

To what degree did
air power contribute
to allied victory at the
battle of el ala...

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To what degree did air power contribute to Allied victory at the Battle of El Alamein in October/November 1942?

The second battle of El Alamein took place between October and November 1942 in Egypt. Allied forces, led by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, fought against General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Panzerarmee Afrika to secure a much-needed victory after Britain had faced various global strategic setbacks. This included the loss of Hong Kong, Germany's invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia and the sinking of allied ships by German U-boats in the Atlantic.[1] This essay will substantiate that the use of air power made a considerable contribution to the demise of the Panzerarmee Afrika and consequently secured victory for allied forces. Most significantly, the Desert Air Force played a pivotal role in the disruption of the supply line to Panzerarmee Afrika, which consequently prevented the Germans from launching a counter offensive[2]. In addition, Air Vice Marshal Arthur Coningham and Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's professional relationship led to Land and Air Commanders working together more closely. Montgomery used this close collaboration with the Desert Air Force to secure his first victory at Alam Halfa Ridge, which in turn led to a more rapid victory for British forces at El Alamein[3]. This essay will detail the importance of the role that air power played in shaping the battle, utilising close air support, through targeting areas beyond the battlefield and having a greater air armada in order to achieve air superiority. Finally, this essay will consider the role that land forces played by utilising the infantry and armour, especially during Operation Supercharge, and it will argue that maximising air power

through air support and aerial bombardment was the leading factor in air-land integration during this operation.

Supplies such as fuel and munitions were fundamental components required for the second battle of El Alamein. The Desert Air Force proved vital to the disruption of the Panzerarmee Afrika supply line. One of the ways this was achieved was with the assistance of Ultra,[4] who provided the exact locations of Axis shipping movements heading to Torbuk. Consequently, the Desert Air Force attacked the ships causing severe enemy cargo losses in the region of 25 per cent of general military cargo and 41 per cent fuel.[5] To counter the losses caused by the Desert Air Force and their continuous attack on his provisions, Rommel attempted to bring supplies in from Benghazi by lorries and other various means.[6] However, they proved attractive targets for long-range Beaufighters who destroyed the convoys. In September 1942, no less than nine Italian vessels were sunk on the African convoy routes, six of these by Mediterranean aircraft. Rommel stated, “[and some of] the petrol, which was a necessary condition of carrying out our plans, did not arrive. The ships which Cavallero had promised us were [...] sunk, some of them delayed and some of them not even despatched”.

[7] Once again, the Desert Air Force were hindering Rommel’s attempts to launch a counter-offensive. On 26th October 1942, 3 days into the second battle of El Alamein, the Desert Air Force intercepted and attacked a heavily escorted convoy of cargo ships making for Torbuk, resulting in the sinking of Proserpina, an oil tanker carrying 2,500 tons of petrol for the Axis ground forces.[8] However, the convoy wasn’t completely destroyed until the

following day when Tergestea, a large merchant vessel off the coast of Torbuk port carrying 1, 000 tons of petrol and 1, 000 tons of ammunition, was sunk.[9]This attack is believed to have been observed by high ranking German officers from the coastline.[10]If this is accurate, not only did they observe the convoy perish in a plume of black smoke, but also, they witnessed the demise of Rommel's last attempt to launch a counter offensive. Had it not been for Coningham's Desert Air Force and their relentless disruption of the enemy's supplies, Rommel would have received sufficient fuel and ammunition to have allowed him to move substantial forces from the rear-guard in order to mount a major counter-attack.[11]

It can be argued that the foundation of a successful professional relationship is based on collaboration. Montgomery wrote in his memorandum that the Eight Army could not fight on the ground without the support of the RAF, [12] therefore, for the Army and Air to co-exist on the battlefield they needed to be united as one force. Thus Montgomery's first priority was to develop a close collaboration with the Desert Air Force. Initially, to form their air-land integration, Montgomery and Coningham built the land and air headquarters near to the front line. This simplified the command of these services and ensured that the correct support was delivered at the right time and in the right places.[13]Montgomery profited very early on from this professional relationship whilst commanding the Eighth Army, where he tasted his first victory at Alam Halfa Ridge. During the battle, once daylight had started to fade and the Army were unable to establish enemy targets, the Desert Air Force would light up the desert below with flares exposing soft-topped

transport, tanks and guns of the Axis forces to be destroyed by medium range and low flying fighter-bombers.[14] This battle demonstrated how the organisation of air power could be used in direct support of the Eighth Army, helping to secure a rapid victory for British forces. To some degree, the growing relationship between air and land forces was an emerging concept in the British military at leadership level. The effects of this professional relationship would inspire Army-Air cooperation for the remainder of the Desert War. The Eighth Army took immense satisfaction in watching the tight formations of the Desert Air Force fly over their advanced armour and clear out Axis forces who presented themselves as attractive targets. This had a huge effect on the morale of the troops below as they knew that they were being supported by the air throughout the campaign.[15]

The Desert Air force's attempt to secure air superiority in early October 1942 began with the ability to put 530 serviceable aircraft into the air which heavily outnumbered the 350 exhausted Luftwaffe of the Axis forces. [16]

This was actioned when, on the 9th October 1942, enemy owned Daba and Fuka airfields were underwater due to a very heavy rain fall on the 6th October. Seizing the opportunity whilst the enemy were stranded, Coningham launched his full armada of bombers and fighters to destroy the two airfields, along with transport, fuel dumps and gun positions.[17] This attack on the already outnumbered and fragile Axis forces meant that Rommel's air support was declining swiftly, thus gaining air supremacy for the Desert Air Force. The Desert Air Force then began its full offensive with a bombing campaign, attacking the enemy's lines of communication, bombing

airfields and providing reconnaissance on the enemy's movements.

Furthermore, they supported the Army's forward area with fighter cover, whilst preventing any attempts by Rommel's forces to spy, either through air or ground reconnaissance. This contributed further to their command of the air and their assistance of Montgomery and his preparations.[18] Four days later, Montgomery deployed his units on land with a reduced enemy threat from the air[19] and launched operation Lightfoot on the 23rd October 1942. This was followed by the artillery of the Eighth Army opening fire on enemy positions.[20] Rommel, now suffering from the effects of the allies controlling the air, recognised that without regaining control, the fight for the desert was looking bleak. As Desert Air power played such a dominant role early on in the battle, Rommel was forced to withdraw his troops on the 4th November 1942, effectively handing victory to the allied forces.

The infantry regiments played a crucial role for the Allied forces during the battle. One obstacle that the Eighth Army had to overcome was the clearing of a path through a vast minefield known as 'devil's gardens'.

[21] Throughout this perilous task the infantry and armour were closely supported by effective air power which enabled the path to be cleared and allowed them access to attack Rommel's troops. The influence of air support was unmistakable to those operating on the ground. Once troops had dug their trenches and taken up fire support positions to assist the armour, all that was required of them was to wait whilst the Desert Air Force took control.[22] One infantry commander stated, " this battle was fought as it were over the heads of the infantry...though shelled and mortared, and

sometimes under machine gun fire, they were spectators, of what, to them seemed was a new kind of warfare". [23] There were no immediate threats from the air, the Allied infantry units were able to engage successful attacks against enemy forces, destroying Axis armour. On the 2nd November, Montgomery launched his next offensive, Operation Supercharge, which was designed to penetrate Rommel's main line.[24]Once again, the Desert Air Force underwent an intensive bombing campaign lasting several hours on the Axis positions, followed by an artillery bombardment. On the second day of Operation Supercharge, the Desert Air Force flew 1, 208 times and dropped 396 tons of bombs on enemy positions in order to aid the movement of ground forces towards the Rahman Track, which would open a corridor to enable Montgomery's remaining forces to attack the Panzerarmee Afrika.[25]Once Rommel began to withdraw, Montgomery became more reliant on the Desert Air Force to bomb the retreating infantry columns, whilst the Allied infantry mounted attacks to finally push out the remaining armour.[26]Although victory was ultimately achieved on the ground, it was by employing the Desert Air Force to provide consistent air support through harassment of Rommel's supply lines, aerial bombardment on the battlefield and further afield, that this was possible.

Despite the obvious significance of land forces, the Second Battle of El Alamein was won on the ground, air power proved essential in facilitating the victory for land forces. The Desert Air Force played a fundamental role in disrupting the supply line to Panzerarmee Afrika in the prelude to the battle, which prevented Rommel from launching a counter offensive against Allied

Forces, and potentially averting their defeat. Arguably, the professional relationship between Coningham and Montgomery proved to be a crucial factor, as they demonstrated that successful Land-Air integration would allow for greater freedom of movement for infantry and armour on the ground. This in turn led to successes on the battlefield as they were being supported by air throughout the campaign. The continuous aerial bombardment of battlefields and other axis establishments by the Desert Air Force had a major impact on the effectiveness of an already exhausted Luftwaffe, thus allowing Allies the freedom to strike Rommel's ground forces from both land and air. Although the records show that Montgomery's Eighth Army commanded more infantry, artillery and tanks than those of the Panzerarmee Afrika, it is evident that air power was a leading factor in maximising their efforts, especially during Operation Supercharge. By the end of the battle, Rommel understood what Montgomery had acknowledged from previous battles; that in controlling the air, you can then control the battle on the ground. It was written that " the Royal Air Force forgot how to support the Army", however, General David Fraser Commandant of the Royal College of Defence Studies re-quoted this with the addition " by the end of 1942 [the RAF] had re-learned the art, with advantages",[27]recognising the true significance of air power at the Battle of El Alamein.

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[1]How El Alamein changed the war, BBC News, 23 October 2002,
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[2]Evans (2012), p. 48.

[3]Ford (2005), p. 53.

[4]I. C. B Dear and M. R. D. Foot (1995), p. 1165.

[5]Terraine (1985), p. 381.

[6]Richards and Saunders (1954), p. 229.

[7]Quoted in Brigadier Desmond Young's Rommel

[8]Evans (2012), p. 46.

[9]Id.

[10]Richards and Saunders (1954), p. 241.

[11]Evans (2012), p. 48.

[12]Hamilton (2001), p. 605.

[13]Ledwidge (2018), p. 66.

[14]Ford (2005), p. 53.

[15]Terraine (1997), p. 385.

[16]Ford (2005), p. 62.

[17]Richards and Saunders (1954), p. 233.

[18]Ford (2005), p. 62.

[19]Orange (1990), p. 113.

[20]Hamilton (2001), p. 696.

[21]Barr (2004), p. 270.

[22]Ibid, p. 328.

[23]Miles (1980), p. 139-40.

[24]Ford (2005), p. 80.

[25]Terraine (1997), p. 385.

[26]Hamilton (2001), p. 766.

[27]Terraine (1985), p. 383.