From July through early November 1942, the British Eighth Army fought three significant battles on the open desert in the west of Egypt. The first battle (July 1-29) was an effort to stabilize defensive lines at the end of a long, disastrous retreat. The second battle (August 30-September 7) was a battle to hold the lines against an offensive attack by the Axis forces under General Erwin Rommel. The third battle (October 23-November 4) was a major battle to break through the German/Italian lines and initiate a general advance intended to destroy the Axis forces.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Britain had military forces stationed from Egypt to India, garrisoned as part of its empire. When Italy came into the war, in June 1940, that nation already had significant military forces stationed in Libya. The Germans and Italians advanced eastward into Egypt. The Suez Canal was of critical importance. Britain had no option but to fight against the invading forces. From that time until the Anglo-American landings in North Africa on November 8, 1942, a modest British military force, supplemented by forces from across its empire, fought Italian and German forces on a front that surged eastward and then westward several times. In May and June 1942, the Axis forces, led by Rommel, attacked eastward, advancing from positions west of Tobruk, in Libya. The Germans and Italians advanced eastward for all of June, crossing the border into Egypt. Both sides were exhausted and short of supplies by the end of June. On July 1 and 2, the British chose to make a stand around an insignificant, desolate rail stop named El Alamein.

There have been many books written about the battles at El Alamein and the larger North African campaign. Glyn Harper's book, *The Battle for North Africa: El Alamein and the Turning Point for World War II*, was published in 2017 to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the battles around El Alamein. Published by Indiana University Press, it is part of a series of books on twentieth-century battles edited by Spencer C. Tucker. Harper, the author of several books, served in both the Australian and New Zealand armies and, at the time of writing his book, was a professor of war studies at Massey University, in Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Harper asks, in his introduction, "So why write another book on the battles of El Alamein?" (p. 5). He gives three reasons, the best of which can be stated as: to provide a "fresh and unbiased perspective" (p. 6). The bibliography at the end of the book is extensive. Harper has researched the existing published and archival material well, and his use of relatively recent books and papers on
the battle and the campaign in North Africa provides new insights into the British leadership and development of British warfighting doctrine from 1940 through 1942. This book, as published, has 255 pages, excluding acknowledgments, bibliography, and index. Given this compact size, Harper's book is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the summer campaign and the fierce battle that took place in October/November 1942. It is a decent introduction to the British war against German and Italian forces in North Africa in 1942.

As odd as it may seem, the British army had to relearn lessons about fighting in large formations, forgotten from the hard school of the First World War. Having been born of a small force, the commanders of what became the Eighth Army had a difficult time adapting to the coordination of large formations across a broad front. The Eighth Army was part of the British army's Middle East Command. General Claude Auchinleck (1884-1981) was appointed commander in chief in July 1941. In the early part of 1942, the Eighth Army was commanded by General Neil Ritchie (1897-1983). With the disaster at Gazala and the ensuing retreat in May and June 1942, Auchinleck assumed direct command of the Eighth Army on June 25. In turn, Auchinleck was relieved from the Middle East Command in mid-August, after the Eighth Army had stabilized the lines at El Alamein. General Bernard Montgomery (1887-1976) was then appointed as commander of the Eighth Army. The spring and early summer of 1942 was a period of intense crisis for the British forces in North Africa. Morale dropped as the Eighth Army suffered serious setbacks, and there was dissension among the unit and army commanders. Using research by Jonathan Fennell, Harper discusses the crisis in morale of spring 1942: Auchinleck had asked London for permission to reinstitute the death penalty for "cowardice" and "desertion" (p. 68). Before this question was resolved, however, Auchinleck was replaced.

The Eighth Army spent much of 1941 through mid-1942 in a period of perpetual crisis. This prevented the allocation of time for units—both the existing formations and new ones being transferred into the army—to train under desert combat conditions. There was poor coordination among infantry, artillery, and armor. The net effect was a disjointed campaign of attrition, with individual infantry and armored units being subjected to horrific casualties in poorly organized operations. The final British offensive, under Montgomery, seemed to continue this trend, with just enough endurance to break the German and Italian lines. Harper quotes Montgomery, before his death: "I've got to go to meet God—and explain all those men I killed at Alamein" (p. 246). Harper does a decent job describing these complex, small, operations on company, battalion, and brigade scale, often with horrific casualty rates. It makes for depressing reading.

While much has been made of the leadership of Montgomery, Harper's narrative shows that the change in leadership was important, yet the North African campaign also owed much to the provision of massive amounts of equipment, superior logistics, and dominant airpower. The British tanks facing the Axis forces in 1941 through mid-1942 were obsolete. Harper writes that the British tanks' main gun was a two-pounder gun. This gun could only fire armor-piercing rounds, which were effective to five hundred yards, far less than the German tanks (p. 18). In the retreat from Gazala until Rommel's last offensive at the end of August and early September, only a few American M-3 Grant tanks were interspersed with the British armored forces. American M-4 Shermans did not begin to arrive until September 1942, after Montgomery had taken command of the Eighth Army.

Having stopped the Axis forces at the first battle of El Alamein, Auchinleck began to oversee the changes necessary in the Eighth Army. Weeks later, Montgomery was selected to command the
army forces in Egypt. With Montgomery, the British rebuilt the Eighth Army, bringing in new divisions, replenishing losses in other divisions, and withdrawing units that were no longer effective from the front. As the Eighth recovered and gained strength, the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force conducted interdiction strikes against German and Italian equipment and transport across the Mediterranean.

Rommel understood that time was on the side of the British and on August 30 attacked British positions south of El Alamein, attempting to gain a low ridge named Alam Halfa. Desperately short of fuel, supplies, and armor, the German and Italian forces were unable to break through the British and Dominion forces, which were not much stronger but had control of the air, coordinated artillery, and had access to fuel and ammunition.

Both sides understood that the next offensive would come from the British. The Germans proceeded to dig in, incorporating and expanding much of the British defensive minefields. The British trained and replenished their personnel, equipment, and stock points.

References to the Eighth Army often suggest that it was a monolithic, smoothly functioning, formation. A British government publication, published in 1945, stated in one long, running sentence, “In the final North African campaign the British 8th Army under Generals [Harold] Alexander and Montgomery routed the Axis forces in the victorious Battle of Egypt fought at El Alamein, October-November 1942, which for the British Empire marked the turning point of the war, and was the first major defeat of the German armies in the field.”[1]

The truth is more complex. The Eighth Army ground through several British and imperial divisions and brigades over the course of the campaign, and many of the formations associated with the army were worn down and under strength. Along with British infantry and armored divisions were infantry divisions from India, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Of the last battle, the major offensive at El Alamein, Harper states that the weight of the battle was carried by just four of the eleven divisions in the army, who closed and defeated the enemy positions. Harper shows that the heavy lifting on the way to a British victory in October/November 1942 was accomplished by the infantry, artillery, and tactical airpower. The Eighth Army’s 10 Corps, an armored corps with two armored divisions (1st Armored and 10th Armored), was barely present in the final battle. Harper writes of 10 Corps: it "had failed in every task it had been allocated, had demonstrated excessive caution, and an inability to follow even the simplest directions" (p. 238). One must attribute this failure to poor leadership: the armored units had been badly shaken during the retreat at Gazala. Harper notes that in a seventeen-day period during the retreat, the Eighth had lost "more than 1,000 tanks" (p. 31). This loss, and clashes of personality among the leaders, showed that the general officers commanding the corps and armored divisions had lost faith in the leadership of the Eighth Army.

Harper’s book is adequate as it goes, but one is left with a gnawing sense that with more effort the book would have been stronger. The quotation, noted above, about the Eighth Army losing more than one thousand tanks has no citation or reference in which to look deeper into this matter (Fennell and Niall Barr discuss the source of this figure). He does not provide an order of battle for any of the battles he describes. To be fair, though, Harper is not alone with regard to the absence of orders of battle (this will be discussed further below). The complex description of operations conducted by the flow of units that passed through the Eighth would have been easier to follow if a number of orders of battle had been included as appendices. Harper’s provision of figures, for casualties and equipment losses, lacks sufficient detail. It may be that such detail may be beyond the scope of the work; this book is part of a series of books on battles. Harper’s "sins of omission" are
no more egregious than the work of other authors, but this could have been a stronger reference with more work. The battles that Harper covers in his book are important, and his book is important due to the inclusion of more recent research on the 1942 British campaign in North Africa.


Lucas Phillips’s book, published twenty years after the battle, has 407 pages of narrative. What gives this book weight is that the author commanded a field regiment of artillery during the campaign. Modestly, he refrains from identifying which field regiment and thus leaves a tantalizing question to be answered. Barr’s book, published two generations after Lucas Phillips’s, has 495 pages of narrative and notes. Barr’s book quotes many significant sources and is, generally, excellent.

One is not surprised to find that the earlier books, with the larger amount of text, provide more detail about actions that took place in that campaign. These books, plus Harper’s, focus on the British/imperial perspective, giving less attention to the German/Italian actions. Their presentation of details and their emphasis vary: there is no sense of redundancy in the accounts. Those interested in this campaign would profit from reading all three books. The span of time that elapsed between the date of publication of the books allows for each author to view the battles from a different historical perspective.

Fennell’s book, published in 2011, contains 300 pages of text. His focus is not on the events of the battles but on the effect of the battles on the individual units and the soldiers in them. His bibliography illustrates the depth of his research. For this reason, any serious effort to understand the flow of this campaign from the perspective of the British army must include Fennell’s book.

Lucas Phillips provided a number of “orders of battle” in his appendices for the offensive that the Eighth Army began in October 1942. These include the Eighth Army, Western Air Force, German army, and Italian army. In addition, he provides an order of battle for the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Armored Division for one of the subsidiary operations during the main offensive battle, Operation Supercharge. None of the four authors provide orders of battle for the early July and late August/early September battles. Three of the authors—Harper, Barr, and Lucas Phillips—describe an important action around the box position held by the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade and supporting units on July 1, 1942, the action that stopped the advance of the Axis forces. Lucas Phillips did not identify the battalions that made up the infantry brigade.[3] Harper writes of the action, noting: “Most of 18 Indian Brigade managed to escape, but it had to leave behind close on 1,000 casualties” (p. 42). Barr gives the most detailed account of this action, taking several pages to present the details of this crucial confrontation, and he does it well. Unfortunately, he does not identify any of the battalions of the 18th Indian Brigade, and the one battalion that he does name was not in the battle, having passed through earlier to take part in another important action in the coming days.[4] There were two battalions of the Essex Regiment in the Eighth Army at this time, serving with different brigades. Barr misidentifies a battalion of the 18th Indian Brigade, which was overrun and destroyed, as 1/4th Essex, which was with the 5th Indian Brigade at the time.[5] The battalion he describes was 2/5th Essex, fighting its first battle: its only battle. The 2/5th Essex, togeth-
er with the 4/11th Sikh and the 2/3 Gurkha battalions, three field artillery regiments and some scattered forces thrown into the fray, were responsible for saving the British position at El Alamein. Barr writes, “The sacrifice of the brigade had bought critical time. Although few, if any, observers recognized it at the time, the resistance of the 18th Indian Brigade had stemmed the tide.”[6] Regrettably, the Essex regimental history gives no breakdown of casualties, nor any roster of personnel of this doomed battalion.[7] Both the 2/5th Essex Battalion and the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade were disbanded after the battle and disappeared from the British and Indian armies. Only Fennell identifies the 2/5th Essex, noting the scale of the casualties, but without any context for the battle.[8]

The discussion of 2/5th Essex brings into focus the issue of casualties incurred in combat units during the individual battles and over the campaign. Fennell is the only author discussed here to examine casualties in any detail, and his focus is on their impact on the morale in the combat units. Fennell assesses the issue of morale in combat units using primary group therapy to evaluate the effect of severe casualties in a number of battalions. In doing so, he presents figures that are not seen in the other books mentioned here. The Eighth Army was adversely affected by the savage battles of the summer and autumn. As discussed previously, Harper notes that the armored divisions had severe losses in the May/June retreat from Gazala and failed to properly engage the enemy forces during the October/November battle. Fennell reports that almost all of the armored regiments engaged in the summer battles required their reconstitution in the United Kingdom or reforming in the Middle East. He documents battalions that were disbanded or reduced to cadre after the fighting from May through July, but his lack of an appropriate order of battle is an impediment to following the evolution of the Eighth Army on a brigade and division level.[9] The reader is left to wonder whether a higher level of background knowledge of the Eighth Army is required to appreciate the points that Fennell makes or whether Fennell does not feel that such knowledge of the Eighth Army is required to appreciate his research. To underline the severity of losses among the infantry battalions after the first four days of the October offensive, Fennell quotes Montgomery's diary: “It is clear from the casualty figures that we have got to be careful, especially as regards infantry.”[10]

Three anecdotes provided by Lucas Phillips give gripping insight into the intensity of the battle between the British forces and the joint German-Italian forces, as the British fought desperately to break the opposing lines. First, Lucas Phillips described a meeting discussing the necessity of the 9th Armored Brigade, commanded by General John Currie, to achieve its objective, following the attack of the 2nd New Zealand Division on the night of November 1/2, 1942. While Lucas Phillips did not explicitly say, he appears to have been witness to this exchange. Lucas Phillips wrote, "'We all realize,' [Lieutenant General Bernard] Freyberg said, 'that for armour to attack a wall of guns sounds like another Balaclava; it is properly an infantry job. But there is no more infantry available, so our armour must do it....' When Currie's turn came to ask questions on these orders, he observed, somewhat diffidently, that the task given to his brigade, of breaking the line of guns on the Rahman Track and seizing the Aqqaqir Ridge, was one in which 50 per cent losses must be expected. To this, Freyberg replied in a matter-of-fact way: 'It may well be more than that. The Army Commander has said that he is prepared to accept 100 per cent.' There was a moment of dead silence before the next brigadier, clearing his throat, turned the attention of the conference to a different issue.”[11]

Second, Lucas Phillips quoted from an account by General William Gentry of the scene around the remnants of the 9th Armored Brigade, around mid-day, November 2, 1942. Lucas Phillips
wrote, "When a little later, Gentry brought up 6th New Zealand Brigade to take over from the Durhams [Durham Light Infantry], he went forward to discover the dispositions of the tanks on his front. He found Currie, fully dressed still, asleep on a stretcher beside his tank, with a dozen or so other tanks dispersed around him. Gentry hesitated to wake him but decided he must. He shook him and, when Currie awoke, said: ‘Sorry to wake you, John, but I’d like to know where your tanks are.’ Currie waved a tired hand at the little group of tanks around him and said: ‘There they are.’ Gentry, puzzled at his reply, said: ‘I don’t mean your headquarters tanks. I mean your armoured regiments. Where are they?’ Currie waved his arm again and replied: ‘There are my armoured regiments, Bill.’[12]

The third anecdote from Lucas Phillips describes the surrender of General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma (1891-1948) as the battle broke past its climax during the daylight hours of November 4, 1942. Lucas Phillips wrote: “Unexpectedly there appeared over the crest of a dune a single Mark III tank. It was immediately assailed and burst into flames. The commander and crew were seen to leap out, but were pinned to the ground by shellfire from the 11th RHA [11th Royal Horse Artillery Regiment (Honorable Artillery Company) (Territorial Army)], whose OP [Observation Post] tank was right in front. A tall figure was seen to detach itself from the others and walk slowly forward. From the facings that glittered at his shoulder and collar, and by his outsize binoculars that he carried, he seemed to be someone of importance. The shooting stopped.... Captain Grant Washington Singer ... was the first to reach the tall, slowly-moving figure. The German, his greatcoat over his left arm, saluted and gave himself up. Singer took him back in the Dingo to [Lieutenant Colonel John Pell] Archer-Shee and reported: 'I've got something here, sir. I don't know what it is, but it looks good.' The prisoner, who spoke a little English, himself gave the answer. It was General Ritter von Thoma." (A footnote to this anecdote states: "Singer was killed in action next day. Von Thoma, on hearing the news, wrote his father a touching letter of sympathy.")[13]

There is more to the story of El Alamein than a recitation of the details in battles. The campaign offers a study of the way units were ground down in the fighting and replaced by new, fresh units, presenting insight into the bitter, devastating nature of the war in the desert. Reading these books, one gets a sense of the evolution of the Eighth Army from an untrained and uncoordinated group of military units into a large force capable of engaging enemy forces using the combined arms elements at its disposal. Many of the units that served in the Eighth during this critical time paid a bitter price for this knowledge. By the time the Eighth Army had broken the German–Italian forces in November 1942, it was on the path to becoming a powerful military force. Harper’s book is a decent place to begin learning about this important campaign. For the purpose that Harper wrote his book, it accomplishes this task.

Notes


[13]. Lucas Phillips, *Alamein*, 393, 394. Lucas Phillips made two errors in this anecdote: the captain’s name was Grant Allen Singer and the unit was the 10th Royal Hussars, Royal Armored Corps. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission website shows that he was killed on November 5, 1942, and is buried in El Alamein War Cemetery, plot XXX. E. 6. The epitaph on his headstone reads: “My Adored Husband / ‘Honour is not preserved / by brave words, but by deeds / in the test of fire’. Daphne.” Captain Grant Allen Singer, Commonwealth War Graves, accessed March 2, 2023, https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/2211952/grant-allen-singer/.

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