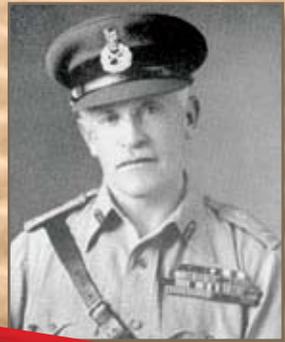


# The Desert Generals



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## Introduction

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In 1960 the historian Correlli Barnett published *The Desert Generals* in which he had the temerity to challenge the all-pervasive cult of Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein by re-evaluating the roles of Montgomery's sacked predecessors in the North African theatre, including both Richard O'Connor, who drove the Italians from Cyrenaica in late 1940 and early 1941, and Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck (whom he pointedly described as 'The Victor of Alamein'), who forced Rommel, 'the Desert Fox', to a halt at the First Battle of El Alamein, only to be dismissed by Churchill for his pains. This publication takes its title from Barnett's book but its purpose is rather different. Barnett's book offered a comprehensive account of the campaign in the Western Desert between 1940 and 1943 but this work has no such aspiration.

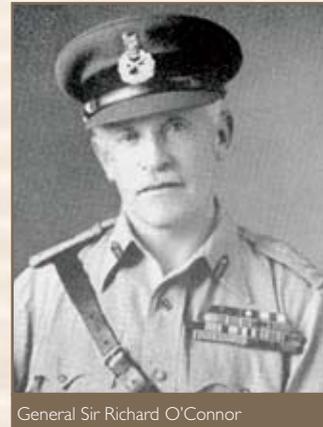
Secondly, Barnett examined the contribution of five commanders to the war in the Western Desert : General Sir Richard O'Connor, General Sir Alan Cunningham, General Sir Neil Ritchie, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck and Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein. This work considers the contribution of only three. Two of the five – Auchinleck and Montgomery – were of Ulster-Scots stock and were proud of their Ulster ancestry. A third, Richard O'Connor could be regarded as 'Scotch-Irish' in the sense that his father was Irish and his mother was Scottish. Furthermore, O'Connor's father was a major in the Royal Irish Fusiliers, an Ulster regiment whose regimental depot was in Armagh and whose traditional recruiting area was Counties Armagh, Cavan and Monaghan.

Finally, while this publication has no pretensions to iconoclasm, there is a desire to do justice to both General Sir Richard O'Connor and Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck.

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## The Forgotten Victory And The Forgotten Victor

Richard O'Connor was born in Srinagar, Kashmir, India, on 21 August 1889. His father, Maurice O'Connor, was a major in the Royal Irish Fusiliers, and his mother, Lilian Morris, was the daughter of Sir John Morris of Killundine, Argyll, a former Governor of India's central provinces. Although not Scotch-Irish in the technical sense in which the term is understood in the United States, O'Connor could be regarded as Scotch-Irish in the sense that his father was Irish and his mother was Scottish. Despite his name, O'Connor's Scottishness was strikingly



General Sir Richard O'Connor

more obvious than his Irishness. First, he was commissioned into the Cameronians in 1909 and became Colonel of the regiment in 1951. Secondly, he was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ross and Cromarty in 1954. Finally, a decade later, he was appointed Lord High Commissioner of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

In 1914 O'Connor served as Signals Officer of 22 Brigade in the 7th Division and saw action in the First Battle of Ypres. In the second year of the war he fought in the Battles of Neuve Chapelle and Loos and gained the MC. In 1916 he served on the Somme. In 1917 he was given command of the Honourable Artillery Company, participated in the Third Battle of Ypres (commonly known as Passchendaele) and won the DSO. In November, the 7th Division was moved to the Italian front to prop up the faltering Italian forces against the Austrians at the River Piave. In late October 1918 the 2nd Cameronians captured the island of Grave di Papadopoli on the Piave River for which O'Connor received the *Medaglia d'Argento al Valor Militare* (Silver Medal of Honour) and a

bar to his DSO. O'Connor had 'a good war' and was mentioned in dispatches nine times.

Between the two World Wars, O'Connor enjoyed a rich and varied military career. Here we only concentrate on those aspects of his career which had the most decisive impact upon him. In 1920 O'Connor attended Staff College, Camberley. Between 1921 and 1924 he served as brigade major of the Experimental Brigade (or 5 Brigade), under the command of J. F. C. Fuller, one of the earliest theorists of armoured (or tank) warfare. This brigade had been formed to test methods and procedures for using tanks and aircraft in co-ordination with infantry and artillery. This experience must have served O'Connor well in his stunning campaign in the Western Desert between December 1940 and February 1941. Unfortunately, Fuller's insights had a greater impact on the Germans, notably Heinz Guderian, the leading advocate of Germany's *Panzer* forces and the mechanization of the *Wehrmacht* and the principal architect of *Blitzkrieg*, than on his fellow-countrymen.

Between 1925 and 1927 he served as a company commander at Sandhurst. He returned to the Staff College at Camberley as an instructor from October 1927 to January 1930. From April 1932 to January 1935 he was a general staff officer, grade 2 at the War Office. He attended the Imperial Defence College in London in 1935. In April 1936 he was promoted to full colonel and appointed temporary brigadier to command the Peshawar Brigade in north-west India. In September 1938 O'Connor was promoted to major-general and appointed Commander of the 7th Division in Palestine, a role he combined with the Military Governorship of Jerusalem.

Shortly after Italy declared war on the UK and France on 10 June

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1940, O'Connor was promoted to temporary lieutenant-general and appointed Commander of the Western Desert Force (subsequently renamed the XIII Corps) and given the task by Lieutenant-General 'Jumbo' Wilson, commander of the British troops in Egypt, of expelling the Italian Tenth Army, commanded by General Mario Berti, from Egypt and of protecting the Suez Canal from attack.

Correlli Barnett has described O'Connor as 'a small, self-effacing man with the shy and gentle air of a scholar'. While there was 'little of the façade of greatness ... no one could talk a quarter of an hour with him without being aware of unusual qualities of character and personality.' The controversial and brilliantly original military thinker Brigadier Dorman-Smith, one of whose principal defects was an inability to suffer fools gladly, was struck by O'Connor's intensity: 'He was always springy and alert, even when still – always alive and vibrant.' Like Montgomery, O'Connor enjoyed the affection and full confidence of his men. Yet, in one very obvious respect he differed from Montgomery. Whereas Montgomery revelled in the limelight, O'Connor shunned publicity.

On 9 December 1940, O'Connor mounted *Operation Compass*, to destroy the Italian Tenth Army and was brilliantly successful. O'Connor drew up his plan of battle, one worthy of the *Wehrmacht* in its originality, with the assistance of 'Chink' Dorman-Smith, an Ulsterman from Cootehill, County Cavan.

At his disposal O'Connor had the 7th Armoured Division (the 'Desert Rats'), one infantry division (the Indian 4th Division), two additional infantry brigades and 275 of the new Matilda tanks. O'Connor confronted an enemy four times larger themselves. Yet, it was the Italians, who were caught completely off-guard, who consistently believed themselves to




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be outnumbered.

O'Connor's modest force 'hemstitched' its way westwards between the desert and the sea, taking in turn each Italian fortified position. By 10 December, the British and Indian forces had taken more than

20,000 Italian prisoners. The following day, the British and Indian forces attacked Sollum. They were closely supported by the Royal Navy and the RAF. Sidi Barrani fell on the same day.

By mid-December the Italians had been thrown out of Egypt, leaving 38,000 prisoners and huge quantities of *matériel* in British hands. One British officer said:

*No defeated army has ever cooperated with its opponents to the extent that the Italians did ... They assembled their own lorries. Refuelled them with their own fuel, and drove them full of their own prisoners to Mektilla, and then came back for more, all without any escort of any kind.*

Little wonder Anthony Eden, paraphrasing Churchill, quipped: 'Never has so much been surrendered by so many to so few.' After drawing up an inventory of captured Italian military hardware, one British historian has wittily added: 'and much more useful, large quantities of Italian wine and cheeses.'

In the House of Commons on 12 December 1940 Winston Churchill paid tribute to Wavell (C-in-C in the Middle East), Wilson (C-in-C in Egypt), and the staff officers who planned the operation. However,

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Churchill failed to mention either O'Connor or Dorman-Smith by name.

By February 1941 O'Connor had destroyed nine Italian divisions and part of a tenth. He had advanced 350 miles, captured 130,000 prisoners, nearly 400 tanks, and 845 guns at a cost of 500 killed, 1,373 wounded and 55 missing. The road to Tripoli, the Libyan capital, was wide open but on 12 February orders came to halt. In retrospect a serious strategic blunder, Churchill had decided that aid to Greece was the top priority. Richard Holmes has observed: 'The troops that might have clinched victory were diverted to Greece at Churchill's behest'.

Mussolini appealed to the *Führer* for help, a pattern which had already been established with respect to *Il Duce's* botched invasion of Greece. Hitler responded by dispatching Erwin Rommel, a relatively unknown lieutenant general, with two divisions to North Africa. Rommel arrived in Tripoli on 12 February 1941, the very same day on which, as we have just seen, O'Connor was ordered to halt his advance. Although formally under the command of more senior Italian generals, Rommel took his orders solely from Hitler and would alter the course of the desert war. Without waiting to build up his forces, he launched a bold offensive on 24 March but that is another story.

Both Correlli Barnett and Richard Doherty regard O'Connor as 'Britain's greatest desert general'. Yet, O'Connor is a largely forgotten figure for essentially two reasons. First, he was shy, modest and self-effacing. Secondly, on 17 April 1941 he and another British general had the misfortune to be captured by a small German unit operating behind the British front line. He later confessed:

*It was a great shock to be captured. I never thought it would happen to*

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*me – very conceited, perhaps – but it was miles behind our own front and by sheer bad luck we drove into the one part of the desert in which the Germans had sent a reconnaissance group and went bang into the middle of them.*

Although he escaped from a POW camp in Italy in December 1943, O'Connor's period in captivity deprives us of the opportunity of seeing how well he would have performed against Rommel. In O'Connor, the commander of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* would have found himself confronted with an infinitely more wily opponent than Montgomery.

O'Connor's formidable achievement ought to be celebrated. Yet, in *The Hinge of Fate* (1951) Churchill recorded: 'It may almost be said that "Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein we never had a defeat."' Unfortunately, the all important qualification – 'It may almost be said ...' – is rarely remembered or quoted but the reality is that the British won spectacular victories over the Italians in north Africa long before Montgomery defeated Rommel in the Second Battle of El Alamein. O'Connor's spectacular victories between December 1940 and February 1941 and Auchinleck's impressive victory over Rommel at the First Battle of El Alamein are unjustly overlooked. We should not perpetuate this injustice.

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**Claude Auchinleck:**  
*the victor of the  
First Battle of El Alamein*

Auchinleck, as John Terraine has observed, was 'the first British general to defeat a German general' during the Second World War. The German general was Erwin Rommel, commander of the *Afrika Korps*, and the battle was the first battle of El Alamein in July 1942. Rommel had won the *Pour le Mérite* in the Great War, Germany's highest decoration for valour. His role in the fall of France in the summer 1940 greatly added to his growing reputation. With respect to Rommel's campaigns in the Desert, the British viewed his performance with awe and respect. Following the fall of Torbruk, Churchill told a 'querulous' House of Commons on 27 June 1942 that in Rommel 'We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general'. Yet, despite defeating this 'very daring and skillful opponent', Auchinleck was relieved of his post in August 1942.

Claude John Eyre Auchinleck was born on 21 June 1884 at Aldershot. The Auchinlecks were a Scottish family. They take their name from a small Ayrshire village between Dumfries and Kilmarnock and about fifteen miles east of Ayr. At the time of the Plantation of Ulster, the family had settled in County Fermanagh. The Revd James Auchinleck was Rector of Cleenish (near Enniskillen) in the late seventeenth century. For the next two centuries the Auchinlecks lived in Fermanagh and Tyrone, marrying into the local gentry and finding a living either on the land or as Church of Ireland clergymen. Auchinleck was very proud of his Ulster ancestry and his identity as an Ulsterman. Only his deep love for the Indian subcontinent and its people rivalled his affection for Ulster.



Sir Claude Auchinleck

Colonel John Claude Auchinleck of the Royal Artillery died when his son was only eight. The young Auchinleck was raised by Mary Eleanor Eyre, his mother to whom he was devoted, and grew up in impoverished circumstances but he was able, through hard work and scholarships, to secure a first-class education at Wellington College and Sandhurst.

In 1904 he was commissioned into the Indian Army as a 2nd Lieutenant and attached to 62nd Punjabi Regiment. He exhibited a remarkable flair for learning the languages of the Indian subcontinent, an important element in his excellent rapport with the native troops.

During the Great War he saw service in Egypt (1914-15), Aden (1915), Mesopotamia (1916-19) and Kurdistan. As a captain in Egypt he helped repulse a Turkish attack on the Suez Canal and in Mesopotamia he was mentioned in despatches three times, was awarded the DSO, *Croix de Guerre* and an OBE and completed the war as a Brevet Colonel.

By the outbreak of the Second World War Auchinleck was a Major General. Unusually for an Indian army officer, he was summoned to Britain in 1940. As an expert on mountain warfare, he commanded troops committed to the 'ramshackle' Narvik expedition. To the intense annoyance of the War Office, Auchinleck was of the opinion that the troops were 'soft and callow'. The War Office's riposte was Auchinleck had been far too short a time in Norway to arrive





at any worthwhile conclusion, to which one might observe that Auchinleck's critics had not been in Norway at all. The Norwegian fiasco was too brief to allow Auchinleck to demonstrate the quality of his generalship.

Auchinleck succeeded Wavell as C-in-C Middle East in July 1941. Wavell was largely the victim of the Churchill's well-meaning but ill-judged intervention in Greece, as four of his divisions, including the New Zealand Division and many of the Australian troops, were transferred

to that country to meet the *Wehrmacht's* anticipated onslaught. This critically weakened the British position in north Africa without materially reinforcing the brave Greeks, who by repulsing Mussolini's invasion, were the first European nation to inflict a humiliating defeat on an Axis army.

Auchinleck had been warned by successive Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff (IGSs), Sir John Dill and Sir Alan Brooke (later Viscount Alanbrooke), both Ulstermen, that Churchill would expect an early offensive and quick results, and if he could not provide them he must explain why very diplomatically. Unfortunately Auchinleck was a bluff, uncompromising soldier, unable or unwilling to learn diplomatic finesse. After a brisk exchange of signals he bluntly told Churchill: 'I must repeat that to launch an offensive with the inadequate means at present at our disposal is not, in my opinion, a justifiable operation of war'.

To all Churchill's constant pressure and cajolery he returned a bleak factual assessment of the desert army's unreadiness for battle. However, the perspective from London was different. Churchill thought reinforcements in troops, tanks, and guns were more than adequate (particularly in the light of the enemy's deficiencies as revealed by Ultra Intelligence); but in Auchinleck's judgement his troops required training and acclimatization, while his tanks and guns were inferior to the enemy's.

Churchill had real but seriously limited experience of war. As a young Subaltern he had served in Africa and India and during the Great War he had briefly commanded a battalion on the Western Front but he had never commanded a larger formation. He had never attended Staff College and he had never learned how to plan operations. He had no comprehension of logistics, the exacting science of supply. In brief, Churchill had experience of *battle* but did not understand the nature of *modern* warfare: large-scale, resource-intensive operations involving the mobilization and deployment of large and complex military formations.

Auchinleck was determined to build up his strength before mounting a new offensive. Churchill feared that if he waited too long Rommel would strike first. Auchinleck believed that he needed 50 percent reserves in tanks. Churchill caustically observed: 'Generals only enjoy such comforts in Heaven. And those who demand them do not always get there.'

Auchinleck managed to delay *Operation Crusader*, the first major offensive by the 8th Army following his appointment, until November 1941. The 8th Army, under General Sir Alan Cunningham, advanced into Cyrenaica. Rommel counterattacked on 22 November. As the battle

appeared to swing against him Cunningham lost his nerve. Auchinleck acted decisively: he flew to the front, restored confidence, and ordered the offensive to be renewed. He replaced Cunningham with (Sir) Neil Ritchie, his Deputy Chief of Staff from Cairo, on 26 November. The *Crusader* offensive continued and the result was an impressive victory. Tobruk was relieved and Rommel forced to retreat into Cyrenaica with the loss of 20,000 prisoners and masses of *matériel*. However, the British triumph was completely overshadowed by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The entry of Japan into the war also deprived Auchinleck of his two excellent Australian divisions which returned to Australia to defend their homeland.

Rommel counterattacked, reinforced with fresh troops, again on 21 January and drove the 8th Army back to the Gazala line by 4 February. The Desert War had a pendulum-like quality.

Churchill unfairly believed that Auchinleck lacked 'offensive spirit' and, as in 1941, pressed him hard to take the offensive again. Auchinleck unwisely refused to fly to London to explain his case that offensive operations before 1 June might risk defeat and the loss of Egypt. He thereby forfeited any sympathy he might have gained with Churchill and the war cabinet. Auchinleck was instructed to attack before 1 June only to be pre-empted by Rommel on 26 May.

The 8th Army was defeated by concentrations of German armour and then outflanked, essentially the same tactics which enabled the *Wehrmacht* to overrun France in 1940. By mid June and the Germans captured Tobruk and the 8th Army's retreat was on the brink of becoming a rout. Rommel's Staff Officers were beginning to plan which hotels in Cairo they would stay in and which they would take over as their HQ.

On 25 June Auchinleck intervened and assumed command of the 8th Army. He organized a carefully chosen defensive line between El Alamein, a railway halt 60 miles west of Alexandria, on the coast and the Qattara Depression some forty miles inland.

The Mediterranean fleet left Alexandria and Cairo was gripped with panic. The British Embassy and GHQ burnt piles of classified papers, showering the city with ash and charred documents. Thus, the day came to be referred to as 'Ash Wednesday' or 'The Flap'. On the morning of 1 July Rommel, only 200 kilometers from Alexandria, wrote to his wife Lucie: 'There are still some battles to be fought but the worst is long over'. By evening Rommel had only 60 miles to go. Succumbing to 'the lure of Cairo' and believing that the British were demoralized; Rommel attacked the British positions on the same day but was repulsed. On 2 July Auchinleck counter-attacked. The rest of July largely consisted of a seemingly inconclusive slogging match but one in which Auchinleck systematically degraded Rommel's forces. Rommel sensed the effect of Auchinleck's intervention:

*General Auchinleck ... was handling his forces with very considerable skill ... He seemed to view the situation with decided coolness, for he was not allowing himself to be rushed into accepting a 'second best' solution by any moves we made.*

Rommel's advance had been decisively halted and by the end of July



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Rommel was writing home to his wife, accurately describing Auchinleck's tactics and in terms just falling short of admitting defeat:

*I can't go on like [this] for long otherwise the front will crack. Militarily this is the most difficult period I've ever been through ... the enemy is using its superiority, especially in infantry, to destroy the Italian formations one by one and the German fortifications are too weak to stand alone. It's enough to make you weep.*

Furthermore, Rommel constructed a massive minefield in front of his forces, providing conclusive proof that he was on the defensive. In Correlli Barnett's estimation,

*The sudden defeat following upon easy triumph broke Rommel; ahead of him lay the dogging ill-health that is born of disappointment and frustration – desert sores, the infected liver, the duodenal ulcer. The old Rommel, that dynamic optimist, was never seen again.*

Churchill now demanded a British offensive, despite the fact that Auchinleck's troops were exhausted. Field Marshal Lord Carver (and future Chief of the Defence Staff), a participant in as well as a shrewd historian of the Desert War, vividly recalled the acute sleep deprivation they had endured. In August Churchill flew to Cairo and, concluding that 'the Auk' (Auchinleck's nickname) was insufficiently 'offensive-minded', replaced him as C-in-C Middle East with General Sir Harold Alexander (later Field Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis), the third son of 4th Earl and Countess of Caledon, and as Commander of the 8th Army with Lieutenant-General William Gott, who was killed in Egypt before taking up command. On Gott's death, Lieutenant-General (later Field Marshal Viscount) Bernard Law Montgomery was appointed Commander of the 8th Army.

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Churchill failed to appreciate the scale of Auchinleck's achievement and Montgomery sought to deny him any credit either for checking Rommel or bequeathing a feasible defensive plan. Montgomery was being disingenuous when he informed Churchill a few days after he had taken command that Auchinleck had no plan and in the event of a heavy attack intended to retreat to the Nile delta.

Any fair assessment of Auchinleck's role would have to acknowledge that 'the Auk' took over as C-in-C Middle East in difficult circumstances. However, it is necessary to challenge the charge that his selection and handling of subordinate commanders left much to be desired. Those making this case will point to Cunningham, Ritchie, Corbett and Dorman-Smith. However, they will fail to acknowledge that in choosing Guigand, he made a very successful appointment, and that Ritchie managed to make a convincing success out of *Operation Crusader*. It is also worth pointing out that the Long-Range Desert Group, the 'Jock Columns', the Special Air Service and the Chindits (in Burma) were all either formed or flourished under Auchinleck's aegis, so Auchinleck cannot be accused of lacking flair or imagination. His defensive victory over Rommel in the first Battle of El Alamein proved to be decisive and paved the way to ultimate victory in the Western Desert. Ronald Lewin, both a veteran of the campaign and a distinguished military historian, cannot be faulted for observing that 'Neither Parliament, nor the nation, nor, in particular, the Prime Minister had grasped its profound significance'. This was not to their collective credit.

As C-in-C India, Auchinleck made a very significant contribution to the war against Japan by mobilizing India's resources, training troops for the Burma campaign and supplying the South-East Asia Command. He continued As C-in-C India after 1945, assisting, though contrary to

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his own convictions, to prepare the future Indian and Pakistani armies for the partition of the subcontinent in August 1947. In June 1946 he was promoted to Field Marshal but declined a peerage because he did not wish to be rewarded for implementing a policy with which he profoundly disagreed. He resigned as C-in-C and retired in 1947.

Churchill subsequently claimed that it pained him to sack Auchinleck. This may well be true because 'the Auk' conformed to the military stereotype for which Churchill had a weakness: tall, handsome and a hero of the Great War. Harold Alexander was also a beneficiary of this aspect of Churchill's makeup. Churchill compared sacking Auchinleck to 'shooting a noble stag'. In November 1942 Churchill told a group of MPs that it had been a 'terrible thing' to sack him. He continued:

*It is difficult to remove a bad general at the height of a campaign: it is atrocious to remove a good general. We must use Auchinleck again. We cannot afford to lose such a fine man from the fighting line.*

But that is exactly what Churchill did. At a function in London in the 1950s Churchill approached Auchinleck and acknowledged that he had wronged him. 'The Auk' simply said: 'I know, Prime Minister.'

## Erwin Rommel

*a note about 'the Desert Fox'*

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It is perhaps worth noting that Rommel was the only German general the British fought between 1940 and 1943. Churchill was completely in awe of Rommel and in August 1942 he told Brigadier Ian Jacob: 'Rommel, Rommel, Rommel, Rommel! What else matters but beating Rommel?'



Rommel

It is difficult to fault the accuracy of Hitler's observation in July 1942 that 'not a little' of Rommel's 'world-wide reputation' was due to Churchill's speeches in the House of Commons.

Ironically, the man who had the measure of Rommel was Auchinleck. He realized, as Churchill clearly did not, that the mystique surrounding Rommel was detrimental to British morale. Hence, his letter to his field commanders, observing:

*There exists a real danger that our friend Rommel is becoming a kind of magical or bogeyman to our troops, who are talking far too much about him. He is by no means a superman, although he is undoubtedly very energetic and able. Even if he were a superman, it would still be highly undesirable that our men should credit him with supernatural powers ... I am not jealous of Rommel.*

Auchinleck tried in vain to convince his officers that the best German generals were in Russia, which was indeed the case. Erich von Manstein, who put the 'blitz' in 'blitzkrieg' in the west in 1940 and who was the architect of great victories in Russia in 1941-42, was, in Max Hastings' view, 'the finest German general of the war'.

In his forward to Desmond Young's *Rommel* (London, 1950), Auchinleck wrote: 'Rommel gave me and those under my command many anxious moments ... He showed no mercy and expected none. Yet I could never translate my deep detestation of the regime for which he fought into personal hatred of him as an opponent...'

In the 1970s Auchinleck told David Dimbleby that Rommel was 'very agile' and 'very dangerous' and that 'you couldn't sleep when he was about but you could tell – more or less – what he was likely to do in certain circumstance'.

Max Hastings notes in *All Hell let loose* (London, 2011): 'The Allies esteemed Rommel more highly than did many German officers, partly because British and American self-respect was massaged by attributing their setbacks to his supposed genius'. That would also be the view of most German historians.

## Montgomery *and the Second Battle of El Alamein*

On 15 November 1942, church bells rang out for the first time in two-and-a-half-years to celebrate Montgomery's victory at the Second Battle of El Alamein. In his Mansion House speech on 10 November 1942 Winston Churchill had cautiously observed: 'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end.

But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'. Although very much a British perspective, it was nevertheless a prescient observation. Taking a wider perspective, El Alamein ought to be regarded as one of three great Allied victories, achieved in 1942-43, which collectively marked 'the beginning of the end', the other two being the Battle of Midway (4-7 June 1942), where the Americans brought an end to Imperial Japan's naval hegemony in the Pacific, and the Battle of Stalingrad (12 September 1942 – 31 January 1943), in which the Russians, at enormous cost, defended the city on the Volga named after their leader and also achieved the comprehensive destruction of Field Marshal Paulus' Sixth Army. This marked the turning point on the Eastern front.

Although born in London on 17 November 1887, Bernard Law Montgomery, the victor of El Alamein, was of Ulster stock. The energetic Hugh Montgomery, Laird of Braidstane in Ayrshire, who acquired a third of Con O'Neill's Clandeboye estate in 1605, was probably the earliest member of the family to settle in Ulster. The strongly Scottish character of north Down largely has its origins in his labours. Another ancestor had made a fortune in the wine trade in Londonderry and bought New Park, a large estate near Moville on the Inishowen peninsula. Montgomery's father, who became Bishop of Tasmania shortly after his birth, inherited the property. Bishop Montgomery was one of the seven



Bernard Law Montgomery

Anglican bishops to sign the Ulster Covenant in September 1912. While Montgomery was evicting Rommel from north Africa his mother lived in the family home at Moville across the Foyle from Londonderry. When Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Roosevelt, was visiting U.S. service personnel in Londonderry in November 1942, Mrs Montgomery and 'the First Lady' together attended the Civic Armistice Service in the city on 11 November.

Montgomery was educated at St. Paul's School, London, and the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. His choice of a career as a soldier came as a complete surprise to his parents. As a cadet at Sandhurst, he set fire to the shirt tails of a fellow cadet, seriously burning him. Consideration was given to his fitness to hold a commission: he was sent home, denied the possibility of being commissioned into the regiment of his choice after only two terms and held back for a year, before being commissioned into the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. He also failed to pass out high enough (he was thirty-sixth) to secure a commission in the much coveted Indian Army.

Montgomery distinguished himself during the Great War, winning the DSO and almost dying of his wounds at Meteren, near Ypres, in October 1914. For five days and nights he lay between life and death in a French hospital at St Omer. He survived but only just. He seems to have regarded the rest of his life as a second chance: an opportunity both to atone for his 'pyromaniac misbehaviour' at Sandhurst and to make something of his life.

The slaughter on the Somme and at Passchendaele made a profound impact on his mind. He served under General Plumer as his GSO 2 (Training). Plumer was one of the outstanding commanders of

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the Great War, a meticulous planner, the architect of the victory at Messines in June 1917 (according to Cyril Falls, 'the first completely successful single operation on the British front' and 'the most perfect and successful example of the limited offensive' in the Great War) and a man determined not to squander the lives of his troops. Plumer's three autumn attacks of 1917 were models of preparation, training and execution. Montgomery was highly critical of Douglas Haig's lack of imagination. He subscribed to the view that there were no victories on the Western Front. 'The only impressive results in the European theatre were the casualties'. In a letter to his mother, dated 8 November 1917, two days before the final assault on Passchendaele, he wrote '... the whole art of war is gain your objective with as little loss of life as possible'.

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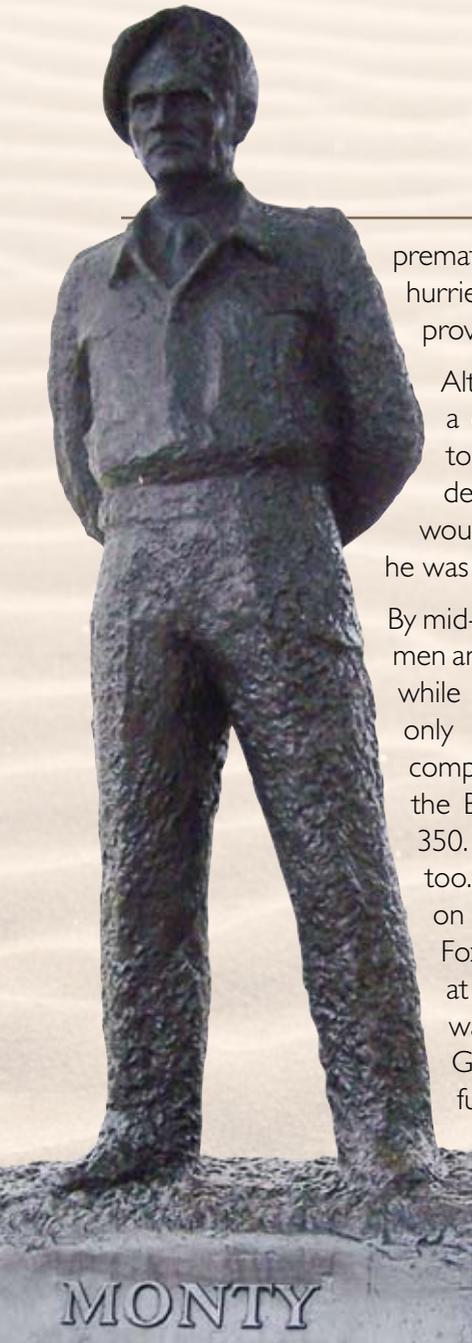
Between the wars he attended the Staff College, Camberley, became an instructor there within five years, and was appointed Chief Instructor at the Staff College, Quetta. Though not a stickler for drill, he was a fanatic for efficiency and training. He wrote a manual of infantry tactics, wholly disregarding the criticisms of his supervising committee. His mantra was 'Poor planning means the unnecessary deaths of brave men', a lesson taught by his experiences of the Great War.

Early in the Second World War Montgomery commanded the 3rd Division in France and succeeded in impressing Alan Brooke, the future Chief of the Imperial General Staff, with his fighting retreat to Dunkirk which contributed much to the salvation of the BEF. After Dunkirk, Montgomery was given command of South-East England in anticipation of a German invasion. He galvanized the forces under his command by rigorous professional training, by realistic rehearsals and by winning the confidence of the men. Montgomery's great forte was always as a trainer and motivator of men.

The modest railway halt of El Alamein has given its name to two Second World War battles fought in the Western Desert. In the first (1–27 July 1942), as we have already noted, the 8th Army under Auchinleck halted Rommel's push to overrun Egypt and seize the Suez Canal and an impatient Churchill rewarded Auchinleck with dismissal.

In August 1942, Winston Churchill appointed Montgomery Commander of the 8th Army. Montgomery was originally Alan Brooke's choice rather than Churchill's. Churchill's preferred candidate, Lieutenant General W.H.E. Gott, was killed in an air crash so Brooke got his way. Montgomery was the type of commander Churchill normally deplored. Auchinleck had been sacked because he refused to be prodded into a





premature offensive. Montgomery refused to be hurried into mounting his own offensive and proved to be even slower than Auckinleck.

Although outwardly cocky, Montgomery was a cautious, thorough strategist. He refused to move until he had all the resources he demanded. He even proclaimed that he would never undertake an operation unless he was certain that it would succeed.

By mid-October 1942 the 8th Army had 230,000 men and 1,230 gun-armed tanks ready for action, while the German-Italian forces numbered only 80,000 men, with only 210 tanks of comparable quality ready; and in air support the British enjoyed a superiority of 1,500 to 350. Montgomery enjoyed other advantages too. Since 23 September Rommel had been on sick leave in Austria. Although, 'the Desert Fox' returned to north Africa on 25 October at Hitler's request, he was absent from the war zone when battle commenced. The German-Italian forces were critically short of fuel, largely the result of British submarines and torpedo bombers operating out of Malta. Finally, Montgomery had insight into what the Germans were thinking, courtesy of *Ultra* intelligence.

Montgomery began the second Battle of El Alamein with a giant artillery barrage and a diversionary attack in the south to draw Axis forces into the area so that the main attack in the north could create a gap for the British armoured divisions to pass through German minefields. Progress was slow however and Montgomery changed tactics, constantly switching the main emphasis of his attack to wear down Rommel's front line. The decisive phase of the battle came with an Australian attack along the coastal road on 26 October which diverted Axis forces while Montgomery launched a fresh attack further south which developed into a major tank battle. By 3 November Rommel had only thirty serviceable tanks in action and on the following day he began organizing his withdrawal. By 6 November Montgomery had driven the Germans from Egypt back into Libya and inflicted a crushing blow to the Axis powers in north Africa.

Having driven the Axis forces back to Tunis, in July 1943 Montgomery and the 8th Army participated in the Allied invasion of Sicily. Two months later the 8th Army landed on the Italian mainland at Calabria and began advancing steadily up the east coast.

As Commander for the Ground Forces for the Normandy landings, Montgomery led the British and Canadian 21st Army group to victory across northern France, Belgium, The Netherlands, and northern Germany, finally receiving the surrender of the German northern armies on 4 May 1945, on Lüneburg Heath.

It is easy to be critical of Field Marshal Montgomery. Churchill described Montgomery as being 'in defeat unbeatable, in victory unbearable'. He sorely tried General Dwight D. Eisenhower's almost infinite patience and was fortunate to avoid dismissal. General George S. Patton referred

to him as 'that cocky little limey fart' and General Omar Bradley thought he was 'all-out, right-down-to-the-toes mad'. In his memoir, *War And Shadow* (London, 2002), General Sir David Fraser, Vice-Chief of the General Staff in the early 1970s and biographer of Frederick the Great and Alanbrooke, makes some telling points.

Fraser describes Montgomery's conceit as

*that of a bumptious schoolboy, immature, insensitive, often rather ignorant. He was needlessly unkind to all other commanders unless they served him and he could get some reflected light. He was suspicious and jealous of contemporaries unless, like Alan Brooke, they dominated him.*

Brooke was the only soldier of whom Montgomery was in awe. After the war, when Montgomery succeeded Brooke as CIGS, Montgomery wrote to Brooke: 'I can only say again that any success I may have achieved in field is due basically to you: it is all your doing'.

*Operation Market Garden*, which was Montgomery's brainchild, was, in Fraser's estimation, 'a thoroughly bad idea, badly planned and only tragically redeemed by the outstanding courage of those who executed it'. *Market Garden* involved a greater level of risk-taking than one would associate with the normally careful and cautious Montgomery but the operation was by no means a total failure.

Fraser generously acknowledges that Montgomery's achievement 'was much greater than is conveyed by enumeration of his somewhat pedestrian military virtues'. Fraser recognised that Montgomery's human touch was sure and sound: 'His huge quality – needed in war as seldom in history – was his ability to give confidence'.

Montgomery believed Rommel's success was due to his rapport

with his troops. For most British troops, generals were remote beings whom they would never encounter. In his *Memoirs* (London, 1958) Montgomery claimed that during his service on the Western Front in the Great War he never once saw the British Commander-in-Chief, neither French nor Haig, and that he only twice saw an Army Commander. Montgomery had no time for the social snobberies which produced this situation. Determined to see, hear from, and be seen and heard by ordinary soldiers, he embarked on a gruelling tour of the units under his command. He had the knack of communicating with the ordinary soldier in the simplest of terms. 'We'll hit 'em for six' was one of his favourite phrases. In August 1942 he acquired an Australian bush hat on which

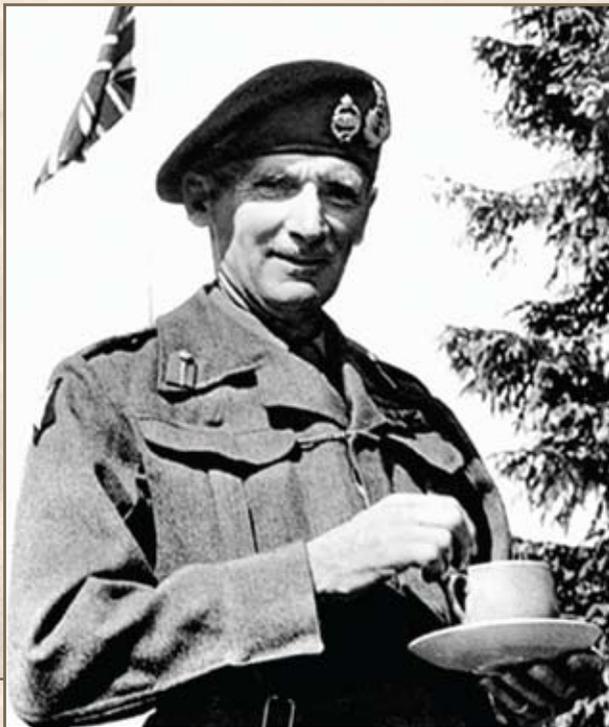
he affixed the badges of all the units he visited. During the latter stages of El Alamein the bush hat was displaced by the black beret of the Royal Tank Regiment, which Montgomery wore with his General's insignia alongside the badge of the Royal Tank Regiment. This unorthodox headgear became his hallmark.



Montgomery's headgear incurred the wrath of King George VI who was close to obsessive about the minutiae of military dress. In a private audience with the King Montgomery pre-empted the Monarch with a

lecture on the importance of an army's morale and how his black beret created a bond between him and his troops. Montgomery told the King that his beret was worth at least an army corps and that it was vital that he should continue to wear it to the end of the war. Predictably, the subject of Montgomery's iconic beret was never raised again.

Although Montgomery rarely endeared himself to his superiors or equals, he is widely regarded as the most successful British field commander of the Second World War and became the most popular British soldier since the Duke of Wellington. Above all, he knew how to inspire enthusiasm in his men. In return, they idolised him.



## Montgomery's Ten Commandments

Careful planning of the break-in battle to give tactical advantage over the enemy – *the Schwerpunkt* (focal or concentration point).

Rapid switching of the thrust line as opposition becomes too stiff on any one axis.

Deception.

Rapid re-grouping and collecting of reserves after the break-in battle.

Maintaining the initiative, involving continuous new thrusts with centralized artillery support.

Concentrating the fire of artillery.

Ensuring tactical surprise at every stage.

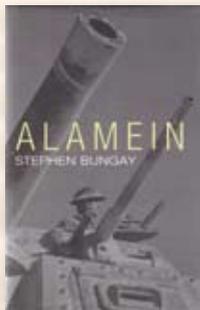
A Commander must so plan and conduct his battle that his operation will be in keeping with the standard of training of his troops ...

Determined leadership is vital, and nowhere more important than in the higher ranks. Generals who become depressed when things are not going well, and who lack the drive to get things done, and the moral courage and resolution to see their plan through to the end, are useless in battle. They are, in fact, worse than useless – they are a menace – since any lack of moral courage, or any sign of wavering or hesitation, has very quick repercussions down below.

To win battles you require good Commanders in the senior ranks, and good senior staff officers; all of these must know their stuff. You also require an Army in which the morale of the troops is right on the top line. The troops must have confidence in their Commanders and must have the light of battle in their eyes; if this is not so you can achieve nothing.

## Suggested further reading:

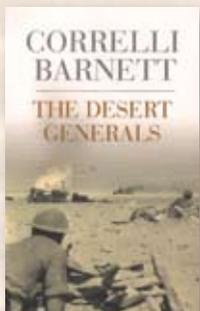
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### **Alamein** - Stephen Bungay

*Published to mark the 60th anniversary of the Battle, Stephen Bungay is a specialist in military history and modern management practice. Thus, Bungay brings an interesting and refreshingly original perspective to the war in the Desert. The book's remit is much more expansive than the title suggests, the Second Battle of El Alamein providing the book's crescendo.*

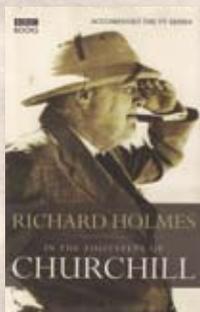
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### **The Desert Generals** - Correlli Barnett

*This iconoclastic book, published over 40 years ago, prompted a comprehensive reappraisal of the war in the Western Desert and launched Barnett's career as military historian of the first rank.*

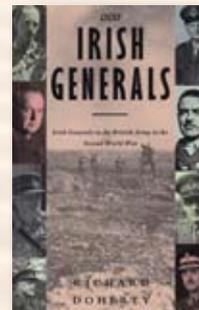
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### **In the footsteps of Churchill** - Richard Holmes

*Written to accompany a stunningly impressive BBC TV series, the late Richard Holmes offers a sure-footed evaluation of Churchill's role as war-time Prime Minister and provides an invaluable context for the hard-fought conflict waged over the North African littoral.*

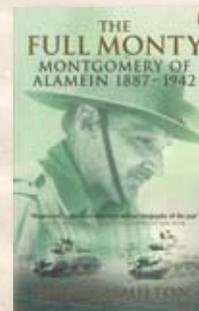
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### **Irish Generals** - Richard Doherty

*Ulster's most prolific living military historian profiles the lives of ten Irish generals, including the three Desert Generals, who made a significant contribution to Allied victory in the Second World.*

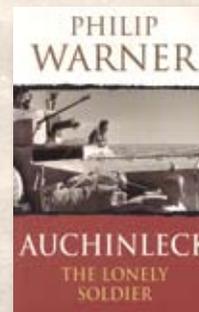
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### **The Full Monty** - Nigel Hamilton

*An accomplished biographer and the author of a number of books on Montgomery, this is the first volume of a radical reworking of Hamilton's more sedate and deferential three-volume official life of Montgomery which was published in the 1980s.*

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### **Auchinleck** - Philip Warner

*Philip Warner offers a rounded account of this remarkable and complex figure, from his childhood in near poverty to his eventual appointment as the last commander-in-chief in India. However, his campaigns in North Africa, especially the First Battle of El Alamein, are the focus of this very fine biography.*

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# Ulster-Scots Community Network

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