distance. This would impose a heavy strain on a force based on Tripoli, over two hundred miles from Mareth and three hundred miles from the next port at Sfax. I had already discussed this point with General Montgomery. In view of the time available I had decided to employ II United States Corps in a limited operation on the extreme right of my line in Tunisia; the objects of this were to restore confidence after the earlier setbacks by a carefully planned successful operation, to exert pressure on the right rear of the enemy defending the Mareth positions, and to be ready to open an alternative line of supply for Eighth Army after they had broken through the Gabes Gap. I planned, therefore, that II Corps, now commanded by General Patton, who had relieved General Fredendall, should attack Gafsa on or about 15th March with 1 Armoured and 1 Infantry Divisions. They would secure firm possession of Gafsa and build up there a dump of petrol for the use of Eighth Army, subsequently exploiting down the Gabes road and towards the Maknassy defile in order to draw the enemy's attention and provoke counter-attack. General Patton was to try to capture the El Guettar defile, south-east of Gafsa, but would not operate any strong forces beyond that until further orders. The thrust against the Maknassy defile was in the initial phase to be of a secondary and subsidiary nature

The American operations against Gafsa were delayed in starting by very heavy rain which bogged down their tracked vehicles, but 1 Armoured Division moved off at first light on the 16th. There was practically no enemy opposition and next day 1 Infantry Division entered the town, which had been evacuated by the Italian garrison; a German reconnaissance unit forming the rearguard contented itself with keeping our troops under observation. A Regimental Combat Team from 1 Infantry Division pushed on through the town and occupied the high ground six miles to the south-east, sending patrols towards El Guettar. These showed that, as we had expected, the enemy intended to hold the defile there. 1 Armoured Division, though again seriously delayed by the state of the ground, moved off down the Maknassy road and by nightfall had reached a point twenty miles east of Gafsa against opposition from the air and artillery fire only. The weather continued exceptionally bad on the 18th but General Patton was able to establish himself in El Guettar village and make contact with the enemy positions in the defile to the east of it.

On the Eighth Army front preliminary operations to drive in the enemy's outpost positions were carried out on the nights of 16th and 17th March; they were generally successful at small cost, except for an operation by 201 Guards Brigade which suffered fairly heavy casualties on the first night when it became involved in an enemy minefield. On 19th March the New Zealand Corps, with twenty-seven thousand men and two hundred tanks, started on its flanking move from south of Foum Tatahouine and by nightfall on 20th March was only a few miles short of the gap between Gebel Tebaga and Gebel Melab; General Montgomery had decided not to attempt concealment, in the hope of drawing enemy attention from 30 Corps' attack. This was scheduled for the night of the 20th. Enemy dispositions at that time were as follows. The north-eastern end of the Mareth line was held by XX Corps with under command the Young Fascists and Trieste Divisions and the German 90 Light Division. The south-western end, where the Matmata foothills begin, was under XXI Corps with the Spezia, Pistoia and 164 Light Divisions. 15 Panzer Division was held in immediate reserve for this part of the front. 21 Panzer Division was also in reserve, but further back, in order to be available, if necessary, for the defence of the Tebaga—Gebel Melab gap, the infantry holding this position was provided by the Saharan Group under General Mannerini, reinforced by various units from Italian divisions destroyed at El Alamein. 10 Panzer Division, which had withdrawn to central Tunisia after the battle of Medenine, was moving south at this time, but it was not destined for the Mareth front; instead it went to the Gafsa—Gabes road to oppose II Corps.

The main attack by 30 Corps began at 2230 hours on 20th March when 50 Division advanced to the assault under cover of very heavy artillery fire and following an air bombardment. The Wadi Zigzaou, which ran in front of the enemy's positions in this sector, was very deep and steep-sided and the bottom was everywhere muddy and in some places had standing water in it. It resembled, in fact, the fosse of an old-fashioned fortress and our troops advanced to the assault carrying fascines and scaling-ladders as though at the storm of Badajoz. The enemy's fire, both frontal and enfilade, was very heavy and it was only by the greatest dash and courage that our advanced troops succeeded in crossing the wadi and establishing themselves on the far bank. Three of the powerful enemy strongpoints were captured and the infantry were firmly established. Unfortunately it was proving impossible to reinforce them, for the wadi which they had crossed on foot was quite impassable for wheels and almost impassable for tanks. A few of the supporting "Valentines" managed to get across but none of the anti-tank guns could be brought forward. A heavy downfall of rain on the 22nd added to our difficulties. As a result, when the enemy in the afternoon of 22nd March put in a heavy counter-attack, using the whole of 15 Panzer Division and part of 90 Light, our position became untenable. 50 Division bridgehead was dangerously narrowed down and on the night of the 23rd our troops fell back once more, on orders, across the Wadi Zigzaou, under cover of artillery fire.

The original plan for PUGILIST had therefore to be abandoned but General Montgomery was quick to take advantage of the alternative which was open to him. By the evening of the 22nd, when it was obvious that our right hand thrust could make no further progress, General Freyberg's forces were already engaged with the enemy west of the Gebel Melab and had broken through one line of minefields in an attack the previous night. The enemy had already begun to move reinforcements to this area, including 164 Division from the western end of the Mareth line, together with some Italians, and 21 Panzer Division from Army Group reserve. General Montgomery therefore decided to call off his frontal attack and reinforce his outflanking move with 10 Corps Headquarters and 1 Armoured Division. They were to move off after dusk on 23rd March