

which had been only weeks earlier nothing but an idea in Hitler's mind, had been created and had a strength of over 150 tanks of the III and IV classes as well as eleven of the Tiger or Panzer VI type.

Von Arnim considered the priorities of his new command. The principal one was to expand the Tunisian perimeter so as to shelter Rommel's armies. The second one was dependent on the first—to prevent the Allies from capturing Tunis and destroying the perimeter. Once those two tasks had been completed successfully, he could turn his attention to the third task. That would be in southern Tunisia, where he would stop the Allies—chiefly the Americans—from striking through the passés and reaching the sea.

Quickly von Arnim amalgamated most of the miscellaneous German units into the von Broich Division and placed this on the northern Tunisian sector, i.e. on the seaward flank. The 10th Panzer Division, the paratroops and detachments from the 334th Infantry Division were in the centre of the German battle line facing the British and the Americans, while the Italian 'Superga' Division held the left, or deep Tunisian flank. But von Arnim was unhappy about the reliability of the Italian troops holding that sector and replaced them with German units. He then turned his attention first to northern Tunisia and opened an offensive with limited objectives. Then, on 18 January 1943, he struck the French and British forces in that sector using the heavy Panzer (Tiger) battalion and elements from the 10th Panzer and 334th Infantry Divisions. This local offensive, having taken prisoners as well as equipment, was broken off during the night of 23/24 January, and von Arnim's troops then successfully fought off the Allied counter-attacks, which came in on the 24th.

In the early days of February 1943 von Arnim's attention switched to southern Tunisia, and he attacked the French forces in that area. There had been a reinforcement to the 5th Panzer Army at the end of January when the 21st Panzer Division from the Afrika Korps came on strength. That increase in Panzer numbers emboldened von Arnim to use it in an attack, which was carried out against the Faid Pass. This was to be an operation undertaken by the 21st and 10th Panzer Divisions. The 21st, as we have seen, came from Rommel's desert army and the 10th Panzer had been posted to Tunisia at the end of 1942. A

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most of the miscellaneous German units and placed this on the northern flank. The 10th Panzer Division, the 334th Infantry Division were facing the British and the Americans on the left, or deep Tunisia. Doubt about the reliability of the units placed them with German units in northern Tunisia and opened an attack. On 18 January 1943, he struck the sector using the heavy Panzer divisions: the 10th Panzer and 334th Infantry. Having taken prisoners as well as the death of 23/24 January, and von Arnim's off the Allied counter-attacks,

von Arnim's attention switched to the French forces in that area. The 5th Panzer Army at the end of the Afrika Korps came on the scene emboldened von Arnim to attack against the Faid Pass. This was the 21st and 10th Panzer Divisions from Rommel's desert army in Tunisia at the end of 1942. A

few days later von Arnim attacked the French forces again, and, although these were supported by the US 2nd Corps, he scored another tactical victory, destroying a whole French division as well as the 168th Infantry Regiment of the 34th Division.

At this point we should mention the surprising fact that von Arnim and Rommel had not met, although they were both commanders in the same theatre of operations. It was not until Kesselring insisted upon it that a meeting took place. The three commanders got together on 9 February and agreed a plan. This was for the combined forces of Rommel's Africa Army and von Arnim's 5th Panzer Army to strike and to destroy the Americans in Tunisia. Rommel's armour was to capture Gafsa in the south, while von Arnim's Panzer formations were to strike through the mountains in the north and capture Sbeitla. The combined German Panzer force would then swing northwards to take Bône and thereby would not only pre-empt the anticipated Allied offensive but might even destroy the British in the north of the country.

Von Arnim and Rommel held divergent views on their respective positions. As von Arnim saw it, his task was to hold a bridgehead and to provide a lodgement area as a base for future operations. It was his duty to prevent the destruction of that bridgehead, and in pursuit of this aim he was content to mount offensives that had limited objectives. Rommel was the bolder commander. In the matter of rank von Arnim was the subordinate, but he led his own army, the 5th Panzer, and was ill disposed to lose his authority over it and over the Panzer divisions he now commanded.

Von Arnim's battle to seize the Faid Pass and advance upon Sidi bou Zid began on 14 February 1943 and lasted two scant days and nights. The German attack burst through the pass, bypassed the 168th Regimental Combat Team, a largely infantry body, and forced Combat Command 'A' (CCA) of the 1st US Armored Division out of Sidi bou Zid. Overwhelmed by the German success, the US 2nd Corps pulled out of Gafsa, a strategic town which Rommel's forces promptly occupied. In an effort to restore the situation, the US 1st Armored Division put in an assault aimed at rescuing the beleaguered 168th Regimental Combat Team. The 1st Armored put in Combat Command 'C' and part of Combat Command 'B' but their attacks failed.

They were dispersed by Stuka aircraft, and only four of the attacking US vehicles were able to drive away from the battlefield, the remainder of the American machines being scattered or destroyed. Von Arnim had won another short, sharp victory.

Then Rommel came back on the scene. He had been in Mareth preparing his Africa Army for the anticipated British offensive there. With his return came the question of the new Axis operation. At TAC headquarters a conference was in progress when Rommel arrived and promptly offered to support the attack with his mobile units by taking them out of their positions in the Mareth Line, which was dormant at that time. Von Arnim, who was advised of Rommel's offer as well as the battle plan that the Field Marshal had prepared, turned down both. Rommel wanted to strike deep, to capture the crossroads village of Feriana and advance either upon Tebessa or upon Kasserine, where he would join forces with von Arnim's Panzers marching from Sbeitla. Von Arnim wanted to carry out only limited operations and would not place his 10th Panzer Division under Rommel's command. Kesselring, to whom both commanders appealed, would not give a wholehearted decision. The result of his indecisiveness, coupled with Rommel's energy and contempt for von Arnim's more cautious approach to the situation, produced a crisis in the Battle for Kasserine Pass. The Panzer divisions failed to effect a breakthrough and the Axis forces began to withdraw.

As von Arnim was to write in post-war years,

It was in the Tebessa sector that a new, dangerous thrust began to grow. The first move, as I saw it, would be [an American thrust] against Gafsa, Sened and the Faid Pass. This would have been a major threat to our rear, in the Mareth Line, which was being defended by General Messe's 1st Italian Army. Everything hung on being able to beat off the Americans . . .

Von Arnim turned down Rommel's battle plan. He considered that his superior's proposal was a dangerous risk which the Axis resources would be too weak to exploit, and it, being weak, could not guarantee success. Von Arnim's own operation, 'Spring Breeze', began at dawn on 14 February, and the opening attack saw the 10th Panzer Division rolling through the Pass while the 21st Panzer drove southwards in an outflanking movement through the desert. The advance by the 10th

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Panzer was successful and by fire-and-movement tactics the Panzers broke through the Pass, bypassed Jebel Lessouda and were there confronted by the tanks of the 1st US Armored Division. The Tigers, commanded by Major Seidenstücker, opened fire and every salvo destroyed more and more US vehicles.

While the tank battle of Sidi bou Zid was raging, the 21st Panzer Division, which had fought its way forward, reached the planned junction point with its sister-division. The US tank men were now under fire from three sides, and Combat Command 'A' was very soon destroyed. Combat Command 'C' fought hard and desperately to reach the armoured component of the 168th Combat Team. It was an unequal struggle. The Americans in their light armoured fighting vehicles were facing Tigers armed with 88mm guns, and soon more than 70 US tanks had been shot to pieces and lay as burning wrecks.

During the night the Panzers of the two divisions united to form a single battle group, and early in the morning of 15 February Ziegler, who was the commander on the ground, ordered the advance to continue towards Sbeitla. En route to that objective the two US armoured commands, now brought back up to strength by reinforcements of fresh tank units, contested the Panzer advance. It was a gallant attempt but one that ended in defeat. The Germans moved forward during the 16th when the 10th Panzer Division struck at Pichon, but then the attack upon that place was cancelled. Developments in Rommel's area led to the belief both in Rome and at Führer HQ that his plan, which had seemed to be too ambitious only days earlier, now appeared to be realisable. The OKW took both Panzer divisions from the 5th Panzer Army and placed them under Rommel's command. At a blow Ziegler's Kampfgruppe was dissolved.

Kasserine Pass had become the new objective, and it was attacked without success by each of the Panzer divisions in turn. The task finally fell to Stotten's Panzer battalion, and his thrust, allied to the other Panzer operations of those days, cost the Americans 169 tanks, 95 reconnaissance vehicles, 36 self-propelled guns and 50 pieces of artillery. It was during those days that the 10th Panzer Division reached Thala. Then fighting opened for the last pass before Tebessa. But the offensive had lasted too long and the German Panzer crews were be-

coming overstrained and overtired. The Panzer weapon had lost its cutting edge and the US Armored Command 'B' easily held the Afrika Korps' next thrust. The 21st Panzer Division had as its new objective the town of Pichon, but its advance was halted at Sbiba by a mine-field.

Von Arnim had always had doubts over the feasibility of Rommel's battle plan, and events had shown the Colonel-General to be right. To add to the worry and confusion which abounded, alarming news came in from the south, where the British 8th Army had attacked the Mareth positions earlier than expected. In view of this new development, Rommel was authorised to pull back his forces.

The events of the past few days had demonstrated the positive need for a really simplified command structure in Africa, and as a result 'Army Group Africa' was created and given authority over both Rommel's forces and those of the 5th Panzer Army. Rommel led the new army group for a fourteen-week period before he returned to Germany to undergo hospital treatment. Von Arnim, who was then named as his successor, had been working on a plan for an offensive to improve the positions of the 5th Panzer Army and which would pre-empt a future Allied offensive. The operation, code-named 'Ochsenkopf', opened on 26 February but was closed down only two days later after it became clear that too little ground had been won. After Rommel's departure on 9 March, von Arnim officially took over the post of GOC Africa with Ziegler as his deputy. On the 23rd the new army group commander paid a visit to the Italian 1st Army, where he authorised its commander to pull back his forces to the Wadi Akarit positions.

The first British attack of the new offensive against Wadi Akarit was flung back, but in the following weeks von Arnim was forced to issue orders for his soldiers to retreat so as to avoid their being totally destroyed. One of his many humanitarian gestures at this time was to forbid Axis aircraft to fly combat missions so as to conserve the petrol that they would otherwise have consumed. That fuel von Arnim used to transport the sick and wounded of his army group. The supply position remained as ever precarious, and when he was accused of always looking over his shoulder he agreed, adding the qualification that he did this in the hope of catching sight of a single supply ship.

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The military situation became critical, and because of the supply position all the Flak batteries that could be spared were placed to the west of Tunis town, there to be employed in an anti-tank or field gun capacity. There was a shortage of mines and barbed wire, and in the whole area there were no natural anti-tank ditches. The most bitter of all the shortages was that of artillery shells and anti-tank projectiles. The 5th Panzer Army was reduced at times to half a day's consumption. As von Arnim remarked drily after one dispute with OKW, 'It is not possible to fire shells which lie at the bottom of the sea.' To see his problem in true perspective, Arnim's new command, Army Group Africa, had sunk to a strength of 34 battalions of German infantry and 14 battalions of Italian infantry. There were only 49 batteries of artillery, 33 of which were light field guns. The total strength in AFVs was 89 German and 24 Italian machines. The Axis forces in Africa were bleeding to death, and no one back in Europe seemed to care. Indeed, the Chief of the German General Staff replied thus to a question put to him about Africa: 'Africa? I have already written Africa off.'

Whether it was a question of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing or whether it was a deliberate lie on Hitler's part, when the Führer was made aware of the critical supply position in Africa he promptly ordered the tonnage to be raised from 90,000 per month to 150,000, but omitted to specify how this target was to be reached. The only decisive statement to be issued to Army Group Africa was the unrealisable order that the positions in the Mareth Line were to be held to the last; not only that, but any British offensive operations were to be met by Axis counteroffensives. In view of the catastrophic fuel situation in Africa, there could be no chance of Army Group Africa's mounting such operations.

There was then a confrontation between von Arnim and Kesselring, the Supreme Commander South. The latter began by criticising von Arnim's handling of his army group, and when von Arnim had the chance to question his superior officer his first question was to ask for the role of the 5th Panzer Army to be defined. Kesselring's reply was that it was to weaken any Allied advance in the north of Tunisia while Mareth had to be held to the last. When von Arnim returned to the supply position his remarks were ignored and Kesselring repeated his

criticism of von Arnim's handling of his Panzer divisions. It seemed incredible to the Colonel-General that his superior seemed to be unable to grasp that in the north of Tunisia there was an Allied army growing daily stronger, while in the south of that country there was an American military force whose strength he estimated to be three divisions, and that against that US group he could commit just one single regiment.

The final battle opened at the end of April 1943, but up to 4 May the line in north and central Tunisia, along the course of the original perimeter, was held. On the day that Tunis fell, 7 May, a crisis developed. A ship loaded with 700 British prisoners of war was attacked by RAF aircraft. The Italian crew abandoned the ship and it was left to the German harbourmaster to contact von Arnim's headquarters and to tell a colonel on von Arnim's staff of the situation. The Commander-in-Chief had a message sent in clear to Sir Harold Alexander, the British GOC, telling him that British aircraft were in danger of killing their own men. Alexander halted the air raids.

On 12 May, at Ste Marie zu Zit, von Arnim decided to end the pointless struggle. He sent an officer emissary to British headquarters, and that officer was then taken to the headquarters of General Anderson, the Commander-in-Chief of the British 1st Army. While awaiting that officer's return, the Germans made preparations to destroy the last of Rommel's caravans and to tip into a wadi the last two of Rommel's command tanks. Von Arnim had refused Hitler's offer to be flown back to Germany. It was his intention that, come what may, he would share the fate of the men he commanded. The Commander-in-Chief was taken to Alexander's TAC headquarters, where he was asked if there was anything he would like. His answer was an immediate 'Yes'. He had saved the lives of 700 British prisoners, and he asked in return that a similar number of badly wounded Germans be returned home in a hospital ship. Alexander agreed to the wish of the last commander of Army Group Africa and then von Arnim left to spend years as a prisoner of war in Britain, the USA and finally Germany. During his time as a prisoner of the Americans he was able to intervene to prevent his companions from being ill-treated by their guards.

At the end of four years' imprisonment von Arnim was released and returned to his family. The estates that the von Arnims had owned in

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eastern Germany had meanwhile been confiscated by the Russians, and he had to set up a new home in Bad Wildingen. He died there, at the age of 73, on 1 September 1962. At his graveside General Westphal gave a valediction that ended with the words: 'Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim was what a senior military officer has to be—a man, a person and a gentleman.'

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