

side, burying alive the men in the post. The German officer could only think that he would be the next one ground under the tank's treads.<sup>37</sup> During their charge, the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry ran over an entire line of German and Italian anti-tank guns. But their victory was short-lived.

The sun rose behind the 9th, silhouetting the tanks against the featureless desert. They were hit by anti-tank gunfire from German 50mm, 7.62mm, and 88mm guns. At less than 1,000 yards, the German gunners could not miss. The Crusaders were "killed" first, then the Grants and Shermans. Fires shot through every port and hatch in the hit tanks (British soldiers called it "brewing"). Surviving crew members tried to escape. Many did not make it. Of 400 men in the attacking crews, 230 were killed, wounded, or captured. Their sacrifice might have been worth it, but the supporting charge they expected from the 1st Armored Division was late.

By the time the 1st Division's brigades did arrive at the front, any idea of charging through the gap was on hold. Radio intercepts indicated that Rommel was mounting a counterattack by the *Afrika Korps*. Lumsden dug in his tanks and anti-tank guns, and screened them from behind with layers of artillery. The counterattack came on 2 November at 11 A.M. and lasted two hours. The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, supported by tanks from the Littorio Division and all the artillery Rommel could amass, tried to break through the British line. The Grants and Shermans withstood the punishment; British artillery blanketed any armored concentrations with fire; and the RAF, aided by the South African Air Force and U.S. Army Air Force squadrons, bombed the battlefield with clockwork precision. Their fighter escorts shot down Stuka dive-bombers that tried to reach the battle. The attack cost Rommel 100 tanks.

With the Axis staggering from the massive blows, two squadrons of Royal Dragoons armored cars, followed by a squadron of South Africans, slipped behind the Axis lines, shot up Italian XX Corps supply depots and anything that moved, returning to their own lines relatively unscathed. On 4 November, the 7th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, made what was their third attack against Aqqaqir Ridge. This time they took the position without any losses—the Germans had abandoned the position during the night. Rommel was beginning his withdrawal from El Alamein. The great battle was over, ending with an unexpected whimper rather than the anticipated bang.

## CHAPTER 2

### Rommel's Road to Tunisia: The Great Withdrawal

Rommel felt despair as he pulled his army west from El Alamein. Within the last hours of the battle, with disengagement already in progress, ample fuel arrived. Kesselring was angry with Rommel—complain, complain; that was all he heard from Rommel and then, when fuel arrived, he quit. From Rommel's perspective, given the false promises and pettifogging of *Commando Supremo* and even of Hitler, the fuel's late arrival at Benghazi must have seemed like a stale punch line to an already bad joke. Kesselring, to his credit, discovered that most fuel was not reaching the front but was being consumed along the road from Benghazi, any vehicle provided any amount the driver requested. He vowed to change the system and make deliveries as close to Rommel's force as possible.

But Rommel's despair was born more from a great conflict. He disobeyed a direct order from Adolf Hitler. At 1:30 P.M., 3 November, the withdrawal well underway, a message arrived from Hitler. It contained three key sentences: "In the situation in which you find yourself there can be no other thought but to stand fast, yield not a yard of ground and throw every gun and every man into battle. It would not be the first time in history that a strong will has triumphed over the bigger battalions. As to your troops, you can show them no other road than that to victory or death."<sup>1</sup>

Rommel was angered that Hitler should impose a tactical decision on the *Panzerarmee* from Berlin. Rommel knew that his determination to withdraw was correct, but he immediately ordered his men

to stand fast. Over the next twenty-four hours, the British nearly destroyed the Italian XX Corps in a bitter fight, and reduced the 15th and 21st Panzers to a thin defensive line around the Tel el Mampsra northwest of Aqqaqir Ridge. By early afternoon, the *Afrika Korps*' front was penetrated. At 5:30 p.m., 4 November, apocalyptic messages from Hitler be damned, Rommel renewed his order to withdraw, knowing it was the only way to save the remnants of the *Panzerarmee*. Kesselring encouraged Rommel's action, considering Hitler's order to stand and die nothing but folly. The next morning, messages arrived from Hitler and *Commando Supremo* approving the withdrawal. Because of the ignorance, incompetence, and politicking of senior officers, Rommel lost precious hours.

The British were capable of mounting a vigorous pursuit of the *Panzerarmee*. Their manpower losses, mostly infantry, were around 4,500 dead and about 9,000 wounded and missing. These casualties, if one escaped being counted among them, were miniscule for an army that numbered over 200,000. They lost 500 tanks, but 350 of these were repairable. Additionally, the British lost 110 guns, most in the anti-tank batteries. The RAF lost seventy-seven aircraft, and twenty U.S. Army Air Force craft were shot down.<sup>2</sup> Again, this was a relatively small quantity given the many squadrons involved and the large number of missions flown.

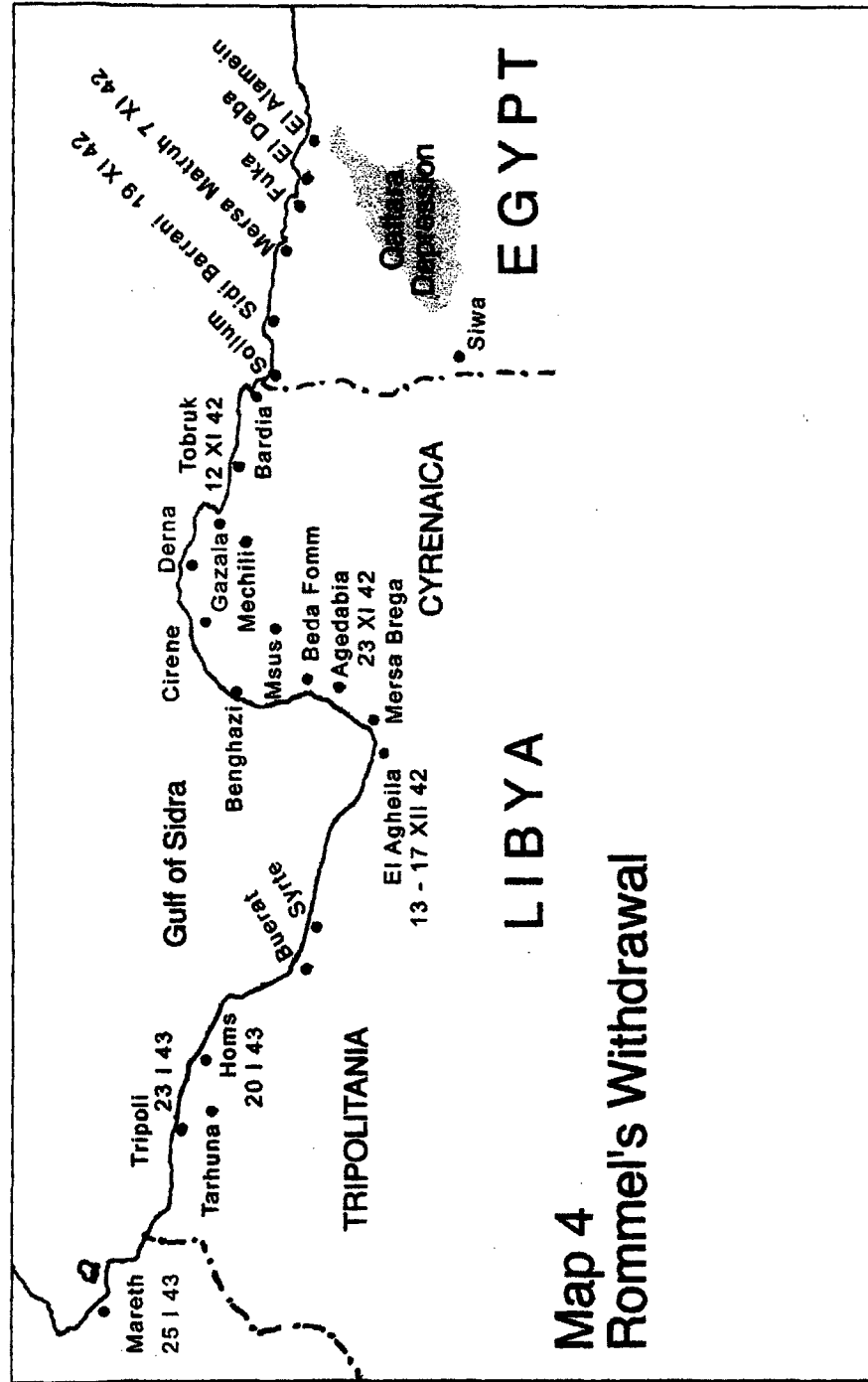
German casualties numbered 1,100 killed, 3,900 wounded, and 7,900 missing. The Italians lost 1,200 killed, 1,600 wounded, and 20,000 missing. The majority missing from both armies were presumed captured. Rommel lost 450 tanks, 1,000 guns, and eighty-four aircraft. The impact of these losses on the *Panzerarmee* was devastating. The Italian XX Corps and half the Trento Division were virtually wiped out. The Bologna Division and the remainder of the Trento Division were without food, water, and transport—never provided by Italian headquarters—and tried to escape the battle line as best they could. Most walked into captivity. Among the German units, the 90th Light Division was reduced to little more than a battalion, and the 164th Light Division was two-thirds gone. The 15th Panzer Division formed only a small combat group. The 21st Panzers brought thirty tanks out of El Alamein but three days later only four were operational. The post-battle *Panzerarmee* consisted of about 5,000 effective troops, twenty tanks, twenty anti-tank guns, and fifty field guns.<sup>3</sup> The inescapable conclusion is that the *Panzerarmee* was Montgomery's for the taking.

## OUT OF EGYPT

Rommel's initial destination was Fuka, west of El Alamein, where his motor units would occupy prepared positions until the infantry pullback was complete or until the British, "who . . . had complete command of the situation and could dictate the speed of our retreat," attacked Fuka.<sup>4</sup> If that happened, he would move even further west, salvaging what he could of his army (Map 4).

Montgomery's overwhelming defeat of the *Panzerarmee* never materialized. Among the important reasons were, first, Montgomery's wariness of a riposte by Rommel; second, the possibility that he believed his victory was more complete than it actually was<sup>5</sup>—a natural enough consequence of a confusing battle—and, third, a cautionary attitude toward long desert sweeps by his own units. Certainly he did not appreciate his field commanders' advice to load the armored and motor brigades with gasoline and let them go after Rommel's army with interdiction points as far west as Tobruk. To Montgomery that smacked of rampant individualism, indiscipline, and adventurism of the worst sort, exactly the kind of nonsense that brought the Eighth Army to despair under previous commanders. He would keep rein on such maneuvers.

Lord Chalfont concludes that Montgomery's "exploitation of the victory at Alamein was abysmal."<sup>6</sup> And so it was. Major General Herbert Lumsden's X Corps was specifically organized as the *corps de chasse*. Yet, on 4 November, with resistance weakening, local breakthroughs occurring, and Italian units in the early stages of withdrawal, nothing was done to activate a pursuit. Lumsden's 1st Armored Division, commanded by Major General R. Briggs, advanced only as far as Tel el Mampsra and stopped. The 10th Armored Division under Major General Alec Gatehouse was east of the Rahman Track, holding their line under the assumption that the Germans would continue fighting the next day. Montgomery also assumed that Major General A. F. Harding's 7th Armored Division, involved in fighting the badly mauled Ariete Division, would continue the battle the next day. Only two units were ordered to intercept Rommel's escape route. Brigadier E.C.N. Custance was to take his 8th Armored Brigade to Galal Station east of Fuka. Major General Sir Bernard Freyberg, commanding the 2nd New Zealand Division, was to take Fuka itself. But when it became apparent that Rommel was not going to stand and fight another day on the Alamein line, new orders were dispatched. Briggs



was to take his division to El Daba, and Harding's 7th Armored, now joined to X Corps, was to cut the coast road a few miles west of that village. Gatehouse and Custance were to block the coast road. Freyberg, his New Zealanders also now assigned to X Corps, would race west and then swing north to the area around Baggush, bringing his troops between Fuka and Mersa Matruh. There were some good landing fields located on the escarpment behind the coastal strip, and Montgomery wanted them for the RAF.

Befuddlement overwhelmed the plans. At the moment of breakout, when speed and boldness were required, Montgomery bogged down his desert corsairs in a reorganizational muddle. X Corps had earlier suffered heavy losses because it was unexpectedly needed to punch through the German defenses. The 7th Armored Division and the 2nd New Zealanders were added to X Corps as compensation. Instead of being the sleek rapier-like instrument of Rommel's ultimate defeat, X Corps became a clumsy patchwork quilt of units, exactly the "bits and pieces" approach to battle that Montgomery himself decried when he first arrived in Egypt.<sup>7</sup>

Reorganization and pursuit produced mixed results. Rommel, upon entering Fuka on early 5 November, discovered that there were no prepared defenses. With the British 22nd Armored Brigade (7th Armored Division) hooking toward the village from the south and with the RAF bombing and strafing, there was no time and few resources with which to make a stand. Rommel kept his troops moving west with all possible speed. The 22nd could not keep pace. Delayed by what turned out to be a dummy minefield and low on fuel, they stopped, awaiting their service units. Briggs' 1st Armored Division took El Daba, but Rommel's main force was gone. Low on fuel and with light fading, the 1st Division laagered for the night. In contrast, Custance's 8th Armored Brigade took Galal just in time to intercept the strong column that evacuated El Daba. The British dug-in their tanks and waited for the column to close, then opened fire, destroying fourteen German tanks and twenty-nine Italian tanks, and capturing a hundred vehicles and a thousand men.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Lumsden exhorted the 2nd Armored Brigade (1st Armored Division) to load up on fuel and supplies, make a swing 70 miles southwest to Bir Khalda, and turn north, making a 35-mile run to Mersa Matruh on the coast road. Lumsden's encouragement notwithstanding, they never made it for lack of fuel. The rest of the division, following miles behind, also ran short of fuel. Lumsden's

troubles multiplied. He joined Gatehouse's 10th Armored Division in their attack against Fuka, but the division started at dusk and, typical of British philosophy, balked at attacking the enemy at night, laagering instead near El Daba. They finally reached Fuka around noon on 6 November, too late to do anything. When Montgomery tried to locate Lumsden, he was strangely unavailable. His days and those of Gatehouse with the Eighth Army were numbered.

Freyberg extricated his New Zealanders from the El Alamein battlefield on 4 November and headed west across the desert until they were south of El Daba. Their progress was slow because of traffic and the staggering amounts of battlefield junk through which they had to drive. Brigades and even battalions lost coordination crossing the plain, and it was not until late in the evening that the entire division and armored support reassembled. They too settled in for the night. The next morning, 5 November, they headed for Fuka. Topping the escarpment above the coastal road, they came upon the same dummy minefield that delayed the 22nd Armored Brigade. Convinced that it was real, the New Zealanders moved cautiously forward against German rearguard artillery fire. By the evening of the 6th, the New Zealander's progress, together with everyone else, slogged to a halt.

Heavy rain blanketed the coastal area and moved inland, turning sandy areas into wallows, filling every hole, and gushing mud down every bit of high ground. Tanks skidded and trucks sank up to their axles in mud, their wheels spinning in the ooze. Montgomery commented in his memoirs that the rain bogged down three of his divisions in the desert and that it was impossible to get any fuel to them, allowing Rommel to avoid encirclement at Mersa Matruh.<sup>9</sup> There is barely enough fact in Montgomery's assertion to avoid the uncomfortable truth that he did not provide his forward units, jammed together at the front, with enough fuel in the first place to make sweeps significant enough to block Rommel. The small hooks along the coastal road were quite inadequate to the task. Montgomery also completely avoided the fact that Rommel stood under the same rain clouds as he did and that, despite overcrowding along the road and his own fuel shortages, he managed to keep his ragtag army moving steadily if not speedily west.

There was also another factor behind the British failure to stop Rommel in the first days after El Alamein, a factor less clearly factual, more interpretive, yet of considerable interest. Montgomery stated that Egypt needed to be made secure for the whole of the war. One

way to achieve that goal was to capture the El Agheila positions and their western approaches.<sup>10</sup> The place had historic and symbolic importance for both the British and the Germans. For the British, it was the furthest point of their advance against the Italians in February 1941. For the Germans, it was the real starting point of Rommel's first campaign in North Africa in April 1941. Thus, as Lord Chalfont concludes,<sup>11</sup> because Montgomery decided that El Agheila was the place where Rommel would make a determined stand, creating the conditions for another attritional battle, there was no compelling reason to try for a quick kill along the way. Montgomery was satisfied that Alamein proved the virtue of matériel strength in a static fight. The method would work again.

Rommel, meantime, decided he could not hold Mersa Matruh. The stockpiled supplies were inadequate, ravaged by troops who already passed through the depot. Moreover, the Italians, badly mauled at Alamein, needed reorganization. Finally, the 21st Panzer Division could field only four tanks and practically no artillery. Using the 90th Light Division and remnants of the 15th Panzers as rearguard, he ordered a withdrawal from Mersa Matruh. On the night of 7 November, the British 7th Armored Division entered the village to find Rommel's force gone. They were on the move 70 miles west to Sidi Barrani near the Libyan frontier. The river of Axis vehicles, threatening to flood the road, crawled on. Trucks were packed with men, and when the vehicles ran out of petrol, they were put on tow—they could still carry troops. Some men even hitchhiked west. In a bold move, the Germans destroyed tanks that ran out of gas or finally collapsed mechanically.

Looking ahead, Rommel needed to get his army through Halfaya Pass into Libya, because as long as they remained in Egypt, they were subject to being cut off. Once in Libya, given some space and given time created by an effective rearguard action in Halfaya Pass, he could reorganize his army. Even though the supply situation remained bleak, Rommel contemplated making a defensive stand at Mersa Brega, a few miles northeast of El Agheila (the Germans and British used these two place names to indicate the same defensive line).<sup>12</sup>

But on arriving in Sidi Barrani, Rommel was greeted by dismal news from Sollum. A column 30 to 40 miles long was stalled east of Halfaya Pass, and the RAF was flying low-altitude attacks against the inviting targets. A week would be needed to complete the retreat through the pass and over the adjacent hills into Libya. The next

morning, 8 November, the column was still 25 miles long. If the situation remained that way, the motorized combat groups—the remnants of the panzer divisions, and the 90th and 164th Light Divisions—would have to fight fierce rearguard actions. Rommel made a decision. To diminish the press against the narrow defiles of Halfaya Pass and reduce the target opportunities for the RAF, he diverted the Italian XX Corps, the 15th and 21st Panzers, and the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion around the pass to the south. The 90th Light remained the principal rearguard. To ensure coordination, he drafted officers to man traffic posts and form control teams. He also gathered all the anti-aircraft weapons he could find to help protect the columns and even solicited some help from the *Luftwaffe*. Thus, by noon, 9 November, the columns again moved west.<sup>13</sup>

These changes demonstrated Rommel's leadership ability to see a problem, define its parameters, and find a quick and workable solution. There was no magic in his ability to slip the hooks cast in his direction. As Rommel commented about British tactics, there was little sense in trying to outflank a withdrawing force unless it was first "tied down frontally" because mobile units from that force could block the sweep, allowing the remainder of the army to escape.<sup>14</sup> The persistent tactical skills Rommel used were faultless timing and the ability to keep his troops moving. As a former Eighth Army officer said, "We didn't maneuver very much to catch the *Afrika Korps*. Their retreat and our pursuit was more like a horse race along the coast road. There wasn't even much fighting where I was. In a short time, the race took on a life of its own."<sup>15</sup>

On 9 November, Mussolini ordered the *Panzerarmee* to hold a line at Sollum. *Il Duce* was afraid, and for good reason as events proved, that Rommel was not much interested in saving Libya. But Rommel was convinced that no one in Rome fully understood the magnitude of what was happening in the desert. Without armor, without anti-tank artillery of any substance, and lacking consistent *Luftwaffe* support, he did not have the resources to halt another strong frontal attack and was helpless against a determined flanking maneuver from the south. Furthermore, the coast road around Sollum, following the wide arc of the bay, was devoid of any natural cover for the retreating columns. Looking east and southeast, the escarpment, rising in places to a thousand feet, barren and flat-topped, dominated sitelines the width of the bay. Rommel could not, would not, defend such an unsupportable position.

Events to the west also influenced his decision to abandon Cyrenaica (eastern Libya). On 8 November, at 11 A.M., reports were confirmed that a joint British and American invasion force was ashore at various points in northwest Africa. That, Rommel concluded, foreshadowed the end of his army.<sup>16</sup> He unilaterally altered the official strategic goal of stemming the British advance. No sand-blown *Götterdämmerung* was part of his thinking. He now wanted his army evacuated to Europe, envisioning the possibility that the Allied invasion force would close on his troops from the west. In that event, he would hold open a corridor in the hills either side of Cirene, about halfway along the road between Derna and Benghazi, that would allow his men to evacuate North Africa by small ships, submarines, and aircraft.

His despair deepened over the next ten days when he took time to visit Major Hans von Luck's desert headquarters at Siwa Oasis. Rommel knew von Luck from their days together in France. Rommel trusted him and now confided in him, telling von Luck of his plans to see Hitler and obtain more supplies, and that Kesselring ordered fuel flown from Italy by fifty JU 52 transport planes. At that moment, Rommel was handed an intelligence report that only five of the planes made it through the RAF screen. Rommel slumped. "Von Luck," he said "the war is lost!" The only way to save the army was to stage a North African Dunkirk.<sup>17</sup>

## ACROSS LIBYA

The RAF's Desert Air Force commanded the skies over Libya. From 23 October, the first day of Alamein, through 8 November, six squadrons of Hawker Hurricane fighter-bombers—IICs mounting four 20mm cannons and IIDs with two 40mm guns—destroyed thirty-nine tanks, 212 trucks and armored personnel carriers, forty-two artillery pieces, 200 assorted other vehicles, and four small fuel and ammunition depots. Over that period the squadrons flew 842 sorties at a loss of eleven pilots.<sup>18</sup> This was a remarkable record, but one not matched by the entire force.

With the Eighth Army moving against Sollum, Rommel ordered the 90th Light Division to withdraw through Halfaya Pass and blow up the road as they went. A battalion from the Pistoia Division together with a few batteries of German artillery stayed behind to slow the British advance and create some confusion. The Italians quickly

surrendered, and the artillery units were overrun the night of 11 November. At the same time, a British Armored brigade traversed the desert plateau south of the pass, coming upon the 90th Light in laager to the west. The Germans quickly broke camp and sped toward Bardia.

During the retreat across Egypt and into Libya, Rommel learned that British units were operating on his south flank. These included the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), the Special Air Services (SAS) under Major David Stirling, the Royal Dragoons, and the 11th Hussars. The SAS, founded during Auchinleck's tenure as commander-in-chief, carried out raids behind the Axis lines, even against Tobruk. The Royal Dragoons, Donald McCorquodale commanding, were the principal unit to race behind Rommel's lines at El Alamein and raid Italian supply depots. The 11th Hussars, the first unit into Libya in 1940, was posted to Egypt in 1935, and pioneered desert survival and navigation techniques. These were experienced soldiers who understood desert battle. Their job was to raid Axis depots and columns and to make certain that Rommel did not mount a counterattack around the British south flank.

Rommel was anxious lest these units be forerunners of a much larger British flanking maneuver. He established a countermeasure by sending his own reconnaissance battalions into the desert, thus screening his south flank. The 33rd and the 580th Panzer Reconnaissance Battalions, comprising the so-called Voss Group, and the 3rd Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion, Rommel's self-confessed pet battalion, formed the screen. Major von Luck of the 3rd was overall commander. They were soon joined by the Italian Nizza Reconnaissance Battalion, a unit from northern Italy. The Germans were not at all pleased with this addition because they were equipped with "sardine tin" armored cars. But contrary to German opinion, the Italians proved to be proud men who wanted to get into the fight even with their second-rate weapons. By 6 November, von Luck's group was operating from Jarabub Oasis, about 70 miles northwest of the vast Siwa Oasis and about 150 miles south of Sollum.

The interaction between the British and Axis units was, in itself, small stuff in what was to be eventually considered a minor front. They were isolated in the desert, detached from all larger formations, the Germans reporting only to General Alfred Gause, Rommel's chief-of-staff. As such, they were separated from the daily concerns

of battle and brutish survival along the coastal plain. Under these very special circumstances, the units created a private war with its own rules. Undoubtedly, their adventures contributed to the emerging mythology about desert battle<sup>19</sup>—that the desert somehow sanitized warfare, that it gave space for the resurrection of soldierly virtues thought long buried in the mud and slaughter of World War I's Western Front, and that after all good humor and sportsmanship counted for something. This was to be *Krieg ohne Hass*—War without Hate (as Rommel's draft narrative of the campaign was titled for its German publication after the war).<sup>20</sup>

The contrast between the coastal areas of Egypt and Libya and the topography of the interior is profound. The northernmost region is a narrow coastal strip that varies up to a few miles in depth. Behind this strip is an escarpment that can be a gentle slope or an abrupt wall that rises a thousand feet. Immediately south of the escarpment is a vast sand-and-pebble plain over which large units could maneuver. The landscape beyond that plain is a dry ragged land cut by windswept north-south ridges and wadis. And beyond that zone lay the Great Sand Sea with dunes that reached hundreds of feet in height and were considered by von Luck to be impassable. But the Long Range Desert Group made the Sand Sea their home.

The aridity was crushing. Normally, an ordinary man with no water supplement on a hot day loses so much bodily fluid that he would probably be dead by nightfall. Of course it rains in the Sahara Desert, but much of it evaporates before reaching the ground. Once in a while, a torrential rain passes over, turning the sand to goo and making the wadis treacherous places as walls of water suddenly, unexpectedly wash everything before them. Or just as suddenly and unexpectedly the sand begins to ruffle as the wind increases. The sky turns yellow-tan and great billowing sand clouds race across the desert in a violent storm, slashing exposed skin, erasing paint from metal objects, and clogging any piece of machinery not adapted to desert operations. The day's heat turns to bone-chilling cold after sunset, the night so black that a patrol caught in the dark could not find their way back to base camp. No lights! A light during the night was certain death. The soldiers acclimated to their grim circumstances and fought a most peculiar war.

The reconnaissance groups operated with American-made Jeeps or German *kübelwagen*, a variety of trucks, some converted to carry guns

like the 40mm Bofors or the British 6-pounder, and they used armored cars such as the British Humbers or Daimlers or the German 8-wheeled Sd.Kfz. 231.

One evening, the Royal Dragoons called von Luck on the radio, asking if a young British lieutenant and his patrol were in German hands. Indeed, they were, and von Luck asked if he could call the Dragoons and the 11th Hussars if any of his men went missing. He was welcome to do so. A few days later, an unofficial agreement was made by which all patrolling and combat would cease at 5:00 P.M. At 5:05 P.M., radio contact was made to trade information about prisoners. In one of those exchanges, von Luck inquired about his battalion doctor who disappeared one night into the desert. Yes, the Dragoons had him and would gladly trade for synthetic Atebrin™ because some men had malaria. Von Luck made the trade. Later, when Rommel visited von Luck's headquarters, the major told him of the arrangements with their British counterparts. Rommel simply said, "I am glad you can have this fair play here in the desert; on the coast, it's just a matter of survival."<sup>21</sup>

Rommel requested a meeting with the recently promoted Marshal Cavallero and Field Marshal Kesselring on 11 November. He needed to know precisely what plans were being made for Tunisia and what the prospects were of getting reinforcements and supplies to his own army. There was no hope of holding North Africa without added assistance, especially with a fresh Allied army in Tunisia that could move into Tripolitania and attack him from the west. The meeting never took place. Unknown to Rommel, Cavallero had been in North Africa for three days but never bothered to contact him. He refused to meet Rommel. So, too, did Kesselring who was in Rome.

An embittered Rommel realized that the one hope of salvaging the campaign and his army was to petition Hitler directly for help. He chose thirty-six-year-old Lieutenant Alfred Berndt for the mission. He was a full-fledged Nazi, a high official in the Propaganda Ministry and, in Africa, a radio broadcaster and sometime keeper of Rommel's war diary. Berndt pleaded Rommel's views, telling Hitler that holding Cyrenaica was impossible, although a defensive line could be established at Mersa Brega if supplies and reinforcements arrived in time. Otherwise, in Rommel's estimation, the best course was an evacuation of the *Panzerarmee* through Cirene. Hitler sent Berndt back to North Africa with assurances that the *Panzerarmee* would be rebuilt to its original strength by bringing men and supplies through Trip-

oli.<sup>22</sup> Hitler did not indicate how, with the RAF controlling the aerial war, that was to be accomplished. He ordered that Mersa Brega was to be held at all costs because the position could be a springboard for a new offensive.<sup>23</sup> Next, Rommel was to leave Tunisia out of his thinking. The territory would be defended—troops were already on the way. Finally, an evacuation of the *Panzerarmee* was impossible because the RAF and Royal Navy controlled all approaches to the Cyrenaican coast. Rommel was disgusted by the entire message, but especially the "at all costs" directive for the Mersa Brega line.

The *Panzerarmee* kept moving west. Bardia was abandoned. So was Gambut, its valuable airfields rendered useless and made dangerous by ingeniously placed booby traps. Rommel intended to hold Tobruk as long as he could carry away the supplies stored there. But intelligence reports indicated the British were maneuvering through the desert to envelop Tobruk from the west. This was exactly the tie-down tactic the British failed to execute after Second Alamein. Rommel scavenged what supplies he could and, not caring to sacrifice his army in defense of a sentimental reminder of past battles, he abandoned Tobruk. The Eighth Army occupied the port 12 November. At Gazala, the retreating columns created another great traffic jam along the narrow paths through old minefields that restricted movement to the coast road instead of allowing some traffic to overflow onto the verges. Gazala was abandoned. Nigel Hamilton, one of Montgomery's biographers, argues that Rommel was intimidated by the massive character of the Eighth Army's pursuit. Constant reports of a thousand vehicles moving west through the desert "shattered Rommel's nerve,"<sup>24</sup> causing him to prematurely abandon defensive sites. Not quite.

The sluggish pace of Montgomery's pursuit of Rommel met with criticism within his own ranks. Major General Harding, commanding the 7th Armored Division, was very concerned. He believed part of the problem was that there were too many divisions at the front, creating congestion and fuel shortages. He would have liked sufficient fuel to lead his division in an end run around Rommel's southern flank, coming up behind his force to block his westward movement. That had not been tried, despite reports to Rommel of a thousand vehicles pushing across the desert. The historian Lord Chalfont concludes that Montgomery could have spared a division for a cross-country trek from the Tobruk-Derna region southwest to Mechili and on to Agedabia.<sup>25</sup> Montgomery avoided that option until 17 Novem-

ber. By then, Rommel's troops were in El Agheila, safe from that blocking maneuver. Justifiably Montgomery needed to secure the airfields around Martuba, between Gazala and Derna, giving the RAF a needed reach across the Gulf of Sidra. Less justifiably Montgomery blamed his delay on another rainstorm that hit the coast during 15, 16, and 17 November. He could have launched the flanking maneuver on the 12th had he been willing to take the risk.<sup>26</sup>

There was an undeniable ambiguity in Montgomery's plans toward El Agheila that has led historians to either eagerly deflate his reputation as a field general or rush to his defense. Thus, on 12 November, Montgomery published a message to the Eighth Army, saying, "In [the past] three weeks we have completely smashed the German and Italian Army," forcing their withdrawal from Egypt, and destroying so many tanks, artillery pieces, anti-tank guns, and vehicles of all sorts that the enemy is "completely crippled."<sup>27</sup> Approaching El Agheila, Montgomery discerned an anxiety among his troops, many of them desert veterans that Rommel twice before dislodged from that position with clever maneuvering. "I therefore decided," Montgomery wrote, "that I must get possession of the Agheila position quickly."<sup>28</sup> But he did not move quickly. Instead, he ordered Leese to dig-in his XXX Corps, and set the attack for 15 December—three weeks away!

For many old soldiers, this patent conflict between goals and time was doubtless another instance of the standard army injunction "hurry up and wait." But there was a solid logistical reason behind the delay, providing one accepts Montgomery's philosophy of supreme matériel and numerical superiority over the enemy. The Eighth Army was strung out along the road from Tobruk to Benghazi to Agedabia. Montgomery wanted to bring them together not only to have a force large enough to punch through Rommel's defenses but also to balance his own forces with a reserve to counter any sudden Rommel riposte. The situation was made more difficult because the poor state of the ports at Tobruk and Benghazi precluded efficient supply handling. Furthermore, Benghazi was the last deep-water port until Tripoli. The railway from Egypt stopped at Tobruk, and landing supplies along the coastal beaches, although possible, was not in every place practical because landward exits from the beaches were often impossible for wheeled transport. Time was needed. For his part, Rommel realized that the Eighth Army was at its most vulnerable and did think of counterattacking; indeed, Marshal Bastico signaled Rom-

mel in late November that Mussolini expected a counterattack. But given the army's condition, Rommel quickly dismissed the thought.

A second reason for waiting was Montgomery's assessment that the El Agheila position was difficult to attack. This is another contentious issue among historians. Certainly both Rommel and Montgomery independently agreed that the physical setting made for a strong defense. As Rommel described it, the line ran onto heavy ground a few miles inland from the Gulf of Sidra—a salt marsh about 10 miles wide next to a very broad area of soft sand. To outflank the area required a looping southern movement, a risky maneuver because the supply lines of the attacking army were exposed to assault by the enemy's mobile units.<sup>29</sup> Montgomery seemed intimidated by Rommel's alleged strength at El Agheila. Reports indicated that he could field a hundred tanks. But as Lord Chalfont notes, Rommel on 24 November commanded thirty tanks and forty-eight anti-tank and 88mm guns, and his divisions were undermanned and underarmed, many of the men having lost their weapons during the withdrawal.<sup>30</sup> Hitler later angrily and unfairly accused the soldiers of throwing them away in panic.

The *Panzerarmee* was deployed along a 100-mile line west of El Agheila. The greatest strength was in the north behind a deep anti-tank ditch and minefields that strung inland for 30 miles from the Gulf. There was also a horseshoe-shaped minefield belt around El Agheila itself. The rest of the line was a loosely connected patchwork defense. Given the time presented him by the British, Rommel rested his troops, reorganized, and refitted some armored units. Despite these favorable conditions, the fuel problem persisted.

Montgomery at first thought that bluff and maneuvering would frighten Rommel into abandoning his positions so that he could attack him later on ground more favorable to the Eighth Army. Why Montgomery was reluctant to simply go in after the *Panzerarmee* at El Agheila, despite the minefields, remains problematic. His 12 November message exalted in a completely smashed and defeated enemy. In that context, Rommel was his for the taking. The possibility remains that Montgomery feared a Rommel counterattack. The historian Correlli Barnett presents a compelling argument that what really saved the *Panzerarmee* was Rommel's reputation for counter-stroke. Montgomery did not dare risk a desert battle of maneuver.<sup>31</sup>

Also problematic, even unappealing given the emerging legend of the Desert Fox, is Nigel Hamilton's statement that Rommel feared



the Eighth Army. Rommel obviously worried about the Eighth's power but, taking his words at face value, he was more concerned about logistics. If Rommel is to be doubted at this point, it is because he often sought scapegoats for his defeats and for precipitous decisions that sometimes backfired. Cavallero and Kesselring were at the top of his fault list. His persistent complaining about the fuel problem wore thin. He even wore down Hitler when, on 28 November, he flew to meet with him in Berlin. Hitler, as he had with other supplicants, promised Rommel supplies, arms, and men, at the same time accusing the *Panzerarmee* of being spineless.<sup>32</sup> Rommel, much discouraged, returned to Africa unsure of his army's future.

Montgomery seemed to render these arguments moot when, in late November, he toured the front and decided that bluff and maneuvering would not work. He decided instead to thrust Leese's XXX Corps behind the *Panzerarmee*, trap it in their defensive positions, and annihilate the force. The 51st Highlanders were to plough through the minefields and along the coast road directly toward El Agheila, letting Rommel think that this was the main attack. The 7th Armored Division was to make a shallow sweep a few miles inland and surface just west of El Agheila. The division, designed for speed, included the 8th Armored Brigade—fifty-seven Shermans, twenty-seven Grants, fifty-eight Crusaders, four Stuarts or Honeys—and two armored car regiments of the 4th Light Armored Brigade. The principal blocking maneuver against further *Panzerarmee* retreat was given Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Division. Montgomery's assignment to the New Zealanders was uncharacteristic and bold, for they faced a 200-mile-long march about 50 miles inland that took them south of the area of soft ground and then northwest toward Merduma located 60 miles west of El Agheila and directly across the *Panzerarmee's* line of withdrawal. The tanks of the Scots Greys, supporting the New Zealanders, were loaded up with fuel for 450 miles and were issued nine days' rations. Montgomery's greatest fear was that the sweeps would be detected.

The attack did not go forward exactly as planned. To hold Rommel's attention and keep his troops in place, the British opened a preliminary artillery and aerial bombardment on 11 December. But it was not until the next day that Freyberg started his long march. Rommel thought the bombardment a mistake because it signaled him that the British were going to attack.<sup>33</sup> He began pulling his men back from El Agheila. This was not panic nor was it fear of the Eighth

Army; it was a continuation of his intent to save as much of his army as he could. Rommel also believed that Freyberg's flank march should have started much earlier than the bombardment so that his division would be in place to block the *Panzerarmee*.

Montgomery saw events differently, claiming that the New Zealanders advanced rapidly.<sup>34</sup> In fact, they were bogged down in soft ground that the Long Range Desert Group reported was firm, and were running out of fuel. To the north, the 51st Highlanders walked into disaster. Their lead units were badly damaged by cleverly disguised mines and booby traps and by machine-gun fire that raked their ranks. Casualties were everywhere, especially among company grade officers. The 7th Armored Division, trying to get through the lower zone of minefields met stiff resistance from the Ariete Combat Group (no longer a division). But Leese's units pushed and pushed and finally made some progress against the defenses. By then it was 14 December. Around 3 P.M., 15 December, refueled and on firm ground, the New Zealanders were at Merduma two miles from the coast road. The 7th Armored Division was in position the next day behind the *Panzerarmee*. The Desert Fox was close to being shut in a box.

German aerial reconnaissance informed Rommel of the 7th's position. He increased the pace of the withdrawal and established a defensive screen around the coast road well past Nofilia. On 17 December, the New Zealanders attacked southwest of that village. The 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion under von Luck and units of the 15th and 21st Panzers counterattacked, using what fuel percolated through from Tripoli. The battle diffused as small units fought, parted, and fought again. Artillery roared at obscenely short ranges. Tanks blasted each other in a confusion of hot steel, smoke, and dust, the British leaving twenty machines burning on the desert floor. A corridor west was found when Rommel realized that the New Zealand 5th and 6th Brigades were actually several miles apart. He split his force into small contingents that slipped through the gap at night. The British armored car units did not have the offensive weight to shut the door on the escape corridor, and the 7th Armored Division was by then too far to the rear. The *Panzerarmee* was on its way west once more. Freyberg, eager to pursue Rommel, was ordered to stop at Nofilia.

By the end of the El Agheila action, Rommel was looking beyond Libya toward Gabès on the Tunisian east coast. That meant abandoning western Libya—Tripolitania. Two consequences flowed from

a withdrawal of such magnitude. First, the withdrawal meant writing off Mussolini's extant North African empire. Second, as Rommel pointed out, the *Panzerarmee* could not engage in a major battle and simultaneously avoid being pinned down frontally,<sup>35</sup> reflecting his continuing concern about a successful British outflanking march. Once in Tunisia, a country of hills and valleys, he could more easily avoid entrapment and could unite with the army forming in the north.

For once, Marshal Bastico, although quite depressed, agreed with Rommel without much bickering. They issued a joint appreciation to *Commando Supremo* in Rome about the North African situation. On 19 December, Mussolini issued a reply: The *Panzerarmee* must resist to the last man at Buerat.

By 29 December, Rommel drew his forces into Buerat, located 230 miles east of Tripoli. He believed that the position was vulnerable to a southern outflanking maneuver just as at El Agheila, Gazala, and Sollum—and for the same reasons. Again he did not possess sufficient armored and mobile units to strike at the necessarily exposed flank of such an enemy march. If the British succeeded and surfaced behind Buerat, the position would easily collapse. For the moment, however, the *Panzerarmee* was free from that concern. Only British light armored units followed them to Buerat because Montgomery planned to bring forward X Corps—4th Indian and 50th Divisions, and the 1st Armored Division—to relieve XXX Corps as pursuit leaders. The exchange of corps was delayed by a heavy storm that hit Benghazi on 4 and 5 January 1943, damaging port facilities. Leese's XXX Corps would therefore remain the Eighth Army's spear point. The attack was scheduled for 15 January. That gave needed time to resupply Leese's divisions, a job tirelessly undertaken by X Corps' transportation units that drove day and night back and forth from Benghazi. In addition, the so-called Inshore Squadron was formed to affect resupply on the usable beaches along the advance route. From November 1942 through to 23 January 1943, they delivered 157,000 tons of supplies to the Eighth Army.

For his defensive line, Rommel fielded ninety-three tanks, over half of which were Italian "sardine tins," 170 artillery pieces, 177 anti-tank guns, eighty-three armored cars, and every mine they possessed.<sup>36</sup> Yet, on 13 January, in response to Cavallero's pleas, he diminished his own strength by sending the 21st Panzer Division, minus tanks and artillery, to support the Gabès corridor.

Rommel's intelligence unit reported that British weapons strength numbered 650 tanks (actually 450, many stripped from the 1st Armored Division), 360 guns, 550 anti-tank guns, and 200 armored cars.<sup>37</sup> XXX Corps was to attack in three main thrusts. The 51st Highland Division would attack, as usual, across the minefields and along the coast road. The 7th Armored and New Zealand Divisions would make a wide sweep around Rommel's south flank. The 22nd Armored Brigade would advance between the two main wings, prepared to move north or south as needed. Montgomery attached himself to the 22nd to command from the field and keep close supervision of the battle. Leese himself commanded the southern wing with the strong injunction to keep his tank losses at a minimum for the race to Tripoli.

The Highlanders struggled across the minefields and into the defenses. The 7th Armored and the New Zealanders made their loops and cut northwest, the former attacking the 15th Panzers. With the full weight of XXX Corps directed against his defenses, Rommel gave orders to withdraw. By dawn, 16 January, the *Panzerarmee* was gone from Buerat, moving rapidly west to Homs. This was a tactically better defensive position than Buerat because hills and ravines to the south made it more difficult to outflank.

But Montgomery succeeded in dislocating Rommel by coming at the Homs line at full speed. There was no build-up, no reorganizing, no waiting. This was uncharacteristic dash for Montgomery, but he was looking past Homs to the real prize—Tripoli. The Eighth Army would run over anything in their way. They could taste the victory at hand. Even though the advance was slowed by German and Italian artillery fire, a shallow flanking movement by Harding's 7th Armored, supported by a powerful artillery barrage, forced Rommel to establish a screen around his south flank and west along the road to maintain access to Tripoli. Rommel ordered another withdrawal under the threat of being pinned down by artillery fire and being cut off by further flanking maneuvers. That order flaunted directives from both Mussolini and Hitler to hold the Homs line—Rommel was to sacrifice his army, giving the Axis time to organize defensive bridgeheads in Tunisia.

Rommel did not see the issues in the same way. Since the end of November, some 18,000 men and 260 tanks had arrived in North Africa. Kesselring diverted most of the men and weapons to the formation of XC Corps in Tunisia, now under the command of Walter