

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 366

### “The Desert Fox”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“We have a very daring and skilful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.”

Winston Churchill, speaking of Erwin Rommel to the House of Commons in January 1942.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 366. The Desert Fox.

I want to begin today by returning to North Africa, which we last looked at in episode 342. In that episode, the Germans were just about to begin their April 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia, so that was a long time ago. Let’s review a bit.

After the Fall of France and the evacuation of the British Army from continental Europe, the only land frontiers left between Axis- and Allied-controlled territories lay in Africa. There was Italian East Africa, surrounded by British colonial possessions, and the border between Italian-controlled Libya and British-occupied Egypt.

Italian East Africa had no lines of supply or communication back to Italy, so it represented little threat, as it was only a matter of time before it fell. The North African front was much more important, as it dangled before Mussolini and Hitler the enticing prospect of capturing the Suez Canal and Alexandria, the home port of the British Mediterranean fleet. In contrast with Ethiopia, Axis forces in Libya could be and were supplied and reinforced from Italy, though granted that supply line was precarious. More about that in a moment.

If the Axis could capture the Suez Canal, that would force the Royal Navy to abandon the Eastern Mediterranean. It would allow for the opening of a supply route to Italian East Africa, and possibly allow the land forces to continue their advance east into Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and who knows, perhaps even into India.

Once France fell, the Italian military was free to reinforce its units in Libya until they substantially outnumbered the British in Egypt, but you'll recall that Mussolini had difficulty prodding his commander on the scene, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, to begin an offensive. One finally began in September 1940, and in a matter of days, the Italians pushed the British back to the Egyptian port town of Mersa Matruh, which lies roughly halfway between the Libyan border and Alexandria.

Graziani refused to advance further until his soldiers were better supplied. In December 1940, the British began their own offensive, driving deep into Libya and thoroughly humiliating the Italian Army, forcing them as far back as El Agheila. This left the British in control of Cyrenaica, essentially the eastern half of Libya.

This forced Adolf Hitler to begin the difficult process of transferring a German Army corps to North Africa to assist the Italians. This corps would be commanded by General Erwin Rommel, one of Hitler's favorites. At the same time, the British were withdrawing their best units from North Africa to reinforce Greece against the coming German invasion there. The British did not expect that Rommel would be ready to begin an offensive for some time, but they were wrong about that. Rommel attacked in March 1941, and in three weeks had reclaimed Cyrenaica, forcing the British Army all the way back to the Egyptian border.

That is, with one exception: Tobruk, the fortified Libyan port about 150 kilometers from the Egyptian border. The British made the decision to garrison Tobruk with a substantial force, including the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division. The garrison could be kept in supply using cargo ships escorted by the Royal Navy from Alexandria, and the presence of the Australians, 150 kilometers behind his front line, made it impossible for Rommel to consider advancing into Egypt. Axis supply lines in Libya were already precarious; the Tobruk garrison was effectively a knife held to Rommel's throat.

And this is where I left the story, in April 1941. As you know, Greece and Crete fell in May and in June Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and I've been focusing on those fronts. So let's get caught up.

First, let's take a look at East Africa. The Italian-led forces in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland—what Mussolini called Italian East Africa—had forced the British out of British Somaliland in 1940, and Italian naval units based in Eritrea were harassing ships in the Red Sea. In January 1941, British-led forces moving north from British East Africa occupied Italian Somaliland. The Italians withdrew without putting up much of a fight, as the flat, barren terrain of the region offered little for a defense. The British pushed on into the Ogaden in Ethiopia. Royal Navy units in the Red Sea, including the carriers HMS *Eagle* and *Formidable*, bombed Italian naval units and merchant ships docked in Eritrea.

Also in January, deposed Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie crossed the border from British-controlled Sudan into western Ethiopia, accompanied by a small British force.

In March 1941, British-led Indian forces from Aden crossed the Red Sea and made an amphibious landing on Italian-occupied British Somaliland, which was soon retaken, its ports made available for resupply of units attacking into Ethiopia from the east.

These three British-led forces pressed on toward Addis Ababa, which was retaken on April 6. In May, Indian troops seized ports along the coast of Eritrea. On May 5, the Emperor entered the capital, five years to the day after it had been occupied by the Italians.

Small pockets of Italian forces resisted the Allied occupation through the end of 1941, and a few didn't give up until 1943. Overall, several thousand Ethiopian and Allied fighters were killed in this campaign. The Italians lost 17,000 killed and about 230,000 taken prisoner.

The liberation of Ethiopia was the first significant Allied victory of the war, though it was overshadowed by the German invasions of the Balkans and the Soviet Union. It allowed President Roosevelt to declare that the Red Sea was no longer a combat zone, which in turn meant that neutral US ships could now deliver goods and supplies to the port of Suez, relieving some of the demands on British shipping.

As for North Africa, the striking thing about this front is how it keeps yo-yoing back and forth over distances of hundreds of kilometers. There are two reasons for this. One is that the flat, stony desert where this fighting took place is excellent terrain for the rapid advance of motor vehicles like tanks and armored cars, but offers little in the way of natural features that could be used to anchor a line of defense.

The other reason has to do with the difficulties in supplying armies in these barren lands. This was a particular challenge for the Italians, who shipped supplies and reinforcements by sea from Italy, taking advantage of the narrow stretch of sea between Sicily and North Africa to stay under cover of land-based air units and then take advantage of the neutral waters of French-controlled Tunisia.

Most Italian cargo was offloaded at Tripoli, because it had the largest port facility in Libya and because it was out of range of the RAF or the Royal Navy. But it meant a long, long haul by truck over endless kilometers of desert before it reached the front lines. This was the real bottleneck in Italian supply. Shipments often backed up in Tripoli for lack of trucks to carry them forward.

Not that supply wasn't also a problem for the British. The Mediterranean was too dangerous, so supply convoys bound for Egypt took the long way, around Africa. A rail line could carry shipments as far as Mersa Matruh, but from there the British also had to rely on trucks.

Every time one side advanced, its supply lines lengthened and their supply difficulties multiplied. Every time the other side fell back, their supply lines shortened and their supply difficulties diminished. This is always true in land warfare, but the unique features of the North

African campaign made it a crucial factor, often a decisive factor, hence the fluidity of the front line.

The British built up their inventories of tanks and aircraft, with the help of American Lend-Lease, as General Auchinleck planned the next British offensive, Operation Crusader, named for a model of British tank. Rommel was also at work, planning another assault on Tobruk. His own supply situation was complicated. Operation Barbarossa meant most of the Luftwaffe squadrons patrolling the central Mediterranean and bombing Malta were moved to the Eastern Front. British attacks on Italian shipping increased and Rommel's supplies diminished. Typically, Rommel refused to worry about such minor issues as logistics, and scheduled the assault on Tobruk to begin on November 21, but Auchinleck pulled the trigger first, beginning Operation Crusader on November 18.

By this time, British Army forces in Egypt were newly organized as the Eighth Army, commanded by General Sir Alan Cunningham. By the way, General Cunningham was the younger brother of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. We've come across the admiral before, and we will again.

Eighth Army consisted of two corps. The XIII Corps, an infantry formation, held the line at the Mediterranean coast. Farther inland stood XXX Corps, which included most of the available armored units. The plan was simple enough. XIII Corps would engage the Italians and Germans near the coast and keep them busy, while XXX Corps would swing around the Axis right flank and advance to Tobruk, relieving the siege, and forcing Rommel to choose between withdrawing behind Tobruk and risking encirclement.

Operation Crusader caught the Axis forces by surprise. An advancing British armored brigade captured a German airfield with 19 planes on the ground before the Germans could react. On the other hand, another armored brigade tangled with the Italian *Ariete* armored division, and forget everything you've heard about the incompetence of the Italian Army; the experienced *Ariete* division gave the British novices a thrashing.

On November 21, General Cunningham, who seems to have been unaware of the fierce resistance from the German and Italian armor, ordered the relief of Tobruk to begin. This involved XIII Corps, including General Freyberg's New Zealand division, pushing forward along the coast toward the town, while inside Tobruk, the garrison attempted to break out of the siege. Losses in the combat that followed were heavy.

Sunday, November 23 was *Totensonntag* that year in Germany. The name translates as "Sunday of the Dead," and is a German Protestant holiday dedicated to remembrance of the departed faithful. Roman Catholics and other Protestants observe a similar holiday, All Souls' Day, on November 2.

On *Totensonntag*, German panzers counterattacked, imposing heavy losses of British tanks. At the end of the day, XXX Corps had just 44 operational tanks, about a third of the number of German panzers attacking them, and the 5<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade was surrounded and wiped out. Over 3,000 prisoners were taken.

General Cunningham asked to meet with General Auchinleck that evening; he described the losses XXX Corps had taken and requested permission to end Operation Crusader, but Auchinleck refused and ordered Cunningham to continue the offensive, regardless of losses.

Auchinleck made a very risky decision there, but it turned out better for him than he'd had any right to expect. You see, Erwin Rommel gleefully took note of enemy losses and concluded that a British withdrawal was now inevitable. Not satisfied with a mere victory, Rommel now aimed to wipe out the British armored formations, flank the British line, and rout the Eighth Army, forcing it at least into a disorganized and desperate retreat, perhaps even surround and trap it. He personally led a force of German and Italian armor around the enemy left flank, hoping to encircle the Eighth Army.

It did not go well for him. His advance was plagued with vehicle breakdowns and communication problems. Meanwhile, the New Zealand division pushed on toward Tobruk and met up with the garrison, breaking the siege. Now it was Rommel's panzers—and Rommel personally—who were in danger of encirclement. Rommel ordered his armored force to withdraw, but the British Army in Egypt was in much better supply than he was, thanks to American Lend-Lease. The British had 200 tanks in reserve, which were brought forward to replace the armor losses, while RAF fighters strafed Rommel's retreating troops.

Auchinleck found Cunningham insufficiently aggressive and replaced him with General Neil Ritchie. With Axis forces disorganized and low on supplies, Ritchie pressed on with the offensive. The *Regia Marina*, the Italian Navy, pitched in by shipping supplies along the riskier route, directly to Benghazi and other forward ports.

Adolf Hitler became concerned over the desperate supply situation his favorite general faced. Hitler ordered 24 U-boats reassigned from the North Atlantic to the Mediterranean to support the Italian convoys, much to the dismay of Admirals Raeder and Dönitz, as we discussed last week. The admirals argued strenuously that U-boats did much more good for the German cause in the Atlantic, and besides, most of the Italian ship losses in the Mediterranean were caused by British aircraft and submarines, which U-boats would be powerless to stop.

Nonetheless, the U-boats gave a good account of themselves. On November 14, German U-boat *U-81* sank the British carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, the carrier with the largest aircraft capacity in the Royal Navy. Happily, only one member of *Ark Royal's* crew died in the sinking. Eleven days later, *U-331* sank the British battleship *Barham*, this time with the loss of 862 members of her crew. The British Admiralty did not make public the loss of the battleship for two months; it was only then that the commander of *U-331* himself learned what he and his boat had accomplished.

If that wasn't bad enough, the Italian Navy had conducted a daring raid on Alexandria on December 19. Three manned torpedoes, guided by teams of Italian frogmen, made their way past the torpedo nets and into the harbor, where they were able to damage two British battleships, at a cost of the six divers taken prisoner. The ships were HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant*. *Queen Elizabeth* would take nine months to repair, *Valiant* six. Consider it Italy's revenge for last year's attack on Taranto.

With the losses of *Barham* and *Ark Royal*, this meant that now the Mediterranean Fleet had no capital ships. This attack, coming as it did less than two weeks after the losses of HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to the Japanese, was quite the blow to Royal Navy morale. The Royal Navy now had no battleships anywhere east of Gibraltar, and the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean was tipping back to the Italians.

Hitler ordered some Luftwaffe units transferred from the Eastern Front back to Sicily to help protect Italian shipping, as well as Junkers-52 transports to help send supplies by air. That might have been a mistake; imagine the good all those transport planes could have done to supply German soldiers on the Eastern Front over the brutal winter of 1941.

Increased supply capacity would help in the long run, but in the short run Rommel's army was exhausted and short on equipment. He ordered a retreat from Tobruk, and in a series of withdrawals, brought his forces back to El Agheila by January. Ten months after he had begun Operation Sunflower, which had taken the Germans and Italians all the way to the Egyptian border, he was right back where he started.

[music: Vivaldi, *Violin Concerto in F major*, "Autumn."]

Over this period of time, during the events I just told you about, there was in the US Embassy in Cairo an American military attaché, Colonel Bonner Fellers. Fellers was a confirmed Anglophobe, but nevertheless in 1941, when the US was still neutral and the Lend-Lease program had begun, the British Middle East Command shared with him frank assessments of the situation in North Africa. He spoke regularly with British commanders, was shown reports, and granted access to the front lines, where he could observe British military operations for himself.

Every evening, Colonel Fellers dutifully composed lengthy reports on what he had learned that day and radioed them to Washington, using the US State Department's so-called Black Code, which was reserved specifically for the use of military attachés. It was called the Black Code because the encryption and decryption procedures were spelled out in a secret book, bound in black.

Cairo was riddled with Italian spies, some of whom had landed jobs in the embassies. By this means, Italian military intelligence had copies of the keys to most of the embassy buildings in Cairo, including the US Embassy. One night in September 1940, two Italian employees of the embassy met with two Italian military intelligence operatives and snuck them into the building.

One of the employees knew the combination to the safe in Colonel Fellers's office. He opened it and the intelligence operatives removed the black code book. They took it back to their base, where every page was photographed, then returned it to the safe before dawn. No one at the embassy was any the wiser.

From that day forward, Italian military intelligence had full access to Fellers's reports, which were chock full of useful information concerning British military operations in North Africa. The Italians shared what they learned with Rommel, although they refused to divulge the means by which they were acquiring the information.

As for the Germans, they had an intercept station near Nuremberg, in southern Germany, which monitored Allied radio communications in the Mediterranean and North Africa. A few weeks after the Italians acquired the Black Code, the Germans broke it themselves, though they did not inform the Italians of this.

This codebreaking coup was not enough to turn things around for Rommel, not at first, and as I said, he was forced back to El Agheila by early 1942, but the Italians and the Germans were also getting information concerning Royal Navy operations in the Mediterranean and details about supply convoys bound for Malta. This information may have had something to do with the recent sinkings of British capital ships.

Erwin Rommel had by this time picked up the nickname *der Wüstenfuchs*, or in English, the "Desert Fox." It's not clear where this nickname originated, but governments and newspapers on both sides embraced it. It was good propaganda for Germany obviously, but in a backhanded kind of way, it was good propaganda for the British too, once they had pushed Rommel back and undone his gains. The good old Tommies had outfought the famous Desert Fox.

In Rome however, Italy's top military commanders were not very happy with the Desert Fox, nor with Benito Mussolini. It seemed to them that Mussolini was becoming Hitler's puppet, and they had had just about enough of Rommel's high-handed manner toward the Italian units under his command. Italians made up most of forces in North Africa, but it was Rommel who gave the orders and Rommel who basked in the glory, even as he was hectoring the *Regia Marina* endlessly about the need to increase shipments of equipment and supplies from Europe. They had held their tongues for as long as Rommel was advancing; now that he was retreating, they were saying out loud what they had been thinking all along.

Rommel didn't let any of this bother him. He was already planning his next offensive and he had two good reasons to believe he could still win this thing. The first was his new American friend in Cairo, Colonel Fellers. The Americans were in the war now, but Colonel Fellers was still sending his daily reports, still sending them in the State Department's Black Code, and because the man was such a committed Anglophobe, they tended to emphasize the weaknesses and mistakes of the British military, which made them especially useful to Rommel.

The second was his old friend, Adolf Hitler. Rommel was the most popular military commander in Germany, and he was Hitler's favorite as well. Hitler admired Rommel's boldness and audacity; his willingness to seize opportunities as they appeared and improvise to take advantage of them, even when the battle plan said to do something else. Hitler wished his commanders on the Eastern Front displayed more of these qualities.

Back in January 1941, when Rommel had first been assigned to North Africa, Hitler had also sent German air units to Sicily. These air units attacked Royal Navy and British merchant ships in the Central Mediterranean, virtually closing it to British ships. They bombed positions in North Africa in support of Rommel's first offensive. They seriously damaged the British carrier HMS *Illustrious*, in revenge for that ship's role in the attack on the Italian Navy at Taranto.

The Luftwaffe and the Italians also used their air superiority to bomb the island of Malta mercilessly, causing widespread destruction. British planes sent to Malta to contest the skies were quickly lost and difficult to replace, since any convoy approaching the island was vulnerable. Only cargo ships with heavy escorts stood a chance.

The Germans and Italians contemplated invading and occupying Malta during this time, but the heavy losses German paratroopers experienced on Crete soured Adolf Hitler on that idea. Then the Luftwaffe was redeployed to the east in support of the invasion of the Soviet Union, and Malta got some breathing room. The British shipped hundreds of fighter planes and bombers to the island, along with fuel and supplies to keep them flying. They rebuilt and enlarged airfields and improved the port facilities.

As British air and naval forces on Malta were increased and supplies and facilities built up, British attacks on Italian shipping to Libya increased along with them. In the period from July to December 1941, half the cargo ships bound for Tripoli were sunk, leaving German and Italian forces in North Africa critically short on supply. This was an important part of the reason they were so vulnerable to the British offensive Operation Crusader.

Hitler was unwilling to sit back and do nothing as his favorite general—as the German public's favorite general—was ignominiously driven out of Libya. He also had to consider the political damage such a crushing defeat would do to Benito Mussolini. He ordered half of the U-boat fleet redeployed from North Atlantic convoy attacks to the Central Mediterranean. He ordered Luftwaffe units redeployed from the Eastern Front back to Sicily.

These redeployments diminished German prospects in the Atlantic and on the Eastern Front, but there can be no doubt they helped the situation in North Africa. The bombing offensive against Malta renewed, costing the RAF sixty Hurricane fighters in January 1942, most of them destroyed on the ground. At one point, the RAF were down to fewer than 30 fighters based on Malta, as unescorted British bombers and reconnaissance planes were now easy prey for German Messerschmitts.



With Axis air superiority established, more Italian ships were getting through to Libya, allowing Rommel's forces to re-equip and prepare for the next offensive. The British calculated Rommel would not be ready until February at the earliest, but, in keeping with his character, Rommel did not wait around. He began this offensive on January 21, once again catching the British unaware and unprepared. A week later, German and Italian troops retook Benghazi; a week after that, they reached the town of Gazala, just 60 kilometers west of Tobruk. They'd taken back most of Cyrenaica in two weeks.

Hurricanes were clearly inadequate to defend Malta, so British commanders began calling for some of the more capable Spitfires. Deploying these to Malta would be dicey. In March, the Royal Navy carrier HMS *Eagle* made two runs to deliver a total of 25 Spitfires to the island. Transfers of planes increased once the Americans loaned out their carrier USS *Wasp*, capable of delivering more than 40 planes at a time. Even so, German and Italian air attacks were destroying Spitfires virtually as fast as they could be delivered.

North Africa was getting supply while the British struggled to get the basics through to Malta. In March, all five ships in a convoy bound for the island were sunk. Food was in short supply, both for the British garrison and the native Maltese. Axis bombings had disabled water distribution. Simple items like clothing, shoes, and tools were impossible to get.

In June, the Royal Navy sent two convoys to Malta at the same time; one from Gibraltar and one from Port Said. The idea here was that Axis air and naval forces would have to split up to attack both. The Gibraltar convoy lost two destroyers and four cargo ships sunk and one cargo ship damaged, though it did reach the island. The Egyptian convoy lost a cruiser, three destroyers, and eleven merchant ships and was forced to turn back.

The OKW, the Wehrmacht High Command, never liked Rommel very much and opposed investing all this effort to support his force in North Africa, now dubbed Panzer Army Africa, but after Rommel recovered most of the ground he'd lost, and with the flow of supplies into North Africa improved, the OKW had a change of heart. In the USSR, Army Group South was advancing toward the Caucasus. If Rommel could at last break through the British lines and capture the Suez Canal, ending the British naval and military presence in the Middle East, Panzer Army Africa could link up with German forces advancing south from the Caucasus and proceed eastward to liberate Iraq and Iran from British and Soviet occupation, and then on to India. OKW was already in talks with the Japanese over a joint German-Japanese invasion of India, and a German *Einsatzgruppe* was already assembled and waiting in Greece to begin operations in Palestine as soon as Rommel captured it.

Bold thinking, but that was Rommel's trademark. Panzer Army Africa spent the next three months facing off against the British Eighth Army at Gazala while its commander waited for the equipment and supplies coming over the sea from Italy to get trucked over the long road from

Tripoli. He couldn't wait too long. The Americans were in the war now; it was vital to win in North Africa before US soldiers and equipment began to arrive in quantity.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Neal and Amy for their kind donations, and thank you to Chris for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Neal and Amy and Chris help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of Erwin Rommel and the North African front into the summer of 1942. Will he find a way to break through the British line at Gazala? The answer is in the title: El Alamein, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Erwin Rommel's relationship with Adolf Hitler was the major reason the campaign in North Africa got the resources it did. The two of them got along well on a personal level. They spoke frequently by telephone, and accounts suggest Hitler very much looked forward to those conversations.

Rommel was a commoner, unlike most high-ranking Army officers. Hitler was also a commoner, and both of them resented the aristocrats in the Army, whom they believed looked down on them. Rommel was never a member of the Nazi Party, but he did embrace the Nazi ideology's impatience with aristocracy and exultation of the common man. Rommel saw himself as one such man. He treated his soldiers relatively well, led them into battle at his own personal risk, and this image of Rommel as friend of the common soldier made him popular with his soldiers, the German press, and with Hitler, but unpopular with the aristocrats who mostly ran the German Army.

Hitler admired Rommel's style of command, and found his popularity politically useful. Rommel's successes in North Africa in 1941 and 1942 helped obscure the fact that the German campaign against the Soviet Union was not going as well as expected. As for Rommel, there is evidence his enthusiasm for Hitler began to wane by 1942. The Nazi atrocities troubled him, and he was enough of a general to recognize the increasingly difficult military situation into which the *Führer* had led the Army and the nation.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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