The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 378
"The End of the Beginning"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

German and Italian forces in North Africa knew an offensive from Montgomery's Eighth Army in Egypt was coming. But a whole other offensive force was gathering at Gibraltar. The Axis side did not yet realize it, but the situation in North Africa was about to change dramatically.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 378. The End of the Beginning.

Two episodes ago, I ended the narrative on October 23, 1942, just as the Second Battle of El Alamein was about to begin. That was ten weeks after Bernard Montgomery was put in command of Eighth Army, a long wait to be sure, especially considering how impatient the Prime Minister was to see the British Army go on the offensive. Fortunately for Montgomery, he had an ally in his superior, General Harold Alexander, head of Middle East Command, who defended him when the Prime Minister expressed doubts.

Montgomery put the time to good use. He spent some of it meeting with his soldiers, which helped boost morale in the battered Eighth Army. New tanks, trucks, ammunition, and supplies were arriving every week, so time was most assuredly on the British side.

The Axis forces were in trouble, and they knew it. Axis aircraft flew regular reconnaissance over the British lines, and they saw for themselves how the British were getting more of everything: more soldiers, more tanks, more lorries, more fuel, more ammunition.

Supply to the Axis side had to be trucked over that long, long road from Tripoli, and the trucks ate up most of the fuel they carried before they arrived. You can understand why Rommel was constantly complaining. By late October, after six weeks of shipments, the Axis front line still had only two days' worth of fuel and sixteen days' worth of ammunition.

The German and Italian forces at El Alamein were not going to be able to outfight the enemy. With so little fuel, they certainly weren't going to outmaneuver them. Their only hope was Rommel's plan, to trap the British in what he called the Devil's Gardens, the spaces between the minefields, and destroy them with artillery and anti-tank guns.

On the other side of the line, Bernard Montgomery was not about to do anything as plodding and predictable as that. The Axis commanders knew a British attack was coming, and Montgomery knew that they knew. The front line was so narrow, there weren't many options for the focus of the offensive. The only terrain that had any military value was the strip along the coast, where ran a road and a railroad track, so that was the obvious place for the Italians and Germans to keep an eye on.

So, in the weeks leading up to the battle, Montgomery put a strong emphasis on misdirection. The British parked their supply trucks near the front line and their tanks to the rear. Obviously, they would want their tanks up front when they began their offensive, so Axis commanders assumed they were safe for the time being. What they didn't know was that at night, when the reconnaissance planes were grounded, the British were gradually swapping the trucks and the tanks. Tanks parked near the front were camouflaged to look like trucks from the air; trucks parked in the rear were camouflaged to look like tanks from the air. Supply dumps were also stacked and camouflaged to look like trucks. The British covered their rubbish dumps with camouflage netting; the Axis side figured that was a trick and ignored them, but then the British would gradually remove the empty crates in the rubbish dump by night and replace them with full crates of ammunition.

Perhaps the cleverest bit of misdirection was the construction of a water pipeline from Alexandria to the front. The reasons why the British might want to build a water pipeline to their desert position were obvious, but it was a ruse. The pipeline was fake, meant to lull the enemy into complacency, and the project timed so that the "pipeline" would be not quite finished when the offensive began. The British used similar tricks to make it look as if the offensive, when it came, would be at the southern end of the line, while preparing the attack for the northern end of the line.

On the evening of October 23, as soon as the sun set, British, Australian, South African, and New Zealander infantry began quietly advancing into the German minefield. Understand that these were anti-tank mines. The footfall of a single soldier would not be enough to detonate them, hence the codename Operation Lightfoot. Soldiers probed the ground with their bayonets, identifying and removing mines, then marking a pathway for the tanks.

Two hours later, under a full moon, the British attack began. The first thing Axis soldiers noticed was the horizon to the east flickering, like a distant thunderstorm. One thousand artillery guns opened fire on the German positions, timed so that the shells would land up and down the 60-kilometer Axis front line at the same time. Allied bombers struck the Axis rear. The German

commander, Georg Stumme, mindful of how little ammunition he had, ordered Axis artillery not to respond.

Just before midnight, the infantry began to advance down the cleared corridors. The Scottish Highland Division marched with bagpipes skirling, a longstanding custom of the Highlanders. There's nothing more terrifying than a squad of bagpipers headed straight for you.

But Rommel had planted an exceptionally deep minefield. The Allies did not realize this, and unfortunately for them dawn came before they had worked all the way through. Allied artillery and air units pounded the Axis positions, keeping them pinned down while the infantry worked in haste to clear the last of the mines.

General Stumme took a car to the front line to assess the situation for himself. As they made a stop along the way, the car came under fire while Stumme was outside. He jumped onto the running board and the car raced for safety, but a few minutes later the driver realized Stumme was no longer there. They found his body later, lying by the side of the road, dead but unwounded. Apparently, the excitement had been too much for him and he'd had a heart attack.

When news of the British offensive and Stumme's death made it to the Wolf's Lair, Hitler ordered Rommel to cut short his R&R in Germany. Rommel rushed back to North Africa, stopping in Rome only long enough to complain once again to the Italian Supreme Command that their supply deliveries were inadequate.

He arrived at the front on the evening of the 25th, two days into the battle. Rommel correctly guessed the British were trying to break through at the northern end of the line and ordered it reinforced. The British had by this time opened lanes through the minefield, but were stymied by the Axis defenders. The heavy Allied air and artillery bombardments had taken a serious toll on Axis soldiers and machines, especially at the northern end of the front. One particularly useful Allied weapon was the American P-39 fighter, a little plane that didn't have much altitude and didn't have much range. The British didn't think much of it, but what it did have was a 37mm cannon that fired right through the propeller hub, making it easy for the pilot to aim, and the cannon was devastating to Axis vehicles.

The British went into this battle with a nearly 2:1 advantage in numbers of tanks, and that ratio was growing by the hour. Still, they were struggling to break through the Axis front line. Axis planes found a British truck convoy bringing in ammunition and fuel and destroyed it. The fires burned for a night and a day. With the offensive seeming to go nowhere, one of Montgomery's subordinates advised calling it off, but Montgomery refused. In London, in the Cabinet War Rooms underneath Whitehall, Winston Churchill wondered aloud why it was so hard to find a general who could, you know, win a battle.

The fighting continued for days, under miserable conditions. To the desert heat and the ever-present flies was added the heat from burning wrecks that dotted the front lines and the stench of

decomposing bodies. Four Italian tankers and one freighter attempting to bring fuel and ammunition to Tobruk were identified and sunk by the RAF, thanks to information provided by Enigma decrypts, which also told Montgomery that the Germans were down to 80 operational tanks and the Italians 200, while he had more than 800.

As the fighting at El Alamein raged on inconclusively, the opposite end of the Mediterranean was thick with intrigue. On October 27, the British submarine HMS *Seraph* left Gibraltar for the French coast to pluck Henri Giraud from the custody of the Vichy government and bring him to the Rock. Giraud didn't want to have anything to do with the British; he insisted an American submarine should pick him up. The trouble with that idea was, the US Navy had no submarines in the Mediterranean.

So HMS *Seraph*, commanded by Royal Navy Lieutenant Norman Jewell temporarily became USS *Seraph*, commanded by US Navy Captain Jerauld Wright, and flew a US flag, so as not to offend the general's delicate sensibilities. The British sailors got into the spirit of the thing, affecting American accents with varying degrees of success. I wonder how many other times in naval history a warship was under the command of two different officers from two different navies.

Seraph was ordered to patrol the French coast until it received instructions on where and when to pick up the French general and escape artist. The submarine waited six days.

On November 2, Rommel reported to Hitler that his army was on the verge of destruction. Hitler cabled back, ordering him "to stand fast, yield not a meter of ground, and throw every gun and every man into the battle."

By the time Rommel received Hitler's reply, he had already begun a retreat. Rommel ordered the foot soldiers, mostly Italian units, to hold the line while what remained of the panzer units and motorized units, which were mostly German, withdrew. Some German soldiers commandeered Italian trucks at gunpoint to use in their own escape, leaving the Italians stranded.

News of Rommel's retreat order reached the Wolf's Lair just after midnight on November 3, but the duty officer did not immediately take this news to Hitler; instead, he put it into the stack of reports for the 9:00 AM review. Hitler was beside himself. He concluded that the OKW had deliberately withheld the news to give Rommel more time to execute his retreat. Hitler called in the duty officer, a major, and threatened to execute him, though the *Führer* settled for busting him down to private.

In Gibraltar, General Giraud met with General Eisenhower and General Clark. Eisenhower asked Giraud to assume command of the French forces in North Africa after the Americans landed and order French troops to stand down. Afterward, Giraud would effectively be military governor of French North Africa, at least until the liberation of France.

Giraud was offended by the offer. He'd expected to be put in command of the entire Operation Torch. In other words, he wanted Eisenhower's job. Eisenhower wouldn't agree to that; he had no authority to agree to that. The irritated Giraud announced that in that case, he would remain a spectator on the sidelines, as he put it. Happily, the following day he relented and agreed to cooperate with Eisenhower.

In Egypt, the Axis forces were in full retreat; the Allied forces in full pursuit. On November 7, the Eighth Army reached Mersa Matruh. On the ninth, Sidi Barrani. On the eleventh, it crossed the border into Libya. Much of Rommel's army escaped, though the British did take some 40,000 prisoners, mostly Italians. Both sides lost hundreds of tanks and artillery guns and dozens of aircraft. Those losses amounted to less than half what the British had started with, but represented almost all of the Axis side's equipment.

The victory at El Alamein was less due to Bernard Montgomery's generalship—though his careful planning and patient preparation certainly helped—than it was a clear sign that the war had reached a tipping point. El Alamein can be thought of as the First World War's Western Front in miniature. Like the Western Front, both sides had sufficient units to cover the entire front, making maneuver impossible and forcing a war of attrition. What made this battle different was that although the British side had a steady stream of equipment and ammunition flowing to it, the Germans did not. In the last war, the Germans had had railroads that could bring their ammunition virtually from the factory floor straight to the trenches. No such luck this time.

The Royal Artillery and the RAF pummeled the Italians and Germans, while the Axis side lacked the ammunition to answer in kind. The RAF also blocked the meager flow of Axis supplies by ship from Italy, with a crucial assist from the wizards at Bletchley Park who were now reading Enigma messages routinely.

After the war, when Churchill wrote its history, he remarked of this battle, "It may almost be said, 'Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat.'" But I prefer the assessment of the battle he made on November 10, as the Eighth Army was approaching Libya. In a speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet in the City of London, he described the victory and summarized it this way: "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

[music: Holst, *Second Suite for Military Band*.]

I want to take a brief diversion here and open up a new topic: the Jewish population of France and of the French colonial possessions around the Mediterranean, because it's about to become important to our narrative.

First, Metropolitan France. When France fell in 1940, there were just shy of 350,000 Jewish people living in France, the majority of them in Paris. A substantial portion of this total was from Germany or Austria or Czechoslovakia, fleeing Nazi persecution and turning to France for

refuge. Long-time listeners know that France is a country with its own sorry history of anti-Semitism; if you don't believe me, check out episode 8. Nevertheless, Nazi Germany's record was far worse. I doubt any of these Jewish refugees ever imagined that France would soon be defeated and they would be under German jurisdiction once again.

The Armistice of 1940 divided France into a zone of German occupation and unoccupied France, which called itself the "French State," ruled by Marshal Pétain from the city of Vichy.

In Occupied France, the Germans set to work at once identifying which of the population under their jurisdiction were Jewish, with the assistance of French police, who, under the terms of the Armistice, were obligated to take orders from the German occupation authorities. The Germans began to expropriate Jewish property and arrest and intern individual Jewish people just weeks after the occupation was established. Other people identified as Jewish in occupied France were forced to wear yellow stars for easy identification, as was the case throughout German-occupied Western Europe.

In 1941, the Germans in Occupied France began to round up Jewish people *en masse*, beginning with the refugees. In 1942, the Germans began shipping Jewish people to Eastern Europe as part of Operation Reinhard. The official story was that all Jewish people were being relocated, to begin new lives in a new homeland. Nazi propaganda emphasized how happy they would be in this Eastern European wonderland. Most sensible people discounted these claims and assumed relocation wasn't going to be all that pleasant for the people relocated. Still, few guessed the awful truth: that these people were being sent off to be murdered wholesale.

What about unoccupied France? Jewish people were better off there, but only relatively speaking. In addition to those native to the region, large numbers of Jewish people from Occupied France fled to the unoccupied zone. Also, German authorities ruling the territories of Alsace and Lorraine, which the Germans now administered in what amounted to *de facto* annexation, expelled their Jewish population to unoccupied France. They gave no advance warning, either to the deportees themselves, or to the government in Vichy, which put them into internment camps on their arrival.

The terms of the Armistice did not permit Germany to dictate domestic policy to the French government at Vichy. Nevertheless, the Vichy government of its own accord began replicating Germany's anti-Semitic laws in France. In October 1940, the Vichy government enacted new laws regarding its Jewish population. The first defined who was Jewish, mirroring the definition in Germany's Nuremberg Laws, and barred Jewish people from certain professions, including law, teaching, filmmaking, and journalism. The second required all Jewish foreigners to be confined to internment camps. Later, Jewish refugees from Occupied France and the people expelled from Alsace-Lorraine were also ordered interned. Another law devised in 1941 required a census of all Jewish people in unoccupied France, as the Germans had already done in Occupied France.

Bear in mind that the Chief of the French State, Philippe Pétain, ruled France by decree, so these laws were essentially his personal declarations. France had been divided into its secular Republican left and its Catholic-extremist-monarchist right since the Revolution, and Jewish people in France had always been stuck in the middle. Revolutionary France had been the first European country to recognize equal rights for its Jewish citizens, while the right tended to think of the French Jewish population as aliens, and the Vichy government was the apotheosis of the French right.

Defenders of the Vichy government point out that it did not force Jewish people to wear yellow stars as the Germans did in Occupied France, nor did it bar Jewish people from public venues, such as theatres, libraries, schools, or sports facilities, as they did in Germany, nor did they require Jewish people to adopt distinctively Jewish names. But then Pétain had less than three years in power. What would he have done if he'd had more time?

As for French colonial possessions, there had been Jewish communities in Syria, Lebanon, and North Africa since ancient times. In Syria and Lebanon, the tensions in Palestine led to violence against Jewish people in those two countries, with the notable exception of the city of Beirut, which remained relatively safe. The violence in turn led to large numbers of people migrating to Palestine.

French North Africa had a Jewish population of some 100,000 at this time, most living in the city of Algiers. France seized control of Algeria in 1830, but it did not extend French citizenship to the indigenous population. In 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, the provisional Government of National Defense issued a decree extending French citizenship to Jewish Algerians, who were described as "indigenous Israelites" in the text of the decree. Muslim Algerians remained second-class citizens in their own country.

As you can imagine, this led to tension between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Algeria. It also led to Jewish Algerians tending to identify with the French and embracing French language and culture. Then came 1940 and rule from Vichy. Along with its other anti-Semitic legislation, the Vichy government rescinded that 1870 decree, stripping the Jewish community in Algeria of their French citizenship, returning them to the status of second-class citizens in their own country.

Vichy anti-Semitism prompted the formation of a largely Jewish underground Resistance movement in Algiers, an armed force who trained and stockpiled weapons. Representatives of the Resistance were among those who met with US Consul Robert Murphy in October.

[music: Holst, *Second Suite for Military Band*.]

Speak to a member of the British War Cabinet or the Imperial General Staff about the French government in Vichy and the UK's relationship with it, and they would have been likely to cite two disturbing truths: that the Vichy government allowed the Germans and Italians to base

aircraft in Syria to aid the Iraqi coup and that the Japanese planes that sank HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had been based on airfields in French Indochina.

The Italian Navy and the German Luftwaffe made shipping through the Mediterranean risky, so as you know, the British were supplying Montgomery's Eighth Army from ships that took the long way, around Africa. Ships traveling to India also went around Africa.

And once they cleared the Cape of Good Hope and circled into the Indian Ocean, they passed by the large island of Madagascar, also controlled by the French government at Vichy. It doesn't take much imagination to picture German or Japanese aircraft flying from that island to threaten this delicate but vital British supply route, nor to envision Japanese warships or submarines using Madagascar as a base. As early as December 1941, some in the British Admiralty were urging a preemptive occupation of Madagascar. Charles de Gaulle brought up the possibility of a Free French operation to take control of the island.

But this was during that awful period when the Japanese were advancing everywhere and seemed unstoppable. Winston Churchill vetoed any action against Madagascar; Britain had bigger fish to fry. General Wavell, head of ABDACOM in the Southwest Pacific, agreed with him, at least until March 1942.

At the same time, representatives of the Kriegsmarine had been meeting with the Japanese to discuss ways in which the German and Japanese navies could work together against the British. In March 1942, the German side proposed the Japanese move forces into the western Indian Ocean. The Japanese side floated the possibility of stationing submarines and perhaps a few surface raiders at Madagascar, in order to attack British shipping between South Africa and Aden or India.

The Americans were reading Japanese naval codes by this time, so when the naval attaché updated Tokyo on these discussions, Washington learned all about them and shared that intelligence with London. The British then decided it was time to go ahead with that invasion of Madagascar, codenamed Operation Ironclad.

After the South African Air Force flew reconnaissance over the island, a Royal Navy task force led by the battleship HMS *Ramillies* and including the carriers HMS *Illustrious* and *Indomitable*, escorted three brigades of soldiers who executed an amphibious landing at the port city of Diego Suarez on the northern tip of the island on May 5. The landing force was able to seize the port and the town without much difficulty; you should note this was the first British amphibious invasion since Gallipoli in 1915.

That got the British control of Madagascar's most important port, but of course it's a big island and it has a lot of other ports, and the French forces on the island, mostly Malagasy colonial soldiers, were not about to give up. In Vichy, Admiral Darlan instructed the French governor to fight the British to the bitter end. The French government sent a plea for assistance to Japan; the

Japanese responded by sending three submarines. One of these submarines launched a midget submarine that penetrated the harbor at Diego Suarez and torpedoed *Ramillies* and a British oil tanker, seriously damaging both ships.

It took six months of on-and-off fighting and multiple assaults on Madagascar's ports. The British took the capital, Tananarive, but the French governor, Armand Annet, escaped and continued to fight a guerilla campaign from the island's lush tropical forests. Annet eventually agreed to an armistice on November 6.

It has been noted that French forces on Madagascar resisted the British longer than French forces in France had resisted the Germans.

[music: Holst, *Second Suite for Military Band*.]

Adolf Hitler loved his anniversaries. He gave a speech every New Year's Day, for example, and on every January 30, the anniversary of the day he was first appointed chancellor, but the most important date on the Nazi holiday calendar was November 8, the anniversary of the 1923 putsch. Every year he traveled to Munich to give a speech to the "old fighters," as he called them: the Party members who had marched with him in his failed quest to seize control of the government of Bavaria.

On the afternoon of the 7th, Hitler boarded his train for Munich. He and his military leaders had seen reports that large numbers of British and American ships had massed at Gibraltar, then sailed into the Mediterranean. The smart bet was that they were escorting a convoy headed for Malta. Hitler himself was too focused on the crucial offensive to take Stalingrad and on his upcoming speech to give the matter much thought.

That night, along the way, Hitler's train was stopped in Thuringia so a message could be delivered to the *Führer* from the Foreign Office: A naval force of British and American ships, numbering over 300, making it one of the largest forces ever assembled in naval history, had entered the Mediterranean and was headed for the coast of French North Africa. Hitler understood the significance of this at once. The Western Allies had chosen to invade North Africa rather than Europe, and the Wehrmacht was completely unprepared for the move. Everything they had was either in Western Europe or Egypt or Russia. So he began to rant about Göring and the Luftwaffe. Why had they not developed the long-range bombers which Germany could now be using to destroy the invaders at sea? Foreign minister Ribbentrop proposed to put out diplomatic feelers to the Soviets to see if a diplomatic settlement of the war in the East was feasible.

Hitler rejected Ribbentrop's proposal. He ordered OKW chief Alfred Jodl to pull together everything the Wehrmacht could spare and ready them to be sent to Tunisia. His biggest concern was the French, and whether they could be trusted to "stay the course." He wondered aloud

whether he should have made more concessions to the French, so they would have greater incentives to remain loyal to Gremany.

In North Africa, Robert Murphy was sitting by the radio, listening to the French-language broadcast of the BBC Overseas Service. At midnight, he heard the announcer read out this brief, cryptic message: “Hello, Robert. Franklin is coming.”

“Robert” referred to him, Robert Murphy. “Franklin” was FDR. The message meant that American soldiers would hit the beaches the following morning.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Gaston, Sergio, and Moritz for their kind donations—quite the international effort there, guys, I appreciate it—and thank you to Nathan for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Gaston and Sergio and Moritz and Nathan help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, 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.

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Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century and I are back from our trip to Scotland. We had a very nice time. A kind listener in Scotland took us both out to dinner in Glasgow, so thank you for that. Now I’m back home and back to worth on the podcast, and I’m a couple of more weeks behind, but that’s how it goes. Don’t worry, we’ll get caught up.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as US forces join in offensive action for the first time in the European Theater, if not quite in Europe. How Green Is My Ally, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. After French forces in Madagascar surrendered on November 6, Winston Churchill invited Charles de Gaulle to appoint a new Free French governor of the island. This was meant in part to make up for Churchill’s earlier refusal to allow de Gaulle and his Free French forces to participate in the invasion.

More important though, Operation Torch was about to begin two days later and de Gaulle had been kept entirely in the dark about it. President Roosevelt didn’t trust him; also, de Gaulle was not popular among the French Army officers in North Africa. Even the ones willing to cooperate

with the Americans didn’t like de Gaulle, who to them was a British puppet and a traitor, who had already been tried and sentenced to death *in abstentia*.

No doubt Churchill knew exactly how de Gaulle would react once he learned Allied soldiers had landed on French soil in North Africa without so much as a heads up, and was trying to placate the general in advance.

[music: Closing War Theme]