

Notes on the Intelligence background to the Battle of Alam Halfa

In the summer of 1942 the German-Italian army was winning the war in Africa. In a prolonged desert conflict General Erwin Rommel had inflicted defeat after defeat upon the Allies. He had become a legend among our own troops as well as his own, and Churchill in one of his fatuous moments had paid tribute to the 'Desert Fox' in the House of Commons. During one week in May Rommel advanced 300 miles to the Egyptian frontier and stood within striking distance of Cairo. In anticipation of the sack of the city the British at GHQ there burned their papers on a day which became known as Ash Wednesday.

But the next major battle, at Alam Halfa, crippled Rommel's army and turned the tide of the African war permanently. The Allied forces had two new commanders, Montgomery and Alexander, but these two largely adopted the strategy of their predecessors: and there was no radical change in the relative strengths of the opposing armies. However, there was a reversal in one theatre: the Intelligence war.

1: Summer 1942 - The Hill of Jesus

Rommel's wireless intelligence unit, or Horach Company, was commanded by Captain Alfred Seebohm, a man who had become almost supernaturally adept at drawing accurate conclusions from snatches of wireless traffic. British Intelligence identified Seebohm's position on the El Alamein front as a coastal area known as Tel-el-Eisa, the Hill of Jesus.

On 10 July 1942 the Allies raided the area. An Australian battalion led by Colonel H.H. 'Hard-as-nails' Hammer had the task of taking Seebohm's HQ. Hammer made his men muffle their boots with sacking. The Italian regiment holding the perimeter of

the encampment was taken by surprise, and many of the Italians were still in bed when they were captured. Seebohm's unit formed a ring around their equipment-packed vehicles. The Australians laid a smokescreen and charged with fixed bayonets (they had to avoid damaging any of the German wireless gear). After some very fierce hand-to-hand fighting the Australians took the post before the Germans could destroy their equipment.

Captured documents revealed that the Germans had broken the Black Code.

2: The Story of the Black Code

In 1941 an agent of SIM, the Italian secret service, had a job at the US Embassy in Rome. This man was an expert safebreaker and succeeded in picking the lock on the safe of the US Military Attache, Colonel Norman E. Fiske. He stole the Black Code, photographed it, and returned the original to the safe before it was missed.

The head of SIM, Cesare Ame, gave the code to the Abwehr.

The Black Code was a high-level cipher used by all US Military Attaches throughout the world, including Colonel Frank Bonner Fellers in Cairo. Fellers was known and trusted at GHQ in Cairo and in British field units. He reported to Washington almost daily, giving details of the location, armour and readiness of British squadrons, assessments of British commanders, and movements of sea convoys.

After Tobruk, when the British began to look askance at their own security, Fellers came under suspicion and was cleared.

Then the raid on the Hill of Jesus revealed that Fellers' daily messages to Washington had been read by Rommel for almost a year.

3: Summer 1942 - A little light reading

Two of the prisoners taken at the Hill of Jesus were named as Aberle and Weber. They were incarcerated in Cairo, and interrogated, ^{by Kitz} but neither would talk. In their kit was a copy of 'Rebecca' by Daphne du Maurier - in English. It was at least unusual to find German soldiers reading English-language novels in the desert. Both men showed signs of unease when questioned about the book.

The pencilled price on the flyleaf had been erased, but it could still be read: 50 escudos. An MI6 agent in Portugal was sent to visit every English bookshop in the country - there were not too many - to try to find out who had bought the book.

4: The Story of Rebecca

A book code is impossible to break. In the coded message, a word is given by its location in the book: for example, if this set of notes were the 'book', then 2/4/1 would be the code for 'Australians' (page two, line four, first word). More sophisticated is a code using a specific page of the book and identifying letters instead of whole words. More sophisticated still is to use different pages of the book according to a prearranged pattern: then the codebreaker has to discover not only which book is being used, but also what the pattern is.

It was this last, most sophisticated type of book code which the Abwehr chose in 1942 for a special espionage mission in North Africa. The book chosen was an English edition of 'Rebecca'. As a security precaution, the Abwehr bought the book in Portugal.

When in July an MI6 agent inquired at a bookshop in Estoril whether they had sold a copy of "Rebecca" recently, the proprietor was most helpful. Yes, it was three months ago, and the buyer was the wife of a German deputy Military Attache. The proprietor remembered quite clearly, for the lady had taken his entire stock of six copies ...

5: Summer 1942 - The Forged Pound Notes

Sterling was no longer legal tender in Egypt, but it was widely accepted as currency, for it could be exchanged for local money at the British Paymaster's office. During July 1942 the Paymaster discovered a number of forged pound notes.

The first was paid over the bar of the Turf Club by a man in the uniform of a British Captain. Several more were taken on the same night at the Metropolitan Hotel, the newsmen's hangout. Then £300 in forged notes were brought in by a Greek merchant who was able to give the name of his customer and the address to which he had delivered the goods - a houseboat on the Nile.

6: The Story of the Kondor Mission

John Eppler, 28, was born in Alexandria of German parents. Although a Muslim and a playboy, he was recruited for the Abwehr in 1939 by a Vietnamese prostitute in Beirut, the famous Su Yan.

Peter Monkaster was a German oil mechanic who had spent much of his life in East Africa.

When Rommel asked the Abwehr to set up a spy ring in

Cairo, Eppler and Monkaster were chosen to establish what was called the Kondor Mission.

They penetrated British-occupied Egypt from the south, by the simple but arduous method of trekking from German territory across 2,000 miles of desert. Their guide was the Hungarian Arabist, explorer and basket case Count Ladislaus de Almaszy. They entered Assyut, a lightly-guarded town 300 miles south of Cairo, showed their forged papers to a British patrol, and caught the next train to the capital.

In Cairo Eppler went to the Kit Kat Club and contacted a leading belly dancer, Hekmeth Fahmy, who was a rabid Anglophobe. She helped him buy a houseboat near her own on the Nile at Zamalek. She introduced him to Sheik Hassan-el-Banna, known as the Supreme Guide, the leader of the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was thoroughly infiltrated by the Free Officers Movement, a nationalist conspiracy within the Egyptian Army led by two young officer called Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar el-Sadat, both of whom were destined to become Presidents of their country. Eventually Eppler and Sadat met and began to plan a Jihad, a holy war which would expel the British from Egypt forever.

All this was heady stuff, but it was the belly-dancer who was most useful. She seduced a British officer at GHQ, Major Smith (not, I imagine, his real name). Each afternoon when Smith visited her houseboat for naughties, Eppler would slip aboard and go through Smith's briefcase. Then at midnight he would transmit what he had learned to the Abwehr's listening post at Athens, using one of two Hallicraft radios (one on his houseboat, the other hidden in a nearby church run by an Austrian priest).

Eppler transmitted volumes of vital secret information before he ran out of Egyptian currency and began to use forged Sterling.

7: Summer 1942 - The Bar Girl

It was Eppler who passed the forged pound note at the Turf Club. At the Metropolitan Hotel, where he spent more funny money, he made another mistake. He picked up a bar girl called Yvette. He took her back to his houseboat, spent the night with her, and paid her £20.

Yvette was a secret agent.

8: The Story of Yvette

Yvette worked for the Jewish Agency, an espionage outfit which at that time worked closely with MI6. She felt instinctively that Eppler was a German and a spy, because (i) he spoke with a Saarland accent, (ii) he had too much money, and (iii) he seemed jumpy. She reported these vague suspicions to her control, who told her to stay in touch with Eppler and also stationed an agent dressed as a beggar on the towpath to watch the houseboat.

A few days later Yvette returned to the houseboat. The place was in a mess. There had been a party. Eppler and Monkaster were sleeping heavily. Yvette looked around. In a desk drawer she found a copy of 'Rebecca' and some sheets of paper bearing cipher groups. She noted some of the numbers. Then she did the trick of standing the book on its spine and letting it fall open to see which pages had been most used. She noted the page numbers.

She did not know it, but she now had sufficient information to break the Rebecca code. However, there was a mix-up. When she left the houseboat the 'beggar' pointed her out to the police and she was arrested.

9: Summer 1942 - The Rebecca Code

Shortly after Yvette was arrested, river boats were stationed at discreet distances from Eppler's houseboat. All roads leading away were blocked. Troops ringed the area. Both ends of the towpath were guarded. The British went aboard.

Eppler went on deck and (this is true) threw rolled-up socks at the soldiers, who thought they were grenades. Eppler knew they wanted him alive, and he fought them off for a few seconds before he was felled by a rifle butt to his kidneys. Those few seconds permitted Monkaster to go into the bilges, open a trapdoor, and dump into the river the radio, the back traffic, and "Rebecca".

Eppler and Monkaster were arrested. The 'beggar' was able to link them with Hekmeth Fahmy, the belly dancer. She too was arrested, and she talked a blue streak. The British arrested the Austrian priest, Major Smith, and Anwar el-Sadat. But they still could not break the Rebecca code.

Monkaster cut his throat with a lunch knife, so the interrogators had only the haughty Eppler. He was taken to a clinic and given a truth drug, but he said nothing useful. He was put through a mock court-martial and sentenced to death. Interrogated in the death cell, he said nothing.

Churchill came to Cairo and went over the deception plan

for Alam Halfa with Monty. Told that breaking the Rebecca code was the last vital element in the plan, Churchill lpersonally visited Eppler and promised him freedom in exchange for the code. Eppler refused.

All this time Yvette was a languishing in jail. Finally the Jewish Agency got her released, and a bright spark in MI6 thought to ask her if she had noticed any books while she was on the houseboat.

And that was that.

10: Summer 1942 - Goodbye, Major Smith

The deception play for the Battle of Alam Halfa was now executed.

(i) Colonel Fellers transmitted false information about British strengths and weaknesses to Washington, using the Black Code.

(ii) Using the Hallicraft from the church, MI6 sent to Athens a faked report from Eppler, in the Rebecca Code, giving a phoney British order of battle.

(iii) MI6 prepared false maps of Alam Halfa, with the shifting sands of the Ragil marked 'hard going'. Major Smith was given the maps and driven into the desert in a jeep. Within sight of the German lines he was blown up. The Germans found his corpse and believed the maps.

The Battle of Alam Halfa was a wipeout. Rommel attacked where the British were strongest, and his tanks got bogged down in the sand. His army was permanently disabled, went into retreat, and did not stop until they reached Sicily.

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