

west movement is canalized by the mountains. In the north two roads, from Gebel Abiud and Béja, meet at Mateur and run through Ferryville to Bizerta. In the Medjerda valley the main road leads to Tunis from Medjez el Bab and a secondary road parallels it to the south, starting from Goubellat. The next east-west road, leaving the Medjez road at Le Kef, crosses the Western Dorsale beyond Maktar and the Eastern Dorsale at Pichon, with a by-pass through Fondouk, seventy miles south of Goubellat. Another road from Le Kef runs through Sbiba, Sbeitla and Faïd; south of that the roads which cross the Western Dorsale at Kasserine or Feriana have to make a detour through Gafsa, from where a good road runs direct to Gabes and a poor road crosses the Eastern Dorsale at the Maknassy defile. These eight roads offer the only practicable routes for crossing a mountain-defended front of some two hundred and twenty miles; they can all be easily blocked with relatively small forces. One further road leads into Tunisia, the road from Tripoli, and to block this the French had constructed a massive system of permanent defences, the Mareth line.

On 14th February Allied dispositions were as follows. 5 Corps commanded the sector north of a line from Le Kef to south of Bou Arada with under command from north to south 46 and 78 Infantry and 6 Armoured Divisions. One American Regimental Combat Team of 1 Infantry Division was under command of 78 Division, south of Medjez. The line in this sector ran from the coast due north of Jefna south through Sidi Nsir station, then south-east to cover Medjez and then due south through Goubellat and Bou Arada. In the next sector to the south the French XIX Corps held the Eastern Dorsale as far south as Pichon. The northern part of this front was held by the Algerian Division with 1 Guards and 36 Infantry Brigades under command. The southern part of the Corps sector was entrusted to 1 United States Infantry Division, less one Regimental Combat Team, and an Armoured Combat Command of 1 Armoured Division. A British Army Group, Royal Artillery, supported XIX Corps throughout the campaign. From south of a line from Thala to Pichon the United States II Corps commanded the area of the plain between the two Dorsale ranges, supported by the French Constantine Division and part of a British Armoured Car Regiment. The American forces consisted of 1 Armoured Division, less one Combat Command but plus one Regimental Combat Team from 1 Infantry Division, and a Ranger Battalion. II Corps held in general the line of the Eastern Dorsale with the important exception of the Faïd pass. On 30th January the Germans had attacked this pass with a force which included over sixty tanks and overwhelmed the small French garrison before the American armour could come to its assistance. They then dug in firmly and resisted all attempts to dislodge them; an action on 2nd February was costly in American tanks and II Corps decided to pull back to Sidi Bou Zid and observe the Faïd area from there. The Germans thus had a gateway through which, if they chose, they could debouch in considerable strength to attack our tenuously held southern flank.

In the extreme south 30 Corps, after the capture of Tripoli, had followed up the retreat-

ing enemy only with light forces. 7 Armoured Division (now 23 Armoured and 131 Lorried Infantry Brigades) maintained pressure along the coast road but were hampered by mines and demolitions. To hasten the enemy's withdrawal 30 Corps used 4 Light Armoured Brigade in a series of outflanking movements south of the main road. By the end of the month the enemy had retired to the edge of the marshes which stretch along the Tunisian frontier from the coast southwards for about forty miles. 4 Light Armoured Brigade patrols pressed on into southern Tunisia but enemy resistance lingered on in the marshes, blocking any further advance down the road. General Montgomery therefore decided to throw more weight into the outflanking movement, using 8 Armoured Brigade, which had been resting near Tripoli and now relieved 23 Armoured Brigade. Moving round by way of El Assa 8 Armoured Brigade secured a bridgehead across the marshes and took up positions astride the track leading to Ben Gardane. The enemy reacted hastily to this move and brought 15 Panzer Division forward from Ben Gardane to support the strongpoint which he had prepared at Taguelmit. At this point, however, heavy rain began to fall again and it was necessary to build a causeway over the marshes before our advance could proceed. As the causeway was nearing completion the enemy withdrew and on 15th February 30 Corps entered Ben Gardane, the first important town in Tunisia, without meeting opposition.

Enemy dispositions, like ours, reflected the effects of circumstances rather than design. At about the same time as the Allies, and for the same reasons, the Axis also created an Army Group Headquarters to control all forces in Tunisia; it was named "Army Group Africa" and was commanded by Field-Marshal Rommel. Under it were two Army Headquarters, representing the forces which had hurried into the country to oppose First Army and those which had been driven out of Libya by the advance of Eighth Army. The former were known as 5 Panzer Army, commanded by General von Arnim, and the latter, having dropped the title of "German-Italian Panzer Army" when Rommel left with most of his German staff to form the new Army Group Headquarters, were now organized as 1 (Italian) Army. 1 Army was commanded by General Messe (subsequently promoted to Marshal on the day of his capitulation), one of the younger generation of Italian commanders who had acquired a good reputation in command of an Italian Corps in Russia. It was organized into the same three Corps, German Africa Corps, Italian XX and XXI Corps. 5 Panzer Army had no Corps Headquarters under command except the Italian XXX Corps which had been set up at Sfax in the early days of the campaign but never played any significant part. The Corps organization is of very little importance to an understanding of the course of operations and even the Army organization was liable to sudden modifications in the interests of creating an Army Group reserve; it will be more useful, therefore, to sketch out the divisional dispositions on the ground as they were on 14th February.

In the north the sector from the coast to inclusive Mateur was held by the Broich Division. This was a scratch formation called after the commander (and later, when the com-