



When Montgomery cracked the Alamein line, thousands of Axis troops surrendered through fear of thirst. Next major water supply: Derna, 400 miles of desert from Alamein.

How Montgomery Smashed Rommel

By ALAN MOOREHEAD

ALAN MOOREHEAD is an Australian newspaperman, thirty-six years old, who has covered the war in Libya, with interludes to report the conquest of Syria, for more than two years. He lived with his fellow Australians and New Zealanders—the crack soldiers of Montgomery's desert command—most of that time as correspondent for the London Daily Express. He is considered an authority on desert warfare. He made one trip to this country recently, going around South Africa with a convoy. His wife and child (infant) are in New York; they made the trip with him. He is back at the front.—*The Editors.*

ON A BRIGHT clear day last August, Lt. Gen. Bernard Montgomery took his binoculars up to the Hill of Jesus and looked across the desert front for the first time.

He was new to this country; new even to this kind of warfare; and he looked around carefully. At his back lay the yellow, ragged ridge of Alamein, swarming with bare-backed Australian troops. Hard on his right hand was the Mediterranean. Inland to the south the desert stretched away, mile after mile of emptiness. Before him, less than 2000 yards off, lay the enemy line—just another expanse of desert roasting under the full midsummer heat of the midday sun.

The map in the general's hand told a more complicated story. Heavily scored lines in red and black crayon marked how the Axis army, starting here on the Hill of Jesus, reached down for forty miles into the desert, where its southern base rested on the quicksands and the pitted ridges of the Qattara Depression. A huge host was in hiding there—Italian infantry dug into shallow fox holes in the sand, 88-mm. guns bedded into rocks, heavy field pieces covered with camouflage nets, and somewhere beyond at least 300 Axis tanks. It was reckoned that Rommel had gathered some 160,000 men on the Alamein line, and more were coming in every day.

Montgomery turned back thoughtfully to his base camp. He had good reason to think deeply that day. Barely a fortnight before, he had been summoned to London and told he was to have command of the Allied forces in the desert. They had put him aboard a night-flying bomber for Cairo, and now he had pledged himself to organize a major offensive that was to throw Rommel out of Egypt.

Winston Churchill had promised two new English infantry divisions, several hundred new U. S. A.

and British tanks of an improved design, a new anti-tank gun and great reinforcement of aircraft of all classes. Montgomery was given just two months to get ready.

On paper it looked possible. Already the tanks were unloading at Suez and some of the infantry had arrived. There were half a dozen seasoned Empire divisions already in the line. They had emerged from that hopeless moment just two months before, when

(Continued on Page 95)



Photographed in the dust and smoke of battle, these British soldiers, bayonets fixed, are charging Rommel's positions.

BRITISH COMBINE

HOW MONTGOMERY SMASHED ROMMEL

(Continued from Page 15)

Tobruk had fallen and nothing except exhaustion had prevented Rommel's panzers from goose-stepping into Cairo. Since that black day, British morale had risen sharply.

The only question was: Could we hold Rommel off long enough to get ready? I saw some of that early fighting on the Alamein line. It was pretty deadly, and even a little heartbreaking, the way things went wrong.

We had a camp near the beach about twenty miles back from the front. Each morning we used to set out for the sector that was busiest. Sometimes it would be a run down across the soft sand to the New Zealanders, who were holding the southern stretch near the depression. The tanks were operating in the center on a low ridge called Ruweisat, and we were often there to watch them go in under an almighty barrage of 25-pounder guns. There was one day when ninety British Valentines went out and only nineteen came back. Some idiot had given them a wrong compass bearing, and the Nazi 88's had picked them off, one after another, as they waded helplessly through the mine fields.

Usually, however, we first made the short trip up to the Alamein box, where the Australians kept hacking and hewing away around the Hill of Jesus. It was hardly a hill—just another hump on the 200-foot-high ridge. Yet Rommel seemed willing to lose any number of lives to get it back. One day he sent up a squadron of tanks. They held their fire until they were right up to the shallow trenches the Australians had dug into the gaudy yellow rock. Then the leading Nazi commander fitted one of his tank treads into the nearest trench, and ran along trying to crush the men beneath to death. It nearly succeeded. Some were crippled. But most of the Australians simply thrust their faces and bodies into the sand and got out of it somehow.

The Australians Hit Back

It was a simple brutal act and it made the Australians so angry that there was horrible fighting on the Hill of Jesus after that. The Australians went forward with the bayonet, and yard by yard they won another slice of that lovely coast. By the middle of August they had made quite a deep indent into the enemy lines and were holding it against almost incessant shelling. It was the worst kind of shelling—a shell that bursts in a great puff of black smoke about 100 feet above the ground and sends thousands of slugs of white-hot metal straight downward into the trenches. The officer in command of my truck used to stand on the roof and listen to them coming over. You can usually judge the direction and length of the flight of a shell if there are not too many of them in the air. You hear first, not the noise of the shot, which follows along afterward, but the angry whistling of the projectile in the air. If it is coming straight toward you, the noise suddenly increases into a high, throbbing whine, and that is the time to fling yourself flat on the sand.

If you are in a bad open spot you wait until a shell has burst; you keep your head down while the blasted metal and rock pitter-patters down around you, then you make a bolt for the near-

est hole. Even if it's bombing, holes protect you. Nearly all the casualties in this desert fighting have been caused among troops in the open. Unfortunately, you do not win wars by sitting in a hole.

The Hill of Jesus was not a hole. It commanded all the surrounding country. Whoever held the Hill of Jesus made the Alamein line look like an L instead of an I, and I can see the importance of that now. From the lower branch of the L one could strike into the midst of the enemy, take his forward troops in the rear. The aggressive possessor of the Hill of Jesus could, in fact, turn the Alamein line.

How a War Changed

I do not think that we quite realized during these hot and exciting mid-summer months how much military history was altering under our eyes. I, for one, had been two years in the desert, on and off, and the fighting was always a thing of fast-rushing movement, of cutting around the enemy through the open desert and then slamming at him from both sides at once. We were used to traveling distances of hundreds of miles each day, and we treated the desert like the sea. Each vehicle was as independent as a destroyer or a submarine. If you saw superior enemy forces coming up on the horizon, you simply cut and ran; the desert was all yours, as open as the ocean. As Gott, the greatest of the British generals, said, "The desert, to him who knows it, is a fortress; to him who does not, it is a graveyard."

When Tobruk fell and we retreated to Alamein, we saw, of course, that things had changed. There was a top and bottom to this line, unlike the line at Agedabia, the line at Gazala and the line at Halfaya, unlike any other line there had been in the desert. The maps showed the sea at one end and the quicksands at the other. We ourselves could see the sea, and it was but a day's run down to the depression, where we could prove for ourselves that a vehicle got stuck in the soft adhesive mud. We wrote dispatches saying that here for the first time was trench warfare in the desert, static warfare. The line could not be turned in the usual way—by just driving around it. But I do not think we adjusted ourselves to this new order of things. We still thought of the tank as an offensive weapon, and of an armored force as a screen to go first into battle. We still interpreted the war in the terms of wide sweeps and fast movement.

Montgomery realized the change at once. Coming freshly from England, where the most static of all land war—the war of the garrison—was being fought, he saw the graphic importance of what had overtaken us. And, to his credit, he saw the importance of the Hill of Jesus as a trump card in the slow game of infantry positions that now had to be played.

Rommel made his final attempt for the conquest of Egypt in September. Realizing, perhaps, that this was his last chance, he cracked hard at the center and the south. When this failed, he fell back on the theory of defense.

All through September and most of October he mined the ground with great subtlety, and covered the mine fields with antitank and machine guns

firing on fixed lines of fire. When the British advanced, the guns had simply to fire without aiming, and they knew they covered the whole area.

While the Germans held the Alamein line the Italians were set to digging for thirty miles back. They improved the British-built antitank trenches and made new ones. They laid coiled barbed wire for hundreds of miles. They fashioned gun positions. They made gas, food and ammunition dumps. In brief, they expected this British attack and they arranged to make it as tough as might be for the attackers.

For more than two years the war had tipped back and forth in the desert, with neither side quite strong enough to tip the scales completely. At the start of the desert war I watched the tanks go roving over the sand wherever they listed. That was Wavell's era. Then last winter the light, fast American tanks arrived, and they charged in at speed with their light guns, in order to get within range of the heavier German guns. The tank fighting was still fluid and fast. Then came the American Grants with a 75-mm. gun as powerful as anything the Germans had, and they no longer charged; they did not need to. They stood hull down on the horizon and blasted the enemy tanks from a distance. The antitank guns moved up and the tank battles became substantially artillery duels. It was static fighting, and the best gun won last summer.

At Alamein, Montgomery saw that the process had gone one stage further. The tank was no longer only static, it had ceased to be an offensive weapon for the opening of a battle. It could no longer run round and take the enemy in the rear. The offensive weapon was again the infantry, backed by artillery and the new artillery—the bomber.

Montgomery struck on the night of October twenty-third. First the bombers, then the artillery—the biggest barrage ever heard or suffered in the desert—then the infantry. But no tanks. First the infantry went in to overwhelm the enemy gun positions, to lift up the mines. As they went forward the artillery and the bombers kept pounding away in front of them.

Montgomery's Strategy

On the Hill of Jesus the fighting was ferocious. Every mound and trench was an objective of itself, to be charted and assaulted and paid for. Every advance brought a counterattack. The fighting went through all the stages from long-range shelling down through machine gunning, rifle fire, hand grenading and the use of the bayonet—a rare thing in the desert.

In half a dozen campaigns in the Middle East, I saw nothing to suggest that the German panzer soldier is in himself a superior infantryman. Confronted with the bayonet, he will run as readily as any other soldier. In the desert I heard of only one notable bayonet charge the Germans made. They came across the pink rocks of Alamein in the night, shouting, "Hitler! Hitler!"; and even then they had the bad luck to run into the New Zealanders, who had been trained almost exclusively in the use of the bayonet for months on end. The trouble was that up to now the finely organized Nazi armor had rarely allowed the British the chance of getting to close quarters with their infantry.

At Alamein, Montgomery deliberately forced the fighting into close quarters. While his new tanks still rested under their camouflage in the

rear, he drove three separate skewers into the Alamein line, and these were infantry advances.

Then, in the first days of November, when the Allies had definite control in the air, he judged the time had come for his great gamble. The new American Mark IV tanks threw off their tarpaulin camouflage covers and lumbered up to the battle line. No one could say yet whether their new 75-mm. guns with the 360-degree traverse were good or not; they had never seen the battle before. Many of the crews were new to actual warfare. There is always a tremendous element of chance in these desert battles, and the trial of a new tank is one of the biggest chances a general can take. Errors and successes show up sharply on the open sand. As nearly as it is possible on earth, you can get a fair trial of strength in the desert, since the terrain helps neither side.

In open formation the tanks rolled forward. They had just one general or-

DEAR MOM

By PEGGY DAVIDSON

DEAR MOM: Your welcome letter came today,
I did not read it till I was alone,
Then Army life for me awhile was gone.
I thought the paper smelled of your sachet.
So you are going to sell the old coupé!
And all my baby chicks are nearly grown!
No, mom, I can't get to a telephone,
We're on maneuvers, town is far away.

Before I went to sleep, I read again
The part where you said, "Son,
I hate to think
Of those old Army cots, hard as a drum!"
I could not help but laugh a bit,
and then
I straightened out my blankets' every kink,
And fell asleep upon the ground.
Dear mom!

der: "Find the Axis armor and fight it." With the tanks went the new British 6-pounder antitank gun mounted on a fast American lorry. The British infantry had breached the Axis line and pulled up the mines; it was up to the tanks to do the rest.

For many months, stories will be told about the ensuing battle. Very little has yet come out. As one who has seen many of the earlier engagements, I can guess that the errors we made before were not committed this time. Where the tanks were always getting split up before and picked off one by one, I imagine they stuck together this time. Where we used to be outgunned, I can only think the new American 75 was better than anything the Axis had. Where our workshops used to be too few and too far off, I conceive that this time they went right in and repaired slightly damaged British vehicles on the field. At any rate, the Axis armor was smashed—smashed beyond all chance of recovering.

We were always taught that once the armor was destroyed in the desert,

everything went. This mammoth victory was no exception. A tank let loose among unprotected infantry is like a shark in a pondful of mackerel. One glance at the map shows you what an awful predicament Rommel was in, once his armor was gone and a good half of his lorries destroyed. There is no water at Daba, none at Fuka and precious little in Bagush and Matruh. Sidi Barrani is barren. So is Bardia. The Tobruk wells and salt-water condensers can support a division at the most. Derna was the nearest sure source of fresh water, and Derna was the best part of 400 miles away. You can't walk 400 miles without water, especially in the desert. For the bulk of the Axis army, every gallon of water, every can of gas and ounce of food had to be carried in lorries over hundreds of miles of indifferent roadway.

Now, once the Alamein line was pierced and the bulk of the Axis armor was smashed, the British were free to run round behind and cut off the enemy infantry from their supplies. Do you wonder then that so many Germans and Italians surrendered? The only alternative was death through thirst and hunger. There is a frightful loneliness and a menace in the empty desert. Believe me, a soldier there, be he British, German, Italian or Hottentot, will prefer to surrender rather than suffer the horrors of a swelling tongue and a cracking throat. I have seen Italians come in to surrender holding up handfuls of notes to barter for a swig from a water bottle and a crust of bread. Once a handful of them walked into our camp, and they were reduced to such a miserable extremity of want that we didn't even bother to take their arms away from them.

Rommel very properly drew what was left of his armor out of the battle and bolted. He left the Italian infantrymen to face the music because that was the only thing he could do. His only hope of putting up a stand farther back was to retire with all speed with every vehicle that was still mobile. These desert decisions are quick, and once you have lost there is only one thing to do—get away quickly before you are caught.

It is a wonderful experience to see a German army in retreat. The news of the victory runs through the British troops like an electric current. Everyone gets the order to strike camp and move forward. Trucks full of grinning and whistling Tommies come bouncing up to the main road. The wildest rumors fly about: "Rommel captured. Twenty generals in the bag. . . . We've landed at Tobruk. . . . Fifty thousand prisoners."

Presently the prisoners start coming down the main road, twenty or thirty packed in a lorry. There are never enough guards at this stage of a campaign, and you will frequently see one Tommy in charge of forty or fifty prisoners. At the moment of capture there is something that happens to a man that deprives him of his initiative. In the faces of these prisoners you see surprise, bewilderment, shock. They make no attempt to escape—that comes later.

Driving farther along the road, you come suddenly on the battlefield. It has none of the usual dreariness of bombed houses and weeping, helpless civilians. On this clear wide arena the aftermath of war is not nearly so terrible as you might think. Even the wrecked tanks scattered over the battlefield do not appear, at first glance, to be out of action. It is only when you draw close that you see, perhaps, that

the gun is pointing at an odd angle to the sky, that one of the tracks is broken and that the turret is blackened by blast. The pathetic belongings of the dead or captured crew are strewn over the sand. The slight desert breeze blows endless sheets of paper across the ground—official orders, German magazines, letters from home. There is a stench of burning rubber. The unburied dead are very still. It is their stillness that most impresses you.

Backwash of Battle

Soon you come abreast of the enemy supply dumps. Gangs of Tommies will be rooting about, hacking open cases of dried fruits and vegetables, of biscuits, cheese, jam and tinned beef. The Axis ammunition is dispersed about in metal boxes. Each dump is a stack measuring about eight feet by six, and covered with sand and rock to disguise it from aircraft. There will be many flat black cans containing water and gas, and you will see Tommies spitting out mouthfuls on the sand in disgust as they sample each can.

There is an unwritten rule in the desert that the most forward troops can use any loot they find—gas, for instance—which will help them pursue the enemy. For the rear troops following after, there is a strict written rule that nothing must be touched until the Royal Army Service Corps come along to assess the booty and distribute it methodically.

Beyond the supply dumps is the front, but the front is impossible to find. No one can tell you clearly where the enemy is. Battalion, brigade and divisional, even corps headquarters are on the move. You race on along the road, and it is quite possible that you pass hundreds of the enemy hiding in ditches beside the way.

The broken valleys of the coast line are a favorite place for fugitives to conceal themselves. Often they give fight. The Tommies pile out of their lorries, rifles and hand grenades ready, and steal forward over the rocks. One by one, the enemy machine-gun posts are charted. By creeping along the tops of the cliffs it is usually possible for the Tommies to get close enough to lob grenades in the mouths of the caves where the enemy is hiding. Then the Germans file out with their hands above their heads. The Tommies rush at them, make a quick search, and then, in single file, the prisoners are led up to the main road. Trucks take them back to the prisoner-of-war cages. These are rough compounds made of coiled barbed wire, and there are never enough of them during a victory. No cages ever built in the desert could contain the thousands of Italians and Germans who swarmed into the British lines in early November this year.

Overhead through all this, British and American aircraft fly back and forth, low down and with a special raciness and urgency. Some play tricks in the sky. There is no longer any opposition; the Stukas have been driven far back. On the ground, the troops will look upward and raise their hands to salute the pilots, and there is a special community of friendship and pride at these moments between the man on the ground and the man in the sky.

The worse the battle has been the higher the excitement runs. And Alamein was a very tough battle indeed. The Allies risked losing the Nile Delta and their whole position in the Middle East in that battle. With justice, their rewards in winning are high.