

began to prepare a reserve to restore the situation. 26 Armoured Brigade had moved back to Siliana in order to hand in their "Crusader" tanks in exchange for the "Shermans" with which they were to be re-equipped; instead they were moved hastily southwards to Maktar, still with their "Crusaders," and two squadrons of "Shermans" from the replacement pool, with scratch British crews, were ordered south to join 1 Armoured Division. 1 Guards Brigade and 39 United States Regimental Combat Team (the advanced unit of 9 Division) were ordered to Sbiba, north of Sbeitla.

American losses now amounted to about eighty-six medium tanks and thirty field guns and 1 Armoured Division was therefore very considerably weakened. At midnight on 16th/17th February the enemy once more attacked at Sbeitla, in bright moonlight, and after fighting all that night and next morning broke into the town. 1 Armoured Division withdrew westwards and went into reserve south-east of Tebessa to re-form. The enemy followed up and occupied Kasserine; Feriana had already been occupied by the force operating from the south which had been joined by the detachment from the German Africa Corps. II Corps had by this been forced back off the plain into the hills; the loss of the airfield at Thelepte, near Feriana, was a heavy blow but all aircraft and stores there were either evacuated or destroyed. Rommel had now his whole force concentrated and halted his troops during the 18th to allow for the necessary regrouping and replenishing. He had driven a big salient into our lines and had the choice of three roads on which to exploit to turn our flank still further: through Sbeitla and Sbiba or through Kasserine and Thala, both converging on Le Kef, and through Feriana on Tebessa. His forces, though they had suffered loss, were relatively intact; the Allied dispositions for defence had been hastily taken up and suffered from the inevitable intermingling of units of three different nationalities.

This was the situation with which I was presented when I landed at Algiers from Tripoli on 15th February. After discussions with General Eisenhower I flew on to Telergma, south-west of Constantine. From here I went straight to General Anderson's headquarters and set out on a tour of inspection of the front. On the 16th I visited 5 Corps, on the northern front and on the 17th XIX Corps. I then went on to II Corps sector where I spent the 18th and 19th. I found the position even more critical than I had expected and a visit to the Kasserine area showed that in the inevitable confusion of the retreat American, French and British troops had been inextricably mingled, there was no co-ordinated plan of defence and definite uncertainty as to command. At the first pass I visited, the Dernaia pass, I had to nominate on the spot the senior American officer as the responsible commander of the sector and ordered him to hold his ground to the last. In view of the situation I decided to assume command at once, without waiting for the 20th, the official date,* and after completing this tour of the front returned for that night to Constantine, where my headquarters had been temporarily set up. It was clear to me that although Rommel's original intention had been

merely to give such a blow to II Corps as would leave his right rear secure while he prepared to meet Eighth Army, he now had much bigger ideas. From previous experience I knew him to be a man who would always exploit success by every possible means to the limit of rashness, and there now glittered before him the prospect of a great tactical victory. If he could break through our weak screening positions on the Western Dorsale, at Kasserine or Sbiba, he would find few natural obstacles to an advance northwards; such an advance would at once take in rear XIX Corps, whose French troops were already shaken by their losses in January and their sudden withdrawal from the Eastern Dorsale, and if it could be successfully pushed to Le Kef he would be in behind 5 Corps as well. This would disrupt the whole front in Tunisia and bring on a withdrawal if not a disaster. In face of this threat I issued orders that there would be no further withdrawal and that the front would be stabilized on the present positions.

On 19th February the enemy carried out exploratory attacks against all three roads I have mentioned, attempting to find out which would prove the easiest for an attack. His main weight was on the right, against Sbiba; the attack on the pass above Kasserine was made by about a battalion of infantry and the force probing the Dernaia pass above Feriana, on the Tebessa road, was only of the nature of a small reconnaissance. South of Sbiba 1 Guards Brigade held firm and repulsed the enemy but the attack in the Kasserine pass was more successful and the enemy began to infiltrate through the American positions. Accordingly on the next day, the 20th, this thrust was strongly reinforced and the other two abandoned; the pass was cleared and 21 Panzer Division, with the infantry and some of the armour of the detachment from the German Africa Corps, pressed on into the basin beyond. Here Rommel found himself faced with two alternatives, for the road, after traversing the pass, diverges to west and north. The former direction would take him to Tebessa, our main southern base and airfield centre, but the road passes through difficult country; the other route runs mainly on the flat and leads via Thala to Le Kef. Accordingly on 21st February he passed 10 Panzer Division battle group* through 21 Panzer Division in a northward thrust, leaving the screening left flank to the German Africa Corps detachment.

The 21st was the critical day. Feeling fairly confident that, after piercing the Kasserine pass, Rommel would thrust up the northern road I had already ordered General Anderson to concentrate his armour for the defence of Thala. Accordingly on the 20th he brought across to that area a composite force based on 26 Armoured Brigade Group, reinforced by the 2/5 Leicesters, and on the 21st they were joined by 2 Hampshires and two field artillery battalions of 9 United States Division, which was being brought up by forced marches to the scene of action. The fighting south of Thala was extremely fierce in relatively open country and the fortunes of war changeable. At one moment a few enemy tanks succeeded in forcing their way over the low pass south of the village but they were shot to pieces by our

* Eighth Army came under command Eighteenth Army Group from 0001 hours, 20th February.

* About half the divisional infantry and artillery and a battalion of tanks.