

# The North African Campaign

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The North African campaign was one of the most intense and grueling battles fought in the deserts of North Africa during the Second World War. The armour duels between Rommel's Afrika Corps and the British Eighth Army have assumed legendary proportions which are cited even today. The campaign included battles fought in the Libyan and Egyptian deserts (Western Desert Campaign, also known as the Desert War) and in Morocco and Algeria (Operation Torch) and Tunisia (Tunisia Campaign) between 1940 and 1943.

The campaign was fought between the Allies and Axis powers, many of whom had interests in Africa dating from the period of colonialism and the Scramble for Africa. The Allied war effort was dominated by the British Commonwealth and exiles from German-occupied Europe. The US entered the war in 1941 and began direct military assistance in North Africa on 11 May 1942.

The North African Campaign was fought mainly for two reasons. The first was the Suez Canal, which was crucial to controlling the Middle East. The second was Middle Eastern oil resources. Control of Egypt was especially important because it sat at the center of a vital geographic-strategic network that included the Eastern Mediterranean, Abyssinia (invaded by the Italians in 1936 and liberated by Britain in 1941), the Middle East as well as the Suez Canal. When Italian dictator Benito Mussolini declared war on the Allies on June 10, 1940, he already had more than a million men in the Italian army based in Libya. In neighboring Egypt, the British Army had only 36,000 men guarding the Suez Canal and the Arabian oil fields. Italian forces became a potential threat to Allied supply routes in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

## **Counter Stroke from Egypt**

On 10 June 1940, as France was on the verge of falling into Axis hands, Italy joined the war in order to win some of the spoils for itself. Nearly half a million Italian troops and their colonial allies launched a campaign threatening the scanty British force of 50,000 in North Africa. Italy's entry into the war also closed the Mediterranean supply line for the Allies to reach Africa further adding to their woes in the Desert.

On the North African front a still larger Italian force in Cyrenaica under Marshal Grazini faced the 36,000 British, New Zealand, and Indian troops who guarded Egypt. The Western Desert, inside the Egyptian frontier, separated the two sides on the front. The foremost British position was at Mersa Matruh, 120 miles inside the frontier and some 200 miles west of the Nile Delta.

Instead of remaining passive, General Sir Archibald Wavell, the Allied Commander in the Middle East, however, used part of his incomplete armoured division as an offensive covering force right forward in the desert, continuously harassing the Italian posts. Thus at the outset of the campaign, General Creagh's 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division – the soon to be famous – 'Desert Rats' – gained a moral ascendancy over the enemy. The British strategy was to keep mobile and not hold ground while inducing the Italians to present targets. In the first three months of the desert campaign the Italian casualties amounted to over 3,500 while the British figures stood only at 150.

It was not until 13 September 1940 that the Italians, after massing more than six divisions, began a cautious move forward into the Western Desert. After advancing fifty miles, less than half way to the British position at Mersa Matruh, they sat down at Sidi Barrani, and there established themselves in a chain of fortified camps – which were too widely separated to support one another. Week after week then passed without any attempt to move on. Meanwhile further reinforcements reached Wavell, including three armoured regiments rushed out from England in three fast merchant ships, on Churchill's bold initiative. Wavell not decided that, as the Italians did not come on, he would sally forth and strike at them. The stroke was planned, not as a sustained offensive, but rather as a large-scale raid. Wavell thought of it as a sharp punch while he diverted part of his strength towards Sudan to drive out the other Italian Army there. Therefore, no preparations were made to consolidate the victories gained.

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On the night of 7 December, the strike force under General O'Connor moved out of the Matruh position on its seventy-mile approach through the Western Desert. Next night it passed through a gap in the enemy's chain of camps and on the 9<sup>th</sup> the Infantry of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division (under General Beresford-Peirse) stormed Nibeiba camp from the rear, with the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Tanks as its spearhead. The garrison was taken by surprise, and 4,000 prisoners captured, while the attackers casualties were small. Soon 'Tummar' West and East were captured and the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division had driven westward and reached the coast-road, thus getting astride the enemy's line of retreat.

On the next day, a converging assault from both flanks by the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured took the enemy garrison at Sidi Barrani. On the third day, a reserve brigade of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division bagged nearly 14,000 prisoners and 88 guns near the coast at Buq-Bug thus bringing the tally of prisoners to 40,000. The capture of Sidi Barrani led to the recall of 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division for employment in Sudan. It thus led to the frittering away of tremendous gains made in the North. Thus on 11 December, the third day of battle, the routed Italians were running westwards in panic while half the victor's force was marching eastwards – back to back! It was a strange spectacle, and entailed a fateful delay. For three weeks elapsed before the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division arrived from Palestine to aid in continuing the British advance. By 6 January 1942, the Italian garrison at Bardia surrendered to the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division with 45,000 soldiers, 462 guns and 129 tanks. The Australian Commander, Maj Gen IG Mackay said that each Matilda tank was worth a whole Infantry battalion to him.

7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division continued on its westward march and Tobruk garrison fell on 22 January 1941 yielding a bag of 30,000 prisoners, 236 guns and 87 tanks. Only 16 Matildas of the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) were left for use in this assault, but once again they made the decisive penetration. Never before in the history of warfare has a single fighting unit made such a decisive part in the issue of a series of battles as the 7<sup>th</sup> RTR did at Sidi Barrani, Bardia and Tobruk in turn.

## **Rommel enters the fray**

On 12 February 1941, the very day that Marshal Grazini's army was being finally wiped out at Beda Fomm, a young German general, Erwin Rommel – who had brilliantly led the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division in the French campaign flew to Tripoli with a small German mechanised force to assist the Italians. Rommel occupied the Agheila bottleneck almost immediately and decided to push on further. The British 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division had been sent back to Egypt for rest and re-fit.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division had moved to Greece and their replacements the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division and the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division were under-equipped and inexperienced for desert warfare. Moreover, due to faulty reports by the Royal Air Force (Rommel had dummy tanks which exaggerated the number of tanks the Panzers had), Wavell did not credit reports of an impending attack.

On 2 April 1941, Rommel resumed his advance with 50 tanks and two new Italian Divisions. By mobility and ruse he sought to magnify his slight strength. Following the shock of Rommel's initial assault, his shadow loomed so large that his two slim fingers, nearly a hundred miles apart, became magnified into encircling horns. The effect of this audacious thrust was magical. The British forces hastily fell back in confusion, and on 3 April evacuated Benghazi. Maj Gen O'Connor and Neame ran into the back of a German spearhead group and taken prisoner. The 1<sup>st</sup> British Armoured Brigade lost almost all its tanks in a hasty retreat and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division surrendered at Mechili. The Germans magnified their strength by raising dust-clouds and lining trucks while the Italians still lagged behind. By 11 April, the British had been thrown out of Cyrenaica and over the Egyptian Frontier, except for a small force in Tobruk. The retreat was even quicker than the earlier conquest of North Africa. The price to be paid for forfeiting the golden opportunity of February 1941 was heavy. In that month, Churchill's visions of stirring up support from their Balkan allies had diverted attention and military effort towards Greece and had led to the slackening up of the Desert advance.

The Tobruk Garrison comprised of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division under General Morshead and the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade (of the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Division) which had arrived by sea and a small armoured force of fifty odd tanks of the 7<sup>th</sup> RTR. The garrison held on for eight months. Elsewhere, the rout continued with a large number of British tanks breaking up during the withdrawal. Two large scale German assaults on Tobruk launched on 11 and 30 April were repulsed. Meanwhile, a British convoy succeeded in crossing the Mediterranean (Op Tiger) and on 12 May, 238 tanks arrived at Alexandria.

A series of battles were fought which saw the posts at Bir Waid, Musaid, Sidi Azeiz and Halfaya Pass exchange hands between the British and the Germans.

## **Operation Battleaxe**

The aim of Operation 'Battleaxe' as set by Churchill were to gain a 'decisive' victory in North Africa and 'destroy' Rommel's forces. The assault was planned over three stages – In the first stage, the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division aided by the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured

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Brigade were to advance along the axis- Halafaya-Sollum-Capuzzo. In the second stage, the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division was to make an exploiting drive for Tobruk. In the third stage, this Division after consolidating Tobruk had to advance westward.

The attacking force began its advance on 14 June. The battle began in 15 June but the enemy at Halafaya Pass was better prepared this time. The enemy artillery took out the Matilda Tanks with their artillery with only one tank remaining. The British aptly called the pass- ‘Hellfire Pass’. Meanwhile, the centre column spearheaded by one regiment of Matildas managed to capture Fort Capuzzo. But the brigade of cruiser tanks leading the left column had run into Rommel’s tank trap on Hafid Ridge and was subsequently pushed back by a counter-offensive launched by a Panzer Regiment.

By the second day, Rommel whose armour strength was almost intact seized the initiative by launching his entire 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division from Tobruk and attempted to envelop the British left flank in the desert. The British repulsed the German attack on Fort Capuzzo but the German frontal attack had disjointed the British plan for a renewed offensive. Rommel’s scythe like advance on Halfaya Pass precipitated the British retreat and on the fourth day of Battleaxe they were 30 miles back from where they had started. Both sides suffered nearly a thousand casualties in the four day period. But the British lost nearly 91 tanks while the German losses stood at only 12 tanks.

Battleaxe made a fresh turn in the tactical trend of the war. Tobruk, ‘Brevity’ and ‘Battleaxe’ proved the effectiveness of a defensive battle – even in open country – if conducted with skill and based on an understanding of the properties of modern instruments. Defence, in a more mobile form had regained the advantage it held in World War I, and could be overcome by a great superiority of strength or a very high degree of skill – in upsetting the opponent’s balance. Rommel by his innovative thinking had used the 88s – an anti-aircraft gun as in a mobile form against tanks. The British came to realize this aspect only later. Another important development missed by the British troops was the bold move of using the 50 mm anti-tank guns in close conjunction with the Panzer tanks. The 50 mm guns were pushed ahead in well dug-out and concealed positions in hollows ahead of the tanks. As a consequence, the British crew never realised whether they were being hit by the anti-tank guns or by the tanks themselves. Another important factor was the inability of the British to combine their Infantry tanks with the cruisers

as they had done in the first desert campaign in Libya. The Germans on the other hand could combine all types of tanks with great difference in speed.

## **Op Crusader**

The British 70<sup>th</sup> Division relieved the battered 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division. They were also reinforced with more tanks and 200 aircrafts. The allies now achieved air superiority over the Germans in this theatre. The British achieved a 2 to 1 superiority in tanks over the British. Battleaxe also saw the removal of British field commanders on the ground and Wavell was relieved by General Sir Claude Auchinleck from India. The British forces in the desert were now reorganised into the 8<sup>th</sup> Army under Lt Gen Sir Alan Cunningham. The new army was divided into the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps under Lt Gen AR Godwin Austen and the 30 (Armoured) Corps under Lt Gen CWN Norrie. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corps included the New Zealand and the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions with a brigade of Infantry tanks. The 30<sup>th</sup> Corps included the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division with two Armoured Brigades (the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup>), the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade Group, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Guards (Motor) Brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division. The 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Division was in reverse. The basis of the offensive plan was that the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps would pin down the enemy's frontline troops while the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps would sweep around the flanks of these fortifications and link up with the Tobruk garrison, seventy miles beyond the frontier – which was to break out to meet the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps. Thus the two corps would be operating in two widely separated areas rather than with combined effect. Thus the British forfeited the opening advantage gained by their strategic outflanking move. As Rommel caustically remarked: 'What difference does it make if you have two tanks to my one, when you spread them out and let me smash them in detail? You presented me with three brigades in succession.

The British 30<sup>th</sup> Corps crossed the frontier on 18 November 1941 and then began a right wheel towards Tobruk ninety miles away. The next few days a series saw both sides engaging themselves at numerous places. At Bir el Gubi, the British 22<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Brigade assaulted an Italian defensive position in a move similar to the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' at Balaclava and in the process lost 40 of their 160 tanks. Intense engagements continued at Sidi Rezegh. Capuzzo once again fell to the Allies on 22 November. During the night of 23 November, the British force at Sidi Rezegh had withdrawn a short distance to await reinforcements from the New Zealanders. But the junction was never achieved and a concentrated thrust by the two Panzer Divisions split them up. Cruewell launched his attack from the South against the 5<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Brigade –

some of the smaller fragments had managed to slip out of the trap in the interval before the German attack was launched. The German concentrated attack went through and more than 3000 soldiers were either killed or taken prisoners. But, by the time it had struck a good defence had been organised which led to a severe loss of over 70 Panzer tanks from a total of 160. The material losses suffered in this one action largely offset the gains made by the strategic maneuvers of the past days and unlike the British, Rommel did not have a reserve to replenish his armour.

On 24 November, Rommel decided to pursue the enemy with his Panzer divisions, to restore the situation on the Sollum front, and at the same time advance against rearward communications of the British in the area of Sidi Omar. By next afternoon Rommel had covered sixty miles in five hours drive through the desert and reached the frontline at Bir Sheferzen. By 26 November, the two Panzer divisions were on their way back to Tobruk and Bardia (the latter from Halfaya Pass). That marked the fade-out finish of a counter-stroke that had opened so promisingly.

The Panzer withdrawal were caused due to several factors – the delay of the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division and the inertia of the Italian Mobile Corps in backing up the Rommel-led drive of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division; the consequent loss of momentum and spread in the exploiting ‘shock-wave’; the fumbling and futile action on the frontier: due in part to lack of accurate information, wireless breakdowns, and misinterpreted orders; the creation by the British of a threat to their opponent’s counter-threat, instead of retreating; the replacement of the Eight Army’s commander at a critical moment. Another factor was the decision by elements of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Corps to stay put at their locations at the edge of the whirlpool caused by the advance of Rommel’s forces and not adding to the stampede. By 26 November, the New Zealand Division supported by Matilda tanks broke through the German investing position and linked up with Tobruk garrison. The Afrika Corps with its 60 remaining tanks turned westward. But by the 29<sup>th</sup> the Afrika Corps linked up with the rest of Rommel’s forces and relived the pressure on them. By 1 December, the Allies had been driven out of the Sidi Rezegh Ridge and Belhamed, cutting the corridor between them and the Tobruk force. The outcome of this third round of battle was an astonishing achievement on the part of an enemy force that had been outnumbered 7 to 1 in fighting tanks at the start of the round, and when it ended was still out-numbered 4 to 1 by the total of those on the British side. But by now, Auchinleck was determined to continue his thrust and the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division was relieved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> South

African, and sent forward to join the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division in an outflanking move to cut Rommel's line of supply and retreat. Rommel decided to pull back westward, abandoning the investment of Tobruk. By 11 December, Rommel's forces had withdrawn safely to the Gazala line which had earlier been prepared as a reserve line.

On 14 December, Godwin-Austen launched his assault on the Gazala line but the main attack on the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division had been a failure. By now, the Panzers were left with barely 30 tanks as against the British force of 200 tanks on the scene. Weighing his options, Rommel decided to take a long step back to Mersa Brega and await reinforcements. The British pursuit slackened due to lack of petrol. The 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division on motor transport, pressed on near the coast, through the hill country of Jebel Akhdar. The Panzers, however managed to inflict reverses on the British at Agedabia and El Haseiat. 65 British tanks got lost by the riposte. 30,000 Axis troops were killed in Operation Crusader although the brunt of the casualties was borne by the Italians. The Allied casualties stood at 13,000 and included some of the desert veterans who could never be replaced.

## **The Tide turns in Africa**

On 30 June, the Germans made for the Alamein line for a brief pause. This pause proved detrimental to Rommel as that time, the British Armoured brigades were still on the desert outstripped by the Panzers. On 1 July, Rommel launched his advance into Bab el Qatara. The advance ran into an unknown 'box' at Deir el Shein where it was held up for almost a day. This gave enough time for the British to check the German advance and prevent them from achieving a swift breakthrough. By 2 July, the Afrika Corps was left with only 40 tanks and tired troops to pursue a swift advance. On 4 July, Rommel called off the advance as he was left with only 26 tanks and his eastward thrust was checked by the New Zealand division. A battalion of this formation had also managed to capture all the guns of the Italian Ariete Division in a sudden counter-attack. By now, the British were reinforced by the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division and their tank strength was brought up to 400.

On 21 July, the British launched a fresh attack with the objective of achieving a breakthrough in the centre, on the southern side of the Ruweisat Ridge, towards El Mireir. The Australians launched a subsidiary attack on the Miteiriya Ridge in the North. At this time, the Panzer armour strength had come down to only 30 tanks. The attack failed to achieve much and was called off after four days of



heavy fighting. The offensive, however managed to halt the German advance. The British Eighth Army suffered over 13,000 casualties during the July battle at Alamein, it had taken over 7,000 prisoners. The loss for Rommel was greater in the absence of reinforcements.

In August, Churchill visited Egypt and Auchinleck was replaced by Montgomery. The Germans were reinforced by a Parachute Brigade and an Italian Parachute Division (both dismounted for employment as Infantry). Rommel also had about 200 gun-armed tanks in the two Panzer division and about 240 in the two Italian Armoured Divisions.

Rommel's attack of 30 August broke off and his eastward thrust had to be prematurely turned north. By 3 September, the Afrika Corps was left with only one day of fuel and the attack was called off. The Germans withdrew westward. The Panzer Army was now in retreat and the tide had finally turned in Africa. The morale of the Allied troops was on the ascendance, however, Montgomery decided not to pursue the 'bottled up' Germans in the desert. The battle of Alam Hafa was symbolic in the sense that it was a turning point battle won purely on defensive ground without launching a counter-offensive. The choice of ground and the positioning of the British forces had a great influence on the outcome of battle. The ground forces held the ring while the air forces constantly bombed the arena, now a trap, into which Rommel's troops had pushed.

## **The Final Offensive**

The British offensive was launched on 23 October. The strength of the Eighth Army was 2,30,000 while Rommel had less than 80,000 troops left with him. The British tank strength was at 1,229. Rommel was however, left with only 240 German and 280 Italian tanks (the latter were of obsolete type). Only the 210 gun-armed German Medium tanks could be counted upon in an armoured battle. To top it all, the Germans had few Panzer IVs and anti-tank guns to match the power of new American Sherman tanks which had joined the British tank inventory. The Shermans were equipped with HE shells which could take out moving targets at long range. So, the British started with a 6 to 1 superiority in the final offensive. Rommel's miseries were compounded by the extreme shortage of fuel and food supplies, the latter contributing to large scale sickness among the Axis troops. The casualty included Rommel himself who had taken sick during the Alam Hafa battle.

On D-Day, the Infantry charge was preceded by a 15 minute 'hurricane' artillery bombardment by more than a thousand guns. In two days, the British

managed to drive a wedge through the German defences and their armour were now in a position to blunt the spasmodic German counter-attacks. But by 26 October, the armour break-through had failed to achieve a break-in and the British armour were surrounded in a ring of German anti-tank guns.

## **Operation Supercharge**

Montgomery's determined new offensive north (towards the coast) opened on 28 October. The thrust was however checked as Rommel brought his 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division to the flank. By this time, the Afrika Corps was left with only 90 serviceable tanks as opposed to 800 British tanks. The fresh British offensive of 2 November was stalled in the minefields and by the powerful anti-tank guns of Rahman track. By nightfall, the British had lost nearly 200 tanks in the cramped positions of the Rahman track. But by now Rommel was virtually at the end of his resources. Rommel's decision to withdraw to Fuka was countermanded by Hitler and the re-deployment to the Alamein front proved fatal to the Afrika Corps. The 51<sup>st</sup> Highlanders and the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division succeeded in effecting a breach between the Afrika Corps and the Italians. On 4 November, three British Armoured Divisions pierced through the breach and deployed – with orders to swing northward and bar the enemy's line of retreat along the coast road. Their exploiting drive was reinforced by the motorized New Zealand Division, and a fourth armoured brigade. The British cutting off action was too slow and narrow. By the time they had closed in around Fuka and Baqqush – the retreating German Army had slipped out. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division was also too cautious and avoided movement by night in pursuing Rommel's main column around Daba. On 9 November, Rommel who had withdrawn to Sidi Barrani from Mersa Matruh ordered his rearguards to withdraw to the frontiers. A special pursuit force organised by Montgomery narrowly missed catching the enemy's tail at Capuzzo on 11 November.

The Eighth Army, besides killing several thousand, had captured some 10,000 Germans and over 20,000 Italians – including administrative personnel – together with some 450 tanks and over 1000 guns. Rommel ultimately withdrew to Buerat, a bound 250 miles away from the British line. Rommel returned to North Africa after Hitler ordered that the Mersa Bregha position had to be held at all costs. Rommel while returning to Tripoli had formed up his plan to withdraw right back to the Tunisian frontier and the Gabes bottleneck, where he could not easily be outflanked and could deliver an effective counterstroke with the reinforcements that would be more closely at hand there.

Operation Torch (Allied Landings in North Africa) and the subsequent battles including Vichy French forces finally effected the surrender of the Axis forces in North Africa.

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