

would then be engaged on the same task, the conquest of Tunisia, an Army Group Headquarters was to be set up. I was to assume command of this, which would involve responsibility for the entire conduct of operations in Tunisia; I was also appointed Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Allied Expeditionary Force. My Headquarters was known as Eighteenth Army Group, combining the numbers of First and Eighth Armies; I proposed to make it a very small and mobile Tactical Headquarters to direct the battle from close up. The staff to form this headquarters was flown round by transport aircraft from Cairo; I myself arrived in Algeria on 15th February and assumed command on 19th February. In a directive from General Eisenhower issued on the 17th* I was instructed that my mission was the early destruction of all Axis forces in Tunisia.

Situation in February, 1943.

Before proceeding to summarize the dispositions of our own troops and the enemy at the time I assumed command it is essential to recapitulate briefly the course of events in the preceding three months, since the very complicated situation then existing was a natural development of the confused and varied fortunes of the fighting during that period. The original expeditionary force which had come ashore on 8th November, 1942, was divided into three task forces which had landed on the west coast of Morocco, north and south of Casablanca, at Oran, and at Algiers. The former two were American; the landing at Algiers, though under American command, included a British Brigade Group and it was the intention to build up into Algiers as rapidly as possible the advance elements of the British First Army, under Lieut.-General (now Sir Kenneth) Anderson. General Eisenhower's mission was first to secure his base in the three assault areas and establish communications between them, and then to launch First Army eastwards from Algiers into Tunisia to seize the ports of Tunis and Bizerta. In accomplishing the former task he had first to overcome the resistance of the French garrison, numbering over a hundred thousand regular troops in Algeria and Morocco. It was believed that these forces would resist the landings and if that resistance was prolonged, although after the first few days the French would probably have to withdraw to the mountains and conduct a guerilla campaign, we should probably be faced with at least three months' fighting before our base and communications could be deemed safe. This appreciation, and the danger of venturing without air cover into ports which the German bombers could reach, were the main reasons why the most easterly landing was made at Algiers, instead of nearer to Tunisia, which would have given us a better start in the race for the Tunisian ports. In order to do this it would have been necessary to land all three assault forces inside the Mediterranean, for our limited resources, especially in shipping, could not be stretched to produce a fourth assault force. But this would mean that our lines of communication would run exclusively through the Straits of Gibraltar which could be closed if Spain entered the war on the

side of the Axis. For this reason it was essential to employ one of the assault forces on the Atlantic coast of Morocco to secure a possible alternative line of communications.

The French did oppose our landings but on 10th November Admiral Darlan agreed to an armistice and ordered all troops in North Africa to cease resistance. This was a tremendous gain and reduced the unhappy period of hostilities with the French from a possible three months to two days. And not only did they agree to cease resistance but also to throw in their lot with us in the fight against the Axis. The Armistice came in for some criticism on the political side but it seems to me very likely that it may have considerably reduced the duration of the war, for if the Germans had been given time they could probably have built up sufficient strength in their Tunisian bridgehead to hold out all the summer of 1943. As it was General Eisenhower was able to turn all his attention at once to the task of pushing First Army at full speed towards Tunisia. He had the great advantage that he could now rely on the French local authorities to preserve order and the French communications system to facilitate his advance. In spite of this there were still tremendous difficulties to be faced. The distance from Algiers to Tunis is five hundred and sixty miles, by two roads and an indifferent railway. Almost the whole of this stretch of country is very mountainous. Communications were made more difficult by the fact, gratifying in itself, that the French were mobilizing an army of thirty-two battalions and for this had requisitioned almost all available local transport and required the use of the railway. First Army, when it began its eastwards advance, consisted only of one infantry division, the 78th, reinforced later by an armoured regimental group, two commando and two parachute battalions.

The decision to make a dash for Tunis, though bold, was undoubtedly correct. The advance was pressed by land, sea and air; Bougie was occupied by 11th November, Bone on 12th November, by a British parachute battalion, and by 18th November our advanced forces were operating east of Gebel Abiud on the coast road and Béja on the inland road, about sixty miles from Bizerta and Tunis respectively. At both points we were in contact with German troops. These had begun to arrive, in the first place by air, on 10th November, meeting no resistance from the French authorities in Tunisia. On 15th November a United States parachute battalion occupied Youks Les Bains and Tebessa, in south-eastern Algeria, and co-operated with the French detachments at Gafsa in southern Tunisia. Between 17th November and 25th December two main attempts were made to capture Tunis. The first succeeded in advancing, on 28th November, as far as Djedeida, on the road between Tunis and Bizerta and only twelve miles from the former. At this point the enemy counter-attacked strongly with tanks and dive-bombers; the latter were able to operate from good airfields, only a short distance in rear and our own air forces were unable to give cover, since the rain had put all their temporary landing grounds out of action. Our forces on the inland road were therefore obliged to withdraw to Medjez el Bab. This town, as its name "the Ford of the Pass" shows, is of great strategic importance. It lies

* Appendix "B"