

## A LAST FIGHT FOR TIME

Speed of movement has been the outstanding feature of the long running fight between GENERAL MONTGOMERY and FIELD-MARSHAL ROMMEL, which began in the desert within the frontier of Egypt and is now moving to its culmination among the mountains of Tunisia. This is appropriate enough to the character of a campaign of which the gains and losses have to be reckoned, by the directors of grand strategy for the war as a whole, primarily in terms of time. In the present phase the famous Eighth Army, acting once more as the spearhead of attack in a concerted operation by all the forces of GENERAL EISENHOWER'S command, British, American, and French, has given yet another demonstration of its astonishing mobility. It is barely a week since the offensive was launched whereby GENERAL MONTGOMERY burst ROMMEL'S dam in the Gabès gap and overflowed into the open plain. Since then, meeting admittedly with little organized resistance, but overcoming the heavy difficulties of supply inseparable from a long pursuit on so great a scale, he has swept nearly a hundred miles to the north, annexed at Sfax and Sousse two considerable ports for the future use of the Navy, and herded the enemy before him to the confines of the last defensible position in Africa, the rugged peninsula of the Tunisian tip. This is pursuit in the grand style, as it has been practised by the same master all the way from El Alamein.

But if GENERAL MONTGOMERY is a master of speed, so in his different way is ROMMEL. Again and again in his long trek across Africa he has contrived to break off action at the moment of impending disaster, and escape, with heavy loss of material indeed, and with lavish expenditure of the little regarded Italian infantry, but with his main German formations still in fighting trim, to fresh positions far in the rear. He has done it again. He has been chased at headlong speed out of nearly half the constricted territory the Axis still held in Africa; but he has not been destroyed. It has been a most perilous retreat. As he fled across the plain from GENERAL MONTGOMERY'S direct pursuit, every gap in the mountains on his westward flank was being assailed by GENERAL ALEXANDER'S British and American troops of the Eighteenth Army Group, all threatening to break through in time to cut him off. In the event his flank guards, disputing the passes of Guettar, Maknassy, and Fondouk, succeeded in imposing just sufficient delay to let his main body escape, though the last of them at any rate suffered in the process severe losses of armour in its short-lived effort to bar the road to Kairouan. The upshot is, therefore, that, great as is the victory marked by the capture of 20,000 prisoners and so much material and territory, the Eighth and First Armies have fallen short of their further objective, which was to catch ROMMEL between them. They are now approaching Enfidaville. This is still short of the ridge running into the plain past Pont du Fahs, where it has been thought that he might elect to fight a rearguard action, or even make a prolonged stand.

Beaten and beaten again, as he has been in every pitched battle that he has faced since El Alamein, it is not to be denied that ROMMEL has served his country well in his fight for time. Now, however, comes the phase in which the allies may reasonably hope to make him pay, in the total destruction of his army, the utmost price for the time he has gained. It will not be easily exacted. Two courses are open to the enemy, either of which is likely to involve desperate fighting. ROMMEL may attempt an evacuation by sea, supplemented perhaps by air transport for some small part of his force, and covered by a delaying action based on the very strong natural positions still available to him in the Tunisian tip. Such an operation would cost him dear. He commands little of the resources that allowed of the rescue of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. He possesses neither of the elements of sea-power, being markedly inferior both on the surface and in the air. In those circumstances he could only dare to move by night; and that would present to the light craft of the allied navy the opportunity for which they have been waiting. The casualties to the fleeing army would be tremendous. On the other hand some part of it would escape.

To stay, and attempt to stand a siege in the fortresses of Tunis and Bizerta, is in the long run to sacrifice the whole: but in the mathematics of the German high command it might be held profitable to barter ROMMEL'S and ARNIM'S considerable armies for a little more time. If that is the enemy's decision, it is in his power to make the final phase of the African campaign the sternest of all. He has no lack of men. Though it is probable that a great part of the Italian contingent—whom ROMMEL at this stage seems to regard almost as

*bouches inutiles*—has ceased to exist in fighting formations, there are still about 150,000 left of the carefully husbanded Germans, including line-of-communication troops. In the much diminished perimeter they have to defend their freedom of manoeuvre will be severely restricted, and they will be dangerously crowded if they are forced back upon Bizerta itself. Their greatest difficulties are likely to be in the domain of supply: for this same air superiority is already taking heavy toll, both of ships and of the transport aircraft on which increasing reliance is being placed, along the traffic route across the Sicilian Narrows.

It is equally true that the organization of supply will present the principal problem for the allied commanders in preparing the final onslaught. They have overwhelming superiority of force, when it can be brought effectively to bear, by land, by air, and by sea—and the possibility is not to be excluded that at some stage the Navy might intervene with spectacular action. But they are still operating on exterior lines. The Eighth Army has come a very long way from its original bases. Although it will continue to draw upon the great accumulations of stores on the route by which it has come, it has the opportunity, after joining hands with the First Army, to make use also of the lines of communication to Algeria. So great a switch of bases is an unusual and intricate operation of war, but may contribute very usefully to expediting the coming attack. Once the interval has been surmounted which several times in this campaign has been shown to be necessary for reorganizing the supply lines after a long and rapid advance, the combined allied forces will be able to close in upon the narrowing hostile territory with a weight of compression that must in the end be irresistible. They will be

greatly helped when they can bring back into service the series of airfields they have captured in the Eighth Army's recent advance; the new power of bombing at close quarters, exercised by an air force that has already established so great a local ascendancy, may greatly shorten the resistance. It is not the issue of the siege--if the enemy decides to face it--that is in question, but only the duration. The battle of Tunisia is still a fight for time.

The events that are foreshadowed when ROMMEL'S capacity to hold back the sand in the glass is at last exhausted are manifestly perturbing the counsels of the Axis as much as they exercise the hopeful imagination of all the allied peoples. The influence of the prospect can be read in the pronouncements issuing from the recent meeting of the two dictators. In Italy especially the Fascist leaders, now themselves helpless in the trap into which they have betrayed their people, are gloomily preparing their dupes for early immolation. Their faith in themselves is long since shattered; and they have little expectation that their German masters can rescue them if they would.