

for refit. Enemy attacks on Medjez with infantry and tanks on 10th and 11th December were repulsed.

Although the withdrawal of 11 Brigade was carried out according to plan, that of Combat Command "B" was only accomplished at the expense of the majority of their vehicles. Owing to a mistaken order by a battalion commander of Combat Command "B," the route which had been ordered was not followed, with the result that all units were bogged and forced to abandon in the mud a very large number of tanks and transport vehicles. It was indeed a crippling loss. Combat Command "B" reverted to command 5 Corps and later the personnel who could not be re-equipped were ordered back to Guelma.

6 Armoured Division who had been ordered to operate offensively from Teboursouk were in contact with light enemy forces east and south-east of Medjez. The components of Blade Force returned to their parent formations on 12th December.

On 13th December I issued to 5 Corps a warning order to prepare to resume the advance on Tunis. The plan adopted by 5 Corps was as follows:—

As a preliminary, to capture Djebel el Ahmera (afterwards known as Longstop), a hill which completely dominated the exits from Medjez. Thereafter, 78 Division with 18 Regimental Combat Team, United States 1 Infantry Division were to advance north-east to Tebourba-El Bathar either side of the river Medjerda, while 6 Armoured Division moved direct on to the high ground at Massicault. Thence, both 78 and 6 Armoured Divisions were to drive straight on to Tunis. Combat Command "B" to be in Corps reserve. Four-fifths of my strength was allotted to this concentrated attack, which I consider had a very good chance of success.

While this major operation was in progress 36 Brigade were to attempt to get behind the rear of the German position at Jefna and advance on Mateur. Four French battalions and one Commando were to hold the enemy in the area north-east of Béja.

Apart from planning and the regrouping of forces for the attack, the period from 13th-22nd December was one of patrol activity only, contact with the enemy being made all along the front. Enemy reinforcements were arriving fast.

The rain and the state of the ground gave me much cause for anxiety, and repeated trials showed that cross-country movement for any type of vehicle was becoming more and more difficult.

However, I decided to take the risk and ordered 5 Corps to proceed with the opening attack on Longstop on night 22nd-23rd December. This was carried out successfully by 2 Coldstream Guards, after severe and confused fighting: the Battalion was, on 23rd December, relieved by 1 Battalion, 18 Regimental Combat Team, United States 1 Infantry Division. With the dawn on 23rd December came torrential rain which went on for three days: the ground became a quagmire.

The attack on Tunis had to be postponed.

Meanwhile 18 Combat Team had been heavily counter-attacked on 23rd December on

Longstop and, mistaking their orders, withdrew from the crest: it was cleared again by 1 Guards Brigade on 24th December, lost again on Christmas Day and, owing to the mud, was then left in enemy hands. The fighting was bitter.

Our troops returned to their original positions around Medjez, and there decisively repelled an enemy attack on the 27th.

Owing to failure of communications, the order cancelling the operation did not reach 5 Northants of 11 Infantry Brigade, who had been detailed to work through the hills to seize the pass west of Tebourba. The battalion pushed through the very difficult country in dense fog right up to the Djebel Lanserine before the commander, realising what had happened, halted his battalion and brought it back after some minor clashes with the enemy. This exploit was accomplished with only mule transport on a limited scale borrowed from the French.

At a conference held at 5 Corps Headquarters on Christmas Eve between General Eisenhower, General Allfrey and myself, it was finally decided to abandon any hope of a major attack on Tunis until the rainy season had ended. The Commander-in-Chief decided, in its place, to stage an attack in the south against Sfax by United States 2 Corps (which was now forming in the Tebessa area). This entailed the immediate removal from 5 Corps front of Combat Command "B" as well as other United States elements, leaving temporarily only 18 Combat Team in the Medjez area.

Thus ended my hopes of capturing Tunis by storm, and it now was clear that when the time came later to launch a new attack it would have to be on a much heavier scale against greatly-increased opposition.

It was a sad decision, but inevitable owing to the weather. And so began the next phase of the campaign, in which the battle front extended right down to Gafsa.

At about this time General Eisenhower again attempted to get the French to agree to unified command under myself as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, First Army. But although General Juin agreed to this, General Giraud refused—on the ground that the state of feeling amongst his troops was still too delicate to permit him placing them under a British General. So the United States troops in the southern sector as well as the French in the centre sector remained direct under Allied Force Headquarters.

The boundary between First Army and the French Sector was to be (all inclusive to First Army) Souk Ahras—thence road to Le Kef—thence railway to Pont du Fahs—Zaghouan. All troops of any nationality north of this line were to be under my command.

At about this time certain officers of pro-Axis sympathies were removed from the Staff of General Barre, thus easing a delicate situation.

At frequent intervals during the whole of this period I met Air Marshal Sir William Welsh in constant and mutual endeavour to improve the air support. Work was pressed on new airfields at Souk El Arba and Souk El Khemis, that at Bone was improved. Air Commodore Lawson was appointed as commander of all aircraft available to support 5 Corps and he placed his Headquarters next to Corps Headquarters.