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The Center Task Force was also composed of American troops. It was to be transported from England and to land at Oran under the protection of British naval forces.

The Eastern Task Force was a combined group made up of British and American units, with the British in the majority. It was also to be transported from England, and its mission was to take Algiers. The Eastern Task Force was to be supported by a special element of the Royal Air Force, the Eastern Air Command, under the command of Air Marshal Sir William Welsh.

The Twelfth Air Force, under Major General Doolittle, was set up to support the operations of the two American groups, the Center and Western Task Forces. Since there was a shortage of well-trained crews in the United States, the Eighth Air Force released some of its own personnel to fill key positions in the new formation. The Eighth Air Force, under Major General Karl Spaatz, had been training crews for daylight high-altitude bomber raids from bases in England, and now took over the task of training the rest of the personnel brought over from the United States for the Twelfth Air Force.

On 23 September, Major General Doolittle assumed command of his air fleet. The following elements were under him:

XII Bomber Command (Colonel Claude E. Duncan),

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XII Fighter Command (Colonel Thomas W. Blackburn), and

XII Air Force Service Command (Colonel Harold A. Bartron as of 4 October).

Since the operations of the Twelfth Air Force were to be coordinated primarily with those of the Center Task Force and since it was to make its headquarters in Oran, it seemed expedient to set up a special air group to support the remotely-located Western Task Force. Instead of bomber and fighter commands, the new group had only bomber and fighter wings at its disposal. On 1 October it was christened the XII Air Support Command and placed under the command of Brigadier General John K. Cannon.

In the person of the British Admiral Cunningham, Eisenhower had an excellent naval chief, known throughout the Near East, at his disposal; he had no air chief with similar qualifications.

Instead, there were two separate air commanders, directing the operations of the British Eastern Air Command and of the American Twelfth Air Force respectively.

The two were divided in respect to nationality, missions, and theaters of operations. This division corresponded in general with the contemplated distribution of the available Allied

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forces between the American Fifth Army and the British First Army.

Both air commanders were directly subordinate to Eisenhower, and coordination of their operations was entrusted to Air Commodore A. P. M. Sanders and Brigadier General Howard A. Craigh, both on Eisenhower's staff.

Doolittle's Twelfth Air Force was nearly three times as large as Air Marshal Welsh's Eastern Air Command (1,244 aircraft to 454).

The operations of the Royal Air Force's Coastal Command in England as well as those of the Eighth Air Force under General Spaatz were closely connected with the preparations for Operation TORCH.

The Royal Air Force, in addition to its other tasks, was chiefly responsible for covering the convoys crossing the Atlantic. At the same time, deceptive maneuvers of all kinds were carried out in order to make the Germans think that preparations were being made for a landing in Norway. The attacks by the Eighth Air Force were directed against the German submarine pens on the French coast, in order to facilitate the planned movement of the transport fleet from England to Gibraltar. Concurrently, targets in northwestern Europe were bombed in order to hold the German Luftwaffe in check there.

If it should prove necessary, Eisenhower intended to fall back on the entire Eighth Air Force; for the moment, however, only two

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heavy bomber groups (the 91st and the 103d) were earmarked for duty in Africa. The P-38's of the 78th Group were retained in England as a fighter reserve.

The overwhelming demonstration of Allied air strength over the African landing points was intended to convince the defenders that the invasion represented a force beyond their control and that they could thus lay down their weapons without compromising their honor.

The landing operation itself was to be carried out under the protection of carrier-based aircraft, while the paratroopers of the 60th Carrier Group were to seize the two most important airfields in the vicinity of Oran, La Senia, and Tafaraoui. Once the airfields were in Allied hands, the Spitfires waiting at Gibraltar and the fighter squadrons left in England could be ordered to Africa.

During the course of the summer, the airfield at Gibraltar was enlarged and improved, and subterranean fuel storage tanks were constructed.

Gibraltar was selected to serve as Eisenhower's headquarters. At the same time it would serve as a take-off point for British and American units being flown to Africa, insofar as the flight from England might have to be interrupted there.

During the landing operation, Doolittle was supposed to remain available at Eisenhower's headquarters. For that period the units of the Twelfth Air Force were to be under the command of his A-3, Colonel Lauris Norstad,

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and those of the Air Support Command in Casablanca under General Cannon. Both were under the commanders of the respective landing forces as regarded the coordination of operations. Later on, Doolittle planned to set up his headquarters at Oran and resume command of the Twelfth Air Force and - later - of the XII Air Support Command as well. He was to await further orders from Eisenhower regarding their subsequent missions.

During the early stages of the landing operation, Gibraltar appeared to be very seriously endangered.

First of all, the airfields in Africa had to be captured, and even then the entire French ground organization would not be anywhere near sufficient to handle all the Allied air units. In the meantime, Gibraltar was becoming extremely congested.

And if Gibraltar should be subjected to intensive and continuous air attack during the waiting period, the Spitfires and Hurricanes could be reduced to scrap metal.

If we take all these factors into consideration, we must admit that Operation TORCH was the most daring action undertaken by American and British planners during the entire course of the war.

Success depended to a far greater degree on political than on military factors.

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Would the French offer resistance and, if so, how stubborn would it be? Had secrecy been maintained? Would Spain intervene? Would the weather forecasts be such that the Western Task Force could get ashore?

Under these conditions, the prevailing mood of nervous tension was quite justified when Eisenhower's aircraft landed at Gibraltar on 5 November. It had been decided that the landings at Oran and Algiers would begin at 0100 on 8 November.

"In order to continue to deceive the Axis powers, the convoys which had passed Gibraltar during the afternoon of 6 November under the protection of 'Force H' maintained a course towards the east. Not until the afternoon of the following day were they sighted by enemy air forces, and on this occasion Force H succeeded in drawing off the attacks; the convoys continued undisturbed, in the direction of Malta. Not until darkness had fallen did they alter course for Oran and Algiers.

The storming of Algiers began according to plan at 0100 on 8 November. General Mast surrendered a key point of the fort, as he had promised General Clark he would do, and this, coupled with the employment of the carrier-based aircraft, did much to facilitate the task of the landing troops.

After Algiers itself, the primary targets

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were the airfields at Maison Blanche and Blida.

Maison Blanche, ten miles southeast of Algiers, surrendered quickly to an American assault group, and by 0900 eighteen Hurricanes from the 43d Squadron had already landed there. Almost simultaneously, a Royal Air Force maintenance group arrived on the scene, having covered the distance from the landing point to Maison Blanche in a little under three hours.

Shortly afterwards Blida, fifteen miles southeast of Algiers, was seized by four Martlets (Grumman F_4F's) from the naval air force.

Sporadic resistance flared up from time to time, but during the course of the afternoon the ship-based guns and the armaments of the carrier-based aircraft succeeded in bringing still another important fortress under control. The 81st and 242d Squadrons landed at Maison Blanche to provide additional air reinforcement.

Negotiations with the French were complicated by the unexpected presence of Admiral Darlan. Fortunately, the unbidden guest soon agreed to be reasonable and, while negotiations were still going on, he called a halt to the resistance in Algiers.

The local fighting, then, had been brought to a successful close, but there was still a shadow

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over the over-all operation."[14]

Oran was to be encircled by landings to the east and west of the city. Then, supported by naval artillery, the landed troops were to storm the town.

Top priority was to be given to the capture of the airfields at La Senia and Tafaraoui by armored troops.

Until such time as the Twelfth Air Force could get into action, the landings would have to be covered by carrier-based aircraft. These aircraft were also supposed to carry out a raid on La Senia at daybreak in the hope of destroying the backbone of the French air forces.

At the appointed time, two companies of a special unit (assault troops) fought their way into Arzeu and succeeded in smothering enemy resistance. As a result, the 1st Infantry Division was able to capture the city by 0745. The way to Oran, however, was still blocked by French units stationed at Saint Cloud.

In the meantime another fighting unit (the 26th R.C.T.) had landed successfully at Les Andalouses, but was prevented by French artillery from taking the decisive ridges of the Jebel Mounjado, from which Mers-el-Kebir and Oran could be held under fire.

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14 - Richards, Denis, op. cit., Volume II, pp 248 and 249, and The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 69.

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The western flank of Task Force B had encountered considerable difficulty in locating its appointed landing area. Once on shore, however, it quickly captured Lourmel and moved on during the afternoon into the Misserghin area.

The coastal batteries of Oran were firing on the 'Rodney', and French destroyers were engaged in a hopeless battle with the British fleet.

In the meantime, the eastern flank of Task Force B had broken through via the 1st Infantry Division bridgehead at Arzeu and pushed on through St. Barbe-du-Thelat. Towards noon, after a brief but savage struggle, it captured the Tafaraoui airfield, thus opening the way for the Twelfth Air Force units.

The 31st Group, originally scheduled for Casablanca, was the first to be ready for take-off in Gibraltar, and Doolittle ordered it deviated to Tafaraoui. It took off with an escort of two Spitfire squadrons.

Its landing at Tafaraoui, at about 1700, was carried out in the face of French artillery fire, which was soon put down, and an unexpected attack by four Devoitines, which had been erroneously identified as Hurricanes. Three of these were shot down.

In order to bring the paratroopers to Maison

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Blanche, Bone, and - if feasible - as far forward was Tunis as soon as possible, Eisenhower had given Bentley's C-47 wing permission to start from southwestern England on the afternoon of 7 November. His plan was doomed to failure by a number of unfortunate mishaps during the flight.

Finally, after an intermediate landing near a lighthouse in the vicinity of Mellila in Spanish Morocco, Bentley saw about a dozen of his C-47's on the dried-out bed of the salt sea Salkra d'Oran. Later, while reconnoitering over La Senia, he was forced down by engine trouble and was immediately taken prisoner.

Nor was Colonel Raff able to avoid mishaps entirely; nevertheless, he managed to land the majority of his paratroopers at Tafaraoui late in the afternoon.

The night of 8/9 November passed with shooting from both sides. Shortly after daybreak, the maintenance personnel of the 31st Group arrived at Tafaraoui by truck.

The French air units had departed from La Senia at noon, their destination Morocco.

During the day, the 31st Group was able to provide valuable assistance in the stubborn fighting around Oran. By means of hour-long attacks, it managed to force back a strong French column advancing from Sidi-bel-Abbes.

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In conjunction with the naval forces, it also participated in the attacks on the French coastal batteries. A total of forty-five sorties were flown during the day. Doolittle landed at Tafaroui during the course of the afternoon.

In the meantime, the landing forces had made further progress. The 1st Division had managed to evade French resistance at Saint Cloud, although its 18th Regimental Task Force (Regimentskampfgruppe) was still pinned down on the slopes west of Mers-el-Kebir.

The western armored force was able to detour around Misserghin and to break the enemy resistance at La Senia in coordinated operations with low-flying Spitfires.

Once the two armored groups had made contact, Oran soon fell, despite a stubborn attempt by the defenders to entrench themselves behind the street barriers.

Towards noon of the following day (10 November), the French realized that further resistance was useless and began armistice negotiations.

Since 8 November, seven aircraft had been irrevocably lost; six aircraft from the 52d Group had been forced to make emergency landings at various points due to lack of fuel during the flight from Gibraltar.

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On 10 November, only twenty C-47's of the 60th Group were ready for commitment.

Algeria was now secure, and the way was open for continued air transport of forces into the area and for the campaign impending further towards the east.

On 8 November, at 0400, Patton's Western Task Force, the largest of the American groups, launched the attack on Casablanca. By 10 November, after two days of heavy fighting in which the outcome was unpredictable, it had taken Port Lyautey and Mehdia. On 11 November, Resident General Nogues capitulated.

Due to the complete disruption of communications, Eisenhower - waiting anxiously in Gibraltar - heard precious little about the progress of the Western Task Force. But the fall of Oran had also sealed the fate of Casablanca[15].

The main requirement for the successful capture of Tunisia was that it be accomplished without loss of time. A scant 100 miles away from the beckoning targets of Bizerte and Tunis lay Sicily, the highly important Axis base.

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15 - Author's Note: Inasmuch as this study is concerned with the commitment of the German Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, the events at Casablanca have merely been mentioned briefly.

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And on 9 November, German fighters, bombers, and troop-laden Ju-52's took off from Sicily for El-Glenina, where they were welcomed at the command of the Resident General, Admiral Jean Pierre Esteva.

During the following days, more and more forces were brought, by both sea and air transport, to Biserte and the nearby airfield, Sidi Ahmed.

But apart from the nearness and obvious determination of the enemy, there was still another factor which made immediate action imperative for the Allies.

It is common knowledge that the rainy period in the north Tunisian mountains usually sets in in December and continues until February. It transforms lower-lying country into a sea of viscous mud.

Thus the Allies had only about one month of good weather in which to contact the enemy and destroy the forces which the Axis powers were in the process of building.

On 9 November, Lieutenant General K. A. N. Anderson had arrived in Algiers in order to begin the thrust to the east with the British First Army and the Royal Air Force's Eastern Air Command.

Even counting the American units, the strength of the British First Army during the first critical stages of the initial fighting in Tunisia was never more than one division,

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with a single armored regiment.

As early as 10 November, a convoy left Algiers to take the harbor of Bougie, 115 miles away. One of the ships had been ordered to proceed another 30 miles to the east, in order to seize the airfield at Djidjelli. From the airfield, fighter aircraft were to return to the convoy as escorts as soon as it drew near to Bougie.

Heavy seas made a landing at Djidjelli impossible, however, and the ships were forced to turn back.

During the afternoon and evening of 11 November, the convoy was attacked by German bombers, and two of the transport ships were destroyed. On the morning of 12 November, the attack on the harbor was renewed, which resulted not only in further losses but also in considerable delay in the unloading operation. This meant, in turn, that the airfield could not be supplied with fuel on schedule, so that the 154th Squadron, landing there during the forenoon, was capable of only partial employment.

Eisenhower's plan to move the paratroopers forward as far as possible could not be carried out until 12 November. Then, twenty-six transport aircraft from the 64th US Army Group, operating under fighter cover, dropped 312 British paratroopers over Duzerville, six miles south of Bone. A number of British assault units had landed at dawn in the harbor of Bone without encountering any

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opposition. As night fell, however, German aircraft began to bomb the airfield as though they wanted to force its evacuation.

The next day a British armored unit (Blade) was landed in Bone and moved right on towards the east. By 15 November, elements of the British 36th Brigade had already occupied Tabarka, only fifty-six miles from Tunis.

On the same day, 350 paratroopers from the 2d Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, landed successfully at Youks-les-Bains, despite the fact that the situation was still quite uncertain at the start of their jump. The battalion soon made contact with the French at Tebessa and subsequently pushed on towards Gafsa, towards the unprotected southern flank of the Axis forces.

On 16 November, the American 64th Group dropped another 384 British paratroopers at Souk-el-Arba.

Eisenhower's efforts to reach a workable agreement with the various French generals in North Africa did not proceed as smoothly as anticipated. On 13 November, therefore, he flew to Algiers and managed to conclude an agreement with Admiral Darlan whereby the latter declared himself willing to cooperate with the Allies. He issued orders to the French troops

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to open resistance against the German forces.

In Tunisia, after a good deal of inconclusive fighting on both sides, important elements of the Division Barre had gone over to the Allies and had pledged themselves to cover the assembling of the British 78th Division.

"In the meantime, Feldmarschall Kesselring had had time to report to the Fuehrer Headquarters regarding his evaluation of the situation and his intentions.

He estimated Allied strength in French North Africa at nearly five divisions (based on a transport capacity of approximately 700,000 tons). This total was augmented by units of undetermined strength recruited from the French colonies. These units, however, were poorly equipped and without adequate weapons.

Kesselring realized that the enemy would begin to move forward as soon as possible in order to be sure of capturing Tunisia - specifically Bizerte and Tunis - before the Germans could dispatch stronger forces to these points.

There was another, even graver danger, however; it was entirely possible that the enemy might succeed in wedging himself between the German forces in northern Tunisia and Rommel's Panzer Army. This might happen at any one of the totally unprotected areas of Sousse, Sfax, or Gabes.

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On the other hand, the enemy would have to cover a distance of 375 to 500 miles between his point of landing and his targets. Much of this distance would have to be covered on foot, through unfriendly and dangerous mountain territory.

Inasmuch as the rainy period was expected to begin about the middle of December, there was probably no danger of a large-scale operation in the immediate future. On the other hand, German leaders must be alert for enemy armed reconnaissance patrols into forward territory, carried out by motorized troops similar to those of the British Long-Range Desert Group.

Feldmarschall Kesselring had decided to take maximum advantage of the favorable mountainous character of the terrain and to set up a line of defense in the form of small resistance bases along the western border of Tunisia, in order to slow down the enemy's progress by every possible means. Every attempt would be made to keep the defense offensive in character, since the lack of combat experience of the Allied troops made them highly vulnerable to all sorts of small-scale harrassing actions.

At the same time, however, a strong motorized force must be organized in the rear area to take over the task of repulsing any enemy breakthroughs on the line of defense. Above all, this combat group must maintain contact with Rommel's forces in the south until an effective line of defense could be established there.

Further, this combat group was to be reinforced

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as rapidly as possible to the point where it would be capable of launching an attack against the rear or flank of the Allied divisions advancing from the west. This thrust could probably best be carried out from southern Tunisia, where the terrain was most suitable, with direction towards the northwest. The specific objectives of such an operation would depend, of course, on the strength of the available combat force.

In order to carry out his plans, the Commander in Chief, South, estimated that, in addition to the Italian units, he would need at least five German divisions, either motorized or armored. Within the framework of these plans, it was the task of Rommel's Army to keep its enemy, the British Eighth Army, as far as possible from the southern border of Tunisia.

Depending upon how the situation developed, it might be possible to utilize the new combat group - temporarily at least - to strike a blow on behalf of the German-Italian Panzer Army.

Successful accomplishment of these plans, however, would depend upon securing the necessary ocean transport space and upon providing an air escort to protect the convoys from enemy air and naval forces.

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The Wehrmacht High Command was in agreement with Kesselring's views and approved his plans. He was promised seven armored divisions for his operations, and the Wehrmacht High Command offered to assume the responsibility of transporting them by ship from Italy to Africa.

The transport of the troops to Italy was to be organized at once. The Commander in Chief, South, was to be responsible for coordinating the dates of transport to Italy with the transport facilities available from Italy to Africa. The first formation to get under way was the 10th Panzer Division, in late November 1942.

Feldmarschall Kesselring's evaluation of the military situation and his plans for further operations in Tunisia are indicative of his farsightedness and daring, and the assurance of reinforcements by the Wehrmacht High Command was a sign of the confidence he inspired.

Kesselring had been in the Mediterranean theater for a year and knew it well. He was fully aware of the decisive importance of effective overwater supply lines for the conduct of military operations.

During a conference with Rommel on 24 November 1942 in Area dei Filoni, he made the following remark:

> "In the last analysis everything depends on supply; true enough, it is not an extensive organization, but even so both the air and sea situations

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are not unfavorable, especially as long as the British air and naval forces are occupied by the invasion and Eisenhower and Montgomery have not yet begun to coordinate their operations in respect to locality."[16]

Kesselring had only a limited time in which to carry out his preparations; the latest possible deadline would be about the end of February, when the rainy season came to an end.

In the meantime, regardless of the situation on the ground, the overwhelming superiority of the US air forces based in Algeria and of the British air and naval forces operating from Malta was bound to have serious effects on the German ocean transports. If Kesselring could succeed in establishing his line of defense along the western border of Tunisia, if his new mobile combat group could be ready for action behind the front - both by the end of the time limit set - and if Rommel's Panzer Army could drag out the pursuit action of the British Eighth Army that long, then this "va banque" gamble for Tunisia might have a chance to succeed.

In any case, Feldmarschall Kesselring had no other alternative if he wished to avoid a catastrophe in the African theater of operations. Everything depended on making the best possible use of the period of grace allotted to him and on acting with the greatest possible speed.

The Wehrmacht High Command, however, seemed unable to comprehend the urgent importance of acting

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16 - See also pages 491 and 492 of the present study.

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without delay, or to realize the inevitable ramifications of such a policy. The very alacrity with which Germany's top military leaders engaged to transport seven armored divisions across the sea from Italy to Africa shows how superficially they had concerned themselves with the problems of the Mediterranean theater of operations.

Were they completely unaware of the influence which the island fortress of Malta had always been able to exercise on ocean traffic to Africa?

Had they failed to realize that the battle of Egypt had been lost because of the lack of supplies?

Were they unable to see that Italy, in its capacity as a power in the Mediterranean, had failed from the very beginning?

Where in the world, after the losses sustained during the preceding years, was the transport space to come from to move seven armored divisions to Tunisia and to keep them continually supplied with everything they would need?

True, the Laval Agreement had placed at the disposal of the Axis some 600,000 tons of shipping in the ports of southern France, but for political reasons these ships had been ceded to Italy. They sailed under the Italian flag and were manned by Italian crews.

The Commander in Chief, South, was forced to requisition the space he needed via the Reichs Commissioner of Shipping (Reichskommissar fuer die Schiffahrt) attached to the

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Italian Navy High Command. Inevitably, this led to friction and delays, since the Italians naturally laid claim to what they considered their fair share - and this share had been very generously calculated.

In addition, shipping space was required for the supplies most urgently needed by Rommel's Panzer Army if it was to have any chance at all of fulfilling the missions assigned to it.

As late as 3 December, in a conference at the Fuehrer Headquarters, Feldmarschall Keitel assured General Ziegler, of the Headquarters, Fifth Panzer Army, that three more armored divisions and two rifle divisions were scheduled for assignment to Africa. In reply to Ziegler's question whether adequate supply could be guaranteed under all conditions, Hitler answered "Of course!"[17]

One cannot escape the conclusion that the Wehrmacht High Command either was not aware of the difficulties inherent in the Mediterranean area as a theater of war or underestimated them thoroughly.

From mid-November on, enemy pressure on the German defensive positions, which were neither strong enough nor located far enough to the west, began to make itself felt. Enemy marching columns

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17 - Colonel Pentow, Hqs, Fifth Panzer Army, "Participation in the Campaign in Africa, 1941-1943" (Beitrag zum Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43), pp 4 and 5.

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moving along the two main highways of northern Tunisia east of Bone and in the vicinity of Sonk Abras were subjected to continual strafing attacks by German dive-bombers, but finally the Germans were forced back by enemy pressure. The Division Barre had disarmed a German patrol near Beja and had ignored an ultimatum to turn over the town within a specified time. The Division was attacked on 21 November by German heavy bombers from Sicily, for its behaviour had proved that it was on the side of the Allies. And so the fighting started in this area. On 23 November, Allied attacks on Mateur-Tebourba and Medjez-el-Bab were turned back with the help of German dive-bombers. During the same period, however, an enemy force made up primarily of light tanks succeeded in breaking through the German lines and, on 26 November, in reaching the airfield at Djedeida (about seven miles west of Tunis). The tanks rolled on over the highway towards Tunis until they were stopped by an 88 mm antiaircraft battery which had been set up at a narrow point along the road to defend the city. Under heavy fire from this battery, the tanks wheeled off towards the west and disappeared from sight. If they had succeeded in knocking out the battery, they would have been able to reach the port of Tunis without encountering any real resistance.

After this phase of the fighting, there were no further breakthrough

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attempts made by the Allies for some time.

On 29 November, however, an American force consisting of about forty four-engine bombers raided the harbor and airfield at Bizerte for the first time; on 30 November British aircraft bombed the harbor and airfield at Tunis.

During both attacks, shipping and supplies were destroyed. At the same time the British air forces on Malta began a concentrated attack on German convoys; the night torpedo attacks were the most effective. Hitler ordered an increase in the number of aircraft assigned to convoy escort duty. This mission soon required so many aircraft that large Luftwaffe elements had to be released from front combat duty to fulfill it.

The over-all effectiveness of these first Allied attacks on the airfields was relatively slight, since the units occupying them had already been evacuated to provisionally equipped alternate fields. A special duty air district staff (Luftgaustab z.b.V.) had been set up in Tunisia to find suitable airfields and prepare them for occupancy. The terrain in general was suitable, and no difficulties were encountered.

German leaders were rather amazed at the rapidity with which the Allies had set up adequate airfields in the highly unsuitable terrain in Algeria. An aerial photograph revealing the use

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of wire screens as flooring cleared up the mystery.

In order to facilitate the accomplishment of its many and varied missions, the staff of the Commander in Chief, South, had been reorganized and entirely separated from the former staff of the Second Air Fleet. Apart from the fact that their Commander in Chief and Chief of Staff were the same, the two groups no longer had anything to do with one another[18].

An independent Senior Quartermaster (Oberquartiermeister) for Tunisia, Colonel Meigl (GSC), had been appointed and assigned to Bizerte. He was in charge of all aspects of the supply problem.

"In the meantime, the British 78th Division had begun to move, but it was handicapped by the fact that its supplies were not arriving regularly. On 17 November it made contact with the enemy for the first time near Beja.

Two days later the Division Barre, which had been covering its movement forward, was defeated by German tanks and low-flying aircraft near Medjez-el-Bab. With its destruction, the 78th Division lost its advanced cover, and Lieutenant General Anderson had no alternative but to reform the British and American units and to organize a reliable supply line before he could risk continuing his advance.

Not until 24 November did he advance to attack the Tebourba-Mateur line. On 26 November the 78th Division took Medjez-el-Bab, and the 'Blade Force' broke through between Mateur and Tebourba.

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18 - There is no information available regarding the new organization of the staff of the Commander in Chief, South (author's note).

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During the night of 26 November, Tebourba fell into Allied hands, and all attempts by the enemy to regain it were successfully repulsed. On 28 November advance battalions pushed forward into Djedeida, from which the casbah of Tunis was plainly visible.

So far only a few squadrons from Doolittle's Twelfth Air Force had taken part in the Tunisian campaign, but their work in Algeria was now almost finished.

On 19 November, the following forces had landed in Algeria:

4 fighter groups (the 1st, 14th, 31st, and 52d, the latter missing one squadron),

1 light bomber squadron (the 15th),

2 transport groups, and

2 B-17 bomber squadrons from the 97th Group.

Certain shortcomings prevented their being employed to full effectiveness in the beginning. Not all the maintenance personnel had arrived, airfield equipment of all categories was scarce, and in western Algeria, ~~which~~ where most of the units were stationed, there was no fighting going on.

All sorts of supplies were brought from the docks to the airfields, but the available trucks were never sufficient for the Twelfth Air Force - neither then nor later on during the campaign in Tunisia. The airfields had been planned to accomodate 300 officers and 3,000 men, and three times that many had to be taken care of. Moreover, there were only four airfields between Casablanca and the Tunisian border

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which were equipped with all-weather runways (Port Lyautey, Tafaraoui, Maison Blanche, and Bone). This situation became painfully clear as soon as the rainy season set in.

Once the invasion was secured, Doolittle was faced with a double mission. He was to employ his Air Force together with Air Marshal Welsh's Eastern Air Command in eastern Algeria and in Tunisia and, at the same time, was to be responsible for covering the shipping lane through the Straits of Gibraltar. For this reason, the XII Air Support Command was to remain in Casablanca for the time being.

The XII Fighter Command, based in Oran, and the XII Bomber Command, stationed in the Bone area, were to work together with the British Eastern Air Command.

As soon as Constantine, the only area whose communications facilities were adequate to the needs of the XII Bomber Command, was pronounced free for Allied occupancy, Colonel Claude Duncan, the commander, began preparations for the move.

In accordance with the agreement made with Air Marshal Welsh, the P-38's from the 14th Fighter Group and the DB-7's from the 15th Bomber Squadron were transferred on 21 November to the Tebessa - Youks-les-Bains area, where Colonel Raff's paratroopers and the French were already in action.

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Colonel Duncan decided to leave the two Spitfire groups (both American units) in Oran for the time being as a reserve force for the Eastern Air Command.

Due to the fact that Maison Blanche was not equipped with radar for the night fighters, during the night of 20 November and succeeding nights the enemy managed to destroy an entire Royal Air Force aerial photography platoon and a good many aircraft of all types on the ground. After this, the bombers were evacuated from the dangerously crowded airfield to Tafaraoui.

The attack carried out by the British First Army during the last part of November was supported by the Eastern Air Command, operating from the Souk-el-Arba area; one squadron of Bisleys (Blenheim V) had been moved forward to Gourrobert for night bombing raids. In order to reinforce the defense of the airfield at Bone, which was seriously endangered during the attack, Doolittle had moved the 2d Squadron, 52d Fighter Group, there on 27 November.

Like a good many other units during the violent early stages of the fighting, the 2d Squadron was completely cut off from communication with the Twelfth Air Force.

The air forces based on Malta also played their part in supporting Anderson's advance. The island had been recently reinforced by fighters and bombers from the Royal Air Force's Middle East Command.

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The attacks from Malta were directed primarily against Axis ports and airfields and against German and Italian air and sea transports to Tunisia.

All during this period, the Allied bombing attacks were concentrated on the Tunisian airfields in the hope of paralyzing the enemy air forces. These attacks were the occasion of a good many evenly-matched aerial combat actions.

On 25 November still another squadron from the 14th Fighter Group was assigned to Youks-les-Bains. The units there, remote from their superior headquarters, were fighting an air war all their own on the eastern coast of Tunisia. They were protecting thereby the Allied forces in central Tunisia, consisting of six French divisions and Raff's paratroopers, and also were covering the extreme right flank of the British First Army in the north.

On 27 November they intervened directly in the fighting being carried out by the 78th Division east of Medjez-el-Bab.

When the British and American forces moved forward against Djedeida and Mateur on 23 November, it looked as though the breakthrough through the ingeniously set-up German defense position had been a success. Accordingly, orders were issued for a paratrooper attack on the airfield at Oudna, nine miles south

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of Tunis, the attack to take place on 29 November.

Once the Oudna airfield was captured, the paratroopers would be able to enter Tunis from the south and - if conditions were favorable - join the advance of the First Army.

Between 1330 and 1400, 530 men from the British 1st Paratrooper Brigade, under the personal command of Colonel P. L. Williams, were landed at Depienne, nine miles northeast of Pont du Fahs. "There was no enemy resistance in the air, and all forty-four C-47's returned safely. This was unfortunately not true of the paratrooper brigade. What was left of it managed to regain the Allied lines (which had not been able to advance as planned) five days later. The survivors reported that Oudna was heavily defended, with tanks and armored reconnaissance cars taking part in the fighting." This was the last large-scale paratrooper undertaking during the campaign in North Africa[19].

The thrust to Tunis had run aground. As it turned out, Djedeida had not been entirely in Allied hands, and the 36th Brigade was still engaged in combat northwest of Hatour.

Welsh ordered continued attacks on the airfields being used by the enemy in an attempt to break

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19 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 87.

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down German air superiority at the front. In the meantime, Anderson was making preparations to resume the offensive as soon as Combat Command B, American First Armored Division, should arrive in the area[20].

The German-Italian troops had thrown back the Allied advance on Bizerte and Tunis; however, they had not succeeded in blocking the mountain passes along the Tunisian-Algerian border. At the end of the November fighting, their defence line ran along the eastern foothills, which naturally meant that the operational area lacked the requisite depth. Thus it was vital that the bridgehead be extended westward as soon as possible. As soon as the new reinforcements were ready for action, the first blow was struck against the important rail and highway center of Tebourba.

In a battle which lasted from 1 through 5 December, the British 11th Brigade was defeated there and suffered heavy losses in both personnel and material. On 11 and 12 December, German forces stormed the Allied bridgehead known as Long Step Hill, located north and south of the Medjerdah sector and one of the most important points in the Allied line. The defending force was dispersed and all its attempts at a counterattack frustrated.

In the meantime a task force from the 10th Panzer Division had been placed on alert to help meet the momentarily expected

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20 - See Appendix _____ for a summary of Allied losses in transport shipping capacity during the landing operation in November.
Assmann, op. cit., page 315.

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Allied thrust towards the coast. This force was to keep the Allies in check, thus securing the land supply line to Rommel's Panzer Army.

By this time all the Axis troops stationed in Tunisia had been made subordinate to the Fifth Panzer Army, under the command of Generaloberst von Arnim since 9 December.

As of mid-December the Fifth Panzer Army Command had the following components at its disposal:

Broich Group

Approximate strength: one reinforced infantry regiment; one paratrooper-engineer battalion; the 10th Bersaglieri Regiment; one artillery battalion, equipped in part with captured French guns from Bizerte. The Group was practically immobile, and procurement of the proper ammunition for the French guns represented a serious problem.

10th Panzer Division (General Fischer)

By mid-December its strength had increased to two-thirds of a division with two-thirds of a Panzer Regiment. The Division did not have enough vehicles at its disposal and its command set-up was inadequate.

334th Infantry Division (General Weber)

Partially mobile in mountain terrain, elements of the Division began to arrive in early December, but with no supply organization whatsoever! It was provisionally equipped with horses and mule-drawn carts.

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Parachute Regiment Koch

This consisted of three almost complete battalions. Its command set-up as well as its supply organization were inadequate. The Regiment was inexperienced in the planning and conduct of joint operations with other Wehrmacht branches.

501st Tiger Battalion

At first the Battalion was made up of only four tanks; it was assigned to defend Bizerte and Tunis.

Personnel Replacement Battalions

These were committed along the supply line as far as Gabes, as well as in the fighting being carried out by the 10th Panzer Division.

90th Reconnaissance Battalion

Its strength was approximately that of one modern reconnaissance company, equipped with armored reconnaissance cars and mobile artillery, and reinforced by a few mobile reserves assigned to the Headquarters, Fifth Panzer Army.

The Italian Division Superga

This consisted of two regiments, some two-thirds of which had arrived in the theater by mid-December. It was equipped with only small-caliber artillery and had practically no vehicles available for supply transport. It was later reinforced by German replacement battalions.

The Italian Brigade Imperiali

The Brigade was made up of several Italian reconnaissance units, combined with a few German units, units from the Division Superga, and

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elements from the German replacement battalions. The Italian troops were partially motorized, the German units had no vehicles at all with the exception of a few bicycles (which belonged to the equipment of the reconnaissance battalion of the 334th Infantry Division, which was sent into action near Mahmasny).

20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division (General Neuffer)

Still in process of replenishment during December, the Division was almost fully operable by the beginning of January. The majority of its guns, however, were immobile, which meant that it could be employed only in stationary defense missions to protect ports and airfields. The few mobile elements were committed in antitank operations in support of the ground forces, although this, too, was greatly handicapped by the unreliability of antitank ammunition shipments[21].

The bridgehead had not been appreciably extended by the ground operations during December. Nevertheless the Axis forces had succeeded in holding back the Allies along the Djebel - Abiod - Medjez-el-Bab line.

In southern Tunisia, the forces in Sousse, Sfax, and Gabes, along Rommel's supply line, had been strengthened and the defense front along the mountain range had been extended somewhat towards the south.

The rainy season began in central and northern Tunisia around 10 December

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21 - Pentow, op. cit., pages 15 and 16.

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and made operations in the mountainous areas extremely difficult. Vehicle movements off the established highways became next to impossible.

Employment of the German and Italian Air Forces

during December

II Air Corps

From bases in Sardinia and Sicily, its units were employed primarily in attacks on Allied airfields and supply posts along the French African coast and in Libya. Their chief targets were the harbors of Algiers, Bougie, Phillippeville, Bone, Tobruk, and - later on - Bengasi.

Most of these attacks were carried out at night or on cloudy days. Allied shipping was subjected to intensive attack by torpedo aircraft patrols.

During the night of 18 December, the British base at Lucca, on the island of Malta, was attacked repeatedly in an attempt to eliminate the British torpedo bombers.

On 30 December, Casablanca was bombed by a long-range bomber unit based in southwestern France. During the retreat of Rommel's Panzer Army, units from the II Air Corps intervened frequently in the ground fighting or were committed against Allied supply columns and railway transports.

The Air Commander, Tunisia, did everything in his power to support the ground forces struggling to prevent an Allied breakthrough at the bridgehead. During the fighting at Tebourba, in early December,

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the role played by the dive-bomber group was decisive (based on the testimony of prisoners of war).

The German fighters, however, failed to achieve the hoped-for success in terms of enemy aircraft downed in their encounters with the Allied four-engine bombers. It was not realized until much later that their airborne armaments were simply not strong enough to penetrate the armor plating of the bombers. Furthermore, the fighter pilots found it extremely difficult to identify the enemy bombers in time, since they flew at a very high altitude.

It was for the latter reason that the Headquarters, Second Air Fleet, did all in its power to set up a fighter aircraft control center based on radar as soon as they could.

The antiaircraft artillery forces also failed to achieve maximum effectiveness against the Allied bombers, again as a result of the latters' high flight altitude.

General Anderson's planned offensive was never carried out. The soundly defeated Blade Force had to be withdrawn from Tebourba; it was replaced by the Combat Command B, from the American 1st Armored Division.

Anderson reported to Eisenhower that a temporary retreat was absolutely necessary unless Tunis and Bizerte could be taken within the next few days.

There were three decisive factors, as General Anderson's report continued - supply, enemy air

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activity, and the rapid increase in the enemy's strength. In an effort to reach Tunis as rapidly as possible, standard troop supply measures had been neglected; both the Army and the Air Force were forced to depend upon unreliable supply lines and had practically no stocks on hand from which to draw. In addition, the roads were burdened far beyond capacity by the shifting about of French troops and their assembly areas.

Enemy air activity, his report continued, was the factor chiefly responsible for the fact that his advance had been held up. For "reasons of geography", the Air Force units under his command were unable to cope with the situation. The enemy air activity he referred to was primarily the stubborn offensive carried out by the German dive-bomber units against the advance forces of his Army. All in all, the obsolete Ju-87's could claim the largest share of credit for the defeat of the First Army. The "reasons of geography" mentioned by General Anderson as an explanation for the fact that his own air forces could not fulfill their mission properly were to be equated with a lack of airfields sufficiently near the front.

In contrast to the above, the conditions enjoyed by the German-Italian air forces were excellent. In addition to their bases on Sicily and Sardinia, they had continental all-weather fields at Sidi-Ahmed, El-Aouina, and at Sfax, Sousse, and Gabes in the south.

Moreover, their own ground troops were in undisputed

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possession of the Tunisian plains, and a good many sites there were eminently suited for utilization as emergency landing fields - almost without modification. Their dive-bomber units were stationed at El-Aouina, only a few miles behind the front lines in the vicinity of Djedeida. And because the Ju-87's were not very heavy, they could also land on open terrain, well out of the range of enemy artillery.

The ground troops could call upon them for help, by uncoded wireless message, and they could be on the spot within five to ten minutes later.

The Eastern Air Command and the Twelfth Air Force could have shot down the obsolete Ju-87's if they had been able to operate en masse. But by the end of November, they had only three advance airfields at their disposal - Bone, 120 miles from the front, Jonk-les-Bains, 150 miles from the front, and Sonk-el-Arba, 70 miles from the front. And the last two were frequently rendered useless by mud. Additional airfields could not be located and equipped easily, since that part of Tunisia occupied by the Allies was full of hills.

Assuming a flight duration of ninety minutes, the Spitfires based at Sonk-el-Arba could spend no more than five to ten minutes over the front lines. As soon as they appeared, the German Luftwaffe retreated over the Gulf of Tunis, landed the Ju-87's at emergency fields, and camouflaged the aircraft under the trees. As soon as the fighters

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had disappeared behind the hills in the west, the German bombers resumed their operations.

Whenever the Allied fighters attempted to escort paratrooper-laden transport aircraft or bombers during their approach flight or to protect coastal shipping, the Me-109's and FW-190's were always in the majority. The Spitfires and P-38's participating in thrusts into the battle area were hard put to defend themselves and were forced to leave the German bombers alone. Moreover, the Allied bomber units were not strong enough to destroy the enemy air forces on the ground, particularly in view of the fact that weather conditions were growing worse. When the German forces resumed their attack on Tebourba, the Twelfth Air Force committed all available units in the doubtful battle. El-Aouina, Sidi-Ahmed, and the port of Bizerte were subjected to repeated bombardment.

During the next few days, air battles were fought with varying success. In an attack on Bizerte on 4 December, the 18th Squadron (Bisley bombers) lost eight aircraft.

The attempt to utilize Medjez-el-Bab as an advance fighter field in order to solve the dive-bomber problem was a failure. When the 93d Squadron approached for a landing, it was met by a surprise attack by Me-109's; two Spitfires were downed

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immediately, while the rest, heavily damaged, were barely able to make their way back to Sonk-el-Arba.

On 6 December, there was another breakthrough on the Allied front. On 8 December Eisenhower approved Anderson's proposal that the Allied force should withdraw to a more favorable defensive position. There the troops could be reorganized and prepared for a subsequent offensive. During the withdrawal operation, the winter rains set in with great violence, making the terrain on either side of the roads completely impassable and transforming Sonk-el-Arba into a mudhole.

The Combat Command B met with an even greater mishap when it stalled in the mud, losing approximately four-fifths of its tanks and guns.

By 4 December, Anderson had reached the approximate line Djebel - Abiod - Medjez-el-Bab.

"Although Eisenhower still had hopes of simply overrunning Tunis by means of an unexpected drive - and his planning had been based on this theory for some time - the Allies had already lost the race for Tunis.

The December rains forced repeated postponement of the deadline set for a renewed attack until the Commander in Chief, deeply disappointed, finally abandoned his plans at Christmas.

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The continuous rains which had held the Eastern Air Command and the Twelfth Air Force at their bases made it possible for the enemy to build up his strength with maximum security.

As Eisenhower has put it so succinctly, the supply marathon had begun with a vengeance. Operation TORCH was simply not destined to be a complete success."[22]

Even in early November, the Allied bomber forces had begun to intensify their attacks on Axis supply ports in Tunisia, Sicily, and central Italy. For the first time, the north Italian industrial region had been subjected to a heavy raid by four-engine bombers. The raid had serious political repercussions and made German assistance urgently necessary.

The Allied air forces assigned to support ground fighting in Tunisia were obviously seriously handicapped by the fact that their airfields could not be adequately improved and equipped because of the rain.

The basic problem of the conduct of operations in Africa had resolved itself - far sooner than the Commander in Chief, South, had anticipated - to the problem of protecting the sea routes.

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22 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 91.

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By early December it was already clear that troop and supply transports to Africa could no longer be adequately accomplished with the usual large-capacity ships. The situation was bound to develop into a crisis as soon as the Allied air forces had had time to build up their ground organization completely and could begin to operate at full force. In the meantime, the heavy bomber units of the Royal Air Force, Middle East, had been moved forward from Palestine and Egypt to the Gambut area.

The Allied air attacks often succeeded in sinking the large vessels right in their home harbors, especially at Naples and Palermo. Those that survived to undertake the journey across the Tyrrhenian Sea were exposed to destruction by torpedo-bombers and submarines. In addition, they operated under the constant threat of attack by light naval units based in North Africa or at Malta. And the closer they came to the coast, the greater was the danger of mines.

Ships of over 1,000 tons took more than twenty-four hours to unload in port, those of 5,000 tons sometimes as long as three days, even though experienced stevedores and foremen had been brought from Hamburg, and German soldiers were organized into loading companies to expedite the operations. Along the quais, the ships could be unloaded from one side only, since the Italian Navy never seemed to be able to provide the requisite number of lighters.

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The length of time needed to unload naturally made these ships more vulnerable to Allied air attack, and many were sunk with all their cargo.

In addition, the protection of the ship convoys during their passage across the sea required the commitment of a large number of air and naval units. The breakdowns in the Italian shipyards played havoc with the number of torpedo boats available for employment at any one time and this, in turn, often led to undesirable delays in the dispatching of convoys.

The German Luftwaffe was being utilized more and more in escort duty for convoy trips lasting several days at a time. After a large number of ships had been lost, Hitler himself issued specific orders regarding the strength of air escorts in the future.

Previously, smaller ships such as tank landing craft and Seibel barges had been used successfully for traffic between Crete and the African coast. To be sure, their capacity was limited (payload of 80 to 100 tons), but they were difficult to spot from the air since they presented such small targets. In fact, they frequently succeeded in bringing down attacking aircraft with their four-barreled antiaircraft cannon. They were relatively invulnerable to submarines because the torpedos were usually too low to score a hit. They could be effectively protected against surfacing submarines and light naval craft by an escort

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of Seibel combat barges armed with 88 mm antiaircraft artillery. Loading and unloading operations, even outside the harbor, could be completed easily within about two hours.

On 8 December, then, in view of the seriousness of the situation, the Commander in Chief, South, requested that as many small vessels as possible be placed at his disposal. When the French forces at Bizerte were disarmed, three French destroyers had fallen into German hands. At Hitler's orders, these had been turned over to the Italians. They were unavailable for commitment during the fighting in Tunisia because the Italians did not want to take any chances on losing them.

According to an American source, Axis strength in Tunisia was as follows in mid-December:

German troops:	19,500
Italian troops:	11,250
Luftwaffe:	2,500
supply units:	5,000
	38,250

Allied strength in Algeria and Tunisia at the same time was as follows:

British troops:	20,000
American troops:	11,000
French troops:	30,000
	61,000[23]

23 - Butcher, Harry, Capt USN, excerpts from "My Three Years with Eisenhower", pages 65 and 66; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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The chances of furnishing the divisions needed for the operations in Tunisia seemed very slim. The battle of Stalingrad had already made such inroads on the available reserves of the Wehrmacht High Command that all that was left, apart from the 10th Panzer Division, were elements of the Panzer Division Hermann Goering. Unfortunately, these available elements included neither the Panzer regiment nor the Panzer artillery, but to make up for this lack the Division was to be given an antiaircraft artillery regiment. For during the month of December there had been a steady increase in the number of ships lost en route as a result of night attacks by Malta-based torpedo-bombers.

The crews of the Italian torpedo boats utilized as escorts had neither the training nor the experience to cope successfully with these night attacks. Sometime around 20 December, the problem of the supply transports to Africa was discussed in detail at the Fuehrer Headquarters with the German and Italian officers concerned.

The Italians agreed to route supply transports over Sicily whenever possible and promised to convert the three destroyers taken at Bizerte into supply ships as soon as feasible. The torpedo tubes were to be removed in order to provide more cargo space. Neither one of these promises, as it soon

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turned out, was kept.

During the conference it was also decided to turn over the construction of additional small vessels to the Italian shipyards, which were not working up to full capacity.

By the end of the year, the Axis forces had succeeded in extending and stabilizing the Tunisian bridgehead. The Panzer Army held a line running approximately from Mateur via Medjez-el-Bab (completely occupied), Pont du Fahs, and Djebel Bou Dabouss (only partially occupied) to Pichon (completely occupied).

The Broich Group held the northern sector, while the 10th Panzer Division was committed to the south of it, from the area east of Goubellat to that northwest of Pont du Fahs; further south, from the hill country to the area east of Pichon, were the Italian Divisions Superga and Imperiali.

The towns of Sfax and Gabes had been occupied by troops in order to secure the supply route to Rommel's Army, and reconnaissance operations had been advanced as far as the western edge of the mountains. The Fifth Panzer Army had a small mobile reserve at its disposal.

By this time, Rommel's retreating German-Italian Panzer Army had reached its position at Buerat.

The Commander in Chief, South, exhausted all the means at his disposal to organize a stronger assault group, so that he could

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go over to the offensive as soon as possible. He was well aware of the fact that the bridgehead was far too shallow to withstand a serious attack.

Contrary to expectations, the Allies had not pushed forward to the coast in southern Tunisia; an advance by way of Kairouan to either Sousse or, further south, to Sfax had been anticipated.

Such a move would easily have enabled them to cut off Rommel's Army completely.

In the fighting in Tunisia, the initiative had so far lain with the German forces, whose fate, however, depended exclusively on whether or not they could continue to maintain their supply lines on the sea and in the air.

And the chances of their being able to do so had decreased perceptibly during the last month of operations.

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Transport Ships Sunk by Submarines[24]

7 November - Transport ship Stone, east of Gibraltar

10/11 November - Viceroy of India; Browning

12 November - Edward Rutledge; Tasker H. Bliss; Hugh L. Scott

12/13 November - Ettrick; Almac

13 November - Maron

14 November - Warwick Castle

Transport Ships Sunk by the Luftwaffe

8/9 November - Leedstown

11/12 November - Karanja; Awatea; Cathay; Glenfiles; Narkunda

Destroyers Sunk by Submarines

10 November - Martin; Hambledon; Tanker Winoaki damaged

12/13 November - Depot Ship Hecla

13 November - Isaac Sweers

14/15 November - Avenger

Destroyers Sunk by the Luftwaffe

11 November - Tynwald

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24 - Assmann, op.cit., page 315.

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Section 5

The situation in the western Mediterranean at the beginning of 1943; deliberations by the staff of the Commander in Chief, South; the course of the battle during January and February; the offensive is broken off; preparations for Operation SATIN; the Casablanca Conference; the unification of Luftwaffe command; the setback in central Tunisia; preparations by the British Eighth Army for the attack on the Mareth line.

During the fighting in Tunisia, the precariousness of the Axis supply situation in Africa once more became painfully apparent. The crisis led to deliberations in a number of quarters, and the opinion was expressed that it might be wiser to give up Africa altogether and withdraw the troops to Italy. There, supported by a reliable supply line, they could be committed more effectively in the defense of the Continent and the islands. This suggestion, which had also been made by Rommel in November 1942[25], could not be carried out.

In the beginning of January, the Italian Supreme Command informed the

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25 - See pages 471 and 472 of the present study.

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Wehrmacht High Command that the decision had been made to withdraw from Tripolitania, but that the state of public opinion in Italy demanded that Tunisia be held at all costs.

If no attempt were made in this direction, the German and Italian agencies most intimately concerned feared that sooner or later Italy would withdraw from the war as an Axis partner.

Thus political expediency gained the upper hand over military requirements.

In view of the critical developments on the Russian front (Stalingrad), the successful defense of the bridgehead in Tunisia, let alone its expansion, seemed highly unlikely.

There was no longer any reason to suppose that the Italian forces would be able to effect any basic change in the situation.

As of early 1943, German leaders had no clear idea of the Allied operational plans for North Africa. Only one thing was certain - the landing in French North Africa was no more than an interlude. The fact that the majority of the Allied forces were being held back was open to a number of interpretations. One of these was that they still had to be trained for the forthcoming battle with the Axis forces and that they were waiting for better weather conditions and for the approach of the British Eighth Army.

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In addition, the question of potential intervention on the part of Spain seemed to be still unresolved. It was also possible that supply difficulties might be the reason for the hesitation displayed by the Allies.

The interpretation fostered by the Wehrmacht High Command, however - namely that the Allies had no intention of attacking the forces in Tunisia directly but wished to utilize their assumed avowal of this goal to mask an invasion of Europe - seems to be entirely unfounded.

The Allies already had a firm and reliable base in Africa, and it was by no means certain that they would be successful in obtaining such a base in southern France, Italy, or on any of the Mediterranean islands. Accordingly, the Commander in Chief, South, was justified in assuming that the drive to capture Tunisia would be continued.

A landing in Italy, of course, would automatically have brought the resistance in Africa to an end, since it would have cut the Axis forces off from their source of supply. Recognition of this fact was by no means new; the Allies had been aware of it since before the invasion in November. Nevertheless, for very significant reasons[26], they were unwilling to accept the risks involved.

The air situation was clearly weighted in favor of the enemy, thanks to his numerical superiority. German radio intelligence had confirmed the presence in the eastern Mediterranean, including Malta, of

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26 - See page 558 of the present study.

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more than 700 single-engine fighters, 600 bombers, 245 reconnaissance aircraft, and 200 transport aircraft; the same source indicated that there were some 500 single-engine fighter aircraft, 330 bombers, and 700 transport aircraft present in the western Mediterranean. Approximately 30 - 40% of these were available for immediate operation[27].

This air superiority had not yet been brought to bear in Tunisia; the inadequacy of the ground organization in Algeria made it impossible to commit the available air forces to full effectiveness.

In contrast, the Axis powers had all-weather airfields at their disposal in Tunisia, Sardinia, and Sicily. At the moment, however, the units of the British Eighth Army were still too far removed from the focal point of the fighting in Tunisia and - in addition - too intensely occupied by their missions in Tripolitania.

The island of Malta continued to be a thorn in the side of the Axis powers insofar as their ocean supply routes were concerned. Since mid-December the number of Allied aircraft based there had been increased to a total of 226 (126 single-engine fighter aircraft and 100 bombers). German aerial photographs had revealed the presence of 281 "boxes", distributed over five different airfields and so solidly constructed that they could only be destroyed by direct hits[28].

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27 - K.T.B. (War Diary), Second Air Fleet, entry dated 13 January 1942: The Course of the War in the Mediterranean from 1 January through 31 March 1943 (7) (Der Ablauf des Krieges im Mittelmeerraum von 1.1. bis 31.3.43); study by Branch 6, Luftwaffe General Staff, No. 891/44, Classified, pages 1 and 2; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

28 - The Struggle for Tunisia (Der Kampf um Tunisien); study by Branch 6, Luftwaffe General Staff, dated 17 April 1944, page 11; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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In the western Mediterranean, the Allies ruled the seas from a point roughly opposite Algiers to the area around Malta. East of Algiers, however, in the Straits of Sicily and south of Sicily, they still had to reckon with intervention by the German Luftwaffe and the Italian fleet.

The possibilities for retaliation open to the Axis powers were extremely limited. As early as the fall of 1940, Generalissimo Franco had rejected Hitler's suggestion that Gibraltar be occupied by German forces; Germany was simply not in a position to grant Franco's not inconsiderable demands for economic and military assistance. Nevertheless, the Wehrmacht High Command was determined to launch certain countermeasures (Operation GISELA) in the event of an Allied landing in Spain or Portugal. Similarly, appropriate precautions had been taken against a possible Allied landing in southern France. In addition, existing Italian defenses on the islands of Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily had been reinforced by the assignment of German troops.

These troops, however, were far from sufficient in number to ensure lasting reinforcement of the Axis forces throughout the entire Mediterranean area. The only hope was to utilize these fresh troops against the Allied southern flank in an attempt to strike a decisive blow against the Allied bridgehead in Algeria.

It must be admitted, though, that this hope -

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from the point of view of the available transport facilities - was fairly illusory from the very beginning.

Even so, on 12 January 1943, the Commander in Chief, South, submitted the following report to the Wehrmacht High Command: ".....approximately 60,000 tons per month can be transported with the facilities recently made available. A Luftwaffe escort will be on hand to obviate any difficulties in transversing the Straits of Sicily.....transfer of the Division Hermann Goering to Tunis, where it will be combined with the 10th Panzer Division (to be withdrawn from present operations) to form an operational reserve. The 999th Africa Brigade should be brought to Tunis as soon as possible."[29]

It is extremely hard to imagine just what factors could have moved Feldmarschall Kesselring to this optimistic view. No one was in a better position than he to realize, on the basis of personal experience, the difficulties inherent in ocean transport as long as Malta was in enemy hands. Is it possible that the radically shortened route to Tunisia could have convinced him that successful defense of the bridgehead was feasible after all, or that the sudden availability - in the present situation - of additional transport space could have blinded him to reality?

In the meantime, German aerial reconnaissance had achieved a fairly accurate picture of the capacity of Allied

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29 - H. Greiner, The Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht, 1939-1943 (Die oberste Wehrmachtfuehrung 1939-1943), Limes Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1951, page 434.

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shipping newly arrived in the western Mediterranean.

The results of German radio monitoring activity indicated that the enemy forces must be composed, at the very least, of five American divisions (1st and 2d Armored Divisions; 1st, 3d, and 9th Infantry Divisions) and one or two British divisions (elements of the 4th, 56th, and 78th Divisions)[30].

In addition, the presence of five or six French divisions had been confirmed.

It was discovered that the following forces from these divisions were stationed on the northern sector of the Tunisian front (from Cap Sarrat in the north approximately as far south as Pont du Fahs, which was entirely occupied by Allied troops): elements of the 6th Armored Division, the 78th Infantry Division, the 139th Infantry Regiment, and the British 1st Parachute Regiment, as well as isolated assault groups.

The British V Army Corps, First Army, was in charge of operations.

Further south, near the Beu - Arado - Pont du Fahs[31] area as well as along the line via Pichon and in the Faid Pass - Gafsa - Feriana area, there were approximately five French divisions of relatively low striking power, elements of the American 1st Armored Division, and two American assault groups of about regiment strength. This sector of the front was under the command of the American II Army Corps.

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30 - See Footnote 27, page 610 of the present study.
31 - See the map on page 133, The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.

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Thus, the over-all strength of the Allied forces committed on the Tunisian front was as follows:

3 British divisions

1 American division

3 French divisions.

Additional Allied forces in about equal strength were being held back in the rear areas of Algeria and Morocco. German aerial reconnaissance revealed the presence of troop billets and training activity.

It could be assumed with certainty that the Allies would drive forward towards the Tunisian coast as soon as the opportunity should present itself.

There were two possible methods of accomplishing this - a breakthrough west of Tunis, or an offensive in southern Tunisia, in the general direction of Sousse and Sfax.

A breakthrough on the Axis front west of Tunis would have brought the Allied forces into the extensive plains, where their superior armored units could be employed most effectively. The German defensive line followed the line of the mountains and was lacking in depth.

Seizure of the harbors of Tunis and Bizerte would have ended the war in North Africa with a minimum of delay. Even

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the German-Italian Panzer Army, which was still holding its position near Buerat as of early January, would have been forced to capitulate since its only supply line ran via Tunis - Gabes. Thanks to the activity of enemy air forces based on Malta, the Army could no longer be supplied by means of the direct ocean route. Nevertheless, weather conditions made it seem extremely unlikely that the Allies would attempt a decisive attack in northern Tunisia before March.

On the other hand, the situation in southern Tunisia seemed almost to demand an Allied drive to the coast in the vicinity of the Little Gulf of Syrte. The Allies could hardly help being aware of the weakness of Axis defenses in this area, and they must have realized that the troops there were incapable of offering any real resistance. Such an attack, a landing at Sousse for example, could have been effectively supported by the air forces based on Malta.

An attack of this sort would have restricted the Axis forces to a narrow bridgehead in Tunisia and would have forced the German-Italian Panzer Army in Tripolitania into a completely hopeless situation. Moreover, weather conditions during the rainy period were far more favorable in southern Tunisia than in the mountainous territory to the north.

As a matter of fact, Eisenhower - as it later turned out - had considered a similar plan (Operation SATIN)[32].

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32 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 135.

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Realizing this situation, the Commander in Chief, South, submitted a proposal to the Italian Supreme Command to the effect that Rommel's Panzer Army should keep the British Eighth Army occupied as far as possible from the Tunisian border. In Feldmarschall Kesselring's opinion, this was the only way in which he could be sure of the operational freedom needed to carry out his long-cherished plan for an attack to the northwest against the flank and rear area of the Allied forces in northern Tunisia[33]. The enemy was to be contained on the Tunisian western front by means of small-scale attacks until such time as the troops needed for the attack could be assembled; the respite thus gained would be used to strengthen the Axis positions.

While Kesselring's plan was carried out with success along the northern sector, the Italian Division Superba suffered a serious setback in the Bou - Arada - Pont du Fahs area and at Djebel Bou-Dabouss. The Superba was completely routed from its position.

During the period 18 through 25 January, an assault group from the 11th Panzer Division managed to restore the situation. During the fighting, the French lost more than 4,000 prisoners, 21 tanks and armored cars, 70 guns, 200 motor vehicles, and 100 machine-guns[34]. British and American troops were hastily ordered to the front in an attempt to salvage the situation.

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33 - See Footnote 27, page 610 of this study; pages 3 and 4 of the study "The Struggle for Tunisia" (Der Kampf um Tunesien), Wehrmacht High Command report dated 26 January 1943.

34 - Loc. cit.

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On 13 January 1943, the 21st Panzer Division of Rommel's Panzer Army was dispatched to Gabes in order to secure the rear-area supply route to Tripolitania[35].

Encouraged by the success of the 10th Panzer Division, the 21st moved forward on 31 January to seize the narrow passage near Faid, which was also occupied by French troops. The Division stormed Faid and the nearby mountain passes, throwing back counterattacks by the American Combat Command A, hurrying up from its position at Sbeitla. By the time the fighting was over, the 21st Panzer Division had captured 1,047 prisoners and captured or destroyed 25 armored vehicles, 20 guns, 8 grenade-launchers, 54 machine-guns, 70 trucks, and 5 aircraft[36]. During the night of 1/2 February, the 2d Panzer Division was withdrawn to Mahnassy in order to obviate the danger of its being encircled from the south.

On 7 February the Sened position, west of Mahnassy, which had been lost to the enemy during the night of 1/2 February, was regained and the Axis positions advanced in the direction of Gafsa. The dive-bomber units contributed materially to the success of the operation[37].

German leaders were alarmed at the strength of the Allied forces in the Faid area. They

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35 - See page 506 of the present study.
36 - See Footnote 26 (translator's note: should this not be 27?); pages 10 and 11, War Diary, Second Air Fleet report dated 3 February 1943.
37 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 142 and 143.

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could only conclude that these forces represented the nucleus for the long anticipated drive towards the eastern coast of Tunisia.

Consequently, it was the presence of these forces which triggered the decision on the part of German leaders to attack Sidi-Bou-Sid and, as a result, the subsequent thrust to Tebessa.

In the meantime, during the night of 22/23 January, the German-Italian Panzer Army had withdrawn from Tripoli and was making its way - in loose formation - back towards the southern border of Tunisia.

During the course of a conference held at about the end of January at the Fuehrer Headquarters, Hitler had given his approval to Kesselring's plan to advance on Tebessa. He had ordered that the attack be led by Feldmarschall Rommel, despite the fact that it would be taking place in the operational area of the Fifth Panzer Army. Rommel's health made a relatively extended leave advisable, and Hitler wanted him to close his career in Africa with a successful offensive action.

In view of Hitler's wishes, Feldmarschall Kesselring considered it imperative that a new chain of command be set up as soon as the German-Italian Panzer Army should enter Tunisian territory. He proposed an army group command (Heeresgruppe-Kommando) under Rommel and pointed out that the Italians - for reasons of prestige - would have to be given command over one army at least.

Unfortunately, during the conference, Feldmarschall Kesselring was unable to

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obtain a final decision from the Wehrmacht High Command concerning the new chain of command.

In this connection it must be remembered that a clearly-defined chain of command was urgently necessary, inasmuch as the German-Italian Panzer Army had entered Tunisian territory on 12 February. As early as 27 January, the Mareth line had been occupied by the Italian XX and XXI Army Corps.

The good relationship between the German and Italian armed forces was seriously jeopardized by the fact that the Italians' chief, Marshal Count Cavallero, was relieved of his post on 6 February. Feldmarschall Kesselring was deeply concerned at the change.

"From the time Marshal Count Cavallero was replaced by Generaloberst Ambrosio, the situation grew steadily more unbearable. The feeling of mutual friendliness and confidence which had existed between Cavallero and me turned into the exact opposite. I had warned Il Duce against relieving Cavallero and replacing him with Ambrosio. Since my warnings were not heeded, I had no choice but to request that I, too, should be relieved. Moved by the urgent protests of Il Duce, during the course of which he guaranteed an atmosphere of 'brotherly cooperation', I agreed to withdraw my request. I could not help suspecting that even at that early date the first deliberations concerning Italy's defection were under way - a suspicion which we know today to be entirely accurate."[38]

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38 - Kesselring, Albert, op. cit., pages 213 and 214. See also "Changes in the Command of the Italian Armed Forces in 1943" (Wechsel in der italienischen Wehrmachtsfuehrung 1943), Appendix ____; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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The assault group which was to carry out the drive to Tebessa was formed from elements of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The group was to come under the command of the staff of the Army Corps. The 10th Panzer Division had been withdrawn from the front line being held by the Fifth Panzer Army, where it was replaced by the non-mobile elements of the Division Hermann Goering. The latter had begun to arrive in Tunisia during the second half of January.

Generaloberst von Arnim, Commander in Chief, Fifth Panzer Army, considered extensive operations along the enemy flank and rear area, as conceived by Feldmarschall Kesselring, to be completely incapable of accomplishment. He did not share the optimism felt by the Commander in Chief, South, and in his sobering analysis of the situation pointed out the following unfavorable factors:

insufficient troops to handle a front 250 miles in length;

shortage of ammunition; and

inadequate supply transport facilities.

He also stressed the fact that since the end of January it had become increasingly obvious that the Wehrmacht High Command had no intention of keeping the various promises it had made. Normal supply shipments were not even sufficient to meet the daily requirements of the Fifth Panzer Army[39].

These objections were undeniably justified.

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39 - See page 521 of the present study.

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Generalobersst von Arnim felt that the most that could be hoped for with the inadequate troops available was a temporary improvement in the situation, to be brought about by means of smaller-scale tactical actions.

He could not be prevailed upon to agree with Feldmarschall Kesselring's view, namely that immediate and extremely daring action was the only way in which a decisive turn in the course of events could be achieved.

In an attempt to reconcile the discrepancy in their views, Feldmarschall Kesselring, in an on-the-spot conference with Feldmarschall Rommel, Generalobersst von Arnim, and General Messe (Commander in Chief of the Italian First Army), carefully examined the possibilities of an attack such as he wanted.

Although his original plan had called for a concentration of all the available forces to strike a shattering blow against the enemy's southern flank, Feldmarschall Kesselring finally agreed to a modified plan involving a smaller-scale attack against a more limited objective. He did, however, specify that his agreement did not mean that he was giving up his larger plan for good.

The first step in the new plan was the encirclement of the enemy forces at Sidi-Bou-Sid, to be followed by a drive towards Gafsa, the 21st Panzer Division approaching from the north and the mobile elements of the German-Italian Panzer Army from the south. Advance patrols were to be dispatched in the direction of Tozeur to secure the approach routes.

Feldmarschall Kesselring made it clear that this smaller-scale offensive might well be viewed as the first phase of his original plan for

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an action leading up to and beyond Tebessa[40].

Feldmarschall Kesselring discussed all the details connected with the conduct of operations with the commanders in chief of the armies and conferred with them regarding the new chain of command made necessary by the change in plans.

In order to free Feldmarschall Rommel to take charge of the attack, a newly-established staff under General Hasse would have to assume command on the Tunisian southern front - and this well before the beginning of operations. The Commander in Chief, South, considered it imperative that Feldmarschall Rommel already be in command of all the Axis forces in Tunisia prior to the beginning of the attack; the Wehrmacht High Command, however, was of another opinion.

For reasons which seem to be rather unconvincing, the Wehrmacht High Command insisted that the Army Group Command should not be established until the attack was under way.

This decision was made in spite of the fact that a basic agreement had been reached with the Italian Supreme Command to the effect that Feldmarschall Rommel was the only possible choice for the post of Commander in Chief of the Africa Army Corps and that he alone should be in charge of the planned offensive.

Thus, from its very beginning, this last, presumably decisive offensive operation, in which the Axis forces were to appeal once more to the gods of battle, seemed singularly ill-fated!

Unfortunately, Feldmarschall Kesselring abandoned his plan to move to Africa with a small combat staff, for he was the only person

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40 - This interpretation is substantiated by General der Flieger Paul

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Footnote 40 (cont)

Deichmann in Appendix ____ of this study. At the time in question, General Deichmann was Chief of Staff with the Commander in Chief, South.

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who could have solved any unforeseen difficulties in the conduct of operations by on-the-spot decisions. He knew how much was at stake!

Under no circumstances should he have followed the order to report to the Fuehrer Headquarters during these critical days.

On 14 February, the American force at Sidi-Bou-Sid was encircled by the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The dive-bomber and fighter forces had made an important contribution to the success of the operation. Another German force, together with the Italian Division Centauro, pushed forward towards Gafsa, which the Allied forces abandoned during the night of 14/15 February. Reconnaissance was carried out as far ahead as Farina.

On 15 and 16 February, the British and American forces made several unsuccessful attempts to recapture Sidi-Bou-Sid; the losses sustained were very high. Pursuing the enemy in tanks, the Germans took Sbeitla on 17 February. Elements of the German Africa Corps had taken Farina and, by 17 February, were engaged in the battle for Thelepte. The Fifth Panzer Army had driven the French forces out of Pichon, the fulcrum of the Axis offensive line.

As a result of the scarcity of the situation reports received, the German-Italian command headquarters in Rome assumed at first that the action in progress was the small-scale locally-restricted attack on Sidi-Bou-Sid.

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which had been discussed with Feldmarschall Kesselring. It was not until 16 February that the replies to their requests for more detailed information made it clear that the entire front was in motion!

Since Feldmarschall Kesselring was still at the Fuehrer Headquarters on 17 February, no decision could be made as to coordination of the objectives of the two Armies involved in the attack.

"Rommel wants to go on to Tebessa, and the Fifth Panzer Army, because it is short of troops, insists on Mateur", reports Colonel Pontow in his contribution to this study[41].

It was not until 18 February that Feldmarschall Kesselring, who had returned to Rome in the meantime and conferred with Il Duce, finally determined a new and unequivocal chain of command.

The 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, as well as those elements of the German Army Corps already in action, were placed under the command of Feldmarschall Rommel to continue the offensive along the Sbeitla - Tebessa line towards Le Kef.

Generaloberst von Arnim was to continue harrassing the enemy by means of repeated raids into his territory, holding his forces ready at the same time for a broad-front offensive between the coast and Pont du Fahs.

A landing at Tabarka, to be carried out with the Naval Command, Tunisia (Marine-Kommando Tunesien), was in process of preparation. The Second Air Fleet was to provide a paratrooper force to destroy the bridge at Le Kef before the

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41 - Pontow, op. cit., pages 49 and 50.

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landing began.

On 19 February, the Kasserine Pass was captured and the Axis forces set off in pursuit of the defeated army, one group in the direction of Thala and a second group in the direction of Tebessa.

Allied reinforcements, however, brought to the scene of action with a minimum of delay, blocked all points of access to the mountains.

The regroupings occasioned by the newly established chain of command cost the Axis commanders an entire day.

The fighting on 20 and 21 February brought scant success to the Axis troops.

Moving along the southern flank of the Fifth Panzer Army, the Combat Group Buhse (Kampfgruppe Buhse) managed to advance to a point some fifteen miles southwest of Matour. The 21st Panzer Division, on the other hand, was stuck fast outside of Sbeitla.

After capturing Thala, the 10th Panzer Division continued its attack. In the meantime, however, the Combat Group was brought to a halt in the mountainous terrain, approximately half-way to Tebessa.

The enemy had recovered from the original shock and had had time to bring in troops from Algeria and Morocco. And the weakened German units were incapable of breaking the resistance offered by these fresh reinforcements. Moreover, violent rains had made the terrain impassable and seriously

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limited the maneuverability of the tanks.

During a conference with the Commander in Chief, South, on 22 February at his headquarters on the Kasserine Pass, Feldmarschall Rommel recommended that the attack be broken off and the troops withdrawn to the positions they had held prior to the offensive.

In view of the situation on the Mareth sector of the front, which might well require the intervention of motorized units, the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian Supreme Command agreed to Rommel's proposal. On 23 February, the Army Group Africa was finally established, with Rommel as its commander in chief. It was made up of the following:

Hqs, Fifth Panzer Army (Generaloberst von Arnim),

German-Italian Panzer Army (General Messe)[42].

By 25 February, having destroyed the railway lines and mined the highways after them, the Axis forces had withdrawn as follows:

10th Panzer Division - Sidi-Ben-Sid area and the area to the north of the town;

21st Panzer Division - Sbeitla area and the area northwest of the town;

Combat Group Buhse - Gafsa area.

The enemy continued in pursuit as far as the Kasserine - Thelepte line.

The offensive operation, which had been launched with such high hopes, had had no tactical effect whatsoever. Nevertheless, in Feldmarschall Kesselring's opinion, the American forces and certain elements of the British Army had taken such a beating that

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42 - See Appendix ____, which makes this "double subordination" graphically clear.

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it would probably be four to six weeks before the Allies would be able to launch their anticipated large-scale attack.

In addition to the extremely high losses suffered by the Allies in terms of dead and wounded, almost 4,000 prisoners, 235 tanks, 169 armored reconnaissance cars, and 160 guns and self-propelled gun-mounts were captured[43].

The Deputy Chief of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff, General Warlimont, had been in Tunisia on 8 February to appraise the situation there.

On 16 February, he reported the following to the Führer Headquarters:

"The North African theater of operations must be viewed as a single entity. The enemy is constructing a highway from Bou Arada to Medjez-el-Bab. He has stationed apparently strong forces before the northern sector of the Fifth Panzer Army; his batteries go as high as 330 mm guns. There is no aerial reconnaissance in depth. There are some eight divisions in the field in the British Eighth Army Sector. Rommel cannot leave a rear guard at his Mareth position if he has to release forces for the drive on Gafsa. He anticipates an Allied attack about the middle of March; there is a chance that the enemy will restrict his offensive to the Tunis and Bizerte area.

Our own situation is about as stable as a house of cards; nowhere are the forces adequate in number. Battalions are spread over six to seven miles each. The supply situation is a determining factor. Von Arnim estimates the requirements for both armies

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43 - See Footnote 27; Wehrmacht report dated 25 February 1943, page 11.

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at 150,000 tons per month for four months (Kesselring, on 12 February, set this figure at 60,000 tons per month; right now, the lowest possible estimate, including the required extra margin for safety, is 90,000 per month). The maximum capacity available to the Italian Supreme Command is 80,000 tons per month, and this includes the anticipated loss of 20,000 tons per month due to enemy destruction of shipping! There are about 400 Navy barges and Seibel barges available - a drop in the bucket! Our strategic and tactical goals must be tailored to fit the supply situation....."[44]

".....about as stable as a house of cards" is probably the most accurate way of describing the over-all situation of the Axis front in Tunisia.

It is common knowledge that a house of cards collapses as soon as it is touched.

Feldmarschall Rommel, commander in chief of the Army Group Africa, assessed the situation as of the end of the February in the following words:

"The two Armies in Tunisia are holding a front approximately 390 miles long. The particularly important defense points along this line are the areas west and southwest of Tunis and the Mareth sector between the coast and the mountains. Approximately 350 miles of the front are either occupied by very thinly dispersed forces or - due to the acute personnel shortage - not occupied at all. A large part of the front line held by the Fifth Panzer Army is mountainous in character, but even so we cannot discount the possibility of an Allied infantry attack at almost any point along the line.

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44 - Greiner, op. cit., page 437.

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If successful, such an attack would result in an Allied breakthrough to the weakly occupied passes.

There is an extremely wide gap between the two Armies running along either side of the El Djerid salt sea. During the dry season, this area offers excellent operational possibilities for Allied motorized units....."

According to Rommel's calculations, the Army Group Africa was confronted by an enemy force composed of 1,600 tanks, 1,110 antitank guns, 850 cannon, and almost 210,000 troops.

In his opinion, the Army Group Africa would be incapable of withstanding a simultaneous attack on both sectors of the front. In order to improve the situation, he made the following suggestions:

"A front 390 miles in length is untenable in the long run; it ought to be shortened to 93 miles. In this case, a possible new line would be the front sector currently held by the Fifth Panzer Army as far as Djebel Mansour (west of Pont du Fahs) and from there over the mountains to Enfidaville. In the event of the establishment of such a front, it would be highly desirable to drive the Allies out of the Medjez-el-Bab - Beu Arada area, pushing them back over the mountains towards the west.

Naturally, the proposed shortening of the front line would entail our giving up large sections of Tunisia, including a number of airfields. It would also mean that the enemy could establish surface communication between his eastern and western groups. The shortened front,

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however, would be advantageous in that it could presumably be held longer than the present one.

If our present long front line should collapse, it would mean that the First Army would be completely cut off from the supply line. The two Armies would be overcome singly by the enemy. And once that happens, we shall no longer be in a position to shorten the front to the line suggested above, because the surviving forces will be too few to accomplish it. In that case, we shall lose the African bridgehead entirely."

In the computation of supply requirements which follows the above passage, Rommel concludes that minimum monthly deliveries in the amount of 140,000 tons are absolutely necessary if the Armies are to hold off a large-scale Allied attack.

"Insofar as I am able to judge on the basis of past experience," he continues, "this requirement can never be fulfilled." At another point in his report, he states that ".....the men on top have obviously fallen prey to certain illusions fostered by the availability, in previous times, of a great deal more shipping capacity."

He concludes his report with the following words:

"In view of the precarious situation in which the Army Group now finds itself, I request an immediate decision as to the continued conduct of operations in Tunisia

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in terms of long-range planning. We must count on the beginning of the enemy's full-scale offensive as soon as the moon is full."[45]

Rommel's appraisal of the situation is undoubtedly closer to the facts of the matter than the views held by the Wehrmacht High Command, the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian Supreme Command.

Although this is never stated expressly, Rommel's report surely took into account his accurate estimate of the fighting power of his Italian allies, which was sinking rapidly.

For this reason, the disadvantages accruing from a shortening of the front - the voluntary abandonment of extensive territories and the establishment of contact between Montgomery's and Eisenhower's armies - were balanced by the tighter operational control made possible by a limited front. If undertaken immediately, the contracting operation could be carried out without enemy intervention, and the troops would have time to establish themselves in their new positions and to improve them.

A contraction of the front, of course, would also make Allied air superiority more effective. Even so, this factor could be countered, to a certain extent anyway, by appropriate measures on the part of the Axis troops and their immediate supply organizations.

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45 - Rommel, op. cit., pages 368 and 370.

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The much weaker German Luftwaffe could not, in any case, hope to destroy Allied air supremacy.

The course of subsequent operations was to prove conclusively that Feldmarschall Rommel's appraisal of the situation and of the fighting power of the Italian forces was entirely accurate.

As was to be expected, however, his recommendations were promptly turned down by his superior headquarters.

In the meantime, during the end of February, von Manteuffel's division had succeeded, after several days' heavy fighting along the coastal sector of the Fifth Panzer Army front, in capturing the Allied station at Sedjenane, half-way between Mateur and Tabarka.

The weaker southern group failed to reach its appointed objectives and succeeded only in occupying limited areas near Goubellat and southwest of Djebel Mansour.

During January the German-Italian air forces had been employed chiefly in Tunisia, Tripolitania, and Sicily. Their primary mission was the maintenance of continual and wide-ranging aerial reconnaissance activity, which - depending upon weather conditions - covered the entire western Mediterranean as far as Gibraltar and the eastern Mediterranean as far as the Nile Delta. The main objective of this activity, apart from

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weather reconnaissance, was careful observation of the coastal waters, the coast itself, and the front lines, in order to obtain accurate data for the planning of operations. The long-range employment of bomber, dive-bomber, and fighter-bomber units was directed principally against enemy supply movements, enemy bases along the North African coast, and enemy airfields in the rear area. The port of Bone, for example, was bombed repeatedly during the course of January (on the 1st, 2d, 7th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, and 23d), resulting in the destruction of Allied convoys as well as of individual vessels.

During January a total of 17 ships with a gross tonnage of 108,000 and 2 destroyers were sunk, and 42 ships with a gross tonnage of 180,000, 1 cruiser, 2 destroyers, and 2 patrol boats were damaged[46].

Bomber, close-support, dive-bomber, and fighter aircraft were also employed in direct and indirect ground-support missions. The role they played in successful offensive and defensive actions in the Tunisian and Tripolitanian areas of operation was a significant one.

Their direct intervention in the ground fighting at Fondouk (3 January), Jefna (5 January), Beu Arada (13 January), and

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46 - See Appendix ____.

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in the counterattack carried out by the 10th Panzer Division (Operation EIL-BOTE (Express)) from 18 through 24 January resulted in high personnel and materiel losses for the enemy and provided continual relief for the Axis forces on the ground. The single and twin-engine fighter units had a two-fold mission to perform within the framework of air defense operations. In the first place, they were responsible for surveillance and protection of the airspace over the Tunisian and Tripolitanian theaters, and in the second place, it was their task to secure the German-Italian convoy routes between Sicily and Africa.

During the month of January, 316 enemy aircraft were shot down, while Axis losses amounted to only 105 aircraft. The Appendix cited below[47] gives a summary of the missions flown each day.

The role of the air transport units became increasingly important for the fighting in Africa. Troops, weapons, ammunition, equipment, fuel, and food supplies were delivered to both sectors of the front each day by the units of the Air Transport Commander (Mediterranean) (Lufttransportführer Mittelmeer), Generalmajor Buchholz.

The air transport units comprised the following aircraft: 400 Ju-52's, 20 Me-323's (Giant), 15 FW-200's (Condor), and 3 BV's (Blohm und Voss)[48].

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47 - See Appendix ____.
48 - See Footnote 51 (?), page 28.

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During the month of January, they delivered the following troops and supplies: 15,816 troops, 4,742 tons of weapons and ammunition, 5,155 cubic feet of fuel, 8.5 tons of food, two 100 mm guns, and two prime movers[49].

The 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division, stationed in the Tunisian area of operations, was made up of the groups in action at Tunis, Bizerte, and Sousse. The primary mission of these groups was the defense of port installations, airfields, and supply bases. In addition, there were five antiaircraft artillery units trained in ground-support operations and distributed along the various sectors of the German-Italian front line. These units proved to be extremely valuable in offensive as well as defensive actions.

The Luftwaffe signal communications forces were generally distributed throughout the entire air defense system. One of their most urgent and important missions was radio reconnaissance of the entire Mediterranean area, which helped to procure valuable data concerning the strength and distribution of enemy forces[50].

The difficulties encountered in the transport of supplies by ship led to a continuous struggle between the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian Supreme Naval Command (Supermarina). The Italians insisted on operating on a fixed schedule calling for

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49 - Air Transport in the Mediterranean (Lufttransportleistungen in Mittelmeer), January 1943; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

50 - See Footnote 27; Report of the IIId Radio Monitoring Group, 2d Luftwaffe Signal Communications Regiment, page 7.

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a convoy sailing every three days, with an average of nine days allowed for each crossing, and they refused to permit any variation in this procedure. In addition, the schedule called for the departure of a slower convoy, composed of supply ships only, every four or five days[51]. In view of the precariousness of the supply situation, this schedule was far from adequate. If a single tanker failed to depart on schedule, for example, it might mean a fuel crisis in Tunis[52]. This basic inadequacy was further augmented by weather conditions, which often forced all classes of ships, troop-laden destroyers, freighters, motor-driven sailboats, tankers, and barges, to delay their departure, to reverse course en route, or to interrupt their journey[53].

As early as December 1942, the Italian transport fleet of 140,000 gross tonnage had been reduced to twenty-six ships with a total capacity of 84,620 gross tons by destruction or damage inflicted by enemy action[54].

Losses due to enemy air force and submarine activity were also high in January[55] (only eleven out of thirty-three Italian destroyers were seaworthy, for example[56]), chiefly because the convoys could not be given adequate air cover. There was very little prospect of these ships' being repaired rapidly due to the remoteness of the shipyards - in Genoa and Trieste - and the shortage of skilled labor[57].

The role played by the paratrooper sabotage units, which

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51 - War Diary, Second Air Fleet, entries dated 1, 10, 22, 23, 30, and 31 January 1943.

52 - Loc. cit.

53 - See Footnote 27; War Diary, Second Air Fleet, entry dated 31 January.

54 - See Footnote 27; page 18.

55 - See Footnote 51, above.

56 - See Footnote 51, above.

57 - See Footnote 27.

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were sent into action for the first time in December, will be described in greater detail at the time their missions are discussed.

During January, the enemy air forces carried out frequent attacks on the port installations at Tunis and Bizerte as well as on Axis airfields. The cities of Ferryville, Sousse, Sfax, Kairouan, and Gabes were also subjected to bombardment. The majority of the enemy air activity at the front was directed against Fondouk (4 January), Jefna (5 January), and Bou Arada (19 January).

Other favorite targets during this period were the German-Italian supply transports in the Mediterranean between southern Italy and Africa, including the supply bases at Naples and on the island of Sicily.

The enemy air forces carried out regular and intensive reconnaissance activity over the entire Mediterranean area.

On 6 February all the Axis air forces active in Tunisia were combined to form the newly-organized Tunisian Air Corps (Fliegerkorps Tunesien)[58] in an effort to tighten their operational organization.

This move resulted in a clear delineation between the close-support air corps on the one hand and the two long-range air corps (the II and the X), on the other. This separation, most welcome to the command staff of the Second Air Fleet, was a logical one in view of the ground organization forces available.

General Seidemann has the following to say concerning the employment of these air corps

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58 - See pages 532 and 533 of the present study.

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in Tunisia.

"The operational plans for the units in the north and at Mareth remained unchanged. As far as the middle sector of the front was concerned, the Air Commander, Tunis (Fliegerfuehrer Tunis), General der Flieger Koch, was to release whatever Luftwaffe units might be needed from action to action.

(General der Flieger Koch had been appointed on 31 January 1943 to succeed General Harlinghausen, who had taken over the II Air Corps).

On 14 February, when the offensive was launched at the Faid Pass, the Air Commander, Tunis, transferred his headquarters to Faucenneria (forty miles northwest of Sfax), where he remained until mid-March. During this period, he also carried out the duties of an Air Commander, Middle Sector (Fliegerfuehrer Mitte). In Gabes, his former headquarters, his operations officer, Major Wildau, assumed command until the arrival of Generalmajor Hagen. Colonel Grunow, Air Commander, Middle Sector, had been reported missing when his aircraft crashed during a flight from Italy to Tunis. Thus his staff was left without a commander, and was taken over by the Air Commander, Tunis. This improvised solution proved to be eminently satisfactory, since the Tunisian Air Corps, having ready access to information pertaining to the development of the ground situation, was in a position to employ its units in western or southern Tunisia, depending upon where they were needed most urgently at the moment.

The ground organization was also modified to fit the new circumstances. The first step, an eminently logical and extremely useful one, was the establishment of the Air District, Tunis (Luftgau Tunis), with three airfield

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area sections (Flughafenbereichs-Kommandos)[59].

All the antiaircraft artillery units in the north were consolidated under the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division (General Neuffer), and all those in the south under the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division. Their employment in airfield defense operations was coordinated directly between the air commanders and the antiaircraft artillery divisions.

The Antiaircraft Artillery Command, Tunis (Flak-Kommando Tunis), in coordination with the Air District, Tunis, set up new plans for the adaptation of the entire area to the exigencies of Luftwaffe operations and set to work immediately to put these plans into effect. Reconnaissance expeditions were sent out to investigate possible sites for new airfields in the south and in the Mediterranean area and, at those sites deemed suitable, airfields were soon established and - on the basis of requirements set up by the flying units - outfitted with the most up-to-date equipment. Most of them had one or two taxiing areas located far away from the aircraft park and billeting areas, with repair shops, ammunition dumps, and radio stations located at convenient points. Whenever possible, all these installations were subterranean and in all cases effectively camouflaged. Thus, from the very beginning, preparations were undertaken to meet the anticipated enemy air attacks. The desert and steppe areas offered more than enough room for installations of the type described.

Signal communications activity was designed to be independent of wire channels whenever possible. The new "radio range communications" (Richtfunkverbindungen or Funkrichtverbindungen) were most effective in that they saved both personnel and

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59 - Details are contained in the Appendix (excerpt from the War Diary of the Air District Headquarters); Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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maintenance time and labor. The communications network was designed in such a way that connections could be restored by means of change-over switching with no loss of time in the event of damage to or destruction of any element of the system. As a matter of fact, these special networks were often enough the only remaining means of communication in a critical situation, and frequently they were the determining factor in the successful outcome of certain Army ground operations. In order to counter enemy penetration flights over Axis-occupied territory, several radio navigation stations equipped with Freya instruments and a number of aircraft reporting posts were set up; terrain conditions being what they were, approaching enemy aircraft units could be identified at a distance of approximately 160 miles. Thus the enemy never succeeded in staging a surprise attack. Due to the fact that air assembly operations took relatively long, enemy units could always be recognized one to two hours ahead of time. As a result, German antiaircraft defense facilities, including the fighter aircraft, could make the necessary preparations in plenty of time. The ground organization also had time to carry out the measures predetermined in the event of an alarm, dispersement of important objectives, camouflaging, etc. All in all, as a result of these conditions, the losses suffered during enemy attacks on airfields were held to a reasonable level.

Coordination with the Army was also reorganized as a result of the appointment of air liaison officers (Flieger-Verbindungs-Offiziere).

The Air Corps maintained liaison with the Army Group Africa, the office of the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian II Air Corps, as well as with the Antiaircraft Artillery Command and with the Air District Command, Tunis.

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The Air Commander, Tunis, maintained liaison with the Fifth Panzer Army, and the Air Commander, Gabes, with the Italian First Army.

The Tunisian Air Corps had been made responsible for protecting the air transport units as they approached the coast of Africa as well as in their loading and unloading operations....."

"The Italian air forces stationed in Tunisia were also reorganized to bring them into closer alignment with the German Air Corps. The Italian Air Commander, Tunis, (General Bernasconi) was in command of the over-all theater of operations. The southern sector was under the jurisdiction of the Italian Air Commander, Gabes; the Italians had no air forces in action in the middle and northern sectors. The Italians assumed responsibility for the protection of their own air transport units, whose operations were quite separate from those of their German colleagues. The relations among the various Italian command posts as well as between German and Italian headquarters were good. Effective coordination of day-to-day operations was achieved without difficulty.

German-Italian supply operations were still entirely satisfactory in February 1943; it was even possible to lay in a small stock of reserve supplies. Even replacement aircraft and spare parts, ammunition, and aviation fuels were still being delivered in sufficient quantities. As a result, the operational readiness of the flying units could be maintained at 50 - 60%, even during periods of heavy fighting, and at nearly 75% during periods of relative calm.

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Surface motor vehicles, as was always the case in Africa, were the only items which were in short supply.

On 14 February, when the Fifth Panzer Army began its attack on the Faid Pass, the Air Commander, Tunis, ordered the participation of the fighter and dive-bomber units stationed at Kairouan.

The force assigned by the Air Commander, Gabes, was also a heterogeneous mixture of fighter and dive-bomber units. Command of the missions as such was invested in the Air Commander, Tunis, and was carried out from the headquarters at Feuconneria. This was also serving as temporary headquarters for Generalleutnant Ziegler, who was in charge of the tactical aspects of the operation. The offensive at the Faid Pass, which began as a purely local attack on a strictly limited objective, developed into the drive on Tebessa. The role played by the Luftwaffe units was a major one.

On 14 February, reconnaissance forces succeeded in identifying and reporting in plenty of time the approach of the American armored forces and their assembly in the area of Sbeitla. The countermeasures made possible by this early warning resulted in the disruption of the American attack and led to the near-destruction of the armored forces involved. The German dive-bomber units contributed much to the success of these countermeasures.

During the following days as well, after Feldmarschall Rommel had taken over the command, the Luftwaffe units were utilized constantly to support the advance of the ground forces. Carrying out several flights each day, the Luftwaffe reconnaissance units were able to report in good time the approach of new enemy forces from the northern front and in the Tebessa area.

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The closer the German troops came to Tebessa, the more active and alert the enemy air forces became.

They flew countless low-level attacks, and it was not always possible to counter these effectively due to the fact that the German air units were stationed too far behind their own lines. Steps had been taken to move them forward to Sbeitla and Thelepte, but so far only a few of these transfers had actually taken place, for the order to cease operations came through before the rest could be gotten under way. The Axis air units were still covering the withdrawal of the troops to their original positions, but apart from the aerial combat necessitated by this activity, there were no further large-scale air engagements.

In the south, the British were drawing closer and closer to the Mareth line. The progress of their advance and the deployment of their forces were kept under constant surveillance (both visual and photographic reconnaissance). At the same time, the Axis reconnaissance forces extended the range of their activity to include Nalcut, in the south, and the area lying southeast of Tozeur - Nebili.

In addition, long-range reconnaissance missions were flown to keep the harbor at Tunis, which the British had started using immediately, under observation. The Axis air units carried out daily close-support missions against the port and its installations. The II Air Corps even resorted to night bombardment attacks in an attempt to make its activity more effective.

During the last days of February, the Air Commander, Tunis, was busy providing support for the offensive being carried out by the Fifth Panzer Army on the northern sector of the front.

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During these operations, the Axis dive-bomber forces were extremely successful in their struggle against enemy artillery and armored forces."[60]

According to data provided by the radio monitoring service, the total strength of the Allied forces amounted to 2,769 aircraft as of the Mid-February.

Ninety-five of these were stationed in Gibraltar, 740 in French North Africa, 244 in Malta, and 1,690 in the area between Tripolitania and Egypt[61].

In contrast to the above, the strength of the German Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean theater as of 20 February 1943 was no more than 837 aircraft, some 551 of which were actually capable of immediate commitment[62].

The superior numbers of the enemy air forces confronted the Axis aerial reconnaissance units with very difficult problems. The long-range reconnaissance units, for example, in addition to their routine coverage of the Sicilian Straits, had to expand their operations to include the sea lanes and ports along the coast of North Africa.

The close-range reconnaissance units were occupied primarily with tactical and combat reconnaissance over and beyond the enemy lines.

As far as long-range bomber operations were concerned, the Second Air Fleet had

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60 - General der Flieger Seidemann, excerpts from "Employment of the Tunisian Air Corps during the Period 6 February through 13 May 1943" (Einsatz des Fl.K. Tunis von 6.2. bis 13.5.43), pages 2 through 11; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

61 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 15 February 1943 (see Footnote 27, page 9 of the source detailed there).

62 - See Appendix _____ for details.

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ordered naval targets as their chief objective. In addition to supply convoys, the main effort was to be directed against the enemy ports of Algiers, Bone, Tripoli, Bengazi, and Tobruk.

The long-range bomber forces were to be employed against ground combat objectives only in situations in which the ground forces were too weak to ward off enemy attacks during their initial, developmental, or conclusive phases[63].

During Operation SPRING BREEZE (Fruehlingswind), the units of the Tunisian Air Corps had 371 aircraft and crews participating in rotating missions. In the battle of Sidi-Bou-Sid alone (14 February), the destroyed 11 Spitfires, 5 tanks, 1 armored reconnaissance car, 3 artillery pieces, 8 track-laying vehicles, and 17 other motor vehicles. On the following day, they turned out in support of their own armored forces, one group of which was fighting at Sadaguia, and another advancing on Sbeitla. They enjoyed considerable success in the area east of Tebessa (21 February 1943).

Towards the end of the month, the close-support forces were concentrated on the northern sector, for it was here that the dive-bombers and fighter-bombers proved to be most effective in their attacks against enemy artillery positions and vehicle and tank parks.

At the same time, Axis air activity along the southern sector of the front was gradually subsiding in both scope and significance.

In comparison with previous months, in February the single-engine and twin-engine fighter units assigned to air defense operations were forced to restrict their activity

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63 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 19 February 1943.

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to more closely limited attacks as a result of the increasingly tighter concentration of their own forces. This proved to be an advantage insofar as fighter cover for the ground fighting was concerned as well as in respect to the providing of air cover for the sea lanes.

During February 240 enemy aircraft were shot down; Axis losses were only ninety-nine aircraft[64].

There had been no appreciable change in the missions assigned to the antiaircraft artillery units stationed in Africa. The majority of the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was occupied in securing the airspace between Tunis and Biserte. Apart from the five antiaircraft artillery groups assigned to support the ground fighting on the northern sector, three such groups were operating in the area south of Pont du Fahs, and two more were assigned to the Army units along the southern sector of the front. In addition, there were three antiaircraft artillery groups assigned to coastal defense operations north of Biserte.

Air defense operations in southern Tunisia, i.e. in the areas of Sousse, Sfax, and Gabes, had been taken over by the antiaircraft artillery forces assigned to the Headquarters, Air District, Tunis.

Most of the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division had remained in the operational area of the Italian First Army, where it was being committed against both air and ground targets. During February the Division accounted for fifteen enemy aircraft, captured 252 prisoners, destroyed eight tanks, one armored reconnaissance car, fifteen motor vehicles,

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64 - See Appendix _____ (see also Footnote 27).

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two antitank guns, several grenade-launchers and machine-gun nests, as well as a number of observer posts[65].

The Luftwaffe signal communications forces continued to improve their "Wim-interference stations"*. They often succeeded in jamming the reports of enemy reconnaissance pilots regarding Axis ship movements[66]. In addition, with the assistance of radio monitoring activity, it was possible to keep Allied troop movements in the Mediterranean area under constant surveillance[67].

The supply situation continued to be critical; Axis losses were relatively high.

During February, the German Luftwaffe succeeded in sinking two Allied merchant vessels with a total gross tonnage of 13,000 and in damaging ten ships with a total gross tonnage of 63,000[68].

Altogether, during the month of February, the German and Italian Navies and air forces managed to sink thirty-one merchant vessels (total gross tonnage 189,000), three destroyers, one cruiser, one submarine, and one torpedo-boat. They damaged thirteen merchant ships (total gross tonnage 60,000) and one light cruiser[69].

During the month of February, the air transport forces delivered 11,229 troops, 3,973 tons of weapons, equipment, and ammunition, 10,630 cubic feet of fuel, and 240.8 tons of supplies[70].

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65 - War Diary of the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division.

* - Translator's note: The German term is "Wim-Störstellen"; no definition or further description could be found.

66 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 5 February 1943.

67 - See Footnote 27; page 15 of the source detailed there.

68 - Appendix ____ (see also Footnote 27).

69 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 1 March 1943; see also Footnote 27; page 16 of the source detailed there.

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70 - See Footnote 49, Appendix for the month of February.

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