Montgomery's Desert Army

Text by JOHN WILKINSON-LATHAM
Colour plates by G. A. EMBLETON
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EDITOR: MARTIN WINDROW

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The North African Campaign, 1940-43

On 10 June 1940 Mussolini declared war on Great Britain. Encouraged by Franco-British defeat on the Continent, the Italians had visions of expanding their colonial empire – Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea – to include Egypt and the Sudan, and possibly, if their German allies permitted, French Algeria and Tunisia. Early in September 1940 Marshal Graziani led a force of seven divisions across the Egyptian border at Sollum and reached Sidi Barrani; there he halted, setting up a series of fortified camps stretching 50 miles southwards from the coast and pausing to enable his rear lines to become established. The immediate signs of Italian aggression ceased, and Graziani's 80,000 men, 120 tanks and 250 guns remained passively in their camps without the protection of an outpost line, an armoured screen, or any programme of patrols.

In December General Sir Archibald Wavell, commanding the British garrison in Egypt, launched what was intended to be a large-scale raid on the Italian positions, with the potential for limited exploitation if successful. His available troops – the Western Desert Force led by Major-General Richard O'Connor – consisted of 4th Indian Division, 7th Armoured Division, and Army troops made up of 7th Royal Tank Regiment and 7th Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery; a total of 20,000 men, 175 light and cruiser tanks, 50 Matilda 'Infantry' tanks, and 120 guns including a high proportion of 2-pdr. anti-tank and 37mm Bofors anti-aircraft pieces.

The simple plan was prepared with the benefit of good intelligence from air reconnaissance and patrolling on the ground. The first attack was to be on the most southerly camp, Nibeiwa; 7th Armoured Div. was to screen the assembly of 4th Indian Div. and 7th RTR and then to swing to the west flank to seal off the camp. The Indians and Matilda tanks were to advance undetected to within fifteen miles of the target, close up during the night, and attack Nibeiwa from the west next morning. If successful, the attack was to be pressed home on the other camps – Tummar West, Tummar East, and Sidi Barrani itself.

At 7 a.m. on 9 December guns began to register on their targets, fifteen minutes later the artillery programme commenced and 7th RTR and the Cameron Highlanders from 4th Indian Div. advanced. At 7.20 a.m. the tanks were inside the camp, followed fifteen minutes later by the lorry-borne Highlanders; and by 8.35 a.m. Nibeiwa had fallen. Major-General Beresford-Pierce, commanding 4th Indian Div., decided immediately to move on to Tummar West; after a sandstorm caused a slight delay the Matildas rumbled forward again at 1.35 p.m., accompanied by 1st Royal Fusiliers. The alerted Italians fought harder than at

1. Map of North African coastline, showing principal towns.
Nibeiwa, but by 4 p.m. Tummar West had fallen, despite a spirited sortie from Tummar East.

Tummar East was swiftly neutralised the next morning, and O'Connor agreed to 4th Indian Div. attacking Sidi Barrani while he directed 7th Armoured Div. in a sweep to cut the coast road 30 miles west and encircle all Italian forces in the vicinity. Results so far had been beyond the wildest optimism; they were soon exploited by a full-scale pursuit of the defeated Italians to the west. Wavell was hampered by the loss, at this critical moment, of 4th Indian Div. whose special experience was needed for an attack on the Italians in mountainous Ethiopia; but they were replaced by 6th Australian Div., who made up in toughness what they lacked in preparation. On 5 January 1941 Bardia fell, and on the 22nd Tobruk was in Wavell's hands. Maintaining pressure along the coast with the Australians, O'Connor sent strong elements of 7th Armoured Div. across the desert to Beda Fomm; here, on 8 February, the last Italians were defeated and rounded up, leaving only a handful to escape into Tripolitania.

In two months' fighting two British divisions had destroyed an army five times their strength, captured 130,000 prisoners, destroyed or taken 38 tanks and 845 guns, and - not least - could display nine captured generals. Five of the seven Italian divisions were completely destroyed.

'I ran away, we were outnumbered!'

(General Bergonzoli, after capture.)

Enter Rommel

'For the time being the main task of the German Afrika Korps is to defend the positions reached in Tripolitania and to hold down the largest possible British forces in North Africa.'

(Führer Directive, 18 February 1941)

In October 1940 Italy had invaded Greece, but by February 1941 had got into considerable difficulty. In January Hitler persuaded Mussolini to accept German aid in Libya, and early in February Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel had arrived with the advance guard of the Afrika Korps in Tripoli. Unaware of this, and anticipating German assistance for the Italians in Greece, Britain advised the Greeks that she was willing to transfer a large part of Wavell's forces from Libya. Having already lost 4th Indian, Wavell was now ordered to send to Greece from his newly reinforced army the 2nd New Zealand, 6th and 7th Australian, and part of 2nd Armoured Division. This left him with only the partially trained 9th Australian and the rest of the armoured division to hold the line in Cyrenaica.

Taking, as always, full advantage of his discretionary orders to 'patrol aggressively', Rommel attacked the fort and airfield of El Aheila in the dawn of 24 March. The weak British force withdrew 20 miles to Mersa el Brega, and Rommel, encouraged by this evidence of his enemy's weakness, planned to attack early in May when his main units would have arrived from Germany. However, when reconnaissance revealed that Wavell was improving his natural defensive position fast, Rommel decided to attack on 31 March with his only complete formation - 5th Light Division. By that evening the British had been forced into hasty retreat, abandoning some 50 Bren-gun carriers and 30 other vehicles. By 2 April Rommel had taken

2. Italian prisoners at work on a British water-point, guarded by an Indian soldier.
Agedabia, and Wavell gave orders for the abandonment of Benghazi and an orderly retreat eastwards. However, Rommel now sent part of 5th Light Div. across the desert in a hook while the remainder, with the Italian Ariete Div., moved on Msus, and 3rd Reconnaissance Bn. drove for Benghazi. They reached it next day, and the speed of the Axis advance caused the British retreat to become disorderly; communications broke down and units became isolated. Taking a short cut to avoid blocked roads, Generals O'Connor and Neame were surprised and captured by German motor-cycle troops—a serious loss to the British. On 7/8 April an ill-prepared garrison under General Gambier-Perry at Mechili was overwhelmed by three converging Axis columns. It was now clearly impossible to hold any sort of line west of Tobruk, and all British forces still in contact were ordered to fall back on that port. All available reinforcements were sent from Egypt, but the enemy were following up fast and they flung themselves on the British defences on 10 April.

To Rommel's chagrin the Tobruk garrison fought back stoutly, repulsing attacks by armour and infantry which struck the perimeter between 10 April and 4 May; among the serious German losses was General von Prützitz, whose vehicle suffered a direct hit from a 2-pdr. anti-tank gun. While the bulk of Afrika Korps, with Stuka and Messerschmitt support, kept up the pressure on the tired, hungry, thirsty, and sun-baked garrison, 3rd Recce Bn. moved east and crossed into Egypt on 20 April, stopping on a line south of Sollum eight days later. Here they fought a series of actions to secure vital positions such as Halfaya Pass. While Rommel's lines stretched back to Tripoli, and Tobruk held out, he was constantly vulnerable to the attentions of the RAF and the Royal Navy; Hitler forbade him to advance 'except for purposes of reconnaissance', and stalemate ensued.

During the spring there had been disasters to British arms both in Greece and in Crete, which had resulted in serious losses of manpower, ships and aircraft. Pressed by the Prime Minister to relieve Tobruk and to mount a counter-offensive in Cyrenaica, Wavell agreed, despite the unease revealed in his report of 28 May. 'Our Infantry tanks are really too slow for a battle in the desert and have been suffering considerable casualties from the fire of the powerful enemy anti-tank guns. Our cruisers have little advantage in power and speed over German medium tanks.' Nevertheless, Wavell hoped to 'succeed in driving the enemy west of Tobruk', despite reports of the recent arrival in the desert of 15th Panzer Div.

Operation Battleaxe opened at 0400 on 15 June with an attack by XIII Corps, under General Beresford-Pierce. The force consisted of 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divisions with 22nd Guards Brigade, and made its main thrust towards Sollum and Fort Capuzzo; the tanks of 4th and 7th Armoured Brigades led, supported by the infantry. Rommel refused to commit his tanks to a running battle, and sited them skillfully to take full advantage of their longer ranging guns. The British were drawn on to a screen of 88 mm guns, which massacred the British tanks. The 90 Matildas of 4th and 7th RTR, with the Guards infantry, fought their way doggedly towards Sollum and Capuzzo and took the latter in fierce fighting against 15th Panzer Div.; but the Germans held 'Hellfire Pass' and the extreme desert flank, and by 18 June the British had been forced to fall back to their start line.

Rommel reported 25 tanks totally destroyed from his force of 150 (95 of which were Mk. III and IV), with a further 75 damaged but repairable. The British had lost 87 of their 200 tanks employed,
4. Gazala, December 1941: a colonel of New Zealand infantry goes forward on reconnaissance with his orderly and signalers.

with another 40-odd damaged but considered repairable. There was no doubt that they had a lot to learn about armoured warfare; their troop-sized ‘cavalry charges’ and wide dispersal could not compare with the intelligent German use of concentrated masses of tanks acting in coordination with the deadly anti-tank guns. Technically, British tank and anti-tank armament was outclassed. The 2-pdr. could penetrate only 40 mm of armour at 1,000 yards, at 30° or less from the vertical, and was really of little use against the PzKpfw III and IV over 500 yards. Tank guns had no high-explosive ammunition, and the tank’s only weapon against infantry was the machine gun. The 50 mm gun of the PzKpfw III penetrated 53 mm of armour at 1,000 yards, and the 75 mm of the PzKpfw IV, nearly 60 mm. The 88 mm anti-aircraft gun employed in the anti-tank role had a penetration of 86 mm at 2,000 yards and was effective against the 40 mm main armour of British tanks at 3,000 yards. The 78 mm frontal armour of the Matilda, the invulnerable queen of the early battles against the Italians, could be penetrated at more than 2,000 yards by the deadly ‘88’. All three of these German guns fired HE ammunition, and German tanks had two machine guns to the British one.

‘Wavell’s strategic planning of this offensive had been excellent. What distinguished him from other British commanders was his great and well-balanced strategic courage. . . .’

(The Rommel Papers)
Auchinleck Regroups

'A very great man, if he had a better balanced judgement and chose men with his head rather than his heart he would be almost superhuman.'

(General Wavell, on Winston Churchill)

After Battleaxe, Beresford-Pierce was severely criticised both for his plan and his method of control, and was relieved of his command. Most of those in a position to know the facts considered this to be justified; but this was not the case with the Prime Minister's replacement of Wavell by General Sir Claude Auchinleck. Churchill, with his Marlburian ancestry, was inclined to order his generals into offensive action without having the intimate knowledge that is invariably vital to success; Wavell's acquiescence in Battleaxe stamped him as a loser in the Prime Minister's eyes after the operation failed.

Auchinleck took over on 5 July 1941, inheriting not only a dispirited army but the problems of a dangerous revolt in Iraq, and an awkward situation created by the Vichy French in Syria – both of which drew troops off from the vital Desert Front. 'The Auk' regrouped his forces in three armies: 8th in the Western Desert, 9th in Palestine and Syria, and 10th in Iraq. The 8th Army now consisted of two Corps – XIII commanded by Maj. Gen. Alfred Godwin-Austen, and XXX under Maj. Gen. Willoughby Norrie from 1st Armoured Division. Churchill was still impatient for a quick victory in the desert as a morale-raiser for the people of Britain, whose eyes were firmly fixed on

5. Indian infantry take cover near Derna, December 1941; the rocky ground made it almost impossible to dig, and sangars of dry stone were used instead.
the only British force fighting the Germans on the ground. There were wider reasons for his insistence, however; the sea and air situation in the Mediterranean was becoming extremely dangerous, with Malta under continuous attack. Russia appeared to be on the brink of absolute defeat, and the threat of war in the Far East was growing ominous.

Auchinleck was determined to maintain a defensive attitude until he was certain his forces were up to strength. The number of divisions in 8th Army was brought up to seven, and tank strength was increased by the arrival from America of large numbers of ‘General Stuart’ light tanks. Regrettably, their maximum armour of 36 mm and firepower of one 37 mm gun and two .30 cal. machine guns rendered them hopelessly inadequate for tank-v-tank actions with the panzers. British tank strength rose to about 720, with some 200 reserves, and 24 combat squadrons contributed to a total of 1,000-odd aircraft in the theatre of operations.

Rommel was also building up his strength for an autumn offensive, despite heavy losses among his supply convoys from Italy. He created 90th Light Division out of several units already present in the desert, this formation joining 15th Panzer and 21st Panzer Divs., the latter re-designated from the old 5th Light. His six Italian divisions were weak in both men and morale, but contributed the necessary infantry bulk to his command, and some 180 tanks of dubious value. His German tanks totalled about 250, of which 136 were PzKpfw IIIIs and some 30 were PzKpfw IVs with 75 mm guns. He was able to call upon some 120 German and 200 Italian combat aircraft.

On 18 November 1941 Auchinleck’s offensive — Operation Crusader — opened with an advance by 8th Army, now commanded by General Cunningham. Light tanks reconnoitred on the desert flank, where XXX Corps — 7th Armoured and 1st South African Divs., with 4th Armoured and 22nd Guards Brigades — would attempt to draw Rommel’s armour into a battle to the death. Meanwhile XIII Corps — 2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Divs., with 1st Army Tank Brigade — would strike north-west from Mersa Matruh to isolate the Bardia-Sollum area; and at the right moment the Tobruk garrison — 70th Division, the Polish 1st Carpathian and 32nd Army Tank Brigades — would break out in the Axis rear. In the event, Rommel failed to react as predicted. He did not allow his panzers to be drawn south, and the British armour advanced to Sidi Rezegh, becoming strung out and slightly dispersed in the process. On 23 November Rommel struck south with the panzers and the four Italian infantry divisions of XXI Corps; 21st Panzer hit the British from the Gambut area, while 15th Panzer hooked round the desert flank and hit them in the rear. Cunningham’s armour was roughly handled, and had Rommel continued this battle XXX Corps might have been destroyed. However, while the battle on the coast continued, he took strong elements from his armour and struck round the British flank towards Egypt in the ‘dash to the Wire’. Norrie’s XXX Corps fell back and, in the British rear, near-panic ensued. By midday on the 25th Rommel had taken Sidi Omar; he swung northwards to the coast, into the army’s flank, threatening them with disaster. Cunningham decided to evacuate Cyrenaica and fall back into Egypt.

At the crucial moment Auchinleck flew in from Cairo and grasped the reins of the faltering offensive. Cunningham was replaced by Auchinleck’s Deputy Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Neil Ritchie, and 8th Army was reinforced with all available troops. Unimpressed by Rommel’s ‘dash
to the Wire’, which was neither strong nor well-supplied and which left the main Axis army without day-to-day control far to the west, Auchinleck had the Tobruk garrison break out and fight towards a rendezvous with the New Zealanders in order to split the enemy in two. Meanwhile 2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Divs. resisted Rommel’s northwards thrust with determination, and the raiding force – having missed large British dumps on the way – began to run short of ammunition and fuel, and was partly encircled when the Tobruk force and the New Zealanders linked up at El Duda on the 26th; the remainder of the raiders withdrew. After confused fighting south of Gambut, Rommel ordered a withdrawal to the west on 6 December, reaching the El Agheila region and halting on 30 December. After three weeks the Axis garrisons at Bardia and Halfaya fell. The Axis lost some 24,000 dead and wounded and 32,000 prisoners, 380-odd tanks and 850 aircraft. British losses totalled some 18,000 and 287 tanks, with about the same number damaged but recovered.

The supply position was now once again reversed, with Rommel back on short lines of communication and the British lines from the Delta being stretched to their utmost. Air attacks on Malta intensified, and the arrival of 25 U-boats in the Mediterranean greatly increased the pressure on the Royal Navy and the supply convoys. On 5 January a convoy landed 54 medium tanks, 20 armoured cars and sundry other supplies for Rommel at Tripoli, and the irrepressible general began planning a lightning riposte. On 21 January a German attack on a narrow front fell upon Ritchie’s advanced line. The Italians pushed up the coast while the Afrika Korps struck across the desert; wet weather grounded the Desert Air Force, and Ritchie was forced to fall back. On 29 January 1942 Benghazi fell and, with it, large stores of all kinds. Ritchie fell back hurriedly to the Gazala line, a series of positions stretching from the sea southwards as far as the old Turkish fort at Bir Hacheim. The coastal half of the line was held by XIII Corps, the desert half by XXX Corps, with the Bir Hacheim anchor garrisoned by General J. P. Koenig’s Free French Brigade, which had recently come to the desert from Syria. Both Rommel and Auchinleck seemed now to have decided on a pause for re-arming and refitting their commands, and this breathing-space lasted until 26 May 1942, when the Axis once more attacked.

The battle of Gazala, notable for the outstanding

7. Australian, New Zealand and British officer cadets watch Army Physical Training Corps instructors – note crossed-sword trade badges – demonstrate unarmed combat. Montgomery was fanatic about the physical fitness of his army, and in the weeks before Alamein many portly soldiers learned to dread the appearance of the APTC ‘Muscle-busters’.
defence of Bir Hacheim by the French and for the massive tank battle fought out around a spot known as Knightsbridge, lasted until 13 June when Ritchie finally ordered a retirement to the Egyptian frontier, his armour reduced to some 100 tanks from a starting figure of nearly 1,000. Many of his 160 new M3 ‘General Grants’ were among the blackened hulks abandoned to the enemy. Tobruk once more became a defended locality behind German lines, but this time it held out for only eight days and, on 21 June, the South African General Klopper surrendered 33,000 men and vast stores to the enemy. In some disorder, and shocked by the loss of Tobruk, the 8th Army fell back to a previously reconnoitred line stretching from El Alamein near the sea to the edge of the virtually impassable Quattara Depression 40 miles to the south. A delaying action was fought at Mersa Matruh on 28 June, buying time for the retreating army which was harassed by Rommel’s hot pursuit.

As so often, Rommel’s presence inspired an unease out of proportion to his physical resources. He had only 55 tanks and some 6,500 exhausted men at the end of long and uncertain supply lines. He now mounted a desperate attack, hoping to penetrate to Alexandria, 60 miles to the east, before the British could regain their balance. This ‘first battle of Alamein’ began on 1 July and, within two days, it was clear that the British had won a defensive victory. While fierce patrol actions continued to flare, the main armies held their positions and frantically built up their strength. On 13 August, Winston Churchill relieved both Auchinleck and Ritchie of their commands, thus adding two more headstones to the graveyard of military careers. In contrast, Rommel received a wireless message from the Führer on 22 July, awarding him the baton of a Field Marshal; the presentation was made in person in Berlin in September. Rommel remarked to his wife that he would rather have had an extra division.
Montgomery and El Alamein

‘Your prime and main duty will be to take or destroy at the earliest opportunity the German–Italian Army commanded by Field-Marshal Rommel, together with all its supplies and establishments in Egypt and Libya.’

(Churchill’s directive to General Alexander)

After consultations at top level, the Prime Minister decided to replace Auchinleck as C-in-C Middle East, and Ritchie as GOC 8th Army, with the team of General Alexander and General Gott. However, the latter was killed when the aircraft taking him to Cairo was shot down by a lone Messerschmitt; and General Sir Alanbrooke persuaded Churchill that Montgomery – his original choice – should replace him.

The first task for the new C-in-C and the commander-elect of the desert army was to restore the morale of the troops. The victorious army, which had proved its worth conclusively by defeating the Axis forces on several occasions, had been transformed into a dispirited band of men sitting on the defensive inside the borders of Egypt. Seemingly endless ‘swans up and down the Blue’, the rapid succession of commanders whose faces were unknown and whose plans had never percolated far down the chain of command, the apparently invincible skill of the now-legendary Rommel – all had combined to undermine their morale. Less than a week after his arrival Montgomery vindicated his selection at a conference which was reportedly one of his best performances. In his memoirs Brooke stated that observers were dumbfounded by the speed with which Montgomery had grasped the essentials of the situation, as well as by the clarity of his plans.

Morale immediately improved when Montgomery made it known that, come what may, there would be no further retreat; 8th Army would fight, and if necessary die, on the Alamein line. While its strength was built up by massive reinforcement the army was to be trained and exercised to a peak of physical and military fitness. The esprit de corps of formations was to be restored by emphasising divisional identity, and by ensuring that except when absolutely unavoidable formations fought as divisions, not in dispersed packets. The commander set out to make himself, and what he required of his troops, widely known by a series of visits to the front line units. Whatever his failings, Montgomery picked exactly the right tone for this public relations exercise, which was generally remarkably successful.

He regrouped his forces in the expectation that Rommel would make a desperate attempt on the line. Every tactic of war was to be harnessed to ensure that the battle took place where and approximately when the defenders expected it. The southern end of the line, theoretically vulnerable to a classic ‘desert hook’ by the Axis armour, was heavily reinforced, with anti-tank guns and hull-down tanks placed along the east-west feature of Alam el Halfa Ridge. The orders were that as and when the attack took shape, it was to be contained and held; but under no circumstances were the defenders to take up any pursuit after it had been repulsed.

The battle of Alam el Halfa took place between 30 August and 2 September exactly as planned. Rommel, short of every necessity due to naval and air interdiction of his convoys from Italy, tried to
fight an armoured battle against well equipped and dug-in troops without having an assured line of resupply. His hook from the south ran into deep lines of concealed defences – previously the *Afrika Korps*’ own favourite tactic – and suffered serious losses; further north, the frontal attacks of his infantry made no appreciable progress. The Desert Air Force enjoyed complete air superiority, and on 3 September Rommel fell back to his start line.

Montgomery’s veto of any idea of counter-attack was part of his larger plan to prepare his forces for a final grand attack which would sweep the *Afrika Korps* out of Egypt and set 8th Army on the road to clearing North Africa completely. His preparations for the set-piece battle had the full support of Alexander, Brooke, and, after some predictable impatience, Churchill. Every formation which could be spared from other parts of the Empire was shipped to the Delta, together with vast numbers of tanks and other weapons; in effect, Rommel and Montgomery now engaged upon a six weeks’ battle of supplies. Rommel had demanded at least 65,000 tons during September and October to neutralise the 100,000 tons which he knew was on its way from Britain and which he had no means of stopping. In fact he was sent only 35,000 tons, of which some 30% was lost *en route*. In September Rommel’s precarious health broke down and he was recalled to Germany. He requested that Hitler replace him with Guderian, but this was refused because Guderian was temporarily ‘in disgrace’ over a dispute about Russian Front operations. General Stumme took over the *Afrika Korps*, assured by Rommel that he himself would return if the British opened a major offensive.

By the beginning of October Montgomery had under command some 1,100 tanks, of which 270 were Shermans and 210 were Grants, and another

10. Gen. Sir Claude Auchinleck (left) watching landing exercises in the Canal Zone, February 1942. The nearest officer has New Zealand epaulette flashes; the bespectacled man is a war correspondent.
100 in reserve. His army of 230,000 men mustered 86 strong battalions, some 940 field guns and 1,500 anti-tank guns, and he could call upon 900 aircraft. The Axis forces had some 500 tanks, of which 260-odd were Italian machines of questionable value. Of the 108,000 men under command more than half—42 out of 70 battalions—were Italian. There were 200 German and 371 Italian field pieces, and 522 anti-tank guns of all calibres; the 86 ‘eighty-eights’ were backed by 95 effective 7.62 cm weapons. Some 129 German and 216 Italian aircraft were available.

The battlefield of El Alamein was to all intents and purposes without physical features. Forty miles wide, it was bounded on the north by the sea and on the south by the Quattara Depression. The classic desert manoeuvre of holding the line while turning the flank could not be used; and because Rommel had developed his front into a continuous line of defensive works protected by minefields up to five miles deep there was no possibility of breaching the line by strategic surprise. Montgomery had therefore to plan for a set-piece battle—his forte—comprising the three phases of ‘break-in’, ‘break-through’ and ‘break-out’, in which his armoured superiority would only be effective in the final stage. Infantry and artillery would decide the first two phases alone. Before handing over, Rommel had organised his line to accord with his experience of the British trait of concentrating artillery fire close to the attacking infantry. He had left his forward line only lightly held by a screen guarding the minefields, concentrating the bulk of men and weapons further back, with the armour held in reserve to plug any gaps torn in the line.

Morale, as always, was to play a large part in the battle. The 8th Army had taken on the character of their forthright and cocksure commander re-

11. Maj. Gen. Brink, South African divisional commander, taking tea with two of his brigadiers. Note rank badge on sun-helmet. The Humber saloon was the standard staff car used by general officers.
mass of vehicles and armour through in precise logistical order in just ten hours of darkness. The arrival of fresh units and the need to leaven his corps evenly with experienced desert fighters required a degree of regrouping. The result was the formation of X Corps under General Herbert Lumsden, comprising 1st and 10th Armoured Divs., whose 434 tanks would exploit the expected breakthrough of XXX Corps, consisting of five infantry divisions and 22nd Armoured Brigade Group.

Montgomery’s original plan was to strike simultaneously on both flanks with his infantry, with the object of drawing in and destroying the panzer units. Early in October, however, he was obliged to change his ideas: ‘I was not satisfied that we were capable of achieving success in a plan so ambitious.’ His revised plan had as a first objective the destruction of the enemy holding troops and with them any possibility of an effective counter-attack. The main thrust was to be made by General Leese’s XXX Corps in the north, on a front of four divisions (9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand and 1st South African), to clear two minefield corridors. Behind them would be X Corps, with orders to engage the panzers. In the south a diversionary attack would be made by XIII Corps under General Horrocks.

General de Guingand, Montgomery’s Chief of Staff, has called the various stages of the twelve days’ battle the ‘stepping stones’, as if they were pre-arranged phases; but of course battles seldom go exactly as ordained by either commander, and victory usually goes to the general who adapts best to the changing tides which flow across the battlefield. Montgomery had the men, the material, and the tactical skill to profit from the favourable currents, and to counter the adverse ones. His opponent had the skill, but lacked the means to react with the same fluid opportunism.

The first, ‘break-in’ phase opened with an unprecedented artillery barrage at 9.40 p.m. on the night of 23 October. Most of XXX Corps reached their objectives by dawn, but unexpectedly strong resistance had exhausted them and they were unable to assist the break-through of armour. X Corps engineers had problems with faulty mine-detectors, and only one corridor was cleared. In the south XIII Corps made only token progress. The
armoured advance through the minefields went ahead, but a withering defensive fire caused heavy losses and by dawn on the 26th no armour had in fact broken through. ‘Kidney Ridge’ – to the enemy, ‘Hill 28’ – was the scene of a tremendous armoured battle as the panzers counter-attacked, and losses were heavy on both sides. Three days’ fighting had cost Montgomery 200 tanks, and the victory which his material superiority had almost guaranteed was eluding him.

By the time Rommel – recalled by a phone-call from Hitler in person - reached his headquarters late on the 26th, Montgomery was concentrating on a sustained crumbling of the enemy’s northern sector. The Axis armour in the north had been reduced to some 39 German and 69 Italian tanks; Rommel was forced to bring his southern armoured reserve, 21st Panzer Division, up to the north, allowing Montgomery to move 7th Armoured Division north in the same way. A British breakthrough became imminent when 4th Indian and 1st South African Divs. made a deep penetration north of Ruweisat Ridge on the 29th. Rommel started to pull out straight away, rather than wait for what he expected to be a decisive defeat. He transferred his 90th Light Division northwards to hold off this thrust while attempting to withdraw his motorised units to a defensible position at Fuka, some 50 miles westwards. He accepted that most of his non-motorised troops would have to be sacrificed, and that, short of petrol as he was, he would have to guard his withdrawal by leaving a strong anti-tank screen.

The ‘Supercharge’ phase of the British plan was unleashed on the night of 1–2 November, bogging down on the anti-tank rearguard at first but fighting its way through during the day. The final break-through was accomplished on 4 November, but the pursuit of the beaten enemy got off to a bad start when 8th Armoured Brigade failed to cut off the Axis armour against the coast that night. Although 1st and 7th Armoured Divs. reached El Daba on the 5th, Rommel had made good his escape. South of Fuka the New Zealanders, making a wide sweep in an attempt to cut off the retreating enemy were held up by a minefield – which turned out, ironically enough, to be a British dummy field laid five months previously! On the 8th, 10th Armoured Division reached Mersa Matruh, capturing large numbers of Italians but few Germans. On balance one must conclude that the pursuit was a mis-managed affair from which Rommel emerges with much more credit than the British, who thus lost the chance to finish the war in Africa for another six months. The losses at El Alamein itself were severe on both sides. Rommel lost 25,000 dead and wounded and 30,000 captured, 1,000 guns, 320 tanks, and nine generals. Montgomery lost 4,610 dead and missing and 8,950 wounded, 150 tanks destroyed and some 400 more damaged, and 110 guns. The bulk of Rommel’s casualties – 17,000 of the dead and captured – were Italian. He managed to preserve about 30 serviceable tanks and roughly the same number damaged but running.

‘May the anniversary of Blenheim which marks the opening of this new command bring to the Commander in Chief of the Eighth Army and his troops the fame and fortune they will surely deserve.’

(Winston Churchill, 20 August 1942, in Montgomery’s autograph book.)
Pursuit to Tunisia

On the morning of 11 November 7th Armoured Division, led as always by the armoured cars of 11th Hussars, crossed the frontier into Cyrenaica after covering 160 miles in three days. On the 13th, 22nd Armoured Brigade entered an empty and extensively destroyed Tobruk; and a week later 7th Armoured Division occupied Benghazi. They cut across the desert to the Gulf of Sirte near Agedabia, but it became apparent that Rommel was preparing to stand yet again at El Agheila, where twice before he had put paid to British hopes of clearing the Axis from Africa. He still had forces under command which demanded attention, since he had throughout the retreat favoured his best German units at the expense of the totally demoralised Italians.

The Anglo-American landings in French North Africa on 8 November convinced Rommel that the end was only a matter of time, but he was determined to hold up the Allies long enough to extricate his faithful army. By 23 November he was back at El Agheila, and although Montgomery wished to turn him out of his position as quickly as possible the British supply position was becoming difficult. The 6,000-ton daily requirement of the army and the Desert Air Force – whose squadrons played a great part in harrying the enemy during this period – all had to come up by road from Tobruk, 300 miles to the east, until the demolished port of Benghazi could be put back into operation. The administrative task was enormous, and Montgomery would not risk an immediate battle. The strong natural position at El Agheila was anchored to the coast near Mersa el Brega and the Wadi Fareg on the edge of the soft sand country. It would require a very wide southern hook to outflank it. Rommel was known to be spreading vast minefields, and was reported to have some 100 serviceable tanks and new supplies of 88 mm and 50 mm anti-tank guns.
Montgomery’s attack was planned for 14 December, after two days’ bombardment. When this artillery and air bombardment opened, Rommel appeared to lose his nerve for the first time; seemingly mistaking the bombardment for the start of the main attack, he pulled back early on the 13th, leaving elements of 90th Light as rearguard. The 51st Highland Division smashed through the lines, the tanks of 7th Armoured were passed through, the New Zealanders made good progress in a hook through the desert to the south, and the Desert Air Force did great execution – yet again, Rommel managed to extract the bulk of his forces and continue his retreat for some 200 miles to Buerat. The supply position dominated British tactics, and only light armoured car forces were able to maintain close pursuit.

Since 23 October, 8th Army had advanced some 1,200 miles; only 4,000 tons were reaching them daily, 3,000 from Benghazi and 1,000 from distant Tobruk. No further major advance was possible without the assembly of large dumps of every type, and the moving up of reinforcement camps, reserve tank parks, engineer stores parks and workshops. Rommel was now receiving considerable reinforcements through Tripoli, and it seemed certain he would stand at Beurat. The 75-mile no-man’s-land was held only by light armour, while the British supply and support position was improved. It was the first week in January 1943 before Montgomery felt able to close up to the Buerat line, and he planned to attack on the 15th; the attack would pass straight through Buerat and head without pause for Tripoli. At the critical moment storms wrecked facilities in Benghazi, and the strangled supply lines limited the scope of the attack; 51st Highland would attack on the coast while 7th Armoured and 2nd New Zealand Divisions carried out the predictable southern hook. Both columns made good progress, the enemy being forced to retreat again on the evening of the 15th, but once again the Axis managed to hold up the pursuit, by minefields and skilful demolitions, for long enough to make good their escape. Tripoli was captured on 23 January, while 7th Armoured pressed on in the wake of the enemy retreat.

After fighting a running rearguard action over 1,400 miles in a period of 91 days; Afrika Korps crossed into Tunisia; the next defensive line could only be the old French fortifications at Mareth, strengthened by Axis engineers. By mid-February Montgomery had taken Ben Gardane and Medenine, and had been joined by General Leclerc’s Free French Flying Column, which had made a fantastic march from Chad up through the Sahara to join the Allies. Re-equipped, it was directed north-westwards to Ksar Rhilane while 8th Army prepared for the attack on the Mareth Line.

On 15 February Rommel bought time by gathering his armour for an attack on the inexperienced American forces in the area of Gafsa and Kasserine. He made such good progress that he soon menaced the whole Allied position in western Tunisia, and General Alexander ordered Montgomery to divert Rommel’s attention back to the east to take the pressure off the crumbling Americans. Montgomery’s demonstrations before
Mareth, and the inept line of advance (on Thala and Sbiba, rather than on Tebessa) forced on Rommel by superior authority, led to the abandonment of the offensive, and Rommel rushed back to Mareth on 22 February.

The Mareth Line, 80 miles inside Tunisia, was a series of blockhouses between the sea and the Matmata Hills. The southern part was tank-proof, and in the centre the steep banks of a wadi presented something of an obstacle. The northern sector, a salt marsh, offered reasonably 'good going' for wheeled vehicles. On the eastern side of the line was a low range of hills; the advantage of artillery observation naturally lay with whoever held them, and Rommel denied them to Montgomery for as long as possible. Montgomery's plan was based on a frontal assault combined with a 'left hook' through the almost impassable Matmata Hills, which he hoped would force the Germans to break off the action for fear of encirclement.

At 2230 hours on 20 March 1943, 50th Infantry Division attacked through 51st Highland at the coastal end of the front; 2nd New Zealand Division, 8th Armoured Brigade, the Leclerc Flying Column, an armoured car regiment and supporting artillery made up the 'left hook' force, designated New Zealand Corps, which set off simultaneously. At first 50th Division seemed to make good progress, but swift reaction by 15th Panzer Division began to push them back with severe losses. Montgomery responded by threatening the German centre with 51st Highland and 7th Armoured Divisions; by inserting 4th Indian Division into the gap at the left of the line; and by sending Horrocks with 1st Armoured Division to join the hooking

16. Tank crewmen pulling through the 75 mm sponson-mounted main armament of a Grant tank. The position of the gun denied commanders the optimum 'hull down' deployment, and its mounting afforded very limited traverse. Drivers also feared HE artillery hits on the front armour, which could send showers of rivets into the crew positions with the effect of grape-shot.
force. On the 26th this force of 27,000 men and 200 tanks reached the Tebaga Pass, almost encircling the Axis army, and by the following night the defenders of Mareth were streaming back towards Gabes and Wadi Akarit. An improvised defence line at El Hamma, and extensive minefields and demolitions at Mareth, once again prevented the closing of the trap, holding up Horrocks and Montgomery for long enough to allow the Axis forces to reach Wadi Akarit. Rommel had left the desert early in March, leaving von Arnim and the Italian General Messe in command; and it was Messe who faced the heavy frontal attack of XXX Corps at dusk on 6 April. Time was pressing, as the Allies’ programme for the invasion of Sicily was already set.

At Wadi Akarit the Axis line was short, and guarded on each flank by the sea and the Chott el Fedjad salt marshes. The 50th, 51st Highland and 4th Indian Divs. were launched at the defences, while 1st and 7th Armoured and the 2nd New Zealand Divs. closed up behind to await a chance to break through into the southern Tunisian plain. The Axis left held, but the centre broke and the defenders pulled back to Enfidaville and the mountains, pursued by X and XXX Corps of 8th Army and, on their flank, by IX Corps of 1st British Army which had attacked from Fondouk and Kairouan on the Anglo-American Front. The Axis forces were now surrounded by 8th Army in the south and the Anglo-American armies on the west and north-west, with their backs to the sea. Their final destruction was only a matter of time.

The ground favoured 1st Army as the instrument of the final attack, and Alexander had Montgomery send 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divs., together with 201 Guards Brigade, to join IX Corps. On 6 May Alexander launched the final push, with 4th British and 4th Indian Divs. attacking in the Medjez el Bab sector and 6th and 7th Armoured Divs. racing through the resultant gap on to the plain, supported by a massive air effort. Tunis was reached late that day and fell on the 7th; a spirited argument still rages between veterans of the Derbyshire Yeomanry of 6th and the 11th Hussars of 7th Armoured Divisions as to who arrived first. By this time the U.S. II Corps had broken through to the north and taken Bizerta; the Cape Bon Peninsula was cut and encircled, and
by 13th May all Axis resistance had ceased.

Axis losses in North Africa since June 1940, when Mussolini made his first attempt on Egypt, were approximately 975,000 men, 7,600 aircraft, 6,200 guns, 2,550 tanks, 70,000 other vehicles, and some 600 ships of all sizes. Allied losses for the entire campaign are not available as they are confused with those sustained in Greece and Crete; but the fierceness of the fighting to the very end is indicated by the figures of casualties for Tunisia alone: 35,940 British, 18,221 American and 16,180 French.

'Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian Campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are the masters of the North African shores.'

(General Alexander's dispatch to Churchill.)

ORDER OF BATTLE

British 8th Army, 2200 hrs, 23 October 1942

HQ
1 Army Tank Brigade (42 & 44 RTR)
1 Armoured Brigade (parts 4 Hussars, 8 Hussars, 2 Royal Gloucestershire Hussars)
12 Anti-Aircraft Brigade (14, 16 & 27 LAA Rgts., 88 & 94 HAA Rgts., two Tps. 27 Searchlight Rgt.)
2 Anti-Aircraft Brigade (2 LAA Rgt., 199 & 261 Btys. 69 HAA Rgt.)
Royal Armoured Corps (B Sqn. 6 RTR, Tank Delivery Rgt., one tp. SA Armd. Car Rgt.)
Royal Engineers (566 & 588 African Troops Coys., 1 Camouflage Coy.)
Royal Signals
Royal Medical Corps (4 Light Fld. Ambulance, 200 Fld. Ambulance)
Miscellaneous: 3 Libyan Arab Force, 1 Sqn. Special Air Service Rgt.

X Corps
1 Armd. Div.
2 Armd. Brigade (Queen's Bays, 9 Lancers, 10 Hussars, Yorkshire Dragoons)
7 Motorised Brigade (2 & 7 Rifle Brigade, 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps)
Attached: 4/6 SA Armd. Car Rgt.; 146 Fld., 73 Anti-Tank, 56 Lt. Anti-Aircraft Rgts. RA

8 Armd. Div.
Incomplete and dispersed among other formations
10 Armd. Div.
8 Armd. Brigade (3 RTR, Notts. Yeomanry, Staffs. Yeomanry, 1 Buffs)
24 Armd. Brigade (41, 45 & 47 RTR, 11 King's Royal Rifle Corps)
133 Lorried Inf. Brigade (2, 4 & 5 Royal Sussex Rgt., W Coy. Royal Northumberland Fsrs.)
Attached: Minefield Task Force
Corps Troops: HQ; 570 Corps Fld. Pk. Coy. RE; Royal Signals; 12 & 151 Lt. Fld. Ambulance RMC.
XIII Corps

7 Armd. Div.

4 Lt. Armd. Brigade (4/8 Hussars, Royal Scots Greys, 1 King’s Royal Rifle Corps)
22 Armd. Brigade (1 & 5 RTR, 4 City of London Yeomanry, 1 Rifle Brigade)

50 Inf. Div.

60 Inf. Brigade (5 East Yorkshire Rgt., 6 & 7 Green Howards)
151 Inf. Brigade (6, 8 & 9 Durham L.t. Infantry)
1 Greek Inf. Brigade Group (1, 2 & 3 Greek Bns., 1 Greek Fld. Rgt. RA, 1 Greek Fld. Engineer Coy., 1 Greek MG Coy., 1 Greek Fld. Ambulance)

44 Inf. Div.

131 Inf. Brigade (1/5, 1/6 & 1/7 Queen’s Rgt.)

20. The Duke of Gloucester visits the HQ of XIII Corps, May 1942. Note the miscellany of uniforms, including ‘Bombay Bloomers’ and suede boots.

132 Inf. Brigade (2 Buffs, 4 & 5 Royal Warwickshire Rgt.)
133 Inf. Brigade (see 133 Lorried Inf. Bgde., 10 Armd. Div.)

2 New Zealand Div.
5 NZ Inf. Brigade (21, 22 & 23 Bns., 28 Maori Bn.)
6 NZ Inf. Brigade (24, 25 & 26 Bns.)
9 Armd. Brigade (3 Hussars, Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, Warwickshire Yeomanry, 14 Sherwood Foresters)

1 South African Div.
1 SA Inf. Brigade (1 Royal Natal Carabiniers, 1 Duke of Edinburgh’s Own Rifles, 1 Transvaal Scottish)
2 SA Inf. Brigade (1/2 Field Force Bn., 1 Natal Mounted Rifles, Cape Town Highlanders)
3 SA Inf. Brigade (1 Imperial Lt. Horse, 1 Royal Durban Lt. Inf., 1 Rand Lt. Inf.)

In Corps reserve: 23 Armd. Brigade (8, 40, 46 & 50 RTR); 121 Fld. Rgt. RA; 168 Bty., 56 Lt. Anti-Aircraft Rgt. RA; 295 African Fld. Coy. RE; 7 Lt. Fld. Ambulance RMC.

War in the Desert
A few words on the special conditions of desert warfare are perhaps in order, since they had such a decisive influence on operations. The movements of men and vehicles in this theatre of operations, and their violent confrontations, bore a closer resemblance to the movements of naval fleets at sea than to operations in other theatres such as North-West Europe. In a terrain so nearly featureless, and so dominated by the raw power of nature, many lessons had to be un-learned.
The two million or so square miles of the Western Desert represent one of the most arid areas on the face of the planet, and one of the most inimical to human life. The regions over which the Second World War campaigns were fought were largely composed of dusty plains and stony outcrops; the great sand sea of the Sahara was seldom penetrated. Along the coastal strip the terrain is largely of limestone thinly overlayed with sand and scattered with countless limestone fragments; here it is almost impossible to dig deeper than a few inches, and field defences were usually in the form of stone walls – sangars. The sand becomes deeper and softer as one travels inland, and the white glare of limestone is replaced by a pinkish tawny colour. Low ridges and plateaux of bare rock rise out of the sand, and are balanced here and there by depressions in the desert’s surface. These features, which would be negligible in conventional warfare, assumed enormous importance in the campaigns of 1940–43; a rise of even three feet above the apparently flat surface of the plain offered its occupier a great tactical advantage. These slight folds in the desert combined with the strange tricks of the light, most noticeable in the heat of the afternoon, to produce visual effects which could be used by the experienced desert soldier to evade or surprise his enemy in a landscape of apparently limitless visibility.

Europeans reacted in different ways to the unearthly quality of the desert landscape. The absence of apparent landmarks, the harsh terrain bare of any vegetation apart from stunted clumps of camel-thorn, the silence and loneliness, and the knowledge that a tiny error in map-reading or compass-bearing could mean a miserable death from thirst, combined to confuse and terrify the newcomer. Surprisingly, many soldiers on both sides came to feel a deep fascination, even an affection for this harsh amphitheatre of war once they became accustomed to it. There was a sense of cleanliness and freedom about it, and its emptiness threw them together with their fellows in a closer
comradeship – again, not unlike the bonds which unite the crew of a ship at sea.

The desert day begins at about 7.30 a.m. when the sun rises very quickly. By mid-morning the heat becomes fierce, stifling and oppressive; temperatures of around 100° in the shade are normal. In the afternoon the heat-haze makes visibility tricky; the horizon solidifies again in late afternoon, an hour or so before the early sunset. It is at this time that the blinding sandstorms are liable to spring up. As the sun sets the evening cools very rapidly. A breeze springs up, and the maddening plague of flies disappears for another day; the sky becomes a dazzling display of huge, bright stars, and all movement ceases. Unless the moon is exceptionally bright it is dangerous to move about by night; the difficulty of navigation is greatly increased, and it is easy to become lost on a journey of a hundred yards. The nights are often bitterly cold, since the ground has no moisture to retain heat.

The lack of water dominates everything. There is life in the desert, but it is furtive and small-scale; scorpions and beetles, lizards, the ever-present swarms of flies which drift silently into every orifice of the body and clothing – but apart from the occasional jackal and the chameleons and jerboas which the troops tried to tame as pets, there are no animals as Europeans understand the term. There is no vegetation apart from the camel-thorn and a few miserable patches of cereal crops in inhabited coastal areas. Rain falls occasionally in the winter along the coast, but inland it is seen only twice a year or so; in the true desert it is unknown. When it does fall it often produces raging floods and huge areas of short-lived swamp; and the sudden appearance of fields of beautiful wild-flowers, which disappear as suddenly, will be remembered with wonder by old desert hands. There are no permanent inhabitants of this huge country outside the scattered coastal settlements; apart from the occasional nomad band of bedouin the soldiers had the desert to themselves. The fact that their battles killed no civilians, and ruined no homes, was a contribution to the morale of both sides.

Water came up to the units in tanker trucks equipped with sterilising gear; it was heavily chlorinated, and the usual ration was one gallon per man per day, for all purposes – drinking, washing and cooking. Eking out the ration by cunning improvisation was an art soon learned by the provident campaigner; twice-used washing water was skimmed and saved for washing clothes, and eventually finished up in the radiator of the vehicle. The beer ration, small enough at the best of times and irregular in arrival, assumed a mystic significance in the eyes of the soldier! Food was plentiful but unexciting: hard tack and bully beef; tinned meat, bacon, vegetables, butter and milk – these were the staples, washed down with gallons of the inevitable tea brewed in 'Benghazi cookers'. Rice and oatmeal appeared occasionally, and

![The Thompson gun, wielded here by a Rhodesian infantryman. These 1938-pattern guns with drum magazines were supplied under Lend Lease until Britain developed her own sub-machine gun, the Sten.](image-url)
1 General Sir Harold Alexander, C-in-C Middle East, 1942
2 Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, G.O.C. 8th Army, 1942
3 Staff Captain (Royal Fusiliers), 1942
1 Lance-corporal, British infantry of the line, 1940-43
2 Troop Sergeant Major, Royal Scots Greys, 1942
3 Private, Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry, 1941-42
1 Gunner, Royal Australian Artillery, 9th Australian Division, 1942
2 Captain, South African Air Force, 1941-42
3 Lance-corporal of infantry, 1st South African Division, 1941-42
1 Trooper, Royal Armoured Corps, 1940-41
2 Sergeant, 7th Royal Tank Regiment, 1941-42
3 Lance-corporal, Corps of Military Police, 1942-43
1 Lieutenant, Coldstream Guards, 1940-41
2 Guardsman, Coldstream Guards, 1940-41
3 Caporal, 13e Demi-Brigade Légion Étrangère, 1st Free French Brigade, 1942
1 Lieutenant, Infanterie de Marine, 1st Free French Brigade, 1942
2 Stretcher-bearer, 4/16th Punjab Regiment, 1942
3 Naik, 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles, 1942
1 Private, Gordon Highlanders, 1942-43
2 Piper, Cameron Highlanders, 1942-43
3 Private, Seaforth Highlanders, 1942-43
1 Lieutenant, Special Air Service Regiment, 1941
2 War Correspondent
3 Officer, 7th Hussars, 1940-41
sometimes onions. Again, the veteran acquired an uncanny skill at producing savoury messes by pounding, shredding, mixing, flavouring and disguising these poor ingredients. When a unit was in a fixed position cook-houses could be established, but usually the soldiers formed small groups and brewed up together in squad billy-cans.

The desert soldier lived a hard but generally healthy life. He lived and slept in the open in an invigorating climate, ate dull but healthy food, got plenty of sun and exercise, and was forced by necessity to adopt far more rigid standards of hygiene than he may have known in 'civvy street'. Bowel disorders were not uncommon, from mild upsets to serious cases of dysentery; there was some malaria, and heat prostration awaited the man foolish enough to take risks with the sun; but apart from the ever-present desert sores, which were more unsightly than alarming, the 'desert rat' was far better off than his contemporary in a wet or cold climate. Discipline in fighting units, as opposed to the soulless holding establishments of the Delta, was usually dictated by common sense and mutual dependence rather than by pointless 'bull', and the special conditions of desert warfare often created a high and cheerful morale. There were many men, of course, for whom the stripped-down, monotonous, necessarily communal life of soldiering was a constant irritation; but in the desert they seem to have been in a minority.

The relative happiness, or intolerable misery of desert life depended almost entirely on logistics – as did every military calculation. Every single necessity of life and warfare had to be imported and carried up to the fighting line in trucks. The chronological account of the campaigns in the first half of this book stresses the decisive influence of these supply lines, which could stretch for 1,000 miles along the single coast road and the networks of tracks marked by hundreds of thousands of stone cairns and old oil-drums. The requirements of a fighting army are formidable; a few examples will suffice. A fighter aircraft consumed on average 250
gallons, or one ton weight of petrol per day – and the Desert Air Force at the height of the campaign had some 500 fighters. Tanks travelled only about five miles per gallon; the daily requirement for 1,000 tanks moving 30 miles was thus around 750 tons. An infantry brigade’s 400-odd vehicles needed 100 tons for an advance of 50 miles. The artillery of a division mustered three regiments of 24 guns each. With roughly 65 rounds to the ton – and 65 rounds could be fired off by one gun in twenty minutes during a hot action – a regiment needed 144 tons of ammunition on a day which involved two hours firing. Rations for 1,000 men amounted to three tons a day, and water another four tons. An army of 230,000 men with 1,000 tanks, 10,000 vehicles, 1,000 guns and 500 aircraft thus required at least 10,500 tons daily. Although static and peaceful periods reduced this figure, it is still obvious why huge dumps had to be built up before any attack. The thousands of patient, red-eyed RASC drivers who spent their war driving endlessly across the glaring surface of the desert were the unsung heroes of the campaign.

Main Weapons

Infantry

Enfield Revolver The standard issue to officers and vehicle crews was the .38 Enfield ‘six-shooter’; like all other revolvers and most automatic pistols, its usefulness on a modern battlefield was sadly limited, although it was a perfectly workmanlike weapon at hand-to-hand ranges. The quoted maximum ranges of Enfields, Remingtons and Webleys, in the 800–1,000 yard area, should not distract one from the fact that only trained experts can regularly place shots in a man-sized target at more than 25 yards.
SMLE Rifle No. 1 Mk. 3 The simple, rugged, reliable bolt-action weapon of both World Wars; .303 cal., 10-round magazine, 16 in sword bayonet. Towards the end of the campaign the SMLE Rifle No. 4 Mk. 1, basically similar but identifiable by the short section of barrel protruding beyond the foresight, was coming into use. Accurate to 600 yards, up to 300rpm.

Thompson M1928 Machine Carbine The famous ‘Tommy gun’ was used in great numbers as a junior leaders’ weapon before the introduction of the Sten; .45 calibre, 50-round drum magazine or 20-round box. Heavy and erratic, but a man-stopper at short range; the drum was vulnerable to dirt and knocks and slow to load. Effective up to 300 yards maximum.

Bren Light Machine Gun Simple, reliable, extremely accurate, the Bren was the regulation squad light automatic weapon, issued one per ten men in the infantry company; .303 cal., 30-round box magazine, 450–550rpm, accurate to 800 yards.

Vickers Machine Gun Direct descendant of the Maxim; heavy, complex, old-fashioned, but totally reliable and able to fire all day long; .303 cal., belts of 250 rounds, 500rpm, accurate to 2,000 yards. Standard battalion support weapon throughout the war.

Mortars The 2 in mortar was the platoon support weapon – small, handy, crude, aimed by ‘eye’, it could drop two-pound bombs with reasonable accuracy at ranges between 100 and 500 yards. The 3 in mortar was the battalion support weapon, firing ten-pound bombs accurately to ranges between 125 and 1,600 yards. Both weapons could fire six to eight rounds per minute depending upon the skill of the crew.

Boys Mk. 1 Anti-Tank Rifle A .55 in weapon firing single rounds from a five-round box magazine, issued one per platoon in 1939 and still in service in the desert, though largely ignored. Its penetration of 14 mm of armour, sloped up to 20° at 300–500 yards range, was quite inadequate.

26. Australians clearing and marking minefield lanes.
27. Anti-aircraft defence for 1st Free French Brigade was provided by the 40 mm Bofors guns of the Fusiliers-Marins—French sailors who had escaped to join de Gaulle.

Grenade No. 36M  Weighing just over 27 oz, this reliable descendant of the First World War Mills Bomb was a fragmentation 'pineapple' with seven- or four-second time delay fuse, which could either be thrown manually, or fired to ranges of up to 200 yards from a discharger cup fitted to the muzzle of the SMLE. Effectiveness varied widely depending on the ground.

Infantry and Artillery

2-pounder Anti-Tank Gun  Towed or mounted on and firing from a portée truck, this battalion support weapon quickly proved inadequate. It could penetrate 40 mm of armour sloped at 30° at 1,000 yards; cf. the German PAK 40, which could penetrate 154 mm at 500 yards.

6-pounder Anti-Tank Gun  Improved design largely used by Royal Artillery, with penetration of 80 mm at 550 yards.

Artillery

25-pounder Gun-Howitzer  The standard field gun throughout the war, which fired from a built-in circular platform allowing rapid traverse and a high rate of fire. Of 88 mm calibre, this weapon fired high explosive, armour-piercing and smoke shell up to 13,400 yards.

5.5 in Howitzer  The weapon of the Medium Regiments, which fired a 100-lb shell up to 10½ miles. Its high explosive round could destroy a tank with a direct hit and disable it with a near miss. Much used in the desert to break up enemy tank concentrations while they formed up for an attack.

40 mm Bofors  The standard anti-aircraft weapon, also used with great effect against infantry and soft-skin transport when conditions allowed. It fired high-explosive shells, which were loaded in clips of five rounds, with a very high rate of fire.

Armour

In 1940–41 the armoured units were equipped with the wholly obsolete Light Tank Mk. III and Cruisers
The best tank available for the campaign against the Italians was the Infantry (‘I’) tank, Matilda II, weighing 26.5 tons and armed with a 2-pdr and a machine gun; it had armour up to 78 mm thick, and was proof against anything except heavy field guns and mines, but was very slow. It was outclassed by the German Mk. III which arrived in 1941. The next ‘Infantry’ tank was the Valentine, a 17-ton tank which was used by the Army Tank Brigades but also, due to the shortage of Cruisers, by armoured regiments within armoured divisions. It was essentially an improved A10, and had a 2-pdr, a machine gun, and 65 mm of armour. Built in very large numbers, it was capable of 15 mph on good surfaces; but its gun, which fired only solid shot and was thus of limited value in action against anti-tank guns, was wholly outclassed by the German tank weapons.

The Crusader Mk. II was a cruiser with a weight of 19 tons and a top speed of 27 mph. It arrived in the desert in 1941 and fought in the June battles, remaining the standard equipment of the armoured brigades until the arrival of the Grant and Sherman. It was still equipped with the ill-starred 2-pdr; the Mk. III, with a 6-pdr, appeared in the summer of 1942, and was a better tank-fighting proposition, but the lack of an HE round was still a severe handicap.

The first American tank to arrive was the light M3 Stuart, christened ‘Honey’ by the British for its pleasant characteristics – but it was still virtually useless for tank battles, with its 1 1/2 in armour and 37 mm gun. It went into service in mid-1941. The first real muscle arrived in the form of the M3 Grant, a medium tank developed from the American M3 Lee (of which some also served with 8th Army). With a 75 mm and a 37 mm gun and armour up to 2 1/2 in thick, this 26 1/2-ton vehicle gave the armoured regiments a fighting chance against the PzKpfw III and IV at last, and fired HE as well as AP shot. Its disadvantage was the mounting of the main gun in a side sponson, so that it had limited traverse and could not adopt a true hull-down position – a lethal liability. Grants were mixed with Crusaders in the armoured regiments from early 1942. The greatest example of American generosity was the gift of some 300 M4 Shermans in autumn 1942; about 270 were ready for action at Alamein. With its turret-mounted 75 mm gun, 75 mm armour, roomy fighting compartment, and useful speed, this 29 1/2-ton vehicle was a match for the panzers at last, and became the Allies’ war-winning tank.

28. Captured German officer, guarded by ‘Tommy’.
woollen socks and the popular suede ‘chukka boots’, which were widely acquired by British officers. The only insignia are the rank badges of full general (crown above pip above crossed sabre and baton) worn on slip-on tabs fitting over the shoulder straps. The Sam Browne belt is worn, with another personal affectation – the regulation leather revolver holster fixed, reversed, to the sword scabbard attachments on the left hip.

A2 Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, GOC 8th Army, 1942

The victory of Alamein was famous for the variety, not to say eccentricity, of his dress. This was partly a conscious attempt to associate himself with many of the units under his command, for morale purposes. He was presented with many examples of unit headgear during his visits to the troops, but the one he retained throughout his wartime service was the black beret of the Royal Tank Regiment, with the regimental badge and his general’s cap badge worn side by side. The rest of his outfit, illustrated from many photographs, is nondescript to the point of being civilian: a soldier’s issue khaki wool pullover, a khaki shirt and baggy corduroy slacks, washed almost white.

A3 Staff Captain (Royal Fusiliers), 1942

The officer’s service dress cap in khaki cloth is worn with the regimental cap badge of the Royal Fusiliers, brown leather chin strap and gilt buttons. The stiffening was often removed by desert officers, giving the cap a crushed and ‘operational’ look. The standard khaki drill shirt and shorts are worn, the latter of generous cut. Long woollen socks and a variety of footwear completed the normal uniform. Cloth ranking is worn on the shoulder-straps of the shirt, the fawn and brown thread pips appearing on a backing of branch-of-service colour, here the red of infantry. The 1937 webbing officer’s set is illustrated in a popular abbreviated form – belt, webbing revolver holster for the .455 Webley Mk. VI, and pistol ammunition pouch. Lanyards were often worn. This staff officer holds the webbing map case with flap folded back to reveal the perspex sheet covering the folded map, on which chinagraph pencil markings were made.
B1 Lance-corporal, British infantry of the line, 1940–43
The archetypal 'Desert Rat' of 8th Army. This soldier wears regulation issue khaki drill shirt and shorts, the latter of baggy cut and known as 'Bombay Bloomers', as they were often from batches manufactured in India. The shirt bears no insignia; divisional shoulder patches were occasionally seen sewn to the sleeve or on tabs slipped over the shoulder straps, but were unusual in the front line. The single chevron of a 'lance-jack', in white herringbone thread on a snuff-brown back-

30. Montgomery poses with 'his' Grant tank, in typically casual dress and RTR beret.

ing, is worn on a brassard on the right arm only. Long khaki woollen socks are worn with regulation issue black hob-nailed 'ammunition boots', with short puttees taped in place at the ankles. The 1937 webbing includes belt, shoulder braces, two large pouches (suitable for rifle ammunition, Bren gun magazines, grenades, grenade discharger cups, or a variety of non-regulation items such as boiled sweets and cigarettes!), a water canteen covered in
felt and slung in a webbing cradle, and a frog for the long bayonet of the Short Magazine Lee Enfield Rifle No. 1 Mk. III. The bayonet was often retained, for its general usefulness, by the crews of automatic weapons. This soldier holds the famous .303 Bren light machine gun, the superbly accurate and reliable squad light automatic which served the British Army for thirty years. Steel helmets were painted sand yellow and sometimes covered with a string camouflage net.

B2 Troop Sergeant Major, Royal Scots Greys, 1942
The Greys served in 4th Light Armoured Brigade, 7th Armoured Division. This senior non-commissioned officer, whose ranking would be worn on the forearm of battledress, wears his rank badge and regimental cap badge on a leather wrist-strap when in shirtsleeves. He wears 1937 web belt and shoulder braces, with the ammunition pouch and open holster characteristic of vehicle crews—it has exterior loops for six spare rounds, and a pocket for a cleaning rod. Apart from the Webley he also carries the Thompson .45 sub-machine gun widely issued to British forces before the appearance of the Sten gun; at this stage of the war the early variant with ribbed barrel, forward pistol grip and drum magazine was used, normally by junior leaders.

B3 Private, Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry, 1941
Just off the boat in the Delta, this soldier wears regulation uniform with the khaki forage cap worn by most infantry; the cap badge, if worn, was well forward on the left side. His 1937 web equipment is worn as in Marching Order, with pack and haversack; the steel helmet is carried under crossed straps on the back of the pack. Webbing anklets were often worn in place of the short puttees. The .303 SMLE No. 1 Mk. III has a dust-cover taped over the lock; and the canvas kit-bag bears stencilled name, rank number, and unit. The appearance of this new arrival, in contrast to the other two figures, explains the veteran’s constant jibe at the tyro: ‘Get yer knees brown!’

C1 Gunner, Royal Australian Artillery, 9th Australian Div., 1942
The Aussies more than made up in value as fighting troops for the headaches they caused MPs (and officers weak in natural authority) when out of the
line. This gunner wears the famous slouch hat, turned up on the left for formal wear but more often worn with the brim turned down all round when in the field; when turned up, the brim was fastened either with the regimental or with the Australian Military Forces badge in bronze. The service dress was still of First World War style, a long-skirted tunic with four bronze buttons and a stand-and-fall collar decorated with the national badge. Web equipment was originally of the 1908 pattern illustrated, but 1937 pattern was also observed. Khaki drill uniform was similar to the British, although the shorts were shorter in the leg, and the short socks were usually turned down over the anklets leaving the leg bare. Rank badges were of British pattern. Brigades and services within the divisions were identified — in service dress — by coloured cloth shoulder patches; these were usually of the same shape throughout a division, with different identifying colours. Ninth Australian Div. wore T-shaped patches outlined in grey; the artillery wore the T diagonally divided, red above blue. Regimental titles in bronze were worn at the end of the shoulder straps.

33. Troops of the Black Watch (note red hackle in tam-o'-shanters, and captured Beretta sub-machine gun held by nearest man) ride a Valentine tank of 50th RTR, 23rd Armoured Brigade, 1 April 1943.

C2 Captain, South African Air Force, 1941–2
The SAAF was a branch of the army, and wore khaki battledress and service dress with identifying badges; the bronze SAAF cap badge is worn here on the battered peaked cap. A rather casual attitude to rank was normal in Dominion forces. The ranking, of British pattern, is worn on slip-on tabs over the shoulder straps of the battledress blouse, and at the outer end orange cloth tabs were
worn by all SA personnel serving outside the Union. Pilot’s wings and the ribbon of the DFC appear above the left breast pocket. The combination of BD blouse and drill slacks is typical. The P-40 pilots of the SAAF fighter-bomber squadrons (Nos 2, 4 & 5) made a great contribution to the Desert Air Force’s operations.

**C3 Lance-Corporal, 1st South African Div., 1941–42**

When not in action, the South African troops generally wore the distinctive small-brimmed pith helmet illustrated. When out of the line it was usual to fix the metal regimental badge to the front above the pagri. The South Africans wore battledress and khaki drill clothing of British pattern, although, like the Australians, they generally favoured more abbreviated shorts. In cold weather the 8th Army made use of the thigh-length, four-button sleeveless leather jerkin illustrated, worn either over or under the battledress blouse. The 1937 webbing with 1942 entrenching tool is worn, the hessian-covered helmet slung from the bayonet for ease of carrying. The divisional sleeve patches were all halved yellow and green; the 1st Division wore the diamond illustrated, the 2nd a circle horizontally halved yellow over green.

**D1 Trooper, Royal Armoured Corps, 1941**

US Army tank crew protective helmets were issued to some extent in 1941, but were not popular and were almost invariably discarded in favour of the famous black beret, originally the distinction of the Royal Tank Regiment but later worn with regimental badges by other armoured units. A one-piece denim working overall is worn over KD shirt and slacks and ammunition boots. This trooper carries the essential equipment of all desert vehicle crews – the halved petrol tin used as a ‘Benghazi cooker’; sand and petrol were mixed and lighted in the bottom half, and water, tea, sugar and condensed milk boiled up together in the top half, set slantwise on top of the ‘firebox’. In the background is a Matilda II tank in the brown, sand and pale blue scheme used in 1940–41.

**D2 Sergeant, 7th Royal Tank Regiment, 1941–42**

The exploits of this famous battalion in the winter 1940–41 campaign, when it spearheaded O’Connor’s victorious offensive against hugely superior Italian forces, made it a byword in the desert. The black beret is worn with regimental badge in white metal. Battledress was frequently worn in cold weather; note the buttoning tabs at the ankles, visible in the absence of web anklets. Each battalion of the RTR wore a distinguishing tab of coloured cloth on the shoulder straps, and in some cases coloured lanyards were worn round the left shoulder; the 7th wore green and red tabs and a lanyard in the same colours. The $2 \times \frac{3}{4}$-inch coloured felt strip identifying arm of service, worn on both upper sleeves, was usually removed in the front lines, but photographic evidence shows that it sometimes survived even when formation signs had been removed. The halved red and yellow strip of the Royal Armoured Corps is seen here, and below it the cloth badge worn on the right arm by RTR personnel. Sergeant’s chevrons appear on both arms; above the left breast pocket is the ribbon of the Military Medal. The 1937 webbing set for vehicle crews is worn on an extended leg strap, with a webbing retaining strap round the thigh; lanyards were worn either to the neck or the shoulder.

**D3 Lance-Corporal, Corps of Military Police, 1943**

The khaki service dress cap with removable scarlet
cover on the crown was the distinguishing headgear of the Corps, whose bronze badge is seen on the band. The cypher CMP is worn in red on a khaki shoulder title, and below it the formation sign of 8th Army. The white oversleeves were worn when directing traffic, one of the MPs' main functions in the area of operations. A chrome whistle-chain may be seen between the breast pockets, and a red-on-midnight-blue MP brassard on the right arm below the rank chevrons. Though inevitably unpopular with the rest of the army, the MPs had an honourable record; their duties frequently brought them under enemy fire, and some of the most unpleasant chores - such as recovery of corpses - often fell to them.

_35. Royal Artillery crew serving 5.5 in gun; the sergeant wears 'Bombay Bloomers' - shorts which were worn buttoned up as here, or could be lowered to tuck into the socks._

_E1 Lieutenant, Coldstream Guards, 1941_ A Guards Brigade served in 8th Army almost throughout the campaign, and the high standards demanded of Household troops were fully maintained. It is significant that by the time that 201 Guards Brigade was transferred from 8th to 1st Army its fighting strength was down to one company per battalion, yet it still fought as a brigade, covered the same length of front and achieved the same objectives. This officer, maintaining the languid style expected of the Brigade, wears typically casual dress. An issue khaki pullover, with the shirt shoulder straps pulled through the slits on the shoulders, is worn over KD
36. 17 February 1943; led by their piper and by an officer in a Glengarry, Gordon Highlanders cross the frontier into Tunisia

shirt and slacks. The usual cloth ranking is worn. The helmet is covered in hessian to soften the outline and avoid any reflection. The officer's 1937 webbing set is worn, with pistol holster, ammunition pouch, compass pouch, and binocular case. The gasmask satchel is slung around the neck. An Old Etonian silk scarf is worn at the throat. Despite the apparent sloppiness of the uniform, certain affectations were rigidly maintained irrespective of the difficulties of battle and terrain; for instance, a Guards officer would rather die than be seen taking cigarettes from the packet - cigarette cases were de rigueur!

E2 Guardsman, Coldstream Guards, 1941

The khaki service dress cap was the normal headgear of the Guardsman when not wearing the steel helmet; the regimental cap star is worn on the band. The flimsy cellophane sand goggles are worn over this; despite their apparently 'utility' manufature they seem to have been popular even among those who had much more elaborate models available - such as General Rommel, for instance! The khaki pullover is worn over KD shirt and shorts, with long socks, puttees, and ammunition boots. Full 1937 Marching Order webbing is worn, with pack and haversack, and gasmask satchel slung round the neck. With the .303 SMLE No. 1 Mk. III a trained rifleman could achieve thirty aimed shots per minute, once the bolt action had eased with use to the point where it could be worked with one finger and thumb.

E3 Caporal, 13e Demi-Brigade Légion Étrangère, 1st Free French Brigade, 1942

Although his 'old soldier' appearance must have horrified British regulars, the Foreign Légionnaire acquitted himself superbly in several actions, including the epic of Bir Hacheim, where the two battalions of 13e DBLE represented half Koenig's
fighting strength. The unit passed into 8th Army by way of Narvik, East Africa and Syria. A mixture of battered and home-made French items, and standard British issue, is worn; French insignia and headgear were unobtainable until the occupation of French North Africa at the end of the campaign. The famous white-covered 1939 model képi was the proud mark of the légionnaire. The muslin cheich or sand-scarf was a traditional item, largely out of date by the outbreak of war but worn by some old soldiers. Standard British battledress and pullover are worn, with British web anklets and ammunition boots, but the leather belt, Y- straps and pouches are World War I French issue recovered from stores in Syria. The canteen – bidon – is the French model, covered with old coat-cloth; the weapon is the MAT .36 rifle. Home-made collar patches of khaki cloth bearing the Legion’s green seven-flame grenade badge are sewn to the battledress blouse, and a makeshift Free French patch featuring the Cross of Lorraine is sewn to the left upper arm. Green reversed chevrons appear above this, and on the right arm. This veteran wears medal ribbons of pre-war vintage, signifying service in Morocco, Syria, and other colonial campaigns.

F1 Lieutenant, Infanterie de Marine, 1st Free French Brigade, 1942
This grim and scarred officer is typical of the colonial Frenchmen who officered the colonial infantry and artillery battalions which were assembled by de Gaulle from the various corners of the empire to form his Free French Brigade. One battalion came from Polynesia, another from West Africa; the Senegalese, in particular, were respected fighters. Their officers wore a mixture of British and French uniform, though the sidecap of the Infanterie de Marine was commonly worn; note gold anchor branch-of-service badge, repeated within two red soutaches on pre-war collar patches sewn here to British BD. Rank stripes in gold on midnight blue are worn on the shoulders, and a makeshift Free French badge on the left sleeve. The belt and holster are French, as are the socks and boots. British KD shorts are worn, rolled shorter for comfort and style.

F2 Stretcher-bearer, 4/16th Punjab Regiment, 1942
Sikh troops wore the light KD paggri on most occasions, including combat in many cases. The standard British greatcoat is illustrated here, together with the old First World War web cartridge pouches still worn in various numbers and combinations on the 1908 or 1937 belts and braces by many British and Commonwealth troops. Note the ‘SB red cross’ brassard, and the absence of weapon or sidearm.

F3 Naik, 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles
Showing his kukri – fighting knife – in its issue frog to his Sikh friend, this typical Nepalese corporal of the elite Gurkha Rifles wears standard battledress with the black, Rifle-style chevrons of rank and the shoulder-patch of 4th Indian Div. Note that the characteristic Gurkha bush-hat, with paggri and black metal regimental badge, is in fact two hats sewn one inside the other to give greater protection from the sun, a long-standing Gurkha custom among the North-West Frontier garrisons.

G1 Private, Gordon Highlanders, 1942–43
The standard battledress is worn with the tam-o’-shanter or Balmoral cap of Highland infantry. It has a khaki tourie or tuft in the top centre, and the Gordons’ large white metal regimental cap badge is pinned to the band through a square of Gordon tartan cloth. The regimental shoulder title is worn, in white on red, with the 51st Highland Div. patch below it on both sides.

G2 Piper, Cameron Highlanders, 1942–43
Each company of Highland infantry had a company commander’s piper, who was almost invariably clad in a kilt of regimental tartan. This piper of the Camerons follows the custom, and has a square flash of the tartan painted on the side of his helmet; the pipe bag is in the same material, and the cords hanging from the ebony and ivory pipes are in a triple weave of dark blue, red and yellow. The rest of the uniform is conventional; 1937 webbing is reduced and a holstered revolver is the only weapon, due to the encumbrance of the pipes. The pipers led the Highlanders into battle on several occasions in the desert, notably at the Tobruk break-out.
37. In light-hearted mood, Scots soldiers try on captured German uniforms.

G3 Private, Seaforth Highlanders, 1942–43
The desert soldier at his ease! Scabbed and bandaged and dabbed with gentian violet as treatment for the ever-present desert sores, this Seaforth has the regimental badge (interestingly, the officers’ version with crowned ‘L’ cypher added) painted in silver on a green square on the left side of the helmet. Note the fibre-board identification tags – ‘dog-tags’ – worn on string around the neck by every British soldier. The round, red tag was fireproof, and the rectangular, dull green one was waterproof; one at least would therefore survive almost any fate which might befall the unfortunate owner.

H1 Lieutenant, Special Air Service, 1941
An officer of one of Lt. Col. David Stirling’s famous jeep patrols, painted from a well-known photograph. Uniform and weaponry were matters of individual taste, but the Arab-style keffiyah, made from an old shirt and held in place by a native agle of goat-hair was highly practical and popular. Note string ‘ties’ along the front edges, so that the face could be covered securely during sand-storms. The KD shirt bears the special SAS parachutist’s wings on the left breast and infantry-style shoulder pips on slip-on loops. Apart from the officer’s issue sidearm, the Fairbairn commando knife is worn in a leather sheath. Note native sandals, and gauntlets worn for driving.

H2 War Correspondent
Accredited war correspondents wore military-style clothing, sometimes of private purchase and sometimes from military stores. This one is taken from a photograph. Insignia is limited to the yellow-on-green ‘C’ on the sun-helmet, and the yellow-on-green shoulder tally ‘British War Correspondent’.
H3 Officer, 7th Hussars, 1940–41

A typical example of the junior officer of cavalry in the garb of the ‘old desert hand’. The regimental officers’ sidecap in scarlet with gold piping and regimental badge is worn in preference to the khaki service-dress cap. The battoned blouson is worn open at the neck with a civilian silk scarf; it bears ranking on the shoulders (invisible here) and the arm-patch of 7th Armoured Division, for whom 7th Hussars provided the armoured car regiment. Corduroy slacks and crêpe-soled suede ‘brothel creepers’ were popular and practical; and in the icy cold of first light the Hebron coat or poshteen was made from the roughly cured skins of the sheep and goats which formed the ‘Arabs’ main diet – was a welcome acquisition, although it seldom lasted more than a year before careless curing led to its distintegration.

Légendes

1 Carte des villes principales de la Côte d’Afrique du Nord: a Un soldat indien garde des prisonniers italiens en train de travailler près d’un mur. b Des brancardiers, sans armes, chargent un blessé dans un camion; observez la posture de la trousse avec laquelle ils se battrent lorsqu’on traverse le terrain de sable mou. c Gaza, décembre 1941; un Colonel de Nouvelle Zélande en patrouille avec son ordonnancier et ses opérateurs de radio. d Derna, décembre 1941: l’infanterie indienne se bâchait, dans un terrain tellement rocailleux qu’un bûcher ou un creux dans le sol étaient impossibles. e Des troupes africaines; l’un d’eux porte un gilet en cuir sans manches sous son blouson de batteur. Les Africains servaient principalement dans les unités de génie. f Des aspirants australiens, néo-zélandais et britanniques regardent une démonstration de combat non-aréalisé par des sergents du Army Physical Training Corps. g Observer les attributs avec des épées croisées sur les manches des instituteurs. h Un équipage indien de mortiers, janvier 1942, portant des pulvérisateurs en laine avec les épaulalettes de leurs chemises visibles. i Un civil indien donne ses papiers à un officier britannique; on notera l’attribut de rang sur la manche du sergent major, et son gilet de cuir, porté par-dessus sa blouse. j Generel Sir Claude Auchinleck (à gauche) regardant des manoeuvres, février 1942. L’officier au premier plan a une insigne néo-zélandaise sur son épaule, et l’homme à lunettes est un correspondant de guerre. k Major General Brink, Commandant de la Division Sud-Africaine, avec deux de ses généraux de brigade. l Équipage de l’avion personnel du commandant de la 5e Armée – un Blenheim. m Des chars fichtis, construits sur des camions pour tromper les patrouilles de l’air de l’ennemi, sont dirigés par un contrôleur de la circulation Military Police. n Légionnaires du 13e DBLE, février 1942. o Un photographe de la Brigade Polonaise, février 1942. Il porte un étui de revolver du modèle de l’équipage de chars. p Membres de l’équipage nettoyant le canon de 75mm d’un char Grant. q Zone du canal de Suez, février 1942; la garniture de l’équipage d’un régiment Rajput est passée à la revue. r Armuriers du REME réparent une mitrailleuse Lewis, une arme abandonnée utilisée uniquement pour la défense anti-aérienne. s La garde d’honneur d’un unité indien de transport mulletier, avec des épées anciennes de l’Artillerie Montagnarde. t Un mélange d’uniformes est visible dans cette photo prise pendant la visite du Duke de Gloucester au Quartier Général du XIII Corps, mai 1942.


Notes sur les planches en couleur

11 Alexander porte la casquette à bande rouge d’un général, avec l’attribut doré de son rang. Son uniforme est l’habituelle tuque légère de ‘khaki drill’, avec des attributs de rang sur les bretelles. Notez l’étui de revolver attaché aux pantalons de cuir du General Sir Sam Browne. 12 Montgomery portant toujours le plus détendu d’uniformes; ici on le voit avec son bâton RTR, un pulvérisateur en laine d’un simple soldat et des pantalons de velours côté. 13 Captain des Royal Fusiliers en service d’état-major portant la tenue tropicale réglementaire et équipement de guerre.

21 Un ‘Rat du Désert’ tout à fait typique en tenue réglementaire et équipé avec une mitrailleuse légère Bren – les chevrons de rang étaient portés normalement sur un brassard, plutôt que couus sur la chemise, qu’on devait laver fréquemment. 22 Des régiments de cuirassés tels que The Royal Scotts Greys portent l’équipement à sangles avec des étuis à revolvers. Ce sous-ensemble inclut des attributs de rang sur les bretelles. 23 Soldat d’infanterie typique en équipement Marching Order, modèle 1937, avec le calot porté par la plupart des troupes qu’ils étaient hors de combat.


Et L’officier Coldstream Guards porte un uniforme de combat typiquement désinvolte avec l’équipement de sangles réglementaire d’un officier, modèle 1937 – étui, cartouchière et petit sac à compas. Dans ces premiers temps le cartable à mousquet à gaz était toujours porté par la poitrine; les signes distinctifs de rang sont couus sur les bretelles de la chemise. 48 Ce Guardsman porte la casquette khaki à visière des Guards, avec un attribut du régiment. Les lunettes de sable en cellophane léger étaient utilisées par toutes sortes de troupes et aussi par le Général Rommel. 49 Les Légionnaires héroïques du 13e DBLE portèrent un mélange d’uniformes et équipements français en cuir d’un modèle ancien pris dans les dépots en Syrie, et le fusil MAS 36.

Gr 2. Dieses Soldat tritt sein Soldatenschild mit der insgesamt aus der äußeren und inneren Gliederung der Armee besteht. Sein Uniformstypus ist ein sogenannter 'Berm Field'. Das Schild trägt ein 'Berm' leichtes MG. Das Scheiterte an der Schlacht an der 'Berm', aber konnten die Schützen mit ihren MGs die Armee zurückdrängen.

Gr 3. Dieser Soldat trägt eine harmonische Uniform, die in kleineren Teilen der Armee verwendet wird. Sein Uniformstypus ist ein sogenannter 'Berm Field'. Das Schild trägt ein 'Berm' leichtes MG. Das Scheiterte an der Schlacht an der 'Berm', aber konnten die Schützen mit ihren MGs die Armee zurückdrängen.

Farbtäfeln

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