

had committed the error of throwing his tanks against well-emplaced anti-tank guns. Our defensive success was a good omen for the attack on the Mareth line. Medenine was Rommel's last battle in Africa. Shortly afterwards (before 19th March) he handed over command of the Army Group to von Arnim. The latter was succeeded at 5 Panzer Army Headquarters by General von Vaerst who had commanded, without much distinction, 15 Panzer Division in Africa up to September, 1942. It seems certain that Rommel's return to Germany was genuinely due to sickness, but no doubt also the German High Command wanted to run no risk of the capture of a General with so great a reputation.

In spite of the failure at Medenine the enemy were unwilling to be forced back on the defensive and on 10th March launched a sudden and violent attack against "L" Force at Ksar Rhilane. This outpost in the desert west of the Matmata mountains was assuming greater importance for, as I shall explain, we already had plans for passing an outflanking force through the desert. The attack was made by the reconnaissance units of 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions and some Italian mobile units, assisted by dive-bombers. General Leclerc's force, which included a Greek detachment, stood firm in a style reminiscent of Koenig's defence of Bir Hacheim and, strongly supported by the Western Desert Air Force, beat off the attack with substantial losses to the enemy. I think the main purpose of this attack was to win some offensive success, even a small one, as his persistence in the north showed, the enemy still hoped to keep us at bay as long as possible by reiterated attacks*. He showed, however, a certain apprehension about our intentions in the area between Gafsa and Faïd, and drew off the greater part of his southern group of armour north of the Gabes gap to watch that flank.

On 14th March I issued a directive on policy to confirm my previous instructions on the way in which I wanted the battle in Tunisia to be fought; it was co-ordinated with a brief statement on Air Force policy by Air Marshal Coningham†. I had taken II United States Corps under direct command on 8th March, leaving the French XIX Corps under First Army, so that I was now dealing with three subordinate headquarters. I proposed also to form an Army Group reserve to be commanded by Headquarters 9 Corps which had just arrived in Africa; it was intended to consist of 6 Armoured Division, one British infantry division and specialist troops such as parachutists and commandos whom I was anxious to pull out of the line. I laid particular stress, for the benefit of First Army, on the policy of not attempting to hold a continuous line over all the mountainous areas of the front but of concentrating on the defence of really vital positions and leaving the areas in between to be observed by patrols. This was for the present defensive phase, which I hoped soon to be able to abandon, but even while on the defensive I ordered an offensive spirit to be shown in small actions to improve our

positions. It was an advantage that we had now begun to sort out the troops originally under General Anderson into their respective national units and given a definite sector to each nationality.

On 15th March I moved my headquarters to a tented site on a well wooded mountain side south of Ain Beida. This was on the main road from Constantine to Tebessa, well situated between First and Eighth Armies and close to Headquarters II Corps, which was near Tebessa. For the present, operations in the south were the most important.

The Mareth Line Battles.

As a defensive position the Mareth line was almost as strong as the enemy line at El Alamein. The Eighth Army plan, therefore, called for a deliberate and well organized attack with all the forces which we could maintain forward. General Montgomery sent me an advanced copy of his proposed plan on 27th February. For PUGILIST, as the operation was called, Eighth Army was to be organized for the frontal attack in two Corps, 30 Corps with 50, 51 and 4 Indian Divisions and 201 Guards Brigade, and 10 Corps with 1 and 7 Armoured Divisions. The plan was that 30 Corps should make a very heavy attack on the north-eastern end of the line, near the coast, to break into and roll up the line from the right, 10 Corps, which would be initially in Army reserve, would then be ready to exploit success by passing through and advancing towards Gabes and Sfax. There was a difference, however, between the situation here and at Alamein in that we had now proved, thanks to the Long Range Desert Group, that we could move an outflanking force through the desert west of the Matmata mountains. Provision was accordingly made for this in the plan; the outflanking troops consisted mainly of the New Zealand Division but included also 8 Armoured Brigade and General Leclerc's "L" Force and for this reason were designated New Zealand Corps. The object of this force was defined as to establish itself across the Gabes—Matmata road so as to cut off the enemy and prevent his escape, in order to do this it would have to break through a subsidiary defensive line, mainly consisting of minefields, which the enemy had constructed between the Gebel Tebaga and the Gebel Melab.

In the plan as fixed on 26th February General Montgomery stated that D-day for the attack would be 20th March. This apparently long delay was rendered necessary by his desire to have all the logistical preparations perfect. I sent my Major-General, Administration, Major-General Miller, to Tripoli on 6th March to investigate the administrative situation and his report on his return on 11th March was very satisfactory. The port was discharging over three thousand tons per day, to be shortly raised to four thousand tons, (on 6th March seven thousand tons were discharged, but this was exceptionally good); the ration, petrol and ammunition situation was therefore good and we could already assume as certain that the operation could proceed according to time-table. Eighth Army was anxious to know, however, what logistical support we could give in the case that the enemy, after a prolonged resistance on the Mareth line, broke completely and we should wish to pursue him for a long

* In a signal on 12th March, giving my appreciation of the enemy situation, I concluded "For Rommel's general intentions see Revelations XII, 12", ("The devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.")

† Appendix "C"