

SECOND PHASE.—PERIOD 26TH DECEMBER, 1942—27TH MARCH, 1943.

On 1st January, 1943, I outlined to 5 Corps its future policy as under:—

(a) To contain the enemy by constant pressure and, by limited attacks, to seize ground required to facilitate a later offensive; plans for which were to be prepared. All attacks to have maximum artillery support. To be ready to advance, even without armour, if the enemy moved troops away southwards.

(b) To help the French as far south as Pont du Fahs in every way possible.

(c) To push on with the construction of airfields.

Widespread enemy parachute activities against my lines of communication during December accomplished little damage. On 1st January, 1943, Allied Force Headquarters assumed control of the lines of communication up to inclusive Bone—exclusive Constantine, thereby affording much needed relief to my administrative staff.

In the early stages of preparation for the United States 2 Corps operation against Sfax I took no active part, though First Army had to assume full responsibility for all maintenance arrangements, dumping programmes, &c. The attack was, however, eventually cancelled by the Commander-in-Chief, about the middle of January.

Meanwhile, on 3rd January, an attack by 36 Infantry Brigade to capture the dominating enemy positions on Djebel Azzag and Djebel Ajred was not very successful and by 5th January after severe fighting in heavy rain, we withdrew to our original front. Losses on both sides were relatively heavy. Again on 3rd January 6 Armoured Division made a reconnaissance in force in the Goubellat plain; and on 11th January followed this by a successful local attack north of Bou Arada.

On 18th January a strong German attack was launched against 6 Armoured Division down the Bou Arada Valley by infantry and at least fifty tanks of 10 Panzer Division, followed the same afternoon by an attack against the French 19 Corps. This was made by newly-landed mountain troops supported by 501 Panzer Abteilung, in which the new Mark VI "Tiger" tank made its début. The attack was directed against the mountain area at the northern hinge of the two Dorsale ranges.

The attack against 6 Armoured Division was stopped dead after heavy fighting, with considerable enemy tank losses. 38 (Irish) Brigade particularly distinguished itself. But French resistance was overwhelmed; the enemy reached Robaa and Ousseltia on the 20th and the equivalent of seven battalions of infantry were cut off in the mountains; also many field guns together with nearly all their few anti-tank guns were lost. I went to see General Juin and found him personally courageous, but tired and not hopeful. I had in the meantime ordered 5 Corps to send 36 Infantry Brigade Group to the Robaa Valley and requested 2 United States Corps to send a Combat Command of United States 1 Armoured Division to the Ousseltia area—both to come under General Juin's orders on arrival. These reinforcements stabilised the situation on the general line Bou Arada—Djebel Bargou—Djebel Bou Dabouss, after fighting lasting until 23rd January.

Meanwhile, as a result of the obvious lack of co-operation and control between the British, French and American commanders, I was appointed by General Eisenhower, at a meeting with him on 21st January at Constantine, to "co-ordinate" the whole front in future, with one executive air commander (General Kuter, United States Air Corps) for the whole front. This, especially the appointment of General Kuter, was a big step forward but that it did not go far enough soon became evident, and at a further meeting at Thelergma airfield on 24th January, the Commander-in-Chief made me "responsible for the employment of American troops," though not yet in control of the French Corps. After a long conference with me that night General Juin agreed to place his Corps under my command, and next day this decision was confirmed by General Giraud.

If chaos were to be avoided, some one person had to command the whole front. As an example of the difficulties experienced at this time, I had to motor over 1,000 miles in four days to visit the various corps commanders. Distances were too great for radio telephony, ordinary telephone was most unreliable, air travel was impossible owing to weather. "Co-ordination" demanded discussion and often compromise and this could only be done by personal visits.

At the end of this period the French were beginning to feel the strain. The campaign did not look too rosy to them, supplies and equipment were nearly exhausted, motor transport was worn out and scarce and the troops were unable to face the German tanks owing to entire lack of anti-tank weapons.

At the end of January the enemy attack on Robaa was renewed, "Tigers" again being used, this time against 36 Infantry Brigade. The 5 Buffs stood their ground, five tanks (including two "Tigers") being destroyed, and the enemy withdrew with heavy loss. This local but successful action had an electric effect on the Tirailleurs, who were also deeply impressed by the efficiency of the British artillery. From this time on to the end of the campaign I gave French 19 Corps strong artillery support under a Commander Army Group, Royal Artillery, loaned, and also gave them 6-pounders and other equipment, which, with other American help, greatly raised morale. Thereafter they withstood remarkably well the effects of the Kasserine battle and the consequent withdrawal to the Western Dorsale, under the energetic leadership of General Koeltz.

Having been made responsible for the employment of all Allied Forces in Tunisia on 25th January, I spent the next week visiting the French and American sectors, meeting commanders and generally getting into the wider picture.

Two things seemed obvious to me: first, the mixture of nationalities had again become worse as a result of the recent fighting and must urgently be straightened out; second, our dispositions were too widely stretched in the south. In the early days, when forces on both sides were weak, it had been right to seize all we could in the attempt to hem the enemy into a narrow corridor. But a new situation had arisen. Apart from the large enemy reinforcements brought overseas into Tunisia, a fresh flow was now arriving from Tripolitania. The approach of Rommel's Army was beginning to be felt; many uninvited guests from opposite