

## 1942 – 1945 North Africa

By mid-January 1942 the Allied spearhead had reached Cyrenaica, which once had seemed lost to Rommel's exhausted Panzer army, and had reestablished communication with Tobruk. However the pattern of the desert war was repeating itself.

As Rommel's forces fell back west on their bases in Tripolitania, the 8th Army advanced farther and farther from its own bases in Egypt. Less than a fortnight after the "Crusader" offensive petered out Rommel struck back at the British outposts, and the 8th Army reeled back along its collapsing communications lines towards the Egyptian frontier. The "Desert Fox" had done it again.

From February until mid-May there was a lull in the desert war as both sides renewed their forces. For his part Rommel was anxious to continue his advance, and Churchill was continually urging his commanders to resume their offensive. Rommel attacked first, but initially it seemed he had miscalculated, as lack of fuel and water became a serious issue for his troops. However the "Desert Fox" was saved by his own willingness to improvise and the slowness of the British commanders to react.

The result, the fall of Tobruk, was not only a huge blow to Allied morale, but it also meant that the road to Egypt and Suez was open. Rommel now urged his army on towards the Nile Delta.

On June 25th General Auchinleck took command of the battered 8th Army and the same evening sent Churchill an appreciation of the situation based on the possibility that the capture of Alexandria was now very real. At this point few would have banked on the ability of the Allies to halt Rommel at the El Alamein line, a series of prepared fortifications reaching south from the sea. Much depended on keeping Egypt, and in particular Alexandria and Cairo, secure.

Early on June 29th Rommel's attack began and the Allies, lacking sufficient troops for a static defence, fought an open battle, channelling the German thrusts into predetermined areas where they could be demolished. These tactics were at the time considered revolutionary and untried, but given the 8th Army's predicament they were both necessary and effective. Although confidence of success was never lacking in the Panzer Army losses in tanks and

infantry began to tell, and Italian troops were beginning to be deployed more and more to plug gaps in the German lines.

By mid- July the very last German reserves had been thrown into the fight and the growing strength of the Allies meant that Rommel's drive eastwards effectively ground to a halt. The merit of Auchinleck's achievement is hidden in the myth of the "El Alamein Line" with the implication that the 8th Army fought behind a front of prepared fortifications. In fact the fighting in July 1942 was entirely open.

Though severely mauled Rommel's forces were still at large in the western desert, and they had to be dealt with once and for all. Churchill was still demanding a major strike without delay but Auchinleck was urging a defensive strategy for the time being. The result was a shake up of the 8th Army's command, that saw the removal of one of Britain's most able commanders, and the emergence of a new and dramatic figure – General Montgomery.

During August and September Rommel made one last attempt to break through to the Nile Delta. It was also Montgomery's first battle in the western desert. The Germans were anxiously attempting to gain another quick success, with dwindling resources, and the Allies careful to hold on to hard won ground. All supplies for the Germans had to come across the sea from mainland Europe, and three quarters of all convoys were sunk by British air and sea power. Malta had already proved its importance as a base for the fight against the German and Italian convoys, and the distance of over 600 miles from the port of Benghazi to the front line added to the difficulties facing Rommel as he considered his next move. For the Allies it was much easier, Alexandria was only 55 miles away.

Now began what in British eyes has long seemed the most important battle of the war, popularly known as the Battle of El Alamein. The Axis Armies at this point were at a disadvantage in almost every department. Rommel was by now a sick man and had returned to Germany for rest and treatment. Despite urging by Churchill for an immediate offensive, Montgomery had fixed the date for his attack as October 23<sup>rd</sup>, the night of a full moon. At 22.00 a 1000 gun barrage signalled the beginning of the offensive which, by previous standards, was by far the greatest seen in the desert. Initially progress was slow and the

fighting bitter, but gradually and with heavy casualties over a ten day period the Germans and Italians were forced to concede ground and eventually go into full retreat.

Now, hurriedly returned from Germany, Rommel marshalled his troops as they fell back; his principal task was the defence of Tripoli. Hitler had given him a strict order to halt the Allies and dig in as far east as possible, and as always he chose to obey Hitler, in spite of his own judgement to the contrary. For a while there was a lull in the fighting as Montgomery built up his forces, and then on January 15th 1943 the British opened up their attack. Realising the strength of the Allies Rommel ordered a retreat to the west, but was unable to shake off the advancing 8th Army, abandoning Tripoli and falling right back to the Tunisian border.

In early March a sick and demoralised Rommel watched for the last time as his battered army went into action against the 8th Army, only to be shattered by the overwhelming weight of defensive fire. The hopelessness of his situation and his unsatisfactory relations with Hitler made him look pessimistically at the outcome of the campaign in North Africa. Now he relinquished his command for the last time and returned to Europe to report, knowing that nothing could be done to save the situation. The Allies, the American 1st Army from the west and the 8th Army from the east, now threatened to crush the remnants of the Germans and Italians between their jaws. Linking up in March 1943 these two Armies now began to put severe pressure on the Axis bridgehead in Tunisia, which ultimately led to the fall of Tunis on May 7th. Next to Stalingrad this defeat represented the greatest military disaster to overcome the Wehrmacht to this point in the war.