Erwin (Johannes Eugen) Rommel
The Desert Fox / Der Wustenfuchs
(November 15, 1891 - October 14, 1944)

1891-1933

Erwin Rommel was born on November 15th of 1891 in Heidenheim an der Brentz near Ulm in the state of Wurttemberg. His father was a schoolteacher and his mother was a daughter of a former president of the government of Wurttemberg. Rommel planned to be an engineer but joined the army in July of 1910. He enlisted with his local infantry regiment, the 124th (6th Wurttemberg) Infantry Regiment as an officer cadet. After three months, Erwin Rommel was promoted to the rank of Corporal and after six to Sergeant. In March of 1911, he went to the officers' military school in Danzig (Gdansk). In January of 1912, Rommel was commissioned and returned to his regiment in Weingarten. While he was in Danzig, Erwin Rommel met and fell in love with Lucie Maria Mollin and they became formally engaged in 1915 and both were married in 1916. On Christmas Eve of 1928, their only child, Manfred was born. Since 1912, until the outbreak of World War I, Erwin Rommel served as regimental officer in charge of recruiting at Weingarten. On August 2nd of 1914, Rommel's regiment marched out to war and Rommel joined them few days later because he had to stay behind in Weingarten. Since the beginning of his military career, Erwin Rommel showed signs of bravery while attacking the enemy against the odds. In September of 1914, Rommel was wounded in the leg when he charged three Frenchmen with a bayonet because he run out of ammunition. After returning to the frontlines in the Argonne area, in January of 1915, Erwin Rommel received his first decoration for bravery - Iron Cross Class I. In September/October of 1915, Rommel was transferred to the mountain unit for training. In late 1916, Erwin Rommel was posted to the Eastern (Carpathian) Front, in the area of Siebenburgen, where he was to fight with Rumanians. In May of 1917, Erwin Rommel was transferred to the Western Front, in the area of Hilsen Ridge, and in August back to Carpathian Front, where he took part in the assaults on Mount Cosna and Caporetto. For his outstanding action at Caporetto, Erwin Rommel was awarded the "Pour le Merite" and was promoted to the rank of Captain. Rommel was one of few junior officers awarded the "Pour le Merite", which was reserved for generals. Shortly after, Erwin Rommel was posted away to a junior staff appointment, where he remained to the end of the war. In mid December of 1918, Captain Erwin Rommel was reposted to his old
In the summer of 1919, Rommel was sent to Friedrichshafen to command internal security company and in January of 1921, to Stuttgart where he commanded and infantry regiment. Erwin Rommel remained in Stuttgart until October of 1929, when he was posted as an instructor to the infantry school in Dresden. At the time, Rommel wrote and published his book "Infantry Attacks" ("Infanterie greift an"), which was based on his experiences during World War I.

1933-1940

In October of 1933, Erwin Rommel was promoted to the rank of Major and was sent to Goslar, where he commanded a mountain battalion. In October of 1935, Rommel was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and received the position of the teacher in War Academy in Potsdam. In November of 1938, Erwin Rommel received the command of War Academy in Wiener Neustadt, which left shortly before the outbreak of World War II. In September of 1939, Erwin Rommel was promoted to the rank of Major General and received the command of Adolf Hitler's Bodyguard for the duration of the Polish Campaign. At the same time, Rommel realized the full potential of Panzer Divisions and tactics of Blitzkrieg. After the Polish Campaign, Hitler allowed Rommel to choose what he would like to command and Erwin Rommel asked for a Panzer Division. On February 15th of 1940, Rommel received the command of 7th Panzer Division, although he had no practical experience in Panzer warfare. In preparations for German Invasion of Low Countries and France, codenamed Fall Gelb, Rommel's 7th Panzer Division became the part of 15th Panzer Corps, which was positioned, in the central sector. The 15th Panzer Corps was under the command of General Hoth. On May 10th of 1940, Germany invaded the Western Europe. On May 12th, 7th Panzer Division reached Dinant and on May 13th, after heavy fighting crossed the River Meuse. On May 15th, Rommel virtually unopposed reached Philipville and continued his advance westwards, passing Avesnes, Le Cateau and reaching Arleux on May 20th. Rommel's plan was to by-pass Arras to the south and then turn northwards in the direction of Lille. On May 21st, Rommel reached the area of Arras, where his forward units where counter-attacked by two British Tank Regiments (70 tanks). After inflicting heavy losses among German infantry and anti-tank gun crews, British tanks advanced and were stopped by few 88mm Flak (anti-aircraft) guns deployed in the rear. It was the first time ever, that 88mm Flak guns were used against ground targets and soon became well known and feared "tank killers". In preparations for the attack into central France, which was to take place on June 5th of 1940, Rommel's 7th Panzer Division was positioned close to the coast near Abbeville. On June 8th, Rommel reached the outskirts of Rouen and on 10th, 7th Panzer Division reached the English Channel west of Dieppe. On June 17th, Erwin Rommel reached the southern outskirts of Cherbourg and on 19th, city's garrison surrendered to Erwin Rommel. On June 25th, fighting in France came to an end. During the Battle of France, 7th Panzer Division earned a title of the "Ghost/Phantom Division", because no one knew where it was, including the German High Command and Rommel's staff. 7th Panzer Division's success in France was based on the speed and total distance covered by it. As commander of 7th Panzer Division, Erwin Rommel presented himself as an unconventional military leader with unique methods of command. Also, Rommel commanded his units from the frontline, since he felt it was important for the commander to always be near his troops. Erwin Rommel was always with the reconnaissance
troops and sometimes he cut the communication with the High Command, because he didn't want to be disturbed. Rommel realized that the High Command didn't know about tank warfare, so he simply cut the communication and explained everything later. His staff criticized Rommel for his behavior and they were often unable to find out where Rommel was. In his letters to his wife Lucie, Erwin Rommel wrote that the French Campaign was a "lighting tour of France".

Erwin Rommel after the Fall of France.

1940-1943
After the fall of France, Erwin Rommel worked on his war diary, which described the events of May and June of 1940. In January of 1941, Rommel was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and in early February was called to Berlin. In Berlin, Erwin Rommel received the command of Deutsches Afrika Korps (German Africa Corps) and was ordered to leave for Tripoli on February 12th. Deutsches Afrika Korps was to consist of two divisions and was destined for North Africa (Western Desert) to aid Germany's Italian ally in their struggle against the British. From December of 1940 to January of 1941, British pushed Italians from Egyptian frontier back to El Agheila in Libya. On February 14th of 1941, leading elements 5th Leichte (Panzer) Division along with their commander Erwin Rommel landed in Tripoli and was joined in early May by 15th Panzer Division. Since his arrival, Rommel found Italians to be demoralized by the defeats inflicted upon them by British, and his relations with Italian commanders left much to be desired.

In view of the tenseness of the situation, and the sluggishness of the Italian command, I decided to ignore my orders and to take command at the front with my own hands as soon as possible - at the very latest after the arrival of the first German units. - Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel - The Rommel Papers.

On February 24th, Afrika Korps had its first combat engagement with British forces at El Agheila and on March 31st launched a successful attack on British positions at Mersa Brega. Erwin Rommel, utilized the tactics of Blitzkrieg, which worked so well in France and took British completely by a suprise. Afrika Korps continued pursuing retreating British, advanced eastwards from Tripolitania through Libya to Cyrenaica and captured Benghazi. On April 13th, Erwin Rommel captured Bardia and Salum and on April 15th, reached Egyptian (western) border. Rommel's offensive forced British and its allies to retreat to the safety of static defenses around Tobruk. Rommel's first attempt to break the Tobruk's defenses made on April 11th lasted until April 13th but failed. It was followed by a second unsuccessful attempt on April 30 that lasted until May 2nd of 1941. At that time, Erwin Rommel was nicknamed the Desert Fox by both his friends and enemies, because he constantly improvised and used tricks in order to outsmart his enemies. Also at the same time, Rommel was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal. Rommel the youngest German Field Marshal ever, since he received the promotion at the age of 50. From mid April to mid June, British launched small scale offensives but were forced to retreat to defensive positions by 88mm Flak (anti-aircraft) guns.
deployed as anti-tank guns.

"The 88 Ambush"

Erwin Rommel deployed and dug in his 88mm Flak guns in the U-shaped formation. They were dug in so deep, that the barrel looked only 30 to 60cm over the ground level. They were dug in, because they had no wheels and stood very high on large pods and had a high profile. Then a low tent was erected over the position of every gun and even with field glasses it was impossible to distinguish them from sand dunes. Since the British saw a lot of sand dunes, they were not disturbed by them as well as that they didn't know of any German weapon with the profile as low as the small sand dunes. Then Rommel sent his light tanks to fake an attack on British positions. The British Crusaders saw an easy prey and followed Panzers to attacked, while Panzers withdraw in the U-shape. At point-blank range, sometimes requiring nerves of steel for the 88mm Flak gun crews, the trap sprang and they opened fire.

In June of 1941, both Allies and Axis, seized any offensive activities and strengthened their defensive positions. At the time, Erwin Rommel became very popular in Arab world and was regarded as a "liberator" from the British rule. In Germany, the Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels used Rommel's popularity among soldiers and civilians as well, to create an image of an invincible Volksmarschall - People's Marshal. In mid August of 1941, Afrika Korps (now designated Panzer Group Africa) was re-organized and in reality Erwin Rommel became the commander of all Axis (Africa Corps and five Italian divisions) troops in North Africa. At the same time, 5th Leichte (Panzer) Division was redesignated as 21st Panzer Division and additional 90th Light Division was transferred to Afrika Korps. Erwin Rommel constantly requested equipment and supplies but received small portions of what he asked for. In October, Rommel started planning for the new offensive and further reorganization and strengthening of defensive positions took place until November of 1941. In the night of November 17th, British Commando unit was sent to penetrate Rommel's Headquarters and assassinate him but was unsuccessful since Rommel was not even there.

On November 18th, British started their offensive codenamed "Crusader". British attacked at the Halfaya Pass to relieve the encircled city of Tobruk. After British attacks on November 22nd and 23rd were stopped, Rommel counterattacked and drove into the British rear, relieving Axis forces at the Halfaya Pass. At the same time, British reached the vicinity of Tobruk and on November 29th, broke through to Tobruk. By December 7th, Afrika Korps was forced to withdraw across Cyrenaica and on January 6th reached El Agheila in Libya. From January 2nd to 17th, Axis forces were defeated at Halfaya Pass, Bardia and Sollum. In mid January, Erwin Rommel consolidated his forces and positions and decided to launch a new offensive when his force would be properly supplied and equipped.

"The Desert Fox in action"
Rommel ordered to attach bundles of wood and bushes on long ropes to all the supply trucks and some Italian light tanks. The Italian light tanks drove in the first line, one after the other, behind them all the supply trucks. The attached bundles of wood and bushes made an immense clouds of
dust. For the British, it looked like the real full-scale attack. They not only withdraw, but turned their delaying forces in the wrong direction. At the same time, Rommel attacked from the other direction with his German Panzer Division. The British were completely outwitted and defeated.

In late January, Rommel launched his new offensive, recaptured Benghazi and forced British to retreat to the safety of Gazala line. In early February, both sides took defensive positions to consolidate their strength. On May 26th of 1942, launched the next stage of his new offensive and after heavy fighting breakthrough the Gazala line and threatened the city of Tobruk. On June 21st, Rommel captured Tobruk and decided to continue advancing eastwards into Egypt and by June 30th reached the British defenses at Marsa Mattruh. Pursuing retreating British, Rommel reached the defensive system at El Alamein, 96km west of Alexandria and 240km west of Cairo. At this point, Axis forces were completely exhausted with only 50 tanks and relied on captured supplies and equipment. From early July to late August, British concentrated their efforts on destroying the remains of Afrika Corps but with little success. Erwin Rommel continued requesting equipment and supplies but the main focus of German war machine was on the Eastern Front and very limited supplies reached North Africa. On August 30th, Rommel launched another offensive directed in forcing the British to withdraw from their positions at El Alamein. He attacked the British rear at the ridge at Alam Halfa, but quickly ran out of supplies and Allied superiority forced him to withdraw to his previous defensive positions. From September to October of 1942, there was another period of when both Allies and Axis, seized any offensive activities and strengthened their defensive positions. In November, sick and in the need of convalescence, Erwin Rommel left for Germany. On October 23rd, British launched their offensive directed in recapturing lost land and destroying the Axis forces in North Africa. Right after the start of the British offensive, Rommel was recalled to Africa and reached his headquarters on October 25th. British with total superiority quickly defeated Axis forces at El Alamein and pushed the outnumbered Axis forces and on November 12th, recaptured Tobruk. To worsen the situation, on November 8th, an Anglo-American Invasion of North-West Africa, codenamed "Torch" began. British continued their offensive and recaptured Benghazi on November 19th, followed by the recapture of El Aghila on December 17th. Erwin Rommel was unable to establish defensive positions nor to launch an offensive due to the lack of equipment and supplies and decided to retreat to the German bridgehead at Tunis. British continued their pursuit of the Desert Fox and on January 23rd of 1943, captured the city of Tripoli. On February 19th, Rommel launched his last offensive in North Africa. On February 20th, he recaptured the Kasserine Pass but on February 22nd, his attack was stopped by the superiority of Allied forces. On the same day, he received the command of newly formed Army Group Africa, which was made up of all Axis troops in North Africa, but he refused to take the command.

On February 23rd, Rommel was forced to take the command of the Army Group Africa. Soon after, Rommel handed over the command of the Army Group Africa to General von Arnim. On March 6th of 1943, Erwin Rommel flew back to Germany, to persuade Adolf Hitler about the hopelessness of the Axis situation in Africa. In reality, Rommel was recalled back to Germany, he then was ordered to take the sick leave and all his pleas to return to Africa where turned down. On March 11th of 1943, Erwin Rommel was awarded
by Hitler, the Knights Cross with Oakleaves, Swords and Diamonds. At the
time, Erwin Rommel was physically and morally shaken and was a shadow of
his past glory. Two months later, on May 13th of 1943, the surrender of
all Axis forces (200,000 men) in North Africa, took place.

Erwin Rommel as a commander of Africa Corps.

1943-1944
From March to July of 1943, Erwin Rommel was enjoying his badly needed
sick leave, spending time with his wife and occasionally with his son. On
July 10th, Rommel was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief in Greece, but
was quickly recalled back to Germany. In early November, Rommel became the
Commander-in-Chief in Italy, but was quickly replaced by General Albert
Kesselring. In late November of 1943, Rommel was transferred to France and
on December 31st, received the command of Army Group B under Field Marshal
von Runstedt. He was responsible for the area stretching from Holland to
Bordeaux and was to organize coastal defenses against the expected Allied
invasion. He was also appointed as Inspector General and was put in charge
of the defenses on the Atlantic Wall. When preparing the Western Europe
for the invasion, Rommel designed special paratroop and aircraft landing
barrier, called "Rommel-Spargel" (Rommel's Asparagus), along with many
other obstacles. Once the landing in June of 1944, had succeeded, Erwin
Rommel realized that the war was hopelessly lost and that to condone
Hitler's senseless continuation of it would be irresponsible. Injured in a
strafing air attack on July 17th of 1944, Rommel could not personally
participate in the attempt to overthrow Hitler three days later (July 20,
1944), but he was gravely implicated. (Rommel's role in the overthrow of
Hitler is still not clear and highly disputed by the historians.) Rommel's
opposition to Adolf Hitler was kept secret, because of his popularity. On
August 8th, Erwin Rommel was transported from the French Hospital to
Herrlingen, where he was placed under house arrest. Erwin Rommel was given
the choice of suicide, to be reported as death from his wounds, as an
alternative to execution as a traitor, which would have placed his family
and close associates in grave danger. On October 14, 1944, Rommel was
taken to the hospital at Ulm, where he died by his own hand taking the
poison. On October 18th, Erwin Rommel was buried with full military honors
and it was a day of national mourning ordered by Adolf Hitler himself.
Overall, Erwin Rommel was an outstanding and an unconventional military
leader with unique methods of command. Erwin Rommel is one of the few
commanders, who was not involved in any war crimes. Rommel was highly
respected by his enemies and was considered to be the last of the knights.
During the North African Campaign, Rommel often cut the water rations of
his troop, so that the prisoners of war could survive. His personal papers
and notes, all put together by Lucie-Maria Rommel and Fritz Bayerlein,
titled "Rommel Papers" ("Krieg ohne Hass"), were published for the first
time in 1950 and described all of Rommel's combat and personal
experiences. In post-war years, Erwin Rommel's son Manfred became Mayor of
the city of Stuttgart.
Some of the information was provided by Jörg Muth.

George Parada
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