

**ALAN MOOREHEAD** tells the story of  
the First Army's thrust for Tunis

# Gamble that failed by hours

## 25 GERMANS SEIZED SFAX

From ALAN MOOREHEAD: Tunisian Front, Friday

**T**HERE is nothing really to stop me walking through the cork-tree forest straight into the German lines tonight.

Yet here I sit in an alpine hotel, with a log fire and a number of young French women, wives of officers, dining imperturbably on a four-course meal.

The only sound I can hear is not gunfire, but a blood-hound baying in the valley.

Stranger still is the situation in Nazi-held Tunis and Bizerta, only half a day's drive from here through magnificent scenery along a macadam road.

It is agonising to hear how near we came to having both places in November without a fight.

There are about 100,000 French, 100,000 Italians in Tunisia, and there is no doubt whatever that the French were, and still are, wholeheartedly on our side.

### No Axis troops

When Roosevelt's Note was presented to the Bey of Tunis he showed no strong emotion whatever—he simply said he would have to show it to Petain.

Tunisia was ripe for taking. There were practically no Axis troops there at all—just a small Italian-German Armistice Commission living in the towns.

The French people rose magnificently for us, but they needed outside support and closer organisation.

Clearly the Germans were taken by surprise on November 8, even if they did suspect something. It was not until several days after the Allied landings in Algeria that Nazi troop-carriers began to roar down on Tunis and Bizerta airfields.

Even then they were bringing in only a few hundred troops daily. These seized the docks, airfields and municipal offices.

Twenty-five Axis soldiers took Sfax. Another 10 grabbed the gates to the south.

### Touch and go

The French, meanwhile, tried to block Tunis harbour by sinking ships in the mouth. They ran a great quantity of their locomotives and rolling stock across the border into Algeria (The French Director of Railways in Tunisia was shot by Nazis later).

All this time the Allies were coping with the mammoth job of getting Algeria and Morocco settled. It was touch and go for the Germans.

By the time Nehring arrived in Tunis the Axis just had enough strength to repel the first Allied troops, who by now had arrived at the gates of both major cities. In many ways the situation was a reflection of the close shave we had in the Nile Delta in July.

Frantically the Axis rushed reinforcements into Tunisia through November. Somehow they managed to remain just strong enough to beat off our increasing pressure.

Another aspect is that after one of the wettest winters on record last year, this winter, up to December, was exceptionally dry. Then, at a providential moment for the enemy, the rain came down and the countryside was impassable.

### Hard battle

From that moment the whole situation changed. The rain still falls. The Axis is reinforcing its narrow bridgehead with might and main.

It is no longer a question of surprise moves and lightning occupations, but one of battle, a hard, bitter battle with the most modern weapons in the world.

I am not allowed to discuss the future, but I must make it clear that we have got to fight hard from now on to win here, and many things can happen.

Equally, it is only fair to say that because Tunis was ripe it does not follow it could have been plucked by the Allied army which was already taking big chances in Algeria and Morocco.

Its fall last year would have been a magnificent surprise. You have only got to look at these huge mountains—the sheer, difficult distance—to understand.

### 200 miles a day

Just to get here from Algiers I have been motoring hard, with all the facilities of a tourist, for three days. There is going to be precious little tourist motorine in the weeks ahead.

I have been driving in the wake of the First Army. We drove more than 200 miles daily through mountains, without the slightest difficulty, but now that Tunis itself is almost in view we have come to a full stop.

Among the wet forests on the

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*Daily Express, January 16, 1943*