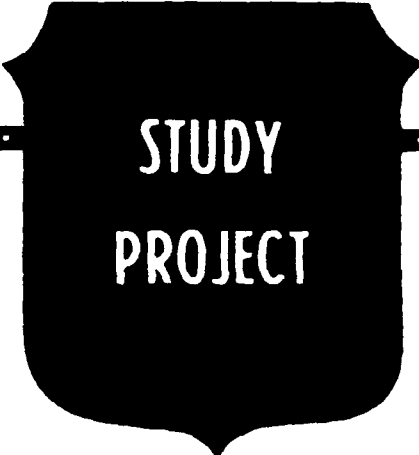


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IN PURSUIT:
MONTGOMERY AFTER ALAMEIN

BY

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also Rommel's tactical and operational intentions. Despite this, the Axis forces were able to withdraw across 1350 miles of open desert, delaying British forces for three months, without suffering significant loss.

This paper seeks to answer three questions: (1) How did Rommel's Army escape? (2) Why did Eighth Army fail to capture or destroy the remaining enemy forces? (3) What were the results and what can we learn about these events?

The consensus of the paper is that the failure lay in a combination of factors. The pursuit had neither been planned nor prepared for by the Eighth Army or its subordinate units. There was no strategic concept to end the campaign, only a series of tactical improvisations. Training in the Eighth Army was inadequate to conduct such a decentralized, highly fluid operation. The Eighth Army commander was neither audacious enough to conduct a successful pursuit, nor confident enough of his subordinate commanders to permit them to do so.

The failure to crush the Panzer Army lengthened the African Campaign, permitted German reinforcement of Tunisia and strengthening of defenses throughout the Mediterranean theater, and delayed the follow-up invasion of Sicily. The strategic effect was to extend the war by several months.

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Battlefield victories are common in war. It is comparatively rare that a battlefield victory is followed with a vigorous pursuit. After the Battle of El Alamein, the British Eighth Army possessed overwhelming superiority on land, sea, and air over Rommel's German-Italian Panzer Army. In addition, the British had the advantage of Ultra, the ability to decipher most German communications. Ultra gave not only a clear picture of Axis weakness, but also Rommel's tactical and operational intentions. Despite this, the Axis forces were able to withdraw across 1350 miles of open desert, delaying British forces for three months, without suffering significant loss.

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IN PURSUIT: MONTGOMERY AFTER ALAMEIN

"...the importance of the victory is chiefly determined by the vigor with which the immediate pursuit is carried out. In other words, pursuit makes up the second act of the victory and in many cases is more important than the first."

-- Carl von Clausewitz.¹

As dawn broke over the shoulder of the Eighth Army on 4 November 1942, victory was at hand. After ten brutal, grueling days of fighting, Panzer Armee Afrika² had been battered to remnants. By eight o'clock, the morning haze burned off and open desert stretched before the armored cars of the 12th Lancers. The pursuit was on. The "Benghazi Handicap" was running for the last time.³

Three months and 1,350 miles after El Alamein, the British entered Tripoli, administrative capital of Italian Libya and goal of British offensives since 1940. It was deserted. The German and Italian defenders had withdrawn to defensive positions in Tunisia. Pursuit of Rommel's army was over for the moment; the soldiers on both sides rested, refitted, and regrouped for the next round of battle. The distance covered was impressive but the strategic result a dismal British failure. Rommel's small remnant had escaped virtually unscathed.⁴

The failure of Montgomery's Eighth Army to capture or destroy the Panzer Armee was deeply disappointing. However, it

generally attracts only passing notice in most accounts of the war in North Africa. The pursuit, sandwiched between the great victory of El Alamein and the final triumph in Tunisia, was overshadowed by the Allied landings on 8 November in French North Africa. More dramatic events elsewhere made the pursuit seem inconsequential in the long run.⁵ This is understandable. Compared to the drama of El Alamein, Kasserine, and Wadi Akarit, nothing very exciting happened. No great encirclements, no long columns of prisoners, no dramatic battlefield surrenders occurred.

The post-Alamein pursuit, however, was of profound strategic importance. It was one of the few opportunities for the Western Allies to crush an Axis Army and close a theater of operation. This could have decisively influenced the course of the war. El Alamein was also the last opportunity to score a decisive, strategic victory under exclusively British leadership. The tide of American arms and armies thereafter pushed the British into an auxiliary role. Had the pursuit been properly done, there is a strong case to be made that the Axis bridgehead would have been fatally compromised, the surrender of Italy hastened, the war shortened.⁶ Such speculations are debateable. There is no dispute, however, that the Panzer Armee Afrika escaped certain annihilation, at least temporarily.

The Axis forces that recoiled across the western desert arrived at the Tunisian border defenses in very weak condition. Even after meager reinforcements arrived, only 34 German and 57

Italian tanks were available to face over 700 British tanks with more coming up. Almost 1,000 Axis aircraft had been overrun or destroyed for lack of repair parts, fuel, maintenance, and crews.⁷ Ammunition, fuel, and supplies were virtually exhausted.

More significant than the losses, however, was what Rommel had saved. Ahead of the Axis rear guards had gone the considerable infrastructure of the Panzer Arme. Supply, transport, medical units, repair depots, maintenance specialists for ground and air combat equipment, engineer construction units, Allied prisoners-of-war, intelligence analysts, communications companies, and operations and logistics staffs with their records, reports, and planning tables transported by thousands of trucks reached safety. Much of the muscle had eroded, but the army's brain, skeleton, and nervous systems were intact. In Tunisia they quickly reorganized. Around these unglamorous, but essential, components Rommel's army was rebuilt -- and quickly.

Rear echelon troops had little direct fighting power. Easily destroyed, these "soft" components were nonetheless difficult to replace.⁸ Their technical skills, however, had to be in place before major combat units, brigades and divisions, could effectively function. Their survival meant that the scarce air and naval transport available could be devoted to bringing in "teeth" (infantry, artillery, armor) rather than "tail" elements. In saving them, Rommel could regenerate his army and fight on in Africa until mid-May 1943.

Field Marshal Rommel's success was amazing by any measure. The conduct of a retreat under pressure is an extraordinarily difficult operation to successfully execute. The retreating force must use every artifice to slow the pursuer but must abandon or destroy anything that cannot be carried off. The pursuing force has the initiative, at the very least. Anyone or anything left behind will be recovered, restored, and eventually returned to the fight.⁹

General Montgomery had the initiative and much, much more. Allied naval superiority was overwhelming. The Royal Air Force commanded the air, checked only by weather and supplies. The Eighth Army began the pursuit well-supplied, close to its major depots, with an awesome superiority in tanks, guns, and equipment.¹⁰ British tactical intelligence was excellent. From an increasing flow of enemy POW's, tactical signals intelligence, unchallenged aerial photography,¹¹ and front line reports, British commanders should have had a much better picture of the battlefield than their opposite numbers in the Panzer Armee.¹² At the strategic level there was something even better.

Montgomery had Ultra. Though imperfect and sometimes incomplete, the ability to read the German Enigma machine codes gave Allied commanders a priceless, decisive advantage. In the African campaign, almost everything of any consequence was radiocoded in cipher. Ultra even provided that most difficult to obtain information: the enemy's intentions. At 1950 hours, 2 November, Rommel sent a situation report to Oberkommando des

Wehrmacht (OKW) giving his strength and intention to retreat. By 0555 the next morning, 3 November, the decrypted message was sent to Cairo for CINC Middle East (General Alexander); at 0835 hours the gist was transmitted to all Middle East stations, including the commanding general, Eighth Army.¹³ Preparations for withdrawal were soon confirmed by aerial reconnaissance and tactical signal intercepts. General Montgomery knew then, a full day before the retreat began, of the imminent departure of Rommel's army. Given the British tactical and operational advantages, why does El Alamein not rank with Jena, Megiddo and O'Connor's 1940 offensive as strategic victories?

The disappointing results of the British pursuit have been addressed by historians, biographers, even participants. Field Marshals Rommel and Montgomery contributed their own assessments. Most commentators have dismissed the causes in a few glib and glossy phrases. Bad weather, weak subordinates, weak planning, partially trained troops, a daring and skilled opponent, and exhaustion have all been cited. As we better understand Ultra's impact on the war, the "blame" has been focused more narrowly on Montgomery. Monty-bashing is popular sport.¹⁴ His towering vanity, abrasive pettiness, arrogance, and ingratitude make him an easy and attractive target on both sides of the Atlantic.

Certainly Montgomery bears the responsibility for the post-Alamein failure of his army, as any commander must. His culpability, however, is more than passive. His personal decisions and actions seriously call into question his generalship during

this period. But Montgomery deserves only partial credit for what happened. None of the explanations are comprehensive. A more thorough assessment is needed, not only on historical grounds, but also as a guide to better operational understanding in the future. This study cannot examine the entire operation from El Alamein to Tripoli. Proper examination of the complex movements, the air and sea components, the logistical aspects and the command structure would require a lengthy book. I intend only to illustrate some representative actions and focus on three key questions. How did the Panzer Arme Afrika get away? Why did Eighth Army fail to bag its quarry? What were the results and what can we learn from this episode?

While the pursuit proper began on 4 November, it naturally flowed from the results of the battle of El Alamein. The battle began on the night of 23-24 October under the code name Operation Lightfoot. Although achieving local surprise and initial success, especially in the New Zealand attack in the south, the British armor failed to boldly follow up the initial breaks in the defense. The momentum slowed and the opportunity faded. After three days the attacks had failed to break through the Axis defenses, and General Montgomery ordered a temporary halt to regroup. Field Marshal Rommel counter-attacked, using up his fuel, ammunition, and armor, unsuccessfully trying to push the British back from key areas seized during Lightfoot. Eighth Army then reorganized, shifting the main effort from the southern half of

the front to a salient carved out just north of the center of the line. The second phase of the battle, Operation Supercharge, focused the massive combat power of two corps, totalling 4 infantry and 2 armored divisions, and ruptured the German-Italian defenses. Recognizing the inevitable, Rommel gave orders on 3 November to withdraw, only to be stopped by Adolph Hitler's famous "no retreat" message. Fresh British attacks the night of 3-4 November ripped a hole in Rommel's defenses that could not be patched with the handful of German and Italian tanks remaining. British armored units began to work their way through intense congestion in the salient and out into open desert.

The pursuit proper can be divided into four phases for ease of discussion. The first phase, beginning on 4 November, offered the greatest opportunities to the Eighth Army. The British push through the defenses began at about 0830 and by 1000 was increasing in momentum. Rommel had ordered his last relatively intact armored formation, the veteran Italian Ariete Division, up from the south to close the gap. By 1530, Ariete had been surrounded and destroyed in heavy fighting by 7th Armored Division. The Italian XX Corps was now destroyed; the Italian X Corps, holding the line south of the break-through, was cut off and surrendered in the next few days. German rear guards delayed 1st Armored Division near Tel el Mampsra where forward progress stopped after five miles.* 10th Armored Division, reconstituted only that

* Early in this action the 1st Armored Division commander's tank and several others were knocked out. He ordered up his artillery to pound the German tanks and anti-tank guns which

morning, was ordered west then counterordered south around 7th Armored Division's fight with Ariete. 10th Armored Division made only a few miles through this confusion before halting for darkness. 7th Armored Division had halted after destroying Ariete, some 2 or 3 miles forward of the salient. 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division made the best progress but, after assembling its brigades, stopped well south of El Daba. That night, as the British X Corps stopped to rest, refuel, and regroup, Rommel ordered his forces through Fuka and beyond.

The morning of 9 November, X Corps ordered the three armored divisions to turn sharply north to objectives at El Daba (1st Armored Division) and Ghazal (10th Armored Division). These short hooks caught some Italian formations and generally completed the destruction of the Italian XXI Corps. This was small compensation for the loss of momentum. The New Zealanders, followed by 7th Armored Division, pushed west only to be halted south of Fuka, well short of the coast road, by a mine field later found to be a dummy. The German withdrawal, though desperately short of fuel, continued to stay just out of reach.

The final British lunge toward Sollum and Halfaya Pass was slowed again by confusion, lack of fuel, German rear guard actions, and heavy rains. Each attempt to loop behind the Germans failed. By 11 November, Rommel was clear of the

eventually withdrew after several hours. As the British closed on the German positions, they captured General von Thoma, Commander of Afrika Korps. Although the active combat was over by 1200, no significant further movement was undertaken by 1st Armored Division that day.

immediate threat of encirclement, having yielded Mersa Matruh, Sidi Barrani, and Bardia. Montgomery ordered a temporary pause at the Egyptian-Libyan border on 10 November for supplies to catch up with the pursuing divisions. Thus ended the first, and most promising, part of the pursuit.

The second phase of the pursuit evicted Rommel from Cyrenaica, recapturing Tobruk, Benghazi, and Agedabia. In two weeks Rommel had retreated behind weak rear guards and extensive delaying obstacles to an old defensive position at El Agheila. Rommel's fuel shortage and weak combat strength forced him to follow the coastal road around the Cyrenaica bulge. The track cross-country to Mechili-Msus-Agedabia was open for a repeat of the outflanking attacks used in previous offensives. Montgomery, however, overruled the pleas of his subordinates and permitted only light armor to use this avenue. Rain again hampered rapid action and kept the RAF grounded. By a whisker, the German flank guards held off the British armored cars and again the Panzer Arme'e escaped.

The third phase lasted three weeks (24 November to 14 December) while the two armies faced each other at El Agheila. Montgomery built up for a battle while Rommel prepared another withdrawal. Although well aware of Panzer Arme'e's startling weakness in every category, Montgomery insisted the preparations go forward for a major set-piece attack. A wide envelopment by the New Zealanders on 12-15 December, though delayed by fuel shortages, cut the road behind Rommel's German rear guards.

After a desperate, but successful, battle they escaped. The Italian infantry had left a week before for the next defense line at Buerat.

The last phase was played out in the remaining corner of Italian Libya. Rommel fully occupied the Buerat defensive position on 26 December. In almost an identical replay of the El Agheila "battle", Montgomery built up supplies until 13 January. Rommel again pulled back just as the British attack was poised to begin. The withdrawal proceeded unmolested through Tripoli which the British occupied the same day Panzer Armees settled into good defensive positions in Tunisia. The pursuit was over. Despite overwhelming superiority on land, sea, and air, the Eighth Army had conspicuously failed to achieve any success after 4 November. Panzer Armees Afrika had emerged tired but intact.

Of the several culprits blamed for Rommel's escape, the earliest was the weather.¹⁵ Montgomery said, "Rommel's forces were saved from complete disaster by heavy rain."¹⁶ Heavy rains on 6-7 November slowed movement, accelerated fuel consumption, grounded the RAF, interfered with communications equipment, and disorganized the British rear echelons. In the storms, resupply convoys got mired or simply lost. Columns stretched out, bogged down. Tank units ran out of fuel.¹⁷ Heavy rains on 15-17 November also impeded the cross-country thrust through Cyrenaica, intended to cut off the retreating Germans and Italians at Agedabia.

The weather, of course, knows no favorites. It rained on both sides. While much (but not all) of the German and Italian wheel traffic could use the hard-surfaced coastal road and thus suffered less from the mud, this was a mixed blessing. Traffic jams negated much of this advantage; Rommel himself noted columns "partly of German, partly of Italian vehicles -- jammed the road... Rarely was there any movement forward and then everything jammed up again."¹⁸ Fuel consumption was a problem for both sides. The Panzer Armee had none. Eighth Army had ample supplies but had enormous problems getting fuel forward to the advancing units as they pushed across the open desert. Cross-country movement is slower and does use more fuel, particularly in soft going. However, the British superiority in both tanks and fuel supplies would have permitted Eighth Army to maintain direct pressure, as well as send outflanking columns deeper inland where the terrain was firmer. Rain certainly did not stop General Ramcke and 600 German paratroopers who raided a British supply column, seized the British transport, and made their way back across the chaotic battlefield to rejoin Rommel on 7 November. The reduced RAF activity was no doubt welcome to the retreating German and Italian soldiers, though there is very considerable question about the effectiveness of the RAF in low-level ground attack at this stage of the war.¹⁹ The rains also grounded the German and Italian air forces, including a combined fleet of 300 transports bringing in critical fuel supplies.

The breakdown in communications was a significant problem.

British radio sets, generally quite good, were largely ineffective at key periods because of the atmospheric disturbances. Wire lines, of course, were left far behind in the fixed defenses of Alamein. Given the fluidity of mobile pursuit, the incessant cross attachment of units and the weakness in prior planning, this loss of radio communications was extremely serious.²⁰ The Germans faced similar problems, though on a smaller scale, but with the added danger that even a single major error on their part would end the game. On balance, the weather was more an excuse than a cause for the failure to run down or encircle the retreating Panzer Arme.

Strong, confident, audacious subordinate commanders could have overcome many problems, including some of the effects of the weather and loss of communication. More importantly, determined leaders could have spurred the weary troops to greater efforts. General Montgomery states he "drove" the Eighth Army hard." Along the way he relieved a commander and gave "an 'imperial' rocket" to a division commander.²¹ Even the official British campaign history attests that subordinate commanders seemed to "lack enterprise." Rommel noted, "The British command continued to observe its usual caution."²² This is in very marked contrast to the Germans who lived, adrenalin pumping, on the razor edge of disaster for three months. German accounts of the retreat repeatedly mention driving through the night to their next position. Conversely, the Eighth Army generally halted at dusk and failed to maintain the momentum of the pursuit after the

break-out.²³

For example, late on 5 November, 22nd Armored Brigade and much of the 2nd New Zealand Division were closing in on the coast road near Fuka, when they were halted by a mine field. It took three hours to get attached engineers forward who then discovered the mine field was a dummy. It had been emplaced by the British as they retreated in July.²⁴ Part of the division crossed as darkness fell and then all halted for the night.

With some notable exceptions, we read little of division and corps commanders being forward with the leading echelons, taking the pulse of battle.²⁵ Brigade commanders were forward but could not marshal the critical resources, air and artillery support, to focus combat power at the decisive point. X Corps was out of touch with most of its subordinate divisions throughout 4 November. Without the front line "feel", X Corps (Lumsden) issued plans for 5 November, assuming Panzer Armee was still in battle positions around Alamein. In fact, they had already left for Fuka and beyond. It was late in the morning before this was corrected. General Freyberg, 2nd New Zealand Division commander, spent the whole day unaware that he had been attached to X Corps at about 1000 that morning. General Lumsden, the corps commander, was not forward and in contact with his divisions. He lost a golden opportunity because of his cautious short hooks to Daba and Ghazal early on and his reluctance in urging forward his armor.

The fundamental problem with most mid-level commanders was

not their location, but their authority, their freedom of action. They were simply not trusted by Montgomery to conduct fluid, independent operations. This was particularly true of the experienced armored commanders, Lumsden and Gatehouse, who were crucial to the success of the pursuit. This lack of trust bred a lack of confidence. In such an atmosphere, audacity will be rare. General Montgomery had made emphatically clear that exact compliance with orders was the rule. This highly structured, rigidly centralized command climate stripped subordinates of the incentive, if not the confidence, to display initiative.

On 10 November, for example, 22nd Armored Brigade reached the Egyptian frontier and came within reach of an enemy column moving west at a distance of about 14 miles. Although the 11th Hussars (division reconnaissance battalion) reported the column contained about 18 tanks, the 22nd Armored declined to give chase because the brigade objective, Capuzzo, lay to the north. The enemy escaped with what was about 50% of Rommel's surviving tanks.²⁶

Flexibility was reserved for the Eighth Army and General Montgomery. If changes were necessary, as was the case after Operation Lightfoot, Montgomery would make them. Recommendations that percolated up to corps and army level were routinely ignored or rejected.²⁷ Following "the plan", Montgomery's plan, assured success in set-piece battle. In the free-wheeling conditions of the pursuit, however, no detailed plan was available. Brigade, division, and corps commanders had not lost the capacity to

improvise but simply lacked the authority. Without directives, they stopped to regroup and await orders. The delays left gaps through which Rommel repeatedly snatched his forces.

The most ironic cause of the failure of the pursuit was very poor staff planning -- ironic because the planning of the operation should have been its strongest asset. Ample staff planning time was available; Montgomery had demanded and gotten seven weeks respite, after Rommel's September offensive failed, to plan and train.²⁸ After two years of desert fighting, the senior staffs should have been experienced, familiar with the theater of operations, the enemy, and the technical and logistical requirements of operations. This was only partially true. The establishment of world-wide operations and the raising of various division, corps, army, and theater staffs had diluted the available pool of trained officers.²⁹ Desert experience was a double-edged sword. After over two years in the desert, many officers were exhausted,³⁰ sick with minor ailments, and perhaps a bit cynical. The wholesale replacement of theater, army, corps, and division commanders, along with Eighth Army Chief of Operations, no doubt affected staff morale. Add to this General Montgomery's "Christ come to cleanse the temple" greeting speech, and we can well imagine the effect on staff creativity.³¹ Creating the post of Eighth Army Chief of Staff and installing General de Guingand was a great improvement, but it was also a significant change in how the British Army normally did business.

The Eighth Army could absorb these changes while on the

defense, since this was a fairly stable situation. The results during Operations Lightfoot and Supercharge were mixed, however. Reconnaissance and intelligence was ineffective at really understanding Rommel's defensive concept. Vigorous patrolling to breach the British and begin to erode the German mine fields, look for gaps, and confuse the Panzer Arme'e intelligence was ineffective. This could have been done without compromising operational security and would have greatly sped up Lightfoot which thrashed around in German "devil's gardens" for days. Meticulous planning cannot solve every possible contingency, of course; but the plans for Lightfoot and Supercharge laid the basis for the pursuit. Their structures caused many subsequent problems.

Several significant aspects of the operational plan are open to criticism. First, the Eighth Army reorganized for Operation Supercharge and then committed the forces to battle in an illogical, self-constipating way. Eighth Army was divided into 3 corps, two (XIII and XXX) were infantry heavy, reinforced with tank brigades from the remaining corps. X Corps was the armor heavy sledgehammer that would break through and position itself in Panzer Arme'e's rear. To speed the break-through, Eighth Army put XXX Corps into the salient with X Corps layered over them, prepared to push through the gap that XXX Corps would create. If the infantry were held up, X Corps was to thrust forward and create its own gaps as necessary.³² While the broad concept may have been General Montgomery's, it is the staff's business to

simplify, clarify and streamline -- to make things easier on subordinate commanders rather than more difficult. This was not done.

The result of giving two corps responsibility for the same ground and essentially the same mission was tactical confusion and administrative catastrophe. It can be fairly said that the success of the battle occurred despite, rather than because of, this tactical plan. The dust, sporadic artillery fire, and nightfall created chaos in the packed salient. XXX Corps artillery, engineer, fuel, and ammunition supply columns competed with tank, infantry, and reconnaissance units of X Corps. The resulting chaos is well-documented by virtually everyone who was there.* Since X Corps expected to have to batter through the Axis defenses, the corps organized accordingly with engineers, infantry breaching parties, and artillery well forward and transport filled with ammunition rather than fuel.³³ When the breakout occurred, British armor lacked the fuel to thrust boldly forward. This caused critical halts that permitted Panzer Arme to escape. The irony was that the Eighth Army had ample fuel reserves available while Rommel's forces were desperately short.³⁴

The organizational changes and early commitment of X Corps caused a second problem. X Corps' organization had been signifi-

* This continued well into the pursuit since all following formations and the essential resupply columns had to negotiate the salient and thread through the gaps made in the mine fields. The lack of adequate traffic control and through-put schedule was among the more glaring staff failures.

cantly altered for Lightfoot, then changed again for Supercharge. Brigades had been shuffled among different divisions throughout the Eighth Army during the battle to the extent that only one of the 11 divisions fought as an entity. This contrasts to General Montgomery's early statements that divisions would be concentrated and fought as such. The disorganization this caused accelerated as units tried to link up, usually at night, and coordinate. This practice continued during the pursuit as well. The example of the 2nd New Zealand Division is illustrative. At various times, it controlled seven brigades from four different divisions and was under the command of both XXX and X Corps. This was not accidental. Prior to Lightfoot, General Freyberg was expected to participate in all planning conferences for both corps, write division plans for two different corps operations, and train his division to work with the newly attached 9th British Armored Brigade.³⁵ Several brigades of armor from X Corps were initially stripped from their parent divisions to reinforce the infantry corps.* Reorganization and shifting units during battle is always difficult, even for well-trained and experienced troops. It precludes well-coordinated plans, causes delays, and usually increases casualties accordingly.³⁶ Good staffs understand and minimize this turbulence rather than succumb to the temptation of moving flags around on the map, as

* 8th Armored and later 10th Armored Divisions were stripped of combat troops entirely at various stages of the battle. Although 4 armored divisions were on the Eighth Army order of battle, only 3 were ever constituted at any one time and for part of the battle only 1st and 7th operated as entities.

was done here.

Additionally, by committing the X Corps to battle from virtually the beginning of Supercharge, Eighth Army was left with no major, mobile formation uncommitted. There was no powerful reserve rested and ready that could exploit unexpected opportunity. The plan committed every armored brigade to the main battle.³⁷ X Corps was a main battle force. It was to sweep in a tight turn to the rear of the Panzer Arme, cut communications and compel the German and Italian elements to fight their way out of the pocket. The corps and division planning staffs focused, understandably, on fighting this battle in the vicinity of Ghazal station and Sidi Rahman. Their mission was tactical rather than operational or strategic. There was no corps de chasse.*

The third major shortcoming of the Eighth Army's plan was the lack of any really good strategy for exploitation and pursuit. The vague and hazy concept of operations for the follow up to the main battle is remarkable. As Montgomery had "guaranteed" victory at Alamein to both Eighth Army and Churchill, it seems notably lacking to fail to do good conceptual planning for the pursuit. None of the four armored division staffs were designated to prepare and train specifically for pursuit.³⁸ The only exploitation forces designated "to operate offensively on the enemy supply routes" were two regiments (battalions) of armored cars.³⁹ No operational or strategic goals were speci-

* The term corps de chasse is one coined by Churchill. Montgomery did not use this term but instead called it his corps d'elite.

fied.⁴⁰ There simply was no strategic concept of operations. Nor did the corps or divisions develop in detail the obvious contingency plans for a pursuit.

Given this, the logistical support plan was inevitably faulty despite the energy that went into it. While the accomplishments were impressive taken in isolation, the over-all performance must be rated unsatisfactory. Many of the planning estimates were grossly in error.⁴¹ Supplies did not keep up with the advancing spearheads. On at least three occasions, major Axis forces escaped because the British pursuit was stalled for lack of fuel.* In contrast, after 4 November, Panzer Arme'e had only one major mauling from lack of fuel -- this despite the continuing critical fuel "reserves" of Panzer Arme'e.**

The logistical and administrative measures that should have been prepared in adequate detail for a long advance across the desert were left fuzzy. Basic questions, such as: what is the objective?, what units are going to carry the fight?, how much combat power can be supplied?, and how far?, went unresolved.

* 0900, 6 November, 20 miles short of its objective at Mersa Matruh, fuel exhausted after 12 hours' drive, 1st Armored Division watched about 1,000 vehicles escape, Pitt, p. 229. 1st Armored was not refueled until 8 November.

On 10 November near Sollum, fuel delays to 7th Armored allowed Axis troops to escape, Playfair, p. 96-97.

Later on 10 November, Montgomery directed a halt to westward movement beyond Bardia-Capuzzo-Sidi Azeiz because they could not be supplied. Playfair, p. 95.

** 6 November, 22nd Armored Brigade over-ran a leaguer of 21st Panzer Division tanks out of fuel and destroyed 16 as well as numerous guns. Playfair, p. 90, and Hinsley, p. 451.

Given the detail of planning for other aspects of the operation, this conceptual vacuum was ominous. Indeed, the effort that went into planning Lightfoot and Supercharge may have simply absorbed all the available planning talent. The logistical failure to sustain the pursuit could have been overcome. Had Eighth Army designated a single corps (X Corps was the logical candidate) as the main effort and concentrated all supply efforts toward it, better results could have been achieved. If the four divisions of X Corps were too much, then two or three could surely have been maintained⁴² and would have been more than a match for the few remaining German tanks.

Air and seaborne resupply efforts were greatly under-utilized. Some creativity in these areas was demonstrated but Montgomery was unaware of the plans as his own memoirs reveal.⁴³ Given the critical importance of supply, Montgomery seems to have been indifferent to the logistic preparations and to have accepted the supply requirements of the RAF without question.⁴⁴ However, the staggering tonnages they required would have to come at the expense of supplying his spearheads and would further slow his progress. Although the official history discusses the supply effort in some detail⁴⁵, it is evident the preparations, though elaborate, were inadequate to the task demand. Air resupply was particularly under-utilized. In contrast to Panzer Arnee, which lived on it, aerial resupply was little more than auxiliary to other means with the British. To sustain the attack on the El Agreilla position, for example, the US 316th Troop Carrier Com-

mand's 39 C-47s carried over 130,000 gallons of fuel for the RAF to forward bases.⁴⁶ Had similar efforts been made to sustain a tank thrust across the base of Cyrenaica, the Panzer Arme'e would never have reached El Agheila but would have perished south of Benghazi as Marshal Graziani's Army had two years before. No assault on El Agheila would have been required.

Poor staff work failed to coordinate more than just the air and naval support which were, after all, separate services. Even army assets were poorly integrated into the plan. The Long Range Desert Group, Special Air Services, and Commandos were greatly under-employed, if not wasted altogether. Their role prior to Alamein had consisted of several, generally costly and unsuccessful, raids on airfields, ports, and logistic facilities.⁴⁷ This shot their bolt prematurely, preventing them from mounting any effective interdiction later. During the battle, they observed the coast road and provided some information from observation posts deep in the enemy rear. Properly positioned, they could have established a chain of relay stations deep in Rommel's rear to guide the pursuit force, conveyor-belt fashion, along firm ground to deep objectives. Given the lack of night training, cross-country navigation skills, and boldness in some of Eighth Army's formations, the special operations forces would have been invaluable. Marking the relay stations for aerial resupply would have sustained, even accelerated, the momentum to Rommel's rear. Alternatively, they could have paved the way for amphibious landings, coordinated with the ground pursuit, to cut

the coast road at any number of places. Lacking in glamour, perhaps, such missions would have contributed far more than the odd ambush of Axis trucking.

Lack of training in fluid operations was a contributing cause of the lackluster vigor of Eighth Army's pursuit. Montgomery felt the training level of his army was inadequate even for the complexities of Operation Lightfoot. Accordingly, he delayed the start of the offensive in order to retrain his troops. Yet this training focused on close combat, infantry assault, and mine breaching operations rather than fast, offensive, fluid maneuver.⁴⁸ Montgomery did not need to train the whole army in such operations, but a corps or even a division so trained would have proved its value. It was Montgomery's intention that X Corps should be his "corps d'elite which was to resemble Rommel's Panzer Army."⁴⁹ To emulate the Afrika Korps, however, required more than assault training; it required confidence, flexibility, and team work. Neither the time nor the vision for this were forthcoming.

In the long run, Panzer Arme Afrika's survival owed a very great deal to its own reputation. Its very weakness, as we now know made naked by Ultra, seems to deprive it of a decisive role in its own survival. It would be incorrect, however, to sweep Rommel and his handful of tanks off the board entirely. Their legend, their audacity, and their tactical skill were still potent weapons. British commanders held back, waiting for the expected counter-attack that was now simply beyond Rommel's

resources. Twice Rommel pulled back at the last minute after stalling Eighth Army for weeks. This bluff and timing were all the more remarkable because of the British intelligence advantages. The names Rommel and El Agheila were enough to mesmerize Eighth Army. Montgomery was determined to win the "Battle of Agheila" regardless of the fact that there was no intention on Rommel's part to stand and fight. And Montgomery knew it. Indeed, Montgomery's victory message of 12 November listed every division in Rommel's army as having "ceased to exist as effective fighting formations."⁵⁰ Through Ultra, Montgomery knew the strength⁵¹ and intentions of Panzer Armee Afrika. Rommel signaled on 8 December that he would pull back from the Mersa Brega-El Agheila position when seriously attacked. With close to 600 tanks present, Montgomery hesitated another week only to grab thin air yet again as Rommel scurried back to Buerat. There Rommel replayed the charade for another three weeks. He was not, after all, called the Desert Fox for nothing.

Despite their great personal valor, some responsibility for the failure must also attach itself to the troops of the Eighth Army. The flair for bold, creative innovation is rare enough at any time. By Alamein, it was running out in the British Army. Many of the audacious young British leaders, tank leaders particularly, had been used up in death rides at Gazala, Halfaya Pass, and the grinding battles around El Alamein.* Corps and division

* Of those not killed or wounded, many were captured, promoted or transferred to other theaters. Expansion and battle losses also diluted the pool of experienced NCO's.

commanders⁵² recognized the problem before Alamein and expected delays. When the opportunity beckoned the bold, all too often the response was to stop, leaguer up, and regroup. The contrast between Montgomery's pursuit and O'Connor's two years before is remarkable.⁵³

A major factor in the failure to press the pursuit was leadership. This is, of course, a contentious statement. Commanders from battalion to corps drove themselves and their troops hard. Even the bravest could only do so much. But the fact remains that, as a group, they simply did not overcome the obstacles of enemy, fatigue, and over-centralization to produce a bold fait accompli.

With some exceptions, there seems to have been a notable lack of forward thrust. Senior commanders were frequently not forward. There were notable exceptions, like Generals Briggs, Harding, and Freyberg. In contrast, General Gatehouse, 10th Armored, displayed considerable hesitation during the Battle of El Alamein, commanding his division from 10 miles back of the lead brigades. He was out of touch with the actual disposition of his forward elements and wanted to withdraw. Monty "spoke to him in no uncertain voice, and ordered him to go forward at once and take charge of his battle."⁵⁴ Montgomery found the corps commander supporting Gatehouse and threatened to sack them both.

The corps and army commanders also failed to create the best opportunities for the pursuit. With a full day's warning that the Panzer Armee was about to break and run, no one took the

elementary precaution of consolidating and preparing even a single division to exploit the imminent withdrawal. Apparently no warning orders of any kind were issued. General Freyberg was eager to launch his division in pursuit but had to wait hours to reassemble it. Although the 2nd New Zealand Division was well-forward and had sufficient transport, its brigades were scattered across the battlefield.⁵⁵ 10th Armored was only reconstituted at 0700 on 4 November. In some instances, corps commanders actually restrained their more dynamic division commanders. The commanders of 1st Armored, 7th Armored, and 4th Indian Divisions fully intended to prepare their divisions for a rapid pursuit. They were forbidden to make those preparations.⁵⁶ Here the corps and army commanders are at fault.

Despite Montgomery's pep talks, much of the hesitation and timidity in the pursuit can be traced to the mental attitude of some of the commanders. Desert veterans and many of the newcomers were mesmerized by Rommel. Too many men had been beaten too often by the unexpected riposte. Caution also arose from concern for casualties. El Alamein was an expensive battle, especially for the infantry. The British Army was already breaking up divisions (44th Infantry, 8th Armored) for lack of manpower.⁵⁷ This trend would continue through the rest of the war as losses exceeded replacements. The British Army was shifting from manpower to firepower-oriented tactics. Throughout the pursuit, especially at El Agheila and Buerat, it was the RAF and the artillery that were counted on to do the killing and win the

battle. When a hard shove would have crumpled up the Panzer Armees, weeks were wasted accumulating artillery ammunition and staging the RAF forward. In the long run, the delays probably cost more British casualties from mines, artillery, and extending the campaign than would have been suffered in a vigorous, all-out pursuit.

If the troops, the staffs, and the subordinate commanders were all factors in hesitant pursuit, what responsibility rightly belongs to the Army Commander? Many of the factors recounted so far are, of course, traceable to Bernard Law Montgomery. As Army Commander, the responsibility for the failure to destroy Rommel's beaten army is his. He never personally accepted this onus, however; his memoirs would have us believe the whole episode was a continuation of the great victory at El Alamein. He acknowledged that Rommel escaped but blamed the weather, supply problems, and weak subordinates. Nevertheless, he failed: why?

In truth, some subordinates did fail to act aggressively. In this, Montgomery was only partially the cause. But he was responsible for selecting most and supervising all of them. If he doubted Lumsden, Gatehouse, and others, he should not just have threatened to sack them but should have supervised their actions more closely from the beginning. He later did so, but the opportunities were largely gone. At El Agheila, he virtually supplanted the commander of the 51st Highland Division.⁵⁸ He eventually replaced Lumsden with Horrocks but then left X Corps,

and much of his armor, far to the rear near Mechili and continued the pursuit with XXX Corps. In fact, there are numerous instances of Montgomery slowing the pursuit and holding back his subordinates.⁵⁹

If his subordinates failed him, in part at least, it was because they failed to see the broad goal of the campaign. Despite his self-congratulatory pep talks to leaders down to battalion level, there was little to convey Montgomery's long-range objective. The planning (and thinking) horizon was limited to beating Rommel in the purely tactical sense. What the Eighth Army was to do afterwards was extremely vague. The available evidence would indicate that Montgomery had not thought much beyond Tobruk before 5 November.⁶⁰ Only weeks later did he begin to focus on Tripoli and Tunisia as ultimate objectives. Many of the short-falls in tactical and logistical planning derive from this shortsightedness. Montgomery focused on the immediate battle and caused everyone else to do likewise.

In part, of course, this single-minded concentration was important in instilling confidence in his army that they could beat Rommel under his leadership. To Montgomery, this meant concentrating every resource and activity toward the immediate goal of defeating Panzer Armee Afrika in a great tactical battle. It is small wonder the task obsessed him. Montgomery knew he was the second choice for the job of Army Commander.⁶¹ He had never commanded a corps, let alone an army, in battle; his experience was limited to division command during the Battle of France and

evacuation at Dunkirk. He had never been in the western desert and had imported many new faces with him. Churchill had picked him for command, but Churchill had picked and then fired many before him with more illustrious pedigrees. Montgomery had "guaranteed" victory and knew he had to produce nothing less. These factors reinforced his inherently conservative nature.

Conservatism and thoroughness were hallmarks of Montgomery's character. He was not one to take chances. He insisted on "a properly coordinated plan" at all times and brooked no arguments.⁶² He was determined to keep "a firm hand on the battle in order to ensure the master plan was not 'mucked about' by subordinate commanders having ideas inconsistent with it."⁶³ Prying Montgomery from one of his ideas was always difficult. It soon became impossible.

It is those who worked most closely with Montgomery who feel most strongly that Alam Halfa and Alamein "condemned him to success": that his method thereafter was to plan certainties and put his bets on them, but never to take risks . . .⁶⁴

Montgomery's narrowly focused conservatism was reinforced by both training and experience. Like so many of his generation, he had experienced the bloody consequences of the disastrous offensives in 1914-1918. Montgomery was an infantryman, a product of the western front, with virtually no experience in mobile warfare. He had a "special blindness" to the opportunities offered by the tank for rapid pursuit. Had he served with General

Allenby in Palestine, his mental approach might have been much different. He would at least have had a practical lesson in successful mobile warfare and pursuit of a defeated enemy army.⁶⁵ Staff exercises between the wars emphasized defense and set-piece attacks.⁶⁶ The nation that invented the tank and produced J.F.C. Fuller and B. H. Liddell-Hart had not systematically prepared its senior commanders to conduct mobile warfare.⁶⁷ Montgomery concentrated his energy on things he had experienced, understood, and was confident of his abilities to accomplish. He understood the dogged defense and the role of artillery and infantry in setpiece, methodical attack. This is what he would conduct even when, as at El Agheila and Buerat, he knew it was unnecessary.⁶⁸ His conduct of other operations was much less assured. So he did not invest much effort in planning pursuit and exploitation, supply, amphibious and airborne operations, or use of special operations forces until and unless forced to do so. By then it was too late to achieve even mediocre results.

The results of the last great chase across North Africa were profound. The obvious facts firmly established General Montgomery's reputation. He had beaten the Desert Fox and expelled him from Egypt and Libya forever. Only a handful of German and Italian tanks had escaped. Rommel was penned in Tunisia between Eisenhower's Anglo-American armies and Montgomery's own. The final Axis collapse four months later was almost an anti-climax.

The Allies had finally found a winning team. Churchill called the final victory in North Africa "not the beginning of the end but . . . the end of the beginning."

On a more practical level, the campaign confirmed General Montgomery's already high opinion of his infallibility. If he had been stubborn before, afterward he was virtually immovable. His inflexibility and reluctance to accept risk had profound influence on future Allied operations. This was soon demonstrated in the campaigns in Sicily, Italy, and at the Falaise Gap, where his methodical plodding slowed the campaign tempo and allowed the Germans the freedom of action to escape destruction. The lethargic advance up the toe of Italy toward the beleaguered Salerno landing areas was a replay of the post-Alamein pursuit. It was not until late 1944 that he demonstrated any broad strategic vision, advocating the narrow thrust argument to blitz into Germany. By then it was too late. No one, and certainly not Eisenhower, would believe that Montgomery had the boldness to lead such a daring attack. The debacle at Arnheim provides a hint of what might have resulted from a grander, narrow thrust.

In the harsh light of history, Montgomery probably should have been replaced in January 1943 and posted where his defensive and methodical approach was more useful. His popularity, of course, totally ruled this out. Nevertheless, his failure to destroy Rommel's army was a strategic defeat. Rommel's delay of Eighth Army permitted the German build-up in Tunisia,⁶⁹ the

recovery and reinforcement of the Luftwaffe in Africa, and the continuance of Italy in the Axis. The Axis build-up stalled Eisenhower's drive east and set the stage for the painful defeat of Kasserine.⁷⁰ By stretching out the campaign well into 1943, the invasions of Sicily and Italy were delayed and the cross-channel attack postponed until 1944. These delays permitted the straining German war effort time to reinforce Italy and the Mediterranean and to fortify and prepare defenses that caused far more casualties than any that might have been risked in a ruthless pursuit.⁷¹

For a comparison of what could and should have been done, we have three excellent contemporary British examples: Lieutenant General Richard O'Connor's winter offensive against the Italians in 1940-41, General Slim's brilliant destruction of the Japanese in Burma in 1944-45, and the break-out and pursuit across France in 1944. In each of these campaigns, the enemy armies were thoroughly routed, their material captured or destroyed, and, in the last two, the theaters closed for active combat operations. This would have happened in North Africa as well, if Eighth Army had "bagged Panzer Armee" and arrived at the Tunisian border by 15 December or even Christmas. A dedicated pursuit force, aiming at such a goal, supplied and reinforced by sea and air and ready to attack from the march, could have achieved this and fatally compromised the Axis build-up in Tunis. Of course, this was neither envisioned nor planned. Even Prime Minister Churchill's repeated strong prompts to General Alexander to hurry Montgomery

along were to no avail. The trained force, the strategic vision, the detailed planning and coordination, the bold leadership, and the audacity did not exist.

ENDNOTES

1. Clausewitz, On War, p. 267.
2. Panzer Armee Afrika, later German-Italian Panzer Armee in Afrika, was the official title for the combined German-Italian forces in the Western Desert. It included the German Afrika Korps and the Italian X, XX, and XXI Corps.
3. The "Benghazi Handicap" referred to the previous campaigns across North Africa. It weighed heavily in General Montgomery's view of post-Alamein operations. See his memoirs for a discussion of the term. Montgomery, The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery, p. 127.
4. "Panzer Armee claimed that the retreat cost it only 17 anti-tank guns and 14 tanks -- hardly a tribute to the vigor of Eighth Army's pursuit; 20 and 14 respectively had been lost at sea." Bennett, Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy, footnote 6, p. 180.
5. The pursuit barely rates mention in the official U.S. Army history, though it had the most profound strategic influence on Allied operations in French North Africa. Howe, Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative, pp. 260-262.
6. See Bennett, App. IX, for a discussion of this possibility. Bennett does not believe events would have been materially changed. I disagree.
7. From El Aghe: a to Tripoli, 114 German and 327 Italian aircraft were over-run in various states of repair. This raised the total to almost 1000 since Alamein. Most of these must have been carcasses cannibalized to keep other aircraft flying since overall Axis operational air strength did fall by nearly that much. In the early phases of the pursuit, however, a few operational aircraft were captured intact as airfields were over-run. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol IV, p. 238.
8. The 621st Signal Battalion, the German signal intelligence unit of the Panzer Armee, was destroyed 10 July 1942 and not reformed until March 1943. Hinsley, British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol 2, p. 404. This unit, also identified as 3rd Radio Intercept Company, was commanded by Captain Alfred Seebohm. John Ferris, "Intelligence and Military Operations in the British Army, Signals and Security," Intelligence and National Security, p. 272.

9. Eighth Army repaired over 300 tanks during and after Alamein. Damaged German and Italian tanks were lost forever. Much of the Italian Infantry, particularly south of the break-through, was abandoned to capture. Playfair, p. 78.

10. About 500 British tanks opposed 36 German and about 130 flimsy Italian tanks. Many of the British tanks were the new Shermans, superior to any German or Italian tanks then in the desert. Guns, infantry, and other measures of strength were comparable. Playfair, pp. 78-79.

11. Desert Air Force Squadron 208 alone had 24 aircraft solely engaged in mapping a complete aerial mosaic of Axis positions. German reconnaissance, severely constrained by British air superiority and shortage of fuel, was limited to 10 aircraft able to make only rare, fleeting patrols. Walker, p. 203. As Panzer Armee Afrika began to break up, camouflage, radio discipline, and other methods of operational security began to erode. Hinsley, pp. 446-447.

12. Axis intelligence gathering was particularly ineffective prior to the launching of Operation Lightfoot. High altitude aerial reconnaissance ended about 15 September while low level reconnaissance was almost prevented by British air superiority. Walker, p. 203, and Hinsley, pp. 431-432.

13. Not since General McClellan captured General Lee's campaign plan before Antietam had such a golden opportunity been laid at the feet of a commander. McClellan bungled his opportunity. Hinsley, p. 448.

14. Montgomery has few sympathetic biographers. His strongest apologists are Alan Moorehead and Major General Francis de Guingand. Virtually all other analyses are directly critical of his handling of this operation. Especially see Barnett, The Desert General, Chapter VI.

15. As early as 1947, Major General de Guingand, in his book Operation Victory, attributed the slow pursuit to weather. Montgomery picked up this theme in El Alamein to the River Sangro and repeated it in his Memoirs.

16. Montgomery, p. 129.

17. Pitt, The Crucible of War, Vol 3: Montgomery of Alamein, pp. 230 and 242. The Afrika Korps also lost tanks and other vehicles to fuel shortages made worse by the soft, muddy cross-country travel. This was especially true among the armored rear guards of 21st Panzer Division. Walker, Alam Halfa and Alamein, p. 449.

18. Liddell-Hart (Ed.), The Rommel Papers, p. 340.

19. C.F.C. Fuller quotes Major General de Guingand and Luftwaffe Field Marshall Kesselring on the general ineffectiveness of RAF air attacks. A Military History of the Western World, p. 201. Playfair notes that sorties of fighter-bombers and bombers fell from 348 on 3 November before the pursuit to 110 on 5 November after the pursuit began but before the rains. Fighter sorties plummeted from 734 to 238. Playfair, p. 88.

20. Radio failure was a contributing factor to the more basic problem. Command and control in Eighth Army and especially in X Corps simply broke down on 4-5 November. Walker, pp. 425 and 427.

21. Montgomery, p. 159.

22. Playfair, p. 96. 2nd New Zealand Division was even accused of having "failed to press its advance." In response, Major General Freyberg wrote in his report, "The policy was not to get involved, but, if possible, to position our forces to cut the enemy off." This was the concept of General Leese's XXX Corps. It does not reflect an understanding of what was necessary to destroy Panzer Armee Afrika. Walker, p. 474.

23. The most critical part of a pursuit is the first night. British armor stopped early on 4 November though already behind the bulk of remaining German and Italian forces. Pitt, p. 225 and Walker, p. 435. Freyberg's New Zealanders were farthest west but also halted, after a minor skirmish, to close up. Walker, pp. 434-435.

24. Playfair, p. 86.

25. This is not a suggestion of cowardice. General Briggs (1st Armored Division) had his tank knocked out on the morning of 4 November; Generals Harding (7th Armored) and Horrocks (subsequent commander of X Corps) were wounded later in the campaign while moving with their frontline troops. The British command structure, however, did not easily facilitate forward command and control. Communications were more extensive at established headquarters. General Harding's TAC command facility was one tank with radios and a single jeep without them. Furthermore, British generals also did not routinely have chiefs of staff to relieve them of day-to-day coordination. The Germans, lacking the intelligence resources, consistently "read" the battle as well or better than their British counterparts. Montgomery apparently did not visit the front until 6 November. Walker, p. 445. Also see John Ferris, "The British Army, Signals and Security in the Desert Campaigns, 1941-42," Intelligence and National Security, pp. 255-291, for a discussion of British command, control, and communications system.

26. See Playfair, p. 95.

27. Generals Lumsden, Harding, Briggs, Freyberg, and others repeatedly pressed for more flexibility and freedom to accelerate the pursuit. Montgomery consistently refused. See Hunt, A Don At War, p. 156; Carver, Harding of Petherton: Field Marshal, pp. 105 and 110; and Hinsley, p. 454.

28. See Churchill's demand for an early offensive and Montgomery's refusal. Montgomery, p. 107.

29. Indeed, staffs were over-produced to command formations that subsequently could not be manned. The shortage of troops led to the cannibalization of 8th Armored and later 44th Infantry Divisions between September and December 1942. Technical troops, such as signalmen, remained in short supply. Ferris, pp. 270-276.

30. For this General Auckinleck must bear some burden as he insisted on the most spartan conditions for himself and his staff while he commanded. This was for "morale" purposes, though how much it raised the morale of the fighting troops is questionable. Its effect on staff morale can be imagined.

31. If there were any lingering questions, Montgomery's famous "no retreat" order and his tirade his first morning in command settled all doubts. That morning he got "extremely angry" because a staff officer woke Montgomery with the situation reports. This was well-established routine, which did not, of course, help the staff officer who took the brunt of his wrath. Montgomery, p. 94.

32. "It will be clearly understood that should 30 Corps not succeed in reaching the final objectives . . . the armored divisions of 10 Corps will fight their way to the first objective" (emphasis in the original). Montgomery, p. 122.

33. Each breaching column of the 1st Armored and 10th Armored Divisions stretched almost 10 miles when on the move, comprising over 400 vehicles. Walker, p. 247.

34. A 26 October decrypted message confirmed Panzer Armee's fuel stocks at 3 (days'-supply); one-third of that was still at Benghazi. By 1 November Panzer Armee completely depended on airlifted fuel from Crete. On 10 November, Ultra revealed Rommel had fuel for only 4 or 5 days. Hinsley, pp. 442-443 and 454.

35. Walker, p. 210-211.

36. A sample of the confusion this caused is illustrated by the situation of the 5th Indian Brigade. It was ordered forward on the night of 3-4 November from a reserve position near Ruweisat Ridge, moved all through the night, and was "flung hastily into battle just before dawn . . . I was unable to discover under

whose command 5th Indian Brigade was supposed to be; anyway I am sure that in fact it operated quite independently." Hunt, p. 139. Many similar examples could be given.

37. Montgomery retained no armored reserve. All armored brigades (2, 8, 24 in X Corps; 23 and 9 in XXX Corps; and 22 and 4 Light in XIII) were committed in the opening stages of the battle. Walker, p. 248.

38. At one point 8th Armored Division staff, stripped of troops, was directed to prepare such a plan. The ultimate "deep" objective of Tobruk was considered. No actual troops were assigned, however; in the event, General Montgomery canceled the project. Playfair, pp. 81-82, and Walker, p. 412.

39. Quoted from Montgomery's operations order. Montgomery, p. 121. This lack of direction rippled down. 2nd New Zealand Division only gave an "exploit" mission to its divisional cavalry, even though the division was designated to go to X Corps for the pursuit. Walker, p. 237.

40. Only on 5 November did Montgomery give the X Corps commander the line of Derna-Timimi-El Mechili as an objective to seize. Playfair, p. 87.

41. "It was becoming clear that the Eighth Army's estimates of petrol consumption made before the pursuit began were far from accurate, so much so that, on figures kept by the NZASC, petrol was being used at almost twice the quantity calculated." The reasons for this were deviations from the most direct route to avoid the enemy or difficult ground, soft going, night driving in low gear, leakage from "flimsy" cans, and fuel from every vehicle used for boiling water and heating rations. Walker, p. 464.

42. This would have been the "single, full-blooded thrust" that Montgomery argued for so forcefully after Normandy. In Africa, under similar conditions, he adopted the same course Eisenhower would later choose -- a broad, weighty, and more methodical, if slower, advance.

43. Montgomery, pp. 131-132.

44. ". . . it was clear that the air forces had to have all they wanted" (emphasis mine). Montgomery, p. 130.

45. Playfair, pp. 101-107.

46. In addition, there were 40 Hudson aircraft available to ferry bombs, ammunition, and other supplies needed by Eighth Army or Desert Air Force. Playfair, p. 17.

47. I am aware that several units, Sondervverband 288, Reconnaissance Units 33 and 58C, and Trieste Motorized Division, were kept back from the front near Alamein to guard against amphibious attack. This diversion was inconsequential, however, as they were quickly pulled into battle when Eighth Army attacked.

48. As early as 25 October, General Gatehouse requested to halt a night attack saying his armor was trained for a static role and not for difficult night operations! Walker, p. 311. Later, Brigadier Custace, commanding 8th Armored Brigade, stopped at nightfall on 4 November because he considered his men "untrained for movement during the dark hours." Pitt, p. 223. Brigadier Kippenberger, 5th New Zealand Brigade, voiced similar concerns to his division commander the same day. Walker, p. 434.

49. Montgomery, p. 103.

50. Montgomery, p. 130.

51. 54 German, 42 Italian tanks, no fuel reserves, desperate shortage of ammunition. The Luftwaffe was "immobilized" for lack of fuel. Hinsley, p. 458.

52. Prior to Operation Lightfoot, after talking with Lumsden and Gatehouse, Freyberg came to the conclusion that the armored formations were likely to be cautious rather than resolute. This fear was so strong among the infantry that Freyberg (New Zealand), Moorehead (Australia) and Pienaar (South Africa) went to the corps commander (Leese) to "voice their disgust." Walker, p. 211.

53. See Barnett's revised edition (1986) of The Desert Generals for an excellent analysis and comparison of both generals' operations.

54. See Montgomery, pp. 117-118. This episode is disputed by others who claim Gatehouse was in fact forward and only came back to his headquarters to use the field phone to participate in the conference. Be that as it may, his conduct of the battle is open to question; later on General Lumsden found it necessary to issue orders directly to 10th Armored Division's brigades, because Gatehouse was out of contact with either his own division headquarters, the corps, or his subordinate brigades. Walker, p. 311.

55. 4th Light Armored (designated to lead) was near Alamein station jostling other units to get forward. 5th New Zealand Brigade was at the base of the salient waiting for 4th Light Armored to pass. 9th Armored and 6th New Zealand were in defenses on the northwest of the salient (6th New Zealand was waiting for transport which was held up to the rear). The New Zealand division cavalry was in the salient to the rear of other ele-

ments. Walker, p. 427.

56. Major General de Guingand advanced a proposition for a mobile encircling force but to no effect. Chalfont, Montgomery of Alamein, p. 192, and Lewin, Ultra Goes to War, p. 269.

57. Only 9 of 24 infantry brigades in Eighth Army were British. The rest were Indian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Free French, and Greek. All 7 of the armored brigades were British.

58. He did exercise greater supervision after the initial disappointments of 4-12 November, but by then it was too late. Since he did closely supervise Lumsden subsequently, he bears the full responsibility for failing to push aggressively across Cyrenaica in strength.

59. See particularly Walker's account of Montgomery's visit, 6 November, to 10th Armored Division, when he ordered them to halt and clear the area to the rear. Hunt later describes Montgomery's refusal to permit General Lumsden's plan to push boldly across Cyrenaica. Walker, p. 445, and Hunt, p. 156.

60. This was the farthest point in 8th Armored Division's planning for pursuit. X Corps was only given the Derna-Timimi-El Mechili area objective on 5 November. On 12 November, Montgomery mentions "Benghazi and beyond" in Libya as objectives in his victory message. By 15 November, he is carefully directing Lumsden in the pursuit to El Agheila, but again no directive for further western pursuit.

61. The popular desert veteran, General Gott, had been given the post but was shot down and killed in route. See Hunt for a rare character sketch of General Gott and a comparison of Gott and Montgomery, pp. 119-121.

62. Playfair, p. 35.

63. Montgomery, p. 128. One of the first commanders Montgomery fired was Major General Renton, commanding general of 7th Armored Division. Renton, a veteran of two years in the desert, disagreed over who should have the authority to commit the British armor to counter-attack. Carver, p. 94. Walker frequently notes Major General Freyberg's opinion that British armor commanders only gave lip service to plans but held the determination to run the armored battle their own way. Walker, p. 310.

64. Lewin, Ultra Goes to War, p. 269.

65. Major General (later Field Marshal) Harding had that experience and was well-served by it. General (later Field Marshal) Wavell was also there. Montgomery had served twice briefly in

Palestine (1931 and 1938) and in Egypt but seems not to have made a serious study of Allenby's campaign. Even the British official history notes the dramatic difference between Allenby's pursuit after Megiddo (1918) and Montgomery's after Alamein. Playfair, p. 81.

66. Even cavalry concentrated on these tasks. The U.S. Army Command and General Staff School booklet, The Tactical Employment of Cavalry, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1937, devotes 26 paragraphs to attack, 16 to defense, 7 to reconnaissance, and 3 to pursuit by horse cavalry. The mechanized cavalry section does not address exploitation or pursuit at all.

67. Montgomery was never able to fully appreciate the concept of the "expanding torrent", though Liddell-Hart tried to clarify it during their association. Particularly see Lord Chalfont's description of Montgomery's character and his limitations in pursuit. The phrase, special blindness, is Lord Chalfont's. Chalfont, p. 191.

68. Ultra had disclosed Rommel's intentions, soon confirmed by tactical means, to retreat. The first Italian infantry had pulled out of position at El Agheila, headlights blazing, horns honking, motors roaring, on 6 December. This continued nightly for three nights, unmolested by artillery or air attack. Irving, The Trail of the Fox, p. 249.

69. By January 1943, despite severe logistical bottlenecks, Axis strength facing Eisenhower in Tunisia had reached about 100,000 (74,000 Germans, 26,000 Italians) along with 379 tanks, over 5,000 vehicles and 600 guns. Rommel had to make do with less than 5,000 men, 50 tanks, and 118 guns to hold back Eighth Army. Howe, pp. 370 and 682-683.

70. By late January, the Axis forces under General von Arnim (5th Panzer Army) and Field Marshal Rommel were strong enough to take the initiative and attack.

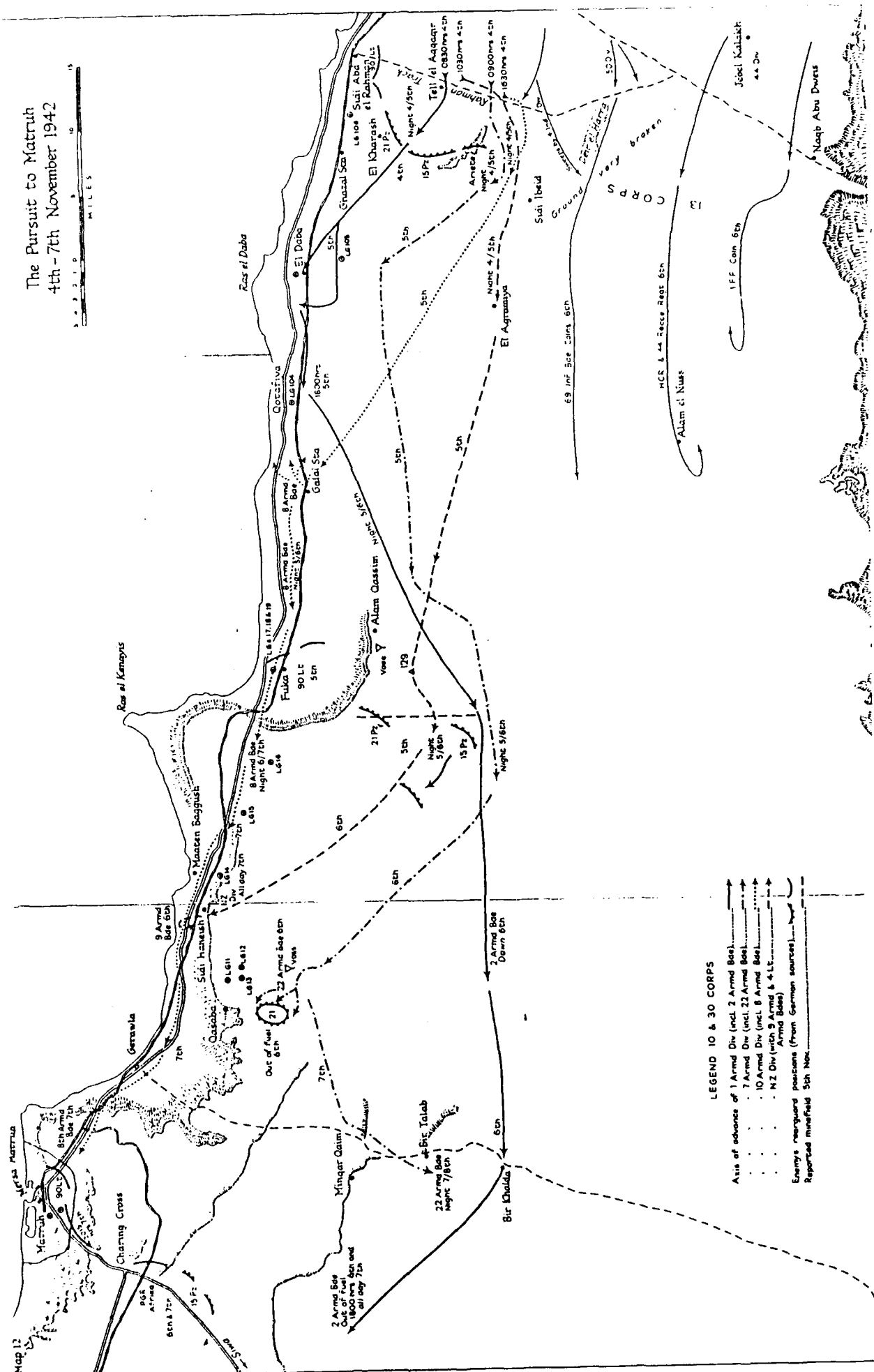
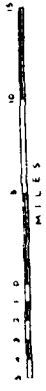
71. The collapse of German armies in the Ukraine and the encirclement of Stalingrad at this time made it very difficult and time consuming to assemble substantial reinforcements for North Africa. In addition, these had to filter in through transportation bottlenecks that limited the daily available sealift capacity to 1,500 tons and an additional 585 tons in airlift. A build-up was practical only if Rommel could delay long enough to make substantial reinforcement possible. Howe, p. 366.

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The Pursuit to Matruh 4th-7th November 1942



LEGEND 10 & 30 CORPS

- Axis of advances of 1 Armored Div (incl. 2 Armored Bde).
- 1 Armored Div (incl. 22 Armored Bde).
- 10 Armored Div (incl. 8 Armored Bde).
- NZ Div (with 9 Armored & 4 L.C.).
- Enemy's rearguard positions (from German sources).
- Reported minefield 5th Nov.

THE WESTERN DESERT
Winter 1942/43



E G Y P T

C Y R E N A I C A

Gulf of Suez

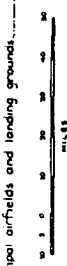
Red Sea

Aqaba

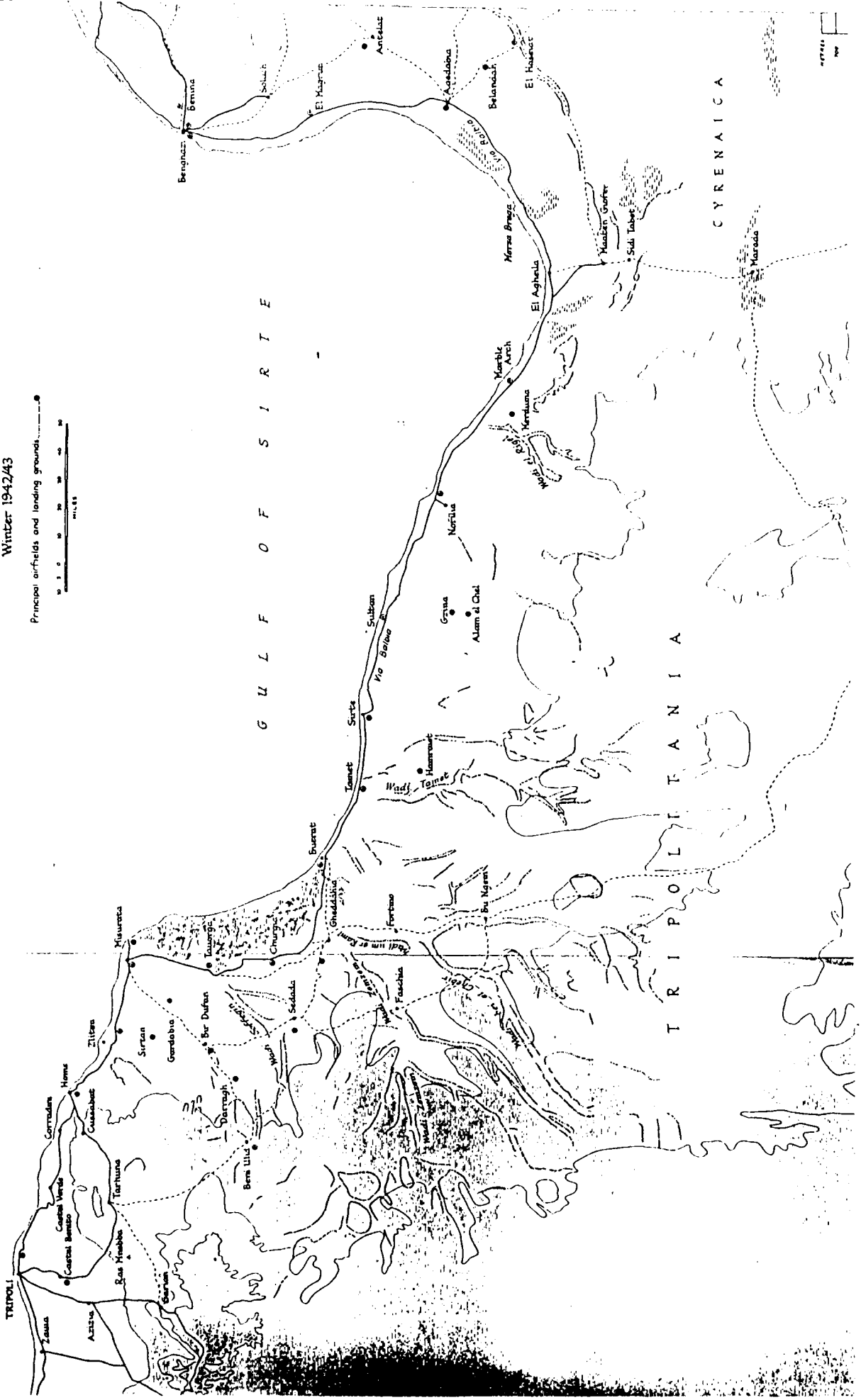
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BENHAZI TO TRIPOLI
Winter 1942/43

Principal airfields and landing grounds

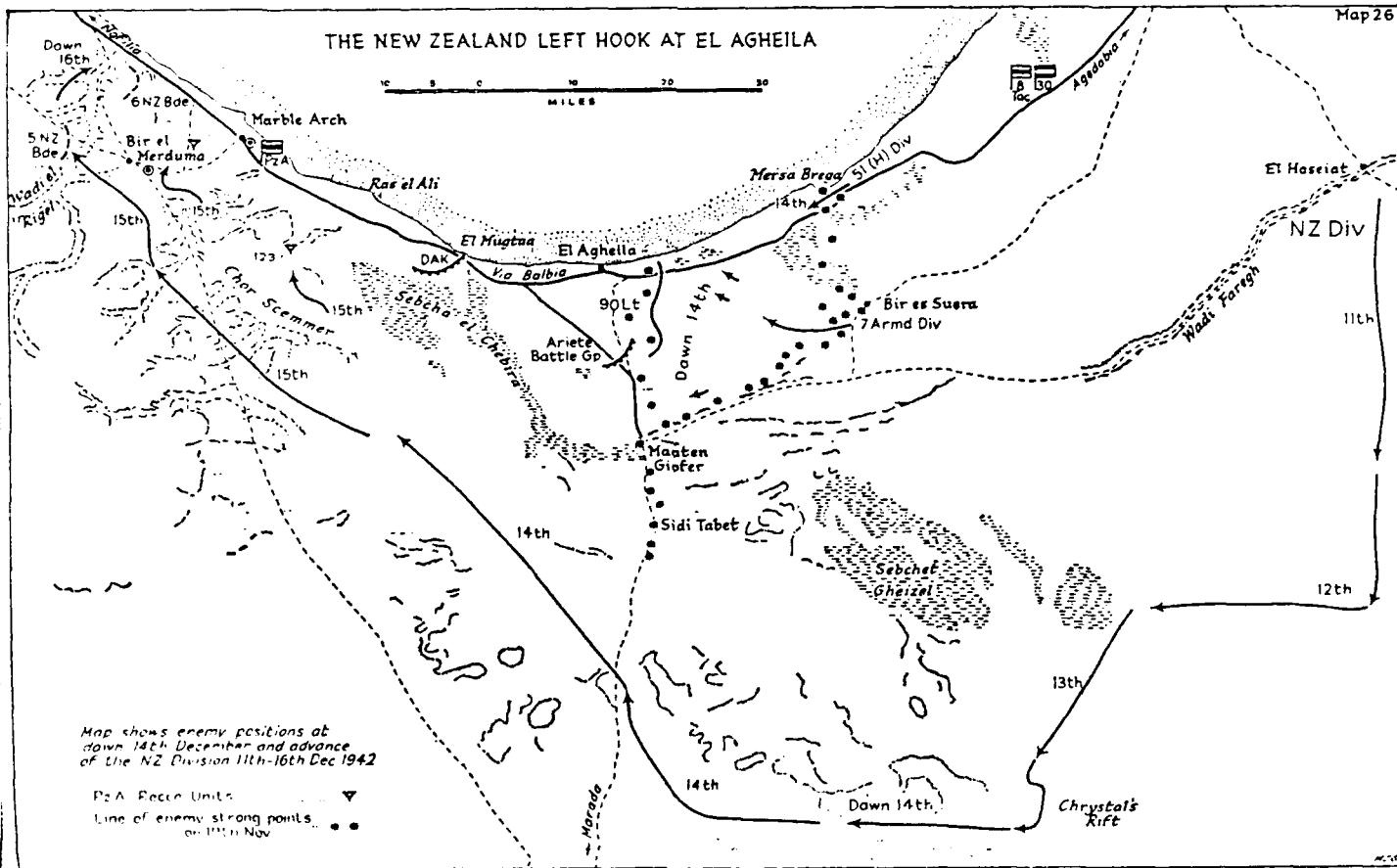


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MILES
KILOMETERS



THE NEW ZEALAND LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

Map 26



26-25