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DESTINY IN THE
DESERT**

The Road to El Alamein –
The Battle That Turned The Tide

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PREFACE: A PIVOTAL STRUGGLE

The victory of the British Eighth Army at the Battle of El Alamein in November 1942 yielded one of Churchill's most famous aphorisms: 'This is not the end, it is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.' For the British Prime Minister and for the nation it was a moment to savour after the long months of failure, defeat and humiliation which had followed the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from France at Dunkirk in June 1940.

El Alamein soon entered a hallowed pantheon of historic British victories among the likes of Blenheim and Trafalgar. In the mythology in which it was soon to be shrouded, the battle also acquired its own Marlborough or Nelson in the person of Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery. Like his illustrious predecessors, 'Monty' was given his place in the accompanying roll call of great military leaders. Moreover, he was destined to become the only British general of the Second World War to have an entire chamber devoted to his exploits in that very real pantheon in London which houses the Imperial War Museum.

The myths of El Alamein endure. The battle, which was fought over twelve gruelling days and nights between two war-weary armies, was billed as though it were a prize fight between

two military superstars: Monty versus the Desert Fox. This was perhaps inevitable. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had already acquired the semi-mythical status which that admiring sobriquet bestowed on him by the British suggests. From the moment of his arrival in the North African desert in February 1941, Rommel had repeatedly out-dared, outmanoeuvred, and outsmarted Montgomery's predecessors on the battlefield. To Churchill's growing dismay, his Panzerarmee Afrika seemed destined to run rings round the Eighth Army indefinitely. At a moment of acute crisis, the appointment of Montgomery to command that weary British force in the Western Desert seemed like the Prime Minister's last throw of the military dice.

By the late summer of 1942, as the new British commander rehearsed for the Battle of El Alamein, the Eighth Army had been so reinforced with men and armaments that it enjoyed overwhelming superiority on the battlefield and in the air. This has led most military historians – on both sides – to conclude that while a British victory was hardly inevitable, defeat was virtually inconceivable. Nevertheless, after so many setbacks on so many fronts, Churchill, by then desperate for good news, was in a state of the highest anxiety. So, when the news reached him that Rommel's army had crumbled and was in full retreat, the Prime Minister's exhilaration was unbounded. He at once cabled his congratulations to the Middle East Command, declaring, 'it is evident that an event of the first magnitude has occurred which will play its part in the whole future course of the World War.' Later, in another of his grandiose aphorisms, he purred memorably, 'Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat.'

In fact there had been victories before El Alamein and there were to be defeats afterwards, which is doubtless why Churchill was careful to preface that exultant affirmation with five cautionary words 'It may almost be said ...' However that qualification has been widely ignored, further contributing to the enticing myths by which El Alamein has become encrusted. Not that this should diminish the significance of the victory which came at a critical moment for Churchill and for Britain's fortunes. After more than three bone-wearying years of war against Hitler, it

finally demonstrated – for the first time – that the British could not only resist the Nazi threat to the home front but were able and willing to take the war to the enemy on a foreign field and emerge with a comprehensive victory. At Churchill's command, Britain's church bells, silent since the outbreak of war, were rung out across the nation in celebration and relief.

But there is far more to El Alamein than the fact that it salvaged Britain's morale and reputation. Although it came to be regarded as a defining moment in British history, it cannot usefully be seen in isolation from the drama of which it formed the climax. Eminent military historians have fought and re-fought every moment of a desert conflict which lasted for two years – the longest British campaign on land in the Second World War. They have untangled every move in the back-and-forth struggle across a terrain so implacably hostile that the challenge of human survival, let alone warfare, was as testing as anywhere on the planet. They have analysed the tactics adopted by both armies, rigorously detailing the strengths and weaknesses on each side. Yet, even seventy years after El Alamein, the battle itself and the tsunami of global events which led up to it are still a source of intense and acrimonious controversy.

There are those who have argued that, far from being 'an event of the first magnitude' as Churchill believed, El Alamein was a battle that need not have been fought, that it was militarily redundant, and therefore that those 13,500 men – from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Poland, and 'Free' France – who spilled their lifeblood in the sand for Montgomery's victory, died for little purpose. Some have gone further, arguing that the entire desert campaign between 1940 and 1942 was an unnecessary diversion which squandered precious resources that should have been preserved for a frontal assault against the German enemy in Europe. From these twin standpoints, such historians concede that El Alamein may have had a certain utility as propaganda – an heroic riposte to those who had come to believe that the British Army had no stomach for the war against Nazi Germany – but it was nonetheless a marginal achievement on a peripheral war front.

This perspective sidesteps or ignores the critical fact that Churchill fought the Second World War as much to save the global reach of the British Empire as to destroy Nazism. It was for this reason above all others that the protagonists on both sides were sucked into the cauldron of the Middle East and North Africa, and it is only against this background that it is possible to make sense of what otherwise would have been indeed a peripheral struggle in the blood-soaked sand of a faraway and irrelevant desert.

Though this book places that military and human drama played out over the vast emptinesses in Egypt and Libya at the heart of the story, it also seeks to place the Desert War in a much wider context. From this standpoint the victory at El Alamein was a providential triumph on a war front that, so far from being peripheral, was pivotal to the struggle between the Allies and the Axis for control of a vital front in a Mediterranean theatre which, in large measure, shaped the course of the Second World War.

For Britain, the Mediterranean was 'the carotid artery of empire', crucial both to safeguarding the nation's vital assets in the Middle East and in sustaining the great outposts of Empire in India, Africa, and the Far East, to all of which Churchill, his government and parliament were unequivocally committed. Britain was still the world's greatest maritime power, holding sway over the lives of two-fifths of the planet's population spread over five continents. At that time almost all British citizens subscribed to a vision of the world in which the sun would never set on their great empire. To argue – as later generations with the benefit of hindsight would come to do – that the Empire was at best an anachronistic delusion and at worst an exploitative and rarely benign system of colonial oppression would have seemed unpatriotic if not treasonable to most of His Majesty's British subjects. Of course there were those who campaigned for an end to Britain's global hegemony, but they were few in number and lacking in impact. That the Second World War would hasten the demise of empire and accelerate the decline in the nation's global influence was, for most people, an unimaginable prospect. As Churchill himself proclaimed a few days after the victory of El Alamein, 'I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over

the liquidation of the British Empire. For that task, if it were ever prescribed, someone else would have to be found.'

Moreover, short of obliterating Germany with bombs, the North African desert was the only theatre where Britain could battle effectively against Nazi Germany. Churchill's challenge was extreme. In the two and a half years leading up to El Alamein, when defeat seemed as likely as victory, Britain came under acute pressure on all fronts in a region which encompassed what is now generally known as the Arab World. The Middle East Command in Egypt was on constant alert against the threat of pro-Nazi insurrection or subversion in neighbouring Arab countries.

Even more threatening was the prospect of a full-scale Nazi blitzkrieg southwards, either from Russia via the Caucasus or through Turkey. From whichever route it might come – and it was under constant consideration by the German High Command – British strategists feared that any such thrust would be designed to link up with Rommel's Panzerarmee forcing its way across from the Libyan desert to Cairo and the Suez Canal. Had Hitler been gifted with strategic vision rather than a blinkered obsession with the destruction of the Soviet Union, it is more than probable that those threats would have been realised, in which case, the consequences would have been cataclysmic, not only for the Empire but for Britain itself.

Thus, from Churchill's perspective, victory or defeat in the struggle against Rommel came to represent respectively triumph or disaster in a crucial theatre of war where the very survival of the British Empire was at stake. As he told a press conference in Cairo two months before the Battle of El Alamein, 'We are determined to fight for Egypt and the Nile Valley as if it were the soil of England itself.' This unshakeable resolve placed what might otherwise have been a minor military campaign on a faraway battlefield at the heart of a prolonged political and diplomatic drama.

With the fall of France in June 1940, Churchill was fully aware that the industrial and military might of the United States would be essential for the defeat of Hitler and the preservation of the Empire. His genius, over the course of the six testing months which followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan in

December 1941, was to seduce President Roosevelt into sharing his strategic perspective: firstly persuading him that the European front should have priority over the defeat of Japan in the Pacific and then – against the fierce advice of almost all the President’s men – that a joint invasion of North Africa, which Churchill was to codename Operation *Torch*, should precede any direct military assault against the enemy on mainland Europe.

One of the reasons the Americans were initially so suspicious of Churchill’s war strategy was a profound aversion to the very idea of an empire from which the people of what later became the United States had liberated themselves only a little over a century and a half earlier. But by the summer of 1942, Roosevelt – despite the profound scepticism of his senior military advisors – had come to share the Prime Minister’s view that victory in North Africa was crucial to the triumph in the West. Once the President had made this decision, the two leaders’ common purpose – in one of the many ironies of the Second World War – placed this military theatre in which the Eighth Army was fighting to sustain the British Empire at the very heart of the Allied war effort.

For Churchill, the arduous, frustrating and often acrimonious months of negotiation between London and Washington which led up to America’s decision to join the fray in North Africa was intimately linked to the alarmingly uneven performance of the Eighth Army in the Western Desert. Following a string of setbacks and defeats in Europe and the Pacific, the failure of Britain’s forces to make headway against Rommel had confirmed Roosevelt’s most senior advisors in their aversion to deploying American troops against the Axis powers in North Africa rather than on the mainland of Europe.

As a supplicant, seeking to establish himself as an equal partner in a new special relationship, Churchill had to prevent the President’s military advisors from poisoning the chalice from which he needed Roosevelt to drink. For this reason, he regarded it as imperative that Britain’s potential should be demonstrated on the battlefield as well as in the conference chamber. As the Middle East and North Africa formed the only available battlefield on