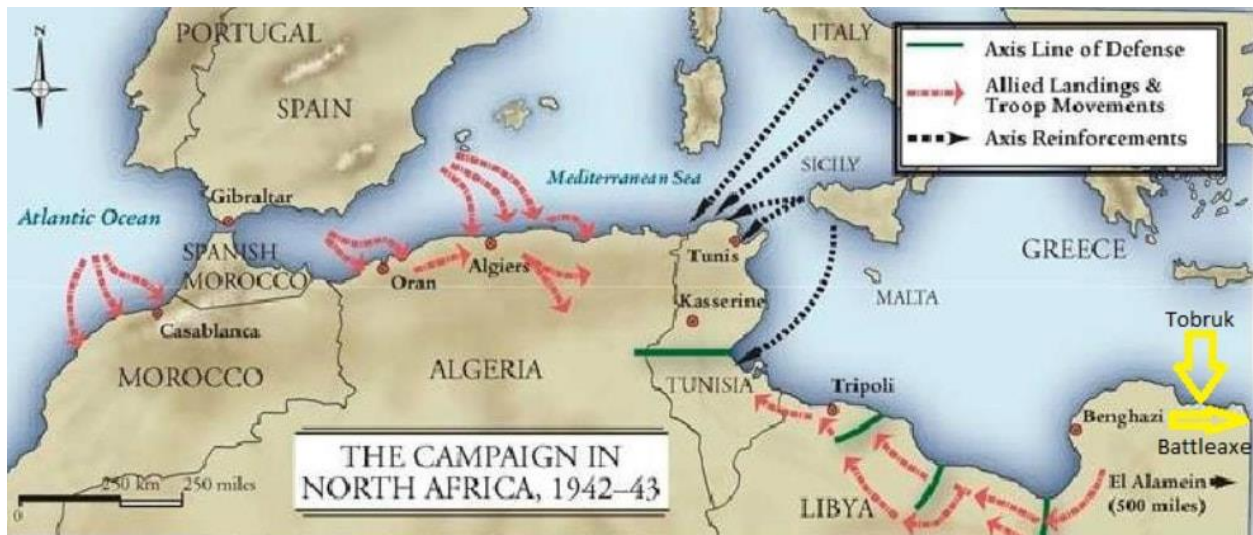


# Operation Torch and the Battle of El Alamein



At Churchill's urging, American and British ground troops would hit the periphery of the Nazi empire first. This would give the inexperienced U.S. troops an opportunity to develop combat experience before facing the tough battles to come on the European continent. The plan, called *Operation Torch*, called for an Allied attack on Axis forces in Africa. American commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower planned a three-pronged attack on Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers, then a rapid move on Tunis to catch and trap Axis forces from the west in conjunction with a British advance from the east. American troops would be fighting Axis forces for the first time. They would be facing battle-hardened German and Italian troops, as well as Vichy French forces.

By July 1942, Hitler's *Afrika Korps*, under the command of General Erwin Rommel, stood poised to take El Alamein, Egypt, a railway junction about 70 miles from Alexandria. Adapting blitzkrieg tactics to desert warfare, Rommel, known as the Desert Fox, had pushed the British back from the Egyptian frontier to El Alamein and from there stood ready to take the Suez Canal and the oil fields of the Middle East. El Alamein held tremendous strategic importance. The Suez Canal was Britain's link to its empire in the east, and the risk of the oil-rich Middle East fueling the Nazi war machine was a clear threat. Axis forces, however, had problems with supply lines. The British commander, General Bernard Montgomery, was aware of Rommel's supply problems. Bolstered by the arrival of American tanks and supplies, Montgomery struck at Rommel's army, which was positioned in a strong defensive line in the desert near El Alamein. In a fierce month-long battle, beginning in October of 1942, the armies attacked,

and counter attacked again and again. Losses were heavy on both sides. One of the British commanders, C.E. Lucas-Phillips, wrote:

*The desert was quivering with heat. The gun detachments and the platoons squatted in their pits and trenches, the sweat running in rivers down their dust-caked faces. There was a terrible stench. The flies swarmed in black clouds upon the dead bodies and excreta and tormented the wounded. The place was strewn with burning tanks and carriers, wrecked guns and vehicles, and over all drifted the smoke and the dust from bursting high explosives and from the blasts of guns.*

As the battle raged, day after day, Allied air power gained control of the skies and thwarted any chance of Rommel's army being resupplied. Running low on fuel and ammunition, the defensive lines of Rommel's *Afrika Korps* began to crumble. In the face of overwhelming odds, the exhausted German and Italian troops fought bravely trying to hold their positions. Colonel Arrigo Dall'Olio, one of the commanders of the Italian troops fighting with Rommel wrote:

*...There were no reserves, as every available man and gun had been put into the line. The Folgore division fought to the last round of ammunition. We have ceased firing not because we haven't the desire to fight, but because we have spent every round.*

By the first week of November, Rommel realized his situation was desperate. He telegraphed Hitler for permission to withdraw. Hitler wrote:

*To Field Marshal Rommel. It is with trusting confidence in your leadership and the courage of the German-Italian troops under your command that the German people and I are following the heroic struggle in Egypt. In the situation which you find yourself there can be no other thought but to stand fast, yield not a yard of ground and throw every gun and every man into the battle. Considerable air force reinforcements are being sent to C.-in-C South. The Duce and the Commando Supremo are also making the utmost efforts to send you the means to continue the fight. Your enemy, despite his superiority, must also be at the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that a strong will has triumphed over the bigger battalions. As to your troops, you can show them no other road than that to victory or death. Adolf Hitler.*

As swarms of Allied tanks began punching holes in the German lines, and as the encirclement of his entire army became a real threat, Rommel ordered a retreat. Failing to make the most the German collapse, heavy rains, water-logged ground, and a lack of fuel turned the British pursuit into a quagmire. By 1943, with the arrival of more Sherman tanks, 6-pounder anti-tank guns, and Spitfires,

British General Bernard Montgomery led the British Eighth Army in a relentless pursuit of the retreating *Afrika Korps* through the desert as they retreated from Egypt and into Libya.

Meanwhile, the Americans had landed at Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers and pushed east over rugged terrain for more than 500 miles. Attempting to trap German and Italian troops fleeing from the British, inexperienced American forces at first faced defeat at the Kasserine Pass. Reinforcements and air power helped the Allies to rally and on May 7, 1943, 250,000 German and Italian soldiers surrendered to the Allies in Tunisia.

The British victory at El Alamein was the turning point that eventually led to the defeat of Axis forces in North Africa by May of 1943. To the war-weary British people, who had struggled alone against Hitler for more than a year, the victory at El Alamein-the first real British victory of the war-provided an enormous psychological boost. “Tonight, you may rejoice. Tonight, there is sugar on the cake,” Churchill responded to news of the victory.



**Churchill tanks of the 1st Armored Division during the battle. November 5, 1942.**



**A German 88 mm gun abandoned near the coast road, west of El Alamein. November 7, 1942.**





*U.S. Sherman tanks moving into action in Tunisia in 1943.*