

18

THREE WARS IN AFRICA

The First World War came to Africa three days after the outbreak in Europe when the German west coast colony of Togoland was invaded and swiftly occupied by British and French forces from the Gold Coast and Senegal; the Kaiser's three other colonies, with the exception of German East Africa in which the redoubtable von Lettow-Vorbeck sustained a guerrilla resistance to the end, were brought under Allied control soon afterwards. The Second World War, by contrast, came to Africa piecemeal and with delay. For that there was good reason: one result of Versailles had been to transfer sovereignty over Germany's former African colonies to Britain, France and South Africa by League of Nations mandate; and while Italy, which had extensive African possessions on the Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts, was allied to Germany, nevertheless it did not enter the war against Britain and France, both also major colonial powers within the continent, until June 1940. Although Hitler retained a colonial governor-in-waiting on his ministerial staff, he had made no move in the meantime to extend his war-making southward across the Mediterranean. Indeed, until Italy declared for him, he had no means with which to mount offensive operations into Africa, and, unless Mussolini tried but failed there, he had no cause.

Germany's defeat of France, in which Italy played an ignominious and Johnny-come-lately part, provided Mussolini with the stimulus to reach for laurels in Africa. Pétain's armistice with Hitler left Vichy in control of the French empire as well as the French navy and armed forces, and therefore neutralised the French forces on the fringes of Mussolini's empire – the *Troupes spéciales du Levant* in Syria and Lebanon and the great *Armée d'Afrique* in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Further, when the armistice provoked the British into attacking and crippling the French main fleet at its moorings at Mers-el-Kebir on 3 July 1940, killing 1300 French sailors in the process, after its admirals had refused to sail it out of Pétain's hands, the resulting bitterness ensured that the French forces would lend no

support at all to their former allies. In July, therefore, Mussolini struck at the British where the Italian forces in Africa were strongest and theirs weakest. On 4 July units from the Italian garrison in Ethiopia occupied frontier towns in the Anglo-Egyptian condominium of the Sudan, on 15 July they penetrated the British colony of Kenya, and between 5 and 19 August they occupied the whole of British Somaliland on the Gulf of Aden.

Italy's ability to move so audaciously against the East African territories of what was still the world's greatest imperial power was determined by the otherwise uncharacteristic disparity of strength prevailing between the two in that corner of the continent. After the recent conquest of Ethiopia, still only superficially pacified, Italy maintained there and in its older colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland an army of 92,000 Italians and 250,000 native troops supported by 323 aircraft. The British, by contrast, deployed only 40,000 troops, most of them local, and 100 aircraft. Britain's local forces included the soldierly and loyal units of the Somaliland Camel Corps, the Sudan Defence Force and the Kenya battalions of the King's African Rifles, but they were wholly outnumbered by the enemy and outclassed in equipment. The 10,000 troops in the French enclave of Djibouti were loyal to Vichy (and would remain so until they were persuaded to come over after the North African landings in November 1942).

Britain was limited in its ability to reinforce its East African garrison from Egypt, where it had maintained an army since its annexation of that semi-autonomous fief of the Ottoman Empire in 1882, because of the need to defend Egypt's western frontier against the army of 200,000 men, mostly Italians, that Italy maintained in Libya (which it had ruled since also annexing it from Turkey in 1912). Britain's strategic difficulty cast a long shadow. Douglas Newbold, Civil Secretary in the Sudan, writing home on 19 May 1940, gloomily anticipated the outcome of the approaching war: 'Kassala is Italy's for the asking. Port Sudan probably, Khartoum perhaps. Bang goes 40 years' patient work in the Sudan and we abandon the trusting Sudanese to a totalitarian conqueror.'

Newbold's fears for the security of Britain's hold on all East African territories were fortunately to prove over-pessimistic. Although strong on the ground, Italy's Ethiopian army suffered from disabling weaknesses. It was timidly led – though the Duke of Aosta, the Italian viceroy, was a man of personal courage and distinction – it was isolated from resupply and it could not be reinforced. The British, by contrast, were at liberty to build up their forces in the region by the transfer of troops from India and South Africa through the chain of ports they controlled along the littoral of the Indian Ocean. In April 1940, General Sir Archibald Wavell, commander-in-chief in the Middle East, had visited Jan Smuts, the Prime Minister of South Africa – whose parliament had narrowly voted to enter the war the previous September – and brought back the guarantee that the dominion would raise a brigade and three squadrons of aircraft for service in Kenya. The force was to be commanded by Dan Pienaar, like Smuts a veteran of the Boer War against the British but, like him, now also a devoted supporter of the imperial cause. In September Wavell risked transferring the 5th Indian Division from Egypt to the Sudan, to join a British brigade there.

During the autumn two extra South African brigades arrived in Kenya to form the 1st South African Division. In December, following the success of Wavell's counter-offensive in Egypt against the Italian Libyan army, Wavell sent to the Sudan the additional reinforcement of the 4th Indian Division. By the beginning of January 1941, therefore, the new British commander in East Africa, General Alan Cunningham, brother of the admiral commanding the Mediterranean fleet, disposed of sufficient force to contemplate expelling the Italians from their footholds on British territory and carrying the war into their Ethiopian empire.

— The Ethiopian campaign —

The British had been to Ethiopia before, on a punitive campaign against the Emperor Theodore in 1867-8; the difficulties of campaigning among its towering mountains had wisely persuaded them not to stay. The Italians, by the deployment of aircraft, tanks and overwhelming numbers, in 1936-7 had broken the primitive army of the Emperor Haile Selassie and thereby also avenged themselves for their defeat at the hands of the Emperor Menelek at Adowa during their first attempt to establish an Ethiopian empire in 1896. The coming Ethiopian campaign, though fought between the European powers, was to partake of the spirit of those preceding it. It was to be essentially colonial in character; many of the troops engaged were non-European; and the mountainous terrain and the absence of roads, railways and all the rest of the infrastructure upon which European armies depended for movement and supply imposed a colonial rhythm on its course.

The British plan for their counter-offensive against the Duke of Aosta's command had been fixed at Khartoum at the end of October 1940. Anthony Eden, the British war minister, had arrived there on 28 October to join Haile Selassie, returned from exile in England in expectation of reinheriting his kingdom, Wavell, Cunningham, who was to take command on 1 November, and Smuts, who had flown from South Africa. Smuts and Eden had strong political motives for urging an offensive. Smuts needed a victory to overcome opposition by his anti-British nationalists to South Africa's participation in the war; that opposition, though not as strong as in 1914 when unreconciled Boers had actually taken up arms in revolt, was still a challenge to his leadership. Eden, for his part, was anxious for the British success at this point of juncture between the African and Arabian corners of the Islamic world, because he needed to offset growing German influence over such Muslim leaders as the Mufti of Jerusalem and Rashid Ali in Iraq, who saw in Britain's time of adversity an opportunity to repay her for such grievances as the maintenance of an imperial garrison at Baghdad and the sponsorship of Zionist settlement in Palestine.

Haile Selassie, a diplomatist of subtlety, persuaded Eden at Khartoum that despite Foreign Office representations to the contrary his return to Ethiopia, where resistance to the Italian occupation was beginning to revive, offered the best prospect of undermining their common enemy's grip on the country. Ethiopian 'patriot' units, armed by the British,

were already in existence on the Sudanese border. On 6 November a British officer, Orde Wingate, representative of a tradition of irregular soldiering which reached back to the early days of Indian conquest and was most recently embodied by T. E. Lawrence, arrived in Khartoum with a million pounds to spend and a fervent belief that he could restore Haile Selassie, the Lion of Judah, to his throne. He immediately took the 'patriot' units under command, flew into Ethiopia to make contact with the internal resistance and, on his return, began preparations to escort the emperor across the frontier.

On 20 January 1941, in the words of an official imperial propagandist, 'His Majesty the Emperor Haile Selassie I accompanied by the Crown Prince ... and two powerful Ethiopian and English armies crossed the frontier of the Sudan and Ethiopia and entered into his own.' The exigencies of long exile excused the exaggeration; Wingate's column was almost comically weak, camel-mounted and bereft of modern equipment. However, it was at least in motion towards the capital of Addis Ababa; and so too, after some inconclusive border skirmishes, were the main British forces which constituted the real threat to Italy's Abyssinian empire. On 19 January the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions crossed the frontier north of the Blue Nile, heading for the fabled city of Gondar; they met little resistance, though at one point a force of local horsemen, the Amharic Cavalry Band, led by an Italian officer on a white horse, attempted a death-or-glory charge against their machine-guns. On 20 January the Sudan Defence Force, whose officers included the famous anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (the equally famous Arabist, Wilfred Thesiger, was on the staff of Wingate's 'Gideon Force' accompanying the emperor), crossed into Ethiopia south of the Blue Nile. Finally, on 11 February, Cunningham's army of South Africans, the King's African Rifles and the Royal West African Frontier Force marched out of Kenya into southern Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland.

The Duke of Aosta correctly estimated that the most dangerous of these incursions was that of the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions in the north and accordingly concentrated the best of his troops around Keren, a small town in Eritrea defended by high peaks and approachable only along a deep and narrow gorge. The Indian divisions attacked it on 10 February and were driven off, attacked again on 15 March and were counter-attacked; but, when their engineers undertook a systematic dismantling of the obstacles with which the approaches to Keren had been surrounded, the Italians decided that they were beaten and retreated into the hinterland. The whole of Eritrea was occupied by 2 April. By then the Italian position in the south had also collapsed. General Cunningham's army, advancing from Kenya into Italian Somaliland, found it difficult to keep up with the enemy, so keen were the local troops to desert their Italian officers and make for home with their rifles and ammunition, rich prizes in that territory of endemic banditry. In late March, having swung north-west from Somaliland towards central Ethiopia, he was forced to fight a battle to open the road to the ancient walled city of Harar, which was won by the black Nigerians of the Royal West African Frontier Force – soldiers in whom Cunningham had previously but wrongly reposed little trust. Thereafter the Italians' hold over their local units began to

collapse irretrievably; by early April only a thin screen of Savoy Grenadiers stood between Cunningham and Addis Ababa. They were brushed aside, and on 5 April the capital fell to the British. Haile Selassie, escorted by Wingate's 'Gideon Force', made a triumphal entry on 5 May. Meanwhile the Duke of Aosta had retreated to the mountain fastness of Amba Alagi, where he surrendered in late May. He was to die of tuberculosis in British captivity the following year.

The war in Ethiopia was now effectively over. British Somaliland had been recaptured by an amphibious landing launched from Aden on 16 March; the Italian commander of Berbera, the capital, burst into tears on surrendering his revolver to a British officer, who comforted him with the thought that 'war can be very embarrassing'. A handful of Italian diehards escaped westward to surrender to a Belgian force advancing from the Congo on 3 July. In the course of the campaign Italy lost some 289,000 troops, mostly locals, and the majority being taken prisoner. The victors were at once dispersed to other fronts where they were more urgently needed – the Indians and South Africans to the Western Desert, the West and East Africans to their home stations, whence they would be shipped in 1944 to fight the war against the Japanese in Burma, in which Wingate would win a legendary reputation. A Free French force which had come from the Middle East to fight returned there. General Sir William Platt, the commander of the Sudan Defence Force, would go on to capture Madagascar from its Vichy garrison – which Churchill feared it could or would not hold against the Japanese – in November 1942. Cunningham, the conqueror of Ethiopia, departed for Egypt, where he would lose his reputation as a successful soldier in the struggle against Rommel.

The Ethiopian campaign was an oddity among those of the Second World War, strategically a footnote to the nineteenth-century 'scramble for Africa', tactically a Beau Geste episode of long camel treks and short bitter conflicts for mountain strongpoints and desert forts. It was appropriate that among the colourful variety of colonial units which had taken part – Mahratta Light Infantry, Rajputana Rifles, Gold Coast Regiment, *Gruppo Banda Frontiere* – the Foreign Legion should have been one. Committed at the personal insistence of General de Gaulle, who at that time was urgently seeking means to turn his declared revolt against Pétain and Vichy into a reality, the Legion had fought vigorously and effectively in the Battle of Keren before returning to the Middle East to take part in the Battle of Bir Hacheim, with its great reputation yet further enhanced.

Ethiopia was not the only front south of the Mediterranean on which de Gaulle sought, in the aftermath of the fall of France, to establish an alternative to the Vichy regime. During September 1940 he had led a Free French force, embarked together with British units of the Royal Navy, against Dakar in Senegal, the cornerstone of the French presence in West Africa. His aim, which was to rally the garrison to the Free French cause, failed; so too did the Royal Navy's, which was to immobilise units of the French fleet which had arrived to defend the harbour. However, though on 25 September de Gaulle was forced to withdraw discomfited, this Free French effort at penetrating West Africa was not without

results. On 27 August the resolute follower of de Gaulle Philippe Leclerc, had succeeded in rallying the colony of Cameroon; on hearing that news the black governor of Chad also came over and the French Congo rallied shortly afterwards. With Cameroon, Chad, Congolese and some rallied Senegalese troops, Leclerc invaded Gabon on 12 October and with his confrère, Pierre Koenig, led columns against the capital Libreville, which surrendered on 12 November. It was evidence of how bitterly ideological this fratricidal war between Frenchmen had become that the governor, Masson, hanged himself rather than surrender; his successor capitulated the same day.

— The Syrian war —

De Gaulle now controlled a solid wedge of territory in the great West African bight and also disposed of four independent military forces on the continent; a brigade in Egypt and a 'division' in East Africa (the two soon to be united as part of the British Western Desert Force); a garrison in West Africa and, in Chad, Leclerc's *Groupe Nomade de Tibesti*. Leclerc, by far the most dynamic of de Gaulle's followers, led his tiny command northward into Italian Libya in the spring of 1941, made contact with the British Long Range Desert Group and then independently captured the oasis of Kufra on 1 March. It was the first single-handed Free French success against the Axis. Conscious of the significance of his victory, Leclerc at once prompted his little band of white and black French soldiers to take a solemn oath ('Le serment de Kufra') not to lay down arms until the French flag should once more fly over the German-annexed cities of Metz and Strasbourg; Leclerc, a former cadet at Saint-Cyr, belonged to the graduating class of 'Metz et Strasbourg'. In the spring of 1941 it must have seemed a bold gesture to cast down such a challenge. Not even the indomitable Leclerc might have dared to foresee that three years later he would be leading French soldiers down the Champs-Élysées to a solemn Te Deum of gratitude in Notre-Dame de Paris for the liberation of the city, or that by November 1944 his 2nd Armoured Division would indeed be present to watch the tricolour rise over Metz and Strasbourg.

In the spring of 1941, it was the spectre of further fratricidal wars rather than any vision of liberation which exercised those Frenchmen who had taken sides over the issue of the armistice. The largest concentration of Vichy French troops, General Maxime Weygand's great *Armée d'Afrique* in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, lay as yet outside the strategic ambit; but General Henri Dentz's Army of the Levant in Syria and Lebanon was a natural target for subversion by Axis agents. Its bases outflanked from the east those of the British in Egypt, where their desert war with the Italians had broken out in earnest in December; it also provided a bridgehead through which Britain's Arab enemies, Rashid Ali in Iraq and the Mufti of Jerusalem in Palestine, could be supported. Dentz, like Weygand, was bound to neutrality by the terms of the armistice; but because of the relative weakness of his force (38,000 to Weygand's 100,000), its isolation from France and its proximity to the Axis power-base in Italy and the Balkans he could be put under pressure to which

Weygand was impervious. Early in April British intelligence decrypts revealed that the Germans and Italians were jointly planning to use Syria as a staging and basing area from which to supply Rashid Ali in Iraq, where that general had overthrown the pro-British regent on 3 April. By 13 May new decrypts revealed that German aircraft with Iraqi markings had arrived in Syria, and next day they began bombing the British forces which were entering Iraq to put down Rashid Ali's coup. Rashid Ali's action had been intemperate and premature. His army was not strong or resolute enough either to overcome the British garrison, which by treaty occupied the large air base of Habbaniya outside Baghdad, or to prevent British troops also exercising their treaty right to enter and transit Iraq through the port of Basra. His siege of Habbaniya, begun on 30 April, was actually broken by the besieged, who chased the investing force away from the aerodrome on 5 May. Reinforced by the hastily organised 'Habforce' of units from Palestine, which made a trans-desert march, and by the 10th Indian Division landed at Basra, British forces in Iraq entered the city and restored the regent on 31 May.

Evidence of Dentz's complicity, however unwilling, in the Iraq episode clinched the British decision (for which de Gaulle had been pressing) to turn against the Army of the Levant; the danger it offered to the rear of the Western Desert Force operating in Libya was not too great to be tolerated. On 23 June, therefore, four British columns moved against it – the 10th Indian Division and Habforce from Iraq against Palmyra and Aleppo, the British 6th Division from northern Palestine against Damascus and the 7th Australian Division from Haifa against Beirut. The short war which ensued was not pleasant; on the border of northern Palestine the involvement of the Free French division resulted in Frenchmen fighting Frenchmen, in the bitterest yet of the internecine struggles between the followers of Pétain and de Gaulle. On all fronts the fighting was imbued with resentment: the British believed they were spilling blood better saved for the Germans; the Vichy French felt the war had been unfairly forced upon them. The French Army of the Levant put up so good a fight that only the 7th Australian Division succeeded in breaking the defences it encountered, and then because it benefited from heavy naval gunfire support south of Beirut. Once it broke through, however, as it did on 9 July, Dentz accepted that his position was untenable and sued for terms. They were granted on 11 July, and allowed all Vichy troops who rejected de Gaulle's offer of a place in the Free French forces to return home; only 5700 of Dentz's defeated 38,000 rallied to de Gaulle. The majority, including Foreign Legionnaires who had fought Foreign Legionnaires in an almost sacrilegious outturn of events, were transhipped to North Africa, where Allied troops would meet them again in the Torch landings of November 1942.

Sour, costly and regrettable though the little Syrian war had been – 3500 Allied soldiers were killed or wounded in its course – the effect of its outcome on British strategy in Africa was wholly beneficent. Following on the heels of Italy's defeat in Ethiopia and the crushing of the pro-Axis party in Iraq, it ensured the security of Britain's *place d'armes* in Egypt from the landward side and liberated the commander of the Western Desert Force

from all other preoccupations but that of beating the Axis in Libya.

The Libyan–Egyptian war had begun in earnest in September 1940. It was the second of the three wars fought on African territory between 1939 and 1945, since its outbreak slightly postdated the Ethiopian campaign and antedated the Tunisian war by over two years. At the time it bulked very large in British eyes, being the only focus of engagement on land between a British army and the enemy anywhere in the theatre of hostilities. Tactically, however, it was a very small war indeed, and, though its strategic implications were considerable, that dimension could not be developed while local British weakness was offset by Italian military incompetence, and those conditions determined its character during its six opening months.

— Victory in Libya —

The Italian army in Libya, commanded by Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, numbered some 200,000, organised in twelve divisions and based on Tripoli, at the end of the short sea route from Sicily. General Archibald Wavell, with 63,000 troops, had his main base at Alexandria, which was also that of the Mediterranean fleet, since Malta had been effectively relegated to the status of an air base in June, immediately after the collapse of France and Italy's declaration of war. Thitherto Italy's Libyan army had been held in check by the French Army of Africa beyond the Tunisian border; the combination of the French Toulon fleet with the British Malta fleet had also sufficed to nullify Italy's considerable maritime strength. After 24 June, however, when Pétain signed terms with Mussolini, Italy's six battleships suddenly became the largest capital force in the Mediterranean, held at risk by the Royal Navy's five only because it also deployed two aircraft carriers, while Graziani's army four times outnumbered Wavell's.

Apparently parity at sea and incontestable numerical superiority on land prompted Mussolini unwisely to order an offensive into Egypt on 13 September 1940. Three days later and sixty miles into Egypt, Graziani halted his forces to construct a firm base. They were to remain there, building camps and forts, for the next three months. However, Mussolini had certainly misread the signs, and his assumption of the offensive had abashed the Royal Navy not at all. On 8–9 July its Force H (based on Gibraltar) and the Mediterranean fleet (based on Alexandria) had engaged the Italian battle fleet in its entirety between Sardinia and Calabria, inflicted damage on it and forced it to retire. Four months later, on 11 November, the air group of HM Carrier *Illustrious*, operating with Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham's Alexandria fleet, caught the Italian battleships in the harbour of Taranto in the heel of Italy and seriously damaged four of them at their moorings. The Royal Navy's superiority over the Italian surface fleet was established by these engagements and was to be reinforced by its destruction of three heavy cruisers in the night battle of Cape Matapan (Tainaron) on 28 March 1941 at the outset of the campaign in Greece. Thereafter, though the Italian navy intermittently succeeded in running convoys across the narrows between

Sicily and Tripoli, and its light forces of motor torpedo-boats and midget submarines achieved some daring successes against the Mediterranean fleet, Mussolini's battleships kept to port. The British Admiralty's fear in June 1940 that it might have to abandon the Mediterranean, as it did at the nadir of its fortunes in 1796, thereafter receded. Axis airpower, punishingly deployed against the emergency convoys run to Malta and Alexandria during 1941, denied it free use but could not break its command of the inner sea.

The Italian army, which ought to have operated as an amphibious extension of the Italian fleet in Libya, was thereby reduced, like the British army in Egypt, to the status of an expeditionary force capable of mounting offensive operations only in so far as it was supplied and reinforced from Sicily, through its main base of Tripoli. Its advance into Egypt in September 1940 had overextended its line of communications and when on 9 December the Western Desert Force, under General Richard O'Connor, launched a surprise counter-offensive against it in its ill-constructed outposts at Sidi Barrani its defences crumbled and it was sent tumbling backward along the coast towards Tripoli in a retreat that did not stop until it reached Beda Fomm, 400 miles to the west, in early February.

'Wavell's offensive', as the counter-thrust was called, set the pattern for the fighting that was to typify the war in the Western Desert for the next two years. It was unusual in the haul of prisoners it yielded – over 130,000, a total which went far to equalise the odds between Graziani's army (200,000) and Wavell's (63,000). It was characteristic in that it took the form of a pell-mell retreat along the single coast road by the defeated party, hotly pursued by the main body of the victor, who meanwhile mounted a series of 'hooks' inland through the desert, designed to unseat the enemy from his defended positions at one port after another (from east to west, Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk, Gazala, Derna, Benghazi, El Agheila, Tripoli) and, if possible, to pincer him between the desert 'hook' and the coastal thrust.

At Beda Fomm on 7 February the Western Desert Force achieved that result. Its 7th Armoured Division had got ahead of the Italians by a breakneck march across the desert neck of the bulge of Cyrenaica, to block the retreat of the Italian Tenth Army, whose rearguards were being pressed by the 6th Australian Division on the coast road. When it recognised that it was caught between two fires it surrendered – an outcome that crowned the daring of 'Wavell's offensive' with a crushing success.

It was, however, to be short-lived, for two reasons. One was that Churchill's decision to intervene in Greece robbed Wavell of the strength necessary to sustain his advance as far as Tripoli; the second was that Hitler sent a German general and a small armoured force to rescue Graziani's army from its misfortunes. While British, New Zealand and Australian divisions were leaving for Athens, Rommel and the Afrikakorps, consisting initially of the 5th Light and 15th Panzer Divisions, were arriving in Tripoli. Though wholly new to desert warfare, Rommel and his troops were prepared to embark on an offensive by 24 March.



Rommel in the desert. Having made his name commanding 7th Panzer Division in France in 1940, Rommel arrived at Tripoli on 12 February 1941, and soon demonstrated his mastery of mobile operations against his British opponents.

only forty days after the advance guard arrived at Tripoli. Its opening stages tossed the British out of their weakly defended positions at Beda Fomm, by 3 April Rommel had captured Benghazi and by 11 April he was near the line from which O'Connor (who had been captured during the course of the fighting) had launched 'Wavell's offensive' four months earlier; Tobruk, held as a fortress by the 9th Australian Division, was surrounded inside the German-Italian rear.

On this sudden and brilliant reversal of advantages, however, Rommel could not improve. For all his dynamism, he was a prisoner of the geographical and territorial determinants of the desert campaign: the desert yielded nothing, and over long stretches the landward edge of the coastal plain was bounded by high ground or a steep depression, effectively confining the movement of the armies to a strip forty or fewer miles wide. In that strip, which extended for 1200 miles between Tripoli in the west and Alexandria in the east, the chain of small ports were the only, but essential, points of military value. Campaigning necessarily took the form, therefore, of a dash from one point of maritime resupply to the next, in the hope that its impetus would topple the enemy off balance and allow his destruction when he was bereft of water, fuel, ammunition, food and reinforcements – the essentials, in that order, of desert warfare.

Rommel's advance had dangerously attenuated his line of supply from Tripoli; that port's connections with Sicily were themselves harried by British surface, submarine and air attack. During April he tried but failed to capture Tobruk, to shorten his resupply route; meanwhile the Royal Navy had successfully run a convoy (codenamed Tiger) past Malta, its vital mid-Mediterranean stronghold, from Gibraltar to Alexandria, bringing a strong reinforcement of tanks to the Western Desert Force. With this accretion of strength, Wavell went over to the counter-offensive and in an operation codenamed Battleaxe tried to unseat Rommel from his advanced position.

Battleaxe was a costly failure, largely because the British threw tanks against carefully positioned screens of German anti-tank guns – the superlative 88-mm gun came into its own over the long clear fields of fire which desert terrain offered – until their armoured formations were sufficiently weakened for the German Panzer units to counter-attack. The failure of Battleaxe undermined Wavell's position; he was dispatched to India and replaced by the Indian army's leading soldier, Claude Auchinleck, on 5 July.

— Auchinleck launches Crusader —

A period of stalemate now descended on the desert war. Britain, not yet the full beneficiary of American Lend-Lease, could not find the means to reinforce its desert army to a decisively battle-winning level; Germany, committed since June to the conquest of Russia, could spare nothing to the Afrikakorps. The only clear-cut shift of advantage in the African war during the summer of 1941 occurred far away from the focus of the fighting, in Iran, where Germany's attempts to repeat the success it had nearly achieved in Iraq in April were checked by an Anglo-Russian ultimatum to the Shah's government, issued on 17 August; it demanded the granting of rights to move men but particularly supplies, including vital Lend-Lease shipments, into and through Iran's Gulf ports to southern Russia and the Middle East. When the Shah's army showed resistance to the British troops that arrived on 25 August to lend force to the ultimatum, it was overcome and he was exiled to South Africa; Soviet troops, who had entered northern Iran, met the British in Tehran on 17 September, after which the country was effectively divided and administered by the two governments until 1946.

While Iran was being firmly incorporated within the anti-Axis sphere of influence, Auchinleck had been preparing his own offensive riposte to Rommel on the borders of Egypt. Tobruk, garrisoned by the 9th Australian Division, still held out; so too, despite unrelenting Axis air attacks, did Malta, which was resupplied by offensive convoy action three times during 1941 – Excess in January, Substance in July and Halberd in September. Auchinleck's aim was now to relieve Tobruk and recapture the bulge of Cyrenaica, as a preliminary to driving Rommel and his Italian satellites – who supplied the bulk of his troops if not fighting power – out of Libya. Crusader, as his winter offensive was codenamed, began on 18 November with nearly 700 tanks against 400 German-Italian. A

first attempt to raise the siege of Tobruk failed, but on 10 December, after Auchinleck had relieved General Alan Cunningham of his command of the Eighth Army (as Western Desert Force had been retitled on 18 September), the Eighth Army linked arms with the British–Polish force which had replaced the Australian garrison; among the Australians' triumphs during the eight months of siege was their repayment in kind to the Germans' technique of drawing attacking tanks down into a destructive anti-tank screen.

Their defeat at Tobruk forced the Germans to retire as far as El Agheila, from which Rommel had commenced his offensive the previous March; but the factors of 'overstretch' which had left him so exposed in November now worked against the British – as did their need to transfer troops to the Far East – and when he counter-attacked on 21 January 1942 they in their turn were obliged to surrender much of the coastal strip so recently won and retire halfway back along the Cyrenaica bulge to the Gazala–Bir Hacheim position, which they reached on 28 January 1942 and then fortified.

Both sides were now tired and paused to recuperate; during Crusader the British had lost some 18,000 men killed and wounded and 440 tanks, the German–Italian army 38,000 men and 340 tanks; aircraft losses were about equal, some 300 on each side. During the spring these losses were gradually made good and by May Auchinleck came under pressure from Churchill to resume the offensive; while he prepared to do so, Rommel anticipated him and attacked on 27 May. The battle which followed, known as Gazala, was among the most reckless and costly fought during the desert war. At one stage Rommel personally led a strong tank raid into the British lines, trusting to the enemy's own minefields to secure his flanks and rear. While he sat defiantly inside the British position, repelling all assaults made upon him at heavy tank loss to the British, his 90th Light and the Italian Ariete Divisions were overcoming the gallant resistance of the force to which Auchinleck had entrusted the security of his desert flank, Koenig's Free French Brigade at Bir Hacheim. On 10 June Koenig's survivors were forced to surrender, their attackers turned north to assist Rommel in his 'cauldron' battle, and on 14 June Auchinleck decided to withdraw from Gazala to a stronger position further east, at Alam Halfa, near Alamein, where the impassable Qattara Depression most closely approaches the sea. Tobruk was left garrisoned in his rear as a fortress, and he expected it to hold out as a thorn in the enemy's side.

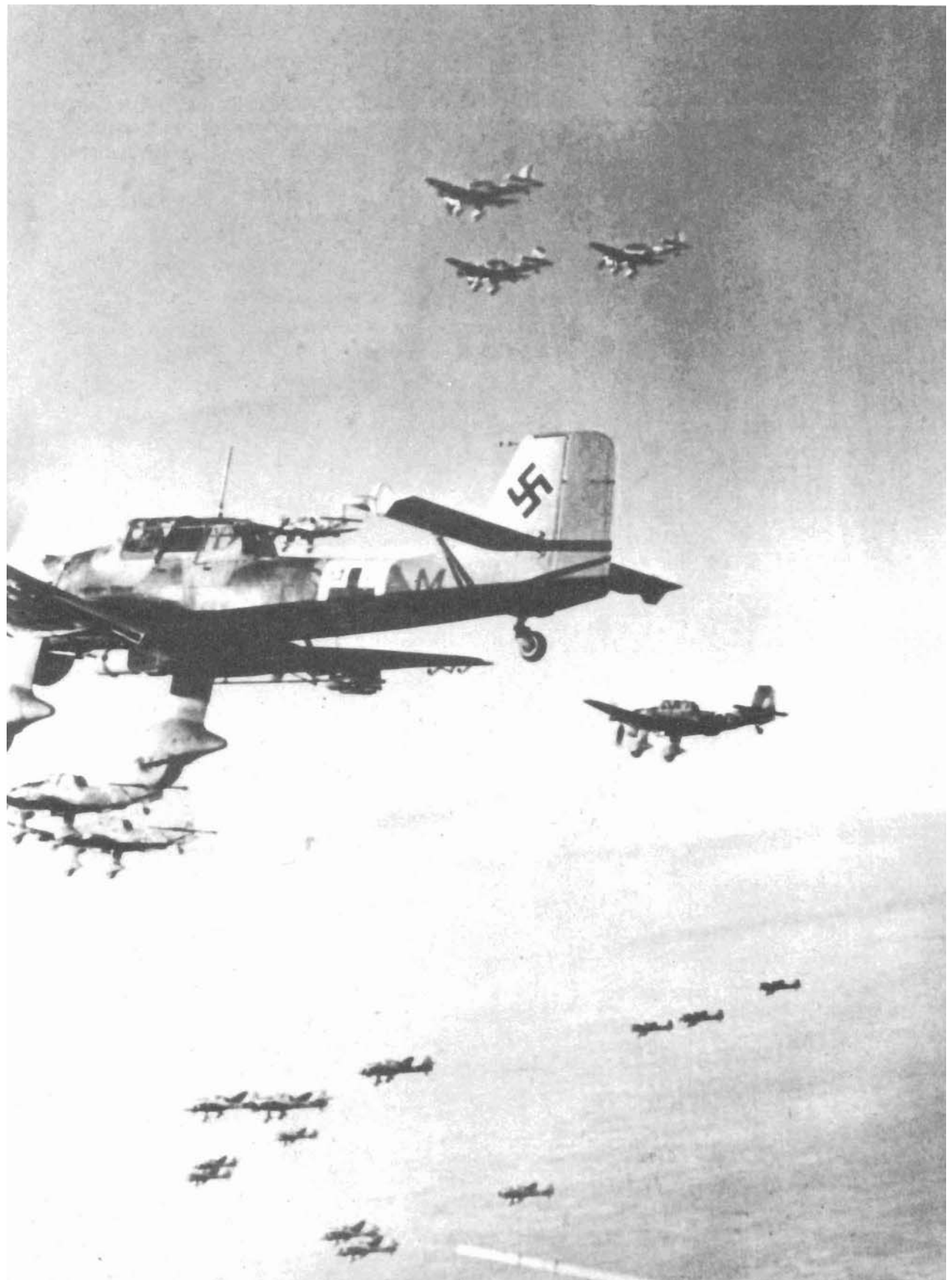
On 21 June, however, after only a week of siege, the 2nd South African Division surrendered Tobruk to the enemy; the capitulation came as a grievous blow above all to Churchill, then in Washington to confer with Roosevelt on plans for a Second Front. 'I did not attempt to hide from the President the shock I received,' he wrote. 'It was a bitter moment. Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another.' Although the surrender reawoke Churchill's doubt of the fighting spirit of his soldiers which was first aroused by the collapse at Singapore four months earlier, it instantly drew from the Americans the generous offer to divert supplies of their new Sherman tank (the first produced by the Allies in the war that matched the Panzer Mark IV in gunpower) from their own armoured

divisions, then in process of formation, to the Western Desert. Accordingly, 300 Shermans and 100 self-propelled guns were shipped by sea around the Cape and arrived in Egypt in September. The strength of the Axis air forces in Sicily still precluded the use of the Mediterranean as a supply route to the desert army – as was demonstrated by the devastation of the Pedestal convoy running supplies to Malta in August. In order to bring bare necessities of fuel and food to the island's garrison and population (who had been collectively awarded the George Cross for their stoicism under relentless air attack), the Royal Navy lost one aircraft carrier and two cruisers sunk, and eleven out of sixteen convoyed merchant ships. By way of reaction, however, the British Desert Air Force was currently interrupting three out of four convoys sailing from Italy to Tripoli, and inflicting losses which threatened almost totally to deprive Rommel of tank and aviation fuel.

The desert war would not, however, be decided by balance of logistic advantage. After the humiliation of Tobruk, Churchill was determined on a victory in the field, which was now urgently required to boost Britain's standing as an ally of the United States – flushed with the triumph of Midway – and the Soviet Union – still tenaciously contesting the Wehrmacht's advance into southern Russia. Between 4 and 10 August Churchill visited the British Middle East headquarters in Cairo to confer with Smuts, the South African premier, Wavell, the commander-in-chief India, Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial



The crew of a British 3.7-in heavy anti-aircraft gun race into action. Although the equivalent of the German 88-mm, the 3.7-in was never used in an anti-tank role. **Right:** Junkers 87 dive-bombers over the desert, November 1941.





General Staff, and Auchinleck. The Prime Minister had decided it was time for a purge. On 15 August he replaced Auchinleck with General Harold Alexander as commander-in-chief Middle East; General Bernard Montgomery was simultaneously appointed to command the Eighth Army.

Dismissing Auchinleck, Churchill reflected, was like 'shooting a noble stag'. With a magnificent physical presence, Auchinleck had every soldierly quality except the killer instinct. Churchill, however, was currently as close to desperation as he reached during the war; on 1 July he had to defend himself against a motion of censure in the House of Commons and he feared that any protraction of stalemate in the desert war would undermine his domestic and international leadership still further. Montgomery, though he lacked Auchinleck's stature and reputation, had a name for ruthless efficiency, and Churchill counted on him to pit his undoubted killer instinct against Rommel's in a decisive contest for victory in the desert.

Numbers – of men, tanks and aircraft – were for the first time turning conclusively in Britain's favour. In August Rommel still had an advantage in numbers of divisions, ten to seven, and with these he launched a local offensive on 31 August against the position Montgomery had inherited from Auchinleck at Alam Halfa. In his first weeks of command, however, Montgomery had done much to strengthen it and had also fiercely impressed upon his subordinate commanders that he would tolerate no retreat. Nor was there any in this bitter but brief battle of Alam Halfa. By 2 September Rommel accepted that he could not break through and, having lost fifty tanks, many in the dense British minefields, withdrew to his original position. A lull now descended during which Montgomery retrained his veteran divisions for offensive action and integrated his new divisions, including the 51st Highland, into the Eighth Army's structure. By October he deployed eleven altogether, with four armoured divisions, the 1st, 7th, 8th and 10th, which between them operated 1030 tanks (including 250 Shermans) supported by 900 guns and 530 aircraft. Panzer Army Africa was supported by 500 guns and 350 aircraft but of its ten divisions only four (two armoured) were German. The Italian divisions, of which two also were armoured, did not command Rommel's confidence. They were dispirited by heavy losses and earlier defeats, shaken in their commitment to the Axis cause by America's entry into the war, badly equipped, intermittently supplied and conscious that their lack of mechanised transport condemned them to the role of Rommel's cannon fodder. Their readiness to stand in the fore of what Rommel now recognised would be a major British offensive was so questionable that he decided to 'corset' them with German units, so that no long section of his line was held by Italians alone.

Rommel was troubled by much else – militarily by his over-extension at the extreme end of his line of communications, 1200 miles from Tripoli, personally by his health. For

Above: A Panzer Mark III during Rommel's successful offensive, 27 May-30 June 1942.

Below: The superb German 88-mm gun operating in an anti-tank role.

all his force of character, Rommel was not robust. He suffered from a recurrent stomach ailment, perhaps psychosomatic, and on 22 September was invalided to Germany. He was replaced by a Panzer general from Russia, Georg Stumme, and was told that when fit he would be given an army group in the Ukraine; but on 24 October he was telephoned in hospital by Hitler with the words: 'There is bad news from Africa. The situation looks very black. . . . Do you feel well enough to go back?' He was not, but left the following day and arrived at the headquarters of the Panzer Army Africa that evening, 25 October, to find a battle furiously raging at Alamein and the German-Italian front already creaking under the strain of the Eighth Army's assault.

— The 'dogfight' —

Montgomery had conceived his offensive in a style altogether different from that of his predecessors, who had been consistently tempted by the freedom of manoeuvre the desert terrain offered into using their tanks as the principal tactical instrument, in the hope of achieving a Panzer-style *Blitzkrieg*. Montgomery rightly judged that the British armoured divisions lacked the flair to out-German the Germans, and in any case he was not prepared to settle for a mere advantage of manoeuvre. Rather than chase the Panzer Army out of its position back towards Tripoli, as had happened three times before, he wished to inflict on it a crushing defeat in a set-piece battle so as to destroy its offensive power for good.

Accordingly he had laid his plan for the Battle of Alamein as a deliberate infantry-artillery assault, supported by some heavy tanks, which would destroy the enemy's fixed defences and their garrisons. Only after what he grimly forecast would be a 'dogfight' did he intend to launch the main body of his armour into and through the position. The battle began at midnight on 23 October with a bombardment by 456 guns, concentrated to support an infantry drive down the coast road but supported by a diversionary thrust in the desert further south. The diversionary thrust failed to draw enemy forces away from the crucial sector and on 26 October, Rommel's first day back in command, Montgomery reinforced the main assault with armour. In a week of bitter fighting, which reduced German tank strength to thirty-five, he succeeded in carving two 'corridors' through the Panzer Army's coastal position and on 2 November stood poised to break through. Rommel was now prepared to retreat but was refused permission to do so by Hitler and committed the last of his strength to hold the northernmost of the two corridors on the coast. Montgomery, who was being kept informed by Enigma of the fluctuations in German intentions, accordingly decided on 4 November to commit the bulk of his armour into the southern corridor. By mid-afternoon the 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions had destroyed the unfortunate Italian Ariete Division, whose obsolete tanks were completely outclassed, and were streaming into the Panzer Army's rear. Rommel, unable to implement Hitler's 'stand fast' order even had he so wished, knew that the battle was lost and directed all the units that could still move to retreat post-haste along the coast road to

the west. It was the start of a harrowing 2000-mile retreat.

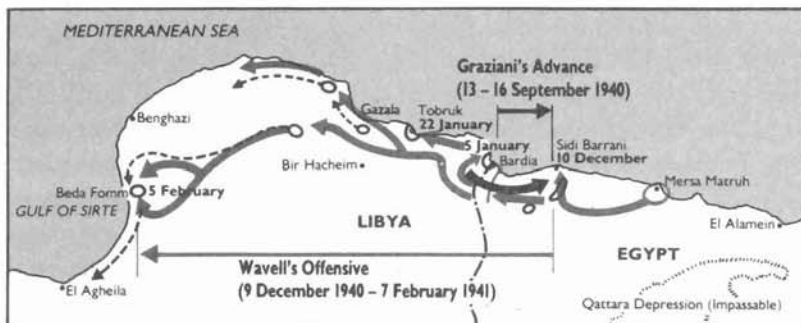
Montgomery has been reproved by post-war critics for an alleged failure to harry Panzer Army Africa to its destruction in the days and weeks after Alamein. It is true that his immediate pursuit was cautious; but he attempted a pursuit none the less, and at Fuka, late on 5 November, the 2nd New Zealand Division nearly succeeded in outflanking the retreating enemy and establishing a roadblock in his rear. Thereafter, however, heavy rain made off-road movement difficult and Rommel's beaten army succeeded in keeping ahead of its pursuers. In any case, it is doubtful whether an attempt at annihilation would have been possible or even wise. Certainly none of Montgomery's predecessors, with the exception of O'Connor in February 1941, had ever succeeded in getting ahead of an enemy retreating along the single coast road. O'Connor's success, moreover, had been won against only a portion of the thoroughly demoralised army – and Rommel's Afrikakorps at least was not demoralised. More important, the rationale of the battle Montgomery had fought precluded a sudden transformation of effort from dogged assault to headlong chase. 'This battle', he had warned in his orders before its inception, 'will involve hard and prolonged fighting. Our troops must not think that, because we have a good tank and very powerful artillery support, the enemy will all surrender. The enemy will NOT surrender and there will be bitter fighting. The infantry must be prepared to fight and kill, and to continue doing so over a prolonged period.' There had been bitter fighting and much killing: the number of British soldiers killed or wounded was 13,500 (a figure almost exactly predicted by Montgomery), by far the highest toll suffered by a British army in the war thus far; it amounted to 5 per cent of the Eighth Army but about a quarter of its infantry. Such losses could be justified only by a clear-cut victory. If Montgomery had mounted a confused and costly battle of pursuit, Rommel and the Afrikakorps might have profited by their cunning in mobile operations to muddy the outcome of Alamein, and Montgomery would have incurred criticism far more severe than he has suffered retrospectively at the pens of literary strategists.

His strategy after Alamein – correctly, it may be judged – was the eighteenth-century one of leaving his beaten enemy 'a golden bridge', the coast road to Tripoli. Along it Rommel beat a passage, under constant attack by the Desert Air Force, to reach Benghazi on 20 November and Tripoli on 23 January 1943, having made a stand at Wadi Zem Zem from 26 December to 16 January. He received no reinforcements and few supplies en route, had left 40,000 of his 100,000 men (mostly Italians) as prisoners in British hands and had only eighty tanks still running. The Panzer Army Africa, by every token of military failure or success, had been beaten at Alamein. Montgomery's debut on the battlefield had been one of the most brilliant in the history of generalship.

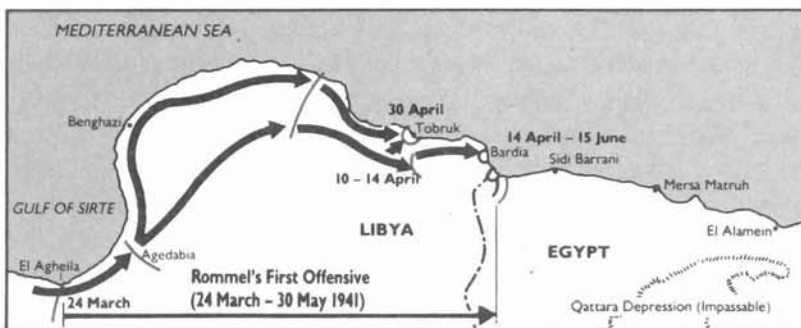
What now saved the Panzer Army Africa from immediate extinction was a development which should have ensured its destruction. The appearance in its rear of the Anglo-American army committed to the Torch landings was to initiate the Allies' third war in Africa. Torch had been agreed upon by the Americans and British in London in July as a

NORTH AFRICA: 1940-43

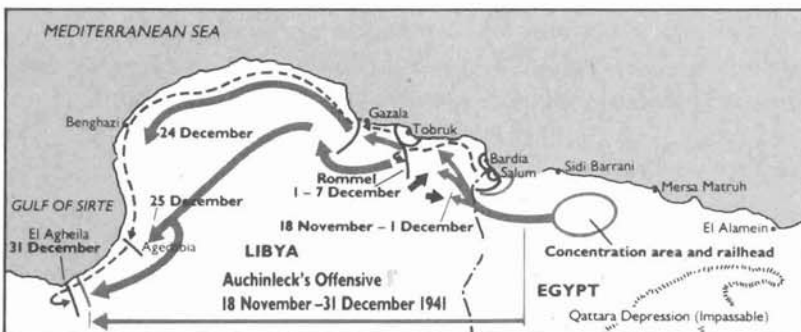
1. During Wavell's first offensive against Italian-held Libya, his Western Force defeated Graziani's much larger army on the Egyptian border, which it had crossed in September 1940, driving it back out of eastern Libya (Cyrenaica).



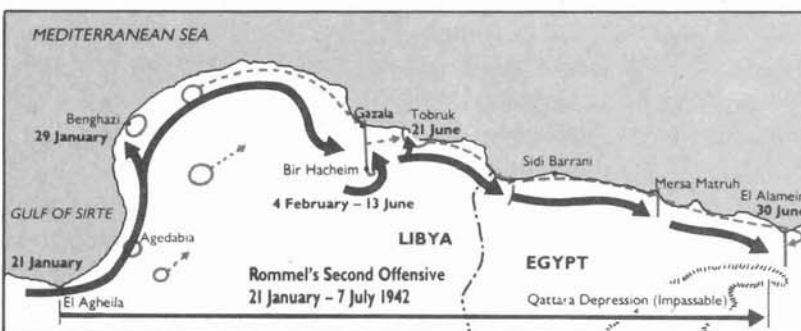
2. Rommel, who arrived in Tripoli with the vanguard of the Afrika Korps in February 1941, recaptured all the territory taken by Wavell between March and June. He also besieged Tobruk, held by an Australian garrison.

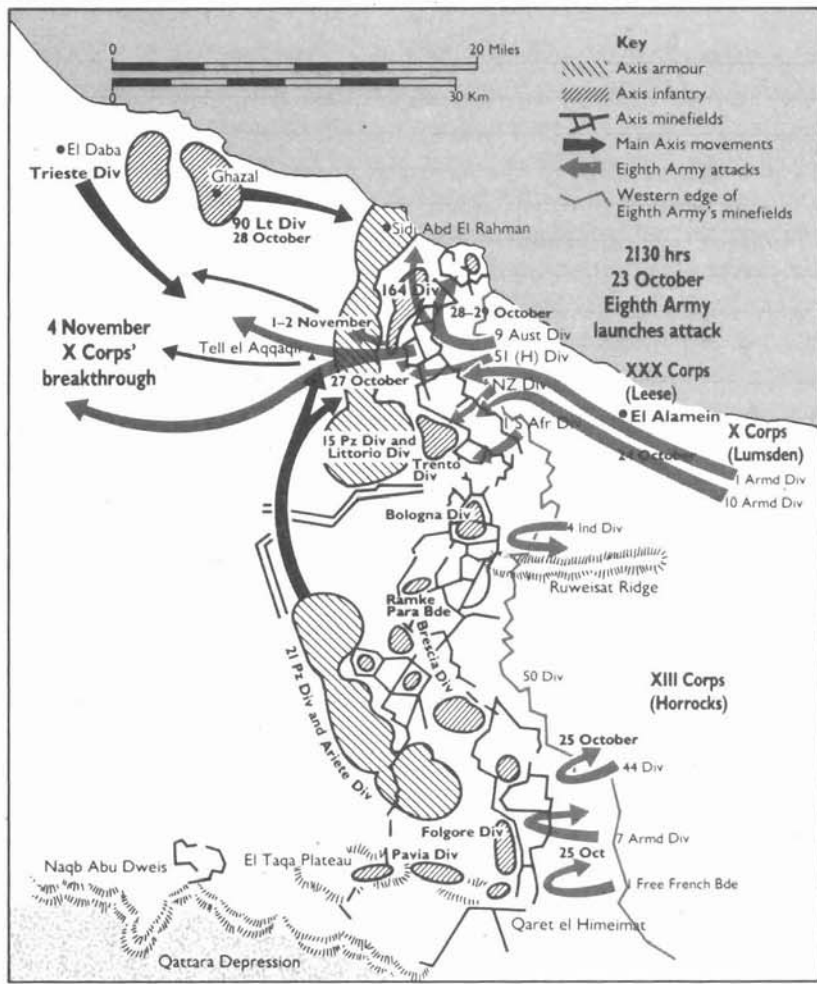


3. Auchinleck's counter-offensive of November 1941, Operation Crusader, relieved Tobruk and drove Rommel, whose lines of communication were over-extended, out of Cyrenaica but failed to cut off his retreating columns.



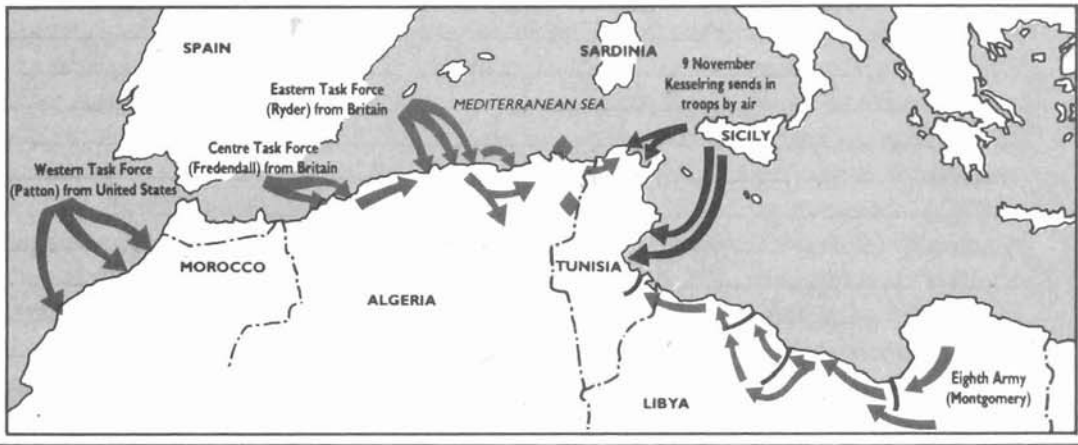
4. In January 1942 Rommel took the offensive and drove the British back into central Cyrenaica, where in June he fought a bitter battle on the Gazala-Bir Hacheim line which forced Auchinleck to retire to the Alamein position inside the Egyptian border. Tobruk was surrounded and surrendered by its South African garrison on 21 June.





5. The Battle of Alamein: Montgomery, who replaced Auchinleck on 15 August 1942, fought a successful defensive battle (Alam Halfa) at the Alamein position, 31 August-7 September. By mid-October he was ready to take the offensive and attacked on 23 October. After ten days of heavy fighting, his Eighth Army broke through and forced Rommel to retreat towards Tunisia.

6. On 8 November 1942 an Anglo-American army began to land in French North Africa. Operation Torch was largely unopposed by the Vichy French garrison, but the arrival of reinforcements from Germany and of Rommel's army, which joined hands in Tunisia, precipitated a fierce campaign in the Atlas Mountains. Tunis finally fell to the Allies on 13 May 1943.



second best to the cross-Channel invasion they were then persuaded could not be risked in 1942. Until a Second Front was launched in 1943, as the Americans hoped, Torch provided employment for the American army which had begun to gather in the United Kingdom that spring. It also provided employment for part of Britain's home reserve, surplus to strategic need now that the danger of a German invasion had receded, and for the first of the ninety divisions which were being mobilised in the United States. When complete, the Torch army consisted of three task forces, Western, Central and Eastern, destined to land respectively at Casablanca on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and at Oran and Algiers inside the Mediterranean. Western Task Force, commanded by General George Patton, consisted of the 2nd Armoured, 3rd and 9th Divisions, transported direct from the United States; Central Task Force comprised the American 1st Armoured Division and part of the future 82nd Airborne Division from Britain; and Eastern Task Force was composed of the British 78th and American 34th Divisions. The whole was embarked in an inter-Allied armada of American and British ships. Sailing at high speed under strong air cover, the convoys reached their pre-assault positions without interception by U-boats. Until Central and Eastern Task Forces passed the Straits of Gibraltar during 5-6 November, German naval intelligence assured Hitler that the fleet was another Pedestal-style convoy assembling to rush to Malta; then it switched to the view that the fleet would land troops at Tripoli. On 7 November fresh indications suggested that it would land in North Africa, until then the least likely destination because Hitler clung to the belief that the Americans would do nothing to drive Vichy more deeply into his arms. Here was a double misapprehension. It was certainly true that the Americans accepted the reality of Vichy's hostility to Britain, but they had persuaded themselves nevertheless that they were regarded by many of Pétain's supporters in a different light. It was equally the case that many in Vichy France clung to the terms of the armistice only as long as Hitler remained clearly the master of Europe; at the merest appearance of any diminution of his power they held themselves ready to defend the long-term interests of France by a change of allegiance.

The North African landings forced such a change of allegiance. The Americans had arranged contact with local anti-Pétainists through General Mark Clark, who landed from a British submarine at Cherchell, ninety miles from Algiers, on 21 October. However, American over-caution in preserving the security of their plans prompted their supporters to premature action, which resulted in Vichy adherents resecuring control of Algiers and Casablanca, where the task forces began to land on 8 November (at Oran a British naval assault was botched). A fortuitous event then worked to reverse the Allied setback. Admiral Darlan, Pétain's commander-in-chief, happened to be in Algiers on a private visit; when it became clear that the Frenchman chosen by the Americans to assume local control, General Henri Giraud, lacked the authority to establish it, the Americans opened direct negotiation with Darlan, who was persuaded by the evidence of Allied strength to change sides, and declared an armistice on the evening of 8 November. This enabled the

British and Americans swiftly to take possession of coastal Morocco and Algeria. Pétain immediately disowned Darlan. The Vichy Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, visited Hitler at his headquarters on 10 November and assured him that Darlan was acting illegitimately, but his protestations availed the Vichy regime not at all. Hitler demanded rights of free access to Tunisia for his forces, proceeded to take it of his own accord and simultaneously ordered his troops to enter the French metropolitan 'unoccupied' zone the next morning (Operation Attila). By the evening of 11 November, the whole of France was under German military occupation and Pétain's government at Vichy had been reduced to a cipher. The marshal would linger on in the office of head of state until driven into exile in Germany in September 1944; but after November 1942 his two-year pretence of sustaining French autonomy stood revealed as a sham.

— The German counter-stroke —

The balance of military advantage between the Axis and the Allies in North Africa ought now to have swung decisively in the latter's favour. Two large Allied armies dominated most of the coastline, Montgomery's Eighth Army in Libya, Eisenhower's First Army in Algeria and Morocco; the *Armée d'Afrique* was meanwhile veering to the Allied side. As late as a week after the landing, the only Axis force still operational in Africa was Rommel's battered Panzer Army, hastening northward from Alamein and as yet a thousand miles from the Tunisian border. Hitler now acted with dispatch to deprive the Allies of their advantage. On 12 November Pétain formally denounced the North African armistice, thus obliging the French commanders in Tunisia, the only sector of French North Africa not yet occupied by the Western Allies, to open its ports and airfields to Vichy's Axis allies. The first German forces began to arrive on 16 November from France; they consisted of the 10th Panzer, Hermann Goering Panzer Parachute and 334th Divisions, together constituting the Fifth Panzer Army, and were at once deployed westward to hold the line of the eastern Atlas mountains against Eisenhower's advancing troops.

The Atlas mountains in Tunisia form a doubly strong military position, since, a little way south of Tunis, the chain divides into the Western and Eastern Dorsals; seen on the map the Dorsals resemble an inverted Y with the tail at Tunis. The Fifth Panzer Army (commanded by Walther Nehring until 9 December, Jürgen von Arnim thereafter) at first lacked the force to hold the Western Dorsal, and British and American troops had advanced there in patrol strength by 17 November. It also had to fight hard to hold off a determined push by the British First Army, with French support, on Tunis and Bizerta, their ports of entry. The arrival of the American II Corps, with armour, allowed the Allies to fix their line on the Eastern Dorsal at the end of January 1943. They were also drawing larger reinforcements from the *Armée d'Afrique*, now under the command of Giraud; at the Casablanca conference in January he had made an uneasy accommodation with de Gaulle which was to last until April 1944.

However, the Germans had meanwhile been improving their position in Tunisia: more troops and aircraft had been transferred from Sicily, and Rommel was approaching the Mareth Line via Tripoli. The Mareth Line was a fortification system on the Libya-Tunisia border built by the French against the Italian army in Libya before 1939; its occupation by Rommel's troops in early February secured the Germans' back against Montgomery, while their holding of the Eastern Dorsal protected them from frontal attack by Eisenhower. Indeed, in the short term at least, the strategic situation in North Africa had been reversed. Rommel, instead of finding himself caught between the pincers of the First and Eighth Armies, had retired to join an army which could now strike at either or even both its enemies from a strong central position. It was about to do so.

The Fifth Panzer Army had used its mobility and armoured strength to keep the Allied forces off balance along the Eastern Dorsal, striking at the weak French XIX and inexperienced American II Corps in turn – at Fondouk on 2 January, at Bou Arada on 18 January and at Faid on 30 January. These attacks disorganised the French, essentially a colonial force quite unequipped to contest the issue with modern tanks, and forced the dispersion of the American armour. Arnim, in colloquy with Rommel, decided in early February that the enemy's situation in southern Tunisia was ripe for a counter-stroke. A dispute between them over how it was to be launched was settled by their superior, Kesselring, Supreme Commander South, and in February one each of their Panzer divisions, 10th and 21st (refitted since Alamein), drove into the American II Corps at the Faid pass through the Eastern Dorsal and further south, panicked the defenders, and by 19 February were pressing at the Kasserine pass through the Western Dorsal. The Allied position in Tunisia was threatened by a 'roll-up' operation from south to north and the threat was only averted by the intervention of the British 6th Armoured Division, supported by the artillery of the American 9th Division. The terrain also favoured the defence, confining the German tanks to narrow valleys as they tried to force their way forward; on 22 January, when Rommel met Kesselring, he confessed that he had misjudged the situation, could not widen the attack swiftly enough to exploit his initial advantage and must now return to Mareth to meet Montgomery's offensive which was being prepared in his rear.

Arnim and Rommel (appointed commander of Army Group Africa on 23 February) now both mounted spoiling attacks against the First and Eighth Armies respectively, but with limited success. The Americans had learned battle wisdom at Kasserine and been brought, moreover, under the command of Patton, who did not tolerate amateurism; the two British armies were battle-hardened and commanded by experienced generals. On 20 March, while Patton was probing at Army Group Africa's rear, Montgomery launched a breaching assault on the Mareth Line, found a way round it when his direct attack was held and drove the remnants of the old Panzer Army Africa back to the tail of the Eastern Dorsal by 31 March.

After this setback the Germans and Italians still fielded a considerable force in

Tunisia, amounting to over eleven divisions when reinforcements were included with the survivors of the old Panzer Army Africa. However, their supply situation was critical: twenty-two out of fifty-one ships had been sunk during January, and the airlift mounted to supplement the sea convoys had delivered only 25,000 of the necessary 80,000 tons during February, despite the employment of the MC323 Gigant motorised gliders; on 22 April Allied fighters intercepted and shot down sixteen out of twenty-one Gigants flying petrol to Tunisian airfields. Not even secret weapons sufficed to offset the German disadvantage. Many of the first formidable Tiger tanks, rushed to Tunisia to oppose the Allied preponderance in armour, were lost in swampy ground and some were even penetrated by Allied anti-tank weapons. Moreover, Hitler did not have his heart in this battle, coming so soon after Stalingrad, a fortress position he had also vainly hoped to sustain by airlift. Tunisia seemed to him doomed as early as 4 March: 'This is the end,' he forecast then; 'Army Group Africa might just as well be brought back.' Characteristically, though he ordered Rommel home on 6 March, he could not bring himself to liquidate the front while something might yet be saved but charged Arnim with fighting it out to the last.

By the end of April Arnim had only seventy-six tanks still running and was trying to distil fuel for their engines from locally produced wines and spirits. On 8 May the Luftwaffe, confronted by an Allied air force of 4500 combat aircraft, abandoned its Tunisian bases altogether. Army Group Africa, which had been hustled from the Eastern Dorsal into the northern tail of the Dorsals by the Eighth Army between 7 and 13 April, was then confined to a small pocket covering Tunis and Bizerta. Its front had been broken in a set-piece assault by the First Army opposite Tunis on 6 May. Both Tunis and Bizerta fell next day. Rearguards kept up resistance during the next week as the remnants of Army Group Africa, short of ammunition and bereft of fuel, tried to withdraw into the final sanctuary of Cape Bon. However, on 13 May no territory remained for it to defend, and its last elements surrendered; 275,000 Axis soldiers including both the German and Italian commanders, Arnim and Messe, passed into Allied captivity. It was the largest capitulation yet imposed by an Allied force upon the Axis, a grave humiliation for Hitler and a disaster for Mussolini, who had committed his destiny to the creation and maintenance of a great Italian empire in Africa. Each of his three wars on the continent had now ended in catastrophe. Hitler, who had participated in two of them, could survive the aftermath; he had risked only enough force to demonstrate loyalty to his fellow dictator and profit by the strategic diversion which his intervention achieved. Mussolini could contemplate the aftermath in no such sanguine spirit. In Africa he had lost both the greater part of the Italian army and his reputation. Whether he and his regime could survive at all now depended upon Hitler.