

“A Cascade of Contradictory Orders”

Torch's success had been eased by the surprise and magnitude of the Allied invasion that had sparked turmoil in the fragmented command structure of French North Africa (AFN), a confusion amplified by Darlan's presence in Algiers. To these factors was added what General Jean Delmas qualified as “a certain innocence, a spirit of discipline, the oath (to Pétain) led *l'armée d'armistice* into passivity and powerlessness,” that sabotaged a staunch opposition to the Allied invasion in Morocco and Algeria.¹ Unfortunately for the Allies, that same “passivity and powerlessness” that had facilitated success in Morocco and Algeria helped to shuffle Tunisia out of reach. From an Allied perspective, Tunisia offered AFN's most exposed link, for several reasons. First, it was most vulnerable to Axis invasion either directly from Italy or through Italian Tripolitania, which made Tunisia's defense a challenge. Second, at the Axis control commission's insistence, Tunisia was sparsely garrisoned. But this had not especially worried the French, as Tunisia and the Constantinois were considered less likely targets of an Allied invasion. Therefore, defense measures were vague and ad hoc, despite the large concentrations of Allied planes and ships at Gibraltar noticed on 7 November.² Third, Tunisia contained a large Italian population favorable to the Axis. Fourth, because Torch had prioritized Morocco over Tunisia, unlike in Casablanca, Oran, or Algiers, commanders in Tunis had to react not to an Allied armada, but to an Axis assault. Finally, no resistance mobilized in Tunis that might have disputed Axis access to Bizerte, or especially to El Aouina airfield in Tunis, the initial entry point of the Axis invasion, replicating Monsabert's momentary sequestration of Blida outside of Algiers for Allied benefit, actions that might have bought enough time for an arrival of British troops.

This did not happen in part because of confusion and delay in Algiers, as Darlan and Laval attempted unsuccessfully to harness the Allied invasion to force Hitler to revise the conditions of the armistice. The result was “a succession of orders and counter-orders” that increased confusion in a way that basically “created competition among several headquarters, thus several

commanders, each with a modicum of authority and all independent in the hierarchy of rank and functions in the chain of command,” writes Robin Leconte.³ Of the three main decision-makers in Tunis, two were admirals who took their rudder orders directly from Vichy, not Algiers. Meanwhile, the commander of ground forces in AFN, Alphonse Juin, complained that the *Commandant supérieur des troupes tunisiennes* (CSTT), General Georges Barré, failed to take decisive action to prevent the Axis seizure of El Aouina. In Juin’s telling, Barré’s “hesitation,” that triggered the Tunisian “tragedy,” was a direct consequence of the deliberate scrambling of the French chain of command upon Weygand’s 1941 departure. Barré’s primary concern was to keep his communications open with Algeria. This allowed Axis forces to occupy Bizerte and Tunis ahead of the arriving British First Army, thereby giving Rommel a new lease on life.⁴ Unfortunately, blaming subordinates and systemic command muddle became a convenient alibi for Juin to obfuscate his own role in the Tunisian “tragedy.” In January 1942, Juin had accurately anticipated events that would incite the Axis to invade Tunisia, and predicted almost exactly how that invasion would unfold.⁵ Why, then, were the French, and Juin in particular, not better prepared to react?

Most historians have focused rightly on Darlan’s nefarious role. Of course, Darlan was only playing Laval’s game to protect the *zone libre* by giving permission to Hitler and Ciano at Munich to invade Tunisia. When even that huge concession failed to protect Vichy’s sovereignty, Darlan reluctantly switched sides.⁶ Yet, Juin’s abdication of responsibility did not go unnoticed, either at the time or subsequently. Alternative explanations for Juin’s hesitation highlight the fact that, as a great admirer of Rommel, and facilitator of the Paris Protocols, he nurtured a pro-Axis bias. A more benign, Allied-friendly interpretation of his behavior suggests that, aware of the ambiguous loyalties of *l’armée d’Afrique*, Juin played the clock, certain that Berlin’s response to Torch would result in the invasion of Vichy’s *zone libre*. Such action would implode the 1940 Armistice, expose the hollowness of Vichy “sovereignty,” and tip French loyalties definitely to the Allies.⁷ Juin’s main concern was to maintain French control of AFN and prevent a Muslim uprising. He quickly concluded that assisting the Anglo-American invasion offered the best guarantee of continued imperial sovereignty.⁸

As in Algeria and Morocco, the tangled command structure combined with policy ambiguity and ethical uncertainty to produce “*la confusion des ordres*” in Tunisia and the Constantinois, which often whiplashed local commanders, who were either abandoned to make their own decisions or forced to decide which of their superiors’ contradictory directives to obey.⁹ This was compounded, in the view of Robin Leconte, by the realization that several senior French officers had conspired with the Anglo-Americans, which signaled a politically fluid situation that made commanders up and down the hierarchy

reluctant to issue orders that might be countermanded by their superiors, or that their subordinates might not obey. Their decision not to act was confirmed by news from Algiers which arrived at the end of the afternoon of 8 November of a local ceasefire concluded between Darlan and American General Charles Ryder. Nevertheless, the order issued at 13:45 from XIX Corps commander General Louis Koeltz to General Édouard Welvert, commander of the *Division de Marche de Constantine* (DMC), had been to march on Algiers. When Welvert asked if that order were still in effect, he was informed at 18:45 that, “following the evolution of the situation, General Welvert has complete freedom to take all of the necessary measures.” In other words, the senior command had abdicated its authority, leaving officers on their own. Tension increased on 9 November as Luftwaffe aircraft began to land at El Aouina in Tunis and Sidi Ahmed airfield at Bizerte. Welvert was besieged by subordinate commanders demanding instructions, including Barré in Tunis, who reported that Vichy’s permission for Axis planes to land in El Aouina had brought French officers to the verge of mutiny. In other words, the French command was caught between the need to stop the spread of “dissidence” in the ranks and pressure to repel an Axis invasion.¹⁰

This confusion rippled down the chain of command to Sétif, almost 300 kilometers southeast of Algiers, where on Sunday morning, 8 November 1942, Second lieutenant Jean Lapouge, who had arrived only eight days previously in the *7^e Régiment des tirailleurs algériennes* (7^e RTA), was awakened by his batman with news that the Americans had invaded. Lapouge hailed from a family of infantrymen, being the son of a colonel of Zouaves and the grandson of an infantry general. A devout Catholic and former Boy Scout, an organization whose motto was “son of France and a good citizen,” Lapouge’s destiny since boyhood had been Saint-Cyr. Although the French military academy had been shifted by the occupation from its Paris suburb to Aix-en-Provence in the *zone libre*, Lapouge had graduated with his class, baptized “promotion Maréchal Pétain,” only a few days earlier. As a native of Oran, he predictably had chosen an *armée d’Afrique* regiment upon graduation, which had assigned him to lead the machinegun platoon in one of its companies. It wasn’t much of a machinegun – a gas-actuated, air-cooled Hotchkiss that sat on a tripod and weighed 25 kilos. Each company was meant to maintain an inventory of four of them, as well as two 81 mm mortars. The Hotchkiss could in theory fire 450 8-millimeter rounds per minute. In fact, its firing strips held only 24 rounds, requiring its three-man crew constantly to reload. If, that is, they had any munitions – the Axis control commissions permitted the Constantine Division, of which 7^e RTA was part, only 30 cartridges per rifle and 200 per machinegun for a 9-month period. The control commissions were equally parsimonious in their authorization of vehicles and petrol, which meant that the few trucks in the division’s inventory were most often requisitioned civilian

vehicles in precarious mechanical repair.¹¹ The result was a reliance on mules to transport munitions and other impedimenta. The Hotchkiss had been a state-of-the-art weapon – in 1914! But it was par for the course in the 7^e RTA, whose two battalions were de-motorized and armed with Great War-vintage weaponry pulled by horse-drawn logistics. “Junk” was the verdict pronounced by American General George Patton when he had encountered French armaments at Casablanca in November. Under these circumstances, he marveled that the French fought as courageously as they did.¹²

Thinking his batman was engaged in a practical joke of the sort frequently played on new cadets at Saint-Cyr, Lapouge pulled the sheet over his head, rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. But the commotion in the corridor convinced him to rise, dress, and report to barracks, where he was confronted by his irate company commander, who reprimanded him for his tardiness. The DMC was reacting to Darlan’s order sent at 07:30 that morning to resist the Allied invasion. But there was no Allied activity reported off the Constantinoides and Tunisia. Rumor circulated that several senior French officers in Algiers had defected to the Anglo-Americans. The regiment collected its equipment and marched north to Kherrata, a village in the Kabylia that dominated a narrow, north–south passage between Sétif and the Gulf of Béjarïa. “Our orders were to stop the Americans!,” Lapouge remembered, although why the French might think that the Allies on their way from Algiers to Tunisia might detour through Kherrata remains a mystery. The 7^e RTA strung mines along the road through the narrow pass and sited their machineguns. The next day, amid rumors that American troops joined by defecting French soldiers were marching on Sétif, Alsace native and 7th Infantry Brigade commander Colonel Jacques (Jacob) Schwartz asked his DMC Commander Welvert for instruction: “Fire [on the mutineers] without hesitation,” came Welvert’s reply. Rather than fire on French troops, and apprised of German planes landing at El Aouina, Schwartz ordered his soldiers back to barracks.¹³ At 23:00 on 10 November, word finally reached Lapouge’s company that they were no longer to shoot at the Americans. On 14 November, the 7^e RTA boarded a train that deposited them at Tébessa on the frontier with Tunisia. The following days melded into a fog of marches and counter-marches with heavy packs, with the fatigue of setting up camp only to break it down, and hike to a new destination.¹⁴

Lapouge’s change of orders, from battling the Americans on 8 November to joining them only two days later, suggested an extenuated transition accompanied by hesitation, prevarication, and a muddle of orders and counter-orders – in essence, a breakdown of authority and hierarchy which caused many officers to make their own decisions. In fact, Torch followed by the Axis invasion of Tunisia forced the French military to confront an existential crisis. Unlike conventional Second World War forces, where political authority remained uncontested, soldiers in France after June 1940 were forced to choose between different

concepts of legitimacy. The French army had been humiliated by its 1940 defeat. The rationale for the armistice had been poorly understood in AFN, which had required Vichy first to dispatch Weygand to shore up the loyalty of its imperial soldiers and impose an oath to the Marshal, and subsequently to scramble the chain of command to thwart a wholesale defection. This ultimately boomeranged as it fragmented the response in AFN to the simultaneous Allied and Axis invasions of November 1942.

However, Torch, and the subsequent Axis invasion of Tunisia, triggered a lengthy six-day crisis as a splintered, confused, and politically insecure command in North Africa spewed imprecise, often contradictory, frequently canceled orders that ricocheted between Algiers, Tunis, Casablanca, Vichy, and Army and Navy commands with their separate and often conflicting political agendas, service networks and personal loyalties. Lower down this multi-layered and whiplashed hierarchy, officers, with partial information and battered by rumor and confusion, were forced to choose which authority, which city, which service network, which intermediary commander, or which order or countermanded order to obey. French officers were often left to interpret the orders received in pragmatic ways. Together with time, this fluid situation multiplied misunderstandings and confusion in the military chain of command, creating space for initiative and the negotiation of individual “moral choices” within the hierarchical framework. Uncertainty and confusion generated competition between command echelons, and tensions within the rank structure between inter-dependent leaders and subordinates.¹⁵

Defending Tunisia

Even before the Torch planners began to consider the invasion of AFN, Tunisia was already viewed by senior French commanders as the critical node and the point most vulnerable to Axis invasion. However, one difficulty with the Vichy policy of “defense against whomever” in AFN was that it failed to define the threat and to establish clear strategic priorities for dealing with it. British advances into Cyrenaica in early 1941 had the French imagining how to reoccupy the demilitarized zone in southern Tunisia to disarm retreating Italians who might appear before the Mareth Line, a Maginot-like clutter of pill boxes and strong points built to seal the “bottleneck” between southern Tunisia and Italian Tripolitania. The arrival of Rommel in North Africa in February 1941 and the establishment of a strong Luftwaffe presence in Sicily had forced Weygand to consider the possibility of an Axis invasion of Tunisia. *Le Délégué général du gouvernement* had vehemently objected to the second Paris protocol struck between Darlan and Abetz on 27–28 May 1941, which would have allowed the Germans “in civilian clothes” to use Bizerte as a supply point for the Afrika Korps. By threatening to open fire on any German who

appeared in Tunisia, he managed to scupper that part of the “protocol” at least, although the Darlan–Abetz bargain did spring Juin from his *Oflag* while eventually supplying 2,000 French trucks for the Germans.¹⁶ On 28 September 1941, with the Mediterranean increasingly engulfed in the war, Weygand had issued a defense plan that posited the most likely threats to AFN to be German incursions either through Spain and Spanish Morocco or into Tunisia with the naval base at Bizerte as the principal target.¹⁷

Deprived from 19 November 1941 of Weygand’s unifying vision and authority, Juin, Darlan, and de Lattre de Tassigny subsequently split over how best to defend Tunisia. At the base of this disagreement was the question of who might constitute the greater menace to AFN. With his navalist perspective and a more collaborationist construct of Vichy “neutrality,” Darlan’s priority was to defend against an attack by *les Anglo-Saxons*.¹⁸ As a land-warfare professional unencumbered by Darlan’s – and the French navy’s – ironclad Anglophobia, Juin, like Weygand, was preoccupied with the possibility of an Axis incursion either from Sicily or through the Mareth Line. But, mindful of Weygand’s fate, “prudence” initially required Juin merely to list the potential invasion routes into AFN rather than prioritize them for his subordinates. However, when, on 30 January 1941, Juin issued his *instruction personnelle et secrète* (IPS) detailing the Axis threat to Tunisia, it raised such a tsunami in the collaborationist spas of Vichy that he ordered it destroyed. Henceforth, rather like Alsace-Moselle, the defense of Tunisia against an Axis incursion became something to be thought of always, but spoken of never.¹⁹

In the absence of an agreed-upon external enemy, predictably the French high command declared war on each other. During his time as *Délégué général* and taking inspiration from those “hedgehogs” that had imploded on the Somme and Aisne in 1940, Weygand had envisioned taking a stand in the north by transforming Bizerte and Tunis into a French Tobruk. In November 1941, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, commander of Tunisian ground forces (CSTT) from September 1941 until he was relieved in February 1942, and Alphonse Juin, land forces commander in AFN, had wrangled over how best to secure the Maghreb’s eastern marches. That what should have been a sober staff *Kriegsspiel* quickly degenerated into an ad hominem slanging match was hardly surprising, as Juin and the temperamental de Lattre had been bitter rivals since Saint-Cyr.²⁰ Speaking as the resident *français d’Algérie*, and from a geopolitical optic that considers geography as destiny, Juin viewed Tunisia as “merely the prolongation towards the east of Algeria’s Constantinois.” Juin’s mandate was to defend AFN, of which Algeria – sovereign French territory – was the keystone, with vulnerable protectorates but-tressing the flanks. Judging that a forward defense of Tunisia was impractical, Juin’s preference was for French forces to fall back on the Tunisian Dorsal, the eastern extension of the Saharan Atlas that slices through the frontier between

Tunisia and the Constantinois. Not surprisingly, perhaps, while Juin's early strategic withdrawal was subsequently endorsed by the French official history of the campaign, many contemporaries found it questionable.²¹

Juin dismissed de Lattre's vision for a forward defense on the Mareth Line as impractical without air cover and adequate logistics. The debate was further complicated by the fact that no one could agree whether the main threat was through Tripolitania in the east or Bizerte in the north. Juin won the argument by backchanneling Darlan, then Defense Secretary, that he too feared a British incursion through Tripolitania, and encouraged him to work Wiesbaden for the very reinforcements, armaments, logistical capabilities, and upgrades of the Mareth Line that would make de Lattre's plan feasible. It was in this context of working to secure German cooperation for the defense of southern Tunisia against the British that Juin had met with Göring and General Walter Warlimont in Berlin on 21 December 1941.²²

But, in the opinion of one of his biographers, the actual reason for Juin's rejection of de Lattre's concentration in southern Tunisia was that it posed a scenario of Erwin Rommel in search of a Tunisian sanctuary should he be put to flight in Egypt and harried across Libya by the British. Were that to happen, Juin had no intention of resisting Rommel, Jean-Christophe Notin speculates, but rather would join forces with him to fight the British. "We'll fight the Anglo-Saxons. I guarantee it," Juin had promised Laval. This alleged declaration joined the widely accepted rumor that Juin had given his word not to take up arms against Germany as a condition for his release from Königstein, to become the ball and chain that the controversial Marshal of France dragged behind him for the remainder of his life.²³ A skeptical Costagliola counters that Juin had been made well aware, in the wake of his failed December 1941 encounter with Göring and Warlimont, that the political and military foundation for a joint Franco-Axis defense of southern Tunisia had not been laid. Furthermore, Juin feared that to make common cause with the Axis would open AFN to Anglo-American reprisals. The bottom line was that Berlin did not trust the French, fearing that, if they were allowed to rehabilitate the Mareth Line, it might be used to block Axis forces retreating across Tripolitania.²⁴

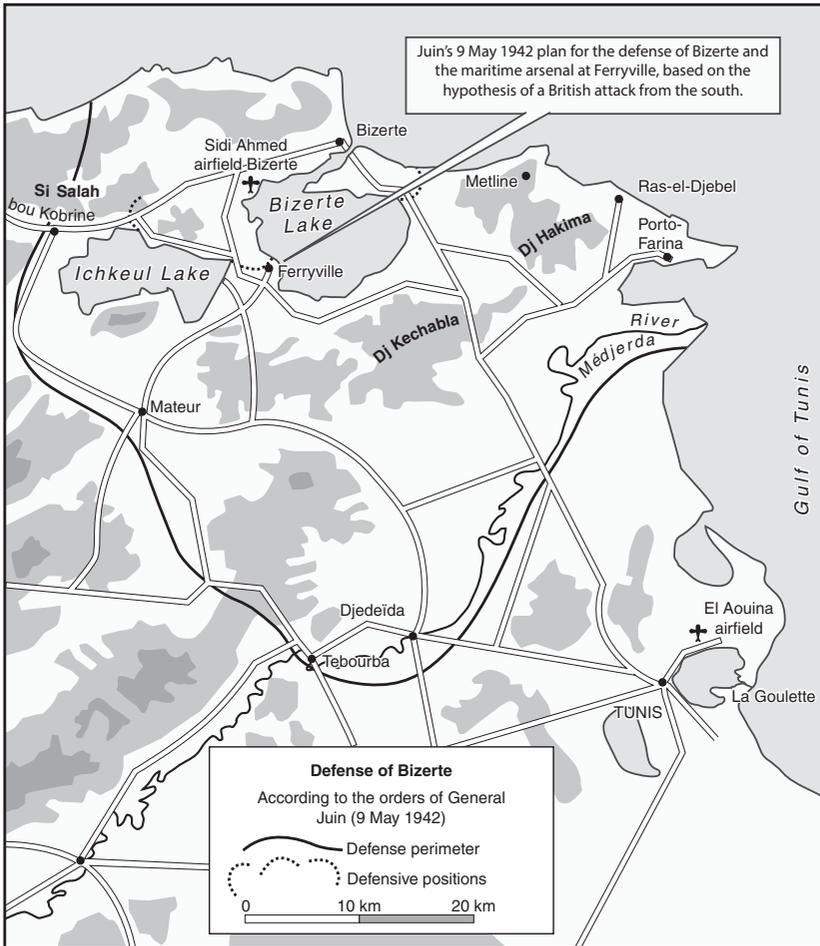
But whatever the complaints about Juin's character – and they were legion – most admitted that his strategic analysis was thorough, a trait that would make him especially appreciated by the Americans. Juin's predilection to fall back into Algeria was also based on the realization that Tunisia offered a fragile redoubt for the defense of AFN. At Italian insistence, Tunisia was lightly garrisoned, with only one lean eight-battalion division of around 12,000 troops, scattered in garrisons throughout the territory.²⁵ Juin complained that the significant Italian population in Tunisia and eastern Algeria contained many Axis sympathizers, who compromised his ability to camouflage troops as

native police, scatter supplemental soldiers in inconspicuous remote garrisons, or create secret arms caches, as had become commonplace in Morocco.²⁶

If the loyalty of the European population was in doubt, the potential for indigenous defection was even greater. In August 1942, the French had incarcerated Habib Bourguiba, the leader of the Tunisian nationalist party Neo-Destour at the Fort Saint-Nicolas in Marseilles. And while Bourguiba had counseled his followers not to be seduced by Axis blandishments, Tunisian Muslims were bombarded by appeals from such pro-Axis stations as Radio Bari, Radio Berlin, Radio Roma, and, from January 1943, Radio Tunis, as well as being showered with tracts written by the propaganda office of Major Mähner in Tunis and distributed along the front, promising favorable treatment to *tirailleurs* and Frenchmen who deserted to Axis lines. However, treachery seems not to have been widespread among the 26,000 Tunisians eventually incorporated into the French army between 1942 and 1945, in large part because it did not take a genius to realize, in the wake of El Alamein, Stalingrad, and Torch, that Axis days were numbered. Nevertheless, the food situation in AFN continued to be a critical worry for French officials, who feared that famine might shift the loyalties of Muslims in Morocco and Algeria toward the Axis. So, Juin had to calculate what percentage of his meager forces should be held back for internal security.²⁷

In January 1942, de Lattre was relieved by Juin protégé Georges Barré, in a switch-out that permanently damaged relations between two of France's most senior generals. In the short term, however, the July 1942 fall of Tobruk and Rommel's subsequent surge into Egypt, that helped to precipitate the Allied decision for Torch, had seemed to render the Juin versus de Lattre strategic debate temporarily academic. By January 1943, when Rommel did appear on his Tunisian doorstep, Juin and his *armée d'Afrique* had wobbled into the Allied camp. Rommel's one-time aficionado now became his antagonist.²⁸ But, if de Lattre's Mareth Line defense scheme had departed with his recall to France, no agreed-upon plan to defend Tunisia (Map 1.1) had been resolved. In Weygand's view, holding Bizerte was vital. In February 1942, Darlan also had informed Juin that the retention of Bizerte in the face of a British attack was "primordial" even at the expense of other points, because it would "attract the maximum of (British) assets."²⁹

Following Darlan's directive, Juin, together with Barré and Bizerte commander Vice-Admiral Edmond Derrien, wargamed the defense of Bizerte on 8–11 April 1942. Juin's conclusion was that the defense of Bizerte's harbor, arsenal, and industrial facilities would require a defense perimeter 104 kilometers long. Defending this perimeter would require the totality of French reserves in AFN and "risk the fate of North Africa and the field army on a single battle." His solution was to remove Bizerte from control of the CSTT, and hand its defense over to Derrien, who would concentrate on defending Ferryville, at



Map 1.1 Map of northern Tunisia.

the southern end of the Lac de Bizerte, which contained France's sole overseas navy yard and arsenal, and the Menzel Djemil isthmus that separates the Lac de Bizerte from the sea. In the meantime, three divisions of troops rushed from Algeria and Morocco would lift the siege of Bizerte within thirty days. Juin's plan was confirmed in a 9 May 1942 IPS, and CSTT Barré was to finalize its details by 22 August.³⁰

In his memoirs, Juin insisted that his plan simply remained faithful to Weygand's vision.³¹ Unfortunately for Juin, he was sent back to the drawing

board by Darlan, now commander in chief of French forces, and Pierre Laval, who had been restored as premier in April 1942. “The military value of Tunisia remains in its harbors,” Darlan lectured Juin on 2 May, and “The Tunis–Bizerte group must be tenaciously defended, above all Bizerte . . . The defense of Bizerte against a land attack must be reevaluated; covering forces must fight tooth and nail to keep the enemy for as long as possible far from the position; the battle for the isthmuses being the final recourse.” Because Darlan’s corrective arrived at the last minute, Juin’s 9 May IPS, which renounced the defense of Mareth, of the eastern ports of Gabès, Sousse, and Sfax, and of Tunis, remained the battle plan for the moment. But it nevertheless specified that, although abandoned, “*their harbors and airfields would be rendered unserviceable*” (italics in the original). But this admonition lacked urgency, because the calculation at Vichy was that other imperial locations were judged to be more likely Allied objectives, a strategic misstep reinforced by the 5 May 1942 British seizure of Diego-Suárez (now named Ansiranana) in Madagascar. So, it did not seem to matter much that command of Bizerte would fall to Admiral Derrien, while “the command of Tunisia” would revert to CSTT Barré, “charged with organizing the south, and the center of Tunisia, and to hold the mountainous zone to the east of Béja.”³² These remained Barré’s marching orders, modified slightly by a further IPS – Juin’s last before Torch – of 22 August, that laid out the “phases of maneuver” that incorporated Darlan’s instructions “to insure no matter what the preservation of Bizerte.” But the assumption upon which Juin’s defense plan was based remained a British attack on Bizerte from the south.³³ In the event, the enemy, the direction, and the configuration of attack diverged wildly from Juin’s planning assumptions.

But conflict scenarios seemed remote in AFN’s somnambulant autumn of 1942, as Rommel had kicked the British into the Nile delta, Juin shuffled his troops away from the beaches and back to their winter quarters in Morocco, the Wehrmacht slouched toward Stalingrad, and the decadent Americans seemed incapable of wresting the distant island of Guadalcanal from Japanese control. Vichy’s complacent planners settled on “stalemate” as the war’s ascendant narrative. At least this postponed the need to reconcile conflicting threat assessments, and problems caused by a splintered chain of command and a penury of troops and matériel. But Juin at least recognized that this disorder at the top delivered mixed messages to *l’armée d’Afrique* that translated into “hesitations and contempt, because resistance to one implies for better or worse collaboration with the other.”³⁴ This wavering at the top, accelerated from 8 November by the fact that the command in Algiers was taken hostage, first by a resistance group and subsequently by the Americans, produced a “lassitude” in the leadership, stoked fear that “dissidence” had compromised *l’armée d’Afrique*, and abandoned officers at the local level to their own devices. In these conditions, Costagliola points out that officers were freed to decide on the

“relative value” of orders according to when they were issued and who or what service issued them, even as the octogenarian Marshal at Vichy squawked “You have heard my voice on the radio, it is the one you must obey.”³⁵

A Confused Chain of Command

Finally, and most critically, if Torch had triggered Vichy’s unmasking, the slow-motion treason that played out in Tunisia further disaggregated and paralyzed an already-contorted French chain of command. Not surprisingly, while a system cross-wired to short-circuit potential pro-Allied conspiracies in AFN perhaps served the purposes of Vichy “neutrality,” it hardly optimized French defense of Tunisia against invasion, especially when command consensus over the most likely threat to AFN, and how to counter it, remained undefined and in dispute.³⁶ Nor did it match Torch planning assumptions. In August 1942, the British Joint Intelligence Committee opined that the rapid arrival of Allied forces in Tunisia would forestall a large Axis invasion. A major premise – indeed, aspiration – of the decision to attack Casablanca had been that token French resistance would delay an Axis invasion of Tunisia long enough to permit Allied forces to leapfrog east from Algiers to Bône, and overland to Tunis. Furthermore, Allied planners had calculated that it would make no strategic sense for Berlin and Rome to commit substantial forces to a major campaign in Tunisia.³⁷ Unfortunately, Hitler had been taking decisions that defied military logic at least since his September 1939 attack on Poland – some might argue ever since the 1935 remilitarization of the Rhineland. And while, in November 1942, the jury was still out on Stalingrad, so far, *Der Führer*’s gambles had mostly paid off. Nor could Torch’s architects factor in the likely reactions of the French high command in Tunisia, largely because they were indecipherable. But, in the event, even Allied hopes for token French resistance in Tunisia would prove illusory. In November 1942, “Defense against whomever” joined “*la comédie politique d’Alger*,” the fragmentation of the French chain of command, and Juin’s reflex to retreat into Algeria, leaving the door to Tunisia ajar to Axis forces.

The September 1942 command reorganization that separated AFN into “terrestrial” and “maritime” sectors, in theory, had divided military authority in Tunisia as elsewhere in AFN, into army and navy spheres. The “terrestrial” theater in Tunisia, stretching from the lower Medjerda valley to the frontier with Tripolitania, was commanded by Barré. A decorated Great War veteran, CSTT Barré had spent virtually his entire career in *l’armée d’Afrique*, commanding the 7th North African Division in 1940. A Weygand protégé, he was subsequently retained in the Armistice Army, assigned in late 1940 to oversee the demilitarization of the Mareth Line. Barré was also an acolyte of his superior in the hierarchy, Juin, who had eased his promotion to lieutenant

general (*général du corps d'armée*) as a prelude to de Lattre's February 1942 reassignment under protest to lead a stripped-down Armistice Army "division" at Montpellier. Juin's little command *coup* supplanted the temperamental and ambitious de Lattre with the less able but more pliant Barré. Juin's command changeout was also meant to insure that, in the event of invasion, French troops in Tunisia would not be locked into a sacrificial defense of Bizerte and Tunis, thus opening Algeria to invasion from the east. If Juin could not win his strategic argument with Darlan and de Lattre on the merits, he would prevail through a reshuffle of personnel.

Tunisia's "maritime" sector translated into the "*arrondissement maritime de Bizerte*" that extended from the coast, down the Medjerda valley to the Algerian frontier. Its commander – a sixty-one-year-old, one-eyed veteran of the First World War, Edmond Derrien – had been slated to retire in 1941, and probably wished that he had. But as an ADD (*ami de Darlan*, friend of Darlan), he had been enticed to stay on with a promotion to vice-admiral. Many believed that Derrien had been elevated above his competence, as his nickname on the lower decks was *Der-rien-de-tout* (not up to much). His command included the "fortified camp" of Bizerte that incorporated France's sole overseas naval arsenal and shipyard as well as the harbors of Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax. A garrison of soldiers called "*le groupement de Bizerte*" defended the Bizerte naval compound.³⁸ For matters of naval combat and defense of harbor installations, Derrien's immediate superior was Admiral Moreau, prefect of the IV^e Région maritime in Algiers. However, "in the event of operations," Derrien fell under the orders of the "General commanding the Theater of operations in Tunisia for everything concerning the defense of the Bizerte sector." This should have been Barré, who held the same rank as Derrien, but who answered to "the Commander in Chief in North Africa" – namely Juin.³⁹ The fact that the "*groupement de Bizerte*" was commanded by Derrien and not Barré would further disarticulate the French response because it would resurrect the Darlan–Juin quarrel over the strategic value of Bizerte, set the navy against the army, and ultimately sabotage the authority of Darlan, Juin, and Moreau in Algiers in favor of Vichy and Tunisia's Resident General, Admiral Jean-Pierre Esteva.

This was because Derrien was close – physically, personally, and through service affiliation – to Esteva (Figure 1.1). German diplomat and self-styled Arab authority Rudolph Rahn described the Resident General and Dardanelles veteran as a "Gentleman of a certain age, stocky, with a large gray beard, boasting a reputation for a profound piety and a sense of almost infantile self-satisfaction." Nevertheless, he judged Esteva "incapable of making any decision."⁴⁰ Esteva answered in theory, through Vichy's foreign affairs secretariat, ultimately to Laval. But, because he was also a full admiral who had commanded both the Far East and the Mediterranean fleets, he had close personal relations with Darlan, whom he addressed in the familiar *tu* form, as



Figure 1.1 Admiral Jean-Pierre Esteva, Resident General of Tunisia, with German representative and Arab expert Dr. Rudolf Rahn, and Major Henri Curnier, commander of the *Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchévisme* in Tunisia, at the entrance of Bordj Cedria camp (Borj Cédria, Tunisia) on 15 March 1943. (Photo by Apic/Getty Images)

well as with Admiral Gabriel Auphan, who managed the Vichy admiralty.⁴¹ The chain of command technically ran through General Georges Revers as chief of the general staff to Eugène Bridoux, the secretary of state for war, or to Auphan, who was both head of the French Admiralty and Commander in chief of Maritime Forces, who depended for their authority on Laval and ultimately Pétain. In fact, after some initial soul searching, Derrien would opt to follow the orders of Esteva and Vichy, rather than listen to Juin and Darlan.

Two Commanders, Two Choices

The reaction in Tunis to news of Torch would be complicated by command turmoil in Algiers, multiple scenarios for the defense of Tunisia, none of which seems to have received final command imprimatur, and a tortuous multi-service chain of command, with Tunis, Algiers, and Vichy all claiming precedence, and through which arrived orders, instructions, suggestions, and directives to the

men on the ground. As a consequence, as elsewhere in AFN, drift, equivocation, and confusion characterized the leadership in Tunisia on 8–13 November, as communications were periodically severed, and contradictory orders arrived from various headquarters. Claims of authority from Darlan, Juin, Noguès, or Esteva, not to mention assorted figures at Vichy, as well as uncertainty that subordinate commanders would follow orders that ran counter to their individual consciences, combined to stifle command initiative. The result during those fateful hours and days, as the “orders and counter-orders” ricocheted across and around Mediterranean shores, was that Barré and Derrien shared with their superiors a culpable hesitancy and indecision, even passivity, in the face of an initially anemic Axis invasion, which filtered down to their subordinates, whose attitudes influenced their command choices.⁴² By 14 November, “the passivity which had begun through indecision had . . . to be continued because of material weakness,” concludes Paxton.⁴³

A “menace” warning went out in the late afternoon of 6 November as reports reached Tunis of an Allied naval buildup at Gibraltar.⁴⁴ In the late morning of 7 November, troops in Constantine and Tunis were put on alert. That evening, Juin ordered Barré to deploy his defense dispositions for the harbors, beaches, and airfields in Tunisia. Moreau passed on Darlan’s order to block the Bizerte shipping canal, but in a very oblique manner that left Derrien much leeway.⁴⁵ The 8 November opened at 00:25 with a warning from the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) of the possibility of Allied landings at Bône, Philippeville, or Tunis, and the OKW offered Luftwaffe support to the French. At 01:00, American consul in Tunis Hooker Doolittle presented Esteva with a letter from President Roosevelt announcing that the invasion was, “*uniquement des Américains*,” and asked that American troops be granted free passage into Tunisia, which Esteva rejected. At 01:45 on 8 November, Barré received an order from Juin “to put in place, at 08:00, the first echelon of troops designated to defend ports and beaches in the Tunis subdivision, the air bases and landing zones. Keep other subdivisions on alert.” As a result, Barré subsequently issued a stand-to order condemning “Anglo-Saxon” aggression and admonishing his soldiers “to execute the orders of the Marshal.”⁴⁶ At 03:50, as news of the attack on Oran arrived, Derrien sent out a “*défense totale*” order, which required the manning and arming of coastal batteries, preparations for the defense of the Bizerte arsenal, and the call up of reservists. At 05:00 the Germans offered Luftwaffe support from Sicily, followed by proposals to send Luftwaffe liaisons to Tunis to coordinate operations. At 09:45, an order from Vice-Admiral Auphan – “We are attacked. We will defend ourselves. That’s my order” – was disseminated to all services. He directed that the La Goulette canal be blocked to deny entry into Tunis harbor.⁴⁷

At 14:00, Vichy gave its permission for two Luftwaffe liaison officers to reach AFN to coordinate operations with the CSTT.⁴⁸ Barré learned in the late

afternoon through the Vichy war secretariat that, “in the case that General Juin can no longer exercise command,” Darlan had put him in charge of an operational theater designated as “Tunisia–Constantine,” which mirrored the Morocco–Oranais command arrangement that had been imposed on Noguès. “Thus, at the end of the day on 8 November, the situation seemed clear,” declares the official French naval history. “General Barré had taken command of the Eastern Theater and the defense plans were activated. The adversaries were the Americans and the British.” The Axis announced that they would dispatch the *Schnellboot* (or *S-Boot*, rapid attack boat) flotilla based in Sicily to Tunisia, together with Italian troops and 88 mm dual-purpose anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns originally designated for Rommel.⁴⁹ However, a telephone conversation between Barré and his new subordinate Major General Édouard Welvert, commander of the Constantine division, concluded that there was no Allied invasion in their sector, which caused them to doubt the information they were receiving. Their main concern seemed to be the reports of the “dissidence” at Algiers that had temporarily detained Juin and Darlan, and the fear that there might be similar plots afoot in Constantine or Tunis.⁵⁰

The problem was that the definition of “dissidence” was evolving, as the navy gradually assembled under the banner of Pétain and Esteva, while the army elected to follow the orders of Darlan, Juin, and XIX Corps commander Louis Koeltz.⁵¹ Obeying Darlan’s message, on the morning of 9 November, Barré ordered his scattered and ill-armed forces to prepare to resist the Allies as the “first aggressors,” although in his memoirs he insisted that his positions were “reversible.” At midnight on 8 November, the German high command had sent an “ultimatum” to the French government via the German armistice commission at Wiesbaden that the Luftwaffe must be allowed to base planes in Tunisia and the Constantinois to resist the Anglo-American invasion. This was followed by permission from Vichy at 08:45 on 9 November for Axis forces to use the air bases in Tunisia and Constantine, as well as the ports of Bizerte and Tunis. Darlan informed Barré at 07:00 on 9 November that “The Americans, having been first to invade Africa, are our adversaries and we must oppose them alone or with help.”⁵²

On 9 November, the commander of the Sétif subdivision, Colonel Jacques Schwartz, received a report that American and French troops had left Algiers marching toward the southeast and asked Welvert about “the attitude to adopt if it’s a question of non-loyal French troops?” The Division Commander ordered him to “shoot without hesitation,” which presumably resulted in Lapouge’s 7^e RTA being ordered to defend the Kherrata pass.⁵³ In the morning of 9 November, two Luftwaffe liaison officers dispatched by Kesselring arrived at El Aouina, the Tunis airport, after having first landed at Sétif in an unsuccessful attempt to contact Darlan. During their meeting with Barré and Esteva, the two officers announced that German aircraft would soon be arriving in

Tunisia, and handed the two Frenchmen “a list of requirements that constituted the basis of military collaboration.” Barré ask for a postponement: “We told them that we would let them know our response after consultation with the Marshal and the Chief of the Government. Our interlocutors agreed to await this reply.”⁵⁴ At 05:20 on 10 November, Barré was informed that General Bridoux at Vichy had given permission for the Germans to land at El Aouina. In a communication with Welvert, Barré expressed concern that Vichy had allowed the Germans to land before the Allies had attacked Tunisia, and that this had caused “unsettling commentaries from the majority of officers on whose loyalty I can no longer count.” In other words, the command was beginning to get pushback from its subordinates over its decision to allow the Axis unfettered access to Tunisia. Perhaps this resistance was encouraged by news that arrived at 11:00 on 10 November, that Darlan had signed an armistice with the Americans, news incompatible with Barré’s order to allow German planes to land at El Aouina. At 17:55 on the evening of 10 November, Welvert at Constantine received the order from Juin to “resist the Axis.” But three hours later, he complained to XIX Corps commander Koeltz that Tunis was telling him the opposite. “What should I do?,” he asked. Koeltz’s answer: “absolute neutrality.” In Leconte’s view, this offered an example of how a subordinate in the French hierarchy avoided responsibility for executing orders “of doubtful origins.” He did not ask for a written confirmation of Barré’s order. Rather, he simply sought out someone else in AFN’s fractured military hierarchy who would supply a different directive, which allowed him to take no action.⁵⁵

The French official history insists that the German demand to use El Aouina was an ultimatum, not a request, one acquiesced to by the French representative at Wiesbaden – fifty Ju 52s, twenty-five Ju 87s, twenty-five Messerschmitt Bf 109s, two Ju 88s, and one Ju 90 appeared over Tunis at 12:30, flying so low that their black crosses and even, some claimed, the faces of the pilots were visible from the ground.⁵⁶ A detachment of the 4^e RCA with two squadrons of tanks under the orders of Colonel, later General, Guy Le Couteulx de Caumont took up a position on the hill overlooking the airbase. An after-action report written on 19 November 1946 placed the Luftwaffe’s arrival (Figure 1.2) three hours later.

Around 15:30 the sky was full of vibrations of the first German planes overflying Tunis before landing at El Aouina. A motorized detachment of the 4^e RCA (*Régiment de chasseurs d’Afrique*) was ordered to El Aouina to oppose the arrival while a battery of the 52^e RAA (*Régiment d’artillerie d’Afrique*) took up a position in the region of Notre-Dame du Belvédère overlooking the air field. The alert was given – the German landing had begun. The news spread like wildfire ... The motorized detachment of the 4^e Chasseurs arrived on the airfield just as the large transport planes were offloading their cargos. The armored vehicles took their position, their turrets swung round, the machinergunners with their fingers on the triggers. In a few seconds, the planes with their



Figure 1.2 German troops disembarking from a Ju 52 at El Aouina airfield in Tunisia. (Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

black crosses would be the first objectives – emotions were taut. But the brief order rang out: “don’t shoot.”⁵⁷

If this post-war report fails to mention who issued the stand-down order, it was because, far from opposing the Germans, Colonel Le Couteulx’s mission, according to the 1946 after-action report, was to “assure the protection of the Axis detachments and see that they don’t venture beyond El Aouina to avoid any incident at Tunis were they to go there.” Barré was to prepare an order explaining the government’s decision to allow Axis use of Tunisian airfields. In the meantime, French forces deployed to prevent an Allied amphibious landing. Shore batteries were armed, submarines prepared to sortie, while ships were scuttled to block the entrances to the harbors at Bizerte, La Goulette at the entrance to Tunis harbor, and Sfax.⁵⁸ When Welvert sent the 3^e RCA on a reconnaissance of southeastern Tunisia, its commander, Lieutenant colonel Pierre Manceau-Demaiu, was informed by the naval command in Sfax that “at

a minimum” they would assume an attitude of complete neutrality toward Axis forces. When Manceau-Demaïu urged that they adopt an aggressive posture toward the Axis, naval officers denounced him as a “dissident” and threatened forcibly to take over command of his squadron.⁵⁹ A similar “economy of force” reflex saw Air Force chief in AFN General Jean Mendigal order his pilots to evacuate their aircraft to Biskra in southern Algeria, well out of harm’s way, an order which Juin never reversed after Mendigal had refused his superior’s direct order on 11 November to resist Axis forces. Obviously, “defense against whomever” excluded resistance against Axis forces.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, as Darlan prevaricated and Clark threatened in Algiers, from 9 November, Axis forces had been allowed resistance-free access to Tunisia, “courtesy of the French authorities.”⁶¹ Furthermore, by exposing the hypocrisy of “defense against whomever,” Vichy had gambled on the loyalty of *l’armée d’Afrique*. “I must tell you what emotion this occupation of El Aouina by the Axis air forces has caused, and the unsettling commentaries that it has provoked among the majority of officers upon whose loyalty I can no longer rely,” Barré reported to Vichy on 9 November.⁶² After being notified of the landings at El Aouina and that an Axis convoy was scheduled to arrive at Bizerte, Derrien had what the Viard Commission, set up in August 1943 to investigate command behavior in Tunisia in November 1942, called “his first ‘National’ reaction,” when he signaled the Admiralty at 16:00 on 9 November: “I must inform you that these events have produced reactions that for the moment I can control in the army, the air force and the navy at Bizerte. But I cannot answer for the consequences.” In other words, Vichy was being informed by its senior commanders that the rank-and-file military was unwilling to accept collaboration with the Axis. And while Axis use of air bases such as “Sidi Ahmed (Bizerte) and El Aouina (Tunis) might probably be acceptable, a joint occupation certainly will not be.” The French Admiralty replied that the Anglo-Americans had initiated the crisis, and that Vichy had no choice but to “submit” to Axis *force majeure*. “Obey Navy Commander in Algiers (Moreau),” the Admiralty urged. In a message to Esteva, Vichy’s Secretariat of Foreign Affairs too laid the blame on the Anglo-Americans and pleaded that they were powerless “to prevent one or the other of the belligerents carrying the war onto our soil.” At least, it pointed out, “The government has [already] requested that no Italian reinforcements be sent to Tunisia and count on this being honored.”⁶³ Clearly, the *Maréchalisme* of the armed forces in North Africa was taxed to breaking point as Berlin and Rome exposed the duplicity of “defense against whomever.”

“A new phase opened, of a particular character,” the 19 November 1946 report continued. “At that point, it was a question of delaying the enemy forces without fighting them. One had to avoid engagement at all costs, but nevertheless contain the advance of the invader.”⁶⁴ In fact, this 1946 report tried to

portray French confusion, prevarication, and the passive posture adopted both by the Constantine division and by the CSTT in the face of Axis invasion as a clever delaying strategy against Axis forces.⁶⁵ As Leconte demonstrates, inaction was rather the response of an insecure senior command caught between pressure from their subordinates to resist the Axis and fear of issuing an order that would set the spas of Vichy boiling. On the morning of 10 November, Darlan proclaimed a ceasefire throughout AFN and “complete neutrality toward all the belligerents.” These instructions were passed on to both Barré and Derrien at noon, who relayed the order to their subordinates. Moreau in Algiers also directed commanders in Bône, Philippeville, and Bougie not to resist American arrivals in those harbors. However, amid complaints that Barré was not cooperating with the Germans, and insistence from Auphan that the Bizerte channel be unblocked to allow access to the Axis flotilla, in the afternoon of 10 November, the Admiralty announced that the Germans had been given free access into Tunis and Sfax. The Secretary of State for War at Vichy, General Eugène Bridoux, forwarded the same information to Barré, with instructions to avoid contact between French and German troops while not abandoning Tunisian soil.⁶⁶ In the evening, Barré learned that Juin had been reinstated as commander in chief. At 23:00, Auphan messaged that an Axis flotilla would soon arrive at Bizerte. Consequently, the harbors at Bizerte, Tunis, and Sfax were to be unblocked, an order rescinded on the next day, 11 November.⁶⁷

The French army’s official history asserts that orders to resist neither the Americans nor the Axis placed Barré in an “ambiguous position.”⁶⁸ At this moment, however, directives from Algiers and Vichy began to diverge for good. According to Notin, only on 10 November, two days after the Allied invasion had been launched, did Juin contact Barré by telephone.⁶⁹ The CSTT told Juin that Vichy had given permission for the Germans to land at El Aouina. Rather than contradict those instruction, at 19:30 on the evening of 10 November, Juin gave the following order: “Take dispositions to resist and cover communications [with] Algeria.”⁷⁰ In other words, Juin preferred to defend Algeria, rather than prevent the Germans from seizing El Aouina. At 17:30 on the evening of 10 November, lumbering Bristol Beaufighters flying from Malta attacked El Aouina and left a Luftwaffe tanker, three fighters and two bombers in flames as well as two German pilots gravely wounded. This British attack caused Le Couteux’s 4^e RCA, allegedly stationed as observers at El Aouina, to scatter and regroup at Pont du Fahs.⁷¹ German air reprisals fell on Bône, Philippeville, and Bougie. On the morning of 11 November, Derrien ordered the French fighter squadron at Sidi Ahmed outside of Bizerte to withdraw to Kairouan to make room for arriving German fighters.⁷² Derrien would later disingenuously complain that he could not defend Bizerte in part because he lacked air cover.

On 11 November – the critical day in Tunisia – events began with Juin informing Vichy that, as Pétain had disavowed Darlan’s ceasefire order and “Given that with Admiral Darlan I am in the hands of the Americans, in my judgment I am unable to exercise command of operations and can only give complete independence to the commanders of the eastern and western theaters (Noguès and Barré).”⁷³ The Vichy admiralty insisted that Noguès was now in command in AFN, and that the order to resist the Anglo-Saxons remained in force. A communication from Auphan that arrived at 14:55 explained that while “my personal preference is passivity vis-à-vis all belligerents,” the government’s decision on the posture to adopt against the invaders would be reached on that evening. Desperate for clear orders, Derrien at Bizerte phoned Moreau, Esteva, and Barré in an attempt to cut through the confusion. “It’s difficult to exercise command,” Moreau told Derrien, because the Americans had cracked down on French radio communication between the Hôtel Saint-George and Bizerte. “I delegate authority to you over your military establishment. Tell the Resident General,” came Moreau’s pass-the-buck message to Derrien – “in other words, ‘sort it out yourself,’” in the unvarnished language of the Viard Commission. That proved difficult to do when Esteva insisted that Darlan had been disavowed by the Marshal, Juin “had given a free hand to Barré–Derrien in Tunisia” (in fact, he had ordered Barré to retreat to Algeria), and, at noon, news arrived of the German invasion of the *zone libre*, that allowed Darlan to “reclaim his liberty.” Barré told Derrien that he was following the order to remain “neutral” and planned that evening to begin withdrawing his troops, transport, and matériel to the west, a move that had been approved by Esteva. In these confused circumstances, the only military order that a “disconcerted” Derrien could think to issue was to prepare to scuttle.⁷⁴

On 11 November, German forces had begun to disembark at Bizerte and La Goulette (Tunis), while the Luftwaffe airlifted more troops into El Aouina and Sidi Ahmed, the Bizerte airfield. At 08:45, Derrien informed Auphan at Vichy that “my understanding is that the arrival of German troops in Tunisia is authorized. The struggle continues against the Anglo-Saxons.” Juin also told Barré by telephone that he was to observe “strict neutrality toward all belligerents.” At 10:35, Barré informed Esteva that he would begin his withdrawal toward the Dorsal. Esteva raised no objections, while Juin also gave him the go ahead to depart “in the evening of 11 November.” But news of the invasion of the *zone libre* caused Moreau in Algiers to signal at 15:47 that “We reclaim our freedom of action. The Marshal no longer being free to take decisions allows us to take those which are more favorable to French interests, while remaining loyal to his person.” Juin, too, urged that the Axis invasion be resisted: “From the reception of this order the position of neutrality vis-à-vis the Axis ceases,” read his Order 395, sent out in the afternoon of 11 November. “All attempts at intervention by Axis forces in AFN must be resisted with force. Prepare for

active operations.” This was followed by Order 396, which told XIX Corps (Koeltz) to put Algeria on general alert, recover camouflaged material, deny the Luftwaffe access to air bases in the Constantinois, and liaise with US forces. At roughly 17:00, Juin phoned Barré to tell him to “beat it” out of Tunis to a line running through Béja, Medjez-el-Bab, and Téboursouk. As commander of the only motorized force in Tunisia, Le Couteulx was diverted from El Aouina, where he might easily have mastered the roughly 1,500 lightly armed Axis troops there, to cover Barré’s retreat. At 17:00, Barré phoned Derrien from Esteva’s office to say “Everything’s changed. We’re fighting the Axis.” Left to defend Bizerte, Derrien too informed the soldiers and sailors of the Bizerte garrison that “Our enemy is the German and the Italian . . . Go for it with all your heart against the adversaries of 1940. We must avenge ourselves. Vive la France!”⁷⁵

However, Juin quickly realized that his desire to take the fight to the Axis, still thin on the ground in Tunisia on the afternoon of 11 November, was not universally embraced by his senior subordinates. Esteva avoided contact “on a transparent pretext [a visit to the Bey] and probably to cover himself if need be.” Esteva then forced Derrien to withdraw his order to resist the Axis allegedly because it opened Barré’s retreating troops to attack. As Barré and his staff departed for Souk-el-Arba, Derrien received strict orders from Auphan in the Admiralty that “you must allow the Italo-German forces disembarking in Tunisia free passage without getting involved. Follow the orders of the Marshal.”⁷⁶ Exercising his legendary prudence, at 20:00 on 11 November, Juin issued Order 397 that “suspended” Orders 395 and 396. He later insisted that this stand down was issued because Koeltz and air force commander Mendigal refused to act until given the green light by Noguès, whom Vichy had named to replace Darlan. Also, Barré feared that it would subject his retreating troops to Luftwaffe attack before they reached Medjez-el-Bab.⁷⁷ At this point, the Viard Commission recognized Derrien’s dilemma: Barré and Juin refused to reinforce Bizerte; Esteva claimed to want no action that allegedly might jeopardize Barré’s retreat, but in fact made himself unavailable for command; Vichy ordered him not to oppose the arrival of Axis forces; while Noguès’ silence was deafening. At the same time, Kesselring redirected General Walter Nehring, who had been passing through Rome on his way to take command of the Afrika Korps, to take charge of the buildup in Tunisia and advance his troops toward the Algerian frontier.⁷⁸

Juin’s decision to withdraw Barré from Bizerte–Tunis opened him to criticism. On 12 November, the French still maintained an overwhelming superiority over what was estimated to be 1,000 German soldiers with a few anti-aircraft guns at El Aouina, 20 fighters at Sidi Ahmed, and 2 Italian troop transports at Bizerte, that had yet to offload their artillery and tanks, and whose destroyer escorts had already departed. Pétain ordered Barré to reverse his withdrawal and remain to

defend Tunisia against the Anglo-Americans.⁷⁹ The two Admirals Esteva and Derrien had preferred to reinforce Bizerte. However, Barré believed that the occupation of the *zone libre* meant that the commencement of hostilities with the Axis was only a matter of time. It would take too long to pull his outlying garrisons into Bizerte, which, as has been seen, was considered by Juin to be an indefensible position in any case, one subject to incessant Luftwaffe attack. At this critical moment, Vichy Secretary of State for War Bridoux had authorized Barré to retreat toward the Eastern Dorsal on the pretext that he wanted to avoid any conflicts with French soldiers who might resist arriving Axis forces. “General Juin, who was commander-in-chief while avoiding behaving like one, issued suggestions,” Viard subsequently opined. On the morning of 11 November, Barré had distributed order No. 2 to evacuate troops, equipment, and matériel toward concentration zones along the line Béja–Medjez-el-Bab–Téboursouk. On the night of 11–12 November, along with the troops, 800 vehicles disguised as civilian automobiles and lorries, 147 locomotives and 2,500 rail cars, odds and ends of weaponry collected from secret arms caches, as well as reserves of petrol and coal, began to travel west.⁸⁰

Thus, according to Viard, the “tragedy of Bizerte” was shaped by multiple factors, among them “uncertainty and lack of character of the leaders,” even in the wake of “the outrage of the total occupation of France.” The committee attributed this hesitation to act, when every minute counted, to “the mystique of the Marshal.” They also faulted French military culture. These military leaders were so “anxious to be commanded” that their “bureaucratic scruples obscured the bigger picture of national interest and the Honor of our Arms.”⁸¹ There was plenty of individual blame to spread around, beginning with Pétain, whose personal messages on several occasions stoked resistance to the Anglo-Americans. Darlan’s evasion of responsibility had been particularly egregious. “Admiral Darlan refused on the 10th to issue orders for Tunisia even though the Americans asked him to, and after the 10th never gave the order to oppose the Germans at El Aouina airfield . . . Therefore, he bears part of the blame for the occupation of this airbase by the enemy.” Juin had suspended Orders 395 and 396 to resist Axis forces in Tunisia. “Between the critical dates of 11 and 13 November, [Noguès] never gave an order to his subordinates who anxiously awaited them, and who until the night of 12 November remained a partisan of neutrality.” Had Juin and Noguès acted more forcefully, the Axis occupation of Tunisia might have been aborted on the tarmac at El Alouina. Moreau left Derrien without guidance, while Esteva was the critical influence on Derrien’s decision to surrender Bizerte to the Axis. Barré also shared responsibility, because he had failed to keep Derrien, his direct subordinate, in the picture, but instead issued contradictory orders. Derrien’s error was to have executed Vichy’s orders after 11 November, even in the knowledge that the government was held hostage by the Germans and even when these orders were vague.⁸²

Juin's passivity and prevarication came in for special censure by Viard. From midday on 10 November, when he resumed command, his orders were vague, even "equivocal." Rather than demand El Aouina's defense, he directed Barré to "resist and cover communications [with] Algeria."⁸³

"It seems that on 11 November, General Juin had reason to recommend the immediate initiation of hostilities against the Germans but made the mistake of not imposing his will by giving the order for a speedy attack on the airfield at El Aouina, where the Germans were not at that moment in a position to resist for long," Viard concluded. "As a result, as the Germans continued to reinforce, this offensive tactic became less and less viable. And it seems obvious that from the moment that the enemy occupied Tunis [14 November], General Barré's tactic of temporization imposed itself on the French command until the day it felt able to reject German requests presented in the form of an ultimatum on the night of 18–19 November, which resulted in the initiation of hostilities the following morning."⁸⁴

Viard had probably not been aware of the pre-Torch debate over how best to defend Tunisia, that had split Juin and de Lattre, and the defense plans worked out in May. One might certainly make a case for Barré's withdrawal to preserve his force, join with the Constantine division, and shield Algeria, in keeping with a long-war strategy. However, in the commission's view, Juin's behavior simply fit a pattern for France's North African command, one in which the surprise and confusion of Torch, combined with the intentional fragmentation of authority and a paralysis of initiative caused by a slavish devotion to Pétain reinforced by the quasi-mystical "Oath to the Marshal," had pitched the French command into accountability avoidance mode. As commander in chief of French forces, Darlan's decision simply to recuse himself on 11 November by withdrawing his order to oppose the Germans who cascaded into the *zone libre* and Tunisia in clear violation of the 1940 armistice agreement, placing his precious High Seas Fleet in peril, redefined the concept of command negligence, and telegraphed spinelessness to his subordinates Koeltz and Mendigal, who pressured Juin to withdraw his 11 November Order 395 to oppose the Germans in Tunisia. Viard concluded that, "on his own initiative," Mendigal was more intent on ordering his obsolete air force in Tunisia out of harm's way, "for military reasons for which it is difficult to find a justification," than on actually directing it to defend Tunisia. Mendigal's evacuation order, opposed neither by Juin nor by Barré, "had grave consequences for which they all share responsibility." Barré initiated his retreat at a time when he might successfully have denied El Aouina to the Luftwaffe. When, on 12 November, eleven Ju 52s landed at Sidi Ahmed, and the *avant garde* of what would become an armada of Axis ships and boats sailed into Bizerte, "French guns . . . were silent," while French tugs nudged the invaders' ships toward their docks. If only Torch had been so trouble-free! Moreau phoned Derrien to whine about the "shambles" in

Algiers, but clicked off without attempting to sort out the shambles in Tunis. Auphan mumbled pious *Maréchalist* homilies into the line about “the secret path of Providence that leads our country toward its destiny.” Juin asked him to send his three battalions stationed at Bizerte to Barré. Derrien refused, but it was not clear what purpose he otherwise intended for the Bizerte garrison, except to fight the Anglo-Americans or surrender them to the Germans. Noguès, the designated commander in AFN, gave no sign of having a pulse. Derrien had spent 12 November on the phone with his superiors – the Marshal, Esteva, Barré, Juin, Moreau, and Auphan – in a futile quest to divine a direction. In the end, in an act of “passive obedience,” he chose Esteva, rather than his direct superior Barré, who seemed obsessed with clearing out of town as fast as possible. To be fair, Derrien had the responsibility to defend a naval base, an arsenal and shipyard, and a small flotilla of boats, none of which was easily transportable. Yet, his passivity constituted neither a military nor a patriotic reflex. In the meantime, “the fate of Bizerte had been decided,” along with that of Derrien. “All of this concluded in the decision of 8 December (to surrender Bizerte to the Germans).”⁸⁵

In Juin’s defense, his directives appeared at last to have caused *l’armée d’Afrique* to shed its cocoon of “neutrality.” As seen at 17:00 on 11 November, Barré had phoned Derrien to announce “Everything’s changed. We’re fighting the Axis.”⁸⁶ However, rather than order Le Couteulx to police up the lightly armed German paratroops at El Aouina, Barré commanded Le Couteulx’s force to serve as his rearguard as he sought to retreat to a viable defensive position before initiating hostilities. He asked Derrien not to fire on Axis aircraft so as not to provoke reprisals. He also rejected Juin’s 12 November request that he initiate hostilities with the Germans, saying that he wanted first to regroup on better defensive positions. Barré had departed Tunis during the night of 11 November to establish his headquarters at Le Kef, 30 kilometers from the Algerian border, where the first Allied liaison officers appeared on 15 November.⁸⁷ Barré subsequently justified his tactical withdrawal toward the frontier as necessary to rendezvous with Allied forces and with Welvert’s Constantine division. However, as early as September 1944, archivists noted that Barré’s command log for the period 9–18 November had been considerably expunged.⁸⁸

Like that of Moreau, Darlan’s authority over French sailors also appeared tenuous. As with Laborde in Toulon, Esteva completely snubbed Darlan’s 11 November invitation to rally to the Allies. This Gallic Cancan caused Eisenhower to explode. “Confronted with these high geostrategic stakes, French preoccupations seemed derisory,” Notin concurs.⁸⁹ In the view of Eisenhower, the parochialism and bickering of French military leaders, and an obsession with maintaining a fig leaf of French sovereignty over a region that was clearly shifting under their feet, were seriously impeding campaign

progress. This absence of a single message from a unified, resolute leadership disoriented many French officers, and led to prevarications, contradictory orders, and desertions that made the French appear to be unreliable partners.⁹⁰ As Juin's biographer notes, the combination of the political divisions at the top of the French military with the equivocations and indecision witnessed in Algiers, where everyone in a command position sought to shirk responsibility, followed by vague orders, "invitations" and "suggestions," issued in an obvious desire to avoid conflict with the Germans and accountability at Vichy, coalesced to give the impression to Allied commanders that Darlan's hesitation resulted from the fact that he was not in firm control of his subordinates. Worse, in the eyes of the Allies, these French flag officers did not even seem to be good patriots. Rather, to the Americans, they appeared as poorly rehearsed actors in frantic pursuit of the play. It did not bode well for future command cooperation, or rearmament, as France slowly and apparently with great reluctance backed into the Allied camp *faute de mieux*.⁹¹

"Never at any moment having issued any order to attack German forces that had set foot in Tunisia and having approved the withdrawal order issued on 11 November by General Barré, [Juin] is responsible, in his capacity of commander in chief from the 10th [November], for the fact that Axis forces could penetrate Tunisia without encountering the slightest opposition," Viard concluded. Juin's defense was that he had been fired as commander in chief by Vichy, an assertion for which Viard could find no evidence. "Juin remained commander by right and in fact and became responsible for the posture of benign neutrality toward the Axis in Tunisia." At no time did Barré cease to believe that Juin was his hierarchical superior. And at no time did Juin issue firm orders to attack the Germans. Had the French resisted, then Rommel, in full retreat from El Alamein, might have surrendered in Tripolitania or southern Tunisia three or four months earlier, Viard speculated.⁹² In fact, as Robin Leconte argues, the success of Torch resulted not from a clandestine resistance, or a defection of senior officers from Vichy, but from bottom-up pressure from the lower tier of the military hierarchy:

... pressure from the soldiers on the officers, the links of hierarchal subordination, the long hours of indecision that followed 8 November, the presence of Axis forces and the risks encountered by troops in Tunisia, all combined to tip AFN [into the Allied camp]. The decisive element proved to be the margin of maneuver allowed, despite themselves, to officers on the ground, left to their own devices in the middle of a confused hierarchy with intermittent contact."⁹³

Juin dodged and ducked, insisting that Darlan, not he, had been in command. But Notin concluded that, "By defending Barré, he was defending himself."⁹⁴ However, in this moment that called for clear command direction, many suspected that Juin's command failures were the result of his pro-Vichy, if

not pro-Axis, sentiments. A more generous interpretation might conclude that he was merely reverting to his original plan to preserve his forces – and to protect Algeria – by extricating French troops to the Dorsal. But this explanation, too, has serious weaknesses.⁹⁵ Gaullist soldiers bestowed the derisive nickname “Juin ’40,” a moniker lifted from a marching song (“Juin ’40, la France est à terre. Présent répond les volontaires.”) about rallying to defend France in June 1940, on their commander: “It required all the blood spilled by the French in North Africa and Italy and in France to whitewash this great general of the acrimony accumulated by his hours of indecision incurred during the American invasion,” Georges Elgozy, who would fight through the Tunisian campaign, remarked bitterly.⁹⁶

As the official navy history points out, on 12 November, Derrien still had two choices: defend his command against Axis encroachment, or sortie his ships and submarines, destroy anything in his arsenal that was not transportable, and, with his garrison, join Barré’s bolt for the Dorsal. Derrien’s fateful decision to remain in Bizerte was based on five factors. First, he believed that he did not have the means to defend Bizerte against Axis attack. Second, he considered that the abandonment of the harbor with its ships, arsenal, and shipyard, as well as what he and Esteva considered its strategic position in Tunisia, without a direct order was unlawful and tantamount to abandoning a perfectly seaworthy ship. A third factor is to be found in the confusion over who was in charge, contradictory orders, and lack of firm guidance from Algiers. Fourth, the news that the Americans had put Giraud in charge provoked a Gaullist-like reaction from Derrien that Washington had no right to dictate who was to lead French forces. Therefore, the “felonious general” (Giraud) had no legal claim to issue orders. This helped to open an inter-service divide, especially after Admiral Platon arrived in Tunis to enforce the message of “neutrality” toward the Axis. In these circumstances, Esteva, Derrien, and the navy commanders in Sfax opted to follow orders from Vichy, whose position at least had been consistent.⁹⁷

Derrien viewed himself as a tragic figure, a victim of French command chaos in the wake of Torch. However, he took his decision neither to retreat nor to resist while fully realizing its implications. “I have seven citations and twenty-four years of service, and I’ll be the admiral who handed over Bizerte to the Germans!,” he lamented.⁹⁸ During the next three days, he was given every opportunity to reverse course – after all, he conceded that the Axis would occupy Bizerte one way or another. On 12 November, Juin telephoned to persuade him to join Barré’s withdrawal, but could only reach Derrien’s chief of staff, who informed the commander in chief that Derrien would abandon Bizerte only on Noguès’ orders. In the late morning of 12 November, twenty Messerschmitts landed at Sidi Ahmed, the airfield for Tunis. Two Kriegsmarine liaison officers appeared to announce the arrival in Bizerte that afternoon of

two patrol boats escorting two Italian freighters, that began to discharge troops and their cargo of artillery and tanks. On 13 November, Derrien was admonished by Barré, and ordered by Darlan to resist the arrival of Germans at Bizerte. Derrien and Esteva complained that they lacked the means to resist, although by the end of the day on 13 November only 2,000 Axis troops had arrived at Bizerte, accompanied by thirty armored vehicles and three batteries of 88 mm cannon. Another 400 to 500 Germans were at Sidi Ahmed.

“Thus, on the evening of 13 November, the military leaders in Algeria and Morocco decided to take up arms at the side of America and Great Britain to fight Germany,” concluded the Viard Commission. “But in Tunisia, General Barré, Admiral Esteva and Admiral Derrien passed up the last opportunities open to them on the 12 and possibly 13 November to resist the Germans with some chance of success by taking the offensive. General Juin did not figure out how to impose on them that option which he seemed to favor, and he continued to wait impatiently for the opening of hostilities without ordering his subordinates to take the initiative.”⁹⁹

On 14 November, Giraud became overall military commander in AFN, with Juin in command of land forces. Derrien sent a staff officer to Barré carrying a letter meant for Juin, exposing his command dilemma at Bizerte. Many of his soldiers were untrained recruits. Two boatloads of German reinforcements were scheduled to arrive that day. He had no aviation. If he resisted, the Germans would take hostages in the town. And so on.

To sum up, I'm in a fix and don't see a way out. I'm going to be the admiral who gave Bizerte to the Boches and yet, I only followed orders. My military honor is shot. I hesitate to be responsible for the massacre of hundreds of brave young men to save my reputation. I'm going to temporize: it's the only solution. I fear also that at the first shot, I'll see the arrival of transport planes here from Tunis or further afield. I'll be submerged.¹⁰⁰

The staff officer was ordered to request a written order from Juin “to throw the Axis forces into the sea.” But he would require reinforcements before he would be willing to execute such an order, which Barré refused to give him because he did not want to create a Tobruk-like redoubt in Bizerte.¹⁰¹ However, with British forces approaching from Bône and Axis forces lacking amphibious operations capability to land outside of a harbor, the analogy with Tobruk seemed contrived.

In the meantime, Algiers and Vichy spewed contradictory directives. Juin continued to ask the retreating Barré “when are your guns going to fire?”¹⁰² Moreau ordered the navy commanders at Tunis, Sousse and Sfax to destroy their equipment and withdraw to the west – Sousse and Sfax deferred to Tunis, while a shore battery disarmed and a minesweeper scuttled in Tunis harbor, and its captain managed to reach Barré's line at Medjez-el-Bab. Simultaneously, the

ubiquitous Auphan reminded officers of their oath of loyalty to the Marshal, and ordered Derrien to tune out Algiers.¹⁰³

On 14 November, British troops seized Bône and its airfield. The next day, 300 men from the US 509th Parachute Regiment toppled out of 33 C-47s over the airfield at Youks-les-Bains, 20 kilometers north of Tébessa on the Tunisia–Algeria border. After a few tense moments, poorly armed French troops entrenched around the field welcomed them with open arms. This would become a major base for the US Twelfth Air Force during the Tunisia campaign. British troops pushed to within a mere 56 miles of Tunis. The number of Axis troops at Bizerte on 14 November had grown to 3,500, mostly Italians, as the Germans occupied the Tunis telephone exchange. The Viard Commission's point was that, had the French leadership in Algiers and the command team in Tunis evinced more energy, focus, and moral courage early on to confront the Axis incursion at El Aouina and defend Bizerte and other Tunisian harbors, they might have spared the Allies a long and costly campaign.

Belle agrees that, in early November 1942, the Axis lacked the capacity to mount a massive break-in into Tunisia at short notice. Boats manufactured for a potential invasion of Malta had been dispersed to supply island garrisons in Greece. Hitler had shown no appetite to use paratroops as anything other than infantry following the successful but costly operation to seize airfields in Crete in late May 1941. His Ju 52s were scattered from Stalingrad to El Alamein, where they were being used to supply Rommel through Benghazi and Tobruk. The roughly 12,000 French troops in Tunisia, even with out-of-date equipment, supported by the French air force and possibly by Allied planes from Bône, Youks-les-Bains, and Malta, certainly had the capacity to prevent the Axis from gaining a foothold in Tunisia for a few critical days until Anderson's First British Army rode to the rescue. It all came down to the attitude of the French leaders in AFN. By 13 November, the Axis counted 3,000 troops and 100 planes on the ground in Tunisia. By surrendering El Aouina, and moving the French Air Force (FAF) out of range – another order that Juin had failed to contradict – the French gifted local air superiority to the Axis, which the Luftwaffe used not only to impede the Allied advance on Tunis, but also to seriously damage Allied shipping off Algiers and Bône.¹⁰⁴ The problem was that, of the French leaders in Algiers and Tunis, only Juin seemed prepared to join the Allies following the ceasefire of 10 November. And even he claimed to have been sidelined in the command musical chairs that played out between Vichy, Rabat, and Algiers. The other leaders began to rally to the Allies from 13 November, but this could not begin to take effect before the 14 November. In the meantime, a combination of contradictory orders from Algiers and Vichy saw Barré align with Juin, while Esteva and Derrien sided with Vichy. Meanwhile, Juin appeared more focused on defending Algeria from the Western Dorsal than on preempting the Axis incursion into Tunisia, as

Mendigal's air force hopped from airfield to airfield to avoid combat – as in 1940, the FAF's "long war" strategy appeared increasingly like a "no war" strategy. But, by then, combat avoidance had become a multi-service contagion. In this way, three lost days at Algiers and Tunis had to be redeemed at the cost of almost seven months of battle.¹⁰⁵ But Juin never paid the full price for his equivocal action in Tunisia: the Viard Commission was merely investigative, not a "judicial" panel. Prosecution was left up to the *Comité français de libération nationale* (CFLN), whose chief, de Gaulle, was prepared to "white-wash" the conduct of his Saint-Cyr classmate for failing to oppose the Axis incursions into Tunisia on 11 or 12 November when resistance might have succeeded, instead shifting the blame onto Noguès. Juin's help in rallying *l'armée d'Afrique* to de Gaulle, and the laurels of victory he was to earn in Italy, erased neither his Vichy taint, nor his equivocal conduct in November 1942. As a result, Juin's wartime legacy would be eclipsed by those of de Lattre and Leclerc, and even by that of Koenig. Consequently, Juin was passed over for the command of the First French Army for the liberation of France. Nor was Juin's presence requested at the surrender of Germany and Japan.¹⁰⁶

The French Army Rejoins the War against the Axis

If the conduct of the French military leadership confused and exasperated the Americans, their own soldiers also found it breathtakingly bewildering. Sergeant Albert Rupert's unit had been put on alert from 8 November when news of the American attack at Casablanca was announced. They joined Barré's "repositioning" toward Pont du Fahs, one shadowed by a German reconnaissance aircraft, as Axis reinforcements occupied Tunis, and sent reconnaissance detachments toward the Algerian border. The French troops continued to retreat westward, rejecting Axis offers of cooperation, French and Germans alternately talking and stalling. On 15 November, the Germans became more insistent, presenting an order from Admiral Platon demanding that the French stand aside and allow the Germans free passage. By 16 November, French and German soldiers still mingled, but eyed each other warily. On the 17 November, the French withdrawal came to a halt at Medjez-el-Bab, a strategic crossroads at the gateway to Algeria, 67 kilometers west of Tunis. The next day – 18 November – Rupert encountered his first Americans. The French soldiers were elated, while the reaction of the GIs, not knowing exactly whose side the French were on, was more reserved. The Americans gave them chewing gum, and boasted that they would soon be in Tunis.¹⁰⁷

With Allied forces closing in on Tunisia from the west, by 18 November, Nehring had concluded that he must counterattack. In the early hours of 19 November, Rahn's assistant and consul in the German embassy in Rome,

Eitel Möllhausen, handed Barré a letter from General Walter Nehring telling the CSTT to treat the Germans as allies and remove all obstacles to their advance toward Algeria, and inviting him to Tunis for an interview with the Resident General “to bring Barré back to discipline.” He reminded Barré that his decision would impact 40 million French citizens under Axis occupation, and over a million POWs in German custody. When Barré respectfully declined, insisting that he must first have an order from Juin, he was informed that hostilities would begin at 17:00.¹⁰⁸ Rupert’s description is far more prosaic. French forces, which consisted of some squadrons of *chasseurs d’afrique* and *spahis*, some Algerian and Senegalese *tirailleurs*, and a battery of 75 mm cannon, had been joined at Medjez-el-Bab by the US 175th Field Artillery Battalion, some anti-aircraft guns, and a section of British armored cars. The American anti-aircraft guns opened fire on two Messerschmitts.

This incident irritated the Germans, and an officer came over to the French barricade at 08:45 and told the French officer: “If at 09:00 the Medjez-el-Bab garrison doesn’t rally [to the Germans], it will be annihilated.” The quarter-hour passed and nothing happened. But at 10:45 violent explosions occurred to the north: the bombardment had begun, precisely at the Smidia farm, our HQ [headquarters] where the day before we had received the German plenipotentiaries. Then the planes descended on Medjez, bombing and strafing. The power station was hit first. In an instant, the western part of Medjez vanished in the dust and smoke of the explosions. Few losses among our personnel, who disappeared into their holes. But the planes hammered the roads choked with vehicles, setting numerous trucks on fire. The Colonel’s [Le Couteulx de Caumont] command car was traversed by a bomb that didn’t explode. As soon as the planes departed, the [German] artillery opened up on the squads along the Medjerda [River].

As assault by German paratroopers across the river was turned back by French machineguns camouflaged among the cacti. Surprised by the unexpected resistance, the Germans returned in force and seemed about to overwhelm the French position when a counterattack by a company of Senegalese restored the line. The fighting continued until 15:30 when, with the aid of US anti-tank guns, the French forced a German withdrawal behind a noisy air attack. The French report admitted that Medjez-el-Bab had been a “modest skirmish” with relatively few troops engaged and the bulk of the Allied forces still far away. Nevertheless, this remote scuffle proved of monumental significance, as it signaled the reentry of the French army into the war against the Axis. While the participants in this skirmish were convinced that they had “saved Algeria,” they were totally floored when, standing among their bullet-ridden vehicles turned into flambeaux by Stukas, with ten dead and fifteen wounded, Sergeant Rupert’s unit received orders – it was unclear from whom – that they were to turn against the Americans. So absurd and out of date were these directives that those who had fired the opening shots of the Tunisian campaign simply ignored them.¹⁰⁹

The Attack on the Bizerte Arsenal

One final indignity remained to be played out in Tunisia – the seizure of the Bizerte arsenal. This had been anticipated ever since the Toulon scuttle. At 18:00 on 7 December, Derrien and his senior staff were summoned to a meeting with Luftwaffe General Georg Neuffer and Hitler's personal emissary and long-time Rommel chief of staff General Alfred Gause. As Ju 88s circled above the camp making an ear-splitting racket, Derrien was informed that all French forces in Bizerte were to be disarmed and their equipment surrendered by agreement with Vichy. Resistance would meet the full force of German arms that promised to kill every last sailor and soldier, while sabotage would be dealt with by court martial. "Up to you to decide, Admiral," read the letter that Gause handed to Derrien. "Either you are free to return to France, or death."¹¹⁰ Having concluded that he lacked the means to resist, Derrien gave in, as German torpedo boats penetrated the Lac de Bizerte and aimed their guns at the French vessels. Because of Derrien's orders, preparations for sabotage were not executed. In this way, in the early afternoon of 8 December, 300 German soldiers appeared at the Bizerte arsenal with a tank and some smaller tracked vehicles.¹¹¹ General Walter Nehring, the commander of the German contingent in Tunisia in November–December 1942, was able effortlessly to sweep up 8,300 French sailors and 3,700 soldiers, as well as a number of boats and naval stores. Most of these men were subsequently repatriated to France, although some escaped to Algeria. Nor was any attempt made to spike the shore batteries or anti-aircraft guns.¹¹² Historians more favorable to Vichy echo Derrien's defense at his court martial, praising him for preserving an arsenal and shipyard put to good use six months later by the Allies.¹¹³ Not surprisingly, de Gaulle, who had softly closed the door and wept at news of Bir Hakeim, thought otherwise: "In this way, an important stronghold thus passed into the enemy's hands," the leader of Fighting France recorded. "This lamentable episode marked the end of a shameful succession of events."¹¹⁴

At his 1944 court martial that condemned him to life imprisonment, ironically in the wake of Toulon for "failure to scuttle," Derrien's defense was that he had obeyed Pétain's orders and sought to avoid the massacre of his sailors.¹¹⁵ But, in a 14 November letter to Barré, Derrien argued that he had served as Darlan's scapegoat. Vichy policy had permitted Axis access to Tunisia by obeying the German ultimatum of 8 November, followed by Darlan's cascade of contradictory orders: "8 Nov., we were fighting everyone. 9 Nov., we fight the Germans. 10 Nov., we fought no one. 10 Nov. [12 h], we fight the Germans. 11 Nov. [night], we don't fight anyone," he complained. On 20 November, Admiral Jean-Marie Abrial, who had succeeded the future naval historian and Vichy apologist Auphan at the navy secretariat, ordered him to diffuse Pétain's order to "refuse to obey Darlan [and] Giraud and to oppose Anglo-American

forces and don't attack Axis forces." Thus, "42 years of service and seven decorations" down the tubes, because Derrien could not make a moral decision.¹¹⁶ Yet, Naval records show that Derrien cooperated closely with German requests to convince Barré to cease his opposition, and that some of Derrien's subordinates felt that their Admiral had not given clear directives on how to behave should the Germans invade the Bizerte shipyard.¹¹⁷ The Germans also occupied the ports of Tunis, Sousse, Sfax, and Gabès, and took over the railways. By 11 December 1942, 50–60 German transport planes were arriving daily, each carrying around 20 soldiers and 4 drums containing 200 liters of petrol. Fifteen to eighteen ships carrying troops had also entered Bizerte harbor, whose entrance Derrien had failed to block, while special Siebel ferries brought in tanks.¹¹⁸

Esteva justified his loyalty to Vichy and his opposition to the Allies with the argument that his responsibility as High Commissioner was to maintain French "sovereignty" in Tunisia. Otherwise, the Italians would assert a claim over the protectorate. His pro-Vichy attitude was reinforced by the 15 November arrival in Tunis of Admiral Charles Platon, Secretary of State for the coordination of the armed forces, who worked closely with Nehring and Rahn to reinforce the loyalty to Vichy of French forces and to convince Barré to reverse his withdrawal toward Algeria and return to Tunis.¹¹⁹ Platon messaged Barré that the Marshal's orders were to "defend the Regency against the Anglo-Saxon invader." However, Barré declined Platon's invitation to meet him in Tunis. The Germans unblocked La Goulette, the entrance to Tunis harbor, and continued to pour reinforcements into Bizerte. From the 18 November, the port of Tunis opened to the invaders. Barré's retreat continued. The Germans penetrated his lines on several occasions, while the Luftwaffe bombed his trains. But still he refused to open fire before he had made contact with the advancing Allies. Meanwhile, Platon also reported that "the entire population: postal workers, the press, the civil service" in Tunis was in "betrayal" mode. "The Germans can't count on anyone," except apparently the French navy. As "local commander" of "le groupement interarmes de Bizerte," Derrien refused to oppose the arrival of Axis forces or allow the soldiers defending the Bizerte naval base to retreat as Barré had ordered. The Viard Commission saw Platon's arrival as the pivotal occurrence that tipped Esteva, and with him Derrien, into collaboration with the Axis. On 18 November, unaware that Barré was absconding from Tunisia, Pétain congratulated both Barré and Derrien for "the faithful interpretation of my orders."¹²⁰

Derrien had rejected the pleas of an emissary sent from Algiers during 14–20 November, who attempted to persuade him to submit to Darlan's orders. Indeed, Derrien's attitude had shifted from self-pity to active cooperation with the Axis invaders. Derrien harangued his command that their duty was to "resist Anglo-Saxon aggression," which, not surprisingly, won Kesselring's

approbation. He allowed the Germans to take over some shore batteries, and, with German encouragement, agreed to organize a meeting between Barré and Rahn, who was now political advisor to the German high command in Tunisia. Even in the wake of the scuttle of the High Seas Fleet in Toulon, Derrien pledged to German Admiral Eberhard Weichold that he would continue to defend Bizerte against the Anglo-Americans and Gaullists, and would make no hostile move against the Axis, in keeping with Vichy policy.¹²¹ After the French Navy had refused to prosecute Derrien, a May 1944 army court martial found the Vice-Admiral's defense – that he was merely applying Juin's May 1942 IPS and playing for time until the Anglo-Americans could reach Bizerte – unconvincing. He was sentenced to life behind bars for "failure to scuttle," a rather confounding verdict as the commanders of the High Seas Fleet had been condemned precisely because they did scuttle. Clearly, *la Royale* needed to clarify its scuttling protocols.¹²²

"The Front Line of Europe"

If the failure to win the race to Tunis had a silver lining for the Allies, it was because the rush by the Axis leaders to invade Tunisia in the wake of Torch was poorly considered, but perfectly in character. Mussolini insisted in the wake of Torch and El Alamein that the crumbling Axis position on the Mediterranean's southern shore had transformed Tunisia into "the front line of Europe."¹²³ "While the Italians held Bizerta, enemy landings in Provence, on Sicily and Sardinia, in Greece and in the Aegean were 'improbable,'" according to the strategic calculation in Rome. "If it was lost the enemy might drive on Crete, the Dodecanese islands and the Balkan mainland and threaten the supplies of Romanian petrol – which were essential if the armed forces were going to be able to fight at all. The lines of communication with Tunisia were the easiest to defend because they were the shortest . . . One thing was certain: once Tunisia was lost, Italy would be exposed to the full weight of Allied air power."¹²⁴ In Hitler's mind, so long as the battle was confined to North Africa, the Mediterranean remained a peripheral theater and German involvement was the price paid to seal the so-called "Pact of Steel." After two years of maintaining the British on the defensive there, the Mediterranean's African shore had been squeezed of strategic opportunity for Berlin. The Axis leaders would have been better advised to extract Rommel's force, saving their troops, air power, and maritime assets to construct a southern European glacis. On the other hand, both dictators understood that, with North Africa entirely in Allied hands, Italy would shift into Allied gun sights. Therefore, Hitler instructed the Fifth Panzer Army's commander – the tall, severe fifty-three-year-old Prussian Guards officer Colonel General Jürgen von Arnim – to buy yet more time in North Africa in a spirit of forward defense. Publicly, however, Hitler declared that the

battle for Tunisia would be “decisive,” constituting “the cornerstone of our conduct of the war on the southern flank of Europe.”¹²⁵

The Axis decision to duke it out with the Allies on the Mediterranean’s south shore made little strategic sense, but it was perfectly consistent with the “systematic incompetence,” “structural disorder,” and “strategic incoherence” of Axis decision-making, and joined a practically endless list of calamitous choices made since 1939 that had accumulated baleful consequences for Germany.¹²⁶ The British historian Simon Ball argues that the Axis leaders continued to “fantasize” that they could inflict a “stunning operational defeat” on the Allies, in either Tunisia or Sicily, in a failing – and flailing – Axis bid to maintain their grip on the central Mediterranean. “In order to survive, however,” writes Ball, “the Axis had to defeat Britain and give the Americans such a bloody nose that they would withdraw their forces to the West.”¹²⁷ With German defeat at Stalingrad looming, Mussolini declared the Russian war a lost cause. He proposed that Hitler seek a compromise peace with Moscow, which Foreign Minister Ribbentrop explained to the Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano was a non-starter – a partial lie as it transpired, as the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) would negotiate with Admiral Canaris’ agents in Stockholm in April–June 1943, as Berlin put out peace feelers to the Western Allies through Madrid, Bern, and Ankara.¹²⁸ At the very least, the Germans might shift to a defensive strategy, to free up assets in order to “Mediterraneanize” the war. Such was *Il Duce*’s mounting desperation that he even proposed that German forces attack the Allies through Spain.¹²⁹ Admiral Émile Duplat, Vichy delegate to the Italian Control Commission in Turin, was told by Italian General Vacca Maggiolini that, while Rome was prepared to write off Algeria, “it’s not finished in Tunisia,” which could become a base for an Axis reconquest of Libya and Egypt.¹³⁰ In the German Mediterranean commander Albert Kesselring’s post-war analysis, the failure to concentrate resources in the Mediterranean constituted the “fundamental mistake” made by the Axis. “As it was, the Axis was dismantled in the summer of 1943 in the Mediterranean,” Ball continues, and “Mussolini’s ouster and Italy’s defection deprived German[y] of any half-credible ally, reducing it to, in Churchill’s phrase, ‘utter loneliness.’ Even worse – and at the same time – Germany itself was reduced to the operational status of a second-class power – unable to fight a sophisticated war in three dimensions – also in the Mediterranean.”¹³¹

The decision to make a stand in Tunisia revealed that Axis strategy had slipped into the realm of fantasy. In vain, General Giovanni Messe urged Mussolini to repatriate the Italian army from North Africa before it was too late. General Rino Corso Fougier, chief of the Regia Aeronautica Italiana (Italian Royal Air Force), warned that, even with Luftwaffe reinforcements, Axis forces would be heavily outnumbered in the air over the Strait of Sicily.

The Regia Marina (Italian Royal Navy) pointed out that it had to defend a coastline stretching from Toulon to Rhodes, and lacked the destroyers to escort merchantmen to Bizerte. Germany would need to equip the Regia Marina's ships with radar and sonar, not to mention providing air cover and supplying Romanian fuel. If Mussolini wanted to expend his naval assets to provision Tunisia, he risked having none left to supply and reinforce Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica, let alone Greece and the Balkans.¹³² Instead of heeding their advice, *Il Duce* ordered a cabinet reshuffle, replaced General Ugo Cavallero as Army chief of staff by General Vittorio Ambrosio, much to Kesselring's alarm, and named a Fascist hoodlum, Carlo Scorza, as the new party secretary with the mission of bolstering Italian popular morale. Plots to oust Mussolini were set in motion, but everyone awaited a signal from King Victor Emmanuel III to move.¹³³ Even as the situation turned desperate from March 1943, Hitler and Mussolini continued to feed their rapidly diminishing inventory of men, machines, ships, and planes into the maw of their Tunisian mincer.

Nevertheless, the Axis counted several advantages in what remained of their North African toehold, beginning with the fact that they had seized the central position in Tunisia that the Allies had to attack and supply from opposite directions. Axis forces would be operating close to their base, Bizerte and Tunis being only 120 nautical miles from Sicily, and 300 from Naples, along a mine-hedged route to deter British surface and submarine attacks, and ringed by Axis airfields in Sardinia, Sicily, Pantelleria, and at Tunis and Bizerte. The Ju 52 transport planes and mammoth six-engine Me323s, vital as petrol transports, offered a formidable initial logistical asset. By 10 November 1942, Fliegerkorps II counted a whopping 673 transport planes and 445 combat aircraft, including the formidable Focke-Wulf Fw 190 and the Messerschmitt Bf 109 that, especially in its later evolutions, far outperformed the British Spitfire. German pilots were also proficient in ground support operations.

But these initial Luftwaffe strengths were adulterated by the requirement to provide wrap-around service to Axis ground and naval forces: tactical ground support, air supply, long-range bombing, and maritime convoy cover and interdiction. Support for Tunisia also shrank air support for other fronts. By 30 November, Luftflotte 2 in the Mediterranean counted almost 500 more planes than did Luftflotte 4 at Stalingrad. Two *Kampfgeschwader* (attack wings) were diverted from Murmansk convoys to attack Allied ships off Algeria.¹³⁴ But it proved to be a losing effort. In the early months of 1943, Allied air and sea interdiction, combined with chaos in heavily bombed Italian ports, had reduced the spigot of Axis supplies from Naples to Bizerte to a dribble.¹³⁵ Nor could air transport make up for the shipping deficit. German fighters battled unsuccessfully to protect straggling Luftwaffe transport armadas from predatory Allied airmen.¹³⁶ By February 1943, German General

Walter Warlimont had concluded that Axis logistics in Tunisia constituted a “house of cards.”¹³⁷

Initially, these limitations were camouflaged by a stellar Axis command team made up of Albert Kesselring, Erwin Rommel, “Dieter” von Arnim, and eventually Giovanni Messe, who had led the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia between August 1941 and November 1942. But friction persisted between the Germans and Italians, who resented Rommel’s “arrogance,” and rightly saw his practice of interspersing – or “corseting” – Italian and German units as a signal of no confidence in Italian morale and fighting ability. A “prima donna” in his own right, “the calculating strategist” Messe often attempted to compete with “gambler” Rommel rather than second him in Tunisia.¹³⁸

By the middle of February 1943, von Arnim’s force numbered 110,000 troops, including 20,000 Luftwaffe personnel and 33,000 Italians, organized into the 10th Panzer Division, the Italian 1st “Superga” Division, the 334th Infantry Division (ID), the Hermann Göring Division, and an array of smaller units. Its inventory included 200 tanks, mostly Panzerkampfwagen (Pz.Kpfw.) III with either a 50 mm or a 75 mm gun and Pz.Kpfw. IV with a 75 mm gun, but among them were 11 60-ton Pz.Kpfw. VI (Tiger) tanks armed with the 88 mm gun. While Hitler assured Kesselring that the Tiger would prove decisive in Tunisia, the “furniture van,” as its German crews dubbed it, was unwieldy, mechanically unreliable, a gas guzzler extraordinaire, too heavy for Tunisian roads and bridges, and too thin-skinned to deflect armor-piercing shells from the new Allied 6-pounder (57 mm) anti-tank gun with an effective range of 1,510 meters. While Alan Moorehead found the Tiger “frightening in its sheer enormity,” nevertheless, “the ugliest vehicle I had ever seen on land” proved to be “a failure in Tunisia,” the Australian war correspondent reported. “We even stopped them with two-pounder (40 mm) guns. They were too cumbersome, too slow, too big a target, too lightly armed to meet modern anti-tank weapons.” Rommel’s arrival in Tunisia at the end of January would virtually double the number of Axis tanks. More feared was the *Nebelwerfer* – literally “smoke thrower” – a wheeled launcher that fired a volley of 5.9-inch rockets that was to panic American troops at Kasserine.¹³⁹

In contrast, those Allied commanders and troops filtering through Algeria, especially the Americans, lacked practice. Though nominally in overall command, Dwight Eisenhower remained in his distant, crowded Algiers eerie, where, according to Moorehead, “admirals were working in sculleries, and as like as not you would find a general or two weaving their plans in back bathrooms and pantries.”¹⁴⁰ The fallout from *l’affaire Darlan* and its aftermath, the Anfa Conference, the requirement to stand up a Fifth Army under Mark Clark – a schemer in his own right – for the invasion of Italy, and, if the British are to be believed, his being too hamstrung by “amateur staff work” in his

“cluttered headquarters” meant that Ike was too distracted to invigilate his subordinates at the front intently enough.¹⁴¹ Eisenhower’s elevation “into the stratosphere . . . of Supreme Command” left operations to a British troika of General Harold Alexander, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, and Air Marshal Arthur Tedder. The US Chief of Staff (COS) George Marshall promoted Eisenhower to full general so that he would at least be the nominal equal in rank of his “subordinates.” In Tunisia, however, US influence would be mitigated by the conviction among the British that Eisenhower had botched Torch, and by the flailing combat debut of US forces.¹⁴²

The burden of battle on the Allied side would be shouldered by a neophyte First British Army commanded by the relatively inexperienced Lieutenant General Kenneth Anderson. A melancholy and deeply religious Scot, the tall, purse-lipped Anderson seemed the reincarnation of his Great War precursor Sir Douglas Haig. Obstinate, sanctimonious, and inflexible, Anderson lacked drive, imagination, and experience in handling armored divisions or grasping the possibilities offered by paratroops, for instance to seize Tunisian airfields ahead of the arriving Germans. Montgomery belittled his First Army counterpart as “a good plain cook” incapable of inventive or complex maneuvers. George Patton, who briefly served as II Corps commander in Tunisia, judged Anderson to be “earnest but dumb,” a severe but mainstream opinion.¹⁴³

German optimism about their chances in Tunisia was anchored in Allied inexperience and the superior fighting qualities of Axis forces, but above all in the significant logistical challenges that the Allies would face in Tunisia, transporting supplies landed in Casablanca, Oran, or Algiers east along a narrow-gauge railway and inadequate road system. The situation in the east was little better. Montgomery seized Tripoli on 20 January 1943. But Tripoli harbor had been so pounded by Allied bombing and Axis demolitions that it would require almost six weeks to whip it into working order. But, even then, supplies continued to be ferried around the Cape, past the Horn of Africa through the Suez Canal, before traveling the 900 miles from Alexandria to the front. Nevertheless, there was a gradual buildup of Sherman tanks, 17-pounder (76.2 mm) anti-tank guns, and 7.2-inch howitzers, not to mention the progressive attainment of air ascendancy after overcoming the handicaps of flying out of hastily constructed airfields at Tébessa and Thélepte on the Algerian–Tunisian border and near Constantine in Algeria, or from Bône, 120 miles from the front. Only in March 1943 did the Allies amass enough air power, achieve coordination of the actions of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the US Army Air Force (USAAF), and refine their tactics sufficiently both to attack Axis shipping and to support the ground campaign. Until then, Allied troops shivered in the shallow, mud-filled trenches of the Western Dorsal, the object of close attention by predatory and opportunistic Stukas, while protesting the truancy of their own pilots.¹⁴⁴

“Worse Than in 1940”

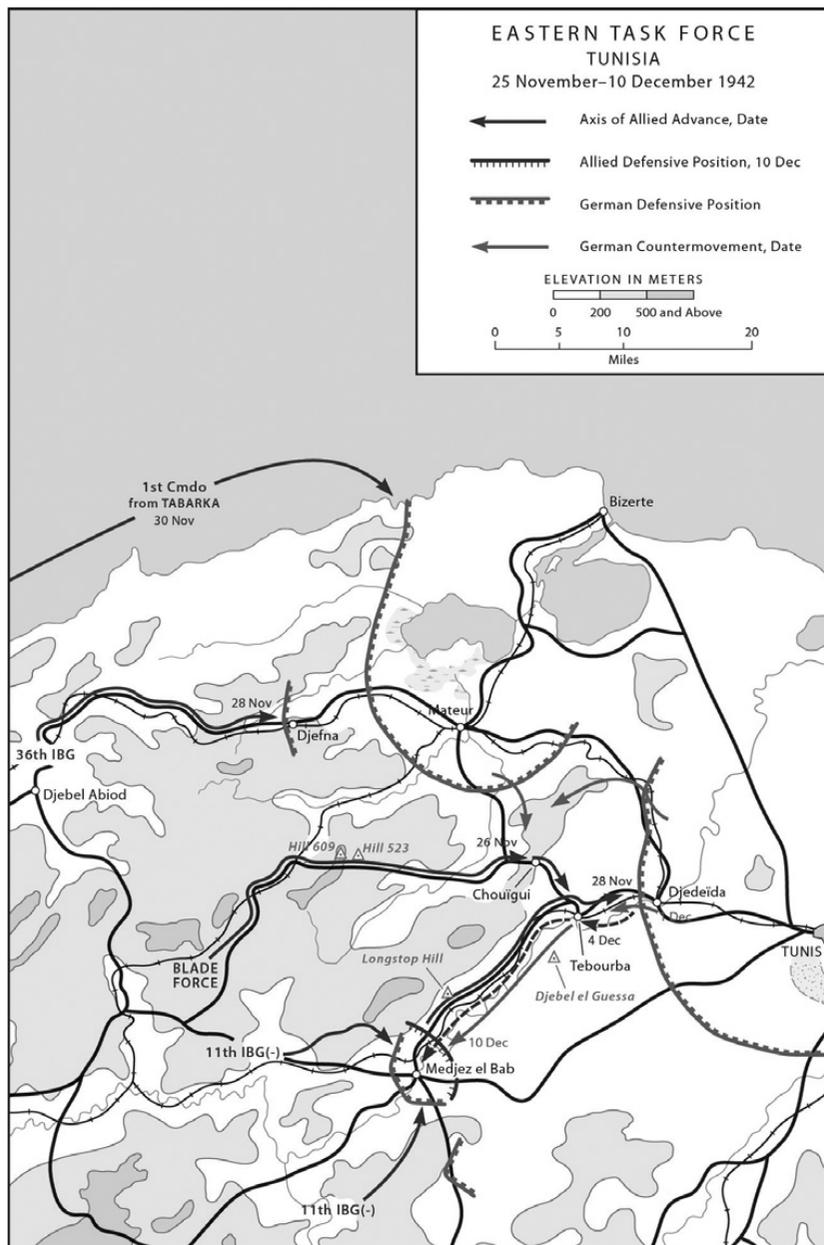
The Tunisia campaign would play out in three distinct phases.¹⁴⁵ The first, which began on 9 November and extended until the year’s end, saw the arrival in Tunisia of three German divisions, two of them panzer, and two Italian to form the Fifth Panzer Army under Nehring, and subsequently von Arnim. Von Arnim’s command initially numbered 67,000 men, of whom 47,000 were Germans. These managed to seize Tunis and Bizerte, and parry a bounce of the British 78th Infantry and 6th Armoured Divisions toward Tunis between 26 November and 2 December. In January, von Arnim received another 41,000 reinforcements, of whom 30,000 were Germans. His command also included the 10th Panzer Division, with its inventory of Tiger tanks. The US Army official history argues that Eisenhower had no confidence in French forces, but only included them initially as a “political gesture.”¹⁴⁶ In fact, he had no choice, because few other forces were available in November 1942. French forces in this period – Barré’s CSTT reinforced by Mathenet’s *Division de marche marocaine*, and further south Koeltz’s XIX Corps – were content to form a “covering force” that sought to occupy the passes of the Eastern Dorsal from Medjez-el-Bab to the Sahara. Two divisions of the US II Corps, slowed by a lack of roads and bad weather that limited air cover, gradually occupied positions at Gafsa and Kasserine, where they joined Welvert’s *Division de marche de Constantine*. With 420 aircraft stationed at El Aouina, an all-weather airfield surrendered by the French without a fight in November only 20 miles from the front, the Luftwaffe also controlled the skies in this early period. Stukas could respond to calls for help from Axis ground forces within 5 to 10 minutes. AFN’s underdevelopment meant that the French had built only four all-weather airfields outside of Tunis, the closest being at Bône, 120 miles from the front. Furthermore, a combination of logistical problems, lack of ground support personnel, and the fact that the Western Desert Air Force was still supporting Montgomery and carrying out bombing missions in Sicily and Italy, meant that the RAF’s successful “Libyan model” of tactical air support would not make its way west with the British Eighth Army until the New Year. These factors tipped the initial air advantage to the Luftwaffe.¹⁴⁷

A second phase kicked off in the New Year with offensives by von Arnim calculated to expand the Axis bridgehead and reoccupy the passes of the Eastern Dorsal. Rommel arrived in Tunisia in late January, and wasted little time in punching through Franco-American positions at Kasserine during 14–23 February, a thrust that threatened to collapse the entire Allied defensive front. This was followed by von Arnim’s offensive in northern Tunisia that continued from 26 February to 15 March. In fact, so effortless did Axis victories seem that von Arnim appeared to believe that, with the aid of a Muslim insurrection and the Axis seizure of Malta, Algiers lay within his

grasp.¹⁴⁸ A lack of modern armaments and equipment, the inadequacies of French training and backwardness of their tactical methods, and weaknesses accentuated by Juin's decision to spread French troops in a shallow front along the Dorsals to shield Algeria caused the French to declare their situation in Tunisia to be "worse than in 1940." Nevertheless, the arrival of Allied reinforcements, combined with the squeeze on Axis logistics, gradually began to tip the military balance in Tunisia. A third and final phase began in the middle of March with Montgomery's arrival on the Mareth Line. Rommel was recalled to Europe, leaving Messe from 12 April to organize a fighting retreat to northern Tunisia. From 20 April, Allied armies jammed Axis forces on land, while naval and air elements squeezed their vulnerable supply lines to Italy, until they surrendered on 13 May 1943.¹⁴⁹

Phase I: "General Ike Fights Two Wars"

Phase one¹⁵⁰ opened as Anderson progressively – and laboriously – occupied Bougie, Djidjelli, Philippeville, and Bône from 10–13 November, after Admiral Moreau in Algiers ordered commanders of the three harbors to prepare to receive Allied ships, despite orders from Vichy.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, delays meant that only on 25 November did Anderson launch two and a half divisions in an unsuccessful stab at Tunis and Bizerte (Map 1.2), in the process demonstrating that the British First Army lacked method and inter-arm liaison.¹⁵² "If . . . Anderson had been willing to gamble a bit more on his logistics and had accepted an entire American armored division, as Ike had wanted him to do, then we would have had the necessary wallop to take Tunis and eventually Bizerte," recorded Eisenhower's US Navy aide Harry C. Butcher. "That means Tunisia."¹⁵³ Anderson's lumbering November 1942 advance into Tunisia also frustrated Juin and Giraud, who felt that they knew the ground and had the imagination and energy to exploit Allied advantages, but lacked the authority, troops, and weapons to do so. After Eisenhower rejected Giraud's 17 December demand that he be given command of the entire Tunisian theater,¹⁵⁴ Juin tried to calm his French superior. "The senior British military commanders are who they are," Juin counseled Giraud on 1 January 1943. "What we take to be incomprehension or resistance is often the result of a lack of or sluggish imagination." The place to begin in Juin's view was to clarify command arrangements.¹⁵⁵ Allied soldiers were scattered along a 250-mile front that intermingled the British First Army, the US II Corps under the fifty-nine-year-old Major General Lloyd Fredendall, and roughly 63,000 French troops, both *armée d'Afrique* and the "dustbin" *Corps franc d'Afrique* (CFA) – a castoff of Jews, Italians, Spanish Republicans, and other political refugees, even Muslims, who joined other unredeemable elements blacklisted from conventional French units. These scattered French forces gradually collected in



Map 1.2 The race for Tunis.

western Tunisia from early December, occupying Gafsa, Sbeïtla (nowadays called Subaytilah), and Kasserine to block Axis penetration into Algeria.¹⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Giraud, eager to undertake offensive operations despite torrential rain, sought to create a staff under General René Prioux, who had commanded the French cavalry corps in Belgium in 1940, before taking charge of the First French Army on the death of Billotte, and piloting it into captivity.¹⁵⁷ One of Königstein's former pupils, like Juin, Prioux had been released by the Germans to repopulate the cannibalized upper ranks of *l'armée d'Afrique*. Prioux quickly organized the classic staff with bureaus 1–4 that by 14 November was sending out orders to mobilize AFN in *divisions de marche*. These were temporary, infantry-heavy agglomerations of roughly 10,000 men each that included a cavalry regiment with some diminutive D1 tanks – which US planes continued to attack in error¹⁵⁸ – and eventually a sprinkle of superseded Valentines released to the French as the British acquired US-made Shermans. The artillery consisted of an artillery group with mainly horse-drawn 75 mm guns and 65 mm mountain guns, which were totally useless against Tiger tanks and much else in the Axis armory, and an engineering company that had neither mines, nor mine detectors, nor anti-tank guns. The French navy contributed some trucks and 37 mm guns, and 47 mm anti-tank guns plucked from arms caches, to which Eisenhower donated “32 anti-aircraft automatic guns of any type available.” While the divisional transport included some aged lorries, most transport was assured by thirty-six mules allocated per company and whatever the soldiers could carry on their backs. Anti-aircraft artillery remained on the French army's wish-list unless French units were covered by British or US anti-aircraft units. Communications consisted of ER 17 radios, which had already been out of date in 1940. Motorcycle couriers proved useless on the goat tracks of the Dorsal. It is hardly surprising that Eisenhower doubted the offensive spirit of a French army whose senior ranks were populated with yesterday's Vichy loyalists, and whose armament in November 1942 would have embarrassed the *poilus* of 1914. Only gradually did three-battalion regiments become the norm, even though most infantry companies operated in isolation in the mountainous terrain. Initially, three of these *divisions de marche* were assigned to XIX Corps (Koeltz) and two to the CSTT (Barré), all grouped in theory as the *Détachement d'armée française* (DAF) commanded by Juin.¹⁵⁹

The FAF Commander Mendigal collected some odds and ends from French West Africa (AOF) that, together with an infusion of American-supplied Curtis P40 Warhawks, gave him an air force of around 300 planes. On 17 November, Giraud and Juin joined Barré at Souk-el-Khemis, about 30 miles west of Medjez-el-Bab. From 18 November, American convoys began to arrive in Casablanca every twenty-five days with reinforcements. By January 1943, Oran was in full working order and jammed with shipping, but still 1,000

kilometers from the front line in Tunisia.¹⁶⁰ All of this answered to a distant Allied Forces Headquarters (AFHQ) in Algiers that was established on 12 November, where, as Harry Butcher noted, Eisenhower “is being careful not to interfere with Anderson, Juin, or Fredendall in any of the decisions that must be made in the field.”¹⁶¹ Eisenhower’s detached command style simply added to the confusion and improvisation that ceded the initiative in the Tunisian campaign to the Axis.¹⁶²

But if Darlan had concluded in the face of the Allied invasion that Algiers was well worth a mass, in the shadow of his coerced conversion to the Allied cause, the Admiral struggled to perpetuate Vichy in Algeria and Morocco *sans le Maréchal*. The fluid situation in Algiers further churned and confused the attitudes of *l’armée d’Afrique*. On 15 November, Darlan had issued a call in the name of the Marshal for unity and discipline among adherents of the Légion française des combattants (LFC) and the military. Darlan’s message was that Vichy survived in AFN in a sort of Babylonian captivity, what Robert Paxton called an “inverse Vichy,” where the Admiral claimed to have inherited the mantle of leadership of the “French State” with Pétain’s clandestine benediction.¹⁶³ In fact, Vichy’s erstwhile proconsuls in AFN had simply pivoted from German to American patronage.¹⁶⁴ This contradiction turned acute when, at a 16 November press conference, Roosevelt tried to defuse dissatisfaction over the Darlan deal by announcing that he had asked the Leader of France in the Maghreb to empty his internment camps of anti-fascists and political refugees and to abrogate antisemitic legislation as required under Article XI of the Darlan–Clark accords. Pressed by Eisenhower, Darlan hedged, lifting some restrictions that prohibited Jews from practicing their professions on a case-by-case basis. Meanwhile, a top priority for General Prioux, Giraud’s chief of staff, was to exclude Jews from combat units because he feared that their proximity to Muslims would create a “disaster.”¹⁶⁵

If *la comédie politique d’Alger* delayed the Allies’ arrival in Tunisia, it also disoriented and disorganized a French army that had to pivot from an Allied to an Axis enemy, rebuild its morale, mobilize seven reserve “classes,” and reorient its forces, scattered along the Mediterranean littoral, toward the east. Furthermore, the arrival of Anglo-American forces had overwhelmed AFN’s fragile infrastructure, and delayed the mobilization of reservists in AFN. Not enough vehicles existed in eastern Algeria to get the Constantine Division quickly to the front. Intermittent telephone service prevented XIX Corps HQ in Algiers from coordinating the mobilization of Algeria’s three territorial divisions effectively. “To this, perhaps one could equally add the lack of enthusiasm shown by certain Europeans and Indigenous (Muslims) to the call to mobilize,” read the 30 November report, that called for “energetic measures” to enforce mobilization and requisition orders among Europeans worried about the impact of casualties on their communities. Nationalists protested in the

suburbs of Algiers, but officials reported that Muslims in the interior submitted to the call-up. However, Le Gac has discovered that recidivism remained significant, especially in the Constantinois.¹⁶⁶

The one group that apparently was eager to mobilize was the Jewish population. When the classes of 1936–1939 were called up on 24 November, according to Richard Bennaïm, the Jews of Oran, “avid to return to combat against the Germans,” responded enthusiastically. However, an all-day train ride crammed into cattle wagons to the Camp de Bedeau south of Sidi-bel-Abbès, where they were greeted by German Foreign Legionnaires, quickly deflated their zeal. Jews were separated out from other “recruits,” and assembled in ranks, where a captain announced that they were to form a “Jewish Pioneer Corps,” an *armée d’Afrique* version of solitary confinement, for “intellectuals, shopkeepers, bureaucrats who had never wielded a pickaxe in their life.”¹⁶⁷ Bennaïm instantly recognized a *Stalag* when he saw one: 10,000 men distributed among 10-man tents called *guitournes* slept on the ground, and queued twice daily to be fed a thin soup. Although he wore his army uniform with his sergeant’s stripes, he was told, “‘here, you are all privates.’ Having learned to translate military language, this meant: ‘no Jewish non-commissioned officers here’ . . . In fact, Bedeau was nothing more than a penal colony for Jews.” The good news was that, unlike German *Stalags* and *Kommandos*, a stroll out of Bedeau and hitchhike to Oran proved fairly risk-free.¹⁶⁸ The Anfa Conference in January 1943 gave journalists the opportunity to visit several camps in Morocco where Spanish Republicans, Jews, Poles, Gaullists, and other political and “racial” prisoners were incarcerated. In the glare of Anglo-American publicity, these inmates were gradually released, beginning in February 1943, some directed toward the CFA, others absorbed in a foreign pioneer regiment created by the British. On 4 February, Juin declared that henceforth “the units of Jewish pioneers must be considered part of the regular army,” and their members were therefore ineligible to enlist in the CFA.¹⁶⁹

On the other hand, the “Vichyite” members of Murphy’s “Group of Five” reaped their reward by being named to various positions in Darlan’s High Commission.¹⁷⁰ On 16 November 1942, Juin brought the *Chantiers de la jeunesse* under military supervision after Van Hecke announced that he intended to “create a free corps [*corps franc*] capable of carrying out a sort of revolutionary war.”¹⁷¹ Juin’s suspicion of the *Chantiers* appeared justified when one of its number being trained by the British at an improvised center on Cap Matifou outside of Algiers, Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle, assassinated Darlan.¹⁷² Convinced that Darlan’s Christmas Eve 1942 murder was the prelude to a Gaullist coup, Giraud arrested medical student José Aboulker and thirteen members of the Algiers resistance of 8 November who had helped to bring him to power. After his release, Aboulker eventually made his way to

London to join the Gaullists, who parachuted him into France on various resistance missions.

But it was clear that, in the wake of the double defeats of 1940 and Torch, the French army was exhibiting symptoms of psychological strain. If the “dissidence” that had facilitated Torch fostered an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust in the officer corps, Darlan’s assassination traumatized senior officers, who feared that French political divisions had turned homicidal. Giraud ordered the military magistrate Major Albert Voituriez to get to the bottom of the Darlan’s death. When, however, evidence pointed to Henri d’Astier and his close associate, the economist and law professor Alfred Pose, as the *éminences grises* behind Bonnier de la Chapelle, Giraud promptly adjourned the inquiry. The prosecution dossier subsequently vanished, and charges against the two men were dropped. Meanwhile, those soldiers who had aided the invasion – such as Mast, Béthouart, Baril, and Jousse – were stripped of French nationality on 4 December, while officers who had fought the Anglo-Americans were decorated.¹⁷³ None of this reflected well on Roosevelt, with his Atlantic Charter pretensions, or on Washington’s “French expert” Robert Murphy, whose “pre-landing friends . . . have been let down, in one way or another,” wrote Macmillan.¹⁷⁴ “Murphy seems to be the main target of criticism, on the ground that he is a Vichyite and has been giving bum advice to the ‘brilliant’ General,” Butcher concurred on 23 January 1943.¹⁷⁵

Its powers ill-defined, Darlan’s Vichy-lite administration proved no more successful than had been the Admiral’s ideological *volte-face*. It amounted to a discredited management whose lack of accountability, aggravated by political events that had left a legacy of acrimony and tangled emotions, rendered it poorly equipped to manage AFN’s and the French empire’s institutionalized disorder. Rallied but recalcitrant, residents and governors general remained laws unto themselves. Although, for the moment, de Gaulle was represented in Algiers only by Air Force General François d’Astier de la Vigerie, he occupied the moral high ground and knew how to make time work for him against this Washington-enabled Vichy rump. As André Beaufre had predicted, *l’armée d’Afrique*, with its racial prejudices, conservative attitudes, and profound antisemitism provided a contentious instrument to mobilize Imperial France, let alone liberate the metropole.¹⁷⁶ As military commander, Giraud initially refused on principle to allow French troops to be placed under Anderson’s command. “This attitude reflected a widespread Anglophobia in the French army in AFN, since Mers-el-Kébir and Syria,” concludes the French official history. AFN may have been liberated, but its leaders remained shackled to out-of-date antipathies, resentments, and prejudices. The result was that, while Anderson had direct command over British and US Forces, the Anfa Conference decided that French troops were to be “coordinated with the agreement of General Juin . . . who will give all material assistance that will

be necessary and possible.” The result was that, in Tunisia, “French forces were deployed on the ground in a very diluted manner and with few means.”¹⁷⁷ The immediate consequence was that Darlan reigned over – but failed to command – an aggregation of semi-independent administrative and military satrapies.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Mark Clark complained that, while GIs were up to their knees in mud on the “front line of Europe,” the French continued to wrangle among themselves.¹⁷⁹ This proved to be a lament that would echo – not always fairly – for the remainder of the war and beyond.

The Fight for the Dorsal

The transition to combat for Lapouge’s *tirailleurs* proved as difficult as it was for Albert Rupert. After receiving contradictory orders and being whiplashed and disoriented by all sorts of rumors, on 14 November 1942, the 7^c RTA entrained for Tébessa near the border with Tunisia as part of the *Division de Marche de Constantine* under Major General Édouard Welvert. At Tébessa, which Moorehead described as a “dismal town . . . where somehow the Roman ruins have been made to look more depressing and uninteresting than any I have ever seen,”¹⁸⁰ they were ordered to make a hellish 33-kilometer hike through the mountains to Morsott that saw many of Lapouge’s *tirailleurs* collapse with exhaustion under the weight of their backpacks and other equipment. On 24 November, his unit was collected in trucks and driven 180 kilometers to Sbeïtla in central Tunisia about 15 kilometers east of Kasserine, which had been occupied by the Americans. “We contemplated the battlefield,” Lapouge recounted. “Burned tanks, personal effects and Italian matériel, bandages, letters (*fratello carissimo* . . .).” His company was ordered to hold this road junction that linked Sfax with Kairouan, with three 25 mm anti-tank guns and four 75 mm field guns. They recovered all the Italian equipment that was still serviceable, especially trucks, and put out barbed wire and anti-tank mines. Lapouge’s batman dug a hole for him to sleep in, which only meant that he woke up with sand in his hair, ears, and mouth. His captain, still cross with him for arriving late to the barracks on 8 November, continued to address him in an abrupt, peremptory tone. It was too cold to sleep. He suspected that one of the sergeants was procuring wine from the locals for his *tirailleurs*. His men came to him to complain about this and that, ask for a transfer because they did not like the sergeant, and so on, which he dismissed as typical Arab exaggeration. He made his men clean their rifles and practice setting up their anti-aircraft defenses. But, otherwise, he had no way to keep them occupied without appearing fastidious and inflexible.¹⁸¹

In November–December 1942, the cautious Eisenhower preferred to build up his forces rather than rush events in Tunisia in a sprint that the Allies had already lost. On 25 November, Juin took command of the DAF made up of

Barré's CSTT, Koeltz's XIX Corps minus the Moroccan troops, and a Saharan group, all armed with whatever antique weaponry they had managed to conceal from the Axis Control Commissions. The French role would ostensibly be to hold terrain conquered by the British. But Juin planned a preemptive seizure of "strategic ground" in the Western Dorsal. The result was that the DAF became overextended in shallow, detached points that were vulnerable to German attack. When, on the night of 29–30 November, a US armored unit drove through Lapouge's position in Sbeitla on the way to attack Sidi Bouzid, the French were left slack-jawed with envy: "Superb matériel. Open armored cars overflowing with arms: 37 mm anti-tank guns, 20 mm machineguns . . ." he noted, wondering whether the French would ever be so lavishly equipped. Two days later, in the early hours of the morning, another 100 or so US vehicles drove through on their way to attack the Faïd Pass. In fact, since the GIs set foot in AFN trussed up like "aristocrats dressed for a hunting party," the French never imagined that common soldiers could be so extravagantly outfitted.¹⁸² For the Americans, the French with their horse-drawn artillery and mounted *Chasseurs d'Afrique* complete with rattling sabers seemed like artifacts excavated from a Franco-Prussian War battlefield.

Algiers symbolized both the contingency of AFN's break with Vichy and its transitional nature. Eisenhower's naval aide Harry Butcher recorded, on 20 December 1942, that his boss was "seeking better understanding [of the French], and the removal of 'bad eggs,'" with Noguès and Algerian Governor General Yves Châtel topping the list. But, to the Anglo-Americans, AFN seemed to offer a vast basket of "bad eggs," including "the smart pro-German staff of Noguès" and "the police chief" of Algiers, the disgruntled lapsed Gaullist Admiral Muselier, now bent on revenge.¹⁸³ In January 1943, Moorehead found Algiers to be an "unwholesome . . . French political stew." Although Algeria and Morocco had supposedly rallied to the Allied cause, Pétain's "unhappy features . . . gazed down . . . from the hoardings and the placards in every street and in every public place . . . There was a constant procession of people back and forth to Vichy by way of Spain where M. [François] Piétrie, the Vichy ambassador in Madrid, acted as a sort of official postbox." In Rabat, Noguès openly derided the Americans as "political children." Moorehead attributed the minimalist opposition to AFN's regime change to the "vast numbers of Allied troops who kept pouring off the transports with their modern arms . . . The people, moreover, were tired with the tiredness of two years of defeat."¹⁸⁴ Opportunism also played a role. "The Darlan–Giraud neo-Vichy regime in North Africa offered a way back to power for some Vichy outsiders," writes Paxton.¹⁸⁵ The "Anglo-Saxon" press denounced this Murphy-managed Vichy resuscitation on North Africa's shores as the Darlan deal redux.¹⁸⁶

At the front, the Allied advance into Tunisia proved to be precipitous, piecemeal, and poorly coordinated. On 4 December, Lapouge's camp became acquainted with Stukas: "coming in low, with a thunderous noise. It's hard not to be frightened. I'm flat on my stomach on the ridge, balled up with my head behind a rock." Bullets ricocheted everywhere. When the air attack, which seemed to go on forever, finally ceased, Lapouge discovered that most of his *tirailleurs* had scattered, which meant that he spent the next few hours scouring the scrub-covered hills with a drawn pistol to force his troops back into line.¹⁸⁷ Nor did the GIs' fighting skills match the quality of their equipment, in Lapouge's view: "They don't know how to fight," he opined. "When enemy planes fly over, they shout, whistle, shoot their rifles in the air. It's an extraordinary waste of munitions."¹⁸⁸ By 5 December, the 7^c RTA had moved up to the Faïd Pass, where they discovered that a plethora of weaponry did not guarantee American success. By early afternoon, ambulances were streaming back in the other direction. A rumor ran through the unit that French sailors had scuttled at Toulon. The ground was littered with bullets, grenades, tins of food, and bandages. Pools of blood were everywhere. They discovered the body of a German officer whose stomach had been blown open. Lapouge organized an impromptu burial with military honors.¹⁸⁹

On 7 December, a discouraged Anderson looked to execute a tactical withdrawal, which caused Juin and Giraud to lobby Eisenhower hard to countermand it. The priority must be to hold Medjez-el-Bab and Pont du Fahs, both important road junctions that controlled access to Tunis and Tunisia's southern coastal plain. This would create a favorable strategic advantage for the Allies once Rommel spilled out of Libya through the Mareth Line.¹⁹⁰ Juin's rush to occupy the summits of the *petite dorsale* sent Lapouge's unit into the Faïd Pass: "a rocky promontory that overlooks the road to Sfax. No plant grows higher than 40 centimeters, except a clump of twenty palm trees around a spring. A pale green field of alfalfa lends nuance to the rocky gray terrain. Tortoises, guinea pigs, strange birds (black, ash-colored . . .). Thirty planes pass overhead." But the defensive routine, while unchallenging, became tedious: his batman woke him at 06:00 with coffee. At 07:30, he inspected his positions with the sergeant, then went to a meeting with his commander. His toilette consisted of washing in a basin. Lunch at 11:00 consisted of a piece of meat, served with either macaroni or lentils. Siesta until 15:00. Any moment might be interrupted by an alert. Another meeting in the Captain's command post. Kill time until dinner at 17:00. At 19:00 back to his dugout to try to sleep.¹⁹¹

Running low on ammunition and having encountered no Americans except a lone GI who had fallen asleep in a haystack and been left behind by his mates, Albert Rupert's unit continued to withdraw toward Algeria at the end of November. A twenty-year-old keen to fight the Germans asked to enlist, so they made him the cook. They had reason to regret it. The neophyte chef built

his cooking fire in the front lines and placed his pot of boiling pasta right in the line of fire. As a consequence, the French soldiers dashed toward the simmering pot clutching their mess tins to fish out a few strands of spaghetti, before sprinting back under cover. Otherwise, they fed themselves by stealing chickens. Having reloaded their trucks in Algeria, they returned to Béja to find that the town had been bombed. Obviously, the inhabitants had been surprised, because plates of food remained on the tables. Disemboweled horses lay about the fields, while bodies of the dead had been laid out by the roadside. Oblivious to the tragedy, the soldiers promptly set about pillaging the houses. On 13 December, they left Béja driving southeast to Bou Arada. Along the way, they encountered many British troops who had been given wine by the locals, so that “the sons of Albion all stagger along in remarkable unity.”¹⁹²

In 1942, 18 December was Aïd el-Kébir, a Muslim holiday which warranted a special meal for Lapouge’s tirailleurs. Everyone was bored. The rain and wind were unrelenting, which made it dangerous to move around because one often failed to hear orders and challenges from sentries. Lapouge had not changed his uniform in a month.¹⁹³ Intelligence revealed that Axis reinforcements continued to arrive at Sousse, Sfax, and Gabès, all ports which had obligingly been surrendered without a fight by the French navy, suggesting that an Axis offensive was in the offing. For the moment, French troops guarded important crossroads and passes. Juin launched the 7^e *Régiment de tirailleurs marocains* (RTM) toward Enfidaville on 20 December, although the attack made little progress in the pelting rain.¹⁹⁴ The British had only two divisions in place. Nothing was coordinated, because Giraud in his obstinacy refused to put French troops under Anderson’s command. Poorly armed French reinforcements continued to trickle in, as did American soldiers from Fredendall’s II Corps.¹⁹⁵

Christmas dinner, which united Anderson, Eisenhower and Juin, witnessed an exchange of gifts: Anderson bestowed twenty new lorries on Juin, in return for which the grateful French commander, “pointing out that his luncheon was disgraceful because it consisted uniquely of tinned food poorly prepared by the British supply corps,” promised to send Anderson a French chef. Poor Juin probably failed to realize that, for Anderson, culinary indifference advertised the values of a consummate soldier and devout Christian. Eisenhower’s gift to Juin was the announcement that the US II Corps would soon take its place to the right of the French XIX Corps. This came as a relief to Juin, because the French were spread thinly in the south, as Rommel sped across Tripolitania headed in their direction. In return, Juin agreed to place French troops under Anderson’s command, only to have Giraud countermand this informal agreement. As a consequence, Juin had to shift his headquarters to Constantine – his hometown – so as better to coordinate operations with the Allies, thus distancing himself from the front.¹⁹⁶ On 29 December, Lapouge volunteered for the

paratroops. But the captain “forbade me to ask for a transfer. I gave in.” Nonetheless, relations between them remained “glacial.” Finally, on the night of 30–31 December, the company was relieved.¹⁹⁷

Lapouge’s situation seemed positively luxurious compared with that of “Captain X,” who commanded the 9th company of the *Régiment de tirailleurs tunisiens* (RTT). His men were in a “detestable state” after enduring Christmas in the wind and cold rain of the Dorsal, against which their tents offered scant protection. Worn-out entrenching tools made it virtually impossible to dig defenses more than 40 centimeters deep in the concrete-like soil, despite the constant mortar fire from Germans who held the high ground to their front. He had no radio or telephone to communicate with battalion headquarters 2 kilometers away. One-third of the 110 men in his company had virtually no training. Nor, once the Luftwaffe bombed the supply depot, did food arrive on a regular basis. And when it did, it was impossible to cook it because unremitting rain made the wood too wet to burn. So, the company was reduced to drinking coffee made from muddy water taken from the wadi and eating sodden bread. His mules had not eaten in five days. *Tirailleurs* were reduced to lubricating their weapons with vegetable oil. Fortunately, for the moment the enemy seemed content merely to keep them on edge by constantly running three tanks and two armored cars up and down the road to their front. Finally, moving into position at night, they launched a successful attack backed by 75 mm guns to take the ridge 400 meters to their front, and managed to bag two officer POWs and considerable amounts of food and equipment.¹⁹⁸ But this local success went unrepeatable elsewhere as DAF attacks broke on strongly entrenched Germans backed by airpower.

Giraud was named High Commissioner by the Imperial Council on 26 December, a rapid reversal of fortunes for the “eternal lieutenant,” who had been rejected barely a month and a half earlier as an ingrate and traitor who possessed no “mandate.” Unfortunately, spooked by the Darlan assassination, Giraud saw conspiracies everywhere.¹⁹⁹ Despite his new political responsibilities, he persisted in meddling unhelpfully in operational decisions.²⁰⁰ Juin attempted to bring his boss down to earth, explaining that his strategic vision, while perhaps brilliant, was wasted on unimaginative Anglo-Saxon generals and beyond the capacities of relatively inexperienced Allied troops. And, given French shortcomings, the DAF was obliged to submit to Allied direction.²⁰¹ At the turn of the year, Juin began to worry that, without reserves, some French sections of the front, especially around Pichon, might be in danger of collapse if the Axis mounted a serious attack. British fears focused on Gafsa.²⁰²

As the New Year dawned, Rupert’s unit, part of the CSTT, shared his position at Bou-Arada, 70 kilometers southwest of Tunis, with zouaves, spahis, French colonial troops, and military police, and with the British. But, because they were not included in His Majesty’s supply manifest, they quickly made the

acquaintance of pig farmers, who invariably complained that they were unable to profit from the invasion because the Anglo-Americans ate only out of tins. However, the Tommies seemed happy enough to exchange their “compo” field rations consisting of unrecognizable foods preserved in a precooked or dehydrated non-perishable state, bouillon cubes, crackers, various drink mixes, and perhaps a pastry, nuts, or a chocolate bar for French-procured “small feisty” pigs and chickens. And while Rupert insisted that the French got on well with Brits, one had to be careful not to mention the “prickly subject” of Syria. The contrasting styles of the two contingents also were on prominent display: while the Tommies had to appear impeccable for morning parade, most of the French troops grew beards, turned out in an assortment of uniforms, and adopted a much more casual attitude to discipline and the enforcement of military courtesies.²⁰³

“The French Were Practically Powerless . . .”: Phase II of the Tunisia Campaign, 1 January–15 March 1943

Early January 1943 found the DAF strung out along the Dorsal, the CSTT in the north with the XIX Corps in the south, with the most vulnerable point being the salient at Pont du Fahs.²⁰⁴ For his part, Juin was aware that the position of French troops on the Dorsal was precarious. Responding to Juin’s desperate 18 January plea for modern weapons, the Allies managed to collect 60 Valentine tanks, an assortment of useless British 2-pounder anti-tank guns, 75 mm guns, and anti-aircraft artillery, 300 General Motors Truck Company (GMC) trucks, 200 jeeps, 8 half-tracks, and other odds and ends for the French, on the understanding that all serviceable equipment would be returned at the end of the campaign. A thorough refitting of French forces must await the aftermath of Tunisia (Figure 1.3).²⁰⁵

As someone familiar with the Western Desert, where battle “was a thing of terribly fast movement that spilled in all directions,” Moorehead’s impression of the Tunisian front was claustrophobia, punctuated by cold and sudden death:

. . . landmines all over the place, snipers perched in the most unlikely spots, shells and mortars dropping out of nowhere . . . This perishing cold, this all-invading mud and this lack of hot food could exhaust and kill a man just as thoroughly as bullets . . . Whoever held the high ground held the battlefield. If you won the pass then you won everything . . . all around the bush was heavy with the sweet and nauseating smell of bodies that were turning rotten in the sun after the rain.²⁰⁶

On 16 January, Lapouge’s company launched a spoiling attack on the ridge-line to their front. The Germans in bunkers rained down grenades, wounding the captain and killing three platoon leaders, which by default elevated Lapouge to company command. Four days later, the chaplain climbed the hill



Figure 1.3 Oran, December 1942: US troops present arms as French troops embark for Tunisia. Relations remained tense between soldiers who only days before had fought each other.

waving a white flag to collect the bodies, only to find that the Germans had departed. Lapouge's Algerians occupied the hill, buried the dead as a corporal recited Muslim prayers, and redistributed the abandoned German equipment. Allied planes flew overhead as the Germans intermittently shelled their position. They attempted to fashion trenches and caves in the unyielding ground, before realizing that they were camped in a cemetery. Superstitious *tirailleurs* insisted that they saw ghosts along the wire. One deserted with his machinegun. Rats scurried about, as rain or sandstorms intermittently lashed their ridgeline. Lapouge's boots were worn out. On 12 February, an American captain with several NCOs arrived to relieve them.²⁰⁷

Increasing Luftwaffe activity and evidence of Axis troop concentrations suggested an impending offensive. The Americans believed Gafsa, which

Moorehead described as “a jaunty little oasis sprawling on the edge of the desert,” to be “in extreme peril.” In fact, the entire Allied line was threatened, as Kesselring ordered von Arnim to launch Operation *Eilbote I* (Express Messenger I), from 18 January, a spoiling operation launched southwards from Pont du Fahs that was meant to unravel Allied positions on the Eastern Dorsal and adjourn Allied plans to launch an attack via Kairouan to the coast. The initial thrust focused three divisions, including the 10th Panzer, at the junction of the British V Corps and the French XIX Corps near the Kébir dam and Pont du Fahs. While the British held their own, without anti-tank weapons or adequate artillery cover, the French folded before *Kampfgruppe Weber* – an improvised formation that contained infantry, artillery, and forty-three Pz. Kpfw. III tanks armed with 50 mm guns²⁰⁸ – that scattered some Moroccan troops and hammered the Third Regiment of the French Foreign Legion with mortars and heavy artillery, before retiring from 22 January. The costs for the French proved fairly catastrophic: sixty-one officers killed in the *Division de marche du Maroc* alone. Overall, 4,880 soldiers died or were wounded, with a further 3,509 missing, plus most of their equipment, including 50 precious artillery pieces. The reasons given for the French setback offered a catalogue of rookie mistakes which recalled 1940: lack of depth of French dispositions, which were configured for offensive, not defensive, operations; surprise caused by a lack of reconnaissance aviation; a dearth of anti-tank guns or artillery more powerful than 75 mm; French artillery opened fire while the German tanks were still 2 kilometers away, which revealed their positions and allowed German counter-battery fire to neutralize them; French 81 mm mortars failed to inspire the same respect as British 25-pounder guns. Counterattacks collapsed for lack of punch; the operational commander of the CSTT, Major General Maurice Jurion, could not control the action because of a lack of communications, which had to be restored by the Derbyshire Yeomanry – the list goes on. The encouraging conclusion was that “the prudence in the exploitation [of the attack] seems to indicate an intensity inferior to that of the German forces of 1940.” Axis “prudence” appears to have resulted from a shortage of assault infantry. In Juin’s estimation, had von Arnim pushed his advantages as Rommel surely would have done, and had French forces not clung to “anchor points – Bou Arada, Djebel Bargou, Pichon” – the Allied line might have collapsed. Nevertheless, French units could not continue to absorb this level of punishment without serious consequences for morale, which proved to be the case on 30 January when, in *Eilbote II*, two battlegroups from the 21st Panzer pounced on French troops in the Faïd Pass. Fredendall hesitated to answer urgent French appeals for support because he did not want to disrupt his plans to attack Maknassy. Only on 31 January did American reinforcements arrive at the Faïd Pass, only to meet a bloody rebuff at German hands.²⁰⁹

At Juin's suggestion, this "close call" prompted Eisenhower to take advantage of Giraud's absence at the Anfa Conference to reorganize the front. "Whether the French approved or not, [Eisenhower] put Anderson in complete charge, directly under himself, and issued instructions to pull the French back and for the British and Americans to take parts of the French sector," Eisenhower's naval aide Harry Butcher noted.²¹⁰ This was not quite accurate. Eisenhower would now direct the Mediterranean theater. The Tunisian front would be coordinated through General Harold Alexander from the middle of February. The Northwest African Air Forces under USAAF Major General Carl A. Spaatz would report to the commander in chief of Mediterranean air forces, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder. French morale remained a primary Allied concern. "The French were practically powerless to meet tanks with their inadequate weapons, and will have to be held in reserve until they can be properly equipped," Butcher recorded.²¹¹ Giraud's "dictatorial" temperament, his "megalomania," and a prickly personality quick to take offense showed no signs of softening. At Eisenhower's behest, Lucian Truscott, one of II Corps' rising stars, prepared a 24 January report for his boss that concluded as follows: "I have the definite feeling that the French can no longer be counted on for much and that in important sectors they must be heavily supported and, to the extent possible, immediately rearmed." To be fair to the French, both Ike and Marshall expressed similar concerns about the leadership, training, discipline, and morale of American forces.²¹² Officially, at least, the French welcomed this command reorganization as a vote of confidence that "marked our total ascension into the Allied ranks on the Tunisian front."²¹³

For the moment, the British V corps under General Charles Allfrey anchored the northern part of the line from the coast south through Medjez-el-Bab to Bou Arada and Le Kef. On 11 February 1943, the French Chief of Staff, General René Prioux, certified that the *corps expéditionnaire* in Tunisia numbered 103,400 combat troops with 17,300 men in support.²¹⁴ Anderson's role for the CAF was to occupy the Western Dorsal. The southernmost sector was held by the US II Corps plus, for the moment, the Constantine division, under Fredendall. The American sector anchored the southern end of the line between Sbeitla and Gafsa, "a fabulous country of stark ravines and crenellated stone ridges that were stained to the colours of pale rose and muddy brown and saffron yellow," recorded Moorehead. "A few villages struggled for wretched existence from the bare land and beyond."²¹⁵ Both the DAF and the CSTT were dissolved. Barré was tasked with organizing logistics, a step toward his forced retirement in July 1943, which many viewed as a betrayal by Juin. Among the many advantages of this new command arrangement was that the French would now benefit from Allied artillery and, they hoped, air support. A furious Giraud was confronted with this reorganization on his return from the Anfa Conference. It would not be the last time that those in the French camp

would take advantage of Giraud's periodic absences to present their guileless commander in chief with a *fait accompli*.²¹⁶

**“We Have Taken a Severe Licking . . .”:²¹⁷ Kasserine
14–24 February 1943**

But this reorganization was interrupted by Rommel's Valentine's Day offensive at Kasserine (Map 1.3). February 1943 found Axis forces at the pinnacle of their strength. Hans-Jürgen von Arnim's army counted 110,000 men, with around 200 tanks, including the latest Tiger heavy tanks. This number of tanks had been doubled when, on 26 January 1943, Rommel crossed the frontier into Tunisia to take command of the Africa Army Group composed of the Fifth Panzer Army, in the north under von Arnim, and in the south the First Italian Army, the Afrika Korps, and an Italian Saharan Group, all led by Messe. Operations could be supported by Luftwaffe planes operating from all-weather airfields close to the front, while the Allies flew from improvised airstrips at Tébessa and Thélepte, or even from Constantine. Supplies arrived at Bizerte, and in smaller harbors at Sousse, Sfax, and Gabès, to outfit Rommel's forces, thus minimizing the transport problems that the German general had experienced in the Western Desert. Rommel's goal at this stage was to maintain control over Tunisia's harbors, so that he would have freedom of maneuver should he eventually be forced to retire north for an amphibious extraction. Montgomery's Eighth Army approached across Tripolitania, and would have to be blocked on the Mareth Line. But with these seeming advantages came drawbacks. The Axis command team, although experienced, often failed to cooperate, while supplies across the Mediterranean were slowly being strangled by Allied interdiction.²¹⁸ But the Allies, too, faced their own logistical challenges in Tunisia – as the main western supply base for the American II Corps and the British First Army, Algiers was almost 500 miles from the front, from which supplies must be dispatched via a rudimentary and dispersed road network and a single narrow-gauge railway that meandered out of eastern Algeria. And once supplies arrived in Tunisia, mules were required to shift them across Tunisia's challenging terrain close to frontline units.

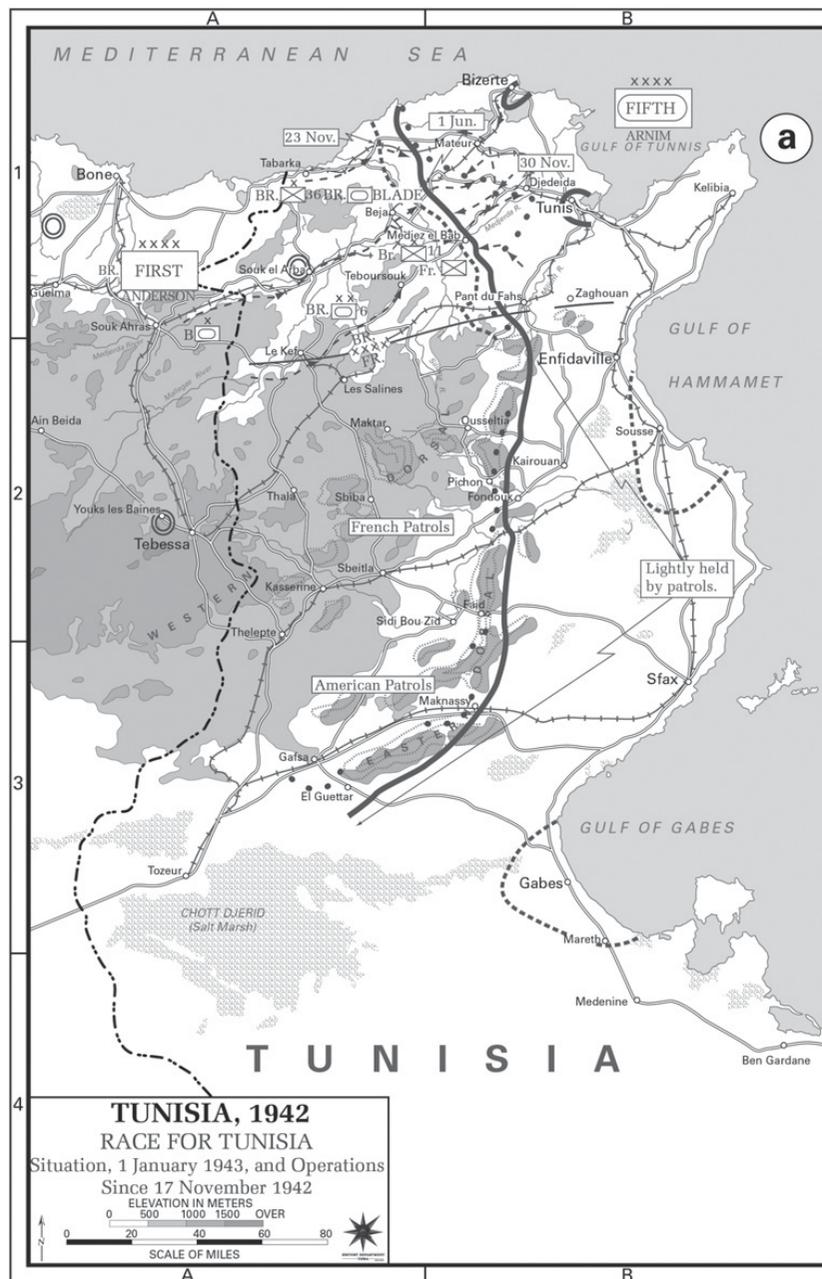
Juin complained of Anderson's failure to respond as Rommel's troops poured across the Mareth Line into Tunisia and positioned themselves for a major offensive. To remove any threat coming out of Algeria to the north–south road that linked Tunis with Gabès and Mareth to the south, between 30 January and 12 February 1943, the 21st Panzer Division and the Italian 50th Special Brigade had pushed the overextended French out of the Faïd Pass south of Fondouk, and then defied two inept American attempts to repossess it. French 75 mm guns were simply overmatched in duels with heavy German 105 mm and 210 mm cannon, and had only a limited ability to repel tanks that

enveloped their positions. German engineers opened breaches in French minefields through which infantry infiltrated, seizing 75 mm cannon that had exhausted their munitions. Finally, fifty German tanks poured through the pass as infantry surrounded French positions on the ridgelines.

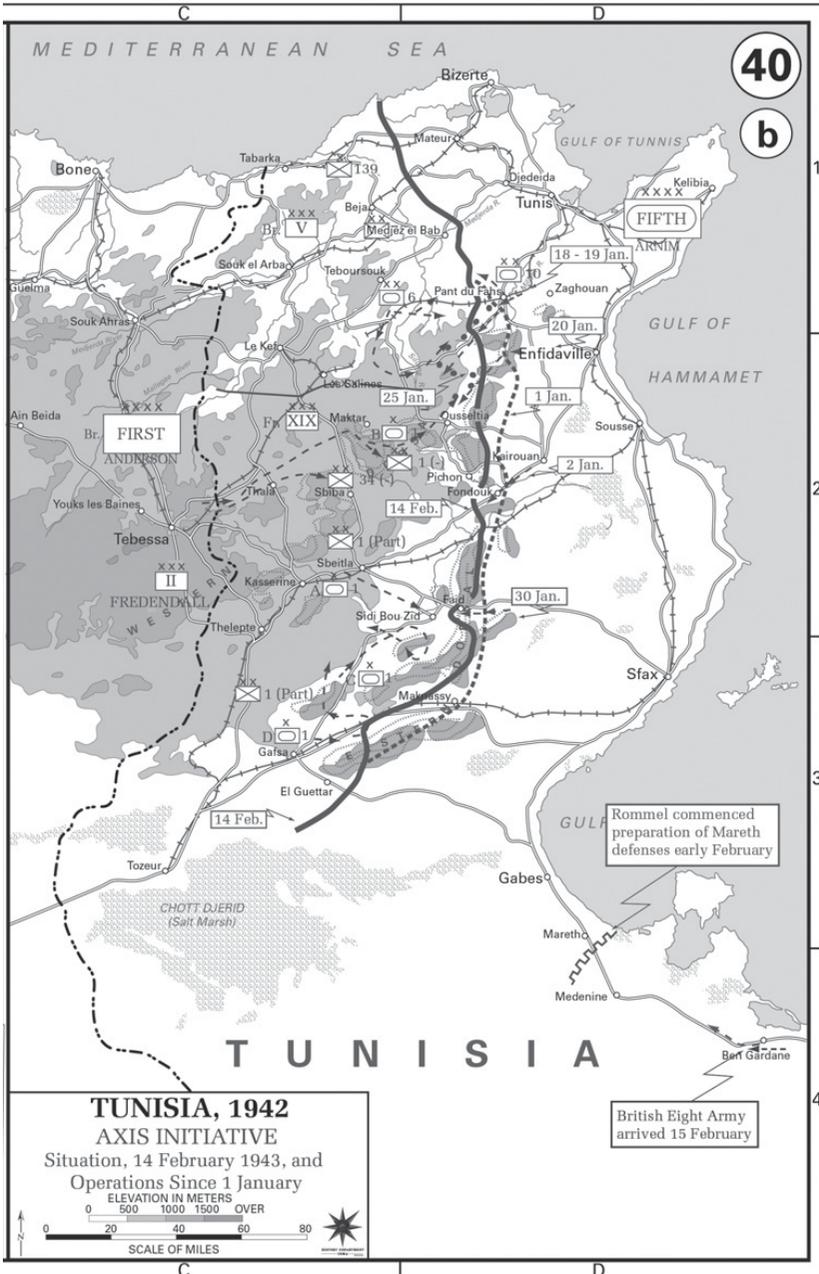
Juin grumbled that on 30 January, armored elements of II Corps, 50 kilometers away at Sbeïtla, were slow to ride to the rescue of the 2nd battalion of the 2^e RTA that was being leisurely carved up by Axis forces.²¹⁹ This was because Fredendall was preoccupied with his own plans to cover Maktar against a German push through the Fondouk Pass. He also schemed to seize Maknassy at the southern end of the Dorsal from the Italians. Only after the personal intervention of Giraud and eventually of Truscott, at 07:30 on the morning of 31 January, was a US counterattack launched, with insufficient air cover; and it was picked apart by German artillery. At the end of the day on 1 February, the French had lost 904 men and the Americans had abandoned any attempt to wrest the Faïd Pass from German control. In Allied eyes, French resolve seemed shaken by the fact that many soldiers had family in France – one battalion alone experienced 132 desertions. Colonel William Biddle was assigned as II Corps liaison to Juin's headquarters to avoid a repetition of the Faïd Pass débâcle.

The French autopsy blamed defeat on “insufficient numbers, inferiority of the weaponry of the infantry, the absence of artillery, lack of reserves, and the poor training of indigenous troops.” The Germans proved much more complimentary of the tenacity of the French, despite their lack of supply and munitions, than of the Americans, “soldiers without experience, clumsy leadership, radio commands sent in clear, insufficient air support.” A 2 February meeting at Telergma, an important forward US airbase in Algeria, between Truscott, Anderson, and Eisenhower concluded that the central front was too lightly held. Anderson began to withdraw battered French units to rest and rearm them, filling gaps in the line with Americans from II Corps. After the war, a debate broke out over who had been responsible for the faulty US dispositions – Fredendall or Anderson? At the time, received wisdom in the Allied camp held that Rommel had been so weakened by his defeat at El Alamein, followed by his retreat across Libya, that he no longer posed a significant threat. That assessment played into the hands of Rommel, who saw a chance to inflict a morale-destroying defeat on US forces whom the Desert Fox recognized were inexperienced, poorly trained, undisciplined, and thinly scattered along the Algerian border. In this way, he might turn the Allied flank, and allow his Panzers to rampage into eastern Algeria.²²⁰

At dawn on 14 February, the 21st Panzer Division, led by Tiger tanks supported by motorized infantry, sprang out of a sandstorm from the Maizila Pass, south of Faïd. At the same time, the 10th Panzer pitched east out of Faïd Pass headed for Sidi Bou Zid, held by units of the 1st US Armored Division



Map 1.3 Dual maps January–February 1943.



Map 1.3 (cont.)

(AD). Despite Enigma warnings, the Americans were caught by surprise, in large part because Anderson insisted that the German attack would come out of Fondouk. As a consequence, the American positions were quickly overrun. But Fredendall's headquarters, believing that the situation was still in hand, refused to panic. On the next day – 15 February – they counterattacked, with Sherman tanks and tank destroyers in the lead. Unfortunately, the hapless Fredendall stumbled unaware into a classic German tank ambush as had been perfected in the Western Desert – 88 mm anti-tank guns hidden in cactus groves and buildings blasted his flanks, as Stukas lashed him from the air, for a loss of 55 tanks, 15 officers and almost 300 men missing in action. “The Americans did not seem to have much experience in open combat,” Juin remarked laconically.²²¹

So far, most of the damage had been inflicted by von Arnim. Eisenhower approved an order allowing II Corps to fall back on the Western Dorsal along a line running from Sbiba south to Sbeitla, and then through Kasserine to Fériana. The Germans divided their offensive forces into two prongs, sending one to Faïd, breaking through the pass on 14 February, while the second thrust up the Gabès–Gafsa road. By 16 February, GIs had begun to filter back, while others were ordered to withdraw by radio or air-dropped messages. However, this proved almost suicidal, as the Germans caught retreating clusters of American soldiers on the plain, and either machine-gunned them or, if feeling charitable, captured them. On the night of 16–17 February, von Arnim attacked behind a barrage of rocket flares, which set off a panic flight among American soldiers that continued into the morning. Juin reluctantly ordered Welvert to evacuate Gafsa. On both flanks, the Americans began to pull back to the Western Dorsal, evacuating Gafsa and Sbeitla. The narrow road going northwest from Gafsa was filled, “bumper to bumper, from head to tail with tanks, artillery, infantry, French Legionnaires, camels, goats, sheep, Arab and French families with crying children, jackasses and horse-drawn carts,” noted one observer. An ordnance detachment following in the rear pulled tanks and vehicles out of ditches into which they had slithered in the rain and blackout.²²² In fact, the retreat was complicated by the fact that US Army engineers were blowing up everything in the path of retreat, including a railway bridge that obliged the French to abandon ten locomotives, considerable rolling stock, and six tons of precious munitions. Giraud protested not only at the loss of valuable munitions, but above all because he feared that the Allied defeat would encourage “the Arabs in the area [to] become active against us now that we have retreated from Gafsa and have taken a licking further north.”²²³

On the morning of 17 February, Anderson ordered the evacuation of Sbeitla and Fériana. At Sbeitla, the last men to leave town were two ordnance officers who lingered to explode the ammunition dumps.²²⁴ Rommel appeared poised to overrun the main Allied air base at Thélepte (where the Americans smashed

unserviceable planes and set 60,000 gallons of aviation fuel alight), before swinging north toward Kasserine to link up with von Arnim's troops. "The loss of the airfields at Thélepte is especially hard to take," Butcher recorded on 20 February. "These were the best fields in that area."²²⁵ Sbeïtla fell, as beaten and panicked troops streamed west from the southern flank of the Allied line. What was left of the 1st US AD retreated through the Kasserine Pass and took up positions on the high ground to the east of Tébessa and Fériana. Only half of its men and equipment still remained. Juin complained that the virtual abandonment of southern Tunisia had opened Algeria to invasion, while leaving the left flank of the XIX Corps in the air, and set off alarm bells in Algiers. Giraud sent him forward personally to reorganize the front.²²⁶ Thélepte airfield was overrun on 18 February, as US ground crews destroyed thirty-four unserviceable aircraft on the ground. But Allied air dominance was beginning to bite, as air strikes by heavy bombers shifted away from tanks and onto troops and logistical convoys.²²⁷ On 19 February, Rommel aimed three Panzer divisions at Kasserine Pass, a mile-wide fissure in the Grand Dorsal 30 miles east of the Algerian border, that was held by a thinly manned defense of US combat engineers and French 75 mm artillery. At first, the defenses held. But gradually confusion and localized panic set in, compromising the Allied positions. A group of Franco-American troops was constituted around General Theodore Roosevelt, son of Teddy Roosevelt and a cousin of FDR, to seize key blocking points, but without success. Intelligence predicted that Rommel would make for Thala, which Juin complained was defended by a single battalion of Algerian *tirailleurs*. "[Wilver] was literally fed up with his superior, the American Fredendall, who in his estimation had no more military knowledge than a mess hall corporal," Juin recorded. After finding an overwhelmed Fredendall preparing to abandon Tébessa and retreat into the "tormented mountainous terrain of the Ouenza," thus throwing Constantine open to the Axis, Juin vowed to defend Tébessa with French forces.²²⁸ In a 20 February press conference, Eisenhower allocated the blame "principally to the miscalculation which 'he' had made as to the ability of the French troops, with their poor equipment, to hold the central front. When the French caved in a couple of weeks ago and their sixty-mile front had to be taken over by British and Americans, the line could only be thinly held." But the real miscalculation in Butcher's view had been made by Anderson, who had bought into a German deception operation that Rommel's attack would come further north, and so had not reinforced the threatened Kasserine front. In private, however, Butcher acknowledged the role of the poor tactical deployment of US forces and the "poor fighting quality, which reflect also on all the officers" for "one of the greatest defeats in our history."²²⁹ For his part, Juin did not need to carry out the threat to defend Tébessa, because by 22 February, Rommel's tanks came under heavy air and artillery attack as they approached Thala. Allied planes also

strafed and bombed German traffic in the Kasserine Pass. Sensing Thala to be out of reach, Rommel ordered a retreat. It may have been premature, because, when Major General Ernest Harmon was sent toward Kasserine by Eisenhower to report on the situation, he was greeted by a cascade of vehicles crammed with clearly rattled soldiers in full retreat.²³⁰

By 21 February, Lapouge's unit had become swept up in the Kasserine *débâcle*. Ordered to bury their munitions and withdraw in the night, his company trudged toward the rear on foot, as convoys of GIs and Tommies clinging precariously to trucks sped past them. Rain began to fall. Ten kilometers from Maktar, well to the north of Kasserine, when everyone was totally exhausted, twelve British lorries stopped to offer them a lift. Fortified with corned-beef, tea, and tinned pineapple, followed by "a remarkable 5 o'clock" of jam, butter, cheese, tea, and biscuits, they were driven to Tébessa. Lapouge was soaking wet. The British cut a towel in two, and then found him a toothbrush and a razor with blades. But they were not yet out of danger – artillery shells thudded around them, and they were again on foot, exhausted, and dispirited. Despite the pouring rain, drinking water was scarce as they trudged 18 kilometers in the mud. The night of 23 February was spent shivering in a bivouac pitched among Roman ruins, from which they might have heard the heavy bomber attacks on Rommel's retreating units. On 1 March, they climbed into large US trucks for a night convoy on twisting roads with no headlights. When one of the trucks slipped into a ditch, a crane suddenly appeared to pull it back onto the road. "Oh, if the Americans could fight as well as they can pull their trucks out of a ditch . . ." On 5 March, Lapouge's unit was sent back into line: "Half of our arms and matériel were missing. We were incapable of action . . . and we were back in line. The officers are discouraged. The *tirailleurs* hesitate a little, but they march."²³¹

Le Corps Franc d'Afrique

In the wake of Torch, *l'armée d'Afrique* was besieged by what it categorized as a rush of "inopportune enlistments." The technical reasons for its reticence to enlist new recruits began with the fact that a military force "rich in generals, in senior and staff officers," was lacking in company-level cadres, as well as NCOs and specialists capable of incorporating, training, and leading them in battle. The logic of the high command was that they would receive plenty of recruits in an orderly fashion once conscription kicked in. But second, and more importantly, Darlan and other senior officers viewed the impatience of a "motley crowd" of enthusiastic patriots of 8 November to fight as a form of indiscipline, whose recruitment threatened to capsize *l'armée d'Afrique's* "imperial" concept of discipline, whose organizing principle was veneration of the commander. Furthermore, the democratic spirit of the *levée* threatened to

undermine efforts to exclude Jews, “Gaullists,” and other “dissidents” from the army. Not only did the presence of this class of recruit pose a threat to homogeneity and good military order, but also Algerian Jews would invariably deploy military service as leverage to reclaim French nationality.²³² And could Muslims be far behind?

Unfortunately for this military elite, momentum to broaden and democratize recruitment beyond a narrow band of largely illiterate and malleable Muslims was building from several sources. Van Hecke aspired to transform the *Chantiers* into a nucleus for military revitalization in North Africa. In this spirit, the general staff decided that 5,000 members of the *Chantiers* were to be sent to the air force, 1,000 to the paratroops, and 10,000 to the army. This allegedly left around 9,000 without an assignment. In fact, little of this redistribution of *Chantiers* manpower was realized in the post-Torch chaos when many never answered the call-up, or, eager to get into combat, enlisted on their own initiative.²³³ A second motivation was Giraud’s push to find a command for his partner in crime Monsabert, shunned by *l’armée d’Afrique* and excoriated by the FAF for having surrounded Blida airfield for Allied benefit on 8 November 1942. According to Monsabert, the first words out of Noguès’ mouth when they had met in Algiers on 11 November 1942 were “Monsieur, you are a traitor!” Members of the Service d’ordre légionnaire (SOL) were keen to assassinate him, he insisted, and he was in such bad odor with his former colleagues that, sensing his career finished, he even contemplated enlisting as a private in the Foreign Legion.²³⁴ Like the Gaullists, by joining the “dissidence,” Monsabert had betrayed his military caste. His motives were now suspect, impure, like those of politicians or diplomats who had undermined the professional soldiers and forfeited the war. These *Maréchalists* yearned for a pure relationship that could only be found in a world they saw reflected in themselves. And Monsabert, along with Magnan, Béthouart, Mast, Toustain, Beaufre, de Gaulle, Leclerc, Koenig, Catroux, and their ilk had broken the bond of their military brotherhood.

A third impulse for the founding of the CFA was a public order requirement to control a potentially troublemaking agglomeration of Gaullists, Jews, pro-British Maltese, Spanish Republicans, those being released under Allied pressure from internment camps in the Sahara, and other “undesirables” by corralling them under military authority and dispatching them to Tunisia. There was also a desire to staunch a flight of Frenchmen, especially those connected with 8 November, into British service, where they sought protection from neo-Vichy retribution. Several from the *Chantiers*, including Bonnier de la Chapelle, had collected at what became known as “Camp Pillafort,” organized on a farm on Cap Matifou outside of Algiers that belonged to a friend of Henri d’Astier and Van Hecke to be trained by British commandos. Admiral Moreau feared that Matifou had become a center designed to transform *Chantiers* inmates into an “Anglo-Gaullist”

militia. Darlan concurred: "Given the danger of Anglo-Gaullist Corps Francs in the proximity of Algiers, I have asked the Commander-in-Chief of Air and Ground Forces in Africa to request that the Allied Authorities distance these irregular formations from the region of Cap Matifou."²³⁵ For his part, Monsabert, impressed by the British training offered at Cap Matifou, saw commandos as a quick path to the "modernization" of French forces, a project that found some support in army ranks.²³⁶ But the British, who had envisaged preparing small groups of men to carry out sabotage behind the lines in Tunisia, were overwhelmed by the numbers that had collected at "Pillafort." The French high command suspected that Matifou was a British plot to create another alternative French force like the *Forces françaises libres* (FFL). "It is true that every undesirable or unstable man who does not want to submit to French army discipline looks to enlist in the corps franc," read a French general staff assessment.²³⁷ So Monsabert agreed to lead these men, if they could be collected in a unit sizable enough to be led by a general. In this way, on 25 November 1942, the CFA was officially stood up.²³⁸

Recruitment bureaus were set up in Algiers, Oran, Casablanca, Fez, and Oudja. Posters and newspaper advertisements announced that men were being sought "without distinction of race or religion," offered a 1,000 franc enlistment bonus, and pay of 10 francs a day to serve in a "*groupe de choc*." Recruiting sergeants appear to have cast a wide net to haul in those eligible for conscription, reservists from other corps, and even Foreign Legionnaires.²³⁹ Monsabert ignored both Prioux's 12 January 1943 attempt to suspend CFA recruitment and orders from Giraud that he must not recruit in "work companies and the concentration camps," and that he should direct Jews toward the "Jewish pioneer corps."²⁴⁰ Instead, on 23 December, Monsabert asked that foreigners who volunteered for the CFA would be given favorable consideration for French nationality, and that their families would not be importuned by the authorities. Unless the French enlisted these foreigners, he warned, the British would continue to recruit them.²⁴¹

This recruitment drive produced a force that, according to Georges Elgozy, who served in the CFA, "was in effect partisan bands assembled in a kind of international brigade. They were obviously anti-Vichyite, anti-conformist, and anti- a lot of things. One could not have devised a corps more opposed to the spirit and the tradition of the sailors."²⁴² Indeed, the mere existence of this band of fugitives, whose unifying principle was a distrust of authority, tied *l'armée d'Afrique* in knots: screeds from Noguès protested that CFA recruitment was undermining good order and discipline in regular Moroccan units.²⁴³ Mendigal complained on 23 January 1943 that eight irreplaceable aircraft mechanics from the Maison Blanche air base at Algiers had enlisted in the CFA, and demanded their return.²⁴⁴ Monsabert's original idea of grouping his recruits in more or less ethnically, religiously, or nationally homogeneous units under

French cadres foundered on a dearth of French officers and NCOs and the sheer heterogeneity of his force. This recruiting effort eventually collected a “belle brigade” of 6,188 men, among them Jews, political refugees, foreign volunteers of 1939–1940 who had subsequently been consigned to concentration camps in gratitude for their service, Italians interned because of their nationality, *Chantiers* fugitives, and sailors who had escaped from Bizerte but been orphaned by the French navy, most of whose seaworthy craft had been scuttled in any case, or whose officers imperiously sulked in their rusting hulks in Alexandria and the Antilles refusing to fight. This CFA class of 1942 also included refugees from Alsace-Moselle, a few notorious communists, Moroccan Muslims enlisted despite Noguès’ remonstrations, and some Spaniards, including a former Republican navy admiral who, according to Elgozy, “during the entire Tunisian campaign, remained resolved to understand neither French nor humor.” Finally, a few unmoored SOL and *Croix de feu* alumni seeking to launder their pasts rounded out this motley muster. Historian of the FFL Jean-François Muracciole calculates that, while the ranks of the CFA contained a large number of French “dissidents,” it was also 15 percent foreign and 25 percent Muslim. Furthermore, in the final phase of the campaign, with the push on Bizerte, the “très Vichyiste” battalion of marine infantry was attached to it, under the future Rear Admiral Raymond Maggiar, a Narvik veteran who had volunteered for Tunisia out of a British prisoner of war (POW) camp after his ship had been torpedoed off Madagascar. After knocking without result on several doors in Algiers, Juin instructed Maggiar to organize a regiment of marines, which would subsequently achieve celebrity as a tank destroyer unit in Leclerc’s *2^e Division blindée*. But that was in the future. When they arrived in the CFA for the final march on Bizerte, Maggiar’s *1^{er} Régiment des fusiliers marins* was instantly labeled the Royal-Voyou (Navy Louts).²⁴⁵ To this was added a “*section féminine*” of nurses and ambulance drivers, whose “heterogeneous” equipment was upgraded by the Americans, and whose alleged sexual promiscuity or lesbian relationships became the subject of salacious speculation.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, a French doctor explained to American war correspondent A. J. Liebling that the main advantage of female nurses was that it helped wounded soldiers better to endure pain: “Since we have so little anesthesia . . . we rely upon vanity.”²⁴⁷

At least three ironies hovered over the CFA’s inception, beginning with the fact that command of a group of men denounced inaccurately in Muracciole’s view as a “gaggle of Gaullists” would be handed to Monsabert, who by his own admission was a recovering *Maréchal*.²⁴⁸ A second irony was that no sooner had the unit been created, in part to keep the British from siphoning Frenchmen into the service of His Majesty, than it would be placed under British command. Not surprisingly, *l’armée d’Afrique* washed its hands of these “undesirables,” who viewed themselves as a patriotic, international, multiracial *levée* that

sought “to redeem the cowardice of many,” but whom regular soldiers disdained as amateurs, and who through Matifou and Bonnier de la Chapelle became tainted by association with the assassination of Darlan. The understanding was that, while the French would supply the uniforms, the British would be responsible for arming the CFA, who would then be employed “outside the French army’s combat zone.”²⁴⁹ Therefore, on 19 December, the first contingent of what Vichy radio denounced as “a great collection of scallywags” and “Apaches” set out in the autumn rains toward Tunisia in old railway carriages pulled behind a wheezing antique locomotive along eastern Algeria’s narrow-gauge railway.²⁵⁰

The official line was that the CFA had been generously offered to Anderson on the pretext that the British lacked infantry. However, the final irony of the CFA was that the British, who in French minds were virtually kidnapping French recruits at Camp Pillafort (Matifou), became rather unnerved by the unexpected delivery of this consignment of military discards. Monsabert acknowledged that the CFA’s disembarkation at First Army flabbergasted the normally reserved Anderson.²⁵¹ According to Durand, only 25 percent of the men in the two ragged CFA battalions deposited on Anderson’s doorstep had any military experience. In the event, the contingent arrayed before him was heterogeneously armed, practically without munitions, largely untrained and undisciplined, contained volunteers as young as sixteen, had been outfitted seemingly out of a church rummage sale, and led by superannuated officers unable to speak either English or Arabic, many of whom had not touched a weapon since the Rif War concluded in 1925. Once they had been attached to the British 139th Brigade, on 12 January, Anderson ordered that the unit be issued British battledress, so that at least they looked like soldiers, be sent for training as a conventional force, and have its leadership upgraded.²⁵²

But a lack of training was only the beginning of the CFA’s challenges. “For these battalions in the process of being organized there exist practically no resources,” Monsabert complained on 12 January, in what would become the lament of the French army until the war’s end. “So, the requirement to provide sufficient cadres for the Corps Franc is urgent.” Indeed, in January 1943, a call went out in Morocco for officer and NCO volunteers from regular units for the CFA. But combat in Tunisia had transformed the pre-November 1942 shortage of cadres into a crisis, so that requests to transfer were discouraged or refused.²⁵³ Nor is it clear that the understated Anderson immediately warmed to the effusive command style of Monsabert, who *tutoyed* everyone, addressed his soldiers as “*mes enfants*,” and, clutching his swagger stick, galloped enthusiastically at the head of group trots or directed his command in collective gymnastics, “animated by perfectly irregular . . . usually unpredictable movements.” Indeed, the combination of a flushed face beneath a thatch of snow-white hair earned Monsabert the nickname “Strawberry in Cream.”²⁵⁴

Anderson must have concluded that Monsabert, with his serially evolving schemes to organize the CFA into commando groups, his intrigues to liberate Corsica with a corps of specially trained natives of that island, and other special operations-inspired caprices, had been sent by the Almighty to assay his piety.²⁵⁵

In the meantime, Anderson complained that he had to “wet nurse” the CFA,²⁵⁶ to whom he assigned four British trainers, “esthetes but competent,” according to Georges Elgozy, who attempted to introduce them to the fundamentals of soldiering. Regular raids by the Luftwaffe added realism to the training, as did patrols near the front lines, often integrated into British formations. Unlike regular units, the CFA had little faith in their military leadership, or even in their comrades. Platoons and sections coalesced around a primary group identity – Moroccan, Foreign Legion, Kabyle, Spanish, Jew, although Jews were a diverse lot depending on their class, education, and whether they hailed from Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia. Elements of the CFA did well in small skirmishes with Bersaglieri on 2 and 10 February, a type of action that British paratroopers dismissed as a “Second XI Match.”²⁵⁷ In Durand’s view, although the CFA was slow to grasp the “science” of combat, by March 1943, it had become no less efficient than were *tirailleurs* or Foreign Legionnaires, who also were led by reservists, and, in the view of the CFA at least, usually evinced less *élan*.²⁵⁸

The Axis offensive of February 1943 had also whiplashed the CFA, which entrenched alongside the British 139th Brigade near Le Kef, but, totally lacking in heavy weapons, was assaulted at 06:00 on 26 February by two battalions of the 10th Bersaglieri and as well as two German battalions reinforced by parachute engineers. The attackers infiltrated across the thalwegs behind a smokescreen, covered by a barrage of 150 mm and 88 mm artillery, as well as anti-tank guns and mortars. Tunisians had been dragooned to drive flocks of sheep before the assault wave to set off mines. While several frontline companies were cut off and submerged, a counterattack organized in the afternoon caught the Italians in a small valley and created a panic. In their first engagement, the CFA estimated that they had killed 160 Italians and captured another 380, together with 6 mortars, 8 heavy machineguns and 12 light machineguns – not a bad performance for the “Second XI.” The CFA priest even captured an Italian army portable altar. CFA losses were 8 killed and 20 wounded, but 127 were missing, an indication that morale was not all that it could have been. Some Italian POWs, insisting that they were Slovenes, offered to join the CFA. Unfortunately, the British retreated in the face of an attack by German paratroops, in the process surrendering 2,000 POWs and most of the captured matériel. Magnan complained that 26 February had been very costly for the CFA, which had lost many of its most experienced cadres and equipment, and that it had no radios to control the battle or vehicles for mobility, nor raincoats

and tents to protect the soldiers from the weather. As a result, the CFA had become “an inert force, unable to react.” From 27 February, the CFA withdrew to the west through the mud and rain on the heels of the British, carrying their wounded as officers struggled to keep squads, platoons, and companies together. British paratroopers covered their retreat to British lines, where they were sprayed with dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), given tea and biscuits, and integrated into the British line on the Djebel Driss. There, they were joined by the 3rd Battalion of the CFA, which appeared to contain many former Foreign Legionnaires who in a previous life had fought for both sides in civil wars in Russia and Spain, as well as significant contingents of Jews and Muslims.²⁵⁹

A training camp was created under British supervision on the north coast at Tabarka, a bombed-out shell of a village nestled in a barren landscape, occupied by gendarmes, NCOs, nurses, and nuns, and subject to regular Luftwaffe visits. The desolation of the location was matched only by the gloom of the weather and the monotony of “English gastronomy.” But, in the summer of 1943, when the soldiers of the CFA switched from British to French logistics, they mourned the absence of Player’s Navy Cut cigarettes, razor blades, and the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI).²⁶⁰ Even British compo meals seemed superior to an *armée d’Afrique* staple of chickpeas and weevil-infested beans eaten out of a communal pot. For some members of the CFA, this reunion with the French army reminded them of the internment camps from which they had fled. As a consequence, most CFA veterans tried to make their British boots and battledress endure as long as possible into the autumn of 1943.²⁶¹

According to the French official history, on 8 February 1943, CFA command had been transferred to Colonel Joseph Magnan, sprung from *armée d’Afrique* purdah after having made common cause with Béthouart to sequester Noguès at Rabat on 8 November. Where the ebullient Monsabert had represented the quintessential “képi bleu” (North African *tirailleurs*), Magnan, a former camel corps officer and “képi noir” (marine infantry), was deliberate, serene, austere, and meticulous. Although Magnan lacked Monsabert’s panache, he understood that enthusiasm could not compensate for a lack of armaments, training, and leadership. Elgozy remarked that CFA volunteers, as a rule distrustful of professional soldiers but especially of a “‘colonial’ mercenary like Magnan accustomed to leading black troops,” nevertheless came to respect their new commander’s “cold lucidity that contrasted with the relentless exhilaration and demagogic lyricism of his predecessor.” But both Monsabert and Magnan had difficulty attracting professional officers and NCOs, in part because colonial army command proved disinclined to allow professional French cadres “champing at the bit” to fight to transfer from “sovereignty forces” in Africa, “because this risks giving credence to the idea that for a colonial soldier to get into combat, he has to transfer out of his original arm.”²⁶² In fact, everyone was

competing to attract or retain scarce and much-in-demand cadres. Magnan brought with him eleven officers and twenty-one NCOs from the *Régiment d'infanterie coloniale (RIC) de Maroc* – a unit made up of French volunteers from the mainland that was tainted in the eyes of the Giraudists by its association with the “resistance” of 8 November. On 9 April 1943, Magnan also tried to introduce more rigor into training at Tabarka. His technique, that began by reading Stalin’s address delivered on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Red Army on the virtues of discipline, must have gone down a treat at Giraud’s HQ, where Magnan was already regarded as a “dissident.” More volunteers appeared, but weapons for them were lacking. Many of the corporals were aged over fifty. Everyone shaved their heads to protect against head wound infections.²⁶³

“As Diabolical in Retreat as in Attack”: Post-Kasserine Tunisia

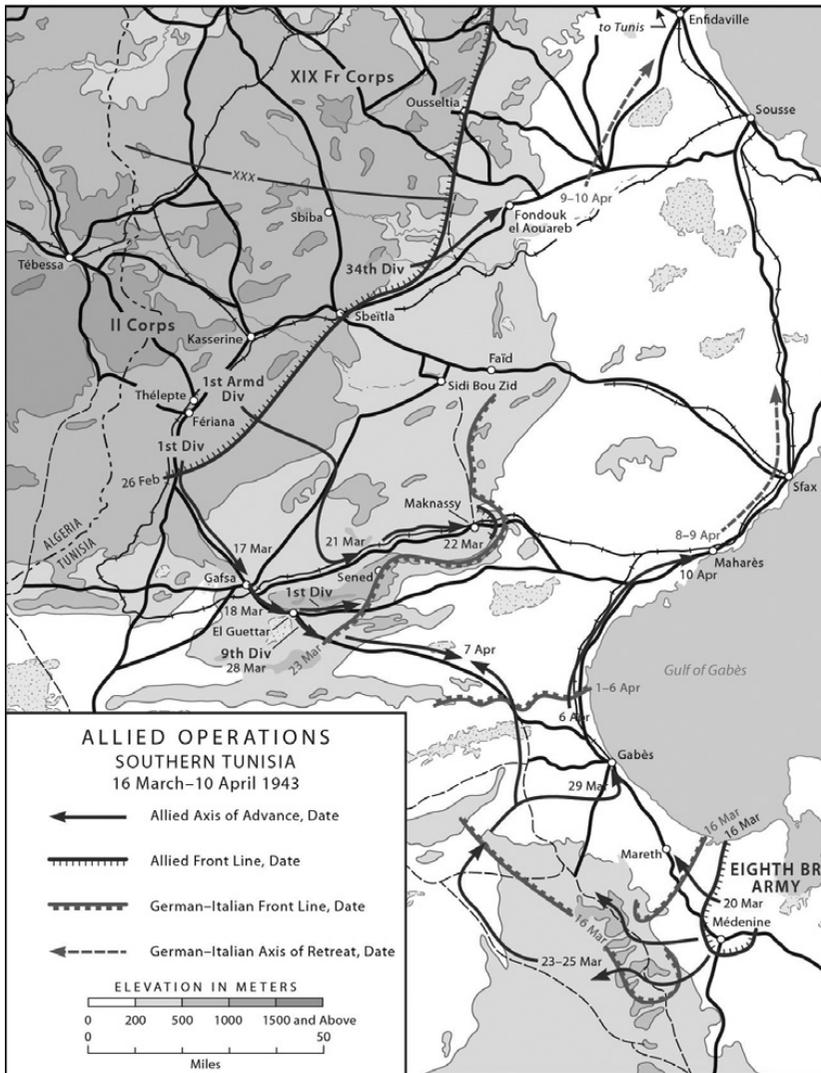
Kasserine proved to be a destructive and humiliating defeat for the Americans, one that cost Fredendall his job after over 20 percent of II Corps had been destroyed, and 4,000 GIs taken prisoner.²⁶⁴ George Patton briefly took command, before handing over to Omar Bradley for the remainder of the campaign. Likewise, Juin had been dissatisfied with Welvert’s performance at the command of the Constantine Division.²⁶⁵ Juin’s threat to defend Tébessa with or without orders from the Allied command revealed that the French were prepared to deploy their army to prioritize their political goals. Yet, this relationship was one of mutual dependence: the Anglo-Americans required French cooperation in AFN and eventually France, while France needed the Allies to liberate their country, while upgrading and modernizing their forces.

In a flash, “Rommel disappeared from the battlefield leaving behind him a terrain difficult to cross, one sown with minefields and ruins,” Juin remembered. “One realized that he was as diabolical in retreat as in the attack.”²⁶⁶ An 8 March circular was very critical of Allied operations in the Kasserine–Thala sector. The Luftwaffe wrought havoc on supply columns. Key blocking positions on the roads must be created quickly in mobile warfare situations because time wasted cost casualties. The first act must be to set out minefields to discourage tank attacks while preparing defenses. French defensive positions were poorly sited, not mutually supporting, easily outflanked, not covered by minefields, and not defended with tenacity. Above all, the report concluded, “the question of capitulation must be clearly understood . . . No able-bodied man who is armed and equipped to continue combat should surrender to the enemy. Even those who seem to be encircled must continue to resist and organize defensive positions. By acting with tenacity, they continue to impede the enemy. The situation might seem desperate, but it is never lost so long as men have heart, high morale, and arms to fight.”²⁶⁷ The problem is that this

report might have been written in June 1940, not March 1943. An undated American report made many of the same points.²⁶⁸ On 10 March, in the wake of the Kasserine débâcle and drawing on lessons from Guadalcanal, Eisenhower ordered an intensification of training, prioritizing live fire scenarios, aggressive patrolling, and night operations.²⁶⁹

Fortunately for the Allies, Kasserine proved to be the high-water mark of the Axis performance in Tunisia (Map 1.4). Rommel's attacks were running out of steam as his supply situation worsened, there were no worthwhile strategic objectives within reach in Algeria, and, finally, the approach of Montgomery and the British Eighth Army to the Mareth Line required Rommel's attention. By 23 February, Rommel had ordered a withdrawal from Kasserine. But his *tour de force* at Kasserine, however fleeting, had revealed Allied shortcomings on the command, operational, and tactical levels. In a belated effort to impose command unity, Eisenhower tapped British General Harold Alexander to act as his deputy and commander of the 18th Army Group, which would include the British First and Eighth Armies, and their attached American and French corps. Alexander's first job was to define a coordinated plan to terminate the Tunisia campaign by the 15 May deadline fixed at Anfa.²⁷⁰

American General Lucian Truscott feared that a combination of casualties and poor armaments would soon render French forces combat-ineffective. By early March, "Command Post Kléber" complained that French troops were exhausted, that their weapons were "worn out," and that morale hovered near rock bottom. Reinforcements requested since 15 February had failed to materialize, which left "five almost useless battalions . . . I'm obliged to take this into account in my tactical dispositions."²⁷¹ In a 20 March report, Colonel and future General Henri Lorber laid out the problems faced by his 3^e RTA in the hills to the north of Medjez-el-Bab. A lack of munitions had prevented his regiment from engaging in realistic training since June 1940. They lacked the numbers to cover their assigned sector, let alone constitute a reserve to conduct an "active defense." Nor had they been in place long enough to work out a defensive fire plan. The 3^e RTA lacked radios, reconnaissance, and close air support – even munitions and lubrication oil for its mortars and machineguns. For these reasons, his *tirailleurs* found it difficult to counter the "ceaseless infiltration and flanking" tactics of the Germans, who used electric torches and flairs to mark their phase lines, employed tracer bullets to adjust fire, and advanced behind artillery barrages. At least so far, the Germans had not brought up tanks. Nor, "surprisingly," had they sought to exploit their superiority to make a breakthrough.²⁷²



Map 1.4 Map of southern Tunisia.

Monty arrive!

Montgomery had formed a low opinion of Free French forces at El Alamein, declaring them “no good; I have had them once in battle and never want them again. I use them to guard aerodromes; they have no other value. Alex is very



Figure 1.4 Montgomery and Leclerc meet in Tripoli in January 1943. So expended was Leclerc's "Force L" after crossing the Sahara that they had to be completely reequipped by the British. (Photo by Keystone-France/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

good about it and keeps them away from me."²⁷³ This made his cautious embrace of Philippe Leclerc's "Chad Column," when he encountered it in Tripoli on 26 January 1943 (Figure 1.4), somewhat out of character. All the more so because Leclerc's tattered band of roughly 2,300 men had straggled across the Libyan desert in 543 barely serviceable vehicles. Along the way, Leclerc had filched a few oases from isolated and demoralized Italian garrisons, so that de Gaulle might use these outposts as bargaining chips to stake a claim on the Italian territory.

The meeting of Montgomery and Leclerc was hardly fortuitous, but had been networked through Cairo and General Harold Alexander. Leclerc's pitch to Montgomery was that *les forces françaises libres* sought a presence in the Tunisia campaign. Montgomery complained to his boss, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) General Alan Brooke, that he was being pressured to employ the French in some role. Leclerc's Chad column clearly constituted a charity case, but its small size made an upgrade feasible. Montgomery ordered them kitted

out in British uniforms, had new motors installed in thirty of their trucks, and ordered that they be issued sixteen anti-tank guns. Leclerc was given a command car, and Montgomery agreed to keep Leclerc supplied in petrol, food, and spare parts. Eighty sappers expert in mine clearing, an air liaison officer, and some jeep-mounted “Free Greeks” who called themselves the “Sacred Squadron,” commanded by a former Foreign Legionnaire under indictment for treason in Athens, were attached. From 12 February, the Gaullist banner in the Eighth Army would be carried by this 4,000 strong Force L (for Leclerc), although the British referred to it as the French Flying Column.²⁷⁴

In February, Force L had advanced to Ksar Rhilane (Ghilane) in Tunisia, an important crossroads that controlled the Ksar el-Hallouf Pass through the Matmata mountains and which Montgomery planned to use as a logistical base to attack the Mareth Line. On 9 March, the Eighth Army Chief offered to allow Leclerc to turn over the defense of Ksar Rhilane to a British unit, but the Frenchman insisted that, with air support, Force L could hold its own. On 10 March, beginning at 06:30, Leclerc’s men were attacked by around forty wheeled vehicles of reconnaissance units of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions backed by Stukas. Advanced French units gradually fell back on Ksar Rhilane, where, at 08:15, thirty RAF planes attacked the Germans as they halted to deploy their artillery. For the remainder of the day, the Germans attempted to turn the French flanks, but were repeatedly balked by the RAF. Alexander compared Ksar Rhilane to Bir Hakeim, where discipline, the use of maneuver by defending forces, and pre-registered artillery fire had combined with air support, all beautifully coordinated by radio communications, to frustrate the German attack. Leclerc even received a “Well done!” from Montgomery.²⁷⁵

“We Entered Tunis on the Tail of an Avalanche”:²⁷⁶

Phase III: 15 March–8 May

From an Allied perspective, the Tunisia campaign had been a costly and perfectly avoidable event. Yet, while it may be argued that the Allied effort had been poorly managed and protracted, ultimately the decision to fight at the end of a tenuous supply line proved a devastating one for the Axis. Despite the best efforts of Esteva and Rahn, German propaganda found little resonance among Tunisian Arabs, while attempts to mobilize Tunisia’s colonists resulted in humiliating failure.²⁷⁷ Berlin could not support both Stalingrad and “Tunisgrad,” while interdicting convoys on the Murmansk route. “If the forces committed, and lost, in Tunisia had been held back to defend Sicily,” Alan J. Levine speculates, “the enemy would have had a good chance of throwing back the Allied attack on the island.” Nevertheless, Axis reinforcements continued to trickle through cordons of Allied submarines and motor torpedo

boats thrown around Italian ports. Tunisia drove the penultimate nail into Mussolini's coffin, and formed the prologue to the break-up of the Axis. But no one on the Axis side, least of all von Arnim, could muster the courage to tell the two Axis leaders that a defense of Tunisia was a profligate waste of resources for an elusive strategic gain.²⁷⁸

On 14 March, after having been tirelessly lectured by Jean Monnet, Giraud announced that "constitutional acts, laws, and decrees passed after 22 June 1940, are declared null and void," while henceforth "Executive acts" would be promulgated by the "French Republic," and "in the name of the French people." Unfortunately, finding busts of Marianne to replace Pétain's portraits proved more challenging, as did the restoration of Crémieux guaranteeing Jewish citizenship.²⁷⁹ Meanwhile, not surprisingly, the situation in Tunis was moving in the opposite direction, with rampant inflation, a diminishing food supply, forced labor drafts, and Allied bombardments. As the war increasingly tilted against the Axis in Russia and Tunisia, any initial Muslim nationalist hopes invested in the possibility of Axis-led liberation evaporated.²⁸⁰

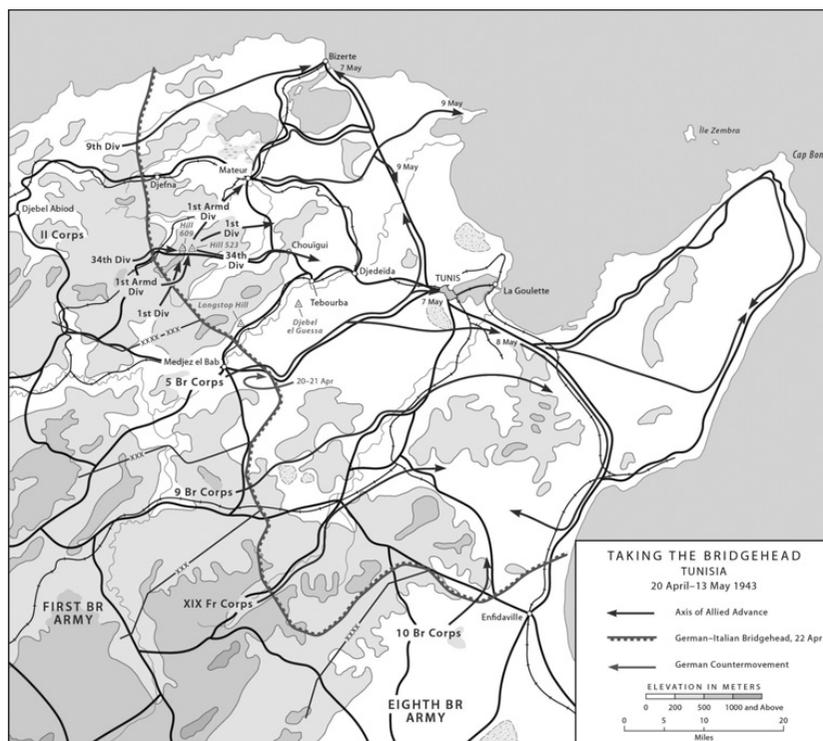
March also found the *Corps d'Armée Français* sandwiched between the British V Corps and the US II Corps to cover a sector that Koeltz protested lacked both sufficient troops and adequate armaments. French forces at the front numbered 72,802 according to Belkacem Recham, 50,601 of whom were North African Muslims.²⁸¹ On 5 March, Lapouge's unit, which, like most *tirailleur* regiments, was 90 percent Muslim before being "modernized" to US standards, was sent back into the line, despite that the fact that "half of our arms and matériel have been lost." But the Allied effort was gaining momentum: day and night, innumerable jeeps, trucks, and half-tracks, "bristling with anti-tank arms and radio antennae pointing toward the sky, full of pompous and colorful English, unkempt, laughing Americans, French, Senegalese, etc." drove at top speed along roads lined with munitions dumps, hospitals, tank parks, airfields, and motor pools, directed by "lighted road signs in all the Allied languages, [and] military policemen with immense white sleeves."²⁸² On 9 March, Rommel was recalled to Europe, bequeathing to von Arnim the honor of closing out a doomed campaign. Patton attempted to take advantage of the Battle of Mareth, launched by Montgomery on 20 March, to deploy his II Corps to reoccupy Gafsa on 17 March as a base to seize some of the passes on the Eastern Dorsal. An offensive launched on 27 March by the French XIX Corps backed by the 34th US ID toward Kairouan via Pichon and Fondouk slowly gained momentum, despite fierce Axis attempts to keep their north-south corridor open. The CFA found itself in the line next to General Manton Eddy's 9th US ID set to attack the 21st Panzer. Eddy took pity on them, and issued sub-machineguns to the NCOs and M1 carbines for officers, as well as some radios, jeeps, GMC trucks, and bazookas. He also attached two

sections of tank destroyers, M7 tracked 105 mm artillery pieces, and a company of engineers to the CFA.²⁸³

While Leclerc experimented with the formation of inter-arms combinations, Force L remained too undergunned to be of much use in main encounters. Therefore, on 19 March 1943, Montgomery attached them as flank guards to the New Zealand Division. Operation Pugilist, launched from 20 March, aimed to break through the Mareth Line, ironically built to keep out the Axis but now garrisoned by them, which the Germans had strengthened with additional minefields and a forward band of defensive posts.²⁸⁴ Only after a nine-day assault combined with a flanking movement by the New Zealand Division reinforced by an armored brigade and the King's Dragoon Guards, and Force L, did Messe withdraw from the Mareth Line on 28 March, to a blocking position on the Wadi Akarit. Alexander was keen to sever Messe's line of retreat. Leclerc's small unit continued to follow the British X Corps as it advanced through Gabès on 29 March.²⁸⁵

During 8–15 April, French and British troops, together with the 34th US ID, seized passes in the Eastern Dorsal. However, they failed to block the retreat of Axis troops under Messe who, pushed out of the Wadi Akarit, fled north through Enfidaville. As a consequence, the Franco-American attack ran into the flank of Montgomery's Eighth Army, which took Sousse on 12 April. The Fifth Panzer Army was down to three infantry divisions, each of only four or five battalions. Messe had at his disposal six infantry divisions, all bled white by previous combats, plus the 15th Panzer, which had practically no tanks, and the three-division Afrika Korps under General der Panzertruppe Hans Cramer.²⁸⁶ Von Arnim issued orders condemning "rumor-mongering" and "defeatist opinions," an indication of teetering Axis morale. Arabs did a brisk business selling safe conduct leaflets dropped by the Allied Psychological Warfare Bureau to Italian soldiers, who would sheepishly hand them over to Allied guards as they entered POW cages in the middle of May.²⁸⁷

While this Axis agglomeration was significantly reduced in firepower, von Arnim's roughly 250,000 soldiers nevertheless occupied a formidable position in Tunisia's hilly headland along a 130-mile perimeter running between the Mediterranean in the north to the Gulf of Hammamet in the east, along a line from the north coast west of Mathur – Jebel Fkirine – to a position north of Enfidaville. On the left, at Eisenhower's insistence that all four American divisions be given a role in the final push, II Corps, which had quietly been transferred from Patton to Omar Bradley's command, shifted north. With the CFA, it would strike through the difficult country around Mateur toward Bizerte.²⁸⁸ The First Army would punch up the Medjerda Valley, Koeltz's XIX Corps made up of Conne's *Division de marche d'Alger*, Boissau's from Oran, and Mathenet's *Division de marche du Maroc*, plus Le Couteux's armored group with their Valentine tanks and US-supplied vehicles would



Map 1.5 The end of the Tunisia campaign.

apply pressure from Pont du Fahs, while the Eighth Army would tackle the hilly terrain north of Enfidaville (Map 1.5). The Allies had amassed overwhelming air superiority. Front lines reported a growing number of duds – as high as 60 percent – among incoming German artillery rounds.²⁸⁹ Nevertheless, in Juin's view, the terrain offered only narrow corridors of attack that discouraged concerted armored thrusts.²⁹⁰ Speculation swirled about how well the Eighth Army, accustomed to open armored maneuvers in the desert, would perform in the broken terrain of northern Tunisia.²⁹¹ Secretly, many hoped that the “noisy and over-confident” desert soldiers, who treated their First Army comrades “as a parade-ground army, beautifully equipped but not much good at fighting,” and Monty, who descended upon Tunisia like the Second Coming, might embarrass themselves.²⁹²

The offensive against the final Axis stronghold kicked off on 19 April. Anderson's objective was to pressure von Arnim to throw in his reserves.

Fighter swarms guided by radio direction finding and ground control intercepts found, illuminated, and attacked Axis vehicle convoys, bombed and strafed airfields, and shot down any Axis fighters that dared contest them. Axis supplies dwindled rapidly as Allied bombers equipped with air-to-surface radar picked even the smallest ships off the surface. Incredibly, Axis troops continued to arrive to support a losing enterprise – 30,000 men, 1,861 tons of fuel, and 1,114 vehicles in March alone. But round-the-clock air attacks inflicted considerable damage, as did attacks on Luftwaffe bases in Sicily. Planes could no longer be repaired in Tunisia. Operation Flax, guided by Y Service tactical radio intercepts, which tracked routes and flight times, resulted in what Robert Ehlers calls “an aerial massacre,” in which 432 Axis planes, mostly transports, were shot out of the sky in exchange for 35 Allied fighters. “Along with Stalingrad, this broke the back of the German air transport force for the rest of the war,” concludes Ehlers.²⁹³

The CFA was assigned to cover the left flank of Omar Bradley’s II Corps, whose role was meant to be a diversionary one in an attack on a 15–20-mile front on the scrub-covered hills and escarpments that dominated the way to Matheur, and Bizerte beyond. The three battalions of Magnan’s CFA and the 4th and 6th Tabors of Moroccan *goumiers*, or goums, were to open *piste* 11 along the Sedjenane River, which was blocked by the 10th Bersaglieri and the German 962nd *Afrika* Rifle Regiment, a disciplinary unit. *Goumiers* fanned out over the hills to prevent surprises. Attacks went ahead on II Corps’ front from 23 April, with the French and Americans from the 9th US ID’s 60th Regimental Combat Team (RCT), shooting blindly into foliage still thick from the winter rains. German anti-tank guns took out three tank destroyers, while engineers struggled to defuse the tangle of mines that made roads impassable. Valleys that were heavily mined and easily defensible from the hillsides had to be avoided, while seizing hills and ridgelines proved to be fastidious, deadly work. Mules kept the advancing soldiers supplied. The CFA counted 20 killed and 100 wounded. American casualties from mines and mortars were also high.²⁹⁴

By 25 April, just when it looked as if the attacks had stalled, it became clear that the enemy was abandoning its positions. “What euphoria to capture ground, to reconquer territory so recently lost!” Elgozy enthused. “The enemy abandoned a huge amount of matériel. One finds everything: machine-guns and condoms, staff plans and pornographic photographs, Bank of Tunisia bank notes and grenades, suppositories against hemorrhoids and tins of sauerkraut.”²⁹⁵ But the fighting was hardly finished. The French continued to push forward up the Wadi Sedjenane with the 9th US ID. Intense artillery fire had ignited fires that burned the underbrush, thereby exposing mines to be more easily defused by British and US sappers. Mines seemed to be the only thing that struck fear into the *goumiers*. The advance continued, but with heavy losses, which reduced the CFA to two battalions. On 30 April, as Foreign

Legionnaires celebrated Camerone, the CFA advanced 15 kilometers. On that day, Mussolini sent a desperate plea to Hitler that unless the Tunisian redoubt could be bolstered, their fate would be sealed. Even as late as 4 May, *Il Duce* and Kesselring were still making plans to reinforce the Tunisian bridgehead.²⁹⁶ While the British had expected little out of the II Corps front, it was II Corps with the CFA that had made the most progress. By 1 May, Axis counterattacks had been bloodily repulsed, and their control of Matheur hung by a thread. Bradley considered making a rush on Bizerte, but feared that von Arnim might pinch it off by concentrating reserves from the stalled First and Eighth Army fronts. Bersaglieri had begun to surrender in droves, often when they saw that they had been surrounded by *goumiers*. “Nothing is more pathetic than these Italian reunions between Italian POWs and Italians in the CFA,” remembered Georges Elgozy. “No animosity on anyone’s part, just a profound shared sadness, almost always cordial.” In contrast, German POWs “overflowed with disdain and hostility,” unless they were Poles or Czechs, who invariably claimed to have been dragooned into the Wehrmacht.²⁹⁷

On 26 April, Montgomery complained that Anderson’s final offensive boiled down to a “dog’s breakfast” of piecemeal attacks, and urged him to pick up the pace.²⁹⁸ But, by 1 May, Axis forces were down to seventy tanks, only four of which were Tigers. Munitions were in short supply, when not totally exhausted, as was petrol. In the final offensive, the CFA was to mount a diversion to persuade the Axis to commit their remaining reserves. A follow-up attack on 3 May advanced behind bulldozers, air attacks, and rolling artillery barrages that leapt forward 100 meters every 3 minutes. But the exercise was hardly casualty-free – for instance, the second battalion of the 3rd Foreign Legion Infantry Regiment registered 170 casualties on 4 May, mainly due to efficient Axis artillery fire, which the French lacked the guns and air spotters to counter. In fact, until the end, the fighting continued to be difficult, and minefields posed a constant threat. At 03:00, the British kicked off Operation Strike, which moved along the Medjez-el-Bab–Tunis road behind a barrage of 442 guns and a significant tactical air input, which caught von Arnim by surprise, and opened the road to Tunis for the British 7th Armoured Division. The next day, the 47th US ID cleared the road into Bizerte. Allied pilots reported the skies empty of Axis planes. Von Arnim ordered his remaining troops to retreat to the Cape Bon peninsula. The CFA, having taken 345 casualties since 23 April, including 131 killed in action (KIA), were given the honor to be the first into the city, raising their flag over the Fort d’Espagne on the north edge of the harbor at 07:00 on 8 May. “No town I had ever seen in the war had ever been knocked flat,” wrote Moorehead. “But Bizerta [sic] was the nearest thing to it. Some buildings were turned upside down. The roofs had fallen to the floors and the floors had been blasted up against the walls. Fire had done the rest.”²⁹⁹ Arab looters in Tunis ignored German cannon and sniper fire that continued from the

rubble, until silenced on 9 May by US tanks. The 1st Battalion of the CFA was subsequently lauded by Giraud in army orders as a “magnificent unit of energy and undisputable warrior courage. It was barely organized before being engaged, and gave proof from the beginning of its splendid qualities.”³⁰⁰ While most of the CFA were proud of their unit’s performance, Magnan complained that it had lacked audacity. Nevertheless, Axis troops continued to resist the French forces south of Tunis around Pont du Fahs and Zaghuan. On 9 May, the last Ju 52 lifted off the runway at El Aouina, with mechanics wedged into the fuselage behind the pilot’s seat, and paratroops lashed to the undercarriage.³⁰¹ The airfield that had offered Axis access into Tunisia in November 1942 had been transformed into a scrapyard of smashed aircraft. Even the runways were deserted, the Germans having concealed their surviving aircraft under the trees. The remnants of the Fifth Panzer Army – about 40,000 men – surrendered. On 11 May, orders came for troops to contact German and Italian units that were still resisting. But the subsequent ceasefire came too late for Caleb Milne, who was wounded by a mortar round near Enfidaville as he tended one of Leclerc’s wounded legionnaires. He was lifted by three Spanish Civil War veterans to the dressing station where he died that afternoon.³⁰² Kampfgruppe Pfeiffer of the Deutsche Afrika Korps entrenched at Zaghuan asked specifically that no reprisals be taken against French who had fought for the Axis. While even the French acknowledged the pro-Axis sentiments of Tunisia’s Muslims, few had proved keen to enlist. At campaign’s end, 43 Frenchmen from the *Légion tricolore*, including 2 officers fighting in German uniform, and 221 Muslims from the *Phalange africaine* or the Arabian Legion, who seem to have been recruits from the Levant, were captured. French reports concluded that most of the Muslims were unemployed men who had been impressed by the Germans or by French police as labor troops. As punishment at the end of the campaign, most were subsequently enlisted into *tirailleur* units and sent to Italy.³⁰³ Von Arnim destroyed his communications center and surrendered to the British V Corps at 07:30 on 12 May. On 13 May at 13:32, the last German radio station in Tunisia went off the air, marking the eclipse of the era of German mobile warfare. Messe evaded capture by the third battalion of the 1^{re} RTA, preferring to surrender to the British.³⁰⁴

By 9 May, Tunis was in full celebration. “The French soldiers who came in were nearly smothered in kisses,” wrote Moorehead. “Staid old French dowagers leaned over the balconies and screamed ‘Vive de Gaulle!’ – they had not yet heard about General Giraud, and our propaganda units were busy plastering the town with coloured posters showing Giraud’s features. The V sign, enclosing the Fighting French Cross of Lorraine, was being chalked up everywhere . . . Tunis still had food and liquor of a sort and the troops made pretty free with it.” This was presumably an oblique reference to the soldiers of the 1st US ID who, in Omar Bradley’s estimation encouraged by their

unmanageable division commander Terry Allen, “had left a trail of looted wine shops and outraged mayors” in Tunisia. Italian troops changed into civilian clothes, or proffered their safe conduct leaflets as they entered POW cages. Many German troops, surprised by this unexpected break-in of Allied troops, watched the spectacle from cafes, or stood around in groups with rifles slung, mingling with liberated British POWs, providentially rescued from shipment to *Stalags* and *Oflags* in Europe. On the outskirts, engineers hastily erected barbed wire pens to contain tens of thousands of Axis prisoners. France’s share of this human booty was 16,040 Germans and 41,837 Italians, modest compensation for the million or so French POWs still held in Germany. In fact, they proved to be just more useless mouths to feed, and bodies to clothe. A search for POWs from Alsace-Moselle began, but some had already been shipped off to the United States. Axis POWs found a modest amount of consolation in the fact that they nevertheless had outfought the Allies and had been overwhelmed by Allied matériel superiority.³⁰⁵

Giraud congratulated Eisenhower on his victory in Tunisia, but was especially appreciative to the Allied commander “for publicly recognizing the fighting qualities of the French Army in Africa. (Same is true privately),” noted Butcher. On 29 May in Algiers, Giraud bestowed a *Légion d’honneur* on Eisenhower in a “sentimental” ceremony, a decoration which Eisenhower vowed he would not wear until “the two men met again in Metz.”³⁰⁶ This declaration would come back to haunt him when Eisenhower clashed with de Gaulle and Leclerc over Ike’s order to abandon Strasbourg in December 1944. Initial contacts were made between Giraud and Catroux to establish a committee to coordinate the French war effort.³⁰⁷

One thing that Tunisia had accomplished was the reintegration of the rebels of 8 November into the fold of *l’armée d’Afrique*. Mast was initially named as Tunisia’s new resident general. However, because he was “indisposed,” Juin accepted Mast’s job. Magnan was promoted to general and named to command Bizerte, and eventually to organize the 9th Colonial Infantry Division (9^e DIC), much to the chagrin of Monsabert, who had coveted that job.³⁰⁸ With considerable difficulty, on 4 February 1943, Giraud had persuaded Koeltz, who had told Monsabert to his face that he had “destroyed the bonds of goodwill” in the army, to give Monsabert command of a couple of tired battalions. These would eventually be upgraded into an American-refitted 3^e *Division d’infanterie algérienne* (3^e DIA), a stellar *armée d’Afrique* division that was a long way from the improvised CFA. “It’s a magnificent command!,” Monsabert enthused. “It’s the beginning of a grand dream.”³⁰⁹ Monsabert would lead this division in the breakthrough at Monte Cassino in May 1944, where he would earn the nickname of “the Butcher of the Rapido (River).”³¹⁰

Retribution

Louis Xueref, a lycée student in Tunis in November 1942, recorded that Italian troops had been welcomed with open arms by Tunisia's large Italian population, to the point that "Lots of young Sicilian girls wore red skirts that they fashioned out of the waistbands taken from the Senegalese barracks at la Goulette. Compared with the Germans, the Italians looked like soldiers out of an operetta, and we readily denounced their cowardice."³¹¹ But, by 2 April 1943, Barré reported that the initial arrogance of Tunisia's Italians was on the wane.³¹² Nevertheless, Axis POWs marched through Tunis in May 1943 were given food and cigarettes by a sympathetic population. The campaign's aftermath would also witness a bitter if relatively brief settling of scores between French and Italian settlers – an estimated 500 shot and 5,000 imprisonments. Rahn had evacuated French and Muslims most compromised in collaboration in April, especially those who had made radio broadcasts. Fearing that he might become a new Giraud, on 7 May, on von Arnim's orders, Esteva was evacuated under protest from El Aouina to the Ritz Hotel in Rome.³¹³ He was captured in Paris after the liberation. Esteva's March 1945 court martial charged the former Resident General with aiding the enemy, including employing the SOL to reinforce the gendarmerie to maintain internal order and dismantle Allied intelligence networks. Like Derrien, Esteva's "double game" defense failed to impress the court. He was stripped of his rank and condemned to life imprisonment at hard labor.³¹⁴

"If Esteva wasn't a traitor, then traitors don't exist," declared prominent communist writer Claude Lecompte, who wrote under the name Claude Morgan.³¹⁵ But there was considerable sympathy after the war in the French old-boy network for high Vichy officials like Esteva who, in de Gaulle's exculpatory view, were "led astray by a false discipline, found themselves complicit, then a victim, of a harmful enterprise."³¹⁶ The notion that Esteva, like Derrien, had been a "victim" of Vichy, rather than a facilitator of collaboration and perpetrator of its racialized dogmas, provided the rationalization for Esteva's 1950 amnesty, which preceded his death by only a few months. The problem for France's colonial proconsuls like Esteva was that both the Axis and the Americans through the Atlantic Charter deployed ideology to radicalize imperial populations and expand war aims. In the view of Notin, Juin's defense of Esteva can be explained by the fact that the French commander's primary concern, as a *français d'Algérie*, was that any sign of hesitation or weakness in the French leadership "would have meant the immediate collapse of the French administration, anarchy, the pillage of our compatriots and probably the confinement in concentration camps of the families of soldiers and administrators."³¹⁷ According to this reasoning, by collaborating with the Axis, like Admiral Decoux in Indochina, Esteva had sought to preserve the empire. With the

exceptions of Catroux, Eboué, and a handful of others who were economically dependent on the British Empire or vulnerable to Japanese encroachment, the fragility of the French imperial mandate no doubt caused French officials to seek security in Vichy continuity and “the wisdom of the Marshal.” It also explains the reluctance of the invading Allies to apply the Atlantic Charter mandate to sweep up the collaborationist French administration.³¹⁸

Conclusion

One of the arguments of post-war pro-Vichy revisionists was that the 1940 armistice ultimately had benefited the Allies, because it had kept North Africa free of Axis control, and preserved *l'armée d'Afrique* and the empire which would constitute France's main wartime contribution to Allied victory. This made Torch, not Stalingrad, the major turning point of the war.³¹⁹ Of course, this ignored Vichy's open door to the Axis in Syria in 1941, the Paris Protocols, and the fact that, when “invited” by Darlan to rally to the Allies, Vichy's fleet elected instead to scuttle. Tunisia also demonstrated that “defense against whomever” targeted the Allies, not the Axis.

Tunisia had always been Torch's wild card. The Allies had bet that they could reach Tunis ahead of Axis forces. However, distance, combined with Darlan-instigated delays in Algiers that sought to wring concessions out of Hitler to lighten the burden of occupation, further muddled an intentionally confused French command structure. Confronted not with an Allied invasion, but with an Axis riposte, commanders in Tunis and the Constantinois found that orders failed to arrive, or were by intention vague, confusing, contradictory, and constantly churning because they were issued by a timorous command whose goal was to avoid responsibility and blame. While Juin dissembled, Mendigal withdrew his planes to southern Algeria, and the navy predictably opted to follow the directives of the Marshal. Hesitancy and delay at the top communicated confusion to subordinates, who were left largely on their own to take decisions. In a situation that combined uncertainty with pusillanimity, Axis forces were allowed to gain control of El Aouina airfield and the port of Bizerte, which even a moderate demonstration of resolution by French arms could and should have protected long enough until the arrival of Allied forces. So much for the “double game.” The result was that the Anglo-Americans lost the race to Tunis, and were forced to fight a campaign in Tunisia that they had hoped to avoid.

Without a doubt, the decision by the Axis leaders to defend Europe from North Africa had proven a serious miscalculation. “Tunisgrad” cost the Axis 238,000 “unwounded” POWs – 18th Army Group claimed 244,500 – as well as “vast quantities of war materials of all kinds,” wrote Butcher, “including 1200 guns of all types, with at least 150 88-mm, not to mention 200 tanks, mostly

German, and aircraft in serviceable condition. In the II Corps area there were huge dumps of ammunition, as well as a million rations of food."³²⁰ Between 8 November 1942 and 7 May 1943, 1,696 Axis planes had been lost in combat and another 633 had been captured on the ground, largely because the Axis lacked spare parts, vehicles, or petrol to fly them home. The German POWs taken in Tunisia included a significant number of skilled Luftwaffe mechanics and technicians. The Luftwaffe had committed 40 percent of new aircraft production to the Mediterranean. The grand total for Tunisia was of 2,329 Axis losses against 657 Allied planes. The Italian navy and merchant marine had suffered catastrophic losses in their attempt to supply the Tunisian bridgehead. In the process, the Allied air forces had worked out a ground support system that they would carry into Sicily, Italy, and France.³²¹

In many important political respects, "Tunisgrad" proved more consequential for the Axis than was Stalingrad – Hitler forfeited a continent, while guiding Mussolini's regime to the cusp of collapse. Both contributed to the slow-motion disaster rolling toward Berlin: by May 1943, the Luftwaffe had been destroyed as an effective force, while the U-Boot challenge had been broken in the Atlantic, allowing a virtually unimpeded flow of US troops and material into the UK and the Mediterranean. Allied bomber forces were achieving the mass and geographical position that would allow them to attack almost unimpeded. There is some indication that, by March 1943, Hitler had begun to understand that his ally's future was at stake in Tunisia, which is why he continued to reinforce his shrinking African bridgehead. More surprising, however, was that, having lost a major support base and Vichy's *raison d'être* in AFN and AOF, as well as sacrificed their fleet, Laval and other collaborators at Vichy doubled down on their "Fortress Europe" bet, even as Hitler no longer had any reason to appease Vichy, and the Allies had proven that they could target amphibious operations to strategic effect.³²²

Despite a slow start, the costs of Tunisia to the Allies were comparatively light: American losses in Tunisia were 2,715 killed and 9,000 wounded, while the British First Army alone cited 4,439 killed and 12,500 wounded. But this does not include 21,363 missing, part of the 70,341 total Allied casualties according to Rolf.³²³ Axis forces later calculated 8,563 German and 3,727 Italian dead. But there were many missing or evacuated as wounded before the collapse. The French announced their losses in Tunisia as 1,105 killed, 8,077 wounded, and 6,982 missing, figures that the French official history rejects as a significant underestimate. The high number of missing in action (MIA) suggests a considerable – and continuing – morale crisis in French forces.³²⁴ According to one post-war calculation, it seems that French forces suffered 9,600 casualties, or 24 percent of the force of the estimated 40,000 French soldiers actually committed to combat. These high casualties were blamed in the main on the inadequacy of French training, arms, and

equipment.³²⁵ The greatest losses had occurred in the December–January fight for the Dorsal, and at Kasserine during 14–26 February.³²⁶

While Juin conceded that the British captured the honors of the Tunisia campaign, he also argued that the French contributions were nevertheless considerable, especially given their scant resources and the immense fronts that they were forced to defend. They had provided the initial “cover” on the Dorsal, under conditions of considerable hardship, that allowed the gradual Allied buildup. They had also actively participated in the fighting, the XIX Corps alone capturing 37,000 Axis POWs despite the fact that it constituted only a sixth of the Allied forces. This victory, in Juin’s estimation, “erased the memory of Dunkirk.”³²⁷ But the Tunis victory parade would showcase that the French still had a long way to go to recoup their status in the eyes of the Allies, the enemy, and their colonial subjects.