

MEDITERRANEAN & NORTH AFRICA: WHAT KIND OF MAN WAS MONTY?

Extracts from Montgomery's report on the North Africa campaign
1942-43

Catalogue ref: WO 214/19

Source a

Divisions were split up into bits and pieces all over the desert; the armour was not concentrated; the gunners had forgotten the art of employing artillery in a concentrated form.

If changes in the higher command had not been made early in August, we would have lost EGYPT.

Source b

In Eighth Army we had:

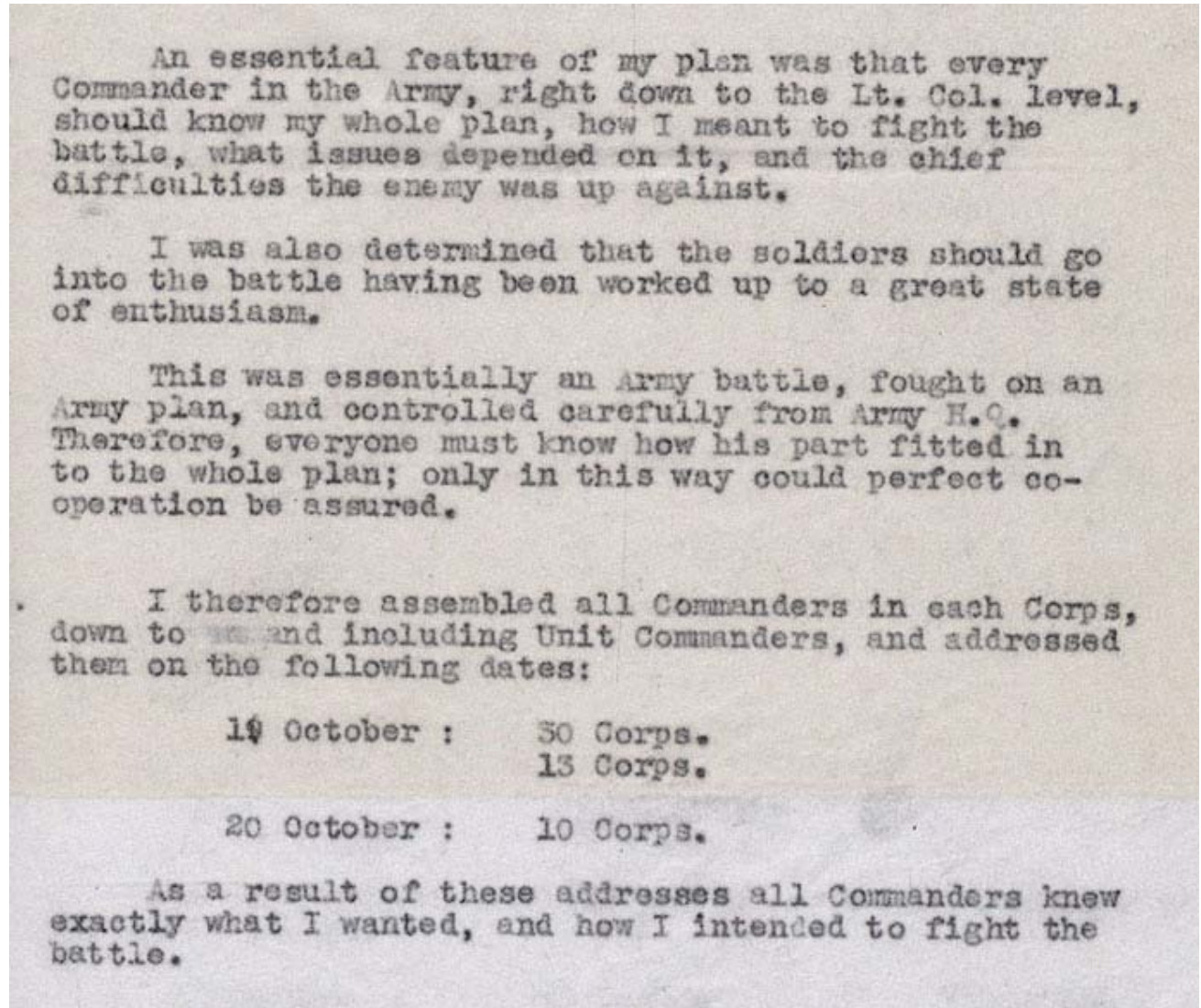
A new Army Commander.
Three new Corps Commanders.

Of all these new appointments at G.H.Q. and at Eighth Army only one Officer had fought in the desert before and that was General LUMSDEN, 10 Corps. All the rest, including myself, were from England and were fit and fresh - new brains on an old problem.

GOTT was to have commanded Eighth Army. I am convinced that this appointment was not sound and might have led to disaster. GOTT was one of the old regime

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Source c



What is this source?

These extracts come from Montgomery's official report to the government on the North Africa campaign.

The report went into great detail about the battle plans and how they were carried out.

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What's the background to this source?

North Africa was a key battleground in WW2. From 1940-42 British Empire forces fought against German and Italian forces to control the area. By the summer of 1942 the campaign did not seem to be going well for the British. German forces had pushed deep into British controlled Egypt as far as El Alamein. By October 1942 the British commander General Montgomery had prepared his forces for an attack to drive the Germans back. The battle began on October 23rd 1942 and lasted 12 days. It resulted in a major victory for the British 8th Army. It was the first decisive defeat of German forces in WW2.

Montgomery took control of the 8th Army in August 1942. He ruthlessly removed officers he considered not up to the job. He also set about building up large numbers of troops, tanks, artillery, aircraft and ammunition. By the time the battle started he had almost twice as many troops, tanks and aircraft as the German commander Rommel. Montgomery was a great believer in training troops over and over again. However, he did not have time to do this and so his battle plan relied on relatively simple, but very clear instructions. This basically meant a very aggressive face-to-face fight rather than a fast moving motorised battle that would have suited the Germans.

It's worth knowing that...

Montgomery accurately predicted the length of the battle as 12 days and the number of casualties as 13 500. He faced criticism from some commanders and politicians in Britain before El Alamein because he took too long to prepare his forces. Montgomery was knighted for the victory at El Alamein. The battle was the first decisive defeat of German forces. Churchill saw it as a turning point in the war.

Montgomery also faced some criticism after he won the Battle of El Alamein. This was because he refused to let his tanks chase after the retreating Germans. Montgomery believed that fast moving, motorised action like this favoured the Germans and did not play to British strengths.

Does this source help us decide if Montgomery is the right man to command the land forces in France?

1. According to Montgomery, what problems were there with British forces before he took over?
2. What was the cause of these problems?
3. Gott was unable to take over because he had been killed in an air crash. Do you think Montgomery's comments were a little insensitive?
4. Why do you think Montgomery was so keen that all the commanders should know his plan?



Learning Curve

WORLD WAR II

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5. Does this source help you to answer any of the questions you have to tackle in your report?