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BOOK REVIEW

Rommel's desert war: waging World War II in North Africa, 1941–1943

by Martin Kitchen

Cambridge University Press: Cambridge; 2009; 598 pp.; ISBN 978-0-521-50971-8;
RRP \$71.95 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 587 KITC 2009

This book is a challenging read on a very popular topic – the generalship of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in the North Africa campaign in World War II. The approach is very scholarly and provides a meticulous research-based insight into the Afrika Korps campaign together with the more human interest-based reasons why Rommel has remained the most revered Axis-power military leader of the war.

The book is published in the Cambridge Military History series, which publishes outstanding research on warfare throughout the ages; and this scholarly purpose is used to justify yet another book on Rommel's North African Campaign of 1941-1943. At 598 pages (which includes 75 pages of end notes and 54 pages of bibliography – reflective of how much has already been published on this topic), the book follows a chronological format in 12 chapters covering: the antecedents; the Italian campaigns of June 1940 (which were initially disastrous for the Italians but, when reinforced by German forces under Rommel, became very successful); the fiercely fought and better-known main campaigns of Tobruk and El Alamein; followed by the lesser known final stages of withdrawal and eventual Axis surrender at what the author aptly calls Tunisgrad in 1943. The bulk of the analysis and commentary is at the political, senior officer and large formation level, rather than at unit, sub-unit and individual soldier level, but tactical-level examples and issues are introduced when necessary.

A major appeal of the book is its effective use of exhaustive research from German, Italian and Allied archives, including a very detailed and ultimately critical analysis of Rommel's actual performance as a military leader – rather than joining in the traditional treatment of Rommel as an immensely popular military figure. It confirms how popular Rommel was with his troops because of his great personal courage and willingness to accept the risks and share the deprivations of front-line combat troops, but the overall analysis paints a very unflattering picture of Rommel as a reckless commander who used his special relationship with Hitler to overcome and ignore the direct orders and advice of other senior German officers and the German General Staff.

The author provides compelling evidence that Rommel used his special relationship with Hitler to routinely break every conventional practice of effective senior leadership in the field (e.g. he disobeyed direct orders from his higher command; he would routinely miss communications with his own headquarters; and he recklessly ignored the realities of his supply situation). The analyses show that Rommel relied extensively on

both his derogatory view of the Axis commanders' competence and his over-confidence in the superiority of German tactics and troops, to justify his decisions. Most unattractively of all, he constantly blamed both his allies and his own subordinates for any failures caused by his own shortcomings – to the extent of his unfairly dismissing in disgrace senior Afrika Korps commanders who failed to achieve the impossible tasks he created for them by his uncoordinated tactics and his lack of concern for logistics support or planning.

The book's major strength is the author's ability to reveal the complex machinations that went on at the most senior levels of political and senior military decision-making on both sides of this conflict; and to provide convincing fully-documented analyses of how even the dash and flair of a brave and lucky commander such as Rommel can be defeated by a combination of much more mundane factors: ultimate complete Allied air superiority; the build-up of superior Allied forces under Montgomery; and the failure of the Axis powers to provide effective logistic support to an independent, geographically-remote, armour-based formation.

The author's detailed analysis reveals a quite unflattering picture of Rommel as a self-serving and very difficult to handle commander who, whilst he was successful, could rely on his special relationship with the Fuhrer to protect his idiosyncratic decisions and leadership style; but once failures began to occur and Hitler's support was withdrawn, Rommel's inability or unwillingness to work with his senior commanders meant that he was even more isolated and unsupported than would have been the case in a more traditional senior command structure.

For me, the major appeal of the book was the very thorough job done by the author in stripping away the conventional wisdom that Rommel was an outstanding Axis commander. In so doing, he presents a major dilemma for students of great military leaders, because the major factors of Rommel's success are revealed to be: highly selective political patronage; a complete disregard for his fellow senior officers; and a willingness to flout and ignore nearly all the sensible rules of planning and conventional rules of warfare!

Rommel's desert war is a valuable addition to our understanding of one of the most prominent German commanders of World War II, and the author has done a very competent job in bringing out the complexities of success and failure at the highest levels of politics and command in warfare.

Michael Hough

