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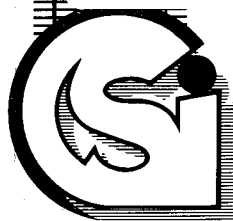
A BATTLE REPORT:

ALAM HALFA

CAPTAIN B. H. LIDDELL HART

GENERALLEUTNANT FRITZ BAYERLEIN, a. D.

MAJOR GENERAL G. P. B. ROBERTS, CB, DSO, MC



**COMBAT
STUDIES
INSTITUTE**

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Alam Halfa



EDITOR'S NOTE

When professional soldiers think in terms of future concepts, it is natural that they should seek to find some of their guide lines in the military actions of the past. It was with this in mind that the idea was conceived of presenting the report of a combat action as seen by two opposing commanders. To be of any value, the report had to shed some light on the problems of today: fluid actions of mobile forces operating over widely separated areas; the logistic problems incumbent in such action; the effect of terrain on the conduct of the operation and, most important, the employment of air elements operating in conjunction with the ground forces.

The campaigns which were fought in the Western Desert during WWII seemed to fit the requirements more so than those of any other theater. Here, unencumbered by the problems which normally beset military operations in more populated areas, the opposing forces were free to engage each other in a classic form of war involving the combatants only. A project to present such a report was begun in the spring of 1955.

Through the assistance of Col R. T. Vance, then the Marine Corps staff representative at CINCNELM in London, B. H. Liddell Hart was reached and several actions were examined to select the one best suited to the purpose.

At first it was considered that the operations at El Alamein might be most rewarding since there the elements of offense, stand and retreat were executed by both sides. Because of the length and complexity of this whole campaign, however, Liddell Hart recommended that the narrative be limited to the battle of Alam Halfa, the second phase of the campaign. Here, the opposing forces were about equal (although the logistical advantage lay with the British) whereas the first battle (retreat from Tobruk) and the third battle (British counteroffensive) were too one-sided.

It was also Liddell Hart who recommended the authors best suited to do the job. Bayerlein commanded the spearhead of Rommel's primary thrust and Roberts commanded the unit which blocked it — each was instrumental in the conduct of the action and both saw the battle from the same level. The authors wrote their portions independently and neither has seen the other's manuscript; thus a true picture, as each saw it, is presented. Liddell Hart has tied the two accounts together and placed the action in perspective. The translation, from the original German, of Gen Bayerlein's article was done by Capt H. W. Henzel, USMC.

The pictures bearing the authors' credit lines are from their own personal collections and the captions identify the actual points concerned.

Discrepancies in the order of battle will be noticed in comparing one account with the other. These, presumably, are the results of erroneous intelligence information on both sides. Although perhaps confusing, these errors will give the reader a picture of the amount of information each side had available. Further, it shows how the fog of battle obscures the field commander's perception of his opponent and firmly substantiates the axiom, that war is truly an art.

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the Authors



Acclaimed as one of the great military minds of the century, **B. H. Liddell Hart** was born in France in October 1895. He received his education in England at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University. With the outbreak of World War I he entered the King's Own Light Yorkshire Infantry and embarked for France in 1915. As a captain he saw action in the battles of Ypres and later he participated in the fierce fighting of the battle of the Somme, where the British used tanks for the first time at Cambrai.

Using his experiences during these actions in conjunction with a great deal of research, he prepared a study of infantry tactics in 1917. He later revised this study for its publication by the British Army as an Infantry Training Manual in 1920.

The opportunity to further his active military career was denied him when he was invalided out of the service in 1924 as a result of the wounds received during the war. Appointed military correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* in 1925, he assumed the role of tactical analyst and military critic while at the same time editing the military articles for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Appointed permanent military critic and correspondent of *The Times* in 1935, he at once made full use of this position to conduct a campaign for a more effective co-ordination of the efforts being made in matters of National Defense, a campaign which led to the creation of a "Ministry for the Co-ordination of National Defense." Unfortunately, the results achieved were far from being what Liddell Hart was asking for in the columns of *The Times*.

In 1937 he became personal adviser to Hore-Belisha, then Minister for War, and was instrumental in the modernization of the British Army and the redistribution of the Imperial Forces. Among many of his proposals that led to a modernized British Army was the creation of an armored division for the Middle East. It was in this organization that a number of officers such as LtCol (later Field Marshal Viscount) Montgomery, and Capt (later General) de Guingand, who became Montgomery's Chief of Staff, received their

desert training. His faith in the importance of armor led him to advocate the concept of deep penetration to cut the enemy's communications far in the rear of the front.

The author of no less than 27 volumes dealing with military tactics, history, strategy and the doctrines of national defense, his works can be considered the texts that educated the youthful officers of both the Allied and Axis armies prior to WW II. A sharp example of this fact is borne out by Fritz Bayerlein's comments on Field Marshal Rommel's personal journal of the campaign in North Africa. He credits Liddell Hart with being the "military author who made the greatest impression on the Field Marshal and highly influenced his tactical and strategical conceptions." General Guderian, creator of the German Panzer units, maintains in his memoirs that the Panzer unit was based on Hart's concept of an armored division combining tanks with mechanized infantry. His influence on the other side of the ledger can be seen in Montgomery's effective use of night tactics in the desert after 1942, and Patton's use of his deep penetration concept in his drive toward the Rhine.



The military career of **Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein, a.D.**, began when he served as a private of infantry on the Western Front in 1917. He was commissioned in 1922, when the military restrictions of the Versailles Treaty limited the Officer Corps of the *Reichswehr* to a small select group. His talents and abilities soon came to the attention of his superiors and he was assigned to the *Kriegsschule* in Dresden, from 1927-30, as an instructor. It was during this period that he came to know another officer with whom he was to be closely associated in years to come — Erwin Rommel. With the conclusion of his tour as an instructor at the *Kriegsschule*, he reported to the General Staff School in Berlin, as a student. He remained

there until 1935. The intervening years until 1939 found him serving as a general staff officer with various Panzer units. When the invasion of Poland was launched, Bayerlein was with the 10th Pz Div. For the campaign in France, he was with *Panzerkorps Guderian* which, as a part of Army Group A, was instrumental in executing the Manstein Plan in smashing through to the Channel coast behind the mass of the Franco-British armies. Remaining with Guderian when his command was expanded and redesignated *Panzergruppe Guderian*. Bayerlein participated in the lightning drive of that unit through Minsk and Smolensk to the outskirts of Moscow.

He first came to the public attention of the Allies as Chief of Staff of the Afrika Korps under Rommel in the Western Desert. His long association with Erwin Rommel and his part in the campaigns in Africa have made him one of the few living authorities on this period. He has collaborated with many military writers in reconstructing the operational history of WWII — Liddell Hart's *The Rommel Papers* probably being the most familiar.

As the war in North Africa was drawing to a close, with the collapse of the Axis forces there, Bayerlein was transferred to the Russian Front, where he took command of the 3d Panzer Div, one of the oldest and best German armored units. In 1944 he moved back to the Western Front with Rommel and took command of the *Panzerlehr Div*. He led this division against the invasion forces in Normandy, at Caen, Tilly and St. Lo. Then, in the last German effort of the war, he had command of that division in the Ardennes offensive, spearheading the forces that hit the American forces in the Bastogne area in the Battle of the Bulge. As the tottering walls around the Third Reich began to crumble he took command of the LIII Panzer Korps during the last ditch defense of his homeland, in the struggle for the Rhine (Remagen) and the Ruhr.

In presenting the German version of the Battle of Alam Halfa in this narrative, Gen Bayerlein can report with accuracy, since he was in actual command of the Afrika Korps at the height of the battle. One of his achievements in preparing this narrative is the manner in which he clears up the still popular misconception that the war in the desert was a duel between the Afrika Korps and the British Eighth Army. In reality, that highly effective unit, the Afrika Korps, was merely a component of the combined Italo-German forces in which the preponderance of troops were Italian.

He now lives in Wuerzburg-Heidingsfeld, Germany.

Major General G. P. B. Roberts, CB, DSO, MC, at the time of his retirement, had one of the most successful careers in recent British military history. Born in the days of the Empire at Quetta, India in 1906, he saw that Empire through some of its most troubled days and played a vital part in the maintenance of the Commonwealth position in North Africa, by his leadership of the British units he commanded there. His career interestingly coincided with that of his opponent in the battle here described. Both were associated



with the development and execution of the theories of armored warfare which their respective services formulated in the decade prior to the outbreak of WWII.

After attending Marlborough College and being graduated from Sandhurst, he was commissioned and posted to regimental duty with the Royal Tank Regiment. He served with his regiment, first in England, then in Egypt from 1928 to 1932. Returning then to England, he became an instructor at the Tank Schools in Bovington. In 1938 he was again posted to duty in Egypt where he was to see so much action in the next few years. In Egypt he was Adjutant of the 6th Royal Tank Regt, and after the war broke out he remained in that area serving with the Eighth Army in the Western Desert until the fall of Tripoli. During this period he served in various staff billets with the 7th Armd Div and the XXX Corps, and then commanded the 3d Royal Tank Regt and the 22d Armd Brigade. After the fall of Tripoli, Gen Roberts, then Brigadier, was moved over to the First Army in Tunisia. For a short time, immediately following his arrival there, he was attached to the US 2d Armd Div under Gen Orlando Ward. This was just after the battle at Kasserine Pass. Until Tunisia was cleared he commanded the 26th Armd Brigade of the 6th Armd Div. Leaving Africa, he returned to England, was promoted to major general and given command of the 11th Armd Div. Gen Roberts trained this division for the coming invasion and landed with it at Normandy. He led this same division throughout the campaigns on the Continent and once again encountered his old opponent of the days in the Desert, Fritz Bayerlein.

Gen Roberts' achievements on the field of battle were recognized by his being awarded the rank of Companion of the Bath, the Distinguished Service Order (2 bars) and the Military Cross. Further, he was mentioned in Dispatches 3 times and the French Government awarded him the Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre.

After the war, in 1946, he was named Commanding General of the 7th Armd Div and in 1948 was appointed Director, Royal Armored Corps. Gen Roberts retired in September 1949, and now resides at "Postillions," Pembury, Kent.

FOREWORD

By Capt B. H. Liddell Hart

THE BATTLE OF ALAM HALFA IN 1942, fought as August turned into September, was a turning point of the war in the Mediterranean—indeed, more truly a turning point than the more celebrated “Battle of Alamein” that followed, in the fall. For by the time this started, late in October, the British build-up of strength in North Africa so vastly exceeded that of the German and Italian forces under Rommel as to ensure the frustration of his attempt to overrun Egypt—leaving only the question of how long he could cling on to the door, and whether he could escape destruction. In the clearer light of post-war knowledge, of the respective forces and resources, it can be seen that Rommel’s eventual defeat became probable from the moment his dash into Egypt was originally checked, in the July battle at Alamein, and this accordingly may be considered the effective turning point. Nevertheless, he still looked a great menace when he launched his renewed and reinforced attack at the end of August. And as the strength of the two sides was nearer to an even balance than it was either before or later, he still had a possibility of victory—and might have achieved it if his opponents

Marshal Rudolfo Graziani



Wide World

had faltered or fumbled as they had done on several previous occasions when their advantage had seemed more sure. But in the event, that possibility vanished beyond possibility of recovery. The crucial significance of “Alam Halfa” is symbolized in the fact that although it was fought out in the same area as the other battles of Alamein, it has been given a separate and distinctive name.

In the two articles which follow, the course of the battle is vividly depicted by key commanders on each side—an illuminating conjunction. At the start of the battle Gen Bayerlein was Chief of Staff of the Afrika Korps, Rommel’s main striking force, and took over command when Gen Nehring was disabled by a bomb splinter during the initial phase. Gen Roberts commanded the armored brigade which covered the keypoint of the British position, and thus played the principal combat role in the issue of the battle. These two outstanding leaders of “armor” confronted each other again, though not so directly, two years later in Normandy—when Fritz Bayerlein commanded the *Panzerlehr* Division and “Pip” Roberts the British 11th Armored Division—being then, at 37 years of age, the youngest divisional commander of the invading armies. These two armored divisions won general recognition as the best on each side.

As the Editor has asked me to write a foreword to these accounts from different “sides of the hill,” the best way to help an understanding of their significance may be to fill in the historical and strategic background to the battle, while summarizing the course of events.

* * * *

The war in the Mediterranean, and on the African continent, started in June 1940 when Mussolini, seeing that France was obvi-

ously collapsing under the German blitzkrieg, plunged into the war on Hitler’s side to reap some of the spoils of France’s conquest, and to take advantage of the weakness of the British position in Africa. At that moment there were only 50,000 British troops in Africa facing 10 times as many Italians—over 200,000 in Italian East Africa and nearly 300,000 in Libya. But the Italian Army was ill-prepared for war and short of motor vehicles. Marshal

Wide World



General Sir Archibald Wavell

Graziani’s advance from Libya into Egypt did not begin until 3 months later in September, and after a 70-mile advance through the desert it halted at Sidi Barrani, and there stuck for 2 months.

The British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, Gen Wavell, decided to try the effect of an upsetting stroke by the Western Desert Force—the embryo of the Eighth Army—under Gen O’Connor. It was visualized as in the nature of a powerful raid rather than an offensive—for Wavell had only 2 divisions. But the “raid” turned into a decisive victory, owing to the demoralizing effect of the heavily armored British “Matilda” tanks—coupled with that of the 7th Armd

Div's swoop through the desert onto the Italians' rear. This sudden blow was delivered on 9 December. A large part of Graziani's army was cut off and 35,000 captured, while the remainder only regained the shelter of their own frontier after a panic retreat that reduced them to a disorderly rabble. Then Bardia was captured, on 3 January, with 40,000 prisoners. Tobruk fell on the 22d, with a further 25,000.

The surviving part of Graziani's army retreated past Benghazi towards Tripoli, but was intercepted by an indirect approach in pursuit that proved one of the most brilliant and daring strokes of the war. The 7th Armd Div made a dash through the desert interior to reach the sea south of Benghazi; on 5 February. Its leading elements covered 170 miles in 36 hours over difficult and unknown country. They amounted to only 3,000 men, yet by their audacity in thrusting across the path of a vastly superior enemy they secured a bag of 21,000 prisoners.

Small as were the forces which had achieved this astonishing conquest of Cyrenaica, there was at the moment little to stop them driving on to Tripoli. But a halt was called by the British Government in order to provide the means of dispatching the ill-starred expedition to Greece.



General Sir Claude Auchinleck

Wavell was instructed to leave only a minimum to hold Cyrenaica. At this juncture, also, the leading part of the German Afrika Korps, under Rommel, arrived in Tripoli. Too late to save the Italians from disaster, this German help came in time to prolong the North Africa campaign for over 2 years, during which Britain's position in Egypt was brought into imminent danger.

A rapid counterstroke launched by Rommel at the end of March took the weak British holding forces by surprise and threw them into disorder. Within a fortnight he had swept the British out of the whole of Cyrenaica, save for an isolated

portion which withdrew into Tobruk—and there remained as a thorn in his side. By the time he reached the frontier, however, he had overstretched his supply lines and was thus compelled to halt.

The Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, Adm Raeder, had urged, and continued to urge, the importance of seizing the keys of the Mediterranean, and shutting the British out of that area. But Hitler showed little interest in such projects, being too intent on his plans of overthrowing Russia, as a way of making Britain yield. The heads of the Army agreed with him on military grounds—they were averse to the detachment of forces to Africa and disliked the idea of committing troops across the sea, where the British Navy could powerfully interfere. While the Italian collapse had driven Hitler to send some help there, both he and his military chiefs shrank from giving Rommel the scale of reinforcements he needed to capture Egypt.

On the other hand, strategic minds in Britain conceived the idea immediately after the fall of France of developing a countermove by way of North Africa against the southern flank of Hitler's position in Europe. Having been frustrated in his premature attempt to develop



such a threat by landing in Greece, Churchill ardently embraced the idea of clearing North Africa—as an avenue into Europe.

After an abortive attack (Operation "Battleaxe") on Rommel's position, the British launched a much bigger offensive ("Operation Crusader") in November, with the large reinforcements that Churchill had sent out to Egypt. By this time Wavell had been replaced by Gen Auchinleck as Commander-in-Chief, while the forces on the Libyan frontier had been constituted as the Eighth Army, under Gen. Cunningham. The offensive opened well, after a wide outflanking move through the desert, but the attacking forces then became disjointed, so that Rommel was able to defeat them in fragments, throw them back temporarily, and almost produce a retreat to Egypt. This whirling battle of tanks continued for nearly 3 weeks, shifting to and fro with repeated turns of fortune, but in the end, Rommel's tank strength was exhausted and he was forced to retreat—right back to his February starting position near Agheila, on the frontier of Tripolitania.

To Rommel's British opponents his most disconcerting characteristic was the way he reacted to pressure like a recoil-spring, and changed from a far-reaching retreat to an equally far-reaching riposte. He had hardly withdrawn from Cyrenaica before he was back there again.

At the beginning of 1942, just as he had reached the shelter of salt-marsh bottleneck on the Tripolitanian frontier, a small convoy arrived with reinforcements. Thereupon he promptly planned to take advantage of the way that the British had become overstretched in their advance. By a surprise counterstroke, when they imagined him as still exhausted, he dislocated their front, then exploited their disorder by an indirect thrust from the desert flank against the Benghazi base, and tumbled them back to Gazala—recapturing more than half their gains.

Churchill again built up the strength of the Eighth Army for a renewed effort to throw Rommel out of Cyrenaica and out of Africa. But Rommel struck first. By a wide

flanking maneuver with his armor in the night of 26 May he threw the Eighth Army off its balance. He was checked, however, before he could reach the coast and cut off the British forces holding the Gazala Line. Thereupon he took up a defensive position with his back against the British minefields—which led the British to feel that he was cornered, and bound to surrender. But their countermoves were too direct and they fell into the defensive trap which Rommel had quickly improvised when he was checked.

With its reserves entangled and expended, the Eighth Army was unable to meet Rommel's next flanking move, and was beaten piecemeal. While one portion was falling back to the frontier, another portion withdrew into Tobruk. Rommel's armored forces swept past Tobruk, as if heading for the frontier, then suddenly switched around and struck at Tobruk in reverse, before the forces there had settled down. Penetrating the defenses at a weak point, the Germans overran the garrison and captured almost the whole of it—together with such an abundance of supplies and transport as to provide the means for a prolonged advance on their own part.

Rommel then chased the remains of the Eighth Army helter-skelter through the Western Desert, and came dangerously close to reaching the Nile Valley, the main artery of Egypt. If that had been secured, and with it the Suez Canal, Britain's whole position in the Middle East would have been wrecked.

On 30 June 1942, Rommel reached Alamein after defeating the British Eighth Army at Gazala-Tobruk, and chasing its tattered remains 350 miles through the desert. That morning he had written home exultantly: "Only 100 more miles to Alexandria!" By evening he was barely 60 miles distant from his goal and the keys of Egypt seemed within his grasp. Hitler was telegraphing congratulations and Mussolini had flown to Africa ready for a triumphal ride into Cairo. On the other side, Auchinleck, the C-in-C Middle East, had gone forward from Cairo into the desert to take personal command of what was left of the Eighth Army, in an effort to

stem the tide. The situation looked desperately black. The British Fleet had hastily evacuated Alexandria. Clouds of smoke rose from the chimneys of the military offices in Cairo as their records were hastily burnt. The world outside naturally interpreted the snowstorm of charred paper as a sign that the British were fleeing from Egypt.

But a vital change had now come at the front. On July 4th, Rommel, still at Alamein, wrote home: "Things are, unfortunately, not going as we should like. The resistance is too great, and our strength is exhausted." His thrusts had not only been parried but answered by upsetting ripostes. His troops were too tired as well as too few to be capable of making a fresh effort for the moment. He was forced to break off the attack and give them a breather, even though it meant giving Auchinleck time to bring up reinforcements.

Auchinleck was not content with stopping Rommel, but sought to turn the tables decisively. How near he came to succeeding is shown by a letter that Rommel wrote on 18 July, "Yesterday was a particularly hard and critical day. We pulled through again. But it must not go on like that for long, otherwise the front will crack. Militarily, this is the most difficult period that I have been through."

Fortunately for Rommel, the British troops were as exhausted as his own, and soon afterward Auchinleck in turn had to suspend his attacks. But Rommel's closing reflection was: "Although the British losses were higher than ours, yet the price which Auchinleck had to pay was not excessive. What mattered to him was to hold up our advance and that, unfortunately, he had done."

Soon, reinforcements arrived from England. Churchill wanted the British to take the offensive without delay, but Auchinleck, more wisely, insisted on waiting until the fresh troops had become tactically acclimatized to desert conditions. In the sequel, Auchinleck was replaced by Alexander as Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, and Montgomery took over command of the Eighth Army.

from the **British Side**



Wide World

THE BEGINNING OF AUGUST 1942 had the makings of a very trying month in the Western Desert. It was a period of disorganization and reorganization, of dust and flies, of orders and counterorders, and of heat and "gyppy tummy" [amoebic dysentery].

The Eighth Army was licking its wounds and sorting itself out; pulling out as many units as possible to re-form and maintaining as much strength in the Alamein line as its equipment and weapons would permit.

As far as the armor was concerned, the majority of the tanks that would run at all were grouped into one Armored Brigade—the 22d, to which, at the end of July, I was posted to command. Individual units had had heavy casualties so that all the armored regiments of the Brigade, with one exception, were composite units.

The order of battle of the Brigade was:

- Royal Scots Greys (Greys)
- 1st/6th Royal Tank Regiment (1 RTR)
- 5th Royal Tank Regiment/Royal Gloucestershire Hussars (5 RTR)
- 3rd/4th County of London Yeomanry (4 CLY)
- 1st Royal Horse Artillery Regiment (1 RHA)
- 1st Battalion, Rifle Brigade (1 RB)

Each Armored Regiment consisted of two squadrons of 12 Gen Grant

tanks and one light squadron of either Crusader or Stuart tanks, with the exception of CLY which had only one Grant squadron of 15 tanks. In addition, it should be mentioned that there were 6 American tank crews dispersed throughout the Brigade who had come over for battle experience. They were the first American soldiers to fight on African soil. They certainly got their battle experience in a somewhat unorthodox battle and I am glad to say without serious casualties, though one or two had to bail out of burning tanks.

The other armored formations left in the Eighth Army were: a weak brigade of Valentine tanks (23d Armored Brigade) and the 4th Light Armored Brigade consisting of a

regiment of Stuart tanks, 2 regiments of armored cars, a motor battalion and one artillery regiment. Being the main armored force available, many were the ideas of how 22d Armored Brigade should be employed. We spent our time reconnoitering different positions which we should occupy in varying tactical circumstances. It was all rather reminiscent of the situation in the Gazala line some 3 months earlier in May; then we had reconnoitered and planned our defensive positions in many areas which we might be required to occupy in a variety of circumstances. In any event, we had not been given sufficient time to occupy the one selected to deal with the German advance round Bir Hachem and so were defeated in detail. Certainly on that occasion we recovered our balance and had the remainder of the battle been handled differently, might well have wrested the initiative from Rommel.

However, at Alam Halfa at the end of July 1942, the multiplicity of plans as far as the 22d Armored Brigade was concerned did not inspire the greatest confidence.

Early in August the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and others visited the Western Desert. As a result of their visit certain changes in the higher command were made. By August 13th, Gen Alexander was the new C-in-C Middle East and Gen Montgomery the new Eighth Army Com-

The author with Gen Montgomery during a visit to the 22d Armd Brigade

Roberts





Gen Montgomery (center) is briefed at Alam Halfa by Gen Horrocks (left) and Brigadier Roberts.

mander.

These changes were to have a marked effect within a few days on our plans, on our life and on our outlook generally. Within two days of his arrival Gen Montgomery had toured the whole front and visited all the units in it. I well remember my first meeting with him; he and the new Corps Commander, Gen Horrocks, were to meet me at a certain point on the Alam Halfa ridge at 0845 hours. At 0830 being afflicted with gypsy-tummy I felt there was just time to disappear over the nearest ridge with a spade, and plodding my way back a few minutes later complete with spade I saw a large cortege arriving at the appointed spot and some 5 minutes ahead of schedule. There was Gen Horrocks, XIII Corps Commander, whom I saluted, there were Bobbie Erskine, Brigadier General Staff, XIII Corps, and Freddie de Guingand, Chief of Staff, Eighth Army and several other characters including a little man with white knobby knees, an Australian hat and no badges of rank who I took to be a newly arrived war cor-

respondent. Monty, whom I had not previously met was obviously going to arrive later. I was just about to ask Freddie de Guingand from which direction the Army Commander might be expected when the gentleman in the Australian hat said to me "Do you know who I am?" — "Yes, Sir," was the prompt reply. It was quite clear that whoever he was it was better to know! And, of course, it was Monty.

Very soon Montgomery appreciated that Alam Halfa was the cornerstone of the defensive position. He ordered up 44 Division from the Delta to occupy the high ground itself, and within the perimeter of that Division's defenses were to be located the 44th Divisional Artillery and certain Corps artillery units. The 22d Armd Brigade, then an independent armored brigade directly under XIII Corps, was ordered to select and to prepare static defensive positions on the southern and eastern slopes of Alam Halfa. It was considered, and quite rightly, that the Brigade was short of training as a Brigade and its mechanical condition, as a result of the mileage already done by the tanks, precarious, and therefore unsuited to mobile operations. In fact this Brigade, with its same equipment, took part in the battle of Alamein and at one time led the pursuit of the German army to Tobruk.

Gone were all the other plans and we gladly destroyed the mass of traces with different code names which had been prepared with laborious staff work to indicate the alternative positions. There was one firm plan and one position to occupy and we all felt better. (See sketch map No. 2.)

It would be relevant here to describe these positions and indicate the factors affecting their selection. First and foremost, it must be borne

in mind that these were to be firm defensive positions and that the battle would be fought to a preconceived plan; there was to be little possibility of maneuver, so normal in armored tactics, to meet swiftly changing situations. The second important factor was the qualities and peculiarities of the Grant tank which was the mainstay of the defense. Its main armament was a 75 mm gun in a side-front mounting. This prevented good, natural "hull-down" positions being selected, and since the gun had only a very limited traverse only limited areas of fire were available for each tank. The tank was very high which increased the difficulty of concealment in anything but very broken ground. Thirdly, a very wide area had to be covered to deal with attack from the east, southeast and south; consequently there were no troops available purely as a reserve.

Very briefly these matters were resolved as follows. The 6 pounder AT guns of 1 Rifle Brigade and of an antitank battery from an artillery regiment, put under my command specifically for this operation, were given the area of flat and unbroken ground to cover; their concealment in such terrain being obviously easier than for Grant tanks. The Grant tanks were put into the broken foothills, and where suitable positions could not be found these were achieved by bulldozing. Finally, the Greys, being equipped with the newest Grant tanks were placed on the eastern slopes, from which direction attack was considered least likely, so that they would be the most likely to be available as a mobile reserve and were at the same time the most mechanically reliable.

The detailed positions having been decided upon, a careful artillery program was planned with SOS tasks, particularly some tasks close

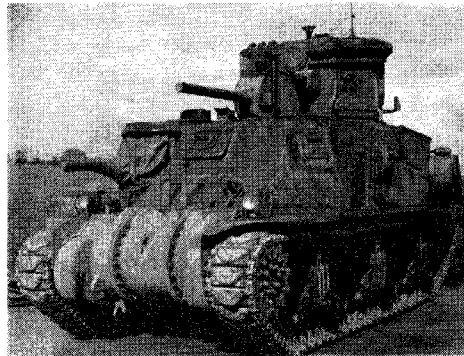
Static positions are prepared and dug in



Stuarts — useful for harassing roles



Grant — its peculiarities present a problem





Touring the front with the Prime Minister. L-R, Alexander, Roberts, Churchill, Horrocks

in front of the antitank guns.

It should be pointed out here that the Grant tank, in spite of the disadvantages already mentioned, was the only tank then in the Desert of any real value against the German PzKw III and IV. With its short-barrelled 75 mm gun in the side mounting it could be very effective against these German tanks at about 1,000 yards range. The other tanks, Valentine, Stuart and Crusader with 2 pdr or equivalent guns were of value in a harassing role, but no use in a "slugging match."

This was, at any rate, the impression we gained in those days, but careful tests carried out after the war have shown that we were unduly pessimistic regarding the performances of our own tanks. At Alam Halfa, however, there was a surprise in store for us as will be seen later.

About this time the Prime Minister returned to the Desert on his way back to England from Moscow after seeing the gentleman he described as the "Old Bear." Having spent the night in Monty's caravan, the next day, 20 August, he toured the battlefield. It was with great pride that I squeezed myself into the cut-down station wagon in which he was travelling with several senior officers, and showed him the 22d Armored Brigade concealed in their defensive positions which we had occupied as a rehearsal that morning. Ten days later the battle was fought over the very ground on which the plan was described to him, and which he remembered in some detail when I saw him again in Tripoli, 5

months later.

The day after Winston's visit we had a "telephone battle" organized by Gen Horrocks and based on Monty's conception of the lines the battle would take. A "telephone battle" is the same thing as an American CPX. Information maps were kept and, in accordance with the normal custom of those days, the enemy movements and positions were shown in blue and our own movements and positions in red. It may be thought that this telephone battle has not much bearing on a study of the actual battle, but suffice to say that on the day of the battle itself, the blue lines of the enemy's movements—as put on the maps during the exercise—required little adteration to conform to fact. The timing was different, but the general idea was there.

It must be explained that all this time 22d Armored Brigade was in what was called "leager areas" some one to two miles south of the selected defensive positions. Vehicles were in "air dispersion" and covering a wide area. Time was spent in improving the defensive positions by hand-digging, bulldozers and maintaining tanks and guns.

Meanwhile, in order to strengthen the armored situation, every effort was being made by the higher command to get forward the 10th Armored Div under Gen Gatehouse, with 8th Armored Brigade which was being re-equipped with 3 regiments of new or reconditioned Grant tanks. 10th Armored Div Headquarters arrived in the Alam Halfa area on about 27 August and 22d Armored Brigade was put under its command. Advance parties of 8th Armored Brigade arrived on 29 August, but main bodies of this brigade didn't arrive until 30 August.

At this time the positions of Eighth Army were as shown in sketch map No. 1. At the southern end of our line the 7th Armored Div, consisting of the 4th Light Armored Brigade and the 7th Motor Brigade held the line of the minefield from the left of the 3d New Zealand Div to the southern edge of Deir el Munassib with 7th Motor Brigade. They guarded the remainder of the minefield and the open flank back as far as Himeimat with 4th Light Armored Brigade. This part of the front was

therefore rather lightly held.

Rommel's attack was expected any night towards the end of the month. In the 22d Armored Brigade, elaborate preparations were made for alerting the Brigade and moving to our defensive positions during the night in "wireless silence."

On 30 August I was personally not feeling my best; nothing serious, but just the effects of heat, sand and flies on top of the long summer battles and being slightly wounded during June. Being anxious to be as fresh as possible, I had got up a spare ambulance truck which could be made fly-proof and was a little cooler than a bivouac tent. I had a nap after lunch and went to bed early. Shortly after midnight I was awakened by gunfire in the distance and it was quite clearly more than some little affair.

The Attack Comes

I look outside and the sky is lit up by flashes, so I get up and stroll over to my ACV (Armored Command Vehicle) to find that the staff have not, as yet, had any reports; I go out into the cool night air again. To the northwest the shelling seems to be dying down a bit, but in the southwest the noise continues, German Verey lights lob forward and an occasional tracer tears across the sky. I am called into the ACV and find that information has come through. It seems that there is a very determined attack against 7th Motor Brigade towards the south of the minefields and we are ordered to our defensive position—to be ready there by 0400 hours.

The code word is sent round the units, the move to start at 0130 hours—it is now 0100 hours. Bivouacs are

Montgomery, with Gatehouse (L) and Roberts (R) compares the new German long 75mm with other tank ammunition



pulled down, signallers roll in the cable, and navigator's tank moves into position. At the appointed time we move off and since we are in "wireless silence" I can only hope that all the units are moving too.

As dawn breaks and we are all in our defensive positions, the tactical situation becomes a little clearer. It appears that there had been a small attack in the north which has been completely held; fighting is still going on in the center, but the situation seems in hand; in the south, however, on the front of 7th Motor Brigade the Germans appear to be penetrating our minefields in spite of heavy casualties. It is quite clear that our part in the battle is some hours away, so we all get down to breakfast.

The morning is an anxious period of waiting; there are two Stuka dive bombing attacks, a fairly heavy one on the Alam Halfa ridge itself and a lesser one on the I RTR—the latter with no casualties. It does not seem that our defensive position has been located.

About 1100 hours it is clear that strong enemy tank columns have penetrated our minefields in the south. The 4th Light Arm'd Brigade is withdrawing; it is not clear what 7th Motor Brigade is doing.

As the morning wears on, the blue marks on our maps indicating enemy positions, continue to move east-



Wide World

In the morning the Stukas attack Alam Halfa ridge

wards. What was 40 tanks moving north has become 90 tanks moving east; there are 3,500 mechanized transports and guns reported; another 50 tanks are joining those moving east. This is quite obviously a large-scale affair. In the early afternoon I feel the need of my own direct information so I order out two of the light squadrons to go up to 5 miles south and southwest of our positions and, without getting involved, to report on any enemy movement. At about 1530 hours reports from the right of the two squadrons begin to come in—"Strong force of enemy tanks moving northeast. Head of column at figures so-and-so." A little later "Column consists of 180 enemy tanks. Direc-

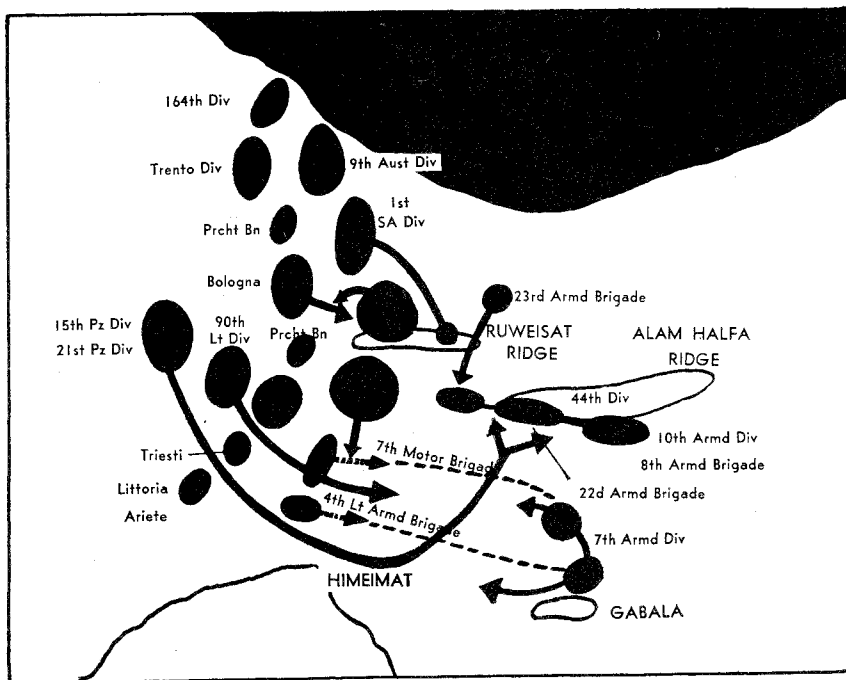
tion the same." They are coming straight toward us. And then at that moment there is another Stuka attack and this time on 4 CLY. There do not seem to be any casualties, but has the enemy become aware of our complete position?

Now I can see the enemy myself through my glasses. They are coming straight up the line of the telegraph posts which lead in front of our position. There is some firing by their leading tanks, presumably at our light squadrons, so I instruct these squadrons to come back but to take it wide so as not to give our position away.

On they come, a most impressive array. And now they are swinging east and look like passing us about 1,200 yards from our more forward positions. I had given strict instructions that we would not open fire until the enemy tanks were at under 1,000 yards range. Here was something of a dilemma. All our information has been passed back to Divisional Headquarters and I believe that at this time Gen Gatehouse is with Gen Horrocks on Alam Halfa itself and a bit further east than we are; it seems that he can see this mass of enemy tanks about to pass our position, at any rate at that moment he speaks to me personally on the wireless as follows, "I don't want you to think that we are in a blue funk here or anything like that, but if these fellows continue on as they are doing you will have to come out and hit them in the flank."

I immediately give orders for 4 CLY and 5 RTR to be prepared to move out of their defensive positions, but no sooner have I done so than the leading German tanks halt. (position of head marked "A" on sketch map No. 2.) so I cancel the order at once. It is fascinating to watch them, as one might watch a snake curl up ready to strike. But there is something unusual too; some of the leading tanks are Mk IVs, and Mk IVs have, in the past, always had short barrelled 75 mm guns used for close support work and firing HE only, consequently they are not usually in front. But these Mk IVs have a very long gun on them; in fact it looks the devil of a gun. This must be the long-barrelled stepped-up 75 mm the Intelligence people have been talking about.

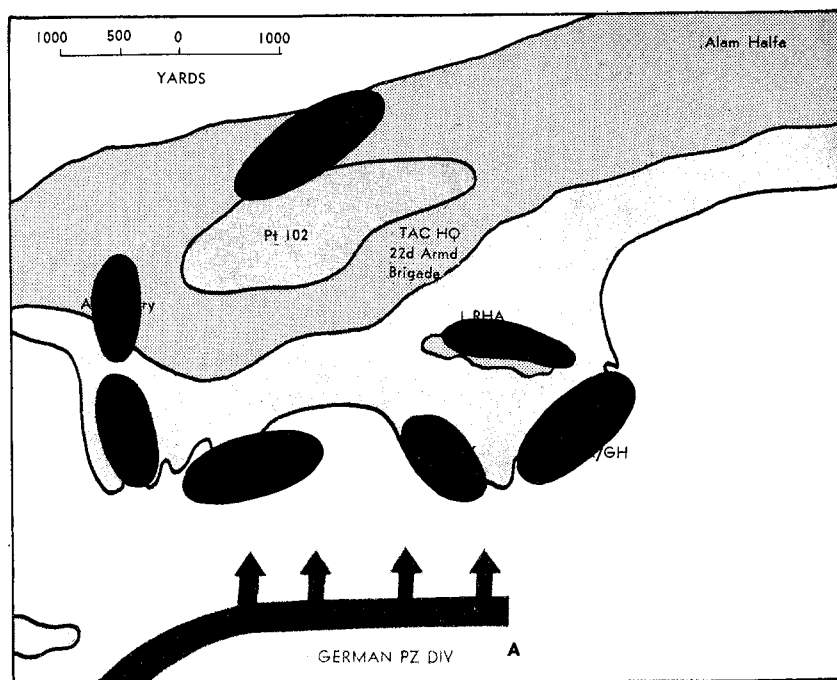
Sketch Map No. 1 — deployment of the Eighth Army at the time of the attack



And now they all turn left and face us and begin to advance slowly. The greatest concentration seems to be opposite the CLY and the AT guns of the Rifle Brigade. (Eighty-seven German tanks were counted at this time opposite this part of the front.) I warn all units over the air not to fire until the enemy are within 1,000 yards; it can't be long now and then in a few seconds the tanks of the CLY open fire and the battle is on. Once one is in the middle of a battle, time is difficult to judge, but it seems only a few minutes before nearly all the tanks of the Grant squadron of the CLY were on fire. The new German 75 mm is taking a heavy toll. The enemy tanks have halted and they have had their own casualties, but the situation is serious; there is a complete hole in our defense. I hurriedly warn the Greys that they must move at all speed from their defensive positions and plug the gap. Meanwhile the enemy tanks are edging forward again and they have got close to the Rifle Brigade's AT guns, who have held their fire marvellously to a few hundred yards. When they open up they inflict heavy casualties on the enemy, but through sheer weight of numbers some guns are overrun. The SOS artillery fire is called for; it comes down almost at once right on top of the enemy tanks. This, together with the casualties they have received, checks them. But where are the Greys? "Come on the Greys!" I shout over the wireless "Get out your whips." But there is no sign of them at the moment coming over the ridge and there is at least another half hour's daylight left.

Meanwhile some of the enemy have started to work round our left flank and the 5th RTR is in action. Although 1st RTR is not engaged, I dare not move them from their position because there seem to be a number of German tanks still in reserve in the rear who could move their way.

And now in the center the enemy is edging forward again. The artillery is the only thing I have available to stop them so we bring down all we can and again they are halted. And then the Greys come over the crest from the north; they have not really been long but it has seemed an age. I describe the situation to them

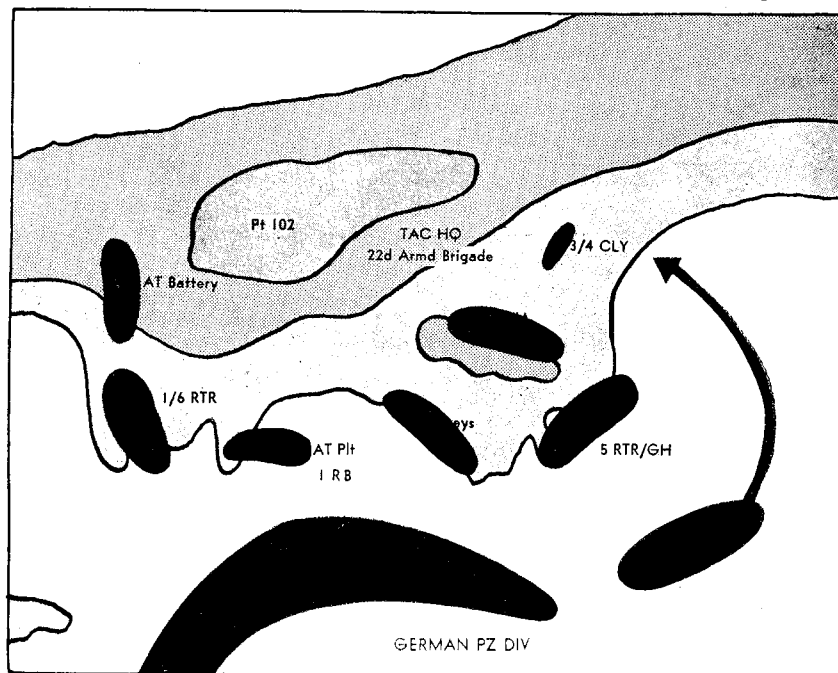


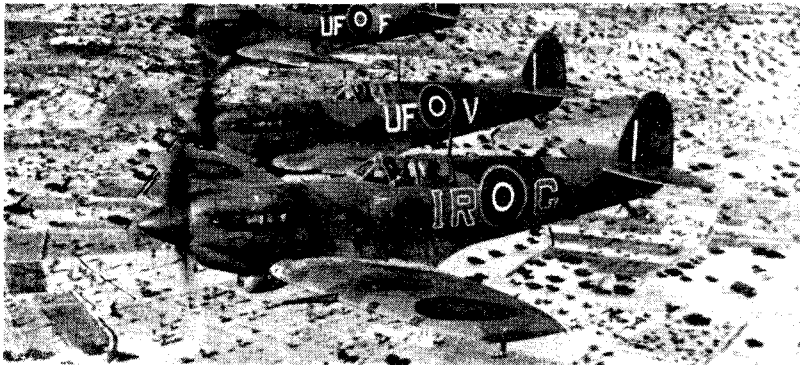
Sketch Map No. 2 — positions of 22d Armored Brigade on Alam Halfa ridge at approximately 1700 hours 31 August

over the air as they come in sight of the battlefield and charge down the hill; they are quite clear of the hole they have to plug and they go straight in. The light is beginning to fade and the situation in the center seems to be stabilized. But there is a little trouble on our left; some of the enemy have worked round the 5th Tanks position and are now coming on to our 25 pdr gun lines; a glance at sketch map No. 3 will

show that they had not got much further to go before they meet nothing. Accordingly, since the center is now a little congested with the Greys in most of the CLY's position I order the CLY (what remained of them) to move round to the left and cover the gap between 5th RTR and the 44th Division's defenses. As darkness falls, flashes and tracer are to be seen on the left flank; the CLY have met the enemy tanks but have halted

Sketch Map No. 3 — the situation at approximately 2030 hours 31 August





Wide World

Co-ordination of the air and ground effort — indispensable key to final success

them, so we seem secure for the night at any rate.

Meanwhile, in the center of the Army front the enemy has been driven off the Ruweisat Ridge by a strong counterattack and have not returned to the offensive. In the south the 4th Light Armd Brigade has withdrawn to the area of Gaballa and the 7th Motor Brigade has withdrawn due east across the front of 22d Armd Brigade, but some 5 miles to the south. Both these Brigades were to do some fine harassing work on the flanks of the enemy on the following day.

It was hardly dark before the first night-bomber passes over our heads and drops a flare on the large concentration of enemy vehicles gathered on the open plain below us. Bombs soon follow the flares, and throughout the night an almost continuous stream of bombers keep up this not very concentrated, but steady and relentless attack. This was the start of continuous day and night bombing which was a very important factor in our success.

Within 22d Armd Brigade, as soon as it is dark, patrols from the rifle companies of the Rifle Brigade are organized to go out with parties of engineers and further immobilize damaged enemy tanks to prevent their recovery by the enemy. Personally, while ammunition and fitters' lorries came up to arm and attend to the tanks and while I await reports of casualties to men and vehicles, I order up my small mess truck and have dinner. It all seems suddenly quite peaceful; my Brigade Second-in-Command, Col Roddick, and I sit at our table under the stars and forget the taste of bully stew and the stress of battle with excellent brandy and cigars recently brought up from the flesh-pots of Alexandria.

Inevitably we discuss the events of

the day. Things are not too bad; the Germans have not been so thrustful as they were earlier in the summer, if they had been they would have taken advantage of that gap in the center when one squadron of the CLY had been "brewed-up." And then they were slow finding our flanks. Of course it is obvious that neither side is as fresh as it had been in May when the Germans had attacked the Gazala line; and it is easy to say what the attacking side should have done when one knows all the details of the defense. But we are not seeking excuses for failures—we are just considering the facts. Even in a tank it is no fun coming under concentrated artillery fire, but, particularly when that fire is mainly of 25 pdr caliber, that should not halt a tank attack. On two occasions it had halted an attack on this day. Obviously the enemy's morale is not as high as it had been a few months ago. And at the very moment we are discussing these matters more bombers are going over us and more flares and bombs are being dropped on their tank formations and supply echelons. A comparatively sleepless night will not improve their morale for the morrow, and besides, the 8th Armd Brigade is likely to come into action the next day; our left flank will be more secure. Of course there are still elements of anxiety; will their long-barrelled 75 mm guns decimate another squadron? Will they press round our right flank which has been weakened by the move of the Greys? But in spite of these disquieting thoughts we feel that we have held them on the first and most important day; that we can do it again, particularly as more reinforcements are available.

As the brandy is finished and cigars burn low, reports from the units begin to come in. Taking the

Brigade as a whole, casualties have not been high. In tanks, and I must make it clear that I am referring to Grant tanks only, the figure seems to be about 20; 4 CLY had 12, 5 RTR 1 and the Greys 4. Seventeen out of a Brigade strength of 87. Of the AT guns, the Rifle Brigade has had one section overrun and some men have been taken prisoner; but the remainder claim heavy enemy casualties. One gun alone claims 5 enemy tanks, and the total for this AT platoon is thought to be 19. The armored regiments have their claims too, though their figures are less certain. A fair and conservative estimate for enemy tank casualties seems to be at least 30. Of course, in such circumstances, one would expect the attacker to have higher casualties than the defender.

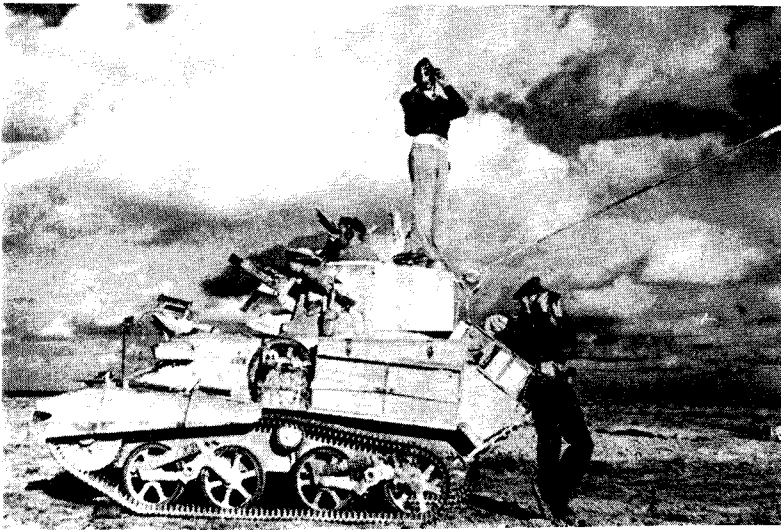
The night is uneventful; the bombing of the enemy continues and more locally there are small clashes between our patrols and the German tank recovery parties. (I regret to say that a few enemy tanks were recovered from under our very noses. The Germans were always good at recovery and showed great enterprise. On the other hand, a great many more were permanently destroyed by our demolition parties.)

As dawn breaks on 1 September we strain our eyes through our binoculars to discover how the enemy's dispositions have changed during the night. Not much change is evident, though it seems that the enemy's forces are spread out rather more widely and further to the east than had been the case the previous evening. Nothing particular hap-

Pilots of the RAF — they dominate the battlefield and leave the enemy helpless

Wide World





Dawn 1 September — we seek to discover changes in the enemy's dispositions

pens at "first light" and there is certainly no determined early attack. However, it is not long before a move seems to be made towards 5th RTR's position and the CLY on the left are also in action. Some enemy movement is seen towards the east and not long afterwards we hear that the 8th Armd Brigade is in action. We learn afterwards that they have had a considerable battle with casualties on both sides, but the enemy's the heavier. Our own positions, including my own Tac Headquarters, are subjected to a certain amount of shelling. During the morning, the Corps Commander, Gen Horrocks, visits me and his arrival coincides with particularly concentrated gunfire. He and I share the safety of the inside of my tank but my less fortunate artillery commander, who has to remain outside, is heard to complain that we are being shelled by 25 pdrs; his Second-in-Command, who is with him, mitigates the insult, however, by scornfully remarking that it is "only a 3-gun troop." (It must be explained that certain of our 25 pdr guns had been captured during the retreat to Alamein and that a troop normally consists of 4 guns.) We are, of course, in full view of the enemy and there is no doubt that Gen Horrocks' arrival and the gathering of one or two nearby officers who want to hear the latest news are responsible for this special attention by the enemy; nevertheless it is well worth it, as is always a visit by Gen Horrocks. He has that wonderful knack of inspiring confidence and enthusiasm wherever he goes, and the raised

morale he leaves behind quickly spreads to those he has not even seen. He tells us that the battle is going well; Monty has the whole thing in hand and everything is going exactly according to plan; the 8th Armd Brigade is now up at more or less full strength and the 4th Light Armd Brigade is having a terrific time on the enemy's southern flank and doing great damage. I tell him that, as I had reported to my Divisional Commander, I am a little concerned about my right flank.

In the afternoon some pressure is, in fact, exerted against our right flank and it looks as if an outflank-

ing movement might develop there. Having nothing else available I order the light squadron of 1 RTR to take up positions west of the 1 RTR position and facing south, and should the enemy advance in that direction to delay them as much as possible. Meanwhile, Gen Gatehouse informs me that the 23d Armd Brigade will be moved over from the coastal sector and protect my right flank from a position on the high ground around Deir el Hima. This is good news.

As it happens, however, the attack in this area is not pressed home with much determination. 1 RTR are engaged from their main position and their light squadron engages the enemy further west. This was sufficient to stop him and though 23d Armd Brigade reached their new position during the late afternoon, I do not believe they were called upon to fire a shot.

The day gradually draws to a close and there is no "last light" determined attack by the enemy. In fact on the whole of our front the enemy has withdrawn out of tank range and the last shots that are fired are by the artillery.

Patrols during the night are again organized but no contact is made. The battle of Alam Halfa, as far as 22d Armd Brigade is concerned is virtually over.

In the morning enemy artillery bombards our positions . . .



. . . we are being shelled by the Germans using our own 25 pounders

