

999 Africa Division, were identified. This was formed mainly from former residents of concentration camps and included a few genuine criminals. In spite of this peculiar origin it fought as well as the average German formation; it was particularly noticeable that the political offenders who made up the great majority, influenced more by the tradition of discipline and the military virtues of the race than by their political convictions, fought with great skill and stubbornness even in a losing battle.

I had ordered General Anderson to take the earliest opportunity of restoring the situation on the northern road and to relieve the pressure on Medjez by extending our line here to the north of the Béja road. The first task was entrusted to 46 Division, using 138 Brigade, 36 Brigade from 78 Division and 1 Parachute Brigade. It was facilitated by the fact that the enemy had thinned out in this area to reinforce other sectors but even so the dense scrub and the boulder-covered mountains were most serious obstacles. The attack began on 28th March in very heavy rain and made steady progress, assisted by the Corps Franc d'Afrique and a Tabor of Moroccan Goumiers on the left flank. On 30th March we re-entered Sedjenane, and the capture was completed by next day. The enemy was now reinforcing by recommitting his carefully husbanded reserves but they were unable to halt our progress. On 31st March we recaptured our former positions east of El Aouana; shortly afterwards the enemy withdrew from his positions on Cap Serrat. By this advance of eighteen miles we had won back all the ground which the enemy had taken three weeks to capture; prisoners amounted to over eight hundred and fifty and there is no doubt that his losses in killed and wounded were heavy.

On 5th April 4 Infantry Division assumed command in the sector north-east of Béja and on 7th April 78 Division attacked north of Oued Zarga to carry out the second part of the Army task. It met opposition from the German 334 Division but continued to press forward on a front of about ten miles to a depth, eventually, of ten miles. This is a most desolate and barren area of mountains, with few and scattered villages. The most important success was the capture on 14th April of Gebel el Ang and Gebel Tanngouche, two ridges over three thousand feet high eight miles north of Medjez, the enemy recaptured both next day but in a further attack we recovered Gebel el Ang and part of Tanngouche. The mountain village of Heidous, which the enemy had converted into a strongpoint, remained in his hands but was now threatened from both north and south. The object of our operations had been achieved. Medjez had been freed from enemy threat and we were able to build up there, in security, the stores required for our final offensive.

The Battle of Wadi Akarit.

After his defeat by Eighth Army General Messe withdrew to the northern end of the Gabes gap and endeavoured to make a new stand there, on the very threshold of the Tunisian plain. His position was based on the Wadi Akarit, a steep-sided obstacle which had been extended by an anti-tank ditch to cover the whole of the gap between the sea and the Chott el Fedjadj. This gave him a line of about

twelve to fifteen miles in length. On the north side the wadi is dominated by two mountains, Gebel Fatnassa on the west and Gebel er Roumana on the east, extending almost to the sea. The road from Gabes to Gafsa runs round the western end of Fatnassa, in a defile between the mountain and the salt marsh, and the road to Sfax runs along the coast round the eastern end of Er Roumana. There is a low col between the two peaks which is traversed by a few tracks and was thought to be practicable for our use if the high ground commanding it could be cleared. Taken all round it was a very strong position, much stronger by nature than the Mareth line.

10 Corps made contact with the enemy's new line on 30th March with the New Zealand Division on the right and 1 Armoured Division on the left. Having inspected the position the Corps Commander reported that it could not be carried by assault with his present forces and General Montgomery decided to wait until he could bring up stronger forces in infantry. His plan was to assault with three infantry divisions, 50th, 51st and 4th Indian, attacking through 10 Corps as now disposed; after a breach had been made 10 Corps would pass through, with the New Zealanders leading. It would take about a week for the attack to be prepared. This would give me time to co-ordinate Eighth Army's offensive with two other thrusts which I had planned. I issued a plan of operations on 3rd April. My object was still "to seize and secure airfields and potential airfields from which we can develop the full weight of our great superiority in the air, thereby paralysing the enemy's supply system to an extent which will greatly facilitate the rapid advance of our ground forces." The first phase was to drive the enemy from the Gabes gap by a frontal attack by Eighth Army and flanking pressure by II Corps. When this operation was completed II Corps would be pulled out and transferred to the extreme northern flank. The second phase was to coincide with Eighth Army's advance towards Sousse. I had organized an Army Group reserve under the recently arrived Headquarters 9 Corps, consisting of 6 Armoured Division, a British infantry brigade and 34 United States Division. At a date after 7th April, and dependent on Eighth Army's progress, this force, on orders from me, would secure the Fondouk gap in the Eastern Dorsale and pass the armoured division through towards Kairouan, threatening the rear of Messe's army. Throughout this period 5 Corps and XIX Corps were to tie down the enemy on their front by thrusts aimed at the capture of important features.

On 27th March the preliminary stage of this plan began when 34 United States Division entered the village of Fondouk, at the western end of the defile, and 9 United States Division reinforced 1 Infantry Division at El Guettar. After this I allowed the Fondouk area to remain quiet but tried to press on with II Corps down the Gafsa—Gabes road. In spite of the favourable development of the Mareth battle very strong resistance was met to any progress beyond El Guettar. On 31st March General Patton tried to push an armoured force down the road but it was held up by mines after advancing only a short distance. He then tried a more deliberate advance with 1 Division working along the mountains north of the road and