

History of World War II: Axis Powers Position Weakens in North Africa

Part I

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Eight decades ago it was not only in Russia and the Asia-Pacific areas, during the middle years of the Second World War (1942-43), that witnessed the decisive decline in the strength of the Axis powers, principally Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and Italy.

By 1942 the struggle for supremacy in North Africa was entering its critical latter stages. German dictator Adolf Hitler believed that North Africa, by itself, was not of paramount importance in safeguarding Nazi Germany's war objectives. All the same, Hitler felt it had been necessary to secure a German presence on the African continent in order to bolster the Italian troops already there, to increase Axis influence over the nearby Mediterranean Sea, and to protect the German and Italian flanks from the possibility of an Anglo-American landing.

Continued Axis military involvement in North Africa also tied down a number of Allied divisions. On 3 February 1941, Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel was appointed by Hitler as the commander of German forces (Deutschland Afrika Korps) in North Africa.

The first Wehrmacht soldiers arrived in North Africa in mid-February 1941 where they landed in Libya. Rommel himself arrived in Libya on 12 February 1941, having flown in a Junkers Ju 52 transport airplane. According to Desmond Young, a British Army officer and writer, Rommel was "the perfect fighting animal: cold, cunning, ruthless, untiring, quick of decision and incredibly brave".

Like many military commanders Rommel had naive political instincts, but he had been acquainted with Hitler for years having first met him in late September 1934. Rommel supported Hitler and welcomed the Nazi takeover of power in Germany, with the terrible consequences that followed. It is telling that Rommel experienced such good personal relations with Hitler.

At the end of 1941 the British authorities thought that Rommel was finished (Mitcham, p. 181). As a result, the British were building up their forces with the goal of taking the Libyan capital city, Tripoli, which was under Italian control. This belief of the British in late 1941 –that Rommel was on the way out – had been due to the Allied victory in their winter offensive, titled Operation Crusader, which began in mid-November 1941, with the fighting occurring in north-eastern Libya across the border into Egypt.

Rommel, along with his Italian partners under the command of their 65-year-old General Ettore Bastico, had between them 395 tanks. Out of the Axis total, 146 of the tanks were Italian vehicles. A considerable proportion of the Italian tanks were in some state of disrepair, partly because they had driven many more miles than the German panzers due to the longer Italian presence in Africa. The 395 Axis tanks were up against the 748 tanks of the British 8th Army (Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie), assisted by their allies such as the Indians, South Africans, Australians, New Zealanders and Poles.

Author Samuel W. Mitcham, who largely focuses on the Nazi regime, wrote,

“Operation Crusader lasted from November 18 to December 7, 1941, and was one of the most confusing battles of the Second World War. The British 8th Army attacked Rommel with 5 motorized infantry divisions and an armored division, plus 3 armored and 2 motorized brigades... Rommel still managed to defeat the initial attacks, but lost the battle when he became too impressed with his local successes, and led a fruitless raid into Egypt with the Afrika Korps, giving the British time to recover. Allied losses were much heavier until this point, but the Siege of Tobruk was broken on December 5, after 242 days. Three days later Rommel retreated from Cyrenaica [eastern Libya], having lost all but 26 of his panzers”. (Mitcham, p. 181)

In early January 1942, a German naval convoy carrying dozens of panzers and large amounts of arms, ammunition and other military hardware, successfully sailed past British-controlled Malta off the south coast of Sicily, and reached Tripolitania on Libya’s Mediterranean coast.

The above operation was possible chiefly because of the actions of the Luftwaffe’s 2nd Air Fleet, overseen by Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, which was raining down bombs on Malta in an attempt to neutralise the strategically important island. By this point Malta was in disarray.

On 21 January 1942 Rommel ordered the Axis forces to advance across northern Libya, where they struck the unprepared Allied defenders in the British assembly areas. The Allied troops were caught by surprise and stretched too thinly, fighting at the end of a long communications line (Goodspeed, p. 424). The British 201st Guards Brigade was overrun by the Axis tanks, as was half of the British 1st Armoured Division.

These worrying developments persuaded the British 8th Army to relinquish Benghazi, Libya’s second largest city, and which rests on the Mediterranean. Benghazi was captured by the German and Italian soldiers on 29 January 1942.

The following day Rommel was promoted to Colonel-General by an appreciative Hitler, and the Afrika Korps was upgraded to become the Panzer Army Afrika. Rommel, who was earning the nickname “the Desert Fox” by friend and foe, maintained his pursuit of the enemy units, chasing them further east of Benghazi to the Gazala Line in far north-eastern

Libya. Here the Axis troops had to halt because of a severe shortage of supplies. In the immediate ensuing months a lull came over the fighting in North Africa, as both the Axis and Allied soldiers amassed their military equipment for the next offensive.

Rommel was becoming pressed for time and, as usual, he would strike first. He now had 333 panzers, while Bastico possessed 228 tanks, for a combined Axis total of 561 tanks (Goodspeed, pp. 424-425). Bastico, with the title of Commander-in-Chief of all Axis forces in North Africa since 19 July 1941, was technically Rommel's superior; but the German general enjoyed significantly more influence in North Africa than Bastico. In part this was because the German armoured presence had grown larger than its Italian ally.

The two men also did not get on well, and Rommel often undermined Bastico's authority by ungraciously ignoring his orders, or completely bypassing him. Rommel and Bastico regularly disagreed on military topics; Rommel was a risk-taker, Bastico was a more cautious and pragmatic officer.

With the new Axis offensive about to start towards the end of May 1942, the 561 German and Italian tanks were in opposition to an Allied tank force of 900. Worse again for the Axis troops, the Allied divisions had 10 times more armoured cars than them, 37.5% more artillery and 8% more aircraft (Mitcham, p. 182). The odds clearly favoured the Allies, or anyway should have.

Rommel launched his assault on the Gazala Line on the night of 26 May 1942, when there was a full moon and clear skies, and so began the Battle of Gazala (26 May-21 June 1942). The main Axis thrust was directed towards the desert flank in the south, accompanied by a deception attack further north. General Claude Auchinleck, the British Commander-in-Chief Middle East, had anticipated the Axis move and he advised Neil Ritchie, commander of the British 8th Army, as to what method of attack Rommel would choose.

The 57-year-old Auchinleck informed Ritchie to keep his superior armoured forces concentrated together for a counterblow, rather than stretching them over a broad area. Ritchie, believing he knew better than the more senior ranked Auchinleck, disregarded the older man's advice and dispersed his armour (Goodspeed, p. 425). Ritchie's positioning of his forces must have pleased Rommel and Bastico a great deal.

Because of these weaknesses in the Allied defence the Axis armour, kept closely together, was able to smash through the Gazala Line, despite it being quite heavily mined, and they subsequently outfought the Allies. Regardless, Rommel had advanced to such a depth that he put his troops in danger of being cut off and encircled. Recognising the threat in time Rommel skilfully extricated his soldiers from a potential trap, by outmaneuvering the enemy and inflicting heavy losses on them.

Following this Rommel temporarily went on the defensive, gathering his panzers behind the Gazala Line in a formidable rearguard position. On 4 June 1942, Ritchie sent in a poorly coordinated attack against the Axis forces. The Allied attack failed terribly. By now American armoured units, equipped with M3 medium tanks, had entered the battle to strengthen the Allies; but the failure of Ritchie's offensive allowed Rommel to regain the initiative.

A large-scale tank battle erupted around Knightsbridge, in the far north-east of Libya, on the 12th and 13th of June 1942. The Axis tanks won a decisive victory and Ritchie decided to pull out entirely from the Gazala Line on June 14th, as the Allies started to retreat further

east towards the frontiers of Egypt.

Rommel continued with the offensive eastwards and he authorised a storming attack on Tobruk, the Libyan port city. Mitcham wrote, "Hardly allowing his exhausted men a pause, the Desert Fox pursued his defeated enemies to Tobruk, which he finally captured on June 21 [1942], with a bag of 32,000 prisoners. The next day a grateful Fuehrer promoted him to field marshal". (Mitcham, p. 182)

Compounding the disaster for the Allies, the Axis troops captured a very large quantity of supplies at Tobruk, including many hundreds of motor vehicles and huge reserves of petrol. Very little of this should have been allowed to fall into Axis hands. Tobruk harbour was almost undamaged and the German and Italian divisions had a major port under their control.

Rommel celebrated victory in the Battle of Gazala by eating pineapples from a tin, and drinking whiskey with water. He wrote to his wife, "Hitler has made me a field marshal. I would much rather he had given me one more division". At age 50, Rommel became the youngest field marshal in the Wehrmacht. Axis casualties amounted to 6,360 during the Battle of Gazala. Allied casualties were almost 8 times higher, the majority of their personnel losses those who surrendered at Tobruk.

Meanwhile, in Italy's capital city Rome, having been following the Italian soldiers' progress, Benito Mussolini became most enthusiastic about the prospect of taking Egypt. The Italian leader took a plane to northern Libya, close to the Egyptian border, and he managed to procure a fine white horse. Mussolini was planning to ride his white horse in triumph through the streets of Cairo, once the capital city was taken by the Axis forces.

Mussolini's confidence did not seem so misplaced. With Axis troops at the boundaries of Egypt, the British Mediterranean Fleet left the port city of Alexandria in northern Egypt to seek safety in the Red Sea. There was panic in Egypt among pro-Allied factions in the country. During late June 1942, the Germans and Italians proceeded to attack Egypt and they swept the Allied forces out of Mersa Matruh, on the Mediterranean. Another 6,000 Allied troops were taken prisoner.

After capturing Tobruk on June 21st, Rommel had 55 panzers remaining and Bastico had 40 tanks. Following victory at Mersa Matruh on June 29th, the Axis troops were increasingly overextended and tired. Rommel should really have paused which is what Bastico favoured doing.

Rommel felt that if he could proceed further and strike hard and quickly enough, the Axis soldiers would be able to capture Alexandria and, 120 miles south-east of Alexandria, Cairo. He hoped that in doing so they would inflict a deadly blow on the Allies. Winston Churchill had previously highlighted the importance of Egypt to the British Empire, in a war cabinet directive of 28 April 1941. "The life and honour of Great Britain depend upon the successful defence of Egypt", the British prime minister outlined. (Goodspeed, p. 381)

Seeing the mirage of victory, Rommel steamed on ahead with another advance through Egypt. The Germans and Italians got to within 70 miles of Alexandria at the coastal town of El Alamein. During what is known as the First Battle of El Alamein (1 July-27 July 1942), on July 1st Rommel attacked on the northern half of the front at the locality of Deir el Shein, but met with unexpectedly stiff resistance there by the British 8th Army. This force was now

under the leadership of Auchinleck, who removed Ritchie on June 25th (Bernard Montgomery would assume command of the British 8th Army in mid-August 1942).

Auchinleck's troops had taken up a position from El Alamein along a line south to Alam Nazil, and just north of the Qattara Depression, which consists of extensive salt marshes and sand dunes and was impassable for heavy vehicles. Auchinleck hastily implemented a flank running east, at right angles, astride the Alam el Halfa Ridge. In the 40 mile distance between the coast at El Alamein and the Qattara Depression, Auchinleck had constructed 4 defensive localities or "boxes" positioned for all round defence.

The Axis divisions resumed attacking on the afternoon of 2 July 1942 but had no success. Another German-Italian attack was launched on July 3rd and it gained some territory at least, but the Axis forces had nearly used up all of their ammunition for heavy artillery, such as the German 88mm guns. The medium artillery which they had consisted mainly of captured British guns and shells. Auchinleck then ordered a counterattack but it was too indecisive to succeed.

For the next 3 weeks until 27 July 1942, the opposing sides struck glancing blows at each other. Historian Donald J. Goodspeed wrote, "In that time the fighting was sporadic, though often heavy - on July 21 the British lost 118 tanks to Rommel's 3 - but neither side could gain a conclusive advantage" (Goodspeed, p. 426). Presumably quite a number of these British tanks had failed due to mechanical trouble.

The First Battle of El Alamein officially ended in stalemate. British casualties in this battle totalled 13,500, while the Axis divisions saw more than 7,000 of their troops surrender, with 10,000 killed or wounded. The 10,000 men killed/injured were not all irretrievable losses, as some of the wounded German and Italian soldiers would recover from their ailments and rejoin their units.

The inability of the Axis powers, in the high summer of 1942, to drive the Allies out of North Africa would have serious repercussions for the Axis regimes. In the second half of August 1942, the Allies landed 500,000 tons of military supplies in North Africa, compared to just 13,000 tons of Axis military equipment in the same two week period.

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