

EL ALAMEIN 1942-1943

North Africa Breakthrough – Two Defeats of the German "Desert Fox"



September 1940

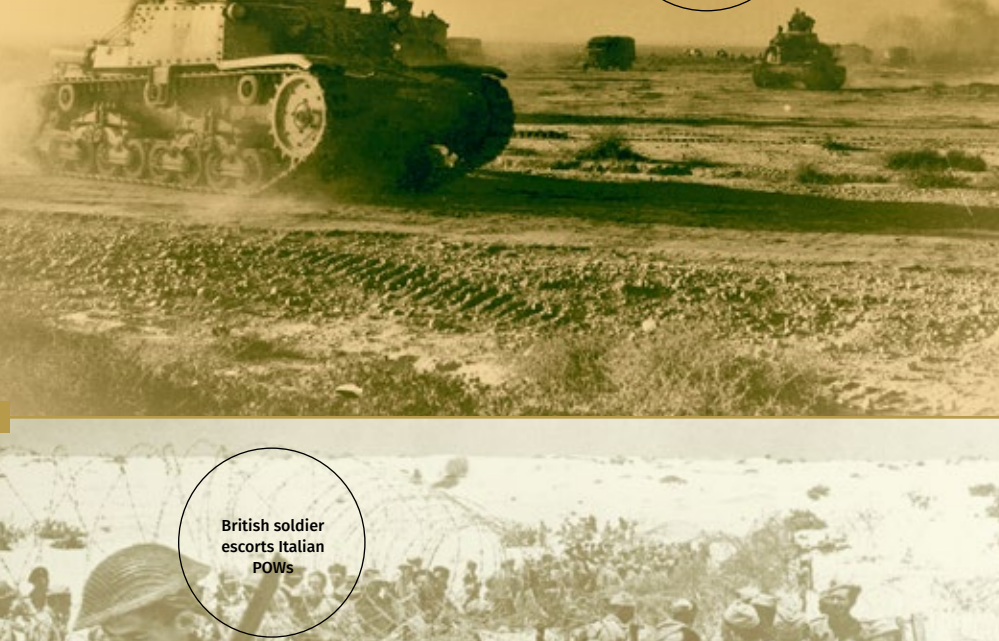
Italian troops operating from Libya – which was under their control – attack British forces in Egypt. The British defend the strategically important Suez Canal and access to the oil fields of Arabia and Mesopotamia.

December 1940

General Archibald Wavell pushes the Italians out of Cyrenaica (northeastern Libya) during Operation Compass. 130,000 Italian troops are taken prisoner. Due to the defeat of the Italian forces, Adolf Hitler sends German troops to Africa. From that moment, the war in the desert takes on a new dynamic – the Germans use the tactic of "Blitzkrieg" – lightning war – using their mobile armoured units.

1940-1942

The area of eastern Libya and western Egypt has become a battlefield for numerous clashes, in which both sides alternately take the initiative. Due to the massive use of tanks and armoured vehicles, the pace of the combat moves very quickly. The attacking side pushes their enemy as far as it can before running into problems with its supply lines. Eventually, the defenses of each of the opposing sides meet in a stalemate and cannot be defeated.



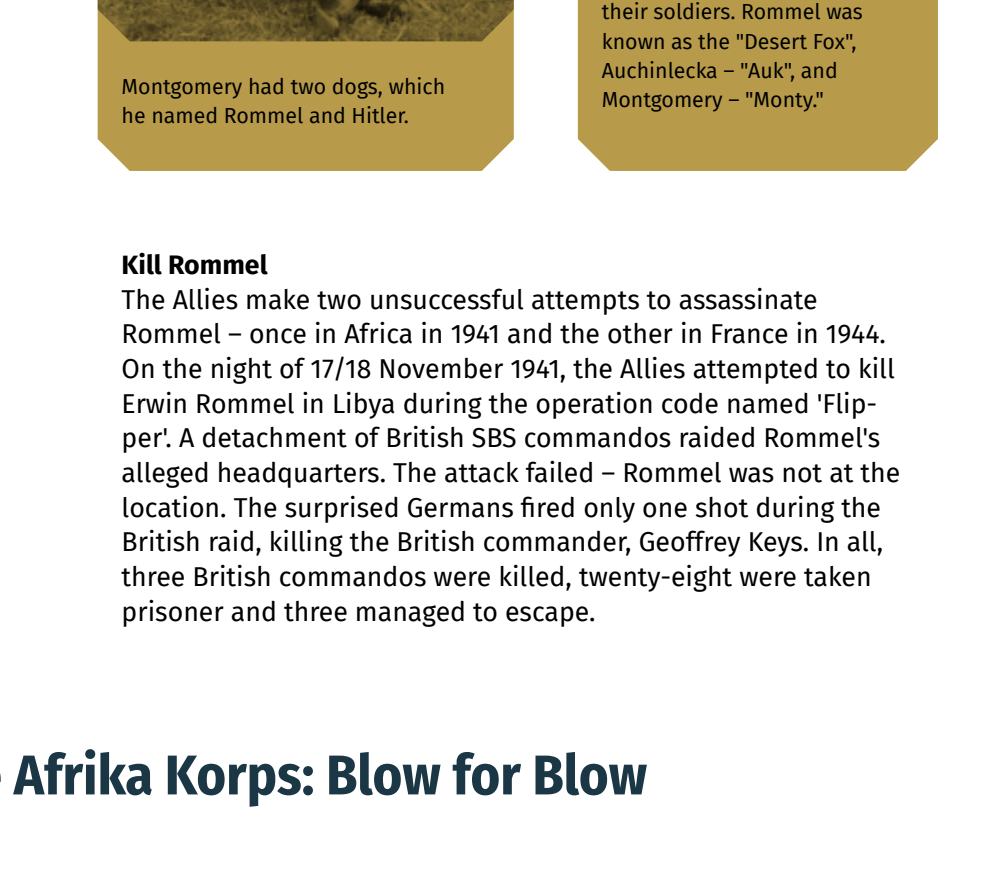
British soldiers were entitled to a ration of 4.5 liters of water per day. However, half of this measure was used for refilling military vehicle radiators and for daily hygiene.

Desert War

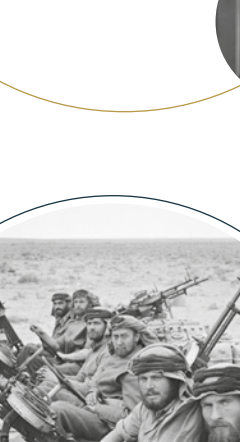
Panzerarmee Afrika – Tanks in the Sand

In the summer of 1940, the Germans offered the Italians support in the form of armoured divisions. But the Italian command refused – it had decided that tanks would not be very effective when maneuvering in sand. However, Germany sent a special commission to North Africa to verify this. Their assessment was quite the opposite. Their decision was confirmed by the great successes of the Afrika Korps – which later was transformed into the African Panzer Army (Panzerarmee Afrika) – based mostly on armoured mobile units.

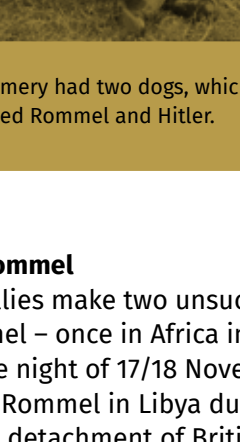
The Panzer III tanks were the basic Afrika Korps armoured vehicles in the desert battles. Although faster than British vehicles, they were not immune to the shells of the 75mm guns mounted on many British and American tanks. During WWII, approximately 5,7 thousand Panzer III tanks were built.



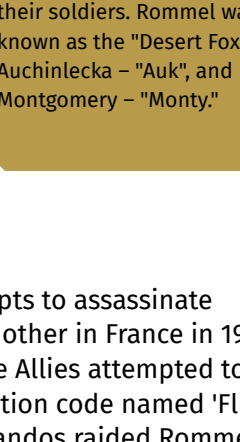
Commanders



Marshal Erwin Rommel
Tank Divisions Commander in Africa during the 1st and most of the 2nd Battle of El Alamein. Known as the 'Desert Fox', he was an outstanding strategist, adored by his soldiers, respected by his enemies. Accused of participation in a plot to kill Hitler, Rommel committed suicide by swallowing cyanide.



General Bernard Montgomery
An outstanding tactician, but a commander with a difficult personal character, convinced of his own genius. He commanded the British Eighth Army during the Second Battle of El Alamein and rose to fame as the vanquisher of the Afrika Korps. He subsequently led the British forces during the invasions of Sicily, Italy as well as the landings in Normandy (Operation Overlord).



Claude Auchinleck
The main adversary of Erwin Rommel during the 1st and 2nd Battles of El Alamein. Although he mostly held back the attacks of the German-Italian forces, in July 1942 he had to retreat. During the Second Battle, the British forces were commanded by General Bernard Montgomery.



We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.

– Winston Churchill



Montgomery had two dogs, which he named Rommel and Hitler.

The commanders who took part in the Battles of El Alamein all had nicknames used by their soldiers. Rommel was known as the "Desert Fox", Auchinleck as "Auk", and Montgomery – "Monty".

Kill Rommel
The Allies make two unsuccessful attempts to assassinate Rommel – once in Africa in 1941 and the other in France in 1944. On the night of 17/18 November 1941, the Allies attempted to kill Erwin Rommel in Libya during the operation code named 'Flipper'. A detachment of British SBS commandos raided Rommel's alleged headquarters. The attack failed – Rommel was not at the location. The surprised Germans fired only one shot during the British raid, killing the British commander, Geoffrey Keys. In all, three British commandos were killed, twenty-eight were taken prisoner and three managed to escape.

The Allies Versus the Afrika Korps: Blow for Blow

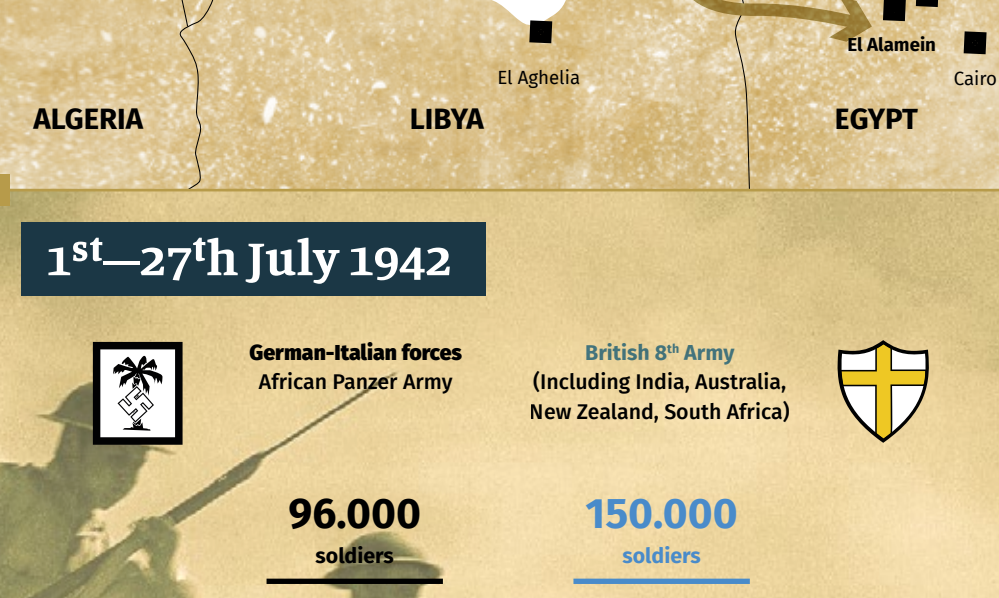
March / April 1941

The first daring, Afrika Korps offensive (Operation Sonnenblume) pushes British forces to Egypt's borders. The Germans besiege Tobruk for 241 days. The city is defended by the British, Australians, New Zealanders, Indians, Poles and Czechs.



June 1941

The British offensive, codenamed "Battleaxe", is meant to break the German defenses and recover Cyrenaica – but to no avail. Rommel's flanking moves hinder the British advance, while the German artillery crushes the British attacks.



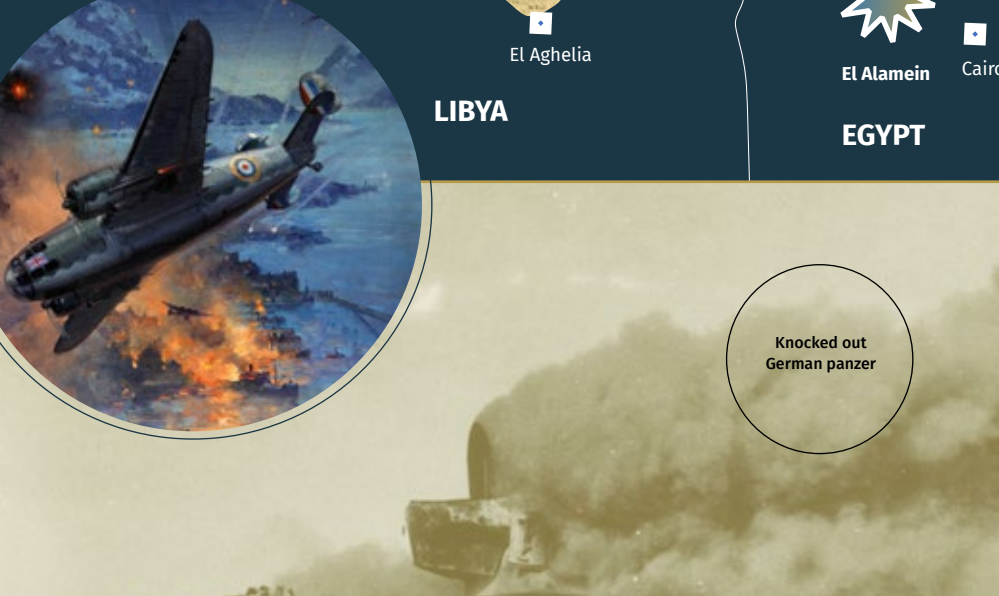
November 1941 / January 1942

The British launch operation "Crusader". Initially the Germans lure British tanks into an ambush and destroy a good number of them. The British reorganize and on November 27th they manage to regain Tobruk, and then occupy Cyrenaica.

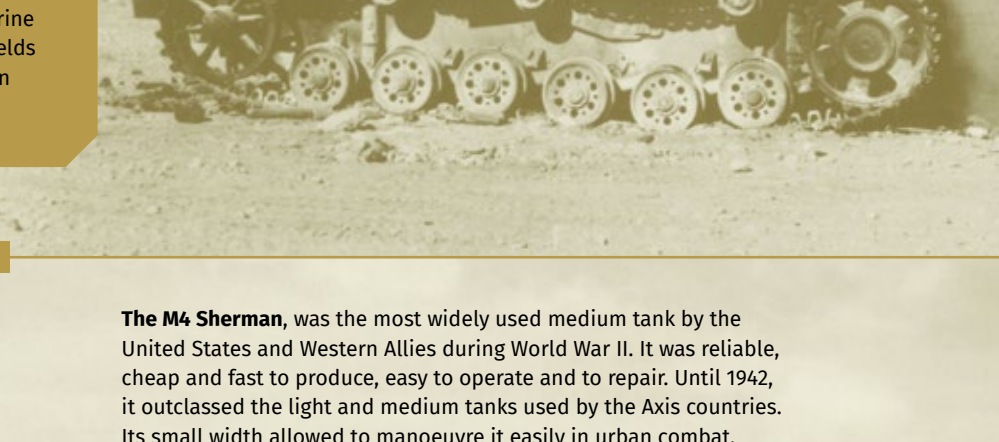


January / February 1942

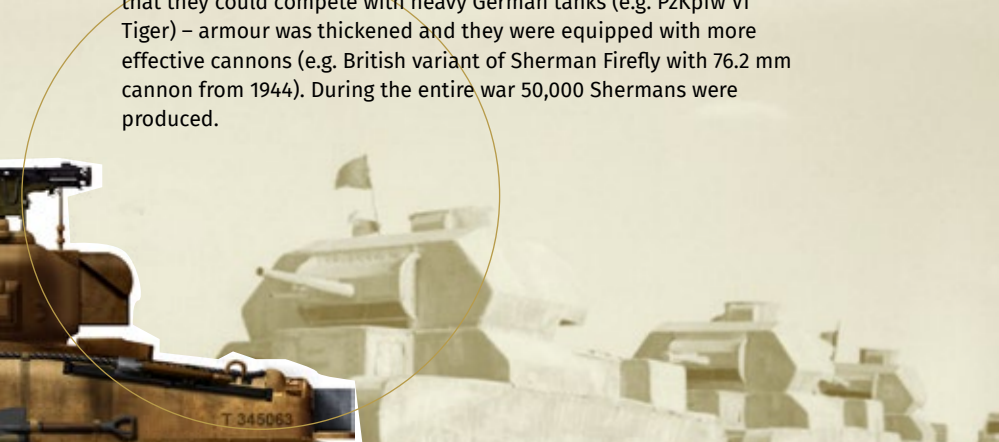
Rommel regains the initiative. With minor losses of his own, he recovers Cyrenaica within two weeks. His offensive pushes British forces back to positions near Gazala.



In a daring armoured charge involving all of his tanks and forces, Rommel crushes British forces at the Battle of Gazala and follows this blow by capturing Tobruk. Thousands of Allied soldiers are captured. The Germans enter Egypt and the British retreat to El Alamein.



Although the Germans originally plan to suspend their offensive after reaching the Egyptian border until after the capture of Malta (Operation Hercules), Erwin Rommel decides to continue it so that the British 8th Army will not be able to reorganize. The British resist but are only 70 km from Alexandria, in the El Alamein area.



El Alamein: The First Battle

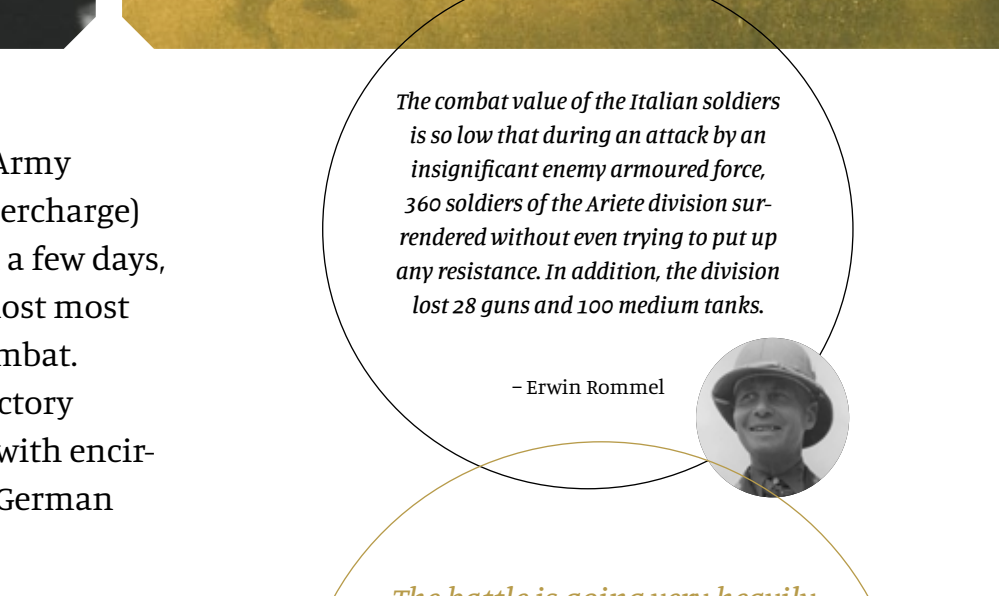
The British defense of El Alamein was based on its favourable geographic location which made it possible to create an effective defense system, shielded on the one hand by the sea and on the other by depressions and desert dunes. The attacking German-Italian troops could not manage to break through the defensive lines of the 8th Army.

British troops carried out a series of counterattacks, which, however, were repelled. Due to their lack of success, both sides – exhausted by the fighting and depleted by the losses they had suffered – stopped further attacks and focused on creating defensive lines.

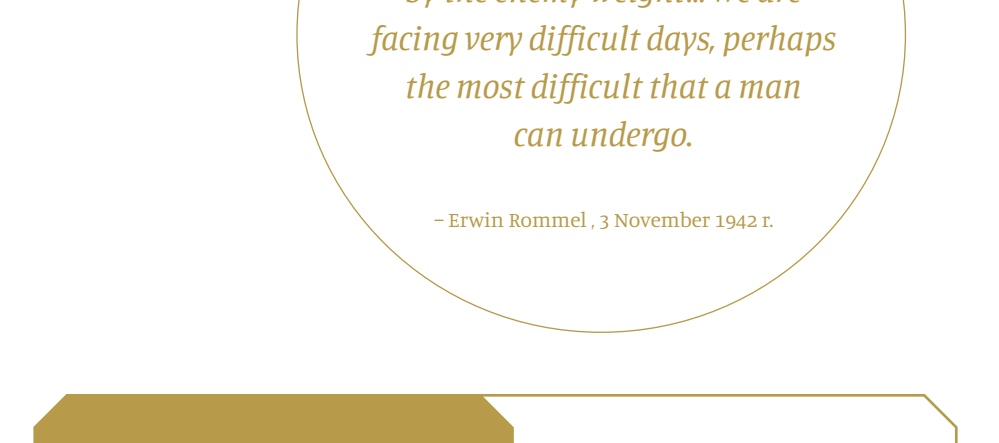


August / September 1942

Rommel tries to bypass and encircle the 8th Army from the south at the Battle of Alam El Haifa. Due to a lack of fuel, the murderous bombing by the British IAF and the effective tactics of General Montgomery's troops, Rommel is stopped and does not take further action. Owing to their difficult situation and the material advantage of the British 8th Army, the German-Italian troops start to organize their own defenses.



The Allies gradually cut off Rommel's supplies. German supply lines were overstretched; constant submarine raids from bases in Malta and bombing from airfields in Egypt and Algeria sunk cargo ships with German supplies bound for Africa from Sicily and Italy.

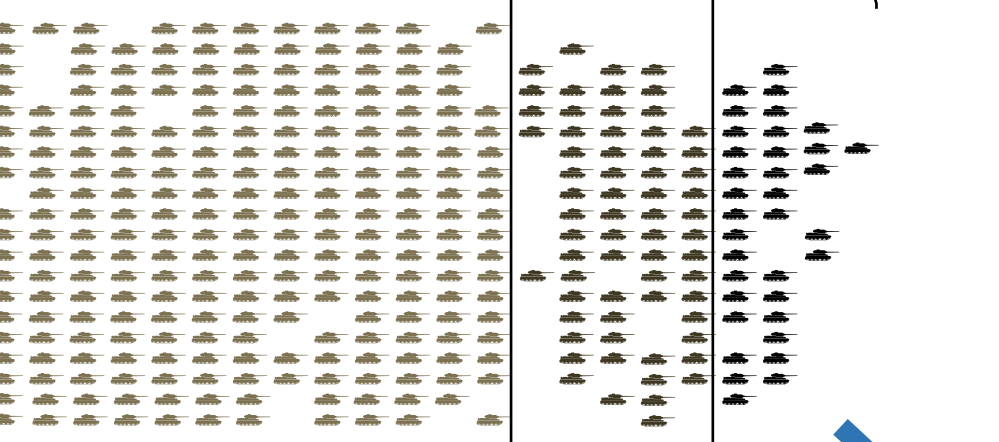


Between the Battles

From the end of July to October 1942, both armies expanded their defensive positions at El Alamein, while preparing for an offensive that would decide the fate of Egypt and the Middle East. The British 8th Army significantly strengthened its forces – it received, among other things, new American M4 Sherman tanks as well as strong aerial support.



Radio intelligence, intelligence and disinformation were taken into combat. Before the Second Battle of El Alamein, the British took active steps to mislead the Germans and Italians and make them believe that they would attack elsewhere. To this end, they broadcast fake radio messages and built fictitious channels of activity. Dummy tanks were also constructed from plywood mounted on wheels and placed in the south. In the north, the real battle tanks were disguised as trucks.



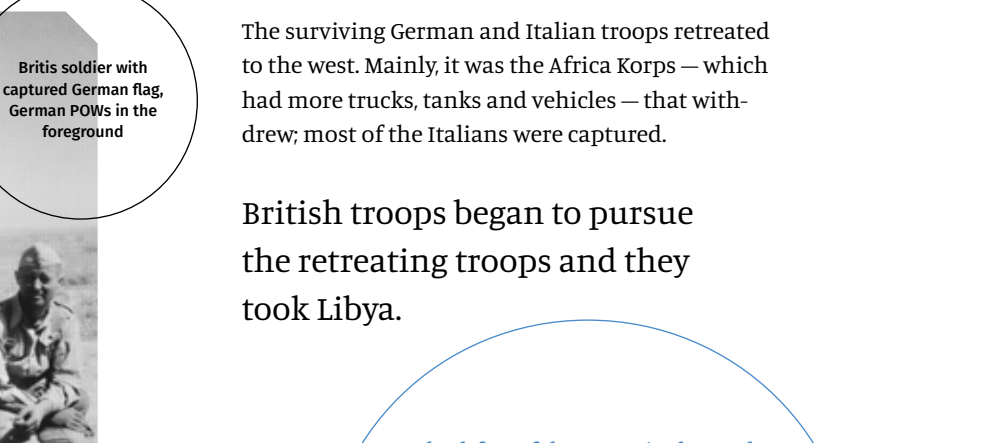
The Germans deployed approx. 500,000 mines, mainly anti-tank mines, creating the so-called Devil's Garden. In order to lure British forces into the trap, the Italians and Germans marked their minefields by imprinting wheel marks on the sand, marking a supposedly "passable" path for enemy vehicles.



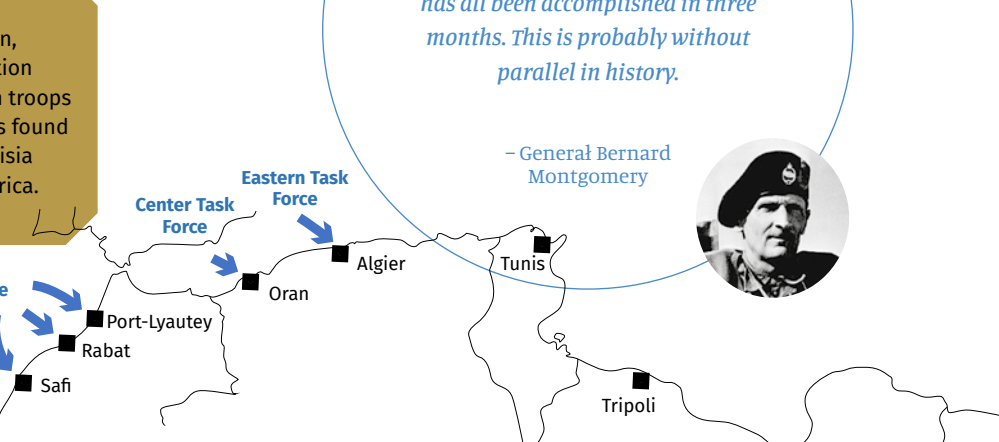
The Mc Sherman was the most widely used medium tank by the United States and Western Allies during World War II. It was reliable, cheap and fast to produce, easy to operate and to repair. Until 1942, it outclassed the light and medium tanks used by the Axis countries. Its small width allowed it to maneuver easily in urban combat. On the other hand, its considerable height (about 3m depending on the version) was a disadvantage – it was a visible target for the enemy. Over the course of the war the Shermans were improved so that they could compete with heavy German tanks (e.g. Panzer VI Tiger) – armour was thickened and they were equipped with more effective cannons (e.g. British variant of Sherman Firefly with 76.2 mm cannon from 1944). During the entire war 50,000 Shermans were produced.



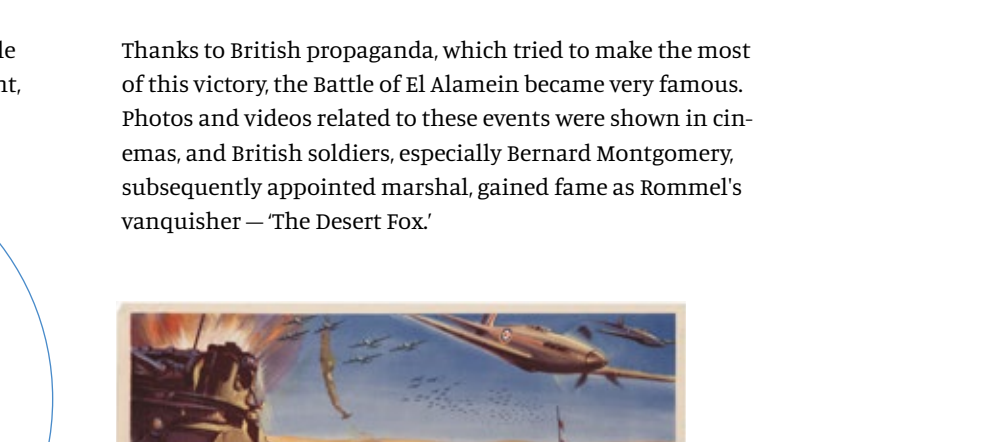
October 23rd – 8th Army (including India, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa)



96,000 soldiers



150,000 soldiers



Knocked out German panzer



October 23rd – 8th Army (including India, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa)



500 tanks



116,000 soldiers



220,000 soldiers

1,100 tanks

October 26th

October 29th

November 3rd

35 tanks

October 23rd

October 26th

October 29th

November 3rd

35 tanks

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