

Mr. Winston Churchill, and General Sir Alan Brooke,* Chief of the Imperial General Staff who had arrived there from Moscow some days previously. At this interview I was notified that I was to assume command of the Middle East Forces. Shortly afterwards I was informed that my commitments were to be reduced by the creation of a separate command, to be known as Persia and Iraq Force, which would assume responsibility for defending the northern frontier of the Middle East block against the threat from the German armies in the Caucasus. I remained responsible for the defence of Syria, Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Cyprus but the threat of a German advance through Anatolia was now considered remote and it was reasonably certain, at the worst, that Germany would not present an ultimatum to Turkey before the spring of 1943. I was free, therefore, to concentrate all my attention on the threat to Egypt from the west and my task is best described in the words of the Directive, written in his own hand, which the Prime Minister handed to me at a subsequent interview on 10th August:

"1. Your prime and main duty will be to take or destroy at the earliest opportunity the German-Italian Army commanded by Field-Marshal Rommel together with all its supplies and establishments in Egypt and Libya.

2. You will discharge or cause to be discharged such other duties as pertain to your Command without prejudice to the task described in paragraph 1, which must be considered paramount in His Majesty's interests."

I assumed command of the Middle East Forces from General Auchinleck on 15th August. I selected as my Chief of General Staff Lieut.-General McCreery who had been my GSO 1 when I commanded 1 Division at Aldershot and in France in 1939 and 1940. His scientific grasp of the whole sphere of military matters made him of the greatest assistance to me throughout my period of command in Africa. My General Headquarters continued to be located in Cairo, but I established an advanced Tactical Headquarters at Burg el Arab,† adjoining the Headquarters of the Eighth Army. My predecessor had, as a temporary measure, assumed personal command of Eighth Army but it was intended that he should be succeeded in that capacity by Lieut.-General Gott, previously General Officer Commanding 13 Corps. Before he could assume command the aircraft in which he was flying to Cairo was shot down by enemy fighters over its airfield and he was killed by machine-gun fire on the ground while assisting the rescue of the other occupants. General Gott had been in every battle in the desert since the beginning; he had commanded 7 Support Group in the first campaign, 7 Armoured Division in 1941 and 13 Corps since February, 1942. It was particularly tragic that, having survived the early days of triumph and disaster when skill and endurance alone could be thrown into the balance against the inadequacy of our resources he should now be robbed of the chance of the high command he had so well deserved at a

moment when the balance of power had at last swung favourably to our side. I was fortunate in being able to replace him at once by Lieut.-General Montgomery,* who arrived in Egypt on 12th August from the United Kingdom. General Montgomery was an old comrade in arms from the French campaign and had served under me in Southern Command in 1941; I well knew his capacities as an inspiring leader and an outstanding trainer of men. He soon won the confidence and the affection of the men of the Eighth Army, many of whom, in particular the newly arrived formations, had already served under him in England. He rapidly made himself familiar with the situation in the desert, and by his frequent visits to the various units disposed along the battle front he brought to all ranks the inspiration of his cheerfulness, enthusiasm and confidence.

The Alamein position had been constructed in 1941 though it had been recognized long before that as offering the best defensive line in the Western Desert. Its strength lay in the fact that its southern flank could be covered by the Qattara Depression. This is the dried-up bed of a former inland sea which stretches from the neighbourhood of Siwa oasis, on the Egyptian frontier, to end at a point about a hundred and sixty miles north-west of Cairo and ninety miles south-west of Alexandria; the bed of the depression consists of quicksands and salt marshes, almost everywhere impassable even for a loaded camel, and on the northern side it is surrounded by steep cliffs which descend precipitously from an average height of over six hundred feet above to more than two hundred feet below sea level. At its eastern end the depression approaches to within about forty miles of the coast of the Mediterranean which here has a southerly trend in the large bight known as Arabs Gulf.

This was, for the desert, a very short line and it had the enormous advantage that it could not be outflanked to the south which was true of no other position we had ever held.† The prepared defences, which had been constructed by 2 South African Division, were based on four defended localities: at El Alamein itself on the coast road, Deir el Shein, Qaret el Abd and the Taqa Plateau on the edge of the Depression.‡ These four strong positions, thickly surrounded by minefields and wire entanglements, with prepared gun positions and cleared fields of fire, extended right across the belt of good going from the Mediterranean to the Depression; but when I arrived in Egypt only one was still in our possession, the so called Alamein "box". The last success of the German drive into Egypt, on 1st July, had been the capture of the Deir el Shein position. The loss of this position had opened a great gap in the line as planned. It seriously

* Now Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K G, G C B, D S O.

† It was not practicable to pass a force through the desert south of the Qattara Depression to reach the Nile Valley through the Fayum, the Germans sent a reconnaissance detachment this way, organized by the Hungarian traveller, Baron Almassy, but it was detected and secured by us.

‡ El Alamein, after which the line and the battle were called, is nothing but a halt on the Desert Railway to Mersa Matruh. The name, which is descriptive as are most names in the desert, means "the twin cairns". Deir means a depression, of which there are several small examples between the main depression and the sea, Qaret el Abd means "the hill of the slave".

* Now Field-Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke of Brookeborough, K G, G C B, O M, D S O

† General Catroux, when he spent the opening night of the Battle of Alamein with me there, suggested we might rename it "La Belle Alliance".