

78/28

~~SECRET~~  
**RESTRICTED**

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TRANSLATION NO. VII/25.

**RESTRICTED**

THE BATTLE FOR TUNIS

NOVEMBER 1942 - MAY 1943

A Study prepared by the German Air Historical Branch,  
(8th Abteilung) and dated 17th July, 1944.

TRANSLATED BY:  
AIR MINISTRY, A.H.B.6.  
19. 5. 1947.

## C O N T E N T S

### A. 1942

- I The political and military background to the operations in Tunisia.
- II Axis preparations.
- III The Allied Landing.
- IV Appreciation of the terrain.
- V The defence of the bridgehead
  - (a) Enemy activity.
  - (b) Axis activity.
  - (c) The supply problem.
- VI The Libyan Campaign.
- VII Summary of developments in 1942.

### B. Early 1943.

- I Enemy activity.
- II Operations of the 5th Panzer Army.
- III Operations of Rommel's Army.
- IV Supplies.
- V Strengths at the beginning of the decisive period.

### C. The Role of the Italians.

### D. The Final Battle.

- I Situation reports by Field Marshalls Kesselring and Rommel in March, 1943.
- II Operations of the 1st Italian Panzer Army up to the retreat on Enfidaville.
- III Operations of the 5th Panzer Army.
- IV The end.

### E. Axis Air and Sea transport operations during the campaign.

- I Air operations.
- II Naval operations.

### F. Summary.

### G. Reasons for the collapse of the Tunisian bridgehead.

### H. Lessons to be learnt from the course of operations in Tunisia.

A. 1942.

## I The political and military background to the operations in Tunisia.

All military operations must be considered in the light of the general political and military situation if lessons are to be readily learnt and the strategy of the Commanders is to be understood. This principle is particularly applicable to the Tunisian campaign, which must be studied in relation to the operations of Rommel and to the general political situation in 1942.

The situation may be briefly described as follows: the German and Italian Panzer Armies had pushed forward in the Summer of 1942 to positions near El Alamein, where they constituted a grave menace to the British in the Middle East. In Southern Russia, German tanks had penetrated deep into the Caucasus and were thus virtually in a position to threaten the Middle East from its other flank. England and America had, in the Summer of 1942, given an undertaking to Russia that they would open a Second Front.

In Europe, Germany's only Ally worthy of the name was Mussolini's Italy. One must specify "Mussolini's" for only this man was keeping Italy in the war. The Italian conquest of Abyssinia and participation in the Spanish Civil War had been a useful practical outlet for Fascist ideology, but had weakened the Nation militarily and had also led to its political isolation. These events had inevitable repercussions in Italian internal politics. The Officers Corps, deeply involved with international finance and the Roman Catholic clergy distrusted Fascism, and Mussolini's position was gravely weakened by mishaps in Libya, a colony very dear to Italy's heart, and which had originally been acquired at the cost of heavy sacrifices.

As regards armament, neither the Italian Navy, nor the Army, nor the Air Force were adequately equipped to meet the demands of modern warfare. Thanks to the development of certain specialized equipment, and to skillful propaganda, an image of Italy's military strength had been built up, which did not however long outlive the opening of hostilities. The inadequacy of military preparations and the inefficiency of the majority of the Italian Officers soon became evident.

In spite of this, Germany, having succeeded in bringing Italy into the War, could not afford to relinquish her support in the Mediterranean, since the Italian North African colonies offered excellent opportunities as a base for a drive against the Middle East. In addition, England's intention of trying to knock Italy out of the war in order to start a Second Front in Southern Europe was well known, and it was at all costs essential for us to hold on to Southern Europe to give us time to prepare our defences against the final onslaught.

## II Axis preparations.

As early as June 1942, preparations were begun by ourselves and by the Italians to occupy the French Mediterranean coast in the event of a landing in Southern France, and to defend it against Anglo-American attacks, in co-operation with French troops.

In connection with these preparations, consideration was also given to the fulfilment of the old Italian dream of occupying Tunis and Biserta, which, by the use of the short sea route between Sicily and Tunis, would enable us to reduce the threat to our Africa-bound shipping. The fact that Tunisia has a very large Italian population also played a not inconsiderable part in these deliberations.

/From

From July 1942, both O.K.W. and the Italian Comando Supremo were aware through agent's reports that the Allies were preparing a landing in Africa and possibly also in Southern Europe. The Italians were mainly afraid of a landing in Tunis or Tripoli, which would have cut off the retreat of Rommel's forces in Egypt.

As late as October 18th, 1942, the High Command believed that the Allies intended to land at Dakar, while landings at Algiers or Tunis seemed unlikely.

The defence of the French West and North-Western African Colonies was considered as the task of the French, and the French demands for material assistance in the most threatened areas of West Africa were therefore regarded sympathetically by Germany.

In reality however, Mussolini's opinion that the will to resist of the French should not be over-estimated proved to be correct. He foresaw that when the long-awaited landing took place, the English would remain in the background, the Americans assuming the leadership and responsibility in the operation, and that Vichy would not want to spoil its relations with the United States.

These views held by Mussolini did not altogether correspond with those of O.K.W.; who took it for granted that in order to maintain their Colonial Empire, the French would co-operate with the Axis powers.

In the main, preparations for an Axis occupation of Tunisia had not, by the end of October, 1942, gone beyond the discussion stage, although the Italians were holding small forces in readiness in Libya.

### III The Allied Landing.

On November 6th, 1942, a total of some 62 ships were reported at Gibraltar. Mussolini judged the situation correctly. He expected a landing to take place in North Africa West of Philippeville, - and therefore out of range of our fighters. Even if our Air Force and U-boats achieved the maximum success against the convoy, - he expected that a partial landing could still be carried out.

The idea of using heavy Italian naval units was not pursued, as in the view of the Italian Naval Command, the Italian Fleet could not hope to master the numerically equal British fleet. Its employment would have been a heroic gesture, but one involving heavy sacrifices and where only result would be to increase the difficulties in carrying supplies to the African Front.

This point of view was shared by the German Naval authorities in Italy. The contrary opinion was held by the Naval War Staff (Seekriegsleitung), who believed that the use of heavy naval units might well have a decisive influence in cutting the flow of supplies to the Allies in Africa, but this theory was never implemented.

In the night of November 7th - 8th, landings were carried out at Casablanca, Port Lyautey, Oran and Algiers and were everywhere met with local French resistance. The landings could only be partly hindered, and fighting continued on land.

It was now a certainty that mobile enemy forces would advance towards Tunis and Tripoli. It was equally clear that the Anglo-Americans would create an air base in North Africa which would enable them to attain the same air supremacy in the Western Mediterranean as they had from Egyptian

bases in England in North-West Europe. This would inevitably lead to further difficulties in maintaining communications between Italy and Africa and would thus place Rommel's army in a dangerous position.

It was therefore essential to counter the Allied invasion of North Africa by a similar landing at Tunis, where the terrain offered favourable possibilities of halting the Allied advance along the Mediterranean coast. In the event of the French proving co-operative, the undertaking could be regarded as being for their support; should they prove unfriendly, it could be considered as a measure made necessary for our self preservation. Tunis was particularly important as an air base.

It had been settled that the French would put up genuine resistance, and we therefore expected that at the most, they would do nothing to hinder our operations and might even assist us to some extent. It was necessary to build up in Tunisia a base sufficiently advanced to enable light forces to attack the Allies in the vicinity of Algiers. This new bridgehead had to be established and maintained in a race for time against the expected Allied advance from Algeria.

The C.-in-C. Southern Area therefore decided on November 8th to send a small staff to Tunisia, commanded by Hauptmann (Captain) Schuermeyer, as representative of the Fuehrer and the Duce to superintend preparations for the landing of German Air Force units on Tunisian and possibly also on Algerian airfields.

On November 9th, the French Government placed the Tunisian bases at the disposal of the Axis, and from then onwards our aircraft were able to operate from Africa bases against the Anglo-American invasion troops.

Two days later, on November 11th, German troops occupied Southern France. The attitude of the French Government in all this was not very clear. The official story was that Admiral Darlan was in the power of the Allies and that he would use his name to launch an appeal to the French Army and population - No-one could suspect the treachery that was to follow.

As a result of the arrangements made between Hauptmann Schuermeyer and the local authorities, fighter units with their ground crews and Flak units were dispatched to Tunisia to take part in the fight against the enemy in Algeria.

#### IV Appreciation of the terrain.

From the geographical data available to the High Command in the Autumn of 1942, the following picture had been formed: The Northern half of Tunisia is mainly wooded with the exception of a range of low mountains running towards Biskra in a North-west - South Easterly direction. The vallies present no difficulties and even off the roads motorized columns can move without difficulty except after heavy rainfall.

Thanks to a well constructed road network the mountains are no obstacle to an advance from West to East. With the exception of the Bay of Tabarka, the Northern Coast of Tunisia is unsuitable for landing operations due to the steepness of the cliffs.

It was necessary to block and guard the roads and passes North of a line running from Bone to Gabes via Souk Ahras, Tebessa, Metlaoui and Kebili, in order to secure Biserta and its approaches from enemy attack. From the very beginning this defensive line was regarded as a preparation for a Westward drive by our troops. The geographical conditions for the proposed offensive were as follows:

/French

French North Africa is traversed from East to West by two mountain chains, separated by tableland, and bordered in the North by the Mediterranean and in the South by the Sahara. The Northern mountain range runs from Spanish Morocco, where it is known as the Riff, to the vicinity of Tunis. Its altitude graduates from about 2400 metres in the West to 1200 metres in the East.

The Southern range, known as the Atlas Mountains, begins on the Atlantic coast near Agadir and merges in the Northern range near Tunis. The tableland between the two chains is about 400-500 km wide on the Atlantic coast, but narrows towards its Eastern boundaries.

The Sahara South of the Atlas Mountains is on the whole not sandy, but hard and rocky, and can be crossed by motorised columns, as can also most of the tableland between the mountain ranges.

Road communications in French North Africa are excellent, and the movement of motorised vehicles is almost always possible, although often dangerous in the many narrow defiles. Mountain troops are necessary for operations in the coastal areas.

The Tripolitanian frontier can be effectively closed in two places. Either in the Mareth area to a width of 30-40 km. between the sea and the Matnatas in the old peace-time fortifications, or North of Gabes between Schott El Fedjadj and the coast (It may be noted here that in February 1943, the Schott El Fedjadj proved to be dry and was therefore passable for motor vehicles.)

Bearing these conditions in mind, and in pursuance of our intention not only to defend the Tunis-Biserta bridgehead but also to launch an attack against the invaders, the following disposition of forces was proposed:

Northern Sector. Infantry, (Mountain troops), and motorised columns, for offensive operations in the Algerian mountains and along the coast, for the purpose of extending our own and reducing the enemy's coastal base.

Central Sector. Tanks and motorised units to operate on the tableland between the two mountain ranges.

Southern Sector. Light and motorised units in the vicinity of the Atlas Mountains, to defend our Southern flank and to encircle the enemy whenever possible. As regards the offensive itself, the plan was to launch a number of spearhead advances in various easily defended sectors in which halts could be made from time to time for reinforcements and supplies to be brought up.

Our ultimate aim was to advance towards Morocco and the Atlantic coast. This could only be achieved if the supply problem could be solved. The opinion prevailed that the lengthening of our lines of communication could be countered by the use of Siebel ferries and tank-landing craft.

The alternative course of action was to confine ourselves to defending the Tunisian bridgehead. While this could be achieved with less men than were required for the offensive operation, it was believed that it would almost certainly result in the rapid encirclement of the Italian mainland and consequently to the loss of our principal air base in the Mediterranean to the Anglo-Americans.

V The Defence of the Bridgehead.

a. Enemy activity

The tonnage landed by the enemy on the North African coast was estimated at about 700,000 B.R.T. Allowing between 14-15 B.R.T. per man, to include equipment, ammunition and food, the initial strength of the Allies had to be reckoned at between  $2\frac{1}{2}$  and 3 Divisions.

Up to November 24th, a total of some 301 troop-transport and freighters had passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on their way to the African coast, escorted by 238 naval vessels of various types. On the basis of W/T interception we were able to establish that the enemy force comprised five American Divisions, (1st and 2nd Armoured Divisions, and 1st, 3rd and 9th Infantry Divisions, and between one and two British Divisions, (elements of the 4th and 56th Divisions.)

The Anglo-American supply bases were located on the coast of Morocco and were therefore out of the range of our Air Force. Supplies had to be brought up by the single-track railway line via Casablanca - Fez - Algiers - Tunis. If civilian traffic was cut by 50%, supplies for between three and four divisions could be transported by rail.

The French Tunisian Division under General Barre, which had left Tunis on November 12th with orders to resist the Allies, soon showed itself to be hostile to the Germans, and the French Commandant of Biserta, a loyal supporter of the Vichy Government, declared that he had no more control over the Tunisian troops.

On November 16th the enemy began the advance towards Tunisia in three columns. One headed towards Tabarka, another towards Souk El Aras via Souk Ahras, while the third advanced in the direction of Tebessa.

The intention of the enemy was clear - to cut off the Air Forces in Tunisia from these in Libya. The possibility of making a swift drive on Tunis and Biserta in the first few days after the landing was not seized by the enemy. Until November 19th, enemy reconnaissance extended only as far as a line running between Abiod - Beja - Lekef - Tebessa, where he was preparing to attack. Whether this delay was due to supply difficulties or to the desire of the Allied High Command to ensure maximum security, by means of the greatest possible numerical superiority before launching the attack is a question that can even now not be answered with reasonable certainty.

On November 25th, an enemy attack supported by strong armoured forces was launched in the direction of Medjez. The bridgehead held, but the enemy continued an encircling movement on both flanks, which was however stopped after our last tank reserves had been thrown in.

A second tank column advancing from Beja towards Mateur branched off Eastwards at Station Sant Nsir, reached Djedeida airfield in the late afternoon, and destroyed a number of aircraft and damaged our ground installation. In the Southern sector, no enemy forces were sighted.

About 50 enemy tanks broke through North of Medjez El Bab. General Nehring decided to retreat to a defence line running between Abiod - Mateur - Djedeida - Saint Cyprin - Quirin - Hammanlif. The situation was critical. To block the enemy advance all available forces had to be employed. All roads leading to Tunis were guarded in a semi-circular defensive belt, but in view of the width of the terrain individual penetrations were unavoidable.

However, the situation was relieved by the Air Force. Continuous Stuka attacks forced the enemy back and resulted in the destruction of 18 tanks. On the roads to Tunis no enemy traffic was observed.

On the basis of reconnaissance of airfields and of the scale of enemy effort over the front, the operational strength of the enemy in the air was estimated at 50 fighters, 20 T.E. bombers, and a number of 4-engined bombers, (up to 12 had been observed operating simultaneously). On thirteen Algerian airfields approximately 600 aircraft had been sighted.

Neither in the air nor on land had the enemy operated in great strength.

The French in North Africa had responded to Darlan's appeal. Their total strength of about 76,000 men had to be added to that of the Anglo-American forces. Our rail communications between Tunis and the South were also disrupted by attacks made by Gaullist troops.

During November and December the enemy was testing our defences on the entire length of the front to discover any weak points.

In November some 142 aircraft were believed to be stationed on Malta of which 102 S.E., 35 T.E. and 5 torpedo carrying aircraft. Photographic reconnaissance and interpretation had revealed the existence of 281 blast bays for aircraft, and 80 dispersal areas without splinter protection. The blast bays were so constructed that only direct hits could be successful. Underground dispersal sites were available at Venetia with space for about 60 aircraft. By December 14th the number of aircraft on the island had risen to 226, of which 126 fighters, and 100 bombers.

Concentrated attacks against Malta with the co-operation of the Italian Air Force had to be discontinued due to lack of the necessary effectives, and the enemy was therefore able to make undisturbed use of this base. Bombers and torpedo bombers specially equipped for shipping search operated from Malta against Axis sea traffic in the Mediterranean.

#### b. Axis activity

On November 12th, the Tunisian bridgehead was reinforced by the formation of a new Army Command under General Nehring (90th Army Corps). The first task was to send out reconnaissance patrols as far Westwards as the line Bone - Tebessa - Gafsa - Kébili to block all road crossings and to maintain contact with the Tunisian Division. Subsequently, the bridgehead was extended Southwards, Gabes being occupied by our troops without resistance.

After the first allied drive towards Tunis had been repulsed at the end of November, the C.-in-C. Southern Area ordered the immediate resumption of mobile operations from the bridgehead. By the mining of roads and railway tracks, and by attacks on shipping, the Allies were to be prevented from bringing up fresh effectives, and air supremacy was to be attained by the annihilation of the still very weak enemy Air Forces.

On November 28th we succeeded in advancing 14 km. South of Mateur. The newly captured ground was unsuitable for tanks and could therefore be defended with infantry and artillery. In addition, it provided a useful base for a flanking attack against any enemy advance towards the bridgehead.

On December 1st, the 90th Army Corps with 65 tanks, including 2 'Tigers', gained ground in the vicinity of Tebourba, and captured, 59 enemy tanks and 13 armoured patrol cars being destroyed, and 862 prisoners taken. The attack was supported by 32 bombers and 35 Stukas of the German Air Force. Results against tank concentrations and motorised columns in the Tebourba area were excellent, particularly as road congestion had led to the enemy forces being massed in one area.

/Thus

Thus the first enemy offensive was routed, but the course of operations had plainly brought out the many defects and deficiencies on our side. The forces at our disposal were numerically inadequate and were insufficiently mobile. The lack of communications also complicated the task of the High Command.

In recent engagements the strength of our serviceable tanks had fallen from 63 tanks and 3 Tigers to 25 tanks and 3 Tigers. On November 29th the C.-in-C. Southern Area estimated that in spite of this grave weakening of our forces, the task could be completed and fresh territory conquered provided that difficulties in bringing up supplies and providing air support could be overcome.

Nevertheless, apart from local German advances in the days following December 9th South West of Tebourba and in the direction of Gafsa, there was a general slackening in the tempo of operations. Bad weather conditions rendered impossible all activity except reconnaissance, and even this produced very unsatisfactory results.

The very limited unloading facilities in the harbours of Tunis, Biserta and Sousse made it impossible to speed up the pace of German offensive operations. Air raid warnings by Freya frequently came too late, only one station being available in Biserta and which worked towards the West, whereas the attacks were generally launched from Malta. This led to panic and the dockyard workers frequently deserted their work.

On December 12th French forces in Tunis, Biserta, Sousse and Sfax were disarmed by troops of the newly formed 5th Army Command under Colonel General Von Arnim. No resistance was offered after an ultimatum had been delivered demanding the surrender of the warships and fortifications undestroyed, with the alternative of death.

The French forces were to have been disarmed on November 27th, but this could not be effected at that time due to the inadequacy of our forces. Admiral Weichhold who had been entrusted by the C.-in-C. Southern Area with the conduct of the operation, therefore assured himself only of the loyalty of the French Commander-in-Chief. Instructions had been given to fire upon the French naval units should they attempt to leave Tunis and Biserta.

The smooth execution of the task was greatly facilitated by the activities of Minister Rahn and his agents, and by Rahn's personal influence on Admiral Esteva, the French Resident-General in Tunis.

The following were captured undamaged in Biserta and Tunis, and were handed over to the Italian Navy:-

3 torpedo boats	1 destroyer
2 avisos	5 freighters
3 tugs	1 mine layer
3 fishing steamers	9 submarines
1 tanker	2 floating cranes.

In addition, the entire dockyard installations and the arsenal at Ferryville were taken over undamaged and without incident.

### c. The supply problem

The whole position in Tunisia was from the very beginning dependent on the problem of carrying supplies between Italy and Tunis. As early as the last days of November 1942, the maintenance of our position depended on whether we could succeed in bringing tanks and heavy guns across the Straits by sea. In the words of the Fuehrer, "The bridgehead had to be built and fortified in a race for time against the Allies in Algeria".

/During

During November, an average of 1500 men with heavy weapons was transported daily by air to the Tunisian front.

The enemy recognized the weakness of our supply lines, and not only sent submarines to operate on our convoy routes, but also dispatched aircraft from Malta to attack our shipping. During the night of December 1st-2nd, particularly severe blows were struck. The tanker 'Georgio' was set on fire by a Malta based aircraft on armed patrol. In addition, an enemy naval force of 1 cruiser and 5 destroyers attacked a convoy of 4 cargo vessels and 5 destroyers bound from Palermo to Tunis. Several cargo vessels and 1 Italian destroyer were lost. It was later established that the enemy naval force was engaged on minelaying in the Sicilian Straits, and came upon our convoy by chance.

Our convoys were continually endangered by the proximity of light enemy naval forces stationed at Bone. They were able under cover of darkness to prey on our convoys which, due to our own mine belts, had to sail along a comparatively narrow route.

Further, the interests of supply and aerial defence were frequently in conflict. The defence of our ground organisation, the essential condition for the operation of Axis Air Force units necessitated the allocation of Flak units. These were, however, also needed to defend the ports of Sousse, Sfax and Gabes, at which supplies for Rommel's Army were landed. To relieve rail traffic from Tunis to the South, coastal traffic with small ships was inaugurated between Tunis and Tripoli.

The ever-increasing strength of the enemy forced us to increase our reinforcements for the African Theatre. As from the middle of December 1942, our requirements were estimated at 60,000 men per month for the entire African front including Tripolitania.

With a view to speeding up rail transport in Italy and increasing available shipping tonnage, it was decided to confine the carriage of civilian goods in Italy to transport by coastal shipping. The Italian Minister of Transport co-operated fully in this project.

Owing to continual shipping losses, the fuel position of Rommel's tanks was becoming more and more critical. Field Marshal Kesselring therefore ordered that in addition to the regular transport aircraft, all available non-operational planes should be used to transport fuel to Tripolitania, using jettisonable fuel tanks for this purpose where possible.

To make good our shipping losses and accelerate the transport of troops, C.-in-C. Southern Area proposed the use of fast naval vessels. The Italian Navy would only supply destroyers for this task, as cruisers would have in turn required destroyer protection. In the opinion of the Italians, it was not practicable to employ auxiliary naval ships or passenger liners. The further proposal that Italian front line submarines might for a time carry fuel to Africa was never seriously exploited.

On December 15th, the 5th Panzer Army Command issued the following statement:- "After the end of the rainy season, the enemy can, and will attack, and our armies in Tunisia will have to go into action. This will be in 6 - 8 weeks' time. At present, reinforcements by air are at the rate of between 300 and 600 troops daily".

"Our ships are being sunk either outside the harbour or inside, by submarine and air attack. The use of the Tunis-Gabes railway and of coastal shipping, has, since December 3rd permitted approximately 200/250 metric tons of supplies to be conveyed to Rommel daily. Since then the railway has been almost entirely put out of action by air attack and sabotage. Large scale use of road transport between Tunis and Gabes is not possible,

/since

since all available trucks are being employed in the bridgehead to supply our troops and carry goods from the harbours. It cannot yet be estimated whether sufficient coastal shipping will be available to ensure the carriage of supplies to Rommel once the use of large ships, railways and roads is no longer possible".

"A similar situation prevails in Tunisia, where with the present resources it will take several months to assemble the necessary forces".

The inadequacy of the A.A. defences at the Tunisian ports can be seen by the order issued that all merchant ships must leave harbour as soon as their unloading was completed, the danger of remaining in harbour being greater than that of putting to sea.

The continual attacks carried out by aircraft and light naval forces on ports and convoyed routes led to an alarming rise in the number of ships lying under repair. At the end of December 1942, the figure rose to 53% of all shipping space available in the Italian area.

On December 1st 1942, 140,000 B.R.T. of shipping tonnage were available for carrying supplies to Tunisia. Within 2 weeks, 26 ships had been severely damaged by air attacks, and the entrance to a number of ports had been mined by British aircraft.

Enemy submarine activity in the Sicilian Straits could no longer be systematically countered, and the German authorities had the utmost difficulty in persuading Italian ships to put to sea. The argument that any delay would result in there not being adequate forces in Tunisia to resist the threatened Allied attack was of no avail.

## VI The Libyan Campaign.

The safeguarding of Tunisia appeared to be of greater importance in the overall framework of our strategy than the supplying of Tripolitania. Hence all available sea and air transport was devoted to the building up and supplying of the Tunisian bridgehead.

This policy proved very detrimental to the reinforcement of Rommel's Army, at this time on the retreat and very hard pressed by the enemy, having been forced by the enemy's vast material superiority to give up the El Alamein line after bitter fighting in early November, 1942.

Adjoining territory near Sollum, where resistance would have been possible had also to be abandoned, as our forces were insufficient to build up a composite front. Rommel did, however, succeed in avoiding complete annihilation by retreating towards the West, but due to lack of fuel, munitions and vehicles were unable to deliver counter blows on the many occasions where this would have otherwise have been possible.

Tobruk and Benghazi had to be evacuated. Only in the Agedabia area at Marsa El Brega could the Army form defensive positions. The enemy also was experiencing supply difficulties after the long pursuit from Alamein and had been held up by mines and demolitions.

At the beginning of December, supplies began to arrive via Tunis, Biserta and Gabes, but the port of Tripoli was so congested by Italian evacuation ships that in the opinion of the Italian Navy no vessels carrying supplies for Rommel would be able to enter for at least two weeks. A personal message from the Fuehrer to Mussolini resulted in partial alienation of these difficulties.

Due to the inadequacy of supplies the enemy could not be prevented from encircling our positions at Marsa El Brega, and Rommel was obliged to retreat to new positions at Buerat which was reached on December 22nd. Optimism prevailed in Italian circles, where it was believed that Buerat could be defended for some time. Supplies were still the key to the whole situation.

This optimism was not shared by the German authorities. As early as December 18th, Rommel had written to the C.-in-C. Southern Area:- "As events to date make it appear unlikely that it will ever be possible to furnish adequate supplies to the army in Tripolitania, the only solution is to make a fighting retreat from position to position towards Tunisia. There will then be a possibility of joining up with our forces there, and once reserves have been built up, of launching a powerful attack, either Eastwards or Westwards".

"The advantages of forming a line of defence in Southern Tunisia are numerous. Strongly fortified positions already exist at Gabes, and the proximity of the impassable Schott area makes impossible any encircling movement by the enemy. These positions can easily be supplied and are favourable for the operation of light mobile forces."

A decision was indeed becoming urgently necessary, as approximately 10,000 Germans and 15,000 Italians were immobilised in the Buerat position.

The assumption that the Schott area round Gabes was impassable and therefore a good natural defence against enemy encirclement was later proved to be false, as the salt marshes were dried up.

In agreement with Mussolini, who in spite of all the internal political repercussions to be expected in Italy, believed that it was more vital to hold Tunis than Tripoli, the Fuehrer decided on a fighting withdrawal to Tunisia, while gaining as much time as possible.

## VII Summary of Developments in 1942.

The results of the initial months of the North West African campaign may be briefly summarized as follows:

In Algeria, the swift landing of German troops had prevented the enemy from occupying Tunisia and cutting off supplies to Rommel's army. Further, the enemy had neglected the opportunity of making a rapid motorised advance in the first few weeks after the landing at a time when the Axis forces were still weak. The Allies preferred to build up numerical supremacy so as to remove any element of uncertainty. To this end, they concentrated on building up supply facilities in the Algerian and Moroccan harbours and on creating a vast supply organisation.

In the Western Desert, the enemy had used their material strength to break through Rommel's positions at El Alamein, driving our armies back 1500 km. to a line West of Buerat. They had however, not succeeded in annihilating them, and in relation to the conditions prevailing on this Front the retreat could be considered as orderly.

/The

The enemy success was due almost entirely to the fact that our supply routes were subjected to constant attack by the enemy Navy and Air Forces, and that our supply losses were therefore heavy.

It was becoming increasingly clear that future developments on both sides would depend largely on the question of transport and supplies. In this campaign, success would go to the side which delivered the most crushing blows against the others supply routes, - in other words, to the side having the stronger Navy and Air Force. 'Strength' did not in this connection denote only purely numerical superiority, but also a variety of other factors, mainly of a political nature and connected with our Italian Ally. The question of how it came about that our absolute supremacy in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the campaign had by this time been lost will be treated elsewhere.

Optimism prevailed as to developments in 1943. It was hoped that by the time the Allied offensive was launched, we should have amassed sufficient material to withstand it. The campaign had the most far-reaching political implications; it was essential to gain as much time as possible in which to take precautions against all eventualities on the European Mainland.

## B. Early 1943.

### I. Enemy activity.

By the end of December 1942, ships representing a total tonnage of approximately 2.6 million B.R.T. had landed troops and supplies in North West Africa. This total does not include ships passing through the Straits of Gibraltar whose destination was unknown.

A force of approximately 150,000 men had to be reckoned with. After subtracting all units operating behind the line, naval maintenance units, coastal batteries, anti-aircraft batteries etc., the enemy strength at the front at the beginning of 1943 was estimated at 2 armoured divisions and 3-4 infantry divisions.

The opposing sides were at that time facing each other along comparatively rigid lines. By local attacks, the Anglo-Americans frequently tried to secure bases for large scale offensive operations. These often led to clashes and at times even to fierce battles.

Towards the middle of January enemy ground activity in the Tunisian sector increased. Taking advantage of the weak points in our lines - mainly on the Italian sectors, the enemy in conjunction with French forces tried to secure the mountain exits to the coast beyond Pont du Fahs, and at the same time to tie down our own forces there. This attempt was however frustrated in all sectors.

### II. Operations of the 5th Panzer Army.

After the enemy attacks had failed all along the mountain front, the 5th Panzer Army launched on February 26th an attack intended to smash the enemy forces near Medjez el Bab and to disrupt the enemy positions generally. Fighting continued until March 5th and resulted in some territorial gains for our troops and in heavy losses of materials for the enemy. The American preparations for an offensive were consequently hampered, and the beginning of the offensive itself postponed by several weeks. We should have achieved far greater successes had weather conditions been better. The heavy rainfalls had turned the ground into mud.

The time thus gained before the enemy major offensive could begin had to be utilized in concentrated efforts to bring up more supplies. Our own air activity was directed at preventing further reinforcements from

/reaching

reaching the enemy and thereby preventing the relative strength between the enemy and ourselves becoming even more unfavourable to us. The Fuehrer therefore issued an order on January 16th stating that attacks on shipping and naval convoys were to have priority over attacks on enemy airfields.

The following ships were sunk (or so badly damaged that they can be presumed to have been sunk) in February 1943:-

31 merchantmen (189,000 B.R.T.)  
2 destroyers  
1 cruiser  
1 U-boat

The following were damaged:-

13 merchantmen (60,000 B.R.T.)  
1 light cruiser.

### III. Operations of Rommel's Army.

On the advice of Field Marshal Rommel, the Fuehrer ordered that should the necessity arise, the Buerat line was to be abandoned, and a fighting retreat made. The Panzer Army was to construct defensive positions between Tunis and Libya from Tripoli to Gabes, with the Mareth and Schott-Gabes Lines as reserve strongpoints.

The withdrawal from the Buerat position began during the night of January 15th-16th. Advanced formations of the 21st Panzer Division consisting of 34 tanks reached Gabes on the afternoon of January 16th. The rest of Rommel's Panzer Army was withdrawn to a line running between Tahouna-Homs.

On January 19th the offensive launched by the enemy on a broad front against our positions South of Tahouna was repulsed with heavy losses by concentrated artillery fire. The enemy however succeeded in encircling our position after a surprise break through by their motorised columns in the mountainous country South West of Tahouna, which we ourselves had considered extremely difficult to pass. The German forces were driven back to Tripoli, which was finally abandoned during the night of January 22nd-23rd.

The necessary destruction of all installations, especially those at the harbour and airfields, and the evacuation of supplies from the town proceeded according to plan. It was not till a few weeks later that it was discovered that the destruction of the harbour by the Italians had been far from thorough.

On February 15th the last elements of Rommel's Panzer Army left Tripolitania. Army Group Africa now consisted of the 5th Panzer Army and the 1st Italian Panzer Army.

The centre of the fighting now shifted to the sector held by the 1st Italian Panzer Army. At the beginning and middle of February German units broke through the mountain passes North of Casserine and Thelepte and achieved certain local improvements in the position.

The enemy concentration was thus seriously disturbed, but, as was pointed out by Fliegerkorps Tunis on February 24th, the units which had broken through were, although numerically superior, composed of many different elements which had been assembled in great haste, and were not capable of further offensive action.

It was certain that a new attack on the Mareth line would soon be launched, and it was therefore decided to forestall the enemy by

an offensive movement in the sector with tanks secretly transferred from Western Tunisia. This attack was begun on March 3rd, and two days later our forces retired once more to the Mareth line having achieved their aim.

#### IV. Supplies.

The decisive factor in the supply situation at the beginning of 1943 was the shortage of convoy escort vessels. The number of transport ships available and the unloading facilities of the Tunisian harbours were of secondary importance.

The causes of this shortage can still not be ascertained with absolute certainty. The explanation given at the time by the Italian Navy that this situation was due to the effects of enemy action and to shortage of fuel may be regarded as at any rate partly true. Another explanation might be that the Italians were anxious to conserve their Fleet as a bargaining weapon at subsequent peace negotiations.

Finally the decision was taken to operate fast supply ships without escort. This involved a great risk, but one which had to be taken if supplies were to be maintained. The Italians however, insisted on the greatest possible air protection. This had to be carried out by German bomber units.

Another measure adopted was to increase the number of destroyers carrying troops to 7. This was out of the total of 35 destroyers available in the area. The use of destroyers for carrying supplies was not practicable; stowage space below decks being insignificant and deck loading possible only on a very small scale.

Enemy activity was steadily increasing. Aerial minelaying was carried out in the approaches to Tunis harbour shortly before the arrival of convoys which normally passed through the Sicilian Straits at night. This led to considerable delays and reduced the already limited tonnage available by lengthening the turn around time. The Italian minesweepers were suitable only for operations in the actual harbour approaches. In rough weather mine sweeping in the entire Bay of Tunis had to be abandoned. The only solution was to use former German minesweepers which had belonged to the Yugoslav Navy. The Italian Navy repeatedly refused to employ German mine-detecting equipment which was offered to them.

In general, co-operation with the Italian Navy was far from smooth. Orders issued by C.-in-C. Southern Area to German Units were neither passed on nor supported by Italian Naval H.Q.'s in Sicily. No sound reasons were ever offered for their attitude.

On January 1st the valuable steamship "RUHR" was sunk, with the loss of tanks, M/T vehicles and Giant Wurzburg equipment. On the same day heavy losses were sustained by Ju.52 aircraft and crews

The supply position was further complicated by the weight of enemy air attack directed against supply traffic and communications installations in Sicily. The air defence forces necessary for the protection of these objectives having been withdrawn from the Sicilian harbours, the enemy task against our shipping and loading equipment was considerably facilitated. Difficulties were ever increasing. At the end of February coal reserves sufficient only for 6 days were available in Sicily. A stoppage of rail traffic due to lack of coal would have had serious results, particularly on the shipment of supplies to Tunisia, and the Italians therefore decided to dispatch supply convoys to Sicily. For this purpose shipping was withdrawn from the direct Africa route.

In the Sicilian ports, there was a shortage of railway trucks, tugs and lighters. Crane facilities were also inadequate.

In the view of the Italians, the custom of using only single or few ships at a time resulted in heavy losses, and in a decline in serviceability, due to the non-stop way in which the shipping was employed. Naval personnel could for the same reason never be withdrawn for re-training and were, in the words of Admiral Sansonetti, "inexperienced in torpedo firing and in the handling of machine-guns, ragged, neglected and resembling a band of pirates".

Of the total Italian strength of 33 destroyers, only 11 were fit for action. Enemy air and sea activity against Axis convoys was increasing daily. Numerous ships were torpedoed in the immediate vicinity of Naples. The Italian convoy routes were on the whole far too rigid.

On March 8th, 1943, in view of the steady losses sustained by Italian shipping Admiral Sansonetti proposed that in the future 3 - 4 strongly protected convoys per month should carry supplies to Tunisia. About 20 convoy escort craft and 40 aircraft would be needed as protection. In his opinion the practise of using single or few ships at a time could only lead to further losses.

The underlying cause of this proposal was most probably the egoistical attitude of the Italians. Having sustained heavy losses in its light naval forces, the Italian Navy was seeking to preserve as far as possible its remaining escort forces.

In the opinion of German Naval Authorities, the system proposed by the Italians had numerous disadvantages. It was difficult to gather a sufficient number of merchant ships of a similar type to form a convoy. Further, it was a complex matter to assemble shipping from a number of different ports and there was also the possibility of harbour being congested with fully loaded shipping should bad weather make it impossible for the escorts to put to sea. Finally, the masters of many merchant ships had had no experience of sailing in convoy.

On the orders of Commando Supremo, the Italian Navy continued with the shipping space available to supply Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, Dalmatia, Albania, Greece and Rhodes. Escort vessels were also necessary for the protection of these shipping routes. Serviceable Italian submarines were to be used to carry supplies to Lampedusa, while former French submarines were to be employed on the route to Africa, but as far as can be ascertained, no more than 3 of the latter mentioned submarines were ever in operation during the entire Tunisian campaign.

## V Strengths at the beginning of the decisive period.

### 1. Axis Strength

German forces in Tunisia totalled 180,000 men, of which Army, 139,000, Air Force 35,000, Navy, 5,500.

Italian troops in Tunisia totalled 110,000 men. The difference between this figure and that of 215,000 men issued by the Italians may be explained by the fact that the Italian figure represents the Establishment strength. (The Italians often reported Establishment as operational strength, in order to be able to demand more supplies).

### 2. Aircraft strengths in the Mediterranean

#### (a) Enemy: position at 9.1.1943.

A total of 1,750 aircraft in Egypt, Africa and Malta, (700 fighters, 600 bombers, 245 reconnaissance aircraft, and about 200 transport planes).

/of

Of these 1,750 aircraft, 235 were stationed on Malta, (136 fighters, 60 bombers, 15 torpedo bombers, 20 reconnaissance aircraft), and 900 in French North Africa, (500 fighters, 230 T.E. bombers, 100 4-engined bombers, 70 transport aircraft).

According to Y service reports, serviceability in January 1943 was between 30-40%. The figures given represent the minimum enemy strength; it may be estimated that at the beginning of the enemy offensive, the figures were higher, as the enemy was receiving continual reinforcements.

(b) Own strength as at 7.3.1943.

	<u>Bombers</u>	<u>Recce.</u>	<u>Fighters</u>		<u>Dive</u>	<u>Ground</u>	<u>Transport</u>	<u>Sea</u>
			<u>T.E.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>	<u>Bombers</u>	<u>Attack</u>		
Fliegerkorps II	38	6	19	49	-	-	-	-
Fliegerkorps X	8	4	10	-	-	-	-	15
Fliegerfuehrer 2	-	2	-	64	20	9	-	-
Fliegerfuehrer 3	10	-	18	60	13	25	-	-
Sardinia	-	2	-	10	-	-	20	-
	56	14	47	183	33	34	20	15

Total All aircraft 402.

(3) Flak artillery and tank strengths as at February, 1943.

(a) Own strength (Flak)

2 cm.	288
2 cm. (Vierling)	59
8.8 cm.	138
10.5 cm.	4

Total 489

(b) Own strength (artillery)

418 guns (German and Italian)

(c) Enemy artillery, tanks and Men

840 guns  
1,700 tanks  
225,000 men

(d) Own strength (tanks)

Approximately 220 Panzers, (Mark III & IV)  
16 Tigers

Even when read in conjunction with supply tonnage figures, the above figures do not present an absolutely accurate picture of the situation. For instance, a comparison of Allied and our own shipping tonnage available would suggest a greater material inferiority on our scale than was actually the case, as the Americans allowed a higher average tonnage per head than the Germans and Italians.

Further, the Axis strength of 300,000 men as compared with the 225,000 of the Allied can easily give a distorted picture, for whereas the enemy figure was composed purely of combat troops, the total of our own forces included Air Force ground personnel, supply service and

/garrison

garrison troops, and also embraced approximately 110,000 Italians, whose fighting value was on the whole small. An additional consideration is that a large part of our forces was immobilised due to shortages of vehicles and fuel.

### C. The Role of the Italians

The conquest of East Africa and the expedition of Spain had led to the political isolation of Italy. This Italian policy with its considerable political and economic repercussions, was not greeted by the Italian Officers Corps with the enthusiasm that Mussolini had expected.

At the outbreak of the present war Germany was prepared to content herself with a policy of benevolent neutrality from Italy. But Mussolini, keeping to his idealistic principles, demanded and achieved Italy's entry into the war, despite the total lack of technical and moral preparation in the Italian Forces, which had neither the weapons indispensable in modern warfare, nor officers suited to such a task. Mussolini desired to take part in the war, and attacked France at the moment when she was collapsing under the weight of the German war machine.

The development was welcomed by opponents of Fascism in Italy, who saw in it the possibility of overthrowing the Government with outside aid. The course of operations in France, Greece and in East and North Africa showed clearly that this treachery had been planned a long time ahead.

Even the Air Force, Mussolini's own favoured creation proved to be a failure. The legend of power which Italian propaganda had spread throughout the world was swiftly dispelled by the harsh realities of combat during the first few weeks of the African campaign, and in which the true value of the Italian Air Force became painfully evident.

It was clear that the hold of the Fascist Party over the Italian population was much weaker than had been assumed in Germany. As an example may be quoted our experience with the Italian population in Tunisia, where assistance in unloading our shipping proved altogether inadequate. Of a labour force of 20,000 Italians, only 56 reported for duty on November 11th, 1942.

For these reasons, the Italians began, as early as the Summer of 1942, and later on an increased scale, to sabotage German operations, and under the guise of politeness to refuse and impede co-operation with the German forces wherever possible.

Espionage was also rife in Italy. In July 1942, the acting Gauleiter of Catania wrote:

"One must remember that the Italians are poor and starving and in many cases suffering from tuberculosis. Such conditions provide a fertile breeding ground for anti-fascist propaganda."

"In Sicily, separationist tendencies have revived and are being fed and supported by English propaganda."

In the light of Italy's attitude, many of our difficulties in Africa are explained. Our convoys were often attacked in the Sicilian Straits by light naval forces which had obviously received precise information as to our shipping movements.

The role of the Italian Navy was also curious. One gains the impression that the Italian High Command foresaw the loss of North Africa long before the Germans envisaged such a possibility. The

Italians continued to supply their positions in the Balkans at the expense of shipping that could better have been used on the African route.

As to the morale of the Italians, there was a marked lack of power of decision and readiness for operations. The heavy losses sustained in recent months had certainly left their mark. Further, it was evident that the Italian forces could in no way be measured by the same standards as our own. Orders from Italian Commands were frequently ignored by troops in the field, or, if followed, subsequently disregarded.

As regards the operation of the Italian Air Force, Field Marshall Kesselring was forced to remind General Fougier, that the help promised by the Italians, to the extent of some 60 aircraft, in attacking Allied ports had not been forthcoming.

The Italian Army also was not of the mettle which the propagandists had made out. On 20th November, 1942, the German General (Liason) at Italian Headquarters reported: "There are at present 7 Army Commands, 28 Army Corps and 90 divisions of all kinds including 23 garrison divisions. Of these forces, 8 divisions have been lost in recent actions, and 1 division partly destroyed. Of the remaining 58 combat divisions, 52 are on overseas service. All these divisions even the best equipped, have only the fighting value of a brigade."

The Italian divisions operating in Southern Tunisia, (in the Sousse, Sfax and Gabes areas) were composed either of troops still demoralized by the retreat from Egypt, or of ill-trained reserves newly arrived from Italy.

The replacement of General Cavallero by General Ambrosio on January 31st 1943 was a further symptom of development in Italy. Mussolini explained to Field Marshall Kesselring that the change was due to internal political reasons. "Cavallero left, because he himself felt his task to be completed". In Mussolini's estimation, Ambrosio was a knowledgeable and clever soldier, fully up to the requirements of the situation.

Kesselring, on the other hand, felt that in Cavallero had departed a man who, of all the Italian soldiers that he knew, was the only person capable of leading the Mediterranean campaign to a successful conclusion. Ambrosio had no experience of the Mediterranean campaign, and as an Army specialist, had little or no knowledge of air and naval matters. Kesselring believed that without an energetic leader, all further effort in the Mediterranean would be in vain. On the other hand, so many valuable troops were still in the African theatre that a solution had to be found.

One of Ambrosio's first acts was to propose that Field Marshall Kesselring should be appointed as C.-in-C. of the Army Group in Tunisia. This extraordinary move aroused the suspicion that with Cavallero's departure German influence in Rome had weakened.

Political opposition in Italy had now come out into the open. Mussolini's statement on January 31st, 1942 that, "the Libyan campaign having now only historic interest, the Italians would understand that a battle for the very existence of Italy was in progress," hardly corresponded with the realities of the internal political situation. Mussolini was clearly no longer able to impose his will in the interests of the common war effort. It is beyond the scope of the present report to judge to what extent Mussolini's powers were diminished by his illness.

The powers of resistance and the will to fight of both the Italian Army and the civilian population were indeed by now very slight. This can be seen by the following extract from a report to C.-in-C. Southern Area from the African Army Group dated 7th April, 1943:

"The fighting power of the Italian formations has sunk so low in

the course of the last few weeks that they can at the present be employed neither in attack or in defence with any hope of success. It is therefore requested that no further Italian troops be sent over, but only Italian ammunition and fuel,"

D. The Final Battle

I Situation Reports by Field Marshals Kesselring and Rommel in March 1943.

The large scale Allied offensive which had originally been expected to take place in February, against the Tunisian bridgehead was considerably delayed by German counter attacks at the end of February and beginning of March. Nevertheless, it had to be expected that the full moon period of March would see the beginning of an all-out attack on the Axis positions. It was in the light of these circumstances that the following reports were sent by Field/Marshals Rommel and Kesselring to O.K.W. on March 1st and 3rd respectively:-

(a) Field Marshal Rommel reported: "it is the task of the High Command to strike at the enemy while he is preparing his offensive so that this offensive will suffer further delay. Should the enemy however one day succeed in going over to the offensive along the entire length of the front, our long and thinly manned line will inevitably be broken in several places, and our two armies separated."

"The only way to avert this danger will be to shorten the front by compressing our armies in a smaller space. The Tunisian bridgehead can only be held for any length of time if our troops are at all points mustered in sufficient strength to beat off enemy attacks. The present front line of approximately 625 kms. is untenable, and must be reduced to one of about 150 km, which could run along the present 5th Army line to Djebel Mansour, and from there over the mountains to Enfidaville. This would necessitate the enemy being driven out of the Medjez el Bab and Bou Arada areas Westwards over the mountains".

"This shortening of the front would naturally necessitate the abandonment of a large area of Tunisia, including several airfields. It would also permit the enemy to establish land communication between his armies in the West and in the East. On the other hand, this reduced front could probably be held for a long time, whereas the present line can only be maintained until the enemy offensive is launched. Should it then be broken, the 1st Army will no longer be able to receive supplies, and both armies will be overcome, one after the other. A reduction of the front line as here proposed would no longer be possible, as we should not have the necessary effectives. In view of the present grave situation, I ask for an immediate decision as to the future plan of operations in Tunisia".

A somewhat different opinion was expressed on March 3rd by Field Marshal Kesselring,

"The present strength of the African Army Group as regards numbers, armament, supplies and mobility is altogether inadequate to repulse on our present lines a simultaneous attack launched by the enemy on both flanks with a view to reaching a final decision. Our forces are however strong enough to delay the launching of the offensive. For this reason, it might be considered desirable to withdraw to a narrower front".

"The abandonment of Southern and Central Tunisia would however mean leaving numerous airfields in the hands of the enemy, who

/would

would then be able to employ his numerical superiority in the air to crush our troops, and make all movements of supplies to Tunis and Biserta impossible. Our own Air Force would be deprived of an area on immediate front and could probably not then be maintained for long in Tunisia. To shorten the front to a line running approximately from Cap Serrat to Enfidaville would in my opinion make it impossible to bring up supplies to the Axis troops."

"Conclusion: to compress both armies in a narrow area would in my opinion be to run the risk of losing the whole of Tunisia. I maintain that the enemy forces can only be checked by mobile operations over a large area, during which time new reinforcements can be brought up, and the whole operational area secured against attack."

From these two reports the critical position of our armies is evident. Subsequent developments in March and April showed that both Rommel and Kesselring had been right; the enemy offensive against the 1st Italian Army not only forced our troops to retire on to a narrow front, but also resulted in the loss of numerous airfields in Southern Tunisia. Enemy aerial supremacy became so overwhelming that the collapse of the bridgehead owing to lack of troops and supplies became only a matter of time. The task of the German Air Force in supporting defensive operations was in these circumstances well-nigh unachievable.

Kesselring's theory of mobile warfare could only have been realised by strong and extremely mobile forces. Supplies were the key to the situation, and due to the indifferent attitude of the Italians, amounting virtually to passive resistance, adequate stocks of equipment and fuel were never available.

## II Operations of the 1st Italian Panzer Army up to the retreat on Enfidaville

Between the 16th and 20th March, the 1st Italian Panzer Army was heavily engaged. On the evening of March 16th, the enemy attacked after an artillery barrage had been laid for over 2 hours by some 25 batteries, and succeeded in breaking through, but was later repulsed by a counter attack by German troops. On the 20th, a concentrated attack was launched on the Mareth line West of the Matnata mountains and in the Gafsa area with the aim of annihilating the 1st Italian Army. After the enemy had succeeded in penetrating on a front of 2 km. to a depth of 1.7 km., the situation was relieved on the 23rd by counter attacks launched by the German 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions which had been held in reserve in the area. Valuable support in these operations was given by the Air Force, both in close support sorties, and in protecting our troops from enemy air attack.

On March 26th, a further offensive was launched by enemy armoured forces, which was however checked by the 21st Panzer Division. The attack was renewed on the 26th in greater strength, and it became necessary to shorten the front in order to achieve a greater concentration of defensive power. The Mareth line had to be abandoned, and positions taken up in the very favourable but still incompletely fortified Schott line at Gabes. The withdrawal of the bulk of the 1st Italian Army was carried out according to plan by March 29th without serious interference from the enemy.

The enemy was regrouping his forces. The main spearhead of attack was expected to be directed at the road running between Gabes and Gafsa, and the necessary adjustments of our own troops were carried out. How long the new line running between Guettar and Akarit could be held depended entirely on supplies of fuel and ammunition. Owing to bad weather conditions only small quantities of supplies had been able to reach Africa in recent weeks, so that despite all the measures adopted, it appeared likely that a further retreat Northwards would be necessary.

The position at Akarit seemed to be favourable; it could not be overlooked by the enemy, but our troops had a field of view several kilometres wide over the terrain which the enemy must cross.

On April 6th a decisive attack on our line at Akarit was launched by the British 8th Army after lengthy artillery preparation; the front held by the Italian Spezia and Trieste Divisions was pierced and the all important position of Djebel Roumana was lost. Despite counter-attacks by German infantry reserves and tanks, the Italian 1st Army was forced to retreat to a line running between Mansour and Enfidaville.

The maintenance of the bridgehead was now only a matter of time. It was certain that the enemy would use his aerial superiority to inflict heavy losses on our sea and air transport craft and also on our fighter and ground attack units. The Fuehrer and the Duce nevertheless ordered that the defence of Tunis should continue. This decision was justified by several considerations; with the total abandonment of Tunisia, strong enemy forces would be freed to carry out the expected landing operations in Italy and Sardinia. In addition, our hold on the Sicilian Straits prevented the enemy from using the short sea route to India through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, and, therefore, tied up an extraordinarily large proportion of his available shipping tonnage.

### III Operations of the 5th Panzer Army.

Simultaneously with the offensive in Southern Tunisia, small scale attacks were launched in Western Tunisia in the Maknassy sector. At the end of March the enemy went over to the offensive along the entire Western Front. Our ammunition supplies were becoming extremely short.

On April 21st a surprise German tank attack was launched in the Medjez El Bab area on a front of 20 km. and to a depth of 8 km. This was followed by a three day tank battle, in which heavy losses were sustained by both sides.

The enemy subsequently delivered a series of attacks on the Western front with the aim of capturing by local concentrations of strength, individual points of importance. In the Constal sector, the enemy was driving steadily Eastwards. Our position was jeopardized by the fact that adequate forces were no longer available to meet the enemy at all points, and it was therefore necessary to retreat.

On May 6th, strongly supported by artillery and aircraft, enemy tanks began to drive North West from Medjez El Bab in the direction of Tunis and Biserta, and succeeded in reaching Massicault.

The danger of the Army Group being split into two was now evident; the enemy could deploy his forces to their full extent in the plain West of Tunis, and no reserves worthy of the name were any longer at our disposal. In addition, the shortage of anti-tank ammunition and tank fuel was reaching alarming proportions.

On the next day, our forces were in fact split in two by a successful enemy break-through South West of Tunis. After long and bitter fighting, Ferryville was captured, and enemy troops penetrated into Biserta. In the late afternoon, street fighting was taking place in Tunis itself.

In the next few days, the enemy, with his overwhelming armoured supremacy, and uninterrupted air support, broke through our thinly manned lines in many places. At the cost of sacrificing our fighting rear-guard it was possible to withdraw the bulk of the Army Group to a new defensive line running between Hammanlif and Zaghuan. After the destruction of the naval batteries at Biserta all naval artillery and combat personnel were employed on land fighting.

On May 9th, enemy tanks broke through in the North East corner of the 'Lake of Biserta' and entered Porto Farina. The remnants of the 5th Panzer Army fought until the last round.

#### IV The End.

In the sector held by the German Africa Korps the enemy succeeded in capturing the heights South of Hammamet.

On May 10th enemy tanks broke through our defences at Hammanlif and advanced through Soliman to Korbus and Grombalia. On May 11th, our forces in the Bone peninsula were cut off from the main Army Group.

On May 12th the Duce announced that the Commander of the 1st Army had permission to seek an honourable armistice with the enemy. Destruction of equipment by the few remaining units was continued until the last moment.

#### E. Axis Air and Sea transport operations during the campaign.

##### I Air Operations

On April 4th, powerful air attacks were made on our transport aircraft and on their bases. Our losses were higher than on any previous occasion. 14 Ju. 52's were shot down, 10 Ju. 52's were destroyed on the ground, 65 Ju. 52's damaged. In addition 1 Me. 323 was destroyed on the ground, and 2 Me. 323's damaged.

On April 19th, a total of 51 Ju. 52's was lost. It was obvious that the enemy was carrying out systematic attacks on our Junkers transport formations aided by preparatory air reconnaissance and radar devices.

As regards sea-transport, it was necessary for our convoys to sail partly at night so that we could concentrate our fighters for their protection during the few hours of daylight in which they were at sea. Fighter protection during the entire day was impossible in view of the inadequacy of our forces, but with sea-traffic by day reduced to a minimum their task was considerably facilitated.

To make up for the increased danger of naval attack run by our convoys sailing at night, approaching enemy naval forces were to be attacked by our bombers and light naval units.

On April 24th, a number of fighter units were transferred to Sicily. The relative strengths in fighters in the Mediterranean were now as follows:-

German Fighters	:	345 (of which 237 serviceable)
German T.E. Fighters in Western Sicily	:	89 (of which 72 serviceable)
Italian Fighters	:	339 (of which 118 serviceable)

Not all the aircraft based on Sardinia and Sicily were suitable for operations over the Sicilian Straits. The above figures do not include obsolete Italian types.

A total of 835 aircraft, including reserves, was therefore available at this date.

The enemy powers had at their disposal on airfields in Western Algeria and Southern Tunisia 1,080 fighters (including T.E. aircraft) which could operate over the Sicilian Straits. Of this figure, 360 aircraft were serviceable. As the Allies were on the offensive, they had the further advantage of being able to concentrate their forces as and when convenient and thus obtain local and temporary air supremacy.

Supply difficulties also proved to be a severe handicap. Due to enemy air attacks on railways and shipping, the German Air Forces in Sicily could only receive two thirds of the supplies originally allocated. (15,576 metric tons instead of 22,900 metric tons).

An appreciable increase in the strength and serviceability of our fighter forces was not possible without an extension of the ground organisation and a strengthening of our defences.

For the protection of our supplies Fliegerkorps II was ordered to make offensive operations on the Sicilian Straits its main task. Our convoys were to be screened with bombers and fighters so that approaching enemy forces could at once be attacked.

## II Naval Operations

Despite the fact that during the Tunisian campaign the entire situation depended on the supply position, difficulties with the Italian Navy continued. On March 24th, for example, one steamer in a convoy having developed engine trouble, the Italian naval authorities postponed the sailing of the 4 other ships in the convoy by 24 hours. All representations made by the Germans failed to persuade the Italians to reverse their decision.

On March 27th, General Wenninger, Senior German Liaison Officer at Commando Supremo, requested that destroyers should be employed to carry troops to Africa. The Italian Admiralty refused to sanction any further operations by these vessels, in view of the heavy losses already sustained. It was stated that to employ the last remaining naval units on troop-carrying operations would be tantamount to suicide.

Bad weather conditions on March 28th resulted in a total stoppage of all sea traffic between Italy, Sicily and Africa. Commando Supremo was requested by General Wenninger to allow single ships to sail to Africa, in view of the fact that the situation there was becoming more and more critical. Once again he was met with a refusal, this time on the grounds that it would be too difficult to steer shipping through the minefields in such weather.

With the deterioration of the situation in the first days of May Field Marshall Kesselring ordered all ships to put to sea as soon as possible, even if only half loaded, in order to bring all available supplies to Tunis with the utmost speed. It was in these circumstances that the Duce despatched the following telegram to the Fuehrer on May 1st:

"As I have stated on more than one occasion, if adequate air forces are not available to counter balance the overwhelming enemy air supremacy in the Mediterranean, it will not be possible for a single ship or aircraft to reach Tunis. This will mean the immediate loss of the bridgehead, together with all personnel and supplies. Even the attempt to use destroyers for transport operations will fail. To-day, repeated attacks were made on a destroyer force by strong enemy air formations protected by a cover of between 70 - 120 fighters. As a result of this attack, 3 destroyers were sunk, of which two were laden with German troops and one with munitions."

/"Fuehrer

"Fuehrer, a solution to this problem is a matter of urgent necessity! Even the enemy admits that our troops in Tunisia are fighting magnificently; but if we fail to send them supplies, their fate is sealed!"

The evacuation of specialist and Headquarters personnel ordered on May 7th could not be achieved. It had been laid down that aircraft and shipping space should for the purpose of the evacuation being divided in a ratio of 60:40 between Germans and Italians.

#### F. Summary

As soon as it became obvious that the originally planned Axis offensive in North Africa could not be successfully launched owing to the overwhelming strength of the enemy and the many difficulties in the supply position, the task of our High Command became one of gaining all possible time so that defensive measures could be taken on the European mainland. The struggle in Africa tied down large enemy forces, and prevented them from carrying out other offensive operations in the Mediterranean. The campaign had placed a severe strain on the enemy's shipping at a time when, due to our successful submarine attacks, the overall shipping problem was particularly acute.

An additional factor was that the enemy air force was delayed in establishing Mediterranean bases for air attacks on Southern and South-Eastern Europe.

These considerations would appear to justify the employment of large German forces in Africa. The outcome might have been different had the Italians showed greater willingness and co-operation.

#### G. Reasons for the collapse of the Tunisian bridgehead.

The causes of our failure in Tunisia can be roughly divided into two main headings:-

- (1) Inadequate supplies due to the disruption of communications caused by the naval and air supremacy of the enemy.
- (2) Lack of effort and support by the Italians.

The Italian Navy, which should have assumed the responsibility for carrying supplies to Africa, was very sparing in the use of its ships. The official explanation of this policy was that the Fleet had to be held in readiness to repel any Allied attack against the Italian Coast. A more likely explanation has already been suggested in this report.

The German Air Force was therefore forced to perform numerous tasks, such as the protection of convoys and anti-submarine patrols - which should by rights have been undertaken by the Italians. This pre-occupation with purely defensive measures resulted in such important offensive tasks as attacks on Malta and on enemy sea and land communications having to be neglected for want of the necessary effectives. The enemy was thus able to assemble his forces and build up numerical supremacy in comparative tranquillity, and finally to use this supremacy to force a decision in his favour.

#### H. Lessons to be learnt from the course of operations in Tunisia.

In vast operational theatres of war, whether in Africa or in certain areas of Southern Russia, it will often be difficult, owing to lack of troops or of supplies, to build up a composite front. In such cases, mobile operations are essential and the most suitable forces are motorised

or tank divisions, which combine great mobility with a high rate of fire power in attack and defence, and demand relatively low numbers of personnel. Their striking effect can be greatly increased by the employment of ground attack aircraft working in close liaison with the land forces.

But such forces are only of value as long as their mobility is maintained. The many heavy weapons carried involve an enormous consumption of ammunition. Extensive supplies are therefore necessary, which must usually be carried over vast distances; and offer great possibilities to an enemy air force under whose observation and within whose range of action all supply movements must take place. By systematic destruction of the enemy's supplies, it is possible to build up immense numerical superiority which must inevitably influence the final outcome of the battle.

The course of the Tunisian campaign has also demonstrated that air transport alone cannot suffice to meet the needs of a large land army. Air transport is uneconomic; it demands a highly developed ground organisation and strong air escort forces, but can in fact deliver only relatively small quantities of supplies.

Where the enemy possesses a strong Air Force, and is able to strike simultaneously at the air fleets and at their bases, air transport is only possible at the cost of very high losses. It can best be used over short distances to carry supplies to isolated or encircled formations; at the present stage of technical development, however, it cannot be expected to have any outstanding influence on the conduct of operations as a whole.

---

Distribution  
Same as Translation No. VII/24.