
Jonathan Fennell. *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein*. Cambridge Military Histories Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Book Review

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Morale: The Eighth Army's Critical Factor in the Desert War

The world has long known the legend of the British Eighth Army in the North Africa campaign in World War II and the influence of Bernard Law Montgomery in effecting the turnaround that began at El Alamein and ended with the surrender of Axis forces in Tunisia in May 1943. In any military campaign, many factors are considered decisive for success. In *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, Jonathan Fennell argues that morale was the most important, contending that all other factors were secondary. He examines the relationships between morale and other factors, using, primarily, official archival sources of the diverse nationalities comprising the Eighth Army (British, Australian, New Zealander, South African, Indian, etc.). In particular, he looks at military censorship summaries, diaries, orders of army commanders, and reports generated by psychiatrists and analysts, as well as, to a lesser degree, letters and other personal ruminations of those in the ranks. His case is compelling as is his methodology.

To validate his thesis, the author provides six chapters showing the relationship of morale to many other important factors considered vital to success in combat. Fennell begins with a summary of the success of the Eighth Army against the Italians in 1940, when its morale was highest. He then proceeds to its many encounters with Erwin Rommel's Panzerarmee Afrika, beginning in the spring of 1941, up to the pre-El Alamein summer of 1942, when morale was at its nadir following the fall of Tobruk and the long retreat into Egypt, and preceding Montgomery's arrival in the theater to assume command in August. Having laid this foundation, the author supports his premise by demonstrating how morale was affected by technology, firepower, quality of manpower, environment and provisions, troop welfare and education, leadership and command, and training. Considering the emphasis given to these factors by most strategists and

military historians, Fennell admits that “published work on morale is consequentially quite limited,” with most literature focused on personal accounts and analysis that concludes that any connection between morale and combat was based on ideological or cultural issues (p. 3). To prove his argument, the author relies on extensive and impressive official sources, from the Army Education and Medical Offices to the Records of the Central Office of Information, various Training Commands, Records of the Home Office, Middle East Weekly Censorship Summaries, and Military Archives of Australia and South Africa. Not surprisingly, these official sources gave the British High Command an accurate look into what was necessary to maintain morale levels in order to achieve success on the battlefield. And what was necessary, and became obvious, was to provide the most advanced new technology for increased firepower; offer entertainment for the welfare of the troops; mitigate as much as possible the privations of the fighting environment (flies, ubiquitous sand, lack of cover, heat, etc.); and train the troops to employ new weapons and familiarize themselves with tactics that would defeat the enemy. Those new tactics stemmed from the army leadership and command, namely, Montgomery.

Over the course of the desert campaign, the Eighth Army had been blessed and plagued with some effective generals who were killed in combat, captured, or otherwise unable to get their views across to the army commander or had simply been incompetent, uncaring, or unable to cope with the enemy’s tactics, operations, or even Rommel’s reputation for success. As a result, Rommel was finally victorious at Tobruk and had pushed into Egypt, ready for the final blow that would carry his army to Alexandria and the oil reserves of the Middle East. Unfortunately for him, this final blow did not occur for two reasons. First, he had outrun his supplies and his extended supply lines were vulnerable, not only to the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean Sea but also to the Royal Air Force, which, as Fennell points out, was as successful and effective a force as there had been in the desert campaign in spite of the Eighth Army’s defeats. Second, the arrival of Montgomery with his assumption of command and style of leadership turned around the Eighth Army’s strategic situation along with the fact that the El Alamein position was such that the Germans and Italians were restricted in their operational options to frontal assaults, by the sea, on one flank, and the Qattara Depression, on the other. The author pulls no punches in describing Montgomery as being methodical and unwilling to move until absolutely ready, yet he also credits the man with an incisive mind, ideas, and sense of flair, all of which would once again give the British Tommy pride in himself and his capability to overcome the enemy and attain final victory. In the two months leading up to the battles at El

Alamein, which finally put the Axis forces on the long road to final surrender in North Africa, Montgomery was able to provide the necessary turnabout in morale that the Eighth Army desperately needed by that time in order to stem the consequent manpower losses to sickness, desertion, and capture experienced in previous battles and return the army to its utmost fighting capability.

In his conclusion, Fennell admits that his “perspective on war is not a new one” and that “morale is not the generally accepted explanation for the outcomes of the major engagements of the desert war” (p. 281). Yet he also maintains that the resurgence of the Eighth Army in the late summer of 1942 was specifically a result of the shift in morale as shown by the near lack of manpower loss to desertion, surrender, and psychological factors, such as battle exhaustion, as shown in the many tables and figures provided along with statistics in the text. He denies that success in the desert was a result of the Allies’ technological and numerical superiority, pointing out that such existed throughout 1942 but was not converted to any tactical or strategic success. Indeed, it was the soldiers’ morale and confidence in themselves, their leadership, weaponry, and so forth that provided the ultimate margin of victory in the desert.

In addition to the many sources cited, maps showing the areas of operations and relevant photos are also included in this latest addition to the Cambridge Military Histories series, edited by Hew Strachan and Geoffrey Wawro. For those interested in insightful analysis and the impact of morale on combat operations, Fennell has made a decided contribution to the literature of military history and, consequently, this volume is recommended.

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