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Auf Wiedersehen, Kesselring!

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Auf Wiedersehen, KESSELRING!

Allied Soldiers In Italy Are Well
Acquainted With 'Smiling Albert'

By Cpl. KLAUS MANN
Staff Writer

ITALY

FIELD MARSHAL Albert Kesselring—from September, 1943, until March, 1945, Commander in Chief of German forces in Italy and now appointed to succeed Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt as German Commander in Chief on the western front—has an impressive military record. He is not an impressive looking man. Sixty years of age, he is rather on the heavy side, with small pig's eyes and a stub nose in a flabby, clever and complacent face. His nickname, "Smiling Albert,"—probably referring to a rather unpleasant leer which is characteristic of his expression—seems to be of British origin and is hardly ever used by the Germans. Kesselring is too much respected and not liked enough by those serving under him to become the object of any intimate jokes.

Allied soldiers in Italy, too, have learned to respect the Field Marshal's ability, especially that of holding on under difficult conditions. The first time that American troops made the acquaintance of this experienced German strategist was during the African campaign. For it was in the fall of 1942 that Kesselring, who had previously been an Air Force general, took over the command of the Mediterranean area for Germany.

FOLLOWING the fall of Tunisia in May, 1943, Kesselring was appointed Commander in Chief "Southwest," but his command was reduced some months later by the creation of Rommel's Army Group "B" in Northern Italy. Rumor had it that the two Field Marshals didn't get along with each other and that Kesselring envied Rommel his inordinate publicity and undeniable popularity with the troops. But with the departure of Rommel to the Balkans and subsequently to France, "Smiling Albert" resumed command of the entire theater.

It was not a very enviable job, to be sure; but then, no German general has an enviable job right now. In any

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (left), new boss of the western front for Germany, is shown with the late Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in Tunisia.



case, Kesselring tries with extraordinary skill and determination to make the best of a precarious position. As far as his military tactics are concerned, he seems to depend strongly on his staff, especially on Generaloberst von Vietinghoff, 10th Army Commander, who has often deputized in the Field Marshal's absence and is considered the "power behind the throne," making the real decisions. Be this as it may, Kesselring's competence as a defensive general is undeniable. He may have had the chance to launch a counteroffensive in Italy, as did Von Rundstedt in the West at great cost and without success, but Kesselring never committed himself to more than local counterattacks. It may have been due partly to his comparative lack of men and materiel and to the limited priority of his theater, but at the same time it testified to his common sense and intelligent caution. Realizing that he hadn't much of an opportunity, at this point, to accomplish any brilliant exploits, he contented himself with holding on here as long as possible aided by one of the most rugged terrains in Europe.

The Field Marshal's official proclamations and Orders of the Day sounded indeed as if he had made up his mind to carry on forever.

On December 28, last year, Kesselring told his troops, "I shall be with you in the hard battles of 1945!"—a promise which was probably supposed to reassure the war-weary German Landsers and to strengthen dwindling morale. And again, in a more recent message that fell into Allied hands: "We do not defend Italy in these battles, but Germany itself. Not one inch of ground must be surrendered to our enemies without fanatical resistance. Officers and men alike must be permeated with this thought. I know that the troops, particularly the commanders, are convinced of the necessity of this campaign."

THERE IS no reason to doubt that the Fuehrer fully appreciates what Kesselring is doing for the losing Nazi cause. The man who has been leading the German Armies in Italy for the past 18 months, appears to be one of the most independent, most powerful and most respected figures in the military hierarchy of the Third Reich.

Kesselring is one of those German generals who came to prominence under the Nazi regime. It was in 1936, three years after the establishment of the Hitler dictatorship, that Kesselring was appointed Chief of the Air Staff. As one of the leaders of the then formidable Luftwaffe, he played an important role during the initial phase of the present war. In those already half-legendary days of the Nazi blitz—the most glorious period, no doubt, in Kesselring's military career. In July, 1940, he was pro-



FIELD MARSHAL ALBERT KESSELRING

moted to Field Marshal in recognition of his contribution to the victorious campaign against France. Soon afterwards the setbacks and disappointments began. Kesselring was transferred to the eastern front with his air fleet in support of the central armies in Russia. But the blitz lost its momentum in the vastness of the Russian steppe; Moscow held out and Kesselring had lost his greatest, most decisive battle.

Yet his prestige and influence are still considerable.

In spite of the emergency in the East and West, the strength of troops at Kesselring's disposal hardly diminished—with less than eight percent of his divisions being shifted to other theaters. The Field Marshal, who has been a holder of the Knight's Cross since September, 1939, and to whom later—in July, 1942—the Oak Leaves and Swords were awarded, was more recently honored with the highest German decoration, the Diamonds. This rare distinction came to him at a time when some speculation had been caused by the fact that Kesselring withheld his declaration of allegiance for a short time after the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. There were even rumors suggesting that the Field Marshal may have been involved in the generals' plot last summer to overthrow the Nazi regime and to bring about peace; but these stories may not have any sound foundation.

MOST GERMAN prisoners seem to agree—and the general's record rather confirms their statements—that Kesselring is sincerely devoted to his Supreme Commander. In fact, some captured German anti-Nazi soldiers in Italy describe him as "one of the worst fanatics." From similar sources come reports about the callousness and brutality occasionally displayed by the Marshal: for instance, when the rations failed to catch up with a front-line unit, Kesselring allegedly shrugged off complaints with this remark, "Why don't they go forward and eat bullets?"

In general, however, it can be said that "Smiling Albert" is only mildly unpopular with his men. The opinion seems to prevail that he is a quiet and correct officer, who has only a few friends, works a lot, and who certainly knows his job. Of course, there are the usual anecdotes told by soldiers of any army about a Commanding General. The German Landsers—who don't have much to laugh about these days—seem to be considerably amused by the fact that their chief has so many traffic accidents, at least three of which sent him to the hospital last year.

There are various stories—frequently repeated and generally believed—about Kesselring's fear of bombs, a curious twist in anecdotes about a man who has devoted a great part of his life to the preparation and execution of the most devastating air raids. On one occasion, when the Marshal was caught by an attack literally with his pants down, the guards saw him running off in search of a deep hole as he tried to hold on to his BVDs. Another time,

he simply dove under a table as he heard bombs falling nearby.

The Marshal has rather an inclination to keep away from forward positions; his own headquarters are always located on a comparatively safe spot and equipped with the most elaborate shelters.

AS FOR Kesselring's private life, there is but scarce information. Gossip-mongers tried to bring in his name in connection with that of a certain aristocratic Florentine lady, but no real scandal developed. Nobody seems to know whether Frau Kesselring—described by people who know her as a typical German housewife, living in a Berlin suburb—has any actual reason to complain about her husband. The Field Marshal is discreet.

What does he hide behind the impenetrable mask of his seemingly cheerful grin? He knows how to guard his secrets—not only the ones of his emotional life but also those of his military intentions. As an experienced soldier, Kesselring must know that the war is irrevocably lost for his side, and that it is suicidal madness, from the German point of view, to continue resistance—no matter where it may be: in the South, West or East.

HOW MUCH longer will Kesselring help in prolonging Germany's desperate game? With what kind of plans and forebodings is he leaving for his new mission? What kind of advice may he have given to his successor, here in Italy? Has he instructed him to keep the exhausted German armies in the Apennines and the Po Valley until they are definitely trapped and have no way back to the Fatherland, except through the heavily bombed, dangerous Brenner Pass?

It would be of considerable interest, indeed, of vital importance to any Allied soldier here in Italy to know the answer to any of these questions. But the only one who could tell us is Field Marshal Albert Kesselring himself. And he doesn't talk: he just keeps smiling.

Adorned with diamonds and gold epaulets, the Field Marshal takes off to another theater where he is to play his last scene, the finale of his military career. We are not sorry to lose him; yet we are looking forward to seeing him again. For we are sure that at the time of our next meeting his Field Marshal epaulets will be gone and his grin will have frozen to a sad grimace. Auf Wiedersehen in Berlin, Smiling Albert!