

During the same month, the following supplies were unloaded from ships reaching Tunisian harbors: 34,000 tons of war material, 14,500 tons of fuel, 200 motor vehicles (excluding tanks and guns), and 33,800 troops⁷¹.

The Luftwaffe General attached to the Royal Italian Air Force (General der deutschen Luftwaffe beim Koeniglich-italienischen Luftwaffe), General der Flieger Ritter von Pohl⁷², had under his command the units and headquarters stationed in Italy (listed in the Appendix⁷³).

During February, the main effort of the enemy air forces was directed against southern Tunisia and the central Mediterranean.

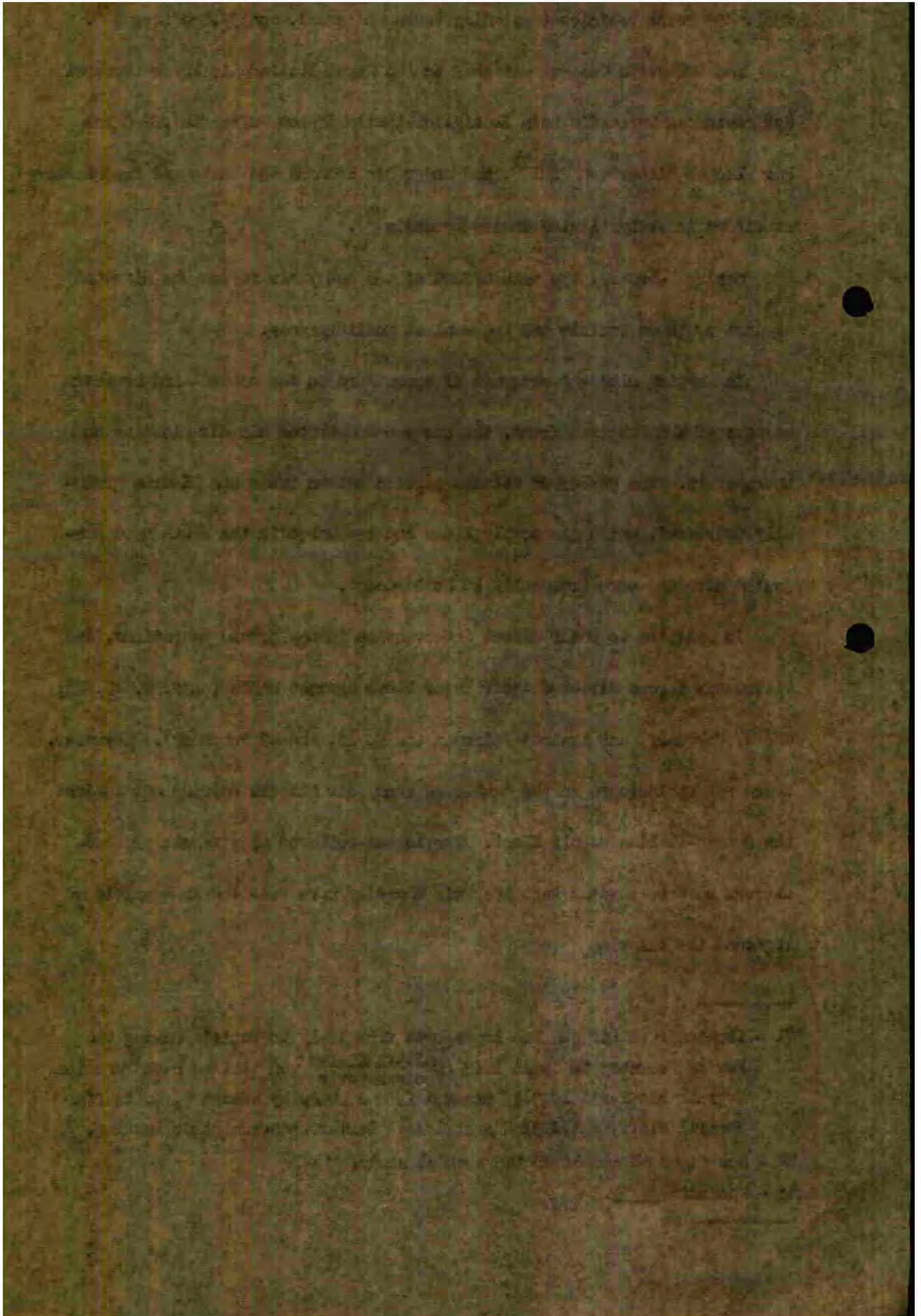
In keeping with the progress of operations on the central and southern sectors of the Tunisian front, the enemy concentrated his air missions on these areas. The number of attacks carried out on Tunis and Bizerte gradually decreased, while the supply lines and the bases in the south were subjected more and more frequently to bombardment.

In addition to their direct intervention in the ground operations, the Allied air forces directed their major blows against Gabes (on 3, 8, 25, 26, and 27 February) and against Kairouan (on 9, 15, and 23 February). Moreover, there was an increase in the number of enemy air attacks carried out against the German-Italian supply fleet. The losses suffered as a result of these attacks were so serious that they might easily have resulted in a crisis as regarded the shipping

71 - The Ratio of Air and Sea Transports from Italy to Tunisia during the Period February to April 1943 (^{Lufttransporte} von Italien nach Tunesien, Februar bis April 1943); excerpt from a study by Branch 8, Luftwaffe General Staff, dated 31 August 1944; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

72 - See pages 62 and 64 of the present study.

73 - Appendix _____



space available⁷⁴.

The Axis bases on Sicily, especially Palermo (attacked on 4, 6, 9, 15, and 23 February), were also raided ^fdar more frequently than during January. In addition, both Turin and Milan were subjected to terror raids on 15 February.

In the rest of the Mediterranean area, including Crete and Greece, enemy air activity was restricted to reconnaissance and harassment flights.

* * * *

After his failure on the northern sector of the Tunisian front in December 1942⁷⁵, Eisenhower turned his attention to the preparation of a large-scale attack which was to be launched from central Tunisia.

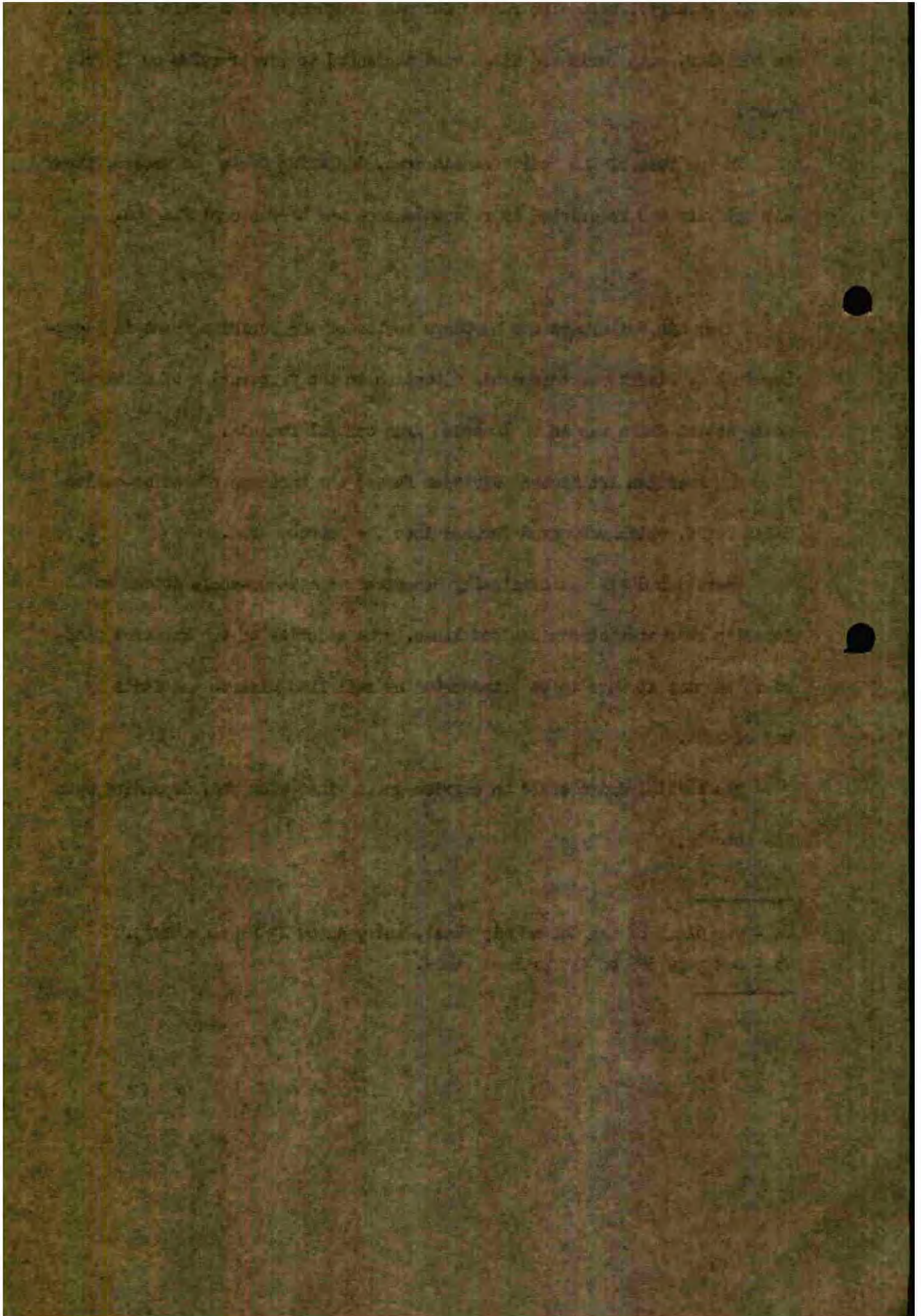
The American 1st Armored Division formed the backbone of the so-called SATIN force, which was moved forward into the Tebessa area.

Operation SATIN was originally conceived as a large-scale attack on Rommel's rear area communications lines. The majority of the supplies needed to support it were to be transported by rail from Bizerte and Tunis by way of Sfax.

The initial drive could be carried out against Sfax and, depending upon its outcome,

74 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 23 February 1943.

75 - See page 599 of the present study.



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then be directed towards the north against Soussa or towards the south against Gabes. Another possibility was to start with the seizure of Kairouan and then move on to attack Soussa. The plan did not envision the permanent occupation of the cities along the coast. The operation was to be launched on 23 January.

The American plan was not without risks.

In the first place, its success depended upon the outcome of a simultaneous attack by the British Eighth Army on the Mareth line. And there was every reason to expect that Rommel, utilizing the old French fortifications there, would decide to offer stubborn resistance.

Even if this should not be the case, Rommel would still be able to release sufficient forces to endanger the southern flank of Operation SATIN and to jeopardize its communications line to Algiers.

The northern flank of the Operation was equally vulnerable, since it was no secret that Axis armored units were concentrated in the area around Kairouan.

Eisenhower was forced to admit reluctantly that there was a chance that Anderson's British First Army might very well become involved in local fighting and, as a result, be beaten or -- at least -- tied down there. On the other hand, he was counting on utilizing Anderson's forces for his decision-seeking offensive in the spring.

Once Operation SATIN left the railway center of Tebessa, all its supplies would have to be transported about 150 miles

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by truck as far as the coast. Trucks were in extremely short supply, but there was a chance that the situation could be relieved to some extent by the supply convoys servicing the central and eastern sectors.

There was a further difficulty in the form of the French-held sector of the front, which had acquired paramount importance in the meantime as the only line of contact between the British First Army and the American II Army Corps.

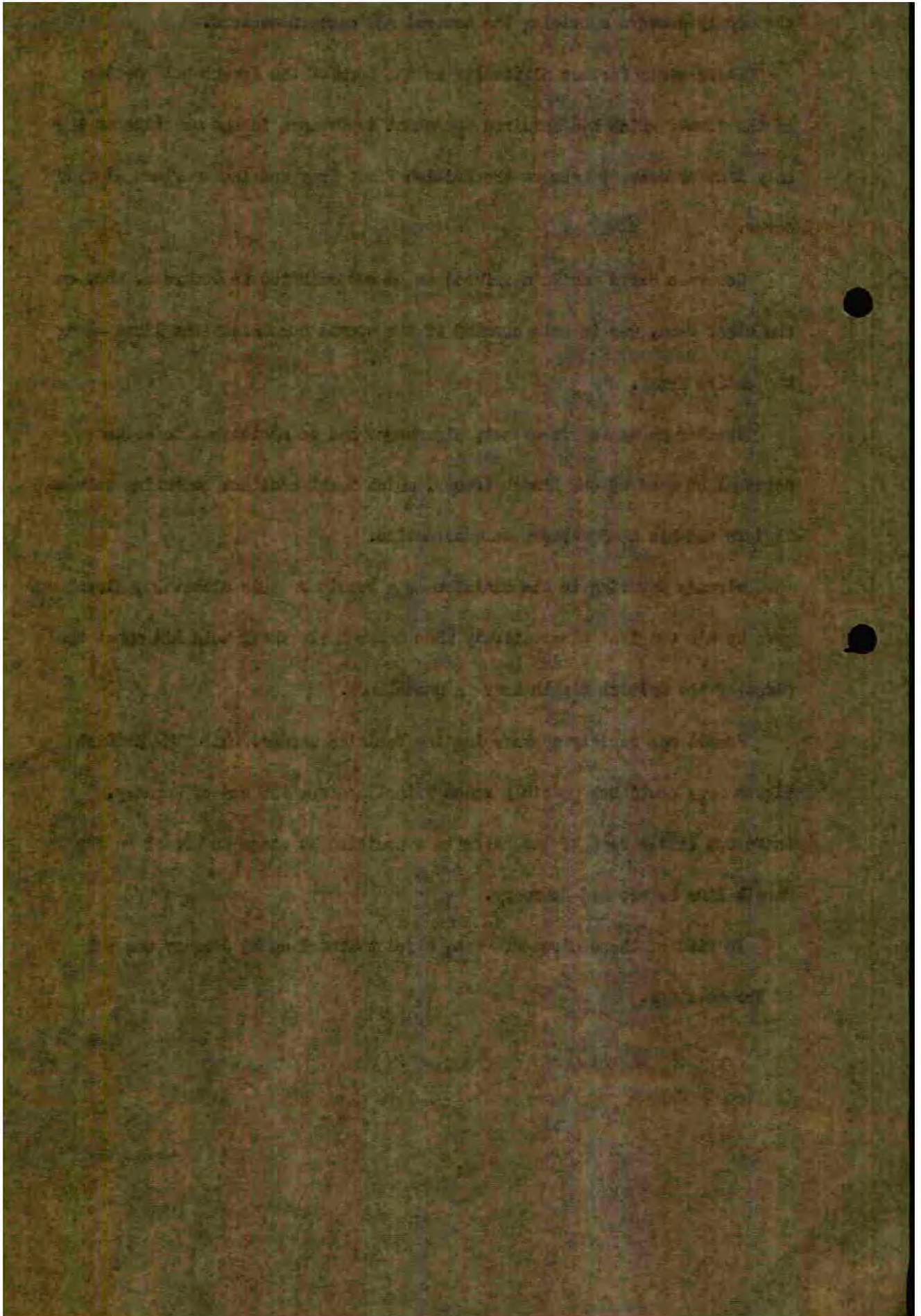
Generals Barre and Juin refused to be subordinated to Anderson, who, on the other hand, was in sole command of the signal communications lines along the entire front.

Whether he wanted to or not, Eisenhower had no choice but to assume personal command of the French troops, which meant constant commuting between Algiers and his headquarters at Constantine.

Already wavering in his decision as a result of this situation, Eisenhower gave up his original plan entirely when General Alexander told him about the plans of the British Eighth Army in Casablanca.

Rommel was rapidly approaching the Tunisian border, while the British Eighth Army could not possibly reach Tripoli before the end of January. There was little hope of its being in a position to stage an attack on the Mareth line before mid-February.

In view of these circumstances, a joint attack on 23 January was out of the question.



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If Eisenhower had stuck to his plan, Rommel would have had complete freedom to attack the southern flank of Operation SATIN. Therefore Eisenhower decided to give up the drive to the coast. Nevertheless, he refused to limit himself to purely defensive operations in central Tunisia, but ordered the II Army Corps to carry out whatever offensive actions it could against Axis rear area installations without exposing itself to engagement with strong Axis forces.

On 17 January, he radioed the commanders in chief of the Middle East to rescind their orders for convoy operations to Sfax and Gabes.

In retrospect, the risk which Operation SATIN would have entailed in a drive to the coast seems to have been overestimated. The coordination of the beginning of the British Eighth Army's offensive against the Mareth line (23 January) with the start of Operation SATIN seems an artificial and unnecessary precaution.

For it is extremely unlikely that both forces could actually have started operations at the same time. It is incredible that Eisenhower's staff should have been so poorly informed about the progress of the British forces in Tripolitania in early January.

At this time there was no chance whatsoever that Rommel could have mustered sufficient forces to endanger in any way the southern flank of Operation SATIN. Is it not possible that Rommel's almost legendary reputation as a military wizard may have played a role here?

Actually, the intelligence that enemy armored units

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were being assembled in an area which would permit them to become a threat to the northern flank of the Allied force should have been reason enough to order an attack on Kairouan simply to clarify the situation!

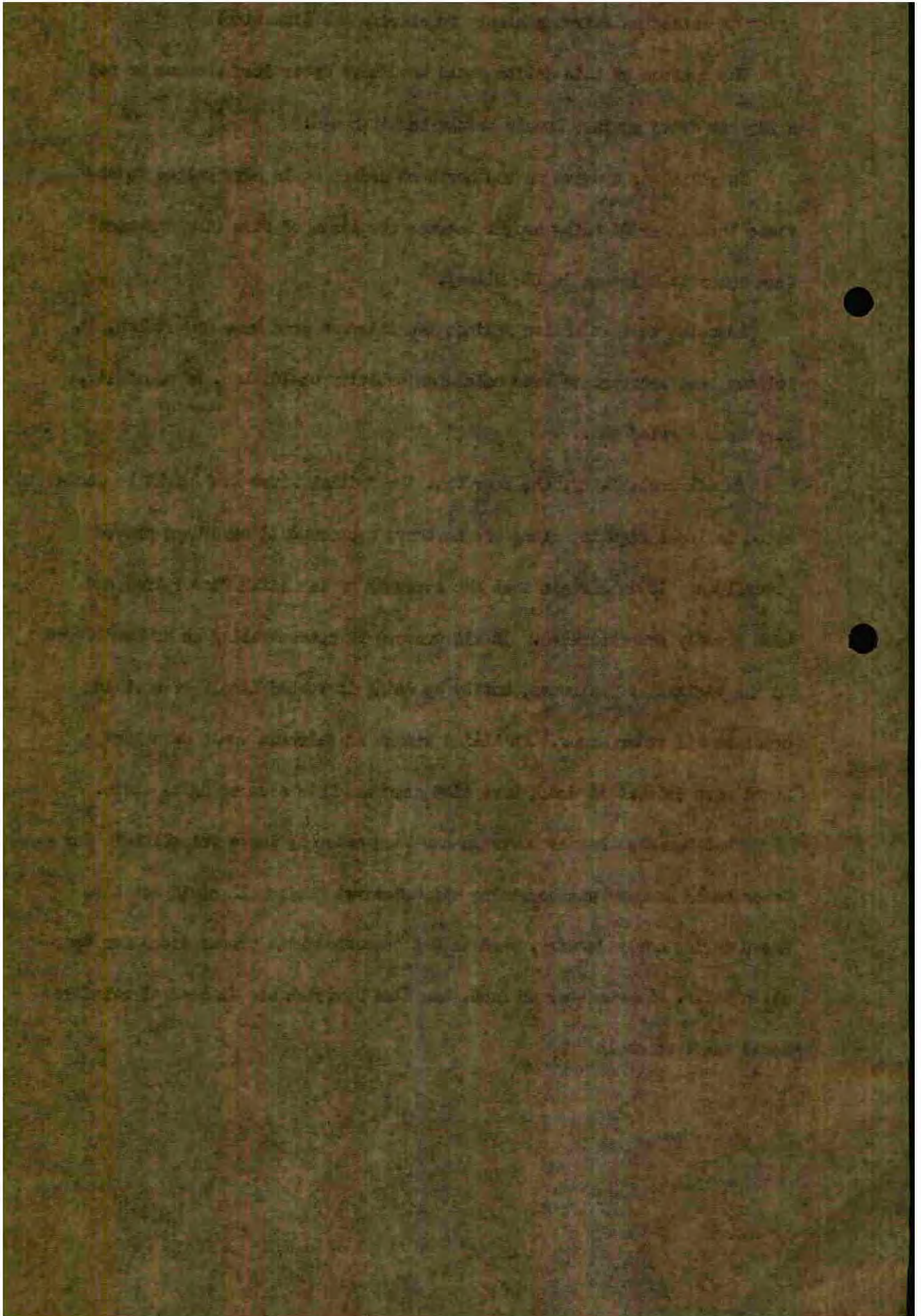
The outcome of this action could then have determined whether or not a further drive against Sousse should be attempted.

In addition, a drive on the northern sector would have helped to obviate the danger of being caught between two lines of fire (the distance from Gabes to Kairouan is 120 miles).

Assuming that an action against the Kairouan area were undertaken, it follows that appropriate reconnaissance activity would also, of necessity, have been carried out.

In all probability, the fear that the British First Army might be decimated in local fighting along the northern sector would have been proved groundless; it is certain that the strength of the Fifth Panzer Army had been greatly overestimated. It did succeed in concentrating an armored force in the vicinity of Kairouan, but by so doing it robbed itself of striking power in all other areas. An Allied attack on Kairouan would have been a sound move in that it would have tied down the Axis armored units there.

That the 21st Panzer Division had been ^{ed} ordered to leave Tripolitania for Gabes on 13 January was something which General Fredenhall could not have known during early January, when he was concerned with preparations for Operation SATIN. As a matter of fact, the 21st Division was in need of reinforcements and thus could



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not get back into operations until 30 January, when it was sent into action near Faussemarié.

It is quite another question whether these reinforcements, inexperienced and unused to combat as they were, should have been permitted to participate in a special mission so far removed from the front.

A mobile war of the type which would undoubtedly have developed during the course of any offensive against Kairouan makes extremely high demands on the power of decision and the flexibility of leaders of all ranks. Tactical coordination of the operations of the various weapons branches participating provides the basis for success.

And without a doubt all of these conditions obtained in the case of the enemy.

It was this fact which represented the greatest risk for Operation SATIN. So much for theoretical considerations.

* * * *

In the meantime, the Casablanca Conference had gotten under way on 14 January.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff reached a number of important agreements relative to the continuation of the campaign in Tunisia and to further operations in the Mediterranean.

This was the first instance of top-level conference and combined planning since the original landing in November (Operation TORCH).

The British agreed to abandon their favorite plan - the capture of Sardinia as the next objective of Allied operations.

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The conference partners finally agreed on an offensive against Sicily (Operation HUSKY), which was to be launched in June or July.

In keeping with the operational decisions taken and in view of the fact that the middle eastern and northwestern theaters of operation were gradually becoming parts of a single, over-all theater of war, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered a new chain of command for the Mediterranean theater.

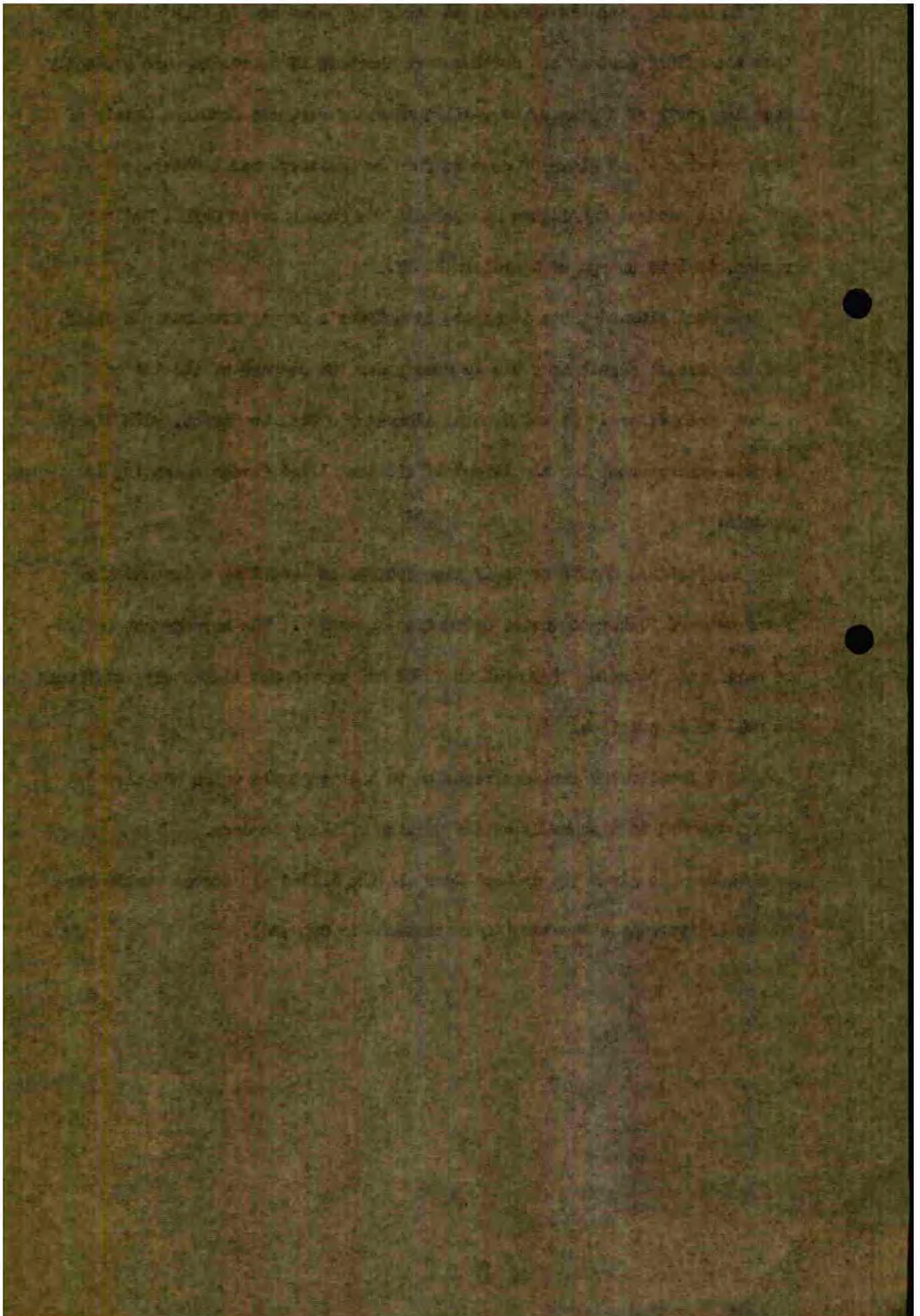
Fleet Admiral Cunningham was selected as Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, to take charge of Operation HUSKY.

General Alexander was to become Eisenhower's Deputy Commander in Chief, and the British Eighth Army was to come under the command of the Allied Forces Headquarters. It was General Alexander's task to direct, with Eisenhower's concurrence, the commitment of all the Allied forces operating in Tunisia.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff also decided to establish a Supreme Air Force Command (Uebergeordnetes Luftwaffen-Kommando). The arrangement followed during the planning of Operation TORCH had proved unsatisfactory, in theory as well as in practice.

As a result, the partners resorted to the proposals which had already been presented to Eisenhower by the British military leaders.

Tedder was given top command over all the Allied air forces stationed in the Mediterranean theater (Mediterranean Air Command).



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The commanders of the subordinate air forces headquarters and the organization of their staffs can be seen in the Appendix⁷⁶.

This decision, with all its ramifications, represented a turning point for the Allied air forces. It created a firm and unequivocal chain of command, not only for use during combat operations against the enemy, but also in respect to the ground organization, maintenance and supply services, and the personnel training and replacement units.

The assignment of officers from both nations to a single staff was a new development for the Allied air forces. This step not only helped to widen the horizon of each individual but also contributed to mutual understanding.

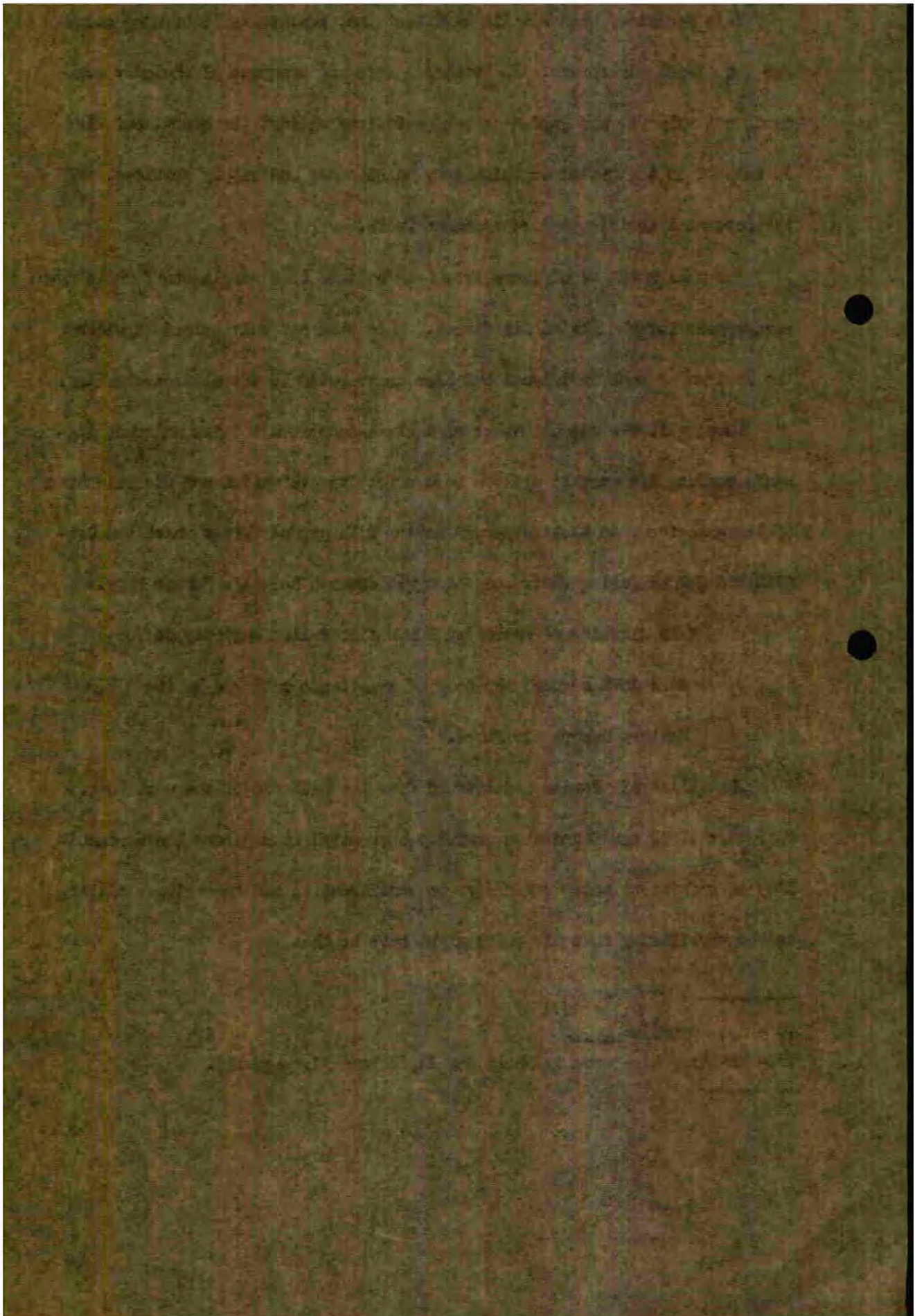
Above all, the establishment of a close-support air corps under Cunningham's command did much to promote more effective evaluation and dissemination of the experience in tactical coordination with ground forces which the British had gained during their long struggle against Rommel's Panzer Army.

"The planning of Operation TORCH also failed entirely to take into account the body of experience gathered by the Western Desert Air Force."⁷⁷

The Allied air forces had learned from the setbacks of the past year. Operation TORCH had found them woefully unprepared as regarded the availability of sufficient motor vehicles; no consideration had been given, either, to the possibility that air units might have to be

76 - See Appendix _____.

77 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 165.



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committed so far to the east of their bases.

Their main air base was located in the Oran - Casablanca area, and it was here that the four engineer battalions (the 809th, 814th, 815th, and 817th) were first set to work on airfield construction.

Unfortunately the two construction battalions of the Eastern Air Command had failed in their attempt to build usable airfields on the swampy terrain until they finally found sandy subsoil in the Souk-el-Khamis region⁷⁸.

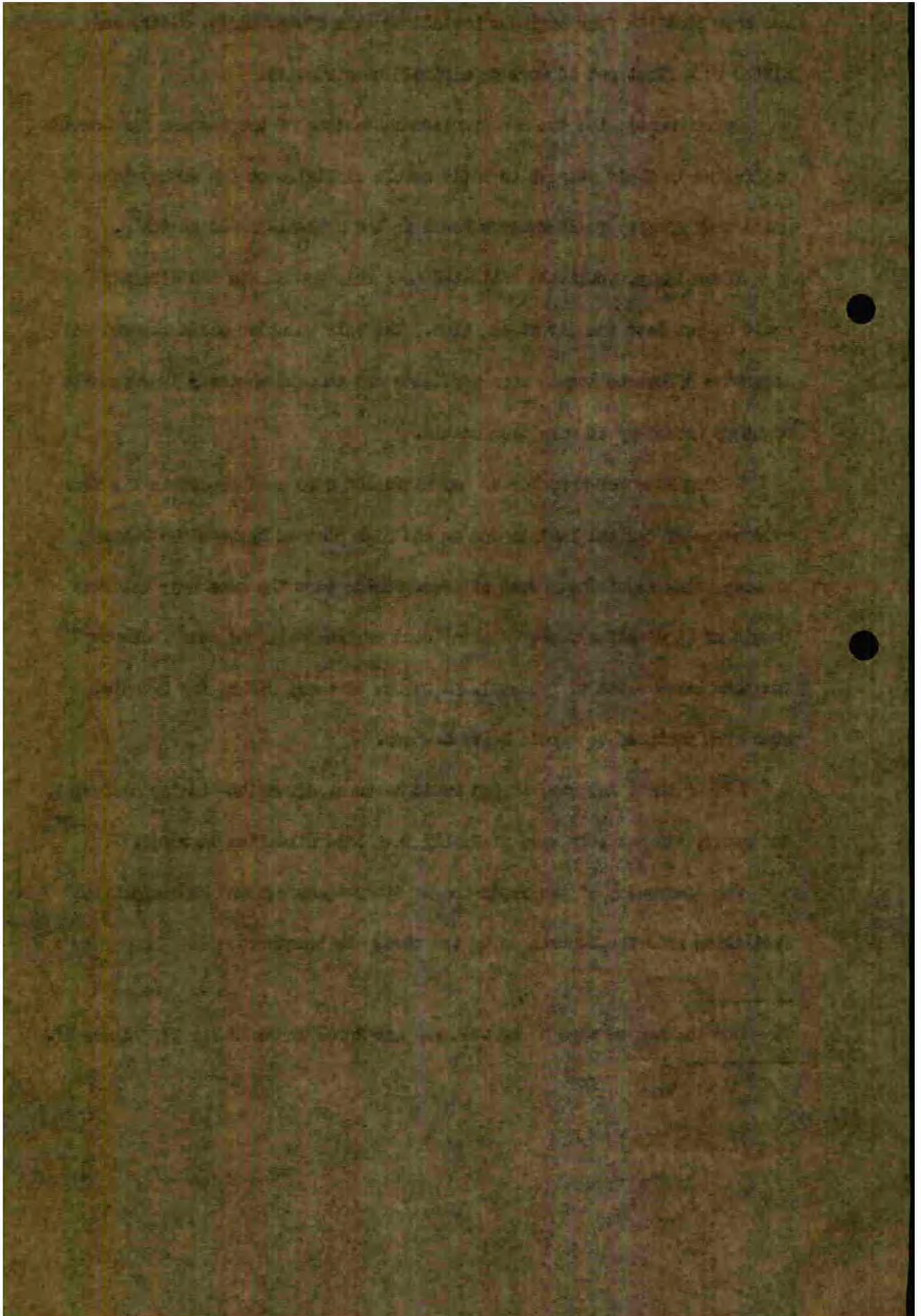
Accordingly, Doulittle estimated that only 200 of his 600 aircraft could be put into the air at one time. The only solution was a renewed and intensive effort to locate more airfields and to make whatever improvements might be necessary to make them usable.

During December a number of new airfields were constructed in the more arid parts of central Tunisia and on the high plateau between the Sahara and the Atlas Mountains. Some of these fields were the ones near Telergma (south of Constantine), near Biskra (west of Tebessa), and near Thalepto (sixteen miles south of Tebessa). A number of them, Biskra for example, were even equipped to handle heavy bombers.

All of them, however, lacked radio beacons, direction-finding equipment, and radar; it was only very gradually that this situation improved.

The inadequacy of the roads and of other transport and communications facilities made the importance of the three air transport

⁷⁸ - See the map on page 80 of the Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.



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groups all the greater.

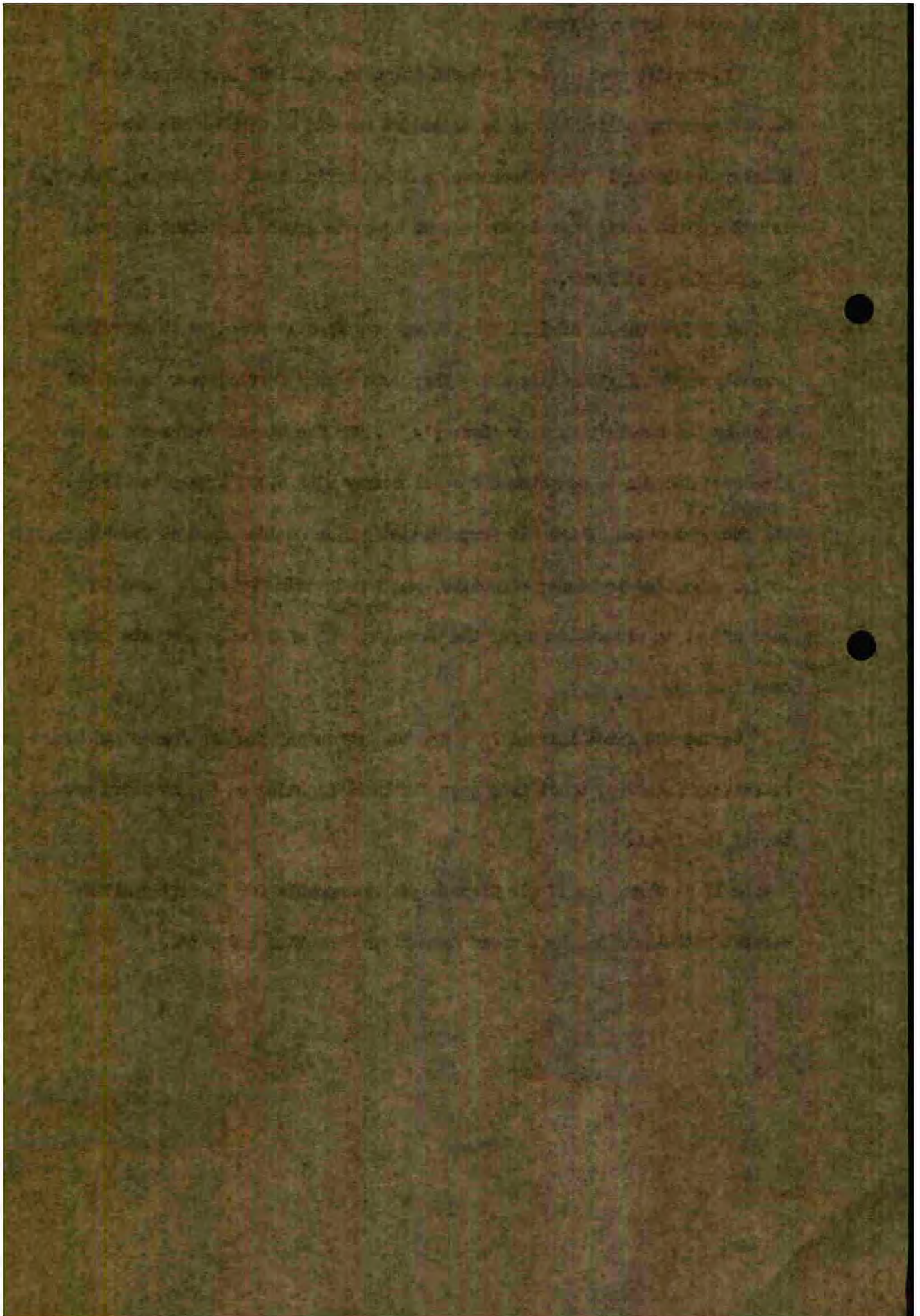
Shipments of aircraft from home were also fairly irregular, especially as regarded fighter aircraft.

The airlift route over the North Atlantic, utilized heretofore by the bomber ferrying units, had to be closed at the end of October because of weather conditions. The detour over central Africa took a great deal longer, for it was not until much later that an adequate ground organization could be established at Dakar.

With the help of Admiral King, a way was finally found to transport the urgently needed fighter aircraft. They were simply ferried over in several trips by the aircraft carrier 'Ranger'. At the Casablanca Conference it had also been decided to dispatch a special convoy with 5,000 trucks to Africa. The reorganization of the air force command, also decided upon at Casablanca, needed some time to become effective, and the interim period was used to good effect in preparations for the establishment of a fully adequate ground organization.

During the first half of January, the German and Italian forces had been relatively inactive, apart from sporadic local fighting on the northern sector of the front.

On 17 January, the II Air Corps began to assemble for Operation SATUR; several battalions had been moved forward to Maserine and Gafsa.



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Along the Maknassy - Fondouk front, the II Air Corps faced a strong German-Italian division equipped with 100-115 light and medium tanks; north of Kairoan was the 10th Panzer Division.

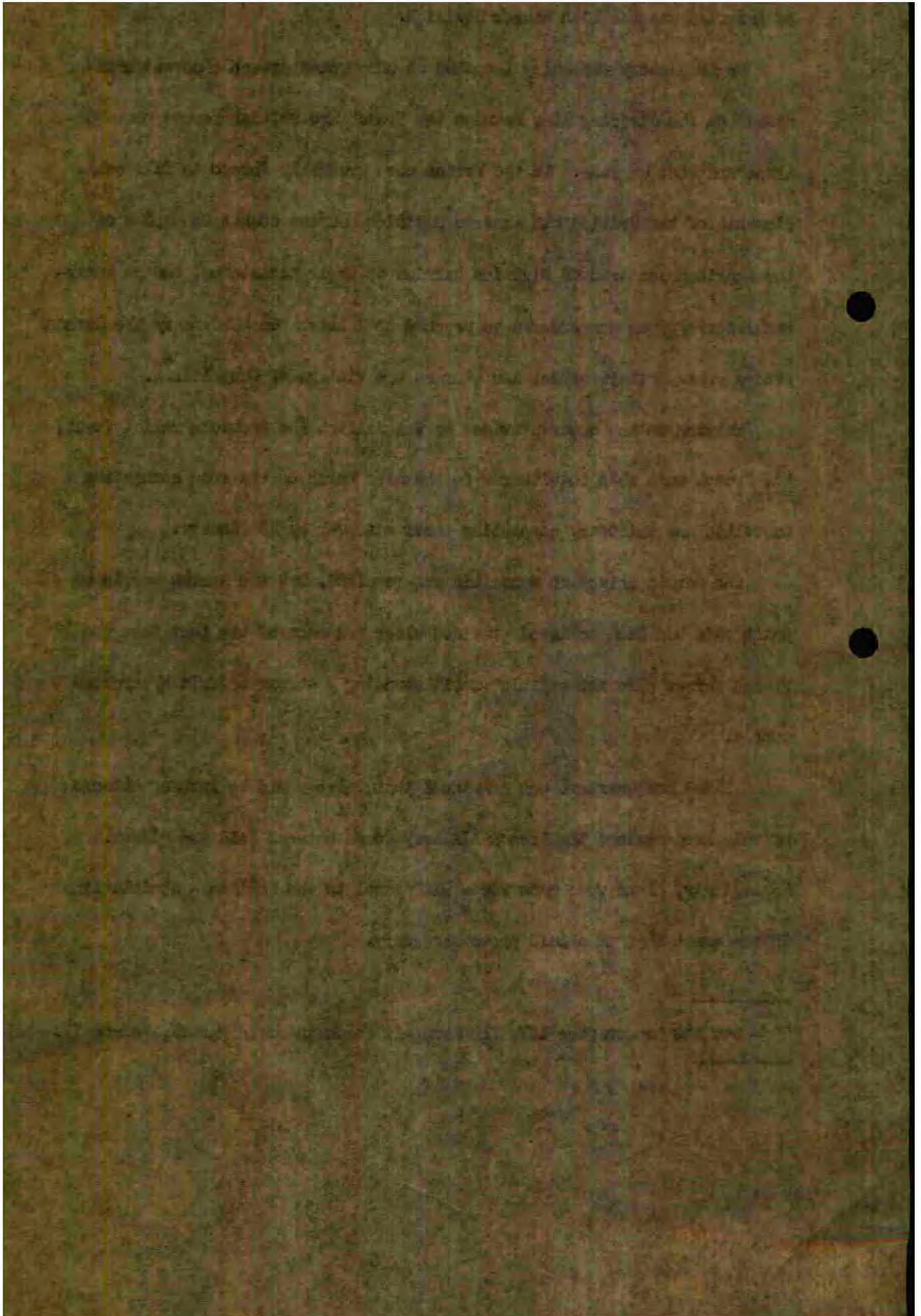
On 18 January the enemy launched an unexpected attack (Operation EXPRESS) on the dividing line between the French and British forces near Bou-
Arada and Pont du Fahs. As the French were gradually forced to fall back, elements of the British 6th Armored Division and the Combat Command B of the American 1st Armored Division hurried to their assistance, and an American reserve group was ordered to proceed to Maktar. On 20 January the German troops renewed their attack and stormed the village of Gusseltia⁷⁹.

Relying on the cover provided by the British and American relief force, the French were able to withdraw to the area north of the road connecting Gusseltia and Kairoan, completing their maneuver by 23 January.

The German attack on Gusseltia was repulsed, but the narrow margin by which this had been achieved provided clear evidence of the fact that the French forces were not capable of withstanding a strong assault by armored troops.

Allied headquarters was convinced that there would be further attacks of this kind against the French XIX Army Corps between Faid and Pichon. Accordingly, plans were made for a withdrawal to the Feriana - Sbeitla line in the event that it should prove necessary.

79 - See the map on page 197, The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.



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As a precautionary measure, Anderson was ordered to hold in readiness the mobile reserves stationed immediately south of his sector of operations. A number of French units were withdrawn from action, and at the same time fresh British and American troops were moved up to the front as rapidly as possible.

As soon as the fighting at Gusseltia began to subside, the II Army Corps started to regroup. Combat Command B was sent back to Feriana, while Combat Command C (composed of a single field artillery battalion) was ordered south to reinforce the Allied troops at Gafsa.

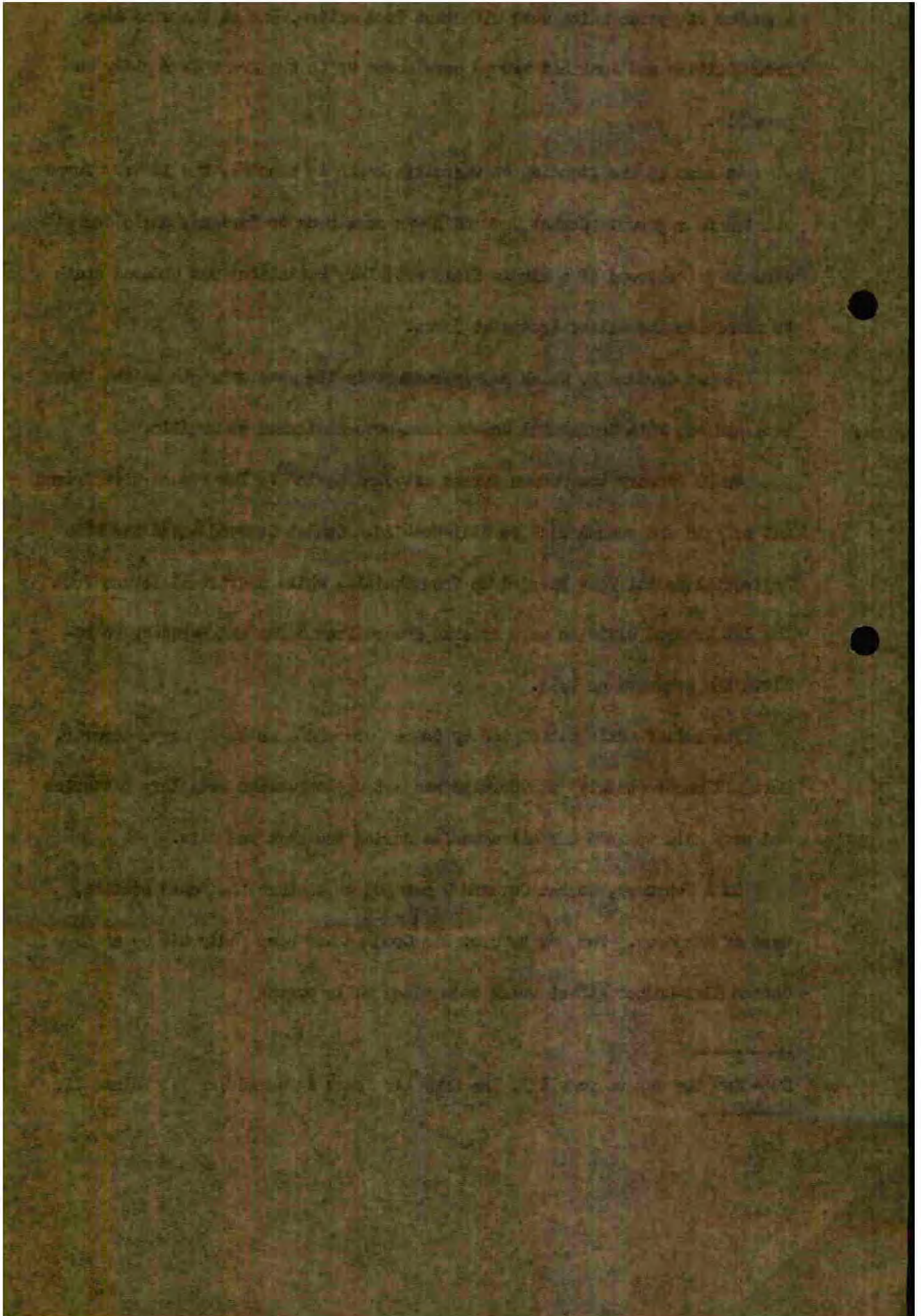
Combat Command A, which had approximately the same strength as the other two, and the 26th Regimental Combat Team were stationed at Sbeitla.

On 30 January the German forces attacked again⁸⁰. The French were driven out of Faid and pushed back to Sidi-Bou-Sid. Combat Command A and the 26th Regimental Combat Team hurried up from Sbeitla, while additional forces from the 1st Armored Division were ordered forward from Gafsa and Maknassy to relieve the pressure on Faid.

The relief actions attempted by Combat Command A on 31 January, however, were all unsuccessful; the Germans had set up long-range artillery batteries and were able to hold off all assaults during the next few days.

On 1 February, Combat Command D managed to capture the Sened station, west of Maknassy. The day before, the Command had been badly hit by a German dive-bomber attack which took place while troops

80 - See the map on page 133, The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.



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were being unloaded. The trucks waiting to carry them on to their final destination were too closely concentrated. This was the only occasion on which the German dive-bombers were able to inflict serious losses on the American forces.

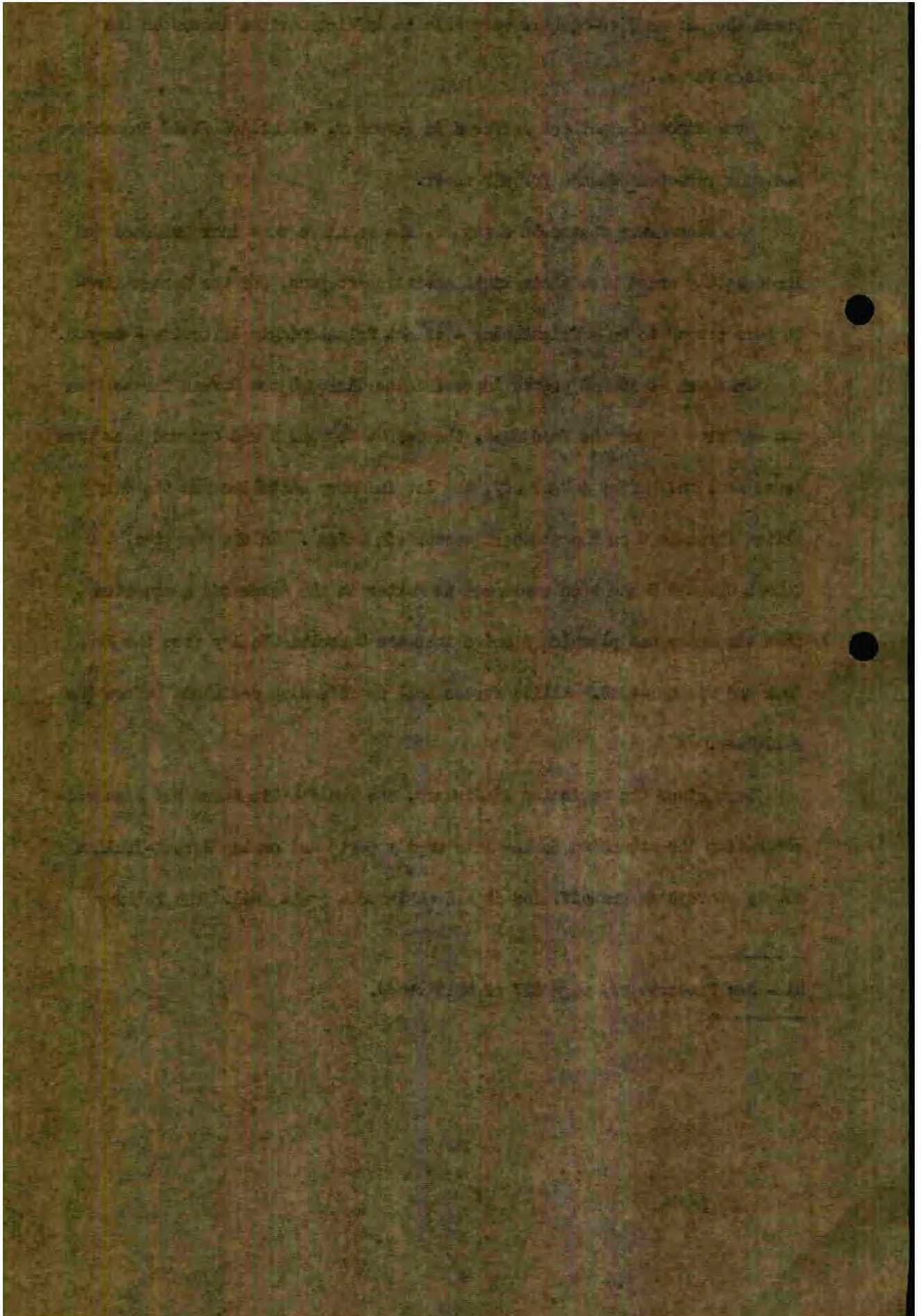
Ever since the setback suffered in November, the Allied field commanders had made repeated demands for air cover.

"As Eisenhower stated in a report, the soldiers were inexperienced and inadequately armed with their light antiaircraft guns, for the German dive-bombers proved to be a frightening - if not frighteningly effective - weapon."⁸¹

Inasmuch as it had proved impossible to dislodge the German forces from the key area around the Faid Pass, the Combat Command D was ordered back from Seneb Station. After 4 February, the 1st Infantry Battalion was the only Allied force left on the southern sector (in Gafsa). In the meantime, the Combat Command B had been reordereed to Maktar in the erroneous assumption that the enemy was planning a drive into the Ousseltia Valley from the Foudouk and Pichon areas. Allied forces took up defensive positions before the Faid Pass.

Ever since the beginning of January, the Twelfth Air Force had been concentrating its attention on the Axis supply ports and on the German-Italian supply convoys in transit, and it had achieved a great deal. The railway

81 - See Footnote 37, page 617 of this study.



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lines to Gabes and to the bases at Sousse and Sfax had also been bombed. The Allied heavy and medium bombers had scored a definite success in their attack on the airfield at El Aouina on 22 January. They hit an ammunition dump, which went up in flames, killing and injuring a large number of personnel.

Bomber and fighter aircraft from the XII Air Support Command intervened in the fighting at Bou-Arada, Pont du Fahs, Gusseltia, and the Faid Pass, providing valuable support for the Allied ground troops. Not only did they manage to bring down a number of enemy aircraft, but they also succeeded in destroying enemy tanks and motor vehicles. They even attacked Rommel's airfields in the Medemine area.

The War Department regulations dealing with air support activity (Field Manuals 31-35, 9 April 1942) proved to be totally unsuited to conditions in Africa. The main reason for this was the fact that, in Africa, the pilots were under the orders of the troop commanders on the ground, and these - understandably - were primarily interested in obtaining adequate local air cover for their own units. Consequently, during the first three days of the operations around Gusseltia, the XII Air Support Command did not fly a single mission over the operational area; nor was the activity over its own front particularly lively.

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On one occasion, the II Army Corps, to which the XII Air Support Command was subordinated, turned down a French request for aerial reconnaissance services with the observation that it was "not assigned" to the area concerned and thus had no interest in developments there.

As it happened, the operational areas assigned to the American and French forces were separated by some sixty miles of extremely difficult terrain. On the other hand, a distance of this kind was no problem at all for General Craig's air units⁸².

After the setback at Faid, the II Army Corps front and the adjacent French-held sector to the north were characterized by an almost uncanny lack of activity for quite a while.

As of mid-February, the Axis forces held more favorable positions than any they might expect to gain during the subsequent course of the campaign. The British Eighth Army was still being held back by the fortifications of the Mareth line. In addition, its operations were handicapped by bad weather and by the necessity of securing its supply lines through Tripolitania before undertaking any extensive action.

This period of respite before Montgomery was in a position to begin his attack gave the Axis forces an opportunity to strike a decisive blow against the poorly-equipped French units in the eastern Dorsal range or against the

82 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 137 and 139-140.

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sadly inexperienced II Army Corps east of Tebessa.

"On 14 February the enemy began an attack which, if it had succeeded in its entirety, would have carried the Axis forces through the Dorsal Mountains and enabled them to capture Le Kef.

Then, if the attack had been carried on towards the north in the direction of the Mediterranean, it would have cut off the Allied forces which were holding the front before Tunis and Bizerte.

Ultimately, this drive forward would have served to protect the Axis flank during the inevitable assaults on the Mareth line by the British Eighth Army.

The main attack was directed against Sidi-bou-Sid, while a secondary offensive developed from the Maknassy area."⁸³

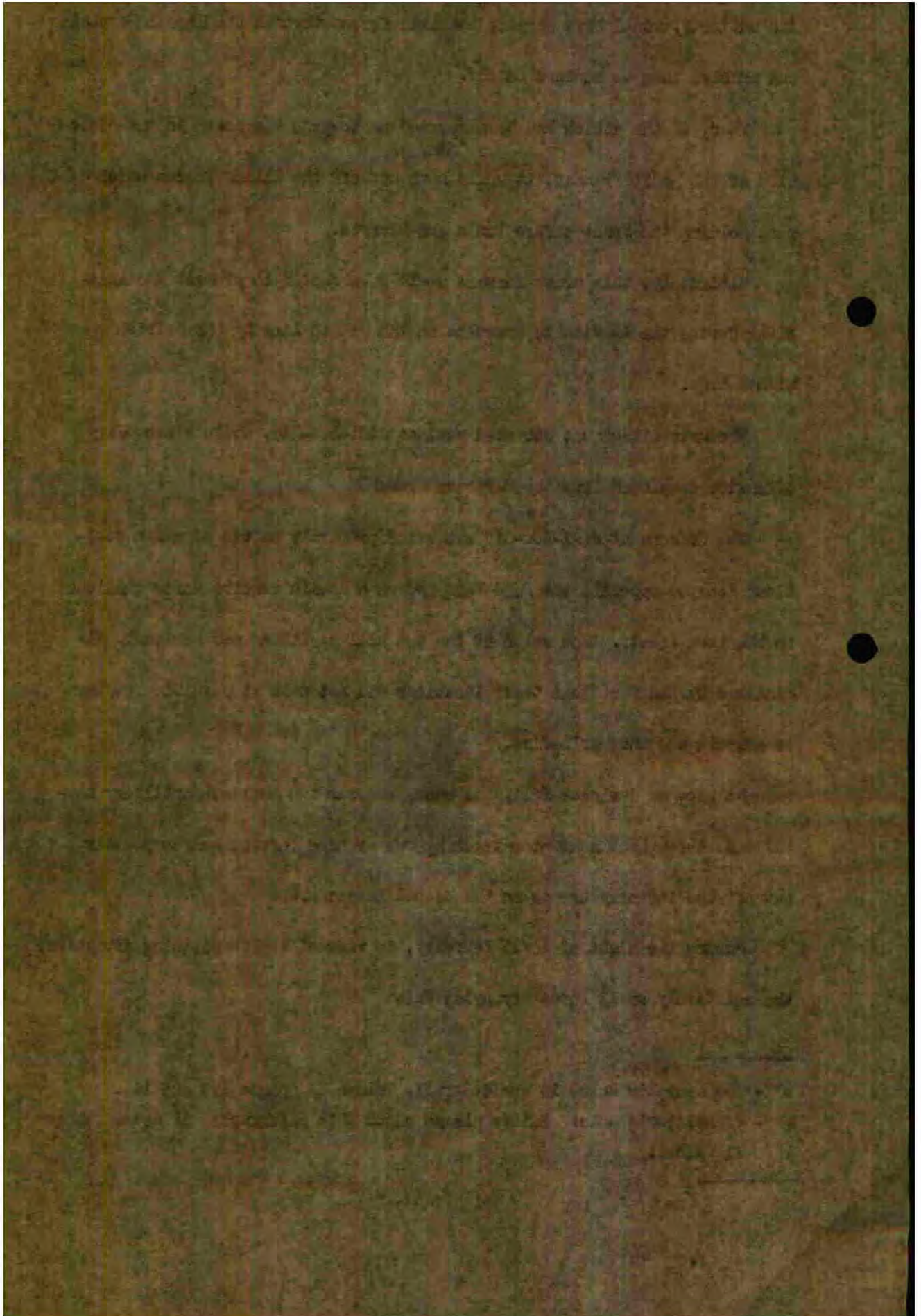
The defense of Sidi-Bou-Sid was based primarily on two mountain positions located opposite the Faid Pass and on a mobile reserve force stationed in the town itself. The value of the two hill positions was seriously diminished by the fact that their locations did not make it possible for them to support one another's fire.

As soon as darkness fell, the enemy overran two American artillery battalions, threw back a counterattack by our armored forces, and completely cut off the infantry troops on the Djebel Lessouda.†

During the night of 14/15 February, in view of the threatening situation, the relatively small force occupying Gafsa

83 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 153 and 154.

† - Translator's note: Editor please check this paragraph; it seems rather illogical!



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withdrew to Foriana.

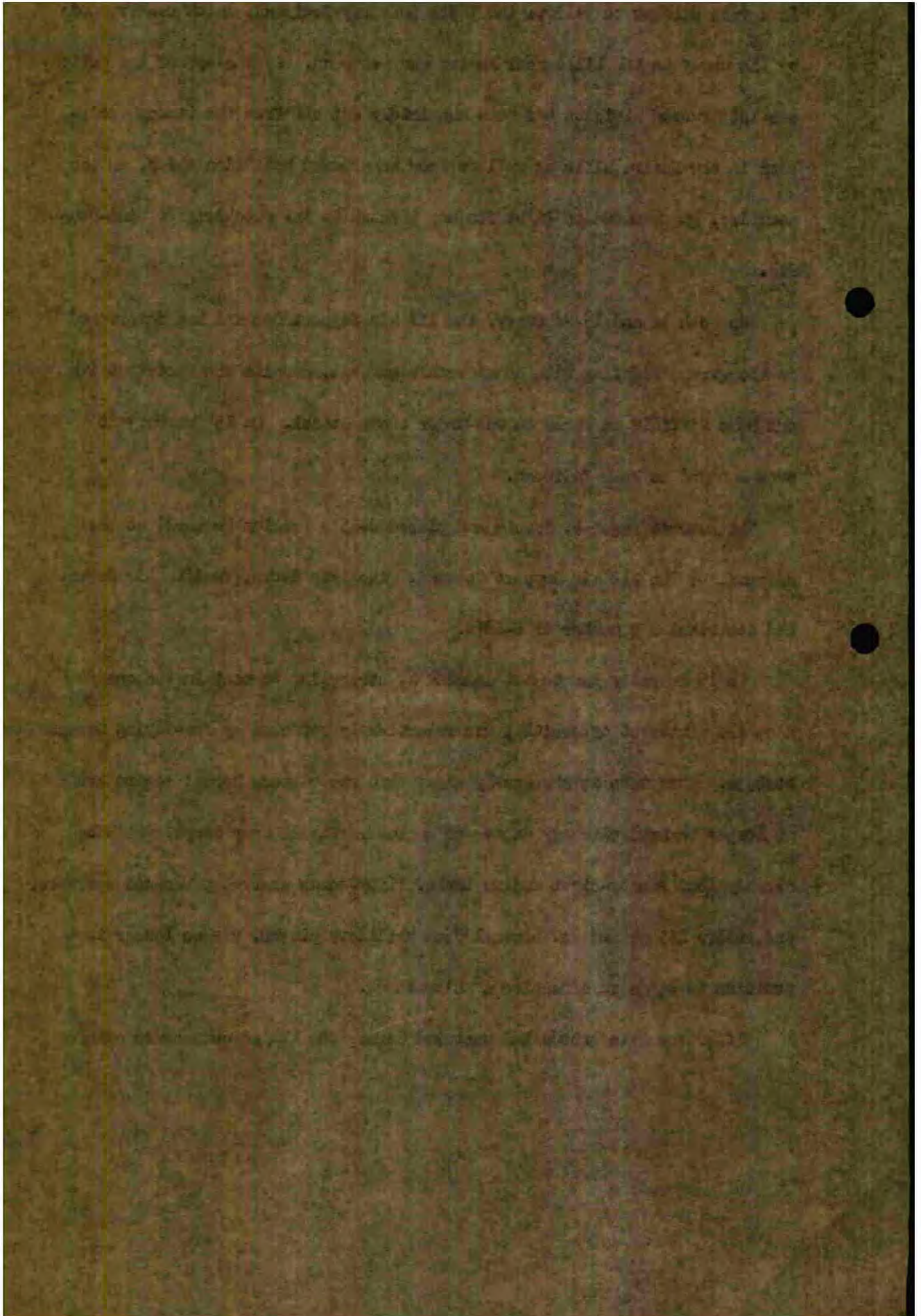
On 15 February the American 1st Armored Division lost a good many tanks in a vain attempt to relieve the 168th Infantry Regiment, which was trapped by the enemy in the hills near Ksaira and Lessouda. By the end of the action, the 1st Armored Division had been completely cut off from the troops encircled in the Ksaira hills as well as from an armored battalion which, in the meantime, had managed to fight its way through to the outskirts of Sidi-Bou-Sid.

On both 14 and 15 February, the XII Air Support Command had intervened in the ground fighting with considerable success, despite the fact that its own home airfield at Thalepte was under enemy attack. On 15 February it even managed to bomb Kairouan.

At Euter's request, Spaatz had placed B-26's (medium bombers) at the disposal of the XII Air Support Command. The 12th Group, Twelfth Air Force, had contributed a number of B-25's.

On 16 February the Combat Command A, struggling to contain the enemy east and southeast of Sbeitla, was relentlessly attacked by low-flying German bombers. This made it abundantly clear that the eastern Dorsal region could no longer be held with any degree of success. The II Army Corps, which had already lost ninety-eight medium tanks, fifty-seven armored personnel carriers, and twelve 155 mm and seventeen 105 mm artillery pieces, was no longer in a position to stage an effective counterattack.

After the Axis troops had captured Gafsa, the Allied commanders ordered



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that the Esserine Pass be prepared as a defensive position. The II Army Corps hoped to be able to hold the Feriana - Sbeitla line until the Pass position was ready.

owing to military necessity, the XII Air Support Command had no alternative but to evacuate all five of its advance airfields during the week of 13 - 21 February. It is worthy of note that it was able to maintain a remarkably high degree of operational readiness in the process.

Ever since the first German attack on the Faid Pass, the Allied leaders had made plans for an emergency evacuation of Sbeitla and Thalepte.

The evacuated units were to be accommodated in Jenks-les-Bains, Tobessa, and Le Kouif. The airfield at Sbeitla was abandoned on 14 February, and during the night of 15/16 February, the enemy troops forced their way into the town itself.

In the meantime, all the necessary preparations had been made to evacuate Thalepte; everything that could not be transported was destroyed. In this way the Allies lost some 228,000 liters (59,280 gallons) of gasoline and eighteen aircraft, only five of which were so badly damaged that they could not have been repaired. The airfield had to be abandoned on 17 February.

During the course of the following day, the II Army Corps reached the Dorsal Mountains and began to build up the Dernaie - Sbiba line for defensive operations.

The survivors of the Combat Command A, detouring around enemy positions, managed to reach Sbiba, where they joined elements of the British First Army and 34th Division.

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The Combat Command B was dispatched into the area southeast of Tobessa, and the three highway approaches were blocked by the forces which had previously occupied Gafsa.

The Allies had done their best to make the Masserine Pass position the strongest of all, for it lay at the point of intersection of the routes to Tobessa (to the west) and Thala (to the north).

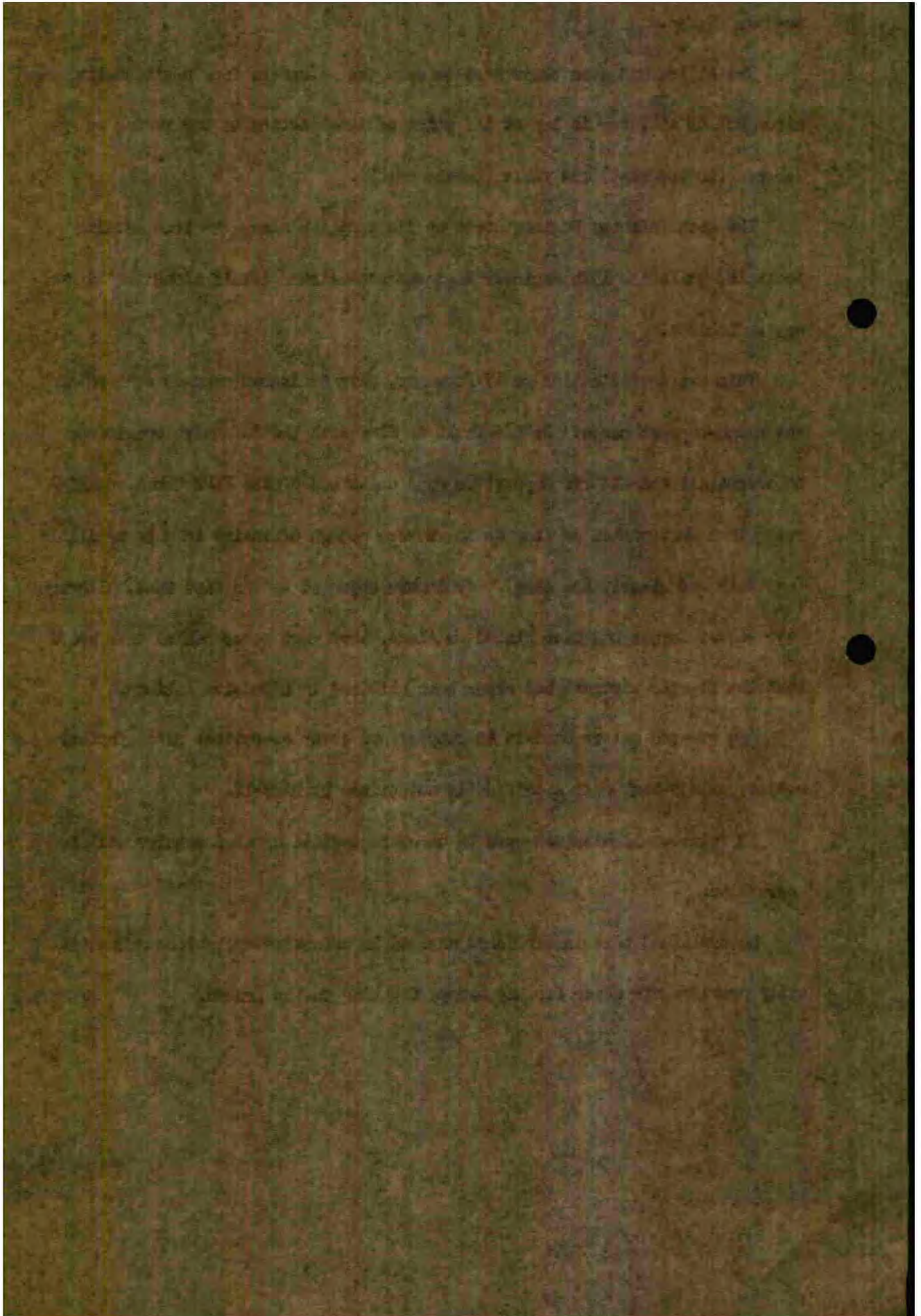
The 26th Infantry Regiment took up its position along the road leading to Thala, while the 19th Engineer Regiment established itself along the highway to Tobessa.

This was the situation on 17 February, when Coningham assumed command of the close-support corps. He had fault to find with the defensive operations of almost all the XII Air Support Command units and of the 242d Group, considering them unwarranted as long as there were enough offensive targets available (and this was clearly the case). Coningham objected to the fact that, although the bomber forces had been placed on alert, they were never called upon and that the fighter aircraft had never been utilized in offensive actions.

"He ordered all commanders to stop ground cover operations until further notice, unless they were specifically authorized by himself.

In future, all missions were to be characterized by an intensive will to aggression.

He explained that an air force engaged in offensive operations automatically provides air cover for the troops fighting on the ground.



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Even the armored forces were expected to do without air cover; in his opinion, enemy troop assembly areas and vulnerably located vehicle parks were the best targets."⁸⁴

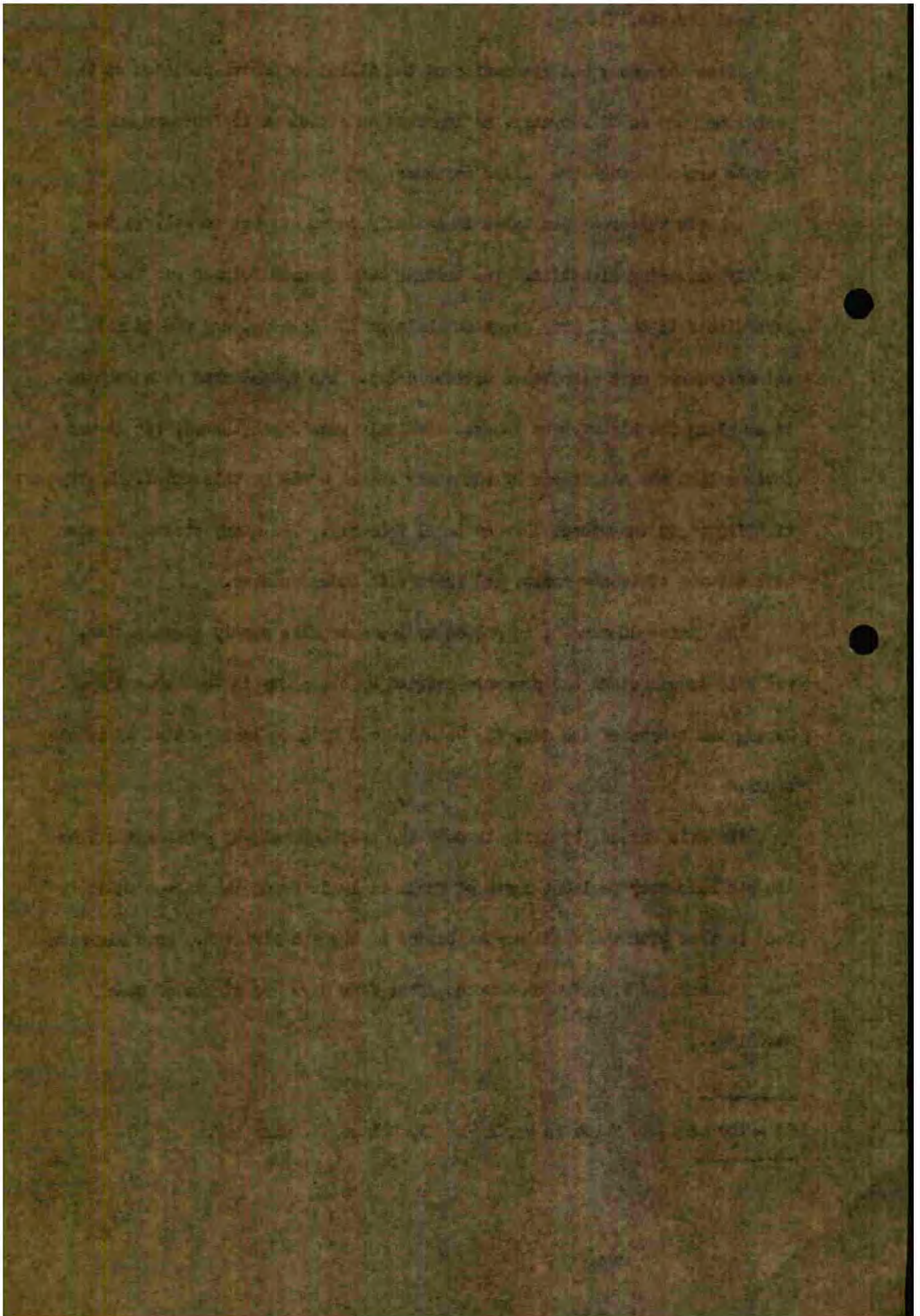
After the enemy had reconnoitered the Allied defensive position on the Kasserine Pass on 18 February, he launched an attack on 19 February and managed to break through the Allied defenses.

Drastic measures were taken immediately in an attempt to salvage the rapidly worsening situation. The British 26th Armored Brigade was made subordinate to the II Army Corps at Thala on 19 February, and additional reinforcements were dispatched without delay. The established defense positions along the highways to Tebessa and Thala were strengthened, for it was obvious that the main focus of the enemy attack would be this point. Heavy fighting raged throughout the day on 21 February. The enemy stormed Tebessa with a force of twenty tanks, and Thala with twice as many.

The Combat Command B, supported by its extensive supply organization, was able to withstand the pressure exerted by the enemy in the Tebessa area. During the course of the day, the 26th Armored Brigade lost a total of twenty tanks.

The Axis forces, breaking through the position held by a battalion from the 5th Leicester Regiment south of Thala at 1945, found themselves suddenly face to face with the artillery batteries of the 9th Division. This Division had just arrived from French Morocco after four days and nights of steady marching.

84 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 157.



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On 21 February, rain and fog made effective commitment in the air impossible, although a force of Hurricane fighters did succeed in raiding the enemy advanced columns. On 22 February, the airfield at Tebessa had to be abandoned because it was inundated with mud. Le Kouif and Kalaa Djerdj were evacuated as soon as the enemy forces began to storm Thala.

22 February was the day of decision. The Axis forces had reached the peak of their military effectiveness.

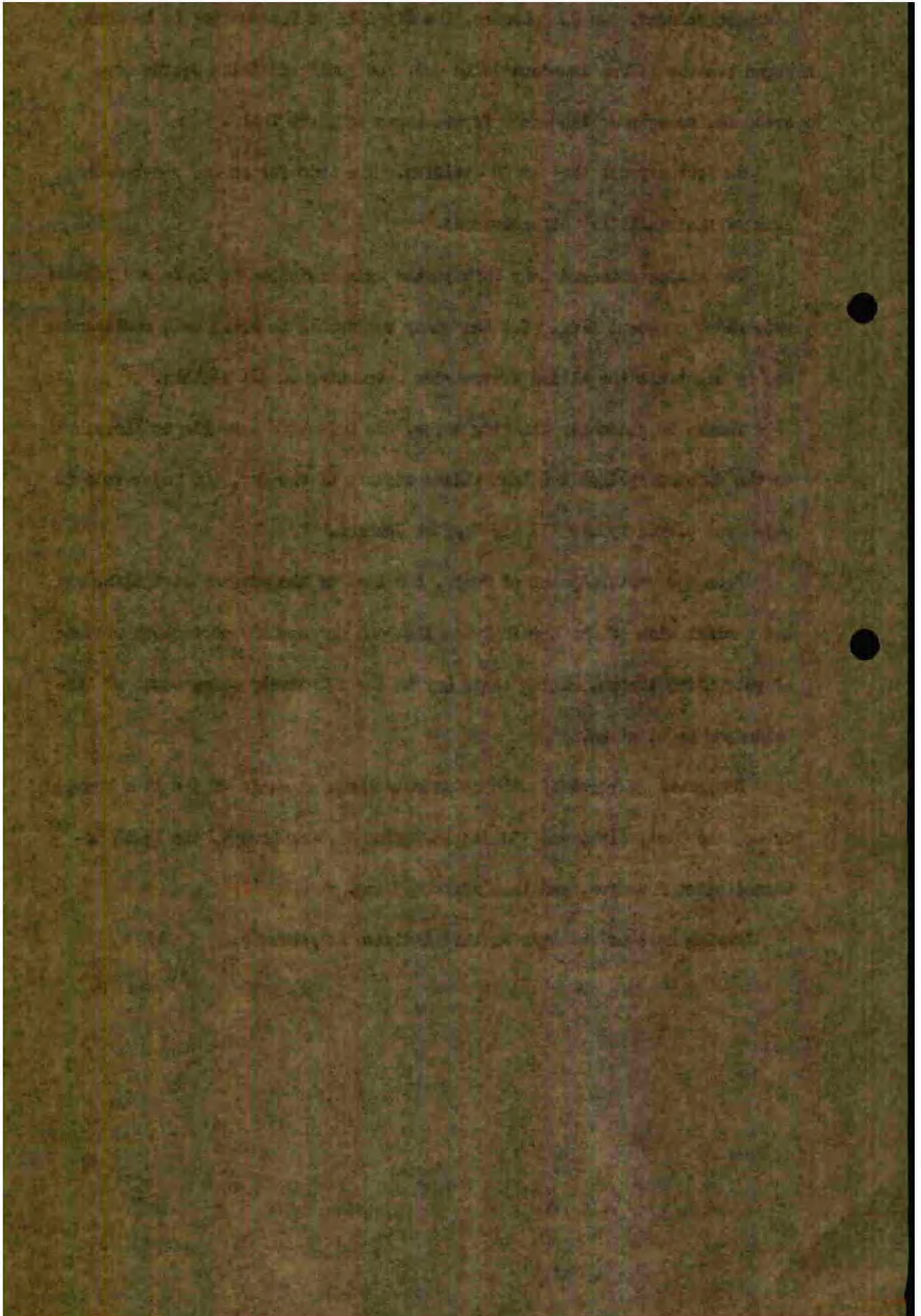
The Allies attacked near Sbiba; the Axis positions at Thala and Tebessa were under constant fire. Yet the enemy was unable to break Axis resistance, and by nightfall the Allied troops were retreating on all sectors.

Thanks to gradually clearing skies, the Luftwaffe was able to contribute to the defense against the last Allied assault of the day, the major role in which was played by the XII Air Support Command.

From the vantage-point of Jouks, the last of the advance airfields, one had a clear view of the seemingly endless and dangerously portentous columns of retreating troops, making their way to the relatively safer towns of Ain-Baida and Constantine.

Jouks was overcrowded with relatively large elements of the 47th Bomber Group, the 31st, 81st, and 33d Single-Engine Fighter Groups, the 154th Reconnaissance Squadron, and the Lafayette Wing.

During most of the time on this decisive 22 February,



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the staff of the XII Air Support Command, which was making preparations for a regrouping of its forces, was completely cut off from communication with its subordinate units. Nevertheless, orders were transmitted by radio to the effect that all available fighter units were to be assigned immediately to operations at Thala.

Weather conditions, however, were hardly conducive to a large-scale air operation. Jouks, for example, was covered by low-lying clouds, with intermittent showers lasting until the late afternoon.

This "hide and seek" weather was responsible for the fact that one squadron of B-17's lost its way and very kindly unloaded its bombs over Souk-el-Arba.

During the next few days, the Italian and German forces continued their withdrawal, for their tanks were badly needed in the south, where the British Eighth Army was ready to start its preliminary grouping for the attack on the Mareth line.

Von Arnim took advantage of the fact that the northern sector of the front seemed to be fairly weak to drive forward against the Mateur - Sedje-mane sector.

As it turned out, an attack on the Esserine Pass was the best possible method of frustrating the Allied plans for the near future. Nevertheless, the partial success achieved there by the Axis troops was not quite sufficient.

The battle had been characterized by encouraging signs of more effective air-ground coordination.

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No longer did each air unit limit itself to the narrow sector assigned to its own corps or army commander. Heavy bombers and B-24s from the Eastern Air Command appeared over Thala and Tebessa, and the full weight of the Allied strategic bomber arm was thrown into the decision-seeking battle.

In the meantime the British Eighth Army and the Western Desert Air Force had carried out a show attack on the Maroth line.

The 205th Group, Royal Air Force, bombarded both the city of Gabes and the airfield on its outskirts; light bombers attacked the positions of the Maroth line itself. The fighters and fighter-bombers had been moved forward to the airfields in the vicinity of Medenine, where their activity kept the enemy air units at Bordj-Boual, Gabes, and Tabaga on constant alert.

All in all, it was a favorable omen for the newly-created "supreme command" of the Allied air forces.

After the seizure of Tripoli on 23 January, Montgomery could afford to send only one division forward, since the supply situation was bound to remain critical until such time as the port installations could be repaired and put into operation⁸⁵.

In the beginning, everything went according to plan - until the enemy blocked the access to Zuara, a small city located on the coast south of the Tunisian border.

Zuara was not taken until 30 January, and even after its capture

85 - See the map on page 101, *The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.*

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the British Eighth Army was still confronted by Ben-Gardane, a relatively strong outpost of the Mareth line fortifications.

At this point the rains began, and Gardane could not be taken until 15 February.

With the help of General Leclerc's Free French troops, which had been placed under the command of the British Eighth Army and which were advancing slowly from Halut towards Ksar-Bhilane, Montgomery was able to take Medenine, with its extremely important airfields, as well as Fom-Fatahouine.

Ever since the beginning of his advance from Egypt, Montgomery had been extremely careful to protect his troops against unexpected setbacks. It was due to his caution in this regard that his Army moved forward so slowly and methodically. He never permitted it to advance unless he had sufficiently strong forces on hand to meet any surprise attack by the enemy.

During the battle at the Kasserine Pass, the British Eighth Army was supposed to show itself in full strength in front of the Mareth line. Actually, however, only two divisions appeared; the supply situation was so precarious that only these two were allowed to move forward.

During the early part of March, Montgomery unexpectedly came up against the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions plus elements of the 10th Panzer Division, so that he had no choice but to order the New Zealand troops to leave Tripoli and come to his assistance.

The original fortifications along the Mareth line had been built by the French to protect Tunisia

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against the danger of an Italian offensive from Libya.

The main line of defense was approximately twenty-five miles long, extending from Zarat (on the coast, approximately twenty-five miles southeast of Gabes) as far as the rugged hills of the Matmata range in the southwest.

The fortifications consisted of concrete bunkers and artillery positions, tank traps, fields of barbed wire, and minefields. In addition, the most important section of the line was protected by a row of carefully camouflaged positions radiating out from the center line.

The builders of the Mareth fortifications had obviously realized that it was almost out of the question for an enemy force to detour around them west of the Matmata Mountains. The flanking movement required to negotiate such a detour was practically unfeasible in that it would lead the force attempting it over nearly 150 miles of completely waterless desert.

During the preparations for the coming struggle, the Long Range Desert Group reconnoitered the terrain and reported that it would be extremely difficult, although not entirely impossible, to detour around the Mareth line.

The fortifications were being defended by three Italian divisions, plus the 90th Light and the German 164th Divisions, stationed in the hills on the southwest flank of the line.

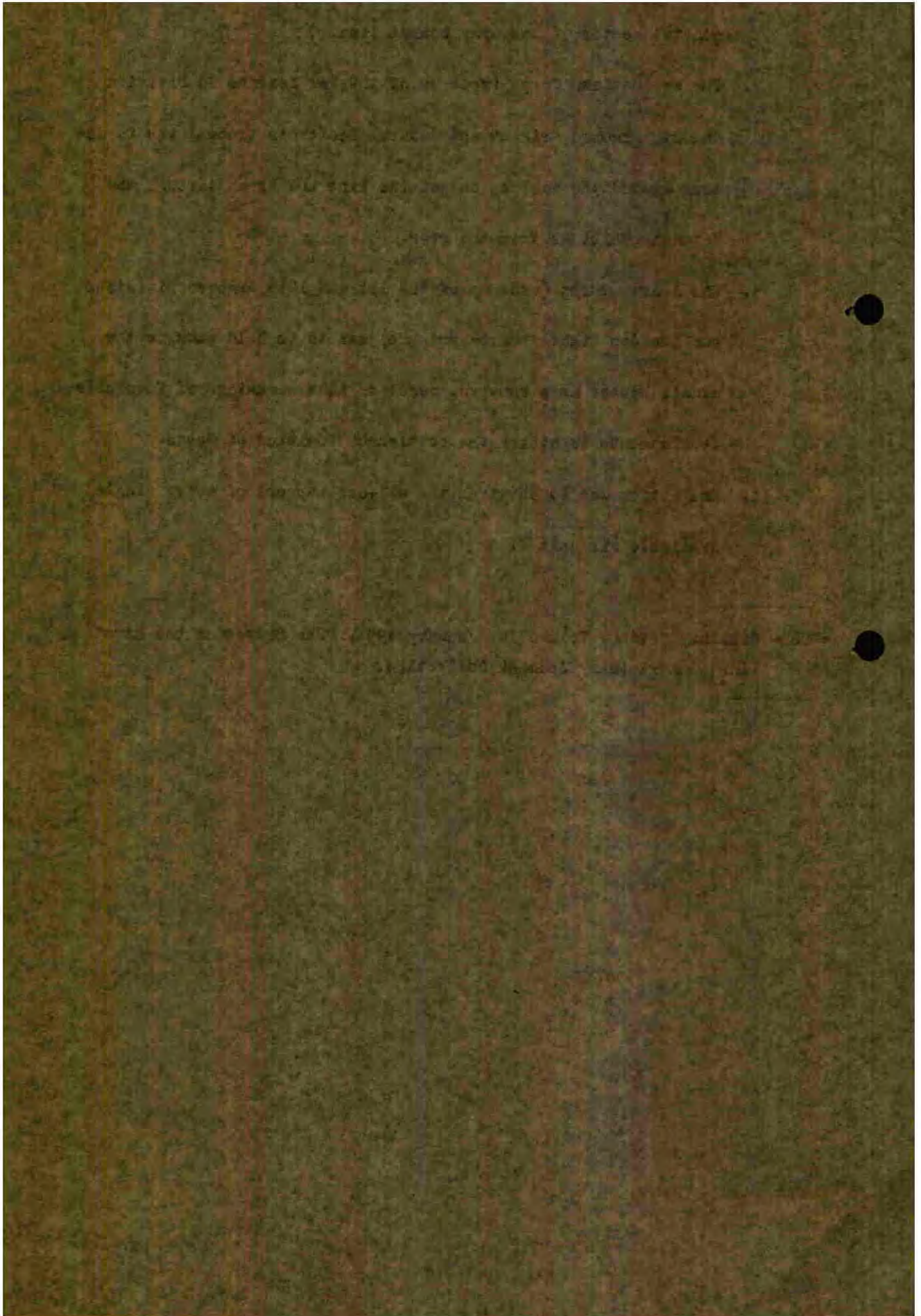
The Allies planned to launch their main attack about 20 March, by which time their supply organization was expected to be in a position to guarantee continuing delivery of the material needed for the operation.

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The plan adopted by the British Eighth Army envisioned the following four phases of activity:

1. The XXX Army Corps was to attack the Italian forces along the coastal sector of the Army combat line.
2. The New Zealand Corps (made up of the New Zealand 2d Division and 8th Armored Brigade and General Leclerc's troops) was to de-tour around the western end of the line and break through the Matmata positions from the rear.
3. The X Army Corps (made up of the 1st and 10th Armored Divisions and the 4th Light Armored Brigade) was to be held back on the middle sector as a reserve, ready to take advantage of favorable developments to attack the bottleneck position of Gabes.
4. The attack was to be given the all-out support of every single available air unit⁸⁶.

86 - Military Review, Volume 10, January 1951, "The Battle of the Mareth Line"; Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Section 6

The battle for the Mareth line and the positions along the salt sea; the withdrawal to the Enfidaville position; the employment of the Luftwaffe in these actions; the factor of Allied air supremacy; the offensive of the British Eighth Army against the Enfidaville position; the shift of emphasis on the Tunisian western front; Allied attacks on the front sector held by the Fifth Panzer Army; Allied air superiority; the collapse of the western front; the last mission of the Tunisian Air Corps; the capitulation of the Army Group Africa.

At the conclusion of the fighting at Tebessa, the Army Group Africa had the Fifth Panzer Army on the northern sector of the Tunisian front and the German-Italian Panzer Army under General Messe on the Mareth line in the southeast. The total strength of the Axis troops was approximately 30,000⁸⁷.

There was a wide gap between the inner flanks of the two armies, a gap which was secured only inadequately by relatively weak advanced forces and, east of Gattar, by the Italian Division Centauro.

In the meantime the Fifth Panzer Army had acquired some reinforcements - elements of the Division Hermann Goering and one 999 division (experienced troops). The commander of the latter division, together with his staff, had been shot down during the flight to their new area of operations⁸⁸.

The Fifth Panzer Army had the following troops stationed on the northern sector of the front:

Division von Manteuffel:

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Luftwaffe Regiment Barentzin (two paratrooper battalions and one heavy infantry battalion);

9th Paratrooper Engineer Battalion (Witsig);

3d Battalion (Tunisian troops);

30th Replacement Battalion⁸⁹;

one artillery battalion consisting of four batteries;

one battalion with 105 mm guns from the 190th Artillery Regiment;

one signal communications platoon;

one understrengthed antiaircraft artillery combat team;

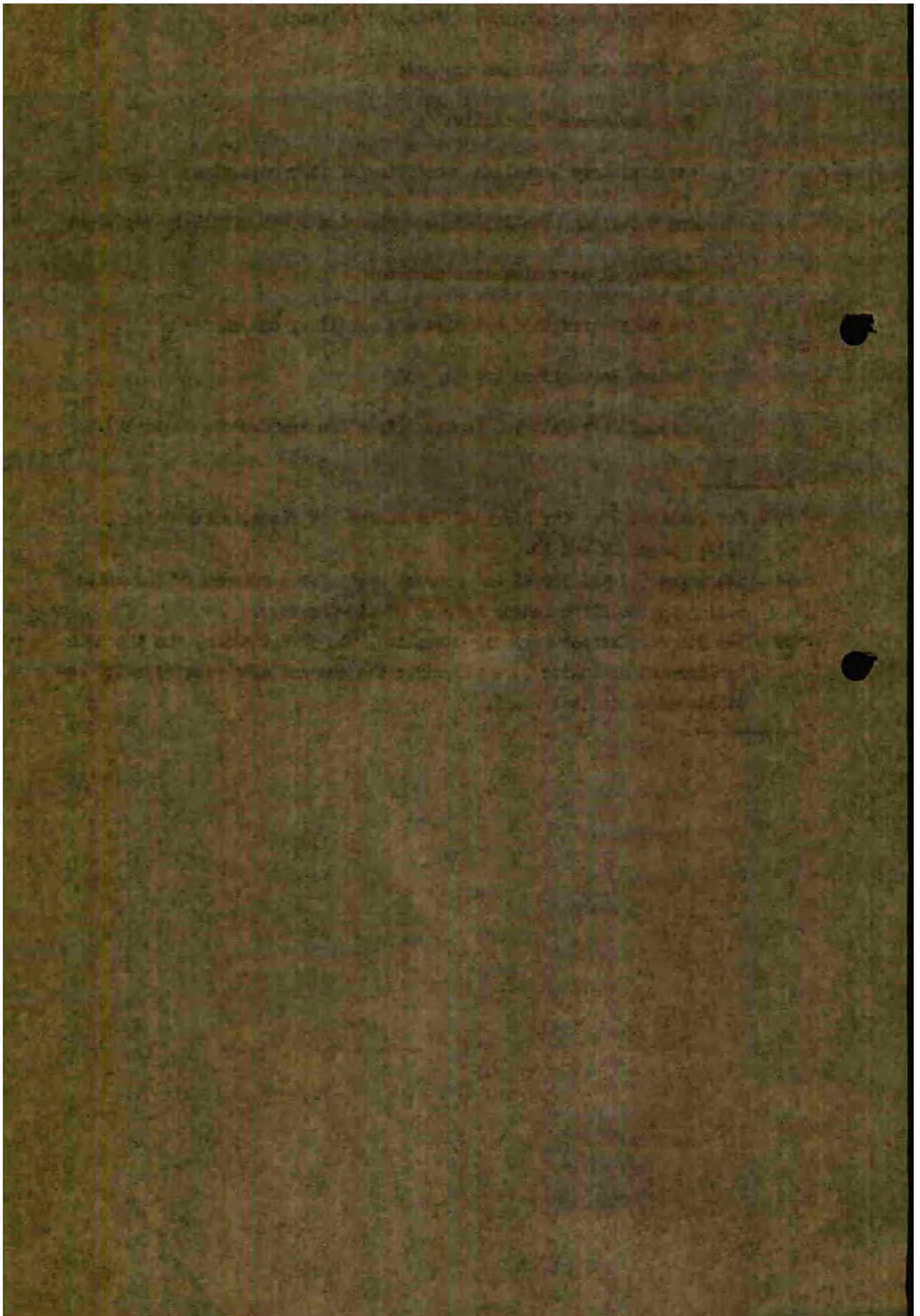
Italian Bersaglieri troops; and

Special Duty Unit von Eckman (from the Brandenburg Regiment).

87 - See Footnote 27; War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 4 March 1943; pages 17 and 18.

88 - See pages 564 and 566 of the present study for a summary of the units making up the Fifth Panzer Army as of mid-December.

89 - The 9th Paratrooper Engineer Battalion, the 3d Battalion, and the 30th Replacement Battalion were all under the command of a provisionally established regimental staff.



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The following force was assigned to the middle and southern sectors:

Combat Group WEBER

Brigade Lang;

47th Infantry Regiment (Motorized) and 504th Panzer Battalion;

334th Infantry Division;

Division Hermann Goering (not yet up to full strength); and

four artillery battalions, comprising twelve batteries⁹⁰.

During the early days of March, the Division von Manteuffel had carried out successful raids along the coastal sector⁹¹, during the course of which the enemy lost 2,100 prisoners, 68 tanks and armored reconnaissance cars, and 36 artillery pieces⁹². In the few days following 6 March, it reached the area around Djebel Abied, west of Tabarka⁹³.

A German Chief of Staff, Colonel Bayerlein, had been assigned to the staff of General Giovanni Messe's Army. This Army was composed of the following elements:

Command Headquarters, Italian XX Army Corps, including Corps artillery;

Command Headquarters, Italian XXI Army Corps, including Corps artillery;

Italian Division Giovanni Fucisti;

Italian 16th Division Pistoia;

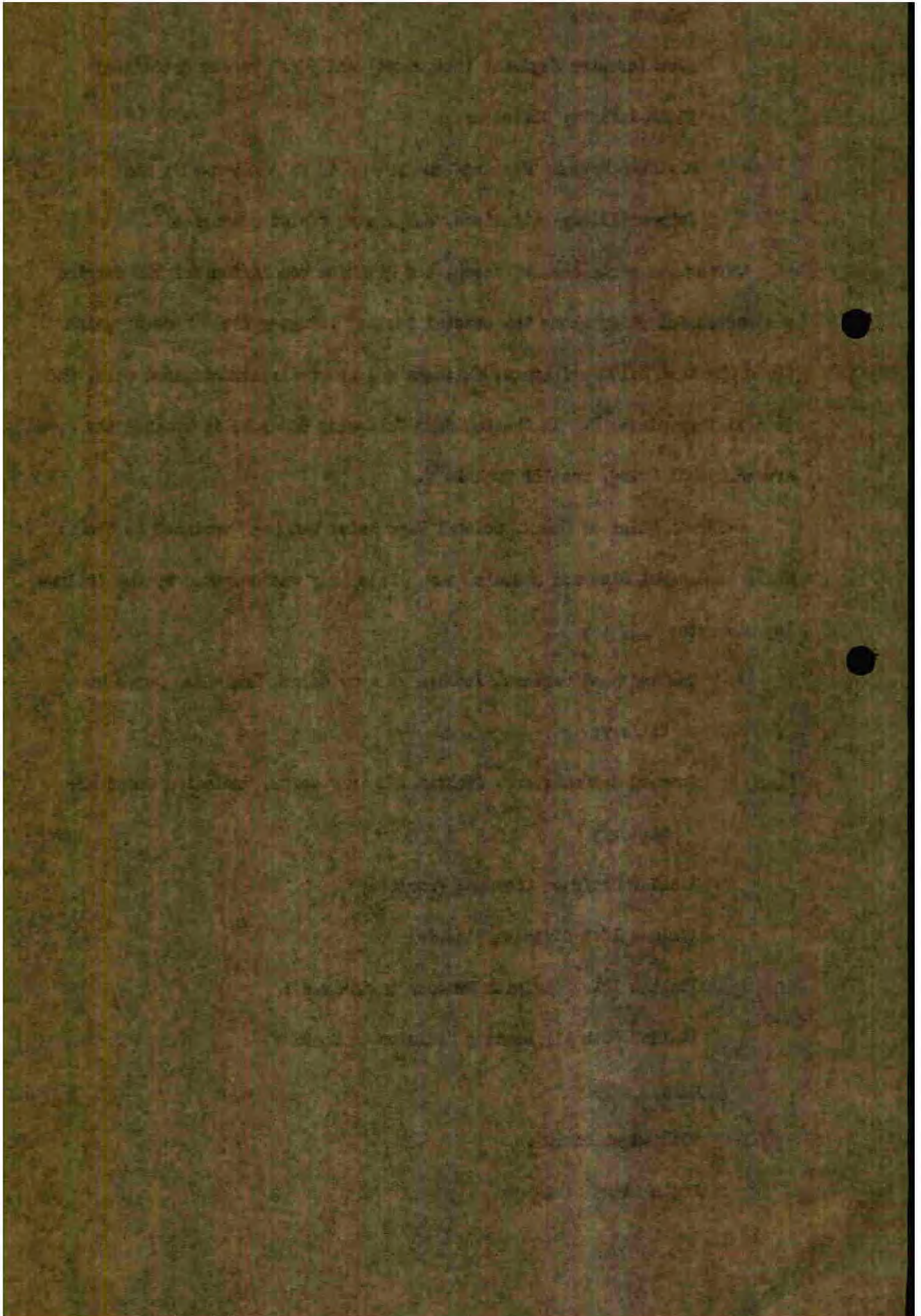
Italian 101st Division Trieste (Motorized);

Italian 80th Air Landing Division La Spezia;

German troops:

90th Light Division;

164th Light Division;



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15th Panzer Division; and
Luftwaffe Rifle Brigade Nicolai.

Of these forces, three Italian divisions (the Giovanni Fascisti, the 16th Division Pistoia, and the 101st Division Trieste) had been assigned to the Mareth line since mid-January as a security force, its task to build up the fortifications of the line⁹⁴.

The German 90th and 164th Light Divisions and the Italian 101st Division Trieste had been assigned the task of holding back the British Eighth Army in its attempt to reach the outskirts of the Mareth line positions.

During the second half of February, the Allied 51st Division and 7th Armored Division had succeeded in pushing back the Axis advance forces towards the south. In addition they had captured the outpost positions of El-Gardana and Medenine, with their well-equipped airfields, and the Four Tatahouine Pass.

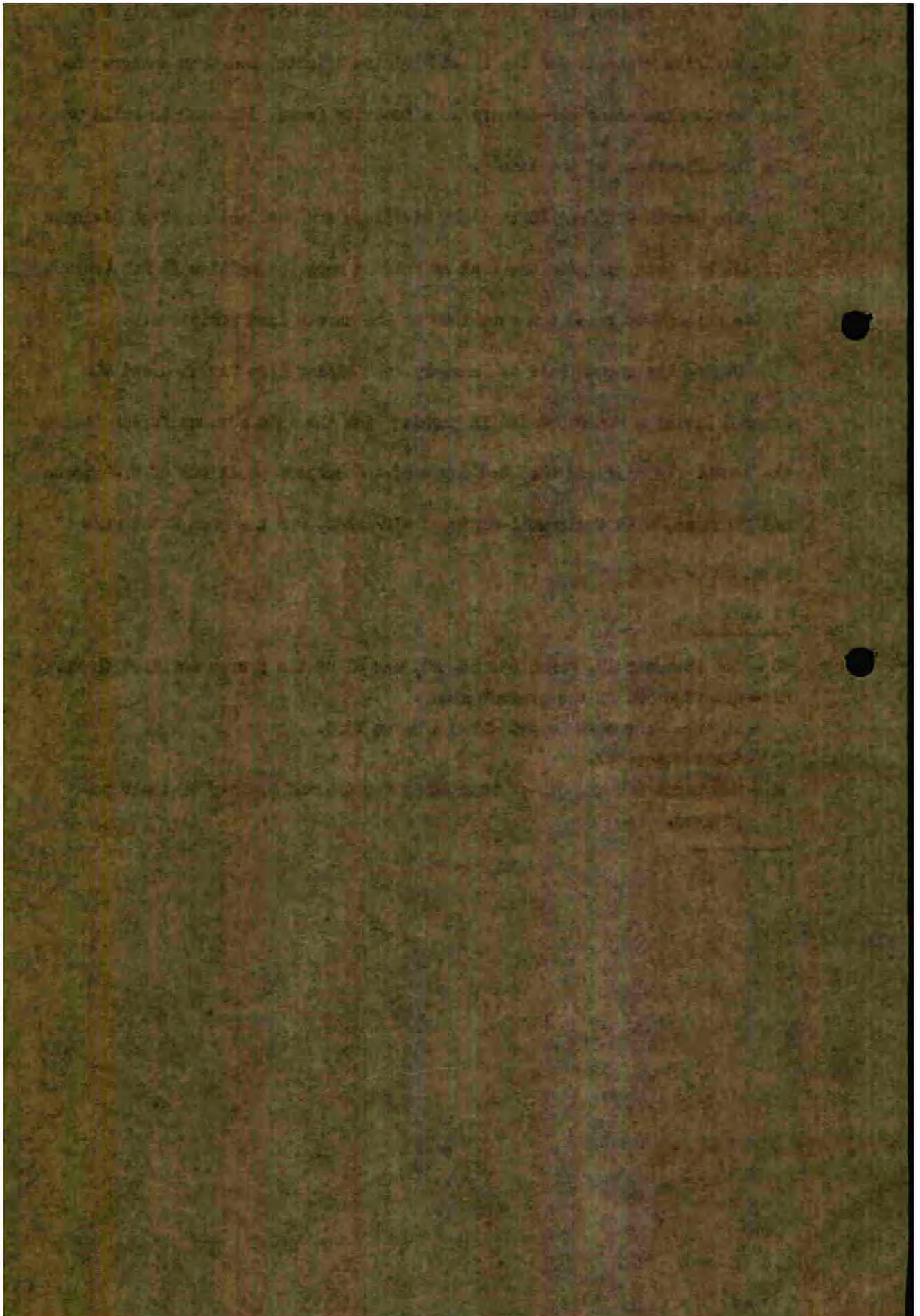
90 - See Footnote 17, pages 63, 64, 80, and 81 of the source detailed there.

91 - See page 588 of the present study.

92 - See the Wehrmacht Report dated 4 March 1943.

93 - See Footnote 27.

94 - See pages 609 and 610 of this study for a brief summary of their positions.



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The majority of the British Eighth Army forces, however, still lagged fairly far behind, as a result of supply difficulties. Thus, the plan of interfering in their assembly operations with numerically superior troops seemed to give promise of success.

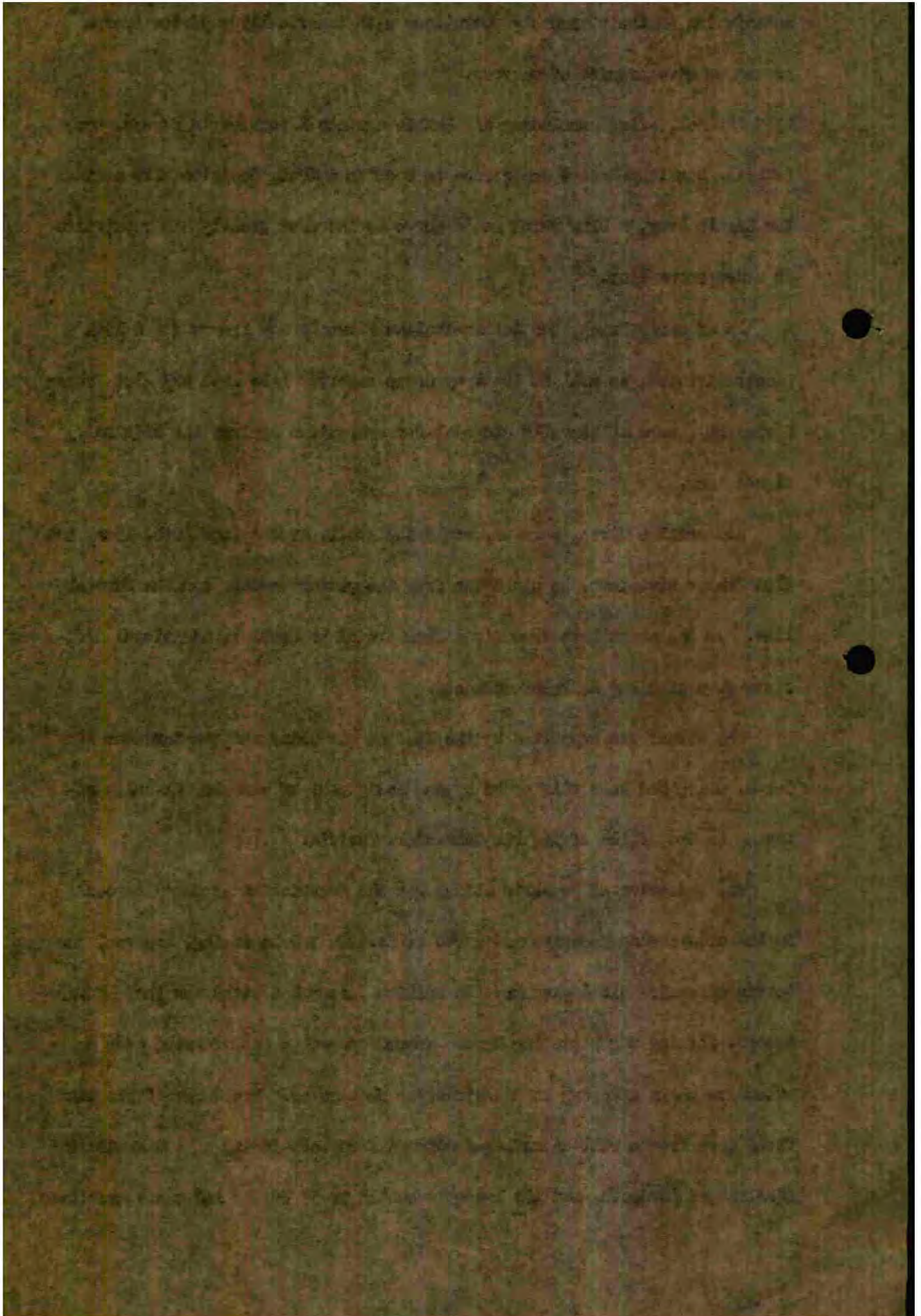
"Rommel, after concluding his battle against Eisenhower's forces, was to bring his long desert experience to bear in a last, decisive blow against the Eighth Army, a blow which would serve to increase greatly his reputation as a desert warrior."⁹⁵

As of early March, the German-Italian First Panzer Army and the 15th Panzer Division, as well as the Army Group reserves (the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions), were at Rommel's disposal for operations against the British Eighth Army.

Not until 6 March, however, could the mobile troops (the 10th, 15th, and 21st Panzer Divisions) be withdrawn from the western sector and the Mareth line. In the event that Rommel's attack proved successful, additional divisions were promised as reinforcements.

The attack was supported by the Italian air units and the Tunisian Air Corps, which had been reinforced by the assignment of a number of units attached to the office of the Air Commander, Tunisia.

The objective of Rommel's attack was the destruction of enemy forces in the area around Medenine and north of it. In the beginning, however, the German offensive hit a vacuum; the British forces had withdrawn their advance troops, forcing the attacking German armored force to push forward over an extensive plain offering no terrain cover whatsoever. The German force was fired upon from a well-camouflaged defense front consisting of 400 antitank guns ranged in depth, and its losses amounted to 52 of the 140 tanks committed.

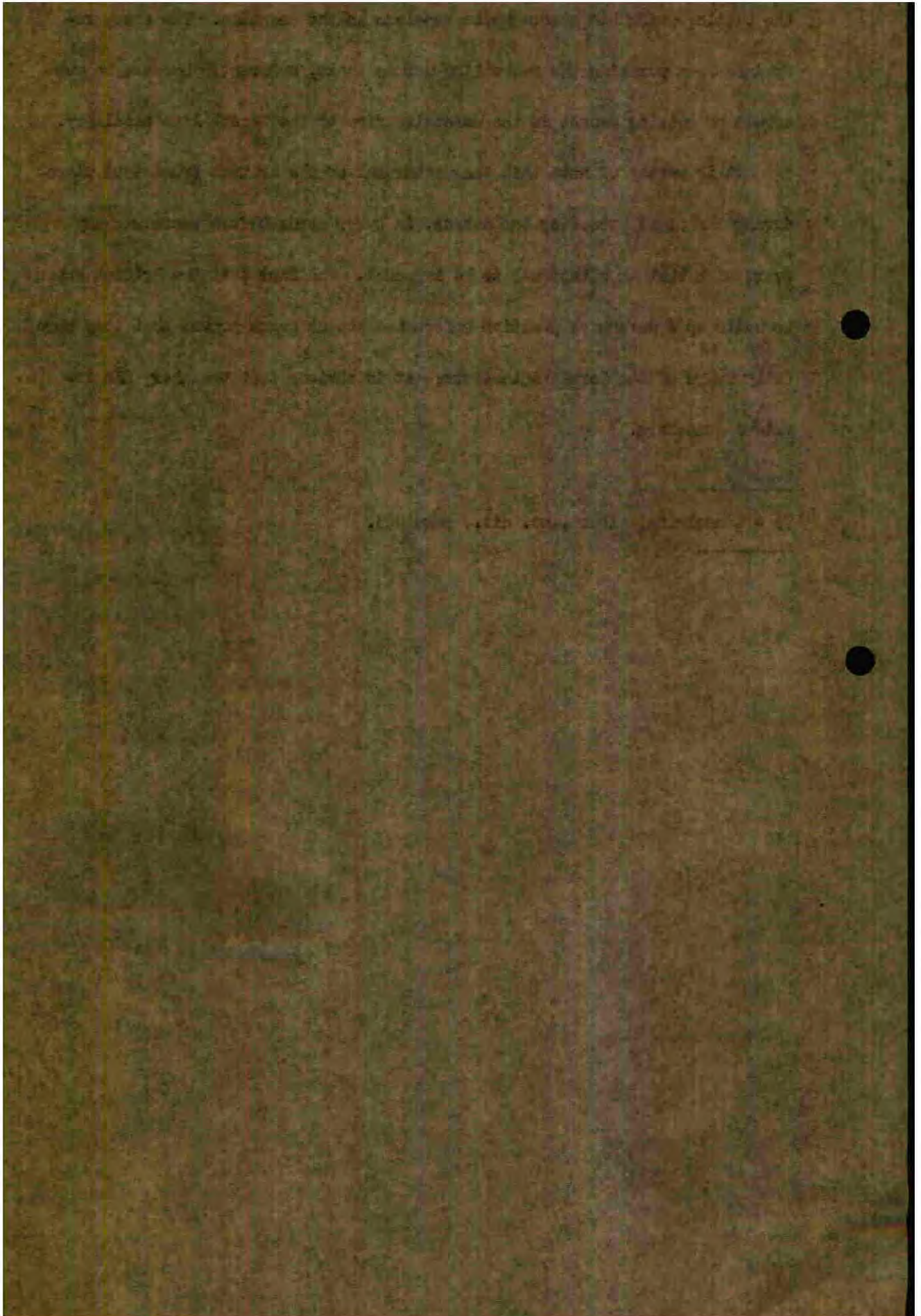


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This assault group of tanks was obviously gravely handicapped by inadequate German artillery cover, and Feldmarschall Rommel decided to break off the battle, which had become quite hopeless in the meantime. The enemy refrained from pursuing the retreating German tanks, apparently because he was afraid of getting caught in the defensive fire of the Mareth line artillery.

It is worthy of note that the withdrawal of the British front took place during the night preceding the attack, in other words before there was any overt sign that an attack was to be launched. The fact that the British began to build up a defensive position before the attack began proves that they were fully aware of the German intentions; it is obvious that treachery was involved somewhere.

95 - Hesselring, Albert, op. cit., page 205.



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The outcome of the attack at Medenine was catastrophic. Instead of the anticipated weakness of the enemy forces, the deciding factor turned out to be the weakness of the German Panzer units, a factor which was to play a significant role in the subsequent fighting on the Mareth line.

Feldmarschall Rommel's declining health forced him to take an extended leave of absence. Generaloberst von Arnim assumed command over the Army Group Africa. At Hitler's order, Rommel's departure from Africa was kept secret in order to deceive the enemy.

The Mareth line was strongest in the southeast; Wadi Zigzagu was being held by a fairly strong armored force.

The western sector was composed of mountain ridges some sixty miles in length, running from south to north, extending from Foum Tatahouine towards Foujane, in the north. This sector, too, was relatively easy to defend as a result of the mountainous character of its terrain.

The natural strength of the Mareth position had been enhanced by man-made fortifications. Some of these had been deprived of their value by the fact that the Italian armistice commission had insisted that the stationary guns mounted in the artillery niches be torn out and removed.

The weakness of the Mareth line lay in the fact that it was possible for an enemy force to encircle it in the northwest by approaching through the narrow passage between Djebel Tabaga and Djebel Malab. In order to reach this point, however, a 125-mile march through the waterless desert along the western slopes of the Matmata Hills was necessary. Shortly before the war began, the French had hastily constructed a road block at Djebel Tabaga.

The Commander in Chief, South, was well aware - both from French sources and from the results of German reconnaissance - that the terrain was negotiable,

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though difficult; he assumed that the British would take this fact into consideration.

In the meantime, German and Italian reconnaissance units, together with the Italian Sahara Group Mannerini (consisting of five motorized battalions with a total of eight batteries), were securing the open southwest flank.

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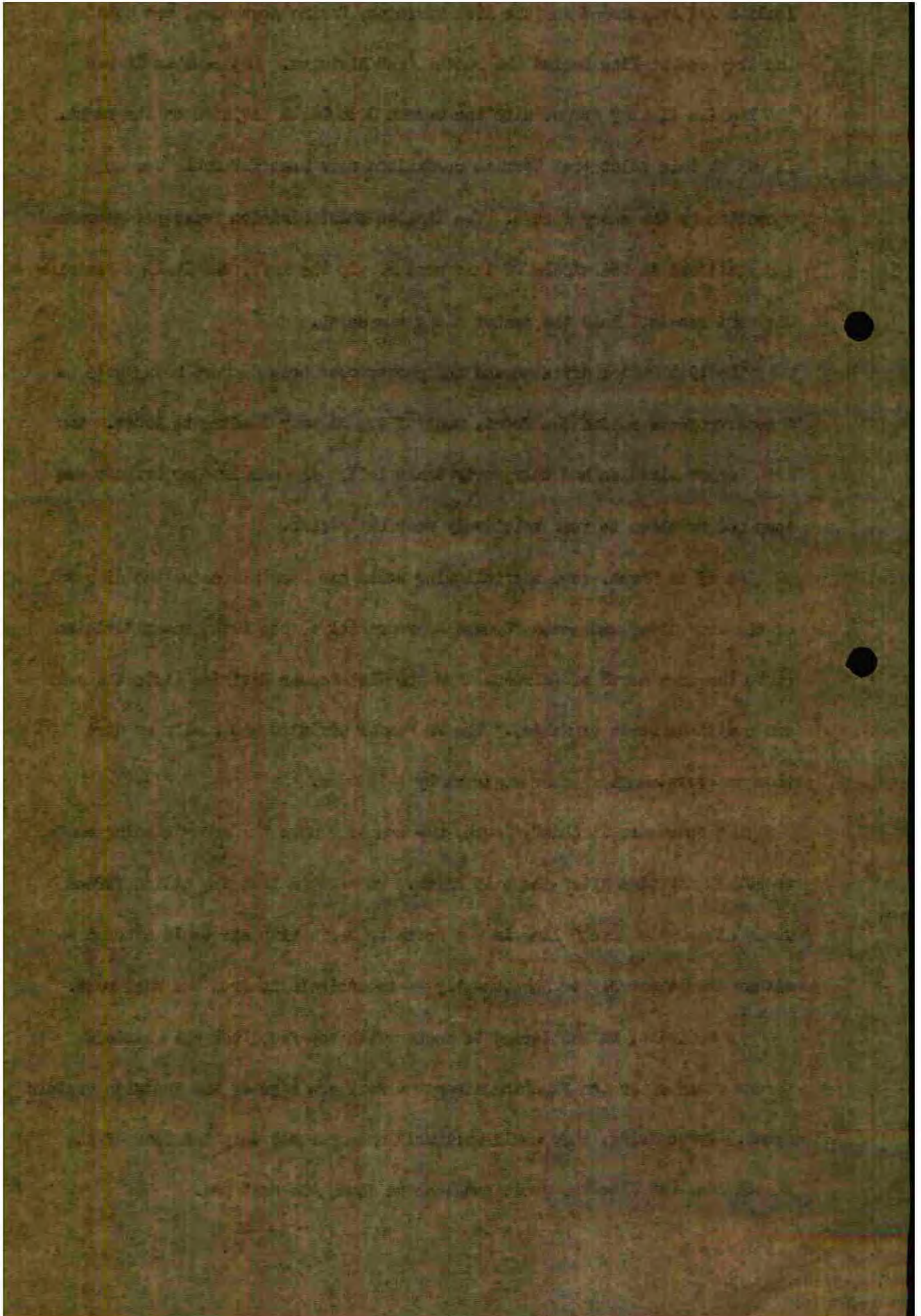
As of 10 March, the southern spur of the 164th Light Division was established on the southeast sector of the Mareth line, facing east. The Italian XXI Army Corps and the 16th Division, facing southeast, ^{were} was holding the Army combat line behind the 164th Light Division. Adjacent to it was the Italian XX Army Corps, with the German 90th Light Division on its right. It was at this point that terrain conditions were most favorable for an operation by the enemy forces. The Italian 101st Division Trieste (Motorized) was stationed in the middle of this sector. To the left, the Italian Division Giovanni Fascisti held the sector along the coast.

The 15th Panzer Division and the paratrooper brigade were being held as a reserve force behind the front, west of the highway leading to Gabes. The 15th Panzer Division had only forty tanks left; the paratrooper brigade was composed of three to four relatively weak battalions.

As of 10 March, too, the following units had been placed at the disposal of the Army Group and moved forward appropriately: the 10th Panzer Division (into the area north of Kairouan) and the 21st Panzer Division (into the salt sea positions north of Gabes). The 2d Panzer Division was really no more than an overstrength Panzer regiment by this time.

The Commander in Chief, South, was counting upon the enemy's being ready to attack any time after about 15 March. He assumed that the Allied forces would attack the Mareth line in the south to begin with and would attempt -- either simultaneously or subsequently -- to encircle it from the northwest.

In addition, he was forced to reckon with the fact that the American forces would enter the fighting along the southern edge of the Tunisian western front. By so doing, they would seriously endanger not only the rear of the Mareth line but also the positions located along the salt sea.



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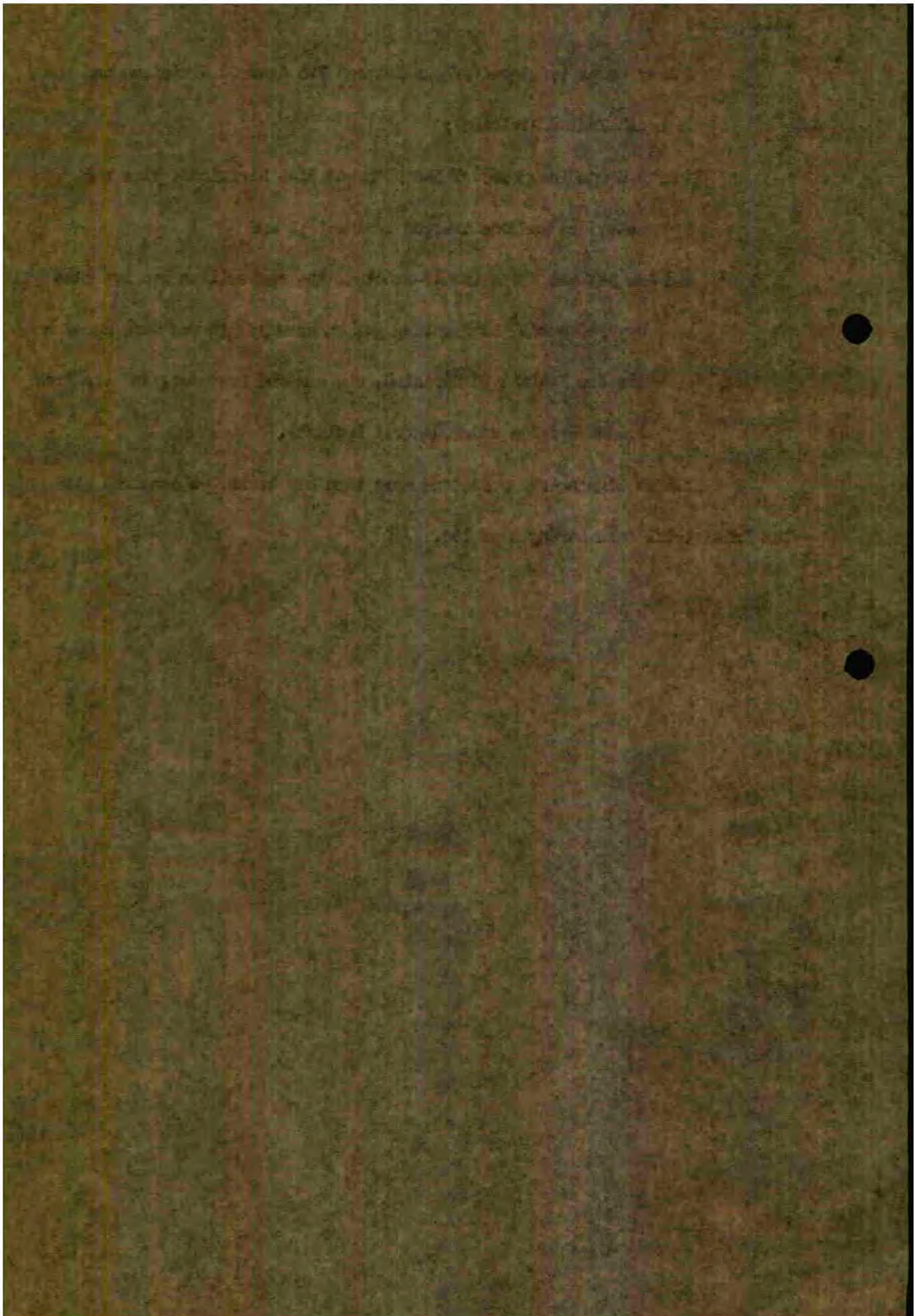
The British Eighth Army, engaged in its final regrouping before the attack, had at its disposal the following units, already known to Axis intelligence:

X Army Corps (composed of the 1st and 7th Armored Divisions and the 4th Indian Division);

XII Army Corps (composed of the 50th and 51st Divisions, plus one motorized and one armored regiment); and

The New Zealand Corps (newly-created, its composition was not discovered until the fighting got under way; it was made up of the New Zealand 2d Division, one armored regiment, and the Free French Brigade under General Leclerc).

The British Eighth Army possessed more than 600 tanks, as compared with the Axis' total tank strength of 150.



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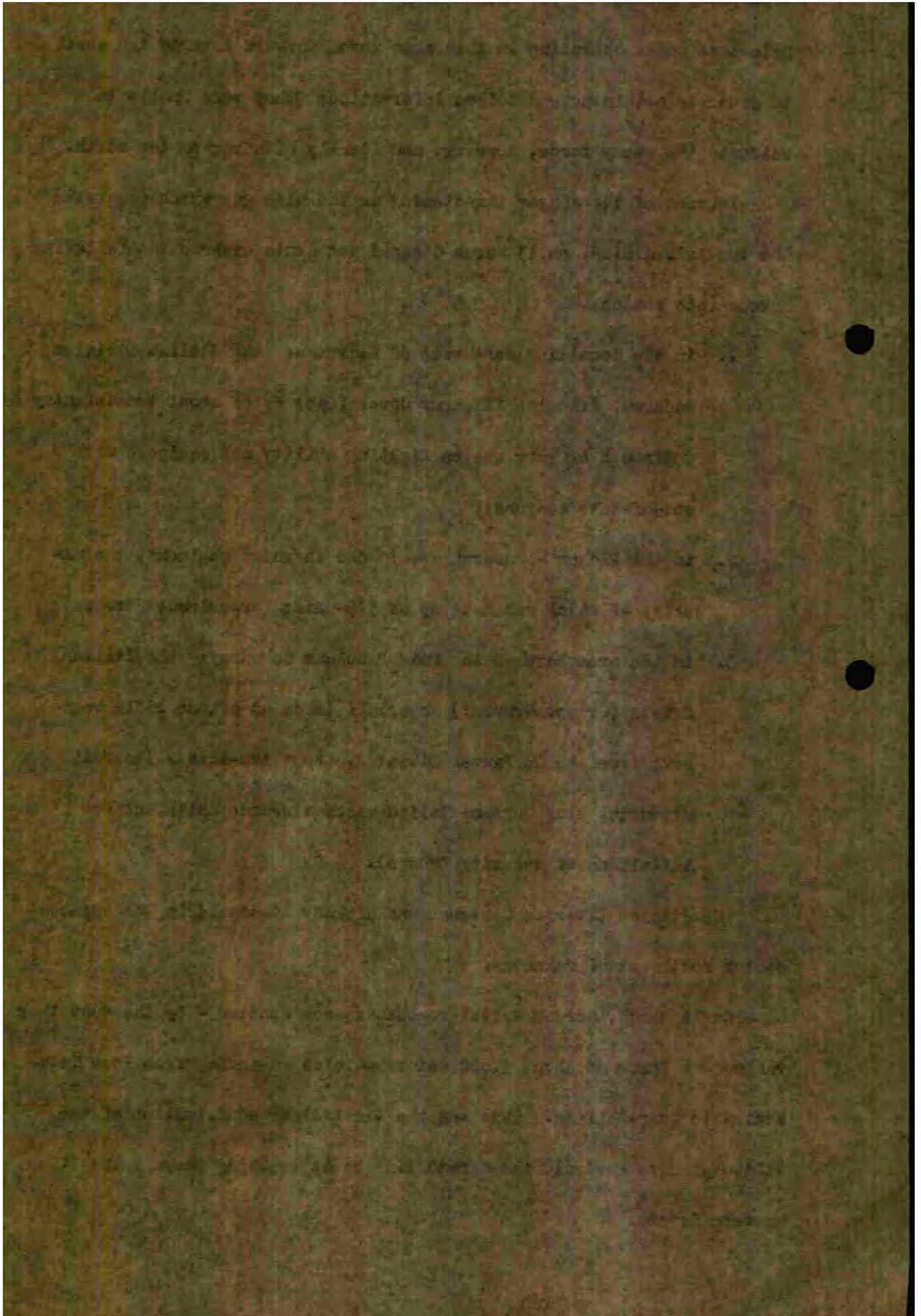
On 10 March, an enemy marching column with approximately 500 tanks was observed to be advancing in the direction of Ksar-Rhilane; it was apparently Leclerc's Free French Brigade⁹⁶. The German-Italian reconnaissance units operating in this area moved forward towards the south in order to obtain more detailed information; they were unable to relocate the enemy force, however, and finally withdrew to the north.

In view of the danger threatening in the wide gap which separated the two Axis armies, on 13 March General von Arnim ordered the following forces into action:

1. in the mountains northwest of Kairouan: the Italian Division Superba, from the XXX Army Corps (made up of about two infantry regiments of very uneven fighting ability and equipped with out-of-date weapons);
2. in the Pichon - Fondouk area: one infantry regiment, the majority of which was made up of 999-units (experienced troops);
3. in the area between the Faid Pass and Maknassy: the Italian Grusse (Gruppe-Group ?) Imperiali (made up of one rifle regiment from the 2d Panzer Division, about two-thirds its full strength, plus German-Italian reconnaissance units and two battalions of security troops).

The Italian Division Centauro was already stationed in the adjacent sector southwest of Maknassy.

On 18 March, German aerial reconnaissance spotted - by the dust they raised - a force of about 3,000 motor vehicles advancing from Fom Tatahouine to Ksar-Rhilane. This was the first clear confirmation of the Allied plan to encircle the Mareth line by approaching through the western desert.



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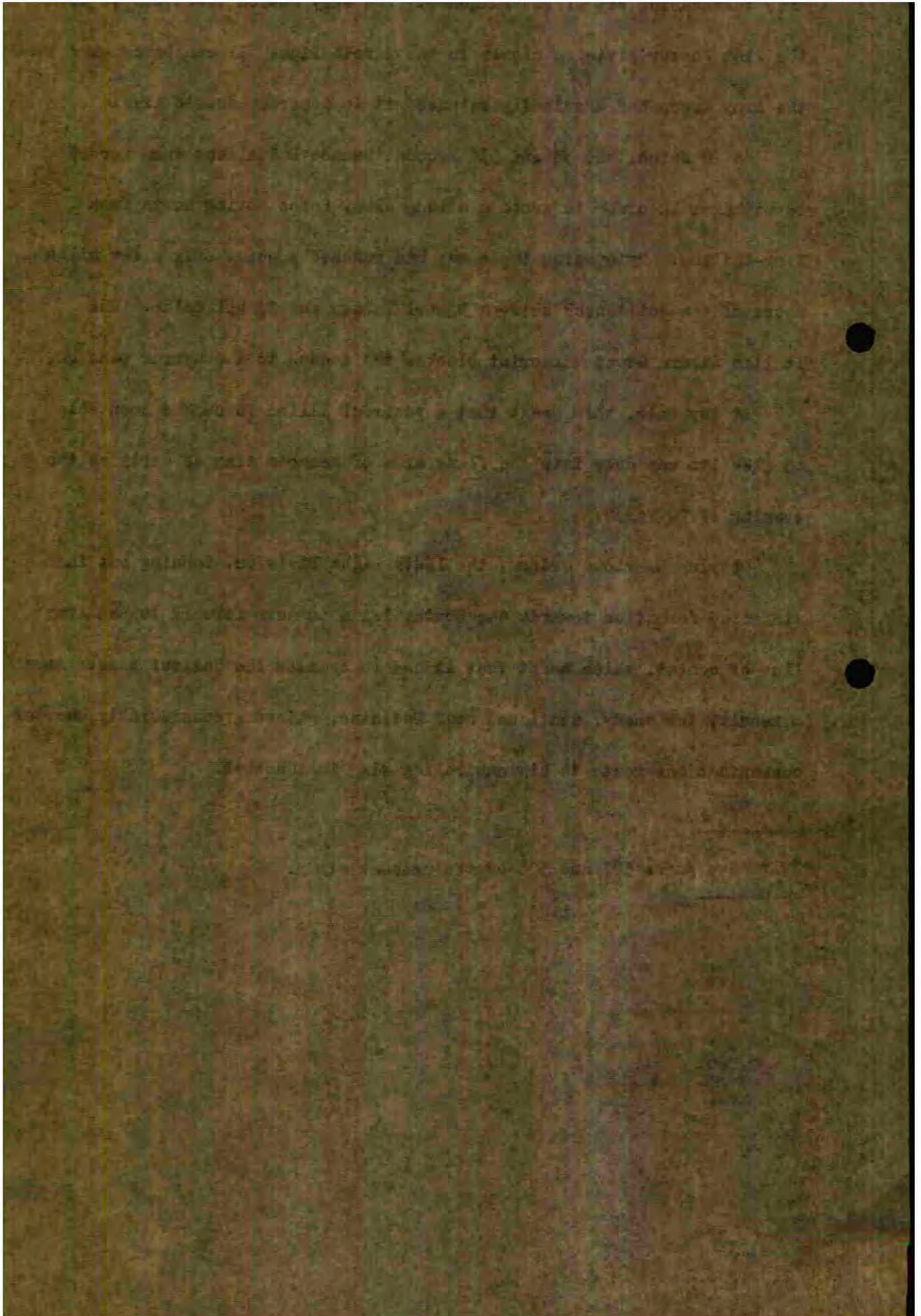
There is nothing on record to indicate whether or in how far the Army Group Africa and the German-Italian First Panzer Army reacted to this threatening bit of intelligence. The only action taken was to move the 21st Panzer Division closer to the Mareth line. It can be assumed that the Army Group had previously released it to General Messe's Army.

On 20 March, the 3d and 35d Reconnaissance Battalions were forced to withdraw in order to avoid a strong enemy force moving north from Ksar-Rhilane. By evening the enemy had reached a point only a few miles short of the bottleneck between Djebel Tabaga and Djebel Melab. The Italian Sahara Group Mannerini blocked the access to the narrow passage.

At any rate, this meant that a powerful Allied force had been able to make its way deep into the flank area of Messe's Army as early as the evening of 20 March.

Obeying previous orders, the 164th Light Division, fanning out in staggered formation towards the south, began to move forward to the Army line of combat, which meant that it had to abandon the Hallouf Pass. As a result, the enemy, stationed near Medenine, gained a considerably shorter communications route to his encircling wing in the west.

96 - See pages 507 and 508 of the present study.

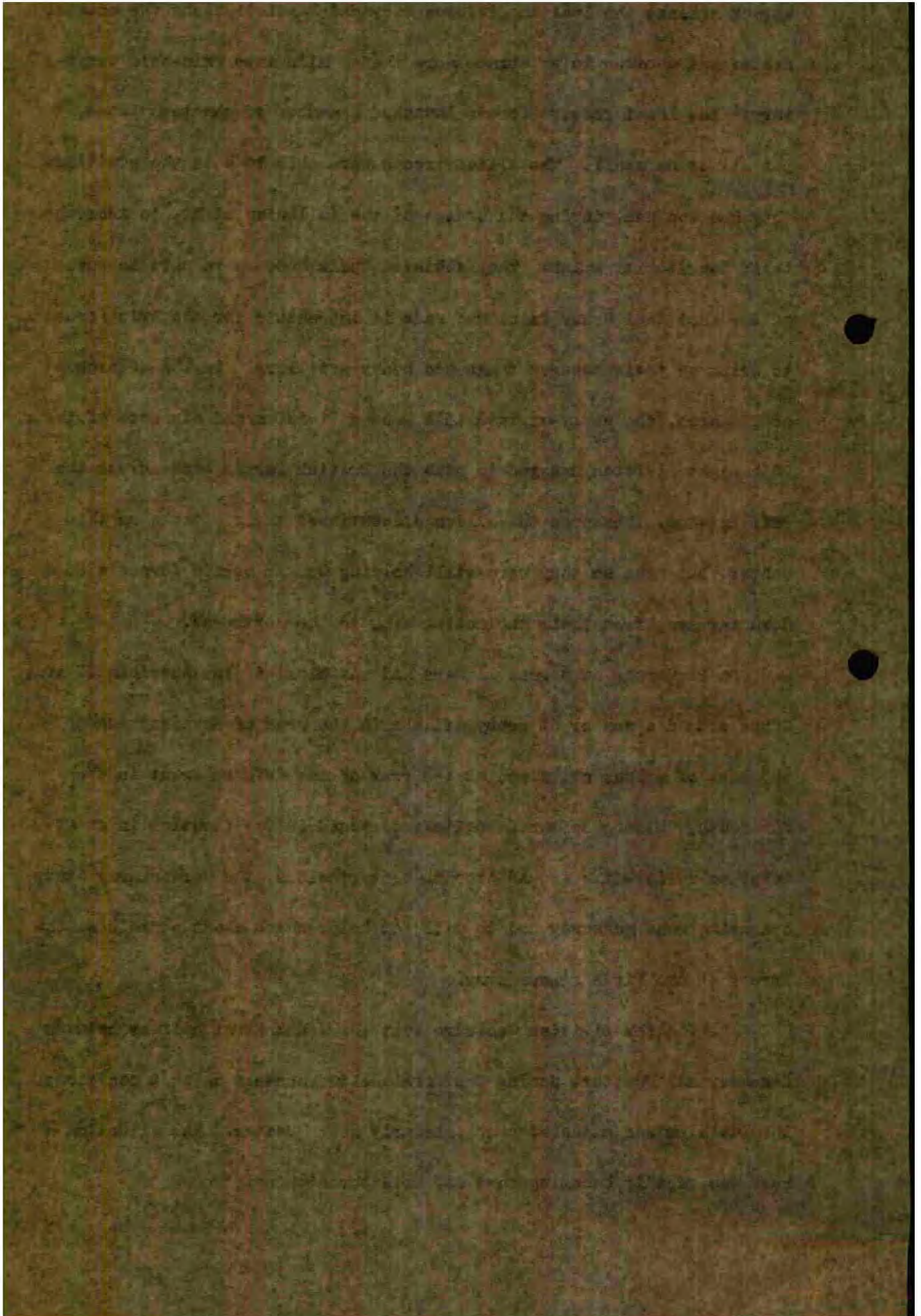


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During the night of 20/21 March, after lengthy preliminary artillery fire, the British 50th Division, XXX Army Corps, carried out an attack against the Italian Division Giovanni Fascisti along the coastal sector and managed to penetrate more than a mile into Axis-held territory. The local reserve forces launched a number of counterattacks, but all to no avail. The Allied troops were able to hold the positions they had won and, during the course of the following night, to increase their territorial gains. They achieved their success in part because of the fact that heavy rains had made it impossible for the Axis forces to bring up their reserve tanks and heavy artillery. On the afternoon of 22 March, the newly-arrived 15th Panzer Division and elements of the 90th Light Division managed to push the British forces back across the Wadi Zigaou. Hereupon the Allies discontinued their attacks on this sector, but even so they were still holding German mobile forces tied down far away from their encircling wing to the northwest.

On 21 March, as German leaders had anticipated, the American II Army Corps staged a number of decoy attacks in the area of Maknassy and to the east of Gafsa, all aimed at the rear of the defense front in the far south. Strong Luftwaffe units intervened in the fighting in an attempt to relieve the ground troops. Nevertheless, the German Army Group operating near Maknassy had to call for help, which meant a drain on the forces of the Fifth Panzer Army.

The Italian Division Centauro lost the Gened Pass, halfway between Maknassy and Guettar, during the first Allied assault on that position; the Division was attacked simultaneously near Guettar. The situation here was rapidly becoming more and more threatening.

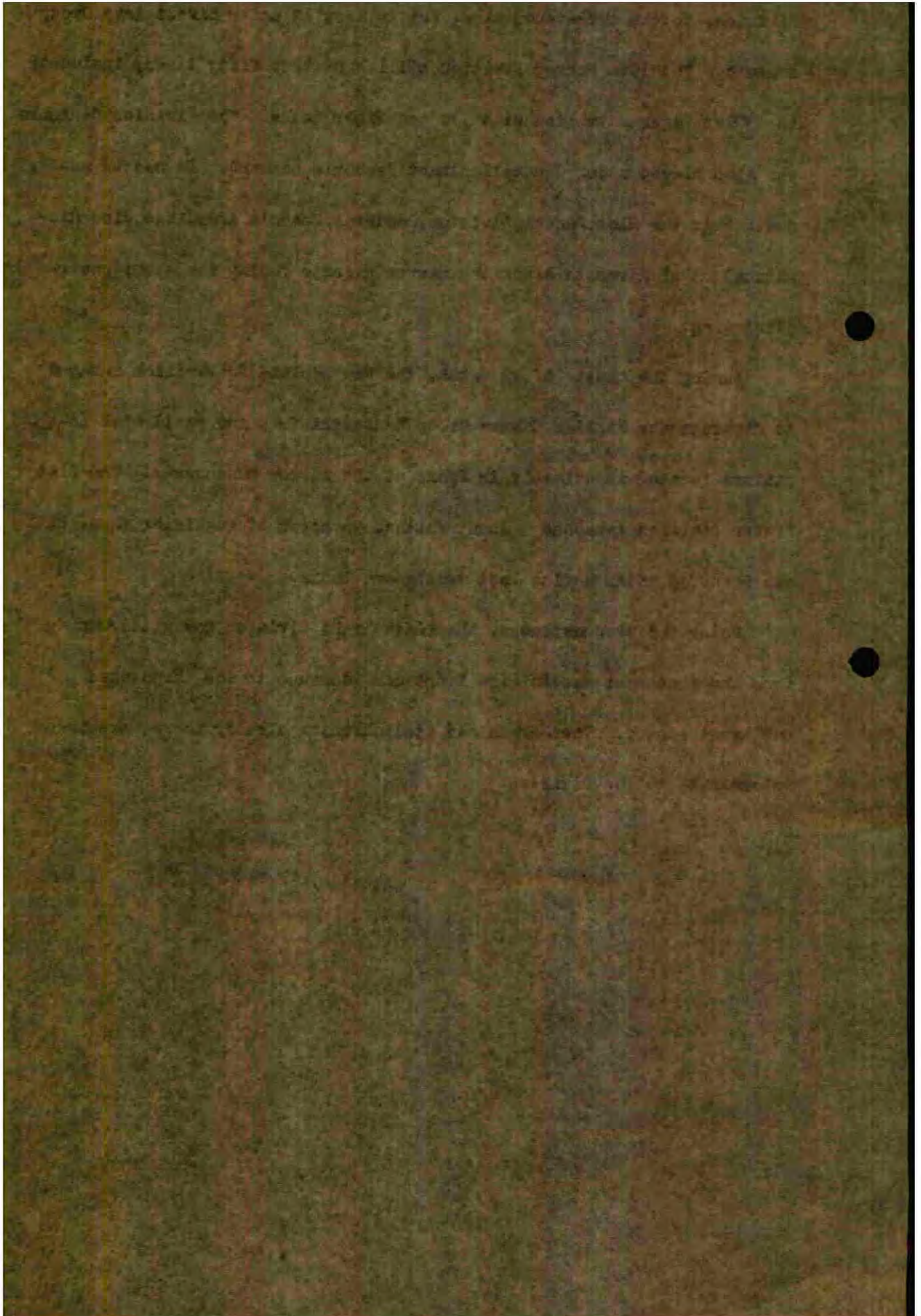


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On 21 March, the Army Group decided to assign Generalleutnant Cramer's staff, together with its last reserve force, the 10th Panzer Division, to the threatened area, but to keep it under direct Army Group command. The 10th Panzer Division still had about fifty tanks, including the 501st Tiger Battalion with its ten Tiger tanks. The Division Centauro was also placed under Generalleutnant Cramer's command. It can be assumed that the 21st Panzer Division, General Messe's Army, was also dispatched on 21 March to block the narrow passage facing the enemy encircling wing.

During the course of 22 March, the New Zealand 2d Division managed to dislodge the Italian Sahara Group Mannerini from two small hill positions located immediately in front of the narrow passageway. The 21st Panzer Division launched a counterattack in hopes of regaining them, but was rebuffed after having lost twenty-one tanks.

Under the circumstances, the 164th Light Division was withdrawn from the southeast March line front and assigned to the threatened northwest sector. The German and Italian units already there were made subordinate to the Division.



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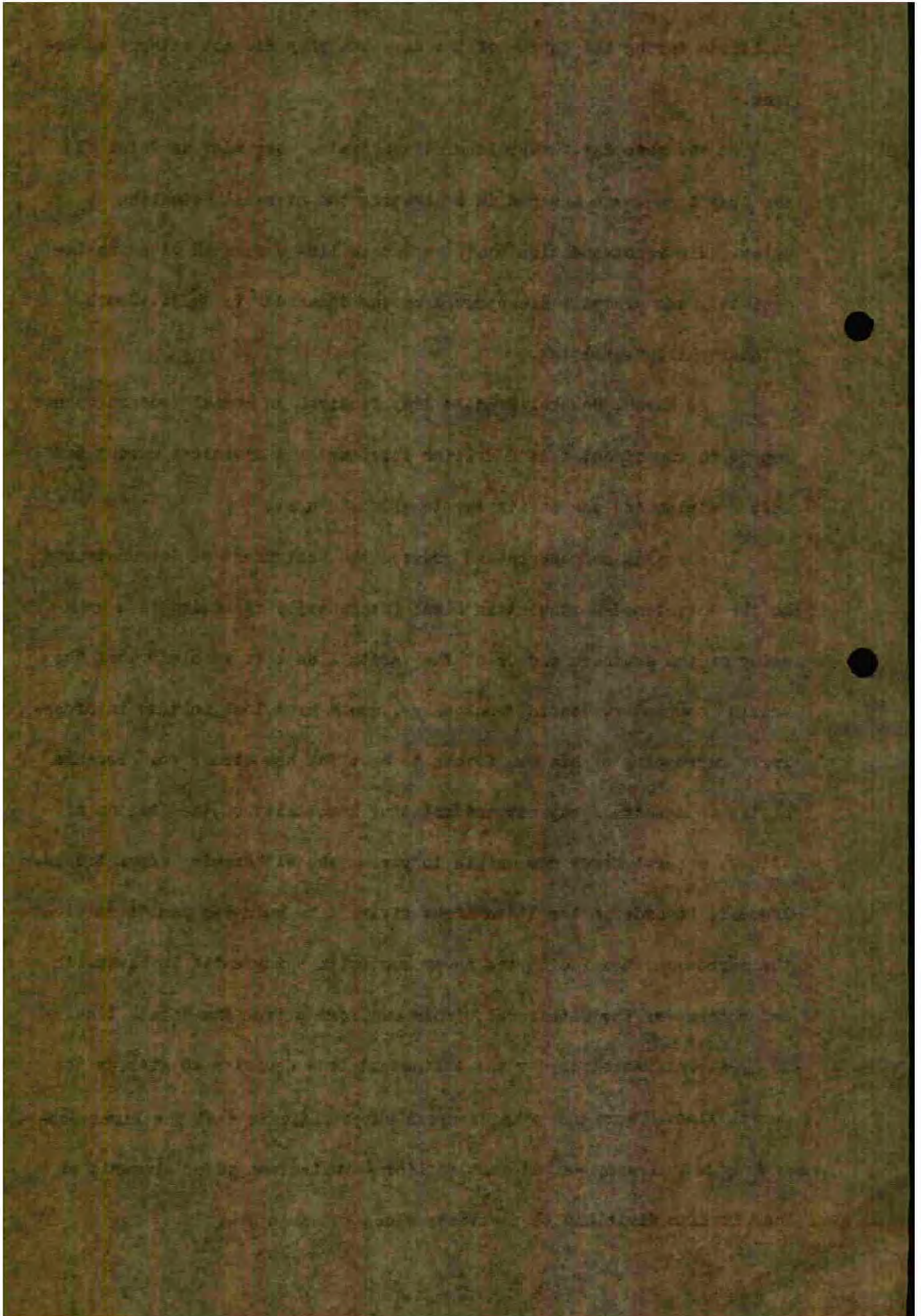
On 23 March the 164th Light Division took over the right wing of the defense front at the pass south of Djebel Tabaga, replacing the 21st Panzer Division. A large number of British tanks reconnoitered the Axis positions during the course of the day, but they did not attempt an attack.

On the same day, Generaloberst von Arnim, Commander in Chief of the Army Group, was engaged in evaluating the over-all situation at Gabes. His recommendation that the Mareth line should be given up immediately was promptly disapproved by the Commander in Chief, South, Feldmarschall Kesselring.

On 24 March, General Messe's Army received an aerial reconnaissance report to the effect that a British force several divisions strong had left Medenine and was on its way towards the west.

If the Axis commanders had ordered the assignment of German troops to the threatened northwestern flank (necessarily resulting in a weakening of the southern sector of the Mareth line), it is clear that the British commander, General Montgomery, would have lost no time in ordering a regrouping of his own forces to meet the new situation. Because of the inadequate equipment and relative immobility of the Italian divisions, General Messe was unable to pursue the withdrawing enemy troops. Instead, he ordered the 164th Light Division to hold its positions along the narrow passage facing the enemy encircling wing until 26 March, in order to cover the withdrawal of his own forces from the Mareth line.

General Messe's order was tantamount to a decision to give up the Mareth line. There are other sources which indicate that the First Panzer Army had already -- and much earlier -- withdrawn major elements of four Italian divisions to positions along the salt sea.



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On 22 March, the Lang Group (made up of four provisionally organized battalions from various sources, including a number of Tiger tanks, artillery batteries, and two 88 mm antiaircraft artillery battalions) was successful in its attempt to repulse an attempted enemy breakthrough on the southern sector of the Tunisian western front near Maknassy.

It was only due to Colonel Lang's far-sighted efficiency that a serious catastrophe was avoided on this sector. Colonel Pontow makes special mention of the bravery displayed by General Imperiali during the fighting here⁹⁷.

In the area east of Guettar, Axis forces also managed to prevent further territorial gains by the enemy troops.

97 - See footnote 17, page 95 of the source cited there.

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During the course of the following days, the pressure exerted by enemy forces east of Maknassy became steadily more intense; their attacks were countered by Axis defensive operations of varying success.

Further to the south, in the area assigned to the German Army Corps, the fighting was strictly local. The Axis forces attempted an attack some ten miles east of Guettar, but it failed.

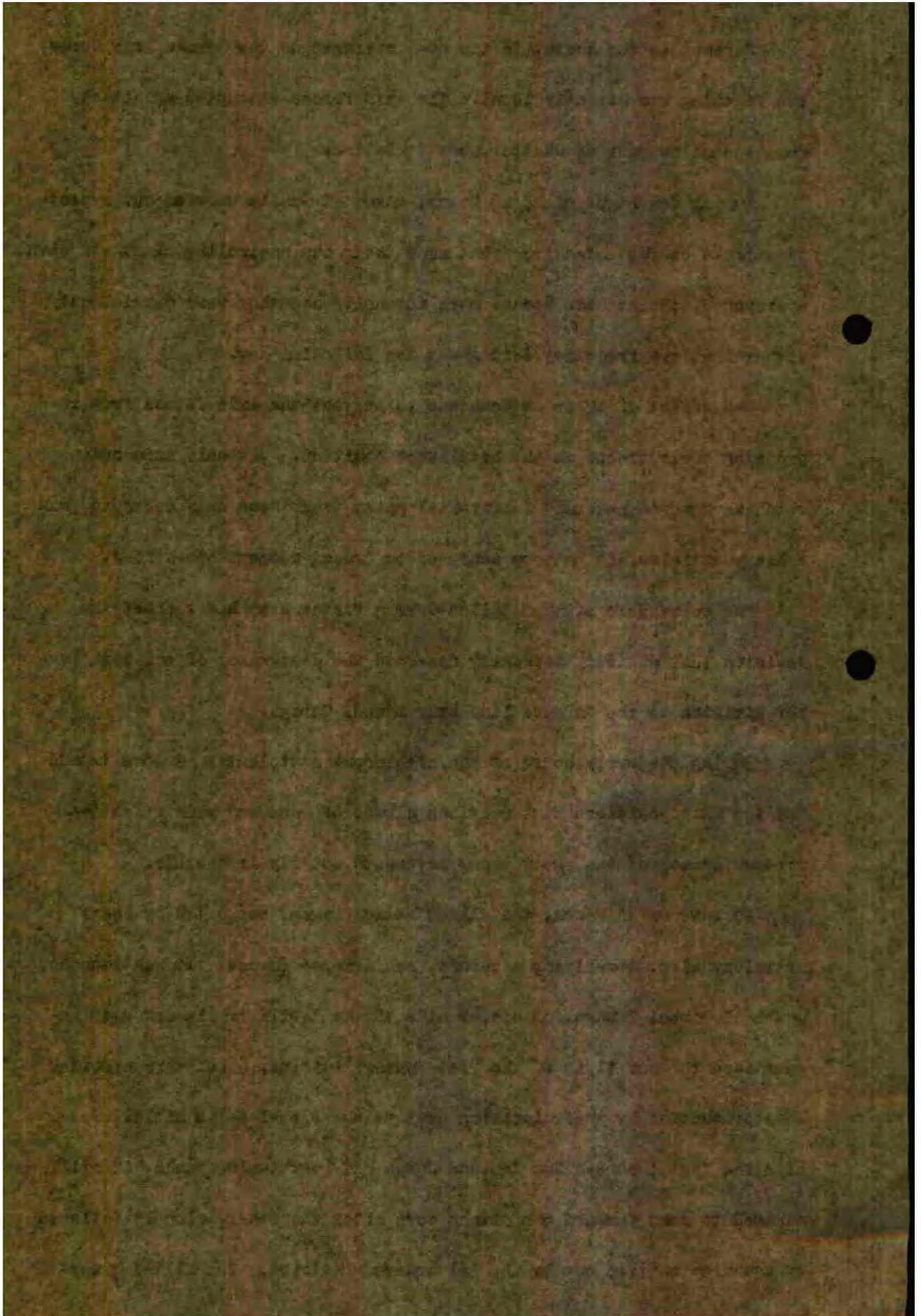
During the night of 25/26 March, enemy air units carried out repeated attacks on the defensive front near their own encircling wing. As dawn approached, the attacks became more intensive and they were carried out with relentless frequency throughout the following day.

One effect of these attacks was to prevent the Axis forces from regrouping their troops in the bottleneck position. The only Axis unit which managed to make any territorial gains (and these only sporadic) was a heavy antiaircraft battery assigned to ground-support operations.

The commanders of the Italian-German Panzer Army had reached the decision that military necessity demanded the assignment of the 15th Panzer Division to the defense line near Djebel Tabaga.

During the early hours of the afternoon, a violent sandstorm inundated the Axis positions with swirling clouds of sand and made effective reconnaissance of the enemy troop movements utterly impossible.

At 1800 on 26 March, the Allied attack began, supported by heavy artillery fire, low-flying aircraft, and armored forces. It was launched south of Djebel Tabaga, on either side of the Kebili trail, and even encompassed the positions of the 21st Panzer Division, which were afforded some protection by their location next to the Djebel Melab hills. Despite the fact that the New Zealand Corps had lost twelve tanks, it still managed to send forward one attack wave after the other, closely followed by assaults carried out by the 1st Armored Division. The Allied troops

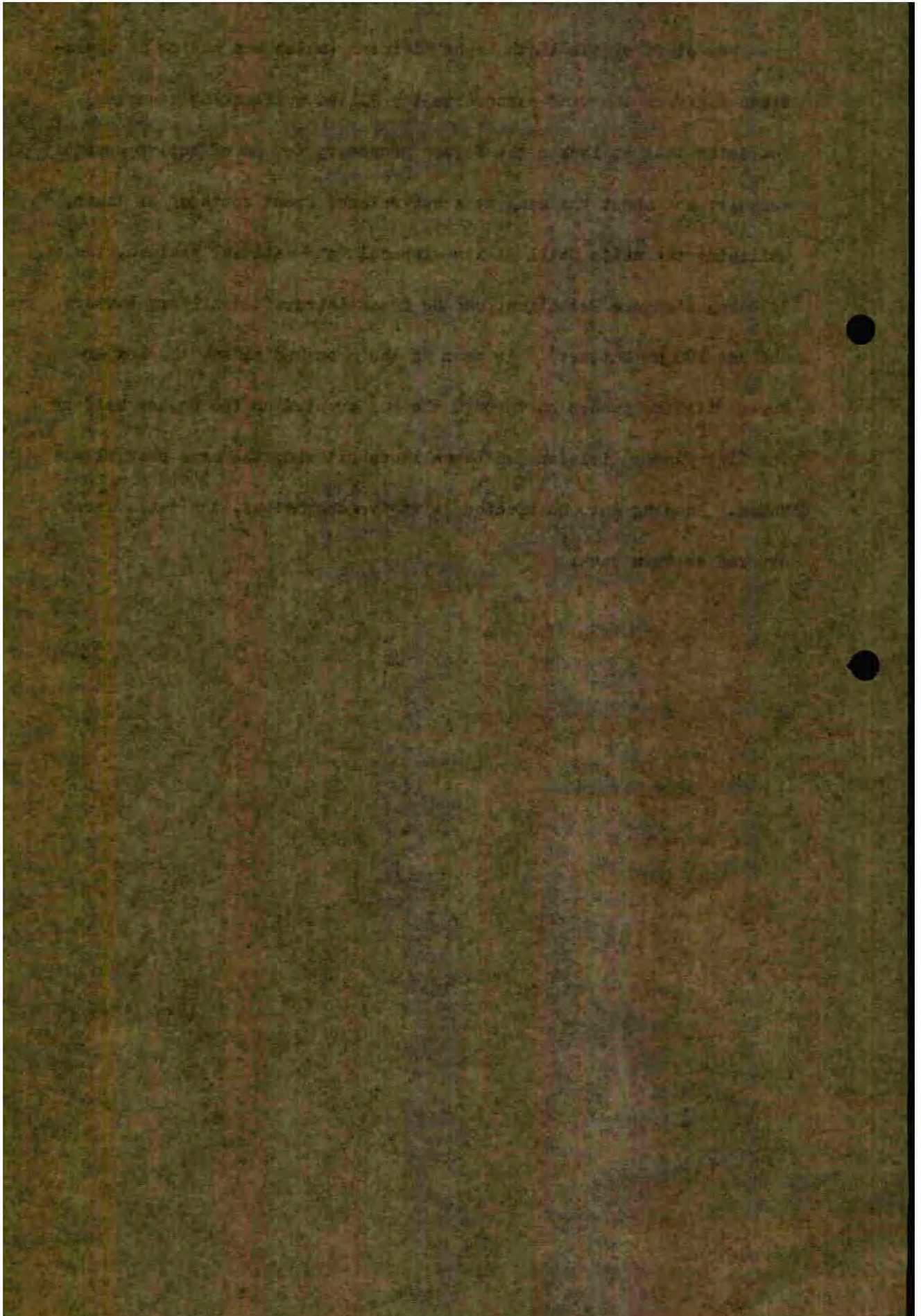


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succeeded in penetrating approximately three and one-half miles into Axis-held territory and in eliminating German artillery.

The attack was interrupted temporarily by the coming of darkness.

The staff of the 164th Light Division (which was acting as operations staff on the wing exposed to the Allied outflanking maneuver), realizing that it lacked the forces necessary for an effective counter-assault, set about building up a new defense front south of El Hamma, utilizing the units still at its disposal (one antitank platoon, the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, one 88 mm antiaircraft artillery battery, and one 100 mm battery). As soon as the moon had risen, the 1st Armored Division pushed on through the gap created on the sector held by the 21st Panzer Division and began reconnoitering the area near El Hamma. Running into unexpected defensive operations, the tanks were ordered to turn back.



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On the afternoon of 26 March, the 15th Panzer Division arrived on the scene of action. Coordinating its operations with those of the 21st Panzer Division (i.e. the remnants thereof, which had no more than twenty-five tanks at their disposal) and moving forward from a position protected in the rear by the foothills of Djebel Melak (sic - Melab?), it succeeded in checking the enemy troops and thus preventing the encirclement of the German-Italian First Panzer Army.

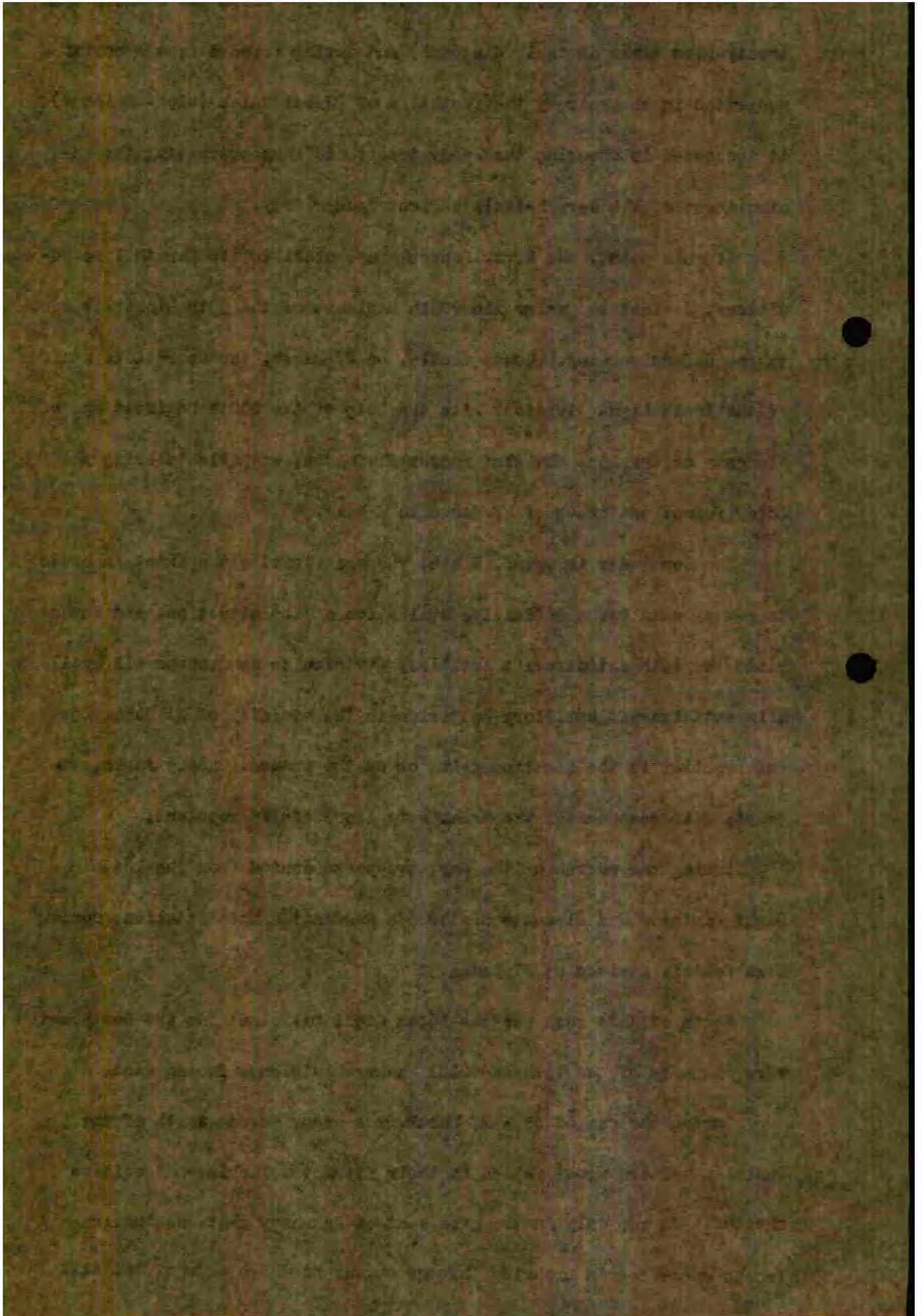
At this point, the First Panzer Army, still in its Mareth line positions, decided to assign the 200th Regiment of the 90th Light Division to the defensive wing. Consequently, on 27 March, the operations staff of the 164th Light Division, with the help of the 200th Regiment and of elements of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, was able to bring the enemy forces southwest of El Hamma to a halt.

The Commander in Chief, South, who was visiting the front in order to gather data for a definitive evaluation of the situation, had authorized the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division to commandeer all available antiaircraft artillery batteries in the vicinity of El Hamma for intervention in the fighting going on on the ground. Enemy tanks, attempting to reconnoiter the area, were successfully repulsed.

During the course of the day, troops separated from the 164th Light Division and elements of the 33d Reconnaissance Battalion, coming from Kebili, arrived at El Hamma.

South of this town was the 164th Light Division; to the southeast were elements of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, facing west.

During the period 25 - 27 March, the enemy forces south of the Tunisian western front failed in their attempt to achieve a decisive success. It was only in the area east of Maknassy that the American troops succeeded in breaking through on the northern edge of the Axis



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position along the ridge.

During the night of 27/28 March, the troops still left on the Mareth line began their withdrawal to the positions along the salt sea.

Thanks to the fact that the enemy failed to realize that a withdrawal movement was in progress, and to the fact that this withdrawal ran exactly according to plan, it was possible to pull back the troops operating at El Hama during the same night. The 164th Light Division made its escape by detouring to the north, while the 15th Panzer Division, with the 21st Panzer Division under its command, withdrew via the highway to Oudref, thirteen miles northwest of Gabes.

The 90th Light Division, functioning as a rear guard force, marched on over the coastal highway leading through Gabes.

On the morning of 28 March, the enemy pushed forward, concentrating his forces along the coastal highway. His operations were effectively handicapped by mines and roadblocks, however. The British I Army Corps, advancing via El Hama, was held back by severe sandstorms. Even so, the 1st Armored Division and the New Zealand 2d Division managed

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to reach Gabes during the course of the evening. Elements of the 15th Panzer Division were holding the narrow passage near Oudref, which was attacked by the enemy during the late hours of the evening.

During the afternoon of 28 March, south of the the Tunisian western front, the Combat Group Lang succeeded in regaining the northern sector of the ridge, which had been lost the day before. One regiment from the 10th Panzer Division, however, had been ordered on alert in El Guettar, to be ready for emergency developments. Thus, German leaders assumed that the situation on their sector of the front was secure for the immediate future.

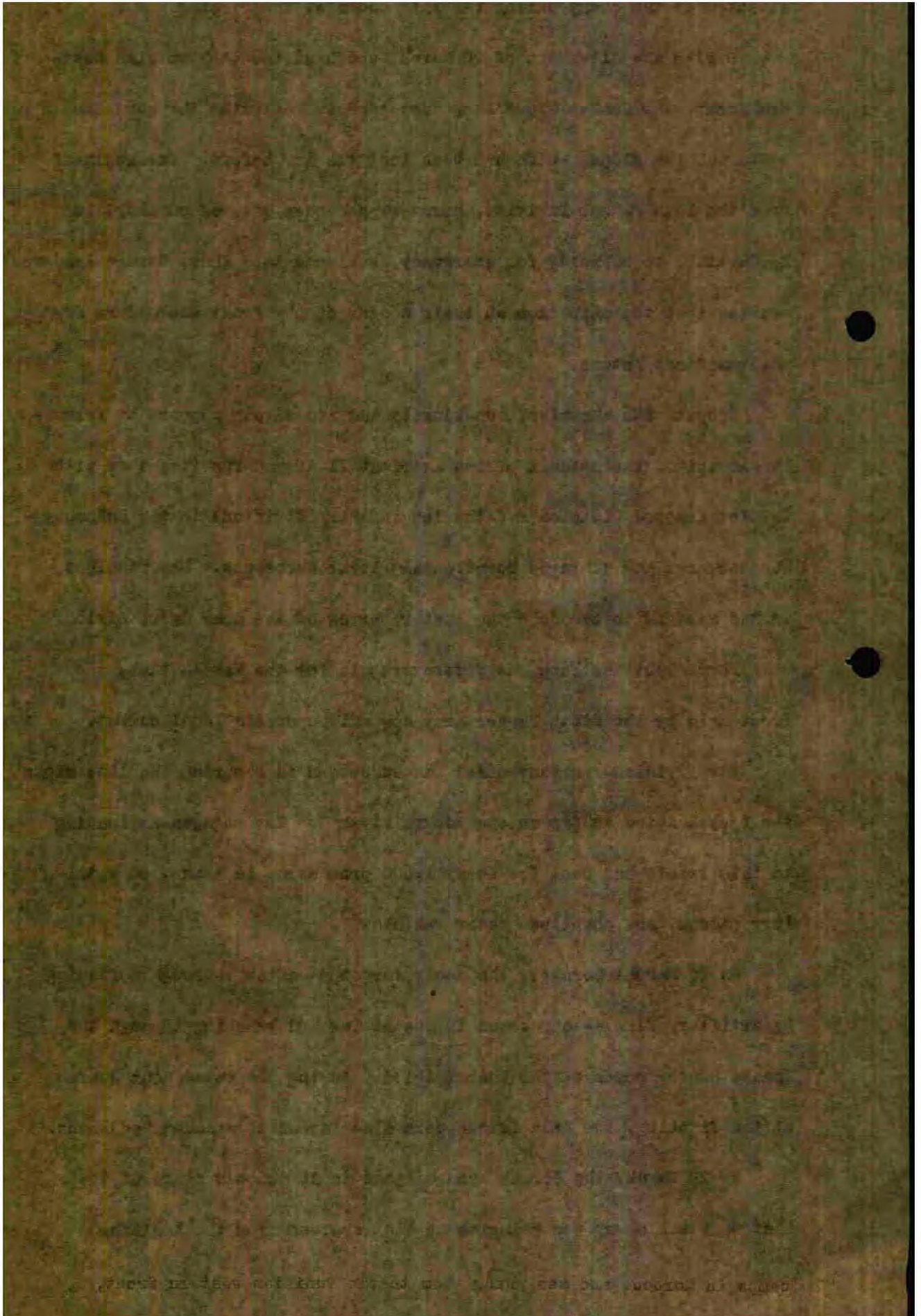
Despite its numerical superiority and its strong support by friendly air units, the assault of the American II Army Corps (together with the 1st Armored Division and the 1st Infantry Division) in the Maknassy - Guettar area had achieved no more than local successes. Nevertheless, it had managed to tie down the last reserves of the Army Group Africa.

Throughout the long and severe struggle for the Mareth line, the front held by the Fifth Panzer Army saw only sporadic local combat.

The Division von Manteuffel had succeeded in securing the line along the Djebel Abiod as far as the Zouara River⁹⁸. The engagement leading to this result had cost the enemy 1,600 prisoners, 16 tanks, 30 artillery pieces, and countless motor vehicles⁹⁹.

On 28 March, however, the enemy forces -- after thorough softening by artillery fire -- succeeded in assaulting and breaking through the Zouara sector north of the Djebel Abiod. During the subsequent course of the fighting, the Axis forces were also forced to abandon Sedjensane.

By 29 March, the German headquarters in Africa was aware of the fact that the enemy was bringing up his reserves from the training camps in Morocco and assigning them to the Tunisian western front,



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ready for action against the Fifth Panzer Army. Since the weather was improving rapidly, Axis leaders had no alternative but to prepare for strong enemy attacks.

The troops required for continuation of the battle on the northern sector could be recruited only from General Messe's Army.

The salt sea position, which they were expected to defend, was extremely strong by virtue of its geographic location; its only disadvantage was its relatively narrow width. In the west, it was bounded by the barely negotiable salt swamps; in the east, by the sea.

98 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 19 March 1945.

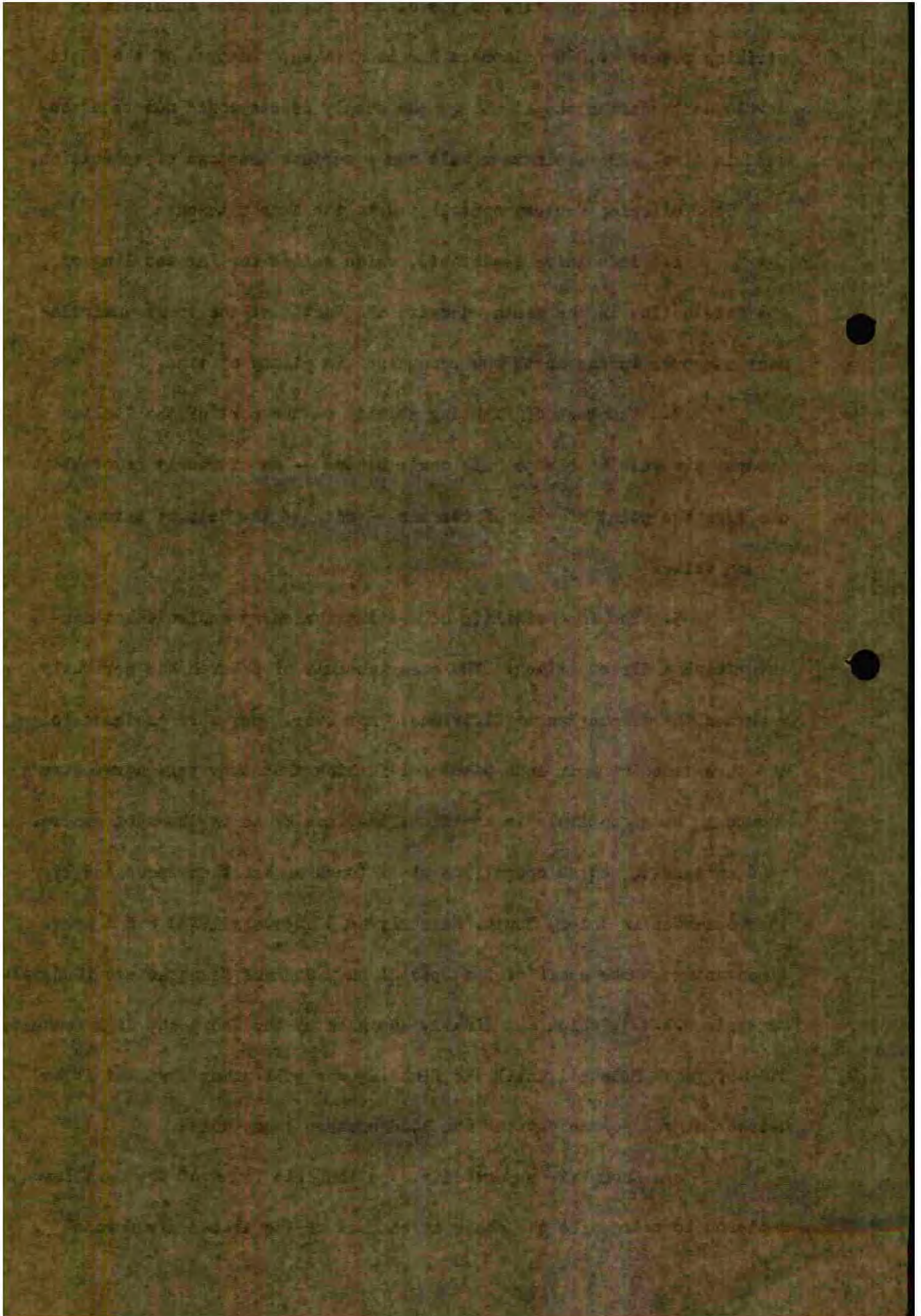
99 - See footnote 27, page 18 of the source cited there.

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During the course of a single week, the Mareth line had collapsed. And the personnel and materiel losses inflicted on the enemy were relatively slight. The Axis, on the other hand, had lost considerable striking power; 6,000 prisoners had been taken. Because of the rapid developments during the fighting, the supply depots could not be evacuated in time. The ultimate result was a serious shortage of ammunition.

The following factors contributed to the Axis setback:

1. Indecisive leadership, which relied for far too long on the Mareth line in the south, despite the fact that the enemy encirclement maneuver in the north was recognized in plenty of time.
2. The lack of fighting ability on the part of the Italian troops, who were unable to hold their sector -- an extremely favorable one from the point of view of terrain -- without the help of strong German units.
3. The impossibility of meeting the enemy encirclement maneuver with a direct attack. The enemy assault of 6 March had seriously weakened the German Panzer Divisions; moreover, they were assigned to the threatened wing in such piecemeal fashion that they were never strong enough to be effective. In addition, the lack of an on-the-spot general headquarters to act as operations staff (such as had been requested by the Commander in Chief, South, as early as 3 February 1943) was a grave disadvantage. The staff of the Special Duty Command Headquarters (General-kommando s.b.V.), which was finally assigned by the Wehrmacht High Command, did not reach Frascati until the fighting was well under way, and it had neither signal communications nor headquarters troop units.
4. Enemy air superiority, the tangible fruit of the Casablanca decision to reorganize the chain of command of the Allied air forces¹⁰⁰.



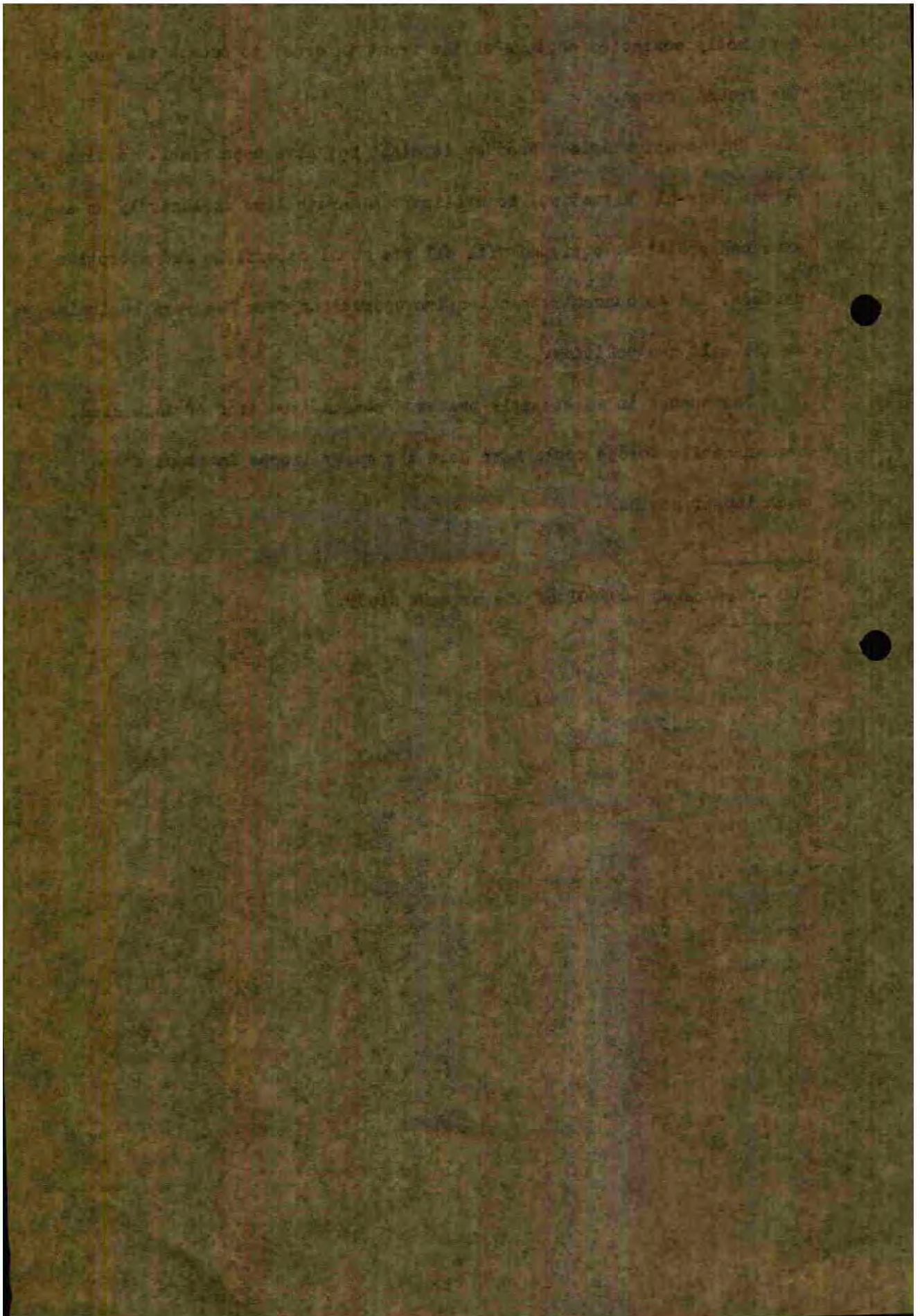
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For the first time in combat, the British made use of the air liaison officers assigned to their staffs in the front-line area. Utilising radio communication, these liaison officers guided the air units to the most hotly contested sectors of the front in order to smooth the way for the ground forces.

The question arises whether it might not have been wiser, in view of the over-all situation, to utilize the Mareth line exclusively as an advanced position, equipped with all the usual camouflage and deception devices, and to concentrate defensive operations from the very beginning on the salt sea position.

Entrenched in an expertly prepared advance position of this kind, German mobile forces could have held the enemy troops in check for a much longer period.

100 - See pages 600/601 of the present study.



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For the enemy had no choice but to attack the salt marsh position from the front; there was no way in which it could be encircled and thus eliminated as a danger.

In addition, from the Axis point of view, the inclusion of the salt marsh position in the line of defense would have been most advantageous in that it would have given the latter additional depth.

On 10 March 1943, the authorized strength of the Second Air Fleet in the Mediterranean area was 1,111 aircraft, 670 of which were capable of immediate employment.

Of this total, the Tunisian Air Corps possessed 386 aircraft, 229 of which were ready for commitment.

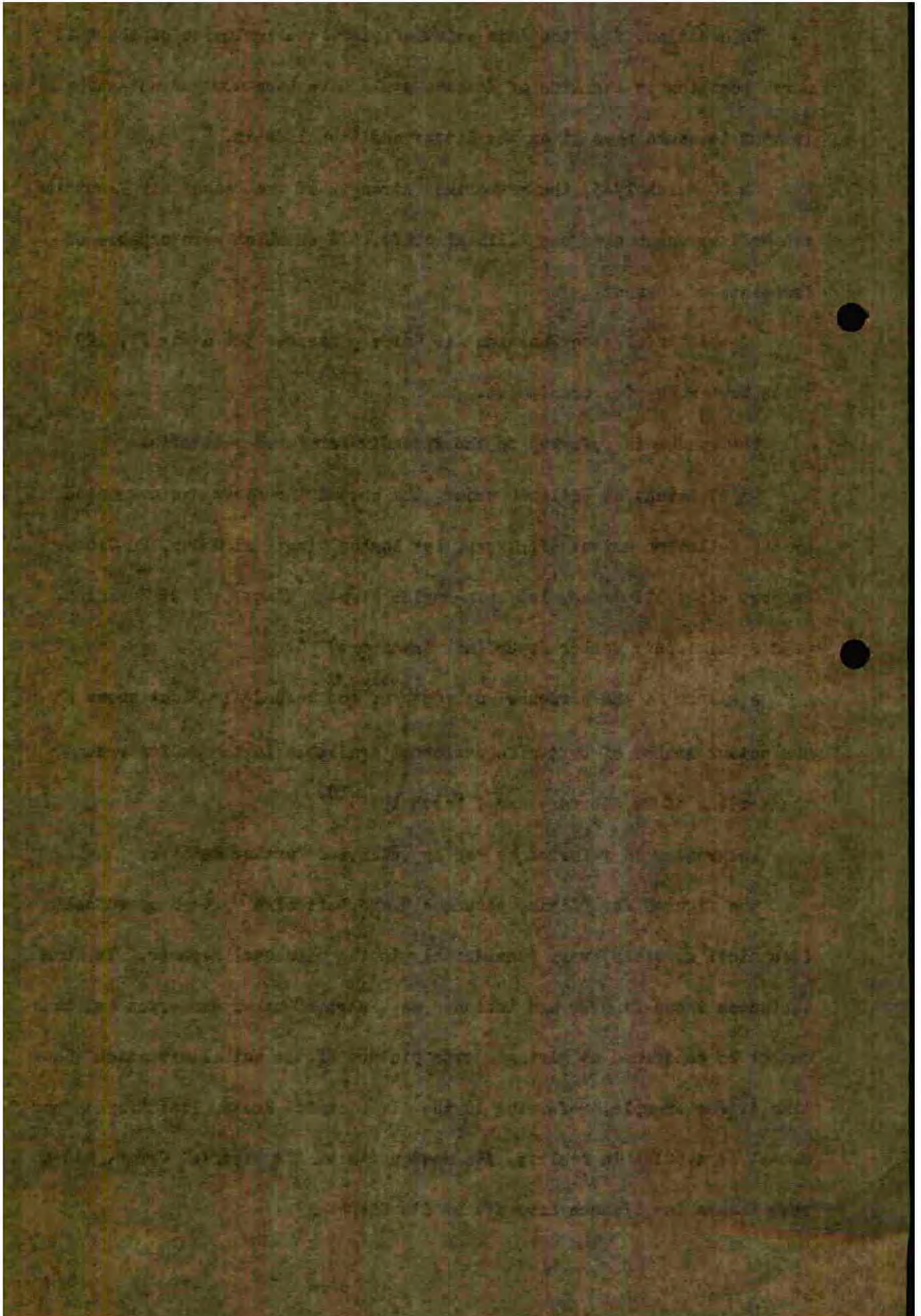
The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

On 27 March, at Hitler's order, the Second Air Fleet was augmented by the following units: II Group, 1st Bomber Wing; II Group, 2d Close-Support Wing; II Group, 1st Twin-Engine Fighter Wing; and 2d Squadron, 323d Special Duty Bomber Group (air transport)¹⁰¹.

A glance at the personnel strength/^{tables}of the Second Air Fleet shows us the actual number of Luftwaffe personnel available in the Mediterranean theater (as of 22 February and 7 March 1943)¹⁰².

The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

The figures for "flying personnel" and Luftwaffe "ground personnel" (technical services) vary considerably in the personnel reports. In some instances these figures are included as a part of other summaries and thus cannot be construed as giving a true picture of the actual situation (Section d, for example, referring to the Air District Crete, lists flying personnel at 4,661; in reality, the Headquarters, Air District Crete, had no more than a few liaison aircraft at its disposal).



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As far as the Italian mainland is concerned, the reports indicate a ratio of approximately 5.5 ground personnel to one member of the flying force. In Tunisia and North Africa, however, the ratio was almost 1:13.

The personnel reports also fail to give any clear indication of what percentage of the assigned ground personnel was actually at work in the aircraft servicing and repair depots at a given time or of the kind of equipment at their disposal.

101 - General der Flieger Paul Reichmann, op. cit., Part IV, Chapter IV, page 1.

102 - The Strength of the German Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean Theater (Stärke der deutschen Luftwaffe im Mittelmeer), Luftwaffe Operations Staff, Reports Branch, 30 March 1945; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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The aerial reconnaissance activity carried out in the Mediterranean theater was divided among the three air corps of the Second Air Fleet. The II Air Corps, based on Sicily, was responsible for operational reconnaissance in the western Mediterranean, including weather reconnaissance and reconnaissance of the activity going on in the ports held by the enemy.

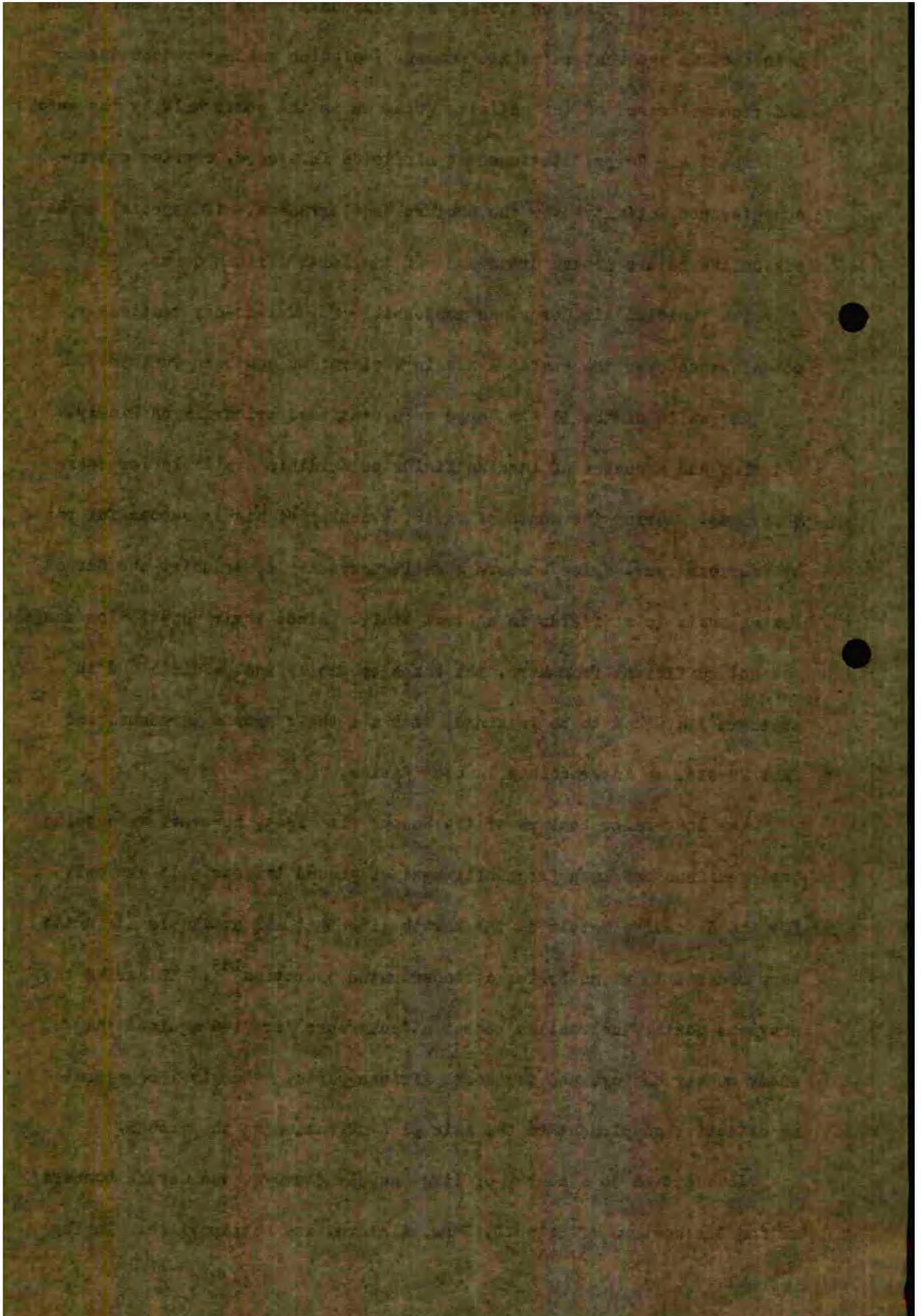
The I Air Corps, stationed at airfields in Greece, carried out reconnaissance activity over the eastern Mediterranean, with special emphasis on the waters around Crete and off the North African coast.

The Tunisian Air Corps was responsible for day-to-day tactical reconnaissance over the combat lines in western and southern Tunisia.

The units of the II Air Corps were stationed primarily on Sicily, but they had a number of landing fields on Sardinia available for emergency use. During the month of March, a number of highly successful raids by American four-engine bombers made it necessary to transfer the German bomber units to airfields in central Italy. Since their penetration range was not sufficient from here, the bases on Sicily and Sardinia and in southern Italy had to be retained, with all their ground personnel and fuel depots, as intermediate landing fields.

The long-range bombers of the Second Air Fleet, however, were being employed less and less frequently against ground targets. It was only for the defensive battle on the Mareth line that all available air units were ordered to stand by for a concentrated operation¹⁰³. As during the previous month, the routine bomber attacks were directed against the enemy supply convoys and the North African ports. Thus they represented an effective supplement to the Axis plan of action on the ground.

In addition to a number of large supply convoys, the German bombers raided the harbors of Tripoli, Bone, Algiers, and Philippville. During



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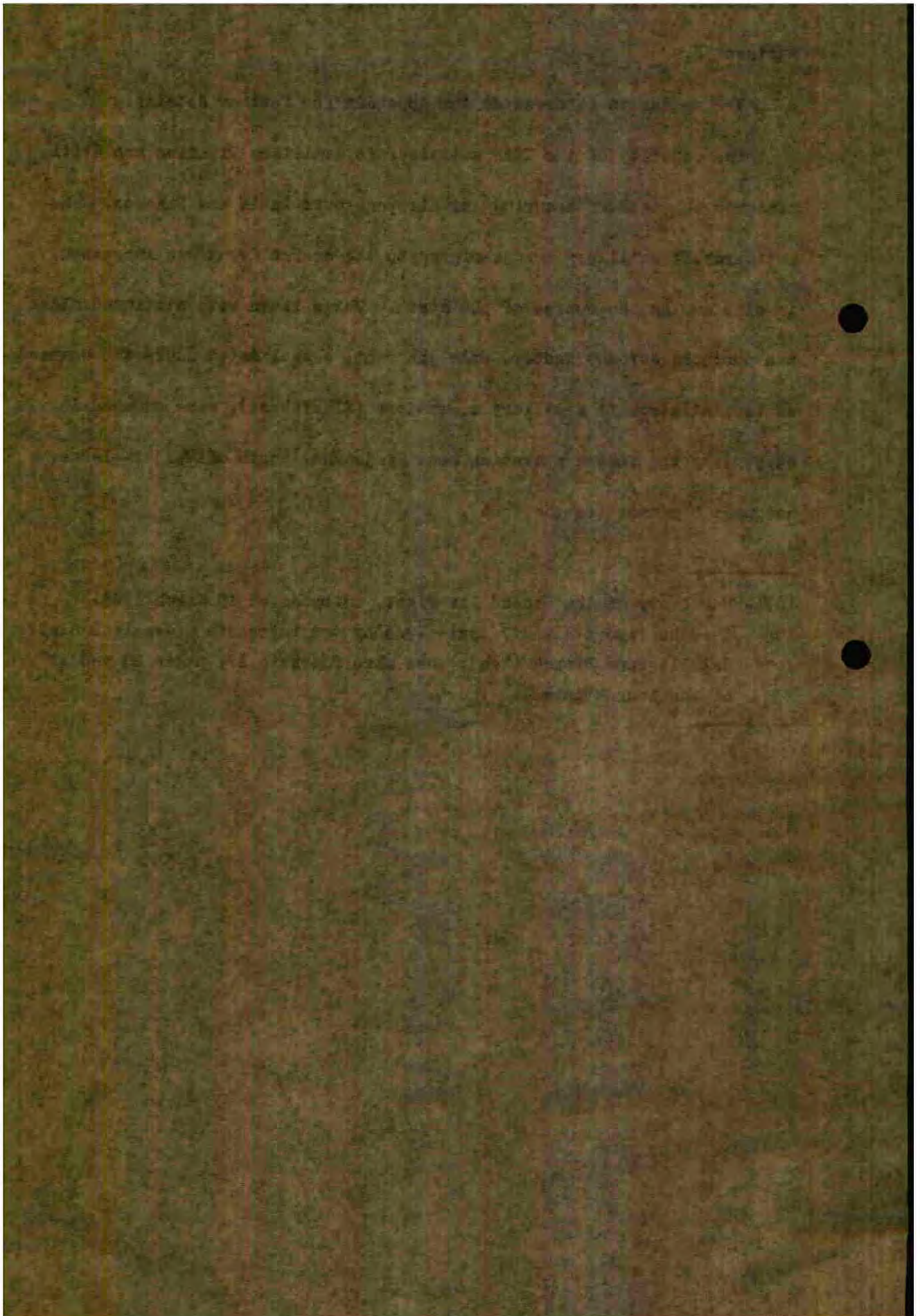
the month of March, they sank a total of six merchant ships (total tonnage 39,700), one submarine, and one escort vessel, and damaged thirty-one merchant ships (total tonnage 164,000), one destroyer, and two submarines¹⁰⁴.

The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

The majority of the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was still assigned the task of securing the airspace over Tunis and Bizerte. The antiaircraft artillery team assigned to the combat front was increased in size during the course of the month. Three teams were stationed along the northern defense sector, while the rest, consolidated under the command of two antiaircraft artillery commanders (Flakführer), were engaged in supporting the forces operating near Sedjenane, north of Medjes-el-Bab, and near Hammamet (to the east),

103 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 15 March 1943.

104 - See the report dated 7 April 1943 by the Luftwaffe Operations Staff, Intelligence Branch (Sea); see also footnote 27, pages 20 and 22 of the source detailed there.



as well as south of Pont du Fahs, near Faïd, and west of Messouna¹⁰⁵.

The 57th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment, stationed in the Naples area, and the 134th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment, on Sicily, were responsible for securing the airspace over southern Italy.

The 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division had not been moved from its position in the combat area of the German-Italian Panzer Army, where a few of its units were engaged in antifighter defensive operations, and the rest -- the majority -- in antitank operations. On 26 and 27 March alone, the 19th Division accounted for twelve enemy aircraft and fourteen enemy tanks¹⁰⁶.

"Because of the length of the supply line to the Mareth front, the following units from the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division had been assigned to the Air District Tunisia, effective 22 February 1943:

6 battalion staffs;

72 88 mm guns, with their crews;

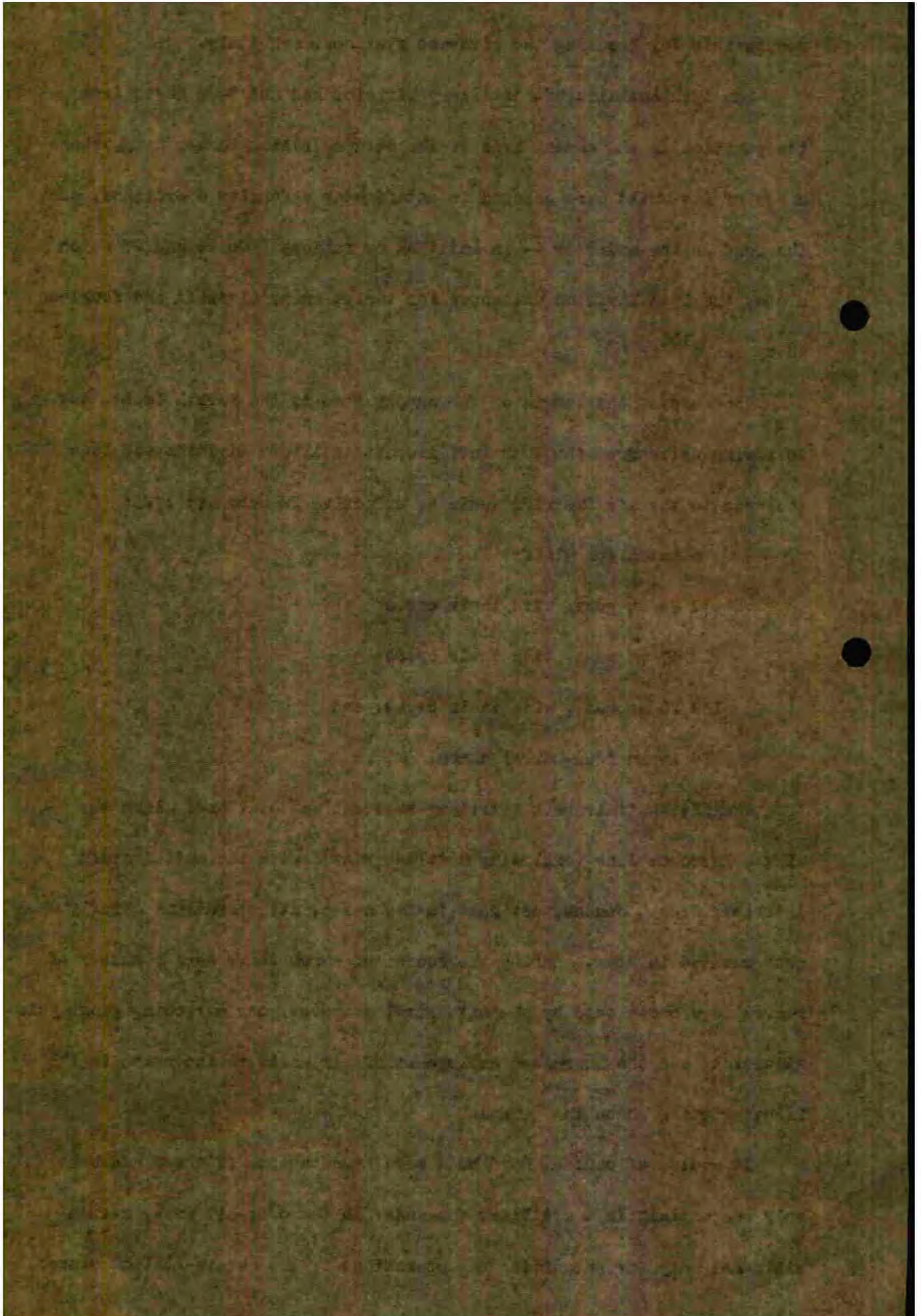
12 37 mm guns, with their crews;

142 20 mm guns, with their crews; and

36 20 mm four-barrel canon.

The 66th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment was stationed along the Sfax - Kairouan line (excluding settled areas), with the Antiaircraft Artillery Group, Sousse, assigned in the north, its operations chiefly concentrated in Sfax. During the course of March there were a number of regroupings occasioned by the withdrawal maneuver, the narrowing geographic situation, and the increased employment of air units to intervene in the fighting going on on the ground.

It would, of course, have been more advantageous if there had been only one antiaircraft artillery commander in the over-all area, responsible not only for supporting the operations of the German-Italian Panzer



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Army but also for antiaircraft artillery operations for the entire rear area under the jurisdiction of the Air District staff.

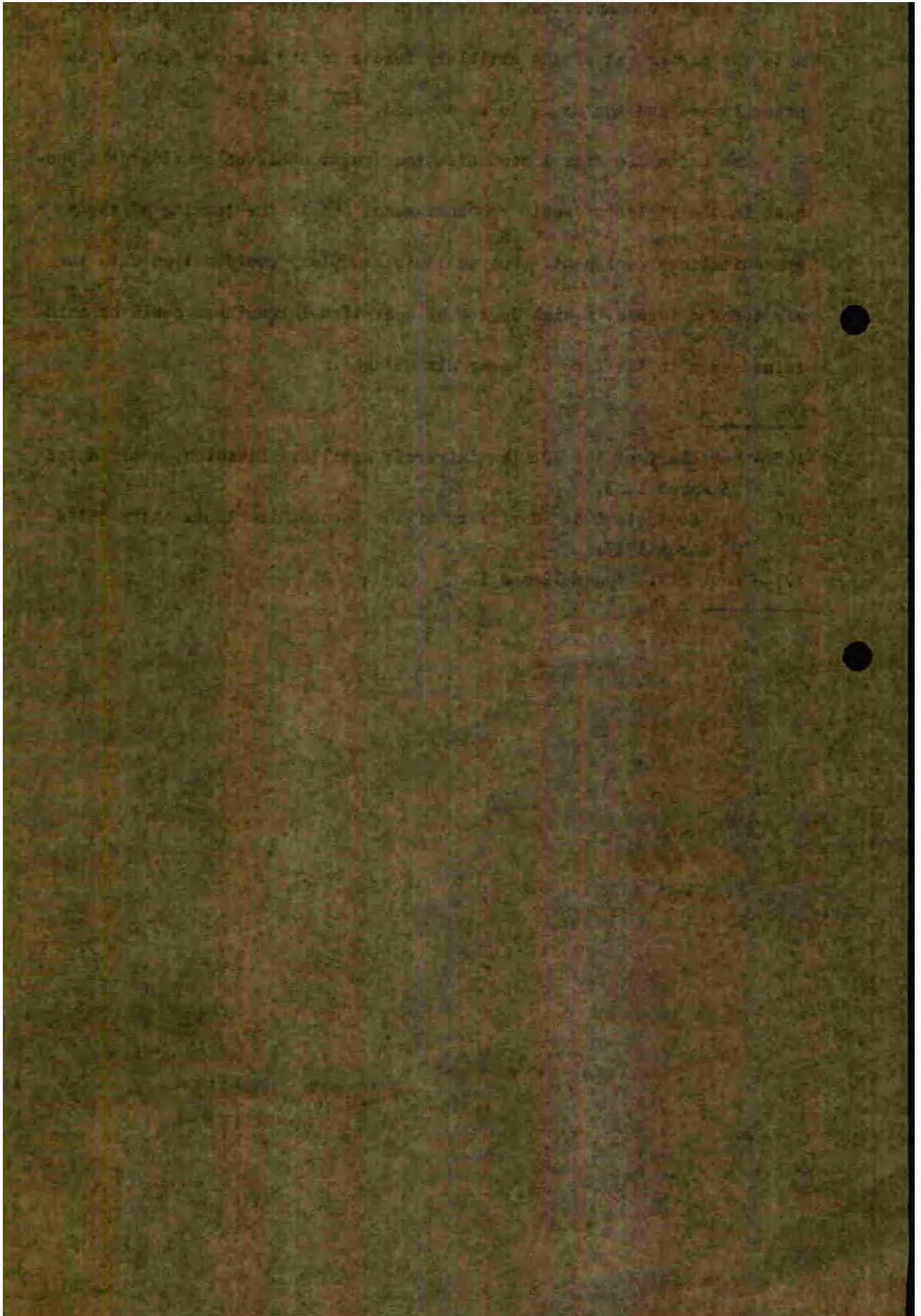
A single commander would have been in a better position to coordinate the assignment of the artillery forces to the various tasks to be accomplished and the areas to be covered."¹⁰⁷

The Luftwaffe signal communications units achieved considerable success in the fields of radio reconnaissance and in the jamming of enemy communications equipment. Due to their exemplary coordination with the air defense forces, a high degree of operational readiness could be maintained even in the face of enemy air attacks.

105 - War Diary of the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division, entry dated 23 March 1943.

106 - See footnote 103; War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 29 March 1943.

107 - Loc. cit., pages 12 and 13.



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The numerical strength of the Allied air forces in the Mediterranean was increasing steadily. By the end of March, the Allied air units had a total of 4,547 aircraft, 3,867 of which were based in North Africa alone. In addition, there were 180 at Gibraltar, 240 on Malta, 40 on Cyprus, and 220 in the Levant¹⁰⁸.

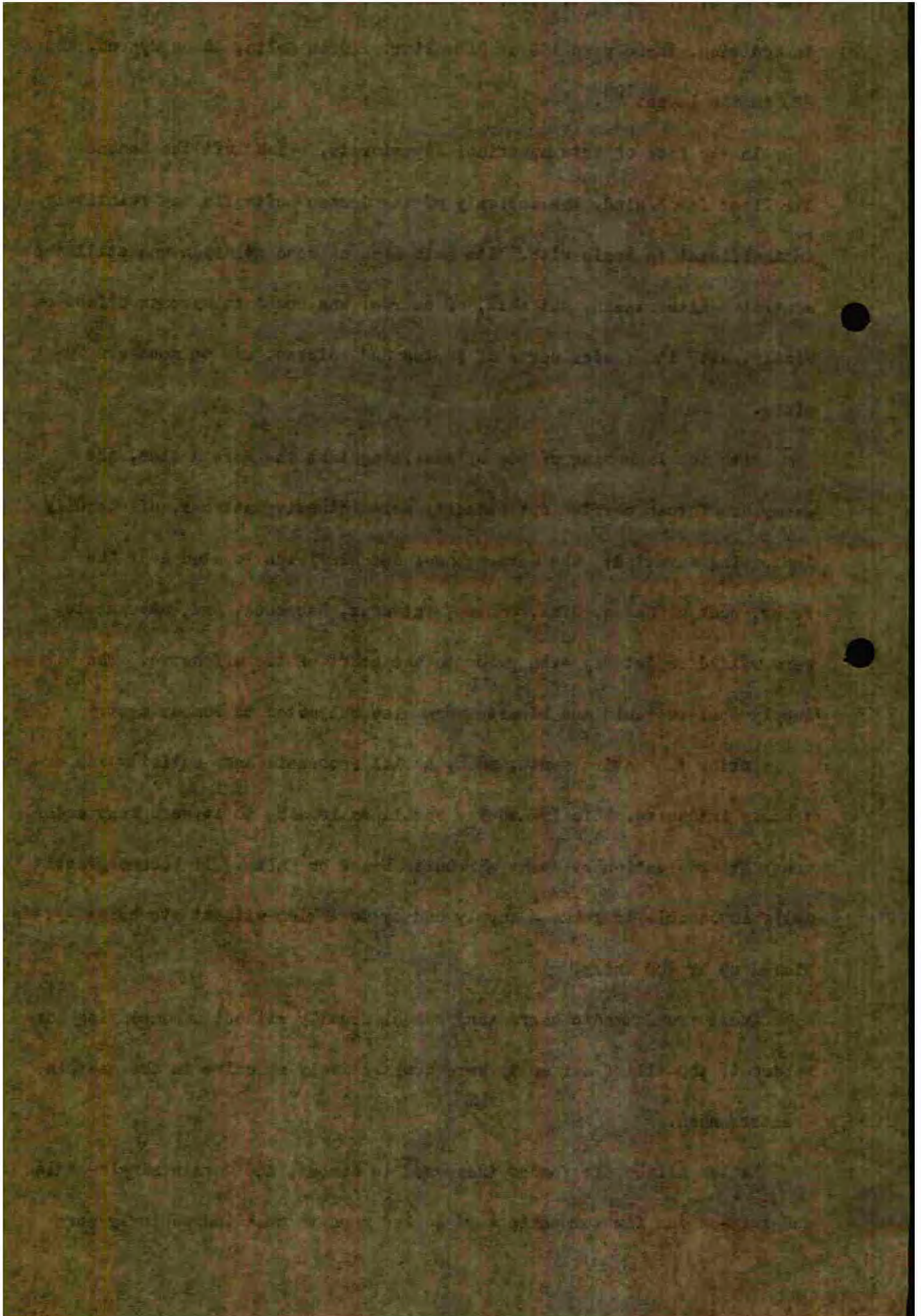
In the face of this numerical superiority, which left the Second Air Fleet far behind, the activity of the German Luftwaffe was relatively insignificant to begin with. Its main area of concentration was still the central Mediterranean, and this, of course, was bound to have an effect on Sicily, with its feeder ports of Naples and Palermo, and on southern Tunisia.

With the launching of the offensive against the Mareth line, the enemy air forces carried out steadily more intensive attacks, of steadily increasing duration; the German bases and airfields located near the front, such as Gabes, Sfax, Sousse, Fatnassa, Messouna, and Fauconnerie, were raided repeatedly even prior to the start of the offensive. The supply centers Tunis and Bizerte were also subjected to bombardment.

During the entire month, enemy aerial reconnaissance activity was extremely intensive. Sicily and the sea lanes leading to it were kept under constant observation by enemy air units based on Malta. It became practically impossible to guide a supply convoy to Africa without its being picked up by the enemy.

Apart from sporadic harassing raids, usually without accompanying bombardment, the Allied air units were comparatively inactive in the eastern Mediterranean.

As the Allied air forces increased in number, the German single-engine and twin-engine fighter units were called upon to meet increasingly more



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difficult challenges. The supply bases and intermediate landing fields on Sicily and in southern Italy required constant and effective cover. In addition, a large number of single-engine and twin-engine fighters were needed to carry out escort duty for the bomber and air transport units as well as for the supply ships operating between Italy and Africa. During the month of March, 209 enemy aircraft were shot down, while German losses amounted to only 160 aircraft.

The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

108 - Second Air Fleet, Intelligence Branch, Report "Situation in the Mediterranean Area" (Lage im Mittelmeerraum), dated 31 March 1943.

Despite the unremitting efforts of the Commander in Chief, South, the difficulties encountered in the maritime situation in the Mediterranean theater proved impossible to ameliorate. The enemy mining activity, his employment of submarines and Malta-based air and light naval units, all represented a constant source of danger for the Axis supply shipments.

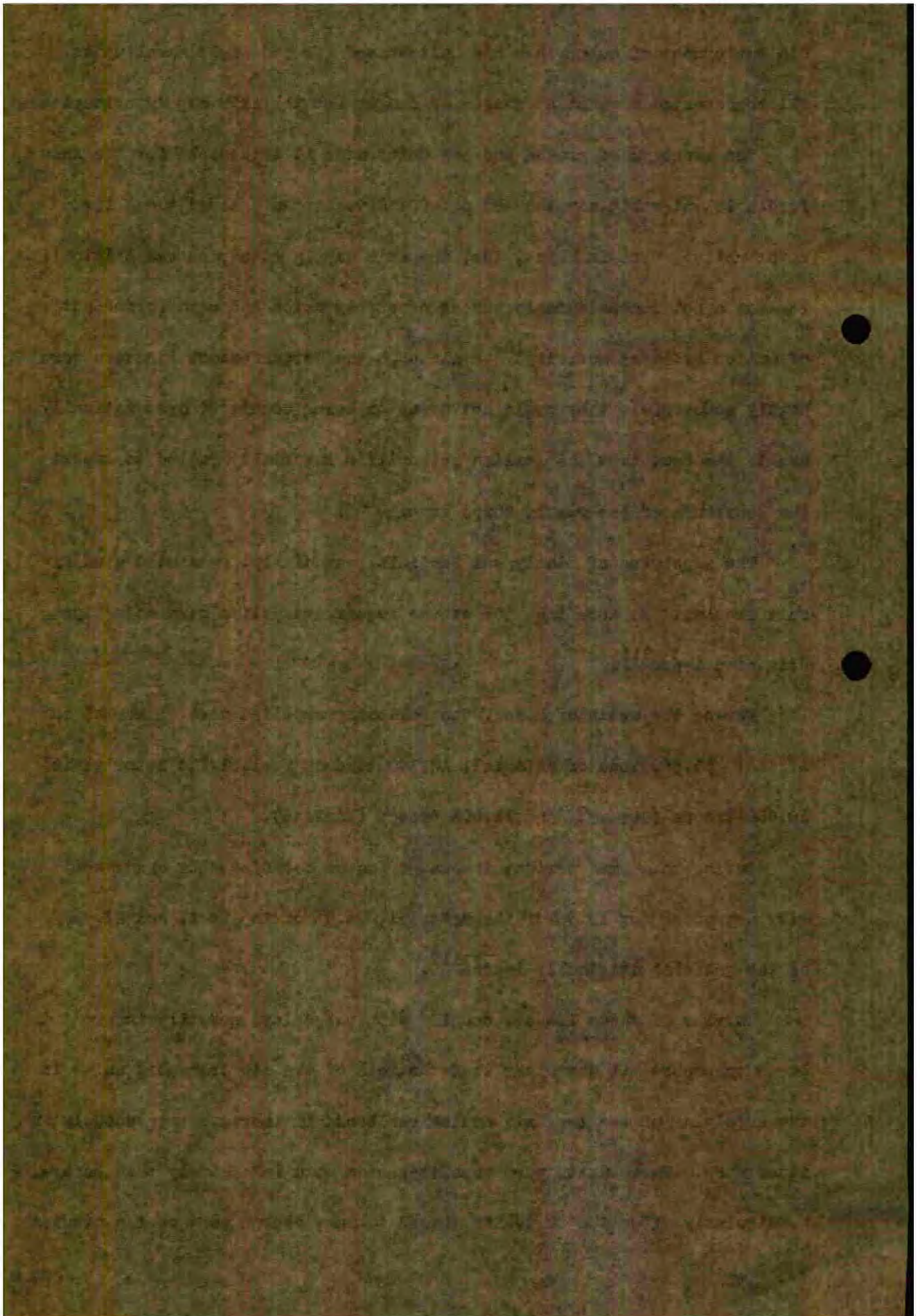
The shortage of ground and air units made it impossible for the Axis forces to entertain any thought of offensive action against the Allied naval units. Thus in March, too, the Axis supply situation was critical, because a not inconsiderable number of supply ships had been forced out of action by enemy activity¹⁰⁹. Although the German escort fighters were highly successful, they could not count on being committed systematically, due to the fact that the Italian authorities invariably failed to report the departure of the supply ships in time¹¹⁰.

The supplying of Sicily and Sardinia, especially, presented a difficult problem. No more than 50% of the required supplies were actually delivered there¹¹¹.

During the month of March, the following supplies were delivered in Africa: 35,380 tons of materiel, 14,300 tons of fuel, 1,114 motor vehicles, 19,000 troops (German), and 11,000 troops (Italian).

During this same period, the cargo losses occasioned by enemy activity accounted for 13.5% of the materiel, 26.9% of the fuel, and 27.9% of the vehicles originally loaded¹¹².

In view of these losses, coupled with the delays normally inherent in ocean transport, it was clear that the role of the air transport units in the supplying of the two Axis armies was bound to increase tremendously in importance. These units were committed even more intensively than before, particularly after the Luftwaffe agreed to take over a part of the mission



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of supplying the island of Sardinia.

Plans had been made to increase the effectiveness of the air transport units by means of alternate crews, day and night shifts, and the assignment of additional transport aircraft¹¹³.

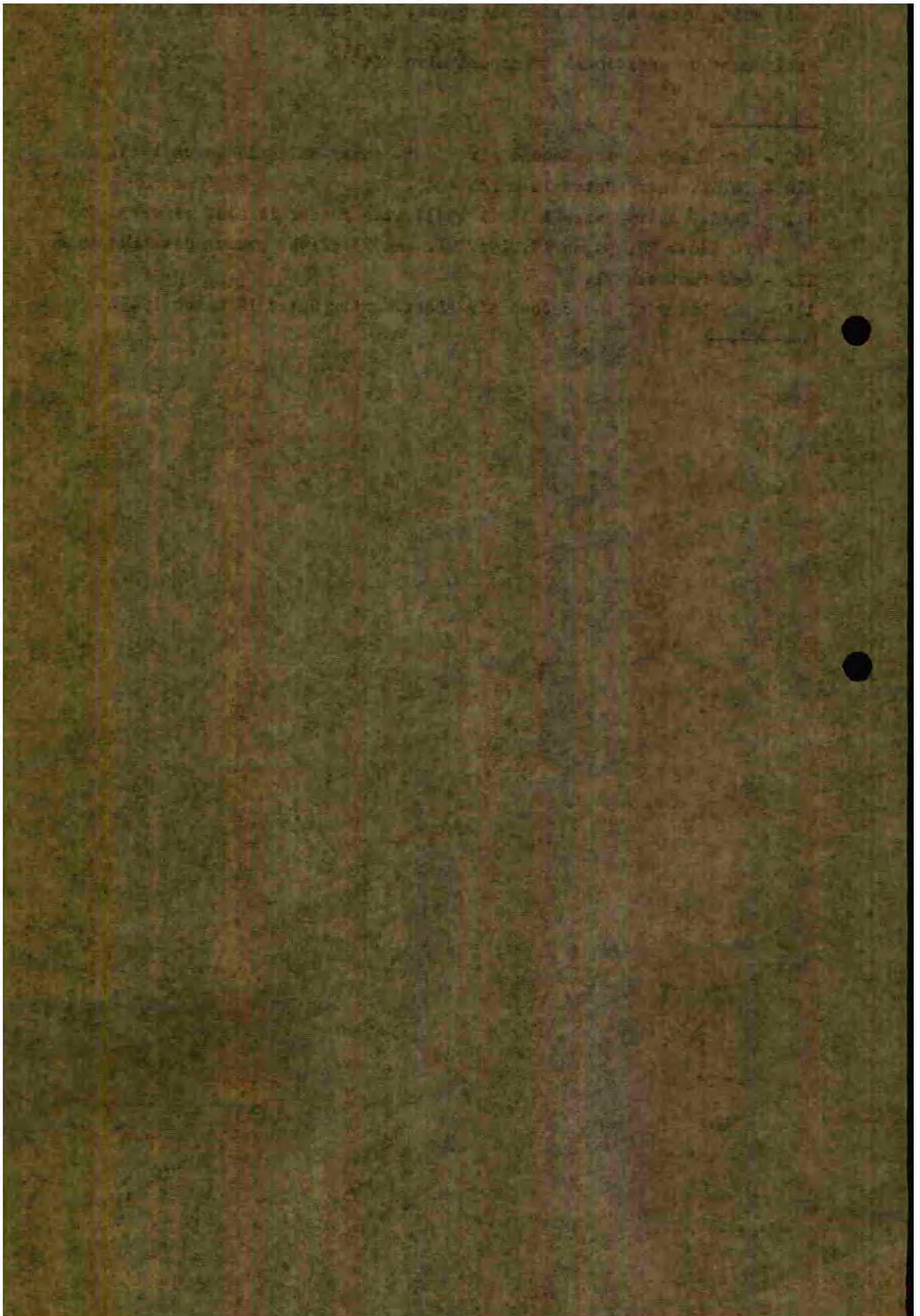
109 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 17 March 1943.

110 - Ibid., entry dated 18 March 1943.

111 - Ibid., entry dated 1 April 1943; the reader is also referred to footnote 27, pages 19, 19a, 21, and 23 of the source detailed there.

112 - See footnote 71.

113 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 12 March 1943.



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If the problem of the moment (i.e. that of the fuel supply) was to be solved, there was no way out but to assign the bomber aircraft to air transport duty temporarily¹¹⁴.

In any case, it was already painfully clear that the war in Africa would be facing a severe crisis without the constant aid of the air transport forces¹¹⁵.

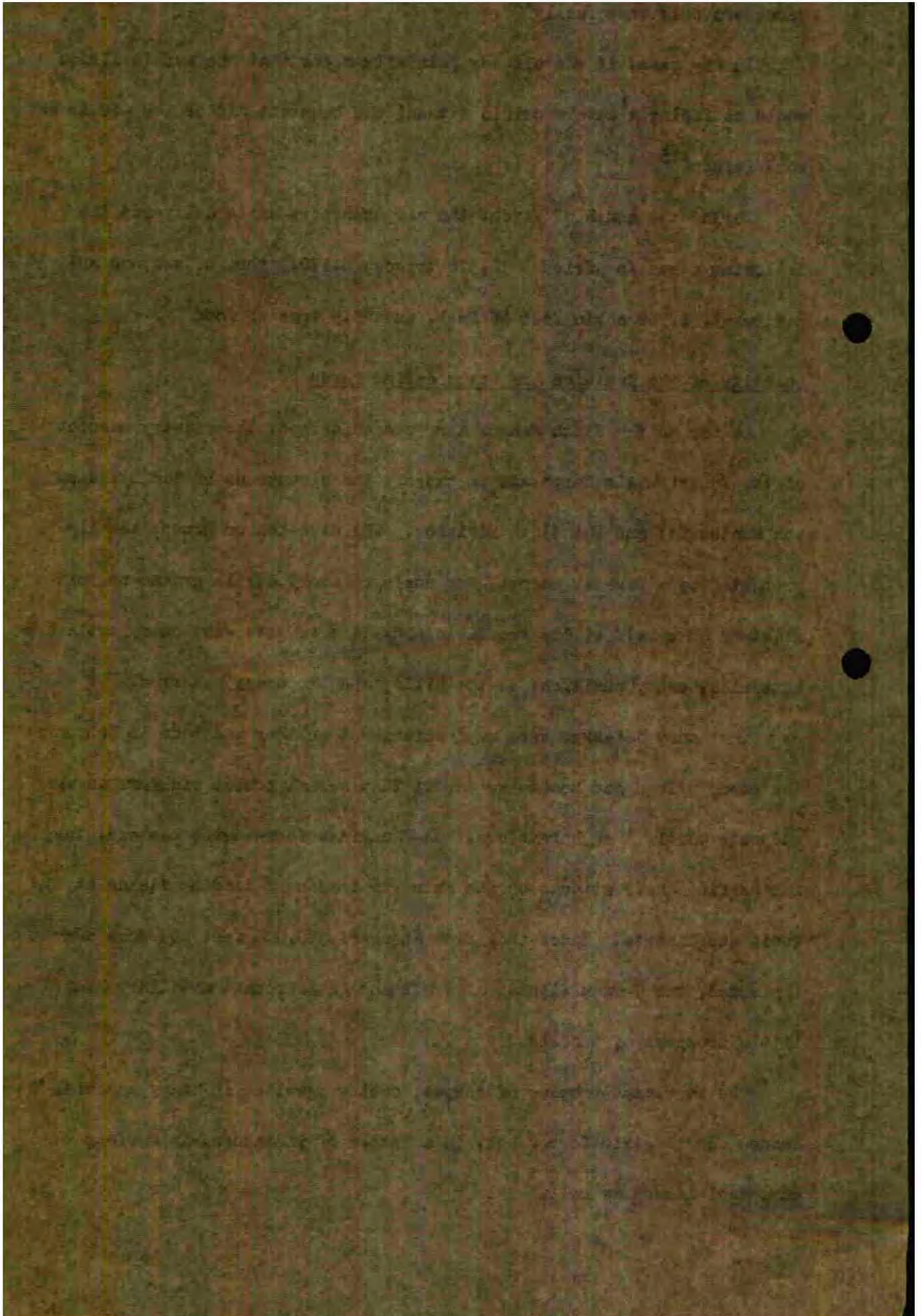
During the month of March, the air transport units delivered the following items in Africa: 12,320 troops, 8,130.7 tons of weapons and equipment, 1,588 cubic feet of fuel, and 25.9 tons of food¹¹⁶.

Activity of the Tunisian Air Corps during March

As far as the Fifth Panzer Army was concerned, the primary mission of the Tunisian Air Corps was to support the operations of the Division von Manteuffel and the 334th Division. The dive-bomber group, heavily protected by a fighter escort, was employed every day in ground-support missions on behalf of the two Divisions. Its targets were enemy artillery batteries, enemy positions in the hills, and the enemy reserves.

The enemy defenses were much stronger than they had been in February; the enemy pilots had become so expert that aerial combat was more savage and more costly than heretofore. The American four-engine bombers, too, intensified their attacks on the Axis air transport landing fields at Tunis and Biserte. Since they flew at nearly 30,000 feet and were heavily armed, the German fighter aircraft and antiaircraft artillery had little prospect of success.

The American practice of carpet bombing resulted in heavy material losses for the Axis forces and, in a number of instances, in serious personnel losses as well.



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The regularity of the American attacks (carried out invariably during the noon hours) made the task of the German air transport units much easier -- they simply scheduled their flights for an earlier hour.

114 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entries dated 29 and 30 March 1943.

115 - Ibid., entry dated 30 March 1943.

116 - See footnote 49, page 3 of the report dealing with March 1943.



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The German fighter units were terribly overburdened by the daily fighter forays, the escort duty for dive-bomber and reconnaissance missions, and the task of covering the approach and landing of the air transport units. The pilots were near exhaustion and their machines soon in need of overhauling, despite the fact that the delivery of new aircraft and instruments was still functioning smoothly.

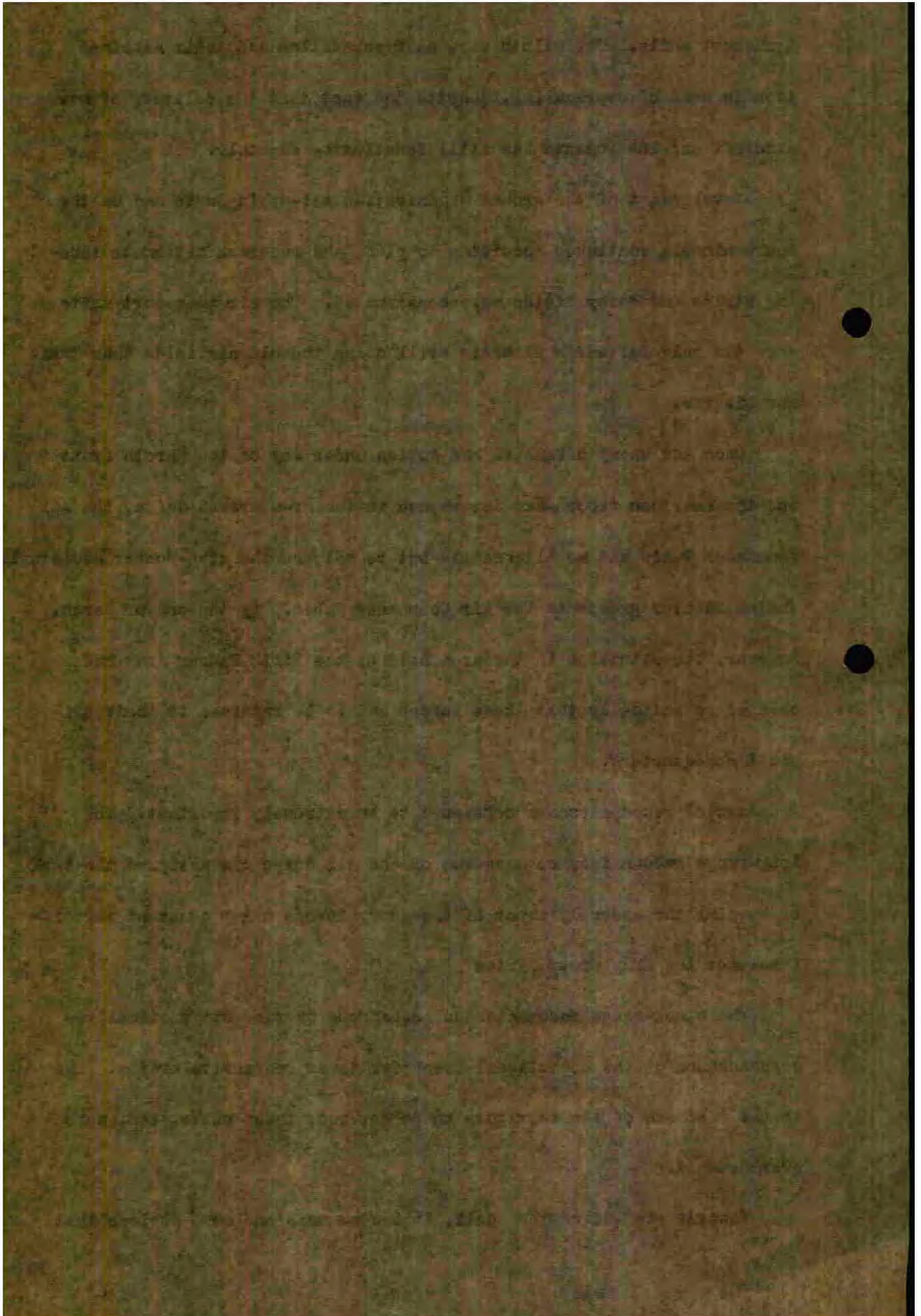
Development of the ground organization set-up in Tunis and on the Bon peninsula continued according to plan, and numerous alternate landing strips and decoy fields were constructed. The air transport units were the only Luftwaffe elements still using the old airfields near Tunis and Biserte.

Once the enemy offensive had gotten under way on the Mareth front and the American troops had intervened in the area around Gafsa, the Air Commander Tunis had no alternative but to release the dive-bomber and single-engine fighter groups to the Air Commander Gabes. By the end of March, however, the situation in the area held by the Fifth Panzer Army had changed so radically that these forces had to be returned to their original headquarters.

Aerial reconnaissance continued to be extremely important. The long-range reconnaissance squadron of the Air Corps was assigned the task of keeping the assembly areas of the enemy forces under constant surveillance for the Army Group Africa.

The close-range reconnaissance squadrons carried out tactical reconnaissance of the operational areas for their respective armies. Due to the vastness of the territory to be covered, these units, too, were overburdened.

Towards the end of the month, it became more and more obvious that



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technologically obsolete aircraft such as the Ju-87 dive-bomber and the HS-129 antitank support aircraft could no longer be employed effectively in view of the air superiority enjoyed by the enemy. In mid-April they were withdrawn from action in Tunisia.

On the Mareth front, it was extremely important to Axis leaders to discover just when the British Eighth Army considered itself prepared to attack. In early March the only noticeable change in the normal situation was the gradual moving forward of stronger forces.

The Commander in Chief, South, considered the time favorable for an attack, to be launched from the southern sector of the Mareth line, which could destroy the assembly points of the enemy forces before the latter could get into action.

He ordered the assignment of all the available air units under the Air Commander, Gabes, to this new mission. On 6 March, German dive-bombers and fighters, together with Italian air squadrons, carried on an all-out attack against enemy artillery positions and tank parks, as well as against the heavily congested airfields in the Medenine area.

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After a short time, Feldmarschall Rommel broke off the attack, because his Panzer divisions had run into a well-prepared defensive front and had suffered heavy losses.

During the days that followed, both sides intensified their aerial reconnaissance activity. At the same time, the number of American four-engine bomber raids on the airfields in the Gabes area increased steadily.

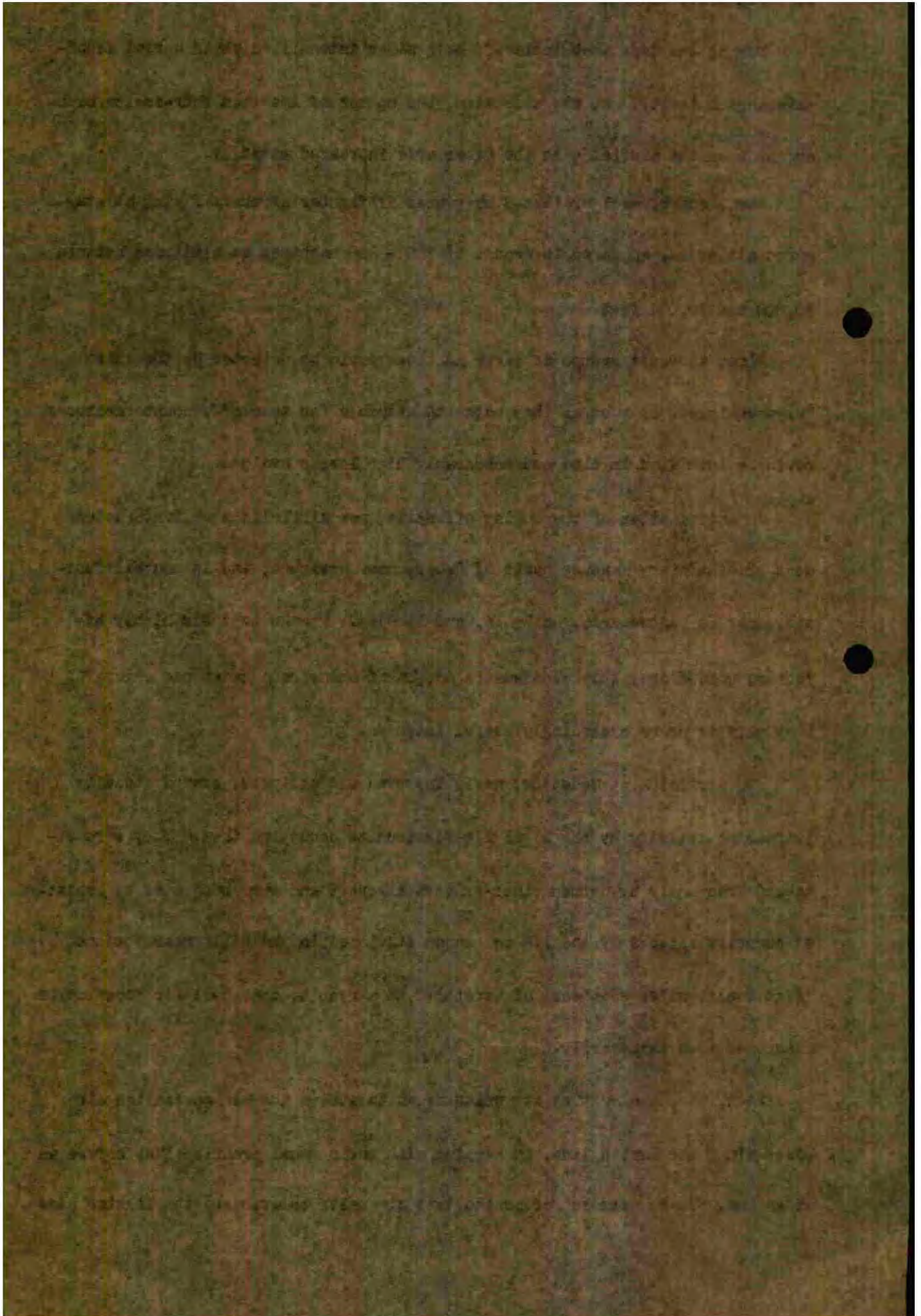
The bombers, well protected by swarms of fighter aircraft flying at staggered altitudes, appeared in groups of 200 - 300 machines at altitudes between 20,000 and 30,000 feet.

Since aircraft groups as large as these could be detected by the Axis Freya equipment as soon as they began to assemble for take-off, countermeasures could be initiated in time and unbearably high losses avoided.

In anticipation of the coming offensive, new airfields were constructed as a precautionary measure north of Gabes, near Messouna, and in central Tunisia, near La Fauconnerie, La Smala, and El Djem. Thanks to their highly effective camouflage, they escaped the notice of enemy reconnaissance aircraft. They were to prove exceedingly useful later on.

The airfields at Medenine, newly improved and equipped, showed steadily increasing activity by the Royal Air Force units occupying them. They were attacked frequently by German close-support aircraft and were subjected to repeated surprise attacks by the 170 mm cannon stationed in the hills near Toujane (some twelve miles southwest of Mareth). As a result, the Royal Air Force units abandoned them temporarily.

Then, too, the British air units began to attack the German-Italian air bases along the Mareth line, in keeping with their usual practice just before an offensive. These attacks forced the Axis air units to evacuate the fighter base



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located nearest the enemy lines.

In coordination with the British attacks, American close-support units from the west began to intervene more and more frequently. During an attack of this kind on 13 March, the 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wing managed to bring down fourteen of a total enemy force of eighteen Aerocobras. Obviously, coordination with the British escort fighters had been muffed.

From the middle of March on, both sides increased their air activity over the Mareth line. Aerial reconnaissance continued as before; in addition, "anti-artillery" air units were pressed into service against enemy batteries, and fighter-bomber raids were carried out relentlessly against promising targets.

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On 17 March, German reconnaissance discovered that the enemy was moving a fairly large force through the Matmata Mountains from Fom Tatahouine towards the northwest. This meant that the northern sector of the Mareth line position might well be in danger of encirclement. Fighter-bombers and dive-bombers were sent up to disrupt the enemy movements, which were kept under steady surveillance from this point on.

Large numbers of Royal Air Force transport aircraft were employed to supply the New Zealand forces making up the encircling wing. The troops were housed in camps constructed in the desert near Soltane and Bir Rhesene (thirty miles southwest of El Hamma). Naturally, every effort was made to disrupt the enemy air supply operation, but in the long run this proved to be impossible. The British transport aircraft were well protected by strong fighter escorts, and the desert camps turned out to be extremely well guarded by highly effective antiaircraft artillery.

During the last few days, the American bombers had increased the frequency and intensity of their attacks on the Axis airfields, which meant that more and more German fighters were tied down in an effort to combat them. As a result, it was impossible to spare additional fighter aircraft to join in the harrassing action against the enemy encircling force.

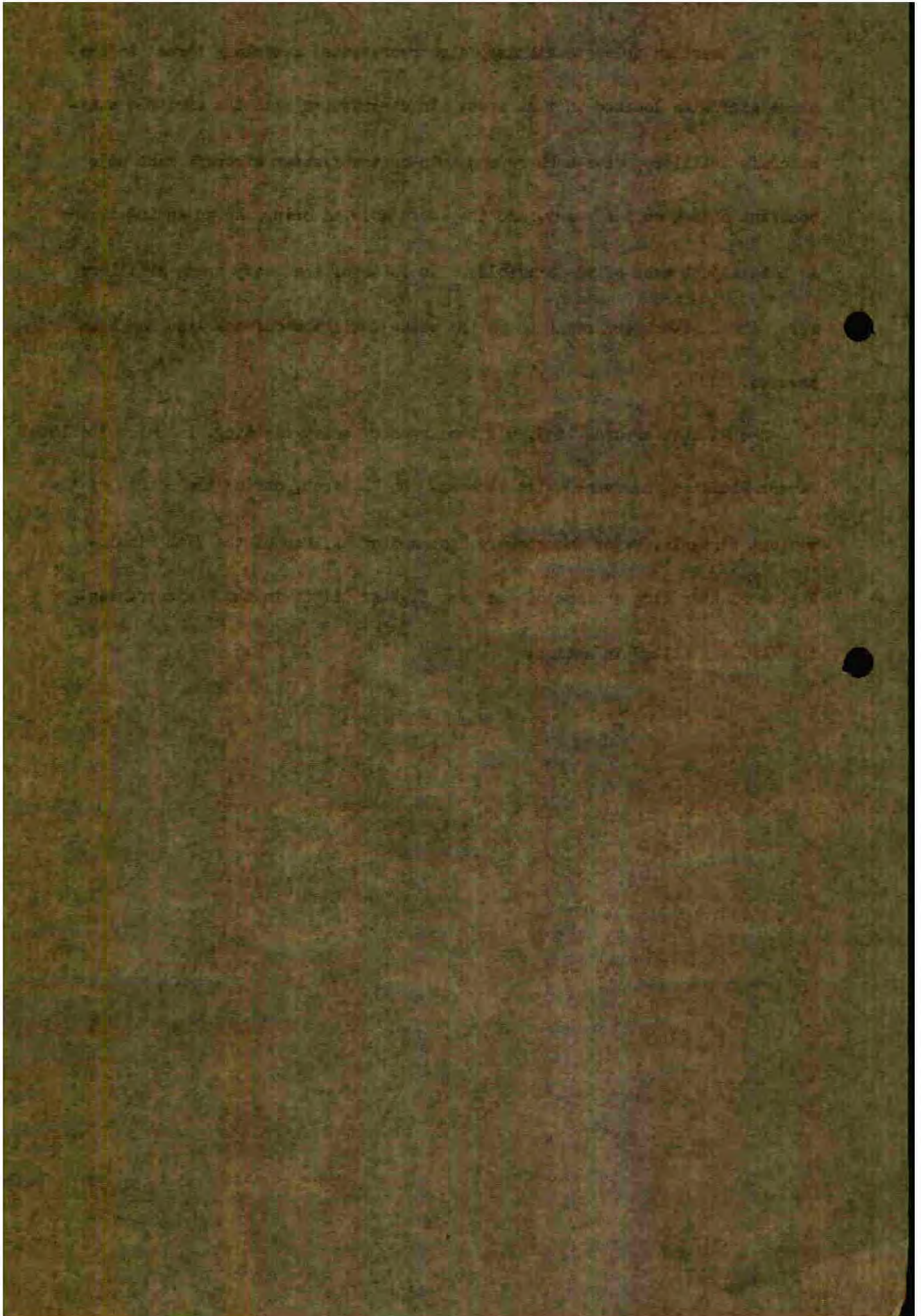
The long-awaited British offensive began during the night of 20/21 March on the coastal sector of the Mareth line in both the north and the south (the encircling wing), the Allied forces pushing forward from Maknassy and Gafsa at the same time. It was supported by repeated bombardment of the Axis ground organization system, making heavy losses inevitable. Axis antiaircraft artillery defenses were necessarily dissipated by the fact that they had to be assigned to so many focal points located far apart from one another.

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The German dive-bombers and close-support aircraft were untiring in their activity against the enemy's advance troops, all in an effort to gain a respite for the forces fighting on the ground.

The American drive to Maknassy also represented a serious threat to the three airfields located in that area. In conjunction with the airfield anti-aircraft artillery, dive-bombers and twin-engine fighter aircraft kept up a constant attack on the enemy, and they were able to bring the advancing troops to a halt just west of the airfields. In spite of the heavy enemy artillery fire, the dive-bombers remained on the scene until the defense line had been secured.

The El Guetter area, too, was the scene of heavy fighting, in which the 10th Panzer Division intervened with success. On 24 March, during the course of the violent struggle, Major Muencheberg, Commanding Officer of the 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wing and one of the best fighter pilots in the Mediterranean theater, was killed in action.



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On 25 March, the German counterthrust against El Guettar was supported by means of air attacks on the American tank and vehicle parks.

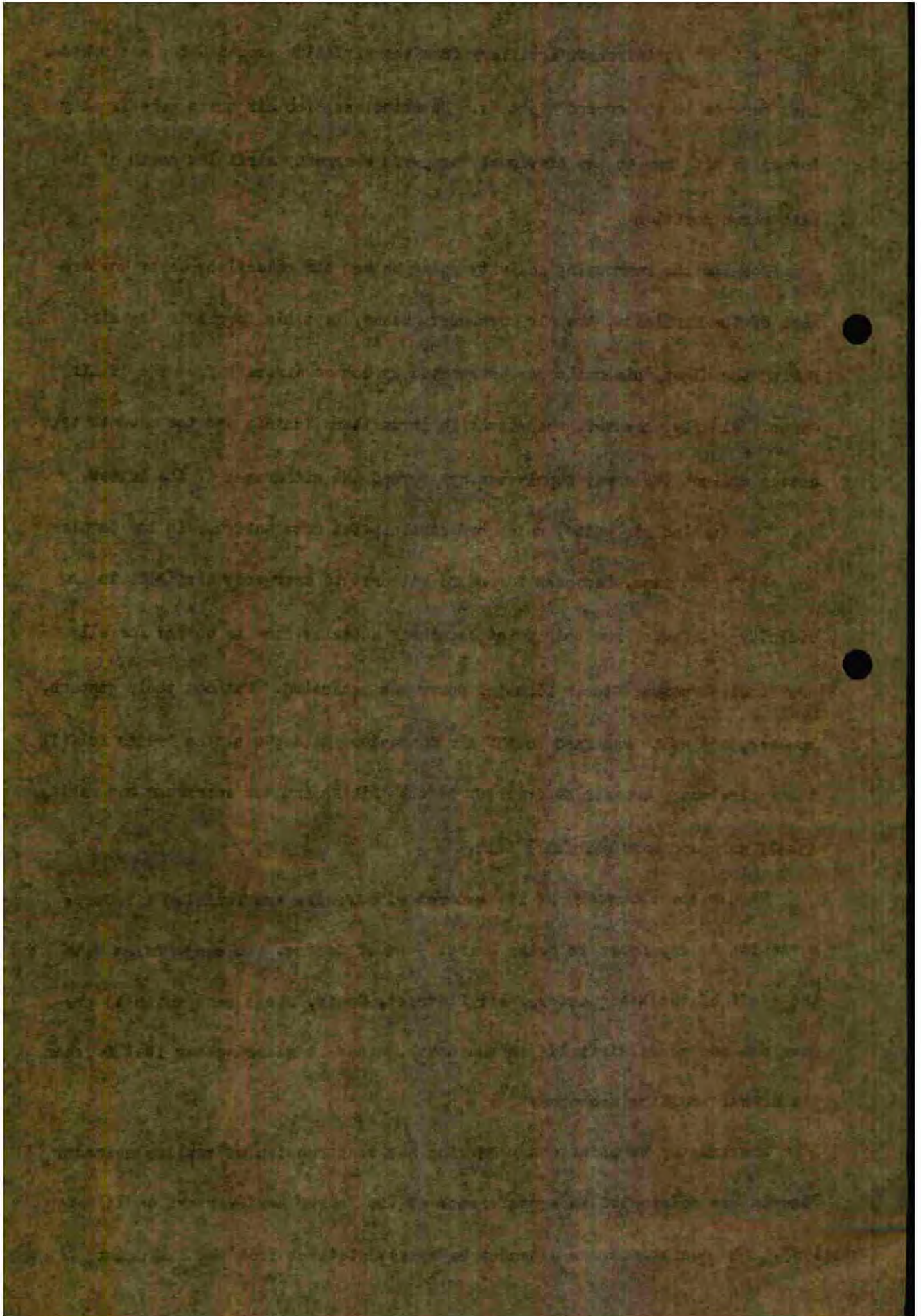
As enemy tanks began to get through on the encirclement wing of the Mareth line, all the antiaircraft artillery from the airfields around Gabes was pressed into service in the ground fighting. Nevertheless, the air units were finally forced to withdraw to the previously prepared emergency airfields north of the salt marsh position.

Despite the regrouping activity going on and the relentless enemy bombardment of the airfields, the Air Commander, Gabes, kept his forces in the air. During the night, his units were supported by bomber aircraft from the II Air Corps. Finally, however, the situation in northern Tunisia and the need to take action against the enemy supply convoys forced the withdrawal of the latter.

The Italian air units, which had participated most actively in the battle for the Mareth line, had been forced to withdraw to emergency airfields in the vicinity of Sfax. From this point on, their activity came to an end for all practical purposes; their fighting power was exhausted. Without their support, however, the units assigned to the Air Commander, Gabes, could no longer fulfill their missions; the air superiority of the British and the Americans was making itself more and more painfully felt.

Within the framework of its general withdrawal, the Tunisian Air Corps moved its headquarters to Kalan Srira, west of Sousse. In conjunction with the staff of the Headquarters, Air District, Tunis, steps were taken to prepare new emergency airfields in the north, since it seemed clear that further withdrawal would be necessary¹¹⁷.

The lengthy negotiations regarding the construction of smaller merchant vessels had culminated in a conference at the Führer Headquarters on 14 March 1943. The conference was attended by representatives from the Wehrmacht



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Operations Staff and by the Commander in Chief, South.

Hitler had finally reached the reluctant decision to "present the Italians with the alternatives of either contributing all the means at their disposal or losing Tunisia and, with it, Italy as well."

117 - Seidemann, Hans, op. cit., pages 10 through 23.

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The agreement reached on 17 March between the Royal Italian Navy and German leaders included among other provisions the decision that Vice Admiral Hugu was to be made subordinate to the Italian Admiral Riccardi and was to be integrated into the Italian naval staff in order to exert whatever influence he could in supply operations. Despite his best efforts, however, he was unable to do anything about the all-time low to which ocean supply transport had sunk. Hitler's decision to force Mussolini to draw on his last reserves came too late to do any good¹¹⁸.

In an attempt to disrupt Allied supply operations on the western sector of the Tunisian front, already rendered difficult by the inadequate highway and rail networks, paratrooper sabotage units had been active behind the Allied front lines ever since December 1942¹¹⁹.

The Commander in Chief, South, had ordered the formation of the "Schacht Commando" (Kommando Schacht) for this purpose. Major Schacht came from the 1st Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, and had participated in the occupation of Crete. The following troop elements were placed under his command:

1. 1st Parachute Company of the Engineer Battalion Witsig;
2. Especially trained troops (the von Köhnen Battalion) from the Infantry Regiment Brandenburg, plus volunteers from the German-Arabian Training Battalion (including German-speaking Arabs and non-commissioned officers from the former French Foreign Legion); and
3. The necessary aircraft and their crews (six Ju-52's for the transport of the parachute forces and three He-111's to tow the twelve gliders assigned to transport those forces not trained in the art of jumping).

Major Schacht and his forces were placed under the command of General Harlinghausen, the Air Commander, Tunis, whose reconnaissance forces also flew the missions needed to obtain reliable aerial photographs of the most important points to be blown up. Major Schacht received the other data he needed from

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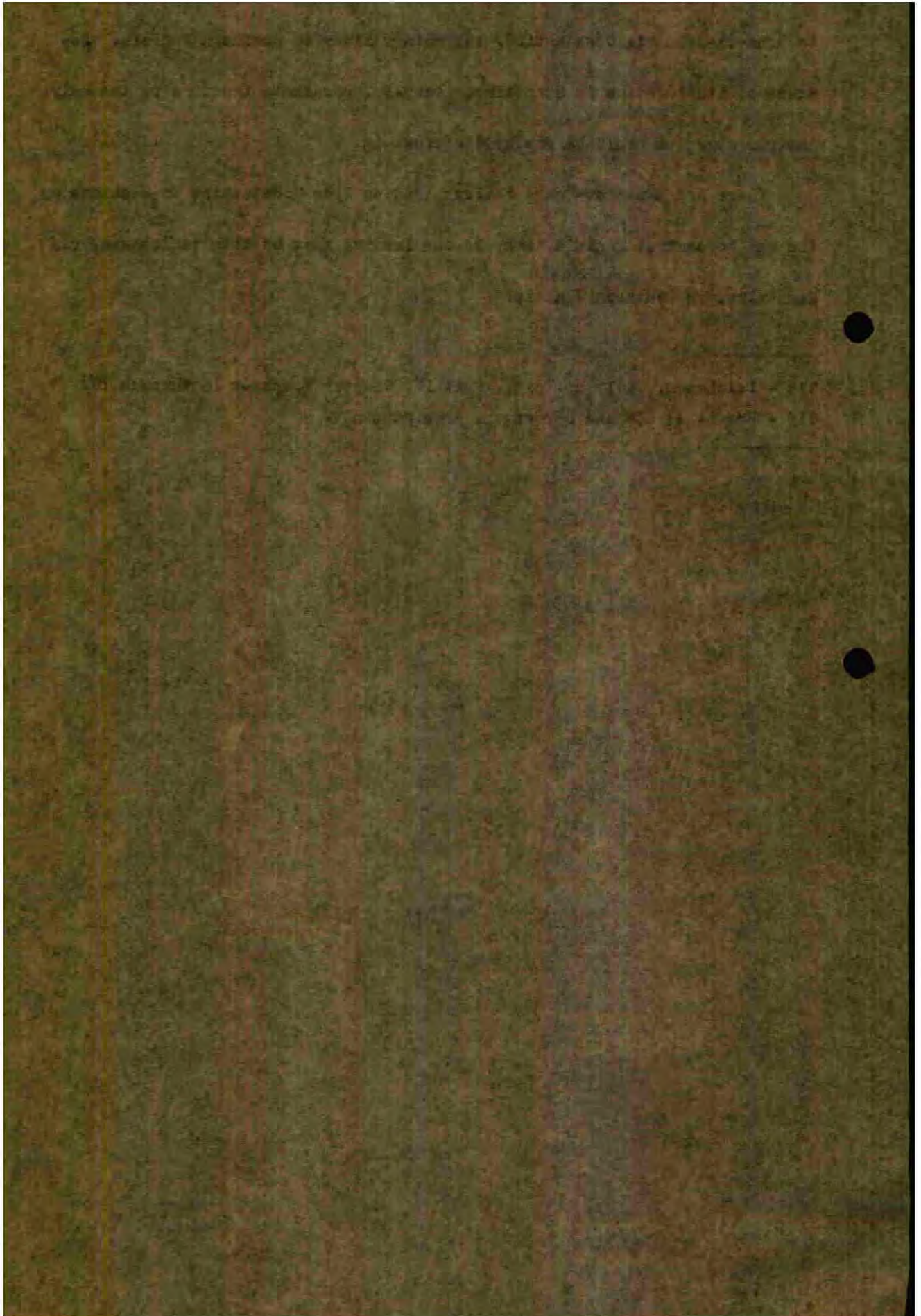
the Intelligence Branch, Fifth Panzer Army, and from other intelligence agencies.

The most important target was the standard-gauge railway from Algiers to Souk-el-Arba via Constantine, the main railway to northern Tunisia. Because of its location in mountainous terrain, parachute troops were the only instrument which could be employed against it.

There was a narrow-gauge railway leading from Constantine to Meskiana on the way to central Tunisia, and the one leading from Sbeitla to Tebessa, via Kasserine, in southern Tunisia.

118 - Deichmann, Paul, *op. cit.*, Part IV, Chapter V, pages 16 through 18.

119 - See pages 636 and 637 of the present study.



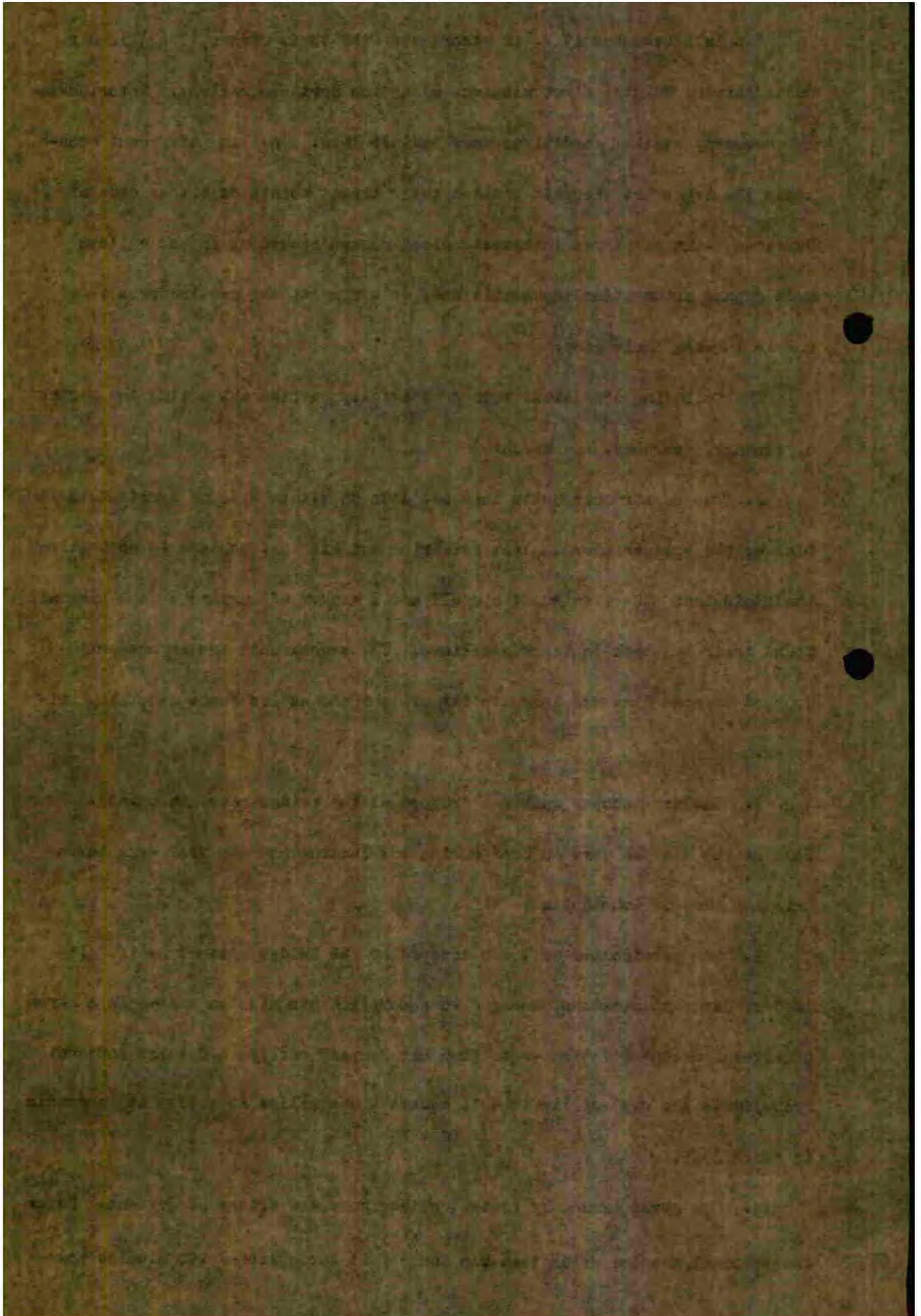
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Because of the lively enemy air activity during the daylight hours, the Axis air forces were restricted to night missions -- five days before and five days after full moon.

"In late December 1942, in accordance with their orders, the Axis air units carried out the first missions along the northern railway. Unfortunately, however, weather conditions were against them. On three different occasions the transport aircraft reached their target points on either side of Gardinau -- in all three instances, cloud masses backed up in the valleys made ground orientation impossible and, as a result, the paratroopers were unable to make their jump.

The following operations were successfully carried out during the months of January, February, and March:

1. Two paratrooper units were set down on either side of Gardinau to blow up the bridges there. 1/Lt Friedrich and his unit managed to accomplish their mission; the lieutenant himself and a number of survivors from his unit found their way back to their own lines. The second unit was erroneously dropped at some distance from its target, and the entire force was taken prisoner.
2. One paratrooper unit was dropped at the bridge near Ain Regada. Some of its members were injured during the landing and the rest were taken prisoner west of Constantine.
3. One paratrooper unit was dropped at the bridge west of Setif. Its leader, Sergeant Beckmann, managed to accomplish his mission and -- in a march of several weeks' duration -- to lead his company safely to Spanish Morocco. Promoted to the rank of lieutenant, Beckmann was killed in action in Pomerania in March 1945.
4. One group landed by freight glider near the bridge at Periana. Under the personal command of Captain von Köhnen, it accomplished its mission and



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returned in full strength to its own lines.

5. One group landed by freight glider at the bridge near Kasserine. It succeeded in fulfilling its mission, but was finally captured by the Americans.

6. One group landed by freight glider at the bridge near Menkiana. It completed its mission successfully. It was supposed to be picked up by a Ju-52, but the radio communications center transmitted an erroneous code designation to Biserte and the aircraft failed to appear. The group was finally taken prisoner by the French.

7. A special duty SD unit was landed by Ju-52 in the vicinity of Biskra. The Biskra airfield was its target. The approach flight of a second group, scheduled to land near the railway bridge north of Biskra, had to be cancelled because the He-111 which was towing the freight glider developed engine trouble. The glider managed a successful emergency landing just behind the Axis lines.

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8. The planned assaults on the bridges south of Bone and near La Calle had to be called off, since radar-guided enemy night fighter defenses were observed from mid-March on.

9. Concurrently with the carefully planned sabotage actions of the Schacht Commando, a large number of explosions and fires (set by explosives up to six lbs.) were instigated by Arabs in the enemy rear area. In a number of cases, explosives were planted in railway locomotives, to set off plastic-covered bombs in the form of coal bricks, but there is no information available regarding the effectiveness of these attacks."¹²⁰

As of mid-March, the Axis air units were forced to discontinue their missions. As the weather gradually improved, the Allied air forces were able to develop their full potential, even in night operations.

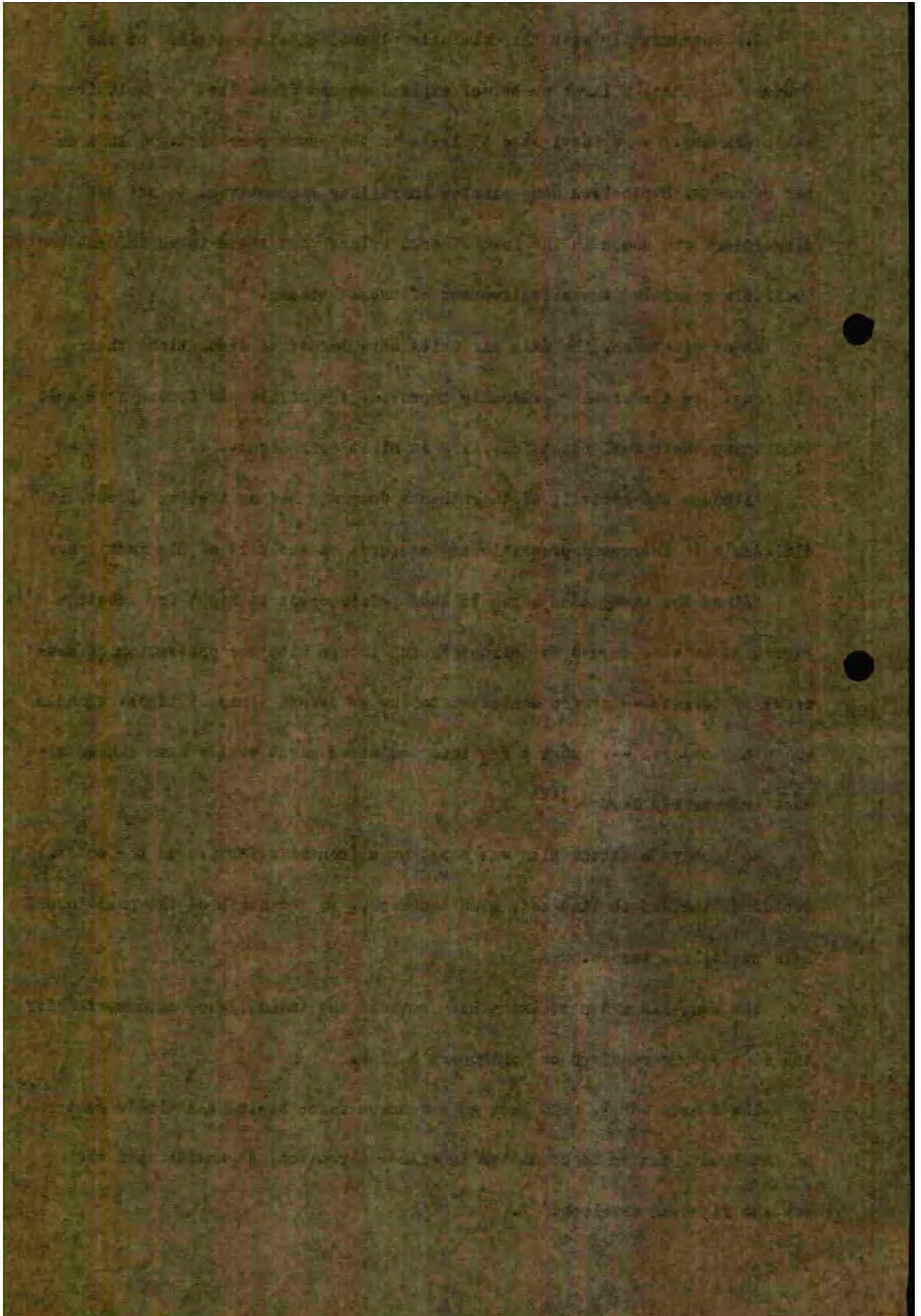
Although the activity of the Schacht Commando had no lasting effect, it did result in increased precautionary measures on the part of the Americans.

"Since the enemy soon began to land paratroopers at night for sabotage missions, we were forced to entrust French troops with the protection of hundreds of targets -- sewers converted to use as escape lines, bridges, tunnels, and other objects --, where a few enemy soldiers might easily have caused almost irreparable damage."¹²¹

Montgomery's attack plan was based on a frontal offensive on the coastal sector of the Mareth line and, simultaneously, to the north of the positions held by Italian troops.

The Long-Range Desert Group had provided the intelligence data needed for the wide detour required by Montgomery's plan.

The I Army Corps, held back as a reserve force behind the middle sector of the front, was to be committed in either direction, depending upon the way the fighting developed¹²².



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Montgomery's plan was a bold but extremely logical one, one which offered prospects of success considering the British numerical superiority in tanks, the fact that the British forces were fully motorized, and the fact that the Allied air forces enjoyed near-supremacy in the area.

120 - Major Gerhard Schacht a.D., "Harassing Missions in the Enemy's Rear Area in North Africa during the Spring of 1943" (Feindrückwärtige Zerstörereinsätze in Nordafrika während des Frühjahrs 1943), Karlsruhe Document Collection.

121 - Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, German Edition, Amsterdam, 1948, page 151; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

122 - Military Review, 1951, loc. cit.; the author is indebted to this source for much of the material presented in this section of the present study.

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In addition, Montgomery's plan was favorably and purposefully supported by the intervention of the American II Army Corps, advancing from the Maknassy - Gafsa area, which helped to tie down and thus neutralize a fairly large German force. The fact that British defensive operations in the area immediately in front of the coastal sector on 6 March were crowned with success was another point in favor of an ultimate Allied victory.

On 10 March, when Leclerc's Free French Brigade, on the march from Ksar-Rhilane towards the north, was attacked by German troops, the Western Desert Air Force intervened to prevent an Allied defeat. At the same time, the air units were able to disrupt Axis aerial reconnaissance activity over the assembly area of the New Zealand troops near Foum Tatahouins.

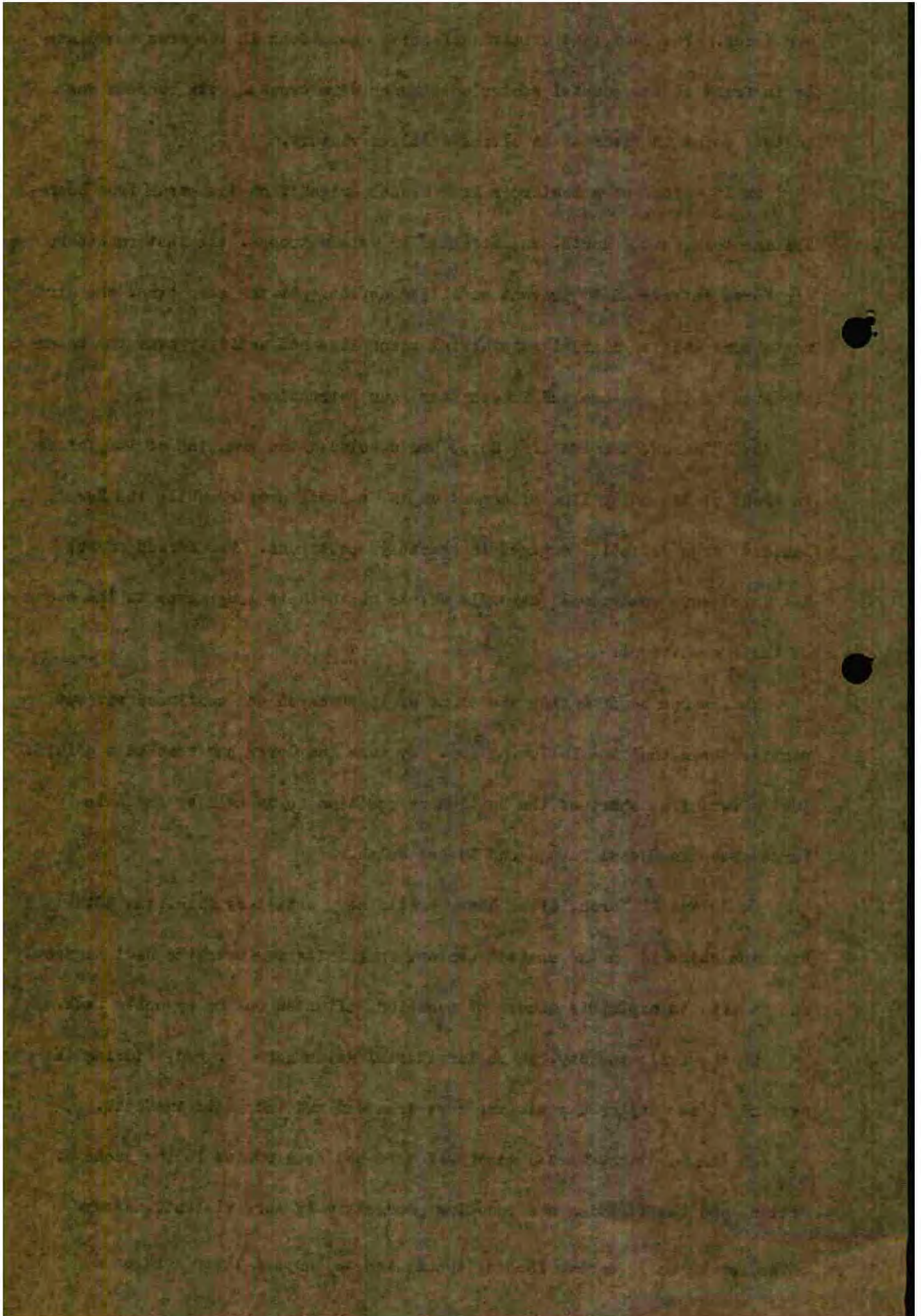
By 15 March, the XXX Army Corps had concluded the grouping of its forces in front of the enemy line of combat on the coastal sector, while the New Zealand Corps was still engaged in assembly operations. The forces of the XXX Corps were ready, well camouflaged, to begin their long march to the scene of their commitment.

This march began during the night of 19/20 March and continued without respite throughout the following day. By dusk the Corps had reached a point just a few miles short of the bottleneck position being held by the Axis forces between Djebel Tabaga and Djebel Melab.

On 20 and 22 March, after heavy preliminary artillery fire, the 50th Division attacked on the coastal sector, fought its way over the Wadi Ziguacu, and managed to capture a number of positions situated on the opposite bank.

On the following day, these territorial gains were secured; during the next night the captured positions were expanded and increased in depth.

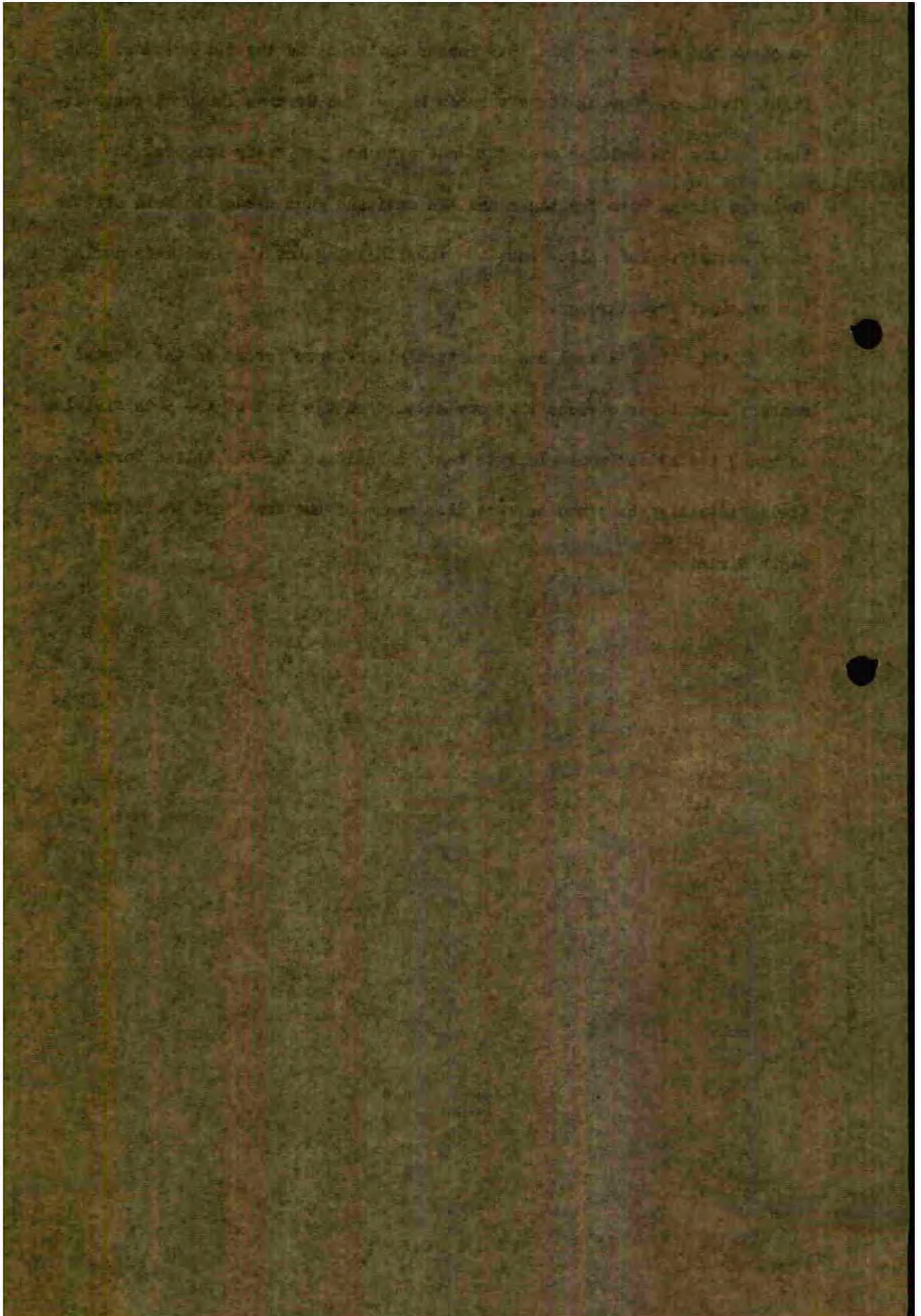
In the meantime, German reserve forces had been rushed to the scene of action, and the fighting was becoming progressively more violent. Heavy rains set in on 22 March, forcing the Allies to suspend their work on a



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number of bridges over the Wadi Zigaou, bridges which were to facilitate the movement of tanks and heavy weapons to the area of operation. The Western Desert Air Force had also been handicapped by the rain in its efforts to check the advance of the 15th Panzer Division and the 1st Brigade, 90th Light Division. During the afternoon hours, the Germans launched their attack. Since the bridges over the Wadi were not yet ready for use, the 50th Division lacked both the tanks and the antitank guns needed to hold off the enemy assault. The Allies lost the territorial gains they had made during the original breakthrough.

By this time, Rommel had committed his reserve forces on the coastal sector, and it was obvious that any attempt on the part of the 50th Division to renew its attack would lead to heavy casualties for the Allied forces. Allied intelligence agencies were also aware of the fact that the 164th Light Division



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had been pulled out of its station in the combat line and assigned the task of checking the advance of the New Zealand Corps on the encirclement wing.

General Montgomery decided immediately to break off the attack on the coastal sector, but to keep the enemy forces tied down there by means of a series of decoy assaults.

In the meantime, Montgomery wanted to take advantage of the success achieved by the encirclement action before Rommel should be in a position to move his reserve forces to that area. Accordingly, Montgomery ordered the following regroupings, to take place during the night of 23/24 March:

1. The 50th Division was to withdraw behind the Wadi Zigzaou;
2. The 4th Indian Division was to move forward from Medenine to the Hallouf Pass, in order to open a communications line between the two original directions of attack. This was intended to facilitate the transfer of forces from one end of the operational theater to the other. There was also the chance that the 7th Armored Division might be brought in to join the encirclement wing;
3. The X Army Corps and the 1st Armored Division were to continue moving forward to join the New Zealand Corps.

In the meantime, the 21st Panzer Division and the 164th Light Division had been sent to reinforce the Italian troops holding the mile-wide passage against the New Zealand Corps.

The task confronting the British troops consisted in breaking through this stubbornly defended bottleneck as rapidly as possible and in holding the way into the more easily negotiable terrain beyond open for the armored units.

The suggestion that Djebel Tabaga might be circumvented was disapproved in view of the fact that any such outflanking movement would place it between two sections of the attacking force, thus making it impossible for either

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side to support the other's fire.

The only solution was to take advantage of the enormous striking power of the Allied air forces.

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By means of concentrated and repeated bombardment attacks, the will to resist of the Axis troops was to be so badly undermined that they would no longer be able to withstand a full-scale attack on the ground.

During the night of 25/26 March, the German-Italian positions were bombarded savagely. The attacks began again at daybreak and reached their climax at about 1500.

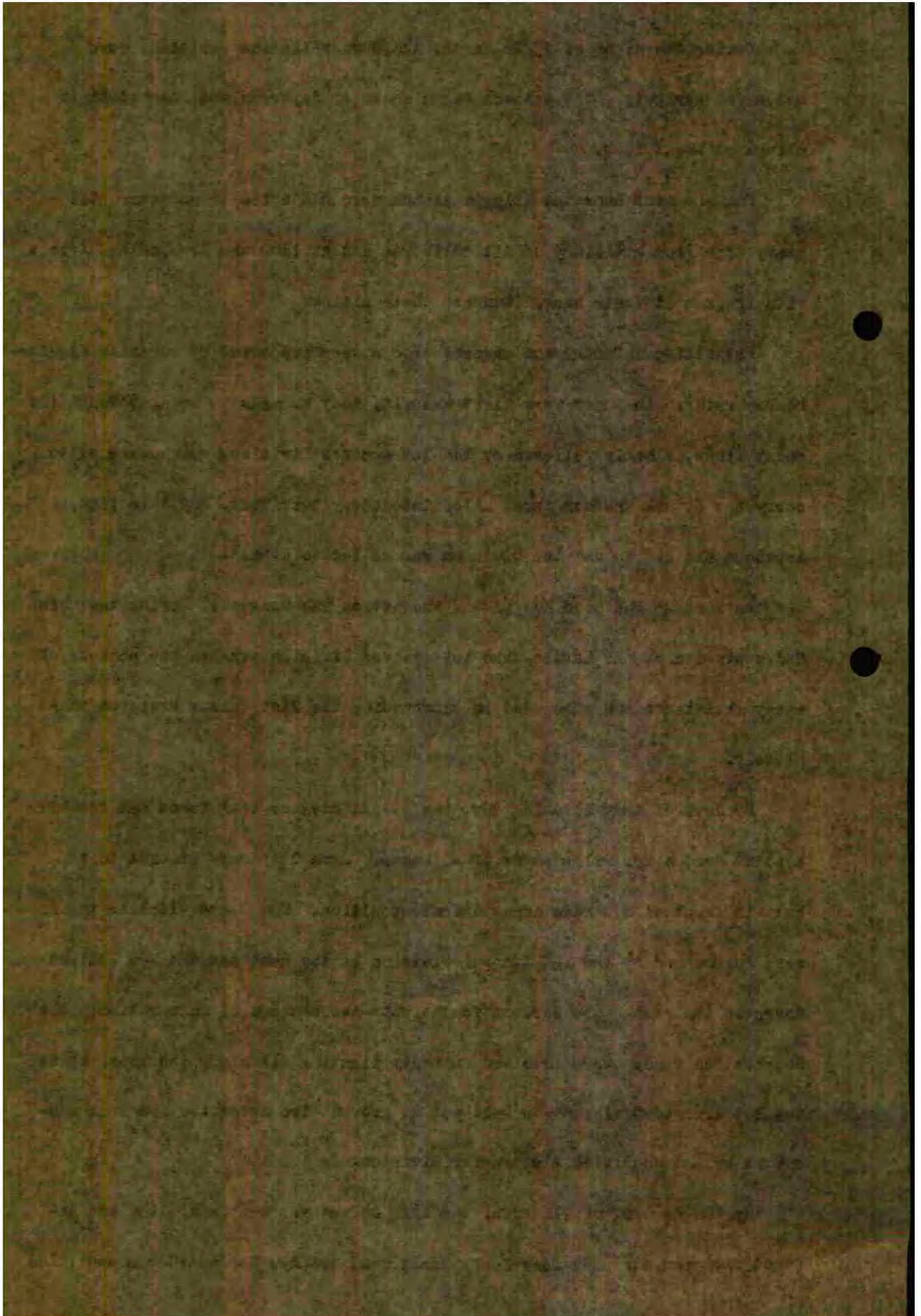
For the next hour the Axis positions were subjected to uninterrupted heavy fire from artillery of all calibers, and at 1600 the New Zealand troops, with the sun at their back, launched their attack.

The Allied infantry and armored troops were supported by repeated fighter-bomber raids. In their very first assault, they managed to break through the enemy lines, closely followed by the 1st Armored Division, which managed to carry the attack another three miles into enemy territory. By this time, darkness had set in and the Division was called to a halt.

As soon as the moon had risen, the attack was renewed. During the noise and confusion of the battle, the 1st Armored Division overran the pockets of enemy resistance and succeeded in surrounding the 21st Panzer Division completely.

By dawn of the following day, the Allied advance task force had reached a point just a few miles short of El Hamma. Here they were brought to a halt in front of a strong enemy defense position. The German-Italian troops were surrounded by the 1st Armored Division in the west and the New Zealand Corps in the east. The Germans fought with the courage of desperation; the New Zealand troops were involved in heavy fighting all along the line, while the 1st Armored Division was hard put to prevent two attempted breakout maneuvers by the encircled 21st Panzer Division.

By the evening of 27 March, the Axis defeat was complete; the 1st Armored Division advanced towards El Hamma, and the New Zealand Corps continued



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its thrust in the direction of Gabes.

In the meantime, decoy attacks were carried out at the front sector being held by the XXX Army Corps; the appearance of the 7th Armored Division during these attacks helped to increase the enemy's uneasiness. The 4th Indian Division was making excellent progress and had already established the planned line of communication.

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During the night of 27/28 March, the Axis troops withdrew in good order from the Mareth line positions back to Gabes. The XXX Army Corps set out in pursuit early the next morning but -- as always -- ran into mines, boobytraps, and road damage. The other flank, the X Army Corps, was held up by violent sandstorms in the vicinity of El Hamma.

Thus the German-Italian units were able to make their escape before the enemy had a chance to close the gap between Gabes and El Hamma.

The battle of the Mareth line was the most difficult operation carried out by the British Eighth Army since El Alamein. Once again, Rommel's tank forces and the 164th Light Division had sustained extremely high losses of both personnel and materiel.

The most striking characteristic of the battle was perhaps the intensity of the destructive blows delivered by the Allied air forces in support of the attack being carried out on the ground.

Once again the key to success had lain in the close coordination of the two military branches during the preparation and execution of their common mission. For the first time, Royal Air Force liaison officers had been employed as forward observers. They maintained wireless contact with the bomber units and kept the latter informed of the progress of the battle.

During the Mareth line battle, air superiority was clearly on the side of the Royal Air Force, and the enemy was able to do nothing to eliminate it. Another important lesson to be learned was apparent from the fact that Montgomery never once allowed the initiative to leave his own hands, not even when the German 15th Panzer Division gained the victory over the British 50th Division.

On the contrary, he reacted immediately to the new situation by shifting his point of main effort from the coastal sector to his unprotected flank.

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Rommel was unable to redirect the 15th Panzer Division and the 90th Light Division to El Hamma in time to meet the renewed attacks of the New Zealand Corps and the X Army Corps. Rommel's mistake is closely connected with the fact that the British Eighth Army managed to retain the initiative -- he missed the chance to establish an effective point of main effort with his own armored forces. The 10th Panzer Division remained in western Tunisia; the 15th Panzer Division was thrown (but too early) into the battle on the coastal sector; and the 21st Panzer Division was utilized to reinforce Axis defenses southwest of El Hamma.

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A further significant factor was the rapidity and determination with which the encircling movement was executed. It was enough that detailed intelligence gathered by the Long Range Desert Group showed that a march through the desert was not impossible.

Determination, effective leadership, and a smoothly functioning supply system facilitated the forced march of the motorized units. It was their rapid negotiation of this extremely difficult terrain which enabled the British Eighth Army to encircle and wear down the Axis forces.

Once again Rommel had ordered the withdrawal of his forces from their original positions in plenty of time, and once again he had tried every trick he knew to frustrate -- at least for the moment -- immediate pursuit by the X Army Corps. ^{Rommel's} ~~His~~ military vision and firm leadership had made it possible for ^{him} ~~Rommel~~ to bring the majority of his troops safely out of a menacing situation.

In the middle of February, in order to check the German forward thrust, additional Allied troops, including the British V Army Corps, had to be pulled out of the northern sector and assigned to the Thala - Tebessa area.

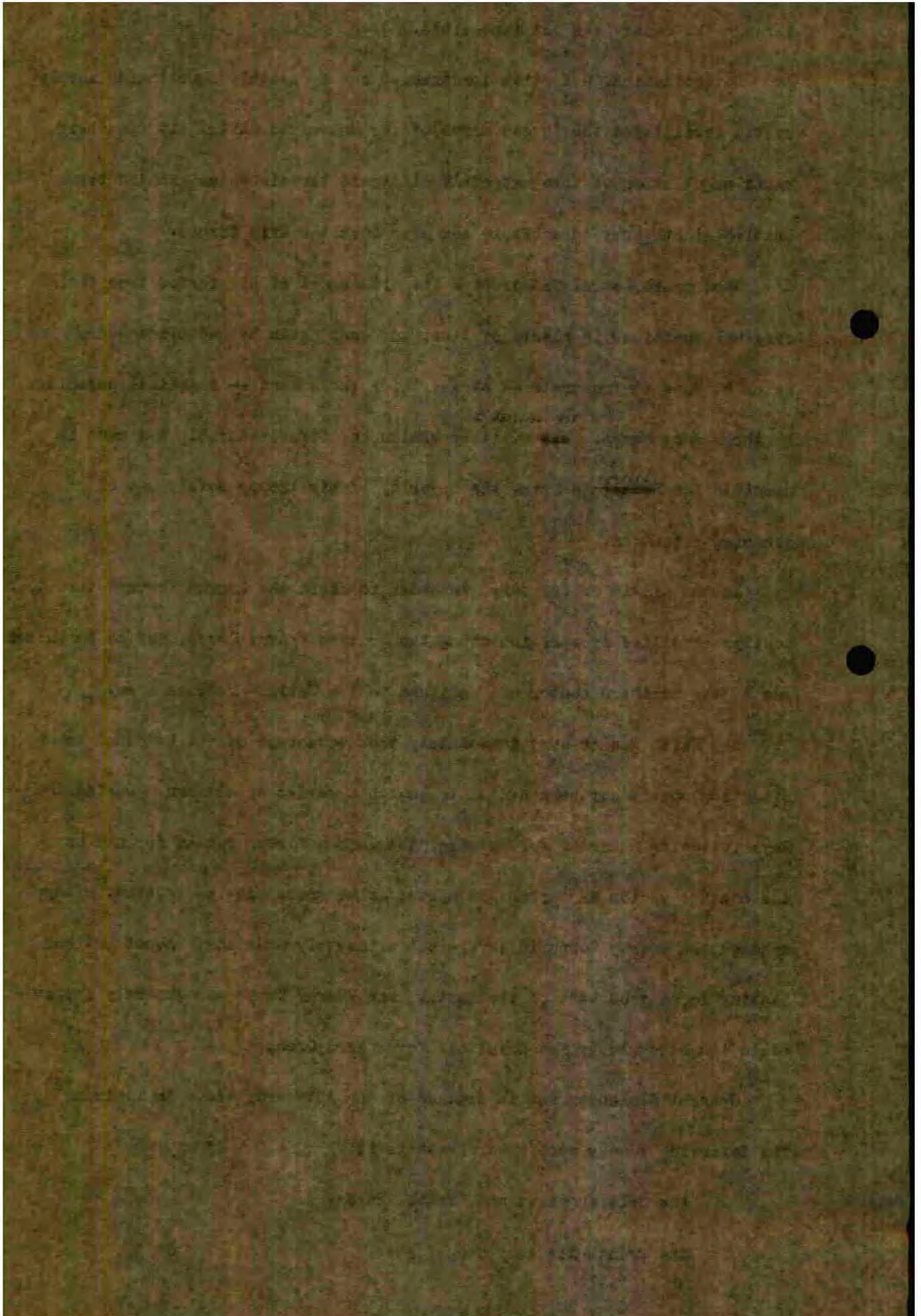
The Fifth Panzer Army immediately took advantage of the weakened enemy situation on the northern sector to launch a series of attacks. During the days following 6 March, for example, the German forces pushed forward on the coastal sector as far as the Djebel Abiod area, east of Tabarka. They engaged the V Army Corps in savage but ultimately undecided combat actions lasting for a good part of the month. The V Army Corps was expertly supported in its struggle by the Royal Air Force 242d Group.

General Alexander was in command of the 18th Army Group in Tunisia¹²³;

The following forces were subordinate to it:

the British First and Eighth Armies,

the French XIX Army Corps, and



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the American II Army Corps.

It was General Alexander's most cherished desire to sort out the confusion of British, French, and American units which had come about during the battle for Tebessa, and to establish an Army Group reserve force.

In northern Tunisia, General Anderson was still in command of the British First Army; in central Tunisia General Patton had recently assumed command of the American II Army Corps, which had been made considerably stronger in the meantime.

123 - See page 655 of the present study.

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Nevertheless, generally speaking, the Allies -- still north of the Mareth line -- viewed the period around the first of the month as a period of preparation for the full-scale offensive to come. They hoped to be in a position to drive the Axis forces out of the southern Mediterranean once and for all.

Fresh troops were arriving, training activity was intensified, and progress was being made in the local fighting and in the final preparation of the positions.

The ultimate objective of the campaign was to defeat the Axis forces in Tunisia at the earliest possible date.

If this was to be accomplished, it was imperative that Montgomery's Army force its way through the narrow gap north of Gabes onto the coastal plateau, where -- in coordination with the II Army Corps -- it could bring its mobility and striking power to bear most fully.

Until the Eighth Army achieved this breakthrough, it was the task of the American II Army Corps to prevent the enemy reserve forces from intervening along the Mareth line. The Mareth line was generally considered to be a hard nut to crack -- even for the British Eighth Army!

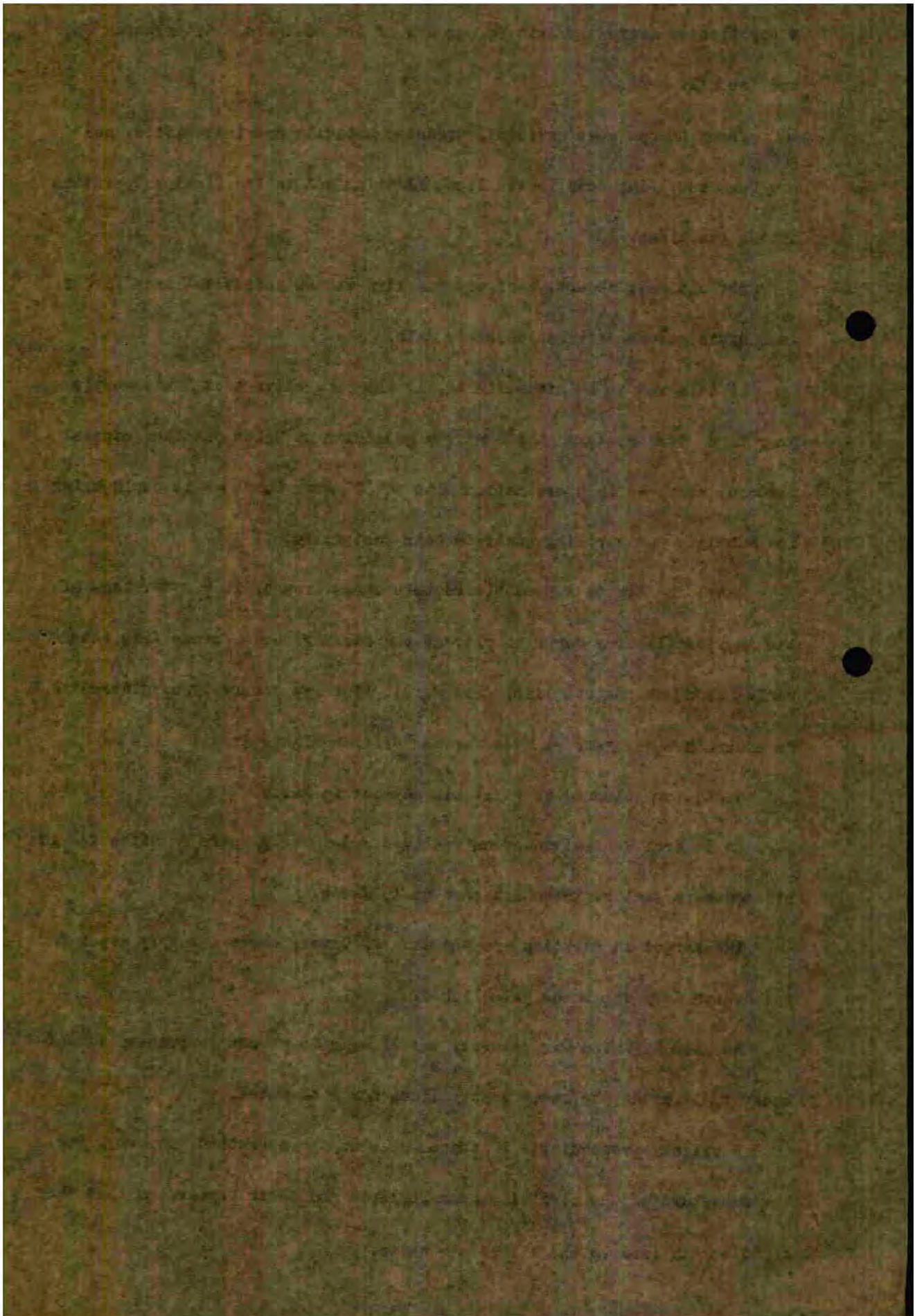
Montgomery planned to start his advance in March.

On 1 March General Anderson received orders to prepare an offensive in his southern sector, to be launched on 15 March.

The target in question was the town of Gafsa, where a supply depot for the Eighth Army was to be established.

As soon as Gafsa was secured, the II Army Corps was to push on to Maknassy to threaten the enemy supply lines north of Gabes.

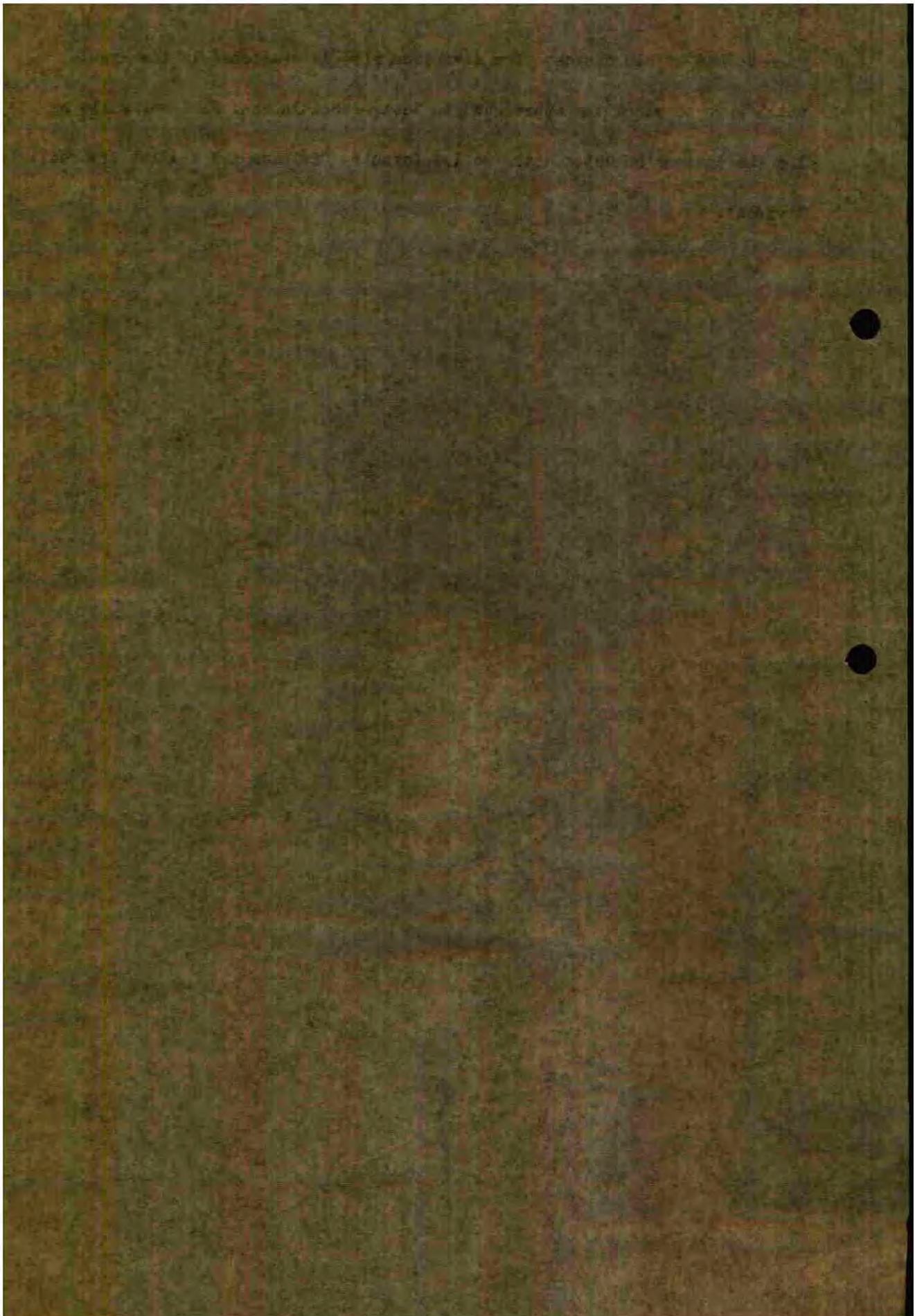
A primary prerequisite to the success of the operation, however, was the recapture of the airfields near Thelepte and their repair, so that they might be utilized by the Allied air units.



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This phase of the operation was given the code designation WOP, and General Patton with his II Army Corps was to be in charge of its accomplishment.

He had at his disposal two divisions, already stationed in the area, which were to block the approaches to Robaa, Sbeitla, and Feriana, while he led the advance on Gafsa with the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division.



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Once Gafsa was taken, the II Army Corps was to launch a series of attacks on Maknassy, in accordance with orders from the 18th Army Group.

The following air forces were assigned to Operation WOP: Williams' XII Air Support Command, with three single-engine fighter groups and one close-range reconnaissance squadron, based on the airfields near Thelepte; and a part of the tactical bomber fleet, to be committed from the airfield at Zouks.

Both the XII Air Support Command and the strategic bomber fleet were in a position to seize and maintain air superiority over the enemy air units.

The offensive of the Eighth Army was planned for three or four days after Operation WOP had gotten under way.

During the night of 16/17 March, Patton launched his attack with the 1st Armored Division and the 1st Infantry Division. Gafsa fell on 17 March, and on the following day the 1st Armored Division pushed forward towards Sened, being halted temporarily by heavy rains. On 21 March, the attackers captured Sened Station. Moving forward, along the highway, they occupied Maknassy on 22 March. By the following day they had reached the pass on the other side of Maknassy.

In the meantime the 1st Infantry Division advanced in a southeasterly direction and, finding El Guettar ~~to be~~ free of enemy forces, began to prepare it as a defensive position. The enemy attacked there with tanks and infantry on 23 March, but the British troops managed to throw them back. Thus the situation was restored on the front sector of the II Army Corps.

During the first two days the strategic bomber fleet and the XII Air Support Command had to be restricted to direct intervention in the ground fighting. Prior to the fall of Gafsa, the 12th Group (B-25's) plastered the town with bombs, and since no enemy aircraft were committed in defense, the Allied fighters were sent up against ground targets. Afterwards they

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carried out reconnaissance missions and low-level attacks, but somewhat less frequently due to the fact that they were needed for escort duty with tactical and strategic bomber units. On 23 March, when the Axis forces staged their counterattack against the II Army Corps, the strategic bomber fleet concentrated its efforts with lasting effectiveness on the enemy troop assembly area east of El Guettar.

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The Casablanca decision to reorganize the Allied air forces¹²⁴ meant a tremendous increase in the duties of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, their commander in chief in the Mediterranean, and not all of these new duties were directly connected with his own specific mission. As regards the conduct of military operations in northwest Africa, he was subordinate to the Headquarters, Allied Forces (H.Qu. der Alliierten Streitkräfte). He was responsible for the coordination of the air force operations with those of the two armies in Tunisia as well as for the air defense of Allied shipping convoys and their ports and supply bases.

The goal of operations against the enemy air forces was not only to facilitate the advance of the ground forces in the struggle for Tunisia, but also to eliminate the enemy's sources of supply in Sicily. Allied planners hoped that this would force the German Luftwaffe to withdraw a large number of its air units from the Russian front during the summer campaign.

By destroying the enemy's land, sea, and air supply lines, Tedder's long-range bombers were to be in a position to keep the enemy bridgehead in Tunisia isolated and at the same time to frustrate any attempt to build up a system of defense for Sicily.

The following air units were assigned to the Mediterranean Air Command for the accomplishment of this difficult task:

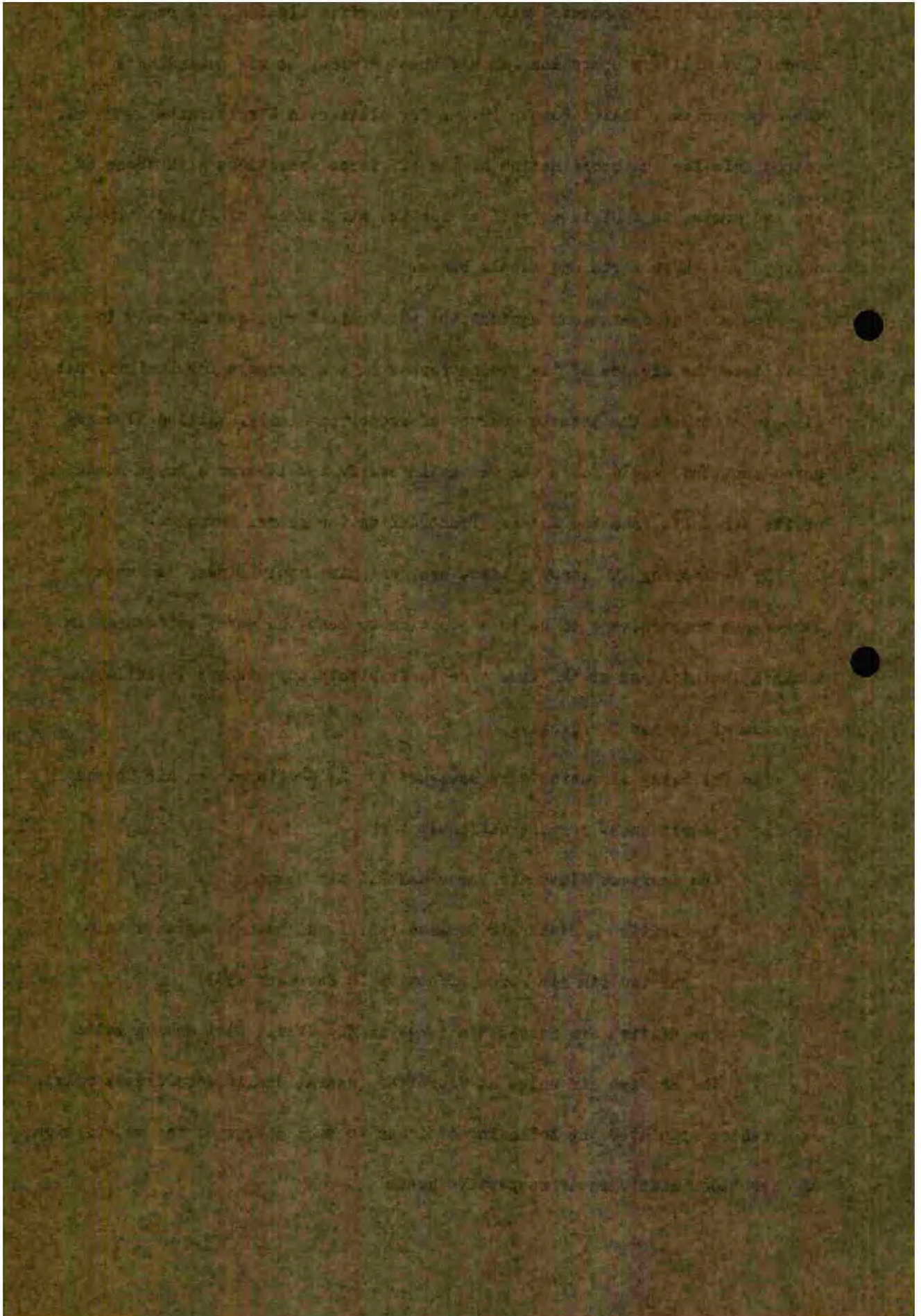
the American Ninth Air Force and XII Air Command

the British Eastern Air Command (which had been integrated into the Twelfth Air Force effective 18 February 1943)

The British air forces stationed in the Middle East and on Malta

the British air units at Gibraltar (operationally subordinate only).

Tedder appointed the following officers to take charge of the supervision of operations within their respective areas:



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Northwest Africa Air Force (Major General Spaatz),

Middle East Air Command (Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas),

Royal Air Force Malta Air Command (Air Vice Marshal Sir Keith Park).

The air commands under Spaatz represented a new factor in the organization of the Allied air forces. The experience gathered during the preceding winter had proved that the fighter control method employed by the Americans heretofore was incapable of adaptation to the multifarious missions required in the African theater. The fighters were expected to take over the air defense of the ports and of the supply convoys, to protect the bomber aircraft against air attack by enemy fighters, and to participate in joint operations with the forces fighting on the ground.

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The bomber wings were no longer permitted to be employed independently by their own commanders. They were required to take on such diverse tasks as eliminating enemy submarines and bombarding enemy shipping convoys, carrying out attacks against remotely located targets, and -- over the battlefields themselves -- destroying enemy artillery batteries and tank and troop assembly points.

Under the new system, General Spaatz was given supreme command over the strategic bomber fleet, the close-support fighter corps, and the coastal air units. These were the three combat instruments which he would need if he was to meet effectively the demands made upon him.

In his hand lay the weapon which the Allies hoped would decide the air war -- and thus the campaign -- in Tunisia.

Without a doubt, the most difficult part of this over-all mission fell to Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, who had been placed in command of the close-support air corps. At this time, the situation in central Tunisia was extremely critical.

Coningham's views in connection with the coordination and the liaison activity between the air forces and the ground troops deviated widely from those held heretofore, and consequently both the air units and the ground forces required thoroughgoing reorientation if they were to operate effectively together to achieve their common goal. In the first place, the 242d Group and the XII Air Support Command had to be brought up to the standard achieved by the Western Desert Air Force. Understandably they were still far behind it in respect to both experience and equipment.

Coningham transferred his headquarters to Souk-el-Khemis, in the vicinity of the advance headquarters of the 18th Army Group and that of General Anderson's First Army.

Major General James Doolittle was in command of the strategic bomber

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fleet, which was also made subordinate to Major General Spaatz. Doolittle had at his disposal the American XII Bomber Command and two British Wellington squadrons, which were protected by his own escort fighters. All of these forces were based on the airfields in the vicinity of Constantine^e, and it was this area which Doolittle selected for his headquarters. The Coastal Air Command, under the command of Air Vice Marshal Hugh P. Lloyd, was also at Spaatz' disposal.

The Coastal Air Command was made up of the 323d, 325th, and 238th Royal Air Force Wings, the headquarters staff of the American XII Fighter Command plus the headquarters squadron, and the American 350th Single-Engine Fighter Group (P-39's).