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THE EL ALAMEIN CRISIS AND ITS AFTEREFFECTS IN THE OKW

by

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I. Introduction

1). For further information supplementing this expose, the reader is referred to the following reports by the same author: "The OKW's Estimate of the Situation shortly before, as well as during and after the Allied Landings in French North Africa in 1942;" "The OKW's deliberations on Warfare in North Africa, after the Allied Landings in French North Africa in November 1942."

The only purpose of the following pages is to present a clear picture of the turning point at which the initiative passed from German into Allied hands.

2). In order to fit the events related here into their proper niche in history, the reader is referred to the introductory remarks preceding the reports mentioned in 1. above.

II. Estimate of the Situation by the OKW

3). Optimistic Analysis

After the abortive German El Alamein offensive, the goal of which was the occupation of the Nile valley, the Italo-German Panzer Army had retired to a rearward position. Field Marshal Rommel was ordered to Fuehrer Headquarters for his report. He described in detail the strength of the newly occupied position and the plans for further improvements. Particularly confident were his remarks concerning the position's defenses which, according to him, had been rendered all the more impregnable by the installation of very dense mine fields. The Field Marshal produced scaled sketches of these so-called "mine orchards" ("Minengeerten") which he himself had planned. Continuing his report, Rommel stated that, generally speaking, he was satisfied with the bearing of his troops and of part of the Italian units. All the same, he requested that his army be furnished replacements for every last man and each single piece of equipment that had been lost.

[ -1- ]           The Field Marshal registered uneasiness about the enemy's increasing air superiority, a factor which he termed one of the most serious stumbling blocks. A certain number of reinforcements for the own air force, he remarked, are to be desired.

The weakest point in the entire situation he saw - as had always been the case in the campaigns of the German Afrikakorps - in the sporadic, usually insufficient, supply shipments, especially of motor fuel. In this regard he also made definite demands.

[ -2- ]           The suggestions of Field Marshal Rommel generally met approval, and his demands were correspondingly recognized. Appropriate measures were initiated, or detailed to the OB Süd - Field Marshal Kesselring, who believed himself able to carry them out with the support of the Commando Supremo [High Command of the Italian Armed Forces].

Although the German plan of operations which called for a thrust into the actual British bases in the Near East had to be suspended for the time being, the situation prevailing at the southern front at first presented no cause for undue apprehension.

4.) Deterioration of the Supply Situation.

Not only were the measures for strengthening the Italo-German Panzer Army, which had been ordered by the German High Command with the approval of the Commando Supremo, not effected in the period following, but, on the contrary, there commenced a steady deterioration of the supply situation in the African theater. The threat to sea and air convoys themselves, as well as to ports, airports, and to the single supply route along the African coast, had increased to such an extent that only few shipments reached their goal and even less reached the troops. The supplies shipped were hardly sufficient for the daily needs of the troops, not to speak of stockpiling. Correspondingly, the planned reinforcement of the troops also fell short of its goal.

All attempts, at least those made on the German side, were unable to change this situation although headquarters of the OB Süd made a wholehearted

[-2-]

effort. Even all kinds of improvisations, insofar as they did not previously come to naught because of the clumsiness of the Italians in such matters, were not able to influence the situation to any extent. On the other hand, a reinforcement of German air forces for transport escort duty was impossible for reasons of supply and the generally inadequate ground service facilities in Africa.

As a result, Field Marshal Rommel's principal demands could not be met.

#### 5.) Commitments on other Fronts.

Africa, moreover, was an Italian theater of war and as such only of secondary interest to the German High Command. Its attention had to remain focused on the Eastern front, where the first difficulties were developing after the beginning of the 1942 offensive. Nor could the Western and Northern fronts be overlooked in the general calculations since enemy operations were to be expected also in those areas.

The above-mentioned circumstances perhaps were responsible for a lack of concerted effort as well as the correspondingly necessary pressure on the leadership of the Italian Armed Forces, such as the seriousness of the situation in Africa would have demanded from top Wehrmacht authorities.

#### 6.) Apprehension in the OKW.

[-3-]

Only when the demands of Field Marshal Rommel became more and more urgent, and the shipping reports of Field Marshal Kesselring began to conflict with these demands, did the German High Command begin to revise its previous optimistic view of the situation in Africa and to increase the pressure on the Commando Supremo. The air transport squadrons were reinforced. Crete was made a supply base. But neither these nor other measures were able to avert the quickly maturing crisis any longer.

### III. The Course of the Defense Battle.

#### 7.) Beginning of the Defense Battle in the El Alamein Position.

The details of the course of the British El Alamein offensive are not

[-3-]

to be described here. Only the general impressions which arose in the OKW are to be related.

The British offensive began on 23 October 1942. Early reports from Africa were at first not alarming, even if the initial air attacks were termed heavy and resulting in great losses. To be sure, the emergency calls for more supplies already were put in most urgent terms.

8.) The Battle to 3 November 1942.

The course of the battle, presumed to be known by the reader, was radioed by Field Marshal Rommel in his daily communiques to the Commando Supremo, from where the German General at the Italian High Command transmitted it to Führer Headquarters. The communiques generally contained a brief report on the activities of the day, the position of the front at the time of deadline for the report, any plans Rommel might have, the supply situation, and requests. Corresponding to the personal traits of the Field Marshal they were concentrated in form and only rarely contained an estimate of the situation. From the tone, size, and manner of transmittal of these communiques, a rather clear, even if not detailed, picture of the individual phases of the battle was created for the German High Command. The increasing air attacks, the beginning and development of British artillery preparations, the repulsion of the first attacks, the early penetration and its later deepening, and finally the threatening break through our own positions could be followed with a delay of 12 - 24 hours. The decrease of our own fighting power became equally obvious, especially the losses of materiel and the rapid consumption of the ammunition and fuel supplies of the troops.

The course of these events began to cause serious concern.

9.) Measures Taken Prior to the Crisis.

The only last measures which could be taken prior to the crisis were transfers by land or air of personnel replacement transfer battalions

[-3-] [Marschbattallione]from Cirenaica and from the Balkans, as well as all conceivable improvisations for expediting matters in general, and especially fuel transports. An effective change in the situation was not achieved.

[-4-] IV. The Crisis

10.) Move of Führer Headquarters.

About the end of October / beginning of November 1942, Führer Headquarters was moved from the Ukraine to East Prussia. For a certain length of time this move naturally limited the volume of work which the German High Command could handle, and burdened both the channels of command and communications.

11.) The Events of the Night of 3 - 4 November at Führer Headquarters.

Adolf Hitler, who during the last few days had constantly asked for new reports from Africa, once more called the author -- then General Staff Officer to the Chief of the Operations Staff of the Wehrmacht -- personally by telephone about 2300 on 3 November, asking whether any further reports had arrived. Upon a negative reply he gave the order to inquire in Rome. The author detailed this task to the appropriate official in the Operations Staff of the Wehrmacht. The latter called back after about one hour and reported that a radio message from the Italo-German Panzer Army was at this time being decoded in Rome. One hour later he called up and reported the essence of the message as he had received it by telephone. In general, it contained but a confirmation of what was already known, i.e., the continuation of the heavy fighting around the enemy penetration into our own lines. It contained no new plans. The official was cautioned to call as soon as new reports arrived, or if the contents of the teletype copy of the telephone message, which was now in the process of transmittal to the Operations Staff, revealed any new aspects as compared to the message just transmitted.

The author made<sup>a</sup> corresponding report by telephone to the Führer

[-4-] personally. He agreed to the arrangement.

The teletype message from Rome arrived about 0300 on 4 November 1942. The officer in charge scanned the contents only superficially and believed to recognize only a confirmation of the excerpt already reported by telephone. For unknown reasons he overlooked a crucial cipher in the middle of the text which had not been known so far. It contained nothing less than the intention of Field Marshal Rommel to break off the battle because the situation was gradually becoming untenable, to give up the El Alamein position, and to begin a withdrawal. The duty officer neglected to inform the author and thereby the Führer.

He filed the teletype message so that it might be used in one of the situation reports for the morning conference with the Führer. The reports were compiled during the early morning hours. This oversight was noticed only at about 0800, at which time the Deputy Chief of the Operations Staff reported it to General Jodl. Field Marshal Keitel notified the Führer at 0830.

[-5-]

12.) The Führer's Order and Its Effects.

Adolf Hitler naturally was angry about this independent decision on the part of Field Marshal Rommel which was of such decisive importance, as well as about the careless handling of the vital message. The latter was decided by an immediate court-martial.

In answer to the former, Adolf Hitler at once had an order of the day radioed to Field Marshal Rommel and the German troops in Africa, ordering them to hold their old position to the last man.

This order, however, arrived too late since the steps taken toward breaking off the battle had progressed too far.

Field Marshal Rommel replied that a counterorder had been issued but that the situation could no longer be saved. Adolf Hitler then decided to withdraw his order.

[-5-]

V. Conclusion.

13.) The above observations reveal, of course from the subjective view point of the author, that the German High Command doubtlessly underestimated Africa's strategic importance and that it overestimated the active interest of the Italian ally in that theater of operations. The German Wehrmacht command could assume, however, that in view of its entanglements on other fronts it had not only performed its duties to its ally but also that it had done whatever it could under prevailing circumstances.

The realization of the enemy's strength and of our own weakness came too late to avert the disaster. The enemy now had the initiative and retained it.

[signed:] Eckhardt Christian

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