CHAPTER 6

Generalship: The Variables of Battle

ON WRITING ABOUT GENERALSHIP

This study of Erwin Rommel's last months in North Africa, emphasizing the fighting in Tunisia, thus far reflects the narrative tradition in military history. Looming large are descriptions of who did what to whom, where, when, and how. Some descriptions were cast on a grand scale, such as the *Panzerarmee Afrika* against the Eighth Army. At other moments, more-intimate perspectives were developed, such as Hans von Luck's war in the desert, or Freeland Daubin's tank battle, or the experiences of Heinz Schmidt with the *Panzergrenadier Regiment Afrika*. Some attention was given to subordinate commanders—for example, von Arnim, Ziegler, Bülowius, von Broich, Hildebrandt, Robinett, and Dunphie. But the main focus, comments about Montgomery's leadership notwithstanding, was always on what Rommel thought, planned, and accomplished or did not accomplish. Thus the emphasis was on Rommel's generalship—how he maneuvered his troops in order to defeat his enemy at the Alamein battles, or in the Kasserine offensive, or at Medenine. But, however many times he adroitly outmaneuvered his foes, Rommel lost and the Allies eventually won.

This win/lose scenario in earlier Rommel studies has fostered judgments by historians of Rommel's standing in military history. B. H. Liddell Hart, in his introduction to *The Rommel Papers*, concluded that Rommel was a powerful leader, worshipped by his troops, and

was deserving of the accolade Great Commander.[1] In contrast, Wolf Heckmann, in *Rommel's War in Africa*, believed him to be consumed by illusions of grandeur, a scapegoater when things went wrong, and the "most overrated commander of an army in world history."[2]

These opposing views of Rommel fell heir to a conundrum often found among historians who take the win/lose approach to generalship. The reader is often led to believe that when a general gives orders for a battle, his troops will respond in a uniform pattern; therefore, what happens is a direct result of the success or failure of the general's plan. Sometimes, battles do work that way, functioning with such precision that the outcome is never in doubt. Such was the example of Heinz Ziegler's maneuvering of the 21st Panzer Division's battlegroups at Sidi Bou Zid. The Germans clearly won, and the Americans clearly lost. But factors often intrude that thwart the best plans by the best generals. In such cases, events do not unfold as planned, and the troops do not function uniformly. That is the problem that plagued Rommel's offensives against Sbiba, Thala, and Kasserine, and that reared up again at Medenine where nothing seemed to go right.

Knowing that Rommel stood on a hill at Medenine, apparently in detached mood, watching the battle unfold, does not explain why the Germans lost. The three panzer divisions ran into a maelstrom of fire. But just what does that really mean? Those who have been under artillery fire uniformly testify that the experience is ear-shattering, nerve-wracking, and gut-wrenching, all the more so because death or injury seems so absurdly arbitrary. But even before a British shell hit, the panzers that had gathered so threateningly executed their attack with temerity. The 15th and 21st Panzers had defeated the British before and, more recently, slipped the hooks Montgomery cast during the long withdrawal to Tunisia. The panzers knew what war was about. Was Medenine one battle too many? The narrative soup needs enriching to bring out the full flavor of the battle. As the British historian John Keegan wrote in *The Face of Battle*, "the concepts 'win' and 'lose' through which a commander . . . approach[es] a battle are by no means the same as those through which his men will view their own involvement in it."[3] Keegan goes on to argue brilliantly for an analysis—not to be repeated here—of the complex variables that constitute battle.[4] Because the emphasis here is upon Rommel's generalship, it is not outrageous to suggest that understanding the variables of battle can give us another way of understanding his decisions.

SELECTED VARIABLES OF BATTLE

Combat—battle—is the appropriate context to understand generalship. Only by coming to terms with the fortuitous events and the confusion that actually shape battle can a general's imprint on outcomes be assessed. Combat is comprised of an infinite variety of situations among which are sociological and psychological variables, the physical setting of the battle or battles, the logistics involved, and the weapons used. These in turn are manifested in a further infinite variety of combinations.[5] Those addressed in this study form a selective list comprised of elements, situations, events, singly and in combination, that have relevance to understanding Rommel's generalship. In doing so, because examples are drawn from the narrative, some repetition is unavoidable.

Some Notes on the Italian and German Armies

"The Army," writ large, is the social, institutional context for what any general believes he can accomplish. The army provides the manpower, more or less trained, sometimes a philosophy of combat, and all the support echelons. Additionally, "The Army" imposes an overall organizational system of corps, divisions, regiments, battalions, and companies. This pattern is found with some consistency in armies the world over. But armies vary within the pattern because they may emphasize certain traits or organizational characteristics over others. Certainly the Italian and German armies, albeit similar to other armies in Western Europe, were quite different from them and each other.

The Italian forces that Rommel inherited when sent to buttress Mussolini's sagging empire were numerous and divided into two armies. The Fifth Army was stationed in Tripolitania or western Libya. The Tenth Army was in Cyrenaica or eastern Libya. The Tenth was formed from nine regular divisions of 13,000 men each, three Blackshirt divisions, and two Libyan divisions of 8,000 men each. Together with support units, the Tenth numbered nearly a quarter million men. Yet, by February 1941, this huge force was defeated completely by Richard O'Connor's Western Desert Force (redesignated XIII Corps and then Eighth Army), a body of about 31,000 men.[6]

Mussolini's 1940 claim that Italy was war-ready was largely based on their subjugation of Libya's Senussi tribemen and of Ethiopia.[7] But fighting tribal wars, conflicts that the Italians won by sheer brutality, was not the same as fighting the British. There were several reasons for the gap between Mussolini's bombast and military reality.

Italian senior officers were often poor quality. Mussolini created generals by the bushel basket, believing that indoctrination of Fascist principles was more useful than military training.[8] A kind of caste system was perpetuated in the Italian Army. High-ranking officers may have been incompetent, but field-grade officers often disdained much contact with their men. Officers came in for all the cheese, dining on fine linens, and using silver service and quality glass. Their meals, of high quality, were prepared by chefs. Rations for enlisted men in North Africa were scant and poor quality. It was common to find German troops sharing their rations with the Italians. Weapons were poor. Most infantrymen carried rifles based on an obsolete 1891 pattern. Artillery consisted of leftovers from World War I. The two main tanks used in North Africa were the M11/39 and the M13/40. The first was an 11-ton machine with 28mm armor and an obsolete 37mm gun mounted in the center front of the hull. The M13/40 had 40mm armor and mounted a 47mm gun. Because it fired a high-explosive shell, the gun was effective against British infantry and anti-tank guns, but it was a poor match against tanks because it had less velocity and lower penetrating power than the British 2-pounder. Rommel discovered that everything about Italian tanks, from their mechanical integrity to their tactical use, was unreliable. In April 1941, during the initial advance against the British, the Ariete Armored Division could field only ten tanks out of a hundred because all the others broke down. Rommel commented that the equipment provided by the Italians made his "hair stand on end."[9]

Many Italian units, when properly officered, fought bravely throughout the North African war. The Ariete Division, using "sardine tin" tanks, stood their ground at Second Alamein and were almost obliterated. Artillerymen typically fought to the last man. When the British broke into Nebeiwa in December 1940, the artillerymen were cut down manning their guns. Yet, at Halfaya Pass after Second Alamein, the gunners quickly folded, having experienced enough dying. A far more common sight was that of their infantry running away. At Acroma, a German scout car arrived to rescue an Italian unit scooped up by the British. The Germans opened fire, giving the Italians an opportunity to escape. Instead, hands raised, they ran toward the British lines.

Rommel summarized the Italians' condition when he stated that it was too bad the first major engagement the Italians experienced led to such a disastrous defeat, especially since Mussolini and his generals had promised so much more.[10] Because of its uneven record, Rommel seldom relied exclusively upon the Italian Army, instead choosing to stiffen their resolve by mixing their units among German units as at El Alamein and later in his plan for the Medenine battle.

The German Army in North Africa was so much better than the Italians that a conventional wisdom emerged in British ranks that they were an elite force. The German Army's *Afrika Korps* was not an elite force. The men were ordinary *Wehrmacht* troops, although veterans of earlier campaigns in Poland and France marched in their ranks. Officers were drawn from all over occupied Europe and Germany. Much is made of the integrity of German divisions, so often recruited from within a common geographic location. But the 5th Light Division, organized after the defeat of France and sent under-manned to North Africa, was augmented by units from around Europe that arrived in bits and pieces. The 5th Panzer Regiment was the first to disembark in Tripoli, followed by the 1st Battalion, 75th Artillery Regiment. Then the 39th Anti-tank Battery was sent over followed by the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion. Even though the 15th Panzer Division did arrive as a more integrated unit, some of its formations—motorized infantry, more anti-tank batteries, flak batteries, and supply and support units—continued to arrive through the spring of 1942, including 288 Commando (or Special Group 288), originally organized for duty in Iraq. Many of these formations were subsequently arranged and rearranged, shuffled about, renamed, or renumbered.[11] For example, the 5th Light Division was redesignated the 21st Panzer Division, and Special Group 288 was renamed *Panzergrenadier Regiment Afrika*. This was not confusion but a built-in organizational elasticity that allowed Rommel to search for the best combinations with which to meet situational and long-term needs of desert battle that was new to them all.

As strangers to desert warfare, the Germans presented a vivid contrast to the British Army. Many British officers were veterans of desert campaigns from the barren hills of India's Northwest Frontier to the Persian Gulf and Palestine. The occupation of Egypt under a protectorate that began early in 1914 made it possible for British forces to

train in the Western Desert. The 11th Hussars, transformed to armor, started training in the 1930s. Major Ralph Bagnold's early desert explorations led to the founding of the Long Range Desert Group. The only sand most Germans ever saw was on the Baltic Sea beaches or those of the Channel coast. Their adaptation to the new environment was uncomfortable. Heat felled even the heartiest men. Heavy rations used in Europe proved inappropriate in the desert. Water was a problem because the German soldiers thought they could drink what was available without precautions being taken to ensure purity. They were overwhelmed by the fly problem, and, not surprisingly, intestinal disorders ran rampant through the ranks. The Germans learned fast how to live in the desert.

Speed, audacity, sharp armored attacks and ripostes were basic German elements of engagement and the *sine qua non* of the conventional perception of the North African campaign. But, from the long view, the German Army in North Africa did not evolve along a line of continuous mobility and modernization of equipment. Instead, to borrow an idea from Omar Bartov's study of the *Wehrmacht* on the Russian front, there was a demodernization of warfare in North Africa, more spasmodic and with different consequences than in Russia, but a perceptible withering nonetheless.[12] Demodernization consisted of a long-term and uneven decline in the ability of Rommel's forces to wage his kind of mobile warfare. Beginning with the Eighth Army's stand at First Alamein, then at Alam Halfa under Montgomery, on to Second Alamein, and culminating at Medenine, the British forced Rommel to fight battles that were throwbacks, however more sophisticated, to World War I battles of attrition. As the role of artillery and infantry units increased in these battles, the function and importance of armor and high mobility decreased.

A fundamental cause of demodernization had little to do with the North African fighting, but was well-established in the German Army during the 1930s. Hitler and his more forward thinking generals planned for blitzkrieg, which relied on mechanization. U.S. Major General Brehon Somervell, chief of the Army Service Force, placed the new German philosophy in perspective by stating, "When [Hitler] hitched his chariot to the internal combustion engine, he opened up a new battle front—a front that we know well. It's called Detroit."[13] The Germans coped for months against the rising tide of Allied logistical power, but it was a game they could not win. Certainly it helped that Hitler viewed the North African campaign as

secondary to the Russian front, whereas Churchill saw Britain's one opportunity to fight the German Army in that theater and threw everything he could into it. However else they may be viewed, the North African battles from 23 October 1942 to the Axis capitulation in Tunisia, 13 May 1943, must be counted as a triumph of superior numbers supported by mountains of equipment, of increasing Allied power versus a stagnation of Axis military power.

In Tunisia, Rommel stood in awe of American equipment. Knowing that similar modern tanks, guns, and other arms would not be supplied to him from Germany, he ordered his troops to gather up the battlefield spoils, turning them to his own uses. Rommel would have been envious but not surprised by a cable Eisenhower sent to the joint chiefs-of-staff, 21 February 1943, telling them that his forces lost 100 tanks in the defense of Sbiba Gap and Kasserine Pass over the previous two days, but that most of the tank losses were already made good and the remainder would arrive within a week.[14] When Allied transport from Algeria to Tunisia suffered for lack of trucks, Eisenhower told Somervell, who was visiting his headquarters, about the problem. Not to worry, Somervell responded. Vehicles would be on U.S. docks in three days. In less than three weeks, the first of 5,400 trucks arrived in North Africa.[15] No such horn of plenty existed for Rommel. He was forced to fight a war of diminishing capacity.

Another factor contributing to the demodernization of the front was the increasing power of the RAF's Western Desert Air Force that supported the Eighth Army. Rommel, in the summer of 1942, abandoned hope that the *Luftwaffe* would ever regain aerial supremacy over the British. No longer could he build his defenses around motorized units that were too vulnerable to air attack; therefore, defenses needed to be constructed so that local garrisons could hold out "independently and over a long period" until reinforcements, probably delayed by the RAF, could arrive.[16]

After Second Alamein, Rommel was never able to muster the necessary armored concentrations to forestall Allied attacks or to mount his own offensive actions in a convincing manner. At Kasserine and Sbiba, Rommel's armor was confined to the narrow valley floors where it was targeted by Allied self-propelled guns, tanks, and field artillery. At Kasserine, German infantry belatedly ranged over the flanking hills to gain control of the high ground, but their numbers were never sufficient to do the job properly. Even though the Germans penetrated Kasserine Pass, they could not exploit their advan-

tage. At Thala, despite superior armored tactics that destroyed so many of Dunphie's tanks, the 10th Panzer's armor became irrelevant, unable to overcome the thinning British defenses. The end of the fighting found British infantrymen and artillery equal to anything the German battlegroup could throw at them.

In the end, Allied supply convoys, the stream of replacement equipment, the endless reserves of fresh troops, and the aerial domination of Axis supply lines robbed Rommel of the mobility and the initiative with which he typically started his battles. The Allies knocked him down and ran him over.

Further Logistical Considerations

Rommel faced a two-dimensional logistics problem that plagued him all through the North African fighting.

First Rommel himself must be held partially accountable for his chronic shortages. When sent to Africa, he was ordered to support the failing Italian Army. Thus, beginning in mid-February 1941, he pushed all available forces forward toward El Agheila to block further advances by Richard O'Connor's little army. Then, on 19 March, he flew to Berlin, wanting more men, more equipment, and more supplies to mount an offensive, believing that only by doing so could a British attack be curtailed. But Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch and General Franz Halder, the army chief-of-staff, cautioned him that he might advance up the east coast of the Gulf of Sidra and take Benghazi but under no circumstances should he go any further. There would be no major offensive in North Africa.

Rommel returned to his headquarters on 21 March, and attacked El Agheila on the 23rd. With O'Connor back in Cairo and the veteran troops replaced at the front with units new to North Africa, the British were swept east. On 31 March, the 5th Light Division attacked Mersa Brega. Agedabia fell on 2 April. By April 4, Axis forces took Benghazi, and on the 11th they were at Tobruk. The Italian generals fumed that Rommel was exceeding his authority. But, on 15 April, Rommel was at Halfaya Pass on the Egyptian border. This sudden offensive not only caught the British by surprise but left the German high command in a state of shock. Hitler, in contrast, gloated over Rommel's audacity and dreamed of linking Rommel's forces, moving them through Iraq, with a German Army coming down through the Caucasus. Thus, a new arena of war was opened, one that would have to compete with the Russian front, a logistical black hole about which Rommel knew nothing at the time.

By mid-summer 1942, with the invasion of the Soviet Union now in full development, Rommel's audacity had produced his second logistical problem with telling reality: The supplies that reached North Africa often did not get to the front in sufficient quantities to sustain his operations. He worried that British troop and matériel strength was increasing daily. Moreover, the RAF unleashed bombing raids on Axis freighters, coastal vessels, and barges bringing supplies and equipment to Bardia and Mersa Matruh. More and more shipping was forced to dock at Tobruk or Benghazi. That lengthened overland transport of supplies. The Desert Air Force bombed and strafed the coast road, and Royal Navy gunboats and monitors made frequent sweeps, shelling anything that moved. The toll on transport vehicles was enormous. At any one time in early August, one-third of these vehicles were under repair, consuming the dwindling parts supply. Even more portentous, 85 percent of Rommel's transport were captured vehicles, many of American manufacture. Parts were difficult to find.[17]

The Italians, through *Commando Supremo*, were responsible for transporting supplies to North Africa for both Italian and German units. During August 1942, the German ground forces received only 32 percent—8,200 tons—of the matériel they required. But the *Luftwaffe* received 8,500 tons and the Italians 25,700 tons. In Rommel's view, his troops were being shortchanged. He complained to Marshal Ugo Cavallero who promised he would make adjustments and then, at their next meeting, smiled and said he could not be expected to keep all his promises.[18] Rommel also demanded larger and more-efficient port facilities at Tobruk, a bottleneck of major proportions where Italian dock hands worked with a clock that did not keep real time. Nothing was done. He begged for better road maintenance, especially more-efficient repair of bomb damage. To no avail. At the end of August Rommel estimated that German forces were understrength 16,000 men, 210 tanks, 175 troop carriers and armored cars, and 1,500 other vehicles—in calculating these deficiencies, he included captured British vehicles.[19]

The impact of these logistical problems was felt immediately at the Battle of Alam Halfa. Lacking promised fuel, sucking dry his transport vehicles to feed his armor, Rommel curtailed his offensive. Even his artillery lacked sufficient ammunition to engage in effective counter-

fire against the British guns and their inexhaustible supply of shells. The reason for these deficiencies lay at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Of 5,000 tons of fuel destined for North Africa during the battle, 2,600 tons were sunk and 1,500 tons remained in Italian ports because *Commando Supremo* feared that it would never reach North Africa.[20] Those convoys that did try to cross received inadequate protection by the Italian Navy, most of whose warships remained in port. This situation was reinforced when twenty vessels were sunk between July and October. At this juncture, Kesselring ordered an airlift to provide some 500 tons of fuel each day. Unfortunately for Rommel, what managed to get through was consumed before reaching the front. Kesselring, to his credit, re-organized the ground delivery system. But the basic logistical problems haunted Rommel through Second Alamein and during the withdrawal to Tunisia.

Once in Tunisia, the logistical problems eased temporarily. Kesselring improved staff organization by practically taking over *Commando Supremo*'s operations office with his own men, and the shorter distance between Sicily and Tunisia lessened for the moment the vulnerability of Axis ships. Rommel at last could focus his attention on operational ideas. But his plan to break through Kasserine Pass, exploit toward Tebessa, and subsequently outflank Allied positions to the north was thwarted by Italian modifications. Also, by February 1943, the Allies re-asserted their air power, cutting supply routes to North Africa and imperiling land convoys to the fronts. Rommel, and finally even von Arnim, saw defeat in the offing. However, Hitler and the German high command insisted that the African army hold out, even when the defenses were reduced to the bridgeheads around Tunis and Bizerte. By that time, Rommel was gone from the scene. Yet he took his concerns to Mussolini whose fatal optimism prevented him from seeing the impending defeat. Rommel's later meeting with Hitler was equally disheartening. Not even the General Staff could see the reality of defeat. Thus, Rommel noted that when von Arnim surrendered his army to the Allies, Hitler's headquarters experienced "an extraordinary collapse of morale, the defeat coming as a complete surprise."[21]

The Will to Combat

German soldiers in Tunisia continued to fight with great tenacity even after Rommel's departure. During the battle for the Mareth

Line, Heinz Schmidt's battalion of *Panzergrenadier Regiment Afrika* captured a wounded British lieutenant. "What are you still fighting for?" he asked his captors, for it was obvious that the British possessed superior numbers and equipment, and the end was coming for the Germans in a few days or, at most, a couple of weeks. Schmidt and his comrades looked at each other in consternation, then laughed at the Englishman's optimism.[22]

The Germans' response was remarkable because, from the summer of 1942 through the spring of 1943, the German and Italian forces in North Africa failed to mount a single sustained successful offensive. The soldiers nonetheless found the courage and strength to keep fighting. Many other armies would have already collapsed. After all, a defeated enemy should have the good grace if not good sense to surrender. At least that is the view of conventional military history: One army wins, the other loses. That win-lose scenario proves inadequate when explaining the tenacity of the *Panzerarmee Afrika*. More helpful are the studies of military cohesiveness.

Research during and since World War II reveals that a complex mélange of historical, sociological, psychological, and ideological factors sustains what John Keegan calls the "will to combat."[23] Unit cohesiveness is essential to maintaining a will to combat.[24] The German Army nurtured such cohesiveness, rooting it in both an ideological orientation and the development of primary group relations.[25] Ideology refers to the explanations, the prepackaged justifications for behavior that resonate through a society. Primary groups are groups that are characterized by intimate, face-to-face interactions that shape beliefs and expectations and that fulfill basic social needs of belonging and the conferring of some kind of status relationships within the group.[26]

Military service, at least as an element of Germany's "talking culture"—the verbalization of what they thought about themselves as a people—was considered honorable duty, because national security was dependent upon the ability to make war, a commonly shared social Darwinism in Western Europe. Being in the army was seen as a noble sacrifice in service of the Fatherland, a belief easily blended with simple patriotism, the ultimate experience of which was the opportunity to die in glorious combat against the nation's enemies.[27]

One suspects that military service was not actually greeted with equal enthusiasm by those who fell heir to compulsory service that began in 1814 toward the end of the Napoleonic epoch and ended in 1918 with defeat in World War I. Then conscription was revived

by Hitler in 1935 at the same time he was co-opting the officer corps to his own uses. With Germany in the trough of the Great Depression and with memories of economic stability fading, military service was embraced with enthusiasm as an escape from chronic unemployment and as a means of being part of the exciting New Order—Naziism and its higher purpose. If conscripts did not understand exactly what that higher purpose was before they entered the army, they found out soon after. All soldiers were required to take an oath. There was nothing exceptional in that. However, this new oath was not to serve Germany but to unconditionally obey Adolf Hitler, who considered himself the embodiment of the national will, and to unhesitatingly die at any time in service of the oath.

Until 1940, it did not seem that anyone would have to die. The bloodless military re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the absorption of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938 provided exciting times that defined Hitler's political magic and mantled the army in an aura of invincibility. All they had to do was show up, and the enemy caved in. These events, nurturing nationalism, even chauvinistic sentiments, and a romanticized view of war, set in motion a strong ideologically based prewar will to combat inherited by successive waves of conscripts.

The will to combat was also fostered by a conscription process that encouraged the development of primary groups. Germany was divided into twenty-one recruitment/conscription zones or *Wehrkreise.* Each infantry division, for example, was backed up by three training-replacement battalions that corresponded to the three regiments of the division. Each replacement battalion had a home station within its particular *Wehrkreise.* The idea was that new men would be trained in a familiar atmosphere and among men who were from the same region, quickly cementing close social relations that bonded them to their units. The unit—battalion or company—was to be a community of mutual interest and caring. As one German soldier wrote in 1941, "I've become such an integral part of my company that I couldn't leave it ever again."[28]

Primary group development and a sense of military community were furthered when Hitler opened up the officer corps to common soldiers. This was done at a pace never before known in the German Army because of rapid military expansion in 1936. From an ideological viewpoint, the change undoubtedly engendered much personal loyalty to Hitler. Every officer was required to conform to Nazi ideology whether or not they were actually a member of the party.[29] Officers were encouraged to inculcate the Nazi spirit in their men, although overt political activity was not expected during active service. Officers were also expected to take care of their men, and noncommissioned officers were expected to share their men's social activities, all as if *in loco parentis.* These duties represented the normative system, one geared for fighting European wars. And so the climate remained until late 1943 when, as a result of the Russian debacle, Hitler questioned the army's loyalty and dedication, and politicized army discipline.

But North Africa was a vastly different arena in which to wage war. Except for the region around Benghazi, the locus of Italian settlement in Libya, and northern Tunisia where French influence was most pronounced, North Africa provided the Germans with few reminders of Europe. Despite some large towns, most communities were small, dusty, and poor. The few Roman antiquities, such as Lepcis Magna in western Libya, held little interest. The diffuse Arab populations were suspicious of the Italians, and sometimes courted by the Germans. Generally, however, they were ignored by both sides, to be gone around or through whenever they happened in the way. And there was the omnipresent desert—sand, scrub, rock, beastly hot in the interior, sometimes bearable along the coast, its vast nothingness disorienting to the uninitiated, but considered a jolly good place to have a war.

North Africa provided the environment in which Rommel reinvented his army. First and foremost, Nazi ideological baggage was minimized. That was not difficult to achieve because the Nazi ideology was taken for granted among the troops and Rommel made no effort to establish ideological litmus tests. Daily reminders of the Nazi *raison d'être* were absent. There was no Jewish population to exterminate, no Slavs to crush. No *Waffen-SS* troops marched with the *Afrika Korps.* Indeed, as Fritz Bayerlein told Brigadier Desmond Young after the war, "Thank God we had no S.S. divisions in the desert or Heaven knows what would have happened: it would have been a very different sort of war."[30] Alfred Berndt, the one Nazi true-believer on Rommel's staff, was more important as a conduit to Hitler than for any ideological presence he represented. Whatever racism Rommel himself carried was washed away by the desert fighting. He was initially contemptuous of Indian Army troops, but their 4th Division soon earned from him high marks for their fighting abilities.

Additionally, the Germans did not have the same low regard for the British and Americans that they did for southern or eastern Europeans. Allied prisoners were treated fairly. German artillerymen regularly ceased fire whenever British medical units came out to retrieve their wounded, and German tanks, whenever possible, skirted around wounded men lying on the battlefields. As Brigadier Young commented, "The British [discovered] that the Afrika Korps proposed to fight according to the rules."[31]

The pre-combat formation of primary groups within the *Afrika Korps* was also different than the normative pattern. For the first few months of the *Korps'* existence, there was only one replacement battalion. All conscripts, regardless of their original *Wehrkreise* zones, trained in that battalion. In about July 1941, the *Korps* was assigned two replacement battalions, one in *Wehrkreise* III (Brandenburg/Berlin), the other in *Wehrkreise* XII (Pflaz/Wiesbaden), again regardless of where the troops' home replacement units were located.[32] Consequently, men sent to North Africa typically were not from the same geographical region and missed in their basic training the immediacy of primary group formation based on shared regional identity.

Rommel exploited the physical isolation felt by his troops by purposely establishing a sense of psychological separation from the Continent. He made it clear that no safe rear areas existed into which they could retreat. Everything they required for battle needed to be brought to the desert that provided nothing. The *Panzerarmee* was on its own. Rommel knew that to survive as an army in that bleak environment, his men would need an *esprit de corps* beyond the average. He put himself forward as a commander who really cared about them, projecting confidence and a sense that he really knew his business.[33]

There also was a need for a bond between the men and officers that transcended European standards. The men had to know they could depend on their officers, on one another, and on neighboring units. Desert warfare demanded no less. However much an extrapolation, Rommel's emphasis on cohesion provided the context within which primary group relations could develop beyond anything experienced in training. Rommel commented that he demanded "the utmost self-denial and continuous personal example" from his officers, and that this resulted in a "magnificent and entirely spontaneous loyalty between officers and men" so that there was no surrender to

the enemy resulting from physical fatigue or apathy, and discipline never had to be enforced even when things were at their worst.[34]

Rommel was not a chateau general sequestered miles behind the front, enjoying the luxuries of his rank. He set a personal example of self-denial and caring. He usually ate the same rations as his troops. He slept little and traveled much, either bounding across the desert in a *kübelwagen*, a Mercedes-Benz 340 staff car, or an armored car to visit some outpost. He also made inspections from his Storch scout plane, occasionally communicating dissatisfaction by dropping a weighted note to his troops on the ground. He appeared at the front during battles, sometimes coming close to death.

North Africa provided Rommel with an unencumbered stage upon which he could shape his army, placing his own stamp indelibly upon it. This gave his campaign something of an independent air. In small things, for example, Rommel allowed his troops to dress rather as they pleased, most adapting shorts and some sort of soft hat—regulation sun helmets were commonly discarded. He was pleased that Hans von Luck established unofficial rules of engagement with the British Dragoons. Rommel, himself, ignored Hitler's order to execute captured members of the Jewish Brigade serving in the Eighth Army, and destroyed the order to execute captured British commandos. As for the larger issues of the conduct of the war, Rommel breached his orders from the first, launching an offensive well beyond the boundaries set by Halder and Brauchitsch. Again and again after Alamein, despite orders to hold various positions, he kept his troops moving west, forcing *Commando Supremo* and even Hitler to belatedly approve his movements.

Underpinning Rommel's independent, even disobedient, streak was his attitude toward the Prussian-dominated General Staff, an important element in shaping his army. As a Swabian, he was something of a General Staff outsider to begin with, and that was probably one source of Halder's immediate dislike of the man. When Rommel taught at the Dresden Infantry School in the late 1920s, he would ask his students how they would solve a given military problem, not simply recite what the Prussian-dominated military catechism required. He considered the curriculum outmoded, more a reflection of World War I trench warfare than a response to technological developments that demanded new and more-mobile tactics. The old Prussians looked at horses; Rommel studied the internal combustion