

Final draft

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The signal from the spy was only one of twenty or thirty reports on the desk of von Mellenthin, Rommel's Ic - intelligence officer - at seven o'clock on the morning of 4 June.

There were several other reports from listening units: infantry had been heard talking to tanks au clair; field headquarters had issued instructions in low-grade codes which had been deciphered overnight; and there was other enemy radio traffic which, although indecipherable, nevertheless yielded hints about enemy intentions simply because of its location and frequency. As well as radio reconnaissance there were the reports from the Ics in the field, who got information from captured weapons, the uniforms of enemy dead, interrogation of prisoners, and simply from looking across the desert and seeing the people they were fighting. Then there was aerial reconnaissance, a situation report from an order-of-battle expert, and a summary - just about useless - of Berlin's current assessment of Allied intentions and strength.

Like all field intelligence officers, von Mellenthin despised spy reports. Based on diplomatic gossip, newspaper stories and sheer guesswork, they were wrong at least as often as they were right, which made them effectively useless.

Von Mellenthin had to admit that this one looked different.

The run-of-the-mill secret agent might report: '9th Indian Brigade have been told they will be involved in a major battle in the near future,' or: 'Allies planning a breakout from The Cauldron in early June,' or: 'Rumours that Auchinleck will be replaced as Commander-in-Chief.' But there was nothing indefinite about this report.

The spy, whose call-sign was SpMinx, began his message:

'Operation Aberdeen.' He gave the date of the attack, the brigades

involved and their specific roles, the places they would pounce, and the tactical thinking of the planners.

Von Mellenthin was not convinced, but he was interested.

As the thermometer in his tent passed the one-hundred-degree mark he began his routine round of morning discussions. In person, by field telephone, and - rarely - by radio, he talked to the Divisional Ics, the Luftwaffe liaison officer for aerial reconnaissance, the Horch Company liaison man, and a few of the better Brigade Ics. To all of these men he mentioned the 9th and 10th Indian Brigades, the 22nd Armoured Brigade, and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade. He told them to look out for these brigades. He also told them to watch for battle preparations in the areas from which, according to the spy, the counterthrust would come. They would also observe the enemy's observers: if the spy were right, there would be increased aerial reconnaissance by the Allies of the positions they planned to attack, namely Aslagh Ridge, Sidra Ridge, and Sidi Muftah. There might be increased bombing of those positions, for the purpose of softening-up, although this was such a giveaway that most commanders would resist the temptation. There might be decreased bombing, as a bluff, and this too could be a sign.

These conversations also enabled the field Ics to update their overnight reports. When they were finished von Mellenthin wrote his report for Rommel, and took it to the Command Vehicle. He discussed it with the Chief of Staff, who then presented it to Rommel.

The morning discussion was brief, for Rommel had made his major decisions and given his orders for the day during the previous evening. Besides, Rommel was not in a reflective mood in the mornings: he wanted action. He tore around the desert, going from

one front-line position to another in his staff car or his Storch aircraft, giving new orders, joking with the men, and taking charge of skirmishes - and yet, although he constantly exposed himself to enemy fire, he had not been wounded since 1914. Von Mellenthin went with him today, taking the opportunity to get his own picture of the front-line situation, and making his personal assessment of the Ics who were sending in his raw material: some were over-cautious, omitting all unconfirmed data, and others exaggerated in order to get extra supplies and reinforcements for their units.

In the early evening, when at last the thermometer showed a fall, there were more reports and conversations. Von Mellenthin sifted the mass of detail for information relating to the counterattack predicted by Sphinx.

The Ariete Armoured - the Italian division occupying the Aslagh Ridge - reported increased enemy air activity. Von Mellenthin asked them whether this was bombing or reconnaissance, and they said reconnaissance: bombing had actually ceased.

The Luftwaffe reported activity in no-man's-land which might, or might not, have been an advance party marking out an assembly point.

There was a garbled radio intercept in a low-grade cipher in which the something Indian Brigade requested urgent clarification of the morning's something (orders?) with particular reference to the timing of something artillery bombardment. In British tactics, von Mellenthin knew, artillery bombardment generally preceded an attack.

The evidence was building.

Von Mellenthin checked his card-index for the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and discovered that they had recently been sighted at

cat Rigel Ridge - a logical position from which to attack Sidra Ridge.

The task of an Ic was an impossible one: to forecast the enemy's moves on the basis of inadequate information. He looked at the signs, he used his intuition, and he gambled.

He Von Mellenthin decided to gamble on Sphinx.

At 1830 hours he took his report to the Command Vehicle. Rommel was there with his Chief of Staff Colonel Bayerlein and Kesselring. They stood around a large camp table looking at the operations map. A Leutnant sat to one side ready to take notes.

Rommel had taken his cap off, and his large, balding head appeared too big for his small body. He looked tired and thin. He suffered recurring stomach trouble, von Mellenthin knew, and was often unable to eat for days. His normally pudgy face had lost flesh, and his ears seemed to stick out more than usual. But his slitted dark eyes were bright with enthusiasm and the hope of victory.

Von Mellenthin clicked his heels and formally handed over the report, then he explained his conclusions on the map. When he had done Kesselring said: 'And all this is based on the report of a spy, you say?'

'No, Field-Marshal,' von Mellenthin said firmly. 'There are confirming indications.'

'You can find confirming indications for anything,' Kesselring said.

Out of the corner of his eye von Mellenthin could see that Rommel was getting cross.

Kesselring said: 'We really can't plan battles on the basis of information from some grubby little secret agent in Cairo.'

Rommel said: 'I am inclined to believe this report.'

Von Mellenthin watched the two men. They were curiously balanced in terms of power - curiously, that was, for the army,

~~where hierarchies were normally so well defined.~~ Kesselring was ~~C-in-C South, and xxxxxField Marshalxxx~~ outranked Rommel, but Rommel did not take orders from him, by some whim of Hitler's. Both men had ~~powerful~~ patrons in Berlin - Kesselring, the Luftwaffe man, was Goering's favourite, and Rommel produced such good publicity that Goebbels could be relied upon to support him. Kesselring was popular with the Italians, whereas Rommel always insulted them. Ultimately Kesselring was more powerful, for as a Field-Marshal he had direct access to Hitler, while Rommel had to go through Jodl; but this was a card Kesselring could not afford to play too often. So the two men quarreled; and although Rommel had the last word here in the desert, back in Europe - von Mellenthin knew - Kesselring was manoeuvring to get rid of him.

Rommel turned to the map. 'Let us be ready, then, for a two-pronged attack. Consider first the weaker, northern prong. Sidra Ridge is held by ^{the 21st Panzer Division} ~~panzers~~ with anti-tank guns. Here, in the path of the British advance, is a minefield. The panzers will lure the British into the minfeild and destroy them with anti-tank fire. If the spy is right, and the British throw only seventy tanks into this assault, the 21st Panzers ~~Division~~ should deal with them quickly and be free for other action later in the day.'

He drew a thick forefinger down across the map. 'Now consider the second prong, the main assault, on our eastern flank. This is held by the Italian Army. The attack is to be led by an Indian brigade. Knowing those Indians, and knowing our Italians, I assume the attack will succeed. I therefore order a vigorous riposte.

'One: The Italians will counterattack from the west. Two: The Panzers, having repelled the other prong of the attack at Sidra Ridge, will turn about and attack the Indians from the north.'

Three: Tonight our engineers will clear a gap in the minefield at Bir el Harmat, so that the 15th Panzers can make a swing to the south, emerge through the gap, and attack the British forces from the rear.'

Von Mellenthin, listening and watching, nodded appreciation. It was a typical Rommel plan, involving rapid switching of forces to maximise their effect, an encircling movement, and the surprise appearance of a powerful division where it was least expected, in the enemy's rear. If it all worked, the attacking Allied brigades would be surrounded, cut off, and wiped out.

If it all worked.

If the spy was right.

Kesselring said to Rommel: 'I think you could be making a big mistake.'

'That's your privilege,' Rommel said calmly.

Von Mellenthin did not feel calm. If it worked out badly, Berlin would soon hear about Rommel's unjustified faith in poor intelligence; and von Mellenthin would be blamed for supplying that intelligence. Rommel's attitude to subordinates who let him down was savage.

Rommel looked at the note-taking Leutnant. 'Those, then, are my orders for tomorrow.' He glared defiantly at Kesselring.

Von Mellenthin put his hands in his pockets and crossed his fingers.

*

Von Mellenthin remembered that moment when, sixteen days later, he and Rommel watched the sun rise over Tobruk.

They stood together on the escarpment north-east of El Adem, waiting for the start of the battle. Rommel was wearing the goggles he had taken from the captured General O'Connor, the goggles which

had become a kind of trademark of his. He was on top form: bright-eyed, lively and confident. You could almost hear his brain tick as he scanned the landscape and computed how the battle might go.

Von Mellenthin said: 'The spy was right.'

Rommel smiled. 'That's exactly what I was thinking.'

The Allied counterattack of 5 June had come precisely as forecast, and Rommel's defence had worked so well that it had turned into a counter-counterattack. Three of the four Allied brigades involved had been wiped out, and four regiments of artillery had been captured. Rommel had pressed his advantage remorselessly. On 14 June the ^aGzala Line had been broken and today, 20 June, they were to besiege the vital coastal garrison of Tobruk.

Von Mellenthin shivered. It was astonishing how cold the desert could be at five o'clock in the morning.

He watched the sky.

At twenty minutes past five the attack began.

A sound like distant thunder swelled to a deafening roar as the Stukas approached. The first formation flew over, dived toward the British positions, and dropped their bombs. A great cloud of dust and smoke arose, and with that Rommel's entire artillery forces opened fire with a simultaneous ear-splitting crash. Another wave of Stukas came over, then another: there were hundreds of bombers.

Von Mellenthin said: 'Fantastic. Kesselring really did it.'

It was the wrong thing to say. Rommel snapped: 'No credit to Kesselring: today we are directing the planes ourselves.'

The Luftwaffe was putting on a good show, even so, von Mellenthin thought; but he did not say, it.

Tobruk was a concentric fortress. The garrison itself was

within a town, and the town was at the heart of a larger British-held area surrounded by a thirty-five-mile perimeter wire dotted with strongpoints. The Germans had to cross the wire, then penetrate the town, then take the garrison.

A cloud of orange smoke arose in the middle of the battlefield. Von Mellenthin said: 'That's a signal from the assault engineers, telling the artillery to lengthen their range.'

Rommel nodded. 'Good. We're making progress.'

Suddenly von Mellenthin was seized by optimism. There was booty in Tobruk: petrol, and dymanite, and tents, and lorries - already more than half Rommel's motorised transport consisted of captured British vehicles - and food. Von Mellenthin smiled and said: 'Fresh fish for dinner?'

Rommel understood his train of thought. 'Liver,' he said. 'Fried potatoes. Fresh bread.'

'A real bed, with a feather pillow.'

'In a house with stone walls to keep out the heat and the bugs.'

A runner arrived with a signal. Von Mellenthin took it and read it. He tried to keep the excitement out of his voice as he said: 'They've cut the wire at Strongpoint 69. Group Menny is attacking with the infantry of the Afrika Korps.'

'That's it,' said Rommel. 'We've opened a breach. Let's go.'

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It was ten-thirty in the morning when Lieutenant-Colonel Reggie Bogge poked his head around the door of Vandam's office and said: 'Tobruk is under siege.'

It seemed pointless to work then. ~~Vandam went on mechanically, reading reports from informants, considering the case of a lazy lieutenant who was due for promotion but did not deserve it, trying to think of a fresh approach to the Alex Wolff case; but everyting~~

~~seemed hopelessly trivial.~~ The news became more depressing as the day wore on. The Germans breached the perimeter wire; they bridged the anti-tank ditch; they crossed the inner minefield; they reached the strategic road junction known as King's Cross.

Vandam went home at seven to have supper with Billy. He could not tell the boy about Tobruk: the news was not to be released at present. As they ate their lamb chops, Billy said that his English teacher, a young man with a lung condition who could not get into the army, never stopped talking about how he would love to get out into the desert and have a bash at the Hun.

'I don't believe him, though,' Billy said. 'Do you?'

'I expect he means it,' Vandam said. 'He just feels guilty.'

Billy was at an argumentative age. 'Guilty? He can't feel guilty - it's not his fault.'

'Unconsciously he can.'

'What's the difference?'

I walked into that one, Vandam thought. He considered for a moment, then said: 'When you've done something wrong, and you know it's wrong, and you feel bad about it, and you know why you feel bad, that's conscious guilt. Mr Simkisson has done nothing wrong, but he still feels bad about it, and he doesn't know why he feels bad. That's unconscious guilt. It makes him feel better to talk about how much he wants to fight.'

'Oh,' said Billy.

Vandam did not know whether the boy had understood or not.

Billy went to bed with a new book. He said it was a 'tec', by which he meant a detective story. It was called Death on the Nile.

Vandam went back to GHQ. The news was still bad. The 21st Panzers had entered the town of Tobruk and fired from the quay on to several British ships which were trying, belatedly, to escape

to the open sea. A number of vessels had been sunk. Vandam thought of the men who made a ship, and the tons of precious steel that went into it, and the training of the sailors, and the welding of the crew into a team; and now the men were dead, the ship sunk, the effort wasted.

He spent the night in the officers' mess, waiting for news. He drank steadily and smoked so much that he gave himself a headache. Bulletins came down periodically from the Operations Room. During the night Ritchie, as Commander of the Eighth Army, decided to abandon the frontier and retreat to Mersa Matruh. It was said that when Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief, heard this news he stalked out of the room with a face as black as thunder.

Toward dawn Vandam found himself thinking about his parents. Some of the ports on the south coast of England had suffered as much as London from the bombing, but his parents were a little way inland, in a village in the Dorset countryside. His father was postmaster at a small sorting office. Vandam looked at his watch: it would be four in the morning in England now, the old man would be putting on his cycle clips, climbing on his bike, and riding to work in the dark. At sixty years of age he had the constitution of a teenage farmboy. Vandam's chapelgoing mother forbade smoking, drinking, and all kinds of dissolute behaviour, a term she used to encompass everything from darts matches to listening to the wireless. The regime seemed to suit her husband, but she herself was always ailing.

Eventually booze, fatigue and tedium sent Vandam into a doze. He dreamed he was in the garrison at Tobruk with Billy and Elene and his mother. He was running around closing all the windows. Outside, the Germans - who had turned into firemen - were leaning ladders against the wall and climbing up. Suddenly Vandam's mother

stopped counting her forged banknotes and opened a window, pointing at Elene and screaming: 'The Scarlet Woman!!' Rommel came through the window in a fireman's helmet and turned a hose on Billy. The force of the jet pushed the boy over a parapet and he fell into the sea. Vandam knew he was to blame, but he could not figure out what he had done wrong. He began to weep bitterly. He woke up.

He was relieved to discover that he had not really been crying. The dream left him with an overwhelming sense of despair. He lit a cigarette. It tasted foul.

The sun rose. Vandam went around the mess turning out the lights, just for something to do. A breakfast cook came in with a pot of coffee. As Vandam was drinking his, a captain came down with another bulletin. He stood in the middle of the mess, waiting for silence.

He said: 'General Kloppe surrendered the garrison of Tobruk to Rommel at dawn today.'

Vandam left the mess and walked through the streets of the city toward his house by the Nile. He felt impotent and useless, ~~sitting in Cairo catching spies while out there in the desert his country was losing the war. It crossed his mind that Alex Wolff might have had something to do with Rommel's latest series of victories, but he dismissed the thought as somewhat far-fetched. He felt so depressed that he wondered whether things could possibly get any worse, and he realised that, of course, they could.~~

When he got home he went to bed.

'That's it.'

'What is this, a decrypt or an agent report?'

'Suffice it to say that the source is reliable.'

'You always say that.'

'Yes. Well, I may not see you for a while. Good luck.'

'Thanks.'

'Toodle-oo!' Brown went out, puffing smoke.

Vandam was not interested in the evacuation of officers who knew too much to be allowed to fall into enemy hands. The friend who helped us in Crete. Was it possible that Wolff was the spy Vandam had hunted, and failed to catch, in Crete? Had Wolff played a role in the devastating German invasion of that island? Could Wolff have been ultimately responsible for the death of Angela?

The thought confused him. He had thought that at last the ghost of Angela would leave him alone, but Brown with his pipe and his secret source of intelligence had brought her back. Toodle-oo, Vandam thought with disgust. Who said toodle-oo any more? What am I supposed to do? he thought. How am I supposed to feel? Do I hate Wolff for killing my wife? They were evacuating personnel from Cairo. Trains would be commandeered. Vandam was to stay. He put his fingers to his temples, thinking: Who do I love? Who do I hate? What am I afraid of? He had not taken a drink all day yesterday, but now, at ten o'clock in the morning, he needed one. Ridiculous. Pull yourself together. Have a cigarette.

A corporal came in with an order. Vandam read it with mounting disbelief. All departments were to extract from their files those papers which might be dangerous in enemy hands, and burn them. Just about anything in the files of an intelligence section might be dangerous in enemy hands. We might as well burn the whole damn lot, Vandam thought. And how would departments operate afterwards? Clearly

the brass thought the departments would not be operating at all for very much longer. Of course it was a precaution, but it was a very drastic one: they would not destroy the accumulated results of years of work unless they thought there was a very strong chance indeed of the Germans taking Egypt. It was all falling apart.

He called Jakes in and watched him read the order. Jakes just nodded, as if he had been expecting it. Vandam said: 'Bit drastic, isn't it?'

'It's rather like what's been happening in the desert, sir,' Jakes replied. 'As they retreat, they blow up huge supply dumps that have been established at enormous cost.'

Vandam nodded. 'All right, you'd better get on with it. Try and play it down a bit, for the sake of morale - you know, top brass getting the wind up unnecessarily, that sort of thing.'

'Yes, sir. We'll have the bonfire in the yard at the back, shall we?'

'Yes. Find an old dustbin and poke holes in its bottom. Make sure the stuff burns up properly.'

'What about your own files?'

'I'll go through them now.'

'Very good, sir.' Jakes went out.

Vandam opened his file drawer and began to sort through his papers. He had been here, in this office, for three years. Countless times he had thought: I don't need to remember that, I can always look it up. There were names and addresses, security reports on individuals, details of codes, systems of communication of orders, case notes, and a little file of ^{Jakes's} ~~notes~~ about John Wolff. Jakes brought in a big cardboard box with 'Lipton's Tea' printed on its side, and Vandam began to dump papers into it.

~~While he was working a signal came through from the Secret~~

Intelligence Service in London. The SIS Head of Station in Portugal had followed up Vandam's inquiry about the novel Rebecca. One of his men had visited all the English-language bookshops in the country. In the holiday area of the Estoril he had found a bookseller who recalled selling his entire stock - six copies - of Rebecca to one woman. On further investigation the woman had turned out to be the wife of the German military attaché in Lisbon.

Vandam paused in his work to reflect on the news. There was only one plausible explanation of the fact that the book had found its way from Estoril to the Sahara. Undoubtedly it was the basis of a code - and, unless there were two successful German spies in Cairo, it was John Wolff who was using that code.

The information would be useful, sooner or later. It was a pity the key to the code had not been captured along with the book and the decrypt. That thought reminded him of the importance of burning his secret papers, and he returned to his work determined to be a little more ruthless about what he destroyed.

At the end he considered his files on pay and promotion of subordinates, and decided to burn those too since they might help enemy interrogation teams fix their priorities. The cardboard box was full. He hefted it on to his shoulder and went outside.

Jakes had the fire going in a rusty steel water-tank propped up on bricks. A corporal was feeding papers to the flames. Vandam dumped his box and watched the blaze for a moment. It reminded him of Guy Fawkes Night in England, fireworks and baked potatoes and the burning effigy of a seventeenth-century traitor. Charred scraps of paper floated up on a pillar of hot air. Vandam turned away.

He wanted to think, so he decided to walk. He left GHQ and headed ~~xxx~~ downtown. His face was hurting. Perhaps that was why he had felt confused and helpless earlier. But he should welcome the

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ache, for was it not a sign of healing? And if he considered his problems one by one, without getting panicked, he might come up with some solutions.

The news that had thrown him was that Wolff had been in Crete. Forget Elene for a moment, he told himself; How do I feel about Crete? When he thought about it he felt a boiling ~~rage~~, and put his hands in his pockets and clenched his fists. His anger was irrational, spurious; Wolff had not tried to kill Angela, she had merely been another ~~xxx~~ casualty in a war in which Wolff was on the enemy side. Wolff had outwitted Vandam in Crete, but that was no more sensible a reason to hate him. Vandam realised that it was when he thought of Billy that he lost his equanimity. What Wolff had done was to deprive Billy of a mother. Vandam hated Wolff for that and he did not care whether the hatred was rational or not.

He thought of Elene, and remembered her with her back arched and perspiration glistening on her naked breasts. He had been shocked at what happened after he kissed her - shocked, but thrilled. It had been a night of firsts for him: first time he had made love anywhere other than on a bed, first time he had made love with the light on, first time sex had been a mutual ^{indulgence} ~~exercise~~ rather than the imposition of his will on a more or less reluctant woman. It was, of course, a disaster that he and Elene had fallen so joyfully in love. His parents, his friends and the Army would be aghast at the idea of his marrying a wog. His mother would also feel bound to explain why the Jews were wrong to reject Jesus. Vandam decided not to worry over all that. He and Elene might be dead within a few days. We'll bask in the sunshine while it lasts, he thought, and to hell with the future.

→ Looking around him, he realised that there was a festive feeling in the air. He passed a hairdresser's salon and notice that it was

→ packed out, with women standing waiting. The dress shops seemed to be doing good business. A woman came out of a grocer's with a basket full of canned food, and Vandam saw that there was a queue stretching out of the shop and along the pavement. A sign in the window of the next shop said, in hasty scribble: 'Sorry no make-up.' Vandam realised that the Egyptians were preparing to be liberated, and looking forward to it.

The sun went in. It was such an unusual occurrence, in the middle of a July day in Cairo, that everyone stopped and looked up. At first Vandam could not understand what was darkening the sky: it seemed like low, swirling mist, dotted with particles. Then he realised it was smoke mixed with charred ~~an~~ paper. All over the city the British were burning their files, and the sooty smoke had blotted out the sun.

Vandam was suddenly furious with himself and the rest of the Allied armies for preparing so equably for defeat. Where was the spirit of the Battle of Britain? What had happened to that famous mixture of obstinacy, ingenuity and courage which was supposed to characterise the nation? What, Vandam asked himself, are you planning to do about it?

He turned around and walked back toward Garden City, where GHQ was billeted in commandeered villas. He envisioned the map of the El Alamein line, where the Allies would make their last stand. Rommel would try to penetrate the line - this was one he could not circumvent. What then? He would have to take the Alam Halfa ridge, which stood astride his route to Alexandria. No, there was no 'have to' where Rommel was concerned - it was possible that he might ignore Alam Halfa, forget about Alexandria, and dash straight for Cairo.

That was one possibility. Another was that, having broken