

this operation it was appreciated that the campaign in Africa must end by the middle of May in order to give us a chance to bring the Tunisian ports into full use. Otherwise the invasion would have to be postponed until August when the deterioration of weather conditions might make the operation impossible. This was a difficult time-table to observe and it was with great satisfaction that I found in the event that I had Bizerta and Tunis eight days before the allotted date and that all resistance ceased in Africa with two days yet to spare.

Fifth Army Offensive in the North.

Before these plans could be put into effect or any thorough reorganization undertaken I found myself faced once more by a new enemy initiative. As the rearguards of Rommel's striking force were trailing back to the Eastern Dorsale von Arnim attacked with the full strength of 5 Army all along the British 5 Corps front, from the sea to Gebel Mansour. The four principal thrusts were made towards Jefna, on the northernmost road, Sidi Nsir on the Mateur-Béja road, at Medjez and north of Bou Arada. No doubt the intention was to keep us at full strain at a time when it was known that the Kasserine crisis had forced us to weaken the northern sector and produced a certain disorganization of our forces; it would also distract us from the pursuit of Rommel, who now proposed to use his Army Group reserve in a blow at Eighth Army. It must, however, have also been the German intention to drive us back into the mountains in the north, if possible capturing Medjez, in order to increase their security in this sector and release reserves, especially of armour, for the coming battle in the more open country of southern Tunisia. The attack came at an awkward time for us, for it prevented us from forming that mobile reserve which I had in mind and forced us to delay still further the necessary reorganisation; for instance General Anderson saw himself obliged to create an *ad hoc* divisional organization, given the name of "Y" Division, to control 38 Infantry Brigade and 1 Parachute Brigade in the area of Goubellat and Bou Arada. The fighting was hard, and the enemy gained some important ground but were unable to attain any vital objectives. The most important feature in our favour was that we retained our essential gateway at Medjez el Bab.

The main blows on 26th February were down the Béja road from Mateur and south of Medjez, the former was made by the Barenthin paratroops and part of 334 Division and the latter by the recently arrived Hermann Goering Regiment, both supported by tanks. An attack on Medjez itself, south of the river, was repulsed with heavy losses after small initial success. The attack further south penetrated deeply into our lines but was beaten back north of El Aroussa while our defences round Bou Arada, some ten miles to the west, held firm in spite of being threatened from three sides. The attack down the Béja road was more formidable; our outpost at Sidi Nsir was overwhelmed after a very gallant resistance but the time gained allowed 46 Division to occupy the pass leading to Béja. Very heavy fighting continued here for a week; losses in 46 Division were heavy but the defence held firm. The enemy were able, however, to advance their positions in the mountains over-

looking the Béja-Medjez road from the north, and Medjez now represented the extreme point of a dangerous-looking salient. There was some feeling at First Army Headquarters that it would be advisable to evacuate Medjez, on the grounds that its fall was almost inevitable and that a withdrawal into the mountains to the west would place us in a stronger defensive position and enable us to economize in troops. I was determined, however, to retain our gateway into the Tunis plain and ordered the town to be held at all costs.

While these attacks on Béja and Medjez were proceeding with varying success the enemy was finding better fortune in his thrust on the northernmost road. The first attacks on our positions west of Jefna, mainly by Italian troops, were held; but on 2nd March the offensive was renewed in this sector with five German battalions, four of them paratroops, and succeeded in gaining several miles. On the 3rd the enemy captured Sedjenane, some twelve miles west of Jefna. 46 Division was obliged to withdraw to a fresh position at Gebel Tamera, about eight miles further west. The enemy's advance on the northernmost road, which had hitherto been of little importance from the point of view of ground lost by us, was now becoming more serious as it threatened Gebel Abiod and the vital lateral road from there to Béja. 46 Division had been weakened by continuous losses in men and General Anderson therefore reinforced it with 1 Parachute Brigade and the Corps Franc d'Afrique, a French volunteer unit. In spite of this reinforcement the enemy continued to advance. After a succession of heavy attacks supported by dive-bombers Tamera was captured on the 17th and by the 21st we had been forced back to Gebel Abiod. This was bitter mountain fighting in miserable weather; the country either side of the road is high and covered with scrub, making the deployment of artillery, our main strength, most difficult.

The Battle of Medenine.

While the enemy were thus vigorously and persistently attacking in the north, Eighth Army continued to build up gradually in front of the Mareth line. This famous fortified position was inspired by the same military conceptions as produced the Maginot line in France, though the Tunisian line was later in date and incorporated ideas derived from the earlier and larger fortification. It ran for a total length of about twenty-two miles on a course roughly north-east to south-west just in front of the small town of Mareth from which it took its name; one flank rested on the sea, the other on the steep-sided Matmata mountains. At the north-east end the Wadi Zigzaou runs in front of the line and, artificially scarped, made a first class anti-tank obstacle. The defences themselves consisted of a system of interconnected strong-points, partly underground, reinforced with concrete.* The fire plan was well conceived to cover all parts of the front with enfilade fire of all calibres and the minefields and wire obstacles were thick and well sited. The mountains shielding the

* From the point of view of the Axis, however, there was one disadvantage; the bunkers had been planned for the French 25 and 47 millimetre anti-tank guns and were too small to house the German 50 and 75 millimetre pieces which had therefore to be emplaced in the open.