

The Italian aerial military reconnaissance before the Alam Halfa battle (Egypt, 1942)

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On August 31st, Rommel did start a second attempt to break enemy defences (known also as the Battle of Alam Halfa), with the main push carried by Italian and German armoured divisions, trying again to swing south of British lines. Gen. Montgomery (who had replaced Gen. Auchinleck as commander-in-chief of the British VIII Army) reaction was immediate, and a strong battle ensued for the rest of the day, without one side prevailing on the other. On the following days, the fight continued, but went on more and more fragmented in several sectors of the battlefield; finally, British strong reaction, lack of results (and of fuel), and also an uncertain view of the situation, forced Rommel to call over the attack, and withdraw to the starting positions. The second battle of El Alamein was Rommel's last chance as - although very short in time - ended-up with important losses and the weakening of the Axis forces.

A reconnaissance military flight was performed on 24th August 1942 by Italian Military Air Force in order to get fresh information about the concentration of troops and vehicles and distribution of British minefields before the start of the Axis advance formerly foreseen on 26th. The flight collects 210 aerial photographs taken by a special photographic device composed by three separated cameras, getting a triple aerial strip along the line of flight. The mission was accomplished by a special aircraft, a Cant Z 107bis belonging to the 191st Sq. B.T., 86th Gruppo B.T., 35th Stormo. It probably was a special aircraft of the Istituto Luce/Reparto Fotocinematografico. The photographic survey started from El Moghra Lakes going north: unfortunately, the lack of navigation instruments and the low visibility made the pilot to go north-east, missing part of the British front. Later, after reaching the Mediterranean coastline, he turned south, covering the northern and central part of the front, from El Alamein box to Deir El Munnassib. The southern part was not taken having consumed all the film. The missing area was the one crossed by Italian and German division during the "6 days run", where they encountered prevailing forces waiting for them and where they get stucked into deep and only partially known minefields.

The aerial pictures have been scanned at the Historical Office of the General Headquarters of Italian Military Air Force (USSMA), then georeferenced and mosaicated coupling control points got from crossed analysis with the Quickbird images of the area.

The photographs shows thousands of vehicles, gun emplacements, depots, minefields and barbed wire fences, vehicle tracks and the famous dummy depots. This collection represent a unique document of the El Alamein battlefield and gives new lights on the causes of Rommel's defeat, demonstrating the lack of proper information on the battle terrain before the Battle of Alam Halfa which, together with short of fuel, aerial superiority and British intelligence (Enigma decryption), was one of the main causes of the failure.

Furthermore, the aerial mosaic gives the opportunity to reconstruct the coastal and desert environment and territorialization pointing out the changes occurred during the last 70 years.

