

The Lost Keys to El Alamein

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A German cryptanalyst presents his own version of the reason Rommel was beaten at the gates of Egypt.

Wilhelm F. Flicke

How slight and unimpressive are often the initial causes which lead to great changes in the course of events; how our picture of great men varies according to what we know about them and the point of view from which we regard them; how easily the fame of great generals grows pale when we know the secret of their successes!

Any history of World War II will doubtless mention one name on the German side with particular respect -- Rommel. This name has become a symbol of German generalship. In the deserts of North Africa Rommel and his men won astonishing victories and boldly chased the British to the gates of Alexandria. But his real aim had been to chase them further -- out of Alexandria, across the Nile, across the Suez Canal -- and suddenly his victorious march stopped. At El Alamein, almost within sight of Alexandria, it was unexpectedly all over.

What had happened? What was the secret of his unexampled victories, and what was the secret of their sudden end? There is no doubt that Rommel was a man of great energy and distinguished military capacity. It would have been hard to find a better general early in 1941 when it became a question of stopping Wavell in Africa. There is no doubt the British fought stubbornly on the Delta's edge in the summer of 1942. But

that is not the whole story.

Cairo Calling Washington

In the fall of 1940 the Italians had crossed the Egyptian frontier and advanced east to Marsa Matruh. There they had been forced to halt. On 9 December 1940 General Wavell started his counteroffensive and by mid-March 1941 had thrown them back to the border of Tripolitania. Meanwhile the German Afrika Korps had been formed and transported to Tripolitania, and General Rommel now assumed command over all German and Italian forces in Italian North Africa.

Rommel went to work with great energy. On 24 March 1941 his Afrika Korps and some fresh Italian divisions attacked the British, who were weakened by three months of combat and an extremely long supply line, and within 18 days drove them out of Cyrenaica. This operation came to a standstill approximately on the Sollum-Djarabub line, and from early April 1941 the front was generally calm. Nothing noteworthy occurred. At least nothing outwardly noteworthy. In reality, something was being prepared quietly which belongs among the most interesting chapters in the history of this war.

An officer whom, for reasons which will become apparent, I shall call General Garrulus was stationed in Cairo as U.S. military attaché. Experience has shown that often when people get a lively interest in a new field of endeavor they merely cause mischief. For Garrulus, in his new post, the significance of the North African theatre was dramatized by Rommel's actions, and the entire Near East seemed about to become the focal point of the war. For an ambitious man Cairo seemed just the right place to be. So Garrulus decided to act. But how can a military attaché act? He writes reports. And how are these reports conveyed nowadays? By radio.

So Garrulus set to and sent one radiogram after another to Washington—reports on the political situation and, above all else, reports on everything connected with the British military preparations and operations. They were enciphered, of course, but the death of any cryptographic system lies in its frequent use. All these radiograms were intercepted by the Germans.

They bore the address MILID WASH or AGWAR WASH and hence were easily recognized. By early July the system had been solved in essence and parts of the messages could be read.² They proved to be a mine of

important information. Garrulus reported to the War Department in Washington on the reinforcement of the British forces in western Egypt, on their equipment with modern arms, on each transport of war materiel that arrived, on the withdrawal of the Australian 9th Division from Tobruk and its replacement by British and Polish units, and on preparations for an offensive aimed at encircling and annihilating the Axis troops.

All these reports were passed currently to General Rommel. They were not yet complete, to be sure, for the cryptographic system had not been solved in its entirety, but they were adequate to keep him posted. Hence it was no surprise to him when in the grey dawn of 18 November 1941 the British offensive under General Sir Alan Cunningham broke loose along the entire front. Rommel had made good preparations and was able to hold his front for a time, but he could not prevent the British from making a break south of Sidi Omar and thus throwing his southern flank off balance. On 19 November the British took Sidi Rezegh and on the same day Churchill proclaimed the impending destruction of the Axis troops in North Africa.

Both sides brought up all the troops they had. Slowly but surely the British drew a ring around the Axis divisions. Nevertheless, despite all tactical successes, the onslaught of the British did not achieve decisive results. Wherever the British started an action, Rommel immediately sent forces to oppose them. He even sent a column behind the British in the direction of Halfaya and cut their line of supply. He always did the right thing at the right time.

Small wonder, for Garrulus was sending one telegram after another to Washington. He ranged all over the battle area, saw and heard everything, knew all preparations, every intention, every movement of the British forces, and he transmitted it all to the United States. The German intercept station copied each message and sent it promptly by teletype to Berlin, where it was deciphered and forwarded by the speediest possible means to Rommel. The whole thing took only a few hours. By now the cryptosystem had been completely solved.

The British were much surprised. Preparations for the offensive had been so thorough that destruction of the Axis troops in its very first phase had been considered certain. Something had not clicked. General Auchinleck, Commander in Chief in the Near East and Wavell's successor, flew from Cairo to Cunningham's headquarters and on 26

November relieved him of his post. A young general of 44 years, Ritchie, was appointed commander of the British Eighth Army. On 8 December Rommel pushed through a weak point in the British encirclement, disengaging his troops without being detected. Before the British recovered from their surprise he had escaped to the westward. On 11 December Churchill stated in the House of Commons that the Libyan campaign had not gone as expected.

In the days that followed, the victorious British occupied several towns and captured some 25,000 men. But meanwhile Rommel had established his shattered units near El Agheila. He had also received dependable information regarding his opponent; Garrulus had seen to that. On 21 January he advanced 16 kilometers into the British line with 3 armored columns. The British were taken by surprise and had to retreat. On the 27th Rommel was north and northeast of Msus. On that day Churchill declared "We are facing a very bold and clever foe, and I may well say a great general!" On the 29th Benghazi was taken. Rommel was promoted to Colonel General. On 10 February operations came to a standstill 100 kilometers west of Tobruk. Rommel was not strong enough to break through the new defensive front of his opponent.

Intercept Procedure

Two great stations had been copying the Garrulus messages since the beginning of the year to make sure that none should be missed, and their intercepts were transmitted with "urgent" precedence by direct wire to Berlin. I should like to illustrate by example the effectiveness of this German operation. The British had carefully planned and prepared an action against Rommel's airfields. They meant to drop parachutists during the night with explosives to destroy the facilities. The action had been so carefully planned that it could not have failed its objective. Garrulus, radiant with joy, reported this to Washington. The message was sent about eight o'clock in the morning by the station in Cairo; it was received in Lauf immediately and transmitted to Berlin. At nine o'clock it was on the cryptanalyst's desk; at ten o'clock it was deciphered; at 10:30 it was in the FÃ¼hrer's Headquarters; and an hour later Rommel had it. He had half a day to warn his airfields. The British project was executed shortly after midnight. The parachutists got a warm reception; the action miscarried. Only at one airfield which disregarded the warning the British met with success.

February, March, and April passed quietly on the front. Rommel knew

precisely how matters stood on the British side: their supplies and equipment, their strength, their plans. Both sides were bringing in reinforcements. After the middle of May the British began to spot extensive German movements and counted on an offensive in the near future.

On 26 May Rommel's famous offensive began. German tanks broke through at Bir Hakim and heavy tank battles raged for days near Acroma. Approximately 1,000 tanks and 2,000 to 2,500 self-propelled guns were engaged on the two sides. On 10 June Bir Hakim, the key to the British defense system, was taken. The Axis troops drove through in three columns. Sidi Rezegh was taken, and on the 19th the Egyptian frontier was reached. On the 21st encircled Tobruk was taken, along with 25,000 prisoners. This had been a bold masterstroke.

By 25 June Rommel had occupied Sollum, the Halfaya Pass, and Sidi Omar, and was in front of Sidi Barrani. Garrulus was still radioing his reports and Rommel was receiving precise information every hour. The British were amazed; Rommel seemed to have second sight. No matter what the British undertook he always anticipated it as if the British High Command had been keeping him posted.³ On 27 June General Ritchie was relieved as commander of the Eighth Army and Auchinleck assumed command in person.

Quickly the British retreated to Marsa Matruh. Here were the fortifications Wavell had laid out when Graziani was at the gates of Egypt. Now Rommel was at the gates of Egypt. In less than four weeks he had chased the British out of all Cyrenaica. Their only hope lay in the Qattara depression which stretches 60 kilometers inland from the coast between Marsa Matruh and Alexandria. The British were resolved to hold the rectangle Alexandria-Port Said-Suez-Cairo. Would they succeed? They were determined to hold Singapore, but had lost it. They were determined to hold the Balkans, but had to withdraw. Now Rommel was near El Alamein, and British domination in the Near East was threatened.

The Propagandists Blow a Source

Then the miracle occurred. No, it was no miracle; it was a tragicomedy. It was as idiotically funny as a passage from a dime novel. It was Saturday, 27 June 1942. I tuned in the Deutschlandsender's six p.m. broadcast. "We are offering a drama with scenes from the British or American

information bureau," the announcer said. "This is going to be some stuff," I thought, but left the receiver on while I went ahead with some work.

Suddenly I pricked up my ears: the drama had as its subject "Events in North Africa" and was commenting on political and military matters. One of the characters represented the American military attache in Cairo, and now there followed a discussion of his extensive supply of information and the way he sent it to Washington. I was speechless. To think that the German broadcast was putting on something that countless people were trying to keep secure! The drama was authentic, and only too well played.

On 29 June, 36 hours after this radio drama, the messages from Garrulus to Washington suddenly ceased. The German intercept operators listened and searched in vain. No further MILID or AGWAR message was ever heard.⁴ When messages began to flow again, the Americans were using a system which defied all our efforts at solution.

Rommel, on the Egyptian threshold, remained without information. The British regrouped their forces; he knew nothing about it. They introduced new units; he was not told. New weapons were unloaded in Alexandria and Port Said; Rommel did not find out about them. The great general now had to rely upon himself and his reconnaissance at the front.

On 3 July Rommel tried a strong thrust to the south. It failed. The next day, using all available troops, he mounted a major attack near El Alamein. After heavy fighting and initial successes he had to withdraw. Since 26 May the British Eighth Army had lost 75,000 men, plus 1,100 tanks and 450 planes. It was in bad shape, but now it held.

Both sides dug in, and began to build up reinforcements. Decisions of great historical moment seemed to be impending. Mussolini betook himself to the Egyptian front in order to be present at the entry into Cairo. Churchill visited Cairo on his way back from Moscow. Lieutenant General Montgomery was made commander of the British Eighth Army, and General Alexander the successor to Auchinleck. Rommel was appointed General Field Marshall. All eyes were on him.

Rommel finally decided to attack. In the morning hours of 31 August he advanced against the southern flank of the British position at El Alamein but immediately encountered strong resistance. He threw in all his tanks and used his old trick of having trucks drive around in the rear to kick up

a dust and simulate another strong tank force advancing. There was hard fighting, but after two days Rommel had to withdraw. He had 12 divisions and at least 600 tanks, but he had no Garrulus telegrams. His operations came to a standstill, soon to turn into retreat. The dream of a campaign through Asia Minor was at an end. Mussolini returned to Italy. The period of Rommel's great victories was over.

1 Excerpted from an unpublished manuscript, *War Secrets in the Ether*, which tells in popular form the history of the German and other communications intercept services. The author habitually attributes to the intelligence product of these services an exaggerated and often decisive influence on the course of world history. Moreover, writing shortly after the end of the war, he apparently did not have at his disposal the authoritative testimony now available which blames the German failure to take Egypt and Suez primarily on the High Command's unwillingness to give Rommel the numbers of tanks and guns he needed. This account can therefore be presumed to exaggerate the importance to Rommel of the intercepted messages it cites; but that they were of some importance is attested in other sources, notably in Ciano's Diaries.

2 The wartime chief of Italian military intelligence, General Cesare Ame, credits his service with both the initiative and the execution of this operation. The following is translated from his *Guerra Segreta in Italia, 1940-43*, pp. 96 ff:

"In the period immediately preceding the declaration of war against the U.S., the Military Intelligence Service, by means of a happy initiative carried out in the greatest secrecy, succeeded in entering into possession of precious American cryptographic material (codes and deciphering tables in active use).

"During the military action ... in North Africa the British headquarters each evening forwarded a summary of the principal operations of the day to the American representative in Cairo. The summary included information and situation details of great interest. This summary, enciphered in the American code, was immediately transmitted to Washington.

"Because the American command had committed the grave error of not replacing its codes immediately after war began, as would have been good practice, our service intercepted the dispatches,

deciphered them rapidly, and during the same night retransmitted them in our own cipher not only to the Supreme Command but also to the Headquarters of the North Africa troops, thus making it knowledgeable of the most delicate and interesting information on the adversary."

An Italian employee of the U.S. embassy in Rome had in fact stolen the basic code, and German and Italian cryptanalysts were left only the problem of working out successive reencipherments. Some years after the war this employee had the sang froid to come back and ask for his old job again.

3 Ame (loc. cit.) says, "On 20 June we had a complete picture of the sharp crisis which gripped the British forces Demoralized and badly led, they would not have been in a position to oppose Axis troops if these had exploited the favorable conditions offered and had pointed decisively toward the Delta."

4 Ame (loc. cit.) says only that "from 25 June on the intercepts, although they contained noteworthy considerations and observations, no longer gave a wide vision of the adversary situation." He apparently attributed the falling off of the channel to tightened British security on information passed to the Americans. But Leonard Mosley's *The Cat and the Mice* (London, 1958) carries a quite different account of how this source was lost. Mosley has it (pp. 80-84) that British interrogation of signal officers captured in an early June attack on Rommel's mobile monitoring unit disclosed that one of the unit's tasks was to copy the regular evening message from the U.S. military attache in Cairo and decipher it, using the code which had been stolen by the Italians. On getting this information the British also monitored these "long, detailed, and extremely pessimistic" messages for ten days, and then let the sender know that they were being intercepted.

It may be supposed, not inconsistently with Flicke's or Ame's story, that Rommel was at this stage doing his own monitoring to shortcut the communications lag. It seems reasonable also that the British were instrumental in stopping the messages, but Mosley's version of the method used is even less credible than Flicke's tale:

"And now tell me, General [Garrulus], what do you think of the Ambassador's wife?"
'She's a honey,' said the general. 'Beautiful, too.'
'Then why,' asked his hostess, 'did you tell Washington last night that she looked like a horse?'"

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