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THE BATTLE OF TUNISIA  
APRIL - MAY 1943

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Index.....	1
Bibliography.....	2
Introduction.....	3
The British Eighth Strikes.....	4
Invasion.....	5
Couped by the Axis.....	6
Reorganization Phase.....	9
The Allies Attack.....	13
The Assault.....	16
Mopping Up.....	18
Analysis and Criticism.....	19
Lessons.....	21
Map A - European States	
Map B - The Eighth Army's Offensive	
Map C - The Invasion of N. Africa	
Map D - Northern Tunisia	

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THE BATTLE OF TUNISIA  
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INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Tunisia, ended in May, 1943, was referred to by the Ministry of Information of the British Government as one battle which "will stand as the classic example of complete achievement." (1) The complete, utter destruction of the Axis forces engaged in that battle had given legitimate basis for such a statement.

To focus better the events that made possible such achievement, it is imperative to look back a few months, the months that preceded and led to the final clash.

Until August, 1942, the North African coast from Morocco to Egypt, as far in as El Alamein (See Map <sup>A</sup> B), was under control of the Axis powers or its satellites, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia under the Vichy government. Libya was the camp of (Von) Rommel's Afrika Korps. The Mediterranean Sea was denied to the Allies for full scale operations. (2)

Blocking Von Rommel's complete control was the stubborn but so far indecisive British Eighth Army. August, 1942, found the Eighth Army with its back against Cairo (See Map B), occupying a line which extended south from El Alamein to the Qattara Depression. They had been holding this ground since their last retreat in June. (3)

The situation of the Allies in this theater was a matter of great concern to their governments. Conversations took place at Washington, D.C., in January, 1942, between the British and U.S. Chiefs of Staff. The situation was discussed in detail but the lack of means impeded any immediate action. In July, 1942, while in a similar meeting, the decision was taken to coordinate a planned offensive by the Eighth Army with landings on the North African shores. (4)

(1) B, p. 59; (2) G, p. C-3; (3) H, p. 22; (4) I, p. 18.

In August, 1942, a new commander, General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, arrived for the British Eighth. On 23 October 1942 the Eighth was marching. El Alamein offensive had been launched. (5) (Von)Rommel started that day a retreat which was to take him across 1500 miles of desert to his doom at Tunisia. (6)

During the planning phase of the offensive, General Montgomery prepared his army for the eventuality of a sudden breakdown in the enemy resistance after the assault. An exploiting, highly mobile force was trained for this sole mission. They were the 1st and 10th Armored Divisions. (7) When that opportunity came on 3 November, they were committed. The pursuit developed and was backed with all means available at the maximum speed possible.

Several times General Montgomery tried to cut off his retreating enemy to force a showdown. He tried at Matruh and Fuka, where two British columns converged simultaneously to cut the retreat. (8) Another attempt was made at El Agheila where (Von)Rommel tried to utilize the natural obstacles in the area to stop Montgomery. An enveloping force again put the Afrika Korps in their race for better defending grounds. (9)

The problem of supplies threatened seriously the success of the campaign. While the retreat shortened (Von)Rommel's lines of communication, it enlarged and complicated General Montgomery's supply lines. The ports occupied along the route of advance were utilized. Early in January, 1943, a storm wrecked Benghazi, his principal supply port at the time. (10) Instead of stopping or slowing down, General Montgomery pressed harder with Tripoli and its fine harbor as his objective. The proximity of this port, 200 miles away, was the decisive factor when he made this decision. It took him 8 days to reach Tripoli. (11)

After losing Tripoli, (Von)Rommel crossed the Tunisian border and organized the Mareth Line. This he built in a bottleneck of approximately

(5) H, p. 22; (6) A, p. 1; (7) H, p. 22; (8) H, p. 25; (9) H, p. 26; (10) H, p. 27; (11) H, p. 27.

25 miles, formed the Matmata hills on one side and the Mediterranean on the other. (See Map B) The British Eighth stopped for resupply, replacements and necessary reconnaissance of the enemy position. (12)

But while (Von) Rommel was busily organizing his new battle position, the enemy on the other side <sup>which side?</sup> was not his only worry.

### INVASION

In our Introduction, page 3, we pointed out the decision taken in July, 1942, by the joint Chiefs of Staff. (13) The objectives of these landings were: "to effect landings in Morocco and Algeria; to rally local French to the Allied cause, and ultimately to occupy Tunisia, so as to menace from the rear the enemy forces opposing the Eighth Army..." (14) In order to attain one of these objectives, that of menacing the rear of Von Rommel's army, it was decided to synchronize the landings with the offensive by the Eighth Army. (15)

On 8 November 1942 (5 days after Montgomery started the pursuit of the Afrika Korps) Allied forces landed simultaneously in the vicinity of Algiers, Oran and Casablanca. (16) (See Map C) General Dwight D. Eisenhower commanded the expedition. It consisted of three task forces (17):

- a. Western Task Force (American) - Objective: Casablanca
- b. Central Task Force (American) - Objective: Oran
- c. Eastern Task Force (British-American) - Objective: Algiers

On the same day and hour that the landings were taking place, President Roosevelt notified the French people by radio and the Spanish Government in a formal note, that the Allies had no territorial ambitions. The French could only expect liberation; Spain did not have to fear any intervention on its Spanish Morocco. Generals De Gaulle and Giraud broadcasted similar appeals to their countrymen. The Bey of Tunis was asked for permission to move troops against the Axis. (18) A note to Marshall Petain at Vichy, brought astonishing, though fruitless, results. He reacted asking for the return of our ambassador and ordering the French to resist. (19)

(12) B, p. 18; (13) I, p. 18; (14) B, p. 3; (15) I, p. 18; (16) I, p. 18; (17) B, p. 3-5; (18) I, p. 21; (19) J, 271.

Algiers surrendered at 1900, 8 November, after light resistance to our Eastern Task Force. (20) The assault had been a complete surprise. Admiral Darlan, who happened to be visiting his crippled son at that city, stunned, gave himself up. Security measures enforced since the planning phases of this operation had worked effectively. (21)

The Germans, upon learning of the invasion, invaded southern France. This move, in violation of the Armistice, aroused the French. In Africa, against Marshall Petain's order to resist, Admiral Darlan, then in custody, ordered a cessation of hostilities. (22) Oran had surrendered the day before, 10 November, and Casablanca, which was still resisting stubbornly, surrendered that day. <sup>Algeria</sup> (23)

The cessation of hostilities against the French at the earliest possible moment after the landings, if any had developed, was one of General Eisenhower's goals. (24) When this was accomplished, the mission of moving against (Von) Rommel became his number one target. (25) It was for this reason, while at the risk of dangerously disregarding logistical problems, he ordered the British First Army to proceed east to the conquest of Tunisia. This unit had not finished reorganizing, and its commander had arrived the day before the order was given. (26)

#### COUPED BY THE AXIS

General Eisenhower knew that he had to act speedily if some of Tunisia, at least, could be occupied before the Germans got there. One day after the Allied landings in North Africa on 9 November, 1942, German air transported troops landed in Tunisia. (27) At a rate of about 1000 arrivals a day, by sea and air, these German troops were regrouped under what became the 5th Panzer Army under General Von Arnim. Bizerte, Tunis, Sfax and Gabes were promptly occupied. (See Map <sup>c</sup> D) The Germans had succeeded in protecting (Von) Rommel's rear areas! (28)

(20) B, p. 5; (21) I, p. 21; (22) I, p. 21; (23) B, p. 5; (24) G(1), p. 3; (25) G(2), p. c-3; (26) I, p. 22; (27) K, p. 16; (28) B, p. 8.

On 10 November the first elements of the British First Army moved out towards the east, and the first landings were made at Bougie the following day, against no opposition. By sea again on 12 November, they occupied Bone farther to the east. (29) American paratroopers landed at Youk les Bains, near Tebessa, on 15 November. British paratroopers occupied Souk el Arba, west of Medjez el Bab on 16 November. Contact with the enemy came up on 18 November, when elements of the British First Army clashed with German forces at Djebel Ablod, about 100 miles east of Bone. It was a race against time by both opposing armies, both trying to secure key positions before the battle that was in the making. (30)

At this stage, the advantage of closer logistical support favored the Germans. In addition to this, the terrain in Tunisia to be traversed by Allied transportation was a heavy handicap. The standing of the soil, climatic changes and the topographical form of the ground were far from ideal. <sup>substantial</sup> From the steep, rocky mountain ranges in the north of Tunisia, the ground slowly comes down to the plateaus and plains in the center and towards the coast, to the marshy flat lands of the south. The mountain range is known as the Grand Dorsal. Coming generally from west and the south the mountains converge eastward towards Pont du Fahs, in two main chains of mountains. The roads available, and there were not too many, were of very poor construction and materials. They run across the mountains through defiles and passes, of which the <sup>best</sup> most known and of which the reader will hear most, are Fondouk, Faid, Maknassy, El Guettar and Kasserine. A rainy day was enough to disrupt all traffic, vehicles and tanks bogging down. <sup>Would they?</sup> Improvised airfields would be unusable for days after. The railroad facilities, <sup>what railroads? where?</sup> besides being inadequate, were obsolete. All these conditions made several localities to be key positions. (29) B, p. 8; (30) B, p. 8.

AS Medjez el Bab  
to Tebessa?

Tebessa was the key to the south. Medjez el Bab, one end of the corridor leading to Tunis, the capital, was the key to its defense. (31)

777

Around 20 November only a handful of Allied troops were disputing the Germans the control of Tunisia. Skirmishes and battles developed on the Tabarka-Mattheur Road, Beja-Mattheur Road and the Beja-Medjez el Bab-Tebourba Road when opponents tried to consolidate gains made during their unopposed advance to those points. 30 November found the forward positions located generally extending north through Medjez el Bab-Djedeida-Cape Serrat. On 1 December the enemy attacked the British armor, known as Blade Force. The attack, supported by tanks and dive bombers, took place in the vicinity of Tebourba. The British were so badly hit that Blade Force had to be immediately relieved. The relieving unit, Combat Command B and the 11th Brigade, could not hold the attack either. A withdrawal reestablished the line generally from Medjez el Bab north to Cape Serrat. (32)

The Germans grabbed the initiative from this instance. The rainy season which had just started increased considerably the difficulties being met by the Allies of transporting troops, materiel and supplies to their thinly-held lines. Most roads were useless (33) as well as the improvised airfields. (34) Air support was inadequate. Allied units were directed to hold gains. They managed to hold the lines more or less stabilized. Vital Medjez el Bab was still in our possession. (35)

On the area south of Medjez el Bab, south flank of the British First Army, the situation was serious. The paratroopers who had jumped near Tebessa and secured it with its nearby airfield on 15 November (36), had been doing a superb job. Having joined their forces with pro-ally French troops in the area, they had successfully carried their mission patrolling such an extensive area. The French were, however, ill-equipped, and with the initiative in the hands of the enemy, such a weak flank

(31) B, p. 2; K, p. 15/20; D, p. 106/107; (32) K, p. 19; (33) K, p. 15; (34) K, p. 20; (35) K, p. 20; D, p. 106; (36) B, p. 11/13.

protection was a threat to the British First Army on the north. The American II Corps, then at Oran and which originally was intended for an offensive against Gabes and Sfax in the southeast, was given the mission on 1 January 1943 of protecting the southern flank held by the paratroopers and French. The II Corps consisted of the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division. (37)

#### REORGANIZATION PHASE

In order to give the reader a clearer picture of the situation in general around January, 1943, at this time we would like to take him from the front lines back to the Allied Headquarters at Algiers. Many bitter lessons had been learned by the Allies during the past few weeks. Many weaknesses had been discovered. The lull imposed by the rainy season was as good an opportunity as any to make corrections. The British Eighth had arrived at the Mareth Line. The Allied force up north in Tunisia was hastily building a strong striking force while engrossing their supply stores. A need of coordination became evident. A centralized command was the solution. The North African Theatre of Operations was organized with General Eisenhower as supreme commander. General Sir Harold Alexander was appointed Commander of the Eighteenth Army Group, which would consist of the British First Army on the north of Tunisia, under General Anderson; the U.S. II Corps under General Fredendall in central Tunisia; and on the south, facing north, the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery. The French troops organized as the 19th Corps, under General Koeltz, were placed under the First Army. (38)

The Air Forces were also reorganized. Marshall Tedder became Air Officer, Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, under General Eisenhower. General Spaatz, under Marshall Tedder, commanded the North West Africa Air Force. Admiral Cunningham, who under General Eisenhower commanded the fleet, extended his area of responsibility to all the Mediterranean. (39)

(37) K, p. 23; (38) B, p. 16 and K, p. 24; (39) B, p. 16 and K, p. 24.

To the student of military subjects it may be interesting to notice that during this campaign, as a result of the above reorganization, the Tactical Air Force came into being when General Spaatz unified the light and medium bomber commands under one command, gave it a fighter support, and assigned it the mission of continuous, close support to land and naval operations. (40)

Having looked into the preparations going on at Algiers, let us see what was going on with the U.S. II Corps after moving to relieve the paratroopers in the area in front of Tebessa. On their north from Fonduk to Bou Arada, the 19th French Corps assumed responsibility. The area south of Fonduk, through Maknassy to El Guettar belonged to the II Corps. (41) This was too big a front to be held effectively. To make things worse, the French had to be pulled back to reequip and train with modern weapons. The frontages were again stretched. (42) As an illustrative case, the 1st Armored, less detachments, was given a sector of about 50 miles wide. The Axis must have spotted these movements since they operated freely in the air. The rainy season did not effect German air operations. Their airfields at Tunis and Bizerte had hard surfaces. (43) Apparently realizing that this was their opportunity to disrupt any consolidations which in the future may threaten their communications between Von Arnim and Von Rommel, the Germans decided to attack. (44)

The importance given to these plans by the Germans can be visualized when Von Rommel, who had problems of his own at the Mareth Line, was to actively participate in that operation. Von Rommel was to open up first with an attack on the area held by the U.S. II Corps in central Tunisia to push them back. It was contemplated that the British First Army on the north, noticing his south flank exposed would pull and adjust its lines. This opportunity was to be taken up by Von Arnim in the north to catch them off balance. He would follow up with an all-out offensive. (45) Accordingly, on 14 February, only ten days after his arrival at the

(40) I, p. 24; (41) K, p. 26; (42) K, p. 27-28; (43) K, p. 20; (44) B, p. 19; (45) B, p. 16.

*North Trip*

Mareth Line, (46) Von Rommel retrieved troops from his army and, with others given him by Von Arnim, launched an attack on Faid Pass and Gafsa. (47) His attacking force consisted of his 21st Panzer and the Centauro Divisions reinforced with elements of Von Arnim's 10th Panzer Division. Gafsa fell without opposition. On Sidi Bouزيد across the Pass, elements of the II Corps resisted but were forced to evacuate the village. A counterattack launched the next day by the II Corps met initial success but was absorbed by the enemy who resumed their attack supported by air. After heavy losses the II Corps withdrew to Sbeitla. (48) Sbeitla could not be held either and the Americans fell back on two columns to Sbiba on the north and to Kasserine. Both important approaches had to be protected. On 18 February, Combat Command A, which had withdrawn to Sbiba, was relieved and going around Thala rejoined the rest of the 1st Armored Division southeast of Tebessa where the division was rallying. (49) The attacks made towards Sbiba proved to be a feint, with the enemy main effort towards Kasserine. The road that goes from Kasserine through the Pass, bisects in two with one leading towards Thala on the north and the other towards Tebessa. Thala protected the south flank of the British First Army; Tebessa was our nerve and supply center in southern Tunisia. (50) (See Map *S*)

During the night of 19 February commanding grounds on both sides of the Pass were secured by Von Rommel. On the morning of the 20th the Pass was forced. In an attempt to stop the German offensive, elements of the British 26th Armored Brigade had taken position at a point 10 miles from the Pass on the Kasserine-Thala Road. Combat Command B (U.S. II Corps) had taken position on the road to Tebessa, about 15 miles from the Pass. (51)

After breaking through the Pass, on the 20th, the Germans launched a fierce attack against the British on the Thala Road. In spite of having lost all their tanks, <sup>who lost tanks?</sup> the position was held. The attack continued

(46) K, Map 4b; (47) B, p. 19; (48) B, p. 19; (49) K, p. 29-30; (50) K, p. 30; (51) K, p. 31.

Very little  
my way  
not clear  
element of  
refusion

for the next two days, after which the British were pushed back about 10 miles. The 9th Infantry Division was on the way from Algiers and was rushed to this front. Two battalions of infantry and part of the 16th Infantry Regiment were assigned to assist the British. The enemy was finally stopped. (52) On the Tebessa Road elements of Combat Command B launched a flank attack on the German position on 22 February. The enemy attack was losing momentum. The air force which had been of no assistance so far, due to the weather conditions, could show up. (53) On 24 February Von Rommel started his retreat. (54) Kasserine and Sbeitla were recovered. The lines were reestablished along the same positions held before the Von Rommel offensive.

Von Arnim had been waiting on the north for the opportunity to launch his part of the offensive planned with Von Rommel. Although Von Rommel had failed to accomplish his mission, in part he had succeeded. The Allied forces along his path had been badly beaten up. The 1st Armored Division (II Corps) had suffered to such an extent that its combat efficiency was to be practically nil for days to come. (55) The British 26th Armored Brigade had lost all its tanks at Thala. Von Rommel's lines of communication were secured by him, at least for the immediate future. But this was of little help to Von Arnim on the north; the expected withdrawal of the British First Army on his front as a result of the threat represented by Rommel's advances on its southern flank, never materialized. But he decided to go ahead anyway with his planned offensive.

On 26 February, two days after Rommel started his withdrawal through Kasserine, Von Arnim was attacking on the north. His offensive was a series of simultaneous attacks, with the main idea of breaking through if a penetration was attained in any of the attacks. (56) (See Map D) He attacked in the direction of Cape Serrat, Sedjenane, Jefna, Sidi Nsir, Medjez el Bab, Bou Arada from Pont du Fahs and Goubellat, and towards (52) K, p. 32; (53) K, p. 32; (54) B, p. 19; (55) B, p. 19; (56) B, p. 17.

Djebel Mansour and the Ousseltia valley. In such series of attacks the situation was not too clear for either side after two days' fighting. Although penetrations were made in two localities, no exploitation could be made by the Germans, due to the resistance presented. These were at Sedjenane, which fell to the Germans, and along the Matteur-Beja Road towards Medjez el Bab. Sealing the penetrations, counterattacks were launched, and on the 30th Sedjenane was reconquered and ground lost on the Matteur-Beja Road recovered. Vital Medjez el Bab had been saved again. (57)

The failure of these German attacks strengthened the Allied situation enormously at a time, late February, when they were coming out of their previous logistical hole. Railroad and road facilities had been improved and used to the utmost in rushing supplies. Gasoline pipe lines had been built. The rainy season was over, augmenting the bright perspectives of the Allies. (58) General Montgomery in the south had finished preparations for his attack at Mareth. Tripoli, which had been thoroughly wrecked by the Germans before its evacuation on 23 January, had been rehabilitated and the Eighth had resupplied well ahead of the enemy expectations. (59) By this time also, General Patton had assumed command of the U.S. II Corps. (60) The stage was almost set for the final assault on Tunisia.

#### THE ALLIES ATTACK

After the recent heavy fighting in the north and central fronts, the lull that always follows the battle was a blessing to the Germans. The south front, however, presented another entirely different situation. Inactive since early in February, Von Rommel estimated that the British had to be pretty far ahead in their preparations. False activity displayed on purpose by Montgomery while Von Rommel was attacking past Kasserine, had not only influenced his return to Mareth, (61) but was keeping him uneasy. Deciding to disrupt any attack plans General Montgomery may have, he decided to attack. (62) He opened up with a sham attack along

(57) B, p. 17; (58) I, p. 24/25; (59) B, p. 18; (60) K, p. 34; (61) K, p. 34; (62) K, p. 35.

the Wadi Zeus area on 4 March. On 6 March he threw his main attack against Toujane on the extreme left of the Mareth Line. His tanks hit the British, after an artillery and air preparation, with the intent of breaking through the flank positions and destroying or disorganizing the inner installations and mainly the infantry. This tactic he had used successfully before, but to an enemy wise to his trickery, it worked no longer. (63) As a result, over half the attacking armor was destroyed. (64)

General Messe assumed command of the Mareth defenses when General Von Rommel returned home, a frustrated man. He redesignated his command as the First Italian Army. (65) The initiative was now in the hands of the Allies with the Axis forced into the defensive.

In coordination with General Montgomery's plans for an assault on the Mareth Line, the II Corps launched a diversionary attack on 16 March, with Macknassy and Gafsa as their objectives. Gafsa and El Guettar fell the following day. The column advancing towards Macknassy was bogged down by the muddy terrain; however, on 21 March they had secured Sened, half way to their objective. (66)

Simultaneously with General Patton's II Corps' attack, the Mareth Line was forced along the upper Wadi Zeus on 16 March. This operation failed after initial success, when reinforcements failed to arrive on time. (67) The Allied Tactical Air Force was active on the fronts of the II Corps and the Eighth Army. (68)

A brief description of the Mareth position will assist the reader in visualizing forthcoming events. The Lake Chott El Fedjadj extends east towards the Gulf of Gabes, leaving a stretch of land of about 15 miles between them. This stretch of land is known as the Wadi Akarit. Immediately to the southeast of the lake a chain of mountains extends parallel to the coast line of the Gulf of Gabes, forming a bottleneck. The Mareth

(63) B, p. 20; (64) K, p. 35; (65) B, p. 22; (66) K, p. 36/37;  
(67) B, p. 22; (68) K, p. 36.

Line was built to close this bottleneck. (See Map) The chain of mountains known as Djebel Tebaga and Matmata hills have a gap between them which leads towards El Hamma. The waste desert sands on the west side of the hills was estimated by the Axis command as an unsurmountable handicap for an attack in force. (69) Just in case, with tank obstacles and the Pistoia Division and the Italian Sabara Group on the gap, it was considered safe. (70)

While the attempt, that failed, at the Wadi Zeus was being launched on 21 March, the Eighth had its 2d New Zealand Division, with an armor brigade, moving around the Matmata hills and towards El Hamma. (71) On 24 March this unit had arrived in its vicinity and made contact with the enemy. Surprised and realizing the threat that such movement meant to his defense, General Messe rushed to El Hamma whatever troops he could muster. The British 1st Armored Division came in support of the 2d New Zealand. In the fighting that followed, large numbers of Italians surrendered. (72) On the 26th the attack was pressed, and on 28 March the evacuation of El Hamma started. It marked the beginning of the deterioration of the Mareth defenses. By 29 March Gabes had been captured. (73)

Retreating from the Mareth, General Messe attempted another stand along the Wadi Akarit. It was by its nature a good defensive position. On 6 April the offensive was renewed by the Eighth, with the 51st and 50th Divisions, with the 4th Indian Division abreast. The line was broken and 9500 prisoners were made. The enemy pulled out as fast as it could, including the forces facing the U.S. II Corps at El Guettar and Maknassy. (74) Mahares and Sfax were occupied on the 9th and 10th. From Sfax the enemy retreated due north towards Enfidaville. In an attempt to out off the retreat, the U.S. 1st Armored Division was ordered east towards Founduk and Kairouan. (75) The enemy could get his main body through to Enfidaville, losing, however, heavily in men and equipment.

(69) B, note on bottom picture, p. 24; (70) B, p. 23; (71) B, p. 21; (72) K, p. 37 and B, p. 23; (73) B, p. 21; (74) B, p. 34; (75) K, Map B.

Prisoners reached the figure of 30,000. (76) Von Arnim and Messe had joined forces, the first assuming supreme command. His lines extended 110 miles south from Cape Serrat, excluding Medjez el Bab, including Pont du Fahs and towards Enfidaville. (See Map D) Within this area Von Arnim had already selected the position best suited for defensive operations in the event he was forced any further to give ground. It consisted of the area included in Cape Bon by a line drawn south from Hamman Lif to Zaghouan and down to Enfidaville. His preparations included adequate supply dumps. (77)

The Allies had air superiority in the front lines. General Patton left the U.S. II Corps to General Omar Bradley when he took over the organization of the 7th Army for the invasion of Sicily. Having no enemy to shoot at in the areas they occupied at El Guettar, Gafsa and Macknassy, the II Corps was moved north. The battlefront was then composed of the following units from south to north: British Eighth, French 19th Corps, British First Army, U.S. II Corps and several small French units along the coast. (78) (See Map D)

With the Axis forces now penned in northern Tunisia, the Allied command was planning an all-out assault on their positions. The main effort was to be launched by the British First Army in the center from their position around Medjez el Bab towards Tunis, while the U.S. II Corps and the French in the north sector and the Eighth Army and French 19th Corps in the south were to attack those flanks. The flank attacks were intended to pin enemy forces in those fronts, denying their ability to assist the central sector. (79)

#### THE ASSAULT

On 19 April 1943 the final assault was launched. The attack which was started by the British Eighth in the south, soon extended all the

(76) B, p. 42; (77) B, p. 49; (78) B, p. 42; (79) K, p. 41.

way north to Cape Serrat. On the 20th after stiff resistance, Enfidaville fell. Fierce counterattacks followed. By the 21st, 1400 prisoners had been made. (80)

The Medjez el Bab-Bou Arada area, where the main effort was to be made, saw action on the night of 20 April. Trying to disrupt Allied preparations in that sector, five battalions of the Herman Goring Division with tank support by the 10th Panzer Division and the 501st Heavy Tank Battalion, attacked the British First Army. Enemy initial successes were evened up before the day was over. The next morning, as scheduled, the British First Army was on the move, attacking through the Bou Arada-Goubellat Road. (81)

Up north the U.S. II Corps moved forward on 23 April (82), followed by the adjacent French Goums along the coastline. Their attack was most successful. (83) While the enemy resistance stiffened along the whole front, their most stubborn opposition was met in the central sector. Tank battles were the order of the day. However, in the north the speed of the progress made by the U.S. II Corps indicated that the enemy was withdrawing and their resistance had only delaying motives. On the 28th, elements of the II Corps reached a position 5 miles west of Ashkel Lake. (84)

In the air, things were not a bit brighter for the Axis. By mid April complete air superiority had been achieved by the Allies. Shipping, air bases and lines of communication of the enemy in Tunisia were being pounded on a 24-hour basis. Close support to ground operations was paying dividends. (85)

On 30 April the British 7th Armored Division and the 4th Indian Division were pulled out from the Eighth Army and occupied positions between the U.S. II Corps and the British First Army in the Medjez el Bab front.

(86) On the north the U.S. II Corps continued its progress. From

(80) (81) B, p. 43; (82) A, p. 12; (83) B, p. 45; (84) B, p. 46;  
(85) A, p. 3; (86) C, p. 69.

positions near Sidi Nsir they were closing on Matrouh. When it fell, its loss was a vital loss to the Axis. Their northern sector was now untenable. The railway and main communications between Bizerte and Tunis were severed. (87)

On 5 May the road to Tunis in the center had been finally opened when Jebel Bou Aoukaz fell. (88) Losing no time the British First Army broke loose through the Medjez el Bab-Massicault Road. Spearheaded by the 4th Indian Division, supported by the 7th Armored Division on the north side of the road, and the 4th British Division, supported by the 6th Armored Division on the south side of that road, the attackers jumped off on 6 May. That day Massicault fell after heavy tank fighting. It must be recalled that the fighting was taking place in the natural corridor existing between Medjez el Bab and Tunis. (89) The advance of the Allied forces continued all along the fronts. The U.S. II Corps was within 9 miles of Bizerte on 6 May. The French XIX Corps was in Pont du Fahs on 7 May. That day Tunis fell to the British First Army. That day the U.S. II Corps captured Bizerte. (90)

#### MOPPING UP

The unbelievable speed with which the Allies were attacking his forces, caught General Von Arnim off balance. His planned withdrawal to the prepared positions at Cape Bon was impossible. The route along which his army was to move south was cut off with their loss of Bizerte and Tunis. That they never expected this to happen is proved by the fact that the advance guard entering Tunis found German officers in the restaurants having coffee. (91)

In view of the collapse of the enemy, the British First Army was ordered to move north and south from Tunis, while the II Corps moved south from Bizerte. Accordingly, the British 7th Armored Division moved on the pursuit northward from Tunis and the 6th Armored Division on the (87) B, p. 46; (88) B, p. 46; (89) C, p. 70; (90) B, p. 50; (91) B, p. 56.

same mission toward Hamman Lif in the south. The confusion in the enemy lines was indescribable. The forces facing the U.S. II Corps were cut off and surrendered on 9 May. That day, the 6th Armored Division entered Creteville and Hamman Lif. (92) (See Map D) Continuing to the south, Hammamet was occupied 10 May. The 4th Division arrived to assist the 6th Armored and moved north from Hamman Lif towards Cape Bon which they covered in a pincer-like movement along the opposite coasts of the Cape. On 11 May the enemy, facing the XIX Corps (French) surrendered. Only the Italian First Army, facing the British Eighth Army, kept offering resistance. After a going through by our bombers, they surrendered on 13 May. That same day General Von Arnim, Axis Commander in Chief, was captured near St. Marie Du Zit. (93)

The Tunisian campaign over, an analysis of the cost to the Axis would be of interest. It is estimated that 50,000 were killed which, added to 248,000 prisoners taken, reached the important figure of almost 300,000. Fifteen German and seven Italian generals were among the prisoners of War. 1696 planes and 95 ships had been destroyed. (94)

The Mediterranean Sea was open again to the Allies.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

An analysis of an operation such as the Tunisian campaign can not be properly made in the time and space of a monograph. The shortcomings and errors made were too many. It can be said at this time, however, that it was undoubtedly fortunate for the Allies to have launched this invasion and the campaign that followed before attempting to take a crack at the European continent. Tunisia was in a way a proving ground for the Allies.

In the first place and most important, the overall command should have been held by one person only, to include operations of the British Eighth Army in Egypt. As planned, the invasion was intended to attack (92) B, p. 56; (93) B, p. 58/59; (94) B, p. 59.

Von Rommel from the year once a foothold had been secured in Algeria and Tunisia. The operations of the Eighth on one side and the invading forces on the other were under separate commands. Developments during the campaign forced the Allies to adopt that decision, a necessity which had been foreseen even by our enemies, as shown in captured documents.

(95)

Climatic and weather changes with the consequent effect on existing roads in the area of operations had been apparently overlooked. It is my opinion that the campaign should have been started longer before or immediately after the rainy season. It was launched just prior to it. That a careful study of the consequences was not made is shown when the operations had to be halted for this reason, and the Allied high command expressed regret and disillusionment when forced to adopt such a decision.

(96)

In the plans made to rally and utilize against the enemy all the North African French troops, the fact known to everybody but apparently not to our high command, that those troops were ill-equipped and still imbued with World War I principles of warfare, was also overlooked. After employing them in a vital sector, which they could not hold in spite of gallantry displayed, the Allied command finally realized that they had to be withdrawn, equipped and trained with modern weapons. Had this been done as soon as they were rallied, their service to the Allied cause would have been more valuable. (97)

Apparently during the planning of this campaign, the possible need of paratroopers and gliders was underestimated. In the race for key positions by both opponents that developed right after the invasion, the utilization of gliders and paratroopers would have been the solution. However, only twice during the whole campaign were they utilized, and in both cases their mission was accomplished. Tebessa, our nerve center in the south, was secured and held by them. The fact that they were not

(95) K, p. 25; (96) K, p. 19 and D, p. 106; (97) K, p. 27.

used anymore in the race against time seems to indicate that there were not available units. (98)

The possibility that the Germans would or could, as they did invade Tunisia by air from Sicily, Italy and southern France, was apparently overlooked or underestimated. Had this been given a thought, the fleet and carrier-based aircraft could have interdicted the operations to limit at least their ability to do so. The outcome of the race for Tunisia probably would have been a different one. With impunity they secured Gabes, Sfax, Bizerte and Tunis. Ironically enough, in the case of Tunis, the capital, our ground troops were within reach of it at Djedeida when the Germans showed up at Tunis and pushed them back. (99)

The Allied command did, however, display initiative and aggressiveness when, in spite of so many important errors in the planning phases, they decided to take calculated risks, rushing ground troops by sea and land to the east when they learned that the Germans were getting there. These troops moved as fast as they could under the circumstances, sometimes even losing contact with their supplies. On a thinly-held line, at the early stages of the campaign, they fought gallantly against an experienced foe who had too many initial advantages. When these advantages on numerical strength, air support, supplies, tanks and materiel were overcome, the Allies gave a good account of themselves in the battlefield.

#### LESSONS

Among the lessons learned, the most important were:

1. The infantry-tank team is unbeatable if properly used. The losing side of two opponents employing them will always be the side that forgets the most of the principles involved in their proper employment.
2. Absolute cooperation between tanks and infantry is essential. Efficient and coordinated communication between both will help achieving it.

(98) B, p. 8; (99) D, p. 106.

*Poorly stated.  
without principle  
Poorly stated*

*NB.  
Poorly worded*

3. The use of tanks alone was successfully used in the early stages of the war against a disorganized enemy. In 1942-1943, against a battle-wise enemy, this tactic became obsolete. The infantry remained the queen of battles. Any new tactic had to be centered on it.

4. Key terrain features should be the main objective of the attacker. Remaining grounds become untenable once they are captured.

5. Immediately upon capture of a commanding ground, troops should keep moving to forward slopes and dig in. Invariably, the topographical crests are covered with artillery by the side losing it.

6. When artillery preparations are used before an attack, the troops should move to within 100-200 yards of the fires before lifting them. A saving of lives will result.

7. Efficiency in map reading should be emphasized more in training of troops. In terrain such as deserts, forests and snow-covered country, the compass and the map are the only reliable guides.

8. Proper location of reserves prior to the battle, and its prompt, aggressive utilization, saved many a day in Tunisia.

9. Hold armored divisions poised to exploit breakthroughs if they develop. Rush them in when the enemy gives signs of deterioration.

10. Aggressiveness and initiative of leaders can outweigh their initial errors, if any.

Poorly stated - N.B.O.

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why forward slopes -  
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