

9 Division doing the same to the south. The former made a little ground on 2nd April but the latter was unable to advance. Nevertheless Messe was now thoroughly alarmed by this threat to his right flank; 10 Panzer Division, which was at that time by far the strongest of the three, had already been kept fully engaged on the El Guettar road and by the 3rd it had been joined by 21 Panzer Division. A strong enemy counter-attack on that day gained some ground from 9 Division. The deadlock continued until Eighth Army attacked and broke through the Wadi Akarit line; even on the first day of that battle, when the position of the enemy's main forces was already desperate, the two Panzer divisions continued to resist the American pressure with great stubbornness. 9 Division suffered heavy casualties that day for no gains and 1 Division only succeeded in advancing two miles. Meanwhile at Maknassy we restricted our operations to feint attacks designed to distract attention from our main effort on the El Guettar road.

The plan for the attack on the Wadi Akarit line provided for an infantry assault by all three divisions of 30 Corps: 4 Indian Division against Gebel Fatnassa, 51 Division against Er Roumana and 50 Division in the centre. The enemy forces were disposed in much the same order of battle as in the Mareth line with XX Corps (Young Fascists and Trieste) at the seaward end and XXI Corps (Pistoia, Spezia and 164 Light) at the inland end. 15 Panzer and 90 Light Divisions were held in reserve behind the centre of the line but 10 and 21 Panzer Divisions were nearly forty miles away to the west, engaged with II Corps, and a strong force, including a "Tiger" tank battalion, was observing 1 Armoured Division at Maknassy. It is peculiar that Messe should have been more anxious about his right flank than his centre, but such seems to have been the case; perhaps he relied on the obvious strength of his positions at Akarit to cause Eighth Army to delay, or else he expected us to wait for the moon to be right. He had already, however, begun to move some of his heavy guns back to the next defence line, at Enfidaville, and can have been under no illusions as to his ability to hold us in the south for much longer.

The battle of the Wadi Akarit lasted only a day but the fighting was described by General Montgomery as "heavier and more savage than any we have had since Alamein". Attack and counter-attack clashed in the hills and both Germans and Italians showed a quite reckless determination and unimpaired morale. 30 Corps attacked at 0400 hours on 6th April, supported by four hundred and fifty guns. It was completely dark at that time and this undoubtedly assisted us in gaining surprise. The major credit for the victory goes to 4 Indian Division, 51 Division gained its original objective but was driven off by a counter-attack and 50 Division in the centre was seriously delayed by resistance on the line of the wadi. The attack on Fatnassa was brilliantly successful against great difficulties of terrain; 7 Indian Brigade, led by the Royal Sussex and 2 Gurkhas, captured all their objectives by dawn and 5 Indian Brigade, which then passed through, completed the mopping up and was in a position to take in rear the defences which were holding up the Corps' centre and right. At 0845 hours the division reported that it had bitten six thousand

yards out of the enemy position and at 1200 hours General Montgomery put in 10 Corps. It looked like a complete *débâcle* for the enemy, but 15 Panzer and 90 Light Divisions, fighting perhaps the best battle of their distinguished careers, counter-attacked with great vigour and by their self-sacrifice enabled Messe to stabilize the situation. That night the enemy withdrew and the two Panzer Divisions which had been fighting a hard but irrelevant battle on the El Guettar road also broke contact and drew off to the north-east. At 1600 hours on 7th April an American patrol met a patrol of 4 Indian Division. At last the two Armies, from the east and the west, had made contact after their long and triumphant advances.*

The battle had cost the enemy over six thousand prisoners and heavy casualties. There was no chance of making a stand south of the mountain line at Enfidaville and retreat was essential. Messe showed a not unnatural solicitude for his Italian troops, who went straight back to the new line, leaving the Germans to form a rearguard for which they were better suited. The second phase of my plan for interfering with the retreat now came into action. 9 Corps, which had been lying concealed in the forest of Kessera, east of Maktar, moved forward to the Fondouk area and on 7th April launched an attack to secure the pass. The plan was to clear the heights dominating the north side of the defile with 128 Brigade (46 Division) and the heights to the south with 34 Division and then pass 6 Armoured Division through the middle. The former attack went well. We entered Pichon on the 8th and pressed forward to the east against fairly strong resistance. South of the pass 34 United States Division was unable to make any progress on the 7th or 8th. Meanwhile the enemy rearguards in the plain to the east were conducting a very skilful withdrawal in front of Eighth Army. Sfax was entered on 10th April by 30 Corps, which had advanced up the coast, and 10 Corps to the west had kept level. 10 and 21 Panzer Divisions were withdrawing on the western flank of Messe's army and I foresaw that they would soon arrive in the Kairouan area. I therefore ordered 9 Corps to disregard 34 Division's failure to the south and launch 6 Armoured Division straight at the pass. This gallant attack went in on the afternoon of the 9th. The motor battalion of the armoured brigade advanced into the throat of the defile under heavy cross fire to make a gap in the minefield and two armoured regiments then plunged through. Unswept mines and anti-tank guns in enfilade took a toll but our tanks pressed on undeterred and the pass was forced.

On 10th April 6 Armoured Division fought a successful action against enemy tanks south of Kairouan and entered the holy city next morning at 1015 hours. This was an unwelcome acceleration to the enemy's withdrawal timetable and 10 and 21 Panzer Divisions suffered more losses which in their weakened state were serious for them. Eighth Army had on 10th April paused for two days, for administrative

* Various parties, from the Long Range Desert Group and the Raiding Forces, had already made contact with First Army; but these had come the long way round west of the Chotts, an impracticable route for any large body.