

## DOŚWIADCZENIA



### **TOBRUK 1941 – ROMMEL’S FAILURE AND HITLER’S SUCCESS ON THE STRATEGIC SIDELINES OF THE „THIRD REICH”**

**Lt-Col dr Thomas VOGEL**

Military Historyk Research Orfice of the German Armed Forces

---

## I

It is mid-February 1941 and the atmosphere in Tripoli, the capital of the Italian colony of Libya, is tense. The first troops of Italy’s ally Germany are landing at the port – at a time when many Italian inhabitants already believe that the colony has been lost and are thinking about fleeing from the advancing British army. The Germans are also causing a stir because of their unusual behaviour. On 14 February 1941, despite the imminent danger of enemy air raids, they are unloading their first combat forces in the glaring beams of headlights, after having arrived by ship earlier that day. After parading in front of their commander-in-chief, they hasten to the front on the following day. A similar spectacle takes place three weeks later when the first major tank unit, the tank regiment of the *5 Leichte Division* (Light Division), arrives in Tripoli on the next ship convoy. This time, the parading seems not to come to an end; this is due to the fact that the columns are circling some blocks repeatedly, thereby, the same troops are passing several times their commander-in-chief, Lieutenant-General Rommel. After that, they also set off for the front. Rommel stages this scene, because he wants to deceive his British opponent about the actual strength of what is still a small German force.<sup>1</sup>

When the deployment of the *5 Leichte Division* to Libya was completed in early April, Rommel had at his disposal a motorized and partly armoured formation that was well suited for large-scale attack operations in the North African terrain. The mission, however, that Hitler and the army commander-in-chief had issued Rommel in Berlin on 6 February 1941, was clearly defensive. In the planning

---

<sup>1</sup> Report on this event, but relying on unquoted German sources, in: David Irving, *Rommel. Eine Biographie* (Hamburg, 1978) (Engl. Orig. Ed. “The Trail of the Fox: The Search for the True Field Marshal Rommel”, London, 1977), 91; a slightly different report in: Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel. Das Ende einer Legende* (Munic and Zurich, 2005), 134.

stage, there had been talk of an “armoured blocking force” before it was given the more illustrious name of the *Deutsche Afrikakorps* (German Africa Corps). Together with Italian forces, it was meant to protect Tripolitania, the western part of Libya, from imminent seizure by the British.<sup>2</sup>

Soon afterwards, Rommel created precedents that were in stark contrast to this mission. Only two and a half months after arriving in Tripoli, the *Afrikakorps*, not yet being complete but reinforced by Italian units, pushed the British 1,500 kilometres back across the Egyptian border. It was only there that the Italo-German offensive was stopped by stiff British resistance. The wave was broken at the encircled but fortified port of Tobruk, initially defended mainly by Australian forces whereas from August 1941 it was defended by British, Polish and Czechoslovak forces. Substantially weakened from the war of attrition between Tobruk and the Egyptian border, and without sufficient supplies, Rommel was forced in mid-December 1941 to withdraw a long way, to the initial position he had occupied in spring 1941.

This explanation for the failure of Rommel's first offensive sounds plausible. Yet it remains unsatisfactory in this abbreviated form because it ignores many contradictions that characterized the particular nature of this theatre of war and that determined events there. The inconsistency starts with the fact that North Africa was not a German theatre of war, but an Italian one that the Germans only entered reluctantly. Having hardly entered it, they virtually usurped command and control there; 'they' means on the one hand Hitler through his increasing influence on Mussolini, and on the other hand Rommel, whose dynamism burst all the hierarchic bonds the Italians had put on him. But the image the Germans conveyed of themselves was rather contradictory. In several respects, this applies for Hitler as the overall commander-in-chief. For some time he allowed Rommel to ignore the restrictions of his mission. Eventually, the insubordinate but successful Rommel ultimately became the dictator's favourite general. Although honoured and promoted, Rommel did not get the military support for his war he had hoped for, have expected and repeatedly demanded. More irritating, despite his failure in late 1941 Rommel even rose in Hitler's favour. – The image of Rommel is full of contradictions too. On the one hand, he is depicted as a brilliant general and a model commander, revered by his own soldiers, and respected and feared by the enemy. A different image appears if we seriously consider how harshly some contemporaries and companions judged him and if we therefore take a somewhat closer look at the way he exercised command and control in North Africa.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For details of Rommel's mission to North Africa see: Bernd Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct of the War in the Mediterranean and North Africa*, in: *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. III. *The Mediterranean, South-East Europe, and North Africa 1939-1941*. From Italy's declaration of non-belligerence to the entry of the United States into the war, ed. *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* (Research Institute for Military History, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany), trans. ed. P.S. Falla (Oxford, 1995); 654-58.

<sup>3</sup> Rommel's leadership provoked severe criticism from several of his subordinate commanders and seasoned officers, and even from the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief of General Staff of the Army. See: Irving, *Rommel*, 135, 140, 144-5; Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 683-694; Reuth, *Legende*, 135-41.

All these obvious contradictions refer to the strategic and operational dimensions of Germany's war operations in North Africa. The focus lies primarily on this area, with regards to the following search for the underlying reasons for Rommel's failure in 1941. Other significant factors that are common to both allied Italy and the enemy will be largely ignored.

## II

To a considerable extent, Rommel's failure in 1941 was due to circumstances that were beyond his control. They can be attributed to the politico-strategic level of the Axis Powers which I will now address. As already mentioned, the German campaign in North Africa was strikingly surrounded by several contradictions from the very beginning: a defensive mission was executed by Rommel in an extremely offensive way. Berlin, however, hardly objected to this and largely gave him free rein. This inconsistent behaviour raises the question about the German intentions regarding their intervention in Africa. The question must be asked all the more because at that time Germany's interest in the Mediterranean area was still very fresh. For a long time, the division of the spheres of influence among the Axis Powers, according to which Italy had the sole claim on its *mare nostrum*, made the area almost a taboo for German strategic considerations. In late June 1940, Major-General Alfred Jodl, Chief of the *Wehrmachtführungsamt* (Wehrmacht Operations Office) and first military advisor to Hitler, contravened this "restriction on free thought". Looking for an alternative, indirect, strategy for fighting Great Britain, he recognized the key function of that region for the battle against the British Empire.<sup>4</sup> Soon afterwards, the German naval supreme commander, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, considered the developments in the Mediterranean area "decisive for the war" and demanded a stronger German commitment to the area.<sup>5</sup> But it was not before September 1940 that such considerations appealed to Hitler as well. His plan for an invasion of England had no longer any reasonable chance of success, making him temporarily receptive for alternatives for fighting against Great Britain. His offer to provide the planned Italian offensive against Egypt with a German armoured division, however, did not meet with the hoped-for response. Mussolini

---

<sup>4</sup> Jodl outlined his thoughts in a memorandum on 30.6.1940 (printed in: *Dokumente zum Unternehmen „Seelöwe“*. Die geplante deutsche Landung in England 1940, ed. Karl Klee (Göttingen, Zurich, Frankfurt, 1965), 298-300; cf. Schreiber, *Political and Military Developments in the Mediterranean Area, 1939-1940*, in: *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. III, 178-80.

<sup>5</sup> For information on the German Navy leadership's generally keen strategic interest in the Mediterranean area from 1940, see: Gerhard Schreiber, *Revisionismus und Weltmachtstreben. Marineführung und deutsch-italienische Beziehungen 1919 bis 1944* (Stuttgart, 1978), 271- 367; *ibid.*, *Mediterranean Area*, 180-222; Ralf Georg Reuth, *Entscheidung im Mittelmeer. Die südliche Peripherie Europas in der deutschen Strategie des Zweiten Weltkrieges 1949-1942* (Koblenz, 1985), 48-53, 64-70.

had his reservations about it and the Italian supreme command viewed it with distrust and disapprobation.

Yet, only two months later, in early 1941, the situation had changed completely. Because of their military fiasco against the Greeks in Albania and the British in North Africa the Italians now were dependent on German assistance in both cases. Hitler's main interest, however, had meanwhile turned to the East – having realized that it would be impossible to defeat Great Britain in the foreseeable future. His decision to attack his ideological nemesis, the Soviet Union, was made and became a new priority in Germany's strategic planning.<sup>6</sup> Although it was rather inconvenient for him, he felt obliged to assist the crumbling regime of Mussolini, his friend and most important ally. But since the North African theatre of war was not considered important for the planned campaign against the Soviet Union, it was given only a minimum of support. A simple comparison of numbers illustrates the great difference in priorities and dimensions: while the *Wehrmacht* had more than one hundred and twenty divisions at its disposal for Operation *Barbarossa*, Rommel initially had to make do with two German divisions. Even later in the final battles for El Alamein, he never had more than four German divisions.

Following Hitler's fixation on the war in the East for ideological reasons, in particular after the beginning of Operation *Barbarossa* in June 1941, all the other theatres of war lost strategic importance almost as a matter of course. Only a small party in the German military leadership apparatus, with little influence, put any stock in the chances which Rommel's success in North Africa seemed to offer for the Axis. In particular the *Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine* (Naval High Command) traditionally thought in greater dimensions and dreamt of a strategic alliance beyond the symbolic axis with far-away Japan – all the more since Japan had entered the war in late 1941 in a promising way.<sup>7</sup> In February 1942, Grand Admiral Raeder several times tried to win Hitler's approval for a strategy in which it was not Moscow, but London and its empire which were considered to be the real opponent or at least an opponent who had to be defeated first.

Hitler in turn twice gave the impression as if attaching greater importance to the North African theatre of war. The first time was in autumn 1941 when he was concerned about the continued existence of the German-Italian war operations be-

<sup>6</sup> For the ideological dimension of Hitler's strategic concentration on the War in the East („Ostkrieg“) see, first and most fundamentally: Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie. Politik und Kriegführung 1940–1941* (Bonn, 1993; 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1965), 564–578; summarizing the current state of research: Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der letzte deutsche Krieg 1939–1945* (Stuttgart, 2005), 76–81.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, individual promoters for enforcing the Mediterranean war theatre were: Lieutenant-General Enno von Rintelen, German Accredited General to Headquarters of the Italian Armed Forces High Command („Deutscher Bevollmächtigter General beim Hauptquartier der italienischen Wehrmacht“), Vice-Admiral Eberhard Weichold, Commander of the German Naval Command in Italy („Befehlshaber des Deutschen Marinekommandos Italien“), General Kurt Student, Commander of 11<sup>th</sup> Air Corps („Kommandierender General des XI. Fliegerkorps“), Colonel-General Hans Jeschonnek, Chief of Staff of the Airforce („Chef des Generalstabes der Luftwaffe“), and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief South („Oberbefehlshaber Süd“).

cause of dramatic problems in maintaining the provision of supplies to Rommel's army. It prompted him to temporarily weaken Germany's war effort in the Atlantic and on the eastern front in favour of reinforcing naval and air operations in the Mediterranean area. Then, in spring 1942, he obviously got caught up in the general euphoria about Rommel's success. At that time, Hitler gave the impression as if the prospect of a British defeat in the Middle East and its far-reaching consequences was causing him to modify his strategy, if not to reconsider it completely. In doing so, he deceived both his entourage and his Italian ally. The need for deciding on the Malta issue, which was of crucial importance to the North African theatre of war, eventually forced Hitler to reveal his intentions. By May 1942, at the latest, it became clear that he was not willing to get more involved in the Mediterranean area if this inevitably was to the detriment of the eastern front.<sup>8</sup> So everything remained as it was: the war against the Soviet Union, which swallowed all the resources, prevented reinforcements for Rommel. As a consequence, Rommel was unable to extend the success of Tobruk in May 1942 to the Suez Canal. It is well known that his offensive ran out of steam with the battle for El Alamein in the summer and autumn of 1942. It may be doubted, however, whether a victory there would have brought the Axis Powers the major strategic advantage they had hoped for. The mere realities of geography and the imbalance in the power potentials of both sides speak against it. In the end, the Axis Powers were unable to counter, not even half-way, the relentless increase in superiority of the Allies, who soon opened a second front in North Africa.

With this attempt to put the theatre of war in North Africa into the greater context of Germany's war policy and strategy, we have run far ahead of the events of 1941. It should have become clear that, not only in this context, this theatre of war could not count on a greater German commitment, as it was only of minor importance to Hitler from the very beginning. In his first advance to Egypt, therefore, Rommel had to make do with forces that might have been sufficient for his original mission, but were definitely too weak to conquer Tobruk. That concludes my remarks on the strategic problems merely from Germany's angle.

What made matters worse for Rommel was the increasing lack of substance in Germany's political and strategic partnership with Italy. Italy proved to be unable to make the expected and necessary contributions to the joint fight for an area for which it claimed a vested interest. (If this had not been the case – one might add – Rommel's mission would not have been necessary at all.) An important reason for this failure was Italy's entirely inadequate level of armament, a point that had become obvious when the country entered the war.<sup>9</sup> This was in complete contrast to the country's overambitious and uncoordinated strategic and operational planning, which resulted in the double military debacle in Albania and North Africa in late

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Reuth, *Entscheidung im Mittelmeer*, 163-71.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview on the Italian military deficiencies see: MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny. Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2000), 148-85.

1940. Italy's failure to conquer the British stronghold of Malta upon entering the war, which was only weakly defended at the time, and its unnecessary and unsuccessful prestige campaign against an already defeated France proved fatal, in particular for the German-Italian campaign in North Africa. Malta, whose garrison was soon strengthened, then became a thorn in the side of the Axis Powers. Until the end, the Italian navy and air force were unable to maintain supplies across the Mediterranean against the British navy and air force operating from Malta and Egypt to the extent that would have been necessary for Rommel's campaign to be a resounding success. Between 8 February and 1 May 1941, when Rommel launched his first offensive on Egypt, more than half of the transport vessels used were lost and with them materiel and personnel that were needed at Tobruk.<sup>10</sup> The situation became even worse after the German air corps, which had been stationed in Sicily, was moved to Greece in May. The remaining Italian air forces were unable to prevent the losses of supplies in the second half of 1941 becoming dramatic.<sup>11</sup> It was not least for this reason that Rommel had to withdraw in December. Quite interestingly, he succeeded in conquering Tobruk in the following year after a massive air offensive had been launched against Malta, for which purpose a German air corps had been moved to Southern Italy. At the same time, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring assumed the new office of *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief South). The Germans took this step in order to increase their influence in the Mediterranean area and concentrate their forces there. In the end, Italian resistance and German military parochialism caused Kesselring to fail. In the spring of 1942, when Kesselring seriously considered trying to conquer Malta, the required forces were lacking – though it must be added that the German side lacked the political will as well. But that is another chapter in the multi-faceted history of the German-Italian war coalition.<sup>12</sup>

While on the subject of the coalition's war operations, there is another point to be made: disadvantages for Rommel – albeit no significant ones – also resulted from the complicated command structures he faced in Libya.<sup>13</sup> They were the expression of the difficult relationship that afflicted the alliance of Germany and Italy. Rommel's special relationship with Hitler and his persuasiveness towards Mussolini, to whom he was nominally subordinated, allowed him almost always to outplay the resistant Italian military hierarchies on which he depended and to get them to do what he wanted. Nevertheless, some unnecessary friction was unavoidable. For instance, Rommel's operations were hindered for a long time

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 687.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 716-7.

<sup>12</sup> For details of the Italo-German struggle for solving the crucial Malta issue in the years 1941/42 see: Reuth, *Entscheidung im Mittelmeer*, 97-205.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhard Stumpf, *The War in the Mediterranean Area 1942-1943: Operations in North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*, in: *Germany and the Second World War, Vol. VI: The Global War*, ed. by the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* (Research Institute for Military History, Potsdam, Germany), trans. ed. Ewald Osers (Oxford, 2001), 634-5.

because he did not have command authority over all the Italian army units in Libya. It took him some time to convince the Italian commander-in-chief to place them under his command. In the end, he had to threaten to abandon Libya completely in order to enforce unified command and control of all army forces under his command. This happened in December 1941 when the withdrawal from Tobruk was inevitable because of the enemy's superiority, and everyone's nerves were on edge.<sup>14</sup> Of course, Italy's concession came too late.

### III

We now leave the politico-strategic level and turn to the operational dimension of the German-Italian campaign in North Africa in 1941. This inevitably narrows the view even more to the dominating personality of Rommel, but allows it to be now considered from a different perspective. The critical eye is no longer on the difficult conditions in which his mission had to be executed, but on Rommel as the commander in charge of the military operations. The question is to what extent Rommel can be blamed personally for the loss of the battle of Tobruk and consequently for the failed offensive of 1941.

During his first weeks in Libya, Rommel's actions were still completely within the framework of his mission, albeit already showing his typical inclination to take risks. Although his forces were not complete by far and also untrained for desert warfare, he threw units against the British enemy as soon as they arrived in Tripoli by ship in February and March 1941. The British meanwhile had seized the entire Cyrenaica, but had reached their limits because their supply routes were overstretched and forces were withdrawn in favour of the intervention in Greece.<sup>15</sup> British resistance was weak and effortlessly broken by the advancing German and Italian units, eventually encouraging Rommel to risk the great leap into Tobruk, which was still 300 to 400 km away, in order to re-conquer the entire Cyrenaica. His appropriate decision from 3 April seemed justified by reconnaissance results obtained on the withdrawal of British forces.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, he acted in disregard of the orders issued by the Italian high command and clear instructions he had received in person a few days earlier in the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (Army High Command) in Berlin, where his plan to attack Tobruk before the end of May was watered down, with Hitler's approval. He was told to confine himself to his defence mission and instructed to wait for his second major unit, the *15 Panzer-Division*, which was planned to arrive by mid-May. After that, he was allowed to start work on improving his position – but even then only to a limited extent. Only

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 747.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jan Stanley Ord Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East. Vol. 2: The Germans Come to Help of their Ally (1941)* (London, 1956), 1-5.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Adalbert von Taysen, *Tobruk 1941. Der Kampf in Nordafrika* (Freiburg, 1976), 78.

then a decision would be made on the intended major offensive. As he was told in Berlin too, he could not expect any further reinforcements for this.<sup>17</sup>

In hindsight, Rommel's decision of 3 April 1941 seems questionable in two respects. Not only because he disregarded all the well-founded orders, but also because in making it he contradicted himself in a certain way. Just two weeks earlier, he had based offensive plans on considerable Italian and German reinforcements.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, he knew for sure that he would not receive any reinforcements. He had just learned that not even the *15 Panzer-Division* would arrive in time. Previously, he had been quite right in showing greater caution because he had to expect to face an opponent twice as strong as he was. Only when already advancing on 8 April did he learned of the opponent's weakness from safe sources.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, his decision to attack had been based on comparatively scant results from air reconnaissance. Rommel's carelessness, if not indifference, in handling the supply situation of his troops, which had already been precarious before the offensive, raised eyebrows among his contemporaries.<sup>20</sup>

On the whole, Rommel's first major operational decision on North African soil only could be justified by subsequent success. Rommel's private correspondence at the time shows that his decision of 3 April was based exactly on this reckoning.<sup>21</sup> Such thinking, however, seems to be more typical of a military gambler, than a commander who takes a high but well-considered risk. But this is not meant to be a final judgement.

Neither objective nor formal arguments were effective against Rommel's conviction that a good opportunity must be seized at that time. In the end, General Italo Gariboldi, commander-in-chief in Libya and Rommel's superior, was forced to understand this at a meeting they had in the evening of 3 April. Rommel finally won when, towards the end of the meeting, a radio message from Berlin was received that could be interpreted as if Hitler had changed his opinion and as a *carte blanche* for Romel's intended offensive.<sup>22</sup> But the significance of the radio message goes far beyond the situation then. It created Rommel's belief that he could be sure of Hitler's general sympathy for his risky and unorthodox approach to operations. Rommel could feel himself encouraged after his surprising military successes, which he had often achieved in this way, both then and in later times, were appreciated at the highest level. With the backing of the *Führer* as the decisive authority to which he was allowed to appeal directly, Rommel repeatedly outmanoeuvred both his Italian superiors and the German military hierarchies. This way, he made

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 673-4.

<sup>18</sup> Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Otto Behrendt, *Rommels Kenntnis vom Feind im Afrikafeldzug. Ein Bericht über die Feindnachrichtenarbeit, insbesondere die Funkaufklärung* (Freiburg, 1980), 91-2.

<sup>20</sup> Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 675.

<sup>21</sup> See Rommel's letter to his wife, dated 3 April 1941, in: Basil Henry Liddell Hart (ed.), *The Rommel Papers*. Trans. by P. Findlay (London, 1953), 111; cf. Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 84.

<sup>22</sup> Liddell Hart, *Rommel Papers*, 111; cf. Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 617-8.

his mark on the Axis' war operations in North Africa even more than his strong personality already did. Under such conditions, there was no chance of any thinking about alternatives to his way of fighting the war.

Be that as it may, Rommel felt himself confirmed by his initial success. The first advance groups of the *Afrikakorps* reached the glaxis of Tobruk on 9 April, just six days after the attack started. On the way, the Germans had encountered and destroyed smaller enemy units, taken many prisoners and seized a lot of supplies. But they had failed to cut off the British main force and prevent it from withdrawing across the Egyptian border. Nevertheless, Rommel already had his focus on the Suez Canal. His further advance, however, was stopped by the fortress of Tobruk, which blocked the coastal road to Egypt over a large distance. The fortress consisted of a well-developed system of echeloned positions and fortifications around the small Libyan port town. Some 29,000 troops, mainly from Australia and well supplied from the sea, had taken up defensive positions within the rings of fortified positions.<sup>23</sup>

The subsequent attempt to seize Tobruk by using the momentum of the ongoing attack turned into a failure in several steps, causing major axis casualties. The few advance forces available at the time were well outnumbered by the enemy, above all in terms of infantry and artillery. For them, it was not possible by 11 April to encircle Tobruk completely. There was an even greater shortage of intelligence on the enemy's positions. Oddly enough, Rommel did not have plans of the fortifications, which had been built by the Italians.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the attacker was at a general disadvantage because the terrain around Tobruk offered little defilade. Nevertheless, Rommel ordered the ring of fortification in the south west to be opened up with two improvised combat groups and Tobruk to be seized without any reconnaissance in advance. It was only during the attack that it emerged that one group was unable to participate in the action because it was committed elsewhere. Thus, the remaining group, which had already been considerably weakened in combat, was doomed to failure. Moreover, it suffered heavy losses from the fierce fire of the defenders when it suddenly came across an insurmountable anti-tank trench.<sup>25</sup>

Neither the failure of 11 April, nor the loss of the element of surprise, nor the knowledge of the strength of the fortress prevented Rommel from continuing the attack over the following few days with his still inferior forces. The attack on 12 April was stopped by a sandstorm and enemy artillery fire before it really got

---

<sup>23</sup> Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 113. By comparison, the Germans only had 19,000 troops in North Africa, and only some of them – albeit an increasing number – were at Tobruk. There were also two Italian divisions under Rommel's command, but they too were not employed completely at Tobruk.

<sup>24</sup> It is unclear whether this is due to a failure on the part of Rommel or whether the Italian side was responsible for this. Anyway, Rommel does not seem to have wasted any time with that issue. Cf. Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 99-100; Irving, *Rommel*, 108. – According to Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 111 (FN 197), Rommel eventually received two insufficient maps of the fortifications on April 20.

<sup>25</sup> Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 681; Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 102-3.

started, but without major losses. However, the next one on 14/15 April ended in a minor disaster for what was still the only German division in the *Afrikakorps* at the time. Under the cover of night, its *8 Maschinengewehr-Bataillon* (MG-Battalion) successfully broke into the external ring of the fortress. But due to their numerical superiority, the defenders succeeded in isolating and wearing down the bridgehead by the next morning. Almost half of the battalion's troops were killed in action or taken prisoner. After 14 days of offensive action, it was down to just about a quarter of its original strength. *5 Panzer-Regiment* had fared little better. Its support for the infantry failed because of fierce fire from enemy artillery and antitank guns. In the end, the regiment had 21 operational tanks from its original number of 38 – the authorized strength having been 161 various types of battle tanks.<sup>26</sup> If the defenders had launched a decisive counter attack – which they did not risk because they overestimated the German forces – the *Afrikakorps* likely would not have been able to stand up to it.

The disaster did not prevent Rommel from launching further attacks in the next few days, for which Italian units were increasingly employed due to sheer necessity. Not surprisingly, they also failed, amid heavy losses, and thereby even provoked the enemy to attempt minor breakouts. Not until then, did Rommel realize that his attacks on the heavily defended fortress were pointless for the moment. Though he was not reasonable enough to blame primarily himself for the failure and heavy losses. Rather, he unleashed his fury against the commander of the *5 Leichte Division*, Major-General Johannes Streich, whom he publicly humiliated for his alleged failure and removed from his post. The commander of *5 Panzer-Regiment*, Colonel Olbrich, suffered a similar fate.<sup>27</sup> Later, Rommel attributed the failure to the poor training and armament of his Italian forces; irrespective of the fact that he had made them attack positions that German troops had already failed to conquer.

Rommel only realized that his worn-down, depleted and widely dispersed troops were in a critical situation when soon afterwards the British field army became active along the Egyptian border near Sollum, less than 100 km east of Tobruk, threatening the thin German security veil there. His appeals for help alerted Berlin and confirmed the opinion of, amongst others, Chief of the Army General Staff Franz Halder in his criticism of Rommel's way of fighting. Since it was necessary to avoid a defeat at Tobruk for political and propaganda reasons, Rommel hastily received some humble reinforcements by air. At the same time, Halder's deputy, Lieutenant-General Friedrich Paulus, was vested with special powers and went to North Africa to obtain for himself a clear idea of the situation and make "the soldier who had gone mad", as Halder spoke of Rommel, see reason.<sup>28</sup> But Paulus could only prevail after another major attack on Tobruk on 1 May got stuck

---

<sup>26</sup> Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 681-2

<sup>27</sup> See: Irving, *Rommel*, 116-8, 135

<sup>28</sup> Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 685.

in the external fortification belt, with battalion-sized losses being incurred. *15 Panzer-Division* paid an enormous death toll, as Rommel had thrown its first elements into the battle as soon as they had arrived. Paulus now put a veto on further attacks and Rommel, whether he liked it or not, had to accept it.

The transition from offensive to defence at Tobruk gave the *Afrikakorps* the opportunity to reorganize its forces and to prepare them for the British counter-strikes that were expected along the front near the Egyptian border at Sollum. These were carried out as early as in mid-May and again in mid-June 1941 in operations *Brevity* and *Battleaxe*. Despite great materiel superiority, in particular of tanks and aircraft, both attempts to break through the Italo-German front and relieve Tobruk failed, with heavy losses being incurred by the attacker. Two factors stood out as the main reason for the continued success of the *Afrikakorps*: on the one hand, the clever tactical use in antitank operations of heavy German anti-aircraft batteries, and on the other hand, the high degree of initiative during combat demonstrated by the German company, battalion and regimental commanders. In contrast, Rommel made little contribution to the success. Despite poor communication lines, he had set up his command post near Tobruk, which was more than 100 km away from the actual battlefield, and had not assigned the overall control of the battle to any of his commanders. Overall command was therefore unstable and uncoordinated and this was the reason why the defeated enemy was able to escape an even greater defeat, namely being largely encircled. Nevertheless it was Rommel who took credit for the successful defence operations in May and June. Hitler promoted him to full General (*General der Panzertruppen*). Moreover, Italy agreed to raise Rommel's command to a *Panzergruppe* (Panzer Group) and to place more divisions under his command while the German contingent was not significantly increased.<sup>29</sup>

With its positions consolidated, the German-Italian *Panzergruppe Afrika* was able to return to the siege of Tobruk in the late summer and early autumn of 1941. Rommel allowed himself a lot of time to prepare thoroughly for a major attack on the fortress. During those months, its Australian garrison was replaced by British forces, a Polish brigade and a Czechoslovak battalion. At the same time, the British field army in Egypt was reorganized into the 8 Army and received considerable personnel and materiel reinforcements. It was Churchill's wish for it to launch a new major offensive to relieve Tobruk as soon as possible.

The British operation *Crusader* eventually started on 18 November 1941, with the British forces enjoying a distinct superiority in terms of materiel. Thus it forestalled Rommel's attack on Tobruk by only a few days. The British had succeeded in keeping their plans secret. The offensive therefore took Rommel by surprise, for his focus had been on Tobruk. It was Lieutenant-General Ludwig Crüwell, his successor as commanding general of the *Afrikakorps*, who spotted the offensive and urged that action be taken. Thereupon, the motorized and armoured troops of the

---

<sup>29</sup> Taysen, Tobruk 1941, 169-70, 181-2.

two sides engaged each other for several days on open field between the Egyptian border and Tobruk. On 23 November, the spearhead of the 8 Army suffered a crippling defeat by Crüwell and was prevented from breaking through to Tobruk. But Crüwell's violent counterattack also meant heavy, and in some cases, irreplaceable losses for the German side. Both attacking tank regiments had lost almost 40 per cent of their tanks, and many seasoned battalion and company commanders had died while leading their troops.<sup>30</sup>

In view of these losses, there must have been doubts as to whether the *Panzergruppe Afrika* would be able to stand up to an enemy who continued to retain Tobruk and was able to rely to large supplies of materiel in Egypt. Considering the confused situation, Crüwell first intended to consolidate his own forces, to clear the battlefield of any remaining enemy elements and to recover and repair his combat vehicles which had been damaged in battle. But now Rommel appeared on the scene – in a way which then and now has raised serious doubts about his sense of reality and his suitability as a high-level commander.<sup>31</sup> Failing to adequately assess and evaluate the situation, and largely on impulse, he ordered the worn-down and weakened forces of the *Afrikakorps* to pursue an enemy who was apparently defeated, but whose strength and positions were unknown. Blind as it were, obsessed by the idea of cutting off the opponent's retreat across the Egyptian border, he placed all available units directly under his command, put himself at the front of the force aboard his command vehicle – and set off south east to the border, and the starting line for the British offensive, about 100 km away.

Rommel had estimated that his operation would take less than 24 hours to complete. Within this time, he planned to corner and destroy the British army and return to Tobruk, in addition to liberating any German units that had been overrun and encircled by the British offensive. Meanwhile, his *Erster Generalstabsoffizier* (Senior Operations Staff Officer), Lieutenant-Colonel Siegfried Westphal, was ordered to command the *Panzergruppe* from the headquarters near Tobruk. In regarding to the problem of how to provide his advance with supplies, Rommel relied on the British supply bases near the Egyptian border being seized; a base which he had only vague knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the inevitable happened: the operation descended into chaos. The hasty departure caused the units to get spread out over a vast distance and area as they moved at different speeds. Rommel himself and Crüwell, escorting him, got lost near the Egyptian border and were lucky to escape having taken prisoner. The British supply bases they had hoped to find were not discovered. For a while, com-

---

<sup>30</sup> Taysen, *Tobruk 1941*, 250. Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 738, therefore refers to it as a "Pyrrhic victory".

<sup>31</sup> Irving, *Rommel*, 181.; Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 739-42; Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War: Waging World War II in North Africa, 1941-1943* (Cambridge, 2009), 162-7; Siegfried Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln. Aus den Papieren des Stabschefs von Rommel, Kesselring und Rundstedt* (Bonn, 1950), 168.

<sup>32</sup> Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 739.

mand of the dispersed units was lost completely because the communication links were entirely inadequate. Rommel only escaped this dead-end situation because his advance came to nothing, since, contrary to his assumption, the British army did not withdraw. Despite the heavy losses the British suffered on 23 November, they still had enough power to continue their offensive to relieve Tobruk. Conquering an important Axis airfield, the British even gained almost undisrupted air supremacy in the region. The continued pressure emanating from the attack and an breakout by the Tobruk garrison finally resulted in the collapse of the weak Italo-German circumvallation in the south-east on 26 November.

It was only the impact of this extremely difficult situation at Tobruk, deep in his own rear, that prompted Rommel to decide to turn back. He had achieved none of his objectives, instead he had further worn down his troops and played into the hands of the enemy. With quite a bit of luck and thanks to British command errors, the remainder of the *Afrikakorps* were able to make it through into the rear of the enemy's spearheads near Tobruk. In accordance with a plan devised by Crüwell, who simply ignored Rommel's different orders, the corps made a final effort and forced the 8 Army to withdraw, contained the British breakthrough and patched up the circumvallation around Tobruk. In the evening of 30 November, it had only 20 to 25 percent of its original strength in tanks.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, over the next few days, Rommel launched repeated attacks in order to free encircled German units in the area close to the Egyptian border. But all the actions failed and heavy losses were incurred since the enemy was by no means defeated. Quite to the contrary, it had sufficient reserves, was able to regroup and was preparing to revive its offensive.

In contrast, the combat power of the *Panzergruppe Afrika* had reached an absolute low. Together, the two German armoured divisions had just 34 tanks, that is to say, not even the nominal strength of two companies. And little could be expected in the way of fresh materiel. Supplies, above all fuel, had dramatically stopped coming through. The British success against the Axis' ship convoys across the Mediterranean was now felt just as painfully as the overstraining of logistic transport on land. In this condition, the *Panzergruppe* was no match for a new British offensive. Rommel gradually realized this by 7 December. After consulting with Berlin, Rome and Tripoli, he had no choice but to order his forces to withdraw from Tobruk to the Gazala positions 60 km to the west. But even there, the pressure exerted by the superior British army was soon too much. Over the following four weeks, the *Panzergruppe* was forced to completely abandon Cyrenaica. At least this operation could be conducted in an orderly manner. In mid-January 1942, the *Panzergruppe* was back where the *Afrikakorps* had set out for the offensive from 10 months before.

---

<sup>33</sup> Stegemann, *The Italo-German Conduct*, 744.

## IV

For the time being, Rommel had failed. He had failed to conquer Tobruk and to defeat the British army decisively, and he had certainly failed to achieve his most ambitious aim, that of reaching the Suez Canal. In the end, he had been repulsed back to his initial position. An important reason for this, if not the *decisive* one, has already been outlined in the description of the events – namely several grave operational and tactical blunders by Rommel himself. He laid the foundation for his failure right at the beginning when he extended his mission on his own authority and without taking consideration of his complete shortage of means. Already at that point he had allowed himself to be guided rather by hope than reality. His success was sometimes astounding, but it lasted only as long as the enemy was surprised or weakened due to other circumstances. Enemy deficits in command can also account for it. Rommel's art of war reached its limits in the confrontation at the fortress of Tobruk which he attacked for some time as if in a blind rage. For a time, the German-Italian army successfully withstood the increasing superiority of the enemy at another battlefield between Tobruk and the Egyptian border. This success was largely due to the tactical and operational skills of Rommel's commanders and not least to the experience and skills of his officers, NCOs and troops. In contrast, Rommel failed in his function as an operational commander, often acting spontaneously – and thus wrongly – even when more military precision was required. Significantly, a final wrong decision ruined the German forces' potential to such a degree that inevitably events at Tobruk turned in favour of the enemy.

Therefore, there is not much left of the myth of Rommel: first, his strong physical presence and his personal spirit, which was a model and a source of motivation primarily for subalterns and rank and file; then, his ingenuity as a military tactician and his talent for improvisation. He was particularly creative, for instance, in deceiving the enemy, as the above-mentioned episode after the landing in Tripoli shows. However, these qualities are not the decisive factors in an overall assessment of the job Rommel did as a commander. His permanent overestimation of the power of his own forces and his tendency to demand too much of them, his ruthless handling of men and materiel, his frequent misinterpretations of the enemy's actions, his failures in reconnaissance and logistics and his often less than plausible operational decisions hardly justify Rommel's legendary reputation as a senior commander. A separate study deserves to be done in order to expose the shaky construction of this legend, a construction resulting from National Socialist propaganda and the glorification of Rommel in the post-war era by German and British veterans and their epigones.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> See: Reuth, Rommel, 150-91; Kay Hoffmann, „Wir müssen weiter ...“ Erwin Rommel – der Held der Wochenschauen, in: Erwin Rommel. Geschichte und Mythos, ed. by Museum of History of Baden-Württemberg („Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg“) and Stuttgart State Capital (Leinfelden-Echterdingen, 2009), 132-151; see also: Cormenlia Hecht, Umstrittene Erinnerung. Erwin

On the one hand, there was no doubt at the turn of 1941/42 that Rommel's campaign had failed. But was Germany's intervention in North Africa therefore a failure in itself? A positive answer would have been given by those who had even higher political and strategic expectations and hopes than Rommel, ones that went well beyond the original purpose of the mission.<sup>35</sup> Their hopes did not reach the fever pitch until 1942, after Rommel had succeeded in conquering Tobruk in his second attempt. These circles were hit all the harder when the military developments in North Africa shattered their dreams. For them, Rommel's defeats at Tobruk in 1941 and El Alamein in 1942 were "lost victories", as Erich von Manstein's dictum later goes. Hitler and his lack of military and strategic judgement were primarily blamed for having passed up unique chances for successfully correcting the strategic course. After the war, this view was maintained in sometimes rather speculative debates of the "what ifs" of this topic.

A more sober assessment of the events and one that is measured against the original expectations of Rommel's mission, yields a much more positive summary of the year 1941, from Germany's point of view. Rommel had accomplished his original mission: Italian rule over Libya did not collapse. In early 1941, the British had not aimed at conquering Libya due to their shortage of forces. Not being aware of this, the impression in Berlin and Rome was, that Germany's intervention had saved Libya. To a certain degree, Rommel had even achieved more than his mission demanded. With relatively few forces, he had succeeded in pinning down far more enemy forces, which the enemy could not employ elsewhere, for instance with the British expeditionary corps in Greece.<sup>36</sup> The psychological side-effect of the North Africa campaign should not be underestimated either. For it gave the Italians their urgently needed self-confidence back. After a whole series of military humiliations, they were able to counterattack alongside the Germans and defeat the enemy several times. The political objective of Germany's intervention was therefore definitely attained: Mussolini's fragile regime was stabilized for the time being. And the "Third Reich" kept its most important ally in greater dependence than even before.

Hitler himself seemed to have been of a similar opinion because he was more than content with the balance of the first year of war in North Africa. He made certain that Rommel was assured of his admiration, reinterpreted the withdrawal as a "defensive victory" and decorated his "favourite general" - the first soldier of the German army - with the Swords to the Oak Leaves of the Knight's Cross.<sup>37</sup> The failure had become a success.

---

Rommel als Projektionsfläche für politische Ziele und Interessen, in: *Mythos Rommel*, ed. by Museum of History of Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart, 2008), 126-142.

<sup>35</sup> See FN 7 above.

<sup>36</sup> See: Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Reuth, *Rommel*, 66.