

Staff Ride Co.!!

El Alamein

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Staff Ride to El Alamein

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From the rocky, weathered fighting positions, facing to the northeast, we had excellent fields of fire and nearly unlimited observation of the battlefield. All was quiet now, as it has been for fifty-one years, following the most critical battle of the North African campaign. Here, at 21:40 on 23 October 1942, Lt. Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery, commanding the British Eighth Army, launched his anticipated offensive with an intensive artillery barrage along the entire front. The battle of El Alamein had begun.

On this summer day in July 1993, I was retracing the defensive positions of the German forces located in the southern sector of the Axis positions. The purpose of my visit was to prepare a staff ride for my officers of the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), who would be in Egypt for an exercise later that year.

A staff ride of the El Alamein battlefield was an ideal training event for the 5th Group, the Special Forces Group oriented to CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command), since desert operations are the cornerstone of most missions the group must be able to undertake. The 5th Special Forces Group conducted a number of successful desert missions during Operation DESERT STORM. The requirement to have a mounted capability for all of the deployed Operational Detachment As (the Special Forces twelve-man A teams) was inherent in the mission letters and operations plans supported by the unit. The group used the DMV (Desert Mobility Vehicle), a modified HMMWV. In desert operations, mobility equates to survivability.

Leaving the coast road at the small town of El Alamein, we traveled with our Egyptian military liaison officer to the southwest, toward the Qattara Depression. We passed the former positions of the Italian *Bologna Division*, located to the northwest of the Ruweist Ridge. The desert was empty, except for occasional herds of camels. Within several kilometers of this location, to the south of Deir el Shein, we came upon a rise in the terrain which offered excellent defensive positions. A review of the German maps of

1942 indicated that this could very well be the positions of the German *Ramcke Brigade*, a *Fallschirmjager* brigade.

The *Ramcke Brigade* was a *Luftwaffe* paratroop formation sent to the *Afrika Korps* in the summer of 1942. It was commanded by *Generalmajor* Bernhardt Ramcke. The brigade was composed of four infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, an antitank company, and a pioneer company. It took up a position in the German-Italian line between the Italian *Bologna* and *Brescia Divisions*, facing the southern sector of the El Alamein line.

As we climbed the high ground off to the north of our road, we immediately saw numerous fighting positions, with rocks piled around each. We used our GPS (Global Positioning System) to lock in our coordinates in an attempt to confirm if, in fact, that was the *Ramcke Brigade* position. After several different readings, the correct coordinates placed our center of mass where the brigade was to have been located, at grid 762983. As we walked through the sand-filled trenches, it was not clear what forces had occupied the position. Slowly, we searched the area, finding remnants of ration and water cans, the majority of the ration tins being sardine and meat cans. Veterans of the *Afrika Korps* referred to the cans of Italian military sausage as "Old Man" (in German, *Alten Mann*), for the initials "AM" that were marked on these cans. The sardine tins also were a basic ration of the *Afrika Korps*, and were from occupied Norway and Italy. They were found lying next to nearly every position, from fighting positions to the communications trenches connecting all the positions. My first thoughts were of the absolutely poor camp hygiene and policing of the positions—thinking that the leadership must have been terrible to condone such a mess. Then, after reviewing the actual events, I realized that this position was held until approximately 4 November 1942—about twelve days—under intense artillery fire. Accordingly, the former occupants of this position were forced to remain

dug in, tossing out their ration cans. As we continued to search the area, we found the remains of many boots. Presumably, so many boots littered the area because of casualties and fatalities.

An examination of the boots also revealed the identify of the force, with German markings on the soles. Some still had remnants of fabric, indicating they were the German tropical boot issued to the *Afrika Korps*. Other artifacts quickly were identified: remains of a German K-98 leather ammunition pouch, baked into a hardened, twisted form, with the metal "D" ring still attached; a German grenade; sections of still-intact German newspapers, preserved beneath the cloth sandbags and sand near the fighting position; a German K-98 shell casing, dated 1941; remains of a tropical tunic exposed by the shifting, blowing sands; and the remnants of a German tropical pith helmet.

Being there on that remote position was like stepping into a time machine and returning to October 1942. As I stood in the German positions, most likely those of the *Ramcke Brigade*, I could not help but think of a photograph of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and General Ramcke overlooking these very positions shortly before the battle of El Alamein. They had been standing very near—possibly exactly—where I stood.

What were their thoughts at that time? Looking to the northeast, I could feel what thoughts a defender would have reviewed in his mind. Were the mines properly positioned, not only to the front, but also for a 360-degree-defense, in the event the position were bypassed? When and where will the British main effort come? How long could the position hold? I tried to answer all of these difficult questions from my vantage point overlooking the terrain, and from my knowledge of the past.

Step by step, we found many fragments of British mortar and artillery shells and unexploded ordnance. We also found a piece of a helmet, a pistol magazine, a link of German MG-42 ammunition, all indicators of the intense fighting which took place. Upon tracing the forward edge of the German defensive positions, we finally found what we also hoped to avoid: antitank and antipersonnel mines, some with fuzes still intact, others with the body rusted away. One was set to detonate electrically, the batteries rotted and fused together. These mines were the reason the position was as untouched as it was, since the local Arabs avoided the area.

After a day on the position, one could not help but sense the tactical situation that the *Ramcke Brigade*



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faced. El Alamein and the gateway to Alexandria and the Suez Canal had almost been within reach. Here, in their last position, they faced an inevitable defeat at the hands of the British Eighth Army. The coastal road and the Mediterranean Ocean were so near, and yet so far from them.

Finally forced to withdraw, the veterans of the *Ramcke Brigade* abandoned their now worn positions and, in the confusion of the German retreat to the west, were presumed lost. But despite the odds against them, the brigade made a 200-mile retreat to Fuka, where they rejoined the German forces. Their movement across open desert dominated by the British was a remarkable feat. Along the way they captured a British convoy intact, thus enabling them to reach their own lines.

Today, all that remains of the *Ramcke Brigade's* position are the pieces of equipment and the sand-filled trenches. As the desert wind blows, more of the unit's past is exposed to the visitor. The rusted bits of barbed wire, the mines, the remnants of a paratrooper's helmet, a soldier's ring, remind us of the human dimension of war. Technology, tactics, and weapons have changed, but not the individual soldier. Standing in the *Ramcke Brigade* positions, overlooking the battlefield to the northeast, was like being on Little Round Top at Gettysburg, recalling and sensing the struggle that took place at that location. A staff ride is, without a doubt, the closest way to capture the human dimension of war and to learn directly from the past.

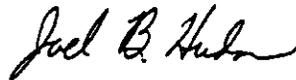
A trip to the El Alamein battlefield should begin at the museum located off the coastal road in the still small village of El Alamein. There, an electric map presents an overview of the North Africa campaign. Additionally, there are excellent displays of equipment, uniforms, and weapons used by all of the forces. Outside the museum, the weathered remains of tanks, vehicles, and artillery pieces salvaged from the battlefield stand in silent tribute to the soldiers who fought.

Following a stop at the museum, a visit to the Commonwealth, German, and Italian cemeteries is recommended. Each site has its own unique characteristics and mystique. The Commonwealth cemetery consists of grave markers inscribed with the name and regiment, or nationality, of the fallen, often with a personal inscription from a family member. Flowers grow around each headstone, in defiance of the desert sun and sands. The German cemetery features a stone, castle-like structure situated overlooking the Mediterranean at El Alamein, a view not seen by the defenders in 1942. Here, all of the names of the fallen are

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inscribed in stone in the castle's inner courtyard. The remains of those Germans killed in the battle also are interred within. The absolutely beautiful view from this location is in sharp contrast to the remote and distant positions held so long ago. The Italian cemetery, likewise, is located overlooking the sea. A new monument and chapel are located here, with the remains of the Italian fallen located inside the chapel. The names of the units and the individual soldiers are inscribed in white marble. Inside, an atmosphere of peace and beauty overcomes the horrors of war one senses these soldiers experienced.

Local Arab citizens may approach you at these cemeteries and monuments to sell an assortment of relics found on the battlefield: cap and regimental badges, rusted helmets, rings, shields from German tropical pith helmets, medals, rusted remains of bayonets and other weapons. All of these belonged to soldiers who lost their youths, their futures, and their lives. They fought an epic battle that resulted in an

Allied victory. The lessons learned from this struggle, and from the campaign in North Africa, continue to instruct us today. The only way to learn from them and to appreciate them fully is to do a staff ride to the El Alamein battlefield.

Brig. Gen. Kenneth R. Bowra is Commander, Special Operations Command, U.S. Southern Command.

Recommended Reading

Desmond Young, *Rommel: The Desert Fox* (New York: Harper, 1950).

B.H. Liddel-Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953).

Dal McGuirk, *Afrikakorps Self Portrait* (Shrewsbury, U.K.: Airlife Publishing Ltd., 1992).

Gordon Williamson and Ron Volstad, *Afrikakorps, 1941-43* (London: Osprey Publishing, Ltd., 1991).

Editor's Journal

With this issue, *Army History* bids farewell to our long-running World War II Chronology, and I certainly want to thank Mr. Ned Bedessem for all his work on that feature. It has been an important part of the Center's fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the war.

This is a combined spring/summer issue. Many of us will be occupied these next several months with military history workshops, conferences, and—let's face it—with vacations.

Please note that in April the Center came under the new TEMPO telephone system, so our numbers have been changed, or at least, the prefixes to our numbers: the old 504 commercial prefix is now 761; the old DSN 285 prefix is now 763.

A.G. Fisch, Jr.

Siena College World War II Conference

Siena College, Loudonville, New York, will hold its Tenth Annual Multidiscipline Conference 1-2 June 1995. The conference theme is World War II—a fifty-year perspective. Conference organizers hope to include papers devoted to the air war, the war in northwestern Europe, the war in the Pacific and Asia, governments in exile, literature, art, film, Yalta and Teheran, popular culture, minority issues, women's studies, religion, pacifism, conscription, and the homefront.

For more information, contact the conference codirector, Professor Thomas O. Kelly II, Department of History, Siena College, 515 Loudon Road, Loudonville, NY 12211-1462, or call (518) 783-2595, FAX (518) 783-4293.