SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN - BACKGROUND
In the wake of its victory at the Battle of Gazala (May-June, 1942), Germany’s Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Panzer Army Africa pressed British forces back across North Africa. Retreating to within 50 miles of Alexandria, British General Claude Auchinleck was able to stop the Italo-German offensive at El Alamein in July. A strong position, the El Alamein line ran 40 miles from the coast to the impassable Quattara Depression.

While both sides paused to rebuild their forces, Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived in Cairo and decided to make command changes. Auchinleck was replaced as Commander-in-Chief Middle East by General Sir Harold Alexander, while the 8th Army was given to Lieutenant General William Gott. Before he could take command, Gott was killed when the Luftwaffe shot down his transport. As a result, command of the 8th Army was assigned to Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery. Moving forward, Rommel attacked Montgomery's lines at the Battle of Alam Halfa (August 30-September 5) but was repulsed. Choosing to take a defensive stance, Rommel fortified his position and placed over 500,000 mines, many of which were anti-tank types.

SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN - MONTY'S PLAN
Due to the depth of Rommel's defenses, Montgomery carefully planned his assault. The new offensive called for infantry to advance across the minefields (Operation Lightfoot) which would allow engineers to open two routes through for the armor. After clearing the mines, the armor would reform while the infantry defeated the initial Axis defenses. Across the lines, Rommel's men were suffering from a severe lack of supplies and fuel. With the bulk of German war materials going to the Eastern Front, Rommel was forced to rely on capture Allied supplies. His health failing, Rommel took leave to Germany in September.

SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN - THE ALLIES ATTACK
On the night of October 23, 1942, Montgomery began a heavy 5-hour bombardment of the Axis lines. Behind this, four infantry divisions from XXX Corps advanced over the mines (the men did not weigh enough to trip the anti-tank mines) with the engineers working behind them. By 2:00 AM the armored advance began, however progress was slow and traffic jams developed. The assault was supported by diversionary attacks to the south. As dawn approached, the German defense was hampered by the loss of Rommel's temporary replacement, Lieutenant General Georg Stumme, who died of a heart attack.

Taking control of the situation, Major-General Ritter von Thoma coordinated counterattacks against the advancing British infantry. Though their advance was bogged down, the British defeated these assaults and the first major tank engagement of the battle was fought. Having opened a six mile wide and five mile deep inroad into Rommel's position, Montgomery began shifting forces north to inject life into the offensive. Over the next week, the bulk of the fighting occurred in the north near a kidney-shaped depression and Tel el Eisa. Returning, Rommel found his army stretched with only three days of fuel remaining.
Moving divisions up from the south, Rommel quickly found that they lacked the fuel to withdraw, leaving them exposed in the open. On October 26, this situation worsened when Allied aircraft sank a German tanker near Tobruk. Despite Rommel's hardships, Montgomery continued to have difficulty breaking through as Axis anti-tank guns mounted a stubborn defense. Two days later, Australian troops advanced northwest of Tel el Eisa towards Thompson's Post in an attempt to break through near the coast road. On the night of October 30, they succeeded in reaching road and repelled numerous enemy counterattacks.

SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN - ROMMEL RETREATS
After assaulting the Australians again with no success on November 1, Rommel began to concede that the battle was lost and began planning a retreat 50 miles west to Fuka. At 1:00 AM on November 2, Montgomery launched Operation Supercharge with the goal of forcing the battle into the open and reaching Tel el Aqqaqir. Attacking behind an intense artillery barrage, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Armored Division met stiff resistance, but forced Rommel to commit his armored reserves. In the resulting tank battle, the Axis lost over 100 tanks.

His situation hopeless, Rommel contacted Hitler and asked for permission to withdraw. This was promptly denied and Rommel informed von Thoma that they were to stand fast. In assessing his armored divisions, Rommel found that fewer than 50 tanks remained. These were soon destroyed by British attacks. As Montgomery continued to attack, entire Axis units were overrun and destroyed opening a 12-mile hole in Rommel's line. Left with no choice, Rommel ordered his remaining men to begin retreating west. On November 4, Montgomery launched his final assaults with the 1st, 7th, and 10th Armored Divisions clearing the Axis lines and reaching open desert. Lacking sufficient transportation, Rommel was forced to abandon many of his Italian infantry divisions. As a result, four Italian divisions effectively ceased to exist.

AFTERMATH
The Second Battle of El Alamein cost Rommel around 2,349 killed, 5,486 wounded, and 30,121 captured. In addition, his armored units effectively ceased to exist as a fighting force. For Montgomery, the fighting resulted in 2,350 killed, 8,950 wounded, and 2,260 missing, as well as around 200 tanks permanently lost. A grinding battle that was similar to many fought during World War I, the Second Battle of El Alamein turned the tide in North Africa in favor of the Allies.

Pushing west, Montgomery drove Rommel back to El Agheila in Libya. Pausing to rest and rebuild his supply lines, he continued to attack in mid-December and pressed the German commander into retreating again. Joined in North Africa by American troops, who had landed in Algeria and Morocco, Allied forces succeeded in evicting the Axis from North Africa on May 13, 1943.