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"Complete, Absolute Victory!"

Those were the words with which General Montgomery greeted correspondents after he had crushed, once and for all, the vaunted Afrika Korps. Here's how he did it—an elementary, brutal slugging match that taught the tacticians no new lessons but proved again the value of old ones

General Montgomery

By Chester Morrison

CHICAGO SUN CORRESPONDENT
BY RADIO FROM CAIRO

NOBODY was satisfied. The battle that had begun at the end of the last week in August ended, suddenly and unspectacularly, in the beginning of the second week of September.

The correspondents who had covered the war in North Africa since its beginning wrote their papers that it was less like a victory won than like a battle that had never been fought. They were disappointed, and among the people of Egypt there was only the accustomed feeling of tenuous momentary security, the customary cynical belittling of this "temporary" jackpot and waiting to see which side was really coming out on top before betting on the future.

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General Montgomery, wearing beret, confers with Air Vice-Marshal A. Coningham

Yet a cocky little Irishman who had taken over the British Eighth Army two weeks before the battle made an astonishing announcement—made it, incidentally, through Wendell Willkie, who dressed it up in terms that seemed at the time to be extravagant. He announced that the Axis armies in North Africa had been thoroughly beaten, that the threat to Egypt had been removed for all time.

A month later—at the end of October—Montgomery swung again, this time with power so tremendous that the German and Italian armies reeled and broke, reorganized clumsily and fled in what seemed like panic. They fled out of Egypt into Cyrenaica, fled back through their own mine fields, fled westward on the one main highway along the Mediterranean coast, fled along desert tracks hub-deep in sand.

And Montgomery stayed on their heels. Montgomery, in his tent or in his dugout, riding in his tank or his jeep in the field, talking of "my plan" with other generals putting his plan into effect. Now, without question, the enemy was beaten. Montgomery had succeeded where a succession of other British generals had failed.

There came a day early in November when the little gray man stood like a pugnacious sparrow on a white rock ledge at the edge of the Mediterranean. He stepped daintily down toward a group of correspondents he had summoned to hear his proclamation.

"Shall we stand here?" he asked, stepping off into the soft sand of the beach.

"This seems all right," his aide replied.

The general considered. "No," he said finally, turning again toward the white ledge which formed a sort of terrace for the cave he was then using as headquarters. "Surf makes too much noise."

The correspondents followed him, scrambling for places, crowding to sit on a rock, producing pencils and notebooks, and resting their notebooks on their knees, pencils ready.

The general stood in the center of his terrace. He was wearing a gray homeknit sweater with a silk scarf knotted about his throat, khaki pants, unscuffed brown calf desert boots and the jaunty black beret of the tank corps. The beret seemed somehow too large for his small gray head. There were no ribbons on his chest. None of these articles of clothing was strictly uniform, but uniform regulations were seldom closely observed in the field.

Always cocky, he was cockier than ever that morning. His small, sharp blue eyes flicked over the correspondents and

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Gen. Ritter von Thoma, commander of Rommel's Afrika Korps, salutes his captor, Gen. Montgomery, left

his close-clipped gray mustache twitched. Suddenly—such was the magnetism of the little man himself—one noticed another figure standing beside and a little behind him. It was Coningham—chief of the R.A.F. in the western desert—ordinarily a commanding figure; tall, heavy and solid, with a hawk nose of the kind which belongs to a man commanding the R.A.F. in the field. Coningham wore the proper uniform with ribbons.

The correspondents waited.

The Smile of Victory

"It was a fine battle," Montgomery began. Here was that past tense again—the same way Willkie had spoken two months earlier—as though the battle was already over. "It was a fine battle," he repeated, and now he no longer could suppress the smile that had been making his mustache twitch. "Complete, absolute victory," he snapped. "Boches finished. Finished!"

Montgomery has that habit of repeating his own phrases, and when he speaks, his letter "r" comes out softly.

"On Tuesday night (this was Thursday) I drove in two hard wedges, with three armored divisions, some of which are now operating in enemy territory. Those of the enemy that can get away are in full retreat. Full retreat. Those that cannot get away are facing our troops and they'll be put in the bag."

Here was a winner talking. "Hello, Mom," he was saying, "It was a tough fight, but I won."

"How do you like my new hat?" he demanded unexpectedly, and waited for the laugh. Montgomery has more hats than most generals in the British forces, but none of the correspondents had ever seen him wearing a tank beret.

He resumed his air of sternness and went on:

"I had not hoped for such complete victory," he began, then amended himself. "Yes, of course I hoped, but I had not expected it would come so quickly. The enemy is completely smashed. Completely smashed."

And it turned out that the enemy *was* smashed. Not completely smashed, not yet, but Montgomery has the knack of reading the future. "He's like the conductor of a great orchestra," one of his most respectful minor subordinates told me once. "He's always at least one bar of the score ahead of the players."

While Montgomery fought on the ground, Coningham fought in the air. The R.A.F. and its adjunct, the U.S.A.A.F., fought by day and by night, with fighters

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Not all the German tanks fought to the end. As shown by the dramatic picture below, many surrendered to British infantry

and bombers, and they achieved a triumph such as has never been achieved by any allied air force in any other theater of war. It wiped out—in Coningham's own words, it annihilated—the Luftwaffe on the ground and in the air.

Banked today along the sides of airfields which were German in October are piles of junk—junked German and Italian planes, wrecked before they could leave the ground.

So the little Irishman seems to have succeeded where others had fallen short of complete success. The enemy fled to El Alamein, fled to Tel el Eisa—the Hill of Jesus. He gave battle for two days at Tel Aqqaquir—Bad Man's Hill—then turned and ran, ran past Fort Capuzzo and Tobruk, past Mersa Matruh and Ain el Gazala, fled into Jebel Akdar—Green Hills—toward Tripolitania, where Americans and another army of British were closing in on Tunis and Morocco.

Egypt had been saved once more.

It was simply done, a simple thing to do, given the weapons with which to do it. And for the first time since the battle for North Africa began in 1940, Montgomery had the means to apply the perfect setup of good big man against good little man.

In the battle of August and September—the battle so disappointing for the spectators—Montgomery had won a passive defensive victory. He massed his tanks, his antitank guns and his field guns in fixed positions south and east of the long sand hump called Ruweisat ridge, which runs east and west for twenty miles south from the coast. He planted his armor there, with orders to his commanders that the tanks were not to move, were not to accept battle whatever the temptation, but were to remain where they were fixed and destroy any enemy armor which came within range.

The enemy came, his panzer divisions nosing eastward past Ruweisat, and swinging north toward the coast. It was an old maneuver. It succeeded the summer before when the Germans swung south around the Free French at Bir Hachéim and cut northeast to within sixty miles of Alexandria, where they stopped.

But in September the maneuver failed. The oncoming panzers met the massed fire of Montgomery's positions, met it and fell back, and the battle was over. Mr. Willkie, who had it on the highest authority, called it a victory comparable to Nelson's Abukir Bay.

Then there were two months of inaction, and nobody was satisfied, least of all Montgomery. The enemy sat on the Alamein line, sixty miles from Alexandria. He always had attacked before, he probably would attack again. Any day now he'd attack, and nobody was doing anything.

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British supply trucks splash through a stream on the outskirts of Matruh

But one idle day I took a long ride in a truck, and at the end of the ride was a wide, flat desert plain covered with tents and, among the tents, thousands of men.

Elsewhere—I never knew all the places—other fresh forces were gathering. New tanks, new guns, new trucks with their fresh paint unscratched, new stores of food and clothing and ammunition and huge dumps of fuel brought to Egypt and laid down where they would be handy.

And in General Headquarters for the Middle East, the Eighth Army general staff was digesting Montgomery's plan. It wasn't altogether the same staff he had found when he arrived in August to take command. The changes had been swift and numerous, and sometimes ruthless.

His gathering power funneled now into the desert; power so tremendous it was breathtaking. Tanks numbering well in the hundreds, guns in hundreds, field guns, howitzers, self-propelled American antitank guns, new American General Sherman tanks with high-velocity 75-mm. cannon which can kill a tank at ranges previously impossible. Montgomery was ready.

He had planted hundreds of guns on a line running twenty miles from the sea at El Alamein southward toward Hemeimat. He put the Free French at the southern end, disposed the rest of his forces to balance the enemy distributions, and concentrated fire power in the northern sector of the front he had chosen.

At twenty minutes to ten on the night of October 23d it happened.

As though he really were the conductor of a great orchestra, Montgomery's baton dropped, and all his guns—his hundreds of guns—roared in unison. It was a barrage such as no one hereabouts had ever heard before.

It was a terrible barrage. Days later I saw dead men without a mark on their bodies, killed by the terrible concussion of shells that had burst near them.

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These British infantrymen have captured a German strong point after hard bayonet fighting

Tricked by the Wind

But a barrage is not intended to kill men. It is intended to keep men under cover. In that purpose, the barrage of October 23d was successful. But the element of complete surprise had been lost through a freak over which even Montgomery had no authority.

The enemy, it was learned later from prisoners, knew the attack was coming, but nobody knew just when or where. Then the wind, which had been blowing steadily from the west for days, shifted, and enemy outposts heard it coming. They heard on the wind the sound of tanks moving up along parallel tracks through the desert, and they knew.

But the knowledge was useful only to the extent that it relieved the tension of uncertain waiting. Nothing could be done to stop it. The enemy had made his plans for meeting the attack. What he didn't expect was the terrible fury of the opening barrage.

That barrage, nevertheless, was textbook tactics. The enemy knew the routes by which the attack must come through his mine fields. He knew that while the barrage lasted, the British engineers were cutting gaps through the mine fields; he knew that armor would follow; and after the armor would come the infantry. He prepared for all these things, and on the first night of Montgomery's new tactics, the infantry and armor were only partially successful. Not all of his infantry and none of his armor achieved their assigned objectives.

But Montgomery was a good big man now, and Rommel a good little man. Montgomery had the power to strike and keep striking. He had power to pound and crush and override and to take punishment and still keep pounding.

It was almost elementary. It was almost brutal. It was a slugging match, and the enemy couldn't take it.

The Free French, who had had faint success against considerable opposition in the southern sector, now poured in on their objectives against no opposition at all. German armor and German infantry began their retreat, leaving the Italians in the south to fall into the bag held open by Montgomery's containing force. Prisoner camps began to fill with men who sat dejectedly under the sun, stripped of their possessions and professions, stripped of their hopes if they ever had any.

"Last night," General Montgomery told correspondents that November morning, "I captured a commander of the Afrika Korps, General von Thoma." As a matter of fact, that capture was

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Safely behind barbed wire, are a few thousand German and Italian prisoners

made by a young armored-car captain.

Montgomery told of spending most of the night fighting over the war on a table-top with his opposite number. He spoke highly of Thoma's ability as a soldier. What he didn't tell them was the circumstances of their first meeting.

It was on the threshold of Montgomery's comfortable motor-caravan truck that he first met the limping captive, still unkempt and smeared with clotted sand. Montgomery led him immediately into the austere truck he used as a map room.

The advance was swift at first, past acres of enemy munitions dumps and enemy trucks packed for flight and left where they stood when the pursuing forces enveloped them, past wrecked trucks, theirs and ours, past the bodies of unburied dead lying in grotesque poses, their faces black in death.

At El Daba it began to rain—just a night's hard rain, at first. It was enough to bring out ravaging hordes of mosquitoes, enough to slow down the pursuit just a little. As the pace slackened, as the movement of vehicles on the one main highway was interrupted for half an hour, for an hour, the long, long line of the huge Eighth Army stretched into an almost endless queue of trucks and guns and tanks and supply wagons.

An Orderly Retreat

As the pace slackened, the enemy paused and took a breath. He took time out to burn his supply dumps, to sow the sides of the roadway with mines, to blow up difficult passes along the highway, to post rearguard detachments which stayed put for a day, holding up the movement of our soft-skinned vehicles until our tanks came to blast our machine-gun nests, or until the enemy rearguard could withdraw after dark to make a new stand a little farther along.

The rain grew heavier and almost continuous. The enemy was withdrawing in a skillful, orderly manner. What had

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So rapid was the British advance that scores of German fighters and bombers were smashed before they could get into the air. The picture above shows some of the Nazi planes destroyed on the ground at Daba.

seemed like a rout a few days before had become a hard chase.

Now there was no question of strategy. It was all tactics. It was a race for Mersa Matruh, for Derna—where the steep winding roads of both entry and exit were blown up—for Bengasi, for El Agheila, for Tripoli. Behind its advance elements, the unwieldy Eighth Army hunched along like a nightmare caterpillar. The Navy ferried in fuel for planes and trucks, food for the men, spare parts for machines. Bases were built where they'd always been built—at Matruh, Capuzzo, Tobruk—and the rain turned the tracks to mud. Airfields turned to mud, and for days only a few planes got into the air—a few of ours, almost none of theirs. Now the good little man was boxing, and the big man was slow on his feet. But the end was inevitable.

So what had been learned? That superior force is a good thing to have. That it must be properly employed to extract its full advantage. That air superiority is essential for victory. That bad weather can bog down the best of armies. That a retreat needn't necessarily be a rout. Nothing tacticians didn't know before.

Montgomery demonstrated it again in this battle, and it's still true—when a good big man meets a good little man, the big man always wins.

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