



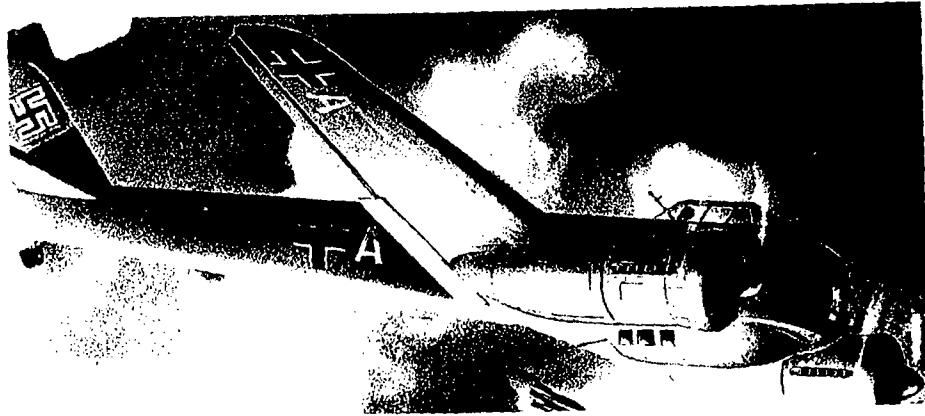
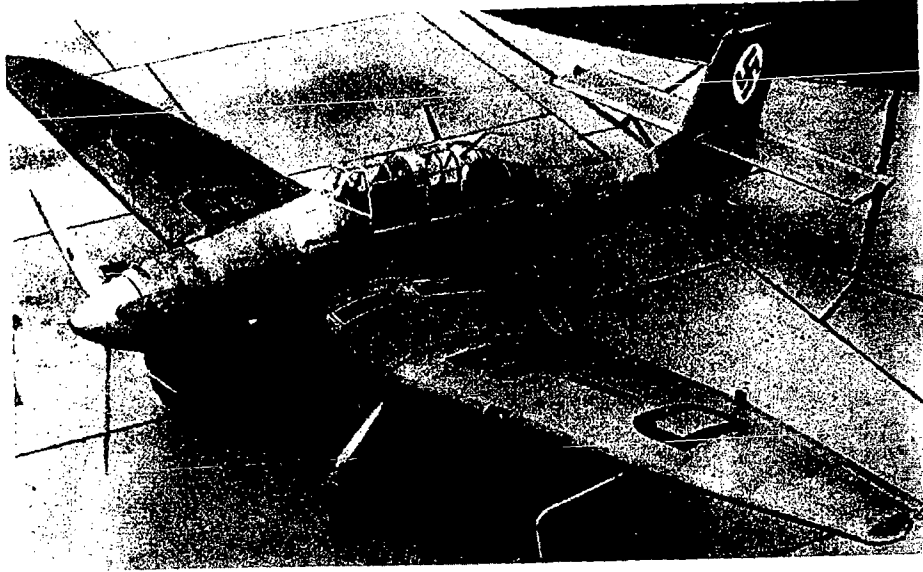
Battle of Medenine: 6-pdr. in action. Used by permission of The Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London



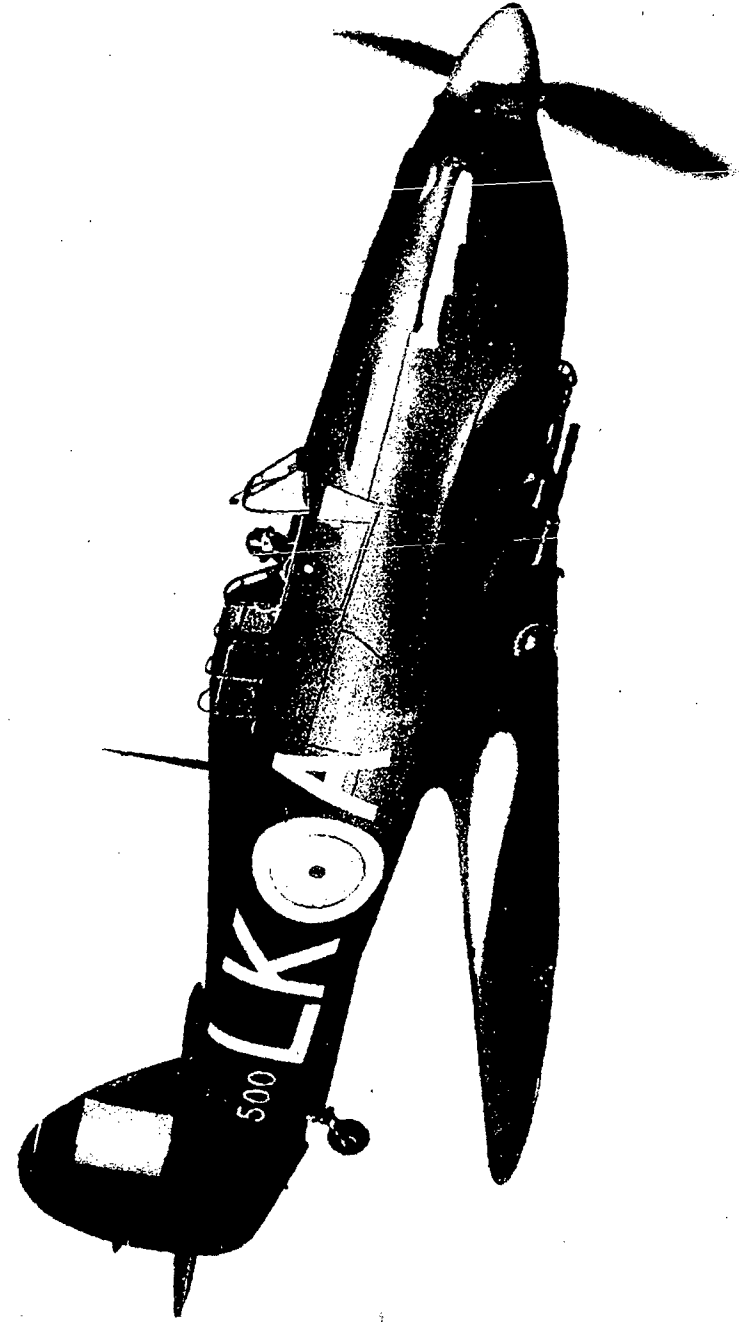
U.S. M-7 self-propelled 105mm gun. National Archives



U.S. 105mm howitzer at Kasserine Pass. National Archives



(Above) German Junkers Ju 87 Stuka dive-bomber. (Below) German Junkers Ju 88 light bomber. National Archives



British Hawker Hurricane IIC fighter-bomber. National Archives

CHAPTER 5

Turning Points: Exit Rommel

THE BATTLES FOR THALA AND THE TEBESSA ROAD

At 4:30 P.M., 20 February, Axis troops rolled through Kasserine Pass. A battalion of the Centauro Division headed west on the road to Tebessa. After a 5-mile run, they could not find an American unit anywhere. The battlegroup from the 10th Panzer Division under Fritz von Broich followed the Centauro battalion into the pass but headed north following the branch road toward Thala. They immediately ran into Gore Force blocking the road.

Lieutenant Colonel A. C. Gore, some of his armor defiladed, sent forward a screen of Valentine tanks from the 2nd Lothians, machines that were a poor match for the German Mk IV Specials and even had trouble with the newer Mk IIIs that mounted a long-barreled 50mm gun. The Mk IIIs and IVs could kill a Valentine long before the British machines, mounting only 2-pounders, reached their ideal firing position. The Lothians, their fate predetermined by their inadequate armament, rattled out to block the German advance. One by one, German gunnery set the Valentines ablaze. A half-dozen American M-3 General Grant tanks from the U.S. 1st Armored Division tried to lend support but were immediately hit by artillery fire. With their tanks shot to pieces, British gunners furiously worked their 6-pounder anti-tank guns, opening fire at the oncoming Germans. The remaining German tanks charged ahead, grinding down the British

positions. Beyond reach of the German tank guns, 25-pounder field guns ranged their fire across the advancing line, slowing the attack. Gore Force was badly mauled in the fight but their sacrifice gave Fredendall time to send Robinett's CCB to Tebessa and deploy Brigadier Dunphie's 26th Armored Brigade further up the Thala road.

By the morning of 21 February, Rommel was convinced that the Allies would stay on the defensive rather than mount a counterattack. He ordered the 21st Panzers to continue punching at Sbiba Gap to keep the defenders in place. Meanwhile, the *Afrika Korps* battlegroup would take Djebel Hamra, the high ground above the Tebessa road as it turned out of Kasserine Pass. The 10th Panzer Division's battlegroup was to keep moving north and take Thala (refer to Map 9 in Chapter 4), making the road and the rail junction just beyond the village unusable.

The 10th Panzers were under way by 1 P.M. Though making good speed, they did not advance fast enough for Rommel. He and Bayerlein jumped in a staff car and drove up the Thala road to find out what was delaying the battlegroup. About 15 miles from Thala they drove into a British artillery bombardment, jumped from their car, and dove for cover. They had run into the remains of Gore Force and Dunphie's 26th Armored Brigade, units of which included what was left of the 2nd Lothians, the 17/21 Lancers, and the 10th Royal Buffs with the support of two field artillery batteries. The British were positioned behind a series of low east-west ridges and wadis, around which "stretched open, heath country."¹ Behind these units, about 4 miles south of Thala, were the 2/5 Leicestershires supported by two Royal Artillery batteries and a mortar company.

The 7th Panzer Regiment led the German attack against the first ridge position. Dug-in Valentines opened fire on the panzer as the range closed. The Germans swung around the end of the ridge and swept the nearly immobile British tanks with flanking fire. Dunphie pulled back his armor to another ridge and then another, mile by mile. His troops brought the German attack to a stop, but only after losing fifteen tanks.

Disgusted with the way von Broich was handling the battle, Rommel took command and ordered truck-borne infantry to closely follow the next tank assault. At 4 P.M., German armor cracked Dunphie's ridge line. German infantry charged into the breach. All was confusion as the front line disappeared. Small units intermixed, German and British soldiers bleeding and dying for any advantage

they could scratch from the miserable ground. The fighting lasted an hour. Dunphie was satisfied that his men delayed the German advance, thus giving the Leicestershire battalion an opportunity to dig a good defensive line. He ordered a smoke screen so that his surviving troops and armor could withdraw to the Leicestershires' position, the final defense line guarding Thala.

The Leicestershires opened a small gap in their positions for the retreating force. Dunphie's command vehicle arrived at about 7 P.M., the last through the line. At least it seemed he was the last until a Valentine tank clattered through the smoke and into the British defenses—immediately followed by German tanks and half-tracks carrying infantry. The Germans had captured the tank quite intact and were using it as a kind of Trojan Horse. The ruse worked as once again the British defenses turned into "a scene of wild confusion."² The battle raged, silhouetted by flares and burning vehicles: tank versus tank at point-blank range; tanks versus artillery as the British 25-pounders found their targets; German machine gunners taking the high ground to enfilade the British infantry line. The torturous fight, among the campaign's fiercest close-quarter combat, lasted three hours. Finally exhausted, neither side able to overcome the other, the survivors withdrew about a thousand yards each. The Germans had destroyed thirty-eight tanks and twenty-eight field pieces, and took 571 prisoners.³ The Leicestershire battalion was reduced to only a few platoons. The British could not sustain another assault.

As if a scene from a B-grade Western movie, help suddenly arrived. For, on 17 February, Brigadier General S. LeRoy Irwin, commanding the U.S. 9th Infantry Division's artillery, received orders from Eisenhower's headquarters to move all his guns from Morocco to Tebessa. In only five hours, Irwin had his troops and equipment on the road. They traveled nearly 800 miles through rain and hail and over impossible roads, arriving at Tebessa at midafternoon of the 21st. More help was on the way as the 9th Infantry Division's 47th Infantry Regiment moved east along with forty-nine Sherman tanks.

Irwin's artillery turned the battle's initiative in favor of the beleaguered British. Desperately tired, the Americans positioned their forty-eight guns alongside the thirty-six British artillery pieces already supporting the thin defensive line. Irwin's artillery included 75mm field guns, 105mm howitzers, and twelve 155mm howitzers, the soon-to-be-famous "Long Toms."

22 February, 7 A.M. Von Broich was about to launch his attack

when a thunderous artillery barrage hit his front, knocking out tanks, self-propelled artillery, communications and supply trucks, and scattering his infantry. He judged it prudent to await further developments before sending his troops into artillery fire that sounded a new and ferocious note. Rommel, who had left the front the previous afternoon, returned to von Broich's headquarters. As the historian George Howe cogently stated, the initiative of the battle was still Rommel's, but to maintain it, he would have to keep winning.⁴ Yet, quite out of character, or overly influenced by Anderson's stand-and-die order, he told von Broich to re-group and assume a defensive posture.

Time, Rommel's real enemy from the moment he first offered his plan to Kesselring, was running out. By not attacking Thala that morning, he surrendered the best moment to overrun the Allied line. The British were weakened by the earlier ridge fights, and the American artillery was not fully entrenched. But with the arrival of Nick Force above Thala on the 22nd, Rommel's opportunity for victory slipped away, replaced by inactivity.

The scenario at Sbiba was no better. Colonel Hildebrandt's 21st Panzer Division battlegroup could not dent the Allied defenses. The British 1st Guards Brigade, the U.S. 18th RCT, and the other American battalions stood firm. The defenses gained some strength when new Churchill tanks arrived from Le Kef during the night of the 21st. The Churchill was a slow (16 mph), 39-ton machine with 88mm armor, thick enough to repel anything but 88mm projectiles. Although earlier models of the Churchill were operational in 1940, the tank suffered mechanical difficulties. The Model III that arrived in Tunisia was more reliable and mounted a 6-pounder gun. This was an improvement over the 2-pounder mounted in earlier Valentines but still not on a par with the 75mm gun of the Mk IV Specials. On the night of the 21st, even a squadron of Valentines would have been welcomed. Alas, do what they might, Hildebrandt's battlegroup could not penetrate the Sbiba line.

On 21 February, at the same time that von Broich launched the first attacks against the ridge defenses near Thala, Rommel ordered General Bülowius's *Deutsche Afrika Korps* (DAK) battlegroup to secure the heights of Djebel Hamra and the passes through that hill.⁵ A reconnaissance battalion left Kasserine Pass about noon followed two hours later by a tank battalion from the Centauro Division and a German infantry battalion. Unknown to the Germans, Brigadier

General Robinett's CCB was moving into position around the Djebel Hamra, and elements of Allen's 1st Infantry Division were deployed near Bou Chebka. Robinett commanded two armored infantry battalions, a reinforced medium tank battalion, two tank destroyer battalions, two field artillery battalions, and two anti-aircraft artillery battalions. General Bülowius's main force advanced from the pass in midafternoon. Robinett waited until they were in full view then ordered his artillery to open fire. One American tank unit, the 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, was positioned hull-down on the south flank. The Germans came at them, tempting the Americans to rise from their positions and counterattack. Instead, the Germans were lured into a trap formed by concealed anti-tank guns. Having learned important lessons since being in North Africa, Robinett ordered his tanks to stay put. They repelled the Germans.

Bülowius was in a quandry. If he renewed the attack in the same area, his force, now 4 miles from the passes through Djebel Hamra, would have to make a daylight crossing over a valley floor that offered no cover and be subjected to constant artillery fire guided by spotters secure on the djebel. To keep DAK's attack viable and waste neither time nor men and equipment, Rommel approved a wide hooking maneuver around the south flank. This was to be a night march.

Torrential rain delayed the march. Once under way, the Germans were disoriented by the darkness and by the confusing and difficult terrain. At dawn, 22 February, DAK began their attack but were astonished to discover that they were not moving against Djebel Hamra. Instead, they were near Bou Chebka, nearly 7 miles south-east. The attack went in anyway, Menton's *Panzergranadier Regiment Afrika* again taking the lead. Heinz Schmidt's 2nd battalion spent much of the day bombarded by artillery. The 1st Battalion was also pinned down and, from what Schmidt managed to see, looked as if they were surrounded by American tanks. Both battalions managed to withdraw that night, but they left behind many casualties. Bülowius's tanks and self-propelled guns lagged too far behind the infantry to offer assistance. They withdrew, leaving the infantry to get out as best they could.

Robinett's main defensive line lay behind a rough road that linked the two passes through Djebel Hamra. The Italian 5th Bersaglieri Battalion tried to breach the defenses but was blanketed by artillery fire. Bülowius sent a battalion from the 8th Panzer Regiment together with Italian assault guns to affect a breakthrough and force

Robinett's units into the narrow ravines of Djebel Hamra where their mobility would be very restricted. The plan failed as American artillery pounded the Axis infantry and, along with well-sited anti-tank guns, stopped the German tanks in their tracks. By 8 A.M., DAK's assault broke down completely, and Bülowius ordered a general withdrawal.

On 23 February, Rommel ordered DAK to withdraw behind the Kasserine Pass line. Unfortunately for the Germans, the foul weather lifted slightly, allowing American aircraft to finally support their ground troops. Or try to give support. A B-17 heavy bomber squadron was supposed to hit Kasserine Pass, but in searching for their target, they became lost and hit Souk el Arba behind Allied lines.⁶ Other missions were right on target. Rommel noted that, within a quarter hour, 104 Allied planes flew over Kasserine Pass, subjecting his columns to bombing and strafing runs. They almost hit Rommel. On the way to his headquarters, eighteen bombers carpet bombed the road only a hundred yards ahead of his staff car.⁷ Observation planes flew overhead, bringing down artillery fire on anything or anyone that moved along the floor of the pass. The American aircraft included A-20 light attack bombers, a squadron of P-39s, and two squadrons of P-38s functioning as fighter-bombers. To the north near Thala, RAF 225 Squadron, flying Hurricane IICs, armed with four 20mm cannons, and escorted by Spitfires, bombed and strafed German positions and columns. These operations persuaded Rommel that the initiative was no longer his.

FACING DEFEAT

The Battle of Kasserine Pass is often narrowly viewed as an American tragedy, indeed as a national disgrace as soldiers of the United States ran away before the resolute Germans. Yet, the stubborn defenders at Sbiba turned back the repeated panzer attacks. The British along the Thala road—assaulted again and again, battered, nearly overrun, their number sorely diminished—held the panzers at bay. The DAK battlegroup turned out of Kasserine Pass along the Tebessa road. The Americans stopped them at Djebel Hamra. Thus the battle as a whole is a history of German failure.

Rommel must have asked himself why the offensive came apart. Perhaps, with some bitterness, he remembered thinking that the Americans were not battle-tested and that the *Deutsche Afrika Korps* would “instill in them from the outset an inferiority complex of no

mean order.”⁸ The initial phases of the offensive proved him right. His infantry functioned more like battlefield policemen, rounding up stragglers, gathering in whole companies of disaffected troops, and marching them off to wire-enclosed camps. Long lines of abandoned vehicles, everything from tanks to jeeps, were evidence of an army nearing disintegration. The Germans reportedly took 4,000 prisoners between 16 and 24 February. The U.S. 1st Armored Division alone lost 1,400 men. British units such as the 2nd Lothians were just about wiped out.

But something almost imperceptible happened as the hours ticked by. Some American units—for example, the 18th RCT, the 26th Infantry, and the battalions of CCB—fought with great determination. The British troops, nearly obliterated, clung to their positions. The steel supporting the defenses was Allied artillery that rained shells on the German attacks with great fury and accuracy. In the end, and with considerable objectivity, Rommel conceded that the Americans fought extremely well, although they could not yet be compared to the veteran British Eighth Army. Moreover, they enjoyed command flexibility, easily shifting units about from one combat zone to another. But the greatest impact on Rommel was the sheer amount and quality of equipment the Americans possessed.⁹ He had to be impressed that British tank losses, normally crippling, were made up easily with American M-4 Shermans.

Rommel was by his own admission envious of the supplies and reinforcements reaching the Allies at a time when he was forced to make do with dribbles. His supply situation was initially better in Tunisia, but by 22 February his battlegroups were operating with a six-day ration supply, his mobile and armored units were running low on fuel, and most units carried only a one-day ammunition supply. He also needed manpower. DAK was undermanned—Hildebrandt's battlegroup, for example, was the only operational unit from the 21st Panzer Division he could readily use. And the troop shortage necessarily reflected von Arnim's disregard of Rommel's needs. The man did not know the meaning of cooperation, demonstrated by short-changing Rommel half the 10th Panzer Division.

Even these faults could have been minimized if only the field commanders used sound tactics. In the various battles—Kasserine, Sbiba, and for the road through Djebel Hamra—the troops raced down the floors of the passes along narrow fronts, exposing their advances to artillery fire directed from the heights above. Such dashes were suit-

able for desert warfare, but in Tunisia the high ground needed to be taken first. Rommel put the blame for that mistake on his local commanders, completely disregarding his own responsibility. Although he ordered von Luck's 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion to make the dash through Kasserine Pass, his infantry did not first clear the heights of the defenders. Instead, the 3rd came under artillery fire and was forced to pull back. At Sbiba, Rommel told Hildebrandt to concentrate his tanks for a focused thrust through the Allied line. The panzers never reached the Allied line. The concentration simply made the tanks easy targets for Allied artillery. Furthermore, all the battlegroups needed to reach their objectives quickly before Allied reinforcements arrived. They did not. Rommel blamed local commanders—Hildebrandt, von Broich, Bülowius—for not sharing his sense of urgency.

At the root of the failures was Rommel's favorite target: *Commando Supremo* and their collective lack of imagination. The plan to march north against Thala and Le Kef dispersed Rommel's offensive power. No one battlefield was given the forces necessary to affect a rapid breakthrough. Rommel was convinced that if all forces were concentrated at Kasserine Pass when the Americans seemed weakest, he could have pushed through and taken Tebessa, thoroughly disorganizing Allied defensive efforts and forcing their withdrawal from Tunisia. Bülowius should have achieved in a few hours at most what it took two days to actually accomplish. By then, the Allies were reinforcing their front. The offensive failed.

Kesselring and his new chief of staff Siegfried Westphal arrived at Rommel's Kasserine Pass headquarters at 1 P.M., 22 February. They found the Desert Fox, architect of so many victories, the battlefield magician, dispirited.¹⁰ Rommel said that continued attacks were useless. The offensive should be canceled and his troops moved to the Mareth Line where the Eighth Army was coiling for an attack from the direction of the desert. To Kesselring, Rommel's thinking not only represented a major strategic change but also reflected a considerable change of attitude or, better, of mood. Gone was the optimism and energy of a few days earlier, replaced by visible mental and physical exhaustion. Kesselring, still optimistic, fully aware of the punishment Rommel's offensive inflicted on the Allies, wondered if something was salvageable from the offensive. He and Westphal pleaded with Rommel that there were still offensive possibilities, that not all was lost. And if he was so short of troops, then why did

Rommel fail to exercise his authority as commander and demand that von Arnim send him the entire 10th Panzer Division? He weakly replied that von Arnim did not know how to take calculated risks.

Rommel remained deaf to all arguments, never convinced that Kesselring, the airman, really understood the problems of ground warfare and was fooling himself that sufficient stores and reinforcements could be supplied by air transport. With the defeat of DAK at Djebel Hamra and Bou Chebka by Robinett's armor and the 1st Infantry Division, and with Allied reinforcements pouring in daily if not hourly, all hope of reaching Tebessa vanished. Rommel reasoned that if he could not deliver a severe blow to the Anglo-American armies in central Tunisia, he would turn his attention south to Montgomery's Eighth Army. Kesselring finally agreed, and that evening *Commando Supremo* formally canceled the offensive. They declared that they had achieved their goals of blunting the Allied incursion and causing grievous losses to their forces. Additionally, all Axis units were to return to the positions they held before the offensive, and all units were to revert to their original commands.

There was a curious codicil to the meeting between Kesselring and Rommel. Kesselring and Ambrosio were forming a new army group to finally shape a centralized command. The German General Staff and Hitler himself wanted von Arnim to take command. Rommel realized that his days in North Africa were numbered. The Italians were impatient to have him go, and Hitler agreed. From a physical health standpoint, jaundice and boils were giving Rommel trouble. But his desire to battle the Eighth Army indicated that he was not going anywhere soon. He wished to play out the last scene of the original open-ended directive that left his departure time in his hands. Kesselring, although taken aback by Rommel's "ill-concealed impatience" to move south,¹¹ made him a surprising offer: Would he take command of the new army group?

Kesselring took credit for the idea, stating, "I think we shall be doing the field marshal a service if we give him overall command,"¹² as if the promotion was a psychological balm. There is also clear evidence that Alfred Berndt gave himself credit for obtaining Rommel's appointment. On 26 February, he wrote Lu that Rommel's physician saw an improvement in his condition and that he could carry on for the next few weeks. Berndt promptly reported this to Kesselring and Hitler. Shortly thereafter *Armeegruppe Afrika* was formed. Berndt declared that he brought this about to renew Rommel's faith and

that he was backed by Mussolini and Hitler.¹³ The German high command was probably apathetic. Some weeks before, the new chief of staff General Kurt Zeitzler told General Walter Nehring that they had “written all that nonsense [meaning the North African campaign] off long ago!”¹⁴ But, in fact, the organization of an army group headquarters was under consideration by Hitler, Kesselring, and the Italians at a meeting in mid-December at Rastenberg. No firm decisions were made, and who was to command was left in limbo. But with Rommel hanging on, there seemed little else for it but to offer him the appointment. And even though Hitler harbored reservations about Rommel’s commitment, the dictator felt a comradeship toward Rommel because of their World War I experiences and was fully aware that his general still possessed enormous popular appeal. That favoritism toward Rommel seems to contradict his desire to have von Arnim take command.

Rommel at first declined the offer, citing his displeasure with *Commando Supremo* and Hitler’s apparent choice of von Arnim for the job. That was true, but Kesselring bore momentary ill feelings toward von Arnim that may have influenced the decision. After his Rommel meeting, Kesselring stopped in Tunis on his way back to Rome for a talk with von Arnim. The conversation was not cordial. Von Arnim wanted all his units back lest Rommel go off on his own and attack Tebessa. Kesselring flatly rejected von Arnim’s argument and chastised him for withholding the troops from Rommel’s offensive that caused a weakened attack. He also informed von Arnim that he was to serve under Rommel in the newly formed army group. Von Arnim was not a happy man. Doubtless, Kesselring must have taken him down a notch in Hitler’s estimation, paving the way for Rommel to head the new army group.

The next day, 23 February, Rommel received and accepted his appointment as army group commander. His written thoughts about the promotion were less than enthusiastic, stating that he did not look forward to “playing whipping boy” for the German high command, *Commando Supremo*, or the *Luftwaffe*,¹⁵ an undoubted reference to Kesselring. Yet, he still could have refused the command. David Irving suggests that Rommel wanted another crack at Montgomery.¹⁶ Beyond that, anything Rommel could do to twink von Arnim must have given him pleasure. But there were also self-satisfactions in his acceptance that make all his grumbling seem like so much dissembling. He liked promotions. He liked receiving med-

als and rubbing elbows with the Nazi inner circle. He liked being a hero to the German people. Regardless of his mental and physical state, once offered a new sword, he could not refuse it.

THE BATTLE OF MEDENINE

Rommel took his new position quite seriously.¹⁷ His authority was seemingly buttressed by Kesselring who, as Rommel planned his attack against the Eighth Army, “refrained from interfering . . . in order to leave him with a feeling of independence.”¹⁸ This was an instance of Kesselring’s beguiling nature for, on 24 February, the day after Rommel accepted his appointment, von Arnim met with Kesselring in Rome without Rommel’s permission or even informing him of his departure. He told Kesselring of his dissatisfaction with the new command structure that seemed to him very confused. Furthermore, he objected to Rommel planning an attack against the Eighth Army without consulting him. Rommel’s preemptive use of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions would compromise von Arnim’s own operations in the Medjez Valley. Yet von Arnim, in a classic instance of compartmentalized thinking, wanted to develop his own offensive against Beja, about 25 miles west of Medjez el Bab. This operation would crack through Anderson’s army that was made vulnerable because so many British troops and so much equipment had been sent to rescue Sbiba and Thala. The possibility of exploiting a breakthrough was enough to gain Kesselring’s approval. But Ambrosio, when the plan was presented to him, gave it a lukewarm reception, hesitant to grant outright approval. The operation was code-named *Ochsenkopf*—Blockhead—a name with more implications than anyone realized.

On 24 February, Westphal—representing Kesselring—met with Rommel at *Luftwaffe* headquarters near Tunis. Rommel was to use the 10th Panzer battlegroup as a rearguard in the Kasserine Pass for a few more days in cooperation with von Arnim’s attack against Beja. Rommel was dumb-founded. What attack? No one said anything to him about attacking Beja. He rejected the request because the battlegroups from the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions were both on their way to Sfax and Gabès and could not be turned around. Furthermore, von Arnim’s plan carried little hope of success—his resources were too limited. And given the stubborn Allied resistance during the recent fighting, it was foolish to think that they would simply back out

of the way. Rommel remarked that if the Beja attack had been scheduled earlier, in coordination with the assault against Thala, he and von Arnim might have crafted a significant victory.¹⁹ Rommel cursed the small minds—von Arnim, Kesselring, and anyone else in his line of fire—who failed to base their assumptions on the existing military situation but instead allowed their fantasies to rule over reason.

Von Arnim's forces charged the British line on 26 February, but soon came under heavy counterattacks. Wet weather turned the ground to mud. The roads were so bad that German tank units and self-propelled artillery could not get close enough to the front to be effective. The enormous Mk VI Tiger tanks, mired down, were blasted by British artillery fire. Fifteen of nineteen Tigers were destroyed. Blockhead drained men and matériel at a rate the Axis could not afford. Rommel intervened, ordering the offensive stopped as soon as was practical. No one listened to him. The fighting dragged on into early March with no one else willing to stop it before the damage was done.

But Operation *Ochsenkopf* did prove something after all. Von Arnim successfully flaunted Rommel's authority as commander of the *Armeegruppe Afrika*. Kesselring had accepted von Arnim's proposal without consulting Rommel. Ambrosio, mute, sat in the wings. When Rommel recovered sufficiently from the end-around played against him, he tried discussing the offensive with Westphal, giving his criticisms. His evaluation was passed on to Kesselring who ignored it. The entire episode was a *fait accompli* before Rommel was brought into the picture. *Ochsenkopf* was the instrument by which, intentionally or not, Rommel's masters turned him into a paper tiger.

On 26 and 27 February, Rommel received from von Arnim and Messe critiques of their situations. Von Arnim believed that the Axis armies were too weak to resist a full attack by British and American forces through central Tunisia. Such an attack would drive a wedge between his Fifth Army and Messe's forces on the Mareth Line. Messe believed that he could not even hold the line, suggesting that he pull back to Wadi Akarit before he was overrun. Rommel added his own comments. The 400-mile line between von Arnim in the north and Messe in the south was impossible to defend. Rommel wanted it shortened to a 100-mile front anchored on Enfidaville. He passed these notes to *Commando Supremo*, the German high command, and Kesselring. Kesselring rejected the plan because it gave the Allies too many airfields, and told the high command that shortening

the front risked losing Tunisia, an event the Italians were not prepared to accept. Hitler predictably rejected Rommel's plan but promised that supplies and reinforcements would be tripled and that Kesselring would send out mobile units to contain Allied forces during the build-up. Rommel must have felt nothing but contempt for his superiors. Optimism and false promises. He had heard it all before.

Yet, there was still time for Rommel to lead one last North African battle, appropriately against the Eighth Army.

His concerns about the Mareth Line were well-grounded. The Eighth Army, having chased him—or dogged him—out of Egypt and across Libya, was ready for a definitive battle, confident of their manpower and battle skills and confident in their matériel superiority. Of course, many of the German troops who served in the *Afrika Korps*, and many Italian soldiers, were as battle-honed as the British. The problem for Rommel was that each day diminished their numbers. The panzer divisions were much depleted, victims of the recent fighting, most of their veterans long gone from the scene. Of all the officers who landed in North Africa with Rommel in February 1941, only nineteen still served with him in Tunisia. By comparison with what the Germans were experiencing in Tunisia, the Eighth Army's march from Tripoli to the Tunisian frontier was a cakewalk. Except for some minor skirmishing along the way, their last battle was at Tripoli some five weeks before. The Eighth was intact, rested, re-inforced, and re-equipped with artillery, anti-tank guns, and more tanks. The Eighth Army was battle-ready.

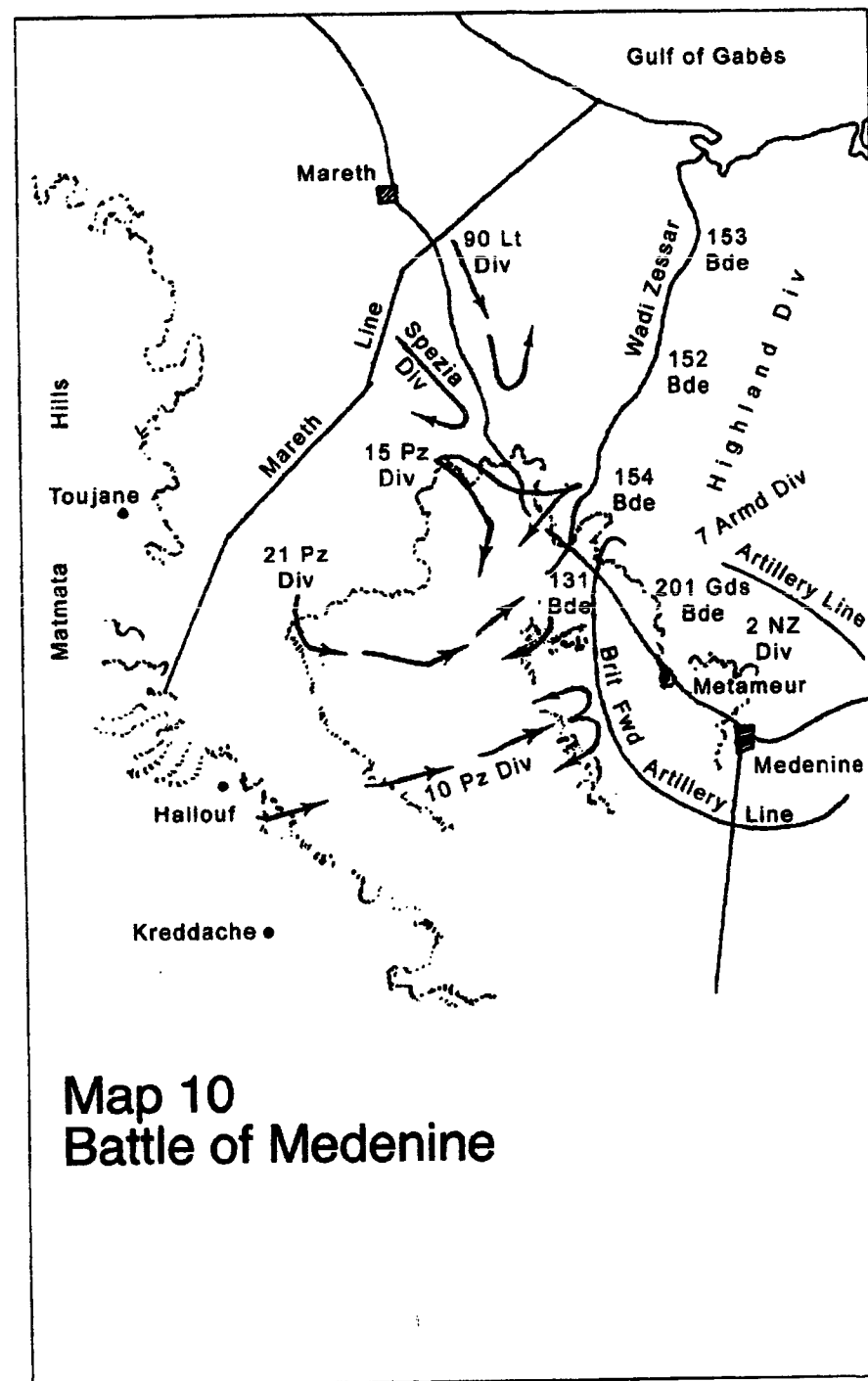
General Alexander ordered Montgomery to breach the Mareth Line. From Desert Air Force observations and from intelligence gathered by David Stirling's SAS and the Long Range Desert Group, Montgomery realized that he would face not only Messe's large infantry force but possibly three panzer divisions. And skirmishes around the Mareth Line in late February confirmed the strength of the Axis positions.

In typical fashion, Montgomery refrained from leaping forward into battle. Instead he took Medenine to secure his south flank and moved his quartermaster into Ben Gardane where he accumulated supplies for the coming offensive. But those supplies had to come overland 200 miles from Tripoli, the closest harbor capable of accepting convoys. Another army might have viewed the situation as a difficult problem. But the Eighth Army was equal to the task, having trucked supplies from Benghazi all the way across Tripolitania.

A defensive screen was established so that the stockpiling could take place with relative impunity. Between 26 February and 6 March, Montgomery brought forward the 2nd New Zealand and 51st Highland Divisions, and the 7th Armored Division. The 201st Guards Brigade and the 8th Armored Brigade added strength. But the backbone of the defense was a massive concentration of armor and artillery: 300 tanks; 350 guns, mostly 25-pounders; and 460 anti-tank guns, mostly 6-pounders supplemented by some new 17-pounders. This was the full power of Sir Oliver Leese's XXX Corps.

Leese created a 30-mile defensive line (Map 10) extending north from Medenine toward the village of Atalallah, then along Wadi Zessar, a natural tank barrier that ran to the Gulf of Gabès. Medenine, on good defensive ground, was a junction for the road northwest to Mareth and on to Gabès, and southeast to Ben Gardane and on to Tripoli. The New Zealanders dug-in around Medenine and Metameur. The 201st Guards Brigade and the 131st Motorized Infantry Brigade, supported by the 7th Armored Division, were centered in the hills above Metameur. A line of anti-tank gun positions covered the approaches to these defenses. The 14-mile line of the wadi was defended by the Highland Division's three brigades. Even though many Sherman tanks were dug-in along the front, most of the armor was held at the rear of these positions, ready to move where needed for counterattacks. XXX Corps was supported by three wings of the Desert Air Force stationed at forward airfields.

On 28 February, Rommel held a staff conference attended by Heinz Ziegler (temporarily commanding DAK pending the arrival of Hans Cramer on 6 March), General Messe, and the various division commanders. Rommel announced his intention to attack Medenine. This was to be a spoiling action to keep the British off-balance, disrupting their supply system and communications, forcing Montgomery to delay an attack against the Mareth Line. He proposed concentrating the weight of attack in the north near the coast, then moving south to Medenine. Although the ground was soft and the going would be slow, he chose that direction because it offered the best chance to surprise the defenders. This attack was to utilize the 10th and 21st Panzers once these units were transferred back to his command following Operation Blockhead. Simultaneously, the 15th Panzer Division and units of the 164th Light Division were to strike through Hallouf Pass against Metameur. The 90th Light Division and the Italian Trieste and Spezia Divisions would lead the



Map 10
Battle of Medenine

push from Mareth to Medenine. All these divisions fielded a total of 150 tanks, 200 artillery pieces of various sizes, and 160 anti-tank guns.²⁰

Ziegler, Messe, and the division officers objected to the plan. Ziegler's intelligence units advised that an attack from the coast was rife with difficulties. The marshy ground would slow the advance. Moreover, the British had heavily mined the area. That left only a narrow corridor along which to advance under massive British artillery fire. The plan was simply too risky. A heated debate followed, but everyone finally agreed to a plan put forward by General Messe.²¹

Messe's plan involved a coordinated frontal attack.²² First, the 90th Light Division and the Spezia Division would launch a diversionary attack from the north between Mareth and the coast, and move south along Wadi Zessar. Second, the main attack would develop as a two-pronged maneuver. One prong, comprising the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, was to gather around Toujane behind the Matmata Hills to screen their approach to the battle zone. The second prong, the 10th Panzer Division and units of the 164th Light Division, would concentrate near Kreddache, the Hallouf Hills screening their approach march. The three panzer divisions, supported by infantry, would move through the passes and attack over open country. The divisional commanders and Messe thought the ground more suitable for rapid maneuvering than on the route selected by Rommel. The 15th and 21st Panzers would strike toward the hills at the center of the British line. The 15th Panzers were to take the high ground, as the 21st Panzers, regardless of losses, overwhelmed the defenses to their front. The 10th Panzers would take Metameur. Messe was not particularly concerned about RAF Desert Air Force activity. Bad weather had kept them relatively quiet during the last ten days, and he expected the *Luftwaffe*, flying from all-weather fields, to keep them on the ground.

The Axis assault was supposed to begin on 4 March, but the difficulties encountered moving the 10th and 21st Panzers from Operation *Ochsenkopf* caused delays. The operation was rescheduled for 6 March. But bad weather did not keep the RAF on the ground for, on the 4th, Desert Air Force observation planes spotted two panzer divisions moving toward the Matmata Hills. British aircraft immediately bombed the columns and German forward area air bases. The sightings and ULTRA machine intercepts of Rommel's messages accelerated British activity along their defensive line. Montgomery and

Leese determined that they would stay on the defensive and let Rommel come to them. Massive field artillery fire would disorganize the Axis attack and keep the panzers away from the defending infantry as long as possible. Anti-tank guns, as at Alam Halfa, could then concentrate on smashing tanks, not protecting infantry.²³ And as at Alam Halfa, the British enjoyed the advantage of commanding high ground.

Dawn, 6 March. The plain between the opposing forces, between 12 and 20 miles wide, was shrouded in fog, a light mist making the air feel heavy. At 6 A.M., Axis artillery opened fire, screaming *Nebelwerfer* rockets tearing through the blanket of fog, 21cm guns pouring shot into the British lines. By 8 A.M., the fog began to lift, enabling the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions to move forward through the Matmata Hills and assemble for an attack directly against the 131st Motorized Infantry and the 201st Guards Brigade. The 10th Panzers left the cover of Hallouf Pass to attack the New Zealanders. To the north, the Highlanders watched the 90th Light Division and the Spezia Division advance. None of the British forces responded to the German preparations. Standing on a hill south of Toujane, Rommel commented that "the attack began extraordinarily well."²⁴ General Messe was still at his headquarters at the Mareth Line.

Many of the the British troops, familiar with the 15th and 21st Panzers and certainly with the 90th Light Division, knew what was coming: hammer blows by artillery and a powerful tank assault supported by skilled motorized infantry. Expectations turned into reality as German artillery fire smashed into the defenses and as Stuka dive-bombers screamed down upon the British. The outer ring of anti-tank guns was damaged. But the British held their ground. Something about this German attack was different. As one veteran of the battle commented, "The silly buggers came right at us, didn't they? Some of us who were in the early desert fighting [1941 and 1942] expected a Rommel flank attack, something clever. It never happened. They kept coming straight across the plain."²⁵

The British retaliated, 25-pounders laying a dense barrage that turned the open ground into a killing zone. Tanks exploded, self-propelled artillery was shattered, and many German infantry, those not killed or wounded, flattened themselves on the ground. High-explosive shells savaged the earth, spraying chunks of jagged rock in all directions, mini-projectiles that maimed and killed. German for-

ward artillery observers, desperately peering through the smoke and the mist, could not locate the British guns. The 90th Light and Spezia Divisions worked their way some 7 miles south to a point near the center of the battlefield where their advance was stopped, not having fooled anyone. A counterattack by the 154th Highland Brigade pushed them back and restored the Highland Division's line. Elements of the 15th and 21st Panzers attacked the area held by the Guards. A section of tanks "crossed a ridge clumsily and 'got shot,'" as remaining tanks churned about as if bewildered.²⁶ British gunners adjusted their ranges and sightings, filling the attack area with artillery and anti-tank gunfire. The German attack stalled.

At 4 P.M., German artillery and Stuka dive-bombers again struck the British defenders at the same time signaling another attack. The panzers, having regrouped, charged forward at 4:30 P.M. The 15th Panzer Division moved against the 131st Brigade, at first making some gains. At 8 P.M., the 131st counterattacked, pushing the Germans back, shattering any hope of them regaining the initiative. The 21st Panzers tried a pincer movement on the 201st Guards Brigade, attacking them from the north and west. Just as the 5th Panzer Regiment and the 104th *Panzergranadiers* were closing on the British line in the north, the German divisional command post came under fire that disrupted communications with the attacking units. The 5th Panzers lost contact with their infantry support as more artillery fire stopped them cold. Five tanks of the 5th Panzer Regiment were destroyed. The war diary of the 7th Armored Division simply and undramatically stated that the expected German attack was repulsed on all fronts, the 131st and Guards Brigades accounting for more than half the enemy tanks destroyed that day.²⁷

The 10th Panzer Division, novices in fighting the Eighth Army, was shocked by the artillery fire that confronted them. None of their experiences in Tunisia prepared them for such a deluge of fire. They lost five tanks almost immediately as they approached the New Zealanders' positions. By the afternoon, deciding the odds were too great in favor of the defenders, the 10th beat a hasty retreat, their attack a complete fizzle.

That night, at continued cost to their armor and transport vehicles, the German panzer divisions disengaged and withdrew to the Hallouf and Matmata Hills. The German casualties numbered 61 killed, 388 wounded, and 32 missing. Italian casualties were 33 killed, 122

wounded, and 9 missing. British casualties numbered 130 men of all ranks. The only British tank squadron that saw action did not lose any machines.

Measured against available manpower, these losses were insignificant. The Germans, however, lost between forty-one and fifty-six tanks, machines impossible to replace before Montgomery assaulted the Mareth Line. The Battle of Medenine left Rommel with only eighty-five German tanks, twenty-four Italian machines, and three Italian self-propelled guns.²⁸

Rommel's judgment of the battle was short and bitter: It was lost because the British were well-prepared to meet the attack. Delays bringing the panzer divisions to the front and superior British intelligence work gave Montgomery and Leese time to organize a sturdy defense and build into it an elasticity that allowed them to meet the Axis from the proper direction. Thus, German intelligence initially reported that enemy artillery was positioned along the entire front. The panzer commanders were astonished to find British fire directed at them from the southeast, directly into their attack corridors. The artillery had been re-positioned to meet them, and that movement was never reported. Indeed, Montgomery, on the day of the battle, wrote Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff, that Rommel's attack at Medenine was foolish. "I have 500 6pdr. anti-tank guns dug in on the ground; I have four hundred tanks, and I have good infantry holding pivotal points, and a great weight of artillery. It is an absolute gift, and the man must be mad."²⁹

The German writer Paul Carell thought that the battle was lost because of treachery, his suspicions roused by the tale of the capture on 4 December of a French soldier who possessed a paper detailing the German attack and nurtured by post-war rumors of an unnamed traitor in the Italian high command.³⁰ What Carell and the rumor-mongers overlooked was the RAF sighting on 4 March of the panzer columns moving south. What Carell also overlooked or did not know about was the impact of the ULTRA intercepts.

Rommel's role at Medenine was passive until his order to disengage. The battle is often viewed as his last; but, the plan was General Messe's. When the battle started, Rommel was at the front, but he only watched, not interfering as the attack went forward into trouble. Under ordinary circumstances, that passivity would not be unusual. As commander of the army group, he in effect delegated, or surrendered, planning and execution to Messe just as von Arnim left plan-

ning and execution in the capable hands of Ziegler at Sidi Bou Zid. At Medenine, Ziegler supported Messe's plan, but on the day of the battle, coordination and control were complicated, even compromised, when Ziegler was replaced by Hans Cramer as commander of DAK. Cramer, understandably, lacked detailed understanding of the plan. Thus, at crucial moments when the attack needed firm centralized command and coordination, decisions were left to division commanders who necessarily improvised as best they could. The battle was lost. With Messe absent from the battlefield, Rommel finally made a decision, the only one he could make, the last battle decision of his career in North Africa: break off the operation.

With the failure of the attack, Montgomery completed the Eighth Army's build-up without interference. The British steamroller was ready to assault the Mareth Line on 20 March, and there was very little left to stop them. Rommel concluded that it would be suicide for the army group to remain in Tunisia.

EXIT ROMMEL

Rommel determined that the only way to save the army was by evacuation. He needed to meet with Hitler so that he could lay out the realities of the situation. He also needed to point out that, although the price of evacuation meant the loss of Mussolini's dream of empire, not evacuating the army meant that nearly a quarter-million experienced troops would be marched off to prisoner of war camps, men who could be used to defend Italy. With these thoughts in mind, he turned over temporary command of the army group to von Arnim and flew to Rome on 9 March. This is the reason Rommel gave for leaving Tunisia.³¹

Much has been made of his departure. General Eisenhower was less than generous in his judgment of Rommel when he wrote, "Rommel himself escaped before the final debacle, apparently foreseeing the inevitable and earnestly desiring to save his own skin."³² David Irving, in *The Trail of the Fox*, did not believe that Rommel intended to return to Tunisia. His evidence for this conclusion is based on the war diary kept by Wilfrid Armbruster in which he wrote that as Rommel departed the Battle of Medenine, he suddenly, very suddenly, decided to take his sick leave immediately. On 9 March, Rommel met with von Arnim at the Tunis airport, promising to try his hardest to save the army. Irving described Rommel's final farewell,

again based on Armbruster's entry, as quite emotional, and ending cynically with a quote from Armbruster: "The whole thing stinks." This judgment overlooks the very genuine emotion Rommel displayed on 7 March when, with tears rolling down his cheeks, he said goodbye to Hans von Luck. Rommel ended the von Arnim meeting by saying that he would return if he could. But, according to Irving, he knew that he was leaving forever, having sent ahead to Semmering—the place of his cure—his car, his staff, and all his papers.³³

The interpretations of Rommel's departure made by historians question his character: coward or self-serving dissembler; a manipulator or a sick man not thinking clearly; or a general genuinely interested in saving his troops. Unfortunately, the interpretations seem to say less about Rommel than about the historians' ideas of what kind of person they want Rommel to be—hero, villain, fool, or hypocrite. These judgments have become emotional distractions that shroud Rommel studies.

The truth may be that he was all these things—except coward; that is quite unacceptable. The record of events from 6 to 9 March must be placed against the palpable frustrations, disappointments, and chicanery he experienced as he at first tried to optimize his offensive capabilities and, failing that, to merely survive as an army. He was soured by the ineptitude of higher command, both Italian and German. Although he was beginning to have doubts about Hitler, he retained a naive loyalty throughout his travail that allowed him to think he could convince the Führer of the army's true needs, a flash of optimism he so despised in others. This is not a portrait that can be neatly boxed and categorized for posterity. Instead, this is a portrait of confusion, inconsistency, and conflict between reasoned thought and emotive reaction that made Rommel very human. The historian is best served by allowing those qualities to seep through.

Once in Rome, Rommel learned from General Ambrosio that *Commando Supremo* did not expect him to go back to Tunisia, and that Hitler did expect him to take his sick leave. This was "far from being my idea," Rommel stated, because he wanted the evacuation plan accepted and then return to his troops,³⁴ a set of events that give pause to Irving's interpretation. Rommel and Ambrosio, accompanied by Westphal, went to see Mussolini, to whom Rommel explained his evacuation plan. But Mussolini, afraid of public reaction were Tunisia lost, only offered to send another division. Rommel suggested that it would be better to equip the frontline troops with

the weapons and supplies necessary to meet the coming British offensive. Mussolini could not face the situation as it was, refusing to accept the reality that defeat in Tunisia was at best only weeks away.³⁵

On 10 March, Rommel was at Hitler's headquarters in the Ukraine. He explained how the army could be saved, but Hitler dismissed his thinking as pessimistic. Becoming insistent, Rommel said that evacuating the troops and re-equipping them once they were in Italy would give him an army with which he could defeat an Allied invasion.³⁶ Hitler said no. He also refused Rommel's request to continue as commander of the army group at least until American offensive intentions became clear. "All my efforts," Rommel wrote, "to save my men and get them back to the Continent had been fruitless."³⁷

Hitler now ordered him to take his sick leave, keeping his departure from Africa top secret. And so it was. On 20 March, the Eighth Army attacked the Mareth Line and the inland route to Gabès at El Hamma. The Americans moved against Gabès itself. There was not an Allied general who knew Rommel was gone.³⁸ A week later, Montgomery still thought he was opposed by Rommel.³⁹ But he was at Semmering.

The Axis armies remaining in Tunisia were in a desperate situation. *Commando Supremo* and Kesselring believed sufficient supplies could be airfreighted to the armies. Even if enough aircraft existed to do the job, the RAF and U.S. Army Air Force shot down the cargo planes with relative ease. Von Arnim, now the *Armeegruppe Afrika* commander, sent for Hans von Luck to undertake a special mission: deliver to Hitler von Arnim's plan for a Tunisian evacuation. But first he would have to see General Alfred Jodl to secure an appointment with Hitler. Von Arnim doubtless picked von Luck because he knew that Rommel trusted him, and his battle record was impeccable. But to send a mere major seemed a trifle strange. Von Arnim explained that Hitler was suspicious of defeatist attitudes among his generals and would be on guard if he or another senior officer presented the plan. Von Arnim placed a condition on his order. He said, "You will travel, and appear before [Hitler], in your dusty, faded uniform. That can't fail to have an effect."⁴⁰ Von Luck flew to Berlin and was ushered into Jodl's office. After he reviewed the evacuation plan, Jodl replied that there would be no Tunisian Dunkirk. "We won't even let you see [the Führer] personally. . . . Your mission is of no avail."⁴¹ Von Luck tried to get back to his unit because he saw that there was

nothing left for him in Germany. War novels, from Eric Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* to Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, know well this attitude in experienced soldiers. But no more personnel were being flown to Tunisia. Von Luck was subsequently captured by the Russians.

At the end of April, orders were issued from Hitler's headquarters that all aircraft and every ship available were to evacuate the troops from Tunisia. It was too late. Few escaped. The Allies, in control of land, sea, and air, were closing on Tunis and Bizerte. The Axis soldiers fought hard, making the British, Americans, and French pay for every mile of ground. The effort was a lost cause. When, in May, German troops arrived at Tunis airport to be air evacuated, they found the field surrounded by Allied tanks. Von Arnim surrendered on 13 May.

The North African war was over.