

Second Battle of El Alamein

Summary: The Second Battle of El Alamein (23 October – 11 November 1942) was a battle of the Second World War that took place near the Egyptian railway halt of El Alamein. The First Battle of El Alamein and the Battle of Alam el Halfa had prevented the Axis from advancing further into Egypt. In October 1942 Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, commander of Eighth Army, opened his offensive against the Axis forces. In a 13-day battle the Axis Panzerarmee Afrika was crushed and forced to retreat from Eg...

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In October 1942 Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, commander of Eighth Army, opened his offensive against the Axis forces. In a 13-day battle the Axis Panzerarmee Afrika was crushed and forced to retreat from Egypt and Libya to the borders of Tunisia. The Allied victory at El Alamein was the beginning of the end of the Western Desert Campaign.

The battle ended the Axis threat to the Middle East and Iran and revived the morale of the western Allies, being their first big success against the Axis since Operation Crusader in late 1941. The end of the battle coincided with the Allied invasion of French North Africa in Operation Torch on 8 November, which opened a second front in North Africa.

Background

Panzer Army Africa (Panzerarmee Afrika/Armata Corazzata Africa Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel) composed of German and Italian tank and infantry units, subordinated to the new Italian command structure Deleasi (North African Command Delegation, Lieutenant-General Curio Barbasetti) had advanced into Egypt after its success at the Battle of Gazala (26 May – 21 June 1942). The Axis advance threatened British control of the Suez Canal, the Middle East and its oil resources. General Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Command and in tactical command of Eighth Army, withdrew the Eighth Army to within 50 mi (80 km) of Alexandria where the Qattara Depression was 40 mi (64 km) south of El Alamein on the coast. The depression was impassable and meant that any attack had to be frontal; Axis attacks in the First Battle of El Alamein (1–27 July) had been defeated.

Eighth Army counter-attacks in July also failed, as the Axis forces dug in and regrouped. Auchinleck called off the attacks at the end of July to rebuild the army. In early August, Winston Churchill and General Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), visited Cairo and replaced Auchinleck as Commander-in-chief Middle East Command, with General Harold Alexander. Lieutenant-General William Gott was made commander of the Eighth Army

but was killed when his transport aircraft was shot down by Luftwaffe fighters; Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery was flown from Britain to replace him.

Lacking reinforcements and depending on small, underdeveloped ports for supplies and aware of a huge Allied reinforcement operation for the Eighth Army, Rommel decided to attack first. The two armoured divisions of the Afrika Korps and the reconnaissance units of Panzerarmee Afrika led the attack but were repulsed at the Alam el Halfa ridge and Point 102 on 30 August 1942, during the Battle of Alam el Halfa; the Axis forces retired to their start lines. The short front line and secure flanks favou

red the defensive and Rommel had time to develop the Axis fortifications, sowing minefields with c. 500,000 mines and miles of barbed wire. Alexander and Montgomery intended to establish a superiority of force sufficient to achieve a breakthrough and exploit it to destroy Panzerarmee Afrika. Earlier in the Western Desert Campaign, neither side had been able to exploit a local victory sufficiently to defeat its opponent before it had withdrawn and transferred the problem of over-extended supply lines to the victor.

Until June 1942 Rommel had been receiving detailed information about the strength and movement of British forces from reports sent to Washington by Colonel Bonner Fellers, the U.S. military attaché in Cairo. The American code had been stolen following a covert operation by Italian military intelligence at the American Embassy in Rome the previous year. Despite British concerns, the Americans continued to use the code until the end of June. Suspicion that the code was compromi

sed was confirmed when the 9th Australian Division captured the German 621st Signal Battalion in July 1942.

The British gained the intelligence advantage because Ultra and local sources exposed the Axis order of battle, its supply position and intentions. A reorganisation of military intelligence in Africa in July had also improved the integration of information received from all sources and the speed of its dissemination. With rare exceptions, intelligence identified the supply ships destined for North Africa, their location or routing and in most cases their cargoes, allowing them to be attacked. By 25 October, Panzerarmee Afrika was down to three days' supply of fuel, only two days' of which were east of Tobruk. Harry Hinsley, the official historian of British intelligence, wrote in 1981 that "The Panzer Army... did not possess the operational freedom of movement that was absolutely essential in consideration of the fact that the British offensive can be expected to start any day".

Submarine and air transport somewhat eased the shortage of ammunition and by late October, there was sixteen days' supply at the front. After six more weeks, the Eighth Army was ready; 195,000 men and 1,029 tanks began the offensive against the 116,000 men and 547 tanks of the Panzerarmee.

Prelude

British plan

Operation Lightfoot

Montgomery's plan was for a main attack to the north of the line and a secondary attack to the south, involving XXX Corps (Lieutenant-General Oliver Leese) and XIII Corps (Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks), while X Corps (Lieutenant-General Herbert Lumsden) was to exploit the success. With Operation Lightfoot, Montgomery intended to cut two corridors through the Axis minefields in the north. One corridor was to run south-west through the 2nd New Zealand Division sector towards the centre of Miteirya Ridge, while the second was to run west, passing 2 mi (3.2 km) north of the west end of the Miteirya Ridge across the 9th Australian and 51st (Highland) Division

sectors. Tanks would then pass through and defeat the German armour. Diversions at Ruweisat Ridge in the centre and also the south of the line would keep the rest of the Axis forces from moving northwards. Montgomery expected a 12-day battle in three stages: the break-in, the dogfight and the final breaking of the enemy.

For the first night of the offensive, Montgomery planned for four infantry divisions of XXX Corps to advance on a 16 mi (26 km) front to the Oxalic Line, over-running the forward Axis defences. Engineers would clear and mark the two lanes through the minefields, through which the armoured divisions from X Corps would pass to gain the Pierson Line. They would rally and consolidate their position just west of the infantry positions, blocking an Axis tank counter-attack. The British tanks would then advance to Skinflint, astride the north south Rahman Track deep in the Axis defensive system, to challenge the Axis armour. The infantry battle would continue as the Eighth Army infantry "crumbled" the deep Axis defensive fortifications (three successive lines of fortification had been constructed) and destroy any tanks that attacked them.

Operation Bertram

Before the battle the Commonwealth forces practised deceptions, in Operation Bertram, to confuse the Axis command as to where and when the battle was to occur. In September, they dumped waste materials (discarded packing cases, etc.) under camouflage nets in the northern sector, making them appear to be ammunition or ration dumps. The Axis naturally noticed these but as no offensive action immediately followed and the "dumps" did not change in appearance, they were subsequently ignored. This allowed the Eighth Army to build up supplies in the forward area unnoticed by the Axis, by replacing the rubbish with ammunition, petrol and rations at night. A dummy pipeline was built, hopefully leading the Axis to believe the attack would occur much later than it did and much further south. Dummy tanks consisting of plywood frames placed over jeeps were built and deployed in the south. In a reverse feint, the tanks destined for battle in the north were disguised as supply trucks by placing removable plywood superstructures over them.

Operation Braganza

As a preliminary, the 131st (Queen's) Infantry Brigade of the 44th (Home Counties) Infantry Division, supported by tanks from the 4th Armoured Brigade, launched Operation Braganza attacking the paratroopers of the 185th Infantry Division "Folgore" on the night of 29/30 September in an attempt to capture the Deir el Munassib area. The Italian paratroopers

repelled the attack, killing or capturing over 300 of the attackers. It was wrongly assumed that Fallschirmjäger (German paratroopers) had manned the defences and been responsible for the British reverse. The Afrika Korps war diary notes that the Italian paratrooper unit "bore the brunt of the attack. It fought well and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy."

Axis plan

With the failure of their

offensive at the Battle of Alam el Halfa, the Axis forces went onto the defensive but losses had not been excessive. The Axis supply line from Tripoli was extremely long and captured British supplies and equipment had been exhausted, but Rommel decided to advance into Egypt.

The Eighth Army was being supplied with men and materials from the United Kingdom, India, Australia and New Zealand, as well as with trucks and the new Sherman tanks from the United States. Rommel continued to request equipment, supplies and fuel but the priority of the German war effort was the Eastern Front and very limited supplies reached North Africa. Rommel was ill and in early September, arrangements were made for him to return to Germany on sick leave and for General der Panzertruppe Georg Stumme to transfer from the Russian front to take his place. Before he left for Germany on 23 September, Rommel organised the defence and wrote a long appreciation of the situation to Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW army

and forces high command), once again setting out the essential needs of the Panzer Army.

Rommel knew that the British and Commonwealth forces would soon be strong enough to attack. His only hope now relied on the German forces fighting in the Battle of Stalingrad quickly to defeat the Red Army, then move south through the Trans-Caucasus and threaten Iran (Persia) and the Middle East. If successful, large numbers of British and Commonwealth forces would have to be sent from the Egyptian front to reinforce the Ninth Army in Iran, leading to the postponement of any offensive against his army. Rommel hoped to convince OKW to reinforce his forces for the eventual link-up between Panzerarmee Afrika and the German armies fighting in southern Russia, enabling them finally to defeat the British and Commonwealth armies in North Africa and the Middle East.

In the meantime, the Panzerarmee dug in and waited for the attack by the Eighth Army or the defeat of the Red Army at Stalingrad. Rommel added

depth to his defences by creating at least two belts of mines about 3.1 mi (5 km) apart, connected at intervals to create boxes (Devil's gardens) which would restrict Allied penetration and deprive British armour of room for manoeuvre. The front face of each box was lightly held by battle outposts and the rest of the box was unoccupied but sowed with mines and explosive traps and covered by enfilading fire. The main defensive positions were built to a depth of at least 2 km (1.2 mi) behind the second mine belt. The Axis laid around half a million mines, mostly Teller anti-tank mines with some smaller anti-personnel types such as the S-mine. (Many were British mines captured at Tobruk). To lure Allied vehicles

into the minefields, the Italians dragged an axle and tyres through the fields using a long rope to create what appeared to be well-used tracks.

Rommel did not want the British armour to break out into the open because he had neither the strength of numbers nor fuel to match them

in a battle of manoeuvre. The battle had to be fought in the fortified zones; a breakthrough had to be defeated quickly. Rommel stiffened his forward lines by alternating German and Italian infantry formations. Because the British deception confused the Axis as to the point of attack, Rommel departed from his usual practice of holding his armoured strength in a concentrated reserve and split it into a northern group (15th Panzer Division and 133rd Armoured Division "Littorio") and a southern group (21st Panzer Division and 132nd Armoured Division "Ariete"), each organised into battle groups to be able to make a quick armoured intervention wherever the blow fell and prevent narrow breakthroughs from being enlarged. A significant proportion of his armoured reserve was dispersed and held unusually far forward. The 15th Panzer Division had 125 operational tanks (16 Pz.IIs, 43 Pz.III Ausf H, 43 Pz.III Ausf J, 6 Pz.IV Ausf D, 15 Pz.IV Ausf F) while the 21st Panzer Division had 121 operation

al tanks (12 Pz.IIs, 38 Pz.III Ausf H, 43 Pz.III Ausf J, 2 Pz.IV Ausf D, 15 Pz.IV Ausf F).

Rommel held the 90th Light Division further back and kept the 101st Motorised Division "Trieste" in reserve near the coast. Rommel hoped to move his troops faster than the Allies, to concentrate his defences at the most important point (Schwerpunkt) but lack of fuel meant that once the Panzerarmee had concentrated, it would not be able to move again. The British were well aware that Rommel would be unable to mount a defence based on his usual manoeuvre tactics but no clear picture emerged of how he would fight the battle. British plans seriously underestimated the Axis defences and the fighting power of the Panzerarmee.

Battle

Phase one: the break-in

Prior to the main barrage, there was a diversion by the 24th Australian Brigade, which involved the 15th Panzer Division being subjected to heavy fire for a few minutes. Then at 21:40 (Egyptian Summer Time) on 23 October on a calm, clear evening und

er the bright sky of a full moon, Operation Lightfoot began with a 1,000-gun barrage. The fire plan had been arranged so that the first rounds from the 882 guns from the field and medium batteries would land along the 40 mi (64 km) front at the same time. After twenty minutes of general bombardment, the guns switched to precision targets in support of the advancing infantry. The shelling plan continued for five and a half hours, by the end of which each gun had fired about 600 rounds, about 529,000 shells.

Operation Lightfoot alluded to the infantry attacking first. Anti-tank mines would not be tripped by soldiers stepping on

them since they were too light. As the infantry advanced, engineers had to clear a path for the tanks coming behind. Each gap was to be 24 ft (7.3 m) wide, which was just enough to get tanks through in single file. The engineers had to clear a 5 mi (8.0 km) route through the Devil's Gardens. It was a difficult task that was not achieved because of the depth of the Axis minefields.

At 22:00, the four infantry divisions of XXX Corps began to move. The objective was to establish a bridgehead before dawn at the imaginary line in the desert where the strongest enemy defences were situated, on the far side of the second mine belt. Once the infantry reached the first minefields, the mine sweepers, including Reconnaissance Corps troops and sappers, moved in to create a passage for the armoured divisions of X Corps. Progress was slower than planned but at 02:00, the first of the 500 tanks crawled forward. By 04:00, the lead tanks were in the minefields, where they stirred up so much dust that there was no visibility at all, traffic jams developed and tanks bogged down. Only about half of the infantry attained their objectives and none of the tanks broke through.

The 1st South African Division, on the left flank of XXX Corps, attacked on a two-brigade front to secure the southern end of Miteirya Ridge, with the 2nd South African Infantry Brigade on the right and the 3rd South African Infantry Brigade on the left. The 1st South African Infantry Brigade was deployed further south to create an anti-tank screen for the protection of the left flank of the attack. By 08:00 on 24 October, Miteirya Ridge was secured after a night of heavy fighting and a high number of casualties.

The 7th Armoured Division (with a Free French Brigade under command) from XIII Corps (Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks) made a secondary attack to the south. The main attack aimed to achieve a breakthrough, engage and pin down the 21st Panzer Division and the "Ariete" Division around Jebel Kalakh, while the Free French on the far left were to secure Qaret el Himeimat and the el Taqa plateau. The right flank of the attack was to be protected by 44th Infantry Division with the 131st Infantry Brigade. The attack met determined resistance, mainly from the 185th Infantry Division "Folgore", part of the Ramcke Parachute Brigade and Gruppe Keil.

The minefields were deeper

than anticipated and clearing paths through them was impeded by Axis defensive fire. By dawn on 24 October, paths still had not been cleared through the second minefield to release the 22nd and 4th Light Armoured Brigades into the open to make their planned turn north into the rear of enemy positions 5 mi (8.0 km) west of Deir el Munassib. Further north along the XIII Corps front, the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division achieved a limited and costly success against determined resistance from the 17th Infantry Division "Pavia", 27th Infantry Division "Brescia" and elements of the 185th Infantry Division "Folgore". The 4th Indian Infantry Division, on the far left of the XXX Corps front at Ruweisat Ridge, made a mock attack and two small raids to deflect attention to the centre of the front.

Phase two: the crumbling

Dawn aerial reconnaissance showed little change in Axis dispositions and Montgomery ordered that the clearance of the northern corridor should be completed and the New Zealand

Division supported by the 10th Armoured Division should push south from Miteirya Ridge. The 9th Australian Division, in the north, should plan a crumbling operation for that night, while in the southern sector, the 7th Armoured Division should continue to try to break through the minefields with support, if necessary, from the 44th Division. Panzer units counter-attacked the 51st Highland Division just after sunrise but were defeated.

The morning of Saturday 24 October brought disaster for the German headquarters. The Axis forces were stunned by British attack and their messages became confused and hysterical, with one Italian unit communicating to Germans that it had been wiped out by "drunken negroes with tanks". The reports that Stumme had received that morning showed the attacks had been on a broad front but that such penetration as had occurred should be containable by local units. He went forward to see for himself, suffered a heart attack and died. Temporary command was given to Major-General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma. Hitler had already decided that Rommel should leave his sanatorium and return to North Africa.

Pending complete clearance of paths through the minefields, the Allied armour was held at the Oxalic Line. In the 51st (Highland) Division sector, the Seaforth Highlanders, supported by tanks of the 2nd Armoured Brigade, attacked and captured the "Stirling" position. Artillery and the Desert Air Force, making over 1,000 sorties, bombarded Axis positions all day to aid the 'crumbling' of the Axis forces. By 16:00 there was little progress beyond the Oxalic Line.

At dusk, with the sun at their backs, Axis tanks from the 15th Panzer Division and the "Littorio" Division advanced from the Kidney feature (also known to the Germans and Italians as Hill 28), often wrongly called a ridge as it was actually a depression, to engage the 1st Armoured Division and the first big tank engagement of El Alamein began. Over 100 tanks were involved and half were destroyed by dark; neither position was altered.

Lumsden wanted to call off the attack planned for the night of 24/25 September but Montgomery overruled him. The thrust that night by the 10th Armoured Division from Miteirya Ridge failed. The lifting of mines on the Miteirya Ridge and beyond took far longer than planned and the leading unit, the 8th Armoured Brigade, was caught on their start line at 22:00 zero hour by an air attack and were scattered. Axis bombers destroyed a convoy of 25 British vehicles carrying petrol and ammunition, setting off a night-long blaze. By the time the 8th Armoured Brigade had reorganised they were well behind schedule and out of touch with the creeping artillery barrage. By daylight the brigade was caught in the open, suffering considerable fire from well sited tanks and anti-tank guns. The 24th Armoured Brigade had pushed

forward and reported at dawn they were on the Pierson Line, although it turned out that, in the dust and confusion, they had mistaken their position and were well short.

The attack in the XIII Corps sector to the south fared no better. The 131st Infantry Brigade cleared a path through the mines but when the 22nd Armoured Brigade passed through, they came under fire and were repulsed, with 31 tanks disabled. British air activity that night focused on Rommel's northern armoured group, where 135 short tons (122 t) of bombs were dropped. To prevent a recurrence of the 8th Armoured Brigade's experience from the air, attacks on Axis landing fields were also stepped up.

D + 2: 25 October

The first attack had ended by Sunday. The British had advanced through the minefields in the west to make a 6 mi (9.7 km) wide and 5 mi (8.0 km) deep inroad. They were on top of Miteirya Ridge in the south-east. Axis forces were firmly entrenched in most of their original battle positions and the attack had been contained. Montgomery decided that the planned advance southward from Miteirya Ridge by the New Zealanders would be too costly and instead decided that XXX Corps while keeping firm hold of Miteirya should strike northwards toward the coast with the 9th Australian Division. The 1st Armoured Division on the Australian left should continue to attack west and north-west; activity to the south on both corps fronts would be confined to patrolling. The battle would be concentrated at the Kidney feature and Tel el Eisa until a breakthrough occurred.

Rommel flew to Rome early on 25 October to press Comando Supremo for more fuel and ammunition, then on to North Africa later in the day. Meanwhile, in the afternoon the Axis forces launched attacks using the 15th Panzer and "Littorio" divisions. The Panzer Army probed for a weakness but without success. The British and Commonwealth infantry attacked at dusk. Around midnight, the 51st (Highland) Division launched three attacks. These were hindered by navigational difficulties as no one knew quite where they were, and heavy casualties were suffered amidst the confusion. Nevertheless,

most of the Oxalic Line was eventually secured excepting the Aberdeen position on the Kidney feature. While the 51st Highland Division was operating around the Kidney feature, the Australians were attacking Point 29 (sometimes shown on Axis maps as "28") a 20 ft (6.1 m) high Axis artillery observation post south-west of Tel el Eisa, to surround the Axis coastal salient containing the German 164th Light Division and large numbers of Italian infantry. This was the new northern thrust Montgomery had devised earlier in the day. The 26th Australian Brigade attacked at midnight, supported by artillery and 30 tanks of the 40th Royal Tank Regiment. The Australians took the position and 240 prisoners. Fighting continued in this area for the next week, as the Axis tried to recover the small hill that was so important to their defence. Night bombers dropped 115 long tons (117 t) of bombs on targets in the battlefield and 14

long tons (14 t) on the Stuka base at Sidi Haneish, while nig

ht fighters flew patrols over the battle area and the Axis forward landing grounds. In the south, the 4th Armoured Brigade and the 69th Infantry Brigade attacked the 187th Infantry Regiment "Folgore" at Deir Munassib, but lost about 20 tanks gaining only the forward positions.

Rommel arrived at El Alamein on the evening of the 25th to resume command of the Panzer Army Africa, which was renamed the German-Italian Panzer Army (Deutsch-Italienische Panzerarmee) that day. Rommel's arrival boosted German morale, though there was little he could do to change the course of the battle.

On arrival at his headquarters, Rommel assessed the battle. Casualties, particularly in the north, as a result of incessant artillery and air attack, had been severe. The Italian 102nd Motorised Division "Trento" had lost 50 per cent of its infantry and most of its artillery and the 164th Light Division had lost two battalions. The 15th Panzer and Littorio divisions had prevented the British tanks from breaking

through but this had been a costly defensive success, the 15th Panzer Division being reduced to 31 tanks. Most other units were also under strength, on half rations and many men were ill; Panzerarmee Afrika had only enough fuel for three days.

Phase three: the counter

D + 3: 26 October

Rommel was convinced by this time that the main assault would come in the north and determined to retake Point 29. He ordered a counter-attack against it by the 15th Panzer Division and the 164th Light Division, with part of the Italian XX Corps to begin at 15:00 but under constant artillery and air attack this came to nothing. According to Rommel this attack did meet some success, with the Italians recapturing part of Hill 28,

Attacks were now launched on Hill 28 by elements of the 15th Panzer Division, the Littorio and a Bersaglieri Battalion, supported by the concentrated fire of all the local artillery and AA. In the evening part of the Bersaglieri Battalion succeeded in occupying the eastern and western edges of the hill.

The bulk of the 2/17th Australian Battalion, which defended the position, was forced to give some ground. Rommel reversed his policy of distributing his armour across the front, ordering the 90th Light Division forward from Ed Daba and 21st Panzer Division north along with one third of the Ariete Division and half the artillery from the southern sector to join the 15th Panzer Division and the Littorio Division. The move could not be reversed because of the fuel shortage. The Trieste Division was ordered from Fuka to replace the 90th Light Division at Ed Daba but the 21st Panzer Division and

the Ariete Division made slow progress during the night under constant attack from DAF bombers.

At the Kidney feature, the British were unable to take advantage of the absent tanks; each time they tried to move forward they were stopped by anti-tank guns. Churchill railed, "Is it really impossible to find a general who can win a battle?" Bristol Beaufort torpedo bombers o

f 42 Squadron, attached to 47 Squadron, sank the tanker Proserpina at Tobruk; three Vickers Wellington torpedo bombers of 38 Squadron destroyed the oil tanker Tergesteia at Tobruk during the night, removing the last hope for refuelling the Panzerarmee.

By 26 October, XXX Corps had completed the capture of the bridgehead west of the second mine belt. The British Forces had sustained 2000 casualties, the Australians 1000, the New Zealanders 1000 and the South Africans 600. The tanks of X Corps, established just beyond the infantry, had failed to break through the Axis anti-tank defences. Montgomery decided that over the next two days, while continuing the process of attrition, he would thin out his front line to create a reserve for another attack. The reserve was to include the 2nd New Zealand Division (with the 9th Armoured Brigade under command), the 10th Armoured Division and the 7th Armoured Division.

The attacks in the south, which lasted three days and caused considerable losses without achieving a breakthrough, were suspended.

D + 4: 27 October

The main battle was concentrated around Tel el Aqqaqir and the Kidney feature at the end of the 1st Armoured Division's path through the minefield. A mile north-west of the feature was Outpost Woodcock and roughly the same distance south-west lay Outpost Snipe. An attack was planned on these areas using two battalions from 7th Motor Brigade. At 23:00 on 26 October 2 Battalion, The Rifle Brigade would attack Snipe and 2nd Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC) would attack Woodcock. The plan was for 2nd Armoured Brigade to pass round the north of Woodcock the following dawn and 24th Armoured Brigade round the south of Snipe. The attack was to be supported by all the artillery of X and XXX Corps.

Both battalions had difficulty finding their way in the dark and dust. At dawn, the KRRC had not reached its objective and had to find cover and dig in some distance from Woodcock. The 2nd Rifle Brigade had been more fortunate

and after following the shell bursts of the supporting artillery, dug in when they concluded they had reached their objective having encountered little opposition.

At 06:00, the 2nd Armoured Brigade commenced its advance and ran into such stiff opposition that, by noon, it had still not linked with the KRRC. The 24th Armoured Brigade started a little later and was soon in contact with the Rifle Brigade (having shelled them in error for a while). Some hours of confused fighting ensued involving tanks from the Littorio and troops and anti-tank guns from 15th Panzer which managed to keep the British armour at bay in spite of the support of the anti-tank guns of the Rifle Brigade battle group. Rommel had decided to make two counter-attacks using his fresh

troops. 90th Light Division was to make a fresh attempt to capture Point 29 and 21st Panzer were targeted at Snipe (the Ariete detachment had returned south).

At Snipe, mortar and shellfire was constant all day. Lucas-Phillips, in his Alamein wrote:

The desert was quivering with heat. The gun detachments and the platoons squatted in their pits and trenches, the sweat running in rivers down their dust-caked faces. There was a terrible stench. The flies swarmed in black clouds upon the dead bodies and excreta and tormented the wounded. The place was strewn with burning tanks and carriers, wrecked guns and vehicles, and over all drifted the smoke and the dust from bursting high explosives and from the blasts of guns.

At 16:00, Rommel launched his major attack. German and Italian tanks moved forward against the Rifle Brigade which had thirteen 6-pounder anti-tank guns along with six more from the 239th Anti-Tank Battery, RA. Although on the point of being overrun more than once they held their ground, destroying 22 German and 10 Italian tanks. The Germans gave up but in error the British battle group was withdrawn without being replaced that evening. Only one anti-tank gun from 239 Battery could be brought back. The acti

on at Snipe was an episode of the Battle of El Alamein described by the regimental historian of the Rifle Brigade as the most famous day of the regiment's war. Its CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Buller Turner, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

When it was discovered that neither Woodcock nor Snipe was in Eighth Army hands, the 133rd Lorried Infantry Brigade was sent to capture them. By 01:30 on 28 October, the 4th battalion Royal Sussex Regiment judged they were on Woodcock and dug in. At dawn, the 2nd Armoured Brigade moved up in support but before contact could be made the 4th Royal Sussex were counter-attacked and overrun with many losses. The 133rd Lorried Brigade's two other battalions had moved on Snipe and dug in, only to find out the next day that they were in fact well short of their objective.

Further north, the attack by the 90th Light Division attack on Point 29 during the afternoon of 27 October failed under heavy artillery and bombing which broke up the attack before it had closed with the Australians.

D + 5 6: 28 29 October

On 28 October, the 15th and 21st Panzer made a determined attack on the X Corps front but were halted by artillery, tank and anti-tank gun fire. In the afternoon, they paused to regroup to attack again but they were bombed for two and a half hours and were prevented from even forming up. This proved to be Rommel's last attempt to take the initiative and as such his defeat here represented a turning point in the battle.

At this point, Montgomery ordered the X Corps formations in the area of Woodcock and Snipe to go over to the defensive while he concentrated the attack further to the north. Late on 27 October, the 133rd Brigade Lorried Infantry Brigade was sent forward to recover lost positions but the next day, a good part of this force was overrun by German and Italian tanks from the Littorio and supporting 12th Bersaglieri Regiment; several hundred British soldiers were captured. On the night of 28/29 October, the 9th Australian D

ivision was ordered to make a second set-piece attack. The 20th Australian Infantry Brigade with the 40th R.T.R. in support would push north-west from Point 29 to form a base for the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade with the 46th R.T.R. in support, to attack north-east to an Axis position south of the railway known as Thompson's Post. Once Thompson's Post was captured, the Australians were to cross the railway to the coast road and advance south-east to close on the rear of the Axis troops in the coastal salient. An attack by the third brigade would then be launched on the salient from the south-east.

The 20th Brigade took its objectives with little trouble but 26th Brigade had difficulty. Because of the distances involved, the troops were riding on the Valentine tanks of the 46th R.T.R. and carriers, which mines and anti-tank guns soon brought to grief, forcing the infantry to dismount. The infantry and tanks lost touch, fighting with the 125th Panzergrenadier Regiment and a battalion

of the 7th Bersaglieri Regiment sent to reinforce the sector; the advance came to a halt. The Australians suffered 200 casualties in that attack and suffered 27 killed and 290 wounded. The German and Italian forces that had participated in the counter-attack formed an outpost and held on until the arrival of German reinforcements on 1 November.

It became clear that there were no longer enough hours of darkness left to reform, continue the attack and see it to its conclusion, so the operation was called off. By the end of these engagements in late October, the British still had 800 serviceable tanks and the Panzerarmee day report for 28 October (intercepted and read by Eighth Army the following evening) recorded 81 serviceable German tanks and 197 Italian. With the help of signals intelligence information the Proserpina (carrying 4,500 tonnes of fuel) and Tergestea (carrying 1,000 tonnes of fuel and 1,000 tonnes of ammunition) had been destroyed on 26 October and the tanker Luisiano (

carrying 2,500 tonnes of fuel) had been sunk off the west coast of Greece by a torpedo from a Wellington bomber on 28 October. Rommel told his commanders, "It will be quite impossible for us to disengage from the enemy. There is no gasoline for such a manoeuvre. We have only one choice and that is to fight to the end at Alamein".

The Australian and British attacks had alerted Montgomery that Rommel had committed his reserve, the 90th Light Division, to the front and that its presence in the coastal sector suggested that Rommel was expecting the next major Eighth Army offensive there. Montgomery decided to attack further south on a 4,000 yd (2.3 mi; 3.7 km) front south of Point 29. The attack was to take place on the night of 31 October/1 November, as soon as he had completed the reorganisation of his front line to create reserves for the offensive (although in the event it was postponed by 24 hours).

To keep Rommel's attention on the coastal sector, Montgomery ordered the renewal of the 9th Australian Division operation on the night of 30/31 October.

D + 7 9: 30 October 1 November

The night of 30 October saw the third Australian attempt to reach the paved road and by the end of the night they were astride the road and the railway, making the position of the Axis troops in the salient precarious. A battlegroup from the 21st Panzer Division launched four attacks against Thompson's Post on 31 October, all being repulsed. Sergeant William Kibby (2/48th Australian Infantry Battalion), for his actions from 23 October until his death on 31 October, including a lone attack on a machine-gun position at his own initiative, was awarded the Victoria Cross (posthumous). On 1 November, contact with Panzergrenadier-Regiment 125 in the nose of the salient was restored; the supporting X Bersaglieri Battalion of the 7th Bersaglieri Regiment resisted several Australian attacks.

On 1 November, the tankers Tripolino and Ostia were torpedoed and sunk by aircraft, north-west of Tobruk.

The shortage forced Rommel to rely increasingly on fuel flown in from Crete on the orders of Albert Kesselring, Luftwaffe Oberbefehlshaber Süd (OB Süd, Supreme Commander South), despite the restrictions imposed by the bombing of the airfields in Crete and Desert Air Force interceptions of the transport aircraft. Rommel began to plan a retirement to Fuka, some 50 mi (80 km) to the west, as he had only 90 tanks remaining, against 800 British tanks. Large amounts of fuel arrived at Benghazi after the German forces had started to retreat but little of it reached the front, a fact Kesselring tried to change by delivering it more closely to the fighting forces. Barbasetti insisted to Rommel that the Deutsche-Italienische Panzerarmee must hold at El Alamein as supplies would arrive for them.

Phase four: Operation Supercharge

D + 10: 2 November

This phase of the battle began at 01:00 on 2 November, with the objective of destroying enemy armour, forcing the enemy to fight in the open, reducing the Axis stock of petrol, attacking and occupying enemy supply routes, and causing the disintegration of the enemy army. The intensity and the destruction in Supercharge were greater than anything witnessed so far during this battle. The objective of this operation was Tel el Aqqaqir, the base of the Axis defence roughly 3 mi (4.8 km) north-west of the Kidney feature and situated on the Rahman lateral track.

The initial thrust of Supercharge was to be carried out by the 2nd New Zealand Division. Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg had tried to free them of this task, as they had lost 1,405 men in just three days, at El Ruweisat Ridge in July. Along with the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade and 28th (Maori) Infantry Battalion, the division was to have had placed under its command the 151st (Durham) Brigade from the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division, the 152nd (Seaforth and Camerons) Brigade from the 51st (Highland) Division and the 133rd Royal Sussex Lorried Infantry Brigade and

the 9th Armoured Brigade under command.

As in Operation Lightfoot, it was planned that two infantry brigades (the 151st on the right and 152nd on the left) each this time supported by a regiment of tanks the 8th and 50th Royal Tank Regiments would advance and clear a path through the mines. Once they reached their objectives, 4,000 yd (3,700 m) distant, 9th Armoured Brigade would pass through supported by a heavy artillery barrage and break open a gap in the Axis defences on and around the Rahman track, some 2,000 yd (1,800 m) further forward, which the 1st Armoured Division, following behind, would pass through into the open to take on Rommel's armoured reserves. Rommel had ordered 21st Panzer Division from the front line on 31 October to form a mobile counterattacking force. The division had left behind a panzergrenadier regiment which would bolster the "Trieste" Division which had been ordered forward to replace it. Rommel had also interspersed formations from the Trieste and 15th P

anzer Divisions to "corset" his weaker forces in the front line. On 1 November the two German armoured divisions had 102 effective tanks to face Supercharge and the Littorio and Trieste Divisions had 65 tanks between them.

Supercharge started with a seven-hour aerial bombardment focused on Tel el Aqqaqir and Sidi Abd el Rahman, followed by a four and a half-hour barrage of 360 guns firing 15,000 shells. The two assault brigades started their attack at 01:05 on 2 November and gained most of their objectives to schedule and with moderate losses. One battalion from the 90th Light Division along with another battalion from the 15th Panzer Division were soon overrun and at 04:45 it was reported that only one Bersaglieri infantry battalion was still manning the defensive line. On the right of the main attack 28th (Maori) battalion captured positions to protect the right flank of the newly formed salient and 133rd Lorried Infantry did the same on the left. New Zealand engineers cleared five l

ines through the mines allowing the Royal Dragoons armoured car regiment to slip out into the open and spend the day raiding the Axis communications.

The 9th Armoured Brigade had started its approach march at 20:00 on 1 November from El Alamein railway station with around 130 tanks and arrived at its start line with only 94 runners (operational tanks). The brigade was to have started its attack towards Tel el Aqqaqir at 05:45 behind a barrage; the attack was postponed for 30 minutes while the brigade regrouped on Currie's orders. At 06:15, 30 minutes before dawn, the three regiments of the brigade advanced towards the gun line.

We all realise that for armour to attack a wall of guns sounds like another Balaclava, it is properly an infantry job. But there are no more infantry available. So our armour must do it.

Brigadier Currie had tried to get the brigade out of doing this job, stating that he believed the brigade would be attacking on too wide a front with no reserves and that they would most likely have 50 per cent losses.

The reply came from Freyberg that Montgomery

... was aware of the risk and has accepted the possibility of losing 100% casualties in the 9th Armoured Brigade to make the break, but in view of the promise of immediate following through of the 1st Armoured Division, the risk was not considered as great as all that.

The German and Italian anti-tank guns (mostly Pak38 and Italian 47 mm guns, along with 24 of the formidable 88 mm flak guns) opened fire upon the charging tanks silhouetted by the rising sun. German tanks, which had penetrated between the Warwickshire Yeomanry and Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, also caused many casualties. British tanks attacking the Folgore sector were fought off with petrol bombs and mortar fire as well as with the obsolete Italian 47 mm guns. The Axis gun screen started to inflict a steady amount of damage upon the advancing tanks but was unable to stop them; over the course of the next 30 minutes, around 35 guns were destroyed and several hundred prisoners taken. The 9th Armoured Brigade had started the attack with 94 tanks and was reduced to only 14 runners, of the 400 crews involved in the attack, 230 had been killed, wounded or captured.

If the British armour owed any debt to the infantry of the Eighth Army, the debt was paid on November 2 by 9th Armoured in heroism and blood.

After the Brigade's action, Brigadier Gentry of 6th New Zealand Brigade went ahead to survey the scene. On seeing Brigadier Currie asleep on a stretcher, he approached him saying, "Sorry to wake you John, but I'd like to know where your tanks are?" Currie waved his hand at a group of tanks around him and replied "There they are". Gentry said "I don't mean your headquarters tanks, I mean your armoured regiments. Where are they?" Currie waved his arm and again replied, "There are my armoured regiments, Bill".

The brigade had sacrificed itself upon the gun line and caused great damage but had failed to create the gap for the 1st Armoured Division to pass through; however, soon after dawn 1st Armoured Division started to deploy and the remains of 9th Armoured Brigade came under its command. 2nd Armoured Brigade came up behind the 9th, and by mid-morning 8th Armoured Brigade had come up on its left, ordered to advance to the south-west. In heavy fighting during the day the British armour made little further progress. At 11:00 on 2 November, the remains of 15th Panzer, 21st Panzer and Littorio divisions counter-attacked 1st Armoured Division and the remains of 9th Armoured Brigade, which by that time had dug in with a screen of anti-tank guns and artillery together with intensive air support. The counter-attack failed under a blanket of shells and bombs, resulting in a loss of some 100 tanks.

Although X Corps had failed in its attempt to break out, it had succeeded in its objective of finding and destroying enemy tanks. Although tank losses were approximately equal, this represented only a portion of the total British armour, but most of Rommel's tanks; the Afrika Korps strength of tanks fit for battle fell by 70 while in addition to the losses of the 9th Armoured Brigade, the 2nd and 8th Armoured Brigades lost 14 tanks in the fighting, with another

40 damaged or broken down. The fighting was later termed the "Hammering of the Panzers". In the late afternoon and early evening, the 133rd Lorried and 151st Infantry Brigades by this time back under command of 51st Infantry Division attacked respectively the Snipe and Skinflint (about a mile west of Snipe) positions in order to form a base for future operations. The heavy artillery concentration which accompanied their advance suppressed the opposition from the Trieste Division and the operation succeeded with few casualties.

On the night of 2 November, Montgomery once again reshuffled his infantry in order to bring four brigades (5th Indian, 151st, 5th New Zealand and 154th) into reserve under XXX Corps to prepare for the next thrust. He also reinforced X Corps by moving 7th Armoured Division from army reserve and sending 4th Light Armoured Brigade from XIII Corps in the south. General von Thoma's report to Rommel that night said he would have at most 35 tanks available to fight the next day and his artillery and anti-tank weapons had been reduced to 10% of their strength at the start of the battle. Rommel concluded that to forestall a breakthrough and the resulting destruction of his whole army he must start withdrawing to the planned position at Fuka. He called up Ariete from the south to join the mobile Italian XX Corps around Tel el Aqqaqir. His mobile forces (XX Corps, Afrika Korps, 90th Light Division and 19th Flak Division) were ordered to make a fighting withdrawal while his other formations were to withdraw as best they could with the limited transport available.

D + 11: 3 November

At 20:30 on 2 November, Lumsden decided that one more effort by X Corps would see the gun screen on the Rahman track defeated and ordered

the 7th Motor Brigade to seize the track along a 2 mi (3.2 km) front north of Tel el Aqqaqir. The 2nd and 8th Armoured Brigades would then pass through the infantry to a distance of about 3.5 mi (5.6 km). On the morning of 3 November the 7th Armoured Division would pass through and swing north heading for the railway at Ghazal station. 7th Motor Brigade set off at 01:15 on 3 November, but having received its orders late, had not had the chance to reconnoitre the battle area in daylight. This combined with stiff resistance led to the failure of their attack. As a consequence, the orders for the armour were changed and 2nd Armoured Brigade was tasked to support the forward battalion of the 133rd Lorried Brigade (2nd King's Royal Rifle Corps) and the 8th Armoured Brigade was to push south-west. Fighting continued throughout 3 November, but the 2nd Armoured Brigade was held off by elements of the Afrika Korps and tanks of the Littorio Division. Further south, the 8th Armoured Brigade was held off by anti-tank units helped later by tanks of the arriving Ariete Division.

Phase five: the break-out

On 2 November, Rommel signalled to Hitler that

The army's strength was so exhausted after its ten days of battle that it was not now capable of offering any effective opposition to the enemy's next break-through attempt ... With our great shortage of vehicles an orderly withdrawal of the non-motorised forces appeared impossible ... In these circumstances we had to reckon, at the least, with the gradual destruction of the army.

and at 13.30 on 3 November Rommel received a reply,

To Field Marshal Rommel. It is with trusting confidence in your leadership and the courage of the German-Italian troops under your command that the German people and I are following the heroic struggle in Egypt. In the situation which you find yourself there can be no other thought but to stand fast, yield not a yard of ground and throw every gun and every man into the battle. Considerable air force

reinforcements are being sent to C.-in-C South. The Duce and the Comando Supremo are also making the utmost efforts to send you the means to continue the fight. Your enemy, despite his superiority, must also be at the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that a strong will has triumphed over the bigger battalions. As to your troops, you can show them no other road than that to victory or death. Adolf Hitler.

Rommel thought the order (similar to one that had been given at the same time by Benito Mussolini through Comando Supremo),

demanding the impossible. ... We were completely stunned, and for the first time in the African campaign I did not know what to do. A kind of apathy took hold of us as we issued orders for all existing positions to be held on instructions from the highest authority.

Rommel ordered the Italian X and XXI Corps and the 90th Light Division to hold while the Afrika Korps withdrew approximately 6 mi (9.7 km) west during the night of 3 Nov