

Military Matters: The German Army in North Africa in WWII

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This article should be read in conjunction with

“The Italian Army in Egypt during World War II” in *QC* 223, December 2007, pp280-288.

Much ink has been used and many trees have died to comment on the North African campaign in WWII. From the Allied side the third Battle of El Alamein was the “end of the beginning” and its first major victory over German forces. From the Axis side, and that of many Allied military historians, the romantic myths of the Africa Korps under the legend of Rommel enthral many. As I point out in my article (*QC* 223) not all German forces were part of the Africa Korps, though most articles on the subject lump them together under the title.

Much debate has surrounded Rommel’s generalship. Some would have it that he was Germany’s best, others that his reputation is one of the myths of WWII. I can do no better to quote from Robert M. Citino’s article in *Military History Quarterly*:

There is no more evocative phrase to emerge from World War II than “Afrika Korps”. The name conjures up a unique theatre of war, a hauntingly beautiful empty quarter where armies could roam free, liberated from towns and hills, chokepoints and blocking positions, and especially those pesky civilians. It calls forth a war of near-absolute mobility, where tanks could operate like ships at sea, “sailing” where they wished, setting out on bold voyages hundreds of miles into the deep desert, then looping around the enemy flank and emerging like pirates of old to deal devastating blows to an unsuspecting foe. Finally, it implies a dauntless hero, in this case Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, a noble commander who fought the good fight, who hated Adolf Hitler and everything he stood for, and who couldn’t have been further from our stereotype of the Nazi fanatic. Everything about the Desert Fox attracts us—the manly poses, the out-of-central-casting good looks, even the goggles perched just so. Placing Rommel and his elite Afrika Korps at the fore allows us to view the desert war as a clean fight against a morally worthy opponent. It was war, yes, but almost uniquely in World War II, it was a “war without hate”, as Rommel famously called it in his memoirs.

It’s an attractive image all around. Unfortunately, practically all of it is a fabrication. The desert was hardly a haven of beauty or romance. The fighting was a nightmare for both sides. Far from letting the respective tank fleets roam free, the desert chained them irresistibly to their supply lines, and a single failed convoy or a lost column of trucks could stop a whole offensive dead in its tracks. Contrary to the dreamed mobility of desert warfare, both sides would spend far more time in static defensive positions, often quite elaborate, than they would launching tank charges.

Yes, the reader might respond, but surely we are on firmer ground with regard to his military skill. After all, no less a figure than British prime minister Winston Churchill called him “a great general” on the floor of the House of Commons. Rommel’s daring exploits at the head of the Afrika Korps (later enlarged and renamed Panzerarmee Afrika) were exciting, to be sure, but many officers in his own army reckoned them an ultimately valueless sideshow. His disinterest in the dreary science of logistics, his love of action, his tendency to fly off to wherever the fighting was hottest - all of these qualities make for an exciting movie. Yet they are problems in a commander under modern conditions, and they all contributed materially to the disaster that ultimately befell him and his army in the desert.

Be that as it may, his derring-do and drive was in great contrast to the pathetic advance into Egypt of the Italian Marshal Rudolfo Graziani in 1940. Rommel and the Afrika Korps won some brilliant victories, including Gazala-Tobruk during May-June 1942, while Nazi propagandists made the most of the Desert Fox's triumphs. Had Hitler sent more forces to Africa in the early stages, perhaps just before the victory at Gazala in June 1942, the fall of Mersa Matruh on June 30, the panicky retreat of the British known as the "the Flap" or "Ash Wednesday", could have resulted in a German victory at the first battle of El Alamein and possibly the British abandoning Egypt. Hitler rewarded Rommel with a field marshal's baton for this victory, the youngest ever in the German army. Rommel remarked to his aides that he would have preferred an extra division. In 1941, before Rommel left Germany to take command of the Afrika Korps, Colonel General Franz Haider, chief of the German High Command, told him that preparations for Operation Barbarossa made it impossible to divert any more forces or logistical support to North Africa. Thus Rommel's mission, he was told, was not to defeat the British but to tie down the maximum number of Allied troops for as long as possible.



Initially known as "Aufklärungsstab Rommel" when he was informed of his new position on February 6 1941, the German army in North Africa was renamed "Detaches Afrikakorps" when Hitler announced its official formation on February 19, the original Aufklärungsstab being absorbed into the new command. At this initial stage the Afrikakorps consisted of the following elements:

Generalkommando (staff element)

The 5 Leicht Division

And various support units among which was the 735th Field Post Office, the first to serve in North Africa

The German military gave great importance to the delivery of mail to serving troops, as an early report indicates: "delayed mail message box, including [news of] family members," could cause the soldiers "concern and (make) his duty difficult" (*German Reich Mail*, Berlin, 1940, p.11). They realised the importance of troop morale and considered contact with home vital to the cause. During the early campaigns of 1937-39, the German Wehrmacht had a military mailing system that provided free postal services within Germany. By September 3 1939, the Feldpost military mail service was organised to include all theatres of action: postcards and letters up to 250gm, including newspapers, could be mailed free of charge by the German paramilitary and military organisations. In November 1939 packages weighing up to 1000gm were included at the nominal fee of 20Rpf.

Security was also considered greatly important, as was the concern that captured mail could be used by enemies' intelligence. To preserve the secrecy of troop movements, each unit down to a Battalion (Abteilung), normally 500 and 1000 personnel, was assigned a five-digit code as its Feldpost Number (FpN). By the end of 1939 letter prefixes "L" and "M" were attached in front of each FpN to units belonging to the Luftwaffe and the Kriegsmarine. Companies making up the battalion had the same FpN with letter prefixes "A" to "E" at the end of each FpN. The letter A generally signified headquarters company, the others stood for line companies. The FpN acted as the return address.

For instance, from the German field Post Overview 1942, the Panzer Grenadier Regiment 155th of the 90th Light Division the companies FpNs are:

Company	FeldPostNummer
Staff I. Battalion	21668 A
1st Company	21668 B
2nd Company	21668 C
3rd Company	21668 D
4th Company	21668 E

Letters were not meant to be taken into the field for fear that they could fall into enemy hands, providing vital information about units of the military force or other relevant clues about the supply situation or troop movements. Diaries were also banned and any letters should be retrieved from fallen soldiers. I suspect that such rules were broken as soldiers carried with them treasured letters from their loved ones back home.

By 1939 40,000 such numbers were in use, at the end of 1942 56,000, and in April 1943 60,000. By February 1944 the number reached 64,000. The numbers were, however, sometimes dropped, say if a battalion ceased to exist, or was then reassigned to a different unit. Numbers could change during reorganisation of a division or being sent to another theatre of war.

All of this leads to problems for the postal historian, because there is nothing on the covers to indicate which unit the letter is from or its location.

Those collectors of German WWII feldpost refer to two publications as crucial. One is the monumental work by Norbert Kannapin, *Die Deutsche Feldpostuebersicht 1939-1945*, which comes in three volumes of tiny print. Kannapin gives feldpost numbers, the units to which they were assigned, and - where known - the dates. The other work is Georg Tessin's *Verbaende und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS 1939-1945*. From Kannapin the feldpost number indicates which unit the sender served with. Then, using the unit information, one can search in Tessin's 15 volumes for more information on the unit - what division/army group it belonged to, often where it was formed and its location during specific months of service and sometimes when and where it was refitted and/or destroyed or disbanded.

Now I have Kannapin but have never seen Tessin. I do however have other sources for the makeup of German divisions. To make research more difficult, however, units were continually being reformed, amalgamated, disbanded ... so to know exactly which units were in which theatre and when is all a bit suspect. To my knowledge no one has yet made a list of those FpN used by the Germans in North Africa and particularly when they were inside Egypt. One is dependent on a dealer or former philatelist who has done the work and described a cover's FpN. This tends to add a premium as "Africa Korps" post is eagerly sought by collectors.

What I have tried to do here is collate all available information from my own collection, other collections, auction catalogues and any articles on feldpost of the Germans in North Africa. Such literature is sparse in English and of course most sources being in German. My minimalist German - "Wo bekomme ich eine Briefmarke" - is of little help, but with the aid of internet translation I can make a stab at it.

A few years ago Kannapin was put on the web and I have downloaded the 69 pdfs, each of some 149 pages. I have put them into a folder that allows some search possibilities but unfortunately only the units are given (without their division) and these are split across two lines, seriously hampering searching within the files. It is much easier, however, to use pdfs to search for a particular number FpN. Several websites give data on German units, some also adding FpN giving information. There are books in German on the Feldpost and I have used several of my books in English on the Afrika Korps that refer to the Feldpostamt in a spasmodic way. Needless to say, some of the data is contradictory. But by going back and forth between the various works I think I have managed to give meaning to the offices in use and FpNs used in North Africa.

I originally thought I might have some one or two dozen FpN numbers but my list has grown to some 200 and further digging would no doubt reveal more. My original intention was to consider the German units only within Egypt but I have touched upon the whole North Africa campaign as I suspect those interested in the subject would do. I also imagined that alongside each FpN I would give the unit and places of operation - but my list extends to some eight pages, so I shall put this on the website as an extended article.

Motorised field post offices were a company within each division and would nominally consist of a Feldpost office, a heavy purpose-built truck, two light trucks and a heavy command car of 33 seats. The company

would nominally be an officer NCO and 11 men. The Feldpostamt was identical the unit number (Takish Nummer) and often other support units would have the same number i.e. for the 15th Pz many have the number 33 having the units 33rd. Pioneer Battalion, 33rd. Signals Battalion and 33rd motorised post office.

Where these were used I'm not sure but most probably by the company orderly responsible for the post. These may have been further up the chain as the FpN was nearly always written by the sender on the envelope as the return address. There were also blind Feldpost stamps. Each Feldpostamt was given a Kenn number for use on registered post which I assume was posted through the main Feldpostoffice. The Kenn number was included within the postmark as well as on the registration label.



*Dienstempel
Official stamp*



*Dienstempel
with FpN*



*Tagesstempel
without Kenn-Nr*



*Tagesstempel
with Kenn-Nr*

Nr FPO	First date reference	Kenn-Nr.	Main division or army group
33	11.1.40	687-697	15th Panzer
90		985	10th Panzer
190	26.11.41	805	90 Light Afrika Div
200	10.3.42	615	90 Light Afrika Div/21st Pnz
220	15.8.42	946	Kreta Fort Div/164th Inf Div
224		946	164 Inf.Div?
334		412	164 Inf.Div?
386		538	Heeres-Gruppe Afrika
639	1.4.41	420	Heeres-Gruppe Afrika
659	6.2.42		Panzer Army Afrika
686	-.4.42		Heeres-Gruppe Afrika
735	18.2.41		21st Panzer from 5 th Light
762	10.2.42	282	Heeres-Gruppe Afrika
791		212	Panzer - AK05
999			999 Afrika Brigade.
Tripoli	10.2.42		
Benghazi	10.2.42		

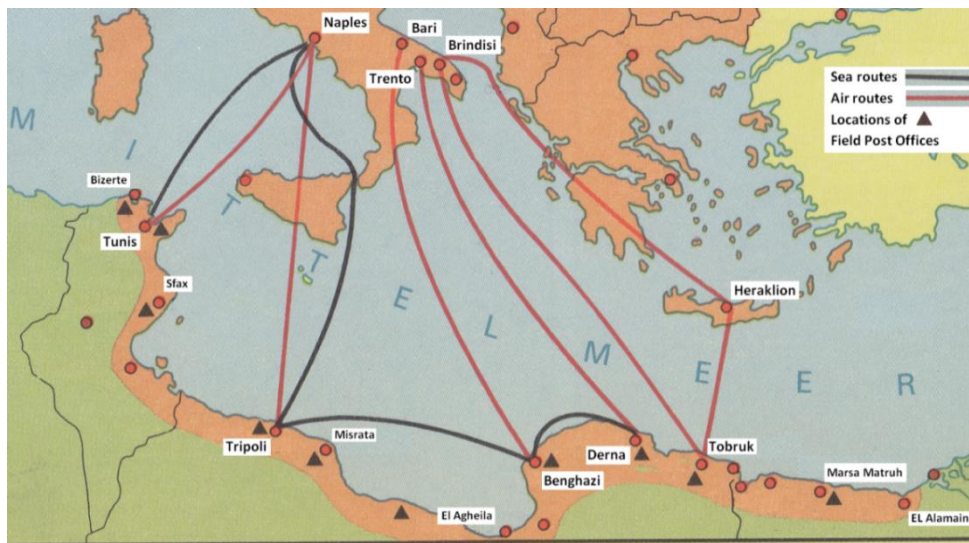
As the 15th/10th Divisions became part of Heeres-Gruppe Afrika these are used as reference but it is most likely that the Feldpostamt remained within their original divisions. FPA has two Kenn-Nr subscribed to it for reasons I don't know. The original could have been lost, one had been issued to another unit within the division etc. The 164 Inf Div again has two Kenn-Nr, but it could be that one was used before the division was sent to Africa. The Kenn-Nr without FpN are taken from covers that are from units in Africa at the time.

These are the FpNs I can attach to units being used in Africa.

00024	00143	00186	00406	00420	00470	00566	00819	00838	00986	01245	01257
01316	01471	01571	01723	01804	01943	02038	02039	02091	02492	02497	02600
02834	02849	03333	03152	03663	03912	04150	04151	04417	04549	04640	05277
05638	05702	6187	06249	06314	06324	06367	07055	07434	07470	07836	08200
08201	08322	08323	08669	08731	08732	08733	08744	09995	09996	10087	10385
10870	10403	11022	11066	11761	13115	13299	13300	13618	14744	14822	15089
L15106	15559	15662	15754	16115	16283	16807	L17792	17867	17892	17954	18022

18179	18255	18801	18561	18876	19106	19184	19495	19558	19584	19589	19681
19910	19981	20114	20491	21150	21658	21668	22057	23357	23763	24025	24026
25201	26032	26066	26198	26258	27868	28065	28770	29019	29320	29947	31554
32856	L31554	L32744	33399	33967	34530	34909	35067	36913	37301	37355	37552
37570	37572	37829	38252	38535	39203	39496	39671	38764	39851	39239	39992
39993	40900	40104	40800	41271	41451	41601	41864	42473	42750	43250	43402
43607	43757	43759	44777	44934	44935	45184	45293	45847	45927	45982	46410
46144	46299	46301	46381	47500	47511	47600	47623	47767	47854	47858	48049
48065	48086	48111	48188	48248	48345	48381	48494	48586	48617	48652	48870
49523	50871	51013	51389	51817	53431	53817	55134	56414	57002	58804	

Note that those with an L-prefix were Luftwaffe units; these were flak units manned by Luftwaffe personnel. Kannapin makes no reference to this additional letter.

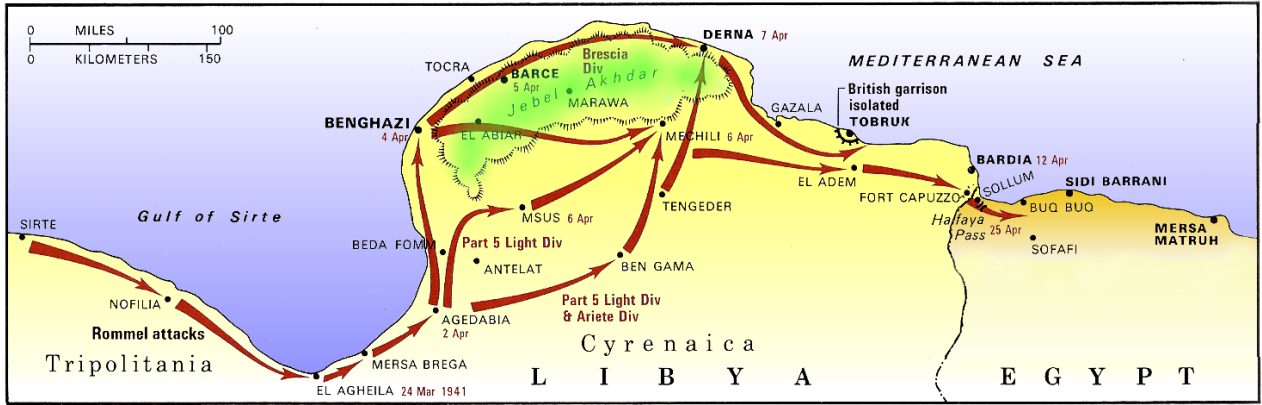


Sea and land routes both used for the post, while in Egypt it most probably went through Derna and Benghazi. As the British established naval superiority over the Italians much mail was lost on Italian ships carrying German post. The map is after Gericke, with small modifications. He gives positions of the FPO but obviously they were changing as the battles went to and fro as nearly all of them were motorised units attached to their divisions. Interestingly, he gives the most forward FPO as Mersa Matruh, some miles behind El Alamein: most probably the FPOs were kept some distance from the fighting for security reasons.

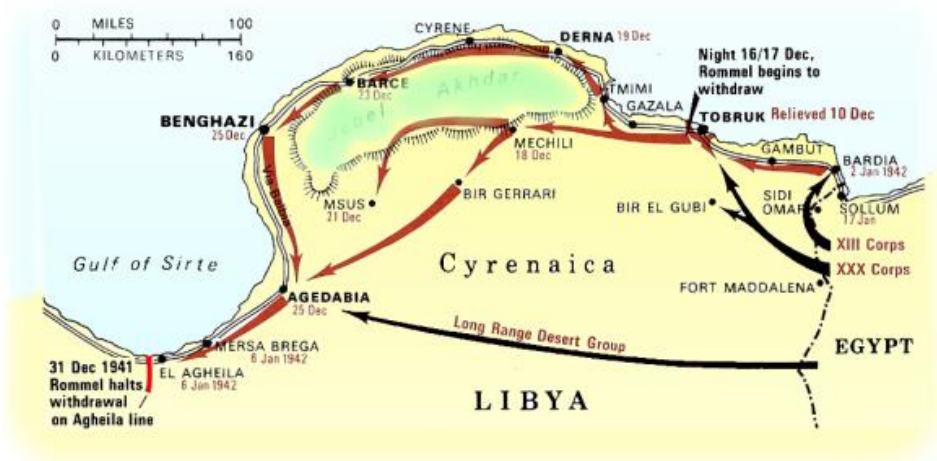


Postcard of a motorised Feldpostamt. I suspect that this is where registered mail was posted and the older portly men were post office staff, many drawn from Postreichstaff(German Post Office) personnel.

Summary of the battles determining when German forces were in parts of Egypt.

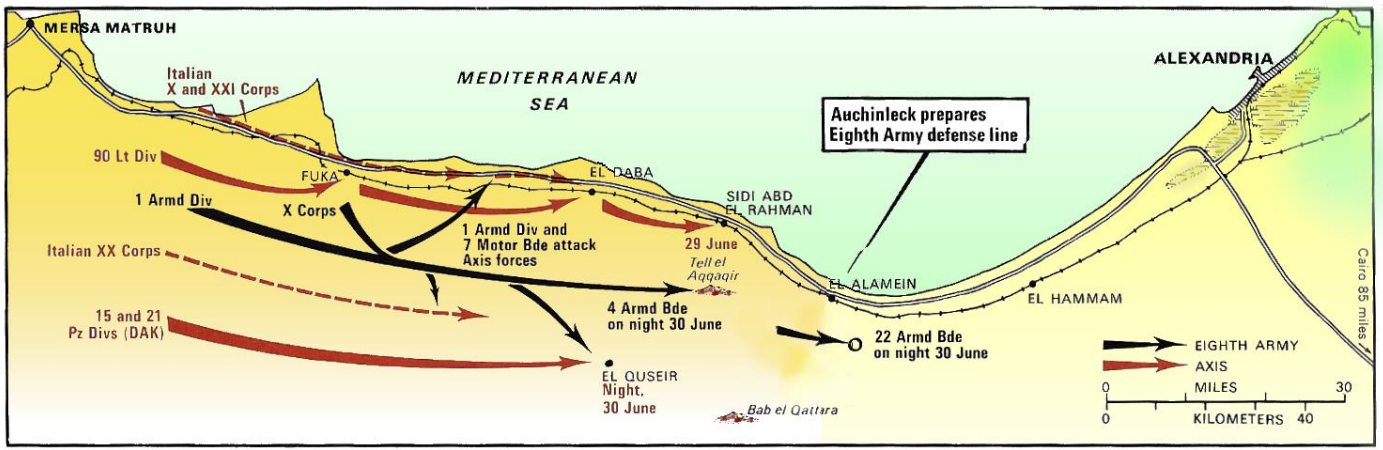


February 22 1941: Lieutenant General Rommel throws the scouting forces of 5th Light Division into the space 30 km west El Agheila. March 2: Churchill's decision to move troops from Egypt to Greece. March 15: 5th Light Division followed by the Division "Ariete". Rommel starts his advance. April 14-15: British forces pushed back to Sollum. May 16: British fall back on to the Halfaya Pass, May 26: German forces launch Operation Skorpion and move up to Halfaya Pass and take it on 27th. Tobruk stays in British hands.



November 18: beginning of the British counter-offensive (Crusader). Before dawn Eighth Army launched a surprise attack, advancing west from its base at Mersa Matruh and crossing the Libyan border near Fort Maddalena, some 50 miles (80 km) south of Sidi Omar. November 1941: Rommel retreats to El Agheila.

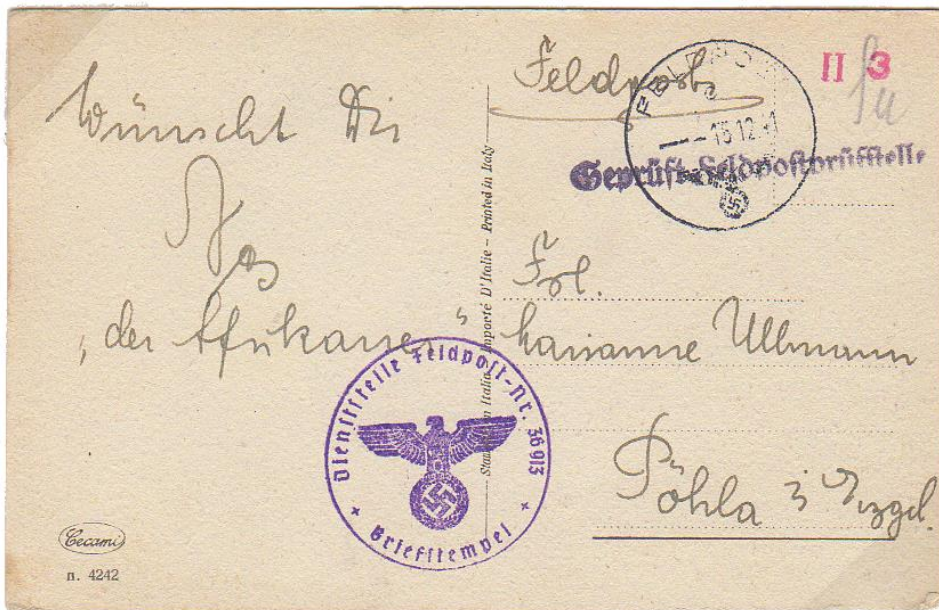
Main Units within Egypt. April 1941-November 1941



January 21 1942: Rommel's second offensive begins. February 4: front line established between Gazala and Bir Hakeim. May 1942: Rommel began a new attack. June 21: Tobruk captured by Axis forces, June 28: Mersa Matruh falls to Rommel. June 30: Axis forces reach El Alamein and attack Allied defences in the First Battle of El Alamein. British stop the German advance.

July 1: Auchinleck calls off offensive activities to allow Eighth Army to regroup and resupply. August 13: Alexander and Montgomery take command respectively of Middle East Command and Eighth Army. August 30: Rommel launches unsuccessful Battle of Alam el Halfa. October 23: Montgomery launches Operation Lightfoot, starting the third Battle of El Alamein. November 5: Axis lines at El Alamein broken. November 8: Operation Torch launched under command of General Eisenhower, Allied forces land in Morocco and Algeria. November 9: Sidi Barrani captured by Eighth Army. May 3 1943: Axis Powers surrender in Tunisia.

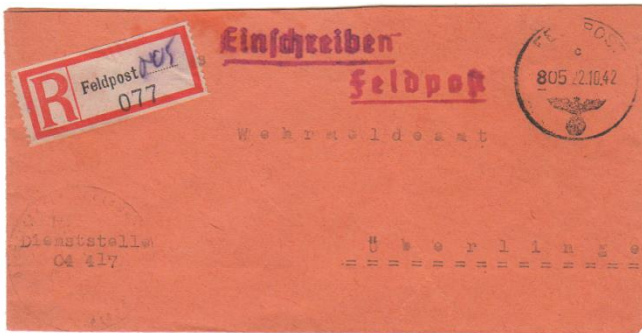
Main Units within Egypt. June 1942-October 1942



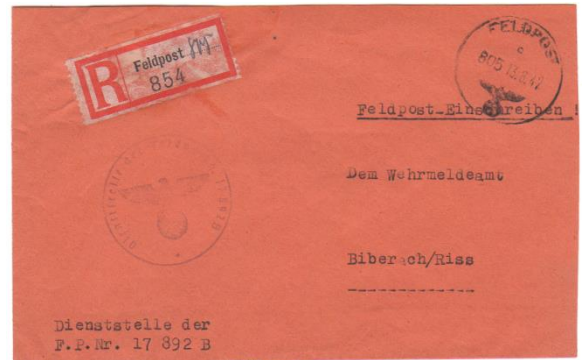
December 12, 1941 - card with dumb FpN 34909 of 2nd company the Panzer Grenadier Regiment Africa 21st Panzer Division. Soon after retreating from Egypt.



August 12, 1942 - from Fp-Nr 27868 (13th Heavy Motor Transport column of Div col 33 of the 15th Pz) at Alam Halfa on the El Alamein line.



October 22, 1942 - from Fp-Nr 04417 with Kenn 805 (co. 2 Antitank Bn 190 of 90 Light Africa Div) posted via division's FPO 90 – one day before Battle of Alamein



August 13, 1942 - from Fp-Nr 17892B (co. 5 Pz Gren Rgt. 155 of 90th Africa div) Posted via division's FPO 190. The unit was part of the force destined to attack the Alam Halfa Ridge on August 30



August 20, 1942 - from Fp-Nr 45982 (4 co. BH 21st Pz Div,) via the division's FPO 200, then on the El Alamein line.



September 12, 1941 - from FpNr card 04640D (Co.3 Pz Gren Rgt115 of 15 Pz Div sent via FPO 200. The unit had just taken part in the battle of Alan Halfa Ridge, the deepest eastward thrust the Afrika Korps was to make



September 9, 1942 - from FpNr L31554 (regimentstab Flak-REg 102bHQ of 102 anticraft reg.) The L indicates Luftwaffa personnel who maned the 88 guns. Here used on liberated 'Honour card' I have similar from Adolf Kosel. At the time of posting the unit was near Abu Hagg and the Egyptian cancel was used.



Another contrived curio - from L17792 of 4 Batterie FlakRegiment 6, which served in Tunis The brown stamp for package mail serves no purpose.

Note I have made no reference to the Palmstempl or Palm tree cachets. The Palm stamp applies only in Tunis and the cachets have been extensively forged. See Die Tunispäckmarke und die Palmenstempel⁴

15th Panzer Division: Formed on 11/1/40 from the 33rd Infantry Division. Organization was complete on 15 March 1941. It contained:

15th Schutzen Brigade
104th Schutzen Regiment
115th Schutzen Regiment
15th Motorcycle Battalion
8th Panzer Regiment
33rd Artillery Regiment
33rd Panzerjager Battalion
33rd Pioneer Battalion
33rd Signals Battalion
33rd Divisional Support units
amongst which was the
33rd motorized Field Post Office
manned by an NCO and 11 men.

The division contained
45 Pz II.
71 Pz III
20 Pz IV
10 command tanks



FpA : Feldpostamt, post office box, mostly motorised.

FpN : Feldpostnummer FpNr , unique field post office number down to battalion level. Return address.

Kenn Nr : Kennnummer, registration number usually one per FpA.

References:

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3. *Arbeitsgemeinsschard Deutsche Feldpost 1939-1945 e.V.* Karl Friedlein. *Roundbrief 93* (September 2004)
4. Kesselstatt, Franz, *Die Tunispäckmarke und die Palmenstempel*. Düsseldorf 1978.
5. Hinrichsen, Horst, *Die deutsche Feldpost: Organisation und Ausrüstung*. Dörfler 1998.
6. Citino, Robert M, "Overrated Rommel", *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 28.2 (Winter 2016), p25 (also www.historynet.com/rommels-afrika-korps.htm)

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Feldgrau: The German Armed Forces 1918-1945 at www.feldgrau.com/index.html

Deutsches Afrika-Korps (DAK) at www.axishistory.com/axis-nations/

Lexicon der Wehrmacht – Deutsches Afrika-Korps at 222.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de