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# Personality and Military Leadership in Uncertain or Rapidly Changing Situations

Shawn P. Connor

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PERSONALITY AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN OR RAPIDLY  
CHANGING SITUATIONS

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

American Public University

by

Shawn Connor

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts

July 2015

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Charlestown, WV

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of the Marines, sailors, soldiers, and airmen with whom I have had the pleasure to serve with during my fifteen year military career. The resilience, courage, and dedication of these men and women have served as my inspiration to seek self-improvement through graduate level education.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty and students of American Military University for sharing your ideas and challenging mine. Most particularly, I would like to thank Dr. Jerome Sibayan for his patience and insight throughout the thesis process. The Military Studies degree program has been challenging and rewarding, and the course work has provided me with the academic tools to continue building my knowledge in the field.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

PERSONALITY AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN OR RAPIDLY  
CHANGING SITUATIONS

by

Shawn Connor

American Public University System, July 26, 2015

Charlestown, West Virginia

Professor Jerome Sibayan, Thesis Professor

The purpose of this capstone project is to study the influence of individual personality traits on the leadership and operational decision making of military commanders engaged in high-intensity conventional campaigns when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Using the case study method and a qualitative content analysis of existing relevant literature, the project analyzed the personality traits of General George S. Patton and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel through the framework of the Five Factor Model of personality and psychological hardiness. Research was based on the hypothesis that the World War II leadership and operational decision making of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations, was significantly influenced by high

conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness, as well as low neuroticism. The findings suggest that the personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness are positively and significantly related to effective leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. The findings further suggest that conscientiousness and psychological hardiness have the strongest and most consistent correlation, while openness and extraversion make significant contributions in context. The findings do not support neuroticism or agreeableness as significant influences.

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# CHAPTER: I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

“I am the only true gambler in the whole outfit.”

--General Patton prior to Operation Torch, July 1942<sup>1</sup>

“The situation is developing to our advantage and I’m full of plans that I daren’t say anything about around here. They’d think me crazy. But I’m not; I simply see a bit farther than they do.”

--Field Marshal Rommel prior to his second thrust into the Cyrenaica, January 1942<sup>2</sup>

General George S. Patton and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel were distinguished operational level commanders who excelled in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Patton’s achievements during World War II rank him as one of the great combat generals of modern history. He was an aggressive decision maker, willing to assume risk and dedicated to mobile armored operations. He believed unfailingly in offensive operations and maneuver warfare. A strong proponent of leadership from the front, he seemed to always be in the right position to make decisions and influence the battle. Patton excelled at building disciplined and proficient units, and then leading them in combat. His distinguishing trait and the essence of his leadership was the ability to transfer to his soldiers, through character and personality, his great will to win.<sup>3</sup>

Rommel is recognized as a master of maneuver and heroic leader, with speed of perception and decision, boldness in concept, and aggression in execution.<sup>4</sup> He has also been criticized for relegating to the background logistic concerns and detailed staff planning, and for rash decision and overambitious objectives.<sup>5</sup> His great victories, often against numerically

superior forces, are marked by his aggressive decision making and brilliant leadership at the point of attack. His defeats are marked both by his personal errors in judgment as well as the ever-increasing material deficit of the German army. He was a great risk taker who believed that strategic opportunity only followed tactical and operational success. Rommel believed that because the unpredictable nature of war made exact calculations impossible, bold and immediate action was usually preferable to delay and preparation.<sup>6</sup>

The ability of Patton and Rommel to excel in uncertain or rapidly changing situations is largely due to a strikingly similar style of leadership and operational thinking. Both men demonstrated aggressive leadership with a high tolerance for risk, the preference for mobile operations with armored forces, and the determined pursuit of ambitious objectives. Both men were proponents of speed in warfare, and sought to create and then rapidly exploit opportunity through decisive, immediate action. Most importantly, both men were forceful commanders who drove combat operations through their own will and personal qualities. This capstone project will analyze the personality traits of Patton and Rommel to determine how individual personality influenced their leadership during uncertain or rapidly changing situations. The project will work from the hypothesis that the World War II leadership and operational decision making of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations, was significantly influenced by high conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness, as well as low neuroticism.

### Background

Previous research has clearly established a causal relationship between individual personality traits and effective military leadership. The Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality along with the trait of psychological hardiness has emerged as the most relevant framework to

examine this relationship.<sup>7</sup> Psychological hardiness has been consistently linked to effective military leadership, to include junior Army officers operating in the uncertain real world environment. While the findings in regards to the FFM traits are less consistent and tend to vary by context, conscientiousness has generally been found as a significant predictor of military leader performance. The research to this point has primarily analyzed military leadership in a school or training environment, with operational leadership receiving less attention. The samples have consisted of cadets and relatively junior officers. Research to this point has not applied the FFM and psychological hardiness to examine historical case studies of effective leadership and operational decision making by senior military commanders.

In this project, the research will focus on the leadership and operational decision making of military commanders who are engaged in high-intensity conventional combat when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. The ability to operate in uncertainty is a timeless and critical component of military leadership, and an important topic for study in the military profession. The high-intensity combat of the World War II European Theatre, which featured for the first time fast-paced mobile operations and large armored formations, offers a unique opportunity for study. Technological and industrial advancements had increased the speed and tempo of combat to previously unknown levels, forcing military leaders to operate in a much more fluid, dynamic, and uncertain environment. General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel both effectively adapted and excelled under these conditions. Their World War II performances, therefore, serve as the case studies to represent effective military leadership in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. This project is based on the following research question- how did the personality traits of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel influence their leadership and

operational decision making when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations during World War II?

The purpose of this project is to study the influence of personality factors on the leadership and operational decision making of military commanders engaged in high-intensity conventional campaigns when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. More specifically, this paper will examine how the personality traits of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, as assessed by the FFM and psychological hardiness, influenced their leadership and operational decision making during World War II. The independent variables are the personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, and psychological hardiness. The dependent variables are the World War II leadership and operational decision making of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations.

## **CHAPTER: II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### Introduction

Leadership and decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations are topics of great importance and relevance to the military professional. In seeking to understand the relationship between personal qualities and effective military leadership, the study of personality has yielded a wealth of relevant academic literature. The literature clearly establishes a causal relationship between personality traits and effective military leadership, validates the Five-Factor Model (FFM) and the trait of psychological hardiness as appropriate constructs to study this relationship, and suggests that certain personality traits are more important to effective military leadership and decision making than others.

The ability to make sound decisions regarding goals and objectives, and to influence the manner in which these decisions are pursued, are critical components of military leadership. Owing to the nature of real-world combat operations, decision making often occurs in an uncertain or rapidly changing situation. In his summary of research linking personality and military leadership, Paul T. Bartone asserts that “highly effective military leaders possess certain personality attributes that allow them to adapt quickly and make constructive sense of rapidly changing and ambiguous situations. . . (and that) these qualities are also used to inspire subordinates and peers.”<sup>8</sup> Research to this point has established a causal link between

personality and military leadership, to include leadership in uncertain and rapidly changing situations.

A major development in the general study of personality has been the increasing consensus on the FFM, or the “Big Five”, as the standard framework to conceptualize and measure normal adult personality.<sup>9</sup> It has been applied in numerous academic studies in various disciplines, including leadership research. In an extensive qualitative and quantitative review of personality trait perspective and leadership published in 2002, Timothy A. Judge et al. found that the strong correlation between the five domains of the FFM and selected leadership criteria suggest that the FFM is an appropriate framework for examining the dispositional predictors of leadership.<sup>10</sup> In the past fifteen years, it has been used extensively in research related to military leadership and the performance of military leaders.

Overall, the research to this point suggests that the influence of the Big Five traits vary by situational context. The trait of conscientiousness is the most consistently and significantly linked to effective military leadership, while the traits of neuroticism and agreeableness show the least correlation. The traits of openness and extraversion yield the most inconclusive results, suggesting that they are the most dependent on situational context.

Despite the importance of the FFM, it is not universally viewed as a complete representation of normal personality. Several researchers have argued that important personality traits may not be adequately represented within the model, including traits related to leadership.<sup>11</sup> This has led some to look for personality traits beyond those defined by the FFM, to be analyzed either independently or in conjunction with the Big Five.

One such trait, psychological hardiness, has been consistently linked to effective military leadership and performance. In multiple studies, U.S. Army researchers have found this trait to

be a strong predictor of leader performance in West Point cadets during both the academic year and summer training periods.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, this includes the first study to examine psychological hardiness in conjunction with the Big Five.<sup>13</sup> Most recently, Army researchers found that psychological hardiness predicts leader adaptability and performance of junior Army officers operating in uncertain real-world environments.<sup>14</sup>

This literature review is organized to thematically provide a review of the project's underlying theories and variables for analysis. The following section will first provide additional background on the underlying theories of the FFM and psychological hardiness. Next, it will review the relevant literature on each of the project's six selected independent variables. Finally, it will introduce and establish the credibility of those authors who contributed to the project's study of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel.

#### Five-Factor Model and Psychological Hardiness

The FFM emerged from the study of personality traits identified in both natural languages and psychological questionnaires over the previous four decades. It is designed to provide a comprehensive representation of normal adult personality through the broad factors of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness.<sup>15</sup> Each of these factors, or domains, is defined by a group of six inter-correlated facets, or more specific traits. While facet level analysis offers a more detailed assessment, the domain level scale is sufficient to provide a comprehensive summary of an individual's "emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal, and motivational styles."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, academic work relating the FFM to military leadership and decision making can be appropriately analyzed at the factor or domain level.

The FFM can be made operational through a number of personality inventories, such as the Big Five Inventory, Big Five Questionnaire, or Hogan Personality Inventory.<sup>17</sup> The most

popular inventory among research applying the FFM to military leadership, however, is the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R) developed by Paul T. Costa and Robert R. McCrae.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the studies contained in this literature review commonly use the NEO-PI-R to analyze the FFM personality traits.

The personality trait of psychological hardiness is based in existential psychology and is associated with resilience and reaction to stress. Susan Kobasa conceptualized this personality trait to describe a set of attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies that describe individuals who remain healthy after stressful life events.<sup>19</sup> It is comprised of three components- commitment, challenge, and control. Psychological hardiness is best understood as a broad, generalized perspective or holistic worldview, and can therefore be appropriately analyzed as a unitary construct as well as by individual components.<sup>20</sup> As a comparison to the FFM, psychological hardiness can be considered the broad personality domain or factor which is comprised of the facets of commitment, control, and challenge. It has been found to be a distinct personality trait, independent of the Big Five, which is consistently correlated to effective military leadership.<sup>21</sup> Of the various personality inventories used to measure psychological hardiness, the Dispositional Resilience Scale 15 (DRS-15) has been the most popular choice in research relating to leadership effectiveness.

### Personality Traits and Military Leadership

#### Conscientiousness

The NEO-PI-R defines conscientiousness by the facets of competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, and deliberation.<sup>22</sup> It relates to how an individual plans, organizes, and carries out tasks and goal directed behavior. High conscientiousness is associated with determination and a strong sense of purpose, as well as academic and occupational

achievement. Nearly all high achievers will be high in this personality trait. Individuals who are low in conscientiousness are less inclined to achievement and less exacting in working toward their goals.<sup>23</sup> It is associated to overall job performance, as well as to initiative, tenacity, and persistence.<sup>24</sup>

There are many relevant aspects of this trait to military leadership. A conscientious leader will likely be technically skilled and competent, well-organized, focused, and persistent. A leader high in this trait will also likely be able to organize, delegate, and supervise the completion of tasks or accomplishment of goals.<sup>25</sup>

There is an abundance of literature linking conscientiousness with effective military leadership. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of existing literature, Judge et al. found conscientiousness to be consistently correlated to both leader emergence and effectiveness. In terms of situational context, the authors suggest that it may be especially important in situations with ill-defined goals or tasks. The structure provided by a conscientious leader in this context can enhance subordinates' understanding and expectations for successful goal completion.<sup>26</sup>

Several studies conducted by U.S. Army researchers at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point support a strong link between conscientiousness and effective leader performance in cadets. In a longitudinal study published in 2002, Bartone, Scott A. Snook, and Trueman R. Tremble, Jr. assessed personality factors through the FFM to predict leader performance in a single class of cadets. Measuring leader performance through the West Point military development grades cumulative for junior and senior years, the researchers found high conscientiousness to be the most significant predictor of performance among the Big Five.<sup>27</sup> A second longitudinal study using the FFM, published in 2009 by Bartone et al., measured leader performance in two contexts- the academic year and the summer field training period. This

study found conscientiousness to be a significant predictor of leader performance during the academic year, but not during the summer training period. However, Bartone et al. suggest that the more complex academic environment may better predict leader performance in large organizations and complex military operations.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between conscientiousness and effective military leadership is also supported by research among active duty military forces. In a study of ninety-nine commissioned officers, Deakin University researchers Luke McCormack and David Mellor analyzed the relationship between the FFM and leadership effectiveness in the Australian Army. They found high conscientiousness to be a reliable and significant predictor of leader performance as assessed by official evaluations and selection to attend resident career-level school. McCormack and Mellor suggest that those who are high in conscientiousness perform better because they are more focused in meeting directives and supervising the completion of their own directives.<sup>29</sup>

### Openness

The NEO-PI-R describes the domain of openness to experience, or simply openness, as comprised of several elements- “active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to inner feelings, preference for variety, intellectual curiosity, and independence of judgment.”<sup>30</sup> Highly open individuals are curious and willing to entertain the new or unconventional. High openness is modestly associated with higher intelligence and education, and especially creative thinking.<sup>31</sup> However, it is important to distinguish that openness is not equivalent to intelligence, and that being highly open does not necessarily equate to being highly intelligent. Individuals who are low in openness are typically conservative and conventionally-minded, prefer the familiar, and have a narrower scope of interests.<sup>32</sup>

As creativity can be an important leadership skill, open individuals may be more likely to be effective leaders.<sup>33</sup> Open individuals tend to remain informed on issues beyond the scope of their employment and to readily grasp technical knowledge. They also tend to be more inventive and versatile in their thinking.<sup>34</sup> This trait may therefore lead to military leaders who are more readily able to understand and implement technological advancements in weaponry and equipment, and to employ these tools in creative ways. Openness may also encourage learning and adaptability, as well as a more thorough understanding of problems or situations.<sup>35</sup>

The research to this point has failed to establish a consistent relationship between openness and effective military leadership, however. The meta-analysis conducted by Judge et al. found openness to be related to leader emergence and effectiveness, especially in situations where creativity is valued.<sup>36</sup> In their study of Australian Army officers, McCormack and Mellor also found openness to be a significant predictor of effective leader performance.<sup>37</sup> The 2002 and 2009 longitudinal studies conducted at West Point, on the other hand, did not find openness to be a significant predictor of effective leadership.<sup>38</sup> Considering separate findings that associate social judgment with leader effectiveness, Bartone, Snook, and Tremble, Jr. expressed surprise at the lack of association for openness, and recommend further study.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Bartone et al. stress the importance of situational context, and suggest that openness may be more important in uncertain or ambiguous situations vice in well-regulated environments such as West Point.<sup>40</sup>

### Extraversion

Extraversion is defined by the facets of warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking, and positive emotions.<sup>41</sup> High extraversion is associated with comfort in large groups, as well as energy, optimism, and cheerfulness. It is strongly correlated with an

interest in enterprising careers and occupations.<sup>42</sup> Low extraversion does not imply negative connotations, but simply the lack of exuberance found in high extraversion individuals. Low extraversion is associated with being more reserved, independent, and introspective.<sup>43</sup>

In organizations such as the military, where group tasks are frequent and teamwork is essential, the sociable and assertive aspects of this trait may be advantageous.<sup>44</sup> This may be especially relevant for military leaders who must influence and motivate subordinates by personal example. The high levels of energy, optimism, and stamina associated with high extraversion may also prove useful for leaders operating in stressful environments or over an extended period of time.

The existing literature is mixed as to the relationship between extraversion and military leadership. Judge et al. found extraversion to be the FFM trait most consistently and strongly related to leadership effectiveness, and thus the most important.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Bartone, Snook, and Tremble, Jr. found that extraversion was not a significant predictor of leader performance among West Point cadets.<sup>46</sup> McCormack and Mellor actually found a negative relationship, with lower extraversion as a significant predictor of effective leadership among Australian Army officers. However, McCormack and Mellor stress the need for further context regarding this finding, and note “that few of the officers in this study scored low on this factor, and very few could even be considered average. . . although these officers were all quite extraverted, those who were deemed more effective were less extraverted.”<sup>47</sup> In the second West Point study by Bartone et al., the findings on extraversion varied by situational context—extraversion was found to be an insignificant predictor during the academic year, but a significant predictor of leader performance during the summer training period.<sup>48</sup>

## Neuroticism

The NEO-PI-R relates the personality trait of neuroticism to adjustment and emotional stability.<sup>49</sup> It is defined by the facets of anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability. Individuals who are high in neuroticism are more prone to psychological distress and disruptive emotions such as fear, embarrassment, anger, and guilt. They are also more prone to irrationality, struggle to control their impulses, and cope poorly with stress. On the other hand, individuals who are low in neuroticism are typically calm and emotionally stable, and stay that way even during stressful situations.

The personality trait of neuroticism can be expected to relate negatively to effective military leadership. A military leader must make sound decisions under stressful conditions, which implies a calm and level-headed demeanor. Individuals prone to irrational or impulsive behavior, and with poor stress reactions, will likely not be able to perform this essential function of military leadership.

The literature, however, has found no significant relationship between neuroticism and effective military leadership. Judge et al., McCormack and Mellor, and Bartone et al. all found neuroticism to be a negative but insignificant predictor of leadership in their studies.<sup>50</sup> Bartone, Snook, and Tremble, Jr., found that neuroticism had no association with leader performance at West Point.<sup>51</sup>

## Agreeableness

Agreeableness is related to interpersonal tendencies, and is defined by the facets of trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness.<sup>52</sup> A person high in agreeableness is sympathetic and altruistic, more inclined to help others and to believe that

others will help them. They tend to be cooperative and popular. On the other hand, people who are low in agreeableness are more antagonistic, egocentric, and competitive. They tend to be skeptical of others and more prone to critical thinking.

The relationship between agreeableness and leadership is conceptually ambiguous.<sup>53</sup> Certain facets of this trait, such as those that aid in building trust and teamwork, will seemingly be of value to a military leader. On the other hand, the facets of altruism and tender-mindedness seem more likely to have a negative relationship with military leadership. In describing the importance of situational context, Costa and McCrae note that “the readiness to fight for one’s own interests is often advantageous, and agreeableness is not a virtue on the battlefield.”<sup>54</sup> The complexity of this relationship and need for situational context make this a difficult variable to analyze and will likely lead to conflicting results.

While the literature conflicts on the relationship and context, there is consensus in that agreeableness has not been found to be significantly related to effective military leadership. Judge et al. found agreeableness to be insignificantly related and the least relevant of the FFM factors, although with the caveat that it may gain importance in situations requiring conformity or cooperation.<sup>55</sup> In the West Point studies published in 2002 and 2009, agreeableness was found to have a positive but insignificant relationship with military leadership.<sup>56</sup> McCormack and Mellor, on the other hand, found a negative but insignificant relationship between agreeableness and effective military leadership.<sup>57</sup>

### Psychological Hardiness

Psychological hardiness is defined by the three components of commitment, control, and challenge.<sup>58</sup> Commitment refers to a sense of purpose and meaning that relates to how active or passive an individual is to participating in life’s events. Control refers to the belief that an

individual can influence his or her life events and surrounding environment. Challenge refers to the belief that change is normal and an opportunity for growth rather than a threat or something to fear.<sup>59</sup> Individuals who are high in psychological hardiness have a strong sense of commitment to life and work, a high sense of control over their life and environment, and the perception that change and challenge are worthwhile learning experiences.<sup>60</sup>

This personality trait is highly relevant to military leadership. It is positively correlated to resilience, performance, and the leader influence process in stressful situations. It is also associated with the ability of a military leader to make constructive sense of an ambiguous or rapidly changing situation, and then transfer this same interpretation to peers and subordinates.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, through their personal example and leadership, as well as policies and actions, military leaders high in hardiness can transfer their resilience to subordinates and throughout an organization.<sup>62</sup> An individual high in this trait will likely be actively engaged and committed to their mission and subordinates, confident and organized in pursuing tasks or goals, and undeterred by obstacles or setbacks.<sup>63</sup>

The existing literature has consistently found psychological hardiness to be significantly and positively related to military leader performance. Bartone et al. found psychological hardiness to be a strong predictor of leader performance among West Point cadets for both the academic year and the summer training periods.<sup>64</sup> In this study, which analyzed personality through the FFM as well as psychological hardiness, it was the only personality trait to predict performance in both contexts. The findings describe the “generally effective leader as competent and committed, confident in his/her ability to manage events and influence outcomes, and conscientious, persistent, and savvy in the face of complex and changing conditions.”<sup>65</sup> The facets of commitment, control, and challenge are strongly correlated to this description. Overall,

psychological hardiness is found to have a broad application for effective leadership in various situational contexts.<sup>66</sup>

As the contemporary operating environment is characterized by uncertainty and the need for broad mission sets, Bartone, Dennis R. Kelly, and Michael D. Matthews subsequently conducted research into the influence of psychological hardiness on the adaptive performance of military leaders.<sup>67</sup> The study evaluates hardiness as measured at entry to West Point against the results of an adaptability survey taken by graduates seven years later, following graduation and three years of active service. The research model considered hardiness both as a unitary construct and as individual facets. Bartone, Kelly, and Matthews found that psychological hardiness, and particularly the facets of control and commitment, are significant predictors of adaptability in junior officers operating in the real-world environment. In explanation, the authors suggest that individuals with a stronger sense of commitment are better able to build on experience and have more confidence in their problem-solving skills, while those with high control are more likely to effectively balance routine and initiative to adapt to a changing situation.<sup>68</sup>

#### Case Study Source Material

Owing to the well-known and extraordinary World War II leadership of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, there is an overwhelming volume of literature available for study. This project will use select secondary literature from respected military historians such as thoroughly researched biographies, campaign analysis, and edited correspondence. The source material for information regarding General Patton primarily comes from Martin Blumenson and Carlo D'Este. Blumenson, the former Third Army staff historian and pre-eminent Patton biographer, provides a concise but detailed description of General Patton's life and career in

*Patton: The Man Behind The Legend, 1885-1945*. He also edited *The Patton Papers, 1940-1945*, a vast collection of Patton's letters and correspondence during the World War II period. Carlo D'Este, a retired U.S. Army officer and distinguished World War II historian, contributes a more exhaustive biography in *Patton: A Genius For War*.

Source material for Field Marshal Rommel comes primarily from David Fraser and Sir Basil Liddel Hart. David Fraser, a former British General and World War II historian, provides Rommel's biography and World War II accomplishments in *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel*. *The Rommel Papers*, edited by Sir Basil Liddel Hart, contain a large collection of Rommel's World War II correspondence and personal campaign reflections.

#### Summary

In summary, the academic literature to this point has found a consistent relationship between psychological hardiness and effective military leadership, to include adaptive leadership in junior Army officers operating in uncertain real world situations. Findings in regards to the FFM are less consistent and the relationship of these personality factors more dependent on situational context. This research has primarily analyzed military leadership in a school or training environment, however, with operational leadership receiving far less academic attention. The samples have consisted of cadets and relatively junior leaders. The literature has not applied these personality models to the leadership and operational decision making of senior military leaders in historical case studies.

**CHAPTER: III**  
**METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH STRATEGY**

Introduction

The study of exceptional military leaders throughout history can offer valuable insight into effective combat leadership and decision making. While previous research has clearly established a causal relationship between individual personality traits and effective military leadership, this research has not included the historical case study of great military leaders. From the high-intensity conventional combat of World War II, General George S. Patton and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel provide outstanding case studies of combat leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to study the influence of individual personality traits on the leadership and operational decision making of military commanders engaged in high-intensity conventional campaigns when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. More specifically, this paper will examine how the personality traits of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, through the framework of the FFM and psychological hardiness, influenced their leadership and operational decision making when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations during World War II. The author hopes to contribute to the larger body of knowledge relating personality to military leadership, and to establish the precedence for applying the FFM and psychological hardiness as a framework for the historical case study of effective military leadership.

## Research Design

This project will apply the FFM and the concept of psychological hardiness to analyze the personality traits of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel. The FFM and psychological hardiness are academically accepted concepts which have been used extensively to study the relationship between personality and effective military leadership. The FFM is the most widely used framework to analyze normal adult personality, while psychological hardiness has been consistently linked to leadership performance among military cadets and officers.<sup>69</sup> Previous research has established the precedence for using psychological hardiness in conjunction with the Big Five to analyze the relationship between personality traits and effective military leadership.<sup>70</sup>

General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel were selected as appropriate case studies to represent effective military leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations during high-intensity conventional campaigns. As a corps and army commander, Patton's achievements during World War II rank him as one of the great combat generals of modern history.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Rommel's leadership and performance as a Panzer commander during World War II also place him in this category.<sup>72</sup> Both men were operational level commanders who were frequently forced to make decisions in uncertain or rapidly changing situations.

This project will use the case study method with a qualitative content analysis of existing relevant literature. It will analyze the personality traits of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, through the framework of the FFM and psychological hardiness, to determine how their individual personality traits influenced their leadership and operational decision making during World War II. The independent variables selected for analysis are the personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, and psychological

hardiness. For the purposes of this project, these variables are defined by the NEO-PI-R and DRS-15, and expanded upon in the literature review. The Big Five personality traits are analyzed at the domain level and psychological hardiness is analyzed as a unitary construct. The selected dependent variables are the World War II leadership and operational decision making of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Data will be collected and measured qualitatively through an analysis of select secondary literature.

### Limitations

In previous research relating personality to effective leadership, the FFM and psychological hardiness have been made operational through two primary methods. The first has been to use self-report personality surveys, such as the NEO-PI-R or DRS-15, to measure personality traits in living subjects. In this method, measures of leader performance are obtained through academic test scores or official evaluations. The second method has been a meta-analysis of key terms found in large volumes of academic literature related to leadership. This method has been applied to historical case studies by quantitatively analyzing the verbatim interviews and speeches of political leaders to determine their personality traits.<sup>73</sup>

This project is limited from both of the above methods. As the case study subjects are deceased historical figures, the administration of a personality survey is obviously not possible. Owing to a lack of time and specialized computer software, the second method is also not feasible. Based on these limitations, and within the stated purpose of the research, this project will consist of case study research made operational by a qualitative content analysis of relevant literature.

## Summary

This project will analyze the influence of individual personality on the World War II leadership and operational decision making of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. The personality traits of the FFM and psychological hardiness have been selected for causal analysis, while General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel have been selected as appropriate case studies. Data will be collected and analyzed through a qualitative content review of selected secondary literature.

**CHAPTER: IV**  
**ANALYSIS**  
**GENERAL PATTON**

Background

“I have never given a damn what the enemy was going to do or where he was. What I have known is what I have intended to do and then have done it. By acting in this manner I have always gotten to the place he expected me to come about three days before he got there.”

--General Patton during the breakout from Normandy,  
August 1943<sup>74</sup>

Influenced by the great military leaders of history and literature from a young age, George S. Patton decided on a military career early in life. He demonstrated a natural understanding of military matters and modeled himself after aggressive commanders who exhibited self-confidence, enthusiasm, and personal courage.<sup>75</sup> A devout student of military history, he gained a deep appreciation for battlefield decision making which was fundamental to his success- according to Blumenson, because Patton was “instantly aware of all the options involved in coming to a decision, he could choose the boldest course because he knew what the great ones had done.”<sup>76</sup> He was extraordinarily ambitious yet suffered from self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, for which he compensated by developing an intense determination in all things and a single-minded devotion to becoming a great military leader.<sup>77</sup>

Patton competed for and gained admission to West Point, and was commissioned as a cavalry officer upon graduation in 1909. From the very beginning, he began to develop his trademark leadership style based on troop proficiency, strict discipline, and bold offensive action.<sup>78</sup> He became one of America’s foremost tank experts during World War I, where he

opened the first American tank school and commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Light Tank Brigade during the St. Mihiel offensive.<sup>79</sup> It was during this time that Patton cemented his commitment to leadership at the point of attack, where he believed that a commander could best influence the action through personal example and decision making.

Following World War I, he wrote extensively on military subjects and preparation for the next war, to include tank employment. Patton advocated for freeing tanks from the infantry, using them instead to penetrate deep into the enemy's rear area and attack his command, communication, and supply centers. He was, however, unable to develop a mature theory in this regard, such as J.F.C. Fuller or Basil Liddel Hart, and his efforts proved unsuccessful until the 1939 breakout of World War II in Europe.<sup>80</sup>

#### World War II Leadership



Photo 1. General Patton in 1944.

During the years leading up to direct American involvement, Patton was instrumental in preparing U.S. forces for armored warfare. In 1940, Patton was hand selected to join the 2d Armored Division, which was tasked with developing the abilities to match the German blitzkrieg.<sup>81</sup> He took command of the 2d Brigade initially but was soon named to command the

division and then the I Armored Corps. He also opened the Desert Training Center in California, which was designed specifically to prepare for armored warfare in Northern Africa.<sup>82</sup> In 1942, Patton was selected to lead the first American forces going directly to combat in the European Theatre. Prior to departing the Desert Training Center, he summarized his findings for his superiors- in armored warfare, combat formations and material were secondary to discipline, rapid and accurate marksmanship, and the relentless will to close with and destroy the enemy.<sup>83</sup>

Operation Torch was designed to gain the Allies a foothold in Northwest Africa and to relieve pressure on Russia by opening a second front.<sup>84</sup> The intelligence picture was extremely uncertain and the operation was considered to be a high risk endeavor- the weather was unpredictable, the intentions of the Vichy French were unknown, and Patton faced the possibility of being significantly outnumbered.<sup>85</sup> He decided on three separate landings to capture his objective of Casablanca. In addition to the main landing at Fedala, he landed forces south to block French reinforcements and north to seize an important airfield.

Patton landed with his main effort and galvanized sluggish beach operations on November 8. By November 10, his forces had surrounded Casablanca and he had determined to attack the following morning. When he received a message saying the French were preparing to surrender, Patton directed that the attack would continue as planned until the French *actually* surrendered.<sup>86</sup> They did so less than an hour before the scheduled start time, and American forces seized the city unchallenged.

In March 1943, Patton assumed command of II Corps. Following their defeat at Kasserine Pass, his first duty was to reinvigorate discipline and fighting spirit within the corps.<sup>87</sup> At this point of the war, it was uncertain if the newly arrived American combat units were ready to face battle-tested Axis formations.<sup>88</sup> Tasked with making a rather conservative supporting

attack to facilitate the British main effort, Patton determined to make such progress against the Axis flank that he would be allowed to continue forward and encircle the enemy force.<sup>89</sup> In what became known as the battle of El Guettar, the II Corps fought well and won a tactical victory against a combined German-Italian force. Patton then pushed his subordinate units forward aggressively but was unable to prevent the withdrawal of the Axis main body. Nevertheless, his leadership inspired a rapid and remarkable turnaround for the previously demoralized II Corps, and the victory gained respect for American capability.<sup>90</sup>

Patton next commanded the Seventh Army during the Sicily Campaign. Following the initial landing, Patton learned that the British had usurped the Seventh Army's planned axis of advance to the objective of Messina.<sup>91</sup> By this action, they had relegated the American force to a supporting role. Patton quickly adjusted his plan, reorganized his forces, and advanced to the west of the British Eighth Army. Denied the opportunity to seize Messina, he determined to drive all the way to the northern coast and capture the city of Palermo instead. While the British advance bogged down, Patton's forces covered more than 100 miles in a matter of days to reach their objectives, seize Palermo, and capture more than 50,000 Axis prisoners.<sup>92</sup>

Now positioned to advance on Messina from the west, and with the British still stalled in the south, Patton determined to seize Messina before the Eighth Army. When a skilled and determined Axis retrograde slowed the advance, Patton ordered, over the objections of naval officers and his subordinate commanders, a series of high risk battalion-sized amphibious landings to the enemy's rear.<sup>93</sup> The first landing was insignificant. The second resulted in heavy fighting and cost significant casualties, but also hastened the Axis withdrawal and opened the road to Messina. Patton cancelled the third landing only when his 3d Division reached Messina and accepted its surrender.<sup>94</sup> The Seventh Army had beat the British to Messina, proven beyond

doubt the capability of American forces, and effectively ended the Sicily Campaign due in large part to Patton's decision making and drive.

Patton assumed command of the newly activated Third Army for Operation Cobra, the breakout from the Normandy beachhead, in 1944. After pushing his forces through the Avranches corridor, Patton received orders to send one corps west to Brittany and three corps eastward to the Seine and Loire Rivers. Patton sent armored divisions racing toward their objectives, covering hundreds of miles to seize designated towns and attack rear area units. When ordered to send one corps north as one wing of an attempted double envelopment, Patton argued for a riskier but potentially more decisive deeper envelopment. Initially denied this request, Patton was eventually given permission by his more cautious superiors.<sup>95</sup> He raced his forces forward and within two days had the majority of his Third Army in position. In conjunction with other Allied forces, they inflicted heavy damage on the withdrawing German forces but were unable to complete the encirclement in time to trap the army.<sup>96</sup>

Ordered to continue the pursuit, Patton led his forces eastward across France toward the undefended German border, crossing several rivers and covering hundreds of miles in only a few days. In the breakout from Normandy, he demonstrated the audacious decision making and control of his forces to achieve, according to Blumenson, "a masterful example of blitzkrieg at its best."<sup>97</sup> The Third Army had achieved an operational level breakout due in large part to Patton's willingness to take risks and ability to make them pay off.<sup>98</sup>

When a gasoline shortage halted his advance for a few days, the Germans quickly organized a stout defense at the Siegfried Line. This, along with poor weather and continued gasoline shortages, ground his advance to a near halt as the Third Army now had to fight for a new breakthrough. Over the next sixteen weeks, Patton continued on the offensive as much as

his supplies allowed. In foul weather and against heavy resistance, the Third Army had by mid-December advanced forty miles through the Siegfried Line and were preparing for the final attack to gain their penetration.<sup>99</sup>

On December 16, however, the Germans launched an unexpected and determined counteroffensive through the thinly manned Ardennes Forest. As the Germans were rapidly pushing a large salient in the American front, Patton advised his superiors that he could launch his own attack with three divisions on December 22. Despite misgiving about the size of the force and doubts that he could take action so quickly, Patton insisted that immediate action and the element of surprise were worth the risk. He was also confident that three divisions were sufficient for the initial attack.<sup>100</sup>

Within a week, the majority of the Third Army had navigated the terrible road conditions and started their attack as scheduled. They met fierce resistance but advanced steadily and lifted the siege at Bastogne on December 26.<sup>101</sup> Patton aggressively pushed his subordinates to continue the attack, fearing that the Germans were escaping to the east.<sup>102</sup> When the Third Army linked with the First Army at Houffalize on January 16, the German salient was effectively eliminated. The relief of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge was another brilliant operation for Patton and the Third Army, and perhaps his finest campaign.<sup>103</sup>

During early 1945, Patton continued to advocate for aggressive offensive action and pushed his subordinate commanders to advance despite poor weather, bad roads, and stiff German resistance. By March the Third Army had reached the Rhine River, and finding all of the bridges destroyed, Patton ordered a division-sized crossing which caught the Germans by surprise. With his foothold on the far side and pontoon bridges established, he led his forces into Germany and continued forward. The unconditional surrender of the German army took effect

on May 9, following which Patton assumed duties administering occupied German territory. In December 1945, he died following an automobile accident.<sup>104</sup>

### Personality Traits

#### Conscientiousness

Patton was a highly conscientious individual, and this strongly influenced his World War II leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. He was especially high in the facets of achievement striving, self-discipline, and dutifulness. His overriding personal ambition was to be remembered as a great military leader, and he pursued this goal with determination throughout his life. On the battlefield, he was committed to achieving victory as quickly and decisively as possible. This led to his aggressive decision making, willingness to accept risk, and strong preference for offensive combat. Owing to his dedication to duty and strong sense of purpose, his commitment to these principles did not waiver in the face of uncertainty. In fact, Patton believed that he possessed an uncanny prescience in making decisions- during the Sicily Campaign, he recorded in his diary that “I have a sixth sense in war. . . and also I am willing to take chances.”<sup>105</sup> Much of this confidence stemmed from his lifetime dedication to the study of military history and great military commanders.<sup>106</sup>

Patton was also exceptionally competent and skilled in the performance of his duties. He thoroughly understood armored, mobile warfare at the tactical and operational levels. He was, as Blumenson describes, a master of the art of blitzkrieg.<sup>107</sup> Patton excelled at creating proficient and disciplined soldiers, and he trusted in their ability to win tactical battles. This gave him the confidence to aggressively push his subordinate units forward, across great distances and into uncertain situations, seeking or creating opportunities to achieve an operational breakout. He

intuitively understood maneuver warfare and the potential for armored forces to achieve operational level objectives by penetrating to an enemy's rear. He also intuitively understood that this type of warfare requires its participants to operate in uncertain or rapidly changing conditions. His answer to this challenge was to conduct bold offensive action, the acceptance of risk to maximize speed and surprise, and aggressive leadership at the point of attack to maintain momentum.

This is not to imply that Patton was unorganized or did not value planning and preparation. On the contrary, he was exceedingly well-organized, and highly valued order and discipline within his command. His ability to organize his forces, articulate his intended goals and objectives, and delegate tasks to his subordinates enabled his various commands to operate in the decentralized fashion which he preferred. His persistent supervision and personal interjection ensured the completion of his tasks and the accomplishment of his objectives. These qualities enabled Patton to effectively adapt as unfolding events led to uncertain or rapidly changing situations, as evidenced by his counterattack at Bastogne and his rapid shift to seize Palermo.

### Openness

High openness, as it relates to creativity in actions and ideas, contributed to General Patton's successful leadership and decision making during World War II. Throughout his military studies and experiences, he demonstrated the willingness to adopt new ideas and the ability to grasp technical knowledge. The most relevant example is his transition from cavalry to armor, and his eagerness to master the techniques and tactics of armored warfare.

Patton was instrumental in adopting the tank and building the U.S. Army into the large, mechanized force which fought in the European Theatre.<sup>108</sup> He broke with traditional Army

thinking and argued against placing tanks in support of the infantry. Instead, he believed the primary role of armored forces should be to penetrate to the rear area and disrupt enemy command, supply, and communications.<sup>109</sup> Patton also became a licensed pilot and advocated for the integration of small aircraft into armored units.<sup>110</sup> At a time when technological advancement was rapidly changing the manner in which militaries would be organized and wars would be fought, Patton's creative thinking and innovative spirit were essential to establishing armored doctrine and preparing armored units for combat in Europe.

Patton also demonstrated versatility and creativity in the employment of his forces during World War II. In keeping with his views on armored formations and mobile warfare, he often employed armored units independent of the infantry. This allowed his armor to bypass intermediary objectives and rapidly cover long distances, maintaining the momentum of the attack to create and exploit opportunities, while the infantry conducted the time-consuming operations to seize and secure these objectives. The speed of independent armored forces also allowed Patton to more rapidly respond to the changing conditions of the battlefield. Operation Cobra is a classic example, as he left infantry divisions to secure the port cities of St. Malo, Brest, and Lorient, while he pushed his armor forward hundreds of miles to liberate a large portion of France. When a German counterattack created an opportunity for envelopment, Patton was able to move three of his corps into position with historical quickness.<sup>111</sup>

#### Extraversion

Patton demonstrated a high level of extraversion during World War II, which was important to his ability to influence decisions and motivate his subordinates. He was assertive, outspoken, and adventurous, making bold recommendations to his superiors and advocating strongly for their implementation. Patton influenced several key decisions in this way, to include

winning the American II Corps an increased role in the Tunisia Campaign despite their uncertain combat proficiency, and gaining permission for the Seventh Army's drive to Palermo after the British Eighth Army usurped the route to Messina.<sup>112</sup>

Patton also excelled at building cohesive units and motivating the soldiers in his command. He visited the troops often and gave rousing speeches laced with profanity. In person, he had an incomparable ability to impart enthusiasm and build rapport with groups of soldiers.<sup>113</sup> While not universally beloved, his force of personality was undeniable in influencing those in his command.

Especially during difficult or uncertain times, the ability to galvanize action and inspire confidence through personal example was an important aspect of his leadership. His extraverted qualities contributed to his ability to expedite confused beach operations during the Torch landing, encourage speed and momentum during fast-paced mobile operations such as the breakout and pursuit from Normandy, and maintain morale when weather and logistic conditions forced a change to static warfare during the winter of 1944-1945. These qualities also contributed to his success in restoring the morale of the II Corps following Kasserine Pass, and subsequently building Allied confidence in American fighting capabilities.

#### Neuroticism

Within the context of leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations, neuroticism was not a significant influence on General Patton's World War II performance. Although he demonstrated higher than average levels of neurotic behavior throughout his life, and even during World War II, this did not negatively affect his operational decision making. There is no evidence to suggest that Patton demonstrated a poor stress reaction when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations. His decision making, while

aggressive, was not irrational or impulsive. On the contrary, Patton seemed comfortable in these situations and his decisions were consistently based in his educated philosophy of warfare.

#### Agreeableness

Agreeableness was also not a significant influence on Patton's World War II leadership and decision making. Even in the context of building trust and teamwork, where facets of this trait would seemingly be of value, Patton did not demonstrate a high level of agreeableness. While he was a strong proponent of decentralization and trust in subordinates, he viewed this as an operational necessity that he would have preferred to avoid- "It is awful to have to confide everything to others, but there is no other way, and if you trust people, they seem to perform."<sup>114</sup> His low level of agreeableness overall suggests that his ability to build teamwork and cohesion in his command originated from other personality traits, such as conscientiousness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness.

#### Psychological Hardiness

Patton was high in psychological hardiness, and this trait significantly influenced his World War II leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. He was strongly committed to achieving victory, ending the war, and fulfilling his ambitions for advancement and greatness. This influenced his decision making toward aggressive offensive action in pursuit of decisive victory. He was also confident, organized, and determined in the pursuit of his goals, and undeterred by obstacles such as uncertain or rapidly changing situations. In fact, Patton's method of operations suggests that he was confident in his ability to control and manage these types of situations, and that he viewed the changing conditions of the battlefield as opportunities to be exploited.

The Sicily Campaign provides multiple examples of Patton's ability to manage an uncertain or rapidly changing situation by effectively framing the problem, coming to a decision, and issuing his instructions. When denied his planned route to Messina, he immediately determined to seize Palermo as an alternate objective. He quickly adjusted his plans, issued his orders, and advanced his forces to successfully capture Palermo. When this created a new opportunity to threaten Messina from the west, Patton quickly attempted to exploit it. When his advance then encountered stubborn resistance, he responded by landing an amphibious force to hasten the Axis withdrawal and clear the path to Messina.<sup>115</sup> When confronted with changing battlefield conditions, Patton remained committed to achieving his goal, controlled the situation through his adaptive leadership and decision making, and steadfastly pursued all perceived opportunities.

Moreover, Patton demonstrated a natural ability to transfer his resilience and determination throughout his command. He unfailingly enforced policies to ensure discipline and troop proficiency, and insisted on aggressive and opportunistic commanders who led from the front. He also excelled at instilling tenacity and mental toughness within his subordinates, which led to an increased ability to sustain performance under stressful conditions. By positioning himself forward and identifying important decision points, he was able to personally influence the course of events by inspiring confidence and steeling resolve. Through his leadership and personal example, Patton instilled in his subordinates the determination and opportunistic aggression to overcome obstacles and operate effectively in uncertain or rapidly changing situations.

## Summary

During World War II, General Patton demonstrated exceptional combat leadership and decision making during uncertain or rapidly changing situations. His ability to do this was significantly influenced by the personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness. High conscientiousness and psychological hardiness were found to have the strongest and most consistent influence. The influence of high openness was related primarily to his adoption, comprehension, and creative employment of armor in maneuver warfare. High extraversion was a significant influence in the context of motivating subordinates and influencing the decisions of his superiors. The personality traits of neuroticism and agreeableness were not found to be significant influences.

## CHAPTER: V

### ANALYSIS

#### FIELD MARSHAL ERWIN ROMMEL

##### Background

“We’ve been attacking with dazzling success. There’ll be consternation amongst our masters in Tripoli and Rome, perhaps in Berlin too. I took the risk against all orders and instructions because the opportunity seemed favorable. No doubt it will all be pronounced good later... The British are falling over each other to get away.”

-Field Marshal Rommel during his first thrust into the Cyrenaica, April 1941<sup>116</sup>

Born into a working class family lacking any notable military tradition, Erwin Rommel nevertheless determined as a young man to gain an army commission. He was hard working and determined to succeed, and excelled at practical exercises if not academics. He was a steady and even-tempered boy, yet seemingly fearless.<sup>117</sup> Rommel was commissioned into the infantry in January 1912.

During World War I, Rommel not only proved himself as an aggressive and extraordinarily capable combat leader, but also developed much of the decision making style which he would demonstrate as a more senior commander in World War II. From the beginning, Rommel recognized the importance of human factors in combat and sought to inspire his command through his own remarkable courage and physical stamina.<sup>118</sup> He was unfailingly audacious and believed in leadership from the front. With an intuitive sense for enemy vulnerability and a mastery of small unit tactics, he believed that rapid decision followed by immediate action was preferable to delay for the sake of prudent planning.<sup>119</sup> He believed in decentralization and bold individual initiative to quickly seize opportunities in battle. Rommel

learned much about the effects of maneuver and attacking an enemy's flank and rear with speed, surprise, and fluidity. He was also willing to accept great risk in the conduct of immediate offensive operations, leaving his own flanks exposed in order to exploit initial success or conduct pursuit.<sup>120</sup>

Following World War I, Rommel continued his military career with typical peacetime assignments. He was an outstanding instructor who was known for imparting enthusiasm in his students. Drawing on his own experiences, he wrote extensively on infantry tactics and decision making- this effort culminated with the publishing of the popular *The Infantry Attacks*.<sup>121</sup> As he continued to advance in rank, he also drew the notice of Adolph Hitler. Immediately prior to the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Rommel was promoted to Major-General and assigned as the commandant of Hitler's field headquarters. Always a vigorous and articulate supporter of the blitzkrieg concept prior to the war, he was able to observe the results first-hand during this initial campaign of World War II. At his earliest possible opportunity, he requested to be transferred to an armored command.<sup>122</sup>

#### World War II Leadership



Photo 2. Field Marshal Rommel

By the start of German offensive operations on May 10, 1940, Rommel had assumed command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. As a division commander, he displayed the same aggressiveness, physical stamina, and personal courage as he had during his World War I career. He led from the very front of his division and often personally took command at the scene of important events or when momentum had stalled.<sup>123</sup> Despite heavy resistance, the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer had crossed the Meuse by May 13 and attacked through the French Maginot Line on May 16. By this point of the rapid advance, the division had advanced to the limit of its orders, was running low on fuel and ammunition, and had elements scattered over many miles. Rommel nevertheless ordered on his own initiative to continue the advance with all possible speed, desiring to maintain the momentum against a psychologically defeated opponent.<sup>124</sup> By May 18, he had seized the town of Cambrai and was ordered to rest his division for at least two days. For the division's remarkable accomplishments during the eight day advance and for his personal actions on May 16 and 17, Rommel was awarded and recognized for having contributed decisively to the entire German operation.<sup>125</sup> He continued to lead his division with aggression and distinction throughout the remainder of the campaign, which ended with the British withdrawing and French surrendering by late June.<sup>126</sup>

From 1941-1943, Rommel served in the North African theatre as a corps, Panzer Group, and then Panzer Army commander. Arriving in February 1941 and taking command of a combined German-Italian corps, he argued for the need to immediately adopt a more aggressive operational posture. Believing that time and the buildup of forces favored the British, he wanted to go on the offensive.<sup>127</sup> With permission to conduct a division-sized attack at the town of Mersa El Brega, Rommel initially met stiff resistance. However, he quickly adjusted his attack and outflanked the British garrison, capturing equipment and causing their withdrawal.

At this point, Rommel recognized that the British intended to avoid decisive battle at all cost, and desired to capitalize on this development.<sup>128</sup> On his own initiative, he committed his entire force to exploit this opportunity, launching a major offensive operation on April 2. Within nine days, his forces had expelled the British from the entire Cyrenaica region. As there was a good deal of uncertainty and confusion amongst his forces, Rommel spent most of this operation flying over the advancing columns in his personal airplane, issuing instructions and taking personal command to drive the advance forward quickly.<sup>129</sup>

Determined to continue all the way to the Suez Canal, Rommel next attacked the strategically important port of Tobruk. With very little intelligence available to him, Rommel again decided that a hasty immediate attack was worth the risk.<sup>130</sup> He failed during two separate April attacks to defeat the prepared defenses of the British, with his forces sustaining heavy losses each time. Recognizing the strength of the British defensive positions, Rommel settled into a siege of Tobruk and reorganized his forces in anticipation of a counteroffensive.<sup>131</sup>

He defeated the first effort to relieve Tobruk, Operation Battleaxe, with a month of defensive battle and his own well-timed counterattack. During the second attempt, Operation Crusader, Rommel initially failed to appreciate the seriousness of the threat and remained determined to assault the port.<sup>132</sup> He eventually recognized the need to address the developing counterattack, and decided on bold maneuver to encircle and destroy the British Eighth Army. It was an ambitious plan, undertaken against the advice of his staff, which gained initial tactical success but failed to accomplish anything operationally significant.<sup>133</sup> While Rommel was leading his forces against the Eighth Army, the Allies succeeded in relieving Tobruk. He returned immediately to personally direct his own counterattack and regain the port. Despite committing his last strength to the battle, he was unable to close the Allied corridor. With his

forces worn and material depleted, Rommel in December chose to withdraw all the way west to Mersa El Brega, ceding all of his previously gained territory.<sup>134</sup>

Following a much needed resupply in early 1942, Rommel launched an unexpected offensive which regained the Cyrenaica in only eight days. Having recovered the operational initiative, he set about continued offensive operations with the aim to finally capture Tobruk.<sup>135</sup> His forces first won the Battle of Gazala in May and June, setting the conditions for the final assault. Making more thorough preparations this time, the Germans captured the port and equipment of Tobruk in less than two days. It was an operationally and strategically important victory, and Rommel was promoted to Field Marshal in its aftermath.<sup>136</sup>

Understanding that the superior industrial capacity of the Allies meant that time was working against him, Rommel aggressively continued his drive against the British.<sup>137</sup> However, logistical shortages and failure to achieve victory at Alamein in July placed Rommel in a dilemma- although he was weak and poorly supplied, he did not want to cede the initiative to an enemy who would soon be unbeatable.<sup>138</sup> Choosing to launch a major offensive in August, he immediately ran into stiff resistance at Alam Halfa, and decided to withdraw from the battle and shift to defensive operations. When the British soon attacked the Alamein line and began overwhelming Rommel's forces, he ordered withdrawal despite Hitler's instructions to hold the ground at all costs. Hitler belatedly approved the withdrawal and Rommel led a successful maneuver to Tunisia, saving his army from large scale capture or destruction.<sup>139</sup>

After receiving some amount of resupply, Rommel led his forces as the left wing of Operation Morgenlust in February 1943. He believed, as usual, that a tactical victory could conceivably open the door for bold exploitation in the enemy's rear and lead to operational results.<sup>140</sup> However, his proposed deep envelopment was deemed too ambitious by the overall

commander and he was assigned a more conservative objective for envelopment.<sup>141</sup> He attacked and defeated the Allied positions at the Kasserine Pass, but judging that the opposition was still cohesive and actually strengthening, declined to pursue an operational drive to the Allied rear.<sup>142</sup> Rommel instead withdrew back to the defensive line at Mareth and attempted a spoiling attack against the British Eighth Army. He called this off after one unsuccessful day. Immediately after, on March 10, Rommel was recalled from Africa owing to poor health.<sup>143</sup>

Following his recovery and an uneventful stint in the Italian theatre, Rommel was assigned to inspect the defenses being constructed in France. He determined that only a quick and decisive victory on the beach, before the Allies could establish themselves ashore, could prevent eventual German defeat.<sup>144</sup> He prioritized the coastal defenses and supervised detailed preparations of coordinated mines, obstacles, and firepower. Breaking with traditional German doctrine and the principle of concentration, he argued against keeping a large operational reserve. Instead, he advocated for a series of dispersed tactical reserves to conduct local counterattacks at the beach.<sup>145</sup> His advice in this regard was not well-received or followed.

As the Allies fought their way ashore in June 1944, Rommel in his own sector remained dedicated to local counterattacks and containment at the beach. Once the Allies had gained a foothold at Normandy, Rommel was in agreement that any attempted breakout should be met with a defense in depth. At this point, however, he already believed the German defeat to be inevitable.<sup>146</sup> On July 17, Rommel was wounded by Allied aircraft fire and evacuated from the field. During his recovery, he was forced to commit suicide for allegedly conspiring against Hitler.

## Personality Traits

### Conscientiousness

Erwin Rommel's high level of conscientiousness was a significant and positive influence on his ability to effectively lead and make decisions in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. He was highly ambitious and extraordinarily driven to accomplish his professional goals and combat tasks. This influenced Rommel toward aggressive initiative and decision making, the selection of ambitious operational and tactical objectives, and the determined pursuit of operational results. These qualities contributed to both success and criticism for Rommel.<sup>147</sup> He first demonstrated these tendencies by achieving operational results during the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division's remarkable advance across Europe in May 1940.<sup>148</sup> In North Africa, these tendencies led to victory and operational breakthrough at Mersa El Brega and the Cyrenaica in 1941, the recapture of the Cyrenaica in early 1942, and the capture of Tobruk in 1942. They also contributed to Rommel's delayed reaction during Operation Crusader and 1941 failure at Tobruk, when he remained fixed on his original attack despite the change in battlefield conditions and then overextended his forces in pursuit of a decisive envelopment.<sup>149</sup>

However, criticism of Rommel's aggressive and ambitious operations must be understood in context. His forces were outnumbered and at a logistical disadvantage throughout the North African Campaign, and Rommel understood that the Allied advantage would only increase over time.<sup>150</sup> He was therefore determined to achieve decisive victory before the ever increasing Allied superiority in men and material became overwhelming. He was willing to accept the greater risk which accompanied his ambitious objectives, and as a result, overextended his forces on more than one occasion. During uncertain or rapidly changing

situations, Rommel retained his commitment to counteract Allied superiority through bold and immediate offensive action.

In terms of professional competence and ability, Rommel was an excellent tactician and master of operational maneuver. He possessed a thorough understanding of combat at these levels, as well as the instinct for rapid and sound decision.<sup>151</sup> His tactical prowess, and willingness to personally assume command of important tactical events or battles, was an important aspect of his leadership in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. By achieving tactical victory and breakthrough at a critical point, Rommel created the opportunity for his armored forces to exploit success and gain operational results.<sup>152</sup> His confidence in the tactical superiority of his troops, as well as his own abilities, enabled him to employ his command to immediately exploit that opportunity. He was comfortable pushing his subordinate elements into uncertain situations without detailed prior planning, and trusted in their ability to win battles and create additional opportunities. Rommel understood that the rapid and unexpected advance of his armored forces could produce large scale shock and psychological defeat, leading to the operational paralysis of his opponent's will.<sup>153</sup>

Rommel excelled at organizing, delegating, and supervising within his preferred style of rapidly moving mobile operations. Since he believed that success in combat was based primarily on seizing and exploiting opportunity faster than one's opponent, he was dedicated to the practice of bold initiative and decision making to the lowest levels.<sup>154</sup> He provided his intent clearly and forcefully, so that there was no doubt as to what he wanted to achieve.<sup>155</sup> He then expected that his subordinates would demonstrate maximum initiative within his intent to generate speed, exploit opportunities, and maintain momentum. Rommel was comfortable with great decentralization within his command, but also believed in leadership at the point of attack.

He relentlessly supervised the completion of his orders and would often personally assume command of critical events.

### Openness

The influence of high openness also contributed to Rommel's World War II success in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. In transitioning from an infantry officer to a panzer commander, he readily grasped how the technological advantages of armored formations created new opportunities at the operational level. He also enthusiastically adopted the main concepts of blitzkrieg- panzer forces using shock, surprise, and concentration to rapidly push into an enemy's rear, while ignoring the threat to their own flank and the uncertainty of the battlefield to maintain the momentum of the advance.<sup>156</sup>

Rommel demonstrated an intuitive interest and understanding of psychology in warfare. He recognized the importance of human factors in combat, and their influence on his own command as well as his opponent. His dedication to leadership from the front stemmed partly from his desire to influence subordinate morale and resolve at critical moments. He also perceived that the primary aim of the blitzkrieg should be to destroy the enemy's will to resist, rather than his physical destruction.<sup>157</sup>

Rommel also displayed inventiveness and versatility during his World War II career. To reduce uncertainty and control his widely dispersed forces, he often piloted his own small aircraft, flying from formation to formation and issuing personal instruction as needed. To meet the inevitable but uncertain Allied landing in France, he was willing to break with the established German doctrine of concentration and employ his armor in a series of tactical level counterattacks.<sup>158</sup>

### Extraversion

High extraversion, as it relates to the ability to influence and motivate others, was a significant influence on Rommel's success during uncertain or rapidly changing situations. He was a charismatic commander who inspired enthusiasm and confidence through his personal example and rhetoric. His energy was extraordinary and infectious, influencing all who came into personal contact with him.<sup>159</sup> This helped to inspire loyalty and cohesion within his command, as well as the spirit of aggressive initiative which Rommel relished. His personality and assertive leadership at the point of attack enabled him to instill aggression and expedite action during critical events.

### Neuroticism

Low neuroticism was a relatively insignificant influence on Rommel's leadership and decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. He was by nature stable and even-tempered vice emotional, with a cool and calculating demeanor even in combat.<sup>160</sup> His ability to remain calm and rational under stress was a positive influence on his leadership and decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. However, the relationship between low neuroticism and his performance under these conditions is decidedly weaker than that of several other personality traits. While Rommel did avoid psychological distress and disruptive emotions, this did not influence his leadership and decision making to the same extent as conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, or psychological hardiness.

### Agreeableness

The trait of agreeableness was also not a significant influence on Rommel's leadership and decision making during World War II. Similar to Patton, his ability to build cohesive units and trust in decentralized subordinate initiative rest primarily in personality traits other than

agreeableness. Although he genuinely cared for his troops, he was also known to be harsh and brusque, intolerant of slackness and ruthless in relieving subordinate commanders.<sup>161</sup> During uncertain or rapidly changing situations, Rommel was more directive and less agreeable in forcing bold and immediate action.

### Psychological Hardiness

High psychological hardiness significantly influenced Rommel's World War II leadership and decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. He was a strongly committed military commander who fought aggressively at the tactical and operational levels even when he believed Germany's strategic defeat inevitable. He was confident in his abilities and believed that he could exert control over any given situation- personal leadership and decision making at the critical point was a defining trait of his command philosophy. He was undeterred by obstacles or setbacks, and relentlessly pursued his goals to completion. Like Patton, Rommel's preferred method of operations suggest that he was confident in his ability to control and manage uncertain or rapidly changing situations, and that he viewed these conditions as opportunities vice threats.

The capture of Tobruk is a prime example of Rommel's psychological hardiness and resilience. Despite his logistical disadvantage, he desired to control the campaign by seizing the initiative and imposing his will on the Allies. He took to the offensive and quickly won tactical victory at Mersa El Brega. Recognizing that this had created an opportunity for exploitation, he immediately committed his forces to clear the Cyrenaica and threaten the strategically important port of Tobruk. When the Allies eventually forced Rommel to cede the Cyrenaica and withdraw, he was undeterred. He quickly regained the region, and the initiative, through an unexpected and determined offensive which culminated in the capture of his original objective. In capturing

Tobruk, Rommel employed his forces to rapidly exploit the changing conditions of the battlefield, and remained committed to achieving his objective following an initial setback.

Rommel also excelled in his ability to transfer resilience throughout his command. Through his policies and actions, he developed well-disciplined subordinate units who acted with bold initiative to rapidly seize fleeting battlefield opportunities. He was dedicated to decentralized decision making, and dealt harshly with subordinate leaders who failed to meet his standards of aggression, initiative, or toughness. His personal intervention during critical or highly stressful events inspired confidence and determination. Through his leadership and example, Rommel transferred to his subordinates the qualities to operate in uncertain or rapidly changing battlefield situations- ruthless opportunism, rapid decision making, the courage to accept risk, and tenacious execution.

#### Summary

The personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness significantly influenced Erwin Rommel's World War II leadership and operational decision making during uncertain or rapidly changing situations. High conscientiousness and psychological hardiness were found to be the have the most significant and consistent influence. The influence of high openness was related to his focus on psychology in combat, adoption of blitzkrieg tactics, and the creative employment of panzer forces. High extraversion contributed to his charismatic leadership style and influenced his ability to motivate his troops. While Rommel also demonstrated low neuroticism and inconsistent agreeableness, these personality traits significantly influenced his leadership or decision making.

## **Chapter: VI**

### **Conclusion**

#### Introduction

Building on previous research linking individual personality traits to effective military leadership, this capstone project has analyzed the influence of personality traits on the leadership and operational decision making of two distinguished World War II commanders, General George S. Patton and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Research was conducted using the case study method with a qualitative content analysis of existing literature. The project analyzed the influence of personality through six broad traits- the Big Five traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness, plus the trait of psychological hardiness. To narrow and focus the research toward findings with contemporary relevance and importance, leadership and operational decision making were analyzed within the context of uncertain or rapidly changing situations.

Research was based on the following hypothesis- The World War II leadership and operational decision making of General Patton and Field Marshal Rommel, when faced with uncertain or rapidly changing situations, was significantly influenced by high conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness, as well as low neuroticism. The findings support this hypothesis in regard to conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness. As expected, the influence of agreeableness was not significant. Unexpectedly, however, the findings did not support low neuroticism as a significant influence.

### Contribution of this Study

This capstone project adds to the larger body of research relating personality traits to effective military leadership. It also establishes a precedent for applying the FFM and psychological hardiness as a qualitative framework for the historical case study of effective military leaders. Within the context of high-intensity conventional combat, this project suggests that certain personality traits significantly influence leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Future research analyzing a low-intensity, population centric campaign may increase the generalization of these findings.

### Summary of Results

The findings suggest that the personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, and psychological hardiness are positively and significantly related to effective leadership and operational decision making in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. The findings further suggest that conscientiousness and psychological hardiness have the strongest and most consistent correlation, while openness and extraversion make significant contributions in context. The findings do not support neuroticism or agreeableness as significant influences.

For Patton and Rommel, the influence of high conscientiousness contributed to professional competence and skill, aggressive and rapid decision making, and the determined pursuit of ambitious objectives. Both men were extraordinarily proficient at the tactical and operational levels of war, capable of training and leading their subordinates to win battles and campaigns. They were also highly confident in their abilities and those of their command, enabling an opportunistic approach to uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Their personal ambitions contributed to the selection of ambitious objectives and a preference for bold action to

achieve victory and glory. Their strong sense of purpose enabled Patton and Rommel to remain aggressively fixed on their goals despite uncertainty or rapid change on the battlefield.

The influence of high psychological hardiness contributed to the ability of Patton and Rommel to act aggressively and proactively, overcome obstacles and setbacks, and remain committed to their goals in uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Both men believed that they could control these situations with initiative and bold action, viewing them as opportunities rather than threats. They retained their confidence and commitment despite obstacles or setbacks, and pursued their goals with tenacity and determination. Through personal example and leadership, Patton and Rommel were also able to transfer their resilient and opportunistic mindset to subordinates.

The influence of openness was significant in relation to their willingness and ability to adopt technological advancements, as well as creativity in force employment and problem-solving. Patton and Rommel each recognized the potential for armored formations to achieve operational level results, and enthusiastically adopted armored warfare. In the process of learning and developing armored tactics and doctrine, they also developed innovative methods to command and control armored formations.

The influence of high extraversion was significant as it related to the ability to motivate subordinates and influence decisions. Both commanders excelled at building cohesive units, as well as imparting motivation and enthusiasm to their troops through personal interaction and rhetoric. Especially during difficult or uncertain times, Patton and Rommel were able to inspire confidence and expedite action with their personal presence. Their assertiveness also influenced the decisions of senior officers, leading to more aggressive operations to create and exploit opportunities on the battlefield.

The traits of neuroticism and agreeableness were not found to have significantly influenced the leadership and operational decision making of Patton or Rommel during uncertain or rapidly changing situations. Although Patton demonstrated neurotic behavior during his life and even during World War II, he did not demonstrate disruptive emotions or a poor stress reaction during uncertain or rapidly changing situations. On the contrary, Patton seemed comfortable in these situations. Rommel did not display high neuroticism and was also comfortable in uncertain and fast-paced situations. Neither commander demonstrated a high level of agreeableness in their World War II leadership or operational decision making. The findings suggest that Patton and Rommel's abilities to remain calm and employ cohesive units were more significantly influenced by other personality factors.

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