

Abstract

The origins of the Second World War can be traced back to the aftermath of the First World War, particularly through the impact of the Treaty of Versailles. The war's outbreak was not solely due to the treaty's severity or lack of wisdom but also stemmed from the Armistice signed on November 11, 1918. This dishonourable action allowed Hitler to rally the entire German population behind him and to justify, in their eyes, each violation of the treaty he enacted. In the Second World War, the liberation of Western Europe unfolded as a triptych: North Africa, Italy, and the invasion of Normandy. The North African Campaign, often referred to as the “War in the Desert,” marked a pivotal moment when the United States began to assert itself as a great power militarily, diplomatically, strategically, and tactically. In relation to the Continental Powers, Great Britain served as a hub for a system of sea communications that encircled Europe, extending from the White Sea to the Aegean. In the event of war, British naval forces could impose a blockade on all hostile and neutral European nations while also supporting whichever power aligned with British interests. This support could take the form of subsidies, munitions, armed forces, or indirect methods such as distracting amphibious operations.

The North African Campaign marked the beginning of significant military engagements during World War II. Initially, there were small skirmishes between platoons and companies, involving just a few hundred men. However, within six months, the campaign escalated into large-scale battles between army groups, encompassing hundreds of thousands of soldiers. This theatre of operations became crucial for the Allies, as it provided a vast battleground where Indian troops fought alongside Commonwealth forces. The struggle lasted for three years over an area of two million square miles, which collectively came to be known as the North African Campaign. It was here that the Allies agreed that unconditional surrender would be the only acceptable outcome to end the conflict. This campaign also marked the point at which the Axis powers permanently lost their initiative in World War II. The North African Campaign was primarily a British Commonwealth effort, with forces from Britain, India, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa joining together to form the 8th Army. It served as a significant lesson in desert warfare, akin to how the Burma Campaign provided insights into jungle warfare.

Military campaigns on land are heavily influenced by the topography of the terrain where they occur. It is essential to overcome physical obstacles in order to defeat an enemy. Throughout history, battles have been as much a struggle against the geographical features of a country as against the opposing forces of an army. Therefore, these battles must be understood within the context of their environment. It is vital to consider the region's physical landscape to properly evaluate the strategies and tactics employed by the British-Indian Army against the Italian Army and the *Afrika Korps* during the North African Campaign. Geographically, North Africa is located between the Mediterranean Sea and the 20th parallel north of the equator. This expansive area includes present-day political units such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

The boundaries of North Africa are defined by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea to the east, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and French West Africa to the south, and the North Atlantic Ocean to the west. The North African Campaign encompassed the entirety of this region, with the main theaters of combat being Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Overall, North Africa functions as a compact strategic unit, characterized by continuous territory, an integrated communication system, and uniform environmental conditions. Key features of the terrain for 'desert warfare' include its hydrography, typical desert conditions, and coastline, all of which significantly influence the outcomes of crucial battles. Control over essential terrain features often determined the ability to outflank the enemy. Additionally, the distribution of forces impacted the development of tactical doctrines. The interplay of these factors shaped British combat methods. Terrain played a vital role in planning, command decisions, and the tactics employed. Military units made continuous operational maneuvers to capture and hold high ground, gaining an advantage over the enemy. Commanders at various levels made tactical decisions based on the success or failure of efforts to destroy enemy units. Plans were designed around the British-Indian units' capacity to occupy key positions, as well as the strength, cohesion, supply levels, and morale of the troops.

The climate of Africa is consistently warm or hot throughout the year, with temperatures rarely dropping very low. The prevailing winds tend to be dry, leading to frequent suffocating sandstorms known by names typical of the desert, such as "Khamsin," "Sirocco," and "Harmattan." Rainfall is infrequent, and when it does occur, it usually comes in bursts of storms

that can significantly influence military operations. The landscape is characterized by sand dunes and marshy areas, alternating with deeply cut ravines called "wadis," which greatly affect the nature of desert warfare. Water wells or cisterns are generally too small to support large numbers of troops, yet they serve as valuable sources of water for garrisoned forces. These water points are located along desert tracks or at junctions and are typically found at intervals of about 25 miles, except in trackless regions where none may be available for miles. Wells, known as "Bir" (an Arabic term also used to designate locations in the desert, such as Bir Hakeim or Bir el Gubi), played a crucial role in the North African Campaign. In addition to being vital sources of water, these Birs serve as the only landmarks in an otherwise featureless desert, aiding in guiding troops during their operations and helping to explain operational tasks to unit commanders and their men. They are significant place names on maps, and control over these locations often becomes a focal point of large-scale military operations.

Military operations shifted towards the Mediterranean, Egypt, East Africa, and the Middle East. This was crucial for both sides, as they put at stake one of Russia's most vital areas of operation—the Caucasian oilfields. A successful campaign in North Africa would provide Germany with a solid foothold by establishing bases in the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, and the Azores, thereby creating a new strategic base for safeguarding a German-controlled 'Middle Africa.' This concept of *Mittelafrika* was Hitler's alternative to a German-dominated Mitteleuropa. With the outbreak of war in August 1939, General Sir Archibald Wavell assumed command of all British land forces in Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Transjordan, Cyprus, British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq, and along the shores of the Persian Gulf. During the winter of 1939-1940, two brigades from the 4th Indian Division arrived in Aden, accompanied by much of their artillery. New Zealand contributed an infantry brigade, a machine gun battalion, a field artillery regiment, and a large portion of a cavalry regiment. Australia sent two infantry brigades, two regiments of field artillery, and additional divisional troops.

Instructions were provided regarding the movement of the divisions, which was to be carried out in a right-handed formation. Training manuals were supplied for reporting traffic incidents to flight commodores, including details such as time, location, speeds, and damage incurred. Additionally, wireless messages were to be sent clearly, accompanied by map references that would allow for quick decoding by the native army. The use of official names on several

occasions aided intelligence staff in gathering information. As the march commenced, the conditions required a high standard of driving. Due to the lack of aerial cover, the rugged terrain necessitated frequent minor repairs on the vehicles. It is important to distinguish between tactical and strategic movements: tactical movements of the vehicles must support the objective of winning a battle, while strategic movements focus on ensuring the vehicles arrive at the concentration area ready for action. Furthermore, orders needed to be issued in advance, and necessary arrangements had to be made for vehicles that would be abandoned. Communication from the rear to the front of the march was consistently slow whenever wireless silence was enforced. This communication could only occur through vehicles that overtook others to deliver messages.

The geography and terrain of North Africa significantly influenced British operations throughout the campaign. At the tactical level, the high ground dominated the landscape, providing the best defensive positions and serving as a key objective for both sides. The importance of seizing and holding the high ground for observation was crucial in efforts to defeat the opposition. Other terrain features, such as deirs and low, hummocky ground, offered influential positions for deploying anti-tank units and infantry formations, increasing their tactical significance as they allowed for control over surrounding areas. The terrain consistently affected operational deployments and battle outcomes, alongside various environmental factors inherent to desert conditions. Additionally, British forces faced several challenges during the campaign, including significant changes to their military doctrine, command and intelligence issues, supply problems, and difficulties in maintaining support from the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. Between 1940 and 1943, British units made numerous improvisations in their attack and defense strategies, which played a significant role in determining the outcomes of their operations. Command and intelligence issues were critical factors throughout the campaign and remain a dominant theme in many studies. The significant changes in doctrine primarily occurred at the tactical level, where battlefield conditions prompted the development of new tactics through improvisation. This essay argues that terrain features played a pivotal role in shaping the tactical decisions and strategies employed during the campaign. It was through these innovations that the British-Indian Army achieved victories over the Italians and the *Panzerarmee Afrika*.