

AMENDE HONORABLE

THE DESERT RATS

(20th Century-Fox)

I CAN remember it being said, back in 1943, when *Desert Victory* was released, that to sit through it practically qualified one for a Purple Heart. *The Desert Rats* (which celebrates the defence of Tobruk by the Australians) scarcely matches the impact of that earlier classic battle narrative, but its best passages, where Army film and studio make-believe are skilfully woven together, come close enough to reality. Close enough for comfort, I had almost written—if you feel entitled to sit comfortably and watch a war film. And there's the rub! *The Desert Rats* does not climb into the first class, or even to the top of the second, but the best of it and the worst of it—and the contrast between them—leaves you with something to think about. Where a better-paced and more skilfully scripted picture might have provoked an uncritical excitement, *The Desert Rats* does occasionally remind you that it takes two sides to make a battle.

If it doesn't do this very well, the reason is that it was never intended to. About 18 months ago, 20th Century-Fox produced *The Desert Fox*, based on Des-

BAROMETER

FAIR: "The Desert Rats."
OVERCAST: "The Farmer Takes a Wife."

mond Young's biography, and introducing James Mason as Rommel Africanus. It reached London, unfortunately, before the uproar which greeted the book had quite died down, and the screenings were met with protests and even picket lines. *The Desert Rats*, in which Rommel is (temporarily, at least) out-generalled, out-foxed, and even out-talked in an argument at a front-line dressing station, is Hollywood's *amende honorable*.

The new treatment is not without amusing overtones. Rommel is again played by Mason—and as far as I could make out, his outfit is drawn from the old wardrobe—but he has been noticeably Prussianised. He is curt, irascible, boastful. He dines luxuriously the cad (crystal, clean napery, Wagnerian dinner-music, and heel-clicking aides), while the Aussies are sweating it out under a water-discipline—chlorinated water at that. And practically all his dialogue is in German.

His place as hero has been taken by Captain (later Lieutenant-Colonel) MacRoberts, a tough young pongo desert

veteran who is seconded to the Australian 9th Div. when it takes over the defence of Tobruk. He despises the slap-happy Australians, whose notions of discipline don't coincide with his own. fights a continuous battle with his humaner inclinations—rather like a land-based Hornblower—and (of course) in the end wins the unquestioning devotion of his men. In the part of MacRoberts, Richard Burton looks, moves and sounds like a soldier, if you don't listen too closely to some of the dialogue he has been saddled with. In the flat-cap and British warm, or commando blacks, he is convincingly operational.

As far as the story goes, a good deal of *The Desert Rats* seemed to me as arid as the desert itself, but there were two effective and dramatic passages. One showed an attack in force by German tanks under the partial cover of a sandstorm, and their destruction by artillery fire. The other was a night commando raid on



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