

18 Army Group shortly afterwards took over command of all forces in Tunisia, taking United States 2 Corps directly under their orders, and leaving me in command of the British and French corps. Once again the various nationalities had perforce become very badly mixed.

By the end of February, 5 Corps consisted of 78, 46 and 6 Armoured Divisions; Headquarters 9 Corps had come out, and 1 Division was beginning to arrive at the ports.

I had got the greater part of 6 Armoured Division at last into Army Reserve, but General Alexander ordered it, with 9 Corps Headquarters and the Corps Troops, into Army Group Reserve almost immediately, though events delayed the completion of this move as the infantry brigade of 6 Armoured Division could not be spared at once.

For on 26th February von Arnim started an attack against 5 Corps on a wide front at Goubellat, at Medjez, at Sidi Nsir and at Jefna.

At Medjez it was defeated with heavy loss within a few hours, although German infantry penetrated deep into our gun lines in places. Further south a strong party of infantry and tanks also penetrated several miles behind our front through the wide gap at Tally Ho Corner and was only smashed just north of El Aroussa by Churchill tanks, which arrived in the nick of time to save a divisional headquarters. Meanwhile 38 Infantry Brigade had heavily defeated an attack north of Bou Arada, and stood firm despite the threat far to their rear.

At Sidi Nsir an isolated detachment, of 5 Hampshires with 155/170 Field Battery, Royal Artillery, placed out as a delaying force, was overwhelmed by a heavy attack supported by tanks; but its very gallant fight gained a precious 24 hours, and enabled 46 Division to occupy the Hunt's Gap position, covering Béja, with 128 Infantry Brigade Group. The enemy abandoned his attack in the south, but continued to press strongly at Hunt's Gap, where heavy fighting in terrible weather continued for a week. 46 Division fought splendidly, but suffered very heavy losses in infantry. However, over 30 enemy tanks, including five "Tigers," were blown up by our sappers, many more were damaged, and heavy casualties were inflicted. By 3rd March the situation was in hand, though spasmodic fighting continued for several days.

Despite his first failure, the enemy on 2nd March renewed his attack near Jefna and gained a considerable local success, forcing 139 Brigade to fall back to Sedjenane. To strengthen the front there, I moved up the Parachute Brigade from the Robaa area, replacing them temporarily by the 26 Regimental Combat Team, United States 1 Infantry Division, which Army Group sent up to me.

Between 2nd and 24th March, the enemy persistently pressed his attacks in the northern sector, slowly driving 46 Division back to Cap Negro-Djebel Abiod line, and dominating the essential lateral road Djebel Abiod-Béja. It was not a happy period; things went wrong too often and we lost some most important ground. But this was the limit of his gains.

Meanwhile, owing to the final withdrawal of four French battalions from the Medjez area to rejoin French 19 Corps, the enemy had with little opposition been able to move forward and occupy all the high ground overlooking the Oued Zarga-Medjez road, including the villages

of Toukabeur and Chaouach. They thus completely dominated Medjez, which was left in a dangerous salient.

The rain fell unceasingly in the north throughout this period.

The German objectives were Medjez and Béja, both of which they failed to attain. During their attacks they lost 2,200 German prisoners between 26th February and 24th March. But they had put 5 Corps into a difficult position, which demanded early righting.

THIRD PHASE.—THE OFFENSIVE PERIOD.

With the enemy at Djebel Abiod, on 18th March I ordered 5 Corps that there must be no further withdrawal whatever: that immediate preparations must be made to use 46 Division to drive back the enemy at least to Sedjenane-Cap Serrat in the north, and if possible to restore in its entirety our former position there, east of El Aouana: thereafter that the road Béja-Medjez and Medjez area itself must be completely freed from enemy domination by the recapture of the hilly country up to the Djebel el Ang and Heidous: and that plans were to be prepared at once for the capture of the high ground west of the Sebkrét el Koutzia north of Bou Arada. These were all essential preliminaries to the launching of a major assault towards Tunis and Bizerta. To help 5 Corps I placed 1 Parachute Brigade, the Corps Franc and one Tabor of French Goumiers under their orders.

The country in the region Djebel Abiod-Sedjenane-Cap Serrat is extremely difficult; mountains strewn with boulders and covered with a dense scrub up to eight feet high, limiting visibility often to a few feet and often requiring axes and knives to cut a path through country where tracks are few and bad.

The attack of 46 Division and attached troops under Major-General H. Freeman-Attwood was begun in the darkness early on 28th March, with heavy artillery support from the artillery of two divisions plus army resources. At the same time the rain began again with redoubled violence and continued almost without pause for a week. Despite this 36 Brigade, 138 Brigade, 1 Parachute Brigade, the Corps Franc and the Tabor all reached their first objectives, taking over 750 prisoners. By a double flanking movement directed towards the rear of the enemy positions Sedjenane was retaken on the 30th March; Cap Serrat, El Aouana and the hills to north and south on the 31st. Pack-mule transport had to be employed on a large scale. An advance of some eighteen miles was made in four days, with a total of over 850 prisoners, half German, half Italian.

The Germans had taken three weeks to capture the same area, and a captured order of the day, issued by Major-General Manteuffel after reaching Abiod, showed that he was highly pleased with that result.

46 Division had now been continuously in heavy fighting since 26th February, had suffered much, absorbed large replacement drafts while still in close contact with the enemy and had then made this successful and swift counter-attack.

As all objectives had been reached a halt was called, and 5 Corps at once began preparations for the attack to clear the Béja-Medjez road.