

The Enfidaville line thus marked the culmination of Eighth Army's great advance across Africa. This holding and diversionary role was not indeed its sole contribution to the final victory, for three and a half divisions were transferred to First Army to give weight to the main attack on Tunis. It is right, however, to take note at this point of the extent of Eighth Army's achievements. In six months they had advanced eighteen hundred miles and fought numerous battles in which they were always successful. This would be an astonishing rate of progress even in a civilized country with all the modern facilities of transport—the equivalent of an advance from London to two hundred miles east of Moscow—but in a desert it was even more remarkable. It reflects in particular the greatest credit on the administrative services. Their problems might have seemed quite insoluble but thanks to the admirable preparations made and the sound basis of experience gained in earlier campaigns administration had kept pace with operations and never failed in its support of the fighting troops.

Before First Army opened its offensive the enemy gave a last demonstration of tactics that had become almost traditional in Tunisia, the spoiling attack. On the night of 20th-21st April he attacked with sudden violence between Medjez and Goubellat, using a force of five battalions and about seventy tanks. The infantry came mainly from the Hermann Goering Division and advanced to the attack with great vigour and determination. We had had little warning of what was imminent and in the early stages of the battle parties of enemy succeeded in infiltrating into our forward positions where the troops were assembling for the offensive, into the gun lines and as far as 4 Division Headquarters. In spite of the darkness and the confusion the attack, given the codename LILACBLOSSOM by the Germans, was a failure; we took over four hundred and fifty prisoners and claimed over thirty tanks destroyed. Nor were our plans for the offensive upset or delayed, except to a minor degree on 9 Corps front, where 46 Division attack had to be postponed four hours.

9 Corps' offensive started on the morning of 22nd April when 46 Division advanced to the attack in the area of the Kourzia salt marshes. On the right, south-west of the marshes, the division was unsuccessful in face of strong defended localities and dense minefields which inflicted casualties on the supporting tanks. The attack on the left, to the north of the marshes, made better progress. Ground was gained steadily and by the late afternoon the Corps commander put in 6 Armoured Division to attack through the infantry. This met opposition from 10 Panzer Division and a tank battle developed. It continued next day when the enemy was reinforced by the tanks of 21 Panzer Division and on the 24th when 15 Panzer Division also arrived. General von Arnim was clearly worried about the danger in this area and concentrated all his armour here; by the 26th all three armoured divisions were opposing us between Medjez and Bou Arada and the Headquarters of the German Africa Corps had been brought round to take command. With these reinforcements he succeeded in stabilizing his front in the broken ground north-east of the marshes and although 1 Armoured Division was committed on 24th

April we were unable to score any significant gains. We had, however, caused the enemy to concentrate almost all his mobile reserves against this sector, and had inflicted heavy losses on him. It was a good preparation for the final blow. On 25th April the enemy withdrew from the salient now protruding south of the Bou Arada—Pont du Fahs road, followed up by XIX Corps. The latter were now within striking distance of the Pont du Fahs defile, having cleared Gebel Fkirine on 26th April. Tank battles continued on 9 Corps front all day of the 26th but that evening 6 Armoured Division was withdrawn into Army reserve.

While the main enemy attention was concentrated on the battle in the Goubellat plain 5 and II Corps had been able to make important advances on the whole front from the Medjerda to the sea. Resistance, indeed, was as strong as ever and all our gains were most stubbornly contested. 78 Division began on 22nd April with an attack on Gebel Ahmera, the left hand bastion of the Medjez gate which had defied us since the previous December. In very heavy fighting they had cleared all but the north-eastern end by midday of the 23rd and mopped up the remaining enemy pockets on Gebel Tanngouche. On the same day 1 and 4 Divisions attacked to the south of the Medjerda; the former captured Grich el Oued and the latter Goubellat. On 25th April 78 Division captured Heidous and next day Gebel Ahmera was finally cleared. We were now firmly based on the left bank of the river and continued to extend our ground on the right bank. On the 26th 1 Division pushed the enemy's positions back as far as Gebel Bou Aoukaz, a dominating feature four miles down stream from Gebel Ahmera on the opposite bank and 4 Division advanced down the main Tunis road to a distance of seven miles beyond Medjez. At this point the enemy began to launch a series of furious counter-attacks. On the 27th he drove back the left flank of 4 Division at Ksar Tyr and for the next three days he continued these attacks with a mixed battle group from 15 Panzer Division. He regained a little ground at the point of junction of 1 and 4 Divisions; his losses were heavy but his troops continued to show an excellent spirit.

On the northernmost sector progress by II Corps was steady and continuous throughout this period. The enemy defences were strong and long-established and the terrain, as I have said, was particularly difficult; these advantages outweighed in the early stages their numerical inferiority and the lack of reserves for the defence, but as position after position was wrested away there were increasingly less troops to man the positions in rear. 9 and 1 Infantry Divisions attacked on the morning of 23rd April on the Sedjenane-Mateur and Béja-Mateur axes respectively. On the first day 9 Division gained its objective west of El Aouana. 1 Division made slightly slower progress but by the 25th had reached the high ground a mile to the south-east of Sidi Nsir station. This advance had exposed the left flank of the division and 34 Infantry Division was now brought in between the other two to clear up the area astride the Sidi Nsir-Mateur road. The ridge of hills west of Sidi Nsir was cleared by 28th April after three days of concentrated artillery fire and on the same day the high ground east of the village was captured after close and heavy fighting.