PM

Thursday, March 18, 1943

British Blast Mareth Line In Big Drive

Nazis Call Assault Start of Full-Scale Battle of Tunisia

The British have struck heavily at the Mareth Line in what both sides call the opening blow of the long-awaited big battle of Tunisia.

There no longer is any doubt that the Allied offensive to wrest the Axis' last foothold in North Africa is at its zero hour if it has not actually begun.

Nazi broadcasts hinted last night that German and Italian troops already have had to yield some ground in heavy fighting on the approaches to the fortified line in southern Tunisia.

BY RADIO

Radio Berlin said the attack began near the coastal anchor of the Mareth Line Tuesday night after a prolonged artillery preparation. Later broadcasts indicated that the fighting had been expanded on a wide front.

The drive apparently was being pressed under exceptionally strong air coverage. Allied dispatches said our bombers were blasting Axis positions on the Mareth Line, had cut the Afrika Korps' railroad supply line between Gabes and Sfax and had battered the supply port of Gabes. (*Map and background story on Pages* 14-15.)

The British are known to have amassed tremendous hitting power before the Mareth Line. Dispatches last weekend reported endless lines of transport moving equipment and supplies into place.

United Press said German broadcasts called the British attacks a frontal assault with major elements of the 8th Army and predicted that they would intensify because only part of the British artillery was used in the preparation.

So far, the fighting is focusd on the southern front. Allied communiques reported only patrol activity in the north and mid-Tunisia where U. S., British and French forces are arrayed for the offensive to back the Axis into the sea.

Allied broadcasts were more reserved so far than the enemy's but Radio Algiers said last night that Gen. Sir B. L. Montgomery's army was set "and an attack cannot be delayed very long. . . .The moment is approaching when the last Axis forces will be chased from Africa."

Bottom of Barrel

British whisky experts are worried. If consumption continues at the present rate, they say the supply of Scotch will disappear completely by 1945. Manufacture of Scotch ended last September.

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