

and were expected to join the New Zealanders on 25th March. This would give us a force of over three hundred tanks with which to attack the enemy's rear. At the same time 4 Indian Division, under command of 30 Corps, was to thrust into the mountains to the west of the Mareth line. Its first task was to open the road from Medenine to Bir Soltane via Ksar el Hallouf, as a shorter route of supply for 10 Corps; subsequently it was to advance along the spine of the Matmata mountains and descend from there to cut the Mareth—Gabes road. This plan, with reminiscences of El Alamein, was christened SUPERCHARGE.

In view of the development of Eighth Army's battle I ordered General Patton late on 22nd March to increase his pressure down the Gafsa—Gabes road with 1 Infantry Division and down the Gafsa—Maknassy road with 1 Armoured Division. II Corps was to seize and hold the two defiles on these roads, which it was now facing, and operate raiding columns from them against the enemy's lines of communication. 1 Armoured Division had entered Maknassy itself without opposition at 0700 hours on the 22nd but failed to seize a fleeting opportunity and was forestalled at the vital defile some five miles east of the town; when it advanced eastwards later in the day it found that the enemy had hastily organized a defensive position there from a German and an Italian reconnaissance unit. Subsequently a battalion of infantry from 10 Panzer Division and some Italian tanks arrived between 23rd and 24th March and with these, reinforced by two more infantry battalions and some German tanks, the enemy succeeded in holding the pass. The advance down the Gafsa-Gabes road was also frustrated, for before it could develop the enemy launched a strong attack with the whole of the rest of 10 Panzer Division. This counter-attack had some initial success but 1 Infantry Division held firm and inflicted losses in tanks on the enemy. The attacks were renewed on the 24th and 25th, again without success. It was greatly to the credit of II Corps that they thus kept in play the whole of 10 Panzer Division while the decisive battle was being fought and won by Eighth Army, and although they were denied the pleasure of a spectacular advance into the enemy's rear they made a solid contribution to the success of operations in southern Tunisia.

While 10 Corps was pressing on across the difficult desert terrain to join the New Zealanders 4 Indian Division plunged into the mountains west of Medenine. By the 26th they had cleared the road through the Ksar el Hallouf pass and turned northwards to work towards Cheguimi. In the meantime the advance of 10 Corps was taking rather longer than expected and Eighth Army decided to postpone the proposed attack from the 25th to the 26th. The problem was to burst through a long defile between Gebel Tebaga and Gebel Melab; the defences in this six thousand yards bottleneck had been strengthened with mines and on the 25th General Messe moved 15 Panzer Division north to this area. This practically stripped the Mareth line of German troops and he simultaneously began to thin out his Italians leaving 90 Light Division, as usual, to conduct the rearguard. While these forces were got away it was vital for Messe to hold the flanks of the north—south corridor as firmly

as possible and with two German armoured divisions and one infantry division facing us, to say nothing of the Italians, it seemed we might find the task of breaking through difficult. General Montgomery therefore, in consultation with Air Vice Marshal Broadhurst, commanding the Western Desert Air Force, arranged for a very heavy air attack employing every available aircraft to precede the ground attack; as a new feature control was to be exercised from aircraft flying over the battlefield.

Following a favourite enemy plan 10 Corps attacked in the late afternoon of 26th March, with the sun behind them. For two and a half hours previously the Royal Air Force had attacked the enemy's positions with bombs and machine-gun fire, creating great destruction among his guns and transport and having a most serious effect on morale. The New Zealand Division began the attack with 8 Armoured Brigade leading and rapidly overran the enemy's defences. 1 Armoured Division followed through and advanced nearly four miles before being halted by darkness. When the moon rose they pressed on again. It was a daring but successful move; in the bright moonlight they drove straight past the bulk of the enemy's armour and at dawn were within a few miles of El Hamma which is only fifteen miles from Gabes on a good road. A further advance at first light put them within two miles of El Hamma, facing a strong enemy anti-tank gun screen. 164 Light Division was engaged here, with 15 Panzer Division to its south. 21 Panzer Division was still cut off between 1 Armoured Division and the New Zealanders and fought very fiercely to extricate itself. The efforts of the three German divisions were successful, in spite of heavy losses, in holding on to El Hamma and keeping open the corridor through which the troops from the Mareth line were withdrawn to the next defensive position north of Gabes. 30 Corps was hampered in following up by many mines and demolitions. 10 Corps was also hindered in its operations against El Hamma on 28th March and the enemy evacuated the village that night. The New Zealanders entered Gabes at 1300 hours on the 29th and were shortly afterwards joined there by the advance elements of 51 Division. The enemy had lost seven thousand prisoners and many tanks and guns.

First Army resumes the Offensive.

First Army, like II Corps, had been able to start on its programme of reorganization and training after the enemy's defeat at Thala, though it had been to a certain extent upset by the enemy offensive which started on 26th February. With the arrival of fresh formations this programme was now beginning to show results: "Y" Division was dissolved on 16th March when relieved by 3 Infantry Brigade, the first to arrive of 1 Infantry Division; the other two brigades of the division took over sectors of the front on 19th and 23rd March and Divisional Headquarters assumed command in the Medjez area. 78 Division and 1 Guards Brigade were relieved and the latter went to join 6 Armoured Division in reserve. The Germans were also reinforcing simultaneously, though not on the same scale. In the middle of March the second regiment of the Hermann Goering Division began to arrive and shortly afterwards the first troops of a new formation,