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8th Army Launches Big Tunisia Battle

By BARNETT BILDERSEE

The Allies are on the offensive in Tunisia and the first full-dress battle for the AEF in World War II seems at last to be under way.

It will be a tough battle against the best of Hitler's fighting men and weapons, but there is no doubt among Allied militarists of the outcome.

Even pessimists agree that the Axis will be driven into the sea. There is reason to believe that the Nazi command itself is resigned to the loss of its last foothold on the south shore of the Mediterranean.

The only questions seem to be how much it will cost and how long it will take. Even in the face of inevitable defeat, the enemy has vital stakes in making the cost to the Allies as high as possible, in time as well as guns and men.

It is clear to the enemy that when the Allies have conquered Tunisia they will have cleared the last barrier to an invasion of southern Europe. It is clear that every Allied tank destroyed must be replaced from home bases across thousands of miles of dangerous seas. It is clear that every day gained will postpone the peril to Europe from the south and give Hitler that much more time to plug the holes in his continental fortress. That is what the Axis will be fighting for.

That the Nazis are without hope, yet determined to make stubborn battle, was reflected last night by a broadcast from the pro-German, pro-military, but anti-Hitler secret radio *Gustave Siegfried Eins*. It quoted Field Marshal Fritz Von Mannstein, former German commander in the Crimea:

"In spite of the fact that all military experts, who know what they say, agree upon the fact that Tunisia is a lost position, the strategists of the party (Nazi) send huge quantities of our best troops, tanks, and planes to Tunisia."



The Nazi radio says the battle has begun before the Mareth Line in southern Tunisia, with a British assault on the Nazis' fortifications after a prolonged artillery barrage.

This was the expected opening blow. It starts another chapter in the 8th Army's chase of the Afrika Korps from Egypt, more than 1000 miles to the east. Although the enemy holds a strong line, with mountain crags securing one end and the sea at the other, he probably will not be able to hold it long.

The 8th Army is reputed to be as close-knit, well commanded, and hard hitting as any in the war. It has utmost confidence in its methodical chief, Gen. B. L. Montgomery, who never has let it fight without fullest preparation. The Afrika Korps' recent surge from the Mareth Line probably was a vain attempt to lure him into a half-ready attack. He waited.

Allied dispatches have reported that Gen. Eisenhower would wait for word from Montgomery that he was ready and that when Montgomery said he was ready he would be. Now the enemy says the battle has begun.

Allied estimates generally concur that the opposing positions are evenly balanced. We have a heavy advantage in manpower—although many of ours must be used behind the lines.

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We hold the enemy within a ring of steel in which he must fight against compression with his back to the sea. The Axis has the advantage of short supply lines across the Sicilian Strait and high defensible ground, which he has had time to prepare well during the Winter rains which have stalled the fighting.

Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, and Bizerte, once-great French naval station, are the enemy's final bastions. They are defended by huge arcs of defenses which the Allies must crack.

The Battle of Tunisia probably will develop on these three lines:

¶ The 8th Army's drive to break the Mareth Line. The Afrika Korps will have to choose between facing it out against the British there, at the risk of heavy losses and the possibility of being trapped, or retreating north along the coastal corridor. If it falls back from the Mareth Line, it may try another stand in the bottleneck between Gabes and Lake Djerid.

¶ An Allied attempt to reach the coast in mid-Tunisia. U. S. forces from the north and French forces from the south, both now in the region of Gafsa, are in the best position to drive between the Axis' southern and northern armies, thus preventing the Afrika Korps from joining forces with the enemy's Tunisian Army on the critical battlefields of the North.

¶ The frontal assault on Tunis and Bizerte, the offensive which Prime Minister Churchill long ago called the last, hard 20 miles which must be crossed in Africa.

