

prising, and sometimes audacious. They gave him a long-standing edge, endowing German equipment with a reputation not wholly deserved. The edge was blunted in Tunisia. The old supply problems reared up once again, the Italians thwarted Rommel's best offensive concept—the strike at Tebessa—the *Afrika Korps* was a shallow remnant, and the panzer battlegroups were ineffective. Thus, the character of their equipment made less difference between the enemies than how that equipment was used. At Djebel Hamra and at Medenine the Americans and British used Rommel's tactics against him, bringing the Desert Fox to defeat and despair.

The variables of battle that emerged in North Africa created the milieu within which the Rommel Legend was born. That begs a question: From which Rommel was the legend fabricated? The cajoling, risk-taking general who pushed his troops forward, always forward? Or the general who retreated—or fled—before the oncoming Eighth Army? Or the general who saved his army by ingenious tactics, outsmarting Montgomery for 1,500 miles? Or the withdrawn general who stood silently on a hill at Medenine and watched the destruction of the *Afrika Korps*?

CHAPTER 8

Rommel: The Masks of Command

THE ROMMEL LEGEND

The Rommel Legend has colored our understanding of his generalship because it is an important element of how he was perceived in his own time and what he became to successive generations. Uncovering the legend's sources is a necessary adjunct to further comprehending his generalship. Three themes comprise the legend, some parts established before he set foot in Africa, and some parts added after his death.

The first and most dominant theme was Rommel the Superior Soldier. Ronald Lewin states that this image was born in Africa, April 1941.¹ That is correct if the legend's audience is restricted to the British Army and the news media in Britain and the United States. The Superior Soldier theme actually developed in Germany where a much larger audience, thirsting for true heroes, eagerly received news of his derring-do. They were well-rehearsed to get the message.

The beginnings of the theme can be traced back to World War I on the Italian front. His leadership, audacious and brave, in taking the mountain peak of Matajur and storming the town of Longarone, his small combat group capturing 8,000 Italians, went unquestioned among the general public. Even though awarded the *Pour le Mérite*, promotion was slow. He remained a company commander for nine years, then was promoted to major in 1932, lieutenant colonel in 1934, and full colonel in 1938.

His book *Infantry Attacks*, published in 1937, a memoir of his war experiences, was also regarded as a brilliant primer of infantry tactics in which flexible command, speed and surprise of attack, and the willingness to gamble are key elements. Rommel, quite justifiably, gave himself center spotlight. The book was a best-seller. Young infantry officers read it enthusiastically, and Hitler probably read it as well.² The general reading public found in it a good war story filled with adventure and an affirmation of their army's bravery during the war. Rommel's reputation was growing.

He quickly became one of the Führer's favorite officers. He had personal contact with Hitler as an honor guard officer and as *Wehrmacht* liaison to the Hitler Youth. A solid footing was established with Hitler by glowing reports from Rommel's commanders attesting to his tactical skills, remarkable stamina, and his rapport with his soldiers and later with his students at the military academies. But more than all that, Rommel was not of the General Staff. He was a soldier, albeit an officer, who suffered all that World War I trench warfare had to give and survived. Hitler took great personal pride in his own trench service, despising the General Staff's detachment from real war. Thus, Hitler and Rommel found common ground, a bond of sympathetic understanding.

Hitler jumped him to the rank of major general in 1939. The new general, aglow that Hitler favored him, was run through a series of fairly meaningless positions and found himself without much to do after several months. He requested command of a panzer division. The commandant of army personnel denied the request, instead offering Rommel a mountain division. Rommel appealed the decision directly to Hitler and, on 6 February 1940, he was given command of the 7th Panzer Division. The General Staff was taken aback by Rommel's affrontery.

During the invasion of France in May 1940, the 7th Panzer Division's exploits fed the Nazi propaganda machine and made Rommel a national hero. He was brave as a lion, pictured in the lead tank, confusing the enemy with his tactics, attacking them again and again, and bringing victory. But newspaper stories and newsreels were not enough. The Propaganda Ministry produced the film *Victory in the West* that narrated the conquest and featured Rommel's division crossing of the Somme River. The battle was re-enacted using actual divisional units and French Senegalese troops temporarily released from prisoner of war camps. Rommel enthusiastically helped direct.

Berliners flocked to see the film when it was released in February 1941.³

More was to come that same month when Rommel was given command in North Africa. No mere adventurer, Rommel had thoughtfully pieced together a system of mobile warfare based on his experiences in World War I, his tenure as a military academy teacher, and his command of the 7th Panzer Division. He applied that system of maneuver warfare against the British with telling results, rolling them back to the Egyptian border. To the British, he became the Desert Fox—quick, sly, clever, tenacious in attack, never quite defeated even when defeated, always dangerous. A Rommel mystique enraptured the Eighth Army and the British public. Could Rommel ever be defeated? Why did British commanders seem so incompetent by comparison? One answer turned on the assumption, the myth, that German arms were superior to British equipment. Churchill even spoke admiringly of Rommel in a Parliamentary address. No wonder that General Auchinleck wrote a communiqué to his troops that Rommel was not a superman but just another ordinary German general. That was not much help to the soldiers at the front, but it was a move toward demystification.

Rommel's headquarters in North Africa was inundated by the press corps, including newsreel cameramen. Additionally, Lieutenant Alfred Berndt, a senior official in Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry, was a member of Rommel's staff. His principal duty was to broadcast Rommel's feats to an awaiting German radio audience. That he broadcast from the general's headquarters near the front lent an immediacy that his listeners found rivetting. When Tobruk fell in June 1942, broadcasts in Germany were interrupted with the news that was received with almost celebratory enthusiasm. The New Order had resurrected German honor because a strange but fascinating little desert army led by its bright star gave the Fatherland triumph after triumph.

The second theme of the Rommel legend, more discernible to the Germans than the British, was Rommel the Common Man. As David Irving states, he became the People's General.⁴ Of course much of the theme was a propaganda creation—the great general in touch with his troops, therefore one of them. Propaganda films depicted Rommel conversing with enlisted men, showing them how to dig slit trenches, leading a platoon of tanks, and helping push his staff car out of a ditch. These scenes were unfamiliar to many Germans nur-

tured on the image of remote aristocratic officers. Yet, the Common Man theme was not cynically entertained; it had to resonate with conviction among the public. That required a solid foundation. Rommel's life provided the materials.

He was not an aristocrat nor even from the wealthy strata of German society. He came from the modest Swabian town of Gmünd (now part of Baden-Württemberg). His maternal grandfather was the president of the local town administration. His father was a secondary school headmaster in Aalem, just east of Gmünd. This was a solid middle-class family, secure, and devoted to the Protestant ethic of work, education, personal achievement, and self-restraint. Rommel carried this ethic into the army, studying for long hours, patiently observing, and with World War I, testing and further developing his ideas about tactics. He subjected himself to arduous physical pastimes. He was an aggressive and tireless skier, climbed the Harz Mountains, hiked, and hunted. When in his forties, his stamina was equal to if not beyond that of younger officers.

His lifestyle on the battlefield was ascetic, thus setting an example of self-denial for his junior officers. He did not smoke, and he drank very little. He often ate the same rations as his men and skipped meals when duty called—he allegedly sent one of his North African generals packing because the man dallied too long over breakfast. He slept when he could. Usually a quick two or three hours would do. Fritz Bayerlein remembered finding Rommel and his chief-of-staff Alfred Gause at Gambut airfield in the back of a British truck where they had slept on straw. Both men were exhausted, dust-covered, unshaven, and had only some stale water and a few tins of food for nourishment.

An important factor in the Common Man theme was his status as an outsider in the military hierarchy. The General Staff was appalled when he blatantly exaggerated his actions in the Italian campaign to justify his claim to the *Pour le Mérite*. During his later teaching assignments, he vented his contempt for traditional solutions to military problems. Rommel paid a professional price: He never was admitted to the prestigious War Academy, nor was he recruited to the General Staff.⁵ He resented the snub but was convinced that both institutions were filled with men of privilege whose over-intellectualizations concealed their ignorance of combat.

During the 1940 invasion of France, as Rommel's Ghost Division ploughed toward the Somme River, an old friend of his, Colonel Kurt

Hesse, leading a group of correspondents, caught up with him. "In this war," Rommel called out, "the commander's place is here, right out in front! I don't believe in armchair strategy. Let's leave that to the gentlemen of the General Staff."⁶ The General Staff was skeptical of his mad-dash tactics and resentful of the attention he was getting. Hesse, *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW or Armed Forces High Command) press officer, warned Rommel of the ill feelings against him at the highest levels of the army. Rommel, enjoying the public adulation, dismissed the criticisms against him as the "resentment of the old guard against an outsider."⁷ Rommel's resentment of his masters was fueled in August 1940 when Friedrich Paulus, who served with him in the same regiment during the late 1920s, and Karl Kriebel, both General Staff officers, were promoted over him to lieutenant general. He concluded, "We combat officers are only good for cannon fodder. As long as this clique [the General Staff] is at the top level, things will never change."⁸

His pessimism was a trifle unwarranted, for he was promoted to lieutenant general in January 1941. A year later, to the consternation of the General Staff, Hitler promoted him to colonel general and then, in June 1942, to field marshal. Along the way he was awarded the prestigious Knight's Cross. These ranks and awards most certainly reflected Hitler's favoritism toward Rommel. They also fed the Common Man theme. National Socialism, promising to level German society, also moved toward a more open military that rewarded talent rather than title and wealth. Rommel was the quintessential example of the new reward system. Here was a soldier, an officer drawn from the common people, who served the Fatherland with extraordinary skill and was rewarded for that service by another common man who embodied the will of the German people—Adolf Hitler.

All the diverse parts of the Common Man theme, readily apparent or not, were woven, intentionally or not, into a pattern that was meaningful throughout the new German society and army. Rommel was a soldier's soldier, the synthesis of the Common Man theme. He infused the *Afrika Korps* with an egalitarian ideal in which every man, regardless of background or rank, earned his place in the *Korps*.

The third theme of the legend is Rommel the Martyr, the forced suicide, the man who, allegedly joining in the Hitler assassination plot of 1944, sacrificed himself to rid Germany of that Great Evil. Rommel's degree of participation in the plot has been debated since war's end. Certainly he knew about the plot in late February 1944 when

his old friend Karl Strölin, mayor of Stuttgart, visited him at Herrlingen, his new villa. A plot insider, Strölin laid out the assassination plan. Rommel's wife Lucie and his son Manfred were present when Strölin said that Hitler had to die. Rommel cut him short, ordering him never to speak of such matters in front of his son.⁹ Rommel, when later serving in Normandy, most likely discussed the plot with Generals Karl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, the commander-in-chief in France, and Hans Speidel whom Rommel selected as his new chief-of-staff in April 1944. Both were conspirators.

Rommel was wounded 17 July 1944 when two Spitfires strafed his car. He stayed in the hospital only long enough to regain consciousness and have a head wound treated, then he convalesced at Herrlingen. On 20 July, Colonel Klaus von Stauffenberg's bomb exploded in the Hitler bunker at Rastenburg. The Führer survived, and his retribution knew no bounds. Rumors involving Rommel in the bomb plot swirled through the remainder of the summer. But Rommel's days were numbered when Generals Speidel and Stülpnagel, and Colonel Caesar von Hofacker, Stülpnagel's adjutant in Paris, implicated Rommel in the plot during their Gestapo confessions. Two of Hitler's trusted generals appeared at Herrlingen on 14 October and ordered Rommel to make a choice. He could be tried before a Public Tribunal and would be found guilty and executed. His family would also be punished. Or he could commit suicide with the Führer's guarantee that his family would be safe and receive his pension. Rommel chose suicide. He drove away with the generals. Two hours later Lucie received a phone call from the hospital in Ulm that Rommel had been brought in by two generals and died of a heart attack. In fact, he died a seedy death in the back seat of the generals' car.

Rommel's acceptance of death had two sources. First and foremost, he thought of his family's welfare. His love for Lucie and Manfred was unwavering. He could save them, and he did. Second, Rommel was after all involved in a treasonable plan to save Germany from complete destruction. In July 1943, Hitler allegedly said to Rommel, "If the German people are incapable of winning the war, then they can rot," and, in the same breath, voiced the romantic sop that historical necessity demanded a heroic death for a great people.¹⁰ Rommel was shocked by these pronouncements but quickly recognized what the consequences would be of Hitler's Wagnerian end to the war. When in Normandy, Rommel openly discussed opening the Western Front to the British and Americans, surrendering his army,

and negotiating a unilateral peace. The *Wehrmacht* could then join the Western Allies in a crusade against the Soviets. Perhaps he believed his death paid for that treason.

After the war, the story of Rommel's forced suicide was made public. Lionized if not apotheosized in Germany and abroad, he became Rommel the Martyr. The legend was complete.

Historical evaluations of Rommel have been skewed by the distractions his legend has imposed, hero worshippers lining up on one side, the inevitable detractors on the other. Two authors can produce remarkably similar narratives of Rommel's exploits and come to very different conclusions depending on their predisposed attitudes about him. That, in turn, has led to a devaluation of the Tunisian campaign. What happened there is impervious to neat classifications. From one viewpoint, Rommel's troops crushed the Americans at Kasserine Pass, creating a victory. From an opposite view, although the Americans bent, they did not break and finally fashioned their own victory from near defeat. The truth is less win-lose than historical ambiguity. That is something of an embarrassment to those who wish Rommel's generalship served up as legend. Thus, those of either camp who skim over or ignore Tunisia enjoy the luxury of avoiding explanations of the campaign's ambiguities as they search for resolution to Rommel's generalship later in Europe. The problem with both views is that they search for common elements among dissimilar events. The general who stood impatiently, even arrogantly, at El Agheila in April 1941 was not the man who tried to pull his dwindling army away from El Alamein in November 1942, and neither was he the same man who stood mute at Medenine. The legend, and the need to fill in missing parts of the legend, has obscured such distinctions.

The articulation of the several variables of battle has demonstrated the complexity of the equipment and organizational elements that influenced Rommel's generalship from Alamein through Tunisia. The emphasis now shifts to the selected and particular variables of command that influenced Rommel's decisions, and that shed some further light on the perceived ambiguities of Rommel's generalship.¹¹

SELECTED VARIABLES OF COMMAND

How easy it is to write "Rommel believed . . .," or "Rommel planned . . ." or, even better, "Rommel attacked . . ." Such phrases are the stuff of conventional military history, and this study is not

immune from their use. That kind of writing, if left unqualified, can be misleading because none of the believing, planning, or attacking took place in an intellectual vacuum. Rommel worked within a specific context composed of subordinate relationships to higher commands, and with the assistance of his own staff and an intelligence apparatus that provided information about his enemy. This operational framework represents Rommel's significant variables of command.

Rommel and His Masters

The German chain of command descended from Hitler through the Armed Forces High Command (OKW), to the Army High Command (OKH), on to Kesselring as Commander-in-Chief, South, then to Rommel as commander-in-chief of the *Panzerarmee*. Awkwardly inserted over Kesselring was the Italian *Commando Supremo*. The result was a political-military chess game, the winner trying to control Rommel. But the game never really ended because it did not have any rules, only clever manipulations. Kesselring took orders from Hitler, less so from *Commando Supremo*. Rommel continually made end runs around Kesselring and the Italians by appealing his needs and concerns directly to Hitler. Kesselring in effect made Rommel commander of the new Army Group *Afrika*, then promptly ignored his authority by approving von Arnim's Operation *Ochsenkopf*, the news of which came as a complete surprise to Rommel.

The chain of command first snapped with Rommel's April 1941 offensive as he brazenly disobeyed orders from Halder and Brauchitsch not to go beyond Benghazi. Halder, a man of wealth and intellect, the son of a general, distrusted Rommel. The slugfest at Tobruk convinced him that the Führer's pet was spinning out of control. On 23 April 1941, Halder wrote in his diary, "I have a feeling that things are in a mess [in North Africa]. Reports . . . from the theater show that Rommel is in no way up to his operational task. All day long he rushes about between the widely scattered units, and stages reconnaissance raids in which he fritters away his forces."¹² Halder sent General Paulus on a fact-finding mission to the *Korps* because "he has a good personal relation with Rommel . . . and is perhaps the only man with enough personal influence to head off this soldier gone stark mad."¹³ On 11 May, Paulus reported that Rommel could not cope with the supply situation he created by exceeding

orders. German supply capabilities were not developed enough to handle the *Afrika Korps'* needs.¹⁴ Halder believed that a new command structure for North Africa might constrain Rommel. Hitler rebuffed his suggestions, leaving Halder to note that all Hitler cared about was allowing Rommel complete operational freedom.¹⁵

During the summer of 1941, complaints about Rommel shot across Halder's desk. Count Gerhard von Schwerin reported that the Tobruk siege, because of high casualty rates, was turning into a mini-Verdun.¹⁶ Others complained that Rommel's erratic leadership resulted in orders that were impossible to carry out, and in an inordinate number of courts-martial he imposed on those who disagreed with him (according to Westphal, Rommel seldom if ever signed them¹⁷). There were complaints that too many generals were being killed and too much valuable equipment was being destroyed. But Halder realized that no one could openly oppose Rommel "because of his brutality and the backing he has at the highest level."¹⁸

Halder's fulminations over Rommel came to nothing both because of Hitler's favoritism and because earlier he had rendered the old General Staff structure impotent. In 1938 Hitler took personal command of all the armed forces and abolished the Ministry for War. In its place he established the OKW under the command of Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel. This organization, operating under Hitler's direct control, substantially reduced the power of the General Staff that was absorbed into the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH or Army High Command). Rommel felt quite comfortable bypassing Halder and going directly to Hitler with his concerns and requests. Hitler often made extravagant promises that he seldom kept. What he did send Rommel were horrid "last man, last bullet" orders. Despite misgivings and pangs of guilt over disobeying, Rommel ignored them to save his army. In each instance, Hitler backed down and, *ex post facto*, agreed to the continued withdrawal.

Rommel cleverly manipulated the weaknesses in the high command structure to pursue overriding alternative objectives: either evacuate the *Panzerarmee* from North Africa or, once in Tunisia and re-armed, strike a telling blow through the Western Dorsale against the Allies. Rommel met with Cavallero, Bastico, and Kesselring near Buerat on 6 January 1943 to discuss the fate of the *Panzerarmee*. The Italians were angry that Rommel had surrendered so much to the Eighth Army without a fight, but reluctantly they agreed that he could retreat into Tunisia because that is where a real victory could be fashioned.

There was one condition: Mussolini ordered that Rommel was to retreat slowly, buying time for a Tunisian build-up. Kesselring kept insisting that a counterattack was possible. Rommel did not agree. He would pull back from Buerat.

On 20 January, the day the *Panzerarmee* retreated from Homs, Rommel met again with Kesselring, Bastico, and Cavallero. The three were enraged by Rommel's rapid withdrawal against Mussolini's direct order to move slowly. Rommel angrily charged that the Italians did not know what they were doing, that the German Army had carried their army throughout the North African campaign and had done most of the difficult fighting. Moreover, the orders to go slow implied contradictory objectives. If the *Panzerarmee* in its present condition resisted the Eighth Army, it would be destroyed. Yet, the Italians expected the *Panzerarmee* to defend the Mareth Line. One objective canceled the other. On 23 January, Rommel abandoned Tripoli—to hell with the Italians!

Rommel carted these fissiparous, even dysfunctional, relationships into Tunisia. Hitler, contradictory to the very end, believed that Tunisia was a springboard for a great offensive that would drive the Allies into the sea. Kesselring, forever optimistic, supported that view. Doubtless, that is why he approved Rommel's plans to strike the Americans in the Western Dorsale and push on to Tebessa. In the meantime, the Italians put pressure on the Germans to get rid of Rommel. Hitler condescended; Kesselring was sympathetic. But Rommel was made army group commander, guaranteeing that he would stay longer than the Italians wished. The appointment had the support of Kesselring and Hitler who obviously contradicted their earlier positions about Rommel. Perhaps that is one oblique reason why, in a last quiver of administrative muscle, *Commando Supremo* modified Rommel's plan by diluting its power. Not only did the offensive fail, Rommel failed.

Thus the continuous confusion and outright chicanery in the Axis command structure, reaching its apogee in Tunisia, contributed significantly to the Axis failure to mount a decisive offense and helped determine that the Allies would win the campaign.

Rommel and His Staff

Rommel was blessed with a small, intelligent, and efficient staff. Ironically, Halder imposed them on Rommel. In late May 1941 Ma-

yor General Alfred Gause and a retinue of staff unexpectedly arrived at Rommel's headquarters to facilitate relations with the Italian command and develop a sound supply system.¹⁹ But, according to Rommel, they were to explore the feasibility of an offensive into Egypt.²⁰ Gause reported personally to Halder on 6 July. His frank appraisal of Rommel led Halder to write that Rommel's "character and his inordinate ambition . . . make him extremely hard to get along with."²¹ Such a comment, coupled with Halder's conclusion that Rommel was a brutal but untouchable madman, invites the conjecture that Gause's presence in Rommel's camp, ostensibly about *Commando Supremo* and supplies, was as a soft brake to Rommel's too-independent spirit and ill-conceived tactics.

Rommel, at first uncomfortable with the newcomers, let Gause know that he was commander of all German forces in North Africa and that he would not be subordinated to any higher command. Gause, a mellowed artilleryman, willingly put himself and his men under Rommel's command and served their new master with great loyalty. Two men, in addition to Gause, were key staff members. Lieutenant Colonel Siegfried Westphal, aristocratic and aloof, was chief of operations. The intelligence department was headed by Major Friedrich von Mellenthin, a congenial man, originally in the cavalry, whose acuity proved invaluable.

In October 1941 Lieutenant Colonel Fritz Bayerlein was appointed new chief-of-staff of the *Afrika Korps*. He was an enlisted man during World War I. Later commissioned, he was a panzer officer under Guderian during the advance on Moscow. Rommel instantly liked him, and, as the campaign ground on, Bayerlein became one of Rommel's personal confidants and a highly reliable officer. He twice assumed temporary command of the *Afrika Korps* and, in February 1943, was promoted to Major General and made General Messe's chief-of-staff.

The staff was small, numbering only about twenty-five officers, and they worked closely with Rommel.²² Once a plan was formulated, general orders were distributed, details about enacting them left to local commanders who understood their situations better than any staff officer. That was the ideal format. However, in the absence of the commander, staff members could make decisions, assuming full responsibility for the results. That necessitated complete trust within the command structure.

Normally, the commander's absence from headquarters did not

represent a major problem because the chief-of-staff would make decisions. This structure did and did not work according to formula at Rommel's headquarters. Frequently Rommel took Gause with him as he dashed around the fighting front. The small size of his staff, really an under-staffing, required that he be out and about, supervising the implementation of plans. That fit Rommel's command style to perfection. But, on occasion, junior officers had to make some important decisions, a situation fraught with danger. In November 1941, for example, as the battle for Tobruk raged, Rommel and Gause were away from headquarters for three days at "the wire," the Egyptian-Libyan border demarcated by a wire fence the Italians erected during the Senussi Wars. DAK was racing to the border in a long bold flanking maneuver beyond Tobruk, hoping to crack through before the British awakened to what was happening. Back at headquarters in El Adem, Westphal realized that the 2nd New Zealand Division was maneuvering to relieve the Tobruk garrison. He tried to contact Rommel and Gause—to no avail. The weight of battle was shifting, and something had to be done to restore tactical advantage. Westphal, on his own, recalled the 21st Panzers from the frontier.²³ Rommel returned to headquarters the next night furious that his assault was diminished by the recall. No one said a word as he entered the command vehicle and silently stalked about, glaring at maps. He abruptly left to get a few hours' sleep. He made no mention of the incident the next day. Westphal had made the right decision, and Rommel knew it.

Once in southern Tunisia, Rommel was presented with a new problem. Fighting in a mountainous terrain, caught in the political intrigues between Kesselring, von Arnim, and *Commando Supremo*, lacking definitive intelligence reports, and with his forces split, Rommel felt that he was losing his grasp of events. He was not satisfied that his generals on the Sbiba, Kasserine, and Thala fronts understood the urgent necessity of pressing their attacks. He needed to see what was happening for himself. A kind of Odyssey ensued. On 19 February at 1 P.M., Rommel was at DAK headquarters in Kasserine. Later that afternoon he drove to the Sbiba front. The next morning at 7 A.M. he was back at Kasserine. At 1 P.M., 21 February, Rommel and Bayerlein drove toward Thala and came under artillery fire. Afterwards, at the 10th Panzer battlegroup's headquarters, they reviewed the attack, then drove back to Kasserine that afternoon. The next morning Rommel went back to the Thala front, returning to Kasser

ine at 1 P.M. to meet with Kesselring and Westphal who, upon returning from the hospital, was now Kesselring's chief-of-staff. Rommel abandoned the attacks against Sbiba and Thala and concentrated his panzers for a push through Kasserine Pass. He again cursed his generals for their lack of drive and sent the 10th Panzer's von Broich and DAK's Bülowius to the front so that they could better grasp the situation.²⁴ The sense of a staff working in concert with their commander is missing from these battles. Instead, the picture is that of Rommel taking on the mantle of heroic leader, trying to will victory by virtue of his personal involvement.

At Medenine, another Rommel plan was changed, this time by his own subordinate commanders. Messe and the divisional commanders developed the battle scheme, leaving Rommel and his staff rather out of the process. But as the attack began, General Messe was still at his headquarters at Mareth. Rommel simply watched—after all, the battle was not his. The panzers charged forward in a frightening display of armored power but, ignorant of the British artillery reshuffle, ran into a ferocious barrage. What started as a battle of the divisional commanders became a shambles. Coordination between the divisions broke down because communications were interrupted and because there was no centralized staff control and no overall responsible commander on the field. The Battle of Medenine was an unqualified Axis disaster. That evening, no longer able to stand his own studied detachment from events, Rommel gave his only order of the battle and his last in Tunisia: Withdraw.

Rommel's Intelligence Network

Rommel's intelligence system needs special attention because his command decisions were much influenced by what he did and did not know. That simplistic generalization, a truism for all generals, has particular meaning in relation to Rommel. What he knew provided the roots for some victories through the spring 1942. After that, what he did not know contributed to his ultimate defeat.

From the beginning in North Africa, Rommel showed flashes of a near-fatal egoism that led him to believe he could anticipate his enemy better than the Axis intelligence system. In October 1941, for example, German and Italian intelligence reports poured into Rommel's headquarters, warning of an impending British offensive. He whimsically dismissed them and left to meet Lucie in Rome. The

British attack, Operation Crusader, opened on 18 November. Rommel reacted with disbelief but, once convinced the offensive was real, returned to the battlefield, directing artillery fire, leading anti-tank artillery and even an infantry company, as if his energy would stop the assault. The attack was broken, but only after General Crüwell sacrificed the 21st Panzers in a furious counterattack.

Rommel's routine frontline intelligence was gathered from friendly Arabs, from grilling prisoners of war, and from *Luftwaffe* observations. But what really caught Rommel's attention were radio interceptions of Allied messages and reports. The most informative came from an unexpected source—Colonel Bonner Fellers, American military attaché in Cairo, who sent regular reports to his superiors in Washington, D.C.²⁵ Fellers was an astute observer. He sent descriptions of the morale and tactical readiness of British frontline units, and the arrival and quality of reinforcements. He made solid analyses of British armor and its deployment. The so-called Black Code was used to send the reports. But, unknown to the Allies, a copy of the Black Code was in Italian hands, stolen in August 1941 from the American Embassy in Rome. Rommel received transcriptions of Feller's reports within a few hours of their original transmission.

Von Mellenthin's intelligence section also made radio interceptions, a specialization of Lieutenant Alfred Seebohm's *Fernmeldeaufklärung Abteilung* (Secret Radio Intelligence or Wireless Intercept Section). Seebohm's unit, like the rest of Rommel's staff, was mobile and stayed close to the front so that the information they picked up was immediately available. The company penetrated the Eighth Army's communications systems, learning British call signals, locating the positions of units, and discovering armored concentrations.²⁶

Two changes took place in July 1942 that drew a demarcation line between what Rommel knew and did not know, between his string of victories and his string of defeats.

First, the Americans suspected that their Black Code was compromised. An investigation team went to Cairo, checked out Fellers' security system but found nothing wrong. About that same time, a German prisoner of the British revealed that German intelligence was making intercepts of Fellers' reports. The British, who had cracked the Black Code on their own, listened to Fellers' transmissions and reported the leak to Washington. Fellers, to whom no blame was attached, was recalled in July. There would be no more reports from

North Africa. In a single stroke, Rommel lost a major source of strategic intelligence.²⁷

The second change occurred on 10 July during First Alamein. An Australian battalion was landed by sea especially to take out Rommel's communications center near the coast. Lieutenant Seebohm was killed in the fighting, and his section was overrun, either killed or captured. Rommel lost not only a considerable body of talent, but the British captured as well their extensive intelligence records. The contents stunned the British command. They recognized how lax their radio and telephonic security provisions were and moved quickly to institute corrective measures. With the end of Seebohm's unit, a vital segment of Rommel's tactical intelligence was lost.²⁸

Rommel, and even OKH and OKW, did not know that the British listened to the most-secret transmissions sent on their Enigma machine. Enigma was a complicated device that changed codes by resetting the various sequences on a rotary mechanism. Thus, there was the possibility of infinite ciphers of any given message. In response, the British Code and Cipher School at Bletchley Park outside of London invented the ULTRA decoding machine that enabled them to crack the Enigma transmissions between Rommel and his masters usually within a couple of hours, sometimes within minutes. Rommel's plans, his troop and armored movements, his strengths and weaknesses, *Luftwaffe* capabilities, and the schedule of supply ships were all known to the British.

ULTRA was not the panacea of intelligence hardware. The machine was so secret that information was always and everywhere distributed to a select few and then disguised so that German intelligence could not even guess that the ULTRA device existed. That secrecy led to some incorrect interpretations and wrong decisions. When, for instance, the *Afrika Korps* was first forming in Tripolitania, February 1941, British Near East commander General Archibald Wavell made a misinterpretation of ULTRA information, concluding that Rommel could not possibly mount an offensive until May. Wavell was wrong. Rommel attacked in April.²⁹

Despite occasional over-dependence on ULTRA, together with drawbacks, mistakes, misinterpretations, and their own tactical errors, the intelligence scales tipped in the Allies' favor during the summer of 1942. By October, British communications at El Alamein were so secure against radio intercepts that the Eighth Army's massive bom-

bardment on the 23rd caught the Germans by surprise. Once the retreat from Alamein was in progress, Rommel's elusive tactics and Montgomery's lack of vigorous pursuit disguised, or certainly prolonged, what was becoming acutely apparent to Rommel. The Axis could not continue, much less win, the battle for North Africa. Rommel's army was being demodernized, a process made more pervasive by Italian logistical incompetence and British and then American aerial and sea dominance. When his primary information sources went down, and with ULTRA revealing his every move, Rommel was even more vulnerable.

The extent of that vulnerability was apparent in Tunisia. The rugged terrain precluded the long reconnaissance sweeps of the desert. Bad weather closed down the ease of *Luftwaffe* aerial observation. Thus, at Kasserine Pass Rommel possessed incomplete knowledge of Allied strength and deployments. The speed with which the Americans moved reinforcements to the Tebessa road area, blocking DAK's planned exploitation of their breakthrough, amazed Rommel. At Medenine, poor reconnaissance produced poor intelligence as the Eighth Army made adjustments in their artillery dispositions. The panzer divisions rushed into a cleverly developed trap.

Rommel's own on-site, at the point-of-the-spear appearances at any of the battlefronts did not compensate for the absence of sound intelligence.

MASKS OF COMMAND: ROMMEL'S PRESENTATION OF THE SELF

Soldiers make expectations of their commanders that are within the well-established parameters of military tradition, indoctrination, and training. But there is one important expectation that is latent, more understood, less formal: The commander must be what his soldiers hope for and require. John Keegan in *The Mask of Command* wrote that the commander portrays the kind of man his troops expect through a self-made mask.³⁰ This can be called the primary mask of command. The process of making the mask may be self-conscious, affected, manipulative, and even cynical. Or the process may be a statement of a sincere, unaffected sensitivity to his troops, an acute awareness of shared circumstances, and a synthesis of his accumulated experiences.

Erving Goffman observed in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday*

Life that any individual possesses a series of masks—a repertoire of roles. The donning of any particular mask, what Goffman called an expressive front, is determined by the situation in which the individual, the actor, finds himself. The presentation of the Self is therefore not simply nor always what others—the actor's audience(s)—expect him to be. The presentation of Self can be determined by what the actor wants his audience to believe him to be in that situation.³¹ Goffman's analysis of Self adds a necessary active dimension to Keegan's view of expectations.

Battle is the theater in which the primary mask is tested for its genuine qualities. The soldiers who form the commander's audience must believe that he willingly shares their hardships and risks, demonstrating that he understands what they hope for and need. Once in place, the mask must remain firmly fixed because, as Keegan continues, what the troops should not know about their commander "must be concealed at all costs."³² Or, to continue the theatrical analogy, Goffman stated that the audience must never be allowed backstage or the performance, no matter how genuine, no matter how sincere, will be tarnished by an unwanted reality that everyone knows is there but that the audience really does not want to see.³³

Some commanders in Tunisia had a flair for self-dramatization. U.S. General George Patton was a consummate actor who managed the presentation of Self with convincing sincerity. The primary mask he wore when he took over II Corps in Tunisia convinced his soldiers that he meant business and they quickly became a solid fighting force. Lloyd Fredendall, his predecessor, strutted and stomped about his headquarters in the caves he had dug behind Tebessa, sent out orders that read like a bad war movie script, swore, drank, and tried to look tough. Eisenhower grew weary of II Corps' ineffectiveness and Fredendall's act. He was sent back to the United States.

Rommel wore three masks of command, none of them self-dramatizing. He did not need that to lead. That is not to say that he was self-deprecating. Quite the contrary. He was given to overstatement when useful; nevertheless, the masks he wore reflected the genuine plurality of the man.

Battle, regardless of plans, is filled with unanticipated developments that offer the alert commander the possibility of success. For Rommel the ability to find those opportunities and take advantage of them could be realized at only one position—the point of contact with the enemy. He moved about battlefields with an unerring sense of direc-

tion, exhorting his men. During the Battle of the Cauldron, 5 June 1942, Rommel was with the lead platoon during their attack. At any time, a soldier might expect to see him standing up boldly in an armored personnel carrier amid shot and shell. "Look, there's Rommel!" the soldier would shout to his comrades. Or, later, on the road to Thala, they could look around and see Rommel and Bayerlein crawling through the dirt, dodging shot and shell, sharing their risks. As David Fraser concludes about Rommel's command style, "He could only play the commander as hero."³⁴ The point-of-the-spear approach validated and sustained his authority and fed the image of the Superior Soldier. This was his primary mask of command. There were others.

Rommel's battlefield appearances were not outrageous to him because it was a German tradition that the soldier would act as the battle situation required, regardless of plan.³⁵ This philosophy implied that the commander had to know firsthand what was happening at the front. Halder was outraged because he thought Rommel allowed ego to overrun good judgment to the point that he was out of control. Halder refused to understand how the commander's role was being redefined by the new warfare in the vast desert where situations rapidly changed. No one before Rommel had done as much on such a scale. He was bound to be wrong some of the time. He was also bound to be right some of the time.

What Rommel expected of himself he also expected of others. Senior officers and staff members found themselves thrust into danger. Walter Neumann-Silkow, an early commander of the 15th Panzer Division, was killed in battle. Among the other generals lost in action were Georg Stumme, who died of a heart attack as his car was raked by gunfire, and Georg von Bismark, who was killed by mortar fire as he tried to get his division through an Alam Halfa minefield. Gustav von Vaerst of the 15th Panzers was wounded in action. Gause and Westphal of Rommel's staff were wounded on the same day in early June 1942. Both Major General Kleeman of the 90th Light Division and Walther Nehring were wounded at Alam Halfa. Some generals were captured. Johannes von Ravenstein of the 21st Panzers and Ludwig Crüwell, commander of the *Afrika Korps*, were taken prisoner at the Sidi Rezegh battles. As Rommel began his withdrawal at Second Alamein, Wilhelm von Thoma packed his kit, put on a full uniform with medals, and went forward, perhaps to die with his men, perhaps to be intentionally captured.³⁶ Serving under Rommel was

dangerous work. Rommel's expectations and the highly mobile desert warfare demanded no less.

Underneath Rommel's heroic mask was another mask, one that most common soldiers never saw: the temperamental mask. Rommel, as with any good commander, often sought his staff's advice. On 5 May 1942, for example, he briefed them on a plan to simultaneously destroy the Eighth Army in the field and seize Tobruk. Gause was against the plan, thinking it too ambitious. Westphal believed that it should go forward. To wait meant that the British would attack first and endanger the *Panzerarmee's* positions. Rommel asked Bayerlein, the *Afrika Korps'* chief-of-staff, what he would do were he the British commander. He answered, giving a detailed analysis of a British attack against the elongated front proposed by Rommel. The Desert Fox listened attentively but did not like what he heard. Such disagreements were common and expected. But there were other moments.

Rommel vented his full fury upon any general or staff member who failed his expectations. As he later wrote, "Officers who had too little initiative . . . or too much reverence for preconceived ideas were ruthlessly removed from their posts and, failing all else, sent back to Europe."³⁷ Von Mellenthin noted that Rommel was a difficult man and that "An iron constitution and nerves of steel were needed to work with [him]."³⁸ Westphal had a terrible argument with Rommel during the Battle of the Cauldron. Minutes later, mortar fire landed around the armored car in which they were riding. Rommel tucked under an armored cover and called for Westphal to follow. But he tarried, still stinging from the earlier rebuke, and was hit by shrapnel.³⁹

A sullen streak was woven into this second mask that accounted for much of Rommel's dour character while in Tunisia. He was exhausted, ill, and beaten down by circumstances over which he exercised little control. He found dubious comfort in casting blame for his failed attacks anywhere it would stick. On 22 February 1943, Kesselring and Westphal drove to Rommel's headquarters, their goal to convince him to continue attacking the weakened Allies, but they unwittingly became audience for his downcast view of events. Rommel told them how the Italians weakened his attack against Tebessa, the one hope of dislodging the Allies. Hildebrandt did not attack the Sbiba defenses when the opportunity was at hand. Von Broich timidly pulled back from Thala, allowing reinforcements to filter into the defensive line. Rommel cursed von Arnim for not transferring needed

troops and tanks to his command for a good punch through Kasserine Pass. No matter what Kesselring and Westphal said, Rommel would not renew the attacks.

Rommel's irritation over fumbled details and his fulminations over lackluster performances represented a level of self, that second mask of command revealed to a only select few. His staff were especially privy to his angry moods. He knew those men best—among them Gause, Westphal, von Mellenthin, the diarists Alfred Berndt and Wilfred Armbruster, and Bayerlein in the *Afrika Korps*. Only in an atmosphere of mutual trust and relative intimacy could this aspect of self, this second mask, be revealed. That Kesselring was occasionally part of the select audience is not surprising. The two men were bound into an ambiguous relationship. Kesselring was Rommel's nominal commander, but both knew that Rommel's easy access to Hitler tempered any controls Kesselring might try to impose. As for Rommel, one might offer the conjecture that he did not especially care what Kesselring thought of him. The meeting on the 22nd certainly demonstrated that Kesselring could not or would not order Rommel back on the offensive but allowed him to shift his priorities south to the Mareth Line.

There was a third mask of command. This one, darker and more brooding than the second mask, was fabricated from the uninformed optimism exhibited by the German and Italian high commands and by Hitler and Mussolini, and by what seemed to be their casual indifference to the *Panzerarmee's* condition. This third mask was painted with the blood of men who gave their last for the Fatherland only to be betrayed by bureaucratic pettifogging.

The third mask of command was initially, and then only partially, revealed late during the Second Battle of El Alamein. On 3 November, while walking agitatedly outside his command vehicle, Rommel agonized over whether he should obey Hitler's order to hold his positions at Alamein at all costs. Westphal told one of his staff, Elmar Warning, to go outside and keep Rommel company. Warning (assuming that he was not merely feeding the martyrdom aspect of the Rommel Legend), told David Irving during a post-war interview that Rommel muttered aloud that the *Panzerarmee* could not stay in its present positions or it would be annihilated within three days. After some further tortured thoughts, he concluded that his men came first before an order from Hitler. Then he added, "Hitler must be crazy."⁴⁰ Five days later Rommel mentioned "Hitler's crazy order"

to Major Hans von Luck, commander of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion.⁴¹ On 20 November, Rommel traveled to Siwa Oasis, the location of the 3rd's headquarters. In a black mood, he again confided in von Luck but spoke more openly than he had twelve days earlier. Hitler's order to make a stand at Alamein still tore at him. Now the *Panzerarmee* was at El Agheila. Once again Hitler ordered Rommel to hold the line without comprehending the magnitude of the beating the *Panzerarmee* took during the Alamein battles, without understanding the extent to which the RAF now dominated the skies, and too deluded to see the supply problem for the shambles it was. A messenger interrupted their walk and handed Rommel reports stating that tankers containing essential fuel had been sunk and that only five of fifty-five Junkers transports airlifting fuel to North Africa made it through the RAF screen. Even though von Luck may have expected Rommel's next words, they must have profoundly shocked him, for Rommel said, "The war is lost."⁴²

The black thoughts that shaped Rommel's third mask of command, seemingly so dangerous in Naziism's poisonous and unpredictable atmosphere, were to him nothing more than an expression of his deep-seated concerns about the military realities he confronted. Yet, he paid a personal price for the third mask's creation—an emerging ambiguity of feeling toward Hitler, as it were a forfeiture of his absolute faith in the man responsible for bringing him so far. For, on the one hand, Hitler's "crazy orders" to stand and die at indefensible positions across Egypt and Libya, the muddled and mendacious Tunisian command structure, and the Italian high command's second-rate performance, apparently tolerated by everyone except, it seems, Rommel, led him to the inescapable conclusion that Hitler was out of touch with military realities in North Africa.

Thus, the meetings between Hitler and Rommel in the Ukraine, beginning 10 March, now assume considerable importance.⁴³ Rommel arrived at the headquarters compound in midafternoon of the 10th. Only four days had passed since the Battle of Medenine. The sights, sounds, and smells of that conflict in which he saw three panzer divisions cut to pieces were a vivid contrast to the superficial atmosphere he found in the Ukrainian headquarters. Except for a few old friends with whom he chatted, he was distressed by the toadies and sycophants he saw jockeying for places on the Führer's carousel of power.

At 6 P.M., Rommel and Hitler had the first of several private meet-

ings. The two men sat opposite each other, sipping tea, talking quietly. Rommel was exhausted, his nerves shot. His eyes and skin showed the effects of jaundice. Bandages covered boils and other desert sores that festered on his neck. Nevertheless, buoyed by the rightness of his convictions, without guile and fearless of the consequences, he revealed to Hitler much of his third mask, bluntly describing the Tunisian front and what needed to be done. He told Hitler that the Allies were growing stronger every day while the Axis supply situation was deteriorating. He excoriated the Italians. Time could be gained by shortening the defensive line back to Enfidaville, but in the end the *Panzerarmee* would have to be evacuated because the Axis could ill afford to allow over a quarter million battle-hardened troops to be scooped up by the Allies.

Most officers who even attempted to speak so frankly to the Führer first endured a verbal tirade, an outright temper tantrum, and then were sacked on the spot. Not Rommel. Hitler calmly told him that he was being too pessimistic, a natural-enough feeling following a defeat. But letting that feeling fester was dangerous because it could lead to erroneous conclusions. Hitler then ordered Rommel to take his medical leave and enjoy a good rest so that he could return to North Africa and lead a counter-offensive against, of all places, Casablanca. The idea was preposterous and so detached from anything militarily possible that Rommel must have wondered if Hitler heard anything he said.

The next day, 11 March, Hitler awarded Rommel Swords and Diamonds for his Knight's Cross, the highest decoration that could be bestowed. Rommel was grateful for the honor, but that day and the next he continued to argue his assessment of the Tunisian front. Although neither man backed away from his position of the 10th, the air of cordiality continued, Goebbels writing in his diary on 12 March that the meetings were going wonderfully.

The reason behind the cordiality was simple enough. Beginning in the late 1930s, Rommel and Hitler formed a bond, probably unique in the Hitlerian military hierarchy, that was based on an unspoken mixture of formal ties, a dishonorable oath honorably if naively sworn, of sentiments arising from common experiences in the World War I trenches, an admiration for one another, and utility by which they used each other, sometimes shamelessly, for whatever ends. During those three days of meetings, regardless of the faults they found in each other, a mutual respect persisted that excused the one's pes-

simism and the other's fantasies. The time had not arrived for mutual mistrust.

The March meetings did not produce solutions by which to ameliorate the Tunisian situation. Rommel flew in a Heinkel bomber from the Ukraine to Wiener Neustadt, some 50 miles south of Vienna, to start his medical leave at nearby Semmering. During the following weeks, he was practically isolated from the Führer's headquarters, receiving little news beyond radio broadcasts and newspapers. At one point, he confided in his son Manfred that he had "fallen into disgrace and could expect no important job for the present."⁴⁴ He paced about like a caged animal, shouting his contempt for the high command and, to Manfred's consternation, asserting doubts about Hitler. The isolation was tearing at him.

Yet Hitler had not abandoned his favorite general and, indeed, would soon resurrect his career, once again offering Rommel a sword he did not refuse.