

Allies Face Long, Costly Campaign in North Africa

By THE GENERAL



Allied armies in Tunisia have begun what cannot help but be a long and costly job—that of destroying Axis forces in Africa or driving them into the sea.

As was confidently expected by most military observers here, the seasoned British 8th Army under Gen. Sir Bernard L. Montgomery struck the first blow of the full-dress offensive against the Mareth Line in the south, held by Rommel. Coincident with Montgomery's assault. Americans in the central sector under Gen. George Patton, jr., pressed forward toward the Mediterranean coast in an effort to drive a wedge between Rommel's Afrika Korps in the south and Gen. Jurgen von Arnim's forces in Northern Tunisia. So far, the British 1st Army, which has held the same positions facing Bizerte and Tunis for two months, has not moved in force.

Gen. Montgomery, who chased Rommel out of Egypt and across 1500 miles of desert to Tunisia, has been patiently building up his supplies ever since Rommel took refuge behind the sketchy fortifications of the Mareth Line. He adhered strictly to the routine of attack which broke the El Alamein Line in Egypt. His artillery threw one of the heaviest barrages of the desert war against Rommel's position while Fortresses, Liberators, and medium bombers maintained a shuttle bombing service over enemy positions. Then his infantry and sappers moved in to clean up booby traps and land mines for the advance of his armor.

Moves North

Rommel at the same time is operating conventionally. He is moving his valuable crack Afrika Korps troops northward and leaving Italians to fight a perfunctory rearguard action.

Gen. Patton's position in the central Tunisian area is more difficult than appears on the map. Although Gafsa has been retaken and his forces have occupied El Guettar and other points nearby they are still a long way from the coast from a military point of view. Between Patton's forces and the Mediterranean the terrain is difficult for an advancing force. Narrow defiles split the mountains, which are a natural defense barrier. Retreat by way of a narrow pass is extremely costly, as Rommel found out when he advanced through the Kasserine Pass and then was driven back.

2 *North Africa*



Gen. B. L. Montgomery, the 8th Army's commander, succeeded at the Alamein line with a formula of murderous air and artillery fire. Now he is repeating it at the Mareth Line, 1500 miles to the west.

As yet there is no impediment to Axis communications between north and south positions. Von Arnim and Rommel can exchange troops and equipment with comparative ease. This made it essential that when Montgomery struck in the south Patton's forces launch at least a limited offensive to prevent reinforcement of Rommel from troops to the north. Patton's advance toward the coast may be anything but a limited operation with a limited objective. It may be a determined effort to drive through to the coast. Nevertheless, it was a necessary accompaniment to Montgomery's attempt to storm the Mareth Line.

Exchange Support

Right now the American forces under Patton are separated from the 8th Army by about 125 miles, with Rommel between. Air communication is well established and the two armies can exchange fighter and bomber support, but the geography of the area creates a great normal divide. The salt marshes of southern Tunisia stretch for 150 miles east and west and lie directly between Gafsa and the Mareth fortifications.

The marshes present a spongy, treacherous surface, difficult to traverse with armor or mechanized troops. It is not unlike the Qattara Depression in Egypt, which formed the southern boundary of Rommel's El Alamein Line. Brig. Gen. H. S. Sewell, British war commentator, predicted the current offensive by the fact that the moon now is full in Tunisia.

"It is worth noting," he adds, "that the bombardment of the El Alamein position began on Oct. 23 and full moon was on Oct. 24."

The most persistent question that arises daily is how long it will take us to wipe up in Tunisia, either by destroying the enemy or forcing him to attempt a Dun

North Africa

kirk-style evacuation to Sicily and Sandinia. It's a question that even Eisenhower couldn't answer and wouldn't if he could. He may have a better idea than the man on the street, but it is doubtful whether he could do more than venture some informed speculation. There are too many imponderables in Tunisian warfare. If he could nail it down to within a few days he probably wouldn't. Why tell the enemy in advance when he can expect to be struck from another direction?



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7