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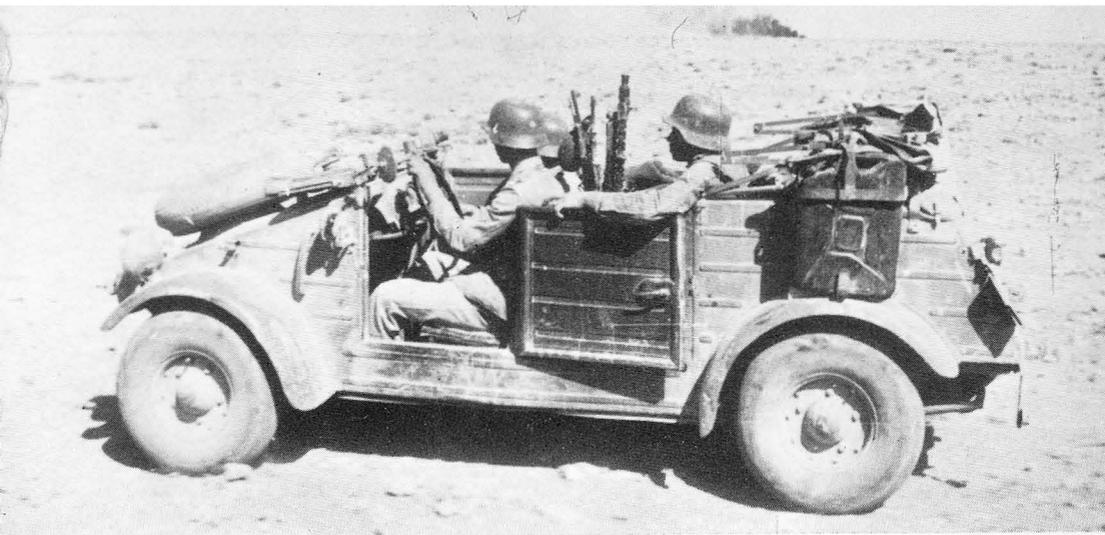
No. 1



# Afrika Korps

1941-42

ALMARK  
PUBLICATIONS



*ABOVE: A Volkswagen Kfz I of a motorised infantry battalion on a scouting mission near Gazala in the summer of 1942. (IWM-HU5606).*

# Afrika Korps

**GERMAN MILITARY OPERATIONS IN  
THE WESTERN DESERT, 1941-42**

**Peter Chamberlain  
and  
Chris Ellis**

Drawings by Kenneth M. Jones



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*The PzKpfw III was numerically and tactically the most important tank used by the Afrika Korps. Here a PzKpfw III Ausf H with the retro-spectively fitted extra frontal armour is seen during Rommel's big offensive of January 1942 which resulted in the re-taking of most of Cyrenaica. Fast movement of armoured units from place to place made the most of Rommel's limited tank forces against superior odds (IWM-HU5601).*

## Introduction

THE war in the Western Desert actually started in June 1940 when Italy declared war on Britain. Libya was an Italian colony bordering Egypt which was guarded by a small British force. British troops took the initiative in the first few months of the war. The 10th Italian Army moved ponderously 60 miles into Egypt in mid-September 1940 under the command of Marshal Graziani. British strength in Egypt was expanded meanwhile from the original 7th Armoured Division by the addition of three Commonwealth divisions, forming the Western Desert Force. On December 9, 1940, the British started a well-planned and brilliantly conducted offensive against the numerically superior Italian Army and this resulted in a sweeping conquest of Cyrenaica, including the taking of the important towns of Bardia, Tobruk, and Benghazi. The Italian Army was virtually eliminated by the first week in February with the capture of 130,000 men and a big haul of equipment.

While this campaign was at its height, Hitler became alarmed at the

political consequences of an Italian defeat and determined to send in German re-inforcements. At this stage there was no long-term planning for German military operations in North Africa though the Chief of Mobile Forces, General Von Thoma, had had exploratory but inconclusive talks on this subject with the Italians as early as October 1940. However, it was not until July 1941 that the long term strategic possibilities of the campaign (ie, the conquest of Egypt and taking of the Suez Canal) were considered. Earmarked for despatch to North Africa via Tripoli was the 5th Light Division, composed of elements from 3rd Panzer Division which had fought in France. They started moving in between February 15-20 1941. In September 1941 this formation was renamed 21st Panzer Division. Following up and arriving early in April was 15th Panzer Division. Together these formed the *Deutsche Afrika Korps* (DAK), more commonly called the *Afrika Korps*. The force commander was Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel who had distinguished himself as a brilliant armoured division commander in the invasion of France. Later Rommel formed another division, 90th Light, from various odd unattached units. In September 1941 Rommel, promoted to Field Marshal, became commander of *Panzergruppe Afrika* with the *Afrika Korps* and two Italian corps under his command. The subsidiary command of *Afrika Korps* now passed to a succession of generals, notably Cruewell and Von Thoma, who were both captured by the British during 1942.

The war in North Africa was never taken as seriously by Hitler and the High Command as German campaigns in other areas, and Rommel was always short of men, stores, tanks, and equipment, his forces being constantly numerically inferior to what became a huge British force, the 8th Army. Until the final 'steam roller' effect of the Battle of Alamein, in October 1942, however, Rommel conducted a series of clever and forceful offensives using superior tactics and better handling of armour to offset his shortage of numbers. Eventually he was forced to retreat back to Tunis by chronic lack of supplies, and overwhelming air superiority and sheer weight of numbers by the British.

The course of the campaign in North Africa has been well documented in a number of books, some of which are listed here for further reading. An outline of German operations up until the period of Alamein is given pictorially in this present publication, the object being to give a visual idea of the style and conditions of the campaign. The pictures between pages 6 and 28 are presented chronologically as far as possible and give a good idea of how uniform, equipment, and appearance of the troops changed over the period covered. Some items of equipment are shown, but these are covered more fully in other titles in this series. Most of the pictures are reproduced by courtesy of the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and negative numbers are given where known. Prints may be ordered from the photographic library of the IWM.

**For further reading**

- The Desert Generals, Barnet, (Kimber, 1960)
- Rommel, Young (Collins, 1950)
- Alamein, Lucas Phillips (Heinemann, 1962)
- The Desert War, Moorehead (Hamish Hamilton, 1965)
- Alamein and the Desert War, ed. Jewell (Sphere, 1967)

All the above have been published in paperback; there are many other books on the subject including the official histories, also:  
The Rommel Papers, ed. Liddell Hart (Harcourt Brace, 1953)

*Campaign maps are given on pages 11, 15, 20, 23 and 32; colour plates are on pages 8, 25, 28, 29, and front cover.*



*ABOVE: An infantry platoon on the march during the retreat from Alamein to Tripoli in November/December 1942. Of interest is the light cart for ammunition and kit, and the shovels for clearing mines. MG34 section brings up the rear. The desert winter was cold (despite the sun) and overcoats were common wear (IWM-HU5591). BELOW: A dominant and destructive weapon used to good effect on Rommel's initiative was the 8.8cm Flak 18, here seen engaging British tanks at Marsa el Brega during the opening of the big German offensive in the last week of January 1942. The half-track towing vehicle is just visible beyond, veered off to the left to enable the gun to go into instant action without emplacement (IWM-MH5545).*





First German division to arrive in North Africa was 5th Light Division, made up of elements from 3rd Panzer Division and virtually a reduced scale panzer division. The move to Tripoli from Southern France took place over February 15-20, 1941, though the last of the tanks did not arrive until March 11. ABOVE: PzKpfw II and a PzKpfw I Ausf. A (right) being embarked. They have tail smoke emitters and still carry the old 3. Pz-Div. sign. The PzKpfw I is a regimental staff officer's vehicle (IWM-STT359). BELOW: Men of a motor-cycle recce. unit, still in field grey, are ferried ashore at Tripoli. Their machines are just visible left and the riders wear breeches instead of trousers (IWM-HU5598).



ABOVE: Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel was formally appointed to 'command German troops in Libya' on February 6, 1941, and arrived in Tripoli on February 12. A large parade was held in Tripoli shortly after 5th Light Division had arrived in early March. Here Rommel, with an Italian general, inspects men of 5th Light Division in their newly issued tropical uniforms. On the right are tank crews with 'death's head' badges on their lapels (see colour drawing, cover). Note that the officers wear caps and the men forage caps—later caps became almost universal wear (IWM-HU5632). BELOW: Rommel's map caravan (still in markings for the Polish campaign) and his Sd Kfz 251/6 command vehicle (still in French campaign markings) parked on the beach during the subsequent move to Cyrenaica.



An infantry gefreiter (lance corporal) shown here in typical fighting order for the summer of 1941. Here shorts and boots are worn, but alternative wear were the breeches shown on page 25. When new the tropical uniform was a very light olive green shade, but this washed and faded out very quickly to a more neutral tone.



The black leather equipment and the standard Mauser Kar 98 7.92mm rifle are shown. The braces of the leather equipment were frequently discarded in desert conditions.



During March 1941 Rommel moved 5th Light Division from Tripoli east along the coast road to the Cyrenaica frontier. ABOVE: Leichter Panzerpahwägen Sd Kfz 222 and VW Kubelwagen of a motorised infantry company leaving Tripoli waved off by the local populace. All the vehicles are overpainted sand-yellow and carry the appropriate tactical symbol (IWM-HU5620). BELOW: A company of PzKpfw III Ausf G pass through Sirte watched by local residents. These vehicles are still grey but the crews wear tropical dress. Note the jerricans on the turret roofs (IWM-GER724).



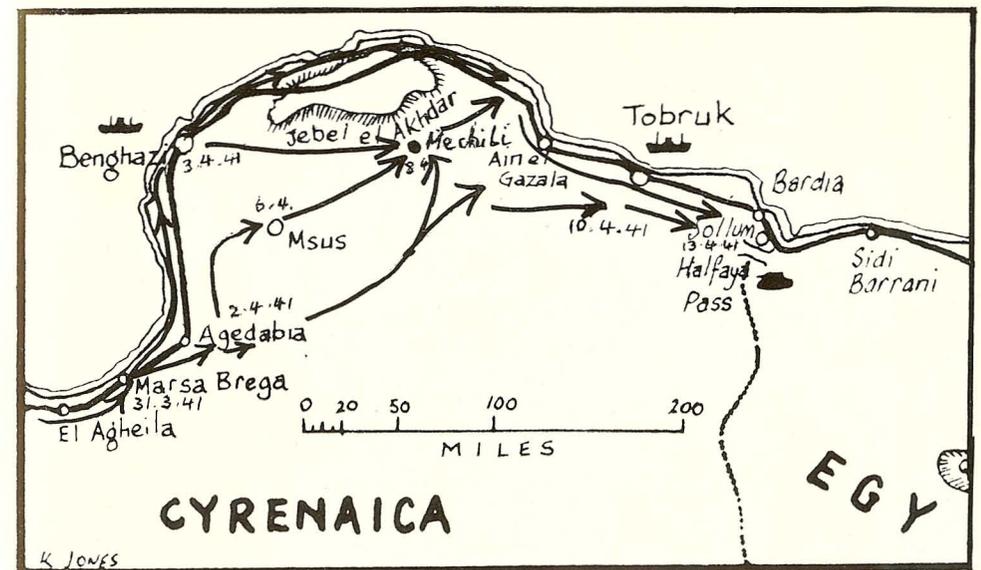


ABOVE: March 21, 1941, found reconnaissance units up by the Cyrenaica border at El Agheila waiting for the main elements of 5th Light Division to arrive. Here is a forward observation position with a *Schwerer Panzer-spahwagen* (8 rad), Fu, Sd Kfz 232 dug in and with radio mast erected. (IWM-GER607). BELOW: Rommel's first offensive move was to capture the bottle-neck coastal route through Marsa Brega on March 31. Here an infantry patrol moves cautiously forward along the sand dunes that evening to probe the British defences. This lightly held position was swiftly evacuated by the British that night, however (IWM-MH5551).



The first clash with British troops took place on the afternoon of March 31 when a German tank patrol encountered British infantry on the El Agheila-Marsa Brega road. The area was held only in brigade strength by the British, however, who withdrew after some short sharp encounters. On April 1, Rommel ordered his tanks on to Agedabia where this PzKpfw I Ausf B is seen approaching the town and passing wrecked British trucks and the evacuated camp. Note the white cross, indicating fresh water, on the jerrican. (IWM-MH5549).

BELOW: Rommel's initial three-pronged advance into Cyrenaica took the Afrika Korps to the Sollum-Halfaya line in two weeks of swift movement. Dates are given in abbreviated form on the sketch-map. Tobruk was bypassed and besieged.





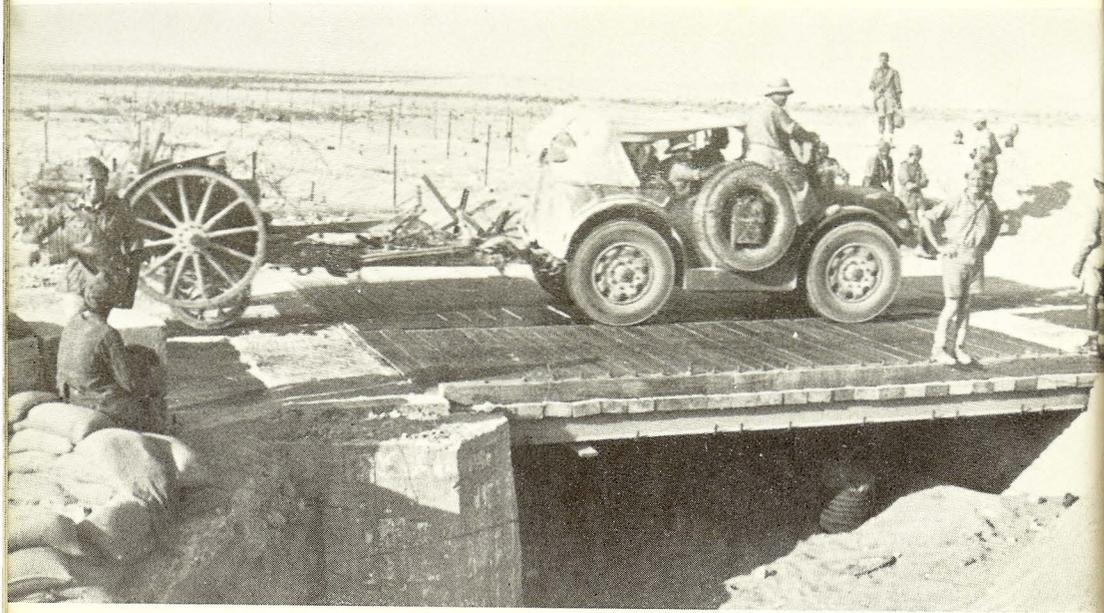
ABOVE: Rommel's advance continued since he found only light resistance from the withdrawing British. The three-prong advance started on April 3, when the 3rd Recce. Battalion was sent racing up the coast road to Benghazi. Here the unit's Sd Kfz 222 armoured cars approach the town passing native traffic en route. Note the freshly painted Afrika Korps emblem now displayed on the vehicles (IWM-MH5556). BELOW: Another column was sent across the desert towards Mechili on April 4. Note (left background) the use of a captured British truck (IWM).

Schwerer Panzerspähwagen (8 rad), Fu, Sd Kfz 232 figure prominently in several pictures on these pages. The extensive use of these well-equipped fast radio vehicles provided the Afrika Korps with superior communications intelligence in the desert. Monitoring the British radio nets kept Rommel well informed of the enemy's tactical movements.

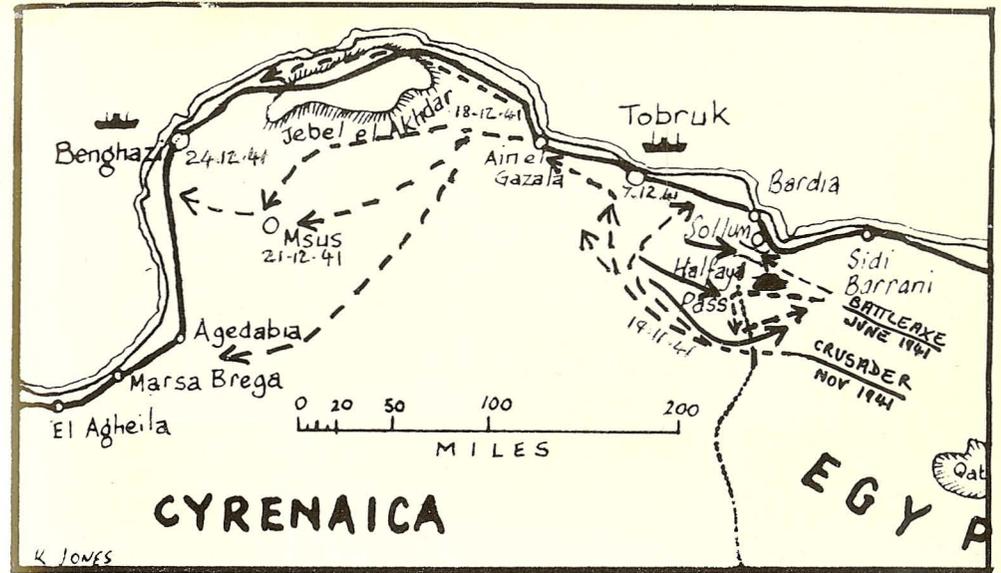


ABOVE: The British strongholds of Msus and Mechili—'Beau Geste' style forts—were captured by the desert column in the latter case with a falsely raised dust cloud to make the attacking force look larger than it really was. British forces, which were holding Cyrenaica only lightly, meanwhile gradually withdrew to the Egyptian border leaving Tobruk cut-off and besieged. Here a Sd Kfz 251 half-track is seen at Msus with a battalion commander and his staff (IWM-GER626). BELOW: Elements of the Italian Ariete Division were under Afrika Korps command. Here Bersaglieri talk with armoured car crews during the push across the desert (IWM-NA5567).





ABOVE: While the British held Tobruk against several determined attacks by Rommel, the rest of the British forces moved back to Egypt. Late in April 1941 Rommel's troops occupied Sollum across the Cyrenaica-Egypt border. Here a Fiat/Spa TL37 artillery tractor and 77mm model 28 gun of the Italian Ariete Division crosses the frontier wire and anti-tank ditch near Sollum (IWM-HU5618). BELOW: The Fieseler Fi 156 Storch STOL aircraft was widely used as a spotter and liaison aircraft (Rommel had his own personal Storch). Here a motorised infantry patrol rests by a picketed aircraft. Note the captured Chevrolet 15 cwt truck used by the infantry (IWM-MH5569).



For the next month, apart from Rommel's attempts to overrun Tobruk and a small attack (Operation Brevity) by the British, both sides consolidated their positions. On June 15, 1941, the British Western Desert Force opened a large offensive, Operation Battleaxe, against the German Sollum—Halfaya line with the object of outflanking it and moving on to relieve Tobruk. By greatly superior tactics, however, the Afrika Korps repulsed the attack. A feature of the offensive was the attempt to take the important Halfaya Pass. Here Rommel, for the first time, used his 8.8cm Flak 18 guns dug in in sangars as most effective anti-tank guns, a surprise to the British, which outranged the British tanks. Here crews work on one of the guns prior to the British attack—note their helmets on the sanga wall (IWM).



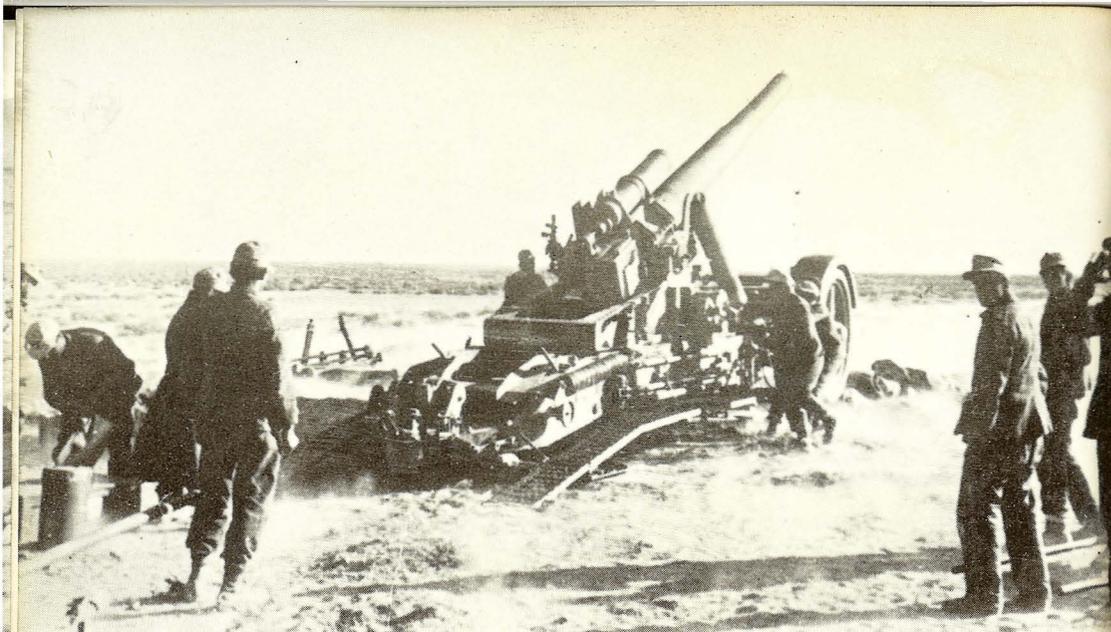


LEFT: The British attack in the Battleaxe operation was confused and loosely co-ordinated from the start. Rommel used his two divisions (5th Light and 15th Panzer) skilfully to end up outflanking the British 7th Armoured Division and nearly succeeded in cutting them off. Here tanks of 8.Pz-Regt move up to the attack on June 17 (IWM-MH5588).

Sketch-map on previous page shows a greatly simplified general disposition for the Battleaxe and Crusader offensives. British advances are shown by broken lines, with dates in abbreviated form. For highly detailed tactical accounts of these battles see 'The Tanks' (Vol. 2) (Liddell Hart, published by Cassell).

RIGHT: The next big British offensive was Operation Crusader in November 1941. By this time the British Western Desert Force had been greatly expanded, and was re-named 8th Army on September 26. The British fielded 14 tank regiments with over 750 tanks. Against this the German forces, now known as Panzergruppe Afrika (of which Afrika Korps was a part), had 320 tanks of which 146 were Italian and of dubious value. The British attacked with two Corps on November 18, 1941, catching Rommel off his guard as he prepared for another attack on Tobruk. The British tanks attacked in 'cavalry' style and suffered big losses from well-sited German 8.8cm and 5cm anti-tank guns. About 300 British cruiser tanks were lost, some also by mechanical failure. After 5 days hard fighting in this battle (Sidi Rezegh), Rommel was down to about 100 tanks. As a counter-attack Rommel personally led his tanks in a sweeping dash for the frontier, outflanking the British in the process. This is a scene at the height of the Sidi Rezegh battle as PzKpfw IIs pull in to refuel (IWM-MH5594).





*The 17cm K18 was the largest gun used by the Afrika Korps. It had a range of 29,600 metres. This one is in action in November 1941, just before the British 'Crusader' offensive, being used to shell the Tobruk garrison (IWM-MH5599).*

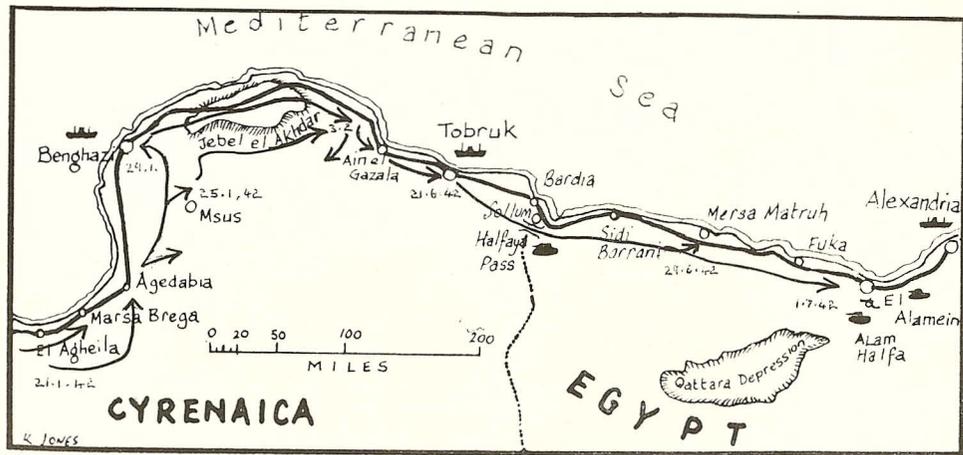
*BELOW: Though Panzergruppe Afrika had won a moral victory against superior odds in the Sidi Rezegh fighting, many tanks had been lost and fuel and supplies were exhausted. Through December therefore they withdrew gradually across Cyrenaica to El Agheila to regroup for a new offensive. Note the captured Australian Chevrolet 15 cwt truck in this view of a motorised infantry regiment on the coast road near Gazala (IWM).*



*Sometimes little mentioned in military histories, both sides in the desert war made extensive tactical use of aircraft. Air operations played a key role in support of the big tank battles, in particular the vicious Sidi Rezegh (Crusader) operations. On November 23, 1941, as Rommel began his out-flanking counter-attack, these Ju 87Bs (Stukas) were setting off on a sortie to bomb the tanks of 30 Corps which was concentrated east of Bir Gubi (IWM-MH5591).*



BELOW: Sketch-map shows the course of Rommel's second big offensive which pushed the British right back to Alamein. First stage was to Gazala, then, after replenishing, on to Alam Halfa and Alamein, taking Tobruk en route.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: In the first week of January 1942, Rommel received 55 much needed replacement tanks, and on January 21 Panzergruppe Afrika began a new offensive into Cyrenaica. Here PzKpfw IIIs, followed by PzKpfw IIs move along the Via Balbia through the Arco Philaenorum 'Marble Arch' which Mussolini had built near El Agheila at the Tripolitania-Cyrenaica border (IWM-GER1185). ABOVE: With a lightning two-prong dash, Rommel advanced into Cyrenaica round the coast road (capturing useful British supply dumps at Benghazi) and across the desert south of the Jebel Achdar forcing the British back to Gazala. Shown here is a 'battle-group' of towed anti-tank guns and motorised infantry (IWM-MH5565).



LEFT: The Afrika Korps made wide use of any captured equipment of value, more so as the campaign went on and replacement equipment from Germany got less and less. This ex-British Humber Mk II was pictured at Gazala on March 2, 1942, well marked to show its new ownership (Axel Duckert).



BELOW: These PzKpfw IV Ausf D tanks were pictured at Marsa Brega on the opening day of the January 1942 offensive. They have the short 75mm gun with aerial deflector mounted beneath it. The British, not expecting a counter-attack so soon, thought this early attack to be only a reconnaissance in force and were caught off guard (Chamberlain Collection).

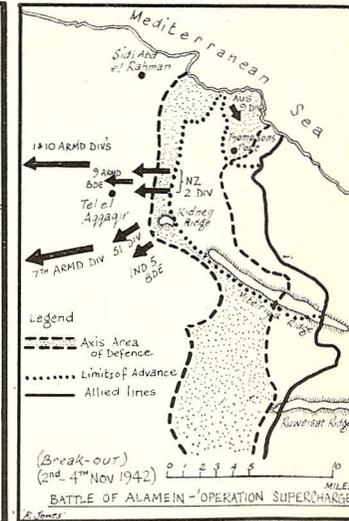
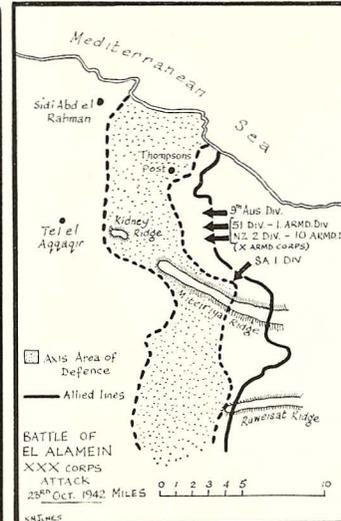
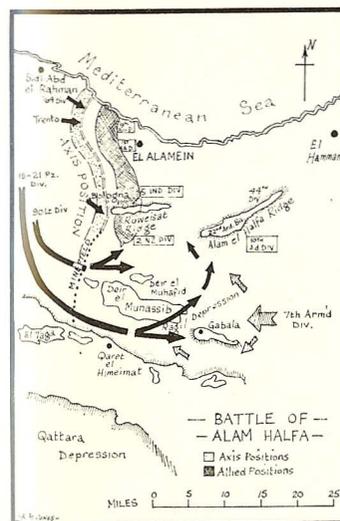


ABOVE: A divisional command post. The Sd Kfz 251/6 half-track of a panzer division commander (displaying the appropriate metal command pennant), pictured during Rommel's offensive of January-February 1942. The general (in sun helmet) is partly hidden leaning against the vehicle talking to staff officers. Note the white outline cross on the half-track (IWM-HU5596). BELOW, LEFT: General Cruewell, the Afrika Korps commander in summer 1942 (IWM-HU5609). BELOW, RIGHT: General feldmarschall Rommel, commander of Panzergruppe Afrika at the same time (IWM-HU5625).



ABOVE: A PzKpfw IV Ausf D during the January 1942 offensive, showing the rear smoke emitter and a plain white outline type cross (IWM-MH5553).

BELOW: The turning point in the German's fortunes came with the battle of Alam Halfa where Rommel tried to outflank the heavily defended British line (left). This move had been anticipated, however, and the 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions repulsed the attack. Rommel was subsequently obliged to withdraw his forces due to lack of fuel and ammunition. In October the British offensive at Alamein began under General Montgomery—virtually a 'steam-roller' attack by forces vastly superior in numbers of tanks, guns, and troops. The breakthrough which started the long German retreat to Tunisia is shown right.





ABOVE: The Alamein period is well documented and saw the final major confrontation between the British and Germans in the Western Desert. This Flak 18 was overrun at Alamein after putting up a spirited performance covering the coast road. Note the 'kill' marks and the empty shell cases (IWM-BM21224). BELOW, LEFT: Digging a personal 'foxhole' for the night (IWM-MH5834). BELOW, RIGHT: Digging out British mines; note also the wire cutters (IWM-MH5863).



RIGHT: Artillery unteroffizier in the common hot weather dress of shirt and shorts. Note that NCOs' and other ranks' caps lacked the full turn-ups of officers' caps and had stitched seaming only forming dummy side turn-ups. Cap here is washed out to neutral fabric shade.

AFRIKAKORPS

'Afrika Korps' cuff tile worn on lower right sleeve of tunic.



LEFT: Lieutenant of infantry in the standard issue tropical dress with breeches and long desert boots. The latter were often modified by cutting them down to ankle length. Olive green shirt and tie were issued for wear under the tunic.



ABOVE: Infantry rifle squad on the march in December 1942 after the retreat from Alamein, all wearing the service greatcoat. Note the extreme fading of the caps (IWM-HU5589).

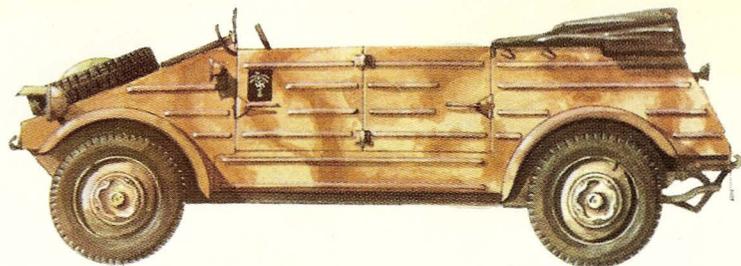


ABOVE: MG34 team in an outpost at Alamein (IWM-MH6328).  
LEFT: Reloading a 17cm K18 in January 1943 during long range bombardment of advancing British troops (IWM-MH6330).  
BELOW: Afrika Korps bandsmen wearing leather music pouches and with feldwebel rank badges on their epaulettes. They also wear the Crimean campaign shield on their left arms (IWM-NA2666).

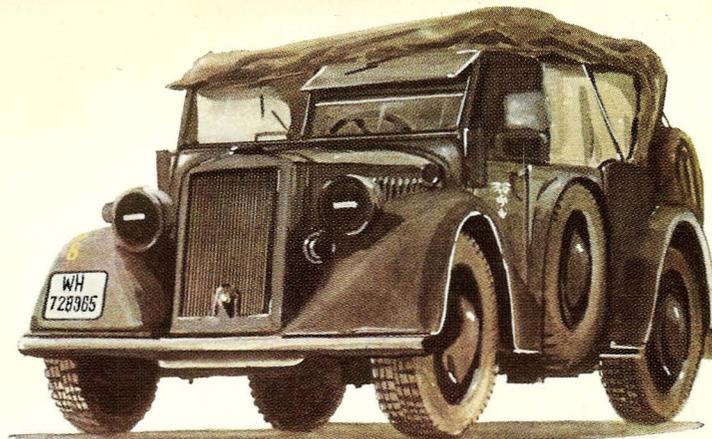


LEFT: Infantry unteroffizier (NCO) and schutze (private) in a slit trench at the Alamein period. The bleached sandbag helmet covers worn in British fashion were not common (IWM-HU5624).  
ABOVE: Panzergrenadier obergefreiter (corporal) of 15th Panzer Division, wearing Iron Cross 2nd Class ribbon, East Front Medal ribbon, and infantry assault badge (IWM-NA1816).





ABOVE: Widely used by motorised infantry regiments as well as most other arms was the famous Volkswagen Kfz 1 Kubelwagen (Leichter Personenkraftwagen). Those used by the motorised infantry normally had over-sized desert tyres (see page 1), but the vehicle shown here has normal tyres.



ABOVE: Widely used by both infantry and panzer units was the Kfz 15 (Horch) staff car/personnel carrier. This vehicle displays the Afrika Korps and 21. Pz-Div. symbols but retains the original dark grey in which vehicles were delivered at Tripoli. BELOW: In 1942 the much improved PzKpfw III Ausf M was the most powerfully armed of the Afrika Korps tanks with a long 5cm gun and smoke dischargers. It had extra stowage boxes and air filters in its tropicalised desert form. This vehicle is in the standard plain dark yellow finish.



LEFT: Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel in 1942 as commander of Panzergruppe Afrika, tropical dress. ABOVE, TOP ROW: Tropical helmet worn by infantry schutze (private) and steel helmet worn by signals unterfeldwebel (sergeant). Helmet was often painted 'sand-yellow' or worn with a cover. ABOVE AND RIGHT: Tropical forage caps as worn by panzer troops, with arm-of-service waffenfarbe (pink).

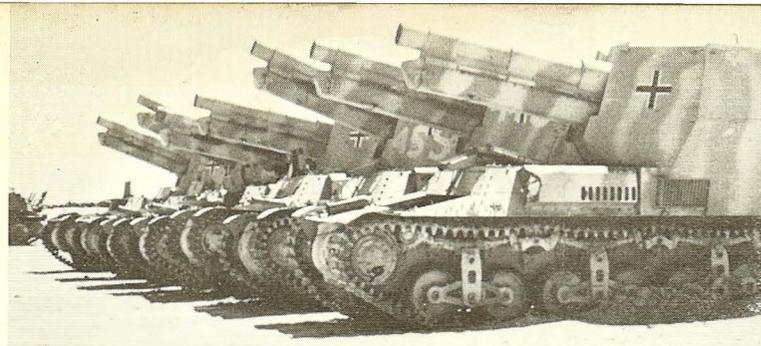
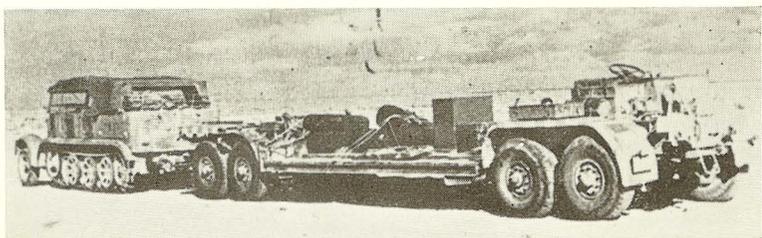




ABOVE: A 10.5cm Leichte Feldhaubitze 18 L/28 with its Sd Kfz II 3 ton towing vehicle in the early weeks of the campaign. RIGHT: 5cm Pak 38, a major anti-tank gun type, with its Sd Kfz 10/1 ton towing vehicle.



LEFT: Major SP gun in use was the 15cm s.I.G. 33 (schwerer infanteriegeschütze—heavy infantry gun) which was mounted on a lengthened PzKpfw II chassis. BELOW: Sd Kfz 9 heavy 18 ton half-track and 60 ton trailer was used in the important tank recovery rôle. German designation was Bs Ah 642 (Chamberlain Collection).

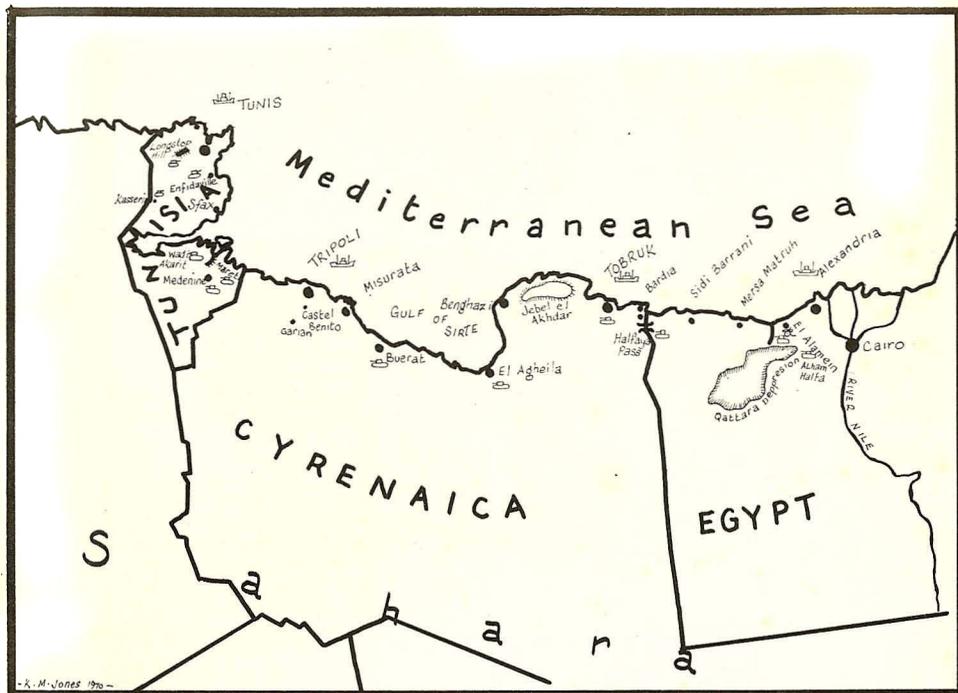


ABOVE: The other important SP gun type was the 15cm s.F.H. 13 (schwerer feldhaubitze—heavy field howitzer) on the Gw Lr. S. (f) chassis. Designated Sd Kfz 135/1 it was popularly called the Lorraine after the origin of its captured French chassis. (IWM-FLM1741).



Of necessity the Afrika Korps had to utilise captured British equipment to overcome its own persistent shortages. At least one artillery regiment was wholly equipped with ex-British 25 pdr gun-howitzers. The two views above show a German-manned 25 pdr in action and a suitably marked 'Quad' tractor and 25 pdr equipment 'on the march'. RIGHT: A famous item of captured equipment was Rommel's command car Mammuth ('Man-moth'), an AEC Dorchester acquired at Mechili. It was later used by the commander of 21.Pz-Div. whose emblem and tactical sign (on black patches) can be seen here.





*The Western Desert theatre of operations with main supply ports, and sites of major battles indicated by ship and tank symbols respectively. Tripoli and Tunis campaigns after Alamein will be covered in a later 'Wehrmacht Illustrated' publication.*



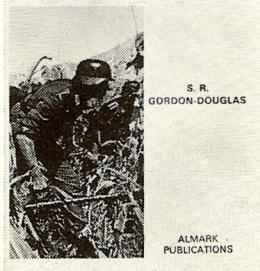
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*Rommel made several abortive attempts to take besieged Tobruk in April-May 1941. Here a 10.5cm Leichte Feldhaubitze 18/40 L/28 is seen in action firing against the beleaguered garrison at this period (IWM-MH5568).*

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by  
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**Front cover**

*RIGHT: A lieutenant of panzer troops, summer 1942, in the typical casual combat wear of the period, complete with neck scarf. Note the metal panzer 'death's head' badges worn on the lapels (shown inset).*

*LEFT: Typical winter wear was either the greatcoat or the ordinary service tunic worn over tropical shirt and trousers. This is an infantry unterfeldwebel (sergeant) with Bergman Maschien Pistole.*

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