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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 168TH INFANTRY, 2D BATTALION/  
(34TH DIVISION)  
FAID PASS, 12-21 FEBRUARY 1943  
(TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN WITHDRAWAL

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OPERATIONS OF THE 2D BATTALION, 168TH INFANTRY  
(34TH DIVISION)  
FAID PASS, 12-21 FEBRUARY 1943  
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 2d Battalion, 168th Infantry, in the Tunisian Campaign from the movement of the Battalion to positions near Faid Pass on 9 February to the reorganization of the Regiment at Sbiba on 21 February.

From early in 1940 until June of 1943 the entire coast of North Africa was a giant battleground, wherein the tide of battle washed an area from Cairo in Egypt to the ancient city of Oran in Algiers. It was to see its culmination in and around the city of Tunis once a pirate lair, but held now by a people who put the pirates of old to shame.

The reason for this campaign lay in the German plan for a world domination and it was their expressed intention to wrest control of the Suez Canal, life line of supply to the British, from the Allies and start a march across Asia. This march was intended to encircle Russia and join up with the Axis partner in the East, Japan.

Twice Italian and German troops had hammered at the gates of Cairo and twice they had been repulsed by a foe, inferior in men and armament. However, the scales of war were slowly tipping and in October of 1942 General Bernard Montgomery, commanding the British Eighth Army, built up a reserve of these needed men and materials and launched an attack that was to carry him to the doors of Tunis and was to be one of the most spectacular offensives of the war.

Some of the deceptive measures taken by the British Eighth Army were on such a large scale that they are deserving of mention here. For, <sup>on the</sup> ~~as a~~ result of these successful strategies <sup>ic</sup> the whole allied plan was to hinge.

In the attack of El Alemain on October 23, 1942 some of the best measures taken were as follows:

1. To split the German armored divisions the British organized a phantom armored corps. They built 20 miles of real pipe line to serve this corps.

2. Constructed 1200 dummy trucks and tanks to represent this corps and moved some each night to increase the effect.

3. Constructed hundreds of emplacements for machine guns, anti-tank guns and artillery and put dummy weapons in them.

4. Construction of dummy minefields. Although no mines were actually laid, working parties were sent out to go through the motions of laying mines.

5. Assignment of dummy calls to this imaginary corps and the inclusion of the corps in distribution of all orders, etc.

So successful was the deception that when German General Van Thoma was captured, one of his first questions was - "What ever became of that Armored Corps in the south?"

With the launching of this attack against General Erwin Rommel, Commander of the famed Africa Corps the stage was being set for another strategic blow at Nazi dominated Algeria to the west.

In a conference held in Washington between British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President F. D. Roosevelt, it was decided to strike at the ports of Casa Blanca, Oran, and Algiers.

By landing forces there, the Allies would gain twofold purposes, one, to enlist the support and aid of the French people in the fight against the Nazis and, secondly, to relieve the pressure against the British Eighth Army by causing <sup>g</sup>german troops, destined to reinforce General Rommel, to be used in the defense of the eastern <sup>?</sup>borders of Tunisia and the City of Tunis, main port of supply for the Axis.

The landings were carried out and so successful were they that successive Allied landings were made farther to the east at the Port Cities of Bone and Bougie.

As rapidly as these port cities were taken and consolidated, early in December, a British Army under General *Anderson* with the U. S. 1st Armored Division, in support, struck at the German held City of Tunis. The attack carried to the outskirts of the city itself when the Germans, perceiving this threat, began to hurriedly build an Army literally in the city itself. From Sicily, Southern France and Southern Italy troops were brought in by air and by sea. So short were the Axis lines of supply that within a matter of days the Germans were able not only to stop the Allied drive but to go on the offensive and drive the First Army back to a line running generally north and south along the Grand Dorsal Mountain chain.

With the situation almost at a stalemate, control of all Allied Forces in North Africa was given to the capable British Commander, General Alexander. General Alexander developed the following plan of strategy that was to lead to the eventual destruction of all Axis Forces in Africa.

The British First Army was to hold a line in the north along the Grand Dorsal chain of mountains, running north and south. The French ~~Fifth~~ Army under General ~~Schwartz~~ along with the U. S. II Corps under General Fredendahl were to hold an extension of that line in the south. This line was to form what would be the west wall of a huge cylinder and the Mediterranean Sea would form the east wall.

The American 12th Air Force along with units of the British Navy would close the top of the cylinder, preventing the Germans from bringing in reinforcements from Italy or evacuating their own troops from Tunis.

The British Eighth Army, moving in from the East, would represent the piston driving the Africa Corps into the cylinder wherein the German Armies could be destroyed almost at will. \*\* ~~Map #4~~

\*\* Map #4.

A further ramification of this plan was that if U. S. elements in the south were able to drive through to the coast and cut the road running from Tripoli to Tunis, this would prevent a juncture of the two German Armies and make the task of the Allied Forces that much easier.

#### SPECIAL CONDITIONS AFFECTING THE OPERATION

##### TOPOGRAPHY

In the northern part of Tunisia the general terrain is highly irregular with hill ranges running generally north and south.

The middle or central part is more of a plain with a number of high, rocky hills, or more aptly, small mountains. Some of the most decisive battles of the campaign were to be fought on these hills at a later date when the German thrust had been stopped and the Allies were once more on the offensive.

The Tunisian "Eastern Dorsal" runs some 120 miles southwards from Pichon to <sup>K</sup>Magnassy, thence some 50 miles southwest to where, 20 miles south of El Guettar, it joins the line of great Chotts or Salt Lakes. The defensive position taken up by the Africa Corps extended from these salt lakes to the coast. This Dorsal, a high mountain ridge, makes with the Chotts a natural defense of Tunisia to east and south. The passes through this mountain chain are few and it was these few passes that were the keys that Rommel must possess if he was to make a successful sweep to the north. The main passes which afforded passage to vehicles were Faid, Gafsa, <sup>K</sup>Magnassy and Fonduk.

Between the dorsal and the coast is the coastal plain. It is 180 miles, running north and south and was to Rommel an escape corridor to be kept open at all cost. This plain broadens from the Mareth Line to about 70 miles south of Kairouan, thence narrowing off to hilly country around Enfidavalle in the north. In the south it is largely barren, undulating desert, but northwards, especially about Sousse and Sfax, it is flatter and has large areas covered with olive groves. About Kairouan is a large, flat area good

for airfields. Military movement over it, except along the coast road, was canalised into predictable areas by number of salt lakes. However, the entire country in dry weather lent itself to maneuver of large tank elements.

#### CLIMATE

The rainy season of West North Africa begins in December and ends in February. Any armored offensive would have to take the future weather into consideration as during wet weather the ground became impassable and movement was restricted to roads. In general, reasonable scope for armored action was confined to the area south of Feriana-Sbeitla-Pichon, the Kairouan Plain, the Goubellat Plain, and the Medjez Valley. Access to all of these areas except Sbeitla were through passes in the hills dominated by the enemy.

#### ROAD AND RAIL COMMUNICATION

Roads in the area were sparser than in Europe. The main roads converged into defiles which thus became important strategical objectives. The main roads were metalled, mostly tarred in the center with soft verges, and very slippery in wet weather. Secondary roads were often well metalled, but more often little more than earthen tracks. In scrub hills forward troops often had to change over for periods to mule transport. After a few hours' rain, many "roads" became largely impassable for the movement of motorized columns, and in dry weather they rapidly deteriorated. Hundreds of wadis were crossed by road bridges, for the most part inadequate to carry heavy military loads, and lending themselves to demolitions with small minefields. This slowed movement and involved making many diversion tracks to fords. Through the hills and mountains, roads often became defiles over long distances, commanded from hills all round, and easily blocked by minefields covered by fire.

Maintenance of supplies forward entailed constant forethought and improvisation in view of the state of the roads above, and the fact that railways were few and could carry only few trains, and these of restricted loads. The problem was made more difficult in the early stages by the enemy's air superiority in the forward areas, which confined vehicle road movement to the hours of darkness.

#### COVER

Except in the Northern Section and around Tebessa and Le Kef, woods cover are very scarce. Small groups of trees exist around some of the farms, but these are very inadequate for a harbor of any size, and usually drew the attention of enemy aircraft. Olive groves afford useful cover if one accepts the following disadvantages: (1) In wet weather the ground below is usually muddy and can immobilize units, and (2) the gunners and commanders of tanks in such areas are blinded. Scrub hills afforded useful facilities for camouflage when vehicles could reach them. \* X

\*\* Map #1-

#### MOVEMENT OF 168TH INFANTRY PRIOR TO FAID OPERATION

The 168th Infantry whose disastrous part in the Faid-Kaasarine operation was to be one of the tragedies of World War II, had formerly been a part of the 42d Division in World War I. At the end of World War I, with the reorganization of the National Guard, the 168th was made a part of the 34th Division and most of the units of the regiment were made up of personnel from Iowa and Minnesota.

The division received its initial training at Camp Claiborne, La. and at the outbreak of the war was alerted and, along with the First Armored Division, was sent to a Port of Embarkation.

\* I  
\*\* Map #1

The Division proceeded to Belfast, Ireland and landed in February of 1942, having the distinction of being the first American troops to land in the European Theater.

After a six month training period in Northern Ireland, the 168th was formed into a Regimental Combat Team, composed of the three Infantry Battalions, the 175th Field Artillery Battalion, one Company of the 109th Engineer Battalion, one Medical Company from the 109th Medical Battalion and elements of an assault landing team composed of British officers and men.

The Combat Team was to maintain this organization with few changes up to and shortly after the operation covered by this monograph.

The Combat Team moved to Northern Scotland in July of 1942 and underwent intensive amphibious operations with and under the guidance of instructors from the British First and Canadian First Armies, the latter just having completed the amphibious landing at Dieppe. After the completion of this training the Combat Team moved to an embarkation port below *August* Glasgow, Scotland and in September of 1942 the Combat Team set sail for *22/3 Oct.* North Africa.

The unit landed at Algiers on November 8, 1942 and occupied the town *alone?* after meeting light resistance. On Christmas Day the 168th moved by rail and motor to the town of Ukes-Le-Bain on the Algerian-Tunisian border. The movement covered a distance of approximately 600 miles and took 12½ days to complete. This clearly shows the extreme difficulty in transporting men and supplies from Algiers east to the battle area.

Upon arrival the Combat Team was attached to the French Fifth Army and were ordered to proceed to Sened Station and seize the town. Sened Station, a small Arab village, important only because of the time (January-February) and the events, was on the right or southern extremity of the American sector in Tunisia. Situated as it was, between Gafsa and <sup>K</sup>Maghassy, on a railway

and on a passable road to the east through the coastal mountain range, its strategic importance grew in proportion to the ever increasing Allied threat to Rommel's "Escape Corridor." The ground immediately in the vicinity of Sened Station represented the only irregularity on the flat, desert plains before Macnassy. It could aptly be termed an outpost of Rommel's forces. For the Allies it was a diversion point. For both sides it was a feeler of events to come. \* II

\*\* Map #2

The 168th took the town supported by elements of the First Armored Division. Due, however, to lack of sufficient anti-tank weapons and air support, the Combat Team was forced to withdraw immediately to Gafsa. The lack of air superiority in the early stages of the Tunisian Campaign was due largely to the Allied effort to knock out the Axis ports of supply at Tunis, Sousse, Sfax and Bizerte. \*\* Map #2. Therefore, they were unable to divert fighter cover for the protection of Allied columns on the road. As a result, any effort made to move men or supplies by day was very unsuccessful. Tactically, the occupation of Sened Station was a failure, but it proved one important point; unseasoned and untried American troops had met the battle-wise veterans of the Africa Corps and had disapproved the theory of German supremacy which was a boost for morale.

#### AXIS STRATEGY

As the 168th moved back to Gafsa to prepare for future battles, another unit far to the west was also making preparations for a future engagement.

The Africa Corps sorely pressed by the hard-driving British Eighth Army had withdrawn to defensive positions on the east side of Wadi Zig-Zag and formed a defensive line from Mareth to the salt flats in the south.

\* II

\*\* Map #2

Rommel could see the inevitable result of further withdrawals up the Tunisian coast, so he must formulate a plan of action that would give him a wider scope of maneuver.

Rommel turned his attention to the southern passes of the Grand Dorsal Mountain passes held by French and American forces.

There can be no doubt that General Rommel was fully aware of the small number of men under the U. S. II Corps and there could be no question in his mind that a concerted effort against any one of those defensive positions would give him a degree of success in proportion to the effort. Then began an intensive reconnaissance aided by information of unquestioned value from the native Arabs. In most cases the Arab sympathy was with the Allied cause, but in a great number of cases the Arab leaders who had long carried a grudge against the French Colonials were more than willing to give information regarding Allied troop dispositions. Such espionage was impossible to control and trying to check the flow of information was as difficult as attempting to stop the tides. \* ~~III~~

It is now evident that Rommel's plans called for a powerful armored thrust against the southern half of the Allied line, capturing the strategic passes and then turning north and driving for the city of Constantine. In studying the overall plan of maneuver, two major objectives immediately became evident. \*\* ~~Map #3~~

One, a drive through the southern passes would expose the flank of the entire line and threaten encirclement of Allied positions.

Two, after clearing the passes it would open the way for a drive through to Constantine and the seaports of Bone and Bougii. If control of these ports were gained, it would cut the U. S.-British line of supply and

\* III  
\*\* Map #3

with the establishment of bases on the northern coast of Algeria, would permit the German Air Force to attack Allied convoys that were supplying the British Eighth Army.

At a glance, the overall picture of Rommel's plan may appear to encompass a tremendous amount of movement, but in reality he was opposed by a force numerically weaker in both men and equipment. The handful of forces opposing him were occupying a line approximately eighty-five miles long, whereas a defensive sector normally allotted the same force would be approximately fifteen miles wide.

To make these plans a reality, on or about the first week in February, Rommel began the assembly of armored elements for the coming assault.

From the north, he pulled the Tenth Panzer Division, which was a part of the Fifth Army, also some motorized infantry. From his own Africa Corps he took the 21st Panzer Division and reorganized them so that they had a full complement. In addition, he gave this force one Wing of Fighter-Bomber aircraft, numbering about 350 planes. These planes were utilized as long-range artillery and so effective was the Air-Ground Coordination that within ten minutes an air strike could be called on any point ahead of the column. \* IV-

Thus, on or about the 10th of February armored columns were moving toward assembly areas around <sup>K</sup>Ma<sup>K</sup>gnassy in the south and the coastal ports of Sousse and Sfax on the east coast of Tunisia.

So successful was the movement that up until the time of the attack Allied Commanders had little or no idea of the forces involved.

#### ALLIED DEFENSE

With the Germans grouping their armor in the Sfax-Ma<sup>K</sup>gnassy area, it was not long before the Allied Commanders became aware of this increased activity.

\* IV

Where, When and With What, would the Germans strike, were questions that went unanswered up until the attack began to take place. However, certain measures could be taken and therefore in the first week of February a general defensive plan of the southern sector was set up. \*\* Map #4

At this time, the following units were under the command of General Fredendahl, II Corps Commander, the 1st, 9th and 34th Divisions, the 1st Armored Division and additional Tank Destroyer Battalions and Corps Artillery. The total force, including service troops, is estimated to be between sixty-five and seventy-five thousand Americans. In addition, there were some French and British elements, but these units did not figure strongly in the initial defensive phases.

Richard Wilson, in his account of the Tunisian Campaign, stated - "Allied dispositions were called for, and they were made. It is admitted now in North Africa officially that some serious mistakes were made in these dispositions. Allied intelligence seem to have been at fault, for the troops were so disposed as to anticipate a main attack from Rommel through the Pichon sector to the north of Faid pass.

"Inadequate preparation was made for a thrust through the Faid pass area. American armor was stationed well to the north, and completely outside of what was to become the Battle Zone. The Allies were all set at Pichon, and some weaker and unsupported units were disposed in the remainder of the Faid area." \* 7-

The final location of elements were the First Division with two Combat Commands of the First Armored Division to be placed in the Pichon sector while the Ninth Division and remaining elements of the First Armored were in more or less of a mobile reserve in the Kaasarine Pass sector. The 34th Division less the 168th Combat team held the high ground in the vicinity of Sbiba. The 168th Combat Team less the 1st Battalion occupied the high

\* V

\*\* Map #4

ground west of Faid pass.

This was the defensive plan set up to meet the Panzer thrust and on the 9th of February U. S. units started to occupy the assigned defense areas. \*\* Map #5

OCCUPATION OF FAID DEFENSE SECTOR  
168th Infantry (-1st Bn) 9-13 February

The 168th Combat Team less the 1st Battalion moved from Gafsa to Ferriana, thence to Sbeitla. From Sbeitla the Combat Team moved out to occupy three main hills between Sbeitla and Faid pass proper. \*\* Map #6

→ Faid Pass was originally held by Italian units when early in December French troops along with a small American force led by Colonel Edson Raff captured the pass. The French garrisoned the pass until the 1st of February when the pass was recaptured by a German mechanized reconnaissance unit. Elements of the 9th Division were sent up and they recaptured the pass and held it until relieved by the 168th. [The French again garrisoned the pass proper while the Combat Team occupied the three high hills directly in rear of the pass as previously mentioned. The 3d Battalion occupied Djebel Ksaira; the 2d Battalion, Djebel Lessouda and Regimental Headquarters plus Service Company, Headquarters Company, Anti-Tank Company and attached units organized Garet Hadid, a range of hills about seven miles to the rear of Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira.]

*1st Bn*  
In addition to the Infantry Battalions a Battalion of 155mm Howitzers were dug in on the west slopes of Lessouda and Ksaira. [This gave the Combat Team a frontage of about 15 miles and clearly indicates the lack of defensive strength.] Communication was extremely difficult due to insufficient number of radios. One telephone line linked the three defensive points together. Minefields were laid around the positions, but an insufficient number gave little or no protection.

\*\* Map #5  
\*\* Map #6

The 2d Battalion organized Djebel Lessouda in a perimeter defense with three companies on the line and with all elements of the Heavy Weapons Company attached to the Rifle Companies. [The Anti-Tank Platoon was used as an anti-personnel unit and for rifle defense rather than in its primary role of Anti-Tank defense.] It had already been found the 37mm anti-tank gun was no match for anything larger than a Mark IV tank. This disposition of companies still left gaps in the perimeter of from 100 to 400 yards, but such was the area to be covered there was no solution to this defect.

[Battalion Headquarters and all headquarters personnel were organized as a reserve and were placed in a shallow bowl or depression near the top of the hill.

The unit moved in on the 9th and spent most of the time up to the 13th preparing fox holes. The ground was a hard, stony, clay and had to be worked with a pick for the entire depth of the hole to be dug.

The supply of water and rations were critical from the outset and immediate rationing of supplies was put into effect.

In addition to these discomforts, the temperature dropped to the below freezing mark at night and with blackout regulations strictly enforced, sleep was a matter of wishful thinking.

#### THE ATTACK, 14 FEBRUARY - 17 FEBRUARY

Just before daylight on 14 February Company Commander of Company "G" reported that the outposts had heard tank motors in the general direction of Faid Pass and also firing from the same area.

All units were alerted and as dawn broke the German Panzer columns could be seen debauching from Faid Pass. The light French outpost had been quickly overrun and the tanks were moving rapidly along the Faid-Sbeitla road. As the tanks neared Djebel Lessouda the 155mm Howitzers took them under fire and the lead vehicles could be seen burning.

29-11-41  
The column withdrew into Wadis and commenced firing at the hill. The first round had gone to the defenders, but this was to be a short-lived victory.

Regimental Headquarters had been notified of the attack and had requested armored support to be sent from Sbeitla. In addition to this, II Corps who had by now surmised this to be the main effort of the Nazi column had sent an armored field artillery battalion less one battery from Ferriana to Sbeitla, a distance of about 40 miles.

Before continuing with the operation, it might be well to examine the reason for the attack of the Germans in this particular sector.

With an armored division attacking through Faïd and a second armored column advancing from Ma<sup>g</sup>nassy to Sidi-Bou-Zid it becomes apparent that with the capture of the towns of Sbeitla and Sidi-Bou-Zid the Germans would control a road network that would allow them to strike in any or all directions. Furthermore, it is even more evident that the speed and direction of the attacks to come proved that extensive reconnaissance had been made and that the object of this sudden thrust was to divide and isolate the few American forces opposing them. \*\* Map #7

Wadi  
Wadi  
Wadi  
In approximately an hour the German tanks began to move, swinging wide around the left flank of Mt. Lessouda. Meanwhile, supporting tanks had moved up and were firing on the Artillery positions. When the flanking tanks got into position in rear of Lessouda, they quickly moved in and overran the gun positions of the 155mm battery at the base of the hill. Shortly afterwards a column of German motorized infantry, approximately a battalion in strength, moved up and detrucked at the base of the hill, bringing with them a number of towed 88mm guns. The infantry began infiltrating around

\*\* Map #7

the base of the mountain, but as soon as they came within small arms range quickly withdrew and began digging in. All of the above action took place between dawn and about 0900 hours. At approximately 0930 a 2d column of armored vehicles was reported moving north from Magnassy.

At 1000 hours one U. S. medium tank battalion with one armored reconnaissance company and a company of Tank Destroyers came out from Sbeitla to meet this new threat. As this small U. S. force deployed and attacked the German column, additional panzer elements from the rear of the column swung around the flank of the U. S. line and took them under intense fire. So quickly was this maneuver completed that within a short space of minutes two-thirds of the U. S. Force was burning fiercely and the remaining elements quickly withdrew and were not seen again.

In the meantime, the 2d Battalion positions on Lessouda had been, as far as could be determined, surrounded and because of the small number of defenders and the far superior number of attackers the situation seemed more ridiculous than hopeless and the morale of the battalion was exceedingly high, considering the situation.

At about 1130 hours the German battalion reinforced with additional foot elements attacked "G" Company on the right flank. So intense was the small arms fire, and in actuality that was all the weapons the battalion had to depend on in close support, that the German attack was stopped cold. Additional enemy infantry and supporting artillery was brought up and at approximately 1400, the enemy attacked again on a wider front. They succeeded in overrunning half of "F" company and captured one platoon and one section of heavy machine guns, but were driven back finally with heavy loss. In the meantime, all contact was lost with regiment and with the adjoining battalion, but one of the last messages to get through from Colonel Drake, Regimental Commander, had been to hold at all cost unless ordered otherwise.

In the short breathing spells between the German attacks, movement of German armor to the west could be seen and it was not hard to guess that the 3d Battalion and Regimental Headquarters were having their particular difficulties also.

At about 1600 a German officer came through the lines and offered to accept the surrender of the Battalion, stating that the Germans were bringing up Mark VI (Tigers) Tanks and unless we surrendered, would level the mountain. Colonel Moore, Battalion Commander, declined his offer and in about ten minutes the enemy artillery resumed shelling the hill. The shelling continued until night fall and then slackened off.

At dawn of the 15th the German guns began to pound the hill and the position of the Battalion was, to put it mildly, hopeless. Tanks and vehicles were still moving to the west, but seemed to have had no success in taking the town of Sbeitla as tanks and guns had gone in position west of Lessouda and were firing in that general direction.

At about 0930 one German battery three miles northeast of Lessouda came under heavy fire from an unidentified American unit and the battery lost three guns before they could displace.

All during the day of the 15th the Germans continued sporadic fire on Lessouda, but no further attacks were made. However, during the day additional infantry elements were brought up and in addition to the shelling six air attacks were made by J. U. 87's, generally from five to eight planes in an attack.

It was very evident that the Germans were planning an all out attack, so an order was issued to all units to hold all firing to an absolute minimum. Also, rations and water were running low but this seemed of small importance at the time.

Just at sunset an American reconnaissance plane flew over the 2d Battalion positions and dropped a message.

In general, the message stated that the Battalion was ordered to withdraw from Lessouda under cover of darkness. Secondly, that an American armored artillery battalion had been ordered to counter-attack and open up a route of withdrawal for the battalion. In addition, a covering force of Infantry and Tanks would meet the battalion along the Faid-Sbeitla road. The battalion was to proceed to the Faid-Sbeitla road, then along this road to a crossroad about 15 miles from Djebel Lessouda where the battalion would be met by guides who would take them through the Allied lines at Sbeitla. \*\* Map #8

After reading the message, Colonel Moore decided to commence the withdrawal at 2230 hours and preparations were started at once.

WITHDRAWAL OF 2D BATTALION, 168TH INFANTRY FROM DJEBEL LESSOUDA

With the receipt of the withdrawal order from Corps, everyone visibly brightened, even though a move of 15 miles was to be made through the lines of 2 Divisions of German Infantry and Armor. During the short time of remaining daylight plans were made for the evacuation.

The Company Commanders were assembled and the following plan was decided on:

Time of movement - 2230 hours.

Route of withdrawal - Down the east slope of Djebel Lessouda to trail, thence to the Faid-Sbeitla Road to designated crossroads. \*\* Map #8

Order of withdrawal - Company "E", Headquarters Battalion, Company "H", Company "F" and Company "G" less two squads as covering force.

Security Elements - No security elements will be put out as it is hoped the Germans will mistake the column for German Infantry.

General Plans - In the event the column is challenged, no answer is to be given. If the column is fired on, Company Commanders will take charge of companies, disperse the column and try to meet at the designated

\*\* Map #8

crossroads. All wounded will be evacuated and will be placed under Battalion Headquarters' control. In the event the column is fired on it may be necessary to surrender them.

Covering force - The covering force of 2 squads from Company <sup>?</sup> "B" will be under the control of an officer from Battalion Headquarters and will evacuate their positions at 2300. They will maintain a certain amount of fire to cover any noise made by the departing column.

Thus, with the general instructions given, final preparations were made.

All weapons and the few radios were made unserviceable. All records, maps, etc. were burned and at 2100 all units reported in as being ready.

This was to be a gamble of the first degree, but in the confusion of war and the great amount of open country a certain amount of success could be hoped for.

The German shelling had slacked off and only an occasional burst of fire broke the quiet of the night.

There was a new moon but intermittent clouds helped to give a certain amount of concealment. Promptly at 2230 the column began the descent of the mountain. Lt. Colonel Moore was at the head of the column and had proceeded about 800 yards when the column ran head on into a battery of four 88mm towed guns, being dug in at the foot of the mountain. So close was the column to the guns that any one individual in the column could have reached out and touched the guns. One of the working party jumped up and shouted something in German, but receiving no answer, started in to work again. One could almost hear the mental sigh of relief and it seemed to help morale to know that Jerry was doing a lot of work for nothing or at least, so it was hoped.

The battalion hit the trail and turning left was soon on the main road where just a few hours before German tanks had been racing by. It

is quite evident that the Germans do not believe in night movement or night attack as one could see and hear the sounds of troops on either side of the road in bivouac.

The battalion moved in column of twos just off the road and no other incident marred the movement.

At about 0345 the column neared the crossroads where the covering force was to pass the battalion through the U. S. lines.

Colonel Moore heard voices to the left of the road and thinking it to be the covering force commander went over to report the column in.

However, as he got closer he could hear that the conversation was in German and before the column could move it was challenged twice. Receiving no answer from the column, the Germans started firing machine guns and flares, but the column quickly moved back toward Djebel Lessouda and then split up according to plan. As a result, there were only few casualties from this initial firing.

However, many men were hit or captured during the night as the Americans infiltrating the German lines ran into bivouac areas and patrols who had been alerted.

One thing in favor of the alerting was that the Germans were expecting an attack and as a result did not check in their rear areas nor were they expecting movement from that direction.

By 0500 on the 16th of February the remnants of the Battalion began to filter into the town of Sbeitla.

The 1st Armored Division, who were fighting the rear guard action, began destroying military supplies and stores in and around the town of Sbeitla as further occupancy of the town was impossible.

At intervals during the 16th, personnel from the battalion come in and many and varied were the tales of how men had outwitted the Germans to

get back. Also, some personnel from the Regimental Headquarters came in and reported that Colonel Drake, the Regimental Commander, and most all of the personnel were either killed or captured. Lt. Colonel Jerry Lyons, Regimental Executive Officer, said that on the morning of the 15th they had been surrounded and that the 3d battalion on Djebel Ksaira had also been cut off. The last word from the 3d battalion had been in the afternoon when they had received a report that the unit was captured almost to a man.

Colonel Lyons also said they had tried to move back from the hill they were on but had been trapped by the German armor in a large cactus patch and that the Germans circled the patch with tanks and fired at the men from ranges of 25 to 150 yards.

The remnants of the regiment were ordered to move to Sbiba where the 1st battalion as well as other units of the 34th division were dug in.

The combat team moved out only a short distance ahead of the attacking Panzer divisions and it was only through the very aggressive rear guard action of the 1st Armored Division that the Germans were kept from encircling the column again.

#### REORGANIZATION

Upon arrival at Sbiba the regiment was hastily reorganized and went into defensive position once again. There, in company with other elements of the 34th, they again came under direct attack of the 21st Panzer Division. In a see-saw battle lasting up to the 19th the division held and was then ordered to withdraw toward La Kef to the north and take up defensive positions in the passes.

Again the Nazi armor, estimated at about 150 tanks, attacked but were unable to advance and on the 22 of February the German Army began a slow withdrawal toward the east coast of Tunisia whence they had come.

This ended what might have been one of the most serious setbacks of the war for the Allies. If the Germans had succeeded in penetrating these last defensive positions, the entire left flank of the Allied line would have been opened up and the loss of men and supplies at a time when these items were so definitely critical would have perhaps materially changed the entire conduct of the war.

In the Faid Pass area the 168th Combat Team lost, in addition to all its equipment, records and supplies, 1,747 enlisted men and 106 officers or a total of 1,853. This amounted to nearly two-thirds of the fighting strength of the regiment. The U. S. Armored elements were reported to have lost nearly a complete Combat Command and it is indeed a tribute to American resourcefulness and initiative that within thirty days the Division was to capture one of the most heavily defended hills in the Tunisian campaign.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Winston Churchill, in an address to the British people, in praise of the Royal Air Force, said "Never in the annals of British history have so few done so much for so many."

This famous statement could have as easily been applied to the Tunisian Campaign. There an unseasoned and untried American Army met the best a battle-hardened German Army could give and not only stopped this powerful thrust, but were to later drive this vaunted army into the sea of defeat.

It is estimated that the total American Forces in the Tunisian Campaign did not exceed 65,000 troops at any given time and yet such was the spirit and drive of these same troops that on only one major occasion was the initiative wrested from them and then only for a short time.

Lest the above sound too much like a justification of the debacle at Faid and Kaasarine pass, let it be understood that there were too many glaring errors in the conduct of this operation to permit any such

justification. Herein is a list of the more important errors, errors that in many cases could have been avoided if someone had analyzed the German position and interpreted his motives correctly.

1. The most glaring error that may well apply to any part of the early stages of the Tunisian Campaign was the utter disregard of the basic principles of war and the attempt, particularly in higher headquarters, to employ untried tactics. The worst criticism an individual could receive was that he was attempting to solve a tactical problem by what he had previously been taught rather than by the new school of military thought that seemed to spring up once a unit had been fired on.

2. Of all the American units fighting in the vast stretches of the Tunisian desert not one had been trained in the principles of desert warfare. This is particularly true of the 168th who had received their combat training in the hedgerow country of Ireland and Scotland and to whom the flat tablelands of Tunisia were as bewildering as could be. Certainly a unit must be flexible in thought as well as action, but there must be some background for flexibility of thought to be able to apply the principles.

3. Some of the more common errors were lack of adequate anti-tank weapons and communication. There is nothing that can be said here inasmuch as these omissions were rectified and these were errors that were acknowledged prior to the campaign.

4. There is another criticism to be made of employing units on too wide a frontage, but with the amount of men available it is surprising the U. S. Forces enjoyed the success that they did.

5. In general, there was a complete breakdown of the Armored-Infantry-Air cooperation that is so essential in modern combat. The Germans had successfully employed this coordination in their sweep through Poland,

Holland and France. Too often did one of these arms feel that their mission was of too great an importance to take the necessary steps to aid or abet~~/~~ one of the other arms.

6. In the particular operation covered by this monograph most of the sins previously listed were committed. In addition, it is obvious that because higher headquarters said that the German attack was going to be delivered in the north that the Combat Team accepted this as "Gospel" and made no plans for withdrawal or evacuation of personnel. The units went into defensive position and crossed their fingers, hoping that everything would turn out all right. As a result, when they were hit, it was only by the grace of God that any personnel were withdrawn successfully.

7. Lastly, the debacle of Faid and Kaasarine Pass was due to the inability of the various levels of staff to correctly interpret the German intention when in truth the Hun gave every indication of what his intentions were. One Allied Commander was quoted as saying - "The Allied disposition of troops to meet the German attack was a gamble, wherein we guessed wrong."

War has been proven a science. It has been demonstrated that it is a series of calculations of cause and effect. When any one individual or group of individuals attempt to circumvent the mathematical pattern by a shortcut of guess work, then it follows that in the end that individual will be the loser.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned from this operation were many and were a counterpart of the criticisms listed in the preceding chapter.

✓ 1. The American Army has always been an offensive army and yet some of the most serious losses have come from an inability to carry out a

successful defensive or retrograde action. The word "retreat" has always been an unpleasant one in our military history, but it clearly shows that we must instill in training the realization that in a defensive action there are principles that if correctly applied, give the defender a very excellent chance of success.

2. Again, in a withdrawing action the cooperation between infantry and armor is wholly essential. Thus, when the Combat Team was withdrawing to Sbiba the very excellent cooperation between the 1st Armored Division and the remnants of the Combat Team kept the German Panzers from overrunning the column which they most certainly were in a position to do.

3. Anti-Aircraft defense. It was found that a bold defense with the fires of the 50 caliber machine gun as well as all other weapons greatly discouraged the close-in attack of hostile aircraft. After the initial fear of air attack was overcome by the infantry units, their fires kept German aircraft from making more than one pass at a column.

4. Tank Defense. It was definitely proven that defense in depth was the answer to tank attack and that individual protection was afforded by a hole that permitted the soldier to be at least two feet below the ground level. The long, slit trench was no protection as a tank could drop a tread in the slit trench and crush the occupant.

5. One of the most important lessons learned is the necessity for the proper training of troops in desert warfare prior to their being committed. There was a period of almost six weeks spent prior to movement of the Regiment into Tunisia that could have been employed to a good advantage but instead was spent in five and ten mile conditioning hikes with no thought of any future action.

6. Lastly, it was brought home that the American soldier must learn to hate the enemy. As has often been said since, he was quite willing to

die but was still not sufficiently indoctrinated with the desire to kill.

Inasmuch as this operation took place in the very first stages of the European Campaign, it is difficult to list all of the faults and lessons because with the passage of time they seem largely the faults of unseasoned and untried troops and it is quite evident that as time passed the major faults were quickly corrected and the minor ones never repeated.