

Time was also required to clarify the confused situation existing with the French. The intention was that all French troops in 78 Division area should be relieved as soon as possible so that, under the command of General Barre, all the French forces could concentrate on the protection of the right flank on the line Le Kef-Teboursouk-Testour.

By 23rd November a preliminary verbal agreement had been reached that all troops of whatever nationality north of the line Le Kef-Zaghuan should be under command First Army and that all troops south of this line should be under French command.

By 24th November the forward concentration of 78 Division and Blade Force, reinforced by light tanks from the United States 1 Armoured Division, was completed and orders were issued for the immediate resumption of the advance with, as a first objective, the line Tebourba-Mateur.

On 25th November the advance was resumed and 11 Brigade attacked the enemy at Medjez, seizing the village and establishing crossings over the river.

On 27th November 11 Brigade occupied Tebourba and repulsed enemy counter-attacks supported by tanks and dive-bombers, destroying several tanks. On 28th November 11 Brigade and 2/13 Armoured Regiment were on the outskirts of Djedeida.

We had attained the nearest point to Tunis that was reached until the final stage of the campaign.

At the same time that 11 Brigade was operating up the Medjerda Valley, Blade Force with 1 Parachute Battalion and the 1 Battalion of the 1 Armoured Regiment, United States 1 Armoured Division, moved into the plain south of Mateur, not without considerable supply difficulties enhanced by the beginning of the rains. Here Blade Force was involved in its first successful armoured engagement on 26th November, an action which continued on and off for several days. A successful raid by the United States light tank battalion resulted in the destruction of approximately 40 Stukas on the ground at Djedeida airfield.

It was now evident that the enemy intended to stand and fight along the entire front and was present in considerable strength—see Appendix "C."

The following week saw hard fighting followed by the start of our withdrawal. This week was notable for the heavy scale of enemy air attack, particularly by dive-bombers, to which the leading troops were subjected, and which our own air forces were at this stage unable to prevent.* They were still operating from Bone aerodrome, with an unreliable (owing to the mud) advanced landing ground at Souk el Arba.

11 Brigade were never able to occupy Djedeida, but remained in contact with the enemy on 29th and 30th November, with Blade Force concentrated in the area of Chouigui.

By 30th November Combat Command "B," United States 1 Armoured Division, was concentrated forward, and an attack on Tunis, with Combat Command "B" and Blade Force working to the east of the Med-

jerda, was ordered for 2nd December, and in conjunction with this 1 Parachute Battalion was to drop at Depienne and threaten Tunis from the south. The drop was successfully made and the parachutists reached Oudna, but the main attack did not take place, for on 1st and 2nd December the enemy counter-attacked with tanks and infantry towards Tebourba from the north and Blade Force was heavily engaged, suffering considerable casualties in tanks.

By the evening of 2nd December Blade Force was withdrawn west and the defence of the forward areas was left to 11 Brigade and the armoured infantry of Combat Command "B" who had to be ordered forward in a defensive rôle. Our tank losses up to date amounted to approximately 40. Many enemy tanks were destroyed, but as he was left in possession of the battlefield most of these were no doubt recovered. The survivors of 1 Parachute Battalion rejoined 78 Division on 3rd December.

On this date the enemy again attacked 11 Brigade in strength at Tebourba and penetrated their positions at several places. The Brigade was cut off and had difficulty in withdrawing during the night: 2 Hampshires, who failed to get the order to withdraw, suffered heavily but fought magnificently. Losses of equipment were considerable and enemy dive-bombing all day was on a heavy scale.

On 3rd December a series of enemy attacks on our positions at El Gueussa developed from the south-east and tank and infantry battles took place all day between Combat Command "B" and the enemy, while 11 Brigade withdrew to more favourable positions north of Medjez.

During the period of the actions described, the administrative situation was precarious in the extreme. Dispatches of stores from Bone, which was intended as the main supply base for the forward area, were seriously affected by enemy bombing. An acute shortage of locomotives and rolling-stock, coupled with demands arising from the French mobilisation and the transfer of United States formations from the west, made compensating stores lifts from Algiers by rail impossible. There was no reserve pool of motor transport to fall back on. All resources were strained to the utmost.

It was clear to me that the offensive against Tunis would have to be postponed to give time to build up resources and to refit the troops who had been engaged for the past month. Several battalions of 78 Division were under three hundred and fifty strong and the strain of persistent dive-bombing was beginning to tell. The heavy rain had also put all my airfields out of action and movement off the main roads was becoming impossible. I did not consider that a further offensive could in any case be undertaken until at least one week's reserves of supplies of all kinds had been accumulated at railhead.

Meanwhile my Tactical Headquarters had moved in succession to Jemmapes, Constantine and Ain Seynour, while Main Army Headquarters opened at Constantine on 29th November.

By 10th December the garrison at Medjez, which included four French battalions, has been reinforced by 1 Guards Brigade less a battalion, preparatory to the temporary withdrawal of 11 Brigade and Combat Command "B"

* By the standards of later campaigns this enemy air activity was not on a serious scale. Its moral effect at the time, however, was increased by the inexperience of the troops and by the scarcity of light A.A. weapons.