

and our relations with the Army and civilians have grown closer and better every day. A French Army, under General Juin, amounting to a nominal thirty-two battalions of infantry and some hundred and twenty guns (when all was assembled), was ordered to mobilise. Its mission in November 1942 was to cover the right flank of the Allied Forces while they deployed. Later, the main body gradually moved eastward, with only minor contact with Italian patrols, to the line of the Eastern Dorsale by early January 1943. While six battalions remained in the British area around Oued Zarga-Medjez and several battalions continued to work with the Americans in the south.

The French mobilisation plan was prepared only for a campaign of 6-8 weeks. The equipment of the Army was lamentable; no anti-aircraft or anti-tank weapons, rifles and guns dating back to the period 1880-1914, no signal equipment or motor transport, no boots or proper clothing, staffs inadequate and not up to date, et cetera. Only in spirit was the Army formidable, and this spirit was carefully fostered by Generals Juin and Koeltz and a fine body of junior commanders. Co-operation and mutual trust between British and French reached a high level by the end of the campaign, but, even to the end, French units were not capable of offensive action against German troops, and could only operate safely in the mountainous sectors of the front.

It must be remembered that the French Army in Africa is largely a native army.

(d) *The Line of Communication Administrative difficulties and the build-up of First Army.*—Administrative matters are dealt with separately, but to understand correctly the background of this campaign it is essential to bear the following major facts in mind:—

(i) The huge distances. From Algiers to Tunis by road is over 560 miles.

(ii) The extremely mountainous nature of the country, and that at first only two roads and an inefficient railway were available eastwards.

(iii) That the Army was entirely dependent on what it brought overseas with it, in the way of transport, fuel, supplies, &c. Nothing whatever was available locally; indeed, we had to supply the railway with coal, and our Allies, out of our none too plentiful stocks, with rations, petrol and other supplies.

First Army did not spring from the sea full-formed like Aphrodite, but grew in stature painfully slowly as convoys arrived at fortnightly intervals. The initial rush on Tunis was made by a force, at its strongest, equivalent only to one infantry division and one tank regiment on light scales. The leading infantry division (78th) was not complete until 1st December; the next division (6 Armoured) was not complete until 15th December; 46 Division reached the front by the first week of February 1943, 1 Division by 22nd March and 4 Division was not fully assembled until the end of the second week of April 1943.

For me it was an exasperating period in which I saw chance after chance disappear for lack of sufficient strength to seize them, and when reinforcements did arrive the enemy in his turn had also increased his strength. Always the need was for more infantry.

(e) *Air Support.*—In the early stages this was bad for obvious and I think mainly unavoidable reasons. All aircraft had to be flown in from Gibraltar or the United Kingdom; all stores, services, bombs, &c., came by convoy; airfields were few and far between—the nearest serviceable airfield to the forward troops at Tebourba in December 1942 being at Bone, 114 miles away; the Air Officer Commanding had to meet naval demands for protection and had other calls, in addition to supporting the Army, which tied him to Algiers while I was going ever further eastwards. As the situation stabilised so did our co-operation grow closer; but it was a slow growth and did not reach maturity until the reorganisation carried out in March 1943.\* Again, in the early days, the great distances, poor means of intercommunication, and the inevitable early troubles which arise when the forces of two nations are beginning to work together all contributed to the undoubted lack of efficient co-operation between Army and Air Forces.

Goodwill there was in plenty, and with increasing experience and, above all, improved means of inter-communication the situation improved. By mid-March 1943, liaison was excellent; we were working as one team and, under Air Commodore Cross, the air support given to First Army in the last stages was intimate, immediate and intensely powerful.

(f) *Weather and the country.*—Before arrival I had imagined North Africa was a dry country. Although I knew that the winter was the wet season in North Africa, none the less, the extent of the rains in the Coastal belt and their effect on the roads, on cross-country movement, and on the airfields, came as a very unpleasant surprise. In the northern zone, in which First Army operated, the rains began in early December and continued until early April. March was the wettest month. Rain, mist and a peculiarly glutinous mud formed the background to all our operations during this period.

Northern Tunisia is a country of high mountains, narrow plains between the ranges, and few roads, with very limited scope for armoured action. In the south it becomes much more open and desert-like, but rocky hills occur everywhere.

#### FIRST PHASE.—THE RACE FOR TUNIS.

As I have already stated, on 9th November the first Germans landed at El Aouana airport, Tunis. By 13th November I had occupied Bougie and Djidjelli.

Every effort was now directed towards getting troops east as fast as possible, and an earlier proposal (which was not put into effect) was repeated for a landing at Sousse by a force from Malta.

The first troops to occupy Bone were two companies of 3 Parachute Battalion dropped by air to hold the airfield and 6 Commando, landed by sea on 12th November to seize the port. On 11th November a small column of all arms from 11 Infantry Brigade Group (known as Hart Force and made mobile by

\* Additional factors which reduced the efficiency of air support were:—

(a) Lack of all-weather airfields, which could not be constructed during the first few months of the campaign; and

(b) Lack of line communications during a period when headquarters were frequently moved.