

February 2021

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Recommended Citation

Landrum, Nathan (2021) "The First Battle of El Alamein," *Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh/vol4/iss1/3>

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Abstract

In June 1942, German and Italian forces under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel launched a successful offensive into British-held Egypt. This move not only threatened the Suez Canal, it presented the opportunity for Germany to seize the oil rich and strategically important Middle East. British and Commonwealth forces under General Sir Claude Auchinleck, however, halted Axis offensive at the First Battle of El Alamein (1-27 July 1942). This engagement proved decisive in the outcome of the North African campaign in World War II and ultimately the European Theater of Operations, as it shifted the balance of toward the Allies, enabling them to drive the Axis out of North Africa by May 1943.

Landrum: The First Battle of El Alamein

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Phi Alpha Theta Biennial Convention

January 2-5, 2020

“Thus after immense victories, the great summer campaign had ended in a dangerous lull.”¹ This reflective statement, written ex post facto by Erwin Rommel, poignantly summarizes his disappointment in the Afrika Korps’ inability to break through British defenses at El Alamein.² Since 1940, Axis, British and Commonwealth forces engaged in a seesaw struggle for supremacy in North Africa. What began as an Italian colonial land grab, eventually developed into a major theatre of operations which served as a springboard for the Allied liberation of Europe. At the height of the campaign in 1942, the Afrika Korps embarked on a lightning offensive which reversed all British gains in North Africa thus far and presented the opportunity for Germany to seize the oil rich and strategically important Middle East. Unfortunately for Rommel, his Afrika Korps was initially halted by the British 8th Army in July at El Alamein and then resoundingly defeated in the autumn. Modern historians traditionally view the second engagement as the pivotal moment of the campaign. However, the events of June to July, 1942, would dramatically shape the subsequent course of events in the North African campaign. The failure of Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Korps to defeat the British 8th Army at the First Battle of El Alamein decisively ended the Axis summer offensive of 1942 and inexorably shifted the balance of power towards the Western Allies in North Africa. From the beginnings of the campaign, plagued by chronic shortages of supplies, to the suspension of offensive operations in July, 1942, the ensuing First Battle of El Alamein would subsequently alter not only the military fortunes of both Axis and Allied forces, but also their perceptions of the campaign as well.

¹ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1953), 262.

² It should be noted that even though the Axis forces that fought at the First Battle of El Alamein were organized as the Panzerarmee Afrika, the common nomenclature Afrika Korps will be used throughout this paper.

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On June 21, 1942, the Libyan port of Tobruk fell to the Afrika Korps. This strategically important supply base with a deep water harbor and access to a rail network attracted the attentions of both Axis and Allied commanders throughout the North African campaign. That same day Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps, issued the following order,

Fortress Tobruk has capitulated. All units will reassemble and prepare for further advance...Now for the complete destruction of the enemy. We will not rest until we have shattered the last remnants of the British Eighth Army. During the days to come, I shall call on you for one more great effort to bring us to the final goal.³

That final goal was the capture of British held Egypt and the Suez Canal, severing its supply and communication lines to the Far East and opening the way for Axis control of Middle Eastern oil. Accompanying his great triumph, Rommel received word that he was to be promoted to Field Marshall for his great success in Cyrenaica. Even though this was truly a great honor, he privately confided to his wife Lucia that he wished to have been awarded another division rather than a promotion.⁴ Despite his conflicted emotions, there was good reason to be optimistic.

By the Tobruk offensive, the Afrika Korps' supply lines were stretched to near breaking. Sustained British air and naval harassment based from Malta along with the tremendous difficulty of transporting materials across desert terrain threatened the success of the Axis summer offensive. Yet the capture of large quantities of food, clothing, ammunition, fuel and even serviceable British tanks at Tobruk boosted the exhausted Afrika Korps' confidence to continue onwards, despite suffering considerable casualties. However, Rommel was not the overall commander in Africa and could not issue the subsequent orders. Instead, he was

³ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 122.

⁴ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 232.

subordinate to German Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, Commander-in-Chief South, Marshall Ettore Bastico, Commander-in-Chief in North Africa and Marshall Ugo Cavallero of the Italian Supreme Command whom all had predetermined that upon Tobruk's capture the next Axis assault would be against Malta.⁵ Once the island fortress was captured and Axis supply lines across the Mediterranean were secure, the Afrika Korps would be permitted to continue onwards into Egypt. Even though Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini personally approved of this strategy, Rommel vehemently objected to it. He was determined to deny the British 8th Army, now retreating headlong into Egypt under Major General Neil Ritchie and Middle East Commander-in-Chief General Claude Auchinleck, the opportunity to resupply and construct fixed fortifications.⁶ The next forty eight hours would greatly determine the outcome of the North African campaign.

On June 21, Field Marshall Kesselring arrived in Africa to press upon Rommel the importance of waiting for Malta's seizure before offensive operations into Egypt could be resumed. In addition, he informed Rommel that his proposed offensive was not approved by Mussolini and the Italian Supreme Command. Present at the conference was Major F.W. von Mellenthin, one of Rommel's staff officers. Writing in his memoir after the war,

Rommel insisted that he must follow up his victory without waiting for an attack on Malta, but Kesselring pointed out that an advance into Egypt could not succeed without full support from the Luftwaffe...Rommel disagreed emphatically and the discussions became exceedingly lively.⁷

⁵ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 191.

⁶ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 122.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

Failing to reach an agreement, Kesselring departed Africa, but not before notifying Rommel that he would not have any Luftwaffe support for his offensive. However, unbeknownst to all, Rommel had already ordered leading elements of the Afrika Korps to Sidi Barrani, some fifty miles beyond the Libyan-Egyptian border, anticipating a satisfactory outcome of the talks.⁸ Though unable to persuade his immediate superiors and undeterred in his conviction, Rommel thereafter sent a personal liaison officer to present his views to Adolf Hitler.⁹

Upon arriving at the German High Command, Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW), the liaison officer delivered Rommel's message to Hitler. In the letter, he wrote, "that the state and morale of the troops, the present supply position owing to captured dumps, and the present weakness of the enemy, permit our pursuing him into the depths of the Egyptian area."¹⁰

However, an accompanying letter from Mussolini pointed out that without Malta's capture, the Italian Navy would have tremendous difficulty protecting Axis supply transports across the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, Hitler approved Rommel's new offensive, and in an enthusiastic reply to Mussolini stated, "...it is only once in a lifetime that the Goddess of Victory smiles."

With an assault on Malta now postponed till September, Rommel's intransigent attitude had paid off and the Afrika Korps swiftly pushed forward on June 23. In order to understand why Rommel wished to push forward into Egypt, despite logistical and support complications, and how this would ultimately result in complete failure by July, it is important to examine the North African campaign within the wider context of the war thus far.

⁸ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 193.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*; trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 123.

Since gaining dictatorial powers in the 1920s, Benito Mussolini publicly made plain his dream of reforging a new Roman Empire. By the outbreak of World War II, large swaths of territory were annexed including Albania and Ethiopia alongside an alliance with Germany. For Mussolini, the purpose of the alliance was as a means to expedite the removal of British and French imperial power around the Mediterranean Sea, rather than an outpouring of ideological solidarity.¹¹ Even though Italy remained neutral at first, once the defeat of France seemed almost certain, Mussolini declared war and a series of colonial acquisitions across the Mediterranean Sea began in earnest. As Britain was headlong into a fight for its survival, in autumn, 1940, Mussolini ordered Marshall Rudolfo Graziani to invade Egypt, despite reports that the Italian Army was not properly equipped for modern warfare.¹² Nevertheless the Italian 10th Army, a 150,000 strong force, invaded Egypt on September 9, 1940, but only managed to capture Sidi Barrani before halting to prepare fixed fortifications and await a British counterattack.

In London, Prime Minister Winston Churchill recognized early on the threat posed to Egypt. Remarking to Stewart Menzies, the Chief of MI6, on May 9, 1940, after having received Ultra intercepts of Axis communications, he said, "...any alternative to holding Egypt cannot be contemplated."¹³ The preservation of British imperial power in Egypt and the wider Middle East was considered vital to the war effort, as not only a supply and communications hub to the wider empire via the Suez Canal, but also as a training ground, oil depot and munitions dump. Therefore, Egypt was to be a fortress by which Britain defended its regional interests.¹⁴

¹¹ Lawrence James, *Churchill and Empire: Portrait of an Imperialist* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2013), 239.

¹² Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 91.

¹³ Lawrence James, *Churchill and Empire: Portrait of an Imperialist* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2013), 239.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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Consequently, despite the imminent threat of a German invasion in the autumn, Churchill ordered the immediate transfer of one hundred tanks to Egypt. As Parliamentary Secretary for Military Supplies Harold Macmillan later noted, “it was to the everlasting credit of the Prime Minister and his colleagues that, even when facing this supreme test, they sent out convoys of tanks and munitions to save the Middle East.”¹⁵

Since the Italians failed to advance further, the British were afforded time to prepare a counterattack. In early December, Operation Compass began under the overall command of Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East.¹⁶ Even though the British Western Desert Force only comprised some 35,000 soldiers and approximately 300 tanks, their assault completely overwhelmed the Italians, resulting in 140,000 prisoners. By February, 1941, the road to Tripoli was wide open and the British seemed poised to capture all of Italian Libya. Combined with reverses in East Africa and a stalled invasion of Greece, Mussolini’s colonial empire lay in ruins and in need of rescue. Henceforth, Italy became increasingly dependent on German military aid and would eventually be regulated to nothing more than a client state.¹⁷ It is within this context that Erwin Rommel and the Afrika Korps entered the North African campaign.

In early February, 1941, Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel arrived in Libya to command the newly formed Deutsche Afrika Korps. This force was at first comprised of two German divisions alongside what remained of the Italian divisions.¹⁸ His mission, while subordinate to the Italian Supreme Command, was to defend Tripoli from the Western Desert Force. Once all

¹⁵ David Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65.

¹⁶ Ian F. W Beckett, ed., *Rommel: A Reappraisal* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2013), 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁸ It is important to note that till the First Battle of El Alamein, the Afrika Korps would not have more than three German divisions. (15th Panzer Division, 21st Panzer Division, and 90th Light Division)

German units had completely disembarked in May, then offensive operations would be permitted.¹⁹ However, purposely defying his instructions, Rommel ordered the Afrika Korps to attack British positions at El Agheila in late March.²⁰ After a bout of serious fighting, the scant British force fled back through Cyrenaica, suffering a large number of casualties.²¹ As the Afrika Korps raced across the desert, Rommel followed closely in his small Storch aircraft. According to one of his staff officers "...during this advance he flew over a company which had halted for no apparent reason, and dropped a message: 'Unless you get going at once I shall come down. Rommel.'" ²² By late April, leading elements of the Afrika Korps crossed the Egyptian frontier and the last British stronghold in Cyrenaica at Tobruk was besieged. However, it was at this point that Rommel encountered serious problems.

Due to Rommel's impatience, the Afrika Korps was considerably understrength during its initial offensive and was markedly slowed when British reinforcements arrived. As a result, the Afrika Korps was unable to dislodge the 9th Australian Division from Tobruk. Even though several attempts were made, concentrated artillery fire and the preservation of a supply line by sea ensured Tobruk's survival. Calling off the attack, Rommel wished to fully assemble the Afrika Korps along with sufficient supplies, then resume the offensive.²³ As in 1942, his logistical system proved incapable of properly supporting his ambitions.²⁴ The continual harassment of his supply lines across the Mediterranean by British forces on Malta severely

¹⁹ Samuel W Mitcham Jr., *Triumphant Fox: Erwin Rommel and the Rise of the Africa Korps* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009), 51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ Unbeknownst to Rommel, the British Government ordered Wavell to transport much of his force to defend Greece, leaving a scant, inexperienced force remaining.

²² F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 45.

²³ Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as Military Commander* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2004), 40.

²⁴ During the summer, 1941, the Afrika Korps lost approximately 35 per cent of all material sent to Africa.

hampered the Afrika Korps' effectiveness.²⁵ Having intercepted an OKW report recommending Rommel's withdrawal, the British launched a counteroffensive which was quickly repulsed. Because of his failure, Field Marshall Wavell was promptly replaced by General Claude Auchinleck.²⁶ By late November, the newly formed British 8th Army, now resupplied, launched Operation Crusader.²⁷ Even though the Afrika Korps inflicted numerous casualties, its weak supply lines and limited numbers forced Rommel to order a withdrawal to El Agheila.²⁸ Nonetheless, the 1941 campaign earned Rommel the nickname, Desert Fox, a promotion, and an additional German division in an expanded Panzerarmee Afrika.²⁹

Despite reverses the previous year, Rommel remained optimistic about the upcoming campaign.³⁰ The British position in Cyrenaica, tenuous at best due to a number of casualties, was weakened by the transfer of units to the Far East. In addition, since the reallocation of Luftwaffe units to the Mediterranean, Axis supplies to Africa steadily rose. Sufficiently rearmed, the Afrika Korps struck out in late January, 1942. Due to the vast openness of the Cyrenaican plain, Rommel's characteristic use of flanking maneuvers resulted in a British withdrawal to a fortified line west of Tobruk. With a brief pause, in early May, the Afrika Korps attacked once again. As before, successful flanking maneuvers forced Major General Ritchie, commander of the 8th Army, to order a retreat back into Egypt. In Ritchie's haste to avoid encirclement, the 2nd South

²⁵ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 57.

²⁶ George R Bradord, *Rommel's Afrika Korps: El Agheila to El Alamein* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 29.

²⁷ The British 8th Army began Operation Crusader with 748 tanks as opposed to 249 German and 146 Italian tanks. By the resumption of offensive operations in January 1942, the Afrika Korps would have 139 German and 89 Italian tanks.

²⁸ George R Bradord, *Rommel's Afrika Korps: El Agheila to El Alamein* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 53.

²⁹ Ian F. W Beckett, ed., *Rommel: A Reappraisal* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2013), 73.

³⁰ Charles Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 89.

African Division became trapped in Tobruk.³¹ Unlike the previous year, its defenders quickly surrendered. For Rommel, the capture of Tobruk was a seminal achievement. However, despite the tremendous success of Axis forces thus far, the North African campaign was not a priority for Hitler and the German High Command.

Since the creation of the Afrika Korps in February, 1941, Hitler and the German High Command expressed on numerous occasions the irrelevance of the North African campaign. Instead, beginning with the issue of Hitler's Directive No. 21, the vast majority of the German armed forces would be aimed against the Soviet Union. From June 22, 1941, onwards, at least two-thirds of German divisions were always engaged on the Eastern Front.³² So when Rommel was ordered to Africa, the German High Command expressed, "...that Africa was a 'lost cause' and that any large-scale investment of material and troops in that theatre would pay no dividends."³³ Therefore, the limited divisions sent to Africa were initially confined to Libya's defense. Writing after the war, Walter Warlimont, Deputy Chief of Operations at OKW wrote,

Even then, it was only after a good deal of hesitation that Hitler finally agreed to provide the necessary German aid to his Italian ally - and this was done primarily for fear that if the Italians lost their colonial bridgehead in North Africa it might cause them to lay down their arms and abandon the Axis altogether.³⁴

Although Rommel was tremendously successful up to the fall of Tobruk in 1942, Hitler still focused on new offensives in Russia, warning that without the capture of the Caucasian oilfields, Germany would lose the war.³⁵ On frequent occasions, Rommel attempted to persuade Hitler and

³¹ Charles Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 97.

³² Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 214.

³³ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 191.

³⁴ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 185.

³⁵ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 405.

the High Command otherwise, writing, “They did not realize that with relatively small means, we could have won victories in the Near East which, in their strategic and economic value, would have far surpassed the conquest of the Don Bend.”³⁶ In addition General Heinz Guderian, a leading figure in the German army, argued that the capture of the Caucasian oilfields, “... from a military point of view, were nonsensical.”³⁷ Therefore, while Hitler was enthusiastic about the potential conquest of Egypt in his letter to Mussolini, he was unwilling to heavily invest in the Afrika Korps.³⁸

Following the capture of Tobruk and narrowly escaping complete destruction, the British 8th Army hurriedly retreated back across the Egyptian frontier. In Washington, Winston Churchill received word of Tobruk’s fall while meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As Churchill read the report his facial expression soured quickly, and before he could utter a word, Roosevelt said, “What can we do to help?”³⁹ Shortly thereafter, several American M3 Grant and M4 Sherman tanks were dispatched to Egypt. Even though supply lines remained open, the 8th Army’s military situation was increasingly becoming bleaker. In a report by Colonel Boomer F. Fellers, an American attache in Cairo, he detailed the weaknesses of British forces, particularly its tank losses.⁴⁰ Unbeknownst to British commanders, the Italian Military Intelligence Service had broken the American diplomatic cipher and sent Fellers’ report to Rommel. This ‘Good Source’ bolstered Rommel’s confidence and sense of urgency, and after lengthy discussions, was

³⁶ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953) 191.

³⁷ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 274.

³⁸ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953) 191.

³⁹ Atkinson, Rick. *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 16.

⁴⁰ Ian F. W Beckett, ed., *Rommel: A Reappraisal* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2013), 89.

permitted to advance into Egypt.⁴¹ While Mussolini at first disagreed with the plan, after reading Hitler's enthusiastic letter, he flew to North Africa with a white horse and awaited the capture of Cairo.⁴² At the point, even though the 8th Army was weaker by the end of June, and Rommel's optimistic and insistent attitude had won over Hitler, the Afrika Korps was considerably weaker, and unable to match its commander's energy.

Despite the capture of large quantities of supplies at Tobruk, the Afrika Korps' now greatly extended supply chain was near breaking. According to Rommel, "Rome had assured me several times that supplies to Africa could only be guaranteed in adequate quantities if the ports of Tobruk and Mersa Matruh were in our hands."⁴³ Despite reassurances, there was not a considerable increase in supplies. In addition, a railway extending from Tobruk into Egypt was rendered virtually useless, because of the shortage of locomotives.⁴⁴ The Afrika Korps' military capabilities were also in serious trouble, which entered Egypt with only fifty-eight tanks and approximately thirty-five hundred men.⁴⁵ The combination of limited supplies, lack of sufficient numbers of men and machines alongside the lack of air cover resulted in an advance into Egypt that was fraught with dangers.⁴⁶

Once the Afrika Korps crossed into Egypt it encountered little ground resistance, but as previously warned by Field Marshall Kesselring, there was little Luftwaffe support. The British

⁴¹ Ian F. W. Beckett, ed., *Rommel: A Reappraisal* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2013), 89.

⁴² H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 193.

⁴³ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 233.

⁴⁴ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 141.

⁴⁵ George R Bradord, *Rommel's Afrika Korps: El Agheila to El Alamein* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 83.

⁴⁶ It is important to note that these were the armored and motorized divisions of the Afrika Korps. There were several non-motorized infantry divisions which Rommel chose not to make great use of in Egypt

Desert Air Force thereafter, enjoyed complete air supremacy, doubling its number of sorties, and the little Axis supplies that could be brought into Egypt were mercilessly strafed.⁴⁷ On June 25, leading elements of the Afrika Korps reached British fortifications outside Mersa Matruh. Even though General Auchinleck, now in personal command of the 8th Army, wished to pull all British forces back to the Alamein line, several divisions were left behind at the fortifications of Mersa Matruh in order to protect his flank.⁴⁸ These fortifications, called boxes, were enclosed entrenched divisions and artillery amidst several minefields with armored divisions behind to check any enemy advance. In addition, the battlefield was dominated by the Sidi Hamza escarpment which separated the British divisions and presented Rommel a tactical opening. According to von Mellenthin, “In short, the Eighth Army had two very strong wings, and a weak center.”⁴⁹

The Battle of Mersa Matruh began on June 26 as the 15th Panzer Division along with two Italian divisions attacked the British 1st Armored and 2nd New Zealand Division below the escarpment, while the 90th Light Division and 21st Panzer Division thrust towards the British center. Due to insufficient forces, the British center collapsed and by June 27, the Afrika Korps had successfully enveloped both northern and southern British positions. With the loss of the coastal road and its main escape route, the entrapped British units panicked and fled, which resulted in numerous casualties. Even though Rommel’s tactics were successful, the 90th Light Division was dangerously isolated along the coastal road and the 21st Panzer Division only had

⁴⁷ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 125.

⁴⁸ George R Bradord, *Rommel’s Afrika Korps: El Agheila to El Alamein* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 94.

⁴⁹ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 126.

twenty-three tanks and six hundred men left by June 27.⁵⁰ According to von Mellenthin, “All this was undoubtedly very disturbing to the British commanders, but if they had kept their heads they should have realized that it was the Panzerarmee which was in greater danger of destruction.”⁵¹ Supremely confident, Rommel ordered an immediate advance, even though his men were exhausted and dangerously short of supplies and equipment.⁵² This optimistic and reckless attitude would result in the near destruction of the Afrika Korps a few days later. It is interesting to note that after the conclusion of the North African campaign, Rommel was keenly aware of his behavior, writing, “When it is remembered that in modern warfare supplies decide the battle, it is easy to see how the clouds of disaster were gathering for my army.”⁵³ Nevertheless, the Afrika Korps continued onwards towards the Alamein line.

The Alamein line was a forty mile stretch of fortified boxes and minefields anchored by a steep escarpment, which gave way to the Qattara Depression. The soft salt beds of the Qattara Depression proved untraversable for tanks, and would severely restrict Rommel’s operational space. By July, 1942, there were several boxes constructed, and according to Lieutenant Michael Carver, logistics officer for the 7th Armored Division, “A mechanized enemy approaching the Alamein line from the west would find himself naturally funneled into three possible avenues...”⁵⁴ Unlike British fortifications at Tobruk and Mersa Matruh, which were hastily constructed, the Alamein line was carefully built. General Auchinleck early on understood the strategic importance of El Alamein and soon after his appointment ordered the construction of

⁵⁰ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 127.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵² Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 239.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁴ Michael Carver, *El Alamein* (Ware, England: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 16.

fortifications.⁵⁵ Even though the Alamein line was similar to those at Mersa Matruh, the limited space of the battlefield favored the British, experts at static, attritional warfare since World War I.

Once the Africa Korps reached the Alamein line on June 30, Rommel gathered his staff officers to formulate a plan of attack. With only fifty-five tanks and two thousand infantry in three German divisions alongside even less numbers amongst his Italian divisions, Rommel understood well the importance of relying on maneuver rather than sustained heavy fighting.⁵⁶ For the upcoming battle, the Afrika Korps relied primarily on the large supply dumps captured in Cyrenaica, but by July 1, these supplies were dangerously low.⁵⁷ To add insult to injury, according to Rommel, “with an almost unbelievable lack of appreciation of the situation, the supply authorities had actually sent only three thousand tons to Africa during June, as compared with our real requirement of sixty thousand tons, a figure which was never in fact attained.” In contrast, the British 8th Army consisted of three South African, New Zealand and Indian infantry divisions, two armored divisions, one motorized division alongside fresh supplies, and machines from the United States.⁵⁸ As with all previous North African campaigns, the British enjoyed at least a two-threefold advantage in medium and heavy tanks.⁵⁹ In Rommel’s estimation, “Their leading men had clearly realized that the next battle in Africa would determine the situation for a long time to come, and were looking at things very cool-heatedly...Mortal danger is an effective antidote for fixed ideas.”⁶⁰ In addition to the growing dichotomy in supplies and machines,

⁵⁵ Michael Carver, *El Alamein* (Ware, England: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 14.

⁵⁶ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 131.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁸ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965), 194.

⁵⁹ David Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 220.

⁶⁰ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 244.

Rommel also became worried at the growing firepower of British weapons. For most of the North African campaign, the Afrika Korps employed superior weaponry, particularly the 50mm and 75mm long barreled tank guns and 88mm anti-tank guns. However, by the First Battle of El Alamein, the situation showed signs of change with the 8th Army's introduction of near equal caliber guns⁶¹ Rommel reasoned, "it was essential to do everything possible to bring about a British collapse in the Near East before any considerable shipments of arms could arrive from Britain or the United States."⁶² Therefore, even though the Afrika Korps was exhausted, short on supplies, machines, sufficient numbers and air cover it had to force a breakthrough at El Alamein.

For the First Battle of El Alamein, Rommel would employ similar tactics to those at Mersa Matruh. Beginning with a feint in the direction of the Qattara Depression, under the cover of darkness, the 90th Light Division was to penetrate between the Alamein and Deir el Abyad boxes, then swing north to capture the coastal road. The 21st Panzer Division would support the 90th Light Division by covering its southern flank. For this plan, without any extensive reconnaissance reports, Rommel believed that the majority of British divisions were further north and south of his chosen line of attack. According to von Mellenthin, "If we could once get our troops in the rear of the British, Rommel was convinced that their defense would collapse. In view of our experiences at Matruh I think that this plan offered a real hope of victory."⁶³ The climax of the North African campaign had finally approached.

⁶¹ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 245.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*; trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 132.

On July 1, the Afrika Korps began its assault between the Alamein and Deir el Abyad boxes. Unfortunately, the attack was delayed, which did not get underway until 0320 hours due to broken ground and extensive minefields.⁶⁴ As it approached the gap, the 90th Light Division discovered that the Deir el Abyad box did not exist. Instead, the box defended by the Indian 18th Infantry Brigade was at Deir el Shein, some three miles east. In response, the 90th Light Division veered towards the north to bypass the newly discovered box, but by 0730 hours it was halted by intense artillery fire from the Alamein box. At about 0900 hours, the 21st Panzer Division launched its attack as per its instructions, and immediately encountered the Deir el Shein box. Once it received new orders, the 21st Panzer Division successfully overwhelmed the 18th Indian Brigade, but lost eighteen tanks. After midday, the 90th Light Division advanced south, but it ran into another box on Ruweisat Ridge defended by several South African brigades. The ensuing German attack stalled under heavy artillery fire. At one point, Rommel went forward to encourage the men onwards, but had to take cover from incoming artillery shells.⁶⁵ While the Afrika Korps performed well under the circumstances on July 1, it had been drawn into strong defensive positions and severely depleted.⁶⁶

That night, Rommel received word from Luftwaffe reconnaissance that the British fleet had left Alexandria. According to him, “This determined me to go all out for a decision in the next few days. The British no longer seemed to trust their luck and were preparing for a retreat.”⁶⁷ Convinced that victory was imminent, the 90th Light Division was ordered to

⁶⁴ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 132.

⁶⁵ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 246.

⁶⁶ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

continue its attack towards the coastal road at 2130 hours. However, its night attack stalled once again due to heavy artillery fire. The following day, the 15th Panzer Division and the 21st Panzer Division pushed forward to assist in the assault against the South African brigades. In response, General Auchinleck committed strong tank forces along with the Desert Air Force to the defense of Ruweisat Ridge.⁶⁸ After another bout of heavy fighting, the Afrika Korps' assault was beaten off, but undeterred, Rommel planned another assault for the following day. As both forces were keenly aware, the subsequent battle at El Alamein on July 3 would greatly determine not only the military outcome of the North African campaign, but its political future as well.

Since the beginning of Rommel's strike from El Agheila in January 1942, British authorities in Egypt struggled to quell many pro-German sentiments amongst the population. As the campaign progressed, reports filtered into Axis headquarters of unrest in Egypt. According to one report, "The Egyptians were gulled into thinking that the Germans had come to free them from British rule. Some might have believed this, for in February, student rioters in Cairo had chanted 'Long Live Rommel!'"⁶⁹ By the fall of Tobruk, new reports indicated that some panicky British officials began burning documents while others fled into Palestine. However, these sentiments were not exclusive to those in North Africa. Among members of the British War Cabinet, it seemed all but certain that the Afrika Korps would enter Alexandria and Cairo. In a July 3 meeting, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff presented the War Cabinet a scenario which postulated the destruction of the Alamein line. Depending on Rommel's movements, the 8th Army and the Nile Delta Army could potentially attack the exposed flanks of the Afrika

⁶⁸ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 248.

⁶⁹ Lawrence James, *Churchill and Empire: Portrait of an Imperialist* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2013), 283.

Korps.⁷⁰ In addition, he noted that if all British forces were driven out of Egypt, “The Chief of the Imperial General Staff then explained the general scheme of demolitions if the worst came to the worst.”⁷¹ While irrigation plants and the Aswan Dam were initially considered ‘Category A’ targets for demolition, ginning factories would receive the highest priority.⁷²

After the Chief of Staff’s presentation concerning the military situation in Egypt, the War Cabinet entertained the thoughts of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs concerning the political intentions of the British Government in Egypt. As of early July, the Foreign Affairs Secretary recommended that for the moment all British officials should remain at their posts and there should not be noticeable preparations for any to leave.⁷³ As with the previous report, in the event of an Axis victory, the British and Egyptian governments along with King Farouk should be forcibly compelled to withdraw to Sudan. At the conclusion of the meeting, it is noted, “The Prime Minister said that if Egypt was overrun, he ought that our attitude to the country should be the same as though the enemy invaded Kent and Sussex, namely, that the enemy should be fought ruthlessly and with Russian methods applied.”⁷⁴ It should be noted that even though these minutes are dated July 3, it is probable that the Chief of Staff and Foreign Affairs Secretary took time to formulate these thoughts before the meeting. While the War Cabinet minutes are silent, the mention of the El Alamein line indicates that at some point in late June and early July, the British Government was actively contemplating defeat in North Africa.

⁷⁰ War Cabinet 85. Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Friday, July 3, 1942, at 12 Noon. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² War Cabinet 85. Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Friday, July 3, 1942, at 12 Noon. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁷³ W.M. (42) 85th Conclusions, Minute 2. Confidential Annex. July 3, 1942 at 12 Noon. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

On July 3 at El Alamein, while Afrika Korps divisions prepared to advance on Ruweisat Ridge, New Zealanders from the Qaret el Abd box attacked Italian positions in the south and successfully captured all of its artillery pieces.⁷⁵ This surprise turn of events, completely altered Rommel's plan for the day. "The resulting threat to our southern flank meant that the Afrika Korps' intended knock-out attack now had to be carried on by the 21st Panzer Division alone, and the weight of the attack was consequently too small. The attack came to a standstill."⁷⁶ By the evening, the Afrika Korps had failed to dislodge the British from the ridge. Severely short of supplies and woefully understrength after intense fighting, Rommel messaged Field Marshall Kesselring that further offensive operations were suspended for the moment.⁷⁷ In von Mellenthin's words,

The check was all the more disappointing, because our air reconnaissance reported that the British fleet had left Alexandria, and that there was much traffic en route from Egypt to Palestine; moreover, leaders of the Egyptian Liberation Movement arrived by air and made contact with Rommel. We had just failed.⁷⁸

Even though Rommel, characteristically optimistic, still planned further assaults, the North African campaign had radically changed. It would not be until late July that he would fully realize the consequences of the previous days.

After the failed attacks of July 1-3, Rommel's situation became quite perilous with only thirty-six tanks, and a few hundred infantry left. In contrast, the 8th Army continued to receive

⁷⁵ War Cabinet. Weekly Resume (No. 149) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation from 0700 July 2nd to 0700 July 9th 1942. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁷⁶ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 249.

⁷⁷ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 133.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

several fresh Commonwealth divisions along with numerous American tanks.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Rommel still remained confident of victory. In a letter to his wife on July 4, he stated, “Unfortunately, things are not going as I should like them. Resistance is too great and our strength exhausted. However, I still hope to find a way to achieve our goal. I’m rather tired and fagged out.”⁸⁰ Whilst fighting continued for the next several days, the battle eventually ground to a halt.⁸¹ Even though Field Marshall Kesselring and Marshall Cavarelo promised more supplies and reinforcements, Rommel quickly realized that the summer offensive was over.⁸² According to Walter Warlimont,

In fact, the position was so changed that Rommel himself was now urging that he should be allowed to break off contact with the enemy and retreat to his frontier position; and he was as insistent as he had been just a short month previously, when he had urged the continuation of the pursuit.⁸³

Indeed, his attitude had changed so rapidly that when his request was denied, he actively considered the entire abandonment of North Africa.⁸⁴ However, Rommel was not the only individual to fully comprehend the decisiveness of the First Battle of El Alamein.

On July 20, after impatiently awaiting the capture of Cairo, Mussolini left North Africa once he received news of Rommel’s failure. Now confident of victory, Churchill announced that Egypt was out of danger.⁸⁵ Although General Auchinleck had successfully halted the Afrika

⁷⁹ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965), 196.

⁸⁰ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 249-250.

⁸¹ War Cabinet. Weekly Resume (No. 151) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation from 0700 July 16th to 0700 July 23rd 1942. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁸² Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 260.

⁸³ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965), 194.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Korps at El Alamein, his failure to permanently destroy it, displeased Churchill. Consequently, Auchinleck was personally relieved of his command in favor of General Sir Harold Alexander, and General Bernard Montgomery.⁸⁶

In London, among members of the War Cabinet, there no longer appeared any member actively contemplating defeat. While North Africa was still considered an important theatre of war, after the First Battle of El Alamein, Egypt no longer featured prominently in its minutes.⁸⁷ Even as the Second Battle of El Alamein commenced in late October, no discussion of defeat arose.⁸⁸ However, the War Cabinet did make arrangements for the defense of Egypt, such as an air supply service for the 8th Army.⁸⁹ In addition, British citizens in Egypt were to be conscripted if the situation changed, though not necessarily for military purposes. According to the Foreign Affairs Secretary, “The real case for these proposals is morale and political. There is evidence that the absence of conscription on the British community hitherto has led to considerable criticism among the more zealous sections of the British community...”⁹⁰ Even though the North African campaign was not over, and Rommel would attempt to break through the Alamein line again, the increasing dichotomy of supplies and reinforcements would inexorably shift the balance of power in North Africa towards the Western Allies.

⁸⁶ It should be noted that General Gott was originally designed at the commander of 8th Army, but his plane was shot down before he could take up the post.

⁸⁷ War Cabinet 92. Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Monday, July 20, 1942, at 5:30 pm. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁸⁸ War Cabinet 145. Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, October 26, 1942, at 5:30 pm. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁸⁹ War Cabinet 315. Air Service to the Middle East on July 25, 1942, at 5:30 pm. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

⁹⁰ War Cabinet. Conscripted of British Subjects in Egypt. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for War. July 18, 1942. (United Kingdom). Accessed October 29, 2018. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>.

In contrast to the pessimism of the previous weeks, after several personal consultations with German High Command, Rommel's characteristic optimism returned.⁹¹ However, this optimism would be short lived. Despite reassurances for more supplies, the situation was still critical by late August. "According to Italian calculations, in the last few weeks of August alone, the British succeeded in unloading no less than 500,000 GRT in northeast Africa, whilst all the Axis Powers could set against this enormous total was 13,000 tons."⁹² On August 31, a barely resupplied, and reinforced Afrika Korps attacked the Alamein line once again at Alam Halfa. According to von Mellenthin,

I should stress that as a matter of sober military appreciation, the general staff of the Panzerarmee did not believe that we could break through to the Nile, and before the attack was launched we pointed out to Rommel that in armored strength the British had a superiority of 3:1, and in air power of 5:1.⁹³

By September 2, the overwhelming firepower of the 8th Army forced Rommel to call off the attack, however, the Afrika Korps remained at El Alamein. It would not be until late October, at the Second Battle of El Alamein, that the Afrika Korps would be forced to withdraw to Libya. Modern historians traditionally view this second engagement as the decisive moment of the campaign. However, it should be noted that even if the Afrika Korps won the Second Battle of El Alamein, the commencement of Operation Torch in French North Africa two weeks later would have forced Rommel's withdrawal from Egypt. Therefore, once Rommel lost the initiative at the First Battle of El Alamein, he irrecoverably lost his real chance of winning the North African campaign. Afterwards, his enemy dictated the course of the campaign.

⁹¹ H.A. Jacobsen et al., ed., *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 195.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹³ F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War*, trans. H. Betzler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 142.

In conclusion, the failure of Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps to defeat the British 8th Army at the First Battle of El Alamein decisively ended the Axis summer offensive of 1942 and inexorably shifted the balance of power towards the Western Allies in North Africa. From the beginnings of the campaign, plagued by chronic shortages of supplies, to the suspension of offensive operations in July, 1942, the First Battle of El Alamein would alter not only the military fortunes of both Axis and Allied forces, but also their perceptions of the campaign as well.

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