

field guns at close range. The situation was exceedingly grave and was only stabilized after periods of extreme danger by the energy and initiative of the handful of gallant troops on the spot. Subsidiary thrusts were also tried, to see whether our concentrations at Thala had weakened us elsewhere. At Sbiba the attack was halted by the opportune arrival of a squadron of "Churchills" from 25 Tank Brigade and on the Kasserine-Tebessa road the United States Armoured Division managed to hold, at Gebel Hamra, the first of the mountain passes, the attack of the Panzer Grenadier Regiment Africa. By midday on the 22nd Rommel appreciated that his casualties were increasing at a disproportionate rate and that the opportunity for further exploitation had passed; he therefore ordered the attack to be broken off. His withdrawal was, as always, well conducted with a most liberal use of mines and explosive devices to discourage pursuit. He was able to extricate all his tanks with the exception of nine, which were too heavily damaged and had to be abandoned. Some Italian Bersaglieri from the Centauro Division were employed in an infantry attack to cover the withdrawal of the Germans and suffered fairly heavy losses. Otherwise there was little opposition from enemy troops and by the evening of 25th February the Kasserine pass was again in our hands. By the 28th we had reoccupied Sbeitla, Kasserine and Feriana and the enemy had withdrawn his main force to the Eastern Dorsale. He still retained Gafsa, but it was lightly garrisoned by the Centauro Division and a German battle group.

At the crisis of the Kasserine battle, on 21st February, I ordered General Montgomery to create as powerful a threat as possible on the enemy's southern flank. He was not as yet well placed to do this since his administrative position was not yet firm; on the other hand there was no immediate risk in advancing ahead of his main strength since the enemy main forces were fully engaged elsewhere. Medenine, the road junction in front of the Mareth line, had been occupied by us on the 18th and by the next day headquarters and one Brigade of 51 Division were at Ben Gardane, with the other two brigades moving forward from Tripoli. By the 24th Eighth Army had two armoured car regiments in contact with the outposts of the Mareth line and General Leclerc's force, now known as "L" force, had occupied Ksar Rhilane, a desert outpost thirty miles west of the Matmata mountains; 51 Division continued to move up and all three brigades were forward of Medenine, but not in contact with the enemy, by the 25th. In the meanwhile I had informed General Montgomery on 23rd February that the situation at Kasserine was now improved and ordered him, while keeping up a display of force, not to prejudice the future by undue risks. He replied on the 27th that he had been careful to keep well balanced and considered his present position adequately strong.

The Battle of Kasserine had given me many anxious moments. As in his advance to El Alamein, Rommel had over-exploited a considerable initial success to leave himself in a worse position than before; he can hardly be blamed for his attempts to snatch a great victory, for on both occasions he came very near to it, but the result was equally disastrous for him. The United States II Corps had been

unfortunate in that their first major battle had been against such experienced troops and so dashing an enemy commander but, as General Eisenhower reported on 26th February, they were resolved to benefit immediately from the battle experience gained by the intensive training of all formations. Their improvement was indeed continuous and outstanding throughout the campaign. Another result of the battle had been that Allied formations of all three nationalities were very mixed up over the whole front and my first intention was to carry out a thorough reorganization. On the day I assumed command, in an order issued on 19th February, I laid down the following principles. Separate British, American and French sectors were to be organized forthwith under their respective commanders. The "bits and pieces" were to be collected and reorganized into their proper formations. The front was to be held by static troops, and armoured and mobile forces withdrawn and grouped to form a reserve striking force; all troops were to be extensively trained and re-equipped where necessary. Finally, immediate plans were to be prepared to regain the initiative, starting with carefully planned minor operations to force the enemy to react, but, I added, "there must be no failures". I organized at the same time an Anglo-American battle school, attended also when possible by French officers, where with the assistance of some experienced officers from Eighth Army the tactical lessons of recent battles were studied.

My strategic intentions I explained in a signal on the 21st. The object of the whole operation was to destroy the entire enemy force in Tunisia and the key to this was the capture of Tunis. The campaign would be divided into two phases. In the first the main object would be to get Eighth Army north of the Gabes gap, where it would gain contact with First Army and gain freedom of manoeuvre to develop its superiority in mobility and striking power. In this phase the role of the First Army would be to assist Eighth Army in getting through the gap—as soon, that is to say, as the Kasserine situation had been stabilized and First Army had regained the initiative. The method would be to stage carefully prepared, timed and controlled operations aimed at securing dominating localities from which further advances could be made, this would force the enemy to react and draw off reserves which could be used against Eighth Army. These restricted operations, as I have already noted, would have the additional effect of assisting the training of the less experienced troops in First Army and of increasing self-confidence and raising morale. In the second phase of operations the efforts of both Armies would be directed towards securing airfields which would enable us to develop the ever-growing strength of our Anglo-American air forces. When we had achieved that we should be able to co-ordinate to the full the striking power of all three services in drawing a tight net round the enemy's position in Tunisia.

One of the main difficulties of the problem was that I was working within severe limitations of time. The Casablanca conference had decided that after Tunisia had been cleared the operation to open the Mediterranean to our shipping should be completed by the invasion and conquest of Sicily. In making plans for