

In this alternative history of World War II, General Erwin Rommel is dead before D-Day and before he is forced to commit suicide. Hitler orders General Heinz Guderian to leave the frozen Russia step to take Rommel's place in Africa.

ROMMEL IS DEAD

By Merrill Hardy

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MERRILL HARDY

Kommel is Dead



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FOREWORD

What Really Happened?

It has been almost 70 years since Erwin Rommel was forced to commit suicide to save his family and to this day he remains one of the most well known and controversial figures of World War II (WWII). To question his military reputation, judgment and skill even today is frowned upon in certain circles. That he enjoyed the absolute support of Germany's psychopathic dictator Adolph Hitler up until almost the very end is an indisputable fact.

Rommel's most severe criticism came from his fellow German officers. The Chief of the Army General Staff, General Hadler, once described him as "that officer gone stark raving mad." Other criticism involving poor decisions, conflict with allies, unnecessarily high casualty rates and trumped up subordinate court marshals were not as well known, but no less damning.

Apparently none of this ever mattered to Hitler. Rommel was promoted ahead of all his peers, received Germany's highest decorations and his commands were lavished with resources unequalled in quantity and quality. Public records confirm Rommel's influence on Hitler, but there are historical hints Rommel's influence on Germany policies may have been far greater. During the progression of WWII Hitler's poor decision making spread from situations involving just Rommel to everything else.

After 1942 Nazi Germany had only two chances to avoid total destruction and possibly obtain a negotiated peace. The first chance was to fight the Soviet Union to a standstill. The second chance was to avoid losing the Battle of the Atlantic.

Stalingrad not only cost the Germans two of their Armies, but four of their allies Armies (two Romanian, one Hungarian, and one Italian). Although German armed forces were able to recover somewhat, the military contribution for the remainder of WWII from these three nations offensively was none and defensively minimal.

Winning the code war (breaking the German Enigma code) cost the Germans the Battle of the Atlantic. Also diversion of German U-boat

assets at critical times to other Theaters, especially the Mediterranean was a contributing factor.

Rommel/Hitler Alliance Drain on the War in Russia

Rommel was sent to Africa in 1941 with orders to hold off British Commonwealth forces and keep Italy from being knocked out of the war. It did not take him long to violate these orders and attack British forces. This created an opportunity for Rommel's superiors they did not ask for and obligations they could ill afford with the Russian invasion staring them in the face. It also handed the German Army its first real defeat at the gates of the fortified port city of Tobruk.

One mark of a great military captain has always been his ability to get the best from his allies. No one gives Rommel high marks for his relationship with his Italian ally. From failure to inform them he was retreating in Crusader and leaving them to fend for themselves to open and implied insults regarding everything Italian. He even implied they were passing information to the British.

During the first half of 1942, the German Army rebuilt nine panzer and six motorized divisions in preparation for their summer Russian offensive. To do this they stripped their factories and other Russian front panzer divisions.

Post Crusader, from Dec 41 to Jun 42 approximately 330 German tanks were shipped to Rommel's forces in Africa, including those sank in route. During this same period in Russia the ratio of German to Soviet tank losses averaged 1:6. Therefore, if these same tanks were instead shipped to Russia and all lost in combat they could theoretically have accounted for some 2,000 Russian tanks.

A similar analogy can be made for troops, planes and guns shipped to Russia instead of Africa. Interestingly the ratio of German to British tank losses approached this ratio during the first part of Operation Crusader.

For the second half of 1942, prior to Stalingrad an additional six panzer and two motorized divisions were scheduled to be built or rebuilt. Instead, the tanks to rebuild two of these panzer divisions were shipped to Africa. These were used again to rebuild Rommel's destroyed two panzer divisions and save his command.

Moreover, in late 1942 one of the other four (Tenth Panzer) was sent to Tunisia. Additionally nearly one half of the new Tiger tanks manufactured in 1942 were sent to Tunisia. Still more tanks and technically

advanced equipment was sent in early 1943 all in the middle of the catastrophic events following Stalingrad.

Added to the tanks were invaluable vehicles, personnel, guns and above all planes. The ground personnel and equipment was formed into an entire Panzer Army. This pattern continued throughout 1943 as another entire Panzer Army was formed in the Balkans. Hundreds and then thousands of planes were sent into the Mediterranean and lost in the Allied meat grinder.

A similar pattern occurred for Italian tanks, planes and war material. Not a single Italian medium tank served with their Eighth Army in Russia. Yet many hundreds were lost in Africa or in transit. Consequently, by the time of the invasion of Sicily, the Italian military was an empty shell.

History has many military mistakes to lay at Hitler's feet but buying into Rommel's strategy of taking the Middle East through Africa while fully engaged with Russia and with Malta sitting across his supply lines was to be considered as one of his top blunders.

Rommel/Hitler Alliance Impact on the Battle for the Atlantic

Much has been written about the monumental shipping losses to U-Boats off the American coast during the first half of 1942. Admiral Donitz had planned for the first installment of this destruction to consist of 12 long range U-Boats. Because of the dire straights Rommel's Army was in he was only able to send five. From 21 Sep 41 to 7 Dec 41 18 U-boats either entered or tried to enter the Mediterranean. From 9 Dec 41 to 15 Jan 42 an additional 17 U-Boats were sent.

This large number of U-boats was deemed necessary to save Rommel's forces. In less than one month Donitz's five U-Boat sent to America sank 25 ships. During all of 1942 numerous U-Boats in the Mediterranean sank a total of 81 ships with high losses to themselves. That the presence of 17 (or more) additional U-Boats off the American coast in early 1942 would have had a noticeable effect upon the war has to be without question.

Of even more consequence was the loss of U-559 in October 1942 in the eastern Mediterranean. Before she sank, British sailors captured U-559's code books. This allowed the Allies to drive the U-boats from the Atlantic by May 1943. This in turn set the stage for the necessary supplies and troops to be accumulated in England to assure a successful D-day operation.

But prior to this U-boat operations enjoyed their most successful month of WWII destruction in November of 1942. The Allied supply

situation was so strained that English fuel stores were reduced to less than a three months supply.

Hitler's other Generals

Heinz Guderian (Heinz) and Erich von Manstein (von Manstein) – Two of the greatest German generals of WW II and perhaps of any war in history.

Both were Prussians, a political subdivision that no longer exists and veterans of WW I. Their joint efforts contributed to many great military achievements including defeat of France and bringing the German army to the gates of Moscow. Heinz's troops were stopped by advanced Soviet tanks (T34 medium and KV heavy tanks) and von Manstein by the Fortress of Sevastopol in the Crimea.

Both were dismissed from service after disagreements with Hitler. Both refused to make militarily stupid decisions that would result in unnecessary waste of soldier's lives and military resources. Both were masters in using military technology.

Both invented and fielded successful vehicle innovations in armored warfare. Both men had sons serving in the German Army. After the war von Manstein served four years of a 12 year sentence for "neglecting to protect civilian lives" and using scorched earth tactics. Heinz was never charged with war crimes. Following a successful career, von Manstein was finally dismissed by Hitler in 1944 after disagreements regarding military policy and tactics.

Heinz was the heart and soul of Germany's Panzer arm in addition to being an exceptional field General. After Heinz's dismissal in 1941 he struggled with medical issues. In 1943 he was reinstated as Inspector General of *Panzertroopen*; he inherited a convoluted mess from over a year of Hitler's meddling with Armored Vehicle Design overlaid with Nazi political infighting. This damage could not be undone.

Heinz did try to salvage and redirect the program. He proposed a new infantry assault-gun/ mobile anti-tank weapon which ended up as the Hetzer. Over a year later, large numbers of Hetzers began to roll out of the factory in April 1944. Simple and effective, it was too late to have much impact on the war.

P A R T

I

A DAY REMEMBERED BY ALL

CHAPTER 1

Heinz Guderian

November 18, 1941 - Russian Front - a few miles from Moscow

As his radio operator took a break to relieve himself, German General Heinz Guderian treaded to the opposite side of his armored command vehicle to stand quietly in the snow and for a brief time to be alone with his thoughts. It seemed every hour of this so-called “Operation Barbarossa” brought news of fresh German disasters.

Their current military circumstances demanded all of one’s energy; there was little time to think of anything else or to have any time alone to one’s self. Now it was snowing again and very cold; this miserable Russian weather was getting worse every day. And yet most of his troops were still fighting in their original summer uniforms or what was left of them.

His troops had fought their way clear across western Russia and it was rumored one could see the spires of Moscow in the distance when the weather was clear. Yesterday, his brave troops had been stopped and even given ground to superior Russian tanks.

Even their few heavy German anti-aircraft guns turned into anti-tank guns in this emergency had trouble dealing with these tanks. Heinz wondered if this wall of tanks would decide today to move west and simply brush their defenses aside. What was left to stop them?

In final acts of desperation, only heavy divisional artillery pieces could effectively knock out these monsters at ranges greater than 1,000 meters. Unfortunately, there were very few of these large and difficult to maneuver guns available.

The shock of Soviets possessing such impressive tanks had still not worn off – the advance of whole divisions stopped by a single tank and its stubborn Russian crew. A German Infantry Division breaking and retreating. Heniz was a great promoter of “Tank Terror”, but certainly not among his own Infantry. He remembered what in complete frustration he had confided to his staff:

“God help us if these Russians had possessed leadership, training, advanced tactics, and organization to go along with their superior tanks. Our troops do not warrant this setback with what they have endured and I fear many will not survive.”

Of course, he mused, Germany had Stalin to thank for taking care of Russian leadership concerns. Russian Army officers had been specifically targeted in the Soviet dictator’s bloody purges during the 1930s, with many capable ones of all ranks executed or sent to Siberia. This was how Stalin chose to deal with anyone he thought might eventually pose a threat to his reign of Communist terror.

Although disorganized in many ways, Heinz knew the sheer size of the Soviet Military machine paled only when compared in size to a country that possessed these massive military resources. These newer Russian tanks were more akin to ideal tanks of the future he had suggested in his book, *Achtung Panzer*, than tank types his *panzertruppen* (tank or armored troops) currently fielded.

He had already sounded the alarm and urgently requested rapid production of a heavy anti-tank gun to counter the threat these new tanks posed. Surprisingly, he had just learned that two of the very first of these guns coming straight off of the factory floor were shipped to Africa, not Russia.

Heinz’s desperate troops had even resorted to using captured Russian field guns in an anti-tank role. Russian ammunition was of substandard quality, but many of their guns were excellent. Indeed, mountains of Russian war material had been captured, much of it undamaged. Unfortunately, they did not have the necessary manpower or resources available to collect, repair or transport these vast quantities of equipment.

Heinz had also recently spoken to a commission visiting the Russian front looking into requirements for a new German tank able to take on these Russian types. Actually, he had helped design some of Germany’s existing tanks so that they could be upgraded over time to remain effective tank killers. But against heavy Russian tanks, in head to head combat Germany’s current tank models were at a severe disadvantage.

Only by skillful maneuver, had his tank crews stood any chance at all. He was well aware how long it could take to perfect a new reliable tank design and the German economy had not yet even been put on a full war footing.

To top it all off, Hitler was not even releasing newly produced tanks as Russian Front replacements, but rather using them to form

new divisions. Thus, there would be no help anytime soon for his over-stretched panzer divisions.

Disaster was staring them in the face. Winter chill and this sense of foreboding made him suddenly shiver as some dry snow that had been resting on his coat again became airborne.

Everything now seemed to be working against them. General “mud” and General “winter” were now fighting for the Soviets. Transportation of their supplies was still hindered by lack of proper rail transport. All Russian train tracks (those that the Russians had not already destroyed during their retreat) had to be modified to fit German rolling stock. Even their supply trucks were more suited for transportation between European rail lines, not this seemingly endless country. Moreover, there was talk of embolden Russian partisans beginning to operate in their rear areas.

Many of “Ivan’s” wonder tanks had been captured with no more damage than an empty fuel tank or half sunk in bogs and swamps with no visible damage at all. But it was difficult to immediately turn these on their former owners in sizable numbers, for newer Russian tanks were based on a diesel engine. Since nearly all German vehicles and even their aircraft engines were based upon a common gasoline grade, to fill even a few tanks with a different type of fuel would be difficult.

Supplying them fuel for active operations was completely out of the question. Not to mention being fired upon by your own anti-tank gunners who had been taught only too well a healthy fear of Russian tanks. Many of his *panzertruppen* he had talked to thought that Russian T-34 tanks should just be copied. He was anxious to see what findings and recommendations this tank commission he had requested would come up with.

It was common knowledge that he was not a patient man when faced with ineptitude and he had reached the end of his rope. Even his fertile mind could not conceive a way out of impending doom. If the drive for Moscow had been attempted earlier, as he had suggested, maybe the Russians would have broken and his troops might be sitting in warm Moscow houses at this very moment.

He had always said there were no desperate situations, there are only desperate people, but soon there would be no more options. It seemed the colder it got the more aggressive Russian troops became. Soon there would be only one course of action. He had already made the decision, if it came down to it he would save as many of his troops as he could, orders or no orders.

What would be the fate of his two sons? Both were *panzertruppen*, following in their father’s footsteps. Wouldn’t he want their commander to make a similar decision in their behalf?

You cannot fight a war if all your troops are dead and your armies are destroyed, he thought to himself. From everything he observed, it would not be long before he faced a fateful clash with his superiors over this impending crisis.

He knew he had enemies in Berlin secretly eager for his failure, especially the Army Chief of Staff, General Halder. Sadly, mercy and understanding from a pack of wild dogs might be easier to come by than from Hitler and some of these “associates.”

Nevertheless, he determined that he would not burden his conscious with the hopeless and unnecessary deaths of his men. Besides, if Hitler would let them save their army then maybe they could rebuild and hit Stalin again next year. That is if they could somehow remedy their current severe tank gap.

He turned to see his radio operator and his driver staring down at him. He stepped back into the open topped armored half-track which was a little warmer than outside, but not by much and picked up the hand full of messages he had been sorting through.

Winston Churchill

London, November 18, 1941

Far away in his London war room bunker England’s Prime Minister Winston Churchill was as usual chomping at the bit.

“What is the word on the commando raid from last night”, as Churchill briefly laid aside his cigar and addressed General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff and a certain Colonel Bentley of the Intelligence Service.

“Not good, I am afraid, Prime Minister. Apparently bad weather took its toll on the mission. A few German supply troops dead, but no sign of Rommel. Also looks like we took a lot of casualties”, replied Bentley.

“Well it was worth a shot. Perhaps we will get future intelligence to try it again. Has this blasted Mediterranean weather affected the timing on the rest of the offensive Bentley?”

“Unfortunately reports indicate it has, Prime Minister. But so far everything is still progressing forward, but I am afraid many of the RAF preemptive strikes are a no go at this point.”

“Well I still expect us to catch them with their pants down. We know from our code breakers that Rommel has positioned his troops to strike Tobruk with his back toward us.

Including units in transit and tanks in the supply system, we now have more than 1,200 first line British and American supplied tanks available for Operation Crusader. Against this we know their combined tank strength stands at barely 400.

Moreover, we have successfully cut off their supplies and in addition greatly outnumber them in nearly every category on the land, at sea and in the air. We will drive them back down the road they came from and then push them out of Africa and I hope drown them in the Mediterranean.”

“Prime Minister, isn’t sending in a hit team to murder Rommel a little over the top,” questioned Brooke?

“Nothing is considered over the top to save the Empire in this war - *or expand it, he thought to himself*. I have made a pact with that Devil himself – Stalin and our very future is being mortgaged away to the Americans to purchase their weapons.

If I had enough bombers I would burn to the ground every Hun City and destroy every house in Germany. So I would suggest if something makes you squeamish you find yourself a different war, Sir Alan.”

Wilhelm Bach (1)

Halfaya Pass, North African Coast - November 18, 1941

Major Wilhelm Bach motioned with his hand for Sergeant Major Ziegler to approach him:

“Has the damage to our positions from last night’s rain been repaired, Sergeant Major?”

“Jawohl, Herr Major, almost as good as new, except for some mines that were washed away or are still under water.”

“Replace them from the reserve stock and borrow what you can from the Italians. I hear Tommy is knocking on the back door and may soon

pay us a call. Unlike General Rommel, I believe Italian intelligence may be right in predicting an immediate attack. Tell the men to stay alert.”

“But Herr Major, do you think they have so quickly forgotten what happened the last time they tested the defenses of what they now call ‘Hellfire Pass’? They received a good dose of our 88s. Now it seems as if we have a gun behind every rock. Nothing can keep us from holding out for weeks, if necessary.”

“I am sure they have not forgotten, but the coastal road and this pass are critical to supplying their further movement east. The British would love to lay some train tracks right along the coast road.

Yes Sergeant-Major, I believe they will come again with everything they have. We must be ready. We may yet become the German equivalent of Tobruk. Be sure to also check on all nearby Italian positions, including Major Pardi’s artillery” replied Wilhelm.

“Jawohl Herr Major, will there be a special Sunday service for *Todentag* (German war remembrance day)?

“Of course, if we don’t have to spend Sunday in our foxholes. This crisis may bring a few more of our hard core holdouts into Church.” Wilhelm added as he turned to continue checking their defensive positions.

(1) Wilhelm Bach (Wilhelm) – “Pastor of Hellfire Pass” - Brilliant line officer and Lutheran Pastor whose position and troops were abandoned by Rommel following the “Crusader” battle. He surrendered together with his men on 17 Jan 42. He died before the end of 1942 of cancer while in captivity.

P A R T

II

Operation Crusader Begins

CHAPTER 4

First Blood

November 19, 1941– Rommel’s Headquarters

“I will hear no more of this old washer woman talk about delaying our assault on Tobruk. These activities are just British units engaged in reconnaissance and deception, that’s all.” Rommel stated as he lectured a concerned Lieutenant General Cruwell, commander of his Africa Korps.

Even Cruwell is getting nervous, thought Rommel. Finally giving in, he dispatched elements of 21st Panzer division (one of only two German Panzer Divisions in North Africa) to reinforce 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion.

Having already been strengthened once, 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion was responsible for blocking one of the main routes British troops must use to relieve the Tobruk garrison.

“We have this miserable rain to thank for an absence of air reconnaissance with our forward airfields almost unusable. Fate chooses a time like this to rain in the desert”, asserted Rommel.

Tanks and More Tanks

Near Bir el Gubi in the North African Desert on November 19, 1941

When Gian arrived at the fortified positions of Ariete armored division shortly after 09:00 everything was a buzz; rumors were flying that action was eminent and that Twentieth Corps armored cars were already engaging the British to their south.

As the morning mist cleared off, he took some time to observe the defenses that Ariete’s troops had prepared and the location of their guns. But what a muddy mess rain had made of the desert floor as he felt the extra weight sticking to his boots with every step.

Having studied engineering before the war, he was a studious observer of German tactics, training and equipment. He knew the men he commanded were able and capable soldiers, many from north Italy, like himself. They were the best Italy had to offer and they were receptive to learning German tactics. His unit was also fairly well equipped as Italian units went, but they were always on the lookout to become better, more effective soldiers.

But despite a war, these days his thoughts also wafted from his brother to Aldina, a young Italian colonist he had recently met in Benghazi. He needed to find an excuse to get back to see her.

This girl was intriguing, but not as much as a Luftwaffe Nurse he had tried to date at Derna three months ago. Even in this desolate place there was not a complete absence of women, but they were certainly rare and of course the competition was a lot stiffer. Suddenly, Gian was suddenly startled back into the reality of war.

“Enemy tanks approaching.” Gian heard an observer shout some distance to his front.

He quickly grabbed his binoculars from their case and scanned the horizon. This lookout was dead on; slowly he made out more and more tanks. To their flanks were also numerous armored cars. Gian stopped counting tanks at 40; these tanks were headed straight for the dug in positions of Ariete. As the tank images grew larger in his binoculars, he identified only tanks mixed with a few infantry carriers and armored cars.

Where was the dreaded British artillery; why were only a few artillery shells falling on Ariete’s positions? Even Italian tankers were respectful of British artillery and their 25-pounder guns. Twenty five pounder, it kind of rolled off your tongue. Gian had been quick to learn that the British characterized many of their guns by the weight of shell that it fired.

Also, where were their supporting units, especially infantry? He looked carefully again, there did not even seem to be accompanying engineers present to deal with Ariete’s minefields. Had British contempt for Italians risen to an even new level? Still, facing down a tank attack was a very nerve wracking experience. It looked like they intended to simply crush the Italian division positions in their path as they raced across the desert.

“Highest state of readiness, prepare to repel tank assault”, was the warning given by Ariete’s Italian officers and NCOs.

Gian's stomach knotted up, there was no time left to return to his unit. His fellow soldiers would be envious; they had been itching for a fight to try out their equipment. He figured if Ariete's troops did not lose their nerve, these British tankers could be in for a rude shock.

From his earlier observations, Ariete's small 47mm anti-tank guns were in good fortified positions. These anti-tank guns were backed by supporting artillery including a battalion of 105mm artillery guns which could also be used as anti-tank guns in emergencies. Gian knew that Italian artillerymen were usually utterly dependable and would not give up their guns without a fight.

Gian knew that even Germans admired Italian skill in constructing effective fortifications in this tough environment. Although usually out classed by British tanks, the Ariete's division's tanks also seemed well positioned to counter this assault if their primary defenses faltered.

There was another surprise awaiting the British for in Gian's unit, the Giovanni Fascisti Reconnaissance Regiment or GF-RECAM, the last thing on anybody's mind was retreat. GF-RECAM had mounted many of their guns on captured British trucks. As if this wasn't enough, there were even a few large 102mm naval guns mounted on trucks.

Gian's keen eye missed nothing when it came to weapons of any kind. He was familiar with strengths and weaknesses of various Allied vehicles and had made a great effort during the summer to develop a working knowledge of these.

This British attack looked pretty major to Gian, there now appeared to be well over a hundred tanks plus armored cars headed straight for Ariete's positions. Italian command had information that a major British attack was expected, but was the entire weight of attack to fall on Ariete? This might be the day that Italians would earn some respect from the British and maybe even Rommel himself. But could they hold? To wait for a tank to roll over your position and grind you under its tracks is a fearful thing.

If these British tanks made it past mines, artillery, their few anti-tank guns and Italian tanks, the Italian Infantry would be powerless to stop them. From as far as Gian could see there were tanks, at least a whole armored brigade. He felt helpless in what was to be his first real combat; all he had brought with him was his service pistol. Therefore, he decided to help with manning one of the heavy 105-mm artillery pieces that could also be used in an anti-tank role.

As the tanks got closer, Gian quickly identified them as British Crusaders. He was familiar with this tank and had actually examined one last

week. Some previously captured models were even being used to supplement Ariete's armored units.

He knew that British tanks frequently carried one or more "Tommy" guns. He dreamed of getting his hands on one of these prized "gangster" guns which was a real status symbol among Italian troops. Despite all his exploring of previous battlefields, someone had always beaten him to the punch and he had never been able to get his hands on one.

#####

All afternoon Gian stayed with the gun crew as the fighting ebbed and flowed. When it was all over, Gian counted more than fifty British tanks disabled in and around Ariete's positions. From what he could see, a few appeared to have suffered no battle damage. They had simply broken down during the fight and then were abandoned. In some places Ariete's troops had given ground, but then their tanks had counter-attacked and now it was British tanks that were retreating. Gian was elated at their success.

Other British tanks had only land mine damage to their tracks and could probably easily be repaired. A great victory. Even older exhausted veterans of this long war were excited. They had stopped the British.

Moreover, this attack was definitive evidence confirming Italian intelligence information of a large British offensive. What these Ariete troops had experienced was certainly no "reconnaissance." Maybe Rommel would now listen and postpone his attack on Tobruk.

Sometime later, remaining British tanks that were able were observed rolling back the way they had come admitting that they were unable to force Ariete's defenses. Gian knew the British would not give up that easily, more would come. Italian casualties had not been severe for such an extended battle. Except for their damaged tanks and knocked out anti-tank guns, the British attack had done little to permanently diminish the combat ability or defenses of Ariete.

"Hey you, what are you doing here, you are not an Ariete officer?" A somewhat excited Bersaglieri Major yelled to Gian.

"I was just awaiting orders for my armored car platoon and got caught up in the fighting, sir." Gian quickly answered.

“Well then I expect you know how to drive. Get your head out of the clouds and into the game. You and the rest of this gun crew that is not wounded help us recover those British tanks before we are hit again. We need every tank in the line we can get and we are short tank crews. Most of our qualified tank crews are busy repairing their own tanks. There are even more British tanks beyond the minefields that appear to be just broken down. If we don't take care of them, the British will. Go now, it will be dark soon.”

This was just what Gian wanted to hear. He would be able to do a lot of scavenging, which was becoming his favorite pastime, in the dark. Later Gian sent word back through a runner for his men to drive to Bir el Gubi and help repair some of the less damaged British tanks.

Unfortunately, Gian knew that Ariete's recovery efforts were limited by lack of suitable vehicles and prevailing ground conditions. Recent rains had made the desert difficult to navigate even for British and Italian tanks. Gian's armored car company had a few extra trained drivers and he hoped that they would be allowed to keep some of these British prizes. More likely, they would just be used to replace or add to Ariete's tank strength.

Gian had encouraged his men to learn how to drive a variety of vehicles and tanks. These men in GF-RECAM were quick learners. Captured tanks could add to their mobility, especially since the rain was making the open desert difficult for wheeled vehicles.

That night, Gian had helped himself to a few of the submachine guns and ammo taken from other abandoned Crusaders for himself and his men. Finally, he had an American “Tommy” gun. Sub-machine guns were always useful weapons and were sure to come in handy later on as he knew the British were sure to try their attack again.

Tobruk Forces Join Crusader

Morning of November 21, 1941 - *Panzergruppe Africa* Headquarters

“Herr General Rommel, we now have a full report. Tobruk's garrison troops, in particular their 70th Infantry Division, have broken out with tank support and have successfully stormed many of our defensive positions.

Their timing and direction of attack can only mean one thing. Their objective is to join British forces attacking from the south. I foresee a very

serious battlefield situation developing.” Colonel Westphal, Rommel’s operation’s officer, reported.

Armed with this information Rommel knew he could no longer ignore obvious British intentions and the immediate danger posed by their actions. A successful British attack from Tobruk could link up with what was now recognized as the entire British Eighth Army already on the move headed north. If these two forces joined together it would effectively divide the Axis Army in two.

Battlefield reality was now undeniable, a conclusion that Italians and his staff had come to some time before. German Third Reconnaissance Battalion, supported by a battery of feared 88-mm guns, was selected to put out the fire. Rommel’s instincts led him to the most critical point on the battlefield.

“I will personally lead Third Reconnaissance Battalion’s counterattack; these British will not break our siege.” Thundered Rommel, as the hard charging General raced off to the sound of the guns in his armored half-track.

Rommel’s Death

As Third Reconnaissance Battalion was halting 70th Division’s advance a small piece of shrapnel from a 25-pounder high explosive round struck Rommel behind his right ear as he was standing upright in his command halftrack. This shell was fired by artillery supporting British 70th Infantry Division’s attempt to pierce Tobruk’s siege ring.

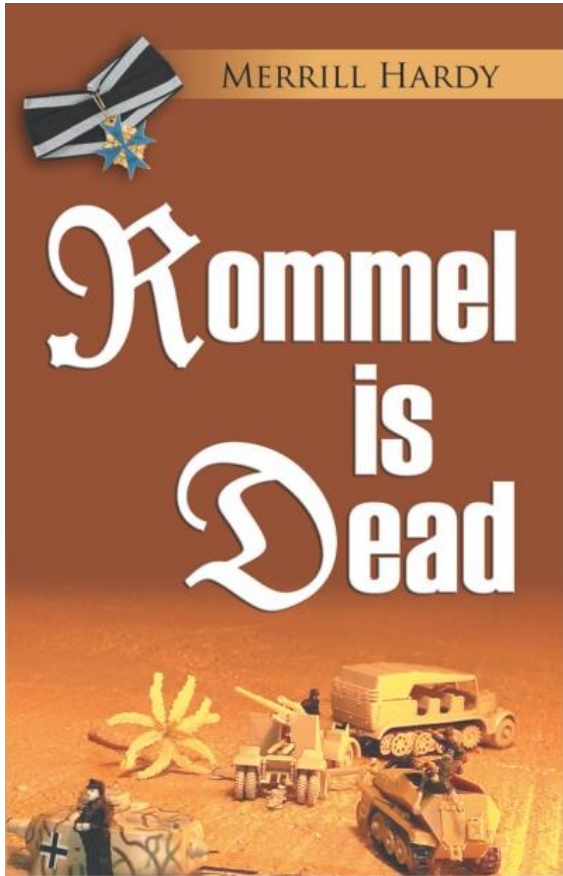
Death came almost instantaneous as Rommel’s lifeless body collapsed on top of his radio operator. His terrified radio operator and Colonel Westphal moved quickly to place him flat in the cramped vehicle, but it was already too late to render any assistance.

Westphal with his uniform tunic and gloved hand still stained with Rommel’s blood immediately sent a quickly written note to General Cruwell by motorcycle messenger. A returned message from Cruwell followed shortly. In it Cruwell instructed Westphal to take Rommel’s body covered in the floor of the halftrack to a field hospital located in El Adem for official medical confirmation of his death.

Due in part to Rommel’s quick counter attack, the Axis siege ring was held, but just barely. It was now up to Cruwell to decide the fate of Axis forces.

With medical conformation of Rommel's death, Cruwell immediately fulfilled his duty and sent word directly to Berlin via a coded Luftwaffe message. Cruwell ordered all personnel with knowledge of Rommel's death to remain tight lipped. He wished to give no satisfaction to the British or cause for alarm to the Italians.

News of Rommel's death, which was immediately given to Hitler, sent shock waves through out the German high command. Cruwell was ordered to hold his defensive positions and counterattack to regain lost territory. He was told that a replacement for Rommel would be arriving as soon as one was appointed and could be transported to Africa. From now on, Cruwell would concern himself with survival of forces under his command and continue to keep the death of Rommel a closely guarded secret.



In this alternative history of World War II, General Erwin Rommel is dead before D-Day and before he is forced to commit suicide. Hitler orders General Heinz Guderian to leave the frozen Russia step to take Rommel's place in Africa.

ROMMEL IS DEAD

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