

ROMMEL

By the Same Author
SHIP ASHORE

ROMMEL

By

DESMOND YOUNG

With a Foreword by

FIELD-MARSHAL

S.R. CLAUDE AUCHINLECK

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Cottage du Grand Gondin
Valescure. (Var.)

D. Y.

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FOREWORD

By FIELD-MARSHAL SIR CLAUDE J. E. AUCHINLECK,
G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.B., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E.

IN THIS book is reproduced a letter which I thought necessary to send to my commanders in the field when the name of Rommel was acquiring almost magical properties in the minds of our soldiers. An enemy commander does not gain a reputation of this sort unless he is out of the ordinary and Rommel was certainly exceptional. Germany produces many ruthlessly efficient generals : Rommel stood out amongst them because he had overcome the innate rigidity of the German military mind and was a master of improvisation.

The German junior officers of the Afrika Korps, the platoon, company and battalion commanders, were, it always seemed to me, better grounded in tactics than our own. This was not the fault of our men but of the peculiar tasks laid on our Army in peace and of the lack of any really systematic training. As the war went on, our men found their feet and, more often than not, outmatched the Germans because their natural tactical instinct was developed and forced to display itself by stress of circumstance. But in the higher ranks Rommel remained pre-eminent as a leader on the battlefield. I can testify myself to his resilience, resourcefulness and mental agility and so long as we are still unhappily obliged to train our youth to arms and our officers to lead them into battle, there is much that we can learn from a study of him and his methods.

My own contacts with Rommel were confined to encounters with him and the Afrika Korps in the campaigns of 1941-42 in the Western Desert, but after reading the story of his earlier

and later years I find that my idea of him, formed in those strenuous days when the battle was swinging back and forth between Benghazi and Alexandria, does not differ much from the author's considered appreciation. In one respect, however, my conception was wrong. I was surprised to learn how simple and homely he seems to have been. I think that we who were fighting against him pictured him as a typical junior officer, a product of the Prussian military machine. That he evidently was not and it may well be that this accounts for his amazing—and it was amazing—success as a leader of men in battle.

Rommel gave me and those who served under my command in the Desert many anxious moments. There could never be any question of relaxing our efforts to destroy him for if ever there was a general whose sole preoccupation was the destruction of the enemy, it was he. He showed no mercy and expected none. Yet I could never translate my deep detestation of the régime for which he fought into personal hatred of him as an opponent. If I say, now that he is gone, that I salute him as a soldier and a man and deplore the shameful manner of his death, I may be accused of belonging to what Mr. Bevin has called the "trade union of generals." So far as I know, should such a fellowship exist, membership of it implies no more than recognition in an enemy of the qualities one would wish to possess oneself, respect for a brave, able and scrupulous opponent and a desire to see him treated, when beaten, in the way one would have wished to be treated had he been the winner and oneself the loser. This used to be called chivalry: many will now call it nonsense and say that the days when such sentiments could survive a war are past. If they are, then I, for one, am sorry.

The author of this book, Brigadier Desmond Young, has spared no pains to learn the facts of Rommel's life and death from his family and others and I cannot think of any one better fitted to record them. A veteran of the first World War, he was in the thick of the fighting in the Desert until he had the bad luck to be taken at Gazala while the battle was still in the balance. He is an old friend of mine and, after his escape

Prelude

SHAMBLING along in the first, sharp sunshine of a June morning we had just cleared the minefield west of Bir Harmat. It was in and around the headquarters of 10th Indian Infantry Brigade at Bir Harmat that we had been overrun by German tanks the evening before. Like all prisoners who have spent a night in the open, we were a scruffy lot. British and Indian, some shivering in bush-shirts and shorts, some muffled to the eyes in greatcoats, blankets and Balaclava helmets, all unshaven, unwashed, tired, hungry and disarranged inside, we were beginning to realise that what was jocularly known in the Middle East as "going into the bag" was not much of a joke after all. Our guards glanced at us from time to time with the dispassionate contempt with which we ourselves had so often surveyed the endless columns of captive Italians. Terrified, normally, of mines, I trudged along through the fringe of the minefield for easier walking. It was only when a young German soldier called me sharply back to the column that I looked down to see where I was putting my feet—and then I did not very much care.

On the other side of the minefield we passed in front of a German battery in action. Our guns and some tanks, hull-down, were evidently looking for it. Shell from a 25-pounder battery and tracer from the tanks began to fall round the column. A young H.L.I. officer near me had his foot blown off. There were shouts of alarm from up in front. By a common impulse, everyone broke into a shuffling double. I ran for a few yards with the rest and then, because it is just as easy to run into shell-bursts as out of them, dropped back into a walk. Soon I found myself alongside the blond young representative of the Afrika Korps who was bringing up the

rear. He motioned to me to run. I took off my cap and showed him my grey hairs. Like a young sheepdog, doubtful whether to pick up a straggler or to keep the rest of the flock together, he hesitated. Then he doubled off in pursuit, beckoning to me to follow.

Since the battery seemed occupied with its own affairs, I strolled off casually to the flank. Fifty yards or so away I found what I was looking for, a slit trench. I slid into it and pulled the spoil down on top of me. Capture in the desert was seldom final. With luck I might lie there until dark and then have a cut at getting through the minefield. Home, by now, might not be until El Adem, but plenty of people had walked much further than that.

Twenty minutes later I was picked up. A German officer, standing up in his truck, spotted me as he passed and stopped. I was hauled out and driven to the head of the column, still under sporadic shellfire. Before I could mingle with the rest of the party a German captain shouted to me in English: "You are the senior officer here?" Perhaps I was. Certainly I was the oldest. "You will go in a staff-car with two German officers under a flag of truce and tell your battery over there to stop firing. They are only endangering your own men." That was true enough. One's natural instinct as a prisoner-of-war is not, however, to do as one is told. I said that I did not think that I could do that. "Then you will detail another officer to do it." I said that I did not think I could give such an order either. (I spent odd moments during the next sixteen months wondering how they would have got me back, if I had reached the battery and whether I had not been a fool to refuse.)

At this moment a *Volkswagen* drove up. Out of it jumped a short, stocky but wiry figure, correctly dressed, unlike the rest of us, in jacket and breeches. I noticed that he had a bright blue eye, a firm jaw and an air of command. One did not need to understand German to realise that he was asking "What goes on here?" They talked together for a few seconds. Then the officer who spoke English turned to me. "The General rules," he said sourly, "that if you do not

choose to obey the order I have just given you, you cannot be compelled to do so." I looked at the general and saw, as I thought, the ghost of a smile. At any rate his intervention seemed to be worth a salute. I cut him one before I stepped back into the ranks to be driven off into captivity.

I could hardly have failed to recognise Rommel. But I could hardly have supposed that, only a few years later, his widow would be showing me his death-mask and telling me the story of his murder.

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