

The move of formations from Eighth Army, the redistribution of 9 Corps and the dumping of ammunition and other stores would take some time, and D-day for the attack, which was given the codename VULCAN, was fixed as 6th May. As a preliminary 5 Corps was to capture Gebel Bou Aoukaz on the afternoon of 5th May in order to free the left flank of the attack from threat from this direction. On the morning of the 6th the 9 Corps attack would start before dawn on a front of three thousand yards with 4 British Division right and 4 Indian Division left, supported by artillery concentrations from over four hundred guns, centrally controlled. The infantry were to begin by seizing a line north of the road through the small village of Frendj, about six thousand yards from the start line. 6 Armoured Division was to follow 4 British, and 7 Armoured 4 Indian. Their first bound was to the area of St. Cyprien, twelve miles further on and the same distance from Tunis, before the enemy could recover from the shock and occupy the perimeter defences. 5 Corps, which had 46 Division north of the river and 1 and 78 Divisions to the south, was to hold the corridor open and be prepared to support 9 Corps. XIX Corps was to launch an attack against Gebel Zaghouan on 4th May; on the same day the New Zealanders on Eighth Army's left would mount local attacks south of Saouaf to assist the French and pin down the enemy on their front. II Corps was to continue its successful advance towards Bizerta.

I summed up these orders in a personal letter to General Anderson on 3rd May which I reproduce here as giving the clearest picture of my conception of the final plan.

"1. The primary object of your attack is to capture Tunis. Every effort must be made to pass the two armoured divisions through on the same day as the infantry attack starts so that the enemy is not allowed time to build up a strong anti-tank screen.

2. 9 Corps must seize a bridgehead through the immediate defences of Tunis as early as possible, before the enemy has time to man these defences.

3. The mopping up of localities which the enemy continues to hold on the fronts of 78 and 1 Divisions must come later. The chief task of 5 Corps after the armour has passed through is to keep open the funnel.

4. Concentration must be maintained and it would not be sound to aim at advancing on too wide a front. For instance, 46 Division may well be required to nourish the threat and to assist 5 Corps to keep the funnel open. An advance north of the river Medjerda would not contribute to the main object. Troops north of the river will be forced to withdraw when you reach Tunis and cut their communications.

5. I consider the best way to prevent the enemy withdrawing a large part of his forces to the Cape Bon peninsula is to reach Tunis as early as possible, thus cutting off all troops north of Tunis. In any case I do not wish your operations for the early capture of Tunis to be prejudiced by preoccupation with preventing the enemy withdrawing to Cape Bon."

During the period before the offensive opened my plans for deceiving the enemy as to our

intentions continued and showed evidence of producing good results. The enemy did not reinforce the area which I had selected for my point of main effort but left its defence to 15 Panzer Division, now in a very weak state. By contrast he retained both 10 and 21 Panzer Divisions in the Kourzia area, opposite my 1 Armoured Division. Shortly before the attack began a battalion from 90 Light Division was brought round from Eighth Army front to St. Cyprien but on 4th May, on the other hand, the enemy removed two battalions of heavy anti-tank guns from the Massicault area to the area north-east of the Kourzia marshes. It was gratifying to realise that we had been so successful in obtaining surprise and that the enemy had split his armour, leaving the stronger part of it away to the south of our point of main effort.

The attack on Gebel Bou Aoukaz by 1 Division went in on 5th May at 1700 hours with strong and effective air support. As I have already explained the capture of this mountain was essential to the whole conduct of operations in order to clear the left flank of the attack. The fighting on the mountain was severe and the enemy counter-attacked many times; major credit for the success must go to 1 Irish Guards who finally cleared the crest, at the cost of many casualties, within the time table laid down for the operation. Gebel Bou Aoukaz was in our hands by nightfall and all that night the infantry of 4 British and 4 Indian Divisions were moving forward to their assembly areas. On 6th May, at 0330 hours, they advanced to the attack side by side on a very narrow front. The massed artillery of First Army, backed by the dumps of ammunition which we had been nourishing so long for this event, fired concentrations on known enemy localities. At dawn the air forces went in. It was their greatest effort in the war up to that date, over two thousand sorties of all types. The weight of the attack was too much for the defenders, already weakened physically and morally by the heavy fighting since 22nd April. Most of them did their duty but there were isolated instances of demoralisation. By 1030 hours the first infantry objectives were captured and by 1130 hours the village of Frendj was reported clear. The two armoured divisions, which were close on the heels of the attacking infantry, at once passed into the lead. So deep had been our initial penetration that they found enemy resistance, though gallant and desperate, to be but little organised, they met some groups of enemy tanks, from 15 Panzer Division, and many of the 88 millimetre guns withdrawn from airfield defence, but the impetus of the offensive was so strong that it carried them by nightfall as far as Massicault, half-way to Tunis. 6 Armoured Division leaguered for the night to the south-east and 7 Armoured Division to the north-east of the village. The enemy were endeavouring to form a new defensive position at St. Cyprien.

The first day's fighting in the Medjerda valley had thus ended in a great success. Meanwhile II Corps to the north was about to reap the reward of its steady and well conducted advance. Under this constant and increasing pressure the German front in the mountains broke on the night of 2nd May and next day reconnaissance elements of 1 Armoured Divi-