

Nehring, a former *Afrika Korps* commander. Rommel felt that if the men and supplies given Nehring were sent to him instead he could have accomplished the defenses expected of him and he certainly could have found the strength to attack somewhere in Libya. The imbalance also confirmed his suspicions that Kesselring was only interested in his Tunisian airfields and always put the interests of the *Luftwaffe* ahead of the *Panzerarmee's*.

The Eighth Army took Homs on 19 January. Four days later, at 5:30 A.M., 23 January, the 11th Hussars rolled into Tripoli. They were 1,400 miles from El Alamein, and the journey lasted three months.

On 25 January 1943, the *Panzerarmee's* lead elements were across the Tunisian border heading for the Mareth line. Rommel entered Tunisia the next day. Two days later he wrote his wife that in a few days he would transfer command of the army to an Italian.³⁸ What Rommel could have written was that, although Italian General Giovanni Messe, a veteran of the Russian front, decorated by the Germans, was coming to relieve him, he was free to choose his own departure time. Messe did not press the issue. In fact, with the Americans and British mounting an offensive into Tunisia from Algiers, changes were afoot that made succession of command less important than it was even a few days earlier.

CHAPTER 3

The Allied Counter-Stroke: Torch to Tunisia

IN THE BEGINNING

Rommel was suffering from jaundice, exhaustion (both mental and physical), terrible headaches, and occasional fainting; his stomach was in perpetual motion; and he could not sleep. He blamed his poor health on a circulatory problem. Hitler decided that he was to take medical leave and go home for a cure and a long rest.

The unstated reason for Rommel's departure was that he was being fired, however open-ended the actual departure date. At least it seemed that way. Hitler, Göring, Mussolini, and, most importantly, Kesselring believed that he had lost his nerve, and they were all tired of his complaints about supplies. He infuriated the Italians by so quickly abandoning Libya. They might forgive the withdrawal from El Alamein and even from El Agheila, but to give up Buerat and Homs without even the pretext of a fight was beyond their comprehension. Worse, Tripoli was practically handed to the British. Hitler, Göring, and Mussolini, somewhere in their vacuous imaginations, believed all during the withdrawal that Rommel should have counter-attacked and gone on the offensive. They never considered how or with what equipment. Kesselring and Rommel argued constantly during the withdrawal, Kesselring's criticism growing more pointed. For as Rommel's army moved west, the RAF's Desert Air Force came within reach of *Luftwaffe* airfields in Tunisia, endangering the build-up of the Axis bridgeheads around Bizerte and Tunis.

Despite the censure heaped on him, Rommel must have felt some vindication. As he predicted, the Americans were fighting their way toward central Tunisia, threatening to cleave the country in half around Gabès. That offensive, a strategic maneuver that was the key to controlling Tunisia and dooming the Axis forces, was becoming a frightening reality. What Rommel did not know was the degree of uncertainty surrounding the inception and execution of Operation Torch and the offensives it spawned.

Dwight Eisenhower, in Britain as commander of American forces in Europe, persuaded to shelve plans for a cross-channel invasion in 1942, reluctantly accepted Operation Torch as the least distracting alternative. He was given only three months to organize the invasion of French Northwest Africa. Eisenhower later concluded that putting aside Operation Sledgehammer—the Continental invasion—was after all a good idea because sufficient men and weapons to sustain a war in Europe were not available in the summer of 1942.¹

Nonexistent was closer to reality. When the United States entered World War II, there was a consensus within the military that getting to the enemy would be very different from World War I. This time it would be an amphibious war.

In March 1942 Rear Admiral Noland Brainard took command of Amphibious Force, Atlantic Fleet, based in Norfolk, Virginia. The force existed only on paper. Ships needed to be rebuilt from civilian to military use. A few types of landing craft were available and the British helped refine new models, but there was no one to man the boats who knew what he was doing. The decision was made that the Army would fight on the land, but that it was the Navy's responsibility to get them to the war and onto the beaches. The Navy did not possess that kind of expertise. The U.S. Coast Guard and various Army engineer detachments had experience in handling small boats but not under combat conditions. Marine Corps divisions on the east coast practiced amphibious warfare, but, at the crucial moment when the Navy needed that experience, they were shipped to the Pacific.

Rear Admiral Henry Hewitt took command of Amphibious Force in June 1942. His command received five hundred inexperienced men per week. Officers, green as grass, met their equally inexperienced men on small craft in mid-Atlantic coast bays and rivers. Sometimes landing boats sank around Norfolk or in the Chesapeake Bay, and others broke down because of a parts shortage. Whatever chaos reigned, the greatest shortcoming was that none of their training was

on the open sea. Even when Operation Torch was put in motion and equipment and men were shipped to Britain, training continued but along shorelines of Scotland that bore no resemblance to proposed African landing zones.²

The Army situation was no better. Eisenhower, named commander-in-chief of Allied Forces for Operation Torch, was an unknown. Even though commissioned in time for World War I, he served Stateside in a series of staff positions. He held similar positions during the 1920s and 1930s, rising by 1940 to the rank of lieutenant colonel and Third Army chief-of-staff in Texas. On 12 December 1941, newly brevetted Brigadier General Eisenhower arrived in Washington, D.C., as chief of the War Plans Division. Seven months later, July 1942, he was a lieutenant general and in command of Torch—a meteoric rise. Dwight Eisenhower never had commanded men in the field, much less in combat. Albeit a highly skilled staff officer and negotiator, giving him command of a vast coalition combat operation was a calculated risk.

Eisenhower, however, enjoyed the complete confidence of General George C. Marshall, U.S. chief-of-staff. Some American generals, such as Charles Ryder, Mark Clark, Ernest Harmon, and George Patton, served with distinction in World War I. But none possessed the broad perspectives and organizational ability of Eisenhower. Eisenhower was also straightforward, not a dissembler, and that in itself would be refreshing in the politically charged atmosphere of Allied cooperation. In the end, as the Tunisian campaign unfolded from Operation Torch, the experience the American generals carried into battle proved less important than the inherent leadership qualities, especially flexibility, they possessed.

American troops lacked sound training, at least by modern battlefield standards. Small unit tactics were archaic. Infantry anti-tank training was nonexistent. Some units did not receive the recently invented bazooka, a shoulder-held, rocket-firing anti-tank weapon (called a bazooka because it looked like a music instrument invented in the 1930s by the popular radio and motion picture comedian Bob Burns), until they were in England; still others did not get them until they were aboard their troop transports and on the way to Africa; but most units received none. In early September 1942, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division in England was still waiting for many of their modern weapons.

Other problems weighed on Torch's planners. The British worried

that the Americans appeared unconcerned with security. For example, carefully prepared maps of Morocco and Tunisia were placed on a truck bed for distribution to various units, and covered by a tarpaulin. Going down the road, the tarp came off, the wind scattering the maps along the roadside and into fields. Local policemen found them and telephoned Free French headquarters in London—ironically, the very organization from which information about Torch was being withheld. Fortunately, the French already owned maps of Morocco and Tunisia and showed little interest.³

Then there was the Spanish problem. Still suffering from the devastation of a three-year civil war, there was little practical prospect of the dictator Francisco Franco dragging his nation into the war on the side of his friends Hitler and Mussolini. But with limited aggression, the Spanish might try to occupy Gibraltar, citing historical rights of domain. Or they might allow German and Italian aircraft to use Spanish bases from which air raids could be launched against Gibraltar or against Allied shipping coming through the Straits of Gibraltar, making Operation Torch almost impossible.

Then the Allies had problems with the French leadership. Admiral Jean-François Darlan, second only to the aged Marshal Henri Pétain in the Vichy government, and commander-in-chief of all French armed forces, was not a dedicated pro-Nazi but was a wholehearted collaborationist concerned with advancing his own interests. His constant shifting of position and his hatred of the British complicated negotiations in North Africa. General Henri Giraud, who escaped from a German prison and was hiding in southern France, wanted to form and lead an insurgent army against the Germans. He was rescued from France by submarine. Meeting with Mark Clark, he was informed of the U.S. intention to invade French Northwest Africa. Giraud immediately presumed that he would be given overall command. Charles de Gaulle, self-declared head of the Free French Army headquartered in London, mistrusted both the British and the Americans. In return, many Allied as well as French generals and politicians mistrusted him. General Alphonse Juin, commander of the French Army in North Africa, was reluctant to make any conciliatory moves toward the British and Americans without Marshal Pétain's blessings.

Major General Clark, Eisenhower's deputy commander and Torch planner-coordinator, had the unenviable task of enticing these mercurial personalities to the Allied cause. They were all rivals for control of French North Africa, and each wanted to be the one man who

could influence dramatically the course of the invasion. For that reason Clark, working closely with Robert Murphy, the American agent in Algiers, managed clandestine meetings during which he negotiated, pleaded, commanded, and occasionally cursed to get a commitment from some one Frenchman favorable to the invasion. But if such commitment was given, would it be honored? Would the French allow the invasion to go forward? Would they fight?

The French forces deployed in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia numbered a formidable 125,000 soldiers, including the famed Foreign Legion. They were supported by 210 out-of-date but operational tanks. By bringing in all their aircraft from interior stations, French air force strength numbered about 500 planes, half of which were fine Dewoitine D.520 fighters. With a speed of 332 mph, and mounting a 20mm cannon and four 7.5mm machine guns, they were equal to many British and American fightercraft. The French Navy, although damaged by the 1940 British attack on the base at Mers el Kebir—in Algeria near Oran—was strong if not formidable. The new and still a-building battleship *Jean Bart*, mounting two batteries of 15-inch guns, as well as cruisers and destroyers were at Casablanca. The battleship *Richelieu* was only three days away to the south at Dakar. If they went to sea as surface raiders, they could cause great damage in the Torch convoys. Additionally, a submarine flotilla was based at Casablanca, adding further danger to the mix.⁴

During the first days of November, German *Abwehr* agents posted in Algierias across the bay from Gibraltar reported that large convoys were filling Gibraltar harbor. A German submarine squadron was dispatched to guard the Straits. But then a convoy was reported sailing up the African coast from Sierra Leone. The worried German command sent the Gibraltar submarines to attack it. The convoy, most of whose ships were empty, was a ruse that allowed more Allied ships safe passage to Gibraltar. Suddenly, on the evening of 5 November, ships began slipping out of the harbor in twos and threes headed into the Mediterranean. Later that night a large convoy was sighted coming through the Straits.

But where were all these ships actually going? Opinion was widely divided among the Axis because aerial reconnaissance reports diverged. The *Wehrmacht* operations staff believed that their destination was French Northwest Africa. That notion was quickly discarded by Hitler in favor of a report that chose Malta. Count Ciano recorded in his diary on 7 November that German opinion was divided be-

tween Malta and landings in Tripolitania, the latter a view held by the Naval operations staff, to cut off Rommel's retreat and destroy the *Panzerarmee*. On that day Hitler, without any basis in fact, refined his Navy staff conclusion, announcing that the fleets were going to land at either Tripoli or Benghazi. Ciano also recorded, quite prophetically as things turned out, that he, Mussolini, and the Italian general staff held another opinion—the convoys were indeed going to French Northwest Africa where Ciano believed the banner of Charles de Gaulle would soon be raised. German intelligence prevailed. German intelligence was wrong.⁵

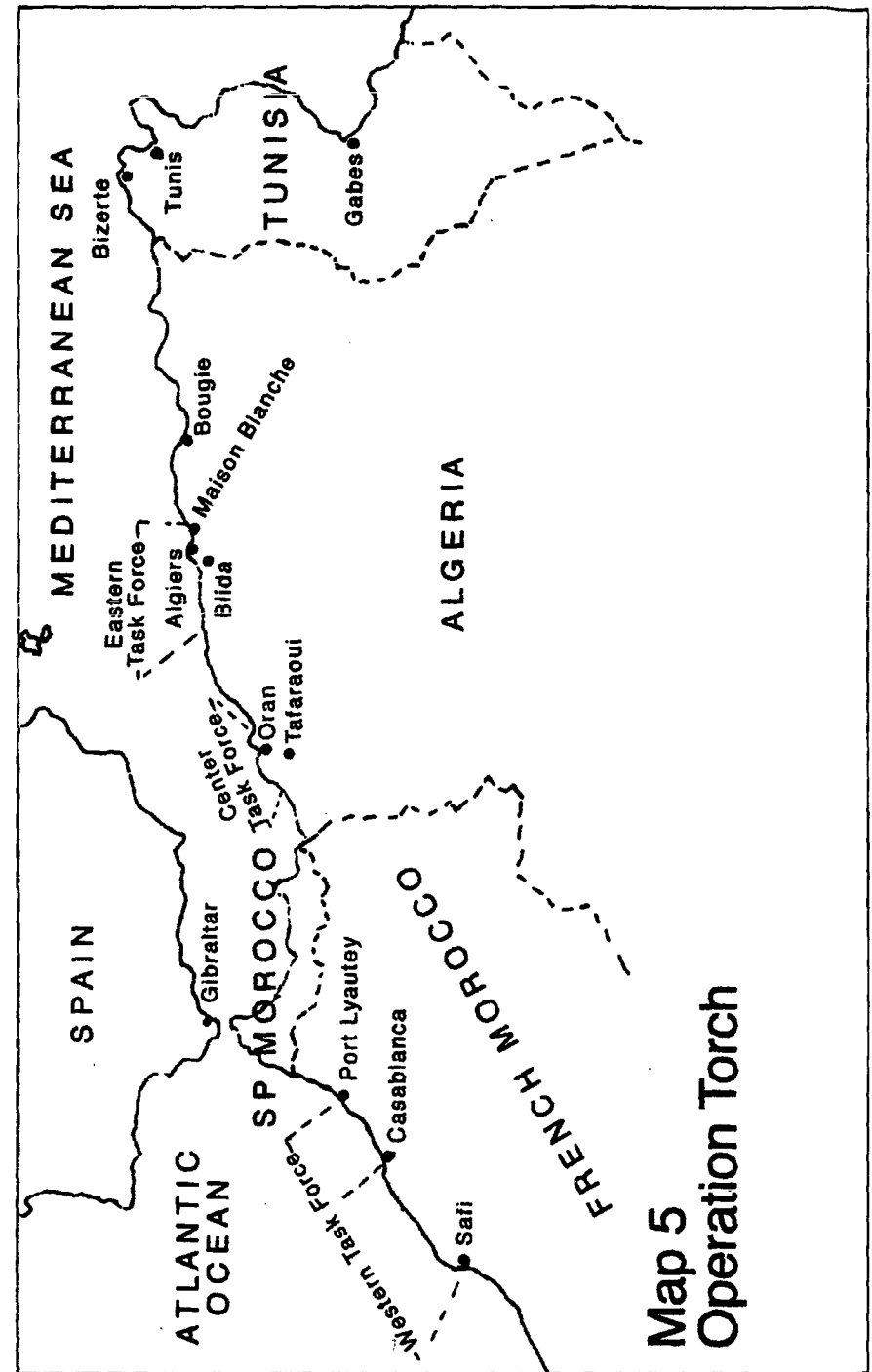
THE LANDINGS

The invasion plan called for landings around Casablanca in Morocco, and at Oran and Algiers in Algeria (Map 5).⁶ The invasion fleets were designated the Western Task Force, the Center Task Force, and the Eastern Task Force. The total invasion force, inclusive of assault waves and reinforcements, was enormous for that stage of the war: 65,000 troops sailed from American ports; another 105,000 U.S. troops and 144,000 British troops sailed from ports in Britain.⁷ The maritime resources needed were equally enormous. The United States Navy and the Royal Navy committed 300 warships to escort the invasion convoys. The Western Task Force escort included such capital ships as the battleships *Massachusetts*, *Texas*, and *New York*, the aircraft carrier *Ranger*, and six cruisers. British naval vessels included four aircraft carriers and the battleships *Rodney*, *Renown*, and *Duke of York*. These ships, supplemented by cruisers, destroyer flotillas, corvettes, and submarines, screened 370 cargo ships and troop transports.

Inexperienced and uncertain of their enemy, the invasion fleets cut through the sea to their final destinations.

The Western Task Force headed for Morocco, expecting little French resistance. But there were problems. Morocco, from the British viewpoint, was too far from Algeria where greater resistance was expected. There was also the practical problem that 15-foot waves often rolled onto the beaches directly from the Atlantic. These could play havoc with the landing craft.

The Western Task Force was to seize Casablanca and adjacent airfields, establish communications with Oran, and guard against possible incursions from Spanish Morocco. Under the command of



Map 5
Operation Torch

George Patton, they were organized into five regimental combat teams from the U.S. 3rd and 9th Infantry Divisions, an armored combat team of 250 tanks from the U.S. 2nd Armored Division, and supporting artillery and anti-tank units.

The assault was divided into three sub-task forces. The southern group, code-named Operation Blackstone, en route to Safi, included the 47th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of the 9th Infantry Division and armored Combat Command B (CCB), 2nd Armored Division, lead by Ernest Harmon. The objective of the central group, code-named Operation Brushwood, was the small port of Fedala, 18 miles northeast of Casablanca. Regimental combat teams from the 3rd Infantry Division comprised the assault wave. Other troops were to land closer to Casablanca. The northern group, Operation Goalpost, landed around Port Lyautey 60 miles northeast of Casablanca. The 60th Regimental Combat Team from the 9th Division formed the assault force under the command of Brigadier General Lucian Truscott. The U.S. Navy informed him that because of the 3,000-mile sea voyage and poor charts of the coast, they could not guarantee pinpoint landings but might be as much as 3 miles off.

Port Lyautey is located on a river some 9 miles inland. On the seaward side, the river loops, framing a large lagoon fringed by ridges and pine woods. Only a narrow corridor, barely 200 yards wide, gave exit at that time from the beaches to the town. A *kasbah* or citadel was located near the river's mouth, dominating the approaches. The entire area back from the beaches was fortified by artillery emplacements, including anti-aircraft guns and a half-dozen 38.6mm coast artillery pieces, machine-gun posts, and a sophisticated concrete trench system.

Just before dawn, 8 November, the first troops struggled ashore. Unfortunately, troop transports standing out to sea were out of position, causing confusion. Thus, on one beach, a second wave of infantry landed before the first. Ship-to-shore transmissions were erratic, and communications between land units broke down because the radios were damaged by salt water. Some landing craft capsized in the surf, tumbling out their human cargo. Many of the men on the beaches wandered about not knowing where to go or what to do.

The garrisons around Port Lyautey responded with artillery that drove the transports 12 miles out to sea. Rifle and machine-gun fire raked the Americans on the beaches. Dewoitine fighters swept over-

head in strafing runs, creating more casualties and destroying matériel. Repeated attacks by the Americans could not dislodge the French. And, despite repeated attacks, the *kasbah* held out, continuing to dominate the river's south bank.

French General Auguste Nogues could have defeated Truscott's invasion force if he had aggressively mounted a counterattack. He delayed, concerned about the political ramifications of any actions he might take. When the attack was mounted, Truscott reinforced his thin infantry line with seven M-3 Stuart light tanks, mounting 37mm guns. At about 7:30 A.M., American lookouts sighted two French infantry battalions and sixteen Renault tanks on the road from Rabat. Truscott's little force took cover behind a low hill and opened fire with a deluge of 37mm gunfire. But the barrage was dispersed, the Americans not having time to adjust their gunsights after landing, and their solid shot projectiles bounced off the Renaults' thick frontal armor. The French lost only four tanks but suffered heavy infantry casualties. U.S. Navy scout planes circling above called for gunfire from the cruiser *Savannah*. The French withdrew after an attempt to reorganize their force was thwarted by the naval barrage.

Elements from the 60th RCT made their way inland during the night. Most fumbled about in the dark, but one platoon supported by tanks fought through French resistance to the Port Lyautey airfield. On 10 November, with reinforcements arriving under the cover of naval gunfire and dive-bomber runs, the airport was taken. Within a couple of hours, Curtis P-40 Tomahawk fighters, brought to Africa aboard the auxiliary aircraft carrier *Chenango*, landed at the base. That same day, after an attack by naval dive-bombers and a frontal assault by U.S. Army combat engineers, the *kasbah* surrendered.

The landings at Safi, south of Casablanca, were as confused as those at Port Lyautey. Ships were not in proper position, landing craft hit the wrong beaches, and troops wandered aimlessly about in a confused state. The French, meanwhile, opened artillery and machine-gun fire the length of the landing zone. As dawn broke, the battleship *New York* and the light cruiser *Philadelphia* opened counter-fire, silencing French shore batteries. After tanks of CCB went ashore, the battle moved quickly inland. By midafternoon, 8 November, Safi was in American hands.

Operation Brushwood at Fedala also went askew. French naval vessels steamed out of Casablanca harbor, attempting to attack the convoy, but U.S. naval vessels beat them off. Again, various army units

were put ashore in the wrong places. Some landing craft were smashed to bits by the heavy surf or thrown onto jagged rocks, spilling out their men. Few among those terrified survivors who staggered ashore had any equipment. French artillery fire and U.S. naval counter-fire added further terror to an already apocalyptic scene. Yet, amid the chaos, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Moore, commanding the 1st Battalion, 7th Regimental Combat Team, managed to collect his men and march them to Fedala. The French garrison, a company of Senegalese infantry, surrendered.

At Casablanca, so many men went ashore in the first waves that they lacked logistical support. A cannon company of the 15th Regimental Landing Group arrived on the beach without any of its guns, and a field artillery battalion had its guns but lacked all its trucks. Not until midnight 9 November did they get off the beach.

The Americans advanced toward Casablanca without meeting much resistance until they came to the main defensive perimeter. The French hit them with intense artillery and machine-gun fire. Even their naval vessels supported their ground troops. But the American troops held lines across major roads and successfully assaulted a military barracks in Casablanca's outskirts, forcing the French into a tighter defensive ring.

General Nogues, the French commander, wanted to surrender; yet the consequences of doing so remained unclear. Quite unexpectedly, the decision was taken from him late on the afternoon of 10 November. Admiral Darlan ordered an end to hostilities. The next day, Nogues surrendered in a formal ceremony that assuaged his honor.

Within the Mediterranean, Center Task Force steamed steadily east during the late afternoon of 7 November, maintaining the fiction that they were headed for Malta. But at 6:15 P.M., a section of the fleet broke to the southeast, their objectives two landing sites west of Oran: the small bay of Mersa Bou Zedjar and the bay at Les Andalouses. A third landing was made by Eastern Task Force at the Gulf of Arzew, east of Oran. Key airfields at Lourmel, La Senia, Blida, and Tafaraoui were captured. At Blida, the garrison commander was at the main gate dickering with Lieutenant Colonel T. H. Tevor, Lancashire Fusiliers, over surrender terms. Unnoticed, a Royal Navy fighter landed on the airstrip and the pilot accepted the surrender of the whole garrison. The attack on Tafaraoui met strong resistance. But light tanks from Combat Command B (CCB), U.S. 1st Armored Division, raced to the rescue. Facing that added strength, the garrison willingly surrendered.

The invasion forces slowly closed around Oran. At 8 A.M., 10 November, a general assault by armored units with infantry support penetrated the city streets as HMS *Rodney* and accompanying cruisers bombarded French shore batteries and American-flown Spitfires strafed ground defenses. The Oran garrison surrendered at noon.

The 38th RCT and five troops of British 1 Commando landed east of Algiers. The airfields at Maison Blanche, Hussein Dey, and Maison Carré quickly surrendered. British fighters landed at Maison Blanche by 10 A.M. A waterborne debacle was simultaneously taking place within Algiers harbor. Two British destroyers, HMS *Broke* and *Malcolm* carrying 650 American soldiers, tried to break through the harbor boom and prevent sabotage of the port facilities. The *Malcolm* was severely damaged by French shore batteries and put back to sea. The *Broke* smashed through the boom and put 250 men ashore but had to withdraw after receiving many hits. Shortly after noon, all hope of rescue gone, the American soldiers surrendered to the French.

Their captivity was not long-lived because another kind of drama was taking place within the city to stop the fighting. General Juin, overcoming the illusions of Vichy national honor, realized that a protracted fight for French Northwest Africa was in no one's interests. Thus, he persuaded Admiral Darlan to call a ceasefire for the evening of 8 November. Mark Clark, General Ryder (commanding the Eastern Task Force), and Robert Murphy negotiated with Darlan for a full cessation of hostilities on the 10th. Morocco and Algeria were pacified, and the French Army in Africa eventually joined the Allies.

That Darlan emerged as the significant figure from among the French hierarchy horrified many in Britain and the United States. The man was a known Anglophobe and a self-seeking collaborationist. Mark Clark, responsible for setting the final deal with Darlan, had obtained for the Allies, however distasteful the means, a pragmatic solution to stressful relations with the French. But the embarrassment of dealing with Darlan was short-lived. On 24 December he was assassinated by another Frenchman.⁸ No one would miss him, but a new French leader was needed. No one wanted Charles de Gaulle. Instead, they chose Giraud who was wandering about Algiers with nothing to do, a man Eisenhower wrote off as a self-serving blowhard. Giraud's one appeal was that he was the least troublesome of the French leaders available.

With *Life* magazine trumpeting on 23 November that the United States had taken over North Africa, the Allied armies turned to Tunisia. But the Germans would soon be building an army in northern

Tunisia, and Erwin Rommel whom *Life*—again on the 23rd—viewed as “a fugitive leading a fugitive army,” would cross the border from Libya to face fledgling American troops. *Life*'s overblown view of who controlled the new theater of war was about to be tested.

TUNISIA: THE CONTEXT OF BATTLE

Even though Operation Torch was an overall success, the invasion task forces were left scattered across French Northwest Africa. Despite this lack of concentrated power, Eisenhower ordered British Lieutenant General Sir Kenneth Anderson to mount an immediate offensive into Tunisia. Anderson commanded what was grandly designated the First Army. It was actually two brigade groups and whatever additional formations the Americans supplied. Eisenhower realized the First's shortcomings, but any delay would allow the Axis more time to solidify their growing strength and give Rommel time to settle into the Mareth Line in the south. Thus, an unexpectedly long and bitter campaign developed as the North African war underwent an abrupt change of scenery from deserts to hills, mountains, valleys, and passes.

Tunisia (Map 6) is only about 500 miles long from the Mediterranean coast to the Sahara fringes in the south. The north coast is girdled by the Medjerda Range of the Atlas Mountains. The landscape reminded the London *Daily Herald* correspondent A. B. Austin of the Scottish Highlands. The northern uplands are host to thick scrub and small forests, especially above the Medjerda River, the only Tunisian waterway to not run dry in the summer. The rich river valley forms a southwest-northeast corridor about 100 miles long that extends from around Souk el Arba in Algeria to Tunis.

The Tebessa Mountains, another spur of the Atlas, flow east from Algeria into central Tunisia. A plateau falls away from these mountains southeast toward Gabès, Medenine, and the Sahara fringe. Two chains of rugged hills flow south from just below Tunis. One of these is the Eastern Dorsale that frames a rich coastal plain beginning in the north around Tunis and continuing south through Sousse and Sfax. The Western Dorsale arcs southwest from the region of Tunis to Tebessa in Algeria and to the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia.

Southern Tunisia is dotted with oases and salt marshes, the largest of which is the Chott el Djerid (also on various maps as Shatt el Djerid or Jerid). This large marsh is bordered on the northeast by



another, the Chott el Fedjadj (or Fefjaj). Its eastern edge is only 15 miles from the Gulf of Gabès, forming a very narrow corridor between southern Tunisia—Rommel's point of entry—and the Axis forces gathering in the north. The Dorsales are quite barren, covered only with scrub and coarse grasses.

Tunisia was to be a different battleground than the vast stretches of the North African coast. Because of the more rugged Tunisian topography, rapid movement by divisions was replaced by tedious maneuvering by battalions and companies. Even though most peaks were not very high, they nevertheless provided tactical advantages generally unknown—with few exceptions such as Alam Halfa—in the desert war. The historian Kenneth Macksey calls the initial stages of the Tunisian campaign the Frontier War,⁹ meaning that the initial battles were contests for an Allied penetration of the Tunisian frontier. But he implicitly invites us to think back to the border wars along India's Northwest Frontier from Afghanistan to the Peshawar Plain, and north into Swat where the constant battling for key passes such as the Malakand, and the marching across plains and ragged hills were to be reprised in Tunisia.¹⁰

Most officers, both Axis and Allied (some British excepted) had been trained to fight in the rolling topography of Europe. But one German general established his career fighting in the Italian Alps in World War I and possessed the potential to change his tactics accordingly. That German officer was Erwin Rommel.

German Army units arrived in Tunis and Bizerte beginning 9 November, and Italian troops followed three days later. The Axis occupation was predicated on the assumption that the French would be cooperative. Indeed, on 20 December 1941, General Juin met with Göring and outlined his plan to defend French Northwest Africa against an "anglo-saxon" invasion. But on 9 May 1942, he circulated a secret memorandum to a half-dozen officers in North Africa that the Mareth Line could not sustain an attack from the British, thus threatening the whole of Tunisia from the south.¹¹ Juin was having second thoughts.

The French capitulation to the Allies complicated German plans for a Tunisian build-up. Nonetheless, the Germans thought that if the Allies could be enmeshed in Tunisia, the front might become a bottomless pit into which they threw men and matériel at a rate that would compromise an invasion of Sicily and Italy and might even forestall a cross-channel invasion of the Continent.

Despite Admiral Darlan's ceasefire order, many French commanders were wracked by indecision out of loyalty to Marshal Pétain. One of these was General Georges Barré, commander of Tunisian forces. As often happens in warfare, the unanticipated moved Barré to a decision. On 9 November, out of sequence, an Italian fighter squadron landed at a field near Tunis. Barré might not have liked the Germans very much, but he did not trust the Italians at all. He moved his troops into the hills, established roadblocks, and deployed his men in a loose defensive line from Teboursouk through Medjez el Bab. He ordered that anyone trying to pass through the lines without authorization was to be shot. That done, Barré watched and waited.

General Anderson ordered parachute troops dropped at various points in northern Tunisia. Units of the U.S. 509th Regiment led by Colonel Edson Raff landed near Tebessa, linked up with French irregulars, and harrassed the Germans in central Tunisia. On 15 November, a British liaison officer from the 36th Brigade Group met with Barré near the coast. The next day, a British parachute battalion landed at Souk el Arba. With such Allied activity going on, Barré decided to fight for the Allies. Thus, on 19 November, General Walter Nehring, commanding German XC Corps, demanded that his troops be given passage through Medjez el Bab and across its important bridge. Barré refused. The Germans attacked twice and were driven back. But the French were in bad shape. They lacked armor and artillery, and their infantry weapons were outmoded. Barré withdrew his men.¹²

Nehring's next move was to expand the bridgehead around Bizerte and establish another around Tunis. The Bizerte bridgehead was actually a loose-knit horseshoe-shaped perimeter 25 miles wide at the coast from east to west and extended some 30 miles south to a point near Mateur. The Tunis bridgehead was another horseshoe-shaped perimeter backing onto the Gulf of Tunis. It was 35 miles wide at the coast, northwest to southeast, and 30 miles deep to a point west of Tebourba. As the forces in the Tunis bridgehead increased, Nehring expanded the southern perimeter to Gabès.

FIRST ACTIONS

Anderson's First Army was simultaneously designated the British 78th Division and V Corps. All the superlative numbering came to the same thing: Anderson could still field only two brigade groups,

the 11th and the 36th. They were supported respectively by Blade Force—17/21 Lancers plus infantry, artillery, and an American light tank battalion—and Hart Force—a small armored group from the British 6th Armored Division. Major General Vyvyan Eveleigh was given field command of the “division” with Anderson’s injunction not to commit his troops piecemeal but to keep them concentrated. The plan was to link the brigade groups with the parachute battalions and, with the cooperation of Barré’s men, advance against Bizerte and Tunis. The advance was supposed to look like an arrow point advancing into Tunisia. But the dual mission meant that the division would have to be split.

The 36th Brigade Group and Hart Force, were to take a northerly route from Tabarka on the coast to Mateur and then move against Bizerte. At Djebel Aboid, the lead unit of the advance, the 6th Battalion, Royal West Kent Regiment, was intercepted by a German engineer battalion supported by a dozen tanks. A vicious fight ensued as the Germans broke through the British infantry, destroying artillery, Bren-gun carriers, and transport, but the 36th Brigade Group battled forward another 10 miles. British 1 Commando was signaled to make an amphibious landing southwest of Bizerte and attack the Germans from the rear. Unfortunately, the commando force was ill-supplied and lacked artillery and air support. They were pulled off the beaches without accomplishing very much. The British Official History bleakly noted that the results were disappointing.¹³ The advance against Bizerte stalled when the two leading battalions, the West Kents and the 8th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, were ambushed in a small pass west of Mateur.

The 11th Brigade Group and Blade Force took the parallel route into Tunisia from Souk el Arba to Beja. From there, they were to take Medjez el Bab and advance to Tunis. According to Captain (then Lieutenant) Freeland A. Daubin, Jr., a platoon leader in the American light tank battalion, the Allied troops went forward with great confidence. This was based on grossly inaccurate intelligence reports that portrayed the Germans in panic following the Allied landings, evacuating 10,000 men a day. The remaining German soldiers were supposed to be a ragtag army equipped with nothing but rifles, a few mountain guns, and obsolete Mk I and Mk II light tanks.¹⁴ The actual condition of the German troops was very different.

On 28 November, the 11th Brigade Group marched straight into the strength of the German defensive lines. Lieutenant Colonel John

Waters led his American Stuart light tanks into battle against the 11th Panzer Engineer Battalion. The battle shifted back and forth, the German gunners effectively raking the lightly armored Stuarts as Messerschmitt Bf 109s, Stuka dive-bombers, and Junkers 88 bombers swooped over the battlefield. The Stuart tanks mounted a .30 caliber machine gun bracketed to the rear of the gun turret as an anti-aircraft weapon. Lieutenant Daubin noted that it was a useless piece of junk because the tank’s vibrations kept loosening the gun mounting. That resulted in every fifth or sixth cartridge jumping out of line with the feeder belt, causing the gun to jamb.¹⁵

Major Rudolph Barlow’s A Company battled to a ridge near Djed-ida. They stopped, looking down on an airfield filled with the very planes that had bombed and strafed them earlier. The Americans could not resist such a target so well suited for their little tanks. Seventeen Stuarts charged downhill, sweeping onto the airfield, destroying eleven planes on the tarmac. One tank raced to the end of the runway and fired canister shells at the planes trying to take off. Twenty-five more aircraft were shot to pieces in their hangars. After destroying vehicles, buildings, and supplies, and killing all the personnel they found, the company withdrew to rejoin their battalion near Chouigui.¹⁶

Both sides were nearly exhausted by the fighting. Eveleigh’s division was short supplies and needed reinforcement. Kesselring, thin in manpower, short of artillery, and with only three divisions to protect a 250-mile front from Tunis to Gabès, ordered Nehring to establish a straighter line. That involved attacking the Allied salient around Chouigui. The task was given to Major General Wolfgang Fischer, whose 10th Panzer Division had just arrived in Tunisia.

Fischer opened his attack on 1 December, sending thirteen tanks down the Mateur road. Major Barlow saw them coming and sent out three tank destroyers mounting 75mm guns to block the advance. The Americans snapped thirty rounds at the lead tank then shifted fire to the next tank and the next. These first tanks were not especially damaged because the Americans did not have armor-piercing shot for their 75s. Colonel Waters sent his A Company to help. They attacked the right flank of the German column at a diagonal and paid dearly for their audacity. The more heavily armed and armored German machines fired into the advancing Stuarts.¹⁷ Several were hit. Orange flames lashed from every hatch. Then the ammunition exploded, causing the hulls to convulse as sparks showered from the turrets and

molten aluminum—the melted engines—puddled on the ground. With A Company taking the brunt of the German gunnery, B Company attacked from the German's rear, knocking out nine tanks. The Stuart's 37mm gun, so ineffective at frontal assault, pierced vulnerable engine doors, vents, and hatches.

Units of Fischer's 10th Panzers—infantry, artillery, and forty-five tanks that included some of the new and as yet untried Tiger Mk VI tanks with 88mm guns—also attacked British positions around Tebourba. The first hit were the 2nd Hampshire Regiment, just off the boat from Britain, and the 1st Surreys. Colonel Paul Robinett's 13th Armored Regiment, 1st U.S. Armored Division, moved to help the British but ran into a column of German Mk IVs. Robinett quickly lost eight Sherman tanks but, with the support of accurate British artillery fire, at least slowed the German advance. In the end, the British infantry were finally worn down. Dive-bombed, shelled, and with German infantry closing on their flanks, the Hampshires, reduced to 200 men, and the Surreys, numbering 343, withdrew under hellish conditions. Very few of them made it back to Chouigui. By day's end, Fischer's panzers destroyed fifty-five tanks and 300 vehicles, captured large amounts of ammunition, and took over a thousand prisoners.¹⁸

The British and Americans tried to pull into a defensive line in the hills west of the Medjerda River, but supply trucks and reinforcements were jammed up on the roads. The troops just in action were near exhaustion. The RAF and U.S. Army Air Force provided some welcome relief when Spitfires and U.S. Lockheed Lightning P-38 fighters swept overhead on strafing runs. These, however, were too few to bring permanent relief or cheer because poor airfields and worsening weather limited flights. Unseen by the troops were the continuous RAF raids from Malta and around the Gulf of Sidra against Bizerte and Tunis. The RAF also exercised increasing control over the sea between Sicily and Tunisia, sinking thirty-two ships in December.

After another attack by Fischer's panzers on 6 December, General Anderson approved further withdrawals into the western hills. On 10 December, units of 1st Armored's CCB were in an area 7 miles southwest of Tebourba along the Medjerda River. Fischer's armor caught them in the open and, after a sharp engagement, the Americans disengaged and withdrew along a dirt track that paralleled the river. Nature finished the job the Germans began. Torrential rain turned the track into a bog. With no way out in sight, believing all was lost,

the Americans abandoned their equipment—eighteen tanks, forty-one guns, and 150 trucks.¹⁹ Eisenhower and his staff had to find a way to stabilize the front against the consistently successful German attacks before launching an offensive.

The German high command wanted even more success. Colonel General Jürgen von Arnim arrived unannounced in Tunis on 8 December and relieved Nehring of his command. Abruptly taken from the Russian front and whisked into Hitler's presence, von Arnim was told he would command the Fifth Army to be comprised of three mechanized divisions and three motorized divisions. Although nominally under *Commando Supremo*, von Arnim was nonetheless to report directly to Kesselring. And even though Rommel was officially subordinated to *Commando Supremo*, he too was to report to Kesselring. Thus, the German high command muddied the Tunisian situation by placing two separate armies in the same theater, in an overlapping command structure, each army drawing on the same supplies and commanded by two men who grew to dislike each other.²⁰ Kesselring soon discovered that he could not get any mutual cooperation from Rommel and von Arnim, both of whom he considered pigheaded.

Kesselring was aware that it was necessary to maintain the two bridgeheads at Bizerte and Tunis to prevent a total collapse of Axis power in North Africa. But should they become defensive bastions against which the Allies would consume their resources? Or should they be used as bases for offensive action? The answers to these questions rested with the future of Rommel's army. Should Rommel's *Panzerarmee* be consolidated with von Arnim's to enhance Axis offensive capabilities? Which general should command? Which direction should an offensive take—a reentry into Libya, reviving old plans and the imperial hopes of the Italians, or should it be directed west into Algeria, sweeping the Allied army into the sea? The former option was a spent vision that would only disinter memories of lost victories. The latter option must have conjured visions of a new German Army triumphing on new battlefields. Or, in stark contrast to both options, should the Axis armies be evacuated? Hitler vetoed that idea when Rommel first proposed it. If staying in Tunisia was the only choice acceptable to Hitler, was that choice viable? The *Luftwaffe's* domination over the battlefields could not last, for the Allied aircraft supply seemed endless. Their generally effective bombing missions meant that the Axis supply situation could only become worse. Yet, if sup-

plies could be maintained at even a modest level, von Arnim and Rommel could mount offensives that would send the Allied divisions into retreat.

The resolutions of these questions and problems were found less in the rational decisions made at headquarters, Allied or Axis, than through the trial and error of battles yet to come.

General Anderson reported to Eisenhower that his troops would be ready to go on the offensive by 22 December. Anderson realized the importance of taking Tunis first, because of its surrounding all-weather airfields. Once that bridgehead collapsed, the Allies could attack Bizerte at a time of their choosing. Total Axis defeat was imminent. Yet, Anderson was concerned that his south flank was practically nonexistent. The only troops operating there were some French units and Raff's American paratroopers. Rommel, advancing from the south, could brush them aside and join with von Arnim in Tunis, or von Arnim could strike out into central Tunisia and, with Rommel, split the Allied forces in Tunisia with disastrous consequences.

To anchor Anderson's south flank and guard against Rommel, Eisenhower shifted Major General Lloyd Fredendall's American II Corps from the Oran sector to a position behind Tebessa just west of Kasserine Pass. Thus, if Anderson's forces took Tunis, then Rommel's force, weakened by its 1,500-mile trek from El Alamein, could be blocked by II Corps and plucked from behind by Montgomery's oncoming Eighth Army.

One problem remained. Lieutenant General C. W. Allfrey, recently arrived to command British V Corps, rightly saw that as the Allied force moved toward Tunis, their left flank would be exposed to attack by Germans deployed along the Medjerda River. To forestall such an attack, Allfrey planned to secure key hills, ridges, and villages, starting with what the British dubbed Longstop Hill (Djebel el Ahmara), located 6 miles above Medjez el Bab. The job of taking Longstop Hill was given to the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards supported by a battalion from the U.S. 18th Infantry Regiment.

The night of 23 December, the Coldstream advanced against Longstop Hill. Informed that it was defended by a company of second-rate Germans with a few machine guns, the Coldstream ran into a battalion of the 69th *Panzer Grenadier Regiment*. The Guardsmen, silhouetted by moonlight and German flares, were ripped by heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. Regrouping, the Coldstream at-

tacked again, this time taking the hill. They settled down and waited for the Americans to relieve them. The Guardsmen waited. And waited. The Americans, lost in a rain squall, had taken the wrong road. But they trudged on and at last found their way to the hill. At dawn, the Americans realized that they controlled less than half the German positions. The bulk of the Germans were on the Djebel el Rhar, an adjoining hill. The Germans attacked with a *Panzer Grenadier* company supported by tanks. The Americans tried to hold but could not. They were driven from Longstop Hill.

The momentum of the German attack was an indication of how important von Arnim and Fischer considered the hill. From its top, an observer had a clear view of the Medjez plain that led to Tunis. Anything moving across the plain could be easily targeted. Longstop was a key to Tunis. General Allfrey came to the same conclusion. Longstop Hill must be taken.

The Coldstream Guards had no sooner marched all the way back to Medjez el Bab than they were ordered to march back and take the hill. Rain fell in sheets as the Guardsmen picked up their weapons and walked back to the front. On Christmas Day, they fought their way back to the hill top. But German machine-gun fire still harassed their positions. Twice more the Coldstream attacked. They held on with the support of the American infantry and a French *tirailleur* unit. By the end of the day, the hill was back in German hands. Too few men, too few machine guns, and too few mortars made it impossible to hold against the relentless German attacks. The two British and American battalions had 539 casualties.²¹

With the loss of Longstop and with the Germans dropping artillery fire into Medjez el Bab, Anderson and Eisenhower agreed that further advances toward Tunis would be delayed.

STALEMATE

The Allied drive against Tunis failed. Faulty logistics, the dispersal of ground forces, a series of casualty-ridden small actions, and bad weather conspired to create that failure. The Allies needed time to regroup, reinforce, and resupply before another offensive was possible. But the Axis did not have the manpower or the firepower to take advantage of the Allied weaknesses and drive them into the sea. Time was needed to regroup, reinforce, and resupply before a full-scale offensive was possible. The shared consequence of these similar pos-

tures was a stalemate, neither side able to dislodge the other from Dorsale positions.

Von Arnim was quite aware that a premature offensive would endanger what gains his troops achieved. Instead, he chose to maintain what initiatives Fischer gained by making small local attacks—so-called spoiling actions—to keep the Allies unsure of his intentions. Two of these actions were relevant to Rommel's subsequent ideas for a campaign in Tunisia.

Von Arnim organized a raid, code-named Eilbote I, in mid-January to capture the Kebir reservoir that served Tunis, to clear French troops from Karachoum, and to secure the Kairouan-Ousseltia road to the south.²² On 18 January, the main German attack fell on Barré's French forces grouped around the reservoir. The French fought as best they could with antiquated equipment but were soon forced back with heavy casualties. Simultaneous to that advance, a German battlegroup attacked the southern wing of British V Corps, engaging the 36th Brigade Group which, because of earlier battles, was in a weakened condition. Neither side gained any appreciable advantages, despite mutually escalating casualties. Another German column, *Kampfgruppe* (battlegroup) Lüder—an infantry battalion and a company of tanks that included some Tigers—moved toward the Ousseltia road. They combined with a contingent from the Italian Superga Division and on 20 January, attacked the French guarding the area, sweeping them from the heights around the Ousseltia Valley. The Lüder group then cut the Kairouan-Ousseltia road.

General Juin, in overall command, called for help and was answered by U.S. Major General Lloyd Fredendall, itching to get his II Corps into action. Fredendall ordered the 1st Armored's CCB, now commanded by Paul Robinett, to report to Juin. The order was farcical—"Have your boss report to the French gentleman whose name begins with J..."—a quality that wrangled his subordinates and finally alienated his superiors. CCB was ordered to clear the Germans from the Kairouan-Ousseltia road. The Americans attacked at 3 P.M., 21 January, and were mauled. At that point, CCB was ordered to disengage and establish defensive positions in support of General Agathon Deligne's Algerian Division. No matter, CCB was out of gas.

On 30 January, von Arnim moved against Faid Pass that was guarded by a French brigade from General Joseph Welvert's Constantine Division.²³ The brigade was confronted by two battlegroups from the 21st Panzer Division. Somehow, the French held the pass.

Juin sent another urgent appeal for help to Fredendall who was sitting at Tebessa with the remainder of II Corps. Welvert begged for help. Orlando Ward, commanding the U.S. 1st Armored Division, asked Fredendall for permission to go to the aid of the French. Fredendall would not help. Instead, he sent a raid into Gafsa and another against Maknassy, maneuvers he planned to exploit into a victory over the Germans that, of course, he would lead. Despite renewed pleas from the French, he kept his men moving south. Meanwhile, the Germans took Faid Pass, trapping the remaining French in the hills.

Fredendall reluctantly sent the 1st Armored Division's Combat Command A to help the French. Too late, they would now have to dislodge the Germans from strong defensive positions. Brigadier General Raymond Quillin, commanding CCA, sent his force across unfamiliar and very rough terrain, the tanks moving slowly and the infantry wandering about not knowing what they were supposed to do. Concealed German anti-tank guns opened fire as Stuka dive-bombers added death and confusion to the battlefield. The weak, tentative attack failed. Welvert concluded that the Americans were amateurs, and Juin was so furious at the lackluster attack that he wrote a formal protest to Eisenhower.

Von Arnim secured the Eastern Dorsale, adjusted his lines, and dug-in. His troops had swept away the French with relentless attacks. They stopped the Americans cold. They ruffled the British. Although the Allies enjoyed matériel advantages, their use of weapons was tactically poor if not amateurish. The conclusion was obvious. The German Army faced inferior forces in Tunisia. That precipitous conclusion became conventional wisdom among the Axis as Rommel's army crossed the frontier into Tunisia.