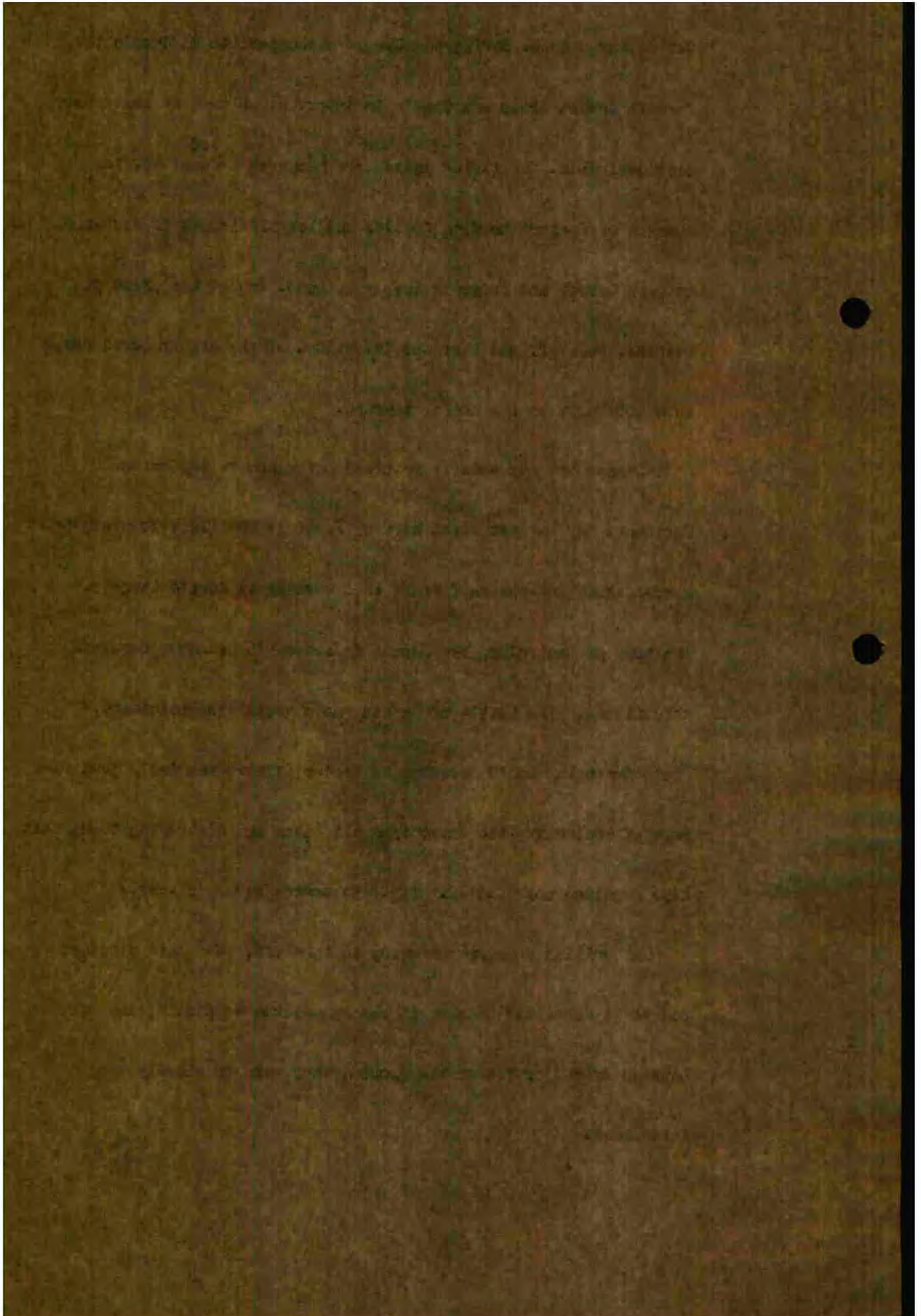


- 194 -

The British flying units had forced the German troops advancing on Bardia to turn about and withdraw, and on 4 December they had made attacks in force during the fighting for El Duda and the Belhamed area. During the German withdrawal to El Gazala the Western Desert Group was unable to intervene as much as would have been desirable. The flying units were hampered by ^{bad} weather, the absence of forward landing fields, and the difficulty of distinguishing between German and friendly supply columns. One of the principal reasons, however, was that the intentions of the XXX Armoured Corps were not known to the bomber command.

"Damned hot day today," reported Coningham to Tedder on 10 December, "my hardest fight here up front is the fight for targets. Needed three-and-one-half hours this morning to locate targets." The hope of encircling the German forces on 16 December remained unfulfilled. "The battle of Gazala was a great disappointment," wrote Coningham on 17 December to Tedder. "There was fully justified hope of encircling the enemy from all sides and destroying them; this hope remained unfulfilled." (Tt.: No source given in text.)

The British bombers were ready to take off, but their missions had to be cancelled because it was impossible to distinguish between friend or foe on the ground, they were so closely interlaced.



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The British fliers also missed an opportunity of raiding the Derna and Maturba airfields, where the German aircraft were crowded together.

On the other hand, the British continued their raids on Axis shipping without letup.

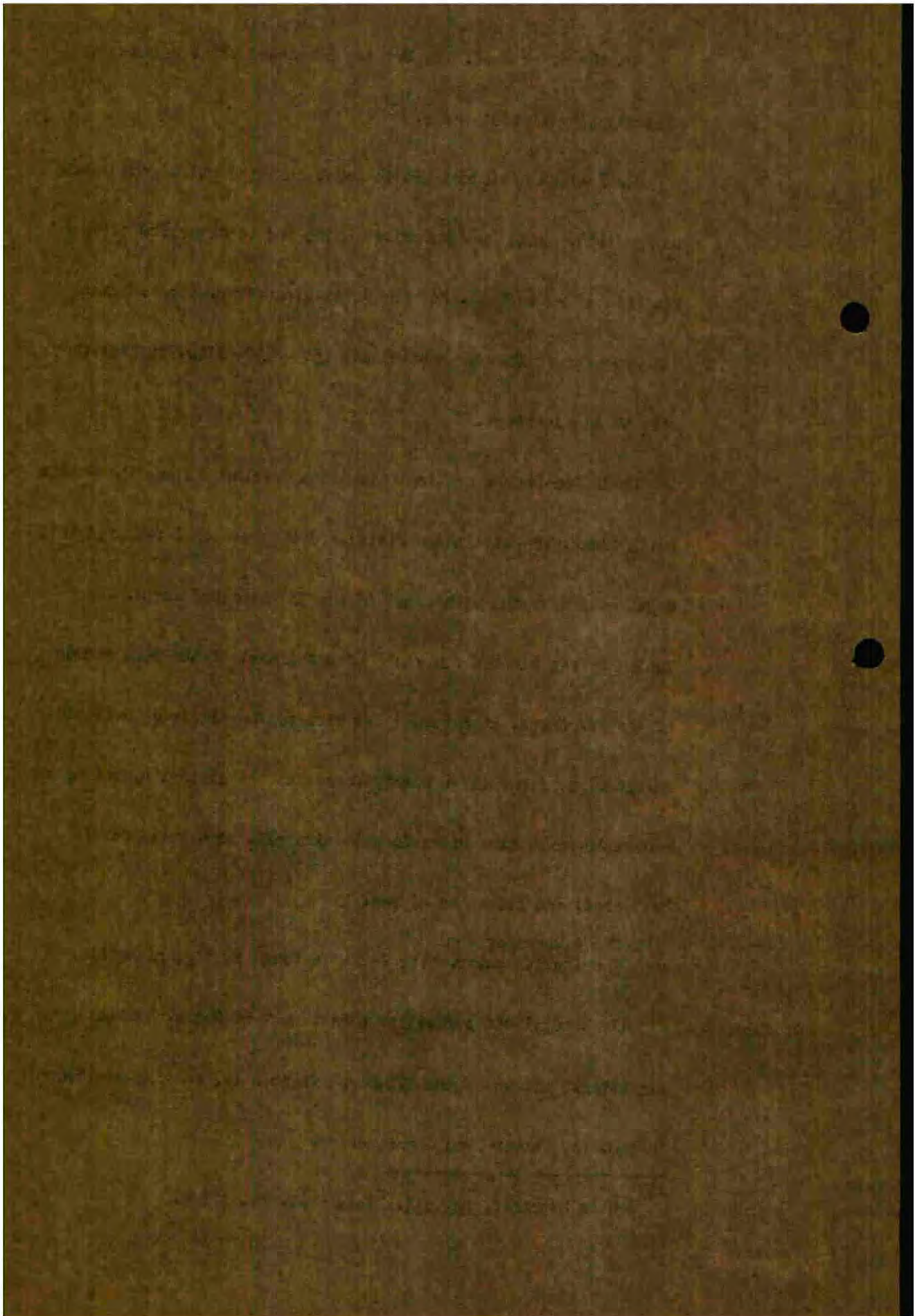
The Italian divisions had to march some 350 miles from Gazala to Agedabia, while the motorized units had to cover 280 miles via Mechili - Benghazi. For the British, however, the distance via Tengedar to Misus or Antelat was 150 - 190 miles, so that they were at an advantage.

On 18 December a critical situation developed along the German north flank. The 4th Indian Division drove west of Bir-Tenrad into a gap caused by the withdrawal of the XX Motorized Corps. The Indian forces blocked the route of withdrawal of the rear guards of the XXI Corps, then turned eastward to the airfields near Maturba, surprised the security forces at the airfields, and captured several unserviceable aircraft, some antiaircraft batteries, and prisoners of war.

On 20 December
The Italian units, which fought a tough rear guard action, finally brought the pursuit to a halt west of Derna. British air attacks hit the X and XXI Corps frequently, causing serious losses. The Panzer Group headquarters

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See Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 178-9.



- 196 -

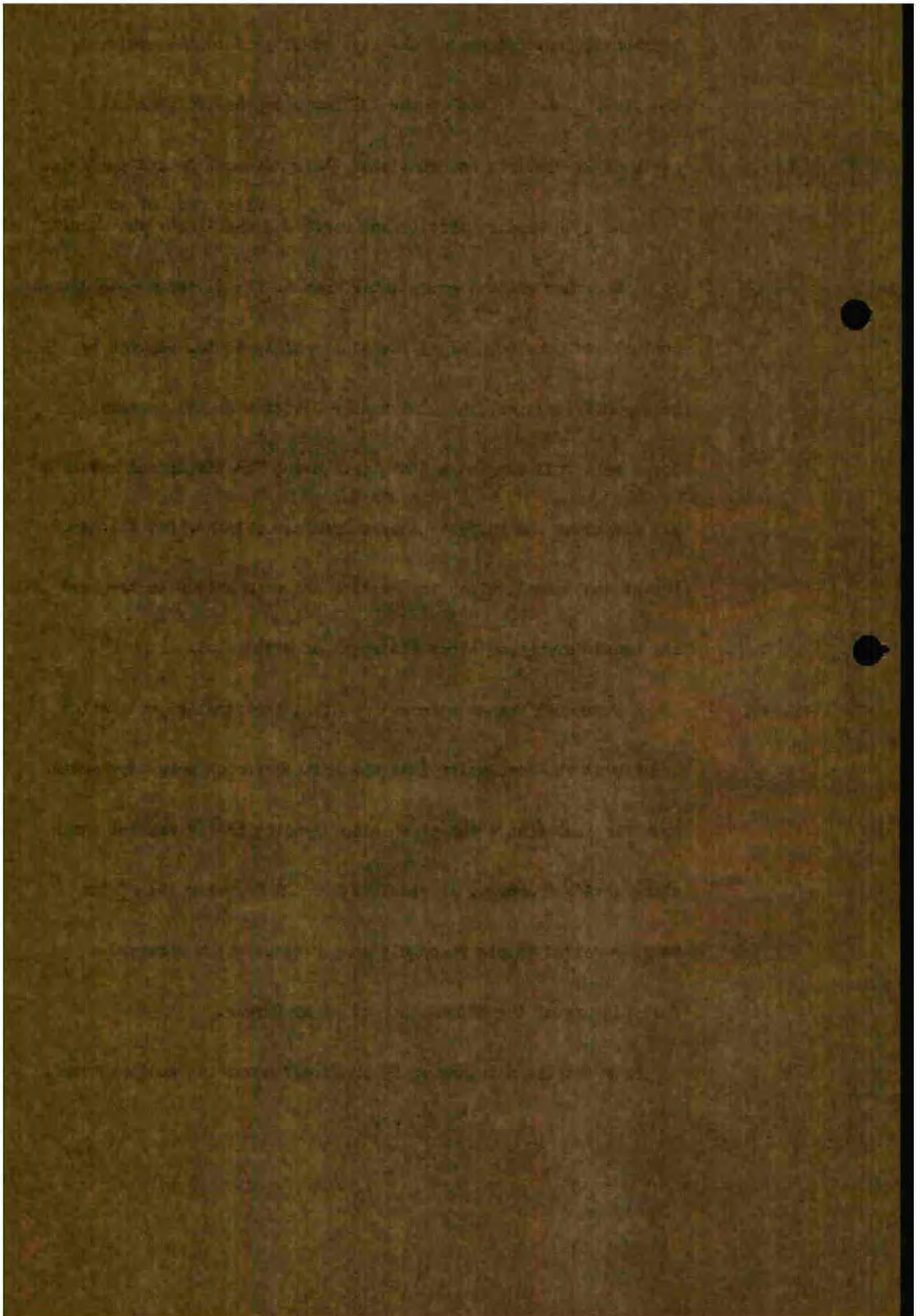
tried to accelerate the retrograde movement of the two corps by all means. In addition to Italian truck columns, German truck units that could be spared were also made available for shuttle transportation. Because of the high march performance achieved, the first combat troops of the XXI Corps reached Benghazi as early as 21 December and continued their movement toward Agedabia.

(15 miles west of Antelat)

The 15th Panzer Division had reached Sid-Salah by the evening of 21 December without enemy interference. The division established contact with the 90th Light Division near Agedabia. Plagued by supply difficulties, the 21st Panzer Division and XI Motorized Corps were following at a distance. During the withdrawal movement all divisions had suffered losses from air attacks. But the major threat had passed, since the British had been unable to trap ~~and~~ the Panzer Group and block its route of withdrawal.

During 21 December Rommel received the first reports which led him to the conclusion that the British forces were approaching from the east toward the steep slope leading to the coastal plain along a wide frontage. At about 1230 on 22 December the Africa Corps received an air reconnaissance message which conveyed a full picture of the disposition of enemy forces.

From Antelat a column of 25 tanks was advancing southwestward,



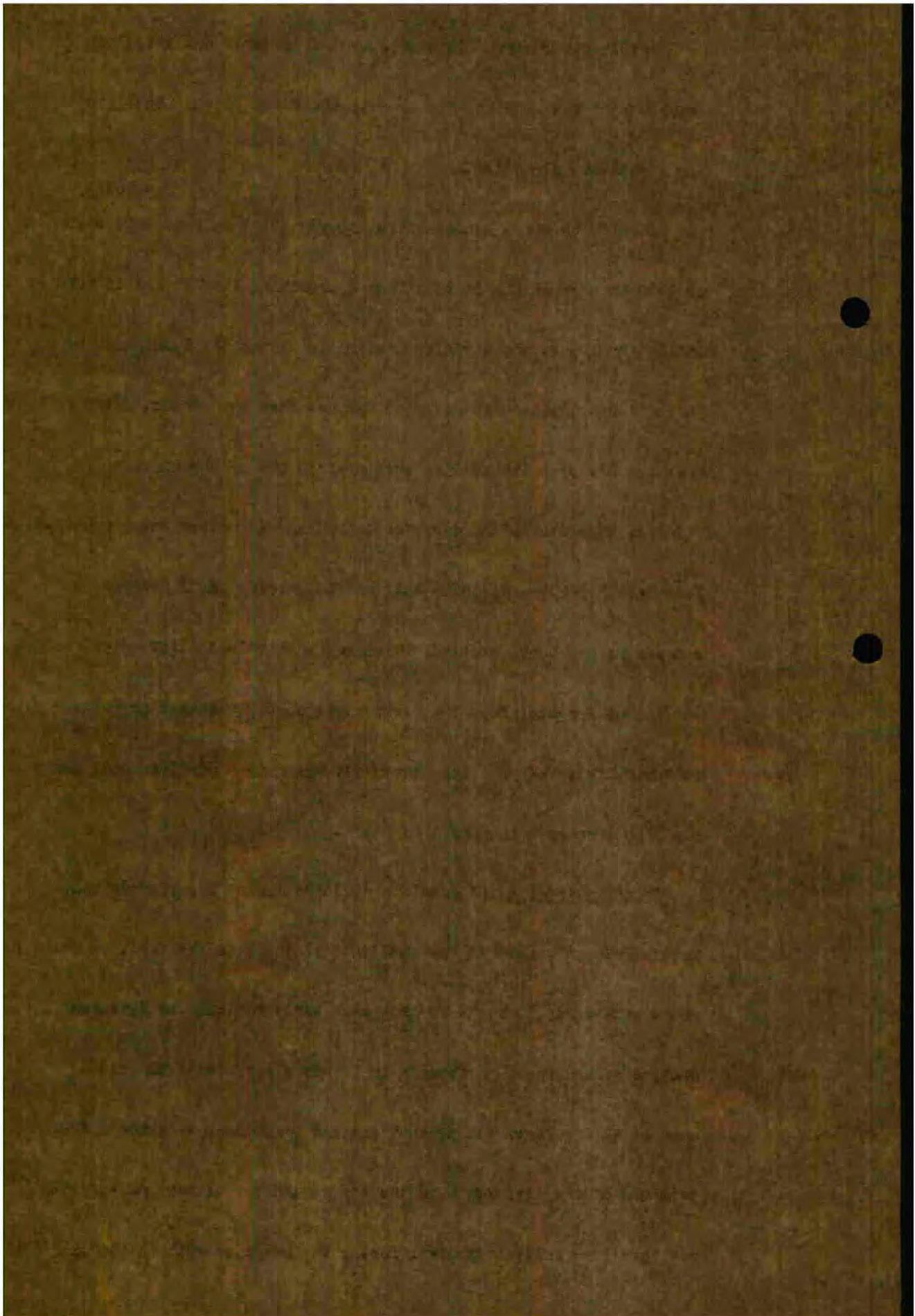
- 197 -

north of Antelat another column of 30 tanks and several self-propelled artillery batteries was descending into the coastal plain and approaching the Via Balbia,

while other march columns protected by tanks and artillery were moving via Msus and the area to the north of that locality in a westward direction.

The Africa Corps headquarters ordered the 15th Panzer Division at 1400 to prevent the British from approaching the Via Balbia between Antelat and Msus. The division decided to attack the march column in the center, which had advanced farther than the others. After that the division intended to turn against one of the adjacent columns, with the latter decision depending on further developments. It was fortunate for the division that on the morning of 22 December a company of new tanks arrived, which had been unloaded five days earlier at Benghazi from the first naval convoy ^{having reached} ~~that had arrived~~ in North Africa after a long interval. The number of divisional tanks was thus increased to more than 40.

Radio intercepts informed the division during its advance that British elements were in the immediate vicinity to the east. On this short winter day it began to grow dark early so that the division stopped its advance, preferring to launch a surprise ~~XXXI~~ raid at dawn on 23 December. All precautions had been taken to conceal the presence of the division from the enemy, and the element of surprise was therefore fully preserved. During the surprise raid the Germans



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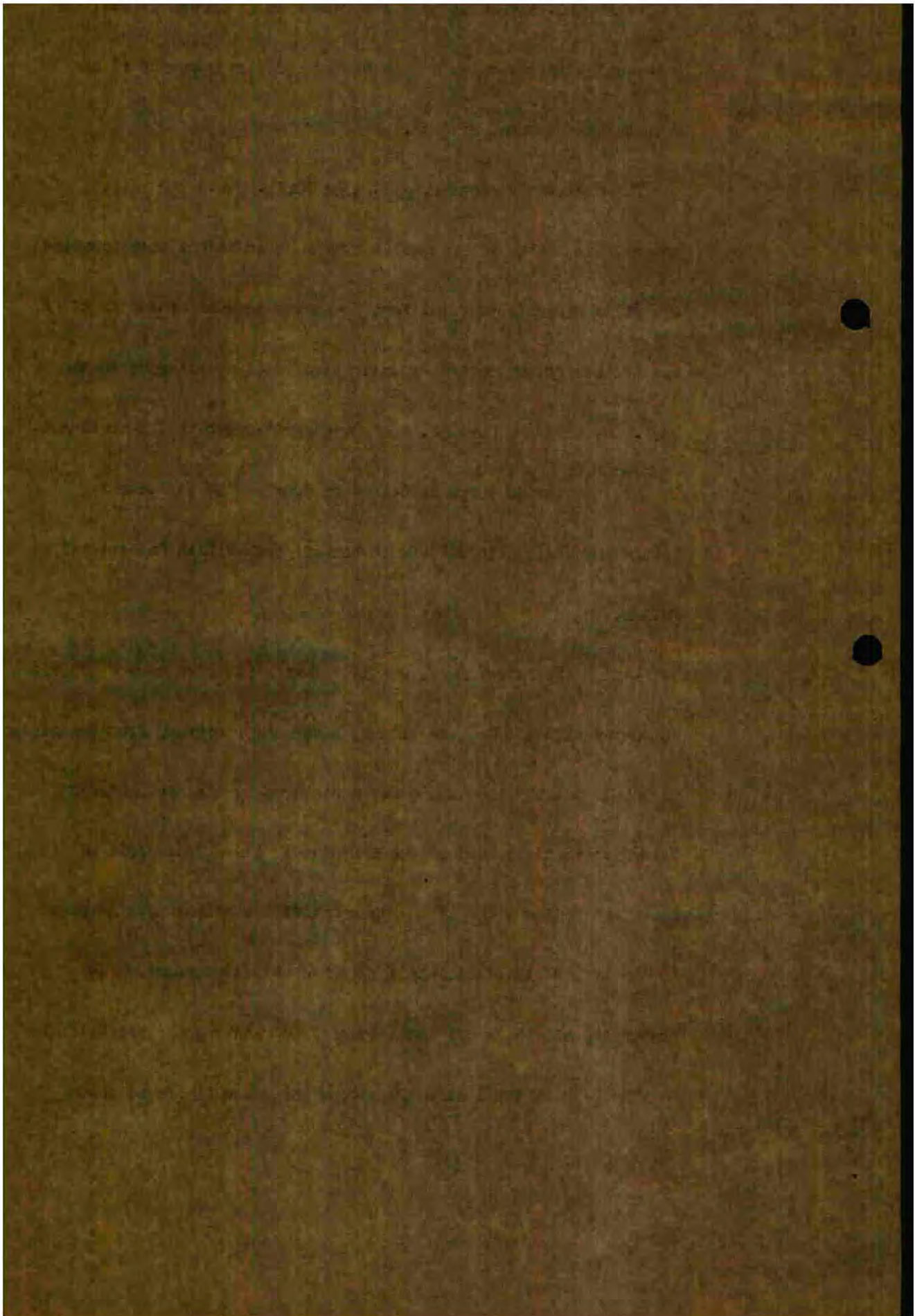
overran two batteries before the gun crews had time to fire a single shot. After a brief struggle the remaining British troops fled eastward. According to statements from prisoners of war, the enemy units involved in this encounter were the remnants of the British 4th Armoured Brigade.

The division commander, Gen. Major (Brig. Gen.) von Vaerst, ordered his troops to pursue the enemy. In so doing, they occupied the ridge without struggle. From there the Germans wanted to attack the British column in the vicinity of Antelat by a thrust in the rear. The British, however, had already withdrawn to the northeast.

At 1400 Africa Corps headquarters ordered the division to return immediately to Sidi-Balah because the British had entered Spiluk.

During its return march the 15th Panzer Division made a surprise encounter with two British columns advancing southward from Seeleidia; they had probably been asked for assistance by the 4th Armoured Brigade. One of the columns was immediately dispersed, while the other was stopped. The 15th Panzer Division continued its movement to the area south of Sidi-Balah; it had actually succeeded in preventing all three British columns from reaching the Via Balbia.

The bulk of the Italian XXI Corps had meanwhile moved into



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the positions prepared near Agedabia, and by 24 December the arrival of the very last elements of the Italian X Corps in those positions was ~~also~~ also to be expected.

The Africa Corps, including its two divisions and the Italian XI Motorized Corps assembled the same day around Sidi-Saleh, and during the night of 24 - 25 December it moved into the area southwest of Agedabia.

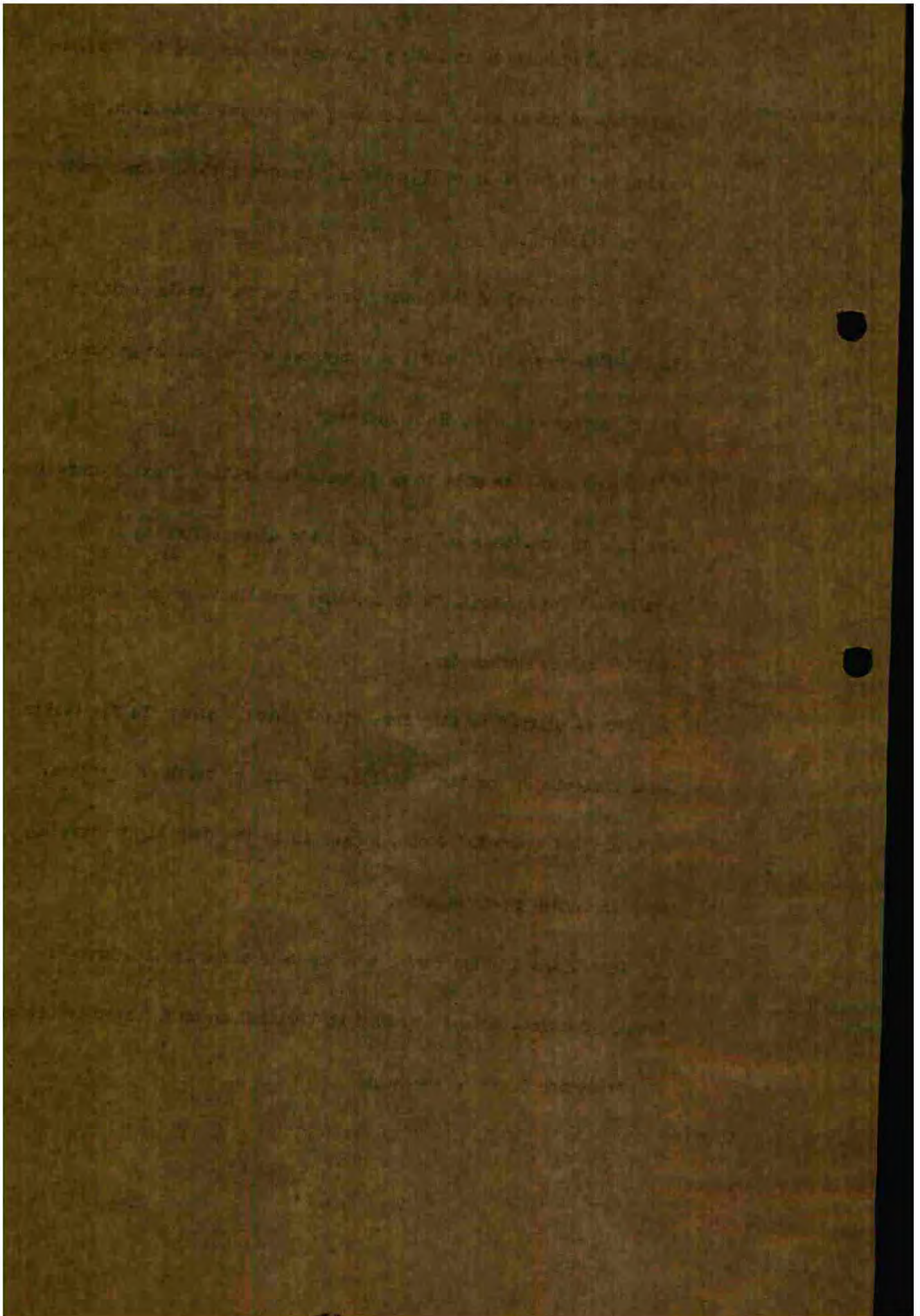
The withdrawal of the Panzer Group from the Gazala position to Agedabia was a difficult and dangerous operation. In general, the operation was a complete success.

Rommel had been able to anticipate the British plan of operations. For this reason, they ^{British} had been incapable of transforming the withdrawal into a rout. To do so, they would have needed a truly skilled armored commander.

Rommel planned to stop the British pursuit along the Via Balbia in a semi-circle position established east and north of Agedabia.

Here the X and XXI Corps, supported by the 90th Light Division, were to regain their stamina.

Later, the Italian forces were to be removed to the Marsa-el-Bregha position. Rommel expected the British armored forces to attempt an enveloping drive to the south



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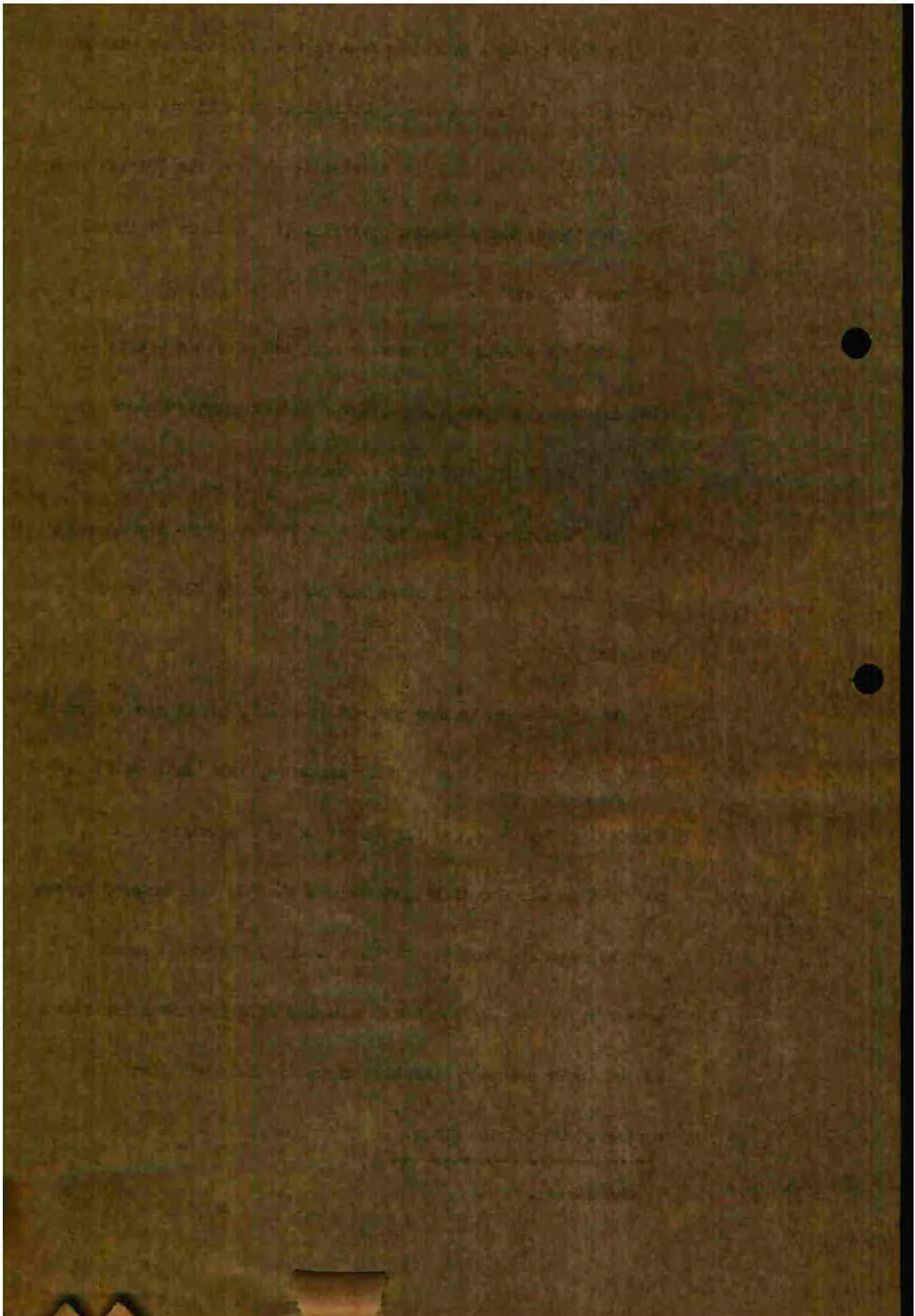
by which they would outflank the Agedabia position. This would give them free access to the Via Balbia.

For this reason, Rommel assembled the Africa Corps east and northeast of Gfafia and the XX Motorized Corps 15 miles south of Agedabia, giving them the mission to prevent the British armor from enveloping the Agedabia position, if necessary by launching offensive operations.

Along the elevated terrain on both sides of the Gfafia -- El-Bassiat highway the 15th Panzer Division occupied strongly fortified defensive positions on the right, with the 21st Panzer Division taking up the sector farther to the north. The assembly area of the XI Motorized Corps was north of the 21st Panzer Division.

The 25 December passed without incident, but on the afternoon of 26 December the first British tanks appeared north of El-Bassiat. On the same day the Panzer Group headquarters also received an air reconnaissance report that British armored forces were approaching from the northeast. On 27 ~~December~~ December an attack by ^{of} strong British forces equipped with 500 motor vehicles and 60 tanks seemed to threaten directly the north flank and center of the Africa Corps.

See sketch.



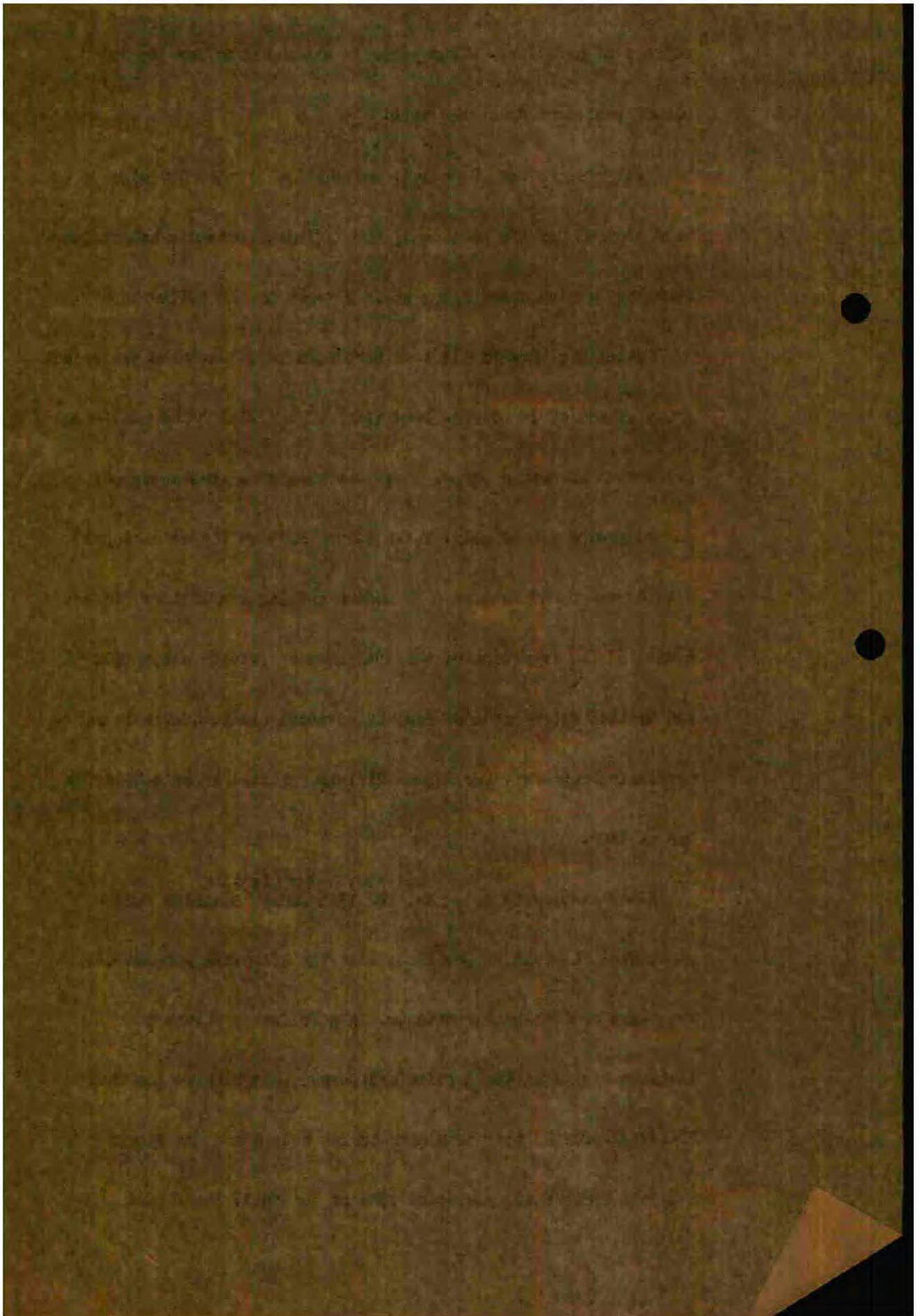
- 201 -

Strong British armored elements had also moved up to the south flank and opposite the front line of the 15th Panzer Division. As early as 1130 these forces ~~XXXXXXXX~~ began to attack with the support of artillery. Minor elements attempted to envelop the German positions from the south.

All attacks were repelled, and the 15th Panzer Division held control of its positions; the division commander believed that the British would renew their attacks on the following day.

During the tank battle that developed on 26 December, the attack group of the Africa Corps, consisting of the 21st Panzer Division and the XX Motorized Corps, which was advancing southeastward, gained ground very slowly. While strong British forces equipped with 60 tanks and supported by medium and light artillery pieces assaulted the frontline of the 15th Panzer Division since 0900 and British reconnaissance elements advanced toward Gfafia in an enveloping movement, the German division started an attack of its own at 1100.

and some heavy fighting
After destroying 25 tanks, the 15th Panzer Division forces penetrated the British positions with the effective support of two waves of dive-bomber attacks. In a follow-up thrust the division dislodged the British and pushed them back to the Wadi El-Faregh. During the third dive-bomber attack the 8th Panzer Regiment reached the southeast side of the Wadi. The pursuit



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was stopped only when darkness set in.

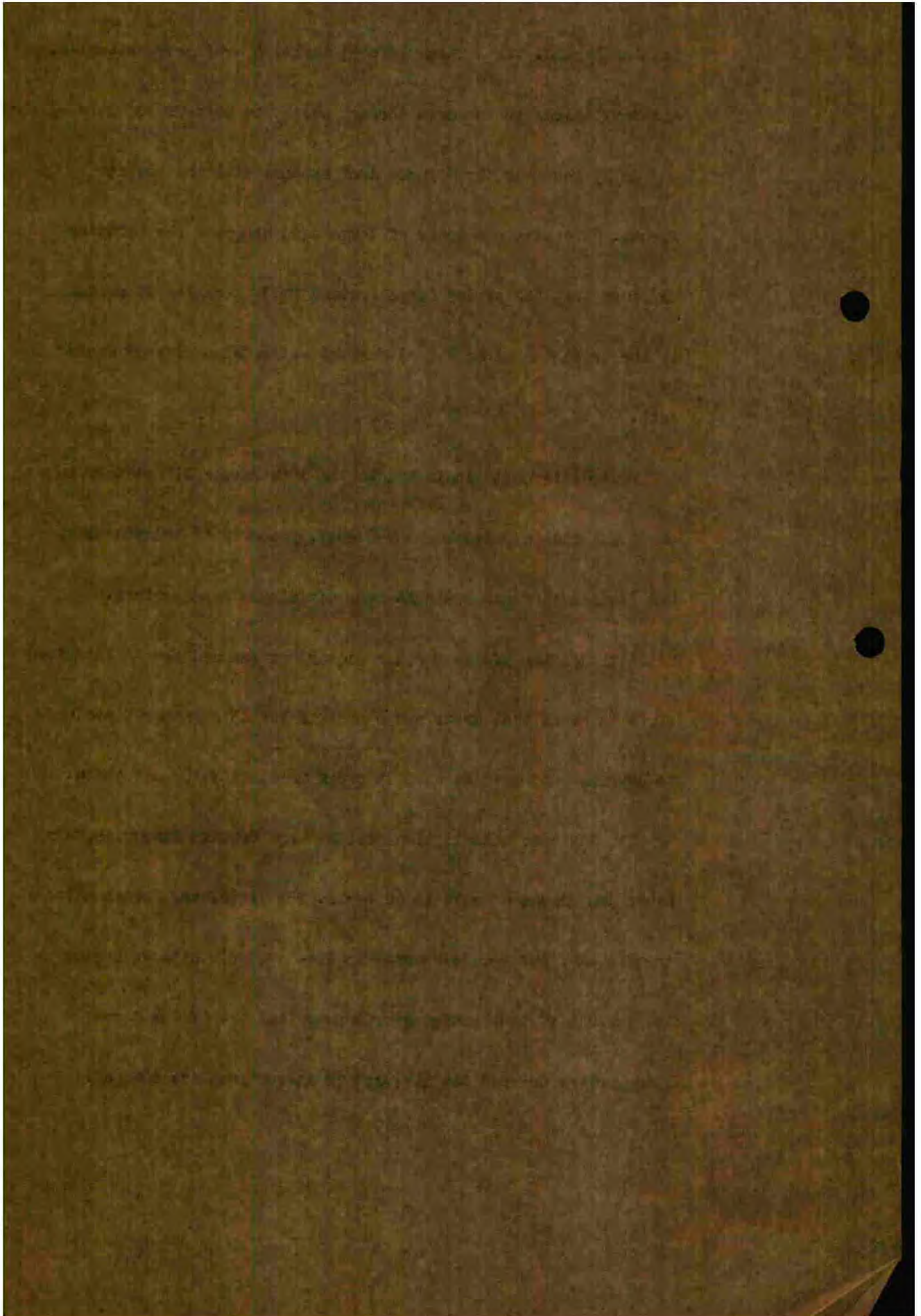
The 21st Panzer Division reached the northern edge of the Wadi toward the evening, while the XI Motorized Corps was even farther behind. The British left 55 tanks, 4 artillery batteries, and many tracks in the area through which the Germans had pursued them.

On 29 December the Germans lost contact with the British forces. Extensive stretches of loose sand hampered the pursuing units so that the Africa Corps decided on 30 December to switch to the defensive along the El-Hassiat -- Agadabia highway facing east.

Radio intercepts indicated to the 15th Panzer Division during the night that a British armored unit, probably of brigade size, was located some six miles XX from divisional headquarters.

Although the Africa Corps headquarters assumed the XI Motorized Corps to be in that area, corps ordered the 15th Panzer Division to advance northward at dawn in order to clarify the situation.

The division actually ran into a large British camp with many tents and trucks as well as 60 tanks. The divisional forces attacked immediately, but were subjected to low-level air attacks during the pursuit of the British garrison so that the Africa Corps headquarters ordered the division to discontinue its advance.



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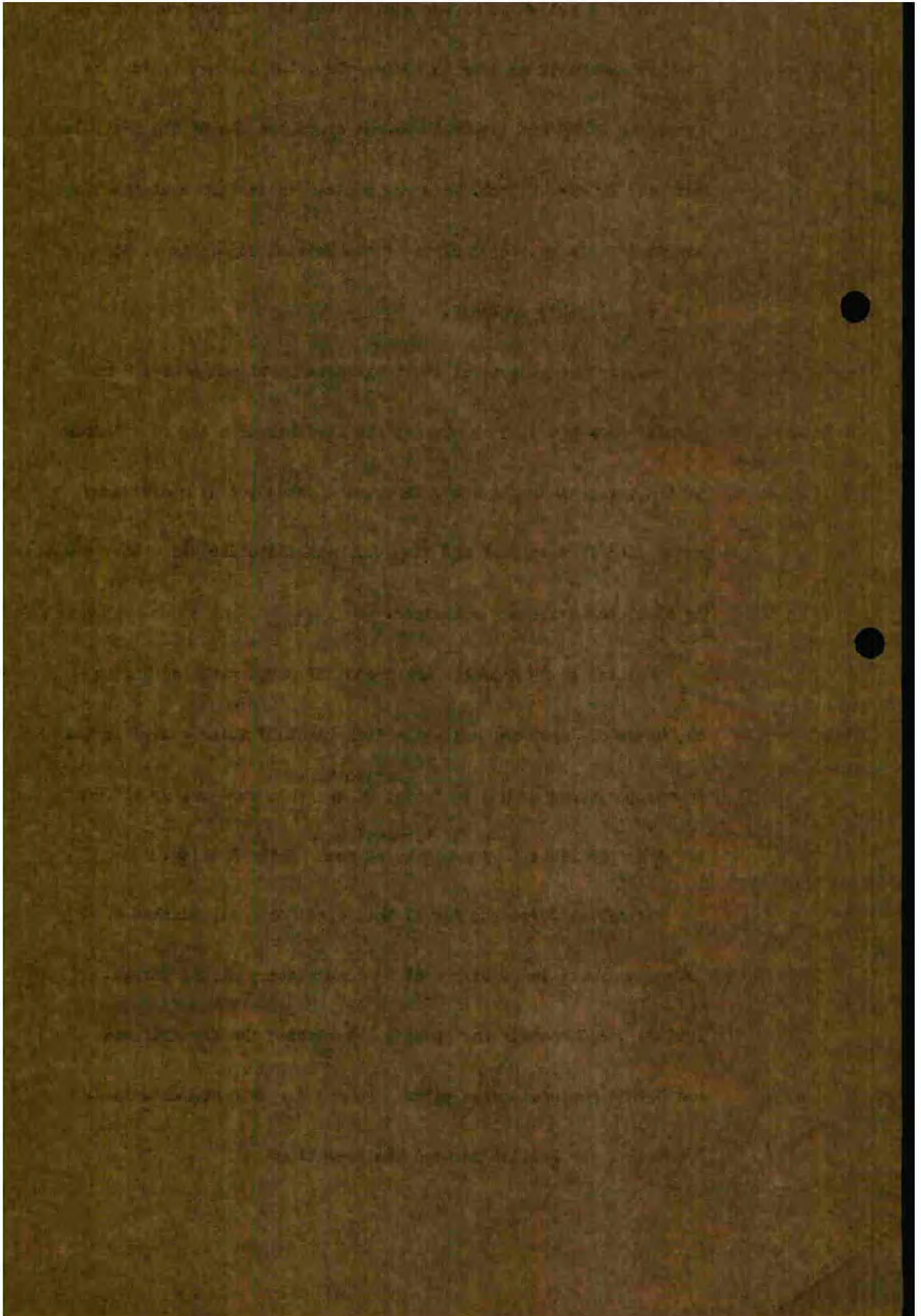
During the brief engagement the British 7th Armoured Division lost 35 additional tanks.

British prisoners of war stated that the brigade had received tank replacements as late as 29 December. But the new tanks were manned by ~~XXXXXX~~ two-to-three-man crews because of the heavy losses suffered by the British. This was a clear indication that the 7th Armoured Division, the nucleus of the British Eighth Army, had been considerably weakened.

Despite the successful counterattacks mentioned above, Rommel persisted in his plan to give up the Agadabia area and to withdraw to the Marag-el-Breghe zone. There, the exhausted Axis divisions would find firm support and time for rehabilitation since they would be close to their supply sources.

Starting on 25 December the X and XXI Corps withdrew during the hours of darkness, while the 90th Light Division stayed in its former positions around Agadabia. ^{Extensive} Mine fields were set up in front of these positions to ^{impending} impede the advance of the British.

The Africa Corps and the XX Motorized Corps established a defensive frontline facing east by constructing strong points. Artillery and antiaircraft pieces interdicted the forward area, and German reconnaissance patrols roamed far into no-man's land. Gradually, the British resumed their cautious



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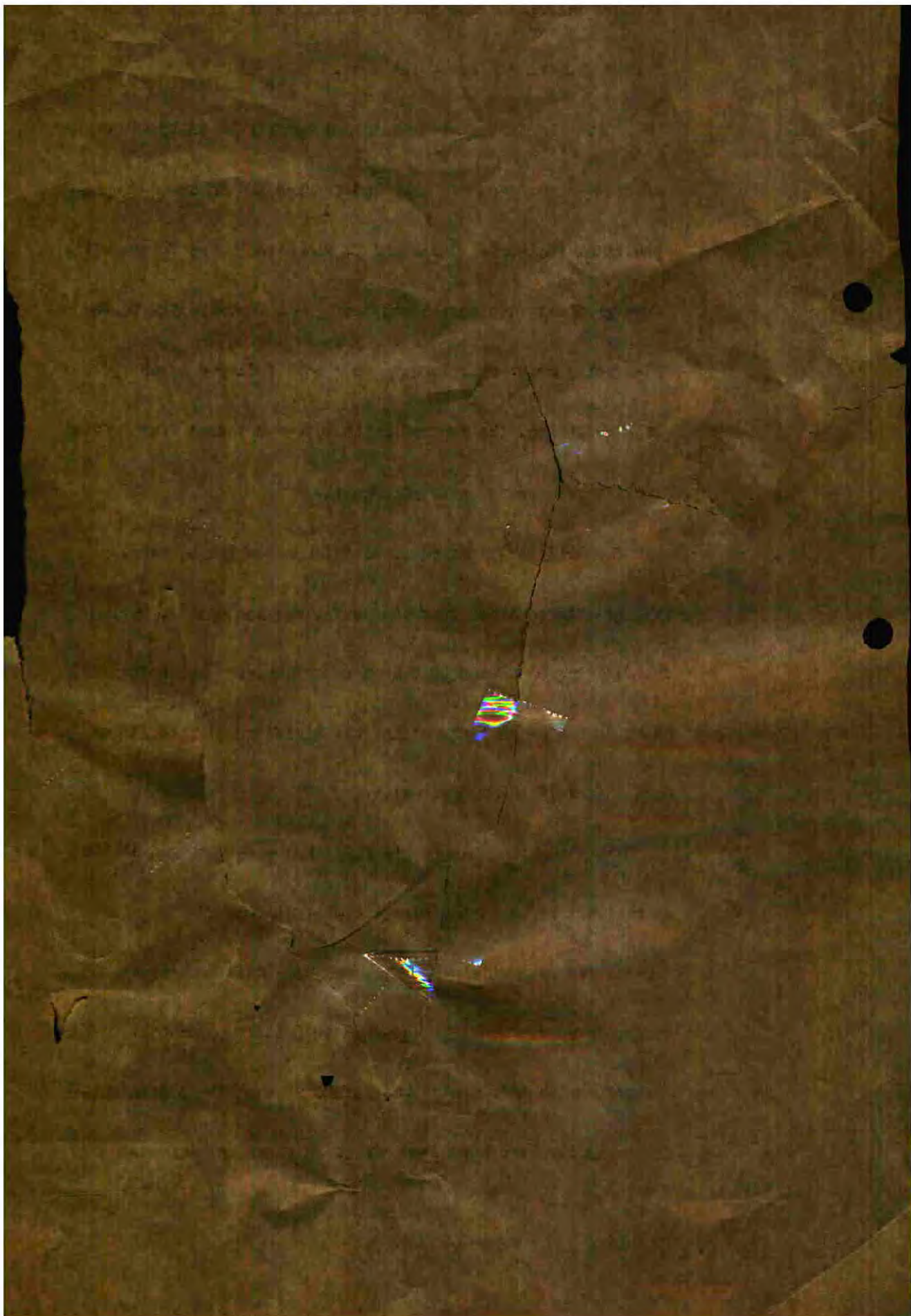
advance, but combat activities were restricted to artillery duels and frequent air attacks. At the same time, British armored reconnaissance patrols passing south of the Wadi El-Faregh penetrated far to the west.

Since the Axis forces would not be ~~INDETERMINED~~ in danger of being enveloped once they had reached the Marsa-el-Bregha position, the Africa Corps and XX Motorized Corps forces withdrew gradually during the night of 5 - 6 January 1942 to the El-Aghella area. On 8 January they were followed by the 90th Light Division. The armored units suffered losses from British air attacks during their withdrawal.

had
The British 7th Armoured Division attempted to envelop the Agadabia position from the south, but had failed. During the fighting on 28 and 30 December the division had suffered heavy losses -- in tanks alone, the division had lost 110 or more than half its T/S strength.

Even though the German Air Force had been hampered in its operational capabilities during the withdrawal of the ground forces, its reconnaissance units had been able to keep the Panzer Group headquarters informed on British movements.

After the Axis ground forces had reached the coastal plain, the Royal Air Force had less effect on their operations.



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"For the first time since the beginning of the autumn campaign the division headquarters was visited by liaison detachments of the Air Brigade Commander Africa who discussed dive-bomber support for the ground forces attack." The dive-bomber groups adapted themselves skilfully to the mobile conduct of operations of the 15th Panzer Division. On the other hand, the 8th Panzer Regiment made most effective use of the dive-bomber assaults.

"While the last bombs were still dropping on their targets, the 8th Panzer Regiment drove right through the Wadi El-Faregh and broke the enemy resistance along its eastern edge."¹⁴⁴

The air supply of the German forces isolated along the Sollum line presented difficult problems. Because of the British counter-measures the Germans suffered heavy losses without being able to improve the situation of the encircled garrisons.

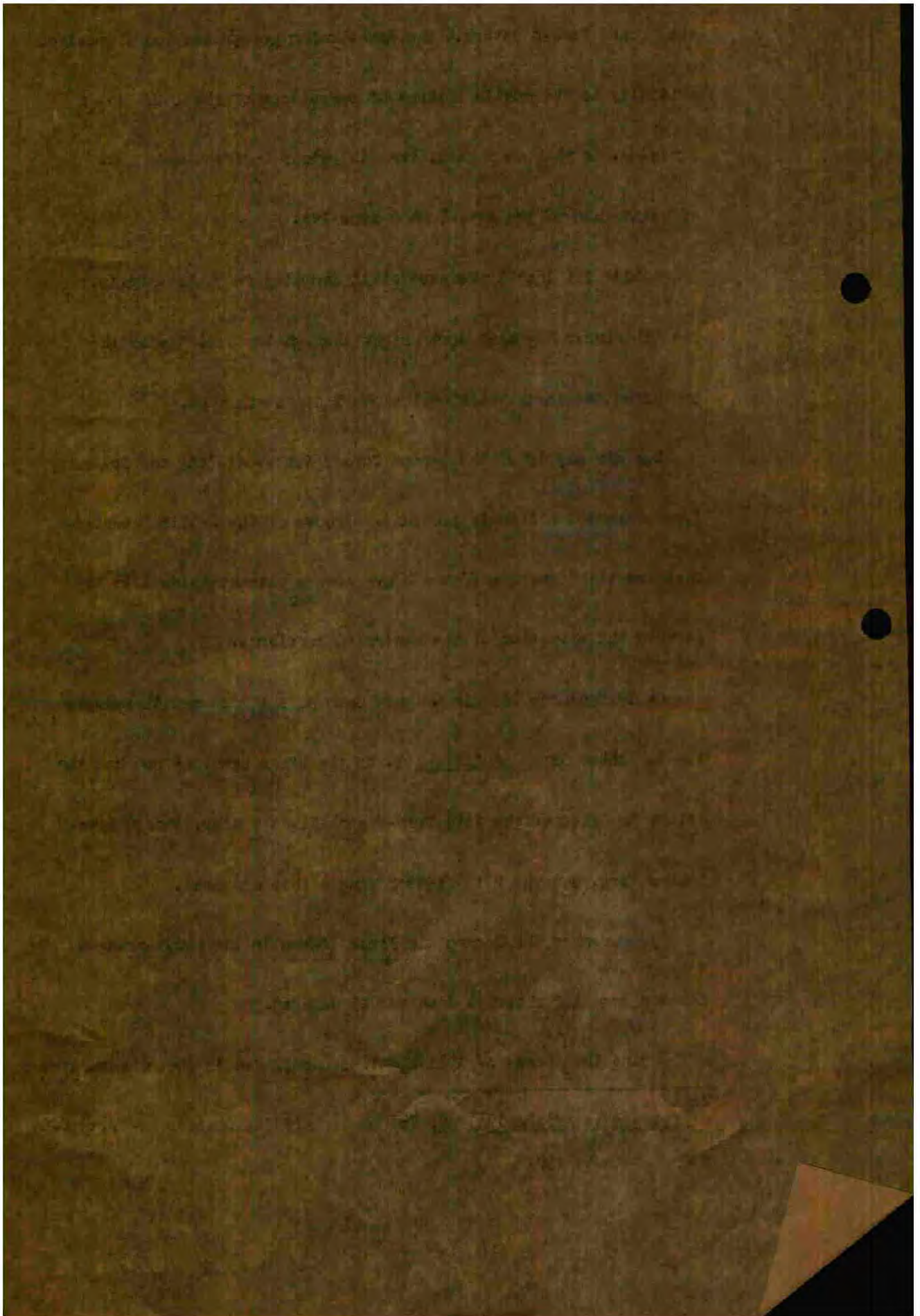
On 19 December the Air Brigade Commander Africa had to release the 3d Bomber Group of Luftgau 1. On the other hand, he now had the entire 3d Group of the 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing, the 3d Dive-Bomber Wing, and the 27th Fighter Wing at his disposal.*

In December the German Air Force losses in the Mediterranean theater were 182 aircraft lost and 29 damaged.

During the course of 1941 the losses suffered in the same theater

¹⁴⁴
Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 6, pp. 338-9.

* See Footnote 139.



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amounted to 547 planes lost and 141 damaged. Of the aircraft lost 144 were bombers, 112 fighter-bombers, and 85 day or night fighters.*

No exact details concerning the activities of the German Air Force during the withdrawal or information about the commitments of its units during that period are available at this time.

British sources did not provide any loss figures.

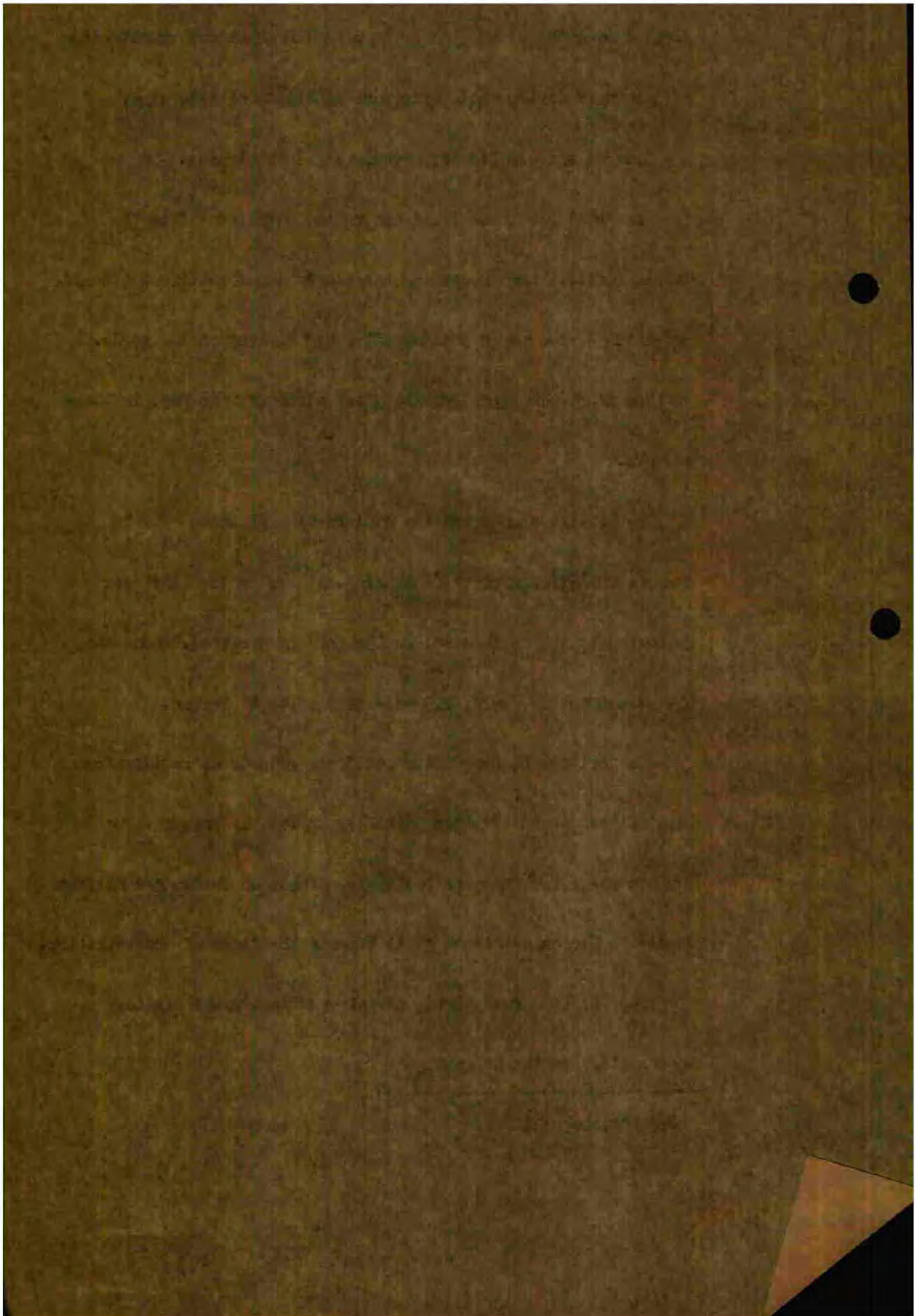
The Royal Air Force found during the withdrawal from the Gazala position more rewarding targets in the mountainous terrain, where the German march columns often had to stay on the roads. For the first time American Kittyhawk aircraft took part in these attacks.

The British airmen had the satisfaction of being able to examine the effects of their bombing attacks on the airfields abandoned by the Germans and on the port of Benghazi. Among the 450 aircraft they found, 229 were alleged to be German.

The British bombing units could not advance as rapidly from base to base as the fighter units did during the pursuit. The bombers therefore concentrated their efforts on Bardia and Halfaya, where the German garrisons still blocked the lines of communication.

The British moved strong antiaircraft and night fighter forces close to the German

* See Footnote 126.



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soon made
strong points and thus ~~maximized~~ the German air supply attempts
ineffective.

After 400 sorties Bardia surrendered on 2 January 1942;
since mid-September the garrison had been under constant attack
by the 2d South African Division, strong army artillery units, and
XXXXXX armored elements.

The garrison of Halfaya, commanded by Major Bach, continued
to offer stubborn resistance. Even a falsified order from Rommel,
instructing the garrison to surrender, which had been dropped by
a Wellington aircraft, missed its purpose.

After 300 sorties the Halfaya garrison surrendered on 17 January
1942, its water supply having been completely exhausted.

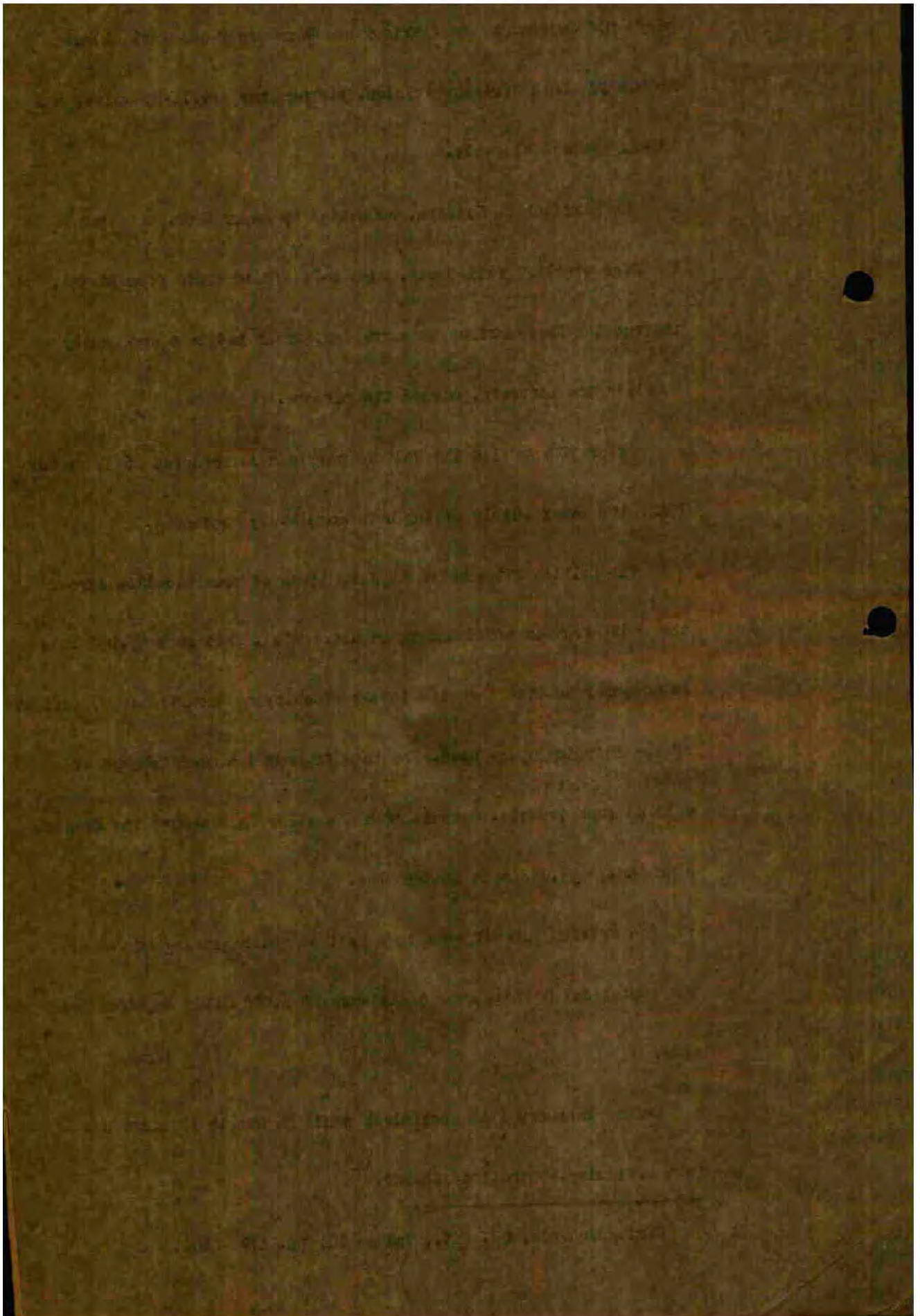
The British attacks on the Axis lines of communication across
the Mediterranean continued to be successful. They sank 39,000 tons
in November so that the Axis losses of shipping amounted to 77 percent
of the shipping space used. The loss figures included damaged as
well as sunk vessels. Because of bad weather, in December the British
sank "only" 35,000 tons in December.

The British pursuit came to a halt at the beginning of January.
The logistical buildup over a distance of 1,000 miles required some
time.

Before February 1942 Auchinleck would be unable to start his
next offensive, Operation ACROBAT.

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 179 - 181.



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Author's Note on the Availability of Source Material

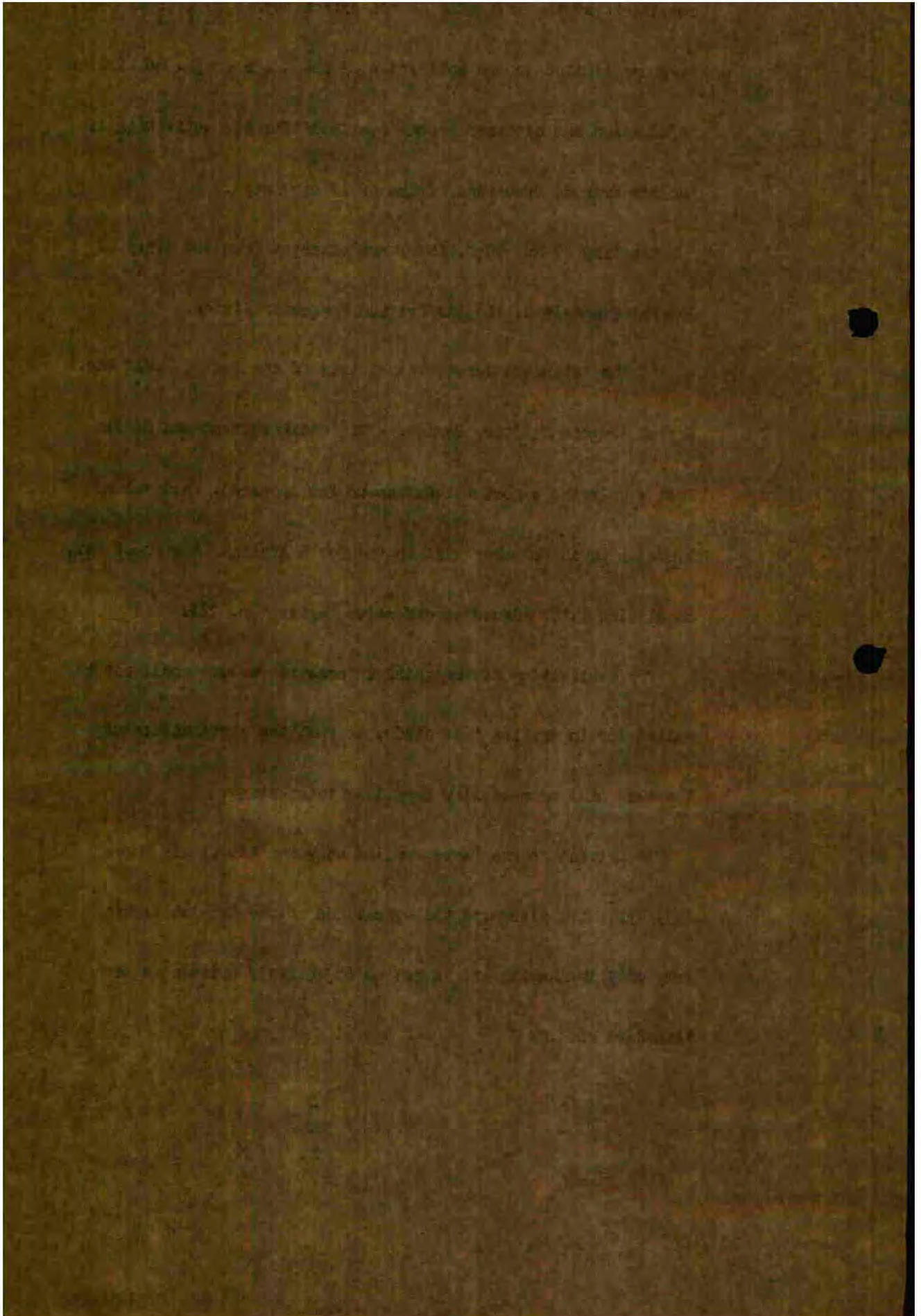
The German sources that provide detailed information on the commitment of the Luftwaffe do not extend beyond 27 October 1941. They are limited to the activities of the X Air Corps. No similar information has hitherto become available for the activities of the Air Brigade Commander Africa or II Air Corps.

Starting 27 May 1942, there are excerpts from the diary of General von Waldau, the Air Brigade Commander Africa.

Of the "standard work" "The History of the Second World War," United Kingdom Military Series, - The Mediterranean and Middle East - only the second volume has so far appeared. This volume leads up to 18 November 1941 in the North African Theater of War, concluding with: "Crusader offensive begins," p. 331.

The publication of the third informative volume could not be waited for in writing this study, so that the continuation of the text will of necessity seem less interesting.

As British source there remains only the "Royal Air Force 1939/45" which discusses the operations of the British Eighth Army only in passing and is not as objectively written as the "standard work."



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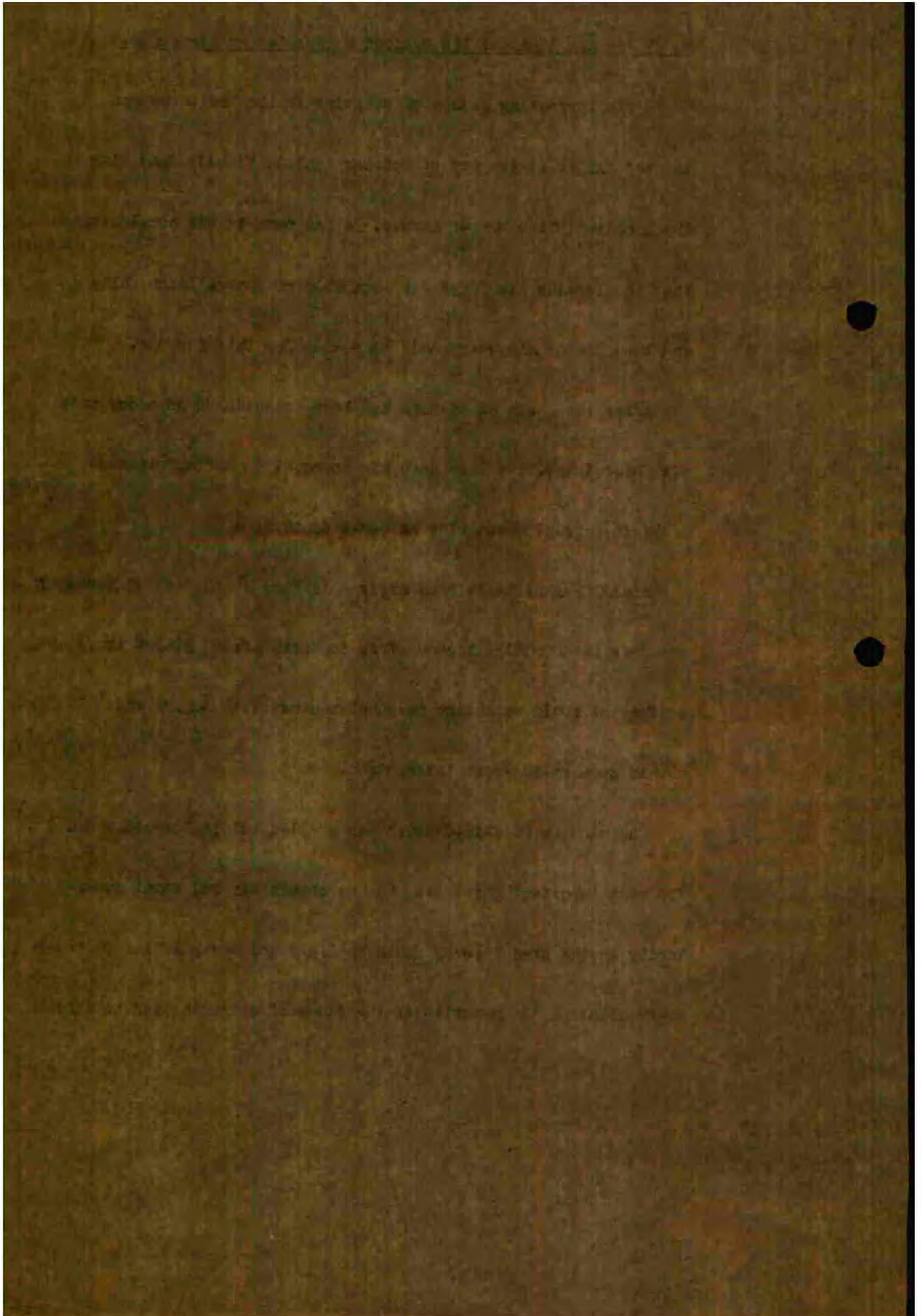
The Commander-in-Chief, South: The Arrival of Second Air Force
in December 1941. Its Organizational Structure of Flying and
Ground Units. Prospects for 1942. Rommel's Surprise Offensive
on 21 January 1942 and Its Support by the German Air Force.

The increasing losses of shipping in the Mediterranean induced Hitler at the end of October 1941 to finally deal with the problem in the proper manner. He had ~~come to~~ ^{arrived at} the conclusion that the Italian Air Force was incapable of neutralizing Malta and that German airpower would be needed for this purpose.

After the chain of command had been established in accordance with his wishes, the Duce gave his approval to the appointment of Field Marshal Kesselring as C-in-C South.

Field Marshal Kesselring arrived in Rome at the end of November and left for Rommel's headquarters in North Africa almost immediately so that he could establish personal contact with Rommel and obtain some on-the-spot information.

The mission of C-in-C South was spelled out in Directive No. 38. Its most important point was that he obtain air and naval superiority in the area between southern Italy and North Africa in order to reestablish the security of the lines of communication to Libya



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and Cyrenaica. The prerequisite for achieving this objective was the neutralization of Malta. Other missions mentioned in the directive were: To ~~cooperate with~~ cooperate with German and allied forces in North Africa, to stop enemy movements through the Mediterranean, and to cut off the resupply of Tobruk and Malta in close cooperation with the German and Italian naval forces available for these missions.

To achieve these objectives, the II Air Corps was transferred from the Russian theater and the C-in-C South was given direct command of I Air Corps, the Air Brigade Commander Africa, and the Air Commander, Italy.

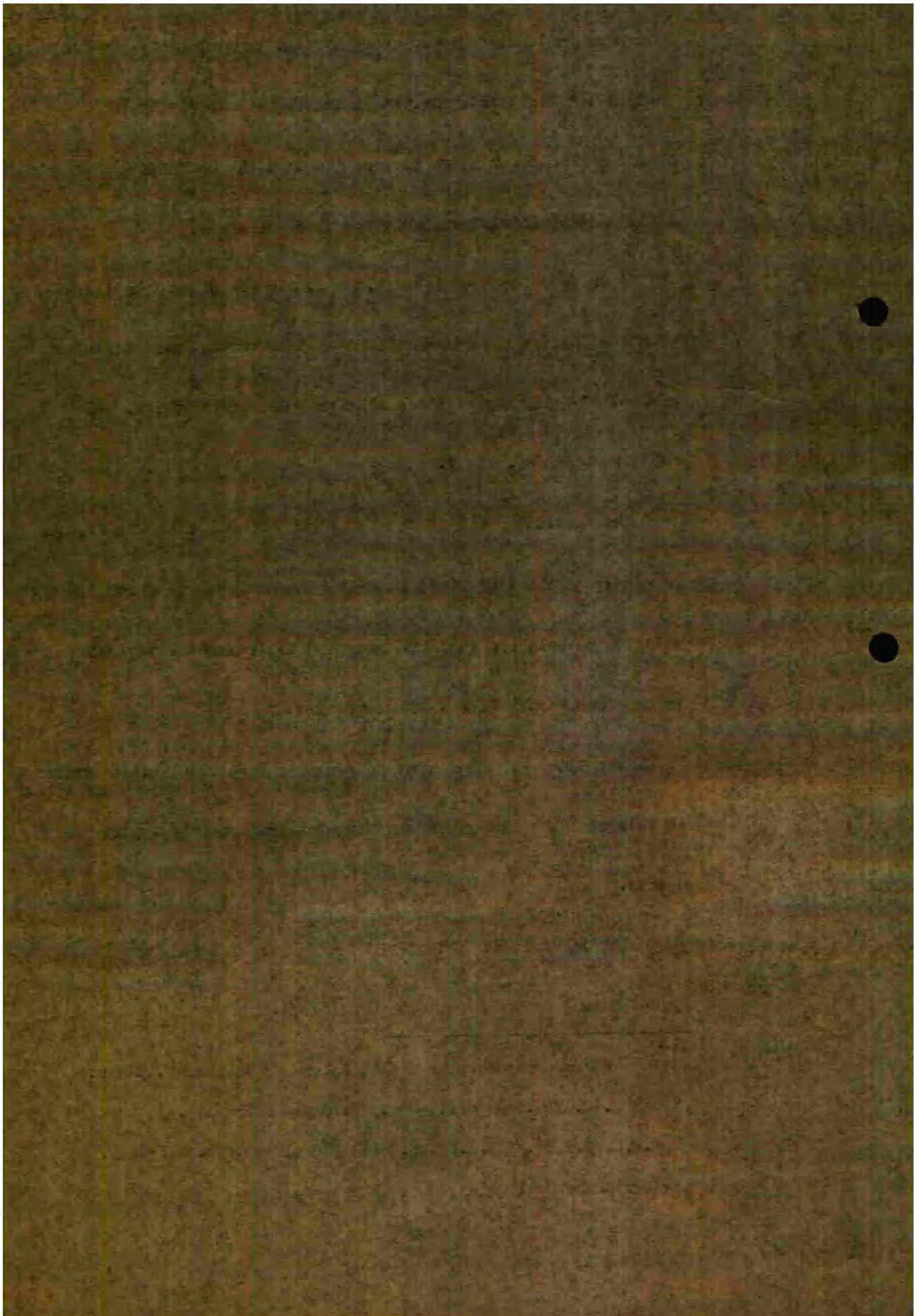
The critical point of the battle of Tobruk, which was reached precisely at the time Field Marshal Kesselring was in North Africa, illustrated only too well the paramount importance of logistics in the ~~HEER~~ North African theater of war.

Ever since the first days of December he devoted his attention to this decisive problem of reviving the transoceanic supply system.

Little could be achieved by taking purely defensive measures as they had been taken heretofore.

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Der Fuehrer und Oberster Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht. Wl. Qu.
den 2.12.1941. (Directive No. 38, dated 2 Dec 41).
O.K.W./W.F.St./Abt.L.(I.op.) 441 980/41 geh.Kdo.Chefsache.
(Karlsruhe Collection).



- 210 -

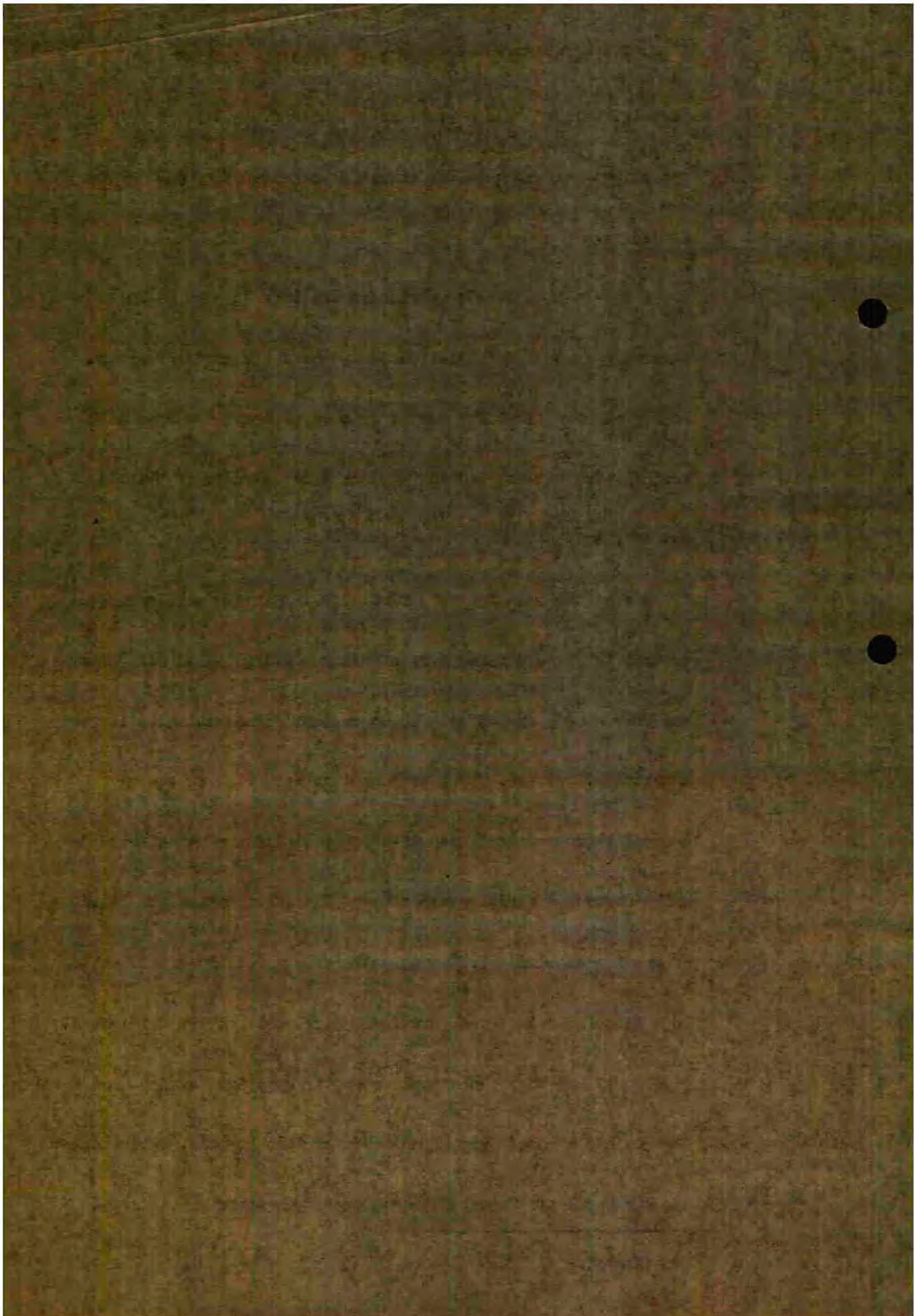
Only by conducting offensive operations against Malta could the situation be improved. Oberst (Colonel) Roth was appointed the Air Commander Sicily; he was a very experienced commander of a fighter-bomber wing that had been effective against naval targets. Until II Air Corps assumed command, he conducted his operations according to the orders he received from the Second Air Force.

The C-in-C South also persuaded the Duce to employ the carefully preserved Italian battle fleet for securing convoys. On 17 December the first convoy in several months reached the North African coast, and the vessels were unloaded in Tripoli and Benghazi.

During the mean time the airfields in Sicilyⁿ were enlarged so that they would be capable of accommodating the II Air Corps, and they were equipped with the necessary signal installations, ammunition, and fuel. These preparations were time consuming because there were only single-track rail lines south of Naples and because the carrying capacity of the ferry across the Straits of Messina was limited. German anti-aircraft batteries were moved to Naples to protect the port from which most convoys originated.

On 22 December the attacks on Malta were intensified, and from then on 200 aircraft were committed for this purpose. Their target was the Royal Air Force. Repeated bombing attacks were carried

* See sketch.



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out against the fighter airfields at Hal Par and Takali,^o the bomber airfield at Luga, and the naval aircraft station at Kalafrana.

During the first days of January 1942 the Germans flew some 500 sorties. At the same time heavy rain storms transformed the partly damaged airfields into swampy terrain. All squadrons had to be concentrated at the Luga airfield that was also damaged but had a better drainage system.¹⁴⁷

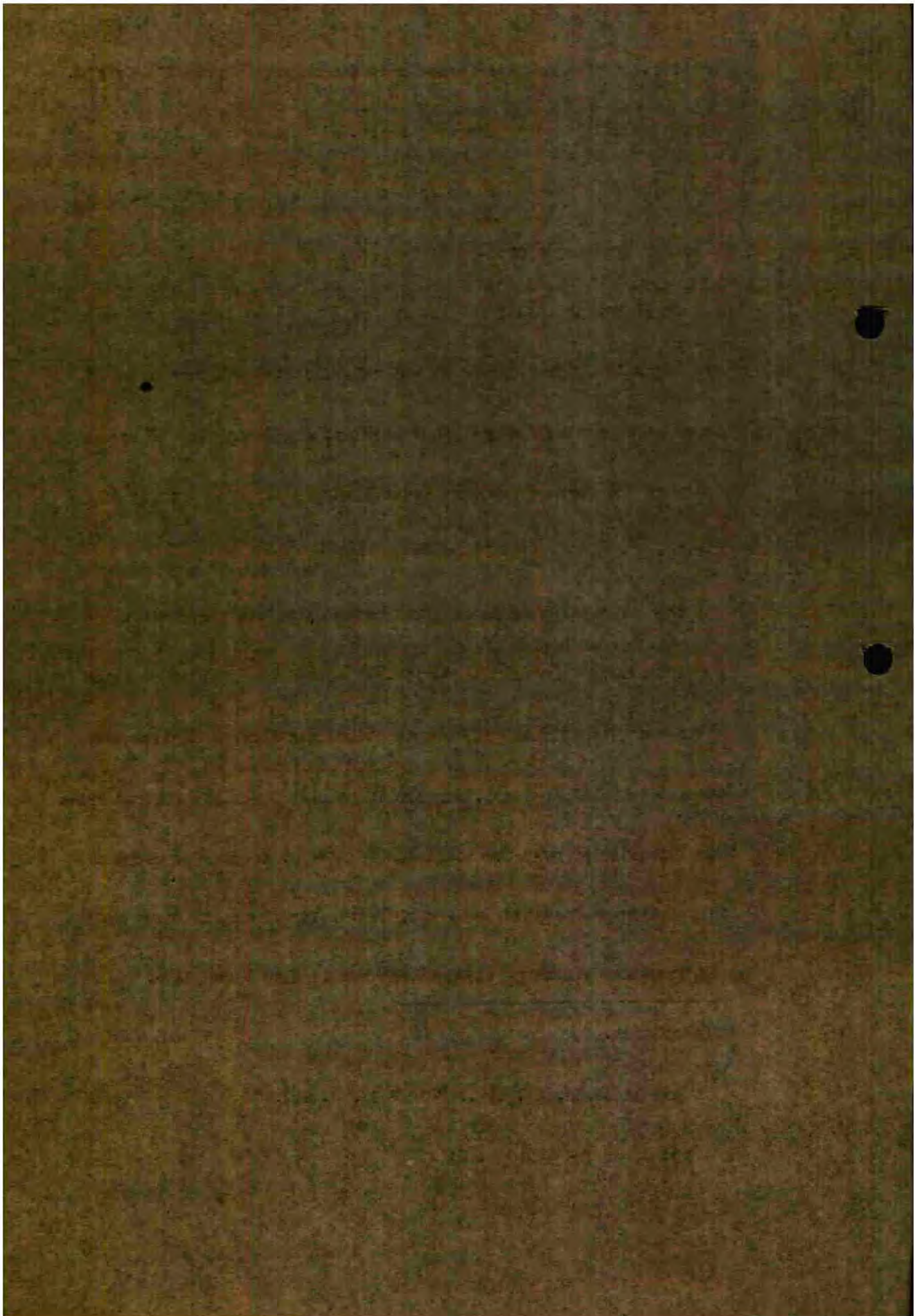
On 21 November 1941 the II Air Corps had been transferred to air bases in Germany, where it was rehabilitated and reequipped. Corps headquarters was set up at Dresden, and during the course of December the corps units were transferred by air from Germany to Sicily.

The information regarding the order of battle and chain of command during December 1941 varies. It cannot be established which units were directly subordinate to Second Air Force and which were commanded by II Air Corps, nor can it be stated how the various units were distributed over the airfields in Sicily. To give as complete information as possible, orders of battle for the I Air Corps and Air Commander Africa as of 20 December 1941 have been added.^{**}

* See sketch.

¹⁴⁷ Denis Richards, op. cit., Volume II, p. 152.

** Appendices I - IV to p. 211.



Appendix I to p. 311Units Directly Subordinate to Second Air Force during thePeriod I - 20 December 1941Reconnaissance Units:

As of 20 December 1st Squadron of 122d Group

Bombing Units:

606th Bomber Group

as of 20 December Headquarters, 26th Bomber Wing

as of 20 December 806th Bomber Group

as of 20 December 1 Group (Cannot be identified because of bad print) Perhaps 2d Group of 77th Bomber Wing ?

Five Bomber Units:

None

Night Fighter Units:

1st Group of the 2d Night Fighter Wing

4th Squadron of the 2d Night Fighter Wing

Fighter Units:

Headquarters, 53d Fighter Wing

3d Group, 53d Fighter Wing

as of 10 December 1st Group, 53d Fighter Wing

as of 10 December 2d Group, 53d Fighter Wing

Units Taken out of Contact and Other Units:

Headquarters, 122d Reconnaissance Group and 2d Squadron,

122d Reconnaissance Group;

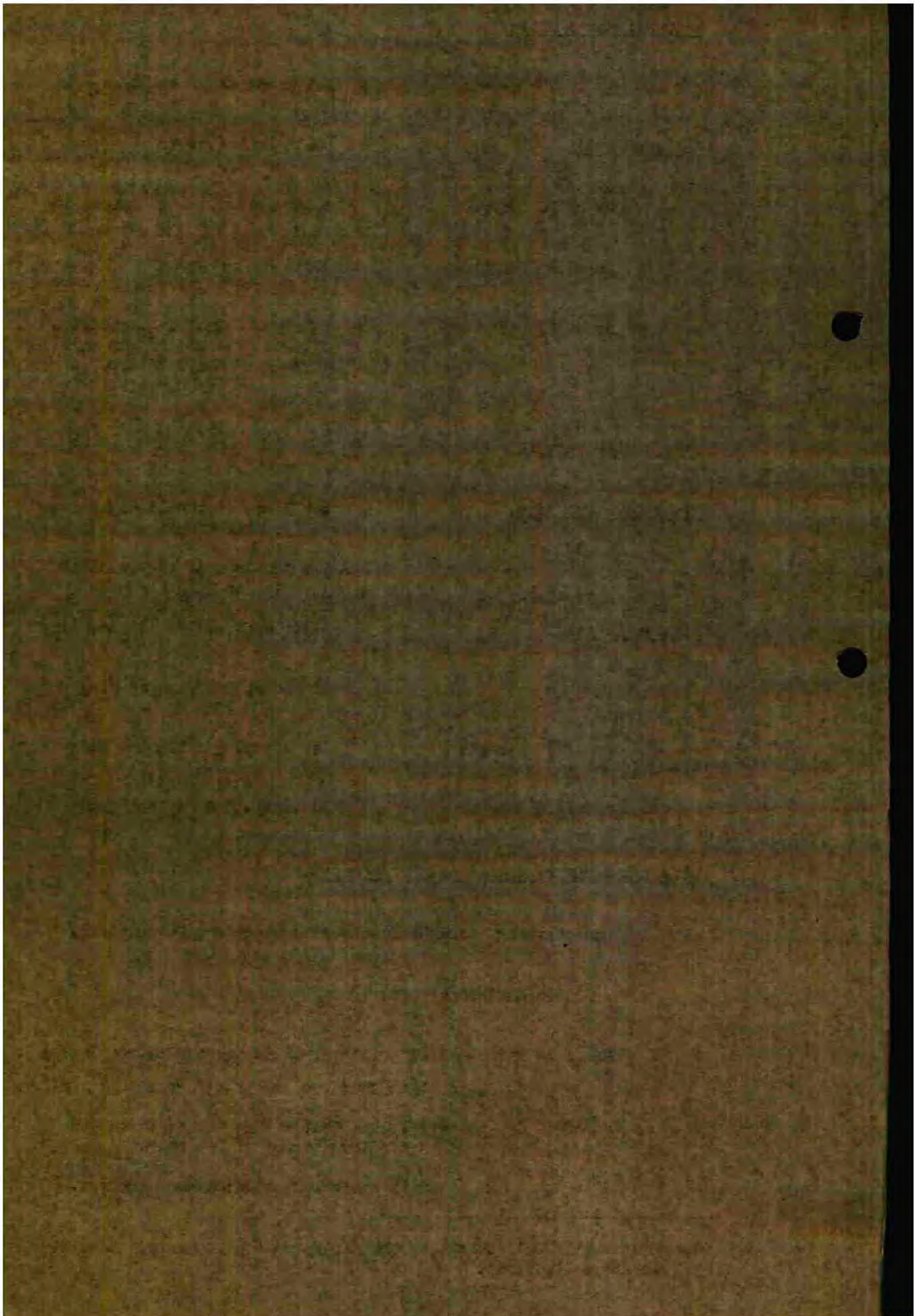
as of 10 December: 2d Squadron, 125th Reconnaissance Group;

as of 20 December: this squadron was transferred to X Air Corps.

as of 10 December: Hq, 26th Bomber Wing - transferred to X Air Corps as of 20 December.

26th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron.

Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command, Sheet 8. (Karlsruhe Collection).



Appendix II to p. 211Units Subordinate to II Air Corps during the Period 1 - 20 Dec 41*Reconnaissance Units: 1st Squadron, 122d Group until 19 Dec.Bomber Units: Headquarters, 54th Bomber Wing

1st and 2d Groups, 54th Bomber Wing

306th Bomber Group until 19 Dec.

Hq, 1st, 2d (Until 19 Dec.), and 3d Groups of 77th Bomber Wing

Dive-Bomber Units: Hq, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing and 9d Group, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing (Until 20 December only the personnel were available.)

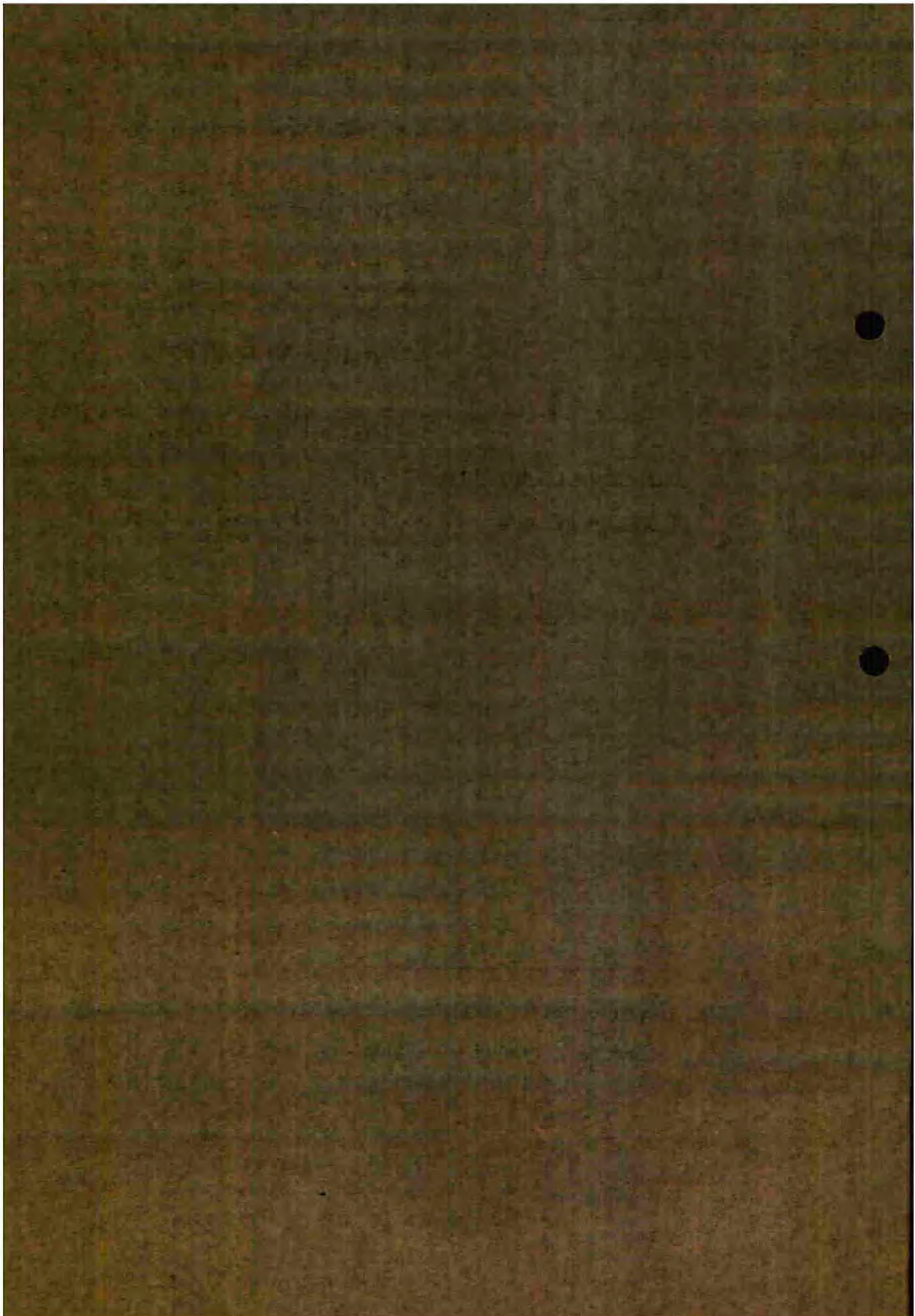
1st Group, 2d Dive-Bomber Wing

as of 20 December: 6th Squadron, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing (only the personnel were available.)

Twin-Engine Fighter Units: None.Single-Engine Fighter Units: Hq, 1st (until 9 Dec.), 2d, and 3d Groups of the 3d Fighter Wing

 Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command.

Sheet 9. (Karlsruhe Collection).



Appendix III to p. 211

Units Subordinate to X Air Corps on 20 December 1941

Reconnaissance Units: 126th Reconnaissance Group
 1st Squadron, 121st Reconnaissance Group,
 less two aircraft.
 2d Squadron, 123d Reconnaissance Group.
 3d Squadron, 125th Reconnaissance Group.

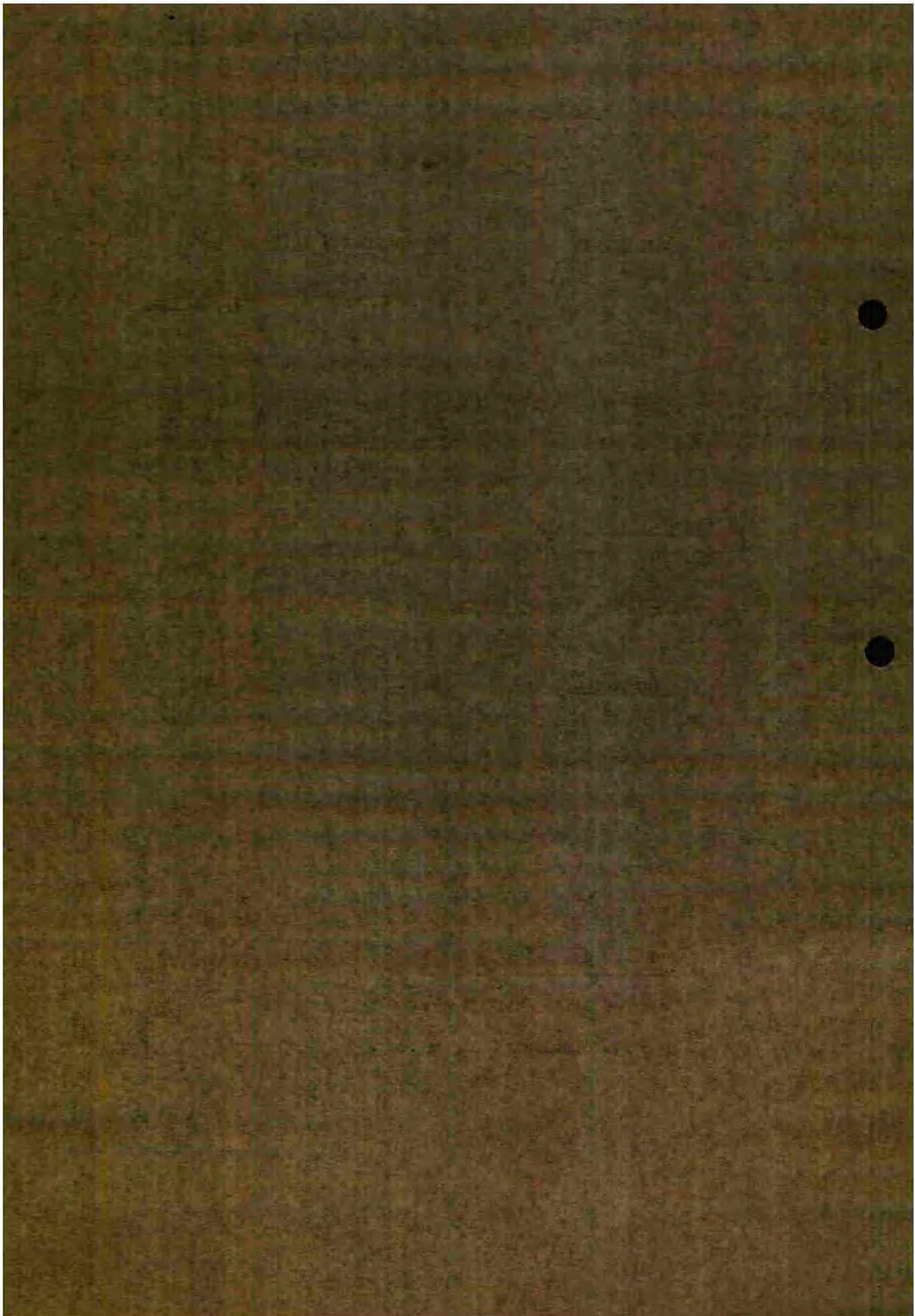
Bomber Units: Headquarters, Luftgau 1
 1st, 2d, and 3d Groups, Luftgau 1
 2d Group, 26th Bomber Wing
 1st Squadron, 28th Bomber Wing
 (After 10 December redesignated
 7th Squadron, 26th Bomber Wing)

Five-Bomber Units: None.

Twin-Engine Fighter Units: None.

Fighter Units: None.

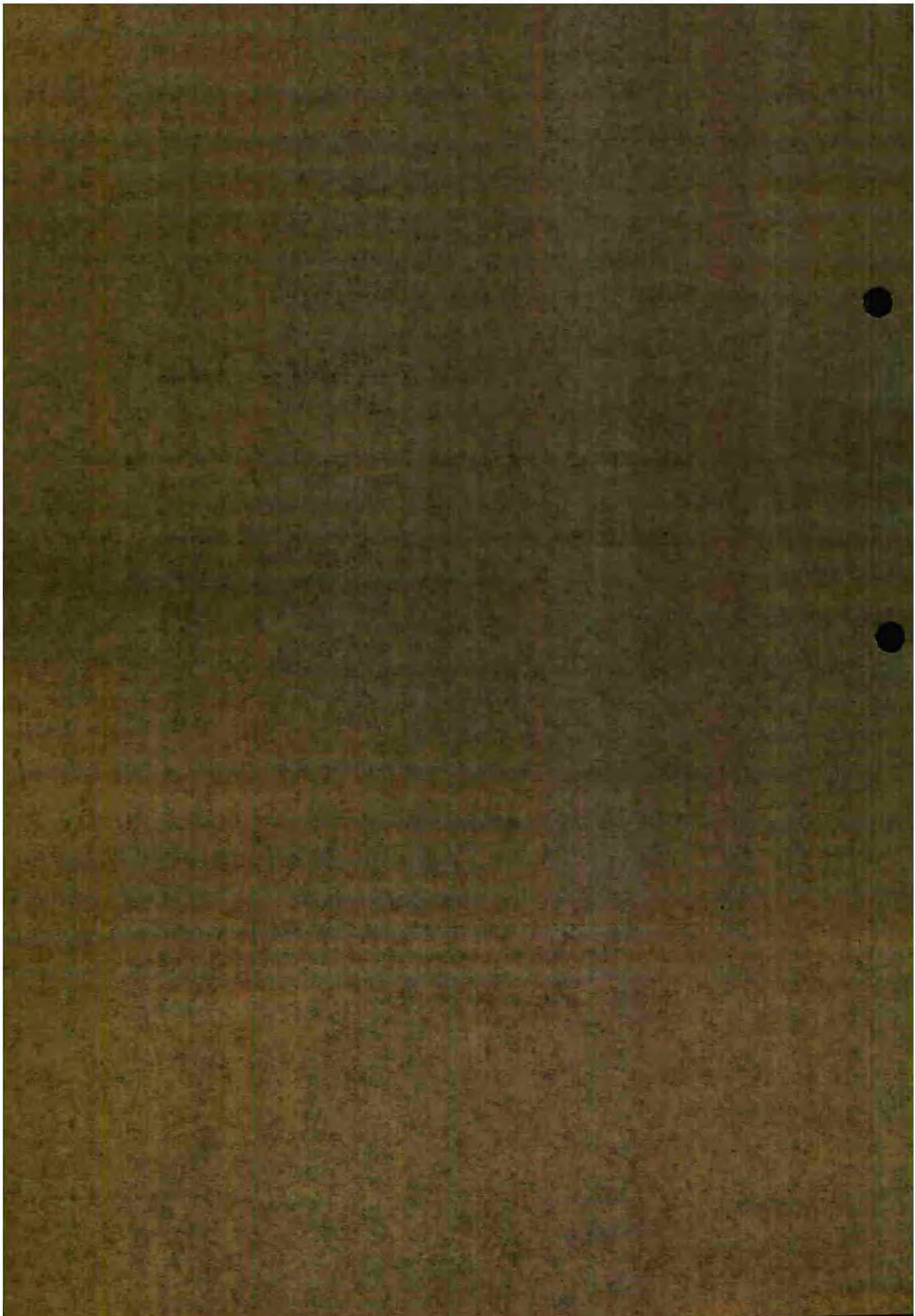
Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command,
 Sheet 7. (Karlsruhe Collection).



Appendix IV to O. 211Units Subordinate to Air Commander Africa on 20 December 1941:*

<u>Reconnaissance Units:</u>	Africa Flight of 1st Squadron, 121st Reconnaissance Group.
<u>Bomber Units:</u>	None.
<u>Dive-Bomber Units:</u>	Headquarters, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing; 1st Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing; 2d XXXXXXXXXX Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing (Formerly 1st Group, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing); 3d Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing (Formerly 2d Group, 2d Dive-Bomber Wing).
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter Units:</u>	3d Group, 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing.
<u>Fighter Units:</u>	Headquarters, 1st, 2d, and 3d Groups of the 27th Fighter Wing.

Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command,
Sheet 1 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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Only for the period after 10 January 1942 monthly "Tables of Flying Units in the Mediterranean and North African Theater" are available.

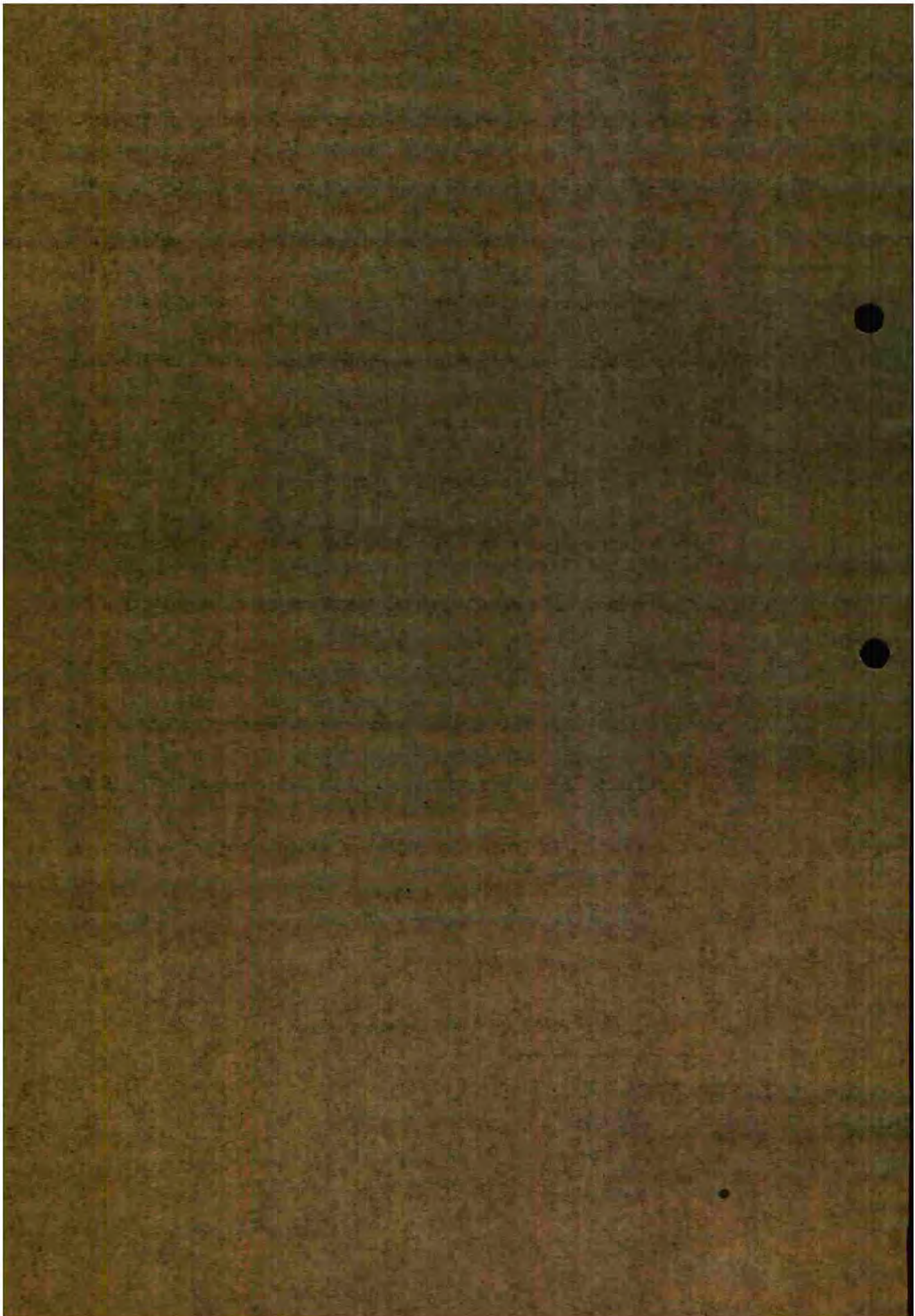
On 10 January 1942 the total number of aircraft available was 523, of which 297 were ready for action. These monthly statistics, however, do not indicate which units were subordinate to the II and I Air Corps as well as to the Air Commander Africa, respectively.

The prospects for 1942 were favorable for the Luftwaffe. The assault on Malta had gained in power and volume so that another major Axis convoy reached Tripoli on 5 January 1942.

Moreover, since the autumn of 1941 German submarines had resumed their attacks on the British Navy in the Mediterranean. On 13 February the aircraft carrier *ROYAL Ark Royal* was hit by a torpedo from U. 18 (Submarine No. 18) east of Gibraltar; the damage was so serious that the aircraft carrier sank soon after being hit. The battleship *Barham* was sunk by U. 335 (Submarine No. 335) off the Lebanese coast. In front of the port of Tripoli the British cruiser *Neptune* struck a mine, while the cruiser *Galathea* was hit by a submarine torpedo on 14 December.

During the night of 18-19 December three Italian

Appendix V to p. 212.



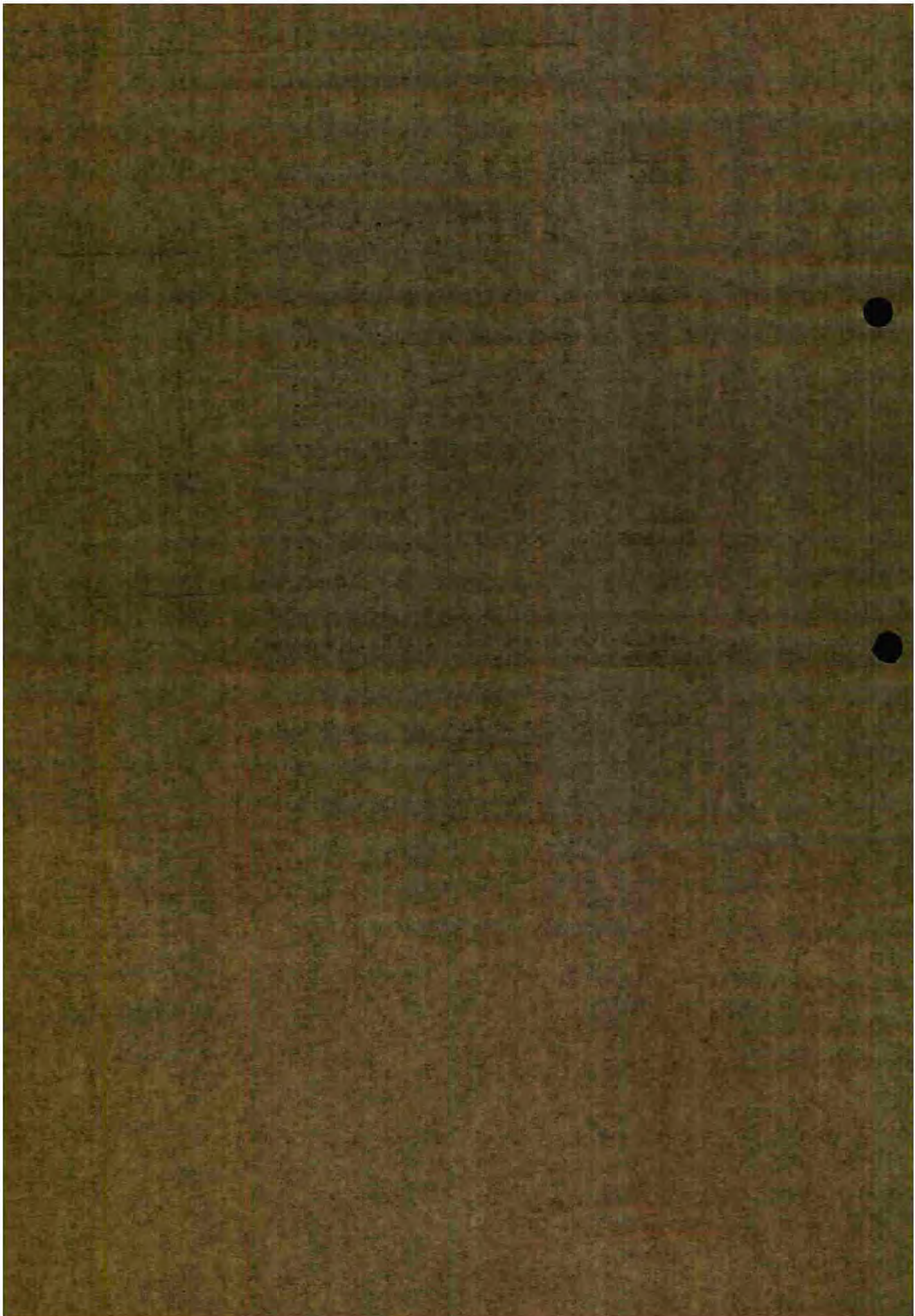
Appendix Y to p. 212

Sheet 1

List of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and in
North Africa.

Status of 10 January 1942*

Unit	Type of Aircraft	Number Avail.	Ready for Action
<u>Close-in Recon.</u> (2d Sq./Radio Intercept) (14th Ps (P))	(Messerschmitt) (110 and Heinkel 126)	16	4
<u>Long-range Recon.</u> (2d Recon. Gp, Air Force) (High Command)	(Junkers 88) (and Dornier) (215)	13	11
1st Sq/121st L.R. Rec. Gp)	(Junkers 88)	4	3
1st Sq/122d L.R. Rec. Gp)	(Junkers 88)	10	8
		<hr/> 27	<hr/> 22
<u>Fighter</u> Hq. 27th Fighter Wing (Messerschmitt) (109)		3	2
1st Gp./27th Fight. W.	id.	22	7
2d Gp./ id.	id.	25	7
3d Gp./ id.	id.	17	10
1st Gp./Pleusia Sq.	id.	10	4
Hq./29d Fighter Wing	id.	6	6
1st Gp./53d Fight. Wing	id.	36	19
2d Gp./53d Fight. wing	id.	37	31
		<hr/> 156	<hr/> 86
<u>Night Fighters</u> Hq. 2d Night Fighter W. Junkers 88		3	3
1st Gp./ 2d Night F. Wing	id.	16	9
2d Gp./ id.	(id. & Messersch. 110)	31	16
		<hr/> 50	<hr/> 28
<u>Twin-Eng. Fighters</u> (3d Gp./26th T.-S. Fight.) (wing) (Messersch.) (110)		18	6
<u>Bombers</u> 1st Gp./Luftw. 1	Junkers 88	29	15
2d Gp./Luftw. 1	id.	29	14
3d Gp./ id.	id.	9	4
606th Bomber Gp.	id.	19	11
2d Gp./26th Bomber wing	Heinkel 111	26	9
7th Sq./ id.	id.	6	2
Hq./54th Bomber wing	Junkers 88	1	1
1st Gp/ 54th Bomber wing	id.	16	11
606th Bomber Gp.	id.	11	2
		<hr/> 146	<hr/> 69
		<hr/> 413	<hr/> 215



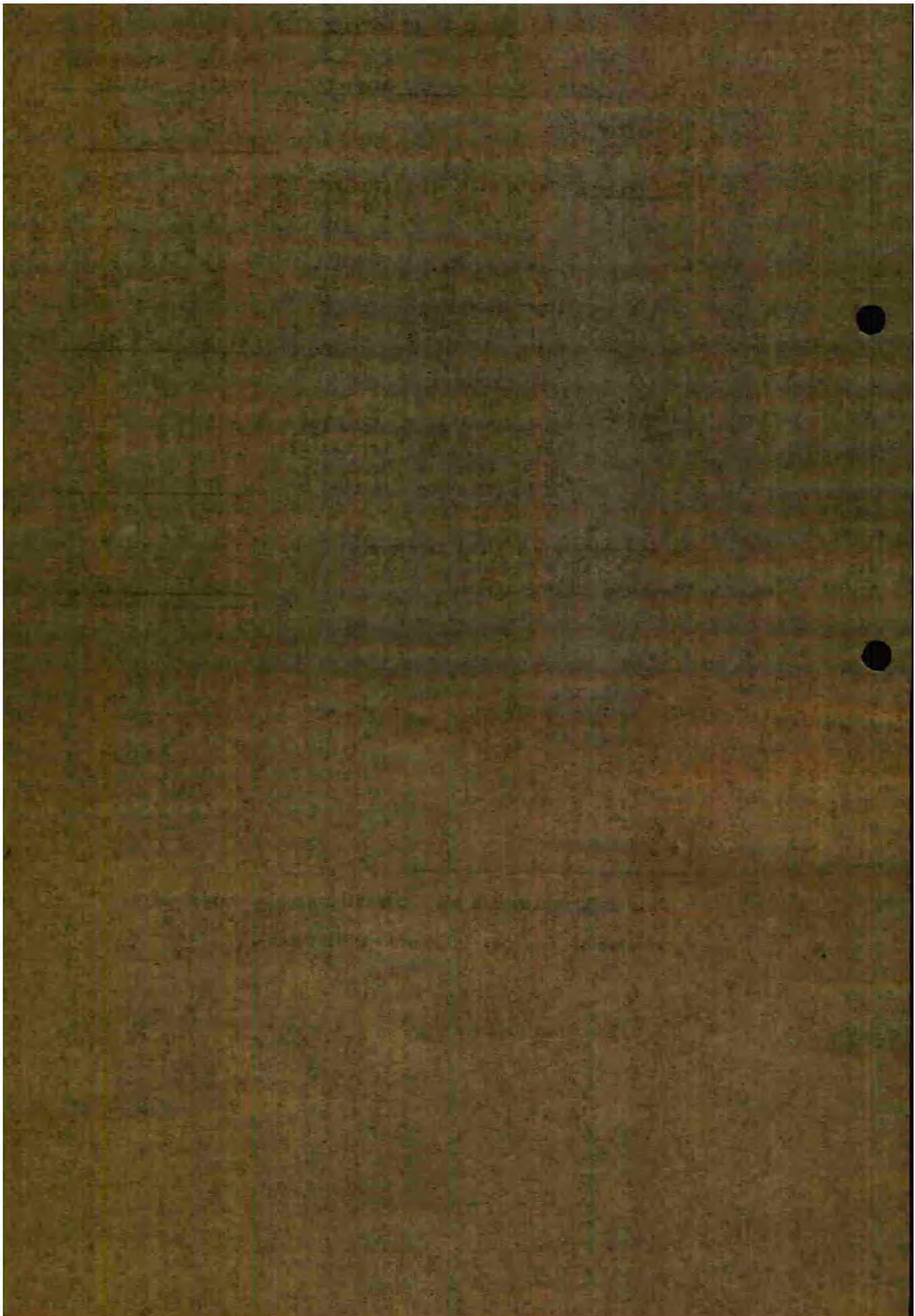
Appendix V to p. 212

Sheet 2

List of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and inNorth Africa.Status of 10 January 1942*

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Type of Aircraft</u>	<u>Number Avail.</u>	<u>Ready for Action</u>
Totals from previous p.		413	215
<u>Dive Bombers</u> Hq/3d D.-B. Wing (Junkers 87) (Messerschm.) (110)		4	3
1st Gp/ id. id.	id.	25	23
2d Gp/ id. id.	id.	31	19
(Operational Sq) (Repl/1st D.-B.) (Wing)	id.	12	10
		72	55
<u>Naval Aircraft</u>)			
2d Sq/125th Gp	Arado 196	9	8
1st Sq/126th Gp	Heinkel 60	12	9
2d Sq/ 126th Gp	Arado 196	7	5
3d Sq/ 126th Gp	Heinkel 60	10	5
		38	27
Grand Totals for the Mediterranean) Theater and North Africa)		523	297

This information has been extracted from situation maps located in England. (Karlsruhe Collection).



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"Two-Men Torpedoes" entered the port of Alexandria, inflicted heavy damages on the battleships "Queen Elizabeth" and "Valiant", and sank a tanker.

These Axis successes destroyed the British naval superiority since "there was not a single battleship on the Mediterranean Sea."

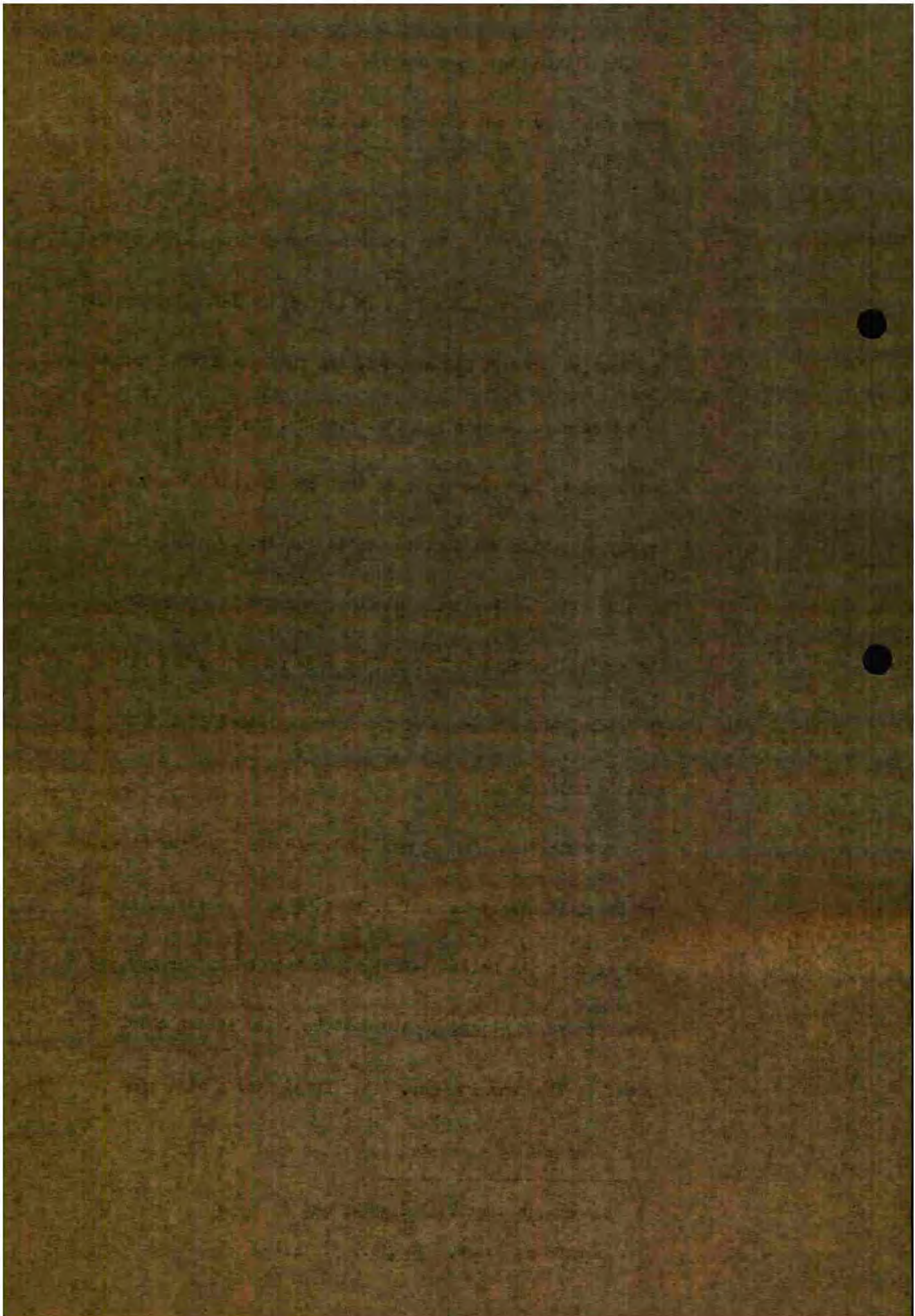
On 11 January 1942 the units of Panzer Group Africa were prepared to defend themselves in the Marsa-el-Bregha position. The British pursuit had stopped, and the Axis divisions had thus been able to gain respite. Finally, the supply system had begun to function again so that the ammunition and POL supply situation had improved considerably. By mid-January the logistical situation could be described as favorable. The arrival of equipment for four tank companies had raised the combat effectiveness of the German armored divisions quite considerably.

Nevertheless, Rommel was concerned over the numerical weakness of his combat units, when he made an inspection flight over the Marsa-el-Bregha position on 12 January, accompanied by Oberst (Col.) Westphal, the acting chief of staff of the Panzer Group. Distributed over a wide area and separated by extensive gaps that could hardly

 148

Asmann, op. cit., pp. 353-4 and

Raymond de Belot, op. cit., p. 141-2.



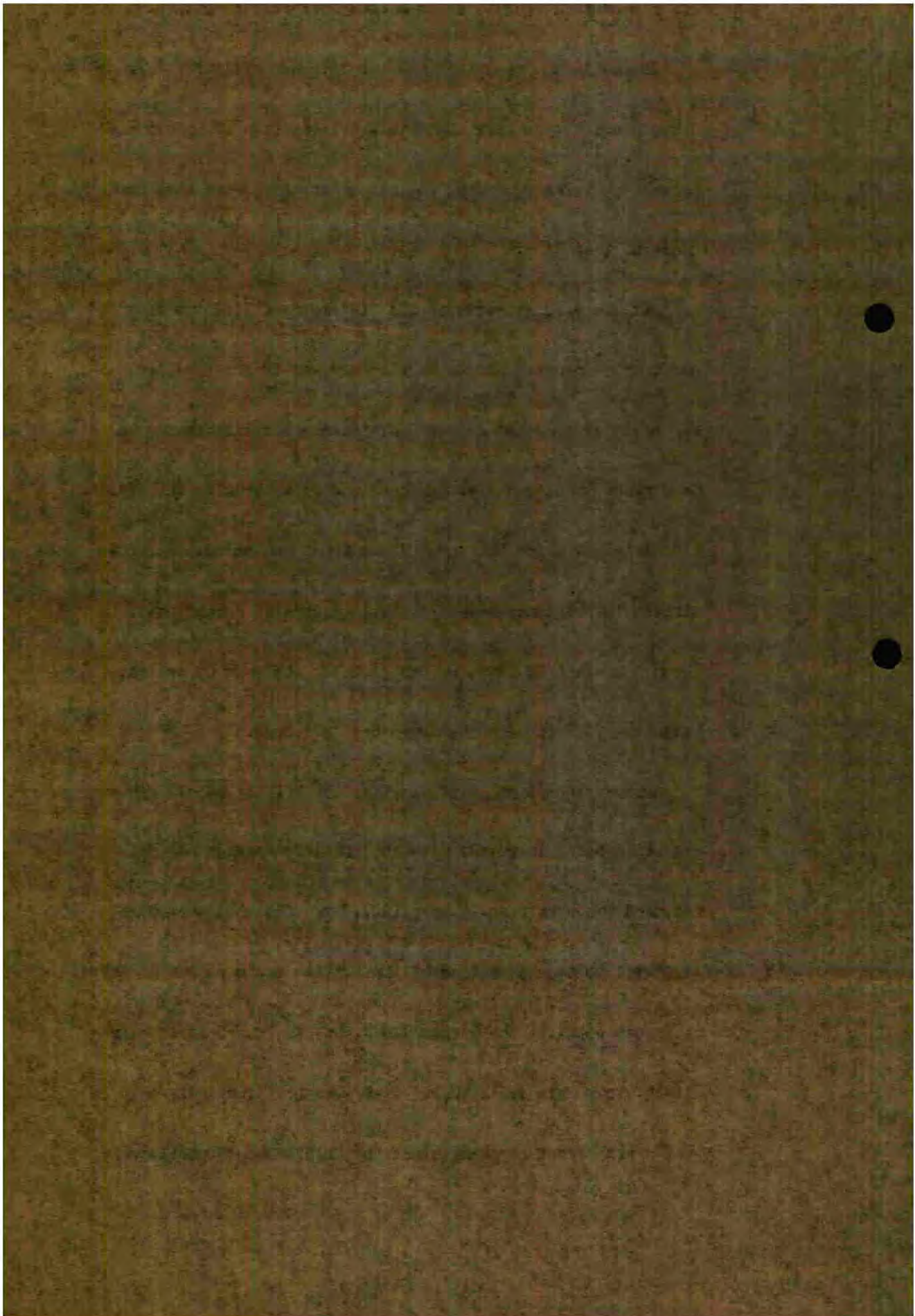
- 214 -

be kept under surveillance, the German divisions held a series of strong points. It seemed doubtful that they would be able to offer sustained resistance to a concerted British attack.

It was to the credit of the intelligence officer at Panzer Group Headquarters that the British disposition of forces was correctly evaluated during the situation conference that took place at that time.

Only forward elements of the 7th Armoured Division had cautiously advanced as far as the Marsa-el-Brega position; the newly arrived 1st Armoured Division was still assumed to be northeast of Agadabia. Benghazi was being held by the Indian 4th Division, which had moved its outpost southward. The South African 1st Division seemed to be concentrated around Msus, the New Zealand 2d Division was probably still in Cyrenaica, while the 70th Division had remained in Tobruk.

Another important point was that the British supply system was still being improved, with the port of Benghazi not yet restored to operations. Oberst (Col.) von Westphal therefore suggested to take advantage of the British weakness and dispersal of forces opposite the German lines, and to launch an immediate attack. To remain in the Marsa-el-Brega position would only weaken the German chances, since the British would probably be

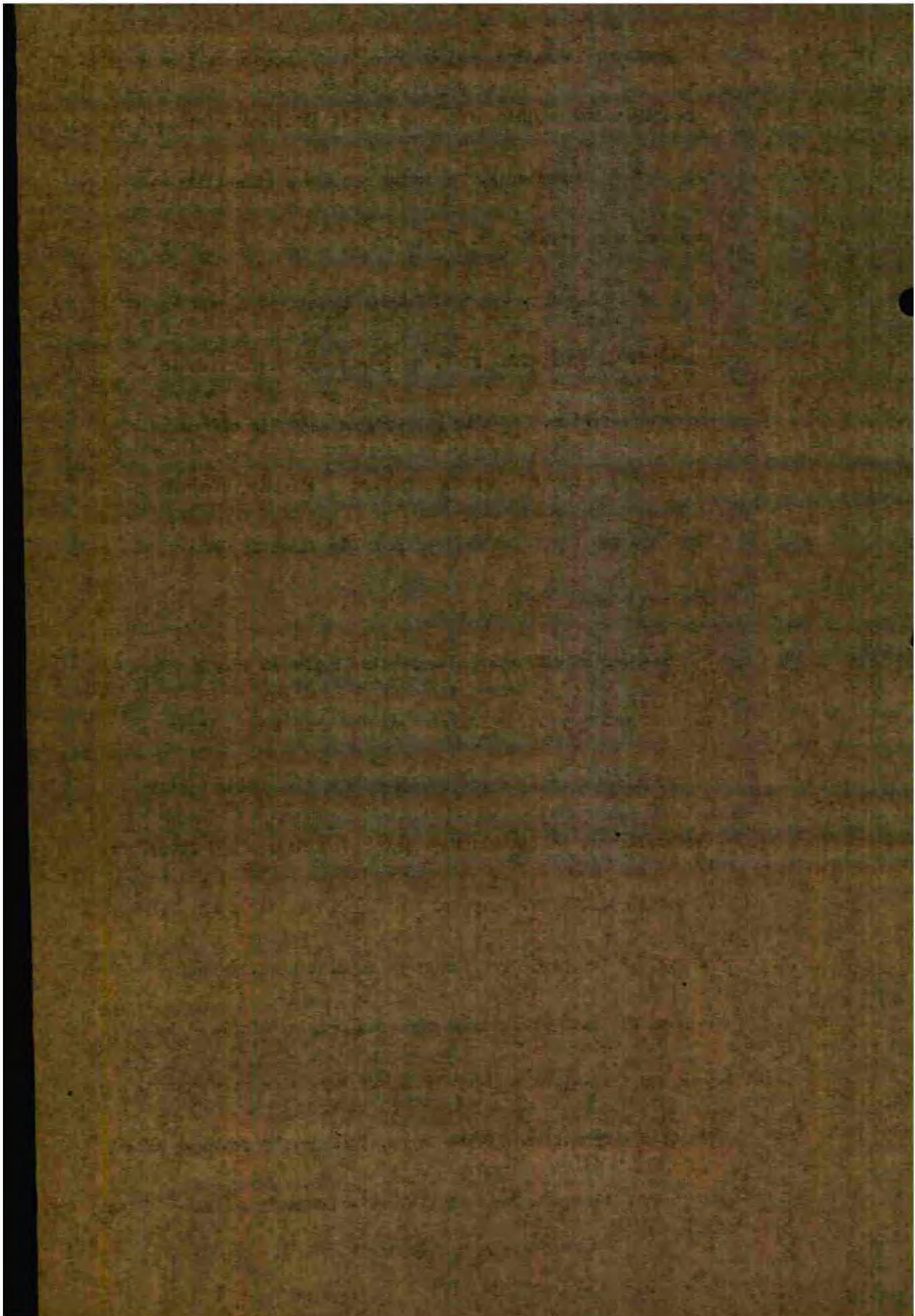


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ready to attack by the beginning of February. At that time a German attack against superior British forces would be far more difficult. Rommel was at first quite concerned about this suggestion; he raised serious objections because of the unsatisfactory motor vehicle situation of all divisions, but particularly ^{status} ~~HE~~ of the armored ones. The motor vehicle availability had reached a desperate low.

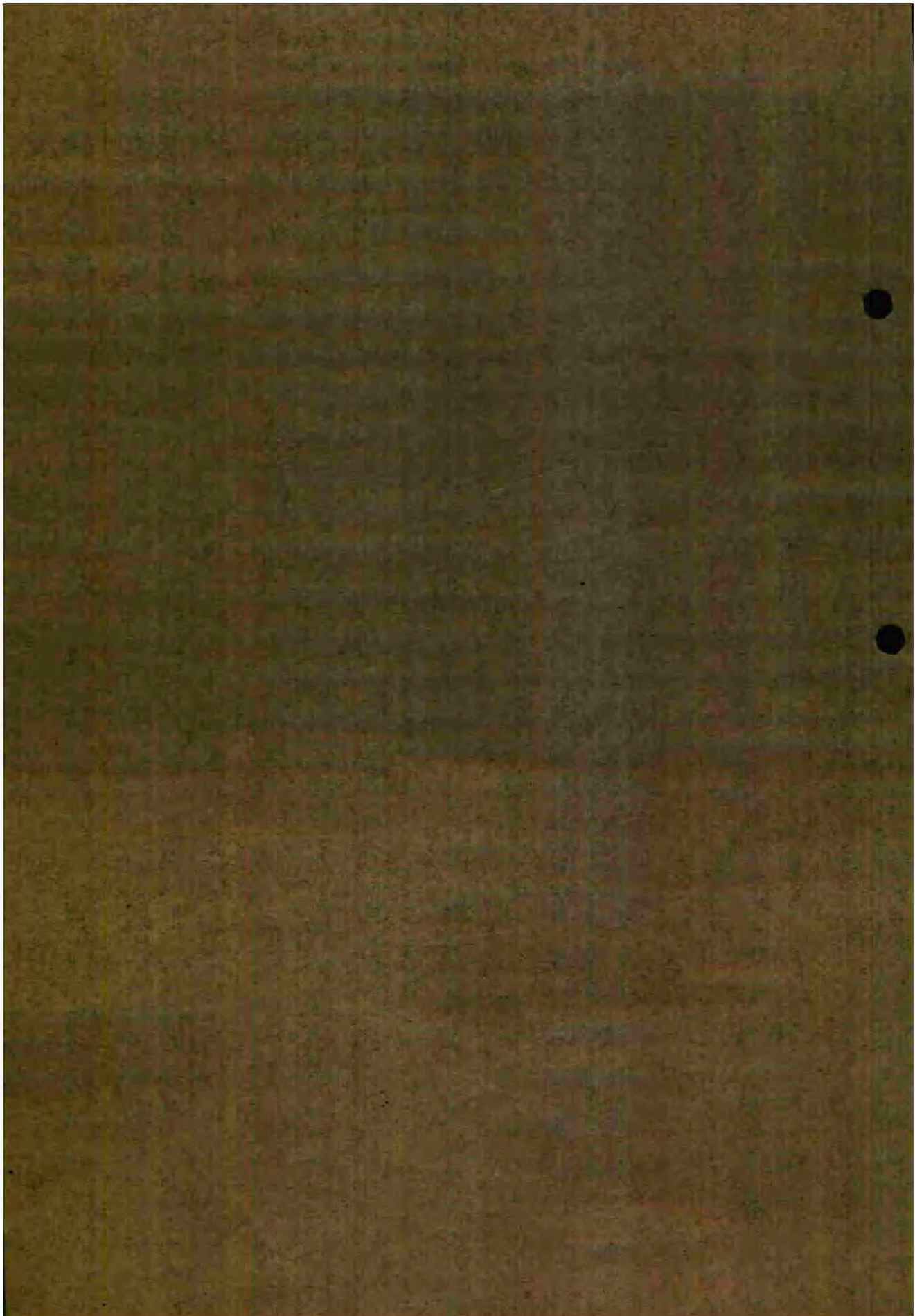
By 13 January, however, Rommel had accepted Westphal's concept. As an initial step, he took every precaution to achieve surprise. For this purpose, he kept his offensive intentions secret, by withholding any pertinent information from his own troops as well as from his superior German and Italian headquarters.

The German air reconnaissance had reported only a few hundred motor vehicles in front of the Axis lines, while reconnaissance patrols on the ground had met solely British reconnaissance ~~HE~~ battalions reinforced by tanks and artillery. It was in that area, however, that Rommel believed the bulk of the 7th Armoured Division to be concentrated. He wanted to encircle this division in the area west of Gfafia - Medi-^{it} ~~from the~~ ~~toward the~~ terranean coast or destroy ^{it} by launching a wide envelopment. For this purpose, the Africa Corps, forming the southern attack force, was to advance between the Wadi-el-Faregh and Bir-el-Ginn



- 215a -

toward the northeast, while Group Marx, forming the northern
the northern attack force, was to thrust along the Via Sabbia
also toward the northeast.



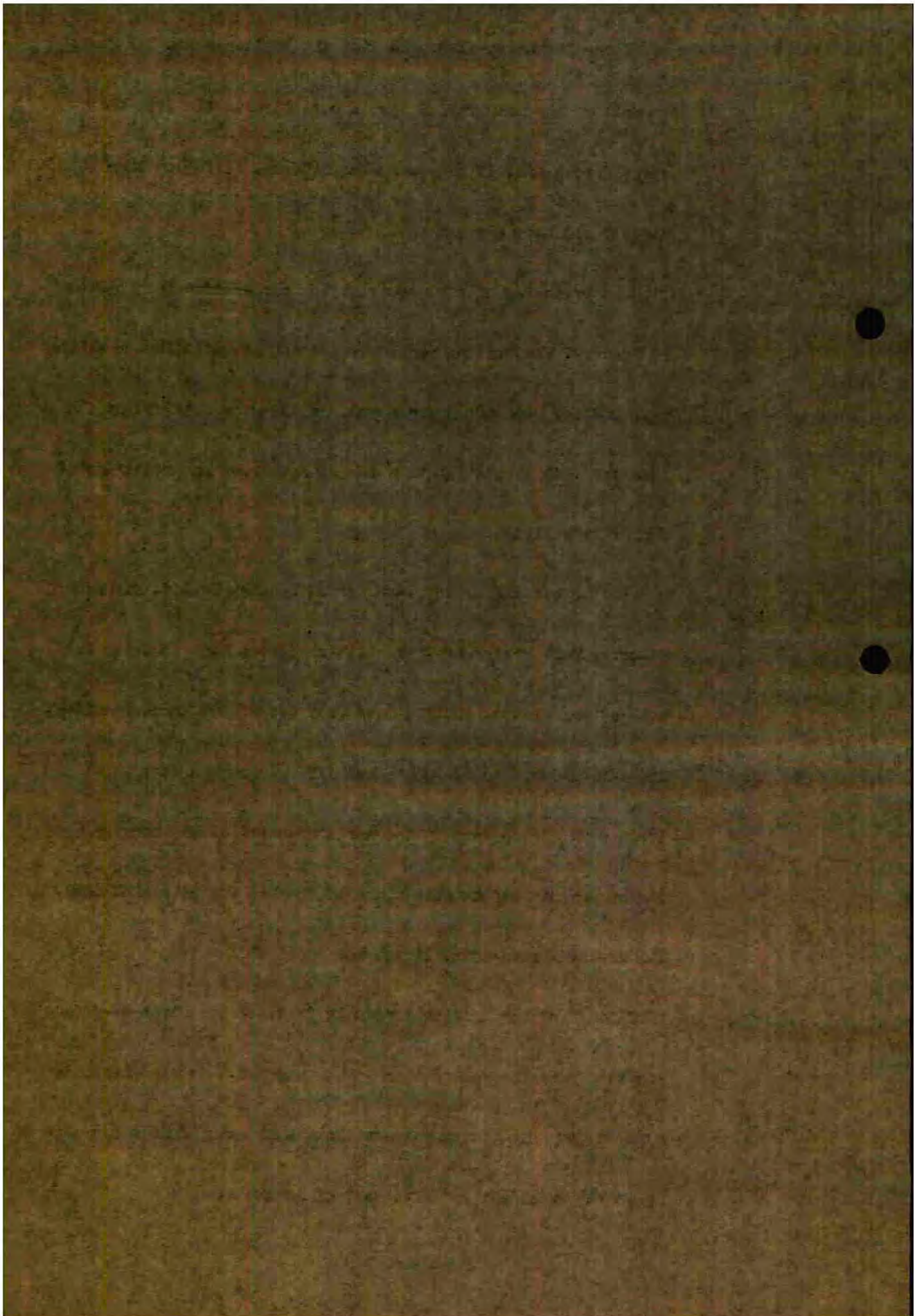
- 216 -

Group Marx was composed of the mobile elements of the 90th Light Division and the Italian XX Motorized Corps, reinforced by tanks from the 21st Panzer Division.

Along the Marsa-el-Bregha line the Italian X and XIII Corps as well as the Motorized Corps Gambera were to tie down the enemy forces and, if they were to withdraw, to follow them closely and keep abreast of them.

The beginning of the German attack was ^{scheduled} decided for 0830 on 21 January. The written order was not issued until the preceding day, and the Comando Supremo and the OKW were notified at the same time. At about that time the Panzer Group was redesignated Panzer Army Africa.

The German offensive plans for 21 January failed. Without offering much resistance, the British forces had withdrawn from both attack groups, putting down only occasional harassing fire. The Africa Corps to the south had literally bogged down in the loose sand; Group Marx in the north advanced slowly because the swampy terrain on both sides of the Via Balbia ^{delayed} ~~hindered~~ its ~~hindered~~ movements. It was not until the evening that Rommel realized that the British forces in front of the Marsa-el-Bregha position were far weaker than he had assumed. Air reconnaissance reports gave him the impression that major enemy forces had linked up in the area east and southeast of Agadabia.



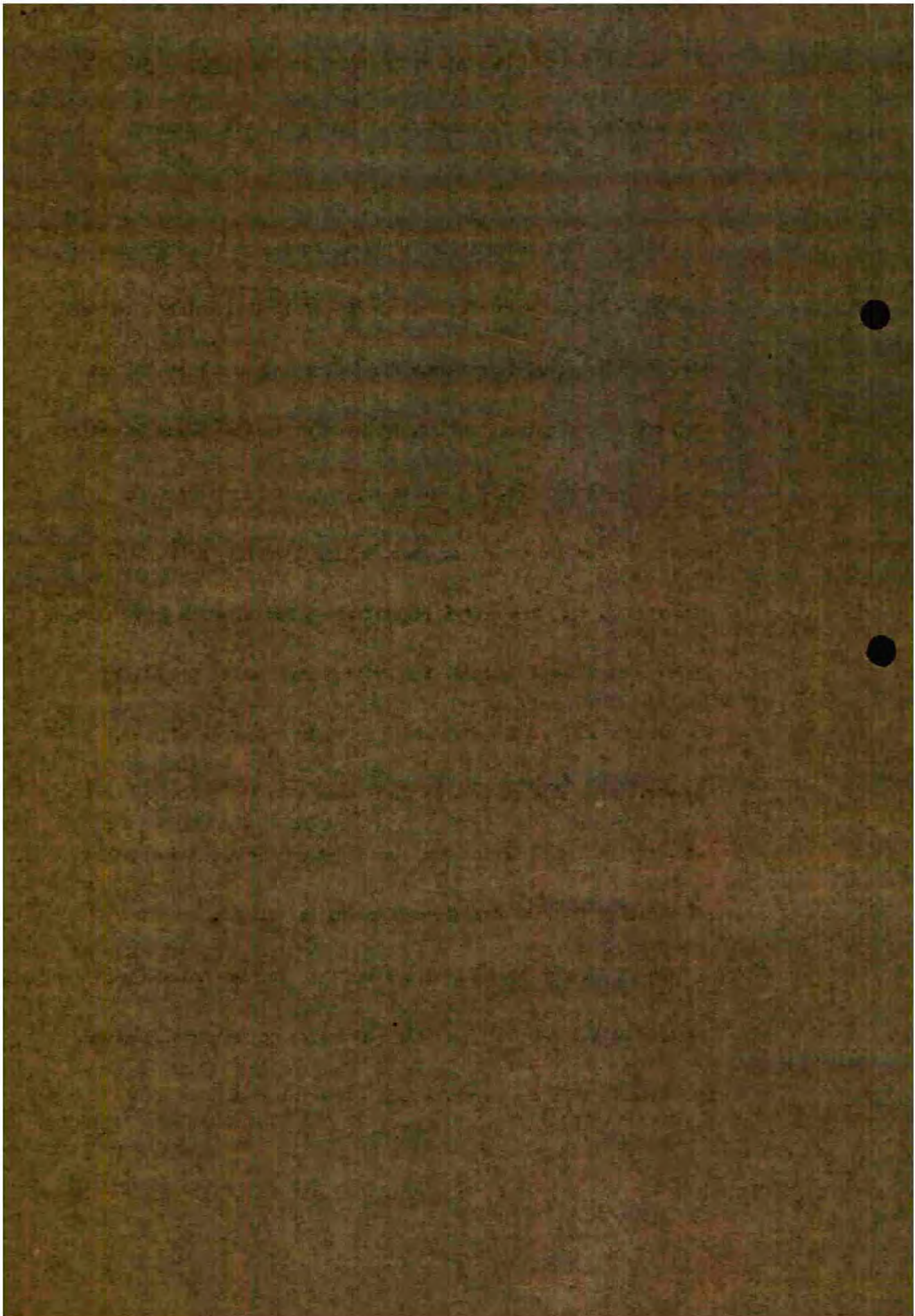
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He could destroy this enemy force only if strong Axis units reached the Saunna - Antelat area via Agedabia at an early time and cut off their ^{British} rear-line communications to the north and northeast..

He decided to place his main effort on the left and put all his strength into a northeast thrust along the Via Balbis via Agedabia.

Rommel's plan to encircle the enemy forces in the area east of Agedabia - Saunna - Antelat was unsuccessful. The isolated British ^{caught} elements were completely ~~knocked~~ off balance so that they did not even consider counterattacking, their only reaction being to retreat as fast as they could. The Panzer Army troops continued their advance by day and night, so that, taking advantage of the element of surprise, they ^{drove} ~~had driven~~ right through far superior enemy forces. Wherever fighting developed, the British were put to flight; ~~and~~ the Germans inflicted heavy losses on their opponents without, however, being able to prevent their escape to the north and northeast. ~~Thereby~~ The Africa Corps at least captured numerous tanks and vehicles that had dropped out during the flight.

On 21 January Rommel realized that the British had escaped the trap he had set for them. Air reconnaissance reports, however, indicated that in the Saunna - Saun - Antelat area



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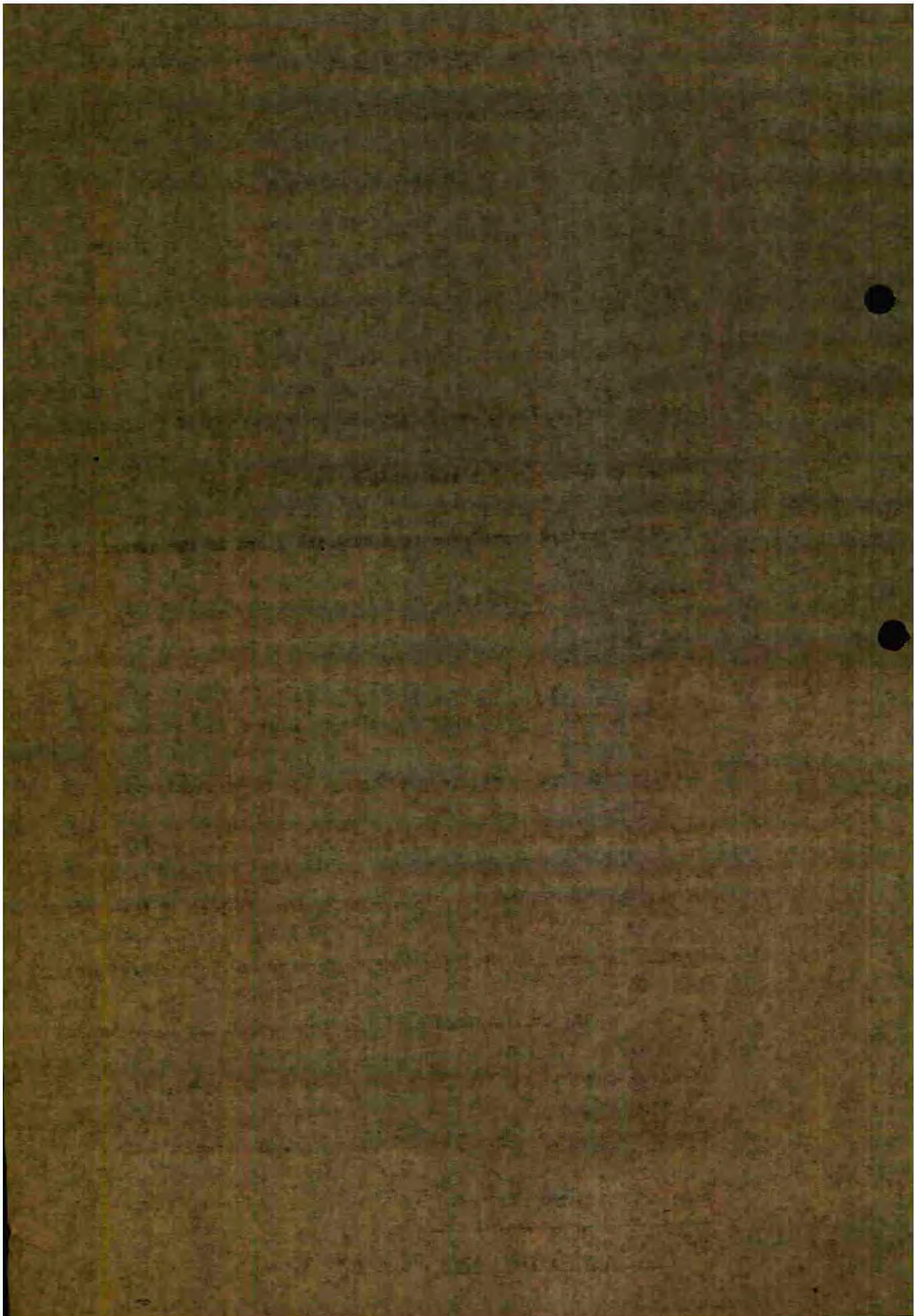
there were still some major British forces, namely 150 tanks, approximately 2,000 motor vehicles, and many supply dumps. On 25 January Rommel therefore ordered the Africa Corps to launch the pursuit in the direction of Msus in order to complete the defeat of the enemy forces. For this purpose, the 21st Panzer Division was given the mission of thrusting from Saunnu toward Bir-el-Melass (southeast of Msus), the 15th Panzer Division was to advance farther to the left from the area west of Saunnu toward Et. Msus, and the 2d Machine Gun Battalion was to move from Antelat to Msus. Group Marx was to follow the 2d Machine Gun Battalion from Agdebia via Antelat. The 90th Light Division and the XX Motorized Corps were to secure the flank of the advancing units against the British forces that still remained in the Benghazi area.

The thrust toward Msus hit the enemy forces just as they were settling down and went straight through the fleeing columns. The 8th Panzer Regiment captured 12 aircraft that were ready to take off at the Msus airfield and overran the command post of the British 1st Armoured Division 6 miles farther to the north. However, the bulk of the British forces escaped once again. The 15th Panzer Division captured on this day a particularly rich booty: 85 mostly undamaged tanks, 45 artillery pieces, 190 trucks, and about 200 prisoners of war.

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Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Vol. I, Part II, Chapter 6, p. 388.



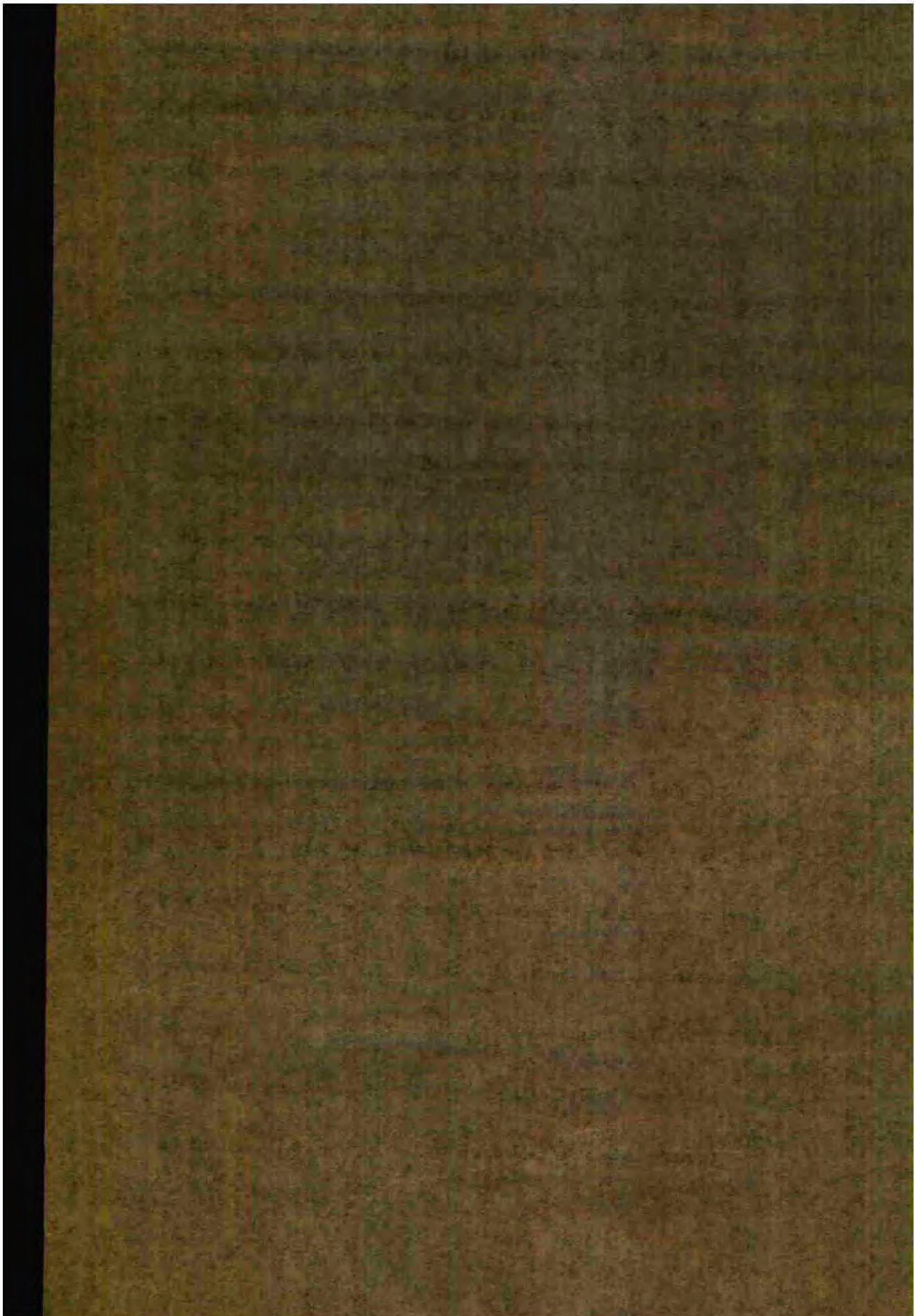
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The 2d Machine Gun Battalion pushed back superior enemy forces toward the northeast, reaching Msus toward 1500. The units committed north of Agedabia were not engaged in combat on that day. The Indian 4th Division did not intervene; instead of taking some of the pressure off the British armored units, the division withdrew to Solluk. The Africa Corps assembled around Msus and Bir-el-Melaz, where it was subjected to air attacks during the night. On 26 January the Germans did not continue the pursuit of the defeated British forces which withdrew to the north and northeast.

The great number of motor vehicles of all types captured by the Germans were used to ^{make up for} ~~replace~~ existing shortages within the Africa Corps and to provide mobile transportation for the 90th Light Division. In addition, voluminous stocks of POL, ammunition, and rations as well as several tank repair and maintenance shops were seized in the vicinity of Msus.

The successful conclusion of the tank battle near Msus meant that Rommel had attained the objective he had wanted to achieve by launching a counteroffensive. The enemy attack preparations had been destroyed, and the British 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions had suffered serious losses.

But Rommel resisted the temptation of thrusting via Mechili in a manner similar to that used in the spring of 1941, when he

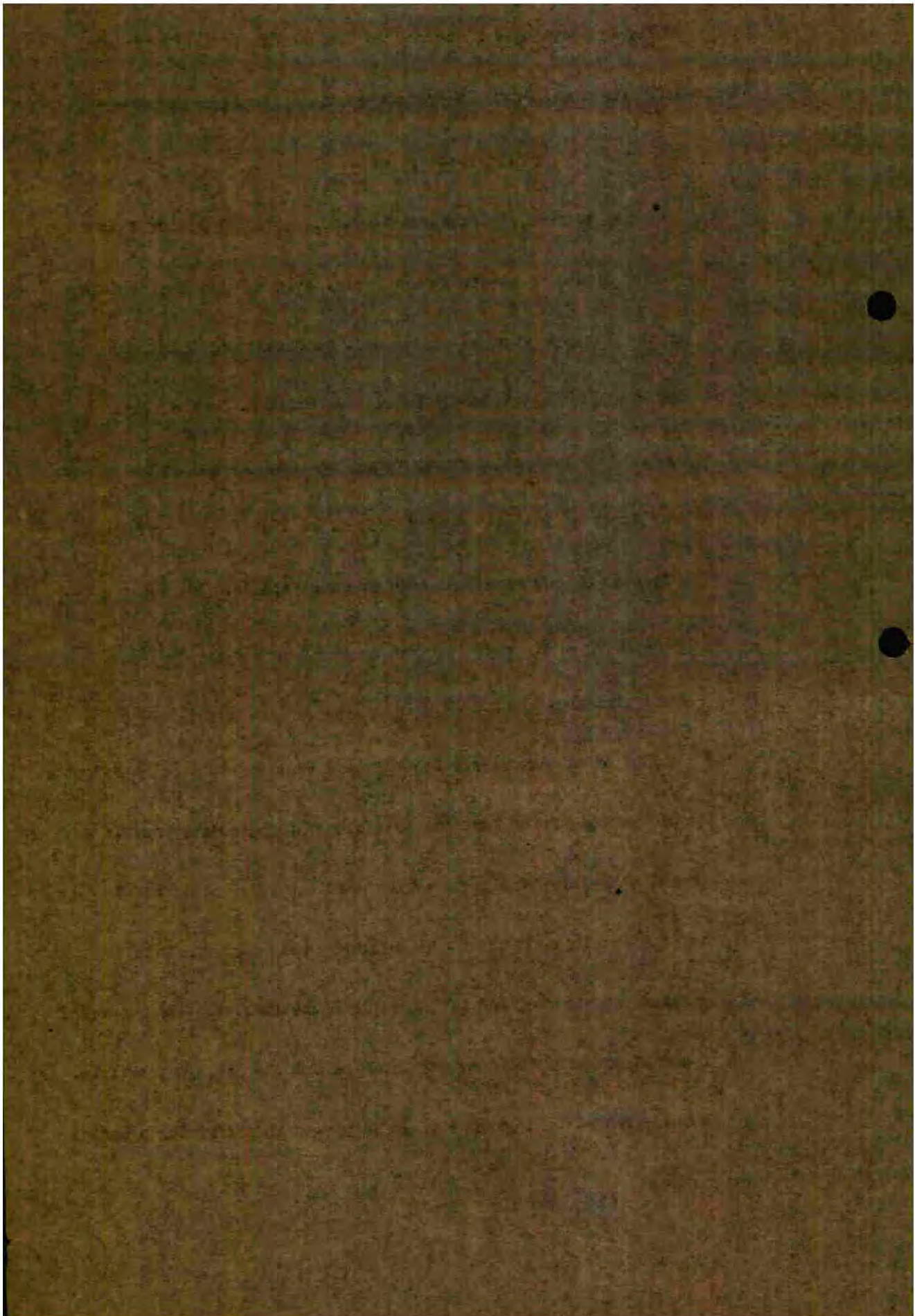


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drove the British out of Cyrenaica. The POL supplies were insufficient for such an extensive operation, quite apart from the fact that, contrary to the preceding year, the British had some undefeated divisions in the eastern part of Cyrenaica and Marmarica. Rommel therefore decided to conduct further operations on a step-by-step basis.

The seizure of Benghazi, however, was an objective that Rommel wanted to attain at any price, even against the decision of the Commando Supremo. After all, possession of this port was crucial for the German logistical buildup. On the other hand, there were major enemy forces in Benghazi and in the area south of the city toward Solluk, so that Rommel considered a frontal attack from the south as unprofitable. Only an envelopment from the east would effectively cut off major enemy elements.

The latest experience demonstrated that it would be inadvisable to employ the Africa Corps in this almost impassable terrain. Rommel therefore decided to employ weak but very mobile forces for the envelopment effort. He selected Group Marx for this purpose; it was composed of two rifle battalions, the two motorized reconnaissance battalions, one antitank and one artillery battery. Rommel planned to lead this group in person in performing a daring



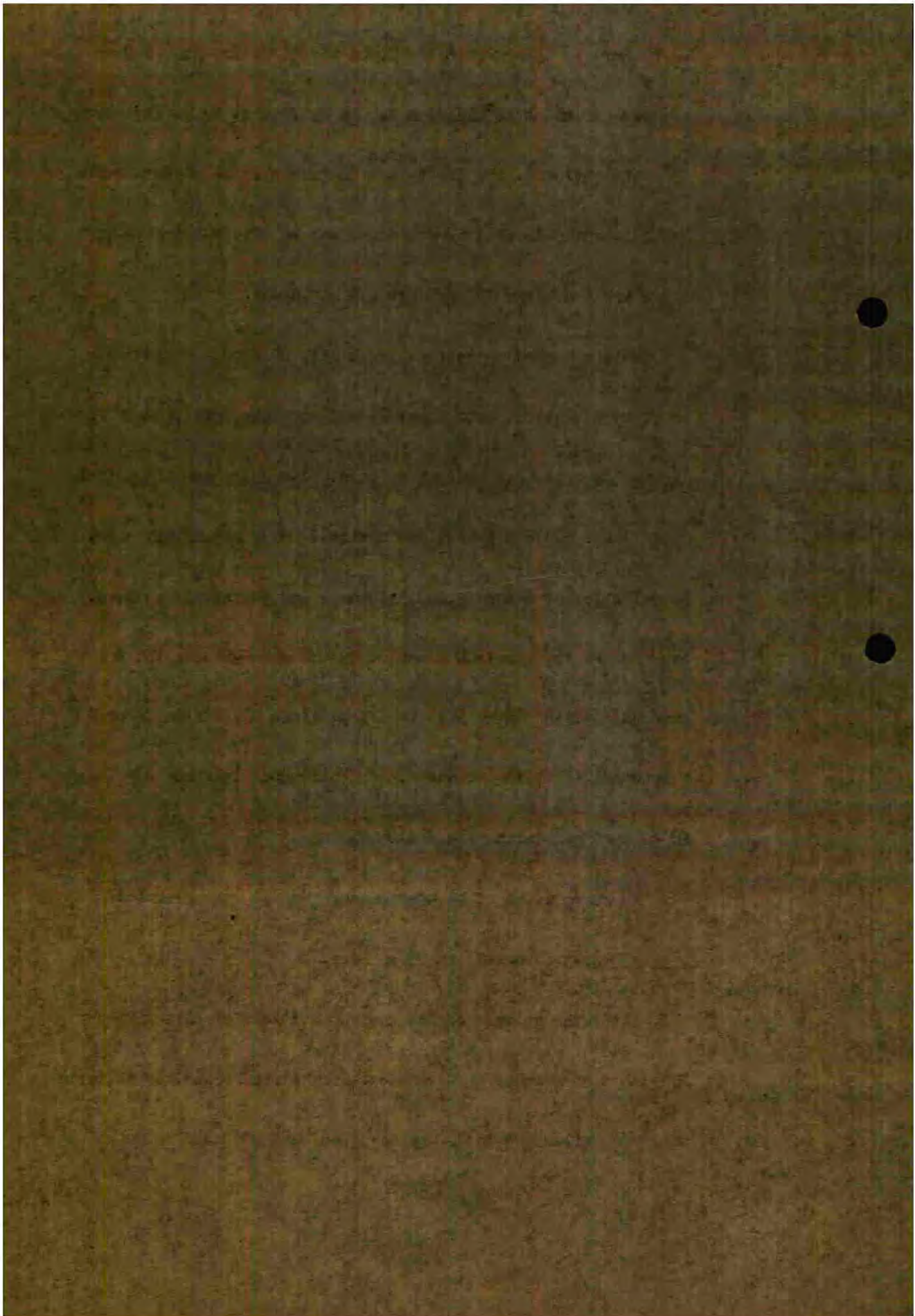
- 221 -

night movement; he intended to reach El-Reghina by the early morning of 28 January and to seize nearby Benghazi by a coup de main. The 90th Light Division and elements of the IX Motorized Corps were to attack from the south toward Solluk and farther eastward in order to tie down the enemy forces. By moving strong elements eastward, the Africa Corps was to make a feint attack toward Mechili, while in reality the corps was to stay put near Marsa and cover the flank facing east and northeast.

Despite Rommel's instinctive ability of finding expedients in every situation, Group Mark bogged down completely on 28 January during its drive across soaked ^{night} ^{sand} dunes. El-Reghina was not seized until 1600, while Benghazi was captured on 29 January at noon. Rommel's forces seized 1,000 prisoners and 300 motor vehicles, but most of the garrison escaped. On the same evening the Ariete Armored Division moved into the city. Along the Africa Corps outposts the British conducted reconnaissance in force on 28 January and during the following days.

In recognition of his performance Rommel was ^{promoted to} appointed Generaloberst (General) on 29 January.

After the seizure of Benghazi Rommel felt certain that the British were evacuating Cyrenaica. On the other hand, he believed that the British would defend the area west of Tobruk



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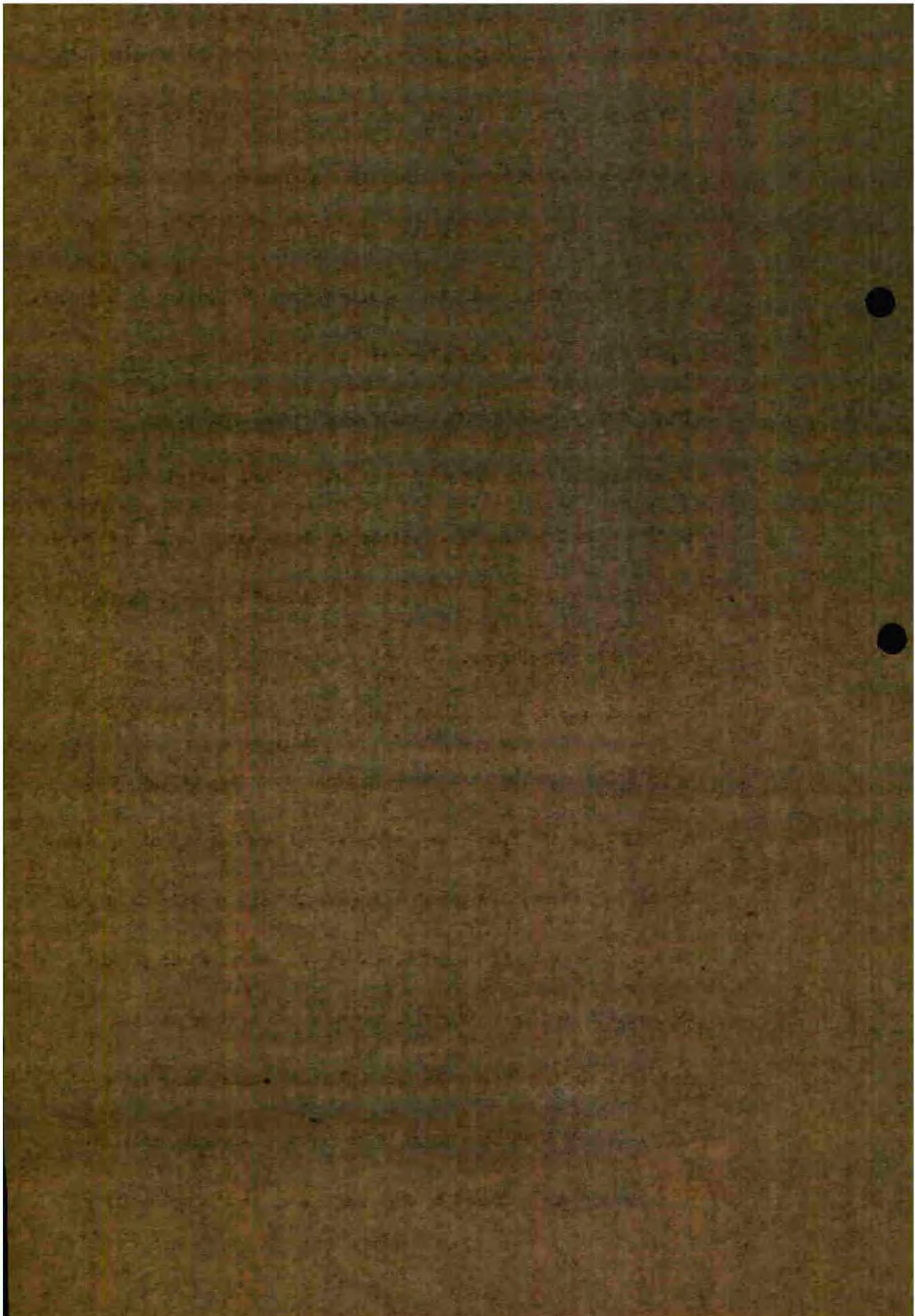
and that they would concentrate all available divisions for the defense of the Gazala position.

Because of existing shortage of fuel, Rommel was unable to employ the Africa Corps for a continuation of the pursuit via Tengedar or Mechili. For this reason, he committed only two weak motorized brigades to maintain the pressure on the enemy forces via Barca toward Martuba and Derna.

The Via Balbia had been heavily damaged by British demolitions, set off at suitable points in the mountainous terrain, where tough rear guard elements blocked the German advance. On 4 February the German pursuit was brought to a definite halt south of the Ummi defile. British low-level air attacks inflicted heavy losses of motor vehicles on both German brigades, particularly on their supply columns.

Rommel had been correct in assuming that the British XXX would offer sustained resistance against an attack of the Gazala position. For the time being, a head-on attack was out of question. But to prevent any disagreeable surprise, Rommel moved the Africa Corps, the 90th Light Division, and the XI Motorized Corps to the Mechili area on 6 February. The Commando Supremo did not authorize him to move up the X and XXI Corps until many weeks later. It held back both corps in the Marsa-el-Brega position.

The reverse suffered by the Panzer Army at the end of 1941



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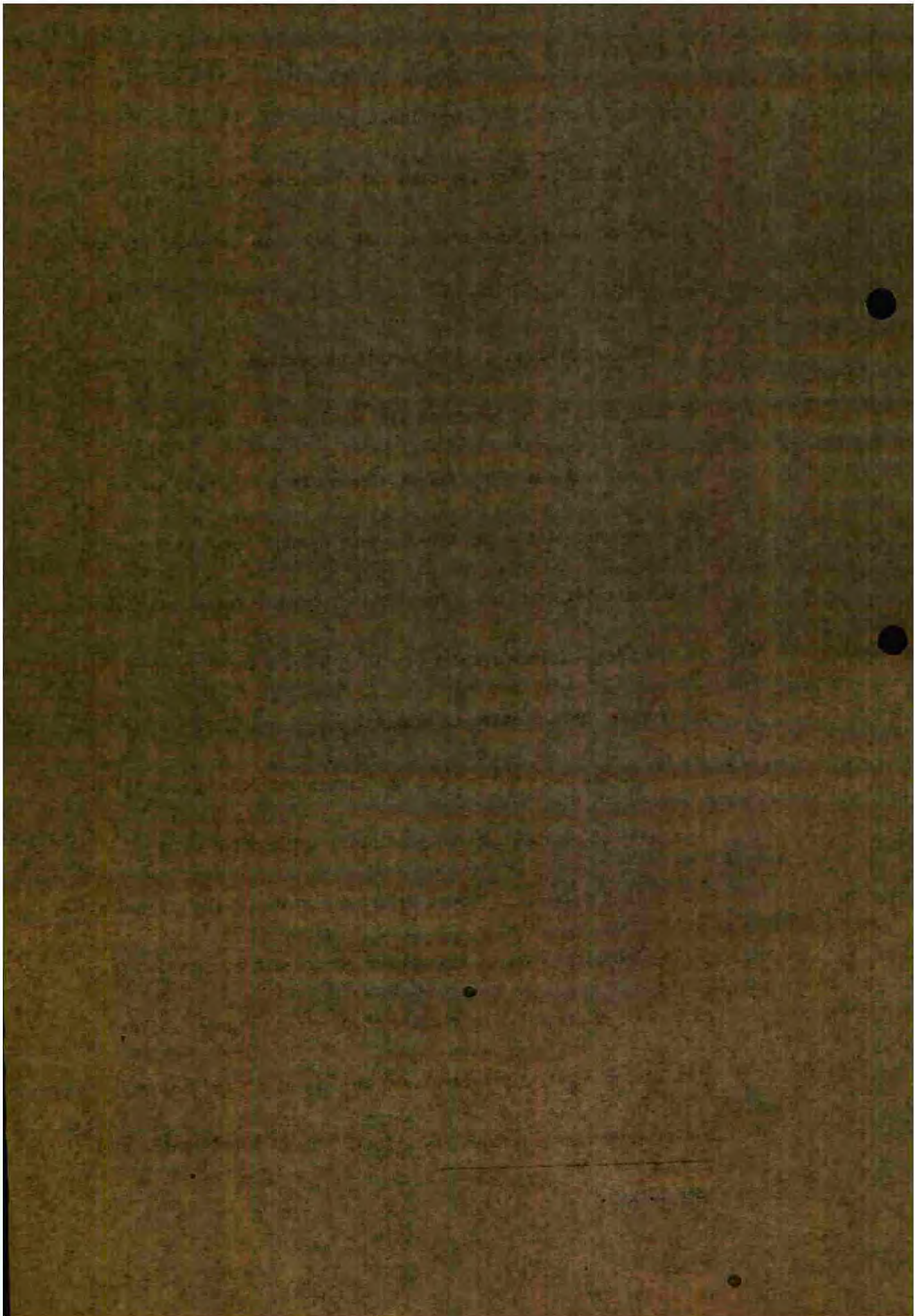
had thus been effaced. Although on the defensive, Rommel had been able to defeat the superior Eighth Army before the British were capable of assembling their forces for an offensive. Rommel had inflicted heavy losses on his adversary and, in pursuing him, had once again seized the Cyrenaica.

Before being able to conduct ~~ELGIN~~ a more far-reaching operation, the Axis divisions would need an extended rest so that they could rehabilitate and supply their units.

The improvement in the logistical position at the beginning of the year had also benefited the Italian Air Force whose strength had risen to about 190 aircraft. The units subordinate to the Air Commander Africa had already been rehabilitated in December. Unfortunately, detailed information on the air force activities in the North African theater for the period covered in this section of the narrative is missing.

According to Army reports the German Air Force units had been able to provide generally accurate information of the British disposition of forces before the start of the offensive. During the first days of the advance ground-air cooperation was extremely successful. The commitment of strong fighter units; that almost completely neutralized the effect of the British air intervention on ground operations, brought considerable relief

See p. 205.



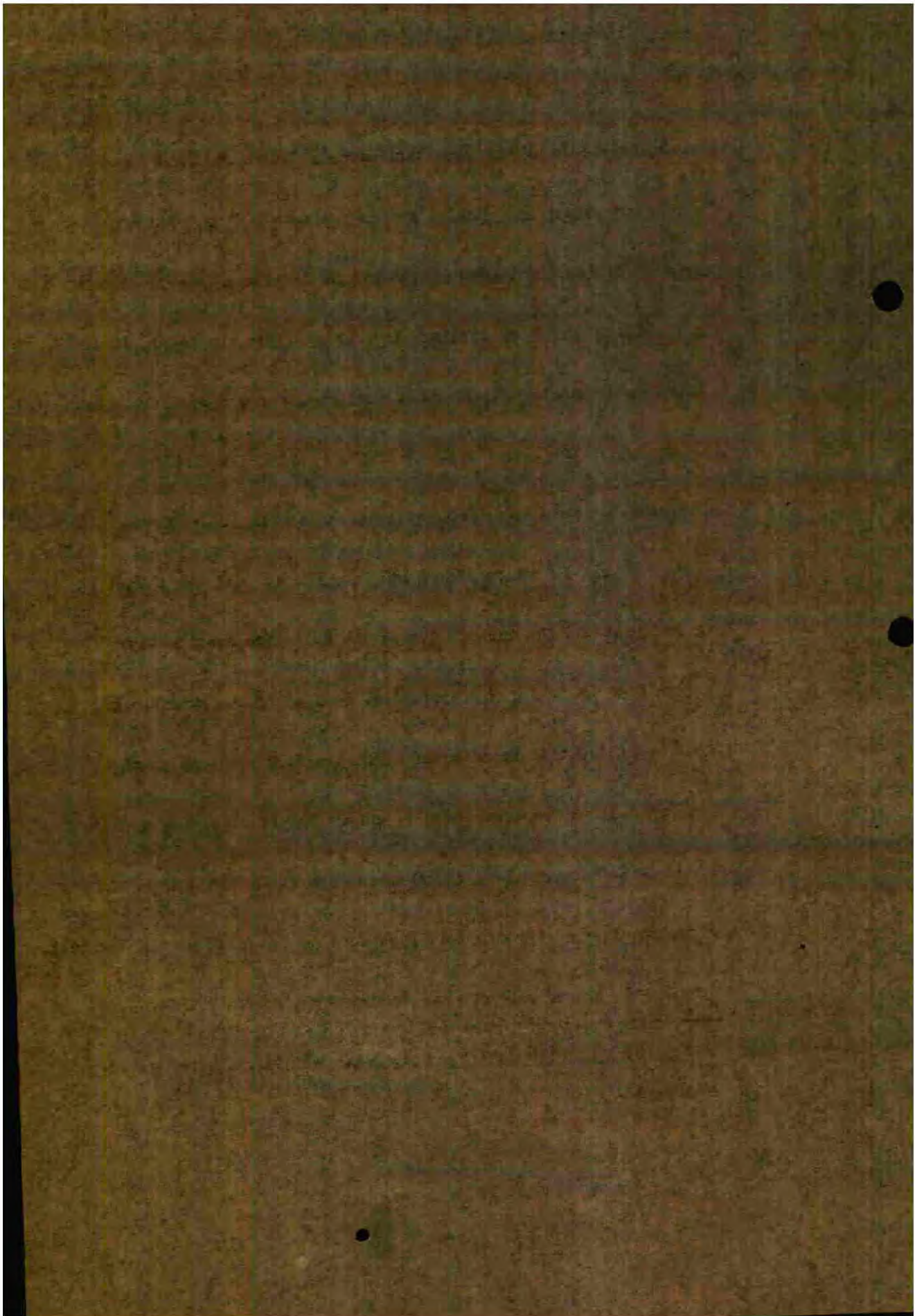
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to the Axis troops. Even on 25 January, when the British Eighth Army was in the most critical situation, the Royal Air Force ~~XXXXX~~ aircraft intervened only by night with a correspondingly lesser effect.

The German Air Force made an essential contribution to the favorable issue of the tank battles near Saunnu and Msus by reporting at an early moment the whereabouts of the British armored forces. By launching concentrated attacks, in which the I Air Corps also participated, the German flying units did their share to dissipate the combat effectiveness of the British armor. On the other hand, the breakout of the British 1st Armoured Division was not discovered until it was too late.

The Axis air units played only a minor role in the thrust on Benghazi and the pursuit across the Cyrenaica because they had to move up to forward airfields. Because of the shortage of motor vehicles this transfer of airfields took too long so that the Royal Air Force achieved a temporary but overwhelming superiority from 4 - 6 February along the eastern edge of the Cyrenaica. This situation changed for the better as soon as the airfields at Benghazi, Derna, and Martuba were once again used by German aircraft. ¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰
Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Volume I, Part III, Chapter 6, pp. 409-410.



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Since mid-January the units of Air Commander Africa were based on El-Aghella and Arco Philonorum, after mid-February on the Derna, Martuba, Tmini (?), and Benina airfields. The headquarters of the Air Commander Africa was located in the vicinity of Derna on or about 10 February.

original

There are no sources available to indicate whether the Air Commander Africa really used all means at his disposal to pursue the British, just like the ground forces. Would it not have been possible to improvise advance landing fields for fighter aircraft near Antelat and Masu at the right time by employing transport planes?

In the entire Mediterranean theater the Luftwaffe lost 112 aircraft during January and February, whereas 27 were damaged.

British

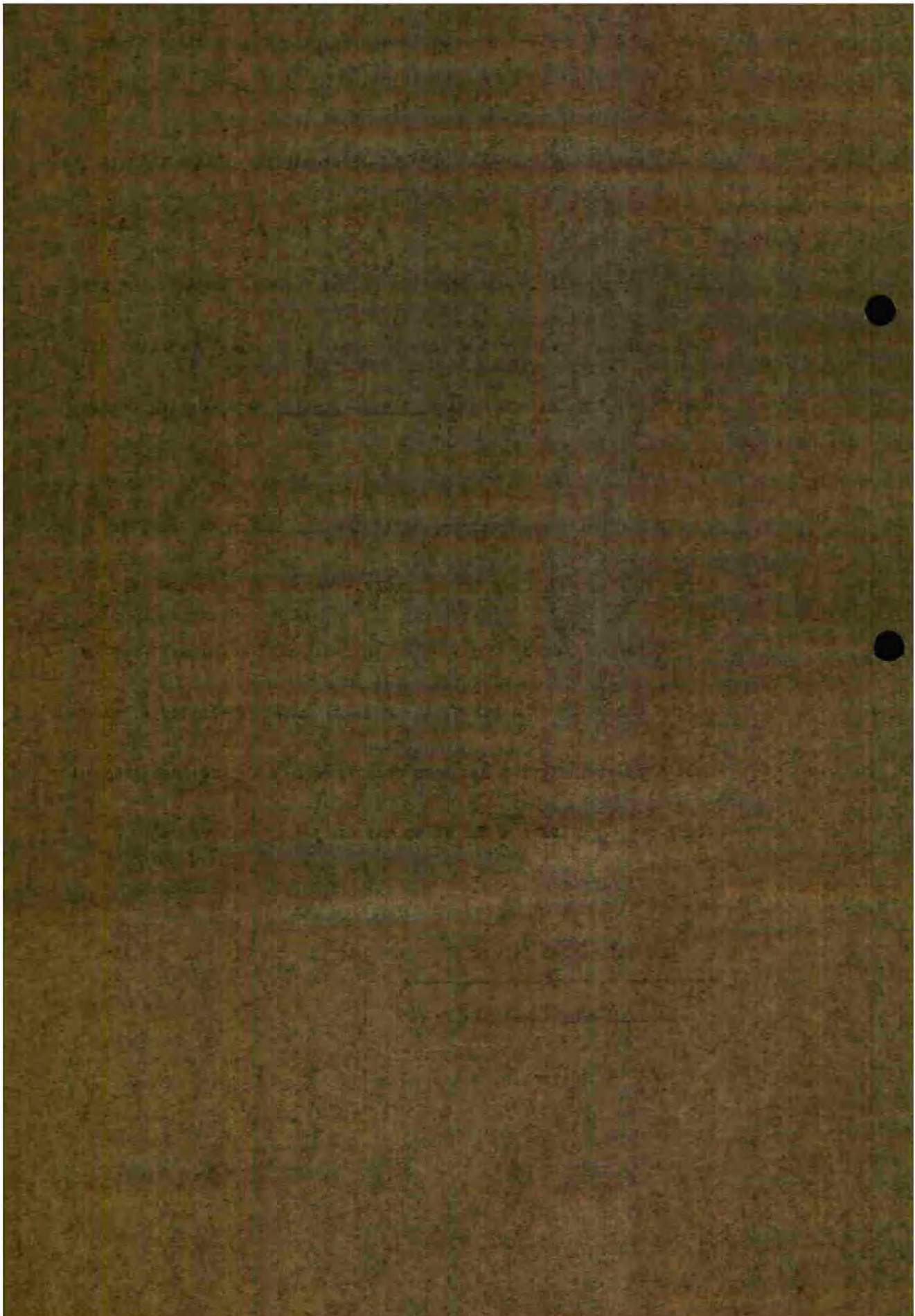
When the pursuit bogged down in front of the Marsa-el-Brega at the beginning of January, the British Commander-in-Chief believed that the German forces had been so seriously defeated that they would not constitute a threat to his army within foreseeable time.

Rommel's sudden attack therefore hit him when he was totally

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Fliegerfuhrer Afrika, p. 16.

See Footnote 126.



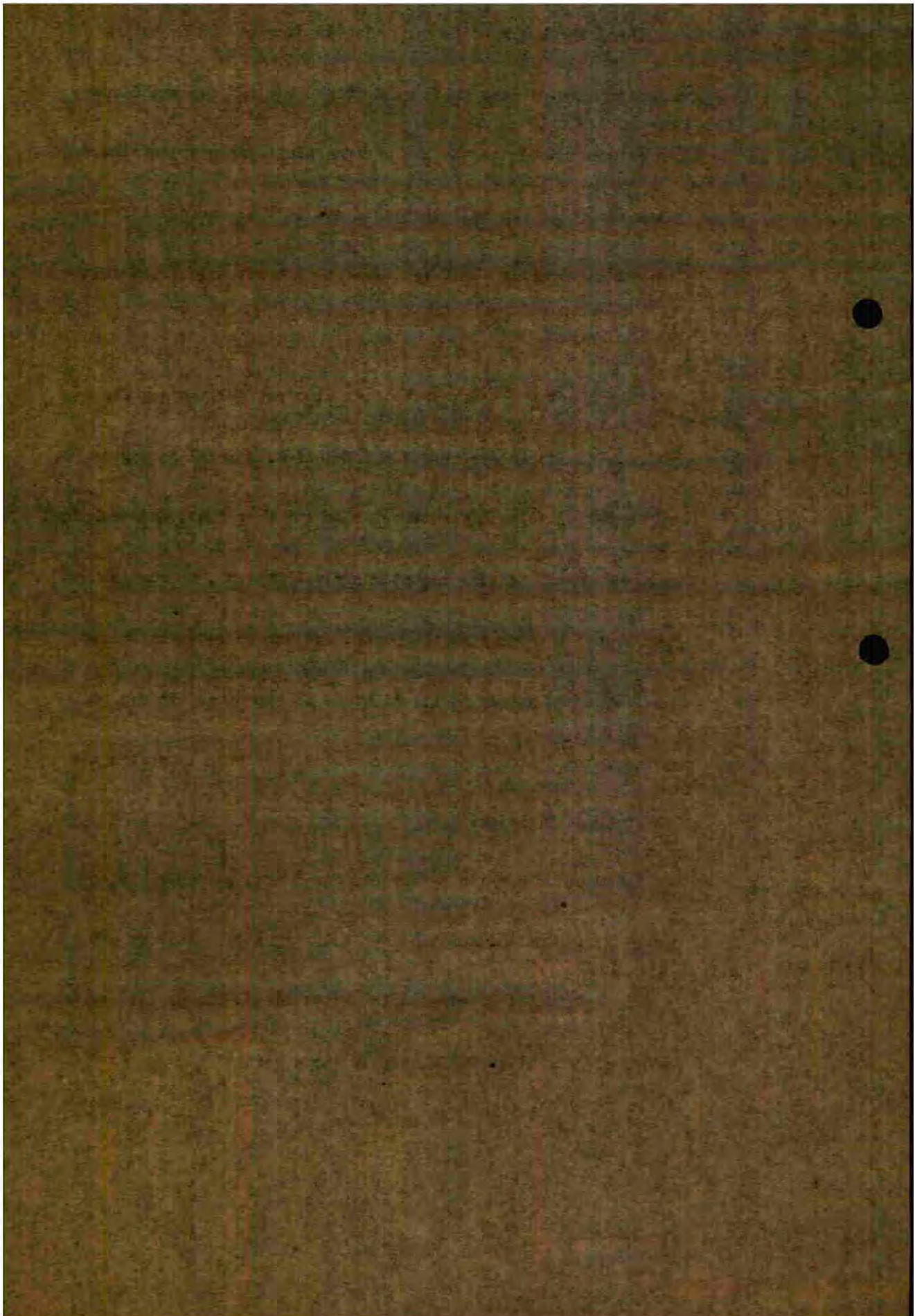
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unprepared and caught him by surprise. "On 21 January," reported Auchinleck, "the unexpected happened, and without any previous notice the enemy began his advance." (Tr.: No source)

The British air units were equally unprepared for such a surprise move. It was their misfortune that the reconnaissance planes were unable to use the advance airfields near Antelat. Heavy rainfall had made them useless, so that shortly before the German offensive half the fighter aircraft were transferred back to Msus.

The "Western Desert Group" was also not fully ready for action. Its supply system did not function, several squadrons had to be pulled back for transfer to the Near East, and technical problems arose with the recently arrived Bostonns, which also contributed to weakening the Group. Another unfortunate factor was that a new supply unit, which had no experience in desert warfare, had just replaced the one that had formerly served the 7th Armoured Division.

At first, Rommel's thrust was given active support by the German flying units. For two days the German dive bombers and Messerschmitt 109's dominated the battlefield. The arrival of German troops at Antelat on 22 January in the afternoon

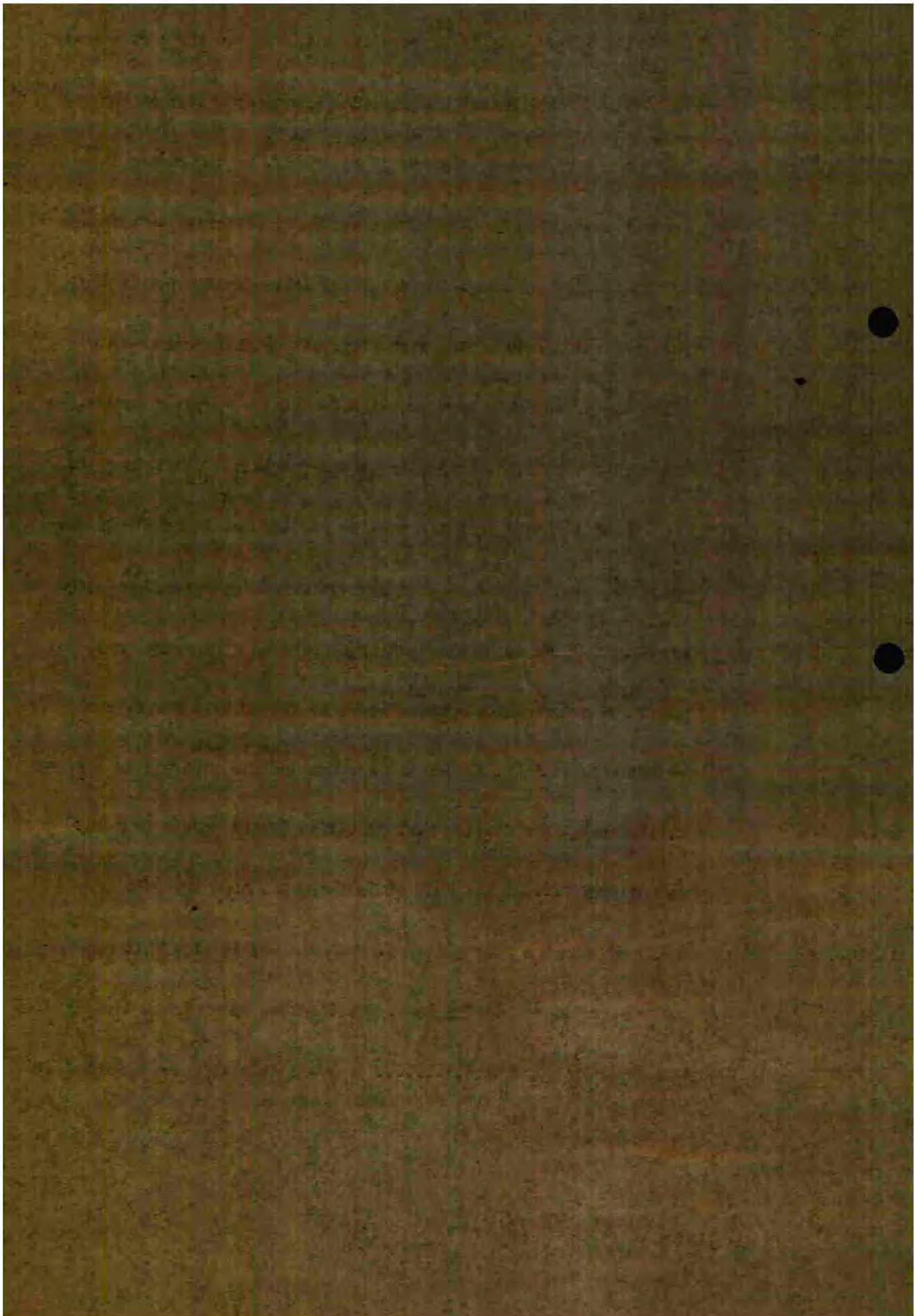


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was totally unexpected and increased the existing confusion. While the airfield was evacuated at the last possible moment, six unserviceable aircraft fell into German hands. On 23 January the British were able to improve the situation in the air, whereas the German ground attack had ^{however,} gained such momentum that it was much more complicated to bring it to a halt. In the evening the general commanding the XIII Corps asked for authority to withdraw to Mechili, if necessary. Cunningham had little confidence in the future developments of the situation, and he therefore moved his maintenance and other service units behind the Egyptian border. The fighter and light bomber units were excluded from this move.

Auchinleck who was at that time in Cairo could hardly believe these reports. Alarmed by what he considered the "premature withdrawal," he flew to Ritchie's headquarters on 25 January and

Ritchie ^{general retreat} urged Auchinleck to retract the order given by the XIII Corps, much to Tedder's delight. Tedder who accompanied Auchinleck reported to Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles F.A. Portal in London on the next day as follows: "... as a result of last night, I hope that the Army will now launch a counterattack. The only way to stop this nonsense ^{is to} ~~consists of~~ hitting back. Our fighters under Group Captain Cross are in a bad mood, it seems that they are at this



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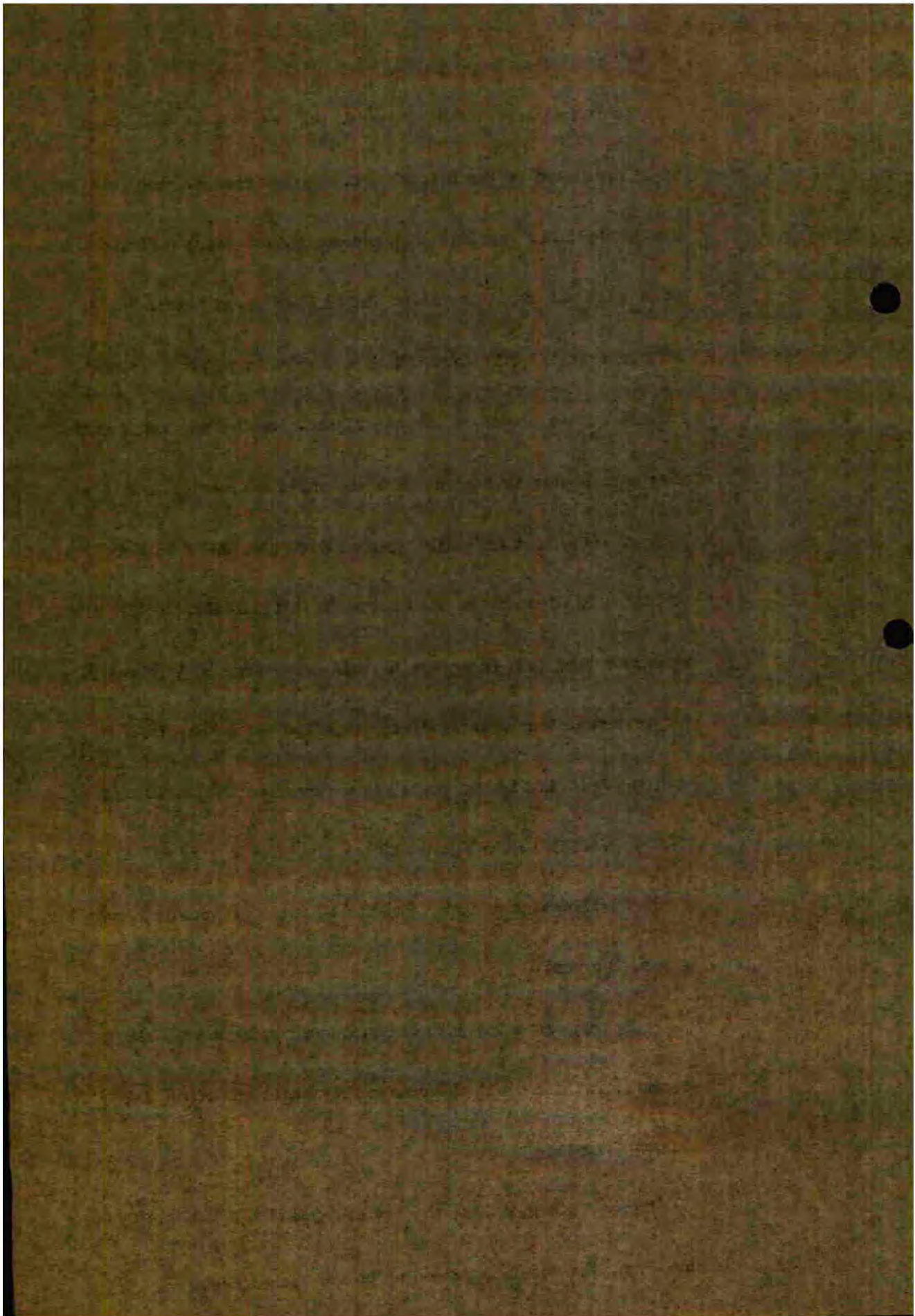
time the decisive and equalizing power."

Flying out of Mechili, they attacked during the following days the advancing German troops and destroyed or damaged 120 trucks.

As Rommel approached Benghazi, the airfield at Benina had to be evacuated by the British who, in the process, abandoned also Mechili much earlier than necessary. The scare suffered at Antelat was still prevalent in the XIII Corps ranks. Based on Gazala the fighter aircraft were unable to support the most forward combat areas; on the other hand, the German flying units were also unable to keep up with the rapid advance of Rommel's troops. For almost an entire week no dive bombers or Messerschmitt 109's were to be seen above the battlefield. Cunningham's squadrons took full advantage of this situation: on 5 February, for instance, they destroyed more than 100 motor vehicles. By then the British fighter units had returned to the Gambut and El-Adem airfields. The light bombers also proved very effective, and the Wellingtons of Group 205 bombed once again their former target, Benghazi.

The squadrons based on Malta, though under heavy Axis pressure, inflicted all the damage they could on German and Italian shipping.

However disappointing the end of Operation CRUSADER might have been, the Gazala position up to Bir Hacheim was



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firmly held by the British. Moreover, they had made sufficient territorial gains to be able to defend Egypt on the ground and in the air.

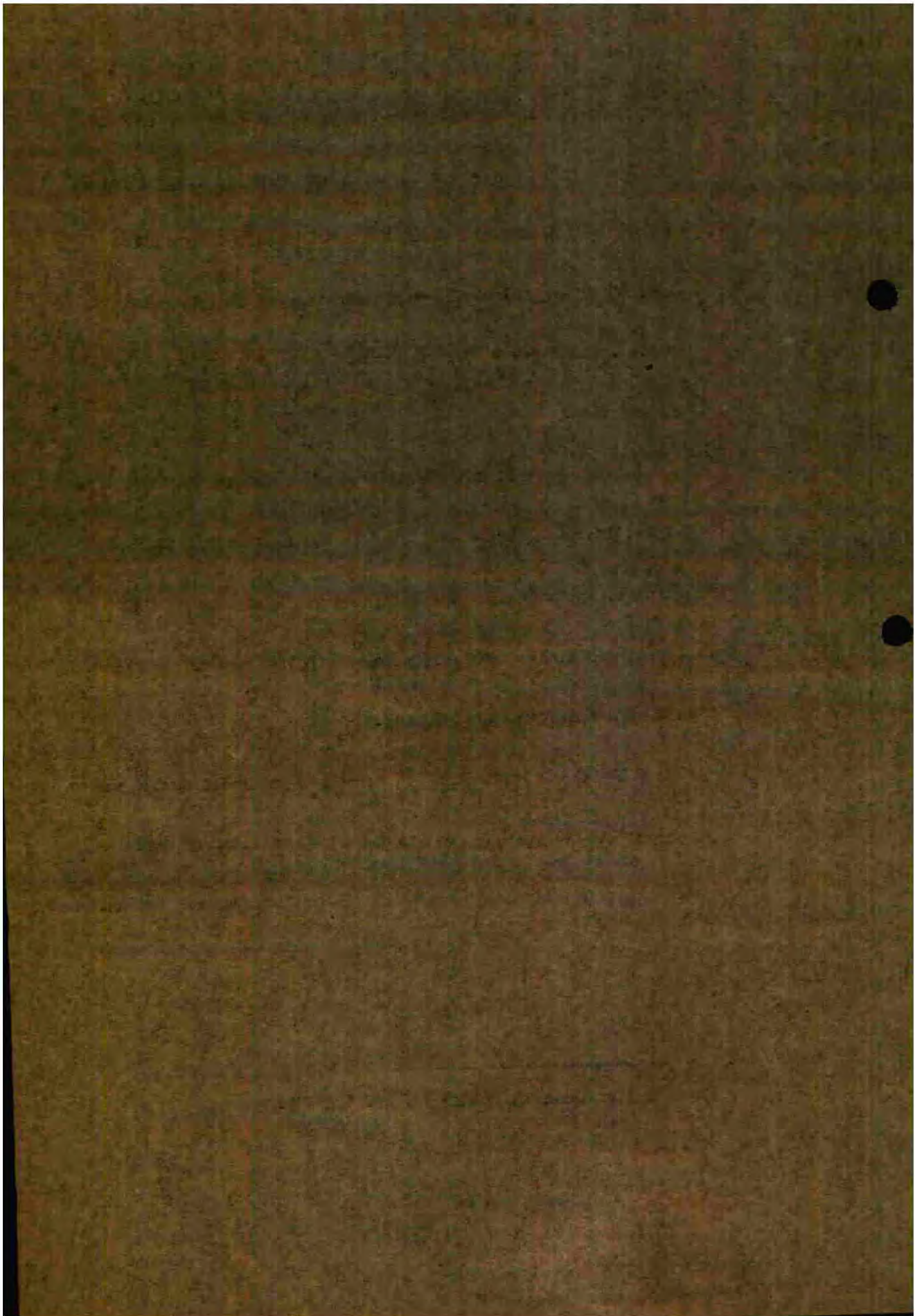
Dawson's new ground organization for the Royal Air Force had proved extremely effective. Between mid-November and mid-March the maintenance and repair shops received 1,035 aircraft in damaged condition, which had been evacuated from about 100,000 square miles of desert territory. During the same period, 800 aircraft were returned to the squadrons as ready for service.

During the period 18 November to 14 February 1942 Tedder's units, including those stationed at Malta, flew almost 16,000 sorties. In evaluating these figures one must remember that almost 900 aircraft were transferred to the Far East from the end of December to mid-February.

While the British lost 575 airplanes in aerial combat and on the ground, they -- in conjunction with antiaircraft units -- shot down 325 German aircraft and an equal number of Italian^{ones}₁₅₂.

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Denis Richards, Volume II, pp. 184 - 91

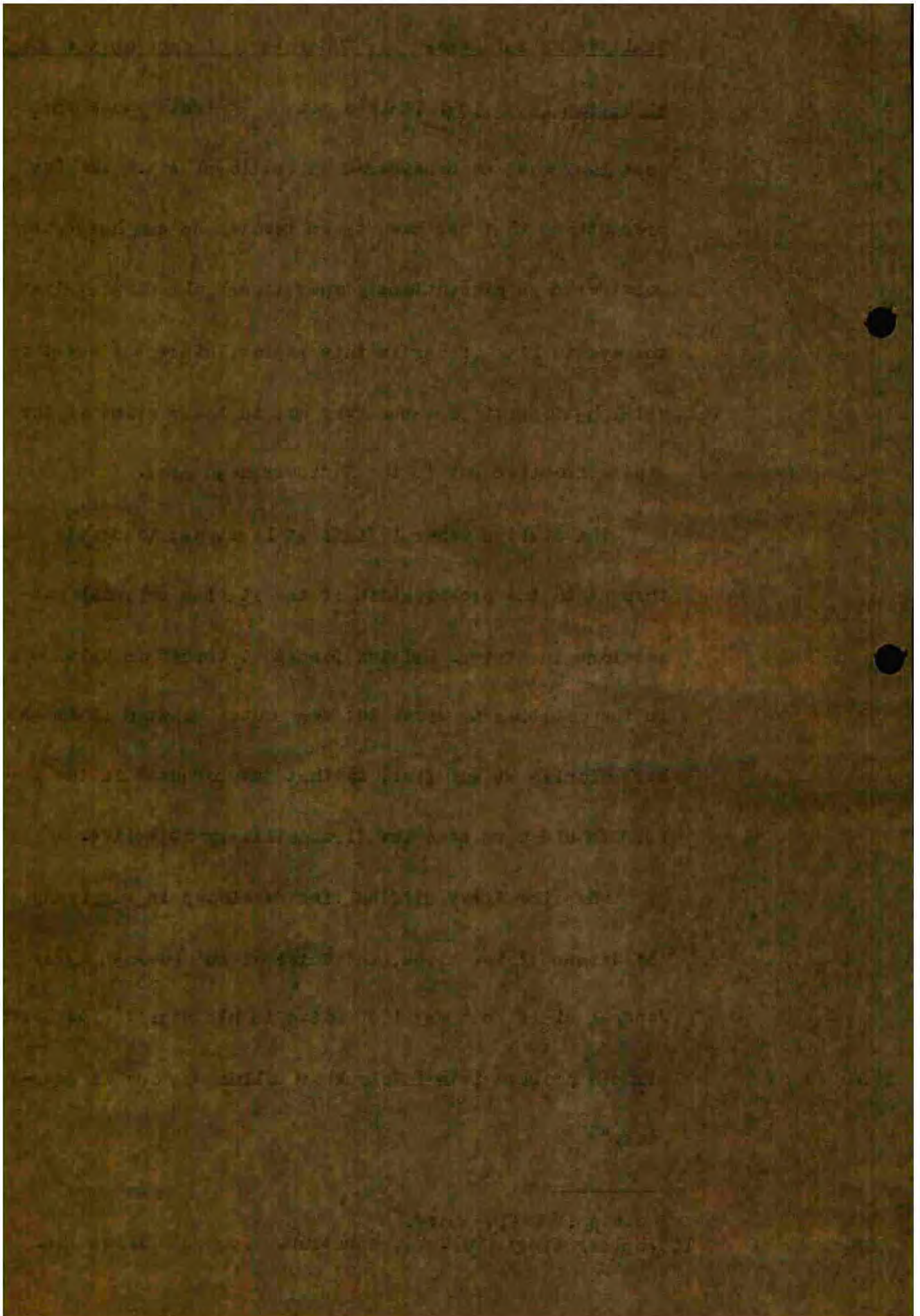


6. The Fundamental Importance of Logistics in Planning Military Operations; Action by Second Air Fleet Neutralizes Malta; German Air Supremacy; Impact on the Supply Situation in Africa. Italy's attack against France on 10 June 1940 must be considered an emotional act.* The few precautions that had been taken beforehand can hardly be considered as precautionary operational planning against the eventuality of war in this region, since the areas of vital national importance were not in the regions of the Alpine frontier but in the Mediterranean area.

The Italian General Staff at least had to devote thought to the preservation of the Italian colonial possessions in Africa. British forces stationed on Malta were in the position to close the sea routes between Italy and her colonies at any time, so that the conquest of the island should have been the first military objective.

When the first difficulties developed in supplying the German Africa Corps, the Chief of the (German) Army General Staff on 8 May 1941 noted in his diary: "The North African problem is not Tobruk or Sollum but one of supplies."¹⁵³

* See pp. 20-21, above.
153. Halder Diary, Vol. VI, Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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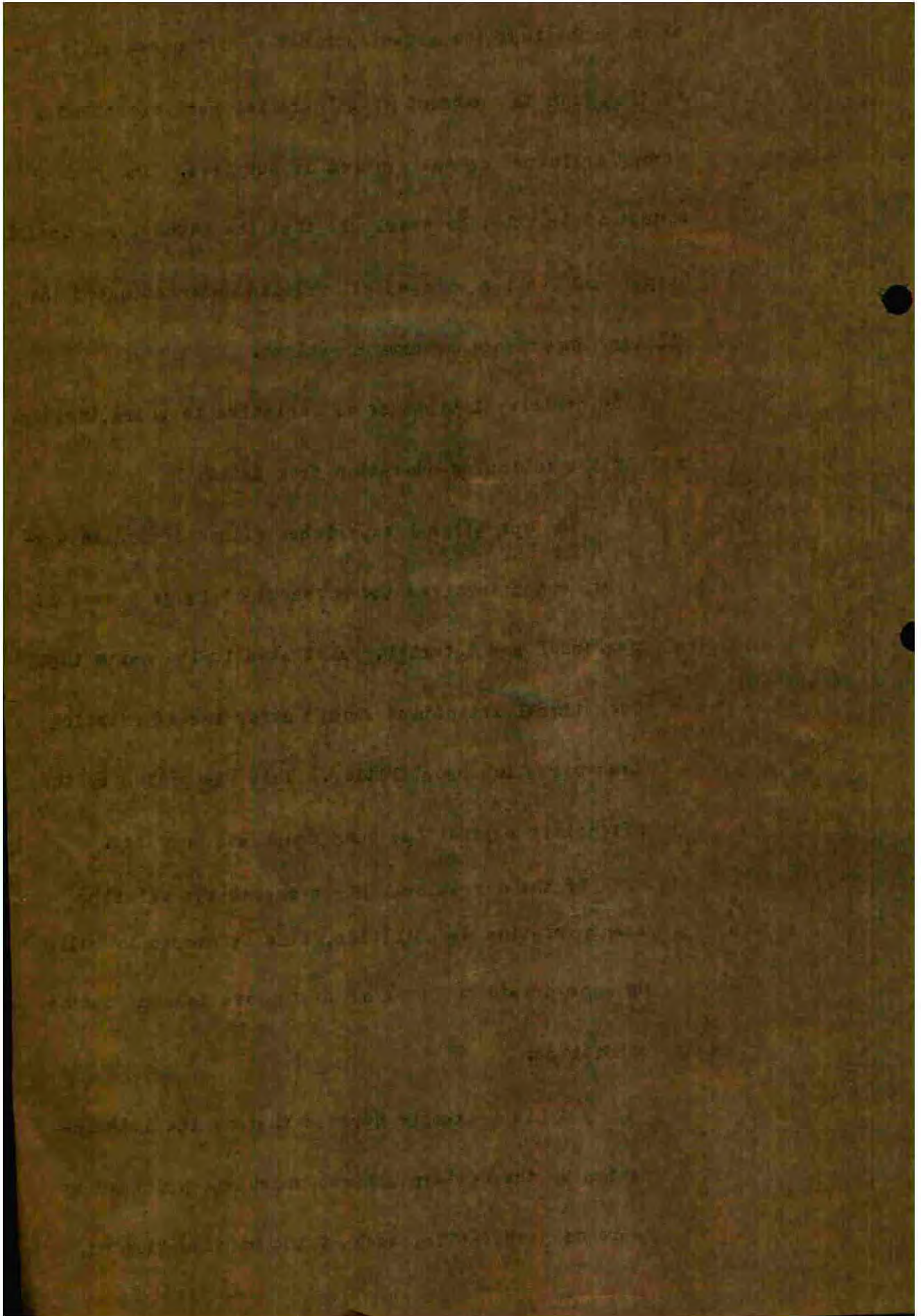
However, the Wehrmacht High Command failed to draw the logical conclusions from this realization. There can be no doubt that the organizational errors necessarily resulting from the conduct of a "parallel war" exercised a strong influence on the problem of supplies. The real source of trouble, however, was that the highest responsible German and Italian command authorities underestimated the military importance of communications.

The decisive importance of logistics is characterized best by the following quotation from TESKE:

The operational experience gained in modern warfare, which involves the movement of large masses of personnel and materiel, culminated in the maxim that operational intentions should never exceed existing transportation capabilities. This was proved by the offensives against the Suez Canal and Murmansk.

If the operational plans exceed the existing transportation capabilities, time is needed to build up appropriate supplies or to improve transportation conditions.

A typical example here is that of the 1944 invasion by the Western Allies, which was preceded by years of preparation, such as the construction of



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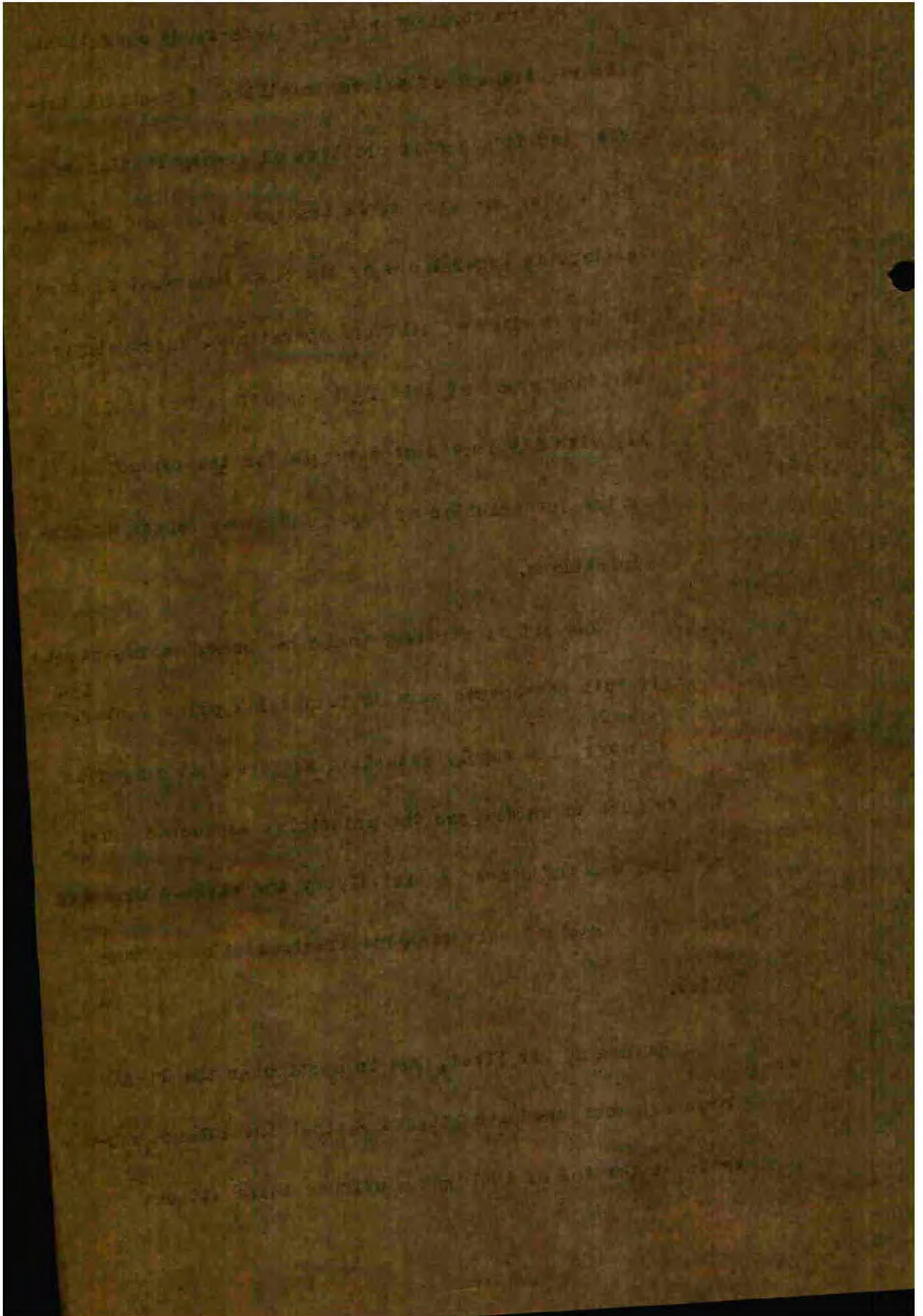
a fleet of landing ships, artificial ports, a fuel pipeline, and so forth.

Modern strategy with its long-range operations, its requirement of extreme mobility of tactical forces, and its gigantic problems of transportation by land, sea, and air, makes transportation and communications in general one of the most important factors in the conduct of military operations. Increasingly striking proof of this fact was offered by World War II, with its incessant struggle for the control of or the interdiction of major and minor routes of communications.

The art of strategy would be doomed to degenerate if this phenomenon were to become its prime factor. 154

However, the supply situation suffered not only from the failure to understand the principles expounded above, but also was influenced decisively by the attacks directed from Malta against Axis seaborne transportation of supplies.

The Second Air Fleet, and in particular the II Air Corps had commenced its attacks against the island fortress at the end of 1941 and continued these attacks

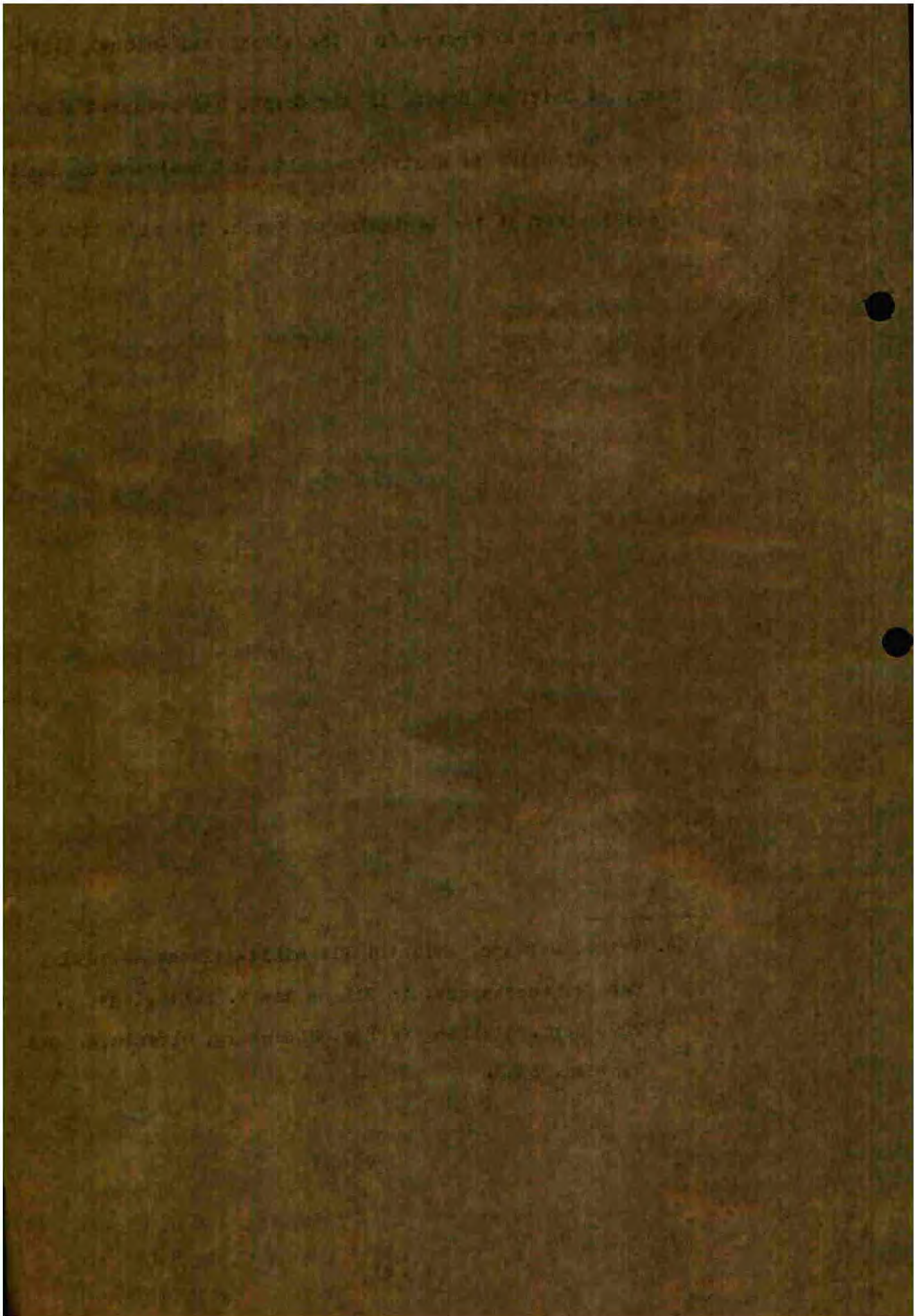


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with growing intensity and in mounting force as the months passed.

Pursuant to orders from the air fleet, Colonel Deichmann, as Chief of Staff, II Air Corps, had prepared plans for an offensive to neutralize Malta and designed to commence approximately at the beginning of March. The objective was

154. Teske, Hermann, Colonel: Die militärische Bedeutung des Verkehrswesens; in Bilanz des 2. Weltkriegs, p. 229, Gerh. Stalling Verlag, Oldenburg, Oldenburg, and Hamburg, 1953.



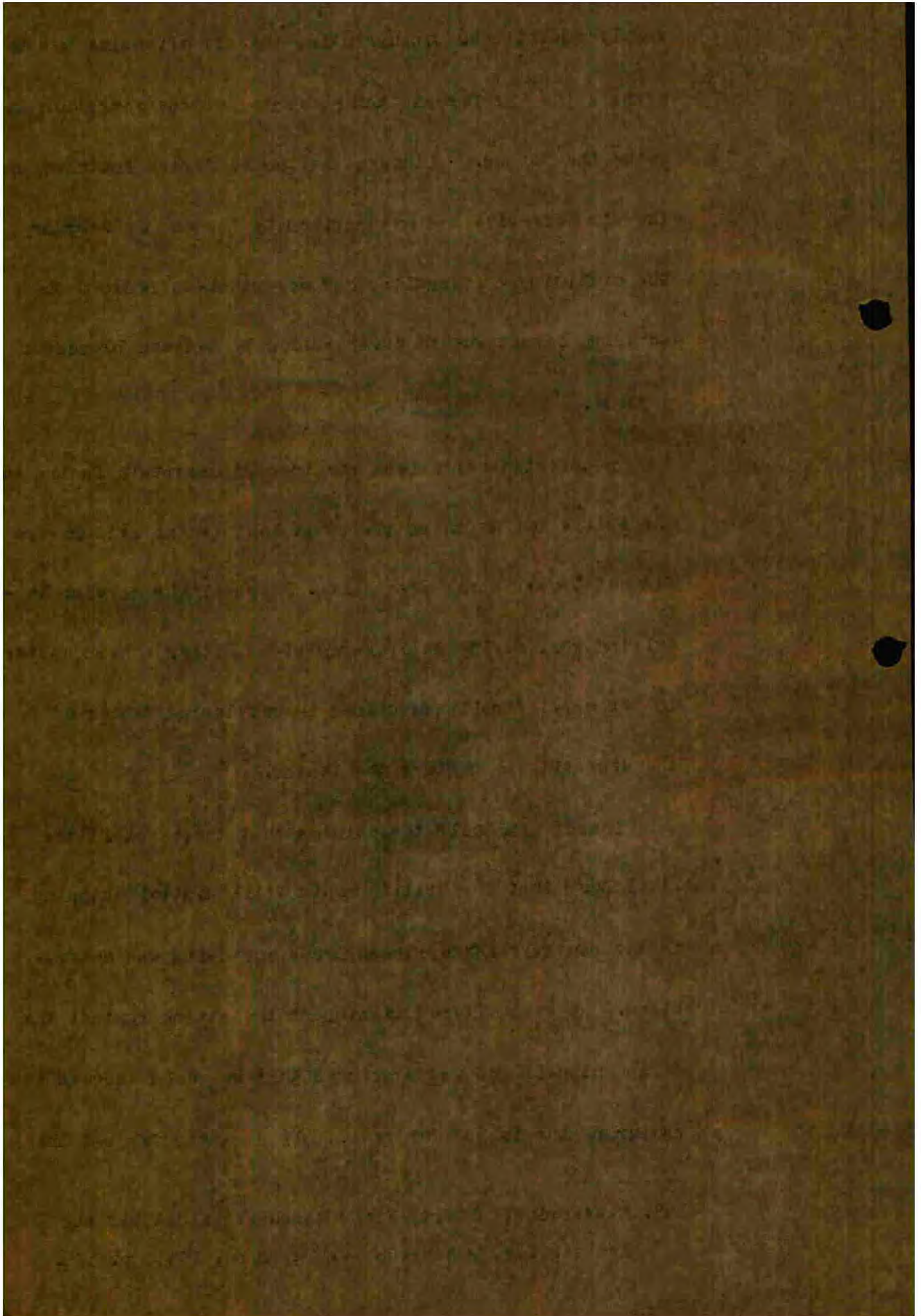
255

to eliminate the hostile air and naval forces stationed at Malta together with their repair and maintenance and supply facilities. Concurrently, the air offensive was to prepare the way for an Italo-German airborne operation to seize the island. Although the bomber forces intended for the air offensive had not arrived by the end of February, the preliminary operations had nevertheless reduced the shipping losses due to enemy action by between 70 and 80 percent.

Supplies nevertheless remained an uncertain factor in the battle for Northern Africa as long as the Axis powers did not have control over Malta. It was Field Marshal Kesselring who, during an oral report at Hitler's headquarters in February, finally succeeded in convincing Hitler of the necessity to capture the island.¹⁵⁵

Fommel also held the opinion that there was little likelihood that the British could still control shipping in the central Mediterranean area as long as Malta was neutralized. He even offered to conduct the attack against the island himself and was convinced that he would succeed in capturing the island fortress. All he asked for was the

155. Kesselring, Albert, Field Marshal: Soldat bis zum letzten Tag, Athenaeum Verlag, Bonn, 1953, p. 148.



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necessary troops and adequate naval and air support.

156

On 13 February Grand Admiral Raeder also drew Hitler's attention to the changed situation in the Mediterranean and urgently stressed the necessity to capture Malta. However, Hitler was doubtful about Italian cooperation in the attack and had his mind on plans for the coming summer

157

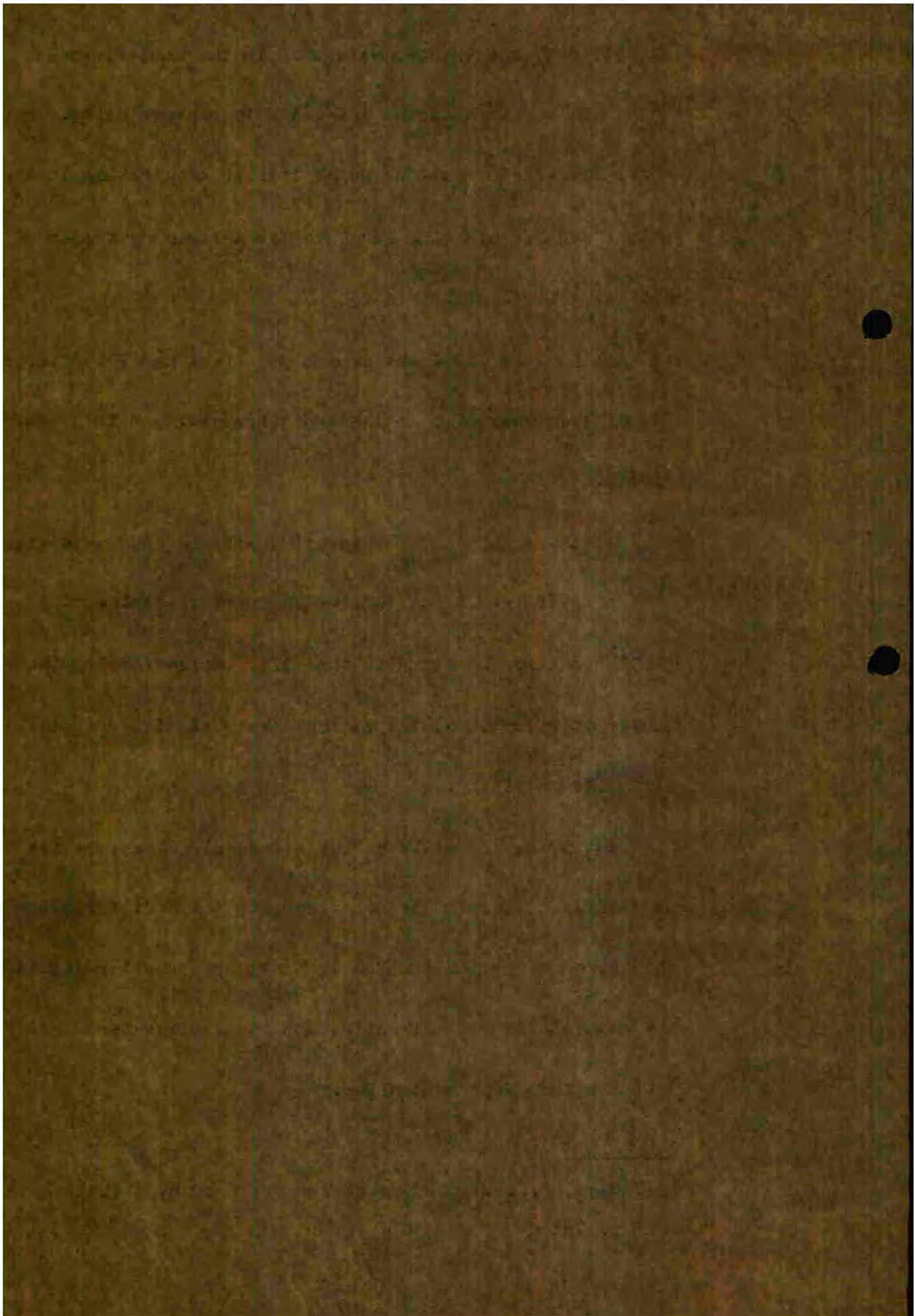
offensive in Russia.

On 14 March 1942 the Second Air Fleet had 701 aircraft, 398 of them operable, in the Mediterranean,* and in Northern Africa.

Of the total of 701 aircraft available, 352 were stationed on Sicily. Of this number 229 were operable. The compilation for 14 March is the first source showing the number of aircraft of the various types stationed on the airfields on Sicily.**

The order of battle of the Second Air Fleet, so far as its flying forces are concerned, in the Mediterranean Theater on 4 April 1942 also is shown by a chart revealing the distribution of all units and the various headquarters by which they were controlled.***

156. Hart, B.H.S.: The Rommel Papers, London, Collins 1953, p. 288



234a

156--cont.

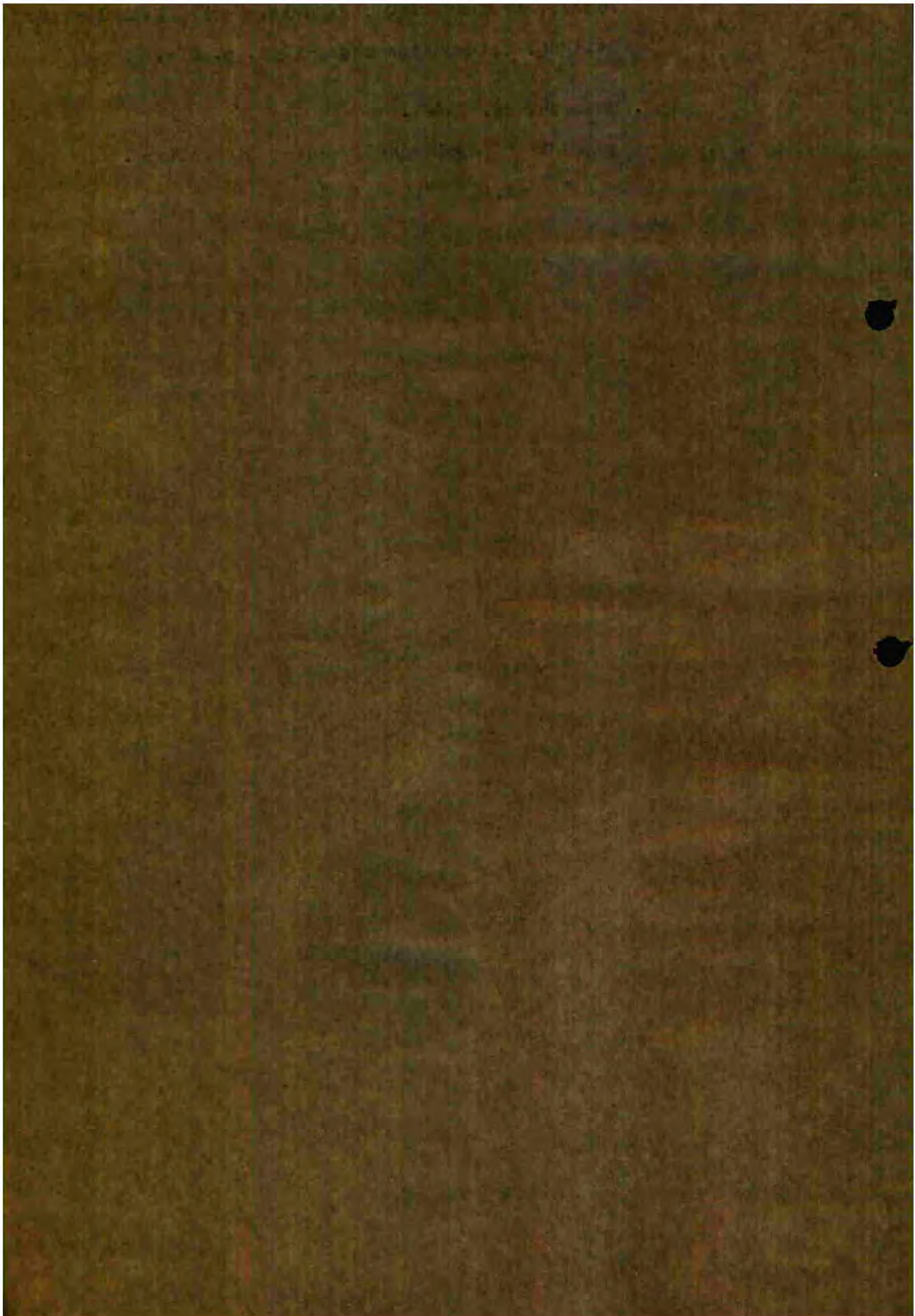
Rommel, Erwin: Krieg ohne Hass, Verlag Heidelberger
Zeitung, Heidenheim/Brenz, 1950, p. 229.

157. Asmann, pp. 356-7.

* Appendix 1 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

** " 2, " " "

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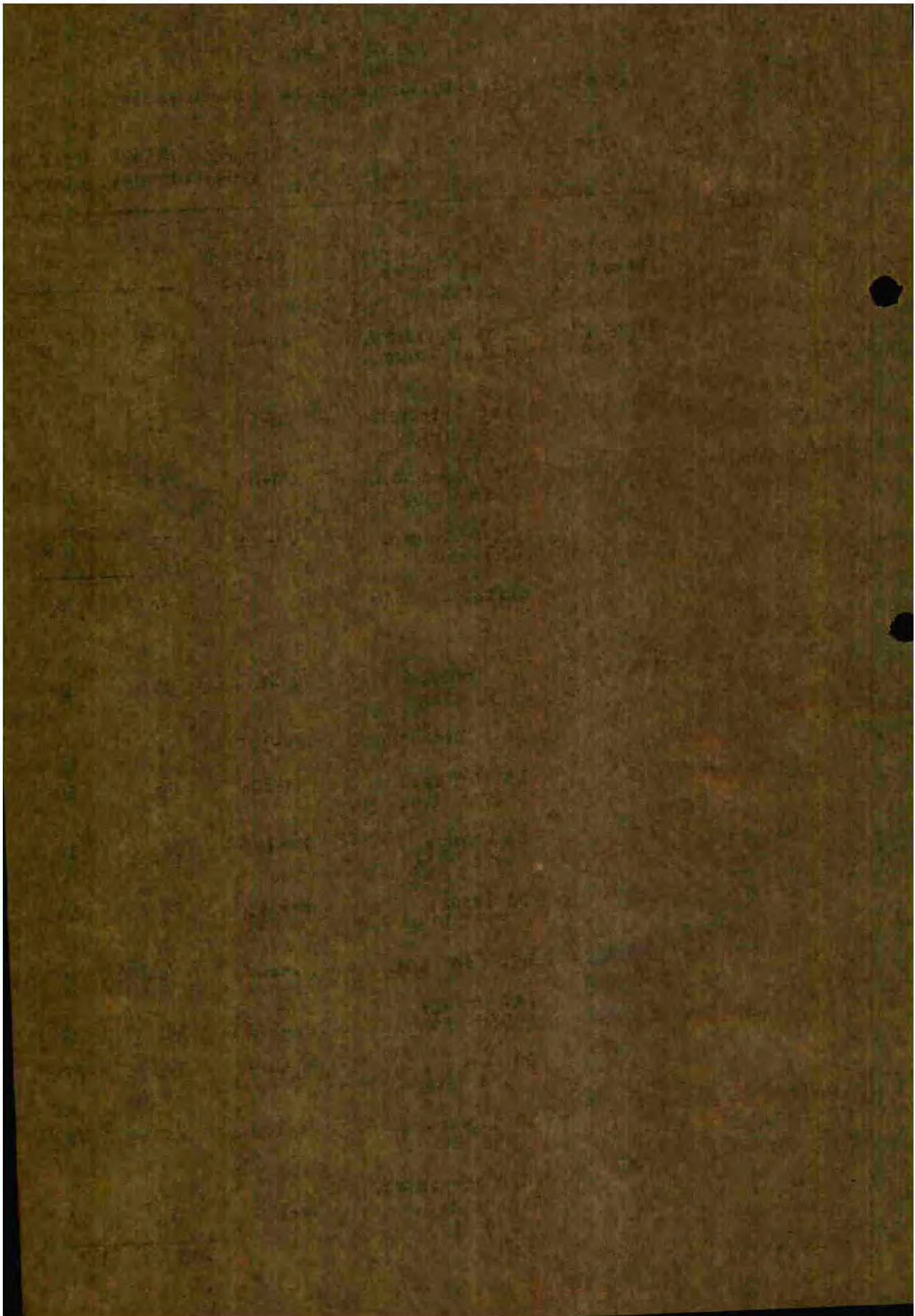
Appendix 1 to page 234.

GERMAN AIR FORCES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN
AND AFRICA

STATUS 14 March 1942

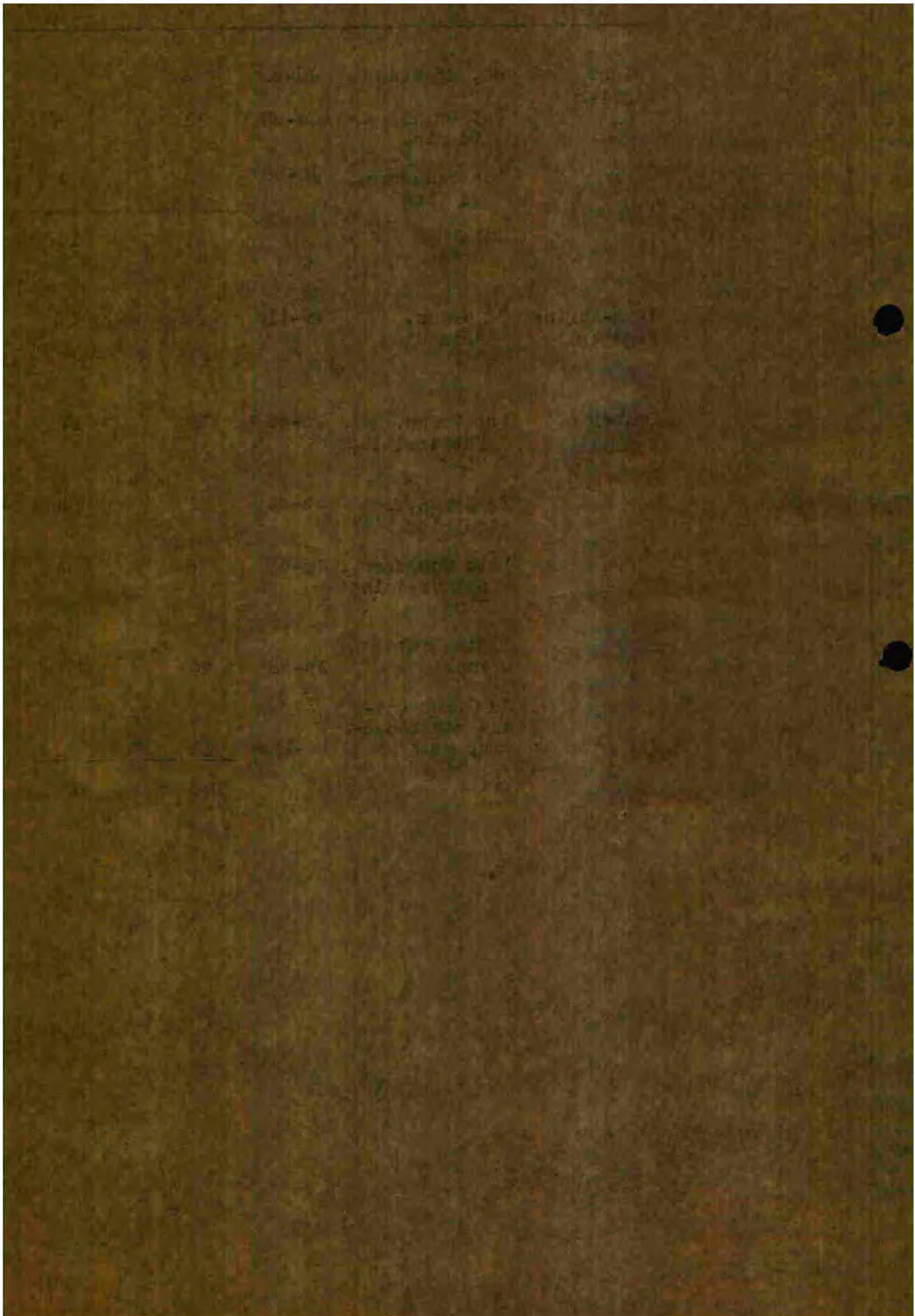
(According to Situation Maps in British Possession)

Type	Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Tactical Recon	2d Squadron w/ 14th Panzer Division	Me-110:	16	9
		Me-109		
Strategic Recon	1st Squadron, 121st Group P	Ju-88	8	3
	1st Squadron, 122d Group	Ju-88	11	7
	2d Squadron, 122d Group	Ju-88	6	4
	2d Squadron, 123 Group	Ju-88	11	6
	Total		36	20
Fighter	2d Group, 3d Wing	Me-109	39	25
	HQ, 27th Wing	Me-109	1	1
	1st Group, 27th Wing	Me-109	26	10
	2d Group, 27th Wing	Me-109	31	14
	3d Group, 27th Wing	Me-109	28	14
	HQ, 53d Wing	Me-109	4	4
	1st Group, 53d Wing	Me-109	35	32
	2d Group, 53d Wing	Me-109	39	27
	3d Group, 53d Wing	Me-109	32	29
	Fighter-Bomber Squadron, 53d Wing	Me-109	8	8
	Total		243	164



Appendix 1 to page 234Axis aircraft strength, status 14 March 1942, continued.

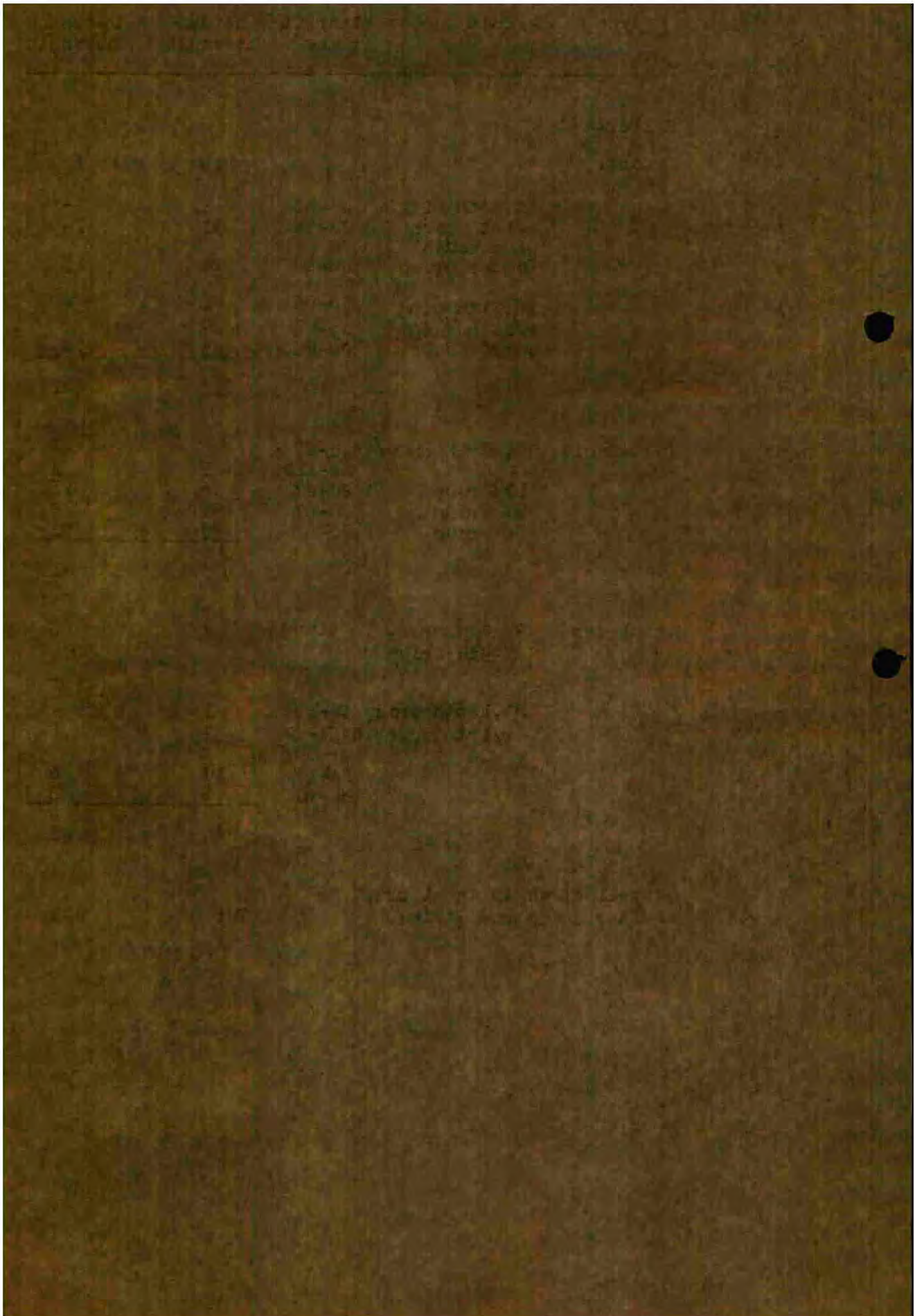
Type	Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Night Fighter	HQ, 2d Wing	Ju-88	4	4
	1st Group, 2d Wing	Ju-88	11	5
	4th Squadron, 2d Wing	Ju-88	3	1
	Total		18	10
Twin-Engine Fighter	3d Group, 26th Wing	Me-110	28	17
Bomber	1st Group, 1st Training Wing	Ju-88	29	17
	2d Group, 1st Training Wing	Ju-88	31	16
	12th Squadron, 1st Training Wing	Ju-88	6	4
	606th Bomber Group	Ju-88	24	18
	2d Group (minus 6th Squadron), 26th Wing	He-111	18	5
	Total		108	60



2

Appendix 1 to page 234Axis aircraft strength, Status 14 March 1942, continued.

Type	Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Bomber--				
cont.			108	60
	HQ, 54th Wing	JU-88	1	-
	w/1st Group	JU-88	31	14
	plus 800th Bomber Group	Ju-88	24	13
	HQ, 77th Wing	JU-88	1	-
	w/II Group	Ju-88	27	8
	& III Group	JU-88	23	12
			<u>215</u>	<u>107</u>
Dive-Bomber	HQ, 3d Wing w/	JU-87 & Me-110	5	3
	1st Group	JU-87	36	18
	2d Group	JU-87	39	2
	3d Group	JU-87	25	20
			<u>105</u>	<u>43</u>
Seaplanes	2d Squadron, 125th Group	Ar-196	9	6
	HQ, 126th Group	BV-138	1	-
	w/1st Squadron	He-60	9	8
	2d "	Ar 196 & He-60	13	8
	3d "	He-60	8	6
			<u>40</u>	<u>28</u>
Overall strength in aircraft in Mediterranean and Africa			701	398

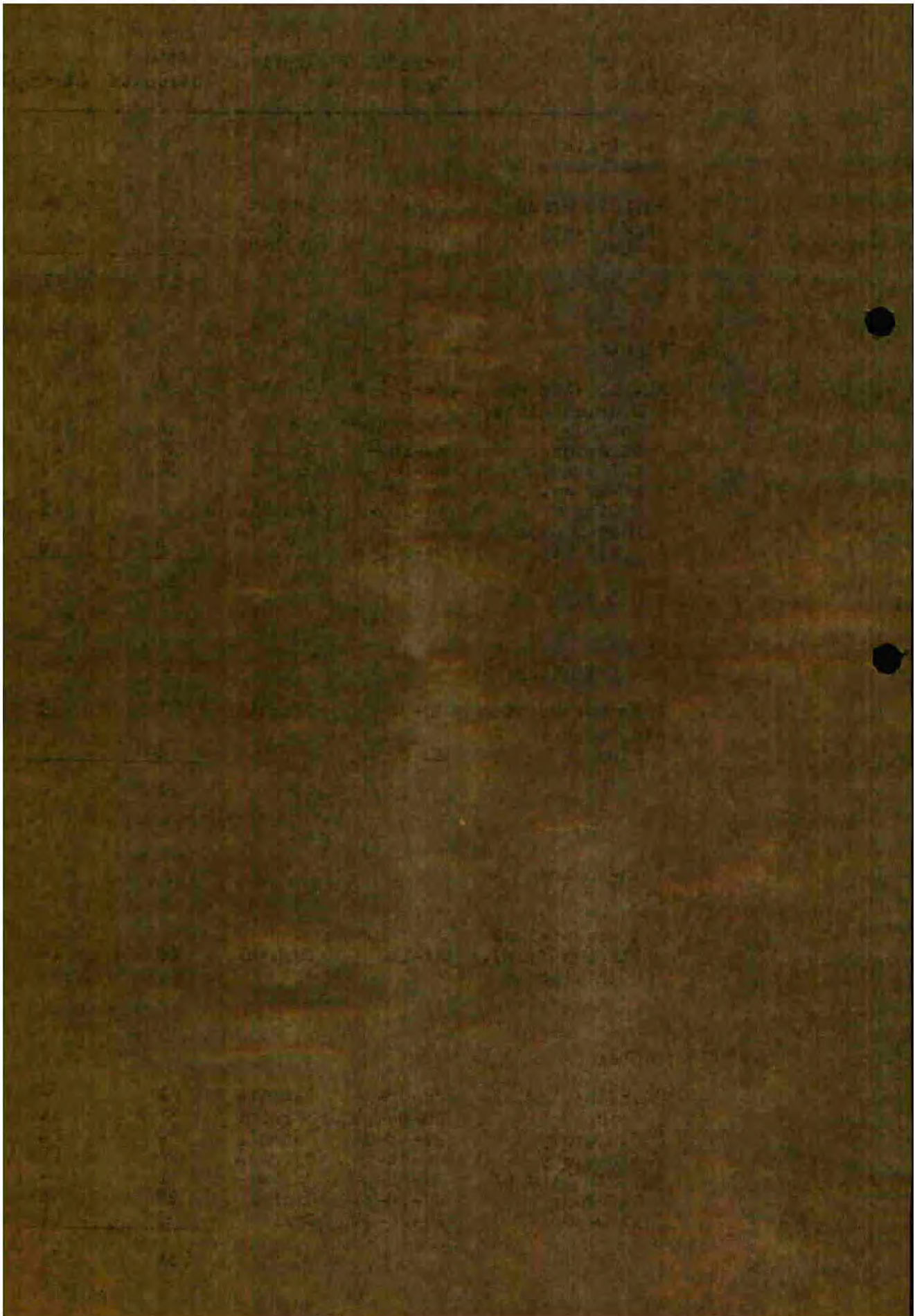


Appendix 2 to Page 234

GERMAN AIR FORCES STATIONED ON SICILY

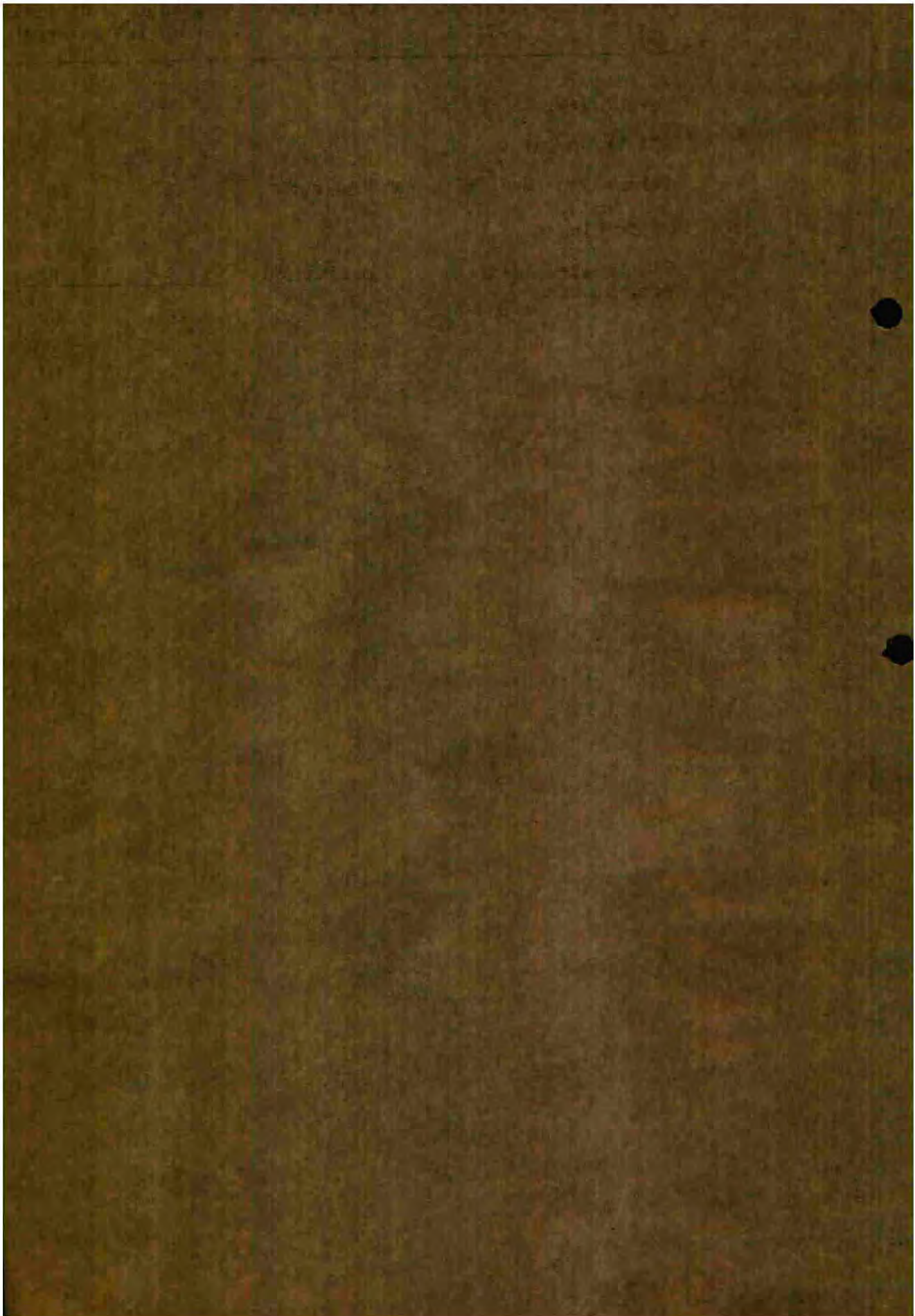
Status 14 March 1942

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Airfield	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Strategic Reconnaissance				
HQ, 122d Group	JU-88	Trapani	6	4
w/2d Squadron & 1st "	JU-88	Trapani	11	7
	JU-88	Gerbini		
			<hr/> 17	<hr/> 11
Fighter				
HQ, 53d Wing w/ I Group minus 1st Squadron	Me-109-F	Comiso	4	4
II Group	Me-109-F	Gela	24	22
III Group	Me-109-F	Comiso	39	27
III Group	Me-109-F	Comiso	32	29
II Group, 3d Wing	Me-109-F	San Pietro	39	25
10th Squadron, 53d Wing	Me-109-F	Gela	8	8
			<hr/> 146	<hr/> 115
Night Fighter				
I Group, 2d Wing	JU-88	Catania	11	5
4th Squadron, 2d Wing	JU-88		3	1
			<hr/> 14	<hr/> 6
Twin-Engine Fighter				
III Group (minus 7th Squadron), 26th Wing	Me-110	Trapani	19	12
Bomber				
HQ, 54th Wing w/ I Group	JU-88-A4	Catania	1	-
806th Group	JU-88-A4	Gerbini	31	14
605th Group	JU-88-A4	Catania	24	13
605th Group	JU-88-A4	Catania	24	18
HQ, 77th Wing w/ II Group	JU-88-A4	Comiso	1	-
III Group	JU-88-A4	Comiso	27	8
	JU-88-A4	Comiso	23	12
			<hr/> 131	<hr/> 65



Appendix 2 to Page 234.German Air Forces on Sicily, Status 14 March 1942, cont.

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Airfield	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Dive-Bomber				
III Group (mi				
(minus 9th Squadron), of 3d Wing	Ju-87-D	San Fancrazio	18	15
9th Squadron, 3d Wing	Ju-87-D	San Pietro	7	5
			<hr/> 25	<hr/> 20



Appendix 3 to Page 234

SECOND AIR FLEET (MEDITERRANEAN)

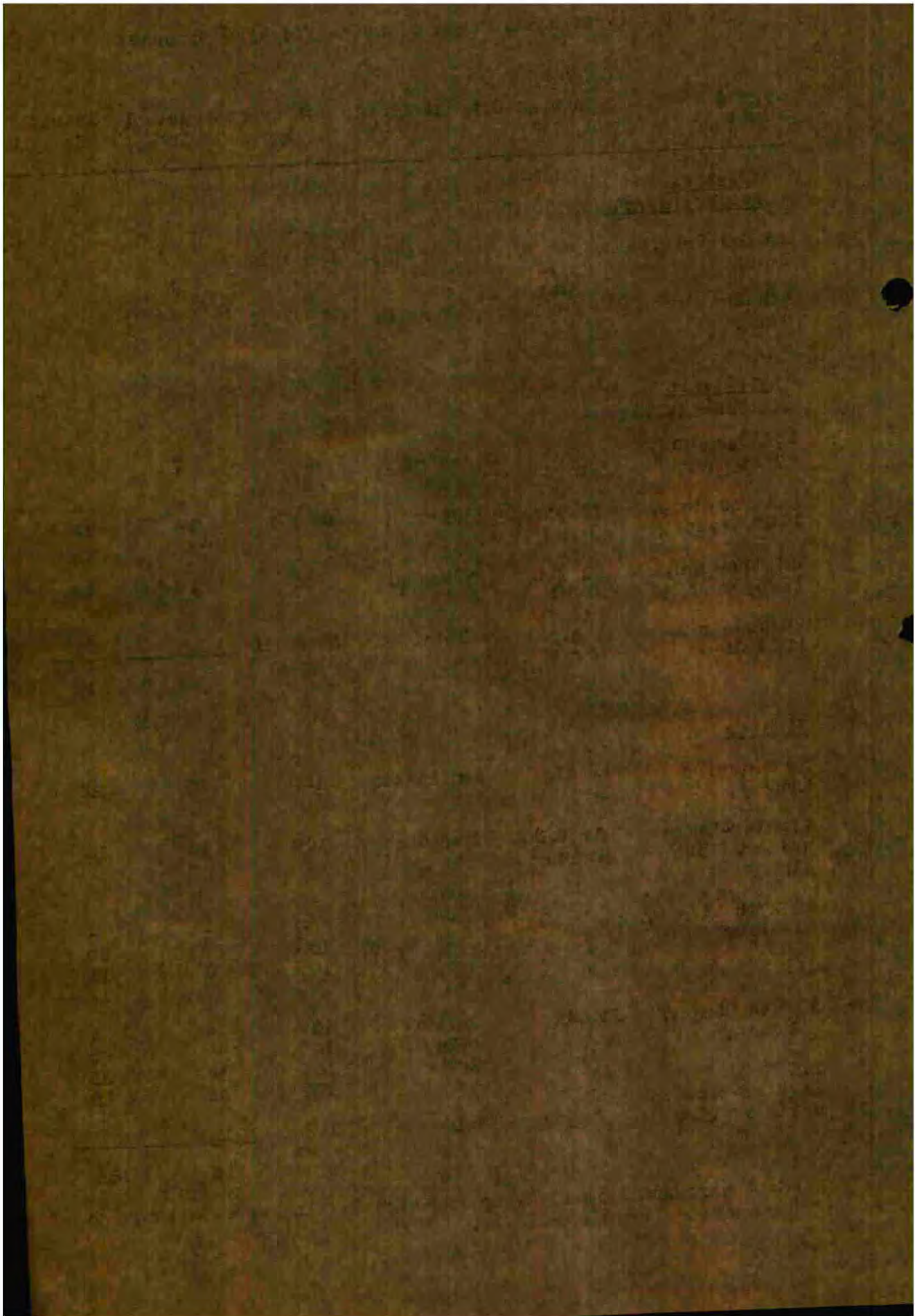
ORDER OF BATTLE (AIR FORCES)

4 April 1942

(According to Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command)

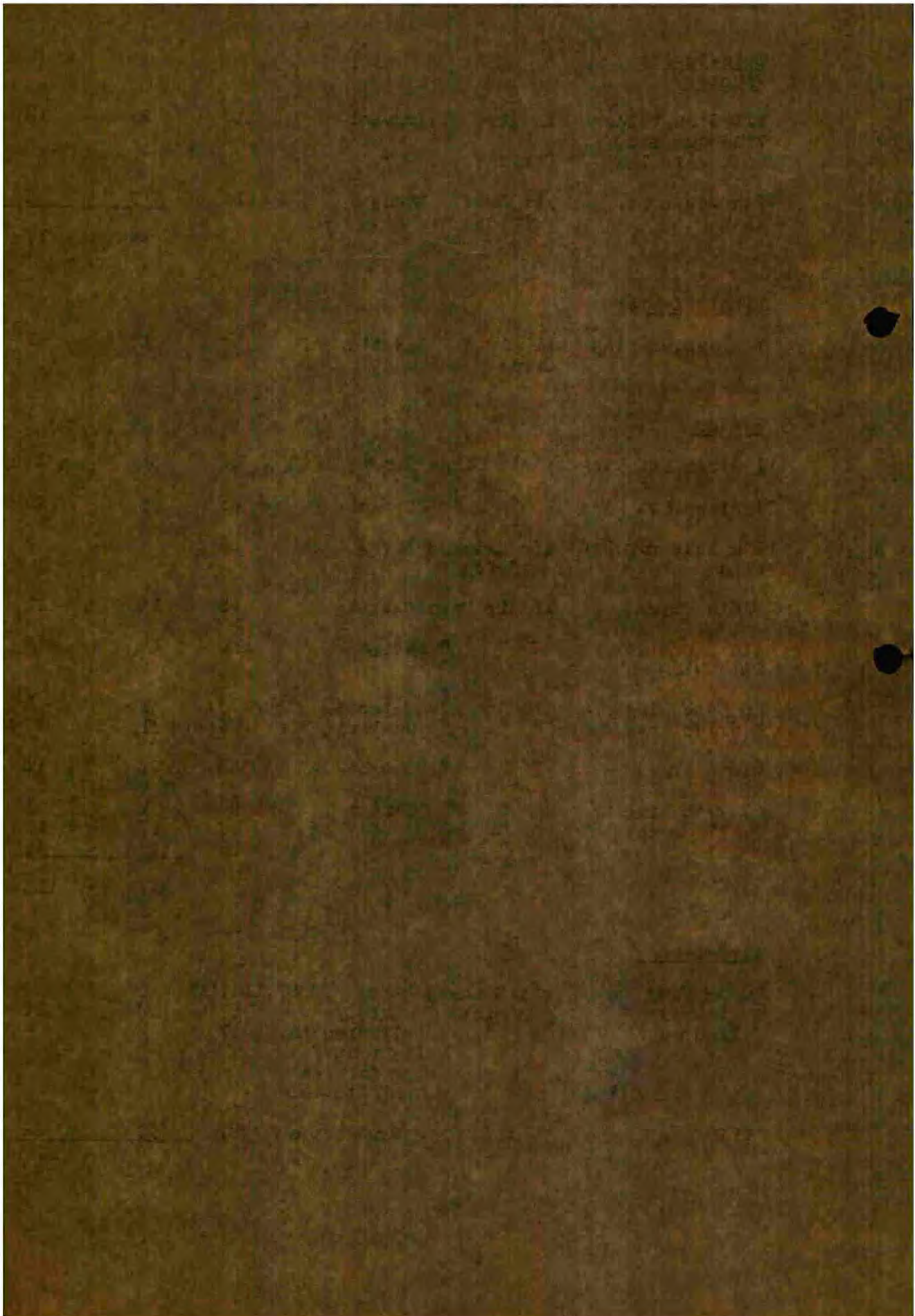
Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
<u>Tactical Reconnaissance</u>					
2d Squadron, 14th Group	IAC ^W w/ Panzer Army	Martuba	109 & 110	14	6
4th Squadron, 12th Group	Africa	Martuba	109 & 110		
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>					
1st Squadron, 121st Group	as above	Lerna	88	7	5
1st Squadron, 122d Group	II Air Corps	Gerbini	88 & 109	14	10
2d Squadron, 122d Group	HQ Air Fleet	Trapani	88	12	10
2d Squadron, 123d Group	X Air Corps	Tatoi	88 & 110	13	4
				46	29
<u>Fighter</u>					
2d Group, 3d Wing	II Air Corps	San Pietro	109	25	22
Fighter-bomber units of 3d Wing	Air Comd Africa	Martuba	109	10	10
HQ 27th Wing w/ I Group	"	"	109	-	-
II "	"	"	109	26	12
III "	"	"	109	30	11
				109	12
HQ 53d Wing w/ I Group	II Air Corps	Comiso	109	4	4
II "	"	Gela	109	34	28
III "	"	Comiso	109	34	23
Fighter-bomber units of wing	"	"	109	32	25
		Gela	109	10	7
				212	154

Note: 4 aircraft from II Group, 3d Fighter Wing were detached to operate from Pantelleria.



Appendix 3 to Page 234--continued

Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Aircraft Type	Strength Actual	Operable
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>					
III Group (minus 7th Squadron), 26th Air Wing	II Air Corps	Trapani	110	20	13
7th Squadron, 26th Wing	Air Command Africa	Berna	110	9	5
				29	17
<u>Night Fighter</u>					
I Group, 26 Wing	II Air Corps	Catania	88	17	11
<u>Bomber</u>					
I Group, 1st Wing	X Air Corps	Candia	88	31	12
II Group, 1st Wing	II " "	Catania	88	35	20
12th Squadron, 1st Wing	Air Command Africa	Berca	88	9	2
806th Group	II Air Corps	Catania	88	16	11
4th Squadron, 26th Wing	X " "	Kalamaki	111	14	5
HQ 54th Wing w/ I Group	II " "	Catania	88	1	1
	" "	Gerbinì	88	31	20
806th Group	" "	Catania	88	27	16
HQ 77th Wing w/ II Group	" "	Comiso	88	1	1
III "	" "	" "	88	17	10
			88	25	15
				207	113
<u>Five-Bomber</u>					
HQ 3d Wing w/ I Group	Air Command Africa	Berca	87, 110, 111	5	4
II Group	" "	Martuba	87	32	16
	" "	(withdrawn to Italy on 7 Apr for rehabilitation)	87	8	-
III "	II Air Corps	San Pietro	87	35	22
				80	42

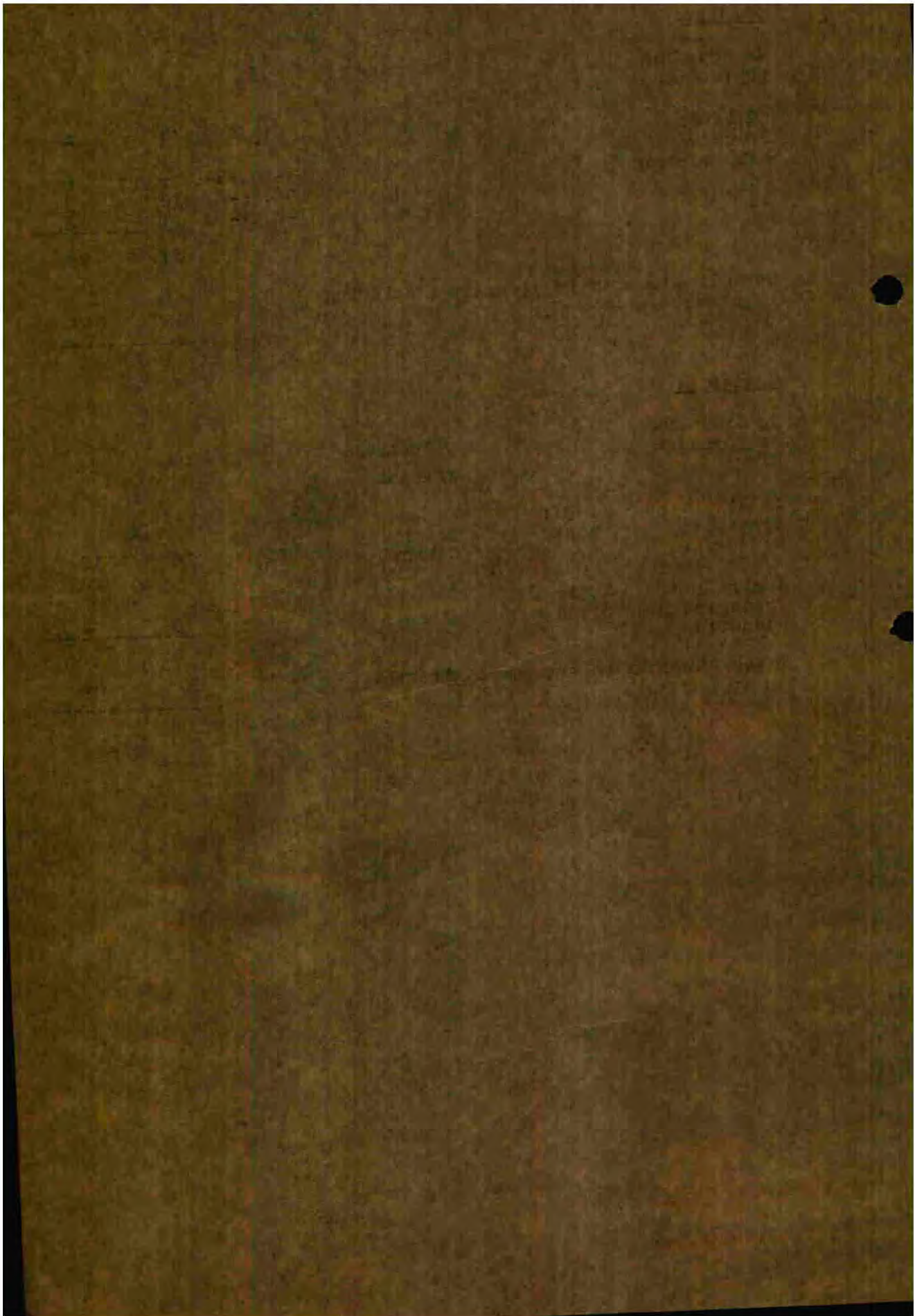


Appendix 3 to Base 234--continued

Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Aircraft Type	Strength	
				Actual	Operable
<u>Seaplane</u>					
2d Squadron, 125th Group	X Air Corps	Skaramanka	198	9	8
HQ 126th Group w/ 1st Squadron	"	"	138	1	-
2d	"	"	HE-60, FI-8	9	6
3d	"	Kavalle	196, He-60	10	5
		Skaramanka	FI-8, He-60	8	6
				37	25
Overall strength in aircraft (Excluding Transport Units)				542	397

Transport

3d Group, 1st Sp Purposes Wing		Brindise & Trapani	52	28	18
II Air Corps Transport Squadrons	II Air Corps	Reggio & Calabria	52	16	12
X Air Corps Transport Squadron	X Air Corps	Athens	52	6	4
Total strength in transport aircraft				50	34



235

The II Air Corps had 378 aircraft stationed on Sicily, approximately 50 percent of them bombers and 50 percent fighters. Of the total number 258 were operable.**

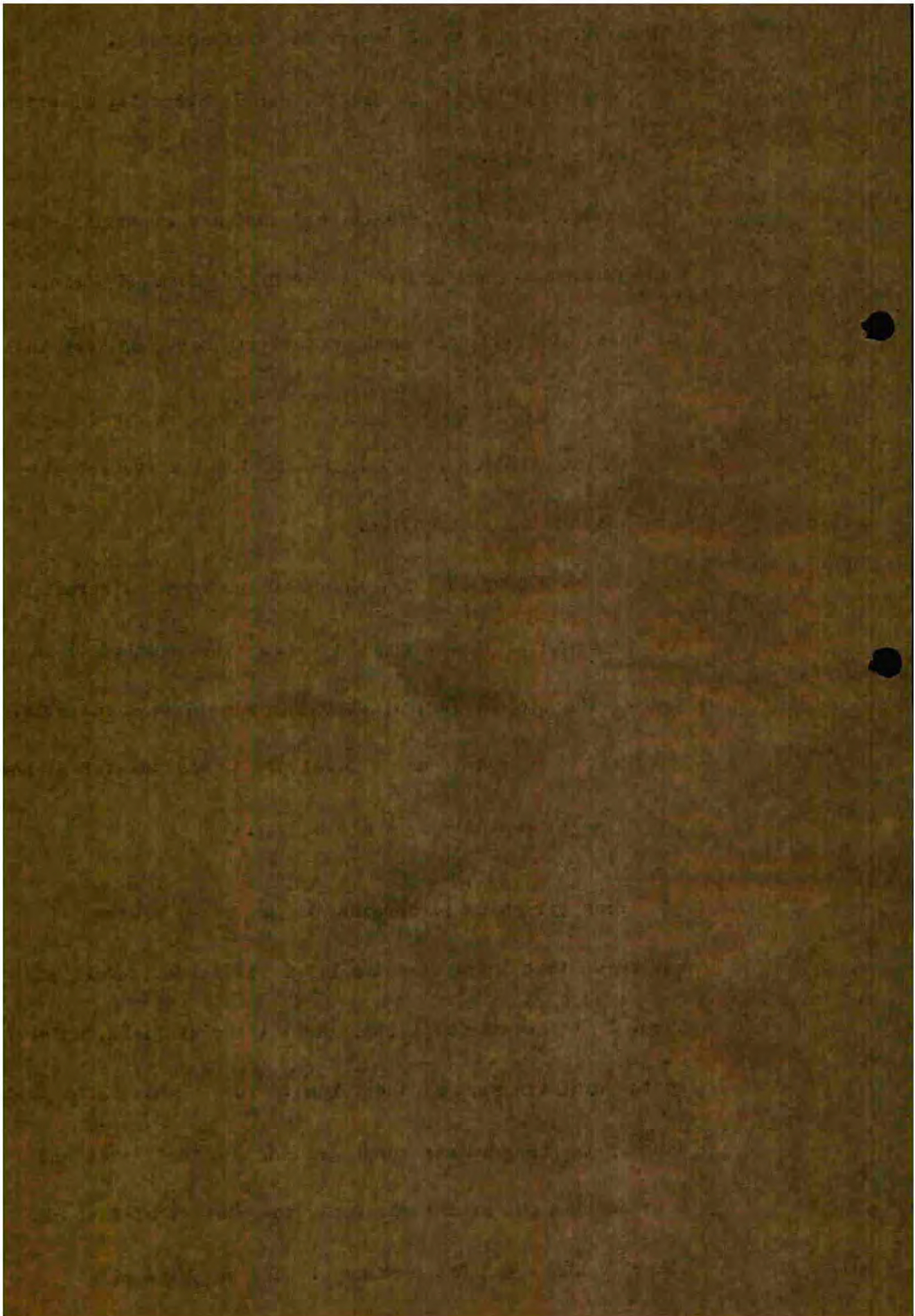
The X Air Corps, in Greece, had 95 aircraft, of which 46 were operable.**

A total of 169 aircraft were assigned to support Panzer Army Rommel and under command by Air Command Africa. Of these aircraft, the most of them fighters, 85 were in operable condition.***

No compilation is available showing the Italian aircraft committed at the time.

By 13 April, finally, the total number of aircraft stationed in the Mediterranean theater had mounted to an actual strength of 742, of which number 467 were operable. This was the largest number committed in the theater at any one time during this phase of the war.***

From air photo reconnaissance and other sources it was known that there were two large airfields, Takali and Luqa, in the center of Malta, and a third airfield, Hal-Far, in the southern part of the island. It was known also that some of the hangars were underground, and that caves had been blasted out of the rocks for the storage of fuel and other supplies and for workshops. The seaplane base

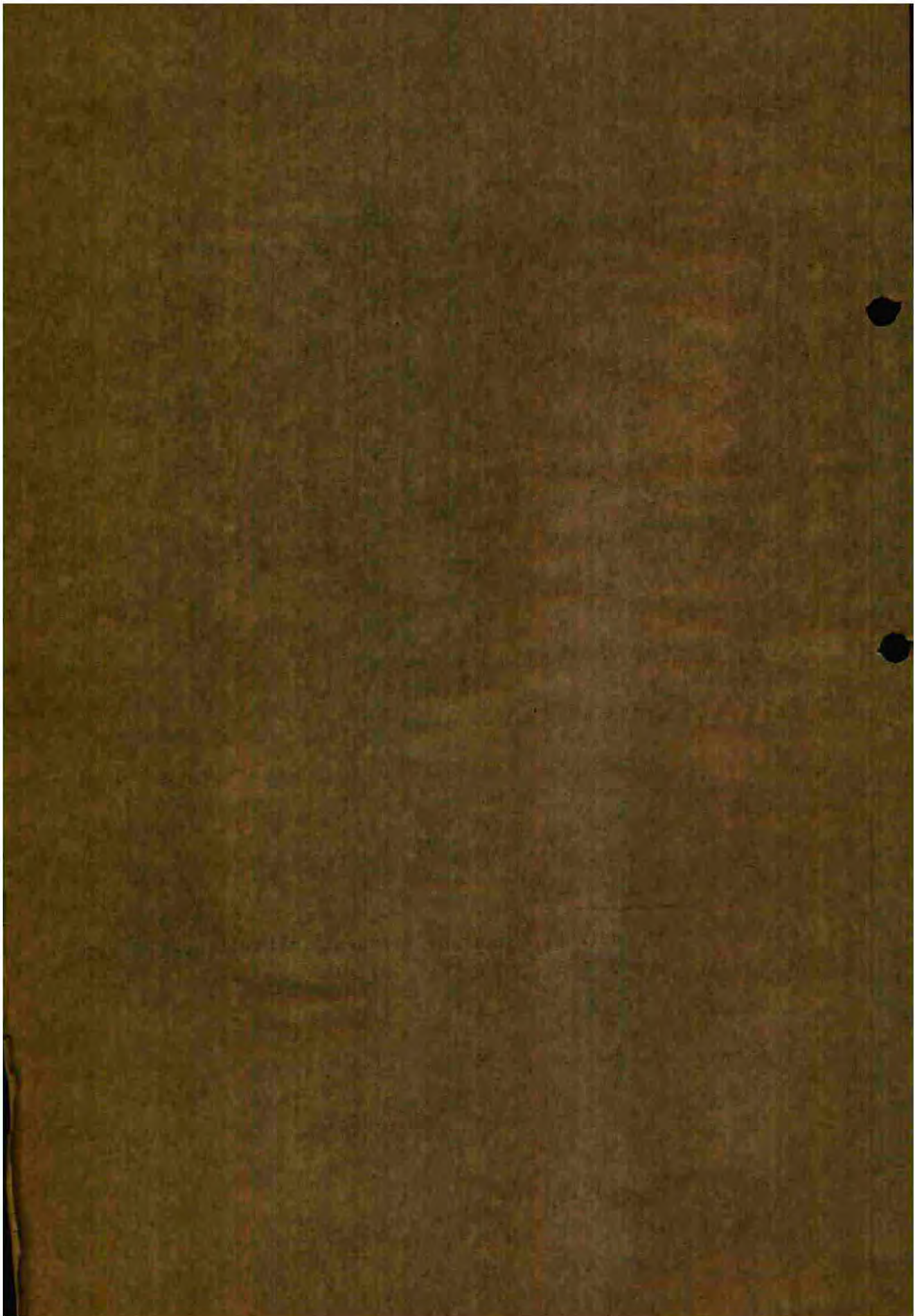


235a

of Kalafrene was in a bay in the vicinity of Hal-Far.

Appendix 1, (Kerlaruhe Document Collection).

**	"	2	("	"	"
***	"	3		"	"	"
****	"	4		"	"	"



Appendix 1 to Page 235

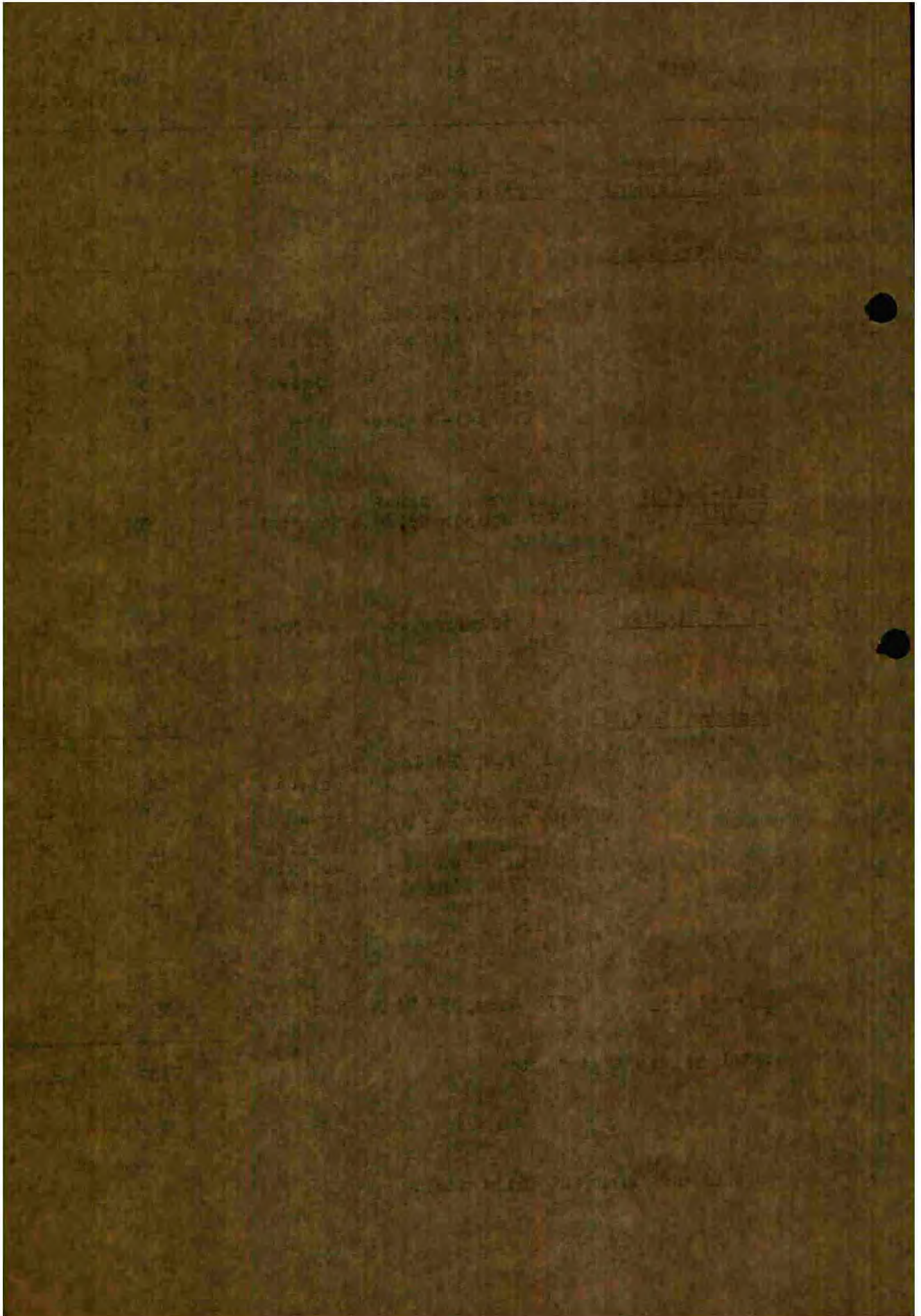
II AIR CORPS

Strength in Aircraft on 4 April 1942

(From Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command) *

Type	Unit	Base	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>	1st Squadron, 122d Group	Gerbini	14	10
<u>Fighter Total</u>			<u>139</u>	<u>109</u>
	2d Group, 3d Wing	San Pietro	25	22
	HQ 53d Wing w/ I Group	Comiso	4	4
	II "	Gela	34	28
	III "	Comiso	34	23
	III "	"	32	25
	Fighter-Bombers	Gela	10	7
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>	III Group (minus 7th Squadron), 26th Trapani Wing		20	12
<u>Night Fighter</u>	1st Group, 2d Wing	Catania	17	11
<u>Bomber Total</u>			<u>153</u>	<u>116</u>
	II Group, 2d Tng Wing	Catania	35	20
	66th Group	"	16	11
	HQ 54th Wing w/ I Group	"	1	1
	66th Group	Gerbini	31	20
	HQ 77th Wing w/ II Group	Catania	27	16
	II Group	Comiso	1	1
	III "	"	17	10
	III "	"	25	15
<u>Dive-Bomber</u>	III Group, 3d Wing	San Pietro	35	22
<u>Total aircraft strength</u>			<u>378</u>	<u>258</u>

* Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Appendix 2 to Page 235

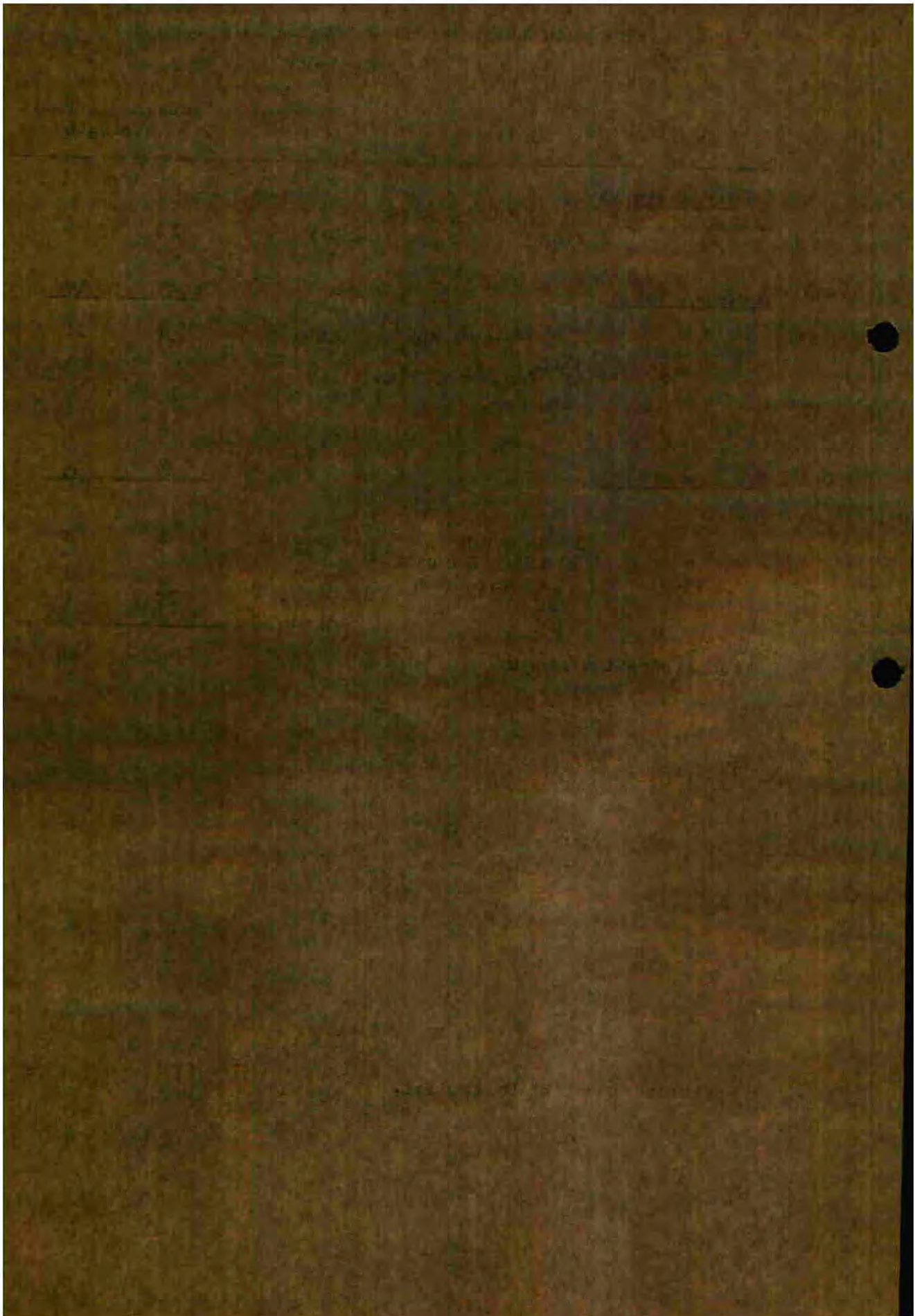
X AIR CORPS

Strength in aircraft on 4 April 1942

(From Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command)^a

Type	Unit	Base	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>	2d Squadron, 123d Wing	Tatoi	13	4
<u>Bomber Total</u>			<u>45</u>	<u>17</u>
	I Group, 1st Ing Wing	Sondia	31	12
	4th Squadron, 26th Wing	Kalamaki	14	5
<u>Seaplane Total</u>			<u>37</u>	<u>25</u>
	2d Squadron, 125th Group	Skaramanga	9	8
	HQ 126th Group w/ 1st Squadron	"	1	-
	2d "	"	9	6
	2d "	Awalla	10	5
	3d "	Skaramanga	8	6
<u>Total aircraft strength</u>			<u>96</u>	<u>46</u>

^a Karlsruhe Document Collection.



appendix 3 to Page 235

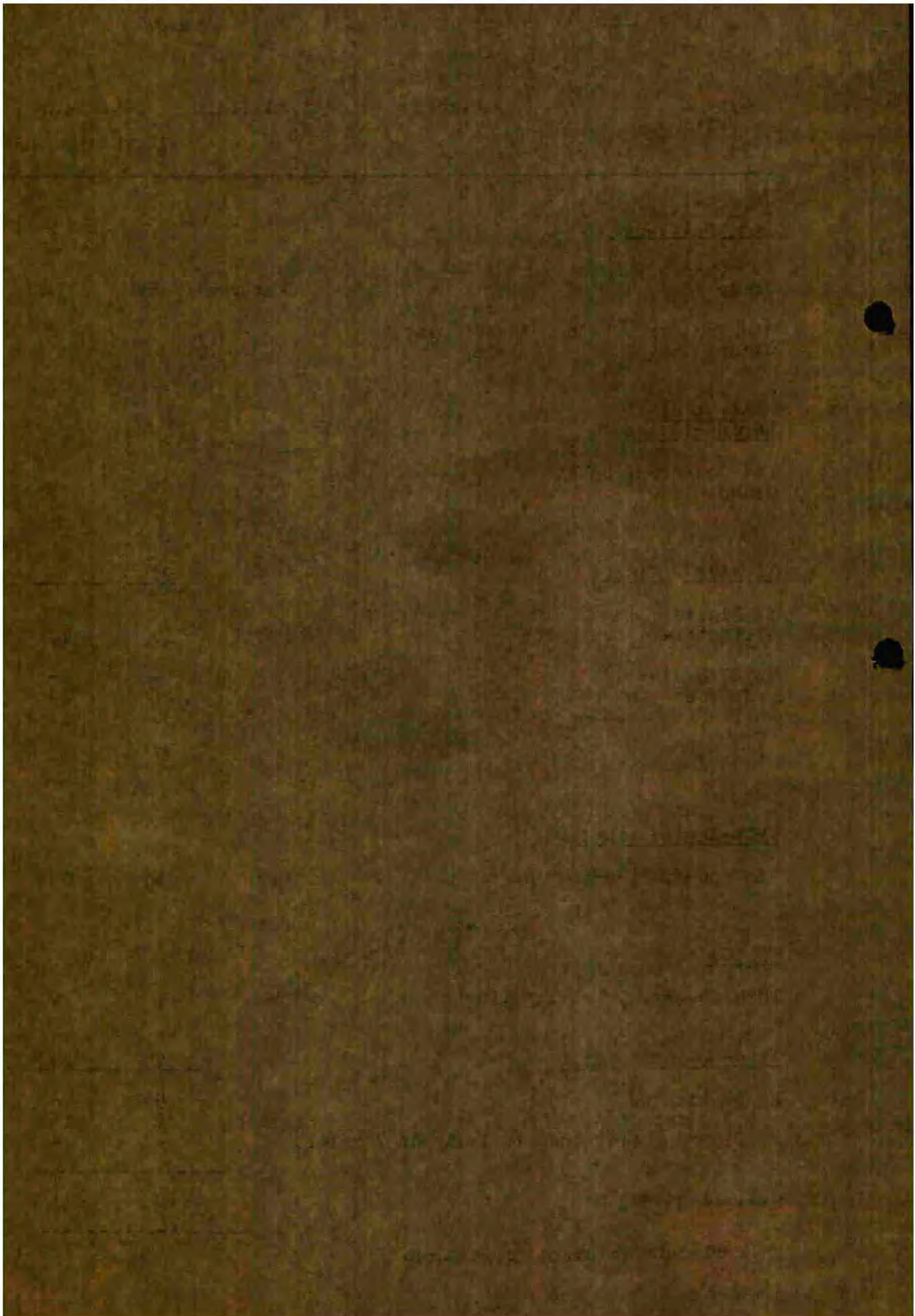
AIR COMMAND AFRICA AND PANZER ARMY AFRICA

Aircraft Strength on 4 April 1942

(From Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command)*

Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Strength	
			Actual	Operable
<u>Tactical Reconnaissance</u>				
2d Squadron, 14th Group	Tactical Air Command w/ Panzer Army Africa	Martuba	14	6
4th Squadron, 14th Group	"	"		
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>				
1st Squadron, 121st Group	"	Terna	7	5
<u>Fighter Total</u>			<u>93</u>	<u>45</u>
3d Fighter Wing fighter-bomber units		Martuba	10	10
HQ 27th Wing w/ I Group		"	26	12
II "		"	30	11
III "		"	27	12
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>				
7th Squadron, 26th Wing		Terna	9	5
<u>Bomber</u>				
12th Squadron, 1st BzG Wing		Berka	9	2
<u>Five-Bomber Total</u>			<u>37</u>	<u>20</u>
HQ 3d Wing w/ I Group		"	5	4
II " (returned to Italy on 7 April)		Martuba	32	16
			-	-
Overall strength			<u>169</u>	<u>83</u>

* Karlsruhe Document Collection.



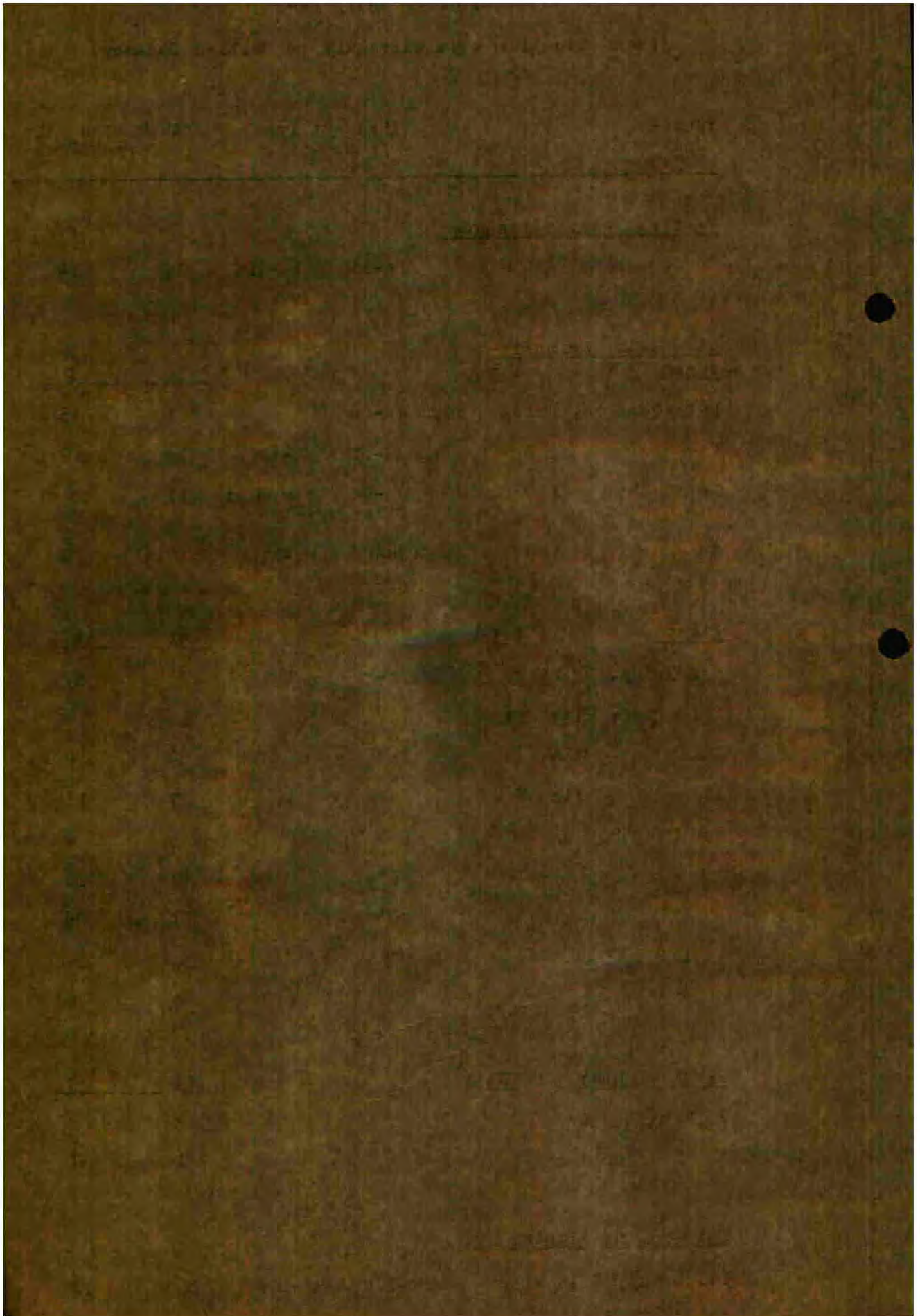
Appendix 4 to Page 235.

GERMAN AIR FORCES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND AFRICA

Status 16 April 1942

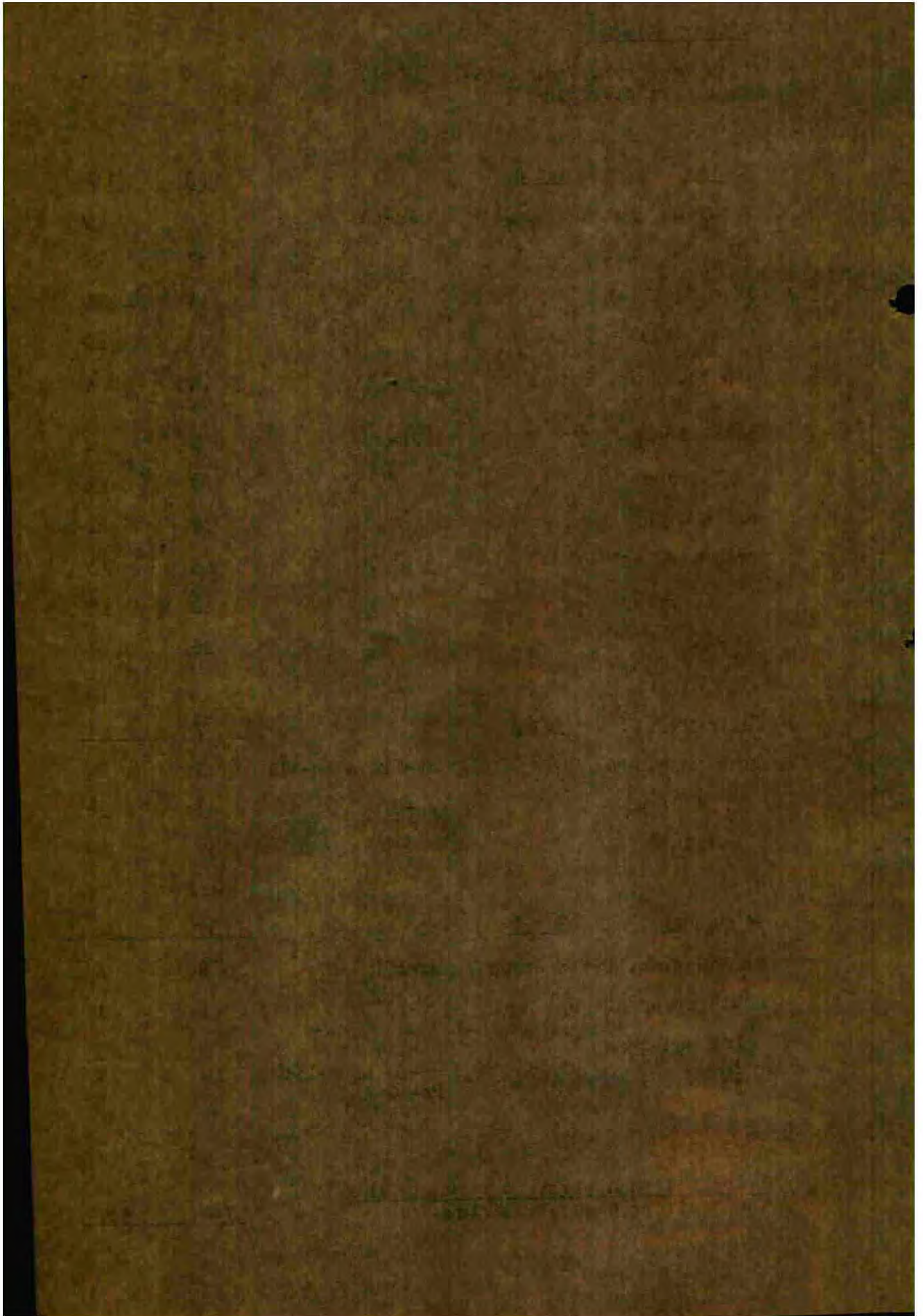
(From Situation Maps Currently in British Custody)

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual	Operable Strength
<u>Tactical Reconnaissance</u>			
2d Squadron, 14th Group	Me-110 & Me-109	19	14
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>			
	<u>Total</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>31</u>
1st Squadron, 121st Group	Ju-88	6	5
1st " 122d "	Ju-88 & Me-109	16	12
2d " 122d "	Ju-88 (Second Air Fleet, Tripartite)	11	10
2d " 123 "	Ju-88 & Me-110	17	4
<u>Fighter</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>241</u>	<u>167</u>
II Group, 3d Wing	Me-109	34	27
I Group, 27th Wing	"	33	19
II " 27th "	"	34	19
III " 27th "	"	27	11
53d Wing HQ w/	"	5	4
I Group	"	40	33
II "	"	31	26
III "	"	30	24
Fighter-Bomber Squadron	"	7	4
<u>Night Fighter</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>9</u>
2d Wing HQ w/	"	3	2
I Group	"	21	7
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>			
III Group, 26th Wing	Me-110 & Me-109	30	12



Appendix 4 to Page 235--continued

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual	Operable Strength
<u>Ground attack</u>			
10th Squadron, 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing	Do-17	6	-
<u>Bomber</u>			
	<u>Total</u>	<u>258</u>	<u>162</u>
I Group, 1st Ing wing	Ju-88	28	17
II " 1st " "	"	37	22
IV " 1st " "	"	44	21
606th Group	"	22	19
4th Squadron, 26th Wing	He-111	14	4
54th Wing HQ w/	Ju-88	3	2
I Group	"	27	18
606th Group	"	30	21
77th Wing HQ w/	"	3	3
II Group	"	22	15
III "	"	28	20
<u>Dive-Bomber</u>			
	<u>Total</u>	<u>77</u>	<u>54</u>
3d Wing HQ w/	He-110 & He-111	2	1
I Group	Ju-87	43	25
III "	"	32	28
<u>Seaplanes</u>			
	<u>Total</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>18</u>
2d Squadron, 125th Group	Ar-196	9	6
126th Group HQ w/	Av-138	1	1
1st Squadron	He-160	9	5
2d "	He-60 & Ar-196	10	2
3d "	He-60	8	4
<u>Overall German aircraft strength in the Mediterranean and Africa</u>		<u>742</u>	<u>467</u>



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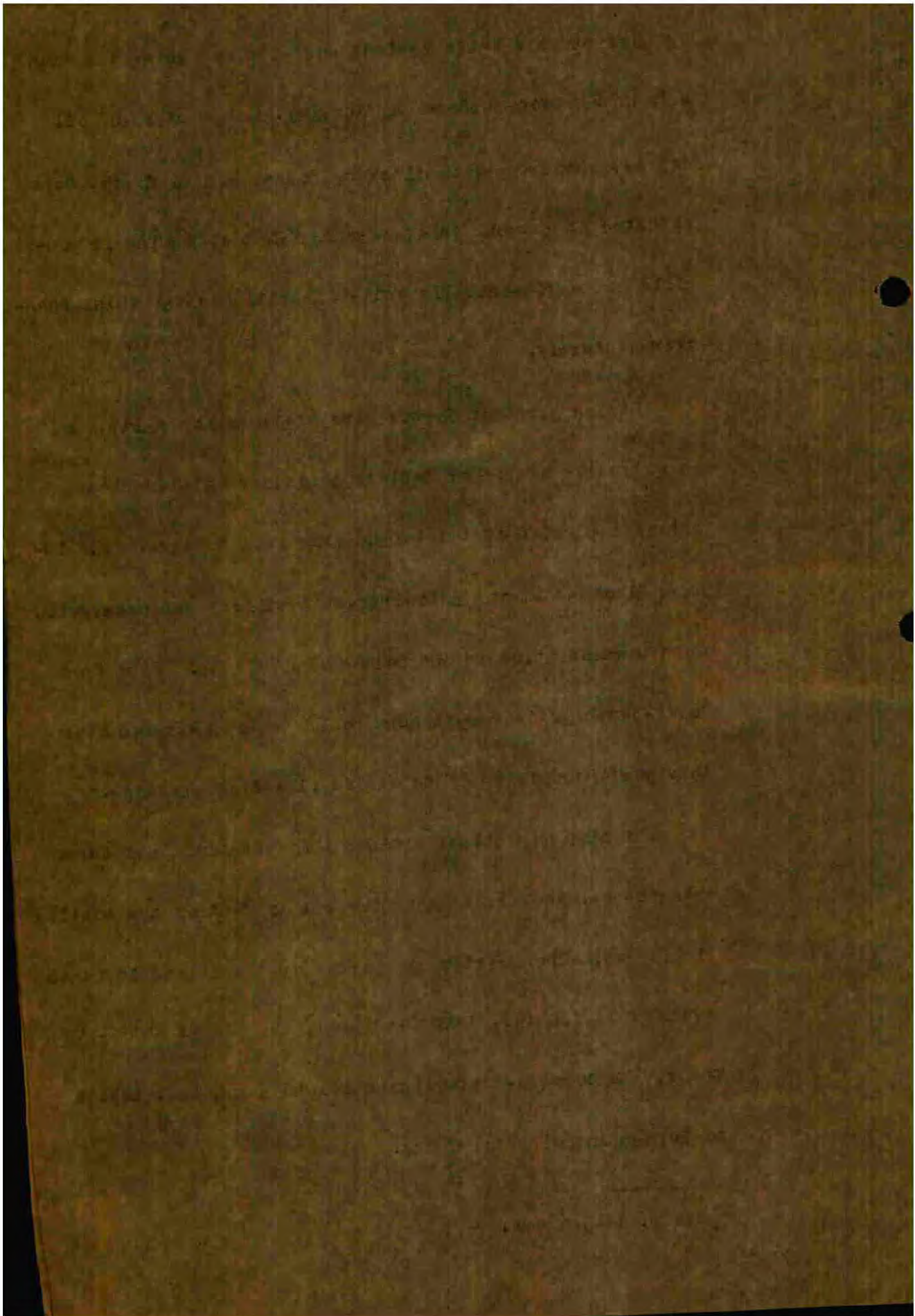
The radar system on the island was well developed.

The number of cruisers, destroyers, and torpedo boats in port at La Valette varied, and at times as many as ten submarines were anchored in the bay. Large coal and oil depots, ship repair facilities, docks, and so forth, were situated at a small inlet near La Valette, making it possible to carvise sizable units of British naval ships whenever necessary.

Strong garrison forces were stationed on Malta, and an extensive system of defense positions existed clear across the waist of the island from west to east. The island also had strong antiaircraft artillery defenses, with main concentration in the port of La Valette. Fire from forty-seven antiaircraft guns could be concentrated over this port, supported by defensive fire from warships."

The plan of attack divided the operation into three main phases. The first objective was to destroy the hostile air forces. The British air forces on the island included a number of fighter, torpedo-bomber, and bomber units. Of these, the torpedo-bombers constituted a constant threat to German shipping to Africa.

* See p. 162, above.



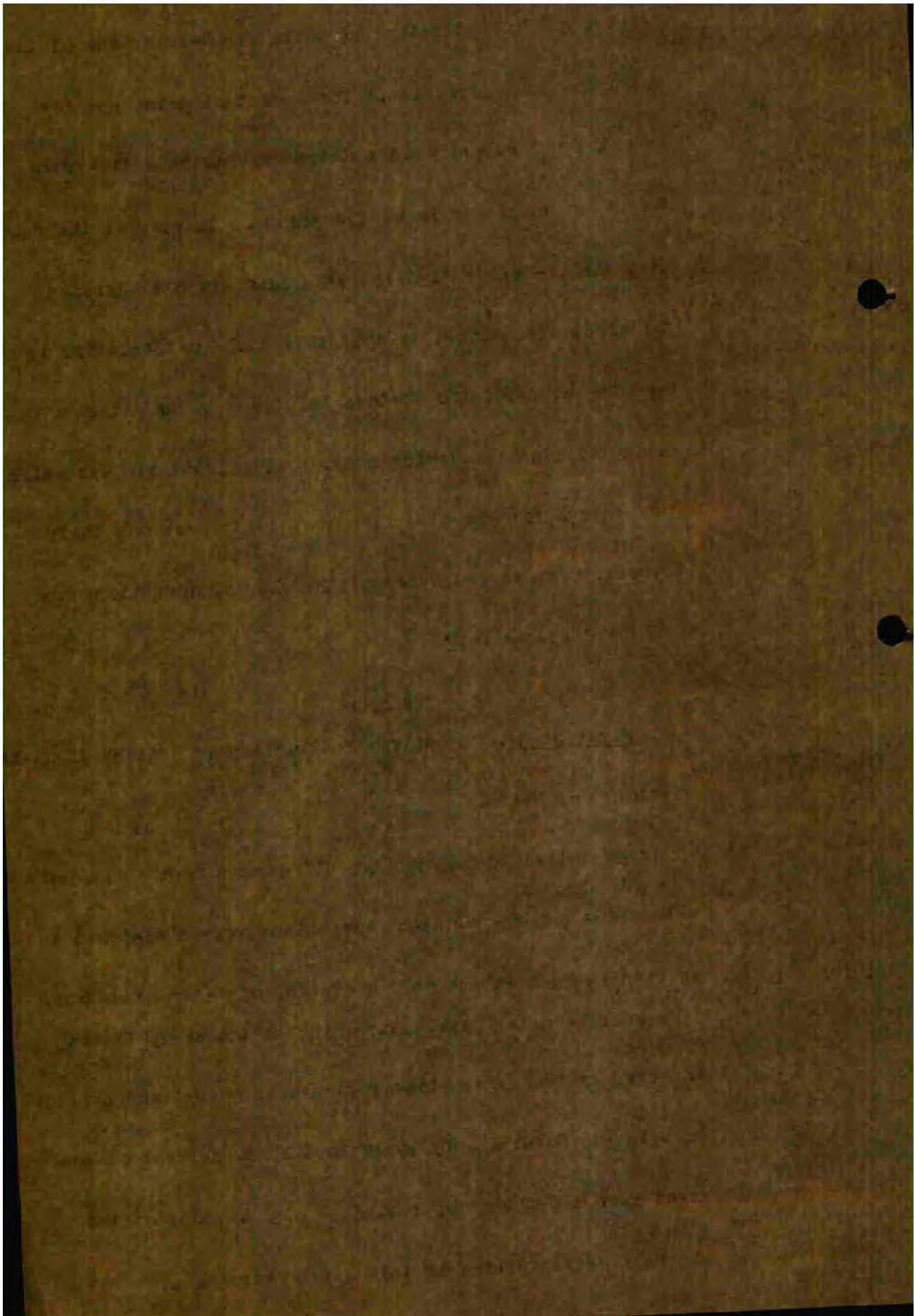
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The first requirement was to destroy the British fighters. One favorable circumstance here was that the British had concentrated all their fighters on one of the three existing airfields. The important point was to take them by surprise in a sudden attack at a time when they were unable to leave the ground. In view of the fact that single-seater fighters as a rule are not equipped for night operations, so that they could not take off or land in the dark, the obvious solution was to attack them during morning or evening dusk, while visibility was still good enough for the attacking bombers to make out their targets. The three phases of the plan of operations now will be discussed.

PHASE 1

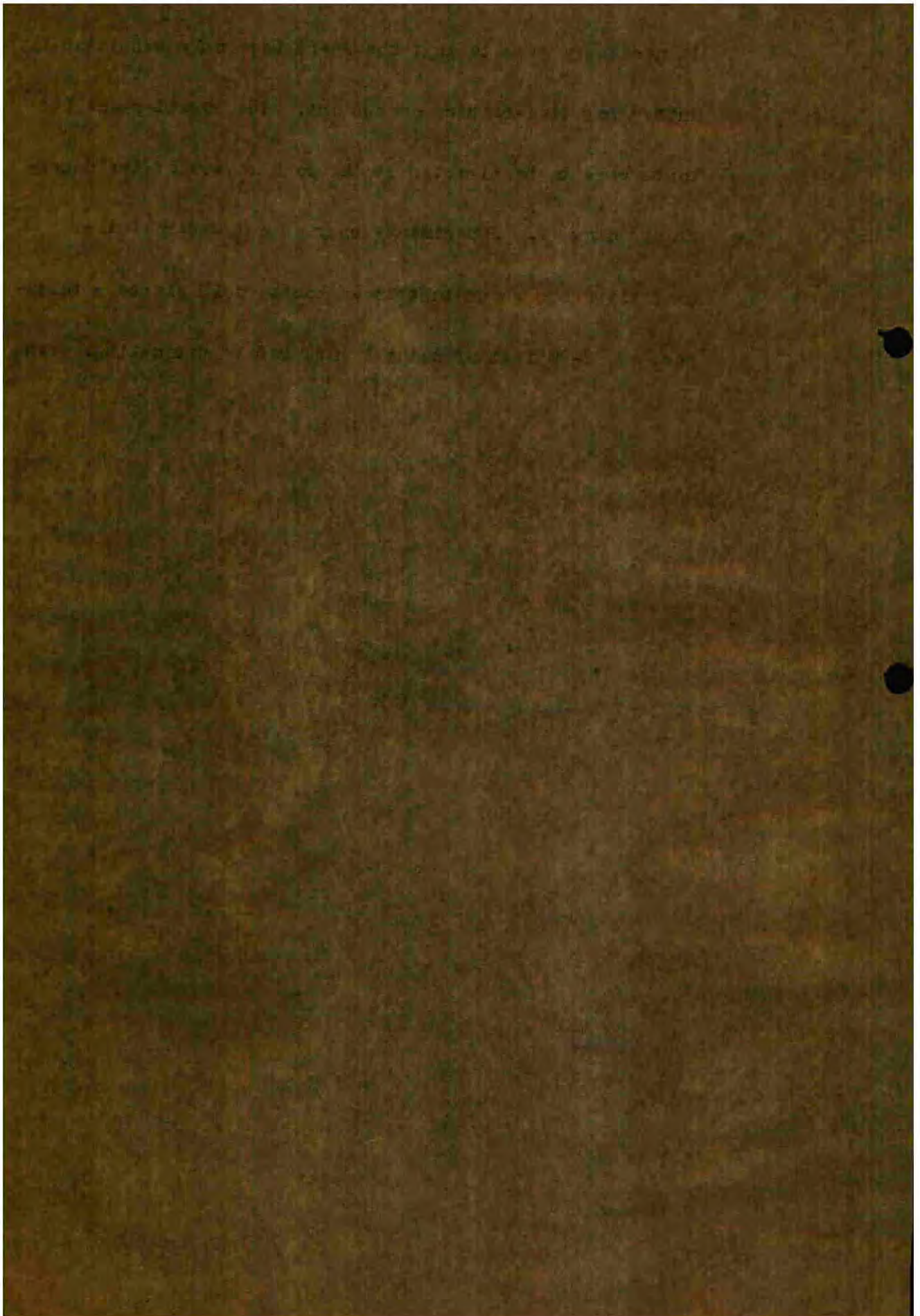
First Stage. Objective: Destruction of British fighters stationed on Malta.

To achieve this objective all German bomber squadrons with crews capable of night operations were dispatched in an evening dusk attack on the evening of D-Day minus one. It should be noted here that, owing to the heavy losses incurred by the German bomber forces in operations against Britain and Russia, only approximately 30 percent of the crews were capable of operating at night. Some of the aircraft participating in this attack were to use



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rocket-propelled armor-piercing and oil bombs in a dive-bombing strike against the underground hangars. Here it is necessary to note that the Ju-88 were only conditionally suited for dive-bombing operations. The rocket-propelled bombs were to be directed at the rock covers of the underground hangars. Experiments carried out under similar conditions had shown that these bombs could pierce a thickness of 36-49 feet of natural rock before detonating. Even



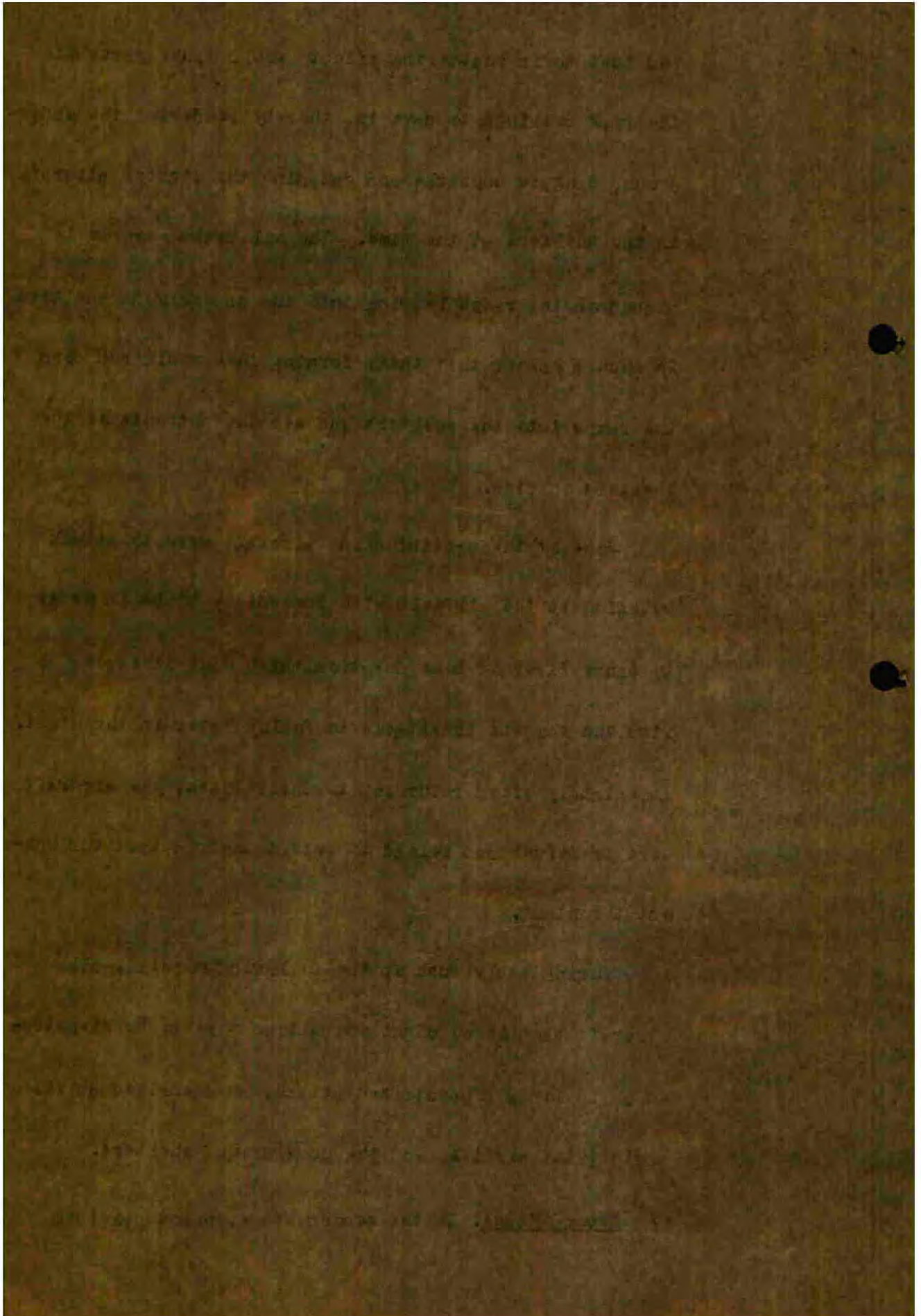
238

though it thus had to be assumed that they would not penetrate into the underground shelters, the possibility existed that their shattering effect would cause parts of the rock ceilings to cave in, thereby rendering the underground hangars unusable and damaging the fighter aircraft in the shelters at the time. The oil bombs were to be placed on the ramps leading into the underground shelters in such a manner that their burning fuel would run down the ramps into the shelters and set the contents of the shelters on fire.

Some of the participating aircraft were to attack building at the airfield with incendiary bombs in order to cause fires of some duration which make it easier to find the targets in attacks to follow later in the night. Immediately after returning to their bases, the aircraft were to refuel and reload to repeat their attack throughout the night.

During early dusk on the following morning, all aircraft capable of night operations were to be dispatched again for a concentrated attack, as described above, against the airfield and the underground shelters.

Second Stage. In the second stage, plans provided



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for a repetition of the concentrated attack by all German aircraft against the same airfield.

Depending on the results achieved, the decision then was to be made whether all forces were to continue attacks against the airfield, or whether elements could be used to commence operations against the other airfields on the island.

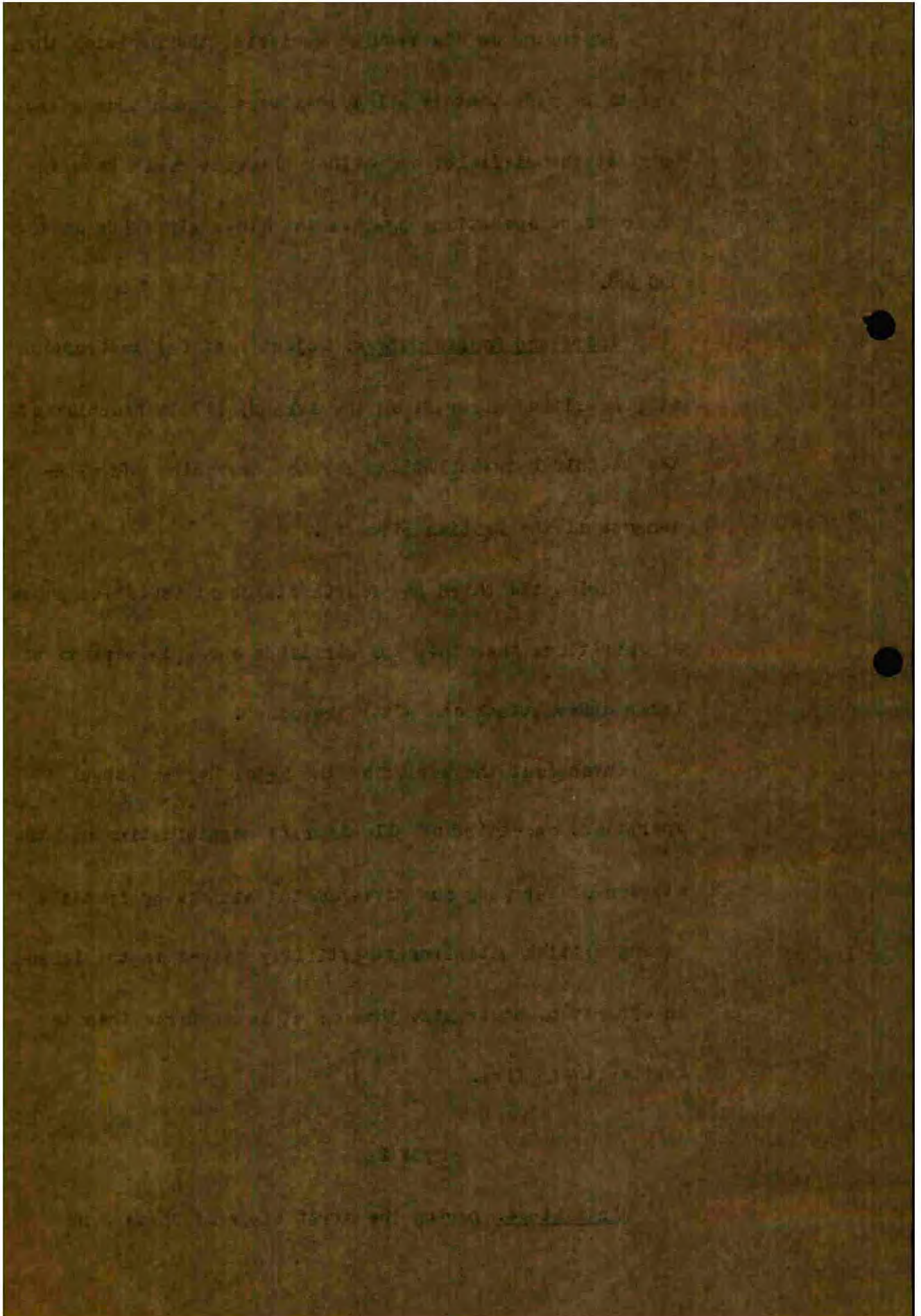
Third and Fourth Stages. Objectives: (a) Destruction of all British aircraft on the island; (b) Destruction of the technical installations for the servicing and maintenance of the British aircraft.

During the third and fourth stages of the first phase of operations the other two airfields on Malta were to be taken under attack one after the other.

Throughout the period of the major German attack operation, one-third of all aircraft participating had the mission of carrying out dive-bombing attacks against the strong British anti-aircraft artillery forces on the island in efforts to neutralize them or at least force them to scatter their fire.

PHASE 2

First Stage. During the first stage of Phase 2 of



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the operation, the plan of attack provided for bombing attacks against British naval ships in port.

Second Stage. Objective: Destruction of all supply and service installations of the British Navy along the shores of the Bay of La Valette.

For this purpose, each bomber wing was assigned a permanent target area, within which the targets were numbered according to their priority. The attack was to be shifted to a new target only after complete destruction of the previous target.



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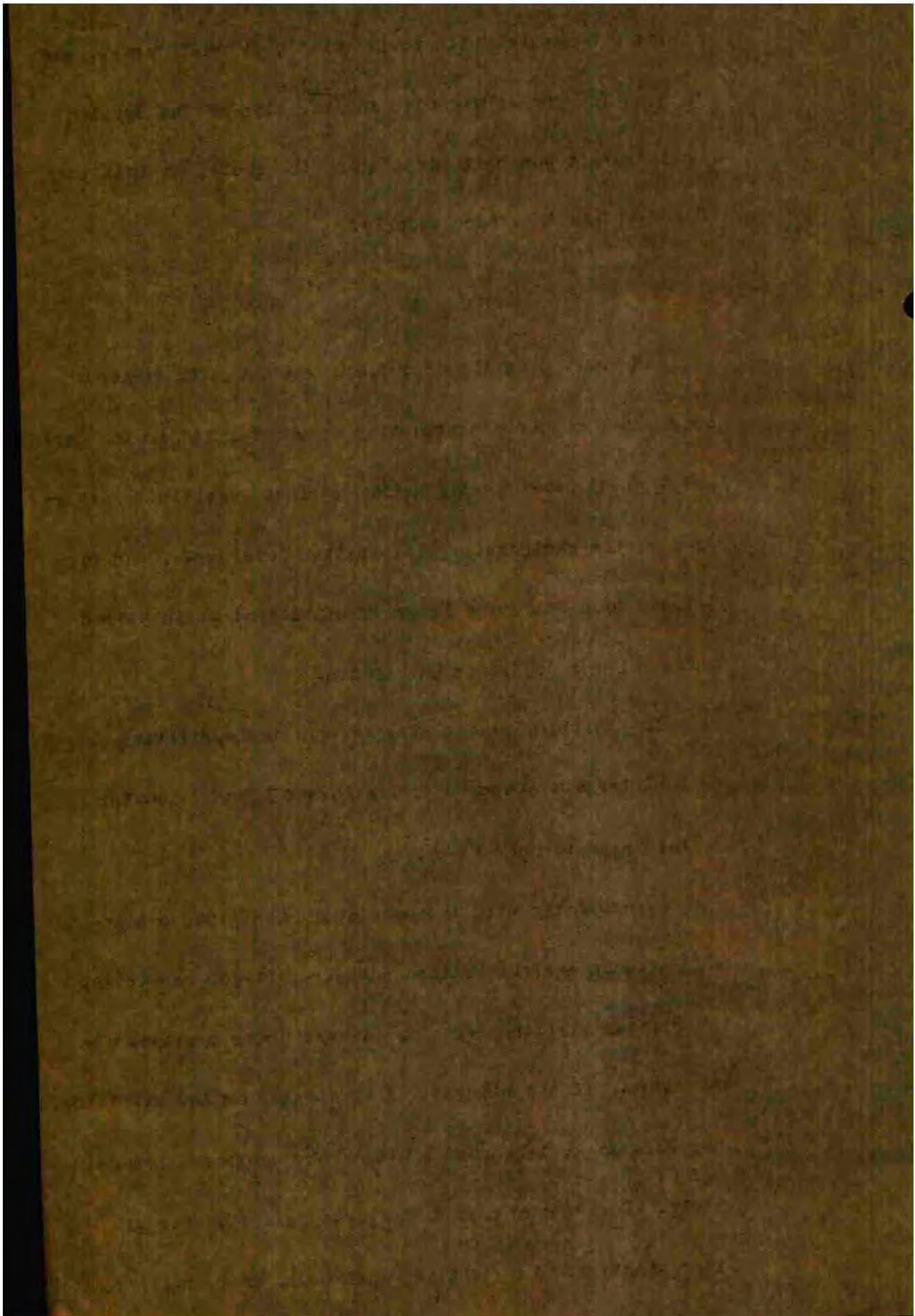
The purpose in assigning separate target areas was to enable the participating bomber crews to really familiarize themselves with their relatively small areas, and to acquaint themselves with the ^{precise} location of the British anti-aircraft gun batteries along the route, so that they could attack them successfully.

PHASE 3

In Phase 3 of the operation, which was to commence only after complete destruction of all targets in the port area, plans provided for action against specific targets-- such as the residence of the British Governor--, and for attacks to destroy the large quantities of grain stored under a large square in La Valetta.

In addition, repeat attacks were to be directed against targets attacked during Phases 1 and 2 insofar as this appeared necessary.

Concurrently with the previously mentioned continuous attacks against British anti-aircraft gun batteries, the British airfields were to be kept under constant observation. If new aircraft were detected on the airfields, they were to be taken under attack and destroyed immediately. Such action was to be given priority over all other missions. In addition, action was to be taken to



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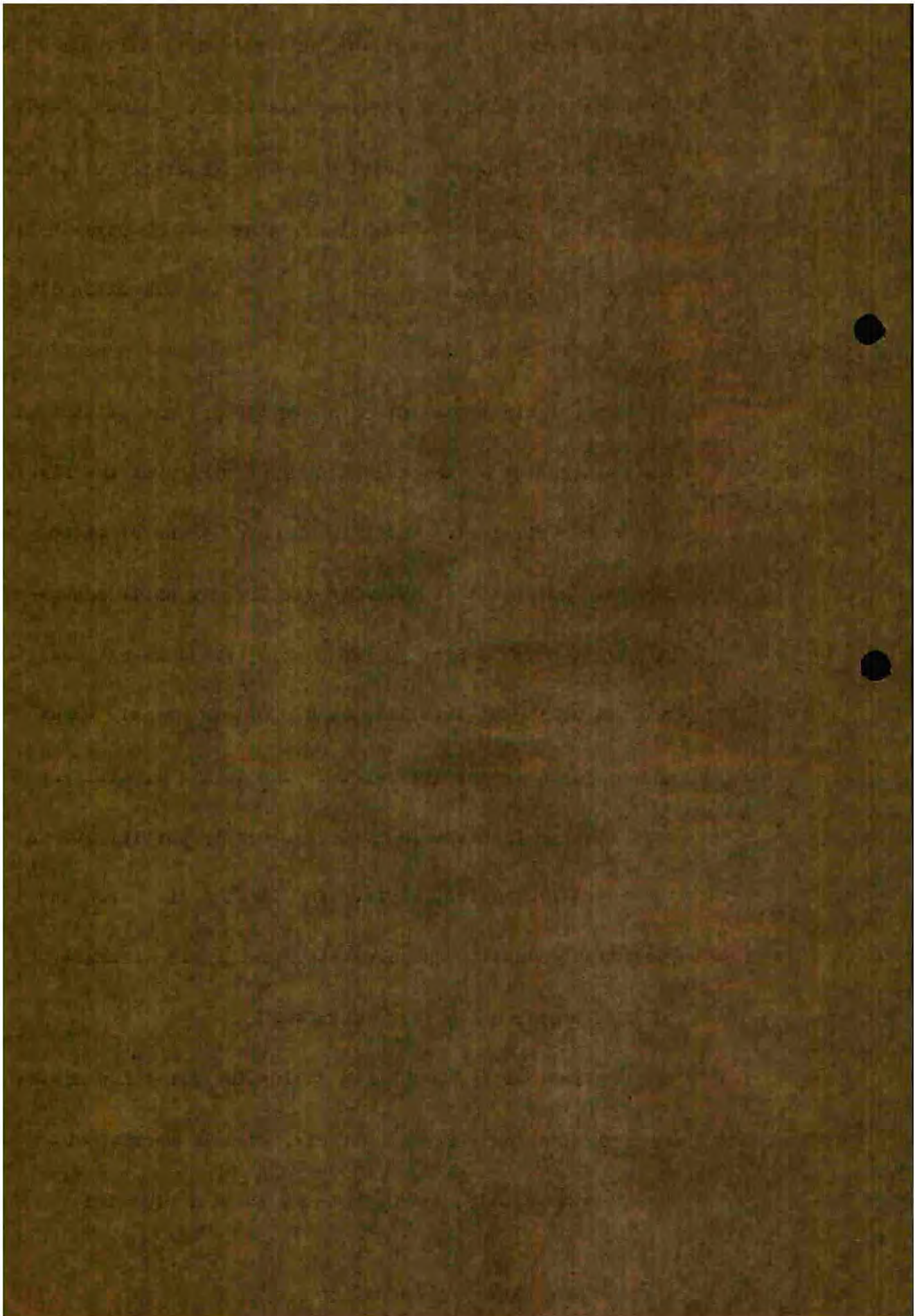
prevent the arrival of supply ships at Malta.

The plan of attack provided for the commitment of fighter forces to protect the bomber forces while airborne in accordance with the requirements of the various phases of the operation. The target area was relatively close to the fighter bases, the average distance being approximately ninety miles, a fact which facilitated the execution of the fighter mission.

One highly important point in the plan of attack was the maintenance of the technical operability of the fighter and bomber aircraft. For this purpose plans provided for the assignment of twice as many repair units and replacement parts depots as was customary. This was possible because of the availability of hangars and repair shops and so forth on the airfields on the island of Sicily.

Italian fighters and bombers were to participate in the operation against Malta. The Italian Air Force had good fighter units equipped with fairly good aircraft, but its bomber units were outdated.

Operations against Malta during the first few months had shown that small unit attacks, even if carried out almost continuously, incurred heavy losses. For this



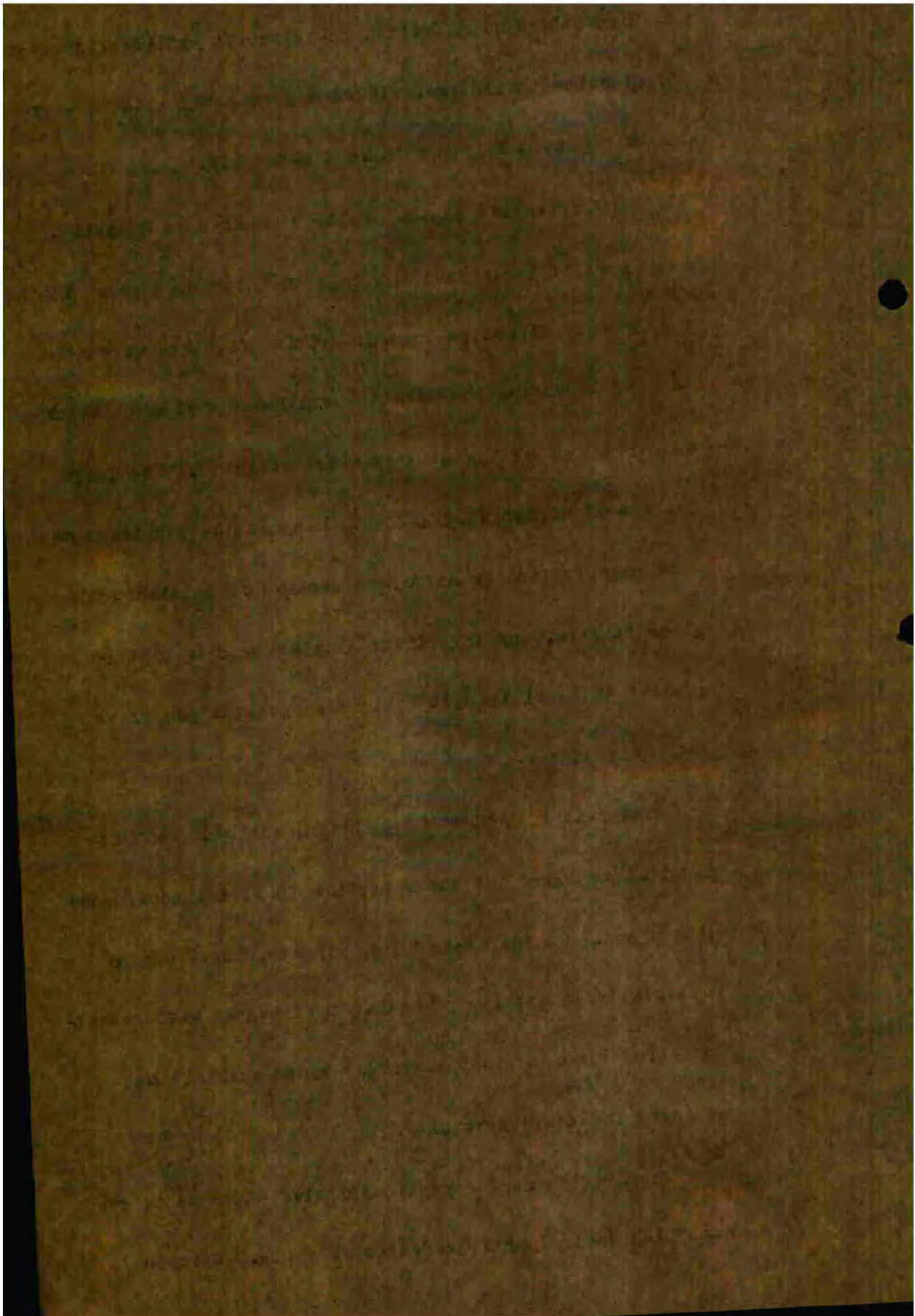
242

reason the II Air Corps planned to commit all operable aircraft simultaneously in concentrated attack, in order to force the strong British antiaircraft artillery forces to disperse their fire. These concentrated attacks were to be repeated twice or three times daily.

The offensive against Malta commenced on 2 April . Very soon it became evident that the night and dusk attacks had been so effective that no British fighters were able to operate during the first concentrated daylight attack or during any of the attacks which followed. The large numbers of German aircraft attacking at one and the same time complicated the uniform direction of British antiaircraft fire, and the direct attacks by dive-bombers against the antiaircraft batteries made the gun crews extremely uneasy.

The results achieved, as just described, made it possible to carry out the operation in strict accordance with plans. On the other hand, however, there was no possibility to ascertain whether the attacks with rocket-propelled bombs against the underground shelters had achieved the desired results.

The British made repeated abortive attempts to re-establish their fighter defenses on Malta. British

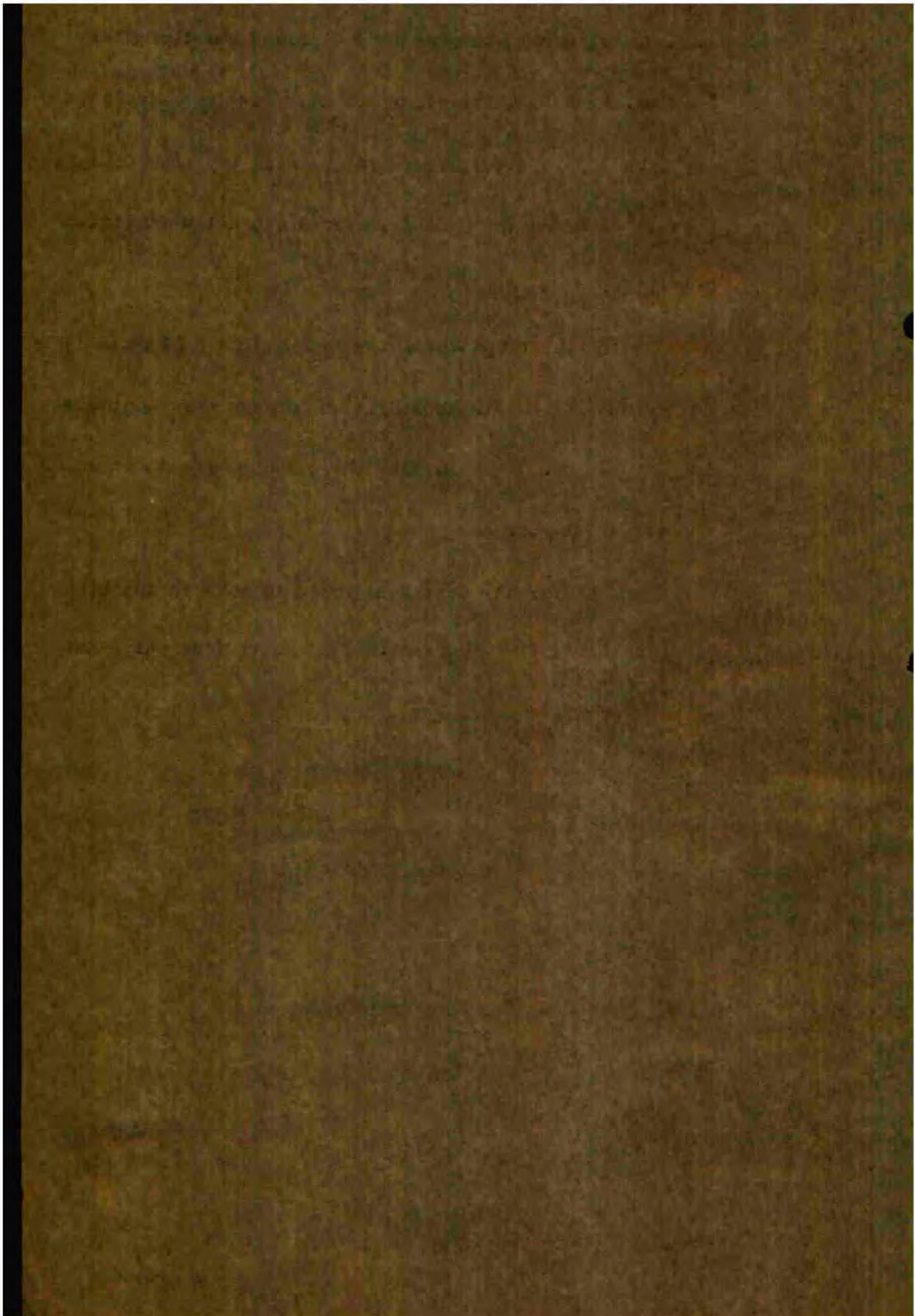


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fighters taking off from aircraft carriers cruising outside the range of German bombers did succeed in reaching the island, but were destroyed on the ground shortly after landing. Each time the German Command received timely warning when aircraft carriers were on their way from Gibraltar or were entering the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar.

On two occasions the operation against Malta was halted because of reports that British convoys were approaching the island. In each case the convoys were taken under successful attack.

We for our part endeavored to move in supplies for Malta from the east. In January four ships got



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through, but the February convoy of three ships succumbed to air attacks. In March Cruiser Naiad, Admiral Vian's Flagship, was sunk by a submarine. Now, in May the island was threatened by starvation.

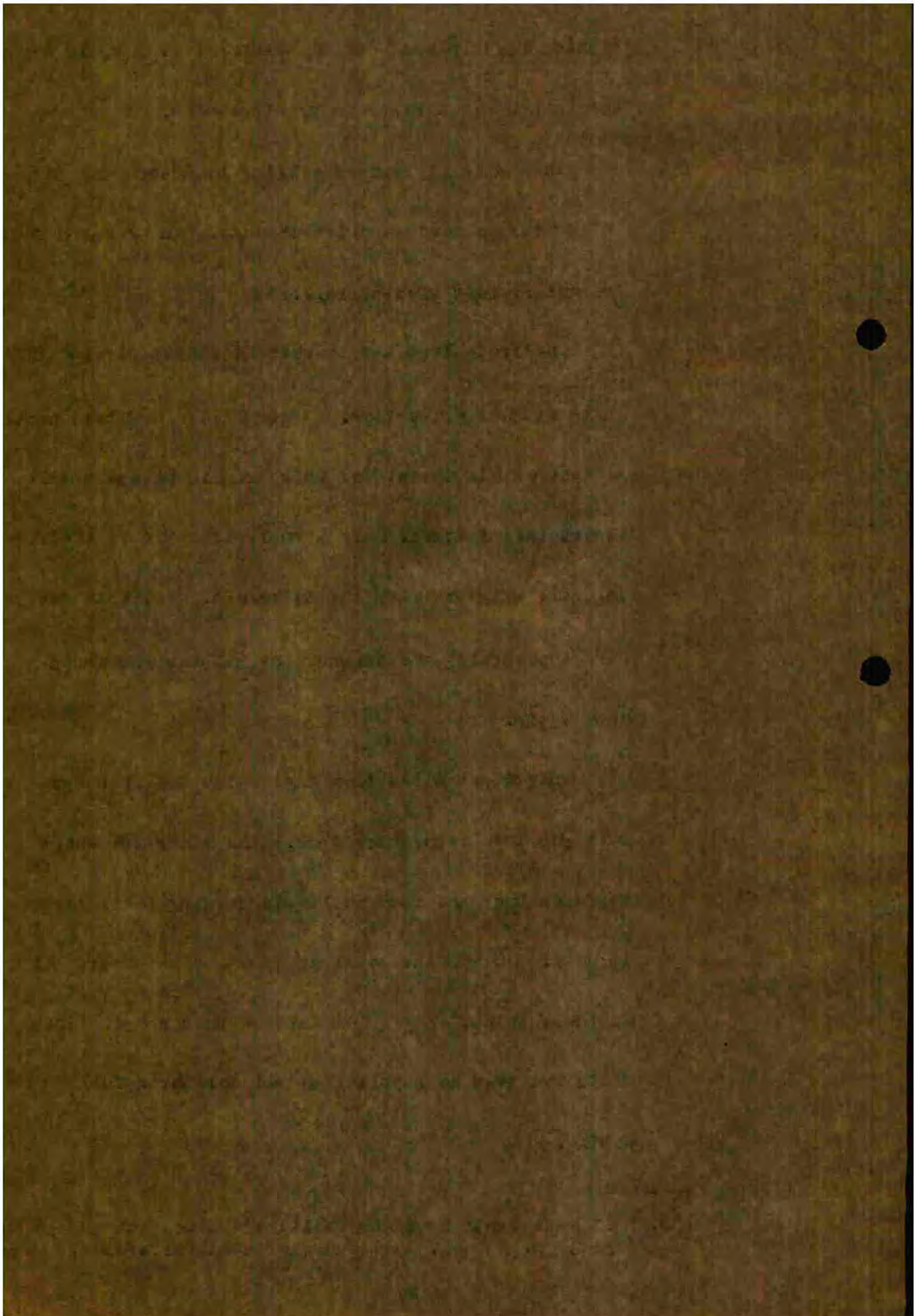
The Admiralty proved willing to accept any risk in efforts to move supplies through. On 20 March four freighters left Alexandria....

The freighters had to cover the last stretch to Malta without protection. Admiral Vian had been unable to take on oil there, for which reason he was unable to escort them farther. Only a small fraction of their valuable cargo reached the defenders. While the ships were approaching the island, the attacks commenced once again.

Only eight miles from their goal the *Glan Campbell* and the *Breconshire* sank. The other two ships suffered the same fate while discharging their cargo in port. Out of the total of 26 000 tons aboard all of these ships, only 5 000 tons reached shore. Then Malta received no supplies at all for three full

158
months.

158. Malta--Excerpts from Churchill: *Die Sturmflut aus Japan*, pp. 346 ff. Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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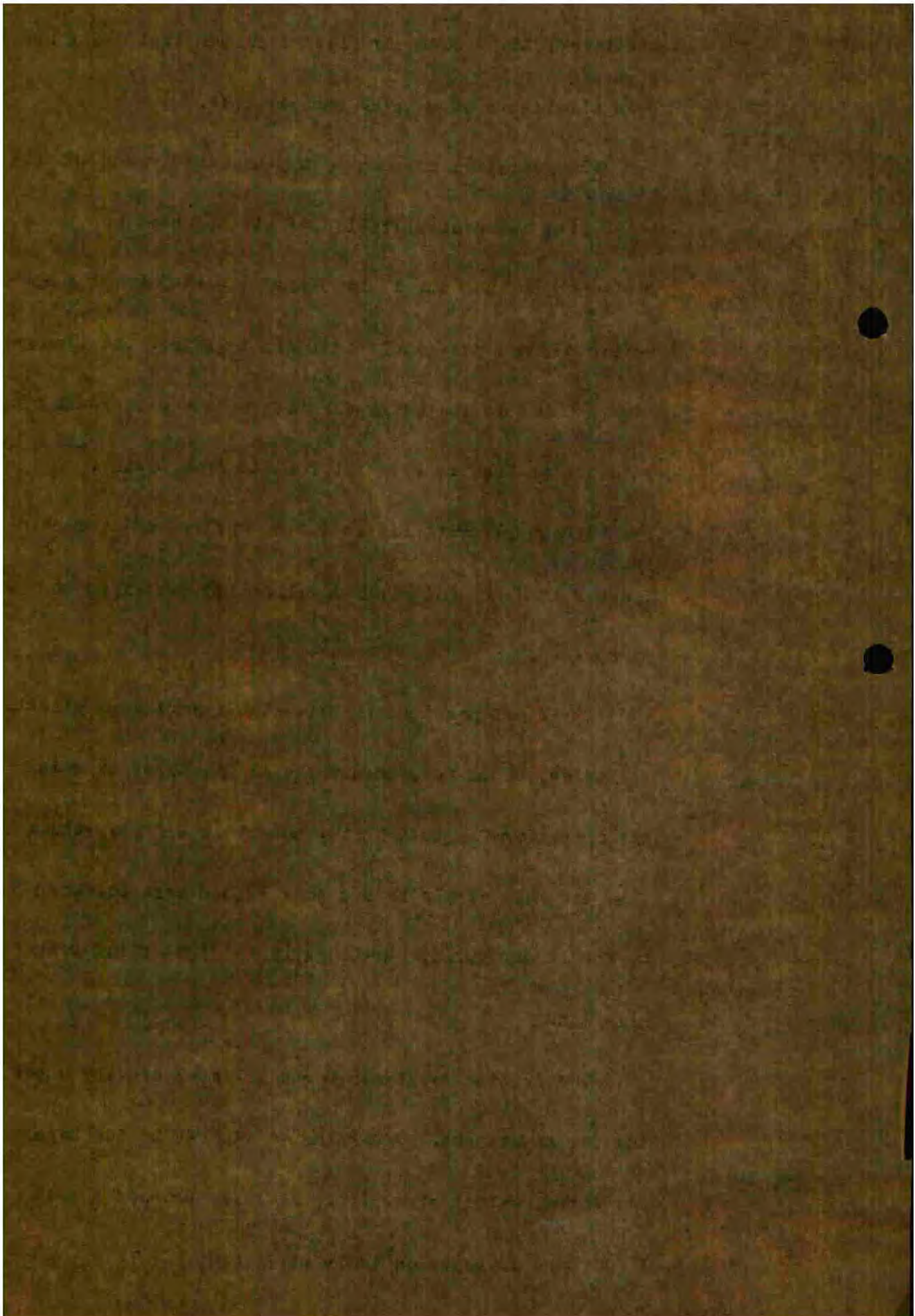
On 10 May, after its units had flown a total of 11 000 missions in which all important targets had been destroyed, the Second Air Fleet reported that Malta had been eliminated as a naval and air base.

The operation planned to capture the island immediately after the neutralization of its defenses had to be postponed because the Italian troops slated for the operation had not yet completed their training. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe ordered the withdrawal of a number of fighter and bomber units from Sicily. 159

German aircraft losses in the entire Mediterranean Theater in March and April totalled 173 destroyed and 68 damaged.

It is not possible to determine from the compilation of losses, how many aircraft the II Air Corps lost in its operations against Malta, but it is safe to assume that the bulk of the losses just stated were suffered by the II Air Corps, particularly in fighter and bomber aircraft.

The British Royal Air Force suffered heavily under the German attacks. According to reports by the Royal Air Force, German aircraft in February dropped almost 1 000 tons of bombs on their airfields, but in March

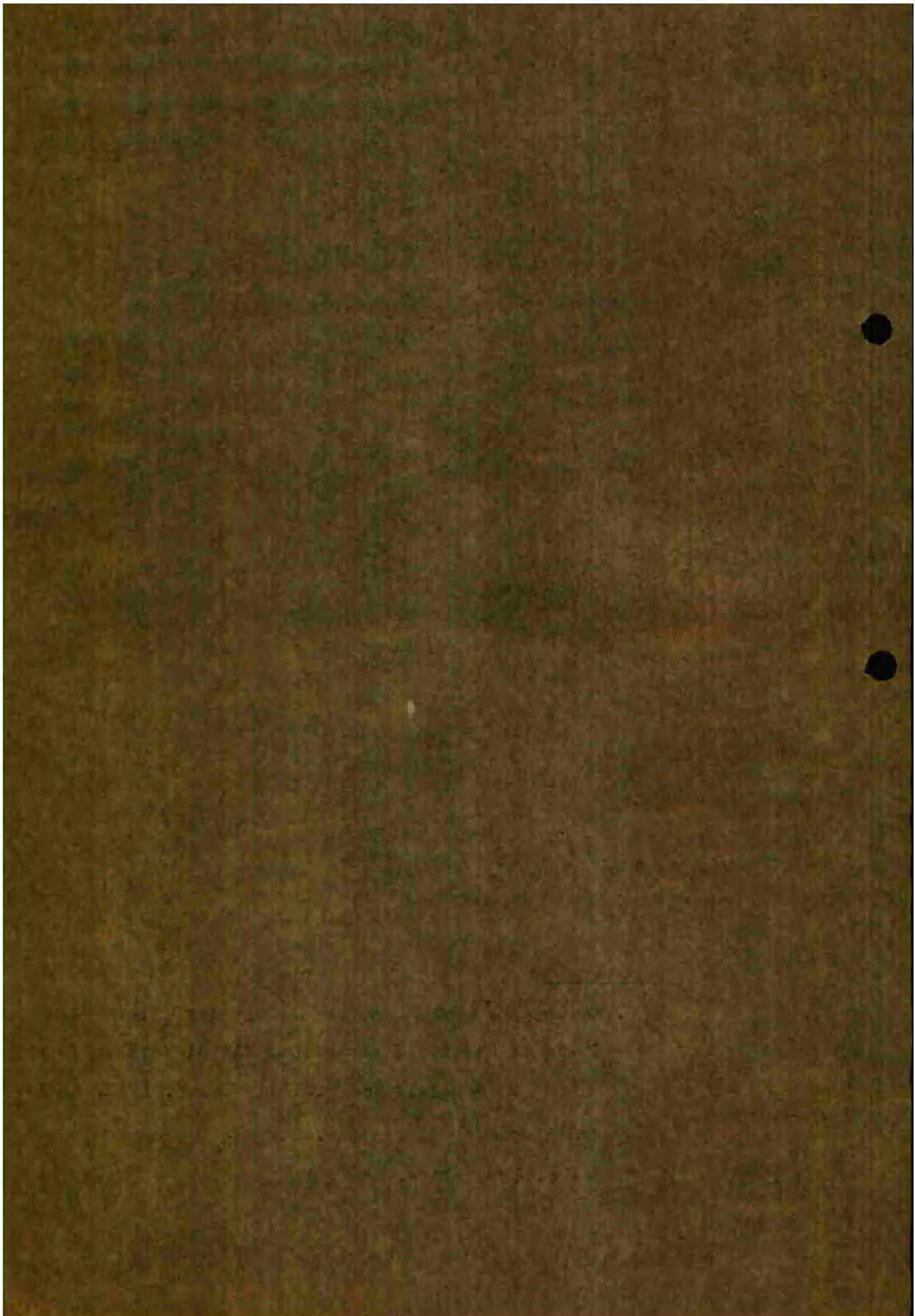


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the attacks increased in intensity. On 7 March, fifteen

159. Reichmann, Paul, General der Flieger, at the time Chief of Staff, II Air Corps: *Die Niederkaempfung Maltas in der Zeit von 2.4. bis 11. 5. 1942*. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

* See p. 126, above.



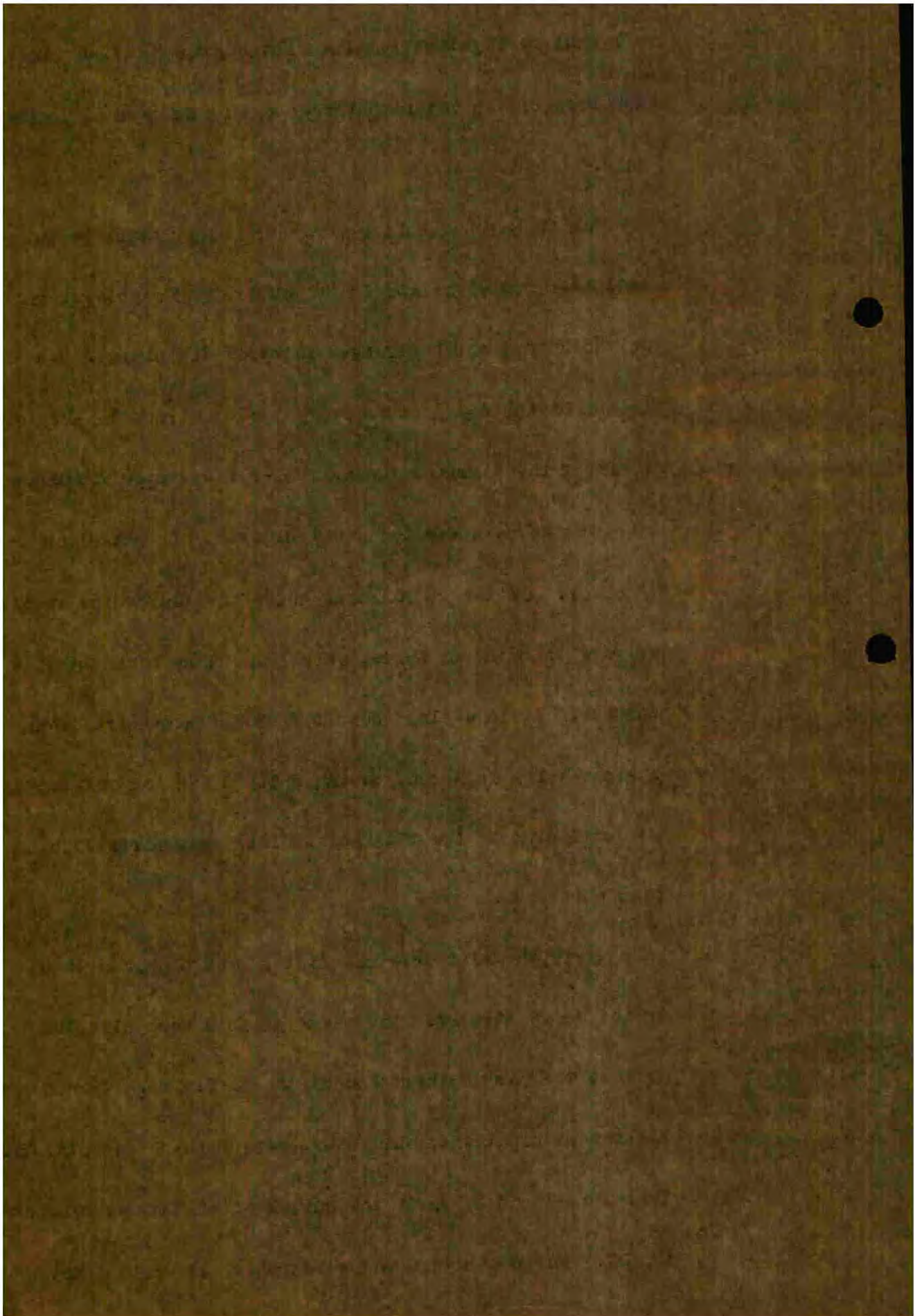
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Spitfires from an aircraft carrier succeeded in arriving on Malta to reinforce the defenses. By mid-March, however, only thirty fighters remained intact, the British bombers had been driven out with the exception of a small handful.

On 20 March Takali came under heavy attack by an estimated number of 143 Ju-88 bombers and fighters, on 21 March by a still stronger force of 218 planes. On the following day another heavy attack struck Takali, destroying the barracks there. Hal-Far was more fortunate.

On the next day the enemy diverted his attention to a convoy. Of the 26 000 tons which the four ships involved were to bring to Malta, only 5 000 tons could be discharged. It is estimated that 2 850 attacks were flown against Malta in March, during which 2 174 tons of bombs screamed down to their targets. Sixty Axis aircraft had been shot down.

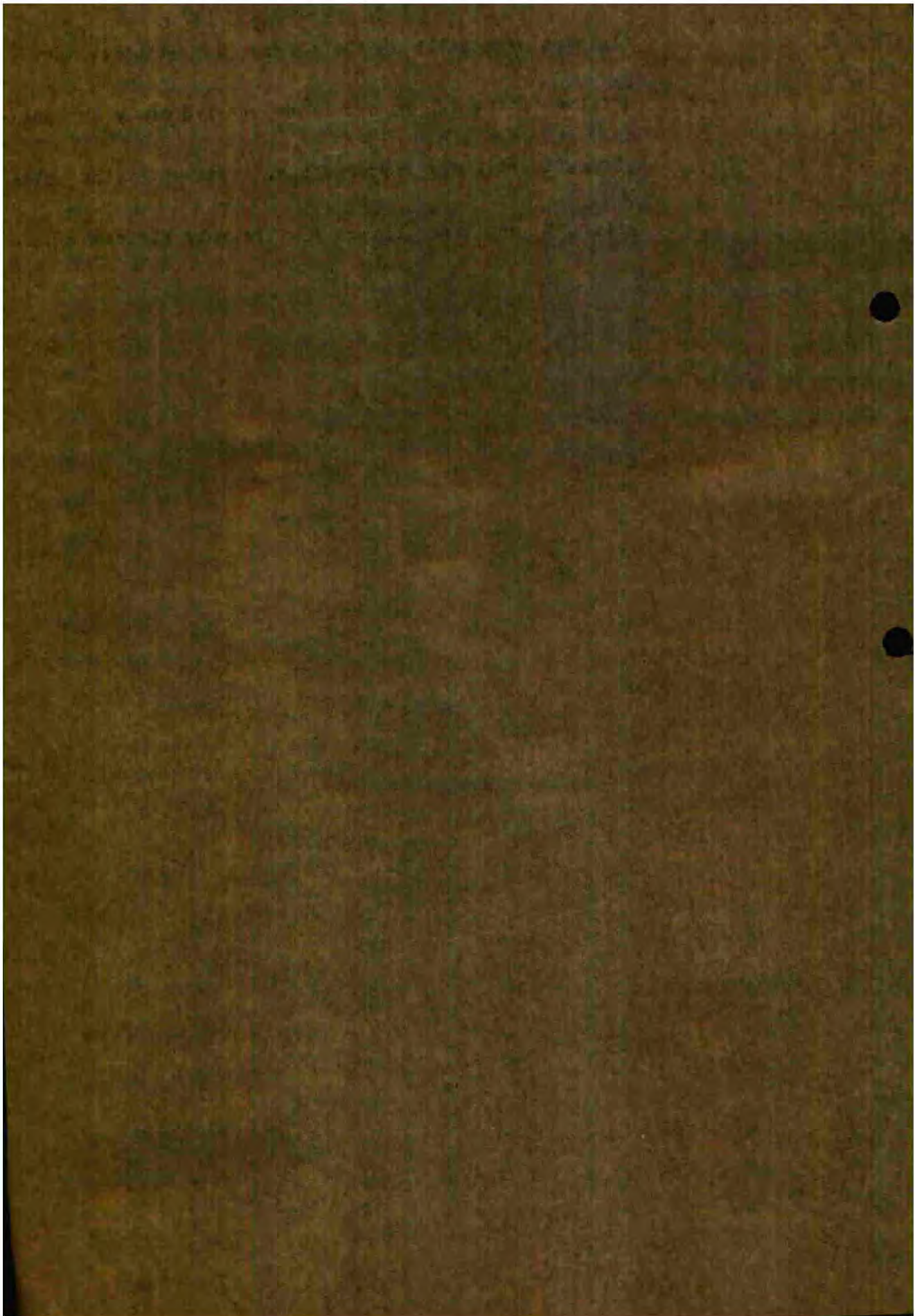
April, the most terrible month, brought no surcease in the enemy attacks. Now these attacks were directed more at the port rather than at the airfields. Two hundred attacks within twentyfour hours were nothing exceptional. Twice, on 7 and 20 April the number of attacks even mounted to 300. The destroyers and submarines, as well as the



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bombers were compelled to leave Malta.

When Tedder flew to Malta in mid-April only six fighters were still on the island, and at times the defense of the island had to be carried on by the anti-aircraft artillery forces alone. Frequently the anti-aircraft guns were allowed to fire only fifteen rounds

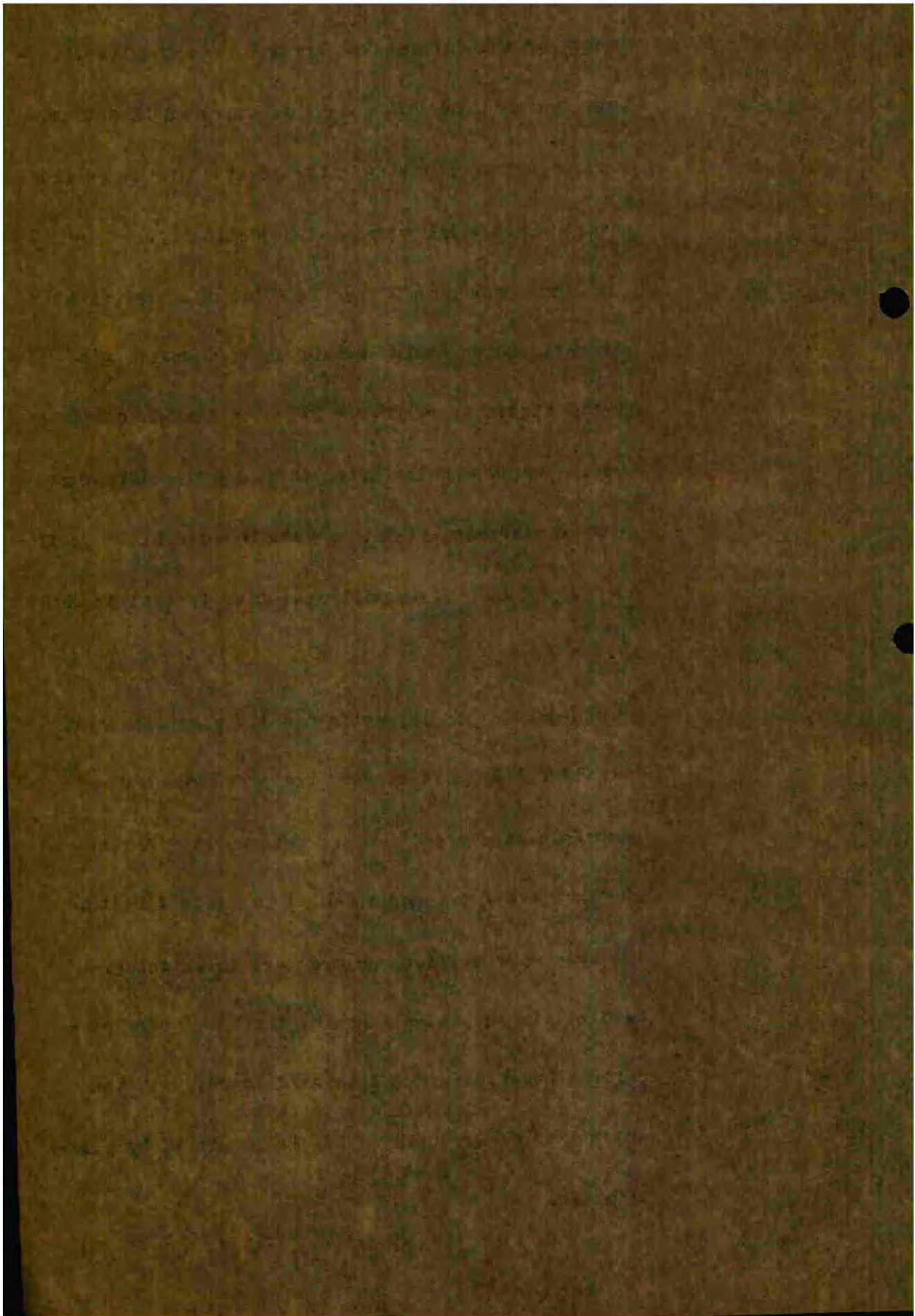


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and that only in response to specific orders. At that time our airfields resembled a crater landscape, the docks and the surrounding areas were a shambles. Valetta was nothing but a mass of crumbled limestone, from which the imposing ruins of its baroque edifices nevertheless still stood out majestically.

Once again, on 20 April, 47 of our best fighter aircraft, which could measure up to Kesselring's Me-109 fighters, reached Malta with the aid of the Wasp. Twenty minutes after their landing they came under continuous attack. On the morning of 21 April only 27 of them were still operable, by evening only 17.

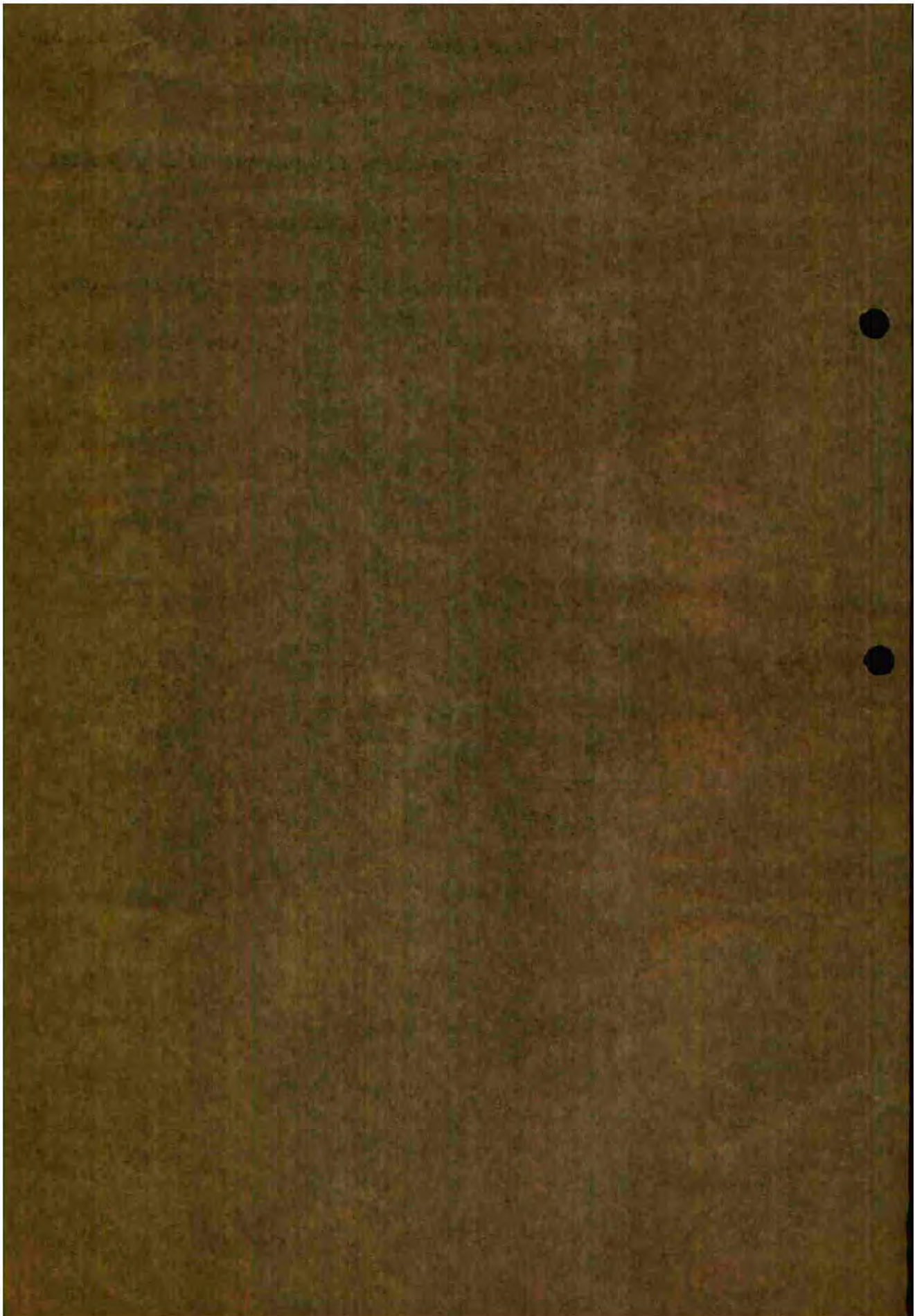
According to our estimates the enemy in April had flown 4 900 attacks and dropped 6 728 tons of bombs. On an average the air raid warning sirens shrieked every two and one-half hours in Valetta. But even more serious dangers were threatening. At Gerbini, in the Catania Plain, the enemy were preparing three runways for cargo gliders, with the intentions of capturing Malta in an attack by paratroopers.



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At a conference between Hitler and Mussolini at the end of April at the Berghof, the two dictators worked out their program for the continuation of their operations.

Because the Luftwaffe was too weak to strike in Libya and at Malta simultaneously, what was left of the Cyrenaica was to be captured at the end of May or the beginning of June; plans provided for the



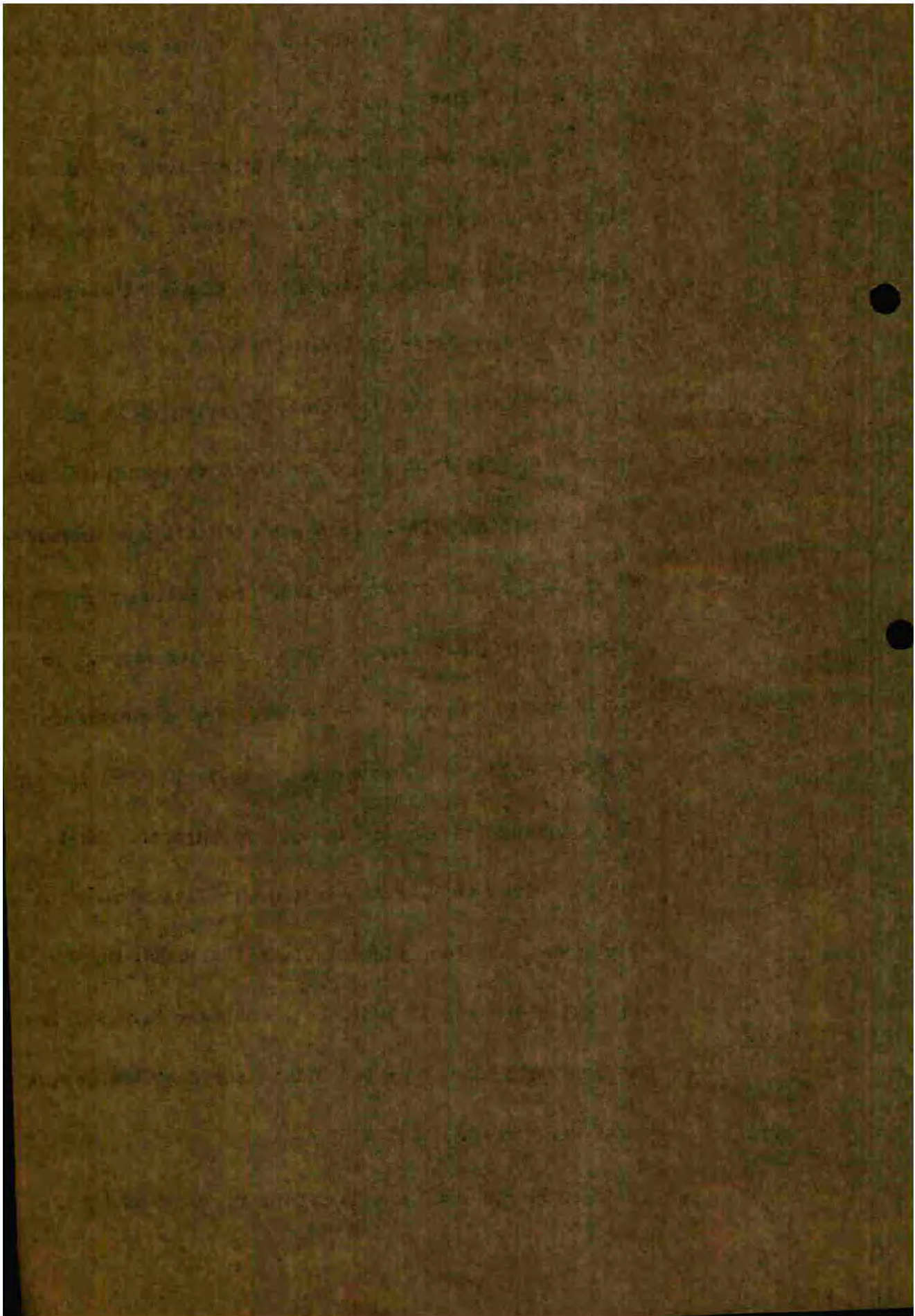
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capture of Malta between mid-July and mid-August. After that, at a time still to be fixed, the invasion of Egypt was to commence, and the triumphal march to the Nile and the Suez Canal was to be opened.

On 4 May Keitel issued the directives for the first two operations. Besides engineers and some thirty tanks, Kesselring was assigned the entire 7th Parachute Division under General Student.

The threat of an invasion, alarming as it was, was not the greatest danger or the most immediate danger threatening Malta. From now on Malta was threatened by the specter of starvation. The February and March convoys had fallen prey to the German Air Force. No convoy arrived in April, and there were no prospects that the supply ships would reach their destination in May. Malta had to rely on its own resources. What could be moved in by submarines or by fast minelaying ships, such as the daring Minelayer *Welshman*, could only delay the end at best, but not avert it. Failing the arrival of new supplies within the next two months Malta was doomed.

Our guns had to remain silent for want of



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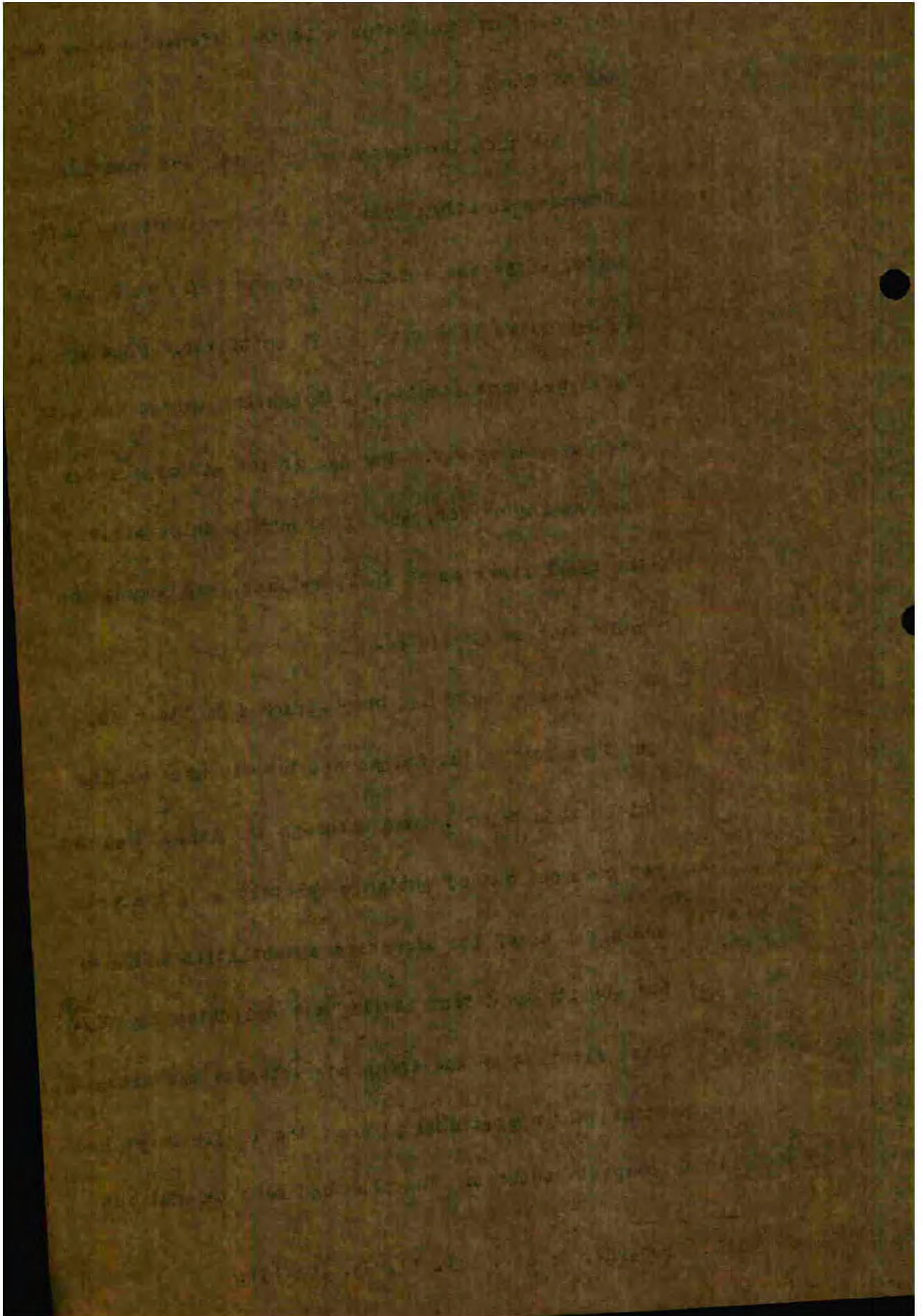
ammunition, our aircraft stood idly on the ground because fuel was lacking, and our men wasted away and could not participate in the defense because they had no food.

But then the campaign in Russia and Fommel's offensive in Libya drew away the forces of the Luftwaffe, while the carriers Wasp and Eagle on 9 and 18 May moved in a total of 79 Spitfires. Once again Malta had some respite, although the threat was not over by a long way. The day of the airborne invasion was drawing nearer, and if no supply ships arrived the small reserves in fuel, rations, and ammunition would soon be exhausted.

Malta's sword had been struck from its hand, and from now on the island had to rely more on its shield than before. And although the island had not yet been put out of action completely as a bomber and naval base, its offensive capabilities and also its ability to defend itself were dwindling rapidly. ¹⁶⁰

These findings by the enemy characterize the situation; at the time; the operational plan of the II Air Corps had led to complete success. The plan had been thought out

¹⁶⁰. Richards, Dennis, Vol. II, pp. 191-198.



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and logically executed. Air supremacy over Malta, and thereby over the central areas of the Mediterranean Theater had passed to the Axis Powers. The heavy losses inflicted on the surface units of the British Navy also had their effect,* so that supply traffic between Italy and Africa were hardly interfered with any longer by the enemy.

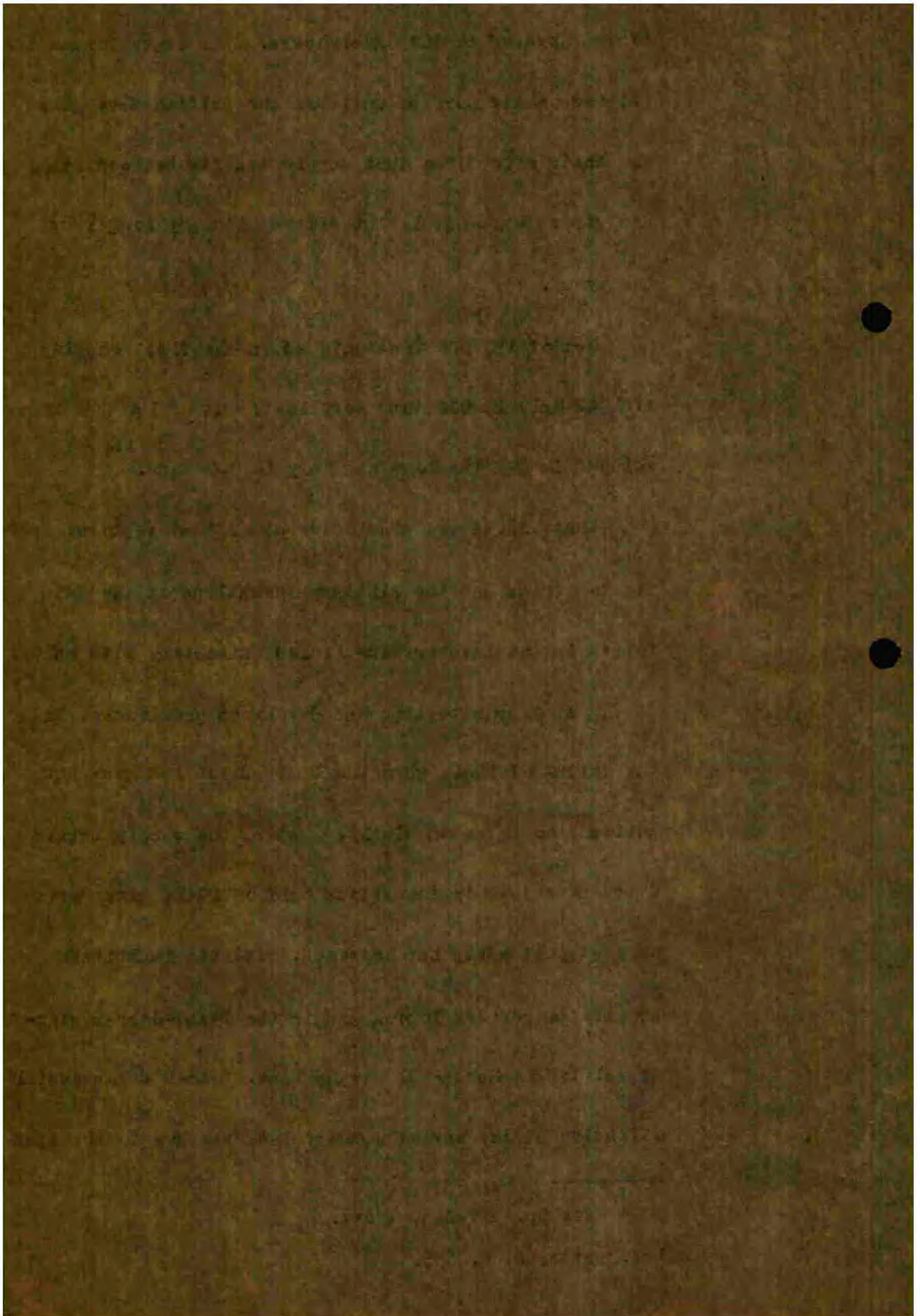
Out of 190 000 tons shipped in the first quarter of 1942 only 16 000 tons were lost; out of 170 000 tons shipped in May the loss was only 10 000 tons. ¹⁶¹

These facts are conclusive proof that seaborne traffic to Africa and the military operations of the Axis forces in the theater were linked intimately with Malta.

A similar situation had developed previously, in the spring of 1941, when the X Air Corps had gone into action from bases on Sicily. Later, the supply crisis which developed in the second half of 1941, after pressure against Malta had lessened, resulted in British ability to relieve Tobruk and in the Italo-German withdrawal to the Marsa-El Bregha line. Rommel's successful offensive at the end of January 1942 was due to the fact

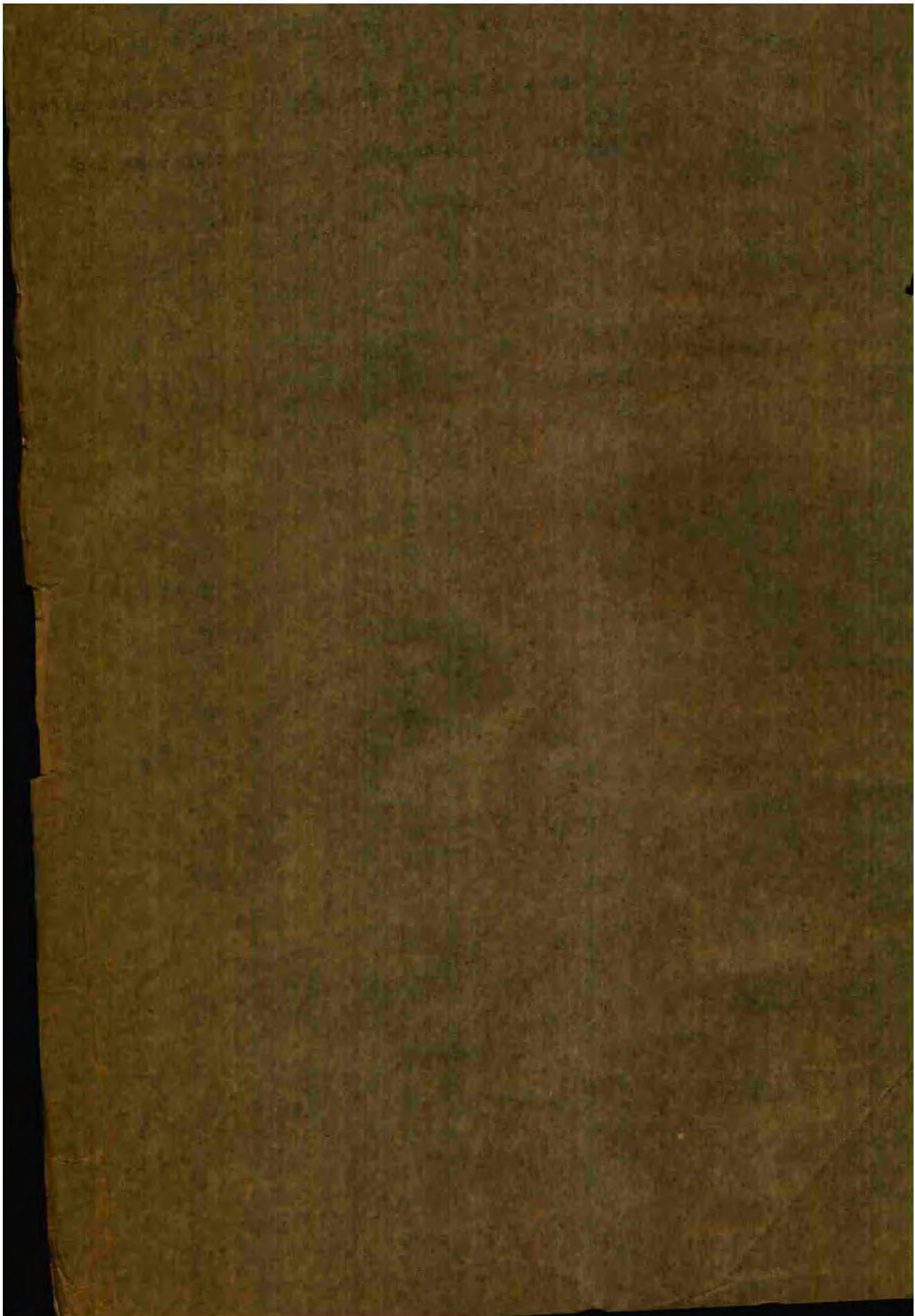
* See pp. 212-213, above.

161. Assmann, p. 355.



supplies were not moving at the turn of the year.

The II Air Corps now had put Malta out of action, and the favorable supply situation of the Axis forces in the spring of 1942 enabled Rommel to launch his offensive against the strongly developed British positions at the western borders of the Marmarica.



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Section VII

The Battle in the Marmarica Area -- The Interception of Convoys --
The Capture of Tobruk -- The Commitment of the Air Force -- Rommel's
Thrust toward Egypt -- Did the Luftwaffe Fail?

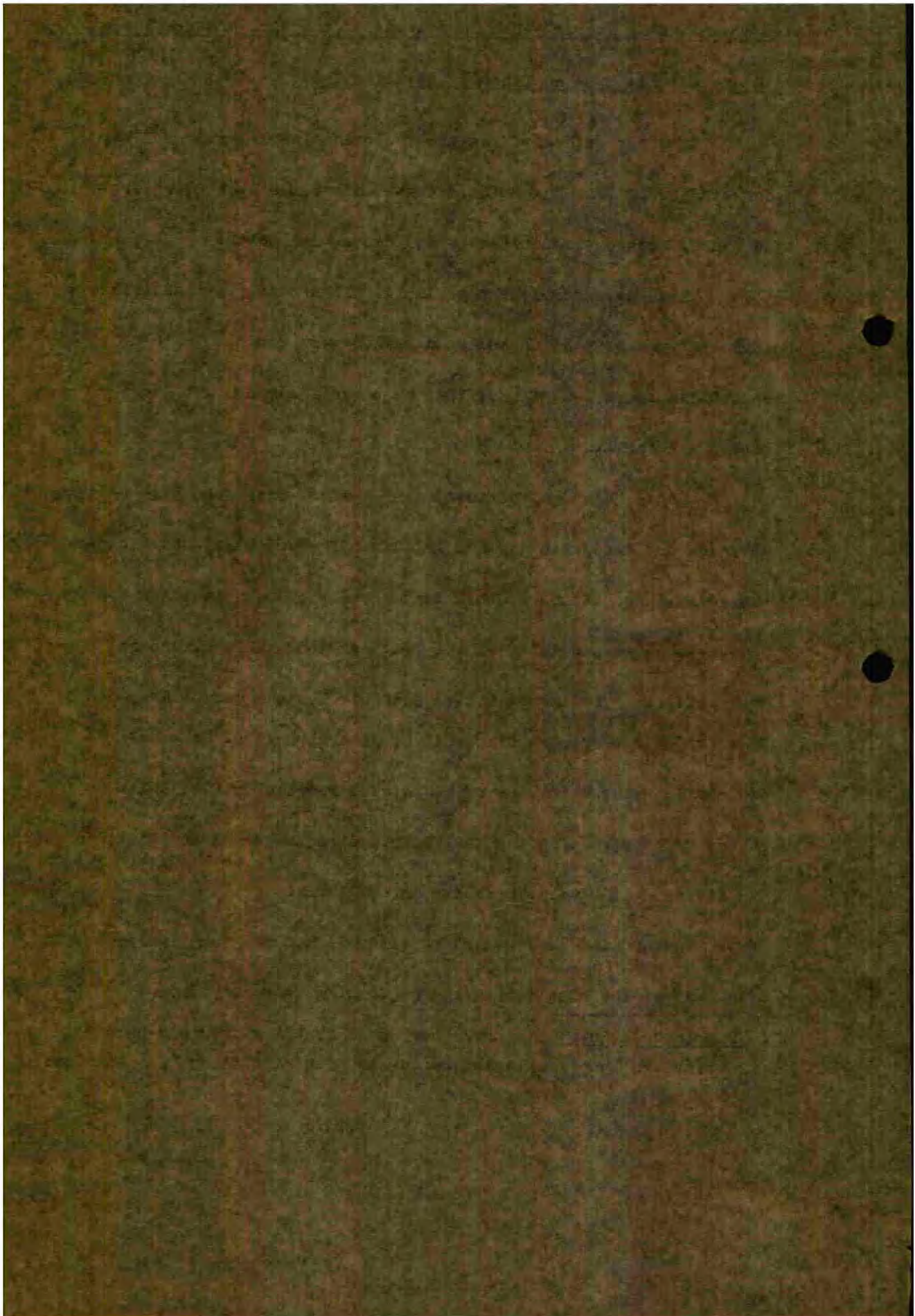
In their defensive position between Ain-el-Gazala and Bir Hacheim the British had built a number of "boxes" that were protected by barbed wire obstacles and dense mine belts.

These were adroitly established all-around positions, like small fortresses, the defenders of which were equipped with all essentials for a long siege; they also had their own artillery pieces and tanks.

Such a "box" was situated near Gazala, where the 50th British Division and the South African 1st Division were stationed along the coast. The British 150th Brigade held the "box" position near Got-el-Daleb in proximity of the Trigh-el-Abd. The southernmost such defensive position situated near Bir Hacheim was held by the Free French 1st Brigade commanded by General Koentig. Somewhat distant from the main line of resistance was the British 201st Guards Brigade holding the Knightsbridge position and the Indian 5th Division at ElAdon, both dug in similarly.

These defensive "boxes" (positions) had the dual function of surveying the mine fields and preventing the enemy from

* Translator's Note: The term "box" used by the author has been retained in the translation because of its significant connotation.



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opening a gap across the mine fields without any opposition. In addition, these "boxes" -- like medieval castles -- played the role of points of resistance, which a carefully advancing enemy would be forced to eliminate. Otherwise, he would run the risk of being attacked in the rear or having his lines of communication cut by diversionary attacks from the garrisons of the fortress positions. According to the British plan, the German forces, engaged in combatting the "boxes," would be attacked by British armored forces held in jump-off positions far from the "boxes." Once the Germans had been forced to engage in armored combat on terrain chosen by the British, the latter could assume the attack at the appropriate moment.

The British therefore hoped that the Gazala position would form a well-integrated defensive system that would give them the opportunity to conduct surprise attacks and, if necessary, fall back on the defensive "boxes." They assumed that the Gazala position would become another Scapa Flow, this time for the British Eighth Army.

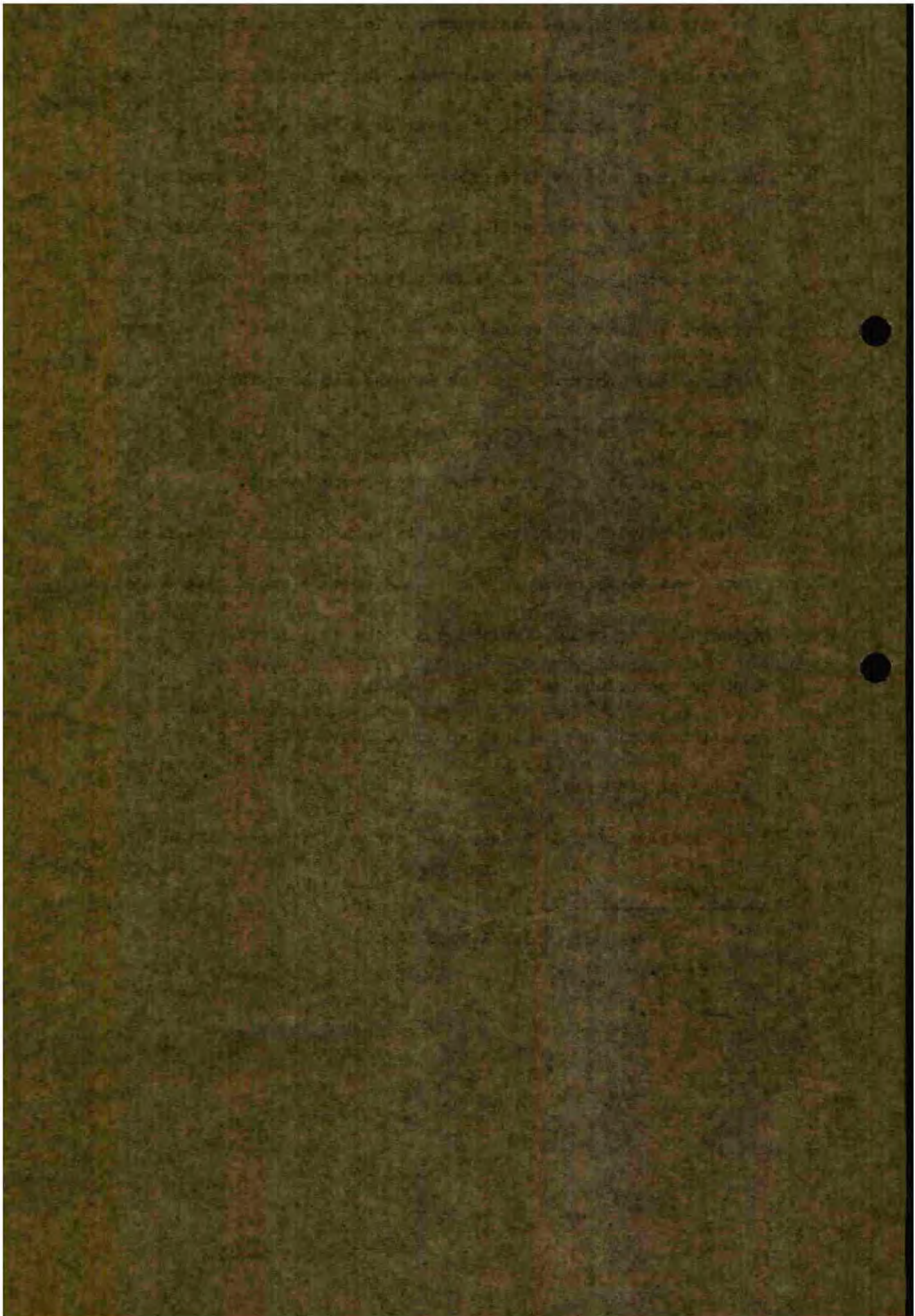
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Annexes 1* and 2** show the strength figures of the two opponents.

162 Young, Desmond, "Rommel," p. 142.

* Annex 27.

** Annex 28.



Annex 1a to Page 252

1. German Army Units

German Africa Corps with 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, and
the 90th Light Division (Motorized), and
one rifle brigade, and
corps troops.

2. Italian Army Units

XXI Corps with Brescia and Savona Divisions;

I Corps, including Bologna and Pavia Divisions;

Trento Motorized Division (p. 76);

XX Motorized Corps with Ariete Armored Division and Trieste
Motorized Division;

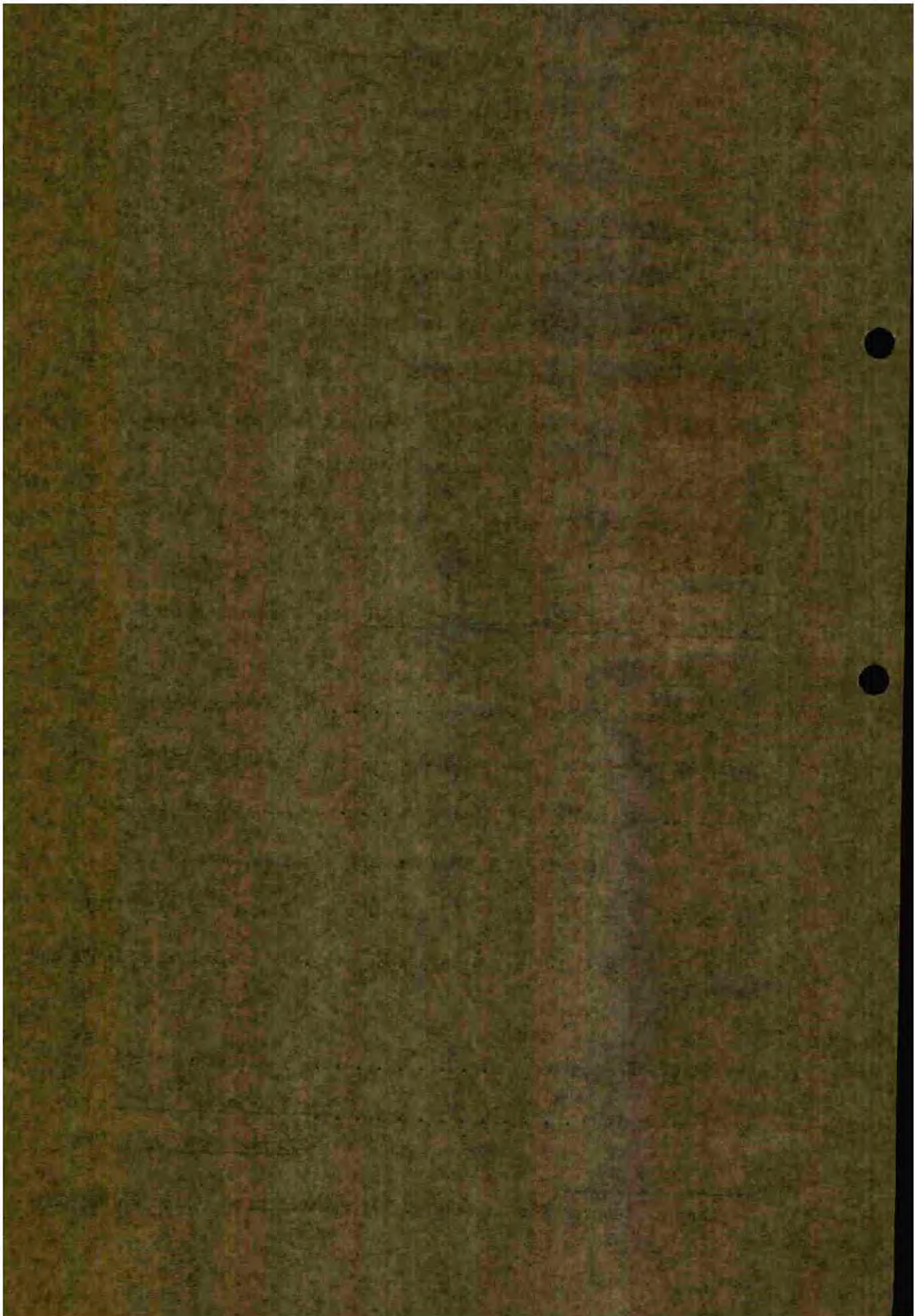
The Littorio Armored Division was moved up during the battle
on about 15 June.

3. German Flying Units, Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander)

Africa*

27th Fighter Wing with	130 Messerschmidt 109's
XXXX 3d Dive-Bomber Wing with	56 Junkers 87's
26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing with	28 Messerschmidt 110's
12th Squadron of Luftwaffe Area Command w/	13 Junkers 88's
2d and 4th Squadrons of 14 (H) with	7 Messerschmidt 110's
1st Squadron of 121st Long-Range Recon Sq	17 Messerschmidt 109's and 11 Junkers 88's
Desert Rescue Squadron	7 Fieseler Storch's
Other Aircraft	<u>1 Heinkel</u>
Total	<u>270 Aircraft</u>

* Diary of General von Waldau, p. 143, Actual Strength on 26 May 1942.



Annex 1b to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)

1. The following units had been assembled for the attack of
26 May 1942:

a. German Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander) Africa:

1 dive-bomber wing with 5 groups	93	aircraft
5 fighter groups	158	"
1 twin-engine fighter group	25	"
1 fighter-bomber squadron	12	"
1 short-range and 1 long-range rec. squ.	20	"
	<u>308</u>	aircraft

b. Italian Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander):

1 ground-support wing	90	aircraft
1 fighter wing	75	aircraft
reconnaissance, etc.	20	"
	<u>185</u>	aircraft
Total	493	aircraft

Of which the fully operational aircraft numbered
approximately 320

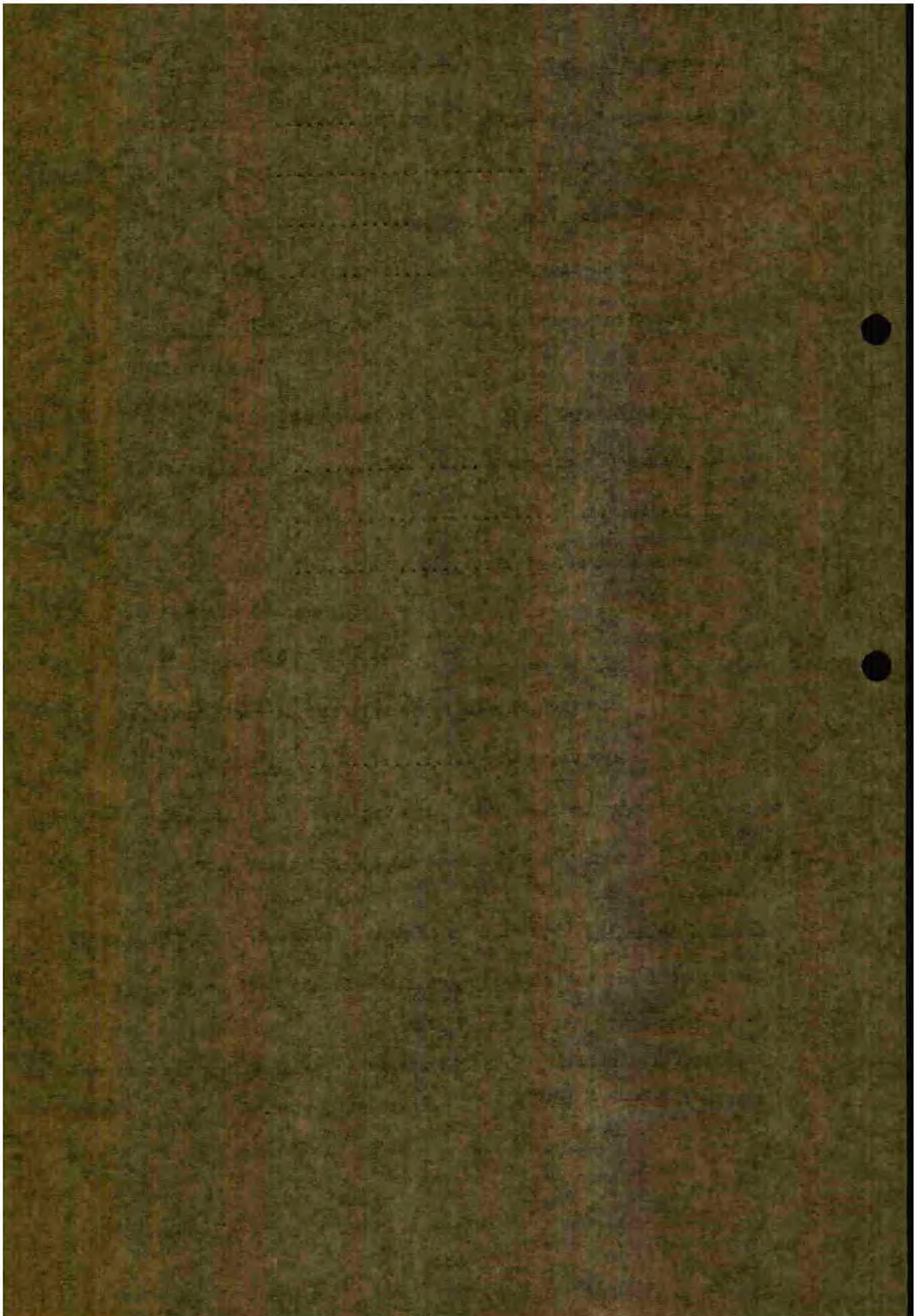
As of 10 January 1942 the 135th Flak Regiment was stationed
in Africa, including 12 medium and 12 light batteries.**

* Feldzug in Afrika (Campaign in Africa), Volume 2, Part V, Annex 5.

** Distribution of Antiaircraft Artillery in the Mediterranean Theater

3. Africa

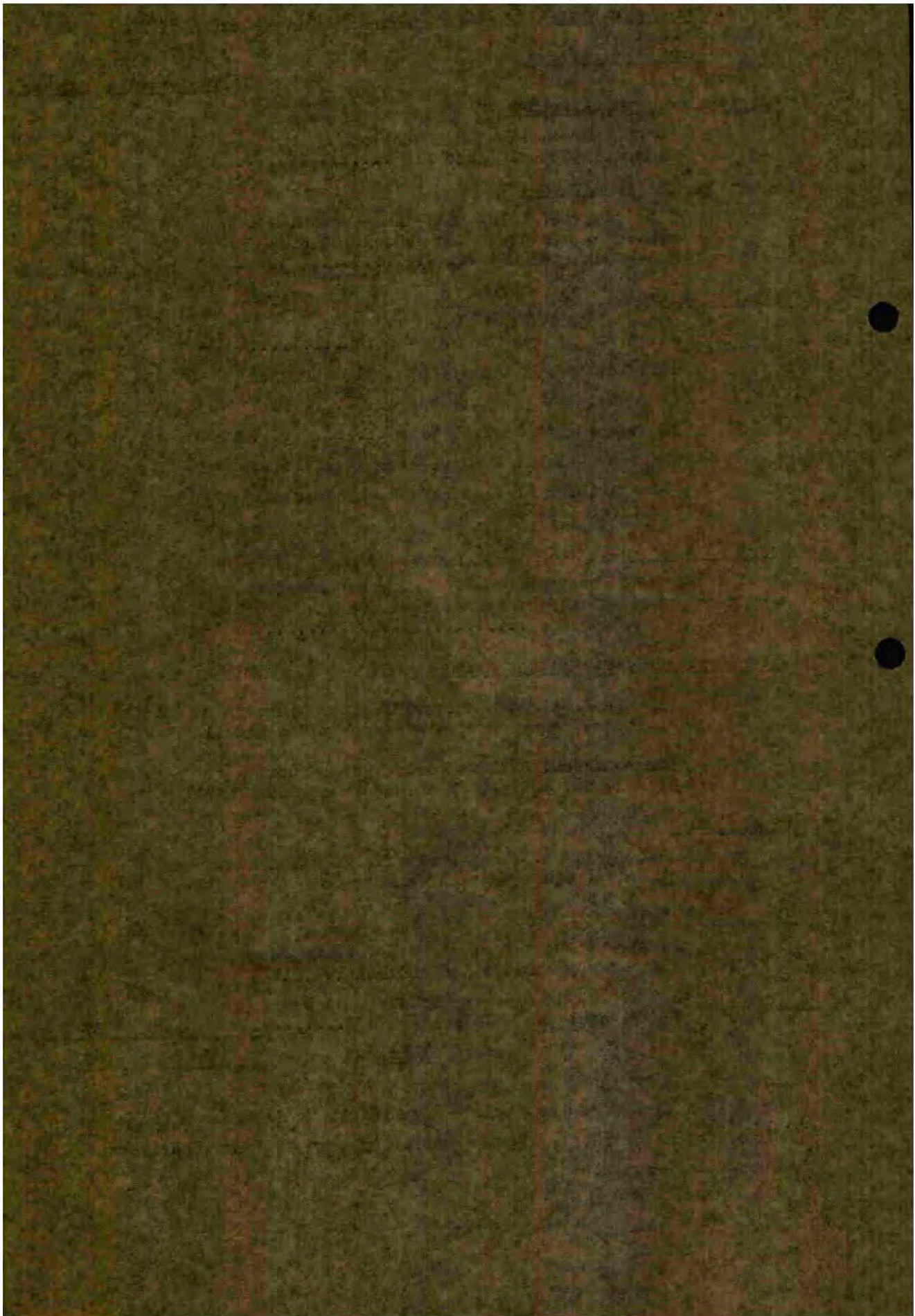
Antiaircraft Artillery in North Africa (General data from various
sources), both in Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Annex 1c to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)Flying Units of Second Air Fleet on 23 May 1942*a. Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander) Africa and PanzerArmy Headquarters

	<u>TO Strength</u>	<u>Actual</u>
<u>Short-Range Reconnaissance</u>		
4th Squadron, 12th (H) Martuba Messerschmidt 109 and 110	21	10
<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance</u>		
1st Squadron, 121st Long-Range Recon. Gp. at Derna, equipped with Junkers 88 and Messerschmidt 109	15	11
<u>Fighter Units</u>		
Hq, 27th Fighter Wing at Martuba,	-	-
1st XXXXXXXXXX Group, 27th Fighter Wing	34	29
2d Group, 27th Fighter Wing	31	27
3d Group, 27th Fighter Wing	30	11
Fighter Bombers, 27th Fighter Wing	10	5
(All stationed at Martuba and equipped with Messerschmidt 109)		
<u>Night Fighter Unit</u>		
as of 10 May: 2d Squadron, 2d Night Fighter Wing, stationed at Derna, equipped with Junkers 88	9	5
<u>Two-Engine Support Fighter Units</u>		
7th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, at Derna, equipped with Messerschmidt 110	12	5
9th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, at Malena, equipped with Messerschmidt 110	11	4
<u>Bomber Unit</u>		
12th Squadron, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Berca, equipped with Junkers 88	17	7
<u>Dive Bomber Units</u>		
Hq, 3d Dive Bomber Wing, at Derna, ^{South} equipped with Messerschmidt 110 and Heinkel 111	2	-
1st Group, 3d Dive Bomber Wing, at Derna South, equipped with Junkers 87	44	37
<u>Totals</u>	<u>234</u>	<u>147</u>

*Strength Analysis of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and in Africa (Extracted from Situation Maps in England), Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Annex 1d to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)Flying Units of Second Air Fleet on 20 May 1942b. II Air Corps and Headquarters, Second Air FleetLong-Range Reconnaissance Units

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>YO</u>	<u>Actual</u>
Hq, 122d Long-Range Recon. Gp., at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	3	2
2d Squadron, 122d Long-Range Recon. Gp., at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	13	6
1st Squadron, 122d Long-Range Recon. Gp., at Catania, equipped with Messerschmidts 109 and Junkers 88	13	10

Fighter Units

Hq, 23d Fighter Wing	6	5
2d Group, 23d Fighter Wing	40	18
5d Group, 23d Fighter Wing	11	5
Fighter Bombers, 23d Fighter Wing	12	6

(All stationed at Comiso and equipped with Messerschmidts 109)

Night Fighter Units

Hq, 2d Night Fighter Wing	4	12
1st Squadron, 2d Night Fighter Wing (less 2d Squ)..	20	12

(Both stationed at Catania and equipped with Junkers 88)

Twin-Engine Fighter Units

Hq and 3d Group, 26th Support Fighter Wing (less 7th and 9th Squadrons), equipped with Messerschmidts 110	16	9
10th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, equipped with Dorniers 17	8	6

(Both stationed at Trapani)

Bomber Units

600th Bomber Group, stationed at Catania	29	17
806 Bomber Group, stationed at Catania	27	13
Hq, 54th Bomber Group, stationed at Catania	3	2
1st Squadron, 54th Bomber Group, at Comiso	27	14

(All equipped with Junkers 88)

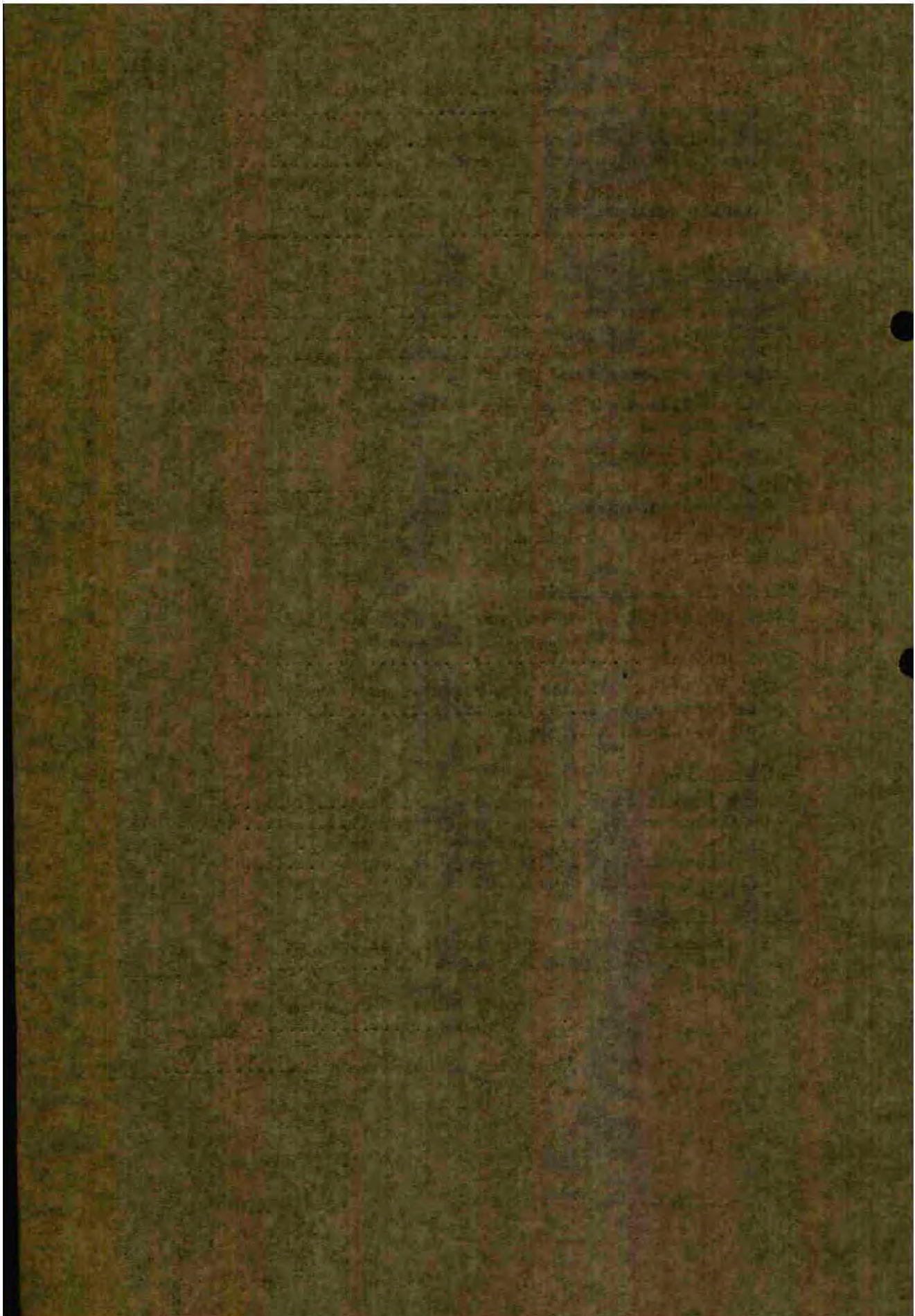
Dive Bomber Units

3d Squadron, 3d Dive Bomber Group, stationed at San Pietro, equipped with Junkers 87	25	17
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Total Table of Organization

Strength

Total Actual Strength



Annex 1e to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)Flying Units of Second Air Fleet on 20 May 1942a. X Air CorpsLong-Range Reconnaissance Units

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>T/O</u>	<u>Actual</u>
2d Squadron, 123d Long-Range Recon. Group, stationed at Kastelli on Crete, equipped with Junkers 88	13	6

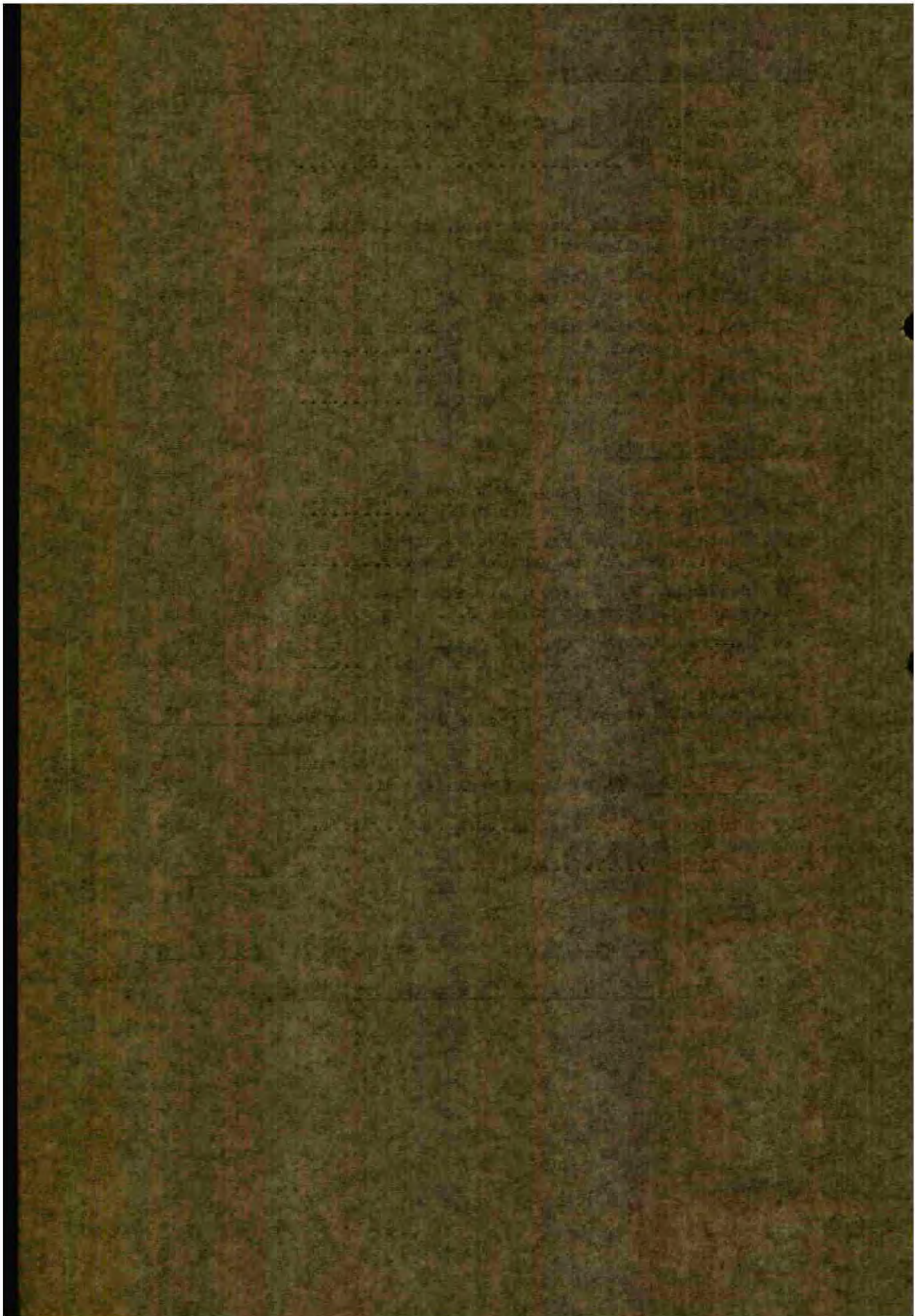
Bomber Units

Hq, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Eleusis, XXXXXXXXXX equipped with XXXXXX Junkers 88....	1	1
1st Group, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Iraklion (Crete), equipped with Junkers 88 .	29	16
2d Group, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Eleusis, equipped with Junkers 88	31	15
2d Group, 100th Bomber Wing, stationed at Kalanaki, equipped with Heinkels 111	25	12

Naval Aircraft Units

2d Squadron, 125th Group, stationed at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado 196	8	4
Hq, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with B.V. (Translation unknown) 138	1	1
1st Squadron, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with Heinkels 60 and F.T.'s (10.)8 ...	15	11
2d Squadron, 126th Group, at Kawalla, equipped with Arado 196 and Heinkel 60's	13	4
3d Squadron, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado 196, F.T. 8, and Heinkel 60s	16	10
	<u>152</u>	<u>80</u>
a. <u>Fliegerführer</u> (Air Force Commander) Africa ..	234	147
b. II Air Corps	244	148
c. X Air Corps	<u>152</u>	<u>80</u>
	<u>630</u>	<u>375</u>

On 20 May 1942 the Second Air Fleet had 375 aircraft
out of 630, which were ready for take-off.



Annex 2A-30 Page 22

1. British Army Units*

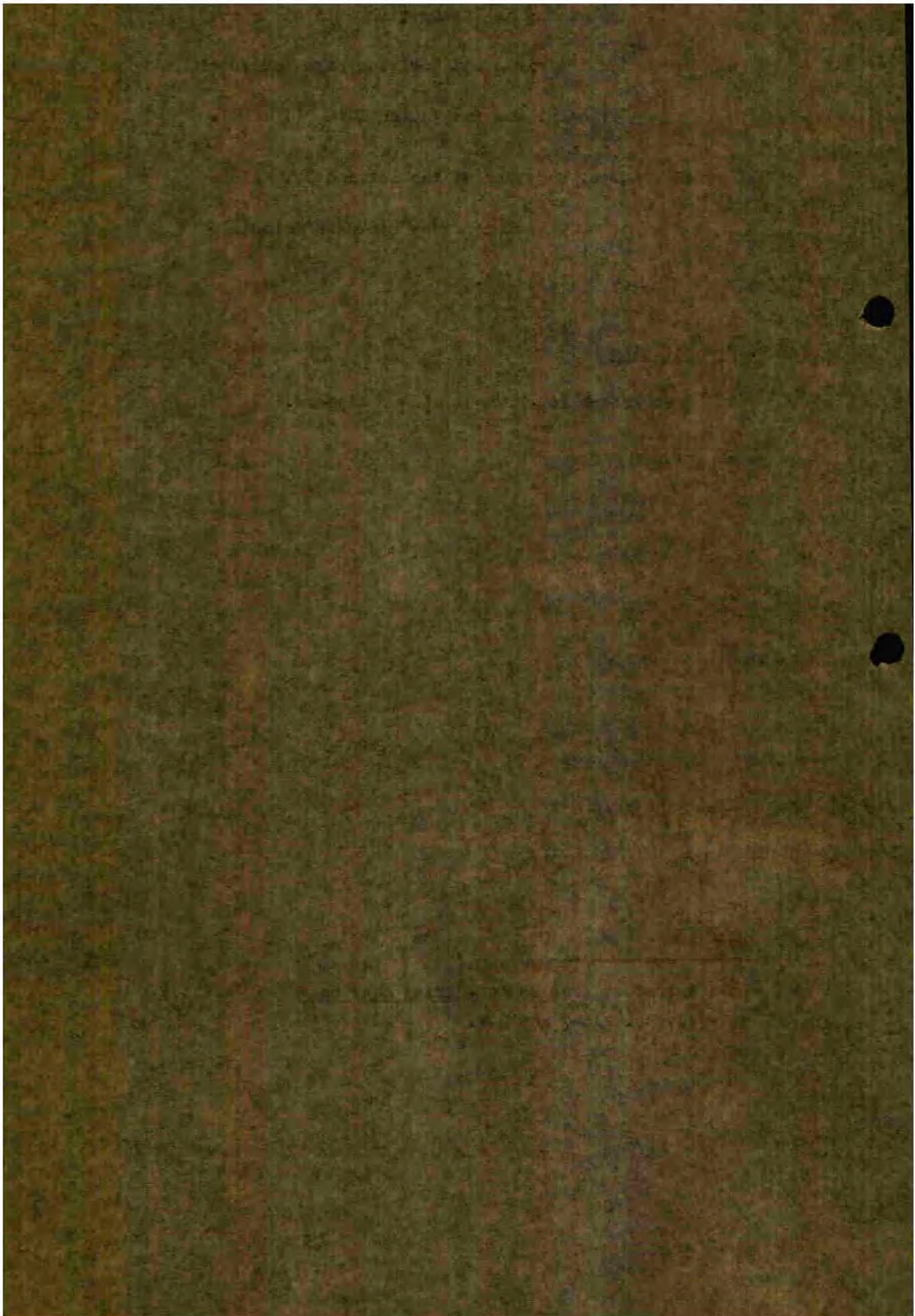
XIII. Corps, composed of 4 motorized divisions (which are designated as the British 50th Division, the South African 1st Division, the Indian 4th Division, and the Indian 10th Division).

XXX Armored Corps, composed of the 1st and 7th Armored Divisions and 4 separate motorized brigades.

2. French Units

Free French 1st Brigade at Bir Hacheim.

* Data extracted from Rommel, Krieg ohne Hass (War without Hatred), pp. 116-7 and 141.



Annex 25 to Page 232British Air Force Units

No compilation of British Air Force strength as of 26 May 1942 is available.

In November 1941 Air Marshal Tedder had 51 squadrons with approximately 765 aircraft at his headquarters and with the Western Desert Group. (Aircraft stationed at Aden, in East Africa, Iraq, Palestine-Transjordan, and Malta are not included.) Page 166.

Around the end of 1941/beginning of 1942 some 20 squadrons with about 300 aircraft were transferred to the Far East. (Richards, Volume II, p. 189)

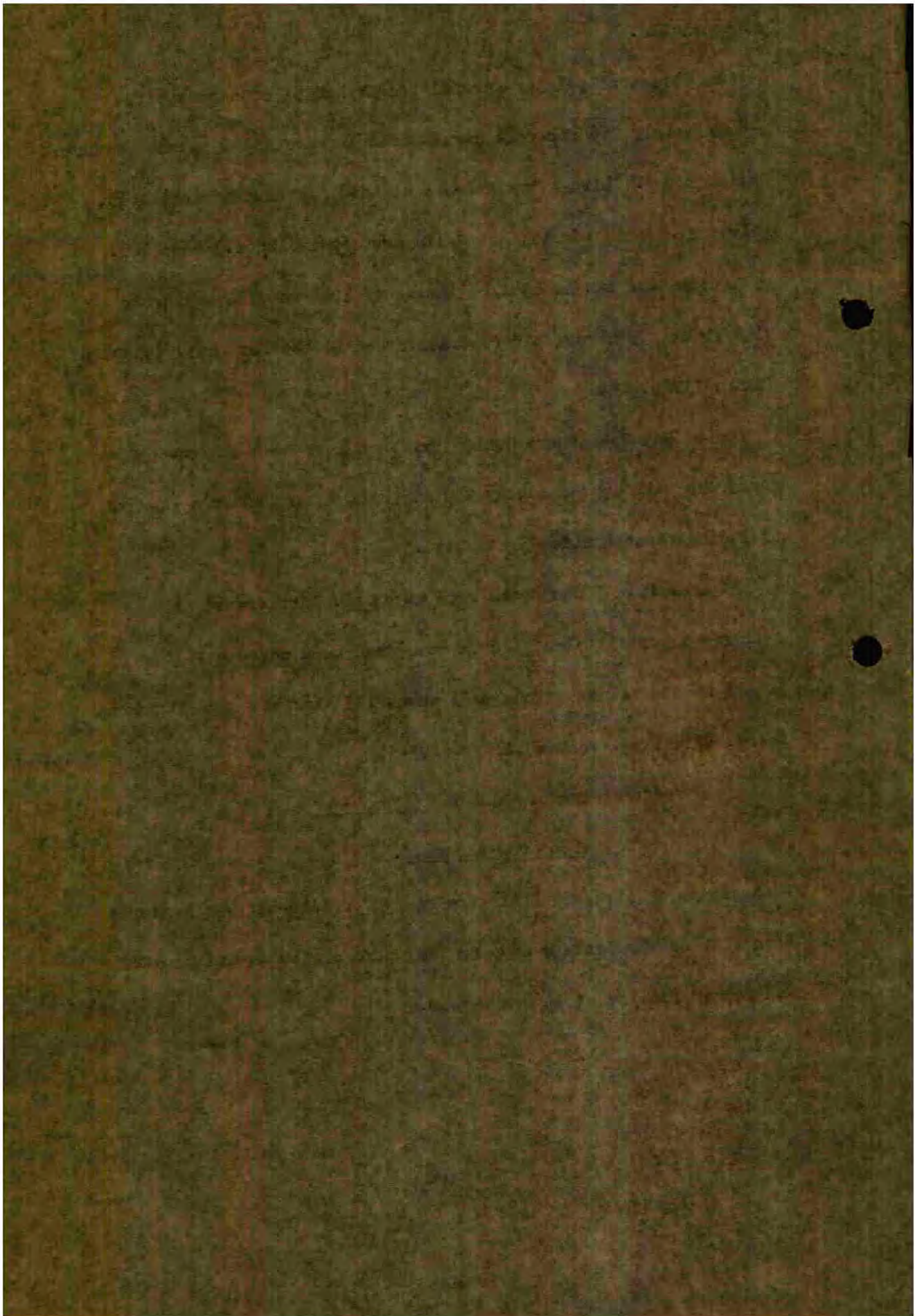
On 26 May 1942 there would therefore have been at least 30 squadrons with approximately 450 aircraft under Tedder's command, excluding those stationed at Malta.

At that time 5 squadrons were at Malta. Furthermore, 100 Spitfire aircraft (about 6 squadrons) had been moved onto the island so that 11 squadrons with about 165 aircraft were stationed there. (Richards, Volume II, pp. 203-5)

Tedder therefore had on 26 May 1942

about 600 aircraft.

Their ratio of aircraft that were ready for take-off was higher than that of the Germans because they were closer to maintenance and repair facilities in rear areas.



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Rommel made the following comments on this subject:

"Many German and all Italian units were greatly understrength; the 90th Light Division, for instance, entered the major battle with average company strengths of only 50 men."

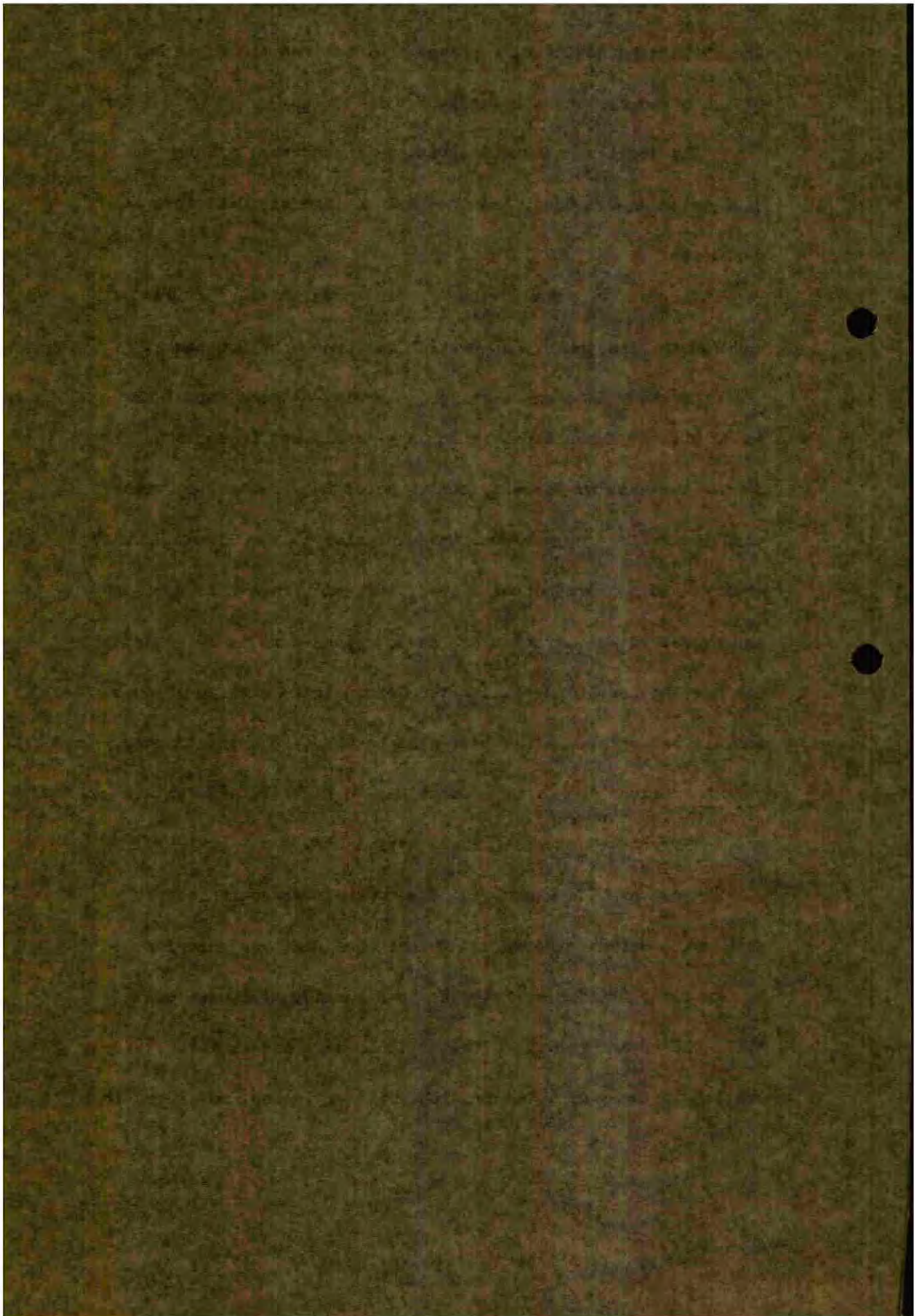
"The Italian motorised divisions should really have been designated as brigades, and the Italian infantry divisions as regiments."

"Whereas the Axis forces went into combat with 320 German and 240 Italian tanks, the British mustered some 900 tanks."

"Our Mark IV tanks with long barrels -- there were four tanks without ammunition available -- could not be employed during the battle. The American tanks of the Grant type, which made their first appearance, were inferior to the German Mark IV equipped with short barreled guns, both with regard to mobility and speed. But the Grant tanks nevertheless were at an advantage because they could immobilise the German tanks with their short barrels before the latter were able to pierce the thick armor of the American tanks. We Germans had 40 Mark IV tanks with short barrels to match 160 Grant-type tanks."

"Our Mark III tanks, which were the most common model with which German armored units were equipped, was superior to the other British tank types whose gunning equipment was still the 40-mm. gun. The Italian tanks were inferior to the British in every way. The British artillery, also, was superior

End of
German
Page-253



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to ours at a ratio of eight to five."

"The German-Italian air forces were probably about even with the R.A.F. at the outset, but later on the relationship of strength changed considerably." 163

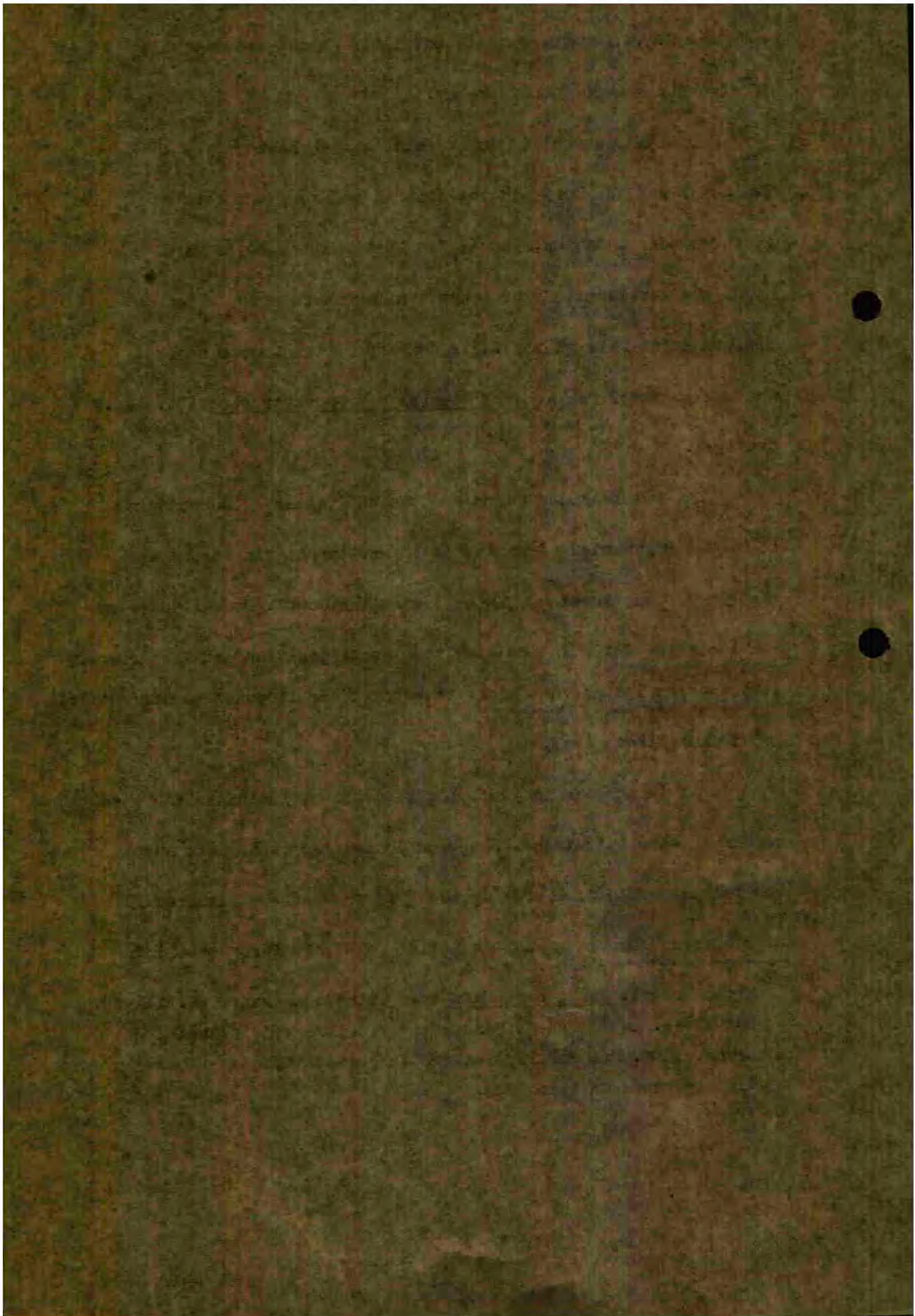
Rommel's plan called for a feint attack launched by the Italian X and XXI Corps in the central and northern sectors of the Gasala position. There, the British were to be tied down, and various kinds of deceptive maneuvers were to be performed for this purpose. The command of the troops engaged in this maneuver was held by General der Panzertruppen (Lt. Gen.) Cruesell.

The German Africa Corps and the WM Italian XX Corps were to bypass Bir Hacheim from the south and thrust via Acroma in the rear of the Gasala position toward the coast. Rommel intended to cut off the divisions holding the Gasala position and the armored forces assembled in that area, to sever their lines of communication, and to annihilate them.

For this purpose the 90th Light Division, including the three reconnaissance battalions, had been instructed to advance into the Belhamed- Elc Adem area in order to prevent the withdrawal of the Tobruk garrison and the moving up of reinforcements into

163

Erwin Rommel, Krieg ohne Hass (War without Hatred), pp. 116-3 and 124-6, published by Heidenheimer Zeitung, Heidenheim/Brenz, 1950. The description of the ground fighting is largely based on this book.



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the Acroma area.

In an effort to simulate the approach of massed armored units near El Adon, the 90th Light Division had been equipped with several "dust makers."

As a follow-up of the annihilation of the British forces in the Marmarica battle, the plans called for the rapid conquest of the fortress Tobruk.

"My freedom of operations had been limited by the Duce who had ordered me not to advance beyond the Egyptian border. Even before the start of the offensive, Malta was supposed to be captured by German-Italian parachute and glider troops. But for some reason that is difficult to understand, our superior headquarters dropped this plan. For this reason ~~EA~~ and in view of the steady increase in British forces, we fixed the date for the start of the offensive as 26 May." **

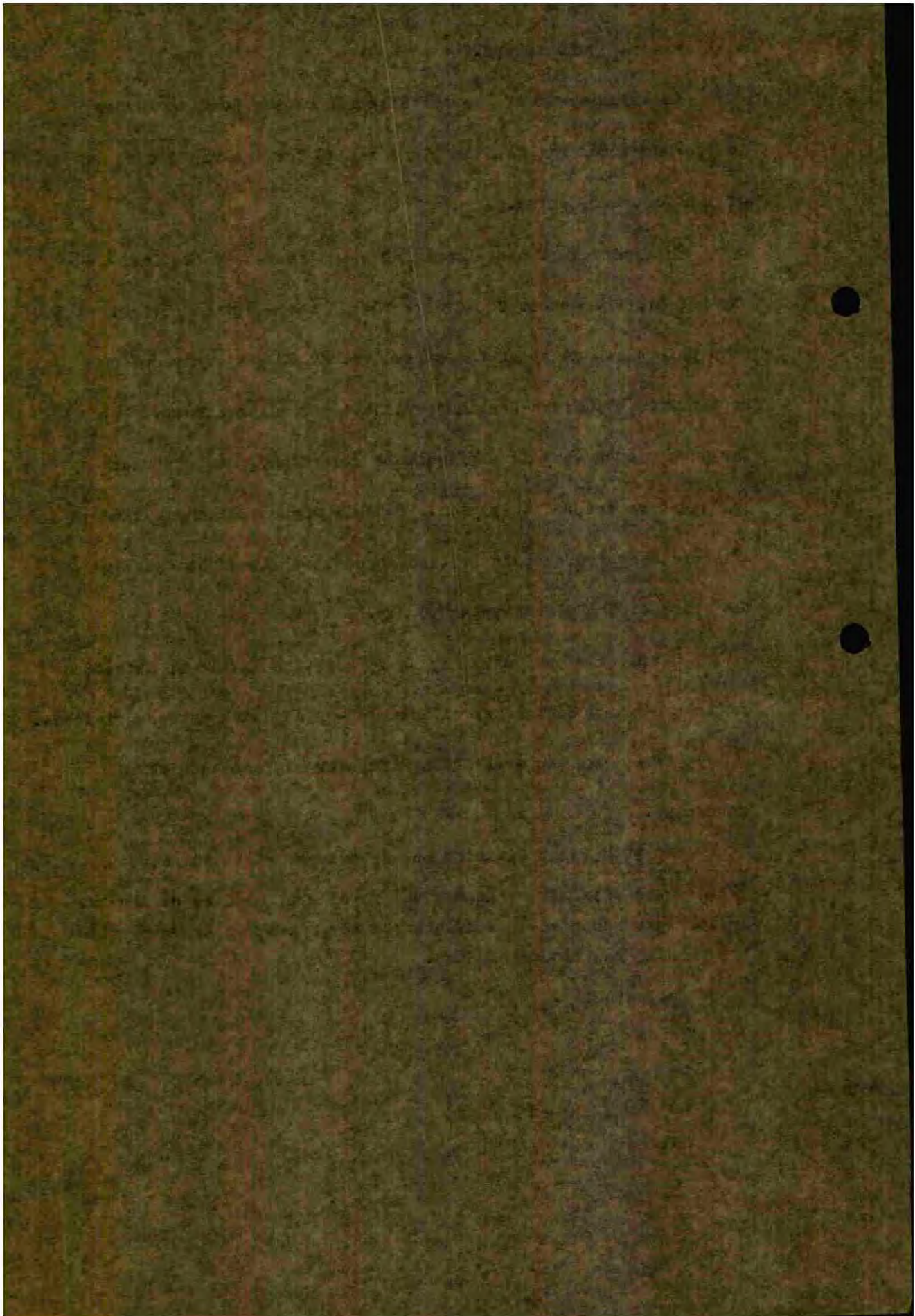
During the period 26 May to 15 June the battle of attrition in the western desert raged without let-up and with extreme violence.

"On 27 May the outflanking maneuver had a chance of succeeding."

The 90th Light Division on the extreme right advanced

* These were aircraft engines with propellers, mounted on trucks, which were supposed to simulate the advance of an armored unit by raising big clouds of dust.

** See footnote 153.



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up to El Adem, while the two panzer (armored) divisions, closer to the focal point of the attack movement, fought their way to the north toward Acroma."

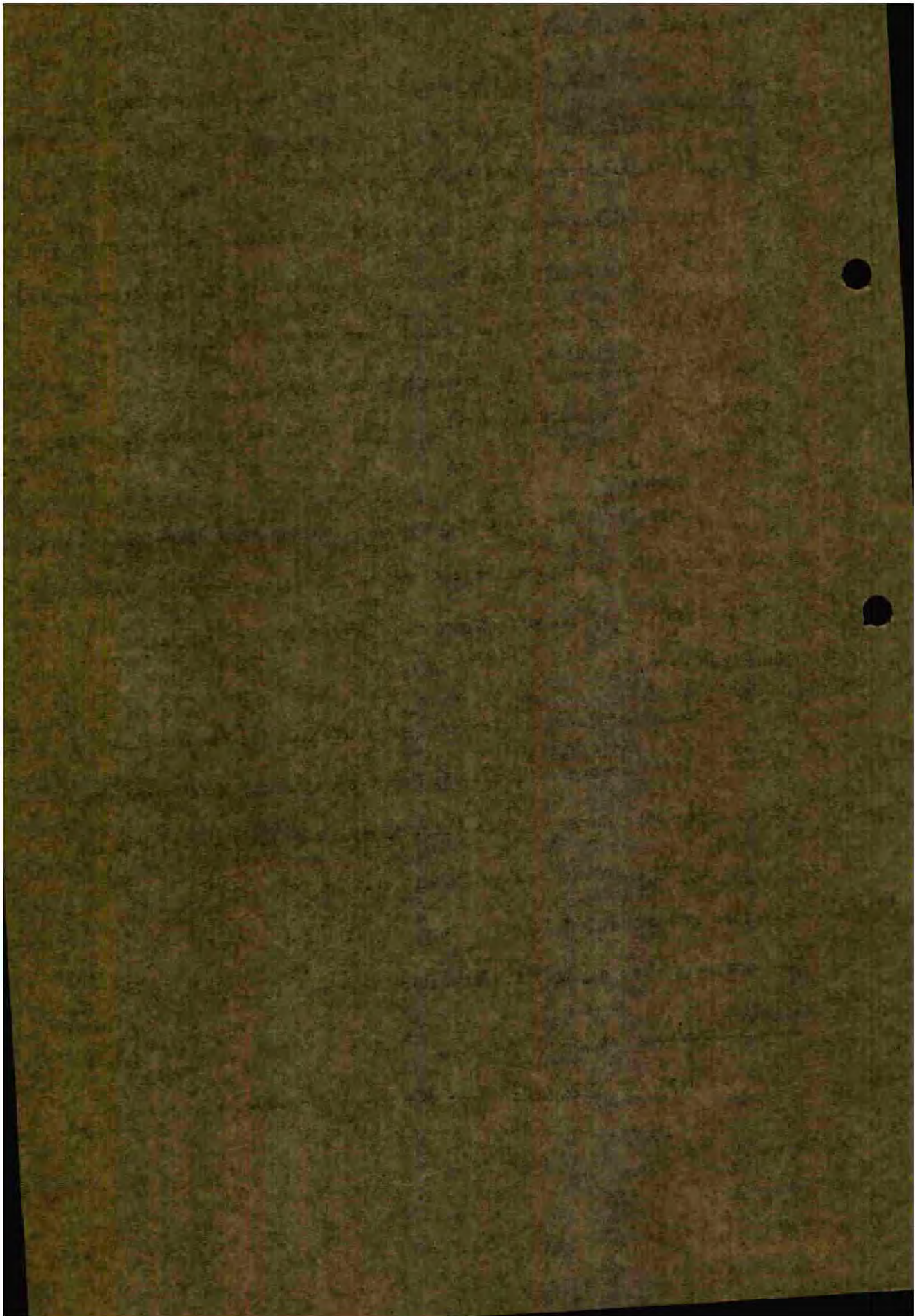
"But near El Adem the advance of the 90th Light Divisions came to a halt, and the armored divisions did not get beyond Knightbridge. Here, where the Acroma - Bir Hacheim road crosses the Trigh Capuzzo, ~~REVAIUMS~~ a battle of attrition developed over a period of time. With some interruptions but with fierce determination the two opponents fought each other over the next few days. The Italian were meanwhile not making much headway in their frontal attack against the British mine fields and in their assaults at Bir Hacheim." 164

Rommel's attack plan on Acroma, which had been conceived with incredible daring, failed. Although the axis forces achieved tactical surprise, the effect produced resembled a sting into a hornets' nest.

The reason for the failure was above all the underestimation of the British armored forces; the Grant-type tanks, which made their first appearance during this battle, immobilized more than one third of the German tanks and knocked them out. The 90th Light Division was separated from the German Africa Corps during the course of the day, and its situation worsened rapidly in the evening.

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 189 - 199.

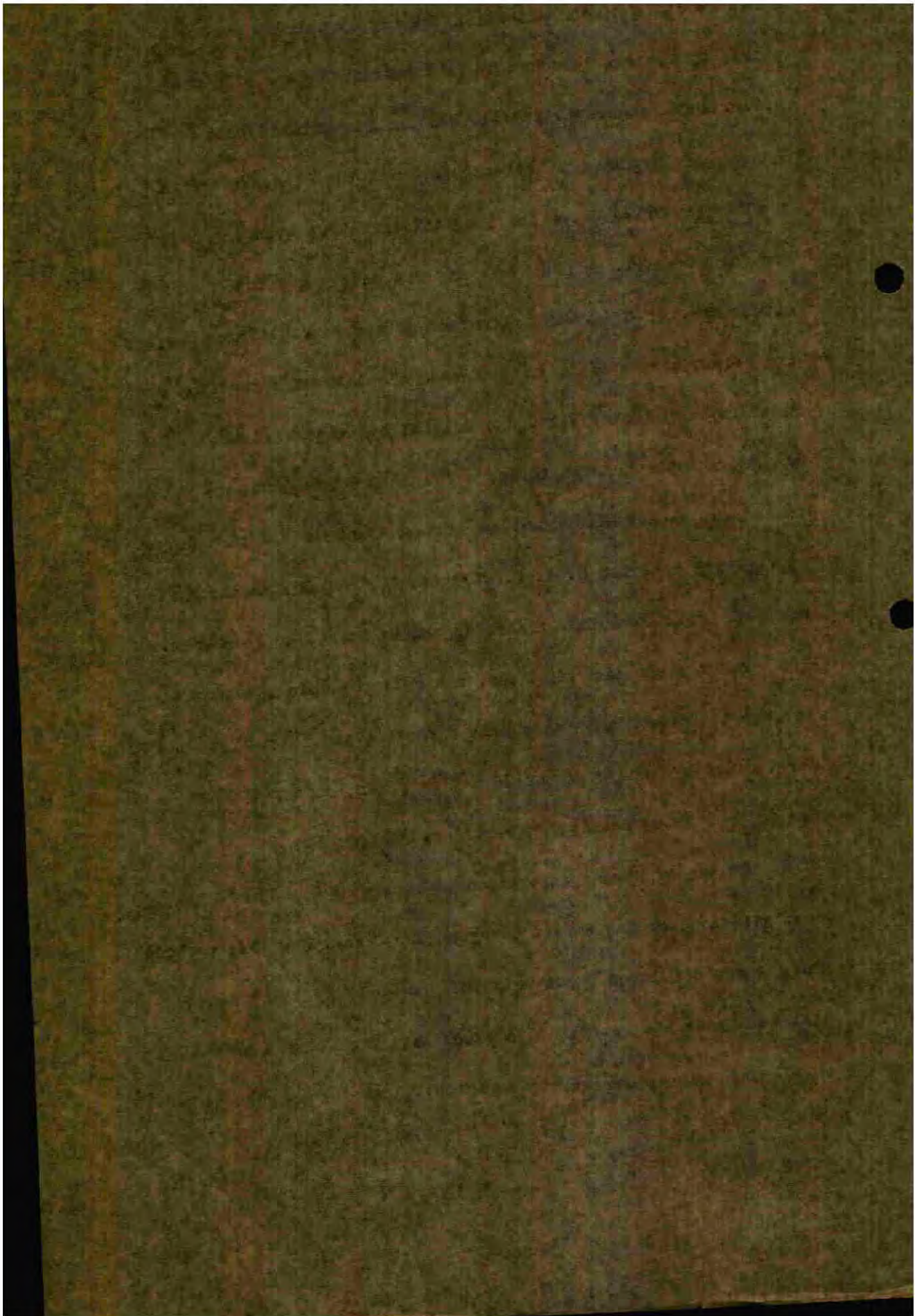


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In addition, the supply of gasoline and ammunition for the armored divisions had been interrupted. Over the extended and insecure lines of communication the supply columns were dispersed by attacks launched by fast British units, with the R.A.F. doing the rest. Rommel, who had his command post up front, had furthermore lost contact with the Headquarters of the German Africa Corps and the Italian attack grouping under General Cruswell. He and his staff frequently got into awkward situations. By 28 May the situation of the German Africa Corps had become very serious and an acute shortage of ammunition and gasoline made itself felt. The British had assembled almost all their available armored forces north of Trigh Capuzzo and rolled one attack after another against the German Africa Corps. At the same time the R. A. F. directed its attacks mainly against the 90th Light Division, inflicting heavy losses on this unit.

Under these circumstances, the only possible solution was to stop the attack in a northerly direction and to withdraw the German forces at daybreak on 30 May in order to regroup them for defense along a shorter front line.

It was of utmost importance to open a secure line of communication for the forces covering the flank. For this purpose the Germans committed those units of the 90th Light Division that had meanwhile been able to break away from combat as well as elements of the German Africa Corps; these forces were to



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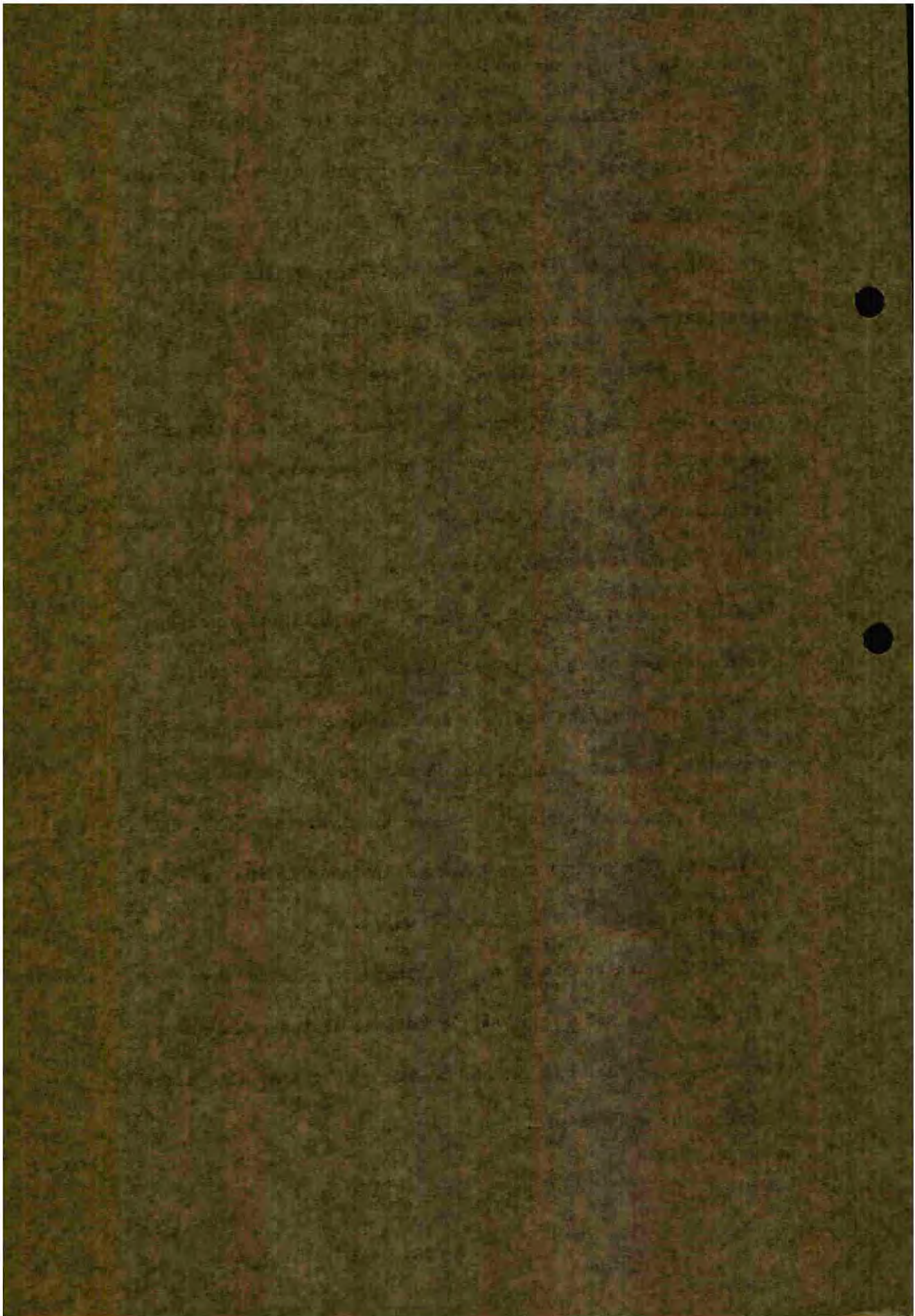
make a gap across the mine fields. In the course of these attempts the Germans found out that near Get-el-Ualeb, in one of the "boxes" (defensive positions), strong British units supported by tanks blocked the German advance.

These British forces were encircled during 30 May.

Elements of the X Italian X Corps had meanwhile succeeded in getting across the mine fields and in forming a bridgehead along the east side on the mine belt. However, the gap in the mine fields was under enemy artillery fire.

The British had followed the German withdrawal with many hesitations, probably because this maneuver had happened unexpectedly. In any case, they did not take advantage of the situation by quickly pursuing the Germans, and they left the 150th Brigade near Ualeb to its fate. On 1 June the Germans captured there some 3,000 prisoners, 101 tanks and armored reconnaissance vehicles as well as 124 artillery pieces; such is the equipment had been destroyed. This success helped to restore the situation of the Panzer Army which had been extremely critical during the preceding days. Above all, EME a ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ secure line of communications to the west had now been created via the Italian X Corps.

But British combat groups continued to make sorties from Bir Hacheim against German supply columns that were advancing via Retonda Segnali and farther to the north; they also mined the roads at many points.



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For this reason, the Germans felt that this strong point would also have to be eliminated. On 2 June the assault on Bir Hacheim was launched by the motorised Trieste Division in the northeast and the 90th Light Division in the southeast.

The activities of the German-Italian Air Forces in connection with the ground fighting of the Panzer Army are described in the diary of the Fliegerfuehrer (Air Force Commander) Africa, General der Flieger (Lt.Gen.) Hoffmann von Waldau, which is quoted here for the first time. ¹⁶⁵

This diary is therefore fully authentic; the air situation is often quoted verbatim from the diary. General von Waldau had been a staff officer in the Operations XXIII Branch of the Luftwaffe High Command, and he was therefore well acquainted with the principles of air operations. Furthermore, he was able to converse in Italian.

On 27 May the Air force units flew missions in the area north and northwest of Acroma in accordance with instructions received from Panzer Army headquarters. Near El Adem, where the ground forces had meanwhile established contact with the enemy, the selection of targets had become more complicated. During the following days the estimates of the ground-fighting situation were entirely based on aerial reconnaissance, since the Luftwaffe headquarters had lost contact with the Panzer Army headquarters.

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"Tagebuch III. Teil (Fliegerfuehrer Afrika) des Generals von Waldau. 27.5.42. bis 8.8.42" (Diary, Part III, of Air Force Commander Africa, General von Waldau. From 27 May to 8 August 1942.) . Karlsruhe Document Collection.

