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AN ANALYSIS OF THE OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP
OF FIELD MARSHAL ERWIN ROMMEL
IN THE AFRIKA KORPS

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of the Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personnel views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

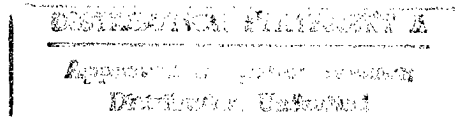
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Abstract of

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There is no doubt that Field Marshal Rommel was an exceptional leader, but why was he such a poor operational leader? Examining Rommel's first year of command of the Afrika Korps it is evident he possessed qualities necessary to be an exceptional operational leader, but he failed to understand operational logistics, and the primacy of policy and strategy. Additionally, his insistence to lead from the front caused unnecessary confusion among his forces, and his lack of unity of effort with his Italian allies decreased his combat efficiency and effectiveness. Rommel's inability to be concerned with other than tactical matters caused unnecessary losses for Germany in North Africa and assisted in Germany's failure to achieve her strategic objective in Russia.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP
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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Field Marshal Rommel was an exceptional leader. He possessed, and exhibited many qualities required to be an outstanding operational leader. Why was he then such a seemingly poor one at times? "Operational leadership" is a term that applies to commanders and their staffs who are concerned with the practical application of operational art.¹ Operational art is "concerned with both theory and practice of planning, preparing, conducting, and sustaining major operations and campaigns aimed to accomplish operational or strategic objectives in a theater."² This paper will evaluate Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's operational leadership during his first year of command of the Afrika Korps and offer reasons why he failed as a successful operational leader even though he possessed many of the qualities required to be an exceptional one.

Throughout my research it became very evident that Rommel failed to do two things: he was not concerned with the operational logistical support for his forces and he failed to understand the primacy of policy and strategy. He failed to transition his superior's strategic objectives into theater operational objectives. Instead, he developed and tried to implement his own operational objectives thereby trying to force Germany's leadership to

accept new strategic objectives. He tried to attain these operational objectives through tactical means by totally by-passing the operational art required to accomplish these objectives. These two failures caused the eventual loss of North Africa and assisted in Germany's overall loss.

Additional faults that Rommel possessed was that he did not effectively coordinate or foster unity of effort with his Italian allies; and that he personally took command of tactical operations on numerous occasions, causing confusion and uncertainty among his forces.

The reason Rommel is viewed as a great leader is because of his accomplishments as a tactical leader; however had he been a better operational leader the war in African could well have turned out very differently than it did.

BACKGROUND

The war in North Africa was going poorly for the Italians. Hitler feared that if the Italians lost Libya that this would severely affect the Axis alliance, additionally it would free up British forces in Egypt to fight elsewhere, and it would give the British additional airfields in North Africa that could cause severe damage to German interests.³ Hitler had no intentions of making North Africa into another major front especially since his strategic objective was Russia. What he wanted was to assist the Italians in defending Libya so as to keep them as an ally and to keep them in the war, and to keep the British troops away from his southern flanks. What Hitler did not want or need was another strategic objective to further decrease his dwindling forces. Since Libya was over 1300

miles from Berlin, Hitler needed a commander who could act semi-independently, who possessed exceptional initiative, stamina, originality and boldness to assist a morally and physically weak ally.⁴ Hitler chose Rommel because he had these qualities.

Unfortunately, these same qualities would eventually make him a liability to Hitler's strategic objective.

Rommel arrived in Tripoli in February, 1941; he immediately began plans for attacking and driving the British out of Libya. In March, he started his offensive, which lasted until May. He drove the British toward Egypt, but was held at Tobruk, where the British were well dug in and fortified. The numerous assaults on Tobruk resulted in great losses for Rommel. Rommel then withdrew and strengthened his defenses around Tobruk. The British counter attack from Tobruk was very costly to the British, due to Rommel's intelligence, ingenious use of artillery, and dug in defenses. The Allied Crusader offensive in November, 1941 caught Rommel by surprise, and would eventually push Rommel to retreat towards Tripoli.

In so many ways Rommel displayed the qualities of an exceptional operational leader. He developed in the Afrika Korps a strong sense of identity, and a feeling of unity. So much so, that this self confidence became a strong force multiplier, because they knew that under Rommel they could accomplish anything.⁵ To them, Rommel was God. How could they not idolize Rommel? He was the ideal soldier, fearless, resourceful, tireless, competent. His unrelenting energy allowed him to be everywhere and do everything. He was a soldier's general, fighting along side with them at the front instead of the rear.⁶ He had the same effect on his enemies, who credited him with having supernatural powers.

This prompted the British Commander in Chief (Middle East Force) to order his commanders, for psychological reasons, to stop referring to Rommel as if he was a “superman”.⁷

CHARACTER TRAITS

Character is perhaps the most important factor of a successful operational leader.⁸ The personality traits that Rommel possessed were those needed by an operational leader. The ones that stand out the most were his moral courage, boldness, professional knowledge, initiative, decisiveness, toughness, ability to motivate, ability to think big, and his leadership by personal example.

His moral courage was unparalleled. Rommel and his Afrika Korps were credited for fighting by the rules and for being gentlemen.⁹ Rommel refused to obey an order by Hitler to “slaughter” all enemy troops who were discovered to be on commando missions, even if those troops were surrendering. Rommel treated all prisoners of war fairly and humanely.¹⁰

There is no doubt Rommel possessed incredible boldness. This boldness was displayed in the combat maneuvering and in the personal risks that he exposed himself to daily. An example of his boldness was the launching of a successful counter offensive in March 1941 against recent British gains at Cyrenaica. He sensed that the British were exhausted and in the process of reorganizing after their prolonged offensive drive through Cyrenaica.¹¹ He therefore launched a counter offensive after being in country for only 6 weeks and with less than half of his expected forces. Rommel’s boldness allowed him to exploit every offensive opportunity that presented itself to him.¹²

Another example of his boldness was his attack on Mersa Brega. His superiors had ordered Rommel not to attack Mersa Brega until his second Panzer Division arrived in May 1941. Rommel however attacked, and conquered it in March 1941 because he reasoned that by May the enemy's defenses might be impregnable.¹³

Rommel's ingenuity and professional knowledge of his forces was unequalled. Rommel used an old weapon in a new way by using his 88 mm AA guns with their barrels horizontal in a anti-tank role. This technique proved disastrous for the British.¹⁴ Additionally, Rommel developed new battle techniques by using anti-tank guns in the front line with the tanks, and by using an anti-tank gun line as a defensive surprise. These new techniques also proved disastrous for the British.¹⁵

Rommel also displayed great initiative and creativity. When Rommel's panzer division arrived at night from Germany, he immediately ordered the unloading of all tanks and equipment, even though this would risk an air attack since the unloading would require the use of flood lights. This was done so that his division would be ready to deploy early the next morning.¹⁶ Rommel was very aware that he was weaker than the British forces, however he wanted to keep the British guessing as to his over all strength. Therefore, when Rommel paraded his forces, after disembarking in Tripoli, he had his tanks drive several times around the block before rolling off to the east, so as to make it look like he had an endless amount of tanks.¹⁷ In another deception, Rommel ordered the construction of a large number of dummy tanks, which were made of wood and mounted on Volkswagen automobiles. Again this was done so as to make Rommel appear as

strong as possible and thereby induce caution on the British, to prevent an attack until Rommel was fully ready.¹⁸

OPERATIONAL TASKS

There are certain operational tasks that an operational leader must successfully accomplish to be considered successful.¹⁹ Rommel's operational planning, operational training, and employment and sustainment of combat forces will be evaluated to determine how successful he was as an operational leader. Although there are more tasks then listed, only the above will be evaluated since those task are considered the reasons why Rommel succeeded or failed in battle.

OPERATIONAL PLANNING

The attack on Tobruk in April 1941 was ill conceived and planned by Rommel. The attack was forced upon his commanders with very little intelligence and conducted with little support. Rommel forced the attack because he falsely believed that the British were evacuating, and he wanted to inflict as much damage to the retreating forces as possible. He acted as a tactical leader instead of an operational leader. He eagerly believed every radio and photo intelligence that indicated that the British were pulling out of Tobruk, and he equally dismissed all intelligence that showed otherwise.²⁰ The attack was so ill planned that the Panzer Division Commander under Rommel who had already lost 120 out of 161 tanks in the assault refused Rommel's order to assault Tobruk again until proper air photo, dive bomber attacks, air cover, and spotter planes were made

available.²¹ Rommel failed to take Tobruk, and the resulting casualties required the Afrika Korps to take a defensive position.

Another attack that was ill planned was Rommel's "dash to the wire" during the British Crusader offensive in November 1941.²² The "wire" was the boundary between British Egypt and Italian Libya. When Rommel's "dash" started he had almost won the Crusader battle; however by the time the "dash" ended the scales had tilted against him.²³ He failed because of his impatience, lack of planning, and lack of logistics. Rommel forced the attack because of his wish to annihilate the retreating enemy. Unfortunately, he didn't consider the logistical support required, or the fact that his men were exhausted or that his tanks needed repairs. Although his divisional commanders and staff recommended against attacking, Rommel was adamant and took personal charge of the attack. Because of his impatience Rommel failed to realize the enemy's positions and was unable to communicate with his headquarters and with his divisional commanders at times.²⁴ Due to Rommel's poor planning the British were able to force Rommel into his first retreat back to Tripoli.

Rommel's problem was that he viewed the North African campaign as a large battle. He thought more on terms of tactical than he did on operational. Put aside the fact that Rommel should not have been fighting such an offensive war as he was, since it was against the strategic objective of Germany; if, however, the operational objective was to take the Suez Canal, Rommel was fighting it all wrong. He was acting as a tactical commander. He was going from battle to battle instead of stepping back and taking a look at the big picture. If he would have done this, it would have been evident to him that

he would need more supplies and resources, and therefore he would need air superiority and control of the seas in order to obtain his objective. Rommel failed to ask and answer the four fundamental questions: "What operational level goals or conditions must be achieved in order to meet the nation's strategic objectives? What sequence of actions must be planned and executed to reach those operational goals? How should the joint force's assets be applied to accomplish that sequence? What are the likely derivative costs and risks?"²⁵

OPERATIONAL TRAINING

Very little operational training was available to Rommel due to the almost immediate actions and constant advances that Rommel took against the British upon arriving in North Africa. However, when time was available, Rommel effectively used it to conduct corps wide training. While the British forces were being contained in Tobruk, Rommel deployed Axis forces so that a flexible response could be made to stop any British attack on his flanks; additionally the Afrika Korps were put through rigorous training for an assault against Tobruk using tank and anti-tank guns together. Because of this constant training, Rommel's men were able to coordinate their attacks even when the situation changed. This allowed Rommel to have "a concentrated stroke at speed."²⁶

EMPLOYMENT AND SUSTAINMENT OF COMBAT FORCES

If Rommel had the additional resources and logistical support necessary, his employment of forces for the majority of his first year would have been correct. The fact that he was able to win battles without the additional logistical support is a tribute to his

tactical proficiency, boldness, and initiative. Unfortunately, it was at the unnecessary expense of his forces and resources. In a majority of his battles, Rommel was over extended. He relied on captured enemy equipment and supplies to continue his advances and to resupply his forces. It seemed that Rommel took care of logistical emergencies as they occurred instead of adequately planning and preparing prior to engaging in battle so as to prevent the emergencies.

Operational logistics was one of the main reasons Rommel failed as an Operational Leader. He did not place enough emphasis and priority on logistics. While he was in Africa, Rommel twice advanced 1500 miles from Tripoli to Egypt, and would twice flee from Egypt to Tripoli all because of logistical support and lack of it. Tripoli was Rommel's main supply base. The further he got from his main base, the more difficult it was establishing advance supply stations.²⁷ Rommel states that the reason for giving up pursuit of the enemy is almost always due to the difficulty of the quartermaster from being able to span the lengthened supply routes, and the quartermaster's not using his initiative and improvisation to increase the supply routes.²⁸ Here he places the blame on the quartermaster for not providing the required supplies to accomplish the objectives. It is however, the responsibility of the operational commander to ensure the supplies are available. His lack of concern for logistics was appalling. When questioned by his superior how he would supply and feed the additional panzer corps that he had requested, Rommel answered: "That's quite immaterial to me. That's your pigeon."²⁹

Rommel's abortive attack on Tobruk in May 1941 and his defeat at the "wire" were due to his weak logistical support, in addition to his poor planning.³⁰ Rommel should

have been more aware of his logistical situation and less concerned with the tactical situation.

PRIMACY OF POLICY AND STRATEGY

Policy determines military strategy.³¹ Military strategy in turns determines strategic and operational objectives. Rommel's objective, as directed by the German High Command, was to assist the Italians and to ensure that they did not retreat to Tripoli without a fight.³² Fortunately for the Allies, Rommel decided that he would change his mission, and perhaps create a new range of possibilities for German strategy.³³ In a clear violation of his orders, Rommel told his staff that his objective was the Suez Canal.³⁴ He did not realize that even if he was able to reach the Canal he would not have been able to hold it. More than likely, he would have needed three things to realize his objective. Malta needed to be in Axis control, he would need air superiority, and he would need secure sea lanes in order to get protection, supplies and resources. He could not get any of these, since they were out of his control. No matter how victorious he was in North Africa, he required the assistance of his superiors to reach his own objective. Since his objective was not the objective of his superiors it would seem evident that he would not receive the assistance he needed to continue on. He hoped that once he got to the Suez Canal his superiors would either be forced to give him more support or they would see that his objective was better than their limited North African objective and thereby change or increase their strategic objective. Rommel wanted the German strategy to include the conquest of the Middle East. He believed that if he could go past the Suez

Canal, along with success in Russia, Turkey might be persuaded to join the Axis' powers, thereby giving Germany access and possible control of Middle East oil.³⁵

While reporting to Hitler's headquarters on his progress in March 1941, Rommel was told by the Commander and Chief of the Army, "that there was no intention of striking a decisive blow in Africa in the near future".³⁶ Rommel then proceeded to instantly and methodically disregard those clear and cautious orders upon his return to Africa.³⁷

Rommel was unable to see that his role in Germany's grand strategy was to be a minor role.

It is the task of the operational leadership to point out to the political leadership that certain military aims cannot be accomplished, or provide alternatives to those military aims if another military aim can be accomplished more efficiently.³⁸ However, an operational commander can not conduct operations that will adversely affect the national strategy or intended strategic objective. The commander must accept the objective and accomplish it. Rommel never accepted the fact that the North African Campaign would only be a minor operational objective and not the objective that would bring victory for Germany. Since he did not accept his superiors' strategic objective he desperately tried to influence their decision by winning battles, and requesting additional material and forces to continue his personal operational objective. This of course would take away vital resources from the real strategic objective of Russia. Rommel could not see this and therefore seriously damaged Germany's chances to accomplish its strategic objective. By overstepping his orders Rommel brought about a situation for which his decisions had

adverse strategic implications, and for which he did not have adequate supplies to accomplish.

OTHER FACTORS

Rommel failed to inform and coordinate his planned operations on numerous occasions with his Italian superiors and allies. He basically wanted as little to do with the Italians as possible. Through his lack of coordination, Rommel failed to effectively use unity of effort, which would have greatly increased his effectiveness and capabilities. An excellent example of his lack of unity of effort was on the attack on Tobruk in April 1941, in which he failed to inform the Italians that he intended to attack Tobruk. Had Rommel informed the Italians he could have received valuable detailed plans for the fort at Tobruk since the Italians had built the fort. As it was, Rommel didn't receive the plans until after the battle.³⁹

On several occasions Rommel personally led the attack against the enemy. This caused severe difficulties and confusion among his staff, divisional commanders, and forces. Clearly, Rommel could have best served the Afrika Korps by providing leadership and coordination from the rear instead of being concerned with tactical vice operational matters.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Rommel was never told that Russia was to be invaded. Therefore, he was not aware of the strategic objective until after Germany attacked Russia.⁴⁰ Therefore, Rommel's

advances towards Egypt may have been done so as to give the German High Command a strategic objective.

Perhaps the reason that Rommel so often led from the front was that he had too little opportunity of exercising his corps as a formation with all its weapons, and perhaps because he did not have the time to assess his commanders and to ensure they could accomplish exactly what he wanted them to do. Therefore, especially in the beginning there may have been an increased need to lead from the front in order to make changes quickly to more effectively use his divisions.⁴¹ Since he did lead from the front, Rommel was able to outclass his enemies in rapidity of decision and movement because he personally took command of his armor.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Within Rommel's first year in North Africa, the Afrika Korps had some terrific successes pushing the Allied forces back. These successes were in large part due to Rommel's tactical leadership at the unnecessary expense of forces and equipment. Although Rommel possessed and displayed extraordinary operational leadership qualities, he failed as an operational leader because he did not grasp the importance of operational logistics and because he failed to understand the primacy of policy and strategy.

Rommel possessed the needed character traits to be a great operational leader; however, he continuously thought like a tactical leader. His lack of unity of effort with his Italian allies and his desire to lead from the front seriously effected his ability to coordinate and direct all his forces more efficiently. Since he acted more like a tactical

leader than an operational leader he was unable to grasp the big picture. Had he been a better operational leader, his successes would not have been so costly in lives and resources, and it could possibly have saved Germany from losing North Africa, and would have assisted Germany in attaining her strategic objective in Russia.

NOTES

- ¹ Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport RI (NWC 4107): September 1996, 1.
- ² Milan Vego, "Operational Art," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport RI: 15 November 1996.
- ³ Hans-Otto Behrendt, Rommel's Intelligence in the Desert Campaign 1941-1943 (London: William Kimber, 1985), 30.
- ⁴ Ronald Lewin, The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps (New York: New York Times Book Co, 1977), 15.
- ⁵ Ibid., 19.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Desmond Young, Rommel (London: Collins, 1950), 23.
- ⁸ Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport RI (NWC 4107): September 1996, 3.
- ⁹ Young, 149.
- ¹⁰ Young, 152.
- ¹¹ K. J. Macksey, Maj, M.C., Afrika Korps (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 6.
- ¹² Charles Douglas-Home, Rommel (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), 91.
- ¹³ David Irving, The Trail of the Fox (New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1977), 73.
- ¹⁴ Ronald Lewin, Rommel as Military Commander (London: B.T. Batsford, LTD, 1968), 44.
- ¹⁵ Lewin, Rommel, 55.
- ¹⁶ Irving, 68.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ B. H. Liddell Hart, ed., The Rommel Papers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), 103.
- ¹⁹ Milan Vego, "Operational Art," Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport RI: 15 November 1996.
- ²⁰ Irving, 84.
- ²¹ Ibid., 87.
- ²² Lewin, Rommel, 73.

- ²³ Ibid., Rommel, 76.
- ²⁴ Ibid., Rommel, 77.
- ²⁵ College of Naval Command and Staff, Joint Military Operations Syllabus 1996-1997, v.
- ²⁶ Lewin, Rommel, 56.
- ²⁷ Douglas-Home, 70.
- ²⁸ Hart, 96.
- ²⁹ Irving, 71.
- ³⁰ Lewin, Rommel, 41.
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- ³² Douglas-Home, 80.
- ³³ Ibid., 79.
- ³⁴ Lewin, Rommel, 39.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 50.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 32.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 33.
- ³⁸ Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport RI (NWC 4107): September 1996, 2.
- ³⁹ Irving, 92.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 71.
- ⁴¹ Lewin, Rommel, 21.
- ⁴² Young, 136.

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