PETER
CADDICK-ADAMS

MONTY AND ROMMEL

PARALLEL LIVES

Contents

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About the Book

Two men came to personify British and German generalship in the Second World War: Bernard Montgomery and Erwin Rommel. They fought a series of extraordinary duels across several theatres of war which established them as two of the greatest captains of their age. Our understanding of leadership in battle was altered for ever by their electrifying personal qualities. Ever since, historians have assessed their outstanding leadership, personalities and skill.

Born four years apart, their lives were remarkably similar. In this groundbreaking study, Peter Caddick-Adams explores Montgomery and Rommel's lives from their provincial upbringing, through to the trench fighting of the First World War, where both nearly died in 1914. Obsessed with fitness and training, the future field marshals emerged highly decorated and with a glowing war record. The pair taught in staff colleges, wrote infantry textbooks and fought each other as divisional commanders in 1940.

The careers of both began on the periphery of the military establishment and represent the first time military commanders proactively and systematically used (and were used by) the media as they came to prominence, first in North Africa, then in Normandy. Dynamic and forward-thinking, their lives also represent a study of pride, propaganda and nostalgia. Caddick-Adams tracks and compares their military talents and personalities in battle. Each brought something special to their commands. Rommel's breathtaking advance in May–June 1940 was

nothing less than inspired. Montgomery is a gift for leadership gurus in the way he took over a demoralised Eighth Army in August 1942 and led it to victory just two months later.

This is the first comparative biography written of the two. It explores how each was ‘made’ by their war leaders, Churchill and Hitler, and how the thoughts of both permeate down to today’s armies. Even though Rommel died in 1944, the rivalry between the two carried on after the war through their writings and other memoirs.

This compelling work is both scholarly and entertaining and marks the debut of a major new talent in historical biography.

About the Author

Peter Caddick Adams is a Lecturer at Cranfield Military Academy specialising in military history and media operations working alongside Richard Holmes. His special areas of interest are battlefield history and he researches in Military Doctrine and Leadership. He has led over 200 visits to more than 50 battlefields around the world. He joined the Territorial Army in 1985 and served as a military media advisor in the rank of major until his recent retirement.

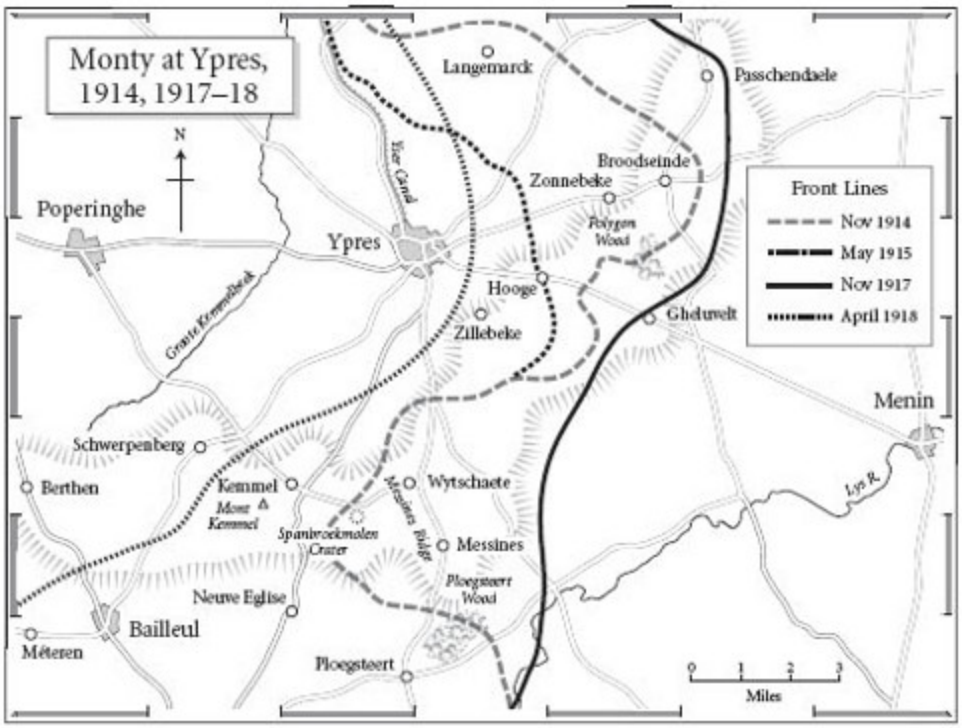
MONTY AND ROMMEL

PARALLEL LIVES

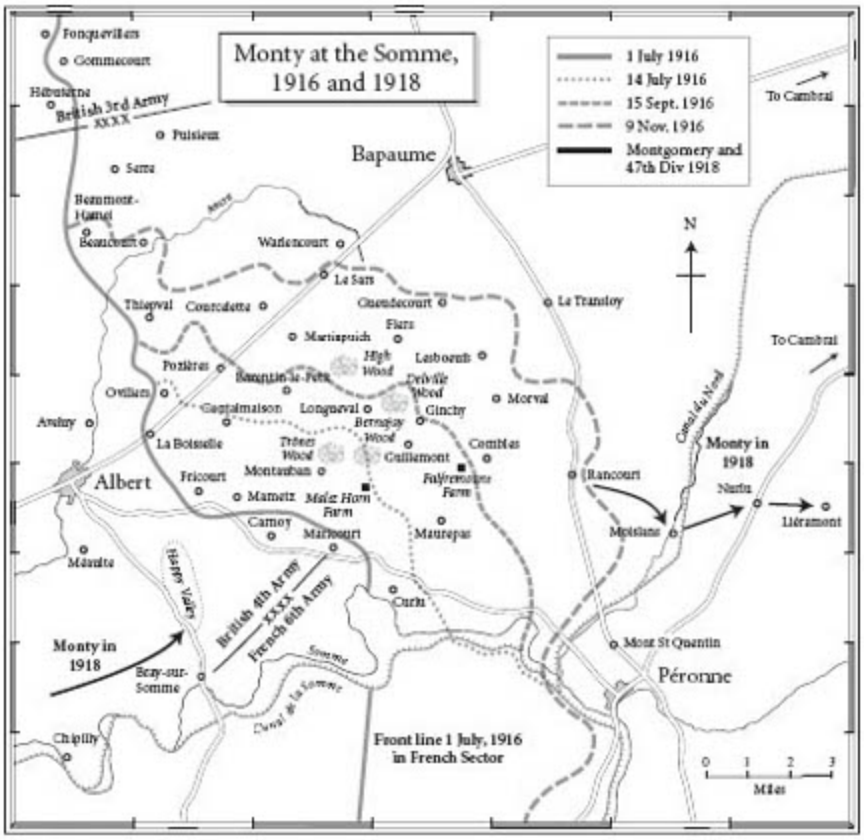
Peter Caddick-Adams

To Stefania and Emmanuelle for their love, support and tolerance in allowing me to spend so much time with the field marshals.

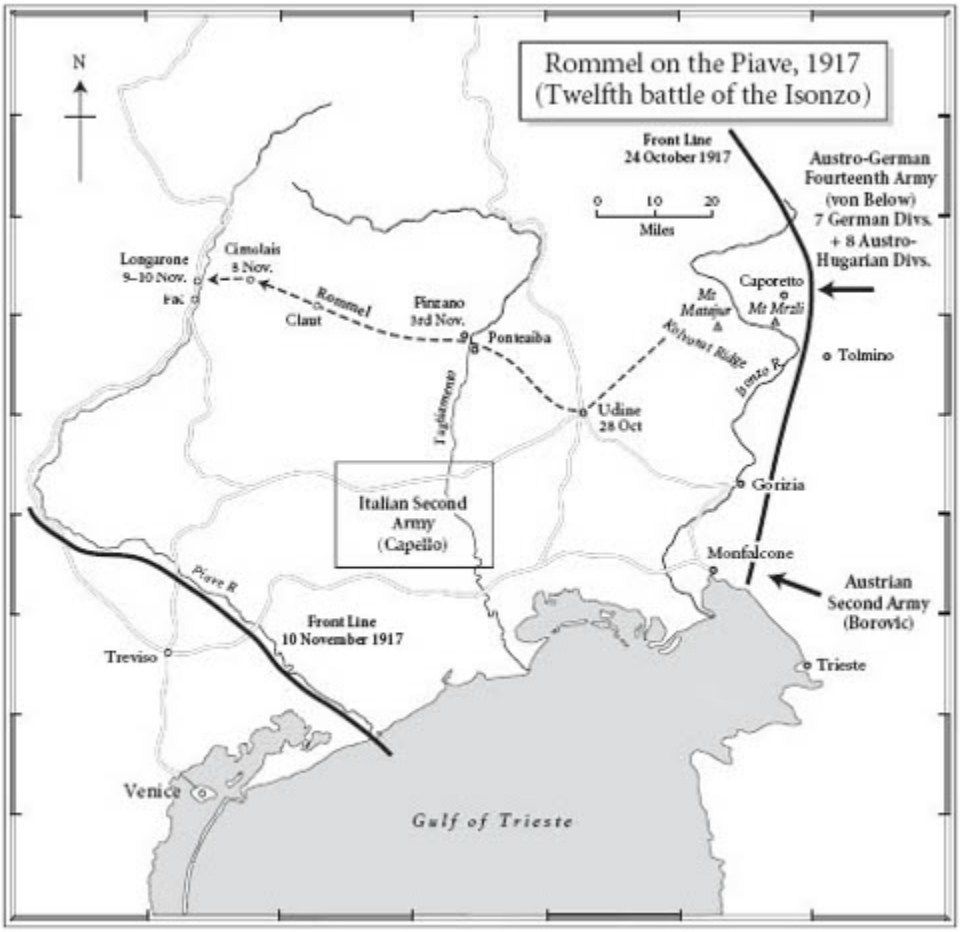
List of Maps



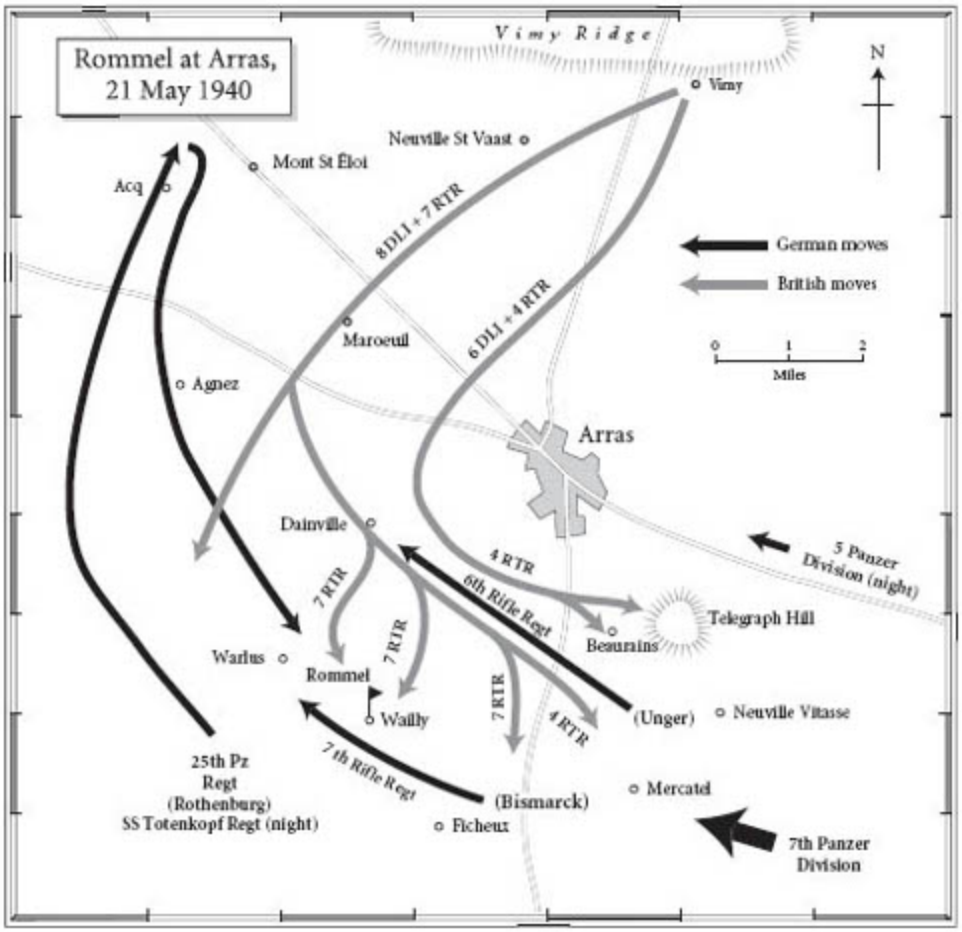
There was rarely a quiet moment in the Ypres area, which witnessed near-continuous fighting, from October 1914 to October 1918. Monty was dangerously wounded in Méteren in 1914, and from 1917–18 he planned operations as a staff officer with IX Corps in the battlefields east of Ypres. Within the Ypres salient are the villages of Gheluvelt and Messines, where Adolf Hitler fought, and Ploegsteert, where Lt.-Colonel Winston Churchill's battalion (6/Royal Scots Fusiliers) was stationed between January and May 1916.



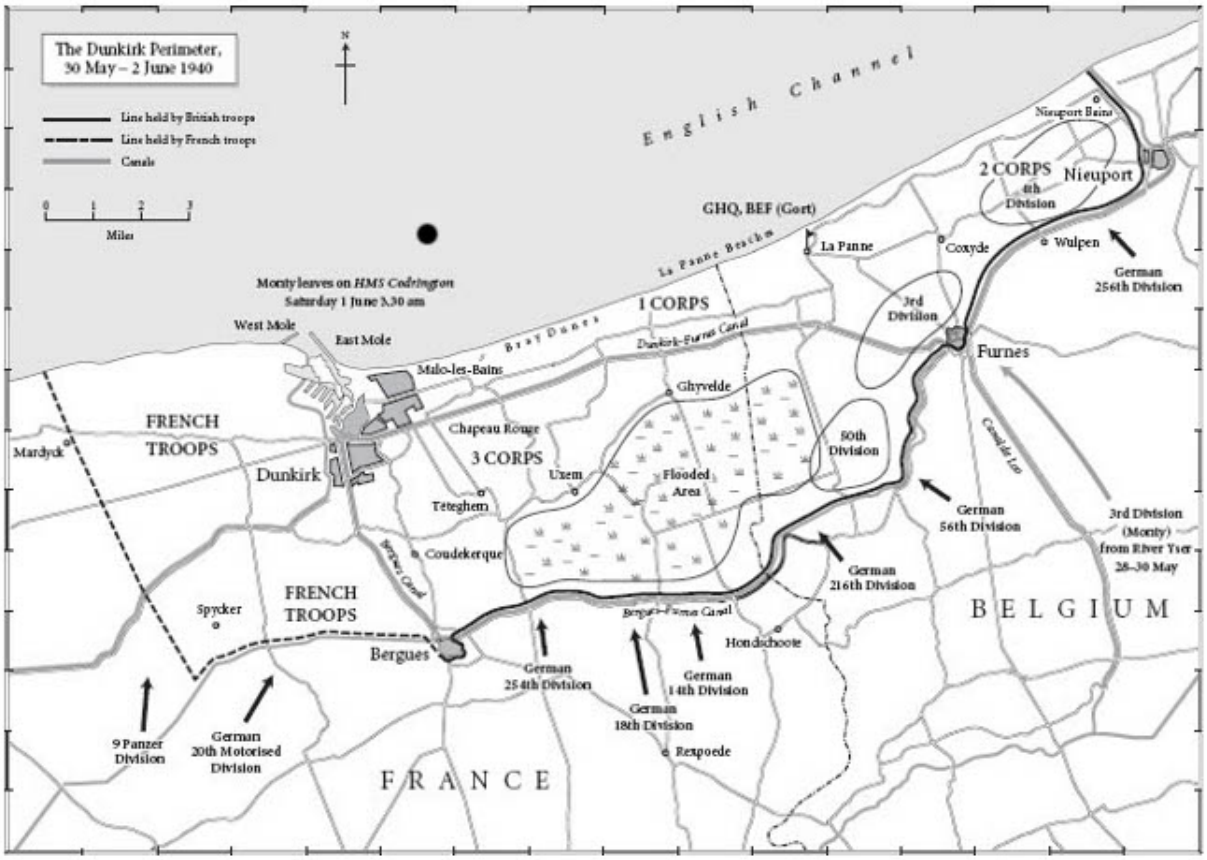
Named after a river that most British troops never got to see, the Somme battlefields witnessed Monty's presence twice. Initially during the 'Great Push' of 1916, whose slow progress is charted here, Bernard's 104th Brigade fought in the area of Trônes Wood, Malz Horn Farm and Guillemont. His advance with 47th Division in 1918 is also shown, including Happy Valley, where his brigade paraded in 1916, but which his division attacked in 1918.



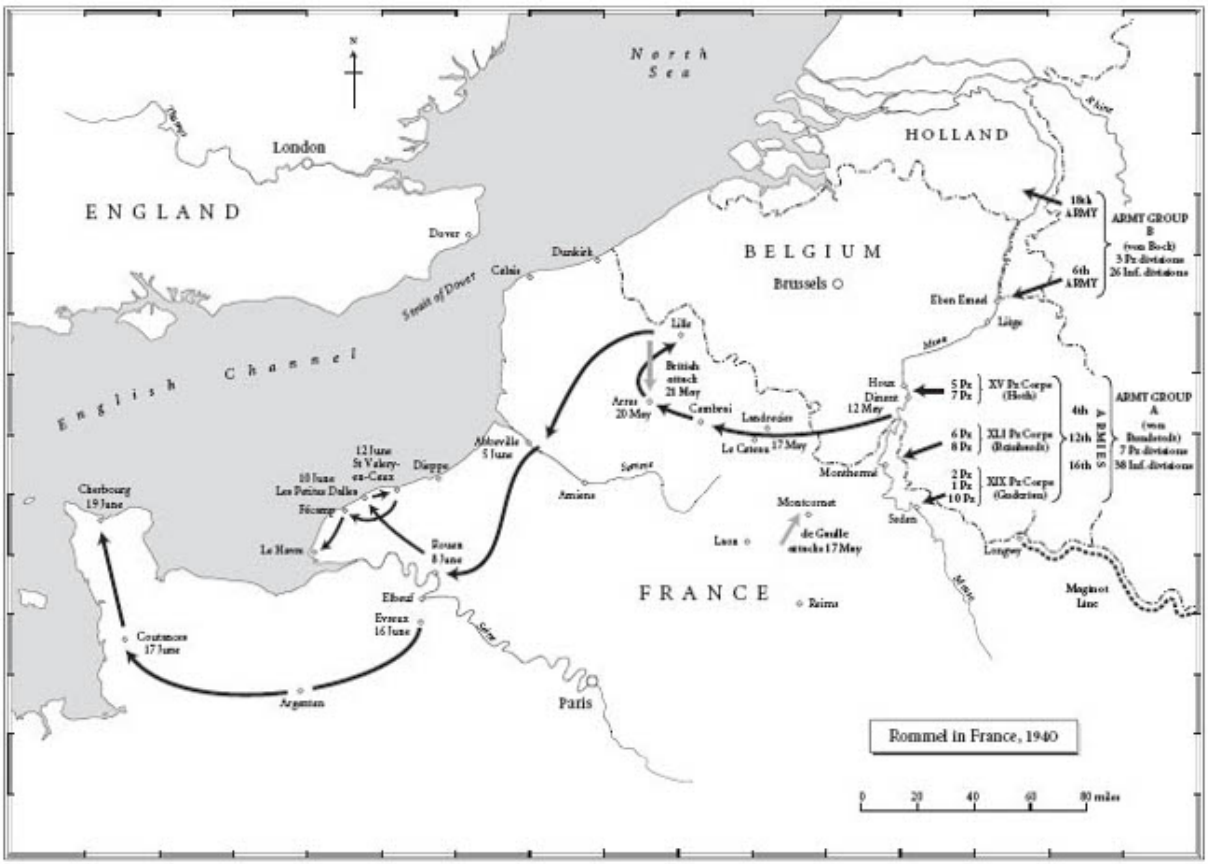
Rommel's 1917 war in Italy was one characterised by speed and movement, in contrast to the static nature of the Western Front. Erwin advanced 150 miles over twenty-two days, ending spectacularly on the River Piave, at Longarone, on 10 November. His achievement is all the more impressive when one remembers that most of it was conducted in contact with the enemy, over tiring mountainous terrain and on foot.



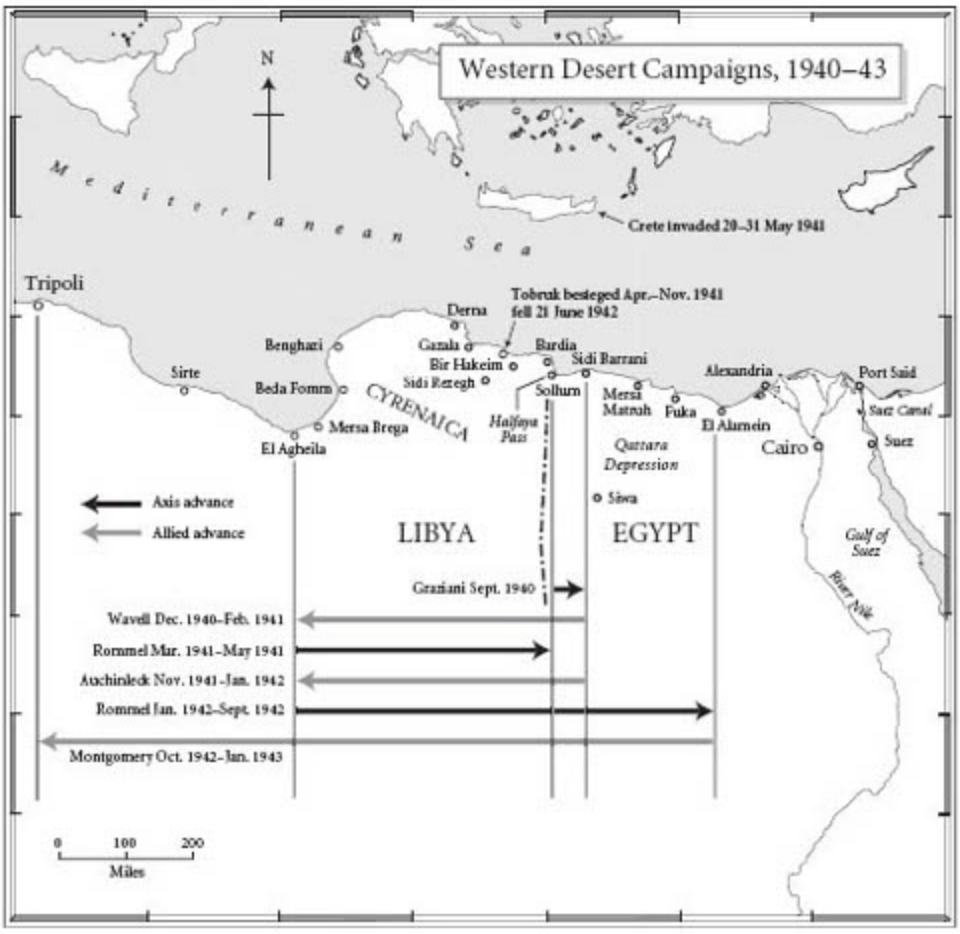
The armoured counter-attack against 7th Panzer Division at Arras was the first time Rommel encountered British troops. Deploying from Vimy, the Royal Tank Regiment's *Matildas* completely surprised disorganised German units; only the speedy use of artillery at Telegraph Hill and Wailly saved 7th Panzer division from annihilation. Caught in the midst of the fracas, Rommel was left with an indelible impression of British resourcefulness.



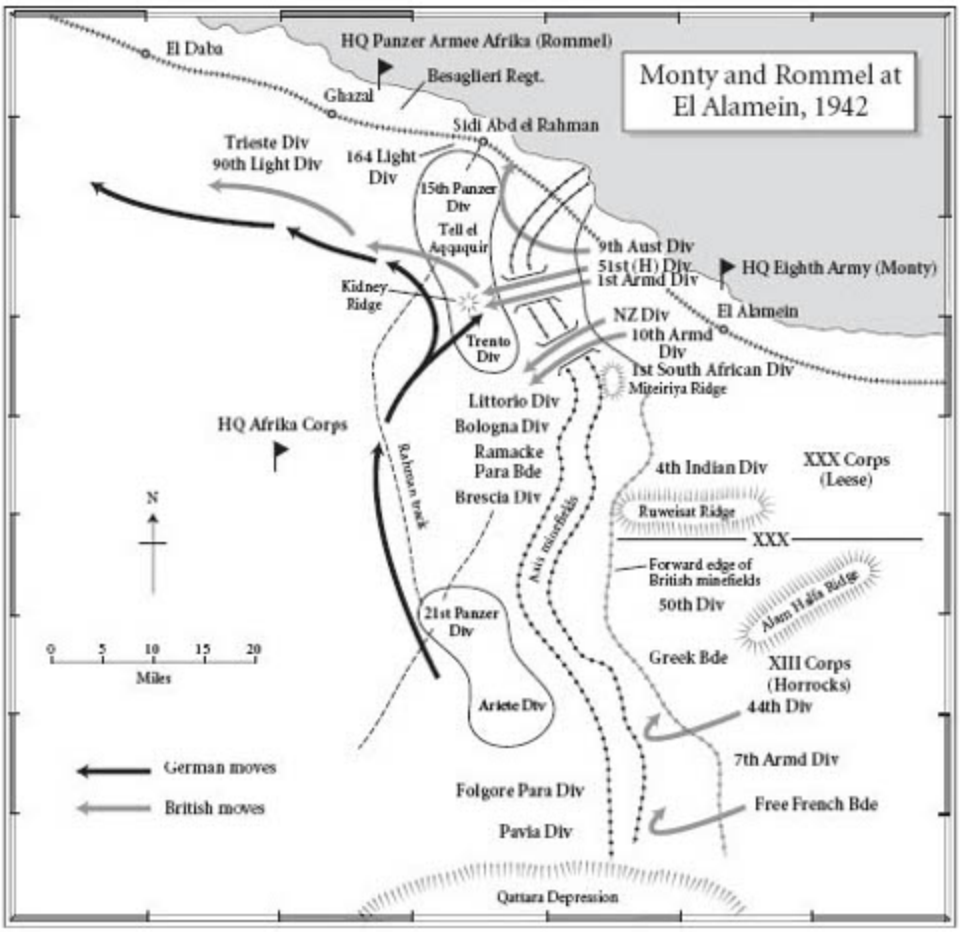
Historians agree that of all British formations which fought in 1940, Monty's 3rd Division performed best. It trickled into the Dunkirk perimeter whilst fighting rearguard actions to slow the German advance, before rescue from the beaches or port. Dunkirk also witnessed Monty's elevation from divisional to corps command, when his boss (Brooke) departed for England.



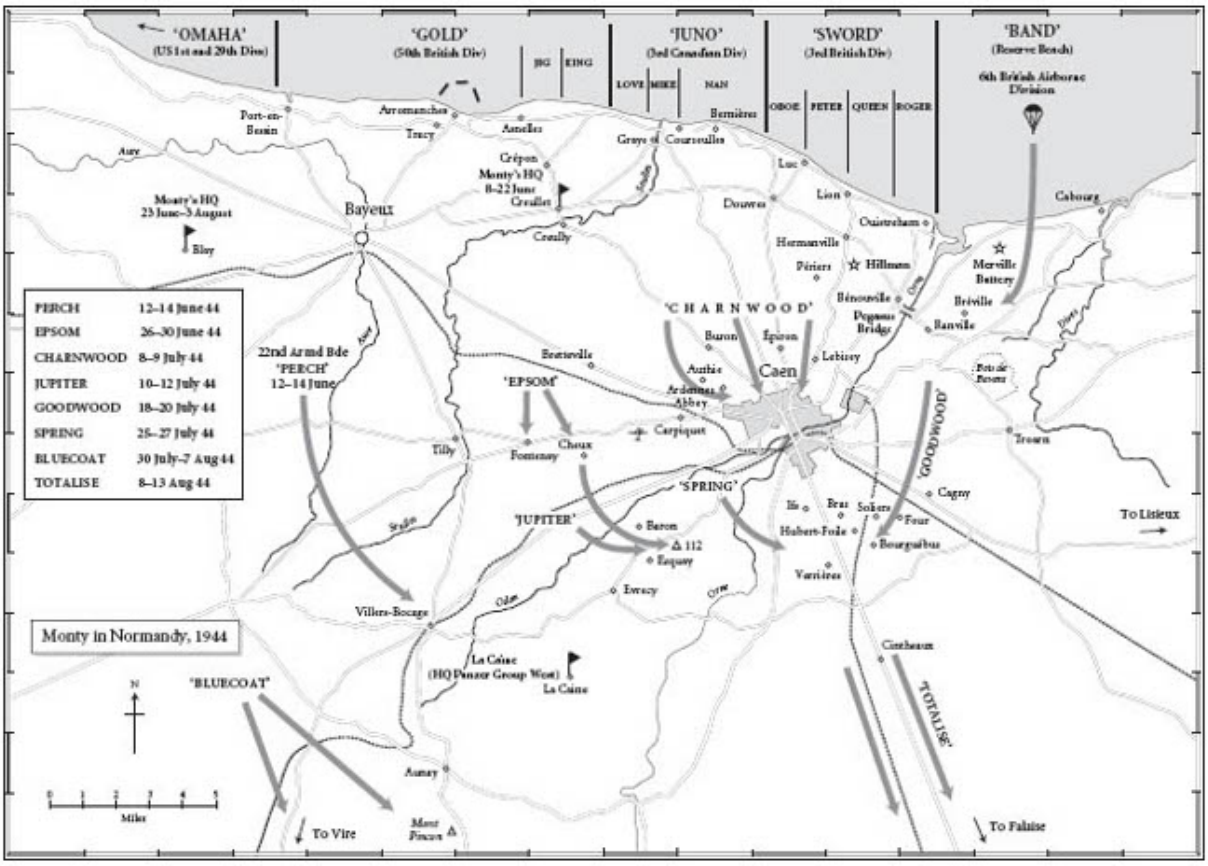
It was 7th Panzer Division’s dramatic progress through northern France in 1940 that brought Rommel national acclaim throughout Germany, a Knight’s Cross and led directly to his North African posting. He covered over 500 miles in forty days – with battles on the River Meuse and at Arras and the capture of Cherbourg on 19 June.



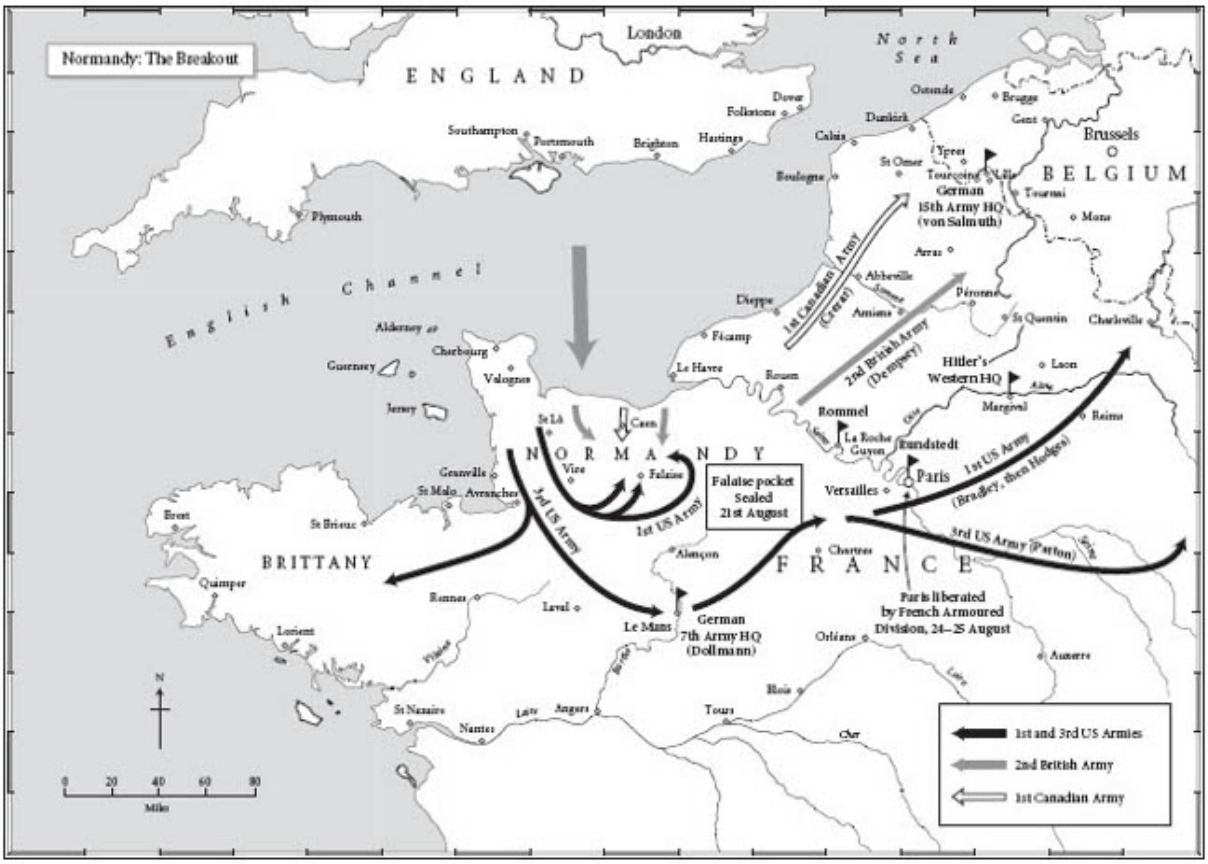
The advances and retreats of both sides in North Africa took place over huge distances, underlining how success rested on efficient logistics. All supplies had to be imported by air or sea and trucked to the battlefields. The campaign had a see-saw nature at the operational level, and Rommel came very close to his goals of Cairo and the Suez Canal.



As well as numerical superiority, some of Monty's success at El Alamein was due to his ability to deceive his opponents into believing that Eighth Army's strike would come from the south. At this stage the Afrika Korps were 700 miles from their nearest port, Benghazi, and 1,400 miles from Tripoli, whilst Cairo for the British was a mere 150 miles east by road or rail.



Caen dominated the eastern sector of the Normandy battlefield. Failure to seize the city on D-Day necessitated a series of frustrating and attritional operations, each of increasing size, in an effort to fight in more favourable terrain and break out of the bridgehead. Note the proximity of Monty's headquarters to the battle zone, whereas Rommel's headquarters was a hundred miles east, at La Roche Guyon.



Considering that the bulk of Allied forces were still around Falaise on 21 August, their subsequent breakout was conducted with great speed. Rheims was liberated on 30 August, Arras and Mons on 2 September, Brussels the following day, Charleville on 4 September and Ypres two days later. Once the Normandy front collapsed there were few German reserves to stem the extremely rapid advance, sometimes dubbed ‘Monty’s Blitzkrieg’.

Prologue

> *At every crossway on the road to the future, each progressive spirit is opposed by a thousand men appointed to guard the past.*
>
> Count Maurice de Maeterlinck

IT IS MID-AFTERNOON ON 21 May 1940, a warm Tuesday, near Arras in northern France. Last year, the scaffolding came down, ending years of reconstruction. The Great War had seen Arras shelled mercilessly. Now it looks like happening all over again.

The same grey-clad invaders are once more at the gates. One of them, an officer who had done well in the previous conflict, is now a divisional commander. The sun catches the unique bauble *Generalmajor* Erwin Rommel wears at his throat, the *Pour le Mérite*. His business is reducing attrition. Not in avoiding combat, but by superior tactics which will limit the fighting. Using tanks at high speed, and lots of them, he aims to slice through his opponents' lines before they know what's happened. So far he has succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. The forty-eight-year-old took over his command just two months earlier, when his men were still in training. Now they are further into France than any of their fellow invaders, and have become known as 'the Ghost Division' for their wraith-like ability to materialise anywhere on the battlefield.

The weather is considerably better than it had been back in 1917, when last a major battle erupted around Arras. Warm sun has turned the chalky topsoil to fine powder; it is hot. The dips and mounds in the fields around

signify the old trenches and dug-outs of earlier battles, mellowed by time. These were once occupied by the headquarters of the British 33rd Division, where his future Second World War rival served as a staff officer. Rusting strands of old barbed wire remain, as if handing over the fighting from one generation to the next.

Rommel can now see dust clouds trundling towards him: this can only mean one thing. Tanks. He curses his luck. Normally he would be riding in the tank of his friend, Colonel Rothenburg, commanding his 25th Panzer Regiment, but today he has let them continue their lightning advance without him. His infantry – the 7th Rifle Regiment – though in trucks, are too slow for his liking and he has dropped back to chivvy them along. And now the British are attacking his unprotected flanks.

Fifty miles away to the north-east, on the outskirts of another big city, Lille, another divisional commander is facing *his* traditional foe. It is a warm day here too. He sports khaki battledress and wears the special ribbon of the Distinguished Service Order. Since the Germans invaded over a week earlier, his troops have been rushed from place to place in Belgium, achieving little. There's no overall strategy and absolutely zero cooperation with his French and Belgian allies. His own warriors are conveyed in a laughable mixture of camouflaged trucks and brightly coloured baker's vans, because of a lack of investment by politicians over the years. The soldiers of his formation have cursed him ever since the war began for their harsh training – tougher than any other division – but now the results are beginning to pay off. They are coping with the endless marches and little sleep better than the rest of Britain's Expeditionary Force.

Deployed along a ten-mile stretch of the lazy River Escaut, between Pecq and Avelgem in Belgium, his men are dug in and have been under intense shellfire since 2 a.m.

Peering through the smoke, Bernard Montgomery can see that the factories and homes lining the water's edge are crumbling under the tornado of German shells. He was woken earlier by a series of distinctive blasts signifying the end of the many bridges across the river, blown by his engineers to block the German advance. His own guns speak again, but the weight of fire is coming from the invaders.

Meanwhile, in the eleven days since Generalmajor Rommel's advance began, the French have barely attacked his panzers with more than a shotgun. Yet, the General is annoyed. His young troops have tasted victory and are off their guard. They have paused, thirsty, and are resting their tired feet in scuffed jackboots. Grimy-eyed, dozing in the sun, their limp fingers hold cigarettes trailing smoke. They are overconfident. The Luftwaffe own the skies, their bombers drone lazily overhead, seeking prey. In the hamlets surrounding Arras, Rommel's vehicles are backed up in the narrow lanes, unable to move. Exactly what he warned them about in training. Quick-tempered, the General is about to shatter the peace of the day.

A shell whines over; then another. Under fire, a half-track explodes, showering the cobbled street with burning fuel and rubber: confusion reigns. A soldier, badly burned, runs screaming. The General is angry at the chaos. Yet he knows exactly what to do: he has seen it all before. The smell of high explosive takes him back, instinctively, to other battles.

He urges his driver through the village and up a hill. Towards the firing. Always *towards* the trouble. They turn right, past the cemetery. Under the leaves of a small copse, he spies more gunners milling around in panic, their hot meals abandoned. He quits his command car and snaps out a hurricane of orders. Then an inner calm descends. His young aide, Leutnant Most, scuttles after him, maps and

notebook at the ready, as he has been taught. With astonishing energy the General moves and thinks supremely fast:

'You men, unhook those guns, NOW!'

'You, the ammunition.' He starts to form a gun line. Anything will do.

'*Herr General*, these are anti-aircraft guns.' No problem. As long as it has a barrel and will fire.

'*Herr General*, we have only anti-aircraft ammunition, not suitable against tanks.' Always problems, not solutions.

'The Tommies will not know the difference. Open Fire!'

He dashes about. Seconds matter. Here and there, he lends a hand to push gun wheels through the dirt, pulls on a barrel to swing this or that cannon into position. A quick squint through his binoculars. The leading tanks are no more than two hundred metres away. It is going to be close.

His artillerymen sweat to feed their guns quickly.

'Make every shot count,' he orders, and picks out targets for his men.

The heavy British tanks, 'Matildas', are now close enough for the squeal of their tracks to be audible above the gunfire; they halt and shudder as the rounds strike home. Sparks fly and a metallic 'ping' sounds, as shells bounce off the armour plate.

Curses! Then some penetrate. The monsters erupt in flames. Loose caterpillar tracks writhe like snakes. The nearest tank pauses, a turret hatch opens with a resounding clang and a grim-faced officer climbs down, cap askew, and – arms raised – walks unsteadily towards the guns that have just killed his driver.

It is over. The chief's quick thinking has saved the moment.

He rests his binoculars and rolls a spent brass shell case, still hot, with his boot. He turns to his aide, a sparkle of triumph in his eyes that he has not known since 1917. But the expression is wiped from his face and replaced with

one of horror as Most, so young and keen, falls towards him and collapses in his arms. Blood gushes from his mouth, he is mortally wounded.

Rommel not only mourns his friend, but ponders, as we could, on what might have been – had the British soldier adjusted his sights and aimed just a fraction to the left.

In the same hour, back on the Escaut, Major General Montgomery watches as the shelling subsides. Suddenly he sees the muddy river is full of little specs – rubber dinghies, manned by German assault troops, paddling furiously. Their machine guns spit fire from the far banks to cover them. One boat flips over, a lucky mortar round shatters another. A sniper takes care of the NCO urging his men on in a third craft. Binoculars reveal that the splashing menace is still swarming across the water. A few have reached the near bank but are met by screaming men in khaki, wielding bayonets. Softened almost into melody by the distance, the mosquito whine of German machine guns alternates with the slower, rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* of British Brens. Quickly, his artillery find the range and a pattern of water plumes engulfs the picture. As the spray and smoke subside, the menace has become a mass of broken boats and twisted life, which ebb slowly downstream.

Although the first attack has failed, there will be others; the British general's life story is one of having prepared for moments such as these; he knows that now is not the moment for sentiment over the dead. Earlier wars and battles have told him what to expect. His formation, who also have a nickname – the Iron Division – must now live up to their sobriquet and hold on the rest of the day and into tomorrow, before orders permit them to withdraw. Much against his expectations, within days he will find himself promoted to command a corps of several divisions, from sand dunes around a little port called Dunkirk. Bernard

Montgomery vows that if he ever visits the continent as a general again, it will not be under such ignominious circumstances.

I have the letter still. It is addressed to my maternal grandfather, who left it to me. The paper is still crisp; the blue ink of the unmistakeable, slightly immature handwriting remains sharp. My grandfather happened to be a bishop, as was the letter writer's father, and in handing me a keepsake dated 6 July 1952, Clifford Arthur Martin, 4th Bishop of Liverpool, triggered a sense of curiosity which never departed. The letter's contents are unremarkable, but I always wondered who this busy Field Marshal Montgomery was, who excused himself as too busy to come and preach in my grandfather's cathedral. Then – after one Sunday afternoon black-and-white feature film – I discovered Monty's nemesis, Erwin Rommel. Gradually the similarities and interrelations between the two commanders dawned on me.

Born four years apart, with birthdays separated by two days, Montgomery and Rommel were wounded and decorated within days of each other in 1914. They were 'outsiders' in several ways: neither came from families with a military tradition, and they originated in provinces distant from their capitals: Ulster and Swabia. Their lives would be closely intertwined, fighting as opposing divisional commanders in 1940, then leading their respective armies during major duels in North Africa and Normandy, which saw both elevated to the dizzy rank of field marshal. Wiry and slight of stature, they came from large families, but produced single sons in the same year, 1928. Both were notoriously thrifty in their domestic milieu, neither was particularly sophisticated, their lives revolved around work; families came second.

The two capitalised on their experience of the First World War through writing, produced tactical textbooks,

and kept voluminous notes and diaries in the Second World War with an eye to post-war publication. The way they would in the future meet and inspire front-line soldiers, plan operations, hire and fire subordinates, deal with logistics and take account of casualties – both estimated and actual – was forged in the fury of combat of the trenches and, by 1918, their respective ideas on leadership and command had already become well established.

The future field marshals reacted to the distance of their superiors in the First World War and became beacons of hope for their respective nations and iconic leaders for their troops, with whom they communicated in person where possible and if not, via newspapers, radio and propaganda. The conflict we commonly associate with the two is the Desert War in North Africa, yet they served in an extensive, and arguably far more important, range of campaigns.

Both men conducted their battles from captured armoured caravans, taken as booty. The pair never met, but Rommel later paid warm tribute to Monty's skill.[1] Whilst interrogating a captured British officer over tea in May 1944, Rommel asked after his 'old friend General Montgomery'.[2] For his part, Montgomery had Rommel's portrait hung in his own battle caravan 'to understand what made him tick', and named one of his dogs and a horse after him. Monty observed later in life that 'I would have liked to discuss the battle [of El Alamein] with him. But he is dead and we cannot tell the story together.'[3]

Montgomery and Rommel often found themselves tested and frequently triumphed over adverse circumstances that would defeat most of us just reading about them, from Montgomery's attempts to shore up his brigade's morale on the Somme in 1916, to Rommel's juggling of diminishing resources to meet the next thrust of the Eighth Army in late 1942. Were they similar in character, or did they just travel the same path through war and life together? Both were

highly controversial during their lifetimes, were often at war as much with their superiors as with their opponents, and yet still beat the drum from afar today. It is perhaps also important to understand both commanders in the context of modern military leadership, especially whilst we are again at war, so as not to perpetuate their faults – hidden as they may be, by the dazzle of the reputation we have given them. They commanded in an era where decisions were made in the war rooms of distant capitals, which they were obliged to enact. They were products of different political systems: Rommel grew up under a militaristic autocracy and served a dictatorship; Monty was the product of a democracy, with all that implies; neither was particularly scholarly or politically aware (to the detriment of their careers) so this may not have occurred to them.

In their different ways they made *themselves* the centre of the decision-making process, wrenching back the initiative from their superiors. Both marshals may have been over-promoted: we shall see. They were certainly stubborn, poor team players and notoriously intolerant of allies. Montgomery refused to accept Churchill's directives as to when to fight at Alamein; the price Monty paid for his squabbles with superiors and colleagues was eternal damage to his reputation. Rommel, meanwhile, frequently disobeyed Hitler. Eventually this cost him his life.

PART ONE

BAPTISM AND FIRE

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

L. P. Hartley, *The Go Between*

1

The Irishman

BERNARD MONTGOMERY and Erwin Rommel shared a gift for communication. This is how we remember them: boosting their troops' morale in the dark days, inspiring their countrymen and befriending the world's media when this was uncommon amongst professional soldiers; leaving a mark for posterity through photographs, film and the books they wrote. Both came from long lines of worthy, middle-class stock – communicators by trade: one was the son of a vicar, the other of a school teacher. Curiously, neither had any significant military tradition in their ancestry. Such solid lineage provided each with continuity and self-assurance, a firm bedrock on which to found any career. The two were born into empires now long gone, in an era of confidence and growth. In Britain and Germany, each then the centre of an imperial web, society was enjoying the fruits of hard-won wealth after the nation-building social upheavals of the early nineteenth century. Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy were at the height of their literary fame. Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, Monet and Van Gogh were producing some of their finest canvases, whilst Brahms, Delius, Grieg and Verdi were delighting audiences with their music. Richard Wagner had just died and Edward Elgar was a decade away from finding fame.

Bernard Law Montgomery, the fourth child of an eventual nine (six boys and three girls), was born in the