

# **ERIT ROMMEL**

**THE TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN, 1942-1943**

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Bruce Allen Watson

**PRAEGER**

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*In memory of my friend Bill Perry*

He served with British forces in North Africa from near the beginning to the end in Tunisia, and then beyond to Sicily, Italy, and Germany. He survived it all with a matchless sense of humor.

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## Preface

July 1942: I walked beside Lagunitas Creek north of San Francisco, going to the wooded campsite that some friends established two days before. At age 13, I felt at home in those woods, some of which were once owned by my maternal great grandparents, partly explaining my slight swagger. My friends expectantly awaited the latest war news, as if we had been apart for weeks. "What's happening in Africa?" they chorused as I walked into camp. "Rommel has taken Cairo," I said dryly, "and is attacking all along the Suez Canal." "Wow!" they chorused again, completely taken in by my fish story. I told a tale of a great tank battle and painted a word picture of a corpse-strewn desert. "Wow!" After dinner I told them the truth, that Rommel was stopped west of Cairo. They readily forgave me. Were boys generally interested in that sort of thing then? I know we were. We all knew about the Desert Fox, and we knew something about Generals Wavell, Auchinleck, and Ritchie. It was the world that absorbed us and that we were trying desperately to understand.

I told a false story to my friends because it was fun, because they were capable of doing the same thing, and because the tale was credible. We believed Rommel to be a battlefield magician. Of course, none of us wanted the Nazis to win the war, but we were feeling a trifle ambivalent. Rommel was somehow different. That bothered us. Since then, I often have wondered where his legend, as we knew it in 1942, stopped and the man began. I addressed some of that problem in my 1995 study *Desert Battle: Comparative Perspectives*. But

that book was about larger issues, so the treatment of Rommel was more suggestive of answers than definitive. This study of the Tunisian campaign and its background presents an opportunity to move into the Rommel-as-general topic with added depth and to find the sources of this legend.

The study begins with the background battles at El Alamein and the arrival of General Bernard Montgomery. That is familiar ground to Rommel buffs and anyone else interested in the North African campaign, but it is essential to understanding Rommel's attitudes and perceptions of what was happening and what was going to happen. A chapter follows that narrates the long retreat from El Alamein to Tunisia and the emergence of Rommel's uncertainties about the campaign. Another chapter traces the impact upon Rommel's thinking of the invasion of French Northwest Africa by the Allies. Then the Tunisian campaign is discussed with emphasis on the battles at Kasserine Pass and at Medenine.

With the exception of the official histories that appeared after the war, a couple of studies of the Kasserine Pass battle, and Kenneth Macksey's fine *Crucible of Power: The Fight for Tunisia, 1942-1943*, the retreat from El Alamein is the point where a gloss usually enters traditional narratives about Rommel: defeat at El Alamein; retreat; cut; next scene, the Atlantic Wall. And why not? Sick, exhausted, for all intents and purposes washed-up, thought a defeatist by Adolf Hitler, standing aloof at the Battle of Medenine, Erwin Rommel's career seemed doomed to extinction in Tunisia.

Yet, what happened in Tunisia gives a more complete picture of Rommel as a general than can be sustained by studies that give the campaign only brief attention. To develop fresh insights from the Tunisian venture, I adapt some methodology developed by John Keegan in his work *The Face of Battle* that frames the last three chapters of this study. This involves articulation of the variables of battle—the nature of Rommel's army, their will to combat, logistics, and principal weapons-against-weapons encounters. That is followed by an analysis of the Rommel Legend and a look at three variables of Rommel's command style—his relations with the higher command, especially Hitler and General Halder; the nature of his own staff; and his intelligence system. Finally, all these variables help to peel away the legend and understand his masks of command.

This study brings together much information that is scattered about in numerous studies. That alone may prove useful. Although

good bibliographies sometimes accompany those studies, specific citations of material within the texts are often omitted as a means of making the books more accessible to the general reader. In this study, I do not eschew notation. I think it important to know the source of who said or did what.

The time has come to review the material related to Rommel's last shot in North Africa, presenting it within an analytic framework supplemental to the narrative tradition, because I think it reveals the man's complex, very human qualities more than any other of his campaigns.

## Acknowledgments

The research for this book owes much to the courtesy I received from the staffs of the Doe Library, University of California, Berkeley and the University's Northern Regional Library Facility, Richmond. The staff of the National Archives, Washington, DC, were very helpful in finding photographs and microfilms. David Fletcher of the Royal Armoured Corps Tank Museum was certainly attuned to my photographic needs. A special thanks is owed Judy Stephenson of the United States Army Armor School Library, Fort Knox, for her assistance in obtaining the misplaced Daubin manuscript.

I have lent the manuscript of this book to many people in pieces and in whole form over many months and through various stages of development, so it is unfair to select only a few names for recognition. They know who they are, and they know the depth of my gratitude for their collective input.

The exception to the above apology is my family. My wife Marilyn once again bore the brunt of initial editing and attacked the job with a very sharp pencil. My son John read the entire manuscript and argued several points with me, giving worthy advice. His brother Brian brought the maps to life from my sketches. I am deeply grateful to both these young scholars.

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## CHAPTER I

# The Battles at El Alamein

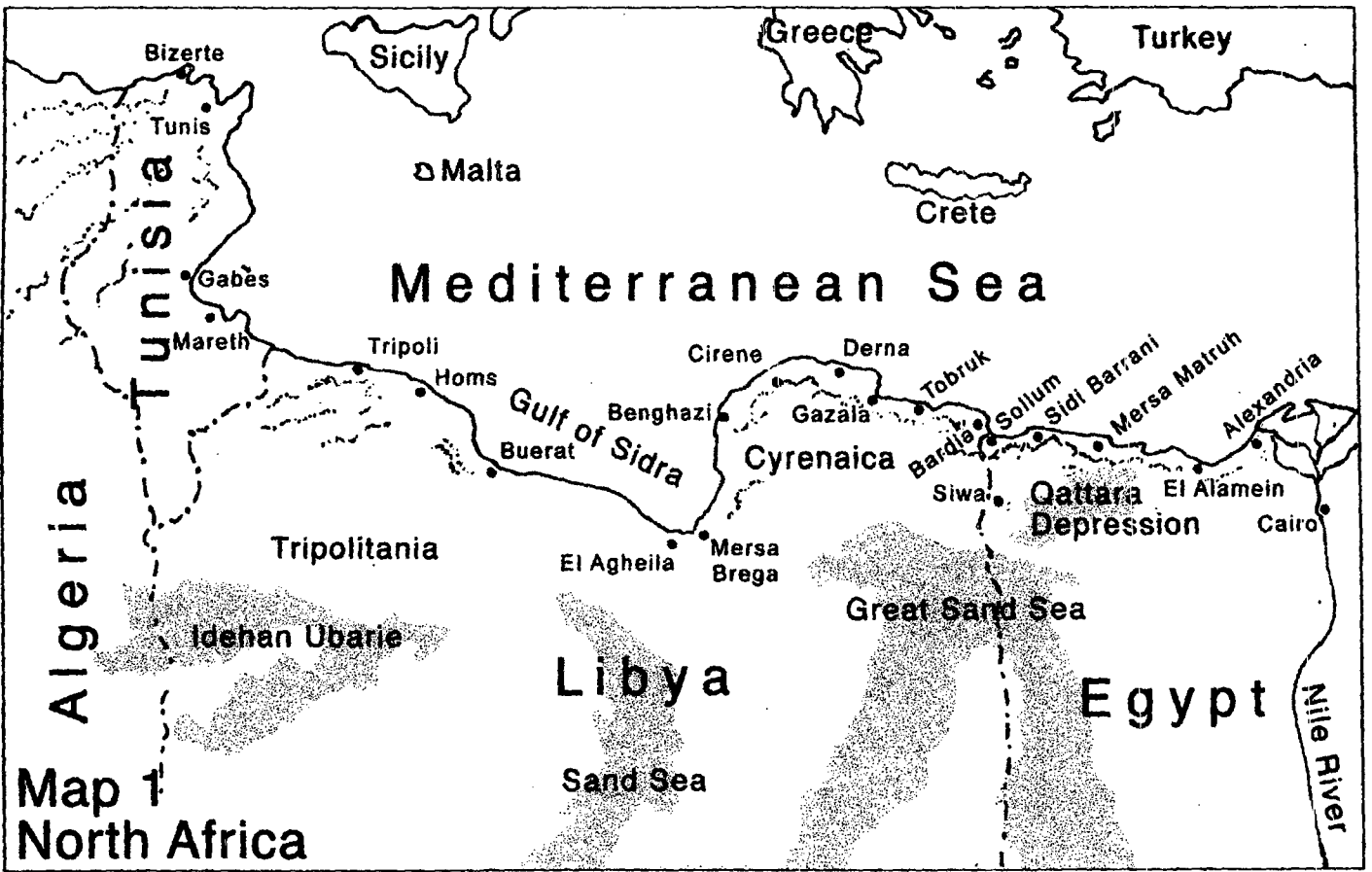
### BACKGROUND: BATTLES AND POLITICS

Cairo, 9 August 1942: "Rommel! Rommel!" fumed British prime minister Winston Churchill. "What else matters but beating him?"<sup>1</sup>

However emotive Churchill's outburst, the fixation with German General Erwin Rommel, the infamous Desert Fox, was well-placed. The prime minister, pictured in those days as so indomitable, was in fact clinging to his position with shredded fingers. In the Mediterranean, German U-boats sank the battleship HMS *Barham* and the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*. The Italians sank HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Valiant* in Alexandria harbor. U-boats raided the Atlantic shipping lanes seemingly at will. In February 1942, the battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* slipped the British blockade of Brest, France, sailed up the English Channel, and, although damaged by mines, made it to Norway. The British public was furious that the Channel was so blatantly violated. That same month Hong Kong and Singapore were lost to the Japanese and the HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* were sunk in a Japanese air attack. The war was not going well for Mr. Churchill.

The inhospitable deserts of North Africa were the only arena in which British and Commonwealth troops could directly confront the German Army (Map 1). And that meant battling Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika*—the German *Afrika Korps*—and supporting Italian and other German divisions.





Map 1  
North Africa

Rommel, a hero of World War I—awarded the famous Blue Max, the *Pour le Mérite*—had survived post-war cutbacks and worked his way through the promotional ladder. He attracted Adolf Hitler's attention with the publication of his book *Infantry Attacks* (*Infanterie greift an*), a combination memoir of his war service and a manual of infantry tactics that taught the value of speed and surprise. He believed that maneuvering would bring his attack to the enemy's weakest point, most especially the supply areas, and create the maximum confusion. End sweeps, misdirection, and command flexibility were at the root of this warfare.

His chance to apply his ideas and refine them came when he commanded the 7th Panzer Division during the invasion of France in May 1940. Cutting through the Ardennes as part of the general advance, his division crossed the Meuse River near Dinant against heavy French resistance. The division drove relentlessly to Cambrai, Arras, and Lille, opening a breach in the French line and causing enormous confusion. By taking Lille from the west, Rommel trapped most of the French First Army. That was 31 May 1940. Ten days later, having crossed the Somme River above Amiens, his 7th Panzers stood at St. Valéry-en-Caux on the English Channel, capturing 4,000 French soldiers and 8,000 men of the 51st Highland Division. The 7th Panzers earned the sobriquet "*Gespensien*—ghost—*Division*" because the French and British never knew where they would attack next.

Rommel was then picked to rescue the sagging Italian North African empire. For Richard O'Connor's Western Desert Force had not only beaten back the Italian invasion of Egypt but shredded their army and pushed it out of Egypt and eastern Libya. Rommel arrived in Tripoli on 12 February 1941 with instructions from the German high command to contain the British advance at El Aghaila, thus preserving Tripolitania. Containment was not in Rommel's book. In April he struck the British forces with a lightning campaign that pushed them back to the Egyptian border in only three weeks. The British counterattack failed. In June another counterattack failed. In November the British mounted another attack, this time pushing the *Panzerarmee* out of eastern Libya. But Rommel then forced the British back to Gazala, just west of Tobruk. Stroke, counterstroke; the constant battling exhausted both armies.

By May 1942, as Brigadier Desmond Young observed, the Desert Fox was gaining "moral ascendancy" over British forces as a consequence of his string of victories.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he was admired, accord-

ing to B. H. Liddell-Hart, for what the British troops considered his basic decency.<sup>3</sup>

On 26 May 1941, Rommel launched a new offensive against Neil Ritchie's Eighth Army at Gazala. Within a day, the British lost most of their armor and the Eighth retreated east. In June, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, German commander-in-chief South (Mediterranean) and the Italian Generals Ugo Cavallero, chief of the General Staff, and Ettore Bastico, supreme commander for Africa, visited Rommel at his headquarters. Kesselring was opposed to continuing the offensive. The *Panzerarmee* was worn out and dependent on captured supplies, whereas the British, despite losses, were continuously resupplied and reinforced. But Rommel smelled victory and persuaded the Italians to change their minds. Kesselring went along. After the war, Kesselring mused that the decision to continue east spelled the end of Axis military domination of North Africa.

Rommel attacked again and again, crushing all British hope of establishing a defensive line anchored at Tobruk. By mid-June, Tobruk was isolated and under siege as Ritchie continued to withdraw east into Egypt. On 25 June, Middle East commander-in-chief Claude Auchinleck relieved Ritchie and took personal command of the Eighth Army.

One of Auchinleck's first communiquees was to all his chiefs-of-staff and field commanders. "I wish to dispel by all possible means," he wrote, "the idea that Rommel represents anything more than an ordinary German general."<sup>4</sup> He conceded that Rommel was able and energetic but he did not want him viewed as a superman.

Auchinleck kept moving his army east, the *Panzerarmee* in determined pursuit. Paul Carell concluded, from a German viewpoint, that "they were crazy days" with British and German vehicles often traveling east only a few hundred yards from one another.<sup>5</sup> Even though Rommel nearly lost a battle at Mersa Matruh, his troops were in high spirits. In contrast, the enemy seemed confused, an endless carpet of abandoned equipment and vehicles—visual testimony of an army who let victories slip away and who were now in disarray. Indeed, the German 90th Light Division captured several intact supply depots that were left by Auchinleck's XXX Corps. The *Panzerarmee* happily used everything they could glean from the battlefields. As for the British, the common soldiers concluded that their commanders did not know what they were doing.<sup>6</sup>

East, always east, moved the Eighth Army. The men wondered

when they would stop and fight. Trucks, artillery, and men filed through Alexandria harbor, dispersing their ships east. The Cairo population felt the panic and wondered if the Eighth Army could stop the Desert Fox. British officers whose only action took place in the Cairo hotel bars prophesied doom. Ritchie had been a loser, but Auchinleck was about to give Rommel the Nile and the Suez Canal. No wonder, the gossip mills churned, he never brought his wife out from India! The man was out of control. His approval of the Special Air Services (SAS) proved that. Nothing but a bunch of jumped-up desert pirates. Completely unorthodox. Many British rear echelon officers relished Auchinleck's impending downfall.

But Auchinleck was not out of control, and he did know what he was doing. The Eighth Army would make its stand at El Alamein, a grubby coastal rail station. Defenses were being prepared that extended 35 miles south to the Qattara Depression, a great hole in Egypt's Western Desert that ranges from -70 feet below sea level to -234 feet. Considered impassable in 1942, it gave the British a south flank that could not be turned by one of Rommel's desert sweeps. The *Panzerarmee* would be forced into the strength of the British defenses with little room to maneuver.

Rommel also understood what Auchinleck was doing when he wrote, "The British . . . were sparing no effort to master the situation," and the soldiers entering the line realized the importance of the coming battle.<sup>7</sup> He also understood that as British manpower and supplies were increasing, his were diminishing. He needed 60,000 tons of supplies in June but received only 3,000 tons. His men, sustained by captured matériel, were near exhaustion. Yet, he maintained the belief that he could smash through the static British defenses and sweep on to Egypt. Attack! Attack swiftly before the Eighth Army settled into their new positions. What Rommel did not know was that the British laid extensive minefields from Ruweisat Ridge, about 10 miles south of El Alamein, to the Qattara Depression.

30 June: During the early morning hours, Rommel ordered his forward units to attack. The 90th Light Division struck along the coast road toward El Alamein. British artillery blanketed them with fire. The 21st Panzer Division struck the Indian Brigade Group at Deir el Shein at the northern edge of Ruweisat Ridge, making substantial gains but under heavy artillery fire. The Italian XX Corps (motorized), hesitant and confused by a British motor brigade attack

at their rear, would not move. When, after a blistering from Rommel, they did advance, it was directly into the attacking British 1st Armored Division. The Littorio Division of XX Corps was mauled, reporting that all their tanks had been hit and that two-thirds of them were complete wrecks.<sup>8</sup>

Unable to break through the British south flank, Rommel shifted his strength north to support his 90th Light Division along the coast road. Furious British artillery fire and extensive minefields made progress impossible. A night attack by the 90th Light was stopped. Further attacks on 2 July were thwarted. The 21st Panzers, fighting in an area of soft sand, were forced on the defensive when a British counterattack included two squadrons of U.S.-built M-3 General Grant medium tanks. These machines, with armor up to 55mm thick and featuring a sponson-mounted 75mm gun, were a powerful addition to British armored divisions.

Rommel's offensive ground to a halt on the afternoon of 3 July. Auchinleck mounted counterattacks, especially directed at Italian forces, the 2nd New Zealand Division breaking the Ariete Division that fled from the field in panic. Rommel wrote his wife Lu (Lucia Maria) on the 4th that "Resistance is too great and our strength exhausted."<sup>9</sup> By 8 July, according to Rommel, the 90th Light was reduced to 1,500 effective men, and the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions together could field only fifty Mk III and Mk IV tanks. The Italian XX Corps was left with only fifty-four M13/40 tanks.

Despite his losses, Rommel managed to mount another attack on 9 July against the New Zealanders, forcing them to yield their positions. But the attack withered as Auchinleck sent forward the 9th Australian Division. They practically demolished the Italian Trieste and Sabratha Divisions. The Australian surge was contained only when Rommel scraped together various German units to form a defensive line.

Attack and counterattack again, the battle staggered through the long July days, Rommel probing and stabbing, trying to find the weak point that would allow him to outflank the British and open the door to the Nile, Auchinleck probing and stabbing, trying to contain the attacks and inflict as much damage as possible on the *Panzerarmee*. By the end of the month, German casualties numbered about 10,000; British casualties reached nearly 13,000.

Rommel, his logistical support in shambles—short of ammunition,

fuel, transport, and manpower—could not punch through the British defenses. His dash to the Nile was over. Indeed, the British Official History crowed that "the fabulous Rommel had been stopped."<sup>10</sup> But the *Panzerarmee Afrika* was not destroyed.

Churchill was not satisfied. Rommel's army must be destroyed. The Eighth Army must attack! Everyday an offensive was delayed gave Rommel another day to grow stronger. Churchill met with Auchinleck in Cairo 3 August. Churchill did not like what he saw—men, guns, cars, and trucks flowing into Cairo. He did not like what he heard, buying into the gossip, rumor, and invective fed him by officers who were not only critical of Auchinleck but outright disloyal.<sup>11</sup> Certainly Auchinleck did not help himself by telling Churchill what he did not want to hear. Rather than surrender to the prime minister's urgings for an immediate offensive, he told him the truth. The Eighth Army was down to its last resources. Rommel was probably in the same condition. However, German tanks and artillery were superior to those of the British, and fresh British troops arriving in Egypt needed a lot more training to defeat the *Afrika Korps*. Huge quantities of munitions and fuel were needed. Under these conditions, an immediate offensive would be both foolhardy and disastrous. Churchill would have to wait until September.

The prime minister was stunned. He thought Auchinleck timid and unenterprising. Thus, on 8 August 1942, Auchinleck, the man who brought Rommel to a standstill, was sacked. Most of the serving general staff went with him. Wisely, however, and nearly too late, Churchill divided the Middle East command, establishing the North African theater as a separate command. The concentration on North Africa was the logical prelude to Churchill's 9 August exclamation, "Rommel! Rommel! What else matters but beating him?" He appointed General Harold Alexander commander-in-chief of the theater. Lieutenant General W.H.E. Gott, an old desert hand, was to lead the Eighth Army. Unfortunately, he was killed when his plane was shot down and strafed by German fighters. Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff, urged Churchill to appoint Bernard Law Montgomery to the post. Churchill agreed and requested that Montgomery be sent to Cairo by special plane. He arrived 12 August.

Montgomery could be prickly, acerbic, overbearing, pompous, and vain. He was also a brilliant organizer who not only showed himself to the troops but talked to many, telling them his general plans, and

made it sound as if they were going to win. The army rallied to him. These traits, one and all, were rooted in a sense of his own infallibility.<sup>12</sup>

World War I, in which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, taught him that the so-called chateau generals, far removed from the fighting, had no idea what disasters they planned. An army, he concluded, must know what they are about and have confidence in their leaders. Distance from the troops only brewed resentment. He took that lesson into subsequent service.

After the war, he served in the Middle East and twice in India. In 1930 he rejoined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, his original unit, as lieutenant colonel of the 1st Battalion. He was simultaneously appointed secretary to a committee of senior officers charged with rewriting the infantry training manual. Montgomery assumed that the rewrite was his job. Over the objections of the committee, he had the manual published, completely ignoring those on the committee.<sup>13</sup> By 1938, promoted to brigadier general, he commanded the Portsmouth garrison. In 1939 he commanded the 8th Division in Palestine, helping to quell an Arab revolt. Later that same year, anticipating the outbreak of a European war, he managed a transfer to the 3rd Division, which he took to France. After the Dunkirk evacuation, he commanded the defenses of southeast England.

### THE BATTLE OF ALAM HALFA, 30 AUGUST TO 3 SEPTEMBER 1942

Montgomery was supposed to assume command of the Eighth Army 15 August 1942. On the afternoon of the 12th, however, he met with John Harding, deputy chief-of-staff in Cairo, and told him to organize two armored divisions and a motorized division into what Montgomery romantically called a *corps de chasse*. This unit would exploit Montgomery's planned breakthrough of Rommel's defenses and chase the Desert Fox to ground. Then he let it be known that the days of independent commands—the so-called Jock columns, Support Groups, and brigade groups, so dear to those who had fought in the desert from the beginning—were over. Henceforth all units would work as parts of divisions. Montgomery also ordered that all plans for retreat from El Alamein and for the defense of the Nile, Cairo, and the Suez Canal be destroyed immediately. There would be no retreat from El Alamein.

These presumptive moves were quite calculated, certainly impolite, and must have made Auchinleck feel completely redundant. Nonetheless, war is war, and a few days can make the difference between victory and defeat. Montgomery knew that time was vital. But he also enjoyed twinkling his superiors. He wrote in his memoirs, "It was with an insubordinate smile that I fell asleep: I was issuing orders to an Army which someone else [Auchinleck] reckoned he commanded."<sup>14</sup> What arrogance. Yet, such rapierlike decisions were part of the image he constructed. There was more. His wardrobe contained odd hats and baggy trousers, making him look like a vain eccentric, yet announcing to all who and what he was and endearing him to his troops. His self-assurance met their need for certainty of command. He let his officers know clearly that when he gave an order, he expected it be obeyed, not discussed or debated—a goal devoutly to be wished for but not always attained. Those who possessed the tenacity to question what he was doing often found themselves in for a scolding or out of a job.

Ironically, he demanded more artillery, more tanks, especially the new American M-4 Sherman tanks—mounting a 75mm gun in a turret with full turning capacity—more munitions, more fuel, mountains of supplies. He wanted absolute matériel supremacy over Rommel; he would settle for nothing less. These demands were anathema when spoken by Auchinleck. Coming from Montgomery, who was fully supported by Alexander, they sounded like words from on high. Indeed, when staff questioned a request made by Montgomery, Alexander told them to give Montgomery anything he wanted. Most importantly and the supreme irony, Montgomery wanted more men and the time to train them. He had no intention of mounting an immediate offensive; rather, he would establish defenses at El Alamein.

Considering the treatment of Auchinleck, the concessions made to Montgomery have the appearance of hypocrisy at the highest levels. But no one in authority was overwhelmed by some Montgomery-esque charisma: not Churchill, not Alan Brooke, and not Alexander. Montgomery lacked that quality. What captivated British leaders was how confidently Montgomery seemingly discarded most every tactic and organization being practiced before his arrival, eventually getting rid of several senior officers who served under previous desert generals. Thus, all three corps commanders were eventually replaced by men who earlier had served with Montgomery. Why build on the

past, so Montgomery's reasoning went, if the past did not work very well? Yet, he clearly kept much of Auchinleck's planning and blithely took credit for it.<sup>15</sup> This is quite clear in his fortifying of the Alam Halfa Ridge, a plan originated by Major General Eric Dorman-Smith, Auchinleck's chief-of-staff, and approved by Auchinleck. But establishing stronger defenses along the El Alamein line made sense, no matter who received credit. Decipherment of German coded messages by the top secret ULTRA machine as well as local intelligence sources confirmed Auchinleck's July prediction that Rommel would attack again late in August.

Montgomery's deployment of units remained those planned by Auchinleck. The 9th Australian Division was positioned at the coast road about 5 miles west of El Alamein. The 1st South African Division and the 5th Indian Division filled the gap from El Alamein to Ruweisat Ridge. Major General Sir Bernard Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Division was positioned from Ruweisat Ridge south to Alam Nayl Ridge. All these units were supported by the 10th Armored Division, 500 tanks strong, of which 164 were M-3 General Grants. The 7th Armored Division, the famous Desert Rats, covered the south flank at the Qattara Depression. Between the New Zealanders and the Depression was a vast minefield.

Alam Halfa Ridge, 20 miles behind the front, was key to the defense. Thus, if the Germans did break through the southern flank, their expected northeast swing would be curtailed by British armored and air attacks, and they would be forced toward Alam Halfa. The 44th Home Counties Division, fresh off the boat from England, guarded the ridge supported by tanks, many of them dug-in. This was a vastly different concept than previous tactics that called for British tanks to roll out and meet the German armor head on—only to be shot to pieces. All the defenses were supported by a prodigious array of artillery, mostly 25-pounders and new 6-pounder anti-tank guns.<sup>16</sup> Unlike previous battles, the artillery was concentrated and could be rapidly directed from one target to another, this elasticity made possible by a new radio network.

Given the punishment handed *Panzerarmee Afrika* at First Alamein, it is remarkable that Rommel even thought of mounting another offensive. Why take the chance when the Italians, responsible for supplying the army, were having difficulty getting ships to North African ports because of British Royal Navy and RAF activity? The Italians were also notoriously tightfisted with what they managed to

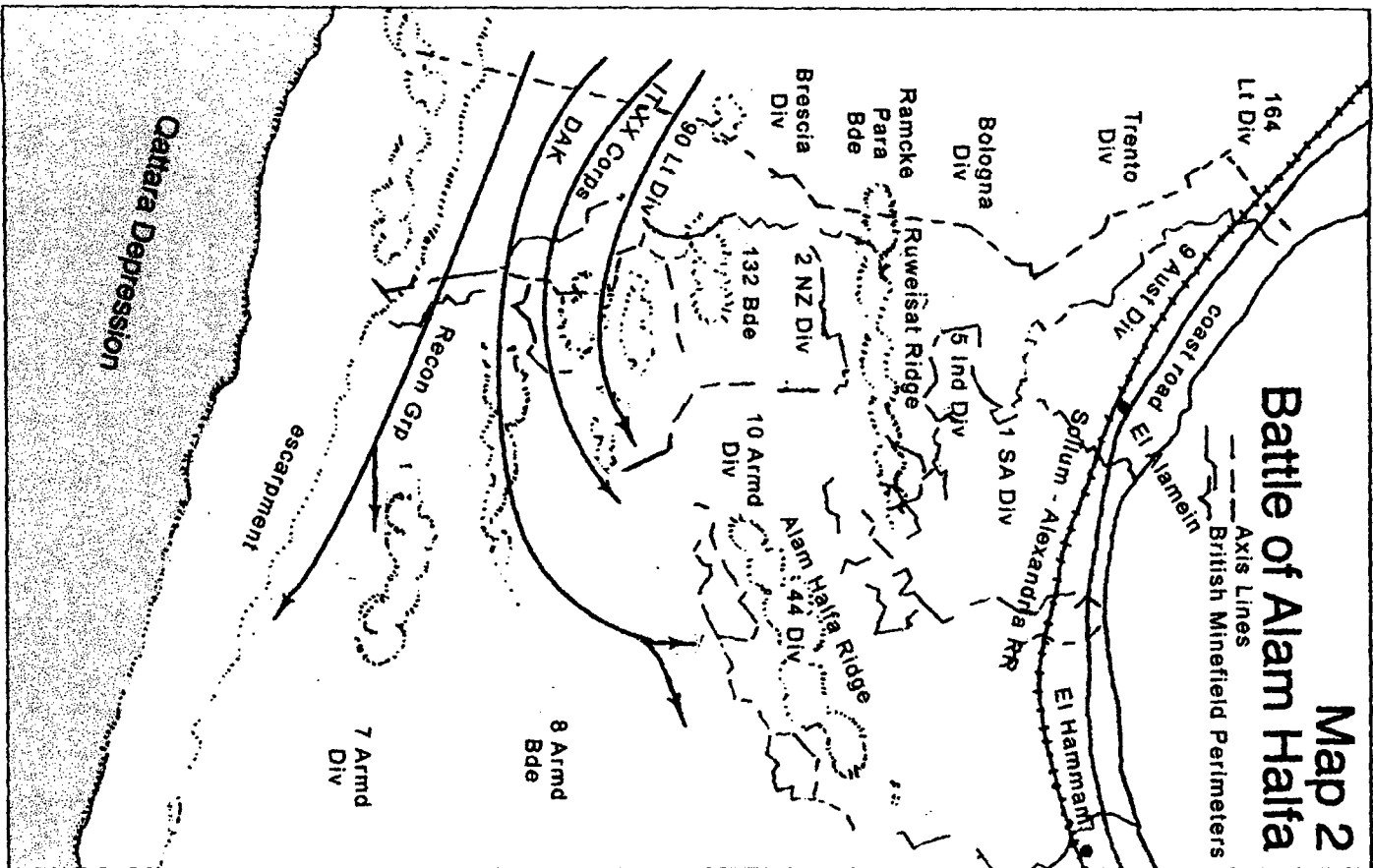
get through. Rommel grumbled that it was always less than he needed and certainly less than the Italian troops were receiving. He concluded that audacious offensive plans were usually abandoned because quartermasters typically lacked imagination and improvisational skills. "Generally," wrote Rommel, "the commander meekly accepts the situation and shapes his actions accordingly."<sup>17</sup> The good commander must possess a clear picture of his needs and develop plans according to his own estimates. Predictably, the German high command, conditioned by Rommel's romp through France in 1940, interpreted his audacity as recklessness.

Rommel believed that he could defeat the British with a southern flanking maneuver at night through what he was informed were light defenses and thin minefields. His troops would then swing north to El Hammam on the coast road 5 miles east of El Alamein.<sup>18</sup> The *Afrika Korps*, commanded by Lieutenant General Walther Nehring, and units of the Italian XX Corps were committed to the task. Meanwhile, the 90th Light Division and the remainder of XX Corps were to attack along the coast road and cover the flank parallel to El Alamein, preventing the British from sending units against the *Afrika Korps'* advance. The *Afrika Korps* and the Italians were to be at El Hammam at dawn, sowing confusion in the British supply area. Isolated from their supplies, the British would either fight in the open battleground that favored German mobility or they would break and run, opening the way east to the Nile and Suez.<sup>19</sup>

Rommel believed that success depended on three operational factors: concealment of the initial troop deployments at the south flank; a quick breakthrough of the defenses; and the accuracy of his intelligence reports. Ultimately, the entire offensive depended upon his estimation of supplies. General Cavallero promised that tankers would arrive in Tripoli and Tobruk within hours, certainly the next day. If they somehow failed, Kesselring promised to air freight 500 tons of fuel each day.

Rommel ordered the battle to open the night of 30–31 August (Map 2).

Attack! Attack with surprise! Attack with speed! These were foremost in Rommel's thinking as sappers, supported by infantry, moved to clear paths through the south flank minefields. The 15th Panzer Division rumbled forward with 70 Mk III and Mk IV tanks. The 21st Panzers advanced with 120 tanks, including a squadron of new Mk IV Specials that mounted long-barreled 75mm guns. The Italians



came on with 243 tanks, mostly M13s that were obsolete the day they went into production.<sup>20</sup> Near midnight, the 15th Panzers encountered the first British defenses, but, instead of being minimal behind shallow minefields, the defenses were strong and behind dense minefields. The 21st Panzers, also slowed by mines, advanced cautiously.

Night abruptly turned to day as the British launched flares. Artillery rounds crashed into the men, trucks, and armor. British machine gun and mortar fire turned the south flank into a killing ground. Flights of Vickers Wellington bombers roared overhead, dropping more flares and bombloads of up to 4,000 pounds each. German casualties mounted. Among them was Major General Georg von Bismark, killed in the minefield by mortar fire. Then General Nehring was wounded, his place taken by his chief-of-staff Colonel Fritz Bayerlein.

By dawn, the leading German elements were through the minefields and 10 miles beyond—but still 20 miles short of Rommel's goal for the initial attack. He discussed the next move with Bayerlein, suggesting that the offensive be called off. Bayerlein pleaded that the *Afrika Korps*, after so much effort, would feel slighted were that order given. No, the offensive must continue. Rommel acquiesced. But the original plan was altered. With the British 7th Armored Division in battle formation and with the 1st and 10th Armored Divisions waiting in the north, it was no longer possible to make the wide sweeping move northeast to El Hamman without the *Afrika Korps*' flank being exposed to attack. Instead, the assault route was shortened by shifting it in a more northerly direction aimed at Alam Halfa Ridge. Little did Rommel and Bayerlein realize how correctly the British guessed the center of the battle. German aerial reconnaissance revealed the ridge to be heavily defended, but they did not indicate in what strength.

Rommel lost the elements of speed and surprise in the first hour of the battle. Now his forces lost more time refueling and re-arming the *Afrika Korps*. Although the Littorio Division of XX Corps was at hand, the Trieste and Ariete Divisions lagged behind, many of their machines still stuck in the minefields.

The attack against Alam Halfa started in a sandstorm that taxed the armored vehicles. Patches of soft sand slowed them still more, their engines straining and their fuel levels dropping. The *Afrika Korps* fully expected British tanks to come charging down the hill in their usual cavalier fashion and be destroyed by anti-tank guns and



armor. Instead, the German tanks ran into a hail of fire from dug-in tanks, concealed 6-pounder anti-tank guns, and 25-pounders. Brigadier G.P.B. Roberts, commanding the 22nd Armored Brigade, ordered his men to hold their fire until the enemy was within a thousand yards. The 1st Battalion, Rifle Brigade, held their anti-tank fire until the range was less than 300 yards.<sup>21</sup> The Royal Air Force (RAF), especially 205 Group, bombed again and again. The next day, 1 September, the British 7th Armored Division attacked the east flank of the 15th Panzers. Even though the 8th Panzer Regiment did break through to within 10 miles of the coast road, British tank and artillery fire and aerial bombing foiled full achievement of that goal.

Rommel called off the attack on 3 September, withdrawing his units to their starting points. Montgomery, in his first desert battle, outfoxed the Desert Fox.

The cost of Alam Halfa to Rommel, considering the speed with which he expected to roll through the British defenses, was heavy. The *Panzerarmee* lost thirty-eight German and eleven Italian tanks, sixty guns, and some 400 transport vehicles. They had 2,900 casualties of whom 1,859 were Germans. The British losses numbered 1,750 men and sixty-eight tanks.<sup>22</sup>

Alam Halfa fully exposed Rommel's major supply problem: fuel. With the gigantic grinder called the Russian Front consuming supplies at an unprecedented rate, Hitler and the German high command, especially after the failed breakthrough at First Alamein, held little regard for Rommel's sideshow campaign. Also, increased British naval activity and the RAF on Malta made Mediterranean crossings risky ventures. Thus, on 27 August, two fuel-laden tankers promised by General Cavallero were torpedoed by British aircraft near Derna, just west of Tobruk. Another tanker was lost at Tobruk. Kesseling did make good his promise to airfreight enough petrol to maintain mobility—that is until the downing of several Junkers transports by the RAF forced the Germans to drain fuel from their reserve vehicles to keep their tanks going.

Another crucial element in Rommel's defeat was the ability of the RAF's Desert Air Force to wrest aerial dominance from the *Luftwaffe*.<sup>23</sup> On 31 August, they flew 482 sorties, and the next day they flew 902 sorties. In contrast the *Luftwaffe* flew only 285 bomber sorties in three days. RAF's 205 Group, reinforcing the Desert Air Force, together with 201 Group based on Malta, destroyed thirty-five percent of Axis shipping crossing the Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> Over the

battlefield, British aircraft worked in coordination with ground forces in a manner never before observed by the Germans. Wellington and Handley-Page Halifax bombers hit Axis concentrations from high altitudes. Blenheims and U.S.-built Martin 187 Baltimores, B-26 Marauders, and Douglas A-20 Bostons came in at lower elevations for tactical support. Hawker Hurricane IICs, with four 20mm cannons, and IIDs, with two 40mm cannons, raked Axis troops, trucks, and tanks in low-level strafing and bombing missions.

The results were clear. Heinz Werner Schmidt, a German officer who was at first an aide to Rommel then served in Special Group 288, grandly declared, "There was a new fox in the desert."<sup>25</sup>

### THE SECOND BATTLE AT EL ALAMEIN, 23 OCTOBER TO 4 NOVEMBER 1942

The *Panzerarmee* was not only stopped at Alam Halfa; it was brought to the point of exhaustion. The historian Correlli Barnett notes that Montgomery could have destroyed Rommel's forces by cutting German communications and supply lines, and "sealing his armour in a cauldron of bombardment [thus] achieving a complete and historic victory by Rommel's surrender, *was en campagne* [in the field]."<sup>26</sup> But Montgomery thought that the Eighth Army was not up to the task, and he was not prepared to sacrifice his men in a headlong attack against the skilled *Afrika Korps*. Barnett takes a more jaundiced view, believing the success at Alam Halfa brought unexpected opportunities that proved embarrassing to Montgomery because he already had planned the Second Battle of El Alamein and would not be cheated of that opportunity.<sup>27</sup> Of the two versions, truth seems to tilt toward Barnett's interpretation.

Thus, Montgomery's reason for not pursuing Rommel rapidly slides into rationalization when it is remembered that he placed the 44th Home Counties Division, the greenest unit on the field, at the most critical point of the battle behind Alam Halfa Ridge. He did not care that they lacked training; he needed their bulk. Given the positioning of the *corps de chasse*, and the superiority of British artillery firepower and air support, the pursuit envisioned by Barnett was a possibility.

Montgomery held back, needing time to better train his troops in the tactics necessary for the new offensive, and to gain such superiority in manpower and matériel that Rommel's army would be

crushed. The word crush is to be taken literally, for Montgomery's offensive approach was conservative, a page torn from World War I—a straight-ahead battle of attrition. Rommel realized it would be so. The southern flank of both armies could not be turned because of the Qattara Depression. At the north was the sea. The only way to victory was through a hole punched somewhere in the 35-mile line.<sup>28</sup>

The date of the battle was directly influenced by a decision made in faraway Washington, D. C., by U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt. That decision determined not only when Montgomery opened his offensive but profoundly influenced the destiny of Erwin Rommel and his North African *Panzerarmee*. Roosevelt approved Operation Torch.

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, a debate started about how and where U.S. forces could be best used. Churchill's preference for dealing with Hitler's Germany first before mounting a major offensive against Japan held sway among the Allies. Accepting that viewpoint, the Americans invented Operation Sledgehammer, an invasion of France at Cherbourg. After much discussion the plan was scrapped, falling, as Churchill put it, "of its own weakness."<sup>29</sup> There were too few landing craft, not enough divisions; the Cotentin Peninsula could be easily blocked; and the United States did not have enough air power in Britain to support a long and involved continental offensive. Yet, the decision-makers agreed that American troops must be involved somewhere in the war against Germany. An invasion of French Northwest Africa—Morocco and Algeria—was thought the best choice. Certainly Churchill did. Roosevelt, at last convinced that Sledgehammer would not work, eagerly agreed to a joint British-American invasion plan code-named Operation Torch.

The operation was thrown together in a few months, involving clandestine meetings in North Africa and the delicate handling of Frenchmen who were not certain of American intentions, who were ambivalent about the Germans, and who hated the British. The politics of the invasion thus became quite byzantine in their complexity. Egos salved, promises made, the invasion was finally set for the night of 7-8 November.

Churchill, meantime, was under the impression that the Eighth Army would mount an offensive in late September. Alexander and Montgomery had other plans. Because the positions at El Alamein required a frontal attack, and because the *corps de chasse* (X Corps)

needed preparation for its role in exploiting the penetration, and because a full moon was needed to extend the operational hours, Alexander informed Churchill that the offensive would begin 4 November minus thirteen days. Churchill responded on 23 September, "We are in your hands. . . . Whatever happens we shall back you up and see you through."<sup>30</sup> Auchinleck should have been so fortunate.

If Churchill accepted the delays for an offensive with relative equanimity, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring was far less generous toward Rommel. He arrived at Rommel's desert headquarters on 2 September, and there was treated to a litany of excuses for the Alam Halfa failure: the aerial domination of the RAF; the frightful pounding by British artillery; lackluster *Lufwaffe* support; and, most heatedly presented, the miserable supply situation, especially the fuel shortage. Kesselring was not impressed. He reasoned that if the German and Italian armor possessed sufficient fuel to fight their way back to the starting point of the attack, then that same fuel could have been used to continue the attack and envelop the British defenses. Kesselring sadly concluded that Rommel was using the supply and fuel shortages as an excuse for his failure.<sup>31</sup> This argument has only limited credibility. Suppose that Rommel did carry through his attack and breakthrough to the north. How far could he have gone before he really did run out of fuel, leaving his now immobile armor exposed to British attack by the 7th Armored Division? His options were severely limited. He elected to save his army.

Kesselring's harsh judgment was shared by the German high command, especially General Franz Halder, the chief-of-staff, who intensely disliked Rommel, believing him to be flippant, irresponsible, and insubordinate. The generals presumed that because in past battles Rommel tore victory from impending defeat, he could keep doing so again and again; therefore, there was no reason to listen seriously to his increasingly tiresome demands for more and more supplies. In a very real way, the chronic shortages were born of his early success. His constant complaining, it was clear to the Berlin generals, was a façade behind which he hid a diminished nerve. With that attitude held by his superiors, Rommel had overstayed his usefulness.

Undoubtedly moral ascendancy was shifting back to the British. But they were unaware of that.

Kesselring and *Commando Supremo*—particularly Mussolini, Bastico, and Cavallero—all agreed that a British counter-offensive was in the making. They assumed that Rommel would repulse it and follow





Italian Ariete and Littorio Divisions had 278 tanks, most of which were M13/40s. The Italians supplied 500 field guns and 300 anti-tank guns. Even though the field guns could not fire more than 5 miles, their brave crews were noted for standing by their weapons to the last man. The Germans had 550 anti-tank guns, many of them 76.2mm pieces captured from the Russians. The latter were plentiful enough that every squad in the infantry battalions of the 90th and 164th Light Division was given an anti-tank gun. The Germans also fielded a few dozen 88mm guns. A half-million mines, with outposts scattered throughout the fields, posed a formidable barrier.

Rommel's defensive philosophy was simple and tailored to the realities of the supply situation. He believed that the British would apply initial pressure all along the front, probing for a weakness. When it was found, more pressure would be applied as Montgomery shifted his forces to reinforce the push. Rommel also believed that that big push would come in the south. Once Rommel was certain of what he called the battle's center of gravity, he would move troops to reinforce it, believing he could maneuver troops faster than the British. But he could not afford a mistake in judgment. Fuel shortages dictated that once he moved his forces around, he could not move them again. If the main attack did develop in the south, the 15th Panzers would fall back southwest, forming a corridor with the 21st through which the British assault would be forced into the open desert and destroyed. Meanwhile, the defenders north of Ruweisat Ridge would have to stop all attempts to penetrate their positions.

The Eighth Army deployed a massive striking power against *Panzerarmee Afrika*. The British boasted 1,000 fully operational tanks, including 252 M-4 Shermans and 170 M-3 Grants, with another 200 tanks in reserve and another thousand in workshops.<sup>34</sup> They possessed over 2,182 artillery pieces, and the manpower of the Eighth Army was twice that of the Axis.

Grouped in the north was XXX Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese, comprising five divisions—9th Australian, 51st Highlander, 2nd New Zealanders, 1st South African, and the 4th Indian. These were positioned in line from the coast road to Ruweisat Ridge. The corps was supported by the 23rd Armored Brigade Group and the 9th Armored Brigade. Behind XXX Corps to the west was Lieutenant General Herbert Lumsden's X Corps—the 1st and 10th Armored Divisions, Montgomery's *corps de chasse*—that was to sweep through gaps made by the infantry divisions. South of Ru-

weisat Ridge to the Qattara Depression was Brian Horrock's XIII Corps that included the 44th and 50th Divisions, a Greek Brigade, the 7th Armored Division, and a Free French Brigade. Dummy tank and truck concentrations, together with camps and supply depots, were established mostly in the south to feed Rommel's preconception. In the north, thousands of fake vehicles, trenches, and dumps were constructed and then abandoned, the idea being that the Germans would get used to seeing them and when replaced by the real thing, they would not notice anything different.<sup>35</sup>

British battle training reached great intensity in early October. At first, confusion reigned as massive traffic snarls clogged roads to the front because British regiments and Commonwealth forces had different signaling systems. Resentments boiled. Lumsden's X Corps was reluctant to follow Montgomery's directives, believing that Leese's infantry divisions in the north could not cut through the minefields. Infantryman believed they would be left hanging on the German wire because the armored divisions were incapable of giving adequate support.

Montgomery did modify his plan somewhat. X Corps, instead of rushing forward to exploit the rear areas of Rommel's line once through the breach, would sweep north and south around and behind the German infantry, isolating them from their armored support. Then Montgomery issued a decree: Regardless of losses, pressure must be constantly maintained against the German lines.

At 9:40 P.M., 23 October 1942, nearly 1,000 British guns opened fire. RAF bombers flew overhead, drowning the Axis defenders in a torrential rain of bombs. Such "drum-fire," as Rommel called it, was a new experience in North Africa and resembled World War I bombardments in its enormity.<sup>36</sup>

British sappers, protected by accompanying infantry, rose from slit trenches and made their way into the German minefields. Many mines were laid at a depth to damage tanks, but Rommel had sown among these booby-traps—rigged aerial bombs and artillery shells buried in destroyed vehicles or armor and in packing cases and other refuse of war. Yet, for all the fear and confusion facing them, the British infantry plodded forward, closely following the creeping artillery barrage. Once a path was cleared through the mines, tanks rumbled forward, opening fire on Axis anti-tank guns and tanks.

Although their advance seemed systematic, the British were in a confused state by dawn. Some Australian units were right on sched-

ule. Some Highland units were short of their goals, complaining that the Australians had gone too far. New Zealand battalions drifted from each other the further they advanced. Communications broke down. Armored regiments clogged the lanes through the minefields, turning some areas of the battlefield into vast parking lots.

The Germans were not much better off. Stumme refused to allow his artillery to fire into the British assembly areas, fearing that his gunners might run out of ammunition. Then Stumme himself went missing. Anxious to know firsthand what was going on, he had taken a staff car toward the front, come under British fire and, as his driver swerved to avoid further fire, Stumme allegedly hopped onto the off-side running board. He lost his grip and fell, suffering a fatal heart attack.

The German high command in Berlin ordered Lieutenant Colonel Siegfried Westphal, Rommel's chief of operations, to tell them if the British were mounting a full-scale attack. Westphal signaled that indeed it was a full attack and that Rommel's return was imperative. Rommel immediately flew from Wiener Neustadt—south of Vienna—to Rome, then to Crete, and finally to El Daba, 35 miles west of El Alamein.

Reaching his desert headquarters, he listened to Westphal's assessment. The next morning General Wilhelm von Thoma, who took Stumme's place, gave his report: *Panzerarmee* was able to stop the British attack but could not gain battle initiative; British artillery and air power were dominant, causing heavy casualties; 15th Panzer Division could field only thirty-one tanks; and the fuel situation was barely sufficient—still no new fuel, even though tankers were reported at sea. New Italian divisions promised by Cavallero before Rommel left had not materialized, and the coast road still needed improvement. If nothing else, Marshal Cavallero was consistent with his empty promises.

By the morning of the 26th, Rommel was convinced that the British main assault would be in the north. He moved elements of the 21st Panzers and most of his artillery from their southern positions to launch a counterattack against the British trying to penetrate his line around Kidney Ridge. The counterattack failed, but so too did the British attempted breakthrough. The next morning, Rommel ordered local counterattacks by the *Afrika Korps* and the 90th Light Division. They all failed, the Panzers turned back by fire from anti-

tank guns and dug-in tanks, the 90th Light mauled by a thunderous artillery barrage and wave after wave of bombers and fighter-bombers.

The battle shifted back and forth, neither side gaining the initiative. The British attacks, none very powerful, some quite costly, were Montgomery's attempt to "crumble" the defenses piece by piece, each attack meant to exact the highest cost to the defenders. For Rommel there was but one goal: hold the front line! But for how much longer? His troops were running low on ammunition, and, during the evening of 27 October, he was handed a message that a tanker and a transport, together carrying 3,500 tons of fuel, were sunk. And Rommel did not believe, despite all the battling, that the British had as yet mounted their main attack.

That blow fell the night of 1-2 November, just north of Kidney Ridge with the advance of XXX Corps. The 151st (Durham) Brigade, supported by the 8th Royal Tank Regiment on the right, and the 152nd (Highland) Brigade, the 50th Royal Tank Regiment in support, on the left, cut a swath 4,000 yards wide and 6,000 yards long toward the enemy aligned along the Rahman Track and on Aqqaqir Ridge. Once the assault forces reached the Rahman Track, John Currie's 9th Armored Brigade started its 15-mile journey from El Alamein station to the front where it was supposed to punch a hole in the defensive line and hold it open until the 1st Armored Division's tanks came through and exploited the gap. The 9th was equipped with 121 tanks—Crusaders, Grants, and Shermans—but trailed a long tail of support artillery, motorized infantry, and supply trucks, tripling the vehicles in the westward-moving columns. The 9th struggled forward, hampered by German artillery fire and stray mines, by the existing traffic at the front, by tanks colliding with trucks, and by mechanical problems ranging from clogged filters to faulty radios and wobbly compasses. The advance took two hours, during which the 9th lost three dozen tanks.

The shadows of a gray dawn stretched across the desert as the 9th reached its attack point. They could see Aqqaqir Ridge in the distance. They charged forward behind a curtain of artillery fire at 6:15 A.M. On and on the tanks charged, the Crusaders in the lead. Then they were at the Axis lines, the carnage created by the artillery bombardment enveloping them. A German officer looked through a periscope and saw four British tanks headed his way. The lead tank charged into a machine-gun post, stopped, and then slurred to one