

Afrika Korps

*An outstanding unit of the Nazi army
in North Africa in World War II.*

Geography and terrain are always important when armies meet on the battlefield, and this was especially clear in North Africa during World War II. The desert environment determined the way war was fought in that campaign. Soldiers not only fought the enemy; they fought the elements as well. Temperatures rose above 100 degrees in the daytime and fell below freezing at night. Sand permeated everything from equipment to food and clothing. The fierce sun bleached uniforms and caused heat waves to dance on the sand, which sometimes prevented seeing farther than 1,000 yards.

The Mediterranean coastline with its sparkling waters was beautiful, but inland was a sterile, desolate, and forbidding desert. Rather than sand dunes, a hard crusty ground littered with rocks and boulders was typical. Maps were unreliable and the absence of landmarks made navigation difficult; men separated from their units could become lost and perish. Some parts of the desert rose in impassable escarpments or sank in depressions many miles across. Desert warfare employed new tactics using mechanized equipment — the tank, armored car, and self-propelled gun — in swift attacks. To take and hold territory required large quantities of supplies, so the main objective was simply to destroy the enemy. The opposing armies had to maneuver quickly, trying to flank their opponents and attack from the rear or The main consideration was always supplies. If an army raced forward too quickly, it might outrun its supply lines and become immobilized, which would lead to a counterattack.

Soldiers shared the desert with snakes, scorpions, lizards, and millions of flies and sand fleas. Large movements of vehicles and troops stirring up the dust

gave away their positions. The dust got into the men's eyes, noses, and mouths, and penetrated into the food and water. Worse, it fouled engines and equipment, including rifles and cannons. Sandstorms were fierce and would stop most advances, causing the men to seek shelter in tents or vehicles until the storm passed. The sand, whipped by winds of 60 miles per hour or more, could strip the paint from vehicles and feel like pinpricks on the skin. It could reduce visibility to a few feet and make breathing impossible without covering the mouth and nose. Despite these conditions, the men of the German Afrika Korps under Field Marshall Erwin Rommel conducted a war in North Africa that almost beat the Allies.



*Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox", leader of the
Afrika Korps.*

The men of the German Afrika Korps, who had been given no desert training, became hardened to the desert conditions as they fought. They were supplied at most only one gallon of water per man per day for drinking, cooking, and washing. They then saved the dirty water to be used in the vehicles. The army did not issue

equipment for protection from the sun, such as sunglasses or lotion to protect the skin. Soldiers were originally issued pith helmets, but they soon discarded these in favor of cloth caps. They also wore shorts as part of the standard uniform. Soldiers soon found their skin chapped by the desert winds. Their lips cracked and their eyes became bloodshot from the piercing sunlight. Everyone was sunburned. Night brought no relief. The men, having sweated all day, would now shiver with the cold. Flies tormented the men by day, and sand fleas emerged at night to swarm the men, causing sores that were slow to heal.

The need for speed and mobility meant long, fast drives to reach a battle. Soldiers often steered their vehicles in a daze for lack of sleep. Sleeping at the wheel might only be interrupted by hitting another vehicle or a random boulder or being stuck in loose sand found off the main track.

Moonless nights and the policy of driving without headlights caused men to lose sight of vehicles ahead of them and become lost in the vast desert. They would then be at the mercy of enemy air attacks when daylight came.

German soldiers were fed meager rations consisting of biscuits, cheese, and canned sardines. Canned meat was occasionally available, but was tough and tasteless. There was never enough water, and thirst was a constant companion; there were periods when water was rationed to one half cup per day. The Afrika Korps captured food and supplies from the enemy. Fuel was also obtained from enemy fuel dumps captured in battle. Both armies used captured vehicles, and cannibalized parts from vehicles that were no longer usable.

The equipment was as susceptible to the harsh conditions as the men. Tanks went only 1,500 miles before requiring an entire overhaul, one-fourth the time of those in a normal environment. Moreover, vehicles became bogged down in sand and the men had to wrestle with machines

that the sun rendered too hot to touch with unprotected hands. The heat required columns to halt in order to allow engines to cool, and there were delays while crews cleaned clogged air and fuel filters. After a long night's drive and a daytime battle, men would refurbish their equipment and prepare for the next day's battle. The average soldier might get three hours of sleep every 24.

The desert's lack of cover made fighting very dangerous. Men in armored equipment had some protection, but the supporting infantries were at the mercy of enemy fire. Barbed wire and trenches surrounded emplacements. In addition, mines were laid in minefields that stretched for miles with only a few clear paths through them. Infantry advanced with armor, and in the confusion of battle soldiers had to stay alert to avoid being run over by their own tanks. Infantry also tried to avoid the tanks because they invited enemy fire. Though the tank provided cover, an exploding tank could kill everyone around it.

Tank crews, although better protected than infantry, were not immune to destruction. Survival depended on the thickness of the tank's armor versus the shell being shot at it. A penetrating shell could ignite the ammunition or fuel in the vehicle, and all inside would perish. Tank crews worked in steel ovens. The big gun would add to the heat, and the tremendous noise required crews to talk with each other by intercom.

Because the shimmering heat waves at midday cut visibility, the armies fought most battles at dawn or dusk. Fighting caused smoke and dust to obscure the battlefield. In addition, identification of the enemy was confusing because both armies used captured vehicles. Tank commanders needed good visibility, so they often opened the hatch and stood up in their turrets, risking death.

After nightfall, with the battle over, commanders shot flares into the sky to show lost units where to regroup. This was

a time for tank crews to do maintenance or repair on the tanks and to rearm and refuel. There would also be guard duty or other tasks to perform, limiting the sleeping time of the troops to just a few hours because they frequently had to go back into action before dawn the next day. The British tank crews were usually on the line for a week before becoming exhausted, but Rommel kept his men in action for two weeks at a time or longer.

The Afrika Korps was an elite group led by an unusual leader. Rommel was revered by his men and acquired the nickname the "Desert Fox." He had no hesitation about visiting the front. During one engagement, he piloted a light plane over the battlefield alone to understand the battle for himself.

Rommel's assumption of command in North Africa changed the entire nature of the war there. The British, who had easily dominated the Italians and had success against earlier commanders, found Rommel's audacious moves almost impossible to counter. For example, the port city of Tobruk, which had resisted Axis capture for 26 months, fell to the Afrika Korps under Rommel in 26 hours. Repeatedly, Rommel defeated the Allied armies and caused England's prime minister, Winston Churchill, to remark that he was a formidable general. Rommel would not be stopped until September 1942 when a lack of supplies from Germany doomed his final drive on Alexandria and Cairo that threatened the Suez Canal. The combination of better-supplied British forces in Egypt and the arrival in early November 1942 of American forces to his rear doomed the Desert Fox to a fighting withdrawal and quashed the Axis plans to control North Africa.

John Drake