

# History of World War II: Axis Position Weakens in North Africa: “The end of the Axis’ power in Africa was only a matter of time.”

## Part II

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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Read Part II:



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By [Shane Quinn](#), July 18, 2023

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*On 21 June 1942 the Axis divisions in North Africa, consisting of German and Italian forces, finally completed the capture of Tobruk in the far north-east of Libya, inflicting a decisive defeat there on the Allies made up of British, South African and Indian soldiers. Tobruk was a strategically important fortress city, and the Axis troops found a very large amount of supplies inside Tobruk, which included more than 1,000 intact armoured cars and thousands of tons of petrol and food.*

Tobruk was taken at the end of the 4 week long Battle of Gazala, and the city succumbed for various reasons. Axis morale was high and the same could not be said of the Allies at this time. The German and Italian troops learned from previous mistakes in 1941, and they had amassed a good knowledge of the Tobruk region. In 1942 the Axis soldiers attacked Tobruk at its most weakly defended point, the south-eastern sector, whereas in 1941 they had attacked blind in the city’s strong south-western sector.

The Allies allowed the defences beside Tobruk to deteriorate in the first half of 1942. The mines around the city had been removed, and the anti-tank ditches and trenches were partially covered back in. The British had only 70 anti-tank guns to defend the 33 miles of perimeter around Tobruk.

A serious blow was already struck against the Allied forces when, just over a week before the defeat at Tobruk, a major tank battle took place in Knightsbridge close to Tobruk. **Colonel-General Erwin Rommel**, the de facto overall commander of Axis forces in North Africa, was helped by the fact that, on the night of 11 June 1942, the Germans and Italians fortuitously gained access to British plans by intercepting orders the latter had made over the open radio.



[Erwin Rommel](#) with Italian governor of Libya, General [Italo Gariboldi](#) (on Rommel's right), in [Tripoli](#), February 1941 (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

Rommel therefore set a trap for the Allied armour, in which they unwittingly went straight into a pincers movement implemented by the Axis troops and that resulted in severe losses for the Allies. Their armoured brigades suffered a mauling by the Axis tanks on either side of them. Among these vehicles was Italy's M13/40 medium tank, the most widely produced Italian tank of World War II and which had a fine record in destroying British tanks.

Furthermore, historian Samuel W. Mitcham wrote,   bn

“On June 12 the British lost their command of the battlefield right from the start... It was an excellent day for the German antitank gunners. The weather conditions were very hazy. Under this perfect cover, the gunners could easily get within killing distance of the British armored vehicles without being seen. Tank after tank was knocked out”. (Mitcham, Desert War, p. 70)

In the hours after the taking of Tobruk, Rommel dispatched a telegram to the German military attaché in Rome, **Lieutenant-General Enno von Rintelen**. Rommel outlined,

“The first objective of the Panzerarmee – to defeat the enemy’s army in the field and capture Tobruk – has been attained. Request you ask the Duce [Benito Mussolini] to lift the present restriction on freedom of movement, and put all the troops now under my command at my disposal, so I can continue the battle”.

As Mussolini knew, what Rommel meant by “continue the battle” was the imminent Axis attack on Egypt, which borders Libya to the east.

With Libya secure and Tobruk at their back, the Axis forces could proceed unmolested with their invasion of Egypt, and on 23 June 1942 the Axis troops were amassing on the country’s western borders. The Germans and Italians thereupon entered Egypt and, on June 29th, they took the port of Mersa Matruh in north-western Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea.

In spite of having insufficient armour, Rommel’s plan was to advance further east of Mersa Matruh and take Alexandria, Egypt’s second largest city, followed by the capital, Cairo. In a British war cabinet directive of 28 April 1941, prime minister **Winston Churchill** had said “the loss of Egypt and the Middle East would be a disaster of the first magnitude to Great Britain” (Goodspeed, p. 381). The only worse scenario than this, according to Churchill, was the Axis conquest of the British Isles.

**General Claude Auchinleck**, commander of the main Allied force in North Africa, the British 8th Army, was considering giving up Egypt completely and sending his army to Sudan, Palestine and Iraq. Auchinleck quickly dropped the idea. Elsewhere panic was spreading, unreasonably. In Alexandria, Allied military officials and diplomats were losing faith in the British 8th Army’s prospects of stopping the German and Italian troops.

With Rommel’s armoured spearhead advancing in late June 1942, the British Mediterranean Fleet stationed at Alexandria set sail for the Red Sea, and demolition crews were ready to blow up the harbour installations. Most of the soldiers left Alexandria and large numbers of pro-Allied civilians fled 120 miles south-east to Cairo, where long traffic jams built up. Smoke was seen coming from the chimneys of the British embassy in Cairo, where valuable documents were being burnt. The same sight was on show at different military headquarters in the Egyptian capital.



A German Signals reception unit in the desert (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

Columns of trucks, laden down with equipment belonging to the British General Staff and the General Headquarters, were seen leaving Cairo and driving in the direction of Palestine. The American Liaison Staff disappeared. Units of the British 10th Corps which were still operational dug in on the Nile Delta.

Of Rommel's attempt to subdue Egypt, Mitcham wrote that "he was halted at El Alamein" which was "60 miles from Alexandria". The Axis troops were unable to defeat the Allied forces in the First Battle of El Alamein, which finished in stalemate on 27 July 1942, and final victory was to elude the Axis powers in North Africa.

One reason for this was that American material resources were beginning to pour into the continent. America's economy had been placed on a war footing, and half a million tons of military supplies reached the Allied soldiers in North Africa in the last 2 weeks of August 1942, which was so much more than the Axis divisions received in the same period (13,000 tons). The Axis forces needed 60,000 tons of provisions a month to sustain them in North Africa. Instead they were receiving well below that number, and the Germans and Italians had to rely mostly on captured equipment.

It must be mentioned that the Soviet military's ongoing resistance was destroying the vast majority of Nazi Germany's war resources. The great ability of the Russian soldiers, to thwart a Nazi victory in the western USSR, resulted in very significant effects in other war theatres like North Africa. The Nazi regime's focus, which was largely on Russia since June 1941, ensured they could furnish only limited supplies to German forces in North Africa. It can be said, as a result, the Russians had considerable influence over the ultimate Axis defeat in North Africa also.

At the start of the First Battle of El Alamein on 1 July 1942, Rommel had a modest 55 panzers remaining, along with 77 field guns of different calibres and 65 anti-tank guns (Mitcham, p. 100). On July 26th, the Axis troops fired their last shell for heavy artillery, and their medium artillery was rapidly running out, while Allied warplanes had gained supremacy of the North African skies from the Luftwaffe.

With the German and Italian failure to advance past El Alamein during the high summer, in retrospect it is clear the Axis lost the war in North Africa during July 1942. Mussolini himself might have realised this. In late June and early July 1942, Mussolini had anticipated the expansion of Axis rule into Egypt, but by July 20th his mood seems to have changed (Goodspeed, p. 426). Canadian author Donald J. Goodspeed wrote "the outcome of the war in North Africa was never really in doubt after First Alamein".

Through August 1942 the British built up their tank force in North Africa to more than 700, while the Germans now had 259 panzers. Many of these panzers came hastily from the repair shops and were in need of total refitting. Due to lack of time this was not possible in the summer of 1942. Rommel unwisely chose to launch another offensive.

In northern Egypt, Rommel struck on the moonlit night of August 30th about 15 miles south-east of El Alamein, during what is called the Battle of Alam el Halfa (30 August-5 September 1942). Goodspeed noted, "Like the First Battle of El Alamein, the Battle of Alam el Halfa proved to be a mistake on Rommel's part" (Goodspeed, p. 427). The new commander of the British 8th Army, Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, was expecting such an attack and he fought a well-organised defensive battle laid out for him by his predecessor Auchinleck, who Churchill had harshly sacked on 8 August 1942.

Attacking from the south, the Axis armour was assailed by British warplanes and stopped by the strong Allied defences at Alam el Halfa Ridge. Rommel was almost killed on 1 September 1942 during a British air attack, but he managed to jump into a trench at the last moment; 7 of his fellow soldiers nearby were not so fortunate and had been hit by shrapnel. In the Battle of Alam el Halfa, the Allies lost 68 tanks in comparison to 49 Axis tanks destroyed; but Montgomery could replenish his tank fleet more easily than Rommel.



British [SAS](#) patrol in armed jeeps (Licensed under the Public Domain)

The Axis tanks were dangerously short of fuel, with almost all of the petrol captured at Tobruk two months before having been consumed. On September 1st with his attack failing, Rommel ordered a withdrawal to a position just in front of their original starting line. British aircraft, including Hawker Hurricanes and Spitfires, continued to harry the retreating Axis divisions over the next few days and inflict losses. British casualties came to 1,750 in the Battle of Alam el Halfa, as opposed to 2,910 Axis casualties, 1,859 of them German, 1,051 Italian. (Goodspeed, p. 427)

After a lull in the fighting, the British began their long-awaited offensive on 23 October (Second Battle of El Alamein, 23 October–11 November 1942). Montgomery's superiority for this offensive is plain to see: at the outset the Allied divisions had 4 times more troops than the Germans, 5 times more tanks and artillery, 4 times more aircraft and 3 times more anti-tank guns. (Mitcham, Field Marshals, p. 184)

Montgomery's plan of battle at El Alamein designated his main thrust to take place in the north, between the Ruweisat Ridge and the Mediterranean coast, while diversionary attacks were to fall further south. There was to be an extensive artillery bombardment, and the British infantry would subsequently proceed to clear pathways through the Axis minefields. After these actions were completed the Allied armour would then advance.

The main attack opened at 9:40 pm on 23 October 1942. It went very slowly at first and British casualties were high. Deep penetrations were made in the enemy's minefields, but no clear hole was punctured through them. At Rommel's urging, the Axis troops fought back

viciously and they launched counterattacks on October 25th. By the end of the first week of fighting, October 30th, the British 8th Army was yet to break through the Axis defences.

At the end of October the Axis divisions were in a real predicament, however. Rommel had about 90 tanks left in the field whereas Montgomery had 800 tanks. Rommel reported that their position was critical and his front might crack apart at any moment.

Rommel attempted another counterattack, which failed, and by November 2nd there were just 30 panzers remaining (Goodspeed, p. 428). Early on November 3rd Montgomery's armour at last blew a hole through the Axis' rearguard. The previous night Rommel had decided to retire 60 miles west to the locality of Fouka in north-western Egypt, but a telegram came through to Rommel from Hitler. He ordered Rommel's forces "to stand fast, yield not a yard of ground, and throw every gun and every man into the battle".

With some reluctance, Rommel obeyed Hitler's command to hold El Alamein and he halted the retreat. This decision simply resulted in further losses, including the destruction of more than half of the remaining panzers and heavy damage inflicted on Italian armoured and infantry forces.

On the night of 3 November 1942 another attack broke through the Axis lines as the Allied troops, which included a New Zealand division, wheeled north in an attempt to cut off the enemy soldiers at the Mediterranean coast. South African troops advanced too, including black South African soldiers who often proved to be both courageous and skilful fighters.

Rommel did not wait for more orders from Hitler and he duly retreated. The attempted encirclement by the Allies did not fully succeed, in part because it failed to strike far enough to the west to reach the sea in time, and partly because Montgomery was again indecisive.

Due to this the opportunity of taking Rommel prisoner, which had been a genuine possibility, was also disappearing. On 4 November 1942 the British did manage to capture a prominent German officer, General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma, who was caught adrift in a minefield and forced to surrender.

Regardless of that, the Axis troops held up the Allied advance long enough, allowing them to pull some of their forces out along the coastal road. When the Second Battle of El Alamein concluded in a decisive Allied victory on 11 November 1942, they had taken prisoner around 10,000 German soldiers and the Axis armour was seriously depleted. Goodspeed noted these events "meant that the end of the Axis' power in Africa was only a matter of time".

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