

LLOYD FREDENDALL: ONE OF THE MOST UNSUCCESSFUL AMERICAN GENERALS OF WW2

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General Lloyd Fredendall



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While the majority who join abide by these values, others choose to disregard the chain of command, resulting in disastrous consequences. This is true of Lloyd Fredendall, whose actions hurt Allied operations following the landings in North Africa.

Lloyd Fredendall was born on Fort D.A. Russell near Cheyenne, Wyoming on December 28, 1883. His father served in the Quartermaster Corps during the Spanish-American War and remained active in the military until his retirement in 1914. He re-enlisted during World War I to supervise the construction of bases in the western United States and retired at the end of the conflict at the rank of Lt. Colonel.

His father's connections enabled Fredendall to secure a recommendation from Senator Francis E. Warren to enter the class of 1905 at the United States Military Academy. He was dismissed after one semester. He was allowed to rejoin but dropped out. While Sen. Warren was willing to appoint him a third time, USMA refused to re-admit Fredendall.

In 1906, he took the officer's qualifying exam and scored first out of 70 applicants. A year later, on February 13, 1907, he received his commission in the US Army as a second lieutenant in the Infantry Branch.

SERVICE DURING WW1 AND PEACETIME

After serving in the Philippines and other assignments, Fredendall was sent to the Western Front with the 28th Infantry Regiment. He instructed at the Army's schools in France, where he built a reputation as an excellent teacher and trainer.

When the war came to an end, he was assigned to training duties. He was both a student and an instructor at the US Army Infantry School, and in 1923 graduated from the US Army Command and General Staff School. He further increased his status within the Army upon graduating from the US Army War College in 1925.



Fredendall, January 1943

Fredendall also completed multiple tours of duty in Washington at the Statistics Branch, the Inspector General's Department, and as executive officer at the Office of the Chief of the Infantry

OPERATION TORCH AND THE ALLIED INVASION OF NORTH AFRICA

Lloyd Fredendall was promoted to brigadier general in December 1939 and given command of the 5th Infantry Division. A year later, he was promoted to major general and given command of the 4th Infantry Division until July 1941.

In preparation for the Allied Invasion of North Africa – known as Operation Torch – General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in North Africa, chose Fredendall to command the 39,000-strong Central Task Force. Once there, he was assigned command of the US II Corps in its advance into Tunisia.



Generals in North Africa: Rear Admiral A.C. Bennett, General Alain de Boissieu, Major-General Lloyd Fredendall and, Admiral André Georges Rioult. (Photo Credit: Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

At the time, the II Corps served under the British First Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Kenneth A.N. Anderson. Anderson found Fredendall to be incompetent, as he used slang when addressing troops and made-up confusing codes, instead of using the standard military map grid-based location designators.

ALLIED ADVANCE ON TUNISIA

In January 1943, the German and Italian troops of *Panzerarmee Afrika*, under the command of General Erwin Rommel, had retreated 1,400 miles westward into Tunisia.

Bulked up by reinforcements, a force of 30 panzers broke through at Faid Pass on January 30 and struck the French positions stationed there.

The French reached out to the American forces for help, but the unit was too small and failed to push back the Germans. During this, Fredendall remained 70 miles away, overseeing the construction of the II Corps headquarters by a company from the 19th Engineer Regiment.



British soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards, establishing positions at Thala, February 24, 1943. (Photo Credit: No 2 Army Film & Photographic Unit / Wikimedia Commons)

Obsessed with the possibility of an air attack from the Germans, Fredendall constructed underground bunkers and anti-aircraft guns. Brigadier General Omar Bradley called the headquarters "an embarrassment to every American soldier," while General Eisenhower used it as an opportunity to remind senior officers of the importance of appearing on the front.

Fredendall refused to heed Eisenhower's orders and remained at II Corps headquarters. He rarely visited the front lines, opting to issue orders over the radio, and disregarded advice from those on the front. As such, he split up units and scattered them too far apart to support each other or be effective. This left them vulnerable to an attack by Axis forces.

PANIC AT THE BATTLE OF SIDI BOU ZID

On February 14, 1943, the Germans launched an offensive at Sidi Bou Zid. Fredendall refused to move from his position at II Corps Headquarters. His hilltop defensive positions at Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira were too far apart to provide mutual support, meaning the Americans could only sit back and watch the German onslaught.



American soldiers looking over a damaged German tank, February 1943. (Photo Credit: MPI / Getty Images)

A counterattack was launched the next day but failed. As such, the Americans abandoned Sidi Bou Zid but were cut off at Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira. The result was a mass panic while the Germans launched Junkers Ju-87 attacks.

Of the 900 men sent into battle, only 300 returned. Demoralized by the defeat and pushed back 50 miles, the Americans fell back to the Kasserine Pass, providing the Germans a pathway through which they could break through Allied rear areas.

THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS REVEALS FREDENDALL'S INCOMPETENCE

The Battle of Kasserine Pass occurred from February 19 to 24, 1943. After heavy fighting, the Germans broke through the pass, but the arrival of Allied reinforcements, paired with issues within the German command, stopped the assault. In just 10 days, the Americans lost 183 tanks and 7,000 troops, of which 300 were killed and another 3,000 listed as missing.



M3 Lee tank advancing to support American forces at the Battle of Kasserine Pass. (Photo Credit: WWII Signal Corps Photograph Collection / Wikimedia Commons)

Eisenhower sent Major General Ernest N. Harmon of the 2nd Armored Division to report on the fighting. He was also tasked with assisting the Allied commanders, including Fredendall, and determining whether he or his 1st Armored Division commander, Major General Orlando Ward, should be replaced. He learned Fredendall and Anderson rarely saw each other and failed to coordinate those forces under their command. Harmon also found out he wasn't on speaking terms with Maj. Gen. Ward, whom he intentionally left out of operational meetings after the pair had a difference of opinion regarding the distribution of his command.

While interviewing field commanders and troops, Harmon discovered Fredendall was doling out commands' contrary to Anderson, creating confusion on the front, and that positions were such that units could not support each other. The field commanders felt Fredendall was out of touch and a cowardly leader.

Concerned, Harmon requested permission to go to the front and shore up Allied defenses.

Following the events at Kasserine Pass, Eisenhower visited II Corps headquarters to confer with Brig. Gen. Bradley, who'd spoken with division commanders and received the same responses as Harmon. It was then the decision was made to replace Fredendall.

While 18th Army Group commander British General Sir Harold R.L.G. Alexander informed Eisenhower he would happily take Fredendall's place, Eisenhower approached Harmon, who

declined, citing it would be unethical to appear to personally benefit from his assessment of Fredendall.



Dwight D. Eisenhower, December 1943. (Photo Credit: US Army / Wikimedia Commons)

On 5 March 1943, Eisenhower personally flew to Tebessa to inform Fredendall of his decision to replace him, which he couched in terms of a routine assignment. Eisenhower arranged the replacement so that Fredendall's reputation was not formally brought into disrepute, an action some believe he soon came to regret.

On 6 March 1943, at Eisenhower's direction, George S. replaced Fredendall as commander of the II Corps. When Patton arrived at II Corps headquarters, Fredendall was at breakfast. Patton had disliked Fredendall in 1941 when they were both division commanders at Fort Benning. After a brief conference, Patton formally relieved Fredendall saying II Corps "was primarily a tank show and I know more about tanks." Patton noted in his diary that Fredendall was "Very nice, conducted himself well – very well." In a letter to his wife Beatrice that day, Patton even wrote that "Fredendall is a great sport, and I feel sure, is a victim largely due to circumstances beyond his control." However, only a week later, after an initial inspection of his new command, Patton completely changed his mind: "I cannot see what Fredendall did to justify his existence."

FREDENDALL IS REPLACED BY PATTON

In the end, control of the II Corps was given to Major General George Patton, who assumed the position on March 6, 1943. Under his command, the unit was transformed, as he implemented a strict uniform policy and training regimen. The turnaround resulted in a morale-boosting victory at El Guettar, just 10 days after.

Due to the events of the Battle of Kasserine Pass, Fredendall went down in history as one of the most unsuccessful generals of the Second World War. While not completely to blame for the Allied failure, as American troops were largely green and overconfident, his inability to follow command structure and his withholding of information are largely to blame.

THE CLOSING YEARS OF WW2

Lloyd Fredendall returned to the US at Eisenhower's recommendation. Despite his mistakes, Eisenhower's refusal to formally reprimand allowed him to be promoted to lieutenant general and eligible for three-star assignments, which he duly received. He returned to the US with a hero's welcome.

Eisenhower's aide made a report to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, where it was communicated, without elaboration, that Eisenhower wished for Fredendall to be reassigned to

a training command. This recommendation was followed and Fredenall spent the remainder of the war working on training assignments across the US.



Gen Fredenall in 1943

DUTIES AFTER RETURN TO THE U.S.

While commanding the Central Defense Command and the U.S. Second Army at Memphis, Tennessee, Fredenall supervised training and field maneuvers, gave away brides, and at first even granted interviews to members of the press. However, after a sarcastic comment on his generalship abilities by a Time magazine reporter, Fredenall changed his mind, and largely blocked further press coverage of his command.

The widespread custom of theater commanders to transfer senior commanders who had failed in battlefield assignments to stateside training commands did not in any way improve the reputation or morale of the latter, who were now saddled with the difficult job of convincing a disgraced commander to take the lead in advocating radical improvements in existing Army training programs - programs which, like Fredenall himself, had contributed to the embarrassing U.S. Army reverses in North Africa.

Author Charles MacDonald described Fredenall as a "man of bombast and bravado in speech and manner [who] failed to live up to the image he tried to create."

The American historian (and retired Army officer) Carlo D'Este has described Fredenall as "...one of the most inept senior officers to hold a high command during World War II."

2nd Armored Division commander Ernest Harmon, in his after-action report for the Kasserine battles, called Fredenall "a son of a bitch" and later said he was both a moral and physical coward.

Fredenall was the first of seven American corps commanders in World War II to be "relieved of command" (most for medical reasons) but despite this, he received one more promotion in rank: in June 1943, he was promoted to Lieutenant General.

Fredenall continued to serve in the US Army through the end of the war. He retired on March 31, 1946. He died in San Diego, California on October 4, 1963