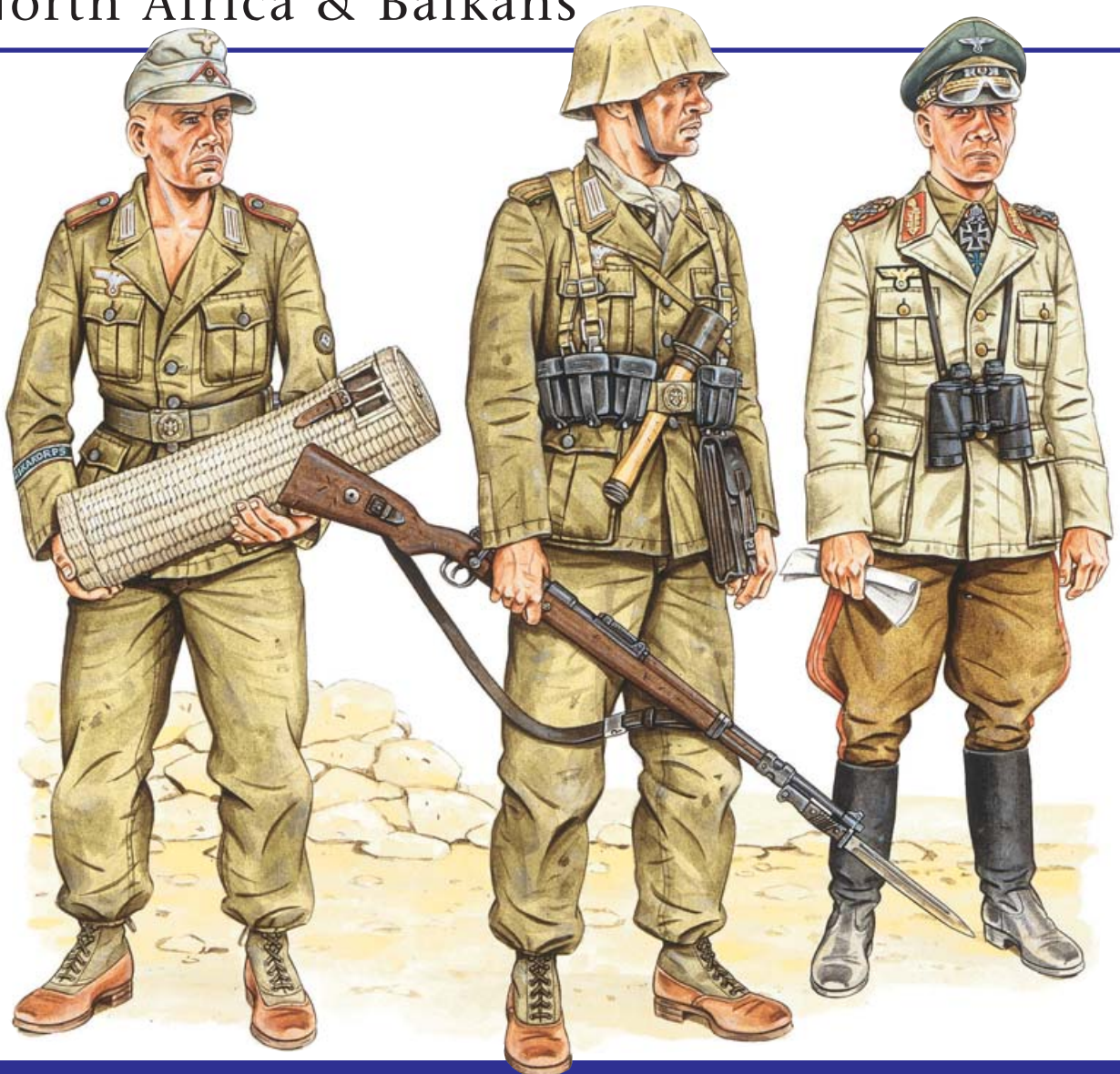


The German Army 1939–45 (2)

North Africa & Balkans



Nigel Thomas • Illustrated by Stephen Andrew

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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THE CONTEXT OF THE NORTH AFRICAN AND BALKAN CAMPAIGNS

The Franco-German armistice of 25 June 1940 made Germany master of Western Europe. Hitler first considered an invasion of Great Britain in autumn 1940, then scheduled Operation *Barbarossa*, the conquest of the European part of the Soviet Union, for May 1941. Anxious to emulate Hitler's successes, the Italian dictator Mussolini embarked upon unnecessary military adventures in North Africa and the Balkans, which forced Hitler's intervention, diverting and depleting precious German resources, and a six-week postponement of *Barbarossa*. This contributed to German defeat on the Eastern Front and Germany's collapse in May 1945.

A member of the Africa Corps, in bleached M1940 tropical field cap and M1940 tropical shirt, stencils the Corps tactical sign to a lorry door with white paint. (Josef Charita)



The Quality of Army Units

On 31 July 1940 Hitler began to prepare for *Barbarossa*. Now the combat area dictated the quality of army divisions that were used: those in North Africa were generally makeshift units, reflecting the low priority of that theatre; the forces committed to Operation *Marita* – the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece – were front-line divisions earmarked for *Barbarossa*. They were replaced by second-line units with limited mobility and combat potential, first-line units making limited appearances in the Balkans until August 1943 and the arrival of the formidable 2 *Panzer* Army.

The Development of Army Units in North Africa and the Balkans

From 5 October 1941 the *Panzer* group was upgraded to a *Panzer* army. Mountain corps were formed after September 1940 and motorised corps were redesignated *Panzer* corps after June 1942. Reserve corps were formed after September 1942 for reserve divisions of units training in occupied countries.

First-line infantry divisions generally retained their 1939 organisation until 1942, often adding a reinforcement battalion to allocate reinforcements.

To raise morale all infantry regiments were redesignated *Grenadier* regiments on 15 October 1942 and the Rhodes garrison was designated an 'assault' division on 31 May 1943. The 22 Airlanding Division was an infantry

unit with airborne training, while the 'Africa' designation reflected reduced organisation or 'non-standard' personnel – German ex-French foreign legionnaires or 'disciplinary' personnel convicted of petty offences but considered redeemable; they were also used for manning fortress units for static guard duties in Greece. 'Special purpose' (z.b.V.) referred to a staff controlling heterogeneous units.

On 13 April 1941 '700-series' infantry divisions that were only 8,000 strong were formed from second-line troops for occupation duties. There were two infantry regiments, which lacked heavy equipment, an artillery battalion, reconnaissance, engineer and signals companies and minimal logistical support. On 1 April 1943 these divisions, along with light infantry divisions (formed in December 1940 for combat in hilly terrain) and selected reserve divisions, were reorganised as rifle (*Jäger*) divisions with younger personnel and M1939 infantry organisation, but with only two rifle regiments. From 1942 territorial rifle units were gradually redesignated security units.

The most important field unit controlled by Army Intelligence (*Abwehr*) was *Brandenburg* Commando Regiment 800 (*Lehr-Regiment Brandenburg z.b.V.800*). On 20 November 1942 it was redesignated Special Unit (*Sonderverband*) *Brandenburg*, with five regiments and a signals and a coastal commando battalion; on 1 April 1943 it was redesignated the *Brandenburg* Division; and on 15 September 1944 it became the *Brandenburg* Mechanised Division.

Sonderverband 287 and 288 were mixed regiments of specialist troops originally organised for commando operations in the Persian Gulf, then reassigned for conventional warfare. *Sonderverband* 287, formed on 4 August 1942, fought in the Caucasus with two mechanised battalions, a signals battalion; AT, armoured reconnaissance and engineer companies, assault artillery and rocket projector batteries and a supply unit. From 2 May 1943 it served in Yugoslavia as 92nd Motorised Regiment.

Sonderverband 288, formed on 24 July 1941 with a staff (HQ, armoured reconnaissance and Arab companies) and eight independent companies (sabotage, mountain, motorised rifle, MG, AT, AA, engineers and signals), fought in North Africa; it became Mechanised Regiment Africa on 31 October 1942.

The 1941 *Panzer* division organisation differed from that of 1939 by having one *Panzer* regiment and two motorised rifle regiments. By August 1941 all mobile divisions had converted to *Panzer* divisions, and on 5 July 1942 motorised rifle regiments in *Panzer* and light Africa divisions were redesignated mechanised (*Panzergrenadier*) regiments. On 24 March 1943 the motorcycle reconnaissance battalions became armoured reconnaissance battalions with armoured cars, motorcycles and jeeps. Divisional *Füsilier* battalions were partly bicycle-equipped infantry introduced on 2 October 1943, replacing dis-

Part of an armoured engineers' section line up for the attack. They are wearing helmets (first issued in late 1941 to front-line troops) with hessian covers held in place by bread-bag straps, M1940 tropical field tunics, tropical breeches and 1st pattern M1940 tropical high-boots. Note the equipment of the machine gunner (right), the hessian bags for grenades and assault equipment, and the spare LMG ammunition boxes. (ECPA)





A Leutnant commanding an assault engineer platoon. Note the MP38/40 canvas ammunition pouches, the M1924 stick-grenades and the MP40 submachine gun slung over the shoulder. The officer has retained M1935 continental officers' field collar-patches and has covered his helmet with a rough hessian cover. (Friedrich Herrmann)

banded divisional reconnaissance battalions, and 'AA' battalions continued cavalry traditions.

In March 1940 anti-tank assault-gun batteries were formed, and on 10 August 1940 they were grouped into battalions, each with 31 self-propelled guns. Army anti-aircraft artillery battalions were introduced in February 1941, with three batteries of 8.8cm anti-aircraft guns as anti-tank guns.

Supply services were co-ordinated by the divisional supply (*Nachschub*) officer, in October 1942, redesignated the divisional supply commander, controlling the motor-transport and fuel-supply columns (from 25 November 1942 grouped into a motor-transport company), horse-drawn transport columns (from 15 November 1943 grouped into a company), workshop company and supply company (later battalion).

FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS

The increasing demands on manpower forced the recruitment of foreign nationals.

3rd Bn *Sonderverband 287*, the German-Arab instruction battalion (*Deutsch-Arabische Lehrabteilung*), was formed on 12 January 1942 and fought in Tunisia. On 22 November 1942 the Vichy-French *Phalange Africaine* (African Phalanx) was formed in Tunisia, and in March 1943 its 220 personnel fought with 334th Infantry Regiment in Tunisia. On 9 January 1943 the 'German-Arab

Troops Command' (*KODAT*), also called the 'Free Arabian Legion', was established in Tunisia; eventually it comprised one Moroccan, one Algerian and two Tunisian limited combat value battalions with German cadres.

In Yugoslavia three 'Croatian Legion' infantry divisions were formed to fight Tito's Partisans: the 369th 'Devil's Division' on 21 August 1942; 373rd 'Tiger Division' on 6 January 1943; and 392nd 'Blue Division' on 17 August 1943. On 12 September 1941 a force of White Russians, eventually five regiments strong and designated Russian Corps, fought in Serbia. German-Arab Infantry Battalion 845, formed on 5 June 1943 from 3rd Bn *Sonderverband 287*, served in Greece; and Armenian Infantry Battalion I/125 fought in Albania with 297th Infantry Division.

In September 1943 perhaps the most exotic formation of the Second World War, the 1st Cossack Division, arrived in Croatia with 2nd *Panzer* Army. Formed in occupied Poland on 4 August 1943 from units who had fought with the Germans on the Eastern Front, it comprised a German cadre commanding two cavalry brigades with two Don, one Siberian, one Kuban and two Terek cavalry regiments, one artillery regiment and divisional support units. Attached to LXIX Corps in eastern Croatia on anti-partisan duties, the division achieved an unenviable reputation among the civilian population.

A Protestant divisional chaplain conducts a graveside funeral service, with Rommel standing behind him. He wears the M1940 tropical field uniform and, as a Protestant, a plain chest-cross. He has no shoulder-boards on his M1940 tropical tunic but has retained continental collar-patches. The pith helmet, of limited value in combat, was more common behind the lines on formal occasions. (ECPA)

THE STRATEGY IN NORTH AFRICA

On 13 September 1940 the Italian 10th Army advanced from Cyrenaica (north-east Libya) into Egypt, only to be forced back into Tripolitania (north-west Libya) by the First Offensive from the British imperial garrison. Hitler decided to send a small expeditionary force to bolster Italian forces by blocking the Allied advance and prevent an Italian collapse in Libya.

Encouraged by initial successes, the German commander, *Generalleutnant* Erwin Rommel, dreamed of occupying Egypt and advancing into the Middle East, linking up with a victorious German thrust through Southern Russia into Iraq and Iran, and threatening British India. However, with the steady Allied build-up his forces (four divisions in Libya) made even the official objective unrealistic. Rommel was constrained by permanent shortages of fuel, supplies and reinforcements; much of it had to be brought by sea from Naples to Tripoli, across the western Mediterranean, which was patrolled by British forces.

The Build-up in North Africa

The contingent which disembarked at Tripoli on 14 February 1941 became the 5. *Leichte Division* (5th Mobile Division) on 18 February. It had *Panzerr Regiment 5* with 120 tanks (instead of 44 in the usual battalion), 3rd Reconnaissance Bn, 39th Anti-Tank Bn, I/75 Artillery Bn (instead of a regiment) and motorised divisional support units – 1/83 Medical Company, 4/572 Field-Hospital, 309th Military Police Troop and 735th Field Post Office, but no engineers or signals. To this were added 2nd and 8th Machine-Gun

