

on the broad Medjerda river which breaks out of the mountains at this point to flow into the plain of Tunis through a defile commanded on the west by the Gebel Ahmera, known to our troops as "Longstop", and on the east by the Gebel Bou Aoukaz. The bridge which has replaced the ford carries the main road from Tunis to the west. On 22nd December, as the first stage of a renewed assault on Tunis, a successful attack was made on Gebel Ahmera. At this point the rain, which had already caused severe difficulties of movement, became torrential for a period of three days. The offensive had to be abandoned and on 25th December the enemy recaptured Gebel Ahmera.

This ended the attempt to take Tunis in a rush and it was clear that we should have to build up forces for a deliberate operation. It was also clear that the enemy would be able to build up faster than we could, for his lines of communication through Italy and Sicily were much more reliable and shorter than ours from the United Kingdom and United States and from his ports of entry to the front they were very short and over good roads in flat country.* It was necessary, therefore, to go on to the defensive in the northern sector though General Eisenhower considered the possibilities of mounting an offensive by United States troops against the southern Tunisian port of Sfax in order to cut the lines of supply to Rommel's Panzer Army. This plan was abandoned in January. The next two months were therefore occupied in consolidating the northern sector as far as possible with the limited means available and in beating off enemy attempts to get round our southern flank.

The latter raised difficult problems of command. The area from Pont du Fahs southward along the mountain range of the Eastern Dorsale was held by the French troops of XIX Corps, with some British and United States detachments. Further south the United States II Corps was assembling around Tebessa, with detachments forward co-operating with the French. As a result of General Giraud's refusal to place French troops under the orders of a British commander, XIX Corps had to come under a rather indirect command from Allied Force Headquarters and for this reason II Corps also remained under General Eisenhower. The weakness of this arrangement was shown when a German attack on the French in the Ousseltia valley, at the northern hinge of the two Dorsale ranges, made dangerous progress and had to be halted by the hasty diversion of British and American troops from First Army and II Corps. As a result General Anderson was appointed by General Eisenhower on 21st January to "co-ordinate" the whole front and on 24th January both XIX and II Corps were placed directly under his command. At the same time General Kuter, of the United States Army Air Corps, was appointed to co-ordinate all Allied air support under command of General Spaatz then Deputy Commander-in-Chief Allied Air Forces.

Such, in brief, were the antecedents of the situation that I found on arriving to assume

command in Tunisia. At the actual moment of my arrival I was met by a serious crisis on my southern flank where a battle had been raging since 14th February. I was therefore flung straight into a position where I had to give my main attention to the needs of the tactical situation; but I had already given much thought to the strategy which it would be necessary to pursue and was confident that, when the immediate dangers had been averted, and after a necessary period of complete reorganization, I should be able to work out the strategic answer to the problem of Tunisia on the lines made necessary by the nature of the country and the strength and dispositions of the opposing forces.

Tunisia is bounded politically on the west by a frontier running almost due north and south and therefore parallel to the sea which bounds it on the east. The most important part of this long north-south oblong is the coastal plain, known as the Sahel, which is generally flat and covered with olive groves. In the north, however, the Algerian mountains send down long spurs which run east and west towards the sea at Bizerta. West of Tunis they leave a space for the fertile plain of the Medjerda, after it has burst through the gap at Medjez el Bab, but south of Medjez there is a tangle of mountains to the west of the Goubellat plain which culminate in the three massifs of Gebel Mansour, Fkirine and Zaghouan. These are a nodal point of a new system of relief; from Gebel Zaghouan a series of mountains extends to the Gulf of Tunis in the north and to the sea in the east, reaching, after a gap in the Grombalian plain, up to the peninsula of Cape Bon; from Gebel Fkirine spring two long ridges trending south and south-west and known as the Eastern and Western Dorsales.

The Eastern Dorsale is a long, narrow ridge, rising to between two and three thousand feet, which extends almost due south as far as Maknassy, where it meets an east-west chain stretching from Gafsa. It is pierced by passes at Pichon, Fondouk, Faid and Maknassy, it is only at these four points, therefore, that an army advancing from the west can break into the plain of central and southern Tunisia. Round its southern end it is turned by a road from Gafsa to Gabes but this too runs through a difficult and very long mountain defile. Further to the south lies the region of the "Chotts"; these are very extensive salt marshes which narrow the coastal plain to a gap of only fifteen miles. The town of Gabes lies on the coast at the southern end of this gap. South of the Gabes gap the flat country is split by the north-west to south-east line of the Matmata mountains. To the east is cultivated country, traversed by the main road to Medenine and, eventually Tripoli; to the west is desert, almost entirely waterless and uninhabited. West of the Eastern Dorsale there is another range interposed across the course of an advance from the west. This at its northern end is known as the Western Dorsale, which runs south-west from Gebel Fkirine, and fades out eventually north-west of Gafsa. The range is pierced by passes at Maktar, Sbiba, Kasserine and Feriana; it is not so serious an obstacle as the Eastern Dorsale. In the south the divergence of the two Dorsale ranges leaves a wide plain, in parts semi-desert.

The coastal plain is well roaded and, in general, north-south movement is easy. East—

* Build-up in First Army was as follows. 78 Division completed 1st December, 6 Armoured Division 15th December, 46 Division first week in February, 1943, 1 Division 22nd March, 4 Division end of second week in April.