

# TAC NEWS

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## El Guettar: Patton's First Victory Tunisia - March 1943

**I**n March 1943, barely a month after the near disastrous battles around Kasserine Pass, the US 2nd Corps was placed under the command of General George S. Patton. Patton's predecessor, Maj. General Lloyd Fredenhall, had shown ineffective leadership during the Kasserine Pass battles and Eisenhower decided to replace him with someone more aggressive. The German offensive was eventually stopped by stiffening resistance among British and American forces, torrential rains, and Axis high command indecision concerning operational goals. 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 leadership soon restored badly needed self-respect and professionalism to the men of the 2nd Corps.

18th Army Group, under British Field Marshall Alexander, was now ready to employ Patton's troops for offensive operations. The 2nd Corps was tasked with attacking fortified Axis positions near El Guettar and Maknassy. These operations were intended to draw off Axis reserves opposing the British Eighth Army along the Mareth Line in southern Tunisia. Terry Allen's 1st Infantry Division was ordered to capture Gafsa, and advance eastwards while Orlando Ward's 1st Armored Division would cover their northern flank by threatening Italian positions near Station de Sened.

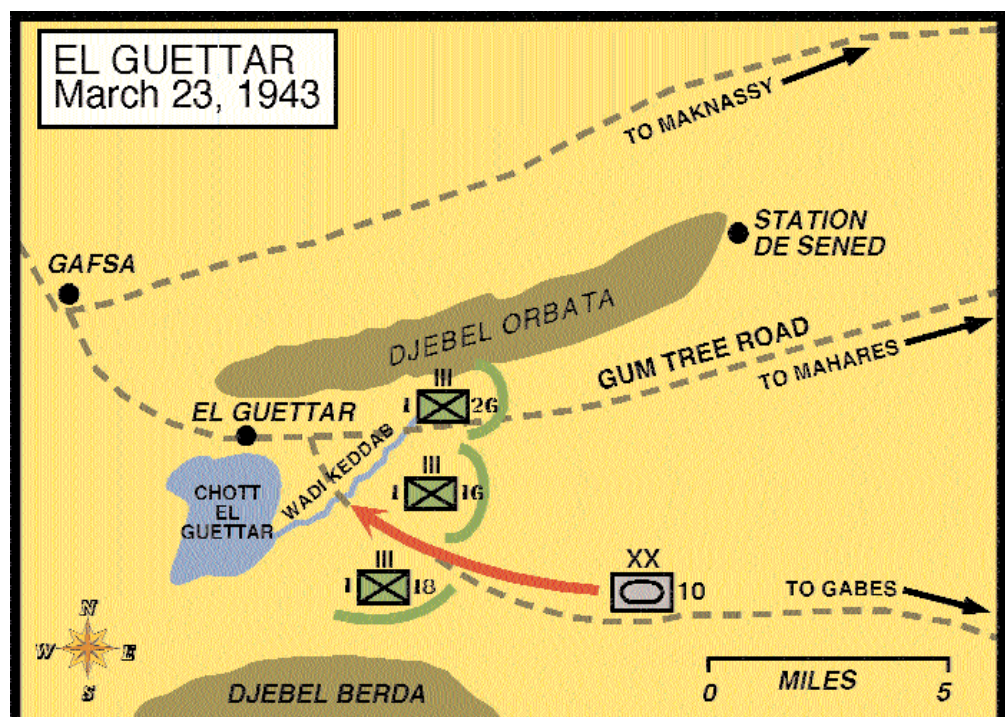
The American offensive began on a promising note with the capture of Gafsa on March 17th followed by an advance down the Gum Tree road towards El Guettar. The Italian "Centaurio" Armored Division opposed any further advance by holding the ridges between the two roads leading east from El Guettar, the Gum Tree Road to Mahares and the Gafsa-Gabes

road. An armored formation in name only, the "Centaurio" Division fielded only 23 obsolete tanks plus two batteries of Semovente assault guns. Libyans recently employed as anti-aircraft crewman manned the division's principal anti-tank unit, the 132nd Anti-tank Regiment. The main terrain feature dominating the two roads, Djebel El Ank, was captured on the night of March 20/21 by the 1st Ranger Battalion (Darby's Rangers) supported by 26th Regiment/1st Infantry Division. Sensing that the Italian defenses were beginning to crumble, Patton planned on continuing the advance until warned of an impending attack by the 10th Panzer Division aimed at El Guettar. 1st Infantry Division redeployed and prepared defensive positions to meet this impending German attack.

The 10th Panzer Division represented the only

available Axis reserve capable of opposing the U.S. advance. It had only recently been moved to Africa and a large proportion of the division had yet to arrive when it was ordered into action at El Guettar. 10th Panzer was able to field one full strength panzer battalion, part of another one, and several well-equipped formations of armored infantry, truck-borne infantry, and motorcycle troops. However, most of the division's heavy artillery support was still unavailable.

To meet the expected German attack, Allen's 1st Infantry Division was arrayed on a line running north to south. To the north was the 26th Regiment, abutting the southern slopes of Djebel Orbata and covering the Gum Tree road. The 16th Regiment held the ridges between the Gum Tree and Gabes roads facing the "Centaurio" Division. The 18th Regiment



held the ground south of the Gabes road with the 1st Ranger Battalion guarding its southern flank on the lower slopes of Djebel Berda. In the rear of the American position was the "Chott el Guettar", a large salt lake into which ran the Wadi Keddab. The "wadi" (a broad, steep sided, ravine) was designated as a final stop line and strengthened with minefields laid along its eastern edge. Positioned behind the wadi was the 601st Tank Destroyer Bttn, equipped with M-3 GMCs, and a company from the 899th Tank Destroyer Bttn, fielding the new M-10 tank destroyers, armed with a powerful 3-inch anti-tank gun.

10th Panzer's counterattack began at 0300 on March 23rd. German troops advanced westward at a deliberate pace with their tanks, assault guns, and armored panzergrenadiers forming a hollow square formation. Following close behind were truck-borne infantry units, which dismounted and followed the armored force closely. By dawn the Germans had penetrated the crease between the 16th and 18th regiments despite fierce American resistance. Two U.S. artillery bttns were subsequently overrun by German tank/infantry teams east of Hill 336 with heavy cost in American lives. It looked as though another American disaster was looming as the German spearhead approached the Wadi Keddab. It was here that the tide of battle shifted dramatically. American artillery, in conjunction with the guns of the 601st and 899th Tank Destroyer Bttns knocked out thirty German tanks while the minefields accounted for another eight. The 10th Panzer Div. pulled back several miles to the east and regrouped in preparation for another attack.

1st Ranger Bttn and elements of the 16th Rgt were shifted to reinforce the Wadi Keddab position and Allen's troops were fully prepared for the next German assault. Preceded by intense dive bombing attacks, German tank/infantry forces once more advanced westward towards El Guettar at 1830 hours. The 10th Panzer Division's afternoon attack fared no better than it's morning one. U.S. artillery fire crucified German formations and they were soon forced to call off this second assault. 10th Panzer retreated to the "*Centaurio*" Division's positions, which it helped to reinforce.

El Guettar marks the only engagement in the North African and Italian campaigns in which a fully assembled U.S. tank destroyer bttn was employed in stopping an enemy armored attack. Although the troops of the 601st and 899th Tank Destroyer Bttns were triumphant on March 23rd, the cost was high. The 601st lost twenty of the twenty-eight M-3 GMCs

engaged at El Guettar and the 899th lost seven out of ten M-10s engaged.

The U.S. II Corps had come a long way in remarkably little time. Just one month after Kasserine Pass, a reinforced U.S. Infantry Division had stopped the bulk of a German panzer division, inflicting heavy casualties. No other army that fought in the North African theatre, Allied or Axis, could claim a steeper learning curve than the Americans in the few short weeks following Kasserine Pass. The American "sword" had been forged!

The Italian 50th Special Brigade, a conglomeration of armor, recon, and infantry units, defended the approaches to Station de Sened, but was spread too thinly to offer much resistance. 1st Arm. Div's drive across the Maknassy Plain began on 20th March, after a 48-hour delay due to rain. The rain softened the ground and prevented the divisions armored units from deploying off road. 60th Regiment/9th Infantry Division, along with 1st Armored Division's Combat Command C (CCC), attacked Station de Sened from the northwest while Combat Command A (CCA) staged a "feint" attack along the Gafsa-Maknassy road. Rough terrain and minefields proved to be more of a problem for Ward's division than the Italian defenders, who abandoned their positions on March 21st and retreated eastward to Maknassy.

18th Army Group now saw an opportunity for Patton's II Corps to take a much more active role in the Tunisian campaign. Ward's division was ordered to seize the Maknassy Pass and raid the airfield complex at Mezzouna. Ward was now faced with a dilemma. With his division scattered about the Maknassy Plain, Ward had to decide whether to attack immediately with the forces at hand, or delay until he could gather his division. Ward decided on the latter course and didn't launch his attack until March 22nd. 1st Arm. Div., again aided by 60th Rgt, ran into stiff resistance from a scratch force of German troops under the command of Col. Lang. U.S. troops attacked Lang's positions over the next three days, but could not break through the carefully sited German defenses. The Maknassy Pass would remain in German hands until April 10th, when Axis forces finally evacuated southern Tunisia after the British 8th Army penetrated the Wadi Arakit line.

The British offensive began on March 26th with a wide flanking movement south of the main Axis defenses. Although Montgomery's forces skirted Axis defenses via the Tebaga Gap, most German and Italian formations managed to escape the British trap and retreat

in good order to The Wadi Arakit line. Field Marshall Alexander now ordered II Corps to resume offensive operations east of El Guettar, to coincide with Operation "Supercharge", which was 8th Army's attempt to penetrate the Mareth Line. He hoped that II Corps could break through at El Guettar before Axis forces established a firm hold at Wadi Arakit.

Leading the assault were Eddy's relatively green 9th Infantry Division and Allen's well-seasoned 1st Infantry Division. Kept in reserve was Task Force Benson, an ad-hoc task force comprised of units from both Ward's 1st Armored and Eddy's 9th Infantry Divs. 1st Infantry's mission was to attack along the Gum Tree road and eliminate Axis positions between it and the Gabes road. 9th Infantry was ordered to drive down the Gabes road and secure the high ground to the south. Patton's offensive started on the night of March 28/29. 9th Infantry's inexperience became apparent as assault units became lost in the dark due to hasty planning, poor maps, and rugged terrain. Most of Eddy's division was back to its start line by dawn. 1st Div's attack met with some measure of success but failed to capture Point 482, which overlooked the Gabes road in 9th Division's sector.

II Corps failure was disappointing, but Patton was not deterred. Task Force Benson was ordered to break through north of the Gabes road. Infantry regiments from both the 1st and 9th Infantry Divs would resume their attacks to cover Benson's flanks while their artillery units were massed in support. Patton's second thrust started on March 30th. By that time, German reserves had begun to arrive and resist the American attack. Panzergrenadier Regiment "Afrika" arrived on March 30th and the entire 21st Panzer Div. reinforced them the next day. Against such opposition, II Corps stood little chance of penetrating the Axis defenses. Still, it had drawn and held two panzer divisions from the Eighth Army's front at Wadi Arakit. For the next six days, the 1st and 9th Infantry Divisions continued to grind away at Axis positions dominating the Gabes and Gum Tree roads suffering high casualties with little to show for them.

On April 6th, Eighth Army began its assault on the Wadi Arakit line. Axis units abandoned their defenses the next day, leaving small rear-guard units and minefields to slow the British advance. That evening, patrol units from Task Force Benson and Eighth Army linked up along the Gabes road, heralding the final phase of the Tunisian campaign.

*by George Chrestensen*



## SPECIAL RULES

A. Optional rules to be used:

- 12.1 The Hot Shot!
- 12.2 The Communications Breakdown!

B. Minefield Destruction

Artillery may "neutralize" minefields. Any minefield is considered to have an "unarmored" defense strength of eight (8). Minefield markers are reduced in "concentration" each time they are "Eliminated" by artillery fire.

- A. "Defensive" minefields are reduced to "Standard" minefields.
- B. "Standard" minefields are reduced to "Hasty" minefields.
- C. "Hasty" minefields are "eliminated".

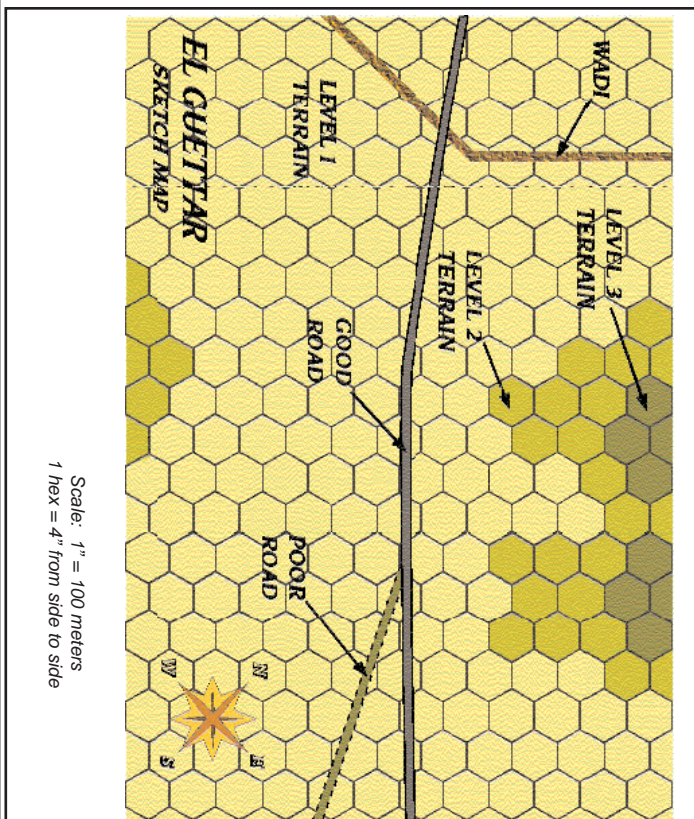
*Note: You are not allowed to attempt to remove any "S" or "D" markers a minefield suffers due to artillery fire during subsequent marker removal phases. (Minefields are not human beings and cannot "recover" or "rally!")*

C. Wadi Terrain Effects

The "wadi" is treated as "Rough Terrain 3" except that Lines-of-Sight are blocked only if a stand occupies the wadi. The wadi is 100 yards wide (1 inch). The good road crosses the wadi at the "Bridge". If two wreck markers are stacked together on the bridge, you must consider it "Blocked" and pay the "Rough Terrain 3" movement penalty if you wish to cross the "wadi" at this point.

## TERRAIN SUGGESTIONS:

- The map should be approximately 72" (East to West) x 48" (Northwest to Southeast)
- Terrain is "Open": Maximum sighting distance at ground level is 40"



## INITIAL DEPLOYMENTS

A. The U.S. Player deploys first. All U.S. units, including artillery stands, are placed on the table.

B. The U.S. player must locate all minefields within four inches of the east edge of the wadi.

C. U.S. units must be deployed at least 25 inches from the southeastern edge of the map.

D. The German player(s) may deploy units up to 12 inches from the southeastern edge of map.

E. The U.S. player(s) may plot indirect artillery fire for Game Turns 1 and 2.

(This must be done before any German units are placed on the map.)

## SCENARIO LENGTH: 15 TURNS

## VICTORY CONDITIONS:

German Victory:

Exit at least twelve (12) or more armed stands (empty truck, halftrack, or tractor stands do not count toward this total!) off the northwest edge of the map by the end of turn 15. Suppressed and/or Disorganized stands may be used to fill this requirement.

American Victory:

Eliminate 30 or more armed German stands before the German player achieves his victory conditions. Once again, empty truck, halftrack, and tractor stands do not count toward this total.

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3. Seek, Strike, and Destroy: U.S. Army Tank Destroyer Doctrine in World War II, Dr. Christopher R. Gabel, Combat Studies Institute, 1985.
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