

THE WAR IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

PART II

By

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C O N T E N T STunisia and the fighting of the
Axis forces in Tripolitania

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1. Brief view of the situation on the day of the Allied landing, 8 November 1942

For some months a major Allied operation had been anticipated and it had been known for some weeks that it would be an operation either in North-west Africa (somewhat improbable) or in the Mediterranean theatre. Opinions were varied as to which place would be invaded. According to authoritative German opinion a landing was expected in the South of France. Count Cavallero and myself expected one in North Africa, and in Italian High Command circles a landing near Tripoli or Benghazi as well. Italy, Sicily and other places were naturally also taken into consideration as possible invasion targets.

At the end of October Montgomery had successfully assaulted the El Alamein position; Rommel was in very hasty retreat. Except for the garrisons of isolated posts and Italian forts there were no fighting forces at all in Tripolitania. Supply conditions had deteriorated considerably to our disadvantages; furthermore considerable losses of supplies had to be expected if Tripolitania were hastily given up.

Fighting the invading force at sea and in the harbours and ferrying army and air forces across to Tunis would make such a demand on the air forces available, that even the air cover for the convoys to Tripoli and Benghazi would be hard to provide, and would have to be cut down. For the defence of Italy and her islands the Italian Army, Navy and Air Force were available; the coastal defences were inferior and unsuitable for countering a large-scale landing.

For Tunis no precautions whatsoever had been taken either by the Italians or Germans. In view of the notorious hatred of the French for the Italians and vice-versa, even the smallest measure would have come up against enormous resistance and would have meant war. For the German Supreme Command the French colonies were forbidden fruit. The ports were not allowed to be entered, supplies were not to be routed through Tunis, and naturally in the same way no German security garrison could be moved to Tunis. That had been completely incomprehensible to me for some time, but now I could no longer in the least understand OKW's refusal to place without delay at least one division in Sicily. Air Force Reinforcements, continually being cut down, were able neither to prevent the landing at long range or to hold up or destroy the troops which had landed, without the co-operation of parachute or army forces.

What were in fact OKW's intentions? In my opinion it was hampered in its treatment of the matter by a false appreciation of the position. Whether it took any special measures for the protection of Southern France is beyond my knowledge. The order to have my airmen ready to beat off an invasion of Southern France was a make-shift to calm our nerves, and anyway was not as simple as it sounded. Adolf Hitler's preconceived idea about a landing in the South of France and the complete neglect of the rest of the Mediterranean front indicated that no great importance was attached to the latter, since owing to the great distances involved no direct repercussions need be expected on the other fronts. Or should OKW have given the initiative in their own theatre of war to the Italians? That could not be the case. Or did they think they could trust the French?

How should one have considered the situation?

If no fresh German troops were opposed to the newly-landed forces, it would mean that

1. the total loss of the German-Italian Army of Africa, since evacuation was out of the question,
2. the loss of Tripolitania,

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3. the peaceful seizure of the French North African colonies together with the forces and supplies to be found there, and
4. a base which would be just ideal as a jumping-off point for a landing on Sicily and in Italy which could yet be carried out in early 1943, together with
5. the possibility of eliminating Italy as a partner in the Axis and
6. the commencement of an air war on Southern Germany before the summer of 1943 was out.
7. Whether this would be followed by further operations through the Balkans towards the East or through Italy to France, one cannot say.

It can only be pointed out as a possibility in the event of the Allies shifting the main point of effort of their operations to the Mediterranean area. The exceptional advantages which would have been associated with the transfer already mentioned of the German effort to the Mediterranean, would now conversely be enjoyed by the Allies.

Thus it follows that everything possible had to be done so that points 1-7 occurred as late as possible, if at all.

Since no comparable and major steps had been taken to prepare against an invasion, the critical initial period had to be bridged by temporary measures and a situation created which would lend itself to further planned development. This included:

1. Delaying the landings by continuous air and submarine attacks, as well as delaying the advance on land against Tunis with whatever means available.
2. Seizing and holding our own bridgehead in Tunis by winning over the French troops and the Bey of Tunis as allies.
3. Extending the bridgehead to a line which could be held easily and with small forces, and which enabled communications with Rommel's line of retreat to be maintained.
4. Establishing an efficient system of supplies to and in Tunisia.

Such were my ideas and deliberations regarding Tunis and the general situation. Rommel's movements were naturally largely dependent on Montgomery's moves and on the air and naval forces assisting him. 3000 km. of open desert however also offered all kinds of possibilities to Rommel in retreat.

On the long road between Egypt and Tunis there were many defensive positions which could be held for a limited time with weak forces, especially since they could only with difficulty be by-passed or taken in an encircling movement. The enemy could be forced to deploy in front of these positions; he would have to attack and would thereby suffer casualties. Also his rate of advance would be slowed down. On top of this, an army as strong as the British Eighth needed a great deal of supplies. Even if they got the supply route by sea going more quickly than in previous campaigns and incorporated supplies by air directly into the general supply system, stoppages were unavoidable and would help Rommel in his struggle to gain time. On that account alone it was essential to prepare the defence line for Rommel's Army south of Tunis and to prevent co-operation between the two enemy armies and their air forces. Unpleasant as it was to have to forsake Rommel's forces in the initial stage of the campaign, the struggle of the German-Italian Panzer Army outside Fortress Tunis was equally important.

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Eisenhower's invasion force was certainly equipped with the best of everything and eager for combat, but in contrast to the British Eighth Army it had no battle experience. As long as the British Eighth Army was fighting a long way off, it lacked its moral support. Troops experienced in mountain warfare even although newly brought in could deal with this force in terrain which was largely of mountain character. The West front in Tunisia had therefore to be set up with fresh forces as quickly as possible. The further away from Tunisia Rommel fought, the more unavoidable was speedy assistance from OKW. Tunis required at least a second army as strong as the former Army of Africa, even if of somewhat different composition. That was what I proposed.

Supplies, especially petrol, will cause difficulties; this is where the abandonment of the attack on Malta in favour of the questionable operation of the Nile had its revenge.

One might also have had the idea, which Rommel several times discussed with me, of withdrawing quickly to Tunis, and since one could neither hold Tunis, or moving into Italy and putting up resistance in the Apennines or better still in the Alps. I will go into this line of thought again when I speak about Rommel's personality. Here I will say only a few words on the rapid withdrawal to Tunis.

1. The Army of Africa would have come into unfinished positions.
2. The mobile divisions would have been involved in all sorts of operations on the west front and would have been considerably expended before the final battle with the British Eighth Army had begun.
3. The British Eighth Army would have arrived very much earlier at the Mareth Line, which since it was badly constructed, would have been unable to put up the resistance which it actually showed later.
4. It is questionable how many non-motorised divisions would have reached the Mareth Line and what their condition would have been.

It is an old empiric principle that one ought to try to fight as long as possible on the ground immediately in front of the fortress.

These long deliberations produced the following brief conclusion: to fight doggedly as far away as possible in the North African theatre, so as to keep the Allied forces out of the European theatre of war, and especially from intervening on the continent.

How this was to be done demanded some improvisations, a frequent occurrence in my military career.

In order to avoid a historical inaccuracy, I must emphatically state that at that time no differences between Rommel and myself had been brought to Hitler's notice. After Italy's desertion this question became acute. I shall return to this in due course.

2. First measures and proposals of C.-in-C. South to clarify the position in Tunis

Whilst the struggle against the invading fleet and ports was going on under my responsibility and under the proven leadership of the II Fliegerkorps and the expected difficulties were being encountered, as far as the army and navy were concerned C.-in-C. South was faced with a blank. It did not make things any easier for me when Adolf Hitler informed me over the telephone at 11 a.m. that: "Darlan was in a difficult situation and urgently requested help"

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and that I had a free hand!" My measures were indicated by the deliberations already mentioned.

As C.-in-C. South, without responsibility for any front on land, I had no army forces at my disposal; anything sent by OKW went by the quickest route to the Army of Africa. The total force, of which I could make immediate use, consisted of one Paratroop battalion and my H.Q. battalion, which were sent across as quickly as possible along with a fighter Gruppe. The commanding general of II Fliegerkorps, General Loerzer, was commissioned to fly over personally and negotiate with the Resident General in Tunis so that either the forces in question fought on our side or at least observed a reasonably requested neutrality. These first negotiations went well; relations between the German and French troops were indeed excellent. But this changed all at once, when an Italian fighter Gruppe landed in Tunis. The hitherto friendly relations became almost hostile and even the immediate withdrawal of the Italian fighter Gruppe could not quite remove the ill-feeling. Marshal Cavallero was to blame for this move. I had informed him of the appropriate steps I was taking and at the same time had urgently requested him to refrain for the time being from sending any Italian troops at all under any circumstance. Without informing me he authorized, probably to satisfy Italian prestige, the transfer of the fighters, which caused deep mistrust. I am today still convinced that the forces under Esteva could have been won over to our side, if this political indiscretion had not been committed, and which moreover put my intentions in a bad light. I think that we would have then been able to turn to our advantage the order from Marshal Petain which arrived later.

OKW now had to make up its mind what it was to do. Without troops the situation in Africa could not be maintained; with a few fresh troops only an inadequate temporary delay could be gained. But OKW either had to put an end to the whole operation and suffer the consequences on the war as a whole or it had to guarantee, get ready and send over sufficient troops. For this new army the supply services too had to be ready to move off.

The more conclusive the fighting in Tunis was, the less Sicily and the rest of Italy as a supply base were in danger from sea and air. Counter measures even against a later landing had nevertheless to be taken there too.

A new front in Tunis had to be set up quickly; a large number of air transport units were indispensable. Freight planes also had to be made available. The front, which would actually also contain the Army of Africa, would require supplies brought by sea more than double the amount necessary in the past for the Army of Africa, since everything had to be newly built up from the bottom. Small and very small vessels had to be used along with the large ships. See my comments on this in Section 7, The War in the Mediterranean, Part I.

OKW sanctioned my plans and proposals and promised everything would be carried out as quickly as possible. General Nehring was immediately placed at my disposal as commander for Tunis. This was a temporary arrangement. If a German division could have been moved over to Tunis on 9 November, thus openly showing the French that we were also capable in this situation of following cut with thrust, then I think that perhaps even General Barré with his two divisions would then have joined in with us as we desired, so that we would have been able to form a bridgehead with a force of at least one division. This would have removed the immediate worry about Tunis and provided a better starting position for a planned broadening of the bridgehead.

Thus the two battalions with the dive-bomber and fighter forces had to undertake a covering task which could only be accomplished if the French troops remained quiet. That indeed they did; their willing or unwilling aid even went so far that my paratroopers carried out patrols in French armoured scout cars. At the same time negotiations with the French, from

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which Barré conspicuously withdrew, were going on to prevent a withdrawal to the west in the direction of Constantine, and without any troops being at my disposal. Since Barré's political position was uncertain and his movements could even be directed against the Allies, it would have also been difficult to intervene, had troops been available. The main effort was and continued to be from the air against disembarkations, the ports including Bone and the airfield south of Algiers.

During these days and then continuously to the end of November Rommel became more and more urgent when telegraphing his demands for more and yet more supplies, which in the present situation were exceptionally difficult to comply with. Some of these wireless messages were worded as if I would have to accept responsibility for the reverses. I have duly spent many hours every day tackling the supply problem and urgently requested Comando Supremo to make a special effort; without any consideration for the situation in Tunis I sent transport squadrons to Benghazi and other places, without earning anything other than the rudest ingratitude. I appointed General von Pohl as my representative with Rommel, sending General Staff officers to him, in order to get calmer judgment and more decisive leadership in Africa. The result of all these efforts showed me that Field-Marshal Rommel's nerves were played out. I again merely comment that Rommel carried out the offensive against Cairo in spite of my objections thereby nullifying my plan of making absolutely sure of the supply route by capturing Malta.

I left Rommel on 5 November after I had helped once more to smooth out his controversy with the Fuehrer. It was clear that if we were to succeed in disengaging from the enemy, it must take place quickly and if at all possible without having to fight. From the situation reports which I received from the units under me (Fliegerfuehrer Africa, Flak Division and Luftgau Staff Africa) it became more and more apparent to me that no more fighting was going on even where there was a chance of success. The reports which Comando Supremo received from Marshal Bastico and others were on the same lines and still more to the point. Count Cavallero and I saw plainly that with the continuation of this long-distance race to Tunis nothing would be left of the Italian divisions, only a remnant of worn out German infantry divisions would arrive in Tunis, the ports of Benghazi and Tripoli would fall into the hands of the British in working order and the morale of the troops would be taxed to the utmost. On top of this the Mareth position which the troops were to occupy would not be anywhere near ready. With Rommel's autocratic leadership, the influence of his superior officer, Marshal Bastico, was exactly nil; Comando Supremo exercised remarkable restraint and requested my or General von Rintelen's intervention with OKW or mine with Rommel. And in this case there was slight noticeable success, until on the 23 November a conference with Rommel was held at Arco dei Fileni in my presence - Bastico being represented by Marshal Cavallero.

I remained in permanent communication with Comando Supremo and informed Marshal Cavallero and the Duce of the measures taken and steps introduced. We were in agreement that until the French attitude had been clarified no Italian unit or official Italian personality ought to come to Tunis, but that everything had to be made ready to jump in with all available forces after this had been clarified. Until then I alone had chief command over Tunis and naturally kept the Duce and Cavallero advised; the old chain of command had to be reintroduced at the latest when the Army of Africa arrived. The Duce was in command assisted by Count Cavallero and Kesselring; a joint German-Italian working staff carried out any tasks necessary. Westphal at that time Staff Colonel functioned as my chief of staff in Africa, whilst Staff Colonel Deichmann as chief of staff to C. in C. South was responsible to me for the whole of the operations.

The urgent job of building the Mareth line was immediately taken in hand by Count Cavallero; two construction battalions which had become available in Tripolitania were employed under expert direction. As Cavallero and I were able to confirm on the occasion of a journey of inspection lasting several days,

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work was being done intelligently and diligently.

On 15 November General Nehring took over the command in Tunis; his staff had to be more or less improvised. There were also two excellent diplomatic representatives in Baron Rahn and Moellhausen, who considerably lightened his dealings with the Resident General and the Bey. The Navy also rendered him valuable assistance in the capable Commodore Mendsen-Bohlken. By energetic representations, co-operation with the French Admiral Darrien and his sailors was guaranteed, whilst the ultimatum to General Barré and his two divisions brought no results. Clarification had become a military necessity; one cannot make pacts with unreliable fellows in time of war. For want of other means of attack, Stuka forces were sent in against the two divisions, as well as against the bridge at Medjez el Bab, so as to make it difficult for a strong motorised force to move against Tunis. The possibility of a surprise had to be taken into account; this indeed quickly occurred when on 25 November, 60 enemy armoured scout cars advanced on Djedeida airfield, where a Stuka Gruppe lay, and did all the mischief possible. General Nehring agitatedly rang me up and drew the blackest conclusions from this incident. The affair was unpleasant, but I could not share his grave misgivings; I tried to set his mind at rest and said I would visit him the next day (26 November). What was one to think of this situation?

Since 8 November an Army had been engaged in disembarking at the various ports in North Africa; the main body had already landed. The scarcely noticeable resistance by the French forces had collapsed, if it had not, as may well be the case, been voluntarily given up. A pointer to the latter was the fall of the French High Command (Darlan and others).

The Anglo-American troops had not been tried in battle; it would take time to assemble them and make arrangements with their new friends, the French. As one did not want to be too hasty at the expense of a reverse, the more caution there was the better, since relations in Tunis were not clearly discernible; at the very least one had to regard the attitude of the French in Tunis as doubtful, and accordingly consider them as potential enemies. As far as the Germans were concerned one only knew that all transport routes were overburdened and that they would do everything possible to build a front in the shortest possible time and form a bridgehead which would allow further steps to be taken. In this case, too, as far as the enemy was concerned one had to assume to be true the old saying "Only uncertainty is certain".

The Germans' only hope was with a force known to be very weak all round to attempt to remove the threat to them in Tunis by a sudden surprise raid; but on top of the unknown factors mentioned above yet others must be taken into account:

A march on foot of 800 km through strange mountainous country; if the railway were usable it was certainly not capable of dealing with a large-scale movement, and anyway it would be attacked by the Luftwaffe.

The untrustworthiness of the Arabs who might considerably upset the movement.

The unreliable weather which could throw out every calculation.

For these reasons I did not think there would be a major operation out of the blue.

How about minor raids? I thought this likely for several very varied reasons:

1. The serviceable reconnaissance troops were not idle; they were becoming used to the country and the people and were bringing in indispensable information.

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2. When it came to fighting they would find out the enemy's gaps and weaknesses which would have to be taken into account or exploited.

3. They would be able to harass the enemy as he marches in.

Such raids had therefore to be expected; but one ought not to take them more seriously than they deserved. One had of course to be on one's guard against this kind of undertaking. These simple precautions were neglected.

1. It ought never to happen that a long column makes a surprise attack in broad daylight on an airfield. Defences and reconnaissance were at fault here. If only the aircraft had been able to take-off and bomb and machine-gun the scout cars, these vehicles would have been driven off with losses.

2. An airfield must be protected by anti-aircraft guns. The lightly armoured vehicles would have been shot up by light or heavy anti-aircraft guns. This protection was either not there or was insufficient, and that is why it was taken by surprise.

This occurrence together with other observations decided me that the extraordinary conditions required strong leadership in spite of the small number of troops. Only an Army HQ Staff had all the specialists which were necessary on this difficult ground. I therefore suggested that an Army HQ be sent over, and indeed this was sent over until 7 December as Fifth Panzer Army HQ under General von Arnim. On top of this, Hitler, because of his experiences with Rommel, posted to Arnim as chief-of-staff another general who was junior in rank but senior in service. Here he was working on the idea that the C-in-C. of a distant front ought to have someone at his side with whom he could amicably discuss everything and on whose support he could count when such matters came up for discussion. At the same time this latter was to be a sort of "deputy Fuehrer". Since the general posted had no special job to do, he could reasonably expect to be entrusted with special duties. I found this a good idea. How it would work depended on whether the generals concerned understood one another. I ought to add that it is true that I had General Nehring relieved of his post but I emphasised his suitability as commanding general; in fact he was shortly afterwards posted as such.

3. The Marshall's Conference at Arco dei Fileni on 23 November

Shortly before these events in Tunis Marshal Cavallero arranged a conference of chiefs at Arco dei Fileni. The chief purpose of this conference was to co-ordinate the situation arising from the landings in North Africa with that in Tripolitania. Here are briefly a few points about the general situation:

the remarkable reluctance of the enemy to move forwards,

the collapse of the French.

From our plans:

establishing a bridgehead in Tunis where it would be possible to gain positions which could be held and to maintain communications with the Italian and German forces in Tripolitania.

The forces necessary for this were guaranteed; some of them were already on their way across. Every possible use was to be made of the German air forces!

However important it might have been to settle accounts in the French colony with the reliable forces of the Africa Army, it was much more important

to hold up the British Eighth Army advancing on Tunis until the Mareth Line and its sister positions were built and appropriate supplies had been laid in in the fortress of Tunis.

These delaying tactics must be part of the general line of action. Any natural features had to be exploited to this end and strengthened, and the Buerat line built for a prolonged defence by using the strongest forces available.

The supply problem was difficult; mutual assistance was necessary. Everything humanly possible, even if transport vessels and aircraft had to be sacrificed, was to be done. The question of diverting supplies via Tunis had to be taken into consideration.

Once again Rommel had to worry about the Italian infantry divisions; for political reasons these divisions could not afford to be lost since this might cause a breakdown in Axis relations. The question of moving everything back in time to guard Tunis had to be considered. On this occasion the evacuation to Tunis of the Italian population was also discussed.

General Seidemann also mentioned special requests for the airmen and again stressed the bad supply situation and Rommel's reluctance to make a fight of it.

The air was cleared by this conference and many differences seemed to be solved.

4. Stabilisation of the situation in Tunis

Meanwhile, since the middle of November formations were moving into Italy, and thence troops with light weapons were carried by air to Bizerta and Tunis, heavy equipment, ammunition, fuel etc. being taken across by sea. At first the airmen (JG 53) and anti-aircraft batteries came from Sicily, which were then reinforced by General von Pohl from Italian reserves.

Stukas, recce aircraft, tank busters and more fighters joined them, and were grouped together under Fliegerfuehrer 1 (Maj-General Kosch).

The forces of the ground organisation, which had to keep pace with the operational units, were grouped under Maj-General Koechy.

The anti-aircraft forces were gradually built up until they exceeded a Flak division in strength; they were entrusted to the reliable care of Maj-General Neuffer.

Later flying and anti-aircraft forces were diverted to Gabes, to protect south-bound traffic by road, rail and sea. Although this group was small, it did very well; they were soon able to prove their superiority against the Lightnings.

One or two Italian fighter Gruppen were soon added; these were only very slowly reinforced and were commanded by General Bernaskoni. Co-operation left nothing to be desired; their battle successes were less obvious.

In advance of the Army paratroopers were made up to a "Hermann Goering" division, and then quickly following one another came the 10th Panzer Division and Maj-General Weber's 334th Light Division. Some more regiments formed a division under Maj-General von Manteuffel.

It should be mentioned also that minor units under especially competent

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officers from the reserve pool were welded together into powerful formations.

A limited number of special Panzer formations were also sent over; the show-piece of these was a battalion of "Tigers".

There was a great shortage of artillery; I remember a discussion at Fuehrer H.Q. when I reported that 68 guns were very few for a front-line over 400 km long.

Now that the French attitude towards the Axis had been openly clarified by General Barré's behaviour, there were no further objections to full participation by the Italian armed forces. In spite of the time they had had to get ready, the troops arrived relatively slowly.

Complete divisions which landed were the Superga and Imperiali Divisions as well as the San Marco Regiment of the Navy which came across from Sardinia in their own motor-torpedo boats.

The German and Italian naval authorities multiplied their efforts in the supply service.

All these forces came under the command of General von Arnim, C.-in-C. of the Fifth Panzer Army.

5. Appreciation of the situation and problems (end of November 1942)

The invading army had gradually begun to move; one had to expect three or four British divisions, two or three American and at least a similar number of French divisions, that is to say altogether seven to ten divisions. At the same time one had to assume that the British and American divisions were abundantly equipped with good material. Against these the Fifth Panzer Army counting in the Italians had barely six complete divisions, of which only one and a half were motorised, but they were already established in the front line. I did not take the superior British Eighth Army into consideration since I knew they were busy a long way away. The RAF had gradually established supremacy in Egypt and Tripolitania, and one had also to consider that possibility in Tunisia. In that respect I was less afraid of the effect on the purely ground troops than on shipping movements and the unloading ports. That could and had to be obviated.

The execution of the operations:

Offensive solution: to concentrate forces and defeat the Allies forces in an attack centred on Constantine. The advantages were plain. Great disadvantages opposed this.

1. By concentrating the troops for the attack large gaps would arise in the front line through which the enemy acquired complete freedom of movement in the country behind the German positions. The encirclement of the German attacking force and the capture of the ports of Bizerta and Tunis had to be expected.
2. At the very most only two of the German divisions were suitable for a large-scale offensive against a modern opponent in the difficult mountainous terrain.
3. There was not enough artillery and tanks.

A smaller offensive with one or two divisions would not break through and has nearly the same disadvantages as mentioned above. Such an offensive would

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have become a serious responsibility before a front had been set up.

Defensive solution: unfortunately one has to be satisfied with this. A purely defensive solution ought to be avoided; if one wanted to engage in that, one ought never to have begun the undertaking in Tunisia.

The defence of Tunis directly before the gates of Bizerta and Tunis is impossible for any length of time; the slightest reverse can result in the loss of Tunis.

In relation to the area involved the forces are exceptionally weak, and the defender is constantly at a disadvantage compared to the attacker. The terrain however counteracts this to some extent, but one must hold the sectors which can be defended with a small force. All endeavours must be directed to this end; if ground can be won by a frontal attack, the greater part of the hostile positions can be broken up by an encircling movement. Keeping up such attacks on various positions with varying forces and numbers has the additional advantage that the enemy will be deceived as to our forces, will himself remain on the move and having to pin down stronger forces for defence will be prevented from massing a strong force for the attack.

The only part of interest was the district from Tunis to the Mareth Line. The northern third of this district was of primary interest, since it is inhabited and has a network of roads and railways, which furthermore lead to Tunis. The central third on the other hand slopes away and is shut off from the desert plains by a chain of heights easily defended and with very few passes. Conditions were similar in the southern third, where undeveloped country and desert make approach difficult for an enemy. One could assume with a degree of probability that troops new to war and the desert would not immediately fall upon this out of the way front.

These points of view determined the distribution of our forces. It was clear that except for the already mentioned fighter aircraft and suchlike no German army units should be moved into the southern half of Tunisia, this area being reserved for Rommel. At first the Italian divisions in the central third were sufficient for defence purposes; attacks and counter-attacks had to be carried out by German troops, which had somehow to be made available as each case arose. The top third had to be taken over by the German forces, where they would actually be engaged all the time in vital positions. How often I regretted at that time that the forces were not available in November to advance on Constantine, or that in December they could no longer be released to push via Sbeitla and Feriana deep into the rear of the still un-established front.

As main battle line it seemed to me necessary to hold a line from Dj Abiod - Beja - Teboursouk - along the Siliana - towards Sbeitla - Gafsa.

The line wanted and to be aimed at by all possible means was: Bone - Souk Ahras - Tebessa - Feriana - Gafsa - Kebili, with an advanced defendable post towards Tozeur.

To begin with, this line was sufficiently removed from the sea (about 200 km) and allowed any reverse that occurred to be absorbed in terrain which was strong and also ready to receive it. The position was naturally strong and had usable communications, which the enemy would be lacking in the whole of the southern part from Tebessa southwards, and also north of this point would not be anywhere near so good as in the part of the field of battle near Tunis. Whereas there were only one main railway line and two secondary lines available to the enemy in the northern half of this theatre of war. Fifth Panzer Army H.Q. could use in addition to the coastal line running from north to south two main lines running to the west and four secondary lines also running westward and evenly spaced over the whole area. All things considered it was an exceptional advantage which must be fully exploited.

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The situation at sea as yet gave no occasion for anxiety. One had to expect a change when the landing operation was practically completed and the air forces could be provided with bases in North Africa (west and east) and in Malta. At the same time one also had to expect submarine warfare to be stepped up against the two sea lanes to Tunis and Tripoli. Unloading in Bizerta and Tunis had to be carried out at full speed in order to avoid losses when in port; this time this was entirely a matter for the German naval authorities in Italy.

There was a very great danger of wasting the Luftwaffe; their duties were too many and their numbers too weak, especially since the Italians were useless over the sea and unreliable elsewhere. The main tasks were:

- a) escort and port protection for sea and air transports,
- b) attacking enemy supply traffic to and in the ports,
- c) attacking enemy air bases, where they were of more than local importance,
- d) giving tactical support to the troops by reconnaissance and bombing raids on the battlefield.

Other duties also important had to wait, and so could not be carried out continuously. Among these were: unbroken long-range photo reconnaissance, attacks on traffic behind the enemy's front-line, and others.

The signal communications service with Italy and within the theatre of war was satisfactory.

On my visits to Tunisia I was able to confirm that morale was sound throughout. This naturally in no way excluded my critical comments. At that time I spoke to none of the divisional commanders who ~~were~~ not fighting with enthusiasm and with complete confidence in the future. And what I saw of the troops was far beyond all praise. It is all the same whether I am thinking of paratroopers or dive-bomber pilots, infantrymen or men from the Hermann Goering division. Officers and men were determined to overcome the undeniable difficulties. The war in Africa however required a certain type of man. Just as there were not millions of men like Gort among the officers and soldiers of the Long Range Desert Group, so it was of course with the Germans. But what there was in Tunis at that time was good.

When one surveys all that, one can only once more regret that Adolf Hitler could not make up his mind at the right time to take preventive steps. Twice as much could have been done with half the forces and with half the casualties. Troops must have been available, since they were certainly made available after the landings.

6. The fighting in Tripolitania from El Agheila up to the Tunisian border

In Tripolitania the violent pressure relaxed after the first few weeks. In general the enemy only followed up and along the Via Balbia; heavy rain-storms in Egypt came to the aid of the retreating German and Italian forces. El Agheila was reached at the end of November 1942 without strong pressure from the enemy, thereby removing the immediate danger to the Army of Africa. The El Agheila line can be held with weak forces, since any encircling movement from the south has to contend with exceptionally difficult terrain and would take considerable time. Then El Agheila adjoins to the west an inhospitable strip of desert, which requires for its conquest quite definite supply measures. Unfortunately the port of Benghazi has not been made so unserviceable as it could have been. Unloading was with the greatest difficulty carried out

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hampered by the frequent unpleasant storms at this time of year. It is true it was not a matter of supplying a small mobile assault group but the British Eighth Army at full strength. Furthermore this position could be held for more than a fortnight, which again helped the building of the Buerat position, which was taken up on the 29 December.

From 22 - 24 December and from 30 - 31 December I flew over the Tunisian and Tripolitanian fronts and was able to take home a favourable impression of the troops fighting in Tripolitania as well. There was no depression, at the most indignation that it was not being fought as well as it might be, and requests for better supplies. Complaints were made of the marked "reluctance" of the Italian troops including airmen. The activities of the German airmen had also become noticeably smaller. The chief reason for this was the shortage of petrol; General Seidemann had forces to spare when he allowed the bulk of the Gruppen of Stuka ~~Geschwader 3~~ to cross to Crete. It would have been better if he had moved these via Tripoli to Tunis. Africa Fighter ~~Geschwader 27~~ was replaced by Fighter ~~Geschwader 77~~. The latter and the reconnaissance forces functioned well. Rommel was never taken by surprise. The main body of Burckhardt's Flak Division went into action on the Army of Africa's front, the rest being deployed on the airfields.

The Buerat position was first attacked on 15 January 1943; this attack was repulsed; the Army of Africa escaped into the Zem-Zem position from a stronger encircling attack from the south, - a process which recurred over and over again until 24 January, that is to say until the surrender of Tripoli. On 22 January the Tripoli position was taken up; from 16 to 22 January, that is in a week, positions were moved back about 350 km as the crow flies, some 50 km daily. With such large movements the campaign was bound to be short. The marshals talks on 23 November could not after all fundamentally alter Rommel's plan of operations. So as not to be misunderstood let me explain that both Cavallero and myself were against any move which would lead to the destruction of the Army of Africa or of any major part of it; this Army had already been reckoned as a main factor in the plan to defend Tunis. But we were both convinced that innumerable opportunities would occur which would allow even an opponent inferior in strength to carry out attacks with limited objectives. The will to fight was there; even the regrettably small supply service was sufficient for this. For example the Buerat position, when it was defended by the Army of Africa, held up Montgomery for a period of two weeks while he deployed, made his preparations and secured his supply line. In the first few days after the arrival from the east in the Buerat position and in the early days whilst the southern assault group was getting ready, there must have been opportunities for Field Marshal Rommel, although actually inferior in numbers, to get away with a fair success with an overwhelming force. The Rommel I used to know would not have let such opportunities slip. What would have been the result in the end? Certainly the British Eighth Army's offensive would not have been stopped, but they would assuredly have advanced much more cautiously as a result of such a skirmish associated with the name of Rommel. Rommel's name was still something to be reckoned with in Africa! Yet another sign was that when the Army of Africa occupied the Tripoli positions, the flying units had to withdraw to some distance in the direction of Tunis. Rommel made this an excuse not to fight for the Tripoli positions either, saying he was adequately supported by the Luftwaffe.

I remember the consequences of an incident which I associate with the defence of the Buerat position. The Chief of the General Staff of the Africa Corps, Colonel Bayerlein, in Rommel's absence and contrary to his general idea, had sent the tanks into an inviting and promising attack and gained a resounding success. Instead of being pleased with this success, Bayerlein could only with difficulty be saved from court martial proceedings.

With the evacuation of Tripoli, where valuable war material was left behind or destroyed, which would have made an important contribution to the

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continuation of the struggle, the fighting for Tripolitania practically ceased, which accounted for the continued reluctance of the Italian forces to go into action. Rommel's decision to send off ahead the three divisions remaining of the original seven Italian divisions into the Mareth Line was the natural conclusion and they moved off on the 25 January 1943.

7. Events in Tunis in January

On 1 January 1943 our troops were holding the general line: Mateur - Medjez el Bab - Pont du Fahs - Dj. bou Dabouss - Pichon. The principal sector was held by 10th Panzer Division, with the Broich Group north of them and to the south the Superga Division and finally the Imperial Division.

Features of the fighting in Tunisia in January:

1. Successful efforts to push the front-line towards the west, which until that operation came to a halt fluctuated between attack, defence and enemy counter-attack. Examples: the fighting in the Djebel Chirich, Djebel bou Dabouss and other areas.
2. Enemy attacks on the Italians in their strong mountain positions usually led to losses and considerable inroads into the valley. German counter-attacks had to repair the damage. The fact that a major success was gained and for example in the operation concluded on the 25 January 4000 prisoners were brought in shows that:
 - a) the Italian troops were not even equal to moderate demands on them and that
 - b) the German troops were vastly superior to the Allied troops in the initial stage of the campaign.

They never once ran the danger of being attacked on a front weakened by the withdrawal of the assault troops.

- c) Towards the end of the month the American thrust through Faid for the first time endangered an area which hitherto could be neglected, but which was of the utmost importance in maintaining contact with Rommel's army. The necessary counter-measures were taken at once and were completely successful.
- d) The German airmen still ruled supreme; the low level attacks on the raw troops had a devastating effect; the operational air warfare too was successful.
- e) The supply route by sea was still in operation and involving few losses; the air supply route was still unthreatened.

But:

in proportion to the size of the area the forces were too weak; one took time too little in consideration, when every day could turn the scale.

This occasioned me to set off by air via Berlin to the Fuehrer H.Q.

8. Conference in Berlin on 11 January and at Fuehrer H.Q. (East Prussia) on 12 January

In Berlin I discussed with the Q.M.G. of the Luftwaffe (General Von Seidel) my worries about supplies of air, anti-aircraft and technical equipment. These consisted primarily in:

a) Larger and quicker deliveries of aircraft which were suitable for operations in the desert.

a2. increased deliveries of fuel oil and spare tanks and

a3. machines with heavier cannon armament.

b) Very speedy allocations of 8.8-cm anti-aircraft guns with increased muzzle velocity and anti-aircraft guns of larger calibre.

b2. Substitution of the 3.7-cm anti-aircraft guns by the 5-cm guns on multiple mountings now being made.

b3. No holding up of ammunition for the anti-aircraft guns.

c) Increased allocations of decimeter ~~type~~ apparatus and Freya apparatus, etc.

c2. allocation and installation of radar equipment for reconnaissance aircraft for use against surface and submerged ships.

Assurances were given me by General Seidel as far as possible and were kept too.

At Fuehrer HQ I described the situation as it appeared to me and how it had to be considered in the light of the foregoing. I drew the following conclusions:

The chance of winning the French over to our side was past. The one and only opportunity which occurred of pushing the German front line as far as Constantine could not be exploited owing to lack of troops.

We had succeeded in doing the improbable by forming a bridgehead and pushing out a front line which actually would not withstand a major offensive but which could be further strengthened. But for this fresh troops were needed. The two Italian divisions counted for little; the three and a half German divisions which were available along a front of just about 100 km and with a total of 68 guns were not enough to improve the position or beat off the major offensive which was expected. There was still time, but we had to make haste. With the start of the fine weather Alexander would try to seize the initiative and make an attack. As attacker he had choice of time and terrain; but weakening his minor fronts he would make himself so strong that the attack must succeed, since it was not possible for us to make a similar concentration of our forces at the right moment.

The Fifth Panzer Army did not yet hold the strategic points which would guarantee holding Tunis in the event of a reverse. The line which I have indicated as essential had got to be reached. But there again troops were required.

The Mareth Line and its switchlines were being built; it could not be expected to be finished before a month or two. For that reason alone I considered impracticable a quick withdrawal of the Italian-German Panzer Army. But I did consider it vital that the British Eighth Army did not make direct contact with the British First Army and that the two air forces could

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not be effective against such a confined space. Unloading which had so far been working well would be considerably interrupted.

The idea on which we had to work must be to keep the two armies territorially apart and to hammer at one after the other from our shorter lines until the desired objective had been gained. It would have been fine if one could have brought in some part or other of Rommel's Army for the fighting for Tunis. I was against bringing his whole army, since that was contrary to my basic ideas; I considered it however right to bring in a part of it, so long as Rommel did not make this transfer of important battle forces an excuse to fight even less and retreat even faster towards Tunis. I could not rid myself of the suspicion, which I must openly express, that since El Alamein the fighting had not been so tough and stubborn as I expected from the Army of Africa.

A proposal to give up one or two divisions was submitted by Field-Marshal Rommel. I proposed one division, which too was ordered by OKW as a reasonable solution of the problem. Field-Marshal Rommel assigned the 21st Panzer Division, which he further reinforced and which crossed the Tunisian border on 22 January. The strained relations with the commander of this division may have played a part in this choice. The division successfully made its first appearance in the Tunisian theatre in the fighting around Faid in late January and early February. The thought that I now had a motorised division in the South as well brought me a feeling of relief; at the same time it annoyed me that now owing to lack of troops the battle for Tunis would be fought even less in a forward direction.

I reckoned that the Mareth Line would be ready sometime between the middle and end of February, as far as one could expect the working party to get. After that the troops had to be installed; if a further four weeks were available to the divisions to get in position, then one could count on a strong defensible position. A prospective plan for manning was asked for, so that the positions could be taken over and completed first by advance parties and later by the divisions. This plan was approved and later proceeded with.

The question of leadership was briefly referred to; the area was too large and after the German-Italian army arrived in Tunisia the forces involved were too strong for one army headquarters to be able to control them in their varied tasks. The fact alone that this theatre was detached and involved working with the Italian units demanded a major German headquarters, an Army Group.

As commander, Field-Marshal Rommel came first into consideration, and I actually suggested him, since I assumed that such a promotion would also again stimulate his ambition and efficiency. That one would have to offer the command of an Army to the Italians was an obvious concession to the sensitive prestige of the Italians. However we hoped there was plenty of time until then!

What was more important was that Adholf Hitler let himself be convinced that

- 1) more divisions - I asked for two or three -
- 2) more artillery - I asked for various Army artillery batteries, and mortar units of all types for the mountains - and
- 3) more armoured and anti-tank units were necessary, and that
- 4) the points discussed with the Q.M.G. of the Luftwaffe were approved and
- 5) the supply route by sea would be established on a new efficient basis.

My explanations received the fullest understanding; and above all my idea of the operations was also approved. Promises of reinforcements were made to me, but unfortunately these evaporated in the course of the weeks. Instead of

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two or three complete divisions, actually only one came to Tunis. Artillery allocations were also below the minimum hoped for. The effect of this however could only be noticed some weeks later, when constant exhortations and repeated personal representations (for example, in the middle of February) brought no effectual improvement. At all the discussions Adolf Hitler lent his ears to my needs and promised me what I asked for. But as soon as I was out of sight, he lost interest in my theatre of war; it lay a long way off, neither he nor his experts cared about it. I recall one example: at one interview Adolf Hitler in the presence of Keitel and Jodl promised me two divisions; when I was having a talk with the Chief of General Staff of the Luftwaffe, General Jeschonnek that evening, General Warlimont rang me up and said that only one division was available, and when I arrived at my headquarters in Italy the promise of the last division had been retracted. I understand the difficulties the Supreme Command contends with and believe I have never - not even now - criticised them frivolously or arrogantly. But the High Command on any front must also be able to count on definite quantities, otherwise there will be a landslide. In my opinion then I have justifiably only made criticisms and complaints when forces have on the occasion of a breakdown been made available which ought to have been there already, thus averting the setback. I could cite many cases of this mistake on the part of the Supreme Command; I might almost say it was typical of OKW. Adolf Hitler had in the course of the years appropriated the instrument of command; he had studied the classics of German army leadership and was only in contact with men who had been brought up on lines of continental warfare, and who were therefore too prejudiced for war on this vast scale. It may also be that consideration for Mussolini forced Adolf Hitler to hold back, but in my opinion the reason for the slow and unsatisfactory handling was that he was not interested in this war.

9. Enemy operations until end of January 1943

Three months had passed since the Alamein counter-offensive and the landings in Africa. Montgomery had captured Tripolitania, a wonderful success which however could have been gained a month earlier considering the British superior strength and Rommel's over-cautious tactics. The desert with a sea on its north side did not offer much choice of tactics; two recurring points are striking:

- 1) the encircling main attacks came from the south, that is from the desert,
- 2) the major offensives were launched during the period of the full moon.

In the desert such large-scale movements especially on moonlit nights could not be concealed. Counter-measures could always be taken in time so that in spite of the ever-dwindling strength of Rommel's forces no disastrous reverse, with the exception of El Alamein, occurred. The defensive positions were either only held for a short time or not at all and withdrawals were made in good time to the next line, or the threat to the flank was balanced by deep staggering of the non-motorised divisions, or the enemy had to fight his way against opposition from rear-guards.

As a result:

- 1) the German and the Italian divisions which could still be used arrived in Tunisia in remarkable strength,
- 2) the British Eighth Army, on arriving at the Tunisian frontier at

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the end of February, found itself up against a newly-built and naturally strong position.

The actual invading troops under Field-Marshal Alexander were young and untried; the attitude of the French may perhaps not have been convincingly clear. The winter weather too was not exactly enticing. However in November 1942 Eisenhower was opposed to an almost empty area; even in December and January the few German troops were more a screen than a defence. No part of the German-Italian front in Tunisia could have held out against a strong and concentrated attack supported in depth. Bizerta and Tunis lay near enough to be seized; and with the fall of these two, Tunisia would have been lost to the Axis; the German-Italian Panzer Army under Rommel could not have prevented their capture. Instead the British and Americans formed a front, struggled slowly through weeks of costly defensive fighting, won a few cheap successes at the expense of the Italians, which had to be later relinquished. At the end of January 1943 we got momentarily wind of a thrust through Faid towards Sfax; an operation was indicated which could prove decisive for Tunisia. Thank God, this operation too only led to a lengthening of the front and thereby a further dissipation of the Anglo-American forces. The German High Command would have had to be incompetent not to have taken full advantage of this favourable situation during the following month.

10. Battles of Rommel's Army in February 1943 as far as the Mareth Line

The chief feature of these battles is that they were no longer fought on a front but from rearguard positions. Here artillery and dive-bombers played a very effective part (see fighting on 9 and 10 February). The sworn "Rearguard", the 15th Panzer Division was given the main task of seeing that fighting was kept up throughout February in front of fortress Tunis. From 20 February 1943 the fronts had moved so close together (Medenine) that one could not speak any more of this Army as a separate entity. The bulk of its troops had already been transferred to Tunis before 20 February.

11. Appreciation of the situation, subsequent operations and measures of organisation (mid-February 1943)

When the British Eighth Army came up to the Mareth Line (20 February) the German and Italian troops in Tunis were shut in in a sort of vast fortress. This was not altered by the sea and air routes still being open.

How were things with the enemy?

Direct contact between the two forces had not yet been made. As yet too there were no recognisable signs of co-operation in the air. On the other hand sea and air attacks on the Axis transport routes were beginning to become more concentrated. A new epoch in the air war was introduced when four-engine bombers raided the unloading ports from heights of 10,000 metres or more, and coping with these presented problem upon problem to the fighter and anti-aircraft forces.

Whilst the invading troops had been gradually moving forward and forming a sort of front, the troops of the British Eighth Army had crossed half of North Africa since the end of October (about 2500 to 3000-km.). This Army had partly to fight its way, had passed the bad winter months en route or in the desert, must have certainly had all kinds of supply difficulties and was dispersed in depth. The lack of roads alone compelled the latter, since it did not usually permit formations to march alongside one another, and except when opening out for battle they could not march away from the road without jeopardising their entire mobility. Here on this sector of the front one could very safely assume that things would remain quiet for a week or two yet.

One must also allow some weeks (two or three) for the Eighth Army to prepare for a major assault on the Mareth positions. Conditions in the west on Alexander's front were different. The extension of the front as far as Faid showed that generally speaking, the march into position was now over and that the front-line was now manned. That everything had not yet gone off according to plan had to be expected from such maiden operations in difficult circumstances (enemy, weather, etc.). Anyway the Allied front in the west had a lead on that in the south.

My plan of operations, which was also approved by Comando Supremo and OKW, was - now that both fronts had joined into one theatre of war - to attack them one at a time. By this means the very least that ought to be achieved was to delay the expected enemy offensive by weeks, or if possible by months. That meant that one had to cause the enemy to lose so much men and material that these would have to be replaced from overseas. It would be best if one could fall on him whilst he was preparing for his offensive and throw him into utter confusion. It was too early to do this with the British Eighth Army. Whilst on the southern front one could always retire into the strong positions on either side, perhaps leaving behind a rearguard, on the western front it was a matter not only of destroying the enemy forces but of moving the front line forward into a sector which offered greater protection against the unavoidable misfortunes of war and which was easier to defend. The whole of the front line in the west was still too near to the coast; it had therefore to be moved forward in its entirety. Frontal attacks would have to be made so as to keep the front busy and pinned down and at the same time to make local improvements in the front which would provide more favourable starting points for fresh attacks. But the country in the central sector (Sbeitla, Kasserine) was suitable for a major offensive. It had the following advantages:-

- 1) The motorised forces of Rommel's Panzer Army could reach the starting base in easy stages; the country was thinly populated, which would accordingly ensure a high degree of secrecy.
- 2) The area could also be crossed without difficulty by the troops from the western front (von Arnim).
- 3) The enemy (American) front was still being formed; this made the attack correspondingly easy and it might be exceptionally effective.
- 4) The direction of attack towards the north-west was of operational importance. Even the near objective, Tebessa, was railway and road nodal point, base, etc., for the American Corps. The thrust was aimed at the rear of the Anglo-American front, which was always an extremely dangerous situation for young and untried troops to find themselves in.
- 5) Furthermore our outside exposed flank did not appear to be in danger from the little-traversed mountains.

The offensive had to be got going as soon as possible before the measures decided upon at Casablanca in mid-January 1943 could become effective. Every day was valuable. The front had to be exploited to the uttermost. Even if a breakdown should occur on the western front in Tunisia, this would be entirely compensated by any eventual success. A drive on Tunis has to come to a halt if the supply lines are cut. The best leader available was just good enough; so Rommel was to be entrusted with the command.

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The Mareth position and the Akarit position behind it both had great natural and artificial strength. A frontal attack on these would at the very least cost many lives; whether it would be successful was doubtful. South-west of Gafsa near Tozeur a pass offered possibility of contact with Alexander's Army and of getting behind the Mareth Line from the west. This key-point had to be seized and held. Indeed this most southern part of the western front could be easily defended, since a chain of heights with only one or two passes shuts off this part of Tunisia from the desert. Furthermore a major offensive against this part of the western front would encounter vast difficulties owing to the desert, supply line, etc.. But troops were lacking for us to be strong everywhere, and to be able to occupy all these points before the situation clarified. The cheapest and most economical solution was to plug the 'bung-hole' near Tozeur.

Events in the first half of the month were much the same as in the previous month.

Names like Ben Gardane, Fom Tatahouine, Medenine and Matmata come to mind and tell of the rearguard actions of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division and the British attempts to encircle them. The loss and reconquest of the Djebel Mansour at the beginning of February are chiefly associated with the name of the 10th Panzer Division.

The fighting which in view of the situation I considered of vital importance commenced on 15 February 1943. The 5th Panzer Army, commanded by Lt.-General Ziegler, started an attack near Sidi bou Zid which caused the enemy very serious losses and won the attacking force considerable territory and a large number of prisoners.

Whilst the Centauro Division was taking Gafsa on 16 February, Field-Marshal Rommel commenced his preparations to meet the encircling movement. Rommel had ideas of denuding the southern front far too much; urgent representations were necessary before the minimum of forces were ready to meet the attack. The 5th Panzer Army - as far as I could ascertain - had similar ideas of thinning its front. On 19 and 22 February I was at the front and confirmed that the 5th Panzer Army had not carried out my orders and had taken no account of Rommel's requirements. I confirmed that one battalion of tanks was in reserve in the neighbourhood of Tunis, that troops of Ziegler's assault group were marching northwards instead of going to reinforce the right wing of the German Africa Corps and that nothing had been withdrawn from the 5th Panzer Army's front for Rommel. I made an appointment at Bizerta airfield with the Army C.-in-C., when I told him what I thought in no uncertain manner. I disregarded the idea of court martial proceedings, and did not report the details to the OKW because I feared the worst might happen. On the occasion of my flight to the front I also saw the attack by the 21st Panzer Division near Sbiba and was convinced that no results could be expected by using tanks in such a manner. Field-Marshal Rommel shared my views, but was unable to carry them out. There is no doubt that Rommel had grown tired. The attacks brought good initial successes; the enemy's losses were considerable and his confusion even greater. General Alexander personally had to assemble his reserves behind the front-line and send them into action until balance had been restored. Since the target I had set could not be reached within a very short time, and the troops of the Africa Corps too still needed a little more rest before they went into action in the south, the attack was called off on 24 February; the units used were at the disposal of their Armies again on 26 February. At the end of the month our troops held positions in the area around Sidi bou Zid, Sbetila and Gafsa with outposts near Tozeur and Metlaoui, and, in the middle of March, west of the Djebel el Abiard. ~~For point reached during attack see sketch.~~

In the northern third our troops began on 27 February an attack on the enemy group near Medjez el Bab. Tropical rainfall hampered the fighting so that successes could only be gained south of Goubellat and south-west of Djebel Mansour.

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In a word, the objective of the attack had not been reached, and the goal I had set could no longer be attained. Time was against us. Certainly the attack caused a delay in the enemy offensive; (the military report of 26 February stated: in the fighting, in which the enemy sustained considerable losses, a total of nearly 4000 prisoners were taken, and 235 tanks, 69 armoured cars and 160 guns and self-propelled guns were captured or destroyed). It gave Rommel a chance to tackle his more pressing tasks against the British Eighth Army.

The prematurely reported episode in the attack on Alexander's army caused me to speed up the introduction of the chain of command in Tunis already discussed. At 18.00 hours on 23 February Field-Marshal Rommel as C.-in-C. took over the newly formed Army Group Tunis. Besides the 5th Panzer Army (General von Arnim), the Italian First Army under General Messe was placed under him. The bulk of the Italian First Army was German. Besides his Italian chief of staff, General Messe was therefore given a German chief of staff, Colonel Bayerlein, who was promoted to major-general on the same day. Messe was chosen as C.-in-C. because as commanding general in the East he had learnt German principles of leadership and had there been decorated with the Knights Cross. I met Messe at Commando Supremo when he came there for instructions from Marshal Count Cavallero, and after that I often sought him out in Tunis and discussed things with him. Like very many of the Italian commanders, he was a good tactician with plenty of ideas. Whether his nerve would hold at a critical moment had yet to be proved. The appointment of Bayerlein, who at first considered this left him out in the cold, was absolutely essential. In this post Bayerlein earned his spurs, as I could personally confirm on the spot.

By the beginning of February the first formations of the Air Commander in Africa had already arrived in Tunis; the organisation in the air had now to adapt itself to the Army organisation, since it was now a matter of a purely tactical air arm. The Luftflotte installed the former Fliegerfuehrer Africa, Lt.-General Seidemann, as general commanding the "Fliegerkorps Tunis". The division into two armies required two air commanders at the principal points in front of Tunis and behind the Mareth Line. In view of the peculiar situation of the two air commanders (1: Major-General Kosch, 3: Major-General Hagen) there was a gap in the middle. A Fliegerfuehrer 2 was therefore pushed in here, this appointment being filled by the commanding general.

The 19th Flak Division under Major-General Franz was posted to the Italian First Army, and 20th Flak Division under Major-General Neuffer to 5th Panzer Army. Besides other duties, Fliegerfuehrer 1 and 20th Flak Division were responsible for protecting the port and the former for protecting convoys in the Gulf of Tunis. Luftflotte 2 was responsible for operations and issuing orders to the convoy service. See Section 7, The War in the Mediterranean Part 1.

The growth of supply traffic necessitated an increase in the tasks performed by the Navy. The organisational changes were however limited to an expansion of these duties; the Navy co-operated well with the A.Q.M.G. of Luftflotte 2 who was posted to Tunis. Similarly with Luftgau Tunis, whose direction lay in the operationally and administratively capable hands of Lt.-General Mueller. At the beginning he had three airport commands under him.

The Italian soldiers, sailors and airmen under their own senior commanders were incorporated into the German overall commands.

To the same extent as the Anglo-American naval forces concentrated on the convoys on the high seas or in the ports, similarly the German air defensive measures had to be re-organised on a larger scale. A difficult period of fighting began for airmen and anti-aircraft defences, during which the requirements of the Army could only be met by a greater strain on men and material.

12. Events in Tunisia, March 1943

In northern Tunisia attacks by von Manteuffel's Battle Group, 334th Division and the Hermann Goering Division, followed the fighting around Kasserine. Von Manteuffel's Group fought along the Oudez Zouara sector north of Dj. Abiod for almost three weeks without a break. As in the attacks further south, they took a considerable number of prisoners and put many tanks and guns out of action. At the end of the month, after very violent and fluctuating fighting, von Manteuffel's Battle Group were holding a line above Sedjenane station. The airmen had backed up the fighting considerably. Manteuffel had brought in the 334th Infantry Division. The Hermann Goering Division, after some successful attacks, was compelled to go on the defensive and was withdrawn to the line west of Goubellat - Djebel Rihane.

In the south the attack which was to wreck the enemy's preparations for an offensive was unsuccessful. 5 German divisions and part of three Italian divisions went into action on 7 March against the enemy forces in the Medenine - Bou Grara - Mareth Line area, but were not able to break through the enemy who were distributed in depth; the troops were withdrawn to their original positions on 8 March. Possibly some of the details of the attack had been betrayed to the enemy; it was however wrong to act contrary to Rommel's usual views and habitual practice by sending an armoured spearhead against a front which had not been reconnoitred in detail. That could only be done if the enemy had not finished moving into position, so that one thought one could catch him unprepared and throw him into utter confusion. This might lead to a decisive action. Whether the Army Group Tunis and the First Army had this idea, I would not like to say today. I only know that when I was told about the planned operation I heard some extraordinarily optimistic views. The Army Group and First Army ought to have taken yet another thing into their calculations: they were attacking troops improved by battle and desert marches who were fully equipped with the best of everything. When the attack made no headway on the first day, Rommel made the only correct decision to retire to his initial positions (8 March). Our hand in Tunisia had played its last trump. The hope of keeping the war away from Europe and especially from Germany for another year had been gambled away. One needs luck to conduct a war; Rommel's luck had quite obviously been out for a long time. Besides this he was tired and ill. His request to be relieved was granted. General von Arnim took his place, whilst General von Vaerst took over command of 5th Panzer Army.

Nothing much could be done to alter the course of the war; it was a foregone conclusion. The British Eighth Army now had the upper hand; the Allied troops fighting to the north were co-ordinating their plans with them. Actually I was expecting two simultaneous attacks or attacks by the British Eighth Army from the south and the British First Army through Medjez el Bab towards Tunis closely following one another. Above all the enemy High Command was bound to come round to the idea of seizing the German supply base; that would automatically put an end to everything else. Why this ready-to-hand operation was not chosen, I do not know. Had their losses in the previous attacks after all been greater than could immediately be made good by the supply service? Were their troops still not sufficiently seasoned to tackle such a task? Didn't they want to hold back the British Eighth Army any longer? An attack from north and south could have been launched without risk, since the German forces in the central third were too weak to be able to have any influence on any decisive battles which might take place on the wings of the front in Tunisia. We were relieved of a lot of worry when it was seen that there were no indications at all of an offensive by the First Army.

From 10 to 20 March the main offensive was launched with the usual artillery fire growing stronger and stronger, and fighting for our advanced lines and positions, ending with their evacuation and a final grouping of our reserves. Gafsa was evacuated like Tozeur had been; I objected to the evacuation of Tozeur; the garrison of such an outpost ought to have fought to the end. Here an outpost had been given a duty worthy of the sacrifice

of its garrison. Troops at our disposal on 20 March were located:

10th Panzer Division north of Kairouan,
21st Panzer Division in the Chott position north of Gabes,
15th Panzer Grenadier Division, "Africa" Panzer Grenadier
Regiment and one Luftwaffe rifle battalion behind the
Mareth Line in a newly constructed intermediate position.

It would have been desirable to move the 10th Panzer Division nearer to the southern front; I let the Army Group know this; the division was too far away to be able to clean up the situation at Gafsa and El Guettar by an immediate counter-attack. The order issued on 23 March was in the first place too late to be carried out; by 26 March the enemy was so strong that the counter-attack broke down.

An even more dangerous threat to the general situation in Tunis was provided by the fighting around Maknassy, which after an attack on 22 March was given up on 23 March. Fighting went on in this district with fluctuating luck but on balance successful until 7 April. That small scattered units, including some from the Luftwaffe, performed at that time is among the greatest feats in this campaign. This fighting was linked with the name of Colonel Lang, who had already distinguished himself under Manteuffel. To him, the soul of the resistance - I personally visited him - falls the glory that the southern force was able to fight unthreatened from the rear.

The attacks on the Mareth Line proved the strength of this system of fortifications. Anti-aircraft artillery and tanks worked splendidly together so that the German counter-attack to clean up the position caused exceptionally heavy losses to the British division which had broken in. On this day Major-General Bayerlein, with whom I was staying, demonstrated his especial qualifications as a leader. Once again a reserve division (21st Panzer Division) was too far away to be able with the 164th Division to beat off the enemy attacking from the west. There was a serious failure here. I noticed the incorrect placing of the reserves before I flew to Bayerlein and ordered the C.-in-C. Army Group Tunis to move them closer to the front at once. In my presence, ordered and pressed by me, General Bayerlein issued orders through various channels to 21st Panzer and 164th Infantry Divisions to move off at once and take possession of the pass as quickly as possible. Before I left Bayerlein's battle headquarters and again in the evening at Battle H.Q. Fliegerkorps Tunis I made sure that the order in all its urgency had been passed on and understood. When I arrived the next morning at five o'clock at Battle H.Q. 21st Panzer Division, the commander of the division had no knowledge of the order but had issued a wonderful order to his own and the 164th Divisions to retreat, which was in utter contrast to the situation as a whole. Unfortunately the order could not be entirely countermanded; things had gone too far for that. When I enquired into the matter it was also unfortunately confirmed that General Bayerlein's order was carried out tardily and inefficiently. I will add a few incidents I personally experienced so that by clearly indicating the errors which occurred in the campaign I can describe the historical course of events and show in fact how much misunderstandings, dilatoriness and such-like could prejudice the situation. For the sake of clarity I must add that air reconnaissance had already on 23 and 24 March observed the British out-flanking movement.

The Mareth position was given up according to plan on 28 March, so that the Chott position could be manned in good time. Gades and El Hamma fell to the enemy on 30 March, after the First Army had again organised its formations and detailed 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions as reserves. During these days there was little to be seen or heard from the Italian First Army H.Q.

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In spite of exceptionally heavy other duties the Luftwaffe very effectively supported the army formations by covering raids on batteries, troop movements, tanks and airfields. The testimony of the ground troops is the best proof of that. Besides these, attacks were made on the harbours from Algiers to Tripoli and on enemy convoys.

13. The value of the Enfidaville position

Even before Rommel reached Tunisia, he had an unfavourable opinion of the Mareth Line and other positions. He thought the area was much too large; that one ought to withdraw to a small beachhead with Enfidaville as its cornerstone. This position could be well and successfully defended by the two armies. He spoke again and again of this idea without being able to convince Marshal Cavallero and myself that it was correct.

My opinion was as follows:

- 1) The Mareth Line and the positions behind it were very good; anyone wanting to take this position would have to sacrifice a lot of time and lives unless the defending troops failed us. Since, however, motorised reserves were standing by behind them, even that would not necessarily lead to a catastrophe.
- 2) By having repeatedly to assault fresh defensive lines, in the event of our having to abandon one or the other of them, the enemy would use up his attacking powers; on top of that, time would be gained which in view of the prospect of the attack being carried on into Italy and other places was of superlative importance.
- 3) In contrast with the western front, in Tunisia where conditions were ideal for defensive warfare and a series of delaying actions, defensive warfare provided the obvious solution, whilst in the west, where such conditions did not exist, only one kind of operations was known: the war of movement.
- 4) With regard to Enfidaville Rommel was thinking too much on historic lines of land warfare. A fortress 40 - 80 km. across in the age of technical, combined land, air and sea warfare, has only local importance; on the other hand distances have become so considerable that troop movements can no longer be carried out during the night only; or when they, as an exception are carried out by night, they are betrayed by the effect of their lighting in a confined area and over an inadequate road network and can be interrupted or destroyed just the same as by daylight, quite apart from co-operation by the Fleet on the flank.
- 5) The decisive factor, however, is that with a beachhead at Enfidaville the supply route by sea and air to Bizerta and Tunis would cease. That means that both armies could simply be starved out in a very short time. It is entirely up to the enemy whether he attacks or not, or whether he contents himself with trapping our forces and then making preparations with his main force to invade from Bone and ports lying to the west and from Tripoli and Benghazi.

But if the enemy does attack he would very soon get hold of this so-called fortress. The front is actually not uniformly good, a point overlooked by Field Marshal Rommel: it has its weaknesses, especially in the west.

- 6) The Enfidaville Line is, however, too good to be neglected; construction has commenced, and arrangements will be made for it to be manned; the position must be defended to the bitter end.

At this period the question of a partial evacuation began to be talked of for the first time at OKW and OKH - there was no question of complete evacuation. During the next few weeks it was more urgently discussed. It was clear by that time that Tunis could not be held indefinitely. However, it was also clear that the capture of Tunis must be delayed as long as possible. For the initial period of the defence against the Anglo-American forces an efficient and well-led body of troops with an appropriate supply service was necessary. But even now there were technical troops and officials who were no longer required but who were now merely extra mouths to feed; they were, however, indispensable elsewhere for carrying on the war on account of their specialist knowledge. General Seidemann moved out in good time and was backed up in this by Luftflotte 2. If one really intelligently visualised the fighting for Northern Tunisia, support by the airmen who were intimate with both the country and the ground forces could also be provided from bases in Sicily. Besides this, since dive-bombers could no longer be employed because of enemy superiority in the air, they ought therefore to be transferred to a front where the enemy did not yet enjoy superiority. Furthermore by pooling formations which were no longer up to full strength, officers, N.C.Os., General Staff officers and key-men could in particular be made available, who were urgently required for newly-formed units and on other fronts. A suitable plan was drawn up which provided for numerical reductions in staffs. The plan in this form was not sanctioned by Adolf Hitler because he feared that many of the measures proposed would have an adverse psychological effect on the morale of the troops. There was some justification for this opinion; one had to avoid sapping the vitality of the troops. But that was obvious, since C.-in-C. South, Army Group Tunis and the Armies were themselves very greatly interested. It was intended to withdraw two high commands from the Enfidaville position.

These proposals were not approved; individual personnel offices and other ministerial departments were able to call for duties by key officials, and C.-in-C. South had to see these were carried out. In this way, especially in the case of the Army and the anti-aircraft arm, not every possibility was exploited which the fighting to follow in Europe made imperative.

Only the Luftwaffe and Navy removed material. Along with the flying formations, secret position-finding and micro-wave equipment was carried off, and the last lot blown up.

14. A brief study of Rommel's character

Field-Marshal Rommel left Africa in mid-March to recuperate and to prepare for a fresh assignment. It gave me pleasure to be able to tell him before he left Africa that Adolf Hitler had adopted my suggestion that he be awarded the Diamonds to his Knights Cross; Italy too was going to give him the Gold Medal in recognition of his achievements. I knew from his Head of Propaganda that he would be very pleased with these decorations.

Rommel's name was something to conjure with; I have said many a time in Fuehrer H.Q. that he should be left in Africa at all costs since he was almost indispensable there and was as good as an extra division. I must add that I spoke and could only speak very highly of Rommel in my reports, even if I did criticise his retreat in North Africa, as I have described here. I neither envied Rommel nor wanted his job, especially since I was considerably older than he; I was always very glad that we Germans had such a good tank man who

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understood the desert so well. I must say this first, since I have been reproached with being opposed to Rommel, who is also supposed to have mentioned this.

Rommel was primarily a soldier through and through. That was his strength but also in view of his attitude in Africa definitely a weakness.

I considered Rommel was the best German exponent of tank and desert warfare; I consider this estimation is true even today. He had almost a sixth sense for this kind of operation in desert terrain.

Rommel was a front-line man whose personal bravery was undisputed; in spite of his native Wurttemberg roughness his men were fond of him. With his subordinate commanders it was not so evident; he was at times insultingly rude. If he had not been a Wurttemberger, one could perhaps have said something to him.

Rommel was not a General Staff officer; he was very touchy about this. He only just had the qualifications required to command an Army, he lacked them for the command of an Army Group. This statement is no disparagement, since he was all the better in his other posts. Every man has his limitations; the man is great who recognises these. He is said to have expressed to a personal friend (General Streccius) his private doubts as to his suitability as an Army Group commander. It was only to a limited degree possible to counteract Rommel's individuality by the appointment of a good Chief of General Staff.

Rommel's nerves were very unstable; the slightest reverse affected the whole front line. The smallest success started him building castles in the air. Every leader has to overcome doubts within himself; but these should be kept to oneself. If pessimistic ideas are to filter through the morale of the best troops is gradually destroyed. Rommel did not understand this sort of silence; the lowest rifleman knew about the doubts his General had. A commander must believe in the success of his mission; at the very least he should be able to simulate this belief in victory. If that cannot be done, then he should give up his post as commander. The capacity for enthusiasm which Rommel used to have disappeared from the time of El Alamein; he relapsed into the gloomiest forebodings, which in the long run became really hard to endure. He carried on without being enthusiastic and therefore did not have the same success and luck as he used to have.

In spite of his simple nature he put up with publicity men around him, who it is true got the world to speak of him, but who did him more harm than good.

It is a pity that the efficiency of this capable soldier had to suffer from such lack of harmony.

15. Final phase of the campaign in Tunis, April-May 1943

a) Appreciation of the situation

At the beginning of April, Army Group Tunis held a narrow bridgehead against the Allied armies. In the course of the fighting the First Italian Army had to give up territory vital to the defence of Tunisia. Apart from the failure and the lack of desire to fight of one or two Italian units, part of the blame must really be attributed to errors in command. The chief disadvantage, however, lay in the fact that there was no usable defence position between the Chott position which they no longer held and the Enfidaville position, and the movements of the First Italian Army were exposed on their flank to attacks from the mountains. A flanking attack for example out of the Fondouk district, which had already previously been fought over, would force the front line in the south to make a hasty withdrawal without actually being attacked on its front. In order to avoid this, special attention had to be given to

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the mountain passes in question. This automatically precluded remaining too long in the Chott position, although this itself was a strong one. The retreat of the fighting formations to the Enfidaville position had to be assured.

The front in the west had the defect of being too close to the sea and the vital ports. The improvements in the front effected by the attacks of the previous month have been partly lost in the course of March. The positions themselves were good and fully equipped with technical apparatus. The men too had been well tried in battle and in some cases were above the average. Provision had also been made for defence in depth. The oppressive feeling that they were sitting practically on the last ridge and were about to be pushed into the plains and the sea was putting a strain on the command and the men. Whatever could be done to build or improve the defences had to be done. Troops could only be made available when the First Italian Army arrived in the Enfidaville position. If the enemy played his cards properly he would not disperse his forces any more but would make a concentrated attack at the vital point. This comprised the second danger. For the defence too had to have room to manoeuvre, if one did not want to be simply annihilated, and this space was unfortunately just not there.

The struggle was being continuously made more difficult by the ever-increasing enemy air attacks; whilst Air Marshal Coningham was finding conditions more and more favourable, allowing him to make concentrated attacks over very short distances, operational conditions were getting worse for Seidemann. If Coningham organised an armed patrol service, flights in and out of the small zone would automatically cease. On the other hand the German Army was used to plenty of support from the air; flying sorties from Sicily would be a makeshift and would continue to be such.

The supply route was already suffering from the increase in attacks by bombers technically well-equipped. The air supply route too was especially threatened. It would have to be stopped when the combat units were withdrawn. The carpet-bombing of the airfields was already causing many casualties to the air supply service.

It had to be expected that soon we would occupy the Enfidaville position; as I have already mentioned in Section 13, I considered that the fight for the Enfidaville position would be the beginning of the end. One had therefore again to consider whether a certain amount of evacuation should not be attempted at that time. But at this time too the idea was rejected by Adolf Hitler; his original decision was final.

It therefore remained to continue to fight as hard as possible for Tunis so as to delay any further moves by the Allies.

b) A broad outline of the course of events

The first week in April passed relatively quietly. From the 7 to 17 April it was by contrast so lively that after a further four-day period of comparative quiet it ushered in the final phase in the campaign with the attack of the British Eighth Army on the Enfidaville position on 20-21 April. Whilst it was purely a matter of a war of movement in flat country on the southern front before Enfidaville, on the western front it was purely positional warfare. The fighting retreat of the Italian First Army was difficult and made more so by pincer attacks. A thrust by Alexander on Kairouan by way of Pichon and Fondouk was to be expected, but this would be counter-balanced by movement and in the fighting. In this campaign both men and officers of the Italian First Army behaved remarkably well. On 13 April this tiring fighting ended in front of Enfidaville.

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On 21 April Montgomery commenced his offensive against the Enfidaville position; he was stopped on 23 April. This defensive success is all the more to be appreciated since Luftwaffe soldiers, some of whom had had but little infantry training, had to be thrown in. General Koechy did the very best possible with his men. On the other hand it showed that not all of the desert campaigners had mastered the art of fighting in the mountains. That might be because they were to a certain extent tired out. After this failure, the High Command in Tunisia (Eisenhower or Alexander) rightly decided to shift the attack to that point which, since it lay on the direct line to Tunis, was plainly the vital one. In this area around Medjez el Bab Alexander had been concentrating his efforts since 7 April to capture the vital hill known as Longstop Ridge (Djebel el Ang). What the defenders performed here is best proved by the fact that the hill did not fall to the British First Army until 27 April. The attackers too deserve mention, especially the Argylls of 78th Division. But it is cheering for a soldier to observe the exemplary manner in which General Alexander concentrated his forces for the final attack of the campaign, even if he were late in doing so. With a spearhead of three armoured divisions and four infantry divisions concentrated in a very narrow space (3-km) even the strongest and best-defended position had to fall, especially since artillery and air force were co-operating in a strength hardly ever seen before. Though the German airmen co-operated well and supported the infantry in the preceding days, there was no recovery against this amount of British air cover. This spearhead was covered on its flank by its own depth; on top of that, the right wing was covered by the French divisions, who advanced through Pont du Fahs and the left by the three American divisions.

One noticed in the fighting of the Americans, whereby they captured Mateur and Bizerta, that they had learned a lot from the fighting at Gafsa, El Quettar and Fondouk, which had not been at all successful.

Air reconnaissance had told Army Group Tunis all about enemy moves; they also knew about the regrouping within the Eighth and First British Armies. Counter-measures were made difficult owing to shortage of petrol, and the shortage of ammunition was even noticeable for the anti-aircraft guns. The 18 and 21 April were black days for the air supply service, since on these two days 50 Ju 52s and 27 Me 323s were shot down just outside the Gulf of Tunis. Actually in view of the experience of the preceding weeks these losses could have been avoided. I had nevertheless to draw the obvious conclusion that future flights should only be made at night; it was unavoidable that this further detracted from the efficiency of the supply service.

I am venturing no personal criticism of the steps taken at that time by General von Arnim, since I did not receive detailed reports of the events which happened one on top of the other; he implored me to desist from a personal visit which I wanted to make early in May. I am therefore unable to say whether he could have further reduced his wing positions, especially on the British Eighth Army's front, or moved more of his rearward troops into the mountain position. During the night I ordered a heavy bomber raid to be made on the enemy preparations and movements so as to show the infantry that they had not been forgotten.

Considered as a whole it was clear to me that the defenders, confined as they were in such a narrow space would not be able to hold out indefinitely against such a concentrated attack from the ground and from the air. The conduct of the troops under General von Manteuffel, Weber and Schmidt were also noticed by the enemy and emphasised by the high number of enemy casualties. The 90th Infantry and 15th Panzer Divisions, to mention only a couple of **formations** of the former Army of Africa, also fought well. One or two of the Italian divisions, such as the Young Fascists Division, must here also be singled out for praise.

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With the break-through towards Tunis (5 to 8 May) the German High Command was practically put out of action; after the fall of Tunis on May 9 the fighting broke into scattered scraps until the last groups resisting surrendered on May 12. I maintained contact up to the last moment with General von Arnim and the commander of the last resistance group, Major-general Koechy of the Luftwaffe. When I recall by memory the last reports from General von Vaerst, who as Commander of the Army remained with the last gun, or those from General Neuffer of the Flak Division or from General Koechy, I feel infinitely proud of the heroic spirit of the warriors of Tunisia. Every German soldier who was there can be proud that he took part in this campaign.

To conclude it only remains to add that Luftflotte 2 and the Italian Air Force, besides supporting the ground troops and protecting our convoys, carried out frequent and successful bombing raids on the Allied supply bases such as Algiers, Philipville and Bone and attacked enemy convoys at sea.

16. Final comments on the fighting in Tunis

Tunis appears to me as the last link of a misunderstood African strategy.

In my opinion the chief fault lay in the complete failure to recognise the importance of the African theatre and the adjacent Mediterranean zone. This under-valuation led to half and impetuous measures. One overlooked the fact that from the end of 1941 the colonial war had a new complexion on it and that Africa had become a major front influencing the decision in Europe.

A second fault lay in underestimating the importance of the supply lines and in the gradual failure of the supply service. The soldier and civilian pay more attention to the battles and their outcome, these make world history. But the more technics control the course of a war, the more must the military command responsible devote itself to the invisible and thankless task of securing supplies.

A third disadvantage lay in the fundamental difficulties of fighting a war as a coalition. Too much compliance and too obvious refusals have been equally harmful. Relations became intolerable when the former C.-in-C. Army, General Ambrosio, replaced Count Cavallero as Chief of the General Staff of the Italian Armed Forces. The mutual trust that had hitherto existed between Cavallero and myself became the very opposite. I warned the Duce against taking this step; when my warnings remained ineffectual, I asked to be relieved. Unfortunately I withdrew this on the urgent entreaties of the Duce who repeatedly assured me of every "brotherly trust". Ambrosio also immediately tried to remove me from my key position, and asked me to take over command of the Army Group in Tunisia. Even if I as a soldier would have gladly accepted this post, I had to turn it down for objective reasons, especially since he could not give away this position anyway. His purpose was to get me away from Rome so that he could fish better in troubled waters without being watched by his Axis allies. I am convinced that in the closest circles the first moves were being made for the revolt which took place later.

Adolf Hitler's restraint regarding France and the French colonies is still as unintelligible to me as it was at the time. This restraint and the niggardly allocation of troops to occupy Tunis very much curtailed the prospects of a successful campaign in Tunisia. Was it correct in such circumstances to take the risk in Tunisia. Today I still think it was, for the reasons given in Section 1.

As I today must consider things in the light of the situation as it developed, it might perhaps have been possible to hold out during 1943 in Africa or at least by holding on longer to Tunisia to postpone until 1944 the offensive against Europe (which for all practical purposes meant Italy). The invading army in North Africa had no experience of fighting and on that account was inferior to ours. Even the British Eighth Army had its difficulties in other spheres; if the delaying action had been more tenaciously carried out, it would have slowed down the speed of the advance and further postponed the arrival at the Tunisian border. The actual German plan of operations would not have required any alteration; many a shortcoming in carrying it out ought to have been avoided, as I have shown in the foregoing description.

The Allied success was absolute, and resulted in giving the enemy an impression of superiority, which was not justified to that extent, but which gave an exceptional boost to their fighting morale. This was a handicap for further operations in the Mediterranean zone which ought not to be underestimated. The loss of Tunisia following that of Tripolitania hit the Italian High Command and the Italian people particularly hard. With the burial of their colonial aspirations the danger increased to their Motherland, which so far had hardly known there was a war on.

17. Appreciation of the situation during the final struggle in Tunisia and after the capitulation of Army Group Tunis

A. General considerations

The occupation of the north coast of Africa could not be considered an end in itself, had the destruction of two Axis armies not alone justified the Allied operations in North Africa. The military victory over the Axis forces in Africa was however the preliminary move for each subsequent step in realising the plans laid at Casablanca which were not known in detail.

Something had been achieved; shipping could now move in the area in which the Allies were interested almost without danger; Malta was no longer cut off, but now had links in nearly all directions. Supplies for any front in the Mediterranean and movements of Allied forces had become considerably easier.

The massing of the Anglo-American forces in Tunisia made one expect in the near future a continuation of enemy operations in the Western Mediterranean.

Sicily lay within reach; the capture of the island would be a further stage on the road to Italy, which was not too difficult to reach from Sicily. One also had naturally to consider the possibility of a simultaneous attack on Calabria.

The only advantage of forcing a way into Italy would be if Italy could be compelled to make peace and the air war against Germany opened from there. Both of these could best be achieved by the capture of Rome; for the air war, the occupation of the Apulian plain would be sufficient.

If the Allies decided to go the whole hog and capture Rome, a preliminary operation against Sardinia and Corsica would gain in importance. Sardinia especially is an exceptionally well-placed air base; the ports of both islands lie mainly on the southern, northern and eastern sides, and therefore faced the Italian coast. There was a large number of possible landing points. British naval interests lay against this operation and in favour of taking Sicily. In my opinion the Allies were bound to place the highest value on shipping being able to pass by Sicily unexposed to danger.

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The German and Italian forces in Sicily and Southern Italy would be cut off by an attack on Central Italy, but they would certainly try and fight their way northwards. At the moment, however, the Allied forces were altogether too weak to be able to fight in two directions at once. But this line of attack would gain in probability should further Allied divisions be sent out and their pool of ships correspondingly increased.

The islands were not unfavourably placed for an attack on Southern France too, especially Corsica which could be used so to speak as a permanent aircraft carrier. On the other hand the chief ports in the islands faced the other front and a distance of over 400 miles would present its own difficulties to a move by an invading fleet direct from North Africa to Southern France. For this too the forces were too weak and would have to be reinforced.

The Allied forces in Tunisia were a long way off for an operation in the Eastern Mediterranean. But these difficulties could be overcome. One could get to the Balkans by way of Southern Italy; the Allied motorised divisions could be moved by road to Tripoli, Benghazi or Tobruk and thence break into the Aegean - they need expect but little opposition from naval forces. The weak but easily reinforcing air forces at the moment on Crete, in the Peloponnese and near Athens and Salonica constituted a defence in depth which could be very effectively used, whilst the Allies lacked comparable bases. But - a landing in the Balkans directed against the rear of the German front in the East with the object of linking up with the Russians was bound to have not only a big military effect but a political one at least as great.

From the foregoing it could be seen that there were many possible ways in which the operation might be continued. When seriously considering the enemy situation two points of view must especially be borne in mind:

- 1) The landings at Algiers and other points ought to be considered more as a peaceful exercise; there was no defence along the coast to speak of. The Allies would systematically go from easier things to the more difficult ones and would choose a task they could perform according to their state of training and strength.
- 2) The Allies place the utmost value on a strong air cover; aircraft carriers alone are insufficient. One must therefore expect an objective which will permit the most extensive support from their own permanent bases. This appears all the more important the less they succeed in overpowering the Axis air forces before the next invasion.

On that account I personally rule out the Balkans, Southern France and Northern Italy as the next objective. Allied naval and air interests point equally to Sicily. Furthermore, it is an objective which can be attacked with the forces available with some prospects of success. A simultaneous attack on the Calabrian coast, which would have its own great advantages, would lead to a splitting of forces, which could possibly jeopardise the success of the whole. As things stand at present I do not think it will occur; but such an attack is obviously possible. On the route to Sicily lies Pantelleria; since this fortified island except for a few aircraft has no great number of reserves to fall back on and thus cannot affect an invasion of Sicily, an attack on this island is questionable.

I consider Sardinia and Corsica the next most likely. Already Marshal Cavallero and later General Ambrosio have looked into this possibility and have stepped up the defences of the islands and the threatened coasts. Whilst Count Cavallero was still Chief of the General Staff I had very detailed talks in Sicily near Catania about the island fortifications with the C.-in-C. Sicily, at that time General Roatta. He showed me on the map details of the installations

on the coast and in the interior. When I saw them myself in April and May, I could no longer understand the General's optimism. What had been constructed just looked good but was not capable of standing up to a modern attack. In the interior of the island there were only badly protected tank obstacles, which hindered their own traffic more than they were likely to hold up the enemy. Altogether a wonderful piece of window dressing! What I saw of the troops on this inspection was on a par with the fortifications. With such troops in that sort of fortification a defence was hopeless. Conditions in Sardinia were somewhat better, the best were in Corsica. Ambrosio went on tours of inspection to the islands; in contrast to Cavallero, who always asked me to accompany him, Ambrosio inspected the islands and coasts on his own, so that I could never get a clear picture of them. Since I, personally and through me the OKW had been urgently asked to send German forces, mutual frankness was the essential condition for successful preparations for defence and for the defence itself. This was lacking. From April onwards I intervened more and more, and went to see for myself the position at the front and at the forward headquarters. After the capitulation of Tunis speed was urged. One had to assume that the Allies, thanks to their excellent network of spies, know about the lack of coastal defences and the inadequate defending forces. In Tunisia they had finally got to know how much power of resistance and will to fight the Italian troops had, and that justified them even in taking a risk. They know that the German forces in Sicily were still very weak and that these were not capable of springing a surprise. In view of their justifiable elation at their victory one had to reckon with an immediate operation, especially as since the beginning of April the end in Tunisia could be anticipated and preparations for an invasion made in remote and safe ports. The same applied to Sardinia and the Italian coastline, especially on the west coast of southern and central Italy.

Whatever might happen was bound to happen at once. What were in detail the offensive moves likely to be made and what would be the probable outcome?

From our experiences of the North African invasion we knew the methods which would be used for a landing of the same kind. Without going into details, let us discuss just the essentials.

- 1) The invasion fleet represented the concentration of a large fleet of transport vessels and an escort fleet commensurate with the size of the transport formations and the degree of danger.

The fleet of transports comprised merchant ships of all sizes which carried the landing craft on board. There were also tankers.

The escort fleet consisted of ships of all armaments from battleships and aircraft carriers down to destroyers.

- 2) The invasion fleet was drawn up in battle order. Its formation covered protection against attacks by enemy naval forces including submarines and defence against enemy attacks from the air.

The attacking formation along the coast gave priority to gunfire protection from the large ships for the landing troops. On top of this there was protection against air raids provided by the ships' anti-aircraft artillery and the aircraft from the carriers. As a cover on the outside they were content with only very minor precautions.

- 3) The landings took place at various points from landing craft, which also brought in heavy weapons and tanks.

The landing operation appeared to the spectator as a slow movement of wide and deep groups of numerous little vessels. The landing points seemed to be well chosen for terrain, currents, etc.

- 4) For disembarking larger items such as heavy and very heavy equipment and supplies, ports which had the necessary facilities were made use of.
- 5) Fighter aircraft were brought over to an airfield in remarkably quick time.

I have indicated that the invasion of the North African coast was a sort of peace-time manoeuvre. The German air raids had to be flown over distances too great to be particularly successful. Even if no practicable means of beating off such a landing could be found, it was at least theoretically possible to ascertain the obvious weaknesses. These were:

- 1) The large movement of ships offered a promising target for naval forces (fleet and submarines) and for the air forces.
- 2) The landing operation with a lot of boats in a confined space offered very favourable defensive chances for air attack and ground defence from the coast.
- 3) This effect could be multiplied by water and land mines.
- 4) Open gun positions could not be held against concentrated fire from the ships' artillery. A flanking operation together with well camouflaged hidden guns and weapons in the centre could break up an attack.
- 5) If the Allied fighters could be put out of action it would increase the chances of success of our own raids and lessen the effectiveness of enemy bombing raids.
- 6) Even with the best of defences the enemy cannot be indefinitely prevented from getting a foothold on one coast or the other. Such small bridgeheads held by the enemy have an indisputable weakness. Reserves ought to be available at all levels so that the enemy can be thrown back into the sea at once.

All these points, so far as time and material yet allowed, should have been taken into account when planning the defence of each individual place. I must add here in explanation that no experience learned from later invasions has been considered here.

B. Detailed comments

1) Sicily:

The object of an enemy attack would be to seize the island to use as a springboard for a landing in Italy. That means capturing the east coast, especially the Strait of Messina. The fact that the most useful ports such as Syracuse, Augusta, Catania and Messina, and the best operational airfields like Gela, Comiso, Gerbini and Catania lie directly along this stretch of coast increases its value for further landing operations. Of course, the defending forces on Sicily must be put out of action as well, since no invasion could be pushed further with an enemy capable of striking in its rear.

Near to Tunis lies the west coast of Sicily with the good ports of Trapani and Marsala and a serviceable air base likewise directly on the coast. Air support can be given from Tunis; indeed given somewhat favourable weather the fleet of landing craft could start direct from the Tunisian coast. A concentric attack on the narrow western tip of Sicily between Capes S. Vito and Granitola presents itself and is bound to be successful. The terrain is especially suitable for a landing. The possession of this part of the island is of no special importance for the continuation of the operation since the east coast still lies 250-km away

and separated by a mountain barrier difficult to cross. It would take a lot of time and lives to work through the whole island. However, in this case one would have to expect an encircling movement through Palermo towards Etna.

There are stretches of coast suitable for a landing all along the south coast, more especially in the Gulf of Terranova, and in the east in the Gulf of Catania. A simultaneous landing along the coasts of the two gulfs mentioned would automatically develop into a pincer attack, with its eastern flank covering the naval bases of Syracuse and Augusta, whilst the left wing would be certain to capture the headquarters and focal point of the island at Enna. Whether they will then bother much about the troops stationed in the west of the island is a matter of taste. The mountain barrier alone would paralyse the weak Axis forces. An attack from the Gulf of Catania has its own difficulties since it would have the naval bases such as Syracuse and the Etna massif on its flanks and would have to expect a threat to the flank from the Strait of Messina and to the rear from the Fleet's base at Taranto. An enemy landing in the south and east would receive air and naval support from nearby Malta. On weighing up all the pros and cons one must expect the main assault in the south of the island, accompanied by a secondary attack either from the Gulf of Catania or on the western part of the island.

The above brings us to these conclusions:

- 1) The coastal defences must be strengthened in depth so that the heavy weapons can be used against the invaders whilst still on the water.

In this order of importance:

South coast with special emphasis on the coast in the Gulf of Terranova.

East coast (Gulf of Catania and adjacent areas), it being assumed that the naval bases of Syracuse and Augusta will defend themselves.

West coast.

- 2) The divisions protecting the coast must be improved, either by relieving them or giving them more thorough training.
- 3) Mobile reserves must be ready.

a) Minimum requirements:

- 1 division in the Catania district.
- 2 divisions in the area Enna - Caltagirone - Caltanissetta.
- 1 division behind Trapani and Marsala near Salemi, which is to be immediately moved to the east if no attack takes place in the west.

Of the above, one or two are to be German divisions.

- b) Efforts were to be made to have two further divisions ready, one of these in the Caltagirone - Ragusa area and the other in the Enna central area at the same time moving the two divisions asked for under a) to the south, one of these to be a German division, making in all three German divisions if possible.

Should the improbable happen and a landing be made in the north, the divisions at Salemi, Enna and Catania were to be moved in against it.

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The defence plan was definitely settled with the High Command in Sicily, to which I appointed as liaison officer General von Senger-Etterlin who was at the same time to be Commander of the German forces there. At this point the decision was made that the foremost reserve divisions were to be got on the move immediately towards the coast, that is to say against the enemy, as soon as it was possible to determine the probable landing point from the direction in which the invading fleet was moving. I considered this the Command's most important job and said so.

Air preparations:

- a) Protection for the Strait of Messina, which was of vital importance for the preparatory measures and later operations.
- b) Fighter forces on the island to be developed especially in the south-east by spreading the ground organisation as much as possible so that they can continue to operate against even the strongest opposition.
Second line air bases set up in southern Italy in support and as a defence against attacks on Calabria and Apulia.
Dive-bombers to be distributed among units.
- c) The strong concentration of bomber and torpedo forces to be replaced by fighters in Apulia and around Naples, Rome and Grossetto.
- d) As well as this, long-range reconnaissance aircraft to operate from their own bases.
- e) The ground radar system to be extended for day and night traffic.

Special Naval measures

In co-operation with engineer assault boats the German Naval Headquarters was responsible for its ferry service of ferries and barges across the Strait of Messina, whilst the Italian Navy controlled the big ferries.

There was much discussion about the use of the Fleet; it was supposed to be fully employed in protection of the homeland, but in the end was retained as a last trump to be played at the vital moment. Work proceeded with vigour on the lines laid down in these discussions.

2) Sardinia

Cagliari was of vital importance to the possession of Sardinia. Cagliari was a central jumping-off point. Sassari on the other hand was a step backwards. The smaller ports in the north were solely of interest because of the link with Corsica.

The main airfield system of Sardinia lay between the Gulf of Cagliari and the Gulf of Oristano. The smaller airfields to the north of this area were comparatively insignificant.

From the centre to the east coast was completely mountainous and not suitable for a major landing.

For a landing from the sea it was a question of the strips of coast in and around the Gulfs of Cagliari and Oristano, and for an airborne landing the country in between these.

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The north-west coast from Alghero to Palau also presented possibilities. If one seized this strip one would still not be in possession of Sardinia, but would indeed have a jumping-off point for operations against Corsica and southern France. The south of France still lay some 400 km from north-west Sardinia; still very far away to provide air support for an invasion of the south of France; for an operation against Corsica such a stepping-stone was not necessary.

Most of the arguments emphasised the importance of the southern half of Sardinia. For that reason work on the coastal fortifications and defence in depth in the area was to be expedited with all urgency. The north-west coast came after that, whilst the east coast only required patrolling.

The proper place for the mobile reserves too was in the southern area, since just as in the case of Sicily they must be able to be sent in at once against a landing force. But they also had to be ready to move quickly north and east and everything possible in the way of preparatory exercises was to be done. Conditions were not unfavourable for counter-attacks.

Minimum requirements: one or two motorised divisions in reserve, but efforts to be made to have two or three of these.

Of these, at least one motorised division must be German. As well as these fortress infantry battalions were necessary who could get to work on the completely neglected coastal defences, especially those along the Gulf of Oristano, and who were to act as a brace at the most important points. General von Lungershausen, who commanded the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division on Sardinia, was commander of the German troops and co-operated with great tact and understanding with the Italian High Command.

Air preparations:

- 1) With the great calls on fighter pilots in Italy, etc., a sufficiently strong fighter force cannot normally be raised for the defence of Sardinia. The numbers at that time were only just enough in conjunction with the Italian fighters to afford scanty protection for sea and air ports and to escort the bomber and torpedo units. In the event of an attack on Sardinia new forces would have to be brought in and the ground organisation made ready for them. Provision had likewise been made for support from bases in Sicily and Corsica, and vice versa.
- 2) The airfields near Cagliari (Decimomannu, etc.) were indispensable for making reconnaissance and raiding flights deep into the Western Mediterranean area. As soon as an attack starts the aircraft must be withdrawn to the mainland or to Sicily, since they would otherwise certainly be destroyed.
- 3) In contrast to Sicily, the ports were of vital importance for supplying the troops. Anti-aircraft protection for these ports and for the airfields was therefore to be increased.
- 4) Stocks of supplies must be laid in in as large quantities as possible.
- 5) Ground locating system to be expanded.

Naval preparations were exclusively in the hands of the Italian Navy, being mainly at Cagliari, where E-boats were also located.

Plans to transfer forces from Sardinia to Corsica and vice-versa were considered and drawn up.

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Work was carried out on the island of Sardinia on these general lines in friendly co-operation with the Italian authorities.

3. Corsica

Corsica was only occupied by the Italians when hostilities with the French broke out. In itself it is no objective for a major landing, and on its own too small for an intermediate stage in a major operation. Corsica is a mountainous country whose interior is easily defended, but whose defence is then only worth-while if reserves can make sorties to prevent the attackers from exploiting the ports and airfields. On the other hand the mountains can be easily sealed off from the coast and the enemy would hardly need to use a major force doing this.

Bastia and Ajaccio are most important commercial and military places on the island. Besides the ports, the chief airfields are also located there; these places are road and rail key points.

Bonifacio with Porto Vecchio are important as transshipment points for Sardinia.

One can imagine that a landing on the north-west coast of Sardinia would be connected with a similar landing at Ajaccio and Porto Vecchio. They would want to seize Bastia as well as Ajaccio. In order to avoid the difficult attack across the mountains they would make either a secondary attack on Bastia from St Florent or attack along the coast from Porto Vecchio. Thus are indicated the main defence points which must be reconstructed. Neither the Sicilians nor the Sardinians are passionately Italian, and the Corsicans are French and therefore presumably hostile. That must be taken into account.

Besides the coastal force one division was absolutely essential as mobile reserve. In order to avoid splitting the German forces too much, only one reinforced regiment could be detailed for the job.

Air:

In the general defence framework some German fighter pilots had also been moved to Corsica, as well as radar locating equipment. For the time being the transfer of stronger forces could not be considered. It was however imperative that the capacity of the airfields was increased and their defences against air raids made stronger. (E.G. new installations at Ghisonaccia).

Naval:

The Navy had two tasks:

- 1) to step up the defences of Bastia and Ajaccio,
and
- 2) to organise the ferry service to Sardinia and Corsica.

4) Italy

The specially threatened west coast was protected by the chain of islands just mentioned and Elba. However, this screen could only be effective if offensive measures could be taken against an invading fleet on its way to Italy. The idea of a breakthrough by such a fleet, always difficult to move and very vulnerable, through the narrow waters between Corsica and Elba, and Elba and the mainland, or through the Straits of Bonifacio and Messina could be discounted at the outset. There remained therefore only the wide passage between Sardinia and Sicily.

The Italian Fleet had indeed not proved itself a "battle" fleet in previous years; but the enemy could not know whether in the event of an attack on Italy itself it might not abandon its former reluctance to fight. They had heard good reports about the small vessels (destroyers, etc.) and the E-boats, and had suffered many a casualty from them. The Allies had not yet been able to get an idea of the coastal fortifications and the effectiveness of the coastal batteries. Furthermore; concentric surprise attacks or thrusts could be made from the strong naval harbours of Messina, Palermo, Trapani and Cagliari, and these could be effectively supported from La Spezia under cover of Elba. In this confined sea area submarines too could reap a good harvest. On top of this air attacks, swinging to and fro between the peninsula and the islands, could become especially effective.

As a result of these deliberations I believed we could assume there was no direct threat to the west coast. For the time being the Italians could look after special defence measures themselves. Nevertheless work must be hastened on coastal fortifications along the whole coast.

Conditions were different in the south. Here a considerable part of the Italian Fleet lay in the naval ports of Syracuse, Messina, Taranto and Brindisi. To attack the east coast of Sicily and the south coast of Italy with an invasion fleet would simply imply a remarkable disregard of the Italian Fleet. But one can imagine an assault on south Italy, with the seizure of southern Italy as far as Gaeta and Termoli or Ortona as primary objective which would mean cutting off Sicily from the mother-country and the premature occupation of air bases for use against Germany. The Allies would know in detail what Italian forces there were in this area. They still could not have a clear idea of the German forces since no decision had yet been taken on this. The Allies would only know one thing, that the forces in northern Italy were relatively strong, and those in central and southern Italy weak. They would also know that the coastal fortifications were exceptionally bad. They knew a little about the German-Italian air forces, which together with the submarines could make themselves very unpleasant on the comparatively long sea journey. Finally they knew that their fighters operating from aircraft carriers were outnumbered by the German and Italian land-based fighters. When one in addition considers that the Allied forces had not yet made a landing on a defended coast, it was hardly likely on considering carefully the pros and cons that an attack on the south coast would be made. Indeed, one could justifiably take the view that even a minor attack on the toe and sole was improbable in spite of its colossal advantages. Maybe a feint or feigned attack? In spite of the relatively great security, something had to be done however in both of these places. What was more important?

- 1) Defence of the Messina coast as far as Cape Spartivento along both sides, with an energetic overall command.
- 2) Isolated spots to be better guarded, since these present also the best opportunities for landings.

By means of 1 and 2 it had to be assured that communications between the island of Sicily and the mainland did not break down.

Minimum requirements: besides the coastal divisions, one mobile division (motorised) each for Calabria and Apulia.

Efforts were to be made to get two mobile divisions each, two of them German; if only one German division were available, then this to be located in the area Reggio - Catanzaro.

Air preparations:

- 1) The Strait of Messina to be guarded as already mentioned.
- 2) Anti-aircraft protection for the airfields in Apulia to be reinforced.

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3) Fighter units to be brought into the southern part of Calabria.

4) Air bases in southern Italy to be expanded and taken over immediately or as soon as the Sicilian airfields were abandoned.

Signed: KESSELRING

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