

An Army at Daw

THE WAR IN NORTH AFRICA

1942-1943

VOLUME ONE OF THE LIBERATION TRILOGY

Rick Atkinson

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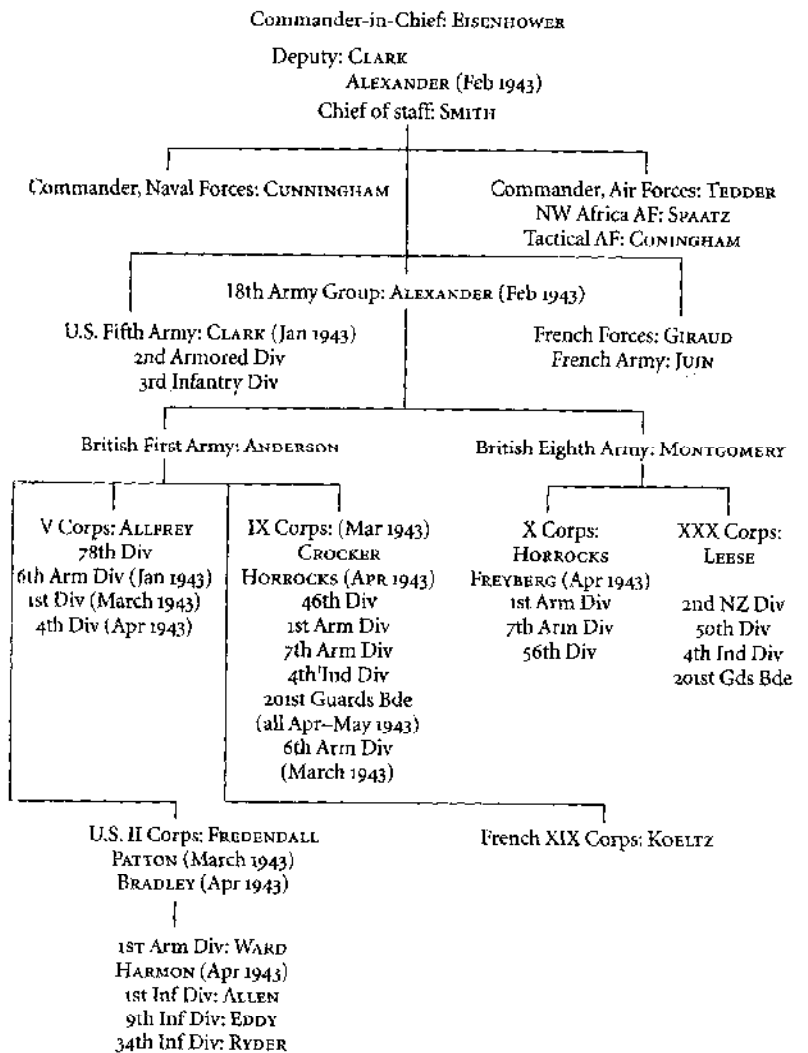
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ALLIED CHAIN OF COMMAND TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN, 1942-43



at six P.M. and rose at four A.M. Canned stew and biscuits were “donkey dung” and “armor plating.” Soldiers softened their hardtack by dipping it into ersatz coffee brewed from pulverized dates, with the color and taste of ink. GI toilet paper was rough-hewn enough to be used for double-sided stationery, and troops caught up on their correspondents even as they battled ferocious dysentery.

“No shave, no bath, very little food, no beds, no liquor, no women, no fun, no nothing,” an American soldier wrote his sister. A platoon leader in the 18th Infantry Regiment apologized for not sending Christmas presents; he had spent his last \$50 on eyeglasses for nine of his men after Army stocks ran short. “Thanks for giving me the grandest gifts of all,” added Lieutenant Robert M. Mullen, “faith and love.” In three months he would be dead. Mail finally arrived for some troops—many had received nothing for two months or more—and Christmas packages often implied a certain homefront incomprehension of life in the combat zone: bathrobes, slippers, and phonograph records were particularly popular.

A redhead in a knit cap, slender as a thread at 100 pounds and given to drink and melancholy, showed up with a typewriter to educate America. Ernest Taylor Pyle had recently become a war correspondent after writing more than 2 million words as a roving reporter during the Depression. From Tunisia he wrote:

There are none of the little things that make life normal back home. There are no chairs, lights, floors, or tables. There isn't any place to set anything, or any store to buy things. There are no newspapers, milk, beds, sheets, radiators, beer, ice cream, or hot water. A man just sort of exists. . . . The velvet is all gone from living.

The lull allowed Brits and Yanks to take each others' measure (in circumstances other than abject bloodletting). Scruffy GIs noticed that no matter how foul the weather, the Tommies shaved every morning, meticulously; in their trousers, collarless shirts, and broad suspenders, they reminded one American officer of “old-fashioned workmen clean-shaven up on a Saturday night.” Every British officers' mess seemed to have a Christmas goose fund, to which each man contributed 200 francs and extensive advice. Yanks soon adopted the expression “Good show!” although always uttered sardonically. Because British sutlers provided many staples for both armies, the Americans at times fed on treacle pudding and oxtail stew with jointed bones. Steak-and-kidney pie in three “compo” rations inspired a field kitchen ditty:

We've eaten B
We like the m
We know a co
But where in

Across the killing fields, the German Ash troop strength in the Tunisian battle tanks, roughly equal to the Allies, with air superiority and good defensive tactics along the coast twenty miles west of Bizerte, Meljez-el-Bab and then down the coast. The Germans held the northern sector, with the Italian Superga Division in the south. The front line here was deeper than forty miles, and such a long front would have been difficult to maintain.

General Nehring's success in bludgeoning the Allies for the abandonment of Mezzogiorno. Without warning, his replacement General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, in command in Russia to take over the command. Nehring flew home. With a maintenance, the fifty-three-year-old general, who had been producing a family since the nineteenth century. Having compiled a record in the Great War and this one, he gave up command. On December 13, the German forces around Tébourba had been forced to go over to the defensive to avoid a disaster. Defense meant fortifications, a matter of life and death. Fifty thousand Jews served nicely in Tunisia. Tunisian Jews were a tiny minority in Tunisia—said to be the original of the Jewish nation held that the small Jewish community of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. In the Jewish statute, Tunisian Jews had a long and other professions since 1945.

On November 23, German troops entered Tunis, including the president of the city. On December 9, the city's grand ra

Canned stew and biscuits were “donked” and the soldiers softened their hardtack by dipping it in pulverized dates, with the color and texture rough-hewn enough to be used for props caught up on their correspondent’s sentry.

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is to take each others’ measure in combat. Scuffy GIs noticed that the Tommies shaved every morning, wore clean shirts, and broad suspenders, they “old-fashioned workmen cleaning up.” British officers’ mess seemed to have a table and each man contributed 200 francs and they used the expression “Good show!” daily. Because British sutlers provided the Americans at times fed on treacle puddings. Steak-and-kidney pie in British kitchen ditty:

*We’ve eaten British compo,
We like the meat the best,
We know a cow has kidney,
But where in hell’s the rest?*

Across the killing fields, the Germans and Italians also took stock. The troop strength in the Tunisian bridgehead had reached 56,000, with 100 tanks, roughly equal to the Allies but with the added benefit of Luftwaffe air superiority and good defensive terrain. From the Mediterranean coast twenty miles west of Bizerte, the line extended just east of Medjez-el-Bab and then down the entire length of Tunisia. German soldiers held the northern sector, with the 10th Panzer Division shielding Tunis, and the Italian Superga Division held the south. Nowhere was the front deeper than forty miles, and no shoulder-to-shoulder manning of such a long front would have been possible even if Nehring had been inclined.

General Nehring’s success in blunting the Allied offensive failed to atone for the abandonment of Medjez and his persistent pessimism. Without warning, his replacement had arrived on December 8: Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, whom Hitler whisked from a corps command in Russia to take over the newly formed Fifth Panzer Army in Tunisia. Nehring flew home. With a bird of prey’s beaked nose and stern maintenance, the fifty-three-year-old Arnim issued from a Prussian family that had been producing officers for the Fatherland since the nineteenth century. Having compiled a distinguished record in both the Great War and this one, he gave Kesselring a diligent, quick-thinking field commander. On December 13, Arnim announced that since Allied forces around Tébourba had been obliterated, the Fifth Panzer Army would go over to the defensive to await the next blow.

Defense meant fortifications, and fortifications required laborers. Sixty thousand Jews served nicely. Mostly artisans and tradesmen, Tunisian Jews were a tiny minority with a long pedigree; on the island of Djerba—said to be the original of Homer’s Land of the Lotus Eaters—tradition held that the small Jewish community had arrived after the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 B.C. Under a Vichy-inspired statute, Tunisian Jews had been banned from teaching, banking, and other professions since 1940. When the Axis invaded, life soured even more.

On November 23, German troops had arrested a number of Jews in Tunis, including the president of the Council of the Jewish Community. On December 9, the city’s grand rabbi was ordered to provide overnight

a list of 2,000 young Jews for a labor corps; when the rabbi requested a delay, the quota was increased to 3,000. All were to appear with tools. After only 120 workers showed up, Axis troops rampaged through the streets and synagogues in various Jewish quarters, seizing hostages. A secret OSS assessment reported: "Equipped with tools and food by the Jewish community, 3,600 laborers were finally drafted." Hundreds worked under Allied bombardment in Bizerte and at the Tunis airfield. Hundreds more dug defensive trenches for Major Witzig near Green and Bald Hills, and for General Fischer's men west of Tébourba. Others were press-ganged to tend the horses and mules that hauled ammunition.

In mid-December, the Council of the Jewish Community was told that as "allies of the Anglo-Saxons," Jews were expected to provide 50 million francs to cover bomb damage in Tunis. A rapacious Tunisian bank loaned the money at 8 percent interest, taking Jewish land and property as collateral. The Germans also began plundering Jewish gold, jewelry, and bank deposits. Meanwhile, the clang of picks and shovels could be heard in the rugged hills above the Medjerda valley.

Prodded by Eisenhower, Anderson sent word to Algiers that the Allied offensive would resume on the night of December 23–24. By then, enough supplies could be stockpiled at the Tunisian railhead for a week of hard fighting, and a full moon would light the way. Evelegh's 70th Division, with American help, would secure the left flank on the high ground above the Medjerda, while the British 6th Armoured Division, just arrived from Britain, blasted through to Tunis on the southern lip of the Medjerda valley.

"This means a most un-Christian Christmas, but perhaps this will be forgiven in view of all the facts," Anderson told the commander-in-chief. He agreed with Eisenhower that the Allies could not allow "passive acceptance of a strong Hun bridgehead," although he put the odds of seizing Tunis at "not more than 50–50, I think. But it is also certainly not an impossible task. Far from it. With good planning and execution, stout hearts and fair weather, we will do our utmost to gain success. If we deserve God's help, we will gain it."

At the same time, Anderson urged Eisenhower to keep his eye fixed on Tunis. Several schemes had floated from Allied Forces Headquarters for operations in southern Tunisia; none would contribute to the paramount objective of capturing the capital and severing the Axis lifeline to Italy. First Army was already "living hand to mouth, with reserves temporarily exhausted," Anderson warned, and he planned to throw 80 percent of his strength into the Christmas Eve offensive. "The essence of any

plan," he advised Eisenhower, "must be to strike with maximum strength at the chosen point of attack."

Before launching his offensive, Anderson sent a reconnaissance party to a German outpost on an arm of the Medjerda valley from Medjez-el-Bey. Seized by Fischer's men after the defile was 100 yards long and 800 feet high, the hogback was welded at a right angle onto the pre-war road. The defile opened the valley within a few hundred yards of the gap where Highway 50 and the railroad crossed. The hill Longstop, a cricket terrace, dominated the hill.

Longstop offered omniscience. From the Medjerda valley could move undetected—no tank. Scented with thyme, copper, and iron, the hill had a dark and forbidding look, as if to seem bony, with powder-covered rocks. Although modest in size, the complex, with a thousand secret folds and lower flanks; a few gum trees stood on the crest. An officer considered the terrain "so forbidding that the Devil himself was surely there." Longstop exemplified why another defile.

Had the British spent less time studying it, subsequent events might have been different. First, Allied intelligence had detected a German company with four to five tanks. Second, a Panzer Grenadier Regiment (a Panzer Grenadier Regiment) another sinewy veteran of Eben Er

Worse yet, the British had mistook the hill for one. It was actually two hills: Djebel el Ah and Djebel el B. Separated by a ravine from the slightly lower Djebel el Ah, the hill was unseen by British reconnaissance at a distance of seven miles. The hill was marked on Allied maps, and infamously captured two weeks in November and early December. "Of great importance," the Coldstream Guards proved most unfortunate.

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Before launching his offensive, Anderson first had to capture an annoying German outpost on an annoying Tunisian hill six miles down the Medjerda valley from Medjez-el-Bab. Djebel el Ahmera had been seized by Fischer's men after the debacle at Bordj Toum bridge. Two miles long and 800 feet high, the hogback ridge appeared to have been writhed at a right angle onto the prevailing hill mass: it jutted into the valley within a few hundred yards of the river, creating a bottleneck at the gap where Highway 50 and the rail line to Tunis passed. The British named the hill Longstop, a cricket term.

Longstop offered omniscience. From its crest, nothing in the Medjerda valley could move undetected—not a rabbit, not a man, certainly not a tank. Scented with thyme, covered with heather and scrub juniper, the hill had a dark and forbidding mien even in sunlight. It was so tacky as to seem bony, with powdery soil that covered a climber as flour covers a miller. Although modest in height, Longstop was intricately complex, with a thousand secret folds and dips. Olive groves bearded the lower flanks; a few gum trees stood sentinel on the crest. One British officer considered the terrain "so foul, broken, blasted, and inhospitable that the Devil himself was surely the principal agent in its creation." Longstop exemplified why another officer called Tunisia "a country of defiles."

Had the British spent less time execrating the hill and more time studying it, subsequent events might have been different. For two critical errors preceded the attack by the 2nd Battalion of the Coldstream Guards. First, Allied intelligence believed the hill was held by a single German company with four to eight machine guns; in fact, enemy strength approached a battalion and included three companies from the 69th Panzer Grenadier Regiment commanded by Colonel Rudolf Lang, another sinewy veteran of Eben Emael.

Worse yet, the British had misread both ground and map. Longstop was actually two hills: Djebel el Ahmera dominated the main crest, separated by a ravine from the slightly lower Djebel el Rhar to the northeast. To capture one without the other was to capture neither. This second knoll was unseen by British reconnaissance, which was conducted by telescope at a distance of seven miles. Even so, Djebel el Rhar was plainly marked on Allied maps, and infantrymen had rambled across the hills for two weeks in November and early December. "We failed to realize its tactical importance," the Coldstreams later acknowledged. The error proved most unfortunate.

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feet behind Robinett, shredding his left leg and flinging him and his driver from their seats. More rounds crashed through the trees as soldiers appeared from the CCB encampment and bundled their wounded commander into an ambulance, which zigzagged through shell fire to the camouflaged command tent around the next bend.

Minutes later, Harmon pushed aside the canvas flaps and walked in "looking hard as rock." A glance at the mangled leg told Harmon that Robinett's war was over. Robinett looked up with glassy eyes. He had already relinquished command of CCB to Colonel Benson. In an hour he would be driven to the field hospital in Béja, vomiting in agony; a regimental band waited to serenade him with "The Missouri Waltz." A flight to Algeria and evacuation to the United States would be followed by many months of medical rehabilitation and a lasting hitch in his ban-tam strut.

"You are about to win a great victory," Robinett told Harmon thickly before stretcher bearers carried him to the ambulance, "and I only regret that I cannot be present to share the battle with my men."

Harmon shook his head. "Poor bastard," he muttered, then turned and strode from the tent.

Tunisgrad

THE most intense artillery barrage ever seen in Africa erupted in gusts of white flame at three A.M. on May 6. More than 400 Royal Artillery guns cut loose simultaneously on targets along Highway 5, five miles south of the Medjerda River. Here First Army had concentrated for the great lunge on Tunis, now code-named Operation STRIKE. "The muzzle flashes lit up the gun pits with a dancing yellow light, and the shells, tearing overhead at a rate of five or six hundred a minute, burst a few seconds later on the opposite slope like the flowering of a field of ruby tulips," a young officer wrote.

Determined to bury the enemy beneath "stunning weights of metal," gunners plotted one shell for every six feet of enemy frontage. (At El Alamein, the figure had been one shell for every thirty feet.) Shells shrieked "over our heads in an endless stream, so close, it seemed that you could almost strike a match on them," a witness declared. After half an hour the barrage lifted momentarily, then fell with redoubled vigor, marching eastward by 100 yards every three minutes. Seventy-two suspected enemy artillery batteries that had been pinpointed by gun flashes

or aerial surveillance received lavish attention: each hostile battery was hammered on three occasions with two-minute concentrations by as many as thirty-two guns. The effect was "a roof of shells . . . destroying every living thing that moves." More than a few inanimate targets were also destroyed, including, as a scout sorrowfully reported, an oak vat containing 8,000 gallons of red Tunisian wine.

Behind the guns at 5:40 A.M. came the planes, again with a bombardment unprecedented on the continent. More than 2,000 Allied sorties would be flown this Thursday, beating a path from Medjez-el-Bab to Tunis. Fighters and bombers so thick they eclipsed the rising sun concentrated on a four-mile square around Massicault and St. Cyprien along Highway 5. Insult followed injury: clouds of propaganda pamphlets warned enemy survivors that they had been duped by "Rommel" and left to die alone in Africa.

Well before dawn, the infantry had surged forward on a 3,000-yard front, guided by a Bofors gun that fired three red tracers on a fixed line every five minutes. At Alexander's insistence, First Army had been reinforced with two divisions and a Guards brigade from Montgomery's horde. They had arrived more than 30,000 strong from Enfidaville over the past few days, fire-blackened tea tins banging against their yellow fenders; although headlights were authorized for the move, after years of blackout not one vehicle in five had working bulbs. No fraternal love was lost between the mountain tribe and the desert tribe—the two British armies were "as different as chalk from cheese," General Horrocks conceded—and Tommies in the 78th Division went so far as to paint signs on their vehicles: "We have no connection with the Eighth Army." But the added weight lent irresistible momentum to Anderson's attack, and by daybreak the British 4th Division and the 4th Indian Division had pried a gap two miles wide through enemy defenses.

Four tank battalions rushed through. Defenders not killed by artillery or air attack died at their posts or broke for the rear, tossing aside their rifles as they ran. Despite advance knowledge from intercepted radio messages about where the British would likely attack, Arnim was powerless; the Fifth Panzer Army had been reduced to fewer than seventy tanks, little ammunition, and even less fuel. By eleven A.M., British armor had penetrated 5,000 yards beyond the gap, with light losses. Anderson initially had proposed having his tankers linger to mop up stragglers, but Alexander overruled him. The tanks were to "drive with all speed and energy on Tunis," Alexander ordered. "The rapier," he later explained, "was to be thrust into the heart."

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"The whole valley before us became a heaving sea of flame," wrote the American journalist John MacVane. "Over a dozen roads and trails, plumes of floury dust rose from the columns of vehicles." The stink of cordite and crushed wheat was nauseating enough to bring some men to their knees. Through "a thick pall of smoke and dust resembling ground mist," drivers bumped along in second gear, navigating by compass heading. The correspondent Alan Moorehead described seeing Alexander racing forward "at almost reckless speed, both his hands tight on the wheel and his face whitened like a baker's boy with white dust."

Allied eavesdroppers intercepted German radio messages sending medics into the line as riflemen; the walking wounded soon were ordered to join them. Another message, from Arnim's quartermaster, requested that no more ammunition be dispatched from Italy because there was no fuel with which to distribute it in Africa. A third message reported that the 15th Panzer Division had been "laid low. . . Its bulk must be considered as annihilated." As German resistance disintegrated, the British vanguard was urged to press on with a prearranged code word: "Butter." Soon radios across the front were chirping: "Butter, butter, butter." By dusk, two armored divisions had reached Massicault, eight miles beyond the infantry and a day's march from Tunis. On a hill-top west of the capital a British colonel reported, "I can see the lily-white walls of that blasted city."

Eighteen Royal Navy destroyers patrolled the Sicilian Straits to prevent any last-moment Axis decampment. The ships' superstructures had been painted an unmistakable royal red after three accidental bombings by overzealous Allied planes. All waters within five miles of the Tunisian coast were declared a free-fire zone, and Eisenhower's naval chief soon reduced his order of the day to seven words: "Sink, burn, and destroy. Let nothing pass."

The righteous wrath of such orders fell heavily on 464 American and British prisoners-of-war embarked on the freighter *Loyd Triestino* for passage to Italian stockades. Marched through the wrecked docks of Tunis on the night of May 5, each man before boarding received a quarter-loaf of sour bread, a tablespoon of canned meat, eight prunes, and a scoop of Red Cross macaroni. Among the Yanks were Lieutenant Colonel Denholm and the 150 men from the 16th Infantry who had been captured on Hill 523. German guards confiscated the prisoners' cash—always tendering a proper receipt in return—and limited their interrogations to wistful queries about whether captured Axis troops were being