
Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942

IN 1967, EMILIO Faldella, author of numerous books on the Italian military, observed that 'the myth of Rommel was created by the English, who preferred to justify their defeats with the presence in the enemy camp of an exceptional general, rather than recognize the superior quality of the combatants, German *and* Italian'.¹ Over twenty years later, Faldella's assertion still smacks of heresy to anyone whose knowledge of General Erwin Rommel is limited to the literature available in English. Indeed, the myth of the 'Desert Fox' is so deeply embedded in Anglo-American historiography – and in the Anglo-American psyche – that to challenge it seems sacrilegious, and most works end by reinforcing it. Even those writers who attempt a critical reappraisal seem incapable of sustaining it. Thus, Martin van Creveld blames Rommel's problems on his 'useless' Italian 'ballast', and David Irving makes light of his character flaws in consideration of his 'undeniable' ability. Irving may express the myth best when he concludes: 'History will not forget that for two years [Rommel] withstood the weight of the entire British Empire on the only battlefield where it was then engaged, with only two panzer divisions and a handful of other ill-armed and under-nourished forces under his command. He was a twentieth-century Hannibal – there is no doubt of it.'²

¹ Emilio Faldella, *L'Italia e la seconda guerra mondiale: Revisione di giudizi* (Rocca San Casciano, 1967), p. 262 (emphasis added). This was also Halder's opinion; see Sherwood S. Cordier, 'Erwin Rommel as Commander: The Decisive Years, 1940-1942' (Ph.D. dissertation, Minnesota, 1963), p. 3. Enno Rintelen was critical of Rommel, who used Berndt to discredit the German military attaché with Hitler; see E. Rintelen, *Mussolini als Bundesgenosse: Erinnerungen des deutschen Militärattachés in Rom, 1936-1943* (Stuttgart, 1951), pp. 133, 165-78, and *World War II German Military Studies*, ed. Donald S. Detweiler, Charles Burdick, and Jürgen Rohwer (New York, 1979) [hereafter *German Military Studies*], ix, MS C-065a. 5 and 12 Nov. 1942.

² David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox: The Search for the True Field Marshal*

The presence in the Axis camp of an inadequately armed Hannibal conveniently explains both why the British took so long to win in North Africa and why Rommel was ultimately defeated. The myth also reaffirms the prevalent Anglo-American stereotypes of German prowess, British doughtiness, and Italian ineptitude. Most Anglo-American writers, for instance, would agree with Rommel that the British had 'cast fear and trepidation into the Italian army', which suffered from 'a very serious inferiority complex' owing to its miserable equipment.³ Desmond Young, one of the earliest purveyors of the Rommel myth, considers the Italian general, Rodolfo Graziani, 'chicken-hearted', while W.G.F. Jackson, a later one, claims the defeat of the Italians in early 1941 opened the way for 'two races of equal fighting quality – the British and German' – to have a go at one another in Africa. Kenneth J. Macksey's taunt is that the British threw out the 'Italian chicken' only to let in the 'German eagle'.⁴

It was Rommel and his 'Germans' that prevailed over the British:

Rommel (New York, 1977), p. 538; and Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 196, 201. Also, Larry H. Addington, 'Operation Sunflower: Rommel versus the General Staff', *Military Affairs*, xxxi (1967), 120-30; Cordier, 'Rommel', pp. 5-6, 353, who agrees with Liddell Hart that Rommel was one of 'the rare Great Captains of history'; Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as Military Commander* (New York, 1969) and *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (New York, 1977); Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr., *Rommel's Desert War: The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps* (New York, 1982) and *Triumphant Fox: Erwin Rommel and the Rise of the Afrika Korps* (New York, 1984), esp. the introduction; and Siegfried Westphal, *The German Army in the West* (London, 1951), esp. pp. 126-8.

³ Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (New York, 1953), pp. 95, 97; also P.C. Bharucha, *The North African Campaign, 1940-1943* (Calcutta, 1956), xxiv-xxviii, for 'effete Italian fascists'; and Mitcham, *Triumphant Fox*, p. 128. Translations into English of Italian works on North Africa are rare, those from the German abundant; for example, Paul Carell (Paul Karl Schmidt), *The Foxes of the Desert* (New York, 1961); Wolf Heckmann, *Rommel's War in Africa* (Garden City, NY, 1981); Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles, 1939-1945* (London, 1955); and Hans-Otto Behrendt, *Rommel's Intelligence in the Desert Campaign, 1941-1943* (London, 1985). For an interesting hybrid, Franz Kurowski, Antonio Cioci, Herbert Kayser, and James S. Lucas, *Der Afrikafeldzug: Rommels Wüstenkrieg, 1941-1943* (Leoni am Starnberger See, 1986).

⁴ Desmond Young, *Rommel the Desert Fox* (New York, 1950), p. 59; W.G.F. Jackson, *The Battle for North Africa, 1940-1943* (New York, 1975), pp. 77, 81; Kenneth J. Macksey, *Tank Warfare: A History of Tanks in Battle* (New York, 1972), esp. pp. 148-51, 163; Werner Haupt and James K. W. Bingham, *North Africa Campaign, 1940-1943* (London, 1968), introduction by K.J. Macksey; also Charles Douglas-Horne, *Rommel* (London, 1973), for the myth; but *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS C-065j, 30 Aug. 1940, for a German view of Graziani as a 'daredevil of an old soldier'.

Correlli Barnett claims that Rommel wove a 'spell' that infected even Sir Bernard Montgomery; Michael Carver believes that 'German' tanks and anti-tank guns instilled an 'inferiority complex' in the British; Desmond Young has not thought it necessary even to discuss any of Rommel's operations in detail; and David Fraser says the British needed 'favourable conditions' to beat the 'Germans'.⁵ Rommel and his Afrika Korps have thus become a demiurge, an article of the historiographic canon.

To question Rommel's achievements is not only to question Rommel and German superiority in war, it is to question Winston Churchill – who kept his job in part by blaming his errors on Rommel – and to call into question the competence of British commanders in the Mediterranean theatre. Moreover, as Irving notes, to pretend that Rommel was a 'pure' military man, whose infatuation with Hitler was due to his political naïvety, is indirectly to justify the Allied 'denazification' programme. It is also, of course, to preclude any discussion of the culpability of German soldiers, who claimed merely to have done their duty. But Rommel owed his career to Hitler, to whom he consistently appealed over the heads of his superiors. Though not a member of the NSDAP, Rommel believed that German soldiers should promote Nazism's 'new policies', and he was an ardent admirer of the Führer, who protected him from his Italian and his German superiors.⁶

Nor was Rommel the 'soldiers' general' that his hagiographers have presented. Chronically insubordinate himself, Rommel demanded absolute obedience from his own subordinates. Efforts to excuse his insubordination by depicting the Italians as inept are specious at best.⁷ According to Giuseppe Mancinelli, who served as liaison between the

⁵ Michael Carver, *Tobruk* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 149; Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London, 1960), pp. 274-5; David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them* (London, 1983), pp. 113, 126, 131; Young, *Rommel*, pp. 47, 70, who advises reading Alan Moorehead's trilogy; and Robert J. Icks, *Famous Tank Battles* (Garden City, NY, 1972), esp. pp. 123-33. The 1983 edition of Barnett's book adds only a few observations on *Ultra's* role.

⁶ Irving, *Trail*, pp. 189, 229, 38-9, 74; W.S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* (Boston, 1950), esp. pp. 119-200, 565 and *The Hinge of Fate* (Boston, 1950), esp. pp. 15-16, 60-9, 395, 401, for effusive praise of Rommel; and Rintelen, *Erinnerungen*, p. 134, for Hitler's protection of him.

⁷ Irving, *Trail*, pp. 40-2, 47-52, 62, 124, 134, 367-72; for more on Italian generals, *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, ed. Philip V. Cannistraro (Westport, CT, 1982), esp. pp. 63, 110-12; and for Rintelen's positive comments, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 78, 134, 154, 190-1. Among those who at some time thought Rommel in some way unsuited for command were Ravenstein, Streich, Hoth, Kluge, Herff, Schwerin, Olbrich, Koehn, Gause, Halder, Rintelen, Kesselring, Jodl, and Keitel, not to mention Italians such as Cavallero, Bastico, Gariboldi, Cambara, and Mussolini.

Italian command and DAK [Deutsches Afrika Korps], Rommel habitually blamed his Italian allies for his own errors. Enrico Serra, a tank commander with the Ariete division, considered him a 'liar' and a 'Prussian', while his own adjutant, Heinz Ernest Schmidt, found him stiff, formal, and distant. The German commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, Albert Kesselring, though he claimed that Rommel was 'unsurpassed in the command of armoured units and in the conduct of raids', thought it true only so long as 'his nerves did not desert him', which they seem often to have done, judging from Kesselring's account. More important, Kesselring considered Stumme – usually ignored or belittled by Rommel's admirers – 'emotionally better balanced, equipped with more of a sense of humour than Rommel', and able to create 'tolerable relations with the Italian commanders', as well as boost German morale. Arrogantly ethnocentric, ruled by his 'fever for action', and disdainful of his Italian allies, Rommel deprived the Italians of their share of captured goods, precluded formulation of a joint strategy, and turned the chain of command in Africa upside down by constantly seeking Hitler's intercession in order to avoid having to obey his nominal Italian superiors.⁸

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The basis for the Rommel myth is an equally exaggerated myth of the inferiority of the Italians, who purportedly lacked not only decent weapons but also good leadership, adequate training, and high morale. Such a thorough denigration of the Italians allows some writers to blame Rommel's errors on them instead of examining their contribution and the extent to which Rommel misused them, either from impatience or from inability to employ his Italian units properly. Rommel himself set the tone in February 1941 when he wrote that the arrival of the 5th Light division's 'up-to-date equipment' in Tripoli had 'made a tremendous impression on the Italians', although it is a mystery why the Italians should have admired equipment only marginally different from

⁸ Heinz Ernest Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert* (London, 1951), pp. 11, 88, 92, 166-8; for Serra, *Fronte d'Africa: c'ero anch'io*, ed. Giulio Eedeschi (Milan, 1979), pp. 97-9; Giuseppe Mancinelli, *Dal fronte dell'Africa settentrionale (1942-1943)* (Milan, 1970), p. 62; Irving, *Trial*, pp. 68-9, 101, 107, 109-13, 115, 120, 124-5, 130-1, for the Germans; *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS 3-Pl, pp. 38, 71, for Kesselring; also Ugo Cavallero, *Comando supremo: diario del capo di Stato maggiore generale* (Bologna, 1948), 2 Aug., 15 Sept., 2 and 8 Dec. 1941, and 5 Feb. 1942 for comments and complaints by Bastico and Gambarà; S[tato] M[aggiore] E[sercito] / U[fficio] S[torico], *Seconda offensiva britannica in Africa Settentrionale e ripiegamento italo-tedesco nella Sirica orientale (18 novembre 1941-17 gennaio 1942)* (Rome, 1949), allegati 24, 27, 28, 29; and Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 125-32, for Tobruk in April 1941.

their own L6 and M13 tanks. Indeed, the more objective Schmidt noted that the Italians applauded *only* Ariete's tanks during the review.⁹ In fact, the *Panzerkampfwagen* [Pzkw.] II was not the equivalent of the M13/40, as Ronald Lewin implies; in general, Italian tanks were comparable to both the German and the British machines of the period, with notable exceptions such as the Matilda. Carver is therefore quite right to note that the success of Italian armour during the Gazala battles in 1942 demonstrated that the problem with the British army was *not* its 'inferior' tanks. On the other hand, he is wrong to assume, as have Barnett and others, that the British were repeatedly frustrated in 1941 and 1942 by 'German' anti-tank guns and 'German' artillery, or even by 'German' tank and artillery doctrine.¹⁰

By 1940, the Italians had analysed German successes in France and Poland, experimented with the *guerra lampo* ('lightning war') in Spain, and evolved an armoured doctrine based on the *guerra di rapido corso* ('fast-moving war').¹¹ Both Lucio Ceva and Filippo Stefani attribute the improved Italian performance in North Africa in 1941 to experience, and observation of German and British campaigns. After January 1941, the Italians also added more and better tanks, grouped in organic armoured and motorized units, not thrown together in scratch formations such as the Maletti Group or the *Brigata Corazzata Speciale* ('Special Armoured Brigade'), though the latter's M13/40s proved very effective when employed *en masse* in early 1941. By this time, the Italians had their first company of armoured cars with RECAM [*Reparto Esplorante di Corpo d'Armata di Manovra* – 'Reconnaissance Unit of the Army Mobile Corps'], and by early 1942 each Italian armoured division nominally had a battalion of forty-seven armoured

⁹ Rommel, *Papers*, p. 105; Schmidt, *With Rommel*, pp. 16-17; and German *Military Studies*, ix, MS C-065k, 22 Jan. 1941, for Hitler on German weapons.

¹⁰ Lewin, *Afrika Korps*, pp. 81, 163; Carver, *Tobruk*, pp. 256-9; Barnett, *Generals*, pp. 99-105; and Rommel, *Papers*, p. 92. For Italian armour, see Vincenzo Sampieri, 'Carri, controcarri, artiglierie nelle battaglie del deserto', *Rivista militare*, xxvii (1971), esp. 1,132; Giulio Benussi, *Carri armati e autoblindate del Regio Esercito italiano, 1918-1943* (Milan, 1974) and *Armi portatili, artiglierie e semoventi del Regio Esercito italiano 1900-1943* (Milan, 1975); Benedetto Pafi, Cesare Falessi, and Goffredo Fiore, *Corazzati italiani (1939-45)* (Rome, 1968); and Lucio Ceva, *Africa Settentrionale, 1940-1943* (Rome, 1982), esp. pp. 45-7 for North Africa.

¹¹ For Italian pre-war doctrine, see Ferruccio Botti and Virgilio Ilari, *Il pensiero militare italiano dal primo al secondo dopoguerra (1919-1949)* (Rome, 1985), esp. pp. 163-271; and Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato (1940-1945): Vol. I: L'Italia in guerra: Pt. 1: Dalla guerra 'breve' alla guerra lunga* (Turin, 1991), pp. 4-110. United States National Archives, Washington, Microfilm, Series T-821, also contains Italian analyses of German and French doctrine and operations; for example, Reel 130, frames 515-24, for a 24 May 1940 assessment of German operations in the Ardennes by Italy's military attaché in Berlin, Efsio Marras.

cars for reconnaissance, and each motorized division a battalion of M13/40s. At the same time, the Italians transformed their infantry divisions into extremely powerful, if immobile, defensive formations.¹² German campaigns certainly influenced Italian doctrine, but they did not create it; and as Stefani notes, lack of tanks, mobile artillery, and aircraft hurt the Italians more than did lack of doctrine.¹³

Rommel was therefore not a tutor to militarily backward Italians, whether in the use of tanks or of artillery. As early as 1937, Italian artillery manuals stipulated the use of massed fire and the pushing forward of guns during an attack – something that Rommel may even have learned from them. Ceva, at least, believes that the ‘Pak Front’ was derived from the Italian *fuoco da manovra* (‘manoeuvred fire’). Ceva also notes that the Italians were the first to use self-propelled guns both in close support and in anti-tank attack in Africa; and Bruno Pastore claims that the Italian ‘massing’ of their artillery fire made up for the poor performance of some pieces. On the other hand, as Stefani notes, while the Germans tended to favour anti-tank offence over ‘directed fire’, the Italians favoured rear-guard artillery to maximize the effectiveness of both. In 1940, this was difficult to do on a tactical level, however, as Italian divisions had only a 6:1 ratio of artillery to infantry battalions, compared to an 8:1 ratio for the British, who had seventy-five 25 pdrs. to an Italian division’s twenty-four 75 mm. and twelve 100 mm. guns. But by late 1941, while the number of their 75 mm. pieces remained the same, the Italians had doubled their 100/17 guns to twenty-four, and added twelve 88/55s (or 90/53s), giving each division a total of sixty guns, for a 10:1 ratio.¹⁴ In other words, the firepower of any given

¹² Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 20-1; Filippo Stefani, SME/US, *La storia della dottrina e degli ordinamenti dell'esercito italiano* (Rome, 1985), ii (1). 541-3, 553-4, ii (2). 14-15, 98; for Maletti, SME/US, *In Africa Settentrionale: La preparazione al conflitto: L'avanzata su Sidi el Barrani (ottobre 1935-settembre 1940)* (Rome, 1955), and *La prima offensiva britannica in Africa Settentrionale (ottobre 1940-febbraio 1941)* (Rome, n.d.); also Giorgio Pirrone, ‘La brigata corazzata speciale in Africa Settentrionale’, *Rivista militare*, xxxv (1979), 105-12; John J.T. Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT, 1980); and Dino Campini, *Nei giardini del diavolo: La storia inedita dei carristi della Centauro, dell'Ariete e della Littorio* (Milan, 1969), esp. p. 146.

¹³ Giuseppe Vasile, ‘L'autoblindo nella seconda guerra mondiale’, *Rivista militare*, xxviii (1972), 1,361-2; Stefani, ii (2). 5-21, 95. The Italians had 327 to 1,100 British aircraft, and 280 AFVs (Armoured Fighting Vehicles) to 506 British in late 1940.

¹⁴ Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 27, 47-8; Sampieri, ‘Carri’, pp. 1,132-3; and V. Sampieri, ‘L'artiglieria semovente italiana dalle origini ad oggi’, *Rivista militare*, xxxi (1975), 70-80; Bruno Pastore, ‘L'artiglieria italiana ad el Alamein’, *Rivista militare*, xxvii (1971), 1,697; and Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (1). 599-674, ii (2). 12-14, 39-40.

Italian division co-operating with Rommel was about twice that of the divisions available to Graziani in 1940.

Of course, the generally accepted view is that Italian equipment was so inferior as to be worthless – and in some instances this was true. However, as Ceva notes, the Italian medium tanks were not outclassed until the appearance of the Grant and Sherman, and Giuseppe Vasile rates the AB.41 as better than most British armoured cars, owing to its 20 mm. gun and 75 km./hour speed. By early 1942, the Italians had wed the 'M' tank chassis to the 75/18 mm. howitzer, which fired both armour-piercing and high explosive shells, and was deadly against most British armour. Indeed, the Italians had improvised some of the first 'self-propelled' guns in 1940, mounting their 20 mm. and 65/17 mm. guns on captured Morris trucks, and their 75/27 mm. on the TL.37 or FIAT 35 trucks.¹⁵ Problems had less to do with the inferior quality of Italy's armour in 1941-2 than with her inability to upgrade current vehicles and introduce the P-40 'heavy' tank; the difficulty of getting armour to Africa in any quantity; and a low productive capacity. In all, the Italians produced only 187 L6 tanks, 2,076 M13-15 models, 645 'semoventi' (self-propelled guns), and 532 armoured cars – not a few of these were lost *en route* to Africa or sent to Greece and Russia.¹⁶

The Italians were thus never able to build the armoured divisions described in their 1938 manuals, which envisioned 'M' tanks as the core of each unit, generating enough shock to effect deep penetration of enemy positions; 'P' tanks as mobile artillery and reserves to back up the 'Ms'; and 'L' tanks as scouts. Flexible units such as this, pushing their anti-tank weapons forward to attack enemy armour, in co-operation with *celere* ('fast') and infantry divisions, lacked only tactical airpower to realize a blitzkrieg. Italian doctrine – with its stress on massed armour, massed and mobile artillery, action against enemy flanks, deep penetration and exploitation, and the 'indirect approach' – *as early as 1936-8*

¹⁵ Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 47-9; Vasile, 'Autoblinda', pp. 1,348-87; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (1). 564 (nn. 15, 16); SME/US, *Verballi delle riunioni tenute dal capo di SM Generale* (Rome, 1985), iii. no. 63; also see Lucio Ceva, *Storia delle forze armate italiane* (Turin, 1981), p. 346.

¹⁶ SME/US, *Verballi*, iii. no. 63. For more on Italian production, see Fortunato Minniti: 'Il problema degli armamenti nella preparazione militare italiana dal 1935 al 1943', *Storia contemporanea*, ix (1978); 'Due anni di attività del "Fabbri-guerra" per la produzione bellica (1939-1941)', *ibid.*, v (1975); 'Le materie prime nella preparazione bellica dell'Italia (1935-1943)', *ibid.*, xvii (1986); 'Aspetti della politica fascista degli armamenti', *L'Italia fra tedeschi ed alleati*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Bologna, 1973); and 'Aspetti territoriali e politici del controllo sulla produzione bellica in Italia (1936-1942)', *Clic*, vi (1979); and J. Sadkovich, 'Minerali armamenti e tipo di guerra: la sconfitta italiana nella

was considerably beyond what most theorists discerned at the time, especially if John J. Mearsheimer is correct about Liddel Hart.¹⁷

Like tank production, that of artillery and ammunition was low, and in late 1940 the Italians had armour-piercing shells only for their 47/32 and 65/17 mm. guns. But by mid-1941, they were using their 100/17, 75/18, and 75/27 mm. guns in the anti-tank role, and in late 1941 and early 1942 Italian units were destroying tanks with the 75/46, 90/53, and 102/35 mm. guns – the last a naval piece – as well as German 88/55 mm. guns. Nor were these guns obsolete. Vincenzo Sampieri rates the 47/32 anti-tank gun as comparable to the German 50/42, and Serra considered it '*un gioiellino*' ('a little jewel'), made more deadly by EP (*effetto pronto*) or hollow-charge rounds in 1941, and later by increasing the calibre of the barrel and the muzzle velocity in the 47/40, which was mounted on the M15/42. As Rommel complained that the 47/32 'was *no more* effective against British tanks than our 50 mm.', it was at least *as* effective – and by early 1942 the Ariete division had the 90/53 anti-aircraft gun, capable of piercing 100 mm. of armour at 1,000 metres, as well as the German 88/55 Pak (manned by Italian crews), anti-tank grenades and mines, and Molotov cocktails – the latter favoured by the *Giovani Fascisti* and the *Folgore* division.¹⁸

Of course, most of the equipment mentioned above was not available to Graziani in 1940, and his defeat was partly explained by his lack of armoured and motorized formations. Even so, Graziani was not as inept as has been asserted. He clearly appreciated the need for motorized and armoured formations, but could not obtain them: as a result, he had to modify his original plan of attack in September 1940, and could not pursue beyond Sidi El Barrani. Six months later, although worried that the British could cut off his forces in Benghazi, he lacked the transport to effect a rapid withdrawal. Nevertheless, the British, who had armoured units and transport, retreated in September 1940 before Graziani just as they later did before Rommel – and if the Italian general managed to lose Cyrenaica in two months, two years later the German lost Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in three. Indeed, not only did both Graziani and Rommel have to resort to static defences and strong points when their offensives ground to respective halts at Sidi El Barrani and El Alamein, the result of depending on strong points without adequate mobile reserves was the same in both cases. And both men seem to have

¹⁷ Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (1), 543-58; and John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (London, 1982), esp. 179-84.

¹⁸ Bedeschi, *Fronte*, pp. 20, 23-8, 270; Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 51, 90, 105-8; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 318; Sampieri, 'Artilleria', p. 1, 191; and *Luftwaffe Doctrine: Elements*

'panicked' when they urged their superiors to retreat before the British rather than hold isolated fortresses or lines vulnerable to flanking movements. Yet Rommel is considered a genius, Graziani an ignoramus – which Graziani firmly denied.¹⁹

Assertions that Graziani should have been more aggressive, and that Wavell was eagerly awaiting the Italians at Marsa Matruh in September 1940 can be laid to rest now that it is clear how hampered Graziani was by lack of motorized troops. Sir Harry Hinsley shows that Wavell knew that the Italians would stop at Sidi El Barrani. If there were similarities between the performances of Graziani and Rommel, Montgomery's hesitant advance in 1942 seems not very different from General R.N. O'Connor's advance by fits and starts in 1940-1. Moving against an enemy who had practically no vehicles, O'Connor did not pioneer a new type of armoured warfare, but used tanks, armoured cars, aircraft, and naval guns to reduce isolated fortresses that were inadequately manned, supplied, and fortified.²⁰ The first real 'armoured clash' occurred only on 24 January 1941 at Mechili – and after having destroyed fifteen tanks, the Italian Special Armoured Brigade pursued the British for twenty kilometres before breaking off contact and returning to their start line, where they later immobilized another six tanks during a feeble British counter-attack. As Stefani notes, this was 'a notable tactical success', if too little and too late to avert disaster. Certainly O'Connor, his seventy cruisers reduced to fifty, and his 120 light tanks to ninety-five at Mechili – a force he reckoned too small to take on the fifty-seven M13/40s and twenty-five L3/35s with the Italian brigade – cautiously called a two-week halt to bring up fresh armour and troops.²¹ The Italians had made a definite impression on the British.

The Rommel myth depends on the assumption that the Italians had collapsed so badly in late 1940 that they were saved only by German help in early 1941. To the extent that the Italians needed German armoured vehicles and weapons, which they could not obtain except with German troops attached, this was true – if one discounts the arrival of the Ariete and Trento divisions in January and February 1941, and if one discounts Italian, British, and German assessments that a British

¹⁹ Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 70-89; Rodolfo Graziani, *Ho difeso la patria* (Crusco sul Navigilio, 1948), pp. 244-6, 250, 255-93 and *Africa Settentrionale, 1940-1941* (Bologna, 1948); and *German Military Studies*, ix, MS C-065, 1 Feb. 1941.

²⁰ Bharucha, *Campaign*, pp. 80, 101; Faldella, *Revisione*, pp. 180-2; B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks* (London, 1959), ii. 43-6; and F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London, 1979), i. 215-17.

²¹ Pirrone, 'Brigata', p. 109; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 96; Liddell Hart, *Tanks*, ii. 55-8; and Ian S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East* (London, 1954), i. 353-4.

advance into Tripolitania was highly improbable, given the terrain near Sirte and the enormous logistical difficulties involved.²² The Italians had actually cost the British dear during the two-month battle, in which isolated Italian outposts were softened up by air, land, and naval bombardment, then assaulted by fresh troops with the practically invulnerable Matilda leading the way. Still, in 1940 the Maletti Group had used their 37 and 47/32 mm. guns to destroy thirty-five of fifty-seven Matildas, and the Tummar posts had added another fourteen. Bardia and Tobruk later accounted for the rest. By mid-February, the British had taken about 115,000 POWs (not the 200,000 sometimes claimed), as well as 1,290 guns and 140 tanks (not 400) – and destroyed about 200 of the 564 aircraft lost by the Italian air force. At the same time, the British had lost four-fifths of their vehicles and all of their 'I' tanks, as well as most of their light and cruiser tanks: not *all* of these losses could be attributed to 'wear and tear'. Finally, they had suffered 2,000 casualties, about 1 in 25 of troops engaged.²³

By the end of February 1941, the British were at the end of their tether logistically, and speculation that O'Connor could have waltzed into Tripolitania is at best idle. His own chief of staff advised against it, as his supply lines were stretched to the limit, his troops exhausted, and his equipment so reduced that he was forced to use Italian armour. The Italians had fought well; besides, not even the British could easily overcome the problems generated by a front 650 miles from the railhead at Marsa Matruh, a distance, as Martin van Creveld notes, as great as that between Brest-Litovsk and Moscow. As P.C. Bharucha observes, Rommel arrived just as the British lay exhausted, though Carver credits his initial success to luck and bad British logistics, while Faldella adds a British unwillingness to fight.²⁴ In short, it was the Italians, not the Germans, who initially wore out the British and thereby contributed to their defeat at the hands of Axis forces in early 1941.

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²² *German Military Studies*, vii, MS C-065f, p. 22, viii, MS C-065l, 13 Jan. 1941, and ix, MS C-065k, 8, 9, 10, and 11 Jan., 7 and 12 Feb. 1941. The Germans would send help only *after* the situation was stabilized in Africa, and saw little chance of Italy losing Tripolitania.

²³ Fraser, *Shock*, pp. 121-2, 124; Bharucha, *Campaign*, pp. 100, 106, 109-14; Liddell Hart, *Tanks*, ii, 43-53; Faldella, *Revisione*, p. 180; Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 18-19; and SME/US, *Prima controffensiva italo-tedesca in Africa settentrionale (15 febbraio-18 novembre 1941)* (Rome, 1974), pp. 280-1. The British did not distinguish civilians, police, and wounded from front-line soldiers in counting POWs.

²⁴ Michael Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War: A New Look at the Libyan Campaign, 1940-1942* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), pp. 17-18, 22; Pirrone, 'Brigata', p. 112; Bharucha, *Campaign*, pp. 124-31; Fraser, *Shock*, p. 147; Liddell Hart,

Rommel arrived in Tripoli in February 1941, at the same time as the Ariete and Trento divisions, and his success depended on Ariete's 6,949 men, 163 tanks, 36 field and 61 anti-tank guns, and the infantry in the Brescia division, as well as the 5th Light division's 9,300 Germans; 130 tanks, 111 guns, and 2,000 vehicles. He also owed something to the 100,000 Italians guarding his rear, the 7,000 Italian vehicles ferrying units and munitions to the front, 1,000 Italian guns, and 151 Italian aircraft, although most writers are content to mention only the 80 German aircraft present.²⁵ It was therefore the Italians who freed Rommel of any worries regarding his rear, flanks, and lifeline, and supported – and at times spearheaded – the attack he launched on 19 March, in the face of warnings from Berlin that no new German troops would arrive until the 15th Panzer division in May. Nor could Alfredo Guzzoni cool him down to allow time to bring the 5th Light, Ariete, Trento, Trieste, and 15th Panzer divisions up to full strength. Stefani notes that Rommel lacked the forces for an *effective* offensive before May, but it was typical of him to adopt a cavalier attitude towards his logistics, and dash ahead regardless. As early as 3 April 1941, OKW [Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – 'Armed Forces High Command'] noted that 'in view of his well-known temperament, the Reich Chancellery is afraid that Rommel will be inclined to advance too far'.²⁶

Axis successes in March and April 1941 were thus condemned to be ephemeral, and reflect confusion and reluctance to engage on the British side more than genius on Rommel's part. Indeed, the pursuit of the rapidly retreating British was the work of Italian logistics, and of General Streich and Colonels Santamaria and Montemurro, who led the assault, more than of Rommel, who did not arrive with his HQ until late on 3 April. Although Italo Gariboldi may have been overly cautious when he complained that he lacked sufficient vehicles both to supply and to reinforce units in the advance on 8 April, Streich had warned Rommel that he was having logistical problems five days *earlier*, and Rommel's failure to inform a supply column of a change of direction left one column without fuel. Rommel nevertheless continued

²⁵ Ariete arrived between 24 Jan. and 26 Feb., 5th Light from 11 Feb., Trento between 27 Feb. and 18 March, Trieste and 15th Panzer in the spring: SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 22-5, 41, 50, 70-2; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 255-6, 306-7; and Campini, *Giardini*, pp. 125-6.

²⁶ Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 105-6, 117-18; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 259-60; SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 29, 90-1; *German Military Studies*, vii, 20 March 1941, and viii, MS C-0651, 3 April 1941, for Hitler's worries that Rommel would act rashly. On 20 Feb. 1941, Gariboldi and Superasi had 123,075 men in six divisions, with 1,037 guns, 3,986 serviceable vehicles, 2,806 camels, 4,658 quadrupeds, and 209 AFVs.

to charge forward, evidently on the basis of air reconnaissance reports that the British were retreating in disorder.²⁷

This obsession with 'speed' led Rommel to underestimate the difficulties involved in moving armies over long distances. Thus he began the investment of Tobruk thirteen days after beginning his attack, not the *two* he had originally estimated. He had strained the Italian logistical system to its limits and left his units strung out over 1,000 kilometres and, more important, had failed to destroy the British armour and let most of the British units slip through to Tobruk. Then, he exacerbated the wear and tear on his own troops by throwing them piecemeal against the fortress's strongly manned positions with, as he himself noted, no idea of the 'nature of the position' or of Tobruk's defences.²⁸

Like Graziani, Rommel had been unable to catch the British, and he blamed everyone but himself for his failure – especially the Italians and the Ariete division, which he scorned as cowardly, though in fact it was the German 5th Light division, not the Italians, who had been so overcome by the Matildas that they refused to attack on 22 April. Indeed, according to German accounts, it was the Trento division that 'erased the British success' against Rommel's positions in late April. Obsessed with speed, and careless of the severe losses that he inflicted on his troops, Rommel now wanted to race to Marsa Matruh, but *both* the Italian and German commands forced a halt, the Italians suggesting it would be prudent first to cover his flank by taking Siwa and Jarabub to the south, while OKW warned him that the German air force could not support a further advance.²⁹

As Faldella observes, Rommel's attacks on Tobruk in April 1941 were precipitous, and his own subordinates from Streich on down criticized his bizarre plan of infantry attacks in the evening, followed up by

²⁷ The use of German commanders to head up battle groups has given the impression that no Italian units were involved, but the Montemarro and Fabris columns attacked Mechili on 7 April with German support, capturing Gambier-Perry and most of the 1,200 POWs taken there. SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 22-5, 70-2, 82-3, 98-100; Campini, *Giardini*, p. 130; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 107-9, 112-14; and *German Military Studies* vii, MS C-065f, pp. 35-6.

²⁸ By April the Italians had 140,999 men, 1,431 guns, and 309 AFVs in Africa. Rommel's forces consisted of four Italian divisions with 37,000 men, 253 tanks, and 498 guns, and one German, with 9,300 men, 30 tanks, 111 anti-tank guns, and two armoured-car companies. SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 102-7, 117, 125; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 121-3; and Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 308.

²⁹ Lewin, *Rommel*, p. 40, blames the Italians for Rommel's errors; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 124-35, 147, for the Italians as 'shits'; and *German Military Studies*, viii, MS C-065l, 14 and 24 April 1941, for Trento; also SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 125-32. For Rommel's panic at Arras in May 1940, Griffard Le Quentin Martel, *Our Armoured Forces* (London, n.d.), pp. 68-9; and Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (New York, 1965), pp. 498-502, 516-17.

armour in the morning. The results were predictable. Between 30 April and 4 May, he inflicted another 740 casualties on his Italians and 658 on his Germans. He then left the Brescia, Ariete, and Trento divisions to contain the British counter-attacks, and withdrew his German units to rest, even though the Italians had also been in combat – and in some cases had walked hundreds of kilometres – since late March.³⁰

Rommel had now stretched his supply lines another 700 miles, delayed the Axis, and facilitated a British buildup. He had also placed his troops in what van Creveld calls ‘an impossible position’, vulnerable both to the RAF and to British naval gunfire.³¹ At the same time, he further alienated the Italians by giving Italian guns recaptured at Bardia to German troops, and complaining of Italian supply efforts.³² In effect, he had overturned the command structure. He was audacious, certainly, but he had also shown himself to be undisciplined and insubordinate, and his improvised attack had failed to reach its objective of annihilating the British. What he had succeeded in doing was to place the Axis troops in a tactically vulnerable, and strategically untenable, situation for the investment of Tobruk. Axis supply lines were now threatened by Rommel’s consumption of the vehicles and *matériel* earmarked for the projected May offensive; by the shift of German air units to the Balkans and Africa, and the consequent resurgence of Malta; and by the disruption of rail service to the Greek ports. But rather than fall back to Gazala or Mechili, as the Italians and OKH [Oberkommando der Heeres – ‘Army High Command’] suggested, Rommel insisted on attacking Tobruk,³³ preparing, as Graziani had done almost a year earlier,

³⁰ Faldella, *Revisione*, p. 195; SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 137-46; Campini, *Giardini*, p. 131; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 128-9; Irving, *Trail*, pp. 109-15, 124-5, 130-1; and *German Military Studies*, vii, C-065f, pp. 40-1, for Greiner, who noted Streich’s criticism, and that while the Germans were bogged down outside Tobruk, Ariete ‘succeeded only [*sic!*] in rolling up several positions’ to the east of Acroma and Ras El Madauar.

³¹ SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 135-6, 159-62; van Creveld, *Logistics*, pp. 186-7; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, i, 395-6; and Irving, *Trail*, p. 54, for Rommel’s wastage of men and equipment in France.

³² Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 134, 137-8. Benghazi had been gutted by the British. For Italian efforts to give Rommel ‘everything that one can’, SME/US, *Verbal*, ii, n. 17 of 25 April 1941; also n. 31; iii, n. 15, for failure of Germany to ship tanks to Rommel; and nn. 239, 240, 241 for the August 1941 ‘crisis’ of Italian units, which had been starved to supply Rommel’s Germans; and *German Military Studies*, viii, MS C-065l, 11 May 1941, for the use of submarines to ferry ammunition to Derna.

³³ Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 261-2; *German Military Studies*, viii, MS C-065l, 31 May 1941, for damage to Athens-Salonika railroad; Rintelen, *Erinnerungen*, p. 133; and Westphal, *German Army*, pp. 110-11, who offers an idiosyncratic view of the chain of command by praising Rommel because he ‘did not let himself be intimidated’ by his superiors, Cavallero and Kesselring.

an offensive well forward of his supply bases, thus open to a British counter-attack – with the difference that Rommel had three armoured and two motorized divisions with which to parry one. He thus survived Operations *Brevity* and *Battleaxe*, attacks which had the same improvised air as his own.

Aware that the Axis troops were 'exhausted' – thanks to a signal to Berlin from Rommel – the British advanced in May, but were stymied at Halfaya Pass by Montemurro's Bersaglieri, whose 47/32s and single 105/28 immobilized seven of ten 'T' tanks, and blunted the British attack. But Rommel gave no more credit to the Italians for their role during *Brevity* than he would for their efforts to stop *Battleaxe* in mid-June, even though during the latter attack the twelve Italian 100/17s at Halfaya probably did as much as or more damage than the four German 88s there.³⁴ Indeed, it would be wrong even to credit Rommel with a clever use of the 88 mm. gun, since the 1939 model had already been designed as a dual-purpose anti-aircraft/anti-tank gun, and by 1940 Flak units had armour-piercing shells.³⁵ If anything, *Battleaxe* had shown that Italians and Germans could hold out only for limited periods with the German 37 mm. or Italian 47/32 mm. anti-tank guns when attacked by Matildas, and that Rommel exaggerated (claiming 220 British tanks destroyed, rather than the 87 actually lost) and let slip golden opportunities – in this case, the chance to trap the British armour. It was also clear that the Italians had been heavily involved, suffering 592, to 685 German, casualties.³⁶

But Rommel again squandered his advantage by mounting a badly conceived and even more badly executed 'raid' on 14-16 September, during which the 21st Panzer division ran out of fuel, and the RAF pounded Rommel's exposed armoured units. Having gained nothing -- and learned nothing of British deployment or plans – Rommel pulled his German units out of the line to rest, leaving the Italians to guard his flanks.³⁷ With only 7,000 vehicles for two German, and 8,500 for seven Italian, divisions, logistics had taken on a nightmarish quality, but

³⁴ SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 154-7, 164-6; Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 24-5; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 135-6, 139, 141-5; Liddell Hart, *Tanks*, ii. 84; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, i. 396-9; and *German Military Studies*, viii, MS C-0651, 14, 19, 30 May 1941.

³⁵ Young, *Rommel*, p. 77, and Peter Chamberlain and Terry Gander, *Anti-Aircraft Guns* (New York, 1975), pp. 21-2, 28-32, for the '88' and Italian guns.

³⁶ Rommel, *Papers*, p. 45; SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 183, 189; and *German Military Studies*, viii, MS C-0651, 18 June 1941.

³⁷ SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 216-17, 241-7, and *Seconda offensiva*, allegato 13; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 152; and Ralph Bennett, *Ultra and the Mediterranean Strategy, 1941-1945* (London, 1989), pp. 82-3, who sees the operation as 'strange and apparently purposeless'.

Rommel continued to preoccupy himself with preparing an assault on Tobruk, acting as if he were operating in Europe with a secure land-based supply line, rather than in Africa over vulnerable sea- and land-based routes.³⁸ Fixed on Tobruk, he dismissed Italian warnings of an imminent British offensive as 'excessive Latin nervousness', and tore up air reconnaissance photos showing a massive buildup of vehicles, men, and guns at Marsa Matruh.³⁹

Fortunately for Rommel, Ettore Bastico had talked him out of deploying his armoured units around Tobruk, and Gastone Gambara and Fedele de Giorgis had the Ariete, Trieste, and Savona divisions on the alert by 18 November. Meanwhile, Rommel, Gause, and Mellenthin continued to believe that the British offensive was merely a reconnaissance in force, until disabused of their misapprehension by a BBC broadcast – thus showing themselves at least as slow to grasp the real situation as Graziani had been in December 1940, and the British in March 1941.⁴⁰ It was therefore the 146 M13/40s of Ariete that blunted the British attack on 19 November, not the 174 Pzkw. IIIs and IVs of 15th and 21st Panzer divisions. Deployed in three battalion-sized infantry boxes with twenty-four 75/27s, thirty 47/32s, twelve 105/28s, and seven 102/35s, Ariete brought seventy-three guns and 137 tanks to bear on the eight 25 pdrs. and 158 Crusaders of XXII Armoured Brigade at Bir El Gobi – with predictable results. The XXII lost at least fifty-five tanks, and spent the next two days in the British rear regrouping, leaving only VII Armoured Brigade intact, since 21st Panzer had managed to destroy twenty-three of IV Armoured Brigade's tanks.⁴¹

Far from being forced back, as was later claimed, Ariete cut up XXII Armoured Brigade, and evidently mauled IV Armoured Brigade and other British units over the next few days. By 23 November, Ariete,

³⁸ SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 216-20; also Eberhard Weichold and Walter Baum, *Der Krieg der Achsenmächte im Mittelmeerraum* (Frankfurt, 1973), pp. 132-3; for Rommel's 'continental' logistical mentality.

³⁹ SME/US, *Prima controffensiva*, pp. 253-4, and *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 33-40; Faldella, *Revisione*, p. 232; also Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 152, 156-8; and Behrendt, *Rommel's Intelligence*, pp. 90-100, who excuses Rommel's failure to find two six-mile-square ammunition dumps during his raid because of bad weather. Of course, Graziani also had this problem in December 1940.

⁴⁰ SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 23-33, 40-1, 46-7; Faldella, *Revisione*, p. 231; Irving, *Trail*, pp. 146-9, 151-2, 157; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 156-8; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 266-7; and Bennett, *Ultra*, p. 90, for criticism of Rommel.

⁴¹ SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, p. 48; Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 35-8; Bedeschi, *Fronte*, p. 100; Sampieri, 'Carri', pp. 1, 128-36; and J.A. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (London, 1957), esp. pp. 137-48, for Bir El Gobi as the key to *Crusader*, and 398-1 for Ariete's crucial role.

Trieste, and Savona had probably accounted for around 200 British tanks and a similar number of vehicles, while Bologna, Trento, and Pavia contained Tobruk. Nor could Rommel take credit for this, since Bastico and Gambara had as much trouble locating him as did Bayerlein and Crüwell during the first four days of the *Crusader* battles.⁴² It was, in fact, the independent actions taken by the Italians and Rommel's German subordinates that saved him from disaster. But again Rommel threw away his advantage in his 'dash to the wire', a manoeuvre that Carver labels 'rashness' bordering on 'madness'. Stringing out his mobile units over sixty miles, Rommel lost contact with his staff and the Italian command for four days, and reduced his armoured units to 'complete ineffectiveness' – he ignored intelligence of British ammunition dumps given him on 20 November. Nor did his return end the confusion generated by his absence, for he went to bed and left the battle to Gambara and Crüwell.⁴³

Between 28 November and 4 December, the Italians were in the thick of the fighting around Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh, and both German and Italian units fought well; but Rommel had squandered his advantage and it could not be regained. Indeed, had he not been lucky enough to get yet another brilliant performance from an Italian unit at Bir El Gobi between 4 and 7 December, Rommel would have had his flank turned and his armour trapped at Gabr Saleh. But the single battalion of *Giovani Fascisti* at Bir El Gobi held XI Indian Brigade, destroyed the better part of 100 tanks, and backed up a British army corps for four days, so badly damaging IV Armoured Brigade that it was withdrawn twenty miles to reorganize, forcing Ritchie to abandon his efforts to turn Rommel's flank to the south.⁴⁴

When Rommel finally ordered a general retreat on 5 December, he forgot to inform Trieste, and Ariete had to fight through IV Armoured Brigade and 7th Support Group. It is therefore gratuitous to criticize the Italians for being 'slow': not only had Rommel left his subordinates in the dark, he had ignored intelligence and mismanaged the battle,

⁴² Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 161-2; SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 48-63; Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 38-41; Carver, *Tobruk*, pp. 61-82; Barnett, *Generals*, pp. 95-8, who refers to Bologna as a 'scratch force'; and Sampieri, 'Carri', pp. 1,137-8.

⁴³ Carver, *Tobruk*, pp. 83-4, and *Dilemmas*, pp. 35-41; Faldella, *Revisione*, pp. 234-5; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 164-8; Ceva, *Africa*, pp. 41-3; and Mario Martinelli, 'La Divisione "Savona" nella seconda offensiva britannica in Cirenaica (18 novembre 1941-17 gennaio 1942)', *Rivista militare*, iii (1947), esp. 950, for Rommel's plan to crush the British against Savona's positions.

⁴⁴ SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 63-75; Angelo Pagin, *Mussolini's Boys: La battaglia di Bir el Gobi* (Milan, 1976); and Carver, *Dilemmas*, pp. 44-69.

then made sure his German units got to safety first in the retreat.⁴⁵ Ariete, not DAK, had fought the first major tank battle in Africa, and Serra believed it gave the Italian tankmen a moral ascendancy over the British, while Campini sees the action at Bir El Gobi on 19 November as the beginning of the 'disintegration' of *Crusader*. Rommel, of course, blamed the Italians for losing the battle.⁴⁶

Nor did Rommel shine in retreat. Bastico organized the defence on the Gazala line that so confused the British, and Ariete accounted for another 100 armoured vehicles at Alam Hamza. Rommel's nerve seems to have deserted him, and it was Gambaro who urged a stand on the Gazala line, while Rommel fabricated excuses to justify his precipitous withdrawal.⁴⁷ It was therefore not German artillery and armour directed by Rommel's genius that led to the poor British showing during *Crusader*, as Fraser and Carver conclude. Rommel's disjointed and hasty retreat cost the Italians dear in heavy equipment and casualties, and it was only Bastico's stubbornness that kept him from scurrying deep into Tripolitania, as the 'panicked' Graziani had proposed when faced with a similar situation in January 1941. Even after CAM (*Corpo d'Armata di Manovra* – 'Mobile Army Corps') had joined DAK to attack XXII Armoured Brigade, and Trieste had captured key documents in a British command tank on 28 December, Rommel still wanted to continue the retreat.⁴⁸

Rommel thus owed his 'brilliant' retreat to the Italian command and armour, as well as to the Italian and German troops on the frontier. Supported by air and submarine after Rommel had depleted many of their supplies in his 'dash to the wire', they had held out athwart British supply routes until 17 January 1942, forcing delays in the British advance.⁴⁹ Six days later, thanks to two successful Italian convoys,

⁴⁵ SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 75-8, 80-90; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 173; Ceva, *Africa*, p. 43; and Agar-Hamilton and Turner, *Sidi Rezegh*, pp. 256-7, 327, 380-1, 387-90, 399-415, for German armour's tendency to outrun its support. Speed is, of course, relative: O'Connor's 'fast' advance to Beda Foom took 33 hours over 150 miles, while the unnotorized Cirene division managed 37 miles in 36 hours in December 1940.

⁴⁶ Bedeschi, *Fronte*, p. 89; Campini, *Giardini*, p. 138; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 148; SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 90-3; and *German Military Studies*, ix, MS C-065a, 4 Sept. 1942.

⁴⁷ Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 311-12; SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 93-109; and Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 173-4.

⁴⁸ SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 114-40; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 174; Cavallero, *Diario*, 7, 14, and 16 Dec. 1941; and Liddell Hart, *Tanks*, ii. 105-44.

⁴⁹ Martinelli, 'Savona', *passim*; SME/US, *Seconda offensiva*, pp. 141-70; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 332-3; also Cavallero, *Diario*, 22 Dec. 1941 and SME/US, *Verbali*, ii. esp. nn. 46, 48, for use of submarines and aircraft to supply Savona.

Rommel was again off and running, as usual without telling his superiors, but this time with crucial Italian – *not* German – intelligence giving him the daily British order of battle, and with the new self-propelled 'semovente' 75/18, which gave the Marcks Group a powerful Italian punch. Despite *Ultra's* failure to alert Auchinleck, Rommel again failed to defeat the British, and Ariete and Trieste were at Mechili to counter Ritchie's counterthrust on 8 February only because Zingales had persuaded Rommel that the position was vulnerable. As in 1941, Italian units proved crucial to 'German' successes, and would have bagged the British at Segnali on the 15th, had the Germans arrived on time.⁵⁰

Having failed to catch the British, Rommel intended to pursue them, and on 15 February left Crüwell in charge in Africa in order to fly home to persuade Hitler to overrule restraining orders from Ugo Cavallero and Kesselring. On his return, he pushed his supply lines forward sixty to eighty kilometres, then withdrew his Germans, leaving Italian troops in the newer, more exposed positions.⁵¹ As usual, he blamed the Italians for his logistical problems, but he was being disingenuous, since he knew that the Italians were doing everything possible to supply him.⁵² His claims that 'will-power' could have resolved everything, though redolent of Leni Reifenstahl's work and Hitler's beliefs, were hardly a realistic solution to his difficulties. In fact, it was Italian logistics, Italian armour, and Italian heavy and self-propelled artillery that had supported his advance, and Italian realism that kept him from dashing so far ahead he lost all contact with his Italian infantry and his bases of supply.⁵³

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⁵⁰ The two groups of 75/18s were the equivalent of 18 Pzkw. III Specials. Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 330-1; Cavallero, *Diario*, 5 and 16-17 Jan. 1942; Bennett, *Ultra*, pp. 98, 100; also Cesare Amé, *Guerra segreta in Italia, 1940-1943* (Rome, 1954), esp. pp. 96 ff.; Carlo De Risio, *Generali, servizi segreti e fascismo: la guerra nella guerra, 1940-1943* (Milan, 1978), pp. 111-27, for SIM's reading of Fellers' messages from Cairo; SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva italo-tedesca in Africa Settentrionale da El Agheila a El Alamein (gennaio-settembre 1942)* (Rome, 1971), p. 46.

⁵¹ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 54, 71-81; Cavallero, *Diario*, 31 Jan., 9, 10, and 24 Feb., and 7 March 1942; and Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 181-4.

⁵² SME/US, *Verbali*, i, ii, iii, *passim*, for Italian concerns with convoys to Libya; for a good summary, Giorgio Giorgerini, *La battaglia dei convogli in Mediterraneo* (Milan, 1977).

⁵³ Westphal believed 'Rommel's iron will' drove his troops, *German Army*, p. 106; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 191-3, 243; and SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 78-81.

Through early 1942, Cavallero and the Italians worried that Rommel would compromise the projected invasion of Malta (Operation C-3)⁵⁴, but in May they gave grudging approval to another advance on Tobruk. Despite warnings from Italian Military Intelligence (SIM) that British armour was positioned behind the Ain El Gazala line to intervene quickly, and despite Bastico's misgivings, Rommel estimated that he would need only two days to wipe out the RAF, three to eliminate British armour, and five to capture Tobruk. Barbasetti di Prun, who had replaced Gambaro as Superasi chief of staff, objected to Rommel's plan, warning that the British could only be encircled on Day X+1 if they did not retreat and if the Axis were not delayed by VII Armoured Brigade. He added that the Axis could not annihilate the RAF, and pointed out that 90th Light was too weak to secure the southern flank and attack. An attack on Tobruk on Day X+4, therefore, as Rommel projected, presented 'some perhaps insurmountable logistical problems' (*delle difficoltà forse insuperabile*). Finally, Barbasetti worried that asking the four divisions of X and XXI Army Corps to move fifteen to twenty kilometres to their attack position after 14.00 on the evening before Day X would wear out the infantry before battle was joined, given the high temperatures and the lack of transport for the Italian troops.⁵⁴

But, as in November 1941, Rommel ignored objections to his plans and pushed aside inconvenient intelligence. He was therefore lucky that Ritchie and Auchinleck failed to act properly on their own, and only realized at dawn on 26 May 1942, when the Axis offensive began, that the main attack was *not* coming from the sector where X and XXI Corps were demonstrating.⁵⁵ He was also lucky that Trieste picked its way through the British minefields, and that Ariete crushed III Indian Motor Brigade and held IV Armoured Brigade, as 90th Light proved too weak both to attack and to guard the Axis flank.⁵⁶

Rommel's plan had been ill conceived, and his units had quite literally stalled by 28 May as DAK ran out of fuel. Had it not been for Ariete and Trieste, which overran British positions and linked up with DAK

⁵⁴ Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 201-32, for a self-serving account; for balance, SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 85-98; Cavallero, *Diario*, 18 and 31 March and 5 May 1942; and Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 286-90 for Barbasetti.

⁵⁵ Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 288; SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 100-1; Carver, *Dilemmas*, pp. 64-5; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 365-6; and Bennett, *Ultra*, pp. 116-17, 121. Unable to determine the Axis point of attack, the British opted to disperse their forces.

⁵⁶ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 91-103; Carver, *Dilemmas*, p. 77, who notes that III Indian Motor Brigade thought it had been hit not by Ariete, but by 'a whole bloody German armoured division' (emphasis added).

on the 28th and 29th, and for the Italian X Corps, which opened supply lines through the minefields, DAK would probably have been destroyed.⁵⁷ On 30 May, while DAK and 90th Light withdrew to the west of the Italian XX Corps, and Rommel noted that 'nothing happened ... except a few attacks on Ariete', Italian guns were inflicting heavy losses on the British near Sidra Ridge, and Ariete on II and XXII Armoured Brigades. Bastico thus reported on 31 May that while the Italian XX Corps had fought well, DAK had done less well, 90th Light was in retreat, and Rommel had lost the initiative. According to Irving, the evaluation of Rommel's performance by Gause and Westphal is unprintable.⁵⁸

Despite Axis successes, the British mounted one more major counter-attack, code-named *Aberdeen*, on 5 June. But the Italian X Corps held in the north, Trieste and 90th Light contained the French at Bir Hacheim, and Ariete joined 15th and 21st Panzer to batter 42nd and 7th Royal Tank Regiments, as well as II, IV, and XXII Armoured, IX and X Indian, and CCI Guards brigades. It is likely that Ariete and Italian guns played a major role in repulsing the British at Sidra and Aslagh ridges, and thus a pivotal one in what Liddell Hart terms the 'turning point' of the battle.⁵⁹ Certainly, the Italians accounted for at least 60, and probably more of the 168 cruiser and 50 'I' tanks lost on 5-6 June, thus contributing considerably to this victory of 'German' armour. Indeed, the Italians had to rescue the German XV Brigade near Gazala on 7 June, though Pavia managed to seal its own breach the next day.⁶⁰

None the less, by 9 June the Axis forces were low on ammunition and had lost 50 per cent of their artillery and armour, with Ariete battle-worthy only because the Italians stripped Littorio division, much to Bitossi's dismay. Then, on 11 June, Bir Hacheim fell to an attack

⁵⁷ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 103-4; Behrendt, *Rommel's Intelligence*, pp. 145-6, noted Fellers' dispatches were the basis for Rommel's May plan, and knew of the number and displacement of mines by the British. Behrendt fails to mention this was due to SIM.

⁵⁸ The anti-tank 'screen' consisted of Italian 75/46 and 90/53 as well as Skoda 75/50 and German 88/55 guns, with self-propelled Italian 47/32 and 75/18 in support. SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 88, 104-9, 152-3; Carver, *Tobruk*, pp. 189-92; Liddell Hart, *Tanks*, ii. 165-9; and Cavallero, *Diario*, 31 May 1942.

⁵⁹ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, p. 111; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 372-3; Carver, *Tobruk*, pp. 194-8, and *Dilemmas*, pp. 93-7; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 216, for Liddell Hart. On 5 June, Ariete took on XXXII Tank Brigade (7th and 42nd RTR), which was supported by LXIX Infantry and IX Indian Brigades, then repulsed IV and XXII Armoured Brigades.

⁶⁰ Carver, *Tobruk*, p. 197; Barnett, *Generals*, pp. 144-8; and SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 112-13.

directed by Trieste's commander, and on the 12th Ariete mauled XXII Armoured and CCI Guards brigades, then attacked IV Armoured Brigade with 21st Panzer. By the 15th, the Italians had again helped to give Rommel the initiative, but he failed to trap the British because he did not order Ariete and Trieste to the coast in time. Carver is therefore correct to credit *both* the Italians and the Germans for the British collapse, but wrong to see the Germans as the only viable fighting units. Barnett also errs in blaming the British defeat on Rommel's 'moral ascendancy'.⁶¹ The Axis victory owed a great deal to Nicolini, who had massed the Axis guns on 4-6 June, and again against Tobruk on the 20th; to the Italian infantry, who held at Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh; to Ariete, Trieste, and the Italian X Corps, which literally saved DAK in the initial phases of the attack; and to the Italian *guastatori* ('sappers') who cleared the way for the Axis armour at Tobruk.⁶² Rommel also owed something to *Ultra*, for the British knew that he was behind schedule and thought him too weak to attack the fortress in late June.⁶³

Once again, Rommel took credit for the victory and gave the Germans first claim to the spoils at Tobruk when it fell on 21 June. Then Rommel threw away his success by persuading Hitler to approve an advance into Egypt, despite the doubts and objections of Cavallero, Kesselring, and Mussolini, and despite earlier promises to go no further than Halfaya. Certainly, there was never a chance of actually reaching the Nile Delta. By late June, Ariete had only ten tanks, twenty-four guns, and 1,500 infantry; Littorio, thirty tanks, eleven guns, and 1,000 bersaglieri; X Corps (Brescia and Pavia), only 2,000 men and ninety guns; and XXI Corps (Trento and Sabratha), only 3,000 men and 100 guns – for a total of thirty-four Italian tanks, 8,100 men, and 240 guns. To this DAK could add ninety tanks, a handful of infantry, and a few score guns, hardly a force capable of overrunning the British positions at El Alamein.⁶⁴

⁶¹ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 115-28; Cavallero, *Diario*, 8, 9, and 10 June 1942; Ceva, *Africa*, p. 318; Campini, *Giardini*, pp. 164-5, for Becuzzi's direction of the assault on Bir Hacheim; Carver, *Tobruk*, pp. 212-15, 219, 221-4, 255-6; and Barnett, *Generals*, pp. 178-81.

⁶² Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 290-4; Campini, *Giardini*, p. 166; SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 134, 274; Adolfo Vitale, *L'Italia in Africa: Serie storico-militare: L'opera dell'Esercito (1911-1943)* (Rome, 1964), i, 276-7; Paolo Caccia-Dominioni, *Alamein, 1933-1962* (London, 1966), pp. 29-32; and *German Military Studies*, xiv, T-Pl, p. 55, for Kesselring's opinion that in May and June 1942 'the Italians fought extraordinarily well'.

⁶³ Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii, 381; and Bennett, *Ultra*, pp. 127-8.

⁶⁴ Mancinelli, *Dal fronte*, pp. 121-3; Cavallero, *Diario*, 20-25 June 1942; SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 136-41; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 295-6, 300.

Rommel's drive into Egypt not only precluded an invasion of Malta, it probably lost the war in the Mediterranean. For Faldella, the drive stands out as 'one of the greatest strategic errors' of the war, and Carver labels it 'rash in the extreme'. Serra saw it as an 'incalculable error', and Bayerlein, Kesselring, Westphal, and Rintelen as a fatal blunder. At the very least, as van Creveld observes, it was 'the worst solution' to Rommel's logistics problems.⁶⁵

Rommel's victory at Marsa Matruh on 28-29 June was thus meaningless, and pyrrhic, since he had again outrun his air support and pushed his troops to exhaustion, while stretching his supply line 400 miles beyond Sollum and 800 miles from Benghazi. Unable to obtain reinforcements, a critically weakened Ariete division was decimated on 3 July by I and VII Armoured Brigades and the New Zealand division, two days after 90th Light had panicked and broken.⁶⁶ Rommel's reaction was predictable: he threatened to retreat with his Germans and leave the Italians stranded, even though he must have been aware that his decision to pursue had created the crisis, especially as his own intelligence had warned him that the British intended to stand at El Alamein. But, again, the Italians were convenient scapegoats, even though it was Keitel who refused further fuel, and the Germans at El Alamein, not the Italians, who arrived late.⁶⁷

The Italians were doing everything they could to alleviate the crisis created by Rommel's advance, in part because the prestige of the Fascist regime was tied to the battles at El Alamein, in part because it was no longer possible to take Malta, and if Egypt were not taken, the Axis could not win in Africa. On 19 July, Mussolini wrote to Cavallero that he understood the Axis troops had been too exhausted to overcome the British at El Alamein earlier in the month, but wanted the present positions held as '*basi di partenza*' ('jumping-off positions') for a future attack. In the meantime, mines should protect the infantry from British

⁶⁵ Rintelen, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 168-78, saw the advance losing the Mediterranean; also, Fritz Bayerlein, 'El Alamein', *The Fatal Decisions* (New York, 1958), p. 100; Faldella, *Revisione*, pp. 268-70, 282; Bedeschi, *Fronte*, pp. 94-6, for Serra; Carver, *Dilemmas*, p. 129; van Creveld, *Logistics*, p. 196; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 232-4; and *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS T-Pl, p. 46, for Kesselring.

⁶⁶ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 142-7, 162-3, 168-9; van Creveld, *Logistics*, pp. 196-7; SME/US, *Verballi*, esp. iii. nn. 194, 213, 214, 217, 219, and 220 for efforts to use Tobruk and Marsa Matruh for shipping. The latter was 5.5 metres deep, while even Italian subs drew over six metres. Also *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS T-Pl, pp. 40, 58, for Kesselring's 'special praise' for Italian efforts to reclaim Tobruk and Benghazi.

⁶⁷ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, p. 186; Cavallero, *Diario*, 27 and 29 June and 17 July 1942; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 392-3; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 236, 241-2; and Behrendt, *Rommel's Intelligence*, p. 166.

armour; all the guns in Africa should be made available to Rommel, with as many *'semoventi'* as possible to bolster the 'obsolescent' M14s, and the Bologna, Giovani Fascisti, Folgore, Pistoia, and Brennero divisions should be sent to the front – but without burdening the Axis forces with too many immobile units. The ports of Tobruk, Sollum, and Marsa Matruh, and the Sidi Rezegh-Marsa Matruh railroad should be used to ease the strain on Axis trucking. Mussolini also ordered headquarters to move closer to the front in order to boost morale. But while the Fascist leader emphasized the need for 'speed', there was little an already overstretched logistics apparatus could do, especially as a resurgent Malta again began to take a toll of Axis shipping, aided by the omniscient *Ultra*.⁶⁸

Aware of the Axis crisis, the British understandably concentrated their attacks on Axis infantry units, both Italian and German. *Ultra* had told them that Rommel had shifted his armour to the south, where it could not react to attacks in the north. As Mancinelli noticed, the more mobile German units naturally plugged the holes punched in the Axis line by the British, who overran the 382nd German regiment, as well as parts of Trieste and Sabratha on 11 July. But the Italians also sealed their own breaches and, in the south, Trieste and Littorio gave as good an account for themselves as the German units. On 22 July, Trento, Pavia, Brescia, and Ariete accounted for a good part of the 1,400 POWs and 146 tanks lost in an abortive British attack. As Rommel himself noted, if the Italians needed the Germans, by mid-July 'the German formations [were] much too weak to stand alone'. Of course, this had always been true, and while the Italians continued to fight, and even advance at Siwa, Rommel pressed for a quick retreat and was only restrained from doing so by Cavallero and Bastico.⁶⁹

By 27 July, the supply crisis had passed, and Trento's artillery destroyed twenty tanks and thirty vehicles during an Axis counter-attack that took 1,000 POWs after the 9th Australian and I Armoured Brigades overran Trento's 61st battalion and the German 361st regiment. It was now the British who were exhausted, but not due to Rommel's 'brilliance' or the 'sheer fighting ability of the Germans', as Hinsley and Barnett claim. As Campini notes, the Italian XX Corps mauled the New Zealanders, and according to Sampieri, Axis artillery – in large

⁶⁸ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *I documenti diplomatici italiani* [hereafter *DDI*] (Rome, 1988), Series 9, viii, doc. 694.

⁶⁹ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 174, 178-82, 186-92; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 257-9; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 302; Mancinelli, *Dal fronte*, pp. 146-8; and for a romantic account, Angelo Anselmi, *Storia dell'VIII battaglione bersaglieri corazzato, Africa Settentrionale 1942* (Bergamo, 1973).

part Italian – combined with mines to destroy 86 of XXIII Armoured Brigade's 97 Valentines and 120 New Zealand anti-tank guns. Rommel seems to have been depressed and ineffectual, and his alternating of Italian and German units – done primarily to maximize scarce anti-tank guns – merely generated confusion, since he stipulated no chain of command.⁷⁰

Although the Italians and Germans had lost heavily since 26 May, with 9,568 Italian and 12,430 German casualties, by 30 August a massive supply effort by the Italians gave Rommel sixty-seven infantry battalions (including thirty-nine Italian), 536 guns (336 Italian), 515 tanks (281 Italian), 119 armoured cars (72 Italian), and 777 aircraft (427 Italian).⁷¹ But he squandered them in an attack with no prospect of success, against a British enemy alerted by *Ultra* and without his Italian intelligence. By 3 September, he had taken 2,450 additional casualties, lost 50 guns and 400 AFVs, and wasted 10,000 tons of fuel. As early as 7 July Cavallero had foreseen disaster, and two months later Rommel delivered it. Having used up his fuel and reinforcements, he now adopted the same system of *capisaldi* ('strong points') used by Graziani in 1940, and for the same reasons. Too weak to attack, lacking the resources for a viable mobile defence, under orders not to retreat, and unable to construct a defence in depth, the Axis forces could only await the inevitable British attack, and hope to survive it.⁷²

Rommel was now ready to go home, having failed to obtain Hitler's permission to withdraw and convinced that defeat was certain. As usual he blamed the Italians for everything, and misled Barbasetti on 29 October, assuring him that he would fight to the last man, while readying his Germans for retreat. Nor does he appear to have been altogether frank in his memoirs, claiming that the last signal from Ariete arrived at 15.30 on 4 November, when he began his retreat. Perhaps, but it appears that Ariete and Littorio held the British at Fuka until late on 5 November 1942, which gave Rommel a full day to outpace the cautious Montgomery, who had perhaps fallen under an Italian, rather

⁷⁰ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 171-95; Campini, *Giardini*, pp. 180-4; Rommel, *Papers*, p. 259; Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 405-6; Barnett, *Generals*, pp. 190-206; Sampieri, 'Carri', pp. 1,139-40; and Faldella, *Revisione*, pp. 260-1, 278-81.

⁷¹ SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 205-10, 235; and van Creveld, *Logistics*, pp. 182, 196-8, for supplies.

⁷² SME/US, *Seconda controffensiva*, pp. 236-63; Berhendt, *Rommel's Intelligence*, pp. 178-87, 225, for the importance of the Tellers' information, and the advantages of being near the Italian units; Cavallero, *Diario*, 7 July 1942; and Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2), 14, 89-90. Like Graziani's strong points, Rommel's lacked depth, but he had strong mobile forces, better anti-tank guns, and more aircraft. Of course, the British were also stronger.

than a German, 'spell'.⁷³ But how could Montgomery admit that he had failed to catch the 'Desert Fox' because he had to fight his way through a few scrawny Italian chickens?

* * *

It would seem that Rommel was neither a good army commander nor a good ally, and it is only by disparaging the Italians, and his own German subordinates and superiors, that one can see him as a genius rather than the moody, high-handed, undisciplined, front-line general that he appears to have been. While Mancinelli considers Rommel a tactical genius, he also considers him an arrogant German who left his allies in the lurch during retreats and never quite understood how to use his Italian troops.⁷⁴ And as van Creveld demonstrates, Rommel understood little of logistics, and continually outran his supply lines. Rommel himself admitted that he habitually outran his infantry and air support, which repeatedly put his forward units in impossible positions, from which they were extricated by commanders like Crüwell and Gambarà, and the logistical support of Bastico and Gariboldi. The Italian navy not only ferried supplies and kept the British fleet at bay, it also reclaimed harbours and brought supplies by coastal shipping and submarine to forward land positions, while the Axis air forces provided direct and indirect support when Rommel let them. The focus on armoured operations in works dealing with Rommel in North Africa has tended to obscure the role of the supporting cast, but without that, he could not have become a star. Rommel's stress on 'speed' and his preference for 'less intelligent but stronger willed' generals to 'academic' soldiers and 'quartermasters' was not a sign of genius or creativity, but is the mark of the front-line unit commander, who is competent at his job, but so preoccupied with tactical questions that he cannot comprehend the army or theatre as a whole.⁷⁵ That Rommel believed will-power could resolve his supply difficulties – he therefore ignored Italian warnings

⁷³ SME/US, *Terza offensiva britannica in Africa Settentrionale: La battaglia di El Alamein e il ripiegamento in Tunisia (6 settembre 1942-4 febbraio 1943)* (Rome, 1961), esp. pp. 358-71; Mancinelli, *Dal fronte*, pp. 192-8, 200-1; Ceva, *Africa*, p. 63; Barnett, *Generals*, pp. 274-5; and Hinsley, *Intelligence*, ii. 450-1, notes that the British were held up by forty tanks and six self-propelled guns (semoventi) at Fuka and Daba until 13.40 on 5 Nov.

⁷⁴ Mancinelli, *Dal fronte*, pp. 35-6, 62; Aldo Lualdi, *Nudi alla meta* (Milan, 1970), pp. 225-7; Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-43*, ed. Hugh Gibson (New York, 1946), 12 Nov. 1942; but Doronzo, *Folgore*, pp. 111-12, 126-8, hitched rides with the Germans.

⁷⁵ Van Creveld, *passim*; Rommel, *Papers*, pp. 96, 119-20, 201, 235; also A. Borgiotti and C. Gori, *La guerra aerea in Africa Settentrionale, 1940-1943* (Modena, 1972) for tactical air support.

that the British were reading his signals – further indicates that he was unsuited to command formations larger than a division, and had only become commander of the Axis armies in Africa by currying Hitler's favour.

Efforts to limit any discussion of Rommel's performance to tactical operations is common, but hardly useful, since it was his performance as an army commander and his impact on the strategic situation that mattered. As Kesselring has noted, Rommel was touchy about his lack of general staff training, something his Italian colleagues had in abundance. Bastico had not only attended Italy's War College between 1902 and 1905, but also he was an instructor at the Royal Academy in Livorno; had written a textbook (*Evolution of the Art of War*); served as editor for *Rivista militare*; commanded infantry and *celere* formations; formed a blackshirt unit; fought in the Libyan, Abyssinian, and Spanish civil wars as well as the First World War; and been nominated a senator. His predecessor, Gariboldi, also had seen service in the First World War, Libya, and Abyssinia, and had attended the War College, where he later directed courses for senior officers. Gambarà, commander of CAM during the *Crusader* battles, had begun as a lieutenant in the alpine troops before 1914; reached the rank of major on the battlefield; done staff work with Bastico in Abyssinia; commanded the Italian volunteers (CTV) in Spain, then VIII Army Corps in Albania: plenty of experience by the time he began to clash with Rommel. Cavallero, often depicted as a sort of armchair general, had taken a first at the War College; served in Libya and the First World War; and was considered by Rintelen to be extremely competent. Even some Italian commanders of front-line units, such as Bitossi, who commanded the Littorio division in 1942, had more armoured experience than Rommel. Bitossi had been instrumental in creating Italy's armoured corps in 1935, then commanded armoured formations in Spain and Dalmatia.⁷⁶ It is thus possible that part of Rommel's hostility towards the Italians may have been the result of insecurity in his command, and a consequent determination not to let more experienced and prudent soldiers influence his decisions.

Clearly, the Italian officers who fought in North Africa were not doddering idiots, as they have so often been portrayed. Nor were run-ins with Rommel proof of a lack of genius. Indeed, in June 1941, Keitel believed that Gariboldi and Rommel were complementary personalities,

⁷⁶ *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS T-Pl (2), pp. 48-9; Stefani, *Dottrina*, ii (2). 111, 306, 330; *Historical Dictionary*, pp. 63, 110, 239-40; and Dorenzo, *Folgore*, pp. 137-8, for a sympathetic anecdotal brush with Bastico. For Bastico's role as a

that the 'hothead' ('*testa di fuoco*') Rommel would be under the calmer Gariboldi, who could use 'clear thinking' ('*equilibrio ... e chiare decisioni*') to rein in his rash German subordinate. If the Italians preferred a 'stationary command' to the front line, Kesselring at least would have seen this as a virtue; there were advantages to being able to find one's commanding officer. Like Rommel, Graziani and other Italian commanders understood the need for armour and motorized troops, but Rome could not send enough in time, since Italian industry during the whole war produced fewer tanks than Germany used against France in 1940. Labouring under such serious handicaps as these, CAM and Gambara managed to save Rommel in November 1941, but their actions have been ignored or distorted. Similarly, efforts by Cavallero, Gariboldi, and Bastico to assure logistical support have been ignored or belittled. Italian commanders like De Stefanis (Trento, Ariete, XX Corps), Bitossi (Littorio), Piazzoni (Trieste), Navarini (XXI Corps), Zingales (CAM), Gotti (Pavia, Trento), de Giorgis (Savona), Balotta (Ariete), Franceschini (Pavia), Azzi (Trieste), Baldassare (CAM), Mancinelli (CAM liaison), Gioda (X Corps), and Barbasetti di Prun and Gambara (Superasi Chiefs of Staff), have been systematically ignored, while Rommel and German commanders like Crüwell have been extolled as geniuses; even minor German officers like Schwerin are singled out for praise. Yet Bitossi had more armoured experience than Rommel, and De Stefanis and Bastico played important roles throughout the campaigns.⁷⁷ To ignore all Italian generals and all Italian divisions and praise Rommel and German battle groups seems a strange way to write history.

Stranger yet, much of the praise for Rommel comes from the British and Germans, who generated the myth of Rommel as part of their respective wartime propaganda efforts. The British also made a systematic post-war effort to extol Rommel, with Young and Liddell Hart leading the way, although, as Mearsheimer shows, Liddell Hart exaggerated the exploits of the German generals in part to re-establish his own reputation.⁷⁸ Certainly, when compared with Italian official histories, the British counterparts offer striking contradictions of fact and interpretation. Which of the two is more accurate is a matter for debate, but unless both are consulted in the same critical spirit, no comparison can be attempted. And if this is true of the official histories, how much more is it true of the popular and scholarly accounts – based on official

⁷⁷ *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS T-Pl, pp. 52-4; DDI, Series 9, vii, doc. 201.

⁷⁸ Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart, passim*: for an early example of pro-Rommel propaganda, Wilhelm Wiesel, *Mit Rommel in der Wüste* (Essen, 1932).

sources and personal interviews – which have tended to exaggerate rather than refine the inaccuracies in the material from which they are constructed? Relatively little care has been taken to examine accounts by all those directly involved in the North African campaigns, for which Rommel's word serves almost as holy writ.

But accounts that tend to blame every defeat on someone else are always to be treated with caution, and given the racist attitudes of the early twentieth century, it is difficult to see how any German or British account could give an objective portrayal of the Italians. There is no question that the Germans looked down on their ally as racially inferior, and friction between the two was endemic and pervasive; Vice Admiral Nomura noted 'rivalries between Italians and Germans everywhere' during his trip through the Balkans in late 1942. In a post-war deposition, the German general, Christian Eckhard, tried to explain this friction, observing that the Germans had a 'contempt' for the Italians, because the Italians realized the Germans were superior and nursed a 'smouldering insubordination', which led to 'constant friction', a 'lack of co-operation', and 'mutual avoidance'. Not surprisingly, Eckhard blamed the Italians for all German setbacks, something Siegfried Westphal tended to do, too – although he did notice that Rommel blamed others when his plans failed, rather than taking into account 'material difficulties'. Still, Westphal lamented the Italians' 'southern tendency', which made them too emotional and unsteady to be good soldiers. For Westphal, as for other Germans, 'the disadvantages of his Latin temperament' combined with the Italian soldier's 'inferiority in fire-power, equipment, and training, and the absence of any inspiring war aim ... [conspired] to push the Italian armed forces hopelessly into the background'.⁷⁹

For Kesselring, the Italians were given to 'listlessness', and were to blame for the loss of Africa and Sicily. Not qualified to be *W'affenträger* ('weapons bearers'), they were useful only to man auxiliary services. As 'southerners', he considered them 'hot-blooded, with all the advantages and disadvantages inherent in their origins'. While he believed the Italian upper class capable of 'short, striking, even most dangerous major and maximum performances', he saw the rural southerners as 'a mass of ... children', and the average Italian as 'conceited', saddled with a 'vivid imagination' which made it difficult for him to tell reality from fantasy, and 'easily contented' with 'coffee, cigarettes, and women'.

⁷⁹ *German Military Studies*, ix, MS C-065k, 15 Oct. 1942; xiv, MS D-145, p. 7, and MS D-172, pp. 1-6; and Westphal, *German Army*, pp. 127-30. One wonders what 'inspiring war aim' drove Rommel and Westphal.

But Kesselring also thought the Italian likeable, 'if one is not repelled by his naturally inherent attributes which are in sharp contrast with the characteristics of people from the North'.⁸⁰

That the attitudes displayed by Eckhard, Westphal, and Kesselring were common to most Germans is beyond doubt. That they shaped a perception of reality also seems certain. For example, on 16 February 1943, two days before the battle of the Kasserine Pass, OKW noted that the British and French considered the Americans 'their Italians'. In other words, this sort of attitude permeated *official* documents, whose 'objectivity' is called into doubt. Nor was the German attitude lost on the Italians: Count Ciano continually complained in his diary, and popular writers like Aldo Lualdi leave no doubt, that Italy's German ally was not '*simpatico*' ('likeable').⁸¹

Given the friction between the Axis partners, and overt racism on the part of German commanders, it is astonishing that most Anglo-American historiography has been so uncritical of German sources, repeating German accounts almost verbatim – Liddell Hart's *The German Generals Talk* an especially influential example. Rommel is the most obvious but not the only myth created as a result.

As for Rommel, it is clear that his particular myth needs re-examination. It is too convenient an alibi for British blunders, and too easy a way to write off Germany's failure to support her ally. Rommel was not a genius; his defeats and his pyrrhic victories prove that. His most ardent admirers are forced to ingenious stratagems to explain such errors as his 'dash to the wire'. Westphal considered him '*Feldherr* of the extreme front line', not really suited to higher command. Kesselring considered him a good front-line soldier, skilled as a tank general and desert expert, but not qualified by temperament or training to command an army or army group. He thought, too, that Rommel had failed to 'meet the Italians half-way'. Even Hitler, Rommel's patron, saw him as rash, and in early December 1942 thought it an 'advantage' that Rommel lacked the 'fuel necessary for the conduct of a further withdrawal', as his penchant for hasty retreats was as well known as his inclination to rash attacks.⁸²

To re-evaluate the myth is to discover, not diminish, the man. Like Garibaldi, Rommel was abrasive; like De Stefanis, he did well as a tank commander; but unlike Bastico and other Italian commanders, he lacked general staff training, an appreciation of logistics, and the ability

⁸⁰ *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS T-3Pl, pp. 10-11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, ix, MS C-065a, 16 Feb. 1954; Lualdi, *Nudi*, pp. 182, 198-9, 227.

⁸² *German Military Studies*, xiv, MS T-3Pl (2), pp. 48-9, and C-065a, 7 Dec. 1942; and Westphal, *German Army*, pp. 126-8.

to subordinate his personal feelings to the smooth running of the alliance. In his animus towards the Italians, he was little different – or better – than most German generals, and his account should be as carefully weighed as any other. He was not the genius of legend any more than the Germans were the main protagonists in the Mediterranean theatre, and to promote either misconception is not to serve history, which is concerned with interpreting the actions of people, not furthering the propagation of myth.

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