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Jill Edwards, ed., *El Alamein and the Struggle for North Africa: International Perspectives from the Twenty-first Century*. New York: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2013. Pp. xxi, 237. ISBN 978-977-416-581-8.

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Essay collections packed with solid, intriguing scholarship are rare, and this one, sadly, falls short of that mark. *El Alamein and the Struggle for North Africa* gathers papers given at a 2012 conference at the American University in Cairo on aspects of the Battle of El Alamein. Like the nearly contemporary Soviet counter-offensive at Stalingrad and Japanese defeat at Guadalcanal, El Alamein certainly qualifies as a turning point in World War II. While, even taken together, the dozen essays gathered here do not constitute a continuous detailed account of the battle, serious students of the campaign will find several of them rewarding.

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For students of World War II, the Western Desert campaign will always be a sentimental favorite. Lawrence of Arabia memorably characterized the desert as "clean," and the fighting in North Africa was the "cleanest" campaign in a very dirty war, featuring comparatively little of the purposeful or collateral brutality that stained every other aspect of the war. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the Axis forces, lives in popular memory as a charismatic, humane, and chivalrous general of legendary skill.

Military historians never tire of analyzing this campaign fought, as Maj. Gen. Johann von Ravenstein (one of Rommel's division commanders) put it, "[in] a tactician's paradise and a quartermaster's hell."¹ The North African theater of the war was bracketed by two major supply bases—Tripoli in the west and Alexandria in the east. The further an army advanced in either direction, the longer its supply lines grew and the harder it became to sustain an offensive. On the two occasions in 1941 when the British pushed deep into Libya near El Agheila, they were exhausted and overextended. The same was true of the German-Italian "Panzerarmee Afrika" in summer 1942, as it drove the 8th Army far into Egypt, halting at El Alamein, an insignificant railway station barely a hundred kilometers west of Alexandria.

1. See Vincent J. Esposito, *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, vol. 2 (NY: Praeger, 1959). Known to military history cognoscenti as "Old Unreliable" in light of more recent, corrective scholarship, Esposito's atlas remains a valuable artifact for those interested in military cartography and symbology.

There were six major offensives in North Africa prior to El Alamein. In late 1940, the British 13th Corps advanced into eastern Libya, routing a much larger Italian army and capturing thousands of prisoners. This prompted German intervention, and Rommel's initial offensive with the Afrika Korps in spring 1941 defeated the scattered British elements, captured the commanding general, and besieged Tobruk, where an Australian division defiantly held out for eight long months. A British counteroffensive that summer—Operation Battleaxe—failed to relieve Tobruk and incurred heavy losses. During a second counteroffensive by the newly-formed 8th Army in the fall—Operation Crusader—Rommel displayed stunning operational daring before withdrawing his depleted Panzerarmee to the Benghazi area. After Axis air attacks on the British base at Malta eased Rommel's supply situation, he made another counteroffensive in early 1942 that ended with the opposing armies facing each other along the eighty-kilometer "Gazala Line" west of Tobruk. Rommel's Gazala Offensive in May was his greatest victory and a thoroughly embarrassing defeat for the British in a year filled with embarrassments. Having lost hundreds of tanks and thousands of men taken prisoner, the 8th Army retreated deep into Egypt and dug in near El Alamein, in the narrow corridor between the Mediterranean and the virtually impassible Qattara Depression, whose steep escarpments bordered a vast landscape of shifting sand dunes some sixty kilometers to the south.

After fruitless sparring by the exhausted armies in August 1942, Rommel ceased offensive operations and began preparing defensive positions as reinforcements trickled in. The 8th Army was more lavishly reinforced with men and American tanks and vehicles. The ensuing battle of El Alamein featured a dozen divisions in action for three weeks on each side. Though outnumbered more than two-to-one, the men of the German and Italian divisions, who were well dug-in and screened by deep minefields, put up a good fight.

In a particularly informative essay, Aldino Bondesan describes a battlefield archeology project begun in 2008 in a sector of the El Alamein front defended mainly by the Italian "Folgore" (lightning) parachute division. As in other armies, the paratroopers proved to be stout fighters and the forensic battlefield evidence confirms that Folgore gave a good account of itself—a reminder that the sorry reputation clinging to the Italian Army was sometimes undeserved.

Thomas Scheben's piece on the epic siege of Malta explains why, from a logistical standpoint, it was so critically important to the events in North Africa. The Axis high command, painfully mindful of the huge casualties incurred in the airborne invasion of Crete in spring 1941, settled for a sporadic air campaign at Malta. The Royal Navy, at frightful cost, kept pushing convoys through to the island, delivering just enough supplies and aircraft to keep it from falling. German and Italian air attacks in winter 1941-42 did manage to neutralize Malta temporarily, thus easing their supply situation in North Africa, but the US entry into the war enabled the Allies to make Malta once again a deadly thorn in the Axis side.

Nick Hewitt's essay summarizes the British Mediterranean Fleet's long, successful struggle against the numerically superior but tactically outclassed Italian Navy. Like other historians, Hewitt somewhat overlooks the military advantage of operational tempo. A fleet that, like the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean, spends more time at sea and drills more diligently will usually prevail in wartime. Hewitt does, however, give the Italian Navy credit where credit is due, echoing some good recent scholarship.²

In another excellent essay, retired Army officer Antulio Echevarria (US Army War College³) weighs in on the question of Erwin Rommel's military genius. Like everyone who has pondered the Field Marshal's career, he finds him to be a captivating yet contradictory figure. He was an often brilliant soldier with an unfortunate propensity for tactical micromanagement; an ambitious self-promoter who had much to promote and earned every bit of the charisma he enjoyed before his forced suicide in 1944. Rommel's bold personal conduct during the Battle of France in 1940 and Operation Crusader in 1941 was unparalleled in a European general since the Napoleonic Wars ("l'audace, l'audace...!"), but he unwisely neglected logistics⁴

2. E.g., Vincent P. O'Hara, *Struggle for the Middle Sea: The Great Navies at War in the Mediterranean Theater, 1940-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2009).

3. Where he is editor of the College's fine quarterly, *Parameters*.

4. See Martin van Creveld's unsparing critique of Rommel in *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, 2nd ed. (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2004) 199-204.

and certainly had a streak of ruthlessness—he relieved one of his division commanders at Tobruk for caring too much about the lives of his men. (The officer replied that there could be no higher accolade for a general.)

Rommel seemed to think himself exempt from military rules: a well-known photograph shows him and his chief of staff, (then) Col. Alfred Gause, strapping themselves into a Fiesler Storch, a small liaison aircraft, blithely violating the General Staff prohibition against a commander and his chief of staff flying together in the same aircraft. In recent years, the Rommel legend has lost some of its luster. As Echevarria observes, Rommel was an enthusiastic Nazi for a time; certainly Hitler would not have chosen an apolitical general to command his personal guard in 1939. But Rommel was an opportunistic careerist, fervently loyal to the Führer until it became clear he was driving Germany toward destruction. He therefore supported the 20 July conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. When the plot failed, Rommel was compelled to commit suicide; his death was disguised as the result of an honorable heart attack to avoid scandal and repercussions against his family.

Niall Barr's essay looks at British leadership during the crisis of 1942 and the run-up to El Alamein. Gen. Sir Claude Auchinleck, commander in chief in the Middle East from July 1941 until he was relieved in September 1942, comes in for much deserved criticism. Barr writes that, while Auchinleck had good strategic instincts, he proved to be an inept field commander. Even worse, he also made some regrettable appointments, including his controversial chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Eric "Chink" Dorman-Smith, known to many American readers as a longtime friend of Ernest Hemingway. Dorman-Smith was a highly intelligent officer with a good grasp of mechanized warfare, but he was so personally abrasive that he alienated most of his colleagues. Despite his sound diagnosis of British tactical failings in the Western Desert, Dorman-Smith had little constructive criticism to offer and was sacked along with Auchinleck, his friend and patron.

Auchinleck's worst appointment came in fall 1941, when he elevated a relatively junior general staff officer, Maj. Gen. Sir Neil Ritchie, to command the 8th Army. Ritchie was well out of his depth in confronting so skillful and determined an opponent as Rommel, and the Gazala disaster resulted. As the 8th Army fled into Egypt, Auchinleck removed Ritchie and took command himself. In early August, he rallied the remnants of the 8th Army and established a defensive position near El Alamein, parrying two attempts by depleted Axis spearheads to dislodge him, but his poorly organized counterattacks were easily repelled. His debrief to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had just arrived in Cairo, did not inspire confidence and Auchinleck was relieved by Gen. Sir Harold Alexander.

Barr does not speculate on the appointment and brief tenure of Lt. Gen. William "Strafer" Gott in command of the 8th Army after Auchinleck's relief. Gott had long experience as a division and corps commander in the Western Desert and was popular with the rank and file. He was known to be aggressive, despite some setbacks in armored combat against Rommel during previous offensives. He might have done very well in command at El Alamein, given the vast resources flowing to the 8th Army in fall 1942. Tragically, his career and his life were cut short when he elected to fly back to Cairo on 7 August, after the initial Axis probes of the El Alamein position were repulsed. His plane was shot down by German fighters and his replacement—Lt. Gen. Sir Bernard Montgomery—went on to win the Battle of El Alamein and become the premier British field commander of the war. Would Gott have done as well (or better) had he lived? Would Montgomery have gotten another such opportunity? We will never know.

Rémy Porte's piece concerns Gen. Pierre Koenig's Free French division,⁵ which heroically anchored the southern end of the British line during the battle of Gazala. The stubborn French defense of Bir Hakeim lasted three weeks, badly upsetting Rommel's timetable and forcing him to improvise—successfully—against inept 8th Army leaders and British and Commonwealth forces unable to conduct effective combined-arms tactics.

The other contributions in *El Alamein and the Struggle for North Africa* (essays 1–4, 11, 12) offer discussions of the various British Commonwealth units that served at El Alamein. They add little of scholarly val-

5. Six battalions, described in some campaign histories as a brigade.

ue, apart from some belated but justified score-settling. Troops from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India fought valiantly in North Africa and left their mark on the history of the war. But they suffered under the inexpert British leaders who often misused them in the campaigns of 1941–42.

In summary, readers will not find a detailed traditional account of El Alamein in this anthology. Bernard Montgomery, for example, figures only in the Commonwealth essays and Niall Barr's study of high command; we get no detailed assessment of his judicious conduct of the battle, his abandoning of initial failures, reinforcing success, and deployment of massive artillery support everywhere. The same goes for the leadership confusion on the Axis side, which saw three German commanders in quick succession failing to stem the inexorable British and Commonwealth avalanche. Such omissions are no surprise, however, in a collection of discrete, closely focused conference papers, and we must be grateful that the essays, especially those I have singled out, will give thoughtful readers much that is instructive and worthy of reflection.