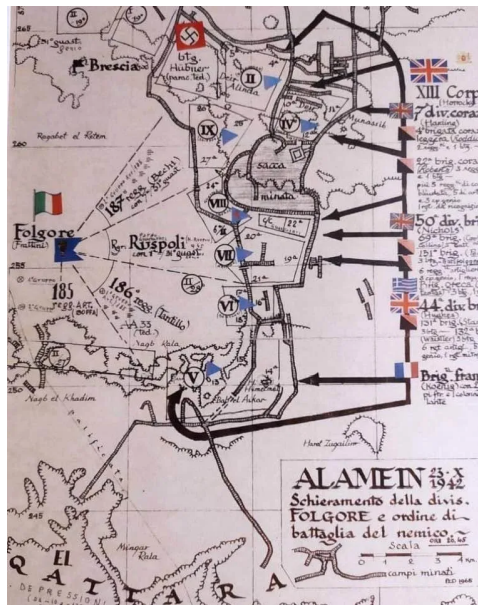




El Alamein and the Folgore Myth: When Courage Surpassed History

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Between October 23 and November 3, 1942, one of the decisive battles of World War II was fought in the Egyptian desert. The second [Battaglia di El Alamein](#) marked the definitive turning point in the North African campaign, halting the Axis forces' advance toward the Suez Canal. At the 120-km mark on the Alexandria, Egypt–Marsa Matruh coastal road, in a desolate area distinguished only by the freshwater springs of the western sector and bounded to the south by the El Qattara Depression, two brilliant strategists faced one another: General Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps, and General Bernard Law Montgomery, commanding the British 8th Army.

A lopsided balance of forces and the beginning of hell

The stark imbalance in forces saw the British Eighth Army field 220,000 men and 1,350 tanks against the Axis' 96,000 men and some 240 tanks, a situation made dramatically worse by the continuing sinking of maritime supply shipments in the Mediterranean. Strategic mistakes in the preceding months, such as the failure to invade Malta, came at a heavy cost to Italian-German

logistics.

At **9:40 p.m. on October 23, 1942**, on a full-moon night, 1,000 British guns opened fire simultaneously, concentrating a relentless bombardment on Axis positions for twenty interminable minutes. It was the opening of Operation *Lightfoot*: under a hail of artillery fire and air bombardment, the infantry of the British XXX and XIII Corps advanced to open corridors through the minefields, protected by dense smoke screens.

The deployment of "Folgore" at El Alamein

As shown by the deployment map as of October 23, 1942, the **185ª Divisione Paracadutisti "Folgore"**, under the command of General Enrico Frattini, was deployed in the far southern sector of the front. Its defensive line extended for approximately 15 kilometers along a series of strongpoints and defensive salients protected by complex minefields ("mine pocket").

The deployment was structured from north to south as follows:

- **Northern Sector (187° Reggimento Paracadutisti - Lt. Col. Bechi):** Positioned near Deir el Alinda and the Munassib ridge, it included the **IX Battaglione** (with the 26ª and 27ª Compagnia) and the **VIII Battaglione** (with the 22ª and 24ª Compagnia). North of the 187° were the positions of Divisione Brescia and Battaglione Paracadutisti Tedesco *Hübner*.
- **Central Sector (Raggruppamento Ruspoli):** Defending the central area, it deployed the **VII Battaglione** (with the 19ª, 20ª and 21ª Compagnia) in coordination with elements of the 31° Battaglione Guastatori d'Africa.
- **Southern Sector (186° Reggimento Paracadutisti - Lt. Col. Tantillo):** Defending the southern sector toward Nagb Rala and the heights of Qaret el Himeimat and Bab el Askar, it deployed the **VI Battaglione** (with the 16ª, 17ª and 18ª Compagnia) and the **V Battaglione** (with the 13ª, 14ª and 15ª Compagnia). Behind Folgore stood Divisione Pavia.
- **Artillery and Support:** The **185° Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutisti** (Colonel Boffa) was deployed in tactical support, alongside German anti-aircraft batteries (AA 33) and anti-tank units integrated into the various strongpoints.

Facing Folgore was the formidable **XIII Corpo d'Armata britannico** under General Horrocks, comprising 7ª Divisione Corazzata ("I Topi del Deserto"), the 50ª and 44ª Divisione di Fanteria britanniche, alongside brigades of Francia Libera and Greek forces.

Courage against steel: thirteen days of resistance

To the unanimous cry of "*Folgore!*", the paratroopers faced British tanks with improvised weapons, using mines dug out of the sand, Molotov cocktails, and light 47/32 guns.

- **October 24-25:** In the central sector, 6^a Compagnia under Captain Marengo was virtually wiped out in a fierce hand-to-hand battle: of 90 men, 20 survived after destroying 30 tanks and inflicting heavy losses. On the afternoon of the 24th, Lieutenant Colonel Marescotti Ruspoli fell (awarded the Medaglia d'Oro alla Memoria). On October 25, the 12^a Company of IV/187° (Captain Cristofori) repelled the attack by the 4^a Brigata corazzata leggera, leaving 22 British tanks knocked out on the battlefield.
- **October 26-27:** The attack by the 69^a Brigata britannica and de Gaulle's troops against Deir el Munassib led to the heroic sacrifice of the 11^a Company, where Captain Costantino Ruspoli fell (Medaglia d'Oro alla Memoria). Captain Valletti, wounded four times, ordered a counterattack led by Lieutenant Trotta, recapturing the positions. Artillery Major Francesco Vagliasindi fell while assuming command of IV/187°. In the sector of the 186° Reggimento, 67 partially destroyed enemy armored vehicles were counted in front of the positions; on October 28, a three-hour truce was granted to bury the dead.
- **Southern Sector (V Battaglione):** An encircling attack against the heights of Munaquir el Daba and Naqb Rala was brilliantly repelled, where the battalion commander and his men launched a bayonet counterattack, overrunning the enemy infantry.

The breakthrough and the end

While in the south Folgore held the line firmly without yielding an inch, in the north Montgomery launched *Operation Supercharge* (November 2), a ruthless battering-ram blow that shattered the Axis front. On November 4, with the *Ariete* Division virtually annihilated and British forces pouring through, the order to withdraw arrived.

Without water, food, or ammunition, reduced to 304 officers and enlisted men from the 5,000 who had left Italy, the paratroopers continued fighting and attacking tanks with daggers. When the British called on them to surrender, they climbed onto the tank wrecks shouting "*FOLGORE!*"

The honor of arms and the birth of a legend

At the time of surrender, the survivors were granted the Honor of Arms. Particularly emblematic was the meeting described by Paolo Caccia Dominioni between General Hugues (commander of

the 44^a British Division) and the captured Folgore leadership (General Frattini, deputy commander Bignami, and artillery commander Boffa):

"In my long military life, I had never encountered soldiers like those of Folgore." — General Hugues

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill paid tribute to their valor in the House of Commons:

"We must truly bow before the remnants of those who were the Lions of Folgore."

The final toll recorded approximately 9,000 German dead, 13,500 British dead, and 17,000 Italian dead. Today, at the Italian Military Memorial Shrine of El Alamein, the famous inscription **"Fortune failed, not valor"** forever immortalized the sacrifice of the paratroopers who made Folgore legendary.