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THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS
14 - 23 February 1943

Type of operation described: AMERICAN II CORPS
DEFENDING AGAINST A STRONG ARMORED
THRUST IN CENTRAL TUNISIA

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THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS

14 - 23 FEBRUARY, 1943

INTRODUCTION

This paper covers ^{the} early phases of joint Allied activities in the Mediterranean - European Theater (North Africa) World War II.

The "Battle of Kasserine Pass" 14 - 23 February, 1943, contrary to popular belief, was not an operation confined to a single pass in Tunisia, but was rather a series of engagements in which the Axis imposed its initiative against the Allies over an area of some seventy-five miles square, culminating in the Kasserine, (Central) Tunisia (North Africa) area. (See Map C)

The writer has no personal knowledge of this theater's activities but has prepared the manuscript from material presently available and from talks with officers familiar with the campaign. It is believed that as historical records are sifted more detailed information will be forthcoming.

This is not to be construed as an excuse for any errors and/or omissions, but is incorporated purely for the information of the reader.

BACKGROUND OF THE TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

To understand its tactical importance, we must first understand the strategic place that Tunisia held in the North African Campaign. The Italians and Nazis had overrun Libya and had pushed on toward the Suez with high hopes of quickly

dislodging the British from Egypt and securing the Suez Canal with the attendant usefulness of the Middle East.

The ports of Tunis, Bizerte, Sousse and Gabes (See Map A) were readily accessible for their supply lines from Sicily and Italy.

German and Italian forces under the leadership of Rommel had overextended their lines in Egypt and four times had been driven west by British dogged determination.

Allied strategy had resolved itself to:

1. The elimination of all Axis opposition on the continent of Africa and remove the threat to Egypt and the Middle East.
2. Clear the Mediterranean supply route to the East.
3. Open a second front in Africa as an alternative to an invasion of Europe from the British Isles.
4. Acquire a base for operations against the Axis from the South.
5. Divert Axis ground and air forces from the Russian front.
6. Establish a national rallying point for re-constituted French resistance. (1)

The Allied Strategic Plan was for General Montgomery's Eighth Army to form the Eastern jaw of a vast pinchers operation in which the Western jaw would consist of Allied forces landed in Morocco and Algeria. (2)

After repeated set-backs, General Montgomery had won the battle of supply in Egypt, and in October, 1943, had routed Rommel's forces and caused him to fall back to

(1) A-4, p. 19; (2) A-4, p. 19.

Southern Tunisia, denying him the port of Tripoli and forcing him to establish a defensive position in the Mareth area, where battle positions were later known as the Mareth Line, a position tactically sound, with the Gulf of Gabes to his right and the vast salt lake Chott Djerid on his left flank. (See Map B)

Almost simultaneously the western pincher was begun. On 8 November 1943, under the command of Lt. General Dwight Eisenhower, the Allies made a three point landing in force at Casablanca in Morocco, and Oran and Algiers in Algeria. (See Map A)

The three landings were made with varying degrees of success. Within a space of three days the greater portion of North Africa, west of Tunisia, was in Allied possession. Losses of Allied forces - American (killed or missing - 770; wounded - 1050) - - British (killed or missing - 240; wounded - 60). (3)

Following immediate reorganization, it was most incumbent upon the Allies of the West to speed east with the objective of over-running Tunisia, meeting up with British forces, routing the enemy and finally denying him the all-important ports of Bizerte, Tunis and Gabes, with their attendant supply potential, both from the point of view of supply from the continent and the much needed resources from Africa. It, too, provided a defense against any plans for the Allies to invade Sicily and Italy. (4)

The Allies and the Nazis were well aware of the strategic importance of Tunisia as the key to ultimate victory and of the importance of certain terrain features. Control of

(3) A-3, p. 13; (4) A-4, p. 19.

the coastal areas meant supply routes and mutual security for the enemy and maintenance of these features were highly dependent upon the control of certain key passageways through the mountains bordering the coastal plains.

Tunisia compares favorably with the State of Nebraska in square miles, but there the resemblance ends. The land mass is extremely divergent and ranges from mountainous areas to flat open arid and semi-arid expanses, from which precipitous heights rise abruptly without apparent rhyme or reason. These "dog-toothed" mountain peaks are known as dжебels. Seasonal rains are heavy and erode much of the country side into a series of contradicting gullies referred to by the natives as "oueds" or "wadis".

Road communications over the greater portion of North Africa is poor at best. Some few are hard surfaced, but even these are narrow and give way ^{under} to heavy traffic, either from the heavy rains in season, or the extremely dry seasons. Mountainous areas ^{are} find them narrow and passing through deep defiles, which limits military logistic effectiveness.

The Atlas Mountains, beginning in Southern Morocco, and extending across French North Africa, terminates in Northern Tunisia as the Grand Dorsal in the form of an inverted V. The Eastern Dorsal, beginning near Pont du Fahs, extends 125 miles south to Maknassy, then in a southwesterly direction toward El Guettar. Below the Eastern Dorsal lies Chott Djerid, a large salt lake. (See Maps B and C). The combination, with few passage ways through the mountains, Fondouk, Faïd, Maknassy and El Guettar, present either an enviable or an advantageous position to the attacker or defender, depending on their position. (5) The Allies

(5) A-3, p. 15.

recognized the need for control of these passages as defensive positions during the supply stages of the early phases as well as their equal need as a line of departure in the final effort to displace the enemy from North Africa.

The enemy was fully aware of the dangers of Allied control of the passages as a constant threat to their coastal control and security and further, of the threat to Allied communications and supply if they were denied the passes.

To the west of this mountain range the Western Dorsal extends from Pont du Fahs southwest, forming a secondary defense line, with passes at Maktar, Sbiba, Kasserine, Derna and El Abiod. *(mts form defense line)*

The roads, being inadequate at best, are narrow and, especially through mountain passes, afford ample opportunity for anti-tank and personnel mine defense. This added to coverage by fire from adjacent heights, offer the attacker little chance for success against a well supplied and well organized defense.

GENERAL SITUATION

By the middle of January, 1943, Allied forces had established themselves on a line some 250 miles long, running generally from Sedjinane, south through Medjez, El Bab, Pont du Fahs, Fondouk, Faid, Maknassy and El Guettar.
(See Map B)

That part north from Bou Arada to Cape Serrat was covered by the British V Corps, consisting of the 6th Armored, the 78th Infantry Divisions and the 39th Brigade. These forces formed the initial efforts of the British

First Army. (6) (See Map B)

The French XIX Corps, Commanded by General Koeltz, and made up of approximately three divisions of predominantly native troops, controlled the Ousseltia Valley and held positions in the hills from Fondouk to the British line. Poorly armed ^{with} ~~by~~ obsolete weapons and lacking facilities for supply and administration, little could be expected beyond holding efforts. They were increasingly cooperative and maintained high morale under the capable direction of French Generals Juin and Koeltz. (7)

The front south of Fondouk was lightly held by American forces. Paratroops of the 503rd Battalion made an extended effort to patrol the desert area from Gafsa to and including Faid Pass. (8)

Prior to this time plans had been under way for an early concerted effort to move on Bizerte and Tunis and end the German occupation. Heavy rains had made narrow roads impassable and had denied the movement of supplies and troops in sufficient numbers for the push, causing the British referred to above, to withdraw to defensive positions after Allied Headquarters had abandoned the drive. (9)

Opposed ^{to} Allied Forces, General von Arnim, in the Tunis-Bizerte area, had the Fifth Army, made up of three German divisions and three Italian divisions. He had extended his beach-heads along the entire coastal plains, keeping communications open between himself and Rommel at the Mareth Line.

Being unable to bring pressure to bear on the enemy in the North, the Allies realized the danger to its southern

(6) A-3, p. 23; (7) A-3, p. 23; (8) A-3, p. 20 and 23;
(9) A-3, p. 19 - 21.

holdings from both von Arnim and Rommel's forces. A successful thrust through Kasserine Pass would allow the German forces to move through Thala and cut off the British 1st Army and sever communications with Algeria, at the same time threatening all Allied bases to the West. The capture of Tebessa, which was becoming the supply point for future operations, would virtually assure the complete isolation of all Allied forces in Tunisia and would mean an indefinite extension of the war. Either way, they would cut through Kasserine Pass. Kasserine Pass was the key to the west.

Why? What? ... 7 Feb 43

Why not use ...

To offset such possibilities, the Allied "Sfax Project" was inaugurated, calling for an offensive move against the ports of Gabes and Sfax. This move was to be initiated from the Tebessa-Kasserine area, designed not only to regain the initiative, but to separate the two German forces, thus securing the south flank of the British Fifth Corps. (10)

Why not use ... to attack?

The American II Corps, ^(composed of what) under the command of Major General Lloyd R. Fredendall, had meanwhile moved into the Tebessa-Kasserine area and had begun concentration of available troops. By 15 January 1943, the 1st Armored Division, commanded by Major General Orlando Ward, had completed its concentration in this area and was preparing for the attack.

Why not use ... to attack?

Lack of coordination ^(?) with General Montgomery's Eighth British Army called for abandonment of this plan and elements of the 1st Infantry Division, minus the 18th and 26th Regimental Combat Teams, were attached to the French XIX Corps to the north. (11)

Meanwhile, General Eisenhower had been placed in command of the North African Theater of Operations, and General (10) A-3, p. 23; (11) A-3, p. 24.

Sir Harold R. L. G. Alexander was appointed his deputy to command the Eighteenth Army Group, which would include the British First and Eighth Armies (Eighth under General Montgomery, closing on Rommel from the East) the American II Corps and French Troops in Tunisia. (12)

The build-up of supplies at Tebessa was paralleled by the movement of the XII Air Support Command to Thelepte and Youks les Bains airfields to support the II Corps.

Meanwhile von Arnim was receiving some 750 men per day and increasing quantities of supplies. (13)

Throughout the month of January the Germans, realizing the weaknesses of Allied positions and their own need for initiating the offensive, attacked along the central and southern portions of the line. On ¹⁸19 January 1943 the British and French sectors were attacked in the area of Bou Arada-Pont du Fahs. (See Map B) The British 6th Armored Division was able to help the French extricate themselves and clear Bou Arada. However, enemy troops moving to the southwest forced the French and British V Corps to withdraw, enabling them to isolate French units in Ousseltia. These troops were extricated by the British 6th Armored Division, Combat Command B of the 1st American Armored Division and elements of the 1st Infantry Divisions just arriving. (14)

The 1st Armored Division was the only armored unit in Tunisia and was to be pitted against ^{the} might of the German armor in piece meal fashion, which had been contrary to the ^{method} tactical employment ^{ed} of the majority of armored commanders since its inception. The Division was broken down into (12) A-3, p. 24; (13) A-3, p. 24; (14) A-3, p. 26.

Combat Commands A, B, and C and provisional D. Each of the first three commands were formed on the old organizational basis of a reconnaissance battalion, one infantry regiment, two armored regiments and three artillery battalions. (15)

Command A was commanded by Brigadier General McQuillen, Command B by Brigadier General P. M. Robinet, Command C by Colonel Robert Stack.

The German attack was renewed 30 January against Faïd Pass, held at that time by French troops who were screening the 1st Armored Division. Faïd was captured but the road junction of Sidi Bou Zid was retained.

Combat Command A of the 1st Armored Division at Sbeitla was ordered East in support and attacked Faïd, on the morning of 1 February but ^{was} ~~unsuccessfully~~ and was forced to withdraw.

Meanwhile Combat Command D, a provisional force, consisting of the 1st Armored Division's Artillery headquarters, a battalion of the 168th Infantry (34th Division) an armored battalion and a battalion of Armored artillery, had captured Sened but were withdrawn to the Gafsa area and concentrated with II Corps units at Sbeitla.

Of necessity, ^(under) French units in the Ousseltia area were relieved by troops of the 34th Division and were issued modern weapons and trained in their use. (16)

Activity was relatively quiet in all sectors from 5 - 14 February. However, the Forces of Rommel and von Arnim had united along the coastal area and, with little fear of attack from General Montgomery's Eighth Army until its regrouping and resupply, the enemy was free to exert ~~his~~ ^{his new} (15) A-1; (16) A-3, p. 27.

some 200,000 combat troops against a poorly supplied and thinly stretched British First Army and American II Corps.

Air and sea supply of men and materiel for the enemy continued to flow across the Mediterranean in huge quantities while the Allies were forced to suffer from lack of them, due to extended lines over all but impassable roads. *Repetitive:* Poor road beds and rolling stock of existing railroads materially limited this form of transportation. Tanks lost by the 1st Armored Division were replaced one by one from the 2nd Armored Division, ^{which was} held in Casablanca due to lack of facilities to move the division forward. (17)

Repetitive
The reader must keep in mind that the phase of the Tunisian Campaign referred to as Kasserine Pass was actually a series of engagements that took place in the Kasserine area from 14 - 23 February 1943, extending several miles to the east and south of the Pass and terminating in the enemy withdrawal through ^(from where) this terrain feature. (18) This was to be the new American Army's first major clash with the Germans. How would it meet the challenge? Was it sufficiently trained? Could it withstand a fully launched Axis attack and repel such a well-trained enemy? "Kasserine, and the complex disaster that produced it, was one of the few critical battles of the war, as vital to final victory as D Day in Normandy. On its outcome hung the Tunisian campaign and the Allied timetable from Sicily to Berlin. At the moment of defeat, it threatened to add a year of fighting to the war against Germany, to postpone the invasion of Italy and France, to crowd the cemeteries from Gafsa to Constantine with Allied dead." (19)

made up of

(17) Observation of Lt. Col. H. M. Clisson; (18) A-1;
(19) A-7.

During the lull of activities, 5-14 February referred to above, re-grouping of all Allied forces was in progress.

By 14 February, the American II Corps was charged with a front extending from the Fondouk through Faïd Pass, Sened and El Guettar. (See Map B)

stated that pass was captured

Combat Command B of the 1st Armored Division had been attached to the British at Maktar. The greater portion of the 1st Armored was assigned a front of some fifty miles from Dzebel Trozza, guarding the pass at Fondouk to Dzebel Ksaira to the south of Faïd Pass. Combat Command C had concentrated the greater portion of its forces at Hadjeb el Aïoun in position to cover the pass at Fondouk as well as the one about ten miles to its immediate front. (20)

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Combat Command A had established ^{what} in the Sidi Bou Zid area fronting Faïd Pass, now in enemy hands. Elements of the 168th Regimental Combat Team of the 34th Division, supported by the 175th FA Battalion, flanked the pass in defensive positions on Dzebel Ksaira to the south and Dzebel Lessouda to the north. A Look at Map C indicates that these two elements were incapable of mutual support from such positions, which was to be borne out soon. The remainder of the 1st Armored Division was in Sbeitla. (21)

Defending the south in conjunction with paratroops of the 503^A Battalion, were French Camel Corps troops, operating in and around Gafsa. The 26th Regimental Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division had withdrawn to the north and now held positions in and around Feriana.

THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS

Saturday night, 13 February, and Sunday morning, 14
(20) A-3, p. 28; (21) A-14, p. 7.

February Rommel took the initiative, plunging through Faid Pass with elements of three veteran Panzer Divisions. At mid-morning, the Afrika Korps was rolling in two great columns through the American defenses, with a hornet's nest of Stukas strafing and dive-bombing the way for them. The main effort was through Faid Pass. The American Infantry at Faid was immediately overrun, and so were the armored units.

The secondary effort from Maknassy in the south could easily cut off defenders of Dzebel Ksaira (Part of the 168th Regimental Combat Team). The element of the 168th Regimental Combat Team on Dzebel Lessouda was immediately in danger of encirclement and annihilation. ^P It appeared certain that having broken through the Eastern Dorsal, Rommel had clearly patterned his drive toward Sbeitla and Kasserine, with the feared move through the Pass, five miles to the north of Kasserine, from which it gained its name. Time appeared to be running out for the Allies in Tunisia.

The enemy units identified in this phase were the 21st Panzer Division from Rommel's forces in Tripolitania and the 10th Panzer Division that had profited ^{now} from German control of the coastal area. They had been recently re-equipped at Sfax. (22)

Enemy capture of the road junction north of Sidi Bou Zid would virtually assure the impotence of the 168th Regimental Combat Team forces on Dzebel Lessouda. Supported by artillery, motorized infantry, Stuka dive bombers and fighter planes, [?] he first overran a battalion of armored artillery on Dzebel Lessouda near the road junction. (See Map C). By 0715 hours the junction had been secured by a (22) A-3, p. 28 and 29 - A-14.

- force including twenty tanks. ^PEncirclement to the north of Dzebel Lessouda was imminent and one battalion of tanks from Combat Command A, supported by one battalion of artillery launched a counter-attack south of Dzebel Lessouda. At the same time the remainder of the Command withdrew west to take up a defensive position at the main road junction about ten miles northwest of Sidi Bou Zid.

The Armored battalion suffered severe losses and together with its artillery was forced to withdraw. Not only had it been reduced to the point of ineffectiveness, but was to the point of being included in the encirclement of Dzebel, Lessouda made by some fifty tanks and infantry.

Throughout the day German Armor and infantry poured over the roads from Faid, Maknassy and Gafsa. ^{through on.} Dzebel Ksaira and Lessouda were completely cut off. Enemy tanks attacking around Dzebel Ksaira had moved toward Sidi Bou Zid and by nightfall 14 February were threatening that town. (23)

The handful of troops in the Gafsa area, threatened by forces moving along the Sened-Gafsa road, were withdrawn to Feriana to assist the 26th Regimental Combat Team in defending the air field at Thelepte.

Loss of the effectiveness of Combat Command A at Dzebel Lessouda necessitated the immediate withdrawal of Command B from British control at Maktar to bolster the new line of defense in the Sbeitla-Feriana area. This was accomplished through the night of 14 - 15 February.

On the morning 15 February the 1st Armored Division was ordered to counter-attack. ³ ~~Command~~ ^{Command} C moved south from Hadzeb El Aioun to attack position some five miles south

(23) A-3, p. 29.

and west of Sidi Bou Zid. With remnants of Command A and a British armored battalion, it attacked ^{at} about 1600 hours. They were met almost immediately by a force of enemy tanks which engaged them in a fierce running battle. First reports were favorable to the Command but they had not realized that the enemy frontal attack was purely diversionary. The British battalion, purposely placed in the rear to exploit any success of the armor, was flanked from both sides and the entire force was ordered to withdraw. The leading armored battalion failed to receive the withdrawal order and was cut off. This action assured the loss of all Allied forces at Dzebels Lessouda and Ksaira. The strength of enemy forces was too great for any effort toward the relief of troops in these positions. Troops of the 168th Regimental Combat Teams were cut to shreds. Some managed to escape through the German ring and reached Allied lines but not before nearly half of the Regimental Combat Team had been either killed or captured.

One group ^{of 1182} was marched under cover of darkness in column of two's under orders to remain silent. Thought to be replacements, they were not recognized until the major portion had moved safely through. (24)

Meanwhile, forward airfields at Thelepte and Feriana, recently loaded with supplies, had been considered as beyond hopes of saving and were ordered abandoned. ~~with these supplies destroyed~~ that Allies were incapable of moving to the rear. ^{were ordered to be destroyed}

"By the second day of battle, 16 February, Rommel had scored a major victory. He had sliced through Faid Pass, overpowered every American force sent against him and was (24) A-3, p. 29; A-14, p. 8; Personal Knowledge of Capt. James A. Luttrell.

not included?

... racing across the Tunisian valley toward the gateway of Algeria. ^{There} Two Combat Commands of the 1st Armored Division were crippled; 100 tanks were gone and close to 1000 infantrymen and tankers. The Allied Force had given up 4000 [?] square miles of desert, ^{how} three forward airfields, and a sizeable wedge of its defensive mountain holdings. In real estate, the Allies had lost heavily; now, even the long-planned "cylinder" [?] developed a carbon knock and was close to cracking." (25)

On 16 February the already decimated divisions had identified in the zone of action the German 90th Light Division, 10th, 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, and the Italian Centauro Division. (26)

"Facing the Germans was the American II Corps, cut down by the initial Panzer assault and unstrung by its sudden retreat. Its 34th Infantry Division had lost most of one regiment; its scattered 1st Infantry Division was now regrouping; its 1st Armored Division had suffered so heavily that only Combat Command B was still intact. On ^{the} Corps' left flank were the French, so poorly equipped that they were now withdrawn. Further north, protecting Thala, was the British 26th Armored Brigade, [?] more equal to Rommel in numbers, but not in equipment or experience." (27)

^{The} II Corps had been reduced beyond power of counter-attack with grave misgivings as to its power to restrain the enemy at all. Aside from the tremendous loss in casualties and prisoners, it had lost ninety-eight medium tanks, fifty-seven half tracks, twelve 155 mm howitzers and seventeen 105 mm howitzers. (28)

The crushing drive of the enemy endangered all troops (25) A-7, p. 23; (26) (27) A-7, p. 23; (28) A-3, p. 30.

on the Eastern Dorsal, particularly the French XIX Corps to the north. All were withdrawn to the Western Dorsal on a line Sbeitla - Kasserine - Feriana.

Realizing that the only hope for restraining the enemy and protecting the British First Army, as well as Allied supplies at Tebessa, lay in an attempt to deny the Western Dorsal passes to him, the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry from the 1st Infantry Division and 19th Regiment of combat engineers were assigned the task of organizing a defensive position in Kasserine Pass. Seeing the need for protection of the preparation, General Fredendall ordered the 1st Armored Division to hold Sbeitla at all cost until 1100 hours, 17 February. (29)

Remnants of Commands A and C were positioned East and South of Sbeitla. They were attacked at 0900 hours but held fast until 1500 hours.

Command A then moved north to Sbiba, Command C withdrew along the Sbeitla-Kasserine road covered by Command B. II Corps seemed so certain of armor reverses that ammunitions dumps and other valuable supplies at Sbeitla were ordered destroyed, much to the chagrin and disgust of the Armored personnel, who were forced to hold fast during the night of the 16th under the light of glowing fires from the dumps - an open announcement to the enemy that the way was opening to him. (30)

Long
subul

(2) *with 3?*
The 1st Armored was ordered to concentrate in the El Abiod area south of Tebessa for use as a reserve should the enemy succeed in breaking through passes at Kasserine, Dernia, and El Abiod.

Visualizing the loss of the vital Thelepte Airfield,
(29) A-3, p. 30; (30) A-1

the Allies had removed or destroyed all of the planes and supplies. By evening of 17 February the field had been overrun ^{by the} as well as the towns of Sbeitla and Kasserine. The enemy had moved well into the foothills near Kasserine Pass.

On the morning of 18 February the 34th Infantry Division, minus, arrived at Sbiba and relieved Combat Command A, enabling it to move to the El Abiod 1st Armored Concentration. ^{was} This unit ^{34th} was supported by the 18th Regimental Combat Team of the 1st Infantry Division and a British Guards Brigade, augmented by several units of poorly equipped but highly efficient French units. (Heavy armored and infantry ~~attacks~~ of the German 10th Armored Division were inflicted 18 - 19 - and 20 February.) ^{where} Massed artillery fire and strong ground resistance effectively neutralized enemy efforts after ~~his~~ having infiltrated well into Allied defensive positions. These attacks, however, proved to be diversionary in nature, ^{with the purpose of} denying the Allies ~~from~~ ^{the} using ^{it} these forces as reinforcements at Kasserine Pass, where the main effort had been planned. (31) (A-3)

~~The~~ The Pass is from eight to ten miles long and one and one-half miles wide. It is a twisting, granite - walled defile leading to Kasserine Valley and the plains snaking westward into Algeria. Beyond the pass, there were ^{no} no more djebels, only the flat valley floor, rolling and criss-crossed with wadis. It was perfect tank terrain, as level as Arizona, and with nothing to slow the Panzers but cactus patches, camels and burros. The road forks in the Pass, one fork running through Thala, twenty-five miles to the north, and on to Le Kef. Exploitation of that route would

(31) A-14, p. 17.

mean isolation of the II Corps from the Allies in the north and open a route to the Mediterranean, encircling the British First Army.

"Victory of Kasserine:

For the Germans - - Meant the broad plains of Algeria lay just ahead, behind a thin Allied defense.

For the Allies - - This was the last chance to hold Tunisia.

For the Americans - - The final hope for saving their battered reputation." - ? quote

The second road leads to Tebessa, some forty miles west, which, by now, had been built up to a vital communication center and large base for supplies. Capture of this base would mean the virtual end of Allied resistance in southern Tunisia and would place the enemy in command of all mountain passes near supply bases that would enable him to deny the Allies the Tunisian ports, keep the supply lines open to the continent and give him sufficient forces to hold and perhaps turn back General Montgomery's Eighth Army before the Mareth Line.

While enemy forces made the feint on Sbiba, consolidation of positions and strengthening of forces were taking place in the Kasserine area.

Elements of the 15th and 21st Panzer Division made a reconnaissance in force into the Pass on 19 February with a battalion of infantry supported by tanks.

Defending forces resisted strongly and extremely accurate artillery fire caused the enemy to withdraw. By prearranged signals and lights, the attacking troops moved under cover of darkness and gained vantage points on the

where was this taken from

high ground in the Pass, where they could effectively use mortar and small arms fire on the Americans. Daybreak of 20 February found the enemy making a determined attack from his new positions, following a heavy artillery preparation. It proved sufficient to dislodge the defenders and forced them to fall back toward Tebessa. Colonel Alexander N. Stark, commanding the 26th Regimental Combat Team, assumed command of forces in the Pass only a short time prior to the attack. Upon arrival from Feriana, he found the four companies of the 19th Combat Engineer Regiment and his first battalion in positions on the low ground at the entrance of the Pass. Insufficient advantage had been taken of the high ground on either side but he was unable to effect proper changes in due time.

Here he realized the effectiveness of the German night infiltration and learned of the need for the round fox hole as opposed to the slit trench. He was supported by some armor and tank destroyers and places the blame for loss of the Pass on poor selection of positions rather than inadequacy of forces. (32)

Once into the Pass the German force pushed its main effort north toward Thala. Some ten miles north he met fierce resistance from forces formed during the night by Brigadier Dumphie, commander of the British 26th Armored Brigade. They consisted of one company of motorized infantry, one armored squadron, one troop of anti-tank guns, a troop of motorized artillery and a battalion of infantry. Despite heavy losses ^{they were} it was able to hold ^{the} its position. All tanks with the armored squadron were lost or destroyed and the infantry battalion suffered heavily.

(32) A-16. ?

^{part} British forces were moved up behind the task force during the night and some took position astride the road three miles south of Thala.

Combat Command B of the 1st Armored Division was ordered to take position on Djebel Hainra, covering the enemy thrust toward Tebessa. Some forty enemy tanks attacked this ^{command} on 21 February but were repulsed. Reconnaissance had assured hull down defilade for the Command in cross wadis. ^{It} Its withering fire had done much to protect the overrunning of Tebessa.

21 February found the enemy renewing his attack toward Thala. The British lost heavily but refused to fall back beyond a line ten miles from the city. By this time two field artillery battalions of the American 9th Division had made a forced march from west of Algiers to this position. In less than one hundred hours it covered 735 miles, over narrow congested roads and through bitter weather. Elements of the 16th Infantry Regiment had been moved up and effectively aided in the defense. Here the British first employed the new forty ton Churchill tank which, though lighter, proved equal to the German Mark VI. (33)

During the confusion of the past several days of battle, command of the ^{troops} had changed ^(how) on numerous occasions with the result of much misunderstanding. During the night of 21 - 22 February the Commanding General of the American 1st Armored Division was placed in command of all operations in the Thala - Kasserine - Djebel el Hainra sector.

The enemy persisted in making its thrust toward Thala and on 22 February engaged the British forces with approximately fifty tanks. Although they met with some success,

(33) A-8. - ?

A-3-0 31

later counter-attacks enabled Allied forces to restore their lines.

On the same afternoon a battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, which had been attached to Combat Command B, counter-attacked against the German left flank from the vicinity of Ain Bou Dries. It was supported by artillery of the 9th Division and the attack proved highly successful. Some 400 prisoners were taken. Here a battery of a 105 mm howitzer battalion of the 1st Division captured only a short time before, was recaptured by the infantry battalion before the Germans could get them around and fire them. (34)

The past few days had introduced Allied Air Power in great force for the first time and the greatest mass concentration of planes and artillery until then was a promise of things to come during the war in Europe. At last the Americans had learned their total strength, their driving force, and their ability to cope with the enemy on even terms. The German attack had been broken. ^{How?} (35)

It is believed that these losses, ^{what losses} in conjunction with the stubborn resistance in the Thala sector, caused the enemy to realize that the losses he was sustaining did not justify continuation of the attack, and as a result, he staged an orderly withdrawal through the Pass early on the morning of 23 February. (36)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

In analyzing this period of the Tunisian Campaign we find that here, for the first time, the American soldier had met the German face to face. Here had been a testing

(34) A-1; ? (35) A-16, p. 186; (36) A-1. ?

ground for the tactics he and his officers had been taught. Were they sound? Basically so, but so often he had failed to use them properly.

A look at Maps B and C will show that at no part of the campaign were units enabled to fight as a unified organization. Spread over some seventy-five to eighty miles square, not one of three participating divisions claimed autonomous control.

This, however, was but a reflection of higher command. American units flowed from British to French to American control so rapidly that few were able to follow ~~over~~ changing directives.

Even the Allied High Command seemed hesitant in its commitment as to the mission of the Tunisian forces. Of course, weather and communications had slowed down logistics to a virtual halt and though the handful of troops seemed small and ill-equipped, increase in numbers could have easily reduced even their effectiveness with added limitations on supplies.

The use of armor in piece-meal fashion against a stronger armored source meant the speeding up of possible defeat rather than its delay.

The First Armored Division, even in piece-meal fighting, had proved that on even terms the American tank was a match for the German.

The defensive positions at Faid, with elements of the 168th Regimental Combat Team, attempting to hold non-mutual supporting positions even against like forces, which it was not, was certainly a tactical blunder.

Not once during the period covered by this paper did the writer find record of an efficient Infantry-Tank team

operation. More, each seemed to avoid the step toward this method of fighting.

Fighting in Kasserine Pass proved that we were failing to use our tactical training. Colonel Stark states that when he assumed command of troops in the pass, prior to the Germans' successful assault, positions of the engineers and infantry troops were in the open low ground at its entrance. Little effort had been made to take advantage of the higher ground on either side. Not only were troops vulnerable from frontal attack and minus excellent fields of fire, they were also vulnerable to infiltration and envelopment of their flanks.

Here the American soldier learned the usefulness of the round fox hole over the slit trench, particularly in protection from air attacks.

Some criticism points to lack of effective high command. Perhaps the higher command was far from the best and, in fact, deserved severe criticism, nevertheless, we must remember that this was our first effort against the German forces. Where were there officers and men with personal experience who could have stepped in and done better? There were none. Here is where they ²¹⁴ were being made. The errors and tactical omissions were to stand the Allies in good stead as lessons for future operations against a determined enemy with his ultimate defeat.

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The organizing of allied forces in war, with a minimum of misunderstanding and a maximum of harmony is slow at best. Only after "Kasserine Pass" did a strong semblance of Allied unity raise its head and assure the fate of Axis forces in North Africa.

LESSONS

The Allies had learned a number of lessons, some of which are:

1. Our tactics were basically sound but were not being properly used.
2. The round fox hole provides better protection than the slit trench, particularly against strafing.
3. On even terms the American soldier could meet the veteran German soldier with high hopes for success.
4. The American tank was a match for the Nazis.
5. Use of armor in piece-meal fashion against strong armor is fatal.
6. A strong supply line must be existent before we could hope to succeed in an all out effort.
7. Splitting of commands into small units leads to rapid dissipation of troops.
8. Unity in allied command is difficult to attain, but must be obtained and understood ² prior to any hope for success.