JAMES LUCAS

HITLER'S COMMANDERS

German Action in the Field, 1939–1945

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT KERSHAW

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Introduction

James Lucas was a prolific author specializing in the German Army of the Second World War. This book about Hitler's commanders was published in 2000 and covers a wide spectrum of distinguished Wehrmacht and SS military leaders. A conundrum often discussed when it was published was why did the German soldier appear generally more effective than his opponents? Between 1939–41 Hitler's Wehrmacht achieved a series of spectacular victories against a coalition of enemies, demonstrating a high degree of operational and logistic flexibility. From 1942 until 1945 it fought a largely attritional war against overwhelmingly powerful Allied forces. The individual commanders that Lucas describes span both these periods. Germany's enemies were to be taken aback by the aggression and élan demonstrated during the blitzkrieg advances, led by many of these commanders. The same men were also responsible for later dogged defence battles with an ability to regenerate capabilities after seemingly irreversible setbacks and still counter-attack at every opportunity. Lucas attempts to explain who these men were and why they were so successful.

Hitler's commanders were able to exploit the potential of well-trained and motivated soldiers, optimally structured and organized to generate maximum combat power. The ratio of armed 'teeth' relative to logistic 'tail' components of German combat formations were much higher than their British and American equivalents in the west, and superior in command

and control terms to the Soviets in the east. Officers and NCOs embraced a shared leadership doctrine, which combined experience and professional technical proficiency alongside a close camaraderie with their soldiers. The essence of German success can be identified by an examination of what motivated their soldiers alongside the sort of psychological traits that underpinned and hardened this resolve.

Soldiers were patriotic to the Fatherland and devoted to the führer, Adolf Hitler, to whom they swore an oath of allegiance. Like Napoleon before him, and in spite of the same heavy casualties, wholesale destruction and strategic errors, Hitler was still revered by many of his men as late as 1945. The fallout attendant on failure was more generally directed at the Nazi 'party hacks' who mismanaged the economy and the organization of the war effort on the Home Front. Duty to the Fatherland remained a motivation throughout the war, but the desire to survive also played a role. Service with elite formations and particularly alongside known veterans, despite the casualties, improved survival prospects, most soldiers believed. Propaganda played a role, particularly the *Untermensch,* or sub-human view of the 'rapacious and merciless' Red Army soldier. Hatred and fear hardened resistance.

Underpinning the Reich's military edifice was a generous system of rewards. German soldiers were paid well and entitled to 14 days leave each year. Again like Napoleon before him, Adolf Hitler showered medals and awards upon his soldiers. When war was declared on Poland on 1 September 1939, Hitler reinstated the Iron Cross decoration. Unlike the British Victoria Cross or American Medal of Honor, which could be awarded for a single act of outstanding gallantry, the Iron Cross was graded from second to first class to Knight's Cross. Virtually all the commanders reviewed by Lucas in this book were Knight's Cross holders or recipients of its further grades of Oak Leaves, Swords, Diamonds, to ultimately Golden Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds. The German

Cross in silver and gold was instituted to supplement the Knight's Cross as was also the War Merit Cross and a whole variety of combat and proficiency badges.

There was a wide distribution of these decorations and they became objects of intense interest and competition among German soldiers. *Hals Schmerzen* or 'sore-throat' was a common affliction that soldiers colloquially applied to those dangerous men who were prepared to risk all, including their companions, to attain the much coveted Knight's Cross. The 'sore throat' relates to the fact that the aspiring hero is itching to wear the award around his neck to alleviate the pain of not having one. The man who wore it was saluted by his peers, whether an officer or soldier. Gallantry awards in a society that ideologically extolled soldierly virtues, such as courage, preparedness to make the ultimate sacrifice and toughness, made a man stand out before the crowd. He became the darling of the girls, alongside the dashing black uniforms of the panzer arm or the distinctive baggy Fallschirmjäger (paratrooper) smock. Cuff links and badges were worn by elite and SS units. Two of Lucas's subject commanders, Eduard Dietl 'the hero of Narvik' and Theodor Scherer, 'the defender of Cholm' successfully fought actions that earned the award of distinguished battle shields. The 'Narvik' and 'Cholm' shield, commemorating their iconic achievements, were worn on the upper left arm of surviving participants.

A draconian system of military justice was in the last resort the final arbiter of combat discipline at the front. During the First World War 48 German soldiers in the Kaiserheer (Imperial Army) were executed for infringements of military justice. Between 1939–45 the figure expanded to over 11,700. 'Undermining fighting morale' and desertion were the primary offences. But it was not simply the fear of punishment that kept the German fighting man in the line and held the fabric together during the crisis years of 1942–5.

A number of psychological characteristics were common to the men that Hitler's commanders led in battle. Soldiers were

invariably young and this peer group was more prepared to take risks. The Hitler Youth produced men who were 'swift as a greyhound, tough as leather and as hard as Krupp steel'. They were psychologically schooled in National Socialism to accept that the individual's role was minor, the *Volk* were all important. These men were subjected to such harsh, realistic and repetitive training in uncomfortable combat conditions that the preparedness to act bravely and take risks in the field became almost a mechanical reflex, rather than an exercise of will. Orders were to be carried out at all costs.

Officers were acutely aware of their iconic representative role and seemed almost obsessively anxious not to display cowardice. The successes of the blitzkrieg years spawned multiple awards for gallantry. Most of the officers that Lucas reviews had won their Knight's Crosses before the fortunes of war changed in 1942. Common to most was recognition not just of bravery but also success. General Dietl managed to stave off almost certain defeat at Narvik in 1940 at a sensitive moment in the war, before blitzkrieg had burst on the west. It was a time when a nervous German population was unsure of the führer's military competence and sought reassurance. Dietl was suitably rewarded and became the first war time soldier to receive the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross, celebrating success, when the future course of the war was by no means assured.

Scherer was rewarded for the successful defense of Cholm at a particularly bleak time for German propaganda. The German advance on Moscow had been broken by the Soviet winter counter-offensive and the Home Front was reeling from the enormity of the casualty lists. The successful relief of Cholm in the spring of 1942 was a ray of propaganda sunlight for a regime under pressure. Scherer was rewarded for doing what was ordered. Many of Hitler's generals had been cashiered for ignoring his infamous 'hold and if necessary die in place' order, designed to shore up a crumbling eastern front. Scherer lost almost two-thirds of his 5,500 men doing just

that, earning Hitler's gratitude by vindicating a seemingly inhuman directive.

The higher the gallantry award the greater the expectation of courage from the wearer. Knight's Cross holders were not expected to fail. Ideological heroes existed. There was always a particular veteran who would achieve notoriety as a 'bunker cracker' or another might be a renowned 'tank destroyer' with an armful of tank kill badges to prove it. Such men were renowned throughout their units and their services constantly called upon. Death became their particular calling.

Why did the German soldier fight on even when the war was clearly lost? Many of the same factors still applied. Survival clearly played a role. It had already been identified that 80% of the soldiers taken prisoner during the first year did not survive, so it was riskier to be taken prisoner than fight on. As Lucas recounts in many of his accounts, camaraderie was holding the core of resistance together. It was better to tenaciously fight on Germany's borders, than in the Reich itself. *Veruckte Helmuts* or 'Crazy Helmuts' were men who had lost families and all they possessed to Allied bombing or to the advance of the Red Army in the eastern provinces. They all became heroes and fought on because they had nothing more to lose and were prepared to sell their lives dearly. Brave withdrawals were not, however, as generously rewarded as brave advances, there was less propaganda benefit. Organization, doctrine and professionalism were the sinews binding small groups together as the Reich collapsed. It appears to have functioned up until the last moment. Leutnant Ludwig Bauer, with Panzer Regiment 33 was astounded to be awarded the Knight's Cross during the final days of the war. A despatch rider found him amid the ruins, just before the surrender was signed.

Robert Kershaw, 2014

Preface

Hitler's Enforcers, which I wrote in 1994, described the ways in which it was possible for Germans to become officers in the armed forces, and because this background information is important I am repeating it here.

The precondition which had been essential in earlier centuries, that of noble birth, was relaxed in the latter years of the German Empire and abolished completely during the time of the Weimar Republic, when education and not nobility was the preferred route. In the period of the Third Reich, these two preconditions were replaced by the demand for National Socialist fervour. Bravery in the field had always been a route to a commission, and in the Second World War many men were promoted as a reward for their heroic acts.

The brief biographies that form the text of this book include men who advanced through the military hierarchy via all three of the routes cited above. They include the aristocratic von Arnim, scion of a family which had supplied the German Army with general officers for centuries; the intellectual Westphal, who served as the Ia to several senior officers; and the paratroop hero Schaefer, a sergeant who held the vital position of Cactus Farm in Tunisia. It should not be a source of surprise that men of quite junior rank are recorded here, for their ability, skill and bravery demanded that they be included in these pages, just as it would be incorrect to assume that only senior commanders were capable of bringing a battle to a successful outcome. Walther Koch, the paratroop commander, was a subaltern officer when he led a battalion-size group which captured the vital canal bridges in Belgium and also seized the fortress of Eben Emaël on the opening day of the war in the West in 1940. Scherer, a major-general commanding a hastily assem-

bled battle group, fought a defensive battle at Cholm during the winter of 1941 and defeated the best strategic efforts of an entire Soviet shock army. These men and others like them are among those described in these pages.

As an aid to the reader's full understanding of the text, it is necessary to outline some part of the recent history of Germany. In 1918 the Imperial Army that had gone out to fight in 1914 sought an armistice, out of which the Great War was brought to an end. A defeated and weakened Germany was forbidden, under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, to have heavy weapons, such as tanks, big guns, aeroplanes or submarines. The Army was restricted in size to just 100,000 men. Germany was, therefore, defenceless against two enemies—first, those nations whose armies invaded her territory, and secondly, a political enemy, communism, which sought to overthrow the elected government. In order to defeat the first type of enemy, groups of ex-servicemen banded together into Freikorps, which fought quite literally for hearth and home. In time the enemy incursions were driven out and there was external peace. The second enemy was defeated by the National Socialists (Nazis) when they came to power.

The German Army had always enjoyed the premier position *vis-à-vis* the other services, the Navy and the Air Force. However, discussions at senior level during the years after the Great War had led to the conclusion that all the services were equally important and that a single High Command, embracing all three, needed to be created. This amalgamation took place in the first years of the Nazi Party's government and well before the outbreak of the Second World War, and that body was called *die Wehrmacht* (the Armed Forces). The Wehrmacht then broke down into three component bodies, an Army High Command (Oberkommando des Heeres, OKH), a Naval High Command (Oberkommando der Marine, OKM) and an Air Force High Command (Oberkommando der Luftwaffe, OKL). Although several of the accounts in this text deal with paratroops who were Luftwaffe personnel, it is true to say that they, *die Fallschirmjäger*, fought a ground war as infantry and have, therefore, been included here as if they were part of the OKH forces. Therefore, we need consider the Army as the body responsible for the operations described here.

The Army High Command had its own General Staff system, whose branches included, among many others, the department responsible for the planning of military operations, another department conferred with gathering intelligence on foreign armies and others for the issue of supplies and for the procurement of recruits and reinforcements. That hierarchical structure was repeated, although on a diminishing scale, down to divisional level, a division being the lowest formation capable of undertaking operations on its own initiative. That organisational structure was a very flexible one and was suited to the needs of the commander of the military force undertaking a particular mission. The divisional commander was expected, when faced with a difficult military problem, to use his own initiative, and this he not only was able to do but was encouraged to do

This tri-force structure was then complicated by the growth of a party political army, the SS. The Allgemeine SS was, initially, the only type of SS organisation, but when the Nazi Party came to power, as it did in January 1933, a second branch, the Totenkopf (Death's Head) regiment, was created, to staff the concentration camps. It was so called because the Totenkopf soldiers carried on their caps the badge of a skull and crossbones, a device which then passed into general wear by the whole SS organisation. Quite early in the Party's years of government, the Allgemeine or General Branch began to tighten its control over the nation and started to form regiments which would be used to put down a counter-revolution. These units were armed and drilled as a military force and became, in time, the third type of SS unit, the Verfügungs Truppen or 'units available'. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War those groups which had been raised to counter revolutionary activities were combined into a Verfügungs Division. This was the birth of the Waffen SS (the armed SS), an organisation which grew during the course of the war to become a mighty force of thirty-eight divisions.

Reverting to the immediate pre-war years, it has to be stated that there was hostility on the part of the Army generals to the idea of the SS carrying arms, for they saw the rise of an armed Party militia as a threat to their unique position as the weapons-bearers of the nation. The Army generals had also opposed the setting up of the OKW, which

they saw as a reduction of their power and influence. For their part, the SS commanders despised the generals as reactionary and lacking National Socialist enthusiasm. That mutual hostility very soon faded on the battlefield, where the SS formations proved their fighting capabilities. In time, the differences in attitude between the Waffen SS and the Army were resolved, and, except for certain differences in uniform, both organisations can be considered as one.

Army, Navy and Air Force personnel wore identical badges of rank, with slight variations. The Waffen SS, however, was different. Not only did it have, to begin with, different rank names from those in the Army, but it also had its own particular insignia. The Waffen SS officers carried on the lapels of their tunics a selection of stars and bars which indicated their rank. However, after the outbreak of war it became clear that having two different sets of names and insignia was confusing. Thereupon the Waffen SS adopted Army insignia for their shoulder boards and added the conventional rank names in the description of their title, although the organisation retained the lapel insignia to the end of the war. Personnel in the Army, paratroop branch and Waffen SS, when dressed in camouflage tunics or white winter jackets, carried on the upper sleeve a pattern of wings, oak leaves and/or bars to indicate rank.

In common with other national armies, the German forces not only wore medals as marks of distinction but had cuff titles and also small metal arm shields to denote that the wearer had been in the action for which the arm badge had been awarded. In the case of the Waffen SS, cuff titles bore either the regimental or the divisional name. The paratroops also wore an identifying cuff title, while in the Army cuff titles were bestowed—usually—for campaigns, as in the case of the Africa cuff title. There were two types of that distinction issued, and it was possible for a soldier to have been awarded both patterns, one being worn on either cuff.

Wound badges were issued in black for up to three wounds, in silver for between three and six wounds and in gold for more than six. The German Cross was an eight-pointed star in black and silver, with a swastika set in a wreath in either gold or silver.

All the men described in this book were awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. The Iron Cross was awarded in a series of stages

from 2nd class upwards to the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds. The German services did not consider a single act of bravery to be sufficient grounds for the premier decoration to be awarded, as is the case in the Victoria Cross. To be awarded the Knight's Cross the serviceman had to gain each stage of the Iron Cross before going on to the next senior stage. It was usual for NCOs or men who had won that decoration to be promoted to commissioned rank. The logic behind awarding or withholding awards for bravery in the German services is confusing. One officer in this book was three times recommended for the Knight's Cross and had his recommendation rejected twice. On one occasion he received instead the German Cross and on the second occasion the Panzer Badge in Silver. This was in line with a recommendation for a Iron Cross 2nd Class, which was turned down, despite the man having carried out a daring mission, on the grounds that, at that time (the early hours of 31 August 1939), no state of war existed between Germany and Poland. The German Army was a mixture of petty officialdom and pragmatic action. It is a fascinating army to study.

Acknowledgements

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However, no expression of thanks would be complete without acknowledging the unfailing encouragement, support and love of my dear wife, Traude. Without her I could never have completed this book.

James Lucas
London, 2000

Generaloberst

Hans-Jürgen von Arnim

The last General Commanding Army Group Africa

Hans-Jürgen von Arnim was born on 4 April 1889 in Ernsdorf, Silesia, the son of a general. The von Arnims were an old military family, and no fewer than thirty of Hans-Jürgen's ancestors had served Prussia, later Germany, and had risen to the rank of General Officer.

As befitted the descendant of such a militarily illustrious family, Hans Jürgen von Arnim was a strong-minded but eminently fair man to his subordinates, with whom he had strong relationships. He did not relish arguments with his superiors, but neither did he avoid them. He was described throughout his service career as ambitious and willing to accept responsibility, and as a calm man who never lost his nerve and who remained unruffled. Early in his years in the Army of the Weimar Republic he was described as having a capacity for hard work and the ability to think and to act decisively.

The young Hans Jürgen was educated in the Görlitz Gymnasium and at Glogau, where he gained his graduation diplomas. He then entered the Army as an Ensign on 1 April 1908, and after completing his officer training course was commissioned, on 19 August 1909, in the 4th Regiment of Foot Guards.

During the Great War he served on the Western Front, first as the regimental adjutant in 1914; then in 1915 he took over as a company commander in the Reserve Infantry Regiment of the 4th Guards Division. During his time with that unit von Arnim was wounded on three occasions. His service won him several decorations for bravery, including both classes of the Iron Cross, the Wound Badge in Black, the Hamburg Hanseatic Order and the Hohenzollern House Order. Later

in the war he was posted to the Eastern Front, where he served in the Guards Jäger Division. He was promoted to the rank of Captain on 27 January 1917, and nine months later he was given command of an infantry battalion, with which he continued to serve when it was returned to France and Flanders during 1918.

At the end of the war he was one of the officers selected to serve in the 100,000-man Army of the Weimar Republic and was employed in the standard German Army fashion, with alternating periods of regimental and staff duties. The latter were chiefly with the 'Troops Department', the cover name for the General Staff. The victorious Allies had ordered the German General Staff to be disbanded and, indeed, the name was discarded, but the structure and the function of that body remained intact.

By the autumn of 1928 von Arnim had risen to the rank of Major in a new regimental post and was given command of the 29th Infantry Regiment in Charlottenburg. His next command was that of the Ortelsburg Rifle Battalion. In 1932 came promotion to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, and six months later he began a two-year tour of duty commanding the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Infantry Regiment. Three years later he reached the rank of Colonel and an appointment as Ia (Operations Staff Officer) to the 23rd Infantry Division. In October 1935 he took command of the 68th Infantry Regiment, which was garrisoned in Brandenburg, and three years later he received promotion to the rank of Generalmajor (Brigadier-General).

In 1938 von Arnim was appointed—some said it was a demotion—to the post of Chief of the Army's 4th Service Department, another cover name for a staff post and one which saw him as the equivalent of a divisional commander, although he did not lead a division until after the outbreak of war, when his post as General Officer Commanding 52nd Infantry Division was announced on 8 September 1939. The division he was to command was forming in the Saarpfalz region and he led it against the Allies during the war in the West. It was in that campaign that he won the clasps to both of the classes of Iron Cross that he had been awarded during the Great War. He was promoted to Generalleutnant (Major-General) on 1 December 1939, and during 1940 he was given command of the 17th Panzer Division. That forma-

tion then moved to Poland to prepare for Operation 'Barbarossa', the German invasion of Russia.

For the opening battles of the war against Russia, in June 1941, von Arnim's division was part of Guderian's 2nd Panzer Group in Army Group Centre. The Panzer group had the task of thrusting through eastern Poland and advancing through western Russia, via Smolensk, and ultimately to attack Moscow. During the advances of those early weeks and months, Guderian and the Panzer formations under his command took part in the vast encirclement battles that marked the German Army's careering progress in that first summer and autumn of the war on the Eastern Front.

But that is to anticipate events. Within days of the opening of the Russian war, von Arnim was wounded on the outskirts of the town of Schklov, and so seriously that he was first evacuated to Lemberg and then to Berlin for treatment. Before that wounding he had already had one lucky escape. On 24 June two Russian T-25 tanks appeared suddenly on the western edge of the town of Slonim, which his 17th Panzer Division had just captured. The enemy machines opened fire upon the group of German officers standing at the side of the road discussing the next stage of the advance. Among that group was Guderian, the Commanding General of the 2nd Panzer Group, Lemelsen, the GOC of the 48th Panzer Corps, and von Arnim. The generals managed to avoid the fire of the Russian tanks, both of which were destroyed by German artillery. On 4 September von Arnim was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, and shortly afterwards was also promoted to the rank of General of Panzer Troops (Lieutenant-General).

The need for convalescence after his wounds had healed meant that it was not until 17 September that von Arnim was able to take up command again of the 17th Panzer Division, which he then led during the encirclement battle of Kiev and, subsequently, in the battles to destroy the Red Army holding out in the pockets of Vyasma and Briansk. One of the great successes of this period was the capture intact of the Desna Bridge as well as the strategically important junction of Briansk. Not long after his return, Operation 'Typhoon' began the German offensive to capture Moscow. In the closing stages of that operation, the German Army Group Centre was trying to encircle two Red Army

fronts, Timoshenko's 'West' and Yeremenko's 'Briansk'. These operations were on a massive scale: Timoshenko's force numbered six armies while Yeremenko controlled three. As early as the first week of October, German operations against these two fronts had created two huge pockets, which were in the final stages of disintegration. It was the task of the 17th Panzer to close the ring at Briansk.

On 5 October von Arnim sent out a battle group and ordered it to strike across the Red Army's defences to the north-west of Akulova and to cut the Karachev–Briansk road. Behind that battle group spearhead would follow the main body of the 17th Panzer Division. The battle group made good progress and had halted at Glushy to regroup when the Divisional Ia drove up, bringing with him fresh orders from the corps commander that the battle plan had been changed. It is a measure of the German Army's flexibility and a tribute to the spirit that von Arnim had aroused in his men that this alteration was carried out smoothly and without friction. The new orders were that the division's thrust line was to change so that Briansk was to be attacked from the rear. That operation brought victory, and the town was taken on 7 October. Its main defences had indeed faced westwards, i.e. the direction from which the Red Army had expected the German assault to be made.

As a result of the 17th Panzer's swift assault and capture of Briansk, touch was gained between Guderian's 2nd Panzer Group and the German 3rd Army, and that contact closed fast the ring that had been flung around the Russian mass in the Briansk pocket. Towards the end of October, the 17th Panzer was immobilised because it had run out of fuel for its tanks. Once resupplied, it was posted to Orel but was again held fast at Protova, this time by the thick autumn mud. By the time that the 17th was mobile again, von Arnim had been ordered to lay down command of his division in order to take up a new post. He was given a new command—that of leading the 39th Corps, which was in the line to the east of Leningrad. The 39th Corps was in a parlous state, and the situation in which it found itself was one potentially catastrophic for Army Group North.

To set the background, the German and Finnish governments had planned joint operations by both their armies, and the objective given

to Army Group North had been to advance rapidly and to seize Leningrad, Russia's second city. The Finns were, however, reluctant to invade Soviet territory and were prepared to advance only as far as that part of the former Russo-Finnish border which ran along the Swir river. There they intended to halt and wait for the offensive by Army Group North to reach them. The German drive, rising from the south, was to begin at Cudevo, a town in the Volkhov swamp on the Moscow–Leningrad autobahn. The German advance was then to be carried to Tikhvin, a town to the south-east of Lake Ladoga on the main railway line between Leningrad and Vologda. From the railway junction at Tikhvin, Army Group North was then to advance north-westwards and gain touch with the Finnish forces along the Swir river. That, at least, was the OKW plan.

Strategically, the most important town in that area of northern Russia was Tikhvin, and a measure of its importance was the fact that Stavka, the Red Army's Supreme Command, had reinforced the area with élite Siberian divisions, together with masses of tanks and artillery. Stavka was determined to hold Tikhvin at all costs, and the scale of the fighting for that sector was such that casualties to the Red Army were said to be the highest of any single major offensive of the Russo-German war. Despite the most strenuous efforts by the 39th Corps, it had not been able to reach the Swir river and to gain touch with the Finns. As a consequence, the corps' right flank was completely open—a situation which Stavka quickly exploited. It was this heavily embattled corps that von Arnim had been ordered to take over. The journey to reach his corps headquarters was a difficult one, and it was not until 15 November that he completed it, having finished the last part by sledge.

The situation he faced was that the Red Army was attacking using divisions of storm troops marching behind waves of T-34 tanks. Corps, which had been forced on to the defensive even before von Arnim arrived, was unable to withstand the onslaught and as early as 9 December had been driven out of Tikhvin. The Red Army, encouraged by that success, intensified its attacks, and these came in from both flanks, creating the danger that von Arnim's corps might be cut off and destroyed. The only order that the corps commander could give was

for his battered formations to fight their way back across the ground they had gained at such cost and to retreat to the Volkhov river.

Three days before Christmas 1941, von Arnim led the last elements of the 39th Corps back across the river in an intense cold, which dropped at times to minus 52 degrees. The corps structure was intact, but its component units had suffered such terrible losses that one, the 18th (Motorised) Division, had been reduced to just 741 men, while the 12th Panzer Division had sunk to 1,144 all ranks.

The corps did not leave the line until the end of March 1942, and it then moved to another sector of that northern front where a new crisis was building up. The land bridge at Cholm, a junction of several roads in an otherwise swampy area, was not only a sizeable town but also a sector of strategic importance. Recent Russian advances in that area had aimed at capturing the town, but although Red Army spearheads had bypassed and isolated Cholm, they had not been able to capture it. The German defenders, a garrison of some 5,000 men, had been ordered to hold the town and, under the command of Major-General Scherer, had every intention of obeying that order.

Von Arnim, aware of the weakness of the Cholm garrison, ordered an attack to be made to push the armour of the 12th Panzer Division through to Scherer's group. But the tracks of the German Panzers could gain no purchase on the icy ground and the attempt had to be called off. It was left to von Arnim's 122nd Infantry Division to carry out another assault, which they did wading through waist-deep snow. For a brief interlude these infantrymen gained touch with the Cholm garrison and co-operated in helping to beat off the Red Army's attacks, but they were too weak in numbers to raise the siege and were forced to withdraw to avoid themselves being surrounded and cut off in the beleaguered town.

The corps commander, determined to do everything in his power to supply the cut-off garrison, then sent in lorry convoys to take forward clothing, food and supplies, but only one column broke through. The Red Army then managed to cut off Cholm completely, but still the garrison held out and fought on. By 1 May the improved weather had not only thawed the snow but had also dried out the ground. Once again von Arnim launched his corps into an assault and, despite the

furious resistance of the Red Army, it broke through to reach and relieve the besieged garrison.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1942 von Arnim's corps was committed to minor actions in and around Rzhev. It was while it was engaged in that fighting that von Arnim received a signal ordering him to report to Hitler's headquarters at Rastenburg. On 3 December 1942 von Arnim reached the Wolfsschanze and was surprised by the news that the situation in Tunisia was such that a new formation, the 5th Panzer Army, was to be set up and that Hitler had chosen him to command it and had promoted him to the rank of Generaloberst (Colonel-General). Upon being told by the Führer of his new appointment, von Arnim posed the question whether supplies to the African/Tunisian theatre of operations could be guaranteed and asked, also, how many divisions would make up the new Panzer army. Hitler assured him that he would command six divisions, so that, once that force—three Panzer and three motorised divisions—was in place and with the lines of supply assured, it would be possible to halt the retreat of Rommel's desert army and to follow that with a counter-offensive. Why Hitler considered that the introduction of another new hierarchical body would simplify the command structure in Africa is unclear.

The situation in Tunisia was at that time certainly menacing. An Anglo-American force had landed at a number of strategic ports in Algeria and Tunisia and was heading eastwards. The aim of the Western Allies was to reach Tunis and then by rapid reinforcement to place a powerful military grouping at the back of Rommel's Axis armies which were carrying out a fighting retreat through Libya. To prevent that military disaster, Hitler had ordered troops to be sent to Tunisia. The first of these, chiefly the battalions of Koch's 5th Parachute Regiment, Witzig's Para Engineer Battalion and the Barenthin Glider Regiment, together with miscellaneous German and Italian groups, were flung into battle and had soon established a flimsy perimeter to the west of Tunis.

There was fighting in northern Tunisia along a line running inland from the Mediterranean Sea as the Axis troops endeavoured to expand their perimeter westwards while the Allied invasion force, driving eastwards out of Algeria, sought to destroy it and to capture both Tunis

and the major port of Bizerta. During January and February Rommel's Axis army was finally driven out of Libya and began to enter southern Tunisia, where it proposed to take up positions in the French frontier defences at Mareth. The race to take Tunis had failed, and the Allied host eventually divided along national lines, with Anderson's British 1st Army (an army in name only) in the north of the country and the American 2nd Corps in the centre. The British 8th Army, coming up out of the desert, would eventually join up with the Americans and the Axis troops would then be encircled. In the American sector of the front there were several passes through the mountains, and it was clear to the Germans that the Americans would debouch from these in an endeavour to reach the sea and thus strike Rommel's Panzer Army Africa in the back. In the winter of 1942 the fighting in Tunisia was, therefore, in the north, by the British 1st Army—represented by the 5th Corps—around Medjez el Bab, with the objective of capturing Tunis, and with a second Allied effort, by the US 2nd Corps, which was to drive through the mountains and to reach the sea. The American effort was reinforced by French forces.

Hitler had assured von Arnim of both men and supplies and had, indeed, already given the same guarantees to Lieutenant-General Ziegler when he came to report to the Wolfsschanze in Rastensburg. Ziegler had also been told that a 5th Panzer Army was to be created, and that the extraordinary military situation in Tunisia made it imperative that that army be led by an officer capable of rising to the challenge of such a command. Hitler then told Ziegler that he proposed to make von Arnim the General Officer Commanding that new army and that he, Ziegler, was to be the commander's official deputy. In that way, Hitler went on, the problem that had always existed with Rommel—that he was so frequently absent from his headquarters without giving clear orders to his Ia—would be overcome, because whenever the army commander visited his troops in front-line areas there would always be an official deputy at the army's main HQ empowered to act on the army commander's behalf. Ziegler then put to Hitler the questions of the supply position and of the flow of reinforcements to the new theatre of operations. He was told that within a short time there would be three new Panzer and three new motorised divisions in Africa. Armed with