



GENERAL SIR BERNARD LAW MONTGOMERY

The Battle of El Alamein

NIGHT comes quickly in the Western Desert. On October 23, 1942, it spread like a cloak over the masses of men, guns and machines lying in readiness before the Alamein line.

Behind his minefields and his wire Rommel, the desert fox, was at bay. His lines extended from the Mediterranean Sea on the north to the militarily impassable Quattara depression on the south, a distance of 28 miles. Seventy miles west the city of Alexandria lay quiet and sleeping—but not soundly.

In the center of the Axis line was a bulge, thrusting towards the positions of General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery's Eighth Army. The bulge had existed since August, marking the high tide of Axis fortunes in Africa. It had been created at the cost of two desperate attacks, the chief value of which had been to prove that further attacks were useless.

The German and Italian forces behind the line from Quattara to the sea consisted of the 15th and 21st Panzer divisions, the 90th Light Division and the 164th Infantry Division, all German, plus the Italian 20th, 21st and 10th Corps. Within the 21st Corps were included the Ariete and Littorio armored divisions.

The British Eighth Army comprised the 10th Corps, of which the 10th and 8th armored divisions were a part as well as the second New Zealand division; the 13th corps, including the Seventh armored division, and the 30th corps, made up of the 51st Highlanders, the Fourth Indian division, the Ninth Australian division and the First South African division. At exactly 21.40 hours the night of the 23rd, the Eighth Army launched one of the greatest attacks in modern military history on the Axis forces.

“To break down a wall,” Commander in Chief, General Sir Harold Alexander, had said, “one inserts a crowbar beneath it and pries a hole.” This in effect is what was done.

To the accompaniment of an artillery barrage which exceeded in power any in World War I, the wall was breached.

Through the original hole, moved the infantry divisions, clearing minefields and opening a wider gap for the armor. The battle was joined, but as yet far from being won.

Behind the two great armies were the opposing air forces, and if the question of who rules the ground was yet to be decided there was no argument about who controlled the air.

In the preliminary estimate of the situation prepared by British GHQ, the comment was made, "Air strength will be vitally needed in the initial phases. The Allies enjoy superiority in the air. The Axis will suffer from numerical deficiency and from aviation fuel shortage. The enemy can reinforce its air strength from other fronts quickly but it cannot move supplies and fuel in a proportional scale for sustained, heavy activity."

Behind the battle lines were mustered 1,117 RAF aircraft and 164 war planes of the United States desert air force. Counting those based in Sardinia, Crete and the Dodecanese Islands, the Axis had available only 713 planes.

In the four days preceding the opening of the offensive the Allied air forces had made an average of over 700 sorties a day, softening up their prey. So important was the part they played that the date and hour of the great attack itself was made contingent on the time when air commanders could give assurance that the skies were already won.

So well were they won that on October 24 the Allied fighters and medium bombers concentrated most of their fury not on the Axis air force, but on the front line gun positions, tank groups and infantry positions of the defending Italo-German army.

It was here that the United States desert air force did some of its best work.

Hard hitting Mitchells of the 12th Medium Bomb Group, protected sometimes by Warhawks of the 57th Fighter Group, and sometimes by RAF Spitfires, dropped 96,000 pounds of bombs during the first day of the battle, while the fighters droned overhead guarding against enemy planes which seldom appeared. On several missions our flyers reported seeing no enemy aircraft at all, while on others Axis fighters were seen but refused combat. Only once did the Messerschmitts come down out of their usual seat in the sun to give combat, and then only briefly, without result.

In their wake the British and American pilots left wrecked tanks and trucks, blazing supply dumps and pock-marked landing grounds. To the Eighth Army, they were a big help. The next day, October 25, while slightly shorter in number of missions flown and pounds of bombs dropped, was long on victories.

In the face of gradually increasing air opposition, seven enemy fighters were shot down by the Allies, of which four were credited to the Americans.

One of the victors was a little known second lieutenant named Lyman Middleditch, of Waterwitch Club, Highlands, N.J. On that day "Middleditch of Waterwitch," as the cowling of his P-40 proclaimed, shot an ME-109 off the tail of one of his squadron mates and thence into the ground, chalking up the first of a series of victories which extended from Alamein to Cap Bon, to make him one of the leading aces of the Ninth U.S. Air Force.

AIR VICTORIES INCREASE

From Cairo meanwhile, General Brereton watched the antics of his eagle brood and found them good.

"I am extremely proud," the General said. "Veterans of two years and more of desert aerial warfare are praising the work of our fighter and bomber pilots. Those who were not seasoned combat flyers when the present fighting began are now operating like veterans."

