

Rommel, Erwin, and Manfred Rommel.
The Rommel Papers
(New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953)

Through my daily flights between Tripoli and the front, I came to know Tripolitania very well from the air and formed a great admiration for the colonising achievement of the Italians. They had left their mark all over the country, particularly round Tripoli, Tarhuna and Homs.

Day by day now, more columns of Italian and German troops moved up to the front. Despite Italian advice to the contrary, the Afrika Korps' Quartermaster (Major Otto), a first-class man, organised supplies along the coast by small ships, thus considerably easing the pressure on our lorry columns. The Italians had unfortunately never built a railway along the coast. It would now have been of immense value.

To enable us to appear as strong as possible and to induce the maximum caution in the British, I had the workshops three miles south of Tripoli produce large numbers of dummy tanks, which were mounted on Volkswagen [*the German People's Car*] and were deceptively like the original. On the 17th February the enemy was very active and I feared that he would continue his offensive towards Tripoli. This impression was strengthened on the 18th, when we established the presence of further British units between El Agheila and Agedabia. To give them in turn an impression of activity on our part, I decided to push forward 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, reinforced by the Battalion Santa Maria and with 39th Anti-tank Battalion under command, as far as the Nofilia area, with instructions to make contact with the enemy.

On the 24th February, the first clash occurred between British and German troops in Africa. Two enemy scout cars, a lorry and a car were destroyed, and three British soldiers, including an officer, taken prisoner, with no casualties on our side. Meanwhile, the movement of further units of the 5th Light Division to the front proceeded as planned.

We were still rather suspicious about the British moves and to clarify the situation, General Streich, commander of the 5th Light Division—who had taken over command at the front—advanced up to the defile of Mugtaa on the 4th March and closed it with mines. He saw nothing of the enemy.

This move gained us a sector of some importance and materially strengthened our position. The salt marsh known as Sebcha el Chebira extends here 20 miles south of the Via Balbia and is impassable to

vehicles except at a few points, which we very soon mined. An enemy frontal attack against the narrows would have been comparatively easy to beat off, and an outflanking movement, which would have involved him in a long march over sandy and difficult country, was not very likely. At Mugtaa we were already some 500 miles east of Tripoli. For our coastal supply traffic we had gained the small port of Ras el Ali—like all those places with high-sounding names, this was in reality a desolate and miserable hole—to which the quartermasters very soon began sending stores.

5 March 1941

DEAREST LU,

Just back from a two-day journey—or rather flight—to the front, which is now 450 miles away to the east. Everything going fine.

A lot to do. Can't leave here for the moment as I couldn't be answerable for my absence. Too much depends on my own person and my driving power. I hope you've had some post from me.

My troops are on their way. Speed is the one thing that matters here. The climate suits me down to the ground. I even "overslept" this morning till after 6. . . .

. . . A gala performance of "Victory in the West"¹ was given here to-day. In welcoming the guests—there were a lot, some with ladies—I said I hoped the day would come when we'd be showing "Victory in Africa." . . .

Our operations against Mugtaa resulted in a British withdrawal eastward and we now supposed their main body to be lying round Agedabia and along the coast to Derna.

The British forces had been reduced in number, and quality, to a greater extent than Rommel realised. At the end of February the illustrious 7th Armoured Division had been sent back to Egypt to rest and refit. Its place had been taken by half of the 2nd Armoured Division, raw from home—the other half having been sent to Greece. The 6th Australian Division had also been replaced by the 9th Australian Division, but part of this was kept back at Tobruk because of maintenance difficulties farther forward. Besides lacking experience, the new formations had also been stripped of much equipment and transport for the benefit of the expedition to Greece. Moreover, O'Connor had gone back to Egypt and been relieved by a commander, General Neame, who was without experience of mechanised desert warfare.

In taking such risks for the sake of giving "maximum support" to the Greek venture, Wavell based himself on the belief that the "Italians in Tripolitania could be disregarded and that the Germans were unlikely to accept the risk of sending large bodies of armoured troops to Africa in view of the inefficiency of the Italian Navy." He was correct in his general estimate of the attitude of the German High

¹Film of the 1940 French campaign, made by German propaganda companies.

Command, and also in his detailed estimate that only the equivalent of "one armoured brigade" (i.e. the 5th Panzer Regiment) had been landed. On normal reasoning Wavell was justified in his conclusion of the 2nd March: "I do not think that with this force he (the enemy) will attempt to recover Benghazi." But such reckoning did not allow for a Rommel.

Enemy attempts to strangle our supplies by naval action in the Mediterranean and air attack against Tripoli achieved no great success at this stage. On the 11th March, the 5th Panzer Regiment completed its disembarkation in Tripoli; this force with its—for those days—up-to-date equipment made a tremendous impression on the Italians.¹

On the 13th March, I moved my H.Q. up to Sirte in order to be closer to the front. My original intention was to fly to Sirte in a Ghibli² aircraft with my Chief of Staff. After taking off, however, we ran into sandstorms near Tauorga, whereat the pilot, ignoring my abuse and attempts to get him to fly on, turned back, compelling me to continue the journey by car from the airfield at Misurata. Now we realised what little idea we had had of the tremendous force of such a storm. Immense clouds of reddish dust obscured all visibility and forced the car's speed down to a crawl. Often the wind was so strong that it was impossible to drive along the Via Balbia. Sand streamed down the windscreen like water. We gasped in breath painfully through handkerchiefs held over our faces and sweat poured off our bodies in the unbearable heat. So this was the Ghibli. Silently I breathed my apologies to the pilot. A Luftwaffe officer crashed in a sandstorm that day.

On the 15th of March, a mixed German and Italian force, under the command of Count Schwerin, moved out from Sirte towards Murzuch [about 450 miles to the south]. The Italian High Command had asked us to undertake this operation because General de Gaulle's troops in southern Libya were beginning to become a nuisance. As far as we were concerned, however, the main purpose of the move was to gain experience of long marches and in particular to test the suitability of our equipment for African conditions. Shortly afterwards the whole of the Brescia Division arrived in the line at Mugtaa and the 5th Light Division was freed for mobile employment.

On the 19th March I flew to the Fuehrer's H.Q. to report and obtain fresh instructions. The Fuehrer made me a retrospective award of the Oakleaves³ for the 7th Panzer Division's actions in France. The C.-in-C. of the Army [von Brauchitsch] informed me that there was no intention of striking a decisive blow in Africa in the near future, and that for the

¹The 5th Panzer Regiment was equipped with 120 tanks, but of these only 60 were medium tanks (Panzer III and IV). In addition, the Italian Ariete Division advanced with 80 tanks—all that were serviceable at the time.

²The name of an Italian aircraft. Ghibli is also the Arabic word for sandstorm, in which sense it is used later in this passage.

³See footnote on page 39.

present I could expect no reinforcements. After the arrival of the 15th Panzer Division at the end of May, I was to attack and destroy the enemy round Agedabia. Benghazi might perhaps be taken. I pointed out that we could not just take Benghazi, but would have to occupy the whole of Cyrenaica, as the Benghazi area could not be held by itself. I was not very happy at the efforts of Field Marshal von Brauchitsch and Colonel-General Halder to keep down the numbers of troops sent to Africa and leave the future of this theatre of war to chance. The momentary British weakness in North Africa should have been exploited with the utmost energy, in order to gain the initiative once and for all for ourselves.

In my opinion it was also wrong not to risk a landing in England in 1940-41. If ever there was a chance for this operation to succeed it was in the period after the British Expeditionary Force had lost its equipment. From then on the operation became steadily more difficult to undertake, and undertaken it eventually had to be, if the war against Britain was to be won.

Before my departure, I had instructed the 5th Light Division to prepare an attack on El Agheila for the 24th March, with the object of taking the airfield and small fort, and driving out the present garrison. A short time before, the Marada Oasis, some distance to the south, had been occupied by a mixed Italian and German force. This force now had to be maintained and our supply columns were being constantly molested by the British from El Agheila.

Accordingly, after my return to Africa, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion took the fort, water points and airfield at El Agheila in the early hours of the 24th March. The garrison, which consisted of only a weak force, had strongly mined the whole place and withdrew skilfully in face of our attack.

After our capture of El Agheila, the British outposts—as we learnt from the Luftwaffe—appeared to fall back to the defile at Mersa el Brega.