Field Marshal Erwin Rommel

In all the history written about battles and their commanders, few people have ever generated more interest and excitement than Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel. Although he is most often known for his exploits in the African campaigns of the Second World War, his valor, chivalry, and daring began far earlier than that.

Erwin was born in Heidenheim, Germany on the 14th of November 1891. His father was a school master. The future Field Marshall was very technically oriented and was hoping to study to become an engineer. However, his father made it quite clear that young Erwin was to become a military officer. So his career began in the 124th Württemburg Regiment in the German Army as an officer cadet at the age of 19. Within two years he was awarded the rank of Lieutenant in January 1912.

During officer training school Rommel met the lady who was to become his future wife, Lucia Maria Mollin. He always referred to Lucia as Lucy or Lu. They were married in November 1916. Their son Manfred was born on Christmas Eve of 1928.

The outbreak of World War I found Rommel to be in the infantry where he received prestigious awards, the Iron Cross 2nd Class as well as 1st Class. Always exhibiting bravery, courage, and panache, his exploits were well known even then. Having been transferred to the elite Alpen Korps (Alpine Corps), 1st Lieutenant Erwin Rommel received Germany’s highest military award, the Pour Le Mérite or as it is more commonly known, the Blue Max. With only one hundred men Erwin overtook the Italian mountain fortress of Matajur. In the process he and his men captured more than 100 officers, 7000 men, and 81 artillery pieces. This would not be the last of Rommel’s amazing military actions.

After World War I, Rommel taught at the Infantry School in Dresden, Germany until 1933. But the winds of war were beginning to build once again as Adolph Hitler started his rise to power. Promoted to the Potsdam War Academy, Rommel shared his brilliant tactical skills with his students and his first book on infantry tactics was highly regarded by all. In addition to these responsibilities the now Colonel Rommel was the head of the Wiener Neustadt War Academy.

As the Second World War drew closer, Adolph Hitler recognized the genius of this young officer and Rommel was appointed the head of Hitler’s personal security
battalion. At the start of WWII Rommel used Hitler’s personal armored train as a means to be at the front of the battles in the Sudetenland and in Poland, rallying his groups into great victories. Many other victorious campaigns followed quickly and by 1940 Rommel was given command of the 7th Panzer Battalion (tank battalion) which was named the “Ghost Division” because it moved so quickly that Rommel’s own superiors often did not know where he was until the battles were over. Much to the dismay of his peers Rommel was to receive another major battlefield award in the form of the Knights Cross. Continually forging on to encircle British and French troops by the thousands, now General Rommel raced to cut off these two armies to prevent their total escape across the English Channel back to England.

By 1941 Rommel was promoted to Commander of the 21st Panzer Division as well as the 15th. These then were combined to become the famous Africa Corps. Major General Rommel’s exploits in Africa were so highly recognized that even Allied troops referred to him as the Desert Fox for always seeming to create a victory out of almost hopeless conditions. Rommel was the first German commander to convert the 88mm anti-aircraft gun into a ground based anti-tank gun. This tactic was so successful that Rommel easily would dupe British forces into pursuing his lightly armored and poorly gunned tanks into an encirclement of hidden 88’s. The German artillery troops quickly learned this technique, routinely destroyed large numbers of British tanks, and captured thousands of Allied troops.

Throughout every campaign and battle, the youngest Field Marshal in German history showed compassion and care for his captives. While in the North African desert he even reduced the water ration of his own troops to ensure that captured troops would have enough water to drink. The Allied commanders regarded Rommel as the last of the chivalrous combatants – a man who respected his enemy and treated them with honor even in their defeat. The Africa Korps was never accused or charged with war crimes of any type at the Nuremberg War Trials.

The African Campaign swung back and forth between the British and the Germans. Rommel never received the supplies he needed so relied on his resourcefulness to achieve many victories in the face of certain withdrawal or defeat. Ultimately Allied forces overwhelmed the Africa Korps by having vast
supplies and finally placing General George Patton of the American forces and General Bernard Montgomery on the British side in charge of the African Campaign.

By 1944 even the fiercely loyal, but non-political, Rommel came to realize that Fürhrer Adolf Hitler was senselessly and hopeless leading Germany to its total destruction. It appears that Field Marshall Rommel at least had knowledge of the 1944 plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler called Operation Valkerie. But three days before the attempt on Hitler’s life Rommel was very seriously wounded by an airplane attack on his command car. Confined to the hospital and then to his home, Rommel recuperated and then prepared to resume his duties. But under severe interrogation torture several of the primary conspirators in Operation Valkerie finally gave up Field Marshall Rommel’s name as one being involved as well.

Given the choice of committing suicide or having his family disgraced and ruined while he stood in public trial, Rommel committed suicide with a poison capsule. Field Marshall Rommel was given a state funeral with full military honors.
Circle True or False after analyzing each of the following statements.

1. True  False  Field Marshal Rommel is most famous for his exploits in the African campaign of the Second World War.

2. True  False  During World War I Rommel served in the Afrika Corps.

3. True  False  During World War I Rommel received the prestigious Blue Max Italian military award.

4. True  False  After World War I Rommel taught at German military schools and wrote books on military topics.

5. True  False  When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany he selected Rommel as the head of the army.

6. True  False  During World War II Rommel was in charge of Panzer tank forces.

7. True  False  Rommel’s nickname during the African campaigns of World War II was Desert Rat.

8. True  False  Throughout every campaign and battle, Rommel showed compassion and care for his prisoners.

9. True  False  Rommel was victorious over British and American forces in the African campaign.

10. True  False  Rommel was implicated in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler and committed suicide rather than face the disgrace of a trial for treason.
Answers

1. True
2. False
3. False
4. True
5. False
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. True