

# TAC NEWS

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## DECISION AT KASSERINE FEBRUARY 1943

Until the morning of February 19th, Rommel's counter offensive against the U.S II Corps in central Tunisia was going better than he expected. Encouraged by the poor performance of the American units outside of Faid in early February, German commanders wanted to take advantage of the American's inexperience and thinly held lines. Rommel's plan was nothing if not audacious, involving two separate thrusts through Tunisia's Eastern Dorsal. His first goal was to capture the key passes through the Western Dorsal, Kasserine Pass being one. From there he could either drive east into Algeria and capture the American supply center at Tebessa or north towards Thala and threaten the British 1st Army's lines of communication. Although Rommel believed that his final objectives might be out of reach, a spoiling attack might buy additional time for more Axis reinforcements to reach the Tunisian bridgehead. This would allow him to strengthen the Mareth Line positions facing Montgomery's Eighth Army, slowly advancing on his southern flank.

Rommel's plan was complicated by the convoluted command structure in Tunisia at the time. The 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions were presently under the command of General Hans-Jurgen von Arnim, commanding general of the 5th Panzer Army opposing Anderson's 1st First Army in northern and central Tunisia. The only mechanized divisions in Rommel's Panzer Army Afrika were the 15th Panzer and the Italian Centauro Armored Division, much too small of a mobile force for Rommel's bold plans. Von Arnim and Rommel were at cross-purposes with regards to strategy on the central Tunisian front. Von Arnim wished to concentrate his mobile forces for a more limited attack farther north to achieve a shorter envelopment of the British 1st Army. He believed that the German Armies in Tunisia did not possess the strength to fulfill Rommel's bold plan. On February 9th, the overall German Commander in the Mediterranean, General Albert Kesselring, met with both commanders to reach an agreement. Although Rommel's plan received Kesselring's blessing, he was overruled by the Italian

chief of staff, General Vittorio Ambrosio, who proposed a compromise plan.

The DAK Assault Group, commanded by General Kurt Leibenstein, would make the southern thrust, dubbed Operation Morgenluft ("Morning Breeze"), capturing Gafsa and continuing north to Kasserine Pass. The northern thrust, Operation Fruhlingswind ("Spring Wind"), was commanded by General Heinz Ziegler, Von Arnim's second in command with the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, driving west from the Eastern Dorsal and destroying U.S. forces deployed near Sidi bou Zid. From there the 21st Panzer would revert back to Rommel's command. Kesselring and Ambrosio were noncommittal about the next phase of the operation, waiting to see the results of the initial attacks. This indecision would prove costly.

Von Arnim's assault began in the early morning hours of February 14th, debouching from the Faid and Maizila Passes respectively falling upon an overextended tank battalion from CCA/U.S. 1st Armored Division and two infantry battalions of the 34th Infantry Division subordinated to CCA. Although both infantry battalions occupied fortified positions on Djebel Hamra and Djebel Lessouda, they were too far apart for mutual support and were quickly isolated. The three companies of the 3rd Battalion/1st Armored Regiment were outnumbered, outflanked, and overwhelmed by elements of three panzer battalions, including two platoons of Tiger Is and a battery of 88mm guns. Only seven out of the original 44 tanks of the 3rd battalion that started the engagement survived. Permission for the two infantry battalions to break out of the encirclement was denied, the reason being a counter-attack force was on its way to relieve them.

The counterattack force was assembled towards the northwest near Sbietla on the night of the 14th. Believing that only one under-strength panzer division was at Sidi bou Zid, Maj. Gen. Orlando Ward, commanding the U.S. 1st Armored Division, sent a force too small for even that.

The ill-fated counterattack began in the early afternoon of the 15th. 2nd Battalion/1st Armored Regiment led the way with a company of M3 GMC tank destroyers deployed on the flanks. 1st Battalion/6th Armored Infantry Regiment and two batteries of self-propelled howitzers mounted in halftracks followed. The American tanks advanced in parade ground formation and ran straight into a carefully laid ambush. Hit in the front by well-hidden anti-tank guns and on both flanks by tanks of 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, only four tanks of the 2nd Battalion, along with the armored infantry battalion and supporting howitzers, managed to escape. With any hope of relief gone, the infantry isolated on Djebel Hamra and Djebel Lessouda attempted to escape their encirclement under cover of darkness on the night of the 16-17 February. Most were either captured or killed, with around 1400 from both battalions ending up as POWs. The most notable of those captured was one Lt. Col. John Waters, commander of the 2nd Battalion/168th Infantry Regiment and George Patton's son-in-law.

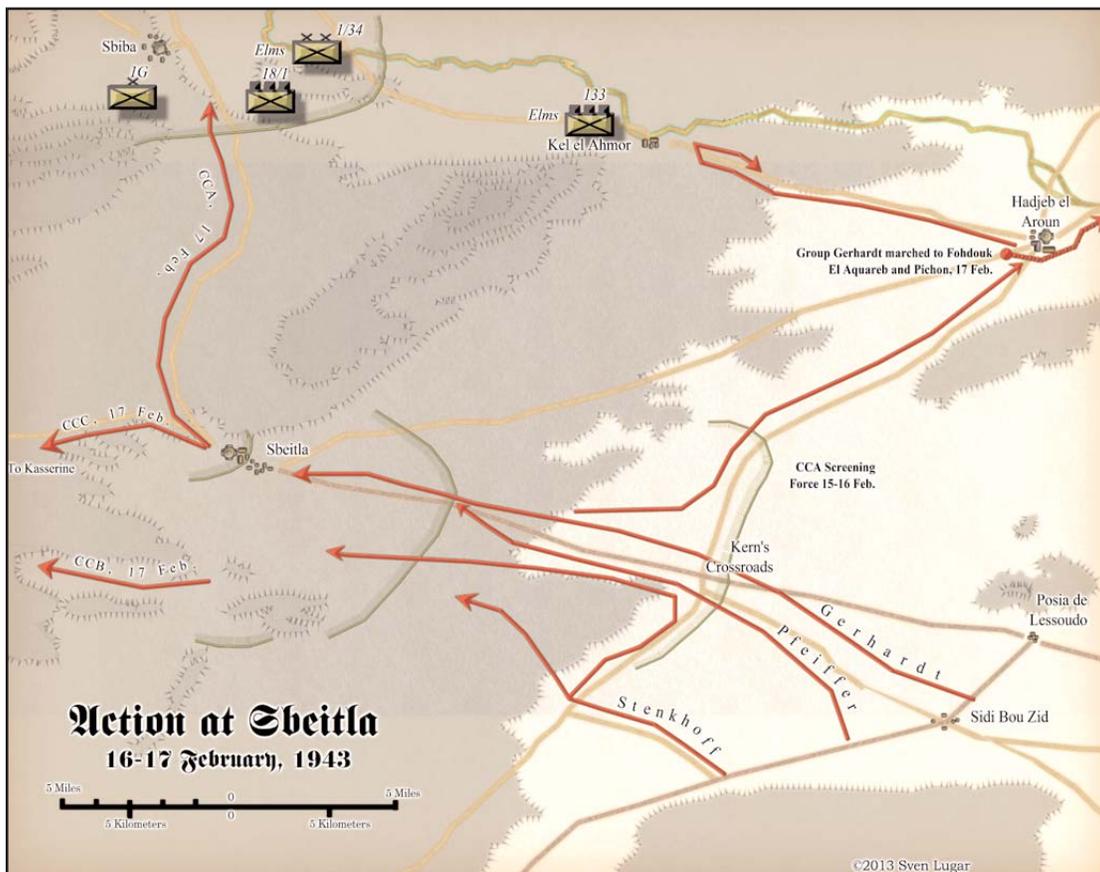
The subsequent concentration of CCA and CCB of the U.S. 1st Armored Division at Sbeitla was assisted by the need for the Germans to mop up the two U.S. infantry battalions and the vacillation of General Ziegler concerning his next move. Ziegler was wary of another American counterattack and sent only small detachments to probe the American lines east of Sbeitla to ascertain their intentions. When another U.S. counterattack failed to materialize on the 16th, Ziegler decided to press on to Sbeitla the next day,

prodded by a furious Rommel frustrated by the delay. At Sbeitla, many of the surviving units of the mauled CCA retreated even before the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions made contact. However, units belonging to CCB put a spirited defense, delivering a bloody nose to Ziegler's force and retreating in good order towards Kasserine Pass.

Operation Morgenluft started on February 15th with the DAK Assault Group and elements of the Italian Centauro Armored Division striking north from Gabes against slight resistance. Gafsa was occupied on the 16th after being abandoned by U.S. and French troops. Feriana and the Allied airfield at Thelepte were captured on the 17th. The fact that Von Arnim did not immediately exploit the successes achieved at Sidi bou Zid and Sbeitla disturbed Rommel. Von Arnim argued that he couldn't advance too far because the supply and fuel situation was tenuous at best. After capturing Sbeitla, von Arnim had sent the 10th Panzer Division north towards Fondouk and left the 21st Panzer at Sbeitla.

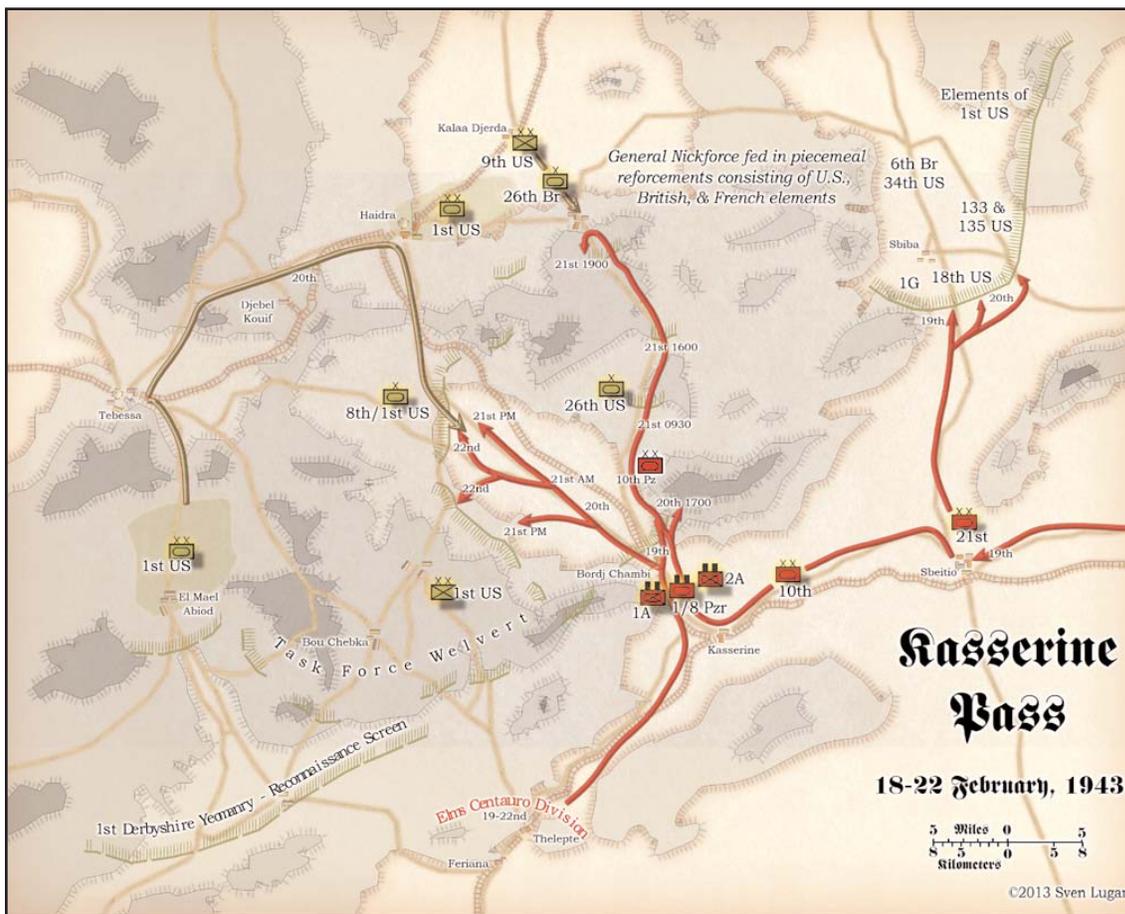
Rommel wanted to assemble all available Axis forces for a major thrust through Kasserine Pass. Once through the pass, he'd take the major Allied supply depot at Tebessa then push on to the coast at Bone. With luck, this northwestern thrust would get him behind General Anderson's British 1st Army, which would be trapped and annihilated. Rommel's plan depended on immediate action but, his superiors had to approve it first. Another day was wasted while Kesselring and the Italian high command mulled it

over. Rommel's proposal was given the green light under the code name Sturmflut ("Stormflood"), but it was a vague and watered-down version of the field marshal's proposal. Under Sturmflut, Axis forces were to push through Kasserine Pass before heading in the direction of Le Kef. Compared to Rommel's original plan this was a shallow, "half-hearted" envelopment of Allied forces. However, Rommel and had been given command of both 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions and, a drive on Tebessa wasn't specifically prohibited. He acted accordingly and directed 21st Panzer to advance due north towards Sbiba while the DAK Assault Group, Centauro Armored Division, and 10th Panzer Division were ordered towards Kasserine



Pass. Once through the pass he might have the opportunity to drive on both Tebessa and Le Kef.

21st Panzer attacked U.S. and British forces at Sbiba on the 19th. At Sbiba, the Allies had assembled elements of the British 6th Armored Division, the 18th Regiment/U.S. 1st Infantry Division, three infantry battalions from the U.S. 34th Infantry Division, three U.S. Field Artillery battalions, elements of two British anti-tank regiments, and some French detachments. Occupying high ground behind minefields, the Allied troops repulsed every effort to dislodge them. After two frustrating days of incurring heavy losses with nothing to show for it, 21st Panzer withdrew south late on the 20th.



Facing the DAK Assault Group at Kasserine Pass was "Stark Force", an ad hoc regimental-sized task force under the command of Colonel Robert Stark. Stark Force consisted of a battalion of the 26th Infantry Regiment (Colonel Stark's original command) and a battalion of the 19th Combat Engineer Regiment (rear echelon troops devoid of heavy weapons). Supporting units included M-3 GMCs of the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion, the 33rd Field Artillery Battalion, and one battery of 75mm guns from the French 67th African Artillery. The DAK Assault Group, now commanded by General Karl Buelowius after a mine wounded General Kurt Leibenstein, consisted of two separate Kampfgruppen as well as elements of the 33rd recon battalion. Kampfgruppe Menton consisted of two battalions of panzer grenadiers and two batteries of 88mm anti-tank guns. Kampfgruppe Stotten consisted of the 1st Battalion of the 8th Panzer Regiment. The DAK Assault Group could also call on one battalion of 105mm howitzers and one battalion of Corps artillery.

Colonel Stark deployed the majority of his forces along the lower slopes of the pass with most of his infantry and some of the tank destroyers occupying hastily built improved positions. Unaware of the American dispositions, General Buelowius' first attempt on the morning of February 19th to capture the pass was made by the 33rd recon battalion, attempting a *coup de main* by barreling down sides the

pass on either side of the Hatab River. The rain-swollen Hatab effectively divided the pass in two except at the bridge along the main road leading east to Tebessa. Intense American small arms, anti-tank, and artillery fire pinned down the German forces before they could close with the Americans. Stark Force easily repulsed this initial assault. Later in the day, Buelowius sent in Menton's two battalions of panzergrenadiers, along with Stotten's panzer battalion, with little result. The American defense of the pass was proving more stubborn than expected.

Rommel was not deterred. Units of the 10th Panzer and Centauro Armored divisions were due to arrive the next day. With these he would force the pass and advance towards Tebessa and Thala. However, Allied reinforcements were also on the way towards Kasserine Pass. British 6th Armored Division's 26th Armored Brigade had been arriving at Thala. Brigadier Dunphie, the 26th Armored Brigade commander, decided to intervene at Kasserine Pass after making a forward reconnaissance. However, 1st Army restricted him to sending a small combined-arms group comprising a company of motorized infantry, a squadron of 11 tanks, an artillery battery and an anti-tank troop. Lt. Col. A. Gore, commanding officer of the 10th Battalion, Royal Buffs, was placed in command. "Gore Force" arrived later on the 19th, taking positions on the north side of the pass, guarding Highway 17, the

Thala road. 3rd Battalion/6th Armored Infantry of the U.S. 1st Armored Division was sent to guard Gore Force's eastern flank.

Attacked late on the 20th by elements of the DAK Assault Group and 10th Panzer Division, Gore Force slowly leapfrogged back. It lost all its tanks in the process, but managed to rejoin 26th Armored Brigade 10 miles north on Highway 17. American positions in the pass were turned that same night by German units infiltrating the heights on either side of the American flanks, forcing the U.S troops to abandon their positions and flee westward. However, both Stark Force and Gore Force had delayed Rommel's advance by a day and, in doing so, bought the Allies critical time to organize a defenses further to the north and west of Kasserine Pass.

Following the breakthrough at the pass, the DAK Assault Group and Centauro Armored Division moved west along the Hatab River valley towards Tebessa. At Djebel el Hamra on February 21st, they ran into CCB/U.S. 1st Armored Division and 16th Regiment/U.S. 1st Infantry Division but could not dislodge them. A counterattack the next day by the U.S. forces drove the Axis forces back and netted over 400 prisoners. The same day 10th Panzer, personally led by Rommel, continued its advance north along the Thala road, overcoming addi-

tional blocking positions established by the 26th Armored Brigade. On February 22nd, 10th Panzers attempts to take Thala were thwarted by the arrival of British infantry and massed U.S. and British artillery. For Rommel the writing was on the wall. Stopped at Sbiba, Djebel el Hamra, and Thala and with supplies dwindling, Rommel elected to call off any further action and withdrawal back through the Eastern Dorsal. Allied units cautiously followed, reoccupying Kasserine Pass on February 25th. Sbeitla and Sidi bou Zid were retaken shortly after.

Following the Kasserine Pass battles, the commander of U.S. II Corps, Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredenhall was sacked and sent back to the States to a training command. Maj. Gen. George Patton was shifted from his command of the U.S. 1st Armored Corps in Morocco to command II Corps. Patton reinvigorated his demoralized troops through a combination of tough discipline, lively pep talks, and unannounced inspection tours of both front line and rear area troops. Patton's dynamic form of leadership soon restored badly needed self-respect and professionalism to the II Corps.

*George Chrestensen*

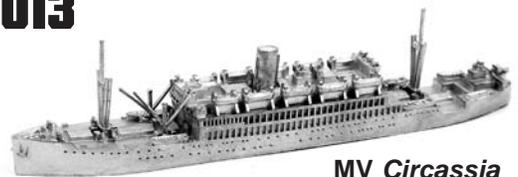
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