

78 Division, under Major-General V. Eveleigh, undertook the task, again supported by heavy artillery concentrations throughout the whole operation.

This mountain land is a vast tract of country, every hill in which is large enough to swallow up a brigade of infantry, where consolidation on the rocky slopes is very difficult, in which tanks can only operate in small numbers, where movement of guns and vehicles is very restricted, and where the division had to rely on pack mules for its supplies and to carry wireless telegraphy sets, tools and mortars.

The general impression is one of wide spaciousness—a kind of Dartmoor or Central Sutherlandshire, but with deeper valleys and steeper hills.

In the early darkness of 7th April 78 Division started its attack north of Oued Zarga, gaining all objectives and taking over 400 prisoners, all German. For the next nine days, until 16th April, 78 Division methodically advanced on a front of about 10 miles to an ultimate depth of 10 miles, taking in turn each key position—the Mahdi, Hills 512, 667, Djebel el Ang, Tanngoucha and the mountain villages of Toukabeur, Chaouach and Heidous—with concentrated artillery fire and splendidly helped by the Royal Air Force with close support bombing. But it was chiefly an infantry battle, fought by units who had been in continuous contact with the enemy without a break since November, 1942. In all, during these nine days 1,080 German prisoners were captured in a series of extremely fierce hand to hand fights, including much night work:

The performance of the Churchill tanks of 25 Army Tank Brigade under Brigadier R. H. Maxwell was very good: mechanically they stood well up to very heavy strain, while the courage and initiative shown by the crews were admirable. Though the tactical handling in close co-operation with infantry was at times at fault.

I consider the 78 Division deserves high praise for as tough and prolonged a bit of fighting as has ever been undertaken by the British soldier.

In close conjunction with 78 Division, 4 Division pressed the enemy hard to the north of Hunt's Gap, and by 14th April had reached the hills just south-west of Sidi Nsir after much hard fighting and against many counter-attacks. This was the first appearance of 4 Division in action.

5 Corps had now secured positions which completely freed Medjez and enabled me to begin dumping and other preparations for a large-scale attack in that area, while in the north I had cleared the vital lateral road and had re-established my advanced troops in positions suitable as bases for a further advance, and in time to hand these positions over to United States 2 Corps, which now started arriving from the far south—being transferred from the Gafsa-Maknassy area by order of 18 Army Group.

On 18th April United States 2 Corps (under Lieutenant-General O. N. Bradley) relieved 4 and 46 Divisions of 5 Corps and assumed command of the area north of the line Oued Zarga - Djebel Lanserine - Tebourba, having under command United States 1 and 9 Infantry Divisions, with a few days later United States 34 Infantry Division and 1 Armoured Division.

On 20th April I moved Main First Army Headquarters to near Thibar.

Meanwhile, further south, 9 Corps (consisting of 6 Armoured Division, 34 U.S. Division, 128 Infantry Brigade Group from 46 Division and Corps Artillery, &c., under Lieutenant-General J. T. Crocker, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.), had on 8th April started an attack under orders of 18 Army Group to break through the German flank defences at Pichon-Fondouk, capture Kairouan and strike the Axis forces retreating in front of Eighth Army.

I ordered French 19 Corps to aid this attack on the north by seizing the Djebel Ousselat and the ridge of the Eastern Dorsale. This they did with the greatest élan, taking several hundred prisoners. By 18th April the enemy had withdrawn northwards, and French 19 Corps was holding the line Karachoum-Djebel Edjehaf-west of Djebel Mansour, in touch with patrols of Eighth Army on the right. During this fighting General Welwert, commanding the French Constantine Division was killed.

THE FINAL OFFENSIVE, 22ND APRIL-13TH MAY.

On 12th April I was ordered by General Alexander to prepare a large-scale offensive to capture Tunis and also to co-operate with United States 2 Corps in the capture of Bizerta, the target date being 22nd April. For this attack 9 Corps was placed under my orders, together with 1 British Armoured Division from Eighth Army.

United States 2 Corps remained under 18 Army Group, but I was made responsible for co-ordinating its action in the attack with that of First Army, and for issuing all the necessary orders and instructions direct. Eighth Army was also to attack on 20th April at Enfidaville, in order to draw enemy forces off First Army.

Enemy resistance was still formidable and he held strong positions. These had to be overcome and his strength exhausted before a real break through could be effected.

Although I had a big total superiority in numbers and material, a limiting factor was the division of my army (including 2 U.S. Corps) into three national sectors; this naturally restricted the full freedom of movement of reserves which otherwise I would have enjoyed with a homogeneous army.

There are three entrances into the Tunis plain:—

In the south—the Bou Arada gap. This was blocked by the strongly held Pont du Fahs defile and the hills on the southern edge of the Bou Arada valley were in enemy hands.

In the centre—across the Goubellat plain. There is a belt of broken country from north-east of the Sebket el Kourzia to Ksar Tyr which blocks the eastern exits from the plain and is easily defended against tanks. But this area was weakly held by the enemy.

An essential preliminary to the use of either of the above passages is to capture the high ground west of the Sebket el Kourzia.

In the north—along the axis Medjez-Massicault. This is the most direct way and the best tank country. But it was protected by very strong enemy positions which barred the way and prevented deployment of large forces across the River Medjerda. I expected very heavy fighting here before I could break through.