

The Success of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* was based on Erwin Rommel's Leadership

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

When most people think about World War II in North Africa, they tend to think of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Arguably one of the most distinguished German Field Marshals, and perhaps one of the greatest military leaders of all time, he was the commander of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (German Africa Corps). Rommel was known by his nickname, *The Desert Fox*, for the skillful military campaigns he waged on behalf of the Axis Army in North Africa. He is also remembered not only for his remarkable military prowess, but also for his chivalry towards his adversaries. Through his leadership, a defeated Italian army with an addition of German units turned into a powerful force against the British in North Africa in 1941 and 1942.

Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel was born in Germany on November 15, 1891 in *Heidenheim an der Brenzt* near *Ulm*, in the state of *Wurttemberg*. His father was a schoolteacher and his mother was a daughter of a former president of the government of *Wurttemberg*. Rommel planned to be an engineer but instead joined the army in July of 1910. He enlisted as an officer cadet with his local infantry regiment, the 6th *Wurttemberg* Infantry Regiment, located at *Weingarten*. After three months, Rommel was promoted to the rank of Corporal and after six to Sergeant. In March of 1911, he went to the officers' military school in Danzig, Gdansk. Rommel was commissioned in January of 1912, and returned to his regiment in *Weingarten*. From 1912, until the outbreak of World War I, Erwin Rommel served as regimental officer in charge of recruiting at *Weingarten*. On August 2, 1914, Rommel's regiment marched out to war.

Since the beginning of his military career, Erwin Rommel showed signs of bravery, Intuitiveness, and contempt for higher authority that he felt did not understand the tactical situation. In September of 1914, Rommel was wounded in the leg when, having run out of ammunition, he charged three Frenchmen with a bayonet. After returning to the frontlines in the *Argonne* area in January of 1915, Rommel received his first decoration for bravery, the Iron Cross Class I. In October of 1915, he was transferred to the mountain unit for training. Rommel was posted to the Carpathian Front, in the area of *Siebenburgen*, in late 1916, where he took part in the assaults on Mount *Cosna* and *Caporetto*. For his outstanding action at *Caporetto*, Rommel received Germany's highest award the *Pour le Merite*, Order of Merit, and was promoted to the rank of Captain. Rommel was one of few junior officers awarded the *Pour le Merite*, which was reserved for generals. Shortly after, he was posted to a junior staff appointment, where he remained to the end of the war. After the war, Rommel went to Stuttgart where he commanded an infantry regiment and served as an instructor at the infantry school in Dresden. During this time, Rommel wrote and published his book *Infanterie greift an*, Infantry Attacks, which he based on his experiences during World War I.

In October of 1933, Erwin Rommel was promoted to the rank of Major and was sent to *Goslar*, where he commanded a mountain battalion. Rommel was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in October of 1935 and received a teaching position at the War Academy in Potsdam. In November of 1938, he took command of the War Academy. Hitler was impressed with Rommel's book on infantry attacks and in the autumn of 1938 selected Rommel to be in charge

of the *Wehrmacht* (German Army) unit assigned to protect him during his visits to occupied Czechoslovakia. Just prior to the invasion of Poland he was promoted to Major General and made commander of the *Führer-Begleitbattalion* (Hitler's personal protection battalion), responsible for the safety of Hitler's mobile headquarters during the campaign. During this campaign, Rommel realized the full potential of Panzer Divisions and tactics of *Blitzkrieg*, Lightning War. After the Polish Campaign, Hitler allowed Rommel to choose what he would like to command and he asked for a Panzer Division. On February 15, 1940, Rommel received the command of 7th Panzer Division, although he had no practical experience in Panzer warfare. During the Battle of France, 7th Panzer Division earned a title of the "Phantom Division," because no one knew where it was, including the German High Command and Rommel's staff. 7th Panzer Division's success in France was based on its speed and the total distance it covered. As commander of 7th Panzer Division, Rommel presented himself as an unconventional military leader with unique methods of command. Rommel commanded his units from the frontline. He felt it was important for the commander to always be near his troops. He was always with the reconnaissance troops. Sometimes he cut the communication with the High Command, because he did not want to be disturbed. Rommel believed that the High Command did not know about tank warfare, so he simply cut the communication and explained everything later. Rommel's troops moved faster and farther than any other army in military history, on one day traveling 150 miles. After reaching the English Channel, he turned south and raced along the coast until he reached the Spanish border. After the fall of France, Erwin Rommel worked on his war diary, which described the events of May and June of 1940.

In the wake of the Italian defeats in North Africa in late 1940, Hitler held a special conference with the chiefs of his armed forces. At the conference, it was decided to send a German army formation to Libya (codename Operation Sunflower). In January of 1941, Rommel was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and in early February was called to Berlin. In Berlin, Rommel received the command of *Deutsches Afrika Korps* and was ordered to leave for *Tripoli* on February 12th. *Deutsches Afrika Korps* was to consist of two divisions the 5th Light Division and 15th Panzer Division. They were destined for North Africa to aid Germany's Italian ally in their struggle against the British. Rommel found Italians to be demoralized by the defeats inflicted upon them by the British. His relations with Italian commanders left much to be desired. For the sake of diplomacy, Rommel was directed to serve under General Italo Gariboldi, who had succeeded the defeated Marshal Graziani as the Italian commander in North Africa. Strictly speaking, the term *Afrika Korps* refers only to the corps headquarters and its attached units, though many people use it as a name for all the German and Italian units in North Africa.

Rommel's orders from the German High Command were to assume a defensive posture and hold the frontline. Immediately after his arrival at *Tripoli* on February 12, 1941, Rommel began organizing the defense of *Tripolitania*, in Western Libya, and making plans for offensive actions. Within hours of arriving by plane, he was back in the air for a flying reconnaissance of the desert east of the city. Soon after his arrival, Rommel staged an impressive military parade through the street of *Tripoli*. He arranged for each tank secretly to circle back and rejoin the parade, thus bolstering the numbers on display for the benefit of enemy spies. Rommel

decided to establish a forward defensive position in the area of *Sirte*, a Libyan village on the coastal road about halfway between *Tripoli* and *El Agheila*, the place where the British had halted their advance on the Italians. General Gariboldi was reluctant to risk the Italian troops by moving them 250 miles in the direction of the enemy, but Rommel insisted. "I had already decided, in view of the tenseness of the situation and the sluggishness of the Italian command to take the command at the front into my own hands as soon as possible," he said. The next day two Italian infantry divisions and the Italian *Ariete* Armored Division were on the road to *Sirte*. On February 14, 1941 the first German troops, one reconnaissance and one anti-tank battalion, arrived at *Tripoli*, and left for *Sirte* the next morning. Finding that the British defenses were thin, he quickly defeated the Allied forces at *El Agheila* on March 24. His 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion's tanks and armored cars charged along a 1000-yard front straight toward the town, while vehicles in the rear were instructed to raise dust. Many of the vehicles in the assault were fakes, members of the so-called "cardboard division," but in the clouds of dust raised, they appeared to give the Germans a considerable force. The British, seeing what they believed to be an impressive enemy contingent, withdrew to *Mersa Brega*. The "cardboard division" was perhaps Rommel's most ingenious deceptive technique. With a few Fiat and Volkswagen chassis, covered with pasteboard "armor" and gun barrels cut from telegraph poles, Rommel had duped the British into retreating without a fight. His bold action re-established confidence in the Italian troops and began the myth of the invincibility of the *Afrika Korps*.

Rommel then launched an offensive which, by 15 April, had pushed the British back to *Salum*. *Tobruk* was then encircled and besieged. Rommel utilized the tactics of *Blitzkrieg*, which worked so well in France and took the British completely by surprise. During this drive, he also managed to capture British generals Richard O'Connor and Sir Philip Neame. Gariboldi tried to restrain Rommel, insisting that any further moves would be in direct violation of orders. Rommel ignored him stating, "I decided to stay on the heels of the retreating enemy and make a bid to seize the whole of *Cyrenaica* at one stroke." On April 3, one of his units reported that most of its vehicles were extremely low on fuel and needed a four-day break to replenish. Instead Rommel ordered all the trucks to be unloaded and sent them back empty to the divisional depot, instructing the drivers to return within 24 hours with sufficient fuel, food, and ammunition to see the campaign through. Once General Gariboldi heard about the order, he became furious and challenged Rommel again. "He wanted me to discontinue all action and undertake no further moves without his express authority," Rommel recalled. "I had no intention of allowing good opportunities to slip by unused. The conversation became somewhat heated." The relationship between Rommel and Italian senior leadership was contentious during the entire North Africa campaign.

On April 13th, the *Afrika Korps* captured *Bardia* and *Salum* and on April 15th, reached the Egyptian western border. Rommel's offensive forced the British and its allies to retreat to the safety of static defenses around *Tobruk*. Rommel's first attempt to break the *Tobruk's* defenses made on April 11th lasted until April 13th but failed. It was followed by a second unsuccessful attempt on April 30 that lasted until May 2nd of 1941. At that time, Rommel was nicknamed the "Desert Fox" by both his friends and enemies, because he constantly improvised and used

tricks in order to outsmart his enemies. From mid-April to mid-June, the British launched small-scale offensives but were forced to retreat to defensive positions by the German use of 88mm *Flak*, anti-aircraft, guns deployed as anti-tank guns. Rommel deployed and dug in his 88mm *Flak* guns in the U-shaped formation. They were dug in so deep, that the barrel looked only 30 to 60cm over the ground level. Then a low tent was erected over the position of every gun and even with field glasses, it was impossible to distinguish them from sand dunes. Rommel sent his light tanks to fake an attack on the British positions. The British saw an easy prey and followed the Panzers who withdraw in the U-shape. Then, at point-blank range the *Flak* guns opened fire destroying the British tanks.

In June of 1941, both Allies and Axis ceased any offensive activities and strengthened their defensive positions. At the time, Erwin Rommel became very popular in the Arab world and was regarded as a "liberator" from the British rule. In Germany, the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, used Rommel's popularity among soldiers and civilians to create an image of an invincible *Volks Marschall*, People's Marshal. In mid August of 1941, *Afrika Korps*, now designated Panzer Group Africa, was re-organized and Erwin Rommel became the commander of all Axis (Africa Corps and five Italian divisions) troops in North Africa.

On November 18th, the British started their offensive codenamed "Crusader." The British attacked at the *Halfaya* Pass to relieve the encircled city of *Tobruk*. After British attacks on November 22nd and 23rd were stopped, Rommel counterattacked and drove into the British rear, relieving Axis forces at the *Halfaya* Pass. At the same time, the British reached the vicinity of *Tobruk* and on November 29th, broke through to *Tobruk*. By December 7th, *Afrika Korps* was forced to withdraw across *Cyrenaica* and on January 6th reached *El Agheila* in Libya. From January 2nd to 17th, Axis forces were defeated at *Halfaya* Pass, *Bardia*, and *Sollum*. In mid January, Erwin Rommel consolidated his forces and positions and decided to launch a new offensive when his force would be properly supplied and equipped.

In late January, Rommel ordered bundles of wood and bushes on long ropes to be attached to all the supply trucks and some Italian light tanks. The Italian light tanks drove in the first line, one after the other, behind them all the supply trucks. The attached bundles of wood and bushes made immense clouds of dust. For the British, it looked like the real full-scale attack. They not only withdrew, but also turned their delaying forces in the wrong direction. At the same time, Rommel attacked from the other direction with his German Panzer Division. The British were completely outwitted and defeated. Rommel launched his new offensive, recaptured *Benghazi*, and forced the British to retreat to the safety of *Gazala* line. In early February, both sides took defensive positions to consolidate their strength. On May 26, 1942, Rommel launched the next stage of his new offensive, after heavy fighting broke through the *Gazala* line, and threatened the city of *Tobruk*. Rommel captured *Tobruk* on June 21st and decided to continue advancing eastwards into Egypt and by June 30th reached the British defenses at *Marsa Matruh*. At the same time, Rommel was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal, the youngest German Field Marshal ever. He was fifty years old at the time of his promotion. Pursuing the retreating British, Rommel reached the defensive system at *El Alamein*, 96km west of Alexandria and 240km west of Cairo. At this point, Axis forces were

completely exhausted with only 50 tanks and relied on captured supplies and equipment. From early July to late August, the British concentrated their efforts on destroying the remains of *Afrika Corps* but with little success. Rommel continued requesting equipment and supplies, but the main focus of the German war machine was on the Eastern Front in Russia and very limited supplies reached North Africa. On August 30th, Rommel launched another offensive directed in forcing the British to withdraw from their positions at *El Alamein*. He attacked the British rear at the ridge at *Alam Halfa*, but quickly ran out of supplies and Allied superiority forced him to withdraw to his previous defensive positions.

From September to October of 1942, there was another period when both Allies and Axis ceased any offensive activities and strengthened their defensive positions. Sick with diphtheria and in the need of convalescence, Rommel left for Germany. On October 23rd, the British launched their offensive directed in recapturing lost land and destroying the Axis forces in North Africa. Right after the start of the British offensive, Rommel was recalled to Africa and reached his headquarters on October 25th. The British, with total superiority, quickly defeated Axis forces at *El Alamein*, pushed back the outnumbered Axis forces, and on November 12th, recaptured *Tobruk*. To worsen the situation, on November 8th, an Anglo-American Invasion of North-West Africa, codenamed "Torch" began. The British continued their offensive and recaptured *Benghazi* on November 19th, followed by the recapture of *El Agheila* on December 17th. Erwin Rommel was unable to establish defensive positions or launch an offensive due to the lack of equipment and supplies and decided to retreat to the German bridgehead at *Tunis*. The British continued their pursuit of the "Desert Fox" and on January 23rd of 1943, captured the city of *Tripoli*. On February 19th, Rommel launched his last offensive in North Africa. On February 20th, he recaptured the Kasserine Pass but on February 22nd, his attack was stopped by the superiority of Allied forces.

On February 23rd, Rommel took command of the Army Group Africa. Soon after, Rommel handed over the command of the Army Group Africa to General von Arnim. On March 6th of 1943, Erwin Rommel flew back to Germany, to persuade Adolf Hitler about the hopelessness of the Axis situation in Africa. In reality, Rommel was recalled back to Germany, and was ordered to take sick leave. His pleas to return to Africa were turned down. On March 11, 1943, Hitler awarded Rommel the Knights Cross with Oak leaves, Swords and Diamonds. At the time, Erwin Rommel was physically and morally shaken and was a shadow of his past glory. Two months later, on May 13, 1943, the surrender of all Axis forces in North Africa, took place.

Rommel's fame in the desert rests on his success as a leader and his uncompromising belief that all prisoners of war should be well looked after and not abused. One story told at the time was that Italian troops took from British POWs' their watches and other valuables. When Rommel found out, he ordered that they be returned to their owners immediately. To many British 'Desert Rats', Rommel epitomized a gentleman's approach to war.

Rommel, the "Desert Fox," was a tactical genius. His personal leadership and ability to improvise on the battlefield with minimal resources were exemplary. Rommel established a pattern of success as a battalion commander in World War I by leading from the front, which

involved learning the battlefield, as well as directing and employing combat power from the front lines. In World War II, he fully developed and exploited his bold style of leadership. In combat, he displayed tactical understanding, initiative, presence, courage, luck, and unyielding energy. Rommel survived tremendous firefights, which all too often killed subordinate commanders and key members of his staff. His direct style of leadership provided him a feel for battle and the ability to make good decisions faster than his opponents. On the other hand, his actions often kept his staff and subordinate commanders unsynchronized in combat efforts. Often Rommel's practice of participating in the fight put the burden of initial planning and directing campaign operations on his beleaguered staff. His instinct for battle and leadership set him apart from his contemporaries and inspired the men under his command. Personal leadership on the battlefield and aggressive, even reckless initiative characterized his style. Occasionally, he made serious mistakes, but his audacity frequently turned them into successes. Rommel's leadership directly contributed to the success of the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* in 1941 and 1942. Had it not been for running out of supplies, Rommel may have captured all of North Africa.

During an interview for a World War II Magazine article, Hans Klein exemplifies the feeling most German soldiers in North Africa had for Rommel:

Next to my father, Erwin Rommel was the most important man that I have ever known. He was almost legendary to the soldiers who fought in Africa. We had a natural love for him. I saw him a couple of times when I was doing my duties as a dispatcher. He never spoke to me, but I was in his neighborhood and that alone was a delight for me. We knew that all the decisions he made were kept with the safety of his men in mind. He tricked the enemy, and found devious ways to maneuver around them to protect his soldiers. That is why we fought so gallantly in Africa.

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