

Rommel's War

STEPHEN AMBROSE'S review of David Fraser's *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* (Book World, Feb. 20) contains the highly questionable statement that "Rommel was a professional practicing his craft at the highest level . . . and doing it better than anyone else." The indisputable fact as shown by numerous official documents is that Rommel's incompetence as a commander allowed his army in North Africa to be severely weakened by disease, a major factor contributing to his defeat. For every German soldier Rommel lost due to British action, he lost almost three because of disease. In the summer and fall of 1942, the rate of attrition due to disease in Panzer Armee Afrika was three times that of the British 8th Army. Just before the climactic battle of Alamein, more than one out of every five Germans was incapacitated by sickness.

The commander is responsible for the health of his command. Rommel never understood this. While he was dashing about the battlefield performing the exploits for which he is now acclaimed, his army was withering away.

Rommel appears to have been a decent person but he, like many famous commanders in the past, seemed oblivious to the medical dimension of war. The end result was that, luckily for us, Rommel became a greater threat to his own men than was the enemy.

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Stephen E. Ambrose unreasonably speculates that Rommel risked being shot for refusing to accept Hitler's plans for repelling the allied landings in France in 1944. More likely, Rommel would have been sent home as many other senior German military men were for disagreeing with Hitler. Legendary commanders like Manstein and Guderian were among them.

Ambrose has also made factual errors. For instance, he wrote that Hitler attended Rommel's funeral. The Fuehrer did not; Field Marshal Rundstedt represented him. Incidentally, Rundstedt "went home" an unprecedented three times during the course of the Second World War because of differences in tactics and strategy with the German dictator.

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