A Hinge of Destiny: The Battle of Sidi Rezegh

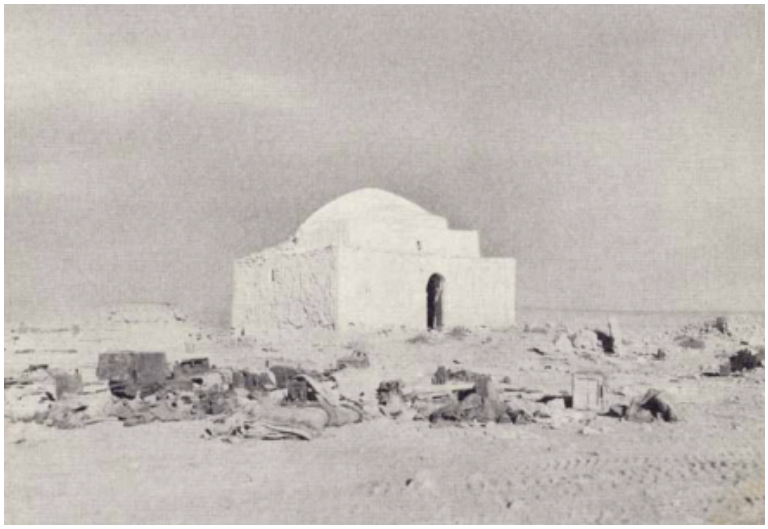
by Peter Dreyer (July 2023)

Speed Essential, by A. H. Glasspool (cartoon sketch of Basil Dreyer, the author's father, running for his foxhole under attack by Stuka dive bombers)

David Brock Katz, *South Africans versus Rommel: The Untold Story of the Desert War in World War II.* Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books.

Robert Crisp, *Brazen Chariots: An Account of Tank Warfare in the Western Desert, November–December 1941.* London: Frederick Muller, 1959. Paperback reprint, New York: Bantam Books.

In November 1941, my later friend Robert Crisp, then a young lieutenant in the British 4th Armored Brigade, was on reconnaissance in the Libyan desert. His vehicle had got stuck in the sand. Struggling to extricate it, he heard a "fluttering noise" behind him and felt a gentle touch on his back. A pigeon was sitting on his shoulder, which came willingly into his hand when he reached for it. A tube of white paper was attached to the bird's leg with a rubber band, which, unfolded, bore an astonishing message: "Bugger you, leave me alone." Bob took the bird to the sergeant in charge of supply for his tank regiment, who denied any prior knowledge of it, but made room for it in his cavernous ten-ton truck. They were miles from the nearest Allied formation, and Bob would never find out who it had come from.



The tomb of Sidi Rezegh surrounded by battle debris

Perhaps, he thought whimsically, it might be the ghost of old Sidi Rezegh himself, the Muslim saint whose sepulcher had stood so long there alone and undisturbed in the middle of the

desert, but was now a focal point in a rapidly developing battlefield. Or perhaps it was a message from what the ancient Romans had called the *genius loci,* the protective spirit of that desolate place. Bob had just been evacuated to Egypt from Greece, where during the precipitous British retreat, a Stuka dive bomber had demolished his tank and almost killed him.[1] Guardian angels were on his mind. Soldiers needed to believe in them.

In Maghrebi and Egyptian Arabic, *sidi* means "saint" or "master," but I have been unable to discover who this Sidi Rezegh was.

Gazing some days later from his tank turret over the airfield at Sidi Rezegh, Bob saw below him "lines of wrecked German and Italian fighter planes … shattered tanks from some of which the smoke was rising black into the blue sky … men digging slit trenches, putting down mines, clustered around anti-tank and field guns … every now and again … a flash of gunfire."[2] He couldn't tell whether they were enemy or friendly. "The only positive identification we had were the tanks on the airfield … all the burning ones were British Crusaders."

Instructions from Brigade headquarters were: "Treat anything you see as enemy." In fact, the troops below him were Allied; those on the escarpment in the distance, Axis. When the shooting started, it was hard to tell which was which.

"Bob Crisp, the South African fast bowler"—a former Springbok cricketer, he had played for South Africa—"got the first hat trick of the Crusader campaign by knocking out three enemy tanks with three shots," Randolph Churchill—the prime minister's son, currently.

Army information officer at Middle East HQ, but moonlighting as a war correspondent—wired Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*. A clipping of this item was embarrassingly posted on the message board at the Gezira Sporting Club, Bob's favorite

watering hole in Cairo.

In the coming weeks, Bob would have occasion to use both his Afrikaans and Zulu, rusty though they were. South Africans, black and white, were in the thick of the Sidi Rezegh battle. Many of South Africa's 5th Infantry Brigade would lose their lives there on November 23, 1941. The historian Peter Dickens writes:

> *The South Africans were surrounded on all sides by German armour and artillery, subjected to a continuous barrage. They tried to take cover in shallow slit trenches … [but] could only dig down to around 9 inches [23 cm] deep due to the solid limestone … The Transvaal Horse Artillery engaged German tanks from the 15th and 21st Panzer divisions, the gunners firing over open sights as they were overrun. This continued until many of the officers were dead and the gunners had run out of ammunition … Although initially a German success, this battle ultimately proved disastrous for the German Afrika Korps as they lost 72 of their tanks to the hard fought attrition and resistance of the Allies and especially the South African forces and this would ultimately turn the tide of the North African theatre of operations to the Allies.*[3]

Crisp was in the thick of it. "On each side of me the South African two-pounders were firing as fast as they could be loaded … as I watched the shield in front of the right-hand gun disintegrated in slivers of steel from a direct hit, and the man sitting behind it with his eye to the telescopic sight disintegrated in slivers of flesh … I got a little lower in the turret."

The South African 5th Infantry Brigade went into action with a

strength of 5,700 men and came out with fewer than 2,306. A photograph taken a little later shows the desert at Sidi Rezegh strewn with the crosses marking their graves.

Dickens's article lists touching queries sent him by relatives of black South African soldiers lost there:

Kgwadi Thobane wrote on January 25, 2019: "Hi! Is there anyway you can help me trace my grandfather. His name is Mapalakanye Thobane who was recruited to the Native Military Corps from Penge or Sekhunkhune, Transvaal around 1938-1941."

Lekula Jonas Taole wrote on June 9, 2020: "I'm the Grandchild of Mr Zitsiro Frank N. [who] served as a member of Native Military Corps from 1939 to 1945. . . . We as family we need to visit the grave in order for him to rest in peace."

Lawrence Vikinduku Mkhonza wrote on October 21, 2020: "I have recently visited a War Memorial. . . . The truth is this War was fought for mankind by all and yet one side is told. I was indeed so hurt when came back and it was like I have discovered who am I."

Kenneth Mabeba wrote on January 9, 2022: "Hi is there anyway I can find my grandfather his name is Mphokwana Mabeba . . . this thing affect[s] my life traditionally because everywhere I go to consult they say I must find his grave please help."

Godwin Booysen wrote on August 14, 2022: "Hi Peter. Please help me find the records of my grandfather Maleho Zachariah Setlhare . . . he originated from Thaba Nchu and he did fight in the War."

A German report described the Sidi Rezegh battle as the fiercest of the entire campaign. The British commander General Willoughby Norrie said that it might well have been a turning point in the Eighth Army's epic struggle. The military

historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart writes: “the crippling cost of this German tactical success was strategically more damaging to the enemy than anything else.” The British 22nd Armoured Brigade’s War Diary noted that German tank casualties “were heavier than in any previous engagement. The S.A. gunners had been magnificent.” An observer said of a detachment of 3rd Royal Tanks from the 4th British Armoured Brigade under Bob Crisp, “I shall never forget how they came out of the 5th Brigade Echelon … went into line abreast and charged down upon the German Juggernaut.”[4]

A little over a month later, Crisp lay on an operating table in Cairo, badly wounded and clinging to life. A theater sister bent down just before they put him under and said compassionately: “You’d better give me the name and address of your next of kin.”

For a picture of what the Desert War was like on the ground, Crisp’s classic, *Brazen Chariots* (illustrated with excellent line drawings) is unrivaled. Some smart publisher ought to reissue it. In *South Africans versus Rommel,* David Brock Katz analyzes the complicated conflict from the perspective of a military historian. But neither looks at the “what-might-have-been” aspect of Rommel’s pyrrhic victory at Sidi Rezegh.

What if the Deutsche Afrika Korps *had* broken through and occupied Egypt? What would have happened then?

It was called the Western Desert because it lay in Cyrenaica, eastern Libya, an Italian, mostly desert colony west of British-ruled Egypt. After the fall of France, Mussolini, whose armies in North Africa vastly outnumbered the British Empire’s forces there, had launched a massive attack on Egypt, only to be ignominiously defeated and driven back—by and large, Italian troops were very sensibly unwilling to die for their Duce. Not for the first time, Hitler had to come to his

ally's rescue, dispatching the Afrika Korps, under the command of General Erwin Rommel, to Libya in early spring 1941.

The forces of British Empire and Commonwealth stood alone against the Axis in North Africa in 1941 and the first half of 1942. The Germans had seemed invincible up till then. Nazi armies had been victorious everywhere, overrunning more than half of Europe virtually without a halt. France and Greece had both fallen swiftly to the German panzers, along with most of the rest of western Europe. In June 1941, the Nazis treacherously invaded the USSR, their own ally, and there too they swept all before them, until they stood at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad and had penetrated deep into the Caucasus.

The turning point in the Desert War is generally held to have been the second battle of El Alamein (al-'Alamīn), fought from October 23 to November 5, 1942, in which the allied forces of the British Commonwealth and Empire—mainly Australian, Indian, New Zealand, and South African infantry, but including Free French and Greek units, spearheaded by British tanks—defeated the fabled Desert Fox. Prime Minister Winston Churchill flew to Tripoli for a parade to celebrate it in February 1943, braving the very considerable danger of his aircraft being shot down.

Nonetheless, Second Alamein must "go down in history as an unnecessary battle," Correlli Barnett contends in his classic study *The Desert Generals*. "It was the swansong of Britain as a great independent power … the last chance to restore British prestige, shaken after a year of defeat."[5] So important was the victory there for British morale that Churchill flew to Tripoli for a parade to celebrate it in February 1943, braving the considerable danger of being shot down.

Rommel technically won the battle of Sidi Rezegh, but the Afrika Korps and its Italian allies were so badly mauled that they were obliged to retreat and regroup. The number of tanks

under Rommel's command was reduced to a mere 58. Any reinforcements would have been brought from Europe across the Mediterranean on ships constantly targeted by British submarines and British and South African aircraft. Rommel had consequently lost his best shot at conquering British-ruled Egypt *before the United States entered the war.* Tokyo had promised Berlin that the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) would move into the Indian Ocean in force just as soon as Rommel controlled the Suez Canal, which among other things would enable IJN warships to enter the Mediterranean, effectively making it an "Axis lake." If the Japanese Navy had destroyed Britain's Eastern Fleet in early April 1942 and Rommel's Afrika Korps had broken through to the Suez Canal that summer, N. A. M Rodger speculates, "German and Japanese forces could have joined hands across the Indian Ocean and the way would have been clear for a united Axis war effort."[6] Rodger's date is wrong, however. November 1941 was the Axis's window of opportunity (albeit a very narrow one). Once the United States, with its immense capacity for churning out planes, ships, tanks, and military matériel of every kind, not to speak of soldiers, was in the war against them, it was too late. By then the Afrika Korps had zero hope of winning in North Africa. In November 1942, a large force of U.S. and Allied troops landed in Morocco and Algeria in what was called Operation Torch. Rommel himself was gone too—transferred to Europe to organize the defenses of the Third Reich.

Timeline

- 11 June 1940: Mussolini declares war on Britain and France
- 13 September 1940: Italian forces launch an invasion of Egypt from their Libyan colony; it fails and they are driven back
- 10 February–12 March 1941: The Deutsche Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel arrives in Libya to support the Italians

- 22 June 1941: In a surprise attack, Hitler’s forces invade the USSR, the ally with which Germany had divided Poland in 1939
- 26 July 1941: The United States freezes Japanese assets and embargoes oil exports to Japan
- 23 November 1941: The battle of Sidi Rezegh.
- 7 December 1941: The Imperial Japanese Navy attacks the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and Japan declares war on the United States and Great Britain
- 8 December 1941: The United States declares war on Japan
- 11 December 1941: Germany and Italy declare war on the United States, which reciprocates
- 8 March 1942: Japanese forces occupy Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies—at that time the fourth-largest exporter of oil in the world, after the United States, Persia (Iran), and Romania
- 21 June 1942: Allied forces at Tobruk surrender; 32,000 Commonwealth troops are captured, a third of them South Africans
- 22 June 1942: Hitler promotes Rommel to *Generalfeldmarschall*
- 17 July 1942: The battle of Stalingrad begins in the USSR
- 1–27 July 1942: the first battle of El Alamein; Rommel fails to break through, although only 66 miles from Alexandria
- 23 October–5 November 1942: Rommel is defeated by British Empire and Commonwealth forces in the second battle of El Alamein
- 8 November 1942: American and British forces invade French North Africa in Operation Torch
- 6 March 1943: Rommel unsuccessfully attacks U.S forces in Tunisia
- 2 February 1943: German forces at Stalingrad surrender; some 235,000 German and allied troops are captured
- 9 March 1943: Rommel returns to Germany on sick leave
- 13 May 1943: Axis forces surrender to the Allies in

North Africa

- 10 July 1943: Allied amphibious landing in Sicily
- 25 July 1943: Mussolini's Fascist regime in Italy collapses and he is arrested
- 14 October 1944: Implicated in the failed July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler, Rommel commits suicide to avoid trial and execution

U.S. entry into the war was not something that anyone could reasonably have counted on in 1941. Facts are stubborn things indeed—but only after they have occurred. Until then they are just possibilities, or perhaps probabilities. Notwithstanding President Roosevelt's personal desire to do so, American public sentiment had been largely against getting involved in the European conflict. No one could confidently have predicted the Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese, who in the long run, as even key Japan's military leaders realized, could have no serious hope of winning a war against America. Admiral Osami Nagano, chief of the Japanese Naval General Staff, is quoted as saying in July 1941: "As for war with the United States … By the latter half of next year [1942] it will be difficult for us to cope … [and] after that the situation will become increasingly worse."[7] Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who planned the details of the Pearl Harbor attack himself, told the Japanese prime minister pessimistically that if it was launched, he expected to "run wild" for the first six months or a year but had "utterly no confidence for the second or third year."[8] It is not too far-fetched to imagine that the news that Rommel had defeated the Eighth Army and overrun the Suez Canal would have tipped the balance and persuaded the Japanese leadership to switch its aim from Pearl Harbor to the Persian Gulf.

Because oil was a big part of what Japan was fighting for. If Rommel had penetrated into the Middle East and displaced the British in Iraq, while linking up with the pro-Axis Vichy

French who ruled in Syria and Lebanon, Tokyo would have been able to count on all it needed from the Persian Gulf. In April 1941, a coup in Iraq by officers of the so-called Golden Square, working with German and Italian intelligence and support, had narrowly been defeated by the British. Germany was Iran's major trading partner, and Nazi propaganda claimed that "Hitler was the Shiite Messiah, or Twelfth Imam, who had returned to destroy the Jews and communists."[9] Iranians might not have bought into this preposterous notion, but anti-British feeling was evidently widespread among them. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company, majority-owned by the British government, had been exploiting Iran's oil with scant regard for its workers since 1909. In August 1941, to counter the increasing influence of Nazi Germany in Iran, the Soviet Union and Britain occupied the country.[10]

With plentiful oil from the Persian Gulf to fuel its vast Asian conquests, Japan's chief rationale for attacking Pearl Harbor would have fallen away. America would likely have entered the war in Europe eventually, but not in 1941, and perhaps not until much later, perhaps only in 1943–44, after reports of the monstrosity of the Holocaust were publicly confirmed. Meanwhile, once the USSR was defeated, Hitler would have been able to prepare an invasion of Britain at leisure, while German scientists worked on creating nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and jet fighters for him, as they were in the process of doing. The future of democracy would then have looked very dark indeed.

Stymied at Sidi Rezegh, however, the Afrika Korps would never conquer Egypt and the Suez Canal. Rommel would thus never be in a position to come in striking distance of the oilfields of the Caucasus, on which the huge tank armies and air force of the USSR depended. His pyrrhic victory at Sidi Rezegh cost him his best shot at doing so. If he had, there would have been no Stalingrad defeat of the Nazi legions. No matter how valorous the Russians were, they could not have defeated the Wehrmacht

without fuel for their tanks and planes.

One might almost say the South African 5th Infantry Brigade prevented this scenario from playing out. But that would be very unfair to the Australians, the Indians, the New Zealanders, and the British Guards regiments, who were all vital to the Eighth Army's stand. Minus any one of these Commonwealth and Empire contingents, and there seems little doubt that Rommel would have broken through. The Eighth Army was an international army if ever there was one, and its triumph was an international triumph.

The Union of South Africa declared war on Nazi Germany (but not yet on Italy) on September 6, 1939, a few days after Britain, India, Australia, and New Zealand, and a few days before Canada. Hitler is said to have laughed on hearing that the list of his enemies now included this faraway, pipsqueak African nation.

Italy declared war on the United Kingdom at midnight on June 10, 1940. This was expected, and by 8 a.m. next morning, SAAF "bombers"—they were in fact refitted Ju 86 South African Airways passenger planes—were attacking the Italians in Abyssinia. The next day South African Hartebees biplanes made their first foray into Italian Somaliland.

The Regia Aeronautica Italiana was no match for the RAF and SAAF in East Africa, and in 1941, Mussolini's men were driven out of Somalia and Abyssinia. In May, the Italian viceroy and commander in chief, Duke Amedeo of Savoy-Aosta, surrendered, and he and some eight thousand Italians were serenaded, as they marched off into captivity, by the bagpipes of the 1st Transvaal Scottish (many of those Italians would settle in South Africa after the war).

In May 1941, South Africa's Prime Minister Jan Smuts was promoted to field marshal as a seventieth birthday present

from his king, George VI, whose great-grandmother Queen Victoria's army he'd fought four decades earlier. Smut's close friend Winston Churchill and King George envisaged that if Winston were to die, Smuts should take over as supreme commander of the British imperial forces.[11]

Under South African law, men of the Union Defence Force (UDF) could not be sent to fight outside the country, but many swore the so-called Red Oath to serve anywhere in Africa for the duration of the war. They wore orange shoulder flashes that indicated this,[12] which also marked them for assault by paramilitary Afrikaner nationalist Ossewabrandwag ("Oxwagon Sentinel") brown-shirts sporting swastika armbands.

German propaganda radio broadcasts directed at South Africa in both English and Afrikaans referred to Dr. Daniel F. Malan (later, from 1948 to 1954, the first Afrikaner National Party prime minister) as South Africa's "National Socialist leader." But over half the South African volunteers who swore the Red Oath were nevertheless Afrikaners (some of whom doubtless saw the military simply as a way out of the poverty into which the Boer War had plunged their families four decades earlier, when the British Army burned Boer farms, slaughtered their livestock, and herded over twenty thousand women and children into concentration camps, where thousands died). Others were no doubt English-speakers with Afrikaans surnames, like my father, Basil Dreyer, who volunteered for the South African Air Force (SAAF) at Cape Town Castle on August 19, 1941, when I was not quite two years old.

The fact that one of Dr. Malan's relatives, Wing Commander A. G. "Sailor" Malan, based at Biggin Hill in Kent, was Britain's highest-scoring fighter ace in June 1941 and wrote the rules for Spitfire pilots, posted in most RAF Fighter Command bases, gives some idea of the divided loyalties that prevailed. The men of Sailor Malan's squadron were astonished to discover that their chief's Christian name was Adolf. Sailor Malan's

rule no. 1: “Wait until you see the whites of his eyes. Fire short bursts of one to two seconds only when your sights are definitely ‘on.’” Rule no. 10: “Go in quickly—Punch hard—Get out!”

Sailor Malan, DSO and Bar, DFC, Croix de guerre, Légion d’honneur, cleft chin and movie-star good looks, would after the war become president of South Africa’s anti-apartheid ex-servicemen’s organization, the Torch Commando, which had perhaps a quarter of a million members. One of them was a young immigrant from the shtetl of Obeliai in Lithuania, Yossel (Joe) Slovo, who had also joined the South African Communist Party in 1942. Some months previously, Lithuanian Nazis had rounded up the Jews remaining in the vicinity of his birthplace, his relatives included, taken them into the forest, made them dig a long trench, and shot them (1,160, mostly women and children, says the official German report). It is a region of orchards: in Lithuanian, *obelis* means “apple tree.”

During the apartheid era, the National Party regime did everything it could to stamp out all memory of the Torch Commando and Sailor Malan, who was denied a military funeral when he died. Joe Slovo would later become the chief of the ANC’s military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and sit in government alongside Nelson Mandela.

South Africa had been ill-prepared for war in 1939. Railways, Harbours, and Defence together made up a single government ministry, and Defence had the lowest priority. The cabinet was split on the issue of war, with some members calling for neutrality and others in favor of merely breaking off relations with the Third Reich. Finally, Smuts carried the day in Parliament by eighty votes to sixty-seven and the Union declared war on Germany.

So dubious was this outcome that SAAF officers had made plans to decamp with the country’s entire small fleet of warplanes

if the vote went against Smuts: "We had every [Afrikaner] Nationalist supporter in the Air Force carefully marked … We had all our aircraft ready with every scrap of ammunition that we could carry and we were going to fly every aircraft in South Africa to Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe]," an SAAF squadron leader later told Brigadier E.{ths}P. Scrubbs Hartshorn ("Scrubbie"). "The few British fighters in Rhodesia were actually standing by to escort us."[13]

Over 334,000 South Africans eventually volunteered for service during the war, about two-thirds of them "whites," and about 9,000 of them were killed in action.

Black South Africans, as we have seen, also served in World War II. Some 80,000 of them were organized into the so-called Native Military Corps (NMC). Absurdly, they had been trained only with traditional assegais and knobkerries, but on the battlefield, they were given guns. Sergeant Petrus Dlamini fought at Sidi Rezegh and El Alamein, then went to Italy with the South African 1st Division. Telling a postwar interviewer about the battle of El Alamein, he said:

> *It was like bees, those German planes together with our planes, the Royal Air Force and the South African Air Force. Many died there. Shots were like falling rain. They would hit here and here where you are sitting. When you are sleeping in your trench you would hear sounds of bombs all the time, when you wake up you would see those injured and those who are dead … Ai! Man! It was terrible, soldiers were lying dead, black and white, but the Germans were retreating and we kept following them … We were one. We fought as one; black and white soldiers … We were one.[14]*

In June 1942, much of the South African 2nd Division was taken

prisoner at Tobruk, and my father's 40 Squadron then fell back to El Alamein, just west of Alexandria in Egypt. Tobruk's garrison of some 33,000 men, including 10,722 South Africans, became prisoners of war. Among them were some 1,200 members of the NMC. The Germans separated these black South Africans from the whites (who were shipped off to imprisonment as POWs in Europe), and put them to work under their Italian allies loading and off-loading ships in Tobruk harbor. One of the NMC soldiers, Lance Corporal Job Maseko, who had prewar mining experience, made a bomb using a condensed milk tin and ammunition cordite and set it off among gasoline cans aboard a fully laden enemy freighter in Tobruk Harbor, which sank. He subsequently escaped and walked through the desert to El Alamein, joined the South African 1st Division, and then served in Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division. Maseko was awarded the Military Medal (MM) for his action at Tobruk. After he returned to South Africa, he was given a pair of boots and a bicycle in recognition of his services. Some white veterans were reportedly given houses. Maseko died in 1952 after being hit by a train, "so broke … he was buried with borrowed money.[15]

Of Corporal Lucas Majozi, a Zulu from the Orange Free State, who was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Meda (DCM), General Dan Pienaar said: "This soldier did most magnificent and brave things. With a number of bullets in his body he returned time after time into a veritable hell of machine gun fire to pull out wounded men. He is a man of whom South Africa can well be proud. He is a credit to his country."[16]

Such was South Africa's racist psychosis, however, that in addition to the NMC, the Directorate of Non-European Army Services (NEAS) also created a "racially" organized Cape Coloured Corps (CC) and even an Indian and Malay Corps (IMC), which were later combined into one. Among the members of the CC who were awarded the MM, a William Loubser from Cape Town is listed, almost certainly a distant relative of mine.[17]

At the outbreak of war, the SAAF had only 173 officers; by 1945, it would field thirty-five squadrons. It fought in East Africa and North Africa, then in Sicily, Italy, and the Balkans, brought aid to the besieged Poles in Warsaw, and flew bombing missions against the oilfields and refineries at Ploieşti in Romania, which were essential to the Nazi war machine.

After taking command of the Eighth Army, on June 24, 1942, General Sir Claude Auchinleck ordered the South African General Dan Pienaar (1893–1942)[18] to hold what was called "the Alamein Box," saying, "if you run away from here *you will have the honour of knowing that you have lost the war for the British Empire*" (emphasis added).

"Scrubbie, man, there's a pretty fair chance that this old Division will stand here for ever," Pienaar said to Scrubbs Hartshorn. "Unofficially—and this, my old friend, is just between you and me—if we get wiped out here, which is more than likely, I want you to use all your ingenuity to collect what South Africans you can and take them back with you. I will arrange with the Oubaas [Smuts] that no matter what direction the British Army retreats . . . you are to go south. With your knowledge of the country you should be able to find somewhere where you will be able to withstand Jerry and at least get a few men back home from this [1st South African] Division."

British military tactics literally dated from the Crimean War. "Let's make this a Balaclava, boys," the commander of the Royal Tank Regiment exhorted his men before one disastrous attack. "With an ignorant and impatient Churchill constantly asking why they could not be thrown into battle as soon as they arrived, fresh units were indeed committed practically straight off the ships," the historian Jon Latimer writes.[19] (Britain's prime minister was a Churchill and not a Marlborough, Correlli Barnett observes; luckily for the

Allies, Germany's Führer, who was even more given to micromanaging the war and had much more power to do so, was likewise a Hitler and not a Bismarck.) The British gunner captain and military historian Ronald Lewin, who fought through the whole campaign in North Africa, notes "how often the British would squander a complete armored brigade in some useless assault on a fixed position." After the decimation of the South African 5th Infantry Brigade at Side Rezegh, Pienaar was very careful to avoid unnecessarily risking the lives of his men, and he endured criticism for this from gung-ho British military poo-bahs. Members of Pienaar's family, including his cousin Filip, had, like Smuts, fought the British in the Boer War,[20] when Boer guerillas had run rings around hundreds of thousands of British troops. Pienaar regarded the up-guards-and-at-'em mentality as moronic and resented attempts to impose it on him. "You know the three things I hate in this world—British lords, British generals and these bloody Guards," he told Scrubbie. "The general opinion among the Australians was that anyone in the British Army with rank treated lower ranks like dirt. Their type if discipline did not appeal to us, and we did not think highly of their senior officers," an Australian soldier said.[21]

Some had thought of Pienaar as a potential successor to Prime Minister Jan Smuts—a victorious Afrikaner general who could have held back the reactionary forces of Afrikaner nationalism, as Smuts had done for almost half a century. Pienaar's death [in a plane crash in 1942 on his way back to South Africa] was thus a very significant loss to South Africa. Had he lived, the country might perhaps have been spared the long agony of the apartheid years.[22]

Early in July, Scrubbie reports, Pienaar had a run-in with British General Willoughby Norrie, concluding by saying: "Look, Norrie, let me get this straight. Am I fighting you or Rommel? If it's you, say so and I will guarantee to take Alexandria in the next 24 hours and—what's more—I'll bring

Rommel with me."[23]

One might deduce from all this that the British thought at that point that they might very well lose the war. "The nerve of those behind the British lines was certainly unsteady," Lewin writes. With Rommel's tanks only sixty miles away, the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet withdrew from its longtime base at Alexandria. Sappers were standing by to blow up its installations, and British shipping was relocated to Haifa in Palestine.[24]

Nevertheless, it is nothing short of astounding that an Afrikaner commander could get away with threatening a senior British general, in what seem like no uncertain terms, to do an about-face and go over to the Axis. Pienaar, who was clearly in a rage, could not really have carried out his threat, of course, because most of his own men would have mutinied. Conversely, however, over half of the South African electorate might have backed him, as the British government very well knew. There was a delicate balancing act in progress. It is significant that Norrie and Auchinleck were both replaced soon after this, probably on Smuts's recommendation to Churchill.

The Wehrmacht was deep into the Caucasus. Most Germans thought they had already won the war. Leases to exploit the Caucasian oil fields were being awarded in Berlin to the newly formed Ost-Öl and Karpaten-Öl companies, and large quantities of pipes to convey the oil were actually shipped there. The Russians would use them later.

Rommel's papers show that he envisaged a thrust into Persia and Iraq to take possession of the oil fields and create a base for an attack on southern Russia. In this scenario, a simultaneous thrust from Finland to cut Murmansk off from the rest of Russia would then have left the Soviet Union isolated, "for the Japs would have hunted down the American freighter

fleet in the Pacific, while the two most important ports, Basra and Murmansk, would have been closed to the Americans … Our final strategic objective would have been an attack on the southern Caucasian front aimed at the capture of Baku and its oilfields," Rommel noted. Without fuel, the Russian tank armies would have ground to a halt, and the Soviet air force would also have been crippled. "Thus the strategic conditions would have been created for us to close in from all sides and shatter the Russian colossus."[25]

However, there was an even quicker way to achieve this once Rommel had broken through into Mesopotamia. On March 5, 1940, when the USSR was still a German ally and supplying much of the Wehrmacht's oil, Field Marshal Edmund Ironside, chief of the British Imperial General Staff, noted that the major Soviet oil installations, pipelines, and refineries in Baku and Batumi could by knocked out in by bombing sorties from British Iraqi bases. Baku had only minimal air defenses and aerial survey photos suggested that "because the wooden oil derricks … were placed only seventy yards apart, incendiary bombs could easily ignite a general conflagration of the entire petroleum saturated area."[26] The distance from Aleppo in Syria to Batumi is only 712 kilometers (384 nautical miles). The distance from British Iraqi bases to Baku is just over 900 km (574 miles). The Luftwaffe could easily have halted Soviet oil production once Rommel controlled those places, although the German plan was to capture them, not send them up in flames. All modern armies are totally dependent on oil, and the Nazi war machine was no exception.

In the way of all this stood control of the air over the Western Desert—Libya—in the latter part of 1942 by the Desert Air Force, of which the SAAF was an essential component. SAAF fighters flew 892 sorties in North Africa in just six days in that year. "It should be realized, although it is a little known fact," write Christopher Shores and Hans Ring, British and German historians of the war respectively,

> *that far and away the biggest contribution to this theatre [North Africa] was made by the SAAF, which provided half the light-bomber force, and a large part of the fighter force. No less than five fighter, one tactical reconnaissance and one strategical reconnaissance, three light bomber and one patrol bomber [SAAF] squadrons served with the Desert Air Force. Many other squadrons operated in East Africa, freeing British units for other zones. And many South Africans flew in RAF units as well as their national squadrons.*[27]

The Luftwaffe might well have won the Battle of Britain too, for that matter, had it not been for its Canadians, Poles, and Sailor Malan and the twenty-two other South African pilots in RAF Fighter Command (nine of whom died fighting it. It was, after all, as the Duke of Wellington said of another battle, "a damned close-run thing."[28]

In June 1943, 40 Squadron was reequipped with Spitfires and sent to Malta to provide reconnaissance support for the Allied forces in Sicily. From Malta, it moved first to Sicily, flying both attack and reconnaissance sorties, and then to Italy. By April 1944, the South Africans were flying in support of the U.S. Fifth Army in the Italian campaign.

To keep a bomber with a crew of eight in the air required fifty men on the ground. The SAAF was flying Spitfires, Tomahawks, Blenheims, and Bostons over the Western Desert, not heavy bombers, but a similar ratio obtained.

The casualty rate among pilots can be judged from the fact that of eighteen men who graduated in one SAAF flying school class in 1941 and were posted to operations, only six survived the war. However, ground personnel also risked their lives,

and their sanity. They suffered incessant bombing and ground-strafing. Landmines were everywhere: when on the move, and you constantly *were* on the move in the desert war, you could never be sure when you might not without warning be blown up. The food was both terrible and inadequate, the weather was generally either blazing hot or freezing cold, and men choked, vomited, and sometimes had to resort to wearing their gas masks in the *khamsin* sandstorms that raged. An attack by parachute troops was frequently thought imminent—10,000 German parachutists had, after all, spearheaded the invasion of Crete in May 1941.

Roald Dahl, for one, thought that it was easier to be a pilot than one of the more numerous unarmed groundlings, who "were never meant to be in the front line . . . The chances of survival might be a good deal slimmer for a pilot, but he had a splendid weapon to fight with." Dahl had flown a Hurricane in the desperate, last-ditch air battle over Athens on April 20, 1941, when almost half of the RAF flyers died, among them the South African Pat Pattle, who, Dahl believed, had probably "shot down more planes than any of the famous and glamorised Battle of Britain aces."[29]

If Hitler had won, the era of apartheid would not now be ancient history. Instead, it might perhaps have continued for centuries. South Africa would have been a fief of the Großdeutsches Reich, ruled by those men in smart black SS uniforms with death's head badges on their caps. The entire culture of the world—if one might call it "culture" in that event—would have been utterly different. Far from being reviled, pathological conditions like antisemitism and racism would be the official global creed. Paradoxically, and ironically, this outcome was to a great extent forestalled by the heroic efforts of men who were themselves no doubt profoundly racist—as well, of course, of the nonwhite South African troops in the Native Military Corps and the Cape Coloured Corps fighting alongside them, who were victims of

that racism and would bitterly remain so in the postwar era until the 1990s, notwithstanding their sacrifices.

My father arrived back in Cairo on November 15, 1943, my third birthday, and boarded a ship to return to South Africa for the first time since his departure for the front over two years earlier. His friend Flight Lieutenant Sidney Glasspool of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, who drew a witty sketch of him running for his foxhole titled "Speed Essential" a reproduction of which appears above, died, aged 29, when his Lancaster bomber was shot down over Berlin days later, on November 26/27.

"Nice war this," Basil had jotted tersely in his daybook on arriving at Sidi Barrani in the wake of an air raid a year or so earlier. He had volunteered for military service at Cape Town Castle on August 29, 1941 and would serve for over four years with 40 Squadron SAAF, in North Africa, in Malta, and in Sicily, attaining the rank of air sergeant, earning a 1939–1945 Star, Africa Star and Clasp, Africa Service Medal, Italy Star, and War Medal, 1939–1945. The war had wrecked him, like so many others, and he came back from it a hopeless alcoholic, dying of cirrhosis in De Aar, our dusty *dorp* in the heart of the Great Karoo, on May 8, 1961. He would have been 46 that December.

Bob Crisp, who had six tanks knocked out beneath him in Libya and went on to live a long, adventurous life in Greece (where I myself got to know him), died in his sleep in 1994 at his home in England, aged 83.[30]

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[1] See, on this, Robert Crisp, *The Gods Were Neutral* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960).
[2] Quotations here are from my paperback copy of *Brazen Chariots: An Account of Tank Warfare in the Western Desert,*

November–December 1941 (1959; New York: Bantam Books, 1984), passim.

[3] https://samilhistory.com/2016/11/23/sidi-rezegh-south-african-blood-helps-turn-the-tide-in-north-africa.

[4] J. A. J. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 237.

[5] Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960, 1982), 272.

[6] N. A. M. Rogers, "Skilled in the Tactics of 1870," review of *War for the Seas* by Evan Mawdsley, *London Review of Books* 42, no. 3 (6 February 2020), 20.

[7] Evan Mawdsley, *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 177.

[8] Ibid., 179

[9] https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/iran-during-world-war-ii#:~:text=Reza%20Shah%20declared%20Iran%20neutral,race%2Dbased%20expansion%20and%20ideology.

[10] Vladimir Kuzichkin, *Inside the KGB: My Life in Soviet Espionage,* trans. Thomas B. Beattie (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 207.

[11] "My faith in Smuts is unbreakable," Churchill once said. They had first encountered each other when Churchill was taken prisoner during the Boer War and subsequently became friends during World War I, when Smuts was a member of the Imperial War Cabinet and King George V's Privy Council. On their long collaboration and the suggestion that Smuts might take over in the event of Churchill's death, see Richard Steyn, *Churchill's Confidant: Enemy to Lifelong Friend* (London: Robinson, 2018), passim.

[12] On November 12, 1942, the Irish war correspondent Denis Johnston noted on the Alamein front line: "The South Africans, with their orange flashes and their very short shorts, are the

charmers of the campaign and the best company." Johnston, *Nine Rivers from Jordan: The Chronicle of a Journey and a Search* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 112.

[13] The details of South Africa on the eve of and during World War II that I give here are mostly drawn from Jennifer Crwys-Williams's highly readable account in *A Country at War, 1939–1945: The Mood of a Nation.* (Rivonia, South Africa: Ashanti, 1992); on the secret plan in 1939 to fly the entire SAAF to Rhodesia if South Africa went National Socialist, see p. 33.

[14] Quoted at https://mg.co.za/article/2017-03-14-memories-of-black-south-african-soldiers-who-bore-arms-and-fought-in-war-ii.

[15]https://samilhistory.com/2015/12/26/a-true-south-african-hero-job-maseko.

[16] https://samilhistory.com/2015/09/27/a-true-south-african-hero-cpl-lucas-majozi-dcm.

[17] Since I have Loubser ancestors, and all the Loubsers in South Africa are reliably said to be descended from the same man, Nicolaus Laubscher, or Loubser (1651–1721), who came to the Cape from Fribourg in Switzerland in the early 1670s. See Adolphe Linder, *The Swiss at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1971* (Basel: Basel Afrika Bibliographien, 1997), pp. 52, 64–69.

[18] In an obituary, the *Chicago Tribune*'s war correspondent called Pienaar "one of the best fighting leaders the British have found in this war. . . . Two points struck everybody who met Dan Pienaar—first his disregard for personal danger; second his solicitude for his men." Quotations here from E. P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town: Purnell & Sons, 1960). Hartshorn was a heroic figure himself. He had lost a hand at Gallipoli during World War I but fought through World War II regardless. My old friend Rab Shiell, who knew him as a boy, remembers him as "a really magnificent bloke" (personal e-mail).

[19] Jon Latimer, *Alamein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70.

[20] See Philip Pienaar, *Met Steyn en de Wet* (Middelburg, Netherlands: F. B. den Boer, 1902). An English translation, *With Steyn and De Wet* (London: Methuen, 1902), is said to have been quashed shortly after publication, perhaps under the Official Secrets Act of 1889.
[21] Quoted by Robin Neillands, *Eighth Army: The Triumphant Desert Army That Held the Axis at Bay from North Africa to the Alps, 1939–45* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2004), 48.
[22] https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Dan_Pienaar.
[23] A version of the story is also told by Johnston, *Nine Rivers from Jordan,* 23, who purports to have overheard Pienaar say this in a telephone conversation.
[24] Mawdsley, *War for the Seas*, 290.
[25] *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B. H. Liddell Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 513–15. Rommel's son Manfred wrote in an appendix that if Rommel had broken through at Alamein, "the moment the first German paratroops and reconnaissance units appeared in and around Cairo and Alexandria, the Egyptians would be called upon to support the Axis forces. It was known from Egyptian officers who were in touch with the Germans that such a revolt was contemplated" (535). Two of these pro-Axis officers were Colonels Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat (who was imprisoned by the British for plotting against them), two future presidents of Egypt in the postwar era.
[26] Sean McMeekin, *Stalin's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 141.
[27] Shores and Ring, *Fighters over the Desert* (London: Spearman, 1969), cited by Carel Birkby, *Dancing the Skies* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1982), 101.
[28] Wellington called the battle of Waterloo in 1815 "a damned nice thing—the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life," and this is commonly paraphrased today as "a damned close-run thing." On South African pilots in the Battle of Britain, see www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-two/world-war-two-in-western-europe/battle-of-britain/south-african-pilots-and-the-battle-of-britain. Numerous Australian, Belgian, Canadian,

Czech, French, Polish, and New Zealand airmen also served in the RAF during World War II. The Poles in particular made a vital contribution to the Nazi defeat in the air war. Polish pilots accounted for 20 percent of all Luftwaffe aircraft shot down during the Battle of Britain (www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-two/world-war-two-in-western-europe/battle-of-britain/polish-pilots-in-the-battle-of-britain). And, of course, numerous Australian, Belgian, Canadian, Czech, French, and New Zealand airmen also served in the RAF during World War II. It was an international affair.

[29] Roald Dahl, *Going Solo* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 126, 150. See also E. C. R. Baker, *Ace of Aces, M. St. J. Pattle: Top Scoring Allied Fighter Pilot of World War II* (Rivonia, South Africa: Ashanti, 1992).

[30] https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2013/mar/05/the-spin-bob-crisp-amazing-life.

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