

709

Lloyd's headquarters were at the St. George Hotel in Algiers, in the same office as was used by Admiral Cunningham, with whom he was expected to work very closely. It was to this office that all communications came, and the data on the positions of Allied and enemy ships were posted continually on the briefing maps.

The Coastal Air Command was responsible for the air defense of North Africa, for naval reconnaissance, for antisubmarine operations, and -- finally -- for the protection of its own convoys and the destruction of those of the enemy. Somewhat later, the coastal units were transferred from Agadir to Bone.

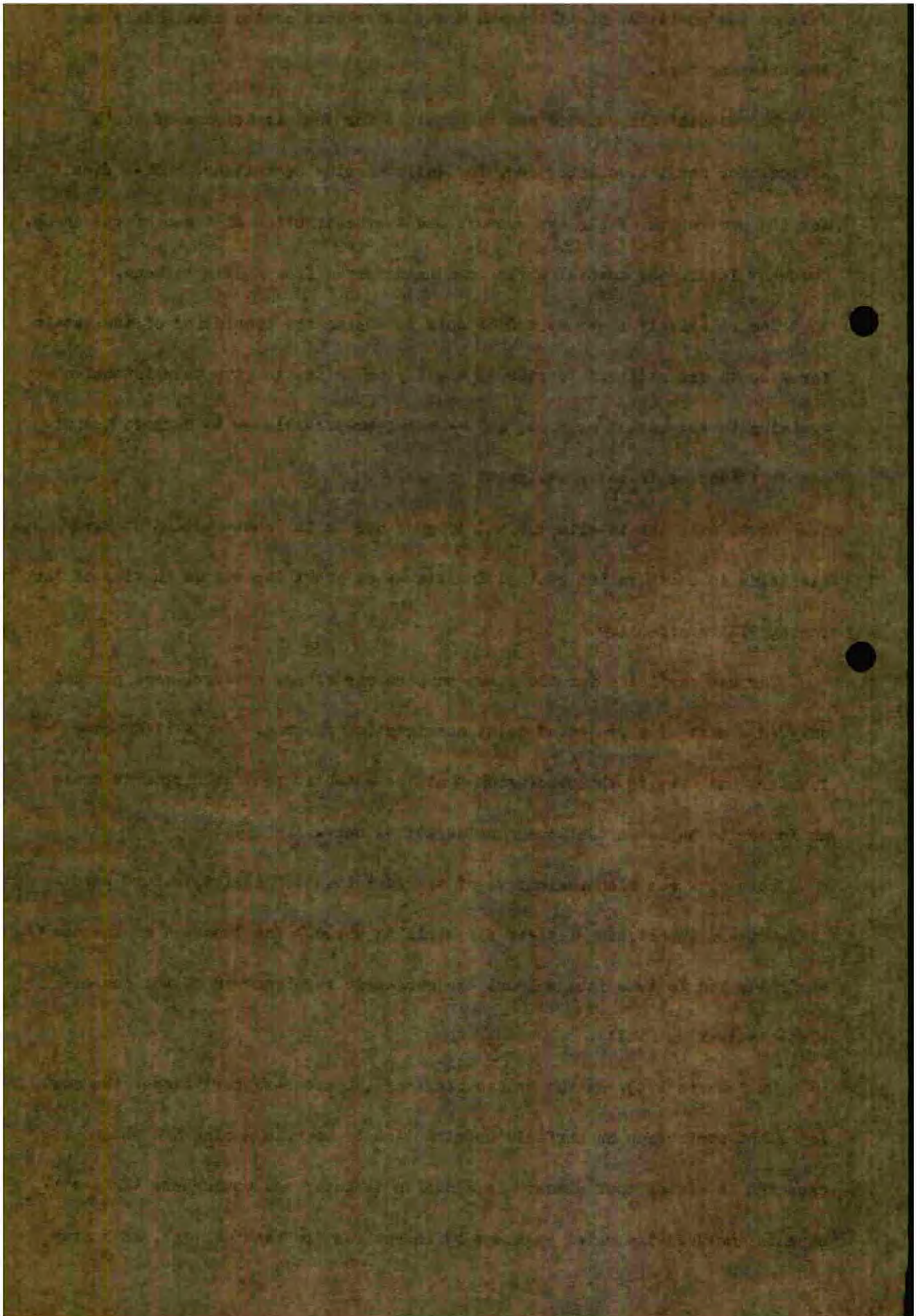
The relatively short period of calm following the conclusion of the battle for Tebessa was utilized to refresh the flying units, to give them intensive training in the newest methods, and -- whenever possible -- to correct technical deficiencies in their equipment (radar).

Above all, the interim was put to good use in the construction of new airfields in northern and central Tunisia -- of great importance in view of the coming Allied offensive.

The new airfields for the close-support air corps, however, were planned only as a part of a projected joint construction program. The Allied headquarters had come to the conclusion that the establishment of airfields could no longer be based on tactical considerations only.

This view was also indicative of the fact that top Allied leaders were aware of the importance of their air striking power. The location of the new airfields had to take into account the strategic requirements of the contemplated attack on Sicily.

On 3 March 1943, at the headquarters of the close-support corps, the most important conference on airfield construction to be held during the entire campaign in Africa took place. In addition to Kuter and Cunningham, the participants included the chief engineer officers from the headquarters, 18th Army



709 - a

Group, from the First Army, and from Tedder's staff.

A scant two days later, orders were issued to the effect that thirteen airfields nearer the front were to be made ready to accommodate the close-support corps by 13 March, and another fifteen were to be prepared for long-range bomber forces in the areas south and east of Constantin^g.

Construction of fields in the rear area was relegated to second or third-place priority.

710

After a slight disagreement with the First Army, to which the British airfield construction troops were subordinated, the Allied headquarters finally decided in favor of Tedder. This decision put an end to the haggling which had been going on for the past six months.

The view had finally prevailed that a uniform policy of airfield construction was just as important as a uniform policy of command for the joint Allied air forces.

In June 1942, in order to relieve the extremely critical situation of the British Eighth Army, a number of American bomber units originally slated for the China-Burma-India theater had been deviated from India to Egypt. These later formed the nucleus of the Ninth Air Force; in the beginning they made up only the detachment "scratched together" by Colonel L. H. Brereton in India. Under his command, these units played an important role in the operations of the British Eighth Army during the summer and fall of 1942 by their many successful attacks on enemy convoys and on the Axis supply ports on the North African coast.

On 12 November 1942, the Ninth Air Force was officially established; nine more American bomber groups were slated to join it.

In May 1942, Allied leaders meeting in London had concluded an agreement to the effect that the following air units should be dispatched to the Middle East, to arrive there on approximately the dates given below:

1 Sep 1942: 1 single-engine fighter group and 1 medium bomber group
 1 Oct 1942: 1 heavy bomber group and 1 single-engine fighter group
 end of 1942: 1 medium bomber group
 1 Jan 1943: 2 single-engine fighter groups
 1 Apr 1943: 2 single-engine fighter groups

TOTAL: 3 bomber groups and 6 single-engine fighter groups.

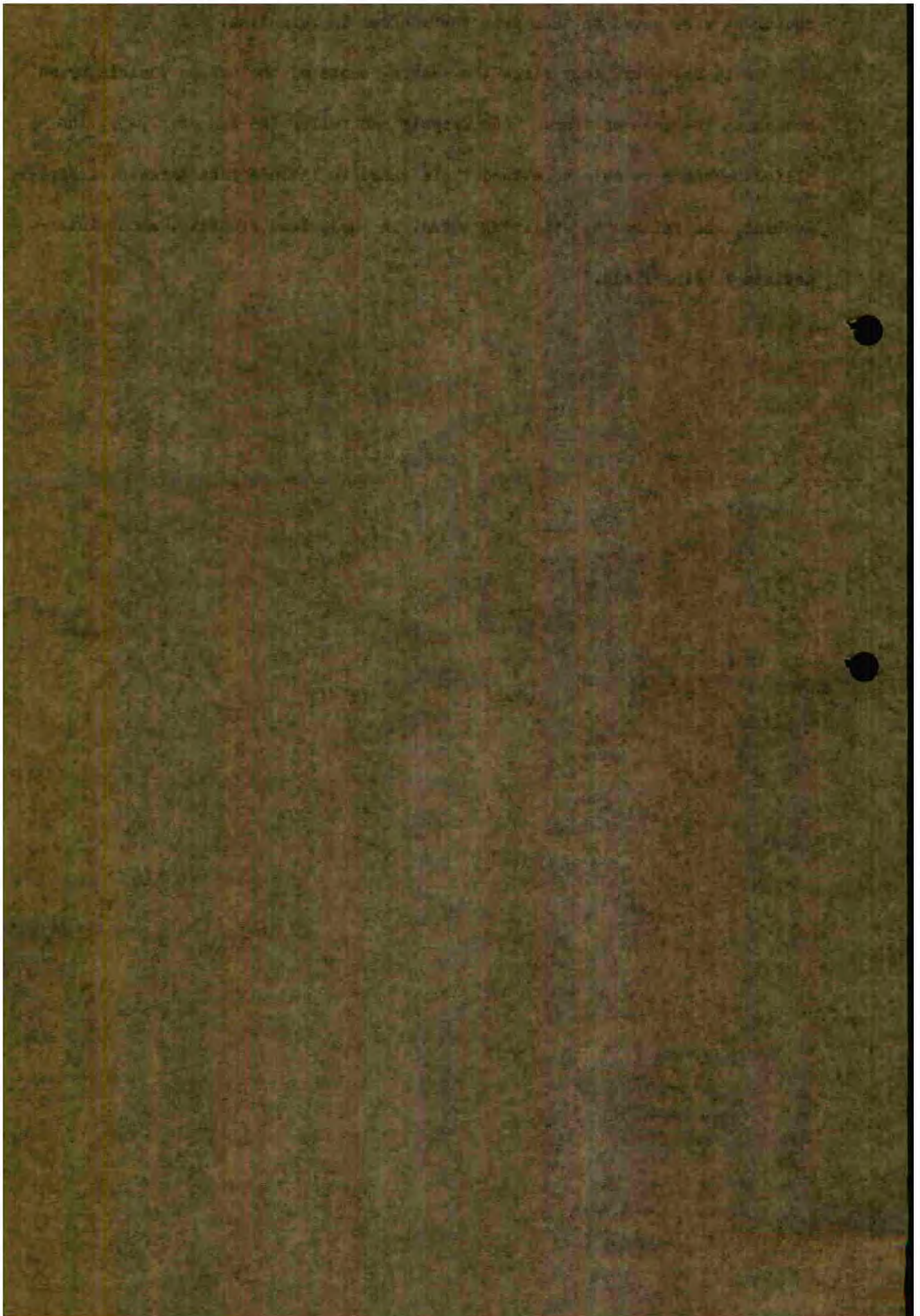
At the same time, the necessary preparations had been made to transfer in

710 - a

ample time the ground organization elements needed to service these groups.

As soon as the airfields around Tobruk fell into the hands of the British Eighth Army on 15 November 1942, a number of Ninth Air Force bomber squadrons were moved to them from their bases in Palestine.

On 15 December, they fired the opening shots of the war on Tunisia by an attack on the town of Sfax. Once Tripoli had fallen (23 January 1943), the Allied bomber were able to extend their range to include such targets as Naples, Messina, and Palermo by utilizing Lucca, on the island of Malta, as an intermediate landing field.



711

By the end of January, all the bomber units of the Ninth Air Force had been moved forward to Gambut. Only the repair depots were left behind in Egypt to finish the jobs presently on hand.

Ever since 6 February 1943, Colonel Brereton had been exercising command over the American army forces in the Middle East (as Lieutenant General Frank M. Andrews' successor) as well as over the Ninth Air Force.

The reorganization of the Allied air forces in the Mediterranean¹²⁴ had resulted in the consolidation of all air units east of the Libyan/Tunisian border in the Middle East Command, under Air Marshal Douglas. The only unit exempt from this consolidation order was the Western Desert Air Force, which was subordinate to Coningham's close-support air corps.

Accordingly, those elements of the Ninth Air Force which had been working together with the Western Desert Air Force also came under Coningham's command.

This applied also to Strickland's Desert Air Task Force Headquarters, which was redesignated Desert Air Task Force, Ninth Air Force. Strickland remained in command.

(In the fall of 1942, an American advanced liaison staff joined the Western Desert Air Force in order to evaluate the experience gathered during the employment of American air units.

The newly-established element was designated Desert Air Task Force Headquarters on 22 October. Brigadier General Aubry C. Strickland was named as its chief of staff¹²⁵).

On 23 February, the new headquarters' 57th Fighter-Bomber Group (P-40's), based at Zuara, had already participated in a series of attacks on enemy airfields near Mareth and Gabes. Like the pointed maneuvers of the British Eighth Army in the direction of the Mareth line, these attacks were intended to distract the enemy's attention from Kasserine.

711 - a

On 1 March, elements of the 57th Fighter-Bomber Group moved to one of the newly-prepared airfields south of Medenine, where they were joined the following evening by the entire Royal Air Force 244th Single-Engine Fighter Wing.

124 - See page 655 of the present study.

125 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 34.

712

Soon thereafter, both units were chased off the airfield by expertly directed German artillery fire. The German batteries were shooting from well-camouflaged positions affording excellent visibility, located in the nearby Matmata Mountains. They also carried out reconnaissance activity with armored cars.

As a result of these developments, the entire 57th Fighter-Bomber Group remained at Zuara until 9 March, when it was transferred to an airfield southwest of Ben-Gardane. Here the 57th Group served as a training unit for the 79th Fighter-Bomber Group, which was scheduled to go into action very soon.

While the 57th Group was still at Zuara, it was joined by one squadron from the 324th Fighter-Bomber Group, which remained with it throughout the campaign in Tunisia. The other two squadrons of the 324th Group were made a part of the 79th Fighter-Bomber Group.

The remaining two squadrons of the 12th Fighter-Bomber Group were transferred to the command of the close-support corps in Algeria.

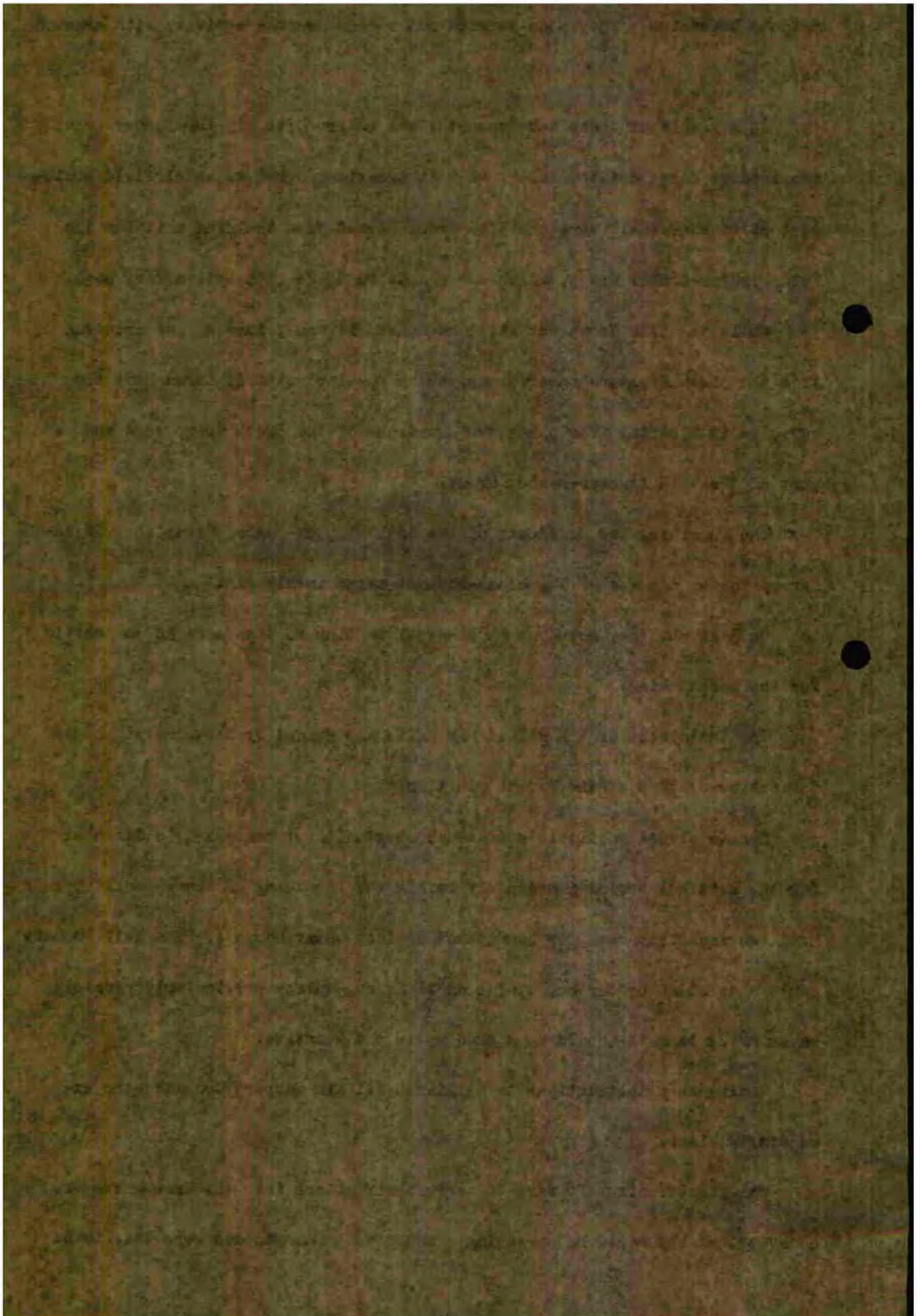
On 3 March, they moved up to El-Assa, in time to take part in the battle for the Mareth line.

The deployment of the Allied air units was guided by Montgomery's plans for the occupation of the Mareth position.

Spaatz placed Doolittle's medium bomber units at Montgomery's disposal for the critical period immediately before the launching of the attack. Spaatz held two squadrons back for commitment against enemy convoys. The B-17 bombers would also stand by for employment on 21 March, unless particularly promising enemy naval targets should be picked up in the meantime.

Cunningham's instructions to Williams' XII Air Support Command were exceedingly clear.

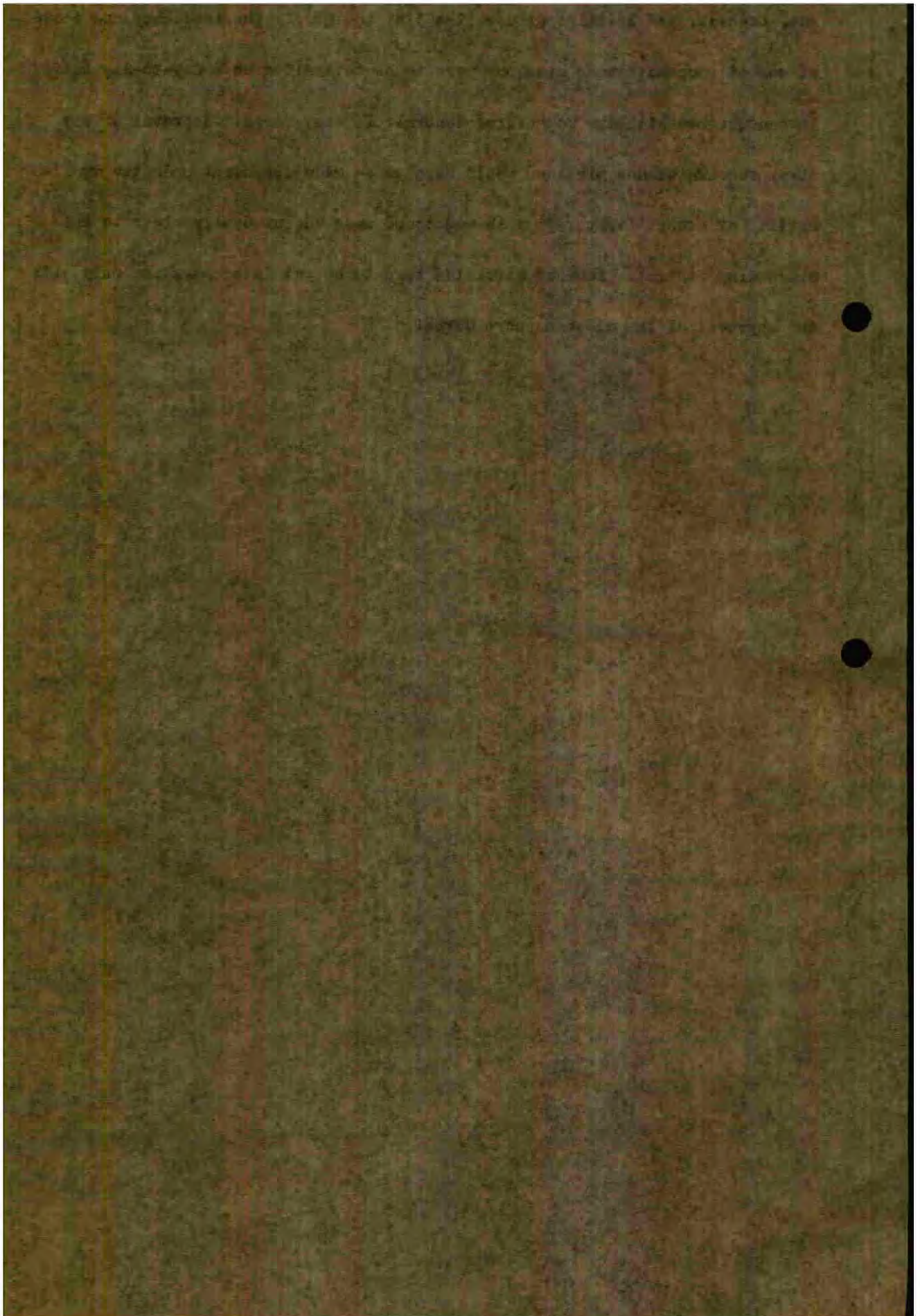
The fighter aircraft were to carry their attack into the area where the enemy presumably would be operating; under no circumstances were they to be



712 - a

utilized as air cover for the Allied ground forces, unless the latter should be subjected to constant harassing by enemy air units.

The 81st Group (P-39's) was to be employed in attacks on ground targets, not, however, the Spitfire groups (the 31st and 52d). The frequency and scope of combat reconnaissance missions were to be determined on a day-to-day basis, in concurrence with the Commanding General, II Army Corps. Approval of any other reconnaissance missions would have to be made dependent upon the availability of escort fighters; this was to be made unequivocally clear to the Commanding General. Advance airfields were to be put into operation only with the approval of the close-support corps.



713

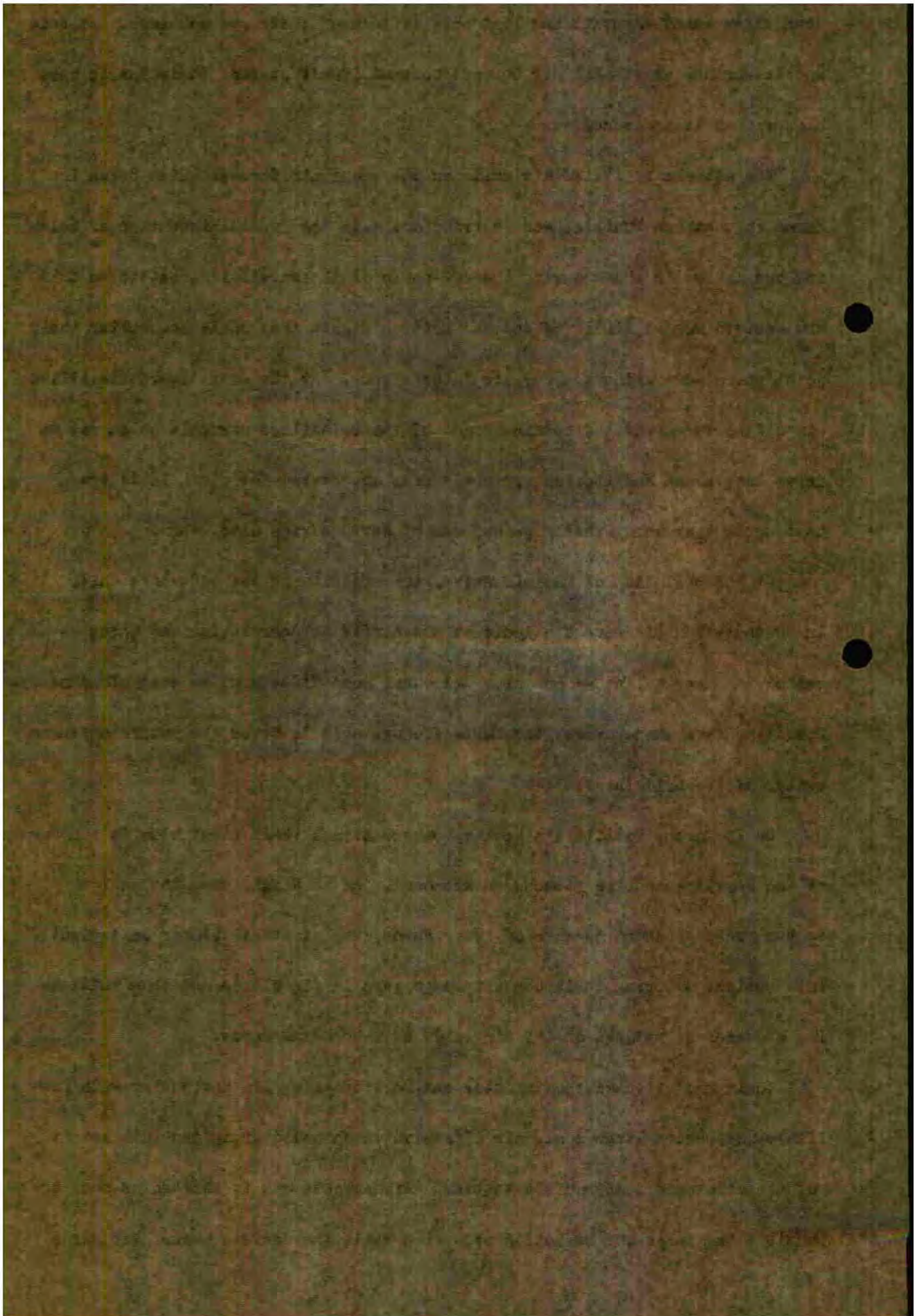
The offensive employment of fighter aircraft deviated considerably from the conduct of operations followed by the XII Air Support Command at Faid and Kasserine. During the period 23 March through 3 April, the fighters brought down sixty enemy aircraft and lost only fifteen of their own machines. At Faid and Kasserine, as the XII Air Support Command itself stated, their losses were higher than their successes.

The attacks by Allied air units on the enemy air forces, which began in March in southern Tunisia, were carried out with the general intention of holding the latter in check during the WOP-phase of the Mareth line battle so that the Western Desert Air Force and the British Eighth Army could accomplish their joint operations without enemy air interference. At the same time, this Allied air offensive marked the opening round of the relentless struggle which was to drive the German and Italian air units from one bombed-out airfield to the next until they were finally pushed out of North Africa altogether.

At the beginning of the offensive, the majority of the Luftwaffe units in southern Tunisia were stationed at the airfields near Tabaga and Gabes -- behind the Mareth line -- and near Mezzouna, some fifteen miles east of Maknassy. Operating from these bases, the Luftwaffe was able to cover the entire southern sector of the bridgehead.

On 15 March, Doolittle's medium bombers struck their first blow in the form of two heavily-escorted attacks on Mezzouna. On 18 March, when the medium bombers were grounded because of heavy rains, the strategic bomber units went into action, dropping their bombs through gaps in the clouds and thus initiating a series of attacks on the airfields at Tabaga and Gabes.

Cunningham selected the targets, and, coordinating his basic plan with Doolittle, ordered a large-scale air offensive which would bring the full weight of the strategic bomber units to bear. His purpose was to shorten as much as possible the lulls in the action occurring while the Western Desert Air Force



713 - a

was refueling or rearming. On 20 March, Doolittle's medium bombers raided Gabes and Tabaga. On 21 March they were augmented by seventy-six more B-17's, and during the following three days they carried out a total of 281 sorties against these two targets.

The enemy evacuated Messouna and Gabes first, but even Tabaga could not be held for much longer. When the Luftwaffe abandoned it to withdraw to Sfax and La Fauconnerie, twenty-eight damaged aircraft were left lying on the field.

By nightfall on 20 March, the New Zealand Corps had almost completely encircled the 27,000 enemy troops and 200 tanks which were holding the positions southwest of El Hounna. The Western Desert Air Force had concentrated its fighter-bombers over this area, while saving the light

713 - aa

and medium bombers for ground support operations to relieve the hard-pressed infantry troops fighting on the coastal sector. On the coastal sector, too, the P-40's and B-25's intervened on behalf of the 50th Division on 22 March, when they bombed enemy troop assembly points. On the same day, the Hurricane II-D's (Tankbusters) also claimed one of their most impressive victories -- they knocked out nine tanks of an enemy group fighting against the New Zealand Corps.

Even after the British 1st Armored Division appeared on the scene at the encirclement flank, the situation did not seem particularly favorable. The enemy had laid extensive mine-fields, possessed several good observation posts, and had antitank guns mounted in the hills overlooking the narrow passage.

In addition to Italian troops, the 21st Panzer Division was on hand, reinforced by the 15th Panzer Division and the 164th Light Division.

In view of the situation, the Allied army staff conferred at length with Broadhurst, Commander of the Western Desert Air Force. Broadhurst suggested a tightly-concentrated low-level air attack, to be carried out during the day against a narrow sector of the enemy front. The effectiveness of such an attack would be heightened by the fact that the enemy forces were not protected by trenches and that their antiaircraft artillery was weak.

Then, protected by a moving barrage, the tanks and infantry would try to break through the gap before the enemy could bring up his reinforcements.

The proposed low-level attack represented a sharp departure from the usual methods of the Western Desert Air Force. Heretofore it had apparently been wary of the potential losses inherent in such a direct encounter with the enemy, fearing that they would jeopardize its ability to maintain its air superiority.

In preparation for the attack, every single available bomber was sent out against the enemy tanks during the two nights preceding the battle.

On the morning of 26 March, the take-off fields were incapacitated by

713 - aa

violent sandstorms, but the weather cleared during the course of the afternoon and the attack (carried out by the 57th and 79th Fighter-Bomber Groups) descended upon the enemy at El Hama from a sunny, though still slightly hazy sky. The attack was led by three light bomber squadrons with fighter escort, followed by the Tankbusters. These were followed at fifteen minute intervals by Kitty bombers in groups of two and one-half squadron strength, appearing

714

over the battlefield to bomb special targets and to direct their airborne armaments against the enemy artillery positions.

Carried out in low-altitude flight, the attack was an unqualified success. And the moving barrage of fire provided a highly effective lane of cover.

The Spitfires kept a constant watch to see that no enemy aircraft appeared in the sky, but the close-support corps was holding the enemy air units close to their home areas. After the two and one-half hours of heavy bombardment, eleven Allied pilots were reported missing.

On 26 March, heavy sandstorms kept the Allied air units on the ground, but to make up for this the P-40's participated in 418 bombardment and low-level harassment missions on 29 March against Axis traffic on the coastal highway as far north as Mahara. The airfields at Zitouna, Oudref, and Sfax were also raided.

In retrospect it must be conceded that these low-level attacks were helped considerably by the fact that the targets along the Mareth line were almost completely without cover.

There were enemy night bomber units stationed at the airfield near Sfax, but since it lay beyond the range of the XII Air Support Command's escort fighters, the field was assigned to the Western Desert Air Force as soon as the ground situation permitted. After 30 March, the strategic bomber units which had carried out the attacks on La Fauconnerie gradually discontinued their raids. The airfield was strongly reinforced with antiaircraft artillery brought up from the abandoned air bases in the south.

The Allied air forces had brought their full numerical superiority to bear during the recent operations.

The strategic bomber units continued to divide their attention fairly equally between attacks against the enemy air forces and operations over the

714 - a

field of battle.

Once the withdrawal from the Mareth line to Wadi Akarit had gotten under way, the Allied air units were confronted with an increasing number of re-warding targets, which were attacked in effective coordination between the strategic bombers and the light bombers of the Western Desert Air Force.

From the opening attack of Operation WOP to the withdrawal to Wadi Akarit, a total of fourteen tanks and 129 motor vehicles were destroyed.

715

The British evaluation of the performance of the Tunisian Air Corps during the Mareth line fighting was extremely objective.

"German tactical air support in North Africa proved to be unexpectedly flexible and effective, and even after three weeks of uninterrupted operations, (following the start of the Eighth Army offensive against the Mareth line on 19 March), the enemy air units still had an aircraft strength of more than 300 machines, 60% of which were capable of immediate employment.

Subject to the restrictions imposed by their limited strength, the Luftwaffe units carried out their assigned missions with success. Whenever they were involved in operations, the majority of the pilots revealed their eagerness to do a good job. Even if they had had air units of the strength which we had, the German armies could not have had better support. The history of these Luftwaffe units is a classic example of what can be accomplished by relatively weak forces of high morale and exceptional efficiency in a struggle against a numerically superior enemy."¹²⁶

While the Ninth Bomber Force (?), based at Benghazi, was carrying out operations against the Axis supply shipments coming from the harbors on Sicily and in Italy, Spats and his forces were caught in a desperate battle to close off the funnel at the western edge of his sector. The long-range bombers and the Coastal Command were available to him for this mission, and they had two main targets to combat -- the supply ports and the convoys.

As of 1 March, the target priority list advocated by Doolittle was as follows:

1. Ships coming from Sicily or Italy and proceeding in a southerly or westerly direction
2. Ships coming from Tunisia and proceeding in a northerly or wasterly direction
3. Luftwaffe targets and Axis airfields
4. Transportation and communications centers in Tunisia.

715 - a

As far as naval targets were concerned, top priority was accorded to tankers.

During the course of the month, these guidelines were changed twice -- once on 16 March, when the heavy bomber units were ordered to concentrate exclusively on naval targets, and again on 24 March, when instructions were issued to the effect that the tankers were to be given top target priority.

126 - The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force, section dealing with the fighting in the Mediterranean during 1943/44, Chapter 11, pages 16/17; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

NOTE: The author is not responsible for the German translation appearing in the text.

716

This order was interpreted to mean that attacks on ships lying in a harbor, or on a harbor itself, were considered more important than attacks on enemy air units.

The Allied air forces experimented constantly to determine the best possible altitude at which to release their bombs. The information gained through this activity was applied with considerable success during the combined high-altitude/low-altitude attacks. On 12 March, for example, three Seibel barges out of a group of eleven were sunk and three damaged.

Only a few of the Coastal Command aircraft had a wide enough range to threaten the alternate routes taken by Axis shipping. One naval air squadron, the Albacore, was transferred to bases as far to the east as possible, so that it could reconnoiter the ocean traffic in the Bay of Bizerte.

The torpedo firing mechanisms were removed from the aircraft of a Marauder squadron (B-26's). This squadron was made responsible for long-range reconnaissance of the waters surrounding Corsica and Sardinia and off the Italian coast as far east as Naples and the Straits of Messina.

During the month of March, these reconnaissance aircraft discovered an enemy convoy in the Tyrrhenian Sea on its way to Africa, and provided Doolittle's long-range bombers with enough data to enable them to attack it in the Sicilian Straits. In addition to the Coastal Command aircraft, Doolittle had his own long-range reconnaissance unit (made up of P-38's) and also had access to the British reconnaissance forces based on Malta. All of these kept him provided with information on any promising targets.

On 22 March, twenty-four B-17's from the 301st Bomber Group succeeded in setting off an explosion in the harbor of Palermo, which devastated nearly thirty acres of docks, sank four freighters, and destroyed two coastal patrol ships, which were hurled against a demolished breakwater wall.

716 - a

The Tunisian harbors also claimed a share of the attention of the enemy heavy bombers. The Wellingtons had selected the port of Bizerte as their particular preserve, and had attacked it incessantly. On 24 March, Ferryville was also hit; the "Citta di Savona", which was unloading a cargo of ammunition, exploded and sank.

La Goulette, Tunis, and Sousse were also bombarded during March¹²⁷.

127 - Author's note: In view of the large number of Allied attacks on convoys, harbors, and airfields, only the most important have been selected for mention here.

717

For some time now, the extensive employment of air transport had represented the last resort of the Axis in the war in Africa, in Egypt and Libya, as well as in Tunisia. The first German troops to arrive had been brought by Ju-52's, and the transport service from Sicily and Italy had increased greatly in efficiency since its inception. By the end of 1942, the air transport units were carrying out twenty to fifty roundtrip flights a day; by mid-March 1943, they were already making one hundred landings daily in Tunis, and during the early part of April this number increased to one hundred and fifty¹²⁸.

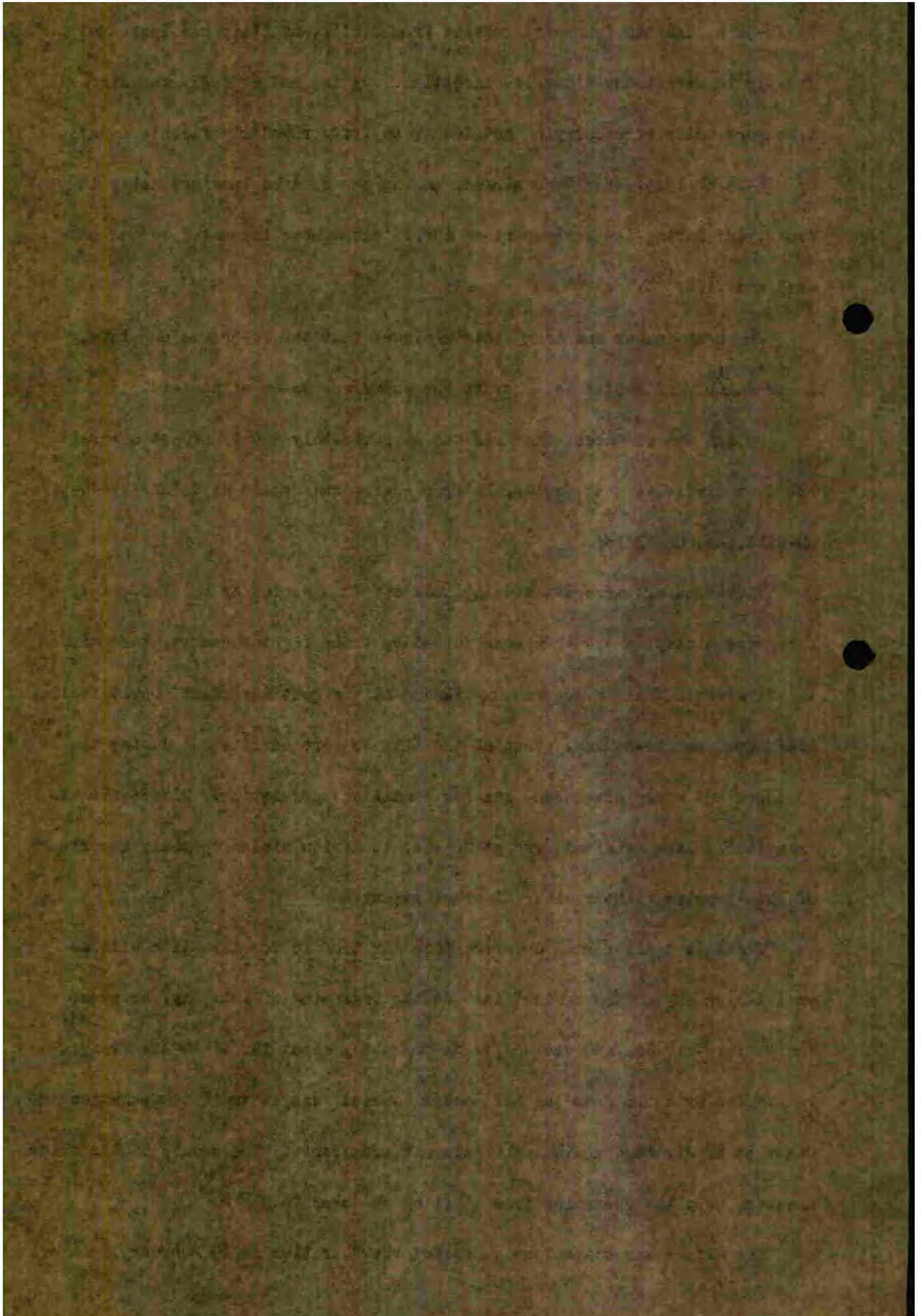
The army forces had long since realized that the Ju-52 was absolutely indispensable if resistance against the enemy was to be maintained.

By the end of March, the Axis had approximately 500 transport aircraft based at airfields near Naples, Palermo, Bari, and Reggio di Calabria (Ju-52's, SM-82's, and Me-323's).

The transport aircraft usually took off from Naples or Palermo. They flew over Sicily, where they were joined by their fighter escort, then across the Straits to Tunisia, where they landed at the most important supply fields, Sidi Ahmed and El-Aouina. Most of the flights were carried out during the forenoon and early afternoon, weather conditions permitting. Direct flights from the Italian mainland (except Naples) to Africa picked up their escorts of about twelve fighter aircraft over Trapani.

The Allied air forces observed this air traffic for some time without undertaking any action against it. At the beginning of February, however, the Eastern Air Command decided to do something about it. The 242d Group, reinforced by units from the XII Bomber Command, was assigned to Operation FLAX, to be directed against the Axis air transports. The crisis at Kasserine, however, kept the Operation from starting on schedule.

The Allied air commanders cancelled the Operation on 19 February. Later,



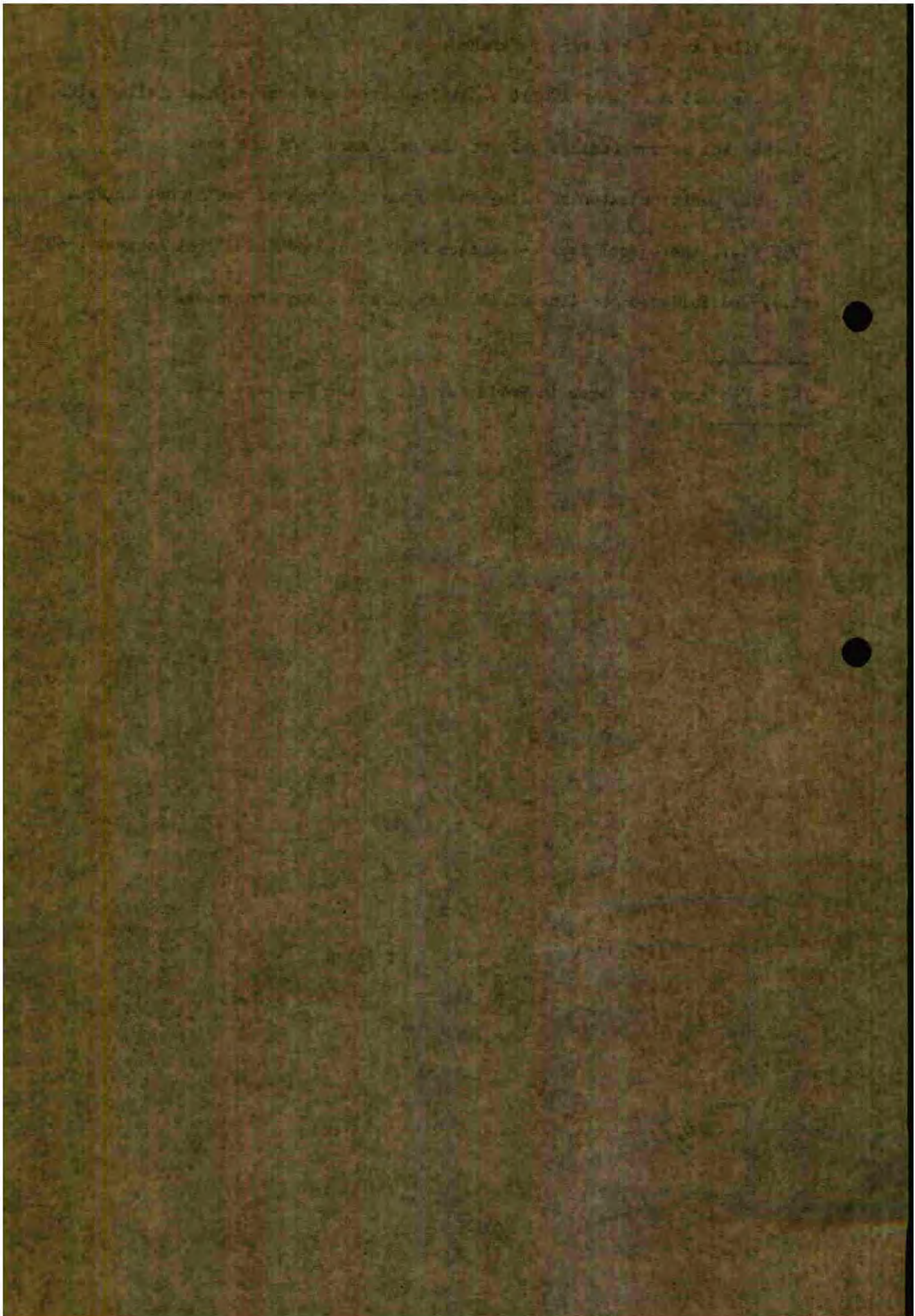
717 - a

Doolittle was placed in charge of combatting the enemy air transport activity. The enemy flights were carefully watched with the help of radar and aerial photographs and an enormous amount of data from a number of sources were filed away for future reference.

The salt marsh, or Akarit position, which was some eighteen miles wide, blocked the narrow passage between the salt marsh and the sea.

The position extended along the southern slopes of the Djebel Haidoui (950 ft.), the Djebel Tebaga-Fatmassa (900 ft.), and the Djebel Roumana (560 ft.), and followed the line of the Wadi Akarit along the coast.

128 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 189.



718

The first two points named above (Djebel Haidoui and Djebel Tebaga-Fat-massa) fall off steeply to the south and rise about 600 ft. above the plains northwest of Gabes. The strip of coast between Djebel Roumana and the sea is about five miles wide and at this point the Wadi Akarit represents a serious obstacle, which, however, is not entirely invulnerable to attack by armored forces.

In the west, the position could not be encircled by motorized troops, however, inasmuch as the salt marshes of El-Pad-El-Fedjed were negotiable only after a long period of drought -- and this condition, of course, did not obtain in March and April 1943.

German and Italian engineer units had been working for some time to prepare the position for defensive operations.

As of 28 March, the following Axis troops had taken up their positions along the salt marshes:

Western sector: the Italian XXI Army Corps together with the 16th Pistoia Division and the Air Landing Division La Spezia; the German 164th Light Division was also subordinate to the XXI Army Corps. Illogically, the 164th Light Division had been assigned to the right wing, where terrain conditions made it fairly certain that the enemy would not attempt an attack.

Eastern sector: the Italian XX Army Corps together with the 101st Division Trieste (Motorized), the Division Giovanni Fascisti, and the 90th Light Division.

Strong combat patrols had been posted some three miles in front of the combat line.

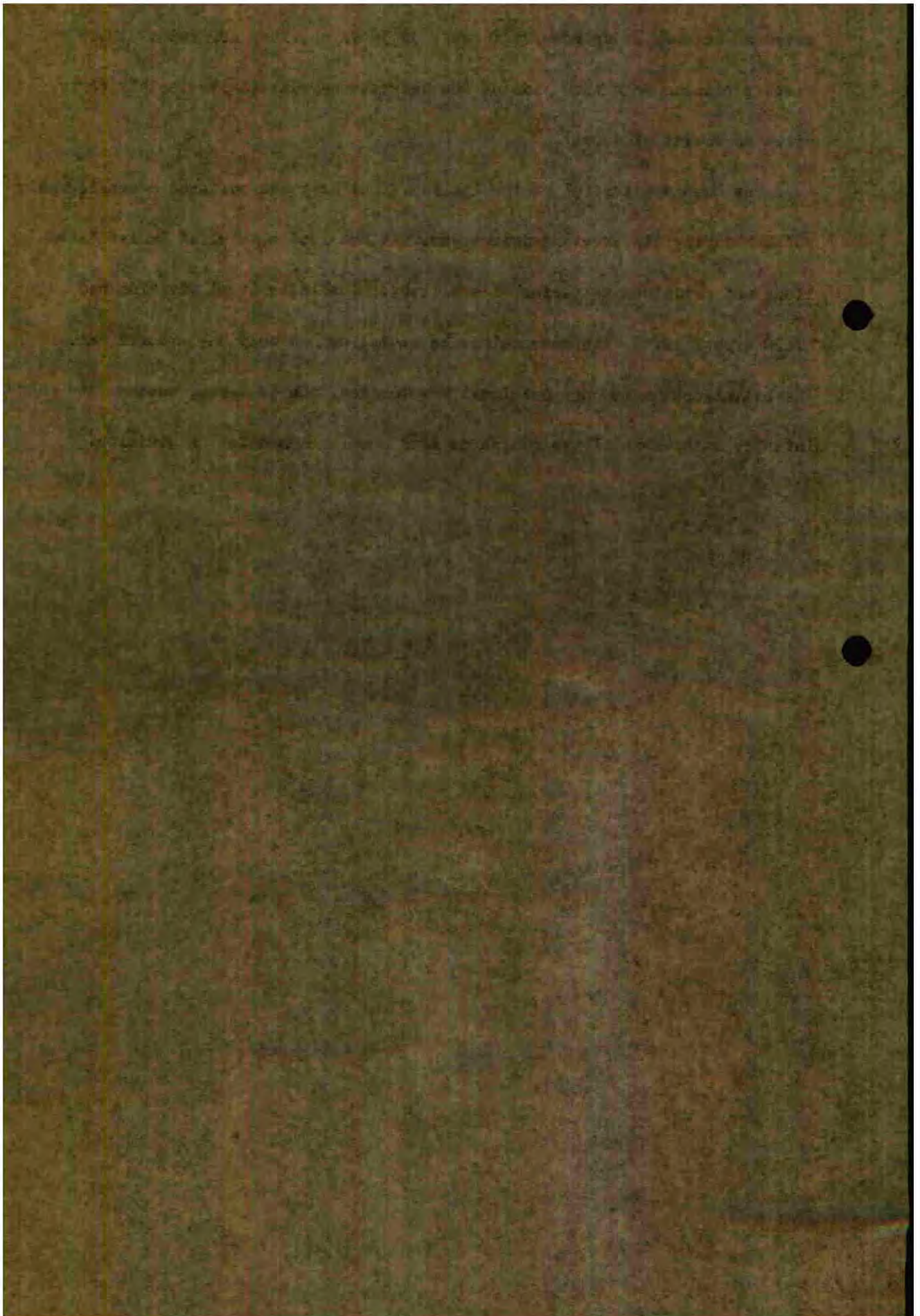
The Sahara Group Mannerini had taken over the task of covering the area lying between the western wing of Messe's Army and the southern sector of the

718 - a

western Tunisian front as far as the region east of El Guezzar, which was being held by the von Broich Group (10th Panzer Division).

The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions had been pulled back and were being saved as an army group reserve force. On 30 March, they arrived at their alert positions on either side of the Gebket-en-Houal (approximately forty miles northwest of Gabes).

The combat potential of the Italian First Army had suffered a considerable setback during its previous operations; it had lost a total of twelve battalions and seventeen batteries of artillery. The 164th Light Division had only 1,100 troops left; its reconnaissance battalion had only one armored car. The battalions had been provisionally motorized. On 30 March, another two infantry battalions of two companies each were assigned to the Division.



719

On 30 March the Army Group Africa received orders from the Italian Supreme Command which, on the surface, stated that the Tunisian western front and the salt marsh position were to be defended, but at the same time made it clear that these points could and should be abandoned as soon as there should be any threat of a tactical breakthrough in the south.

Generalleutnant von Arnim, Commander in Chief of the Army Group Africa, gave the following evaluation of the situation:

"On the western front there is no immediate danger as far south as Maknassy.

Maknassy and its vicinity represent the critical point strategically; thanks to the Combat Group Lang, however, the situation there is stable.

As far as the rest of the western front is concerned, it is clear that developments at El Guettar, where the enemy attack is anticipated on about 30 March, must be watched very carefully.

The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions will be ready for immediate employment as soon as adequate fuel supplies have been received.

Considering the exceedingly low combat efficiency of the Italian troops, which has recently been substantiated once more, it is doubtful that they will be able to withstand an enemy attack for very long. The Army Group Africa will hold out until the very last minute.

A step-by-step retreat from the salt marsh position, however, as envisioned by the Italian Supreme Command, could hardly have much chance of success. On the contrary, the fact that the terrain gradually widens like a funnel towards the north is far more likely to enable the enemy to pursue our withdrawing troops, especially in view of the excellent network of roads in that area."

On the southern sector of the western Tunisian front, in the Maknassy area, 30 March passed uneventfully -- to the surprise of the Axis leaders. The only enemy activity noted took the form of tank patrols along the road

719 - a

leading from Gafsa to El Guettar.

The advance troops posted just before the salt marsh position were forced back to their base position. Although enemy activity was noted, the Axis troops were forced by the acute shortage of ammunition to let it proceed without interruption¹²⁹.

During the period from 1 through 3 April, the enemy sent out armored reconnaissance patrols along the entire front line. One of these patrol groups managed to capture -- temporarily -- the Axis position on the Djebel Roumana, which was defended by the Italian Division Trieste. In a counter-attack on the following day, a regiment from the 90th Light Division recaptured the position, albeit at the cost of heavy losses.

129 - See Footnote 17; page 104 of the source detailed there.

720

On 5 April, Feldmarschall Kesselring, Commander in Chief, South, had arrived in Africa in order to see the situation for himself. On the evening of 6 April, the day of his return to Frascati, he transmitted his report to the Wehrmacht High Command.

He stressed the fact that the salt marsh position, if properly defended, was "practically unassailable". As of the moment, he continued, Italian divisions were holding the harbors which represented the key to possession of the entire position. In view of the acknowledged inefficiency of the Italian troops, however, he had ordered them replaced by German units. Since the German units were still under way, the change could not become effective for another twenty-four hours.

In the meantime, the catastrophe which was to frustrate completely the plans of the Commander in Chief, South, had begun.

During the night of 5/6 April, a Gurkha battalion stormed the Djebel Tebaga-Fatmassa in a surprise attack, without any previous artillery softening whatsoever, and drove off the defending Italian troops. At 0415, approximately 500 guns opened fire, marking the beginning of a full-scale attack on the heart of the salt marsh position. By 1000 on the following morning, the Italian First Army had received definite confirmation of a successful enemy breakthrough on the sector held by the Divisions Trieste and La Spezia. Furthermore, the enemy had succeeded in widening the breakthrough gap at the Djebel Tebaga-Fatmassa position and in overrunning the nearby Djebel Roumana position. The behavior of the Italian divisions in terrain of this kind, so ideally suited to defensive operations, left German leaders grimly convinced that they had been deliberately betrayed.

This interpretation is substantiated by the following:

"Another point worthy of mention is the fact that the Italians are apparently eager to surrender and sometimes did so in entire companies. There is

720 - a

at least one authenticated instance in which a whole truckload of Italian officers, in gala uniforms and with a cock's feather on their helmets, drove off happily to the prisoner-of-war camp....."¹³⁰

In Rome, General Ambrosio, Chief of the Italian General Staff, refused to fly to Africa with Feldmarschall Kesselring. Kesselring had requested him to use his personal influence to urge the Italian officers and troops to do their very best.

In the meantime, the enemy had managed to negotiate the obstacle represented by the hilly terrain; fresh forces, brought up from the rear area, poured through the gap to the broad plains lying to the north.

130 - Harry C. Butcher, *op.cit.*, Part I, page 102 (German edition; page 278 in the original), data pertaining to 8 April 1943; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

721

The last desperate countermeasures initiated by the German forces came too late to be effective. When it became clear that the ports lost to the enemy could not be regained -- since the available troops were numerically inadequate -- the Army Group Africa had no alternative but to abandon southern Tunisia.

If the German forces had remained any longer in their position after the enemy breakthrough, they would have inevitably been isolated by the fully motorized enemy troops.

The Commander in Chief, South, concluded the report he submitted to the Wehrmacht High Command on the evening of 7 April with the following statement:

"This means that we have lost Tunisia!"

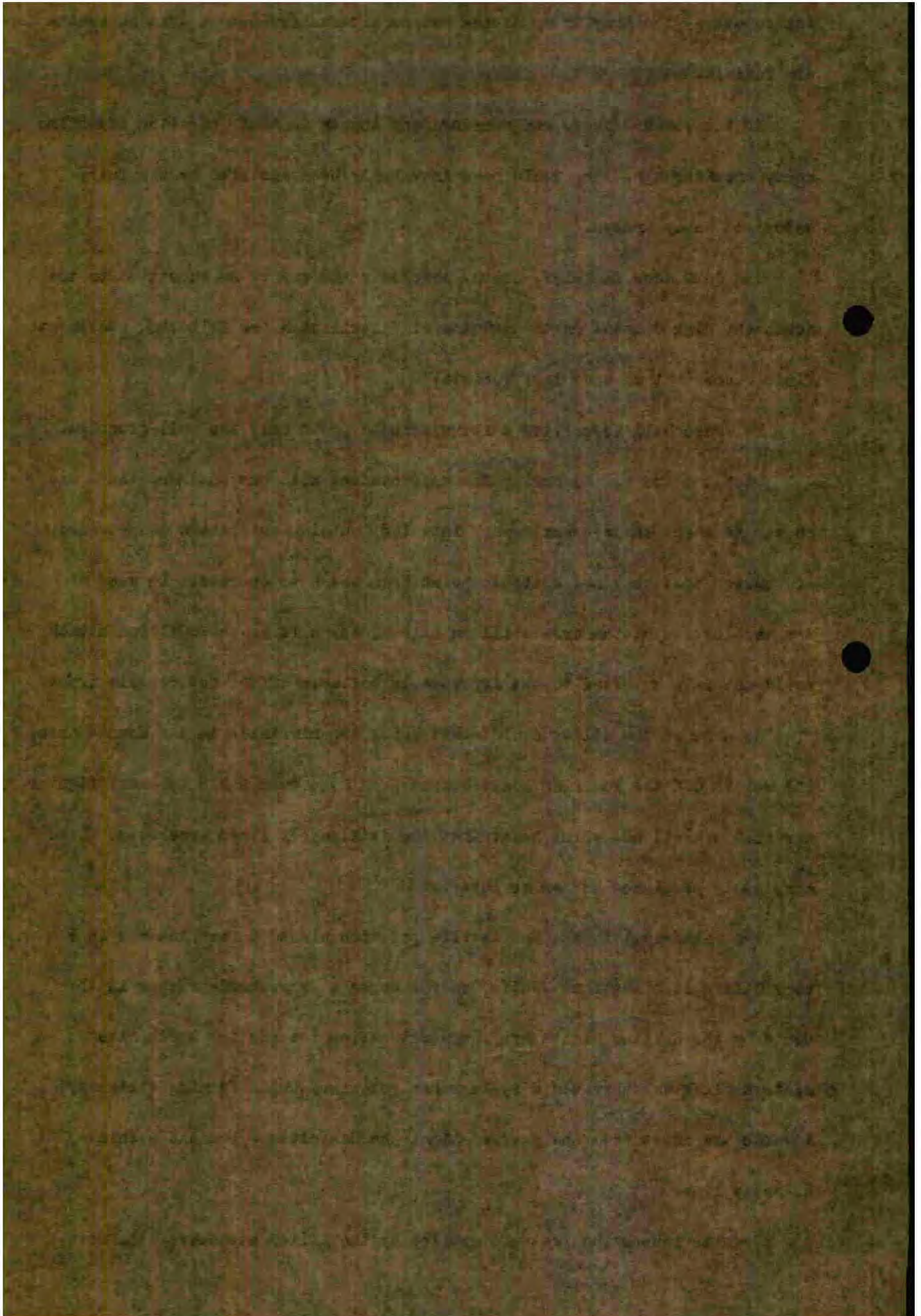
Feldmarschall Kesselring's fears were to prove only too well-grounded.

Once the two Allied armies had made contact with one another, there was no way to check their breakthrough into the Tunisian bridgehead -- provided, of course, that they had a stable point from which to operate. In view of the shallowness of the area still in Axis hands, a large-scale Allied attack could not help but lead to the irrevocable collapse of the entire Axis front.

As soon as the Allies could start using the airfields in the Sousse area, the waters off the Tunisian coast became even more vulnerable to enemy fighter aircraft operations, which meant that the Axis supply lines were bound to be completely paralyzed sooner or later.

The withdrawal to the Enfidaville position placed German leaders in a very difficult situation. While General Messe's Army, hard-pressed in the south by the British Eighth Army, was retreating towards the north, its western flank was threatened by American motorized units forcing their way towards the coast from the passes along the Ousseltia - Fondouk - Paid - Maknassy line.

Despite increasing pressure applied by the Allied attackers, the move-



721 - a

ments of the Fifth Panzer Army and Messe's First Army had to be very carefully coordinated.

The retreat from the salt marsh position began during the night of 6/7 April. Most of the Italian troops, at least the mobile units, were sent ahead to the Enfidaville position to secure it for the rest of the forces to come.

The German units took over as a rear guard force, establishing themselves on a temporary defense line between Sebkwat-an-Noual and Gekhira along the coastal highway.

722

Simultaneously, also on the southern flank of the Fifth Panzer Army, the Combat Group von Broich moved from the El Guezzar area back to the narrow passage northwest of Sebket en Noual. In this way they prevented the Allied forces in western Tunisia and the British Eighth Army in the south from making contact with each other.

The British Eighth Army followed in hot pursuit with tanks and artillery, but succeeded only in overrunning the Italian Sahara Group near Sebket en Noual.

Attempts by the American II Army Corps to drive through the Axis western defense line in the Maknassy - Sened area failed to bring success.

On 7 April, the British V Army Corps launched a series of attacks on the Beja - Medjes-el-Bab sector of the Fifth Panzer Army's line. The attacks lasted nearly two weeks.

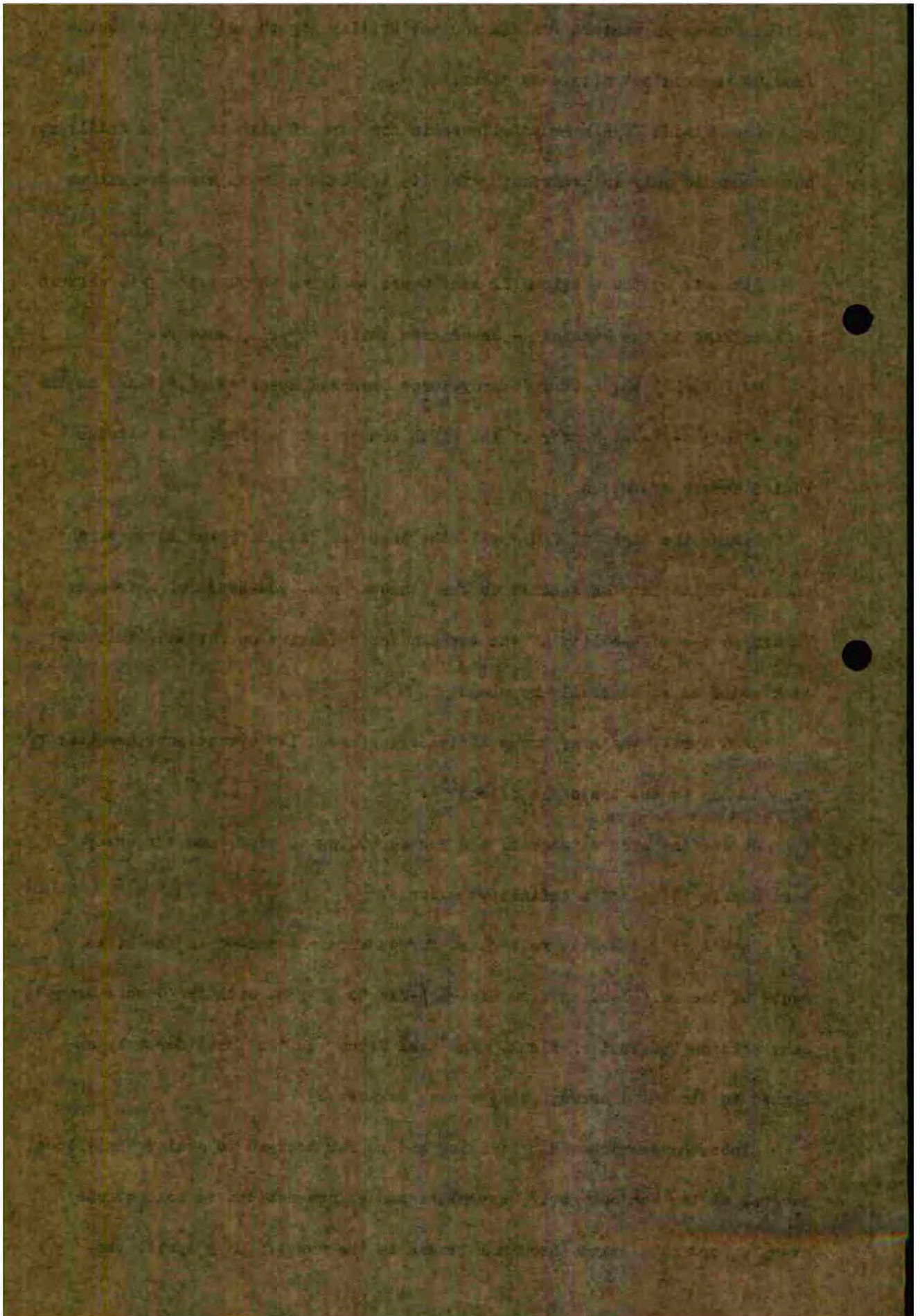
During the night of 7/8 April, the American 34th Division threw strong infantry units into an assault on the Fondouk Pass, southwest of Kairouan. Thanks to the suitability of the terrain for defensive operations, this attack could be successfully repulsed.

On 8 April, the Army Group Africa transferred its operational headquarters from Sousse to the peninsula of Bon¹³¹.

So far the Axis withdrawal had run according to plan, and the enemy had been unable to record a definitive success.

On 9 April, the Axis rear guard forces were entrenched in the hills south of the road leading from Sidi-bou-Sid to Agareb, with the Combat Group Lang holding the western flank. The Lang Group was the force formerly assigned to block the narrow passage near Maknassy.

Since the American 34th Division had so far managed to achieve only local success at the Fondouk Pass, General Alexander now decided to concentrate every effort on a drive through Kairouan to the coast. On 9 April, the

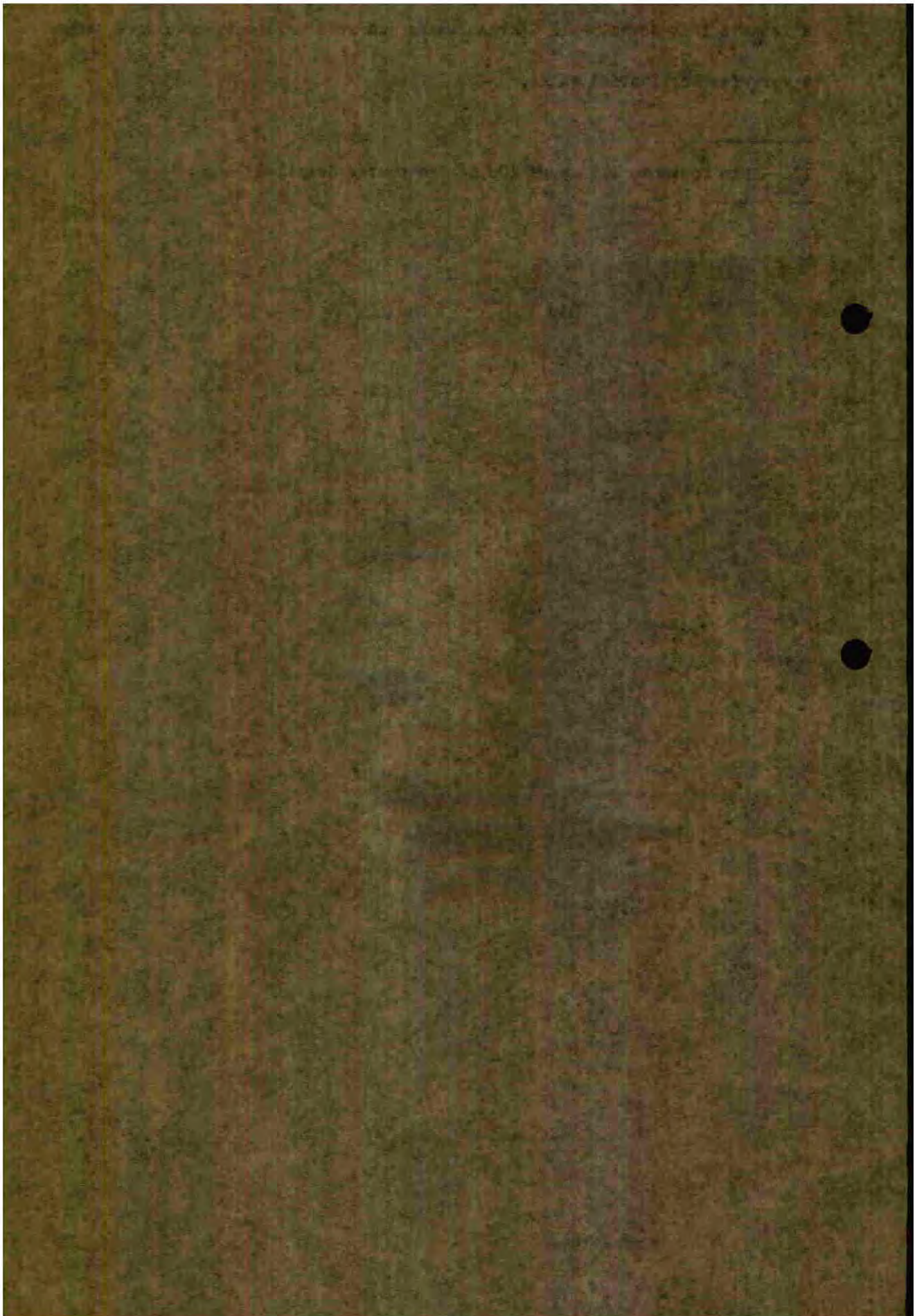


722 - a

British 6th Armored Division attacked in an attempt to force a breakthrough.

Its most advanced regiment ran into an extensive mine-field, which was guarded by antitank cannon mounted in the surrounding hills. The Allied attackers lost seventy-six Sherman tanks and were unable to make more than a very few territorial gains.

131 - See Footnote 17; page 108 of the source detailed there.



723

It was the Combat Group Lang, again, which was largely responsible for the defensive success. It had been relieved of its assignment as a rear guard force and arrived just in time to go into action on 9 April east of the bottleneck position.

In view of the threatening developments in the Fondouk area and the growing pressure being applied by the pursuing enemy forces, German leaders decided to surmount, in one long leap, the obstacle presented by the open terrain between Sidi-bou-Sid - Sfax and Kairouan. This maneuver took place during the night -- with no enemy interference whatsoever -- and by the morning of 10 April, the following forces had established themselves in their new rear guard positions:

10th Panzer Division: near Kairouan

15th Panzer Division: east of Kairouan, near El Djem

164th Light Division: west of El Djem

90th Light Division: near La Ghebbia, on the coast highway.

The British Eighth Army occupied Sfax on 10 April and contented itself with merely carrying out armored car reconnaissance beyond this point.

Armored elements of the British IX Army Corps, on the ^{other} ~~same~~ hand, which had broken through the enemy lines near Fondouk, managed to reach Kairouan. They were evidently too weak to continue their drive through to the coast.

Due to strong enemy pressure at Kairouan, the Combat Group Lang was withdrawn on 11 April, with orders to make its way around the 10th Panzer Division to a position west of Sebket Kalbia.

The 164th and 90th Light Divisions were transferred into the areas southwest of Enfidaville and northwest of Sousse, respectively.

Thanks to the flexibility of their leaders and to the high morale and combat experience of the troops, the difficult withdrawal was accomplished with relatively few casualties. One German and nine Italian battalions, none

723 - a

of them even partially motorized, were taken prisoner by the enemy.

If General Alexander had decided earlier to commit his numerically superior forces in a breakthrough attempt via Kairouan to the coast -- and this would have been a conceivable decision in view of the military situation -- then the Enfidaville front could never have been established.

On the northern sector held by the Fifth Panzer Army, the air situation was deteriorating steadily in favor of the Allied air forces.

724

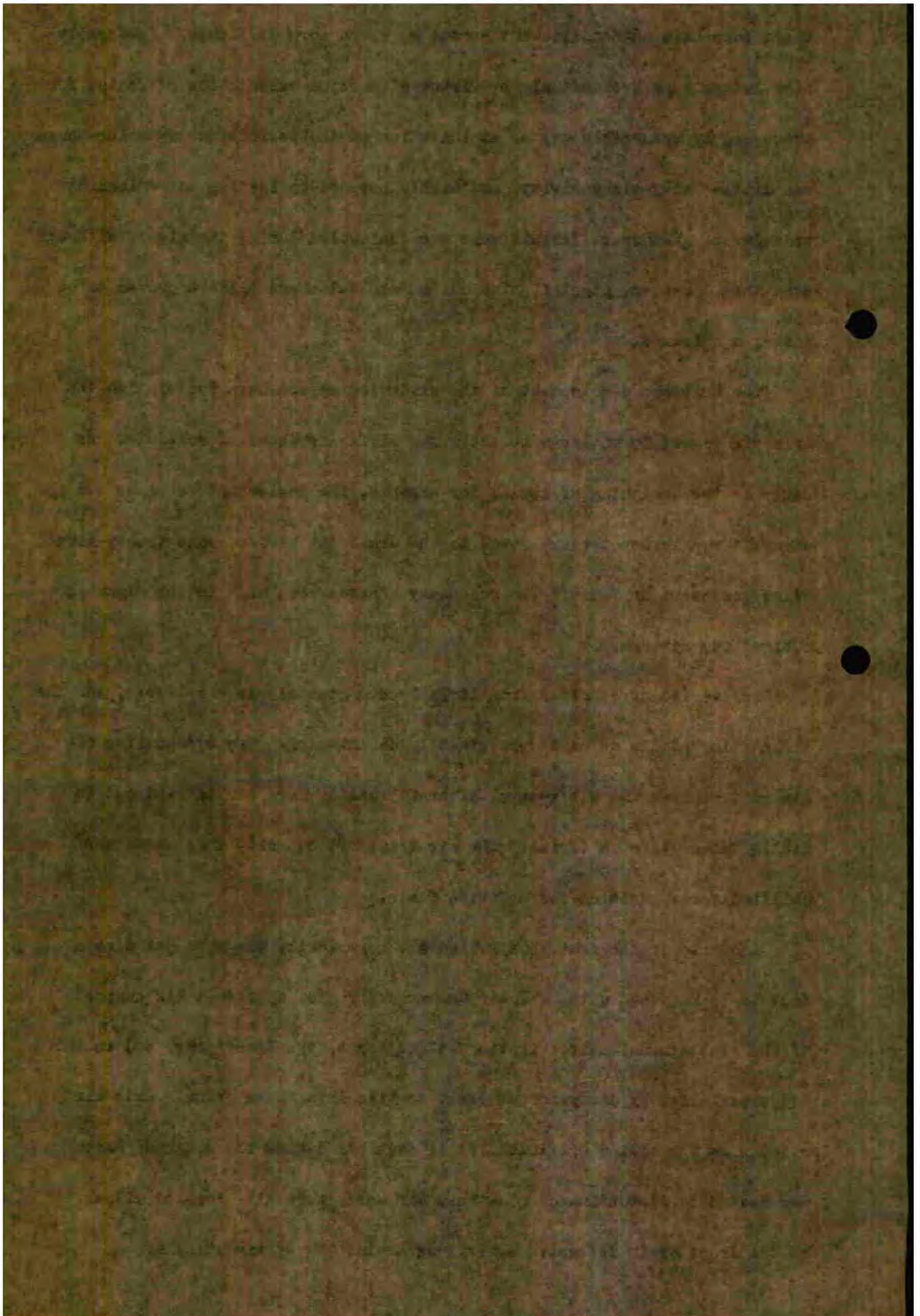
Enemy air attacks by increasingly stronger forces were a daily occurrence; the Axis fighter units were gradually forced on the defensive.

As a result, Axis air transport operations were greatly endangered and their successful accomplishment became more and more difficult. Unbearably high losses were avoided only by virtue of careful calculation of routes for these highly vulnerable units, exploitation of the periods during which there was little enemy air activity, and highly speeded-up loading and unloading procedures. Transport flights were even scheduled during the night, although even then the enemy night fighter units from Malta and Algiers proved to be rather a nuisance.

The critical development of the situation in southern Tunisia led the Axis air forces to withdraw to their new airfields ahead of schedule. As early as the beginning of April, for example, the logistical services and the aircraft repair depots were moved to the Grombalia plains, some twenty-five miles southeast of Tunis. The necessary changes were made in the signal communications network.

Deliveries of supplies from Italy became steadily less reliable, and the already low stocks on hand were steadily diminishing. The overhauling of aircraft engines and all general aircraft repairs were now carried out in Sicily rather than in Africa. The air transport capacity thus saved was utilized for ammunition and aviation fuels.

In spite of the fact that Allied air superiority was more and more a fact to be reckoned with, the Air Commander, Tunis, continued his support of the stubborn defensive fighting at Jedjenane, the Djebel Ang, and in the Medjerda Valley by carrying out daily sorties into these areas. Axis air attacks on the Allied airfields, still feasible during the month of March, now had to be discontinued. The Axis air units were all occupied either at the front or in defensive operations against enemy air attacks.



724 - a

The Tunisian Air Corps had been forced to withdraw the units of the Air Commander, Gabes, to the provisionally equipped airfields in the Sfax - La Fausconnerie area and -- in the north -- near La Smela and El Djea after the abandonment of the Mareth line by the Axis forces and the threatening encirclement by Allied troops advancing from Gafsa. These airfields, however, lay approximately sixty miles behind the front. Unfortunately the Allied drive to Maknassy had rendered the three airfields near Messouna completely useless.

725

The Air Commander, Gabes, was redesignated the Air Commander, South, and his headquarters was moved to La Fauconnerie. The Air District Headquarters deactivated the Airfield Command Gabes, a part of which returned to Italy and the rest of which was attached to the Airfield Command Tunis.

The operational areas of the two Air Commanders were defined in a new regulation; according to it, the boundary between their areas of jurisdiction ran from Enfidaville to Tebessa.

The Air Commander, South, committed his units over El Guettar and Maknassy, but his main mission was the disruption of the British regrouping operations in the bottleneck position near Gabes. Bomber units belonging to the II Air Corps were also ordered from Sicily to take part in this mission. The enemy air forces kept up constant attacks on the German airfields. The damage, however, was not too serious; the new, widely spaced airfield buildings proved to stand up well under attack.

A number of airfields, as a matter of fact, were never even recognized as such by Allied reconnaissance.

The Italian air units were playing a less and less important role in operations. Their airfields were too crowded and their antiaircraft artillery performed very poorly. On more than one occasion, enemy low-flying attacks managed to destroy entire Italian squadrons on the ground.

After the salt marsh position had been lost, the Italian units withdrew to the areas around Sfax and, further south, near Graiba. The corps staff established its headquarters in the Sousse area.

The breakthrough into the salt marsh position and the subsequent decision to abandon central Tunisia did not find the Luftwaffe unprepared. The units were quickly and systematically withdrawn to the north. As a result they were able to continue their task of supporting the operations of General Messe's rear guard forces and of covering the retreat of those elements

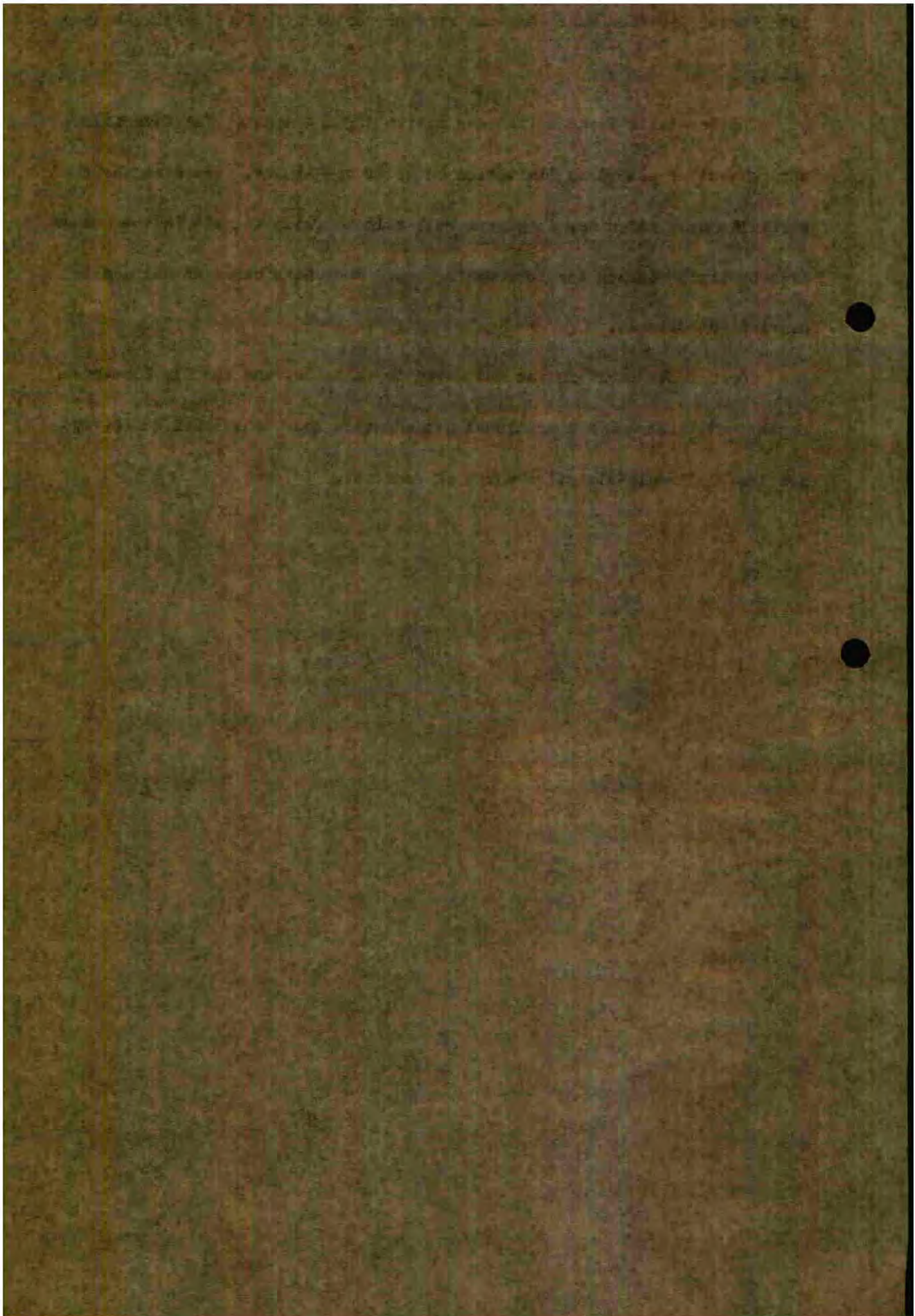
725 - a

withdrawing to the north.

The close-support forces (III Group, 1st Close-Support Wing) continued to attack the enemy's advance patrols; the defensive operations of the 10th Panzer Division near Kairouan were supported by Luftwaffe dive-bomber units.

The Royal Air Force units were active day and night. The favorable spring weather placed no limitation on their commitment. Based at their airfields near Medenine, they were well able to reach targets in the Sousse area by flying across the intervening sea. The units based on Malta also carried out attacks.

General Headquarters was now moved to Carthage, and the Air Commander, South, established his operational headquarters near Menzel bou Zeffa, approximately twenty-six miles north of Hammamet.



726

On 8 April, the Axis air forces had to abandon their well-equipped airfields near La Fauconnerie in order to evade advancing British armored forces. On 10 April, the fields at La Smela and El Djem had to be evacuated, and soon afterwards Msaken suffered the same fate.

The evacuation of Msaken meant that the Axis forces had been driven out of all their airfields south of the Enfidaville position. From now on, General Messe's Army could be supported only from the airfields located in the vicinity of Tunis. The majority of the Axis air activity was directed against Kairouan and the area directly north of it. The Italian air units had withdrawn to the plains of Grombalia, but because their ground organization was not yet ready for employment, they took very little part in operations¹³².

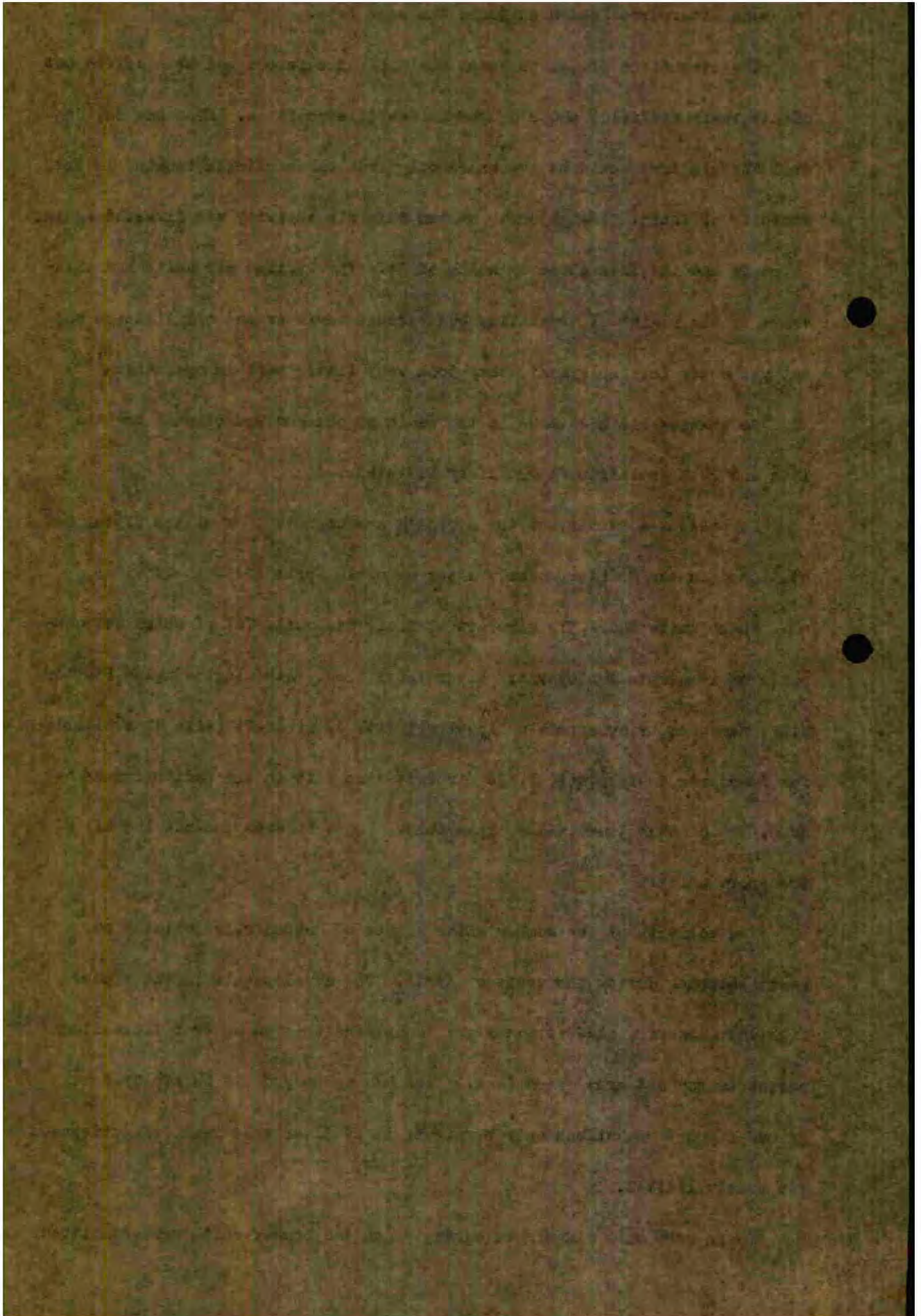
No changes had been made in the chain of command established for the 19th and 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Divisions.

We possess a summary of the strength and organization of the flying units stationed in the Mediterranean theater as of 10 April 1943.

These units had 1,377 aircraft at their disposal, 767 of which were capable of immediate employment. After the I Group, 4th Single-Engine Fighter Wing, had been transferred to ^DPlasti with its 49 aircraft (with 41 available for immediate employment), 1,328 aircraft were left in the Mediterranean area, 726 of them immediately employable. These figures include the air transport units.

The activity of the bomber units was to be concentrated chiefly on enemy shipping during the month of April. The developments in the ground fighting, however, made it necessary to utilize them to an ever increasing extent to support army operations. Inasmuch as they could be employed in ground-support operations only by night, it is clear that their effectiveness was fairly limited.

There were only six nights during which the bomber units were committed



726 - a

in accordance with the original plan; during three of these nights, bomber and torpedo-bomber aircraft attacked enemy shipping convoys, and during the other three, the harbors of Philippeville, Algiers, and Bone.

An attack by Allied four-engine bombers carried out on Easter Sunday on the airfields at Grosseto, which housed both the torpedo-bomber squadrons and the torpedo-bomber school, was devastatingly effective. The Italian aircraft reporting service had failed to report the approach of the enemy aircraft; the torpedo-bombers were put out of action for months as a result.

132 - Hans Seidemann, *op.cit.*, pages 23-29.

727

Axis ocean supply transport became steadily more unreliable; not even during March were the Italians able to fulfill the quota they had promised -- 80,000 tons per month for the African theater. To an ever greater degree, the Allied air attacks on Axis harbors and railway networks resulted in disastrous destruction of facilities and consequent delays.

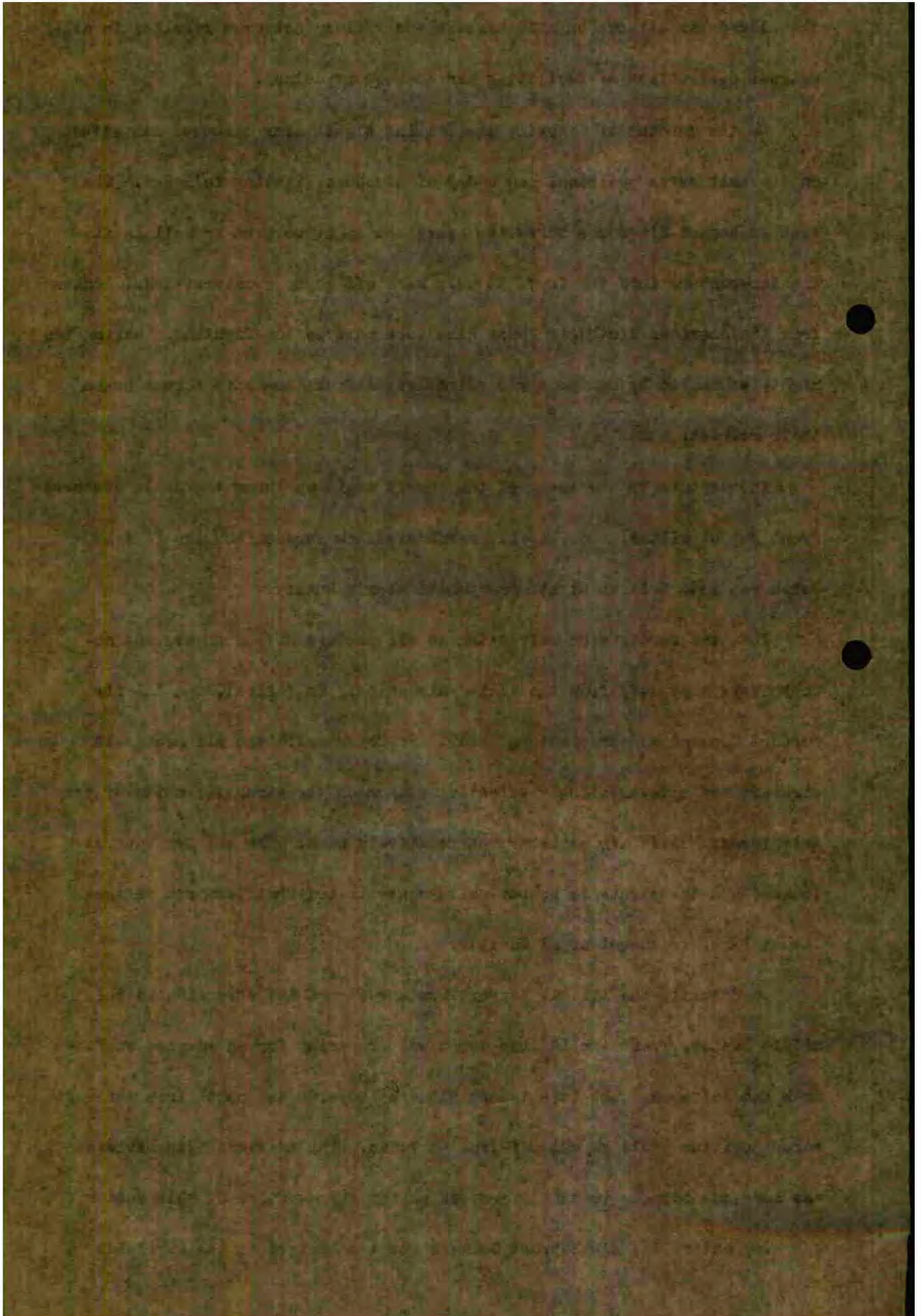
On the morning of 6 April, the British Eighth Army launched its attack on the salt marsh position, and a day of stubborn fighting followed. The Western Desert Air Force threw its heavy and light bombers as well as its fighter-bombers into the fray, to help ward off enemy counterattacks. Units from the American Ninth Air Force also took part in the fighting. During the night, exhausted by Montgomery's relentless attack, the Axis forces began their retreat.

The capture by the enemy of the Akarit position threw the whole southern front out of kilter. On 7 April, reconnaissance forces from the II Army Corps ran into British Eighth Army units near Maknassy.

The Axis forces were retreating on all sectors of the front, and nowhere were they safe from the Allied air units. On 7 April, the XII Air Support Command and the Western Desert Air Force mobilized all available aircraft for a devastatingly effective attack on the straggler units of the Axis forces. Axis air activity was relatively weak. The XII Air Support Command and the strategic bomber units concentrated their efforts on the Chamsi Pass, southeast of El Guettar.

On 8 April, the XII Air Support Command turned its attention to the middle sector, where the IX Army Corps was preparing for an advance on Fondouk and Kairouan. The Axis troops withdrew^{ing}/towards the north from the salt marsh position could be cut off from Kairouan. The American 34th Division was made subordinate to the IX Army Corps for the duration of this action.

The entire XII Air Support Command was transferred to the airfields



727 - a

around Sbeitla. The attack began on 8 April, the Pass was captured on 9 April, and the attackers reached Kairouan on 11 April. Even so, the Axis forces, with the help of hastily summoned reinforcements, were able to hold them off long enough to permit their own troops to withdraw to the area north of Kairouan without interference.

The Allied coordination of ground and air operations was not all it might have been on this occasion. The IX Army Corps had had no experience in the technique of coordinating joint objectives in the face of enemy action.

728

Communication was inefficient. Definitely scheduled bomber attacks were called off at the last minute, and when it was finally decided to employ the bomber units after all, it was too late for them to carry out their missions effectively.

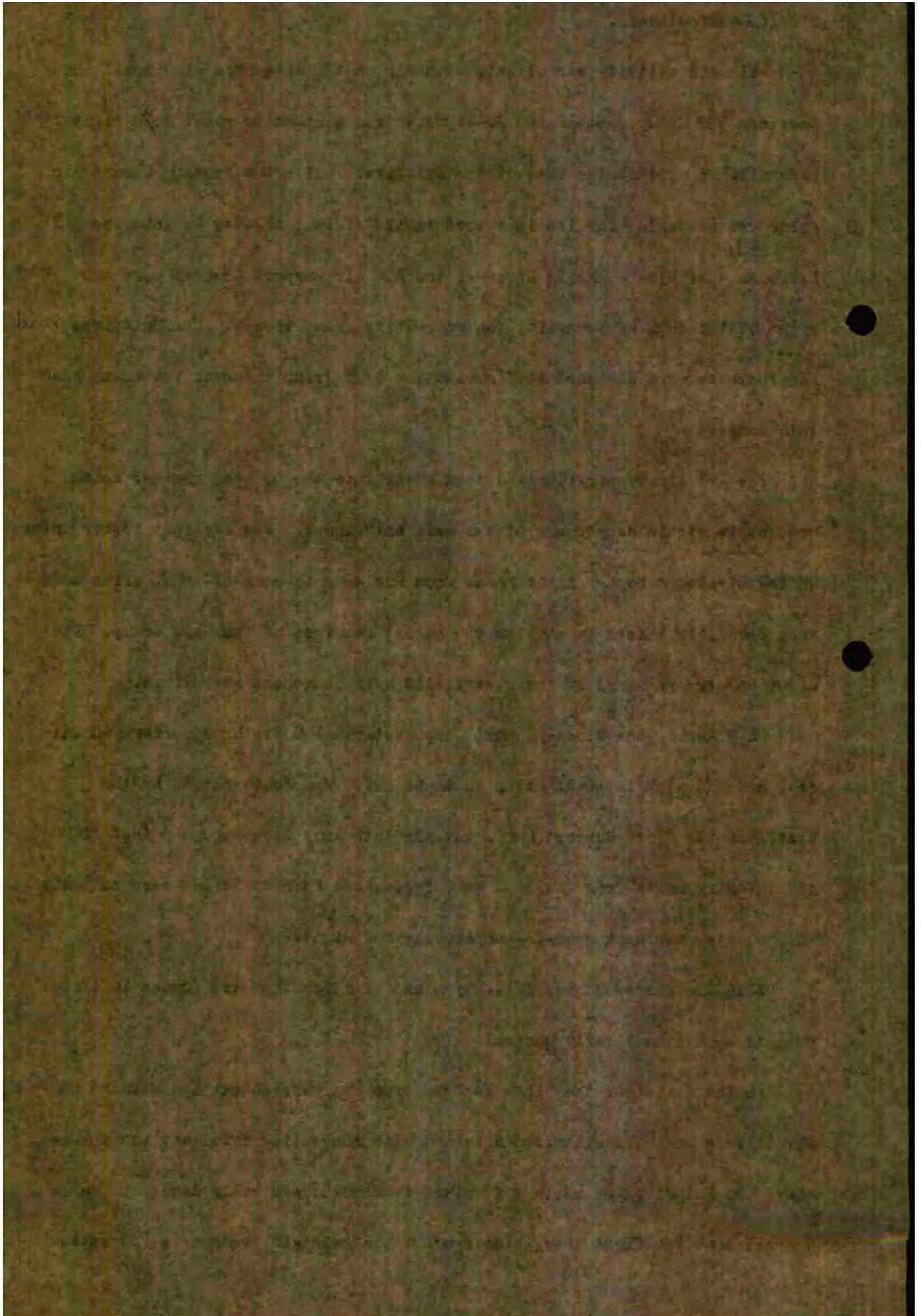
Axis air activity was slight, although on the afternoon of 9 April the American 52d Group spotted two Ju-88 units and managed to shoot down ⁴eight aircraft, as against the loss of one Spitfire. While the Western Desert Air Force was preparing for its last move in the African theater -- into the Kairouan - El Djem - Hergla area --, the XII Air Support Command bore the brunt of the task of harassing the retreating enemy troops. Its Spitfires *and* Hurribombers were assigned to fly with the 242d Group whenever the enemy came into range.

The XII Air Support Command then moved into the Le Sers region, which brought it within easy range of the Axis bridgehead. The daylight bomber units of the strategic bomber fleet moved from Thelepte to Souk-el-Arba, which made them favorably placed to utilize the escort services of the 242d Group. The night bombers remained at their airfields near Canrobert and Biskra.

On 9 April, the Close-Support Corps established its headquarters in Haïdra, and one week later it moved on to Le Kef. The route chosen by the staffs of the Close-Support Corps and the 18th Army Group crossed that of the infantry units from the II Army Corps, whose four divisions were on their way to Beja, moving bumper-to-bumper, day and night.

Thus the framework was laid, by means of which the Axis forces in Africa were to be systematically encircled.

In the meantime, the Ninth Bomber Force had carried out its attacks on the islands and on the Italian mainland with increasing frequency and intensity. On 1 April, the railway terminal in Messina was badly damaged; on 5 April came the first heavy blow against the Axis air transports (Operation



728 - a

FLAX).

At about 0800, a few miles northeast of Cap Bon, a group of twenty-six P-38's (assigned to keep the Straits under surveillance) managed to bring down eleven aircraft of a Luftwaffe force consisting of 50-70 Ju-52's, 20 Me-109's, and 4 FW-190's. Only two P-38's were lost in the process.

729

At about the same time, a B-25 unit managed to sink two Seibel barges and one destroyer. The escorting 82d Group brought down fifteen enemy aircraft, which were flying without escort. Soon thereafter the unloading stations at Sidi Ahmed and El-Aouina were raided with fragmentation bombs.

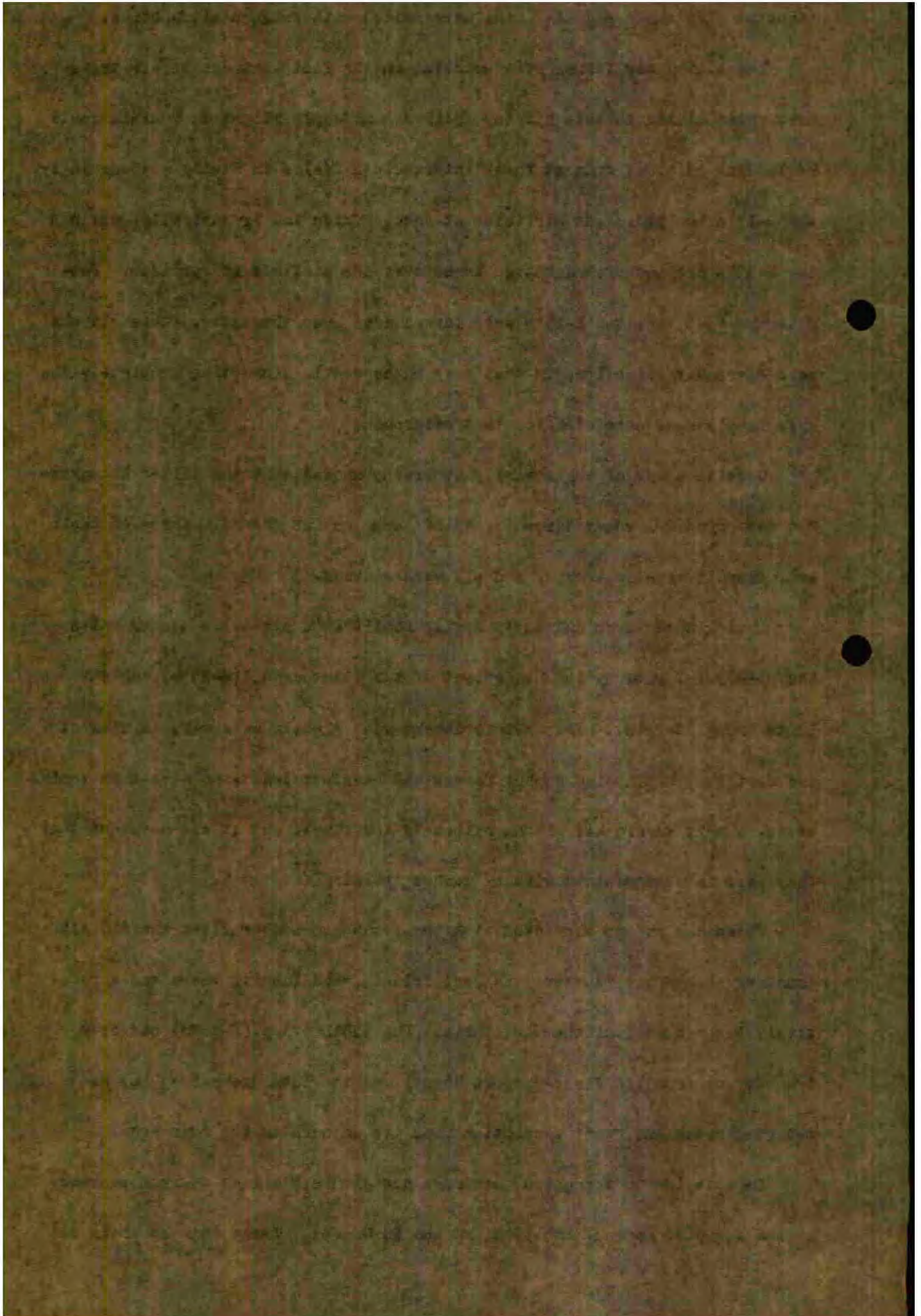
The Allied air forces were counting on the fact that German air transport units slated to take off for their second daily flight to Tunisia would be landing at about noon at their intermediate fields in Sicily. Accordingly, the B-17's bombarded the airfields at Boccadefalco and Trapani/Milo, while the B-25's dropped fragmentation bombs over the airfield at Berrizzo. Despite the fact that two B-25's were forced down over the water, these attacks were extremely effective, in that they succeeded in disrupting completely the Axis supply runs scheduled for that afternoon.

Careful study of the aerial photographs showed that the Allied attackers had destroyed 201 enemy aircraft, 40 of these on the ground. Three of their own aircraft were destroyed, and six were missing.

During late March and early April, Doolittle's strategic bomber units had been reinforced by the assignment of the 321st Group (B-25's) and the 320th Group (B-26's). This reinforcement was urgently necessary in view of the fact that his medium bomber forces had been reduced to no more than twelve crews. Their morale had hit an extremely low level, and it was apparent that they were in need of intensive refresher training¹³³.

There was no one connected with the strategic bomber fleet who did not consider the escort fighters his best friends, and luckily there was a relatively large number of them available. The 325th Group (P-40's) had been transferred from the Close-Support Corps, and the 14th Group (P-39's) had returned fresh and ready for action from its sojourn in the rear area.

In addition to these two, two more new groups had made their appearance at the scene of action, the 99th and the 2d Groups. These took up their new



729 - a

tasks in April.

Thus reinforced, and thoroughly familiar with the tactical objectives of the military planners in their activity area, the strategic bomber units achieved ever greater effectiveness in their contribution towards the isolation of the enemy bridgehead.

On 4 April, a force of ninety-one B-17 bombers raided the harbor, airfield, and switching yard of Naples.

As of the beginning of April, the weakened Italian fleet had only three heavy cruisers at its disposal, and one of them, the *Bolsano*, was laid up at La Spezia for repairs. Allied aerial reconnaissance discovered the other two, the *Trieste* and the *Gorizia*, anchored in the bay at La Maddalena,

133 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 192.

730

surrounded by underwater nets designed to ward off submarines.

Spaatz order^ded an attack on them as soon as practicable, and on 10 April a force of twenty-four B-17's sank the Trieste with 1,100-lb. bombs dropped from an altitude of 2000 ft. The fuses were set at 1/10 of a second for the head, and 25/1000 of a second for the main charge, in order to make sure of damaging the armored deck plating.

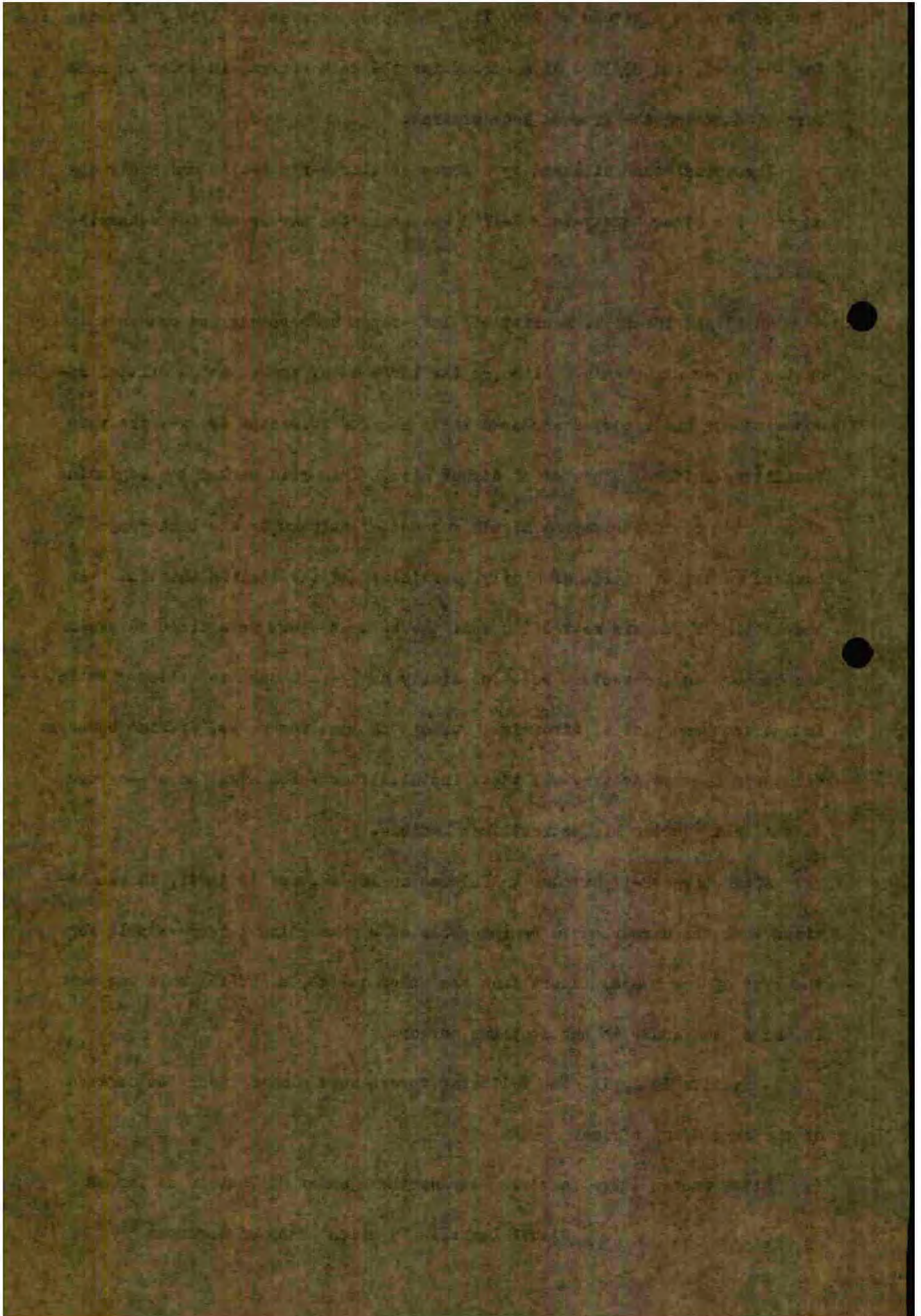
The Gorizia was attacked by a force of thirty-six B-17's and badly damaged. The other twenty-four B-17's bombarded the harbor and the submarine pens.

On 13 and 18 April, Doolittle's long-range bombers carried out an attack on the harbor at Catania. Although the large enemy tanker which British reconnaissance had reported anchored there managed to escape damage, the port facilities suffered a number of direct hits. This raid marked the beginning of a series of intensive and highly successful attacks by the long-range bombers on the airfields of Sicily, Sardinia, and the Italian mainland. As the battle of Tunisia neared its end, the hardest blows were directed against the harbors on the western coast of Sicily and -- although to a lesser extent -- in the southern part of Sardinia. During the last few weeks, Spaatz' bombers did their best to destroy all those installations which might be of any use to the enemy during his retreat from Tunisia.

After three B-17 attacks on Palermo on 16, 17, and 18 April, it was obvious that the harbor would be incapable of accomodating larger vessels for the rest of the month. Apart from the other damage, a 190-ft. hole was torn in one of the quais in the seaplane harbor.

Effective 13 April, the following forces were placed under the command of the Army Group Africa:

Fifth Panzer Army: covering the northern coast of Tunisia as far as
Djebel Derhalla, 9 miles south of Zaghouan



730 - a

Italian First Army: covering the eastern areas as far as the coast east of Enfidaville

The demarcation line between the two Armies ran from Hammam Lif (twelve miles southeast of Tunis) along the mountain territory as far as Djebibina (fifteen miles southwest of Enfidaville).

The forces of the Fifth Panzer Army were deployed as follows:

front line: the so-called Division von Manteuffel, between the coast and south of the Mateur - Beja railway¹³⁴

stationed next to the Division and holding the area as far as the

Tunis - Medjex-el-Bab highway: the 334th Division, a full-strength division which was partially motorized.

134 - See page 676 of the present study.

731

stationed next to the 334th Division and reaching as far as 3 miles north of Pont du Fahs: elements of the Hermann Goering Division; their strength was approximately 2/3 of an infantry division, without artillery or armored units.

from this point to the end of the Army combat line (where the front made a deep dip towards the south): the German Army Corps with the 10th Panzer Division (later replaced by the 21st Panzer Division).

In addition, the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was stationed within the area of operation of the Fifth Panzer Army, its primary mission being to protect the harbors and airfields of Bizerte and Tunis.

As far as reserve forces were concerned, the Fifth Panzer Army had at its disposal the armored units of the 15th Panzer Division, the 10th Panzer Division, and the German-Arab Training Battalion.

The forces of the Italian First Army were deployed as follows:

to the right, in the west: the Headquarters, XXI Army Corps, with the Division La Spezia on the right flank near Hill 522

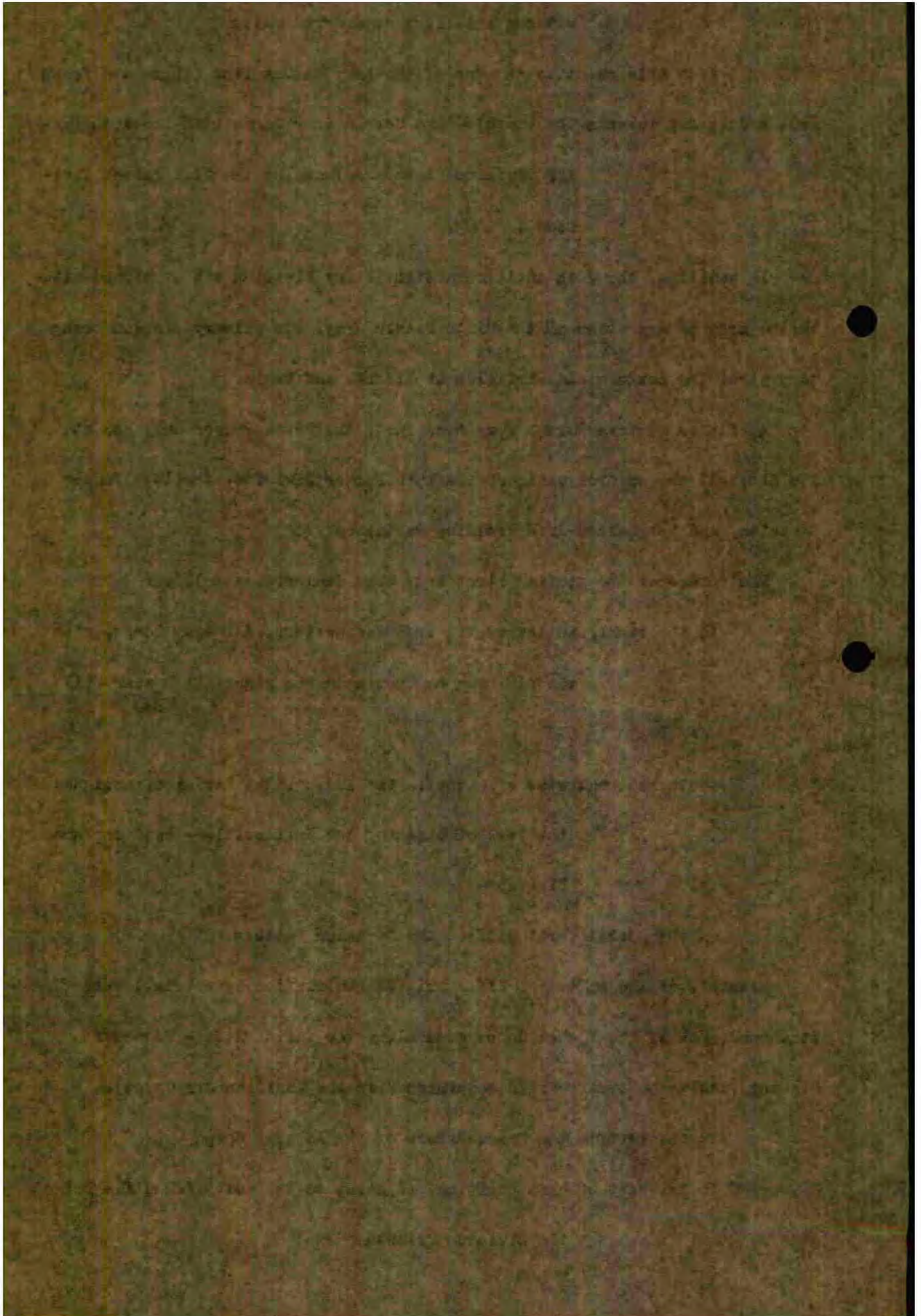
south and southwest of Saonaf: the 164th Light Division, assigned the task of blocking the Enfidaville - Pont du Fahs highway

on the Djebel Garci hills: the Division Pistoia.

Elements of the Luftwaffe Rifle Brigade (Luftwaffenjäger Brig.) were stationed east of the Djebel Garci area along the Enfidaville - Zaghuan highway (twelve Luftwaffe field companies from the Tunisian Air Corps).

to the left: the Headquarters of the XX Army Corps

to the east of this position, adjacent to the Luftwaffe Rifle Brigade: the Division Trieste



731 - a

on either side of Taerouna: the Division Giovanni Fascisti
from the area around Enfidaville to the coastal highway: the 90th
Light Division.

The hill positions, which were not yet seriously threatened and which were
relatively easy to defend, were assigned to the Italian units.

As heretofore, the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was located in the
area of operations assigned to the Italian First Army.

The deployment of the enemy forces is indicated in the appendix.



732

During the battles of the last few months, the British soldiers of the Eighth Army had proved themselves to be worthy opponents, whose combat experience made them antagonists to reckon with. As far as their leaders were concerned, Axis intelligence was aware of the fact that they were methodical in their planning and that they were not likely to risk their forces in any undertaking whose success seemed doubtful.

As regards the American troops, Axis intelligence knew that they were numerically superior and that they were armed with the most up-to-date weapons and equipment. So far, however, both officers and troops had demonstrated a certain lack of experience in combat.

Axis intelligence sources were doubtful about the will to fight of the pro-Allied French troops; in any case, their equipment was sadly out-of-date.

Evaluation of the Terrain: West of Mateur, from the coast as far as the Valley of Madjerda, the terrain is mountainous, its altitude subject to frequent and intensive variations. It contains certain hills and ridges which command a six-mile view of the region in some places and, for this reason, is of great tactical importance.

The ridges are quite flat, thus requiring fairly large defending forces. The few roads of importance can easily be blocked at the turns. The area is completely barren, with the exception of the area west and north of Sedjenane, which is covered with woods and impenetrable underbrush. Tanks can be employed in this area, although the extreme unevenness of the terrain makes it very difficult.

The terrain best suited to the employment of tanks is that located on both sides of the Madjerda Valley. East of Hedjer-el-Bab, in the direction of Tunis, stretches a plain of some five to eight miles in width, which opens in the east onto a settled, cultivated area of small farms on a broad plateau. This terrain offers no obstacles for armored forces. In the north it is

732 - a

bounded by hills rising to 1,300 ft., and even in the south there are a number of lower hills and ridges which afford a view over the plains. For this reason, possession of the hills in the north as well as those in the south is vitally important for the ultimate outcome of any military engagement.

The territory between Djebel Mansour and the area north of Pichon is very mountainous, and some of it is heavily wooded as well. The few roads penetrating the area have never succeeded in making it general^{ly} accessible, particularly in view of the fact that the region to the north is a mass of deeply cut valleys. Inaccessible from both east and west, this terrain is highly unsuited to large-scale military operations, from both the defensive and offensive point of view.

733

The Enfidaville position blocked the exit from the Kairouan - Sousse plains into the area of Tunis. The position was located along the southern and southeastern slopes of the Djebel Zaghouan, whose highest peak -- 4,237 ft. -- is the loftiest in all northern Tunisia.

Thus the Zaghouan position blocked not only the highways coming from the west, southwest, and southeast, but also the coastal highway leading from Enfidaville to Tunis. The Djebel Garci, 1,350 ft. high, was located about at the middle of the position line and afforded an excellent view to both east and west. The peak itself is a complex of several ridges with steep, rocky walls. The Enfidaville position was doubtless effective, despite the fact that the rocky soil made its reinforcement difficult. Only in the east were there olive groves, which offered some measure of protection against air attack.

The Italian Supreme Command ordered the Army Group Africa to defend the line running from Bab Sedjenew via Medjes-el-Bab and Bou-Arada to Enfidaville.

In the opinion of the commanders of the Fifth Panzer Army, terrain conditions and the deployment of the enemy forces made it obvious that the main direction of thrust would be via Medjes-el-Bab towards Tunis.

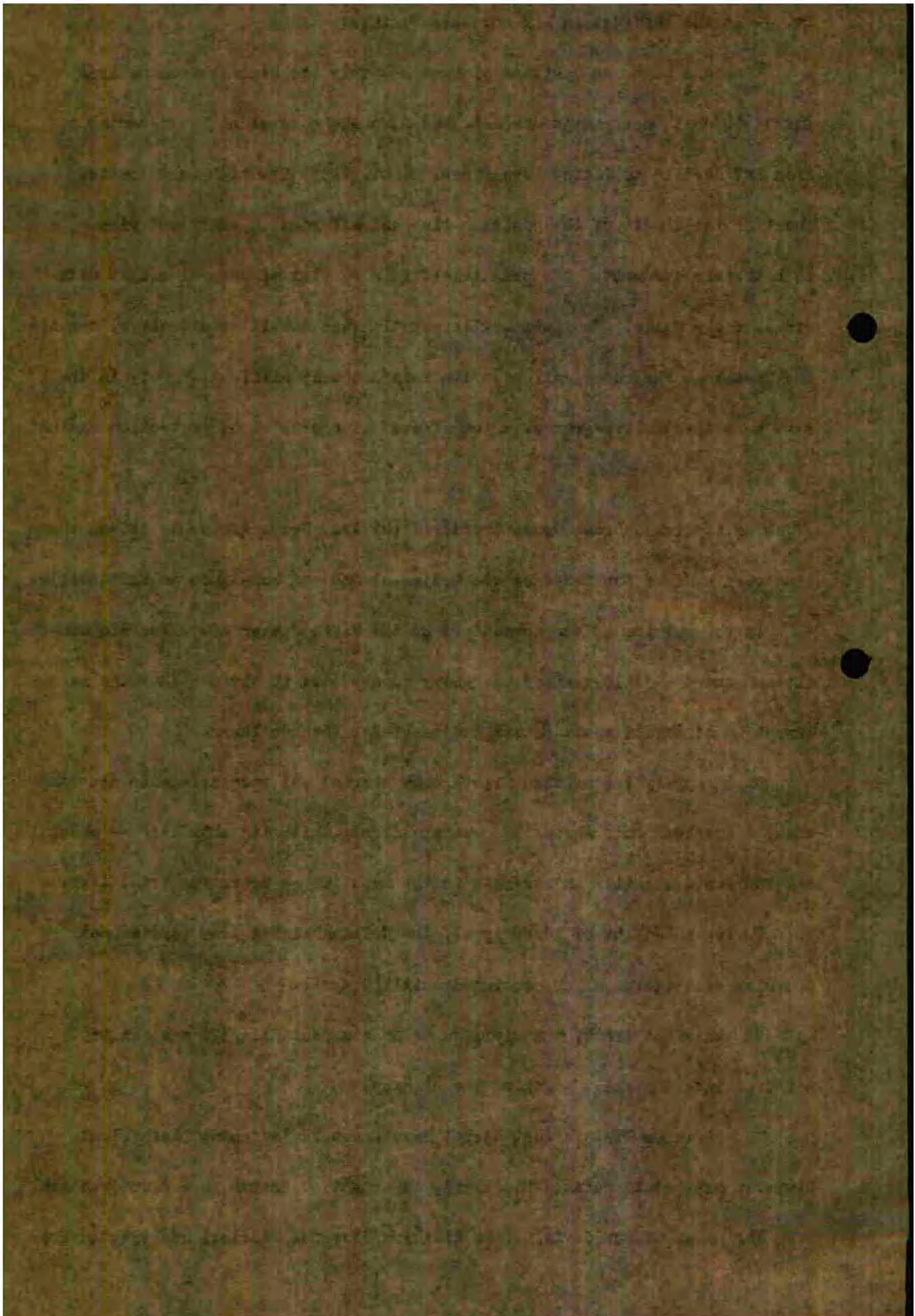
On 16 April, the British Eighth Army carried out reconnaissance near the enemy's advance posts along the southern front, while its artillery -- which had increased steadily in strength in the meantime -- began its trial fire.

During the night of 19/20 April, the British Eighth Army carried out a series of attacks, which continued until 29 April.

On the right flank, the Division La Spezia lost Hill 522 and had to withdraw into the hills north of the highway.

The Division Pistoia lost Djebel Garci, but the adjacent 164th Light Division managed to retake this highly important objective in a counterattack.

Northwest of Enfidaville, the Division Giovanni Fascisti was ejected from



733 - a

its position on the rocky peaks near Tacrouna, which made it impossible for the 90th Light Division to hold Enfidaville any longer. Nevertheless, the 90th Division was able to bring the enemy forces to a halt in the hills six miles north of the town.

734

The German troops had borne the brunt of the fighting, expertly supported by their artillery. The enemy had not succeeded in achieving a breakthrough, and the fighting on the southern Tunisian front was gradually subsiding. So far, General Messe's Army had not encountered a single one of the three British armored divisions; the terrain was not very conducive to their employment. As a result, however, Axis planners finally accepted the erroneous conclusion that these divisions had been moved to the western front of Tunisia.

During the course of the month, there had been violent outbreaks of fighting at a number of points along the western front.

The enemy was obviously seeking a weak point where he could launch a breakthrough operation with some prospect of success.

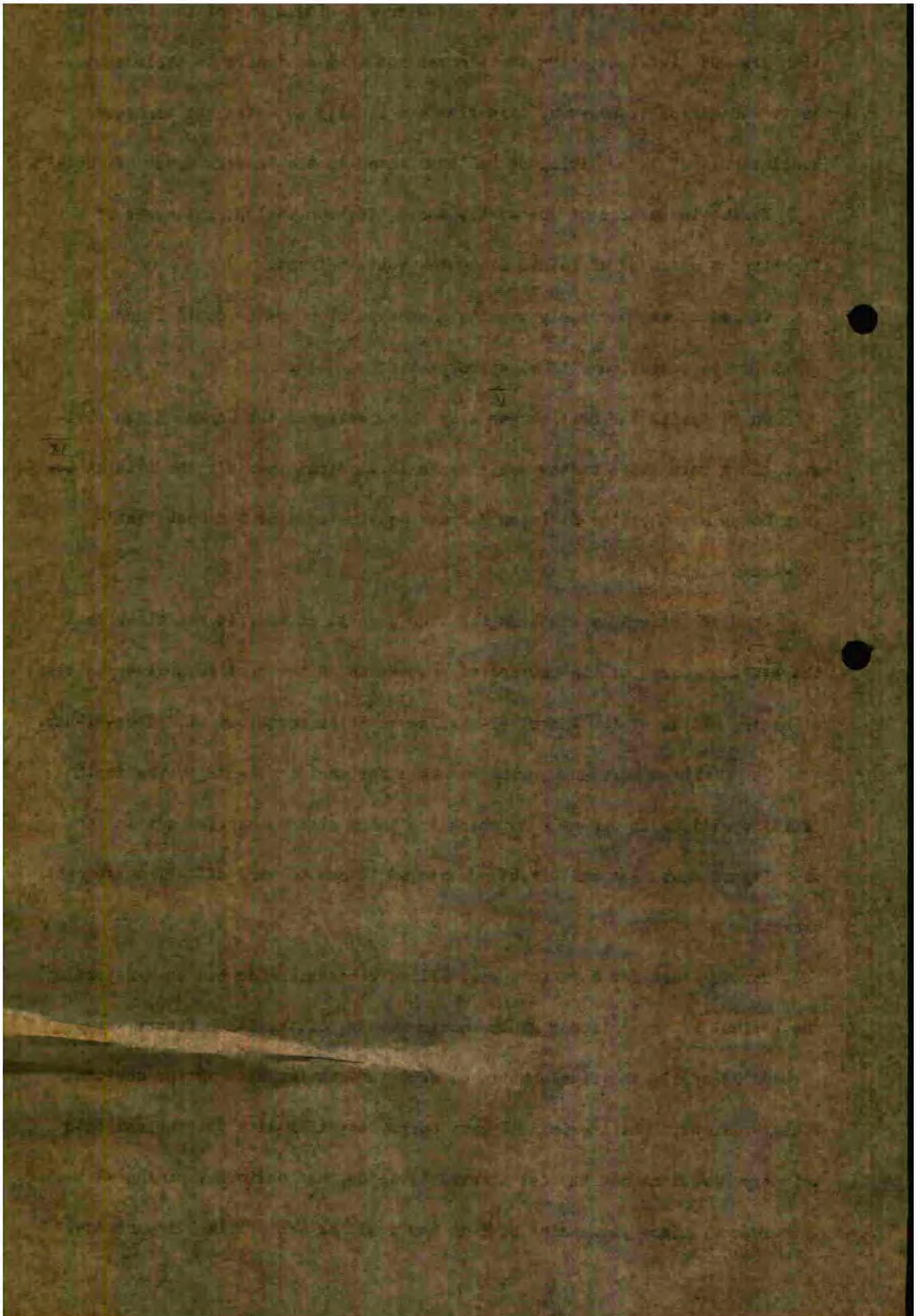
On 21 April, the British ^V5th Army Corps attacked the German 334th Division along both sides of the Madjerda Valley. Simultaneously the British ^{IX}9th Army Corps attacked the Division Hermann Goering east of the Goubellat - Bou-Arada highway.

When the extremely stubborn fighting came to an end, it was clear that the ^V5th Army Corps was in undisputed possession of the most important positions along the slopes of the Djebel el-Ang, seven miles northwest of Medjes-el-Bab.

The Division Hermann Goering was more fortunate; thanks to the depth of its position, it was able to check the enemy attacks carried out in the vicinity of Goubellat and directly south of it and to ward off all subsequent assaults.

For the last few days in a row, Allied reconnaissance had been reporting the arrival of fresh troops at the northern wing of the Fifth Panzer Army.

On 23 April, the final battle of decision was launched on the western Tunisian front. The American II Army Corps, together with the 1st and 34th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division, was obviously aiming at the Mateur area, since possession of this key position was of vital importance.



734 - a

The Fifth Panzer Army, stationed along a front some thirty-seven miles long, found itself face-to-face with three enemy corps, all of which were far better equipped as far as tanks and artillery were concerned. The German forces were simply too few to hold an unbroken front line effectively. During the ensuing hard fighting in mountainous terrain, the objective of both sides was to gain possession of certain individual hills. The Allied forces, with their superior tanks and artillery, pushed their way through the inevitable gaps in the front and were able to gain several miles of enemy territory towards the northeast.

735

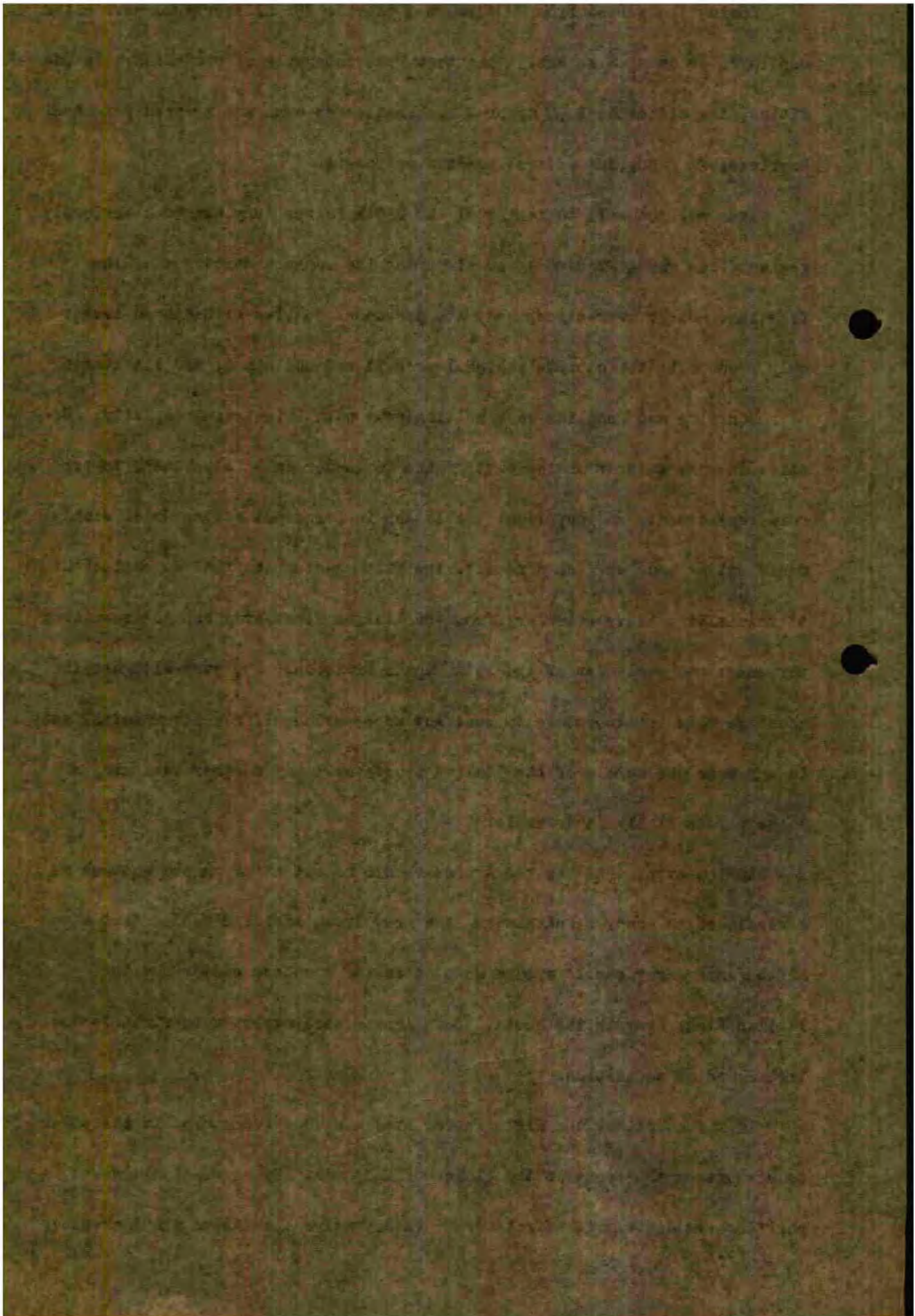
The outcome of the fighting was still uncertain during the last days of April. Allied attacks alternated with German counterattacks, and neither side was able to gain a really decisive victory.

During the period from 20 through 30 April, 291 Allied tanks were either destroyed or damaged so badly that they were incapable of operation. In addition, the Allies lost 36 armored reconnaissance cars and armored personnel carriers, 21 guns, and several hundred prisoners.

Even so, the will to resist of the Fifth Panzer Army had been seriously weakened, as was to become apparent during the subsequent course of the fighting. Never over-strengthened, its personnel complement had been lamentably reduced by the extremely high losses it had sustained, and its stores of ammunition and gasoline were melting away with frightening rapidity. Despite intense efforts on the part of the Commander in Chief, South, to procure replacements and supplies, the losses in personnel and materiel simply could not be made up. As a result, the Fifth Panzer Army had no choice but to requisition heavy artillery from the Italian First Army and the remaining personnel and equipment of the 15th Panzer Division. The over-all gasoline shortage made it impossible to send any more personnel from other units, and in any case the morale of the Italian troops made any further weakening of these forces highly inadvisable.

In the event that the two Armies should be cut off from one another as a result of an enemy breakthrough, the Army Group Africa directed that the Fifth Panzer Army should assume command in the northern sector and the Italian First Army in the south. Both Armies were expected to fight to the last round of ammunition.

In the meantime, the Fifth Panzer Army had done everything in its power to strengthen the front in the plains of Medjerda. By means of staggered positions in depth, its effectiveness in defensive operations was increased,



735 - a

subject to the limitations imposed by the small number of troops available. The motorcycle battalion of the 10th Panzer Division was integrated into the Medjerda Valley defensive front, and the remainder of this Division -- some thirty tanks and their crews -- was held back in readiness as a reserve force.

Antiaircraft artillery defense of the harbor at Tunis was abandoned, and the 88 mm batteries thus freed were assigned to antitank operations west of Tunis.

During the month of April, the Army Group Africa was reinforced by assignment of the following units:

2d and 3d Battalions, 2d Rifle Regiment (without headquarters staff);

Headquarters Staff and one battery, 1st Battalion, Artillery Regiment Hermann Goering;

Headquarters Staff and one battery from the armored battalion, Division Hermann Goering.

The above forces arrived by air transport without their heavy weapons and supply columns¹³⁵.

135 - See Footnote 17; pages 137/138 of the source detailed there.

756

The Army Group Africa expected that the Allies, who had seized favorable bases of operation on both sides of the Medjerda Valley at the end of April, would now launch a decisive breakthrough in the direction of Tunis.

During the last few weeks, the German Luftwaffe had been unable to bring its forces to bear in the face of the overwhelming enemy air superiority.

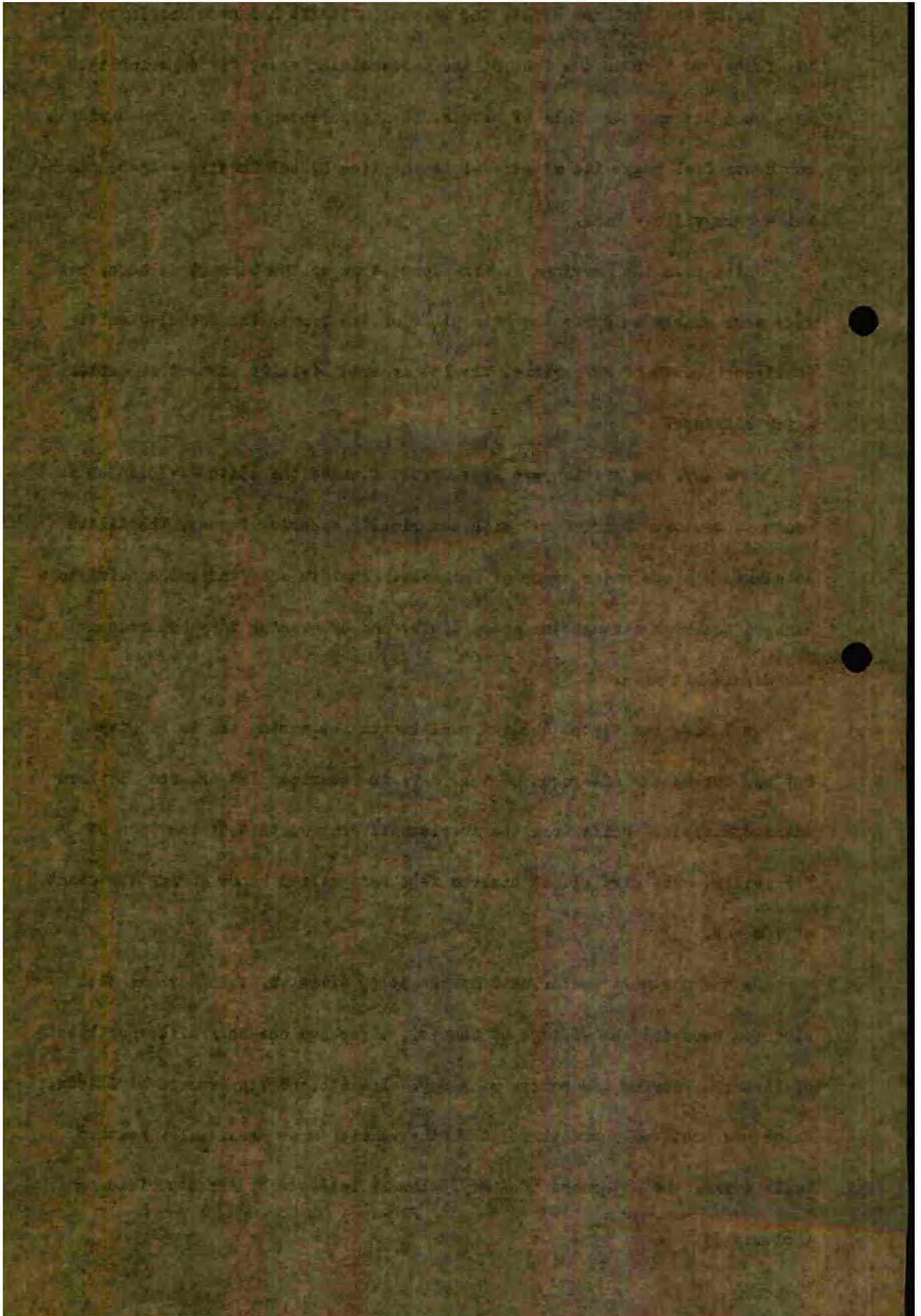
On 3 May came the fall of Mateur, on the northern sector. The Division von Manteuffel began its withdrawal to the line Djebel Cheniti - Djebel Ischkul - Ferryville - Tine.

Units from the American II Army Corps took up the pursuit at once, but they were unable to shake the main pillar of the front, the Djebel Cheniti position; south of Ferryville, the 1st Armored Division managed to capture a few hilltops.

On 6 May, the British ^{IV} 9th Army Corps attacked the 334th Division on the southern sector. Carried out with numerically superior forces, the Allied attack took place under cover of darkness. The 6th and 7th Armored Divisions managed to break through the enemy lines, and by evening they had reached the Massicault area.

On 7 May, the Djebel Cheniti position in the north had to be given up, and during the afternoon of that day, the American 1st Armored Division entered Bizerte. Units from the American II Army Corps took the town of Ferryville. The airfield at Bizerte fell into Allied hands during the night of 7/8 May.

On the northern sector held by the 334th Division, the American 34th Division occupied the village of Chouigi, three and one-half miles northwest of Tebourba, during the course of 7 May. The 6th and 7th Armored Divisions, which had achieved a breakthrough further south, near Massicault, reached Tunis during the afternoon of 7 May, closely followed by the 4th Division (Motorized).



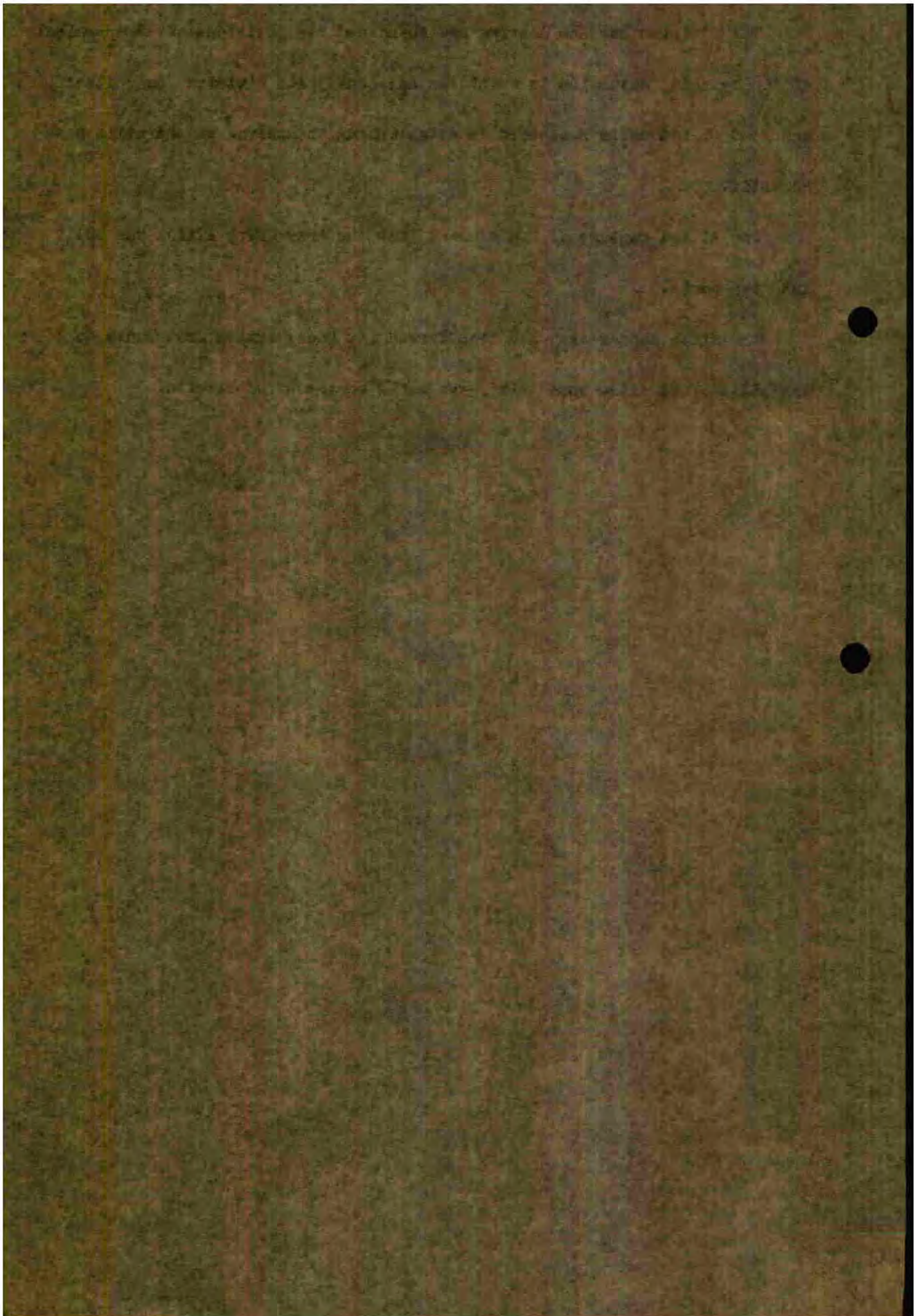
736 - a

The 7th Armored Division immediately headed north, while the 6th Armored Division and the 4th Division (Motorized) turned towards the southeast, in the direction of the Bon Peninsula.

The Division Hermann Goering had abandoned its positions after appraisal of the menacing situation in which the adjacent 334th Division found itself, and most of its units succeeded in establishing themselves in the hills near Hammalif.

The Allied capture of Tunis meant that the Army Group Africa was split into two parts.

The Fifth Panzer Army had transferred its headquarters from Tunis to the hills of El Alia, some thirty-two miles southeast of Biserte.



737

Isolated combat groups, made up of survivors from the Division von Man-
teuffel, the 334th Division, and the 15th Panzer Division, had dug in in
positions in the area extending from Biserte to south of Tunis. They kept
up stubborn resistance as long as their ammunition lasted. By 8 May, their
position had become untenable, and during the course of that afternoon, these
hold-outs from the Fifth Panzer Army had no choice but to capitulate.

In the region of Hammamlif, the Hermann Goering Division was able to
throw back the assault of the 6th Armored Division, thanks to its large
complement of antitank artillery.

By the same token, the Italian First Army was able to hold off heavy
assaults on its southern front positions, also on 8 May.

In the meantime, the Axis forces were attempting to set up a new defense
front in the mountains south of Hammamlif and in the hills west of Grombalia.

Further south, elements of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions were as-
sembling for the final struggle.

The 90th Light Division had moved into covering positions north of En-
fidaville, ready to protect the Italian First Army during its withdrawal.

On 10 May, however, the British forces managed to break through the narrow
gap near Hammamlif, carrying out a part of their assault under cover of dark-
ness. One of their armored columns pushed on towards the northwest via Soliman,
while another moved southeast towards Hammamet, which it reached during the
evening hours.

The building^s of the new Axis defense front was frustrated by the British
advance, which had made coordinated leadership of the Axis troops impossible.

The staffs of the Army Group Africa and the Italian First Army had with-
drawn to the hills east of Menzel-bou-Zelfa in the meantime. They were no
longer in communication with the isolated groups still fighting here and there.

Acting on orders, the commander of the Division Hermann Goering left Africa

737 - a

with the last departing Ju-52 on 10 May. Shortly before his departure, he had conferred with the staff of the Army Group Africa, which was preparing to surrender.



738

He reported to the Commander in Chief, South, that the troops -- widely dissipated and without any means of communication with one another -- could not possibly be expected to continue a systematic military operation. They had no choice but to defend themselves individually to the last bullet.

The isolated German-Italian groups which had escaped into the mountains southwest of Grombalia were surrounded by the enemy. On 12 May, encircled from all sides by British, Indian, and French units, there was nothing for them to do but capitulate.

13 May marked the elimination of the last pocket of Axis resistance, made up of relatively strong units from the 90th Light Division and the Italian First Army which had managed to ensconce themselves in the hills north of Enfidaville.

The struggle for Tunisia had come to an end.

During the course of the last day, the staff and the 1st and 2d Companies of the engineer battalion, Division Hermann Goering, were landed by aircraft at the bridgehead -- but without weapons and equipment.

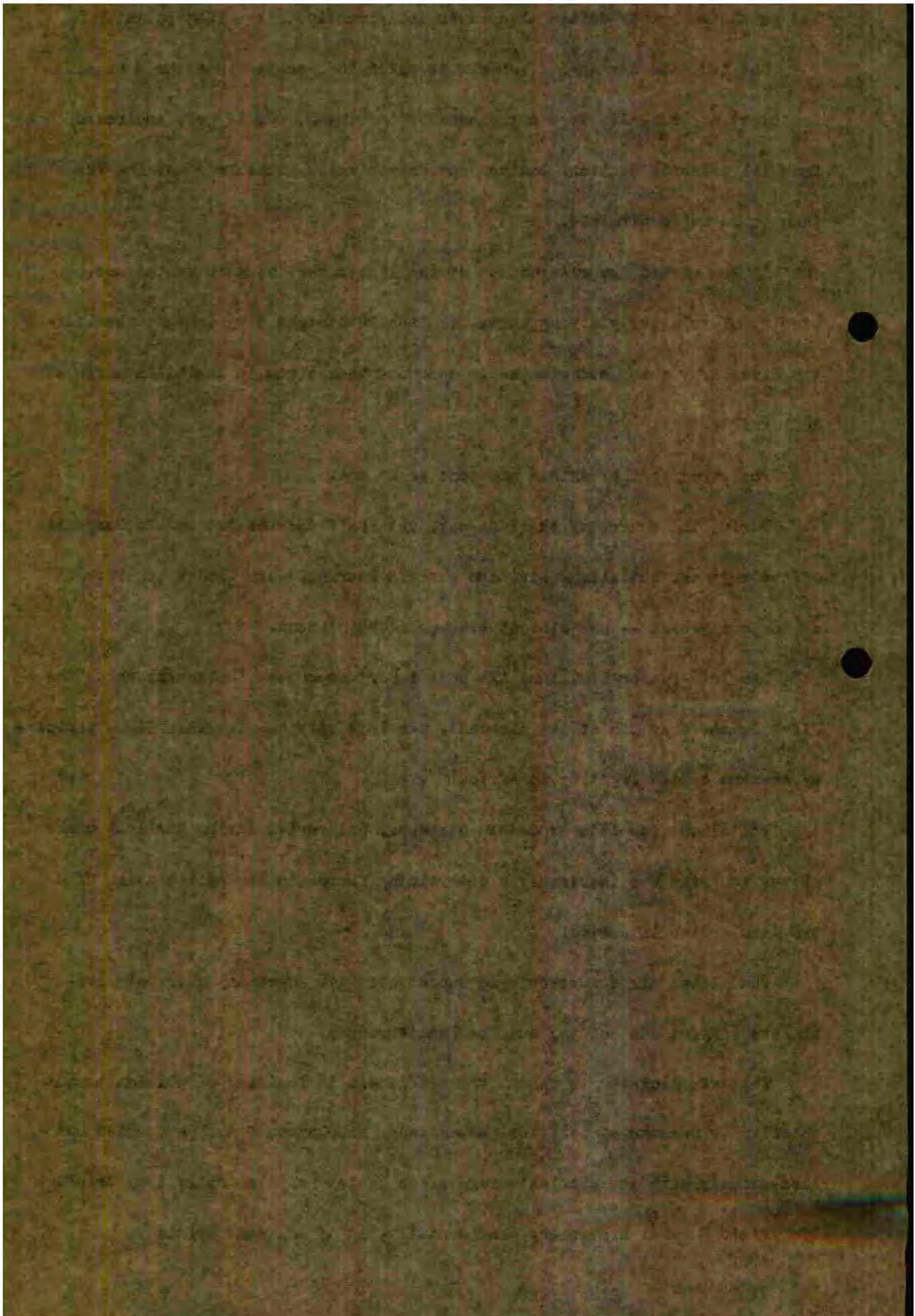
The 10th Panzer Division, the most important combat instrument which the Fifth Panzer Army had at its disposal, was left with no more than 2,000 vehicles by the end of the fighting in Africa¹³⁶.

The almost complete breakdown of supply deliveries during the last weeks of the campaign was inevitably a determining factor in the capitulation of the Axis armies in Africa.

The Allied air forces enjoyed uncontested air supremacy over both continents (Africa and Europe) and the Mediterranean.

The Axis decision to defend the bridgehead in Tunisia, a decision taken chiefly for reasons of political expediency, simply could not be carried out successfully with the available forces, no matter how heroically they tried.

Field Marshal Montgomery, incidentally, is of the same opinion:



738 - a

"From the purely military standpoint, there can be no justification for the decision to remain in North Africa once the Mareth line had been broken.

I suspect that Hitler ordered it for political reasons.

136 - See Footnote 17; page 138 of the source detailed there.



It is always dangerous to take on tasks which have no military value whatsoever purely for political reasons.

This may sometimes be necessary, but ordinarily it ends in catastrophe."¹³⁷

The German Second Air Fleet had almost no opportunity to employ its bomber wings during May.

Any thought of conducting tactical air warfare, as the Allied air forces were doing, had long since been put aside as impracticable.

It is true that on two occasions the II Air Corps did carry out night attacks on enemy shipping convoys and port installations (including Bone).

But the majority of its aircraft had to be employed to protect Axis shipping from submarines. Each escort trip lasted three days and three nights, and this made it impossible for the bomber units to fulfill their real and proper mission. The single-engine and twin-engine fighters were not much better off!

Hitler personally determined (on the basis of the most recent losses in shipping) the number of fighters to accompany each convoy!

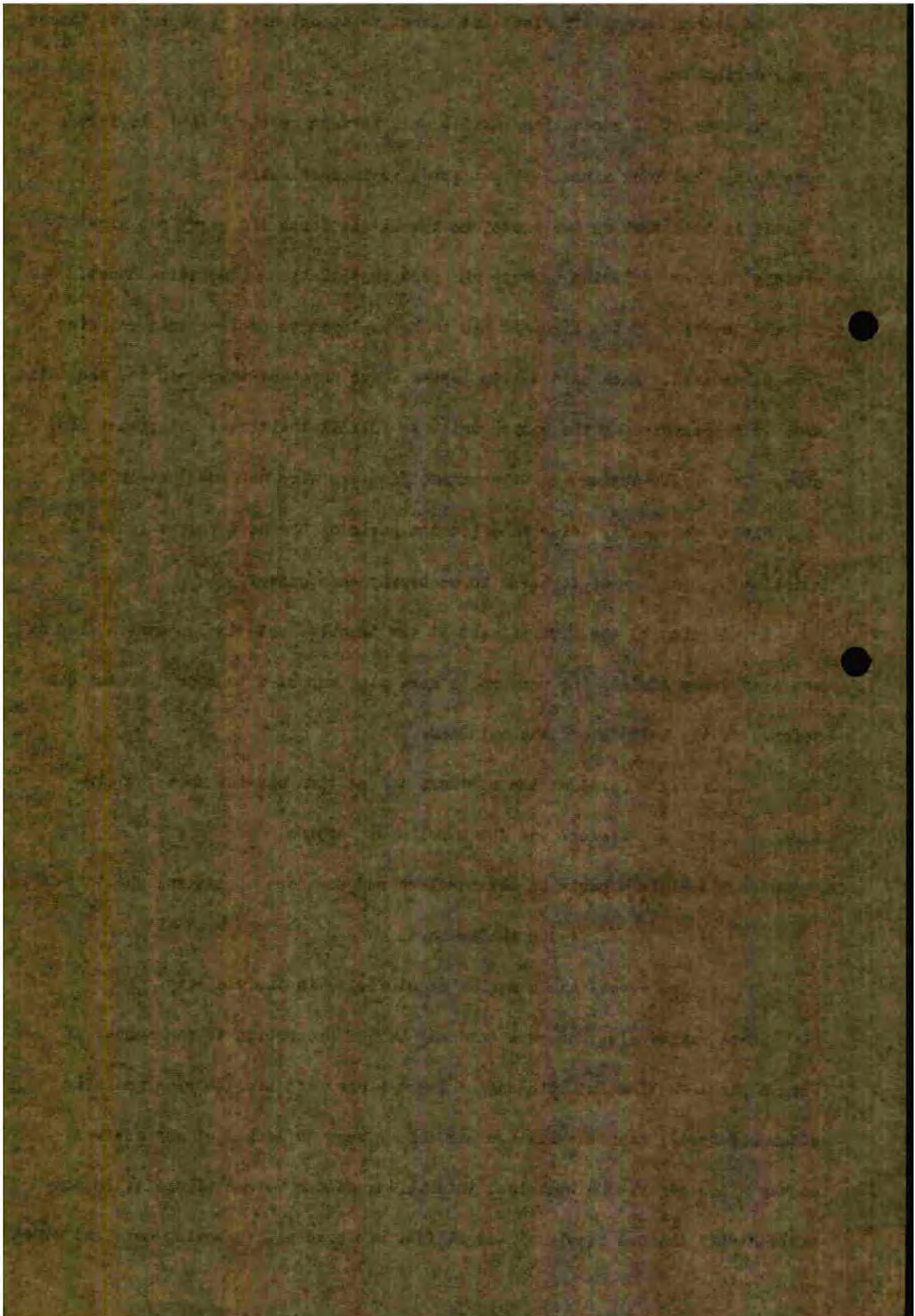
In addition to their commitment at the trouble-spots in the combat area of the Army Group Africa, the same units were also expected to take over the air defense of the islands and the mainland:

Sicily - ports on the northern and western coasts, numerous airfields, and the Straits of Messina

Sardinia - ports on the northern and southern coasts and the take-off fields in the south

Naples - port and a number of airfields in the vicinity.

These varied missions were entirely out of proportion to the number of German single-engine and twin-engine fighter aircraft available, especially after mid-April, when the Italian air forces were no longer of any use whatsoever. Moreover, the technical inferiority of the German aircraft, in comparison with the new models of the Allies, was gradually becoming more and more



739 - a

apparent.

137 - "Montgomery's Desert Diary", Life International, 10 November 1958,
page 73.

740

From mid-April on, the air situation in Tunisia grew steadily less favorable for the Axis. The Allied fighters controlled the entire airspace, and their bomber units kept up their attacks on the supply ports and airfields in Sicily and southern Italy with greater and greater effectiveness.

The Allies possessed not only numerical superiority -- to a hitherto unsuspected degree --, but also kept bringing up new, fresh crews who were well trained in the operation of the most up-to-date aircraft models.

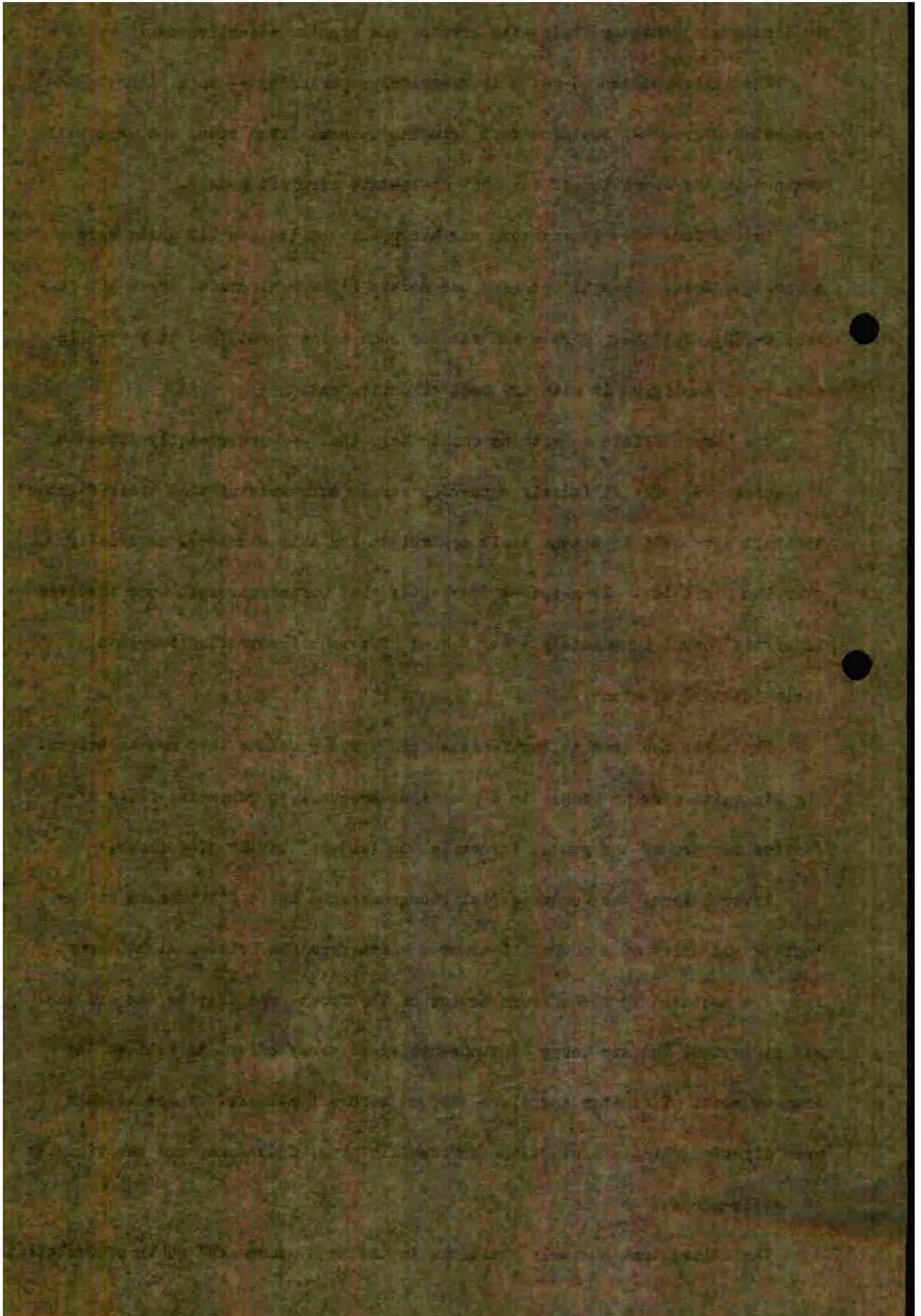
In the face of this enormous air strength, the Italian air units were at a complete loss. They did possess one modern fighter aircraft, the M-202 (Macchi C-202), but their morale had reached such a low point that they were incapable of employing it with any real effectiveness.

The German fliers -- with no one to help them -- were steadily forced on the defensive. The Allied air supremacy was so overwhelming that their fighter aircraft were able to extend their control to the Axis airspace, especially over the airfields. It happened frequently that German aircraft were involved in aerial combat immediately after taking off, thus frustrating completely their intended missions.

The tasks assigned to the Tunisian Air Corps remained the same as before. The air units were no longer in a position, however, to guarantee fully effective support of the ground forces in the latter's battle of defense.

Nevertheless, the German aerial reconnaissance units did succeed in detecting the shift of a number of armored units from the British Eighth Army from the southern to the western sector of the front, and despite the critical air situation, the Air Corps continued to exert every effort to relieve the Army by means of fighter and close-support aircraft attacks. These attacks were directed chiefly against the Enfidaville area, Sedjenane, and the vicinity of Medjer-el-Bab.

The Allied tank assembly positions in the area around and south of Goubellat



740 - a

and near Bou-Arads could be combatted to some extent by units from the Division Hermann Goering, but only at the cost of sacrificial losses.

"It was bitter to have to look on while our own combat-sager pilots were kept on the ground, the potential danger they represented to the enemy having simply been eliminated by the fact of Allied air superiority."

741

By 15 April, the Tunisian Air Corps had already taken over command of all the air units stationed within the area of the Tunisian bridgehead. Only those technical services and signal communications forces remained which were absolutely necessary for day-to-day accommodation of the active units.

The staffs of the Air Commander, Tunisia, and the Air Commander, South, were withdrawn to Sicily and Sardinia. The staff of the Air District Tunisia was disbanded. The so-called Airfield Area Command Tunisia (Kommando Flughafenbereich Tunisia) assumed responsibility for the logistics and supply of the Air Corps as well as for the 19th and 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Divisions.

As of 15 April, the Tunisian Air Corps had the following forces at its disposal in the bridgehead area:

53d Single-Engine Fighter Wing (3 groups)	- 90 Me-109's
77th Single-Engine Fighter Wing (3 groups)	- 90 Me-109's
III Group, 1st Close-Support Wing	- 25 Me-109's
III Group, 4th Close-Support Wing	- 25 FW-190's
2d Squadron, 14th Close-Range Reconnaissance Group	- 8 Me-109's
4th Squadron, 14th Close-Range Reconnaissance Group	- 8 Me-109's
Desert Rescue Squadron (Wuesten-Notstaffel)	- 21 Fi Storch's
Mine Detector Squadron	- 3 Ju-52's
Luftwaffe Signal Communications Regiment	- 16 companies
Headquarters, Airfield Area Command	
Field Repair Depot Unit (Feldwerft-Verband)	

With the concurrence of the II Air Corps, the surplus aircraft mechanics and other skilled specialists were utilized to staff an aircraft repair and supply base on Sicily. The surplus "general ground personnel" from all units were sufficient to form sixteen Luftwaffe field companies of 180 men each -- a total of nearly 3000 troops. These companies were equipped with hand weapons and given a training course of several weeks' duration by Army instruc-

741 - a

tors, after which they were assigned to the Division Hermann Goering and to the units fighting north of Enfidaville. Their performance on both sectors was highly satisfactory.

The technically obsolete Ju-87 (dive-bomber) and He-129 (close-support aircraft) were withdrawn from the front. From this point on, the long-range reconnaissance squadrons were committed from bases in Italy.

During the month of April, the ocean transport of supplies grew more and more unreliable. The Ju-52's equipped with mine detectors proved to be extremely helpful in protecting shipping traffic. Assigned to continual patrol missions, they checked the routes ahead of the convoys. They were able to fulfill their mission until the very end, since they were never discovered and attacked by the enemy fighters, which flew at a much higher altitude.

742

Despite extensive harassment activity by enemy fighter aircraft, the German transport aircraft were able to keep up their work during April. There were two catastrophes, however, both attributable to faulty operational planning.

On the early afternoon of 18 April, 15 Me-323's and 25 Ju-52's were shot down over the Sicilian Straits; on 21 April, 43 Me-323's and 27 Ju-52's met the same fate north of Cap Bon. A total loss of 52 Ju-52's and 58 Me-323's¹³⁸.

After this, daytime air transport flights were discontinued entirely. The enemy reacted accordingly, however, and increased the employment of his night fighter units.

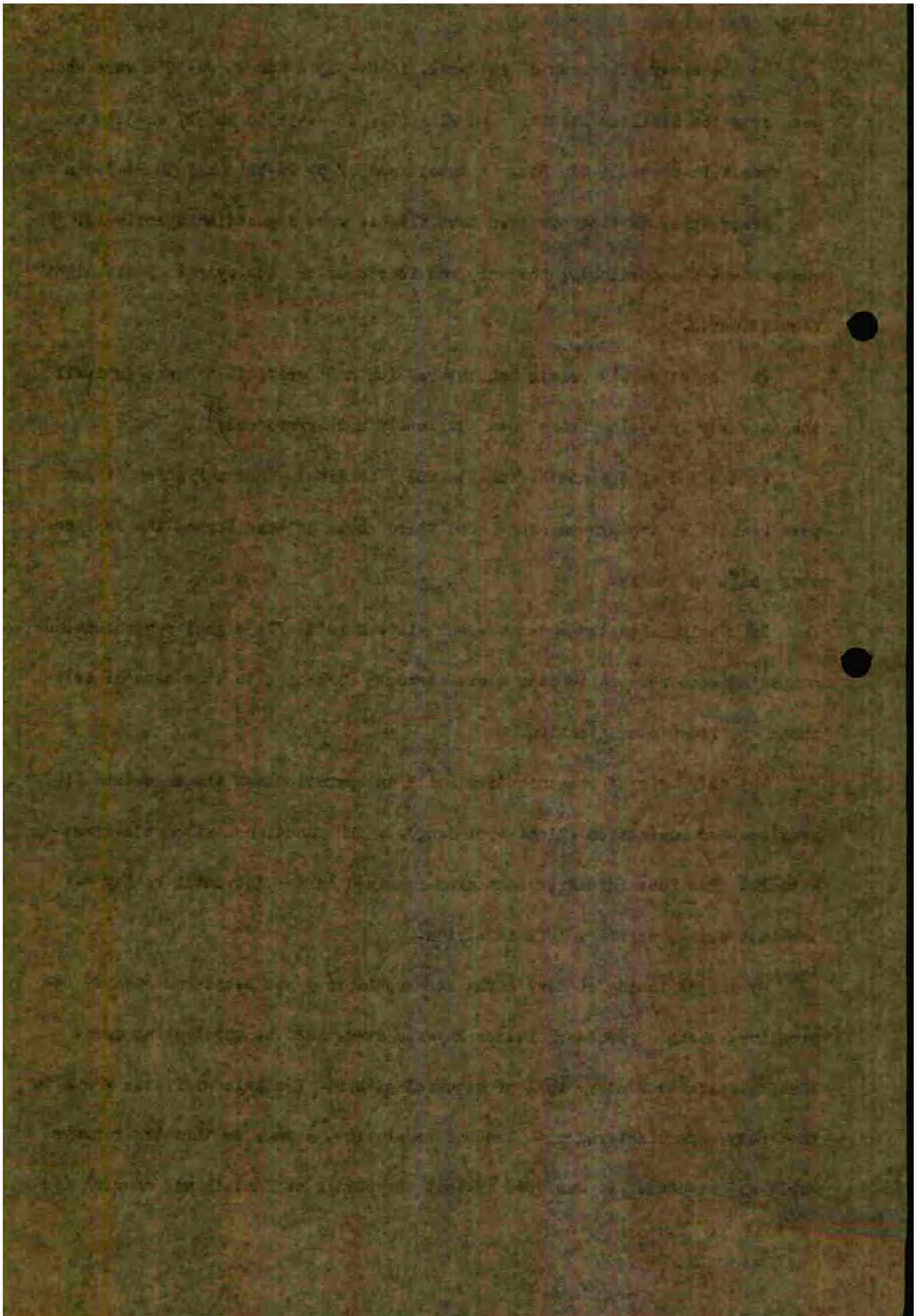
The latent supply crisis had entered its most critical stage; in April the Axis supply system broke down completely and irrevocably.

At the end of the month, the 53d and 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wings were reduced to two groups each. The third group of each formed the replacement units in Sicily.

In keeping with the cut-back, the sixteen Luftwaffe signal communications companies were reduced to four above-strength companies to take care of telephone and radio communication.

The only type of communication still in operation was the so-called Directional communication (Richtverbindung), which functioned without a wire network. The four Luftwaffe companies remained on the job until 13 May -- the last German soldiers left in Africa.

By the beginning of May, enemy air superiority had become unbearably oppressive. German personnel losses sky-rocketed, and the unrelenting enemy bombing raids took heavy toll of materiel stocks. The Axis airfields known to the enemy were plastered with bombs several times a day, so that the runways could not be used. It was obvious that the battle of Tunisia was nearing its



742 - a

end.

The only Luftwaffe units left at the bridgehead were one group each of the 53d and 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wings, two close-support groups, and the long-range reconnaissance squadrons.

When the British tanks reached Tunis on 6 May (? - sic), these units were able to withdraw safely to the Bon Peninsula.

138 - Deichmann, op.cit.; according to Chapter V, page 9, of this source, these two attacks resulted in a total loss of 50 Ju-52's and 27 Me-323's.

742 - aa

On the afternoon of 8 May, at the order of the Commander in Chief, South, (concurrent in by the Army Group Africa), all the Luftwaffe units flew to Sicily. The fuel supplies in Africa were exhausted; after 10 May all air activity on the Peninsula had to be discontinued, as the British tanks pressed forward towards Cap Bon. All subsequent Luftwaffe missions were carried out from Sicily. On 10 May, Luftwaffe aircraft succeeded in shooting down a large number of enemy aircraft which were flying about over Tunis, apparently in the assumption that they were perfectly safe from attack.

On 11 May, the task of supporting the operations of the Army Group Africa was transferred to the Fighter Commander (Jagdfliegerführer), Sicily, with headquarters at Trapani. All the units of the Tunisian Air Corps were assigned to him for this mission¹³⁹.

The participation of the Luftwaffe units in operations in Africa was consistently characterized by an eagerness for combat and a disregard of danger and death.

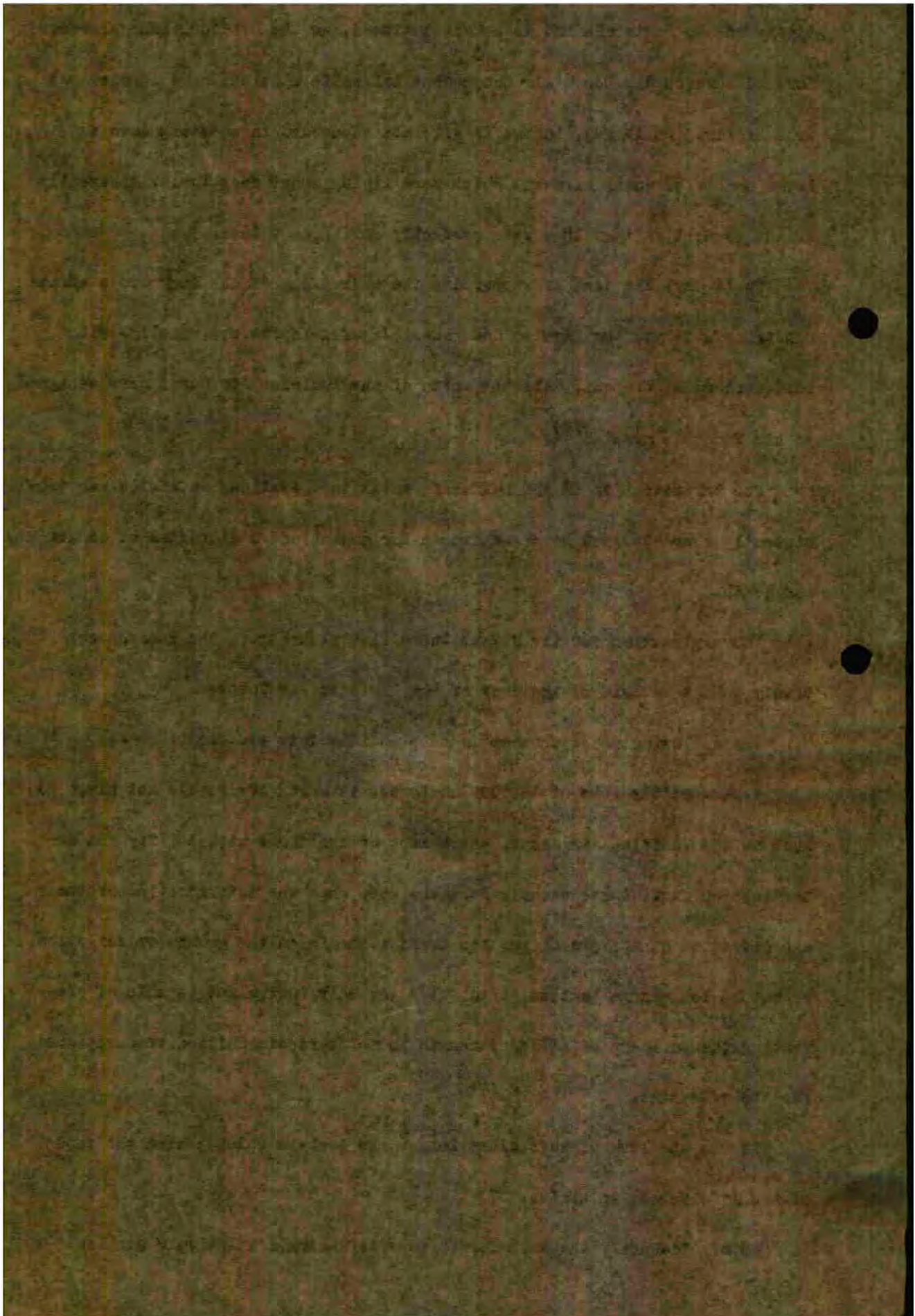
The explanation for its defeat there lies elsewhere; the reasons certainly cannot be laid at the door of the Tunisian Air Corps.

The following passages seem to substantiate this statement:

".....But the fate of the German forces in North Africa did not hinge so much on the Tunisian Air Corps, which kept up the fight with ability and determination until three weeks before the end, when the deterioration of the the situation on the ground put too great a strain on the ground organization, as on the long-range bombers, which were the only instrument capable of preventing the build-up of Allied strength and of harassing Allied preparations for the offensive.

It was the lack of sufficient long-range bombers which sealed the fate of the Axis forces in Africa."¹⁴⁰

As of mid-April, the Axis forces were defending a relatively shallow



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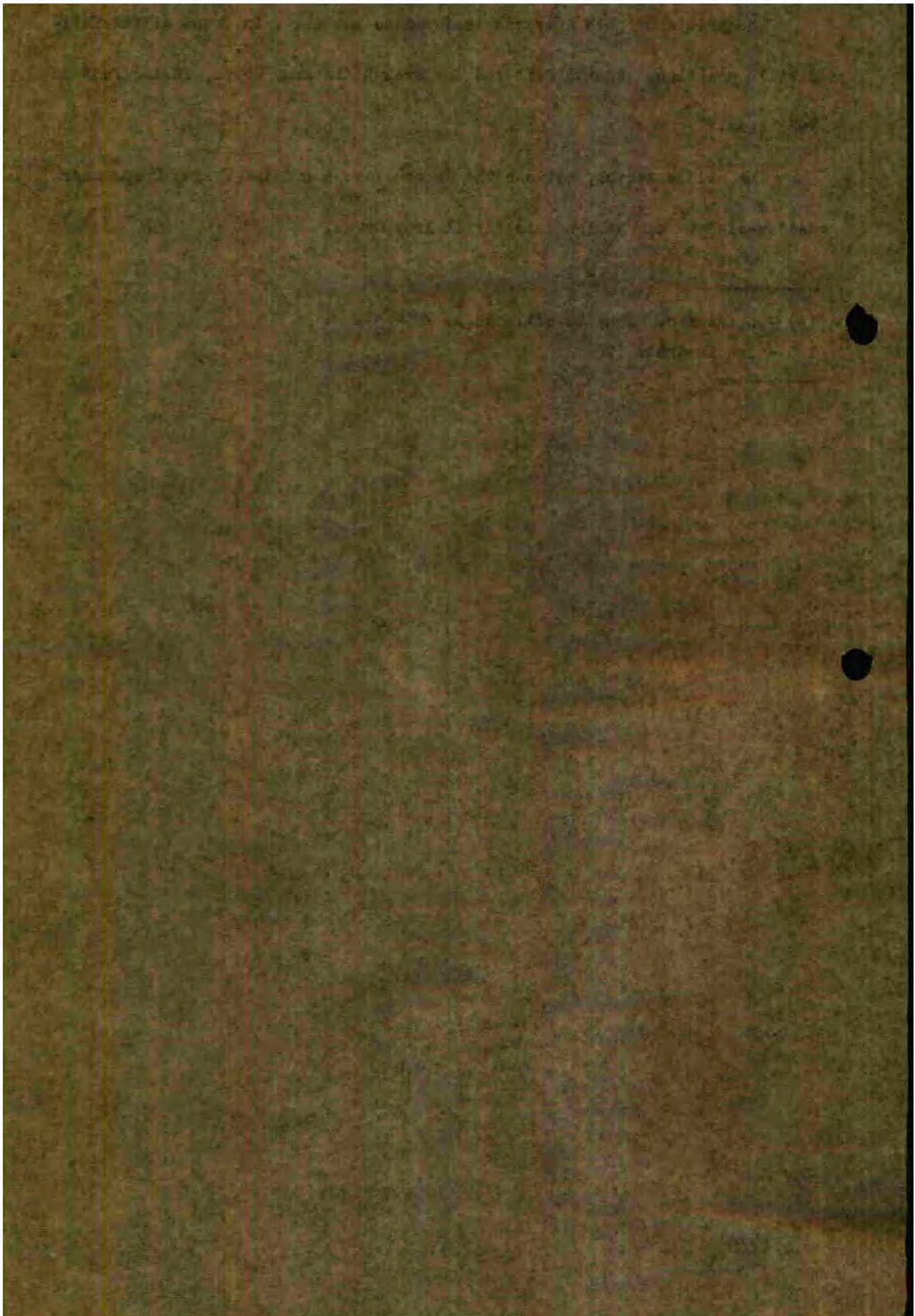
bridgehead surrounded by hills, along the approximate line Enfidaville - Pont du Fahs - Medjez-el-Bab - Sedjenane. On the opposite side of this line, the Allies were preparing for their last assault.

The British Eighth Army was deployed to the east, in front of the Enfidaville position; to its left was the French XIX Army Corps, in the Pont du Fahs area.

The middle sector, between the French forces and the V Army Corps near Medjez-el-Bab, was assigned to the IX Army Corps.

139 - Seidemann, Hans, *op.cit.*, pages 29 - 37.

140 - See Footnote 126.

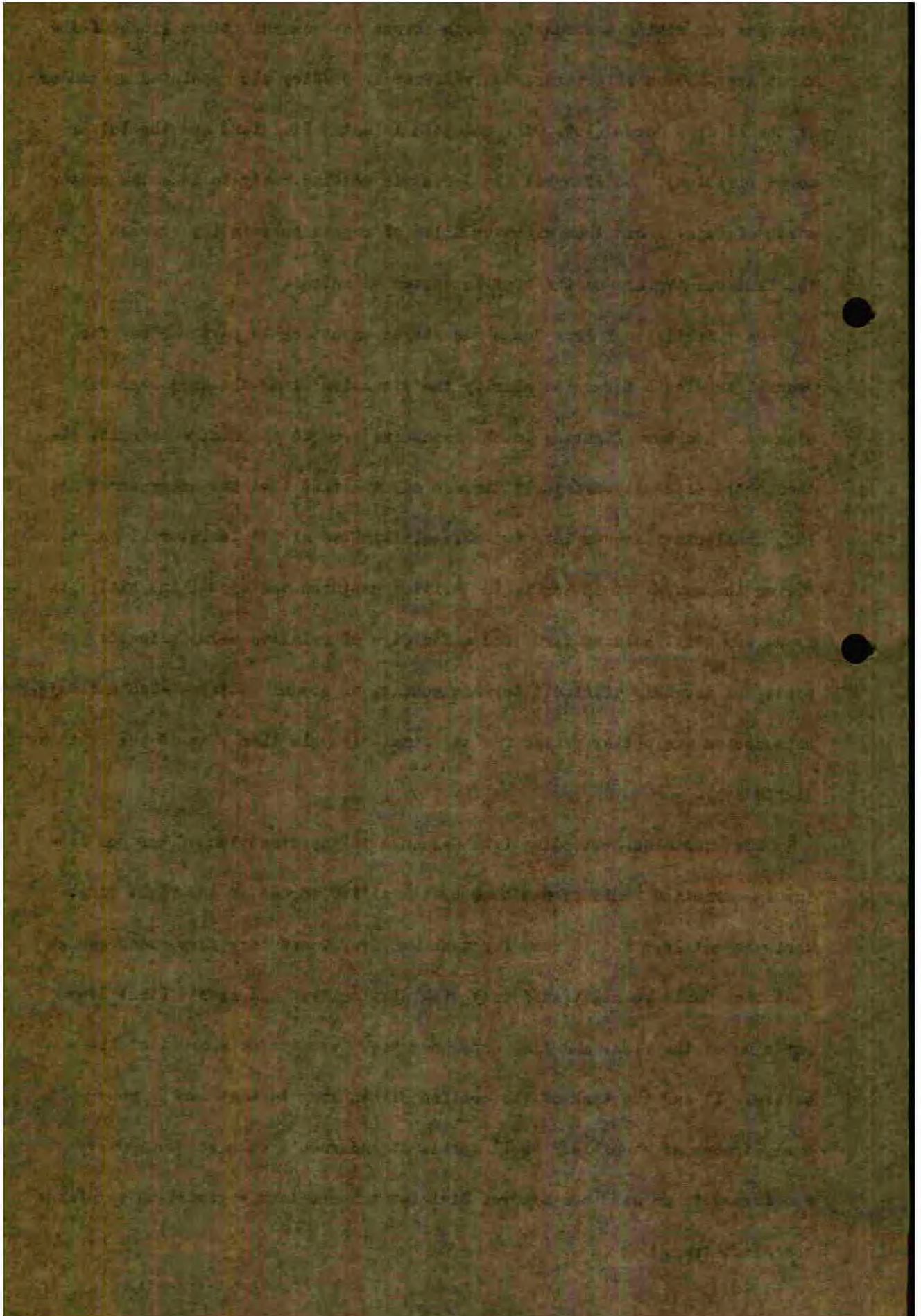


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On the northern sector of the Axis front, units from the V Army Corps ~~HERE~~ were stationed in expectation of ^{The} an attack by the American II Army Corps. The latter had been pushed off its course via Akarit by the advance of the Eighth Army and was moving towards the north across the communications lines of the First Army. Soon afterwards, General Omar N. Bradley was appointed commander of the II Army Corps (1st, 9th, and 34th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division); on 12 April the Corps was getting ready to take the sector north of Beja. More than eighteen miles of rugged terrain lay between it and the flat country around the traffic center of Mateur.

On 7 April the V Army Corps had staged an attack to pave the way for General Bradley's forces to clarify the situation along the Medjes-el-Bab highway. Stubborn fighting in the mountains brought the desired result, although the extremely difficult terrain and the fact that the enemy threw his last available reserves into the struggle limited Allied territorial gains. During the course of 15 April, the British captured the Djebel Ang hill; the front was still holding firm, and a few days of relative calm followed. Despite the terribly difficult terrain conditions around Medjes-el-Bab and Beja, this sector was better suited for the final struggle than that of the British Eighth Army.

The mountains, extending from Zaghouan in the direction of the Bon Peninsula, shielded Tunis from attack by the Allied forces on the right wing. Their extent left little room for tank maneuvers, and they were steep enough that they could be negotiated only with difficulty. Anderson's First Army (made up of the V, IX, and XIX Corps) now took over the main brunt of the battle. It was the task of the British Eighth Army to tie down as many enemy troops as possible. On 11 April, at Anderson's command, Montgomery was forced to release one armored division and one tank regiment to reinforce the First Army.



743 - a

Montgomery's first attempt to take the Enfidaville position served to substantiate the impression that the drive to Tunis was anything but a Sunday stroll.

His attack was launched during the night of 19/20 April. The village of Enfidaville capitulated, and armored reconnaissance troops pushed on into the flat country beyond. The New Zealand Corps occupied the Carcouna rocks for two days; they were so steep that the troops had to use rope ladders to get to the top. Montgomery's forces threw back a number of enemy counterattacks, regrouped for a thrust along the coast, and finally came to the conclusion that the potential gain was not worth the effort involved.

744

The Eighth Army launched its attack without the usual preliminary preparations of the Western Desert Air Force; the only preparations were a number of reconnaissance flights and a few fighter-bomber raids.

The enemy positions were well camouflaged; there were no vehicle parks visible, and besides there were low clouds over the combat area. In addition, the refractory Italians in the Djebel Garci hills had been subdued by a number of fighter-bomber attacks.

All things considered (it was the day of the Palm Sunday massacre), the simultaneous attacks on sea and air traffic turned out better than had been expected.

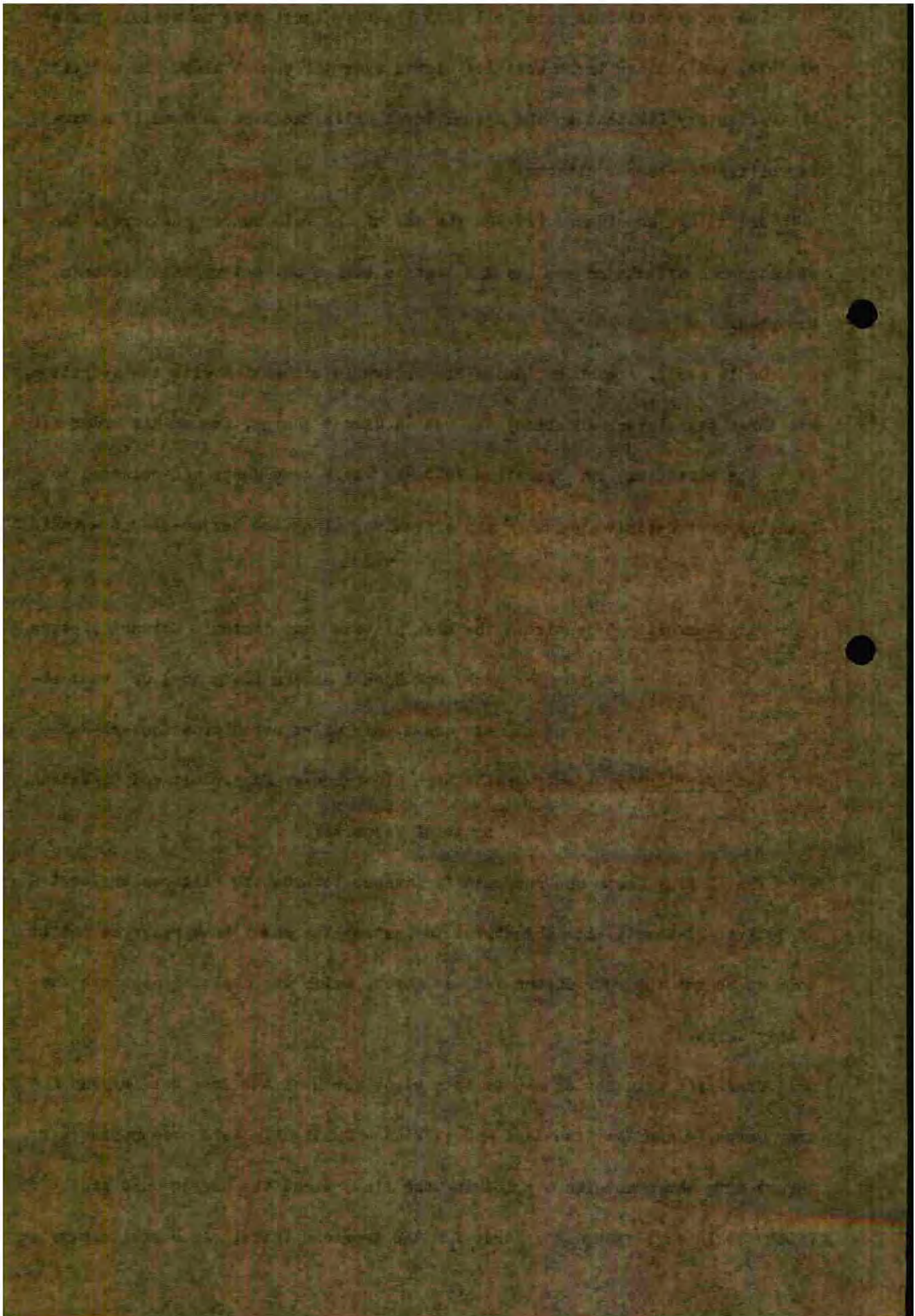
On 16 April, Alexander issued his orders in connection with the operation, and three days later, Anderson, who was in direct charge, issued his Order No. 37 to the First Army for Operation VULCAN. The V Army Corps was selected to lead the most decisive phase of the offensive, along the Medjes-el-Bab - Tunis line.

First-priority Objective: the high plateau near "Peter's Corner" (Peters Eck) and Djebel Ahmera (Longstop) on the western coast, six miles north of Medjes-el-Bab

Second-priority Objective: the high plateau near Massicault and El-Bathan, south of Tebourba.

The IX Army Corps was supposed to advance towards the hill country west of Bekret-el-Komzia, its objectives to destroy the enemy tank reserves and to come up behind the rear of the defense force, which was deployed opposite the V Army Corps.

Bradley's main attack was to take place north of the area held by the V Army Corps, along the line Beja - Qued Tine - Chouigui. This presupposed a thrust into the mountains overlooking the line, since the narrow Qued Tine Valley could easily become a trap for the American tanks. As a preliminary



744 - a

step, the XX Army Corps was to clear the highway leading from Robas to Pont du Fahs.

22 April was set as the deadline. The IX Army Corps was to attack during the forenoon, the V Army Corps after dark, the II Army Corps during the following night, and the XIX Army Corps upon receipt of orders from Anderson.

The Allied close-support air forces had a fourfold mission to fulfill in connection with Operation VULCAN.

First, they were to destroy the enemy air forces; second, to disrupt the enemy supply lines -- sea and air; third, to pin the enemy forces down on the ground; and fourth, to prevent the enemy from staging a second Dunkirk.

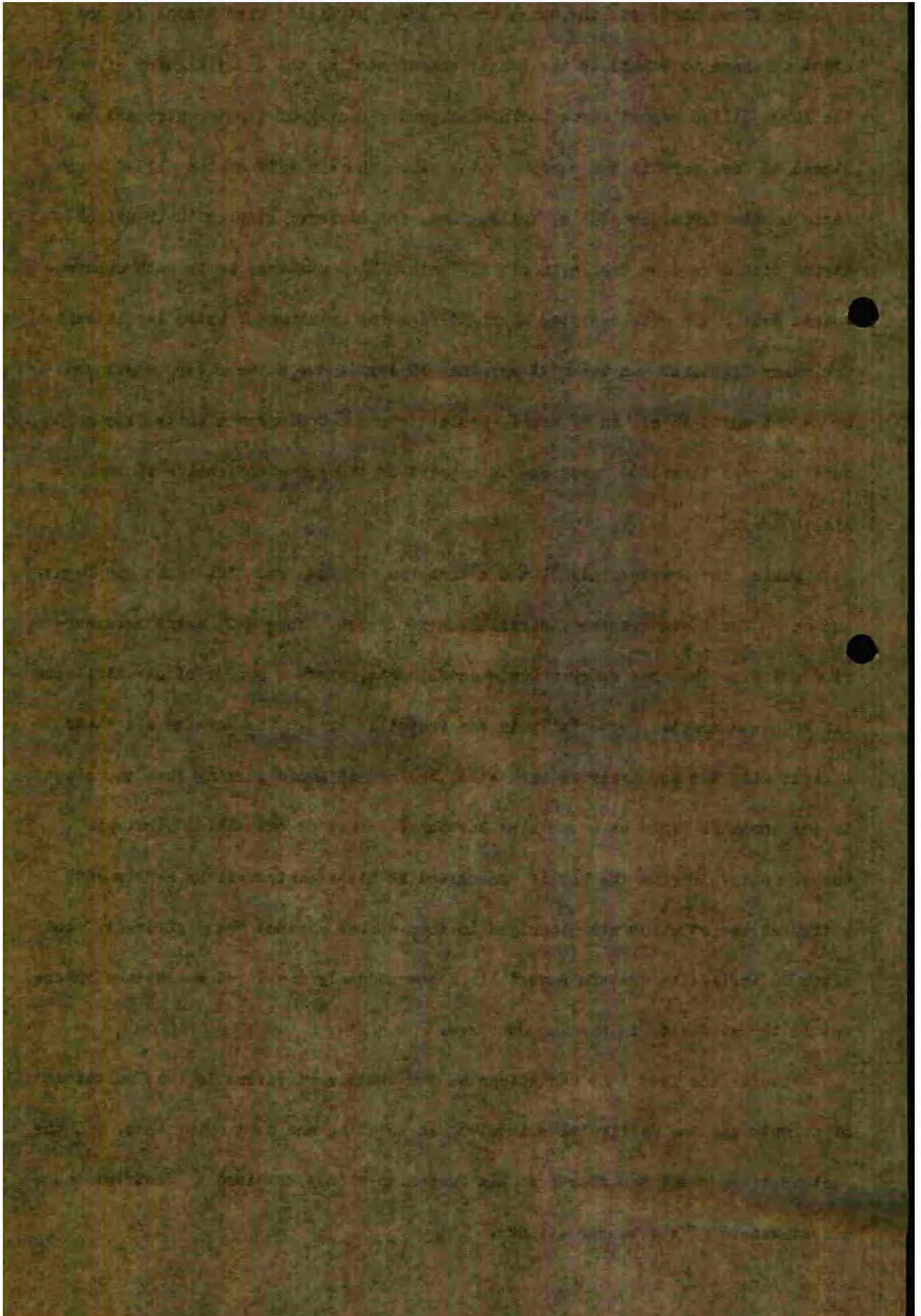
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The deadline date for the Army was 22 April; in compliance with Coningham's order, the close-support units began their comprehensive program of activity during the night of 18/19 April.

The first phase was the usual one -- enemy airfields were bombed day and night in order to eliminate the danger represented by the enemy fighter aircraft. The large Allied escort force included a goodly number of fighter aircraft assigned to free pursuit and combat in the air. The aircraft of the Allied strategic bomber force, Leo-455's, Wellingtons, and Bisleys, started their attack series with a raid on Sebala, north of Tunis. They utilized bombs with delayed-action fuses, and were escorted by night-fighting Hurricanes, which lay in wait for enemy fighters. On the next morning, 19 April, the attacks were continued by A-20's and B-26's; on 20 April, Doolittle's and Coningham's units flew a total of more than 1,000 missions in support of the ground offensive of the Eighth Army.

During the previous night, the attacks on La Mansa and Sidi Ahmed had begun, and on 20 April sixteen enemy airfields were bombed. Four B-25 raids were carried out over the area between Tunis and Bizerte, where a number of new airfields had been constructed, especially in the Protville area. The Germans did their best to hide the few aircraft they still had and to avoid parking them too close to one another. This area was also the chief target of the Allied strategic bomber units. During the day it was raided at stated intervals by A-20's with a fighter escort which also indulged in free combat against enemy aircraft. And after 10 April, the Western Desert Air Force suddenly developed an intense interest in the airfields in the Cap Bon area.

Despite the fact that conditions on the whole were favorable, the multitude of targets and the difficulties involved in locating and destroying them, and the fact that the enemy had dispersed his forces so widely combined to restrict the effectiveness of the bomber attacks.



745 - a

In the area west of Tunis, for example, the Germans were utilizing twenty-five different airfields, and their fighter aircraft -- like rats scurrying from one hide-out to another -- were seldom encountered at the same one twice. Moreover the aircraft were often kept in parks located as much as a mile away from the runway.

There is no doubt that it was the systematic dissipation and the ready mobility of the Luftwaffe which saved it from total destruction. On the other hand, this is hardly the way in which air forces ought to be employed.

A storm during the night of 20/21 April frustrated all Allied air activity. Even so, the intensity of the Allied air attacks had clearly shown the German units that

746

the aircraft assigned to Tunisia were a fairly poor risk. During the course of 20 April, the Me-109's and FW-190's transferred their base of operations to Sicily, which was still relatively safe. Not all of them got away, for on 7 May there were still some 200 aircraft holding out at the bridgehead.

The fact that the Allied air attack was expected during the night of 20/21 April forced the German units into an unequal fight in the area between Medjes-el-Bab and Goubellat. This action cost them more than thirty tanks and had no appreciable effect on the timing of the Allied attack.

The IX Army Corps struck its blow in the area north of Bou-Arada. ^{During} For the course of the three days of heavy fighting which followed, two British divisions broke through the line and engaged enemy tanks in combat. By 25 April, the IX Army Corps had gained enough ground to force the enemy to retreat from the sector left of the XIX Army Corps. After this, the French forces advanced some nineteen miles before they were brought to a halt near the foothills north of the Pont du Fahs - Enfidaville highway.

During the course of 26 April, the 1st and 6th Armored Divisions succeeded in putting a large number of enemy tanks out of action. Then, quite suddenly, the enemy withdrew his tanks and began to retreat across the mine-fields, covering the action with antitank guns.

Accordingly, Anderson ordered the attack stopped and withdrew the two divisions to serve as an Army reserve force.

Moving ahead of the attack schedule, the V Army Corps took on the enemy positions at the head of the Medjerda Valley on 22 April, and promptly ran into trouble. Neither the destructive power of their artillery nor the preceding intensive bombardment was of very much help to the infantry forces trying to take these strong and famous fortresses: Djebel ben Aoukas and Djebel Ahmera.

By the end of April, however, Anderson had gained sufficient elbow-room

746 - a

for his tanks in the area east of Medjez. In addition, the enemy situation made the time seem ripe for a breakthrough. On 23 April, the II Army Corps began a series of assaults on the northern sector, in the confusing jumble of seemingly unending foothills which guarded the access to Mateur. With the French Africa Corps fighting at its left, it concentrated its attack on the area of Oued Tine, thus coordinating it with the main Allied offensive east of Medjez-el-Bab.

747

This attack was so successful that by 1 May the defenders were hardly able to maintain their hold on the hills which screened the plains surrounding Mateur.

It was during this night that the Axis forces began their general retreat all along the line. Mateur was abandoned and a hastily improvised line of defense was set up in front of Biserte and the last range of hills before the plains of Tunis.

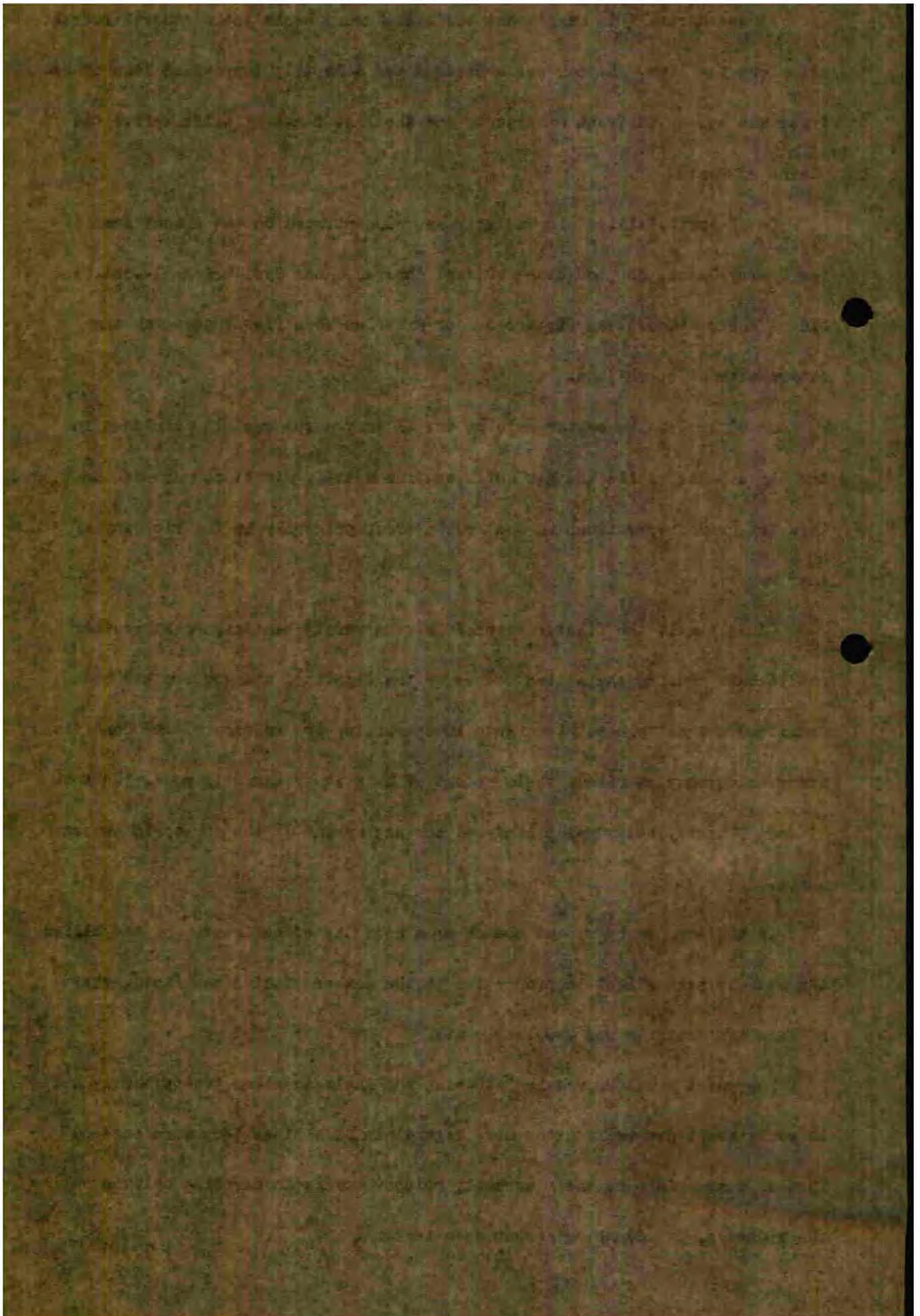
On 22 April, Allied air activity was concentrated on the combat area of the V Army Corps, on "Longstop" (Djebel Ahmera), Ksar Tyr, Grich-el-Oued, and Ain el Asker. Countless fighter-bomber missions were flown, covering the entire area of operations.

On 23 April, the sector held by the II Army Corps was also included in the air attacks, while the air units continued their direct support of the infantry ground operations in the Medjes area, primarily in the vicinity of Ksar Tyr.

On 24 April, the fighter aircraft were severely handicapped by weather conditions. During the entire course of the fighting, the bombers had been committed against pin-point targets in the hills, and in view of the conditions under which they operated, their record of hits was remarkably good. On both 29 and 30 April, heavy rains hindered the employment of the strategic bomber units.

If the topography of the combat area made the effectiveness of the Allied air attacks seem slight in proportion to the number of missions flown, that of Axis air activity was absolutely nil.

The point had been reached at which the Anglo-American troops hardly had to worry about danger from the air, regardless of whether they were engaged in mass regroupings at their assembly points, moving in marching columns on the highways, or advancing across open terrain.



747 - a

For at this exceedingly critical time, the Axis fighter aircraft left in Africa were urgently needed for escort duty with the shipping convoys in the perilous waters of the Tunisian Gulf.

748

Even if this had not been the case, it is doubtful that they could have accomplished much more -- other than to increase the total record of enemy aircraft shot down by the Northwest African Air Force.

During aerial combat on 21 and 23 April, twelve enemy aircraft were destroyed at the cost of two Allied machines. After this, the Luftwaffe reduced the frequency of its missions over the combat area from day to day.

The Allied air forces had achieved veritably uncontested air supremacy.

By the end of April, it was clear that a breakthrough by sufficiently strong forces in the direction of Tunis -- the same maneuver which Anderson had failed to bring off during the preceding winter -- would bring about the complete collapse of the entire Axis front.

Montgomery voiced his objections to the effect that a full-scale assault even by a numerically and technically superior Eighth Army would not really serve any useful purpose.

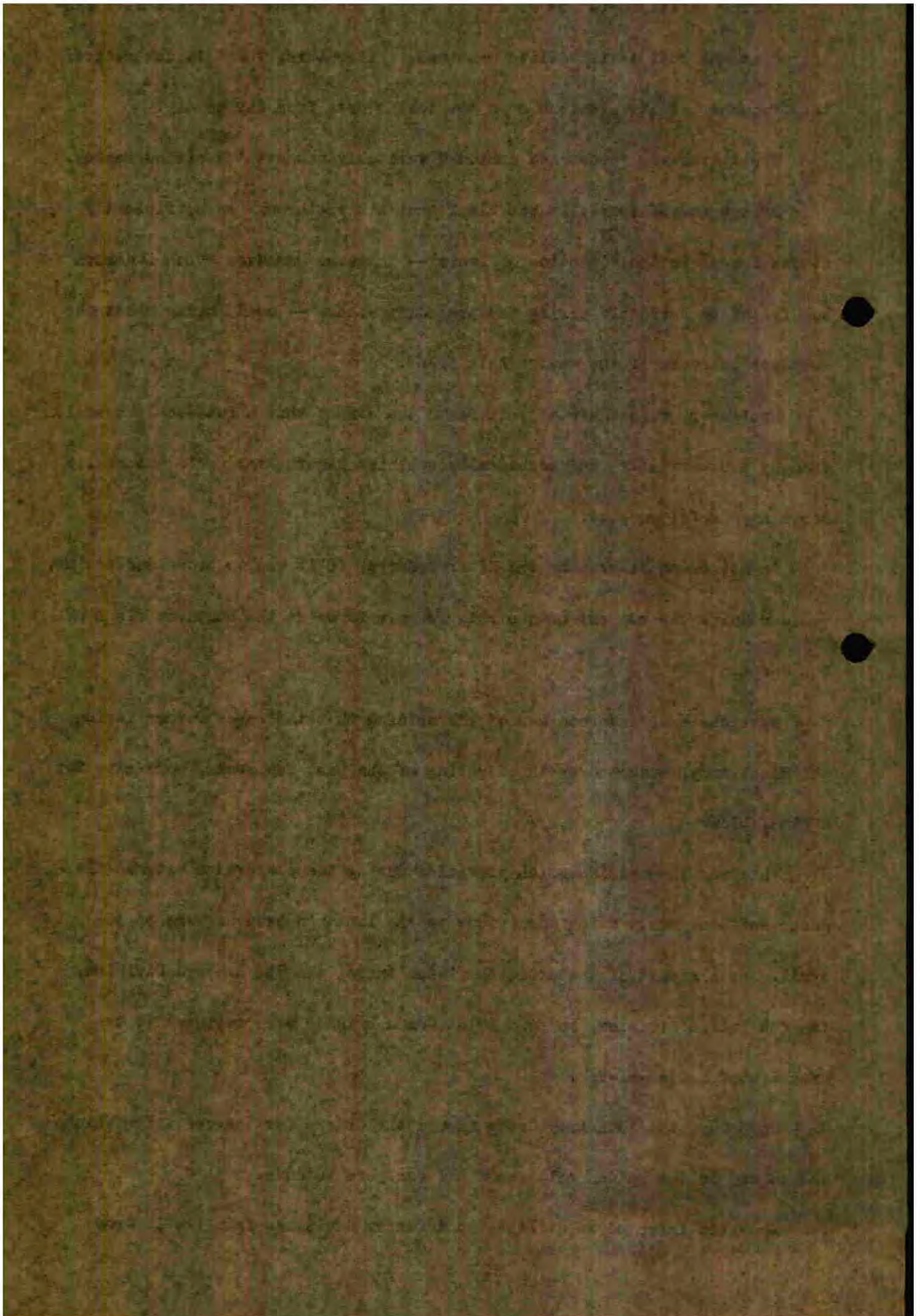
An attack on Bizerte by the II Army Corps, if it was to prove successful, would require the support of a strong reserve force on the southern flank of the Corps.

Nevertheless, Anderson was of the opinion that the enemy forces facing the First Army, weakened by the fighting of the past few weeks, were ripe for a final blow.

This was the opinion which prevailed during the conference between Alexander and Montgomery which took place at the latter's headquarters on 30 April. As a result of the decisions taken there, the 7th Armored Division, the 4th Indian Division, and the 201st Guard Brigade were assigned to the area around Medjez-el-Bab.

On 3 May, the 18th Army Group issued the orders for the operation which was to end in the sudden collapse of all enemy resistance.

Anderson intended to utilize two infantry divisions from the IX Army



748 - a

Corps for an assault on a relatively narrow front south of Djebel bou Aoukas. Supported by two armored divisions, he was bound to break the strength of the Axis with a single blow and to bring about the surrender of the fortifications at Tunis before the enemy should have time to man them properly.

749

In connection with this action, the V Army Corps was to carry out an earlier attack on Djebel bou Aoukaz, and the XIX Army Corps was to work its way forward over the difficult terrain around Djebel Zaghouan.

The II Army Corps, finally, was to continue its assault on Chouigui and, then swing over in the direction of Djedeida to help support the offensive of the IX Army Corps. A full-scale artillery barrage was planned for the main phase of the offensive, and the close-support units had received instructions to prepare for what was expected to be a hitherto unheard-of number of enemy attacks. Even the 205th Bomber Group (Wellingtons) was employed from its remote station at Misurata in nerve-racking nocturnal bombardment.

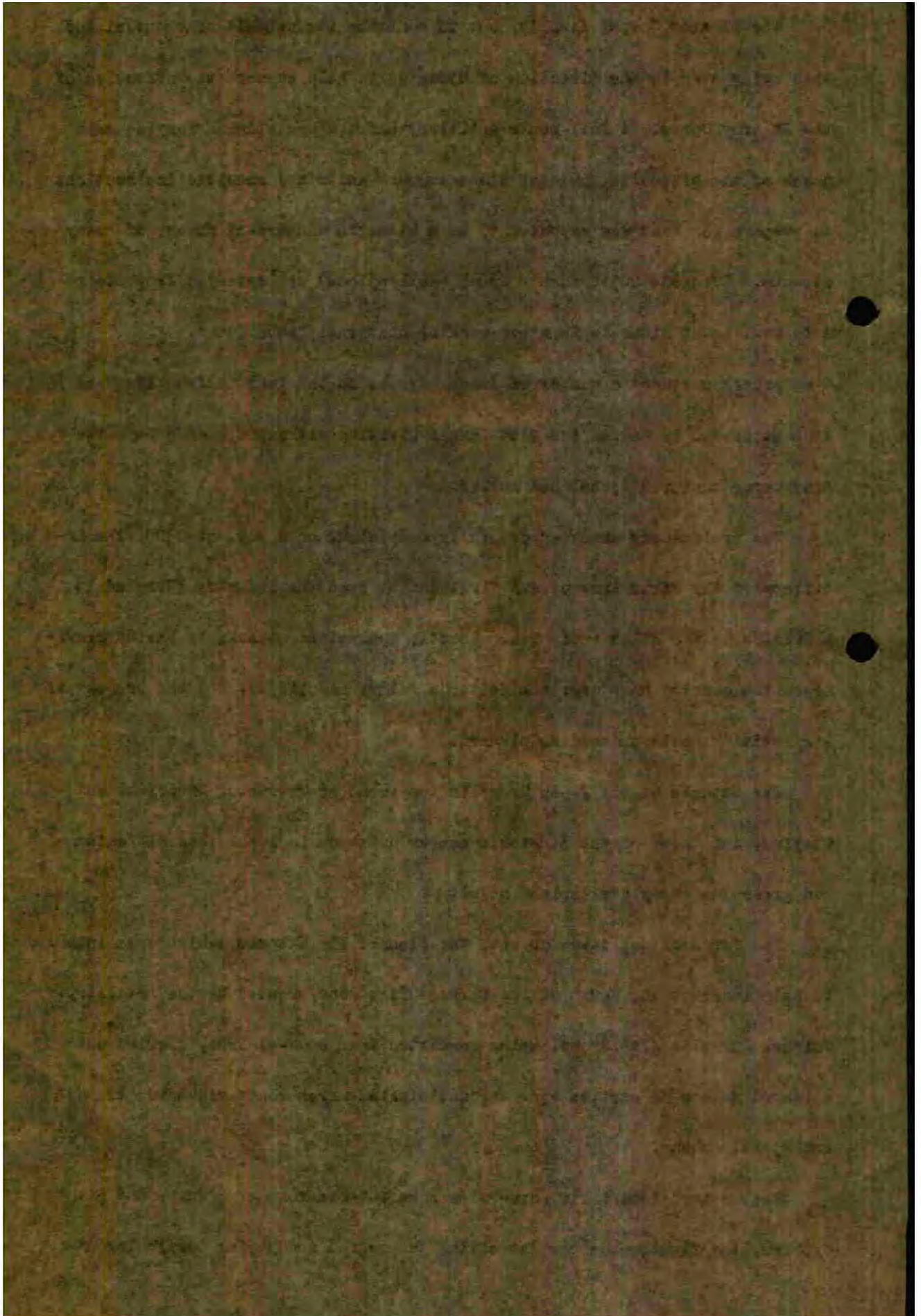
Anderson staged a number of dummy attacks on the Pont du Fahs area and thus succeeded in having the 21st Panzer Division withdrawn; on 5 May, the V Army Corps captured Djebel bou Aoukaz.

The preliminary phase successfully completed, on 6 May, at 0500, the artillery of the First Army opened fire, and at dawn the infantry attacked in a front some two miles in length. Shortly thereafter, thanks to Divine Providence the morning haze over the Medjerda Valley had lifted, and the program of air activity could proceed as planned.

The attacks of the 205th Group in the areas of Tebourba, Djedeida, and Cheylus, and those of the strategic bomber units on La Sebala and El-Aouina had given the enemy a sleepless night.

The forenoon was taken up with the planned air attacks, which were intended to help increase the depth of the barrage fire zone created by the artillery. Colonel Ferral's 47th Group, being committed from Souk-el-Arba, carried out a record number of sorties over the anticipated march route via Bordj Fremdj and Djebel Achour.

The Western Desert Air Force flew some 200 missions over Furna and St. Cyprien, the fighter-bombers patrolling the region and paying particular at-



749 - a

tention to the highways. Explosions and fires could hardly be identified through the clouds of smoke and dust.

750

By 1100 the Allied infantry had fought its way forward nearly 1.2 miles, and German resistance was near the breaking-point. The enemy tanks now launched their assault and, by nightfall, had succeeded in taking Massicault.

The Allied air units had flown more than 2,000 missions, 1,000 of them before 0900.

On 6 May, the German Luftwaffe, too, appeared on the scene in large numbers for the last time. The German aircraft were challenged in the air by Allied fighters, which shot down twelve machines, while losing only two of their own.

An American Spitfire group surprised twelve German Me-109's during take-off operations. American reports indicated that only three of the enemy aircraft escaped.

During the course of 7 May, German resistance crumbled even further, and during the afternoon, British tanks moved along the Avenue Gambretta into Tunis.

At almost exactly the same time, American tanks were entering Bizerte along a route which the Germans allegedly had mined thoroughly and provided generously with booby-traps.

Chouigui, too, fell on 7 May, and two days later British and American troops made contact at Protville, thus cutting off completely the German forces holding the hill positions around the former battlefield of Tebrouba.

On 10 May, the ranking German commander requested an armistice, and German resistance in the area of the II Army Corps had indeed come to a standstill.

The tanks of the IX Army Corps left the direct route to Tunis to turn to the north and south in order to cut off the encircled enemy forces and to prevent the escape of any larger groups of enemy soldiers to the Cap Bon area, where they might have dug into last-ditch defensive positions.

Enemy resistance continued for a little while in the hills near Hammamliif, but on 10 May the 6th Armored Division managed to break through in the direc-

750 - a

tion of Soliman and to advance across the Peninsula as far as Hammamet.

British and French units were now rapidly approaching the positions still held by the remainder of the Axis armies. The German Army Corps, subjected to enemy fire from all sides, capitulated from its encirclement position on 11 May.

The next day, General von Arnim was taken prisoner near St. Marie du Zit; General Messe, the staunch defender of the Mareth line, managed to hold out until 12 May, when an enemy bombardment attack convinced him that the time had come for surrender.

751

After General Messe surrendered his forces on 13 May, all systematic Axis resistance came to an end; Operation TORCH had been carried through at last.

The Northwest African Air Forces, the Middle East Air Command, and the Malta Air Command of the Royal Air Force had steadily intensified their attacks ever since mid-April, acting in accordance with the orders of their Commander in Chief¹⁴¹.

From that moment on, when the enemy withdrew into the tightly limited bridgehead position, his situation was hopeless. In the opinion of Allied leaders, he was left with only two choices -- flight or capitulation.

As a result, Allied headquarters immediately began preparing plans to hinder the escape of the Axis forces.

The ^{air}airfield at Pantelleria, with its subterranean hangars, was considered a vital target with top destruction priority. The Allies suspected that enemy fighters based there would be utilized to cover the debarkation operation.

Doolittle wrote as follows: "We ought to attack them on the ground, at their assembly points, wherever large ships can dock, along the coast, wherever small motor-boats can be loaded, and at sea as well."¹⁴²

The missions assigned to the Close-Support Corps for Operation VULCAN¹⁴³ were supported with great effectiveness by the attacks of the strategic bomber units -- carried out at Tedder's order.

Occasionally, these units attacked directly over the battlefield, as for example on 20 April, over the Eighth Army combat area, or from 22 April on, while the First Army was launching its decision-seeking assault on Tunis. By this time, Spaatz had achieved his first objective -- unlimited air supremacy over the Tunisian bridgehead.

The Allied pilots could fly anywhere they wanted to over the area in which their ground forces were fighting, without having to fear enemy intervention of any kind. In the meantime, the units of the Fifth Air Force, together

751 - a

with the Western Desert Air Force, (the 57th and 12th Groups), had been moved to airfields in the Sfax - Kairouan area. Shortly thereafter, the American 340th Medium Bomber Group also arrived in Sfax.

The Western Desert Air Force was selected to deliver the final crippling blow to the German air transport units. Based at favorably located airfields in the vicinity of Sousse, its radar equipment was trained in the direction of the sea.

141 - See pages 706 and 707 of the present study.

142 - Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 199.

143 - See page 744 of the present study.

752

On 18 April, at approximately 1500, the Luftwaffe had succeeded in landing a large air supply transport in Tunisia, probably at El-Aouina or La Marsa.

During the return flight, undertaken low over the surface of the water and with the fighter escort at staggered altitude, the transport aircraft unexpectedly ran into four P-40 squadrons from the 57th and 324th Groups. The Allied aircraft were also accompanied by an escort of Spitfires, flying at a high altitude.

At the end of the ensuing fray, 50-70 (other estimates run as high as 100) Ju-52's and 16 Me-202's, Me-109's, and Me-110's, which had been flying at the edge of the Ju-52 group, had been destroyed. Allied losses amounted to six P-40's and one Spitfire.

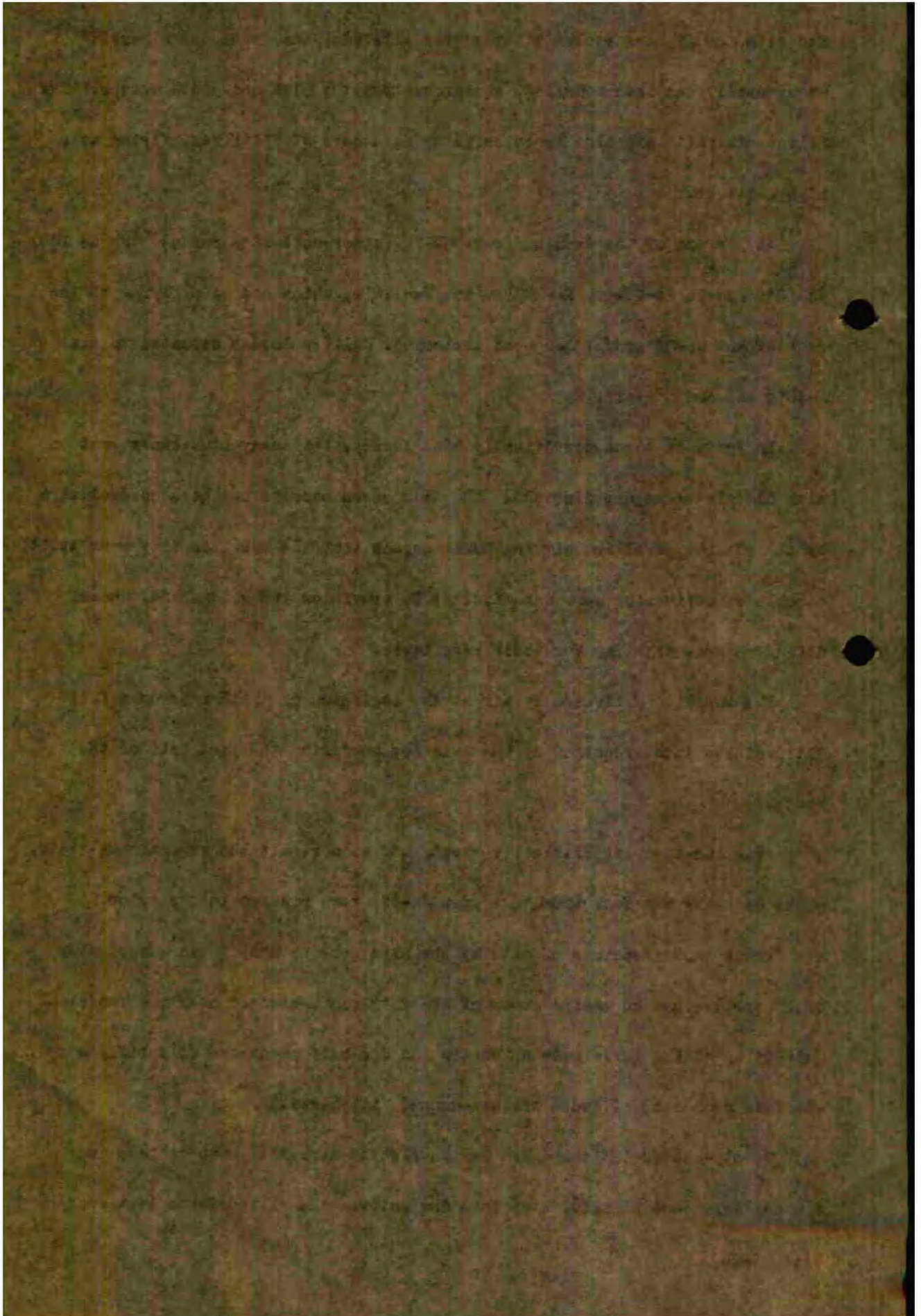
In spite of these terrifically high losses, the enemy stubbornly went on with his air transport missions. The Axis ocean convoys had been so decimated by the attacks of Allied air and naval forces that the supplies they were still capable of delivering were insufficient to provision the bridgehead, whose defenders were fighting for their very lives.

The supplies delivered by air at the beginning of April made up a full third of the total required by the Axis forces during the last half of the month.

Aviation fuel was critically short, and as a result the gigantic Me-323's, whose capacity was four times that of a Ju-52, were pressed into service.

These last desperate efforts by the Axis were brought to an abrupt stop on 22 April, when an entire group of Me-323's was destroyed over the Tunisian Gulf by an Allied force made up of two and one-half squadrons of Spitfires and four squadrons of South African-manned Kittyhawks.

Twenty-one Me-323's and ten German fighter aircraft, most of them in flames, were sent plunging down into the water; the Allied force lost four Kittyhawks.



752 - a

Generalmajor Ulrich Buchholz, Air Transport Commander, Mediterranean (Lufttransportführer Mittelmeer), ordered the daytime flights discontinued. Utilizing crews trained for instrument flight, he switched to limited night missions in order to keep at least the most urgently needed supplies coming through.

He ordered his crews to try a dawn approach via Cagliari every once in a while, in order to avoid the dangerous region around Cap Bon. The Ju-52's sometimes ran into Allied Beaufighters which had been called to the area by radio reports from the Allied Coastal Command.

753

The total incapacitation of the Axis air transport system was accelerated by attacks carried out by the strategic bomber units on the widely scattered airfields utilized by the Luftwaffe transport aircraft. During the week from 10 - 16 April, fragmentation bombs were dropped on Castelvetro and Milo, in Sicily, as well as on Demomannu, Monserrato, Elmes, and Vilacidro, in Sardinia. Further attacks were carried out against the increasingly active Axis convoys, which had no alternative but to try to take the place of the necessarily sharply limited air transport missions in bringing the most vital supplies to Africa. For a while the Allied fliers were effectively hindered by bad weather, but as soon as this period had come to an end, they renewed their attacks and succeeded in sinking a considerable number of Seibel barges and motor-boats.

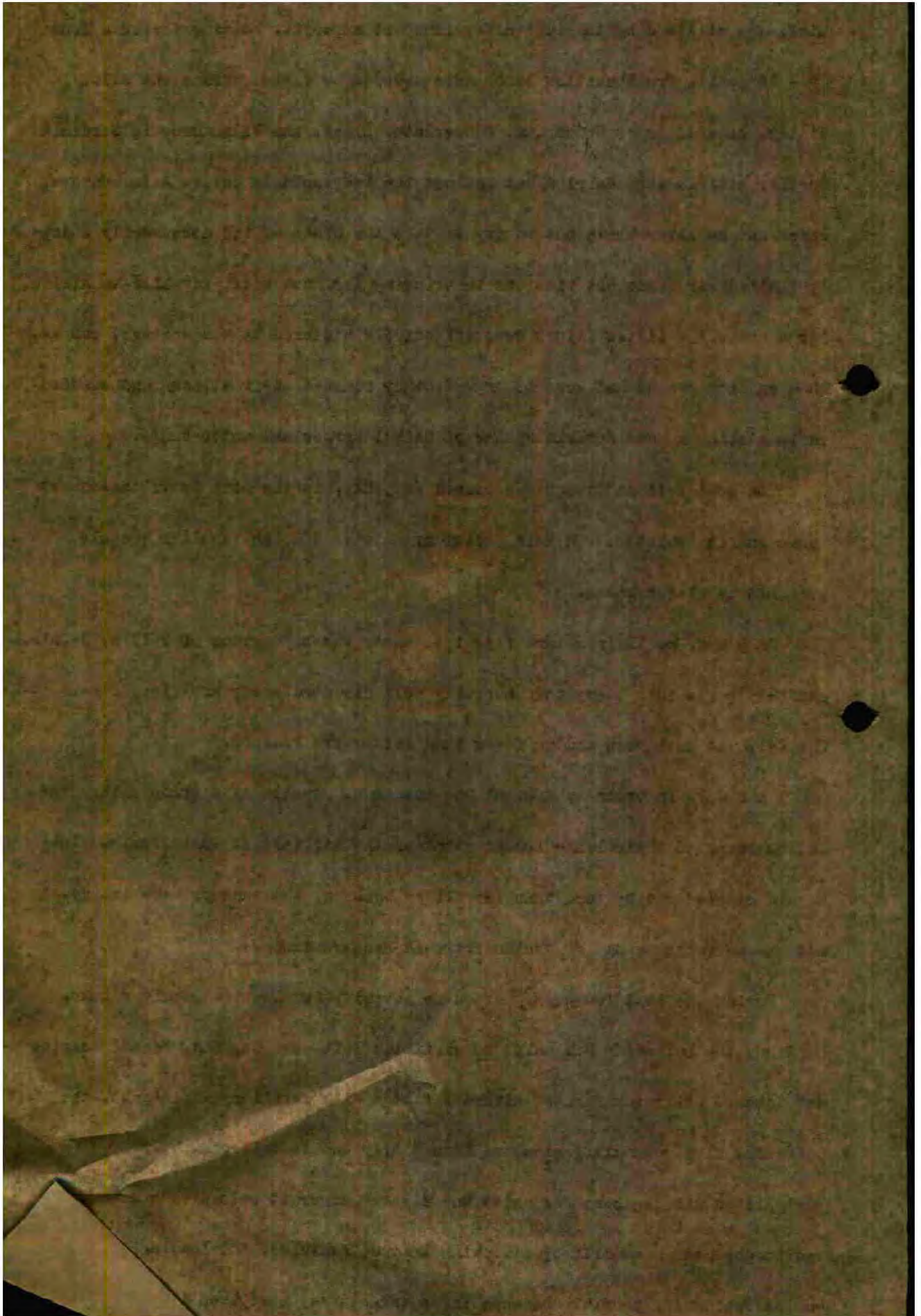
The most serious damage was caused on 5 May, in the port installations at Tunis and La Goulette. On this occasion, a total of eight smaller vessels were hit by Allied bombs.

On 9 May, on their return flight to their bases, a group of B-17's, B-26's, and B-25's ran into heavy and unusually well directed enemy artillery fire. One B-17 was shot down and no fewer than fifty were damaged.

On 8 May, in order to prevent the escape of sizable Axis troop units, the Allies launched their long-planned attack on the airfield at Pantelleria. In a raid carried out by more than 120 Allied bombers, the runways were destroyed and the entrance to one of the underground hangars damaged.

During the last few days, Luftwaffe activity had been extremely slight; by 8 May the Luftwaffe had only two airfields left near Cap Bon, Mensel Termine and Korba. Utilizing fighter aircraft fitted with auxiliary fuel tanks, the Luftwaffe flew some sixty missions from Sicily and Pantelleria.

Allied strategic bomber units and fighter aircraft helped to break enemy resistance near Haemmalif by attacking troops, vehicles, and loading platforms on the Peninsula, possibly because these targets may have been interpreted as



753 - a

tangible signs of Axis plans to move troops out of the area.

In addition, the Allied air units supported the troops fighting on the ground around the encirclement area at Zaghuan, in which Axis resistance still blazed up sporadically, only to flicker out again -- finally for good.

The German Luftwaffe had been forced to abandon more than 600 inoperable aircraft on the airfields at Tunis, Bizerte, and Cap Bon. This number was more than the total losses suffered by the XII Air Command during the entire period from November to May.

The participation of the US Army Air Force in the campaigns in North Africa was anything but voluntary.

Nevertheless, once in Africa the American Air Force mastered the extremely difficult principles guiding the coordination of air and ground operations, and that in a surprisingly short time and with relatively low losses.

It is true that these principles were based largely on the experience gathered by the Royal Air Force in the Middle East; nevertheless they represented the same basic tenets for which the Army Air Force had been fighting for a long time. Spaatz, Kuter, and Stratemeyer all found their own views substantiated by what they saw in Tunisia, and the same was true of Brereton and Craig in the western desert. And, finally, Arnold did his best to see that the new doctrines were taken seriously in the War Department.

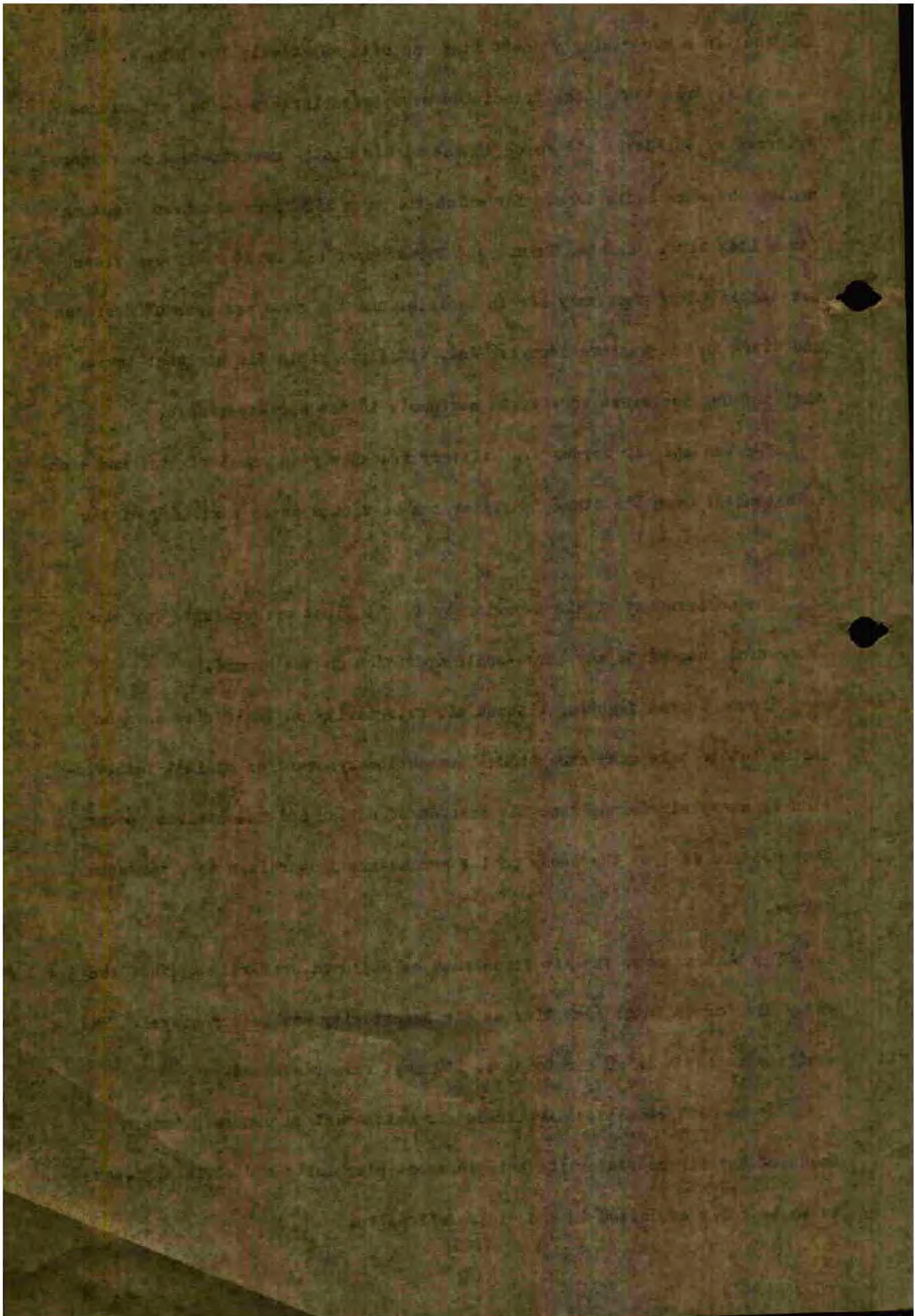
"Ground and air forces are military branches with equal rights, and each is dependent upon the other; neither can be viewed as an auxiliary of the other.

The achievement of air superiority is the first prerequisite for the successful outcome of any large-scale operation on the ground.

Ground forces fighting without air superiority on their side have no choice but to take such exceptional precautionary measures against intervention by enemy air forces that the freedom of action and the striking power they need to destroy the enemy on the ground are jeopardised to a dangerous degree.

For this reason, the air force must be employed primarily against the enemy air forces until such time as air superiority has been achieved. The mobility inherent in an air force is its most valuable asset.

The command of all the available air units must be concentrated in the hands of the air commander if their inherent elasticity and striking power is to be fully exploited in a decisive offensive.



754 - a

It is for this reason that the command over both ground and air units in any one area of operations must be entrusted to the commander in charge of the operation in progress.

755

In accordance with his orders, it is up to the separate commanders of the air forces and the ground units to order the appropriate commitment of their respective units.

Quoted from Field Manual 100-20, 21 July 1943.¹⁴⁴

While the campaign in Tunisia was still going on, the Americans had drawn the logical and necessary conclusions applicable to the commitment of their air units and had acted accordingly.

German leaders, in contrast, were unable to bring their ideas concerning the conduct of tactical air warfare to bear after the spring of 1942.

Hellmuth Felmy

General der Flieger a.D.

44 - Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 205 and 206.
