

Eighth Army were entering my southern parLOUR, and it was clear that several weeks would elapse before Eighth Army was in a position to help to entertain them or sufficient United States reinforcements could arrive.

In addition, the French had seriously overstrained themselves and were insistently demanding relief of their tired troops; though at the same time General Giraud strongly urged that it was essential to preserve under French command a definite sector of the front, even though this sector contained American and British troops. So in the centre I formed a French Corps (19 Corps) under a commander to be appointed by General Juin (General Koeltz was selected) to hold a firm central pivot in the mountain area on the flanks of which the American 2 Corps and British 5 Corps could operate.

Owing to the peculiar circumstances prevailing in the French Corps area, I arranged for it to be divided into two divisional sectors, that on the right under command of United States 1 Division and that on the left under command of a French divisional commander to be appointed. Under command of the French division were to be 1 Parachute Brigade in the area of Djebel Mansour and, until relieved by re-equipped French units, 36 Infantry Brigade in the Robaa area. Combat Command "B," United States 1 Armoured Division, were to remain in the Ousseltia Valley under the command of General Koeltz until the situation stabilised, as a reserve.

It was decided in principle to withdraw French units from the line for re-equipment, and that, as soon as possible, they would return to relieve the British and United States units in the French Corps area. And all French troops still in the American and British sectors were to be returned to French 19 Corps.

On 30th/31st January the enemy attacked Faïd and destroyed the French garrison before help from United States 1 Armoured Division at Sbeitla reached them. This defeat again seriously upset the French and they repeated their requests for early relief of tired troops.

I ordered the following steps to be taken during the first ten days of February:—

United States 18 Regimental Combat Team to return from 5 Corps and rejoin United States 1 Division, to strengthen French 19 Corps and relieve the most tired French units in the Pichon area.

United States 2 Corps to complete the raid being planned against Sened; to postpone the attack to retake Faïd until stronger forces were available; to hold on to the Sidi Bou Zid position and form a strong mobile reserve in the Sbeitla area; to continue to hold Gafsa unless strongly threatened, when the garrison would be withdrawn on my order; the general task given to United States 2 Corps still being to protect the right flank of the Allies.

In addition, I formed for the first time an Army Reserve in the Kesra area, consisting at first of a reinforced Combat Command of two tank battalions from United States 1 Armoured Division. This to be reduced to one battalion as soon as the leading Combat Team of United States 34 Division (now coming up from the lines of communication) had taken over the Pichon area from French 19 Corps.

I warned General Koeltz to be ready at short notice to evacuate the Eastern Dorsale, as there

were signs that a German attack was pending in the Pichon-Faïd area.

Early on 14th February the enemy attacked strongly at Sidi Bou Zid and, after three days of heavy fighting during which it was most difficult to get a clear picture of the situation, broke through and captured Sbeitla on night 17th/18th February. During this period I released the Army Reserve to revert under orders of United States 2 Corps.

As a result of the loss of Sbeitla, United States 2 Corps fell back to the line Dernaia-Kasserine Gap-Sbiba, French 19 Corps conforming on the North and withdrawing from the Eastern Dorsale without loss. I sent up 1 Guards Brigade from 5 Corps to reinforce United States 34 Division at Sbiba.

After a short pause the enemy renewed his attacks. He was held at Sbiba but broke through the Kasserine Pass on 20th February and sent his armoured forces (15, 21 and parts of 10 Panzer Divisions were all identified) northwards towards Thala and westwards towards Tebessa. I ordered U.S. 2 Corps to move their only remaining reserve (Combat Command "B") to meet the westward threat, and at the same time despatched a composite force from 6 Armoured Division in the Kesra area, consisting of 26 Armoured Brigade Group, 2/5 Leicesters and some extra field and anti-aircraft artillery, all under Brigadier C. G. G. Nicholson, D.S.O., M.C., and known as "Nickforce," to Thala. This force was augmented on 21st February by two field artillery battalions of United States 9 Division and by 2 Hampshires. Combat Command "B" and "Nickforce" both were placed under orders of U.S. 2 Corps. During 21st/22nd February "Nickforce" only just managed to hold on, but the German attack was halted finally by 1400 hours 23rd February. It had been a close shave. I then ordered 1 Guards Brigade across from Sbiba to Thala, but by the time it arrived the enemy had begun to withdraw.

I think the enemy took advantage of his initial easy success and decided to exploit it by a raid to cut our lines of communication at Le Kef, where he could have done much damage. I do not believe he intended at the outset to do more than hit U.S. 2 Corps a severe blow, in order to gain time and space for Rommel, who was himself in command of this operation.

British and American units pressed the enemy and followed his withdrawal back through Kasserine slowly, owing to the huge quantity of mines.

This was the last enemy attack against U.S. 2 Corps in the south: henceforth he was on the defensive.

A decision to re-equip 6 Armoured Division was taken at the end of December, and the convoy arriving on 20th January brought two hundred and forty-one Shermans. Courses of instruction were organised and the first regiment was due to take over its new tanks on 15th February. Operations in the Kasserine Gap, however, retarded the programme, and it was not until 25th February that re-equipment started. The whole Armoured Brigade was re-equipped by 20th March, and after two weeks' training went into action for the first time with Sherman tanks in the Pichon-Kairouan area on 8th April. The Valentine tanks thus released were handed over to the French, who received them with much satisfaction.