

British Repel Axis Tanks in Night Battle

By M. H. HALTON



ON THE EGYPTIAN DESERT FRONT LINE, July 17 (Delayed). —Bumping south yesterday through the choking, soft sand of this battlefield, I reached the central position in time for a good view of what must be one of modern war's most dramatic spectacles—battle of tanks in the dark.

At 5 in the afternoon I reached the headquarters of one of our armored forces. A staff officer described the day's fighting and told where we had succeeded and where we had gone wrong—once when New Zealanders attacking with anti-tank guns found themselves separated from their infantry by a German tank encampment.

"Here we are," said the officer pointing to a map, "and there is the wedge we made today. Here is our armor. Here is the ridge the Germans are trying to recapture. We expect them to attack again this evening. Go to this point and you will see something."

Before I reached the lookout, the enemy had begun his operation. For the second time in a day, German storm troops, supported by tanks, were attacking across a shallow, sandy depression against Ruweisat Ridge, a low escarpment 10 miles southwest of El Alamein, and for the second time they had to go through a curtain of steel from our field guns, antitank guns and machine guns and from our tanks waiting in hull-down positions to strike.

The Black Tanks

Standing on a car, I could see Rommel's black tanks moving down the far slope and into the valley with our shell bursts moving with them. They were halted, but at 9 o'clock, after one of the heaviest Stuka raids I have seen, they came on again under the dim light of the stars and the thin new moon.

On that darkening stage the spectacular Act 3 of the day was played. Tense with excitement, I watched the movement of German and British tanks by the flashes from their guns. There would be 20 or 30 flashes and rolling thunder from one point as the Germans stopped to fire and, almost at once, flashes and thunder as British tanks replied. Flashes in the dark were firing at flashes in the dark. The earth was shaking and the night illuminated by Very lights, star shells and burning vehicles or petrol dumps.

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We could see this great startling episode, but tell little of what was really happening. But later, when the rolling cannonade had subsided, it was apparent that the attack had failed. The enemy had lost some more tanks.

Desperate Attacks

July 15, Noon (delayed).—Through to-day's blazing hot morning of dust, shell-fire, machine-gunning, dive-bombing raids and drifting powder smoke, the battle before El Alamein continued.

Generally evening is the time for the enemy to attack, when our gunners and machine-gunners in the forward positions face the glare of the setting sun, but this morning the enemy has been keeping up his small-scale but desperate attacks.

He started with 36 Stukas dive-bombing our position and a number of tanks trying to make a breach. But the Australians are still in their positions.

"They can come on like this all day and we will still like it," said an Australian captain, "but they will have to stop before long."

Aussie machine-gunners were covering the salt flats before their positions with a shroud of bullets, and hundreds of shells from our 25-pounders and bigger guns were falling among the enemy positions.

If the pandemonium would ever cease here in the front positions, one might have time and serenity enough really to describe this glaring, shimmering, choking, cracking cockpit of battle at this place called El Alamein.

A Thought for Russia

It is not a major action and sometimes we think it is small stuff. One keeps thinking of Russia's Don Basin where as many army corps are engaged as we have divisions.

Two p.m.—Here, not 300 yards from our guns and exploding enemy shells, soldiers are swimming in the sea beside a pile of rocks where I am writing.

July 16, 6:30 a.m.—Squadron after squadron of our bombers are going over in the dawn. We look up and count the bombers a few seconds before their bombs fall on enemy positions 3000 yards from where I write. They fly in close formation seemingly



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imperturbable in the hurricane of enemy anti-aircraft fire, while above them British and enemy fighters wheel, dive, swoop and spit their venom of steel. Perhaps my readers may have read this a hundred times before, but it still excites us who see it in the storm of battle, cursing as we see one of our aircraft go moaning down in flames, or shouting hard brutal words when an enemy plane staggers and smokes with a demon on his tail, or crying, "Look at that!" when our bombs burst in terrible crumps and enemy munition or petrol vehicles go up in spasms of flame.

I saw many prisoners walking out of the battle smoke. They were dazed and exhausted.



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