

# Erwin Rommel

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Born at Heidenheim near Ulm, Germany on 15 Nov 1891, Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel was a professional soldier who discovered his destiny while he was young.

## **The Making of Rommel**

Dour, self-reliant, unsophisticated, Rommel devoted his life to the theory and practice of war. He owed his roots to the German provincial middle class and remained disinterested in the Prussian aristocracy which dominated the German Army of those days. In fact this aloofness from German army aristocracy was frequently to haunt him when Hitler, too, did not entrust him with command of large Panzer Armies to pursue the Russian Campaign as also during the crucial period in the North African campaign when Rommel was not supported by the German staff with crucial logistics and force levels. Such was Rommel's pride in his own abilities and simple groundings that he even refused to attend Staff College and be, thus, initiated into the 'magic circle'.

## **Early Military Career**

Rommel worked hard for his promotions and finally got the break he wanted when he caught Hitler's eye with his infantry training manual 'Infantries Greift'. Rommel joined the 124 Infantry Regiment as an officer in July 1910. Contrary to

present day norms, it was Rommel's early days as an Infantry man, which shaped his future path to glory as an Armoured Corps Officer !

### **Personal Example and Bravery – Rommel's Core**

Right from his first days as an Infantry man to his last days as a Panzer tank-man, Rommel believed in leading through personal example and unlike his British Senior adversaries, he was always there at the front, personally directing and leading battles. Says Desmond Young, "from the moment that he first came under fire he stood out as the perfect fighting animal, cold, cunning, ruthless, untiring, quick of decision, incredibly brave." Awarded Iron class II in 1914 and Iron Class I in 1915, Pour Le Mente (Comparable to Victoria Class) in 1918, Rommel's early days in World War I were full of exemplary bravery. He was engaged in numerous fire fights viz. attack, counter attacks against the French and against the Italians in the Carpathian Mountains.

### **Picked Up Essence of Armour Manoeuvre**

Rommel picked up his later days Armour manoeuvre tactics as an Infantry man! He not only led attacks personally as a young subaltern or battalion Commander, he coined very path breaking tactics of outflanking his enemy, by penetrating the enemy's rear through the flanks to exploit the element of surprise. This was the recipe for his famous victories in North Africa in 1941-42. 'Where Rommel is, there the front is', was a saying at the time. Says Desmond young, "He was a young man of 25, looking even younger than his age and in rank only an oberleutenant from a not particularly, distinguished line regiment.... And yet his seniors looked to him for guidance. "Rommel was loath to go for 'siege warfare' tactics as a means of waging war. He believed in mobile operations with Infantry, relatively small but of high quality and rendered disturbingly more effective by the addition of aircraft.

### **Hitler takes Notice**

Hitler had read his Infantry manual "Infantries Grefit' and selected Rommel to coordinate the Fuehrer's battalion, his body guards and spearheaded Germany's blitzkrieg across Poland and Prague (Hungary) and later across France as part of his illustrious senior Guderian's famous Ranger Corps.

### **Command of 'Ghost Division'**

On 15 Jul 1940, Rommel won very early spurs as a senior officer being given the

command of 7 Panzer Division, which in Germany came to be more famously known as the 'Ghost Division' for its uncanny knack for appearing on the enemy's rear and flanks, seemingly out of nowhere. Throughout the African campaign Rommel thrust deep into enemy's rear, attacking its flanks and maintained momentum of attack – the fluidity of operations became his hallmark as compared to the slow moving, cautious, and set piece battle methods of the famous British adversary Field Marshal Montgomery. Again in contrast to Montgomery who was meticulous and thorough in his plans, Rommel was aggressive, dynamic, unpredictable and believed in massed Armour attacks from the flanks and to the rear. His ingenuity was always to the fore as for instance in the earlier European Blitzkrieg across the Meuse river, he set houses on fire to create smoke screen to camouflage his army's move in the absence of smoke equipment. In fact, Rommel was also the pioneer of break in, protection of bridge head and break out operations in riverine terrain, something which concerns the Indian Army on its Western frontiers today.

## **Broke Rules**

He broke rules daily by being 'out there fighting' as a senior officer. He was 'physically more robust than the troops he led and always to show them an example'.

## **Mental Capacity**

Between Alamein and Tunisia, he showed mental and emotional capacity to accept huge responsibility, absorb large shocks over a period of time, absorb stresses and strains of victory and defeat and ability to restore situation after a serious defeat after a long retreat.

## **A Soldiers' General**

Always a soldiers' general he showed self abnegation. His natural understanding with the troops was a 'gift of god'. The 'Afrika Korps' followed Rommel whenever he led. The men always knew Rommel was the last man to spare Rommel himself. The man had unflinching trust in him as distinguished from affection. He did not acquire nick names like 'Monty' (Field Marshal Montgomery). 'Uncle Bill' (Field Marshal Viscount Slim), 'Ike' (General Eisenhower). He remained Rommel to his men who followed him as one who produced results, who led through example tempered with authority, Rommel had the courage and personal stature to say no to his superiors' unreasonable demands and tasking and believed in winning wars with as few casualties as possible saying, "Germany will need men after the war also".

## **Position of Commanders in Battle**

Famous historian, Sir Liddell Hart paid tributes to Rommel's style of remaining 'well forward with his troops and taking direct control of operations at key moments in battle, as compared to his British senior adverseness who 'suffered from their far-back position. In 1941, at Gazala and Tobruk, Rommel's electric presence was an extra weapon, for his mechanised warfare concepts. Rommel would justify this by saying. "No admiral won a battle from a shore base".

## **A Charmed Life**

Rommel, thus led a charmed life with numerous battle wounds and near 'fatal misses' and saw the day through on intuition. T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia) said, "the greatest commander is he whose intuitions most nearly happen".

## **As a Strategic Leader**

Ironically, Rommel could never be tested as a strategic leader in North Africa because Africa for Hitler was a sideshow and for Churchill a key battle theatre. Hence, allocation of resources for Rommel was low key and insufficient, logistics even more so. And this proved to be his undoing at El Alamein and Alam Halfa where he had very inferior and insufficient administrative backing. If only Hitler had entrusted him the command of the German Russian thrust or with the counter offensive, break out battle from the Ardennes for Arnhem, would Rommel have done justice to his natural abilities, which, alas for him and Germany, it did not materialise. Rommel's charmed life came to an end when he was grievously wounded under mysterious circumstances in an aerial attack. He was finally given a no choice option by Hitler in which he had to take his own life, ironically, remained unvanquished by the enemy to the end.

## **Ultimate Tribute**

Said Field Marshal Auchinleck in an ultimate tribute, "There exists a danger that our friend Rommel is becoming a kind of magician or bogey-man to our troops who are talking far too much about him ..... A superman ..... even if he were a superman it would still be very highly undesirable that our men should credit him with super natural powers."

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