

Sidi Rezegh, he had rejected the advice of his two divisional commanders and dashed off on a raid to the Egyptian frontier which, in face of the stubborn British maintenance of the objective, led directly to the loss of his positions round Tobruk and his retreat to Agheila at the cost of sixty per cent. of his forces. His present position in front of Alamein I hoped would turn out to be another example of this tendency. Whether it was on his own initiative or by order of Hitler that he held the whole of his forces forward at Alamein it is impossible to say; but if he had organized a firm defensive position further back, at Matruh or Sollum, with a light covering force to detain us at Alamein, he would have been much more difficult to deal with.

Rommel's superior in the Mediterranean theatre was Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring. Also a regular officer of the old Imperial Army, of Bavarian origin, Kesselring had served as an artillery officer and on the staff until the creation of the Luftwaffe, when he transferred to the new arm in which he rose rapidly. After commanding the 2nd Air Fleet (Luftflotte) in the Battle of Britain and on the Russian front in 1941 he brought it to Italy in October of that year. In April 1942 he assumed the title of Commander-in-Chief South. His authority extended to all the shores of the Mediterranean and by contrast with Rommel, who was an Army commander only, he was now supreme commander of all three services. This superior position reflected his superior strategical abilities but he was naturally obliged to leave the actual conduct of operations in Africa to his more impetuous subordinate. Rommel had a tendency to blame, in certain circumstances, his lack of success on the inadequate logistical support he received from Kesselring—unjustly, for in these matters the latter was obliged to work through the Italians. I was later to be more directly opposed to Kesselring in the Italian campaign and in my judgment he was greatly superior in all elements of generalship to Rommel.

Preparations for a Defensive Battle.

It was obvious that if the enemy were to retain any hopes of success they must attack us before we could develop our full strength and there were not wanting indications that this was their intention. I had decided already that we must meet this attack on our present positions without any thought of withdrawal. As rapidly as possible thereafter we should prepare to concentrate our strength and assume the offensive. On 19th August, therefore, I issued a written Directive to General Montgomery in the following terms, confirming previous verbal instructions:

“1. Your prime and immediate task is to prepare for offensive action against the German-Italian forces with a view to destroying them at the earliest possible moment.

2. Whilst preparing this attack you must hold your present positions and on no account allow the enemy to penetrate east of them.”

I ordered that this decision should be made known to all troops.

It was now becoming possible to reinforce the troops in the desert and Eighth Army decided to strengthen 13 Corps on the southern flank, since the northern part of the front was held strongly enough and it was likely that the

enemy attack would take the form of an out-flanking move to the south. 44 Division, which had arrived in Egypt at the end of June, had just completed its concentration and training and on 15th August I gave orders for it to join Eighth Army. The divisional headquarters, with 131 and 133 Brigades, was sent to relieve 21 Indian Brigade on Alam el Halfa ridge with orders to develop the positions there in the greatest possible strength. The remaining brigade, the 132nd, with one regiment of artillery, was placed under command of 2 New Zealand Division. 10 Armoured Division (8 and 9 Armoured Brigades) had been training for some time but it had never fought as a division, since its tanks had been taken to make up for battle losses in 1 and 7 Armoured Divisions. 8 Armoured Brigade, however, had just been re-equipped and I ordered the division, less 9 Armoured Brigade, to proceed to the forward area. On arrival it took command of 22 Armoured Brigade, of 7 Armoured Division, and took up positions at the western end of Alam el Halfa ridge, between 44 and 2 New Zealand Divisions. 23 Armoured Brigade, which had been dispersed in support of the infantry of 30 Corps, was concentrated on the Corps left flank where it would be available also as a reserve for 13 Corps. With the arrival of these reinforcements there were ranged on Alam el Halfa ridge, threatening the flank of an enemy advance in the southern sector, some sixteen medium, two hundred and forty field and two hundred anti-tank guns, all under Corps command, besides the guns of nearly four hundred tanks and over a hundred anti-tank guns manned by the infantry. The minefields and wire entanglements had been largely extended and the position was a very strong one.

While these preparations were going on in the desert I paid particular attention to the campaign which was being conducted by the Air Force against the enemy's lines of communication. Never had the Axis supply lines in Africa been so stretched as they were when they stood at El Alamein and the strain was felt, above all, in fuel. In dumps or in motor convoys fuel was relatively immune from air attack but to reach Africa from Italy it had to come in tankers and these had been given the first priority as objects for air attack. Working to a plan drawn up in consultation with my staff, the Royal Air Force, assisted by bombers of the 9th United States Air Force* had been waging a most successful war against Axis tankers during which more had been sunk than had arrived. The resulting shortage had a vital effect on the development of the subsequent battle.†

The Battle of Alam el Halfa

I had expected the enemy to attack on or immediately after 25th August, the night of the full moon, and this was indeed his original intention, but the fuel situation caused a delay. In the meantime the concentration of forces on the southern flank made obvious the imminence

* Three squadrons of American fighter aircraft of this force at this time formed part of Western Desert Air Force under Air Vice Marshal Coningham; by January, 1943, eight American fighter squadrons were co-operating with Eighth Army.

† The shortage was so serious that the Germans were reduced to flying in fuel from Greece, a most wasteful procedure.