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THE COURSE OF THE WAR

IN THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE OF OPERATIONS

JANUARY 1 - MAY 13, 1943

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THE COURSE OF THE WAR IN THE  
MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE OF OPERATIONS

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A survey of the military situation in the Mediterranean at the beginning of 1943 must be based on the course of operations in Africa.

The Anglo-American landing in Morocco and Algeria, which took place in November 1942, inaugurated a new phase in the war in the Mediterranean. German and Italian counter-measures led to the occupation of the bridgehead in Tunisia and thus strong enemy land, sea and air forces were tied down in Africa. Meanwhile the German Africa Corps had to abandon its positions at El Alamein, and withdraw across Cyrenaica and Syrte before an enemy enjoying superiority in men and materials. This withdrawal to the west and the resulting redistribution of units enabled the German and Italian forces to be concentrated in one compact area.

This movement was carried out according to plan in January 1943.

The fighting in Tunisia was directed by Panzer Army Corps 5, with supporting Italian troops drawn from the German and Italian Panzer Army in Tripolitania.

Support in the air was provided by units of Luftflotte 2 (which was operating in the Mediterranean area), together with Fliegerkorps II, Fliegerkorps X, Fliegerführer Tunis, Fliegerführer Afrika, Luftwaffe Staff at Rath (Gabes) and Lufttransportführer Mittelmeer, while units of the 19th and 20th Flak Divisions were used in anti-aircraft operations as well as in the land fighting.

Units of the German and Italian navies and merchant fleets assisted the land forces; their main function was to keep up the supply of materials to the two African theatres of operations.

On the Tunisian front, our forces were faced by strong British, American and French formations, while in Tripolitania we were opposed by the British 8th Army. In addition there were the enemy air forces based in Egypt, Libya, Malta and French North Africa: wireless reconnaissance in the eastern Mediterranean, including Malta, revealed the enemy's air strength as:-

- 700 fighters
- 600 bombers
- 245 reconnaissance aircraft
- 200 transport aircraft

Based on north-west Africa, the enemy had:-

- 500 fighters
- 330 bombers
- 70 transport aircraft.

A large part of the Allied fleet was deployed against enemy bases in the Mediterranean.

In Tunisia the fighting, which was occasionally severe, was of a preparatory nature, but nevertheless it did result in some improvement of position. In the north-western sector of the bridgehead, all the principal roads were in German and Italian hands, notably the coast route to Bizerta, and the road to Tunis; the Medjerda valley, centres of communications and hill positions were also occupied. In the southern part of the sector, all enemy attempts to break through to the coast were frustrated and successful counter-measures were taken. Geographical conditions favoured defence; steep hills and valleys are a feature of the countryside, and "wadis" and "shotts" run almost up to the coast. These facts made it difficult for the enemy to deploy his strength.

In Tripolitania the main fighting took place on a front 100 kilometres wide, along the coast. The principal operation was the withdrawal of the German and

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Italian troops to the west. Fighting a mobile war, the Army was able to evade all the enemy's attempts at an encircling movement and, in spite of all difficulties, the planned transfer of forces, which ended with the abandoning of Tripolitania, was completed.

At the beginning of January the front in Tunisia extended in a line from the north coast, east of Cape Serrat, in a southerly direction west of Mateur, west of Teboura, east of Medjez-el-Bab, west of Pont-du-Fahs, west of Cairouan, terminating near Gabes.

Simultaneously, the German and Italian Panzer Armee defended the Buerat position, south of the Bay of Syrte, against constantly increasing enemy pressure.

Fighting during January produced no significant modifications of the front in Tunisia. Faced with the enemy threat of a concentrated attack on Tunis and to the coast, via Cairouan, the duties of Panzer Army Corps 5 were primarily defensive. It was possible to keep up nuisance attacks on the weaker enemy positions, in order to split the enemy's forces and impede his progress; by counter-attacks, our line was moved forward and the area in the south where the German and Italian forces were concentrated was secured. A description of the fighting corresponds to these activities: on both sides there was harassing fire; scouting patrols and advanced parties were active; vehicles were attacked and strong points withdrawn; brisk reconnaissance raids were launched; mines were laid and roads blocked.

An important event in south Tunisia was the storming of Fonndouk, southwest of Cairouan. French troops which attacked there on January 3, and were driven back to the west; we suffered slight losses. 218 prisoners were taken and the military equipment captured or destroyed included 30 trucks, 9 guns, 21 machine guns and numerous infantry weapons.

On January 5 we were able to take Jefna (in the northern sector, west of Mateur), where the enemy had been trying to drive us out of the hilly country in the direction of Bizerta. On the other hand, the Italian Superga Division suffered heavy casualties during the enemy attack which began on January 11 in the central Tunisian battle area; land had to be given up in the region of Si Salah and to the south. Simultaneous enemy attacks between Bou Arad and Pont-du-Fahs were repulsed.

To restore the situation on the Superga Division's front and to enable the main defence line to be evacuated again into the hilly country, German forces began "Unternehmen Eilbote" ("Operation Courier") in the second half of the month. As a result the enemy suffered the following losses between January 18 and 24:-

4,000 prisoners  
21 tanks  
70 guns  
200 vehicles,

in addition to more than 100 machine guns and large quantities of war material.

In the southern sector the 21st Panzer Division extended this success by launching a local attack which resulted in the capture of Faid on January 31, after heavy fighting.

In Tripolitania the front was quiet during the first half of January, except for artillery fire and reconnaissance activity by both sides. In the area of Syrte the enemy prepared his army for a renewed attack. Our forces were given the task, not of holding the Buerat position indefinitely, but of withdrawing to the Tunisian border, at the same time conducting a rearguard action which would last for some weeks. Tripoli was to be held

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for as long as possible, as the Duce felt its evacuation would be a considerable political reverse; moreover, the sudden transfer of 150,000 men would present great difficulty.

The enemy offensive began on January 15. Throughout the withdrawal, its focal point was in the southern sector, and the intention was to surround the German and Italian Panzer Army with a move from the direction of the desert. Prolonged resistance in face of the enemy's superiority proved impossible, in spite of the courage of the defenders. The withdrawal began during the night of January 15/16, and the first line to be occupied ran from Seddada to a point 56 kilometres north-west of Buerat. In the face of sustained enemy pressure, the front had again to be taken back during the night of January 16/17, to the line Ulid-Birdufan-Tuarga (40 kilometres south-east of Misurata); and on January 17 it was again withdrawn to the line Tarhouna-Homs. But even here it was not possible to organise any lasting defence, which might have been instrumental in minimising the immediate threat to Tripoli. With their supply system always under constant strain, the German and Italian forces were faced by an enemy several times their strength, who used his superior forces to dictate the course of the battle. On January 22 our front was withdrawn to the Tripoli defence line, which ran 50 kilometres east of the city; and then, during the night of January 22/23, Tripoli was evacuated, and the new positions taken up were on the line Bianchi-Oliveti, 25 kilometres west of the city. On January 24, rearguards were fighting in the area of Zauia, on the 25th, in the Sorman-Sabratha sector, on the 27th they were between Sabratha and Zuara and on the 31st, to the west of Zuara. Thus the frontier between Tripolitania and Tunisia was reached, and our troops approached the Mareth Line, which they were to occupy. During this fighting retreat, heavy losses were inflicted on the enemy, and the action of the Luftwaffe resulted in heavy damage to enemy material.

The activities of the enemy air forces in the Mediterranean were directed, during the month of January, against the two theatres of operations in Tunisia and Libya. Repeated attacks were launched against the airfields and harbours of Bizerta and Tunis, against Ferryville, Soussou, Sfax, Cairouan, Gabes, Tripoli and against airfields in Tripolitania. Enemy air attacks in support of the front line forces took place in the areas mentioned on the dates shown: Fonndouk (January 4), Jefna (January 5), Si Silah (January 19), and attacks in support of the 8th Army began on January 15. In addition, the German and Italian sea supply routes between southern Italy and Africa, based on Naples and Sicily, were subjected to air attack. Enemy activity in other parts of the Mediterranean, over Greece, Crete and the Mediterranean islands was not on a large scale. Throughout the entire area, the enemy kept up intensive reconnaissance.

Our numerically inferior air forces were sent into action on a large scale in the area Tunisia - Tripoli - Sicily.

The first essential was sustained and extensive reconnaissance, which, when the weather permitted, included the western Mediterranean as far as Gibraltar and the eastern Mediterranean as far as the Nile Delta. Emphasis was laid on meteorological observation and reconnaissance off the coast line and over the battle fronts, so that those responsible for the direction of operations could be kept supplied with a continual stream of accurate reports.

Long-distance attacks by bombers, dive-bombers and fighter-bombers were aimed at the enemy's supply traffic, his bases on the North African coast, and at airfields in the rearward areas. The Fuehrer himself ordered that enemy shipping concentrations were to be persistently attacked. The harbour at Bone was frequently attacked during the month (on January 1, 2, 7, 14, 15, 16, 17); ships whether in convoy or not were attacked with great success. During January the losses inflicted on enemy shipping were as follows: 17 ships totalling 108,000 tons, and 2 destroyers sunk: 42 ships totalling 180,000 tons damaged, in addition to one cruiser, 2 destroyers and 2 patrol vessels. The use of bombers, dive-bombers and fighters in tactical and strategical support of the army was a contributing factor to the defensive and offensive successes in Tripolitania and Tunisia during January. Aircraft of Fliegerkorpe II,

/Fliegerkorps X

Fliegerkorps X, Fliegerführer Tunis and Fliegerführer Afrika carried out persistent attacks on enemy airfields, roads, railways, transport movements, anti-aircraft gun positions, tank and vehicle concentrations, tent camps, assembly points and troops on the march in the neighbourhood of the front. By direct intervention in the land fighting at Fondouk (January 3), Jefna (January 5), Bou Arada (January 13), during "Unternehmen Eilbote" (January 18-24), and during the withdrawal in Tripolitania, large-scale losses in men and material were inflicted on the enemy, and relief was thus brought to our own army units.

Fighter and fighter-bomber units were given a dual task within the scheme of aerial defence. (1) They had to patrol and protect the skies over the operational areas in Tunisia and Tripoli. (2) They had to cover the German and Italian sea lanes between Sicily and Africa and protect convoys from enemy air attacks. Accordingly the units were employed to defend harbours, airfields and dock installations and to protect the immediate vicinity of the front, in addition to being used as escorts for bombers, fighter-bombers and transport aircraft, and as night fighters. Further, they provided air cover for our convoys and hunted submarines. The high number of enemy aircraft shot down in the Mediterranean during the month - 316 - was principally a result of their work.

The use of transport aircraft assumed an added importance in the course of the war in the Mediterranean, for the fighting in Africa depended on what was achieved in the field of supply. Daily flights were organised to the two fronts by aircraft under the command of Lufttransportführer Mittelmeer; troops, arms, equipment, ammunition, fuel and food were carried. In one day the cargoes carried amounted to 1,227 men, 374 tons of arms and equipment, and 9.7 cubic metres of fuel. The sum total for the whole month was 15,716 men, 4,742.7 tons of arms, equipment and ammunition, 146.1 cubic metres of fuel, 8.5 tons of food and 2 10 cm. guns on tractors.

The 20th Flakdivision, which was in action in Tunisia, was fused into the Flakgruppen Tunis, Bizerta and Sousse. Its principal function in these areas was to provide anti-aircraft protection for harbours, airfields, and focal points in the communication system. 5 Flakkampfgruppen were formed to be used in ground fighting, and were distributed along the sectors held by the German and Italian troops, where they were employed with success in the offensive and defensive fighting.

Air defence in Tripolitania was carried out by anti-aircraft gun units of Special Duties Staff, Luftgau, Afrika. The 19th Flakdivision was engaged exclusively in fighting near the front, and it had to take part in defensive measures on the ground in addition to providing A.A. defence.

Units of Luftwaffe Signals were successfully incorporated in the air defence system. The shortage of Freya and Wuerzburg equipment was particularly noticeable. (Both these pieces of equipment were used in radar). Wireless intelligence in the Mediterranean was instrumental in providing essential information on the strength and disposition of the enemy forces.

The situation at sea in the Mediterranean was characterised by the convoy activities of both sides to assure supplies for the fighting in Africa. The Allies had adequate heavy and light naval forces at their disposal and therefore possessed a high degree of superiority at sea. It was not possible to interfere decisively with the large enemy convoys, even though the Luftwaffe went into action on a larger scale against shipping targets. Our own escort vessels - most of them Italian units - were urgently needed to protect convoys between southern Italy and Africa. The difficulties connected with supplies by sea were considerable and led to a constant dispute between Oberbefehlshaber Sued and Supermarina. The Italians wished to work to a fixed plan, allowing for a convoy every three days and fixing the time for a complete trip by steamer at 9 days; they did not wish to be compelled to alter these arrangements. In addition a slower convoy, limited only to supply traffic, would sail every four or five days. In

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the existing situation, this was not satisfactory. For instance, if one tanker did not put to sea, there was a threat of a petrol crisis in Tunis. Moreover, our own convoy operations were hampered by bad weather, with the result that destroyers carrying troops, cargo boats, motor yachts, tankers and ferries were held up for unusually long periods, then turned back or interrupted their voyages.

The losses suffered by the Italian convoys through enemy attacks from submarines and aircraft were high, as the protection was inadequate. The over-all situation was made more difficult by the large distances from harbour facilities (Genoa and Trieste) and the lack of trained workers.

Military developments in the Mediterranean, which had led in January to the fusion of all German and Italian forces and to the consolidation of their position in Tunisia were dependent on the fighting in Africa during February.

The Axis forces which were in action (strengthened by reinforcements brought in by sea and air during the previous month), remained basically the same.

The northern and central sectors of the battle area continued to come under the control of Panzer Army Corps 5. In February, the defensive screen to the south-east and south-west was composed of the German and Italian Panzer Army, which was now called the 1st Italian Army.

The integration of Luftflotte 2 with Fliegerkorps II, Fliegerkorps X, Fliegerfuehrer Tunis, Fliegerfuehrer Afrika, Fliegerfuehrer Sardinien and Lufttransportfuehrer Mittelmeer was altered during the course of the month to facilitate a more compact organisation of all air forces by the creation of Generalkommando Fliegerkorps Tunis. Fliegerfuehrer 2 (formerly Fliegerfuehrer Tunis) and Fliegerfuehrer 3 with units of the former Gabes air striking force and Fliegerfuehrer Afrika came under the command of the new Corps.

For the main part, the war at sea had to be conducted by the Italian navy and mercantile marine. Only a few light naval forces were forthcoming from the German side (speed boats, submarines and mine sweepers).

The enemy position altered as the result of reinforcements being brought up, particularly in Algeria. The Allied troops were put under the unified direction of an American Supreme Command. According to wireless intelligence reports, the enemy air strength in the Mediterranean now totalled 2,769 aircraft, of which 95 were in Gibraltar, 740 in French North Africa, 244 in Malta and 1,690 in Libya and Egypt.

Figures calculated from aerial photographs, observation, counter-intelligence reports and estimates, set the total tonnage of the enemy fleet in the Mediterranean at 1,475,000 tons, of which 1,100,000 tons were in the western sea areas, and 375,000 tons in the eastern.

In Tunisia, February marked the period of preparation for the approaching decisive battle with the enemy, who had many times our strength. The Axis troops, which were now faced with a war on two fronts, took advantage of internal communication lines and gained the initiative by virtue of their greater battle experience and the superior quality of units which had been tested in battle. By renewed attacks they achieved important improvements in their positions, extending the perimeter of the bridgehead from Bizerta and Tunis right up to the Algerian frontier and securing bases which would be of considerable value, should the enemy begin an offensive. Only on the south-eastern front did the defensive fighting continue.

The western front in Tunisia, which was still only weakly held, corresponded generally to the January line. It began on the northern coast, then ran in a south-easterly direction to west of Pont - du - Fahs, swung further

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to the west in the central Tunisian area near Cairouan until it was almost at Pichon; then it ran west of the Fomndouk crossroads up to the north-south line of hills in the central Tunisian mountains, via Faïd, thence to the Maknassy area, terminating in the positions held by the 1st Italian Army in the district south of the salt lakes. To all intents and purposes, the south-eastern front now coincided with the political frontier between Tunis and Tripolitania.

The northern sector of the Tunisian front was quiet throughout practically the whole of February. There was only artillery and patrol activity, with small local operations. The main fighting took place in central and south Tunisia.

Our offensive in the Faïd area, which had begun on January 30, was successfully continued and came to an end on February 3; 1,047 prisoners were brought in; 25 armoured vehicles, 20 guns, 8 mortars, 57 machine guns, 10 trucks and 5 aircraft were either captured or destroyed. But fierce enemy attacks against our forward troops near Sened (south-west of Maknassy), led to temporary withdrawals. However, it was possible to retake Sened as early as February 7, and at the same time to advance our own positions significantly (as far as 10 kilometres south-west of Send in the direction of Gafsa). Admittedly, this did not yet prevent the enemy moving his forces to the south; and the threat of a union of the British 8th Army with the American and British forces in Algeria did exist.

On February 14, we began an offensive operation in central and southern Tunisia; it was known as "Unternehmen Fruehlingswind" ("Operation Spring Wind"); its purpose was to remove the threat mentioned above, and to disrupt and delay the Allied advance. On the very first day the Axis troops broke through the enemy positions and took Si Bou Zid, west of Faïd. The enemy suffered heavy losses and had to retreat to the west. The courageous assault groups then pressed on to the south, past Sadaguia (on February 15) in a south-westerly direction, and penetrated into Gafsa on February 16. With the help of troops sent into action further to the north, Pichon, Hadjeb el Aïoun and Sbeitla were taken on February 17, while units of the 1st Italian Army occupied Feriana and Thelepte. The enemy withdrew to his Algerian base of Tebessa, and our spearheads were able to advance into the areas of Shiba, Kasserine and Thala. In addition, strong formations of a British armoured division were annihilated in a battle to the east of Tebessa on February 21. When the engagement was broken off, the enemy had suffered heavy and bloody losses; in addition nearly 4,000 prisoners were taken, and 235 tanks, 169 armoured reconnaissance cars and 160 guns and self-propelled guns either captured or destroyed. Our victorious troops were in bases which were more than 200 kilometres from the Tunisian east coast.

To prevent the enemy from assembling his forces around Medjez el Bab, in the northern sector of the front, a local attack was launched on February 26; it also resulted in ground being gained.

In the south-eastern sector of the Tunisian front, the enemy did not sustain his offensive during February. There was only minor activity, during which the 1st Italian Army, as planned, disengaged itself from the enemy. In the night of February 4/5, our rearguards were taken back to the boundary position west of Pisida; on February 13 to the Tatahuine line, 10 kilometres south and 10 kilometres east of Ben Gardane; on February 14, the Army withdrew to the west of Ben Gardane, to escape an enemy threat of encirclement; during the night of February 15/16 the positions occupied were west of Medenine, and in the face of a new enemy encircling move, on February 20, the Mareth Line, which had meanwhile been completed, was occupied.

The focal point of the enemy's air activity during February was in southern Tunisia and over the central Mediterranean. The enemy was also active on the central and southern Tunisian front, supporting the movement of troops and the direction of the battle. The number of attacks on Tunis

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and Bizerta was smaller, while supply and air bases were more frequently hit. In addition to striking in immediate support of the land forces, the Allied air force was directed against Gabes (on February 3, 8, 25, 26 and 27) and Cairouan (on February 9, 15 and 23). Increased importance was attached to the enemy attacks on the German and Italian supply fleet, as they caused considerable losses and there was the threat of a shipping crisis. The Axis bases in Sicily, and above all in Palermo, became the object of air attacks (on February 4, 6, 9, 15 and 23) far more than in January. Terror attacks were aimed at Turin and Milan. In the remaining Mediterranean area, including Greece and Crete, enemy air activity was limited to reconnaissance and nuisance flights.

The enemy's superiority in the Mediterranean presented our reconnaissance aircrews with important and difficult problems; the German and Italian strategy in defence and offence depended on prompt observation of all enemy movements and operations on land and at sea. In addition to patrolling the sea lanes from Sicily, long-range reconnaissance aircraft also surveyed constantly the shipping routes off the North African coast, and harbours. Short-range reconnaissance aircraft were used tactically above and behind the Tunisian front to observe the fighting.

Bomber, dive-bomber and fighter-bomber units of Luftflotte 2 were directed for the most part against targets at sea. An attempt was made to attack all enemy convoys carrying supplies to Africa, in addition to the ports of unloading at Algiers, Bone, Tripoli, Bengasi and Tobruk; it was also hoped to spot concentrations of small ships or landing-craft which might be used in the event of a landing operation. Long-range bombers were only to be used against ground targets when the close support air strength was not adequate to the task of opposing the development and course of an enemy attack. In accordance with this principal, enemy shipping was in constant danger of Axis air attacks throughout February. 2 merchant ships of 13,000 tons were sunk, and 10 merchant ships, totalling 63,000 tons, and one cruiser, were sunk. But above all the enemy harbours received heavy blows. Tripoli alone, which the Fuehrer had ordered to be particularly attacked, was raided 15 times during the month.

Bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters were to be concentrated at certain bases so that they could provide strategical and tactical support for the army in the forward areas; they were to oppose enemy attacks by raiding important localities, and assure a speedy advance and consistent defence.

At the beginning of the month aircraft were used with success in the ground fighting in the area of the 21st Panzer Division (February 1 and 2); extremely effective attacks were also made on tank and vehicle concentrations, enemy preparations and airfields. The Allied offensive dispositions were thus brought to nought. Good results were achieved in the local fighting in the northern sector of the front (February 5 and 9), and in front of the 1st Italian Army, (February 5 and 7). Air force units distinguished themselves still further by the consistent support which they gave to the army during "Unternehmen Fruehlingswind". 371 aircraft, units of Fliegerfuehrer 2 and 3 were in constant action in the battle around Si Bou Zid (on February 14), where they destroyed 11 Spitfires, 5 tanks, 1 armoured reconnaissance car, 3 guns, 8 tracked vehicles and 17 trucks; they also supported our armoured units in the fighting near Sadaguiia (on February 15) and the advance in the Sbeitla area (on February 17). Notable successes were achieved to the west of Tebessa (on February 21). Towards the end of the month those aircraft employed to provide tactical support for the army were mostly in action in the north of the Tunisian front (from February 26). Dive-bombers and fighter-bombers proved effective in attacks on batteries, field positions and vehicle and tank concentrations. On the other hand, our air activity on the south-eastern front grew less extensive and lost some of its significance. But even then, it did contribute to the successful conclusion of the transfer of the army to the Mareth Line.

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During February our forces were concentrated in a smaller space and thus the fighter and fighter-bomber units responsible for aerial defence were sent into action on a more compact basis than during the previous month. This development favoured the defence of Tunisia and was particularly noticeable in its effect on the protection against the increasing enemy attacks of the sea routes between Sicily and Africa. Fighters were used in the forward areas to neutralise the enemy airfields near the front and they also had to provide cover for our movements which were being carried out without camouflage. By providing air cover and fighter screens, they protected our attacking units and the transport aircraft and their ground organisation. Enemy aircraft were frequently driven away from convoys, and aircraft showing lights were used to deceive enemy fliers by night. Night fighter activity was on a small scale. In February the enemy lost 240 aircraft, the greater percentage of which fell to our fighters.

The supply situation in Africa was tense, and during February transport units of the Luftwaffe had to be used daily to keep the Tunisian front supplied. Once again the results achieved were good. During the month, the following were flown over:-

11,229 men  
3,982.1 tons of arms, ammunition and equipment  
301 cubic metres of fuel.

The operational duties of the flak units still in Africa had, in general, remained the same. Most of the 20th Flakdivision was engaged in anti-aircraft defence in the areas of Tunis and Bizerta. 5 flak battle squads were detailed to take part in the land fighting in the northern sector; 3 more fought in the area south of Pont-du-Fahs and a further two were put at the disposal of the army units at the south of the front. In addition, 3 flak battle squads were in the coastal defence sector to the north of Bizerta. A.A. units of Special Duties Staff Luftgau Afrika had now assumed the anti-aircraft defence of south Tunisia, the Sousse area, Sfax and Gabes. The main strength of the 19th Flakdivision remained in the operational area of the 1st Italian Army and was used there against air and land targets.

Luftwaffe Signals units extended the Wim system of radio jamming stations. Thus, by the use of wireless, they contributed to the safe passage of convoys in the Straits of Sicily; for they were frequently able to jam enemy reconnaissance reports on shipping movements. With the aid of wireless intelligence, it was also possible to have a continual survey of the enemy forces arriving in the Mediterranean. Signals units were also used with success when aircraft had to participate in the ground fighting, as the immediate support of the army depended on the extremely good work of the Luftwaffe Signals liaison units.

The position at sea in the Mediterranean during February was determined by the superior strength of the enemy's naval forces and mercantile marine. Nevertheless, the seasonal increase in the figures for U-boat sinkings occurred, while the threat to our own convoys was not removed. In all, the German and Italian navy and air force sank: 31 merchant ships (189,000 tons), 3 destroyers, 1 cruiser, 1 submarine, 1 MTB and several smaller vessels. 13 merchant ships, totalling 60,000 tons, and 1 light cruiser were damaged. Our shipping losses continued to be considerable. It was, however, possible to improve the supply position in comparison with January; for instance, at Bizerta, on February 21, 3,420 tons of cargo were unloaded in a single day. Exclusive of the supplies flown over by the Luftwaffe, the amount of material taken to Tunisia during the month was: 34,000 tons of material, 14,500 tons of fuel, 2,000 vehicles, apart from tanks, guns and 33,800 men. 9% of the material and 34% of the fuel were lost in transit. Herculean efforts were needed to satisfy the demands of the Tunisian front by shipping across supplies. Difficulties still existed with regard to tankers and the provision of escort vessels.

The great enemy superiority in men and material on land, at sea and in the air, which was clearly revealed during the fighting at the end of

/February

February, became even more marked in March, as the climax of the fighting in the Tunisian theatre of operations approached.

Meanwhile, the formations engaged were reinforced on both sides by a continual stream of supplies. Their positions remained generally unchanged.

In Algeria and south Tunisia, the Allied troops were in the last stages of their preparations for an offensive. In February, the Axis forces had not allowed the enemy to operate as he had wished, but in March they were forced on to the defensive. Simultaneously the enemy armies attacked the bridgehead from south and west and thus seized the initiative for the further course of the war in Africa, even though they were not able to bring the campaign to a close as had been planned. The fortified area of Bizerta and Tunis, where all the Tunisian roads and railways converge and where the main Axis supply routes were, formed the firmly-held core of the German and Italian positions in Africa and it remained beyond the enemy's grasp, though he approached from all sides.

At the beginning of the month, the front was 650 kilometres long. Our basic line began, as in February, at Cape Serrat, then enclosed a British bridgehead at Medjez el Bab; thence it ran west of Pont-du-Phas, along the narrow, barren mountain pass via Pichon and Faid to Maknassy and from there through the Sned Pass and Gafsa and the former French Mareth Line positions. There were also mobile defence units in the areas Sbeitla, Feriana, Metlaoui and Tozeur. We held this long front only with weak forces. Companies, and sometimes even only outposts, defended the passes and held down enemy regiments and divisions which were not in a position to strike a decisive blow, and which were awaiting further reinforcements.

Our local offensive operation which had been started in the northern sector of the front on February 26, could be successfully continued at the beginning of the month. Toukabour (on March 1) and Chaouach (on March 2) were taken after heavy fighting, and the enemy base at Medjez el Bab was thus threatened from the north-west. The enemy lost 2,110 prisoners, 68 tanks and armoured reconnaissance cars, as well as 36 guns. Another battle group advancing to the north gained valuable ground. On March 4 Sedjenane, west of Jefna, was taken; on March 6, Cape Serrat, and on the following day the area of Djebel Abiod was reached.

Meanwhile, in the face of a threat to the southern sector, our forward defensive units were withdrawn from Sbeitla (on March 1) and Feriana (on March 2) and Tozeur (on March 9). To disrupt and delay the enemy's advance, the German and Italian troops on the Mareth front went over to a successful offensive on March 6. But the front in the south was without significant operations apart from lively reconnaissance artillery on both sides and small-scale artillery harassing fire. Only Metlaoui had to be evacuated by the Axis troops; this was on March 15. Our reconnaissance patrols had to withdraw towards Gafsa in the face of strong enemy motorised columns. Renewed enemy attacks against Gafsa were repelled.

On the northern front there were local operations which had no real effect on the situation. The resumption of our offensive in the Djebel Abiod sector led to an improvement in our positions, and made it possible to advance the German outposts up to the river Zouara. In this part of the fighting the enemy lost 1,600 prisoners, 16 tanks, 30 guns and numerous vehicles. In the second half of the month, the enemy attack on two fronts started. The big offensive began on the Mareth front on March 16. The planned breakthrough was not achieved in spite of the use of masses of men and material and the long period of preparation; its failure could be attributed to the defensive fire and counter-action of the German and Italian troops. The enemy then tried to achieve his object by further attacks to the west of the Matmata mountains and from the Gafsa area in an attempt to cut off the 1st Italian Army from its rearward areas. Thereupon our weak defending forces evacuated Gafsa and in the face of strong enemy pressure withdrew via El Guettar and Sened to

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east of Maknassy, where in now defensive positions all attacks were repulsed and all attempts at encirclement frustrated. In hard fluctuating fighting the enemy formations advancing along the Kebile escarpment were held, so that adequate arrangements could be made for the evacuation of the Mareth Line and the planned transfer of all our forces into positions north of Gabes. Fierce fighting developed, notably with the British 8th Army, which had to attack in open country and which suffered unusually heavy and bloody losses. Our withdrawal to the north, in the course of which Gabes was given up, ended on March 30, and resulted in a shortening of the front by about 200 kilometres.

Along the whole of the western front the battle continued. The focal points of the enemy offensive were at Sedjenane, which was lost in the course of the fighting, south of Forndouk and in the area of the Gafsa-Gabes road.

The numerical strength of the enemy air force in the Mediterranean was constantly increased during March; at the end of the month it amounted to 4,547 aircraft, which were located as follows: 3,867 on airfields in North Africa, 180 in Gibraltar, 240 on Malta, 40 on Cyprus and 220 in the Levant. Considering these large totals, which by far exceeded our strength, enemy air activity was on a relatively small scale. The focal point continued to be in the central Mediterranean. There was a noticeable increase in the air activity against Sicily, the German and Italian supply routes based on Naples and Palermo, and in southern Tunisia. A striking feature was that in the first half of the month the Allied air force only played a small part in the land fighting. Only after the opening of the offensive against the Mareth Line did the instances of direct support to the ground forces become more marked. Repeated attacks were made, principally against our bases and airfields in the forward area such as Gabes, Sfax, Sousse, Fatnassa, Mezzouna and La Fauconnerie. Further attacks were directed against the supply centre round Tunis and Bizerta. Enemy reconnaissance was very active throughout the whole month. Sicily and the sea were kept under constant observation from Malta. Thus, scarcely a single German and Italian convoy crossed to Africa without being spotted. Of the attacks made on Italy, that on Palermo on March 22 caused extensive damage. Many heavy blows were also struck at Messina. On the other hand, the results achieved by the enemy in attacks on Naples were insignificant. In the whole eastern Mediterranean area there was no enemy air activity to report, with the exception of the usual nuisance flights, which were generally carried out without bombs being dropped. In the west the enemy delivered a heavy attack on Cagliari, in Sardinia, and on airfields on the island (on March 31).

The number of our aircraft was always too small for the numerous tasks involved and the extensive battle area. Nevertheless, their employment within the framework of the entire war situation in March was full of significance.

Reconnaissance operations in the Mediterranean were divided among the three Fliegerkorps of Luftflotte 2. Based on Sicily, Fliegerkorps II was responsible for meteorological reports, as well as for information on the position at sea and in the harbours of the central Mediterranean, including Malta. Fliegerkorps X flying from bases in Greece carried out reconnaissance in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly in the waters around Crete and off the North African coast. Fliegerkorps Tunis was responsible for the continual reconnaissance of the fronts in west and south Tunisia. On the results of this reconnaissance were based the measures taken by those in command to attack enemy supply convoys, shipping concentrations in harbours and concentrations of troops on the ground fronts.

Long-range aircraft of the Luftwaffe were once again used only on a limited scale against ground targets in the Mediterranean area. Only in the defensive fighting for the Mareth Line were orders given for all units to be sent into action. The attacks which we began in the previous months against the enemy supply fleets and North African harbours provided necessary support for attacks on the ground, which prevented the enemy from

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carrying out his plans for an offensive, or at least delayed them. In addition to several convoys, the harbours of Tripoli, Bone, Algiers and Philippeville were persistently attacked. On March 6 a great victory was achieved in the sea area between Tripoli and Misurata; 3 ships, totalling 26,000 tons, were sunk and 2 more, amounting to 13,000 tons, were damaged. During the whole of the month air actions resulted in the following losses being inflicted: 6 merchant ships, totalling 39,700 tons, 1 submarine and 1 escort vessel sunk; 31 merchant ships, totalling 164,000 tons, 1 destroyer and 2 submarines damaged.

Short range aircraft took a large part in the defensive and offensive victories of the army on the two Tunisian fronts. At the beginning of the month large numbers of bombers, dive-bombers and fighter-bombers took part in the fighting in the northern sector, where they were used with success against concentrations of troops and vehicles, artillery positions and tanks; thus they barred the enemy's approach to the west via Sedjenane into the Djebel Abiod area and interfered with his advance in the line Beja-Munchar-Qued Zarga-Medjez el Bab. During our thrust against enemy positions in front of the Mareth Line they attacked ground targets with very good results (on March 6 and 7) and thus inflicted heavy losses in men and material on the English troops as they were preparing to attack. When the focal point of operations was moved to southern Tunisia, operations continued against the enemy's preparations for an offensive. When the offensive on the Mareth front began on March 16, these operations assumed an added ferocity. Dive-bombers and fighter-bombers made repeated attacks against enemy spearheads, areas of concentration, motor and tank columns, supply convoys, tent camps and air bases near the threatened sectors of the front. Thus relief was brought to the army south of the Mareth Line, west of the Matmata mountains, east of Gafsa, near El Guettar and in the Maknassy battle area; our bombing and air operations were responsible for the fact that the enemy's attempts at encirclement were frustrated and that our movement back could be carried out according to plan. Towards the end of the month, short-range aircraft flew against the enemy troops on the offensive in the area of Sedjenane-Abiod; once again, they achieved repeated and noteworthy successes.

As the number of aircraft available to the enemy grew, so did the demands made on our fighter units. Effective fighter cover was essential for the German and Italian supply bases in southern Italy and Sicily and the starting off points of Fliegerkorps II. In Tunisia, in addition to providing protection for harbours and aerodromes, fighters were called upon to protect the Axis troops in their offensive and defensive operations. In addition, a large number of fighters was employed as escort for bomber and transport aircraft and for our convoys between Italy and Africa. These units and convoys (which were subjected to numerous enemy attacks), were adequately protected, a fact which was proved by the notable defensive victories. The total of enemy aircraft shot down by air defence forces during the month was 209.

The supply situation in Africa continued to be difficult. Therefore the use of transport aircraft to supply both armies was extremely important. Because of losses and interruptions in sea transport, transport aircraft were put under an even greater strain than before, especially as the Luftwaffe had now partially assumed responsibility for the supply of Sardinia. It was planned to extend the achievements of the transport aircraft by changing crews, operating by day and night, and by the use of additional machines. To enable the difficulties - particularly in the supply of fuel - to be surmounted, it was necessary to make temporary use of bombers on transport duties. By this time it was clear that, but for the activities of transport units, the situation in Africa would have become critical. The following were flown across the Mediterranean during the month: 12,320 men, 8,130.7 tons of weapons and equipment, and 61.62 tons of fuel.

The main forces of the 20th Flakdivision continued to provide anti-aircraft protection in the centre of the Tunis-Bizerta bridgehead. Those A.A. battle squads detailed to take part in the land fighting were further rein-

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forced during March. Three formations were in the northern coastal defence sector; the remainder came under two Flakfuhrer and fought in support of the army in the areas of Sedjenane, north of Medjex el Bab, Hammamet, south of Pont-du-Fahs, near Faid and west of Mexxouna. At these points they formed a valuable addition to the defence, even though the heavy flak was not very effective against tanks. As before, the 19th Flakdivision was in the area occupied by the 1st Italian Army; the majority of its units were used as anti-tank forces and for the protection of roads, though some were engaged on anti-aircraft duties. In two days, March 26 and 27, they accounted for 12 aircraft and 14 tanks. German units provided for the air defence of southern Italy were Flakregiment 57, in the Naples area, and Flakregiment 131, based on Sicily.

Luftwaffe signals units gained recognition for themselves by the results of wireless reconnaissance and radio jamming, for both of which services they were responsible. As a result of splendid cooperation with the air defence forces, rapid action against enemy air attacks was assured.

The difficulties which characterised the situation at sea in the Mediterranean could not be overcome in spite of renewed efforts by those in command. Our supplies were under constant threats from enemy minelaying activity, submarines and aircraft based on Malta. It was out of the question that we should conduct an offensive war at sea against the enemy fleet, in conjunction with our attacks on the land fronts, as there was a shortage of suitable surface craft. During March the supply situation in the Mediterranean was strained, because once again a number of supply ships were lost. Nevertheless the defensive victories gained by aircraft in the defence of convoys were significant; a systematic defence of convoys by aircraft was rendered far more difficult by the fact that Italian reports of sailings were given too late. The supplying of Sicily and Sardinia was particularly unsatisfactory, as only half of the material intended could be taken over. Cargoes taken to Africa during the month included: 30,000 men (19,000 German and 11,000 Italian), 35,386 tons of ammunition and equipment, 14,300 tons of fuel and 1,114 vehicles. Losses in transit amounted to 13.5% of the material, 27% of the fuel and 28% of the vehicles.

The preparations which the Allies had been making for months with a view to a large-scale offensive against the German-Italian positions in Africa were completed. The decisive battle would now settle the course of events in the Mediterranean.

The Axis troops were considerably inferior in number of those of the enemy. The 5th Panzer Army and the German Africa Corps were on the Tunisian western front, and the southern part of the battle area was defended by the 1st Italian army. Altogether there were 139,000 German troops and 110,000 Italians. They were reinforced by Luftflotte 2 with Fliegerkorps Tunis, and also Fliegerkorps II which was mainly based on Sicily and Sardinia, Fliegerkorps X which was operating in the Tunis area from Greece and Crete, and the Air Transport Units which were based on Sicily and Naples. They were supported in the air defence and ground fighting by anti-aircraft units, headed by the 19th and 20 Flak Divisions. The war at sea was left mainly to Italian ships and crews.

Against this, on the enemy's side there were 275-350,000 British, American and French troops brought up, and there were 200,000 more British troops to the south of the battle area. With their large numbers of tanks they had a considerable attacking force. The possibilities for attack which this offered were further strengthened by the air force consisting of more than 4,500 aircraft which the enemy had assembled in the Mediterranean area. 60% of this was fighter strength, 30% medium bombers and 10% heavy bombers. The Allied fleet made the position more dangerous, and the Axis troops were forced to keep continuous defences against landing operations in southern Europe and Africa.

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The first phase of the great battle for Tunisia, which began on March 16 with the attack on the Mareth Line, was not decisive. In the main, we succeeded in keeping our own forces intact, without surrendering vital sectors of the bridgehead. However, the enemy offensives were renewed with increased fury in the month of April. Now we were faced with a problem which we had avoided up till now - a battle on two fronts which were of a different nature both geographically and tactically. On the southern front there was a planned withdrawal between the mountains and the coast, covered by fighting rearguard troops. During this withdrawal the 1st Italian Army succeeded in countering the British onslaught. On the German-Italian front however the fighting was restricted to fierce defensive actions, mostly only of local significance. By this means it was possible to defend the western front and also to protect the flanks of the southern group, and thus carry out the military and political intentions of the Axis. In agreement with the Fuehrer, the Duce had ordered that the Tunisian battle area should be held to the end, and the defence was to take the offensive as far as was possible. Thus the war in Africa had three objectives: (1) tying-down of Anglo-American forces in North Africa; (2) keeping the Straits of Sicily blocked; (3) making more difficult an all-out offensive against southern Europe.

In April the front line started at Cape Serrat. From there it stretched in a south-eastern direction east of Sedjenane and west of Jefna as far as the area west of Toukabeur. It skirted the British bridgehead near Medjez el Bab, continued west of Pont-du-Fahs and Pichon over the north-south ridge of the Tunisian heights to the area south of Faïd, passed east of Maknassy with a deep bulge to the area south-east of El Guettar and from there bent sharply round to the east to the area north of Gabes.

In the first few days of the month the front remained quiet except for local engagements south-east of El Guettar and near Makassy. The enemy full-scale offensive began on April 6 simultaneously near Oued Zarga on the western front and before the shot positions in the south, and was extended during the course of the following days to the Pichon and Maknassy-Mezzouna areas. The attacks, effected with tanks and the heaviest artillery preparations, led to penetrations of our lines, and the resulting situation was very grave. Continually repeated German counter-attacks could hold the enemy, and caused him considerable losses in men and materials, but could not break enemy lines.

In the north the losses in territory were only small. On April 9, the front here was taken back north-east of Oued Zarga and behind Toukabeur.

The superior British forces on the southern front however managed to push strong spearheads into the lines of the withdrawing 1st Italian Army. Even on April 7, the enemy penetrations here threatened to develop into a breakthrough. Because of this the Army had to fall back on the line of the Doauou-Skhirra hills, to avoid the surrounding of large formations by the enemy. As a result, the British 8th Army was able to link up with the II American Army Corps advancing from the Gafsa area. Meanwhile the situation of our forces in the Maknassy-Mexxouna area under continually heavy pressure from the enemy had become more serious, and on April 8 we were forced to fall back on the new line of defence Hir Atil-Graiba-Sebkret Quadrane. On April 9 the army withdrew north-west of Mahares, without any great interference from the enemy. By late evening on April 10 the line Sebkret de Si el Hani-Bembla (15 km. south of Sousse) was reached; on April 11 the army was on the heights of Sebkret Halk el Mensel-Sebkret Kelbia after the evacuation of Sfax, and on April 12 the positions at Enfidaville, which had been planned as a further line of defence, had been reached.

These movements were made possible by the courageous resistance of the German troops in the south of the western front. Here they were opposed by strong enemy assault forces, especially in the Pichon-Kairouan area, where a broad valley offered favourable conditions for tank warfare. On April 9 we had to leave Pichon. A strong enemy force which had broken through near

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Fomndouk was beaten off on April 10, 15 km. south west of Kairouan, where we inflicted heavy casualties and shot up 60 tanks. But still the strong enemy pressure continued, and after the planned destruction of all war installations we evacuated the town of Kairouan on April 11. In this operation our own casualties were also considerable.

Although the Allies could push forward into the Sbika area, they were not able to effect a decisive breakthrough into the heart of the bridgehead positions. The situation again became very quiet. Local fighting, especially in the Medjez el Bab sector, characterised the following days.

In the night of April 19 the British 8th Army on the southern front began a new phase of the battle with a terrific onslaught. This time it was impossible to bypass our troops, an operation which had brought the enemy commanders their success at the Mareth positions, and which had been the object of their attacks in all previous phases of the fighting. The enemy were left with only the hope of a frontal attack and a breakthrough from the front. They failed.

On April 22 the strong attacks on the western front were renewed. This developed into heavy, bitter fighting in the area between Sebket el Kourzia and Medjez el Bab, and finished in the withdrawal of our troops for 3-5 km. Again the road to Tunis and Bizerta was closed to the enemy by the outstanding fighting qualities of our troops, and their intention to resist to the very end. Between April 27 and 30, the German troops were successful in counter-ing enemy pressure. The enemy lost 98 tanks, 86 armoured patrol and personnel cars, 21 guns, countless carrier vehicles, several hundred prisoners, and suffered particularly heavy casualties.

The great losses in territory in the south of Tunisia, which had taken place during the month, had so greatly reduced the size of the bridgehead that now even the main area in the north-east of Tunisia was seriously endangered. This threat became even more imminent when enemy preparations for attack in the direction of Mateur continued with no abatement during the local fighting in the last days of April.

The great numerical superiority of the enemy air forces played a large part in increasing the difficulties of the defensive fighting in Tunisia. The Allied flying units were used again and again in support of the army operations at the front, thereby increasing the difficulties on the German-Italian side, often necessitating the use of Axis air defences, which were urgently needed elsewhere. Thoroughly appreciating the situation, these units made planned attacks on the German-Italian supply lines. They became a continuous menace to our reinforcement lines between Sicily and Africa, and dealt crushing blows against our Ju 52 and Me 323 units, which were responsible for air transport. These attacks were complemented by heavy air raids on our supply bases in Sicily and southern Italy, where apart from airfields, the harbours of Palermo, Messina and Naples were attacked. These attacks caused much serious damage. In one raid alone on the airfields of Trapani, Palermo, Chinisia and Castel Vetrano on April 6, 25 transport aircraft were shot down or destroyed on the ground, and a further 67 were damaged. In the rearward area of Tunisia the enemy attacks were also mainly confined to harbours and airfields. Tunis, Bizerta and the airfields at Marie du Zit and Soliman were the most frequent targets. In the rest of the Mediterranean area Sicily was the target for many heavy attacks. There were only nuisance raids over Greece and Crete.

The course of battle in Tunisia during April made especially high claims on our air reconnaissance units. So that we would be prepared against new attacks it was essential to increase our air reconnaissance from the Army Group, and continual close cooperation was needed between all the units used and the army commands. Therefore Fliegerkorps Tunis was required to keep constant watch over the whole of the battle area and all the airfields near the front and was also responsible for reconnaissance

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over this area. It was the duty of Fliegerkorps II to watch enemy air activity to the rear of the enemy lines and make daily reconnaissance flights over the North African harbours. Apart from this, reconnaissance was required off the east coast of Tunisia in the late afternoon of each day, so that the light enemy sea forces which constituted a menace to our supply lines could be attacked at the right time. To Fliegerkorps X was assigned the task of reconnaissance in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean, especially in the sea areas around Crete, in the Aegean Sea and around the Dardanelles. The strength of the enemy defences made it necessary to use fighter protection with the reconnaissance aircraft over the front and in the western and central Mediterranean. The results were very good, in spite of the difficulties, and were specially commended by A.O.C.-in-C. Luftflotte 2.

In April the long-range bombing forces of Fliegerkorps II and Fliegerkorps X were only used to a very limited extent in the air war. The situation however called for the increased use of the Luftwaffe in Tunisia. For this reason the heavy bomber units had to be prepared for use in force as support for the Army Group, by joining in the ground fighting, concentrating their strength before the German-Italian lines. If the fighter protection was not sufficient for this, they would have to carry out their duties during the night. In this manner, at the beginning of the month, they fought the enemy forces at El Guettar, successfully attacked tank formations during the withdrawal to the north, attacked motorised convoys and battery positions on the southern front, were used on April 11 as defence against enemy tanks south of Kairouan, and achieved very good results by raiding enemy airfields and hampering the enemy advance in the area Oued Zarga - Medjez el Bab - Bab Arada. This meant that the bombing attacks on sea targets had to be reduced. The use of bombers against the two harbours near the front line, Bone and Philippeville was intended in the main to destroy enemy landing craft known to be there. The total effect of the Luftwaffe against Anglo-American shipping in the Mediterranean during the month was correspondingly small. 2 submarines were sunk, 1 destroyer was damaged, and 10 other ships, totalling 32,000 tons, were damaged.

Parallel with the work of the heavy bomber forces, the close-range bombers were used in tactical and strategic support of the army. During the first days of the month they also attacked the enemy preparations near El Guettar; using dive-bombers, fighter-bombers and twin-engined fighters, they greatly eased the burden of the army at the strong point of defence in the Oued Zarga area and on the southern front, and by increasing the enemy losses they played their part in circumventing a rapid enemy breakthrough. Flying in waves, they defended the withdrawal of our rear troops on April 9 and 10 against the enemy spearheads advancing from the Pichon-Fomndouk area, and during the following days they turned their attention to the Anglo-American armoured and motorised columns pressing forward near Kairouan and Sbika. From the middle of the month onwards they concentrated most of their strength in northern Tunisia. There they protected our troops in the positions at Enfidaville, and were particularly successful in support of the army in the region of Medjez el Bab and Sebket el Kourzia. In only two days, April 24 and 25, 18 enemy tanks, 3 armoured vehicles, 12 transport vehicles, 1 tank car and several anti-aircraft batteries were destroyed by twin-engined fighters and fighter-bombers.

These successes were only made possible by the use of fighter and ground attack units for purposes of air defence. Above all it was plain that fighter protection would need to be very strong in defence against the enemy's lively air activity. Apart from the safety of the reconnaissance aircraft, fighter-bombers, dive-bombers, bombers and ground attack planes there was an ever increasing need for protection for our own transport units. There also had to be an effective escort of all kinds of fighters to defend sea traffic from the frequent enemy attacks. This escort had to be especially strengthened to counter the massed forces of enemy fighters over the Straits of Sicily. The many and various defence tasks to protect the fighting army units and the rearward area of operations with its harbours and airfields were effectively

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carried out by flying patrols and independent flights over the front, along the coast, and along the supply lines. The numerical inferiority which was caused by all these operations during the day was made worse by the fact that it was essential to keep strong fighter forces in southern Italy, Sardinia and Sicily. In spite of this, considerable success was achieved. During the month 206 enemy aircraft were shot down by our air defences.

The safeguarding of supplies between Italy and Tunisia became one of the chief problems of the battle leaders in Africa. Because there were always difficulties with these supplies, which had to be dealt with immediately, transport aircraft were used in all critical situations and became invaluable. The enemy, realising this, concentrated their fury on the transport units. On April 22 alone enemy fighters shot down 14 Me 323's and after the heavy raid on the transport units base on April 5, there were only 29 Ju 52's capable of leaving the ground. As a result of the considerable losses incurred the whole matter of supplies became so acute that several times during the month bombers had to be brought in to fly over supplies of fuel. By this means 593,000 litres of petrol were flown to the front on April 8. Not only the Tunisian theatre of operations but also to a certain extent Sardinia had to be supplied by air. According to incomplete reports, an average of 78 transport aircraft a day flew over during the month of April a total of not less than 9,289 troops, 538.2 tons of equipment and ammunition, and 96.1 cubic metres of fuel from Italy.

The anti-aircraft units in Tunisia had to surrender many of their crews to the army for the ground fighting. The 19th Division, which was with the 1st Italian Army, held back the British attempt on April 5 to break through near El Hamma on the southern front, and constituted an effective barrier to the advancing enemy spearheads and tanks after the offensive had begun. Their conduct in battle, which was demonstrated again at the Enfidaville positions, earned recognition. The principal task of the 20th Division was the defence of Tunis and Biserta against enemy aircraft and the defence of the harbours and transport ships. Their ground fighting units, which were incorporated into units fighting on the western front, distinguished themselves in defensive actions against tanks near Kairouan and Sbika on April 10 and 11. In two days a battery in this sector shot up 16 enemy tanks. They were transferred towards the end of the month to the northern sector of the front where they conducted successful actions in defence of our own lines. They inflicted heavy losses in men and materials on the enemy by attacking advancing infantry, groups of motorised vehicles, convoys, strong points and tanks. German anti-aircraft units were also stationed in Sicily, Sardinia, in the Naples area, northern Italy, in the Balkans and Crete.

In the whole area of operations of Luftflotte 2, Luftwaffe signals units were incorporated into the air defence system alongside anti-aircraft units and fighter squadrons. Their points of concentration was in the central Mediterranean where they were to build up a far-reaching network of air reporting stations along a line Sicily - Tunis - Sardinia - Corsica. With their radio reconnaissance, radio jamming service, and the use of air signals liaison units, they played a considerable part in the daily conduct of the war.

The war at sea was influenced by the numerical superiority of the enemy warships and merchant navy. According to a report from air photographers on April 5, there were in the western sea areas alone, excluding Gibraltar, 2 battleships, 6 cruisers, 8 destroyers, 38 escort vessels, 17 auxiliary mine-sweepers, 35 heavy motor boats, 9 torpedo boats, 13 speedboats, 11 submarines, 1 submarine escort vessel, 2 repair ships and 150 landing craft. At the same time the total amount of merchant shipping was 663,000 tons, including 152 freighters, (570,000 tons), 4 transport vessels, (33,000 tons) and 13 tankers, (60,000 tons). This meant that the supplies of the Anglo-American troops in Africa were assured. In contrast to this our own shipping was in a critical state. In all, 60,000 tons of German shipping and 68,000 tons of Italian shipping (freighters and tankers) were available for carrying supplies

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between Italy, Sardinia, Sicily and Africa. The available forces (including the Italian fleet) opposed to the Allies did not make it possible to gain even local mastery of any part of the sea. The minefields which had already been laid were not sufficient to prevent light enemy sea forces and submarines attacking the convoy routes. Our own minesweeping and submarine-chasing units were not strong enough to ensure reasonable safety from mines and submarines all the time. And so, in spite of the strong air cover, we suffered considerable losses. This is the reason why the question of supplies became so desperate by the end of the month. The difficulties thus experienced by the battle leaders in Tunisia were also greatly increased by the knowledge of the possibility of an Allied landing in Tunisia, Sardinia or Sicily. The intentions of the Allies in this respect could be judged by the numbers of landing craft which had been sighted and which increased during the month. This meant that the necessary defence measures had to be taken.

In May 1943 the battle for Tunisia drew to a close. The German-Italian troops, which in April were still able to resist the advance of the superior enemy, found it impossible to offer any more practical resistance. Their difficulties were increased by the fact that they no longer had sufficient forces to oppose the enemy and to close for any length of time any gaps in the lines.

Confronted by the numerous enemy it was only possible to withdraw a few of the weakened units from the battle and replace them with fresh troops. At the same time the enemy managed to regroup his forces completely. The French auxiliary troops took over the most northerly sector of the front, which had previously been held by the British 1st Army. The American 5th Army, which had formerly constituted the centre of the enemy attacking forces, was now transferred to the Mateur sector, and the British 1st Army to the Medjez el Bab area, where the final offensive was to be mainly concentrated. On the whole, the British 8th Army was not affected by these alterations, and fought as before on the right flank of the enemy lines in the south.

The bridgehead which the Axis forces still held was about the same size as the province of Oldenburg. It was about 60 km. deep, and the front line was about 150 to 200 km. long. The line of German-Italian defences ran from the north coast east of Cape Serrat through the Sedjenane valley towards Matuer, passed to the east of Medjez el Bab, as far as the Pont du Fahs area and from there ran south of the Djebel Zaghouan to the Tunisian east coast north of Enfidaville.

The pause in the fighting, which the enemy had seen to be necessary since April 26 when their forces broke through during the final major attack on the southern and western fronts, lasted until May 6. The heavy enemy pressure still continued during the first days of the new month and led to minor losses of land in the coastal area. On May 3 the town of Mateur, which lay well behind the front, was evacuated after all installations had been destroyed, and a more favourable position was taken up 22 km. west of Biserta. As a result an enemy tank attack south-east of Mateur was turned back with heavy losses for the enemy.

On May 6 the Anglo-Americans began their final offensive. With their strongest forces and powerful artillery and air support and countless tanks they advanced from Mateur and north-east of Medjez el Bab in an attempt to break through to the road to Tunis. The 15th Panzer Division, which resisted fiercely to the last man, was practically annihilated during this operation. The situation was desperate, and there were no more reserves available. By concentrating the whole of their superior equipment, the enemy increased their breakthrough in the Mateur area, extending it to the south west of Tunis, thus splitting Army Group Africa into two parts. Heavily pressed by the enemy, our troops fought their way back step by step. Biserta and Ferryville were lost. Two enemy armoured divisions and two to three infantry divisions led the main push towards Tunis. On May 8, after heavy street fighting, the city had to be surrendered to the enemy.

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Meanwhile there was extremely heavy fighting along the whole of the western front. With far superior armoured forces and uninterrupted waves of aircraft the enemy were able to force a further breakthrough at many points, in spite of the heroic resistance of the defenders.

While this was going on, the remains of the 5th Panzer Army were using their last combat troops in contesting every step of ground in the narrow bridgehead south of Bizerta, offering heroic resistance although they had run out of artillery ammunition and fuel. It was no longer possible to hope for a breakthrough to the larger fighting force on the Bon peninsula. And so these units were forced to stop fighting on May 9.

However, on May 8, thanks to the sacrificial fighting of the German rearguards, the main parts of the Army Groups with the German Africa Corps and the 1st Italian Army found it possible to build up a new defence front along the general line Hamman Lif - Zaghuan - Enfidaville.

Still the enemy tanks overpowered the resistance of the anti-aircraft groups near Hamman Lif on May 10 and pushed past Soliman to Korbous and Grombalia. On May 11 there were able to enlarge this breakthrough to include Hammamet and Bou Fichta, thus separating the Army Group from the Bon Peninsula. A simultaneous enemy attack on the heights of Zaghuan was only beaten off after bitter hand-to-hand fighting. In this engagement the German Africa Corps shot up 30 enemy tanks. However, on May 12 an attack by enemy armoured forces from Bou Fichta to the south and past Zaghuan to the west again split up the German-Italian forces, and laid them open to simultaneous attacks from the Anglo-Americans.

Thus the battle in Africa came to an end on May 13. The Anglo-American air forces played a decisive part in the enemy operational successes, which led to the destruction of the German-Italian bridgehead in Tunisia. They took part in the ground fighting to an extent never before attempted, thus increasing the pressure of the advancing attacking forces, and putting the defensive powers of the German and Italian troops to the severest of tests. During the lull in the fighting during the first days of the month the enemy flyers limited their activities to single operations against certain areas of the front and the supply lanes in the rear. When the offensive started they were used in uninterrupted waves, and attacked the retreating Axis troops the whole day long with bombs and machine gun fire. On May 6 alone, 756 enemy aircraft were counted. The Allies possessed undisputed and complete superiority in the air. Meanwhile the enemy air raids on the supply bases in southern Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Pantelleria continued. Palermo, Messina, Marsala and the airfield at Pantelleria especially were attacked without respite. The massing of Anglo-American air forces over the Sicilian Narrows was also intended to render a partial evacuation by sea impossible for the German-Italian leaders. Simultaneously a terrific enemy air offensive against the Italian mainland and islands was introduced, which continued right through the battle in Africa, and which was intended to be the initial phase of new attacks on the fortress of Europe.

Our own air reconnaissance units had the difficult task of acquiring the necessary information for attacks on the enemy strong points of attack, and of doing this in spite of the barriers set up by strong enemy fighter units. It was especially important to obtain complete afternoon air reconnaissance in the west, south and south-east. It had to be done early so that definite enemy targets could be attacked in daylight by fighter-bombers and ground attack planes, followed up by Fliegerkorps II with twin-engined fighters and Ju 88's. Only armed reconnaissance was possible against sea targets. This had to be done with absolute accuracy to ensure complete defensive preparations against all kinds of enemy landings, and also to ensure the timely concentration of air forces against assemblies of landing craft.

We were especially anxious about the possible employment of long-range bomber forces, which was indicated by the enemy intentions to attack southern

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Europe. The main tasks of Fliegerkorps II now consisted of raids on enemy landing fleets and their harbours, as well as attacks on concentrations of transport aircraft for air landings. Once again the Ju 88 units joined in the ground fighting on May 7, focussing their attention on enemy gatherings and movements at the breakthrough point before Tunis. At this time and also later, after the close of hostilities in Tunisia, the Anglo-American harbours and shipping in North Africa suffered considerably from heavy blows in daily raids. Above all Bone, Djidjelli, Algiers and later Bizerta were hard hit. These raids must have been an important factor in the selection of a date for carrying out the planned landing operations in the Mediterranean area.

Fliegerkorps Tunis further gave close air support to the army's heavy fighting on the African soil. At the beginning of the month, fighter-bombers attacked enemy concentrations near Sidi Nsir and at the eastern end of the Debkret el Kourzia, ground attack aircraft covered the withdrawal in the Mateur area, and were there engaged in the successful defence against enemy tanks on May 4 and 5. On May 6 and 7 they eased the burden of the army units before Tunis who were engaged in bitter defensive fighting. It was not possible to use further aircraft in the heavy fighting up to May 13 because the relevant bases were lost during the enemy's rapid advance, and as a result of this the aircraft units which were still in Tunisia had to be transferred back to Sicily.

The single-engined and twin-engined fighters which were used for air defence put up a particularly strong defence against the superior enemy forces. During their patrol flights over the Tunisian area of operations, Sicily and Southern Italy, they were engaged in fierce air battles, during which they shot down a considerable number of enemy aircraft, whilst only suffering slight losses themselves. In combined flights against the enemy, with light and heavy forces, they first had to wrest freedom of the air from the enemy before any considerable air forces could be used. Even the taking-off at the air bases could often only be done with fighter protection. The forces set aside for safety measures had to be proportionately strong. This applied also to the fighter aircraft which were necessary for the protection of convoys and ferries at sea, and harbours, and for sea reconnaissance. Everywhere where the Allies kept up their air attacks in the central Mediterranean, a strong air defence was essential to ensure the possibility of activity for our own air forces and their ground installations.

The use of transport aircraft, which continued to fly over some of the essential reinforcements for Tunisia and Sardinia, had to be restricted to the hours of darkness, as a defence against enemy attacks. With the difficulties of supplying the army by sea, the transport units became, during the last days of the fighting, the only means by which the Army Group could be supplied with the necessary equipment for a prolonged resistance. At the beginning of the month, bomber aircraft again came to their assistance to transport fuel. However, under the increasing threats, and with the loss of the Tunisian airfields, even this means of help was reduced to a minimum after May 8. It was only possible to drop supply containers over our positions. The transport aircraft flew their last supply flight to Africa on May 12. From May 3 onwards the air supply units only flew to Sardinia.

The anti-aircraft units in the African theatre of war were, almost without exception, employed in the ground fighting to support the army units in the defensive action. The German-Italian potential for resistance was thereby greatly increased. Especially in the fighting against tanks, armoured vehicles and field positions, considerable success could be obtained by light and heavy flak batteries. On May 3, units of the 19th Flak Division destroyed one tank and 22 vehicles in a very short time during a German Commando operation in the sector of the German Africa Corps. Finally they were used as the central core of the defensive front from the beginning of the Anglo-American offensive in the Mateur-Medjezel Bab area onwards. On May 6 at the point of breakthrough the 20th Flak Division shot up 4 aircraft and 15 tanks, but in the same action they lost 16 light and 15 heavy guns. Two days later the

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same division, before giving up the fight and destroying their equipment, inflicted a loss of 37 more tanks on the enemy. On the same day the 19th Flak Division shot up 14 tanks and 9 aircraft. In heroic fighting they built up such a barrier of artillery with 8 heavy batteries on May 9 near Hammamet that the enemy attempts at a breakthrough there were completely destroyed. However, on May 10 this division was also forced to give up the fight.

In order to force a postponement of any enemy attempts at a landing, some of the anti-aircraft units in Sicily and Crete were regrouped for the attack on targets on land and at sea. In Sicily 15 fully motorised artillery groups, each with 2 8.8 cm. and 2 cm. cannon were prepared. In Crete there were 8 groups, each with 1 8.8cm. cannon, 2 cm. cannon, and 1 60 cm. searchlight. In the area of the 5th Flak Division in north Italy preparations were made to transfer all German batteries to the Italian armed forces.

With the building up of an air reporting service, and the technical preparations having been made for fighter escorts by day and night, the air signals units laid the foundations for a planned defence against enemy air offensives. In addition to afternoon reconnaissance by the air forces, they also started reconnaissance of surface vessels so as to help in the protection of our sea traffic in the Sicilian Narrows. The last bases of the air signals units on Tunisian soil, the night fighter H.Q's in the Tunis area and in Cape Bon, had to be blown up on May 9 to protect them from the advancing enemy. Meanwhile, in the interest of defence preparations against an enemy landing, work was started to increase the signals network in southern Europe, which included above all radio substitution for all the most important telephone lines, and radio control of the air reporting service in the depths of the area.

The continuation of resistance in Africa depended on the arrival of supplies. The whole battle would be decided by the question whether supply ships would be able by every possible means to bring supplies through. In this way the position at sea, which was fraught with ever increasing difficulties, affected the further conduct of the war in the Mediterranean. In May it was no longer possible to send our convoys to Tunisia through the Straits of Sicily, and the small ships and ferries were not sufficient to satisfy the needs of the front. In this, the losses which had been sustained during the first 6 months of the Tunisian operation were a definite disadvantage. Of the Axis fleet, 10 destroyers, 8 torpedo boats and 62 transport ships were sunk, and 5 more destroyers, 7 torpedo boats, and 12 trading steamers damaged. Under the pressure of the enemy breakthrough to the north of the Tunisian front the destruction of the harbour installations at Bizerta and Ferryville had to be ordered on May 6. On May 9, due to the loss of the harbours and the enemy mastery of the sea lanes, as well as the powerful enemy air superiority, it was no longer possible to supply the army with reasonable quantities of ammunition and fuel. Therefore on May 10 supply by sea was ordered to be discontinued. Pantelleria, Sicily and Sardinia continued to be supplied by sea, even though this often presented serious difficulties. The number of enemy landing craft had meanwhile been greatly increased, which indicated the enemy's intentions of a large-scale invasion. On May 6, in the western Mediterranean alone there were 75 landing ships with 400 larger landing craft and a considerable number of smaller landing craft.

The final battle in Tunisia was a turning point in the history of the war in the Mediterranean. The Anglo-American large-scale offensive against the North African outpost of the European fortress in the autumn of the year 1942 was intended to break up the Axis positions by simultaneous advances from the east, west and south, and thereby lay the foundations of the main attack against the mainland of Europe.

The attack of the British 8th Army, which began on October 25 against the El Alamein front showed itself clearly during the course of following events to be a part of this plan. The landing of American and British

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combat forces in Morocco and Algiers, which had long been planned, and was put into effect on November 8, was obviously intended to be the same.

The German-Italian leaders parried this thrust in three ways:-

1. Attack on the enemy transport fleet.
2. Occupation of the French Mediterranean coastline.
3. The despatch of an expeditionary force to Tunis.

Bomber units and submarines were constantly in readiness for the enemy, and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy war fleets, as also on the supply convoys they protected. The crossing of the line of demarcation into unoccupied France, and the occupation of the French southern front was carried out according to plan, and in complete agreement with the Vichy Government. The most important thing for the continued conduct of the war was the crossing to Tunis. For this the Axis powers had placed themselves in a strategic position, which was absolutely vital to their position in the Mediterranean, especially for the mastery of the Straits of Sicily.

The first phase of the fighting for Tunis consisted of the time from the beginning of the landing in French North Africa until about the end of the year 1942. During this time fighting on both sides was limited to mobile detachments which could be rapidly thrown into battle. During the course of this "sorting out" operation, the German-Italian troops were able to offer successful resistance to the enemy spearheads attacking the small areas around the towns of Tunis and Bizerta. After being reinforced by fresh troops from Italy, the Axis troops were able to go over to the offensive from the beginning of December onwards, attacking the American, English and French forces pressing in from the west, and it was possible greatly to increase the bridgehead which had at first only been very small. The line of our strong points extended 50 km. inland. The successes thus achieved were made by numerically very weak forces. They called themselves divisions, but really they were not even as strong as regiments. There was therefore no continual front, but only a very weakly held line of resistance, which still had such wide gaps, especially in the south of the area, that the enemy could have broken through at any time. Only in the north, which was the actual core of the Axis positions in French North Africa, could the line be considered secure. In a very short time the Tunis bridgehead became the Tunisian battle area.

The resulting increase in size of the new theatre of war decided the course of events in the second phase of the battle for Tunis, from the beginning of the new year to the beginning of February 1943. This consisted of consolidating the positions already won, and improving them by local advances. Especially in the south, reinforcements had to be continually brought in so that the frontier between Tunisia and Tripolitania could be kept open to the German-Italian Panzer Army. The Axis troops in Libya were engaged in bitter fighting, which was very costly for the enemy, but they were forced to withdraw to the west before the advancing enemy, who were superior in numbers, both in men and materials. A simultaneous protracted defence of Tunisia and Libya was considered impossible in the circumstances. It was therefore decided to withdraw the Rommel army from Libya and join them up with the troops in Tunisia so that they could further strengthen the new positions. With this concentration of all German-Italian forces in one compact battle area, the concentration planned by the Axis leaders was practically completed.

The third phase of the war in Tunisia, from the beginning of February until the middle of March 1943 consisted in preparation for the coming decisive encounter with the Allied troops, which had in the meantime been continuously strengthened. Everything now depended on the winning of a favourable assault position for this battle. This was to be done by concentrated attacks which would disturb the enemy's prepared positions, and so postpone the beginning of the offensive. During the successful carrying out of these plans the area

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occupied by the Axis achieved its greatest extent. Especially in central and southern Tunisia the German-Italian lines were pushed further to the west, until they were very near the Algerian border, 200 km. away from the eastern coast. The front was 650 km. long. It was useless to think about a lasting defence of these far-flung lines. Although the enemy had suffered terrific losses during our attacks, it was not possible to stop the great offensive taking place. During this time when the German-Italian troops outwardly appeared to be at the pinnacle of their success, the Allied divisions were being assembled in the rear for the final battle.

The fourth phase of the Tunisian fighting from the middle of March onward was dominated entirely by the enemy initiative. The British 8th Army on the southern front finished their preparations first. They began the expected attack on March 16 on the Mareth front, and pushed the 1st Italian Army back to positions north of Gabes. The enemy had not succeeded in forcing the breakthrough they had intended, and all the vital parts of the bridgehead remained as before in German-Italian hands. The position for the Axis first became serious when the enemy went over to the offensive on both the Tunisian fronts at once. Now the weak Axis troops had to surrender the whole of southern Tunisia to the numerically superior enemy, and were pushed together into the small area in the north-east of the country. This did of course mean that our troops were again concentrated, but they had now to operate under unfavourable conditions, as the enemy now had the German-Italian supply bases within range. On April 20 the enemy began an outstandingly heavy but unsuccessful attack on the southern flank where the 1st Italian Army were. The final offensive could only be carried out after the lull in hostilities on May 6, by the Anglo-Americans directing all their forces against the northern sector of the front, attacking towards Bizerta and Tunis. This time the decisive breakthrough was achieved. The Army Group was split in two, and after May 9 when they were also cut off from Cape Bon, they fought a losing battle. At the outlets to the Tunisian highlands, the last resisting troops fought in the bitter struggle a heroic battle worthy of the fame and the proud tradition of the German Africa Corps. Left on their own, hard hit, without water and food, with the wounded amongst them, there lay the soldiers of all the units, with their guns in their hands, awaiting the enemy, who swept at them in never-ending waves. The British and Americans did not manage to clear up the few remaining defenders until May 13. The last few holding out had to show the white flag, as they had no ammunition left.

Thus the defenders of Tunisia were destroyed by the absolute superiority of the enemy, and shortage of supplies. Their battle was not fought in vain. The German and Italian soldiers in Africa had entirely fulfilled the task they had been given. By their resistance, which forced the enemy to contest every foot of territory in long and bitter fighting, they tied up in Africa the enemy's strongest forces, and thus inflicted upon him severe losses in men and material. The easing of the strain on other fronts which resulted, and the time which had been won, was of vital importance to the Axis.

#### A.H.B.6 Distribution

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