

MONTGOMERY AS I KNEW HIM

"Most Successful British General Since Wellington"

IN August, 1942, Eighth Army was discontented, puzzled and pessimistic. It had fought many battles bravely, won great successes, and suffered inexplicable and catastrophic defeats which it felt were undeserved. Most units and all formations had shared in one or more defeats; in fact it was said that newly-arrived troops were not broken in until they had been overrun. Rommel's thrust into Egypt had certainly been checked on the short line from the sea through Alamein to the Qattara depression, but in July there had been a series of hasty, ill-organised counter-offensives, all ending in disaster, and now it was known that Rommel was nearly ready to make another throw.

No one felt very confident. Apart from the unsuccessful fighting, the summer campaign had been a nightmare of heat and flies, unit strengths were low, and many men still at their duty were weak and overstrained. Probably the enemy were no better, but Eighth Army had lost confidence in the command. Too many things had gone wrong, too often battles had been fought because it would be nice to win them, and with patently insufficient preparation, too often tanks had left infantry unsupported, too often high hopes had been cast down. Alternative positions further

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east had been prepared and places in them allocated; it wasn't clear whether we were to fight in them or where we stood. Plans for withdrawal had been prepared and circulated, though they all contained unconvincing provisos that nothing therein should be taken as indicating any intention to retire. Much of the Armour was still scattered in ineffective "Jock" columns, and much of the infantry still enclosed in "Boxes." There was much "belly-aching" about all orders from the higher hierarchy. All troop-carrying transport was well forward and the Army stood with one foot in the stirrup ready to run.

"STRAFER" GOTT succeeded Auchinleck in command. He was identified with the old order, had been in the desert from the beginning, but he was liked and admired. On the day of his appointment he held a conference at which he explained his plan for the coming defensive battle. It looked rather promising. Then he went off by plane for a short leave in Cairo and 10 minutes later was shot down and killed.

After a few days we heard that General Montgomery was coming from England to take command. No New Zealanders had heard of him and our English friends were unenthusiastic. One English Brigadier told me that he was understood to be mad and, more cheerfully, that he would certainly get rid of some of the dead wood. He took over the command at 2.0 p.m. on August 13 and that afternoon came forward to see General Freyberg, the most experienced and formidable soldier in the Army. The General told us that night that he had told the new Army Commander that he was sorry for him. Middle East was the grave of lieutenant-generals, none lasted more than a few months. He also told us that he was a hundred per cent. for Montgomery but that he had many enemies and would have more.

Next day our transport was ordered 70 miles away; no more question of running if we wanted to. All work on the alternative positions was to stop, there was to be no more talk of, or planning for, withdrawals. The whole Army stirred, this was the way to talk. A little sharp-featured man with cold eyes and a hard voice arrived at my headquarters in a jeep. He paid no compliments, made no kindly remarks, asked a number of pointed questions and waited for the answers, and left me feeling distinctly stimulated. That even-

ing I went round my battalions, got their officers together and told them of the changes, that there was going to be no more retreating, that here we stood and here we would fight and that before long there would be better things. It is pleasant to remember the delight of those gallant veterans. No one who served in Eighth Army at that time will ever forget the miraculous change he brought about, or will cease to be grateful that at that time we had such a Commander.

ROMMEL attacked at the end of August and was beaten off with ease. General Montgomery explained to senior officers how he intended to conduct the battle—much after Gott's plan—and he fought it precisely so. There was no attempt to follow up the success, means were inadequate, and the Army turned its attention towards preparing for the great battle that was to turn the war.

Everything was done right. All troops were rested and then trained for the attack. The plan was made known through descending levels until every commander and every soldier knew his part. We were elated to find that we were really going to attack in force, four divisions together on a broad front. Preparations went smoothly ahead, with no sign of confusion or uncertainty. It was a different army. When the infantry moved forward to open the battle in the bright moonlight of October 23, they did so with supreme confidence and determination to win. Ten days later, after the "break in," "the dog fight" and "the break through" that Monty had predicted, the victory was gained and the Axis armies were in their first irretrievable retreat.

IT is nonsense to say that Alamein was Alexander's battle, not Montgomery's. There is no evidence whatever that Alexander, Commander in Chief Middle East, did more than was his function. He gave the directive "You will attack and destroy the Axis Armies in Africa." He ensured that all possible resources in Middle East were made available, perhaps kept the ring clear from outside importunity, and did not interfere. It has been suggested that if their positions had been reversed Montgomery would not have been equally patient. But I have never seen or heard of anything to show that he was unable to leave his chosen commanders full discretion and freedom to carry out the tasks he had given them.

THIS is not the place to attempt a survey of all Field-Marshal Montgomery's campaigns. New Zealand Division served in Eighth Army during the whole period of his command except for the short campaign in Sicily, and the earliest phases in Italy. In his time it was a good Army to belong to. There was never any haste or confusion, orders were clear and unaltered, everything was thoroughly prepared and there was a feeling of balance and confidence. The difference was very clear when we went to Fifth Army before Cassino.

There are certain controversies, made the most of by Ingersoll and Butcher, temperately and clearly dealt with by de Guingand and Moorehead and by the Field-Marshal himself in his two books.



AS MOST New Zealand troops will remember him—a photograph taken on the road to Tripoli not long after the final desert offensive had been launched