

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 367

“El Alamein”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

When a commander has won a decisive victory...it is generally wrong for him to be satisfied with too narrow a strategic aim. For that is the time to exploit success. It is during the pursuit, when the beaten enemy is still dispirited and disorganized, that most prisoners are made and most booty captured.

Erwin Rommel.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 367. El Alamein.

In April 1942, Adolf Hitler took some time off to relax at the Berghof, but he had to interrupt his retreat on the 29th of April to meet with Benito Mussolini. This was their first face-to-face meeting since August of 1941. Then, the invasion of the USSR looked to be a smashing success. Now, Hitler needed to reassure Mussolini that the campaign in the East was still winnable. He told Mussolini that any kind of negotiated settlement to the war was unacceptable. The Axis powers had sacrificed much; they were entitled to their reward.

Mussolini asked Hitler to move ahead with Operation Hercules, the plan to invade Malta. Hitler did not refuse; he merely told Mussolini that after last year's losses on Crete, Germany would need more time to rebuild its paratroop units. He pointed out that since he'd redeployed Luftwaffe units from the East to Sicily, the British air and naval forces stationed on Malta had largely been neutralized, making it easier for Italian ships to deliver increasing quantities of supplies and reinforcements. This made Malta less important; the more crucial goal for now was to send Rommel as much support as possible.

In his diary, Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister, Count Ciano, noted that Hitler seemed fatigued and his hair was grayer than it had been last year and guessed the reversals in Russia had taken their toll. They had done nothing, however, to diminish Hitler's ability to monologue.

Count Ciano also expressed sympathy for Mussolini, a guy who also loved to talk, being forced to sit and listen to all this, which only underscored that Mussolini was the junior member of this partnership. He observed that Hitler's military leaders, including Keitel and Jodl, struggled to stay awake during the *Führer's* harangues and expressed sympathy for them: "They have to swallow this every day, and I am sure there is not a word...they do not know by heart."

The Italians were not fooled; they left the meeting with the sense that Hitler and his staff were putting the best face on a troubled situation. Hitler intended to stay longer at the Berghof, but when it began to snow in the mountains, he left. After commanding the German Army through a Russian winter, the last thing he wanted to see right now was snow, so he returned to the Wolf's Lair.

As you know, the German Army scored some early victories on the Eastern Front as it prepared for Plan Blue, the 1942 summer offensive. Down in Libya, General Rommel was making preparations, too. In February 1942, he had surprised the British with another offensive and pushed them back almost to Tobruk. Since then the front line had remained stable at a point about 60 kilometers west of Tobruk, near the village of Gazala. With the increase in shipments to Libya, Panzer Army Africa was receiving around 60,000 tons of supplies a month, a major improvement, while Rommel, being Rommel, planned his next offensive. His orders were to push the British back to the Egyptian border, but no farther, and to do it by July, when the invasion of Malta would finally begin.

The British and their allies used this time to build their defensive line and prepare for their own next offensive. They cannibalized the Tobruk defenses, relocating the barbed wire and minefields before their current front line at Gazala, while cargo ships defended by the Royal Navy delivered supplies to Tobruk, where they were stockpiled for the planned offensive.

As usual, Rommel surprised his enemies by attacking earlier than expected. His next offensive began on May 27, as he personally led German and Italian motorized units around the southern flank of the British line. We've seen this maneuver before.

His goal was to drive north to the coast and surround a large portion of the British Eighth Army. The flanking maneuver was successful at first. On Rommel's far right flank, the German 90th Division stumbled into the headquarters unit of the British 7th Armored Division, capturing several of its senior officers and leaving the 7th without effective command for two days.

Rommel's main force, though, was blocked by the British First Armored Division, now armed with American Grant tanks. The American tanks weren't as fast or maneuverable or well-protected as British tanks, but they surprised the Germans with their 75mm guns, which had much more power and range than the guns on British tanks.

This left Rommel at the spearhead of his mobile force, which now could not advance, virtually surrounded by British forces. Rommel's chief of staff advised him to withdraw and give up on

the operation. They could always tell the OKW that it had been merely a “reconnaissance in force.” Rommel refused this advice and ordered his units to fight on.

The British commanders thought Rommel’s force was surrounded, so they saw no need to attack in haste. First let the Germans burn through their ammunition and realize they’re trapped. But Rommel’s situation, while perhaps worse than he realized, was better than the British realized. The Germans hunkered down into a defensive posture, while Italian units gradually cleared a passage through one of the wide minefields the British had laid before their front line and were able to resupply Rommel’s force from the west.

The Germans were now effectively defending a salient in their own line, a bulge that pointed east, into British-controlled territory. The British called it “the Cauldron” and were unable to push Rommel back behind his own line. Instead of attempting to push forward, Rommel next sought to widen the gap the Italians had made in the British line, attacking the British sideways, as it were. He first attacked north, toward the British 150th Infantry Brigade, which was destroyed by the German 90th Infantry and the Italian Trieste armored division, on May 31. The Axis took 3,000 prisoners and captured over a hundred tanks and armored cars and more than a hundred artillery guns.

That success inspired Rommel to try the same trick again. He ordered those two units to turn around and attack the British line south of the Cauldron. The next “British” unit in that direction was in fact a Free French infantry brigade, who were anchoring the southern end of the British line. The Germans and Italians pounded this unit with attack after attack, assisted by bombardments from artillery and dive bombers, but the French held on for more than a week against overwhelming fire power, until General Ritchie ordered them to withdraw.

This moment is significant because it represents the first time French and German soldiers met in combat since the armistice of 1940, and the French acquitted themselves with honor. Charles de Gaulle is said to have wept when a report of the brigade’s performance was made to him.

Which was all well and good, but the withdrawal of the French brigade cleared Rommel’s right flank and now he was in a position to roll up the British line all the way to the coast. Happily for the Allies, the Eighth Army put the time the French had bought it to good use, pulling back their slower infantry units along the coast and avoiding what might have been a disastrous encirclement.

The British withdrawal raised the question of whether and how to defend Tobruk against the advancing Germans. Middle East Commander General Sir Claude Auchinleck ordered Eighth Army commander General Neil Ritchie to defend Tobruk if possible, but, recognizing that its defenses had been stripped, not to allow it to become garrisoned and besieged as it had been last year. If worst came to worst, the supplies should be destroyed and the city abandoned.

It seems, however, that the prime minister took a personal interest in Tobruk. Churchill believed that the long siege of Tobruk last year had made the city into a symbol of British resistance and that to lose it now would represent a serious blow. Churchill communicated this to Auchinleck, who in turn told Ritchie that yes, maybe it would be okay to garrison Tobruk, so long as it wasn't surrounded.

The ambiguity over Tobruk—and how hard the Eighth Army was supposed to fight for it—led to disaster. On June 18, Rommel's tanks reached the sea east of Tobruk, isolating the city once again, with 33,000 Allied soldiers trapped inside. About a third of them were units from the 2nd South African Infantry Division.

That number of soldiers was comparable to the garrison that had successfully defended Tobruk for eight months, but in fact the two situations were very different. First, some 10,000 of those 33,000 were support personnel, not front-line soldiers. More important, the British had taken the defenses around Tobruk and repurposed them to protect a front line that had now collapsed.

During their dash to the coast, the German panzers had captured RAF airfields, their stockpiles of aviation fuel intact, and a storage dump that included thousands of trucks. Italian infantry advancing east toward Tobruk along the coast came across supply dumps they had left behind when the British drove them away, and which the British had never bothered to collect.

The captured airfields and aviation fuel facilitated Luftwaffe bombing of the city, though Rommel was told these air units would soon be needed for the Malta invasion, so he'd better move fast. No problem; moving fast was Rommel's specialty. He was eager to begin the assault on Tobruk as soon as possible, to capitalize on British disorganization. On June 20, his panzers attacked the city from the east. The British defense was confused and ineffective. German tanks had taken most of the city by sunset.

The following morning, the commander on the scene, South African General Hendrik Klopper, surrendered. The Germans took the 33,000 soldiers in Tobruk prisoner. Measured by the number of prisoners taken, this was the second-worst defeat in British military history. It misses being the worst only because of the fall of Singapore four months earlier.

On June 22, the first anniversary of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler promoted Rommel to field marshal. At 49 years old, that made him the youngest of that rank in the German Army, much to the irritation of the other general officers. Though British engineers had done their best to destroy the supply stores in Tobruk, most of them fell into German hands. The Germans now had thousands more trucks, huge stores of food and drinking water, and thousands of tons of fuel. Rommel must have been pinching himself. This had to be a dream.

German soldiers who had been on short rations for months and whose uniforms were tattered helped themselves to British biscuits, canned milk and chocolate, along with British shirts and socks, but they did not share their bounty with their Italian allies.

The Axis forces were supposed to stop at the border and wait for the invasion of Malta, but the newly-minted field marshal was feeling his oats. The British withdrawal had been chaotic and a huge cache of supplies had fallen into his hands. Naturally he wanted to push on, to pursue and harry the retreating British all the way to Alexandria, and his new best friend, US Army Colonel Bonner Fellers, the military attaché in Cairo, saw the situation in the same way. Fellers's latest report to Washington, which Rommel had in hand, included his customary pessimistic view of the British position. The last sentence of his report spelled it out as plain as could be: "If Rommel intends to take the Delta, now is the time."

Rommel agreed wholeheartedly. He send a message to Benito Mussolini, recommending that he be permitted to continue the offensive into Egypt and that the invasion of Malta be postponed so the Luftwaffe could continue to support him. Mussolini consulted with Hitler, who was still nervous about another major paratroop operation after Crete. He told Mussolini: "The goddess of luck in battle only visits a commander once. He who fails to seize such a moment will often never get a second chance!"

Hitler was thrilled by Rommel's victory. He admired Rommel's daring and his willingness to improvise, and wished his generals on the Eastern Front displayed more of those qualities. The fall of Tobruk and the early victories in the Soviet Union were signs that spring of 1942 had brought a resurgence of German power. It was not hard to believe that Egypt was about to fall, and the Caucasus soon after that. Add in the dramatic Japanese successes of the past six months, and you might think the Axis powers were on the cusp of victory.

Winston Churchill and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, were in Washington on June 21, in a meeting with their American counterparts, President Franklin Roosevelt and General George Marshall, when a messenger brought the news of the surrender of Tobruk. Churchill was shocked and steeled himself for the American reaction. Roosevelt asked, "What can we do to help?"

Four days later, a by-election was held in the constituency of Maldon in Essex. Although the Conservative who had held the seat won it handily back in 1935, and despite the agreement between Labour and the Tories that neither party would contest a seat held by the other, a left-leaning journalist who lived in the constituency and ran an independent campaign, defeated the Conservative candidate by thirty percentage points.

The loss of Tobruk was credited as the reason for the Tory defeat, and a Tory MP introduced a no-confidence motion in Parliament. Churchill's government won the vote on that motion, decisively.

[music: Elgar, *Pomp and Circumstance*, March No. 3]

In North Africa, Rommel began his pursuit of the British as soon as he received permission. General Ritchie gave up on his initial plan, which was to make a stand at the Egyptian border,

and instead chose to fall all the way back to Mersa Matruh, which had been the British Army's fallback position after that first Italian offensive back in 1940. Now, Axis forces were invading Egypt for the second time.

Rommel's units took Sidi Barrani on June 24. On June 25, General Auchinleck relieved Ritchie and took personal command of the Eighth Army. On the 26th, Panzer Army Africa caught up to the British at Mersa Matruh and prepared to attack. The British armored units had suffered serious losses, and Rommel hoped to use his panzers to surround and destroy the British infantry before the Eighth Army had time to regroup.

But the attack had to be delayed. Advancing into Egypt brought the Axis forces closer to the RAF and farther from the Luftwaffe, making it harder to maintain air superiority. A truck convoy bringing up supplies from Tobruk was attacked and destroyed by the RAF, which forced Rommel to wait until afternoon to begin his attack.

By the following morning, June 27, German panzer units broke through the southern end of the British line and circled east and north. Auchinleck ordered the commanders on the scene to retreat, if necessary to avoid encirclement. By nightfall, the Germans reached the coast road, behind the British.

But only a few small German units had made it to the coast. British forces in Mersa Matruh began fighting their way east, to break through the German position and withdraw to their next defensive position, the village of Fuka, about 50 kilometers to the east. The 2nd New Zealand Division approached the Germans in the dark and surprised them with grenades. Close order combat followed, with the New Zealanders bayoneting the unprepared Germans.

Most of the British forces broke through, although there was poor coordination among the units. Some of them received the order to withdraw much later than others. While the Germans pursued their enemies east toward Fuka, the Italians surrounded Mersa Matruh. On June 29, the roughly 6,000 Allied soldiers still in the town surrendered to the Italians. In taking Mersa Matruh, the Italians seized another sizeable British supply cache.

Meanwhile, the Germans pursued and harried the retreating British forces. An Indian infantry brigade that reached Fuka was attacked by panzers before it could regroup and it was destroyed. The Germans captured 1,600 prisoners from routed and retreating units. Other retreating units fled all the way to Alexandria. Thousands of soldiers deserted.

In the Wolf's Lair, Adolf Hitler was convinced that Rommel was about to seize control over Egypt. Mussolini flew to Libya and picked out the white stallion he planned to ride through the streets of Cairo during his victory parade.

The Axis capture of Mersa Matruh meant that the port of Alexandria was now within reach of German and Italian air units. The new commander of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet,

concerned for the safety of his ships, ordered them to leave Alexandria, disperse, and head for ports in Syria and Lebanon.

The evacuation of the fleet sparked a panic in Egypt. Shopkeepers kept portraits of Mussolini handy, ready to display when the Axis forces arrived. Long lines formed in front of Egyptian banks as customers emptied their bank accounts. On July 1, British diplomats and British Army offices in Cairo began burning their files. This day became known as “Ash Wednesday” for the blizzard of ashes their fires sent blowing over the city.

A rumor spread that the Germans would be entering Cairo in 24 hours, sparking an exodus of Europeans, who tied their household goods to the tops of their cars and fled east. German propaganda broadcasts deliberately added to the panic. One advised Egyptian women, “Get out your party frocks, we’re on the way!”

Some Egyptians joined in the panic; others were amused by it. Others saw an opportunity, such as an Egyptian Army officer named Anwar Sadat, who began buying up empty bottles that could be made into Molotov cocktails when the uprising against the British began.

No one in Egypt was more frightened than the country’s small Jewish population. British authorities in Egypt gave them priority on train tickets to the east, but British authorities in Palestine refused to admit them.

The inability of the Eighth Army to make a stand at Fuka forced them to withdraw to the last defensible position before Alexandria and the Nile: a small town, barely more than a railway station, called El Alamein, which lay barely 100 kilometers west of Alexandria.

To understand the coming Battle of El Alamein, first you have to look at the Qattara Depression. The Qattara Depression is a unique geographical feature. It is what it sounds like, a large, low-lying area in the Western Desert of Egypt; its floor lies an average of 60 meters, or 200 feet, below sea level. It’s roughly 300 by 130 kilometers and has a surface area of 20,000 square kilometers, making it a little bigger than Lake Ontario in North America or Lake Ladoga in Russia, which is the largest lake in Europe.

The Qattara Depression might well have been a lake, if it were located in a wetter part of the world, but it’s not. It’s located in the Western Desert of Egypt. Groundwater from the surrounding high ground flows into the Depression, but it quickly evaporates, leaving the floor of the Depression covered by salt flats and fine sand, and in some places salt marshes.

There is one town in the Depression, located around an oasis large enough to support about 350 people. The only other population is an indeterminate number of Bedouins and their sheep.

The Depression is shaped roughly like a teardrop, with the bulb of the drop pointing southwest and the pointy end stretching northeast, then curving to the east. It is this curvy part in the northeast that concerns us, because here the Qattara Depression comes within 70 kilometers of

the Mediterranean. And where is this place where it comes within 70 kilometers of the Mediterranean? You guessed it: El Alamein.

The fine sand in the Depression wreaks havoc with any kind of machinery, and the soft ground makes it virtually impassable to tanks. That's assuming a tank could get down there. The northern edge of the Depression is a steep cliff.

Militarily speaking, it is simply not feasible to send armed forces into the Depression. Both sides managed to send reconnaissance units down into the Depression; these were small units which were experienced in desert conditions and traveled light, but they played no combat role.

The bottom line is this: for all practical purposes, the Qattara Depression is impassable. The Axis and Allied forces fighting at El Alamein have no choice but to restrict themselves to that 70 kilometer passageway that runs between the Depression and the sea. The British took full advantage of the defensive possibilities. They had already laid mine fields and built defensive positions across this 70 kilometer strip, and it was to these positions that Auchinleck withdrew his units, where they were joined by some Indian Army reinforcements arriving from Iraq.

All this was very bad news for Erwin Rommel. The geography made it impossible for him to resort to his favorite trick, leading his mobile German units around the southern flank of the British line. This time, the southern end of the British line was up against a 60 meter cliff.

Rommel drove his army all the way from Tobruk to El Alamein, a distance of 500 kilometers, in 15 days, harrying the British every step of the way. This works out to 33 kilometers per day, including time spent in combat, which is a rapid pace for an army, especially an army marching through a desert, and as Rommel's army advanced, it's supply line grew longer and longer, while the British supply line grew shorter and shorter. The distance from air bases in Libya grew longer, shortening the length of time German and Italian planes could attack the enemy before running low on fuel, while the distance from RAF air bases in Alexandria grew shorter, meaning British planes could spend more time attacking the enemy before they had to turn around and head for home.

The Axis army had captured substantial supplies at Tobruk and Mersa Matruh and thousands of trucks to transport them, but even so, it was difficult to get those supplies to the front line. The British command understood very well how long and fragile Rommel's supply line was, and they sent the RAF to bomb Axis truck convoys mercilessly.

Rommel ordered his army to charge ahead at full speed, straight into the British line, counting on sheer momentum to blast through the enemy defenses, presumably garrisoned by demoralized and disorganized troops. It was not to be. The British Eighth Army had been through a lot, but morale held. No doubt it helped that they had prepared positions to fall back into and resupply arriving quickly from Alexandria.

Panzer Army Africa reached the British defensive line on June 30, exhausted. Rommel wanted to attack immediately, but the panzers were low on fuel and the Luftwaffe's planes had yet to relocate to their new forward positions, so the attack was delayed until July 1. His plan was to concentrate his mobile German units at a weak point in the British line, then have them punch through and cut the British off from the road to Alexandria.

He couldn't pull it off. Rommel kept up the attack for the next four days, but was unable to force a breakthrough. The RAF was dominating the skies, and the British were receiving reinforcements. On July 4, the 9th Australian division arrived, and five days later two Indian Army brigades joined the line. They brought with them tanks. Lots of tanks. Soon the British had close to a 2:1 advantage in numbers of tanks, as well as new and more powerful 25-pound anti-tank guns.

The British now took the initiative. Rommel had his own forces dig in, while the British began a series of counterattacks in an attempt to break the German line and force a withdrawal, but the Eighth Army remained plagued with the same difficulties coordinating movements among its multinational forces that had done them in at Gazala and Mersa Matruh.

Finally, on July 31, Auchinleck ended offensive operations. The British and Commonwealth forces would instead concentrate on strengthening their defenses, because by now even they knew that Rommel was going to attempt another offensive, and probably sooner than expected.

Rommel, as always, blamed the Italians, complaining that he wasn't getting his equipment and supplies fast enough. In fairness, though, the original plan had been for an assault on Malta. The Italian Navy had not expected the ground forces in North Africa to make a sudden charge deep into Egypt, and were not ready to support it. Also, though neither Rommel nor the Italians knew it, the British Ultra project was giving their enemy advance notice of every Italian convoy.

Winston Churchill and the new Chief of the Imperial General Staff, stopped off in Cairo on their way to their meeting in Moscow with Joseph Stalin. They were dissatisfied by the outcome of this battle and relieved Auchinleck, replacing him with General Sir Harold Alexander as commander-in-chief of Middle East Command. They promoted the commander of XIII Corps, General William Gott, to command of the Eighth Army.

Unfortunately for General Gott, he was killed just days later whilst flying from the front line back to Cairo. His transport plane was intercepted and shot down by German Me-109s. This was initially thought to have been merely a case of bad luck, but it is possible the Germans had advance knowledge of Gott's flight, thanks to US Colonel Bonner Fellers and his detailed reports, and had deliberately targeted the general.

To replace Gott, Churchill and Brooke turned to the commander of the British 3rd division, General Bernard Montgomery. Montgomery's division had been stationed in England ever since Dunkirk, and the story goes that when he had received the news of his new appointment,

Montgomery lamented to another British general, “After having an easy war, things have now got much more difficult.” The other general encouraged him to cheer up, and Montgomery replied, “I’m not talking about me; I’m talking about Rommel!”

History knows this conflict as the First Battle of El Alamein. As the name implies, there will be a second, three months later, but that is a story for another episode.

We’ll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Simon for his kind donation, and thank you to David for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Simon and David 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 and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it’s my own work, sometimes it’s licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you’re there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today’s show.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we get up to speed on the situation in China, which we haven’t talked about in a while. The Second United Front, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. We keep encountering the Second New Zealand Division in episodes on the Balkans and North Africa. We’ll probably run into them again. That being the case, I thought I should mention that the division included the 28th Battalion, an all-Māori unit of about 3,600. It was raised early in 1940 in response to calls by Māori groups for such a unit and it was attached to General Freyberg’s division. It fought in Greece, on Crete, and in North Africa, and later in Italy. At first the unit served under white officers, but over time these were replaced with Māori, and in May 1942, a Māori colonel was made battalion commander.

They developed a reputation for ferocity that was acknowledged even by the Germans, and become one of the most decorated units in the New Zealand Army. General Freyberg said of them, “No infantry had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or, alas, had such heavy casualties.” Over 600 of the 3,600 who served in the battalion were killed, and more than 1,700 injured over the course of the war.

[music: Closing War Theme]

© 2024 by Mark Painter. All rights reserved.