

El Alamein - 1942

By late July 1942 Rommel's drive eastwards had been blocked by a series of prepared fortifications reaching from the sea in the north to the Qattara Depression in the south. This became known as the El Alamein line. Few would have banked on the 8th Army's power to ultimately prevent the Germans from reaching Alexandria; however Auchinleck, the British commander, intended to fight a decisive battle so long as there was at least a chance of success.

At this point Rommel was attempting to re-group for a late August offensive. However by now he was a sick man, wearily planning his final fling, and this could not take place until new supplies of fuel and equipment could be brought forward. By August 10th he had decided to attack the rear of the 8th Army from his southern flank.

In the meantime the Allies had at last shaped a Middle East strategy; Churchill and President Roosevelt decided to put aside the longed for Second Front favoured by Stalin, and instead make a concerted effort to clear the North African shore once and for all. This became known as Operation Torch. This envisaged an Anglo/American landing in Morocco while the 8th Army attacked to throw Rommel back from whence he came. Churchill left London on August 2nd to placate Stalin, stopping in Cairo on the way. He was in a fretful mood, unhappy with Auchinleck's handling of the North African campaign and seeking to replace him as Commander-in-Chief with General Gott. However, even as Churchill's telegram was on its way to London announcing the appointment, the aircraft carrying Gott to Cairo was shot down and he was killed. This clearly jeopardised the Prime Minister's policy of installing an able commander to prepare for an early September offensive without delay. Thus, with some reluctance, Churchill was forced to accept General Montgomery although it has to be said this was not his ideal choice.

During the night of August 31st Rommel launched his long awaited attack against the El Alamein front. Short of fuel and ammunition he was unable to make a frontal assault and reverted to his only other option – an enveloping attack. Diversionary attacks were made against the northern front, but the main attack went in against the southern flank where the British

concentrations were weakest. In this way he hoped to roll up the entire enemy position exactly as he had so many times in the past. However during his very first reconnaissance Montgomery had immediately appreciated the importance of holding the southern flank and whilst unable to defend the whole front in depth he took steps to deploy two fresh divisions in this area. In addition, Montgomery had already made it clear to his staff that any further retreat was out of the question. Troops would stand and fight where they were; there was to be no question of going back.

Initially the German attack made slow progress, but as time went by driving sandstorms and stubborn defence badly depleted the Africa Corps' fuel stocks to such an extent that eventually the advance was called off. By September 2nd the promised supplies of fuel had still not arrived and the German troops were being attacked by relays of RAF aircraft. Faced with little or no re-supply of fuel and with insufficient fighter cover the German advance no longer had any chance of success. In retrospect the view was expressed that Montgomery's success in this first battle of El Alamein was the result of his superiority in men and equipment. However true this may have been in the latter stages of the campaign this was not the case in August and September; it was simply due to the speed with which he appreciated the essentials of the situation once he arrived in the desert.

Now began what in British eyes has long seemed the most important battle of the war – popularly known as the battle of El Alamein. This ignores the first battle of El Alamein, fought over virtually the same ground 16 weeks before, at which Rommel's Africa Corps was given the first inkling of its ultimate fate. From now onwards the Axis Army was at a disadvantage in almost every respect, not the least of which was the loss of their charismatic leader as Rommel had returned to Germany for rest and medical treatment. For his part, Montgomery was determined not to attack until the 8th Army had overwhelming superiority. Time was on his side, for the Allies now controlled the supply lines and new equipment, including Sherman tanks, could be delivered in unprecedented quantities. Finally on October 24th after an extremely heavy artillery barrage four divisions advanced through corridors cleared in the enemy minefields. What ensued was a week of very heavy fighting.

Slowly but surely the Australian 9th division drove a wedge into the enemy positions and during strong German counter attacks the 1st Armoured division destroyed over 50 tanks. At this point the German fuel position became even more acute when two much needed tankers were sunk off Tobruk. By October 29th preparations were in hand for the launching of a break-out attack under the code name of operation Supercharge. Meanwhile the Australians continued to push forward and at one point there seemed a possibility of cutting off the bulk of the German forces and completely surrounding them. Supercharge was finally launched on November 2nd with a creeping artillery barrage across a 4,000 yard front. Despite suffering heavy casualties over the following two days it was clear that the enemy was beaten and air reconnaissance confirmed that the retreat had started. Furthermore, shortage of fuel prevented the Germans from providing transport for more than a portion of their forces.

By November 4th all available information showed that the enemy was in full retreat with the Desert Air Force wreaking havoc among the lines of vehicles moving steadily westwards. Although Montgomery now knew that it was only a matter of time before ultimate victory in North Africa, there still remained a long and arduous series of operations yet to be undertaken.