

Further east 1 Division advanced along the long range overlooking the Oued et Tine valley on the northern side.

On 27th April General Bradley relieved General Patton in command of II Corps and the latter went to take command of the Seventh Army which he was to lead in the invasion of Sicily. General Patton had produced, during his period of command, what I might almost call a transformation in the troops of II Corps. By his influence they had recovered from the natural depression caused by the early setbacks, they had absorbed with great rapidity the benefits of the intensive training to which they had been subjected and were now showing in hard mountain fighting that they had added the skill of the trained soldier to those excellent natural qualities which had been previously in part obscured by inexperience. General Patton was to score other triumphs in the Mediterranean and in North-west Europe but I think this not the least of his achievements. General Bradley had been attached to II Corps Headquarters and General Eisenhower now thought that this would be a good time to give him experience of actual command in operations before commanding a Corps in Sicily.

The attack by 9 Division on the northernmost road progressed rather more slowly. The enemy positions at Jefna were particularly strong and before they could be grappled with there were many outlying positions, on the hills either side of the road, which had to be cleared. Manteuffel's parachutists fought as well as usual and by 2nd May we were still held up at the immediate approaches to Jefna, though to the north we had outflanked it by some three miles. Heavy fighting continued on 1 Infantry Division front both on Gebel Sidi Meftah and to the north of it but in anticipation of its fall II Corps were now bringing up 1 Armoured Division to operate on the extreme right of the Corps in the valley of the Oued et Tine. This valley leads direct to Mateur; no road follows it but it is practicable for armour once the left flank is freed by securing Gebel Sidi Meftah. 78 Division to the east of the Oued had gained ground north of Gebel Ahmera and north-east of Heidous. On 30th April 34 Division scored its most noteworthy success with the capture of Gebel Tahent (Point 609). This commanding dome-shaped hill, east-north-east of Sidi Nsir, was defended by parachutists from the Barenthin Regiment, perhaps the best German troops in Africa.

#### *The Final Offensive.*

By 29th April I had decided that it was necessary to reinforce First Army again and change the point of attack further to the north. The heavy pressure which we had been bringing to bear since the 22nd had gained us a foothold at the entrance to the plain of Tunis and had stretched the enemy's powers of resistance almost to breaking point, but if I was to finish the campaign quickly, to fit in with the time-table for Sicily, a sudden powerful stroke was necessary. The events of the past week had shown that Eighth Army was unable to make any vital contribution by attacks on their front; indeed, in spite of the pressure they had kept up, the enemy had found himself able to withdraw all his armour from the southern front. I therefore ordered General Montgomery on 30th April to despatch at once to First Army the best formations he could spare to reinforce the main blow from

Medjez. He nominated 7 Armoured Division, 4 Indian Division and 201 Guards Brigade. These were both the freshest and the most experienced formations in Eighth Army. They were, indeed, the nucleus around which Eighth Army had grown up, for in 1940 they made up the whole of the Western Desert Force\*. It was particularly appropriate that the two divisions which had won our first victory in Africa, at Sidi Barrani, should be chosen for the main role in our last victory, the battle of Tunis.

I informed General Anderson on the same day of these proposed reinforcements and of my plan for their employment. The operations of 9 Corps, though falling short of their original objective, had attracted enemy attention to the southern part of the Goubellat plain. I intended to keep his attention fixed there by retaining there 1 Armoured Division, reinforced with a large concentration of dummy tanks and transport, and to make my main blow straight at Tunis along the Medjez-Massicault road. For this I intended to employ, under command of 9 Corps, two infantry and two armoured divisions. They would be assisted in the initial assault by the greatest weight of artillery that could be made available and by a very heavy air attack in the "blitzkrieg" style. I laid all the emphasis in planning on speed and the maintenance of the objective. The armoured divisions were to move off behind the infantry divisions simultaneously with them so that there would be no delay or hesitation in pushing them through the infantry the moment a break through was achieved. I insisted that none of the divisions of 9 Corps should turn aside to mop up isolated areas of resistance or to attempt to roll up the enemy's exposed flanks but were to continue straight for Tunis, ignoring any enemy to left or right. By this means they would forestall the enemy on his defences round Tunis and split his whole front in half. If these instructions could be strictly followed I felt confident of turning the German "blitzkrieg" technique on its inventors and preventing an African "Dunkirk".

This question of an enemy evacuation of Tunisia naturally occupied a great deal of our thoughts at the time and although our success was in the event so rapid as to prevent any attempt being made it is worth while giving a brief study to the subject. From our point of view it was vital to prevent any substantial evacuation, both because of the psychological value of complete annihilation and because a reinforcement of Sicily by large numbers of German troops would make our next task much more difficult. I was uncertain whether the well-known German reluctance to abandon any position, however untenable, would work against an evacuation; it now seems likely that they would have attempted it had they been given a chance. We were, however, by then in a position to throw a naval and air blockade round the Tunisian coast which, in spite of the extensive minefields at sea, could be relied on to let very little pass. In the worst case, assuming the enemy was able to stabilize a firm bridge-head position, it was calculated that it would be theoretically possible to remove up to a maximum of seventy thousand men; in the event only just over six hundred got away and these were nearly all sailors or dockworkers.

\* 201 Guards Brigade was at that time numbered 22.