

Erwin Rommel on his Defeat in Africa (1942)

Abstract

In contrast to histories of the war on the Eastern Front in both academic and popular history writing, the North African theatre retains a certain reputation for being the single front devoid of stark ideological conflict, and one bereft of the more horrifying aspects of the Second World War. In a similar way, the German commander of that theatre, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, attained near hero-like status during the war on both sides of the conflict. In Germany, the Propaganda Ministry sought to establish Rommel as a “soldier’s soldier” and a brilliant tactician, emphasizing his victories in France and Africa as a sign of his invincibility. In Allied media, too, Rommel enjoyed a reputation as an honorable, but near impossible to best, commander. After the war, Rommel’s reputation on both sides of the conflict helped perpetuate the myth that he never supported the National Socialists or their aims, and that Rommel had no personal relationship with or to Adolf Hitler. Historical writing for decades focused solely on Rommel’s military exploits and left alone any political or ideological considerations. This myth was encouraged especially by Rommel’s forced suicide for his involvement in the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Recent scholarship has challenged these assertions, demonstrating that in fact Rommel had been an early supporter of National Socialism and enjoyed access to Hitler during the war through an aide.

In this excerpt, Rommel discusses the crippling situation by Fall 1942, ultimately leading him to conclude that the war effort was lost. He recalls how, faced with impossible odds, he decided to use what remaining resources he had and ordered a general retreat of the entire corps across the coast – against the orders of both the German High Command and Hitler. Although this retreat saved the lives of many German soldiers, and although it represented the soundest military decision, his decision to defy Hitler is often hailed as an example of his antipathy for the regime and National Socialism.

Source

4th November 1942

My headquarters left during the night for Fuka. Time and again we got stuck in the sand. Everyone had to climb down and help dig the vehicles out. It reminded me of the desperate time we had of it trying to reach Alexandria, following our victory at Tobruk, when my troops were exhausted but elated after the long battle, crossing the same stretch of ground that we were crossing now, in order to grasp the one chance of seizing the initiative in North Africa. Our supply route had failed, and we were finally seeing the consequences. Bitter thoughts in this night of defeat.

By morning, the coast road on our immediate right was lit up by flares, and British bombs continued to fall on our columns. Authorisation for the retreat from El Alamein to Fuka came – as did the authorization from the Fuehrer – much too late in the day, requiring us to extricate all German-Italian troops, in particular the non-motorised units.

[...]

5th November 1942

Around midday, heavy fighting broke out between our motorised units and the British forward column near Fuka. Time and again sandstorms blew up and deprived us of visibility. Soon a strong British flying column came up behind our unprotected southern flank. It was therefore clear – we had to sound the

retreat, or all would be lost.

Now that the Afrika Korps had been breached between the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and we had no more reserves, I ordered – with a heavy heart on account of the German and Italian units still on the march – the withdrawal to Mersa Matruh.

The only formations retaining any fighting strength were the remnants of the 90th Light Division, under Count von Sponeck, small combat groups from the two panzer divisions of the Afrika Korps, the Panzergrenadier Regiment Afrika, and a quickly assembled body of German troops drawn from the last of the 164th Light Division.

On the morning of 6th November, as we tried to gather ourselves together, we came across a coloured British soldier who had hidden near our vehicles. In the course of the morning we were able with difficulty to gather our vehicles and filter them through the mined zone seven kilometres east of Mersa Matruh.

During the retreat we suffered an acute shortage of fuel, since the withdrawal of the armies had increased our rate of consumption.

Meanwhile, our columns were rolling westwards and approaching Sollum. In the afternoon, the Italian General Gandin appeared on behalf of Marshal Cavallero to enquire after our situation and intentions. I was pleased at this. I delivered a detailed account of the fighting, in particular underlying the supply problems, the Fuehrer's and the Duce's orders, and especially those from the Commando Supremo. I told him directly that given the existing balance of forces, we could under no circumstances hold the enemy, and that the British, if they wished, could advance unopposed to Tripoli. We could not engage in battle, but would have to hold off the British as best we could while our troops, in chaotic disorder, were pulled back over the Libyan-Egyptian border. They could not be set in order until Libya was reached, for fear of being completely cut off. Therefore, speed was essential.

No operation could be undertaken with our remaining tanks and motorised units because of the complete lack of fuel. Whatever fuel we received, had to be reserved for the withdrawal of the men. Gandin was clearly disturbed as he left my battleground.

Clearly, war was a simple affair to the Commando Supremo: when during the El Alamein crisis in July, I had advised Marshal Cavallero that in the event of a British breakthrough we would be faced with two possible situations either to stay in the positions and be forced into surrender after two or three days for lack of water, or to retreat fighting to the west, Count Cavallero said he could not advise on what to do: the prospect was simply not to be considered. Easy enough to say.

The fuel situation was desperate, even though ships had unloaded nearly 5000 tons of fuel at Benghazi on 4th November – a record achievement – since news of our predicament had apparently stirred even Rome into action. But fuel on the dockside was no use to us. We needed petrol here, at the front, where our columns were waiting. Meanwhile, some 2000 of the 5000 tons had been destroyed in British bombing raids over Benghazi. We tried hard to persuade the Italians and Kesselring to transport the fuel on. Torrential rains were falling at this time; many tracks were too hopelessly waterlogged for vehicles and we mostly had to use the coast road. However, the British also faced problems since they also couldn't move their columns through the desert fast enough. The result was a major slowing down of operations on both sides.

In view of the bad transport situation, we could not expect any reinforcements from Europe in the foreseeable future. It was unavoidable, then, that in the event of a further British onslaught we would have to evacuate Cyrenaica, and we couldn't contemplate making another stand before Mersa el Brega.

Perhaps, I hoped, by the time we arrived, more materiel would have been sent from Tripolitania so that we could meet the British strike force much better equipped, and have the chance of attacking enemy elements.

Since it was becoming apparent that the British were moving with an armoured division to the south of Mersa Matruh, I ordered 90th Light Division to act as rearguard while the remaining forces all evacuated the area during the night and withdrew to Sidi el Barrani. The British correctly turned north during the night of the 7th, to try to cut us off. But the trap was already empty, and the British found only the wreckage of various vehicles we had destroyed for lack of fuel. It is pointless to try outflanking an enemy without having first engaged his front, because the defender can always use his motorised elements, when he has fuel and vehicles, to hold out against the flanking column while evacuating the trap.

Throughout the night, the enemy carried out uninterrupted bombing attacks on the Sollum-Halfaya passes. The two glaring problems were getting the columns through in time, and the fuel situation. So long as the large columns were jammed at the entrance to the passes, the motorised units would have to hold off the enemy at all costs. By morning there was still a 40- kilometre-long queue of vehicles waiting to get through the passes. Very little progress had been made during the night due to the continuous RAF attacks.

Around 08.00hrs I met Colonel Bayerlein to inform him that a convoy of 104 ships was approaching North Africa, and that the British and Americans were possibly about to strike from the west. This supposition was confirmed at about 11.00hrs. The British and Americans had landed during the night in northwest Africa, I was soon informed by Army Chief, Colonel Westphal. This meant the end of the army in Africa.

Source: "Chapter IX. Afrika Korps in Retreat," in John Pimlott, ed., *Rommel in his own Words*. London: Greenhill Books, 1994, pp. 151-53.

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