Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel

( listen (help·info)) (15 November 1891 – 14 October 1944), popularly known as the Desert Fox (Wüstenfuchs, listen (help·info)), was a German Field Marshal of World War II. He won the respect of both his own troops, as well as the enemies he fought. He was a highly decorated officer in World War I, and was awarded the Pour le Mérite for his exploits on the Italian front. In World War II, he further distinguished himself as the commander of the 7th Panzer Division during the 1940 invasion of France. However, it was his leadership of German and Italian forces in the North African campaign that established the legend of the Desert Fox. He is considered to have been one of the most skilled commanders of desert warfare in the war.[1][page needed] He later commanded the German forces opposing the Allied cross-channel invasion in Normandy.

As one of the few generals who consistently fought the Western Allies (he was never assigned to the Eastern Front), Rommel is regarded as having been a humane and professional officer. His Afrikakorps was never accused of war crimes. Soldiers captured during his Africa campaign were reported to have been treated humanely. Furthermore, he ignored orders to kill captured commandos, Jewish soldiers and civilians in all theaters of his command.[2]

Late in the war, Rommel was linked to the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler. Due to his wide renown, Hitler chose to eliminate him quietly; in trade for the protection of his family, Rommel agreed to commit suicide.

Rommel was born on 15 November 1891 in Heidenheim, 45 kilometres (28 mi) from Ulm, in the Kingdom of Württemberg (then part of the German Empire). He was baptised on 17 November 1891. He was the second child of the Protestant headmaster of the secondary school at Aalen, Professor Erwin Rommel Senior (1860–1913), and Helene von Luz, who had two other sons and a daughter. Rommel wrote that "my early years passed quite happily."

North Africa 1941–1943

Rommel's reward for his success in the invasion of France in the summer of 1940 was to be
promoted and appointed commander of the 5th Light Division (later reorganised and redesignated 21.Panzer-Division) and of the 15.Panzer-Division which, as the Deutsches Afrikakorps,( listen (help·info)) were sent to Libya in early 1941 in Operation Sonnenblume to aid the demoralised Italian troops which had suffered a heavy defeat from British Commonwealth forces in Operation Compass. It was in Africa where Rommel achieved his greatest fame as a commander.

First Axis offensive

His campaign in North Africa earned Rommel the nickname "The Desert Fox." On 6 February 1941 Rommel was ordered to lead the Afrika Korps, sent to Italian Libya to help shore up the Italian forces which had been driven back during Operation Compass, launched by British Commonwealth forces under Major-General Richard O'Connor during December 1940. Initially ordered to assume a defensive posture and hold the front line, the Axis High Command had slated a limited offensive towards Agedabia and Benghazi for May, planning then to hold the line between those cities. Rommel argued that such a limited offensive would be ineffective, as the whole of Cyrenaica would have to be captured if the front lines were to be held.[14] The task of even holding the remaining Italian possessions seemed daunting, as the Italians had only 7,000 troops remaining in the area after O'Connor's successful capture of 130,000 prisoners and almost 400 tanks during the previous three months of advance.[15]

On 24 March 1941 Rommel launched a limited offensive with only the 5th Light Division supported by two Italian divisions. This thrust was to be minor, in anticipation of Rommel receiving the 15th Panzer Division in May. The British, who had been weakened by troops being withdrawn to fight in the Battle of Greece, fell back to Mersa el Brega and started constructing defensive works. Rommel decided to continue the attack against these positions in order to prevent the British from building up the fortifications.[16] After a day of fierce fighting, the Germans prevailed and the advance continued as Rommel disregarded holding off the attack on Agedabia until May. The British Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command, General Archibald Wavell, overestimating the strength of the Axis forces and already apprehensive about the extent of his advances during the previous winter, ordered a withdrawal from Benghazi in early April to avoid being cut off by Rommel's thrust.

Rommel, seeing the British reluctance to fight a decisive action, decided on a bold move: the seizure of the whole of Cyrenaica despite having only light forces. He ordered the Italian Ariete armoured division to pursue the retreating British while the 5th Light Division was to move on Benghazi. Generalmajor Johannes Streich, the 5th Light Division's commander, protested this order on the grounds of the state of his vehicles, but Rommel brushed the objections aside.
because, in his words, "One cannot permit unique opportunities to slip by for the sake of trifles." The Italian Commander-in-Chief, General Italo Gariboldi, tried repeatedly to halt Rommel's advance but was unable to contact him. After Benghazi had been secured following the British withdrawal, Cyrenaica as far as Gazala was captured by 8 April.

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