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Niall J.A. Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005. Pp. xliii, 531. ISBN 978-1-58567-655-2.

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In his introduction to *Pendulum of War*, Barr offers a clear synopsis of the British Eighth Army's operations at El Alamein from June to November 1942. He stresses the importance of the campaign as both a contemporary event and a part of the post-war mythology that resulted from Winston Churchill's and especially Bernard Montgomery's trumpeting of the victory's importance and their place in it. While few deny El Alamein was a turning point, early critics of Montgomery like Desmond Young noted that "The general impression ... seems to be that [the Eighth Army] remained cowed and cowering at El Alamein ... [until] General Montgomery arrived out of the skies and ... at once turned defeat into victory. The legend is unfair to the Eighth Army: it is also contrary to the facts" (xxxviii). Barr seeks to address this problem by analyzing "the full range of developments which took the Eighth Army from defeat to victory" (xliii).

Barr's first two chapters are an excellent summary of the war in North Africa from its beginning to the Panzerarmee's first attacks at El Alamein on 1 July. Especially noteworthy is his analysis of the position of Commander-in-Chief Middle East. First held by Archibald Wavell, then by Claude Auchinleck, the command encompassed a huge geographical area from Rhodesia to Iran and involved many difficult strategic issues, including the looming threat of Axis forces in North Africa, Italians in East Africa, Vichy forces in Syria and Lebanon, an uprising in Iraq, and the possibility of a German drive through the Caucasus into Iran and Iraq. When Auchinleck took direct command of Eighth Army on 25 June following the battle of Mersa Matruh, he was still the theater commander as well. Although this dual command gave him full knowledge of theater-wide strategic concerns, it also diluted his and his staff's effectiveness.

The supply situation facing both sides in the Desert War recurs throughout Barr's narrative. Although the Axis routes were far shorter, they were under constant pressure from British forces based at Malta and Egypt. The British supply chain was extraordinarily long—ships took up to seventeen weeks to reach Suez for offloading—but was generally much safer. Barr also picks up on a point often overlooked: the British had the advantage of a supply and industrial base in the Middle East that pre-dated the war. Locally made supplies and food supplemented material brought by convoys, while repair depots around Cairo provided the Eighth Army with a logistical asset that Axis forces could not match.

Barr also addresses the intelligence available to both sides leading up to El Alamein. He sees German access to American diplomatic codes (coupled with tactical intelligence provided by Kompanie 621) as critical to Rommel's success prior to El Alamein. When the American "Good Source" was lost on 29 June, Rommel was deprived of his strategic eyes and, when Kompanie 621 was captured, virtually all of his operational and tactical intelligence capability vanished. On the other hand, British intelligence grew in quantity and val-

ue. Ultra summaries disclosed the operational status of Axis units and a general picture of Axis plans, permitting the British to stand units up or down and redeploy formations to meet possible operational threats. The limitations of Ultra restricted its tactical uses to very narrow applications like the interception of fuel tankers. The British continued to improve tactical and operational intelligence throughout the campaign, especially through ground observers and reconnaissance by the Desert Air Force. In addition, the British “J” service, implemented during the July battles, listened in on friendly communications and facilitated a better picture of allied dispositions and much faster tactical responses than did Ultra and “Y” service intelligence or aerial reconnaissance filtering down from higher echelons.

Barr argues that the July battles show the Eighth Army, despite its pounding at Gazala and Mersa Matruh, remained a cohesive force willing and able to fight a series of defensive battles and counterattacks throughout the month. The fighting in the first days of July, “vindicated Auchinleck’s new policy of mobile brigade groups” (87). He saw the need for rapid movement in desert warfare and turned away from the previous practice of deploying infantry in unsupported “boxes.” Units unable to transport their troops were sent to the rear and artillery fire control was centralized. Auchinleck’s brigade groups had become an all-arms force of armor, mobile infantry, and artillery—a seemingly effective counter to the Panzerarmee. Even Rommel noted that Auchinleck “was handling his forces with very considerable skill and tactically better than Ritchie had done” (87). Nevertheless, the new style of fighting had its problems. Auchinleck’s corps and divisional commanders did not like the idea of brigade groups and caused him plenty of frustration as he cajoled them into following orders. To make matters worse, Auchinleck never seemed to use the Eighth Army as an integrated whole. Instead, the British counterattacks mounted in July were invariably piecemeal. Though the stated goal was the destruction of the Panzerarmee, Auchinleck seemed unable to coordinate the army’s corps, much less its brigade groups, for a decisive blow. He did, however, recognize the Italian infantry component of the Panzerarmee as its weakest link and struck it at every opportunity.

Auchinleck also faced an unusual situation in that the Eighth Army was a multi-national force comprised of British, Dominion, and Indian Army units, each under its own rules of order and discipline. Dominion forces (Australian, New Zealand, and South African) could even trump the army commander’s orders by threatening to require approval from their home governments. In addition, Dominion and Indian Army officers could not be replaced nor their units broken up or consolidated under other commands.

Although Auchinleck’s counterattacks in July failed to break the Panzerarmee, Barr contends the Eighth Army learned valuable lessons from those engagements. He stands firmly on Auchinleck’s side in the “Auk vs. Monty” debates. Simply stated, the foundations for the Eighth Army’s renewal and later successes had been laid by Auchinleck and were not the result of sweeping changes by Montgomery. During the crucial early August pause in action, an army mine clearance school was established, night movements were practiced, artillery coordination was tightened, communication links between units were improved, and the necessity of mutually supporting units and coordinated attacks was instilled. In addition, new units were acclimated to the theater and critical equipment like anti-tank guns and tanks upgraded and their crews retrained—a luxury not available previously due to

constant fighting. As anti-tank units were upgraded, the now obsolete 2lb anti-tank guns were doled out to the infantry battalions to provide some measure of defense. The importance of training, even for veterans, was recognized and units were rotated out of the line for exercises. The Eighth Army was also redeployed, as Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith prepared for Rommel's next offensive and planned their own: some units formed defensive positions in depth and along key terrain features like Ruweisat Ridge and Alam el Halfa Ridge, while others were deployed for counterattack.

Thus, the army Montgomery inherited in mid-August had already turned a corner and absorbed the hard lessons of July. Barr argues that when Rommel launched his final attempt to crack the British at Alam el Halfa on 30 August, it was Auchinleck's Eighth Army and defensive plan that stopped the Germans, not any major effort on Montgomery's part. He even maintains that Monty's de-mobilizing of the infantry made it difficult to destroy the Panzerarmee once it had been stopped. The British armor commanders were reluctant to attack the German gun line without infantry support, squandering the chance of an immediate counterattack on the immobile Panzerarmee. Rommel managed to withdraw, and a six-week stalemate ensued.

While Barr is rightly critical of Montgomery for taking so much of the glory for Alam el Halfa and the final battles of October and November, he does credit him with the change in command style and nonchalant confidence that immediately impressed his officers and troops. Where Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith had failed to communicate with their commanders and staffs effectively, Montgomery was careful to make his corps and divisional commanders fully aware of the others' plans as well as his own goals. He gave the corps commanders nearly complete freedom to develop their own plans once he had issued operational orders, unlike Auchinleck, who was often far too involved tactically. The discipline Montgomery and de Guingand brought to the staff work was invaluable to the Eighth Army. Closer work with the Desert Air Force was another hallmark of Montgomery's command. Though Barr constantly stresses the importance of the DAF to the Eighth Army in battle, their close cooperation reached new heights under Montgomery's leadership.

Despite such improvements, Barr sees Montgomery returning to the past in planning Operation Lightfoot, that is, to the British way of war in World War I. He dispensed with mobile brigade groups and returned to set-piece battles: there would be frontal infantry attacks with overwhelming artillery support on a narrow frontage to breach the Axis line and allow a *corps de chasse* of armor to move into the enemy rear. For officers who had come of age in the Great War, it was a very familiar tactic. The superb state of training and planning paid off during the first day of Lightfoot, as the infantry divisions performed to very high standards and made relatively smooth advances through deep minefields at night—a far cry from the July battles. By the third day, the infantry “break in” was complete, but there would be no breakout because the defenses were deeper than expected and casualties far heavier. Lightfoot had stalled. A push north to the coast to cut off Axis forces in a salient forced Rommel to throw in his final reserves. Only then was Operation Supercharge launched in a final attempt to break the Axis line. Fighting devolved into piecemeal infantry attacks and unsupported frontal assaults by armor against gun lines reminiscent of the July battles. Technically, Supercharge too failed because the line was still not breached. Nevertheless, the grinding battle of 2 November shattered the Panzerarmee and Rommel

ordered its withdrawal. Monty and Churchill had their victory, but at a frightful cost.

The Eighth Army at El Alamein had truly transformed itself “from a clumsy and inept fighting formation into an effective and battle-winning army” (412). I fully agree with Barr’s assessment “that the three battles of El Alamein cannot be seen as separate and distinct events but ... as an important continuous experience in the development of the Eighth Army” and that it “learned more from its defeats than the Panzerarmee ever learned from its victories” (409). I highly recommend *Pendulum of War* to anyone interested in the Desert War.