

June, 1942; it was always employed to stiffen the Italian infantry, nominally under operational command of the Italian XXI Corps but administered direct by Panzer Armee. The same role was given to the Ramcke Parachute Brigade of four battalions. This force was apparently organised in the first place to co-operate with the Italians in an assault on Malta in the summer of 1942 which was cancelled when Rommel's success in the desert seemed to render the operation unnecessary. It fought throughout in a ground role and showed high qualities of training and courage. Finally there was a motorized, heavily armed group known as 288 Special Force, a miniature motorized division, originally organised to take part in the Syrian campaign of 1941 and sent to Africa in April, 1942.

The Italians provided two of the armoured and six of the infantry divisions in the Panzer Armee. The two former, 132 Ariete and 133 Littorio Divisions comprised, together with 101 Trieste Division, XX Corps, usually qualified as XX (Mobile) Corps. The northern end of the line, from the sea to south of Ruweisat ridge, was held by XXI Corps with, from north to south, the German 164 Division, 102 Trento Division* and 25 Bologna Division; two battalions of the Ramcke Parachute Brigade were also under command in the sector of the two Italian divisions. The shorter southern sector was held by X Corps with 27 Brescia and 185 Folgore Divisions.† The latter was originally a parachute division, the first which Italy had formed. It was rushed across hastily in August to strengthen the infantry of the Panzer Armee and was always used in that role. Unlike the other Italian Divisions, which were recruited on a territorial basis, this division was formed of men of outstanding physique picked from the whole country and, although quite unaccustomed to African conditions and hampered by shortage of equipment and lack of administrative services, it gave a very good account of itself. Besides the formations I have enumerated there were three independent Bersaglieri regiments, of motorized infantry, employed as Corps troops. In rear of the defended line was 17 Pavia Division which was resting at Mersa Matruh under Army command. 16 Pistoia Division, a recent arrival in Libya, was in reserve in the Bardia area and the "Young Fascists" Division at Siwa oasis.

The organization and armament of these troops reflected the prevailing conditions of the desert. All the German formations, except for the newly arrived 164 Division, were motorized; the Italian divisions were not, except for the three in XX (Mobile) Corps. The German armoured divisions were equipped with the Mark III and Mark IV tank; a few of the latter were of the newer type with the high velocity 75 millimetre gun. Italian armoured divisions were equipped with the Mx3 tank, of thirteen tons and mounting a 47 millimetre gun; it was mechanically unreliable and poorly armoured. In both German and Italian infantry divisions the most striking feature was the very great strength in anti-tank guns. It is fair to say that, though all desert warfare is not armoured

warfare, it is always conditioned by the presence of armour; since the desert allows infinite mobility and flanks are nearly always open, every formation and unit down to the smallest must be capable at any moment of all-round defence and prepared to meet an armoured attack. For this reason anti-tank guns were decentralized down to infantry companies which had a total of three apiece and, where possible, six. They were usually of 50 millimetre calibre though 90 Light Division was equipped with captured Russian 3 inch pieces (7.62 millimetre).* The Italians in 1942 had carried out a re-organization of their infantry on similar lines.† In both armies, therefore, the unit for infantry was the company, organized on homogeneous lines throughout and heavily armed with anti-tank guns. A characteristic feature was the formation of "Kampfgruppen" or "Raggruppamenti" which we should call "columns of all arms" or "task forces," created for a special mission.

The Axis Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, had commanded the German forces in Africa since their first arrival in February, 1941, and a considerable body of legends had grown up around him. It was natural that the British Press should pay particular attention to the German commander whose forces were engaging the only British army in the field at that time, but this interest had led to an exaggeration of his undoubted qualities which tended to have a depressing effect on our own troops, however much it may have appealed to the newspaper reader at home. I have always considered it vital to obtain all the information possible about my principal opponents and I took steps shortly after my arrival to sort out the truth from the legends about Rommel. He was a Wurtemberger of a middle-class professional family who was commissioned in an infantry regiment shortly before the first world war; he served with distinction on the western, Italian and Rumanian fronts, winning among other decorations the order "Pour le Mérite," the highest Prussian award for gallantry. Between the two wars he was chiefly known as the author of works on infantry tactics. A Colonel in 1939 he commanded 7 Panzer Division in France in 1940 as a Major-General. Since arriving in Africa he had been rapidly promoted from Lieutenant-General to Field-Marshal and had been awarded the senior grade of the Ritterkreuz, the highest Nazi decoration. As I studied the records of his African campaigns it was soon clear to me that he was a tactician of the greatest ability with a firm grasp of every detail of the employment of armour in action and very quick to seize the fleeting opportunity and the critical turning points of a mobile battle. I felt certain doubts, however, about his strategical ability, in particular as to whether he fully understood the importance of a sound administrative plan. Happiest when controlling a mobile force directly under his own eyes he was liable to over-exploit immediate success without sufficient thought for the future. An example was the battle of November, 1941, when, after winning a great tactical success at

* Originally a motorized division but now called "appiedata" or dismounted.

† I use the name by which it was later known. At this time the division was called Cacciatori d'Africa or "African Sharpshooters"; it adopted the name Folgore in September.

* There was also, of course, the 88 millimetre anti-aircraft gun, beloved of Allied War Correspondents, who appeared to be unaware of the existence of any other calibre in German artillery.

† Italian infantry divisions, by contrast with the German, had only two infantry regiments.