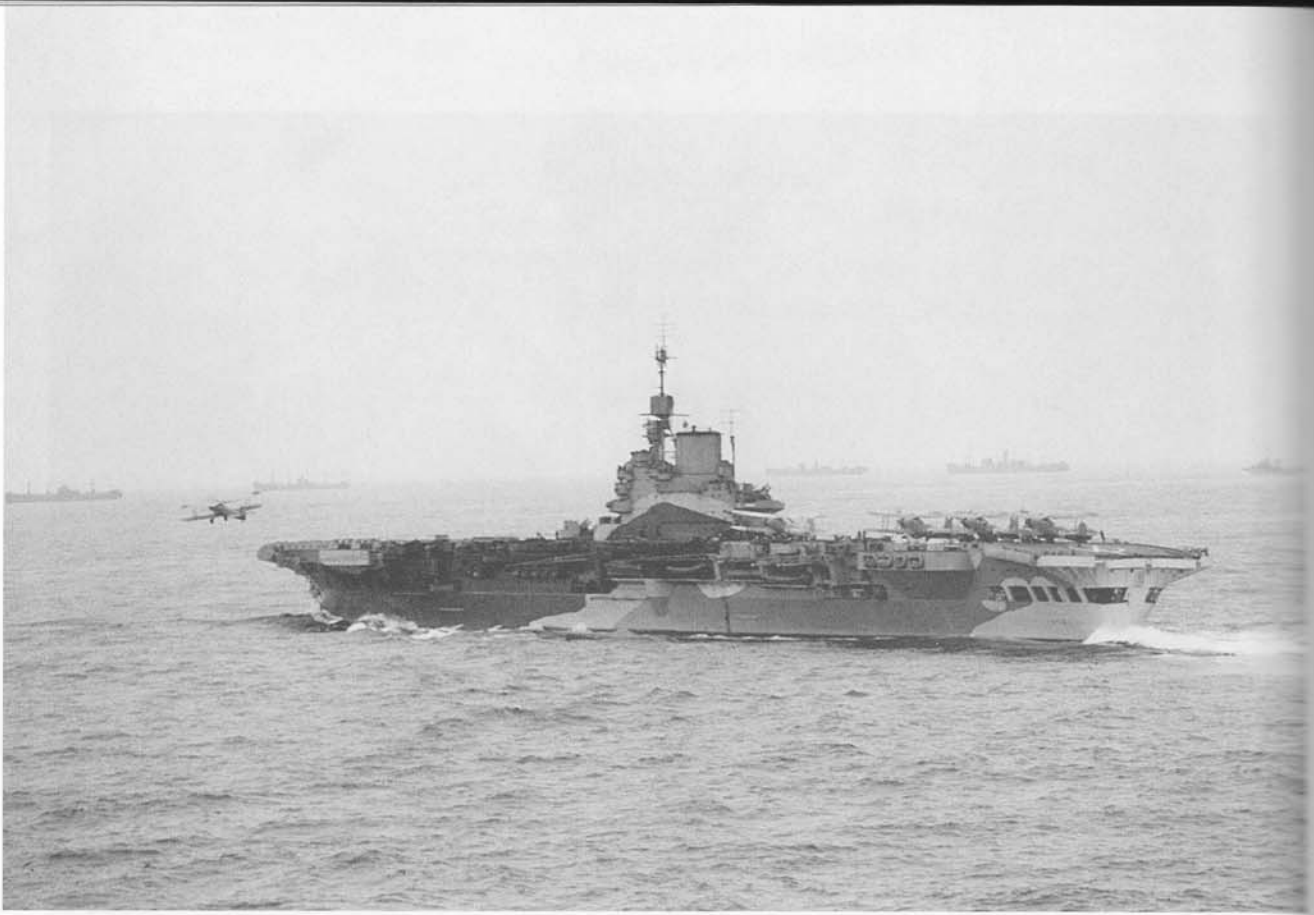
Headed by 'Old Glory', these GIs set off from a beachhead area near Algiers, to capture the Maison Blanche airfield. This was essential as aircraft based on Gibraltar had flying time problems owing to lack of fuel capacity. Fortunately it was easily captured at about 0600 hours, and at 1000 hours, Hurricanes of 43 Squadron RAF were able to land. (IWM — NA 23)

troops, at Oran 18,500 and at Algiers 20,000. The Casablanca-bound Western Task Force was commanded by Gen George S. Patton Jnr and comprised units of the 2nd Armored, 3rd Infantry and 9th Infantry Divisions, US Army, escorted and transported by the US Navy direct from ports in Virginia, USA, under the command of Rear Admiral Harry Kent Hewitt. The Central Task Force bound for Oran was also made up of all US Army troops commanded by Maj Gen Lloyd R. Fredenall, and comprised units of 1st Armored Division and 1st Infantry Division. It was escorted by ships of the Royal Navy, commanded by Commodore Thomas Troubridge, sailing from ports in the UK. Finally, the Eastern Task Force, which would eventually be under the overall command of Lt Gen Kenneth Anderson, comprised units of the British 78th and the American 34th Infantry Divisions, both also sailing from Britain and escorted by ships of the Royal Navy under command of Rear Admiral Sir H.M. Burrough. The Eastern Task Force's assault force was initially under the command of Maj Gen Charles W. Ryder of the US Army, to give the impression that the enterprise was wholly American. It would land first on the beaches, secure the beachhead and then go on to capture the Algerian capital and the airfields at Blida and Maison Blanche.

The entire Allied Expeditionary Force was under the command of Gen Eisenhower, the first American/British officer to be given command over such a two-nation force in



The potential military commander for any breakaway French forces in North Africa was Gen Henri Giraud — seen here some time after the Axis surrender, when he was presented with the Legion of Merit by the Commander of the Allied Forces taking part in Operation 'Torch', General Dwight D. Eisenhower, on 4 August 1943. (IWM — BNA 6055)



HMS *Formidable* seen here flying off aircraft, was one of the aircraft carriers covering the landing operations in North Africa. (IWM — A15731)

Assault on Algiers. American and British servicemen land at Surcouf, some 20 miles east of the city. Further out to sea are the larger vessels that brought them to North Africa. (IWM — NA 17)





Another view of the beach at Surcouf on the morning of 8 November 1942. (IWM — NA 30)

British troops landing on a beach near Algiers. The landing craft is very close to the edge of the beach, so they will hardly get their boots wet. (IWM — A 12706)







The commander of the Western Task Force was Gen George S. Patton Jr, or 'Ole Blood and Guts' as he was popularly known. Patton was one of the most experienced and ablest American armoured soldiers in the war, having commanded tanks at brigade level in the First World War. He is seen here with Gen Sir Harold Alexander on board ship, but this photo was not taken during the 'Torch' operation, as Patton didn't get his third 'star' until after he was put in command of II Corps. (It was probably taken during the invasion of Sicily.) (IWM - NA 77)

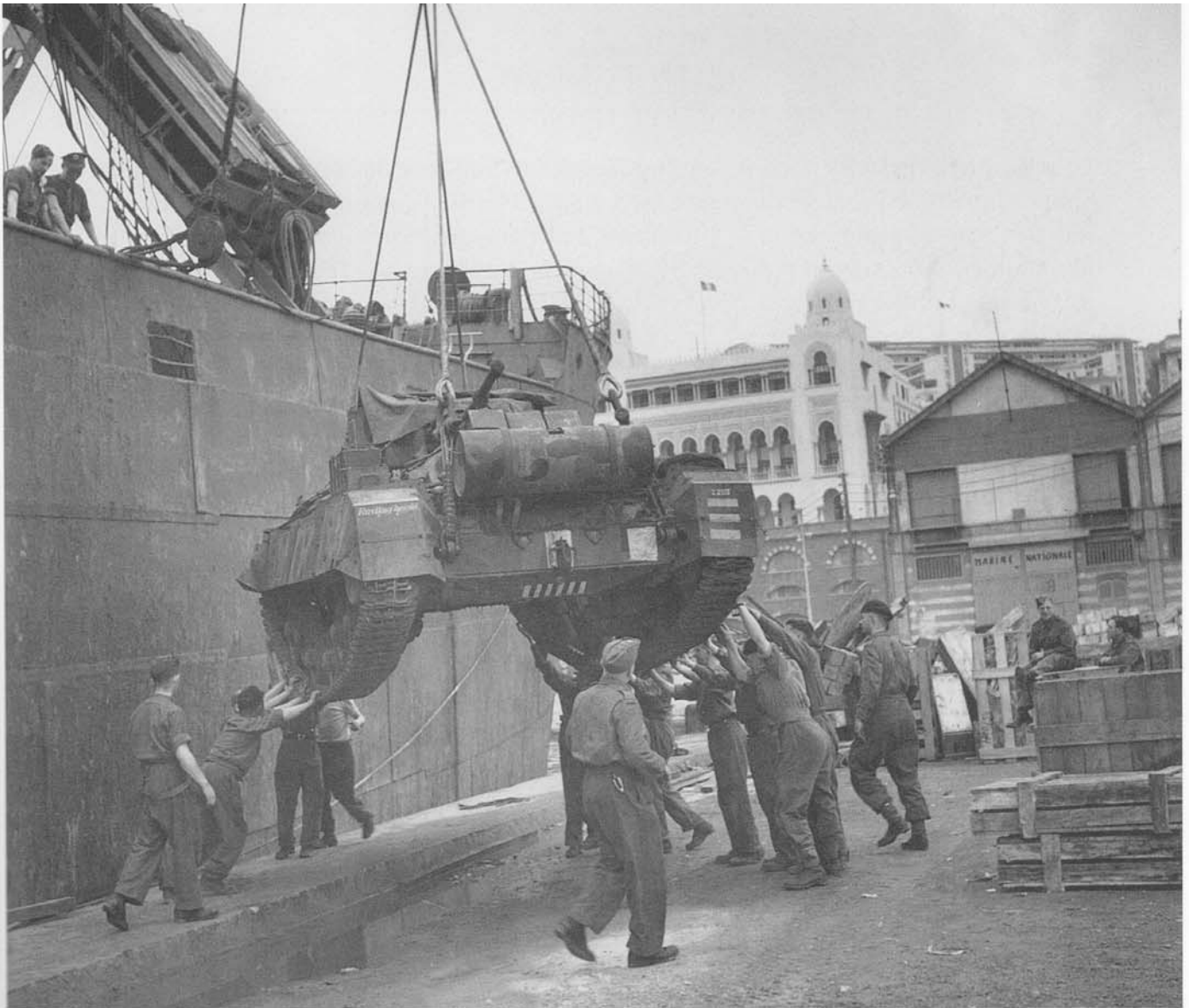
which neither force was subordinate to the other. 'I was determined from the first to do all in my power to make this a truly Allied force,' he wrote later in his memoirs, 'with real unity of command and centralization of administrative responsibility.'

#### *LITTLE GERMAN RESPONSE.*

On the Axis side, the first indication that something was going to happen came on 9 October, when the head of Italian military intelligence told the Foreign Minister that the Allies were preparing to land forces in North Africa. Further similar warnings followed, but the Axis leaders were far too involved with the Russian Front to pay much attention, so nothing was done to intercept the convoys en route, although the ever-present threat from hostile submarines remained throughout.

#### *THE WESTERN TASK FORCE*

Patton had divided his task force of 31,000 troops into three groups. The northern one, under Maj Gen Lucian K. Truscott, comprised 60th Infantry Regt of 9th Inf Div



Unloading a British Vickers Valentine tank at the docks in Algiers. It belonged to one of the units of 6th Armd Div. (IWM - NA 93)



US tank crews prepare their Sherman medium tanks for battle in a tank camp in Oran, Algeria. The main armament was packed with heavy grease so that it was not affected by the salt air during the long sea voyage from the USA. Some of the myriad items of the tank's tools and equipment, are also being carefully checked. (US Army)

plus an armoured task force from 2nd Armd Div and was due to land near Mehdia and capture Port Lyautey; the centre force under Maj Gen Jonathan W. Anderson (3rd Inf Div plus an armoured task force from 2nd Armoured Div) would land at Fedala; the southern armoured task, under Maj Gen Ernest A. Harmon (2nd Armd Div less the two forces, plus the 47th Inf Regt of 9th Inf Div) was to land at Safi. The last two forces would then converge and take Casablanca from the landward side. Landing difficulties (mainly caused by lack of experience in transferring the landing force to the landing craft delayed the attacks, while GSP was also personally delayed from landing<sup>1</sup> and didn't get ashore until about 1230 hours. There was still quite a fight in progress but no bullets came his way and he spent the night in his HQ in the Hotel Miramar in Fedala. Patton was up before dawn and went to see Maj Gen Anderson – and was not best pleased to find him still in bed! He was even more incensed when he looked around the beach and the harbour and found it all in a mess. 'As a whole the men were poor and the officers worse; no drive,' he wrote in his diary, 'it is very sad.' Typically he got to the nub of the problem and began to 'kick butts' – and it worked. By the end of the day Truscott had captured the airport at Lyautey, while Harmon's southern task force defeated an enemy column, destroying nineteen trucks and six tanks, as he pressed on for Casablanca. However, on the debit side, the French shore batteries had opened fire and had had to be silenced, and some French naval vessels had left port and attacked the troop transports. The French battleship *Jean Bart*, which was in the harbour but uncompleted, had engaged the task force with its four 15-inch guns until it, too, was silenced. Patton received orders from Ike the next day telling him to 'crack the tough nut [Casablanca] as quickly as possible'; this is exactly what he was doing, although he had wisely delayed H-Hour for the final attack until daylight, so as to give Anderson's green troops time to form up in the light and for the French to agree to his ultimatum to negotiate an armistice. The surrender was thus achieved at 1100 hrs without a further shot being fired.

#### THE CENTRAL TASK FORCE

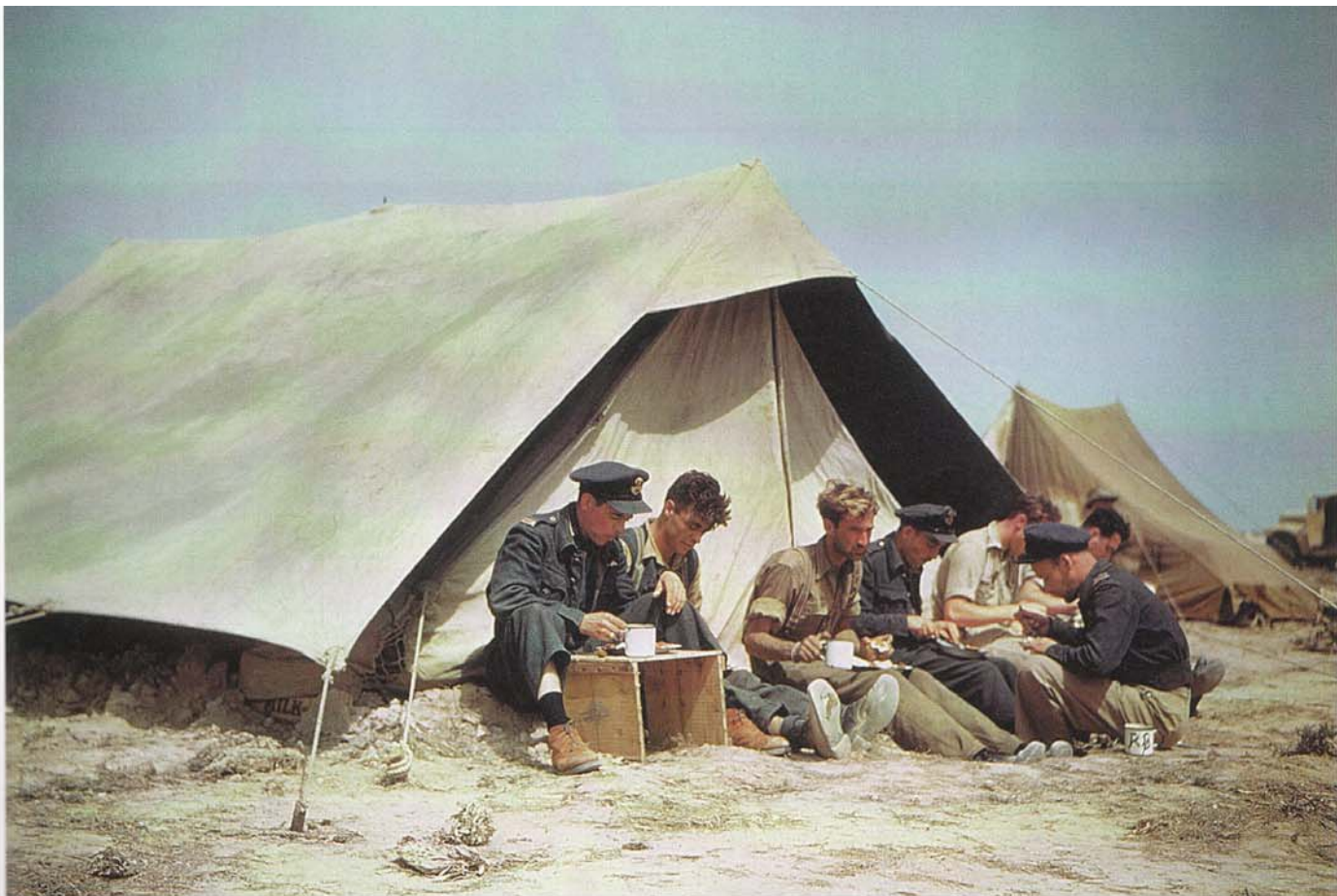
Although the Central Task Force had also landed at three separate sites, they were much closer together than those of the Western Task Force, being under 40 miles in total frontage. Two sites were west of Oran, while the bulk of the task force was concentrated east of the city. Armoured task forces from CCB 1st Armored Division landed both east and west, while the 16th and 18th Inf Regts went ashore east of Oran and the 26th Inf landed at Les Andalouses, together with the rest of 1st Armored. The local anti-Vichy leader had informed Gen Mast that he had been unable to influence

1. Patton had planned to go ashore at 0800 hours, by which time the first objectives should have been taken. He enjoyed watching the naval bombardment but cannot have been best pleased when the back-blasts of the gunfire blew his landing craft off the deck and he lost all his personal kit! Fortunately, he had just sent his orderly, the ever-faithful Sgt George Meeks, to fetch his precious pistols.



Men of 417 Sqd  
(NW - TR 830)

'Scramble!' A C  
sarie. Goubrine



Men of 417 Squadron, RCAF, enjoying a meal at the entrance to their tent in Goubrine, Tunisia. (IWM - TR 830)



'Scramble!' A Canadian pilot of 417 Squadron, RCAF, climbs into his Spitfire for another sortie. Goubrine, Tunisia. (IWM - TR 832)



An night air-raid in progress on Algiers. (IWM — NA 176)

the local Vichy troops, nevertheless things got off to a good start, with a Ranger battalion capturing two shore batteries and this meant that the initial landings went quite smoothly. However, further inland French resistance increased, while in Oran itself it had been hoped that the port facilities could be captured by a special force due to be landed by two Royal Navy coastguard cutters. Unfortunately, resistance in the port was extremely fierce, both ships were sunk and most of the special force became casualties. However, the next day two key airfields in the La Spezia area were occupied; as air superiority was gained, the French counter-attacks were repulsed.

#### *THE EASTERN TASK FORCE*

The mixed American and British force which landed in the Algiers area had much the easiest time, principally because the local commander was Gen Mast, who had been able to ensure minimal resistance. For example, when Fort Sidi Ferruch was taken in the early hours Gen Mast personally welcomed the commando troops and offered them transport to take the airfield at Blida. French resistance stiffened in the



On to Tunis! Mobile columns from the Eastern Task Force pressed on deep into Tunisia, reaching Mateur and Djedeida, only 20 miles from Tunis, before being forced back through lack of reinforcements and supplies. These Royal West Kent positions are in the hills near Mateur. (IWM – NA 210)

afternoon, in particular at the fortress on Cape Matifou on the eastern side of the Bay of Algiers and at the two fortresses guarding the harbour, but these were silenced by Fleet Air Arm aircraft and a bombardment by the cruiser HMS *Bermuda*. Meanwhile, Gen Ryder was conferring with Gen Juin (representing Admiral Darlan) and a ceasefire was agreed in the port and neighbourhood to begin at 1900 hours.

### THE END

By 10 November the French defenders had clearly had enough. Hitler had ordered the occupation of Vichy France the day before, so there was little to be gained from

continued resistance. Gen Mark Clark, who had arrived on the 9th arranged for an armistice with Admiral Jean François Darlan, who, as mentioned already, had secretly let the Americans know that he was prepared to cooperate with them. Eisenhower had devised a power-sharing plan between Darlan and Giraud which he hoped they would accept. The 'Darlan Deal' made the admiral the political chief of all of French North Africa. His title was High Commissioner and C-in-C French Ground and Air Forces in Africa. Giraud became commander of all French military forces in the theatre of war. This arrangement was bitterly opposed by de Gaulle's Free French and the factionalism between them and the ex-Vichy men seemed insurmountable. The murder of Darlan on 24 December 1942 would provide a somewhat drastic solution to the problem.

### ON TO TUNIS

It had been the Allied intention that, once the Eastern 'Torch' landings had been successfully achieved at Algiers, forces of the now renamed British First Army would be sent with all speed into Tunisia, to reach Tunis and Bizerta – some 500 miles away. Originally, when 'Torch' was being planned, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, British commander of the 'Torch' naval forces, had strongly advocated a landing at Bizerta. However, this was ruled out because of a shortage of resources. Nevertheless, it was considered important to reach Tunis as quickly as possible, in order to get the local French population firmly on to the Allied side immediately. In addition to any ground advance, it was also felt that additional seaborne landings should be made on more easterly ports, such as Bougie (100 miles east of Algiers) and Bone (125 miles east of Bougie) to assist with future resupply. The Bougie landing (Operation 'Perpetual') was planned for 9 November, but bad weather and heavy surf delayed it for two days. However, by 0430 hours on 11 November three landings ships, carrying the British 36th Infantry Brigade, were approaching Bougie with a strong Royal Navy covering force. Additionally, a further LSI<sup>2</sup> was making for Djidjelli, some 30 miles east of Bougie, to take over the airfield there once it had been captured. There was no French opposition as the landings were made, but no aviation fuel reached the airfield until the middle of the 13th. This meant that the party which had taken the airfield were subjected to very heavy enemy air attacks.

Nevertheless, the absence of French opposition had been encouraging, so a small mobile column from 11th Inf Bde (known as 'Hart Force' after its commander, Maj Hart of 5th Northhamptons) set off from Algiers making for Bone, while at 0300 hours on the 12th a force of commandos plus two companies of the 3rd Royal West Kents were put ashore at Bone, and two companies of 3rd Parachute Bn were dropped at Bone airfield. Both the port and the airfield were quickly captured. Setif and

2. LSI = Landing Ship Infantry. These were larger than the normal landing craft and were capable of undertaking an ocean voyage independently, while landing craft needed to be carried on a larger vessel.

Junkers Ju 52  
'Tante-Ju' as it  
the main Luftwaffe  
the Desert War

Also among the  
paratroopers of  
Regiment 5. A  
impressed the  
ammunition of  
of Tunisia. (The  
Messenger)



Junkers Ju 52 over the Mediterranean.  
‘Tante-Ju’ as it was affectionately called, was  
the main Luftwaffe transport aircraft during  
the Desert War. (BKUW — page 20)

Also among the first arrivals were  
paratroopers of the Fallschirmjäger  
Regiment 5. As seen here, they soon  
impressed mules into service to carry their  
ammunition and stores in the hilly djebels  
of Tunisia. (Hans Teske via Col C.R.  
Messenger)







The first Axis forces to arrive in Tunisia after the Allied invasion were units of the Luftwaffe. A squadron of 53 Fighter Group, a Stuka Wing (Ju 87 dive-bombers, as seen here) and some Ju 52 transport aircraft landed at El Aouina airfield near Tunis within a few days of the invasion. (IWM — MH 15591)

Constantine were next taken, then Tabarka, a small port only 60 miles from Bizerta. Unfortunately, both the weather and the going deteriorated steadily, torrential rain ruining the roads and tracks and making any further movement almost impossible. Despite these drawbacks, the British reached Mateur and Djedeida, less than 20 miles from Bizerta and Tunis, before being forced back through lack of reinforcements and supplies.

#### *AXIS REACTION*

After their initial lack of interest, the Axis forces had in fact acted with considerable speed as far as occupying Tunisia was concerned. On the actual day of the Allied landings, Kesselring had asked to be given a free hand and this was approved by Hitler on the 9th. He then obtained approval from Vichy France for German troops to cross France on their way to Tunisia. The first Germans arrived in Tunisia on the 9th, when Oberst Harlinghausen had landed with three aircraft, to be followed a few days later by a squadron of 53 Fighter Group, a Stuka Wing and a number of Junkers Ju-52s carrying ground staff, who landed at the El Aouina airfield near Tunis. Two days later a company of Fallschirmjaeger Regiment 5 followed them, occupying the city of Tunis and its harbour on the 14th. On the 12th Gen Walther Nehring who had been stopped on his way through Italy to North Africa, was appointed by Kesselring to command a German invasion force in Tunisia. It was to be known as XC Army Corps and would command all German and Italian land forces there. More paratroopers soon arrived.

The German paras first clashed with the Allied forces on 16 November when a party of paratroopers with two Italian guns on Jebel Abiod opened fire on the British. The battle for Tunisia had begun.



A song for both sides. The haunting song 'Lili Marleen' ('Lilli Marlene' in the English version) became a hit with both German and British soldiers in North Africa. It was originally sung by Lale Andersen on the radio and became one of the most famous songs of the war. Anne Shelton recorded the first English version. This is the original hand-coloured cover of the first edition, and was given to the author by the composer, Norbert Schultze. (Author's Collection)

## NINE

# ON TO MEDININE, MARETH AND THE GABES GAP

### UNIFYING COMMAND ON BOTH SIDES

On 14 January 1943 it was agreed at an Anglo-American conference, held at Casablanca and attended by Roosevelt, Churchill and their Chiefs of Staff, to unify the command of all Allied forces in North Africa – see chart at Annex ‘A’ to this chapter – with Eisenhower as Supreme Commander and Alexander as his deputy. Undoubtedly this coordination of effort would make life easier for all concerned, there was still a lot of fighting to be done, as the Axis forces were there in considerable numbers. This had necessitated – as the second chart (at Annex ‘B’) shows – the formation of another major headquarters to control them, namely the Heeresgruppe Afrika (Army Group Africa, of which, as promised by Hitler, Rommel was the supreme commander.

From Montgomery’s point of view the most important aspect now was how to get his battle-tested and victorious Eighth Army into the open maritime plain of Tunisia, so that they could strike towards Sfax, Sousse and eventually Tunis itself, linking up with the much less experienced Anglo-American forces which had landed during the ‘Torch’ operation, so as to surround the enemy and squeeze them into submission. This would mean the Eighth Army formations having to fight their way through the considerable defences of the Mareth Line, but even before that they had to cross the frontier into Tunisia, take on enemy forces at Ben Gardane, then deal with the important communication centres of Medinine and Fom Tatahouine. Monty comments in his memoirs that by 4 February ‘the last of the Italian Empire was in our hands’, as his troops crossed the frontier. Despite more heavy rain, which turned the desert into a quagmire for some days, Ben Gardane was occupied on 16 February and steady progress was resumed, Medinine falling on the 17th and Fom Tatahouine the following day. Montgomery’s forces had now been joined by Free French troops under Gen Philippe Leclerc, GOC French Equatorial Africa, who had led his force on an amazing 1,500-mile march across the desert from Lake Chad. The French were given the task of harassing the Axis western flank. Monty would soon be in a position to close up on the Mareth Line defences, helped immeasurably by the fact that the port of

# TRIPOLI TIMES

TUESDAY 23 MARCH 1943 - No. 48

EDITORIAL OFFICE: No. 92, VIA COSTANZO CIANO

PRICE TWO LIRI

## TRIUMPH OF THE EIGHTH ARMY! FANTRY SUCCESS "TO TUNIS" ON MAIN ROAD

- MONTGOMERY

Eighth Army has moved forward to attack the Mareth Line.

On Saturday night, said yesterday's communique, troops of the Eighth Army attacked the Mareth positions.

Fierce fighting ensued. Operations are continuing satisfactorily.

A special message to the Tripoli Times from Eighth Army says:

Several abortive counterattacks were made by the Italians and after each of these attacks a number of the enemy surrendered. German stiffening behind their allies north of the road was noticeable.

Our forces moving around the enemy flank continued their advance despite bad going and mines and by last night (21st March) they contacted enemy defensive positions South East of the Djebel Tebaga.

Ten attacks were made by our light bombers on enemy positions behind the Mareth area.

Direct hits were scored and the enemy interference was almost nil. Enemy armour was attacked by our aircraft South of El Hamma.

Correspondents in Tunisia say the attack was given tremendous air support.

It must, says our reporter, have made Rommel's troops think of Alamein. It was very like Alamein with the same tank-squadron tearing away to the attack.

They had been waiting for the word. On Friday night the weather changed for the better and that was the signal for a 24-hour a day policy of attack on targets selected by General Montgomery. They are still going on.

The news of the attack was given by Mr. Churchill at the end of his broadcast. He said: "I have just received a message from General Montgomery that the Eighth Army is on the move and that he is satisfied with its progress."

"Let us wish them God speed in the struggle and lend our efforts to the war and ever more vigorous prosecution of our supreme task."

The bold announcement that Eighth Army has attacked has made a great impression on neutral countries.

One commentator last night pointed out the difference between General Montgomery's methods in this respect and Rommel's. Rommel's policy is to preserve a nervous silence when his attack is launched and then, if it is a failure, as at Alamein and again in the Mareth area a fortnight ago, to say it was merely a reconnaissance in force.

Another radio commentator told his listeners: "When the veteran Eighth Army goes into action and says clearly it is attacking, results are certain."

### AMERICANS PUSH ON.

American forces in the Gafsa sector continue to press on towards Maknassy. They have taken more than a thousand prisoners.

In the Sedjenan area our troops made contact with the enemy again and fighting continues.

Besides attacks on the Mareth Line by the Western Desert Air Force, enemy positions and air fields in Central and Northern Tunisia were attacked by other Allied bombers, while fighters were shooting up enemy transport.

### JAP SHIPS HIT

Eight more Japanese vessels have been attacked and hit by Allied bombers in the southwest Pacific, stated yesterday's communique.

A number of them were found off the coast of Dutch New Guinea, down which Japanese land forces are spreading.

In the Solomon sea a large destroyer was hit and last seen limping home at reduced speed. In addition many ground targets were attacked.

### SHUTTLE-BOMBING AGAIN

By Front Reporter FH-11, Gerald Samson

TUNISIA, Monday. A shuttle light-bomber attack served on and behind the Mareth Line was conducted throughout the day by the Western Desert Air Force. Over 130 tons of high explosives were dropped on the town of Mareth, heavy gun batteries and enemy infantry positions.

"As the cramps of the first bomb bursts on the target were heard, the operations trailer in which I was sitting, a second light-bomber formation this time a South African Wing, roared overhead on its way to blast another strong point. At the same time a third light-bomber force took off from the beach landing ground in front of us. And so it went in unending succession, stated a squadron leader from London.

After one of the attacks on the town of Mareth, the crew came back with full tanks, and they had had weapons.

Between them they completely covered the target in the face of a heavy curtain of A.A., and the Intelligence Officer after he had completed the interrogations.

"I dropped my stick and then looked back. The target was more or less square and they fell long in the centre of the target, the observers, Pilot Officer M. Naper of Kenya, who had a narrow escape.

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The moment when Hitler is beaten and Germany and Italy are destroyed will mark the grand climax of the war. That will be the time to make a new declaration on the task before us."

If he should be spared to see that day and be at the helm, he would propose a new task to the Cabinet. It would need a very different disposition of our forces, some of which would be demobilised while some would garrison the defeated countries.

On this assumption, it would be best hope that the United Nations headed by the three great victorious powers - the British Commonwealth of Nations, the United States and Soviet Russia - would immediately begin to confer upon future world organisation.

They would safeguard against future wars by disarming and keeping disarmed the criminal states and by bringing the grand criminals to justice and bring back to the occupied countries their mechanical resources.

There should come into being a Council of Europe and a Council of Asia. On the Council of Europe would rest the task of the settlement of Europe.

"I hope we shall not throw aside all the work done by the League of Nations," went on Mr. Churchill.

"We must try to make the Council of Europe - or whatever it may be called - into a real effective League with a high grade of Justice and with forces - national, international or both - to enforce its decisions and prevent renewed aggression and the preparation of future wars."

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when a piece of strappell passed through his oxygen tube and out of the fuselage.

In another raid in which Flight Lieutenant R.D.M. Evers, captain of the Worcestershire County Cricket team, and Flying Officer C.V. Boyle, the Irish Rugby international, took part, a German infantry camp together with M.T. and a number of buildings went up in smoke.

Bomb bursts enveloped the whole camp, remarked Evers. "I can vouch for five vehicles having been definitely written off," observed Boyle.

In another historic eve-of-battle message to Eighth Army, General Montgomery said:

On 3th March Rommel addressed his troops in the mountains overlooking our positions and said that if they did not take Medenine, and force the Eighth Army to withdraw, then the days of the Axis forces in North Africa were numbered.

The next day, 4th March, he attacked the Eighth Army. He should have known that the Eighth Army NEVER WITHDRAWS; therefore his attack could end only in failure - which it did.

We will now show Rommel that he was right in the statement he made to his troops.

The days of the Axis Forces in North Africa are indeed numbered.

The Eighth Army and the Western Desert Air Force, together constituting one fighting machine, are ready to advance. We all know what THAT means, and so does the enemy.

In the battle that is now to start, the Eighth Army...

Will destroy the enemy now facing us in the Mareth position. Will burst through the Gabs Gap.

Will then drive Northwards on Sfax, Nousse, and finally Tunis. We will not stop, or let up, till Tunis has been captured, and the enemy has either given up the struggle or been pushed into the sea.

The operations now about to begin will mark the close of the campaign in North Africa. Once the battle starts the eyes of the whole world will be on the Eighth Army, and millions of people will listen to the wireless every day - hoping anxiously for good news. We must not let them be anxious. Let us see that they get good news, and plenty of it, every day.

If each one of us does his duty, and pulls his full weight, then nothing can stop the Eighth Army. And nothing will stop it.

With faith in God, and in the justice of our cause, let us go forward to victory.

FORWARD TO TUNIS! DRIVE THE ENEMY INTO THE SEA!

By the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill

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I am resolved, he went on, not to give or make all kinds of promises and tell all kinds of fairy tales to you who have trusted me and marched through the Valley of the Shadow until we reached the upland region on which we now stand.

It was our duty to be prepared for the day Hitler was defeated. Then we should transport all the necessary additional forces and apparatus to the other side of the world to finish the greedy, cruel Empire of Japan.

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and prices kept at a reasonable level. There would be some changes. The State must be prepared to manage.

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In 30 years, it would be worse still. People must be encouraged by every means to have larger families. Conditions of shorted and child welfare must be improved. And side by side with that the war against disease should go on.

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Speaking of trade prospects after the war, the Prime Minister said he foresaw a great demand for our "consumable goods."

We had learned much about production in the stress of war, our methods had improved and there were new industries which would be of use.

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Speaking of trade prospects after the war



Tripoli docks were soon a hive of activity, but the tanks and supplies arriving now were destined for the Eighth Army. Here a shipload of Crusader tanks has just arrived, been unloaded on to special tank-landing craft, brought to the dockside and driven off to be carefully inspected and serviced by the REME before being married up with crews and sent forward to join units. (IWM – E 22961)

Tripoli was now working well – some 3,500 tons of supplies being unloaded there every day. Rommel's rearguard had reached the Mareth Line positions on 15 February, some eleven days after the victorious Eighth Army had held its victory parade in Tripoli. They not only had to prepare defences there, but also had to deal with the new threat posed by the Allies in Western Tunisia. However, on 14 February the Axis forces launched strong attacks against II US Corps in the area of Gafsa in Western Tunisia, operations codenamed 'Frühlingswind' and 'Morgenluft'. The inexperienced American forces reeled back in some confusion towards Tebessa and Kasserine, while Alexander asked Monty to exert as much pressure as possible on his front so as to draw off enemy troops from this worrying attack that was threatening to outflank the Allied positions in the north. The enemy had undoubtedly weakened his Mareth front in order to make the thrust through Gafsa, so Monty took the gamble and strengthened



Running up the engines on a Douglas DB-7 Boston aircraft, belonging to 24 Squadron of the South African Air Force, May 1943. (IWM – TR 856)

his attacks, although this did leave him vulnerable to potential counter-attack. Nevertheless, it had the desired result and Rommel broke off his assault against the Americans and regrouped his forces, switching 15 and 21 Panzer back to the southern front.

Monty makes special mention of PzKpfw VI Tiger tanks being seen in action by the First Army in Tunisia – the very first time they had been used in the theatre, although they had already been in action on the Eastern Front.<sup>1</sup>

1. The 57-ton Tiger I (Panzerkampfwagen VI Ausf E), with its thick armour and lethal 8.8cm gun, first saw action in the Leningrad area in August 1942. Still in service at the end of the war, it had gained a reputation for invincibility out of all proportion to the actual numbers of Tigers in service (just 1,354 were produced between July 1942 and August 1944).



These Hawker Hurricane Mk IIDs, filmed just taking off, belong to 6 Squadron of the Desert Air Force and are off on a tank-busting raid near Gabes, 6 April 1943. (IWM – TR 869)

## MEDININE

On 6 March it was the Eighth Army's turn to face determined attacks by enemy armour. At Medinine, however, Monty had positioned his defence very well indeed and was waiting for the panzers to attack, confident that his troops would repulse the enemy and give them a 'sharp lesson'. Although there was no wire or minefields protecting the British positions, the infantry were well dug-in and in well-sited defensive positions. Monty also had some 400 of his own tanks in reserve, plus over 500 anti-tank guns located in good fire positions. The tanks of 15, 21 and 10 Panzer Divs attacked four times during the day, but every attack was beaten off with heavy losses to the attackers. By last light it was all over and the Germans were forced to withdraw. In all, 52 enemy tanks had been knocked out, all but 7 having been destroyed by anti-tank guns. 'A model defensive engagement and a great triumph for





Tigers on the loose! This PzKpfw VI Ausf E, Tiger 1, was the first to be captured complete by the British in North Africa. The crew baled out and left it when a lucky shot from a Churchill's six-pounder gun jammed the turret. It was otherwise undamaged and was brought back to the UK for evaluation. It is now at the Tank Museum and is being restored to full running order. (IWM — NA 2351)

Monty visits his units. As always, the GOC of the Eighth Army spent much of his time before battles visiting his troops. Here he is talking to Lt Col A.C. Clive MC, CO of a battalion of the Grenadier Guards, in their positions overlooking the outer defences of the Mareth Line. The AFV is a Stuart command tank (on a Stuart 1 chassis). (IWM — NA 1176)



the infantry and the anti-tank gun' is how Monty described the battle, emphasising that he had positioned his anti-tank guns to kill enemy tanks and not to protect the infantry.

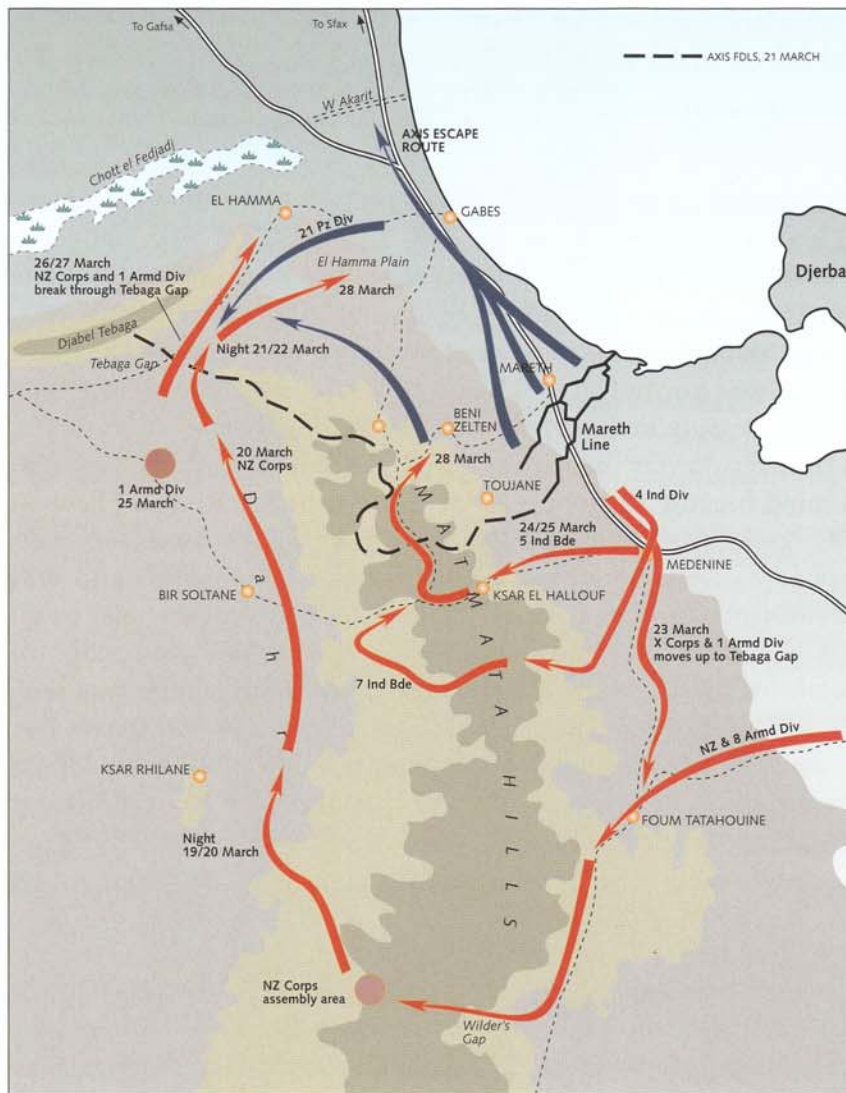
#### *ROMMEL BOWS OUT*

On or about 7 March Rommel made up his mind to go to see Hitler again, to try to make him understand how worrying the situation really was in North Africa. He took off from Sfax airfield at 0750 hours on the 9th and flew to Rome. Here he went to the Italian Headquarters, where, in conversation with Generale Vittorio Ambrosio, it became clear to him that those in power were not going to allow him to return to North Africa. Mussolini was cordial, but he hadn't the faintest idea of the true situation and Rommel left 'heartily sick of all this false optimism'. He also left without the 'Gold Medal for Military Valour' which the dictator had intended to present to him, but changed his mind because of Rommel's 'defeatist attitude'. Rommel flew on to Hitler's Russian HQ (called Wehrwolf and located in the Ukraine some 100 miles from Kiev). Hitler clearly came to the same conclusion as Mussolini and was unreceptive to Rommel's pleas to rescue his Afrikaners. He ordered Rommel to go home for some sick leave, so that he would soon be able to 'take command again for operations against Casablanca' – a measure of just how out of touch Hitler was with the true situation. The following day, somewhat unexpectedly, he saw the Desert Fox again and presented him with the Diamonds to his Knight's Cross.<sup>2</sup> Rommel would never go back to Africa again, his place as supreme commander being taken by Colonel General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim.

### **MARETH**

Montgomery could now get on with the detailed planning for breaking through the Mareth Line. He had already decided that he would attack on both flanks of the enemy position simultaneously, sending 50 Inf Div and 23 Armd Bde of XXX Corps to attack along the coast, passing through 51 Inf Div which was holding the eastern sector of the front. While this attack was taking place, the reinforced 2nd New Zealand Division (the 'NZ Corps', as it was called, comprising 2 NZ Div, 8 Armd Bde, Gen Leclerc's French troops, plus an extra armoured car regiment and additional medium artillery – a force which totalled some 27,000 men with 200 tanks) would find its way around the western flank<sup>3</sup> and then turn northwards behind the Matmata Hills (see map overleaf). X Corps would be held in reserve with two armoured divisions and 4th Lt Armd Bde, ready to assault the Gabes bottleneck. Montgomery was counting on the Allied air forces to play a significant part in the coming battle and

2. Only twenty-six others received the Brillanten (Diamonds), Rommel being the sixth to win them.
3. The western attack force would use 'Wilder's Gap' to reach the escarpment. This was discovered by New Zealander Capt Nick Wilder DSO, the commander of the LRDG NZ patrols.



Battle of Mareth, 20 March  
1943

was confident that, strong as it was, the Mareth Line would be unable to withstand both attacks at the same time. The final objective was to be the seaport of Sfax, some distance north of Gabes. As he did before El Alamein, Monty took immense trouble to ensure that his plan was understood by all, personally briefing all commanders of lieutenant colonel rank and above and issuing another of his stirring 'Personal Messages' before the battle.

Zero Hour for the 50 Div attack was 2230 hours on 20 March, while on the other flank the New Zealanders had been ordered to advance some 40 miles on the night of 19/20 March and occupy a forward assembly area, lie concealed there all day on the 20th, then continue their night marches until they contacted the enemy. However, they were observed earlier than anticipated, so Montgomery ordered Freyberg to continue

EIGHTH



ARMY

## PERSONAL MESSAGE

from the

## ARMY COMMANDER

(To be read out to all Troops)

1. On 5th March ROMMEL addressed his troops in the mountains overlooking our positions and said that if they did not take MEDENIN, and force the Eighth Army to withdraw, then the days of the Axis forces in North Africa were numbered.

The next day, 6th March, he attacked the Eighth Army. He should have known that the Eighth Army NEVER WITHDRAWS; therefore his attack could end only in failure — which it did.

2. We will now show ROMMEL that he was right in the statement he made to his troops.

The days of the Axis forces in North Africa are indeed numbered.

The Eighth Army and the Western Desert Air Force, together constituting one fighting machine, are ready to advance. We all know what *that* means; and so does the enemy.

3. In the battle that is now to start, the Eighth Army:

- (a) Will destroy the enemy now facing us in the MARETH position;
- (b) Will burst through the GABES GAP;
- (c) Will then drive Northwards on SFAX, SOUSSE, and finally TUNIS.

4. We will not stop, or let up, till TUNIS has been captured, and the enemy has either given up the struggle or been pushed into the sea.

5. The operations now about to begin will mark the close of the campaign in North Africa. Once the battle starts the eyes of the whole world will be on the Eighth Army, and millions of people will listen to the wireless every day — hoping anxiously for good news. We must not let them be anxious. Let us see that they get good news, and plenty of it, every day.

If each one of us does his duty and pulls his full weight, then nothing can stop the Eighth Army. And nothing will stop it.

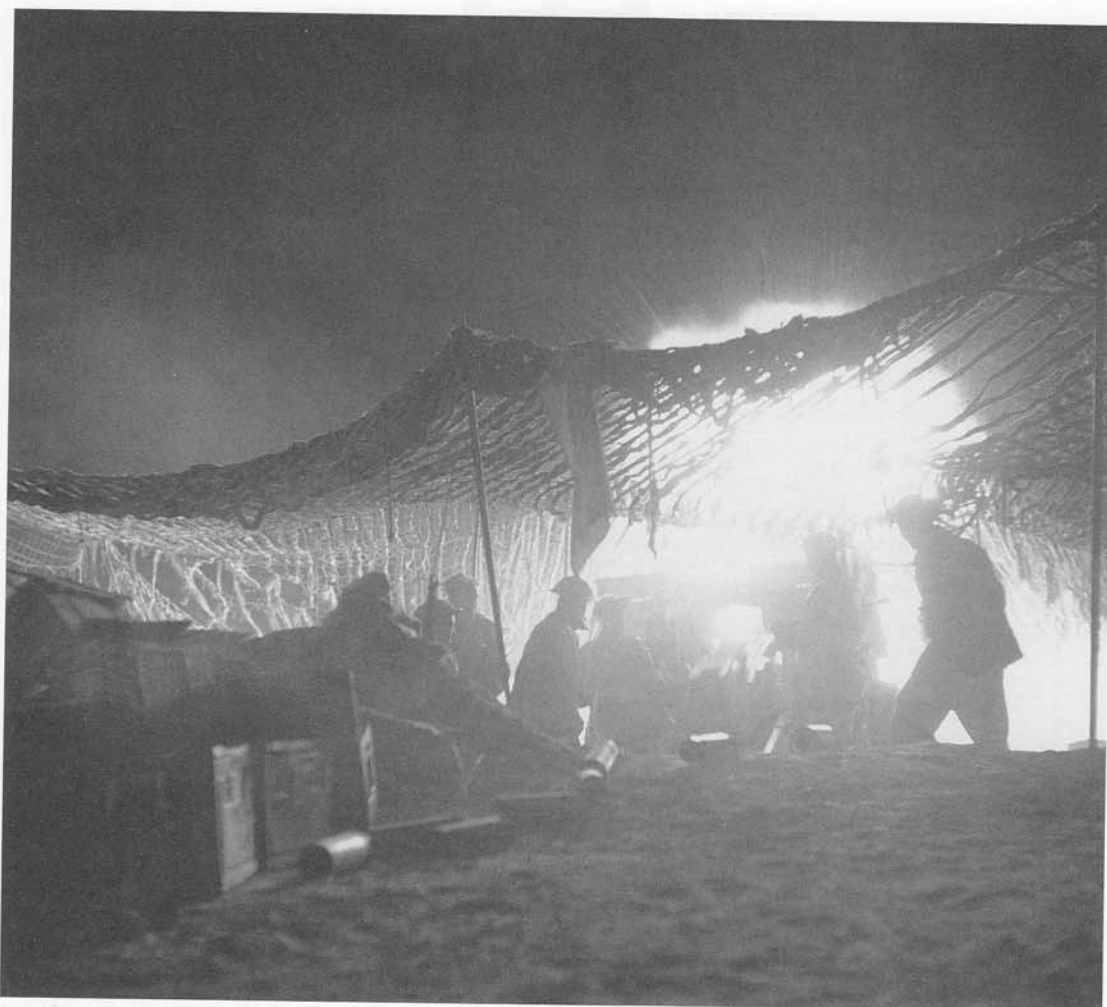
6. With faith in God, and in the justice of our cause, let us go forward to victory.

7. FORWARD TO TUNIS! DRIVE THE ENEMY INTO THE SEA!

B. L. Montgomery

19 March, 1943.

General, G.O.C.-in-C., Eighth Army.



Battle begins. The battle for the Mareth Line began with a heavy artillery barrage. (IWM – NA 1397)

moving throughout the daylight hours of the 20th, hoping that this would distract the enemy's attention from the attack on his other flank. They made remarkable progress over terrible going and successfully reached the enemy 'Switch Line' (between Djebel Tebaga and Djebel Melab) by last light on the 20th. Meanwhile the 50 Div attack had begun well and managed to cross the Wadi Zigzaou obstacle<sup>4</sup> and to capture three major strongpoints on the far bank, even though they were well located and defended with wire and minefields. Monty's reading of the situation was that by the 21st his eastern sector attack had secured a 'foothold' in the Mareth Line and that now the 'dog fight' was about to begin.

4. Wadi Zigzaou was a formidable obstacle which had some water in it. Its banks had been cut sheer away by the enemy and numerous important target areas were pre-registered by enemy artillery and mortars.

The British held their positions throughout the 21st, despite the arrival of enemy reserves, including the tanks of 15 Pz Div, reinforced by 90 leichte and paratroops, who were preparing to mount a major counter-attack. Heavy rain on the 22nd made the Wadi Zigzaou an even worse obstacle, and the bad weather prevented the Allied aircraft from flying. It was now abundantly clear to Monty at this stage of the battle that it would be very costly to continue with the coastal sector attacks, although it was equally clear that the enemy had committed their reserves on that flank. Therefore he stopped 50 Div's assault and instead put all his effort into reinforcing the New Zealanders' outflanking movement, so that the western 'hook' could deliver a decisive blow towards El Hamma-Gabes (see map on p. 180) before the enemy could reinforce that area also. It was essential, therefore, to give the impression that he was getting ready to mount another attack in the coastal area, while actually reinforcing the western thrust. Accordingly, he ordered HQ X Corps and 1st Armd Div to move after dark on the 23rd to join the New Zealanders, estimating that it would take them two days to reach their destination as they would have to follow the same long detour via Wilder's Gap.

At about the same time (the night of 23/24 March) Monty withdrew his northern troops to the friendly side of the Wadi Zigzaou and ordered a regrouped XXX Corps (7 Armd, 50 and 51 Inf Divs) to start thrusting forward in the centre with the aim of containing as many of the enemy forces as possible in that area. He also opened up a lateral road through the mountains, running from Medinine to Hallouf to Bir Soltane, to aid the re-supply and the switching of forces between fronts. He reckoned that if they could secure the area Matmata-Toujane-Zelten, then it might be possible to launch 4 Indian Div on a sweep to get behind the Mareth Line positions, then cut the Mareth-Gabes road. This operation was also launched on the 23rd. In his memoirs Monty says: 'My hope was to keep the German reserves involved in the east until my west flank operation got under way. If I could delay the switch of enemy troops for 36 hours, they would be too late to intervene effectively against the outflanking movement.'

It was necessary now to mount a swift attack in order to break through the enemy blocking position which was holding up the New Zealanders. It was again going to be preceded by a heavy air bombardment throughout the night to thoroughly unsettle the enemy. This would then continue through the next day until about 1500 hours, when it would be followed by an hour-long artillery barrage. The west to east attack would then begin, with the setting sun fully behind it, blinding the enemy defenders. H Hour was to be 1600 hours on 26 March. Simultaneous pressure by XXX Corps would also help to confuse the enemy. Unfortunately, a dust storm was blowing hard at first light on the 26th and continued for most of the morning, which meant that the air attacks could not begin, although it did hide the forming-up of the New Zealanders and X Corps. Fortunately by mid-afternoon the storm had ceased and the bombing started and continued for some two-and-a-half hours, the aircraft continually bombing and strafing the enemy at low level. Then the ground offensive began, according to plan, and successfully broke through the enemy defences – first the New Zealanders, and

then the tanks of 1st Armd Div. They continued their attack until it was too dark to see to advance any further, having penetrated some 6,000 yards. However, once the moon rose the advance was able to continue, smashing its way through the enemy armour, so that by first light on the 27th the leading tanks were just a few miles short of El Hamma, where they were held up by a screen of anti-tank guns. Meanwhile, the New Zealanders, already following up the armour, were engaged in 'mopping up' the enemy, who were defending desperately but in some confusion thanks to Monty's unusual tactics. By the night of 27/28 March the battle had been won and the enemy had begun to withdraw. It was hoped that they would cut off a large number of the defenders occupying the Mareth Line positions, but this did not prove possible, thanks to the usual delays and difficulties caused by mines, booby traps, demolitions and dust storms. Nevertheless, the Eighth Army had won its toughest fight since El Alamein, and it was one in which Montgomery had been able to use a far more varied tactical approach than merely the 'hard slogging' of that first great battle. He had, although he



Riflemen of the East Yorks mopping up at the concrete defences of the Mareth Line. The original defensive system was built before the Second World War between the sea and the Matmata Hills, to prevent Italian incursions into Tunisia. (IWM - NA 1338)

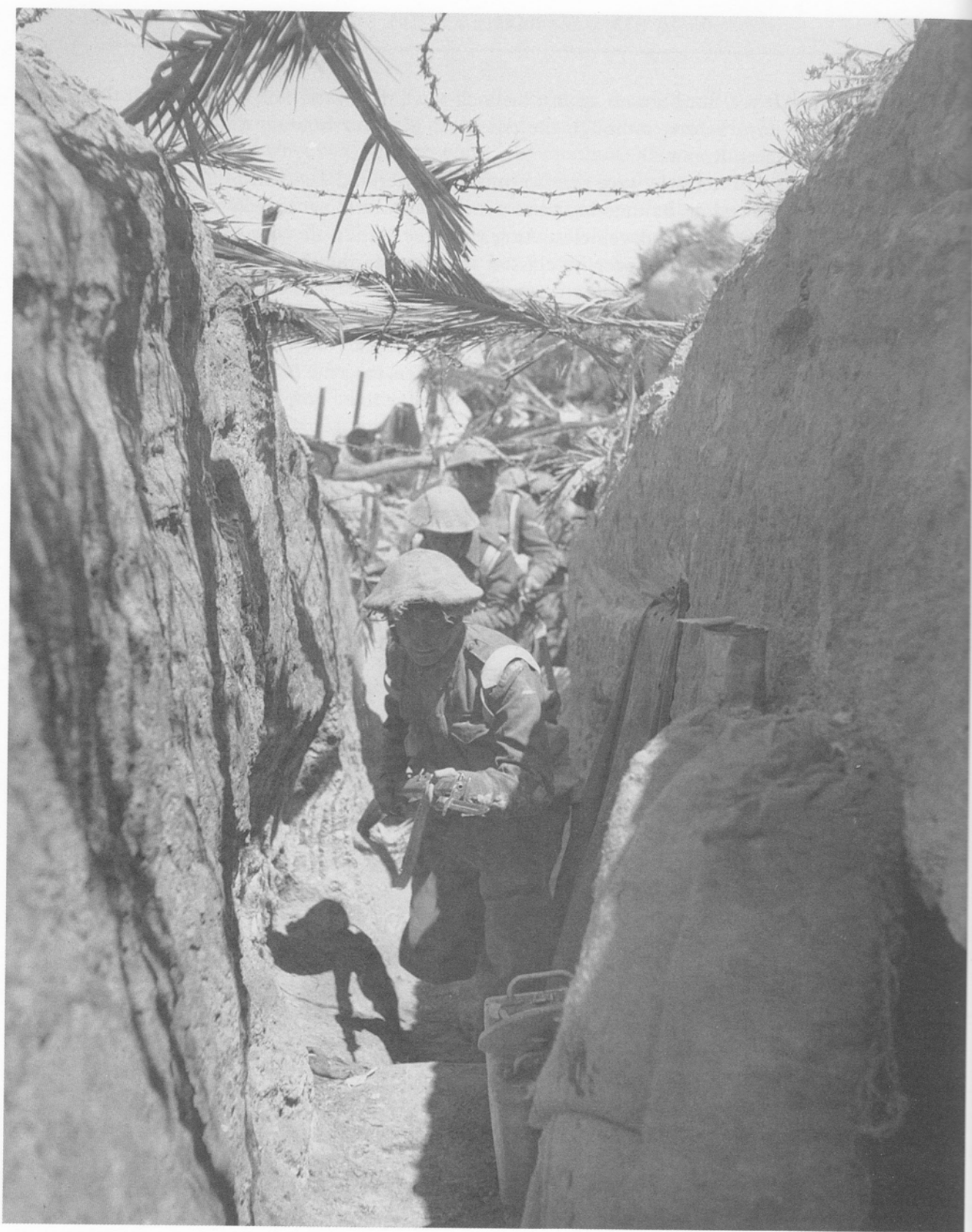
didn't know it yet, not been up against his arch-rival, the Desert Fox, who had left the scene some days before, although the defensive plan for holding the Mareth Line position had been Rommel's.

The results of the battle were that 15 and 21 Panzer and 164 leichte Divisions had all taken a tremendous hammering from which they would never recover, having lost many heavy weapons and vehicles. At least three Italian divisions had also been destroyed and could no longer be classed as adequate fighting forces. Over 7,000 prisoners had been taken in the battle up to 28 March, 2,500 of whom were captured at El Hamma and they were mainly Germans. Before the abortive counter-attack at Medinine, Rommel had warned his troops that if the enemy did not succeed with their offensive against Montgomery's Eighth Army, then the end of the German/Italian Army in Africa was close. His words would now prove to be prophetic.



A squadron of Douglas Boston DB-7 aircraft belonging to a South African squadron of the Desert Air Force, returning from a sortie over the Mareth Line. (IWM — TR 863)





Infantrymen mopping up in the trenches of the Mareth Line. It looks very much like First World War trench warfare and must have involved plenty of hand-to-hand fighting.  
(IWM - NA 1336)



On to El Hamma. British Crusader tanks make their way between mud-walled houses, past a German sign indicating that there is a waterpoint in the village. (IWM – NA 1638)

## AFTER MARETH

### *THE GABES GAP AND WADI AKARIT BATTLE*

Although the coastal plain widens beyond Mareth, between Gabes and El Hamma there is another bottleneck to be negotiated, which was known as the 'Gabes Gap'. This runs from the Wadi Akarit<sup>5</sup> – another difficult obstacle, especially to tracked and wheeled vehicles – which is in the north, near the coast, to an equally impassable area of lakes and marshes known as Shott el Fedjadj at the other end. Between the two was the Gabes Gap, only some 12 to 15 miles wide, and clearly an area which the Axis forces would defend strongly. They had withdrawn from El Hamma, Gabes and

5. The difficulties in Wadi Akarit lay not so much in the wadi itself, but rather in the steep ridge of hills that ran from the coast and along the northern edge of the Shott el Fedjadj. Some work had been done by Axis engineers to block the routes with minefields and anti-tank ditches.



A convoy of RAF vehicles passing a crashed Junkers Ju 52/3 transport aircraft which was destroyed on the Gabes airfield when it was captured at the end of March 1943. (IWM – TR 884)

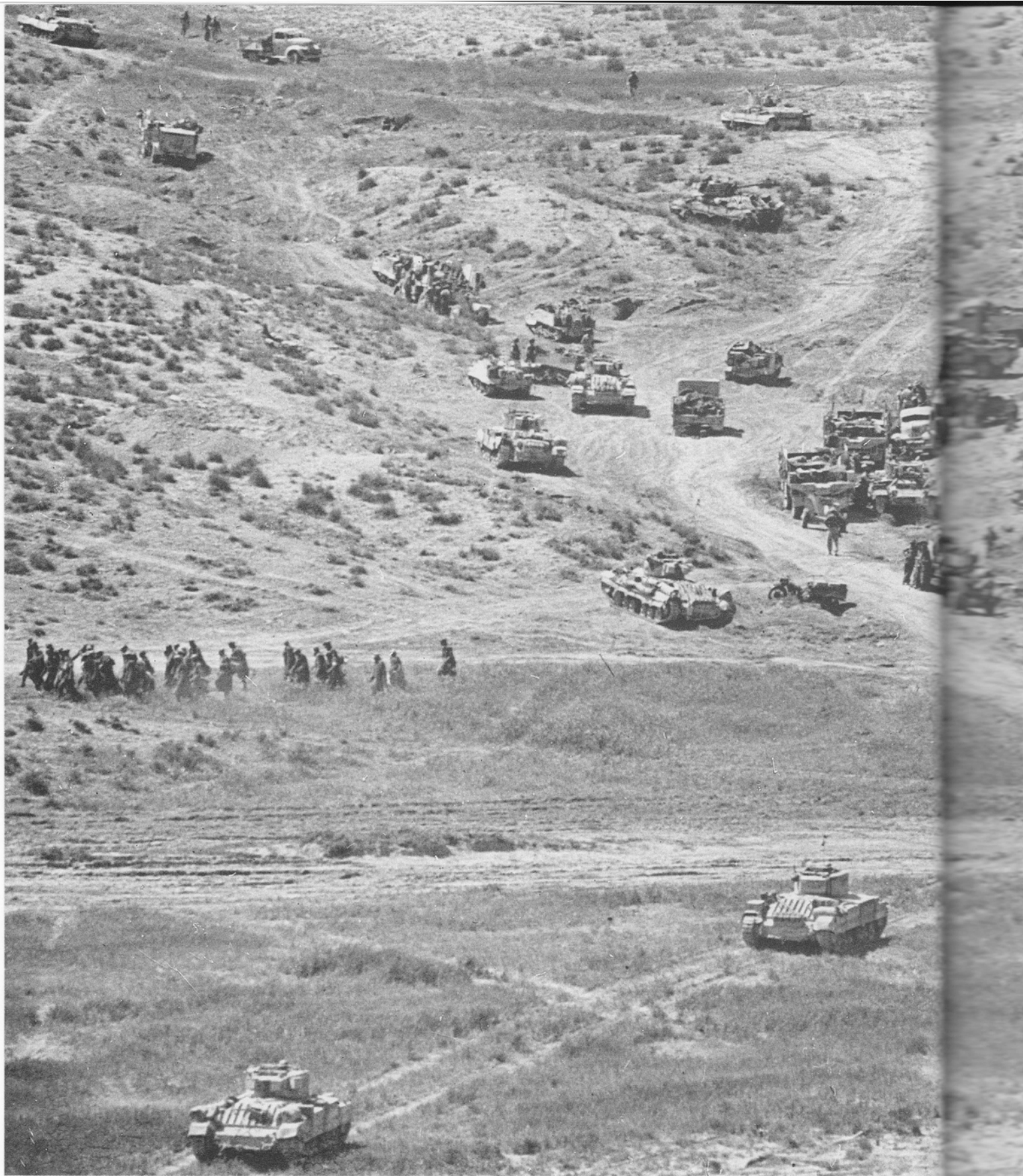
Oudref on 29 March, under pressure from the 1 Armd Div and the New Zealanders, but clearly were now going to make a fight of it. Monty ordered X Corps to close up and probe the Wadi Akarit to see if they could force their way across, while XXX Corps got ready to stage a follow-up attack if X Corps were unable to achieve a breakthrough. At this juncture Monty also broke up the ad hoc 'New Zealand Corps' which he had formed for the western 'hook'. He then put 2 NZ Div under the temporary command of XXX Corps, giving them responsibility for the front and ordering them to attack the Wadi Akarit position with 4 Ind and 51 Inf Divs. Once they had secured a bridgehead, X Corps would pass through them, pick up the New Zealanders and carry on to secure the airfields around Mezzouna. XXX Corps and 51 Inf Div would then advance on a narrow front along the coast road towards Mahares, as 7 Armd Div waited ready to break out to the west as soon as they were able. Later Monty decided

to increase the size of the assault force considerably to include both 50 Inf and 4 Ind Divs as well as the 51st, leaving 2 NZ Div to hold the front. The attack across the Wadi Akarit would not be easy, because of the excellent observation which the enemy had from the outset from the high djebels, such as Ras Zouai (1,000 ft) and Roumana. Monty made strenuous efforts to increase his tank strength for the coming battle and comments that by 4 April he had managed to amass nearly 500 tanks.

The battle began at 0400 hours on 6 April in the dark, as they could not wait for the next full moon – which would not occur for another ten days. It was accompanied by heavy artillery support – described by the enemy commander (Messe) as being ‘an apocalyptic hurricane of steel and fire’. 51st Div took the Djebel Roumana and cleared two passages through the minefield and over the anti-tank ditch, but 50th Div had some hold-ups before they eventually got across. Messe ordered 15 Pz Div, which were actually involved on the other front fighting against the Americans near El Guettar, to



84) 'For you the war is over.' A long column of Italian POWs, led by a single Tommy, makes its way eastwards from El Hamma, 28 March 1943. They do not look too displeased to have been captured. (IWM – NA 1612)



Breaking through the Gabes Gap. Eighth Army Valentine tanks and other vehicles are seen here moving through the Gabes Gap, some 10 miles north of Gabes. (IWM – BNA – 1830)

send its reserve panzers to block any breach that might be made between Roumana and Ras Zouai. In fact von Arnim had anticipated this and was able to quickly withdraw some eighty DAK tanks from his reserves and release them to Messe early. They arrived later that morning. However, Monty's X Corps did not exploit their gains as quickly as anticipated, so that when they did so – at about 1330 hours – they found a number of the dreaded 88mm anti-tank guns of 15 Pz Div, blocking their way around Djebel Roumana. It was decided to halt the exploitation until the following morning, when they would have the support of the combined artillery might of both X and XXX Corps. They need not have been so cautious. At about 1700 hours, Messe received reports from his commanders to the effect that, although they had managed to stop the immediate breakthrough, they did not think they could continue to do so for much longer. Messe therefore authorised them to withdraw towards Northern Tunisia. The way was now clear for Monty to advance and the two corps did so – XXX Corps along the coast and X Corps inland. Some 7,000 prisoners – mainly Italians – were taken in the battle.

On the evening of the next day, 7 April, the extreme western armoured car patrol of the Eighth Army met the leading patrols of 1st (US) Armored Division on the Gafsa–Gabes road, due south of Maknassy. Thus, exactly five months to the day after the 'Torch' land-





On into Gabes. Having turned the Mareth Line and destroyed part of the Panzerarmee, the victorious Eighth Army switched its main attack west through El Hamma, then on to Gabes, where this Grant was cheered by locals. (IWM — BNA 1635)

ings, the two great Allied armies had met. The days of the Axis forces in North Africa were clearly numbered.

### THE ADVANCE TO ENFIDAVILLE

Although the operations of the First Army in Tunisia have yet to be recounted, it is logical first to complete those of the Eighth Army, which were running in tandem. By last light on the 7th the leading Eighth Army forces were well past the Gabes Gap and up to a general line from Cekhira on the coast westwards to Sebkret er Noual. Monty comments that the countryside was littered with burning enemy vehicles and

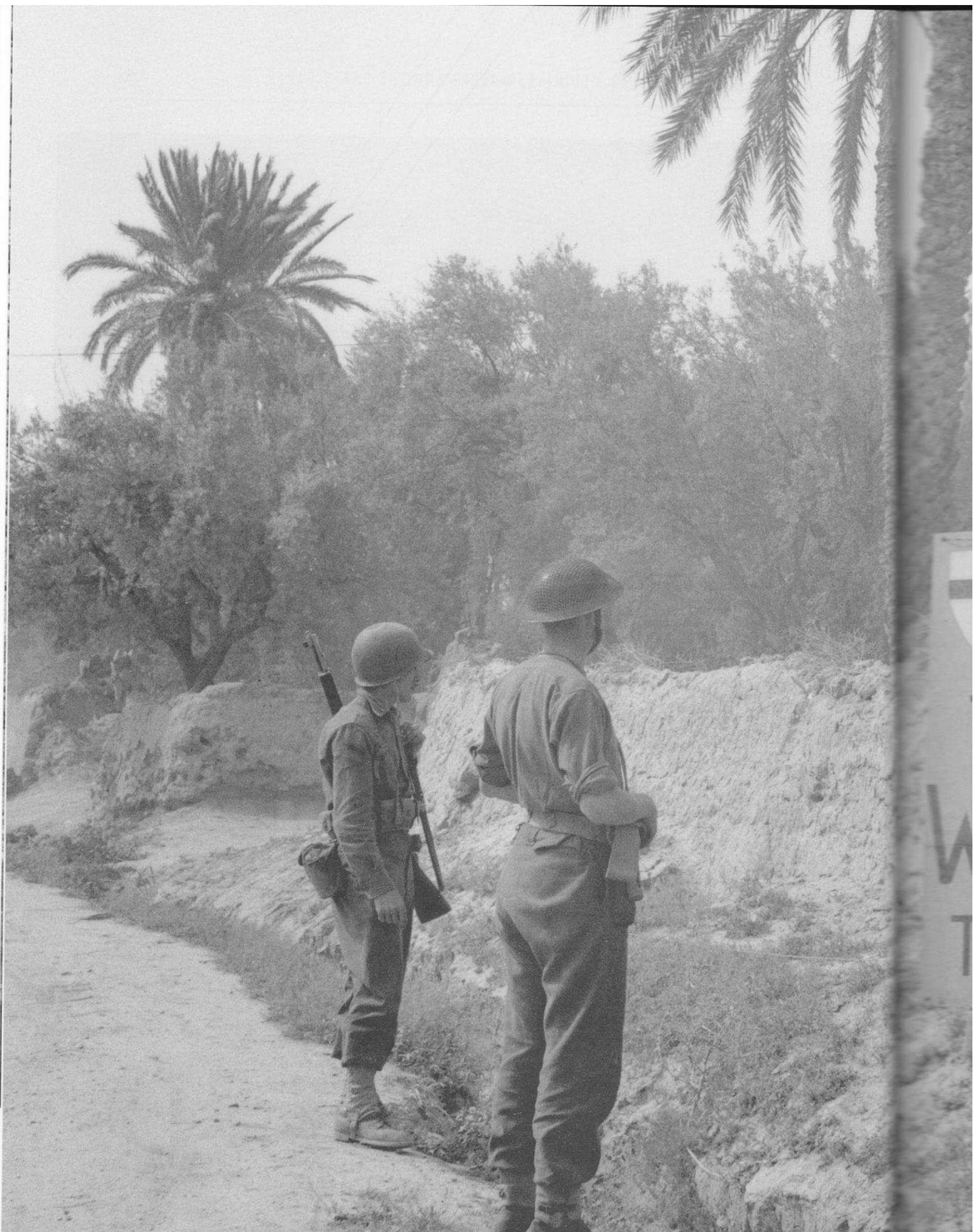


The historic moment came on 7 April 1943, when the two armies finally met on the Gafsa–Gabes road, due south of Maknassy. (IWM – FLM 1636)

abandoned equipment, while everywhere there were parties of Italian troops wandering aimlessly about, trying to surrender. On the coastal route the DAK rearguards continued to carry out a fighting withdrawal, so there was still much to be done. Sfax was taken on 10 April, Monty thus winning a bet he had placed with Eisenhower that he would capture that port by the 15th. His ‘prize’ was a Boeing B17 Flying Fortress, for his personal use!<sup>6</sup> Montgomery next ordered X Corps to capture

6. The Boeing B17 ‘Flying Fortress’, complete with American crew (who remained on the US payroll), remained for his exclusive use for the rest of the war.







This tongue-in-cheek signboard, erected by the First Army in Gafsa, is admired by a GI and a Tommy, who are probably wondering what form the celebrations will take when the two armies meet. (IWM - NA 1587)



Eighth Army Valentines reached Sfax on 10 April 1943. (IWM — NA 1914)

Sousse (taken on the 12th) and to join up with the First Army at Kairouan. By the 13th they had reached the outskirts of Enfidaville, which was the most eastern point of the anticipated Axis 'Last Stand' position, which then ran north-westwards to Pont du Fahs, Medjez el Bab and Sedjenane. It was here that Monty received word from Alexander that the First Army had been chosen to make the main effort in this final phase of the campaign, while his Eighth Army merely exerted as much pressure as possible in order to tie down as many enemy forces as they could. This decision was mainly based on the fact that the going in the plain to the west of Tunis was much better suited to the deployment of armoured forces.

The battle for Enfidaville began on the night of 19/20 April. As always there was heavy artillery and air support, but it soon became clear that the enemy troops were determined to hold on to their last remaining foothold in North Africa for as long as possible. Fighting was especially severe in Takrouna, but gains were made and they were soon some miles beyond Enfidaville. The enemy mounted a series of strong counter-attacks on both the 20th and 21st, suffering heavy casualties, but Monty's troops remained in possession of their gains. However, it soon became clear to him that the Germans were determined to fight for every yard of ground and, as they were occupying excellent defensive positions, casualties would be heavy. Therefore it was decided

to strengthen the First Army attack across the better going of the Tunisian Plain by switching a certain number of seasoned units from the Eighth Army to the First Army. These were the 7th Armoured Division, 4th Indian Division, 201st Guards Brigade and some medium artillery. In addition Gen Horrocks was appointed to command IX



Gen Bernard Law Montgomery, the equally charismatic British commander of the Eighth Army, who turned defeat into victory. He wears his famous double-badged RTR black beret. (Author's Collection)

EIGHTH



ARMY

PERSONAL MESSAGE

from the

ARMY COMMANDER

(To be read out to all Troops)

1. Now that the campaign in Africa is finished I want to tell you all, my soldiers, how intensely proud I am of what you have done.
2. Before we began the Battle of Egypt, last October, I said that together, you and I, we would hit Rommel and his Army "for six" right out of North Africa.  
  
And it has now been done. All those well-known enemy Divisions that we have fought, and driven before us over hundreds of miles of African soil from Alamein to Tunis, have now surrendered. There was no Dunkirk on the beaches of Tunisia; the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. saw to it that the enemy should not get away, and so they were all forced to surrender.  
  
The campaign has ended in a major disaster for the enemy.
3. Your contribution to the complete and final removal of the enemy from Africa has been beyond all praise.  
  
As our Prime Minister said at Tripoli, in February last, it will be a great honour to be able to say in years to come:—  
  
"I MARCHED AND FOUGHT WITH THE EIGHTH ARMY".
4. And what of the future? Many of us are probably thinking of our families in the home country, and wondering when we shall be able to see them.  
  
But I would say to you that we can have to-day only one thought, and that is to see this thing through to the end; and then we will be able to return to our families, honourable men.
5. Therefore let us think of the future in this way.  
  
And whatever it may bring to us, I wish each one of you the very best of luck, and good hunting in the battles that are yet to come and which we will fight together.
6. TOGETHER, YOU AND I, WE WILL SEE THIS THING THROUGH TO THE END.

B. L. Montgomery

General, EIGHTH ARMY.

TUNISIA.  
14th May, 1945.



Preparing for the next operation (the invasion of Sicily). A Sherman M4A4 medium tank practises loading and unloading to and from a landing craft. (IWM – NA 513)

Corps, whose commander (Gen Crocker) had been wounded.<sup>7</sup> Monty was left with 2nd New Zealand Division, 51st and 56th Infantry Divisions, 12th French Division (newly placed under his command) and two armoured brigades. He decided to hold the front with the 56th and 12th French Divisions, to keep the 51st Division in reserve (where it could start training for its next operation – the assault on Sicily), and to use the New Zealanders and one armoured brigade for an operation on the western flank towards Saouf.

On 14 May 1943 Monty issued a final personal message in North Africa – his famous ‘I marched and fought with the Eighth Army’, which is reproduced on page 198.

Undoubtedly Monty had much to celebrate. His Army had travelled some 1,850 miles from El Alamein to Tunis and had been ‘in at the kill’. Now he had to move on to the next operation in Sicily, but before his Army tackled this new challenge they would have a short respite in the Tripoli area, where they would be visited by King George, ‘a fitting climax to our campaigning in Africa’, as Monty remarked.

7. Crocker had been accidentally wounded during a demonstration of a new anti-tank weapon.

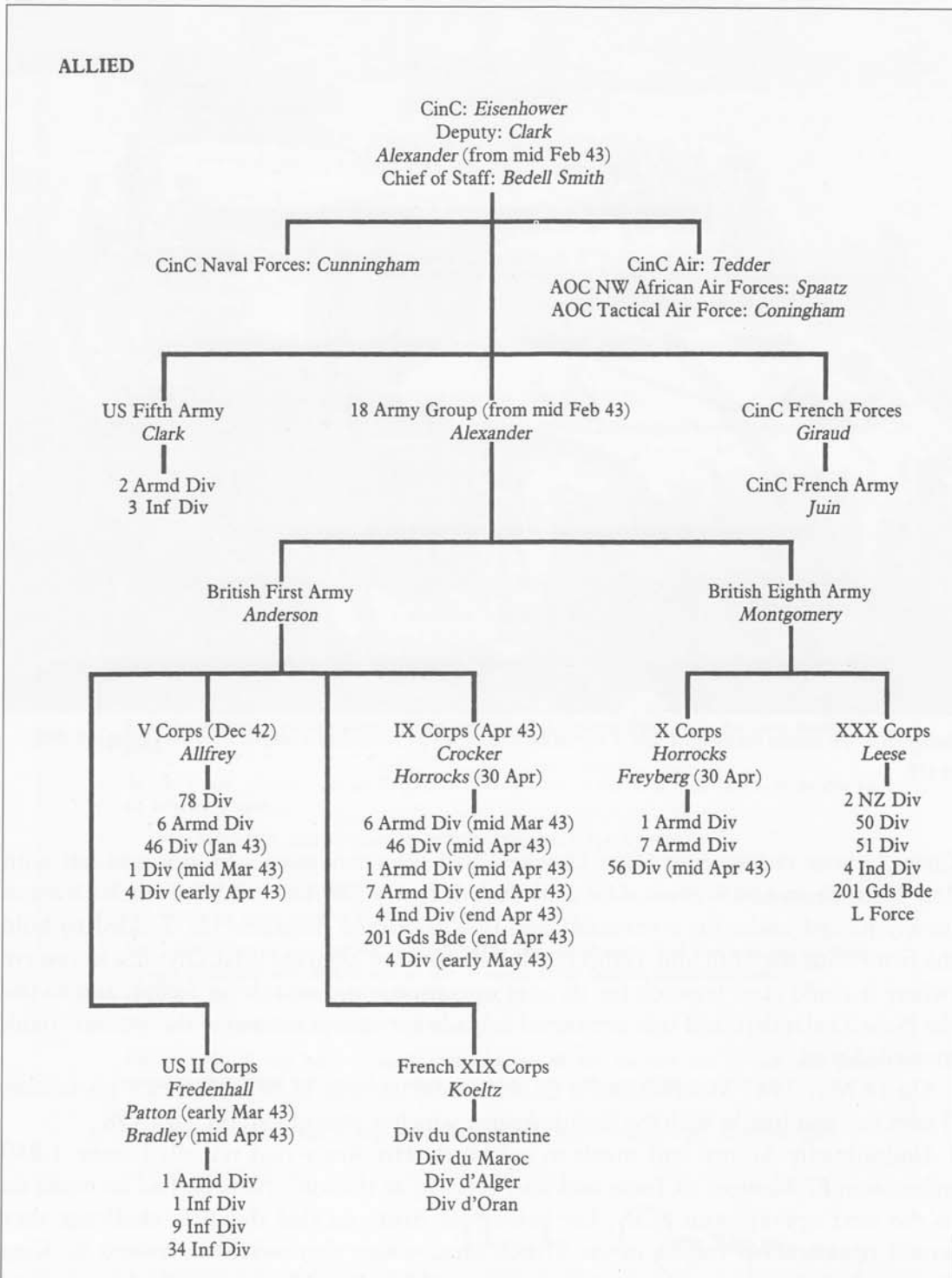


Chart showing Allied forces in North Africa.

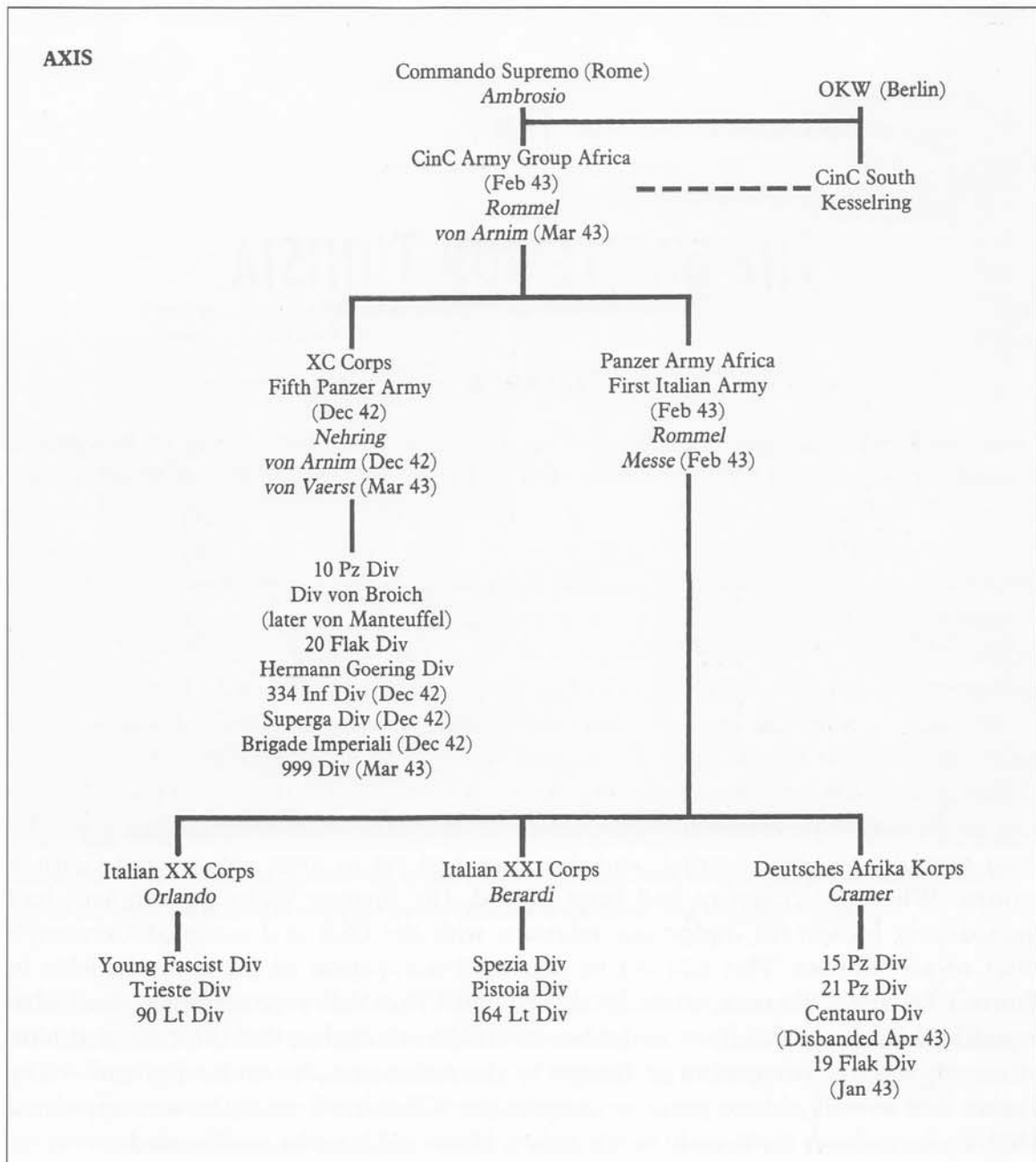


Chart showing Axis forces in North Africa.



## TEN

# THE BATTLE FOR TUNISIA

### TRAPPED?

Once the French ceasefire became effective in Algeria and Morocco on 10 November, it must have appeared to any outside observer that the Axis forces in North Africa were well and truly trapped between two massive, victorious, inexorably advancing Allied armies and that it would only be a few short weeks before they were crushed between the jaws of this gigantic pincer movement. While the eventual outcome was probably never truly in doubt, there was a lot of hard fighting still to come, especially in the 'bleeding' of the inexperienced American troops. There was also much to be learned by the various American, British and French staff officers at all levels, who had to get used to working together. After the general success of 'Torch', those involved must have thought they were in for an easy ride, the apparent lack of enemy reaction fostering an air of complacency among the newly arrived 'green' troops. However, they had conveniently forgotten that the resistance from the Vichy French had generally been sporadic and half-hearted, and that they had yet to meet any veteran German troops. When the ceasefire had been agreed, the furious Vichy government had immediately broken off diplomatic relations with the USA and accepted Germany's offer of air support. This had led to the rapid occupation of the main airfields in Tunisia by the Germans, already mentioned. The Vichy government had also repudiated Darlan's ceasefire – and when he tried to rescind it, the Allies arrested him. However, with the occupation of Tunisia by the Axis forces, he cut his ties with Vichy France and so was able to agree to support the Allies. As a result he was appointed High Commissioner for French North Africa. He would later be assassinated.

### AN AXIS BRIDGEHEAD

The Allies had lost the initial race for Tunis, thanks as much to the weather conditions as to the enemy resistance, which was still only patchy. Now, they would try again. However, the situation was getting more difficult as additional Axis troops arrived. As already mentioned, the first Axis commander was General der Panzertruppe Walther Nehring, who had been wounded in the arm on 31 August 1942 while commanding the DAK, and was returning to North Africa after convalescing in Germany. He had



Kasserine Pass. American infantrymen of the 2nd Battalion, 16 Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Division, marching through Kasserine Pass on their way to Kasserine and Fariana. They are behind a reconnaissance unit which has cleared the route of mines. (Real War Photos – A 1152A)

been 'extracted' en route back to Rommel's army and put in charge of *all* German troops in Tunisia, being given the task of planning the establishment of a bridgehead extending to the west as far as necessary for freedom of manoeuvre – if possible as far as the Tunisian-Algerian border. Although this proved impossible, he was still able to prevent the Allies from taking Tunis and stopped them from reaching the central Tunisian coastline, which would have isolated his bridgehead from Rommel's forces now withdrawing into Tunisia. His HQ, Stab Nehring, was established in Tunis on 14 November, then had its name changed to XC Corps. Eventually it would be absorbed by the Pz AOK 5 on 9 December. Nehring would be replaced by Gen von Arnim, principally because he had let it be known that he, like Rommel, doubted the wisdom of trying to hold on to Tunisia.

By the end of November approximately 25,000 battle-hardened reinforcements had been flown/shipped in from German central reserves and from Russia. In addition there were about a hundred new tanks, including a heavy tank battalion equipped with





The American tank crew of a 1st Armored Division M3 medium tank, with its main 75mm gun in a side sponson, carry out their ablutions before going into battle. From the look of the gun-cleaning rod and oil/grease fins and so on they have been preparing the tank as well as themselves. (Real War Photos — A 1156A)

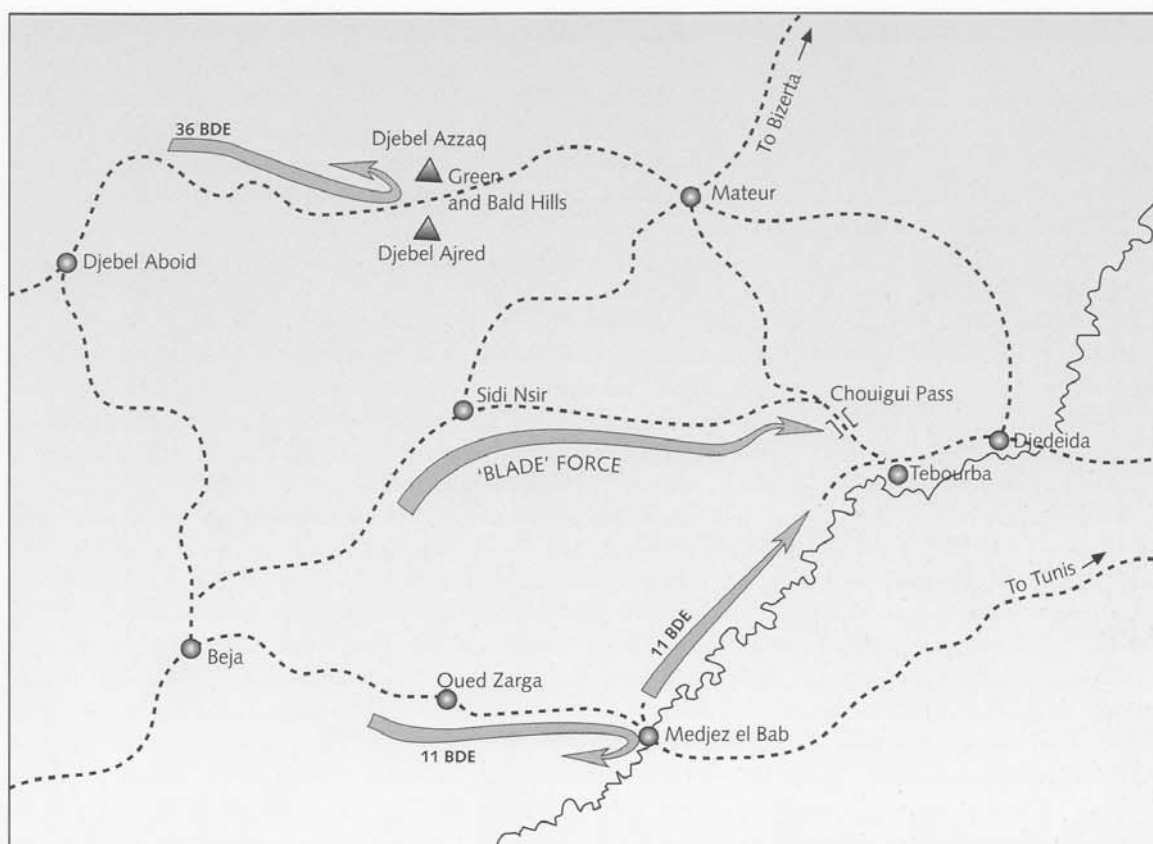


Close-up of an American gun crew manning their 37mm M3A1 anti-tank gun, which had a muzzle velocity of 2,900 ft/sec. Armour penetration using AP was only 1 inch at 1000 yards, but double that with APC ammunition. They have set up their gun to cover enemy tank approaches to Sidi Bou Zid. (Real War Photos - A 1152)

Tiger tanks. It must have been galling to Rommel to find that Hitler was prepared to send troops to bolster up what the Desert Fox considered to be a lost cause, when he had been unwilling to let Rommel have adequate reinforcements months before, when it had really mattered. However, von Arnim never received all of the seven divisions which were promised to him by Hitler.

### FIRST ARMY ATTACK

Gen Anderson's plan was to continue the advance from Bone and Bougie, which had begun during the second week of November (see chapter 8), with 11th and 36th Brigades of 78 (BR) Infantry Division. The former would push along the inland route



First Army's advance into Tunisia, 24–30 November 1942

from Souk el Arba via Medjez el Bab and Tebourba to Tunis, while the latter took the north coastal road from Tebraka via Djebel Aboid to Bizerta. Following up on the inland route was a mixed force of armour and artillery, known as 'Blade Force', which was using both rail and road to get forward.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, first contact with the Germans was made on 16/17 November. In the following days the main fighting was around Medjez el Bab, where the French Tunisian Division under Gen Barre had withdrawn on the arrival of the Germans, hoping that the Allies would arrive in time to give them support *before* Barre had to decide whether or not to join the Axis forces. On the 19th Nehring gave him a blunt ultimatum – join us or face the consequences, and when this was not heeded, German aircraft and paratroopers attacked the French positions. However, the French held out and that evening withdrew to Oued Zarga covered by a force of British paratroopers, supported by American artillery.

1. The main part of this force was the 17th /21st Lancers regimental group, which was equipped with a mixture of Crusader and Valentine tanks; however, it did include other forces, such as a company of light tanks belonging to the US 1st Armored Division.



A German 10cm Kanone 18 medium field artillery piece in action in Tunisia. It was really a bit too heavy to be towed by horses, and its small shell weight (15.4kg) was disappointing. It was eventually relegated to coastal artillery. (IWM – TR 152)

The 78 British Infantry Division was only lightly equipped, so its two brigades found the going tough, especially as the chosen routes were too far apart to be mutually supporting. The 36th Brigade, on the northern route, was ambushed in the djebels and, after three days' hard fighting had to withdraw. The lower column fared no better, their assault on Medjez el Bab being repulsed with heavy casualties. Between these main routes, however, Blade Force, now advancing towards Tebourba–Djedeida, had a stroke of good luck. The company of M3 light tanks ('Honeys') attached from 1st (US) Armd Div managed to bypass all the enemy outposts and reach some high ground overlooking the Djedeida airfield. Here they saw flights of Stuka dive-bombers being prepared for more raids against the advancing Allied troops. With guns blazing they charged down on to the unsuspecting enemy and shot up the airfield, destroying some twenty aircraft, plus stores of ammunition, fuel and so on. When Nehring heard of this



A Bofors light anti-aircraft gun crew in action on the Goubellat Plain near Tunis, May 1943. The Swedish-designed Bofors 40mm LAA gun was probably the best and most widely used of all LAA guns of the war. It was built under licence in the UK. (IWM — 920)





GIs in an outpost in the Kasserine Pass area, grimly awaiting another German counter-attack. (IWM—NY 6411)

attack, he panicked and ordered the evacuation of Medjez el Bab and the concentration of all his troops for close defence of Tunis and Bizerta. He rescinded this order later when he realised that it was just a 'flash in the pan', but his actions had enabled 11 Bde to take Medjez el Bab and then to advance and capture Tebourba on the 27th. However, that was as far as they got, being unable to take Djedeida with its important bridge over the River Medjerda, as German opposition stiffened and the Luftwaffe began more heavy dive-bombing and strafing attacks. This continued in the last days of November with increasing severity, until 78 Div troops were forced to halt their advance and wait for reinforcements to arrive and for their air cover to be improved. Tebourba was a reasonable defensive position and, although this meant an end to the First Army's initial attempt to take Tunis, Gen Anderson was forced to agree to a pause, especially until such time as the currently chaotic Army/Air cooperation could be sorted out.

Unfortunately for the Allies, the initiative had now passed back to the Axis forces. Kesselring had visited Tunis and had been very annoyed by Nehring's panic withdrawal from Tebourba, ordering him to mount an immediate counter-offensive with 10 Pz Div. This began on 1 December and after two days' hard fighting the Germans had pushed the First Army troops back to Tebourba and beyond, causing heavy casualties and loss of vehicles and equipment. Once again lack of air support was mainly to blame, Eisenhower making a special point in his report on the battle, saying that they had 'gone beyond the sustainable limit of air capabilities in the pell-mell race for Tunisia'. The German panzers swept on towards Medjez el Bab during the period 6-11 December, inflicting heavy casualties on the inexperienced American armour. The 'Old Ironsides' (US 1st Armored Division) were especially hard hit, their divisional history commenting, for example, that: 'The day's lessons were deeply disturbing. The enemy's armament and tactics had been extremely effective. American armament and tactics had failed.' As if to emphasise the point, even the weather now turned against the Allies, although on the plus side more troops had begun to arrive at Algerian ports – such as the remainder of 78th (BR) Inf Division, most of 6th (BR) Armd Div and V (BR) Corps HQ under Lt Gen Charles Allfrey. V Corps HQ took over the Tunisian front on 6 December, its first action being to recommend that any further attacks should be delayed until after the arrival of the next batch of convoys, due later that month.

The crew of this British Bofors anti-aircraft gun are being protected by French soldiers with their Chatellerout light machine-gun, mid-December 1942. (IWM – NA 306)



Bringing their 25-pdr field gun into action at Djebel Bargou on 31 January 1943, this British gun crew probably had to use their excellent weapon for close-range anti-tank work as well as providing normal artillery support. (IWM – NA 581)





'Report my Signals, Over!' Good communications were vital in battle. Here infantry signallers use an 18 set, which was man-portable and designed to be used between Bn HQ and its sub-units. (IWM - NA 374)

British 3.7in mortar crew in action. They are members of the Royal West Kents and were dealing with the enemy in the Djebel Bargou area in late January 1943. (IWM - NA 576)





Bringing in a wounded GI. This soldier was on patrol some 6 miles in front of the Royal West Kents' position when he was hit four times by machine-gun fire. He lay out in the mountains for three days before being rescued by some Moroccan troops who brought him safely into the British lines, where he was handed over to the RAMC. (IWM — NA 580)

Sweeping for mines at the side of the Medjez—Tebourba road, April 1943. In the background is Longstop Hill. Some four hundred German anti-tank mines were lifted on this road in three hours. (IWM — NA 2411)



Allfrey also recommended that the leading troops be withdrawn to a more realistic defensive line. However, this would have meant giving up Medjez el Bab – to which the French objected most strongly. Eisenhower had to be brought in to adjudicate and eventually it was agreed to make only a limited withdrawal to the Djebel el Almar, to the north-east of Medjez el Bab. The date for the reopening of the Allied offensive to take Tunis was optimistically set to begin on Christmas Eve. As mentioned already, however, the weather broke on 7 December, so that when the limited withdrawal began on the night of 10/11 December it had to be effected in torrential rain and thick glutinous mud, which would remain an ever-present hazard for the next three months.

To make matters even worse, the Germans decided to renew their offensive towards Medjez el Bab on 10 December, just when the withdrawal was about to begin. Aggressive German armour now added to the Allies' woes, the fighting being especially severe for a key feature known as 'Longstop Hill'. It was a vital tactical point which changed hands continually but was eventually lost to the Germans (who named it 'Christmas Hill') and it remained in their hands right up until 24 April, when the Allies launched their final offensive. Both sides were hampered by the mud and rain, which more than anything else finally persuaded Eisenhower to call off the assault on Tunis. In his memoirs he talks about seeing, during a personal reconnaissance of the ground, a motor-cycle stuck in a field, about 10 yards off the road. Four soldiers were trying to free it from the mud, but all they did eventually was to get themselves 'mired in the sticky clay'. Ike went back to his headquarters and directed that the attack be postponed indefinitely.

### OPERATION 'EILBOETE'

Soon after his appointment von Arnim was directed by Kesselring to capture all the passes in the Eastern Dorsales region so as to give the Axis forces access to a series of 'launching pads' from which they could strike into the Tunisian plain beyond. Von Arnim's proposed plan to fulfil this directive was Operation 'Eilboete', in which he planned to capture the forward Allied positions there, starting in the north and working southwards. The operation began on 18 January, with a diversionary attack on Bou Arada in the north by the ubiquitous 10 Pz Div. However, the 6th British Armoured Division, helped by the Tunisian mud, rapidly stopped the Panzers in their tracks. Many of the bogged-down German tanks were later blown up by British sappers before they could be recovered. Below 10th Panzer Div, the reinforced 334th Infantry Division struck southwards, cutting off and destroying French-held positions on the way. Elements of 36 (BR) Bde, supported by American tanks, managed to halt the German advance, but only after the Kairouan and Fonduk Passes had been lost. Faid Pass further south was held initially, but was taken by 21 Pz Div some days later, on 30 January. The German armour then pressed on towards Sidi Bou Zid, all the Eastern Dorsales passes now being in German hands. 'Eilboete' had undoubtedly been a success.

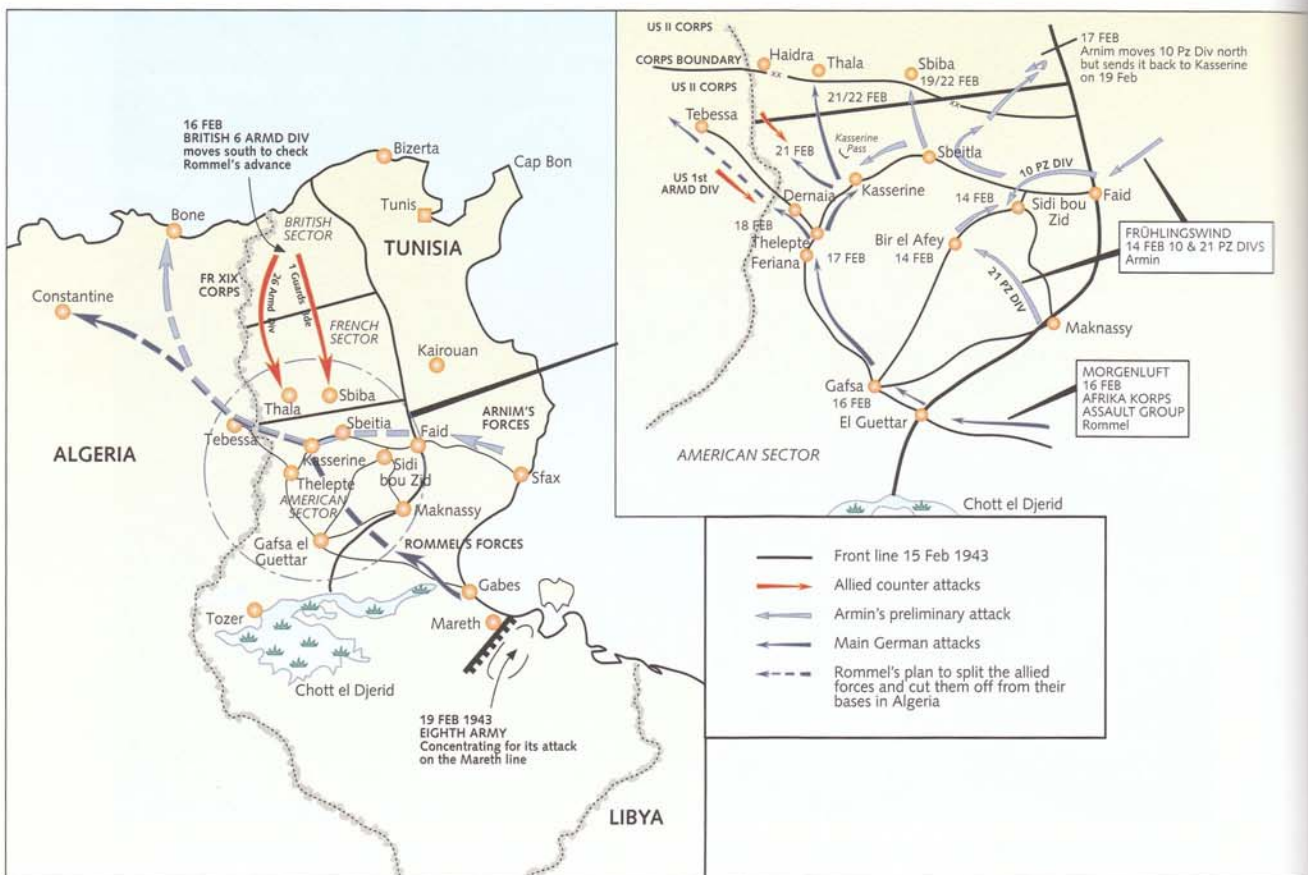


Direction Kasserine! A column of German Panzer IIIs pass a smartly dressed military policeman on traffic duty on their way up to assault Kasserine Pass.  
(Author's Collection)

### A MAJOR OFFENSIVE

It now became clear from Allied intelligence sources that a major Axis offensive was being planned to start in Central Tunisia in about the middle of February. It must be remembered that Rommel's Panzer Army Africa had now withdrawn into Tunisia behind the Mareth Line. Rommel appreciated that it would take Montgomery some time to gear up his forces to take on the formidable Mareth Line defences, so he had time to strike at the new enemy in Western Tunisia, especially at the Americans, whose inexperience made them the 'weakest link'. This had already become apparent in the 'Eilboete' operation in the Eastern Dorsales region, where both US and French troops, in particular the Americans, had suffered heavy casualties. However, coordination between the two elements of Heeresgruppe Afrika was never going to be easy, especially as Rommel and von Arnim did not get on and both had their own ideas on the scale of the proposed attack.<sup>2</sup>

2. Rommel and von Arnim actually heartily disliked each other. They were complete opposites, von Arnim being one of the 'old school' who thought of Rommel as 'that upstart Swabian'.



German attacks 'Frühlingswind' (14 February 1943) and 'Morgenluft' (16 February 1943)

Rommel wanted to be far more ambitious than von Arnim, planning to launch a major strike through the passes of the Western Dorsales, aimed at annihilating the II US Corps, then to sweep up in rear of the British First Army and force the Allies out of Tunisia entirely. Von Arnim merely wanted to enlarge on his initial successes in the Eastern Dorsales. A compromise was finally reached and on 14 February von Arnim launched his attack ('Frühlingswind') through the Faid Pass towards Sidi Bou Zid, with 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions. Rommel would launch his attack ('Morgenluft') with the DAK two days later through Gafsa. Both attacks were ultimately aimed at the Kasserine Pass, their main purpose being to cause maximum casualties and destruction among the inexperienced American forces, which would, they hoped, severely affect their future fighting ability. If the German luck held, they might even be able to cut right behind the Allied lines and destroy their main bases at Bone and Constantine. Kesselring eventually had to adjudicate between the two plans – neither of which actually went as far as he had wished – and chose what can only be described as an unfortunate compromise. Von Arnim was allowed to mount his assault, but had to



A German SdKfz 250/3 lichter Funkpanzerwagen (light radio vehicle) belonging to 21st Panzer Division. The sign below the divisional tactical sign represents a towed artillery unit. (Signal via Author's Collection)





More PzKpfw IIIs, these are Ausf Ns, moving up into battle in Tunisia. (Author's Collection)



Italian Bersaglieri moving carefully through the small town of Gafsa. (Stato Maggiore Dell'Esercito)

release 21st Pz Div once he had taken Sidi Bou Zid and pass it over to Rommel to help clear his rear by attacking Gafsa.

The German attack on US II Corps began very successfully, the American troops being forced back with heavy casualties, losing nearly seventy tanks within the first hours around Sidi Bou Zid. The attack continued on the 15th, and south of Sbeitla the US 1st Armored Division was practically annihilated, losing some 165 tanks. One member of 21 Pz Div wrote afterwards:

Our division had gone round Sidi Bou Zid far to the south and now stood west of it between Sidi Bou Zid and Gafsa. . . . At about 0100 our eyes jumped out of their sockets and we caught our breath as a huge wedge of tanks came towards us. Undaunted 1 Company's new 7.5cm anti-tank gun started the battle . . . Now the Americans knew our positions and they halted. Either they overestimated our strength or lacked aggressive instinct. Our artillery used this hesitation to lay down a barrage, during which the tanks of 5 and 7 Regiments (the latter from 10 Pz Div) pushed right and left of the thickly bunched American tanks under cover of tall cacti. Then all hell broke loose! Our panzerschützen fired shot after shot; yelling and explosions filled the air; tanks were burning, enveloped by dense clouds of black smoke, while others exploded, and some turned in circles, with one track destroyed, aimlessly firing all the while. Then the Luftwaffe joined in the attack and the inferno mounted – a picture of hell right before our eyes.<sup>3</sup>

Rommel entered Gafsa on the 15th unopposed and pushed out his reconnaissance units towards Feriana. Von Arnim refused to release 21 Pz Div, arguing that Rommel no longer needed it as he had already taken Gafsa, and instead went ahead with his own plan to strike northwards. Rommel began to prepare for his return march to Mareth, but then changed his mind and signalled Kesselring: 'On the basis of the enemy situation . . . I propose an immediate enveloping thrust from the southwest on Tebessa and north of it, provided Pz AOK 5's supply situation is adequate. This offensive must be executed with strong forces. I therefore request that the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions be assigned to me immediately.' Kesselring gave his approval, but it took some time to get the OKW and the Italians to agree to such a major change of plan. However, eventually their approval was given and the advance began on Djebel Hmara and Sbeitla. Von Arnim had to give up his own attack and go on to the defensive. Rommel's attack began with the same elan and dash as the previous operations had done – 21 Pz Div took Sbeitla while 10 Pz Div thrust on towards the Kasserine Pass, which they reached by the 19th. This was the key to the Allied position.

3. Quoted from the privately published history of MG Bn 8, which appeared in the author's, *Afrikakorps at War, Vol. 2.*

### THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS

Most of the Allied reserves were now deployed in the north, so the troops left to guard this important pass were a polyglot collection of American troops – an infantry battalion, part of an engineer regiment, a field artillery battalion and a TD battalion, together with a battery of French artillery. To this was added, during the first night of the battle, another American infantry battalion and a mixed British force rushed through from Thala. The commander of US II Corps, Lt Gen Lloyd Fredenall, had ordered Col Robert Stark, CO of the 26th US Infantry Regiment, to take command and asked him to ‘pull a Stonewall Jackson’. Stark somehow managed to keep the strong panzer forces at bay for the first day (19 February), but that night Rommel switched the direction of his attack and by the following afternoon had broken through the pass, and Axis forces were heading for both Tebessa and Thala. However, the action was far from over. On the 21st the battle continued, the Americans managing to block the Axis advance on Tebessa, while British action around Thala was just as effective and reports that more reinforcements were on the way convinced the Germans that they should break off their attack and go on to the defensive. Heavy rain and the close terrain compounded Rommel’s problems, so that when he and Kesselring met at the Pass on the 22nd, Rommel was forced to admit that events had not gone the way he had expected; the four days of torrential rain and the fact that his tanks had had to be confined to the small number of roads through the mountains – plus of course the failure of von Arnim to send the promised panzer reinforcements (including the Tigers) – had all led to this stalemate. There was nothing he could do now, but break off the battle and go back to Mareth, where his other enemy was getting ready to open another offensive. Kesselring agreed, called off the assault and the following day appointed Rommel as ‘Commando Supremo’ of Heeresgruppe Afrika, which encompassed both Messe’s Panzerarmee Afrika and von Arnim’s Pz AOK 5.

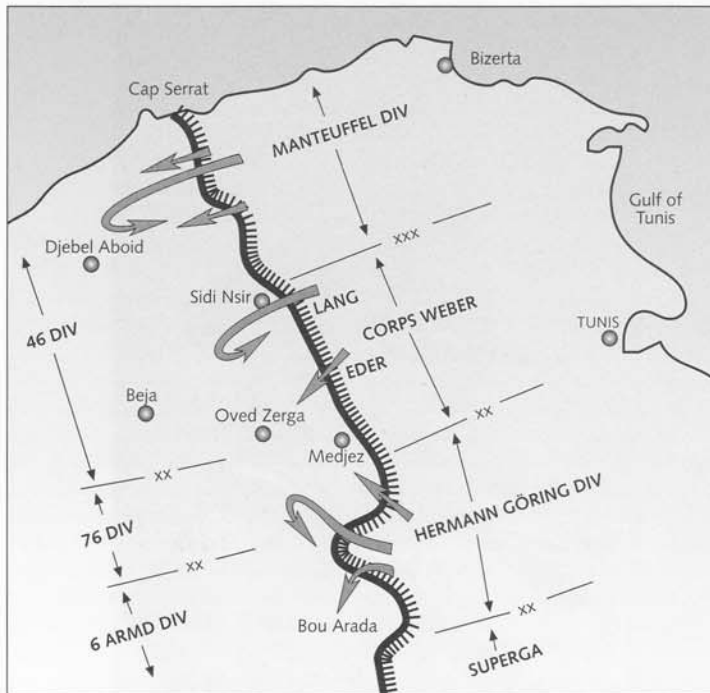
#### *FREDENALL REPLACED*

Meanwhile, on the Allied side there was continued muddle and confusion within the US II Corps command system – the official history talked about ‘a tangled skein of misunderstanding, duplication of effort, overlapping responsibility and consequential muddle’. This was not new and Eisenhower fully realised that he must take some positive action. This led to his sacking Fredenall as commander US II Corps and his replacement by Gen George S. Patton Jnr. Ike did not intend to leave Patton in command of US II Corps for very long, because he had already decided to earmark him for command of the US VII Corps for the forthcoming invasion of Sicily, but he was the perfect choice to put some backbone and fighting spirit back into the demoralised American troops. According to eyewitnesses, Patton hit II Corps like ‘Moses descending from Mount Ararat’, but instead of the Ten Commandments he brought his own text of severe unrelenting discipline. He motored around all the units



Feldmarschall Kesselring presents a medal to a Luftwaffe ground crew man. (BKUW – page 152)

down to battalion level, accompanied by siren-screeching scout cars and half-tracks, all bristling with weapons and covered in the largest stars his aides could produce. Lt Gen Patton (Ike had just promoted him) spared no one from his blistering speeches and the enforcing of dress regulations – such as the wearing of ties, leggings, helmets and sidearms and shaving every day. At this point he was probably the most hated military commander in American history, but something was happening to II Corps. It became, in spite of itself, a Patton Army – tough, bitter and proud, capable of doing the impossible. This was, of course, the ‘visible face’ of Patton; what the troops on the ground did not see were the endless hours he spent running his staff ragged to ensure that the Corps got everything it needed – such as new tanks, vehicles, equipment, uniforms and rations. Part of his genius was in ensuring that everything was available exactly when and where it was needed – and this included personal leadership, so, when the fighting recommenced, Patton was soon up there with his leading troops, commanding in much the same way as Rommel did. For example, on 7 April he



Operation 'Ochsenkopf', 26 February–19 March 1943

discovered that one of his tank/infantry battlegroups was held up by a minefield and that the commander was reluctant to move forward. After berating him on the radio without success, Patton drove forward and personally led the way through the minefield and on until they were only a few miles from their objective, before he reluctantly returned to his headquarters.

### OPERATION 'OCHENSKOPF'

Just three days after the Axis forces broke off their attack at Kasserine, von Arnim launched a new offensive. Operation 'Ochsenkopf' was designed to push the Allies back in the north and centre on a 60-mile

frontage, in order to prevent them from having a 'launching pad' for yet another assault on Tunis. The offensive lasted from 26 February to 19 March and, although it initially gained ground against the newly arrived British 46 Inf Div, it was held by the British 78 Inf Div and then forced back. Rommel was extremely annoyed when he heard about von Arnim's offensive, especially as the Tiger tanks that were employed in one action had nearly all been lost. He very soon gave orders to von Arnim to 'put a stop to the fruitless affair'.

### OPERATION 'WOP'

As already mentioned, at the time of the German attack on Kasserine Alexander had asked Monty to exert as much pressure as possible on his front so as to take some of the heat off the American II Corps. Now it was the Americans' turn to reciprocate, as Monty began his battle to break through the Mareth Line. This was just what Patton had been waiting for and his Operation 'Wop' against Gafsa more than filled the bill – although Patton was most unhappy about the restrictions put upon him by Alexander. Operation 'Wop' proved to be outstandingly successful, despite the spring rains, with US 1st Inf Div taking Gafsa on the 17th, then pushing reconnaissance patrols out to El Guettar. To their north US 1st Armd Div reached its assembly area but was held up there for forty-eight hours by torrential rain. However, they then pressed forward and took Station de Sened, forcing the enemy to withdraw to Maknassy on the 21st.

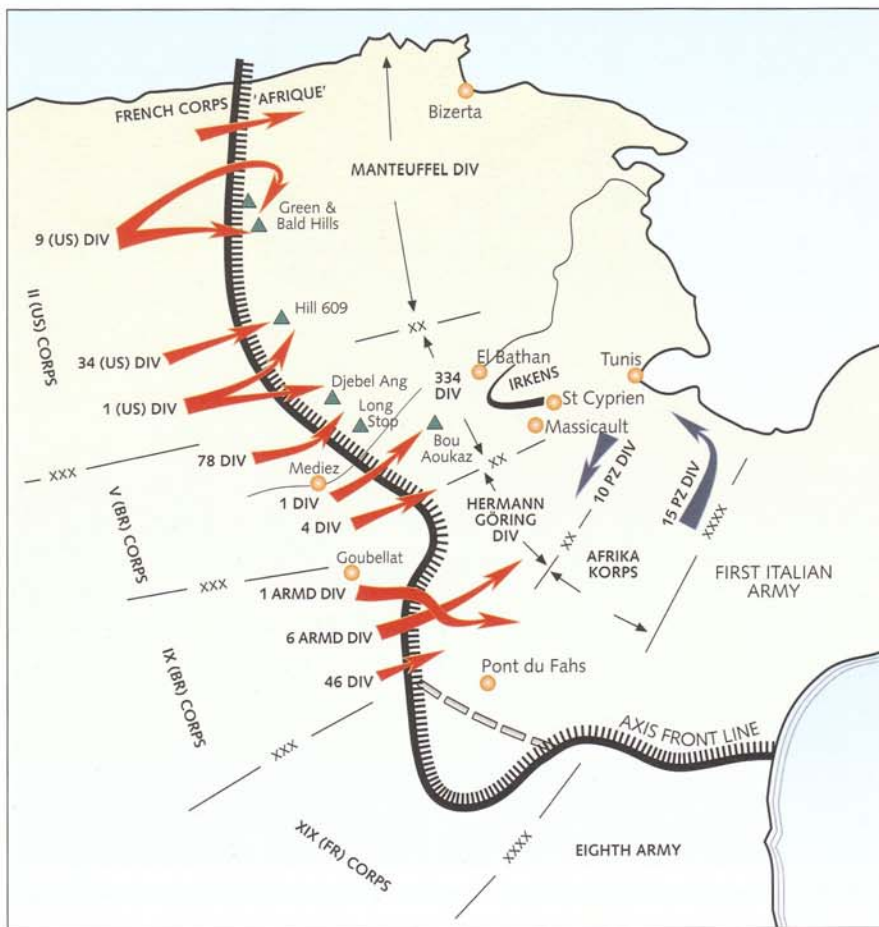
Having received Monty's request for renewed American pressure during the 'dogfight' period of the Mareth battle, Alexander ordered Patton to take Maknassy, then to send a light armoured force ahead to raid the Axis airfield at Mezzouna, some 10 miles east of the Eastern Dorsales. Patton found Maknassy clear of enemy, who had withdrawn to the hills behind the town. The Americans might have broken through had they continued their attack, but instead they paused to regroup (following Alexander's strictures about ensuring that all attacks were properly supported), lost impetus and allowed the Germans to bring up mobile reserves and hold their positions.

Monty again asked for Patton's II Corps to threaten the enemy flank and rear, so as to isolate Messe's army at the Mareth Line. This they did, attacking with three divisions – 1st and 9th US Inf Divs advanced on the Axis Gafsa–Gabes, while US 1st Armd Div waited to exploit on to Djebel Tebaga, once they had secured El Guettar. As explained in the last chapter, Monty's Eighth Army eventually penetrated as far as El Hamma on 27 March, but was unable to prevent a large proportion of the Axis armour from escaping. By 31 March Messe's army had been forced back to the bottom

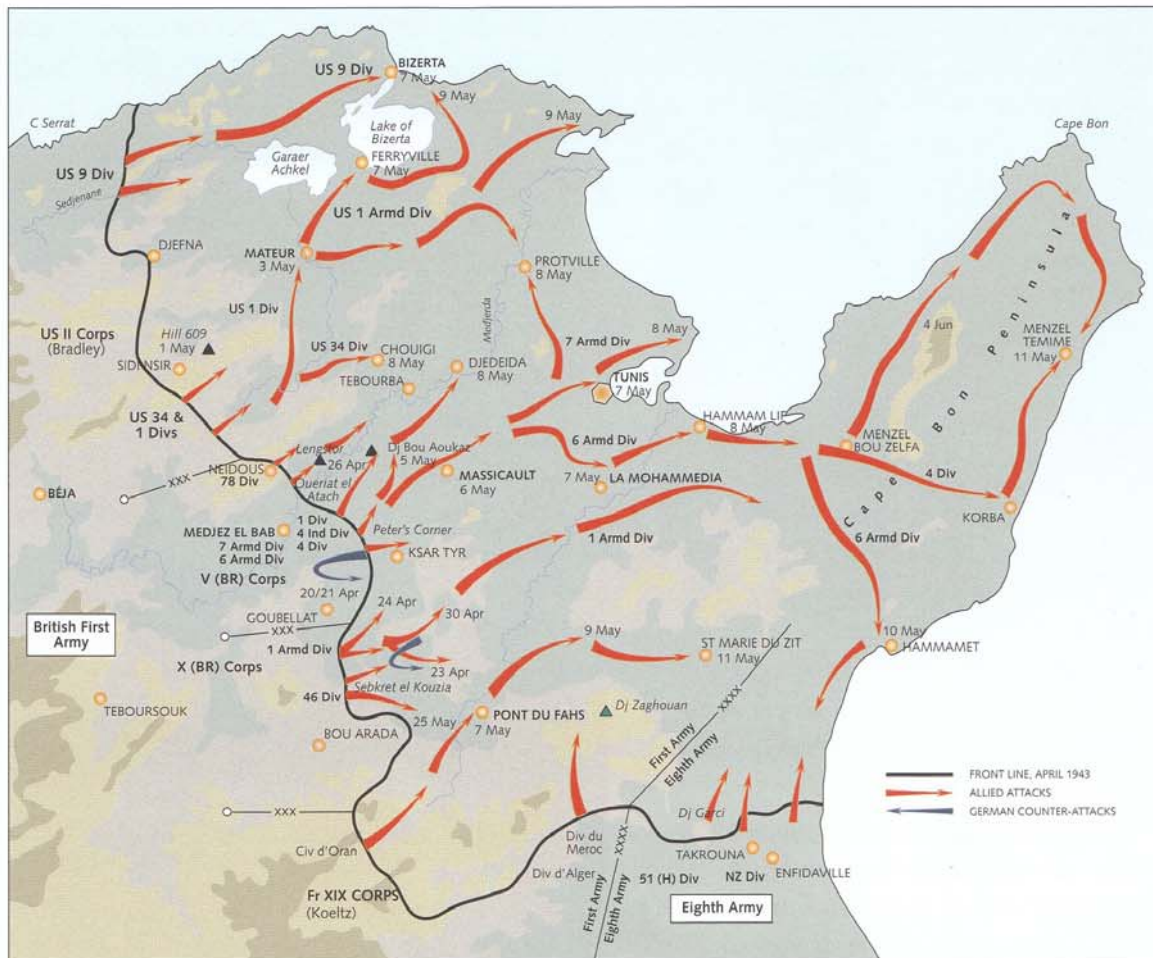


Operation 'Vulcan'. The Allies began their final push with elements of both armies. This SP 'Priest' – a 105mm gun mounted on a Grant chassis – belongs to one of the artillery units of the Eighth Army, sent across to support First Army. (IWM – NA 2264)

end of the Eastern Dorsales and, although there were significant numbers of troops there (over eleven divisions including reinforcements), their resupply had reached a critical situation as nearly half of the transport ships bringing supplies were being sunk. The tonnage landed in Tunisian ports fell drastically, from 70,000 tons in January 1943, to 29,000 tons in April and to just 3,000 tons in May. When one compares this with the estimated minimum of 60–70,000 tons monthly, which the logistic staffs reckoned was needed to supply the Axis forces in Tunisia, then the difficulties under which von Arnim and Messe were operating can be well imagined. Air supply was equally badly affected by Operation 'Flax', which began in March 1943 and was a special interception programme aimed at cutting the air supply lines between Italy and Tunisia. It would reach its climax on 18 April, when, in what became known as the 'Palm Sunday Massacre', the US 9th Air Force attacked a large formation of over a hundred Ju 52s over Cape Bon'. Over half the transports were destroyed. Followed four days later Allied fighters caught sixteen of the giant Messerschmitt Me 323s, the six-engined version of the Me 321 transport glider, and shot down fourteen of them, all loaded with fuel.



Operation 'Vulcan',  
22–28 April 1943



The end in Africa – final Allied assaults

### OPERATION 'VULCAN'

Events were clearly building up to a final showdown, as the Allied noose tightened around the Axis perimeter. 18th Army Group staff had been planning the final offensive for some time, and it was to be called Operation 'Vulcan'. As might have been expected, there was now considerable rivalry between the British and American troops and also between the First and Eighth Armies, as to who would administer the final 'coup de grace', but Alexander decided that the British First Army and the American II Corps would be the main 'players'. Alexander's plan was for First Army to take Tunis, while US II Corps (now commanded by Gen Omar Bradley) protected their flank and then captured Bizerta. Meanwhile Eighth Army would endeavour to draw as many enemy as possible away from the other front. In the north Bradley chose to send his divisions slogging through the hills rather than attack via the easier but more heavily defended valley routes, being assisted on his seaward flank by the presence of French mountain troops of the Corps d'Afrique. Allfrey's V (BR) Corps (1st, 4th and





Lt Gen Kenneth Anderson CB, Commander of the British First Army, talking to Maj Gen Omar Bradley, who took over US II Corps from Gen George S. Patton Jr. Anderson is described by Mark M. Boatner III in his biographical dictionary as 'a big brash Scot, who made himself unpopular with the ambitious but inexperienced US officers like Mark Clark, but was soon highly regarded by Ike himself'. Bradley, 'the Soldiers' General', was junior to Patton in Tunisia but would 'jump over' him to command an Army Group in north-west Europe (1 August 1944), thanks to Patton's behaviour in Sicily where he slapped a shell-shocked soldier. (IWM – NA 2362)

78th Divs) attacked along the Medjerda Valley towards Tunis, as IX (BR) Corps (1st and 6th Armd Div, and 46th Inf Div) commanded by Crocker, attacked across the Goubellat Plain, then swung north to link up with V Corps, encircling many of the Axis blocking positions. Below them, the French XIX Corps cleared the southern routes to Tunis.

The main assault began on the 22nd. Progress was initially slow and there were heavy casualties on both sides. The Axis launched a number of spoiling attacks just as 'Vulcan' began, but none was successful, although as always the veteran German forces fought with grim determination, despite their desperate position. II (US) Corps began a slow advance with massive air and artillery support all along their 40-mile front in the north. Taking all the various fronts into consideration, the Allies now had something like a six to one superiority in



At von Arnim's HQ in Benane, Tunisia, during a visit by Field Marshal Kesselring and some of his staff. (Rolf Munniger via Author's Collection)



Tunis liberated. Giving a 'V' for Victory sign, a British officer poses in the sidecar of a German motor-cycle, accompanied by a crowd of delighted citizens. (T.P. Dalton via Author's Collection)



Victory in Tunis. A British Churchill tank motors through the streets of Tunis on 14 May 1943, two days after the German surrender, past cheering crowds. (NZ 1177)

Monty talks surrender with Italian Generale di Armata Messe. Also in the picture is Monty's Chief of Staff Freddie de Guingand (behind Messe), while in the chair opposite (giving the 'V' sign!) is Gen Kurt Freiherr von Liebenstein. (IWM — NA 2891)





A tank crew of the 16th/5th Royal Lancers cleaning the main armament on their tank, near El Aroussa, Tunisia, April 1943, as they prepare for the final operations against Tunis. (IWM - TR 939)

Acres of prisoners  
in the Tunisian  
permanent POW

into captivity. The  
Tunisia, Colonel  
took over the  
9 March 1943  
later. (IWM -



Rows of prisoners — both German and Italian — wait in the Tunisian sunshine to be taken to more permanent POW camps. (IWM — NY 8171)



Into captivity. The senior Axis commander in Tunisia, Colonel General Jürgen von Arnim, who took over the Heeresgruppe Afrika from Rommel on 11 March 1943, had to surrender just two months later. (IWM — NA 2875)





Churchill celebrates. During a visit to the airfields and battle areas of Algeria and Tunisia, the Prime Minister addressed a crowd of soldiers and airmen in the ancient amphitheatre at Carthage. (IWM — BNA 846)

numbers and a fifteen to one superiority in tanks – von Arnim having fewer than eighty tanks still running. His Army was so desperately short of fuel that they were trying to manufacture it by distilling local wines and spirits! The Luftwaffe had now abandoned its bases in Tunisia, leaving the ground troops unsupported as the Allies gained complete air superiority. As Operation 'Vulcan' progressed, the inexperienced troops of the First Army were in danger of losing momentum, so Alexander persuaded Monty to transfer two of his best divisions, plus an additional brigade, to the First Army to get things moving again. He chose 4th Indian Div, 7th Armd Div and 22 Guards Brigade (later renumbered as 201 Gds Bde), all experienced 'old hands' who had been in action since the beginning of the North African campaign. In addition, Gen Horrocks was sent across to command IX Corps, as Crocker had been accidentally wounded. The new operation to get things moving again was called 'Strike' and began on the evening of 5 May. Although in many areas the Axis forces fought on doggedly, it was clear that the end was in sight. Like Rommel, von Arnim had begged Hitler to rescue his troops, but their Führer ordered them to fight on to the last man and the last bullet. Off the coast the Allied navies were told by Admiral Cunningham to 'Sink, burn and destroy, let nothing pass!' As a result, only some 650 Axis troops are said to have escaped to Italy. On 6 May 'Strike' smashed its way



There were many graves in North Africa, of men for whom a 'corner of a foreign field' was now something very special. These are some of the fallen of the Deutsches Afrikakorps. (Author's Collection)

through the remaining German armour, under a massive artillery and air bombardment. On the following day, 7 May, armoured cars of the First Army entered Tunis unopposed, while American forces found Bizerta similarly abandoned. Down in the south the defenders of Enfidaville were stranded; isolated pockets of resistance crumbled over the next few days, so that by 12 May virtually all resistance had ceased and the Axis forces had capitulated. Among the last to give in were the once-proud Deutsches Afrikakorps, Rommel's beloved 'Afrikaners'. For them and all the rest, the war was over.

### LAST SIGNALS

On 12/13 May 1943 two very different signals were dispatched by the opposing armies in North Africa. The first was from the headquarters of the DAK to the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH). It read:

Ammunition shot off. Arms and equipment destroyed. In accordance with orders received, the Afrikakorps has fought itself into the condition where it can fight no more. The Deutsches Afrikakorps must rise again. Heia Safari!

Signed: Cramer, General Commanding.

At about the same time, Gen Alexander sent a signal to Prime Minister Winston Churchill at 10 Downing Street which read:

Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian Campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores.<sup>4</sup>

The battle for North Africa was over.

### THE COST

In the two years and eight months of warfare in North Africa, from the first Italian attack into Egypt in September 1940 to the final surrender in Tunisia in May 1943, the Axis losses were some 620,000 (killed, wounded and prisoners), of whom about two-thirds were Italians and one-third Germans. Of these over 275,000 surrendered in Tunisia and were taken prisoner, including both their most senior commanders, von Arnim and Messe. Allied casualties were: British 220,000 overall, French about 20,000 and American (November 1942 to May 1943) 18,000.

4. *British Official History*, Vol. IV.



## EPILOGUE

Peace and stillness have again returned to North Africa. The rhythm of life in the few towns and villages does not disturb the quiet of the empty desert nor the inhospitable mountains of Tunisia. The roar of engines, the rattle of tank tracks, the exploding grenades and bombs, like the chattering machine guns, have fallen silent. The flotsam and jetsam of war has sunk beneath the desert sand or has disintegrated, then been collected and taken away as scrap. The tracks of the battalion which displayed the red eagle have vanished. Wide expanses of the desert are barred for decades by mines, which, preserved by the climate, remain a danger to man and beast. The shy gazelle have returned and along the old caravan routes, the Trighs along which the tanks and trucks rolled, the camels once again stride their leisurely way.

That is the opening paragraph of the final chapter of *Nur ein bataillon* a privately circulated history of Machine Gun Battalion 8 of the DAK. It goes on to explain how only the dead now remain there, but that the thoughts of the survivors will always return to the North African desert (remember the words of the great desert explorer Wilfred Thesiger in the introduction?). The final chapter closes with the words that appear on the monument at El Alamein. They speak for all the fallen:

You who stood here in battle  
Whether enemy, friend or brother,  
Whether son of Germany,  
Of Italy, of England,  
Valiant was your way,  
Your law was the law of humanity.

Only God knows you all,  
He knows your names,  
And has gathered you into the ranks of the faithful.

He holds in His hands the plea  
Of the living and of the dead:  
The plea for peace!

## APPENDIX ONE

# THE SOLDIER AND HIS EQUIPMENT

### THE BRITISH AND COMMONWEALTH SOLDIER

Normal temperate battledress was clearly too hot for wearing in desert conditions, so suitable 'Khaki Drill' (KD) uniform was issued. This comprised khaki tunics, shirts, long trousers and shorts, being worn with boots or shoes. One of the most unpopular items was KD shorts with extra deep turn-ups, worn either buttoned up or let down to be bound around the ankles with special threaded white tapes, thus eliminating the need to wear KD trousers. They were a disaster when issued early on and did not last long, being known by one and all as 'Bombay Bloomers'! As to headgear, most soldiers wore their normal regimental hats and berets or, in action, steel helmets. Commonwealth troops wore their own distinctive headgear, such as Australian slouch hats or Indian turbans. Other necessary clothing items such as long stockings, hose tops, thin vests and pants and so on were issued to all ranks as necessary. However, desert nights were often bitterly cold once the sun had set, as were the mountainous areas of Tunisia. Thus battledress was gratefully worn on occasion and greatcoats, sheepskin coats and the like were widely used. Also in the desert many officers wore hard-wearing corduroy trousers, suede desert boots with crepe rubber soles (universally known as 'brothel creepers') and coloured silk scarves, and most carried fly whisks. Such items of 'uniform' became universally famous thanks to the splendid 'Two Types' cartoons drawn by the cartoonist 'Jon' which appeared regularly in MELF (Middle East Land Forces) newspapers.

#### *PERSONAL EQUIPMENT*

This was based on the pre-war 1937 pattern webbing which had been developed from the 1908 pattern but was lighter and had been designed to suit all arms and not just the infantry. It was still designed to accept blanco and its brass fittings were supposed to be polished for parades, but this obviously did not happen on operations, and webbing was more likely to be scrubbed and the brass left dull. Apart from the bayonet no articles were suspended below the wearer's waistline so as not to impede movement. Miscellaneous standard issue items such as first field dressings, 'Housewife' (sewing/darning kits) holdalls, identity discs, anti-gas equipment, eating utensils and so on were issued as normal, one of the most important being the water bottle, as water could make the difference between life and death in the desert.



An alfresco haircut for the Medical Officer of 417 Squadron, RCAF, at Goubrine, Tunisia. (IWM TR 831)

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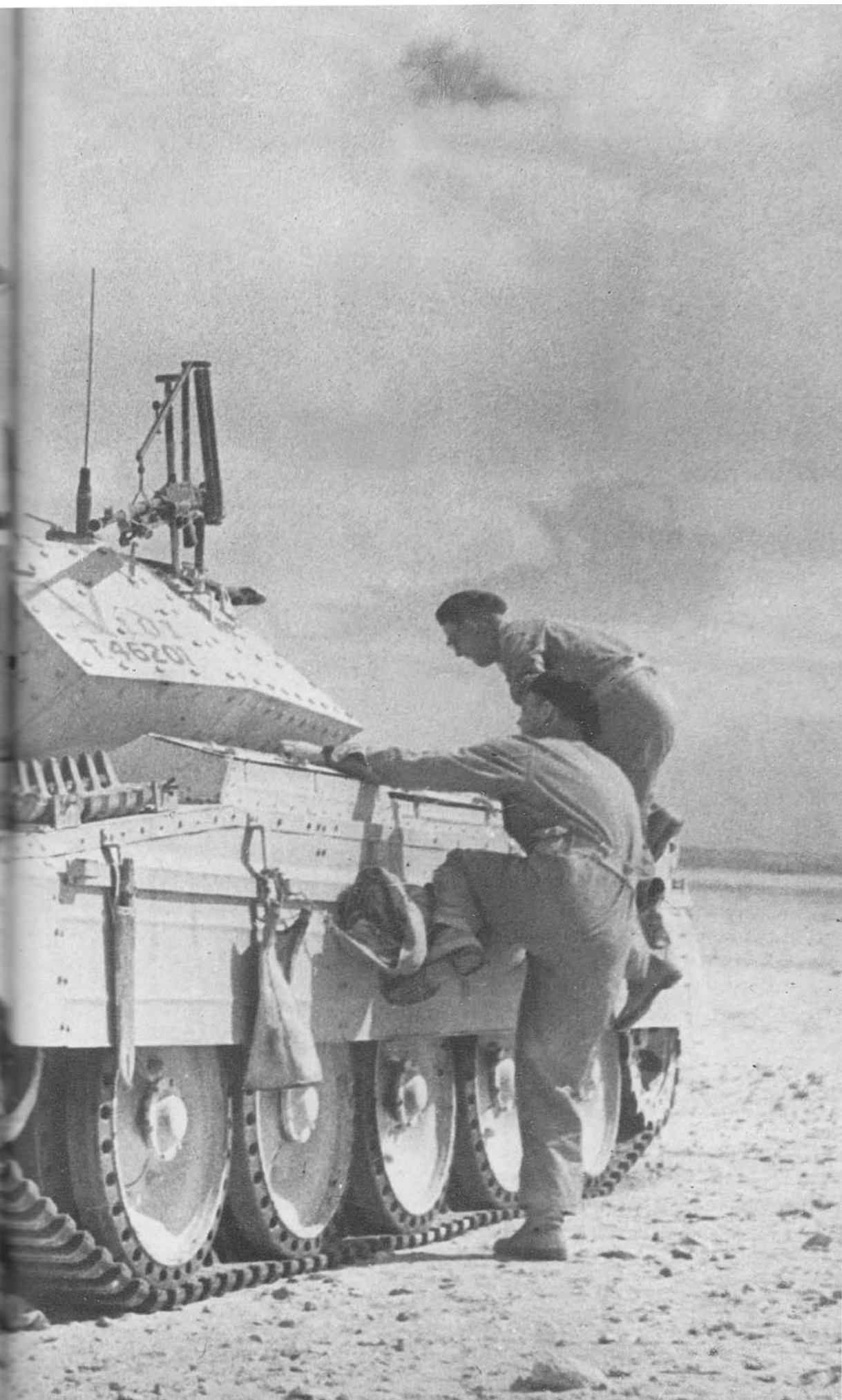


These Tommies were members of an early 'Jock Column' fighting patrol. They wear KD shorts and shirts and a mixture of forage caps and pith helmets (not usually worn in forward areas). (IWM — E 14040)



Two Aussies, wearing BD blouses, steel helmets and an assortment of webbing, carry .303in SMLE rifles with their sword bayonets attached. (IWM — E 1597)





Crews mount! Dressed in British issue KD/one-piece denims, these Free French crewmen mount their Crusader cruiser tank. Note their webbing pistol belts and ammo pouches. (IWM - E 17109)



These two British generals wear short tailored greatcoats. O'Connor wears corduroy trousers and a coloured silk scarf, while Wavell wears riding breeches and riding boots. (IWM – E 1549)

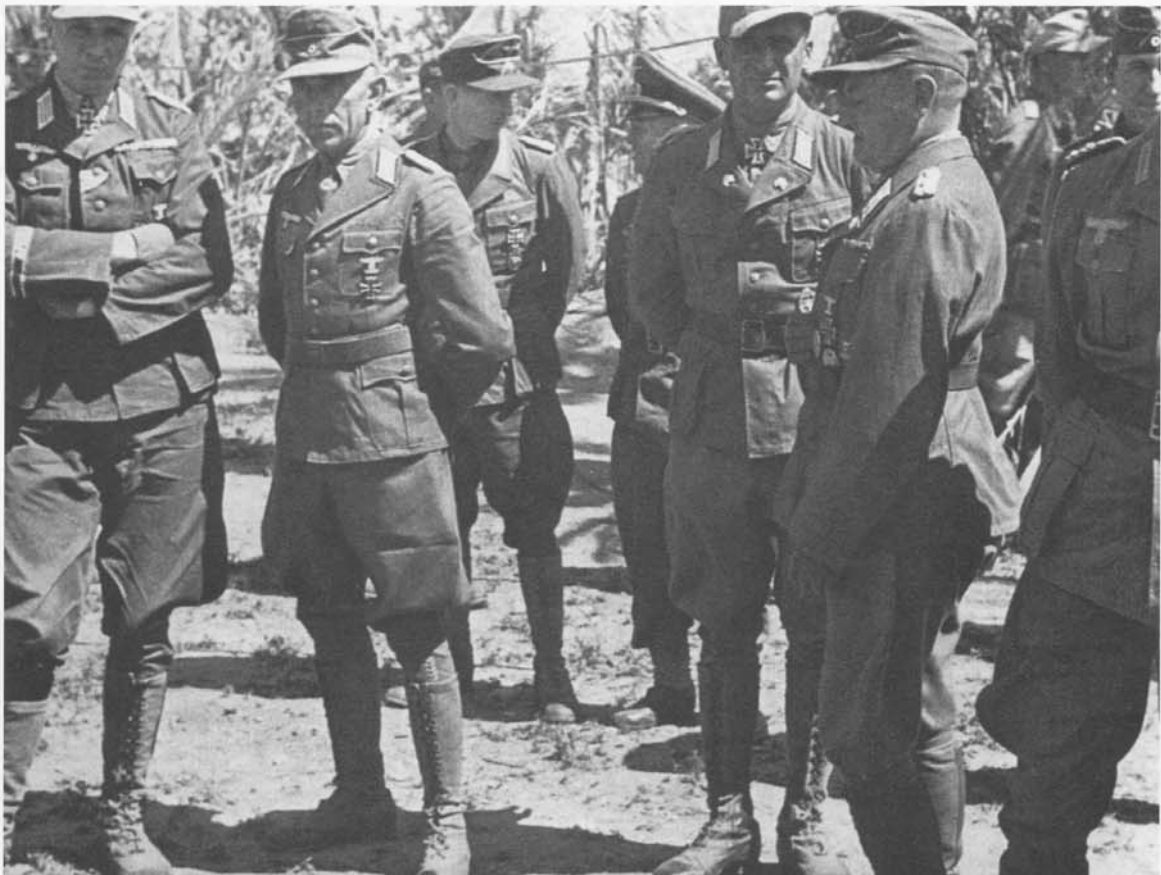
### *PERSONAL WEAPONS*

In most cases the pistol carried by officers, DRs, tank crewmen and some NCOs (of the rank of sergeant and above) was the .38in calibre six-shot Pistol, Revolver No. 2 Mk I made by the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield, while the standard rifle was the .303in Rifle No. 1 Mk III, Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) as used in the First World War. This was one of finest rifles ever produced. It remained the standard rifle for the Australian and other Commonwealth armies, large numbers being produced in India, even though it would be later replaced in the British Army by the Rifle No. 4 Mk I. The SMLE had a 10-round magazine and a long 'sword'-type bayonet. Other personal weapons included the 9mm Sten machine-carbine and the Mills 36 hand grenade. The section machine-gun was the .303in Bren Gun, which had a 29-round overhead box magazine.

### **THE GERMAN – DEUTSCHES AFRIKAKORPS (DAK) – SOLDIER**

The specially designed olive-green tropical uniform comprising jacket, shirt, trousers or shorts, headdress, etc., was the result of much hard work by the Tropical Institute of the University of Hamburg, which had been given the task in 1940. Once approved it was produced by manufacturers in Berlin and Silesia. They managed to complete their task in time to equip the first two divisions of the DAK before they departed, although

there were some variations in shades of colour. It was both smart and comfortable. The jacket was lightweight, with five buttons in front and four pockets. A tropical eagle badge was worn above the right breast pocket. There were four varieties of nether garments: long straight trousers, field trousers worn tucked into boots, riding-breeches worn with riding boots or lace-up tropical boots, and shorts worn with long socks, shoes or boots. Shorts could only be worn between 0800 and 1700 hours as an anti-malarial mosquito precaution. A variety of headgear was worn, but the only truly tropical items were the peaked field cap (Feldmütze mit grossem Schirm) and a 'fore and aft' cap, both of which were of olive-green drill; a tropical/pith helmet made of cork and canvas was usually only worn in rear areas. The steel helmet was the normal M35 model, sand-coloured and sometimes worn with a cloth helmet cover. One of the main distinguishing items was the Afrikakorps cuff title which was worn on the right sleeve some 15cm from the bottom of the sleeve. (The criteria for this award were six months on African soil, or wounded in action in the North African theatre, or contracting an illness there which meant evacuation, but only after at least three months' service.)



A group of German officers in tropical uniform. Note also the Afrikakorps cuff title being worn by Oberst Menny on the far left, also the Knight's Crosses worn at the neck, breast badges, etc. The senior officer in the group, Gen Maj von Bismarck, wears a peaked cap. (Author's Collection)





These panzer grenadiers were from 15 Pz Div. Note their basic rifleman's webbing, breast badges, etc. The Gefreiter (Corporal) also wears an Iron Cross 2nd Class ribbon in its normal place. (IWM — NA 1815)

Rommel and the two officers behind him (the nearest is Oberst Menny, comd of 15 Schützen Bde) wear greatcoats, and Rommel wears his favourite plaid scarf! (Author's Collection)



### *PERSONAL EQUIPMENT*

Because of the damage which heat and lack of humidity caused to leather, most of the usual leather items of personal equipment were replaced by olive-coloured webbing. Waistbelts, ammunition pouches, etc., of web material were issued, although many soldiers and officers continued to wear leather, while 'Y' straps and 'D' rings continued to be of leather. Olive-coloured breadbags – used to contain a variety of items as well as rations (such as washing gear and eating utensils) – were widely used and the most important life-saving item was the 2-pint felt-covered aluminium/enamelled steel canteen complete with cup (*feldflasche und trinkbecher*). Olive-coloured canvas rucksacks with webbing or leather fittings were issued to hold personal items, spare clothing, etc., and the similarly coloured canvas pack (*tornister*) was the same as the normal European issue. Other items that did not vary were mess kit, entrenching tool, gas mask and rolled shelter quarter. Various models of sand/dust goggles were issued, although some people (such as Rommel himself) preferred to use captured British anti-gas goggles.

### *PERSONAL WEAPONS*

The soldier's rifle was the 7.92mm Karabiner 98k, which had a magazine capacity of only 5 rounds, but was otherwise a good, accurate rifle. Now in plentiful supply was the 9mm Machine Pistol MP 40, which had a magazine capacity of 32 rounds and a cyclic rate of fire of 500rpm. The Stick Grenade 24 and the Hand Grenade 39 were two other basic weapons, as were the Walther P38 and the Luger PO8 pistols. The squad light machine-gun was the MG 34 with its 50-round belt; these could be linked to form a 250-round belt. It used the same ammunition as the rifle and had a rate of fire of 800–900rpm.

## **THE ITALIAN SOLDIER**

Tropical uniforms had originally been designed for service in Ethiopia (1935–6) being of similar cut and style to the standard grey-green temperate climate woollen tunic but made of light khaki linen. Unlined, the jacket had dark plastic buttons and shoulder straps. NCOs wore their rank badges on the upper arm. There was another type of jacket, the *Saharina*, which was very popular with officers (and soldiers when they could get them!) because it was very comfortable to wear. It eventually became the official officers' tunic. It was a four-pocket bush jacket with a conventional collar and cloth waist belt. Other forms of dress included a dark khaki four-pocket tunic and an unlined pullover-type tunic which opened to the waist. Tropical shirts were also of khaki linen (officers usually wore tailor-made shirts of the same pattern) and there was a mixture of trousers, breeches, shorts and pantaloons, mainly of khaki-olive green linen. Tan coloured lace-up high boots were worn, but the most common pattern was the same as the temperate climate boot but in tan leather. Officers favoured knee-high riding boots, while puttees and leather leggings were also worn by all ranks. It is true



Italian officers in Libya wearing tropical uniforms, with badges of rank worn at the bottom of the sleeve. Also all wear the five-pointed star on their collar patches – this was worn by all ranks of the regular Italian Army. (Stato Maggiore Dell'Esercito)

Askari of 'Gruppi Sahariana' clean their machine-guns on the back of one of their vehicles. Note their magazine pouches, baggy trousers and turbans. They were some of the best Italian desert troops, being fully mechanised. (IWM – MH 9246)



to say that many variations in uniform were permitted because of shortages (many ships were sunk en route to North Africa), including the mixing of tropical and temperate clothing. Headgear included steel helmets (M33 pattern), crash helmets (for tank crews), tropical peaked caps (for officers), tropical side caps and pith helmets. Specialised units – such as the Alpini and Bersaglieri – wore their own traditional headdress, which included grey-green felt caps and a red felt fez with a long blue woollen tassel.

#### *PERSONAL EQUIPMENT*

Much of the soldier's personal equipment was of First World War vintage, revolver holsters, for example, varying from grey-green or khaki canvas to chemically dyed leather. Ammunition pouches, bandoliers and so on were in leather or canvas, and knapsacks, rucksacks and haversacks were all made of light, waterproof canvas in a variety of colours. The inevitable gas mask (Model 33 carried in a square bag, Model 35 in a cylindrical bag) was standard, as were aluminium water bottles and mess tins. Shelter quarters (also worn as ponchos) were made in khaki although the European pattern was also issued, and first field dressings were wrapped in waterproof paper. Officers also normally had binoculars and compasses in leather cases and carried brown leather map cases.

#### *PERSONAL WEAPONS*

The Italians had a large range of personal weapons in service because just before the war they had decided to change the calibre of their standard rifle, carbine and LMG from 6.5mm to 7.35mm. Some of the new weapons had been introduced, but the changeover was still under way when war began, so a mix of small arms was to be found in most units. There were, for example, one revolver and two automatic pistols – the modello 89 10.35mm cal revolver, and the Glisenti modello 1910 and Beretta modello 1934 automatics; two rifles (6.5mm Fucile 91 and the new 7.35mm Fucile 38); two carbines (6.5mm Moschetto 91 and 7.35mm Moschetto 38); two elderly 9mm SMGs (Moschetto automatico OVP and Beretta 1918/30) and one more modern Beretta, the 38A which became a favourite with the Allies. There were large numbers of Fiat 14 and 14/35 6.5mm LMGs in service, also the 6.5mm Breda modello 30. The official side arm was the bayonet (various types) but there was also a combination bayonet/entrenching tool and a combat dagger – the official side arm of the Fascist Militia.

### **THE AMERICAN SOLDIER**

Probably the best dressed combat troops in North Africa were the GIs of the American divisions, whose uniform was designed to give plenty of freedom of movement. Items such as the short weatherproof jacket was scarcely a 'garment of beauty' but it allowed them to walk in the easy stooping gait to which they were accustomed. The hot

weather service uniforms, which consisted of shirt and trousers, were made of a light tan or khaki drill material known as 'chino'. Their personal equipment, such as mess tins, water bottles, rubber-soled boots, woollen underclothes and windbreakers, was superior to the British equivalents and their uniforms in general were made of finer stuff. The Garand M1 rifle and the officer's carbine were regarded as the best small arms in use. SMGs included the new M1A1 version of the familiar Thompson, which dispensed with the front pistol grip and had a 20/30-round box magazine instead of the old 50-round drum; the lighter M3 was also .45in calibre, with a maximum range of about 100 yards. Fire was automatic only but an experienced operator could squeeze off single shots. The GIs certainly had excellent gear but the Pentagon did not get everything right. They had not supplied the 'Torch' force with any wet- or cold-weather gear. The nights in Tunisia, once the sun had gone down, were bitterly cold, so



GIs listening to news from home. They wear a splendid mixture of uniform and headgear. Only one wears ammunition pouches and carries his rifle. (IWM — NA 2428)



Two sergeants from different armies – on the left in BD is a Britisher from Monty's Eighth Army, while on the right is a GI from US II Corps. The difference in uniform and equipment is very apparent. (IWM – NA 1821)

everyone wore whatever they could find – sweaters, knitted caps, gloves and, where possible, greatcoats. The GIs quickly adopted the casual style of dress of the British in the desert, so, for example, when not directly under fire, steel helmets were never worn; instead the olive drab wool cap – known as the ‘beanie’ and designed to be worn under the helmet – became the most favoured headgear – but not with Gen Patton! One can imagine how he reacted to sloppy dressing and the ‘beanie’ became the symbol of slovenly attire in the II Corps area, his dress orders being rigorously enforced. Fines for being improperly dressed went up to \$50 for officers and \$25 for enlisted men. ‘When you hit their pocketbooks,’ he used to say, ‘you get a quick response.’

#### *PERSONAL EQUIPMENT*

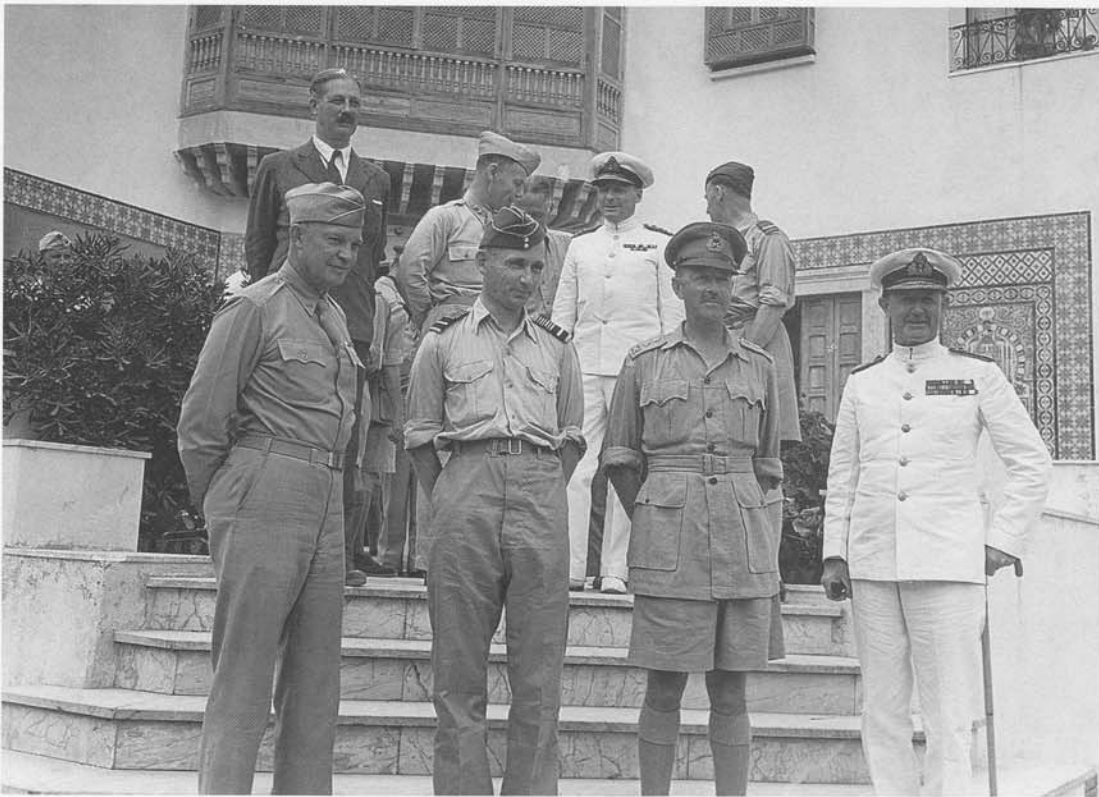
Basic webbing was worn by all enlisted men (and the majority of officers) in combat and consisted of a broad webbing belt which was fastened in front (cf: British equivalent) by a blackened metal fastener. The cartridge or magazine belt had five thin webbing pouches on each side of the buckle (each held a clip of rifle ammunition), a first aid pouch and a canteen. Officers and tank crews wore a pistol belt for the big





American tankmen, posed in front of an M3 Medium Tank. They give a good idea of the mixture of uniforms worn — note items such as the much sought-after zippered windcheater, the composition crash helmet and the one-piece olive drab overalls and steel helmets worn by most of the group. (Real War Photos — A 1150A)





Senior Navy, Army and Air Force officers, photographed after the Axis surrender, provide good examples of both nations' tropical dress — from Ike's 'chinos' to Alex's shorts! (IWM — CNA 1075)

Colt .45 cal and two magazines. Both belts had plenty of metal eyelets top and bottom so that extra items could be attached.

### THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

Inevitably the soldiers of one army took a liking to items of dress, weapons and equipment of another — witness Rommel's liking for British anti-gas goggles to keep the sand out of his eyes. Perhaps this quotation from a German soldier's desert diary says it all:

The night passed quietly. We obtained further things from Tommy's supply dump and slowly made ourselves become Tommies, our vehicles, petrol, rations and clothing were all English. I was somewhat international too with Italian shoes, French trousers, German coat and hat, English linen, stockings, gloves and blankets. A soldier's life is fine! Devoured everything, put on new linen and had some rest. Tommy, this is our revenge for the things you have done to us! Breakfasted off two tins of milk, a tin of pineapple, biscuits and Ceylon tea.

## APPENDIX TWO

### MAIN ARMoured FIGHTING VEHICLES USED IN THE DESERT WAR BY ALLIED AND AXIS FORCES

#### Armoured Cars

##### British

<i>Type</i>	<i>Wt (tons)</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Armament</i>	<i>armour (max)</i>	<i>max speed (mph)</i>	<i>range (miles)</i>
Rolls-Royce	3.8	4	1 x MG	9mm	50mph	150 miles
Morris CS9/LAC	4.2	4	1 x Boys atk rifle	7mm	45mph	240 miles
			1x MG			
Marmon Harrington Mk I-IV (South Africa)			variety of weapons mounted incl captured German (37mm) and Italian (47mm); original weapons were Boys atk rifle and MG, while Mk IV had a 2pdr			
Marmon Harrington Mk IV	6.19	4	1 x 2pdr	12mm	50mph	200 miles

##### German

<i>Type</i>	<i>Wt (tons)</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Armament</i>	<i>armour (max)</i>	<i>max speed (mph)</i>	<i>range (km)</i>
SdKfz 222 (light)	4.8	3	1 x 2cm KwK 30	8mm	85	300
SdKfz 232 (heavy)	8.3	4	1 x 2cm KwK 30	15mm	85	300

#### Tanks

##### British

<i>Type</i>	<i>Wt (tons)</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Main armament</i>	<i>armour (max)</i>	<i>max speed (mph)</i>	<i>range (miles)</i>
Lt Mk VI	5.24	3	1 x Hy MG	14mm	35	130
Cruiser A9	12.8	6	1 x 2pdr	14mm	25	150
Cruiser A10	14.15	5	1 x 2pdr	30mm	16	100
			(or 3.7in how in CS model)			
Cruiser A13	14	4	1 x 2pdr	14mm	30	90
Cruiser A13 Mk II	14.75	4	1 x 2pdr	30mm	30	90
			(or 3.7in how in CS model)			
Matilda Mk II	26.5	4	1 x 2pdr	78mm	15	160
Valentine	17	4	1 x 2pdr/6pdr or 75mm	65mm	15	90
Churchill	40	5	1 x 6pdr or 75mm	152mm	15	88

(NA version especially for North Africa)

**American tanks** (used by both British and American forces)

<i>Type</i>	<i>Wt (tons)</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Main armament</i>	<i>armour (max)</i>	<i>max speed (mph)</i>	<i>range (miles)</i>
M3 Light1	2.23 tons	4	1 x 37mm	37mm	36	70
M3 Medium	26.9 tons	6	1 x 75mm and 1 x 37mm	57mm	26	120
M4 Medium	29.7 tons	5	1 x 75mm	76mm	24	120

**German**

It is not worth including details of the tiny PzKpfw I, or even the light PzKpfw II, as neither were any better armed than their tiny Allied equivalents. Until the arrival of the American M3 Medium (Grant/Lee) and the M4 Medium (Sherman), Allied armour was hopelessly outgunned by the more heavily armed panzers, known as 'Specials'. Examples are the improved PzKpfw III Ausf H with its KwK L/42 5cm gun and the PzKpfw IV Ausf F2 with its KwK L/43 long-barrelled 7.5cm. The PzKpfw VI Tiger with its 88mm gun made its appearance in December 1942, but was never there in sufficient numbers to make a major impact, unlike the 8.8cm Flak/anti-tank gun which was probably the most feared and most effective anti-tank gun of the war.

<i>Type</i>	<i>Wt (tons)</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Main armament</i>	<i>armour (max)</i>	<i>max speed (mph)</i>	<i>range (km)</i>
PzKpfw III Ausf H	21.8	5	1 x KwK L/42 5cm gun and 2 x MG34	37	40	165
PzKpfw IV Ausf F2	23	5	1 x KwK 40 L/43 7.5cm gun and 2 x MG34	50	40	200

**Italian**

<i>Type</i>	<i>Wt (tons)</i>	<i>Crew</i>	<i>Armament</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Tankette		2	1 or 2 x MG	to accompany infantry
CV 3/33 etc	3.2			
L6/40	6.8	2	20mm gun and 2 x MGs	light tank
M11/39	11	3	37mm gun and 2 x MGs	medium tank
M13/40	14	4	47mm gun and 2 x MGs	medium tank

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There are many, many books on the campaigns in North Africa during the Second World War, covering every facet and nuance of the fighting that took place there between 1940 and 1943. I have shown here only those to which I have made reference in my text. For the new reader, the most comprehensive, lucid and easy to follow account of all the campaigns is, in my opinion, that of the late General Sir William Jackson. GF

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\* Some years after its original publication, Field Marshal Montgomery's two books *El Alamein to the River Sangro* and *Normandy to the Baltic* were republished in one volume by the Arcadia Press with Barrie & Jenkins in the early 1970s.

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