

THE WAR IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

PART I

By

FIELD MARSHAL KESSELRING

BEING A STUDY

WRITTEN FOR U.S. HISTORICAL DIVISION

MAY, 1948

TRANSLATED BY

AIR MINISTRY A.H.B.6.

FEBRUARY, 1951

RESTRICTED

FOREWORD

I have written the history of the campaign in Africa without documents, and under extraordinarily difficult conditions. To begin with I had no maps at my disposal and even later had only inadequate supplies of them. Certain inaccuracies in time and place were therefore unavoidable.

I wish to thank General Seidemann and General Deichmann for their objective revision of this work and their suggestions.

I have only described events in Africa and their consequences so far as I knew them from my own experience or from actual Battle Reports of Luftwaffe and other headquarters under my command. For that reason, the descriptions are only excerpts. From the Battle of Tunisia onwards when I was Supreme Commander of the combined German forces, the narrative is historically correct.

Signed: Kesselring

RESTRICTED

Contents of "The War in the Mediterranean" Part 1.

Page Nos.

1. Establishment of C-in-C. South and the reasons for it. Arrangements for Co-operation with the Italian Armed Forces. 1
2. The situation at the end of November 1941. 2
3. Organisation of the German-Italian High Command. 3
4. Evaluation of the German-Italian Command organisation. 4
5. The forces engaged, strengths, training, equipment and assessment. (a) German forces. (b) Italian forces. 4 & 5
6. Events up to the capture of the Sirte positions (El Agheila, December 1941 - January 1942.) 6
7. Deficiencies in the supply services and convoys of the Axis Powers and action taken to remedy them. 7
  - (a) Organisation of Command. 7
  - (b) Supplies in the depots. 8
  - (c) Transport fleets and escort forces at sea; equipment policy of the Italian Navy; Air escorts. 9
  - (d) Air transport units. 15
  - (e) Coal and fuel supplies. 15
  - (f) Organisation for loading and unloading. 16
  - (g) Appreciation of the enemy's naval and air forces. 17
  - (h) Conclusions to the chapter on convoy and supply services. 17
8. Rommel's counter-offensive of 21 January 1942 with a brief appreciation of the plans of the British High Command. 18
9. Consequences of the check to Rommel's counter-attack at the El Gazala Line. 19
10. The Air Offensive against Malta (2 April 1942 - 10 May 1942). 19
11. Deliberations over the continuation of operations; critical view of the Tobruk - Malta question. 21
12. Operations of the Africa Army from the Gazala position to the capture of Tobruk and measures directly following. 25
13. Planning the attack on Malta. 29
14. War Council at Gambut. (Rommel; Cavallero; Bastico) 30
15. The advance on the Nile and its immediate consequences. 31
16. Final deliberations and their results. 31
17. The attack. 34
18. Consequences of halting the attack. 35
19. New Measures to improve and safeguard supplies. Second air offensive against Malta. 36
20. Reflections on the defensive battle at El Alamein. 39
21. My deliberations on the object of the Allied invasion in November 1942 and counter-measures taken by me. 40

RESTRICTED

- 1 -

1. Establishment of "Commander-in-Chief (OB) South" and the reasons for it:

Arrangements for co-operation with the Italian Armed Forces.

The extension of the war to the Mediterranean was contrary to the interests of the German High Command and was on that account not desired by the Germans. When Comando Supremo proved incapable of waging a successful war on its own, it became necessary to send more and more German troops and material as time went by. This was bound to have an adverse effect on other fronts; or if one wished to avoid this possibility, then half-measures would have to be taken which could satisfy nobody.

Brought up to think along continental lines, I had neither the opportunity nor cause to acquire a detailed knowledge of conditions in the Mediterranean, while serving in Poland, the West, against England and in the East.

In November 1941 I was transferred together with Luftflotte 2 to Italy as C-in-C South, in order to support Rommel's Army, but more particularly to reorganise the supply services which were in a bad state owing to British sea and air supremacy in the Mediterranean. My suggestion expressed at German Headquarters and later at Italian Headquarters that we should not be content with breaking British sea and air supremacy in the Mediterranean but that we should secure the position for all time by occupying Malta, was turned down. My proposal based on theoretical considerations did not have sufficient backing. Practical experience gained in the ensuing period caused me to renew this proposal and indeed submit it as a minimum requirement. It then met with better understanding and was sanctioned. Preparatory measures, such as preparing the necessary shipping, training an Italian parachute division, were undertaken immediately. The operation could not be carried out for reasons which will be discussed in detail later.

In addition I became convinced that the Mediterranean theatre would become a major front, once we were engaged there. That would mean the capture of Gibraltar, Malta, Suez and Aden and seizing French and Italian possessions in North Africa. The military and political consequences of such a policy are clear. I shall merely mention them here: absolute security for the German southern front, outflanking the British sea route, and outflanking the Russian front deep into Russian territory; unequivocal clarification of the attitude of Spain and Turkey.

At the beginning of the war in the Mediterranean the extent of German Aid was determined exclusively by Italy's requests for support, but later considerations of our own, particularly those affecting the war as a whole, had a decisive influence on the military-political decisions. In an objective appreciation of the situation one must confirm that because of the continental strategy which had become an integral part of all German High Command theories, we failed to recognise fully or in good time the importance of the Mediterranean to our own and to the enemy's strategical conduct of the war. Furthermore one must also confirm that because of the situation created on other fronts, it was not possible to make men and material available in such quantities as were necessary to ensure decisive results. Because of this, the question arises as to whether it would not have been wiser to liquidate this front and employ the material engaged there more usefully elsewhere.

My attitude on this point will be made clear when I am discussing the various phases of the campaign. I must however at this point emphasise that many things would have been omitted or at least carried out in a more efficient manner if a well conceived plan had been available at the start of the war. The fact that our successes and failures actually determined the way in which the war was to be continued must be regarded as the outstanding failure of German High Command strategy.

RESTRICTED

/My

RESTRICTED

- 2 -

My Staff was transferred to Italy at the end of November 1941. As a result of previous negotiations between OKW and Comando Supremo, the Italian forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) earmarked for the task already mentioned were supposed to be placed under my command. On my arrival in Rome the German military attaché General von Rintelen informed me that Comando Supremo could not agree to this allocation of duties. My first talk with the Chief of the Italian General Staff, Marshal Count Cavallero, showed that Cavallero could not detach the Army and Navy from the Italian High Command since this would mean surrendering the independence of the Italian High Command. He said that in an emergency he was willing for the Air Force to be placed under my command. Half measures were of no use to me or to the job in hand; I therefore abandoned all idea of subordination, but requested in its place a much closer and trusting co-operation between the three services of the Italian Armed Forces and myself. Count Cavallero assured me that no order would be issued by Comando Supremo regarding war measures in the Italian and African theatres of war without my full co-operation or counter-signature. This arrangement was adhered to: in retrospect I think I ought to say that this concession, which took into consideration the national feelings and innate pride of the Italians, made successful co-operation possible for the first time. I have always considered voluntary co-operation on a sound basis of trust better than compulsory subordination with its inevitable friction.

2. The Position at the End of November 1941.

The position at this time was centred around the breakdown of the Axis supply services to Africa, the effects of which were becoming increasingly serious; British naval and air supremacy in the Mediterranean was becoming more obvious every day. Malta had become the focal point both as a naval and as an air base.

In Africa Rommel's position had become critical; he was engaged in a delaying battle east of Derna; his operations were being hampered beyond measure by the infantry divisions, in particular by the Italian divisions with their low standard of fighting efficiency. The total loss of Cyrenaica was to be expected.

Differences between General Rommel and Marshal Bastico made things more difficult.

My task of safeguarding the supply route by smashing the naval and air bases on Malta was top priority. The expansion of the ground organisation on Sicily, the transferring of supplies necessary for this assault, the growth of co-operation with Italian Air Force units all took time. Meanwhile air escorts had to be provided for the most essential convoys. This protective duty, successful as far as it went, was costly in losses and interrupted the preparatory work for the air assault on Malta.

In addition to this Rommel's Army had to be given increased air support. In spite of the excellent co-operation which existed between C-in-C South and the Italian Air Force Command and between the Luftwaffe in Africa and the Italian Air Force there, the brunt of the fighting was borne by the German units; on the whole their performance, worthy as it was of recognition, did not satisfy the Army. I must however state that without the self sacrificing efforts of these Luftwaffe units, Rommel's retreat would not have stopped in the Sirte (Agedabia on 24 December 1941, later from 13 January 1942 at Marsa el Brega).

As an additional task, often at Marshal Cavallero's request, I was given the job of smoothing out differences between the Italian and German High Commands in Africa, which were now becoming more and more frequent and at the same time more and more serious.

/3.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 3 -

3. Organisation of the German - Italian Command

Tripolitania was placed under the Governor - General, Marshal Bastico for all purposes; he was therefore also C-in-C of all Army, Naval and Air Forces operating in Tripolitania, including Rommel's Army. The liaison officer, an Italian General Staff Colonel was also Italian Chief of Staff and he represented Rommel in all tactical matters concerning the Italian corps and divisions.

Fliegerfuehrer Afrika was under command Luftflotte 2 (through X Fliegerkorps) and had been ordered to cooperate with Rommel's Army headquarters. X Fliegerkorps headquarters was in Athens and later in Crete. Its operational area was Salonica - Athens. Luftflotte 2 itself was subordinate to the C-in-C Luftwaffe and since its Commander was also C-in-C South it was also subordinate to the Duce and O.K.W.

The reinforced Flak Regiment of Luftflotte 2 was tactically under command of Rommel's Army; the rest of the anti-aircraft units in North Africa, which were used mainly on harbour defence, were under command of the Luftwaffe General in Italy. (General von Pohl, Italuft, Rome). An increase in the number of Luftwaffe units in Africa later made the fusion of the ground organisation and the supply services of the Luftwaffe under one Luftgau command necessary. Liaison between the two Luftwaffe headquarters was close and efficient.

The 19th Flak Division which was formed later was placed under the Luftwaffe General in Italy, General von Pohl; it was instructed to cooperate with Rommel's Army. The Luftwaffe General in Italy was subordinate to Luftflotte 2.

The German Naval Headquarters was subordinate to C-in-C and at the same time to Supermarina (Italian Naval High Command). Later, when German units moved to North Africa, they were consolidated under one German Naval Headquarters Staff, subordinate to C-in-C South, and instructed to cooperate with the Italian Naval Command.

Luftflotte 2 was responsible for the co-ordinated direction of the Air offensive against Malta, and for this purpose II Fliegerkorps and the Luftwaffe General in Italy were placed under its command. Orders issued by Luftflotte 2 were forwarded to Superaereo (Italian Air Force High Command) who then reissued them as orders to Italian Air Force formations in Italy.

Supply services for the German and Italian Armed Forces were operated by the various branches of the Armed Forces. German Army Supplies were handled by Q.M.G. Rome who dealt directly with Rommel's Army and the Quartermaster General of the Army. German Naval Headquarters in Italy controlled naval supplies, while the Luftwaffe General in Italy was responsible for all Luftwaffe supplies. C-in-C South was finally responsible for all the Armed Forces Supplies.

Transport through Italy and across the Mediterranean was controlled by the General Staff of Comando Supremo's Transport Department (General Raimondi): rail transport was dealt with in conjunction with the Italian Minister of Transport and sea transport with Supermarina (in conjunction with German Naval Headquarters) which had complete responsibility for loading, unloading and transporting across the sea. Maritime Anti-Aircraft for the convoys was provided by special army and naval anti-aircraft sections (2cm. and 3.7cm) and air cover by fighter and night-fighter squadrons operating from Italy, Sicily and Africa.

Despite the appointment of liaison officers by both sides, co-operation was not good. In a special operations staff at Italian Naval High Command, in which German and Italian Air Force Officers were incorporated, a satisfactory solution was gradually reached. All

/operational

RESTRICTED

operational details were left to the responsible authorities of the Italian and German Navies, Luftflotte 2 and Superaerco.

4. Evaluation of the German-Italian Command Organisation

(a) African Front:

The organisation here was sound apart from very minor points such as the subordination of the Luftwaffe, which fortunately however did not prove a restriction when put into practice. Because of the opposition and feelings of active dislike that existed between the Senior German and Italian members (Rommel and Bastico etc.) and because of Rommel's unwillingness to consider the feelings of the Italians, actual conditions in the command were extremely bad, if not intolerable.

Rommel's star which was then at its zenith prevented any change in command, but at the same time it did have certain compensations.

(b) Supply Service:

In its final form the command organisation was efficient. Mutual understanding, which was sought and founded on a basis of comradeship and friendship, was fostered by Comando Supremo by almost daily meetings of the heads. Count Cavallero was both sensible and energetic; the very loyal co-operation between Count Cavallero and myself inspired a close co-operation throughout the command.

Incompetence lay in other spheres, which will be discussed later.

(c) Malta:

It would have been practical if the Italian air forces had been placed under Luftwaffe Command; in view of the good mutual understanding and of the shortages from which the Italian Air Force was always suffering, this question was not important.

5. The Forces Engaged, Strengths, Training, Equipment and Assessment

(a) German Forces:

The calibre of German, Navy and Air Force personnel were all equally high, but there were barely enough to carry out even minimum requirements. Material was good or excellent, but only in exceptional cases was there sufficient for tactical requirements. In addition to a lack of allocations due to the urgent needs of other fronts, the African front suffered even greater shortages from shipping losses.

Each theatre of war has its own characteristics; the troops had to accustom themselves slowly to atmospheric conditions, temperature and living conditions generally, and adapt their battle tactics to nature and their new enemy. If this goal were attained, the German High Command and troops would be equal to any task.

The Luftwaffe and Navy temporarily compensated to a large extent for their lack of numbers by stepping up their number of sorties. The wastage and exhaustion which was necessarily tied up with this had to be taken into account. Continuous action without respite by all three German Services, including the Army, undermined the stamina of the troops even further. But in spite of everything one must pay the highest tribute to their spirit and morale.

There was a good spirit of comradeship with Italian troops even though at the same time an understandable bitterness about the behaviour of the Italian High Command and troops spoiled friendly relations.

On the whole the German troops were on very good terms with the Italian population, though it naturally varied in places.

(b) Italian Forces

The main theatre of war for the Italian was definitely Africa; in addition forces were tied up in Albania, Greece, Croatia and Southern France in very large numbers quite incomprehensible to me.

Young men of military age were also far from fully utilised. The long drawn-out colonial wars had demanded large sacrifices; in many places a definite feeling of war fatigue was unmistakable.

The war was controlled from the homeland; the home country felt nothing of the war. It was my impression that many people did not take the war as seriously as their duty to the soldiers at the front required. All measures were lacking in drive. There, where an all-out effort on all sides was needed, things were done in half-measures. The inadequate personal and material effort was not due to any essential shortage but to an unintelligible restraint as I was later able to confirm after Italy's surrender in the available manpower and in the camps, ports, etc. It may have been for want of a survey of conditions and needs and the requirements for a campaign or the idea that through small economic commitments during the war they would be in a stronger position to tackle the peace, or it may have been pure business acumen, but the combined disadvantages of such an attitude led to the loss of Africa and Sicily.

On the whole the Armed Forces were not ready for war. The High Command, I think I ought to exclude Cavallero, believed more in what they wished things to be than in things as they really were. German aid was only requested in the necessary strength at a moment when it was already too late, when its effectiveness was no longer in proportion to the effort. I had the impression that the reason for this restraint was prestige and pride in their own Armed Forces and its capabilities. Shortly before the surrender the Chief of the General Staff, General Ambrosia, changed these tactics and made unreasonably high requests for troops and supplies, so that one could deduce their later intentions from the nature and extent of these demands.

The Italian soldier cannot be compared with the German. The scanty training was on peacetime and barrack-square lines; field training was lacking. Contact between officers and men was non-existent; if the troops had not been so pathetically simple and easily contented, the consequences would not merely have been a surrender, but a revolution within the Armed Forces.

The senior officers were mostly good or very good; with well-trained and well-equipped troops they would undoubtedly have had some success. Going downwards the standard deteriorated rapidly. And yet the exception proves the rule; I have seen units in all three services, which for morale in action and pure courage were the equal of any other European soldiers.

Army: Africa:

Too few motorised units; tanks without sufficient armour and lacking effective weapons. Too few and completely ineffective anti-tank weapons. Infantry inadequately armed. Artillery was of a high standard, but owing to insufficient range was not good enough for fighting the Allies. Signals service insufficiently developed. Supply services too, such as rations, were inefficient. The number of divisions were barely up to minimum requirements. The quality of the divisions also left a lot to be desired; better divisions were available in Italy. Question of leave, reliefs and rations had a very bad effect on morale.

/Sicily:

RESTRICTED

- 6 -

Sicily:

Two divisions of medium quality, the others worse than average; for supporting arms see above. Coastal defences were incredibly neglected.

Navy:

Well earned the name "fair weather fleet". Morale of the small ships was at times outstanding; this was offset by the unseaworthiness and age of the ships. Poor technical equipment which excluded night firing and proper defence against submarines and aircraft. The fighting spirit of the battle fleet was not to be compared with that of the small ships. That of the very small boats was excellent. Merchant ships in sufficient numbers were available; but there was a shortage of ships with derricks. The convoy service suffered from lack of ships ready to sail, a thing which always remained incomprehensible to me. The dock services were on a peacetime basis and inadequate. There was a lack of strict control. German ships sailed with the Italian.

Air Force:

Its development had stagnated since Balbo's time. The natural bent of the Italian airmen was for light aircraft. Italian fighters preferred stunt flying to operational flights and combat experience. Their aircraft did not compare with British and German aircraft, and their armament was inadequate; there was no intercommunication system at all. The poor fighting spirit in face of the enemy can to a large extent be attributed to this deficiency. The Italians were passionately fond of the Stukas given them by Luftflotte 2 and flew them successfully.

Their heavy aircraft lacked all the technical standards required in the African theatre of war. Added to this was their innate reluctance, so that one can hardly speak of operational successes. Although obsolete the torpedo-aircraft and especially the torpedoes themselves were good. Their operational successes were comparatively good. Their small number, however, prevented any decisive results. Multiple sorties by day, customary with the Germans, were unknown or at least unpopular. However, the mutual understanding between the German and Italian High Commands and troops produced satisfactory results practically throughout the campaign.

6. Events up to the Capture of the Marada - Marsa el Brega  
Position December 1941 - January 1942

Rommel's retreat came as a shock to Comando Supremo and the Duce. Further, Cavallero and Bastico perceived in Rommel's actions no consideration for the Italian infantry divisions and believed that Rommel wanted to save his mobile divisions and let the Italian infantry divisions fall into the hands of the enemy. If that happened it would have a serious effect on public opinion in Italy; it might even affect Italy's desire to continue in the war.

In a spirited conference at Cirene on 22 or 23 December 1941, Rommel insisted on a mobile war for the German and Italian motorised divisions, but promised, because of my energetic requests that he would do his utmost to fit in the movements of the motorised forces as far as possible with those of the other forces. I too gave an assurance that I would reinforce the Luftwaffe to oppose the pressure of the British forces and would only allow my units to leave the Derna airfield area which commanded the Via Balbia, when the Italian forces were at the same strength or had been withdrawn. The order to blow up the winding road south of Derna therefore had to be reconsidered.

/Actually

RESTRICTED

Actually the move was carried out as planned without large enough losses to endanger the position. As is usually the case with such retreats, the infantry divisions withdrew in remarkably quick time. Rommel thus had sufficient forces, including tanks, in the district before Sirte or Agedabia and later at Marsa el Brega to be able, with support from the Air Force, to halt the enemy advance in this area and set up a new defence line between Christmas 1941 and New Year 1942. I personally took part in this campaign on 23 December 1941 and was able to report by radio telephone to Mussolini and Hitler that I considered Rommel's current success had averted the danger. I had three reasons for this opinion:

1. The British attack was lacking strong direction and it was obvious that difficulties of various sorts were developing; a forcing of the Sirte was no longer likely.
2. The enemy's supply service from Derna was diverted to secondary routes and supplies by sea broke down for quite a long time even after the capture of Benghazi owing to damage to the harbour.
3. The supply line was too long and difficult for improvised methods.

The German positions at the eastern entrance to the Sirte at Agedabia, and later at Marsa el Brega could also be held with weak forces. A frontal attack on the Marsa el Brega position presented special difficulties, and an encircling movement on either flank (the desert which was impassable for very large formations on the right, and the sea on the left) was so difficult that one did not have to take it into consideration. The position was ideal for the troops available. Besides the actual weakness of the German and Italian Forces there was a considerable shortage of ammunition; even the question of fuel supplies was a serious worry. Since it would be several months before Malta could be subdued, the convoy service had to be improved, increased and better protected, since in the long run everything, even the possession of Africa, depended on supplies.

7. Deficiencies in the Supply Services and Convoys of the Axis Powers and action taken to remedy them

A regular convoy service required;

- a. Unified control.
  - b. Well stocked depots on both sides of the Mediterranean capable of supplying the needs of the front line forces at all times.
  - c. Transport vessels including tankers and the necessary naval and air covering forces always available.
  - d. Transport aircraft always at the ready.
  - e. Sufficient supplies of coal and fuel oil so as to be able to meet any demand at all times.
  - f. Efficient and well organised loading and unloading facilities at the ports of departure and arrival.
  - g. A review of the enemy sea and air situation.
- (a) As far as (a) was concerned there was no clear control organisation; the framework of the later organisation was roughly drawn up; the controlling body was missing, but the various headquarters worked as well as they could together along the agreed course. Mention has already been made of the creation of a satisfactory controlling body. It represented the best attainable, but had fundamental faults, caused by the differences which existed between civilian methods and military ideas.

/(b)

RESTRICTED

- 8 -

- (b) The principle that well-stocked depots must be available was generally recognised in theory. In practice, however, supplies were never available in the quantity required.

Reasons:

Production in the home country ran to a well-thought out armament plan but did not keep pace with the increased requirements caused by events on the various fronts. Accordingly, allocations were therefore made where most urgently needed; the peculiarities of an overseas theatre of war whose transport route was endangered were not sufficiently taken into account; it may also have been that in some cases, owing to shortages, demands could not be fulfilled. The stocks in the depots should have been at a level far in excess of the expected withdrawals. That was never the case.

In view of the dangers threatening the transport service, times favourable to transports should have been utilised to bring excess stocks of supplies to the African theatre. This was often impossible owing to shortage of material and for reasons which will be mentioned later. During 1941/42 air raids on dumps in Italy and Greece were rare. During 1942/43 they were intensified, above all in conjunction with air raids on the embarkation ports. Conditions in Africa itself were unfavourable, where anti-aircraft and fighter cover for the ports and depots had to be restricted in order to keep these forces up to strength at the front. However, losses in the depots were kept within tolerable limits in the Tripolitanian theatre. I will now deal with losses in the ports.

Even in places where normally one never has to worry about supply difficulties bottlenecks occur occasionally. In such emergencies it was then a question of transporting direct from the places of production to the front, usually by air. Transport aircraft in sufficient numbers used to be available for these supplies. More on this point in section (d).

Steps taken by the Army, Navy and Luftwaffe Headquarters especially economy measures during lulls in the fighting, were not sufficient to replenish the dumps to the required extent. Ammunition, fuel and tyres in particular remained in short supply.

The Italian supply organisation found it easier in some places and more difficult in others. They had the advantage that their troops were operating in their own territory, their resources lay comparatively nearer, and to sum up they only had to cater for one theatre of war. Even in peacetime Tripolitania had its own contingent of armed forces and correspondingly stocked depots. To compensate for the lack of a through railway line, Tripolitania had an efficient heavy road transport service and an adequate pool of vehicles, which fortunately were mainly diesel-driven. What was more difficult was that not only the Army but the local population too had to be supplied with imports, even with wood. The local production of the colony was on the up-grade; but it was not yet sufficient for its needs.

It was regrettable that owing to the different equipment used by the Italian and German troops reciprocal aid was confined to only a few articles. The differing tastes even caused difficulties when exchanging foodstuffs. It is interesting to note that it was only with difficulty that the German soldiers could be persuaded to give up their normal compact diet and had to be compelled to change over to a diet suitable for the hotter climates. Exchange of goods between German and Italian Army formations was considerably restrained owing to an unsurmountable mutual mistrust, which did not exist to anything like the same extent between the two Navies and Air Forces.

/(c)

RESTRICTED

(c) The large Italian merchant fleet plus a limited number of German ships which were in the Mediterranean at the outbreak of the war were available. Whilst the latter were valuable, the Italian ships were quite naturally of all shapes and sizes; there were very old worn-out ships both large and small alongside ships of the latest type. The shipping pool ought actually to have been equal to any task, even when greatly increased, since there was no traffic worth speaking of except that in the Adriatic, Greece including the Aegean islands and the coastal traffic including that to the islands (Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, Pantelleria, etc., and to Tunis). This however was not the case. In my opinion this was mainly due to the following reasons.

1. All the dockyards in Italy were operating on a peacetime footing.
2. Deficiencies in the allocation of raw material and spare parts; as a result of 1. and 2. far too much time spent in the berths and repair yards.
3. Innate reluctance and fear of risks on the part of the ship-owners, who were more concerned with preserving their ships for peacetime than trying to win the war.

This was started or increased by the considerable losses which together with the visible shortage of escorts and mistakes in loading (for example, petrol loaded with ammunition etc.) had a strong psychological effect on crews and made it difficult to sign them on. The Merchant Navy was not on a war footing.

4. Wide dispersal made direction difficult and wasted considerable time and fuel.
5. A reluctance to make Italian ships available for German cargoes.
6. Difficulties in the composition of convoys owing to large discrepancies in speed between individual boats.
7. Shortage of fuel-oil and coal.

All these deficiencies could only be improved slowly; their complete elimination was quite out of the question. The idea of total mobilisation of human and material forces for war was not a characteristic of the Italian people. The German ships were gradually worn out, so that with the dropping out of these and the falling off in the effective tonnage the difficulties of the Italian merchant navy grew increasingly bigger and failed more and more to carry out its tactical requirements.

Shortly after our positions at Alamein had been captured it was obvious that, with the shipping available, supplies could not be kept up for any length of time. Since the invasion of Malta was no longer feasible, and OKW would not authorise the use of Tunis and Bizerta because of treaty obligations, and as the short sea-route from Crete to Tobruk had not appreciably eased the situation, new methods were now tried. This consisted of bringing in submarines, gunboats and destroyers to carry supplies which did not take up much room, increased use of transport aircraft which had meanwhile been grouped in Geschwader and finally the employment of unescorted seaworthy coastal sailing vessels and a large-scale building programme of new small vessels and barges. Experience had taught us that small vessels of shallow draught with a speed of 15-16 knots and very small boats of 6-10 knots like the naval ferry barges were safe against torpedoes and, owing to their high defensive armament of small calibre anti-aircraft guns and the escorting ferries (Siebel F), suffered very few losses. They could safely be used in a sea of force 4 and could survive Sea Force 5/6, even if

somewhat battered. A further advantage was that loading and unloading was completed extraordinarily quickly and could if necessary take place on the open coast so as to avoid any ports threatened by air raids. Fast ships which could cover the main stretch during the night were practically non-existent and could not be constructed in such a short time.

The requirements which C-in-C South had emphatically submitted consisted of at least 1000 of the smallest vessels (Naval ferry-barges and Luftwaffe Siebel - Ferryboats), new-type wooden ships with a load capacity of about 400 tons and Naval Special-purpose vessels of about 500 to 600 tons. The programme was taken in hand. Endless friction within the German and with Italian armament industry had to be overcome. The time thus lost prevented this programme from bearing fruit.

The tanker problem had long since been in a critical state. The tankers were the number one target for enemy attacks. Of course these vessels required special protection; camouflage measures were sometimes successful. From an early period other aids were being sought. Petrol itself was in short supply and the loss of a 4-6000 ton tanker left a gap which was almost impossible to close. The diesel-oil supply service of the Italians was the easiest to maintain, since the ships in use running on crude and heavy oil were emptied apart from sufficient fuel for the return journey. The submarines, gunboats and destroyers were almost without exception used for the transport of fuel-oil; the small vessels too were mainly brought in for this task. In addition transport aircraft were used to ferry across 200 to 500 tons daily. The four-engined transports and bombers (the latter only in exceptional emergencies) were especially suitable, since their own tanks could also be emptied. At the same time the disadvantages of using aviation spirit in tanks or motor-vehicles had to be taken into consideration. Like the tankers at sea, petrol dumps and road convoys were top priority targets. In this way too a percentage of the meagre petrol supplies was lost. Even if no decisive set-back occurred through lack of fuel, operations and tactics became so dependent on the fuel supplies available to such an uncomfortable degree that proper, even essential measures could not be carried out. Instances will be mentioned later.

Escort forces; the Italian fleet was large enough to deal with any task. German forces were not available; it was not until the end of 1942 that one of the destroyers built in Greek shipyards was commissioned; it put up a splendid performance. German submarines took an indirect part in this protection, since they were always standing ready either in the east or the West according to the situation, usually off the main ports (Gibraltar, Suez) to attack English convoys or ships of the Fleet. Owing to their small numbers they could not achieve decisive results; but they upset British Shipping in the Mediterranean.

Only the 1st Task Force was as a rule used for escort duties; the 1st Cruiser Squadron came under consideration only in exceptional cases.

The 1st Escort Flotilla was not 100% seaworthy. As a rule it could not operate in Sea Force 5. The following situation developed from this inability: when the sea was calm and the weather fine all the British sea and air attacking forces appeared on the scene.

With their limited defence against submarines and aircraft the convoys were more or less helplessly exposed to enemy attacks. If a torpedo could not be dodged, or our own aircraft could not tackle the enemy planes in time or in sufficient strength some vessel or other would be sunk or at least seriously damaged. When the weather was bad and stormy, giving considerable cover and at times even obsolete security, the convoys could not sail because the escort vessels could

not stand up to heavy seas. Using cruisers for escort duties, only allowed with fast convoys on exceptional occasions, proved to be no answer to the danger. Because of the great age of the merchant-ships and destroyers, the long periods of service without respite and the long periods subsequently spent in overhaul, as well as ships 'written-off' completely, sufficient numbers could no longer be employed as time went by. This itself increased the danger run by the convoys. On this account convoys frequently had to postpone their sailings. This meant that delays occurred in meeting the supply demands from the front and at the same time cargoes were piling up for future convoys. Through lack of merchant-ships and escort vessels supply by sea became a mathematical problem; thus the position was bound to become gradually worse, until supplies by sea ceased altogether. When this occurred C-in-C South wanted to know that the supply problem was being tackled by other methods. However, Admirals Riccardi and Sanzonetti of the Italian Admiralty deserve particular recognition.

By taking over and allocating ships in ports in the South of France and putting them to sea again a temporary improvement took place at the most critical period (1943). The long drawn-out arguments over the three large fast destroyers and the submarines in Tunis and Bizerta unfortunately prevented more timely and effective help. A disadvantage of an allied command whose aim was not to make the best possible use of shipping available, but was more concerned with prestige and thoughts of peace!

Attempts were naturally made with all possible means to eliminate or alleviate the existing shortages by German aid. On some occasions by allocating the fuel, ran materials and spare parts, and then again by installing submarine spotting devices in Italian vessels, training personnel to operate them, and seconding instructors. All were necessary measures, but owing to the slow official channels and the peacetime conditions especially in the docks and the developments in Libya and French North Africa they came too late.

A characteristic feature of the war in the Mediterranean was the widespread and efficient enemy spy system. I have no idea how far up the enemy spy organisation reached. The fact remains that the enemy was tipped off about most convoys, as was obvious from his counter-measures, which otherwise were most improbable. Every possible step was taken to offset this, and occasionally they were to some extent successful.

The activities of British naval forces in Gibraltar and Alexandria were either known to us or were calculated by piecing together various facts which had become known to us and confirmed beyond all doubt by submarine and air reconnaissance. On three occasions we succeeded in getting the Italian Battle Fleet to come out after overcoming considerable internal difficulties between the Italians and the Germans. The Battle Fleet was looked on as the "Pièce de resistance" and therefore great care was taken of it. Therein lay the real difficulty. At that time the Battle Fleet was dispersed in several harbours and it took time and manoeuvring, as well as a large consumption of fuel to assemble it. On all three occasions one ship or another was not ready to sail, was not fuelled, or was in dry dock. Combined Fleet exercises could not take place (chiefly owing to lack of fuel) and firing practice was rare. Added to this were the technical deficiencies already mentioned. Difficulties on the naval side were crowned by air cover, which with the very limited strength of the German and Italian Air Forces in the Mediterranean made excessive demands on an air force which was already claimed for convoy protection; this applied particularly to the Luftwaffe, which had to carry out 75 - 90% of the sorties, and was bled white.

Even when the fleets came within maximum firing range and actually exchanged a few shots, the Italian Fleet had to break off the action at nightfall, since they were unable to fire in the dark, and run off to the nearest home port (Taranto or Messina).

/The /What

The only results were:

1. As well as the failure of the Fleet an enormous quantity of diesel-oil was uselessly consumed.
2. The prestige of the Italian Fleet was sinking lower and lower.
3. In spite of the sortie of the Battle Fleet the convoys had to take shelter in the nearest ports owing to the uncertainty of the outcome of the battle between the two fleets and wait for the enemy fleet to withdraw; this delayed the supplies.
4. The German and Italian airmen were worn out for no useful purpose; bomber attacks on enemy warships, so far as they were carried out had little or no success, since co-ordination with the Italian Navy was lacking.

The Italian Battle Fleet never made a sortie against enemy convoys which could have brought success. It never got beyond discussions as to "when, how and where". When action is conditioned by worry about losses, success cannot be expected.

Just one word about naval armament policy. At a time when the limited value of the battle fleet, especially battleships should have been recognised and the dockyards were overloaded and there was a shortage of material, work continued on the battleship "Roma". Mussolini himself took the salute when this Technical Wonder and Pride of the fleet sailed past him in the Adriatic. I believe that work on other large ships was continued, some were definitely retained in commission, and each of them devoured goods in short supply. It is clear even to a layman how much could have been saved for the supply services if there had been an armament policy suited to the actual situation and war requirements. I had long since ceased to believe that Mussolini's plan to use his whole fleet in a decisive action at some critical point in the war would ever take place. The above account gives ample reason for this.

In concluding these notes I must state that I have tried to depict the situation objectively. I must also add that it is far from my intention to offer destructive criticism; my friendship with Italian Commanders is too deep and I have far too often observed their devoted work for our common cause. An historical account, however, demands truthfulness and progressive development requires shortcomings to be disclosed.

**Air Covering Forces:** Here again my friendship with Italian Air Force officers of all ranks, particularly General Fougier, who had served under me as Commander of the Italian Air Corps in Flanders and whom Mussolini appointed Secretary of State for Air on my arrival in Rome, does not permit me to make mere destructive criticism.

Fighters were used in a purely defensive role, offensive raids were carried out mainly by torpedo - bombers and bombers, while occasionally dive-bombers and fighter-bombers were used to good effect. I have already commented on their technical performance, which could more accurately be described as a lack of performance. Consequently I had to let the Italian fighters operate in the less dangerous zones, in the Tyrrhenian Sea and along the coast off Benghazi and Tripoli and partly too in the Adriatic and the Straits of Patras. The danger zones in the Mediterranean (from Trapani - Palermo - Sicily - Southern Adriatic - across to Africa and in the Aegean Sea) were patrolled by German fighter squadrons and Ju.88's and Me.110's of the Night Fighter units which were only partially suited

/for

RESTRICTED

- 13 -

for the job. Movement of forces by both sides was made to fit in with the Operational areas. Already from Spring 1942 convoys had been accompanied by 1 to 3 bombers carrying depth-charges, whose task was to scout for enemy submarines, warn the convoy and make the initial attack. In the latter respect the bombers were supported by torpedo-boats, etc., who were to continue the attack on the submarines with depth-charges and in exceptional cases with gun-fire. Repeated attacks on surfaced submarines by aircraft with 20 mm. cannon had at the very least the result of making them submerge immediately.

Operations Staff, Luftflotte 2, was in command and gave any necessary orders to II and X Fliegerkorps and Fliegerfuehrer Africa, and passed on requests for any assistance required to Superaereo.

All German aircraft were flown with extra tanks, all sea rescue aircraft were ready to take off and sea rescue vessels ready to sail or at their stations. Complete locating equipment was installed where most needed. The strength of the air cover depended on the degree of danger, the weather, time of day, speed, size and importance of the convoy. After dark the auxiliary fighters Ju.88 and Me.110 took over escort duties alone, since the S.E. fighters had to land at dusk. Air cover varied between two and sixteen aircraft. Various methods were used in overcoming difficulties of relieving aircraft over the sea. Practice gradually produced record breaking performances, pilot aircraft (Ju.88 and Me.110) were used in the more difficult cases and occasionally the aircraft were beamed in by one of the escorting aircraft they were to relieve. But this was only allowed when the convoy was known to the enemy, there then being no question of concealment. If enemy aircraft were reported during the approach flight to the convoy, all available fighter forces with a large enough range were sent into action in order to intercept the enemy formation before it could reach the convoy. Owing to the limited range of the fighters and the great distances involved this nearly always involved considerable risk. A chance had to be taken and results justified such action. In several cases enemy naval forces at a strength of from four destroyers to a mixed formation came out from Gibraltar, North African harbours (after the landing in North Africa), Malta and Alexandria against the Axis convoys. The presence of such units of the Fleet in these harbours was a preliminary warning for C-in-C South and an alert signal for the attacking forces required: bomber, dive-bomber and torpedo-bomber units. These sorties which had to be flown from very great distances caused a colossal strain on flying units because they had to fly into anti-aircraft barrages whose numbers, calibre and accuracy made them particularly effective. To be shot down was more or less tantamount to death by drowning. In a few cases it was possible to rescue crews by the very varied rescue measures from all the Axis held harbours in Italy, the Balkans and North Africa. Occasionally the Allies' ships reported the rescue of airmen from the sea. Whilst for example an attack by the Lehrgeschwader on four destroyers south of Crete two or three were sunk without any loss to ourselves, on other occasions we have had very heavy losses when sinking one to four ships; in these instances nearly all the machines which returned were damaged. But the purpose of the action was always achieved; the enemy aircraft were prevented from pressing home their attacks on the convoy. It was not until the start of the Tunisian Campaign that Italian torpedo-bombers took any successful part in these attacks, operating in mixed waves with Luftwaffe aircraft. If one of our larger convoys was scheduled and known, C-in-C South ordered air attacks to be made at the opportune moment against the ships in the harbours or the harbour entrances to be mined from the air or by sea. These attacks were almost as a matter of course carried out at night thus suffering less casualties, but naturally limiting the period of effectiveness. These attacks were supplemented by blocking the harbours by submarines; these measures also proved successful, when they were unexpected.

/Important

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 14 -

Important as it was to combat the enemy air and naval forces operating against our convoys, it was equally important to intercept and destroy enemy convoys sailing from the West to Malta, Suez, etc., from the West and East to Malta and at times to Tripoli, Benghazi, Tobruk and later to Algiers and other places; In this connection Malta stood in the foreground since Malta without supplies had neither operational nor tactical importance. These operations had to be carried out almost exclusively by the Luftwaffe. These attacks too made very heavy demands on the Luftwaffe; the enemy convoys sailed with strong or very strong cover, sometimes aircraft carriers being assigned to them; or they sailed so close to the coast that they could be escorted and defended by enemy fighters based along the coast, until they came under fighter cover operating from the port of destination. Uniform composition and high speed of the ships reduced the danger factor. Finally the ships, naval and escort forces were British, which preferred the most unfavourable and stormy weather for their voyages and by that alone made air attacks much more difficult to carry out.

In spite of this the results of air attacks were convincing; out of two convoys approaching Malta simultaneously from the East and West only two ships, one of them unfortunately a tanker, were able to reach the island; all the other ships were sunk. Such results were never again achieved; but from every convoy a greater or smaller number of ships were eliminated, and several times their destination ports attacked as well. German submarines took a particularly successful part in the attacks on enemy convoys in areas beyond the effective range of the air forces.

Just one word more about convoys at night. The main burden of protecting convoys during darkness fell on the naval forces; this was, as already mentioned, made more difficult owing to the lack of aircraft and submarine locating apparatus. I have already spoken of the remedies which were devised later. Luftwaffe co-operation was confined to sorties by sea reconnaissance aircraft which were fitted with locating apparatus and were above all to serve as a protection against naval forces including submarines; Radar search for enemy aircraft was the task of the German ground Freya station covering the route of the convoy. There was also the wireless intercept service. All three systems operated well. The naval and Luftwaffe forces attached to a convoy had to observe wireless silence until there was no doubt that enemy reconnaissance had discovered the position, direction and speed of the convoy. Night reconnaissance by enemy aircraft and submarines which became more and more frequent from the middle of 1942 onwards was effectively countered by dropping decoys.

The excessive burden placed on the Luftwaffe can be clearly seen from the above account. As well as total losses and injuries there was the wear on aircraft and crews. The life of aircraft engines and airframes had been increased by five to twenty per cent, but overhauls could not be avoided. The more highly developed the engines, the more essential that they be overhauled. From an air force point of view the cover service by the Luftwaffe was unproductive. To a great extent it was merely an expensive waste of flying. It was not possible to alter this state of affairs; unfortunately too, nothing could alter the fact that this made it difficult to have the necessary number of aircraft ready to take off for purely offensive tasks. The resting period for the crews became increasingly shorter and the demands on units became increasingly greater. These flights could only be considered a gain in that they gave practice in flying over the sea; notable results were achieved too by units flying single-engined aircraft.

/Taken

RESTRICTED

Taken as a whole these flights were a severe preliminary strain to the battle for Malta.

d. Transport Aircraft: neither Italy nor Germany had transport formations in their air organisation in 1941/42. Each Gruppe had a few transport aircraft for its own immediate needs. On the whole they were used for the first time in the battle for Norway, for Crete, and then in winter 1941/42 in the East. The airborne operation against Holland too can be considered as preparatory. The schools were stripped bare; consequently air crews in training had to suffer since irreplaceable instructors and aircraft were lacking. From this time on they were organised into Gruppen, even if there was no establishment. It is clear that such small units were exploited to the last man by front-line headquarters, without their being cared for to the same degree. This got better when the Gruppen were co-ordinated into Geschwader and for the purposes of organisation and service placed under their own commanding general. This dual subordination was the lesser evil. In the Mediterranean theatre all sorts of intermediate forms of command made their appearance. C-in-C Luftwaffe had in the emergency made two or three Geschwader available, which carried out their difficult and thankless task from bases in Sicily, Italy, Greece, Crete and Tripolitania. When these flights were not made at night, fighter escort was also necessary, at least to meet them at dawn and for cover over the ports. Notable achievements were flying one division over from Crete to El Alamein (Tobruk), carrying petrol and short supply goods on a maximum scale, carriage of anti-tank guns and other weapons in the six-engined aircraft, and so on. For a long time the crossings were made without loss, until in Spring 1943 off Tunis immediately following each other one Air Transport Geschwader of Ju.52's and a Gruppe of six-engined transports were caught by enemy fighters and almost entirely destroyed. These losses gave American journalism cause to criticise my leadership. For the sake of historical accuracy, it can be definitely stated that these losses were not due to any shortcomings or recklessness in the orders issued by Luftflotte 2.

All these transports were extremely vulnerable. If anything prevented the fighters from meeting them, one had to expect a considerable number to be shot down. If enemy fighters or bombers interfered with the fully laden aircraft when landing or taking-off, this likewise meant writing-off a considerable number of them. By strong anti-aircraft defences at the airports in question, by extensive fighter escort and by making use if a large number of operational airfields these losses were kept within reasonable limits. Above all, this was achieved by the unloading organisation, which operated excellently, the splendid discipline of units when landing and taking-off, and the prudent, far-sighted measures taken by the airfield commanders. The close co-operation between Fliegerfuhrer and Luftgau was at its most effective at the lower levels.

Experience over the years showed that Air Transport units are indispensable for carrying supplies in dangerous situations, but they will never be capable of catering for the supply requirements of large formations. Since the supply service is a self contained organisation, all means of transport must be under unified control up to Army depot level.

e. Coal and Crude Oil:

Italy had only completely inadequate sources of coal and crude oil. Stocks, the so-called mobilisation stocks, were only available in insufficient quantities. Germany therefore had to help with both. But, oil, above all things, was also in very short supply for the German High Command. This resulted in unpleasant and eventually unsatisfactory business dealings on both sides. A further result was that the scanty stocks had to be distributed among scattered dumps, and oil

RESTRICTED

- 16 -

requirements for a convoy were not immediately obtainable. This caused delays. Owing to the very acute shortage, supplies had to be withdrawn from the emergency reserve of the Italian Battle Fleet; once or twice the fuel tanks in the battleships had to be partially emptied, so as to be able to supply the most pressing needs of the escort vessels. This meant a great loss of time. It must be acknowledged that the C-in-C of the German Navy usually met requests for help from the Italian naval authorities in a most generous manner. Luftflotte 2 also assisted Superaereo in the same way.

Coal was not such a vital question since more was available, the larger number of consumers permitted easy mutual assistance and coal burning was confined exclusively to some of the cargo ships.

It is difficult to say, without being accused of being wise after the event, whether these conditions could have been improved. Certainly only if more had been given by the Germans, and the Italians had acted with more purpose. But the fact remains that because of these difficulties fullest use could not be made of favourable opportunities for sailing and the minimum essential escort could not always be provided. Because of this and other shortcomings already discussed, the supply service was inadequate.

f. I did not have direct official control over loading and unloading. Reports about shortcomings reached me from the German loading and discharging officers. I was able to confirm the accuracy of these exposures by making occasional visits to the ports. The report to OKW about this caused Hitler at the end of 1942 and beginning of 1943 to send Goering and later Admiral Donitz to Italy, to support my efforts with Comando Supremo and the Italian Naval Command. Long discussions and a tour of inspection of various ports by the Reichmarschall took place. In this sphere the Germans set up by arrangement with the Italians a special authority to reform the worst faults; things got better, but were by no means good. The main defects were in the following:

1. The loading and discharging organisations did not work against time; they took their time.
2. Co-operation between preparation of material and loading left a lot to be desired.
3. Air Raid Warnings were excessively prolonged; sometimes loading and discharging came to a standstill for half a day or longer.
4. Unloaded cargo remained an inexcusably long time on the quays and because of this was sometimes destroyed during air raids.
5. Loading was delayed through strict adherence to painfully exact loading lists. The loading of German and Italian goods together on one ship, the distribution of supplies of a similar type between several ships and the observance of the necessary fire regulations were additional excuses for delays. No vehicle or tank was allowed to be loaded with full fuel-tanks; refuelling at the disembarkations port took some time, so that through this as well full use could not be made of periods when there was no enemy air activity.
6. Blown up or destroyed quays forced us to discharge cargoes by tender or to use unsuitably located unloading points.

/7.

RESTRICTED

7. Sufficiently strong anti-aircraft protection could only be obtained after a very long time; almost everywhere German anti-aircraft artillery had to manage on its own. This weakened the anti-aircraft and anti-tank strength at the front.

Endeavours were made to improve or eliminate all these defects. If after a long struggle improvements in organisation were effected, their value was already lessened by further enemy action. An example of this was the excessively long air raid warnings. The harbour areas were not provided with bomb-proof shelters for the dockers. But this was essential if a shorter warning was to be instituted. Concrete shelters were built gradually but unfortunately too late; only then was it possible to incorporate an imminent danger alert within the general warning, which required special observers in the port areas. In this way it was possible to reduce warning periods to quarters of an hour. The fact that the men remained in the vicinity of the ship had the further advantage that immediately after the raid any fires which had broken out could be extinguished.

In Tunis where C-in-C South had set up a senior supply headquarters under the former Q.M.G. of Luftflotte 2, record performances were achieved. Whereas a troopship took 2 to 5 days to unload to Benghazi or Tripoli, this was done in Tunis and Bizerta within one or two days. When heavy raids were expected the ships were taken away from the quays and anchored in the harbour roads or in the case of Bizerta in the Lake of Bizerta. Many losses were thus avoided.

The shortcomings in unloading facilities coupled with the greater danger of large ships at sea caused me to advocate, among other things, the use and building of small and very small ships. Of these only a few were destroyed during the voyage and practically none fully laden in the harbours. This caused Hitler to issue an order that valuable weapons such as tanks were to be loaded only on ferry-boats or barges or up to a maximum of six on large ships.

Good air-raid protection could only be assured by large batteries of six to twelve guns. Until the beginning of 1943 the old type 2-cm, 3.7 and 8.8 cm. guns were sufficient. Against the first four-engined bombers which attacked Bizerta and other places from a height of 10,000 metres, only the 8.8 cm. with an increased muzzle velocity, the 10.5 cm. and the 12.8 cm. anti-aircraft guns were still suitable. Similarly multi-barrelled small calibre anti-aircraft guns on single mountings had to be dropped.

g. Convoy traffic had to be adapted to enemy air and sea activity. Reconnaissance by spies, submarines and aircraft as well as by the wireless intercept service were up to the required standard. But it was wrong to allow oneself, on the strength of reports which at the time could not be checked, to be so influenced in one's decisions that any bold treatment or initiative was lost. Unfortunately this happened all too often. Good reconnaissance had to be coupled with a flexible command and reliable ships. Fear was often the cause of restraint in operations and of incomprehensible and even panic decisions, which became the graveyard of every effort.

h, Conclusions to the chapter "Convoys and Supplies"

I have described in detail the shortcomings of the convoy service, and at the same time of the supply service generally, because, as on the other fronts, but even more so on the African front, supply problems had become the decisive factor in the conduct of the war. Because of the tremendous efforts made by Luftflotte 2 to restore the situation, we were spared the necessity of considering the question of whether the problems on the African Front were directly conditioned by the difficulties which were cropping up (a considerable number of convoys had, in fact, been sunk before my arrival in the Mediterranean theatre).

Prior to the air offensive against Malta, all available air forces had to be used from December 1941 until February 1942 on convoy escort duty. This had a satisfactory outcome. At the beginning of February 1942 I was able to report to Goering in Rome that the proportion of convoys destroyed to those reaching Africa had been reversed; by the beginning of February the percentage of ships reaching Tripoli and Benghazi had risen from 20% to 80%. This increase made the start of Rommel's counter-offensive possible.

8. Rommel's Counter-offensive of 21 January 1942, with a short Appreciation of the Plans of the British Command

One can only properly appreciate the performance of the supply services from the beginning of December 1941 to the end of January 1942 if one bears in mind that the German and Italian Army and air forces arrived at the Sirte positions decimated and without supplies, and that the troops, some of which were sorely in need, maintained themselves with supplies from a ship which had escaped from Benghazi and gone aground in the gulf off El Agheila.

Rommel's decision to launch a counter-offensive on 21 January 1942 was like most of his decisions taken very suddenly and without the knowledge of and therefore in opposition to the C-in-C of Tripolitania, Marshal Bastico. Rommel had made a habit of keeping operations a secret from the Italians as long as possible because he believed the secrecy of his plans was not sufficiently preserved.

It is undoubtedly true that the success aimed at depended on surprise which demanded absolute secrecy. Therefore all means of ensuring secrecy were certainly justified. But such conduct is also certain to make "allied operational command" difficult, and can indeed wreck it. I have already mentioned that it was often left to me to intervene in such cases; such was the case on 25 or 26 January when I intervened together with Marshal Cavallero. Marshal Bastico wanted to forbid the offensive, but on Rommel's and my advice agreed to an attack with a restricted objective, which he deluded himself merely included the capture and holding of Benghazi. Comando Supremo did not want to risk anything more, as it did not think it could justify another setback in the face of public opinion. But it was clear to me that Rommel would only halt a victorious advance if enemy resistance made it necessary. This was just as it should be. The following incident is, I think, worth recording because of its unique nature. I flew Marshal Cavallero to the above mentioned conference in my Storch, since only one Storch was ready to take off and I had to attend the conference. The conference dragged on so long that the return flight starting at dusk became a night flight, landing safely at El Agheila. What was so unusual was that a German field-marshal had flown the Marshal of Italy, Count Cavallero, over the desert in an aircraft not equipped for night flying.

The offensive, carried out by very weak forces with wonderful enthusiasm, supported in model fashion by the Luftwaffe in Africa, was continued up to the so-called El Gazala position (30 January 1942). All credit for this success must go to Rommel; he was unsurpassed in leading armoured formations and such-like raids, provided his nerve did not desert him. I will deal with Rommel later in a special appreciation.

During January 1942 we had obtained a very clear picture of the dispositions and strength of the British Forces and their fighting qualities. Rommel's offensive which I too supported involved no special risk provided it stopped at the right time, but the capture of Benghazi was absolutely essential for speeding up and safeguarding our supplies.

/On

RESTRICTED

- 19 -

On the other hand I could never quite follow the line of thought of the British command. The history of the war will have to decide whether it was an aimless pursuit to exploit to the full the hard-won initial success, in the hope of smashing Rommel and thus gaining the whole of Africa, or whether it was supposed to be a deliberate operation of extermination. Without doubt the vast area of Africa is ideal for such large-scale operations of movement. But in North Africa the very few roads and tracks and the limited passability of the desert are definite disadvantages. In addition a weak enemy force can hold up an attack of an opponent superior in numbers if in suitable positions. Added to that is the fact that great distances, partly over desert, consume men and material. Why were not all available means (roads, ships and air transport) employed to eliminate as quickly as possible this state of attrition? In spite of its partial destruction and an insignificant amount of mining Benghazi Harbour was still usable and supplies brought by sea could thus be brought up as near as possible to the front; furthermore the port was conveniently placed in relation to the Sirte front. Air raids were to be feared, but anti-aircraft and fighter forces could reduce their effectiveness to a minimum. If, at the critical moment, one could not bring forward the forces necessary to continue the attack or at least to hold the line reached at Marsa el Brega, a setback was to be expected, which was bound to have a bad psychological effect as indeed it actually did. These considerations lead one to the conclusion that the advance of the Eighth Army could not have been according to a prearranged plan.

Although the German-Italian air forces in Africa were weak, they were however superior to the R.A.F. in spite of the poor fighting quality of the Italian airmen. Shortage of fuel on the German side was not enough to balance things up. The German fighters in particular were superior and the Stukas were as feared by the British troops as they were loved by our own troops. The bombing activities of the British with their nightly firework display at Benghazi led one to assume great bomber strength.

9. Consequences of Halting the Counter Attack at the El Gazala Line.

When Rommel's counter-attack had run itself to a standstill in the El Gazala position (beginning of February 1942) the position of the German-Italian forces in Tripolitania was similar to that of the British Eighth Army at Benghazi. How long the successful attack lasted stood and fell by the supplies of men and material. This was even more so since the time of year which was unfavourable for fighting prevented a successful conclusion and the British supply lines were becoming shorter and better. The repair of the harbours at Benghazi and Derna was a matter of great urgency. Work was carried out here with remarkable enthusiasm in spite of the tropical conditions and they did not even shirk the most daring improvisations. The best harbour construction engineer in Italy was ordered to Benghazi; he did an excellent job. Only a few days after the capture of Benghazi the first steamers were able to unload there. One special piece of luck too was that German ammunition and other dumps were found to be undisturbed, and supplemented supplies brought by sea beyond all measure. At the same time, however, preparations for the air offensive against Malta had now to be completed with increased vigour.

10. The Air Offensive against Malta (2 April - 10 May 1942)

The long preparatory period, which in view of the situation in Africa was a great nervous strain, was repaid by results.

Before the offensive I had personally ensured that:

1. A certain number of bomber crews, fighter pilots and air sea rescue crews had been trained for their tasks and were ready for action.

/2.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 20 -

2. Stocks of fuel, ammunition and spare parts were adequate and that anything likely to be required was assured through the supply services.
3. The Headquarters organisation within II Fliegerkorps which was placed in command was working smoothly and had communications sufficient for any eventuality.
4. The ground organisation was sufficiently elastic and well protected by anti-aircraft artillery.

At a conference of the commanders I was convinced that the main idea of the operations command had taken root everywhere and that the orders for the offensive were fully understood. On my inspections I found confidence in the undertaking and the maximum standard of serviceability in the units. Under such conditions it was to be expected that the offensive would result in a positive success at the cost of only a small number of casualties.

The essential point of Luftflotte 2's orders were:

1. By a surprise attack to eliminate the enemy fighters or at least to reduce them to such an extent that they could no longer be a serious menace to the subsequent bomber raids. Furthermore British fighters were to be engaged in the air whilst in this short period the three known airfields were to be attacked with heavy bombs, light fragmentation bombs, cannon and machine gun fire, in order to destroy or put out of action any aircraft on the ground and to make the runways at least temporarily unserviceable for landing and taking off. Anti-aircraft defences were to be neutralised.
2. The subsequent bomber attacks were to:
  - a. Augment the effect on the earlier attacks on the airfields and ground staffs until these were finally eliminated.
  - b. Later make the dispersal area and shelters on the airfields unusable, and
  - c. Destroy the harbour installations, including as far as possible, shipping, but at the same time sparing all municipal installations.
  - d. The daylight attacks were to be carried out uninterruptedly and in great concentration with such a strong fighter cover that the British fighters were kept away from the bomber forces and pursued until they were gradually wiped out.
  - e. At night-time continuous nuisance raids by single aircraft were to impede clearance and repair work. In addition, in due course they were to destroy the few British supply ships entering the port by dive-bombing attacks and to drop mines in the harbour entrance.

This plan made exorbitant demands on all formations; they were met to the full at a considerable cost. The attack on the island fortress was made difficult by the following:

/a.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 21 -

- a. On the outskirts of the airfields and in the harbour there were natural and artificial installations of every type in the rock (parking places for aircraft, dumps, shelters) against which the available one ton bombs had no penetrating effect. An attempt to blast open the entrances with fighter-bomber attacks was also unsuccessful. Possibly the most effective raids on the airfields were dispersed attacks using small high-fragmentation bombs.
- b. The concentration of strong British anti-aircraft artillery augmented by ship's anti-aircraft fire to protect the harbour made an effective box barrage which required a great deal of courage to penetrate and which of necessity took its toll of aircraft.
- c. The weakness of all dive-bombing attacks lay when going into and pulling out of the dive which checked the speed of the aircraft and broke up the formation. Casualties occurred here which could only be reduced by fighters diving with them and the introduction of a covering force at pull-out height. This force also had the task of protecting the bombers until the aircraft in attack formation reformed in Kette and Staffel formation.
- d. The British fighter units deserve admiring recognition for their bravery, their manoeuvrability in action and especially in their perfectly executed tactics of diving from a great height (10-12000 metres) through the close flying formations of bombers. The same recognition must be extended to the British unloading organisation; tankers and ships which arrived were unloaded in an unbelievably short time.

In Malta the Luftwaffe had met a worthy opponent.

II Fliegerkorps headquarters in Messina did a remarkable job in planning and carrying out the attack; equally praiseworthy was the readiness for action of the units under its command.

Interruptions occurred owing to the attacking forces being switched to convoys, whose destruction was essential if any lasting success against Malta was to be achieved. In very hard battles we were able to destroy these convoys completely except for a few ships.

The main offensive began on 2 April 1942; on 10 May 1942 I could consider our task completed. By the successful elimination of Malta, air and sea supremacy was assured on the supply routes from Italy to Africa. The supply service was able to meet all demands made on it. Great credit is due to the Luftwaffe for being able to confine its attacks to purely military targets, a fact admitted by the British. It would have been a simple task to capture the island after the bombing raids. The blame for the fact that this was not attempted must be borne by the German-Italian High Command which was later to pay for this omission.

For the time being all danger had been removed and the situation on land, sea and in the air in the Mediterranean appeared safe.

11. Deliberations on the Continuation of Operations:

Critical views of the Tobruk-Malta Question

With the air successes against Malta OKW too believed that the situation was now so eased that they considered it possible to withdraw most of the air forces from the Mediterranean theatre, especially since they were needed in

RESTRICTED

/the

RESTRICTED

- 22 -

the East. Even if I could see that the air forces were urgently required elsewhere as a vital weapon, I do not consider that one ought to be satisfied with the "successful destruction", merely to be able to cope indefinitely with a minimum of air forces. Of course sufficient forces remained in the Mediterranean for policing Malta, attacking enemy convoys and protecting our own convoys; but these forces were too weak to prevent the rebuilding of Malta and supplies from reaching Malta for any length of time. In addition the Mediterranean was too vast and Malta too well protected by its underground installations to be able to keep Malta down indefinitely with such weak forces. A Malta refreshed and ready to do battle would be bound to endanger the supply route to Africa just as it had done earlier in summer and autumn 1941. This decided me quite early on to win over Comando Supremo to the idea of capturing Malta and together to make fresh representations to OKW on these lines. We succeeded in obtaining permission for this in February 1942, so that preparatory measures could be put in hand from March. The German-Italian Air Forces had air supremacy until July and the attack on Malta was scheduled for the beginning of July. What with a resurgence of British Sea and air activity against axis convoys and the restrengthening of Malta, particularly since the attack had to be abandoned, coupled with more and more demands on the Luftwaffe, German supremacy in the Mediterranean was gradually crumbling away.

I was in agreement with Rommel too; he supported my plans against Malta, and in return I told Hitler of his views on future operations, whose first and main objective was the capture of Tobruk. It was clear that to secure Tobruk and use its harbour installations required the front to be pushed forward as far as the old Libyan-Egyptian frontier. The occupation of Sidi Barrani or better still Mersa Matruh would have been even more of a safeguard for our forces and at the same time would make it impossible for the British to use the small harbour at Sidi Barrani. I personally, and I think I can speak for Comando Supremo too, had no further aim.

The first and foremost aim of my headquarters, heavily burdened by problems of supply, was the capture of Malta. Only by doing that could I consider operations in Africa safeguarded. Switching the supply route to the port of Tobruk could never have the same effect. I was repeatedly emphasising this point to Rommel and to others.

This situation as regards Tobruk was as follows:

1. It was not definite whether the port would fall into our hands at all and if it did when and in what condition. There were enough wrecks already lying in the harbour approaches.
2. The bulk of the supply goods still had to be shipped from Italy, and therefore were still within range of Malta. Greece and Crete could help, but the supply routes to Salonica, Athens and Crete were so dangerous that the arrival at the embarkation ports of the necessary supplies for an army or indeed for the whole of Tripolitania could not be guaranteed.
3. The Athens-Crete and Crete-Tobruk route was within sea and air range of the British bases in Egypt, so that its protection required strong forces in spite of the short distance. This, together with the protection of convoys sailing from Italy, made too great a demand on the forces available.

/If

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 23 -

If in the end I and Comando Supremo gave way to a sudden proposal of Rommel's to launch an offensive in Africa before the attack on Malta, this was due more to personal reasons and to too much consideration for Rommel's reasons which were tactically correct. This was a mistake by myself and Comando Supremo. I ought to have known that a tactical success can only be exploited and sustained if the supply services are functioning faultlessly. I ought furthermore to have known that Rommel never stops when he has a success or indeed a major success in his hands. I shall return to that.

Fliegerfuehrer Africa (General Seidemann) wrote on this problem: "The question of whether to attack Malta or Tobruk or whether to attack Malta and Tobruk was decided in February 1942 when the decision was made to attack the Gazala positions first. The capture of Tobruk was only cautiously mentioned towards the end of the operations order. The main objective was: defeating the British forces so as to prevent them from being, in Autumn 1942, in a position to start another large-scale offensive like that of 1941. Should the opportunity arise of capturing Tobruk at the same time, this should be attempted as long as it did not entail getting tied up and suffering greater casualties."

From which headquarters this order originated, I do not know. Very likely from OKW, and sent to Panzer Army Headquarters, Africa. It concerns operations in North Africa only, and therefore has nothing directly to do with Malta. On this question I can state conclusively:

1. It was my duty to regard the protection of the supply lines between Italy and Africa as my number one priority. It therefore goes without saying that I fought with Comando Supremo and with OKW for the most important measure: the capture of Malta. In my reports to Hitler I never left any doubt that North Africa could only be held for any length of time if the Axis was in possession of Malta. The misgivings of Goering, who feared high casualties as in the Crete operation, were not plausible, since the conditions on Crete were different in every respect from those on Malta. Hitler saw that too and on that account agreed to my final request to be allowed to attack and take Malta.
2. At this talk I also vigorously put forward the case for the continuation of Rommel's operations and almost literally said: together with Malta the capture of Tobruk is vital. The reasons I gave for this were the improvement in supply services to the front, Italian prestige, and above all that one must anticipate a British attack, and indeed smash all preparations for one.

This request too was granted. Here I must quote the words of Hitler, who on my vigorously expressed requests took me soothingly by the arm and said "Now take it easy Field Marshal Kesselring, I'll certainly do it".

3. At that time I had decided that the operations should be in the order, first Malta then Tobruk and this was endorsed by the Fuehrer.
4. I frequently discussed these points with Rommel; we were in agreement about both operations. It was clear that Rommel's views were more concerned with the ground situation; all the same he must have known that supplies were a decisive factor in the African campaign. On the other hand I was far too much a military tactician not to understand Rommel's anxiety to launch the attack against the El Gazala positions before the attack on Malta, since he could see that the British

/were

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 24 -

were very much advanced with their preparations for attack. These tactical considerations unfortunately decided me to give priority to the army offensive, instead of sending very strong protests to OKW and Comando Supremo.

5. I believed I was justified in this since I had reckoned on a faster operation, which could stop at the Egyptian frontier or just beyond it.

There is no doubt at all that Rommel intended to attack Tobruk from the start. I myself had counted on it; indeed I had vigorously supported the idea. But if, as General Seidemann writes, the assault on Tobruk was only to be attempted in certain circumstances, then quite clear and local limits were specified for the attack.

The fact that Rommel, due to the uncertain situation, did not mention an assault on Tobruk in his first orders does not amount to a denial of the existence of a definite intention to attack and capture Tobruk.

6. Differences of opinion between Rommel and myself first occurred after the fall of Tobruk, when I heard for the first time of Rommel's grandiose plans to advance to the Nile with his Army. I have only recently learnt from Seidemann's comments that Rommel, without informing either Count Cavallero or me, requested and received authority for the hazardous operation against Egypt through Dr. Gerndt, a staff officer who was in close contact with Hitler. Only now is it clear to me why a wireless telegram from Adolf Hitler forbade me to obstruct Rommel's operations in any way, thus tying my hands as it were. This was doubly so, since Comando Supremo too adopted and approved of Rommel's plan at the conference of leaders at Sidi Barrani or Gambut.

I pointed out the great danger of the plan and tried at Rommel's headquarters to reach agreement with Count Cavallero. Unfortunately this proved in vain. (For further details: see Section 13, 'Planning the Attack on Malta').

7. General Seidemann does not understand why I gave such energetic support to Rommel's advance after opposing it beforehand. I shall explain this later: It is only natural that after I had been overruled I did my very best to forward the issue so as to avoid any later reproach that inadequate support from Kesselring was to blame. Any soldier will approve of such an attitude.
8. General Seidemann also informed me that it was only the fact that supplies had been guaranteed by C-in-C South that gave Rommel the incentive to continue his advance to the East. Although the fallacy of this statement is obvious from what I have written, I want to make the following points on this subject:
  - a. At this time Rommel never spoke to me about supply difficulties. Even at the leaders conference mentioned above there was no mention of this matter.
  - b. On the contrary, Rommel considered that the supply problem was solved now that the abundant stocks at Tobruk had been secured.

/c.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 25 -

- c. At that period the difficulties of supply lay less in C-in-C South's zone than in overcoming the long journey from Benghazi to the front. Only a few ships could enter Tobruk.
- d. I gave Rommel no assurance at all.

Even today I cannot entirely understand why the two Armed Forces Operations Staffs in Rome and in East Prussia refused for so long to allow decisive measures to be taken against Malta.

Hitler could only be won over to the idea after one of his temperamental outbursts. I would not like to state even now with certainty whether he sanctioned this operation without reserve; as an Army man he undoubtedly imagined the assault would be considerably harder than it actually was. It is only necessary to consider the position after the air offensive, when Malta could have been taken at a very small cost. Perhaps he thought that his consent to such operations would force him to make more and more concessions of men and material just at the time when other fronts, which were nearer to his thoughts, would make demands which then seemed inevitable to him. This attitude seems to be typical; similar cases frequently occurred in later years.

As opposed to this I must state what I regard to be fundamental principles of warfare: The essential consideration must be: what has to be achieved. If it is merely a question of an objective to which no vital importance has to be attached, then one will make the time, kind and strength of the attack dependent on the general situation. But if the objective is of such importance that sooner or later it will have a decisive influence on the general situation, then at the very least one should strive, by employing all the forces necessary, to settle the matter decisively as soon as possible. If this cannot be achieved, then one should not embark on any operation whose successful outcome is dependent on the capture of this objective. If it is to be done by a concentrated effort, then one generally will be able to make the necessary forces available. If one does not take advantage of a tactically favourable moment, the requirements for a later attempt are many times those required in the first place, without being sure then of achieving the desired objective.

In the case of Malta, one regiment or at the most one division of paratroops would have been sufficient to take the island after the first air offensive; the parachute operation would not have incurred heavy casualties. Co-operation by the Fleet could have been limited to a minimum; it could have moved in and occupied the island almost as a peacetime exercise. For the operation planned for Summer 1942 we had to reckon on using many times these forces. Further examples of this kind are the events in Tunis, Salerno and above all the prelude to the invasion in Northern France. These were all cases where certain success would have followed the use of a small force at the right time, but which later could no longer be settled satisfactorily even at a very great cost.

Italy obviously shrank from the risk; Comando Supremo did not believe their Forces were capable of carrying out such a task. I shall have something more to say on this subject later.

12. Operations of the Africa Army from the Gazala positions until capture of Tobruk; Immediate results of these operations

The retreat of December 1941 was counterbalanced by the great success of the winter offensive and the establishment of the El Gazala line.

/Rommel

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 26 -

Rommel has once more increased confidence in his leadership and in his troops and had managed to discover British weaknesses. In his opinion time was working against him. In the course of the next six months he had to reckon on a considerable build up of the forces opposing him and relative to this strengthening, a growth in the fighting spirit of the British troops. He knew too that the high morale of his own troops could not be maintained in static desert warfare; on the other hand any attempt to cripple the enemy would require the employment of equipment and men on a very large scale, with corresponding amount of wear and tear. That was bound to be a burden to the planned offensive. Rommel's demand that supply services should be loaded to the absolute limit, could be given fuller consideration in view of the success achieved against Malta. By the beginning of May Rommel's Army and the Italian Forces in Libya were already fully stocked with supplies; in some cases even surplus reserves were held.

Rommel worked out his own plan of operations and arranged all questions of air support with Fliegerfuehrer Africa, General von Waldau. One of General von Waldau's main responsibilities was to co-operate with Italian 5th Squadra Commander, in whom I also had the greatest confidence.

Co-operation by the Navy, which was to carry out a flank attack from the sea on the enemy's rear and later to bring in supplies, was arranged with Admiral Weichold.

The operation was based on a surprise move and was to lead to the cutting off and destruction of the forces on the extreme right flank of the British Forces by an encircling attack from the desert coupled with a diversionary landing by a smaller but specially selected force. A second thrust was to surround and capture Tobruk. Field Marshal Rommel wanted to be present on the flank where the decisive battles were to take place but naturally he had to be available for making decisions at a higher level. General Cruewell was in command of the operation and was to give the order for the landing to start.

The plan was simple and clear; Marshal Bastico gave his consent after he had been given very brief details. I was not satisfied with the command arrangements. Once before Rommel had not been available for taking high level decisions through being out on a distant flank; a static headquarters ought to have been set up. The difficulty of bringing the motorised units into the assembly area by a march through the desert during the night before the attack was overcome by Rommel's skill and signals from aircraft. The surprise was affected but liaison with Rommel broke down; battle reports which were of great importance to both the air force units and to General Cruewell were entirely lacking.

The confusion on the battlefield with tank attacks and counter-attacks and movements on a front which had become completely fluid had increased the difficulties of air reconnaissance beyond all measure and had made every sortie flown a risky proceeding. In spite of this our own ground forces were not endangered during the uninterrupted Luftwaffe sorties, and this and the following days must be regarded as red-letter days for the Luftwaffe command and personnel in Africa.

During the early morning General Cruewell landed his Storch in enemy held territory and was taken prisoner. The front was without a Commander; I placed myself completely at the disposal of the Ia of this Operations Staff, Major von Mellenthin. On being urged by him and General von Waldau I said I was prepared to take over command at the front, since Major von Mellenthin was

/unable

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 27 -

unable to take on the responsibility and no suitable Army Commander was available. Since no reports or orders came in from Rommel and wireless queries remained unanswered, I ordered the landing to be carried out. Air reconnaissance reports gave me so clear a picture of the situation that it was obvious to me that the main force was indeed engaged in an indecisive battle with British armoured forces, but that weaker forces were already fighting considerably further northwards on the heights bordering the Via Balbia. Air reconnaissance reports which were coming in continuously all telling the same story about battle movements and artillery firing on both sides in the area south of Acroma made the picture of the situation even more complicated. Since I was unable to fit these reports into Rommel's plan of operations, I had to disregard them when weighing up the situation.

Just at the very moment when Rommel's main force was in difficulties I was reckoning on a spectacular success by the unexpected appearance of German troops, even if not numerically strong, in the rear of the enemy. There was no special risk attached, since the troops could be withdrawn the following night if the worst happened; otherwise they could be supported by the frontal attack. I was therefore all the more surprised when this attack was forbidden by Rommel, during the night. However much inspiration Rommel's presence might have given the troops with the attacking force, he was, nevertheless, completely exposed to all the risks and uncertainties of a battle. People who were there have told of the state Rommel's Headquarters was in on the day the offensive started. Rommel instinctively felt that a quick success was no longer possible and on that account cancelled among other things the proposed landing. The question of the Commander's location has not been discussed in detail; I shall deal with this subject later. As was expected, the tank battle on the following day was a victory for Rommel; it was a day of great achievement for both the Command and the armoured formations.

In the meantime the position on the right flank had deteriorated; fairly strong enemy forces filtering through had some success against the extremely weary front-line troops and were endangering the rear areas and the supply services. I pressed for an interview with Rommel, whenever and wherever he might like. The interview took place on the southern flank and had the desired results, first a static Command Headquarters and better liaison, and secondly measures against the enemy who had broken through. It was a pleasure to see Rommel's marvellous techniques in desert warfare at work. By that afternoon the situation was critical; as I flew to the conference in my Storch, followed by another, I was fired on from the ground by machine-guns and 2-cm guns. By making a big detour I then reached the Battle Headquarters of one of the Italian Corps (scene of the conference), whilst the other Storch had to return to base. In the evening tanks had already broken through (apparently a unit on reconnaissance) which, moving westward along the supply routes would have been able to destroy all Rommel's supply columns. I immediately flew back to my formations, gave the alarm and sent up every Stuka, Me 110 and fighter-bomber which I could get hold of and which was ready to take off. The attack was successful, the raiding columns sustained considerable casualties and were compelled to withdraw. When the aircraft landed at late dusk, I had lost among various other casualties two of my best, most experienced and keenest desert air crews - but in my opinion a serious set back had been avoided.

A fresh danger made its appearance in the south. For reasons unknown to me Rommel had refused to allow the Bir Hacheim oasis to be occupied on the first day; soon afterwards it was occupied by the French Foreign Legion. (That later proved to be wrong; it appeared that the oasis had been occupied for some time by the "Fighting French".) The attempt to neutralise the oasis solely by air attacks, which Africa Army had repeatedly called for, had no effect. The attacks then personally led by Rommel made but slow progress; I protested strongly because no immediate infantry attack followed the many effective bombing raids. This led to considerable differences; however, with the capture of the oasis, which turned out to

/be

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 28 -

be strongly fortified and protected by mines, the differences were overcome by the greatest possible co-operation on both sides.

It was an indication of Rommel's vitality that immediately after the fall of Bir Hacheim oasis and a brief consultation with me he pursued the enemy with his armour in the direction of Tobruk. The latter was soon encircled and the assault launched.

The achievements of the Army and Luftwaffe up to the encirclement can be considered among the most outstanding performances of the war. The Italian troops fought exceptionally well. The assault on Tobruk following up previous successes, was boldly planned and carried out without loss of time. In this case too Rommel and von Waldau (Fliegerfuehrer Africa) made a co-ordinated plan. I transferred from Greece and Crete every unit capable of dive-bombing still stationed there. On the eve of the attack I visited each unit and made my shortest but nevertheless most successful speech: "Airmen, if you do your duty tomorrow, in the evening every radio station in the world will be able to announce: "Tobruk has fallen". Good Luck!"

The attack commenced punctually. Supported most effectively by the dive-bombers, the main attack, launched from the south on the Tobruk fortifications immediately after the last bomb had fallen and supported most efficiently by artillery, advanced so far into the positions that the harbour was brought within artillery range. In spite of a hard struggle with many a crisis, the attack was successful. Tobruk had fallen into German hands! This was announced to the world over the radio. The Fliegerfuehrer Africa was decorated with the Ritterkreuz, General Rommel was promoted to Field Marshal, a step which brought energetic protests from the Italians. I too felt that an award of the "Brillianten" would have been more appropriate, since Rommel had once more displayed his typical bravery.

The capture of Tobruk helped to restore Italian prestige. I would like to record that Italian Army and Air Force units, within the limits already mentioned, rivalled the performance of the German troops.

A considerable number of prisoners were taken; large supplies of war material of all kinds including food came in very useful to our own supply service; supply services could now be improved and the supply problem eased with certain restrictions, because of the acquisition of Tobruk harbour.

The slight cost of this victory was out of all proportion to what was achieved; British resistance received a severe blow and their immediate supplies were jeopardised by Tobruk's capitulation. This was a situation which would surely have induced any general, let alone Rommel so full of his triumph, to follow up his success. This was an opportunity of destroying the whole of the British Army, but speed was the essential factor. On 21 June I visited Rommel at his headquarters in Tobruk and found him about to issue the order to continue the advance at noon towards Sidi Barrani. This plan coincided with my ideas, although I did not consider the proposed move of the main forces across the desert necessary. If the British troops were demoralised, then they could be smashed in the shortest way; because the distance was shorter, the road would permit a swift advance and thus an even greater exploitation of shock tactics could be expected. The Luftwaffe was able to paralyse the RAF so that air opposition would not have been able to interfere with the advance of the main body along the short stretch. Indeed it was up to Rommel to make this decision, since he now naturally consulted his Italian superior Marshal Bastico even less. General von Waldau had arranged his tactical dispositions with Rommel. I knew that everything that was humanly possible had been done,

/General

RESTRICTED

General von Pohl received instructions to move the ground organisation into the Tobruk area; where it is true there were adequate airfields, but which had to be cleared of mines, adapted and protected by anti-aircraft. This was carried out in a very short time.

Measures to get the harbour installations in working order as quickly as possible were discussed and agreed upon with Admiral Weichold and the Italian naval authorities. At the very least some of the many wrecks in the harbour would have to be cleared. I placed the greatest value on unloading in Tobruk, whether it took place alongside the quay or by means of barges. Even if petrol supplies were increased and the M.T. parks filled up with captured vehicles the route from Benghazi to the front or indeed from Tripoli to the front was too long to ensure supplies for a prolonged period. A second major unloading point had to be set up in Tobruk; the Italian naval authorities deserve special credit for speeding up the repair work to the harbour.

### 13. Planning the Attack on Malta

The plan for the attack on Malta did in fact have to be altered; I did not consider the front in North Africa safe unless Malta was taken. I therefore asked Comando Supremo and OKW if the preparations could be completed and the attack on Malta carried out.

As soon as I received permission to go ahead with the attack on Malta, after the very lively discussions already mentioned, a start was immediately made after a final talk with Comando Supremo on working out the plan of attack and getting the necessary troops and supplies ready. The forces to be used were so calculated that failure was out of the question.

The following were assigned:

2 paratroop divisions, one of them being the Italian Folgore Division, which was surprisingly quickly and successfully trained by the very active paratroop commander, General Ramcke. This division consisted of elite troops; manoeuvres at which I was present for part of the time showed that these men had the right spirit for paratroops. The many difficulties were overcome with remarkable energy.

Two or three Italian shock division, formed from the best divisions in the Army and specially trained.

Part of the battle fleet for direct attack on the island and to escort the assault boats. Larger ships of the Italian merchant navy to ferry the troops over.

Air Force units in somewhat greater strength than employed for the first air offensive against Malta.

After a lot of planning the following draft of operations was drawn up (very roughly, since the operation was not carried out):

1. Main attack by airborne paratroops to capture the heights in the south as a starting point for their job of occupying the airfields to the north and then swinging round towards the east.

A short time before this, a bombing raid to be made on the airfields and anti-aircraft positions. (High level run-in in contrast to the sea level approach of the transport aircraft carrying the airborne troops).

2. Main attack from the sea against the bases in Marsa Scirocco Bay accompanied by simultaneous bombing raids on the coastal batteries followed by smoke screens.

3. Diversionary attack from the sea on St. Paul's Bay in the north of the island.

In the final discussion the C-in-C Italian Navy expressed the greatest doubts, since in his opinion the attack could only be made if all the guns had been put out of action. These doubts were only allayed after an outspoken discussion in which I overcame these objections by giving examples. It is questionable whether the Italian Navy was really inwardly sympathetic.

14. War Council at Gambut

At the time of the assault on Tobruk the preparations for Malta were well advanced. The operations against Sidi Barrani and Mersa Matruh took longer than had been supposed; even although strong resistance had to be overcome at several points, the bulk of the casualties which amounted to about 50% of the tanks were caused by the move through the desert. After the fall of Mersa Matruh or directly after the fall of Tobruk a conference took place at Gambut, Marshal Cavallero taking the chair and all the other Commanders-in-Chief concerned being present. Field Marshal Rommel reported that there was practically no opposition of importance left and that he could promise that the Army would be in Cairo in ten days. I felt it necessary to dampen somewhat the enthusiasm caused by this report. I said in everyday language:

"Even if I admit that Rommel has a better understanding of the situation on the ground, I cannot however restrain my misgivings. In this new advance, casualties must be expected at the same rate as at Mersa Matruh, even if the actual fighting is limited. The supplies necessary cannot be maintained for any length of time. Even if there are no British reserves worth mentioning in Egypt at present, it is safe to assume that the first troops are already on their way from the Near East. I too am of the opinion that the enemy should be pursued until we drop, if it is certain that a fresh opponent will not be encountered.

I can speak with authority on behalf of the Luftwaffe. My airmen will be completely exhausted by their aircraft which require overhauling and by their lack of supplies, and will be forced to come down in Egypt or before they get there. They will be opposed by formations fully up to strength with serviceable aircraft and which can be reinforced within a very short time. As an airman I consider it madness to rush in against intact air bases. The co-operation of the air forces being of decisive importance in a battle I must from this point of view decline to continue the offensive with Egypt as its goal".

Field Marshal Rommel, again asked by Count Cavallero to state his views, maintained his optimistic opinion and guaranteed to be in Cairo in ten days.

Marshals Bastico and Cavallero gave their consent. The Duce was going to come to Africa so as to be present at the entry into Cairo. I received a curt order from Hitler by wireless not to obstruct Rommel but to support him in every way. In spite of my inward doubts about the feasibility of this grandiose plan and the misgivings which I had openly expressed, I had nevertheless decided to do everything humanly possible on the Luftwaffe side to make Rommel's plan work and to prevent an irreparable set-back.

The Italian Commanders were so enraptured with the certain "Cairo" success, that they already considered it necessary to look up the best hotels in their guide-books. I could no longer listen to such talk and asked them to refrain, pointing out that rejoicing

/before

before a victory was a bad omen. Instead of indulging in enchanting phantasies, it was more important to take steps to overcome the enormous difficulties that lay on the route to Cairo. Even in matters of hygiene preparations had to be made. Taken all in all, everything that was possible at the time was done. Cairo is not Alexandria and the supply problem was far more difficult. The different problems of supplies required the small port of Sidi Barrani to be put in working order, so that unloading could take place at least from the very small ships and barges. This work was put in hand.

15. The Advance on the Nile and its immediate consequences

The first few days of the advance went according to plan; they proved Rommel right. Soon the resistance stiffened to such an extent that one was forced to conclude that either new forces had been committed or the original formations had made a remarkably quick recovery. The battles grew harder until fighting near El Alamein stopped the advance and made Rommel go over to the defensive. At this time the battle became critical, the situation only being restored by committing the armoured reconnaissance units and Luftwaffe regardless of losses. Both Army and Luftwaffe forces were exhausted; they needed immediate and abundant supplies of men and material. In addition fresh formations had to be brought up, one infantry division coming from Crete followed by the division of German and Italian paratroops earmarked for Malta. Since these divisions were ferried over by the air because of the urgency of the situation, they therefore had no vehicles; this meant carrying out an emergency adjustment of transport within the German and Italian divisions and air force units which diminished the mobility of all formations even further. Consequently vehicles had to be brought up in comparatively large numbers, for anti-aircraft and flying units too. This, coupled with catering for more units made even greater demands on the supply services. In order to guarantee supplies the capture of Malta was necessary, and at the time this was no longer possible. I had to give up my demands for this assault as conditions could no longer guarantee success. The abandonment of this project was the first death blow to the whole undertaking in North Africa.

16. Final Deliberations and their Result

Many questions arose which required examination and answering.

- a. Can North Africa, with lines of communication stretching from the Nile to Tunisia, be held indefinitely at the Alamein position with this comparatively weak force?
- b. Can the offensive be resumed, so as to obtain more favourable and more secure supply conditions by taking Alexandria and other places?
- c. Is it any use fighting out a decisive battle in the very advanced and therefore perilous El Alamein position, or is it
- d. better to withdraw nearer to the supply base (Tobruk)?

What was the situation?

The enemy attack too had petered out after only a few days; this indicated that, as I expected, the British Army had been reinforced, but was not yet strong enough to launch a large-scale counter-offensive, since the defection of some of the Italian divisions was certainly an incitement for a break-through in force.

All things considered, there was still time; how long this would last would be determined by the extent and thoroughness of the

/preparations

RESTRICTED

- 32 -

preparations for the counter-attack. The later it came, the heavier it was bound to be. Everybody had to agree to that.

What were the conditions within Panzer Army Africa ?

The German-Italian front had come to a halt in a sector where it had extremely well protected flanks. The width of the position suited the forces which the Army had gradually gathered together. The German troops were on the whole good, some of them above average. The Italian infantry divisions varied, the "Folgore" Paratroop Division was above average; some had improved considerably, while others were definitely a liability, who were more of a hindrance than a help. However, taking full account of their quality, Rommel was using them in such a manner that no catastrophe could occur; in some cases they were placed very close to and covered by German troops. Reserves were available in the German armoured divisions. The anti-aircraft force was stronger than it had ever been, and I had instructed the commander of this division to regard Rommel's orders as emanating from me. The flying forces had gradually regained their normal establishment for Africa; they could not keep pace indefinitely with the reinforced R.A.F.; but the flying personnel were however, all old desert campaigners, who with their traditional keenness were, to some extent, able to hold their own against superior enemy numbers.

Rommel had devoted all his love and energy to constructing this defensive position. I did not see the position myself but he had told me several times that he believed it could withstand a major British offensive. His particular pride were such technical refinements as Devils' Gardens etc. The position also had remarkable depth - but neither a second nor a third separate line had been set up, nor even reconnoitred. This definitely showed that Rommel considered it possible to hold out at this distance from this base.

It would have been to our advantage if the British Eighth Army had prematurely attacked this position, sustaining in the process such severe losses that a boldly led counter-attack could have achieved the desired result. That did not happen. Instead of an insufficiently prepared major offensive, the Eighth Army was content to sound the front by a number of very small raids; in no case did these have any decisive results, but nevertheless a great deal was achieved; the British soon acquired an exact knowledge of the layout of the German defences, disposition of the troops, artillery positions, etc. In this fighting we used up a lot of material and suffered considerable losses all the time. On the other hand Montgomery must have concluded from the strength of the defensive position that Rommel no longer thought of continuing the offensive had intended to try and bring about a decision in a defensive action. This meant that any subsequent German offensive would have had a good degree of surprise.

A fresh German offensive could only be successful if it caught the enemy whilst he was still preparing for his own attack, that is to say if it took place as quickly as possible. In that case a minimum stock of supplies, especially oil and ammunition, must be available if the attack was not to be held up for lack of supplies. According to our calculations the last ten days of August was the latest feasible time; owing to the unreliability of the supply route it was not possible to give a firm guarantee that all supply requirements would be carried out in time. In my considered opinion too, any fundamental change in the supply situation was no longer a possibility. The forces which had long beforehand been prepared and made available for the attack on Malta, especially the German and Italian paratroop divisions and the air force units, had been moved to Africa to stiffen the front there; they had already gone into action and to some extent been used up. Since

/at

RESTRICTED

at that time too Hitler had not given permission for the Bizerta - Tunis route to be used, there remained no other way to stabilise the supply position and thereby the situation as a whole except by advancing; that would mean launching an offensive to reach Alexandria or at least to beat up the Eighth Army to such an extent that it would be unable to resume the offensive for many months to come. A threat to the supply route from two sides, from Malta and from the Nile, was bound sooner or later to bring it to a stand-still. I only promised therefore, to do what was humanly possible.

To my mind there was no doubt that Rommel would not abandon his objective, Alexandria and Cairo, which was so nearly in his grasp. This was no supposition, but had been the main subject of his many conversations with me. He too, just as I, naturally had doubts as to whether the supply service would come up to his expectations and whether OKW would satisfy his requirements. It was this which led to the construction of the Alamein position in the manner mentioned, of unheard-of strength for African conditions. It was obvious that we would have to remain in this extended Alamein position as long as we expected to continue the offensive. I suppose, in fact I am almost certain, that Rommel was not thinking of withdrawing to the frontier of Tripolitania and Egypt, and on that account did not even toy with this idea, so as not to distract his mind from the fundamental issue. On the other hand I am sure that Rommel, if he were able, would not have fought a decisive action in the El Alamein position but would have followed his old desert technique of going over to a battle of movement.

The following points were definitely decided upon during these weeks:

- a. The defence of the El Alamein position and
- b. an attack from this position if supply requirements could be satisfied.
- c. At that time there was no thought of withdrawing without fighting to the frontier or other positions or of a retreat with delaying action, since everyone was full of the idea of moving forward.

By the middle of August the plan of attack took a more concrete form: the attack was to be made with a strong right wing using the armoured formations and motorised divisions. On 28 August a decision had still not been made, because stocks of fuel were still inadequate. On 29 August I promised Rommel that I would let him have the amount he was short from aviation stocks and would have it flown over beforehand. The O.Qu (GSO1.(Q)) thought that he would then be able to accept the responsibility for the supply service. This decided Rommel to take the offensive, which he ordered for 30 - 31 August. At this talk with Rommel I emphasised that I would not be in favour of any more offensives if this one was not carried out now. Enemy superiority on the ground and in the air, especially the overall effects of enemy air activity, would not allow it to take place at a future date; actually now was the latest possible moment. Personally I also counted on the British forces being so severely battered by the attack, even if its objectives were not reached, that we would not have to reckon on a British offensive for some time.

General Seidemann reveals that Rommel only gave the order for the attack after it had been reported that a tanker had entered Tobruk; as this report proved to be incorrect, I promised him 400 cubic metres of aviation spirit. On the strength of this promise Rommel finally ordered the attack. In order to give a clearer picture I should like to give my version of this matter.

/1.

1. From a tactical point of view I considered, as did Rommel, the days round about the end of August beginning of September as the latest possible time for a counter-attack. I pointed this out clearly and added that in my opinion our stay in Egypt depended on the success of such an attack, which must destroy the enemy preparations for an offensive. Compare the case of "El Gazala".
2. Besides Rommel and myself, the Ia (Lt-Colonel Westphal) and the O.Qu. (Major Otto) were present at the conference when this was decided.

The question of whether to attack or not was difficult to decide. Quick supplies from Italy could no longer be counted upon after two tankers had gone down; I had emphasised this when I promised to do all that was possible by emergency means. (Aircraft, submarines, barges etc.).

Answering a specific question by Rommel, the O.Qu. stated that he could recommend an attack as far as supplies were concerned if 400-500 cubic metres of petrol were flown in to him. After thinking it over for a short time I promised that this would be done.

The Ia cautioned the O.Qu. not to be too optimistic in his calculations; after checking up once more the O.Qu. did not change his opinion. Orders for the attack were therefore given.

3. For my part I only promised the 400 cubic metres of petrol; I only heard today that this amount was not supplied in full. If I had known that at the time, I would have made the balance available from the aviation stocks in Africa.
4. But that was not the reason for the failure of the attack, which was due to the causes which I have given below.

#### 17. The Attack

Rommel himself was as usual on the flank where the attack was to be made. Held up by unexpected minefields, he did not advance as quickly as he had expected in the first few hours; on top of that heavy enemy air raids, which were on a far larger scale than previous raids caused very heavy casualties. Influenced by this, Rommel had already by seven or eight o'clock given the order to call off the attack, but after reconsidering he ordered the attack to be resumed at noon, later amending it to one o'clock (this was the first thing he told me when I arrived on the battlefield at nine in the morning). It is naturally difficult to say whether the attack would have had the desired results if it had been carried through without pause. One thing however is certain, that the interruption gave the enemy every chance and diminished ours to a corresponding degree. I was not surprised when the attack was called off early in September. Enemy air activity played a large part in that. One must assume from the indications of the minefields in the path of the attack, that Montgomery had considered an attack by Rommel possible and expected it to come, as did all Rommel's attacks, from the desert; it is also possible that the British Eighth Army, in view of the heavy mining of the German front, did not consider an attack from the centre or the left wing likely and was able accordingly to concentrate its engineer defences on the British left flank. The minefields not only gave the enemy Command time for counter measures but confined our own forces to a narrow course which offered the R.A.F. the best possible targets. Our own endeavours therefore had to aim at breaking out of these straits as quickly as possible,

/so

so as to be able to manoeuvre in a less vulnerable area thereby dispersing the effects of enemy air raids. This halt in the attack increased our disadvantage. I was ready for anything except this decision of Rommel's: Rommel was no longer the bold leader of old; the long period, almost two years, of uninterrupted fighting in the hot climate, with the incessant friction from co-operating with the Italians, and the disappointment at the failure of the advance to Cairo had seriously upset his health and above all his nerves. Rommel needed a rest. Leave was granted him, and he left after he had set up a new defence line.

#### 18. Consequences of Halting the Attack

In my opinion, the serious consequences of halting the attack were that the supply route was now no longer in the long run assured, and further that the British had obtained first hand evidence of the state of the German-Italian forces in North Africa. Time was now on the side of the British.

1. The Anglo-American landing in North Africa, which had surely been planned for many months past, the first hints of which were already quite clear to us, was the preliminary to a pincer operation. Even if it was thousands of miles away, it was bound to result in a dissipation of the Axis forces and the effect it would have on the morale of the troops fighting isolated in Africa was not to be underestimated.
2. Unless they were forced to throw in their main force or reserves to beat off Rommel's attack, the British would have gained a victory whose results were not so much factual as moral. Weaknesses would be revealed, which would invite exploitation in the future.
3. The R.A.F. was on its way in, and was able to support the war at sea at all points, and Malta had been so strongly equipped with men and materials that it was no longer possible to make an assault on it.

Now that they had a strong R.A.F. behind them, the British Army could also be expected to tackle bigger tasks, especially as the successful defence was bound to have had a good effect on morale.

In these circumstances, was it correct to await the enemy's large-scale offensive in the Alamein position? I can no longer remember in detail the reasons which influenced Rommel. Rommel and Bastico alone made the decision in this matter. Rommel had great belief in the strength of the position; indeed according to everything that I myself saw and heard, it had been built with all his skill and attention. The troops were good and, judged against previous desert forces in Africa, numerically strong. Supplies too were adequate for the time being. Without being branded a gambler, it was safe to assume that in the event of an attack the position would hold. To this must be added that no positions had been constructed or even reconnoitred and prepared further to the rear.

Considered in retrospect, it was wrong to halt the attack and remain in the El Alamein position having full regard to the unusual commitments involved and advantages enjoyed. There were two courses of action open:

1. Under cover of a rearguard, to withdraw from the enemy to the frontier position east of Tobruk, at the same time holding Mersa Matruh as an outpost.

/2.

2. Sham defence in the Alamein position, forcing the enemy into a decisive battle about thirty kilometres to the west in a position which, as far as terrain was concerned, would rest on a strong left flank and which had yet to be reconnoitred in detail and developed. Each of these plans had its advantages and disadvantages.

The first while shortening and strengthening the supply line would be a severe blow to the political prestige of Italy; again and again one had to pay the penalty for allowing politics to influence strategy and operations.

By adopting the second course of action it would be possible to escape the initial impact of the attack, which is always the heaviest and in the second position to repulse the enemy who would by then not be so strong nor so well placed for attack. Since Egypt could no longer be taken, it was now merely a matter of wearing out the enemy so as to hold the Italian colonies, keeping a hand in the Mediterranean game and perhaps to gain a success once more by taking advantage of any favourable opportunity which occurred. At this time Rommel and I had our first serious discussion concerning future developments, as to whether in the circumstances Tripolitania could be held at all. These discussions continued at some length immediately after El Alamein and later; I shall return to the subject later on.

However wrong it might be judged, the decision to hold the El Alamein position had been made. Comando Supremo with its various Commanders-in-Chief of Army, Navy and Air Force, Marshal Bastico with the generals and admirals under him, OKW, Rommel and my own Headquarters did everything possible to prepare for the decisive struggle. Rommel's relief, General Stumme, a general with a vast experience of armoured warfare in the Russian campaign, also did everything possible and weighed up the situation and positions from an unbiassed angle and effected several useful improvements. Of a more equable and less moody nature than Rommel, he contributed considerably to increasing the morale of officers and men; he also succeeded in setting up a tolerable relationship with the Italian Commanders. But he too did not enjoy the best of health. The hot climate was poison to his blood disorders.

#### 19. New Measures to Improve and Safeguard Supplies Second Air Offensive against Malta

C-in-C South and Comando Supremo, together with the C-in-C Italian Air Force and the C-in-C Italian Navy, were using all means to increase the efficiency of unloading facilities at the ports of Tripoli, Benghazi, Tobruk and Sidi Barrani and to give them better fighter and anti-aircraft cover; at the same time they were attempting to introduce new means of transport and were organising a supply system in the Italy-Greece zone. Meanwhile, however, increasingly heavy attacks were being made against the supply ships of both sides. On the whole, both sides suffered very heavy losses but managed to achieve their object. The Axis managed to reinforce and re-equip and supply their forces in Africa almost up to full requirements, while the British had once more made Malta capable of repulsing any attempt at a landing. The most obvious reflection of the latter was the increasing strain placed on our convoys. This purely defensive phase of the war could not in the long run guarantee freedom of movement in the Mediterranean; with the prospect of a full scale Anglo-American landing in the theatre, the possibility of the supply service ceasing altogether had to be considered. On top of this, operations by saboteurs against airfields in Africa and Crete were very effective. I was not content merely to sit back and watch everything slowly going to ruin. Therefore, with the approval of Comando Supremo, I again proposed to Hitler and Goering, that we launch another air offensive against Malta.

/I

RESTRICTED

- 37 -

I was fully aware of the difficulties: Malta's defences were again completely effective and a considerably strengthened fighter force was ready to defend the island. More and more fighter aircraft were being ferried by air from Gibraltar, and we were unable to take any effective countermeasures. Even when our radar picked up the approaching aircraft, our fighters arrived in the ferrying zone too late; every airman knows how difficult it is to locate a fast fighter in the open. On top of this the relative strength of the air forces had swung to our disadvantage and escort duties were making great demands on the German and Italian formations. Finally the British, drawing their own conclusions from their experiences in the first air battle for Malta, had dispersed their bases and arranged the greatest possible protection from bombing.

On the German side (ObdL) all that was possible at the time was done; not every requirement could be fulfilled. The high quality of the air force units were to some extent a compensation. The fighter units already had operational experience against the R.A.F.: the bomber formations also had had years of experience in flying over the sea. For daylight operations Ju 88/s were to be used for the main tasks, the slower high altitude bombers being used mainly for night bombing. The Italian bombers and fighters were hardly worth considering because of their obsolete aircraft and the inadequate training of their bomber crews in night flying. The attack was again under the experienced command of II Fliegerkorps. In spite of the fact that the right tactical moment had been chosen and all operational conditions fulfilled, the attack did not have the success desired; I had to call it off on 18 October 1942 because of the high rate of casualties, particularly in view of the imminent Anglo-American invasion. The reasons for this failure are:

1. Since the opportunity for surprise did not occur, the bombing raids on the air bases were ineffective. The real battle against the enemy fighters had to be carried on in the air and against bombproof dispersal areas, and was correspondingly more difficult and less effective.
2. Protection of the German bombers was rendered difficult to a great extent by the neutralisation for the first time of German radar (deflection by dropping tin-foil strips "window").
3. The British defence methods had been still further refined and extended in scope and range. This was possible because of the greater number of operational aircraft available.
  - a. The effective attacks by single fighters from very great altitudes (10,000 metres and more) in a dive through German formations continued to be as successful as before and it was not possible to prevent these attacks by single enemy fighters with a corresponding layering of German fighters.
  - b. Enemy fighters staggered at a high altitude paid special attention to the vulnerable periods of attack of the German dive-bombers; they attacked the dive-bomber just before they started to dive and as they pulled out of the dive until they re-formed. Counter measures are naturally defensive in character and not so important as the attack.
  - c. Control from the ground was difficult since our radar locating apparatus was neutralised by the method mentioned in paragraph 2.

/d.

RESTRICTED

- d. Aircraft badly shot up needed special protection, which had to be provided by the fighter escorts and considerably decreased the battle strength of the fighters remaining on escort duties.

20. Reflections on the Defensive Battle  
at the Alamein Position

As a preliminary to the landing in Africa, the major attack on the El Alamein position commenced on 23 October 1942. In the middle of my conference with Goering in Naples I received a wireless report on the attack and the heroic death of the Commander-in-Chief, General Stumme. The battle was waged with an expenditure of ammunition unprecedented in Africa and for the first time with exceedingly strong air forces. The dense minefields, Devil's Gardens and other obstacles were completely neutralised by this barrage.

There are just a few general points about this phase, which I myself only experienced on short visits:

After I had obtained a clear picture of the R.A.F. effort and its effect on material and morale, I gave my impressions in a wireless telegram to the C-in-C Luftwaffe and OKW, adding in conclusion:

For the first time the R.A.F. has appeared in sufficient strength to be a decisive factor in the battle. But this is probably only the initial phase of the stepping up of Allied air activity which we must expect. If we do not want to be smashed in the near future by the enemy air forces, now is our very last chance to make a comparable increase in strength.

By then I was convinced that the Allies were too far ahead to be overtaken, unless we had for a long time past been working in the same direction. I emphasised this again to Goering on his visit to Italy. I insisted on the urgency of sending fighter aircraft, knowingly stressing that all other types of aircraft could be neglected. Until supremacy in the air had been secured, bombers should only be used in experimental formations. Towards the end of November 1942 Rommel flew to Headquarters to discuss the position with Hitler. At the time I knew nothing about the visit nor its object. The first I heard of it was when I received orders to meet Goering and Rommel at Rome railway station. At the same time I heard that Rommel had made a bad impression of dejectedness on Hitler, and on this account Goering was said to be bringing him to Italy in his command train in order to have a good influence on him during the journey. I myself noticed Rommel's tired demeanour; he looked almost more in need of a rest than he did before he went on leave.

Goering and I were convinced that Rommel in this state was not able to do what was expected of him and what the difficult situation required. His thoughts were already retreating to Tunis and thence to the Alps. I knew Rommel and knew that in the face of a partial setback he regarded the whole battle, indeed the campaign, as lost, but that a success could once more inspire in him that vigorous leadership. I was hoping that Rommel, once more on African soil, would be seized by the atmosphere of the front there and would inspire and lead his men in his old audacious style. Besides, there was no one there to replace him. On top of the worry of the African front, I had for some weeks past to bear the daily increasing pressure prior to the Allied invasion.

As the decision for the El Alamein position was developing I wanted to visit Rommel once more to discuss the position with him. Owing to engine trouble on the flight to El Daba I was compelled to land in Crete. When I landed early next morning in Africa I was requested to go to Rommel at once. The situation had deteriorated visibly.

RESTRICTED

- 39 -

Rommel had decided to retreat and had already withdrawn his right flank from the commanding Qattara position. Hitler when informed of this, forbade any idea of a retreat and ordered, in no uncertain manner, the present position to be held. He also appealed to Rommel's honour and censured the withdrawal as cowardly running away. Rommel considered this order slanderous and binding. The whole Army should face the enemy again and he wanted to join in the fighting as a rifleman. I explained to him that such action was completely out of the question and that such a step would mean the end of the German Army in Africa and would lead to the eventual loss of Tripolitania. I told him that the Fuehrer was working on a wrong assumption since his troops were no longer in the positions but in the open desert and that the order could therefore not be countermanded. He and I immediately sent urgent signals to OKW asking for a free hand, and this was granted in a reply received the same afternoon. This was the foundation of the fighting retreat from Egypt, which produced scenes unparalleled in the history of War, such as the retreat of Ramcke's Paratroop Division, friend and foe marching along one road, mixed up together. It was fortunate for us that the R.A.F. was not sufficiently trained to bomb a retreating enemy out of existence. They had many chances to do this, especially at Halfaya Pass.

General Seidemann now informs me that according to General von Rintelen I spoke to OKW on 1 November and indicated that the crisis had been overcome, just at the moment when all the Axis reserves had been used up and the break-through was imminent. My comment on that is:

1. The only notes in my possession are extracts from the flight logbook (Colonel (Engineer) Baumler).

These state:

1/2 November - El Daba, Iraklion, Rome.  
3/5 November - Rome, Athens, Iraklion, Quasala,  
El Daba, Iraklion, Rome.

Two things can be deduced from the above:

- a. That I could not have spoken to OKW on 1 November, and
  - b. that I could not have formed any impressions of my own of the situation through my visits to the front.
2. However it was my custom after making a flight to give General Jodl a brief resumé or to have my Chief of Staff pass it on to him. In this instance this might have occurred on 2 November.

On my visits, in addition to Fliegerfuehrer Africa, the Commander of the Flak Division and Luftwaffe units, I have always made a point of including Rommel in my itinerary in order to discuss the situation and to be able to give him any assistance and to meet his wishes. Therefore if I did pass on any information about the situation to Jodl it was certainly only what I had heard from Rommel himself or possibly comments from General Seidemann and the commander of the Flak Division. I cannot agree to the suggestion that I submitted an appreciation of the situation not founded on facts to which the strict order of the Fuehrer could be attributed. It would indeed have been absurd for me to have done that and then on my next visit to Africa on 4 November to have persuaded Rommel not to carry out Hitler's order. And it would have been all the more incomprehensible that I then personally signalled a report on the situation as I found it to Hitler requesting that Rommel should be given a free hand in operational decisions. That this was granted is due entirely to my instigation and representations.

/21.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 40 -

21. My Deliberations on the Object of the Allied Invasion in November 1942 and the Counter-measures taken by me

The American invasion was preceded by a spate of propaganda, which can only be described as a very bad war of nerves. For weeks on end the most contradictory rumours, views and observations were reported to my Headquarters. Artistic variations of location of landings, strength of the invading force and its equipment kept tuning up. The movements of the fleet off the west coast of Africa led to most divergent guesses of likely landing points all along the west coast of Africa. The strong garrison of Gibraltar which was being continually reinforced caused the objective to be sought in the Mediterranean, while the confirmed presence of several aircraft carriers and large transports indicated a large-scale landing outside the range of air cover from Gibraltar, Malta, Alexandria and Syria. The stream of ships leaving Gibraltar for the Mediterranean was bound to extend by half a day the uncertainty regarding the start of the operation. My appreciation which took critical account of all reports which came in was as follows:

1. The invasion will be timed to co-ordinate with the movements of the British Eighth Army in Africa. For that reason a landing on the west coast of Africa is improbable.
2. This invasion is a kind of maiden operation; there are no precedents to go by and the American troops lack battle experience.

The Allies know that there are large air forces in Italy and its islands and that these cannot be put out of action by fighters from the aircraft carriers. On the other hand they have an intact naval fleet, which together with their air forces could make things very unpleasant if they got near our ports.

Therefore landings very close to the Italian islands and coasts can be considered improbable. For this reason it is unlikely that an attempt will be made to break through the narrow straits between Sicily and Tunis. This also rules out the possibility of landings near Tripoli or Benghazi.

If a landing is made on the north coast of Africa, it will certainly be at such a distance from the airfields in Sicily and Sardinia that bomb and air-torpedo attacks will have to be made at extreme range, with these consequent advantages to the invading fleet: reduction in the number of air raids to be expected, reduction in bomb-load and a longer return flight over the sea, which can be dangerous for damaged aircraft. There is not the slightest chance of the Italian Fleet making an attack at such a distance from their home bases.

Algeria must therefore be regarded as the territory which will be invaded. It is questionable what resistance the French will put up, but even the slightest resistance will help.

It is true that the road from Algeria to Tripolitania or even to Tunis is long, but it has certain advantages for the initial operations of the Allies.

3. A landing on Sicily would have very definite advantages: It would sever traffic between Italy and Africa and bring the Italian peninsular directly into the war zone. Although such a landing could decide the campaign, I consider it unlikely on account of the dangers already mentioned for the invading fleet.

/4.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 41 -

4. A landing on Sardinia and Corsica must be considered an independent operation with a view to further operations. The possession of these islands could prove a great advantage in any later landings in Italy or the south of France. Italy would thus be threatened from the air. However, it must be considered improbable since it does not fall within the limitations I have mentioned.
5. Conditions for a landing in the Balearics are similar to those for Sardinia and Corsica; at the moment I am not interested, and it would be out of range for most of my forces.
6. Southern France is an attractive objective, but would have no connection with other events in the Mediterranean. In spite of its size, the invasion fleet on its own is too weak for such an operation. No reports have yet been received that other naval forces are following behind.

I took certain precautions on the strength of the above appreciation of the situation.

1. C-in-C Luftwaffe sanctioned the most urgent of the Luftwaffe reinforcements, including one or two Gruppen trained in naval warfare and in operating over the sea.
2. The air bases in Sicily and Sardinia were overhauled and provisioned. The same was done for the torpedo units at their traditional base of Grosseto.
3. Co-operation with the Flieger Division in Southern France was arranged.
4. The necessary arrangements were made with the Italian Air Force; unfortunately the Italians could only assist with a very small number of torpedo aircraft.
5. The reconnaissance services were extended.
6. The German U-boats were deployed in such a manner that they could locate and report the convoy and then attack it.
7. Arrangements were made with the Italian Navy in case, contrary to expectations, the Allied fleet should enter Italian coastal waters. Furthermore I requested permission from OKW to hold at least one motorised division in readiness in Sicily, so that it could either be taken across to Tunis or be able to beat off any landing in Sicily that might take place. The Italian divisions in Sicily were not trained in this kind of fighting and the coastal defences had been incredibly neglected.

This request was not sanctioned. So as to have at least something in reserve, a battalion of paratroops was kept ready for action as well as my local defence guard battalion.

Even on the day before the landing in North Africa, Goering, speaking in Hitler's name, declared my judgement of the situation to be wrong. At Headquarters they were fully convinced that the landing would be made in the South of France. I was therefore held responsible for the whole of the air forces at my disposal being able to go into action against such an attack.

Since it was of the utmost importance to interrupt the approach by sea, my formations were correctly placed for carrying out this task.

/The

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

- 42 -

The second step was to shift the air bases to Corsica and Central and North Italy, which of course had to be done by using transport aircraft. For the time being the supplies already at these bases would be sufficient. Furthermore I was convinced that there would be no operations against the South of France.

The departure from Gibraltar and passage through the Straits of Gibraltar was reported by our agents and U-boats. C-in-C South was informed in good time as to the strength of the enemy, the organisation of the convoy and the arrival of the individual ships of the invasion fleet. Our own long distance reconnaissance aircraft were shadowing it. Reports kept coming in that an easterly course was being maintained; France and North Italy were therefore out.

II Fliegerkorps was given command of the air forces. The Fliegerkorps Commander wanted to attack at extreme range with all his forces, that is to say, to attack the convoy in strength while still on its way. I considered that such an attack would be a wasted effort with little chance of success and likely to incur heavy casualties. This might possibly lead to attacks against the actual landings being cancelled or at least restricted. For these reasons I felt unable to sanction his plan.

Distribution

C.A.S.  
A.M.P.  
A.C.A.S. (Ops)  
A.C.A.S. (I)  
D.S.T. (12 copies)  
T.S.D/F.D.S. (3 copies)  
Cabinet Office. E.D.S. (3 copies)  
Chief Military Historian (2 copies)  
Representative of the Australian War Memorial.  
A.H.B.1. (2 copies)  
A.H.B.2.  
A.H.B.5.  
R.N.Z.A.F.  
R.A.A.F.  
U.S. Air Historian  
File.

RESTRICTED