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The year 1942 saw the high point of German military successes in the Second World War, but there were, as always in military operations, some setbacks. These, it was confidently anticipated in Führerhauptquartier, would be overcome as the war machine of the Third Reich drove on to final victory. One of the minor problems, which affected the war in North Africa, was that the Axis armies fighting in the Libyan desert did not have a major port sufficiently close to the combat zone through which the German-Italian forces could be supplied. Tobruk would have been ideal, but it had been captured by the British in 1940 and they had held it against Rommel's attacks in 1941. Now, in the spring of 1942, with Rommel and the Axis desert armies fighting a long way east of Tobruk, the need for such a port, with major facilities, became vital. A proposal had been made to the OKW that if the British-held island of Malta could be captured, then this would be an acceptable alternative to Tobruk. Hitler grasped the concept immediately and ordered the necessary preparations to be made.

Thus it was against the Führer's imperative need for a deep-water port that planning began for an airborne assault that would seize Malta. Hitler knew that its capture would require a strong force of expert soldiers, and he knew also that it would be an operation which would be attended with a number of serious risks. Not only would the island have been prepared to defend itself against attack from the air, but there would be the most violent British reaction to the Axis operation. The Royal Navy had a very strong presence in the Mediterranean, but to counterbalance that domination the Axis battle plan proposed that its seaborne invasion force would be escorted by heavy units of the Italian Navy.

During the May 1942 preparations for the Malta operation, Walter Koch, whose battalion had captured the Maas bridges and the fort of Eben Emaël in 1940, was ordered to train a 5th Para Regiment which would spearhead that mission. It had been the OKW's original intention to employ Koch's unit, which was to form part of the 3rd Para Division, and which would be used to reinforce General Ramcke's Para Brigade already in Africa, but military events altered that intention. The order from Führer headquarters was acted upon and soon, at the paratroop training ground of Grossborn in Magdeburg, men began to

come in. These first arrivals in Koch's new regiment were mostly experienced paratroop soldiers who had been with him in his original Sturm battalion or else were men who had served with the air landing regiment. Around that cadre of seasoned men a 3rd Battalion was created, its companies fleshed out with recruits from the three main para training schools. Concurrent with the raising of 3rd Battalion, a 1st Battalion was also being created. A 2nd Battalion already existed but had been posted to the Libyan desert, where it formed part of Ramcke's brigade and was known as Battle Group Hubner.

In July the 1st and 3rd Battalions of Koch's regiment were posted to Normandy to undergo intensive training on the French Army's exercise area at Mourmelon to the south-west of Reims. In the event, preparations for the mission to take Malta by airborne assault were cancelled. In Africa Rommel's new spring offensive had finally taken Tobruk and thereby obviated the need to attack the island. Hitler is reported to have qualified his cancelling of the Malta operation with these words: 'Once the Italian admirals learn that the British fleet is under way they will turn their ships around and race back to port, leaving the troop transports defenceless.' Whether that reason was a valid one cannot be confirmed, but the Malta mission was cancelled. Koch's two battalions were then posted to Italy, ready to be transported overseas to serve in the Libyan desert. The Allied landings in French North Africa required as a matter of urgency that all available units in France and Italy be despatched to Tunisia to guard the back of Rommel's desert army.

In the early hours of the evening of 10 November 1942 Captain Knoche's 3rd Battalion was detrained on to the platforms of the Caserta railway station. When news of the Allied invasion of French North Africa was received, both of Koch's battalions had been placed on 'alarm' status. As a result of the hasty troop movements, the arrival of part of Koch's formation solved a problem that confronted Kesselring, the German Supreme Commander South-East. When Hitler learned of the Anglo-American landings he had telephoned Kesselring asking what forces were immediately available to be put in against the invaders. The Field Marshal's reply was that, apart from his own defence unit, there were only the two battalions of the 5th Para Regiment ready for action. Hitler ordered that these be flown to Tunisia with minimum delay.

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The regiment were posted to the French Army's exercises. In the event, preparations for a airborne assault were cancelled. The operation had finally taken place in North Africa required its units in France and Italy be destroyed. Hitler is reported to have said: "The German fleet is under way they are to port, leaving the troops as a valid one cannot be led. Koch's two battalions were ordered overseas to serve in North Africa required its units in France and Italy be destroyed. Rommel's desert army.

On 11 November 1942 Captain Koch's platforms of the Caserta Division of French North Africa had been placed on 'alarm' status. The arrival of part of the 1st Paratrooper Division confronted Kesselring, the German commander. When Hitler learned of the situation Kesselring asking what to do in against the invaders. The 1st Paratrooper Regiment ready for action in Tunisia with minimum delay.

Both battalions had concentrated in Caserta during the evening of the 10th and as an 'O' group an advance guard was formed consisting of an officer and men from No 10 Company. From Caserta that group was taken to the airfield outside Naples, taking off on 11 November. A refuelling stop was made in Sicily, and when the Ju 52s left on the following day they were forced to fly low over the water to avoid attacks by RAF fighter aircraft. The advance party landed on El Aouina airfield outside Tunis, where an air raid was in progress, and found that they were not the first German troops to arrive in Tunisia. The para group was ordered to drive through the city and to block the westward-leading roads, i.e. the direction from which the Anglo-Americans would come.

The first flight of aircraft carrying men from the 3rd Battalion began to come in during the early hours of the 12th and the soldiers were disembarked in short order. The air crews had been given instructions to unload with all speed, and they flung the equipment on to the runway in their haste to depart. Within hours the Junkers had returned carrying No 10 Company and part of No 12. Already a stream of units was coming in, to build up a defensive perimeter of troops around the capital.

On 15 November the leading elements of Jungwirth's 1st Battalion began to fly in and found that the regimental headquarters had already sent out reconnaissance patrols. One of these had reported that the French were using delaying tactics to prevent the important area of Medjez el Bab, and its town of the same name, from being occupied by the Germans. Captain Koch had persuaded the French to withdraw and to allow his men to occupy the high ground around the town. It was a vital area and at an 'O' group on the 16th Koch proposed that an immediate all-out assault be launched to extend the Axis perimeter westwards. General Nehring, the corps commander, concerned that such a move might result in his resources being overstretched, countered with the proposal that battle groups be formed to capture the town and the bridge across the Medjerda river.

Captain Knoche, commanding the 3rd Battalion, led out his battle group but found upon his arrival in Medjez el Bab that Battle Group Schirmer was already there. That group had arrived in Medjez el Bab

announcing, untruthfully, that they were the advance guard of a newly landed parachute regiment. The French may or may not have believed the story, but they began to reinforce their troops in the Medjez area. In the face of a growing French build-up Schirmer decided to pull back his battle group, causing Koch to complain that if his plan of action had been followed Medjez would by that time have been in German hands. Koch had arranged for a Stuka raid for first light on 19 November and gave orders that Knoche was to attack after the aerial bombardment if he detected signs that French resistance was crumbling. If it was not, then he was to remain in position outside the town. Finally, Koch told his subordinate that in any event he was to prevent the Anglo-American forces from driving on to Tunis.

Koch then discussed with Knoche the disposition of the 3rd Battalion and particularly the platoons of anti-tank and anti-aircraft gunners. The regimental commander mentioned that he had pulled the Schirmer group out and that Knoche was to take command of all troops in the Medjez sector. Knoche formed the troops he had been given, some 300 men, into three battle groups. The first objective, he told them, was to be the bridge over the river, and the operation depended upon the result of the Stuka air raid. There was no air raid at the appointed time, but one did come in shortly before 1130 hours. As the dive-bombers swooped down, the paras of Nos 10 and 12 Companies opened fire and then charged the French positions.

The attack succeeded in capturing most of the town east of the river, but the important bridge lay in no man's land between the German and the Allied positions. A contingent of Italian infantry that had been promised for the dawn attack did not arrive until the early afternoon. Even the reinforcement of these fresh troops was not enough to bring the attack forward, and it was cancelled. Late in the afternoon Koch arrived and almost his first action was to criticise the disposition of Knoche's battle group. At an 'O' group Knoche laid before his superior a plan to attack during the night and to seize the town. Koch doubted whether the battle group would be strong enough to gain the objective, and he then left the battle front to return to Tunis. Within hours he was back again, bringing with him a lorry loaded with explosive charges.

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The regimental commander and the battle group commander then discussed, once again, the latter's plan of attack. It was agreed that when the main assault went in small groups of paras who would have waded across the Medjerda river were to move in towards Medjez and blow up any enemy positions they came across. Ten such groups were formed, and each was led by a veteran who had fought in Crete. Each group was kitted out with machine pistols, hand grenades and other explosive devices and each was given a sector in which to operate.

Allied artillery fire died down after last light, and at 2300 hours the individual groups reached their jump-off positions. At midnight they set out at intervals to wade across the river. They penetrated the west-ern part of the town and began to work their way towards the centre. Once assembled, they waited in the darkness until it was time to act. At 0100 hours the explosive charges they had placed began to detonate, blowing up lorries and smashing Allied armoured fighting vehicles. The sudden attacks were a complete surprise and in the streets of Medjez there were vicious firefights as the Allies sought to mount counter-attacks against the German groups. The paras formed a hedgehog po-sition and kept up a controlled fire in order to conserve ammunition. The Allied soldiers were held off and then, just before dawn, the sound of tank engines and tank tracks was heard. The noise came from a group of Allied tanks, which were promptly attacked by the paras. Two of the vehicles were destroyed by hollow-charge grenades placed on their exteriors. The Allied troops then pulled out of the town in the direction of Oued Zarga and in their flight left behind not only dam-aged and undamaged machines but also a store of rations and other things which the paras were able to use.

The first battle by Koch's regiment to take Medjez el Bab had suc-ceeded, but as yet the first Allied troops were only an advance guard. The mass of the Allied armies was moving out of Algeria and into Tunisia. Back in the capital, which was now securely in German hands, the time had come for the Axis troops to change from a defensive to an offensive strategy if they were to extend the area of their perimeter. In Medjez the initiative passed from Knoche's battle group and was taken up by Schirmer's group, which was ordered to pursue the enemy up the road to Oued Zarga. He decided to attack this small town but Koch

ordered the operation to be aborted. Schirmer led the infantry guns of No 12 Company through the hills near Beja with his little artillery group and opened fire, causing the Allies a great many casualties.

Meanwhile in the town of Medjez the paras consolidated their positions and pushed patrols out to strengthen the regiment's right flank. One of those patrol groups was attacked during the following night by Spahi cavalry. The detachment's mortar and machine-gun fire crushed the French cavalry attack. The first battle to hold the German perimeter was opened and was to develop into a bitter struggle as the Allies continued to bring in fresh troops in their attempts to destroy the Axis forces in Tunisia.

At this point, as the fighting died down temporarily, let us recapitulate on what both sides had been trying to achieve and how successful, or not, they had been. The Axis armies in the desert had already begun a slow retreat at the beginning of November 1942, when the Anglo-American forces landed in French North Africa. As a result of these landings in Algeria and Tunisia, the Allies had placed a military force at Rommel's back. If the Anglo-French-American armies could establish a dominant military presence in Tunisia, then Rommel's armies would be crushed between the British 8th Army and the Allied host in Tunisia. It was to prevent this catastrophe from coming about that Hitler had sent troops to Tunisia with orders to make sure that Rommel's force retreating through Libya would have sufficient space to concentrate and to regroup.

The Führer's orders had been, first, to form a bridgehead and then to expand this westward. This is what the para groups and the follow-up divisions had been fighting to achieve. Quite early in the campaign Koch's unit had been reinforced by Witzig's engineer para battalion and then another para unit led by Major Barenthin. Then followed German and Italian divisions to strengthen the perimeter. The development of the Tunis campaign was to see the German attempts to extend the perimeter and the Allies to smash this. If the latter could gain the important road junctions, they could bottle up the Axis armies before going on to destroy them completely. In view of the Allies' superiority in manpower and material resources the campaign could only have one end, and although the German-Italian forces were aware of



the infantry guns of No. 10 Light Artillery Group and the anti-aircraft batteries.

The British consolidated their positions on the regiment's right flank. During the following night by machine-gun fire crushed the German perimeter struggle as the Allies attempted to destroy the

temporarily, let us recapitulate the events and how successful, the desert had already begun in 1942, when the Anglo-American forces placed a military force against the German armies. Then Rommel's armies were driven from the Allied host in North Africa. From coming about that time, make sure that Rommel's forces had sufficient space to concentrate

on a bridgehead and then on the groups and the following day early in the campaign the engineer para battalion reinforced the perimeter. Then followed the German attempts to break this. If the latter could bottle up the Axis armies in the view of the Allies' superior forces the campaign could only be won if the Allied forces were aware of



Above: General von Arnim, here seen as commander of the corps that had responsibility for the defence of Cholm. He is being shown the positions in the town that Major-General Scherer's force held from January until the first week of May 1942.



Right: General von Arnim (left) with General von Vörst, Tunisia, 1943.

their impending fate they fought staunchly, launching a series of offensive operations to delay the inevitable.

To return to events at the end of November 1942, Koch had recalled Schirmer's group and had given orders to Knoche to drive to Tebourba and to hold that area with a line of defensive positions intended to protect the Tebourba airfield against possible Allied attack. The consequence of this order was that the German paras were spread out in penny packets from the airfield via Medjez el Bab and on to El Aroussa—a battle line 60km long. Because Koch's units were so divided the paras were nowhere in strength.

Reports came in that Allied armour was on the move and had reached El Aroussa. To check this Allied thrust Knoche moved his anti-tank and anti-aircraft detachments by night. In daylight the paras saw a number of American armoured vehicles moving, seemingly aimlessly, around in the El Aroussa sector. Koch's subordinate had chosen his positions well. He opened a destructive fire upon the US vehicles and after a two-hour firefight the Americans pulled back. Then Koch arrived and, after being briefed on the situation, ordered the action to be broken off and told the units that he had brought with him to withdraw into positions between El Aroussa and Bou Arada.

Knoche's battle group was ordered back to Medjez el Bab, where a new crisis was developing. In the Medjez sector there was a build-up of Allied armoured forces whose strength was too great for Schirmer's battalion to withstand. He and his men were forced out of the town and took up positions in the high ground to the east of Medjez. The right wing of Knoche's battalion remained wide open to a possible Allied thrust until a detachment of the 10th Panzer Division came forward and gained touch. From that point onwards the fighting in the Medjez area was in the nature of an aggressive defence by Koch's regiment, fighting, together with the other formations which had come across from the European mainland, with the aim of preventing the Allies from advancing upon Tunis and thereby ending the campaign.

The fighting reduced in intensity during the winter and wet spring of 1943. Lieutenant-Colonel Koch was forced to pull back his regiment to the area west of Massicault and he positioned the battalions on either side of the main road. Just before the end of the year General



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Nehring ordered an attack to be made in the Tebourba area. For this he proposed to take Koch's regiment from its positions in the Medjez area and to use them to spearhead the advance into the back of the Allied forces. If that battle plan succeeded, the Allies would be encircled before they realised that Medjez had been denuded of troops. As a measure of just how short of troops the Germans were, for the forthcoming offensive so many had to be taken from rear-area units that Tunis city was defended by just 30 men and two 88mm guns.

It was the task of Koch's regiment to attack from the south and thereby close the southern and south-western parts of the ring. Koch led his men into action on 30 November in an advance up the Medjez road to camouflage the fact that the town had been evacuated. The paras were then to swing westwards so as to fall upon the backs of the US armoured units. The advance of Koch's regiment was led by his 3rd Battalion, and while this moved towards Medjez the main body of the regiment swung towards El Bathan. The 3rd Battalion soon joined the other battalions, and they not only cut off the little town but gained touch with the advance guard of the 10th Panzer Division. The paras then fought from house to house in the town, battling their way forward until they had driven the US forces into panic flight towards Longstop Hill.

The battle had been both a tactical and a strategic success. Strategically, the Germans had prevented the Allies from 'winning the race to Tunis'. Koch's paras moved back to positions east of Medjez el Bab and concentrated in the hills which dot the area. The fighting was then in the nature of patrol activity and small offensives.

In March 1943 the 5th Para Regiment was renamed the Jäger Regiment 'Hermann Göring' and a month later Koch himself was flown to a hospital in Germany for specialist treatment. He was not to return to Africa, where his old unit passed into captivity in the May of that year, but on 28 August 1943, after convalescence, he was placed in the officers' pool for future employment. Two months later, while driving in thick fog on the autobahn near Berlin, Koch was in collision with another vehicle and was killed.

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