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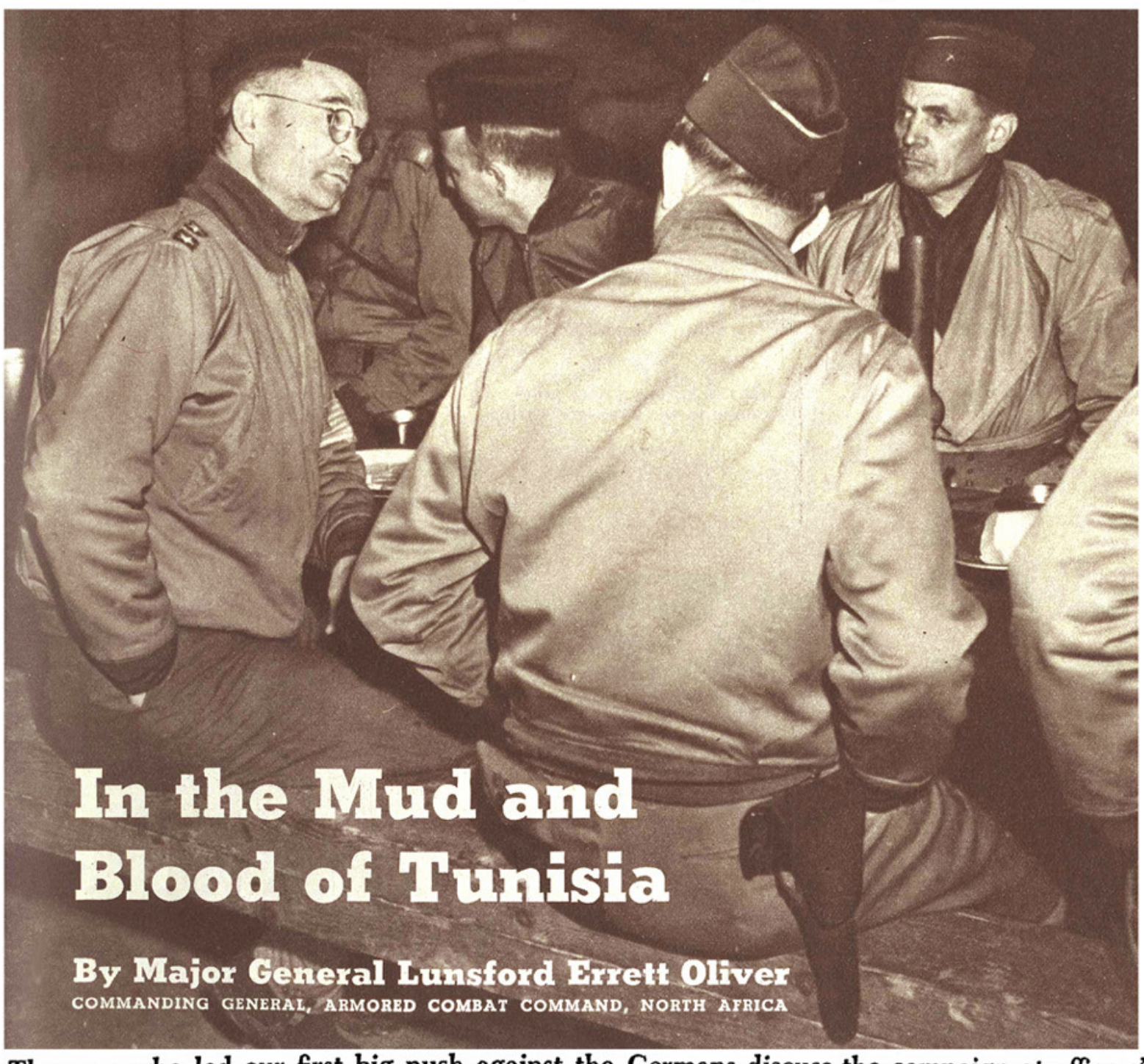
What happened during those first bloody days in Tunisia? What went wrong during our initial advance on Tunis and Bizerte? When can we expect North Africa to be cleared of the enemy? These and other vital questions about our Mediterranean operations are discussed here by the general who commanded our first ground troops to fight Germans



In the Mud and Blood of Tunisia

By Major General Lunsford Errett Oliver
COMMANDING GENERAL, ARMORED COMBAT COMMAND, NORTH AFRICA

The men who led our first big push against the Germans discuss the campaign at officers' Tunisia. Left, Maj. Gen. Oliver; right, Brig. Gen. Palmer; with back to camera, Lt. Gen.

WE SHALL win in North Africa. Of that I am certain. But I am equally certain it will be a hard struggle, with heavy losses on both sides.

It is my personal conviction that our men are excellent soldiers and that our equipment is on the whole superior to that of the enemy. If I have any criticism to make, it is perhaps in the employment of our equipment rather than its quality. We are still new to war. We have not yet learned certain lessons, and one of these is perfect co-ordination between air and land forces.

Individually, we have the best ground and air force of any belligerent power; we need only experience to perfect the necessary "team play."

The Germans have shown us in France and elsewhere that air-to-land and land-to-air radio communication enables the enemy to employ air and land power with telling effect. We have not yet perfected this valuable tactic, and I feel that we must if we are to obtain the utmost striking power from our armor and our air support.

Our weakness in this regard, together with ever-present mud conditions encountered, prevented our further advance in a certain decisive phase of the Tunisian campaign, which I am about to describe. Before I do, however, I must go back to the beginning of our North African operations and sketch for you the action which preceded the events of those rain-drenched days of December 7th, 8th and 9th, when, due to a variety of factors, we sustained a defeat entailing loss of men, officers and mobile equipment.

We landed in North Ireland on the 20th of May and thereafter participated in numerous maneuvers with the British. On September 3d, I was called to London and told about the forthcoming operation in North Africa and was assigned to head a combat command of an armored division, having under my command approximately one regiment of tanks with its complement of self-propelled artillery and antitank guns and infantry.

We spent the months of September and October preparing for the operation. This included special training in landing operations, which had to be done without letting the troops know where or when we would strike. For this training and for the preparation of our vehicles for the attack, our outfit was moved to England. All our motorized equipment had to be waterproofed to enable it to move without damage in a limited depth of salt water.

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North Africa

A U.S. Army convoy somewhere in Tunisia.

I had envisioned some of the problems involved in this work and in the loading of the equipment but, frankly, I had no idea of the amount of labor this finally entailed. Close packing of the vehicles and supplies was necessary. We figured it all out on paper first, after careful measurement of the equipment and material and of the shipping space available. Everything had to be loaded in such a way that what we wanted first should come off the ships first. Then plans for the actual landing involving co-ordination with the Navy and Air Corps and an infantry division had to be prepared. My staff of about twelve men and an equal number of British worked an average of fourteen hours a day for about 45 days, preparing for our mission.

Finally, on an October night, our men were loaded aboard ship after our equipment had been taken on. We didn't sail until late October; we spent the time training aboard ship in unloading soldiers by scrambling down landing nets and carrying out a landing on shore and reloading aboard ship. Nobody was allowed ashore except on the practice landing area. About three days before the sailing of our men, the ships with our supplies and some of our equipment set out for our objective.

We took a long, roundabout way to

The days are warm now in Tunisia, but the nights are cold. British and American advance patrols wear warm clothing to guard against frostbite

"One of our 75-millimeter antitank guns knocked out five German tanks with five shots." An Allied soldier carefully approaches a blazing tank

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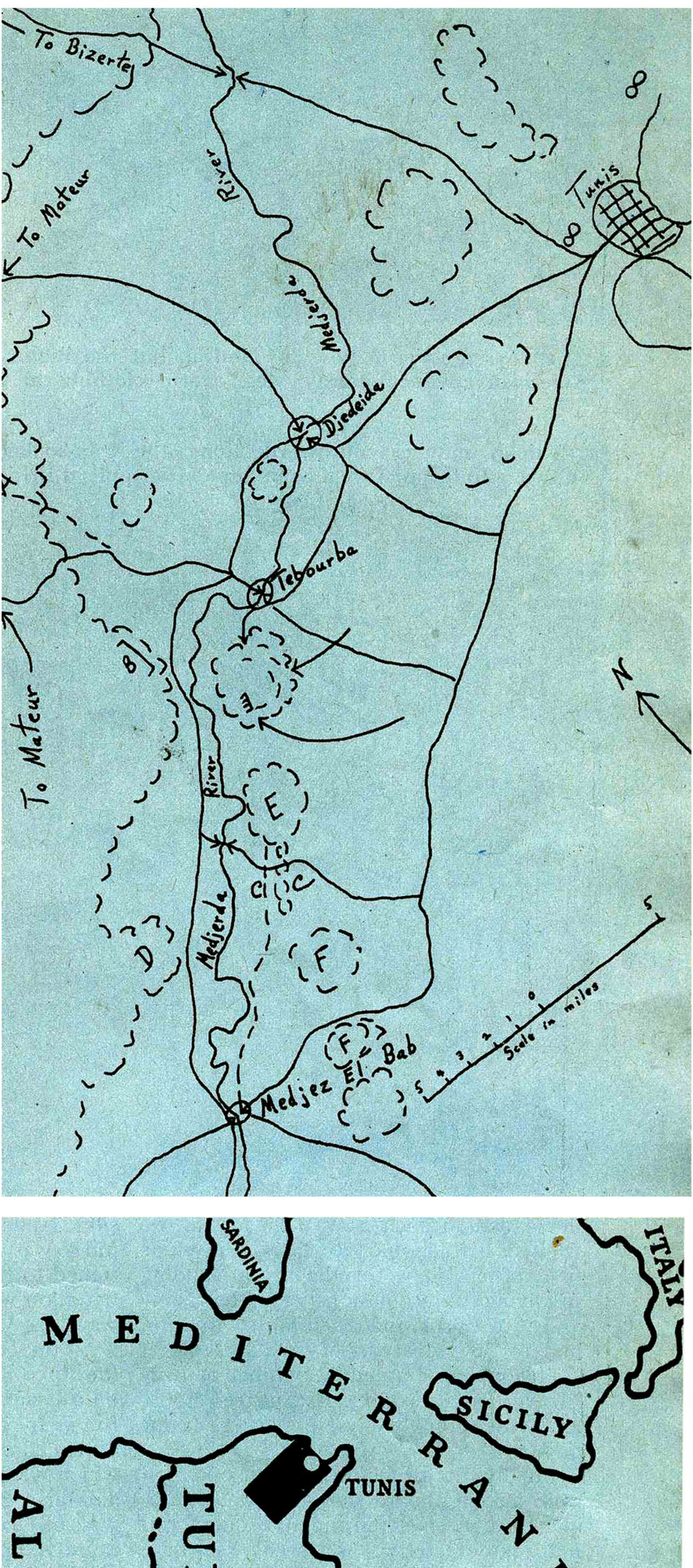
North Africa

Gibraltar. We appeared off Gibraltar from the west. Meanwhile, the convoys were assembling at prearranged rendezvous points for their concerted movements toward Casablanca, Oran and Algiers. All of our ships carrying troops sailed in one convoy. Before we arrived at the Straits, we who were headed for Oran peeled off and loafed for one day, while those for Algiers went on through the Straits.

On the night of November 7th, we were considerably north of Oran, and immediately it was dark, we turned for Oran itself. Zero hour for simultaneous landings for Casablanca, Oran and Algiers was 1



Above: Black rectangle on lower map is the area of operations shown in General Oliver's own map at top. Red arrows indicate attacking German mechanized forces; points marked by letters are the successive positions of the Allied units as the general details them in his forthright article

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North Africa

A. M. We were at our designated position at exactly the right hour to the second and ready for our landings at several prearranged places. Two combat teams of the infantry division landed at the beach at Arzeu twenty-five miles east of Oran. A third combat team of the infantry division landed at Les Andalouses twelve miles west of Oran. This force was assigned to move directly upon Oran. One battalion was to move along the beach toward La Macta to protect our east flank.

'Vehicles moving southward along the rain-soaked road were bogging down." In this picture a Bren gun carrier pulls a British truck out of the mud

"Our marksmanship was as good as the Germans', but to be just as good isn't enough; we have got to be considerably better in order to win"

Of my combat command, two thirds of the force landed at the village of St. Lieu on a beach already taken and established for us by one of the combat teams. This we called our Red Force. The other third, which we called our Green Force, landed at Mersa Bou Zedjer, forty or fifty miles west of Oran. We had the task of moving rapidly upon two airports, Tafaraoui, twenty-five miles south of Oran, and La Senia, twelve miles south of Oran. We were to take and hold these positions and then to assist the infantry division in the attack on Oran from the south.

The whole operation might have failed had we not had available some of our recently developed Armored Force bridge equipment. In landing, we used three ships known as maracaibos. These were shallow-draft, flat-bottomed, seagoing ships which had been converted by the British for carrying tanks and had gates in their bows with telescoping ramps. The vessels drew only seven feet at their bows.

Debarkation a Success

At Oran, however, due to the flat slope

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of the beach, these ships would run aground four hundred feet from the water's edge. This meant that our vehicles would have to go into six feet of water, which wouldn't do. Here we employed our bridge which we extended from the fully projected ramp toward the beach. The ships beached at 4 A.M. and were unloaded by 8 A.M.

In those four hours, we debarked from each maracaibo some twenty light tanks, forty half-tracks and several jeeps, self-propelled antitank guns and towed antitank guns. There were slightly over eighty pieces of equipment of this kind on each ship, and they had been packed in, literally, like the proverbial sardines in the can. The men rode off in the vehicles, four hundred from each ship.

I was happy to see the landing operations proceed so well, for all of us had been apprehensive.

Prior to the actual landing, we encountered no opposition. And there was little opposition on the beach itself where the infantry had already mopped up. After daylight, a few French planes tried to strafe us, but we had aircraft carriers with Spitfires and Hurricanes on them, and these planes kept our attackers well away.

Our airport force was able to leave by 8:40 A.M. and head for the Tafaraoui airport thirty-five miles away. We had taken that airport by noon. The column found a few French bombers being bombed up, but our tanks pinned them to the ground. The French couldn't get away. They were slow and confused. The Germans had allowed them little fuel and ammunition for maneuvers which would have enabled them to meet the situation in which they found themselves at this moment.

There was some opposition, but our column captured five hundred prisoners. The men seemed docile enough, although some of the officers appeared belligerent. By 4 P. M., a squadron of Spitfires arrived from Gibraltar.

This same force which captured the Tafaraoui airport might have gone on to take La Senia but was hampered by the prisoners. By the time the prisoners had been cared for and placed under guard, some time had elapsed, and when finally the column set out for La Senia, it found some French artillery blocking the way.

In the meantime, our Green Force had effected a landing without opposition. The maracaibo at this beach ran aground on a bar, and there was water fourteen feet deep between it and the shore. The bridge was hardly long enough, there being water four feet deep at its shore end. Jeeps coming off the end of the bridge went completely under water with only the driver's head showing, but pulled up on shore safely.

The flying column of this Green Force ran into considerable opposition on its way to the La Senia airport and lost one tank and several men in an attempt to force its way through a village. The column bypassed the village finally and moved on to the airdrome which it took at nine o'clock on the morning of November 9th, capturing five hundred prisoners and about sixty planes. When the G-3 at Corps headquarters inquired whether I would need any assistance to take La Senia, I was able to tell him that the field was in our possession.

La Senia, however, was close enough to the city of Oran to come under fire from

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its coastal defense batteries, and our men were fired upon intermittently throughout the day. In the end, we lost about eight killed, forty wounded.

Our losses as a whole, however, were rather high, due particularly to an unfortunate action in Oran itself. We had orders to take Oran Harbor intact by November 11th. We needed the harbor and its facilities in order to unload the reinforcement convoys which were on the way. Four hundred men were loaded on naval cutters. They were to dash into the harbor and occupy it to prevent sabotage. The action was planned for 1 A.M. For some reason, the time of the attack was changed to 3 A.M.

We Crash into Oran

A few minutes before the cutters entered the harbor at full speed, a French cruiser and a destroyer were encountered, and our operations met disaster. The French warships opened fire on our ships, and many of our men were lost.

At 7:30 on the morning of November 10th, we broke through the French barricades on the southern side of Oran and at 8:30 we sent our first column of tanks and half-tracks into the city, followed at 9 A.M. by a second column. Some of our forces went to the docks and others into the suburbs to cruise about and knock out any opposition in the way of the infantry division. The French commander of the Oran division defending the city surrendered to Lieutenant Colonel Todd, who commanded the first tank column, and the mayor of the city surrendered to Lieutenant Colonel Waters, who had charge of the other column.

Within an hour, people crowded the streets to give us a great ovation. They were obviously and sincerely glad to see us there. Men, women and children, both French and Arabs, joined with the soldiers to cheer us and welcome us on our triumphant march along the main street of Oran at noon of November 10th.

That afternoon we went to our assigned bivouacs for repairs, rest and to prepare for further operations.

On the morning of the 10th, while we were being held up by the barricades and were subject to heavy artillery fire, I saw one of our light tanks hit by a 75-millimeter shell. Two men inside the tank were uninjured but two other members of the crew, who had crawled out to observe, were killed. A half-track also was hit, its three men were killed outright, and the vehicle was burned.

But all of our men went on about their business as though they were on maneuvers. I have heard of some reports of timidity on the part of our troops, but my experience was quite to the contrary. I never personally saw any timidity but rather a calm and cool courage, which bespoke the excellent training they had received. About the training I shall have more to say in just a moment.

When prisoners were taken at La Senia they were put in charge of Major Martin Philipsborn. A company of French troops among those captured had lost their captain. The men wanted to bury him and asked permission to do so. Major Philipsborn asked whether they wanted to bury him with military honors and a salute.

"Yes, sir," the company's spokesman

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said; "but we have no ammunition."

Thereupon, Major Philipsborn did an unusual but, as it turned out, brilliant thing. He issued the prisoners a round of ammunition for each man in the ceremonial detail. The Frenchmen were overwhelmed with his kindness and understanding. News of what our major had done spread quickly through the French ranks, and the good will that the major's gallant gesture aroused made our task with the French prisoners much easier than it otherwise might have been.

On the evening of the 11th, Philipsborn was sent to a point on the coast about 75 miles east of Oran to capture the crew of a submarine which had been driven aground by British planes. Philipsborn brought back four German officers and thirty men. The sub's captain didn't know that Rommel was taking a licking in Libya. He couldn't understand why we had entered the war; said he didn't see how it made any difference to us if Germany enslaved all of Europe. When asked whether he operated in the Mediterranean under Italian command, he was very indignant; said he had never seen an Italian and hoped he never would. He operated out of a base at Brest.

We prepared for further action, for we had an idea we might be sent eastward to help the force which had landed at Algiers and was pushing eastward to take Tunisia. On the afternoon of the 12th, we were ordered to send one battalion of tanks, which left early in the morning of the 13th, overland for a journey of 270 miles. There were no cars on the railroad strong enough to carry our medium tanks. On the 14th, we sent eastward two tank-destroyer companies, also overland, and on the 16th, a light-tank battalion was sent by rail.

On the 21st, the remainder of my command was ordered to move. Railroad cars were to be made available for our half-tracks. All wheeled vehicles were to proceed by road and these left on the morning of the 22d. I flew to Allied Forces Headquarters for instructions.

There I was told that a tie-up about shipping our half-tracks had developed and they wouldn't be moved until the 25th. Furthermore, I was told that, beginning on the 25th, only one trainload a day could be moved and, since twelve trainloads would be required, the arrival of the remainder of my force would be unduly delayed.

Aware of this, General Eisenhower decided that the half-tracks should be started overland on the morning of the 25th, only the light tanks moving by rail.

A forced march brought my entire command together on the morning of the 30th in the general vicinity of Medjez El Bab.

On the morning of the 29th, I reported to the commander of the British division to whom I was to be attached for future operations. He told me things were proceeding very well and that he hoped to take Tunis and Bizerte.

Later in the day he said that things were not going as well as they might. The Germans had command of the air, while Allied Air, operating some fifty miles back from temporary fields, had difficulty bringin replacements. The Germans could fly their planes into Tunis and Bizerte from their bases in Sicily.

Allied Air, on the other hand, had to

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fly theirs in from carriers or bring them to Africa in cargo ships and assemble them there. The Germans operated Stukas, Ju-88's, Messerschmitts and a few Focke-Wulfs. They would strafe our troops along the roads all day. Our Spitfires would be up for maybe ten to fifteen minutes, whereupon Germans would immediately disappear, to return at once when our planes came down.

The material damage inflicted by the enemy air force wasn't great but it was tough on morale. One of my units got strafed as many as twenty-two times in one day.

At the time the Division Commander had sent a brigade to advance via Medjez El Bab and Djedeida. Another column was operating farther north in the vicinity of Mateur.

Since the German airpower was the chief factor holding up our advance, at the suggestion of a Senior Commander, we planned an operation in which my command would, on the night of December 1st, advance in three columns to take the airfields in the vicinity of Tunis. The operation was somewhat hazardous, but we felt that it had a good gambler's chance of success and it seemed like the thing to do.

I was explaining this plan to General Anderson, commanding the British First Army, at about noon on December 1st, when news was received that a large number of German tanks from the direction of Mateur were debouching from the hills via the road marked A on the map and moving to attack the Allied positions at Tebourba and Djedeida. General Anderson at once called off our plan.

Germans Decoy Our Tanks

I was directed to send one of my infantry battalions to protect the road to Tebourba, and they took up an impregnable position (marked B on map) overlooking the plain where German tanks were moving about. The German tanks did not at once attack the British positions, and the next morning one company of my medium-tank battalion went out to attack the Germans, and the boys stuck their necks into a noose. The German tanks decoyed our machines into a screen of German 88-millimeter antitank guns, and while we knocked out some of their tanks, we got much the worst of it, as we lost nine General Grants.

The next day we were directed to chase some German parachutists out of the hills directly southwest of Tebourba. Snipers were interfering with communications along the road supplying the Allied forces. The company we sent forward was partly successful. On the following day we sent forward another, and together the two companies cleaned up the situation. On December 4th, the rest of the battalion were sent up in reinforcement to occupy the entire hill mass overlooking Tebourba.

On the 3d, however, the Germans had attacked and overrun a brigade at Tebourba. My medium-tank battalion and a light-tank battalion had withdrawn to Medjez El Bab for badly needed repairs. The Germans overwhelmed this sector with tanks and airpower. Quite a few of the brigade of defending troops were crushed in their shallow slit-trenches by the German tanks. The brigade withdrew

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into the gorge between our two infantry battalions. For the next week or so, our armor took the brunt of the fighting.

At 9 A.M. on the 6th, the Germans attacked the hill mass south of Tebourba with three battalions of infantry and fifty tanks. We lost an excellent opportunity on this day to strike a severe blow at the enemy because our tanks were held up at least two hours in moving into position where they could have taken the Germans on their flank as the enemy moved forward to the attack.

Enemy Losses Were Heavy

The German infantry attack was repulsed by our own men with severe losses. This I know from reports of our own men, and from accounts of enemy prisoners. The enemy tanks, however, which skirted the southern edge of the aforementioned hill mass finally forced our infantry from their positions. They overran our artillery battery and the nearest infantry platoon on the southwestern part of the hill mass and forced the remainder of the battalion to withdraw to avoid being cut off. Meantime, our tanks, which were initially in the positions marked C, and had finally moved forward, were stopped by the German antitank guns.

I obtained permission to bring my other infantry battalion from its position at B across the Medjerda River by fording, in order to counterattack and regain our position. This counterattack was made at about dark and the northwestern part of the hill mass was regained with little opposition.

We withdrew during the night to the hill mass marked E. My armored force was badly in need of some rest, and our equipment, after the long march and several days of action, was badly in need of repair and maintenance. Some additional infantry was expected soon.

It was planned to readjust the lines, involving local withdrawals, so that the infantry could hold them while the armored force went somewhat to the rear for rest and work on vehicles. It was feared that the withdrawal I wished to make would tip off the Germans as to this plan.

On the night of the 7th, when I had wanted to withdraw, it began raining. The rain continued for several days and the ground became very soft. Finally an order was issued for a withdrawal on the night of the 8th, but it was immediately canceled. Then on the 9th I was ordered to withdraw on the night of the 10th.

This order, I subquently learned, was intercepted by the Germans, and on the morning of the 10th they attacked to cut off our route of retirement across the bridge and on the paved road to Medjez El Bab. A column of their tanks came down the road from Tebourba and was taken under fire by twelve of our tanks, and the Germans withdrew. At the same time some of their infantry attacked one of our battalions with heavy losses to themselves.

They made a tank-attack threat against Medjez El Bab, which we countered with an attack with our light tanks, our light General Stuarts moving in against German M-4 and M-3 machines. During this action, one of our 75-millimeter antitank guns knocked out five of their tanks with five shots, and we lost several tanks which became bogged in the mud.

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This will indicate good shooting on our part, and while I believe our shooting was on the whole fairly good, it was still not so good as it might have been. This was due to a shortage of ammunition.

I believe it would be better to fire four shots in practice for every one fired in combat. That, I am afraid, wasn't the ratio we worked on. On the whole, our marksmanship was as good as the Germans'; but in warfare, to be just as good isn't enough; we have got to be considerably better in order to win. Moreover, the liberal use of ammunition in practice relieves a serious transportation problem. Obviously, if your marksmanship is good, you need not carry as much ammunition as you require when you must make allowance for an inordinately high percentage of misses.

On the evening of the 10th, I was told at my command post near Medjez El Bab that I was wanted by the Divisional Commander.

I wanted him to send up a company along the concrete highway to hold a bridgehead to enable us to move the troops and equipment we had on the hill marked E, across the river and down the highway.

My request was readily granted, but the night was pitch-black and I had to find the brigade commander, which took a little time in the darkness. I thought I'd go up and watch them come out; then decided not to go, for I would be bucking traffic all the way and would only add to the congestion. I had cause later to wish I had gone up.

The local commander on the spot (an officer whom I had appointed to co-ordinate the movements in the area) decided that the forces should not come over the bridge and down the hard highway but should move down along the earth road east of the river (shown on the map in broken line) instead. There had been a few random shots from German tanks near the concrete bridge, and he assumed that the enemy was attacking in strength.

At 1:30 that morning, an aide handed me a radio from the local commander stating that vehicles in the column moving southward along the rain-soaked road were bogging down and that he had ordered their abandonment and destruction. Immediately after that message was received, his radio did not reply and presumably was knocked out. We lost a number of vehicles including half-tracks, self-propelled antitank guns and eleven light tanks. I immediately relieved the local commander of his command. I never felt so bad in my life. The only comfort I could draw from this blunder was the fact that we still had our men, all of them having marched back safely.

I wish to make it clear that no fault attaches to our allies for what happened. What happened was our own fault. From what occurred, however, we can profit. In general, we failed to do what we had been taught to do. We proved ourselves inclined to be too impetuous. We tried to overrun the Germans instead of utilizing the proper combination of fire and movement and adequate reconnaissance.

The Role of Airpower

I am thoroughly convinced no army can get anywhere without adequate air support. I am equally convinced that bat-

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tles cannot be won with airpower alone. Air and ground troops must be thoroughly trained to act as units. The Germans, thus far, have worked air support for ground soldiers to a far better degree than we have. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't develop such co-ordination.

There are a few other general observations I would like to make. I believe the American people must be prepared spiritually to accept the inevitable high losses which will be entailed in the fighting henceforth. Up to the time I left the North African front, *our* losses totaled about 750 killed, wounded and missing, and we had scarcely begun to fight.

I have no doubt as to the ability of the men to "take it," but our objective is to "hand it out." To hand it out, we must have the full support of the civilian home front.

I found the French to be good fighters but they desperately need equipment. They are very friendly and cordial to us and they fight very well. We should supply them with good modern equipment as rapidly as possible.

It occurs to me, in conclusion, that perhaps it was better that we didn't immediately and easily take Tunis and Bizerte and thus drive the enemy so quickly out of Africa. His presence in North Africa now entails, on his part, the enormous expenditure of men and materials, at a time when he can least afford it, which might not have been the case had he been able to withdraw with smaller forces earlier.

When the Axis Dunkirk in North Africa occurs, it will be a costly one which might well pave the way for a rapid collapse of Italy and perhaps Germany herself. The elimination of the enemy in North Africa ought to materialize sometime this summer.

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