

THE CONQUEST OF NORTH AFRICA



PRICE TWO SHILLINGS

CHAPTER V

The Swinging Pendulum: Wavell—Auchinleck—Rommel

WE left General Wavell and the Army of Egypt on February 9, 1941, at the conclusion of their victorious advance from Sidi Barrani on the Egyptian coast to Benghazi on the west coast of the Gulf of Sirte. They had conquered all Cyrenaica and the eastern section of Libya. British defence of Greece began on February 15, 1941; the Cretan campaign ended on June 1, 1941, when we were forced to evacuate the island.

What had happened meanwhile during this interval in Libya, where in February we seemed to be well on the way to Tripoli and the capture of all Italian North Africa? Something very disappointing, a serious setback, which, however inevitable in the larger Near-East strategy, meant the deferment of the conquest of North Africa for another two years.

The effort needed for the Greek campaigns had, as we have already seen, greatly weakened General Wavell's strength in the field. Not only had he been obliged to provide from his own troops the divisions sent to Greece, but he had further supplied 17,000 men for the defence of Crete. Yet still further calls on his possible reserves in the Nile Valley had now to be sent to Syria and to Iraq, where a German fomented revolt had broken out. The Army of the Middle East being built up for future use in that part of the world, was still more or less in the embryo stage, although reinforcements were being pushed out from England, India and the Dominions with all possible speed. Equally serious was the loss we had suffered in material, the divisions and armoured brigades sent to Greece and Crete having been obliged to leave their heavy equipment in tanks, guns and lorries behind them on their evacuation. And the British fleet, fully occupied in protecting the concentration of Greek troops from the Ionian and Aegean Islands, had few ships to spare in the Central Mediterranean except for cover given to the land forces along the African coast by an inshore squadron.

So the Axis High Command seized the opportunity to redress the balance of forces in North Africa. Two German armoured divisions, with the bulk of the Afrika Korps, had been sent across the Mediterranean to assist the Italians, who were themselves strongly reinforced from Italy. Marshal Graziani had been relieved of his command by Mussolini and has not been heard of since. The new Axis commander, soon to prove a redoubtable enemy, was the German General Rommel, who had commanded one of the victorious German divisions against the French in 1940 and was already a veteran of tank warfare. Rommel was a very

different type of General from Graziani. He was an exponent of modern tactics, bold and audacious, a leader always in the front line with his men and urging them on, quick to seize and exploit the slightest tactical advantage.

Not only had General Wavell's position been weakened by the withdrawal of his tried troops, but his line of communications for serving the advance lines had been dangerously extended. The railway line along the coast which the engineers had already begun to construct was far from complete.

Wavell driven out of Libya: stands on Egyptian Border

There was nothing for us but to withdraw, and General Wavell began this operation on March 28. The evacuation of Benghazi by our troops was announced on April 3, 1941. The units of the 2nd Armoured Division which had arrived from England and had taken up positions to guard the western frontier of Cyrenaica were over-run and lost a large proportion of their armour to the German armour, more heavily gunned and speedier than ours. Rapidly the enemy pressed eastward, but General Wavell threw a strong force of the remaining Australian division into Tobruk with orders to hold the town, as Mr. Churchill described it later, "as a hard and heavy prop." For eight months Tobruk withstood every attack, until the day when it could be relieved by General Auchinleck in his advance. (see MAP 5, p. 22).

Despite these tactical successes, it must be admitted that a very serious error of calculation had been made by General Wavell. As he handsomely acknowledged later, he had underestimated the time that would be needed for the Germans to reinforce the Italians with a real striking force. He was now preparing to follow the same policy he had so successfully used at Sidi Barrani of choosing his own time and battleground. During the retreat from Benghazi the British forces had suffered a further loss of a different kind. Generals O'Connor, Neame, and Gambier Parry, while making a detour deep into the desert, to avoid the traffic jams caused by our retiring transport columns, ran into a German motor cycle patrol in the neighbourhood of Mekili and were forced to surrender. The loss of the Corps commanders was serious. The German advance was not made, however, without heavy losses, and the Navy inflicted many of these with its continuous bombardment of the troops advancing along the coast road.

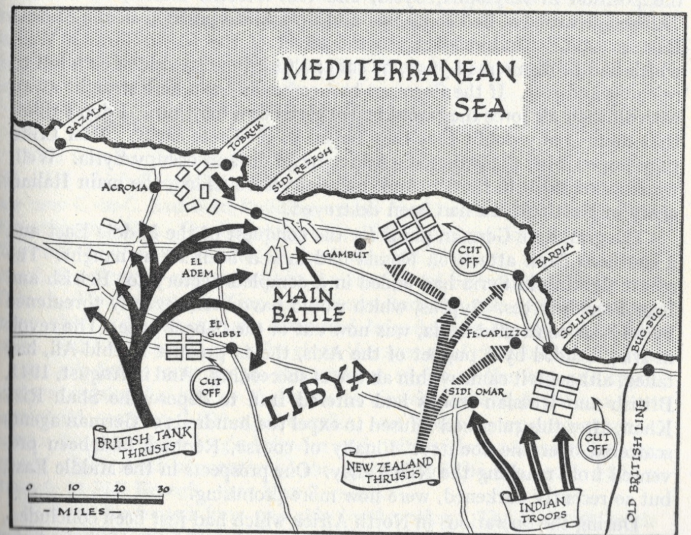
Nevertheless our arms had suffered defeat, and even disaster. Sollum was lost by us on April 28, and a few days later Rommel, flushed with victory, was hammering at the gates of Egypt. The causes of our reverse were complex. But high among them must be placed, in addition to the initial miscalculation of the time needed for German reinforcements to arrive, an under-calculation of the quality of our new enemy. Graziani and his forces, enormous as had been their superiority in men and material, could in no regard be compared with the Afrika Korps, its formidable commander and its highly trained troops. Also the armour used by the Germans was vastly superior to that used either by the Italians or by

ourselves, tanks of 36 tons being thrown against our positions in Cyrenaica.

Our retreat, as always in British history, had its redeeming and heroic moments. One of these was the brilliant raid made on the port of Bardia on the night of April 19/20, 1941. This daring exploit involved the destruction of an important bridge, the blowing up of very considerable stores, and a number of coastal and defence guns which we had been obliged to leave behind when evacuating the town a few days earlier. In spite of Axis claims that the landing party was annihilated the effort was entirely successful and of the considerable body of men engaged only sixty failed to respond at the roll-call on board the ships which took them off.

At the very door of Egypt, Rommel unaccountably failed to make use of his superior power. On May 15, 1941, Sollum was recaptured by us after heavy fighting, but Halfaya Pass and Fort Capuzzo remained in enemy hands. Sollum had now changed hands four times in eight months. Repeated attempts were made to drive us out of Tobruk, but the garrison steadfastly held on. On occasions the heavy tanks of the enemy made inroads into our outer line of defences, but on each occasion they were strongly counter-attacked and thrown back.

The reasons for Rommel's delay in pushing forward into Egypt are not clear. Probably, sure of ultimate victory and believing that time was on his side, he was waiting for the concentration of large forces behind his advance lines for making the decisive move to capture the Suez Canal.



MAP 7.—Auchinleck's stiffly opposed advance reached its victorious climax at the battle of Sidi Rezegh.

In spite of the delay caused by the campaigns in Greece, there was still just time for a combined Axis offensive through Asia Minor and Russia to have succeeded, if Rommel had been able to win through. In the middle of June, therefore, General Wavell began a limited delaying offensive which forced Rommel to disclose the strength and quality of the armour which he had secretly brought up. This minor offensive entirely succeeded in its object.

At this point there were dramatic changes in the High Command. On July 1, 1941, General Wavell changed positions with General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief in India, General Sir Alan Cunningham became commander of the Army of the Western Desert, and General Maitland Wilson, who had commanded the expeditionary force in Greece, was appointed C.-in-C. of the newly formed army of the Middle East. It was not until November that the Army of the Western Desert was officially styled the Eighth Army, a title under which it was to win immortal renown.

Causes of Setback and some Compensating Advantages

Before relinquishing his appointment in Cairo General Wavell addressed correspondents on the alternating set-backs and successes in the Middle East. He pointed out that it had always been a question of equipment. The troops had fought well with what equipment they had, but it was doubtful whether they would ever have enough. Summing up the position in Abyssinia, Syria, and the Western Desert, he added: "Although we have had some ups and downs the position in the Middle East is solid." And referring to the effect of the Russo-German War, which had broken out in June, he said: "Chiefly it has given us a lull to re-equip and rest. If the Germans had come on down here straight away with all their air force they would have given us a hard time. I don't think that there is any doubt that they hoped to get Crete easily. After Crete they hoped with their air force intact to go on and occupy Syria. Well, we stopped them in that." And, he might have added, the main Italian army in North Africa had been destroyed.

The grandiose German plans for the conquest of the Middle East and a southern flank attack on Russia had indeed been set at naught. The severe fighting in Syria had ended in a complete victory for British and Free French forces. Cyprus, which would have been severely threatened by an Axis-controlled Syria, was now out of the danger zone. The revolt in Iraq, headed by a puppet of the Axis, the ex-premier Rachid-Ali, had failed, although it came within an ace of succeeding. And in August, 1941, British and Russian troops had entered Iran to depose the Shah Riza Khan, after this ruler had refused to expel the hundreds of German agents scattered over the country. Finally of course, Rommel had been prevented from reaching the Nile Valley. Our prospects in the Middle East, but so recently darkened, were now more promising.

During the operations in North Africa which had just been concluded, the spirited defence of Tobruk had commanded the admiration of the free world. General Morshead, the able Australian commander, believed

implicitly the old adage that attack is the best defence. He ordered continual sorties by the garrison. Tank-hunting parties were organised for the purpose of obtaining identification of enemy units and inflicting casualties. These sorties were not confined to the perimeter of the fortress but often took our men several miles into the enemy lines, in spite of continuous dive-bombing from the air. The little ships kept up a non-stop service and kept the garrison supplied with water, ammunition and food. As the siege wore on the whole of the garrison was gradually changed, and for the last few months a Polish brigade took part in this heroic defence.

At this time the newly trained Commandos had also arrived in the Mediterranean, and men of the Scottish Commando had been attached to the Eighth Army. Early in November, 1941, they were detailed for a blow at Rommel's headquarters. A party of fifty men and six officers were taken by the submarines *Torbay* and *Talisman*, and landed on the African coast. The party divided into four. One was to attack General Rommel's headquarters at Beda Littorio, the second to assault the Italian headquarters at Cyrene, the third the Italian Intelligence Centre at Apollonia, and the fourth was responsible for the destruction of the telephone and telegraph lines of communications. The success of No. 1 party was nearly complete, although it found Rommel absent, attending a conference in Rome. Three of his Lieutenant-Colonels were killed and many of the guard. It was in hand-to-hand fighting on this raid that Lieutenant-Colonel Keyes, son of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes, lost his life. The members of his party wandered in the desert for 41 days and finally rejoined the British Forces on their entry into Cyrene. Owing to rough weather the British submarines detailed to meet them had been unable to put inshore. This was the only party to return.

Auchinleck plans Counter-offensive; Relief of Tobruk

This Commando raid had been planned as a prelude to the general offensive which General Auchinleck was now contemplating. For months our new C.-in-C. had been building up his forces and armour behind the Egyptian frontier. On November 18, 1941, he went into action on a fifty-mile front from Sollum to Jarabub. His plan was to contain and smash the German armour within the triangle of Sollum, Sidi Omar and Tobruk. This meant dividing his armour, but the risk of the Germans being able to knock out our armoured brigades one by one had to be taken, if the enemy was not to be given the open road right back to Tripoli.

A tank battle now began, the greatest so far of the war, and raged without ceasing for just on three weeks, swaying to and fro over a vast battlefield covering 1,200 square miles, and breaking up into separate battles fought out by single brigades and units with the utmost ferocity, among which must be mentioned the epic fight of the 5th South African Brigade at Sidi Rezegh. (see MAP 7, p. 31).

Fortune fluctuated from one side to the other. The Germans made one dangerous break-through, thrusting a corridor deep into the British front, but a mobile defence, organised on the spot, stopped them and they

were forced to withdraw. In the middle of the battle the command of the Eighth Army again changed hands. General Cunningham, the victor of Abyssinia, who had fallen ill, was replaced by a younger officer, Major-General Ritchie.

Our operations continued with varying fortunes, but after much hard fighting one at least of our immediate objectives, the relief of Tobruk—by far the most important—was attained on December 8, 1941. The enemy positions at Bardia and Halfaya had been by-passed for later reduction.

British advance from Sollum to Gazala and El Agheila

General Auchinleck's battle plans had not been uniformly successful, but the courage, tenacity and determination of the Allied troops at last wore down the enemy's often more skilfully contrived opposition. Another fierce battle was fought at Gazala, after which the enemy began to break and was driven in considerable confusion into the low hills of the Mekili area, back to Agedabia and finally once again to El Agheila. Here Rommel found that stores and tanks had been landed on the beach to await him, and fresh reinforcements had come through from Tripoli.

The British advance forces were now at the end of an extremely long line of communications which it had been quite impossible in the time at Auchinleck's disposal to organise properly. They had the task of holding Rommel at bay and at the same time of reducing the Axis forces left behind on the coast at Bardia and Halfaya. These were in a hopeless position and were shortly reduced to surrender.

But on neither side in this ding-dong, pendulum-like war had fortune come to stay. As in 1941 and 1940, the year 1942 was to see many extraordinary reverses and counter-strokes before victory could be decided. On January 27, 1942, Rommel felt himself strong enough to jump forward again. His men were rested, and his armour had been very heavily reinforced. He pushed aside the light British covering forces and struck at Benghazi. There he narrowly failed to trap the 7th Indian Brigade, but he did make a haul of static troops. General Auchinleck had given orders to withdraw, always fighting, and by early February we had formed a front line near Gazala. Rommel had not sufficient forces with him to deliver a proper punch and the front remained inviolate for some months. Once again our campaign had proved disappointing, but again it had not been entirely without redeeming features. Tobruk had been relieved and the railway from Egypt had been advanced almost to its neighbourhood, allowing troops and stores to be brought direct from the Nile Valley to the scene of advanced action. (see MAP 1, inside front cover).

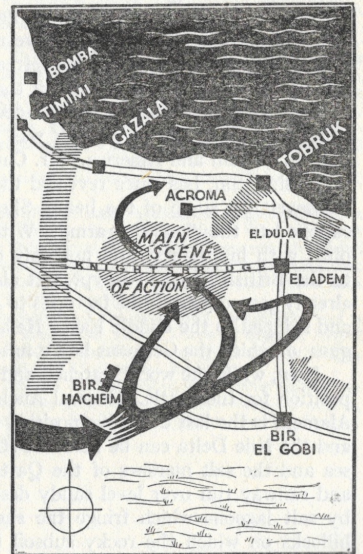
It was not until May 26, 1942, four months later, that Rommel continued his offensive. He was now greatly superior in heavy tanks, and had received a new anti-tank gun of much heavier calibre than ours. The southern end of the British line was held by the Fighting French at Bir Hakeim. Rommel, with two Panzer divisions, began by outflanking the Fighting French troops—most of them old Foreign Legionnaires—but east of the line his Panzers were met and held by an Indian Motor Brigade.

Bir Hakeim itself was assaulted by an Italian mobile column, which was beaten off. The next day, May 27, the battle spread to the Gazala sector, where the South Africans held their own.

Checked north and south, Rommel found a way out by breaching the minefield, which extended the whole length of the front from Gazala to Bir Hakeim, first on the Trigo Capuzzo and again 10 miles further south at El Ualeb. The R.A.F. now came gallantly into action, and tried to close with aerial bombing and machine-gunning the gaps in the minefields. By the night of May 31, however, Rommel had been able to withdraw, after very heavy losses, much of his armour. *Axis tank losses at this moment were estimated at 260.*

Fighting at the gaps still continued and on June 2 it was announced that the enemy had forced a bridgehead from Bir Ucheida to the crossing of the Acroma Road and the Trigo el Abd, and had pushed our forces back between the gaps. In the battle area around Knightsbridge, 12 miles south of Acroma, it was reckoned that in spite of the enormous number of vehicles destroyed by the R.A.F., Rommel still possessed over 2,000 motor vehicles. This area became known to our troops as "The Cauldron," and for the next few days it boiled with never-abating fury. There had been a moment at the beginning of the month when Rommel, in difficulties over his supplies, had fought himself to a standstill. "Had we been able," General Auchinleck wrote later, "to take advantage of the enemy's condition we might have turned the scale. In point of fact we were equally exhausted, and this was impossible." On June 3 the enemy succeeded in overrunning the 150th Brigade, and General Ritchie's counter-attack, at first successful, was itself swamped with very considerable losses. (see MAP 8, p. 35).

On June 10 the garrison of Bir Hakeim, which had put up a magnificent resistance, was withdrawn. "Three days later," says Auchinleck, "the British forces were forced to evacuate positions in 'The Cauldron' and open the way for the enemy to break through to the coast and to try to cut off the South African and 50th Divisions in their positions south of Gazala." These forces had to be with-



MAP 8.—This pictures Rommel's victory of "The Cauldron" at "Knightsbridge," which forced Auchinleck to retreat to Egypt.

drawn. On June 16 the Germans announced that the great battle had been decided in their favour. Tobruk was encircled on June 19 and fell the next day, the attack being led by Rommel in person. British prisoners taken in Tobruk numbered 28,000, making a total of 45,000 in the whole campaign. Our losses in dead and wounded were also very heavy, and the armoured divisions had been actually destroyed.

Rommel was now naturally jubilant, and on this occasion he lost no time in exploiting his victory. On June 25 it was announced that we had evacuated Sollum and Sidi Omar. The enemy crossed in three main columns between Sidi Omar and Maddalena. By June 30 he had reached the coast beyond Fuka, and at dawn on July 1 a major battle was engaged east of El Daba, when an Axis column of over 3,000 tanks and lorries, comprising the whole of Rommel's armoured forces, moved against the southern end of the British positions at El Alamein.

Auchinleck makes a Stand at Alamein

It was here, on a line running from Arabs Gulf to the Qattara Depression, that General Auchinleck had decided to make a stand. The issues at stake were clearly enormous. The peril to Egypt was imminent. A couple of days' march east of Alamein would take Rommel into Alexandria. Already the impressionable Italians in that cosmopolitan city were streaming out to greet the victor. Mussolini, it was said, had already donned the festal uniform in which he would make his long-awaited entry into Cairo. But Rommel had overrun his destiny. The R.A.F. had splendidly covered Auchinleck's retreat, and in spite of the power of the Luftwaffe, was now paramount in the air.

As the preparations for the all-decisive encounter at El Alamein were being made, the fall of Tobruk was being severely and bitterly judged both in Britain and America. Mr. Churchill, who heard the painful news in Washington, has since revealed that he immediately asked President Roosevelt for some of the heavy Sherman tanks which were just being supplied to the American army. Without hesitation the President complied with his request and not only ordered these tanks to be supplied to the British Army in Egypt, but also ordered that a number of them, already gone out from the factories to American forces, should be collected and shipped to the Middle East. He also sent a useful quantity of mobile guns, of which the Germans had a full supply, but which we entirely lacked.

Now, while the world watched and waited, the two armies moved into position for the battle. General Auchinleck had chosen his ground well. Alamein is the last defensive position on the west from which Alexandria and the Nile Delta can be held. It stretches for forty miles between the sea and the salt marshes of the Qattara Depression. The coastal road and railway run over level sandy desert ledges bounded on the sea side by salt lagoons which fringe the shore. In the centre are ridges and hillocks on which the rocky subsoil breaks through the thin veneer of sand, and then falls away in a sheer cliff to the Depression. South of the Depression begins the great Sand Sea. The position is therefore vulnerable only to frontal attack.

Undeterred by the failure of his first quick attack on this naturally strong position on June 30, 1942 Rommel threw the Littorio Division against the northern sector of this line. The northern sector was held by a South African brigade newly arrived on the front. The southern sector was held by the battle-worn troops of the 4th Indian Division, who had covered themselves with glory in the advance and the retreat. During the night the Germans, attacking in the south, overran an Indian strong point, and the C.-in-C. thought he had broken through. The German High Command announced to the world that Rommel was "pursuing the beaten British into the Nile Delta."

Actually this was the end of Rommel's success. He was furiously counter-attacked, and towards nightfall began his withdrawal. For several days the battle waged to and fro, but the vital position was held and the first Battle of El Alamein had been won. Future historians may look upon this as one of the decisive battles of the war. During the following months we improved our positions slightly, but the enemy was in too great force to be thrown definitely back by anything less than large-scale operations. On the other hand, he could not move forward. Alexandria and the Nile Valley were saved, and our whole Near East position remained intact and impregnable.

BRITISH UNITS IN THE BATTLE OF EGYPT.

Life Guards, Royal Horse Guards, Queen's Bays, Royal Dragoons, Scots Greys, 3rd, 4th, 8th, 10th, 11th Hussars, 9th and 12th Lancers, Derbyshire Yeomanry, Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, County of London Yeomanry, Staffordshire Yeomanry, Nottinghamshire Yeomanry, Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, Warwickshire Yeomanry, Yorkshire Dragoons, Honourable Artillery Company, Essex Yeomanry, Lancashire Hussars, Norfolk Yeomanry, Northumberland Hussars, Leicestershire Yeomanry, West Kent Yeomanry, Denbighshire Yeomanry, Surrey Yeomanry, Sussex Yeomanry, Caernarvon Yeomanry, Cheshire Yeomanry, North Somersetshire Yeomanry, and South Northamptonshire Yeomanry. (All armoured and mechanised.)

Many units of the Royal Tank Regiment, including those from Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool and Oldham.

The Queen's Royal Regiment, The Buffs, East Yorkshire Regiment, Green Howards, Cheshire Regiment, Royal Sussex Regiment, Black Watch, Essex Regiment, Sherwood Foresters, Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, Middlesex Regiment, King's Royal Rifle Corps, Durham Light Infantry, Seaforth Highlanders, Gordon Highlanders, Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Rifle Brigade and Royal Northumberland Fusiliers.

The United Kingdom contingent included all the armoured formations and a large part of the Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers, Royal Corps of Signals, Royal Army Service Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Corps of Military Police, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

The above list includes only units from the United Kingdom. Other units were also at the battle, but the names have not been issued. There were, of course, divisions from South Africa, New Zealand, the 4th Indian Division, the 9th Australian Division, Fighting French and Greeks.

CHAPTER VI

The Triumph of the Eighth Army

ON August 10, 1942, Mr. Churchill arrived in Cairo on his way to visit Premier Stalin in Moscow. He took advantage of this visit to make a second complete overhaul of the High Command and headquarters staff. General Sir Harold Alexander, who had been the last to leave Dunkirk, and who had later commanded the brilliant fighting retreat from Burma, was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, *vice* General Auchinleck. General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery succeeded General Ritchie as head of the Eighth Army. A further appointment which was to have far-reaching effect on the future development of the campaign was the appointment of General Lindsell as head of supplies. At home a section of the public, disheartened by the bad news from Egypt and Russia, clamoured for a second front. The Premier, on his return, challenged the issue in Parliament and was given a vote of confidence by a very large majority. In giving his instructions to the Generals at Cairo Mr. Churchill had told them that on no account were they to allow themselves to be influenced by this popular clamour.

General Rommel made one more attempt to break through our line, and on August 30, 1942, actually succeeded in piercing the lightly defended southern section at the Ruweisat Ridge. He made for the coast, trying to bring our armour to battle. The bait was refused, however, and three days later he was forced to retire after heavy losses with little or nothing to compensate for them. The second battle of El Alamein was ours.

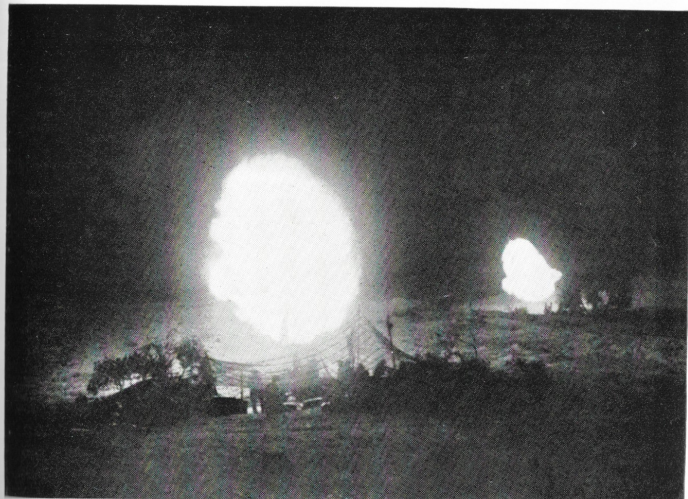
For the next six weeks the position remained static. General Alexander was training his divisions, which had been reinforced by South African and three fresh divisions from Britain. The heavy Sherman tanks were arriving from America and the new six-pounder anti-tank gun was there in quantities. Hundreds of bomber and fighter aircraft arrived from overseas. The 25-pounder field gun was supplied in such quantities that General Montgomery's offensive, when it opened, began with a barrage of these guns spaced only 23 yards apart along a six-mile front.

Meanwhile Rommel had troubles of his own. He was badly in need of reinforcements, which Hitler was unable or unwilling to send. Accordingly he went to Berlin to urge his demand in person, arguing that if the required reinforcements were supplied he could crush the Allied forces at El Alamein and win the Nile Valley. Twenty days before the Eighth Army attacked he boasted at a reception given in his honour in Berlin: "We hold the gateway to Egypt with the full intention to act. We did not go there with any intention of being flung back sooner or later. You may rely on our holding fast to what we have got." He got his way and



War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

Wire is the bugbear of the infantryman, and the Axis forces made good use of it in the Western Desert. British troops are here seen negotiating strong wire obstacles.



War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

The Mareth Line Battle opened with a terrific day and night shelling on March 20, 1943, by the heavy guns of the Eighth Army. This photograph gives some idea of the intensity of the night firing.



War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

This is the way mechanised warfare works in the desert. Infantry, transported in carriers, approach an escarpment.



War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

A desert convoy gets through in the Libya battle area : motorised infantry moving up to the front in well-scattered vehicles.



War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

During the Eighth Army's victorious drive many German tanks were taken at the point of the bayonet. Here such a surrender is illustrated.



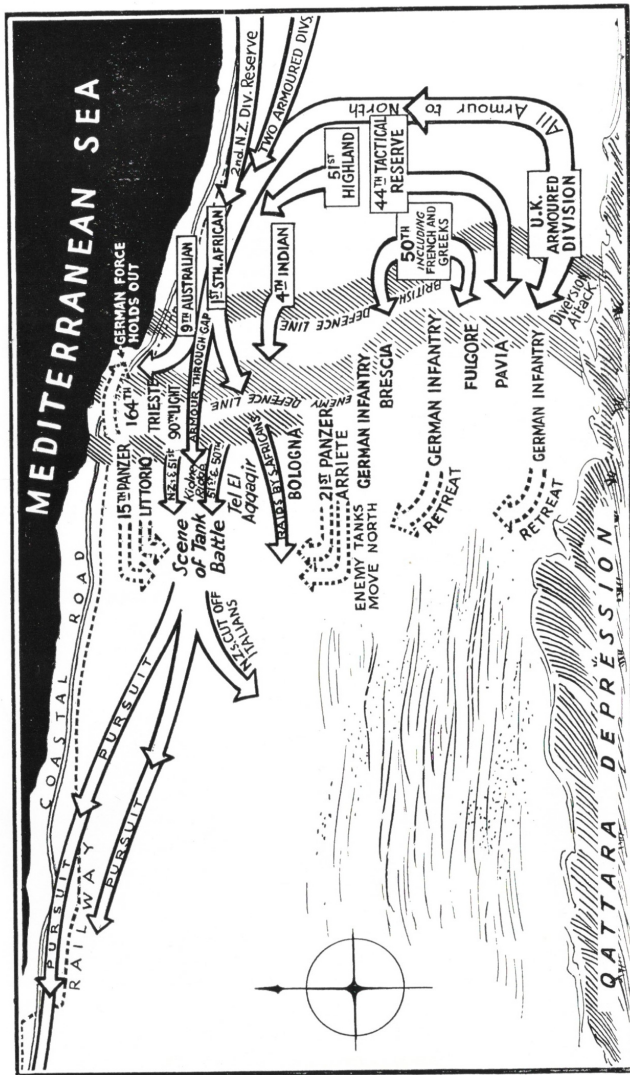
War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

British infantry, tommy guns ready, and supported by tanks, moving up to the battle front in the Alamein area.



War Office Photo—Crown Copyright reserved

The Eighth Army crosses the Tunisian frontier : tanks entering Ben-Gardane, a small town 20 miles inside the border on the afternoon of February 15, 1943.



MAP 9.—This illustrates the disposition of the Allied and Axis forces at the Battle of Alamein. The white arrows indicate the thrusts made by the Eighth Army, the dotted arrows the line of retreat followed by the enemy.

reinforcements of men and munitions were sent to him, and, to complete his satisfaction, Hitler made him a Field Marshal.

But it was evident that the initiative was falling again into Allied hands, and that great events might be shortly expected. From October 9, 1942, the R.A.F. began a massive and unprecedented bombing of Axis bases behind the enemy lines, an air offensive which was kept up night and day without pause for fourteen days and then on through the course of the battle of Alamein. This was described by a German war correspondent in the following words: "We have never seen such a picture. We have known the British mainly as night fliers, but now they come in the day, in impressive numbers and with formidable protection. For days now the enemy's bomber squadrons have come over in parade formation without deviating an inch and surrounded by swarms of fighters which hover in the air like bees." At the same time, to cripple Rommel's supply bases in Italy, the R.A.F. started a series of crushing raids from Britain on Italian industrial and shipping centres—Genoa, Turin, Milan, Naples.

Alamein, the most critical Battle of North Africa

On October 23, 1942, the battle was joined. Rommel had placed his armour more or less equally divided on the north and south extremities of his line, behind minefields which as usual were strengthened with strong points and anti-tank emplacements. The greater part of the German infantry were in the north and the Italian infantry, stiffened with a strong admixture of Germans, were in the south. The centre, the bait, was weakly held by the Italian Bologna Division. General Montgomery spread his army more evenly, with Australians on the coast, South African and Indian troops in the centre, and the 51st Highland Division with the Greeks and Fighting French towards the end of the line. A British armoured division was ready to make a diversion at the extreme south. The 2nd New Zealand Division and two armoured divisions were held in reserve fifty miles east in the Delta. (see MAP 9, p. 42).

When the battle opened, the Highlanders were moved north behind the lines to wait the right moment. The reserve divisions, leaving behind them an exact simulacrum of their camp and tanks in the Delta, moved up almost immediately behind the line.

It is a curious comment on the third battle of El Alamein that General Montgomery's victory was largely due to Marshal Rommel himself. He had advanced to, and consistently held, a position which could not be outflanked. If he was defeated on this position it meant complete disaster. It has been suggested that Rommel had been forbidden by Hitler to withdraw from this position when he saw an offensive in preparation. If this is correct, Hitler then sacrificed Rommel, as later he sacrificed his army outside Stalingrad. An alternative hypothesis is that the always arrogant Rommel, although aware of the danger, was reluctant, after his boasts in Berlin, to do anything which looked like a retreat; and thus brought disaster on himself.

Rommel had so arranged his order of battle as to invite Montgomery to strike at the weak centre of his line. He would then have attempted to

crush our forces between his two Panzer divisions closing in from north and south. But Montgomery was not to be caught. He attacked in the north, throwing the Australians against the strongest part of the Axis line. The plan was for the infantry to make a break-through and tanks to come through to smash the German Panzer divisions.

The battle opened with a terrific barrage at 9.30 p.m. on October 23. At 10 p.m. our infantry advanced under a brilliant moon, and by 5.30 in the morning were four miles west of the enemy minefields on a front of six miles. During the next days this breach had to be widened and deepened until the head was on the far side of the Axis defences, allowing a clear passage for our armoured forces.

For six days the Axis forces counter-attacked furiously, but every attack was held by our artillery and infantry. On November 6, when brigades from the 50th, 51st and New Zealand divisions had pushed the nose of the salient three miles further west, the break-through was complete. Seven hundred planes had carried out a terrific bombing of enemy airfields and lines of communication. Behind the lines concentrations of troops and guns were strafed and valuable reconnaissance work was carried out. In conjunction with our submarines, our aircraft pounded enemy shipping in the Mediterranean with the result that four-fifths of the supplies for Rommel's forces were sunk. The enemy air force was practically non-existent—as later we advanced into Cyrenaica we found 550 enemy aircraft destroyed or grounded on their airfields.

Montgomery breaks through, Axis Armour destroyed

During the first ten days of the battle sappers cleared the minefields which are the principal traps on modern battlefields. Unlike the battles earlier in the year, in this we had now no shortage of tanks. Manned by famous cavalry and yeomanry regiments and the Royal Tank Corps, Crusaders from Britain and General Grants and Shermans from U.S.A. went into battle against the Axis armoured corps, which had already suffered during the abortive counter-offensives.

On November 2 the great tank battle of El Aqqaqir began. It raged for just about ten hours, by which time the Axis tank formations were for all practical purposes destroyed. By clever tactics Montgomery had forced the enemy to mass his armour in one force to the north of the line, thus dictating to Rommel a frontal assault as the only possible form of counter-attack. The communiqué of November 5 stated that 260 wrecked German and Italian tanks had so far been counted on the battlefield.

The battle of October 23–November 2 was decisive. The German infantry had already begun to retreat during the tank battle and on November 3 the retreat had become definite. Italian divisions on the south wing were abandoned by their German allies, who commandeered all transport from the Italians to get their own men away. The German 164th infantry division was practically wiped out. Among the prisoners were General Ritter von Thoma, commander of the Afrika Korps, and Major Buckhardt, leader of the German paratroops. The German Panzer

divisions which were the basis of Axis power in North Africa had been practically destroyed and could not be replaced.

The third battle of El Alamein was the Battle of Egypt. It cost the enemy 73,000 prisoners, including 8,000 Germans, over 1,000 guns and 500 tanks. Eight days later the Axis forces were once again driven out of Egypt. They tried to make some sort of stand on the Fuka escarpment and again at Bug-Bug. By November 12 the British forces, though hampered in their thundering pursuit by persistent rain, had pushed the last Axis soldier across the frontier.

The first stage of the great advance which was to bring the Eighth Army across Libya to Tunisia had been accomplished. General Montgomery, in an address to his troops on October 23, had told them that they must "hit Rommel for six," meaning that he must be driven right out of the ground, *i.e.*, Africa. Speaking in the House of Commons on November 11, Mr. Churchill revealed that when he passed through Cairo on August 10, he had given directions to General Alexander that the paramount and main duty of the Eighth Army was to attack and destroy at the earliest opportunity the German-Italian army commanded by Field Marshal Rommel, together with all supplies and establishments. "I think," the Prime Minister added, "the General may be soon sending along for fresh instructions."

Axis pursued across Cyrenaica and Tripolitania

There was now no doubt that Rommel had made up his mind to retreat right across Cyrenaica and possibly to make a stand once more at El Agheila, which position had already served him well. But for the torrential rains in the first week of November it is probable that the Afrika Korps would have been completely destroyed inside Egypt. Our pursuing mechanised forces were quagmired, allowing Rommel to keep a moderately safe distance ahead for most of the way across Libya.

The R.A.F. was dominant everywhere. The remnant of the Luftwaffe could no longer stand up to it. At El Daba, General Montgomery was so close on the enemy's heels that he captured 80 additional tanks in good running order and many guns. Derna and Mekili were entered on November 15. By November 19 no fewer than 120 landing grounds had been occupied by us. The Germans made a brief stand between Martuba and Slenta, but were hit hard, leaving in our hands 28 more tanks, 24 guns and nearly 300 lorries, besides much other equipment. Heavy rain still slowed up the pursuit, but Benghazi was entered on November 20. The R.A.F. kept up its bombing well ahead of the advancing Eighth Army, and on November 21 inflicted extremely heavy damage on Tripoli. Agedabia was taken on November 23. A few days previously the Jalo oasis had been occupied by a flying mobile column which had cut across 200 miles of desert and caught the Italians as they were digging in.

Actual fighting in Libya degenerated into rearguard actions as Rommel continued his retreat towards Tripoli. He drew out from El Agheila on December 14 although he had heavily fortified the rising ground at Mersa Brega, 25 miles along the coast towards Agedabia, as well as the

causeway through the salt marshes and other strategic points within an area of 25 square miles. General Montgomery turned the Mersa Brega position on December 13, and this decided Rommel. By December 15 he was on the run again with our forces well west of El Agheila and in hot pursuit. The country here is broken up by numerous wadis leading down to the sea, and might have given Rommel the opportunity of making a serious stand, but beyond desultory rearguard actions and dropping thousands of mines to delay our advance he did nothing but continue his flight.

Italian North Africa completely occupied

By Christmas Day, Sirte was occupied by our forces. The Buerat area was cleared and occupied on January 4, 1943, Zem Zem on January 15, and Misurata, the second largest town of Tripolitania, on January 18. Between January 19 and 23 the defensive triangle formed by Tarhuna, Homs and Tripoli was overrun, and Tripoli itself, the capital of Italian North Africa, was occupied on January 23. The chase was kept up and Zuara, 30 miles from the Tunisian border, was in our hands by January 31. Zelten was occupied on February 2. By February 8 the only Axis troops remaining in Libya were prisoners of war. General Montgomery had carried out the Prime Minister's instructions of August and destroyed the Axis armies and establishments in Egypt and Libya. The last vestige of Mussolini's African Empire had been destroyed. General Alexander on February 8, 1943, sent to Mr. Churchill his famous telegram:

"Sir: The orders you gave me on August 15, 1942, have been fulfilled. His Majesty's enemies, together with their impedimenta, have been completely eliminated from Egypt, Cyrenaica, Libya and Tripolitania. I now await your further instructions."

Meanwhile Fighting French forces had achieved a remarkable exploit in Southern Libya. A strong column under General Leclerc had left Fort Lamy on December 23, 1942, and, in a series of engagements at Oum al Aranem, Brach, Gatrun, Murzuk and Sebha, had routed the Italians, making prisoners of all their garrisons and conquering the whole of the Fezzan. They had then continued their advance through Tachiumet and on January 14, 1943, had made contact with the French forces fighting in Tunisia. In 21 days this gallant column of desert fighters had fought and advanced 2,000 miles—a splendid feat of physical endurance.

In three months to a day the Eighth Army had beaten Marshal Rommel and his Afrika Korps, and chased them 1,350 miles across Africa, inflicting 80,000 casualties, killed wounded and prisoners, captured 500 tanks, 1,000 guns and many thousand transport vehicles with huge quantities of stores. The actual speed of the advance was greater than it appeared, as the army was stationary for three weeks at El Agheila and for seventeen days around Buerat, while General Montgomery prepared his positions and waited for his supply columns and heavy artillery to come up. Marshal Rommel had on his side an army excellently equipped with armour and artillery, men accustomed to desert warfare and buoyed up with continuous victory; men, moreover, well—even expertly—led.

The Battle of Egypt was not the first British victory in land operations during the present war. But it was the first important British victory in land warfare won against the German troops, comprising crack German divisions and commanded by one of Hitler's hitherto unbeaten Marshals. The tactics which made the victory possible were by no means a mere copy of the German tactic of *blitzkrieg* which had brought all Europe to the feet of the *Herrenvolk*. Nor were they, on the other hand, a reversion to the tactics of the war 1914-1918. Two almost wholly new factors made the Battle of Alamein a totally different thing from the Somme, Arras, or Passchendaele. These two new factors were (i) the appearance on both sides of armoured divisions of heavy and medium tanks, and (ii) the possession also by both sides of powerful air forces.

The new tactics which won the Battle of Egypt

The air preparation for the Battle of Alamein was of two kinds. For weeks before it long-range bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft struck at Rommel's supplies. Tankers were sunk, supply ships torpedoed, stores destroyed on the quaysides, and lorries strafed and bombed as they toiled over the desert between Rommel's ports and Alamein. In the days immediately before the battle, the air preparation consisted partly of sustained and terrible attacks upon the enemy's airfields themselves by which the enemy's air forces were steadily brought into subjugation, partly through the destruction of aircraft on the ground, partly by their destruction in combat when they rose to intercept our raiders.

It was the same thing with the tanks. When the 51st Highland, the 44th and 50th U.K., the New Zealand, and the 9th Australian Divisions gradually broke through the northern end of the enemy's line, (a process which took them from October 23 to November 1/2), they opened a gap, and through that gap there poured two United Kingdom Armoured Divisions. Beyond the gap they met the 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions, the very cream of the German armour. At El Aqqaqir the battle was fought out. The Italian Littorio and Arriete Armoured Divisions joined in. Further British armour was thrown forward. After a very severe struggle, in which heavy losses occurred on both sides, the German armour was broken in this great armour-to-armour clash. There had been nothing like it in warfare since the mighty clashes of heavy cavalry in the 17th and 18th centuries. When it was over the enemy was in full retreat, and he became the prey of the other modern equivalent to cavalry, the several hundred miles an hour fighter, fighter-bomber and light bomber aircraft, which pursued him without respite for a thousand miles to the west. Thus our air forces played a triple rôle in the battle. Before it, with the Navy, they struck at Rommel's supplies. During the battle they struck at his actual positions and armour. Finally, after the battle they struck at transport retreating along the coastal road.

Victory at El Alamein, and since, was achieved by the most perfect welding of our sea, land and air forces into one perfect and flexible weapon. The Battle of Alamein and the Alexander-Montgomery advance to Tunisia shattered not only the enemy's forces but many a misconcep-

tion as to the art of modern war. Most descriptions of the German methods of army-air co-operation have been largely imaginary. It has been said that particular squadrons of Stukas and strafing fighters were devoted to particular German divisions or even brigades and battalions, and brought up when particular commanders found resistance in their way which they have wished to have blitzed from the air. That is not the way the Germans did it, and it is certainly not the way Montgomery and Alexander do it. An authoritative pronouncement upon the use of air power by a spokesman of the Eighth Army of the Alamein campaign is as follows :—

“The greatest asset of air power is its flexibility, and this enables it to be switched quickly from one objective to another in the theatre of operations. So long as this is realised, then the whole weight of available air power can be used in selected areas in turn, this concentrated use of the air striking force is a battle-winning factor of the first importance. It follows that control of the available air power must be centralised, and command must be exercised through R.A.F. channels. Nothing could be more fatal to successful results than to dissipate the air resources into small packets placed under command of army formation commanders, with each packet working on its own plan. The soldier must not expect, or wish, to exercise direct command over air striking forces. The commander of any army in the field should have an Air H.Q. with him, which will have direct control and command of such squadrons as may be allotted for operations in support of his army. Such air resources will be in support of his army, and not under his command. But through this Air H.Q. the army commander can obtain the support of the whole of the air striking force in the theatre of operations, because of the flexibility of air power.”

Land, sea and air forces welded into one weapon

Within a very few weeks of this authoritative pronouncement, General Montgomery splendidly demonstrated its soundness. When he wished to break the formidable Mareth Line, and found the job likely to be very difficult and costly if attempted by frontal assault, he sent a flanking force round to El Hamma. To get this force into position, over almost trackless desert, if it was to be equipped with sufficient blitzing power in the way of tanks, artillery, etc., seemed an insoluble problem. The problem was solved, not by allotting a *section* of the desert air force working with the Eighth Army to this particular flanking force, but by the temporary allotment on the critical day of *virtually the whole* of this air force to an overwhelming attack on the German forces defending El Hamma. The success of this air onslaught is now history, and its lesson is being absorbed by every commander.