



Lay Of The Land

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'FRANK'LY SPEAKING

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Recalling my interview with a foot soldier – Leib Frank – who participated in the decisive Battle of El Alamein 80 years ago.

By David E. Kaplan

This past October 2022 saw the 80th anniversary of the **Battle El Alamein** pass undeservedly without much fanfare. One can only imagine the concern of the Jews in Palestine at the time fearing the worst. Their fate and the fate of a Jewish state hung in the balance – it hung on the outcome of one battle that proved a turning point in the war, halting the advance of the Axis powers in North Africa and paving the way for final victory. British leader **Winston Churchill** said famously in the wake of the victory:

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”



Pressing Forward. *Troops in the thick of battle at El Alamein in the Egyptian desert. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)*

However, for Jews around the world, it might have meant “*the end of any beginning*” of a future Jewish state if Rommel had not been stopped dead in his tracks on Egyptian soil. We may well ask, “**What if the Nazis had won the Battle of El Alamein?**”

They would have swept into-then-Palestine destroying any chance of a future Israel and massacred Jews

wherever they found them. Hence, it could be argued that the **Battle of El Alamein** shaped the history of the Holocaust by restricting the “Final Solution” to Europe.

On this 80th anniversary, I revisited my interview in 2002 with the late **Leib Frank** at his home in Kfar Shmaryahu in central Israel. In 1942, Leib had been a young 5th Brigade signaller among the South African troops attached to the Rand Light Infantry.

“One thing was certain,” said Leib, “was the feeling amongst the troops that the major battle that was looming,” on the parched, flat and barren North African desert “would dwarf” all that preceded it. But there was another more personal dimension as well!

“Although there was this sense among the troops that the impending battle had to be one to save civilisation, for our group of Jewish boys, it was more focused – we felt it was a war to save the Jews.”



High Anxiety. An anxious crowd gathers around a radio shop in Tel Aviv Street to hear news of the war.

There was “a new spirit of optimism,” says Leib, “once Monty took command” of the 8th Army following crushing defeats in the preceding months, notably the fall of Tobruk. “We now had at the helm a commander that did not include the word **‘defeat’** in his vocabulary.” He then with a smile added:

“I mean insofar as it applied to his own troops.”

As an example of this, Leib recalled an incident that when Monty came upon a platoon digging trenches way to the rear. “*He bellowed in his high pitched voice, ‘**Stop digging there at once – you’ll never need them.**’ The troops grasped the salient truth – there would be no further retreat.*”

Shortly before battle, Monty issued a personal message to his officers and men:

“The battle which is now about to begin will be one of the decisive battles in history. It will be the turning-point of the war. The eyes of the world will be on us, watching anxiously which way the battle will swing. We can give them their answer at once. It will swing our way.”



Mighty Monty. *Determined to reverse the defeats in North Africa, General Bernard Montgomery is seen here ready for action in 1942.*

The men were left with no illusion as to what was in store.

Although from August to October 1942, some 41,000 British reinforcements had streamed into El Alamein, Leib and his comrades had been sweating it out since June preparing for the big onslaught. *“It was a daily grind of digging trenches and training exercises. The one consolation,”* recalled Leib, *“was that we were*

positioned on the coastline. After a hard day, we would relax and bathe in the sea.”

But were they ready?

“Battle hardy we were not. The only action we had experienced until then were night patrols in jeeps. We would come upon enemy positions and get off some shots. There would be a token exchange of fire, but in relation to what was to follow, it didn’t feel like ‘real’ war.”

The ”Real war” as Leib described it, began on the night of the 23 October. Monty had retired early to bed. It is said that hanging on the wall of his trailer was a portrait of the Desert Fox **Erwin Rommel**, beside which he had scribbled a quote from Shakespeare’s **Henry V**:

“O God of Battles! Steel my soldiers’ hearts.”



At Ease Soldier. Leib Frank in front of his tent in the
desert in Egypt.

For soldiers in the field – whether armed with pikes or longbow on the green fields of fifteen century Agincourt or clad in Khaki on the desert plateau at El Alamein – pre-battle jitters are inevitable. One can only imagine what occupied the thoughts of the young lads as they mentally prepared during the final countdown. Many would write letters home or make entries in their diaries. For Leib and his Jewish comrades, **David Wacks, Sam Caplan, Melville Levin** and **Wally Hochstater**:

“the time had finally arrived. We had been through so much together embarking on the Il d’France at Durban and were rearing to give ‘Jerry’ a thrashing. It seemed a lifetime ago that Wally and I had been lavishly entertained at the Moshal mansion the night before we left Durban and Sol Moshal taking us aside for a lecture on ‘staying away from brothels’. The next morning we were chauffeured to the quayside in the Moshal’s black limousine, surprising the troops who all braised up to

attention, thinking the top brass had arrived. I would only think back to that sumptuous ‘Last Supper’ when faced later with typical army slop of bully beef and dog biscuits.”



Off to War. Leib Frank (2nd left) and his Jewish comrades before embarking on Durban docks to join the war in North Africa.

BRAISED FOR BATTLE

Monty picked the night of October 23 for the attack, assured that there would be a full moon. In fact, the wide, golden glowing moon, hanging low over the silhouetted desolate terrain, was so bright that the noncombatants to the rear, trying to sleep, tugged blankets over their heads to block out the light. This augured well, for it would provide sufficient natural light for the sappers to clear paths through the enormous minefields that Rommel had laid in front of his position. The sappers had 8 hours before dawn to clear the area before the infantry and armour advance. Leib and the soldiers of the **Rand Light Infantry** were waiting.

The attack started with a thunderous artillery barrage. As skilled a tactician as Monty was, not all was going according to plan. *“Our surveillance was not as good as it should have been,”* said Leib. *“We soon found to our distress that we had been dropped from our transport short of the designated spot and what’s more, at the bottom of a ravine. To get out and back to ground level, we had to scale a perpendicular rock face. Some of the boys made it up by themselves, and then very quietly*

helped pull us up by with our riffles. But 'Jerry' was not caught napping. The moment they picked up on our movement, they opened up with massive rapid machinegun fire."

Leib was one of the many early casualties.

"I was hit in both legs. Lying in pain on the battlefield, I watched the troops advance. Fallen comrades lay on both sides of me, although at some distance. I did not know whether they were alive or dead. Stray bullets were spitting in the sand all around."

*Leib digging trenches in the
blazing sun.*



HANGING ON

There were no natural obstacles on the battlefield to provide any form of cover. Virtually incapacitated, Leib focused his sapping energy on removing his helmet and positioning it in front of his head to afford some limited protection. *“I lay there in that position for four hours until the stretcher bearers arrived at midday. Bleeding profusely, I could do nothing to stop the flow. Over the hours that I lay there, sand got into my wounds and the sun was sizzling hot. Running out of water, I thought I had little chance of survival. Inevitably, I began to reflect how my life was drawing to a close before I even had an opportunity to make a success of it.”* Managing to hang on, Leib was barely conscious when the stretcher-bearers finally arrived. *“Their training left much to be desired as they offered me cognac instead of water. That was the worst thing they could have done as it accelerates the heartbeat leading to an increased loss of blood.”*

Leib's legs were in bad shape. As a result of the hours lying on the sandy battlefield without medical attention, gangrene had set in. It is doubtful that Leib's stretcher-bearers or the medical orderly, who quickly applied bandages to the wounds to stop the bleeding, expected him to survive. He was taken to a field hospital where he received medical attention that saved his life. From there, Leib was taken to an underground hospital, where he was operated on and thereafter moved to the South African Hospital in Alexandria. It was there that Leib would learn that the battle in which he had heroically participated in the *first act* had moved to the *final act* of a crushing victory. After 12 days, Rommel had lost some 90% of the 500 tanks with which he had begun the battle. Facing annihilation, the Desert Fox had no alternative but to order a complete withdrawal on November 4th. While the final curtain call for the demise of Nazi Germany would only come some years later, Leib, who was to see no further action and would to the end of his days endure the wounds of war, could look back with immense pride. Not only did the outcome at El Alamein

signal that the tide of the war was changing, but for Leib and his Jewish comrades who saw it also as “*The war for the Jews*”, the future of the emerging Jewish State of Israel was ensured.

Leib would later settle in the new State of Israel that he fought to secure.



Still Serving. Surviving the Battle of El Alamein, Leib Frank (l) would later emigrate to Israel from Zimbabwe (Rhodesia at the time) where he would serve as Director of TELFED assisting the immigration of Southern African to the new state of Israel and in that capacity is seen here together with his chairman, Leo

Kawalsky (r) meeting with former Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion. Leib Frank.

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