

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH.

TRANSLATION NO. VII/V

THE LUFTWAFFE IN THE BATTLE FOR TUNIS.

A STRATEGICAL SURVEY.

A study prepared by the German Air Historical Branch (8th Abteilung)

And dated 17th October 1944.

FOREWORD

This study aims at giving a brief description of the part played by The Luftwaffe in the Battle for Tunis, 1942/1943.

Mention is made of the principal factors determining the course of the air war, and the participation of the Luftwaffe at various stages of the battle for this advanced bastion of the European fortress is shown.

The study is based almost entirely on the war diaries of Luftflotte 2.

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INTRODUCTION

The battle for Tunis was a turning point in the history of the war in the Mediterranean theatre. The full-scale offensive launched by the Anglo-American forces in the Autumn of 1942 against the North African bastion of the European fortress, had as its purpose the destruction of the Axis positions by means of a simultaneous advance from the East and from the West. The enemy would thus ensure the essential conditions for the principal attack against the Italian Mainland. The course of subsequent events showed clearly the important role assigned in this plan to the attack on the El Alamein front, opened by the British Eighth Army on October 25th 1942. The same purpose was served by the Anglo-American landings in Morocco and Algeria, which, after lengthy preparations, took place on November 8th.

The German-Italian High Command parried this thrust in 3 ways:-

- 1) By attacking the enemy's transport fleet.
- 2) By the occupation of the French Mediterranean coast.
- 3) By sending an expeditionary force to Tunisia. The most significant of these moves was the landing in Tunis, which gave to the Axis powers a strategic point of great importance to their position in the Mediterranean, particularly with regard to the control of the Sicilian narrows.

The objectives of the Luftwaffe in the new theatre of war were:-

- 1) To hinder the Allied Forces operating in North Africa.
- 2) To maintain control of the Sicilian narrows.
- 3) To counter any direct attack on the German sphere of influence, in Southern Europe.

The execution of these tasks was entrusted to Luftflotte 2, which at the climax of the battle in April 1943, had at its disposal an average operational strength of 432 aircraft per day, of which 30 were reconnaissance aircraft, 109 bombers and 293 fighters. At the same time, the total enemy strength in the Mediterranean consisted of 2,700 fighters, 1,350 medium-bombers and 450 heavy-bombers, a total of 4,500 aircraft.

THE FIRST PHASE

The operations in Tunisia, which lasted from November 8th, 1942 until May 13th, 1943, may be divided into 4 phases. The first phase covered the weeks from the beginning of the landings in French North Africa up until the end of 1942. In this period, ground actions were fought by mobile units which had been hastily flung into the battle. The Luftwaffe, on the other hand, had been since the early days of November in a position to carry out effective and extensive attacks against the enemy landing forces.

Reconnaissance aircraft had sighted the Allied invasion fleet off the Moroccan coast in good time, and long-range bombers carried out attacks against the convoys over a wide area. Considerable damage was inflicted by bombs and torpedoes, and some 300,000 tons of enemy shipping were sunk in November by the combined efforts of the Luftwaffe and the German Navy. During December, bombers alone sank 1 destroyer and 1 patrol-boat and damaged 1 destroyer, 1 M.T.B., 1 submarine and 20 ships totalling 111,000 tons. These successes brought considerable indirect relief to the Army, especially as the supply position of both sides was acute.

Good results were also achieved in direct support of the ground forces. Bombers, dive-bombers and fighters made effective attacks on enemy tank concentrations and motorised columns. The eastward drive of the Anglo-American forces from Algeria was delayed, enabling us to extend our bridge-head, which was, at the beginning, very small indeed.

Although the decisive battle was fought on the ground, the

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preliminary air war had a material and moral effect on the result. This was particularly true of transport operations by the Luftwaffe. The whole situation on the new front depended from the start on the problem of bringing supplies from Italy to Tunis. Although supplies for the Army could not be brought extensively or solely by air, the use of the JU.52 and Me.323 units often ensured the rapid transport of supplies, notably at critical moments and in bad weather. This was of great importance at the beginning of the campaign when the bridgehead was formed and reinforced in a race for time against the Allies. During November and December 1942, at least 41,768 personnel, 8,614.8 tons of arms and ammunition and 1472.8 tons of fuel-oil were transported to Africa by air. In view of the numerical superiority of the enemy air forces, these operations made big demands on our air defences but these were successfully overcome.

The role of all German flying units was from the beginning, an offensive one, since air supremacy could only be achieved by a concentration of power at a certain time and place. Enemy ground organisation in Morocco and Algeria was still undeveloped. British bomber units were pinned down as the result of operations in Tripolitania, and everything therefore depended on forcing a decision by speedy action.

THE SECOND PHASE

Thus in a short time, with the assistance of the Luftwaffe, the bridgehead at Tunis was expanded into the Tunisian Front. This expansion of the theatre of operations determined the nature of events in the second phase of the Battle for Tunisia, which covered the period from the beginning of 1943 to the end of February of that year.

The situation precluded a prolonged defensive action in French North Africa and it was therefore decided to withdraw Rommel's army from Tripolitania for the re-inforcement of the German units already in Tunisia. The strategic bomber units of the Luftwaffe were given the important task of weakening the enemy's scale of effort against these troop movements. Our operations were directed, above all, against the Allies' supply lines, his main bases on the North African coast and against airfields behind the enemy lines. Heavy attacks were made in particular on the Algerian port of Bone. The enemy suffered severe losses in shipping and during January alone, the Luftwaffe sank 17 ships, with a total tonnage of 180,000 tons as well as 1 cruiser, 2 destroyers and 2 patrol boats.

At the same time, operations of close-range bombers, in direct support of the Army played an important part, both in attack and defence, in the Tunisian and Tripolitanian sectors. Constant attacks were made on enemy air bases, roads, railways, transports, flak emplacements, concentrations of armour and vehicles, bivouacs, front lines and troops on the march in the frontal areas. Severe losses in men and material were therefore sustained by the enemy.

The transport of supplies by air continued to bring appreciable relief to the hard pressed army formations, whose supplies were constantly jeopardised by the sea-supremacy of the enemy and by the grave losses inflicted on our convoys. The air transport units eased the situation by carrying to both sectors during the month of January a total of 15,415 personnel, 4,728.6 tons of arms, instruments and munitions, 149.5 tons of fuel and 8.5 tons of food.

The offensive character of our air effort was generally maintained, but the numerical strength of the enemy increased daily, and with the forces at our disposal, air supremacy could not be achieved. In addition, fighters and T.E. fighters were so preoccupied with aerial defence over land and sea that they were seldom available for independent offensive missions against the enemy. To an ever increasing extent, they were forced to confine their attentions to the protection

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of ports, airfields, convoy routes, etc., and to escort sorties for fighter, dive-bomber and transport aircraft operations. The Luftwaffe was nevertheless able so successfully to achieve its combined offensive and defensive action, that Rommel's army was able to withdraw from Tripolitania according to plan, and with the concentration of German-Italian forces in a compact fighting area, the plans of the Axis High Command were complete.

THE THIRD PHASE

The third phase of the Tunisian Campaign, lasting from the beginning of February to the middle of March, 1943, was characterised by preparations for the coming struggle with the Allies. The Germans aimed at securing the most favourable positions possible, at harassing the enemy's movements, and generally at delaying as long as possible the opening of his offensive. In the execution of these plans, the Axis-controlled front was considerably extended.

Long range bomber attacks on sea targets were included in our plan of operations. In order to put out of action the enemy's supply lines, the ports of Algiers, Bone, Tripoli, Benghazi and Tobruk were to be continually attacked. These attacks were to be supplementary to the attacks carried out against land positions, and aimed at striking at the root of Allied offensive power. Attacks on shipping in the Mediterranean therefore became of less importance. In February 2 merchant vessels totalling 13,000 BRT were sunk, and 10 ships totalling 63,000 BRT and 1 cruiser were damaged. The main emphasis of bomber attacks at this time was on raids against the North African ports. Tripoli alone was bombed 15 times during the course of the month.

In addition, a concentration of all the available resources of the Luftwaffe was effected for the direct support of the army in the forward battle areas. Ground strafers, dive-bombers and fighter bombers carried out attacks from suitable bases in the Tunisian area, and excellent results were scored against tank, M/T., troop concentrations and against airfields.

Air activity in South Eastern Tunisia lessened in extent and in importance but the withdrawal of our tank forces in this area was completed according to plan.

Even at this time, when the Luftwaffe was at the peak of its success in Tunisia, the supply problem was critical. Although it had been possible to effect some improvement with regard to the passage of supplies by sea, the part played by our air transport units remained of vital importance. Without their help, it would have been impossible to feed the front with troops in time for them to be of any use. In February, 1943, 10954 personnel, 3918.5 tons of arms, equipment and munitions, 240.9 tons of fuel, and 1.6 tons of food were flown over to Tunisia.

With the concentration of our forces in a smaller area, the fighters engaged on aerial defence became a more compact force; this proved to be beneficial to our defences in Tunisia, and also facilitated protection of our convoy routes between Sicily and Africa which were being attacked with ever growing vigour by the enemy.

THE FOURTH PHASE

Thus the enemy was prevented from making full use of his great numerical superiority and was obliged to modify his plans. These important results were in a great measure due to the skilful handling of the Luftwaffe's resources. But in spite of this temporary respite, the enemy's superior strength made it impossible for us to postpone for any length of time the opening of his offensive. The lack of a strategic air force prevented us from attacking the enemy's rear bases and the flow of Allied reinforcements could not therefore be interrupted. This decisive factor may be said to have turned the scales in favour of the Allies, who had the initiative during the whole of the fourth phase of the Campaign, beginning at about the middle of March, 1943. First of all, our prepared positions in the Southern battle

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area were cut off. The long awaited attack on the Mareth Line began on March 16th, and the Italian First Army was pushed back to fortified positions north of Gabes. The enemy had not yet achieved the break-through that had been expected and all vital strategic points were still in Axis hands.

The position first became dangerous when the enemy launched simultaneous attacks on both Tunisian fronts. By this time, our depleted forces had had to abandon all Southern Tunisia and were crowded together in the North Eastern area. The enemy was now advancing into the immediate vicinity of the main Axis supply bases and could take full advantage of his aerial superiority not only to carry out attacks on our troops, but also to block our supplies. Our own air force lacked forward airfields and could consequently not remain long over the combat area. In spite of all these trials, our successes remained greater than would be considered possible under such conditions.

Limited use was still made of long-range bombers for strategic bombing operations, but the overall situation demanded that the Luftwaffe be employed to an increased extent for defensive purposes, and the long-range-bomber formations had also to provide close support for the Army. Consequently they were divorced from their proper role and could do even less than before to interfere with enemy reserves and reinforcements behind the battle area.

Attacks against shipping were however continued on a reduced scale. Important operations aiming at the disruption of Allied invasion plans were carried out against the Ports of Bone, Philippeville, Djidjelli and Algiers. Apart from these attacks, the Luftwaffe in March and April sank 6 ships totalling 39700 GRT. 3 submarines and 1 escort and damaged 41 ships, 2 destroyers and 2 submarines.

The operations of the ground strafers, dive bombers and fighter bombers were very similar to those of the heavy bomber formations. They had to contend with ever growing difficulties. Their ground organisation lay near the front and was continually subjected to Allied attack. Enemy defences became so strong that our bombers could only operate when their path had been swept by fighters. Consequently, still greater demands were made of the Luftwaffe, and due to the lack of fighters for escort duties, sorties had to an increasing extent to be made by night.

Another important task was the protection of our air transport units. Our shipping movements, already disrupted by enemy attack, became even more precarious due to mass operations by enemy fighters over the Sicilian Straits, and these had in fact to be discontinued after the end of April. The role of the transport aircraft was therefore all-important in the critical last weeks of the campaign. The enemy had clearly realized this, and attacked them with the utmost vigour. A serious aircraft shortage set in and operations were finally restricted to night flying for greater security. Delay was inevitable and often during the last weeks of the campaign it was necessary to employ bombers to transport supplies, particularly fuel from Sicily to Tunisia. Finally such operations became altogether impossible, and after May 8th supplies had to be dropped to the land forces from the air. The last transport flight was made on the night of May 12th. During April and May an average of 56 aircraft a day has carried at least 8049 personnel, 5232 tons of arms, equipment and munitions and 6.6 tons of fuel.

Flak units, which at the beginning of the campaign had been employed on anti-aircraft duties, were during the closing stages thrown in to support the army as ground artillery formations. Their work was of great value to the German-Italian forces; particular success was achieved by light Flak units against tanks, armoured vehicles and fortified positions. These flak units of the Luftwaffe fought heroically until the end, and were among the last to surrender.

Thus broken, without food and water and surrounded by their wounded and dying comrades, our troops awaited the final assault of the

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enemy. On May 13th, the Anglo-Americans attacked our few remaining defences. Our troops had no more ammunition and the white flag was hoisted.

The victory of the enemy over our troops in Tunisia was due solely to our numerical inferiority and supply difficulties. But their fight had not been in vain. To quote the High Command Communiqué (OKW Bericht) issued on May 13th, 1943, "By your resistance, disputing bitterly every inch of ground, you have for months on end tied down strong enemy forces and have caused them severe losses. The relief thus gained on other fronts, and the time that has thus been won, have been of inestimable value to the High Command".

Sources

Luftflotte 2 War Diaries.
General Staff, 8th Abteilung, Studies.