

THE ROMMEL PAPERS

EDITED BY
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With the assistance of
LUCIE-MARIA ROMMEL
MANFRED ROMMEL
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Field Marshal Rommel and (right) General Fritz Bayerlein during
the Battle of Alamein, November 1942

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INTRODUCTION

THE IMPACT that Rommel made on the world with the sword will be deepened by his power with the pen. No commander in history has written an account of his campaigns to match the vividness and value of Rommel's—which, for the most part, has now been retrieved from its various hiding places and put together in this volume.

No other commander has provided such a graphic picture of his operations and method of command. No one else has so strikingly conveyed in writing the dynamism of *Blitzkrieg* and the pace of *panzer* forces. The sense of fast movement and quick decision is electrifyingly communicated in many of the passages—Rommel carries the reader along with him in his command vehicle.

Great commanders have mostly been dull writers. Besides lacking literary skill in describing their actions, they have tended to be cloudy about the way their minds worked. In relating what they did, they have said posterity little about how and why. Napoleon was an exception, but the value of his account is impaired by a more than usual unscrupulousness in treating facts, and by his intentness to falsify the balance-sheet. Like Caesar's, his writing was not merely coloured but dominated by a propaganda purpose.

Rommel's narrative is remarkably objective, as well as graphic. In drafting it he certainly had, like most men who have made history, a concern for his place in history. But while he shows a natural desire for justification in his explanation of events, it is subordinate to his burning interest in the military lessons of the campaigns. His evidence stands up uncommonly well to critical examination, and checking by other sources. A number of errors of fact can be found in it, but fewer than in many of the official and personal narratives compiled with the advantage of post-war knowledge. There are some disputable interpretations, but not the purposeful distortions, for national or personal credit, which are all too often found in such accounts.

The clarity and high degree of accuracy which distinguish Rommel's picture of the operations are the more notable because of the confused impressions that are apt to be produced by fast-moving tank battles, especially in the desert. The clearness of Rommel's picture owes much to his way of command—his habit of getting right forward and seeking

to be near the crucial spot at the crucial time. It also owes much to his prolonged self-training in observation, highly developed eye for spotting what was significant in a scene, and knack of registering it. His passion for taking photographs at every step of advance was a symptom of this characteristic—as it was with Lawrence, in the Arabian theatre of World War I.

There were marked resemblances between these two masters of desert warfare, whatever their differences in temperament, range of interest and philosophy. They were strikingly akin in their sense of time and space, instinct for surprise, eye for ground and opportunity, combination of flexibility with vision, and ideas of direct personal leadership. Another military link was in the application of mechanised mobility to desert warfare. Lawrence, who is popularly associated with camel-rides, was among the first to see how the new means of mobility could transform desert warfare, and had demonstrated this embryonically and in miniature, with a few armoured cars and aircraft. Rommel's exploitation of these potentialities on the grand scale would have delighted the Lawrence who was a connoisseur of military art and had a revolutionary bent.

Rommel, also, had an urge to express himself on paper as well as in action. That became evident—long before he became famous as a commander—from his extraordinarily vivid treatise on infantry tactics, inspired by his experiences as a young officer in World War I and by his reflections upon them. Most text-books on tactics are deadly dull, but he brought life into the subject. The more mobile operations of the next war, and his own greater role, gave him bigger scope—of which he took full advantage. He was a born writer as well as a born fighter. The same expressive gift and urge can be seen in the way he sketched on paper, with pencil or coloured chalks, the operations he planned or even imagined.

Throughout his activities in World War II he kept constantly in mind the project of a book to match the performance, and continually made notes for the purpose—notes that he developed into a narrative whenever he had a breathing space.

Death, under Hitler's decree, prevented him from completing the project, but what he had already drafted makes a book that has no peer among narratives of its kind. It may lack polish, but its literary power is very striking. Along with descriptive clarity it has dramatic intensity, while its value is much increased by the comments that accompany and illuminate its story. His section on "The Rules of Desert Warfare" is a masterly piece of military thinking, while the whole narrative is sprinkled with sage reflections, often with a fresh turn—about concentration in time rather than in space; about the effect of speed in outweighing numbers; about flexibility as a means to surprise; about the security provided by audacity; about the stultifying conventions of the "quarter-master" mind; about creating new standards and not submitting to

means; about the value of indirect rather than direct reply to the enemy's moves; about the way that air inferiority requires a radical revision of the rules of ground operations; about the unwisdom of indiscriminate reprisals and the folly of brutality; about the basic inexpediency of unprincipled expediency.

Until I delved into Rommel's own papers I regarded him as a brilliant tactician and great fighting leader, but did not realise how deep a sense of strategy he had—or, at any rate, developed in reflection. It was a surprise to find that such a thruster had been so thoughtful, and that his audacity was so shrewdly calculated. In certain cases, his moves may well be criticised as too hazardous, but not as the reckless strokes of a blind and hot-headed gambler. In analysis of the operations it can be seen that some of the strokes which miscarried, with grave results for him, came close to proving graver for his opponents. Moreover, even in failure his strokes made such an impression on them as to assure his army a chance of escape.

One of the clearer ways in which commanders can be measured is by the extent to which they impress the opposing side. By that measure Rommel's stature is very high. In centuries of warfare only Napoleon has made a comparable impression on the British, and that was not achieved purely in the military field, as it was in Rommel's case.

Moreover, Rommel became much more than a bogey to the British. Awe for his dynamic generalship developed into an almost affectionate admiration for him as a man. This was inspired primarily by the speed and surprise of his operations, but it was fostered by the way that he maintained in African warfare the decencies of the soldierly code, and by his own chivalrous behaviour towards the many prisoners of war whom he met in person. He became the hero of the Eighth Army troops who were fighting against him—to such an extent that it became their habit, when wanting to say that someone had done a good job of any kind on their own side, to describe it as "doing a Rommel".

Such intense admiration for the enemy commander carried an underlying danger to the soldiers' morale. Thus the British commanders and headquarter staffs were compelled to make strenuous efforts to dispel "the Rommel legend". It is a tribute to their sense of decency and his personal conduct that such counter-propaganda was not directed towards blackening his character but towards diminishing his military scale. In that respect, his ultimate defeats provided a lever—and it was hardly to be expected that his opponents would emphasise his crippling disadvantages in strength and supplies, or the significance of what he managed to achieve under such handicaps. Juster comparison and truer reckoning are left for history, which has a habit of correcting the superficial judgments that temporarily keep company with victory. Hannibal, Napoleon and Lee went down in defeat, yet rose above their conquerors in the scales of history.

In true judgment of performance, due account must be taken of the conditions and relative resources, together with the other factors that lie outside a commander's control. Only then can we properly estimate the quality of his performance. The outstanding feature of Rommel's numerous successes is that they were achieved with inferiority of resources and without any command of the air. No other generals on either side in World War II won battles under these handicaps, except for the early British leaders under Wavell—and they were fighting Italians.

Rommel's performance was not flawless, and he suffered several possibly avoidable reverses—but when fighting superior forces any slip may result in defeat, whereas numerous mistakes can be effectively covered up by the commander who possesses a big margin of superiority in strength. For all his audacity and rapidity of movement and decision, Rommel comes out well, on balance, from the test embodied in Napoleon's saying that "the greatest general is the one who makes the fewest mistakes."

That criticism, however, has too passive a note to fit the nature of war, and is apt to foster a dangerous caution. It would be more profoundly true to say: "the greatest general is the one who leads his opponent to make the most mistakes." By that test, Rommel shines even more brightly.

The best line of comparison between famous commanders of different eras lies through their art, which can be distinguished from changing technique. It is possible to make a comparative study of the use they made of the means at their disposal to achieve their effects—particularly their use of mobility, flexibility, and surprise to upset their opponents' mental and physical balance. It is even possible, with such as have disclosed their conceptions, to gauge how far their effects were a matter of calculation.

Here, above all, lies the instructive value of Rommel's papers—and the more so because his narrative was not revised in the light of post-war knowledge, while his letters frequently provide pre-event evidence of the way in which he approached his problems. It is in the approach, more than in the act, that a man reveals the bent of his thought, and the compass of his mind.

The Rommel Papers should go far to dispel the dust of controversy that has been stirred up, from various motives. Rommel's narratives were written long before he could have any idea of the controversy that would arise outside Germany, and could frame them to meet it; his letters to his wife have still more immediacy. It is remarkable how frank they are in comment in view of the fact that they were liable to be opened. From these conjoint sources the reader can get a clear view into Rommel's mind and the mainsprings of his action. The picture may naturally differ according to the individual reader's predisposition, but there is little obscurity about the personality itself, and its various facets.

Rommel was very human—apart from his extraordinary energy and

his military genius. The "warts" are plainly self-revealed in his narratives and letters. Like most of the leaders of mankind he was in a state of immaturity. During his spell of greatest success his attitude had the boyishness that is captivating but dangerously unphilosophical, and his outlook had the limitations that make for success in leadership. In the earlier part of the war, his letters suggest that he tended to regard war as a great game—the game for which, in his country's service, he had trained himself with single-minded devotion. For maximum driving power, a commander must feel like that about war—and the most successful of them always have. Rommel had an unusual capacity for reflection, but his did not go beyond the military field until the last months of his life.

Like most forceful soldiers, too, he did not find it easy to be tolerant about contrary views, especially among those who were fighting on the same side. That is manifest in his biting comments on Halder and Goering in particular, which were certainly unjust on several counts. It should also be remembered that he was a sick man during the later stages of the African campaign, a condition which naturally tended to increase his aggravation and warp his view. But there was little malice in him—his explosiveness was an outlet—and he was unusually ready to repair an injustice when his anger passed. That can be seen, for instance, in the high tribute he pays to Kesselring in his final reflections. Moreover, his comments on the enemy—French, British and American—show a remarkable freedom from hatred and readiness to recognise their qualities.

Rommel's attitude to "the Fuehrer" and his long-continued loyalty are a puzzle only to those who do not understand the habit of mind produced by a professional soldier's early training, particularly in Germany, and are unable to imagine how things look from such a point of view. But the Papers make clearer two factors that for a time buttressed his soldierly loyalty. It is easy to perceive how Rommel's dynamism made him responsive to Hitler's and how the obstruction he suffered from the intermediate "top-hammer" with which he was in close contact made him feel more sympathetic to the distant Fuehrer. That continued while Rommel's reflectiveness was simply military. But the wide measure of independent authority he had in Africa, the larger problems with which he had to deal, and the deep impression made on him by the material superiority of the Allies, gradually widened the scope of his reflection—and thus paved the way for the momentous change of attitude that developed when he came back to Europe and into closer contact with Hitler. It would have been madness for him to have recorded on paper this process of change—indeed, some of his later letters show an obvious effort to disguise it—but there are a number of clues scattered through the pages. His son and closest associates have supplemented these with their evidence of how he was brought to the break-away, and the resolve to overthrow Hitler, which cost him his life.

The main importance of the papers lies, however, in the abundant light they shed on Rommel's military leadership. Their evidence confirms the judgment of the British soldiers who actually fought against him, and shows that their estimate was closer to the mark than the counter-propaganda designed to depreciate his formidable reputation. The "Rommel legend" clearly had a much better foundation than most. Saved for his many narrow escapes from death or capture in battle, he owed less to luck than most commanders who have attained fame. Now that his actual conceptions and the workings of his mind are laid open for examination it becomes evident that his successes were earned, not accidental. They bear the hall-mark of military genius.

This is not the place for a biographical survey of Rommel's career—which has been ably and vividly presented in Desmond Young's book,¹ a valuable complement to this. But it may be worthwhile to epitomise the principal features of Rommel's generalship, and briefly discuss them in relation to the general experience of warfare.

In most fields, genius is associated with originality. Yet it has been rare among those who are usually acclaimed as the great masters of war. Most of them have gained their successes by using conventional instruments superlatively well, and only a few have sought new means and methods. That is strange, since history shows that the fate of nations has been repeatedly decided, and the most epoch-making changes in history determined, by change in weapons and tactics—especially the latter.

But such developments have usually been produced by some student of war with a fresh turn of mind, and by his influence upon the progressively inclined soldiers of his time, rather than by the action of any top-level commander. In the history of war great ideas have been less numerous than great generals, but have had a more far-reaching effect. The distinction between the two is a reminder that there are two forms of military genius—the conceptive and the executive.

In Rommel's case they were combined. While the theory of *Blitzkrieg*—the new super-mobile style of warfare with armoured and motorised forces—had been conceived in England, long before he came on the stage, the quickness with which he grasped it and the way he developed it showed his fresh-mindedness and innate conceptive power. He became, next to Guderian, the leading exponent of the new idea. That was the more remarkable because he had had no experience of tanks until given command of the 7th Panzer Division in February, 1940, and then had less than three months to study the theory and master the problem of handling such forces before he was launched into action. His brilliant share in the panzer drives that produced the collapse of France led to his being given the opportunity of applying the new conception

¹ *Rommel* (Harpers, 1951).

in Africa and with the advantage of independent command—which Guderian was never allowed in Europe, fortunately for Germany's surviving opponents. Moreover, in Africa, Rommel demonstrated a subtler application of the theory, blending the defensive with the offensive and drawing the opposing tanks into baited traps, preparatory to his own lightning thrusts. In other respects, too, he made signal contributions to the new technique.

It is significant that Rommel was one of the few eminent commanders who have gained distinction as military thinkers and writers. More remarkable still is the fact that his chance to prove his powers as a commander came through the effect of his writings. For it was his book *Infanterie greift an* that first attracted Hitler's attention to him, and by the impression it made paved the way for his phenomenal rise.

Rommel was able to make the most of his chance because he also possessed executive genius. The extent to which he had it may best be realised by taking note of the qualities that the great commanders of history have shown—although the degree of each quality has varied in each case.

In earlier times, when armies were small and fought with short-range weapons, and when the battlefield rather than the theatre of war was the general's arena, the quality most prized in a commander was *coup d'œil*—an expressive term for the combination of acute observation with swift-sure intuition. All the Great Captains possessed in high degree this faculty of grasping instantly the picture of the ground and the situation; of relating one to the other, and the part to the whole. Rommel most clearly had this faculty. It had a renewed importance in Africa owing to the nature of fast-moving armoured warfare and the moderate scale of the forces in that theatre.

In recent times, as the range of weapons lengthened and armies became more extended as well as larger in scale, so the need increased for a faculty wider and deeper than *coup d'œil*—for insight. The power of penetrating, as Wellington aptly expressed it, into what was going on "at the other side of the hill"—behind the enemy's lines, and in the enemy's mind. In the present even more than in the past, a leader must have a deep understanding of psychology in general, and of the opposing commander's psychology in particular. The extent to which Rommel possessed this kind of insight, or psychological sense, can be seen in his *Papers* as well as in his operations.

Such a psychological sense is in turn the foundation of another essential, and more positive, element of military genius—the power of creating surprise, of producing the unexpected move that upsets the opponent's balance. For full effect, as history shows, it must be reinforced by an acute time-sense, and by the capacity to develop the highest possible degree of mobility. Speed and surprise are twin qualities. They are predominantly the "hitting," or offensive, qualities of true general-

ship. And their development, like that of the informative senses, depends on a faculty which may be best, and briefly, defined as creative imagination.

In power of producing the unexpected move, acuteness of time-sense, and capacity to develop a pitch of mobility that can paralyse opposition, it is hard to find a modern parallel to Rommel, except Guderian, the prime minister of *Blitzkrieg*. Later in the war, Patton and Manteuffel displayed similar qualities, but comparative assessment is difficult because of their more limited scope. So it is, also, when we go back into the past, where instruments were so different—although we know that Seydlitz, Napoleon, and Bedford Forrest were outstandingly gifted in achieving surprise through speed, and although a similar dynamism can be discerned in the great Mongol leaders such as Genghiz Khan and Sabutai. The secret of this combination has never been so clearly communicated as in Rommel's Papers.

In seeking to upset the enemy's balance, a commander must not lose his own balance. He needs to have the quality which Voltaire described as the keystone of Marlborough's success—"that calm courage in the midst of tumult, that serenity of soul in danger, which the English call a cool head." But to it he must add the quality for which the French have found the most aptly descriptive phrase—"le sens du praticable." The sense of what is possible, and what is not possible—tactically and administratively. The combination of both these two "guarding" qualities might be epitomised as the power of cool calculation. The sands of history are littered with the wrecks of finely conceived plans that capsized for want of this ballast.

On this count, there is more question about Rommel's qualifications. Along with tremendous courage he had what is called the artistic temperament, and was apt to swing from exaltation to depression—as his letters show. Moreover, he was often criticised in German staff circles, including his own, for not taking sufficient account of supply difficulties, and attempting strategically more than was practicable administratively. In a number of cases the course of the operations tends to bear out such criticism. On the other hand, the Papers show that in the risks he took there was a deeper calculation than appeared on the surface. He demanded more than was possible by "Quartermasters'" standards as the most probable way of gaining great results under the new conditions of strategy. Although that strategic policy miscarried at times, it is remarkable how often he managed more than was possible administratively by any normal calculation—and in consequence achieved results that would not have been possible in any other way.

Finally, and beyond all the other qualities that mark a great commander, comes actual power of leadership. That is the dynamo of the battle-car and no skill in driving will avail if it is defective. It is through the current of great leadership that troops are inspired to do more

can seem possible, and thus upset an opponent's "normal" calculations.

There is no doubt on this score of Rommel's qualification as a "Great Captain". Exasperating to staff officers, he was worshipped by the fighting troops, and what he got out of them in performance was far beyond any rational calculation.

B. H. LIDDELL HART

THE STORY OF THE ROMMEL PAPERS

By Manfred Rommel

WHEN MY father died, he left a considerable number of documents which had accumulated during his campaigns. There were army orders, situation reports, daily reports to the High Command; besides these official documents he left a number of volumes comprising his personal diary, and comprehensive notes on the French campaign of 1940 and on the war in the desert.

After the First World War my father published a book on infantry tactics, based largely on his own experiences. When he was writing that book he found he had preserved few of the essential documents, while his diary was hardly more helpful; there were great gaps during the most important periods, when he had been too occupied with fighting to have time for his diary.

My father undoubtedly intended to publish another book on the military lessons to be derived from his experiences in World War II, and this time he was determined not to be at the same disadvantage in the matter of contemporary records.

From the moment he crossed the frontier on 10 May 1940 he began to keep a personal account of his operations, which he generally dictated daily to one of his aides. Whenever a lull allowed, he prepared a more considered appreciation of what had taken place.

He preserved all his official orders, reports and documents. In addition there were hundreds of maps and sketches of his operations which he or his staff had drawn in coloured chalks, some being carefully and exactly finished off in drawing ink; there were also drafts for maps intended to illustrate his subsequent writings.

As events took a less favourable turn, my father became all the more anxious that an objective account of his actions should survive his possible death so that his intentions could not be misinterpreted. On his return from Africa he worked on his papers in great secrecy, dictating, or giving drafts for typing, only to my mother or to one of his A.D.C.s. On his return from France in August, 1944, he began to write an account of the Invasion, but he destroyed this when it became clear that he was

suspected of complicity in the July 20 plot. On the other hand, some papers have survived which he would undoubtedly have burned had he had the time.

My father was an enthusiastic photographer. Here, again for the purposes of his book, he had gone back to Italy after the first World War to get photographs, which he needed for making tactical sketches, of the places where he had fought in 1917; but that had not been easy, for the Italians did not welcome German officers with cameras to their frontier territory. My father travelled as an "engineer" with my mother on a motor-cycle. For the book he planned to write on the Second World War he intended to be well provided with photographs and he took literally thousands, both in Europe and in Africa, including a large number in colour. He took photographs only when advancing, he once told me; "I don't photograph my own retreat."

Furthermore, he wrote to my mother almost daily and she had preserved about a thousand of his letters.

Only a proportion of all this material survived the various vicissitudes which it underwent.

During the months immediately preceding the outbreak of war, my father commanded the War Academy at Wiener Neustadt, about thirty miles south of Vienna. The academy was housed in an enormous old castle. When in 1943 British and American bomber squadrons started to raid the town and our home was in danger of being destroyed, we deposited some of my father's papers in the deep cellars of the castle; others we sent to a farm in south-west Germany. The rest we took with us when in the autumn of 1943 we moved from Wiener Neustadt to Herrlingen, five miles from Ulm in Württemberg.

My father's death made my mother all the more anxious to save his papers, not only for personal reasons but so that, when history came to be written, the truth might be told. Already at the time of the funeral, an S.S. officer had tried to find out, in the course of conversation, what had become of my father's papers. We did not take the bait. Nonetheless, it appeared highly probable that an attempt would be made to take them from us.

My mother, therefore, immediately began to assemble all the papers in the house. I went to Wiener Neustadt to retrieve the documents which we had left in the castle cellars. One did not need to be very far-sighted at that time to realise that Soviet troops would, in due course, reach Vienna; and, as it turned out, six months later they stormed the castle after it had been reduced to a heap of rubble following stout resistance on that part of the German officer cadets in training there. Everything that was not nailed to the ground, was plundered.

With the help of my father's sister and of Captain Aldinger, his

A.D.C., my mother began to pack up all the papers ready for evacuation should the need arise. She intended to rely on dispersal, for while it was probable that one hiding place would be discovered, it was improbable that all would be.

In the middle of November, 1944, Captain Aldinger, who had stayed with my mother to help her clear up my father's affairs, was suddenly ordered by the town major of Ulm to present himself at the main railway station of that city. It was said that an officer on General Maisel's staff would be there and that he had certain matters to discuss with Captain Aldinger. It was General Maisel who had fetched my father away a month earlier. It was further intimated to Captain Aldinger that this officer had orders to proceed to Herrlingen afterwards.

The purpose of this visit was obscure to my mother and Captain Aldinger. Was an arrest planned? Or did they intend to carry out a house search for my father's notes? No one could tell.

The work of hiding the remaining papers was speeded up as much as possible. By the evening of the 14th November, with the exception of drafts and jottings for his personal notes, all that remained in the house were official war documents, marked "Secret", which would, in any event, have to be given up.

On the morning of the 15th November, Aldinger left Herrlingen to go to Ulm. "I shall leave the car here," he said to my mother; "God knows whether I shall ever come back. Perhaps I shall be arrested right away. If not, I shall come back to Herrlingen at once."

My mother waited. When the afternoon came, she became seriously concerned about Aldinger's arrest. There was all the more danger that this might happen because, with the exception of my mother and myself, he was the only witness who knew the real cause of my father's death. Towards three o'clock the gate of our garden opened. Aldinger came in. He was alone and was carrying rather a bulky parcel under his arm which was wrapped in white paper. Mercifully my mother's fears had not materialised. The officer on Maisel's staff had handed over the baton and service cap which the two generals had taken from my father on the 14th October, after he died. They had taken these "trophies" to the Fuehrer's Headquarters and, as we found out afterwards, they were kept for a time in the desk of Schaub, Hitler's A.D.C. Immediately after my father's death, Captain Aldinger had repeatedly and vigorously protested, in the name of my mother, at this unheard-of behaviour and had now, against all expectations, been successful.

The majority of the documents had by this time been dispersed. They were hidden on two different farms in south-west Germany, in one case rolled up in a cellar, in the other behind a heap of empty boxes in a ~~cellar~~ ~~basement~~. A small box which contained some of my father's notes on the ~~basement~~ ~~of Normandy~~ was buried by a friend of ours between the walls of a bombed Stuttgart ruin in a part of the town which had been so pounded

by numerous air attacks that it was no longer likely to be considered a worthwhile target. My father's diaries for 1943-44 were deposited in a hospital, while other material was sent to my aunt in Stuttgart. My mother retained in the house at Herrlingen the drafts of my father's notes which had formed the original manuscript on Africa, films taken by my father in the French campaign of 1940 and his personal letters.

Strangely enough, my mother was so preoccupied with the fear that the Nazi authorities might get hold of the papers that she never thought of the possibility that the Allies, who were now approaching, might show an equal interest.

During the second half of April 1945, the bombing became continuous. Hour by hour the American H.E. bombs crashed down on Ulm, which was burning night and day in many places. From the west and from the north the sound of artillery fire could be heard and day by day it became more menacing. The remnants of the German Army were streaming back weaponless through the valley in which Herrlingen lay, some on farm-carts, some on foot, all in perpetual fear of attack by U.S. fighter-bombers. The local Volksturm, comprising youngsters of fourteen and old men of sixty-five, was mobilised. Placards had been put up everywhere which read "Anyone who fails to defend Ulm against the enemy is a swine."

One day, it must have been the 20th April, my mother, looking out of her window, saw the American tanks approaching Ulm. Only when, on the following day, Allied soldiers set fire to parts of the neighbouring village on the false assumption that it was occupied by German partisans, and long columns of refugees from that village came streaming through Herrlingen, only then did my mother become anxious about the documents that were still in the house. She got the letters, notes and films ready so that she could take them with her at a moment's notice. Part of these she threw in an old trunk which, with the help of neighbours, she buried in the garden.

The American troops now occupied Herrlingen. Sentries were posted everywhere. It was impossible to bury any further material. Among the first Americans who came to see my mother was a Captain Marshall of the Seventh Army. He asked whether there were any documents in the house. In the confident belief that private letters would not be confiscated, my mother answered: "I have only the personal letters of my husband written to me." "Where are these letters?" asked Marshall.

He went with my mother down to the cellar. When he saw the folders containing the letters lying in a box, he said: "I will have to take them away. We shall want to have a look at them. I will bring them back in a few days."

Next my mother was told that the return of these letters would be delayed for a bit. A fortnight later Captain Marshall's interpreter came

to my mother, and said: "The Captain is terribly sorry that we can't keep our promise but the Army has decided that these documents will have to be sent to Washington."

One day, in the middle of May, at eight o'clock in the morning, my mother was ordered to leave her house by nine. An American unit was to be billeted in our home. While my mother was still packing, American soldiers started to open the drawers and cupboards and to search. Numerous documents of my father's (drafts for notes on Africa and handwritten maps) which at the time were on the library shelves, in the desk and in the cellar have not been seen since. All my mother managed to do was to bring away on a small hand-cart a trunk containing my father's films, the manuscript of the African campaign, and the official history of the 7th Panzer Division's operations in France in 1940, of which only three copies had ever been made.

The papers which were evacuated to other places met with varied fates.

On the one farm in south-west Germany, some Americans appeared, announced that they belonged to the Counter Intelligence Corps and demanded to see the trunks which Field Marshal Rommel had had placed there. Unfortunately, some of these trunks and boxes had already been brought up from the cellar—in which they had been walled up—into the house itself. The Americans commandeered a chest and a trunk. The chest contained my father's documents, notes and sketches from the First World War—the material he had used in his book, *The Infantry in Attack*. The trunk contained my father's complete Leica equipment (a camera and twelve different accessories), personal effects and about 3,000 snapshots which my father had himself taken. He was particularly proud of his colour photographs, some of which had been taken with a certain amount of danger to himself. One, I remember, which was most impressive, showed Australian infantry attacking with bayonets. There were several thousand other photographs which he had collected from war reporters and soldiers between 1940 and 1944; some he had already captioned.

The Americans gave a receipt for the chest and the trunk. But American officers who subsequently came and tried to be helpful about the recovery of the trunks, and to whom we showed this "receipt," were doubtful whether these people had really been acting under official orders. There remained on this farm another box containing the personal diary of my father from 1940 to 1943 as well as notes on the French campaign of 1940; there were two further boxes with maps. The owner of the farm, a friend of my father, had denied, despite threats from the two C.I.C. people, that he had any further material. Subsequently, he did his best to see that at least these boxes remained in our possession. Then, in an unguarded moment, stolen from the loft by an unknown

person. Whether he was pleased with what he found when he opened the box, is doubtful.

On the other farm, meanwhile, a Moroccan force had taken over. Cattle and poultry were slaughtered and open fires were burning in the farmyard. The whole place was thoroughly searched several times by Moroccans. Fortunately, none of them ever suspected that a further cellar existed behind a whole heap of empty boxes. It was in this way that the documents here were saved.

The papers which my aunt had kept for us and those that had been buried in the Stuttgart ruins also survived the German collapse.

When my mother had to leave her home, she found emergency accommodation in a small room in the neighbourhood. It was here that she made an inventory of the material that remained to her. The box which had been buried in the garden at Herrlingen was once again unearthed and removed to another place. The boxes on the farm, which had in the meantime been evacuated by its Moroccan occupiers, were fetched. Thus, when my mother eventually found new shelter in the Herrlingen school, she took all the material along with her.

When my mother learned that posthumous denazification proceedings were going to be taken against my father with the object of confiscating what effects he had left, she once again loaded up the small hand-cart and hid the documents away from where she was living. Fortunately, these new threats never materialised, though we heard of a case in which similar documents belonging to another officer were confiscated.

Encouraged by Brigadier Young, and by Captain Liddell Hart's undertaking to edit my father's papers, I eventually started to reassemble the documents from their various hiding places. In fact, it was possible to translate hurriedly a few passages and incorporate them as an Appendix to the biography of my father which Brigadier Young had written and which was by then already at press.

General Speidel, my father's former Chief of Staff, made repeated efforts to have my father's letters restored to my mother. Brigadier Young asked General Eisenhower to intercede with Washington for their recovery. Finally, through the efforts of Captain Liddell Hart, and after much protracted search, the letters were handed over to General Speidel by Colonel Nawrocky on behalf of the American Historical Division. It transpired that in Washington they had been filed, not under "ROMMEL", but under "ERWIN", my father's Christian name and the signature on the letters. Some are still missing, notably those written at the time of the Invasion. However, some other documents dealing with Normandy were subsequently returned to my mother.

With the return of the letters we felt we had recovered as many of my father's papers as had survived the destruction of war, in part carried out by my father for his own personal safety, and the looting which inevitably follows in the wake of war.

EDITORIAL NOTE

THE MAIN part of Rommel's papers deal with the North African campaign. The whole of his narrative is printed in this volume. The only part of the story he did not cover, as he would have done if he had lived, is the winter campaign of 1941-42. So a chapter on this has been provided by General Bayerlein—then Chief of Staff of the Afrika Korps—with the aid of Rommel's notes and letters as well as his own knowledge, from very close contact, of Rommel's views. Bayerlein's own exceptional experience and ability as a "Panzer leader" make this addition all the more interesting.

Rommel's story of the 1940 campaign is on the whole intensely exciting, but in some places it turns aside to deal with minor details of unit movement, while occasionally there is nothing of particular interest in the day's events. Such passages have been cut, as indicated in the text.

During the months he was in Italy, during 1943, Rommel did not conduct any active operations, but his diary contains a number of illuminating entries about the Italian *coup d'état* and the efforts to prevent Italy changing side. Manfred Rommel has woven these diary passages, and Rommel's letters at the time, into a short chapter.

Rommel did not live to write his story of the Normandy campaign, but he left a lot of notes and a number of other records, especially about his pre-invasion ideas and plans. General Bayerlein has pieced these together, and also incorporated in this chapter Rommel's letters of the period.

In a final chapter, Manfred Rommel relates the story of his father's death, and of the tense weeks that preceded the arrival of the executioners who came to carry out Hitler's decree.

The interest and value of these chapters and of Rommel's own narrative is much enhanced by his letters. For they convey the colour of his thought at the actual moment in the operations, and thus, besides their vividness, often provide an historical check on the recollected story in his subsequent narrative.

He wrote his wife almost every day, however hard pressed, although his letters were always rather short. They were usually written in the early hours of the morning, and sometimes when he was on the move

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in his armoured car or in a tank. The handwriting of the letters often has a shakiness caused by the movement of the vehicle—or the chill of the hours before sunrise.

While he had to be discreet in referring to operations in progress, it is remarkable how frank he often was in his comments, in view of the risk that his letters might be opened—either by the ordinary or the secret censorship.

Naturally, many of his letters were simply affectionate notes to his wife, but any that contained significant comments are incorporated in this volume.

Acknowledgments

IN THE first place, tribute is due to the excellent work of Manfred Rommel and General Bayerlein in the initial assembly and classification of the material. I was greatly impressed by their diligence and conscientiousness during all the months we worked jointly on the Papers. The first section recovered was Rommel's draft narrative of the African campaign, and this was published in Germany under the title of *Krieg Ohne Hass (War Without Hate)* with a number of footnotes by Manfred Rommel and by General Bayerlein. These footnotes have been kept in the present volume—where the full material is being published for the first time—while I have added numerous editorial notes to clarify points in the narrative and to provide an historical background, relating Rommel's actions and observations to those on the Allied side.

For the recovery of the letters and their restoration to Frau Rommel, grateful thanks are due to Major-General Orlando Ward, Chief of Military History, U.S.A., and to the initiative taken by Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall, the eminent military analyst and historian, whose help I sought in the matter.

In the editing of *The Rommel Papers*, I would like to express my appreciation of the manifold help given by Mark Bonham Carter, Paul Findlay (the translator—but far more than that), and Ronald Politzer, as well as of Manfred Rommel and General Bayerlein. It was most refreshing and stimulating to have such discerning and able associates in the editorial task.

B. H. LIDDELL HART

*Wolverton Park,
Buckinghamshire, August, 1952*

Part One

FRANCE 1940

Their move swallowed up practically all the meagre amount of petrol we did receive, and transport of ammunition to the front virtually ceased. The armoured and motorised forces were all but immobilised and could never have reacted to British attacks. SOS after SOS was dispatched to Europe. With the enemy concentrating his air reconnaissance—also part of his ground reconnaissance—in the south, it was obvious that he was preparing a wide hook through the desert to outflank our line. It therefore became every day more urgent to get ourselves mobile again.

CHAPTER XVIII BACK TO TUNISIA

CHAPTER XVIII

MY STAFF in Africa were profoundly shocked when they heard what little appreciation our highest command had shown for our position.

Meanwhile, the British had not been idle. Artillery had been brought into position and supply dumps established, and they were now very active with reconnaissance. Now that we were out of range of air transport from Sicily, our petrol situation had grown even worse. In fact, we were to all intents and purposes completely immobilised. With petrol so short, the Luftwaffe was having to confine itself to only the most essential of sorties.

Although 5,000 tons of petrol had arrived in Africa for the Panzer Army during November, no less than 8,100 tons had been sunk by the British on the way. The scale of these sinkings and the quantity of petrol lost by them is made even more clear when it is realised that the greater part of the 5,000 tons which did arrive was flown over by the Luftwaffe.

In these circumstances it had now become a matter of doubt whether we would ever be able to get our formations back as far as Buerat. The major British attack was expected for mid-December and we had to be out by then. When I talked over the situation with Marshal Bastico on the 3rd December we decided to go on doing all we could to get the facts across to our higher authorities. For the rest we were completely dependent on the arrival of the promised petrol ships.

But the petrol situation did not improve during the next few days. Our first idea had been not to attempt a withdrawal until enough petrol was available to get the whole force back. But we soon had to give that up, since on the 5th December it became increasingly evident that the British attack would not be long delayed. So we began to shift the Italians back on the night of the 6th. In spite of the need for secrecy—I was certain that if the British once got wind of our intentions they would attack immediately—the Italians made an atrocious din and some of their vehicles even drove back through the moonlit night with blazing headlights.

Thus the Italians were carried away night by night to the west.

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8 Dec. 1942

MY DEAR MANFRED,

It's time that I sent you my congratulations on your 14th birthday. My wishes must not arrive too late.

The war is very hard and it looks doubtful whether I shall be permitted to return to you. You know what a difficult struggle we're having with the British at present, how great their superiority is and how small our supplies. If it goes on like this, we shall be crushed by the enemy's immense superiority. It is a bitter fate for my soldiers and me to have to go through this at the end of so heroic and victorious a struggle. We will do our very utmost to avoid defeat.

Now, to you, Manfred, dear. . . . You're going to be 14, and school will soon lie behind you. You must realise the seriousness of the situation and learn as much as you can at school. You are learning for yourself. It is not impossible that you might soon have to stand on your own feet. The times could become very, very hard for all of us. Be guided by your mother, who always has your best interests at heart. I am not pleased that the Hitler Jugend makes such heavy demands on your time and that school has to suffer as a result. It's probably too much for you. . . .

11 Dec. 1942

DEAREST LU,

Not much news. Things have livened up a little at the front. Our supply troubles are as bad as ever and are causing me a lot of headaches. I wonder if you could have an English-German dictionary sent to me by courier post. It would come in very useful.

I'm terribly looking forward to seeing your letters and especially the first one. Nehring has been relieved of his command and a Colonel-General has taken over. I wonder if he'll do any better?¹

Christmas will be here in a few days. I wish you both, from my heart, a very happy Christmas.

On the night of the 11th December, after laying down heavy artillery fire on several of our strong points, the British opened an attack along

¹Nehring, the former commander of the Afrika Korps, had been sent to command in Tunisia, but was there superseded by von Arnim.

the coast road in the north. Shortly afterwards my troops succeeded in engaging a British scouting party which had the task of reconnoitring road conditions near Merduma. Thus Montgomery's intentions were finally clear. The British made attack after attack against our strong-points in the north and soon there was no more doubt—the enemy offensive had opened.

The withdrawal of the non-motorised German and Italian troops was now complete. It being essential to avoid getting our forces too closely engaged in battle in the Mersa el Brega line we sounded the retreat in the evening and, from 7 o'clock onwards, an unbroken stream of fighting troops and transport moved off to the west. There was no hope of opposing a British outflanking thrust with the motorised forces; we had too little petrol. It would therefore have been suicide to have remained in the position any longer.

Montgomery had intended to launch his attack on the 16th December, but hastened it when he saw signs, at the beginning of the month, that Rommel was about to withdraw. His plan was to make a frontal attack with the 51st Highland Division, with the 7th Armoured Division advancing on its left flank, while the 2nd New Zealand Division carried out a much wider outflanking move with the aim of getting astride Rommel's line of retreat—at the Wadi Matraïn, near Merduma, sixty miles west of Aghella. The attack as a whole was conducted by XXX Corps (Leese) which had taken over from X Corps.

The New Zealand Division was concentrated round El Haseiat by the 9th December, and started its outflanking move from that rearward position on the 12th. Montgomery ordered that large-scale raids by the 51st Division should open on the night of the 11th, to occupy the enemy's attention, and that the frontal attack proper should be launched on the 14th. But these preliminary raids were taken by Rommel to be the start of the attack, and thus led him to hasten his intended withdrawal—an effect that spoilt Montgomery's plan.

Our petrol was only enough to carry the motorised group back to the El Mugtaa district—where, provided the British did not advance round the flank into the Merduma area, we intended to make a preliminary halt and await the renewed attack.

The British commander's planning had contained one mistake. Experience must have told him that there was a good chance that we would not accept battle at Mersa el Brega. He should not, therefore, have started bombarding our strong-points and attacking our line until his outflanking force had completed its move and was in a position to advance on the coast road in timed co-ordination with the frontal attack.

Meanwhile, on the 10th December, the Fifth Panzer Army Command had been formed in Tunis under Colonel-General von Arnim. Unfortunately, very little co-ordination existed between this new command and ourselves. We badly felt the need during this period of a single authority on African soil which could have welded together under a

common command the two armies whose fates were so closely dependent on each other.

THROUGH THE SIRTE

Once again my troops were moving through the arid and monotonous wastes of the Great Sirte, westwards—and probably for the last time. The retreat went as planned during the night, with the British obviously noticing nothing, for next morning, the 13th, they put down a violent barrage on our old positions. British fighter-bombers attacked the bottleneck at El Mugtaa all that day.

Late in the morning, a superior enemy force launched an attack on Combat Group Ariete, which was located south-west of El Aghella, with its right flank resting on the Sebcha Chebira and its left linking up with 90th Light Division. Bitter fighting ensued against 80 British tanks and lasted for nearly ten hours. The Italians put up a magnificent fight, for which they deserved the utmost credit. Finally, in the evening, the British were thrown back by a counter attack of the Centauro's armoured regiment, leaving 22 tanks and 2 armoured cars burnt out or damaged on the battlefield. The British intention of cutting off the 90th Light Division had been foiled.

Throughout that day I had reconnaissance forces out in the Merduma area to prevent a surprise attack on the coast road by an enemy outflanking column.

That day the British sank a tanker and two fast ships laden with a total of 3,500 tons of petrol. This was a heavy blow for us, particularly in view of the British threat from the south, which made a speed-up in the operation essential.

Air reconnaissance, which had been specially ordered because of the anxiety we felt for our flank, very soon reported the advance of powerful British forces on Merduma. This meant that we now had to use our last drop of petrol to get out of the sack. It was infuriating for me to have to stand idly by and watch the wonderful opportunities which the enemy offered us for effective counter-moves. For example, the British commander used a column of only about 2,000 vehicles for his southern hook, and it would have been simple enough, if only we had had the petrol, to have left a small force holding the Mugtaa defile while the bulk of our motorised forces attacked and destroyed the enemy outflanking column. As things were, however, the situation presented us with deadly peril.

So that night the retreat was resumed. Next morning, the 21st Panzer Division held the Mugtaa defile as rearguard. At about 10.00 hours, I moved Army H.Q. back to a point some 30 miles east of Noflia, where, during the afternoon, I received news from the Luftwaffe commander that the British had reached a point 20 miles south-east of

Merduma. This was bad news indeed, because there was then very little petrol left at the front and we had to get some up over the road. Meanwhile, the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, which was screening our southern front, was being slowly forced back to Merduma by the greatly superior enemy force.

At about midday a British bomber formation flew over, the first for a long time, and chose my H.Q. as a target for its bombs, probably attracted by General Seidemann's highly conspicuous Storch. The Ic truck was burnt out and several other vehicles were damaged.

During the afternoon the 15th Panzer Division, with a combat group of 21st Panzer Division, moved in front of Merduma to hold the Via Balbia open for the main body of the 21st Panzer Division, which was still heavily engaged at Mugtaa. To avoid the forces at Mugtaa fighting themselves to a standstill, I at length gave the order for a retreat to the level of Arco dei Fileni.

In the evening the British broke through the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion's screen near Merduma and a considerable force moved off west towards Nofilia in an attempt to outmarch us.

I now decided to deploy all troops within reach in the district round Nofilia. The Afrika Korps moved off to its new positions during the night, with the 90th Light Division remaining as rearguard at Wadi Matratin. Dawn found the 21st Panzer Division on the march to Nofilia, but the 15th Panzer Division's petrol was late in getting up and the division was still standing fast at Merduma.

In the early hours of the 16th, British infantry succeeded in taking a commanding height in front of the 90th Light Division's rearguard line. By the time the 15th Panzer Division arrived at the Via Balbia, with the main body of the enemy following up hard on its heels, the British vanguard had already crossed the road. However, the division succeeded in scattering the British vanguard and fighting its way through towards Nofilia with very few casualties. With the British main body following it up so closely it was now impossible for the division to hold the rearguard line on the 90th Light Division's southern flank, as had originally been intended. This made the 90th Light's position untenable and they, too, had to be brought back to Nofilia.

DEAREST LU,

16 Dec. 1942

We've made camp in flower-decked meadows. But we're on the way back, alas, and there's no prospect of the situation improving. Eight more days to Christmas. I wonder where we'll be then.

The British columns in the south now made another attempt to cut us off. A Cairo Radio broadcast announced that we were in a bottle which the British commander was about to cork. When we heard this I said to my officers that the bottle would soon be empty if only we could

get our tanks full. Our petrol was only just enough to get us back to Nofilia, and, with no substantial supplies in sight, I found myself compelled to face the prospect of holding on in the Nofilia area for another day, in spite of the threatened encirclement. To prevent the enemy making a quick dash to the coast road and cutting it beyond us, our formations were ordered to deploy in depth along the road to the west. Thus the screen formed by the Afrika Korps round Nofilia was to be continued west along the road by the 33rd and 580th Reconnaissance Battalions, the Panzer Grenadier Regiment "Afrika", and the 90th Light Division in that order. The Sirte area was held by the "Young Fascist" Division and Combat Group Ariete.

During the night our forces moved into the areas assigned to them and by morning they were in position, but again out of petrol. In the course of the morning [17th] the British attacked at a point 6 to 10 miles south-west of Nofilia and a violent action started with units of the Afrika Korps and the 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion, all of which were immobilised. The battle drew steadily closer to the coast road. Finally, after a few tons of petrol had at long last arrived, a counter-attack was launched by elements of the Afrika Korps and the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, and 20 British tanks were shot up in heavy fighting. This held the road open and, when the petrol ration came through, the units which had been threatened with encirclement streamed back along it to the west.

At nine o'clock that morning I left my H.Q. to persuade Marshal Bastico to join with me in contesting the order to hold on at any price to the Buerat position. I regarded it merely as an intermediate stop; I wanted to force the British to a lengthy halt, but intended to withdraw to Tarhuna-Homs when they renewed their attack. It was clear by this time that the Comando Supremo would go on giving authority to retreat at the last possible moment, that is to say, when the danger to the army was so great that it could even be seen from the perspective of Rome. But that could be too late. The withdrawal to Gabes could have been planned far more systematically and far more to our advantage, if people had acted consistently with the end in view, instead of repeatedly allowing themselves to be forced into making emergency decisions at the last moment under the impact of enemy pressure.

On the way I discussed the matter with General Navarrini. He was not very optimistic and thought it doubtful whether, with petrol so short, we would ever get back that far. I pointed out that the main thing for us was on no account to accept a decisive battle and to do everything in our power to avoid the British pinning down our forces frontally. It was, of course, true that our speed of retreat would be determined by the small amount of petrol which could be brought up in any one day.¹

¹This point deserves emphasis, since it has a constant bearing on any strategical and tactical deductions about the course of the operations during the British advance through Tripolitania.

But I thought that there was still a hope that the British would not throw their main effort into an outflanking drive round the south. Had they done so, then our escape would more than once have been a matter of grave doubt.

At about 12.00 hours I went into conference with Marshal Bastico at Buerat. After I had once again stressed the importance of starting to think now about the evacuation of Tripolitania, we eventually decided to wireless a joint appreciation of the situation to the Commando Supremo and to ask once again for decisions. I was to prepare the appreciation. During the conversation Marshal Bastico explained in some detail the results which would ensue from the evacuation of Tripolitania. But with supply conditions in such a state, these results were inevitable. A soldier must learn to accept facts.

Bastico himself was fully aware of the fact that we would not be able to hold on to Buerat. I asked him to look on the Tarhuna-Homs line as our next stop. Immediately after the conference was over I dictated my appreciation, in which I asked permission to evacuate the non-motorised infantry by stages from the Buerat position. I also asked that on the wider issue all operational thinking should be directed towards executing the Gabes plan. My appreciation was endorsed by Marshal Bastico in all essential points.

The Panzer Army's supply situation did not improve. Of ten large ships destined for Tripoli, nine were sunk by the British and the tenth carried no petrol.

To add to our worries, we were in a continual state of anxiety about Tunisia. We received virtually no comprehensive information on which we might have formed a judgment of the situation on that front. Both armies were supposed to assume that the other could maintain its position and to act accordingly. My main fear was that the British and Americans might take their correct operational decision and attack the Gabes bottleneck from Southern Tunisia, thus driving a wedge between the two armies. It was, in fact, partly this that made me in such a hurry to get back to the west and if it had been left to me and I had had more petrol, I would probably have moved across into Tunisia far earlier than I actually did.

DEAREST LU,

18 Dec. 1942

We're in heavy fighting again, with little hope of success, for we're short of everything. One's personal fate fades into the background in face of the bitter fate of the army, and the consequences and effects it will have.

Bastico was also very depressed yesterday. The situation in the west seems to be no better, particularly in the ports. We are hoping to be able to carry on for a few days yet. But petrol is short, and without petrol there's nothing to be done.

On the 18th December I inspected the Buerat position, the construction of which had meanwhile been going ahead under the direction of Westphal, so far as our very limited resources permitted. 80,000 mines had been laid, most of them, however, anti-personnel mines. At several points along the front an anti-tank ditch had been dug by German and Italian labour units.

Meanwhile, the British had announced that they had closed the ring round Nofilia and were about to mop up its contents. Several of our units were said to be inside and making vain attempts to break out. In fact, only one platoon had been left inside and even that succeeded in breaking out.

On the afternoon of the 19th of December, a Duce order arrived in reply to the appreciation which Marshal Bastico and I had sent jointly to the Commando Supremo. Judged in relation to the circumstances at that time, its wording was pretty bombastic. It read roughly as follows:

"Resist to the uttermost, I repeat, resist to the uttermost with all troops of the German-Italian Army in the Buerat position."

How did Mussolini imagine such actions were fought? I had really done all I could to arouse some understanding of the art of desert warfare in our higher commands and had particularly emphasised that to concern oneself with territory was mere prejudice. The all-important principle was to keep on the move until a tactically favourable position for battle was found and then to fight. In the conditions we were facing, that position was the Gabes line. Nevertheless, orders were once again issued to the troops to "resist to the uttermost".

I immediately wirelessly Marshal Cavallero and asked him what we were to do if the enemy outmarched us in the south and simply chose not to do battle with the Buerat garrison.

Marshal Cavallero replied that the battle should be so conducted that the Italian troops were not sacrificed again. I thereupon instructed General Mancinelli to drive personally to Marshal Bastico and inform him that I could not "resist to the uttermost" in the Buerat position and at the same time get the Italians away. He had to make up his mind which it was to be. Bastico replied evasively.

His position was extremely unpleasant. He was very well aware of the difficulties we were facing and, as I have already said, ultimately realised the impossibility of making a lengthy stand at any point this side of Gabes. But as Governor of Libya he did not feel he could come out in favour of evacuating Tripolitania. Besides, he knew that Cavallero and his clique were only just waiting for an occasion to get rid of him as a scapegoat for their own mistakes.

I was, in fact, very much afraid at that time that the British commander might continue his attempt to outmarch us in the south. If he had done so, then the Buerat position would have collapsed without a shot.

Montgomery could not continue a large-scale advance for administrative reasons. So he preferred to wait until he had built up sufficient stocks to carry the advance right through to Tripoli without a pause. "I was also concerned with ensuring the correct balance in the rear areas and, in planning the next phase of our advance, was anxious to bring forward a corps to occupy the El Aghetta position when XXX Corps moved on again to the west." X Corps was to be brought up—comprising the 1st Armoured, 50th, and 4th Indian Divisions. Its move up, however, was delayed by supply complications arising from damage to the port of Benghazi in heavy gales on the 4th and 5th of January.

Characteristically also, the Luftwaffe tried to have another go at us. Kesselring declared that we had improperly used petrol intended for the front in the rear areas, and that it was because of this that we were unable to undertake any counter-moves with our motorised forces. There was not the slightest truth in this accusation and the only purpose of it was probably to provide a story to account for the small quantities of petrol which were reaching us. Actually, 95 per cent of the petrol we had received had been used in withdrawing the front and getting up petrol to the fighting formations. The only people who had taken petrol without authority were Luftwaffe units. For days past hundreds of supply lorries had stood stationary on the road with empty tanks, and the troops had now barely enough ammunition to keep the enemy at bay. We were, therefore, intensely angry at this story and immediately sent Kesselring a signal telling him what we thought about it.

The British now seemed to be undertaking large-scale supply operations in preparation for a more complete outflanking drive. Endless columns of vehicles were moving west down the Via Balbia from Tobruk and Benghazi and unloading was going on at top speed in both the ports.

Intensive operations were being conducted against our supplies by the Long-Range Desert Group, working to a well-thought-out plan. They succeeded again and again in shooting up supply lorries behind our lines, laying mines, cutting down telephone poles and similar nefarious activities. Their parties were extremely difficult to catch, for they made only the briefest of appearances and then vanished without trace back into the desert.

While the motorised troops continued to hold their position at Sirte, tremendous efforts were made to build up the Buerat position. We laid every mine we had. In case the Duce should really decide to hold a fixed front at Buerat we at least wanted to be prepared. It would, of course, have been better to have used all our resources in pushing ahead with the Tarhuna-Homs line, where the non-motorised Italians could have been used to far better advantage.

Soon the Buerat front was strong enough to resist a fair-scale British break-through attempt—that is, of course, assuming that they chose to attack it frontally. Like almost every other position in North Africa, the enemy could make a hook round the south to attack the Via Balbia,

without even making contact with the fortified line. If he decided to throw several divisions into such a move the battle would be decided by the motorised forces alone. And in motorised forces we were hopelessly inferior—quite apart from the fact that our petrol would not possibly run to a mobile battle. Non-motorised forces cannot create a centre of gravity quickly enough, and they thus lack the quality which matters most in mechanised warfare. Because of their lack of speed the enemy can take them on one after the other, each time with locally superior forces, and destroy them piecemeal without suffering undue casualties himself.

During the next few days I repeatedly pointed out that the British might choose to make no frontal assault on the Buerat position, but instead go round its southern flank. I asked for instructions for such an event. On each occasion I received an answer referring me to the Duce's order. Everybody in Rome was scared to death of making an independent decision and invariably tried to unload the responsibility on to somebody else. I decided on no account to let up until I had been given an answer which did justice to my question. I had no wish to be the scapegoat for the armchair strategists in Rome.

DEAREST LU,

To-day my thoughts are more than ever with you two at home. To you, Manfred, once more all the best for your 15th year. I expect you will already have received my birthday letter. And I wish you both a very happy Christmas. God will help us as in the past.

... I'm going off very early this morning into the country and will be celebrating this evening among the men. They're in top spirits, thank God, and it takes great strength not to let them see how heavily the situation is pressing on us.

Kesselring was here yesterday. New promises were made, but it will be the same as it ever was. They can't be kept because the enemy puts his pencil through all our supply calculations.

On the 24th December we set off at 07.00 hours on a beautiful sunny morning to inspect the country south of our front. First we drove along the Via Balbia and then—with two Italian armoured cars as escort—through the fantastically fissured Wadi Zem-Zem towards El Fashia. Soon we began to find the tracks of British vehicles, probably made by some of Stirling's people [*actually, the Long-Range Desert Group*] who had been round there on the job of harassing our supply traffic. The tracks were comparatively new and we kept a sharp look-out to see if we could catch a "Tommy." Near El Fashia I suddenly spotted a lone vehicle. We gave chase, but soon found that its crew was Italian. Troops from

24 Dec. 1942

my *Kampstaffel* were also in the area. They had surprised some British Commandos the day before and captured maps marked with British store dumps and strong points. Now they were combing through the district also hoping to stumble on a "Tommy."

During the return journey our Christmas dinner trotted up to us in the shape of a herd of gazelles. Armbruster [*an interpreter on the staff of the Panzer Army*] and I each succeeded in bringing down one of these speedy animals from the moving cars.

When I arrived back at H.Q. I learnt that the British had meanwhile launched an attack south of Ssrte with 4,500 vehicles and were now moving on to the west. In Sirte itself, the men of the 15th Panzer Division had just got together for their Christmas celebration when the attack came and they had to pack up and hastily evacuate the district. At about 17.00 hours General Bayerlein and I joined the H.Q. Company's Christmas party, where I received a present of a miniature petrol drum, containing, instead of petrol, a pound or two of captured coffee. Thus proper homage was paid to our most serious problem even on that day. At 20.00 hours I invited several people from my immediate staff to share a meal off the gazelles we had brought in that morning.

During next day [*the 25th of December*] the British halted their advance and seemed to be waiting for reinforcements and stores to be brought up. The 90th Light Division and 580th Reconnaissance Battalion, who were holding the rearguard line, were pulled back step by step behind the Buerat position.

I took this opportunity to inspect the Buerat position from the enemy's side, mainly to find out how effective our decoy installations were. At El Alamein, the British had concentrated a tornado of shells on our 88-mm. gun positions, in order to neutralise from the outset the guns which were most dangerous to them. So this time we were making extensive use of dummies to disperse the effect of the British artillery.

By the 29th of December all troops had withdrawn behind the Buerat line.

DEAREST LU,

Our fate is gradually working itself out. Supplies have been very short and it would need a miracle for us to hold on much longer. What is to happen now lies in God's hands. We'll go on fighting as long as it's at all possible. I saw this coming when we were last together and discussed the most important things with you.

In these hard days my thoughts are more than ever with you. I have to keep telling myself that it will all come right again some day. Keep your chin up and I'll do the same.

28 Dec. 1942

The battle has now been joined. I haven't the slightest doubt about its outcome, the forces are too unequal. Supplies have almost entirely dried up. So now we must surrender ourselves to the inevitable and hope that God will yet prosper our cause. I was at the front yesterday and am going again to-day.

Kesselring is coming again to-day and there is a hope that the situation may change "slightly" in our favour. Not much, but still a little. One can't, of course, expect anything very great.

At midday I'm having a meeting with Bastico, who is more and more feeling himself as C.-in-C. That's something one simply has to swallow. Anyway, it does mean that he shares the responsibility. . . .

I'm badly worried about the heavy fighting going on in the East [*Stalingrad*]. Let's hope we'll come through it all right. The army here is in the best of spirits. It's a good thing the men don't know everything.

BUERAT RESPITE

To our surprise, the enemy halted at Buerat and thus granted us yet another reprieve, which we immediately used to plead once again for the withdrawal of the Italian troops to Tarhuna. If we were to escape envelopment from the south, then the non-motorised Italians had to get out—as at Mersa el Brega—while the going was good.

Only light forces had followed up Rommel's retreat to the Buerat line. Montgomery was planning to launch his attack on that line, with the XXX Corps, on the 15th January.

Accordingly, on the 31st of December, yet another conference took place between Marshal Bastico and myself. The Commando Supremo had apparently now decided, after a long shilly-shally, not to risk the possible destruction of the army at Buerat. But they still wanted to have it both ways and thought that I should hold the Buerat position to the extreme limit of resistance and, if destruction threatened, retire to the west. They said it was essential to maintain resistance in Tripolitania for at least another month or two. I replied at once that the length of our stay in Tripolitania would be decided by Montgomery and not by the Commando Supremo, and that the non-motorised troops must be moved back immediately. It would be too late once the British had launched their attack. I drew particular attention to the fact that the enemy had hitherto always tried to outflank us outside the range of our fire.

Marshal Bastico thereupon asked whether I was prepared to order the withdrawal of the non-motorised forces myself. This, of course,

31 Dec. 1942

would have been a way out, but it would have brought me into even worse odour with the Comando Supremo, with results which would have hit the whole army. They would, moreover, have doubtless taken the first opportunity of sending me another Duce order. It was thus a matter of principle. I therefore replied that I must insist on receiving Marshal Bastico's formal authority for the withdrawal of the infantry divisions, but would decide myself when they would actually move off.

It is always a bad sign in an army when scapegoats are habitually sought out and brought to sacrifice for every conceivable mistake. It usually shows something very wrong in the highest command. It completely inhibits the willingness of junior commanders to take decisions, for they will always try to get chapter and verse for everything they do, finishing up more often than not with a miserable piece of casuistry instead of the decision which would spell release. The usual result is that the man who never does more than supinely pass on the opinion of his seniors is brought to the top, while the really valuable man, the man who accepts nothing ready-made but has an opinion of his own, gets put on the shelf.

Marshal Bastico was a fundamentally decent man with a sober military understanding and considerable moral stamina. He saw the position as I did, in its true light, but had the misfortune to be charged by the Comando Supremo with the task of representing the Duce's point of view to me. As this was usually fallacious he was always on bad ground in the argument which followed. He did, in fact, always take my part, and by his efforts at mediation contributed greatly to the fact that the retreat through Tripolitania, in spite of the senseless obstinacy of our superiors, was a success.

So on this New Year's Eve we sat together in the operations truck in a mood of grim humour. As far as possible we kept off the military situation and so managed to stay in reasonably good spirits.

DEAREST LU,

The old year did not pass without some easing of our situation. So I enter 1943 with new hope. That's at least something.

My most heartfelt wishes for the New Year to you and Manfred. Bayerlein, Bonin and I sat cosily round in our small command vehicle till midnight and our thoughts turned frequently towards home. . . .

A few days later, the order arrived from Marshal Bastico to start shifting the Italian troops back to the Tarhuna-Homs line. But there was still a string attached to it, for it charged us with the task of holding up the British in front of the Tripoli defences for at least six weeks. I have already shown how pointless it was to fix such targets. Of course I tried to gain as much time as I could, but it never occurred to me to

commit myself to definite dates. I immediately reported to this effect through Bastico to the Comando Supremo.

During the lull at the beginning of January 1943, I kept continually on the move with Bayerlein, trying to gain a picture of the country over which the forthcoming battle would be fought, and to have the battlefield, as it were, imprinted on my mind. We took this opportunity to visit the old Roman city of Leptis Magna, the ruins of which were still standing. An Italian professor acted as our guide and explained the features of the place in excellent German. But our thoughts were more with Montgomery than with ancient ruins. Moreover, the strain and lack of sleep of the past few days were beginning to tell, and my A.D.C., Lieutenant von Hardtdegen, particularly distinguished himself by falling asleep between two pieces of feminine statuary. Bayerlein photographed him there.

5 Jan. 1943

DEAREST LU,

Nothing new to report from here. The enemy still doesn't risk an attack. I wonder how long it will be? I wrote to Helene and Gertrud yesterday. It's still cold and windy. The only time it gets tolerably warm is when the sun comes through for a bit at midday. That's something I'm not used to in Africa. I've had a letter from von Luepke, who was taken prisoner a year ago. He was in South Africa, escaped and trekked north with another man for four months. Finally, a Zulu handed him over to the British again.

There's very little post coming through at the moment; most of what comes is from November. There's probably a whole lot at the bottom of the sea. I'm in a slightly better humour again, there being now some hope that we'll be able to make a stand somewhere.

7 Jan. 1943

Kesselring and Cavallero have been here, also Gause. But they're not even making promises now. We've got to manage as best we can. Gause will be ringing up to ask you to get a couple of pairs of Marshal's epaulettes with batons. It's still quiet here, our friends are very cautious.

Nothing new. Our opponents are taking their time over things, which means a more orderly existence for us. I went a long way inland yesterday and am going off on another reconnaissance to-day.

How are things with you? The field post, like supplies generally, is working wretchedly. Did Manfred ever receive my birthday letter? He doesn't mention it.

Meanwhile, the British moved farther up, obviously still intending to put the main weight of their attack on the south. British bomber

8 Jan. 1943

activity was also increasing again, and they were attacking our supply installations day and night. Thirty tons of ammunition reached the front between the 1st and 8th January, as against 50 tons used. During the same period we used 1,900 tons of petrol; 800 arrived.

On about the 10th January, the threat of an Anglo-American attack from Tunisia on the Gabes defile [*mid-way between Tripoli and Tunis*] became particularly acute. This operation would have divided the two armies. Marshal Cavallero accordingly asked me whether I could move a division across there. As this defile represented a lifeline for us, I suggested sending over the 21st Panzer Division and supplying it from Tunis. The division moved off to the west on the morning of the 13th.

DEAREST LU,

Now we're getting on the move again. You can imagine my anxieties. My thoughts rest with you, in these long and wakeful nights.

It's Bayerlein's birthday and he's just being serenaded. The Afrika Korps has a particularly high regard for him and has much to thank him for. There's no important change yet in the situation. There was a sand-storm yesterday and our movements went unobserved. Things in the east seem to be on the mend again, which is a great relief. But how they'll go here will depend in the long run entirely on supplies. And I need not tell you what they're like. The enemy air force is already very active.

We now learnt, through our wireless interception service, that the enemy would complete his preparations and be ready to attack on January 15. We had already established the presence of 400 to 500 British aircraft on the forward airfields—not many, it is true, compared with their numbers at El Alamein, but more than double those of the German-Italian air force, which also included no heavy bombers. The line-up of forces on the 15th was approximately as follows:

	British	Axis
TANKS	approximately 650 ¹	36 German, 57 Italian
GUNS	" "	72 German, 98 Italian
ANTI-TANK GUNS	" "	550 111 German, 66 Italian
ARMoured CARS	" "	200 17 German, 16 Italian

¹The actual number of tanks that Montgomery brought up for this thrust was 450. The plan of attack was that the 51st Division would push along the coast road, with the 23rd Armoured Brigade on its left flank to develop local leverage, while the 7th Armoured Division and 2nd New Zealand Division carried out a wider manoeuvre. Montgomery took personal command of the coastal thrust, so that Leese might be more free to conduct the outflanking operation—which was to drive towards Tripoli by way of Beni Uliid and Tarhuna.

In the event the British pushed their artillery forward on the night of the 14th. The first attacks followed at first light on the 15th, launched in the southern sector by the 7th Armoured Division and elements of the 2nd New Zealand Division. They first made a thrust on Fortino with about 140 tanks and 100 armoured cars, and then went straight on to attack the 15th Panzer Division. There they were brought to a halt. After bringing up artillery they continued their attack in the early afternoon and a violent tank battle ensued which went to our advantage. The British left 33 tanks lying on the battlefield. We lost two.

The British were now moving up over the whole of the rest of the front and it was obvious that they would continue their attack with all their strength, concentrating the main weight in the south. We had neither the petrol nor the ammunition to guarantee a defence in such a battle, and so orders went out to retire to the west. All troops, German and Italian, moved off during the night.

DEAREST LU,

Our movement has begun. How fast it will go will depend on the pressure. I'm not feeling too good, for obvious reasons. Berndt has been away again and is expected back to-morrow.

Physically I'm well so far. Of course the nervous strain is particularly severe just now and I have to keep a real grip on myself.

15 Jan. 1943

THE END IN TRIPOLITANIA

Next day, the 16th January, the British followed up closely and soon a strong British force with a total of 100 fighting vehicles launched an attack against the thirty of 15th Panzer Division. With nothing on its flanks, either north or south, the division was in a far from comfortable position. The British drove recklessly into their fire and lost another 20 tanks in heavy fighting. The 90th Light Division threw back the 51st [*Highland*] Division after it had already penetrated into the outpost positions of the rearguard line.

The petrol shortage now began to make itself felt again, for consumption had, of course, gone up considerably with the increased movement. Partly for this reason and partly because of the steadily increasing enemy strength we were not going to be able to keep up the fight in open country much longer and so had to avoid becoming too closely involved in the battle.

DEAREST LU,

The second day of the battle lies behind us. It was tough going on the southern flank, and it will be a miracle if we can hold out for long against this overwhelming onslaught. I've seen this coming, as you know, even though other people have until recently taken a much more favourable view of our situation. In the fighting ahead we will do our duty as our country expects of us.

On the 17th January rearguard fighting developed near Beni Uliid, in which the mass of 7th Armoured Division moved as if to outflank and cut off our units. Accordingly the 90th Light Division also now made a fighting withdrawal.

This front, with its wide-open southern flank, could not, of course, be held for long without running the risk of losing a considerable part of our force. I therefore gave orders for the retreat to the Tarhuna-Homs line to begin on the night of the 17th January. To make quite certain of the safety of the Italian infantry, I also gave orders for their transport back to the Tripoli defence line to begin immediately the motorised forces arrived in the Tarhuna-Homs line.

At midday on the 17th, I informed the Chief of Staff of the Italian Command in Libya that in face of the enormous superiority of the enemy there could be no thought of holding the Tarhuna-Homs line. We had to be prepared to see the British arrive in front of Tripoli as early as the 20th January.

While the Italians were being carried off to the west, the British followed up with strong forces and moved up to our line. The Italian High Command had informed me that the Tarhuna-Homs line was difficult to outflank. In other respects, too, the defensive possibilities were extremely good, for any British attack from the south or south-east had to be made over sandy and adverse country. In fact, there is no doubt that given a somewhat better stock of supplies, we could have kept the enemy at bay here for a very considerable time.

DEAREST LU,

The fighting continues with undiminished violence. We're now in fairly hilly country where we hope to make something of a stand. But there's no compensating for the inequality between the two forces. Berndt has arrived back, Kesselring has supplanted him in the Fuehrer's favour. His journey was certainly very useful and timely, but whether the expectations can be fulfilled is another matter. So much has already been overtaken by events and we still have the worst to come. Berndt brought me the warmest greetings from the Fuehrer, whose unbounded confidence I still enjoy. And indeed we

17 Jan. 1943

are doing all that is humanly possible in this situation. But whether success will be granted us is of course more than doubtful.

The times have grown very grave (in the East also). There's going to be total mobilisation of labour for every single German without regard for place of residence, status, property or age. You should keep your eyes open in good time for something suitable. Manfred, too, will soon have to stand behind a work bench or an anti-aircraft gun. It is, as you know, a matter of life or death for the German people. I'm writing this to you because I want to tell you quite openly what is likely to happen. It's better to get used to the idea early, for then it's easier to adapt oneself. Of course things are not so rosy either for our enemies, especially the Russians. For a long time now they've been brutally forcing the last ounce of work out of every section of their people. It is only by this that their latest successes can be explained.

On the 19th January about 200 British tanks pushed on along the road to Tarhuna in an attempt to overrun my troops in their first rush. But they were halted, with very severe losses, by the concentrated fire of our artillery.

On the same morning I set up my H.Q. in a settler's farm on a hill north-west of Tarhuna, from where we could see dust-clouds stirred up by British vehicles moving along the Tarhuna-Garian road, south of Tarhuna. On arriving a few hours later at the 15th Panzer Division, I discovered that the British were on the point of launching a thrust on Garian with a whole armoured division. This was a particularly threatening move and I threw in the whole of our artillery to meet it. Immediate regrouping became necessary. The 164th Division, units of the Parachute Brigade and the Reconnaissance Group were deployed in a screen to the west to prevent a British attack on the Tarhuna-Castel Benito road. Soon the enemy brought his artillery up and poured shells into our positions near Tarhuna. The British commander was now conducting his operations far more energetically than he had done in the past.

Meanwhile, no fighting of any consequence took place in the northern sector, and we were able to complete the disengagement of the forces still in the Homs area according to plan.

In the evening the British intention became finally clear—to bind down our forces by heavy attacks at Homs and Tarhuna, while at the same time carrying out an outflanking movement on a major scale through Garian. Thousands upon thousands of British vehicles were concentrated in the south. During the day the Luftwaffe tried all they could to hold up the advance of the southern British column, but with little success; by evening the column had reached a point some 30 miles from Garian and had crossed the Tarhuna-Garian road. When this news came in I was forced to decide to give up Tarhuna immediately

in order to release a large enough striking group with which to oppose the enemy advancing deep in our flank. It was also necessary to speed up the withdrawal of the Italians still remaining in the Homs area.

All moves were carried out as planned in the night of the 19th January, and by morning our dispositions were as follows:

- (a) During the night the 90th Light Division had relieved the Italian Infantry at Homs and taken up positions as rearguard.
- (b) The 164th Division was holding the defile west of Tarhuna with the Parachute Brigade deployed in depth behind it to prevent a British attack on the road.
- (c) The 15th Panzer Division and Reconnaissance Group Luck were located in the area round Azizia to parry a thrust up from Garian to the north.
- (d) The "Young Fascist" Division and Combat Group Centauro were positioned south of Sorman to meet any British attacks still farther west.

In the early hours of that morning gigantic explosions from the direction of Tripoli announced the demolition of the port installations. All the more important depots were destroyed, there now being no further hope of retaining our hold on the port.

DEAREST LU,
20 Jan. 1943

We got through yesterday very well, but the supply position is making our situation more difficult every day. The enemy is trying hard to shift the fighting to the west as quickly as possible. . . .

. . . Paulus is perhaps even worse off than I am. He has a more inhuman enemy. We can only hope that God does not desert us altogether. [*Paulus was commanding the forces at Stalingrad which had now been cut off and surrounded by the Russians.*]

In the early morning [*of the 20th*], a signal arrived from Marshal Cavallero, sent by him on instructions from the Duce, in which the latter stated that my decision to withdraw our forces from the Tarhuna-Homs line and position them to meet the expected major attack in the Azizia-Sorman area was contrary to his instructions to hold the Tarhuna-Homs line for at least three weeks. The situation was not serious enough to justify my action, which had been over-hasty. A stand simply must be made, as otherwise the Mareth line could not be properly built up. For the rest, Cavallero referred me expressly to the Duce's directives and demanded my compliance.

We gasped when we received this signal. A position which has been broken through or outflanked is valueless unless there are mobile forces

available to throw back the enemy outflanking column. The best strategic plan is useless if it cannot be executed tactically.

I immediately wiredless the Comando Supremo to this effect but had an opportunity the same afternoon of speaking to Marshal Cavallero in person, in the presence of Field Marshal Kesselring and Marshal Bastico. I gave my views on the signal we had received that morning and stated forcibly that the time limits I had been given had come from Mussolini and Cavallero; I had never accepted them. At the conclusion of the discussion, which became very stormy, I demanded a specific Comando Supremo decision as to whether we were to do battle with the British at Tarhuna-Homs and thereby deliver up the army to certain destruction, or whether we were to move off to Tunisia. "You can either hold on to Tripoli a few more days and lose the army, or lose Tripoli a few days earlier and save the army for Tunis. Make up your mind," I said in the end to Marshal Cavallero. During the meeting the bad news came in that British torpedo-boats had sunk ten out of fourteen petrol barges west of Tripoli.

Next day [*the 21st*], the enemy attacked sharply at all points of the front. Strong British columns worked their way through the wadis between Garian and Tarhuna, which the Italians had described as completely impassable, and threatened to cut off the 164th Division's rearguard, west of Tarhuna. I sent a combat group under General Frantz to meet this move.

Meanwhile, other British forces made an attempt from the east to take the pass held by troops of the 164th Division west of Tarhuna, but without success. The enemy's strength in this sector was steadily increasing and, in view of the acute danger to our right flank, I was compelled to order the withdrawal of the non-motorised infantry from the Tripoli defence line and their transport back to the Zavia area. Marshal Cavallero, on behalf of the Duce, avoided giving a clear-cut decision on my question whether or not Tripoli should be defended to the last. He instructed me that the army must be preserved, but that as much time was to be gained as possible.

Incidentally, the events of that day fully confirmed the correctness of my judgment on the 19th January and justified the removal of the motorised forces into the Sorman-Azizia area. Had we stayed in the Tarhuna-Homs line, as the Duce was insisting from his seat in Rome, the army with all its infantry would have been surrounded and destroyed.

22 Jan. 1943

DEAREST LU,

I couldn't write yesterday. There was too much doing from morning till night. Severe rebuke from Rome because we're not holding out any longer against the enemy pressure. We do what we can. Yesterday's developments have completely justified my course

of action. With the supply difficulties we're having, it's a question of whether we'll manage to carry on the struggle at all for long. We intend to fight and will fight as long as it is possible. I have my troubles with our Allies, that I need not tell you. That they should now become saucy, on top of everything else, was only to be expected. I don't think they'll be with us much longer. People and nations don't change.

The movement west continued until the 22nd, by which time the enemy had brought up 6,000 vehicles to Tarhuna and was expected to attack on the 23rd. Consequently, I now found myself compelled to order the evacuation of Tripoli, after all its installations had been destroyed.

The appointed moves were completed during the night, under heavy enemy pressure and non-stop fighter-bomber attacks. Our success in getting almost all our material and stores away from Tripoli was a considerable feat on the part of our Quartermaster, as only 7 per cent could be taken by sea, the remaining 93 per cent having to go by road. Food which we had to leave behind was handed over to the Prefect for distribution to the civil population.

DEAREST LU,

I hope to make a good job of the manoeuvre in progress now. There is very lovely country round here, one would like to travel through it at ease in peace-time. Will that ever be?

Starting from midday on the 23rd January, the British launched strong forces against the Tripoli defence line, but were beaten off. Our 30,000 Italian infantrymen were now to be moved back immediately to assist in the construction of the Mareth line. To secure their withdrawal against a surprise attack, the remaining forces were again grouped in a screen along the road far to the west. In the afternoon I managed to take a look round the Roman ruins at Sabratha.

The Eighth Army entered Tripoli three months to the day after launching its attack at Alamain—having advanced 1,400 miles.

After the fall of Tripoli, the British allowed themselves a short pause to regroup and bring up supplies. This suited us very well for it gave us time at least to carry away the supplies we had stored in the Zuara area.

DEAREST LU,

Yesterday went as planned. I simply can't tell you how hard it is for me to undergo this retreat and all that goes with it. Day and night I'm tormented by the thought that things might go really wrong

here in Africa. I'm so depressed that I can hardly do my work. Perhaps someone else would see a little more light in the situation and be able to make something of it. K. [Kesselring], for example, is full of optimism. Maybe he sees in me the reason why the army has not made a longer stand. He can have no idea of the true value of my troops, especially the Italians, or of the balance of strength which is weighted even more heavily against us by the excellent motorisation of the enemy, his establishment of tanks and armoured cars and his favourable supply situation. I'm waiting anxiously to see what's going to happen. I shall hold on here as long as I can. K. is now my superior.

Note by General Bayerlein.—At that time, Rommel's recall was being pressed by the Italians, C.-in-C. South and the Fuehrer's H.Q., on the grounds that he had given up the Tarhuna-Homs position against the Fuehrer's and Duce's orders. Rommel was deeply distressed at first by these attempts.

On the 26th January, we shifted Army H.Q. into the district west of Ben Gardane [across the Tunisian frontier]. On the way we saw the railway which was under construction between Tunis and the Libyan frontier. If only we could have held the front at Sirte for three months, this railway would probably have been completed between Tunis and Sirte. It was greatly to our disadvantage that the Italians had not built a line along the North African coast before the war, as a supply route several hundred miles long is really only tolerable if the bulk of the goods can be carried either by rail or sea. Road transport is relatively uneconomic due to the large amount of petrol it consumes.

At midday on the 26th I received a signal from the Commando Supremo informing me that on account of my bad state of health, I was to be released from my command when we reached the Mareth line, the actual date being left to me. An Italian Army Command was to be formed under General Messe, who had led the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia. After my experience during the retreat, I had little desire to go on any longer playing the scapegoat for a pack of incompetents and requested the Commando Supremo to send General Messe to Africa as soon as possible, so that he could be initiated into his new command.

DEAREST LU,

In a few days I shall be giving up command of the army to an Italian, for the sole reason that "my present state of health does not permit me to carry on." Of course it's really for quite other reasons,¹ principally that of prestige. I have done all I can to maintain the theatre of war, in spite of the indescribable difficulties in all fields. I am deeply sorry for my men. They were very dear to me.

¹Passage doubtful. It is partially illegible in original hand-written text.

28 Jan. 1943

23 Jan. 1943

Physically, I am not too well. Severe headaches and overstrained nerves, on top of the circulation trouble, allow me no rest. Professor Horster is giving me sleeping draughts and helping as far as he can. Perhaps I'll have a few weeks to recover, though with the situation as it is in the East what one would like is to be in the front line.

At about 15.00 hours [on the 26th] I went off to inspect the Mareth front and form a judgment as to its value. The front lay [80 miles inside the frontier of Tunisia] between the sea and the Matmata Hills and consisted of a line of antiquated French block-houses which in no way measured up to the standards required by modern warfare. Added to that they had been completely disarmed after the Armistice with France. They could, therefore, serve little purpose in action other than as cover against artillery fire, and the defence proper would have to be fought from field positions lying between the French block-houses. The southern part of the line could be regarded as completely proof against tanks. Its centre was given some protection against tanks by a steep wadi, but this obstacle could be overcome by well-trained tank crews. Its northern end was covered to the front by a salt marsh, but most of this was negotiable by vehicles. The siting of the line was also bad, for it lay immediately behind some high ground, which denied any long-range artillery observation to the defence, and at the same time provided the attacking force with excellent opportunities for fire control. So these hills, too, had to be held by our troops, which meant a serious division of our strength.

Strategically, the choice of this line by the Commando Supremo held a big snag, as it was capable of being outflanked—though it is true, with some difficulty. In 1938, the French Generals Catroux and Gautsch had made a trial outflanking march with a Sahara Company loaded on lorries in order to establish whether or not such an operation was possible, and had, in fact, decided that it was not. But the British under Montgomery were far better motorised than the French desert troops had been. If they undertook such an operation, then the occupation of the Mareth line and all the construction that had been done on it would avail us nothing. I therefore issued a warning in good time against the possibility of such an enemy move.

In view of this weakness, I demanded occupation of the Akarit line between the Shott el Jerid and the sea. This line [40 miles behind the Mareth line] could not be outflanked and would have therefore enabled us to make effective use of the non-motorised infantry. I emphasised that our motorised forces were not strong enough to hold fronts at El Hamma on one side and Gafsa on the other, and at the same time provide support for the Mareth line. But our superiors could not see it. In the event, of course, the British did actually carry through an extremely well-planned outflanking movement, which rendered the Mareth line completely worthless. Although Bayerlein, in fact, succeeded in leading his mobile

forces back to Akarit in a reasonably intact condition in spite of the break-through threatening from three sides, it would have been far better if we had concentrated our fortifications at Gabes in the first place.

Rommel does not mean at the town of Gabes, but at the defile 15 miles westward—across which ran the Wadi Akarit. He sometimes speaks of this as the Gabes line and sometimes as the Akarit line.

On the 31st January, Marshal Bastico laid down his command and returned to Italy. There had more than once been friction between us, but it had almost always been as a result of some directive or other from the Commando Supremo. In general, we had worked well together and he had often supported me. It was to a great extent to his credit that in spite of the peculiar ideas of our higher authorities, the army did manage to get back to Mareth reasonably unscathed and did not fall victim on the way to some order or other to fight to the end.

But the dismissal of Marshal Cavallero, which occurred at about the same time, came as welcome news. It would have been better if that man had been replaced long before by somebody a little more competent.

By about the 1st February, the British had already begun to get a lively traffic passing through the port of Tripoli, using several light tankers. Our air reconnaissance also reported the presence of a number of larger ships. Of course the Luftwaffe was in no position to hinder the enemy at all in this work. The British approach march began in the east and we could soon expect the Eighth Army to be moving against us in all its old strength.

At about this time Messe arrived in Africa. Like most people who came from Russia, he looked on things with considerable optimism. I did not intend to hand over the army until I could feel that its position was reasonably firm for some time ahead.

2 Feb. 1943

DEAREST LU,

Nothing much new. The calm before further operations. It seems—from what has been said—that the change in command was planned long ago. The Italians have always laid claims to it, of course.

During January, a number of our A.A. gunners succeeded in surprising a British column of the Long-Range Desert Group in Tunisia and captured the commander of 1st S.A.S. Regiment, Lieut.-Col. David Stirling. Insufficiently guarded, he managed to escape and made his way to some Arabs, to whom he offered a reward if they would get him back to the British lines. But his bid must have been too small, for the Arabs, with their usual eye to business, offered him to us for 11 pounds of tea—a bargain which we soon clinched. Thus the British lost the very able and adaptable commander of the desert group which had caused us more damage than any other British unit of equal strength.

On the 15th February 1943, the rearguard of the 15th Panzer Division finally withdrew into the forefield of the Mareth line and the great retreat from Alamein to Tunisia was over. The fighting spirit of the troops was unbroken, which was little short of a miracle after such a series of reverses and was ultimately due to the fact that they did not feel themselves to have been defeated by anything but sheer weight of material.

DEAREST LU,

Dr. Horster came to see me yesterday and advised me to begin my treatment as soon as possible. My whole being cries out against leaving the battlefield so long as I can stand on my feet.

8 Feb. 1943
I've decided only to give up command of the army on orders, regardless of the state of my health. With the situation as it is, I intend to stick it out to the limit, even against the doctor's advice. You will understand my attitude. The successor that Rome has sent for me will have to wait his turn.

12 Feb. 1943
It's two years to-day since I arrived on African soil. Two years of heavy and stubborn fighting, most of the time with a far superior enemy. On this day, I think of the gallant troops under my command, who have loyally done their duty by their country and have had faith in my leadership. I have endeavoured to do my duty, both in my own sphere and for the cause as a whole. . . . We must do our utmost to beat off the mortal dangers which beset us. Unfortunately it's all a matter of supplies. I hope that my decision to remain with my troops to the end will be confirmed. You will understand my attitude. As a soldier one cannot do otherwise.

FROM ALAMEIN TO MARETH—RETROSPECT

In mechanised warfare, retreat offers a commander, even with numerically inferior forces, considerable tactical opportunities, provided always that certain conditions are fulfilled. These conditions are:

- (a) That his force must remain intact and retain its fighting power.
- (b) That each fresh assembly area during the retreat must be provided with adequate stocks of petrol, ammunition, rations and replacement equipment.

The farther the enemy advances and the longer his supply route

becomes, the more troops he must leave behind, if he is to be able to maintain himself. During an advance, the supply route is lengthened, during a retreat it is shortened. The retreating army always has its strength concentrated. Hence the moment must eventually come when the retreating force is locally superior to its enemy. If at that moment it has access to an adequate supply of petrol and ammunition, it has a wonderful opportunity. It can turn and strike at the advancing enemy force, and destroy it—assuming that the enemy is foolish enough to stand and give battle. Such an operation must be executed at great speed to ensure that the enemy is given no chance to bring up reinforcements.

With this in mind it had been our intention to break off the Alamein battle before it had reached its climax. We had suffered throughout the battle from considerable command limitations, caused by the presence of the strong German and Italian non-motorised formations. And these limitations, we knew, would become far worse during the retreat, when the motorised forces would be repeatedly compelled to stand up to the British long enough to permit the Italian withdrawal to be completed.

But then events took charge. On orders from the Fuehrer and Duce, we were compelled to go on doing battle with the British on the 3rd and 4th November. And these two days decided our future fate, for they cost us very nearly 200 tanks [including the *Italians*]—almost all our remaining armour—and a large part of the Italian formations. They robbed us of all chance of engaging in mobile warfare during the retreat, for the army was now so shattered that there was nothing for it but continued withdrawal. The most we could hope to do was to force the enemy into repeated approach marches and deployments and thus gain as much time from him as we could. This we succeeded in doing. Nowhere—either at Mersa el Brega or Nofilia, at Buerat or Tripoli—was Montgomery able to destroy us. But a counter-attack by our motorised forces was unthinkable.

This was particularly deplorable, as the enemy presented us repeatedly with excellent tactical opportunities for such a move. Montgomery had an absolute mania for always bringing up adequate reserves behind his back and risking as little as possible. The speed of reaction of the British command was comparatively low. In the earlier stages of the retreat their outflanking column was too weak and we could have attacked and destroyed it on several occasions if only we had had the petrol. Montgomery should have put his main weight behind his outflanking drives, as these had the greatest chance of bringing us to battle. At Buerat and Tripoli, on the other hand, the British commander showed real stature and had obviously overcome his urge for exaggerated caution. He went out for a decision with energy and vigour and it needed a great effort from us to save the situation.

I can claim the credit for having correctly assessed the supply possibilities for my army, and for having arrived, on the basis of that

assessment, at the correct strategic conclusions. All things considered, we had managed to make the best of the situation. Tactically, the retreat had not run its course according to the British plans, which had intended the destruction of my army, but according to mine. The army had been able to cope with all its difficulties, even with the German and Italian higher commands, who, from their distant European vantage-points had again and again sought a panacea in resistance to the last round. It would have been resistance to the last drop of water. Gratitude and admiration were due to the troops, who, despite the constant retreating, the bad rations, and the tremendous strain, had not failed even in the most appalling situations and had showed a fighting value no less than on the day they had captured Tobruk.

The fact that our higher authorities had refused to think from the outset in terms of a final unavoidable evacuation of Tripolitania had cost us much time and material. Thus the entire work of fortifying the Buerat line had in the end been useless; likewise the fortifications at Tarhuna-Homs. If only the Italian infantry had gone straight back to the Gabes line and begun immediately with its construction, if only all those useless mines we had laid in Libya had been put down at Gabes, all this work and material could ultimately have been of very great value.

CHAPTER XIX

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

WITH THE move into Mareth we were once again able to work on different strategic principles. By exploiting our "interior lines," we were now in a position to concentrate the mass of our motorised forces for an attack on the British and Americans in Western Tunisia, and possibly to force them to withdraw. We had no need to expect any effective diversionary attack by Montgomery during this operation, for any such attack, launched without powerful artillery and bomber support, was certain to come to a halt in the Mareth line, with a heavy cost in casualties to the British. We first intended to eliminate the threat of the two armies being divided by an Anglo-American thrust from Gafsa to the sea, by smashing the enemy assembly areas. This done, our striking force was to double back to Mareth to attack Montgomery. We proposed to give up the Medenine [20 miles east of Mareth] and Ben Gardane areas to the British shortly before this attack, in order to prevent them opposing us in prepared defences.

As a prelude to these operations, the 21st Panzer Division, which was under Fifth Army Command and had meanwhile been brought up to strength again, attacked the Faid Pass [80 miles north of the Gabes defile] on the 1st February, with the object of gaining it as a starting point for a thrust on Sidi Bouzid and Sbeitla [15 miles west and 35 miles north-west, respectively, of the Faid Pass]. The pass was stormed in an outflanking attack and 1,000 prisoners were taken.

The greatest operational danger for the Tunisian bridgehead was an American attack from Gafsa [70 miles north-west of the Gabes defile] through to Gabes, which would have divided the two Axis armies. Consequently, our first aim had to be to break up the American assembly areas in south-west Tunisia. Accordingly, the 21st Panzer with elements of the 10th Panzer Division was ordered to attack the Americans at Sidi Bouzid and Sbeitla, with the object of breaking up and as far as possible destroying their concentrations. At the same time, a combat group formed by my army was to dispose of the American garrison in Gafsa. No further operational objectives were fixed for the moment.¹

¹The operations are comprehensively called the Battle of Kasserine.