

mander changed, called the Manteuffel Division) which consisted largely of the assorted units which had been the first to arrive in November. Taken by surprise by our North African landings the German High Command naturally turned first to airborne troops and two regiments and an engineer battalion were hastily flown in,* including the Koch Storm Regiment and the Barenthin Regiment, formed from two airborne training establishments. These two regiments, together with various independent battalions and spare tank and artillery units, made up Broich's command. To his south, covering the Medjerda valley, was 334 Infantry Division, a newly raised formation which arrived in the second half of December and first half of January. On its left, covering the Goubellat plain, was 10 Panzer Division, a regular armoured division which had fought in the French campaign; it had arrived by the middle of December. The greater part of the Eastern Dorsale was the responsibility of the Italians, under the command of 1 Superga Division. This was reinforced with two battalions of Italian marines and the German 47 Grenadier Regiment from Crete. Also in this general area was a German heavy tank battalion, the 501st, equipped with the new Mark VI "Tiger" tank, and the advance elements of the Hermann Goering Panzer Division.

In the centre, behind Faïd, the enemy had accumulated an Army Group Reserve which was intended to strike out at our southern flank. The main strength of this was provided by 21 Panzer Division, which had been withdrawn from Tripolitania in January ahead of the withdrawal of the other forces there and reinforced in tanks by the absorption of an independent tank battalion which had arrived earlier in Tunisia; also included were half 10 Panzer Division and a detachment of 501 Tank Battalion. Operating on the southern axis from Gabes to Gafsa was the Italian 131 Centauro Armoured Division and a detachment of infantry and armour from the German Africa Corps, mainly from 15 Panzer Division. Facing Eighth Army were XX and XXI Corps with four Italian infantry divisions, Spezia, Young Fascists, Trieste and Pistoia, plus the German 90 and 164 Light Divisions, and the remainder of the German Africa Corps. The Saharan Group, the remains of the Italian Saharan command, was operating in the desert west of the Matmata mountains, reinforced by a German reconnaissance unit. Field-Marshal Rommel's intention, having abandoned Tripolitania and fallen back to the Mareth line, was to deal a swift blow at the Americans in the plain west of Faïd in order to make sure that they would not be able to come in on his rear when he was heavily engaged with Eighth Army. He knew he would have time for this, because there must necessarily be a considerable interval before General Montgomery would be able to bring really strong forces into southern Tunisia and begin the assault of the Mareth line. His long term policy was defensive: to retain a bridgehead in Africa, and there is considerable evidence to show that the German High Command expected to be able to retain at least part of Tunisia for a long time to come.

* But, contrary to general popular belief at the time and later, the Germans did not bring in tanks by air

The Axis forces in Tunisia amounted to the equivalent of fourteen divisions, of which about half were Italian, including one Italian and three German armoured divisions. The Allied forces at that date in contact with the enemy amounted to nine divisions, including two French divisions with obsolete and inadequate equipment; two more divisions in Tripoli would soon become available. I expected to be able to build up to a strength of about twenty divisions by May, if all went well, but at the moment Rommel was being reinforced faster than I was and his normal intake was about a thousand men per day. The reason for this was that he had a short and easy route of entry from Sicily and I determined that my main effort must be directed to cutting this line of communications. In order to do this it would be necessary to gain air superiority over the Sicilian narrows, and for this we should need the airfields in the Tunisian plain, especially those at and around Kairouan. The immediate problem was therefore to get Eighth Army through the Gabes gap into the flat country where their armoured superiority would have full play and could be expected to carry them in one sweep to the beginning of the mountainous area at Enfidaville. With the enemy once back in a comparatively small perimeter round Tunis and Bizerta we should be able to establish a tight blockade by sea and air. This would mean that I had the enemy held in a complete strangle-hold and, with full command of the initiative, could deliver the *coup de grace* at the time and place of my own choosing.

The Battle of Kasserine.

On the morning of 14th February a strong German force, estimated to contain about a hundred tanks, emerged from the Faïd pass and attacked the positions held by 1 United States Armoured Division at Sidi Bou Zid. The American division was rather dispersed at the time the attack was made, with detachments at Sidi Bou Zid, on the Gebel Lessouda, an isolated mountain north of the village, at Sbeitla and south of Hadjeb el Aïoun on the Sbeitla-Pichon road. The German armour was handled with great dash and supported by a strong force of dive-bombers. Our forward battery positions were overrun and while a tank battle raged in front of Sidi Bou Zid another enemy force had by 1130 hours cut off the infantry holding positions on the Gebel Lessouda. Our tank losses were heavy and the battle became fluid and difficult to control. By evening 1 Armoured Division had concentrated between Sidi Bou Zid and Sbeitla, and next day, the 15th, attempted a counter-attack. This was unsuccessful and the armour drew off towards Sbeitla, leaving the infantry on Gebel Lessouda still isolated; some were able to withdraw but many were taken prisoner. It was now clear that our armour had been too depleted to hold the plain and a withdrawal was ordered back to the Western Dorsale. To conform, the Ranger battalion and the Derbyshire Yeomary detachment had been already withdrawn from Gafsa which was entered by the enemy on the afternoon of the 15th and the French withdrew in their sector from the Eastern to the Western Dorsale. This movement was carried out in good order and the enemy followed up only slowly. General Anderson