

pooling all the available Brigade transport) left Algiers by road for Bone, where it arrived on 15th November. By 13th November the move of 36 Brigade main body had started, and one battalion had arrived at Sétif by rail and another battalion by sea at Bone, where it was joined by some artillery and servicing units. The carriers and motor transport of this brigade, however, were at this stage still unable to land.

36 Brigade, still on assault scales, lost no time in getting forward. By 15th November their advance guard had occupied Tabarka, and on 18th November their leading battalion repulsed an enemy attack at Djebel Abiod, destroying 11 tanks and armoured cars. The other battalions of this Brigade were following up quickly, and Hart Force, which had led the advance all the way, was operating to the east of Djebel Abiod. 78 Division had established their Headquarters at Bone.

On 15th November 1 Parachute Battalion attempted to drop at Souk el Arba landing ground, but was unable to do so until the following day owing to weather conditions. The appearance of this battalion had a stimulating effect on the local French troops. The battalion lost no time in getting forward (on foot and using local transport), and, by 17th November, was operating north-east from Béja and in contact with German troops.

While this general move forward was in progress, the follow-up convoy arrived on 13th November bringing the 17/21 Lancers Regimental Group (later known as Blade Force), 1 Parachute Brigade (less one battalion) and the balance to light scales of the transport of 78 Division (less one brigade group). Units and sub-units of 78 Division and Blade Force were moved east as fast as transport was unloaded, 11 Brigade Group being finally concentrated in the Béja area by 22nd November and Blade Force in the Souk el Arba area by 20th November. Advance Headquarters, First Army, also arrived by the follow-up convoy and, on 13th November, opened up at Hotel Albert, Algiers.

Simultaneously with the advance in the north, steps were taken to secure the early occupation of important airfields further south. On 15th November 503 United States Parachute Battalion dropped at Youks-les-Bains without opposition, with a view to making the airfield available for our use. This battalion, under the command of Colonel Raff, operated most energetically from its base at Youks. On 17th November detachments occupied Gafsa airfield, and mobile patrols in requisitioned transport roamed widely over the whole of the southern area, meeting small Italian forces. Contact was also made and good relations established with the French garrison at Tebessa, who co-operated in many patrols.

On 16th November arrangements were made for my force to be supplemented by the addition of two American tank battalions (one medium, one light), some armoured infantry and supporting arms, and steps were taken to get these troops up to the forward areas as soon as possible.

By 17th November the enemy strength was estimated at 500-1,000 fighting personnel in the area of Tunis and 4,000 at Bizerta, with some tanks in each case; in addition, a considerable

number of aircraft had been flown in. The enemy had occupied Mateur and had pushed out west and south-west, in contact with 36 Infantry Brigade's advanced troops west of Djebel Abiod and with the French at Sidi Nsir and Medjez.

On 17th November orders were issued for 78 Division (still less one brigade group), after completing its forward concentration in the area Tabarka-Souk el Arba-Ghardimaou, to advance on Tunis and destroy the Axis forces. The French Command had agreed that they would, to the best of their ability, cover the concentration of 78 Division and the right flank of their subsequent advance, and it seemed possible that French troops would also actively assist in the northern sector. Further south the attitude of the French forces was very uncertain.

Subsequent operations took place on three clearly defined axes. These were:—

- (a) The main road Béja-Medjez-Tebourba-Tunis.
- (b) The road Béja-Sidi Nsir.
- (c) The road Tabarka - Djebel Abiod-Mateur.

#### OPERATIONS DURING PERIOD 17TH NOVEMBER-25TH DECEMBER, 1942.

##### *Northern Sector.*

36 Brigade was in contact with the enemy positions at Djebel Abiod. The carriers and reconnaissance cars of Hart Force, which had been pushed far forward and were then cut off by the German advance, made their way back to 36 Brigade by 19th November, but the infantry transport was lost. The infantry company took to the hills and did not rejoin 36 Brigade until 21st November, having conducted a successful guerilla campaign against the enemy's rear. The brigade advanced slowly against slight opposition and many mines and booby traps to Jefna, where the enemy occupied a very strong position on commanding ground. Several attempts to dislodge him from these heights failed. Losses were heavy. 1 Commando landed 14 miles west of Bizerta and worked south in an endeavour to get behind and dislodge the enemy at Jefna. They did considerable damage but failed in their object and rejoined 36 Brigade on 3rd December.

##### *Southern Sector.*

On 19th November French troops under command General Barre rejected the German ultimatum at Medjez. The two German attacks which followed were repulsed. Persistent demands for air and tank support were made by the French and it was evident that they would not long be able to resist. In fact they withdrew from Medjez during the following night, leaving forward elements of Blade Force holding Oued Zarga and 1 Parachute Battalion holding Béja. At this time 11 Brigade and the remainder of Blade Force were completing concentration at Béja and Souk el Arba respectively.

On 21st November the enemy withdrew to the east bank of the river at Medjez. It was, however, evident that 78 Division were not yet strong enough to press the advance and orders were issued for it to delay any move forward temporarily until the build-up of forces and supplies was sufficient to give it a reasonable chance in the assault on Tunis.