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Allan Converse

Excerpt

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CHAPTER

TWO ROADS TO ALAMEIN

On the night of 23 October 1942 thousands of troops of the British Eighth Army stood ready to advance across a bleak stretch of the Egyptian desert near the railway station of El Alamein. To the west, the infantry of the German–Italian Panzer Army awaited them.

The infantrymen, sappers and machine-gunners of the Eighth Army assault waves were not alone: next to them and close behind them stood hundreds of tanks, and further to the rear were numerous guns, all loaded and ready. The battle to come – Operation LIGHTFOOT – would be a new kind of battle in this war: a set-piece battle of attrition and step-by-step advances, the kind of battle the British Army had learned to win in the First World War. For the first time since 1918 the ‘Poor Bloody Infantry’ would be going forward with adequate support from tanks, guns and aircraft.

Eighth Army’s tactics were not strictly new, but they would be implemented by a new commander: Bernard L. Montgomery. Montgomery believed in the use of all arms as a combined team, in thorough planning and preparation, and in training for specific tasks. Such methods had proved their value in the Great War, but they had been forgotten or neglected between the wars and in the earlier desert battles.

Montgomery also knew the importance of yet another battlefield factor: morale. Eighth Army’s morale was not in fact bad when Montgomery took command in August of 1942, but the new general did all he could to build it up. He made a great show of scrapping all plans for withdrawal from the Alamein Line. He spoke often to the troops, praised them and

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issued emphatic orders of the day. He got rid of unsatisfactory commanders and assured those who remained that their divisions would not be broken up but would fight as intact entities. Most of all, Montgomery ensured that his army would fight only when it was ready and had ample weapons and supplies. He radiated absolute confidence, and he communicated this confidence to the rest of his army, from generals down to privates. Thanks in part to Montgomery's efforts, Eighth Army faced the coming battle in a resolute, confident mood.

Eighth Army's guns opened with a deafening crash at 2140 and fired for another three and half hours; it was the heaviest bombardment of the war so far, further augmented by bombs from forty-eight Wellingtons of the Royal Air Force. Beneath the curtain of shellfire, the assault troops moved forward: four infantry divisions under XXX Corps and two armoured divisions of X Corps in the north forming the main assault force, a fifth infantry division and an armoured division from XIII Corps in a subsidiary thrust to the south, and raiding parties from two more divisions in the centre.

These divisions were not simply coloured arrows on a map, undifferentiated blocks of military 'stuff'. They were drawn from the different nations of the British Commonwealth and Empire – Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and Britain itself – and each had its own personality and its own history, as did the individual brigades and battalions that composed them.

DIGGERS AND GEORDIES: REVIEW AT ZERO HOUR

On this night, the right of Eighth Army's line – the post of honour – was held by the 9th Australian Division. The 9th was already a famous formation. Formed early in 1941 out of the bits and pieces of the other three Australian Imperial Force (AIF) divisions, the 9th had won fame in 1941 for its obstinate defence of the port of Tobruk against the Afrika Korps. After months of rest and retraining in Syria and Palestine the 9th returned to action in July of 1942, in time to play a vital role in the first battle of El Alamein.

In command of the 9th Division was Lieutenant-General Leslie Morshead. A shipping executive in civil life, Morshead was a small man with a pronounced Australian accent and a toothbrush moustache. Behind this unimpressive exterior lay a determined, aggressive spirit and a sharp military brain. Morshead was a hard driver, an excellent trainer and a

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sound tactician. He was one of Montgomery's strongest supporters in Eighth Army ('This man really is a breath of fresh air,' Morshead had declared after Montgomery took over), and the two men respected one another and thought along similar lines. Morshead asked a great deal of his troops, but he looked after their interests in his disputes with British commanders, and the men of the 9th admired him.¹

Now, as the barrage roared over their heads, four battalions of the 26th and 20th Australian Infantry Brigades stepped forward. The 26th Brigade, the right-flank formation of the division, was led by a new brigadier. David Whitehead was a tough, cerebral Australian Scot with an excellent record as commanding officer (CO) of the 2/32nd Australian Infantry and 2/2nd Australian Machine Gun Battalions. Whitehead's spearhead was the 2/24th Battalion ('Wangaratta's Own') from Victoria; it was a good unit but an unlucky one. Right behind the 2/24th came the 26th Brigade's follow-up battalion, the 2/48th. This South Australian unit had a high percentage of older men in its ranks, but it had an excellent reputation and its hard-driving commander, H.H. ('Tack') Hammer, was outstanding. The 26th Brigade's third battalion, the 2/23rd, was held in divisional reserve. The 2/23rd was another Victorian unit with not one but two nicknames ('Albury's Own' and the 'Muds and Bloods'). The 2/23rd's colonel, Bernard Evans of Melbourne, was one of the division's best COs and an aggressive promoter of himself and his unit. All three of the brigade's battalions had fought hard and suffered heavy losses at First Alamein.²

The 20th Australian Brigade attacked to the left of the 26th. The brigade's usual commander was the excellent Victor Windeyer, a Sydney lawyer and former CO of the 2/48th Battalion, but Windeyer was ill and would not rejoin until a later stage of the battle. In Windeyer's absence the 20th Brigade was under H.K. Wrigley, commander of the Australian Middle East training organisation and a former officer of the 2/6th Battalion in the 6th Australian Division, a nursery of fine leaders. Most of the 20th Brigade had seen little heavy fighting since Tobruk, where it had repulsed the German attack on Easter day, 1941. The 20th Brigade assaulted with two battalions 'up' and one in the second wave. The two assault battalions, the 2/13th and 2/17th, both hailed from New South Wales, and both had distinguished themselves in the Tobruk campaign. The 2/13th was the only Australian unit to remain in Tobruk throughout the siege, fighting well in the CRUSADER battle that finally liberated the port. The commander of the 2/17th, the ferociously efficient Noel Simpson ('the Red Fox'), was one of the finest COs in the Australian Army.

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The 20th Brigade reserve, the 2/15th Battalion from Queensland, had suffered heavy casualties in a major raid just two months before (Operation BULIMBA).³

The right flank of the 9th Division's line rested on the Mediterranean, in the shadow of the blood-soaked hill of Tel el Eisa. Here the division's third infantry brigade, the 24th, launched a noisy diversion. The 24th Brigade had played a less important part in Tobruk than the other two, but it had seen hard combat in the First Battle of Alamein that summer. It was led by the hard-drinking Arthur Godfrey, the only 9th Division brigadier remaining from Tobruk days. The 24th Brigade's units were of disparate origin and composition. The 2/28th Battalion came from the remote state of Western Australia; it had nearly been destroyed during the summer fighting, and had only just completed a hasty and difficult reorganisation. The 2/32nd Battalion was something of an oddity. It had been formed in England late in 1940 from spare personnel of other units in 'Australforce', the Australian contingent in the United Kingdom. Although allotted to the Victoria military district for administrative purposes, the unit's personnel were a mixed bag of men from all Australian states. The 2/43rd Battalion, like the 2/48th, came from South Australia. It was a solid unit, but lacked the brilliant reputation of the 2/48th.⁴

The 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion was a specialist unit formed from a core of New South Wales and Queensland Light Horsemen. On this night, as usual, its Vickers gun crews were dispersed among the infantry battalions to give fire support. The 2/2nd had debuted brilliantly in the July fighting, but LIGHTFOOT would be the first major action for the 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion. The Pioneers were what Americans would have called 'combat engineers', sappers who doubled as infantrymen. This New South Wales unit contained many older soldiers and, as LIGHTFOOT opened, it was deployed in a line-holding role on the 9th Division's right flank.⁵

The 9th Division had its own reconnaissance unit, the 9th Cavalry Regiment, a mixture of British Crusader cruiser and American Stuart light tanks and mechanised infantry in Bren carriers. The Victorian and South Australian troopers of the 9th Cavalry could serve in either the infantry or mobile exploitation roles, and in the coming battle they would perform both. The unit was a relative newcomer to the 9th Division, having first seen action in the conquest of Syria from the Vichy French in 1941.⁶

Advancing with the Australian infantry were the sappers of the engineer field companies, whose role in LIGHTFOOT was particularly critical: theirs was the unpleasant task of clearing the myriad of mines that

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shielded the Axis positions. There were no Victorians or New South Welshmen among the 9th Division's Royal Australian Engineers; one field company, the 2/7th, drew its personnel from no less than three Australian states.

Behind the men on foot were the guns under Alan Ramsay, one of Eighth Army's finest gunners and a future divisional commander. The seventy-two 25-pounder field guns of the divisional artillery were served by three field regiments, the 2/7th, 2/8th and 2/12th. The Victorians of the 2/12th, who had fought in Tobruk, had the most battle experience. In the opening phase of the battle, a great deal would depend on the Victorian 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment. Their anti-tank guns had to get forward quickly to assist the infantry against the inevitable counterattacks by the Axis armour. Protecting the division against air attack were the Bofors guns of the 2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, a mixed New South Wales-Victorian unit recently formed from personnel of other units already in the Middle East.

The 9th Australian Division was really a multinational team of all arms, and a wide variety of other units were either 'under command' of the 9th Division or 'in support' for LIGHTFOOT. Many of these units were British, including the veteran 7th Medium Regiment of the Royal Artillery and a Royal Engineer heavy mortar company. The most important attached troops, however, were the 40th and 46th Battalions of the Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) of the British 23rd Armoured Brigade. These Liverpool tankers had already supported the 9th Division in several major actions, and before LIGHTFOOT they had spent weeks training with the infantry and sappers. The Australians admired the Pommy 'tankies' for their bravery, but after past bitter experiences they were distrustful of armour in general and especially of the frail, weakly armed Valentine tanks that equipped the 40th and 46th RTR.

Amid the masses of infantry, tanks and guns, a casual observer of the scene in the 9th Division's lines that night might not have noticed other and less glamorous members of the divisional team preparing for their tasks: the stretcher-bearers and doctors making ready to treat the inevitable casualties, psychological as well as physical; the chaplains, strengthening the men for the spiritual and mental ordeal ahead; and the provosts ('Redcaps') and regimental police. The provosts had a vital function as traffic control, but they also had to deal with the men who could not be led or persuaded into action.

While XXX Corps carried the main thrust of LIGHTFOOT, XIII Corps launched a major diversionary operation in the open country

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between the Ruweisat Ridge and Qaret el Himeimat. On the night of 23 October, the British 7th Armoured and 44th Divisions assaulted the Axis line between Himeimat and the Deir el Munassib depression. The third division of XIII Corps, the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, sent out fighting patrols to harass the enemy. At the same time, the 50th also prepared to launch an assault on the enemy positions at Munassib, scheduled for the second night of LIGHTFOOT.

The 50th was a different sort of division from the 9th Australian. The 50th, a TA (Territorial Army) formation from the north of England, was one of only three British infantry divisions in contact with the enemy in October 1942. The 50th had first seen combat in the 1940 campaign, fighting with distinction at Arras, La Bassée Canal, and Dunkirk. Since coming to the Middle East in 1941, the 50th had fought in the battles of Gazala and Mersa Matruh, and some of its elements had also seen action in the July fighting on the Alamein line.

The battles of the summer had been disastrous for the 50th. The division had lost an entire brigade at Gazala, while the remaining two had nearly been destroyed at Mersa Matruh and suffered further heavy losses at First Alamein. The division's losses were so severe that it had almost been disbanded, and it had spent most of August and September in the rear resting and reorganising. The 50th Division that re-formed on the Alamein line in October was a hastily stitched patchwork of new and old, and very unlike the homogenous division that had fought at Dunkirk and Gazala. The division's commander, John S. 'Crasher' Nichols, was a bespectacled alumnus of the Essex Regiment, a pure fighting soldier who had distinguished himself in combat in Syria and Operation CRUSADER. Nichols had risen fast; less than a year before LIGHTFOOT he was still a battalion commander. Nichols had led the 50th only since July but he had worked hard to pull it back together.

The reorganised 50th had only two British infantry brigades. The 69th (Yorkshire) Brigade, which would make the assault on Deir el Munassib, was led by Edward C. Cooke-Collis ('Red Ted'), a veteran Green Howards officer of high reputation within the division. The brigade had many experienced leaders, but after its summer losses it was no longer as cohesive or well drilled as it had been. All three of the brigade's battalions were under new commanding officers who had only just taken over. Two battalions stood ready in the line, the 6th Green Howards on the right flank, north of Munassib, and the 5th East Yorkshire Regiment on the left, to the east of Munassib. The 6th Battalion of the Green Howards came from the North Riding of Yorkshire; it had distinguished itself in the Dunkirk

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campaign and had once been Cooke-Collis' own command. The 5th East Yorks, on the left of the 6th Green Howards, came from Hull and the Humber Estuary. The 7th Green Howards, sister battalion to the 6th, was in reserve; its brilliant new CO, Derek Seagrim, would later win a VC in Tunisia.⁷

The 151st (Durham) Brigade held the line north of the 69th, ready to support its sister brigade to the south. The 151st consisted of the 6th, 8th and 9th Battalions of the Durham Light Infantry (DLI). Nichols had commanded the 151st at Gazala; now it was led by the Australian-born Joscelyn E.S. ('Jos') Percy, former CO of the 9th DLI. Like the 69th, the 151st Brigade had large numbers of recruits in the ranks, hastily drafted in from strange regiments to make up for the losses of the summer. The brigade had two especially fine COs, the tough 'Jake' Jackson of the 8th DLI and the much-admired Andrew 'Nobby' Clarke of the 9th. Interspersed among the battalions of both brigades were the accomplished Vickers gunners of the 2nd Battalion, the Cheshire Regiment, the only British Regular Army battalion in the division.⁸

The all-sorts nature of the 50th became clearer still further north along the divisional front. Here, to the right of the 151st Brigade, were two brigades of Allied troops: the 1st Greek Brigade and the 2nd Fighting French Brigade (2ème BFC). The Greeks were aggressive to the point of recklessness, particularly while on patrol, but the brigade had never seen major action before. Part of 2ème BFC had seen brief combat at Gazala, but it was only two battalions strong. Most of the brigade's men were not French, but black colonial troops from the French African colonies. Neither of these Allied brigades was highly rated by the British, and the French (who had only just joined the 50th) were particularly short of equipment.⁹

The 50th Division was strong in artillery, but this strength, too, was heterogeneous. Two of the division's original field regiments had survived the summer fighting, the 74th Field Regiment from Durham and the 124th from Northumberland, but they now had only two field batteries each instead of the standard three. To make up numbers, the 50th received two units that were relatively new to the desert: the 154th Field Regiment (the Leicestershire Yeomanry converted to artillery), and the 111th Field Regiment, a TA unit from Bolton, Lancashire. There were also five batteries of Greek and French field guns. The 102nd (Northumberland Hussars) Anti-Tank Regiment came from the 50th's home area and had much combat experience, but it had only recently joined the division; one of its batteries consisted of Rhodesians. The 25th Light Anti-Aircraft

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Regiment, a unit of Liverpool Territorials, had suffered heavy losses in the summer and was detached elsewhere. To temporarily replace the 25th, the 50th had received the unfamiliar 34th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, a TA unit from South Wales.¹⁰

The Australians were a solid, experienced team, but the reorganised Northumbrians were not. Nichols knew this, but he was determined that his newly rebuilt division should make a good impression in its return to battle.

THE DOGFIGHT

As the barrage lifted from the forward Axis positions, the Australians plunged into a maelstrom of intense combat that was to last for a week and a half. The 20th and 26th Brigades seized most of their immediate objectives by the morning of the 24 October, but the Germans and Italians soon counterattacked and for the Australians the struggle had only just begun. Far to the south, the 69th Brigade of the 50th Division went into action in its diversionary role on the night of 25/26 October. The 5th East Yorks and the 6th Green Howards attacked two key strongpoints at Munassib, the Moor and the Cape. The attack did not go well. The troops took some of their objectives but became entangled in wire and mines, were hit by their own artillery fire, and fell back after suffering several hundred casualties. Nichols sensibly refused to initiate the second phase of the division's planned assault, and Montgomery closed down the diversionary operations of XIII Corps.

The struggle in the north grew fiercer by the day as the armour of X Corps struggled to break out from the positions seized by XXX Corps. As the armour ground to a halt along Miteiriya Ridge, Montgomery altered his master plan. He resolved on a series of 'crumbling' attacks to wear down the Axis infantry, preparatory to another major armoured assault on the Axis centre. To do the crumbling, Montgomery turned to the Australians. Beginning on 28 October, Morshead's already tired and depleted division attacked northwards towards the sea, cutting in behind the powerful Axis position of Thompson's Post. Rommel could not allow Thompson's Post to fall, and the Australian attack also threatened his line of supply and retreat along the coast road. The fighting in the 9th Division sector soon reached a high pitch of fury as the Australians battled for places whose names would become as famous as Pozières and Lone Pine: Barrel Hill, the Saucer, the Block House and the Fig Orchard.

Rommel reacted to the Australian thrust exactly as Montgomery hoped, committing much of his precious reserve to costly and largely futile

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counterattacks against the 9th Division. As Rommel denuded the rest of his line to contain Morshead, so the opportunity arose for a fresh blow against the Axis centre. By 1 November, Montgomery was ready to strike again between Miteiriya Ridge and the Australian left. The new attack – Operation SUPERCHARGE – would be a LIGHTFOOT in miniature, with an even greater ratio of men and guns to space. To mount it, Montgomery had drawn heavily on XIII Corps. The 151st Brigade was transferred from 50th Division and put temporarily under command of the 2nd New Zealand Division; other elements of the 50th had already been allotted to other divisions of XXX Corps, and the remainder of the 50th had extended its front far to the north in order to allow XXX Corps to close up and concentrate further for SUPERCHARGE.

On 1 November the Germans launched a massive counterattack against the 24th Australian Brigade, which had just relieved the shattered 26th in position on Barrel Hill. The Australians were hard-pressed, but they drove the Germans back one last time. SUPERCHARGE went in that night, the veterans and recruits of the 151st Brigade moving up through the ranks of the adjoining 20th Australian Brigade. The fighting was bitter and confused and the Durhams suffered heavy casualties, but by dawn on 2 November they stood on their final objective. The success of SUPERCHARGE led to the climactic battle between the British and German armour, an encounter that sealed the British victory. Rommel began to withdraw on 3 November; when patrols from the 9th Division went forward early on 4 November, they found the enemy gone from their front. To the south, patrols from 50th Division also found the enemy in full retreat. Eighth Army had won the British Empire's greatest land victory of the war so far.

THE STRAIN AND THE REWARD

Total British casualties at Second Alamein were 13 560 officers and other ranks. This was a small total by the standards of many Second World War campaigns and smaller still compared to First World War battles like the Somme, where the British had lost 57 000 men on the first day alone. Yet Alamein, unlike the Somme, was a major victory with tangible operational and strategic results, and from that point of view it was well worth the cost.

Whatever the results and the relative scale of loss, the casualties were felt most keenly by the units engaged. Alamein was no walkover, especially for the infantry. This was particularly true of the 9th Division, which lost 2686 men, 22 per cent of Eighth Army's total casualties. Some battalions

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in the 9th Division were so reduced as to be non-effective, the 2/24th Battalion alone losing 359 men. The division's command ranks were devastated: Brigadier Godfrey was killed, the chief engineer, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert J.H. Risson, was badly wounded, and seven battalion commanders were also killed or wounded. The 50th Division was much less heavily engaged, but it lost a minimum of 894 men in its British units, the equivalent of a full battalion, or a seventh of the division's British infantry. The division lost at least 1211 men, 8.9 per cent of Eighth Army's total casualties.¹¹

The stress of combat had tested morale in both divisions to the utmost. Morshead's aggressiveness and complex manoeuvres placed a heavy burden on the Australian infantry, who suffered constant Axis artillery fire and repeated counterattacks. At the height of the fighting on 27 October, Corporal Cyril Mears of the 2/17th Battalion scribbled a few lines in his diary:

The enemy has now bombed my section position, he is giving us hell, five yards from my trench a machine-gunner has been killed, the stretcher bearers are carrying out the wounded now, Sgt Ted Rand was killed near the same spot. When will it all end[?] Two Australian Btns attacked again tonight, the gun fire is frightful[.] One chap from the [2/15th Bn (QLD)] came in with his arm shot off, I laid him in my dug out while looking for a stretcher, blood covered my blanket & over coat[.] Thank God for daylight[;] a terrible night.¹²

The 151st Brigade was not heavily engaged for as long as the Australians, but the scenes in SUPERCHARGE were as terrible as any on the Australian front. Private Ernie Kerans of the 9th DLI saw some of the worst of it:

Over the sounds of the barrage and the small arms could be heard cursing and the cries of the wounded.

Someone in a pitiful voice was crying for his mother. From everywhere, 'Stretcher bearers, stretcher bearers!' and always the continuous noise. Sight had gone but the screams and curses mixed with the chatter of the machine-guns and explosions of shells, continued.¹³

Some men cracked under the strain and had to be sent to the rear as psychiatric casualties, labelled 'Not Yet Diagnosed (Nervous)' or NYD (N), and many others came close to the same black edge. Discipline, too, began to fray as the battle went on and the pressure increased. Part of the