

from TUNIS. This constituted the foremost advance towards the TUNISIAN capital that we were ever able to attain before the conclusion of the campaign, six months later. Here we were stopped, and elsewhere our progress had already slowed.

In the North, the 36th Brigade had initially advanced about 100 miles in the direction of MATEUR, against very little opposition; but thereafter found its progress considerably slowed by enemy mines and booby traps. At the same time, BLADE FORCE, in the plains South of MATEUR, began to encounter supply difficulties which were enhanced by the beginning of rains. In every sector the enemy's dive-bombing was an important factor in finally stopping our advance, because our own airfields were too far away to provide us with the necessary cover.

By late November it became evident that the enemy was present in TUNISIA in considerable strength, and that he intended to stand and fight on the entire front. By this date, indeed, forces of the Axis which had arrived in that land, exclusive of service troops, amounted to approximately 15,500 combat troops, 130 tanks, 60 field guns, and 30 anti-tank guns; and they included such formidable units of air force troops as the Barethin Regiment, and the Storm Regiment Koch. Most serious of all was the enemy's possession of concrete-surfaced airfields in the TUNIS - BIZERTE area, to which planes could be flown from SICILY in half an hour, and in almost any weather; whereas our nearest dependable field was at BONE, 114 miles away, with an advance landing ground at SCUK EL ARBA, which became increasingly unusable as the rains began, and as the surface began to mire. British Spitfires could fly over the lines for not more than five or ten minutes, and the few E-58's available were insufficient to furnish continuous patrols. German JU-87's were close to the front, and the extraordinary coordination of German ground-air communication made the enemy's air support available in the front lines within five or ten minutes of the demand. Under such conditions German aircraft merely fled at the approach of the Allied Planes, and returned easily to the assault when the skies were clear.

With our long lines of communications, with insufficient landing grounds, and with an inadequate number of planes for the missions they had to perform, it became increasingly difficult to cope with the air-power that was aligned against us. We had had to furnish escort for parachute troops participating in attack; and we had to cover our shipping at BONE, where we were suffering serious losses from bombing. We not only suffered high combat casualties, but, as a result of inadequate fields, we sustained serious operational losses as well. In all, our attrition rate was above the 20 per cent allowed for, and, under such circumstances, although we bombed the enemy's fields, we could not seriously curb his increasing air-power.

We held our forward positions until the end of November; and then, with the arrival in the forward areas of Combat Command "B", General Anderson ordered for December 2nd an attack toward TUNIS by this new unit and by BLADE FORCE. The attack was not made, however, because it was anticipated on December 1st by an enemy attack with dive-bombers, infantry, and tanks, which heavily engaged BLADE FORCE near TEBOURBA, and inflicted severe tank losses. BLADE FORCE had by this time lost a total of 40 tanks, and was withdrawn on the evening of the 2nd, leaving the defense of the forward areas to the 11th Brigade, and to the armored infantry of Combat Command "B", which had now to be ordered forward in a defensive role. On December 3rd the enemy attacked again near TEBOURBA, penetrated the 11th Brigade positions, and finally cut that unit off completely. The Brigade managed to extricate itself during the night, but

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the 2nd Hampshire, who did not receive the order to withdraw, suffered heavily. Dive-bombing had again been on a devastating scale, and losses of equipment were again considerable.

By December 4th it was clear that our offensive against the enemy would have to be postponed to give time for the refitting of badly battered troops, and for a build-up of adequate resources. Several battalions of the 78th Division were under 350 strong, and the strain of persistent dive-bombing was beginning to tell.

On December 8th I approved General Anderson's proposal to withdraw his forces to more defensible ground. This I considered advisable, but I was resolved that no vital areas were to be given up, and the important center of MEDJEZ EL BAB was to be held at all costs. I personally accepted the responsibility for any disaster, much feared by the First Army Commander, that might result from the decision to hold MEDJEZ. It was my hope and trust that only a limited withdrawal would suffice to provide the troops under General Anderson with a necessary rest and refitting, and with a breathing spell, that would permit us to build up a week's supply at the railroads.

The supply needs of the First Army were most pressing precisely at the time when our entire communications system was under its most severe strain. Throughout November the administrative organization had been taxed to the limit in an effort to support our rapid Eastward advance, and during the first weeks following the landings, when there were no reserves on the ground, supplies for the forward troops had to be dispatched to them almost direct from the ship's hold by any expedient possible. In the earlier convoys both administrative personnel and vehicles had necessarily been kept to a minimum, and the rapid advance absorbed an ever larger proportion of the available vehicles for the transport of troops and their supplies, with a corresponding reduction in the number used for port clearance and transport in the base area. Nor could we supply the transport deficiency by too heavy reliance on the North African Railway system, despite the cordial and cooperative efforts of the great majority of French railway authorities, both civil and military, to make their facilities available. The railways were heavily handicapped by lack of maintenance during the war, and there was a serious shortage of locomotives, of rolling stock and of trained operating personnel.

The urgent need for certain classes of supply, and particularly for ammunition, necessitated a selective discharge of ships in the ports, and in many cases, a selective movement of trains or even of individual wagons. Such interruptions as this of the normal flow of traffic, together with the shortage of road transport, caused a rapidly increasing congestion of stores on the docks, along the lines of communication, and at railroads. By mid-December the congestion was so bad that it became necessary to stop all rail loadings at ports and depots for a period of four days. This was required in order to clear the heavily overloaded rail lines before the regular flow of traffic could be resumed. Even so late as early January, after we had increased the effective capacity of our lines of communication by the establishment of depots, and by the accumulation of small reserves which permitted an improvement in our control of maintenance movement, our transport system was still unable to meet the full requirements of the forward troops.

More and more in time the weather appeared to be our worst enemy, crippling both our offense and defense, and making it increasingly difficult either to advance or to withdraw. Rains saturated the valleys of Northern RUSSIA, and made a quagmire of the airfields. While enemy

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aircraft continued to use their all-weather airports, our bombers were glued in the mud; and, when they could take off, it was frequently only to discover that their primary targets were shrouded in low clouds. Two thirds of the aircraft at SOUK EL KHAYMA were inoperative because of the mud. Consequently, we were unable to prevent a steady inflow of men and of supplies, by air and by sea, from SICILY into TUNISIA. By December 18th, we estimated the forces of the enemy in that land numbered a total of 42,200 men, and of whom at least 24,800 were German. Not only did this number increase day by day, and not only was the flow of supplies to support those forces steady, but also we knew that many of the supplies brought thus into TUNISIA were trans-shipped by rail to SFAX, and thence by rail and by sea to Rommel's forces in TRIPOLITANIA.

Incidentally, the weather hampered the movement of our forces under General Anderson in withdrawal, although fortunately that withdrawal was accomplished with a minimum of enemy interference. However, United States Combat Command "B" became badly mired and finally had to abandon the larger part of its equipment, retrieving only three of its eighteen 105 MM Howitzers; twelve of its 62 medium tanks; and 38 of its 122 light tanks.

It was a crippling loss, well-nigh irreplaceable because our supply system was already overtaxed, and because our losses now hindered still further our efforts to compete with the rate of Axis build-up. I had supported General Anderson's First Army with every bit of American strength that could be sent forward in the effort to achieve decisive results, and necessarily, American units had been used piecemeal in the desperate effort to win a quick victory. The continuous fighting, with its serious attrition of British units, hindered the build-up of reserves, and as soon as reinforcements reached the line they were immediately absorbed by the fighting units. Nevertheless, at this stage, I was absolutely unwilling to give up thoughts of an all out effort to win control of the critical area of TUNISIA. I still hoped that by a decisive blow we could avoid settling down into a logistic marathon with the Axis, if only we could get a spell of good weather, and secure some respite from the continual harassment of the enemy's spoiling attacks.

We could no longer hope to capture the whole of TUNISIA by a single stroke, but we might still be able to seize the city of TUNIS, crowding the enemy back into BIZERTE, and BIZERTE itself might be ours in another month. The enemy was superior in both number and quality of tanks, but we had a decided advantage in artillery. It was, in truth, our hope that our artillery could dispose of the enemy tanks. Moreover, although the morale of German Armored and Air Force troops was of the highest, it did not appear from the specimens that we had captured and were holding prisoner, that the enemies' infantry was his best. Accordingly, I decided to launch an attack about December 20th with the capture of TUNIS as the minimum objective.

Again the weather frustrated our plans. After the middle of December it steadily worsened. I visited the front at this time, and discovered by actual test that, off the roads, we could not maneuver any type of vehicle. I saw four men engaged in a futile struggle to extricate a motorcycle that had mired in a flat grassy field. Air operations were virtually closed down as a result of the appalling conditions on the ground and in the skies. The broken stone which we laid down to give solidity to the air fields merely sank in the mud, and to surface adequately a single runway, we required 2,000 tons of steel matting. Such a quantity would absorb for at least two days the entire capacity of the forward area, for their usable daily capacity at that time was only 500 tons. And this was a

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time, it should be remembered, when all that tonnage was urgently required to supply the immediate needs of our troops. Since our only real hope of victory lay in the use of air power, and in the skillful maneuver of artillery to blast the enemy's armor, our operations had again to be postponed, and, on December 15th, were finally abandoned.

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The abandonment of our immediate offensive plans was the bitterest disappointment that I had yet suffered, but I was convinced that to attempt a major attack under prevailing conditions in Northern TUNISIA would be merely to court disaster. We could not hope to resume major operations in the North until the middle of March, and we had to set about the slow business of building up for an attack at the end of that period. The logistic marathon, which I had desperately tried to avoid, had begun.

THE SFAX PROJECT

With the abandonment of offensive plans in the North it became necessary to look closely to the situation that could easily develop along the vast front extending from PORT DU FAHS to GAFSA. Von Arnim in the North and Rommel in TRIPOLITANIA could, either one, strike a crippling blow through the thin screen of French troops and American paratroopers attempting to cover the EBESSA region. A strong mobile flank guard was indicated. As early as December 15th, I had given instructions to General Clark to study the possibility of concentrating the United States First Armored Division in that region, together with as much United States Infantry as could be made available and supplied there. My purpose, clearly explained to Generals Clark and Fredendall, was to hold on lightly to the line of hills covering the forward airfields, including those at TRIPOLI, with a fully unified and armored division concentrated behind that screen to strike any force attempting to penetrate it. Any favorable opportunity to act offensively, particularly against Rommel's communications, was to be seized. As the staff began the study of this directive, a potential developed that became known as the "SFAX PROJECT". It had several aspects, one of which was a possibility of regaining the initiative directly, even if only on a limited scale. Moreover, there appeared to be some possibility of effective action against the enemy lines of communication linking von Arnim and Rommel through the port of SFAX, which was the chief loading point for supplies sent by sea to TRIPOLI. If successful, such an operation as this would have the further advantage of providing flank protection for the First Army in the North against the otherwise inevitable junction of Rommel and von Arnim. An offensive against GAFSA and SFAX could be mounted in the EBESSA - KASSERINE area with every prospect of better weather conditions than those which now prevailed in Northern TUNISIA, but it was difficult to find the troops for the task, and still more difficult to supply them. From the beginning of the planning on this project, the instructions were positive that under no circumstances would we attempt to seize and hold a particular point where siege conditions might ensue.

The bulk of the United States armed forces were still in the rear areas, and here the Western and Center Task Forces, which composed them, were committed to the protection of our extended lines of communication from the threat of hostile action through SPANISH MOROCCO. However, I decided to detach the United States II Corps of which the United States First Armored Division was the nucleus from the Center Task Force at ORAN and to concentrate it forward where it could undertake a new combat mission. I thought for a time of appointing General Clark to command the operation, but I

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