



Operation Crusader and the Desert War in British History and Memory: “What is Failure? What is Loyalty?” by Alexander H. Joffe.

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With the greatest regret I have to tell you that, after most anxious consideration, I have decided that I must relieve you as the commander of the 8th Army.
—Auchinleck to Cunningham, 25/11/1941.

Operation Crusader, launched in late fall 1941, was the third British offensive intended to lift the siege of Tobruk in the Western Desert campaign in North Africa. Alexander Joffe, an archeologist and historian of the ancient Near East, ventures far afield in his detailed study of a controversial event during the offensive—the relief of the 8th Army commander, Lt. Gen. Alan Cunningham, by the Commander in Chief, Middle East, Gen. Claude Auchinleck. Joffe is a distinguished scholar, but his expertise is not in modern military history generally, but in what historian and political scientist Simon Ball (in his dust-jacket blurb) calls “new wave” military history. Discerning readers will be so alerted by the word “Memory” in the book’s misleading title.

There is little here about Operation Crusader itself—a series of tactical engagements within a larger strategic context of great interest to military historians. Instead, Joffe concentrates on the personalities at the highest levels of the British Middle East Command and the 8th Army during the North African campaign. He also examines the internal politics of the British Army as well as wartime politics at the highest levels. Inevitably, Winston Churchill weighs in, as does the South African warlord Jan Smuts. Joffe reveals a willingness in many quarters to give the Cunningham a “soft landing,” although the man himself and his closest friends and family might not have seen it as such. Though he was appointed to other high-level positions during and after the war, he never again held a combat command.

Joffe’s sparse account reconciling the circumstances of Cunningham’s relief with the battlefield situation includes just two maps, neither annotated or useful. He does, however, clarify Cunningham’s removal through an analysis of official reports and voluminous personal correspondence, both contemporary and subsequent. A sympathetic Auchinleck let Cunningham know that officially his removal would be attributed to physical exhaustion, and back in Cairo he was indeed admitted to a hospital. But he was no more exhausted than any other senior officer in the 8th Army. Few people in the higher ranks of the British Army, Churchill’s wartime government, and even Parliament and the media were fooled.

What we know about this incident is that Lt. Gen. Cunningham personally summoned General Auchinleck, the Commander in Chief in the Middle East, to 8th Army Headquarters on 23 Nov. 1941, about five days into the battle. Cunningham was depressed by the lack of progress to up that point: British tank losses were extremely heavy, the 5th South African Brigade was destroyed, and Rommel’s Afrika Korps had outflanked the British en route to the Egyptian frontier. This was the famous “dash to the wire” intended to disrupt and panic the British rear and force the 8th Army to withdraw. On arrival at 8th Army HQ, Auchinleck firmly rejected Cunningham’s suggestion of a withdrawal. He returned to Cairo on 25 November and decided to remove the Army

commander, stating in a cable to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in London that he was “convinced CUNNINGHAM no longer fit to conduct intensive offensive required” (33).

Auchinleck’s decision to continue the offensive was undoubtedly correct. Rommel’s “dash to the wire” was a skillful yet desperate gamble that might well have succeeded, had Cunningham remained in command. Auchinleck, however, had a broader perspective on events beyond the scope of Operation Crusader. On the same day he ordered Cunningham’s relief, he summoned Maj. Gen. Neil Ritchie, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Middle East Command in Cairo, to assume command of the 8th Army with orders to continue the offensive. Auchinleck correctly believed that Axis forces were in an untenable logistical situation. By November 1941, the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force operating in the central Mediterranean had gained the upper hand over the Italian Navy, and Axis supply convoys could no longer reach North Africa. When Rommel’s “dash to the wire” failed to induce a retreat, his fuel-starved divisions were forced to raise the siege of Tobruk and withdraw deep into Libya. But you won’t find any of this in Joffe’s book.

Chapter 1, “Reconstructing Crusader,” briefly addresses aspects of British military doctrine that contributed to the 8th Army’s failures in the Western Desert. At the time of Operation Crusader, the British had not mastered combined arms operations in fluid mechanized warfare. Their doctrinal evolution after the Great War envisioned “set piece” battles with strict separation of armored and infantry forces. Joffe writes that the Western Desert campaign was “predicated on the fanciful notion of a decisive desert tank battle on the analogy of a naval engagement at sea” (11). Time after time the British Army’s inept coordination of tanks, infantry, and artillery could not match German capabilities, a failure worsened by British technical deficiencies in tank and anti-tank gun design and auxiliary services like tactical communications. British superiority in airpower mitigated these liabilities, as did the dominance of the Royal Navy over the Italian fleet. And, too, the Allies held a clear edge in strategic intelligence, thanks to ULTRA.

Chapter 2, “23–26 November: Break-down and Insubordination,” recounts the removal of Lt. Gen. Cunningham from command of the 8th Army, using contemporary documentary evidence and recollections of the principal characters.

The book’s last chapters (3–8) concern the extensive fallout from Cunningham’s removal. They tell familiar and admittedly fascinating tale of the back-biting and second guessing that often follows controversial command decisions. Senior British and Commonwealth officers in the Middle East command speculated that Cunningham may have experienced a breakdown during the battle. Nevertheless, he was a well connected officer, strongly supported by what might be called the “Artillery lobby” and drew public sympathy because his older brother, Adm. Andrew Cunningham, was the widely admired commander of the Royal Navy’s Mediterranean Fleet. The Cunningham brothers hailed from a prominent Scottish medical family and the publicly announced diagnosis of “exhaustion” as the reason for removing Cunningham’s was soon questioned. His supporters in Parliament raised this issue in a period of growing mistrust of Churchill’s wartime leadership, when British defeats were more common than victories. Joffe clarifies the influence of Cunningham’s “famous brother, [and] the network of gunners and possibly conservative politicians” (195) who rose to his defense.

Though Alan Cunningham’s professional reputation was tarnished by his relief during Operation Crusader, he avoided public disgrace, going on to serve in high-level positions.¹ The most notable was his postwar war stint as High Commissioner in Palestine, where he headed an

1. E.g., Commandant of the Army Staff College, Commander in Chief in Northern Ireland, and Commanding General of the Eastern Command in the UK.

unpopular Mandate authority meant to keep peace between impatient Jewish leaders striving for independence and various Arab factions bitterly opposed to a Jewish state in Palestine. No senior British official could have done better than Cunningham in this unenviable position.

The subtitle of Joffe's book derives from a letter by one of Lt. Gen. Cunningham's principal staff officers, Brig. Gen. Alexander "Sandy" Galloway, who never forgot what happened during Operation Crusader and his role in Cunningham's removal. He criticized his superior's defeatist and defensive mindset at a meeting with the two Corps commanders shortly before Auchinleck arrived at 8th Army HQ. "Later accounts make it clear that Galloway had pressed the Corps commanders to continue the battle and that Cunningham had or was prepared to order a withdrawal" (29). While Auchinleck was at 8th Army HQ, he and Galloway held a private meetings that left no written record; Galloway was no shrinking violet and certainly shared his doubts about Cunningham. He later told a senior South African general at Middle East Command HQ that "Cunningham almost lost his head" during the critical phase of the battle (75).

Galloway went on to hold important staff and command positions during the war and managed, after retiring, to insert his opinions into the British Army's official history of the war in the 1950s. He believed, as does Joffe, that Operation Crusader deserves more attention in our remembrance of the war in North Africa. It sheds needed light on a time when British and Commonwealth forces were painfully learning to wage combined-arms warfare against a formidable German adversary.

As his private (after the fact) correspondence reveals, Galloway felt some guilt over his role in Cunningham's relief. We are left to square his disloyalty to his commander with his superior grasp of the combat situation.

Its misleading title aside, the book's focus on the personalities involved in and the political fallout from Auchinleck's removal of Cunningham makes for fascinating reading. That said, the book exhibits the typical shortcoming of "new wave" military history written by non-specialists concentrating more on "narrative" and "memory" than on establishing the facts of the matter.

To his credit, Alexander Joffe is a careful historian who makes excellent use of the abundant personal correspondence of the principals as well as recorded statements both public and private. It is touching to learn that many senior officers in the British Army were loathe to sully Alan Cunningham's professional reputation. They seem almost apologetic about his removal from command in the middle of a battle, an action that, in the full context of Operation Crusader, was right and proper.