Chapter 19

Sand Gets Everywhere

My name is Max Gruber. I have blond hair and blue eyes. I was 20 in 1941.

A gentle, cool breeze blew in from the northwest as I lay down on my mat in our temporary tents on base. Outside today, scorching hot and no wind to help cool off the air, was nothing like it is now. Everything about this climate and this part of the world made me wonder why our Fuhrer wanted it so badly if no true German was going to live here. Perhaps he just wanted the entire world for us in case we grow too large or perhaps it is to keep our enemies away from ever reaching the glorious fatherland. Either way, I know I would never move down here, and I missed my home back in Bonndorf in Southwest Germany.

When this war started, I was still in school, dreaming like the other boys to take up arms and destroy all the enemies to the fatherland. My parents were frightened for me to join because I am the only child of them. Today, though, I will make them proud with being a corporal in the Afrika Korps.

Even in December, the desert is too hot for a boy from the country and one that loves winter no matter how cold it gets. For now, the battle seems to be going well for us though we were informed by our commanding officer to expect an attack by the gather British forces any day. I had hoped the attack would wait until after Christmas, so the fighting would not last through. I had been saving as much money as the army pays me, and I have been saving every hour I earned so I may leave on furlough to see my family at home. It seems I do not get everything I wish for.

Almost immediately, the British began a fierce attack against our poorly supplied troops with numbers that were quite frankly terrifying. By the 16th, Rommel had sent the orders to begin a retreat to El Agheila in North Africa. The British forces were too large with their tanks double the amount we had, and we only had the Italian tanks with us. They by far were not as superior to our panzer and tiger tanks, so I certainly beat a hasty retreat. The retreat kept pushing us back further east for the remainder of December and into January for most of the month.

The enemies started to let up on their constant attacking by the end of January while we started to stockpile more weapons and reinforcements. On January 21, General Rommel’s counter-offensive from El Agheila began. This was the biggest offensive I had taken part in since coming to Africa, and we managed to take the British by surprise in their lines. The battles were fierce no matter what part of the lines soldiers were in. For weeks, we pushed back the enemies from their newly won ground and kept pushing them to just west of Tobruk. When reaching there, the battles came to a standstill because both of our sides had received additional reinforcements. Small battles and raids between the troops were heard of all over the lines but no new major offensives took place.

The weather was getting even hotter again with the start of spring and slowing giving way to summer. Even with this unbearable heat, General Rommel set forth new attack plans to surround and capture the British troops. On May 26, his plan to action as we began an offensive against the Gazala Line, the line fought over between the troops. Right away, we were deployed to pass around the southern flank of the enemy's positions, but the British did not respond how we had predicted. They possessed 200 United States tanks to end the drive rather quickly before we could cut them off at the sea. The tanks also “tore great holes in our ranks” as Rommel so elegantly put it. Many of fellow soldiers had died during this attack and yet my superiors urged us to continue for the fatherland. On the 28th, a renewed effort was put forth by everyone in my division, but we made little progress. The next day, the commanding officers ordered to move into defensive positions for the time being.

The days went on for the month of June with heat, resisting the occasional raids from enemy soldiers and planning our own raids. This was hard, however, because the British had locked themselves into Tobruk in the fortresses of the city. In the middle of June, the British launched a surprise attack against our troops stationed around the city. They spearheaded a hole that separated many of our forces from the supply lines and such that was need. For days, I fought on thinking the whole time that our surrender was imminent. Their assaults, however, were doing were little damage to the troops but only seemed to increase the fighting spirit of my fellow Germans to drive back these weak attackers.

Just when the attacks seemed to be getting urgent and our supplies started to run low, a large counter-attack began east with panzer divisions. They trapped the diminished forces of the British and isolated a large number of their troops from the main fortress. By June 21, we had captured Tobruk and the fortress within with its 33,000 men and immense amount of stores of ammunition and other supplies.

With such luck and victories in mind, not one soldier complained as we were ordered over to recapture El Alamein we had previously lost. On June 30, we had reached the city and began the First Battle of El Alamein. All during the month of July, it was back and forth with who was taking the offensives and who was defending the ground they had lost or won. With the stores of supplies once again draining and the casualties mounting to high, General Rommel cut short the offensive and pulled back. The totals came back as 13,250 casualties for the Allies and 17,000 for the Axis troops. Though the Allies claimed this as their victory because they had stopped our advance, we would show them later who the supreme beings and victors would be. I believed this with all my heart. I was 20 years old. The war was going fine down here, but there seems to be gains and losses back out east.