

THE BLOODY ROAD TO TUNIS

**Destruction of the Axis Forces in North Africa,
November 1942-May 1943**

DAVID ROLF

Foreword by Major-General Julian Thompson



The Bloody Road to Tunis

For Mary and Launa

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in North Africa:
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With a Foreword by
Major-General Julian Thompson



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The author also wishes to place on record his appreciation of the work of John Richards, who drew the maps, and of Grace Horton, who compiled the index.

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Foreword

The Tunisian campaign of 1942–43 failed to meet the objectives originally set for it by the Allies: to take Tunis by Christmas 1942, and trap Rommel in Libya. Instead, it took six months of some of the bloodiest fighting experienced by the Western Allies in the Second World War, before General Sir Harold Alexander could signal to Winston Churchill: 'It is my duty to report that the Tunisian campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores.'

In his aptly titled *The Bloody Road to Tunis*, David Rolf makes it clear why the earlier hopes for quick victory were dashed. Perhaps the most fundamental error committed by the Allied planners, not for the first nor last time in the Second World War, was underestimating the Germans' speed of reaction – in this case to the combined US and British invasion of North Africa on 8 November 1942. A distinguished British soldier with much battle experience said of another battle, in another theatre: 'Time and again, however empty of Germans and peaceful the scene appeared to be, if you touched them in an area important to them, their reaction was swift and violent.' He was referring to the astonishing ability of the German forces, the Army especially, regardless of the punishment they might have taken, to be 'quicker on the draw', in the tactical and operational sense than most of their opponents. Nowhere was this more brilliantly demonstrated than in their lightning reinforcement of Tunisia by air and sea, and the ruthlessness with which they dealt with the French, snuffing out any attempts at resistance; few and feeble though these were under a dithering and divided leadership.

David Rolf has meticulously researched both Allied and German documents in order to present the reader with a balanced picture of the campaign. His clear exposition of the terrain is excellent, an aspect that is too often ignored, or brushed over, by authors of works of military history. The logistic difficulties faced by both sides are also given due weight, again important for the effect this was to have on the manner in which each side was to handle the campaign.

Although not sub-titled as a study in command, the author has provided many fascinating insights into this aspect at all levels, from Eisenhower, the Allied commander-in-chief, to junior non-commissioned officers. For me this is one of the most compelling features of the book. Many of the vivid passages which relate the experiences of commanders, especially at the lower level, are taken from unpublished sources in Britain, the United States and Germany.

There have of course been many books in which Eisenhower's character and military genius, or lack of it, have been discussed. Comment has ranged from uncritical hero-worship to denigration. When one examines Eisenhower's unremarkable military record, including a total lack of warfighting experience, it

is a tribute to the perspicacity of General Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, that he summoned him to his staff in Washington immediately after America entered the war. Eisenhower's appointment as Commanding General of all American forces in the European Theater of Operations followed a few months later. Marshall was not infallible, as demonstrated by the early fall from grace of some of his other selections for high command when exposed to the crucible of battle, including Fredendall in Tunisia and Lucas in Italy. But Marshall's choice of Eisenhower was inspired. David Rolf's discussion of Eisenhower's faults and strengths is even-handed and perceptive. A generalissimo rather than a general, a committee chairman of genius, more than any other commander, Eisenhower was responsible for providing the glue which held together the US and British forces first in North Africa and later in Europe. As a supreme commander, the post he was eventually, in Alanbrooke's words, pushed 'up into', he excelled. As a field commander he was not a success — as events would show when he assumed personal command of all land operations in North-West Europe. This failing was evident early in the Tunisian campaign. Responsibility for the American disaster at Kasserine ultimately rests with Eisenhower for sanctioning, by default, the thinly spread deployment of the US II Corps. After a personal visit before the German attack at Kasserine, he expressed dismay at the dispositions, but did nothing, possibly lacking the experience to correct the flaws in the layout, and the confidence to 'grip' and 'sort out' the commanders responsible.

Commanders often make mistakes in their first battle, and those that remain in post and are promoted, are the ones who have learned from their mistakes, while avoiding being sacked, killed or being taken prisoner. The Americans had a great deal of learning to do in a very short space of time, and one of the consequences of the hard and protracted fighting in North Africa was to 'blood' the US Army. As battle pitilessly seeks out the weaknesses in human beings, so it finds the flaws and cracks in military organisations. Among those thus exposed were poor training, faulty tactics, inept leadership at all levels, and perhaps above all lack of what Napoleon called 'the first quality of a soldier: fortitude in enduring fatigue and hardship'. American soldiers, despite being the products of a comfortable society, commanded by officers with little or no battle experience, learned very quickly indeed. The basis for the performance of battle-hardened outfits such as the 1st Infantry Division ('The Big Red One') in Europe was laid in the misery of the wet, cold, scrub-covered mountains of Tunisia, fighting crack German formations.

The British were not immune to making mistakes either, with less excuse. Anderson, the commander of British First Army, which initially included the US II Corps, was uninspiring, slow, and tactless. With greater drive, and more imaginative use of the parachute troops at his disposal, both British and American, the Allies might, just, have reached Tunis before the German build-up stopped the advance in its tracks, leading to the grinding slog that ensued.

Alexander was brought in from his post as Commander-in-Chief Middle East to take charge of the mess as deputy C-in-C to Eisenhower. He ended up taking command of British First and Eighth Armies with all American and French ground

The Bloody Road to Tunis

forces under his newly formed 18th Army Group. Although his arrival brought considerable improvement on the muddle he inherited, the Allied armies in North Africa still suffered from a lack of firm control and direction from the top.

David Rolf also pays due regard to the indispensable contribution of the air forces and navies to Allied success in the campaign, and the daring, but ultimately fruitless, efforts by German and Italian air and sea transports to supply the Axis armies. He quotes the ferocious signal from Admiral Cunningham, the Allied Naval Force commander, to his ships attacking the vessels attempting to evacuate the Axis troops; 'Sink, burn and destroy. Let nothing pass.' For now was Cunningham's opportunity to exact revenge for the agony of the Royal Navy and British Army during the evacuation of Greece and Crete two years earlier under the lash of the Luftwaffe.

Axis prisoners taken at the end of the Tunisian campaign outnumbered those at Stalingrad earlier in the year. It was a crushing defeat for Hitler and Mussolini. There are those who argue that the invasion of North Africa and subsequent campaign were unnecessary. It is hard to see how Montgomery could have cleared the North African coast single-handed, without the pressure exerted on the Axis forces by the opening up of another front. The experience gained in the landings, the first Allied combined operation of such magnitude, was to be invaluable in those that followed; as were the formulation and testing under battle conditions of all the arrangements and organisation for staffing and commanding a huge military enterprise involving the armed forces of two nations. Finally, and it cannot be said too often, the foundations of the dash and spirit that the US Army was to show in Sicily, Italy, France and Germany, were laid on the bloody road to Tunis.

Julian Thompson

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Preface

The struggle for Tunisia was a furnace in which British and Americans, from the top brass to the humblest soldier, learned how to live, fight and die together. To discover how the Allied fighting machine was forged, from the tentative floundering of the British First Army and US II Corps in the mud and rain of northern Tunisia to Montgomery's Eighth Army, far away in the burning sands of Libya, I have turned not only to official papers but especially to the letters, diaries and accounts of men who were there. They experienced the fighting at first-hand or bore the enormous stress of directing battles in which one false move could bring disaster.

In doing so I have been mindful of a remark made by General T.J. Conway who, as a young man, fought in Tunisia: 'You know, one of the matters seems to me not really discussed... [in] unit histories or the history of war, is again the question of personality... I think it's a core element which again, is largely neglected.' I hope this is something fully brought out in these pages. Time and again, I have been struck by the good humour, comradeship and limitless courage of the troops, irrespective of nationality, who were caught up in the struggle. Their common humanity lit up the sombre events which this book relates.

While researching archive collections in Britain, America and Germany, I have received much help and assistance from many people. In particular, Jürgen Seibel again accompanied me to the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv where his fluency in English and German enabled me to work quickly and efficiently through the German documents. He also translated other material into English, read part of my manuscript, and made a number of important comments. Angie Gibbs also kindly helped with some of the early research and commented perceptively on several draft chapters.

In London, Philip Reed, formerly Deputy Keeper of Documents at the Imperial War Museum and now Curator of the Cabinet War Rooms, was once more outstandingly helpful in directing me to the Museum's extensive manuscript collections. I am grateful also to Roderick Suddaby, Keeper of Documents, and Conrad Wood of the Museum's Department of Sound Recordings, who provided me with invaluable guidance.

At the Churchill Archives Centre, Elizabeth Bennett and her staff were unfailingly helpful, as was Patricia Methven and staff at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives. My frequent requests for information when working at the Public Record Office and libraries of the Universities of Cambridge and Birmingham invariably met with professionalism and courtesy. I am the fortunate recipient of an Honorary Research Fellowship in the Department of Modern History at the University of Birmingham and a Research Associateship at

Preface

University College, Worcester. Both have offered me valuable opportunities to discuss my research with fellow historians.

In the United States I enjoyed researching in the Eisenhower Library and was particularly helped by Herb Pankratz. I also appreciated working at the George C. Marshall Research Library, where my task was made much easier by the fact that, exceptionally, I was allowed to read and photocopy sections of the Marshall Papers which at that time were in process of cataloguing and publication.

Returning to Washington, I was a regular visitor to the US National Archives at Suitland, MD (relocated in 1993 to Archive II at College Park, MD), where staff did their best with somewhat inadequate resources to guide me through the complexities of its filing system. In contrast, the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, provided superb working conditions and I was particularly grateful to staff there for persisting until they secured access for me to the Patton Papers. Finally, my visit to the United States Army Military History Institute was rewarded by a splendid range of papers and associated material. The Archivist-Historian, Dr. Richard J. Sommers, introduced me to David A. Keough who possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of the files I found most useful and Pamela Cheney also went out of her way to be helpful.

In staying in various places I met with a great deal of kindness from many people. With his considerable knowledge of the various archives, Samuel W. Mitcham was a friendly guide and sent me a copy of a German manuscript I was unable to obtain. Edward L. Field and I discussed common interests in military history and he located for me a copy of 1st Armored Division's *Battle History*.

I benefited considerably from advice offered by Carlo D'Este when I met him in London before visiting the US archives. Professor Neville Brown, now a Senior Research Associate in the University of Oxford and Associate Fellow of OCEES, was a supportive colleague – particularly when I was away from my University duties at Birmingham – and Colonel R.J. Gibson, who served with 4th Indian Division in World War II, has been immensely encouraging as well as providing insights from his own experiences.

My thanks are also due to my publisher, Lionel Leventhal, and my editors, Donald Sommerville and Catherine Stuart, who saved me from many inadvertent mistakes. Nevertheless, for such omissions and mistakes that still remain, I am solely responsible.

Dr Mark Thurston assisted with technical aspects of preparing a final manuscript, while my wife and daughter have had to put up with my absences when I have been exploring various archives. I hope they think it has all been worthwhile.

Note on Language

British and American spellings have been maintained, especially in direct quotations and official titles. Thus, British 7th Armoured Division but US 1st Armored Division; British honour but US Medal of Honor and so on.

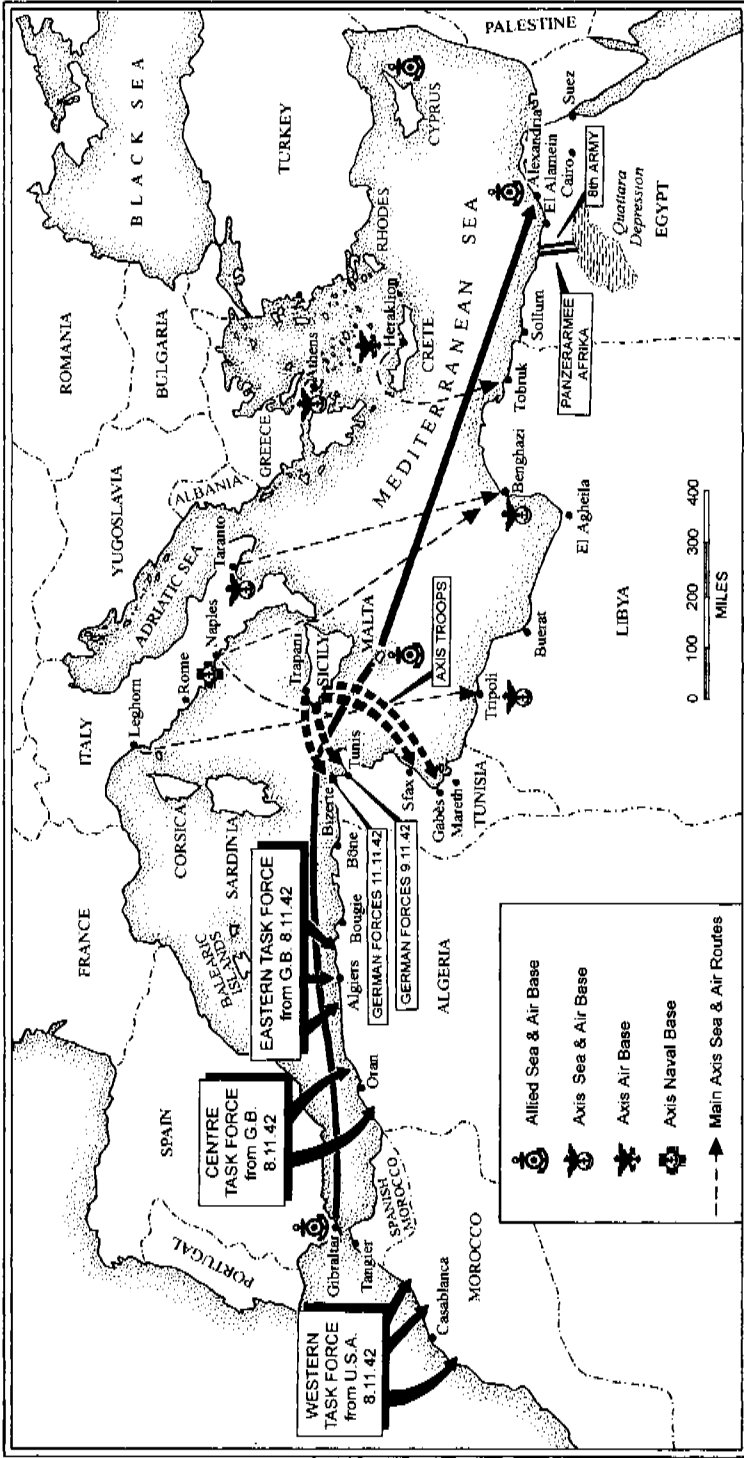
PART ONE

Armour for Tunis!

‘Things go well as a whole – but we are not moving fast enough; Tunis is anyone’s who cares to walk in, but the Huns are beating us in the race...’

Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, naval commander for Operation Torch, to his deputy, Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, mid-November 1942.

Quoted in Chalmers, *Full Cycle*, p.151.



Battle Forces in North Africa and Lines of Supply and Communication
November 1942

Chapter 1

Fight Like Hell

‘This is the greatest setback for German arms since 1918. The Americans will take Rommel in the rear, and we shall be expelled from Africa.’

General von Wulsh, head of the German Armistice Commission, to General Auguste Nogues, Resident-General of French Morocco at Rabat, shortly after sunrise on 8 November 1942.¹

The American colonel’s last-minute instructions had been brief and to the point: ‘I want you men to hit that dock hard,’ he said, ‘then light out like stripy-arsed baboons up the wharf until you can get some cover. Then fight like hell.’²

Among the detachment of the 135th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) landing from HMS *Broke* at Algiers harbour in the early hours of 8 November 1942, was Pfc Harold Cullum. Brought all the way from Pennsylvania and among the first to get ashore, his baptism of fire was violently cut short by two bullets, the first of which blasted a hole in his stomach and the second in his arm. Sprinkling sulphanimide powder onto the gaping wound where chunks of clothing and equipment had been driven deep into the flesh, he wrapped his shattered arm in a field dressing and, when the recall whistle blew, attempted to crawl back to his ship. Eventually taken prisoner, he ended up in a French hospital where expert attention saved his life.

Yet it was French gunfire which had wounded him in the first place. The British and Americans, in the massive gamble that they had code-named Operation Torch, had brought more than 107,000 men across the oceans to the shores of North Africa in two mighty armadas, and in three simultaneous landings placed them ashore at Algiers, Oran and Casablanca.

At Casablanca and Oran, the French resisted this invasion of their colonial territory: ill-fated attacks on Algiers and Oran harbours were bloodily repulsed; and parachute drops by Colonel William C. Bentley’s 2nd Battalion, 503rd US Parachute Infantry Regiment, to secure airfields at Tafaraoui and La Senia, south of Oran, turned into near-disaster. Nevertheless, the scale and speed of the Allied invasion ensured the narrow success of their great venture, though much

remained to be done to bring together warring French factions. One was led by General Henri Giraud, who had escaped from German prison camps in two world wars, and claimed imperiously that he could rally all the French in North Africa to the Allied side – the other by Amiral de la Flotte Jean François Darlan.

Operation Torch came into being principally because the two most powerful men in the Alliance, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, wanted it. Churchill had clear, long-term, objectives which he put forward with his customary vigour. An assault in North Africa would remove the Germans and Italians from the region, help to secure critical British supply lines through the Mediterranean and build a base from which Allied troops could springboard their way into southern Europe.³ Roosevelt, who had promised Stalin that a 'Second Front' against Nazi Germany would be opened in 1942, had been caught on the point of this guarantee. Unwilling to abandon the British in their hour of need, for once during the war the President overrode the advice of his own Joint Chiefs of Staff, settling for an assault in the Mediterranean which Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff Committee had called for time and again.⁴

In the Mediterranean, Germany was locked in a struggle not of her own making. Against the unanimous opposition of his generals, Benito Mussolini committed his forces to a desert war in September 1940, despite the unpreparedness of the army, which had few motorised vehicles, modern artillery or tanks, and a limited industrial power-base incapable of remedying these deficiencies or provisioning his troops.⁵ The arrival of German forces in North Africa in the spring of 1941 was conclusive proof of the failure of Mussolini's hopes of a cheap triumph. They arrived not to pursue a particular military objective, nor as part of a broad strategic plan, but simply to support the Italians, check the British advance to Tripoli and possibly regain Cyrenaica.

The German forces in Africa were placed under control of *Comando Supremo* (Italian Supreme Command) while Hitler's headquarters, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW or High Command of the Armed Forces), initially limited itself to advice and supplies. As German involvement increased, however, Feldmarschall der Luftwaffe Albrecht Kesselring left von Bock's Army Group Centre on the Eastern Front and flew to Rome in November 1941 where he was appointed *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (OB Süd or C-in-C South).

Kesselring was ideally suited to his task. Known as 'Smiling Albert' from his habitual grin and highly optimistic temperament, he had been Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe in 1936–37. In creating a close working relationship with the heads of the Italian armed forces he came across an old friend, General Rinso Corso Fougier, of *Superareo* (Italian Air Force High Command), who, according to Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, was 'a real pilot, not a balloon officer.' The other Italian armed forces' chiefs were Marshal Ugo Cavallero, Chief of the General Staff, and Admiral Arturo Riccardi of the *Supermarina* (Naval High Command). A man of immense organizational and administrative abilities, Cavallero was undoubtedly pro-German; indeed, he co-

operated to such an extent that his own position became endangered. He was replaced by General Vittorio Ambrosio in February 1943, which 'produced joy among Italians and dissatisfaction among the Germans.'⁶

In the struggle for North Africa only the Luftwaffe was clearly and unequivocally under *OB Süd* control. Other than this, there were overlapping German-Italian commands which resulted in Kesselring taking orders from the *OKW* in some matters and from *Comando Supremo* in others. Only his strong personality held the ramshackle organization together and resolved some of the tensions arising from these confused relationships. His HQ moved from Taormina in Sicily to Frascati near Rome in October 1942, so that by his presence Kesselring could exert a stronger influence on *Comando Supremo* over German supply problems.⁷

Kesselring's ambiguous command relationships were compounded by the lack of consistent leadership from inside *OKW*, as Hitler increasingly overrode his General Staff's advice and insisted on more and more 'Führer decisions' in the face of setbacks in Russia and elsewhere. The invasion of North Africa therefore hit the German High Command at a critical moment.⁸

The first danger was averted by General Walter Warlimont, Deputy Chief of the *OKW* Operations Staff, and Kesselring, whose frantic staff work ensured that Hitler's initial response to the landings was speedily translated into the formation of a bridgehead in Tunis and occupation of Vichy France. At 0700 hours on 11 November 1942, ten divisions of the German First Army and Army Group *Felber* crossed the demarcation line between German-occupied northern France and the unoccupied territory to the south which had been governed until then by the puppet Vichy regime.⁹ At the same time, two Italian divisions from Sardinia landed on Corsica and units of the Italian Fourth Army marched into the French Riviera. To the surprise of Hitler's HQ, there was virtually no resistance.

In Algiers the French were shocked by the pitiless way in which the Führer discarded the armistice of 1940. Even so, they could not reconcile their differences. Admiral Darlan ordered the French commanders in Tunisia to resist the Germans, countermanded his order and then reinstated it. At Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ), Gibraltar, the Commander-in-Chief, Lieutenant-General Dwight D. Eisenhower, raged over the venomous squabbling and was in such a fury 'that I sometimes wish I could do a little throat-cutting myself.'¹⁰

Eisenhower's appointment as C-in-C had been a surprising one. He had graduated from West Point in 1915, without particular distinction, and was posted to the 19th US Infantry Regiment at Fort Sam Houston on the outskirts of San Antonio. Despite strenuous efforts, he failed to be listed for overseas duty when America entered the Great War in 1917 and remained labelled as no more than a useful trainer of troops and desk officer: 'I had missed the boat,' he later remarked.¹¹

During the inter-war period he served under various powerful leaders in an

effort to avoid a career dead-end, imbibing much of the politics and bureaucratic niceties characterising the higher forms of military life. Only later, under the tutelage of Roosevelt's US Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, did his career really blossom. Marshall brought Eisenhower to the War Department in December 1941, and thereafter there remained a close personal link between the two. Eisenhower was always the junior in rank, but became the best-known US military leader of the war, satisfying the public's craving for an all-American war hero. In the autumn of 1942, however, the new C-in-C was virtually unknown outside military circles. He had no combat experience and was viewed with baffled scepticism by the British who could not understand how a man could be produced from comparative obscurity to hold the highest command.¹²

Eisenhower proved to be dutiful to a marked degree, with great application to the task in hand, a keen eye for detail and a ruthless streak which implied superlative determination. He could also be impatient and brutally abrupt with those whom he discarded.¹³ His public character, however, was entirely different. It was that of a friendly and relaxed small-town American, his speech peppered with homespun phrases reflecting his roots deep in his native Abilene soil. Eisenhower was adept moreover at promoting this image to the British and American publicity machines which were more than happy to play along.¹⁴ He was in addition a peerless chairman of inter-Allied committees, arbitrating smoothly between rival plans.¹⁵ No visionary, nevertheless he saw clearly that it was vital for American and British staffs, and the troops they ultimately commanded, to work together at all levels.

Eisenhower's deputy, Major-General Mark W. Clark, had to bear the brunt of French wrangling at Algiers. Long-limbed, beak-nosed and intensely, disagreeably ambitious, he eventually lost his temper and threatened the squabbling leaders with immediate custody and the establishment of military government. This settled matters and when Eisenhower arrived he had only to endorse the agreement which had been reached. Having now definitely joined the Allied side, Admiral Darlan was to head the civil and political government of North Africa, Giraud to be C-in-C of all French forces and General Alphonse Juin to command a reinforced French volunteer army fighting alongside the Allies; Noguès (French Morocco) and Chatel (Algeria) would retain their Resident-General posts.

Meanwhile, at *OB Süd* HQ it was not yet clear whether the German High Command planned to hold Tunisia at all costs or simply carry out a limited engagement in order to defend Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel's lines of communication in the Western Desert and prevent a disastrous collapse of Italian morale.¹⁶ The Allies for their part intended to squeeze Rommel's forces in a trap between Eighth Army, now advancing from Egypt through Tripolitania, and First Army operating from Tunisia.

From the outset, however, Allied planning had been characterised by indecision; the Americans, anxious about possible hostile reactions from the Spanish dictator, General Francisco Franco, worried about opposition from Vichy

France and fearful of a German move against Gibraltar which might close the Strait and cause havoc for the Allies, proposed to consolidate their positions in French Morocco for about three months before advancing eastwards.

British planners went for a bolder design. They had insisted on a deep strike into the Mediterranean itself, at Algiers, and, in conjunction with the Eighth Army sweeping in from the west, a swift move on Tunis before the enemy could effect a bridgehead there. Indeed, Lieutenant-General Kenneth Anderson, given the task of pushing eastwards once the Allies landed in North Africa, wanted an early attack on Tunis and even suggested that US aircraft land there on the morning of the Torch assault – though even if the bluff worked the crews would, in all probability, be taken prisoner. As the British correctly predicted, once firmly established, with their shorter lines of communication and land-based air power, the Axis forces would be difficult to prise out.

Early on the morning of 9 November 1942, two German officers, Hauptmann Schürmeyer and Hauptmann Behlau, arrived in Tunis. Under the pretext of helping the French resist the Allied invasion they discussed defence of the city with the Resident-General in Tunisia, Vice-Admiral Jean-Pierre Estèva – ‘an old gentleman with a white goatee’ – the *Commandant Supérieur des Troupes de Tunisie*, General Georges Barré, and the local French air force commander, General Péquin. They had been ordered by the head of the Vichy Government, Pierre Laval, to co-operate with the Germans.

While these discussions were taking place, Kesselring ordered one of Göring’s intimate friends and a former fighter pilot in the First World War, Generaloberst Bruno Loezer, commanding Fliegerkorps II from Taormina in Sicily, to fly fighters and Stukas across and seize the airfield at El Aouina (Tunis). Accordingly he sent elements of the 53rd Fighter Squadron and transport aircraft, carrying supplies of fuel, oil and light flak guns. Colonel Geradot, the commander of the airfield, narrowly escaped and hastened by air to the British First Army’s command post, established that day at the Hotel Albert in Algiers. He brought discomfiting news that 40 German bombers already sat on the tarmac at Tunis.¹⁷

The fiction that these forces were being invited to aid the French was maintained by sending Oberstleutnant Harlinghausen of Fliegerkorps II to Tunis to see Estèva.¹⁸ Believing the French offered no opposition, he alerted *OB Süd* and, next day, a fighter group of Me-109s and Kesselring’s *Wachkompanie* (personal HQ Company) carried in gliders towed behind Ju-88s, were on their way from Sicily.¹⁹ As each aircraft taxied to a halt at Tunis, it was covered by the guns of a French armoured reconnaissance car. For a while, matters were in the balance until transport planes brought in the 5th Fallschirmjäger (Parachute) Regiment. Scrambling out, a company set up its anti-tank weapons and machine-guns and trained them on the armoured cars. The French withdrew to the outer perimeter and an uneasy peace settled over the airfield.

During this time, Loezer was again telephoned by Kesselring who told him that Barré and Estèva were communicating with the Allies via a cable linking Tunis to

Malta and by a secret radio operating on the roof of the US Consulate. Loezer was told to see that no further messages were transmitted. Arriving at Tunis, Loezer found the troops who had just flown in still organizing themselves. The resident German Armistice Commissioner warned Loezer that the situation was exceedingly delicate and it was with 'mixed feelings' that Loezer passed through French troops on his way into the city. 'The men made a good soldierly impression,' he wrote. 'I saw no officers. Machine guns and anti-tank weapons were trained on the airfield.'²⁰ He was met by Barré's representative, frostily polite, who could give no assurances about French co-operation. Estèva was more encouraging, assuring Loezer he had received instructions from Vichy and would do everything to help, on the understanding that the Germans were to be restricted to airfields at Tunis and Bizerte (Bizerta). French forces had orders to shoot if they strayed elsewhere.²¹

Loezer, satisfied with what he had seen and heard, made his way back to the airfield. Not a man moved to detain him though this would have been simple enough, as he observed: 'There can be little doubt that the small air forces with their planes on the ground would have been easy prey for the French troops in readiness there if they had attacked in this situation.'²²

The same was true at Bizerte airfield, occupied on 11 November, without a shot being fired, by a single Ju-88 and two sections of the *Ahrendt* parachute engineering column. Again the French stood off and allowed the Germans to reinforce their bridgehead.

'The French behaviour is inexplicable,' complained Brigadier Haydon vice-chief of the Combined Operations staff at Gibraltar, 'The Germans, Italians and Japs appear welcome in any French possession! We who were their Allies and who are fighting for their ends as well as our own, are resisted at every turn. It is high time they were called upon to declare themselves one way or another.'²³ But the chronic indecision which beset the French leaders ensured this would not happen. 'I thought there would be some gesture of opposition, at least for the honour of the flag,' commented a surprised Ciano.²⁴ Its absence provided a window of opportunity for the Germans in Tunisia, which they were quick to exploit, in turn condemning the Allies to a costly and extended campaign.

Notes to Chapter 1

- ¹ Recounted by Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Volume 2, *Operations in North African Waters, October 1942 – June 1943*, p.65.
- ² MacVane, *War and Diplomacy in North Africa*, p. 49. MacVane was an accredited war correspondent for the American National Broadcasting Corporation.
- ³ Mayer, 'The Decision to Invade North Africa (Torch) (1942)', in Greenfield ed., *Command Decisions*, p. 131. For the full background see also Matloff and Snell, *United States Army in World War II: Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1941–1942*, Chaps. VIII & XII–XIII; also Matthew Jones, *Britain, the United States and the Mediterranean War; 1942–44*, Chaps. 1–3.
- ⁴ For the Torch invasion, see Breuer, *Operation Torch: The Allied Gamble to Invade North Africa*; Gelb, *Desperate Venture: The Story of Operation Torch*; Vincent Jones, *Operation Torch: Anglo-American Invasion of North Africa*; Pack, *Invasion North Africa 1942*.
- ⁵ 'Never has a military operation been undertaken so much against the will of the commanders,' Muggeridge ed., *Ciano's Diary 1939–1943*, p. 289; entry for 9 September 1940. See also Deakin, *The Brutal Friendship: Mussolini, Hitler and the Fall of Italian Fascism*, p. 15.
- ⁶ Muggeridge ed., *Ciano's Diary*, pp. 552–3; entry for 31 January 1943. Ciano's views were decidedly anti-Cavallero of course: 'Cavallero who lies, consorts with the Germans, and steals all he can.'
- ⁷ General der Flieger Paul Deichmann, 'Designation of OB Süd as Supreme Commander Mediterranean Theatre (September 1942)', Foreign Military Series, MS D-008 (1947). United States Army Military History Institute (USAMHI).
- ⁸ Generalmajor Christian Eckhard, 'Study of the Situation in the High Command of the Wehrmacht shortly before, during and after the Allied landing in French North Africa, 1942', (1947) in Detwiler *et al.*, *World War II German Military Studies*, XIV, MS D-066.
- ⁹ 'Greiner Diary Notes from 12 August 1942, to 17 March 1943', Detwiler *et al.*, *World War II German Military Studies*, IX, MS C065a. The situation and discussions at Hitler's HQ can be followed in more detail in Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht*, see esp. Vol. 4/II, pp. 936–7. Greiner was the custodian of the War Diary in Hitler's HQ between August 1939 and April 1943 and reconstructed much of it after the war from contemporary notes and drafts. The manuscript in the *Kriegstagebuch* is a much fuller edition of that reproduced by Detwiler.
- ¹⁰ Eisenhower to Bedell Smith, 11 November 1942; *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, The War Years: II*, ed. Chandler *et al.*, Doc. 609.
- ¹¹ Early details of Eisenhower's life have been taken from his *At Ease: Stories I tell to Friends*, and Burk, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Hero and Politician*.
- ¹² Notes from Sir Frederick Morgan Papers; USAMHI.
- ¹³ Major-General Albert Kenner interviewed by Dr Forrest Pogue (27 May 1948); Office of the Chief of Military History [OCMH] Collection, USAMHI. Kenner landed with Patton as Chief Surgeon of the Western Task Force in Torch and, in December 1942, became a Brigadier-General and was assigned to Eisenhower as Chief Surgeon, North African Forces.
- ¹⁴ See Childs, *Eisenhower: Captive Hero*, esp. p. 70.
- ¹⁵ Brigadier C.J.C. Molony to Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Tucker, 25 August 1959; Tucker Papers, 71/21/6, Imperial War Museum (IWM). Molony, who was one of the compilers of Volume IV in the Official History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series, mentions that he has this information about Eisenhower 'on fairly good authority.'

The Bloody Road to Tunis

- ¹⁶ Rommel was promoted Generalfeldmarschall after taking 'Tobruk in the summer of 1942, the youngest Field Marshal in the German Army. 'Hitler has made me a Field-Marshal,' he wrote to his wife. 'I would much rather he had given me one more division.' Quoted by Young, *Rommel*, p. 131
- ¹⁷ First Army HQ, War Diary, entry for 9 November 1942; WO/175, Public Record Office (PRO). Playfair *et al.*, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, The Destruction of the Axis Forces in Africa*, gives a total of 51 German aircraft by the end of the day at Tunis.
- ¹⁸ Deichmann, 'Mission of OB Süd with the Auxiliary Battle Command in North Africa after the Allied Landing. Battles in Tunisia – Part I (November–December 1942)', Foreign Military Studies, MS D-067 (1947). USAMHI. 'The fiction that the Germans were aiding the French against attack was only lightly disguised: Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring, 'Final Commentaries on the Campaign in North Africa, 1941–1943', Vol. 1, Foreign Military Studies, MS C-075 (1950). USAMHI.
- ¹⁹ 'Das Bilden des Brückenkopfes 'Tunesien im Herbst 1942', *Die Oase*, No. 3 (March, 1973), p. 3.
- ²⁰ Generaloberst Bruno Loezer, 'Negotiations with the representative of General Barré and the resident of Tunis, Admiral Estèva', Foreign Military Studies, MS D-040 (1947). USAMHI.
- ²¹ 'Report for General Nehring on the Political and Military Situation in Tunisia from 9 to 21 November 1942', ('Tunis, 21 November 1942); Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv [BA-MA], RH 19 VIII/358.
- ²² Loezer, 'Negotiations with the representative of General Barré and the resident of Tunis, Admiral Estèva'.
- ²³ Major-General J.C. Haydon, 'Torch Diary, IWM 77/190/ZE, entry for 12 November 1942
- ²⁴ Muggerridge ed., *Ciano's Diary*, p. 523, entry for 12 November 1942.

Chapter 2

Death or Victory

‘The dead are lucky, it’s all over for them.’

Generalfeldmarschall Rommel to his wife, 3 November 1942.¹

Hitler never attached as much importance to North Africa as the British, considering it only an annoying diversion from the war of ideology and extermination he was pursuing on the Eastern Front. For Mussolini it was much closer to home and far more than a colonial struggle. But ultimate mastery of the Mediterranean rested not only on the commanders and their toiling troops but particularly upon the complex balance of forces by which they were supplied.

On land the lengthening lines of supply and communication, which trailed behind every offensive move, granted advantages to the defender and imposed a natural balance in which the possession of Cyrenaica was crucial to both sides because everything that moved and breathed in the desert war had to be supplied by sea. ‘If there must be a war the best place for it to take place is in the Desert,’ observed a senior administrative officer on Alexander’s staff, Major-General Miller. ‘The logistics are in many respects made simpler. The further the battle from the sources of supply the weaker must the army become. Conversely the shorter the L[ine] of C[ommunication] the quicker can reorganization and reinforcement be achieved.’² The key to Britain’s Mediterranean effort was Malta and the Axis’ failure to subdue it in the spring of 1942 was, as Kesselring rightly suggested, ‘a mortal blow to the whole North African undertaking.’³

When General Sir Harold Alexander became C-in-C Middle East in August 1942, Churchill’s hand-written directive ordered him to ‘take or destroy at the earliest opportunity the German-Italian Army commanded by Field-Marshal Rommel together with all its supplies & establishments in Egypt & Libya.’⁴ There was little to suggest that he would be more successful in fulfilling these fine sounding phrases than any predecessor.

Alex was urbane, civilized and charming, and had impeccable credentials from his family pedigree. After serving with great personal courage in World War I, he rapidly climbed the ladder of promotion, becoming the British Army’s youngest general at the age of 45 in 1937, when he was given command of the 1st Infantry Division.

During the desperate retreat to Dunkirk, General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff from December 1941, compared him to another outstanding commander, Bernard Montgomery, of 3rd Infantry Division. They

were, Brooke observed, totally different characters. Under the severest pressure, Alexander remained unruffled, composed, and seemed hardly to realise, 'all the very unpleasant potentialities of our predicament.'⁵ Unfortunately, this merely demonstrated to some observers a failure to grasp the full tactical and strategic importance of a situation. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, wondered aloud if Alexander, 'carried enough brains to be C-in-C,'⁶ while Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Taker, commanding 4th Indian Division in the Western Desert, thought he was, 'quite the least intelligent commander I have ever met in a high position. I cannot imagine his ever producing a plan, let alone a good plan.'⁷

Even Alexander's official biographer questioned his abilities: 'I don't think his conduct of the African campaign was more than an administrative job – it wasn't a true general's job. He was sort of a quartermaster in a way... I don't think he was a very clever man, Alex... He was an English country gentleman, almost uneducated, who never read a book or had any interest in the arts at all... But he had a particular charm and a gift for making people like him; absolutely straight.'⁸

Apart from Mark Clark, this smoothly cultivated exterior endeared him to the Americans because he fitted their expectations of the English gentleman. Senior Americans like Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, or even George Patton, who freely admitted that he was, 'not, repeat not, Pro-British,' all thought highly of him, and it is true that Alexander's personal qualities were such as to help smooth the often difficult edges of Anglo-American relationships.⁹ The central problem with his style of command, however, was the lack of firm direction offered to his subordinate commanders: as Liddell Hart observed, '[Alexander] attained such early and continuous success in his career, that he never had a grindstone against which to sharpen its edges. Moreover, he had an innate reluctance to impose himself on others and in avoiding needless interference sometimes failed to provide the guidance that was needed.'¹⁰

Nowhere was this more sharply illustrated than in the case of Lieutenant-General Montgomery (as he was in 1942), who had his faults but was certainly, in Taker's words, 'one of the most persistent, optimistic, determined and courageous men on the battlefield.'¹¹ Monty's supreme self-confidence stemmed from a lifetime of professional dedication to the Army. An iron will and military success eventually turned a shy and diffident personality into the towering example of vanity and egocentrism which he later became. On the one hand capable of deeply generous acts towards individuals, which often went unrecognised other than by his Chief of Staff, Brigadier Freddie de Guingand, Montgomery was also capable of 'breath-takingly mean behaviour.'¹² 'He has the reputation of being an able and ruthless soldier and an unspeakable cad,'¹³ noted Oliver Harvey, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's private secretary, when Monty was appointed to command Eighth Army in August 1942.

Undoubtedly a self-publicist of real genius, Montgomery set out at once to stamp his authority on his new command. Carefully appointing his own press officer, the distinguished war correspondent, Alan Moorehead, he expertly projected an effective image by his informal mode of dress and frugal habits. And his troops responded when he revived their spirits, instilling in them the belief

that they were the best in the world or, more down to earth, exhorting them: 'Kill Germans, even padres – one per week and two on Sundays.'¹⁴ Nor did they forget Monty's influence: 'There was never a general under whom I felt it a greater honour to be serving than yourself,' wrote one much-wounded 'genuine survivor of the North African campaign,' adding, 'at least an ordinary ex-serviceman can salute from this distance and sincerely thank you for the great leadership you gave us...' ¹⁵ Said Eisenhower's invaluable chief of staff, Walter Bedell ('Beetle' or 'Beadle') Smith, 'He had transcendent ability to make his troops share his self-confidence.'¹⁶

'Here we will stand and fight; there will be no further withdrawal,' the new commander told his HQ staff on 13 August 1942, in the shadow of the Ruweisat Ridge. 'We will stand and fight here. If we can't stay here alive, then let us stay here dead.'¹⁷ The effect of this address was, said de Guingand, 'electric – it was terrific! And we all went to bed that night with a new hope in our hearts, and a great confidence in the future of our Army.'¹⁸ This assurance quickly spread throughout Eighth Army. 'It's very wonderful what an atmosphere [Montgomery] has created in this short time,' wrote Lieutenant-General Oliver Leese, commanding XXX Corps, in October, 'He has great force of character and great personality.'¹⁹ Pinned above Montgomery's desk in his campaign caravan throughout most of the desert campaign was a photograph of Rommel in classic 'Desert Fox' pose complete with sun-goggles pushed up on peaked hat, Ritterkreuz (Knight's Cross) glinting at the throat and heavy binoculars slung over the chest of his leather jacket.²⁰ This image was part of the battle of wits summoned up by Montgomery, with Churchill's connivance, which saw the desert war as a duel between two giant personalities.

War correspondents conspired by using romantic and sanitized terms in which the Germans were brave and the Italians, 'if not brave, then chivalrous.' British troops adopted the Afrika Korps' song, *Lili Marlene* and, in the House of Commons, Churchill complimented Rommel with the words, 'May I say across the havoc of war, a great general.'

Not all of this was entirely remote from the truth. Certainly, the conduct of the Afrika Korps was free of the bestialities which accompanied German armies elsewhere: 'Thank God, we had no SS divisions in the desert or heaven knows what would have happened,' said Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein, who saw active service in Africa from October 1941 to May 1943, adding, 'it would have been a very different sort of war.'²¹ Rommel's own account of the desert campaign, *Krieg Ohne Hass* ('War without Hate') exemplified this approach. Troops on both sides had a respect for each other's basic humanity and fighting capabilities.

Rommel imposed his iron will on the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (DAK), giving its 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and 90th Light Division a powerful, cohesive identity in which men took a real and justifiable pride so that, even after the war, many former members still carried the palm-tree brassard in their pocketbooks. Unlike Montgomery, he exercised a much more immediate control on the battlefield which often involved putting himself in considerable personal danger and could cause problems for harassed staff officers in his absence.²²

By the time Montgomery took over Eighth Army, his opponent had been in the unforgiving desert overlong. After 19 months of unremitting warfare, Rommel was suffering from desert sores, chronic stomach and intestinal catarrh, circulatory disorders and symptoms of exhaustion, as well as liver trouble. On 23 September 1942 he left to recuperate at a mountain resort near Vienna and was replaced by General Georg Stumme.²³

Montgomery's renewed offensive at El Alamein, which began on 23 October 1942, brought Rommel hurrying back on the Führer's direct orders. He arrived at dusk 48 hours later, to learn of Stumme's death (from a heart attack) and that the enemy was smashing through the *Teufelsgarten* ('Devil's Gardens') – the mined areas on which his defences were based.

Despite the most heroic attempts, Rommel's *Panzerarmee* was unable to prevent Eighth Army breaking through. Outgunned and out-manned, Rommel signalled twice to the OKW his intention to withdraw along the coastal road, westwards to the Fuka line. The Führer read Rommel's second order early on 3 November – it had been intercepted, decoded and was in the hands of Brooke only hours later – and immediately ordered 'victory or death.'²⁴ But with only 35 tanks left and most of his ammunition shot off, Rommel had no option other than to begin a general retreat on the following day, subsequently ratified by Hitler.

In London, Churchill was impatient. Now that Rommel was on the defensive – 'Alex and Monty are hunting him hard,' he told Eisenhower on 13 November – he was anxious to push on. 'I am sure,' he added, '...that intense efforts should be made to secure the mastery in the tip of Tunis and the capture of Tripoli.'²⁵ Determined to prevent this scenario, Kesselring had other ideas.

In order to buy time, he ordered negotiations with Estèva to be prolonged as long as possible while reinforcements, under Oberst Lederer, were poured in to establish a bridgehead. On 12 November, 500 men were airlifted into Tunisia with 74 tons of stores and the first sea transports with ships, 17 tanks, and motor vehicles arrived. Another 600 men were flown in the next day, when Kesselring was confidently expecting the use of Gabès and Sfax airfields, 150 miles south of Tunis, and 3,000 had arrived by the 15th, they were provisioned with 170 tons of petrol and promised supplies and arms originally meant for Rommel. In fact, all air transport space had been diverted from the German-Italian Army to Tunisia for nearly a week.²⁶

General Barré agreed to the occupation of the French garrisons at Tunis and Bizerte but the Germans soon realised he was playing a waiting game and had not committed his *Tunis* Division to either side. Harlinghausen became suspicious that he might go over to the Allies and ordered Leutnant Baitinger to occupy all public buildings and block the western approach roads to Tunis on the night of 13/14 November, despite Estèva's protests.

Sanitätsgefreiter (Medical Lance-Corporal) Viktor Fink, crossing Tunis alone to see that part of this order was carried out, felt distinctly uneasy: 'I must have presented a strange sight to the people,' he said, 'with my uniform and machine gun.' The tram conductor seems to have been impressed and let him travel without a ticket.²⁷

Had General der Panzertruppe Walther Nehring arrived a week earlier, Barré's support might have been secured.²⁸ When the new field commander for Tunisia was sent by Hitler to replace Lederer and form a deep bridgehead, he discovered an alarming state of affairs at his newly-formed XC Army Corps. Nevertheless, the Allies had already forfeited the element of surprise gained by Operation Torch and were to suffer grievous disappointments as a result.

Notes to Chapter 2

- ¹ Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers*, p. 320.
- ² Lieutenant-General C.H. Miller, Papers; IWM 78/20/1.
- ³ Kesselring, *Memoirs*, p. 129.
- ⁴ Churchill to Alexander, 10 August 1942; Alexander Papers, PRO WO/214/18.
- ⁵ Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 109.
- ⁶ John Harvey ed., *The War Diaries of Oliver Harvey 1941–1945*, entry for 7 August 1942, p. 147.
- ⁷ 'Some Notes by General 'Tucker', 6 October 1945; 'Tucker Papers, 71/21/6.
- ⁸ Nigel Nicolson quoted by Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p.472. Alexander is defended more vigorously by Reid in *Churchill's Generals*, ed. Keegan, Ch. 6, *passim*.
- ⁹ Patton Diary, entry for 11 August 1942; Patton Papers, Box 3. Library of Congress.
- ¹⁰ 'The Military Balance-Sheet of World War II', Copy of notes by Liddell Hart for lecture given at the University of London, November 1960; Tucker Papers, 71/21/6. See also Liddell Hart, *The Memoirs*, II, p. 238.
- ¹¹ 'Some Notes by General Tucker'.
- ¹² Hamilton, *Monty: Making of a General*, p. 37. See also de Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p. 175.
- ¹³ Harvey, ed., *War Diaries of Oliver Harvey*, entry for 10 August 1942, p. 148.
- ¹⁴ Quoted by Knightly, *The First Casualty*, p. 306.
- ¹⁵ 'Jock' to Montgomery, 23 October 1962; Montgomery Papers, BLM 1/119. IWM.
- ¹⁶ Beddell Smith interviewed by Pogue (13 May 1947). OCMH Collection.
- ¹⁷ Quoted by Hamilton, *Monty: Making of a General*, pp. 622–4.
- ¹⁸ De Guingand *Operation Victory*, pp. 136–7.
- ¹⁹ Leese to his wife, 22 October 1942; Leese Papers, Box 2. IWM. Leese was one of Montgomery's protégés and had replaced the luckless Ramsden shortly after the battle of Alam Halfa. 'You're not exactly on the crest of a wave, Ramsden,' said Montgomery in sacking him. See Chalfont, *Montgomery of Alamein*, p. 174.
- ²⁰ Moorehead, *Montgomery*, p. 133.
- ²¹ Quoted by Young, *Rommel*, p. 149.
- ²² Lewin, *The Life and Death of the Afrika Korps*, p. 22.
- ²³ Mitcham, *Hitler's Field Marshals and their Battles*, p. 184.
- ²⁴ Liddell Hart ed., *Rommel Papers*, p. 321.
- ²⁵ Churchill to Eisenhower, 13 November 1942; Eisenhower Papers, Box 23.
- ²⁶ Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. II, pp. 490–1; Bennett, *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy*, pp. 190–1.
- ²⁷ Kurowski, *Endkampf in Afrika*, p. 46.
- ²⁸ Kesselring, *Memoirs*, p. 142; Kesselring, 'The War in the Mediterranean Area, Part I', Detwiler et al., *World War II German Military Studies*, XIV, MS 'I-3 PI.

Chapter 3

Unreliable Auxiliaries

‘Why don’t the French start tossing the Huns out?’

*Captain Harry C. Butcher, entry in his diary for 12 November 1942.*¹

Mussolini’s flamboyant but empty gesture in sending his troops into Tunisia ‘struck *OB Süd* like a bomb,’ said the Luftflotte 2 Chief of Staff, Paul Deichmann.² The Germans had told the Vichy French that the Italians would not be permitted to send troops to Tunisia but on the morning of 10 November Mussolini had begun such a move by dispatching a flight of fighters. Nothing could have been better calculated to drive Frenchmen into the arms of the Allies than the arrival of Italians in fighter aircraft and torpedo boats. Kesselring was aghast and protested vigorously to *Comando Supremo*, which replied that units were on their way and could not be stopped, though it was later established that the fighter group did not take off from Sardinia until two hours after Kesselring’s protest was received.

After the Italians arrived, the French broke off negotiations and Barré moved his forces westward into the mountains, establishing his HQ at Béja and maintaining contact with the Germans without actively opposing them. Although the Italians were later recalled by Cavallero, Kesselring remained convinced that the French would have rallied to the German cause had it not been for their presence.

Fifty years old, experienced in desert warfare as commander of the *DAK* from February 1942 until wounded at the Battle of Alam Halfa in August, Walther Nehring had been convalescing at Wünsdorf near Berlin. Still suffering from a festering laceration in his arm, he was anxious to return to Rommel’s HQ and, while en route at Rome, was surprised to be ordered at once to Tunis.

To seal off the approaches to Tunis Nehring had only the 5th Fallschirmjäger Regiment, the 11th Fallschirmjäger Pionier Bataillon (Parachute Engineer Battalion) under the command of Major Rudolph Witzig – neither of them yet motorised – one Marschbataillon (personnel replacement transfer battalion) equipped only with small arms, an artillery battery with four 88mm guns, and a Panzerspähkompanie (armoured reconnaissance company) under Oberleutnant (Lieutenant) Kahle.



Axis Defensive Lines in Tunisia, actual and intended
 1942

At Bizerte the Italians had two battalions of Marines (about 800 men) and, around Mateur, the beginnings of the Italian *Superga* Division which had disembarked on 15 November with 557 vehicles. But there was no German command system, no fully operational motorised unit combining the various arms, no signals unit – use had to be made of the highly unreliable French telephone network until late in November – no medical unit and virtually no vehicles; even Nehring had to hire a French taxi-cab for use as his staff car.³ On an early reconnaissance he was, ‘deeply impressed [by the difficulties], although hardly cheered’, by what he saw.⁴

In mid-November, by sea and air, part of the battle weary *Hermann Göring* Division arrived after a difficult passage from Cognac, soon to be followed by 10th Panzer from Marseilles and Weber’s newly-formed 334th Division.

Their task was formidable: they had to, ‘master the almost hopeless situation,’ wrote Oberstleutnant Bürker, a senior staff officer with 10th Panzer Division, ‘and to use all of their determination to go into action and all of their abilities in order to prevent the enemy from quickly taking possession in Tunisia.’⁵

Nehring acted quickly to establish his close-in defences with two separate bridgeheads: one based on Tunis, guarded by the 5th Fallschirmjäger Regiment under Harlinghausen, until Oberstleutnant Walter Koch replaced him, the other on Bizerte, commanded by Oberstleutnant Stolz, who was eventually replaced by Oberst Fritz Freiherr von Broich. However, as early as 26 November, Allied wireless intercepts discovered that Nehring was bemoaning his lack of forces to defend both and wondering which he should hold, ‘since neither of them can achieve much.’⁶

Stukas, reconnaissance aircraft and fighter-bombers were organized into No. 1, Air Force Command under Generalmajor Kosch. Luftwaffe ground elements were placed under the control of Generalmajor Koechy and a seasoned officer, Generalmajor Neuffer, took charge of anti-aircraft artillery units which gradually came to exceed divisional strength.⁷

Kesselring was forced to adopt a purely defensive strategy in order to keep open a line of retreat into Tunisia for the German-Italian *Panzerarmee*. Unable to defend the country for any length of time if fighting took place at the very gates of Tunis and Bizerte, his major interest lay between Tunis and old French fortifications of the Mareth Line, in the south, to which Rommel would eventually be driven. The northern third of the area was highly populated, with a well-developed road and rail system radiating from Tunis. The centre was less important, cut off from desert plains by ridges with few passes and, therefore, relatively easy to defend. Conditions in the southern third were similar, with unexplored terrain and desert making any Allied advance difficult.

Kesselring assumed, rightly, that Anglo-American troops, unaccustomed to combat and desert conditions, would not be committed in the distant southern sector of the front. With the exception of some fighter aircraft, no German forces were assigned to the southern half of Tunisia until such time as Rommel retreated there. In the central zone stood the *Superga* Division and first elements of the Italian XXX Corps.

The Bloody Road to Tunis

A desirable western defence line would have extended from Bône on the coast, via Tébessa and Gafsa, to Kébili in the south, with Tozeur as a defensible outpost. Though his long-term aim was to stabilise this front, within his limited means Kesselring could only push his troops westwards as far as a line from Djebel (mountain) Abiod southwards through Béja to Sbeitla and Gafsa and invest this as the main line of resistance. At least it had the advantage of being located far enough from the coast to absorb enemy attacks, for the hinterland was rugged and could be strongly fortified by the time the Allies were in a position to attack.

AFHQ knew that German opposition immediately after the invasion was weak, amounting to no more than small parties equipped with a few armoured cars, motorcycles, anti-tank guns and engineers sent forward to block the line of advance.⁸ But they had their own problems, not least in the country through which General Anderson hoped to push his First Army.

This was extraordinarily difficult and quite unlike the desert in which Eighth Army was chasing Rommel. In the sector north of the Medjerda River, high, irregular hill ranges dominate the landscape. On their bleak shoulders, cork forests and thick scrub, at times breast high, often made the going tricky. From Souk Ahras, the Medjerda winds to its mouth between Tunis and Bizerte through a valley that sometimes narrows into a gorge and at other times is up to ten miles wide. Here, extensively cultivated ground consisted of clay soil which turned quickly into a thick, clinging, glutinous mass after rain, smearing boots and clothing and completely clogging wheeled and tracked transport. To complicate matters, valley areas were frequently intersected by deep-cut wadis (gorges) which proved to be natural tank obstacles, whether dry or turned suddenly to raging torrents after rain. Tracks turned into quagmires and the few roads inevitably converged into dangerous defiles. Bridges were usually unsafe for heavy military loads and easily mined. The winter was the local rainy season and during the Allied campaign unusually heavy rains persisted into April, later than normal, severely hampering any movement.

South and south-east of the Medjerda Valley is the Tunis Plain, lying inside a perimeter bounded roughly by the towns and villages on a line Tébourba—east of Medjez el Bab—Goubellat—Bou Arada—Pont du Fahs. On the west and east of this area was some 250 square miles of mountains and hills, irregular, flint-capped and often covered with low scrub. On their commanding, windswept escarpments a few defenders, properly dispersed and well dug-in, could observe the tank ‘runs’ and cover them with mines and anti-tank guns.

For about 120 miles from Pichon to Maknassy run the Eastern Dorsale mountains which then turn south-west until, some 20 miles south of El Guettar, they join the line of great Chotts or salt lakes. The Mareth Line closed the gap between these ‘lakes’ and the coast. Further west is the higher Western Dorsale range, running from the dominating peak of Djebel Zaghuan in the north all the way beyond Fériana, in the south. Protected by these natural obstacles, the heartland of Tunisia could not be entered lightly; any attempt to force a way through by road was likely to be very costly since passes were few and well covered.