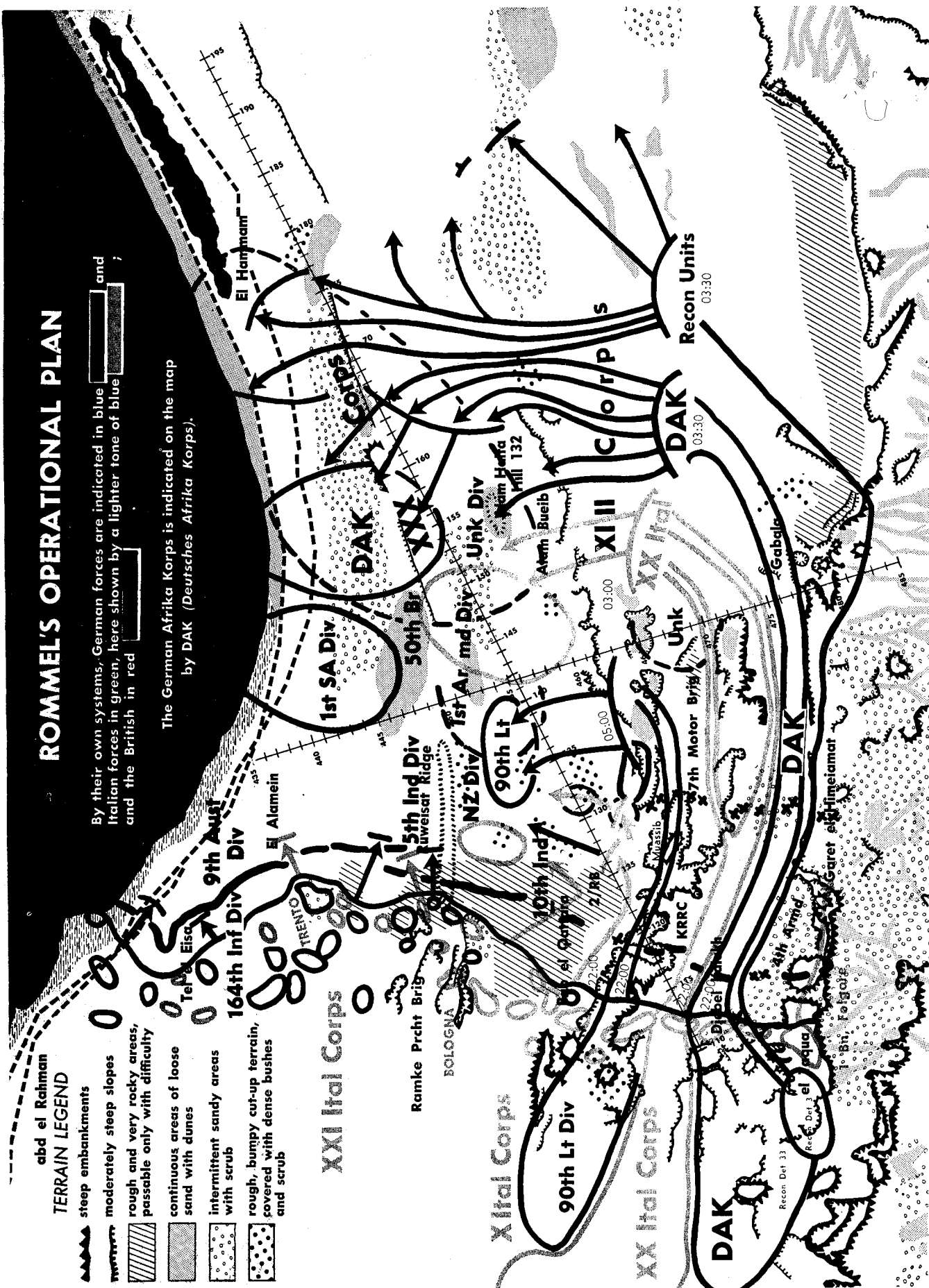


abd el Rahman
TERRAIN LEGEND

By their own systems, German forces are indicated in blue and [redacted] Italian forces in green, here shown by a lighter tone of blue [redacted] and the British in red [redacted].

The German Afrika Korps is indicated on the map by DAK (*Deutsches Afrika Korps*).



The Attack

At the end of August 1942, according to the results of our reconnaissance, the British stood approximately in the following positions:

In the northern sector under the command of the XXX Corps were the 5th Indian Div, the 50th British* and the 9th Australian Divs; behind them, on the coast, was the 1st South African Div in reserve. The southern sector was defended by the 2d New Zealand Div under the XIII Corps and adjacent to it on the left, the 7th Armd Div with its reconnaissance units. Behind the center and the southern sectors of the Alamein position stood the 1st British Armd Div,** and as it was later discovered, the 10th Armd Div also.

Rommel had the following intentions:

By observing all precautionary measures possible in order to avoid detection, the mechanized offensive group consisting of the German Afrika Korps (a part of the *Panzer-armee Afrika*), the XX Italian Corps and the 90th Light Div were to be moved into assembly areas at Djebel Kalakh. The tanks were to be moved by night-marches into positions on the line of departure in the course of 4 nights, one quarter each night, and there camouflaged in position. Following this, the wheeled vehicles were to be moved into the assembly areas the last night. But at the same time their disappearance was to be covered by the dispositions of the supply and service troops into their old area. Above all, our intentions must be kept secret.

Our reconnaissance had consistently reported during the last few weeks that in the southern portion of the Alamein front the enemy had planted minefields which could be easily overcome. These obstacles should be penetrated during the night of 30/31 August by pioneers and infantry, and the enemy ejected from the positions by tank units following immediately behind. The *Deutsches Afrika Korps*, with elements of the Italian Motorized Corps, should advance at top speed to the east during the same night to seize the territory southwest of El Hammam, 40 to 50 kilometers dis-



Bayerlein

Discussing the situation just prior to the battle: Rommel, Bayerlein, von Bismarck

tant from the line of departure.

While the X Italian Corps (which held the southern front) was to remain ready for the defense, the 90th Light Div and part of the XX Italian Corps were to cover the left flank of the offensive group in order to ward off anticipated British counterattacks.

At first light the *Deutsches Afrika Korps*, however, should even continue to press the advance northward to the coast and seek a decision in open battle. In this operation, relying on previous experience, Rommel, above all else, reckoned on the long time required for the British command and troops to react. He hoped, therefore, to be able to confront the British with the *fait accompli* of the entire operation by this stroke.

Following this, everything was to move rapidly. According to Rommel's concept, he couldn't afford to have the battle fall into a static phase. Continuing smaller limited attacks by the remaining German

and Italian infantry in the Alamein position were to tie down the British strength there while the decisive battle was planned to take place behind the British front. We wanted to equalize our inferiority in matériel strength by relying on the superior ability of our troops to wage a battle of movement and the highly developed tactical skill of our commanders. This had been our experience in the recent battles in the Western Desert, 1941-42. Separated from their supply points, the only thing that would remain for the British to do would be to fight to the last round of ammunition or breakout and escape to the east, which would mean giving up Egypt.

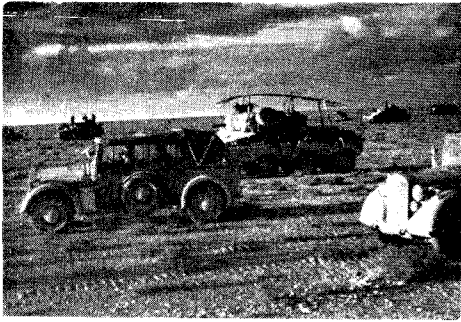
The success of this operation depended not only on the availability of supply support to our forces, but also on the surmise that our offensive preparations could be completed without being discovered by the enemy. In addition, we had to assume that the British positions could rapidly be overwhelmed and the ad-

Last light — the attack would jump off at night



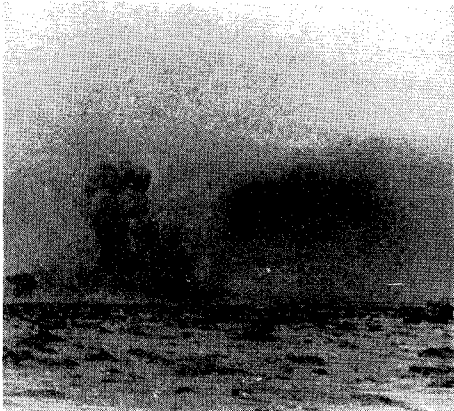
*Ed: This division was not in the line, though one of its brigades was brought up on 2 Sept.

**This unit did not participate in the battle. See Gen Roberts' map for correct order of battle.



From assembly areas . . .

Bayerlein



after heavy artillery preparation . . .

Bayerlein



Pioneers move into the minefields clearing lanes for the infantry to get ready . . .



vance into the British rear could be speedily effected.

By the end of August the supplies of munitions and fuel promised by the Italian *Commando Supremo* had not yet arrived. The period of full moon, which was absolutely necessary for the execution of the operation was already waning. A further delay would have meant the complete abandoning of our offensive plans.

During the night of 30/31 August we jumped off in the attack against the southern bastions of the British Alamein Front. Shortly after our troops had crossed the eastern limits of their own minefields and traversed No-Man's-Land, they ran into heretofore unknown British mine obstacles which were tenaciously defended. Under cover of heavy artillery fire and after several assaults, our pioneers and infantrymen succeeded partially in driving narrow passages through the British barricades. As a result of this, our losses were considerable and we lost much time since the mine fields were of considerable depth and had been additionally planted with a great number of booby traps.

Soon the carpet bombing of the RAF began on the area occupied by

our forward elements. Wave after wave of heavy bomber formations dropped their high explosives while both sky and earth were intermittently made light as day by parachute flares and pyrotechnics. Gen von Bismarck, commanding general of the 21st Panzer Div was killed by a direct hit and Gen Nehring, commander of the Afrika Korps was severely wounded by a bomb fragment.

As a result, by daybreak, the most forward elements of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* and the Reconnaissance Group could only reach a point 12 to 15 kilometers east of their own mine fields. Rommel's intention, to drive 50 kilometers to the east with his motorized units during the moonlit night and to further press the attack northward at first light, had not succeeded. The element of surprise upon which, in the final analysis, the entire plan was built, had consequently been lost. We now considered, in the face of this fact, whether or not we should break off the battle. The British now knew our dispositions. Rommel decided to base his decision to break off the battle or to continue the offensive upon the immediate situation of the Afrika Korps.

The *Deutsches Afrika Korps*, in the

. . . and Go!



booby-trapped minefields prove difficult . . .

Bayerlein



but the attack moves on through the barriers . . .





Rommel discusses with Bayerlein the possibility of breaking off the action or the advisability of continuing the attack

meantime under my command (I had taken over command of the Afrika Korps after Gen Nehring had been wounded) had overcome all the British mine obstacles and was in the process of continuing the attack to the east. Rommel discussed the situation with me, and we arrived at the decision — continue the attack.

Since the British armored units had now concentrated and stood

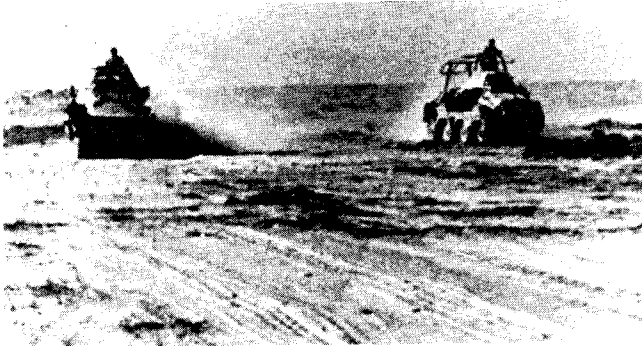
ready for immediate counteraction, we were forced to make our turning movement northward earlier than we had originally planned. The operational objectives for the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* was now Hill 132, Alam Halfa; and for the XX Italian Corps, Alam Bueib. According to the information of our air reconnaissance this ridge was heavily fortified and, as was later confirmed, occupied by the 44th British Inf Div,

which had just been assigned to the Eighth Army fresh out of Great Britain. Naturally, it was quite clear to us that the struggle for this high ground which was the key to the el Alamein position, would be very difficult in light of our experiences in similar battles. Fieldmarshal Kesselring, commander of the Luftwaffe in Africa, was therefore requested to attack the fortified ridge with strong air forces.

After the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* had refueled and rearmed, which took considerable time, it assembled at 1300 hours. During an intense sandstorm, which was blowing from our backs into the face of the enemy, the attack of the 15th and the 21st Pz Divs got underway well in the beginning. Unfortunately, at this time the Italian armored divisions *Ariete* and *Trieste* were still held up by clearing lanes through mine fields and by the serial movement of their units through the captured British defense system. For this reason they could only begin their attack by evening.

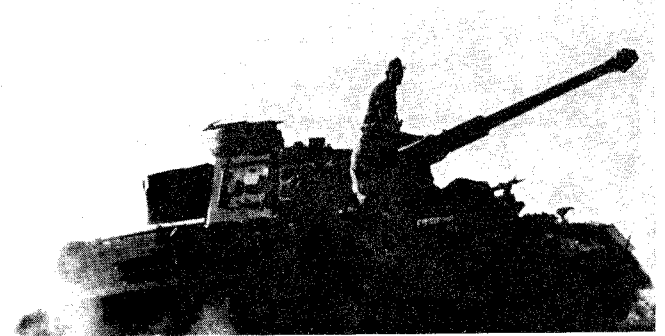
After Rommel had again discussed the situation with me he travelled over to the Italian divisions and spurred them on with all haste. In the meantime, our tanks

the forward elements have progressed only 12 to 15 kms eastward ... in the afternoon the attack of the Panzer divisions is well underway ...



still the Afrika Korps moves on (here east of Djebel Kalakh) ...

Bayerlein



and passes through the minefields east of Djebel Kalakh ...

Bayerlein



and vehicles labored with the greatest difficulty through the loose sand which covered the terrain of the approach march. The entire day a sandstorm raged, making life miserable for our men, but at the same time it prevented the RAF from attacking our units. Because of this difficult terrain, the fuel levels within the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* had been seriously reduced by evening. Around 1600 hours our attack against Hill 132 was stopped for the time being. The Italian Corps, which was to support us on our flank, was still a considerable distance away. The 90th Light Div had reached its assigned position. The Reconnaissance Group (Recon Detachments 3, 33 and 580) had made contact to the east and south-east with the 7th Armd Div.

During the night 31 August/1 September our Recon Group was the target of heavy British bomber and fighter attacks. With the help of countless parachute flares every movement was subject to an immediate strafing attack. Soon a great number of our vehicles were in flames and burned out. The Recon Group suffered heavy losses.

In the meantime, the gasoline which had been promised us had not arrived in Africa. Also the task of the resupply columns moving east through the clearings in the mine fields became very difficult in view of the heavy harassing attacks of British armored units and the RAF. So, at the very last minute (the morning of 1 September) Rommel was forced to stop any large-scale actions for the time being because movements involving greater depths with motorized units had to be avoided. At the most, we could only attempt to conduct several local limited attacks.

Limited by these requirements, the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* continued the attack during the course of the morning of 1 September against Alam Halfa with the 15th Pz Div. In the course of this action the major portion of the Division reached the terrain just south of Hill 132 after destroying several British heavy tanks. Then, however, this attack, too, had to be halted because there was hardly enough fuel on hand to continue, and strong enemy armored attacks were being launched against our unprotected east flank.

During this entire day the RAF conducted heavy strikes against the *Deutsches Afrika Korps*. In the open coverless terrain, where the explosion of the bombs was partially reinforced by rock fragments, heavy casualties were incurred. From the staff of the Afrika Korps alone, 7 officers were killed in action on this day.

In the afternoon Rommel again reconsidered whether or not he should break off the engagement in view of the critical supply situation. All day the ceaseless attacks of the British bomber formations continued on the battlefield. Enemy artillery fired immense quantities of ammunition into our positions. Movement on the battlefield was impossible. Again and again our outnumbered fighter aircraft threw themselves against the British bomber formations. But seldom did they succeed in getting close to the British bombers, since they were always engaged in aerial battles with extraordinarily strong fighter formations of the RAF which were assigned to protect the seemingly endless flight of the bomber squadrons.

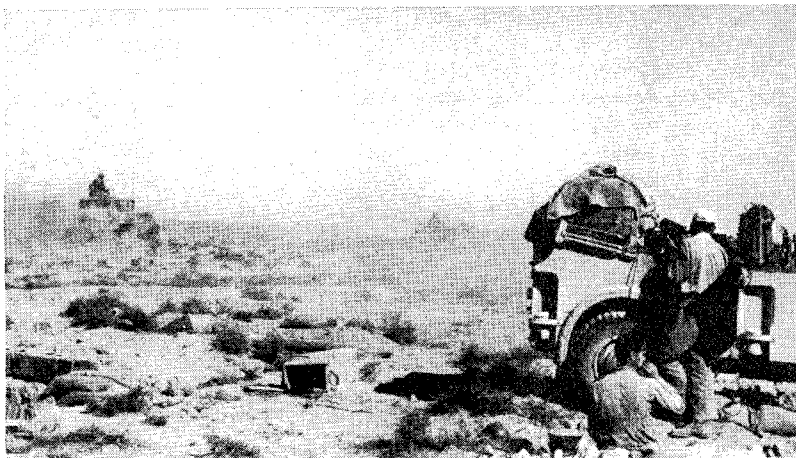
Rommel moves forward with the advance. He and Bayerlein consider the course of events — their decision is based on the immediate situation of the Afrika Korps

Bayerlein



The Panzers move on past the captured strongpoint of Deir el Shein

Bayerlein



Italian infantry move up — Rommel urges them on with all haste

Bayerlein



Our problem was one of supply. Even at this late date the gasoline which had been promised by Kesselring and Cavallero had *still* not yet arrived on African soil. By the night of 1 September the *Panzerarmee* had only enough gasoline left at its disposal to keep the supply columns going, and even by most frugal use it would only last for a short time. There was no fuel for tactical maneuver.

The whole night through, until the morning of 2 September, we were again under continuous aerial bombardment by bombs of all sizes.

After this night, because of the critical situation in the air and the catastrophic supply situation, Rommel decided to discontinue the attack and pull back, step by step, to positions extending from el Taqua to Bab el Qattara. For the time being, we remained in this area.

In the meantime, the British had gathered powerful armored units between Alam Halfa and Bab el Qattara. However, they attacked hesitantly and could easily be repulsed.

Also during the night of 2/3 September we were hit by ceaseless attacks of large formations of British aircraft. Pyrotechnics bathed the entire desert in bright light. Magnesium bombs, which could not be extinguished, burned on the ground and lighted the surrounding area. In between these, huge quantities of high explosive and fragmentation bombs fell on the terrain occupied by our troops. The 88mm flak guns, which during the days before succeeded in shooting down a bomber now and then, were discovered by the British and attacked from much higher altitudes. Hundreds of our vehicles were destroyed or damaged.

On 3 September we continued our retrograde movement according to plan. The British attacked only here and there and for the most part let the RAF and the artillery take over.

An attack by our Luftwaffe against the 10th Indian Div, which was in the assembly area for a counter-attack against the center of the front, caused the units which were assembled there to scatter to the

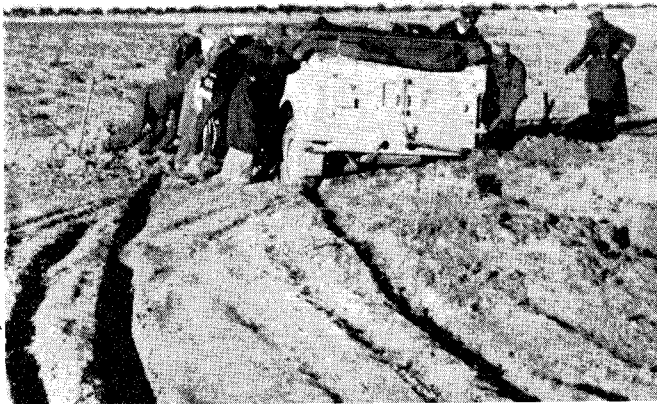
Bayerlein at the head of the Afrika Korps — leading the advance to Alam Halfa

Bayerlein



Rommel gives a push to his command car bogged down south of Munassib

Bayerlein



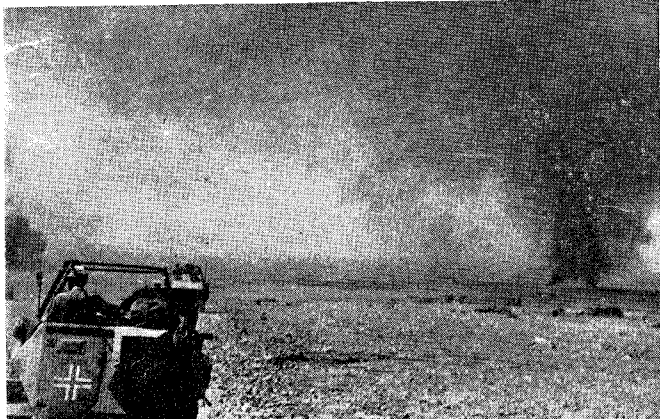
The battle at Alam Halfa 1 September

Bayerlein



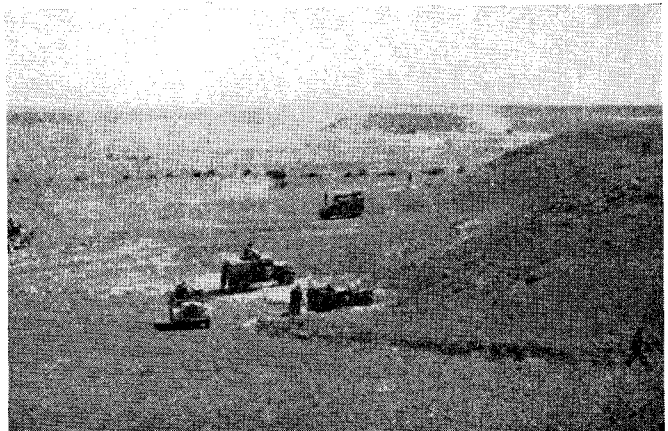
Moving around south of Alam Halfa

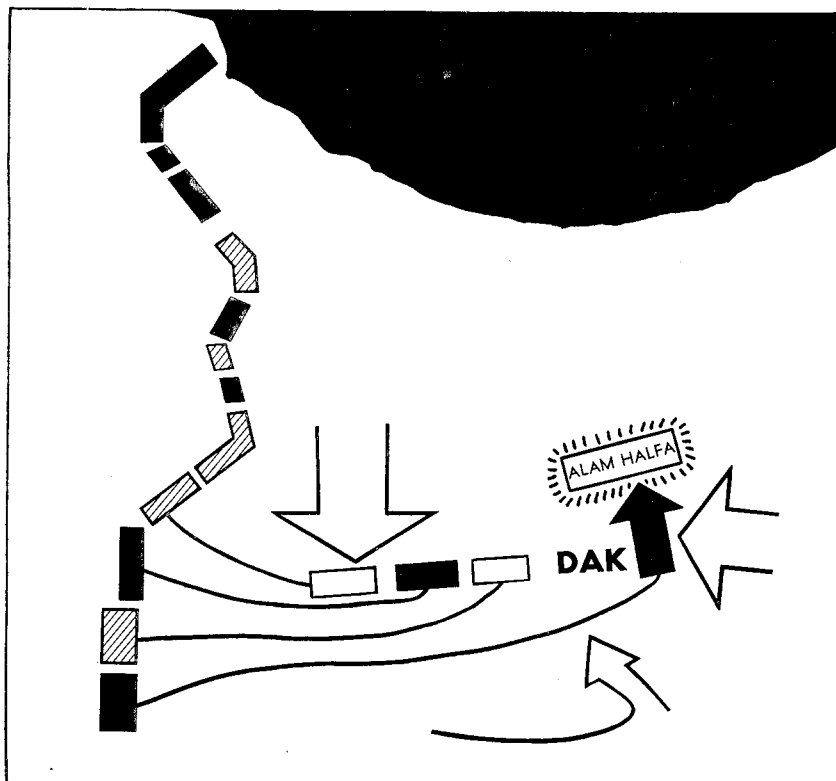
Bayerlein



Moving by Garet el Himeimat during withdrawal from Alam Halfa

Bayerlein





The German attack as it was executed

winds. Also, all other attacks launched by other units against our flanks, especially the New Zealanders, were too weak to be able to effect a penetration—they could be repulsed. A night attack conducted against the X Italian Corps resulted in especially high losses for the British. Countless enemy dead lay on the battlefield and 200 prisoners were taken among whom was Gen Clifton, commanding general of the 6th New Zealand Brigade.

In general, the British showed little enthusiasm to engage us in a decisive battle. Such an engagement was not necessary for them in view of the fact that time was working for them in gaining matériel superiority.

By the morning of 6 September our retrograde movement had been completed and our troops had again established contact and linked up in the defense. With the failure of this

offensive operation, our last chance to win in the Nile Delta had passed.

Conclusions

The offensive failed for the following reasons:

- 1) We were too weak for such an extended enveloping operation.
- 2) The British positions in the south were, in fact, exceptionally heavily mined as compared to the information we had from reconnaissance; and the British knew our intentions.
- 3) Devastating attacks by the RAF, which had complete command of the air and which literally nailed us to the ground, made any orderly advance and any effective movement impossible.
- 4) The fuel, a necessary requirement for the completion of our plan, did not arrive. The ships, which Cavallero had promised us were either sunk, delayed or never sent. Kesselring, unfortunately, was

not able to keep his promise—if necessary, to fly 500 tons per day to the front.

The losses to our troops were extraordinarily high. In the front lines they were caused by the bombs and strafing attacks of the RAF. The German and Italian units suffered casualties amounting to 570 dead, 1,800 wounded and 570 captured—altogether almost 3,000 men. We lost in addition: 400 vehicles, 50 tanks (of the 200 we had), 15 artillery pieces and 35 antitank guns. According to reports from our units, during the course of the operation they had taken 350 British prisoners and 150 British tanks and armored cars fell into our hands or were destroyed—along with 10 pieces of artillery and 20 antitank guns.

An important lesson which was to influence all our later plans, especially the entire method of our conduct of the war, had been learned during this operation: *The operational and tactical capabilities are of little consequence if the enemy commands the air space with a powerful air force and can fly massive attack missions undisturbed.*

The ground troops of the British had hardly come into the picture during our attack. Montgomery had desisted from undertaking a strong attack to regain his southern front, an attempt at which he probably would not have succeeded. Instead of this, he let his overwhelmingly superior artillery and air force take over. In addition to this, our lines of communication were constantly exposed to harassing attacks by the 7th British Armd Div. This action by the British commander was indeed correct and practical, since, thereby, he could inflict on us much greater loss in comparison to his own casualties and still keep his units combat-ready.

After these experiences we could only look forward to the coming offensive of the British against the el Alamein position with gloomy thoughts.

Fritz Bayerlein

CRITIQUE

IT WAS NATURAL that the disappointing end of the British July counteroffensive should have renewed the bad impression left by the disastrous breakdowns of June — obscuring the basic fact that the enemy's aim of overrunning Egypt had been defeated — and produced an impulsive feeling that a clean sweep of the higher command was needed. Psychologically, such drastic action had much justification, for it responded to the wave of feeling among the public at home and in the contributing Commonwealth countries as well as among the troops on the spot. But in the light of later knowledge and historical examination, these sweeping changes were an indiscriminating and unjust conclusion to a crucial month of the war. It was left to the enemy to put Auchinleck's achievement in true proportion and be first in paying him due tribute. An ironical sequel to his removal was that the renewal of the British offensive was postponed to a much later date than he had contemplated, and an impatient Prime Minister had to bow to the new High Command's determination to wait—until satisfied that preparations and training were complete, even though the delay meant leaving the initiative to Rommel.

During August Rommel was reinforced by only 2 fresh formations, one German and one Italian—the *Ramcke* Parachute Brigade and *Folgore* Parachute Division, both being “dismounted” and employed as infantry. But the wastage in the other formations was made up to a considerable extent by drafts and fresh supplies of equipment—although much more arrived for the Italian divisions than for the German. By the eve of the attack there was approximately a total of 200 gun-armed tanks with the 2 panzer divisions and 240 with the 2 Italian armored divisions—which, as Alexander remarked in his dispatch, “hardly came into action at all in

this battle.” The German armored strength comprised 169 Panzer IIIs (of which 74 were J type, with the long 50 mm gun), and 35 Panzer IVs (of which 26 had the new long 75 mm).

On the British side, the now well-fortified front was still held by the same 4 infantry divisions as in July, with strength rebuilt, and the 7th (Light) Armd Div remained, while the 1st Armd Div went back to refit and was replaced by the 10th—comprising two armored brigades, the 8th and the 22d (which had 4 tank units instead of the usual 3). There were 3 other fresh divisions now in Egypt—the 44th and 51st Infantry, and the 8th Armored. The 44th was brought up to the front to reinforce the rearward position on the Alam Halfa Ridge. From the 8th Armd Div the 23d Armd Brigade already brought up, was initially used to support the infantry holding the front, but after the opening phase it was placed under Gatehouse's 10th Armd Div, which thus controlled 3 armored brigades—the largest body of armor that ever fought under one divisional commander during the campaign. As for the tank strength, the Prime Minister in his report to the War Cabinet from Cairo on 21 August said: “For an August battle we should have at the front about 700 tanks, with 100 replacements.” Alexander in his dispatch gives the figure as 480 in the formations engaged.

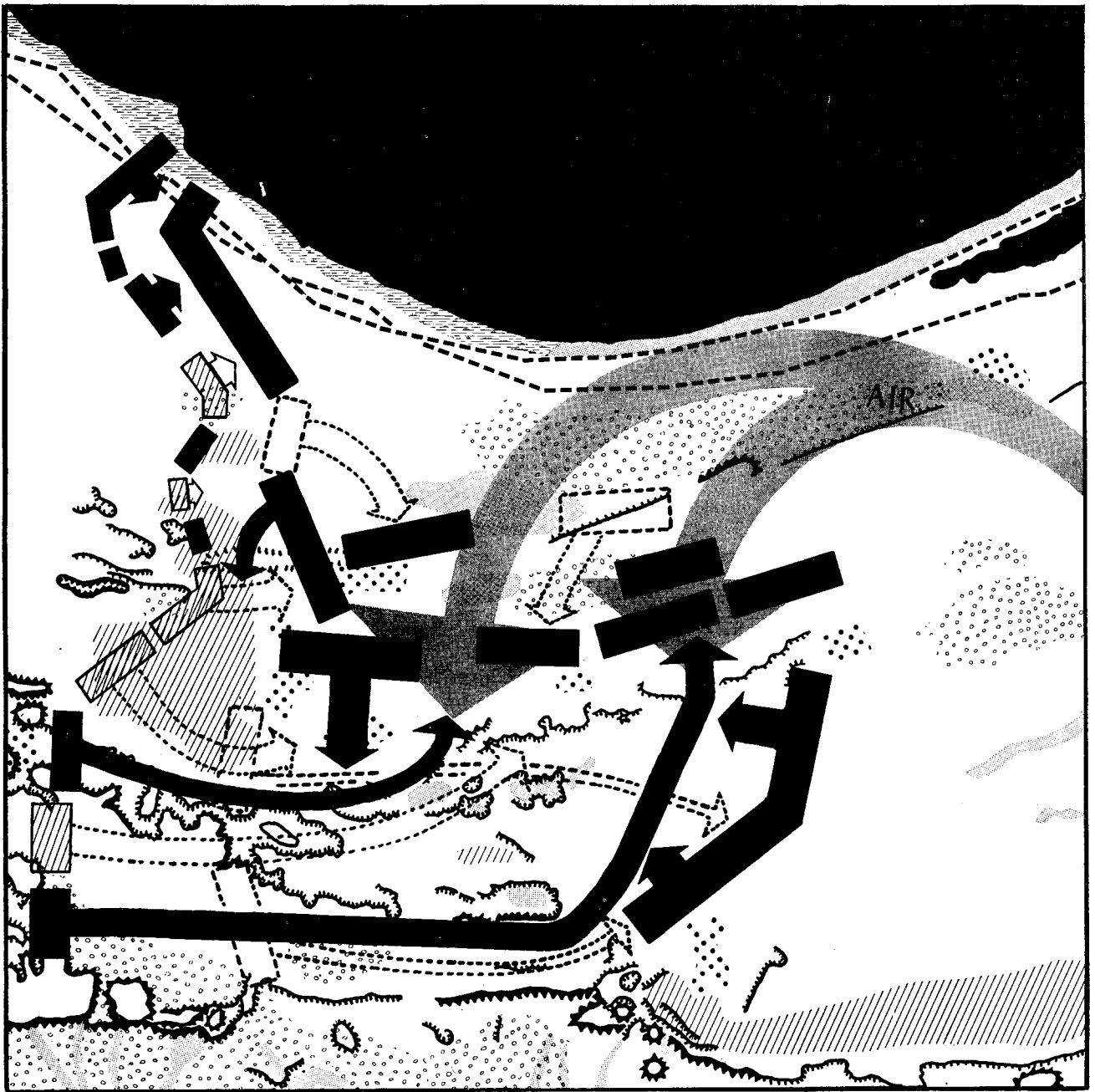
There was no alteration of the plan for countering a renewed enemy offensive that had already been devised before Auchinleck left. Alexander, in his dispatch, stated the facts with an honesty that shattered stories of its radical recasting which subsequently became current. He said that when he took over the command from Auchinleck: “The plan was to hold as strongly as possible the area between the sea and Ruweisat Ridge and to threaten from the flank any enemy advance

south of the ridge from a strongly defended prepared position on the Alam el Halfa ridge. Gen Montgomery, now in command of Eighth Army, accepted this plan in principle, to which I agreed, and hoped that if the enemy should give us enough time he would be able to improve our positions by strengthening the left or southern flank.” The Alam Halfa position was given further reinforcements before Rommel struck, but in the battle its defense was not put to the test, as the issue was decided by the positioning of the armor.

The XXX Corps front, from the coast to the Ruweisat Ridge inclusive, was held by the 9th Australian, 1st South African and 5th Indian Divs—from right to left. South of it, the XIII Corps front was held by the New Zealand Div, while the open flank of 15 miles between its left and the escarpment of the Qattara Depression was covered by a mined belt that was itself given mobile cover by the 7th Armd Div (composed of light tank and armored car units).

This southern stretch was, obviously, the only part of the front where a quick penetration could possibly be achieved, so in making such an attempt Rommel was bound to take that line of advance. This was what the defense system evolved under Auchinleck had been designed to produce.

While surprise in direction was thus ruled out, Rommel sought a solution of the offensive problem by surprise in time and speed—to break through the southern sector and get astride the Eighth Army's communications so quickly that it would be thrown off balance and drawn into disjointed action on a reversed front. His plan was that, following a concealed side-step of his mobile forces, the mined belt should be captured by night attack, and the Afrika Korps with part of the Italian XX Corps was to drive



Outcome of the entire battle was dictated by use of the terrain and immobilization of the German offensive effort by airpower.

on eastward for 25-30 miles before morning. Then at dawn the striking force would wheel northwards to the coast and overrun the British supply area. This menace, he hoped, would draw most of the British armor in chase, so that he might trap and destroy it in the open. Meanwhile, the German 90th Light Div and the rest of the Italian XX Corps was to form a protective corridor which, in that case, should be strong enough to withstand piecemeal attack from the north until he

had won the main battle, in the British rear. He said that in adopting this plan he "placed particular reliance on the slow reaction of the British command, for experience had shown us that it always took them some time to reach decisions and put them into effect."

If Rommel's night advance had gone anything like as fast as planned, the effects might have been upsetting—as the British armored brigades were not kept close together at the outset, and in the event were

not concentrated until the second morning. But they were allowed ample time. For Rommel soon discovered that his Intelligence was mistaken both about the depth of the mined belt and of the British positions. On those obstacles his plan was wrecked. By dawn the leading troops were only some 8 miles beyond the mined belt, while the mass of the Afrika Korps was not ready to begin its long eastward drive until 0930. By then it was a target for air attacks.

As speed-surprise had been lost, Rommel thought of abandoning his offensive, but after discussion with Bayerlein decided to let it go on, in a modified way. Since it was evident that the British armor had been allowed to assemble for action, Rommel came to the conclusion that "it was impossible to continue with our wide sweep to the east, as our flanks would be under constant threat. . . . This compelled us to decide on an earlier turn to the north than we had intended." The Afrika Korps was therefore ordered to make an immediate wheel and head for Pt. 132, the dominant feature of the Alam Halfa Ridge, while the XX Corps came up on its left flank. This change of direction brought it towards the area where the 22d Armd Brigade was posted—and also towards an area of soft sand, cramping to local maneuver. Its original line of thrust was well clear of this area.

On the British side, the 8th Armd Brigade's battle positions were some 10 miles distant, southeastward, from the 22d. It was thus more directly placed to check a bypassing move, on Rommel's part, instead of trusting to the indirect deterrent of a flanking position. In taking the risk of such a separation, between the brigades, the higher command relied on the fact that each of them was almost as strong in armor as the whole Afrika Korps, and thus should be capable of holding out until the other brigade arrived to support it.

The 8th, however, did not reach its assigned position until 0430—it was fortunate that the enemy had been so much delayed, for under Rommel's original plan the Afrika Korps had been directed on that same area and intended to arrive there before dawn. A collision in the dark, or assault in the morning, before the 8th was firmly in position, might have produced an awkward situation, especially for troops who were in action for the first time.

As a result of the enemy's change of plans, the attack fell on 22d Armd Brigade alone, but not until late in the day. Continued harassing by the 7th Armd Division—which only gave way gradually—and the delayed arrival of fuel and ammunition con-

voys as well as air attacks, so retarded the advance, that the Afrika Korps did not begin the shortened northward wheel until the afternoon. On approaching the battle positions of the 22d Armd Brigade its massive tank columns came under a storm of fire from "Pip" Roberts' well-sited tanks and then from his supporting artillery. Repeated advances and attempted local flank moves were checked—until nightfall closed down the fight, bringing well-earned respite to the defenders and spreading depression among the attackers.

The abortiveness of the enemy attack was due, however, not only to these actual repulses. For fuel was so short in the Afrika Korps that as early as 1600 hours, Rommel had cancelled his orders for an all-out effort to gain Pt. 132.

When morning came, fuel was still so short that Rommel was forced to give up the idea of making any large-scale move that day, 1 September. All that could be attempted was a local and limited attack, to gain the Alam Halfa ridge, employing only the 15th Pz Div. It was a very uncomfortable situation for the Afrika Korps, for the pounding it had suffered all night from the RAF and the XIII Corps artillery was continued throughout the day. The diminished attacks of the German armor were successively checked by a reinforced defense—early that same morning Montgomery, now convinced that the enemy was not driving east towards his rear, had ordered the rest of the armor to concentrate alongside Roberts' brigade.

In the afternoon Montgomery "ordered planning to begin for a counterstroke which would give us the initiative"—his idea being to develop a wheeling push southward from the New Zealand position to close the neck of the bag. He also made arrangements to bring up X Corps HQ—"to command a pursuit force" that was "to be prepared to push through to Daba with all reserves available."

But after another night of almost continuous bombing by the RAF, and the *Panzerarmee* having now only one day's standard fuel issue left, Rommel had decided to call off the offensive and make a gradual

withdrawal.

During that day, 2 September, the Germans were seen to be thinning out and columns started moving westward. But requests for permission to follow them up were refused—as it was Montgomery's policy to avoid his armor being lured into one of Rommel's traps. At the same time he ordered the southward attack by the New Zealand Div, reinforced, to begin on the night of the 3/4 September.

On the 3d, the Afrika Korps made a general step-back, but was only followed up by patrols. That night the "bottling" attack was launched, against the corridor held by the 90th Light and *Trieste* Divs. The attack became badly confused, suffered heavy losses and was abandoned next day.

During the 4 and 5 September the Afrika Korps continued its step by step withdrawal from "the bag," but no further attempt was made to cut it off, and it was only followed up by small detachments. On the 6th it came to a halt on a line of high ground 6 miles east of the original front, and was clearly determined to make a stand there. So on the 7th, Alexander and Montgomery decided to break off the battle, leaving Rommel in possession of this limited gain of ground—a small consolation for his strategic frustration.

Since taking over the Eighth Army, Montgomery had impressed his personality on the troops with very bracing effect. This was now strengthened by the thrill and relief of seeing the enemy in retreat, even if only for a short distance—a palpable sign that the tide had turned.

The question remains whether an exceptional opportunity was missed of annihilating the enemy while the Afrika Korps was in "the bag," and thereby saving the later trouble and cost of assaulting him in his prepared positions. But so far as it went, the battle of Alam Halfa was a great success. At its conclusion the enemy in Africa was left powerless to resume the initiative and, with the ever-increasing flow of British reinforcements, the next battle was bound to be, as Rommel called it, a "Battle Without Hope."

SUMMING UP

Tactically, this battle has a special interest. For it was not only won by the defending side, but decided by pure defense, without any counteroffensive—or even any serious attempt to develop a counteroffensive. It thus provides a contrast to most of the “turning point” battles of the Second World War and earlier wars. While Montgomery's decision to abstain from following up his defensive success in an offensive way forfeited the chance of trapping and destroying Rommel's forces—momentarily a very good chance—it did not impair the underlying decisiveness of the battle as a turning point in the campaign. From that time onwards, the British troops had an assurance of ultimate success which heightened their morale, while the opposing forces labored under a sense of hopelessness, feeling that whatever their efforts and sacrifice, they could achieve no more than a temporary postponement of the end.

The lesson-value of the Battle of Alam Halfa is increased by the conditions of the atomic age in which we now live. For where both sides possess the power to use thermonuclear weapons of unlimited destructiveness that very potentiality imposes fundamentally limiting con-

ditions on warfare and the military aim. An aggressive-minded dictator may still venture on an invasion with limited objectives in some part of the globe on the calculation that so long as he does not pursue his advantage too far, his opponents will hesitate to use their thermonuclear weapons against his homeland, since that would precipitate an all-out nuclear war fatal to both sides. In meeting a limited invasion of this kind it would be worse than foolish for his opponents to follow up a repulse of the invading forces with a counteroffensive in the old way, aimed to annihilate the invading forces—as that would be the surest way to produce general suicide. Threatened with imminent annihilation, anyone will resort to the use of mutually suicidal weapons for, if he is made to feel that he is likely to be destroyed in any case, he will not care whether it happens in a “conventional” or “unconventional” form of warfare, nor care how many other people perish with him. Thus, in the atomic age the old aim of complete “victory” has become a lunatic aim, and the only sane concept of strategy is to aim at repulsing the aggressor's forces so effectively as to make him abandon his aim. “Alam Halfa” is worth studying from this new strategical viewpoint,

as a prototype battle.

There is also much to be learned from its tactical technique. The positioning of the British forces, and the choice of ground, had a great influence upon the issue. So did the flexibility of the dispositions. Most important of all was the well-gauged combination of airpower with the ground forces' plan. Its effectiveness was facilitated by the defensive pattern of the battle, with the ground forces holding the ring while the air forces constantly bombed the arena, now a trap, into which Rommel's troops had pushed. In the pattern of this battle, the air forces could operate the more freely and effectively because of being able to count on all troops within the ring as being “enemy,” and thus targets—in contrast to the way that air action is handicapped in a more fluid kind of battle.

Rarely has any vital battle been as uneventful as that which is now engraved in history as the “Battle of Alam Halfa.” The battle was won by sitting tight—and offering no target—in a well-chosen position that commanded the enemy's line of thrust, while the air force battered the attacking force which could neither press an assault nor dare to push deeper.

Bob Willard

