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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION
AT EL GUETTAR, 20 - 24 MARCH 1943
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY DIVISION
ATTACKING THROUGH MOUNTAIN PASSES
AND DEFENDING AGAINST ARMORED COUNTERATTACK

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST INFANTRY
DIVISION AT EL GUETTAR
20 - 24 MARCH 1943
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the 1st US Infantry Division at EL GUETTAR, TUNISIA, 20 - 24 March, 1943.

The place of this action in the general history of the Allied conquest of AFRICA, may be seen if one briefly reviews the history of the campaign in that theatre.

In order to provide a long awaited offensive which was within their logistical capacities, and at the same time secure control of the MEDITERRANEAN - the lifeline to the Middle East, The Allies landed three forces on African coasts on November 8, 1942: one on the west coast of MOROCCO, north and south of CASABLANCA; one at ORAN; and, finally, one at ALGIERS. (See Map A) (1) The two former task forces were American; the latter British, though under American command temporarily.

Once established ashore, the eastern task force was restored to British command, and went racing eastward. This was a bold gamble to secure TUNIS before the Axis powers could build up sufficient strength to meet this threat to the supply base of their African forces, now in full retreat westward, after their failure to wrest EGYPT from the British Eighth Army. (2)

But unfortunately for the Allies the French cooperation in TUNISIA was not immediately forthcoming, and the Germans, in early November, began a rapid build up of their Tunisian reserves. (3) Coupled with this circumstance was the fact

(1) A-1, pp. 72-73
(2) A-1, pp. 82-83; A-2, p. 865
(3) A-1, p. 111

that the ~~October~~ ^{November} landings were in themselves such a strain on Anglo-American resources, that the Allies were really not in a position at this time to sustain two major offensives (Anglo-American task force from west, British Eighth Army from east) against increased enemy forces in TUNISIA. (4) Further, the heavy rains, characteristic of African weather at this time, made all vehicular movement difficult, and the airfields in our forward sectors unusable.

Thus the first Allied push from the west toward TUNISIA ended in the EASTERN DORSAL, a high range of mountains overlooking the objective, the Tunisian coastal plain. (See Map A) (5)

Having stalled the drive of the British Eighth Army at the MARETH LINE - a system of defenses constructed by the French to block entrance to TUNISIA from the southeast (See Map A), the Axis forces turned their attention westward in late January, 1943, and early February, and attacked through the FAID PASS. (See Map A) (6) The momentum of this attack, along with a push from the south, carried the enemy on through the KASSERINE PASS (See Map A), before this over-ambitious counter-offensive was finally contained, and the enemy withdrew back to the EASTERN DORSAL. The Axis had made their last major bid to regain the offensive in Africa. (7)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

By early March the Allies had reorganized their Western forces, constituting separate British, French and American sectors. The confusion which had resulted from mixing battle

(4) A-1, pp. 116, 118; A-2, p. 866

(5) A-3, p. 18

(6) A-2, p. 867

(7) A-1, p. 148; however, cf. A-3, p. 33

groups of three nationalities was cleared up; and while the enemy engaged the British First Army to the north in a series of strong local attacks, the American II Corps of four divisions was constituted and concentrated in the vicinity of TEBESSA. (See Map B) (8)

Meanwhile the British Eighth Army, having beat back one counter-attack, was poised along the MARETH LINE, and carefully readying itself for an all-out assault north into TUNISIA.

As can be seen (See Map B), any thrust by the II Corps constituted a threat to the right flank of the German forces in position before the Eighth Army; and for this reason, among others, General Alexander, Commander of Eighteenth Army Group - a headquarters established to coordinate all Allied Forces attacking TUNISIA, ordered the American II Corps to begin a limited advance "to exert pressure on the right rear of the enemy defending the MARETH positions". (9)

The II Corps, at this time, consisted of the US 1st Armored Division and 1st, 9th, and 34th Infantry Divisions. Of these, the 1st Armored and 1st Infantry Divisions were the more battle-wise - both having participated in all major actions in western TUNISIA previously related, though nearly always piecemeal fashion, and under British and French command. But now, the 1st US Infantry Division, assembled as a unit, was ordered to attack GAFSA, on the 17th of March. (See Map B) This attack was successful, as the elements of the Italian Centauro Division, defenders of the town, abandoned it as indefensible; and American patrols pushed southeast down the GAFSA - GABES ROAD in pouring rains to enter the oasis of

(8) A-1, p. 148

(9) A-2, p. 874, A-4, p. 9

EL GUETTAR. (See Map B) (10) Meantime the 1st US Armored Division had also passed on through GAFSA, and started up the GAFSA - MAKNASSY ROAD to the northeast.

DIVISION SITUATION

"Following the mop-up of GAFSA, the (1st) Division received a warning order at 1630A, 20 March 1943 to make the necessary plans, including the areas for placements of artillery, for an attack along the GAFSA - GABES ROAD to take the commanding ground east of EL GUETTAR, about 18 miles southeast of GAFSA. Orders were received for this operation at 1800A, 20 March and a fragmentary order was issued to the assembled unit commanders."

(11) This command, which sent the 1st Division into its attack at EL GUETTAR was received late in the afternoon of the 20th of March - a fact which will bear later analysis; actually the Commanding Officer of the 18th RCT did not receive the alert until 1740A. (12)

To understand this mission, it is necessary to consider for a moment the terrain to the east of GAFSA. Eastward from the town lie two great plains separated by precipitous rocky mountains. The road to MAKNASSY runs from GAFSA out across the more northern of the two plains, while across the southernmost stretches the macadam highway to EL GUETTAR and GABES.

(See Map C) (13) Just the other side of the oasis of EL GUETTAR on this southern route, the plain is again divided by a mountain mass in the center, and walled in by another to the south; thus two defiles are formed - along each of which stretches a road (See Map C); the northeastern forking road being the small unimproved road called the GUMTREE ROAD (14), while the southern

(10) A-5, p. 8; A-6, p. 66

(11) A-5, p. 9

(12) A-7, p. 1

(13) A-8, p. 58

(14) Believed to be so-called by US Forces only

fork is the continuation of the highway to GABES.

The Division, at the time of the capture of GAFSA, consisted of three regimental combat teams - the 16th, 18th and 26th; and, in addition to four organic field artillery battalions (5th, 7th, 32nd and 33rd) (15), it had an additional field artillery and AA Battalion, plus the 1st Ranger Battalion, and 701st and 601st TD Battalions attached. (16)

Reconnaissance elements from the Rangers and the Division Reconnaissance Company probing southeast from EL GUETTAR had contacted the enemy on OUED EL KEDDAB (HILL 336) just south of EL GUETTAR (17), and had also located enemy positions dug into the narrowest part of the GUMTREE ROAD defile. (See Map C) The enemy strength was estimated to be about 6,000 troops of the Italian Centauro Division, which had so lately vacated GAFSA. (17)

DIVISION PLAN OF ATTACK

The Division plan of attack was for the 1st Ranger Battalion to make a night march of 10 miles northeast up along the side of the mountain which formed the northern wall of the GUMTREE ROAD defile, to attack at 0400A, 21st March, and occupy a covering position above the Italian emplacements which faced back along the GUMTREE ROAD toward EL GUETTAR. (See Map C) The 26th RCT was to attack astride of the GUMTREE ROAD northeast straight into the Italian fortifications, and through them to the small Arab village of BOU HAMRAN. (See Map C) (18)

Meanwhile the 18th RCT was to attack astride the road forking southeast out of EL GUETTAR (the GABES highway), and seize DJEBEL EL MEHILTAT and DJEBEL EL KREROUA (an extension of DJEBEL BERDA), the commanding ground on both sides of the road at the narrowest part of the defile. (See Map C) (17)

(15) A-9, p. 782
(16) A-6, p. 424; A-9, p. 782
(17) A-6, p. 67
(18) A-6, p. 67; A-5, p. 9

The 18th RCT was to be in division reserve. (19)

The Division Artillery and Tank Destroyer Battalions were to support the attack from positions in the vicinity of LORTRESS and EL GUETTAR. (See Map C)

MOVEMENT TO LINE OF DEPARTURE AND FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

While it was still dark on the morning 21 March (20), the attacking regiments - the 18th and 26th, entrucked from their defensive positions between GAFSA and EL GUETTAR for the motor move to the line of departure. (See Map C) Participants in the action state that these units reached the eastern outskirts of EL GUETTAR before daylight and detrucked for the attack. (21)

Lt. Col. Gerald C. Kelleher prepared his 1st Battalion, 26th RCT, to lead the column of the left attacking echelon up the GUMTREE ROAD. (Column of Battalions was necessary because of the narrowness of the attack route.) (22) Lt. Col. Darby's 1st Ranger Battalion had already completed its flanking movement along the mountain side during the night 20 - 21 March, and at 0400A, was in position above the Italians at the narrowest part of the GUMTREE defile. (See Map C) (23)

1st and 2nd Battalions, 18th RCT, deployed at the southeastern edge of EL GUETTAR, and were followed by 3rd Battalion - this was the order of attack.

(19) A-5, p. 9

(20) Official reports do not give exact time, nor were eye-witnesses interviewed able to recall.

(21) Personal interviews with Lt. Col. Henry M. Clisson (then Captain, CO Cn. Co, 26th RCT); Major Sam Carter (then Captain, CO, D Co, 18th RCT); Captain Alfred E. Koenig (then Lt., Plat. Ldr., AT Platoon, 2nd Battalion, 18th RCT). Also cf. A-10, p. 11; A-11, p. 9

(22) Personal interview with Lt. Col. Henry M. Clisson

(23) The discovery of this route, and the knowledge of enemy locations in the defile was effected by night reconnaissance of officer-led patrols from the Ranger Bn. (A-12, pp. 10-11)

NARRATION

THE ATTACK - 21ST MARCH

At 0500A, a bugle call signalled the assault of the mountain-scaling 1st Ranger Battalion down onto the Italian positions in the narrows of the GUMTREE defile. (24) The enemy, whose guns were trained down along the approach from EL GUETTAR - the attack route of the 26th RCT, was caught completely unaware. The lightly armed Rangers - without the support of the 81 mm mortars of the attached D Company, 1st Engineer Battalion - overwhelmed all opposition and began mopping ^{up} isolated strong points. (25) This last operation received support at 0900A, when the Engineers finally arrived with their mortars. The tardy arrival of these support weapons was caused by the inability of the Engineers to keep up - while hand carrying their heavy equipment - with the killing pace set by the Rangers in their amazing night climb along the sides of DJEBEL ORBATA. (26)

The 26th RCT, meanwhile, had jumped off, after some delay subsequent to planned H-hour of 0600A, in its attack at the mouth of the defile with 1st Battalion in the lead, 2nd Battalion to follow and assist, with 3rd Battalion in reserve. (27) By 1000A the leading elements of the 26th had fought their way through the pass and announced to Division that DJEBEL EL ANK was cleared. (See Map C) (28) 1st and 3rd Battalions 26th RCT then continued up the GUMTREE ROAD toward BOU HAMRAN, 2nd Battalion taking up positions on DJEBEL EL ANK.

(24) The exact location of these positions was the point where the GUMTREE ROAD passed between DJ. ED DEKRILA (a spur of DJ. ORBATA) on the north side and DJ. EL ANK on the south. (See Map C)

(25) A-12, p. 14

(26) A-8, pp. 141-142; pp. 160-161

(27) Personal interviews with Lt. Col. Henry M. Clisson (see footnote 21); Lt. Col. Albert R. Cupello (then Capt., CO, Heavy Weapons Co, 1st Bn, 26th RCT); Major Thomas J. Gendron (then Capt., S-4, 1st Bn., 26th RCT). But, to the contrary "...combined, three-pronged assault..."

A-12, p. 14

(28) A-5, p. 9

Concurrently with this action to the north, the 18th RCT was having a relatively easy time to the south.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions moved out toward their first objective, OUED EL KEDDAB (See Map C) (29), immediately after detrucking, with 1st Battalion south of the GAFSA - GABES ROAD and 2nd Battalion on the north. 3rd Battalion, arriving sometime later took up position in a wadi (dry stream bed) southeast of EL GUETTAR preparatory to a follow-up of the two leading battalions at 0600A. (30) The 1st Battalion advanced rapidly, passed over that portion of the objective on the south side of the road, and found itself on the open plain beyond with daylight coming on. Seeking to return to the relative cover of OUED EL KEDDAB, one company - Company C - crossed the road, and assaulted 2nd Battalion's portion of the objective from the rear. This unplanned-for action ended the fight, and all three battalions of the Regiment were on the objective by the middle of the morning. (31) Immediately after the capture of OUED EL KEDDAB, supporting division artillery began to fire on the reorganizing elements of the regiment, whether because they were convinced that the position was still in enemy hands, or believed that their salvos were landing on enemy positions further east, is not clear. (32) The artillery had moved into position near LORTRESS and EL GUETTAR during the night, and had not had time to survey properly or orient themselves. (33)

In accordance with the division plan of attack, 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 18th RCT moved out toward DJEBEL EL MEHILTAT,

(29) Also known as HILL 336 and "WOP HILL"; A-10, p. 9

(30) Capt. Smith in his manuscript (A-11, pp. 9-10) states that 3rd Bn. was the attacking Bn. on left - or north of the road. This is contrary to Maj. Carter (A-10), and statement in a personal interview of Major Robert E. Murphy (Capt. Robert E. Murphy, Co., H Co., 18th RCT, at EL GUETTAR). Confusion is probably due to fact that 3rd Bn. was committed early, and that three battalions actually participated in the assault.

(31) A-5, p. 9; A-10, p. 12; A-11, p. 10

(32) A-10, p. 12; A-11, p. 10

(33) A-9, p. 781; A-14, pp. 9-10

immediately after securing HILL 336. (See Map C) Except for strafing attacks by enemy fighters, the battalions encountered no opposition, and by 1316A were reported by Division as in position in the foothills of the objective. (34) 1st Battalion remained in position on HILL 336, and sent a patrol out toward DJEBEL BERDA (See Map C), which the Battalion was to attack according to division order.

Following the successful assault of the 26th RCT to the northeast, the 1st Ranger Battalion returned to bivouac at EL GUETTAR by 1610A to constitute the Division reserve. (34) The 16th RCT, which had initially been in reserve, had been ordered at 0836A to send the 2nd and 3rd Battalions to the vicinity of EL GUETTAR, where the 3rd Battalion was ordered to dig in on HILL 336 under command of 18th RCT. Company B, 1st Engineer Battalion, on orders, laid a minefield across the GABES ROAD in front of HILL 336, to tie in with an Italian minefield already there. (See Map C) (35)

22ND MARCH

At 1130A, 22nd March, the 1st Battalion, 18th RCT, began its move from HILL 336 across the plain toward DJEBEL BERDA, taking advantage of all ground swells on the open plain for meagre cover. (See Map C) The enemy resisted with artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire; but the Battalion pushed forward in spite of casualties, and just after dark Lt. Col. York, 1st Battalion Commander, was able to report his unit on position in a crescent just below HILL 772. In order to push the advantage thus gained, the Regimental Commander ordered 2nd Battalion to cross the valley from the vicinity of DJEBEL

(34) A-5, p. 9
(35) A-7, p. 1

EL MEHELTAT and join with 1st Battalion for a night attack on DJEBEL EL KREROUA, a spur of DJEBEL BERDA which reached north-eastward from the central mountain mass toward the GABES highway - forming a narrows in the defile with the southeastern extremity of DJEBEL EL MEHELTAT. (See Map C) (36) Eleven 75 mm SP howitzers from the Cannon Companies of the 18th and 26th RCT's were also ordered to support this attack. (37)

The 32nd FA Battalion - which, together with the 5th FA Battalion, was already well out from EL GUETTAR - was ordered eastward to the vicinity of DJEBEL EL MEHELTAT to support the attack of 1st and 2nd Battalions, 18th RCT. (37)

There can be little doubt that these artillery battalions were pushed dangerously far forward, because of their difficulty in supporting infantry attack in the mountain masses on either side of the defile from a central position back at EL GUETTAR. (See Map C)

The 601st TD Battalion moved forward to a position east of HILL 336 to protect the exposed artillery units, and prevent a "tank penetration which would cut the supply axis of CT 26 and CT 18". (38)

The 26th RCT, having captured BOU HAMRAN 21 - 22 March, began moving with two battalions, 2nd and 3rd, to the south toward the "Horseshoe", DJEBEL EL MEHELTAT. (See Map C)

The entire Division was, at this time, in a position extending some ten miles in depth and twelve miles in width, astride two mountain passes. The terrain forced the infantry into the peaks on either side of the mountain passes, leaving

(36) A-7, p. 1

(37) A-7, p. 1; A-5, Overlay No. 8

(38) A-13, p. 16

the centers of these avenues of approach to the guardianship of the artillery and tank destroyer battalions. Whether or not the Division was well-positioned was soon to be tested.

23RD MARCH

At 0430A, on 23rd March, the 2nd Battalion 18th RCT joined the 1st Battalion on DJEBEL BERDA. At 0440A an artillery concentration was laid on the objective, DJEBEL EL KREROUA, and a few minutes later the two battalions were mopping up on the spur - an excellent example of infantry-artillery coordination. The attacking infantrymen had moved in immediately upon seeing the white phosphorous explosions signalling the end of the artillery preparation; the enemy had not yet recovered from the shock effect when the assault waves hit them. (39)

At 0500A, before the 18th RCT had completed their re-organization on DJEBEL EL KREROUA, the sound of motors and firing broke out in the valley down along the GABES ROAD to the southeast. (39) In half an hour, the breaking of dawn revealed a large enemy armored and infantry force moving westward along the valley floor toward the 1st Division defenses.

The Division responded immediately to this threat with massed artillery fire, and other weapons of all calibres. This attack was almost entirely unexpected. The only warnings had been reports from front line units on the noise of motors in enemy territory at about 0400A, and the mad dash of two German motorcyclists into American lines at 0500A. (40)

(39) A-10, p. 18

(40) A-10, p. 17; A-13, p. 16

The attacking force, probably the entire available strength of the German 10th Panzer Division, moved well up between the infantry positions on either side of the valley.

(41) Just before reaching HILL 336, the tank column divided into three assault groups, the more northern of which fell with great force on the positions of 3rd Battalion 18th RCT in the foothills of DJEBEL EL MEHELTAT. (See Map C) (42)

The second group proceeded slowly up the highway toward EL GUETTAR; while the third group, about 22 tanks, attempted to flank HILL 336, (OUED EL KEDDAB), by moving into the open ground to the southwest. (43) These last two elements were halted by the minefield and the obstacle of the soft, boggy plain around CHOTT EL GUETTAR (See Map C), combined with savage fire from the tank destroyers and 1st Division artillery. By 0930A this armored attack in the center and to the south of HILL 336 was broken, and further enemy action until 1400A was limited to infantry assault, long range artillery, and air attack, both dive bombing and strafing. (43)

The 3rd Battalion, 18th RCT, and the two forward FA battalions (the 5th and 32nd) were in serious trouble. The enemy assault into the foothills of DJEBEL EL MEHELTAT over-ran positions held by the forward divisional infantry and artillery units, and six field pieces of both the 5th and 32nd FA Battalions were lost. (44) However, the attackers also took their losses, as the artillerymen fired their weapons point blank at maximum rate until the last possible minute, and the infantry did not give way even though tanks were on

(41) While the 1st Division G-3 report places the tank strength of this enemy force at 60 - 70 tanks, eye-witnesses place the number between 100 and 125. A-5, p. 10; A-7, p. 1; A-10, p. 21; A-11, p. 16; A-13, p. 18

(42) A-10, p. 19

(43) A-13, p. 17

(44) A-6, p. 68

top of their positions. Company K, 18th RCT, was completely overrun in this attack, but the members of this unit fought from their holes even after the enemy had passed their position. (45)

The 1st and 2nd Battalions in position on DJEBEL EL KREROUA were not attacked directly all this day. (46) The enemy shelled these positions with field pieces and self-propelled guns, but the positions were not as vulnerable to armored attack as were those on the lower slopes across the valley. (47)

The savage resistance of all 1st Division units caused the enemy to withdraw down the slopes into the Wadis to regroup; and they towed their smashed vehicles to the rear for repairs.

By 1500A, the 1st Battalion 16th RCT was relieved by the 3rd Battalion 39th Infantry at GAFSA, and was able to rejoin the 16th at EL GUETTAR. (48) E Company of the 16th RCT made a limited counterattack from the vicinity of HILL 483 (See Map C) and retook the positions lost by the 5th and 32nd FA Battalions, and reestablished contact with 3rd Battalion 18th RCT.

The 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion and 17th Field Artillery had also been moving in during the day to reinforce the divisional supporting fires. (48)

Division Headquarters sent out word that the enemy was

(45) Practically all sources heretofore quoted specifically mention this heroic defense

(46) A-10, pp. 19-23

(47) A-10, p. 19

(48) A-6, p. 69; A-9, p. 781

preparing another attack, and between 1640A and 1700A, (49) a second infantry-tank attack supported by bombers and fighters was launched. However, this time the reinforced Division artillery saturated the valley with time-fire, and the infantry poured small arms fire down from their positions. The high-point of the assault again was reached in a partial over-running of K Company 18th RCT positions, but again this gallant Company held fast. Finding the cost too high the enemy finally began a withdrawal, and spent the late afternoon and evening recovering his crippled vehicles from the battlefield. (50)

The infiltration of 26th RCT onto DJEBEL EL MEHILTAT was effected successfully sometime after the action just described, and none too soon; for the battered 3rd Battalion 18th RCT began withdrawal to HILL 336. The 2nd Battalion 16th RCT was ordered into the positions being vacated by 3rd Battalion 18th. (51)

At 1900A 601st Tank Battalion, badly torn by its courageous fight against heavier German armor, was relieved by the 701st TD Battalion. (52)

24TH MARCH

Early in the day 24 March, the 26th RCT was actively engaged in a fight for DJEBEL EL MEHILTAT; and this action was not successively terminated that day. (53)

The remainder of the Division was not actively engaged on any large scale, save for the 2nd Battalion, 18th RCT, and 1st Ranger Battalion.

(49) A-6, p. 69; A-9, p. 781

(50) A-12, p. 16

(51) A-6, p. 70

(52) A-5; A-7

(53) Lt. Col. Albert R. Cupello (see footnote 27) - personal interview; A-6, p. 10

The enemy fired on the positions of the 2nd Battalion 18th RCT on DJEBEL EL KREROUA with tanks and self-propelled guns all day. Just after dark the tanks and assault guns moved forward and fired point blank at the battalion's advanced positions. (54) This barrage was immediately followed by an infantry assault in strength estimated variously as a company or a battalion. (55) This assault caused the 2nd Battalion Commander to order a withdrawal to a position at the base of HILL 772. (See Map C) Companies A and B were exposed by this move, and also moved back to a position where the 1st and 2nd Battalions were able to reorganize and consolidate a defense. (56)

At 1100A 24 March, the 1st Ranger Battalion was ordered by Division Headquarters to move from its position on the left flank of 3rd Battalion 18th RCT, in the foothills between DJEBEL EL MEHELTAT and HILL 336, across the valley to seize HILL 772 on DJEBEL BERDA. (See Map C) (57) By 1730A the Rangers had captured their objective after some fighting, and at 2000A the Battalion, less D Company, which remained to hold the ground just won, was ordered down the slopes to reinforce the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 18th RCT. A day later, on Division order, all units withdrew from DJEBEL BERDA under protest from Lt. Col. York, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 18th RCT, who correctly foresaw that it would be retaken only at bloody cost. (58)

(54) A-10, p. 23

(55) A-10, p. 25; A-6, p. 70

(56) A-10, p. 23; A-6, p. 70

(57) A-13, p. 16. Note: Actually the 3rd Battalion 18th RCT was being, or had already been, relieved by the 2nd Battalion 16th RCT at this time

(58) A-10, pp. 24-25

In summary: In this battle, one of the first in World War II in which the US 1st Infantry Division participated as a unit, it acquitted itself most commendably. While the specific mission, of gaining control of the high ground east of EL GUETTAR, was not completely attained, the more general mission, of exerting pressure on the right rear of the enemy facing the British Eighth Army, was fulfilled. The enemy was compelled to send the 10th Panzer Division into a costly and unsuccessful counter-offensive to contain the threat posed by the attack of the 1st Division. Following this engagement, the Axis forces fell back slowly in this sector until the Allied commands, pushing along this route, finally achieved contact with the British advancing from the southeast. There can be little doubt but that this end result was to a large measure the achievement of the 1st Division's successful defense at EL GUETTAR. The losses in equipment sustained by the 10th Panzer Division in this action were irreplaceable, and the suicidal assaults of the German infantry against defenses manned by determined 18th Infantrymen took heavy toll of the enemy's finest troops.

Further, the 1st Division proved to itself and the Allied High Command that American troops could fight the "slugging" type of warfare supposedly beyond the capabilities of green troops. At EL GUETTAR the 1st US Infantry Division proved that American Infantry, with assistance of supporting weapons, could fight armor successfully.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. RECONNAISSANCE

A division order should, if at all possible, get out to the regiments in time for even small unit commanders to make an adequate reconnaissance. True, the warning order for the attack at EL GUETTAR did not reach 1st Division until 1630A, and the final order at 1800A; as a result, there was no alternative but to go ahead with the attack, relying on patrol reports and night reconnaissance of portions of the battle-field as a basis for the division attack. While such reconnaissance worked out well for the Ranger Battalion, the same could not be said for the artillery, which displaced forward at night into unreconnoitered positions. The 18th RCT had to begin its attack without benefit of adequate reconnaissance, and the successful outcome of the attack on OUED EL KEDDAB was due rather to the aggressive spirit of the troops of the unit and good fortune, rather than to best use of the terrain. Subsequently, this regiment had to send out more patrols, before it could continue its attack toward the right side of the regimental objective - DJEBEL BERDA. While it can be argued that the best possible action was taken under the circumstances, it also seems apparent that had units been notified of plans to continue attacking down the GABES highway through EL GUETTAR immediately after the taking of GAFSA, a thorough daylight reconnaissance could have been made of this difficult terrain.

2. HAND CARRY OF HEAVY WEAPONS

In any movement of troops special consideration must be given to supporting weapons in order that their backing will be available to the attacking echelons when they are committed;

and this is especially true in the case of the heavier infantry weapons which must be hand carried during a rapid advance on foot over difficult terrain. The 81 mm mortars of Company D, 1st Engineer Battalion, had to be hand carried during the night march made by the 1st Ranger Battalion over the side of DJEBEL ORBATA, and the Rangers were relying on these weapons to support their morning attack. As the event turned out, the mortars fell behind during this gruelling climb, and their support was not available to the Rangers when they began their attack. Surprise alone prevented the attacking Battalion from suffering severe casualties in their assault on the well-emplaced Italians. Had some provision been made to assist the Engineers with the transport of these weapons - use of relief carrying parties or pack animals were possible alternatives - the gun crews might have had their weapons ready to fire at H-hour.

3. AGGRESSIVE, SPONTANEOUS ASSAULT

The rapid and easy occupation of OUED EL KEDDAB (HILL 336) by assault elements of the 18th RCT on 21 March was made possible by an unplanned, spontaneous assault of one aggressive small unit. Finding themselves exposed at daylight on the open plain after passing over their initial objective, C Company swung left over onto the northern half of the GABES highway, looked back at the relative cover of HILL 336, and spontaneously assaulted and overran the Italian defenders on that Hill from the rear. While the soundness of unplanned maneuvering into an adjacent unit sector can be questioned, undoubtedly this aggressive action of the individual soldiers of C Company was the principal factor in the success of the 18th RCT's taking of their first objective.

4. ARTILLERY IN FORWARD POSITIONS

There can be no denying that the 5th and 32nd FA Battalions

had weapons too far forward during the action at EL GUETTAR. It may be said in mitigation that the terrain was such that adequate fire support was not possible in rearward positions, that lack of reconnaissance and the critical time element did not allow attention to fine tactical detail in selection of gun locations, or that the counterattack of the 10th Panzer Division was unexpected. However, the initial penetration of a not entirely successful armored attack did catch weapons of both battalions so far forward that they were overrun.

5. DEFENSE IN DEPTH

There can be and has been much discussion over the dispositions of the 1st Division on the 23rd of March; but this may be stated with certainty: the Division had disposed its combat elements to a depth of some 10 miles, and its defense against the armored counterattack was a success. The location of the bulk of infantry on the high ground on both sides of the pass east of EL GUETTAR was necessitated by the terrain. The center of the division drew back deep to the reserve infantry positions, but this sector of reentry was covered by Tank Destroyer elements and artillery units. When the counterattack came, it had to deploy to assault the infantry on the sides of the pass, while its center punch was successfully countered by the rearward echelonment of Tank Destroyer units. The 10th Panzer broke through the screening elements of the defenders, and also the forward combat lines, but never were able to effect a penetration into the entire depth of the 1st Division defenses.

6. INFANTRY OVERRUN BY ARMOR

The admirable defense by K Company, 18th RCT, proved that determined and courageous infantrymen can hold ground even though overrun by tanks. The brunt of the armored assault on infantry

units of the Division was borne by 3rd Battalion 18th RCT, and principally by K Company which was astride the line of approach on two successive assaults. Although taking heavy casualties, this Company remained in position until finally ordered out of the line by higher headquarters. The pluck of individual soldiers of this unit was, in a large measure, responsible for the failure of the enemy to drive the 18th RCT from the left side of the valley.

7. DESTRUCTION OF DISABLED ENEMY ARMORED VEHICLES

Immediate action must be taken to complete the destruction of enemy armored vehicles crippled on the battlefield to prevent subsequent recovery and repair. At EL GUETTAR the Germans were able to recover vehicles damaged by the defenders on the morning of the 23rd of March; also, they were active that same evening towing to the rear, tanks that had been put out of action by artillery fire in repulsing the afternoon assault. Had attention been given to these damaged vehicles, or particular units assigned the mission of completing the destruction of this equipment, the Germans would have been unable to use these weapons later.

LESSONS

1. Orders should, if at all possible, be issued in time to enable small unit commanders to make adequate daylight reconnaissance.
2. When heavy weapons must be hand carried during arduous marches, provisions must be made to relieve exhausted gun crews if they are to have their equipment in position at the proper time.
3. Aggressive and spontaneous assault on the part of small infantry units can often precipitate the successful conclusion of an attack.
4. Artillery positions must be selected with caution, and a careful estimate of the enemy's capabilities made to ensure

that the locations are not too far forward.

5. A defense against armor must be organized in depth, and if an attacking unit does not have its combat elements echeloned to the rear it is extremely vulnerable to this type of counterattack.

6. Determined and courageous infantry can hold ground even if an attacking enemy armor has overrun its positions.

7. Disabled enemy armor must be completely destroyed by units assigned this particular mission if recovery is to be prevented.