

THE BATTLE
for
NORTH
AFRICA

El Alamein and the Turning Point for World War II

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MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS



First published by Indiana University Press, 2017

This edition published by Massey University Press, 2017
Private Bag 102904, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland 0745, New Zealand
www.masseypress.ac.nz

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of New Zealand

Printed and bound in the United States

ISBN: 978-0-9941473-0-1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All publications are a team effort. For me, one of the most enjoyable parts of the publishing process is being able to acknowledge the assistance I have received in writing a book and to thank people for their contributions.

I must begin by offering my thanks to Spencer C. Tucker, the initial editor of this series of books. In 2010, Spencer took a great deal of interest in a visiting Fulbright Scholar to the Virginia Military Institute. A friendship developed and it was at Spencer's invitation that I commenced work on this book. I remain immensely grateful for the faith he placed in me and for his ongoing support. Indiana University Press has been delightful to work with and has easily overcome the tyranny of distance in dealing with an author who lives a long way from the USA. Also overcome, but perhaps not so easily in my case, has been the different spellings used in both countries. I also wish to acknowledge the work of Janice Frisch, Peggy Solic, and Ashley Runyon and thank them for their support, efficiency, and sound advice.

The primary source material for this book has been obtained from research institutions in four separate countries. Without fail, the staffs at all these institutions have been friendly, courteous, and helpful. I am deeply indebted to them for their professionalism, assistance, and dedication. I must especially acknowledge Neil Frances and the staff of the Wairarapa Archive in Masterton, New Zealand. Neil and his colleagues searched their photograph collections of the Second World War and provided all the images used in this book. They did not charge for this service and I am grateful for their generosity.

Paul Lumsden produced the excellent maps from his farm near Ward in New Zealand's South Island. As I live in New Zealand's other large island, this process also meant there were problems of distance involved. Thanks to the internet, the rural phone service, and Skype, any problems were easily overcome.

Massey University, New Zealand's defining university, was fully supportive of this project. The University gave me the time to undertake the research and to write this book. Massey University's School of Humanities also provided some financial assistance toward its publication.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and thank my wife, Susan Lemish, for her support and all the work she has put into this book. Susan read all the first drafts twice, assisted with the research, checked all the footnotes and bibliography, and undertook a myriad of other tasks necessary to bring this book to publication. It is not surprising, then, that Susan does not want to hear about the battles of El Alamein for some time now.

Glyn Harper
Palmerston North, New Zealand
January 2017

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INTRODUCTION: THE EYES OF THE WHOLE WORLD, WATCHING ANXIOUSLY

On the evening of October 23, 1942, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery settled in for a good night's sleep. Montgomery later claimed that he retired to his caravan early as was his habit, read a few pages from a novel "and some time after nine o'clock he went to sleep."¹ If this was true, it was a remarkable display of calm, steely resolve and composure given what was at stake. Earlier Montgomery had written a Personal Message to be read to the men of his Eighth Army that morning. Part of his Message read:

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.

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.²

Montgomery was in no doubt that the battle would swing his way. It was part of the reason he claimed to sleep so soundly that night. Earlier he had dined with Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese, his 30 Corps commander. On learning that Leese intended to watch the opening barrage timed for 9:40 p.m. that evening, Montgomery counseled against it. Leese recalled what Montgomery said to him:

My job, he said, was to go to bed early so as to appear fresh in the morning and be able by my appearance to give confidence to the troops. I had then to be on top of my form so as to accept the inevitable shocks of battle; and be able to plan quickly and soundly the next night's attacks. He could not have been more right.³

Montgomery may have been right, but Leese ignored his advice and later moved to a slight ridgeline from which he could observe the opening barrage. It was the largest fired by the British Army in the war up to that time. But Montgomery, despite his claims, was also awake watching the barrage. His Chief of Staff, Brigadier Francis (Freddie) de Guingand, was at a vantage point on the coast road that night and his notes on the battle make it clear that Montgomery was with him.⁴ And Montgomery recorded the event in his diary. The opening barrage was:

a wonderful sight, similar to a Great War 1914/18 attack. It was a still night and very quiet. Suddenly the whole front burst into fire, it was beautifully timed and the effect was terrific; many large fires broke out in enemy gun areas.⁵

This was clearly not the dream of a slumbering army commander. It shows that Montgomery, despite what he wrote later, knew how important this battle was to the Allied war effort and to his own career.

At 9:40 p.m., the artillery barrage opened right on time. The noise from nearly 900 guns was a crescendo of sound that made the air vibrate; the muzzle flashes lit up a cloudless black light. Twenty minutes after this opening barrage, the infantry from five divisions and a Free French brigade crossed their start lines. Montgomery had been correct in his assessment. A turning-point battle of the war had commenced and the eyes of the world were turned to this life-and-death struggle in North Africa.

Twenty minutes after the sound of the guns shredded the night air, the first enemy artillery rounds passed over Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg's forward headquarters. The GOC of the 2nd New Zealand Division had just received news that the "Infantry are off – both bdes [brigades] are away to a good start." General Freyberg turned to his G1, the principal staff officer, and remarked:

If there was ever justice in a cause this is it. I don't think the Itys will stick it and I don't think the Boche will either—they didn't in the last war. . . Auchinleck could have won the war by putting in Blamey instead of Ritchie. Mind you this is going to be a stiff fight.⁶

Freyberg was right, but this had also been anticipated by Montgomery. That day, Montgomery, no stranger to the cost of large-scale set piece battles, had written in his diary a grave reality:

The battle will be expensive as it will really become a killing match. I consider that the dog fight of the “crumbling” operations may last for a week, during which time we shall never let go our stranglehold. I have estimated for 10,000 casualties in this week’s fighting.

All we need now is average luck and good weather.⁷

Both Freyberg and Montgomery were correct. The Eighth Army had a stiff fight ahead in what would become a real “killing match.” But this October battle of El Alamein would be the turning-point military action of the North African campaign. Montgomery’s opponent was the famed Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who commanded Panzerarmee Afrika, the name of his Italian-German desert army from mid-1942. Up until this October battle, Rommel and the Panzerarmee had held the initiative and had dominated this theater of war. The multinational Eighth Army, comprising soldiers from the British Empire and some of Britain’s allies, decisively defeated the Axis opponents during this battle. Freyberg was right in that the Italians and Germans on the Alamein position could not “stick it” against the weight of manpower and materiel wielded against them by an Army commander who demonstrated considerable skill in their use.

While this second battle of Alamein has been praised by some commentators as a great and important victory, it was a battle that never ran to the detailed and careful script Montgomery had prepared. The intense infantry fighting that required soldiers to close with and defeat an entrenched enemy was primarily carried out by just four of the eleven divisions of Eighth Army. The three armored divisions of Eighth Army had mixed performances, and some units demonstrated considerable reluctance to follow Montgomery’s repeated orders to engage with the enemy. While Rommel was defeated on this battlefield, he was able to extricate the remnants of his shattered Panzerarmee Afrika and reconstitute it to fight yet more battles in North Africa. Three times wide encircling movements, described as “left hooks,” almost managed to “bag” the Afrika Korps, Panzerarmee’s main German component. That they failed to do so was the product of excessive caution by the Eighth Army, combined with their faulty tactics and several poor command decisions. The pursuit of the defeated Axis forces after the battle has attracted less attention and considerable criticism than the battle itself.

* * *

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this battle to the British Empire and its people. To date there had been little to celebrate in this war, as by mid-1942 there had been few victories and a string of defeats and disasters. A future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom wrote that the disasters of the first six months of 1942 “marked the lowest point of our fortunes and put the greatest strain upon our morale.”⁸ The United Kingdom had endured much since the start of the war in September 1939, but the “continued misfortunes” of the spring and summer of 1942 “were harder to bear.”⁹ General Harold Alexander recalled that when he arrived in the Middle East in August 1942 to assume command of an army that was baffled and suffering a crisis of morale, “the situation did not look good.” Alexander wrote that on his appointment, “For me the war so far had been nothing but defeats, rearguard actions and efforts to stave off disaster.” But he believed that things would soon change.¹⁰ Alexander was right and both he and Montgomery, the man who by accident had been appointed Eighth Army commander, were primarily responsible for the change in the United Kingdom’s fortunes. The change was sudden, too, and occurred within weeks of both men assuming their respective commands. It was a remarkable transformation. The October Alamein battle was at the heart of this change. It was never a forgone conclusion that the Eighth Army would win this battle, nor did the battle go according to plan. Few battles ever do and this one, so profound in its impact on the Axis and the Allies, never did stick to the script that had been written for it.

Victory at El Alamein in October 1942 saved reputations and established others. According to Stephen Bungay, this battle saved the reputations of both Churchill and the British Army. Churchill was not exaggerating when he wrote that “all our fortunes turn upon the speedy and decisive defeat of Rommel.”¹¹ The British Army at last showed it could beat the German Army in battle, even though that army had been made up largely of Italians. It also affected Churchill’s reputation, enabling him to become “not just the rallier of a nation in defeat but the standard bearer of a nation in victory.”¹² It also firmly established the reputation of the Eighth Army and made its commander famous almost overnight. He was later awarded the impressive title Field Marshal the

Viscount Montgomery of Alamein. After so many disasters and defeats, many of them in the last year in this very theater of war, the October battle of El Alamein “seemed to be a true watershed in Britain’s fortunes during the war.”¹³ Bungay wrote that although “not a very big battle by the standards of the war,” the October Alamein battle was one that Montgomery, Eighth Army, and the British Empire “had to win.”¹⁴

While the October battle of Alamein was an undoubted victory and a turning-point battle, it was not without its controversies. This book examines what happened at El Alamein in October 1942 and its place in the history of the North African campaign and the Second World War. It also looks at the two earlier battles on the El Alamein position. At first, it had been intended to include both these battles in a background chapter. However, as they were both pivotal to what occurred in the final battle at Alamein, more detailed explanations of them was necessary. They have therefore been allocated a separate chapter each.

There were three battles fought on the Alamein position. These earlier battles have often been ignored by military historians, especially the one that occurred in July. This July battle, known now as the First Battle of El Alamein, was a confused and seemingly unconnected series of engagements, but it was this battle that halted Rommel’s triumphant advance into Egypt. The August battle, the battle of Alam Halfa, was significant in that Rommel’s last attempt to get to Cairo was halted by a combination of factors, including exemplary air-land cooperation and the skillful use of signals intelligence intercepts. At last British military commanders were learning how to use their vast military assets correctly. It is not possible to understand what occurred during the October or Second Battle of El Alamein without some knowledge of what had occurred in the recent months leading up to it. Finally, this book also considers whether the reputations won and lost at El Alamein were deserved and analyzes the significance of the battle to the Allies and to Germany.

So why write another book on the battles of El Alamein? Without doubt, the Second World War was one of the most catastrophic and harrowing events in human history. It is deservedly one of the most written-about subjects in history. A search of the British Library catalogue on the topic of the Second World War in July 2016 showed them holding almost 10,000 titles on the subject.¹⁵ Amongst these holdings, the campaigns in

North Africa were well served with 1,807 titles devoted to Montgomery and 140 to his opponent Rommel.¹⁶ In 2011, the library held 308 titles on the North African campaign, which amounted to more than four books a year on the subject or a book every three months of the sixty-nine years since the November battle.¹⁷ The United States Library of Congress has similarly impressive holdings. In July 2016, it held 10,000 titles on World War II. In relation to the North African campaign, the US Library of Congress held 359 titles on the topic Alamein and 270 titles on North Africa–World War II. The titles it held on Bernard Montgomery numbered 189; those on his opponent Rommel were more than triple at 611.¹⁸

With such impressive coverage, it would seem that another book on the El Alamein battles of 1942 is not necessary. There are, however, several reasons for doing so. First, interest in the North African campaign remains high. A reason for this is that so many countries were involved in what was a unique theater of war. From December 1940 and lasting for more than two years, “over a million men from ten faraway countries fought here, and more than 50,000 of them died.”¹⁹ As John North has written, the October Alamein battle is the story of “a great battle . . . fought in the desert” and of “two armies . . . locked in deadly combat for months on end.”²⁰ With the 75th anniversary of the battles approaching, interest in what happened at Alamein and why it was important is unlikely to wane. Second, a large number of the books on the North African campaign have taken a partisan approach to the various commanders involved or have told the story of the Alamein battles from a particular national perspective. This book attempts to avoid these limitations. Third, there is no doubt that the October Alamein battle was an important turning point in the war. It marked, albeit on a smaller scale than other turning-point battles of the war, the first decisive defeat on land of an army commanded by a German general and containing panzer and infantry formations of the Wehrmacht. While Rommel’s defeated Panzerarmee contained many Italian formations, it is a myth that these units did not fight well in North Africa in the Alamein battles. Such an important event in the history of the Second World War is always worthy of further study. It is hoped that this book will provide a fresh and unbiased perspective of a critical battle of the Second World War. Finally, the battles of Alamein, even after so many years, remain

contested ground. Part of this was fueled after the war in a “third battle of El Alamein,” when so many of the participants published their accounts of what happened. The state of Eighth Army in early August 1942, who was responsible for success at Alam Halfa and the October battle, and how important all three battles were all still remain controversial and debated topics. As Jonathan Fennell wrote in 2011, “After close to seventy years of scholarship, the causes of Eighth Army’s success at El Alamein are still contested.”²¹ It is not expected that this book will resolve these debates, although it is hoped that it adds substantially to them.

NOTES

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13. Barr, *Pendulum of War*, xxxvii.
14. Bungay, *Alamein*, 3.
15. The British Library, accessed July 13, 2016, www.bl.uk. The exact figure was 9,794.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Jonathan Fennell, “‘Steel my soldiers’ hearts’: El Alamein Reappraised,” in *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* (Vol.14, Issue 1, Fall 2011): 1.
18. Library of Congress, accessed July 13, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov>.
19. Bungay, *Alamein*, 2.
20. North, *The Alexander Memoirs*, 5.
21. Fennell, “Steel my soldiers’ hearts,” 2.