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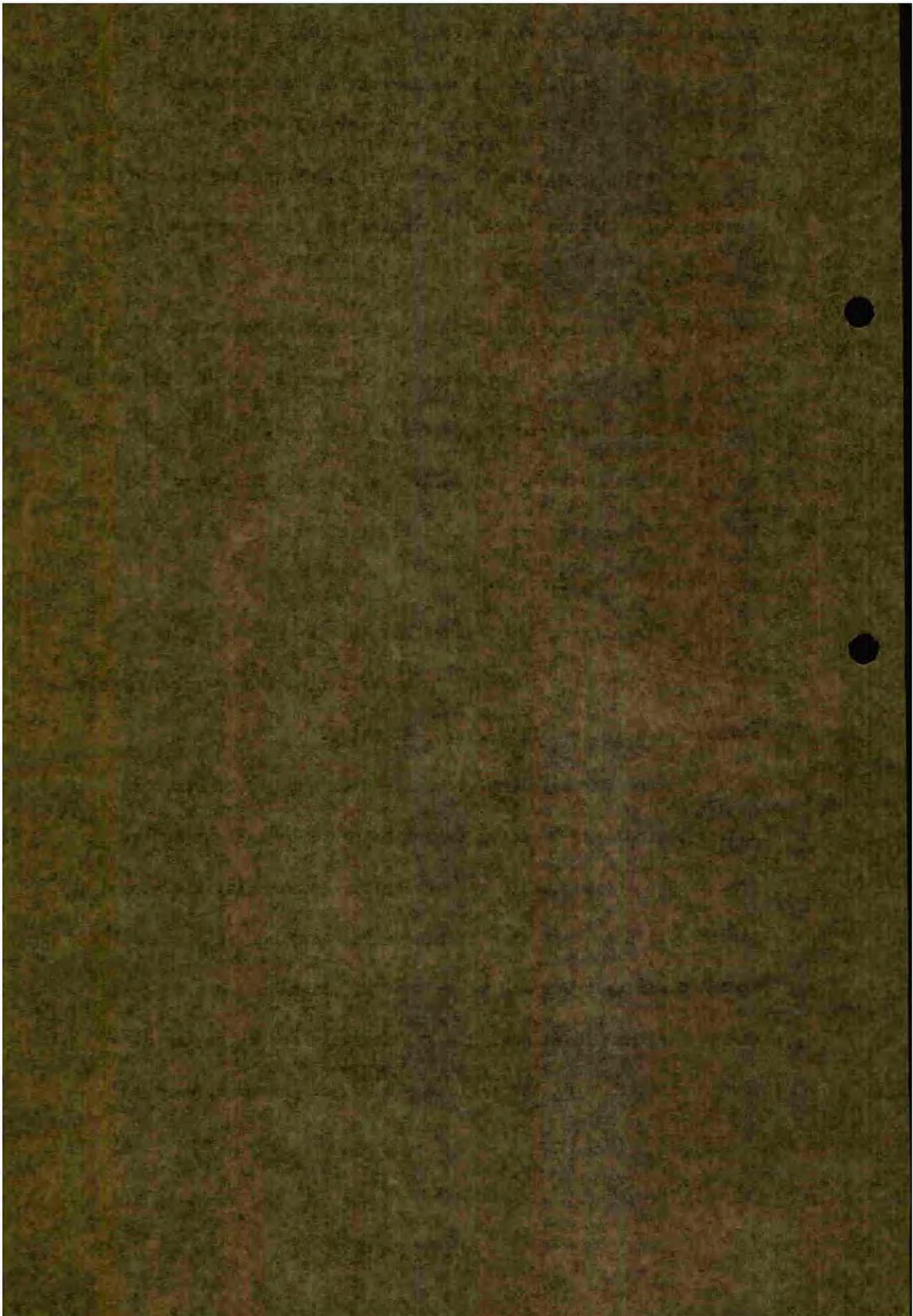
The complete ignorance of our own plans and the very obvious regrouping of the enemy forces made it mandatory to be extremely careful in the selection of attack objectives.

On 29 May, also, it was impossible to establish communications with the Panzer Army; several requests made to the air force signal liaison detachment, asking for information on the German ground forces' situation and plans, remained unanswered.

The surprise penetration of British tanks on the south flank of the Italian X Corps was characteristic for the confusion that reigned concerning the over-all situation. During this surprise thrust General Cruwell, who intended to fly to the Panzer Army headquarters in a Storch liaison aircraft, was shot down and taken a prisoner.

The difficulty of coordinating the Army's requirements for support with the Luftwaffe's capabilities became particularly obvious during the first days of fighting.

The Army had many wrong ideas on the procedures that had to be followed to carry out an *Blitzkrieg* operations order, even though the air units were ready for commitment. The ground forces failed to take into consideration how much time was needed to brief air unit commanders on the situation on the ground and in the air, and to disseminate and transmit orders to the dispersed air fields of the various squadrons. Moreover, armored



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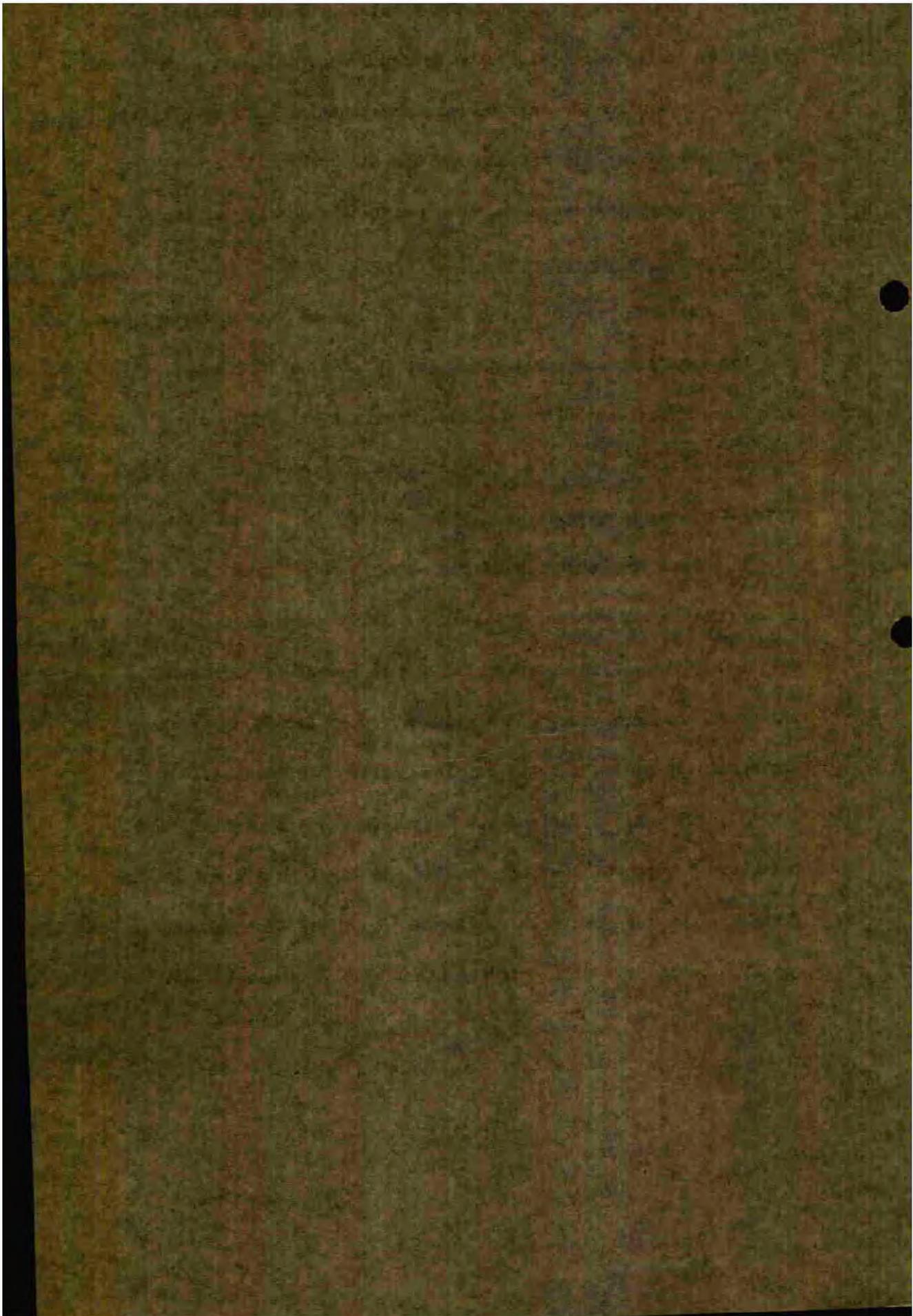
combat moves so fast that operations orders requiring air support usually arrive too late to be effective. Data transmitted via radio are therefore often outdated insofar as their tactical relevance to the enemy situation is concerned. One must emphasize in this connection that air operations conducted without complete ground combat intelligence imposed tremendous mental strain upon the air unit commanders, thus completely justifying the five times repeated breaking off of operations on 29 May.

On 30 May radio contact with the Panzer Army headquarters, the German Africa Corps headquarters, and the Luftwaffe signal detachment was reestablished, thus greatly facilitating the evaluation of the situation in the light of our own air reconnaissance results.

The enemy assembly of two strong armored groupings in preparation of a major battle was clearly identified from the air. The southern group was in the area east of Bar Harwat, while the northern group was slowly moving southward under the protection of tanks about 6 miles southwest of Acroma.

The main effort of the Luftwaffe was directed against these two groupings; the Germans flew 526 missions against them. These attacks were continued during the hours of darkness and repeated during the early morning hours of 31 May and 1 June.

The X Air Corps intensified the night attacks on El Adan and the Italians flew assaults on Acroma. The enemy



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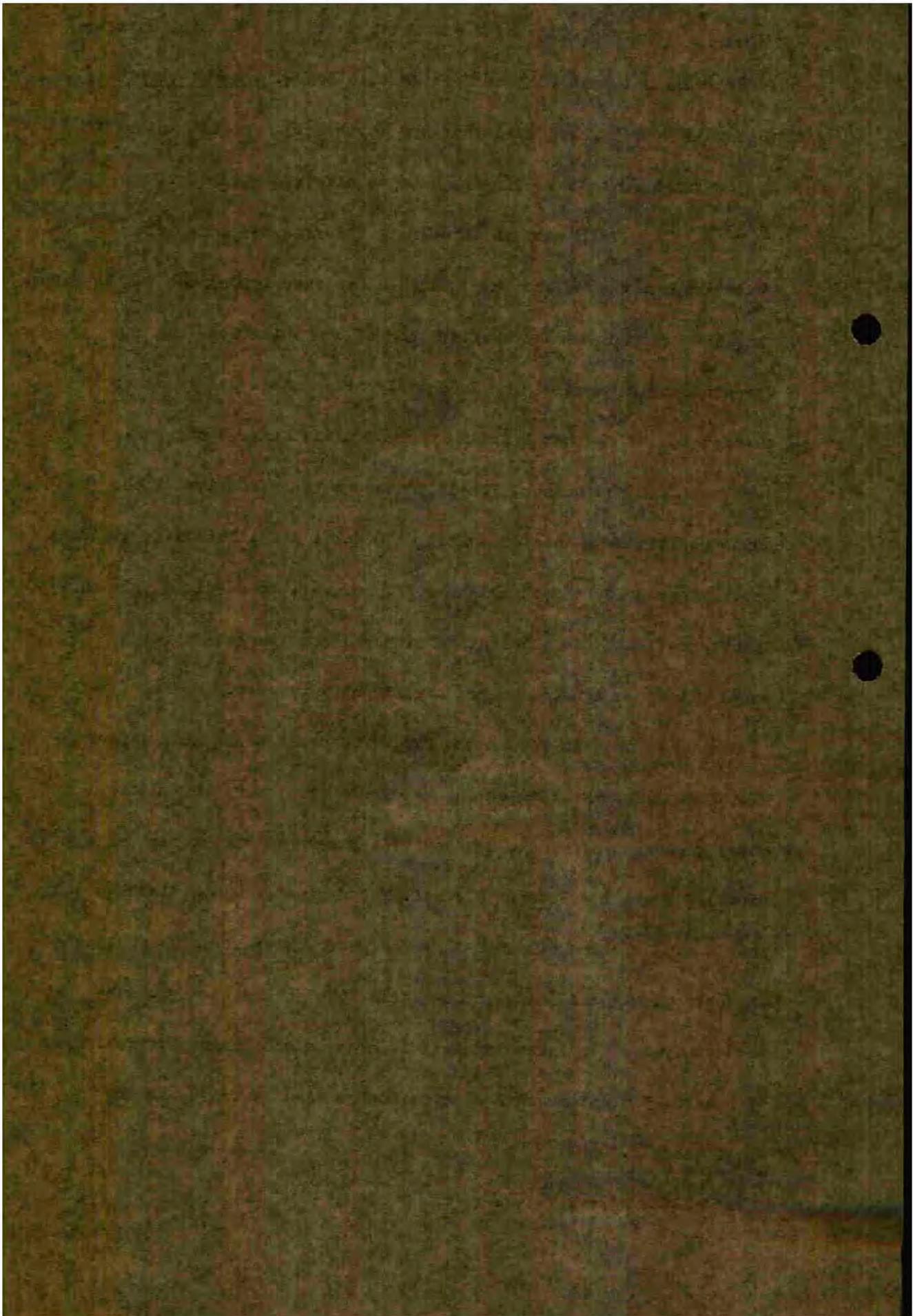
force that had been encircled near Ualeb was also softened up by dive bomber attacks.

The expected major offensive by the two British armored forces failed to materialize for the time being. Generaloberst (General) Rommel recognized that the intervention of the Luftwaffe had contributed to the over-all success hitherto achieved.

As Field Marshal Kesselring informed the Luftwaffe headquarters, the Panzer Army attached decisive importance to the fact that the constant threat to its lines of communication from the direction of Bir Hacheim be definitely eliminated. General Rommel planned to let the two British armored forces drive against his new fortified positions ~~INXXXXX~~ ^{and} to assume the offensive at the most propitious moment for seizing the initiative. Luftwaffe attacks on enemy armored concentrations were, however, to be given secondary importance, with the elimination of the forces threatening the supply lines designated as primary air ~~XXXX~~ targets.

For this reason the Luftwaffe shifted the main effort of its attacks, starting on the afternoon of 31 May, toward the enemy groupings along the southern flank between Bir Hacheim - north of Segnali - Rotondo Signali. The daring missions flown by ^{Squadron} the 3d MWG of the 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Group were instrumental in destroying these enemy forces during the following days. Subsequent evaluation indicated that 17 armored reconnaissance vehicles, 47 trucks, 3 tractors, and 2 prime movers were destroyed during these attacks.*

* Von Waldau Diary, p. 44.



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The Panzer Army headquarters had finally arrived at the decision to attack the support point Bir Hacheim on 2 June ~~1944~~ with two divisions on line, and it had asked for maximum air support for this occasion.

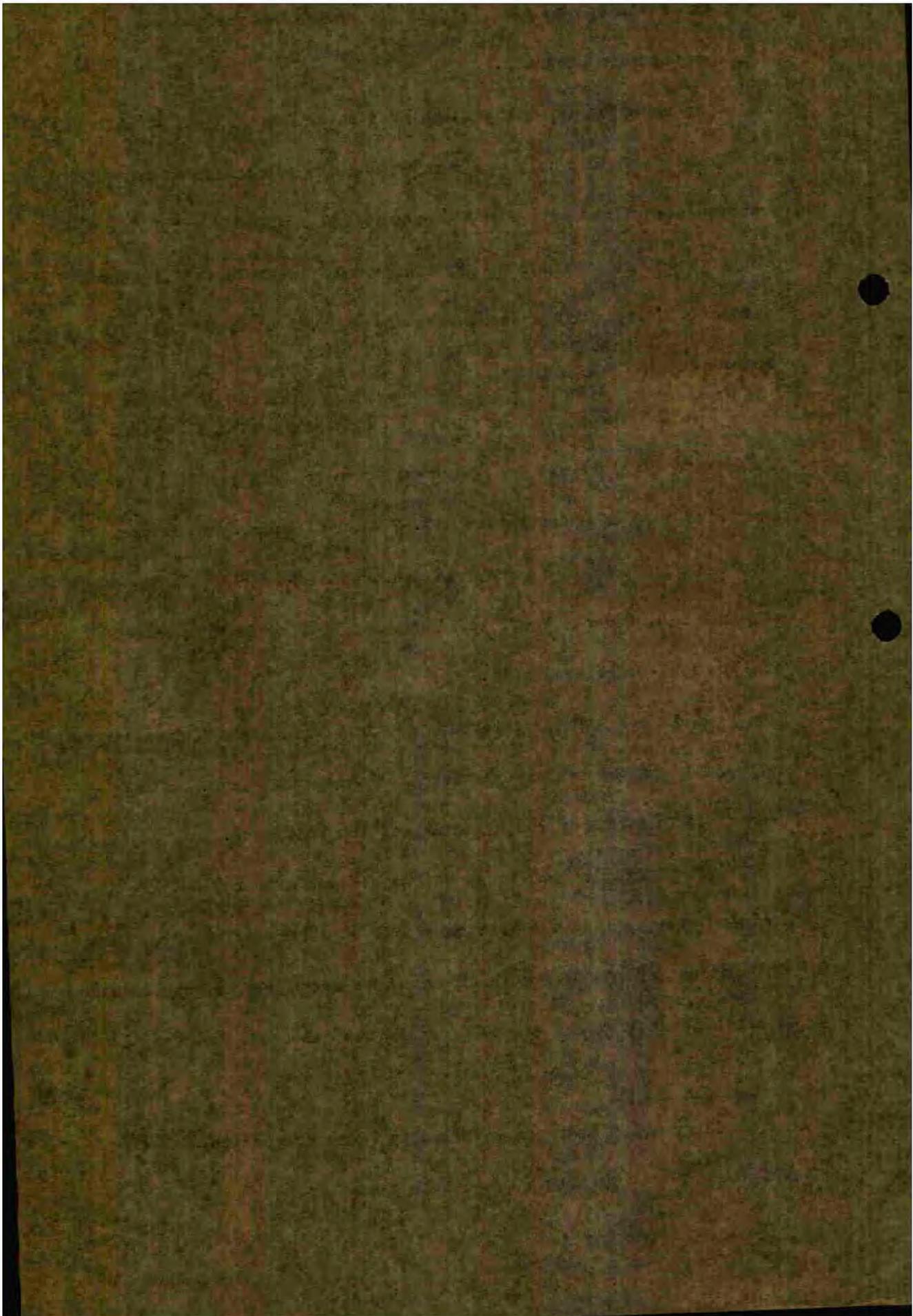
As shown by experience, the British had up to then established a routine of flying only one morning and one evening mission, which however were flown by a force embodying all available aircraft. The British units had orders to avoid combat with German fighter aircraft, except with those which were engaged in escorting dive bombers.

During the period 25 May to 1 June the Germans shot down 73 British fighters and 2 Wellington aircraft during aerial combat. They also dropped a tonnage of ^{metric} 547.47 tons of bombs. The German losses amounted to 14 aircraft (4 Messerschmidts 109, 4 Messerschmidts 110, 5 Junkers 87, and 1 Junkers 88); no figures on Italian losses are available.

It is not without interest to cite Field Marshal Kesselring's impressions on the combat experience of these past days. He had been at the front from the beginning of the offensive.

"The operation was based on the element of surprise. The decisive blow against the British was to be struck by an enveloping movement out of the desert which was to be subsequently supplemented by the landing ^{maneuver} from the sea of a small, but selected, landing force.

* This information had been verified by radio intercepts.



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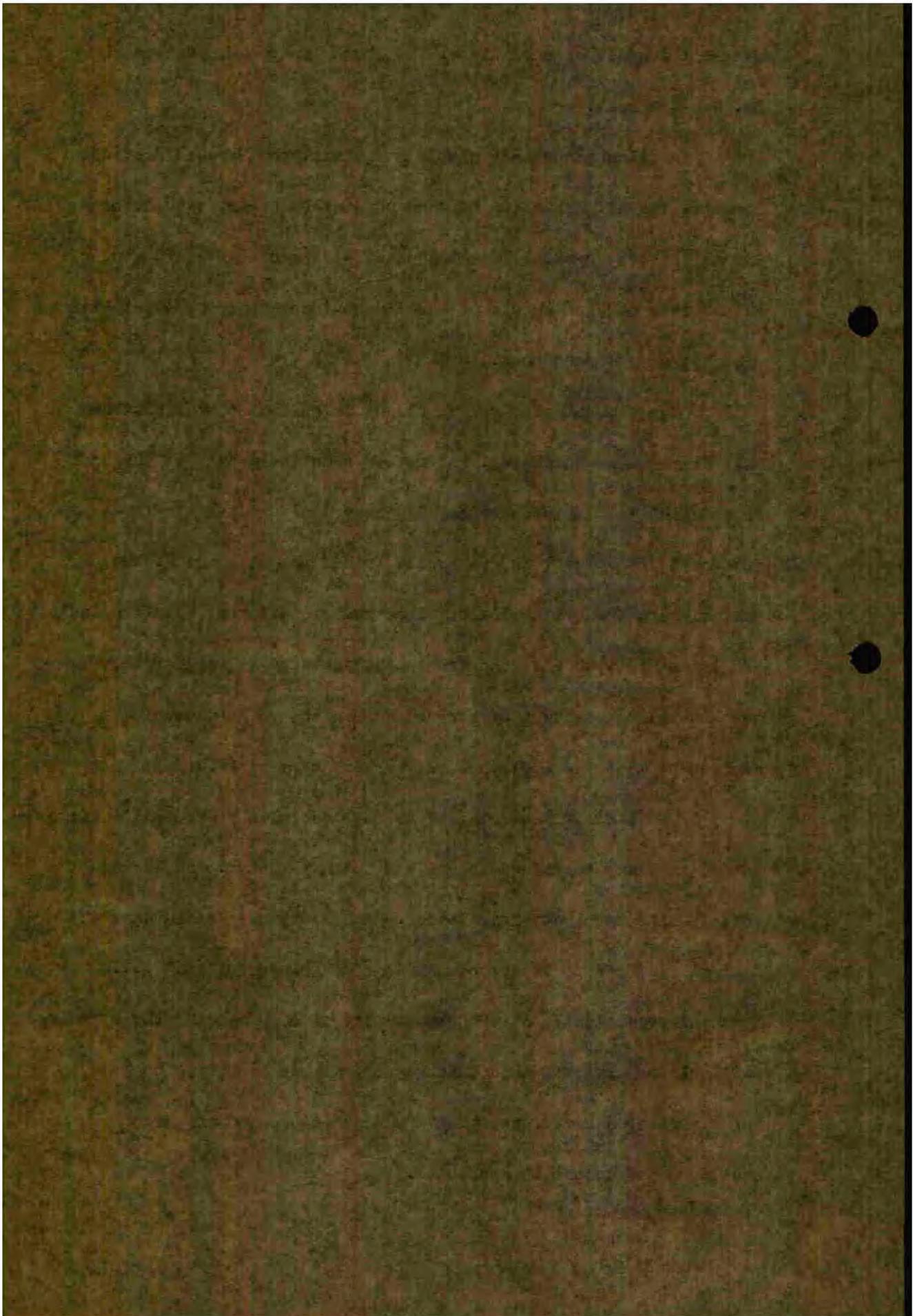
" ... Field Marshal Rommel intended to lead the forces employed on the enveloping flank, but wanted to remain in charge of the over-all conduct of operations. The front line commander was Lt. Gen Cruewell."

"The plan proper was simple and clear, and Marshal Bastico had approved it. The chain of command displeased me. Once before Rommel had lost control of the conduct of operations by remaining with forces engaged on one of the flanks. One should have established a stationary command post."

"The element of surprise was achieved, but communications with Rommel were disrupted. The messages on the course of the ground fighting, which were equally important for the air force personnel and General KHM Cruewell, failed to get through. The confusion on the battle field, where armored attacks, counterattacks, and movements with inverted front lines changed at rapid pace, complicated the conduct of air reconnaissance to an unusual degree and made the employment of bombers very risky."

" On the early morning of 29 May General KHM Cruewell's liaison plane landed in enemy territory and he was taken prisoner. The German combat units had lost their leader. Upon everyone's insistence I finally agreed to assume command of the ground forces."

" On this occasion I had the opportunity of experiencing the difficulties involved in conducting operations according to the wishes of a higher headquarters that refuses to answer questions and cannot be contacted."



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"However dynamic Rommel's presence at the outflanking movement's focus might have been, he was very exposed to and too directly involved in the vicissitudes of the battle. One must have listened to eyewitnesses in order to realize what the situation was like on the first day of combat during the armored battle at Rommel's headquarters."

"I repeatedly tried to establish radio contact with Rommel whom I asked for a meeting whenever and wherever it might suit him." "It was a real pleasure to observe Rommel's incredible skill in conducting desert warfare. The existing situation was anything but favorable." "A subsequent conversation between Rommel and me took place on the subject of Bir-Hacheim, which was held by strong Free French forces under General Koenig and which constituted a grave danger to the German troops. According to Rommel's request the Luftwaffe flew heavy dive-bomber attack missions against this target, in the end even with gasoline bombs. These air attacks and later infantry assaults were all the more unsuccessful, because the timing of the ground and air attacks could not be properly coordinated." 166

The Royal Air Force was very active from the outset and tried

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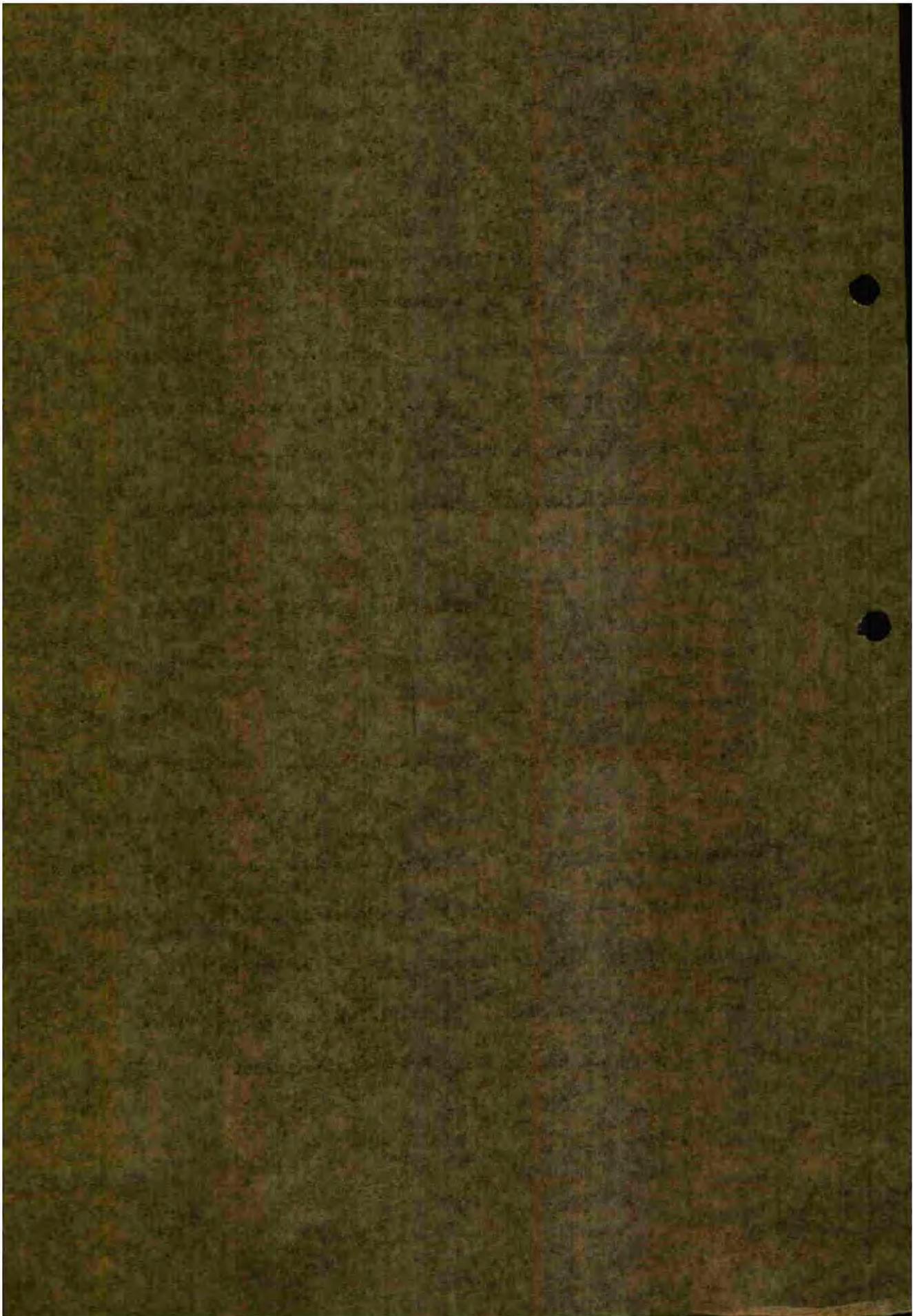
Albert Kesselring, Soldat bis zum letzten Tag (Soldier to the Bitter End), pp. 170-2. Athenaeum Verlag, Bonn, 1953.



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Cunningham's
 to achieve air superiority. Cunningham's fighter aircraft flew
 more than 150 sorties. Boston and Baltimore bombers attacked by day,
 Wellingtons attacked the German air fields by night. The fighter-
 bombers, of which there were then four squadrons available,
 assaulted the supply columns in the rear of the armored divisions
 and put about 200 vehicles out of action. On 28 and 29 May
 Cunningham
 Cunningham abandoned all efforts to obtain air superiority and
 concentrated all his forces on attacking the supply columns,
 mainly to the east and south of Bir-lacheis. In the afternoon
 flying was hampered by sand storms. Under the protection of one
 of these sand storms, the Italians succeeded to open a gap in
 the British minefields, which Rommel used to pass through his
 supplies.

On the morning of 30 May the enemy (the Germans) were in
 a very critical situation. While some tanks withdrew southward
 to shorten their supply lines, other units pulled back to the west.
 There, however opened another gap in the British minefields from
 the rear, which was even wider than the first gap. The battle raged
 for the possession of these two gaps. The British Mustangs and later
 the Kitty bombers (sic) brought the cauldron to a boil.
 Vehicles that were heavily damaged by gun fire, others that
 had been hit by bombs, and finally vehicles that had crashed
 into one another all ran into the British minefields.



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Other attacks on the supply lines south of Bir-Hacheim were no less successful. On 31 May and 1 June heavy sandstorms spread over the battlefield, thus restricting the activities of the Royal Air Forces. The Germans, however, began to show a most unwelcome aggressiveness so that Cunningham had to switch to the defensive.

During these days Rommel succeeded in regrouping his forces, maintaining his positions in front of the gaps in the minefields, and improving his situation at the expense of the Eighth Army.¹⁶⁷

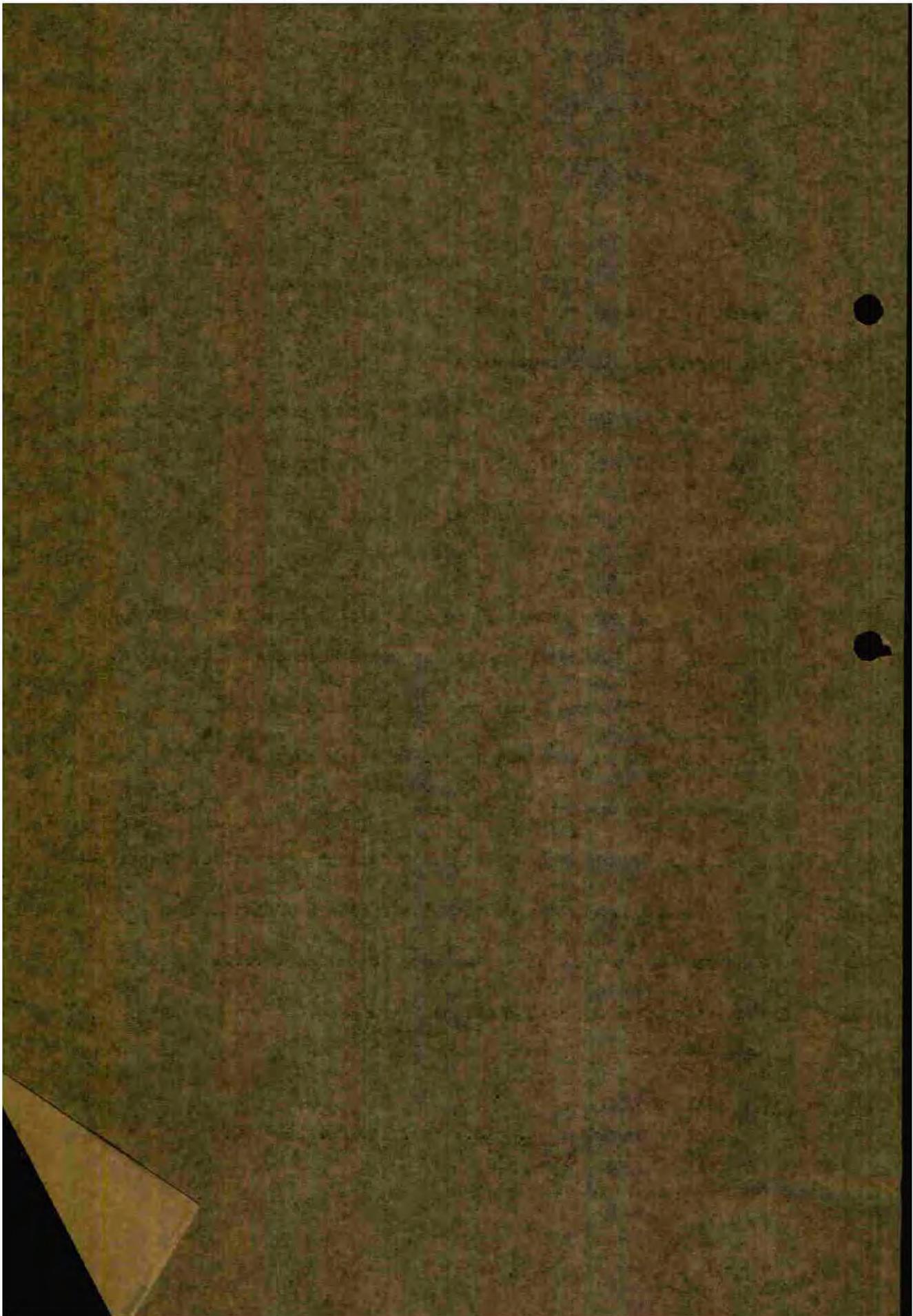
Three days passed until General Ritchie proceeded to attack. This interval was extremely useful to the German Africa Corps which could thus repair some of the many tanks that had cropped out or been damaged.

"What had gone wrong? It is always easy to criticize from hindsight and act as if everything could have been anticipated. But in this instance I can prove it black on white that I was the things right, then and there. In his book "A Fear of Battle," Alan Moorehead reports that I said to him on 2 or 3 June: "Our great chance came when Rommel was wedged in against the minefields and we could have attacked with the Indian 5th Division under General Briggs. This chance we have now missed."¹⁶⁸ When the attack finally jumped off on 5 - 6 June, it was already

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MEMORANDUM

Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 199-200.



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three days late. The strong point of the 150th Brigade had been captured by the Germans." "The 5th of June was the turning point of the battle, even though the British had lost their chances for a complete victory already three days before." 168

The Panzer Army expected an attack either against the frontal sector of its divisions in the center or against the encircling forces near Bir Hacheim. For those reasons the 15th Panzer Division was assembled south of Bir-Harast during the night of 4 - 5 June. From that assembly area the division could move northeast or southeast according to the situation. On 5 June the British jumped off after a strong artillery barrage lasting for one hour. The 2d and 22d Armored Brigades as well as the Indian 10th Division and 201st Guards Brigade attacked the Ariete Armored Division east of Ualeb. The Italian Division withdrew to the positions occupied by the army artillery in its rear, and there the British thrust was stopped by a concentrated barrage of all pieces. Now the Panzer Army jumped off to the attack, making a counterthrust while protecting its northern flank.

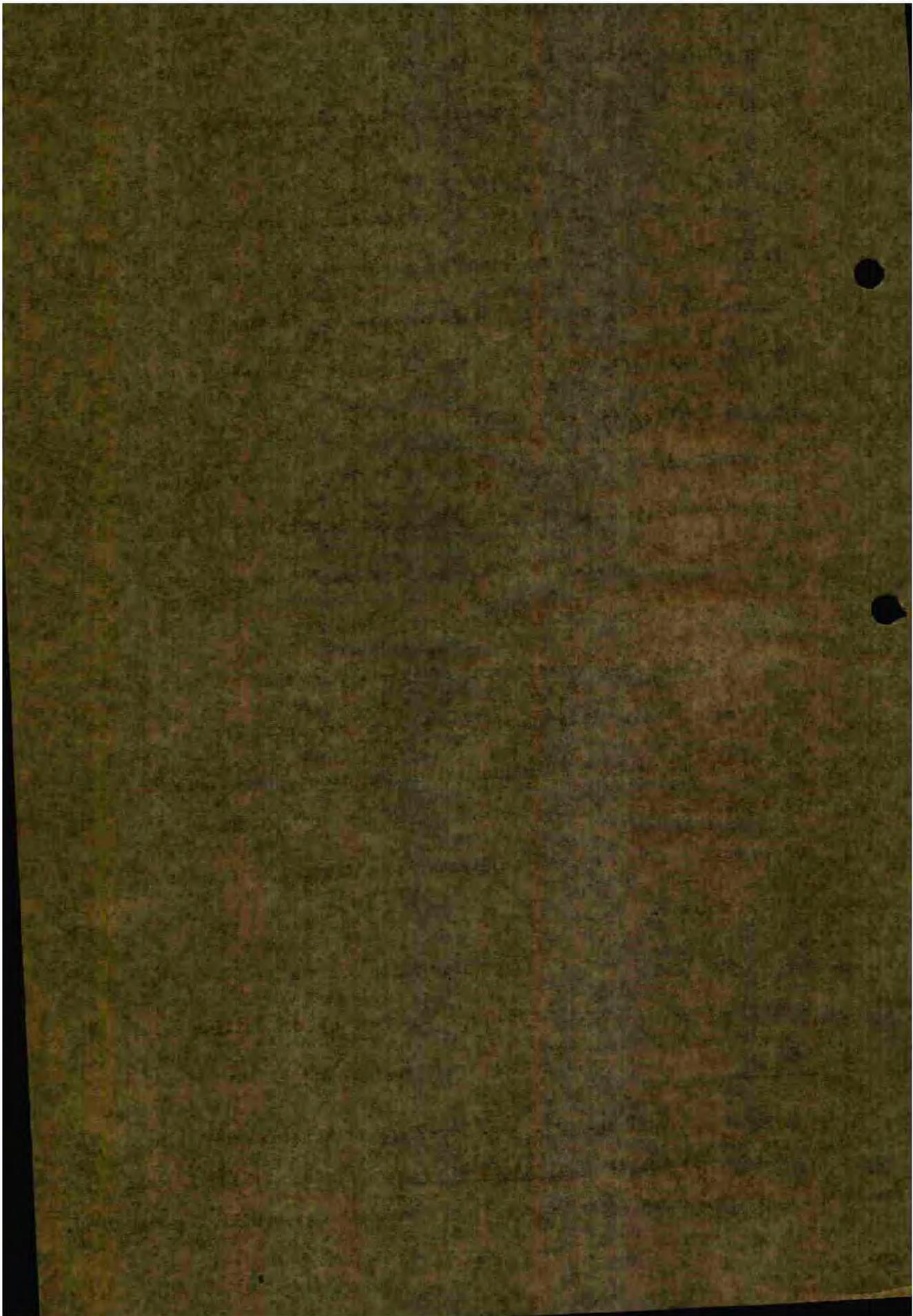
Reichel led Combat Group Wols, which was the army reserve, conducting his force in person into the rear of the British holding the positions near Knightsbridge. The 15th Panzer Division

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Desmond Young, op. cit., pp. 146-7 and (the second quotation)

Allan Moorehead, Afrikanische Trilogie (African Trilogy), vol. II,

p. 200. Georg Westermann Verlag, Braunschweig, Berlin, Hamburg 1947.



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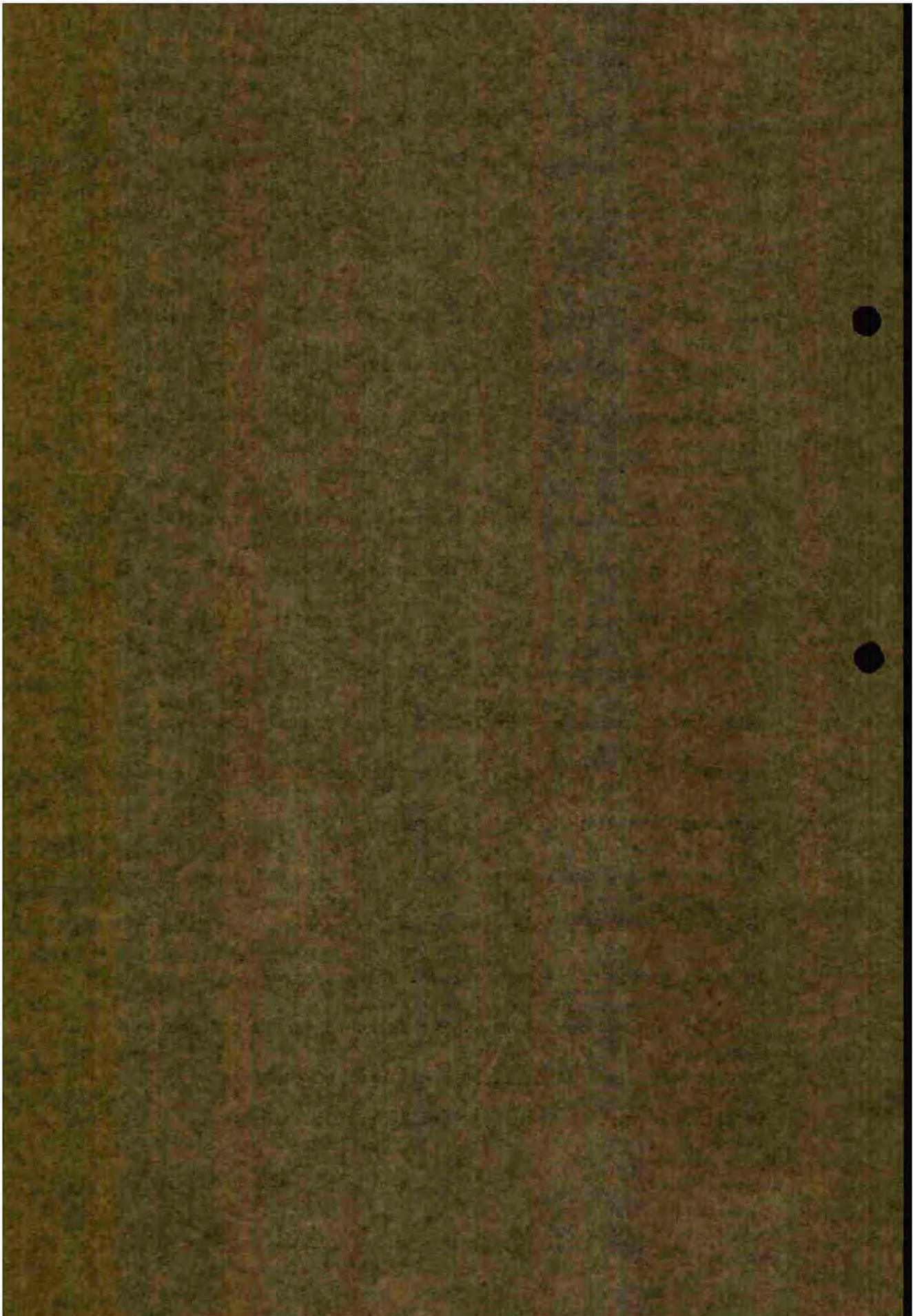
moved along the left flank of Rommel's force; its mission was to envelop the enemy forces from the south. On 6 June the bulk of the 21st Panzer Division, which had hitherto been unable to disengage from British attacks, could gain ground by advancing to the east.

On the other hand, Combat Group Wels, which had been enveloped by British forces, had to withdraw to Bir-Hachem during the night of 5 - 6 June.

During the heavy fighting that lasted through 10 June and during which the British armored units suffered severe losses from concentrated fire, the British were pushed back across the Trigh Capuzzo.

General Ritchie had not been able to make up his mind whether to pull his divisions out of the northern sector of the Gazala front and to assemble them in time for flexible employment. With their 300 guns and 200 to 300 armored reconnaissance vehicles and machine gun carriers these forces would have carried considerable weight and would probably have stopped the eastward thrust of the 21st Panzer Division.

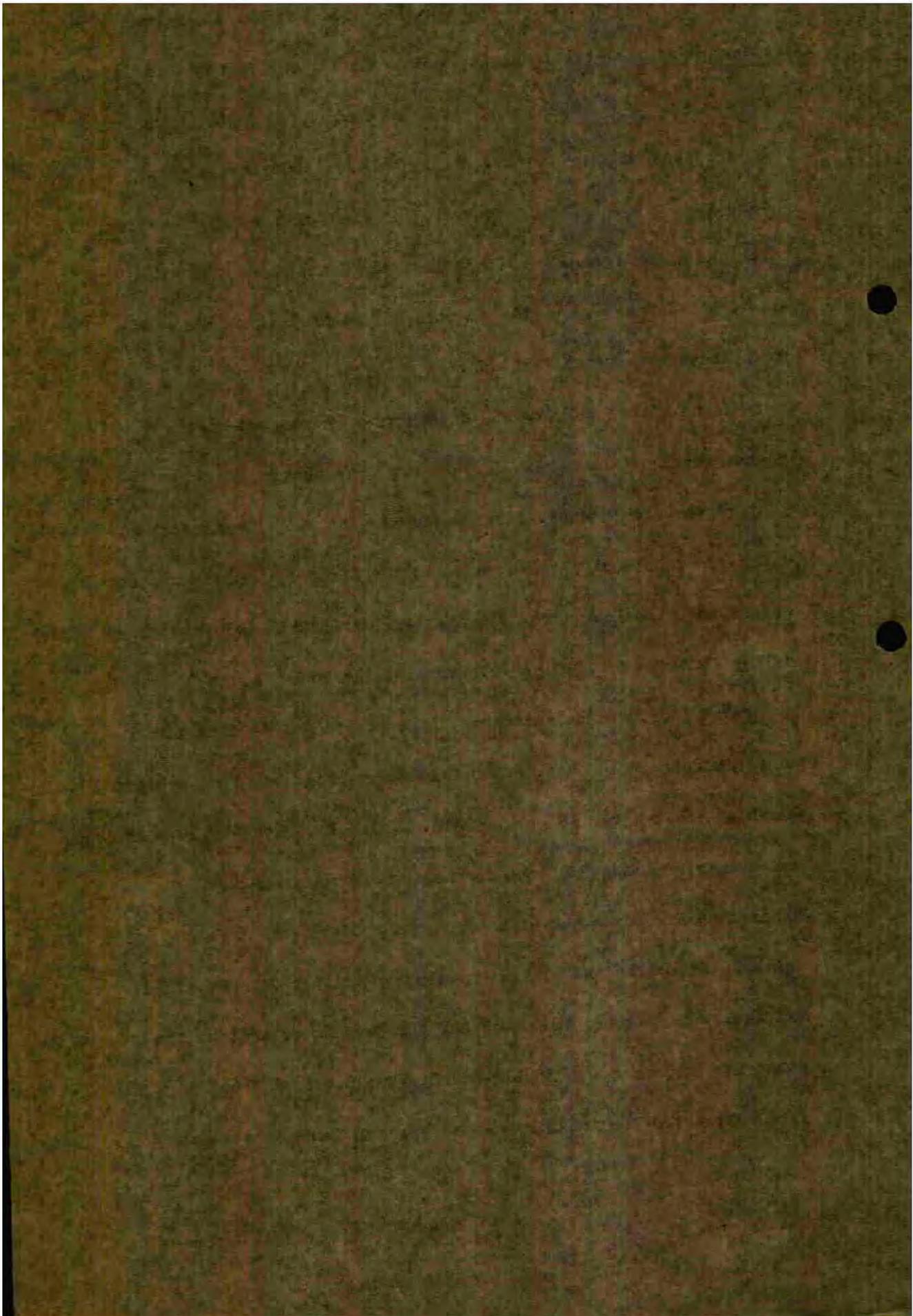
Meanwhile, the Trieste Division and the 90th Light Division had begun to attack near Bir-Hachem, supported by ~~WILLING~~ attacks in waves of the dive-bomber units. There a struggle of extreme severity had gotten underway. The French defended themselves in cleverly constructed field positions and close combat facilities, such as foxholes, small fortifications,



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machinegun and antitank gun positions, which had all been protected by densely sown minefields. For this reason, the German attack made only little headway. On 6 June the 90th Light Division's advance guards reached points that were still some 900 yards from the fortreas of Bir-Hacheim. During the next two days the two divisions were equally unsuccessful in achieving a major success, with the enemy forces remaining in their dugouts. On the other hand, the Germans were able to ward off minor British attempts to relieve the French garrison.

In an effort to give the offensive some renewed vigor, a combat group of the German Africa Corps was brought up as a support force on 9 June. After severe losses the assault forces, who which had constantly been exposed to the fiercely fighting French defenders' ferocious fire, fought their way ^{to} within 220 yards of the fortress by 2000 hours. Finally, the combat group led by Oberst (Col.) Haade succeeded in penetrating ^{deeply} into main line of resistance by 10 June. After this penetration had been achieved, Bir-Hacheim could no longer be held. During the night of 10 - 11 June some sizable elements of the garrison under the command of General Koenig broke out of the ring of encirclement in a westerly direction and linked up with the British 7th Motorized Brigade. Upon seizing the fortress, the Germans found that the defensive positions around Bir-Hacheim consisted of about 1,200 pillboxes for infantrymen and heavy weapons as well as



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various other facilities. Under the courageous leadership of General Koenig the garrison had been able to resist the German assaults for almost 10 days. Now the divisions WAFK engaged in the struggle had become free to participate in the decisive battles of the Marmarica.

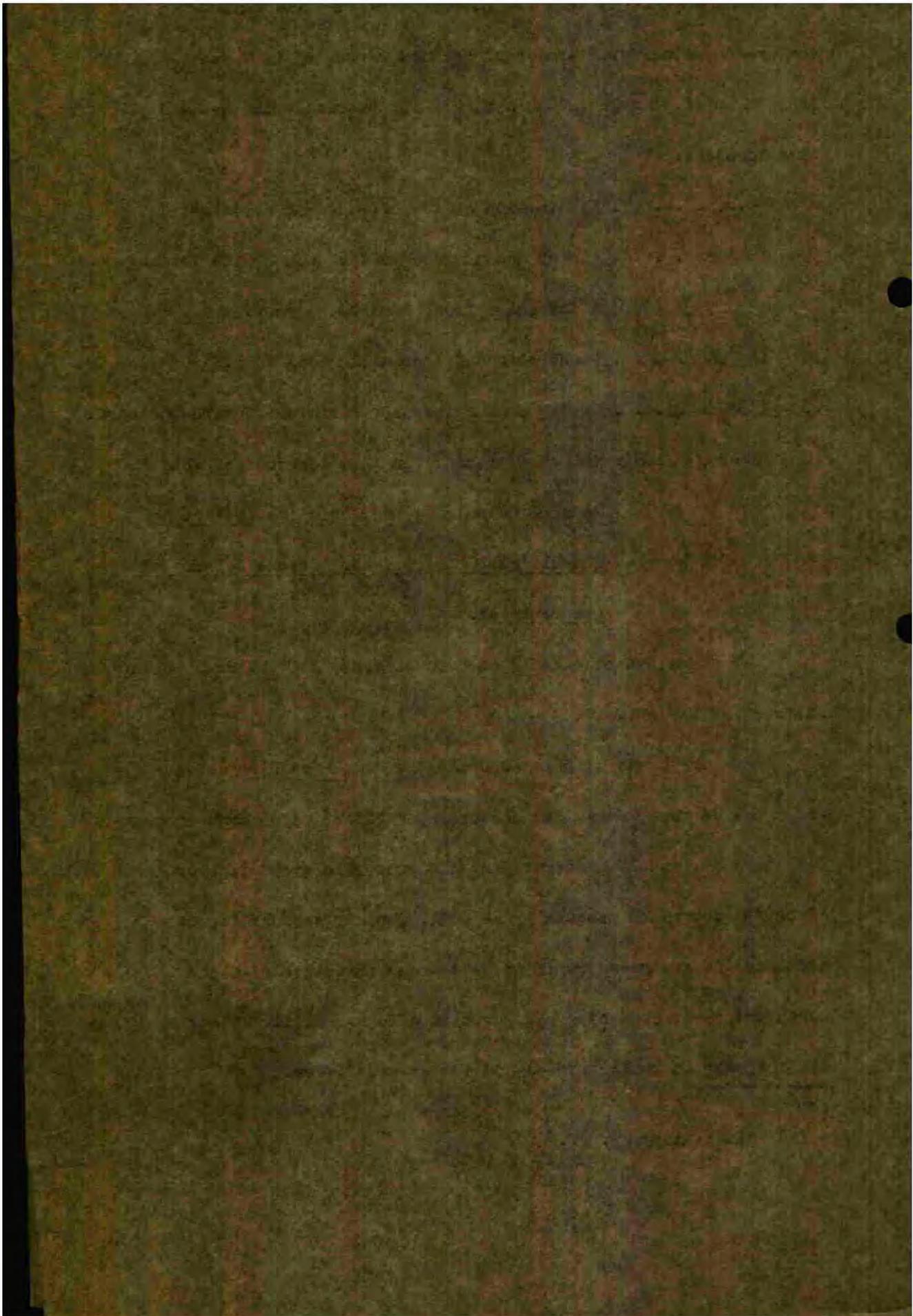
The course of the fighting around Bir-Hacheim had led to a number of altercations between the Luftwaffe and Panzer Army headquarters, during which Field Marshal Kesselring in person also intervened.

The Luftwaffe sorties that had been flown every day since 3 June, involving strong forces several times a day, had resulted in quite considerable losses for the Germans (14 aircraft). These sorties, however, had not achieved their objective in the sense that the ground forces had not taken advantage of them for their offensive operations. The reason for this lack of success was above all the weakness of the assault troops who were incapable of breaking the resistance.

General Rommel, however, refused categorically -- despite Field Marshal Kesselring's admonitions -- for the Wehrmacht to provide more forces for assault missions.

Instead, he requested the Luftwaffe to shift its main effort from Bir-Hacheim to the enemy forces along the east and north flanks of the German Africa Corps. This request was put into action with evident success. On 6 and 7 June Luftwaffe





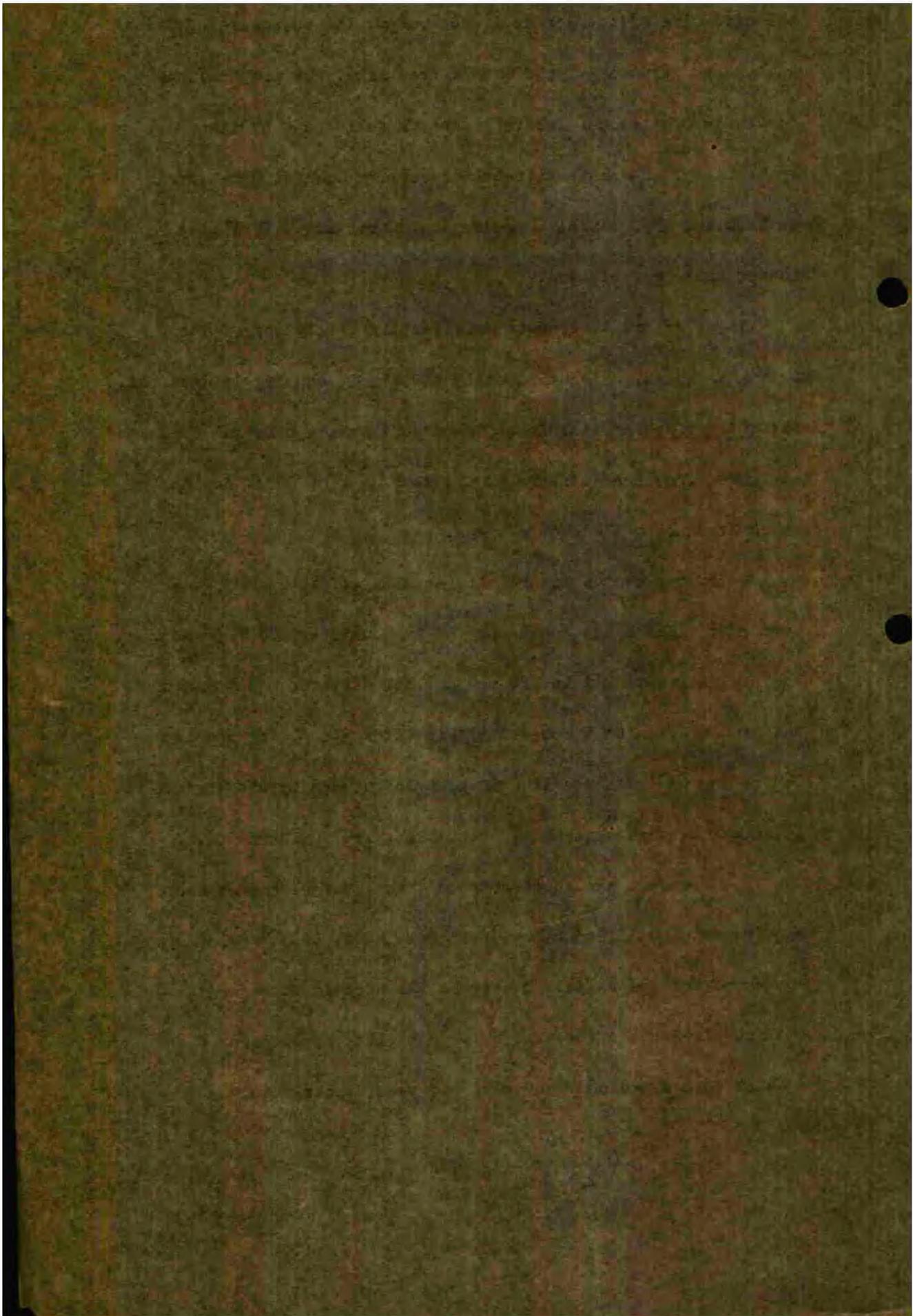
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According to the time schedule the enemy forces west of Acroma were to be attacked on 9 June in order to initiate the offensive of the German Africa Corps, the objective of which was the penetration of the Gazala front line. The preparations for these operations, however, were cancelled out by renewed requests for immediate dive-bomber support against Bir-Nacheln at 1200 and 1730 hours; these requests originated from the Panzer Army headquarters.

In an effort to produce an effective commitment of the Luftwaffe units, which was really equally in the Army's interest, the Fliegerführer (Air Force Commander) made a personal call at Panzer Army Headquarters on the ^{afternoon} ~~MORNING~~ of 8 June, during which he expressed his objections.

Using the evaluation results as a basis, the Air Force Commander planned the commitment of his units well in advance. The evaluation took into ~~his~~ account not only the situation on the ground but also the tactical air information. The readiness for action of the air units was also influenced by the various technical factors that had to be taken into consideration.

The frequent and short-noticed changes of decisions and requirements nullified all planning of the tactical command agency of the Luftwaffe. So long as the sorties in strength against Bir-Nacheln were not being exploited by the ground assault forces because they were too weak, these attacks



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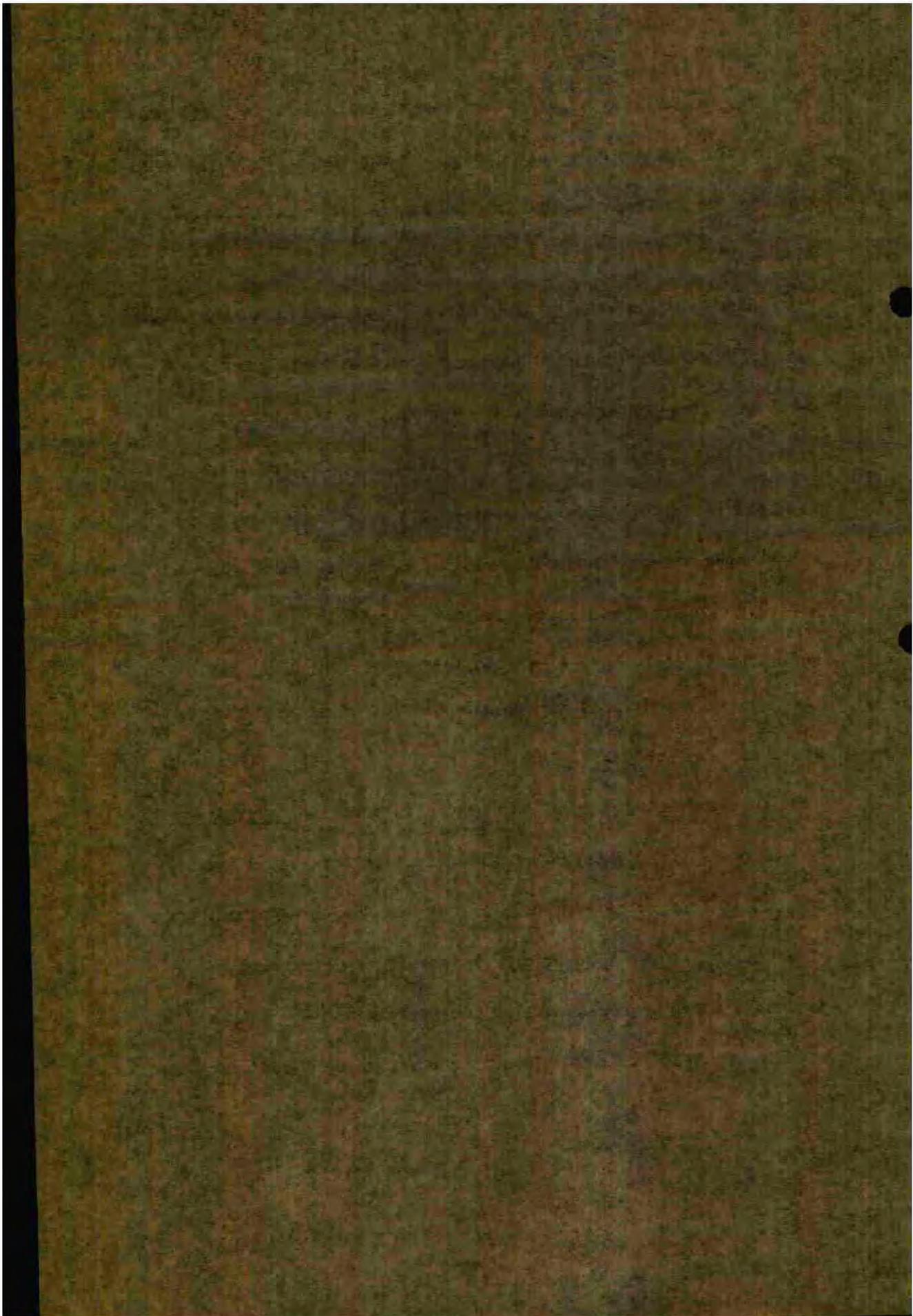
remained without effect. They led to the premature attrition of the Luftwaffe and to the superiority of the Royal Air Force at the decisive points.

The Panzer Army headquarters upheld their plan to first penetrate the Gasala position. No northward drive was to be started before 0700 at the earliest so that the Luftwaffe could hit first. The timing of the attack was not clearly fixed.

When on 9 June the ground forces were again unable to make headway toward Bir-Hacheim despite the double early commitment of strong dive-bomber forces, the Panzer Army headquarters finally decided to move up one battalion and some artillery of the 15th Panzer Division. It requested the employment of strong dive-bomber support for the evening in order to launch "one last attack." The air force units flew a particularly successful sortie by 59 dive-bombers at 1930, dropping their bombs on enemy battery positions at the main nest of resistance one mile north of Bir-Hacheim.

In the evening General von Waldau reported to Generaloberst Rommel "that to this day 1,030 aircraft have been committed in support of the ground forces during attacks on Bir-Hacheim."

On 10 June the Fliegerführer (Air Force Commander) conducted three major attacks on Bir-Hacheim and the outpost area immediately in front of the fortress, using a concentration



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of forces for this purpose. Even though the first attack had to be discontinued because the heavy haze and dust obstructed the vision so much that the own troops could no longer be identified, the IJIRA second and third sorties consisting of altogether twelve waves were extremely effective according to reports of the Panzer Army headquarters. Several fires were visible from over 12 miles distance on the ground.

Altogether 124 Junkers 87 and 76 Junkers 88 dropped 139.72 tons of bombs. They were protected by 168 Messerschmidt flying escort missions. During the air combat 1st Lieutenant Marseille achieved four more victories, bringing his total of enemy planes shot down to 31.

Reconnaissance reports indicated strong concentrations of enemy vehicles near El-Aden and Socoma.

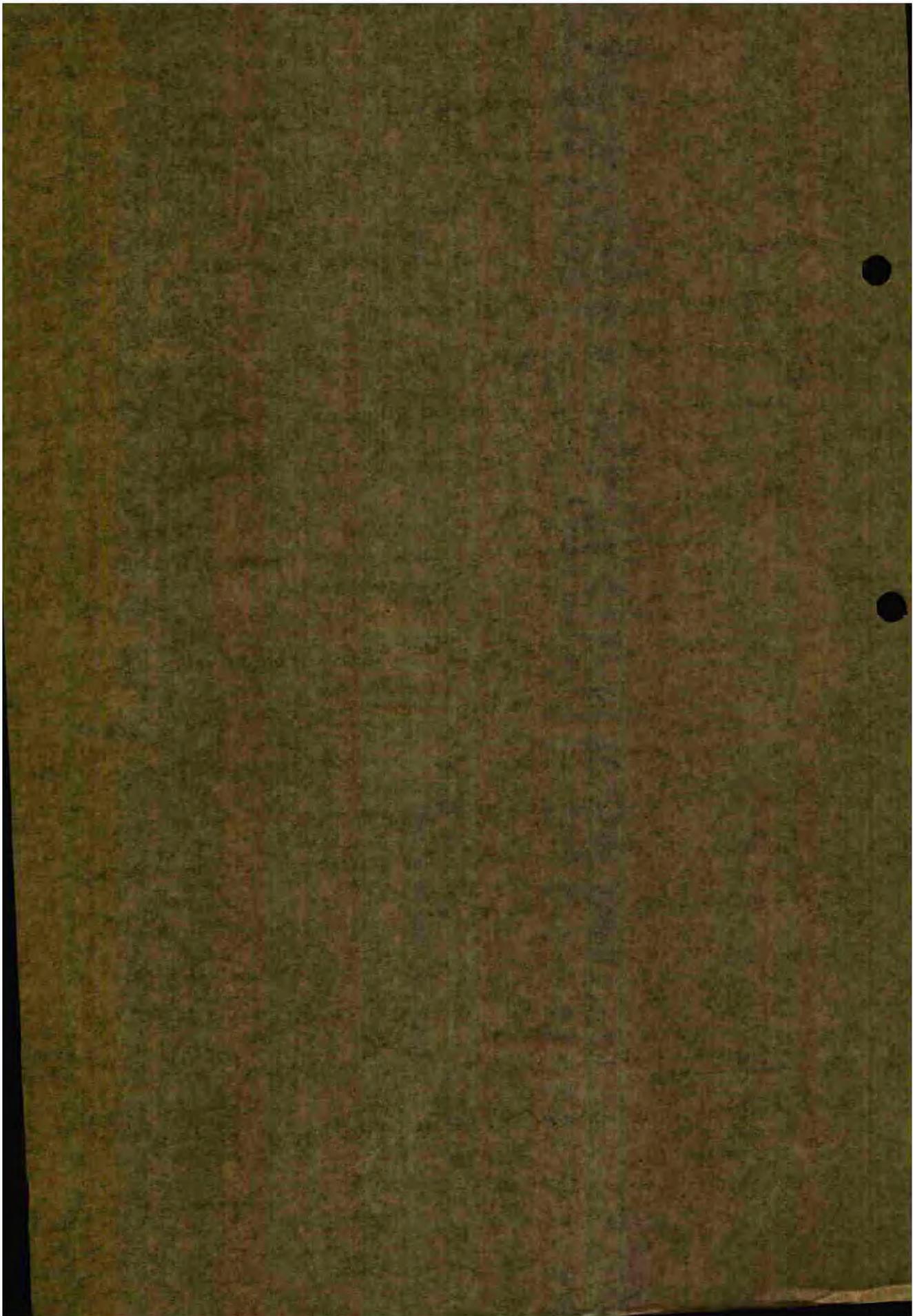
In the morning hours of 11 June German aircraft established that the area around Bir-hacheia was in German hands. For this reason targets northwest of El-Aden were attacked for the first time at 1215 hours. The Air Force Commander assembled all his forces by 1600. The main effort of the attacks was directed against the area between El-Aden and Socoma.

Extracts from the diary of an Englishman captured at Bir-hacheia might be of interest, because they describe the demoralizing effect of the continuous air attacks very graphically. ¹⁶⁹

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Von Waldau Diary, pp. 63-4. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

Appendix 29.



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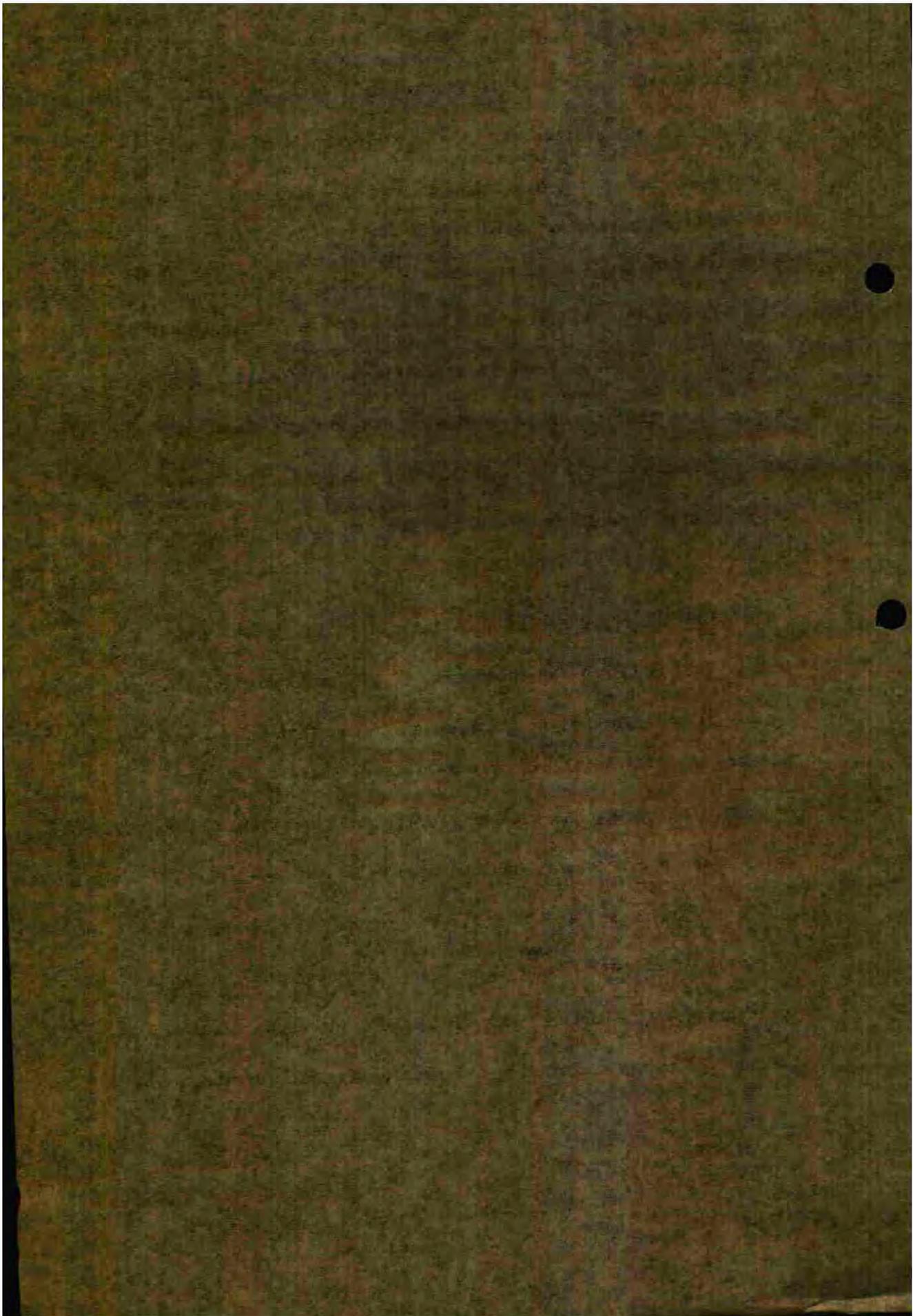
The British Air Force first placed its main effort on supporting and supplying Bir-Hacheim. Comingham's fighters decided according to their commander's own words "to adopt the Free French and their fortress." On 5 June the British fighters flew therefore more than 100 sorties; around noon some Tomahawks of the 5th Squadron downed 7 Stukas at a loss of 9 British aircraft. South of the fortress some 60 German vehicles were put out of commission.

During the following days the attacks on German transport columns and dive-bombers were repeated successfully; all that happened within view of the French who sent Comingham a radio message saying: "Well done, thanks for the Royal Air Force." He immediately replied: "Thank you for the sport, you have done well, too."

But after 7 June the indecisive fighting in the Knightsbridge area required the commitment of all available forces.

On 8 June, when it had become obvious that Rommel had made up his mind to annihilate Bir-Hacheim, whatever the sacrifice might be, the bulk of the Western Desert Group was moved back to the support of the Free French.

The situation of the fortress garrison had become more desperate than ever because the 90th Light Division had begun to intervene. The fortress was subjected to incessant attacks launched by waves of infantry and armor, supported by strong



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artillery and a steadily growing number of air force units. Despite constant commitment of British fighters and victories achieved by the 6th Squadron, equipped with Hurricane II D -- the so-called tank busters -- with 40-mm. guns, the German pressure grew. On 9 June overwhelming artillery fire was directed at the fortress.

The dropping of rations and water cans from the air did not replace the normal resupply on the ground or the support of ground relief forces.

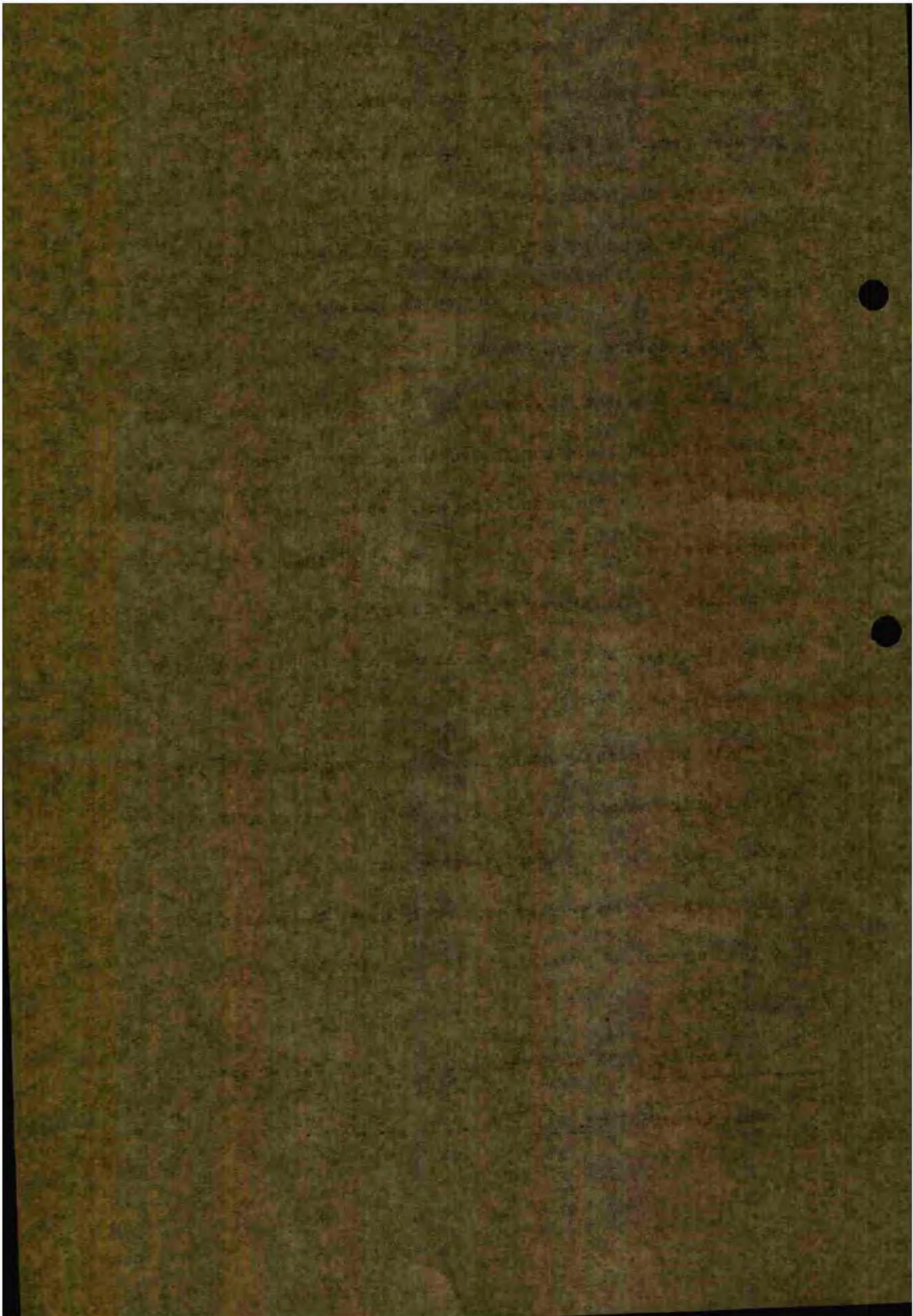
On 10 June the Hurricanes and the first Spitfire squadron that appeared in the desert saved the garrison from being overwhelmed by the German assault forces, but two subsequent thrusts reached their objective. During the night of 10-11 ~~REVENNER~~ June the surviving defenders evacuated the fortress upon orders from above. Some 2,000 men escaped on 11 June, protected by British fighter aircraft.

The unexpectedly heavy and extended resistance of the French at Bir-Machain as well as the defense put up by the British armor near Knightsbridge were both actively supported by the Royal Air Force. They completely upset the schedule ~~KX~~ that the Germans had prearranged for the execution of their offensive. ¹⁷⁰

After the fall of Bir-Machain, the 15th Panzer Division

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 200-2.



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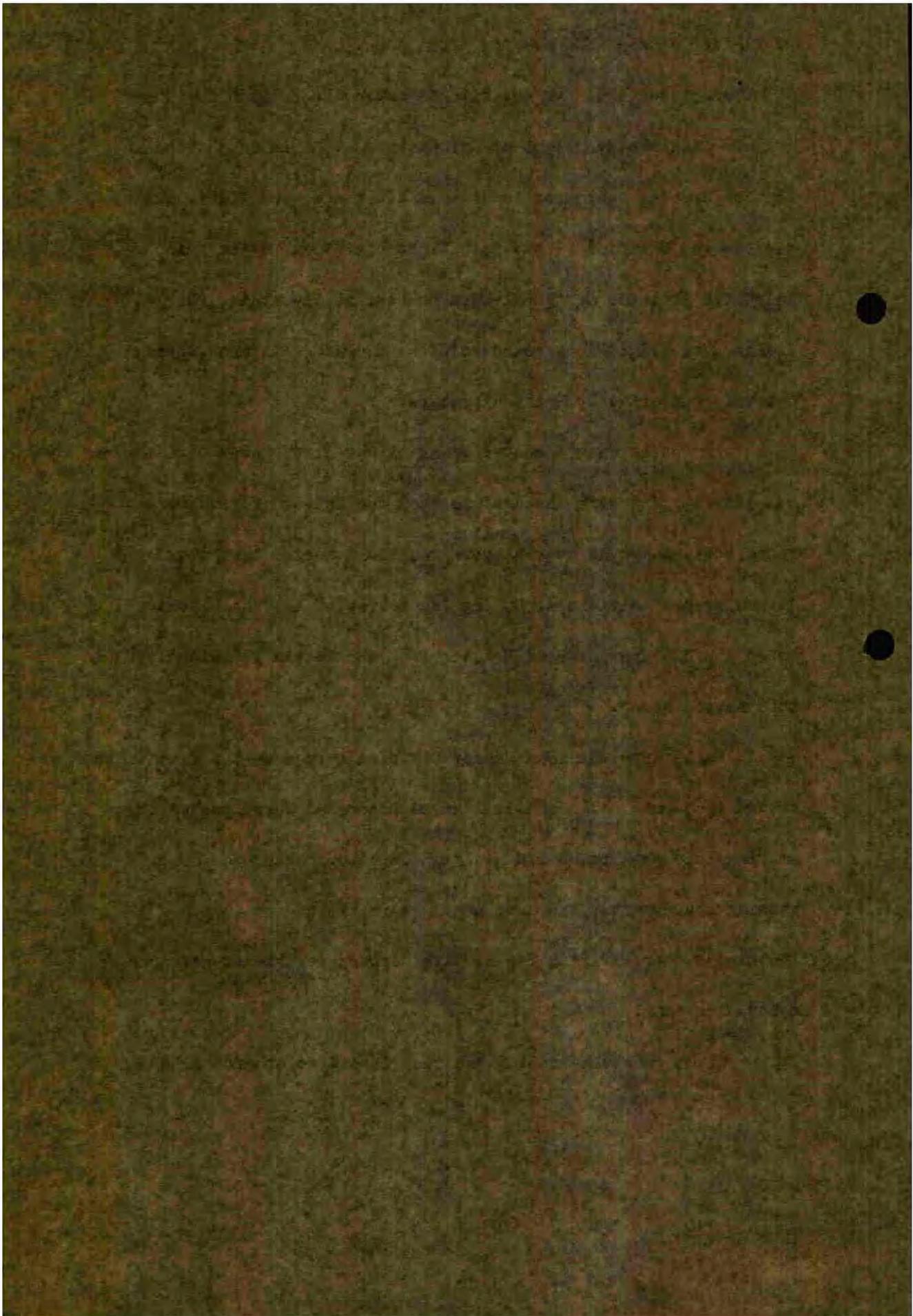
and the 90th Light Division as well as the 3d and 33d Reconnaissance Battalions, led by Rommel, reached the area south and southwest of El-Adem on the EMM evening of 11 June.

To counter this danger, Ritchie moved the British 2d Panzer Brigade into the area east of Knightsbridge. On 12 June these British armored units were scattered after a severe fight, and El-Adem was occupied by the 90th Light Division. In the main defensive position of the El-Adem muster, at El-Batain, the Indian 29th Brigade continued to offer tough resistance, being actively supported by British bombers.

Also on 12 June a combat group of the 21st Panzer Division had jumped off toward the east so that the British forces were being confined to an ever ^{smaller} ~~smaller~~ area and squeezed by the two German armored divisions. During the course of 12 June Ritchie moved the 32d Army Armored Brigade from the Gasala position into this narrow strip.

On 13 June the 15th Panzer Division topped up the elevations toward the west, while the Italian XX Motorized Corps pushed the British into the area north of Trigh Capuzzo. During the evening hours, after the sand storm had relented somewhat, the 21st Panzer Division resumed its forward thrust and advanced toward the east.

On 13 June the British had been forced to abandon also



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Knightsbridge, one of their pivots of defense, which they had defended so strongly.

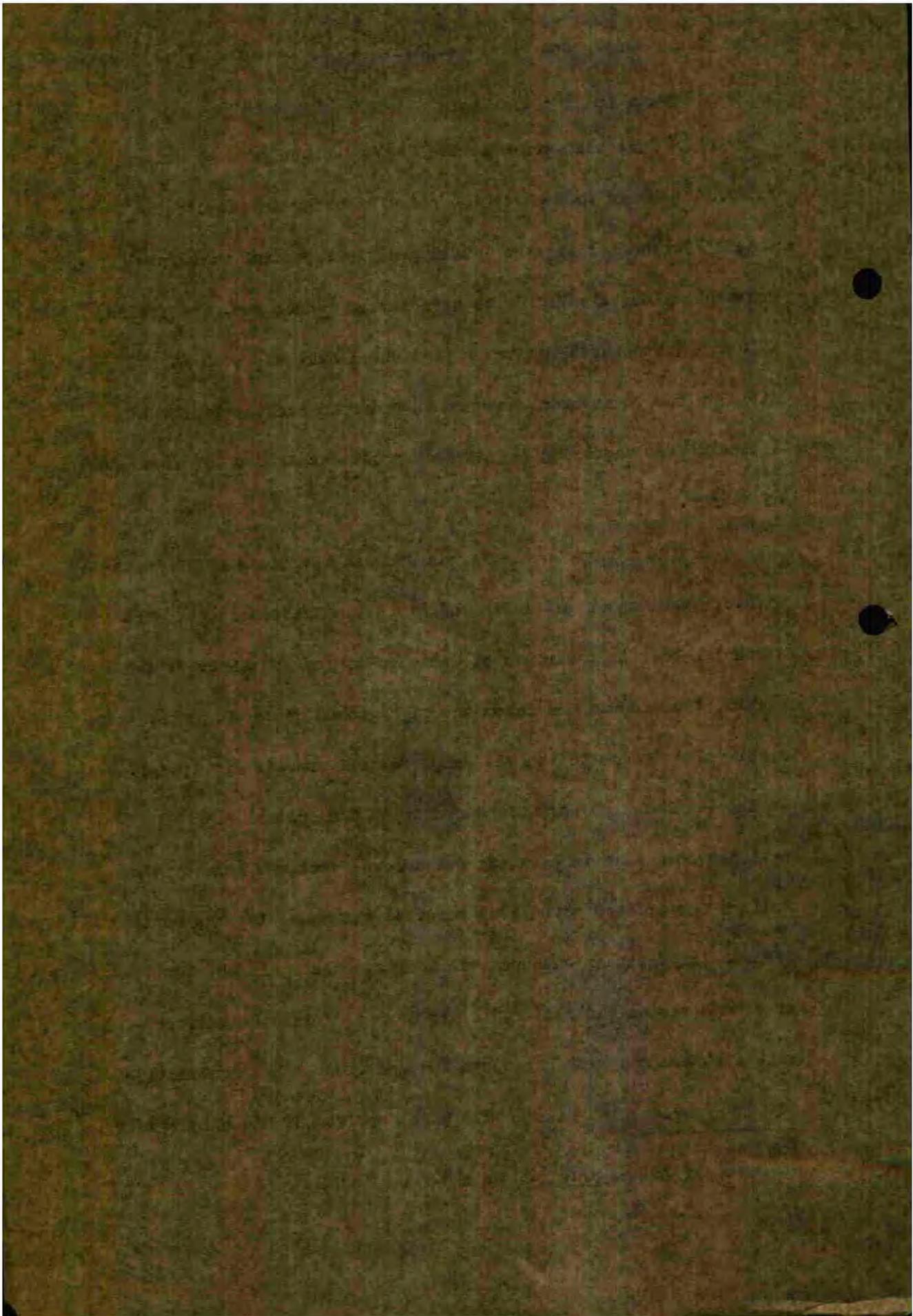
"On 13 June, when darkness fell, we had lost the major part of our armored forces." 171

On 14 June the German Africa Corps was supposed to seize Acroma and break through to the coast in order to cut off the British forces holding the Ganala position. British withdrawal movements along the Via Balbo were already under way. The Italian XX Corps (Motorised) was to protect the flank, the 90th Light division was to advance eastward in order to create a favorable situation for capturing the advance positions around the fortress of Tobruk.

On the afternoon the German armored divisions moved northward. Extreme speed was indicated since the British forces were streaming back in thousands of vehicles toward the east. By the evening the Germans had taken the high ground west of Acroma, thus opening the access to the Via Balbo for all practical purposes. During the hours of darkness elements of the British 50th Division succeeded in breaking out across positions held by the Italian Corps; they moved southward. At the same time the South African 1st Division withdrew via Tobruk. Once again the 1st Armored Division had suffered heavy losses during the defense of Acroma, with its remnants withdrawing to the east. With the annihilation of his armored units Ritchie had been deprived of his only chance

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Desmond Young, op.cit., p. 148.

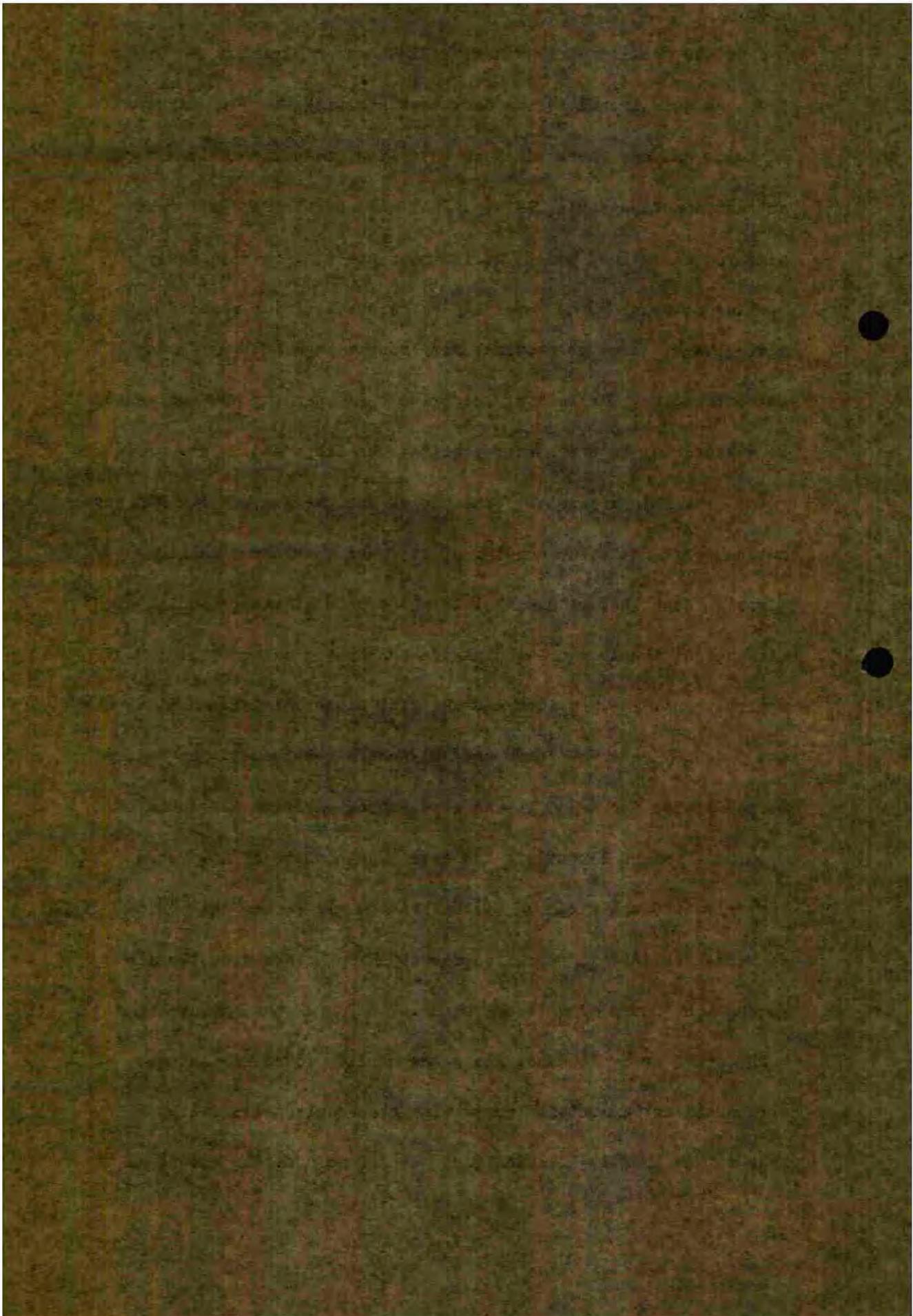


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to intervene actively in the further fighting in the Marmarica area.

On the morning of 15 June the 21st Panzer Division was moved from the area around Acroasa and, together with the 90th Light Division and one reconnaissance battalion, it was committed for an eastward thrust via El-Adem. That same evening these forces captured the strong point Batrina near El-Adem. Despite heavy bombing attacks by the Royal Air Force the division reached Sidi-Beneh, where its advance was brought to a halt by strong defensive fire. The bulk of the British Eighth Army had succeeded in withdrawing to the border area between Libya and Egypt.

The main defensive positions of the El-Adem complex were not captured until the morning of 17 June, when the 90th Light Division took them by assault. In the course of the preceding night elements of the Indian 29th Brigade had broken out of the ring of encirclement. The previous day the 21st Panzer Division had taken the strongly defended fortresses El-Duda and Belhamed. The entire German Africa Corps and the Ariete Armored Division now launched a pursuit toward Gambut and the area to the south of it. There were situated the airports of the British Air Force, which had to be neutralized in order to prevent interference from the air during the ground assault of Tobruk. The Tobruk and Gambut areas were mopped up by 18 June. Among the supplies found in that area were artillery ammunition dumps with stacks of shells dating back to November 1941, which were now put to use. The essential



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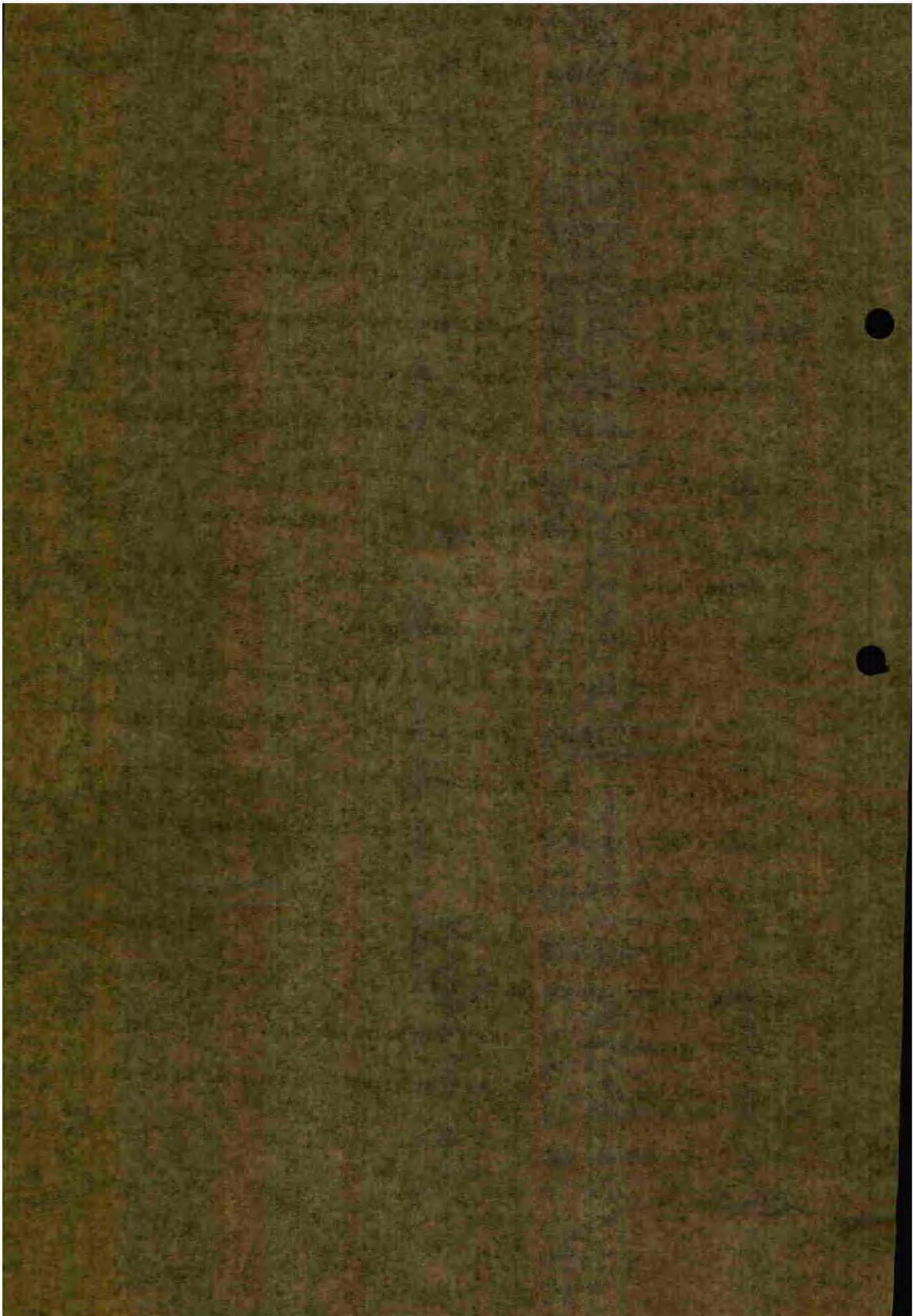
movements for closing the ring of encirclement around the fortress from the west had been carried out simultaneously. The command post of the Panzer Army headquarters was moved to the strong point El-Hatian, which had previously served the same purpose for the headquarters of the British XXX Corps.

As early as on the afternoon of 19 June the German Africa Corps marched to its assembly areas for the attack, while the 90th Light Division moved eastward in order to deceive the enemy with regard to the plans of the Panzer Army. Apart from that, the 90th Light Division was also to capture the British supply facilities between Tobruk and Bardia.

The Italian Pavia Division and the Littorio Armored Division, ^{were} the first elements of which ~~had~~ just arriving, were to cover the west and south flanks of the attack forces.

The Luftwaffe ^{was} ~~had~~ finally ~~had~~ able to concentrate its main effort on the El-Adem -- Acroma area after Bir-Hacheim had been captured. The over-all reconnaissance results of 12 June indicated that the enemy evaded the German attacks by withdrawing to the northwest and northeast.

For this reason, the Luftwaffe launched bomber and twin-engine fighter attacks on the enemy lines of communication, mainly in the Acroma area, from the early hours of dawn. The Army had not communicated its plans to the Luftwaffe until noon of 13 June.



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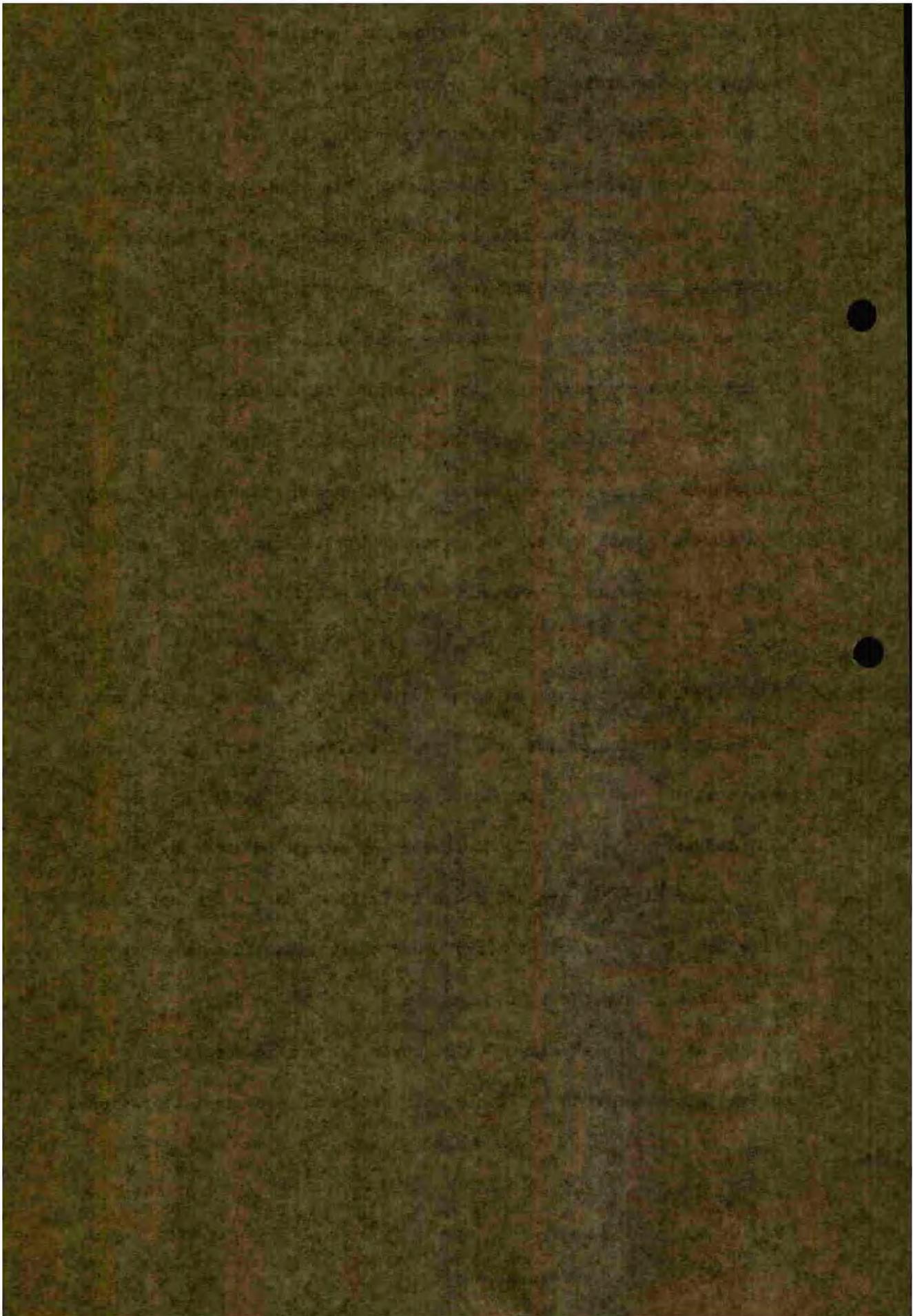
so that the Air Force Commander was under the impression that the Army requests for air support were not based on concepts of joint formation of main effort. These requests pertained to constant strong fighter protection; dive-bomber sorties at short notice against specific targets, without indicating the plans of the German ground forces; and reconnaissance missions, the execution of which was hardly possible because of the shortage of fighter aircraft. These exaggerated requests were complied with independently by the Air Force Commander within the availabilities of material and according to the situation in the air.

During the midday hours the 90th Light Division was given air support against enemy attacks in the area northwest of El-Adem. In accordance with the wishes expressed by the Panzer Army headquarters, the point of main air effort was shifted to the Acroma area.

After having given repeated information on the situation and the definite plans of the Army, the Luftwaffe headquarters received news that the German Africa Corps would launch an attack on the elevated terrain seven miles southwest of Acroma on 14 June.

After dive-bombers had flown their first sortie against this target on 14 June, further attacks had to be diverted to a convoy of 50 ships outside Tobruk.

A major British effort to resupply Malta also forced the Luftwaffe commander to shift his main effort to air-naval operations.



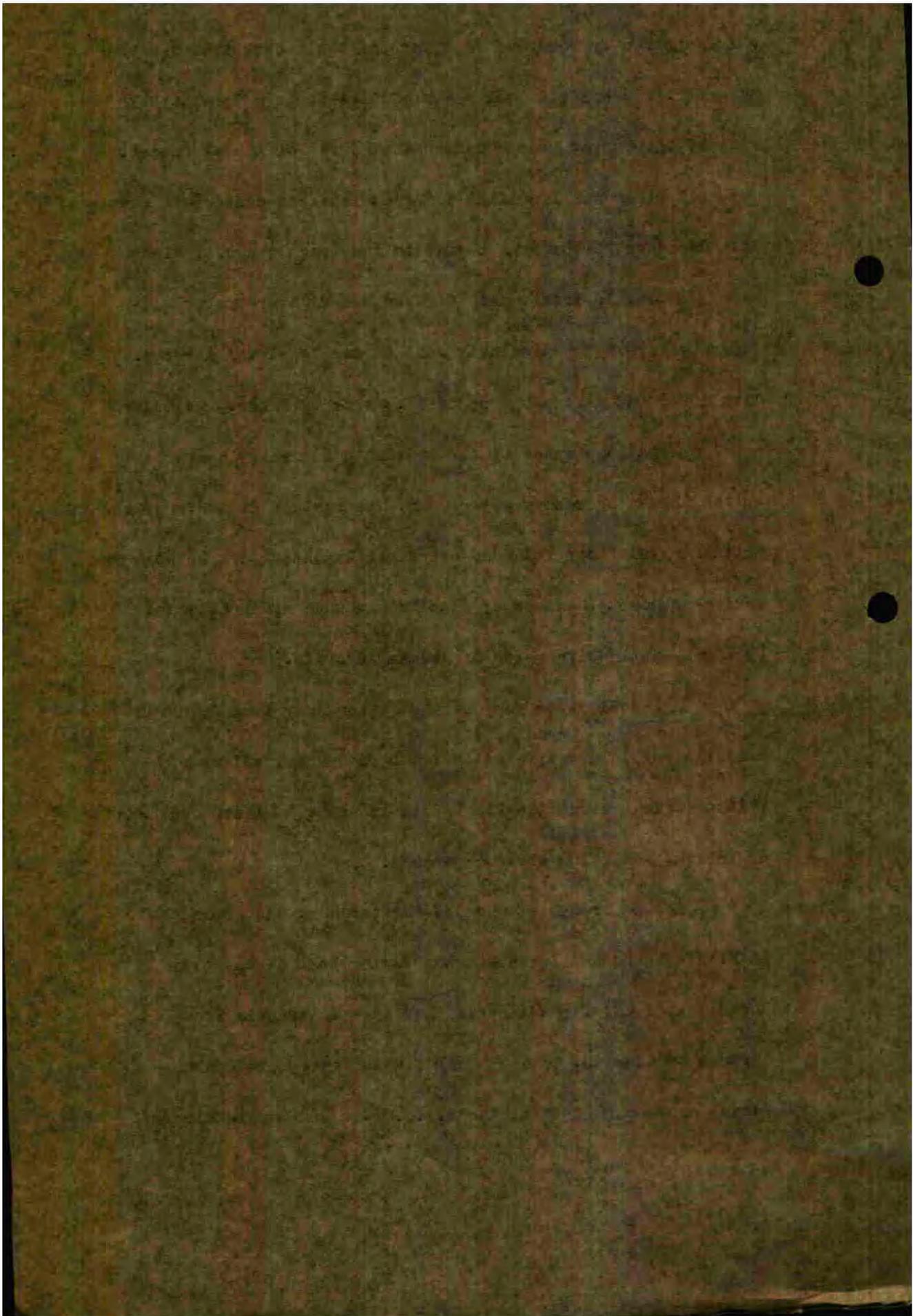
- 283 -

Outside the port of Tobruk Luftwaffe aircraft sank a freighter of 3,000 ton capacity and a 500-ton escort vessel, which apparently belonged to a part of the convoy that had been diverted. Three additional waves of dive-bombers flew attacks against the convoy proper during the course of the afternoon.

All other still available forces launched continuous daytime attacks on the withdrawal movements and truck concentrations along the Gazala front, with fighter and fighter-bomber aircraft performing particularly well during low-level attacks. Altogether 390 aircraft dropped 81.3 tons of bombs. The major naval operation planned by the British was greatly hampered by the German successes of 14 June. The eastern elements of the British naval force remained overnight in the waters between Africa and Crete, and on 15 June it was once again attacked by three distinctive waves of German aircraft.

In an effort to support the Panzer Army around Tobruk and at Acroma, Luftwaffe units attacked concentrations of British trucks along the Via Balbia and some 10 miles southeast of Tobruk, achieving obvious success.

The 3d Groups of the 53d Fighter Wing shot down 10 Beaufighters and 1 four-engine flying boat of the type Consolidated 29; these aircraft had been in transit from Martuba to Eleusis. During a GEMF fighter sweep above the Panzer Army near El-Adem, the R.A.F. lost six Curtiss aircraft



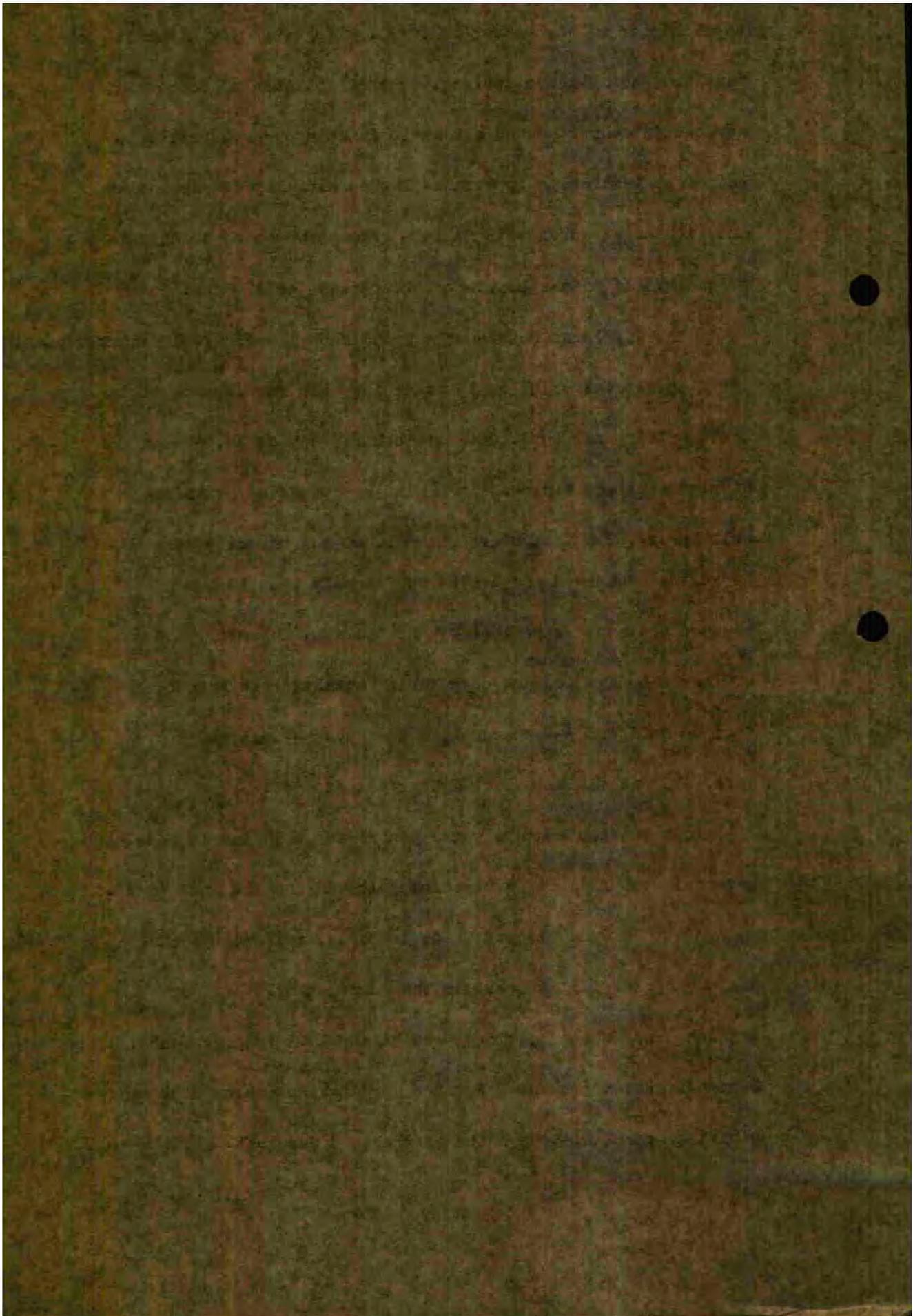
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with 1st Lt. Marseille shooting down 4 of them to bring the total number of his victories to 91. Altogether 209 aircraft participated in these actions, dropping 51 tons of bombs. An advance detachment moved out on 16 June in order to relocate the fighter aircraft to Gazala. The possibility of displacing one fighter squadron with minimum ground personnel to the El-Adem airfield is taken into consideration for 17 June.

The Air Force Commander's units sank 1 cruiser, 1 escort vessel, and 2 commercial ships on 15 June; they had formed part of the convoy moving eastward. One battleship decoy of 10,000-ton displacement was observed in a sinking condition, with its hull upward. Two freighters with 16,000-ton capacity were so severely damaged and burned so fiercely that it was assumed that they were lost by the British. Moreover, one cruiser was damaged, one ship firing antiaircraft guns of various calibers -- apparently a destroyer -- was set on fire, and one additional freighter was damaged.

Both British convoys were destroyed on 14 and 15 June, with only two freighters reaching Malta during the last night.

After 16 June the Luftwaffe in North Africa could once again give its full support to the Panzer Army. That day British truck concentrations were hit by 15.2 tons of bombs. German fighters prevented further air attacks on the 21st Panzer Division near Sidi-Resegh and shot down 9 aircraft. Fighter-



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End of G.
p. 284

bombers attacked trucks within the Tobruk perimeter and the British fighter airfields near Gambut, hitting two British FMI planes that were just taking off.

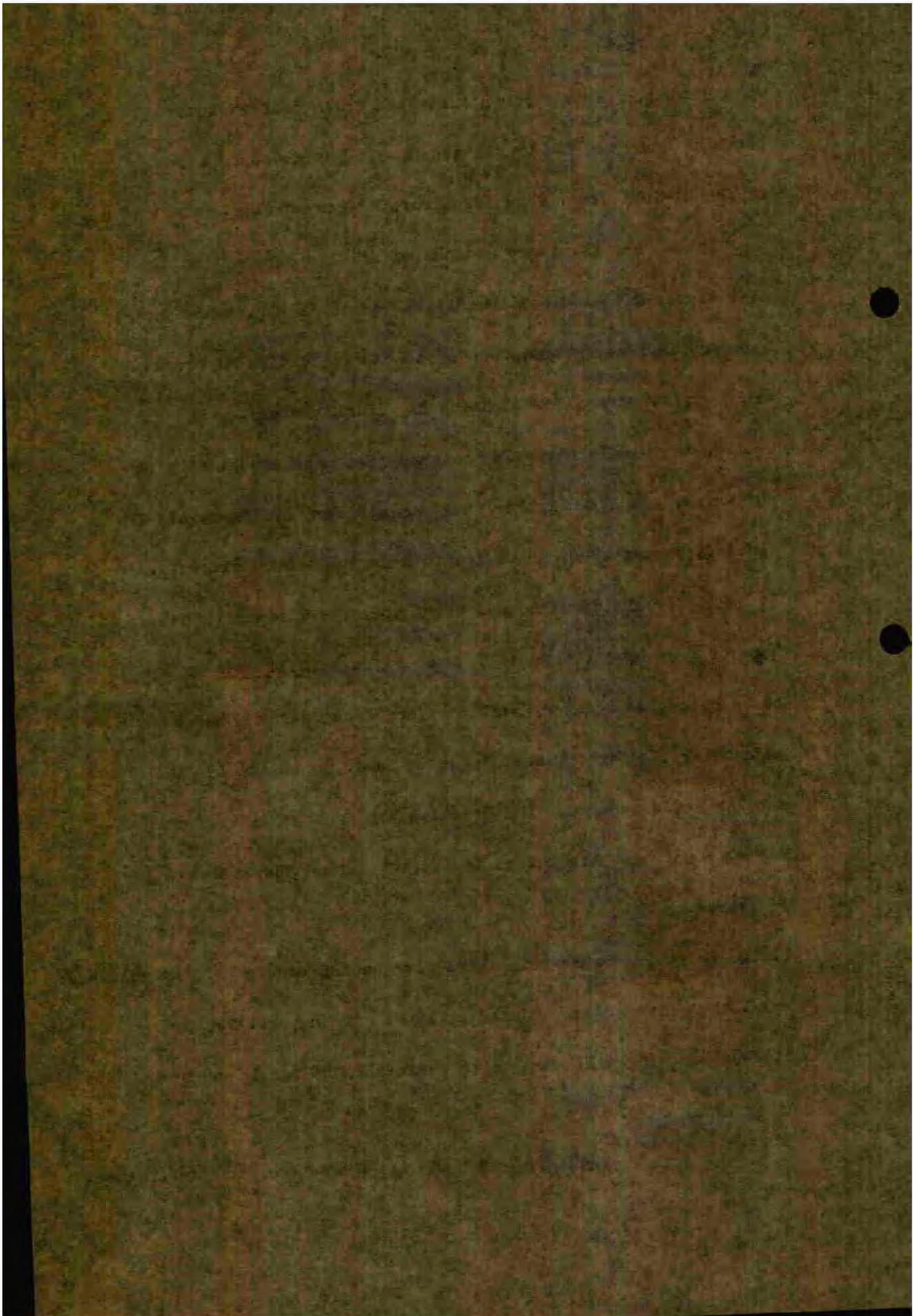
Reconnaissance reports indicated truck traffic toward the east and some 200 trucks accompanied by about 20 tanks in the El-Gobi area. Some 198 aircraft flew sorties.

On 17 June the heavy attacks of British aircraft on the 21st Panzer Division continued. All German fighter units were employed in free sweeps; they shot down 12 British aircraft, with 1st Lt. Marseille obtaining his 101st victory.

On the Gazala airfield that had just been occupied by the Luftwaffe, the 27th Fighter Wing was attacked by low-level aircraft around 1400, which led to a loss of seven aircraft.

The forward displacement of fighters to El-Idem that had been ordered by the Supreme Commander South (C.B. Sued) had to be cancelled because artillery fire from Tobruk started soon after the first planes began to land. On 18 and 19 June the Air Force Commander had detailed conferences with General Rommel concerning the Luftwaffe support during the assault of Tobruk.

1. The following basic principles for issuing orders were established:
 - a. The ground forces wanted earliest air support. The 3d Dive-Bomber Wing will make tests whether bombs can be dropped as early as 0520.
 - b. The attack sectors for the 3d Dive-Bomber Wing are determined.



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End of O.
p. 285

c. Italian units were to be committed during the following hours and one-half.

d. Early assembly of one wave of fighter escorts to attack targets upon request of the Panzer Army. Reporting according to line of attack methods, transfer to dive-bomber grid squares.

e. Immediately afterward continuous preparation of individual waves of dive-bombers and Italian C.R. 42's.

f. Second wave of Junkers 88 about 2 hours and 40 minutes after the first bombs were dropped over the target area, i.e. cross roads -- flak batteries and positions at the airfield.

g. Commitment of Italian Cant Z against flak positions at the airfield and port.

2. To mark the right and left flanks of the main points of penetration, the artillery commander was to fire smoke shells when enemy aircraft approached.

3. For pinpoint target attacks, directional fire was promised to facilitate the finding of the target.

4. The ground forces were to continually make themselves identifiable by blue smoke signals that were to be used both before and during the attack.

5. Two hours after the start of the attack reconnaissance flights were to be begun and continued along the right flank from El-Gobi to Gambut. A weather detachment was to move out on 19 June.



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End of G.
p. 286

6. General Rommel considered it feasible to displace forward some air force supplies to Sidi-Bexagh, but without occupying the airfield. It was questionable whether the entire 90th Light Division could stay there.

The Luftwaffe unit commanders were orally briefed on the afternoon of 15 June on the basis of this conference, and then the written orders were issued.

The draft of the operations order was preserved and has been attached as Appendix 30; the grid-map table is missing.

On 18 June, also, the intelligence officer at Headquarters, Air Force Commander, Africa, listed the number of enemy squadrons and aircraft.

In the frontline and rear areas as far as El-Daba there were:

42 squadrons with 675 aircraft; and

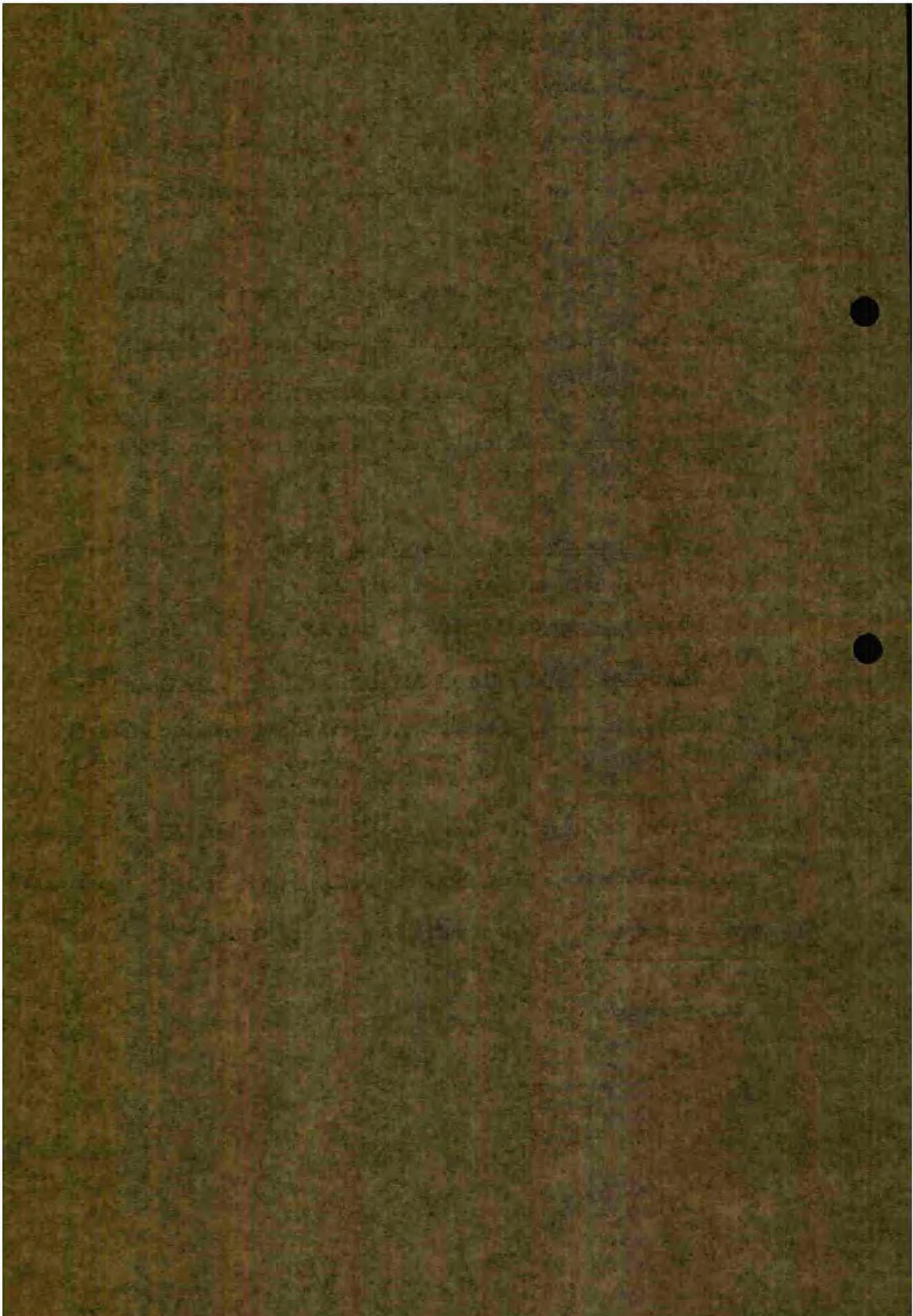
in the Nile area: 13 squadrons with 235 aircraft, for a total of:

59 squadrons with 900 aircraft that were ready for take-off.

In addition, it was assumed that the British had some 200 aircraft in the Palestine, Syria, and IEM Iraqi areas.

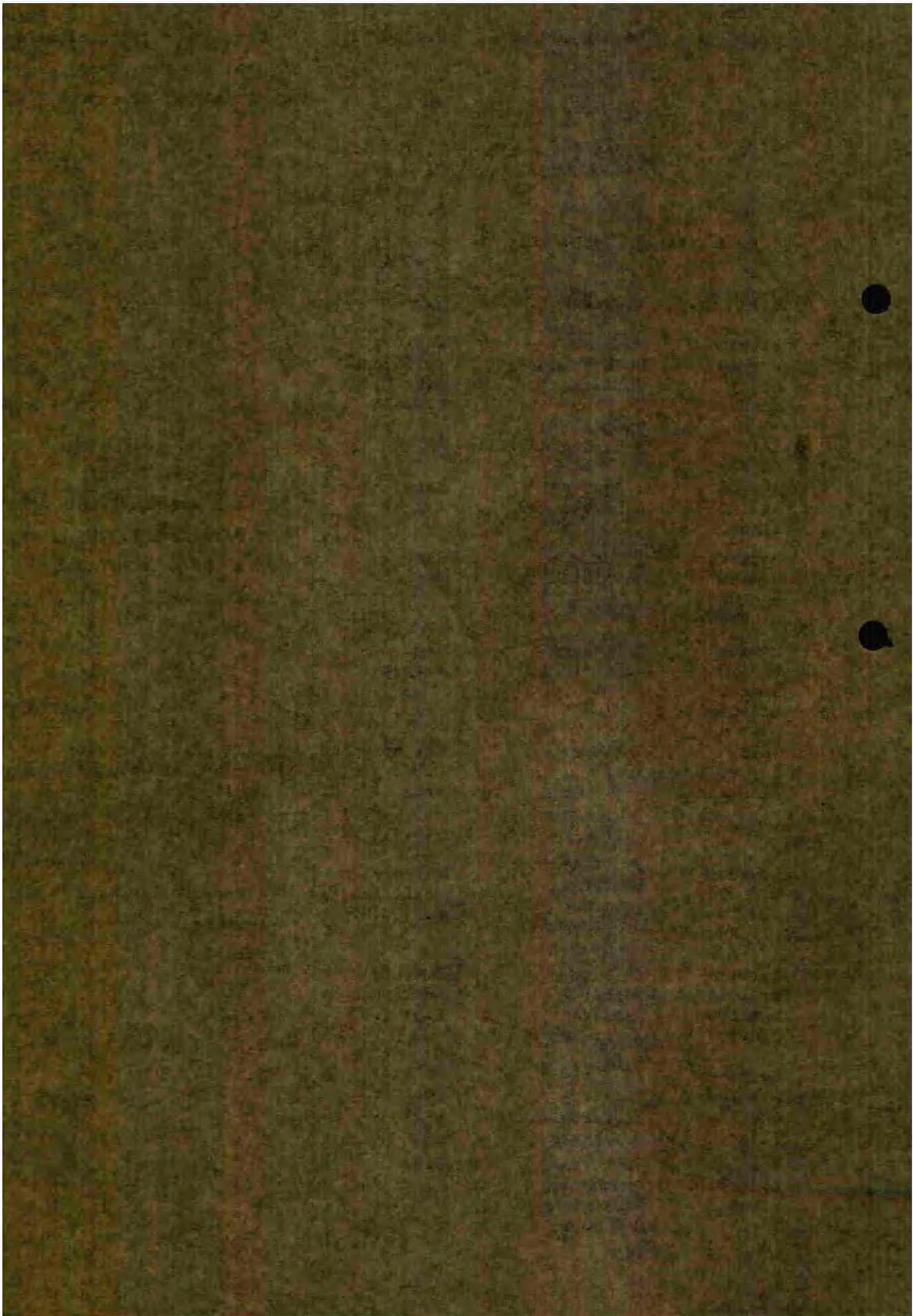
During the last few days only six squadrons had been committed above the combat area, the remaining frontline squadrons were probably being deployed and shifted.

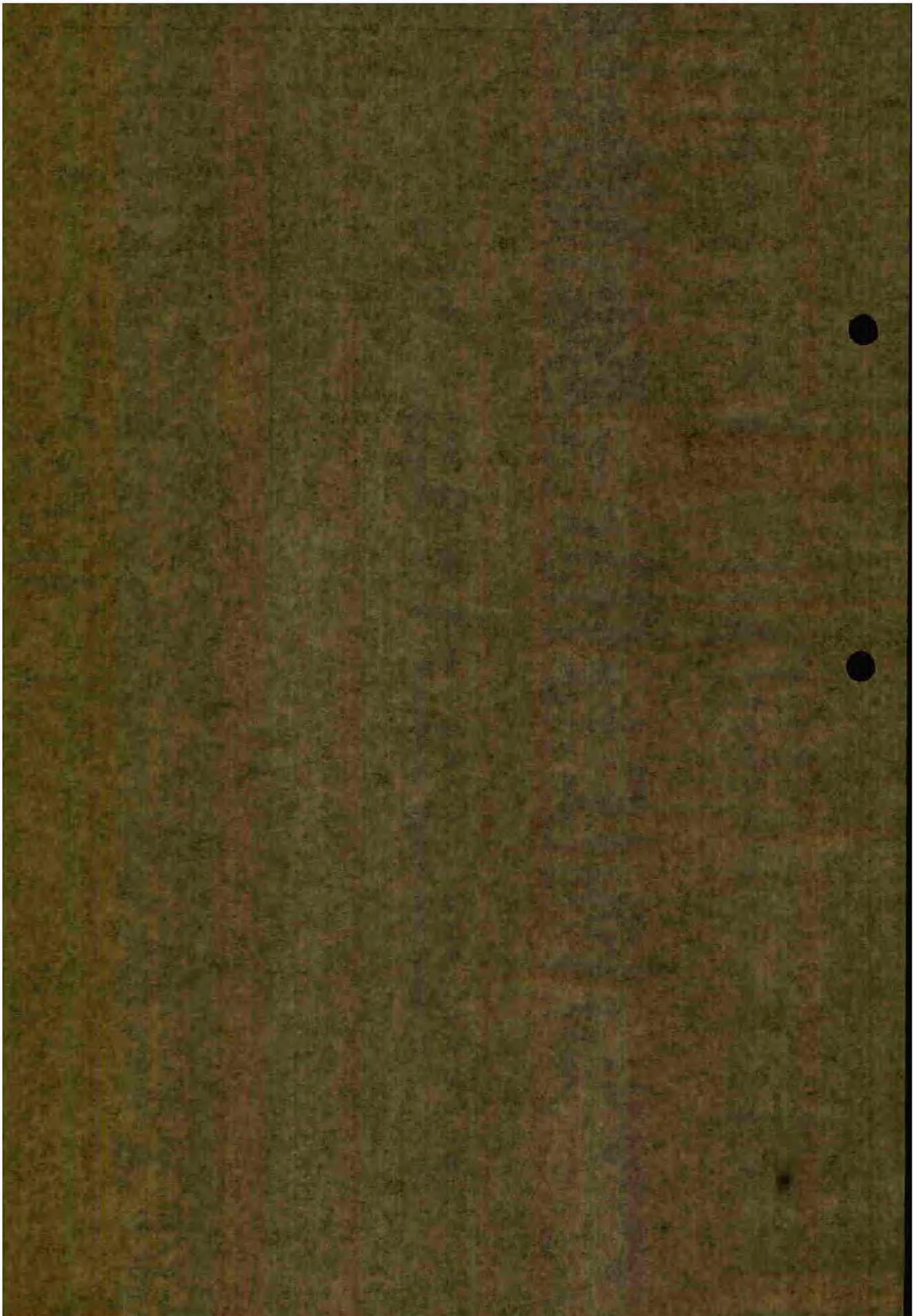
See Appendix 30.



Annex 3 to Page 287 (Appendix 30)

Time	Unit	Target	Observations
<u>H-hour</u>			
plus 2 min.	3d Bomb. Wing	R.49 - R.59	Continuous reconnaissance above Tobruk, every 2 minutes after H-hour
	First Luftwaffe Area Command	R.61 - R.71 Battery positions F.10; E.8	
+ 15 Minutes to	3d Bomb. Wing	Battery positions in J.5;	
+ 20 min.	6 Junkers 87	E.6	
Between H + 20 and 30 minutes	3d Group, 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing 3 Messerschm. 110	Battery positions B.8; 9; C.9, 11	
Between H + 30 and 40 minutes	3 Messerschmidts 110	Same target) Alternate target around and southeast of road fork B.4;) Point of main effort:) Identified batteries.
Between H + 50 and 60 minutes	3 Messerschmidts 110	Same target	
Between H + 70 and 80 minutes	3 Messerschmidts 110	Same target	
Until H + 90 minutes	Settore Est.	Batteries in E.3, 4, 5, 6 and Area D.3; D.4; B.3, 4, 5, 6; C.3, 4, 5	
Between H + 90 and 100 minutes	3d Dive-Bomber Squadron 9 Junkers 87	Battery positions F.3; E.4.) Alternate targets southeast of road fork area) D.3, 4) B.3, 4, 5, 6) C.3, 4, 5
Between H + 100 and 120 Min. (?)	3d Dive-Bomber Squadron 1 Junkers 87	Battery positions E.4; E.3	
Between H + 100 and 120 minutes	3d Dive-Bomber Squadron 9 Junkers 87	Battery positions C.9; B.8	
H + 120 and 130 minutes	3d Dive-Bomber Squadron 9 Junkers 87	B.9	





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The Second Air Fleet forces opposing the British were on 20 June:

- a. Air Force Commander Africa had 333 aircraft, with 186 ready for service;
- b. II Air Corps had 120 aircraft, with 78 ready for service; and
- c. X Air Corps had 161 aircraft, with 95 ready for service. The total authorized strength was therefore 614 aircraft, of which 357 were ready for service.

The Royal Air Force covered the withdrawal from the Gabala position after the fall of Bir-Hacheim by hampering the advance of the German armored forces until 14 June in the Adem - Acroma area, thus preventing them from breaking through to the coast.

Most of
Then the British aircraft were diverted to protect the convoy that MHR was leaving Alexandria.

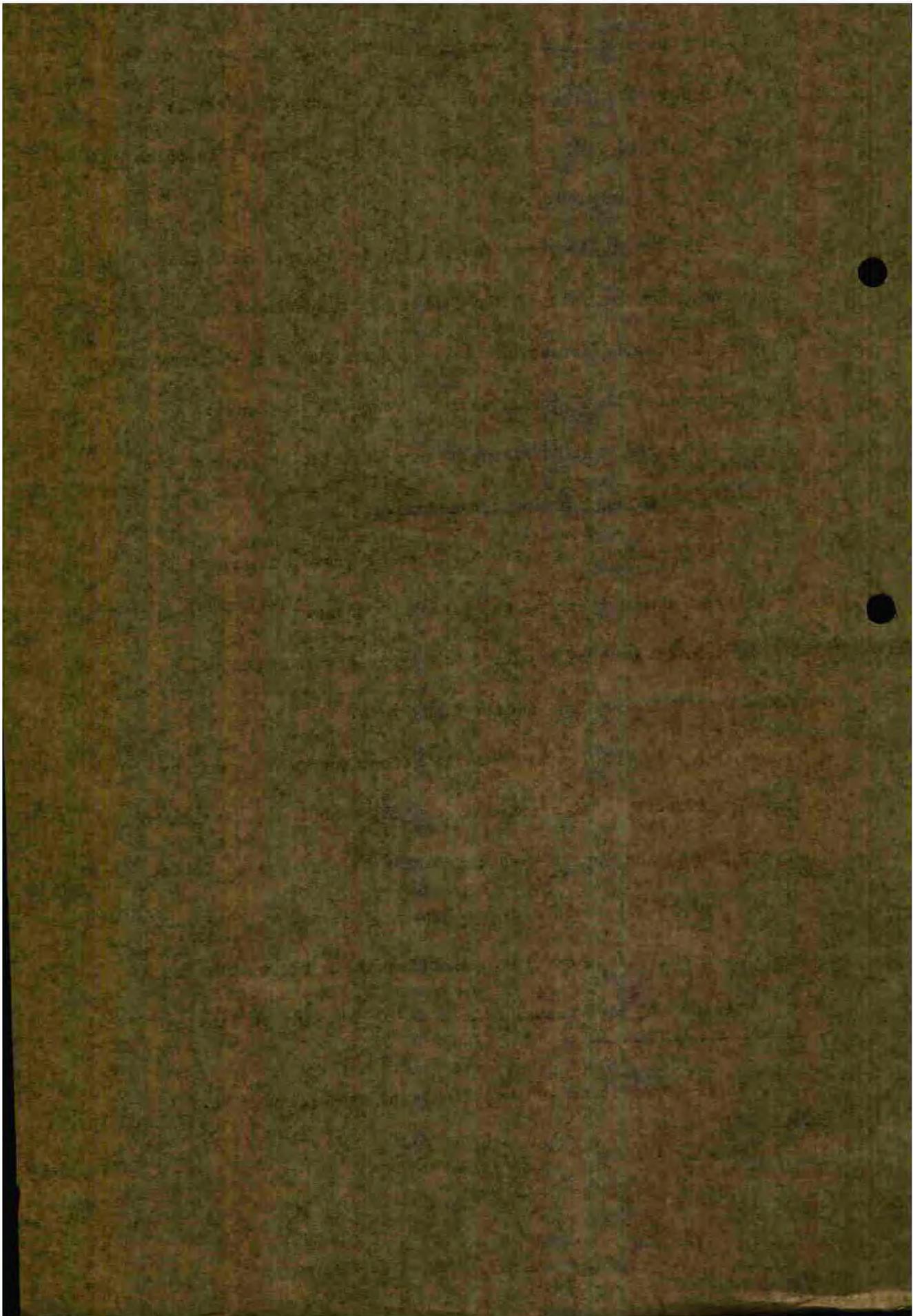
The resupply of Malta had been of grave concern to the British War Cabinet during the past few months. ^{and growing} ** On 20 March the last 5,000 tons of supplies had arrived on the island, and since then Malta had not received any more.

Now, in June, a large-scale effort was made to improve the situation. This time convoys were to be sent out simultaneously from the east and from the west in order to converge on Malta.

To protect these convoys, the British had started air operations well ahead of time, launching their first attacks on airfields and port installations on 20 May, and continuing

* For their composition and organization, see Appendix 31.

** See Page 243.

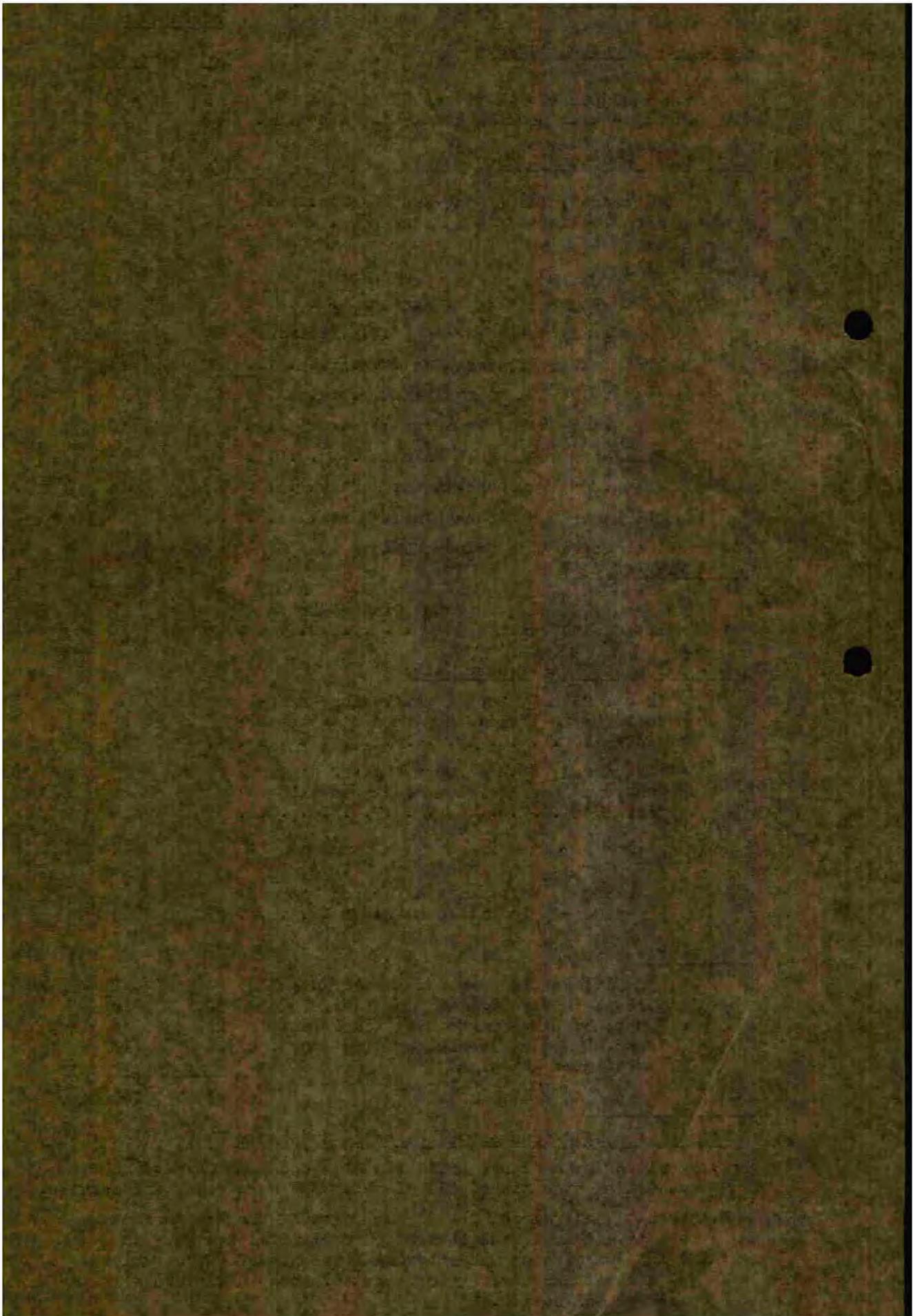


Annex 4a to Page 288a. Air Force Commander Africa and Panzer Army Headquarterson 20 June 1942*

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>FO</u>	<u>Actual</u>
<u>Short Range Reconnaissance</u>		
4th Squadron (H)/12 (I) at Martuba, equipped with Messerschmidts 109 and 110	25	15
<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance</u>		
1st Squadron, 121st Long-Range Recon. Gp. at Derna, equipped with Junkers 88	12	9
<u>Fighter Units</u>		
Hq, 27th Fighter Wing at Martuba	1	0
1st Group, 27th Fighter Wing at Martuba	29	13
2d Group, 27th Fighter Wing at Martuba	22	14
3d Group, 27th Fighter Wing at Martuba	21	12
27th Fighter-Bomber Squadron at Derna	9	5
27th Fighter Command at Malmedy	5	3
3d Group, 53d Fighter Wing at Martuba	26	18
53d Fighter-Bomber Squadron at Martuba	7	4
(All equipped with Messerschmidts 109)		
<u>Night Fighter Unit</u>		
1st Group, 2d Night Fighter Wing at Berca equipped with Junkers 88	28	10
<u>Twin-Engine Support Fighter Units</u>		
3d Group, 26th Support Fighter Wing, some- where in North Africa, equipped with Messer- schmidt 110	47	16
10th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, somewhere in North Africa, equipped with Dornier 17's	9	6
<u>Bomber Units</u>		
12th Squadron, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Berca, equipped with Junkers 86	15	9
<u>Dive Bomber Units</u>		
Hq, 3d Dive Bomber Wing (Messerschmidt 110)	2	2
1st Group, 3d Dive Bomber Wing (Junkers 87)	30	16
2d Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing (Junkers 87)	21	18
3d Group, 3d Dive Bomber Wing (Junk, 87)	26	13
(All stationed at Derna)		
	<u>333</u>	<u>186</u>

Composition of Second Air Fleet on 20 June 1942

- Situation maps of the Luftwaffe High Command indicate an authorized strength of 614 of which 337 were ready for service.
- Strength Analysis of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and in Africa (Extracted from Situation Maps in England) indicates an authorized strength of 607 of which 337 aircraft were ready for service. Both in Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Annex 4b to Page 288

b. II Air Corps and Second Air Fleet, Respectively

on 20 June 1942

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>Authorized</u>	<u>Actual</u>
<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance Units</u>		
Hq, 122d Long-Range Recon. Group at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	3	2
1st Squadron, 122 Long-Range Recon. Group at Catania, equipped with Junkers 88 and Messerschmidts 110	12	7
<u>(Second Air Fleet)</u>		
XXXXXXXXXX 2d Squadron, 122d Long-Range Reconnaissance Group at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	15	7
<u>Fighter Units</u>		
Hq, 53d Fighter Wing	4	4
2d Group, 53d Fighter Wing	17	17
<u>(Both at Comiso and both equipped with Messerschmidts 109)</u>		
<u>Night Fighter Units</u>		
Hq is Group, 2d Night Fighter Wing at Catania, equipped with Junkers 88 and Messerschmidts 110	3	3
<u>Bomber Units</u>		
606th Bomber Group at Catania	30	20
806th Bomber Group at Catania	26	16
Hq, 54th Bomber Group at Catania	2	2
	120	78

* See Footnote 4a



Annex 4c to Page 288

c. 7 Air Corps on 20 June 1942

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>Authorized</u>	<u>Actual</u>
<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance Units</u>		
2d Squadron, 123d Long-Range Recon. Group, stationed at Kastelli, equipped with Junkers 88	14	2
<u>Bomber Units</u>		
Hq, First Luftwaffe Area Command, stationed at Eleusis, equipped with Junkers 88	1	1
1st Group, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Iraklion, equipped with Junkers 88	28	14
2d Group, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Iraklion, equipped with Junkers 88	25	18
2d Group, 100th Bomber Wing, at Tatoi, equipped with Heinkels 111	20	14
1st Group, 54th Bomber Wing, at Eleusis, equipped with Junkers 88	25	19
<u>Naval Aircraft Units</u>		
2d Squadron, 125th Group, stationed at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado's 196	9	7
Hq, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with B.V.'s (Translation unknown) 138	1	1
1st Squadron, 126th Group at Skaramanga, equipped with I.T. 8 (???)	11	3
2d Squadron, 126th Group, at Kawalla, equipped with Arado 196	10	7
3d Squadron, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado 196 and Heinkel 60	11	7
	161	93

See Footnote 4a and b.



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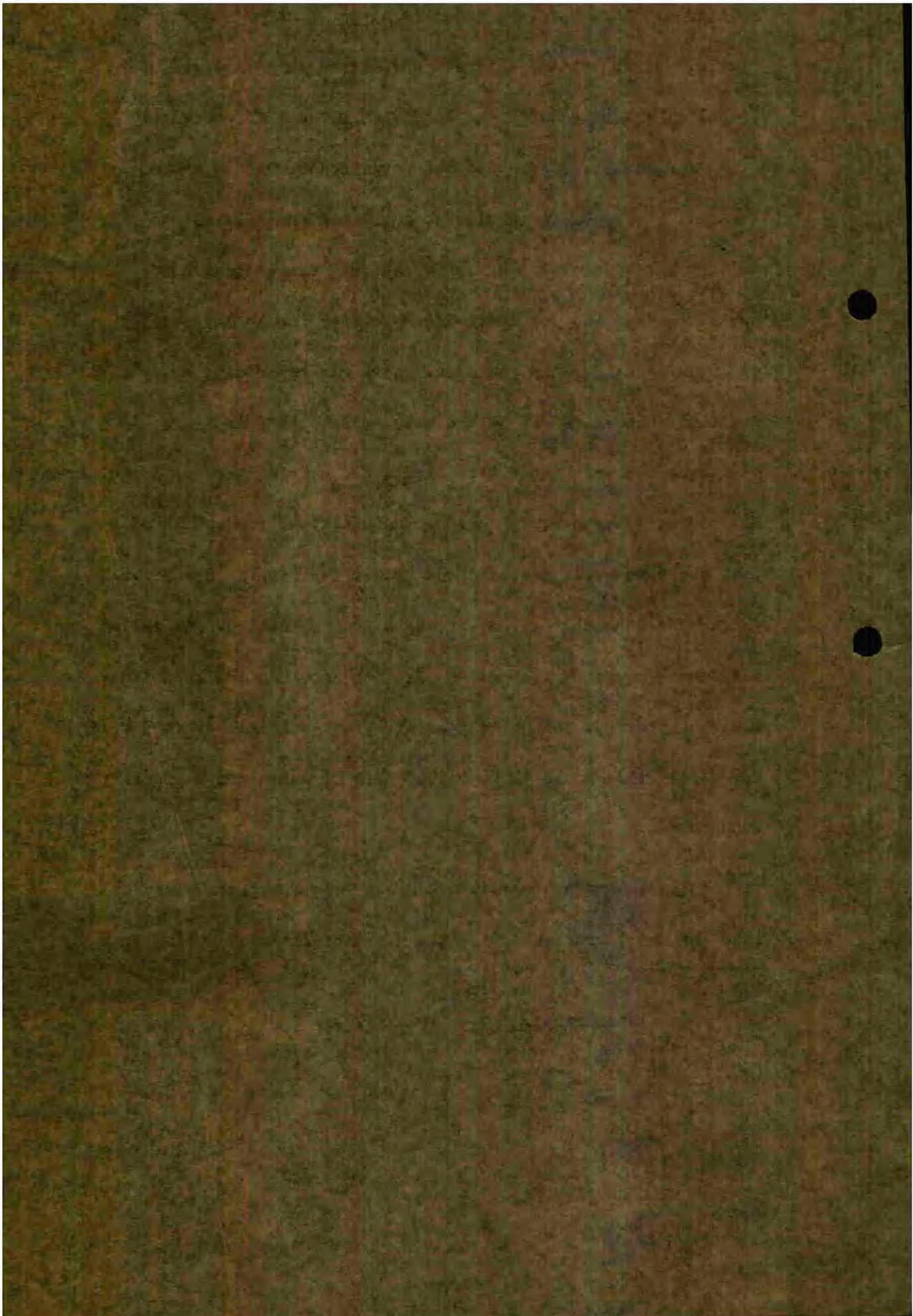
them without let-up every night up to 11 June. The fighter aircraft stationed on Malta had increased to more than 100 Spitfires, which had been moved in by the aircraft carrier "Eagle." Other British aircraft had also been transferred to Malta, and some 60 of the latter were ready for service.

The situation on Malta had nevertheless become extremely serious. "Our rations consisted of one and one-half slices of very bad bread with jam for breakfast, canned meat and one slice of bread for lunch and -- except for an extra slice of bread -- dinner was the same. There was sugar with every meal, but margarine was served only every second or third day. Even the drinking water, light, and heating were rationed. All ordinary items were missing, and since the production of beer required coal, none had been brewed for several months..." "We needed hundreds of tons of bombs and ammunition. The island was facing surrender, by mid-August its garrison and inhabitants would be starved. Unless help arrived, we would all be ~~IRM~~ dead for a long time so that the actual date of surrender was really much sooner." ¹⁷²

In execution of Operation HARPON "six freighters moved into the Mediterranean during the night of 11 June, coming from

172

Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol II., pp. 203-4.

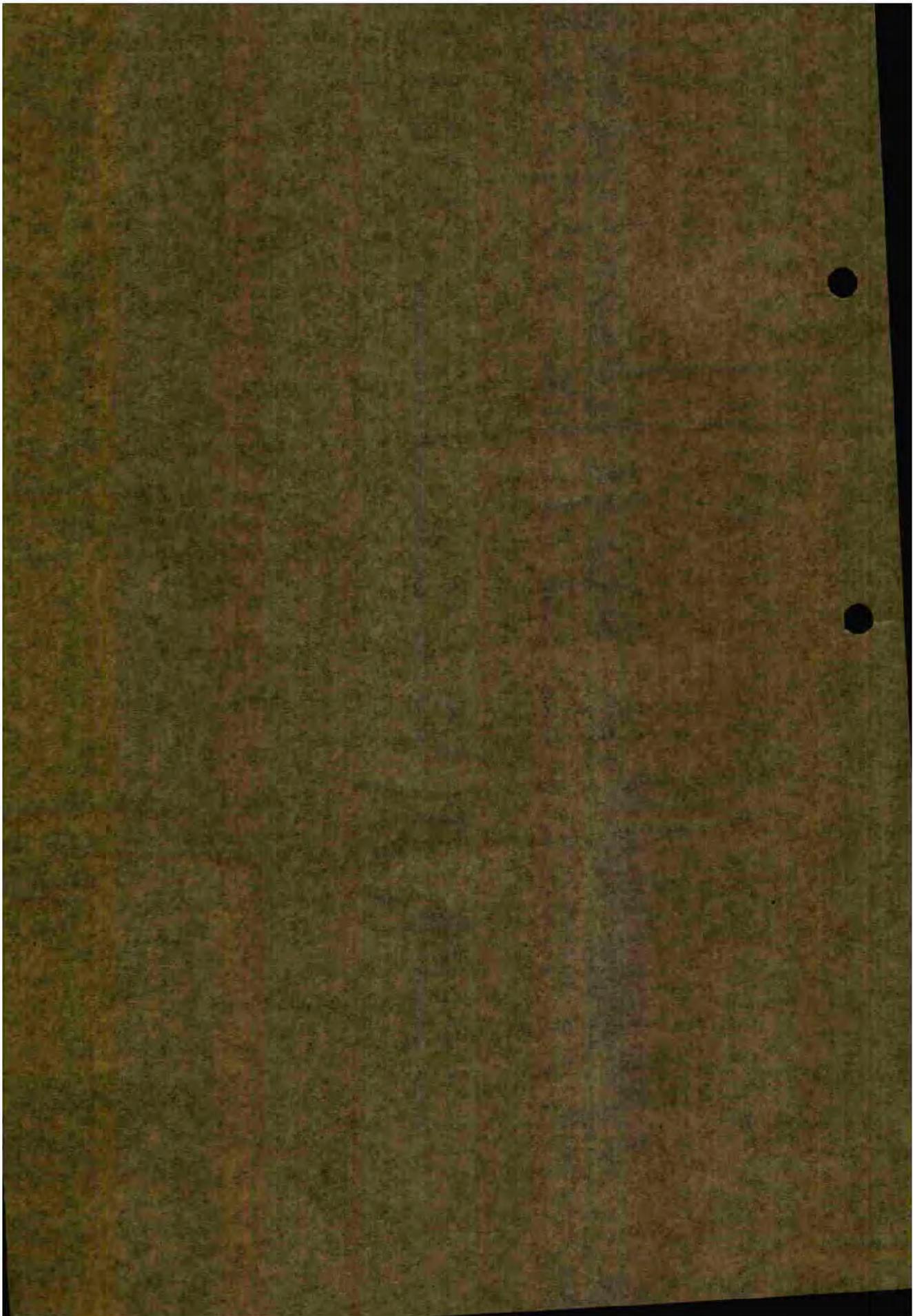


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the Atlantic. They were escorted by the antiaircraft cruiser "Gairo" and nine destroyers. Admiral Curtis had his command post on the battleship "Malaya"; the aircraft carriers "Eagle" and "Argus", 2 cruisers and 8 destroyers were ready and available to lend support. On 14 June the convoy was attacked at the longitude of Sardinia, with the Germans dropping many bombs. One freighter was sunk, and the cruiser "Liverpool" was damaged and put out of action. In the evening, when the convoy approached the straits, the heavy ships had to turn about."

"On the next morning -- 15 June -- two Italian cruisers, several destroyers, and numerous aircraft attacked the convoy south of Pantelleria. The enemy naval guns were superior to the British in range, and before the British succeeded in chasing the Axis forces -- not without losses to them -- the destroyer "Pedeuin" sank and another one was severely damaged. The air attacks, however, continued throughout the day; three additional British freighters were sunk. The two remaining ships of the badly shattered convoy arrived at Malta during the night. The convoy approaching from the east -- Operation VIGOROUS -- which consisted of 11 vessels, was even less fortunate.

Admiral Vian, who was again in command, had this time a far stronger cruiser and destroyer escort at his disposal



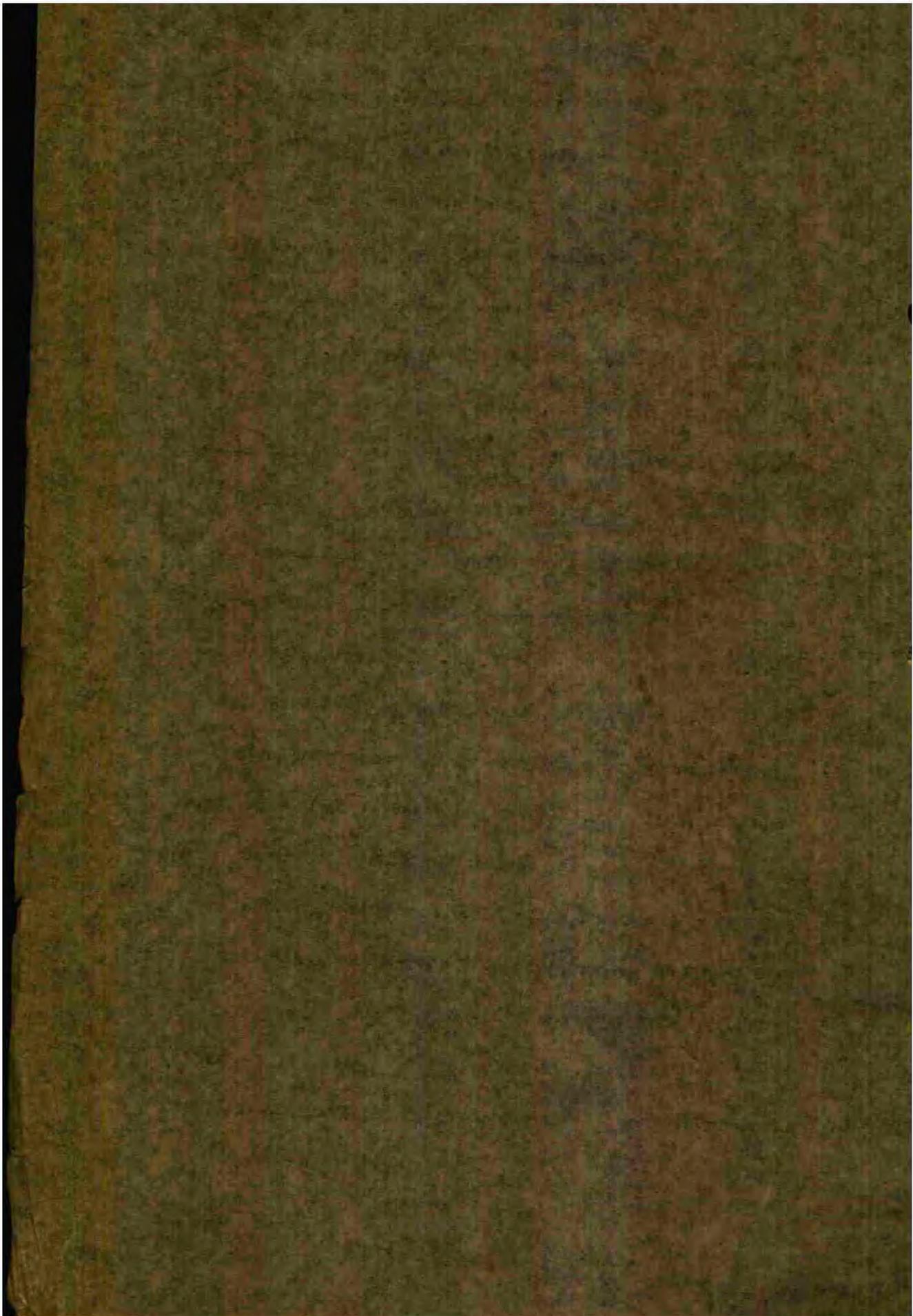
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than when he had won his victorious engagement in March. However, his naval force included no battleship nor aircraft carrier despite the fact that it could be assumed the major part of the Italian Navy would be mustered against him."

"On 11 June the convoy left, and on 14 June it was exposed to incessant air attacks south of Crete. That evening Vian received a radio message that the enemy fleet, including two battleships of the "Littoria" class, had left Taranto, apparently with the intention of catching him."

"On the other hand, there was justified hope that the British submarines and the Royal Air Force planes stationed on Malta and in the Cyrenaica would hit the Italian fleet very strongly during its approach toward the convoy. One Italian cruiser was actually hit and subsequently completely sunk. But that was not sufficient. The Italians maintained their southeasterly direction so that a clash with this overwhelmingly superior force on the morning of 15 June appeared inevitable. Convoy and escort vessels were forced to return to Egypt. The cruiser "Heraion" had meanwhile been sunk by a submarine, while 3 destroyers and 2 freighters had been lost to air attacks. The Royal Air Force also suffered heavy losses."

"The Italians, however, lost one additional heavy cruiser and one of their battleships was damaged. But the



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eastern access to Malta remained closed, and no other convoy attempted to force its way from that side until November of 1942."

"Thus, despite maximum British efforts only 2 out of 17 supply ships had reached their destination, and Malta's plight continued unabated." 173

The R.A.F. had been forced to commit the bulk of its units to support Operation VESOCUS during 14 and 15 June, after which it shifted its effort once again to the battle fields of the harassment. The British Eighth Army had succeeded in withdrawing upward via Tobruk and El-Adem. Its armored forces, however, had suffered heavy losses in the process of withdrawing. The R.A.F. had supported the ground forces during their withdrawal movement with utmost aggressiveness so that Rommel had been unsuccessful in interrupting the withdrawal. On 16 June, when he thrust toward Sidi-Buzegh bypassing El-Adem, his far-advanced armored units were attacked successfully on several occasions so that they were forced to stop their drive.

The air bases around Gambut were not evacuated until the last possible moment; and the ground personnel performed outstandingly during the evacuation. The Germans found no material or supplies that could have been of any use to them.

But the R.A.F. was unable to prevent that at Tobruk some

173

Winston Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13. Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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sizable forces were encircled by the Axis powers.

Netzel hoped that the thrust on Tobruk -- a ~~final~~ turn-about action launched out of a pursuing movement -- would surprise his adversary. Outside the fortress to the west of the Egyptian border, there were no sizable British armored forces.

It was believed that because of the swiftness of the fighting after 12 June, the staffs and combat units had been unable to plan a systematic defense of Tobruk. The garrison consisted of the reinforced South African 2d Division, the Indian 11th Brigade, two battalions of the Guards brigade, a few armored battalions led by the 52d ~~Infantry~~ Armored Brigade Headquarters -- an army reserve staff -- and several artillery regiments.

To the east and west Tobruk was surrounded by rocky impassable terrain, which extended southward into a flat sandy plain. The Italians had fortified the outlying terrain in an outstanding manner at the time Balbo governed the province. The many fortifications that formed a belt around Tobruk were sunk into the ground in such a manner that the attacker could identify them correctly only from the air. The fortifications consisted of an underground labyrinth that led to antitank and machine gun positions.

Every single pillbox was protected by an antitank ditch

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 209 and 215.



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and barbed wire entanglements. Behind the outer belt of fortifications, which in most instances was constituted by several concentric lines, there were strong artillery positions, field positions, and several individual fortresses. Most of these fortifications were secured by belts of mine fields of great depth.

The Italian XXI Corps, reinforced by some tanks, was designated to carry out the deceptive attack in the southwest area of the fortress belt. The force that was to conduct the decisive assault consisted of the German Africa Corps and the Italian XI Corps. The penetrations areas in the southeast were to be bombed by the entire combined German-Italian air force.

As soon as the infantry had overcome the line of fortifications, the German Africa Corps was to push ahead across the road fork toward the port area and open the Via Balbia toward the west. Following the German Africa Corps, the Italian XI Corps was to seize the fortified positions and thrust toward the Ras-el-Madaux into the rear of the South African forces.

Starting at 0520 on 20 June, several hundred Axis aircraft began to hammer at the points that were to be penetrated in the southeast part of the fortress. Enormous columns of dust rose into the air, carrying with them obstacles and weapons of the defenders. Bomb after bomb



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End of G.
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tore into the barbed wire entanglements. Directly after the Luftwaffe assault, the infantry units of the German Africa Corps, the 15th Rifle Brigade, and the Italian XX Corps began their advance. During the preceding night some gaps had already been cut across the minefields so that the infantry was able to penetrate the first British positions within two hours after the air attacks. One pillbox after another was taken in bitter close combat actions. At 0800 the engineers bridged ^{antitank} the EMH ditch, the path was thus opened for an advance of the armored units.

By about noon the German Africa Corps reached the road fork at Sidi-Mahmud after having immobilised some 50 British tanks in tough actions. The Pilastrino fortress continued to fire while British ships attempted to leave the port; German antiaircraft guns and artillery pieces sank five of these ships. By the evening Fortreca Pilastrino also offered to surrender, while the axis forces took Fortress Elara by assault. At the hour of darkness about two thirds of the fortress terrain were in German hands, the city and port had been taken by the Africa Corps already in the afternoon.

At 0940 on 21 June General Klopper, the commander of the South African 2d Division and officer in charge of Tobruk, surrendered the fortress to General Rommel. His command post had been destroyed and he had lost contact with his troops. He was thus unable to prevent the defeat.



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More than 45,000 prisoners and valuable supplies were captured by the Germans, more than 1,000 tanks and almost 400 guns were destroyed or captured by them. In recognition of his outstanding performance, Rommel was appointed Field Marshal.

The Luftwaffe was able to score direct hits on practically all pillboxes in the planned target area, when it started the day off early in the morning of 20 June. Thus, the ground forces attack was given the necessary impetus. The continuous bombardment of the batteries that had been well marked by the ground forces facilitated the quick penetration of the SSXXI some of resistance and influenced the capture of the fortress decisively.

Since no British fighters appeared over the battlefield, the further attacks of the Luftwaffe took place without incident. The total number of sorties flown was 588, with the Italians flying an additional 177.

But the assault of the fortress had after all required an extreme effort of all concerned, since the many weeks of very heavy fighting against enemy forces that were numerically superior and had more materiel had left their traces on the Axis troops.

Even so Rommel believed that he should ask another extreme effort from his victorious units by making them take up the pursuit of the defeated British Eighth Army.

The enormous booty of ammunition, POL, rations, and



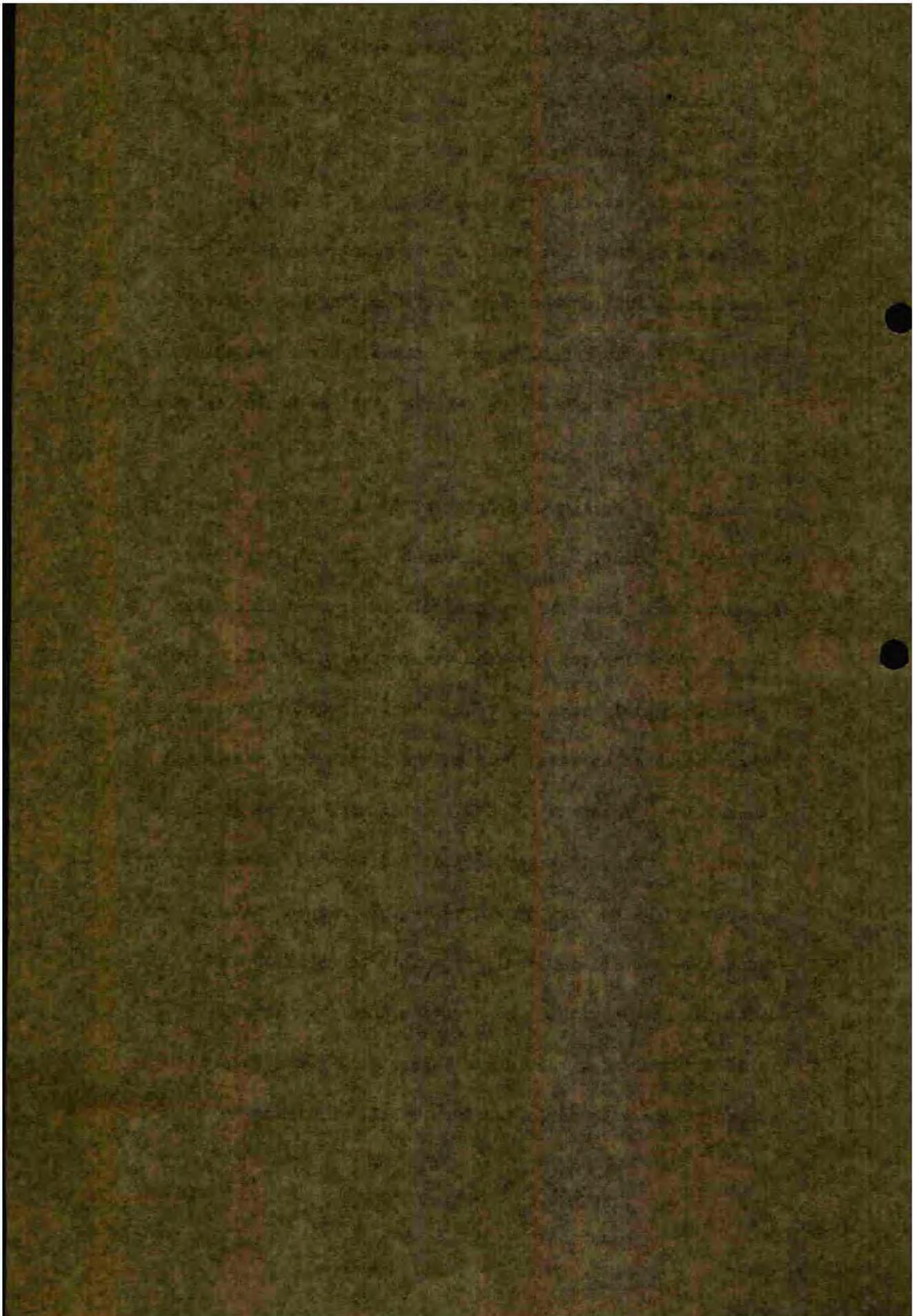
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material of all types guaranteed in his opinion the flow of supplies for the continuation of the offensive.

He therefore arrived at the conclusion that the weakness of the British resulting from their defeat at Tobruk ought to be used for penetrating as far as possible into Egypt.

He had repeatedly been told in Rome that the flow of supplies to North Africa could not be guaranteed in sufficient quantities so long as the ports of Tobruk and Marsa-Matruh were still in Axis hands. Because of the fundamental change in the over-all situation, he believed that he could dispense with the capture of Malta.

In Rommel's opinion the British Eighth Army was extremely weak at this point. Two newly brought up infantry divisions formed its main force of resistance. The armored units that had been moved in from Egyptian rear areas in extreme haste could not possibly have any real combat strength. For these reasons he hoped to catch up with the Eighth Army during its withdrawal and force it to give battle. Once the remaining elements of the British forces that had escaped after the Marsa Matruh fighting were destroyed -- this seemed quite feasible -- the British would be unable to mobilize any additional forces within the Egyptian theater. Without ^{real} any IAW resistance, the German Panzer Army could safely advance toward Alexandria and Suez Canal, suffering no



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further delay. Upon Rommel's request the Duce lifted the limitation on the operational freedom of action of the Panzer Army, and on 23 June the Axis units began another eastward advance.

The British Eighth Army had already evacuated the border territory with the intention of manning positions around the fortress Marsa Matruh.

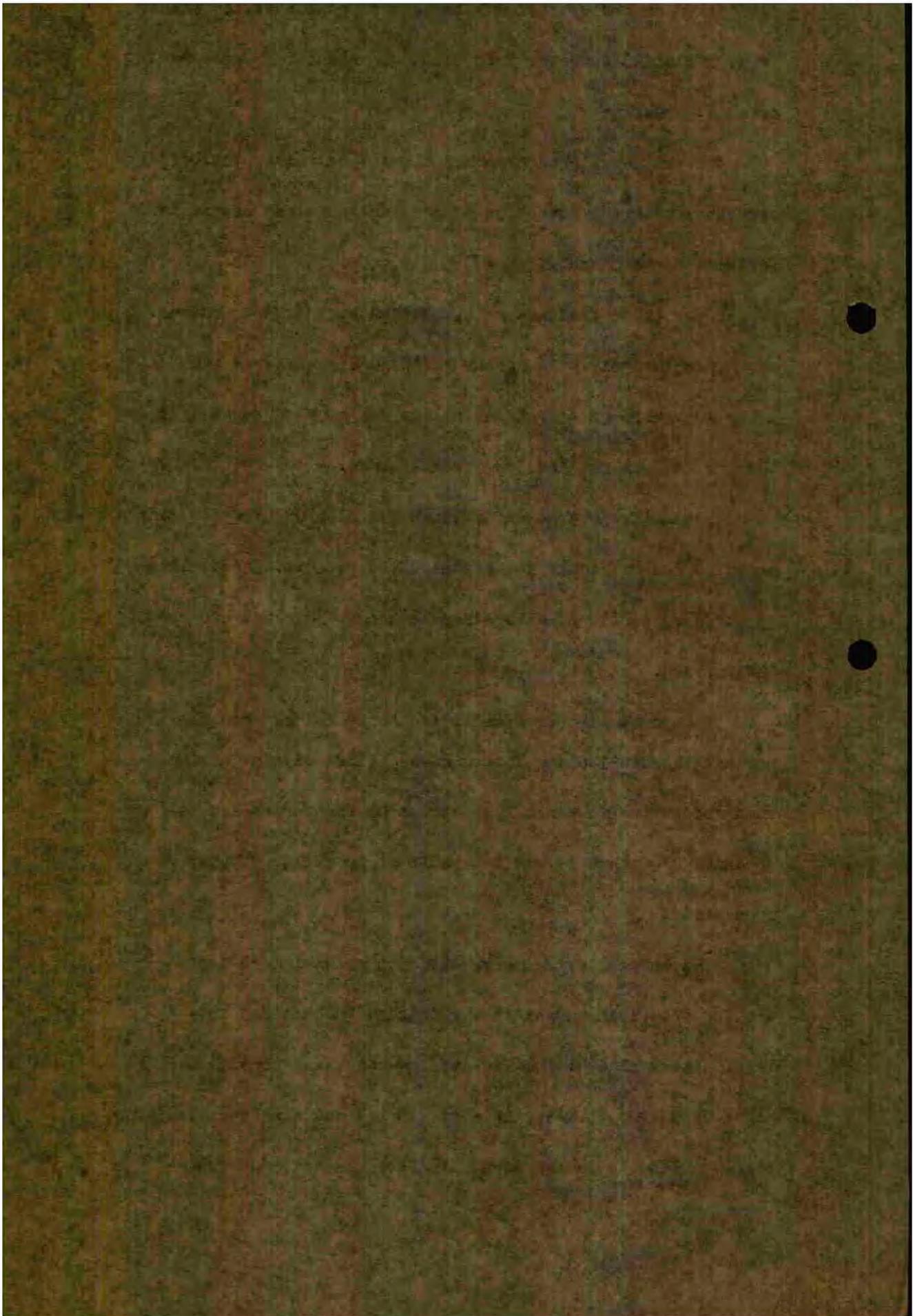
Under these circumstances, extreme speed was essential.

Unfortunately, the German Africa Corps suffered from a serious shortage of POL during the day of 24 June so that the advance was stalled for several hours.

The Littorio Armored Division was also delayed for many hours so that it could not continue the pursuit. The Italian XX Corps consisted of altogether 14 tanks, 30 guns, and 2,000 infantrymen.

The Royal Air Force inflicted heavy losses upon the pursuing German-Italian forces during those days at a time when the Luftwaffe was still regrouping its forces and re-organising so that it was incapable of providing fighter protection.

The German Africa Corps with its remaining 50 tanks was the principal target of the British bombers and low-level attack planes. The air attacks continued through the night. The 200 multi-engine aircraft and 360 single-engine planes available to the Royal Air Force in western Egypt



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flew one sortie after another.

Despite all handicaps the Panzer Army succeeded in approaching the Marsa-Matruh area within six miles distance on 26 June. The British had dug in along the line Bir-Khala -- Marsa-Matruh, but during the evening hours the 90th Light Division penetrated farther north and cut off the coastal road to the east and the west.

Marsa-Matruh had been fortified in a manner similar to Tobruk, but the fortifications were by far less cleverly constructed than in the latter fortress. Within the entire area there were probably some 200,000 men. In Marsa-Matruh were the bulk of the New Zealand and Indian 10th Divisions, as well as elements of the British 50th and Indian 5th Divisions.

On 27 June the German Africa Corps, commanded by General Nehring, together with the Ariete Armored Division attacked the British armored forces assembled in the area north of Bir Khala. The fight lasted until late in the evening, whereupon 18 destroyed American tanks were scattered over the field of battle.

During the night and on the early morning of 28 June major elements of the motorized garrison of Marsa-Matruh succeeded in escaping through gaps in the ring of encirclement.

In the afternoon, at about 1700, the 90th Light Division,

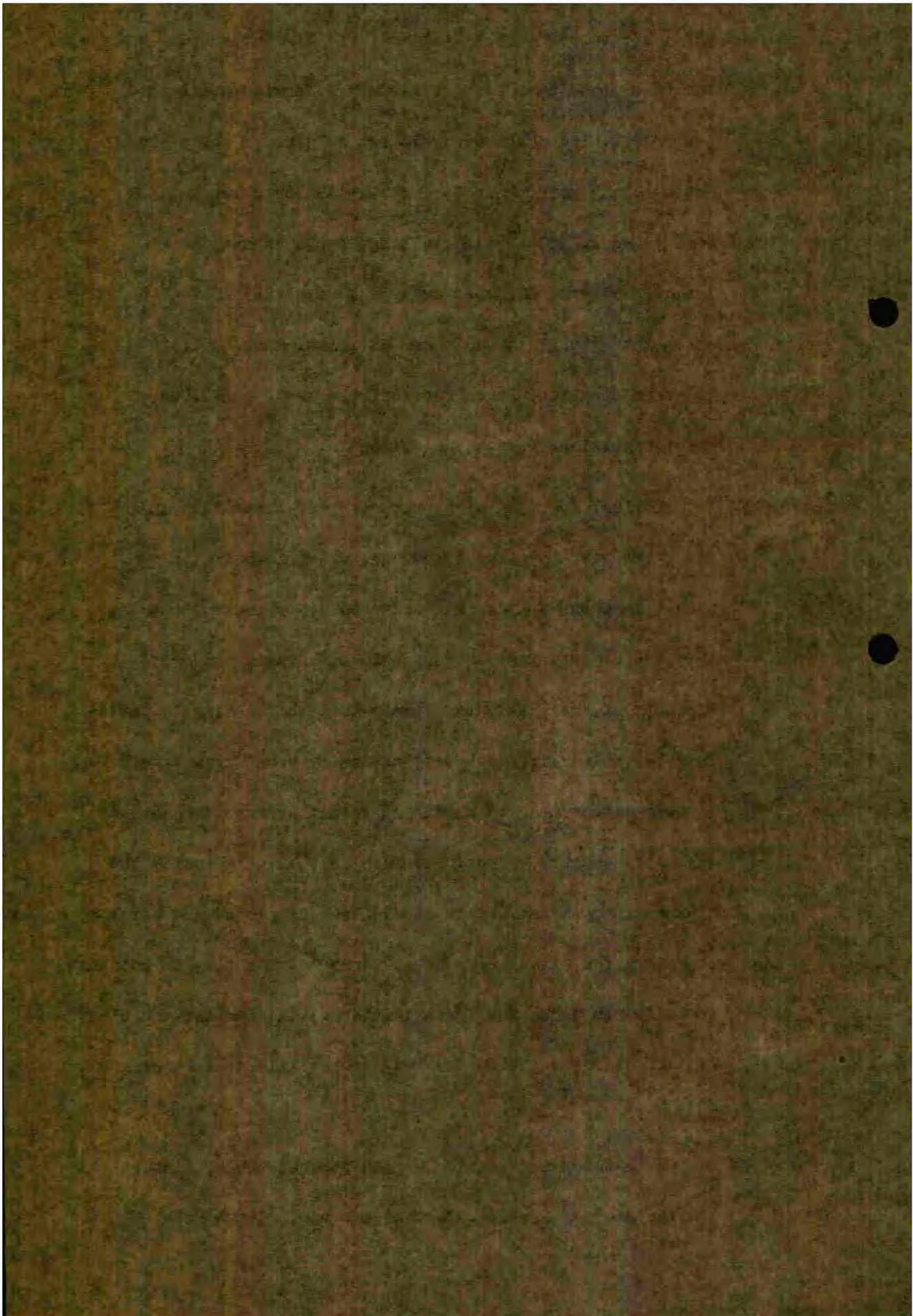


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the 580th Reconnaissance Battalion, Combat Flight Kiehl, and the elements of the Italian X and XII Corps which had had been moved up by truck, assembled for the attack and jumped off. The tough struggle lasted through the night but by early morning on 29 June Marsa-Matruh was in German hands. In addition to large supply dumps the Germans captured military equipment of all types, altogether enough to equip one division. Some 40 tanks had been disabled within the fortress area, and 6,000 British soldiers were taken prisoners.

The last fortress with prepared port installations along the west-egyptian coast had fallen into Axis hands. Once again the British had suffered heavy losses, but they had nevertheless succeeded in withdrawing major elements of their infantry forces into the El-Alamein position, which had already been occupied by some fresh troops and the improvement of which had been underway for some time with all possible effort. The Germans planned to reach the El-Alamein position before it had been completed and seize it before the withdrawing Eighth Army had had time to establish its defenses along the fortifications. This bastion was the dam: if it was ruptured, the way to the Nile delta would be open.

On 29 June at dusk the Germans reached the area about 6 miles west of El-Daba. To the east the British were



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Fighter Wing was moved forward to Gambut, the Luftwaffe commander at the Panzer Army headquarters with the 4.(H)/12 squadron went to Area, and the 3d Dive-Bomber Wing to Bir-Bu-Hania. Attacks against the enemy rear area communications were handicapped by heavy accumulations of sand (dust?) at the new airfields.

It turned out that the British fighters in the Sidi-Barrani area were still unable to count on ground station support which would have enabled them to obtain information and control data from these ground installations.

On 24 June the liaison officer at the Panzer Army headquarters reported that that the area south of Sidi-Barrani had been reached. The objective of that day was the area 30 miles southeast of Sidi-Barrani.

According to reports of the Panzer Army headquarters some individual fighter-bomber attacks achieved good and lasting effects. After noon all flying activities had to be stopped because of sand storms.

The reconnaissance information showed that the enemy continued to withdraw to the Mrsa-Matruh area and farther to the east.

While his airfields were still being successfully attacked by First ~~KXX~~ ^{Luftwaffe Area} Command aircraft in the afternoon, the British had evacuated these fields by the evening.

On 25 June the fighter aircraft concentrated their main effort

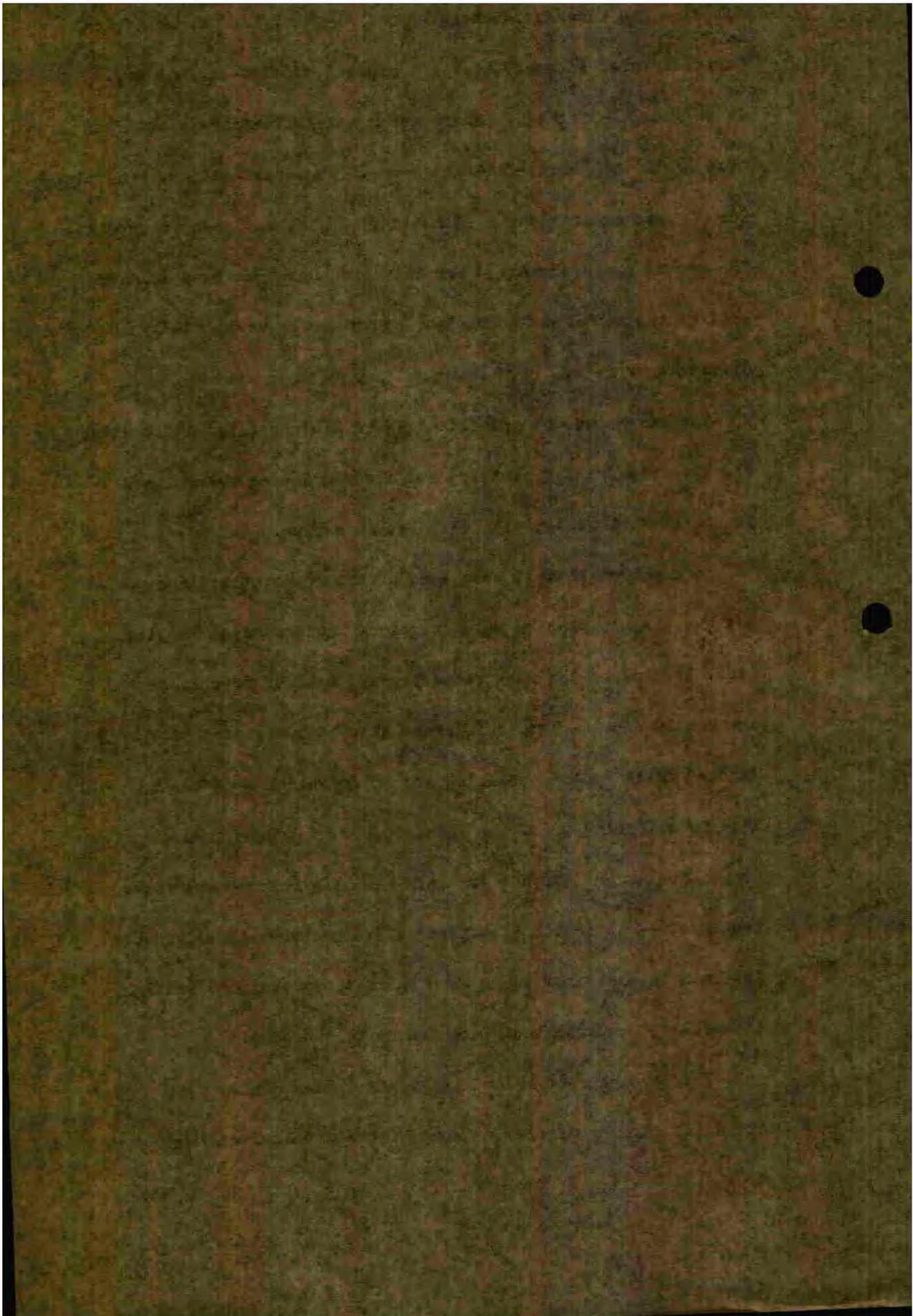
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blowing up their supply dumps. The points of the 15th Panzer Division had already advanced beyond El-Daba. The German Africa Corps captured enormous booty, including one 150-mm. battery. On 30 June the fighter bombers and low-level aircraft attacked once again the German-Italian forces. The German attack, scheduled for 30 June against the El-Alamein position, had to be postponed. The German units earmarked for this offensive had been delayed both by the withdrawing British forces and by unexpectedly difficult terrain.

The Air Force Commander attacked on 21 June (sic) the British elements withdrawing eastward and covered the southern flank in the El-Gobi area by launching other sweeps.

He reported that it seemed as if the opponent could or would not execute his plan to hold out along the Maddalena - Sollum line. Because of the unexpectedly swift fall of Tobruk, he apparently did not have sufficient time to reorganize his badly damaged units in this position and to establish a defensive line by reforming them. The total number of trucks counted around Sollum and farther eastward -- the Air Force Commander continued -- indicated that after all some very sizable forces had escaped eastward. There were indications that the British intended to continue their withdrawal to the east.

The Germans reorganized their air forces during the 22 and 23 June by displacing some of the units. The 27th



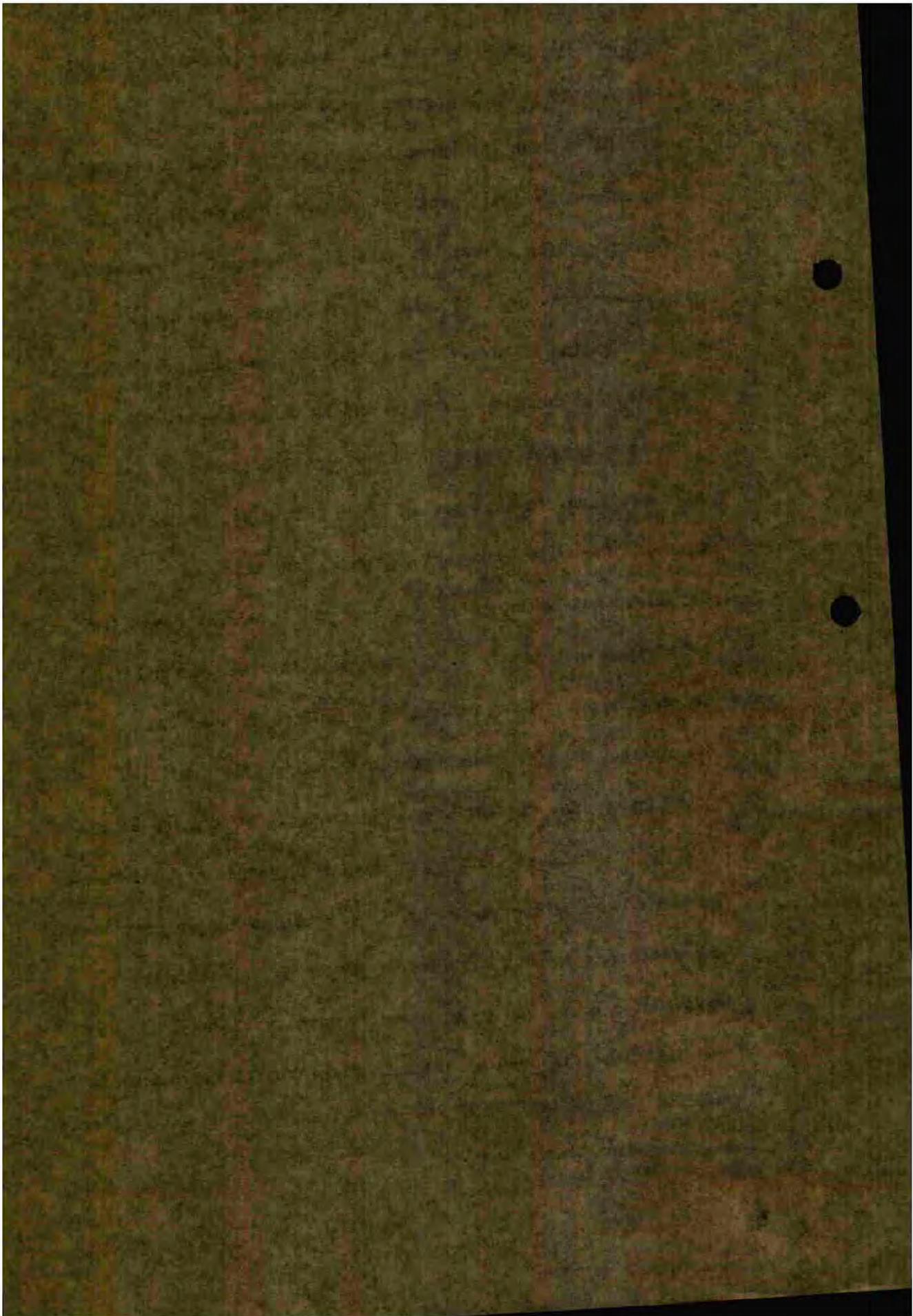
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on protecting the air space above the Panzer Army, which had to suffer from heavy and frequent low-level and bombing attacks by British aircraft approaching from the Marsa-Matruh area. Altogether 19 British aircraft were shot down.

On 26 June the First Luftwaffe Area Command aircraft attacked supply dumps south of Marsa-Matruh, while the 3d Dive-Bomber Wing interfered with enemy movements southeast of Nysa-Matruh. Some 29 enemy aircraft were shot down.

British fighter-bombers inflicted serious personnel and materiel damages during an attack on Shterasat, which came as a complete surprise and was not countered by anti-aircraft fire. On the morning of 26 June a conference took place at Rommel's headquarters, which was attended by Cavaliere and Bettio; they conveyed the Duce's approval for continuing the offensive. The Comande Supremo was willing to provide 500 trucks in order to displace forward the essential Luftwaffe ground personnel and supply services.

On 27 June fighter sweeps continued. The advance of the 90th Light Division south of Marsa-Matruh gained ground. Dive-Bomber attacks along the right flank could no longer provide the necessary support for lack of proper target data. One dive-bomber group was to be moved forward by 28 June. General von Waldau had to make a forced landing, his liaison aircraft (Storch) having been destroyed on the ground by enemy fighters swooping down three times.



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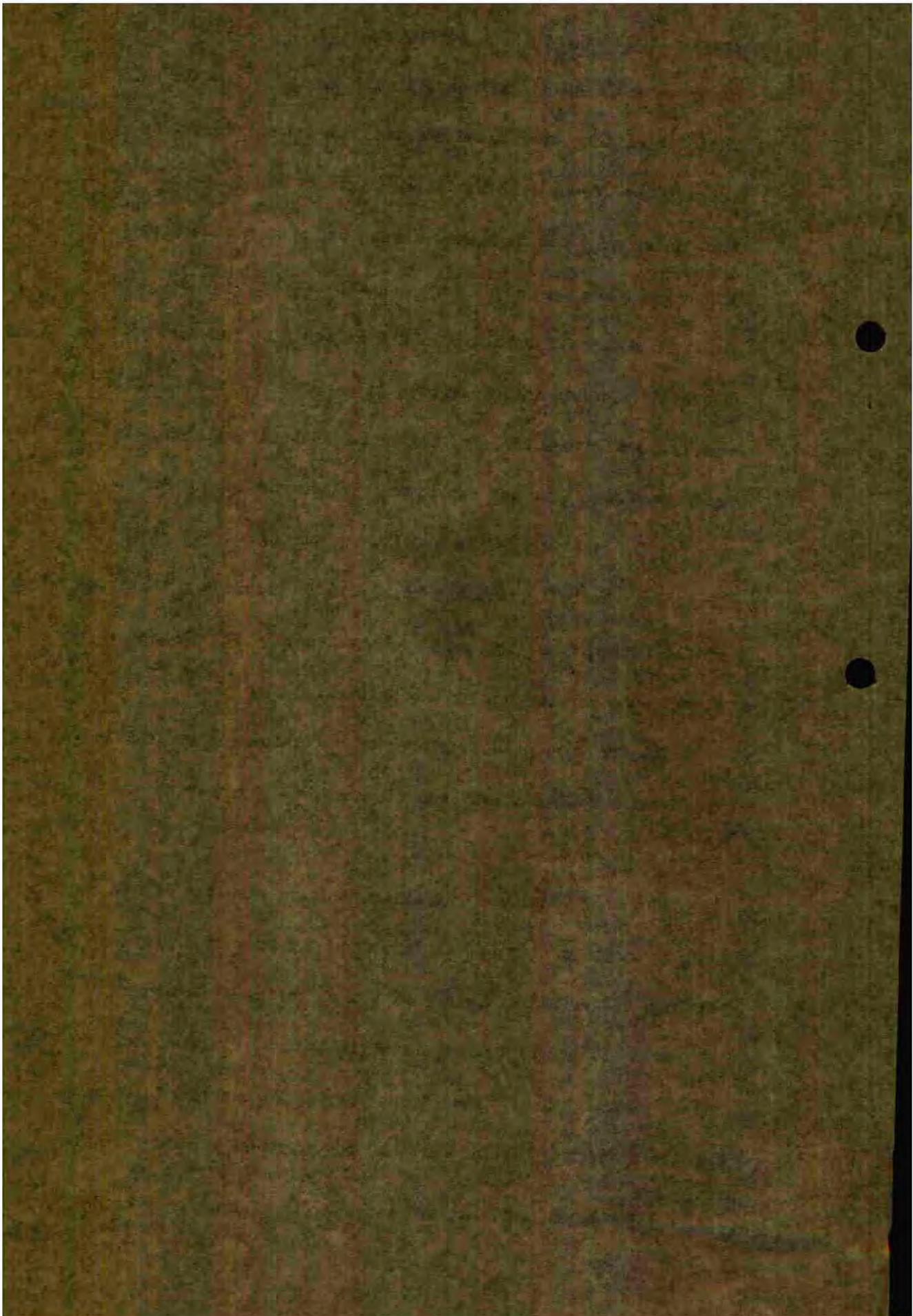
On 28 June the Luftwaffe flew free sweeps above the Panzer Army as well as one joint sortie with Italian units against enemy assemblies and railheads in and around Marsa-Matruh. These operations were based on reconnaissance information provided by German aircraft. Upon requests received from the Panzer Army headquarters, strong enemy concentrations southeast of Marsa-Matruh were attacked at 1830. This attack had been delayed for lack of a XXI switch line and because the radio communications arrived late. The attack was finally carried out on the basis of reconnaissance information obtained by Luftwaffe means, the veracity of which was beyond doubt.

On 29 June Marsa-Matruh fell, and the Germans captured tremendous booty despite the heavy damage previously inflicted by the Luftwaffe in the port area and despite the planned demolitions carried out by the British.

The free sweeps encountered only little enemy opposition. The British fighters had been displaced to the rear to the Basma (?) area.

The army continues its eastward drive with the German Africa Corps jumping off at 1600 from the area southwest of Fuka toward El-Quesir and with the Italian XX Motorized Corps adjoining to the right. The Littorio Armored Division was north of the German Africa Corps, while the motorized elements of the X and XXI Italiana Corps moved via El-Daba to the east.

After having established contact, the Panzer Army head-



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quarters indicated that it plans to launch a deceptive attack against the south portion of the El-Alamein position on 30 June; this was to be followed by a penetration in the center. The northern front was to be collapsed by a thrust to the north-east. For this purpose the Luftwaffe was to provide strong support in the south and subsequently in the center. The instruction wing was to provide air force commanders for this purpose. The operations officer of the Panzer Army headquarters doubted whether the attack can be launched so soon.

The displacement of the Luftwaffe units took place on 30 June into the area around and west of Fuka. The command post was established west of the Panzer Army headquarters north of Fuka.

On 30 June the Panzer Army was advancing eastward in the direction of the defensive position extending southward from El-Alamein; the elements of the Italian X and XXI Corps which lacked mobility were left to mop up the area of Marsa-Matruh. At 0300 on 1 July the Panzer Army was assembling for the attack.

The displacement of the Luftwaffe units into the Fuka area on 30 June was delayed by sand storms so that the intended evening assault of the El-Alamein position could no longer be staged.

The Air Force Commander took off in a liaison plane (Storch) to look for the Panzer Army headquarters; in the area south of Galal he found elements of the Littorio, which



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had encountered American tanks. The Italian armored forces were so badly shaken up that their mobility was strictly limited.

End of Germ.
p. 305

There followed a conference at El-Daba at Field Marshal Rommel's headquarters; he indicated that he planned to launch his attack at 0300 on 1 July and discussed the possibilities of air support.

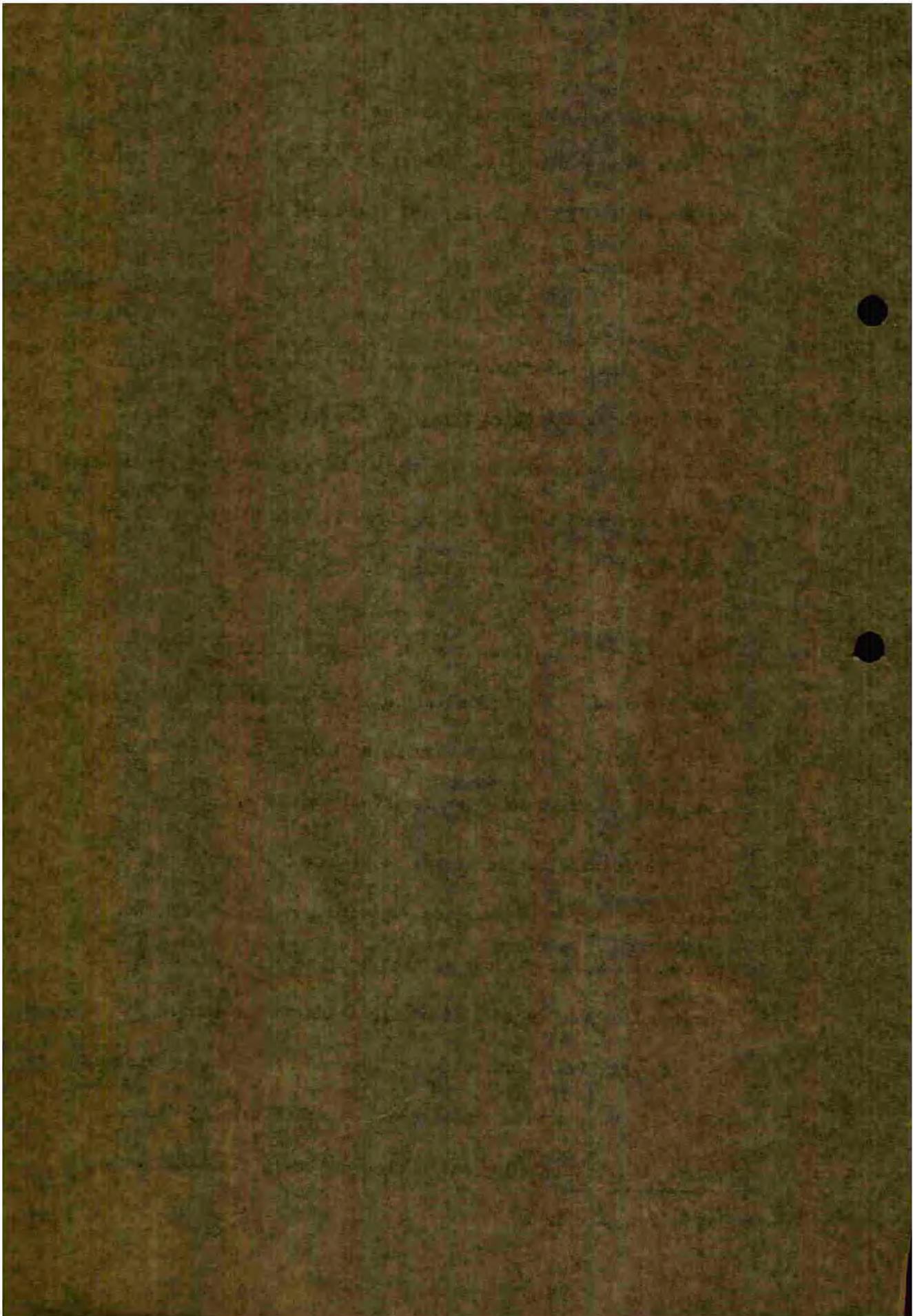
There are no statistics on German air victories and losses for the units subordinate to the Air Force Commander Africa until 30 June. The total losses of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean theater for the months of May and June amounted to 248 aircraft, most of which were fighters and bombers; in addition, 94 aircraft were damaged.

The German capture of Tobruk gave the Allied Powers a terrific shock. When Rommel immediately continued his advance toward Egypt, the British Navy left Alexandria and all the rear area installations became greatly excited.

The British Air Force had to remain inactive during the seizure of Tobruk because its fighters had previously been forced to evacuate Gambut so that they were incapable of intervening from their distant airfields in the east.

The British reaction in the air was all the more violent after 23 June, when their aircraft attacked the Axis troops by day and night during their advance toward El-Alamein. The

* See Footnote 126.



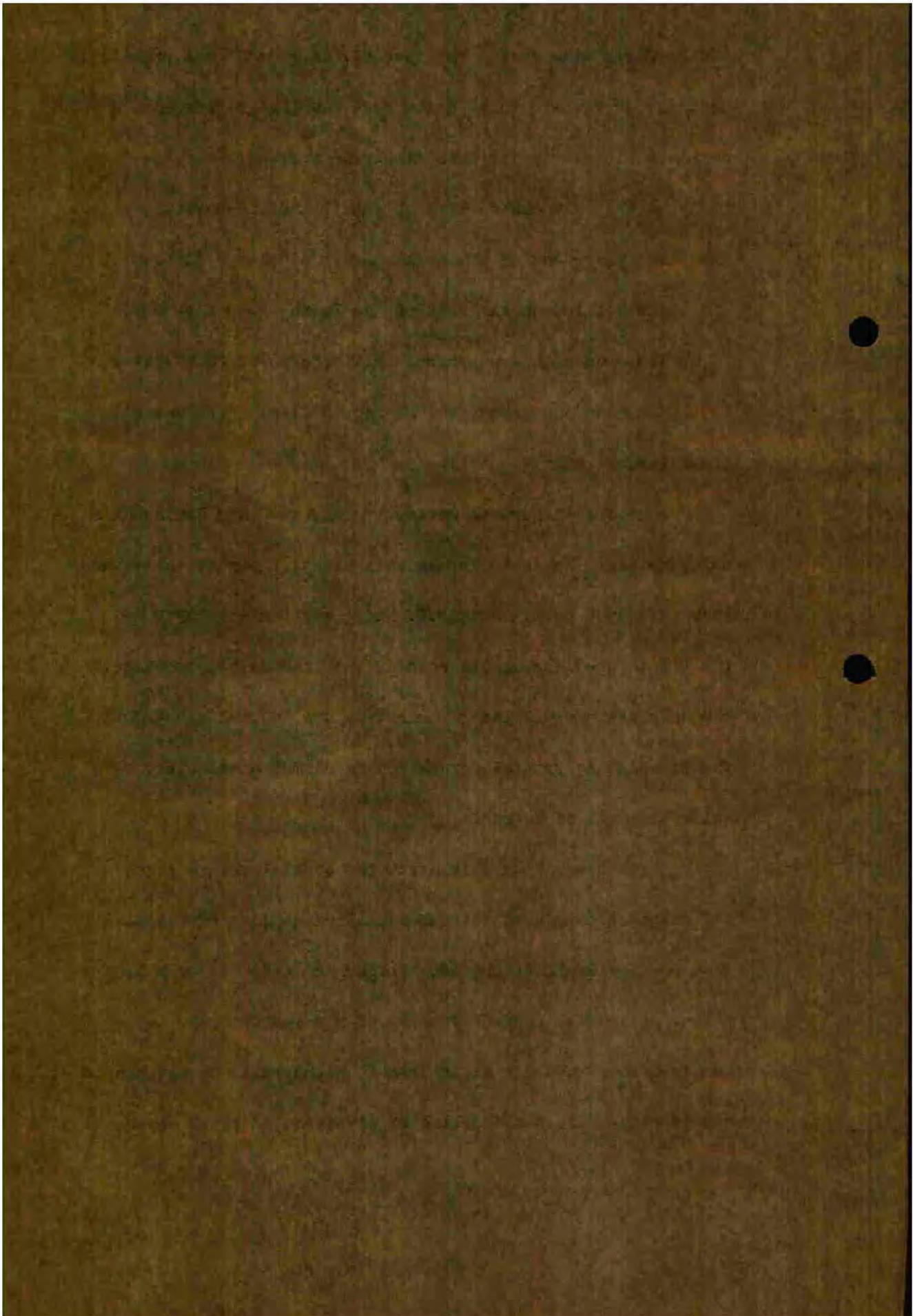
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extraordinary effect produced by these air attacks can be gathered from the entries in the war diary of the German Africa Corps made during this period. They mentioned repeatedly that the German air force units were nowhere to be seen and complain bitterly about this fact. The Luftwaffe had been badly hurt by attacks on Gazala, Tuni, and Sid-Barrani, which had taken place during critical moments of the pursuit.

The Wellington aircraft of the 205th Group flew 60 to 70 sorties per night, supported by Albacores of the 821st and 826th Seaplane Squadrons, which dropped flare bombs and hit their targets only too well.

When the withdrawal movements continued and Goringham's units returned to their former main bases, their effectiveness increased even more. The R.A.F. had given perfect cover to the Eighth Army during its retreat from the Gazala position. The surprise was all the greater that the Luftwaffe had let the withdrawing British forces escape almost unmolested, even after the fall of Tobruk.

"For several days in a row the coastal road offered the extraordinary spectacle of a continuous line of vehicles that moved closely behind one another and extended over many miles. It was the perfect example of a defeated army. Helplessly driven into one close area it withdrew along one single narrow road. This was the kind of situation of which some



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enthusiastic young bomber squadron commander might dream. With a certain amount of logical thinking on the part of the dive-bombers and fighters, the British columns would have been driven into bundles of utter confusion."

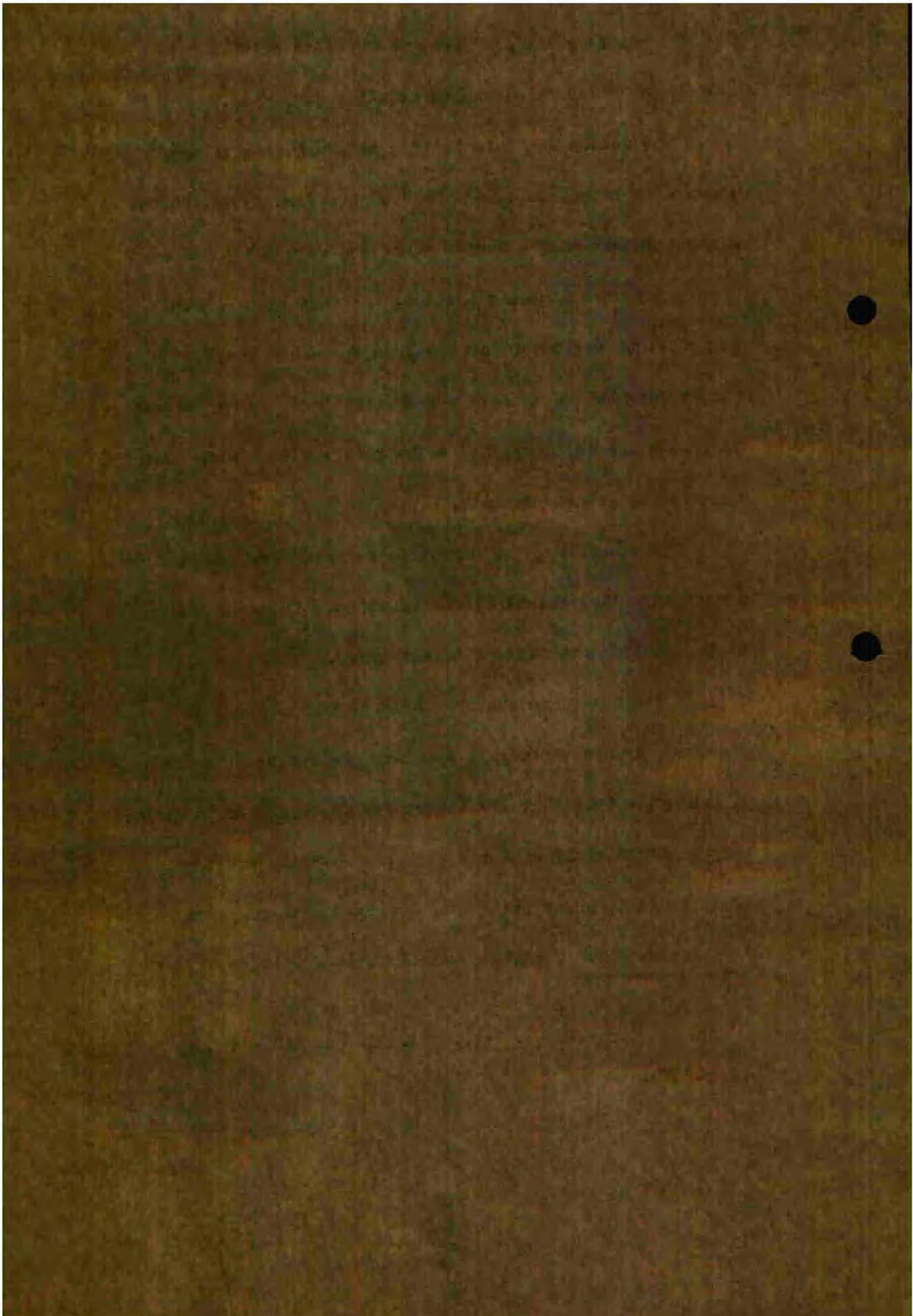
The reason for this failure of the Luftwaffe was assumed to have been caused by two different facts. First, a great number of the German squadrons were incapable of keeping up with Rommel's advance. Although he had asked for complete air cover for his troops and had expected to receive it, he had ^{constantly} ignored the fact that air force personnel, just like the infantry, had to be well equipped with trucks in order to advance rapidly.

"Furthermore, the Luftwaffe had not developed the art of adjusting to any situation without delay to such a high degree as the Western Desert Group," 175

These accusations are serious, but they can be answered, if one thoroughly examines the course of events. It was quite true that the German air force squadrons were very insufficiently equipped with trucks. This was the great handicap under which they operated when compared with the very fully equipped and motorised British

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 210 - 3; and p. 215.



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squadrons (Author's parenthetical note: streamlined squadrons). Furthermore, thanks to the activeness of Tedder, Dawson, and the efforts of several others, the R.A.F. had fully adopted the doctrine of mobile warfare.

Another factor was that it was easier to "adjust to the prevailing situation without delay" if a withdrawal quickly leads into friendly territory -- such as in this instance -- where the flying units are supported by large-scale, well organized ground organizations.

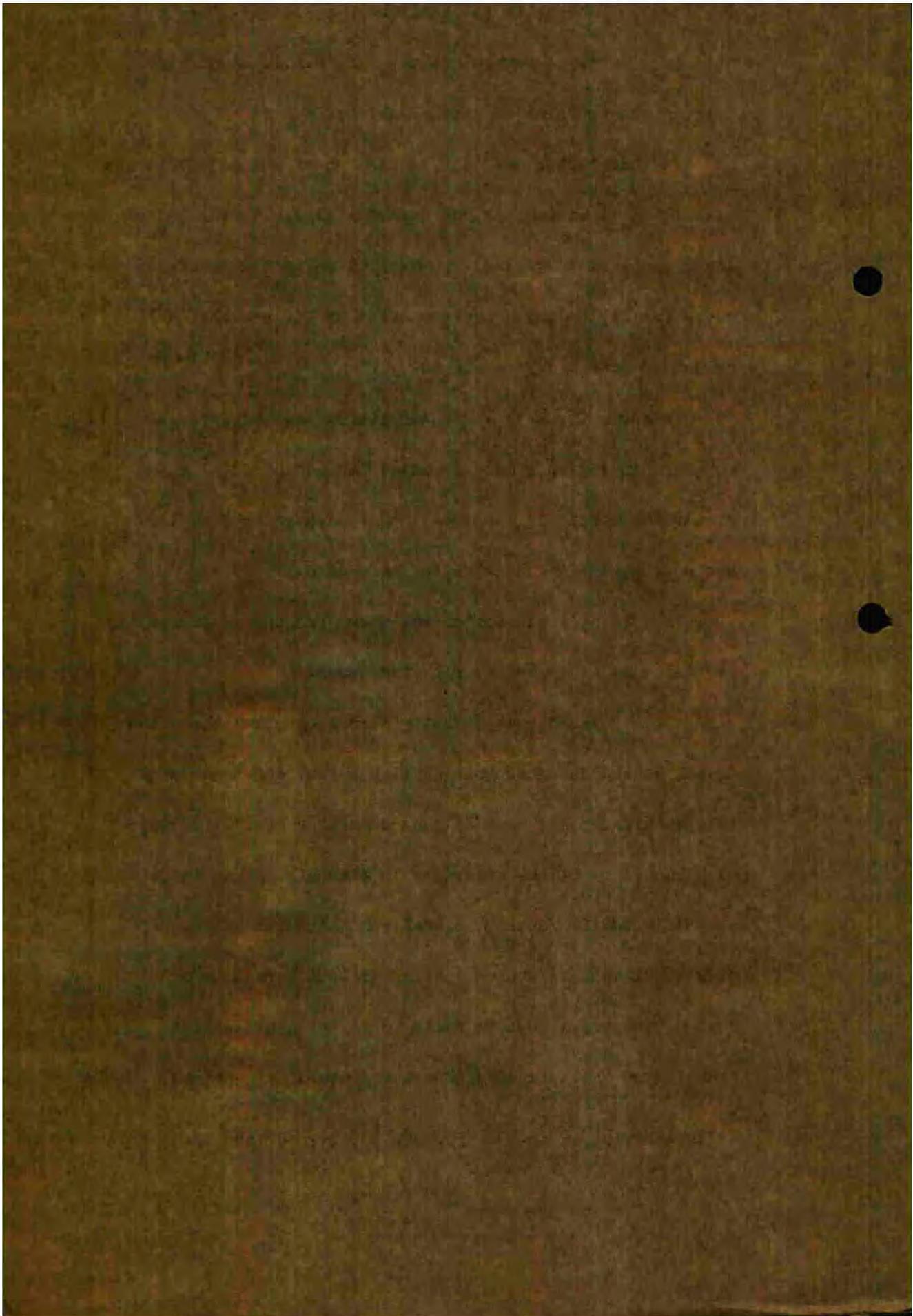
In advancing into enemy territory, the pursuer must move up his entire ground organization and needs time to repair the airfields the enemy has evacuated so that they are once again in condition for take-offs.

The friendly air forces can therefore not be so readily available to make contact with the enemy.

But why was the ^{unique} opportunity missed by which the withdrawal of the defeated British Eighth Army was transformed into a catastrophic rout by massed sorties of the Luftwaffe?

The diary of the otherwise so ~~MINUTELY~~ astute leader of the Luftwaffe forces, General von Haldeau, mentions several attacks on the retreating British forces in a number of entries, but it fails to refer to a specific transfer of the main effort to the route of withdrawal

For instance on pp. 52, 55, 58, 59, 69, 80, and 83.



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ployed to Sicily, while others were preparing to take similar action."

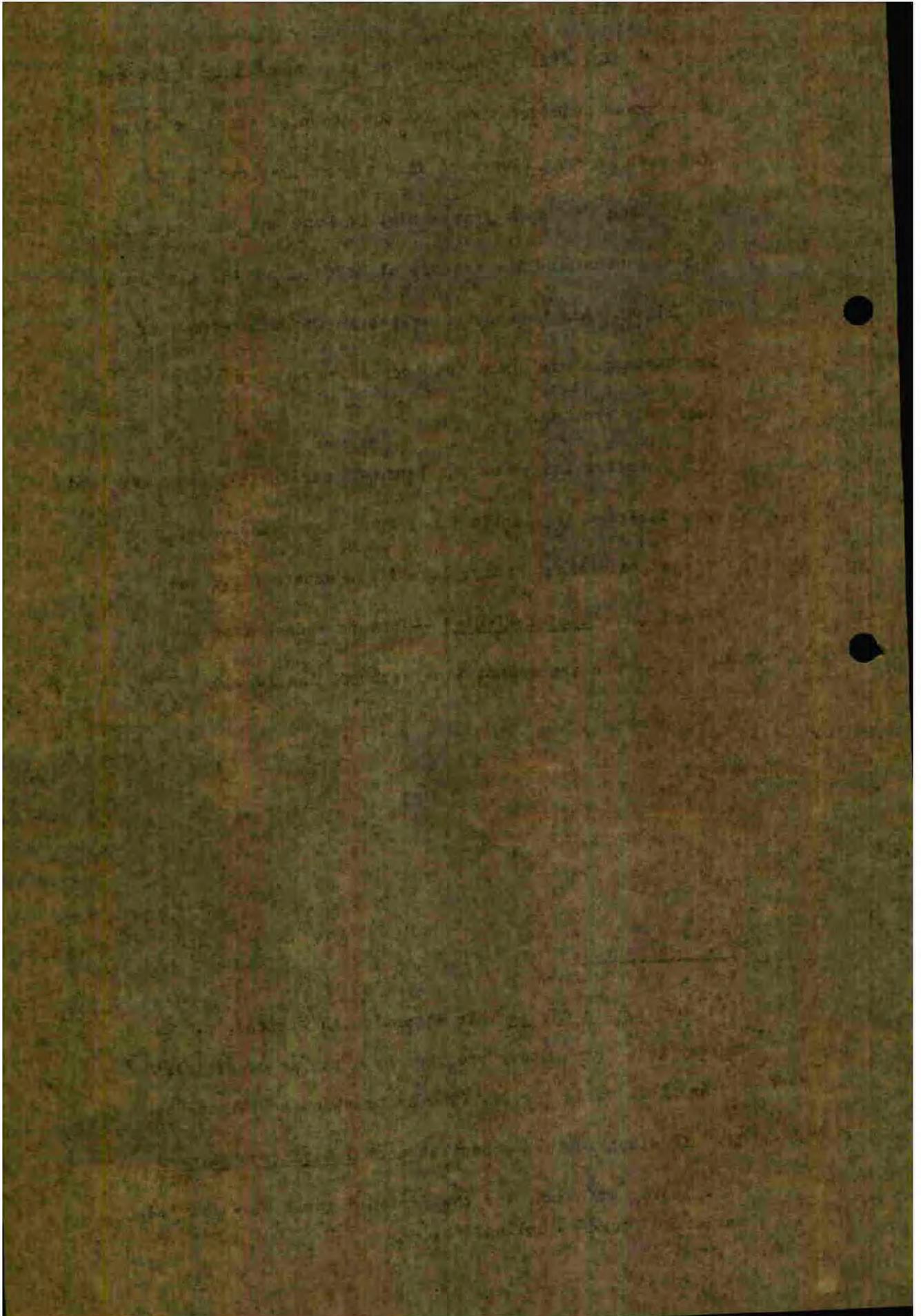
"No logistical planning for an advance into Egypt had been under consideration, and the means of transportation for such an operation were also not available." 176

When the Armed Forces High Command and the Comando Supremo cancelled the seizure of Malta after the capture of Tobruk, this unexpected switch in the main effort of the strategic air operations presented an apparently insoluble problem.

Orders issued on the basis of strategic plans have such far-reaching implications that they cannot simply be changed without notice like field orders (Tr.: The German term "Sattelbefehle" -- orders issued from the saddle -- has the connotation of improvisation.)

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Luftlage in Afrika (Air Situation in Africa), p. 12. Survey based on a study prepared by a number of officers after ~~KHXX~~ World War II. (The information pertaining to the air situation was contributed by General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Seidemann, for the period 8 April 42 - July 42. Karlsruhe Document Collection.)



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Section VIII.

Malta or Cairo, the Cause of the Downfall. The Background.
Field Marshal Kesselring at Field Marshal Rommel's Command
Post on 22 June 1942. The "Conference of the Marshals" on
26 June 1942 near Sidi Barrani. The area of Conflict.
The Armed Forces High Command's Decisions and Their Grave
Consequences.

Soon after his arrival in Italy, Field Marshal Kesselring had clearly realized that the conquest of Malta was essential for securing the sea traffic lanes. The fate of the German-Italian forces in Africa was entirely dependent upon the flow of supply. The past year had brought out this fact quite clearly.

In February 1942 Field Marshal Kesselring convinced Hitler, also, of the absolute necessity to seize Malta.*

Rommel was of the same opinion; in fact, he had offered to conduct the operation in person.**

General G.D. (General, Retired) Westphal, who was his operations officer at that time, reported on this subject as follows:

* See Footnote 155.

** See Footnote No. 156.

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"After the fighting in the western Marmarica area had come to a conclusion, Rommel flew to the Armed Forces High Command headquarters in East Prussia in order to report and to receive instructions on the conduct of operations during the year 1942."

"He specially emphasized the urgency of seizing Malta, which he considered as a prerequisite for all further operations in the central Mediterranean. But he was not given any clear-cut directives. Mussolini, also, evaded the issue. But Rommel did not want to be stalled. In April 1942 he submitted a very detailed evaluation of the situation to the Armed Forces High Command and the Comando Supremo. This evaluation culminated in the assumption that the British -- contrary to Italian hopes -- would launch a new offensive with strong forces despite the hot temperatures that would reign at that time. For this reason it would be necessary to anticipate once again their next move and capture Tobruk by June, at the latest. The conquest of Malta was again a matter of life and death for the German-Italian forces in the desert, since the existing threat to the flow of supply across the sea could be reduced to bearable proportions only if this enemy support point was eliminated."

"It was desirable that the seizure of Malta be so timed that it would precede the attack on Tobruk. If the preparations

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for a joint naval and air assault on the island could not be completed within a short time, it would be necessary to conduct the thrust on Tobruk before the other operation. In any event, however, would it be necessary to conduct the seizure of Malta immediately afterward."

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"It developed, however, that the preparations for the Malta operation could not be completed before June. For this reason the attack on Tobruk was to take place before the assault on Malta. If, subsequent to the conquest of Tobruk, the main Axis forces reached the Libyan-Egyptian border, the Luftwaffe units, which could effectively support only one operation at a time, would have to be diverted to the operation directed against Malta."

"The start of the attack of Panzer Army Africa was planned for 26 May 1942." ¹⁷⁷

The Comando Supremo ^{also} had finally come to the decision that Malta would have to be seized.

"If Malta was taken from the British, the central Mediterranean would no longer be dominated by Royal Air Force units and the British would lose one of the pivots of their support point systems."

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"On 21 April 1942 the Armed Forces High Command finally

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Siegfried Westphal, General der Kavallerie, i.D. (Lt.Gen, Ret.)
Schicksal Nordafrika (North Africa, The Fateful), p. 198.

Europa-Contact Verlags G.m.b.H., 1954, Doeffingen/Wuerttemberg

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agreed to support the Italian preparations for the seizure of Malta. Two German General Staff officers joined the staff planning the capture of Malta, which was commanded by General Gandin."

" The planning for the summer 1942 was the main topic discussed during the Duce's visit to the Obersalzberg (Tr.: Hitler's Alpine retreat near Berchtesgaden) on 29 and 30 April."

" Cavallero advocated that the conquest of Malta be considered as the most important requirement for the further conduct of military operations in North Africa. Kesselring, who took part in the conference, was of the opinion -- which he based on information from Rommel -- that before the Malta operation -- given the code name HERCULES -- the Panzer Army Africa would have to defeat the British so that the latter would not be capable of launching an attack of their own to relieve Malta. The Luftwaffe forces were numerically too weak to provide simultaneous support in several theaters of war. Since Keitel and Jodl agreed with this theory, Cavallero finally consented to let the Panzer Army first attack at the end of May and capture Tobruk, if possible. The army would then, however, have to stop at the Egyptian border so that by full moon in July at the latest Operation HERCULES could be carried out by the Axis. This agreement

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was approved by Hitler and Mussolini."

"After returning from this conference, I accompanied Cavallero to Africa to discuss the Obersalsberg agreement with Bastico and Rommel."

"The directive from the Comando Supremo specified that, after the capture of Tobruk, the Libyan-Egyptian border along the line Sidi-Omar -- Halfaya -- Sollum was not to be passed by the bulk of the Panzer Army. Some of the air force units and means of naval transportation were then to be withdrawn and diverted to Operation HERCULES." 178

Field Marshal Kesselring also confirmed the information given by Generals Westphal and Rintelen:

"Commander-in-Chief South and Panzer Army Africa had agreed in the spring 1942 that the next objectives for operations in the Mediterranean theater would be Malta and Tobruk. Tobruk without Malta would not suffice. The naval routes Athens -- Crete and Crete -- Tobruk were within reach of naval and air forces operating from British-Egyptian support points. Axis convoys operating along these routes had to be strongly protected, which in turn overtaxed the available forces that were needed to protect convoys out 178

Enno von Rintelen, op. cit., pp. 165-171 (Extract pp. 3,4,5, and pp. 6-8). Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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of Italy. Another factor was that the flow of supply via Greece suffered from handicaps that could never really be overcome because of the demands made by the Russian campaign. There was only one point on which Rommel and I differed: the sequence of operations."

"It was my task to secure the naval routes of communication and the ports of discharge. For this reason, I suggested to Hitler that Malta be seized first, to be followed by the cross country assault of Tobruk. Even though Hitler had agreed to follow this schedule, I supported later -- at the end of April -- at Berchtesgaden Rommel's plan to carry out the ground attack first by jumping off from the El-Gazala position. I was enough of a tactician on the ground to understand Rommel's pleas. Furthermore, the attack preparations against Malta had not sufficiently advanced to permit the start of the operation without any delay. I thought that this support on my part was justifiable, since the farthest objective -- the Italian-Egyptian border -- would thus be reached all the sooner, ~~INEXCESS~~ if the British assembly preparations were disturbed during an early phase. After a victory on North African territory the attack on Malta could not possibly go wrong, all the more since the preparations for such an attack could meanwhile be brought to their successful conclusion." 179

179

Kesselring, op. cit., p. 168.

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After considering the descriptions by Generals Westphal and Von Rintelen as well as by Field Marshal Kesselring, Rommel's version of the reasoning used for the offensive planning cannot be accepted as being correct.

"Even before the start of the offensive, Malta was to be seized by Italian and German parachute and airborne units. However, for incomprehensible reasons our higher headquarters
 Thus,
 dropped this plan." "XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, we XXXXXXXX determined that D-day would be 26 May, mainly because the British forces constantly grew in strength."

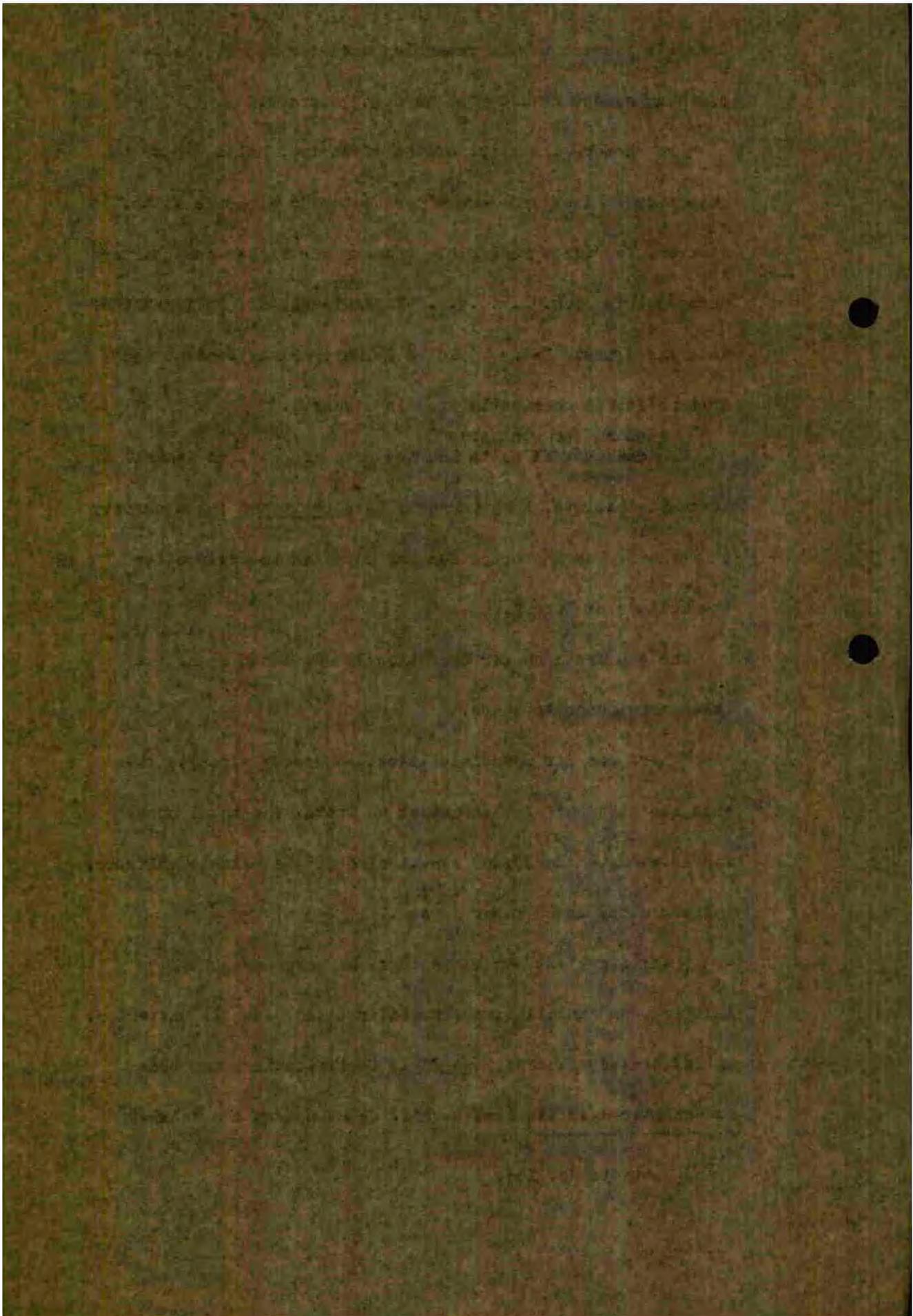
plans for conquering
 The ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Malta had not been dropped, as Rommel seemed to believe, they had only been postponed for a variety of reasons, and the operation was supposed to begin after the seizure of Tobruk.

The preparations for Operation HERCULES had meanwhile taken more concrete shape.

"There was far more intelligence on enemy strength than what was known before the attack on Crete. The total enemy forces amounted to 30,000 men, including the Maltese volunteer units and the armed labor forces."

"Many excellent aerial photographs were available. All fortress installations, fortifications, coastal batteries, antiaircraft positions, and field fortifications had been reconnoitered to the last detail. We even knew the caliber

See Footnote No. 163.



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of the coast artillery guns and their angular adjustment toward the interior of the island. Many machine gun nests had also been identified from aerial photographs."

"An army had been assembled for the seizure of Malta; it was to be commanded by General Cavallero, the Italian Chief of Staff of the Comando Supremo."

"The over-all command was therefore to be exercised by the Italians; that was only too natural. The attack forces consisted of the German XI Air Corps -- a parachute corps -- and three Italian corps. The parachute and airborne forces alone numbered more than 30,000 men." "To these forces were added the Italian Folgore Parachute Division and the Italian Superba Airborne Division."

"Six additional Italian divisions had been assembled as landing forces to be transported by naval craft; their total actual strength was to be more than 70,000 men."

"This was an overwhelmingly powerful force to be employed against Malta, five times as large as the force used against Crete." 180

This information provided by General Student was supplemented by Generalleutnant (Maj Gen) Conrad, the Flieger- 180

Kurt Student, Generaloberst d.L. (Gen., Ret.), Der beab-
sichtigte Angriff auf Malta (The Planned Attack on Malta),
extracted from Der Deutsche Fallschirmjäger (The German
Paratrooper), No. 10/56, pp. 3-4. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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fuehrer (Air Force Commander) of the XI Air Corps.

"As during the operation against Crete, I had the task to direct the approach flights of the parachute and airborne units committed for this purpose. General Student promised that I would probably receive ten groups equipped with Junkers 52 and three wing headquarters staffs, which would be subordinate to me. Then he asked me how I planned to use my groups and ~~REHE~~ whether I had any further questions or suggestions."

then
"During the latter part of summer 1941, the operations officer, Captain Collani, and I had prepared a study on methods for conquering Malta, even though we had not been requested to do so. In formulating our ideas, we tried to avoid repeating the mistakes made in Crete. I was thus able to give General Student an immediate reply that was based on thorough and well-considered study of the problem." ...
To begin with, D.F.S. 230's (small freight gliders) and Gothaer Waggonfabrik 249's (larger freight gliders), equipped with crash parachutes, were to land immediately after the last bombs had dropped. They were to land at antiaircraft artillery positions, near command posts that had been identified, and in the vicinity of mysterious caves, that is to say near pinpoint targets and in far greater number than in Crete. I suggested to scrape together all my B2-aircraft to tow the freight gliders. Directly after these landings, the parachutists were to jump over their

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End of Germ.
p. 320

designated targets. My plans called for six groups of parachute troops and following them immediately, four groups of airborne troops. Because of the relatively short flight distances, the ten groups could fly several sorties per day. I also recommended that the first Junkers 52 drop the parachute commandos who had proved so effective in Crete with their special equipment. Special reconnaissance aircraft (pathfinders) would have to mark the flight direction on the water by using "water-smoke-bombs." They would draw a direct central line toward the targets on Malta so that the following Junkers groups could find their targets even though the island might be camouflaged by smoke." "Obviously, I can no longer produce the exact figures from memory at this time. But with the assistance of my "large notebook" I can reconstruct the following figures:

"We counted on approximately 600 parachute combat observers, 450 glider pilots, 200 of whom with parachute drop experience (Tr.: Sturzfallschirmausbildung), 300 s all freight gliders, and 200 large-size freight gliders."

"Then I flew to Italy to check on the airfields in person. After talking to General Rancke and Major Mors of the advance party of the XI Air Corps at Frascati near Rome, and after reporting to the Commander-in-Chief South, I landed at Catania. There I had a very thorough-going conversation with

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Generals Muller and Buchholz. Then I visited the selected
 End of Germ. p. 321 airfields in the company of these gentlemen, including the
 we went and
 command posts; southwest of Catania, west of Face del Simeto,
 visiting the airfields of Caltagirone, Gela, and Comiso.
 The command posts were fields from which the harvest had
 just been taken, offering neither shelter nor camouflage
 possibilities, quite apart from the fact that they lacked
 water facilities and workshop installations. Telephone
 communications and quarters were to be constructed. The
 locations seemed unsuitable because of the high incidence
 of dust during the dry summers. (See the experiences made
 at the Topolia airfield.) Moreover, some of the command
 posts were so close together and situated from west to east
 that the glider trains would endanger one another in case
 the aircraft had to take off with an east wind. On the
 following day I also visited the Reggio airfield, which seemed
 suitable, and the Vibo-Valentia airfield, which appeared too
 small to me. Immediately upon returning to Berlin I submitted
 a detailed report in writing, describing my impressions,
 making suggestions, and voicing my objections." 181

Field Marshal HME Kesselring had the following comments
 with regard to the plans for the attack operations on Malta:
 181

Gerhard Conrad, Gen.Lt.a.D. (Maj.Gen.,Ret.) Vorbereitungen
 fuer den XXIV. GEMEINEN Fiegerischen Einsatz der Fallschirm- und Luft-
 lande-Verbaende bei dem beabsichtigten Unternehmen Malta, Juni 42

(Preparations for the Commitment of Parachute and Airborne Units
 for the Planned Operation against Malta, June 1942). Karlsruhe
 Document Collection.

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"The plans called for General Student leading two parachute divisions, including the Italian Folgore Parachute Division. (The division had been quickly trained by the very active parachute officer, General Rasche. He had been very successful, since the division was rated excellent. The exercises I witnessed indicated that these forces had the true parachute ^{unit} spirit.) Transportation wings, heavy freight gliders (Gothaer Waggonfabrik 242's with a 24-ton capacity) and "Ginats" (Giganten -- with a carrying capacity of 24 tons for the transportation of tanks were available. In addition, there were 2 to 3 Italian assault divisions, elements of the battle fleet, whose naval guns were to conduct the artillery preparation against the island fortifications, while other ^{vessels} were to escort the transport ships. There were also some assault boats. The ~~MHERWIEKMSHIXKXKH~~ flying units were somewhat stronger than the forces committed for the first air attacks on Malta."

"The operations plan was essentially as follows:

1. The parachute troops were to assemble after their landing and attack the elevations in the south. After their seizure, these hills would be used as points of departure for the attack on the airfields south of the city and for the capture of the port of La Valetta. Shortly before the ground assault, the airfields and antiaircraft positions were to be bombed from the air.
2. Main attack effort of the naval forces and seaborne assault troops

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against the strong points south of La Valetta. They were to attack the port of La Valetta proper in conjunction with the parachute units while the coastal batteries were simultaneously being bombed from the air.

3. A diversionary attack was to be carried out by naval forces against the bay of Marsa Sirocco." 182

Even though Malta's defenders had been reinforced by the arrival of 100 Spitfires, the general situation on the island was rather sad.

The large-scale resupply effort made in mid-June was to refurnish Malta for some time, but only two freighters actually reached the port of La Valetta. The manifold shortages had thus not been relieved.

There is no reason to doubt that the employment of such strong air forces, having the benefit of the experiences made in Crete and the assistance of considerable Italian landing forces from the sea, would have resulted in the capture of the island.

The Italian Navy would at first be opposed solely by British torpedo aircraft and submarines. There were no major British naval units available in the Mediterranean.

The shock resulting from the unexpectedly swift fall
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Kesselring, op. cit., pp. 173-4.

See page 289.

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of Tobruk, which affected the entire British Empire, would surely also have paralyzed the determination to offer resistance that Malta's defenders might otherwise have displayed. Under these circumstances it would have been doubtful whether the naval squadron stationed at Gibraltar would have given assistance, especially since the successes achieved by German submarines in the Mediterranean forced the British to be very cautious.

Among the Italians it was primarily the Chief of the General Staff at the Commando Supremo, General Count Cavallero, who was fully convinced of the necessity to conquer Malta. This "daring" step had been subjected to much criticism.

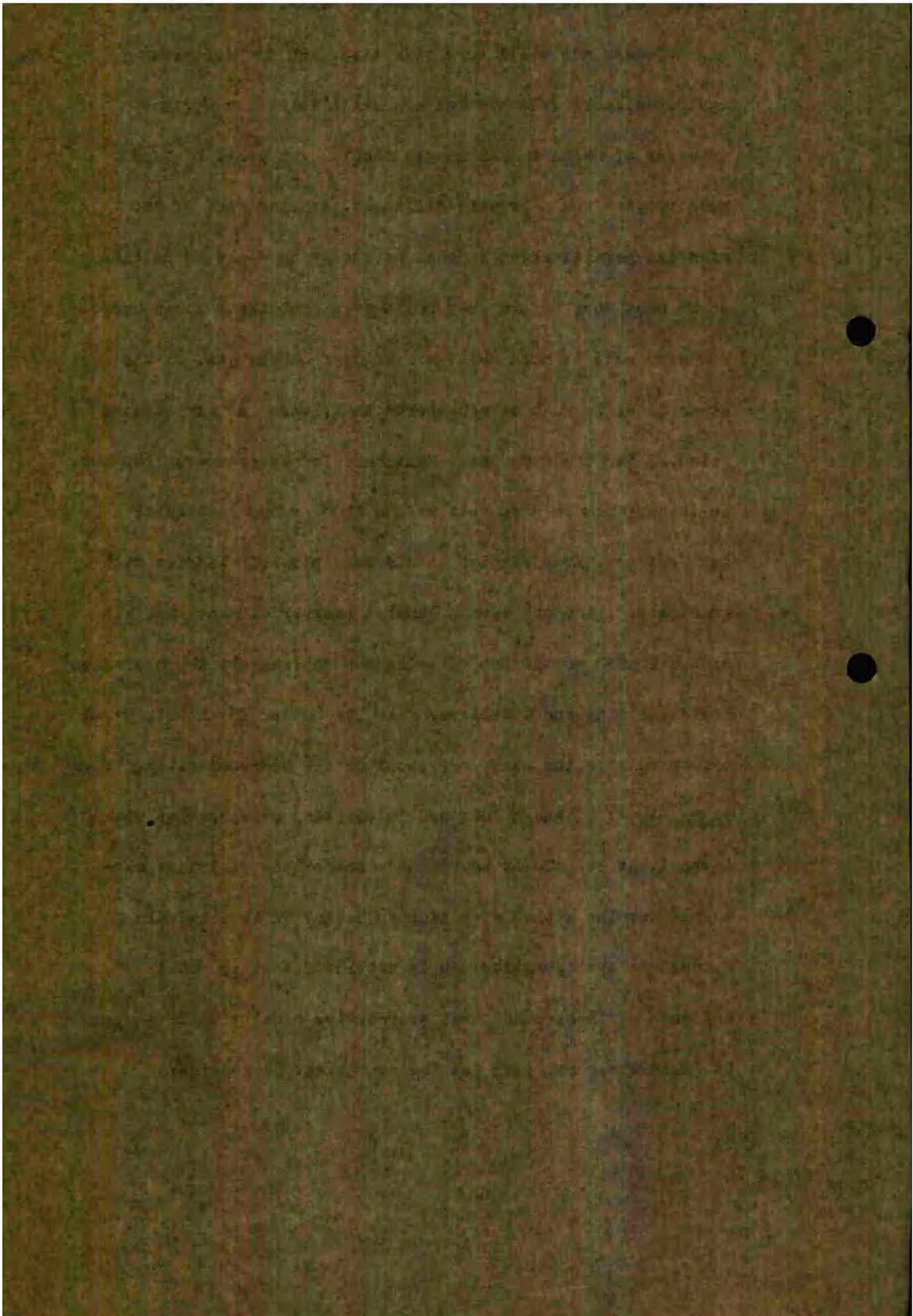
Count Ciano, the Foreign Minister, made the following comments on this subject in his diary entry of 12 May 1942:

"Cavallero declares: 'I know that this is a difficult operation and that it will cause heavy losses; I also know that I risk my neck in this operation. But I am the one who wants to have it because I consider it absolutely essential for the further conduct of the war. If we seize Malta, Libya will be secure. If we don't, the situation of the (Italian) colony will become more and more precarious. I shall take charge of the operation, myself.' . . . Cavallero does not hide the fact that he hopes to earn a lot of personal prestige from the operation, but I don't think he ever will."

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13 May 1942: "Colonel Casero does not share Cavallero's flaming enthusiasm for the attack on Malta. The island's air defenses are still very effective, and the defenses against attacks from the sea are still fully intact. The interior of Malta is one single machine gun nest. To land paratroopers would be very difficult. A major part of the aircraft participating in such an operation would be destined to be shot down before they could ever drop their human cargo. The same must be said about a landing from the sea. On the other hand, it must be remembered that, when our air attacks relented for two days only, Malta's defenses grew even tougher. In these last few days both we and the Germans lost quite a few feathers. Even Fongier considers a possible landing with great worry, and the German General Loerzer did not hide his open aversion to the project. The men who support the operation are Kesselring and Cavallero, with the latter trying his usual tricks to make the other one shoulder the responsibility."

31 May 1942: "I had a long and interesting conversation with Carboni. At the moment he commands one of the divisions earmarked for the attack operation on Malta. He is decidedly opposed to the operation. He is convinced that we shall suffer heavy losses and that no positive results will be achieved by carrying out the operation. He considers



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Cavallero as responsible for the situation and regards him as an intriguing and untrustworthy person."

20 June 1942: "General Carboni came to Rome to discuss the operation against Malta, which is supposed to take place at the time of the next new moon. He is convinced, in his capacity of a military man, that we are heading for an un-~~HEIL~~precedented disaster. The preparations were childish, the equipment is missing and where it exists, it is unsatisfactory. The landing troops will never be able to land or, if they do succeed in landing, they will be completely wiped out. All commanders are convinced of this situation, but nobody dares to speak up for fear of Cavallero's wrath. But I am more than ever of the opinion that the operation will not take place."

Finally, the entry of 22 June 1942: " On the other hand, there is a certain amount of hesitation with regard to the operation against Malta. Mussolini wrote to Hitler and informed him that we would have to cancel the operation definitely, if we did not obtain 40,000 tons of oil for this purpose." ¹⁸³

These excerpts from the Ciano diaries must be considered as significant for the general atmosphere and were quoted for this reason. They are not to be taken as factual criticism

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Extracts from the British book: The Ciano Diaries, pp. 484,

485, 492, 499, and 500. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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since they completely lack objectivity in examining the military aspects of the situation. They do reflect, however, the internal differences and oppositions to Mussolini's Fascist regime; these obstructionist trends dominated the entire military scene in Italy, with the soldier at the front having to suffer the consequences of this internal dissension.

Since the seizure of Malta never transcended beyond the preparatory stage, one cannot make any decisive statement as to its feasibility. Only the fact that Malta was ready to be taken by assault on 10 May after the attacks it had undergone in April can be taken as proof that the execution of the operation was justifiable and that it would have succeeded in all probability.

After the fall of Tobruk, Rommel was in a victorious mood that was fully justified. On 22 June he committed his forces to launch a pursuit across and beyond the Egyptian border. There was apparently no objection raised against this step.

According to the plan that had been originally prepared, the line Sidi-Omar -- Halfaya -- Sollum was not to be passed by the Panzer Army's main force. At the time, however, the bulk of the army was still in the Tobruk area.

Field Marshal Kesselring writes on this subject as follows:

See Footnote No. 178.

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"On 22 June 1942 I visited Field Marshal Rommel at his headquarters. Upon my arrival I found him issuing orders for the advance on Sidi-Barrani for noon of that day. This plan was in line with my own concepts without reflecting on the feasibility of the Malta operation."¹⁸⁴

Field Marshal Kesselring was therefore apparently of the opinion that solely reconnaissance and security units were to push ahead toward Sidi-Barrani, whereas the bulk of the Panzer Army would stop along the Egyptian border.

It seems unlikely that Rommel's plan to thrust toward Cairo and thus abandon the seizure of Malta was discussed at this meeting, since Kesselring would surely have pointed out his opposing views on that occasion.

He writes that he visited Rommel; if, for instance, General Bastico had been present and the argument over the question: "Malta or Cairo?" had started already on 22 June, Field Marshal Kesselring would certainly have mentioned that fact.

One can draw two conclusions from the above-mentioned facts: Either Rommel himself was not fully decided upon which objective he intended to pursue in the immediate future or else he hid his true plans when he encountered

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Kesselring, op. cit., p. 173.

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evaluation of the situation are quoted verbatim.

1. The Concept of the Italians

"General Bastico, as the nominal Commander-in-Chief of Italian North Africa, requests by order of the Comando Supremo and on the basis of his own convictions that the pursuit into Egypt be stopped in accordance with the agreements on the seizure of Malta, which were concluded at Berchtesgaden. This request is all the more urgent because the island fortress has very quickly recovered from the heavy Italian-German bombing attacks of last spring, so that the naval transports from Italy had ~~EMENEM~~ suffered very heavy losses already in June. The elimination of Malta is more important to the Comando Supremo than conducting the pursuit to the Nile, which for supply reasons would necessarily lead to great difficulties."

2. Rommel's Concept

"Contrary to the ideas he expressed in February and in contrast to his operational plans of April,^{*} Field Marshal Rommel evaluated the situation -- he had apparently transmitted these thoughts to Hitler and Mussolini as early as 21 June -- as follows:

"Tobruk has fallen; its significance as fortress and factor influencing friendly and enemy operations is well

* See also pp. 313-4.

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known. The supplies captured at Tobruk will suffice to provide for the Panzer Army for a long time. Bardia has been seized, and thus the entire territory of Libya has been recaptured. The Egyptian position at Sollum is already in friendly hands. Tobruk and Benghazi, which are relatively close to the front line, are available as supply ports for the army. The situation is more favorable than ever before. Rommel considers the British as completely defeated. He therefore believes that he has to venture an immediate pursuit to the enemy basis in the Nile Delta by forcing his weak and overextended troops to make an extreme effort in order to transform half a victory into a full one. He also counts on the low morale of the British troops and leadership, which would facilitate his task. However, immediate and rapid action is absolutely essential. He is afraid that too much time has already been lost by the fighting for Tobruk. The supply difficulties would rapidly and fundamentally improve, if Alexandria was captured in the near future."

"The British are "on the run;" one must not let them catch their breath and settle down. A delayed attack of the Nile Delta will require far more troops and cause far greater losses than an operation launched at the present. Consideration of the army's existing supply difficulties must not be decisive.

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For the time being, the supplies captured at Tobruk were available, and in addition the port of Tobruk was in German hands. The attack plan to seize Malta was outdated by the course of events; at this time it would mean a division of Axis forces which would all have to be concentrated at one decisive point in Egypt in order to form the maximum main effort. This was particularly true of the air forces."

"For these reasons Rommel would start his advance into Egypt that very evening and cross the border by tomorrow."

3. The Commander-in-Chief South's Concept

"During a conference between Field Marshal Rommel and the Commander-in-Chief South, which took place at Tobruk at midday on 21 June, the latter shared Rommel's opinions and supported them by stating: 'that the supplies would be procured ~~EVERYWHERE~~ as required,' as witnessed by the then acting chief of staff of the Panzer Army."^{**}

* If the last sentence was actually said, it is impossible that this could have taken place at Sidi-Barrani on 26 June. On that day the Panzer Army was still 6 miles southwest of Marsa-Matruh. (Krieg ohne Hass, p. 168)

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Apparently there is another confusion of dates. The C-in-C South saw Rommel first on 22 June at his headquarters; the fortress was surrendered at 0940 on 21 June about 4 miles west of Tobruk. (Krieg ohne Hass, p. 162)

The C-in-C South's remark "that the supplies would be procured as required" was probably not made until Hitler's radio message had arrived, instructing the C-in-C South to desist from raising any objections to Rommel's operational plans and to support him with all the forces at his disposal.

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"Later -- apparently also during the conference on 23 June -- the Commander-in-Chief South resumed exposing his former concept according to which the seizure of Malta was such an urgent task that it would have to be carried out before the offensive into Egypt. The preparations for this operation, which had to be made on the part of the Luftwaffe, were already underway. Units and equipment had already been deployed to Sicily."

"The support of the advance into Egypt could therefore be made effective only by overcoming many handicaps and long delays."

Field Marshal Kesselring himself made the following report on the conference of 26 June:

...."First came a report on the situation by Rommel, who declared that there were practically no enemy forces of any significance opposing him and that his army could reach Cairo within 10 days."

"My reply to this was as follows:"

"Even though I realized that Rommel had more insight in the situation on the ground than I, my objections would have to be raised. Any further advance, even if there was only a minimum of combat activity, would result in a maximum loss of armored and motor vehicles. The necessary supplies would not become available for a long time. Even though there might perhaps be no sizable British ground force reserves in Egypt, one could be sure that the first

* See Footnote No. 176.

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reinforcements from the Near East were already now moving up. I, too, was of the opinion that one ought to pursue the defeated enemy to the very end, if one was certain that one would not encounter new enemy forces."

"I felt competent to speak for the Luftwaffe. My flying face ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ forces would ~~XXXX~~ ~~ME~~ the Nile in a completely exhausted condition with aircraft that needed overhauling and without sufficient supplies."

"They would be opposed by fully combat-ready units which could be further reinforced in the shortest time. As an airman I considered it madness to attack head on an airbase that was fully intact. Because of the decisive importance of the part played by aviation I had to reject from this point of view alone the continuation of the offensive that had as objective the conquest of Egypt and the seizure of Cairo."

"When Cavallero asked Rommel to reconsider his position, the latter adhered to his optimistic concept and guaranteed that he would reach Cairo within 10 days."

"Marshal Bastico and Cavallero agreed. The Duce came to Africa to be present at the triumphal entry into Cairo."

"I regretted this decision, which according to a radio message from Hitler I was forbidden to discuss any further."

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Essentially, the seizure of Cairo would mean little, if anything, in terms of ~~ENEMY~~ logistical support." 187

General von Rintelen, the German Military Attache in Rome, also commented on the question of Cairo versus Malta.

"When I visited Cavallero on 22 June in the morning he asked me whether I was of the opinion that the Panzer Army should continue its drive into Egypt or whether it should stop, as planned, and Malta should be attacked. Without hesitating I answered that it would now be Malta's turn and that the plans made in conjunction with the Armed Forces High Command would have to be adhered to. Cavallero informed me that he only wanted to obtain my opinion. He shared it, and he gave me a copy of an order to the High Command in Libya that had been approved by the Duce and which I transmitted to the Armed Forces High Command."

"But Rommel launched his offensive across the Egyptian border. He answered the inquiry of General Count Barbasetti, the Chief of Staff of the Italian High Command in North Africa, who pointed out to him that the Duce had issued

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Kesselring, op.cit., pp. 166-7.

According to this information there could not have been any differences of opinion with the Italians during the conference between the C-in-C South and Rommel on 22 June. This contradicts the contents of the study prepared by a group of officers after World War II (pp. 329-330).

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divergent orders, that he intended to thrust toward the Gulf of Persia. Rommel also sent me a radio message, asking that I should obtain from Mussolini that he change his order because he had found such large quantities of supplies upon capturing Tobruk that he could reach the Nile without further resupply."

"I took no such action, but inquired at the Armed Forces High Command headquarters, where I was informed that the situation had changed completely since the capture of Tobruk and that the seizure of Malta was no longer necessary. It was in vain that I pointed out to Jodl that there had been no fundamental change, that as a military port Tobruk had only a small capacity, and that furthermore the naval routes continued to be threatened."

"Rommel had also asked Hitler to give him freedom of action. It was understandable that the victorious leader wanted to pursue closely the withdrawing foe, but Rommel did not take the supply difficulties of his army into account, and these problems could be alleviated only by the conquest of Malta."

"The decision of the Comando Supremo was reversed by a letter that Hitler sent to Mussolini. Hitler advised his friend to abandon the Malta operation for the time being and to venture the thrust toward the Suez Canal

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immediately. "The laurels of victory are only once within reach", stated this letter. "An opportunity once missed never returns. In 1941 the British lost their chance of taking possession of all the Libyan territory by withdrawing forces and shipping them to Greece instead of using them for a thrust on Tripoli."

"When I presented this letter to Mussolini I was sorry to find him only too ^{Mussolini with his} receptive. ~~THE~~ forceful personality, ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ was only too pleased by Hitler's letter. He had disliked signing the order of the Comando Supremo by which the advance was to be halted at the Egyptian border. From Hitler's letter he meant to read a belated justification of his attack on Greece in the autumn of 1940, because this attack had split the British forces and thus saved Libya. He looked at me proudly, and was greatly excited at the perspective of attacking Egypt immediately and occupying Cairo and Alexandria. Mussolini's confidence in Hitler's strategy was at that time still unlimited. Cavallero was unable to achieve anything with his opposing arguments. He had no backing for his evaluation of the strategic situation and he felt abandoned by the Armed Forces High Command." ... "Cavallero had to change his orders and postpone the operation against Malta until September. This meant the final abandonment of the plan,

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since the subsequent heavy fighting did not permit to continue preparations for landings, let alone their execution."

"The position taken by the Armed Forces High Command, which knew only too well the dangers of the cross-Mediterranean supply routes and the logistical difficulties in North Africa, cannot be explained, except by mentioning the stubborn opposition with which Hitler considered Operation HERCULES."

It was really this preconceived opinion of Hitler which prevented the execution of Operation HERCULES. General Student stated on this subject as follows:

"It was soon obvious that the necessary technical and organizational preparations of the Italians would require some additional time. Cavallero called the key officers of the Army, Navy, and Air Force to a crucial conference in May during which it became manifest that the attack on Malta could not be executed until August or even the first half of September because of technical reasons. In concluding, Cavallero stated: 'This important operation must in all events be completed before the autumn tempests.' "

"While I was engaged in these preparations, I was suddenly called to Hitler's headquarters on one of the first

* See Footnote No. 178.

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days of June. The exact date escapes my memory. Hitler had until then not intervened in the preparations, and I traveled to Rome at noon, thinking that he would now urge a faster execution, as he often did."

"The conference, that took place on the next morning in Hitler's presence with a large number of people attending, lasted several hours. I first explained in great detail the plans agreed upon in Rome. Hitler listened attentively and patiently and asked a number of questions during my report. He agreed that a bridgehead could be formed. And then he suddenly could not hold back: 'But I guarantee you the following. When this attack gets started, the Gibraltar naval squadron will immediately take off and the British naval units from Alexandria will also approach. You should then see what the Italians would do. As soon as the first radio messages are intercepted, all ships will return to the Sicilian ports, both the war ships and the transport vessels. And then you will sit all alone on the island with your parachutes.' "

"Hitler refused to be convinced that the plan could be successfully executed, but maintained clearly and decisively that the operation should not be executed during 1942. At the same time, he refused to let me return to Rome;

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by this action he probably wanted to emphasize the decision he had taken. I therefore flew to my headquarters at Tempelhof and reported from there by telephone to Field Marshal Kesselring, giving him in the course of a long conversation the results of my conference with Hitler. The Field Marshal was very angry and did not hide his feelings."

"I would like to emphasize once again that this decision to abandon the attack on Malta was made at a time when Rommel was still engaged in heavy and indecisive fighting for the Bir-Hacheim strong point far south in the desert. After the successful conclusion of these engagements and the subsequent conquest of Tobruk on 20 June 1942 Rommel no longer had the choice between Malta and Cairo, but had to decide whether he would stop at the Egyptian border or pursue the defeated Eighth Army 'to the last breath of man and ~~HEER~~ mare.' Moreover, if the attack on Malta was to be launched at all, this operation would not take place until August and probably not until September." 188

This description of events gives an entirely new aspect to the question "Malta or Cairo?" It ^{was} ~~is~~ for the first time that Hitler criticized so severely in front of a sizable number of witnesses the Italian Navy -- and thus also

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Student, op. cit., End of the October Issue (11) of "Der deutsche Fallschirajaeger" (The German Paratrooper) No. 11/1956, pp. 3-4. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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Mussolini. That this criticism was justified cannot be contested, after the Italian Navy had demonstrated its failure. But the proper conclusions were again not drawn, since two "parallel wars" continued to be conducted.

As it was only to be expected of Hitler, he did not inform the Commander-in-Chief, South, of his plans.

In April he had agreed to the seizure of Malta, but some four weeks later he reversed his decision in a sudden, ^{emotional} change of mind.

If he had been convinced that the conquest of Malta was vital for the continuation of military operations in North Africa, he would have found means and ways to adhere to the July target date. But he hesitated, like all "self-made men," in making decisions ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ and did not take into account the strategic factors of a consistent conduct of operations. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

Hitler's negative attitude toward conquering Malta was strongly favored by Goering. The Reichs Marshal's aide and the last Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe commented as follows on this subject:

Oberst (Col.) von Branchitsch: "The situation in the Mediterranean Theater developed entirely differently. Here the Luftwaffe was faced by an unsolvable problem because the available forces were clearly insufficient to satisfy the

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manifold requirements. The plans of the top-level commanders were incompatible with the available means. The most difficult problem was the elimination of the British naval strong point Malta and of the air force units stationed on that island."

"The final success was not scored, and the failure of the Italian Navy contributed its share to this result. In addition, the Luftwaffe had to participate in the operations in North Africa and had to assume great air transportation responsibilities in an effort to overcome the shortage of shipping space."

General Koller: "The Reichs Marshal took credit for having changed the Fuehrer's mind on the decision of capturing Malta. It is regrettable that he acted in this manner for fear that he would lose his parachute forces in such an operation."¹⁸⁹

The picture becomes quite clear, if one considers the following statements made by Field Marshal Kesselring:

"Apart from the Comando Supremo, both Hitler and the Armed Forces High Command shared the responsibility for this wrong decision. They were, however, in a far more difficult position to evaluate the situation correctly once Rommel's public relations campaign for an offensive"¹⁸⁹

Die Deutsche Luftwaffe im Mittelmeer (The German Air Force in the Mediterranean Theater), extracted from studies written in 1945 -- after Germany's surrender -- by General Koller and Colonel Bernd von Brauchitsch. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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toward the Nile valley was under way. This overseas theater of war was strange to the German leadership whose thinking was rooted in the European Continent. The German leaders were not aware of the significance of the Mediterranean and did not realize the difficulties inherent in military operations in that theater. Instead of following a definite plan of operations and holding the initiative in so doing, Hitler and the military leaders acted on the spur of the moment and under pressure, when no other solution than taking action was possible."

"Hitler's personal friendship for Mussolini prevented him from intervening in the conduct of operations in the Mediterranean, although such intervention ~~MI~~ would have been beneficial. 'Mussolini in Cairo' was the motto."

"At that time Rommel exercised an almost hypnotic influence over Hitler, thus almost completely excluding an objective evaluation of the situation based on facts. For this reason Hitler ordered me, as already mentioned, to completely abstain from any objection to Rommel's plan of operations and to support him with all means at my disposal. In issuing this order, Hitler was probably impressed by the Tobruk victory and influenced by Rommel's personal representative, Dr. Berndt."

"Goering was Hitler's loyal supporter in opposing

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the Malta operation subconsciously. Goering was afraid of suffering a second costly ~~operation~~ "Ureta" with "tremendous" losses, although there was no relationship between the two operations. Hitler was no doubt glad that the Tobruk victory gave him the excuse to cancel the Malta operation he disliked, and that without losing face. I informed Goering repeatedly that, after the air attacks during April and May, Malta could be seized with the minimum forces and few losses, whereas far greater and costlier efforts would be necessary if the attack was postponed. The Italian Comando Supremo meanwhile met with a series of never ending objections on the part of the Supermarina."

"With the decision to thrust toward the Nile, the execution of the Malta operations plan was indefinitely postponed. It subsequently became impossible, when the North African offensive failed and the forces earmarked for the conquest of the island -- both ground and air forces -- were committed in North Africa."

"To sum up this problem one might state that it is of utmost interest to the military historian and the psychiatrist. The failure to take Malta was to decide the campaign in North Africa."¹⁹⁰

The passive resistance of Italian personalities as well as Hitler's and Goering's aversion to the Malta operation created the proper psychological climate for

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Kesselring, op. cit., pp. 168-9.

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the favorable reception that Rommel's urging for a thrust on Cairo was to find in Axis circles. It is difficult to explain, how Rommel could abandon the Malta operation so lightly, against his better knowledge. His views on the situation, as it presented itself after the capture of Tobruk, have already been stated in detail. But in his justified and sure sense of superiority he committed a number of disastrous blunders.

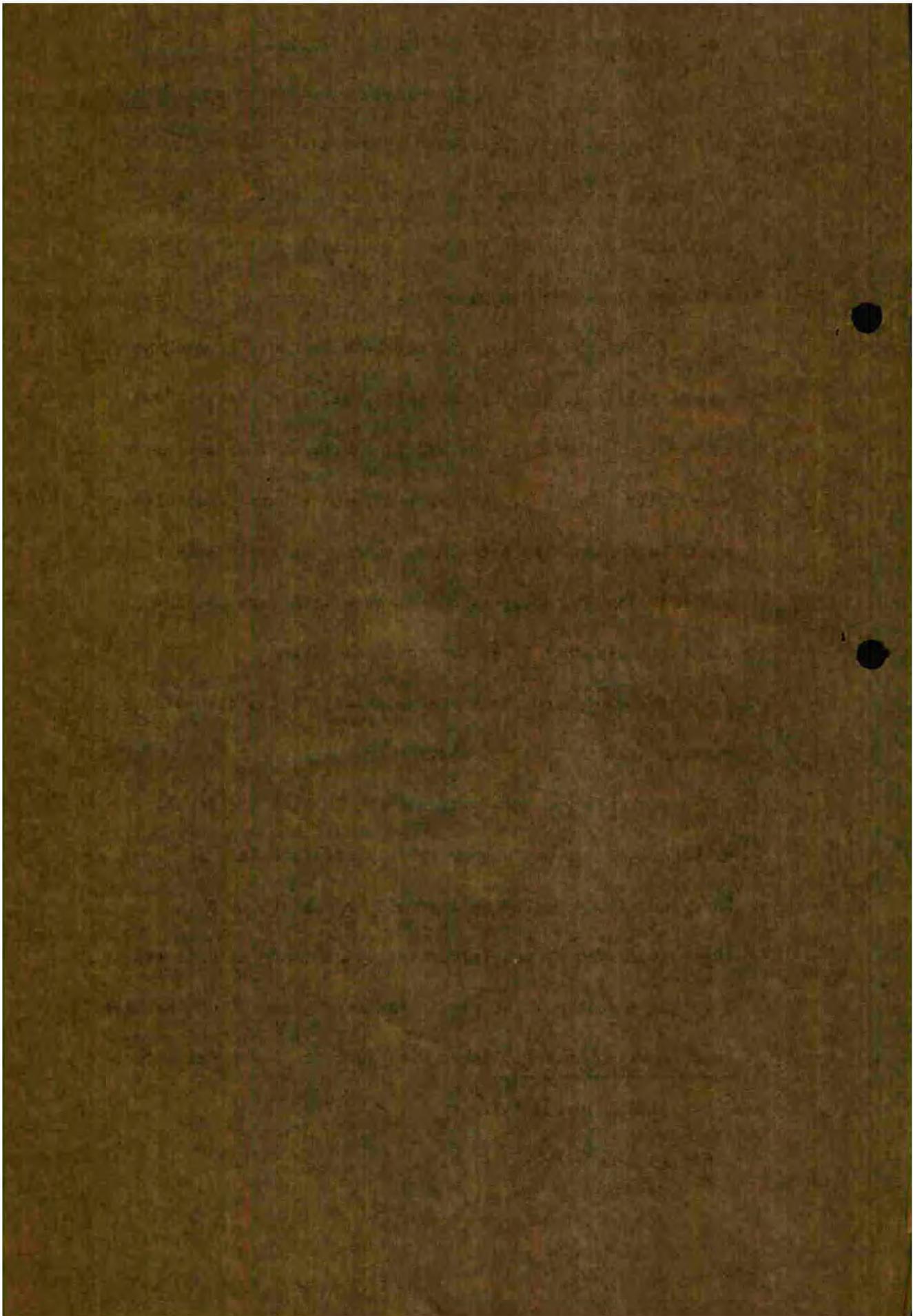
First, the British had not been weakened as much as Rommel believed. They had certainly suffered heavy losses of men and materiel, above all of tanks. But, since they were fully motorized, they were able to escape encirclement. Each time they were threatened by an encirclement, sizable elements escaped. Rommel knew this fact and the air reconnaissance units had confirmed it.**

the enemy army had been defeated and its elements were engaged in full retreat.

Not defeated, however, was the British Air Force, which got closer and closer to fully constructed air bases and fully operational ground organizations each time the withdrawing ground forces covered another mile in the eastward direction. The repair and maintenance installations, which Dawson had established with such foresight and expert-

* See MEMOIR pp. 332-3.

** See pp 300, 307-8.



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ness and which were equipped with all technical expedients, were situated at extremely favorable locations, some 100 miles at distance. Moreover, some combat-ready flying units were stationed in the Nile Delta, in Palestine, in Syria, and in Iraq.

The German Luftwaffe was therefore at a considerable disadvantage compared with the British. Its overextended lines of communication, reaching from Tobruk to El-Daba over some 300 miles, lowered its combat readiness; furthermore, its ground organization and signal communications had to be established.

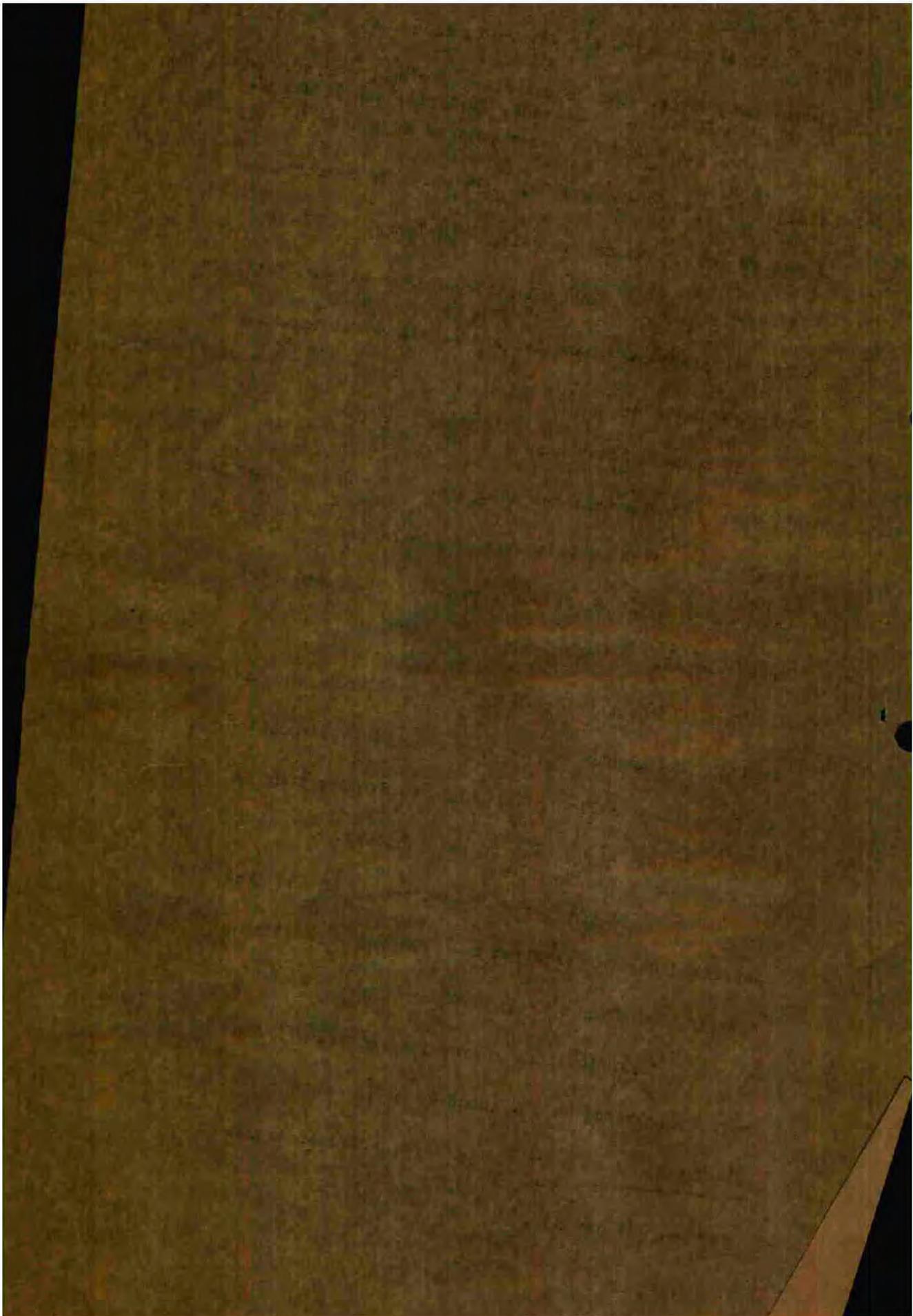
This meant a heavy handicap for the German field command and should have been taken into account by Rommel. One look at the map indicated that between El-Alamein and the Qatara depression there was a position that could not be enveloped.

Rommel's hope to catch up with the fully motorized British forces even before they reached this position, to force them to give battle, and to destroy them on that occasion, turned out to be a fallacy.

Had the reports that had been coming in and that concerned the construction of a defensive position at Alamein been forgotten altogether?

"The fortifications underway near Qaret-el-Ahd were still being built. About 20 miles southwest of El-Alamein there were strong barbed-wire obstacles

• See pp. 287 and 335.



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about four battery positions, apparently some pill boxes were under construction, and there were also 30 tents and 15 trucks."

"Near El-Alamein there were field positions and wire obstacles. A road leading southward was being built at the El-Alamein railroad station." This had been the air reconnaissance report ~~XXXXXXXX~~ ^{supplementing} aerial photos of the west Egyptian area and dated 20 October 1941.¹⁹¹

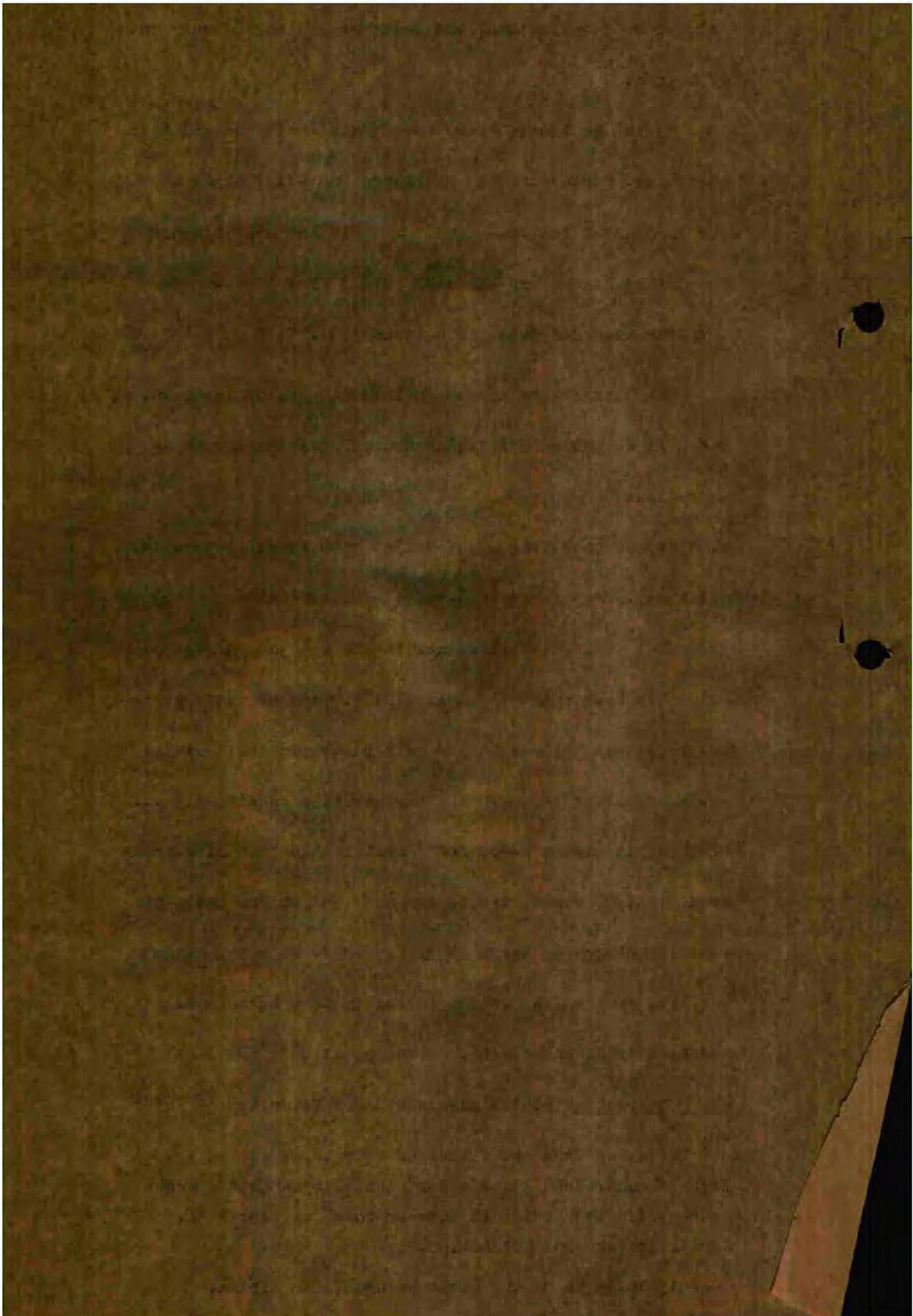
The German Army issued an intelligence bulletin No. 4, dated 11 November 1941, which stated under paragraph 4e as follows:

a. Near the coast the construction work at El-Alamein is under way. From there to Qaret-el-Abd extends a 10 - 15 feet wide multiple-belt entanglement; a major strong point has been built at Qaret-el-Abd. This obstacle probably continues all the way to the Qattara-depression, but its existence along this stretch has not been confirmed." ...

b. There is also a so-called "Fortification Map El-Alamein", at a 1:25,000 scale, issued in June 1942 on the basis of aerial photographs taken on 31 May 1942. This map might not have reached the combat forces in time because it had been produced so late. Moreover, it ~~does not show~~ ^{does not show} only the construction of the El-Alamein fortifications proper,¹⁹¹

Extracted from the situation reports of the Luftwaffe High Command, Intelligence Division, Libya-Mediterranean Sector, for the period 19 October to 27 October 1941. Karlsruhe Document Collection.

* See Appendix 5a of the first volume North Africa.



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and not the course of the entire Alamein position.

Whether the Field Marshal still remembered these data can no longer be established. Since he used to minimise intelligence reports that might impress his own forces, it would be possible but not likely".... 192

(Tr.: This sentence, though properly punctuated, is unfinished in the German text.)

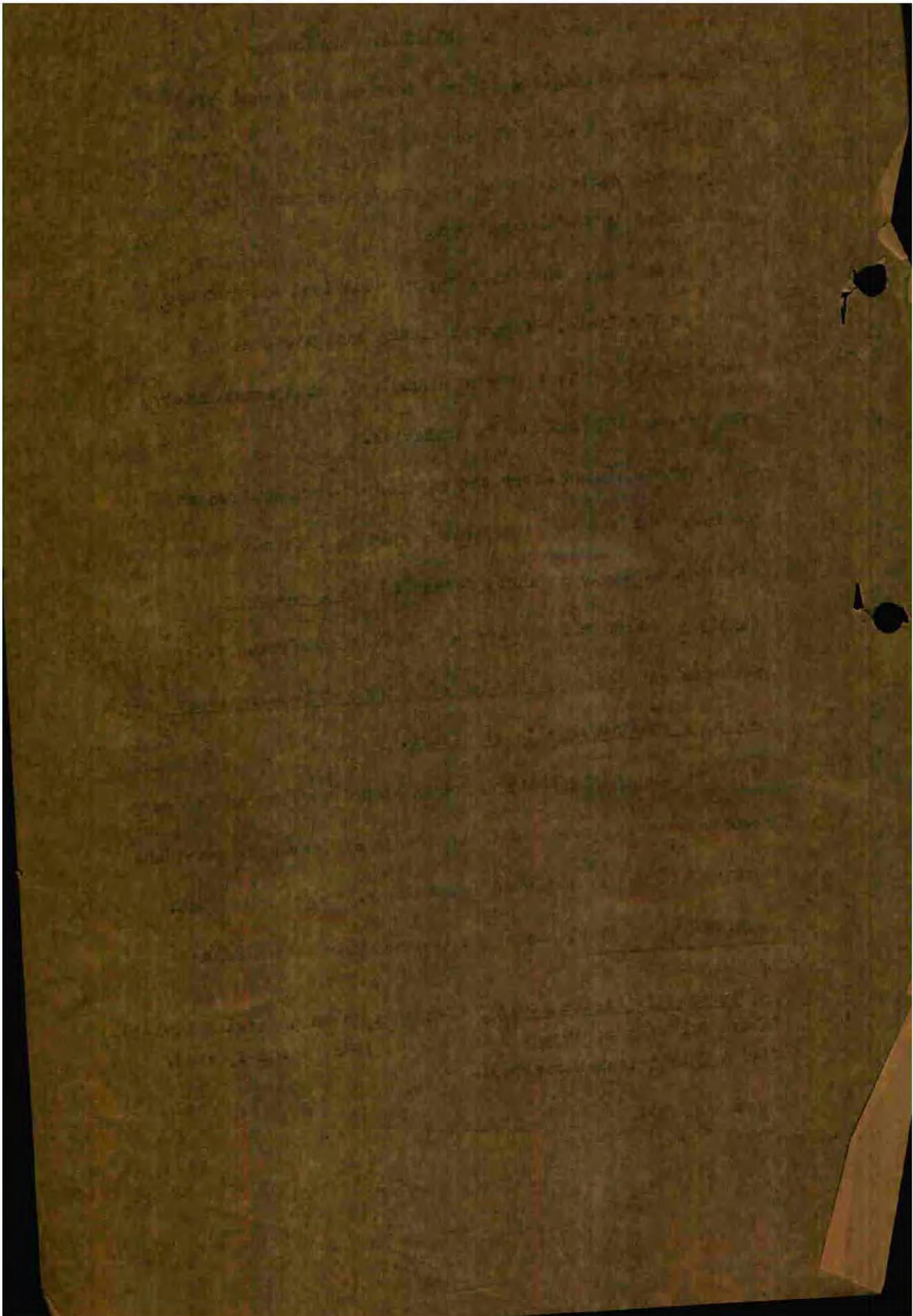
Even though the photo map of June 1942 arrived too late in the field, one might assume that its contents were known at Panzer Army headquarters. That headquarters was responsible for its distribution.

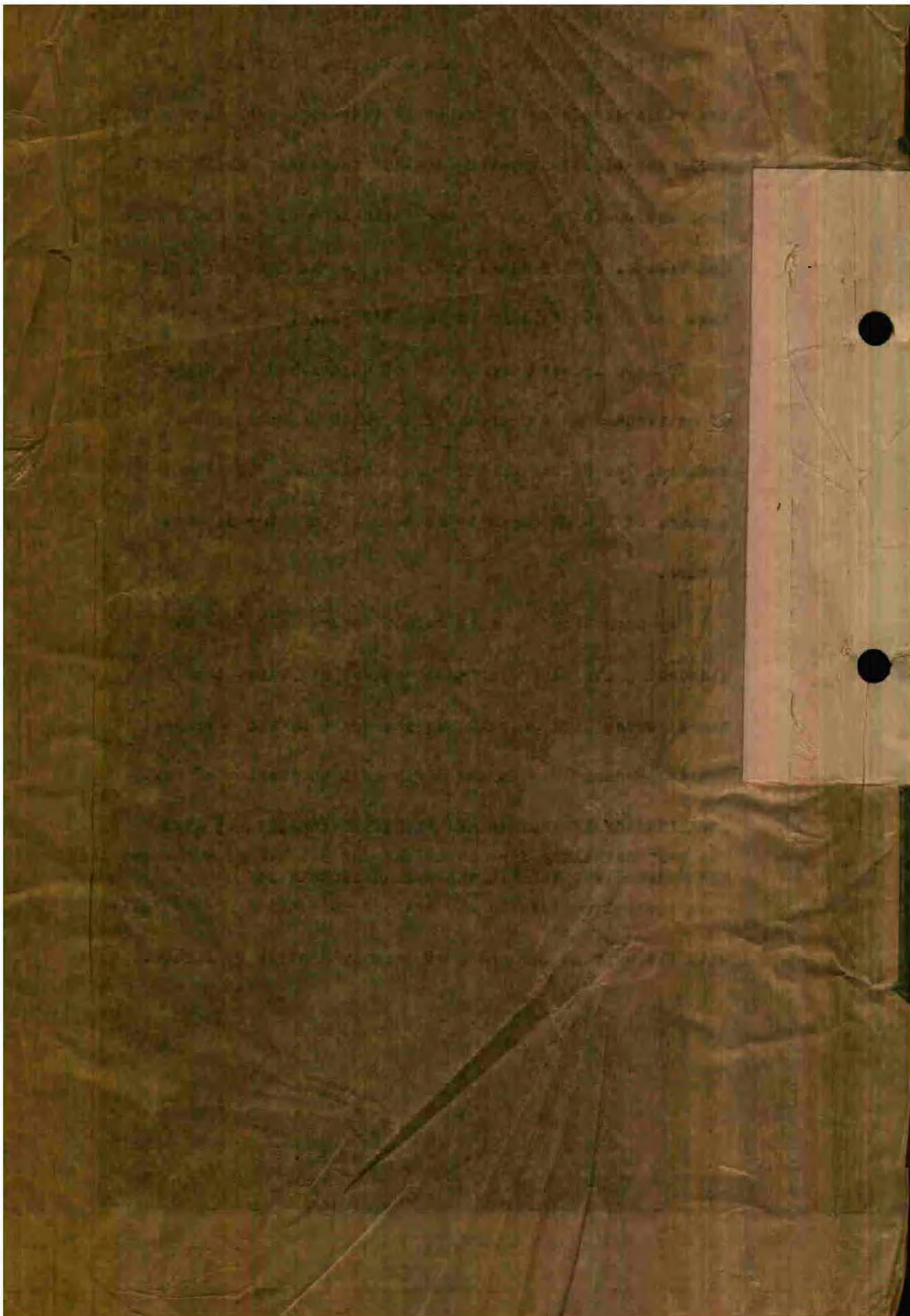
Rommel stated after the capture of Marsa-Matruh as follows: "They were nevertheless able to withdraw major elements of their infantry forces to the El-Alamein position, which was already occupied by some fresh troop elements and the construction of which had been underway for some time in an all-out effort." *

Even though the booty captured at Tobruk covered the supply requirements for some time, the losses of manpower, guns, and tanks could not be replaced immediately. Rommel knew that. He also had no doubt about the troops being exhausted and 192

Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43 (Campaign in North Africa 1941-3), Volume II, Part 4, Appendix 20/ Africa 1942, pp. 1-2, Study MS-T 3 (Historical Division).

* See page 300.





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Section 4

The Allied Landing in North Africa

Evaluation of the situation by the Axis powers and measures taken by them; the launching of the second front in Africa; preparations for Operation TORCH and its execution; the advance into Tunisia; the fighting in November and December

1942.

P. R. C.

Prior to September of 1942, the Commander in Chief, South, was occupied solely by conducting day-to-day air operations in the Mediterranean. His staff was that of any other air fleet headquarters having only German Luftwaffe units under its command.

In September 1942, however, on the basis of intelligence data pointing to an imminent enemy landing in the Mediterranean theater, the Commander in Chief, South, was entrusted with the command of all German forces (Army, Navy, and Luftwaffe) stationed in the Mediterranean area. The only exception was the German-Italian Panzer Army, which remained under Italian command, with its command headquarters in Africa.

Up to this point, German planners had been aware only of the fact that Russia was pressing for a second front in Europe,

Director Aerospace Studies Unit AFTRM, Wright-Patterson Maxwell AFB, Ohio	RETURN TO:	K 113, 107-1614/62 [1955]
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and that Molotov and Stalin had received binding assurances to this effect from the United States and Great Britain.

It is uncertain how exactly the Wehrmacht High Command was informed of a contemplated landing in the Mediterranean theater.

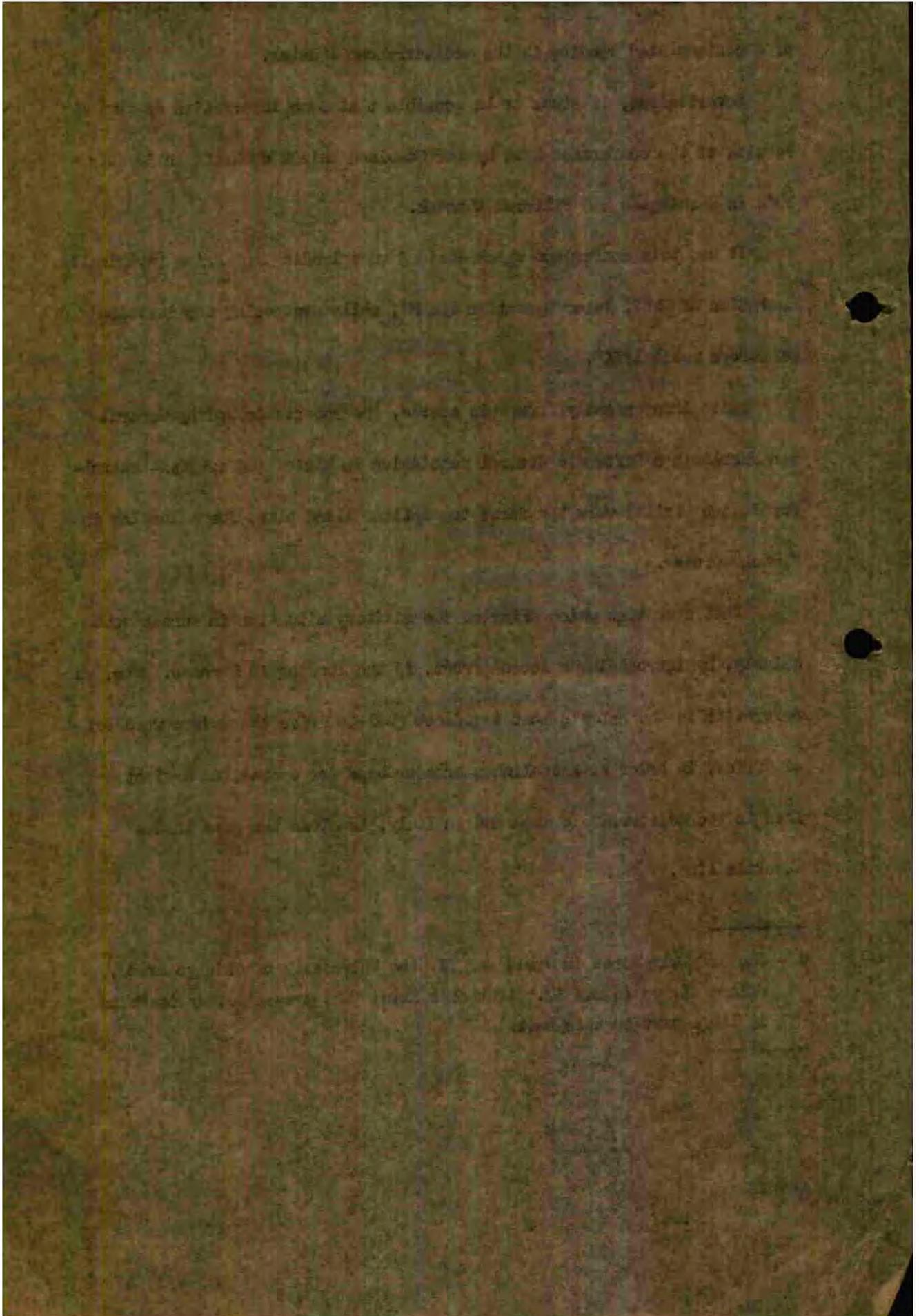
Nevertheless, it seems to be possible that some information as to the results of the conference held by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 30 July 1942 in Washington had filtered through.

It was this conference which decided on a landing in Africa (originally Operation GYMNAST, later Operation TORCH), while postponing the invasion of Europe until 1944¹.

Quite independently from this source, the reports issued by General von Wuehlich's Luftwaffe Control Commission in Africa (Luftwaffen-Kontroll-Kommission Afrika) were the first to mention Allied plans for a landing in French Morocco.

"That operation which affected the military situation in Europe most quickly, by introducing a second front, is the landing in Morocco. Now, as before, it is the enemy's most immediate goal to drive the Axis powers out of Africa, in order to establish a broader base for operations against them in the Mediterranean area and in Italy, to close the gaps in the blockade line,

1 - The Army Air Force in World War II, the University of Chicago Press, Volume II, pp 46 and 47. (Author's note: The present study is based in large part on this work.)



to encourage the defection of the French colonies in Africa from the mother country, and to force Italy to sue for peace."²

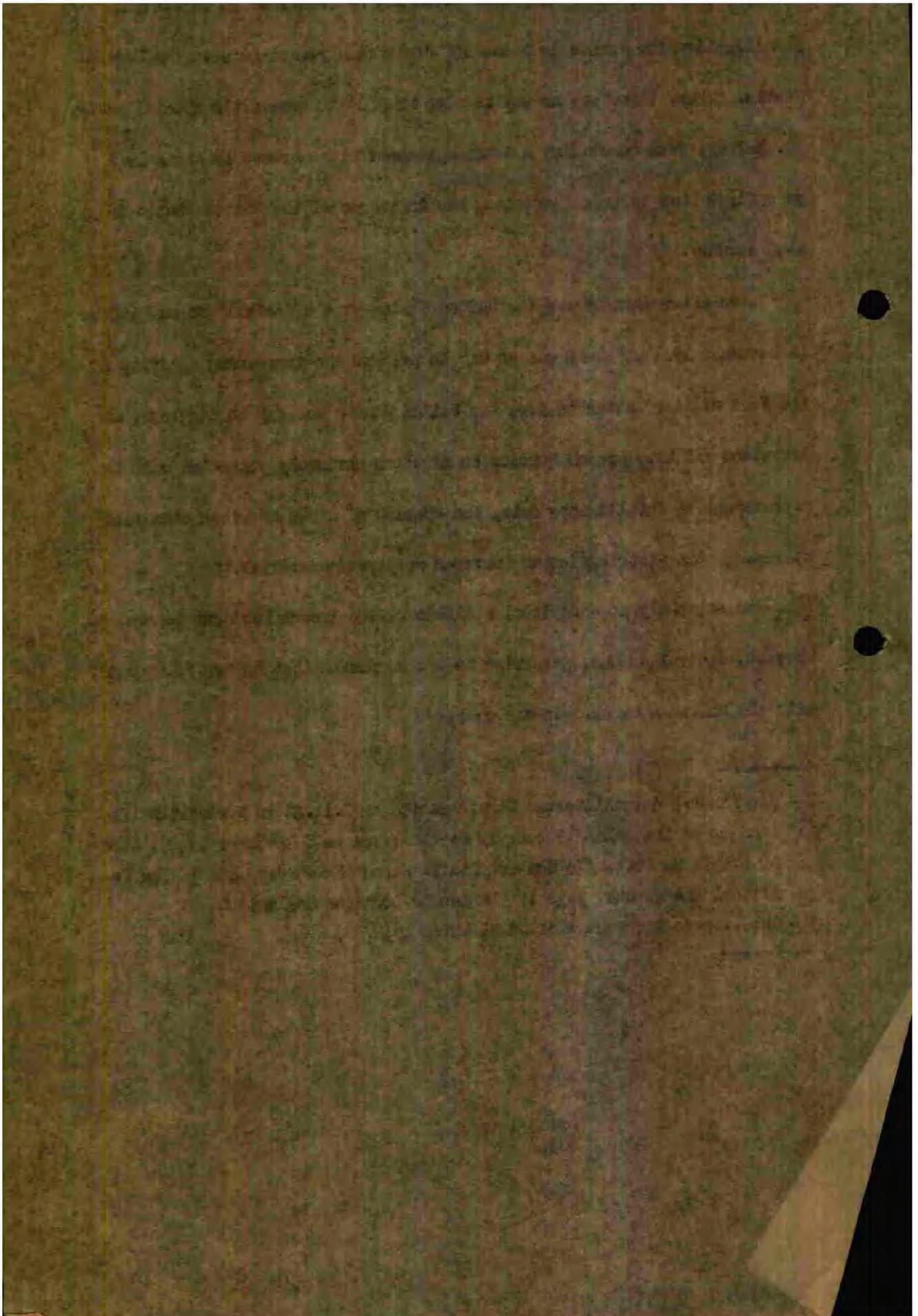
The armistice of 22 June 1940 could not be construed as sufficient justification for France to break off diplomatic relations with the United States. Thus, there was no way to stop President Roosevelt's special envoy, Mr. Murphy, from concluding a trade agreement with Morocco in April 1941 as a first step towards increasing the influence of the United States in that country.

Even after Germany and the United States were officially at war (after 11 December 1941), "there was no way to prevent the increasing activity of the four military attaches from the United States embassy at Tangiers, who travelled all over French Morocco on missions obviously connected with the procurement of intelligence data, the opening of a new American consulate at Fes, or the distribution of American propaganda material."³

The strangely non-committal attitude of the French Resident General in Morocco, General Nogues, gave rise to the suspicion that he was in sympathy with the American cause. In any case,

2 - Die Landung der alliierten Streitkräfte am 8.11.42 in Nordafrika (The Landing of the Allied Forces in North Africa on 8 November 1942), Study by Branch 8, Luftwaffe General Staff, dated 17 February 1945; The Political Background, page 1; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

3 - Ibid., page 10, report dated 25 March 1942.



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in view of the inadequacy of the coastal defense system, it was doubtful that an Anglo-American landing could be repulsed for any length of time. "Prolonged resistance against an attack by a strong enemy force equipped with up-to-date weapons is out of the question."⁴

"The Central Commission in Africa considers an Anglo-American attack to be inevitable some time during the next few months."⁵

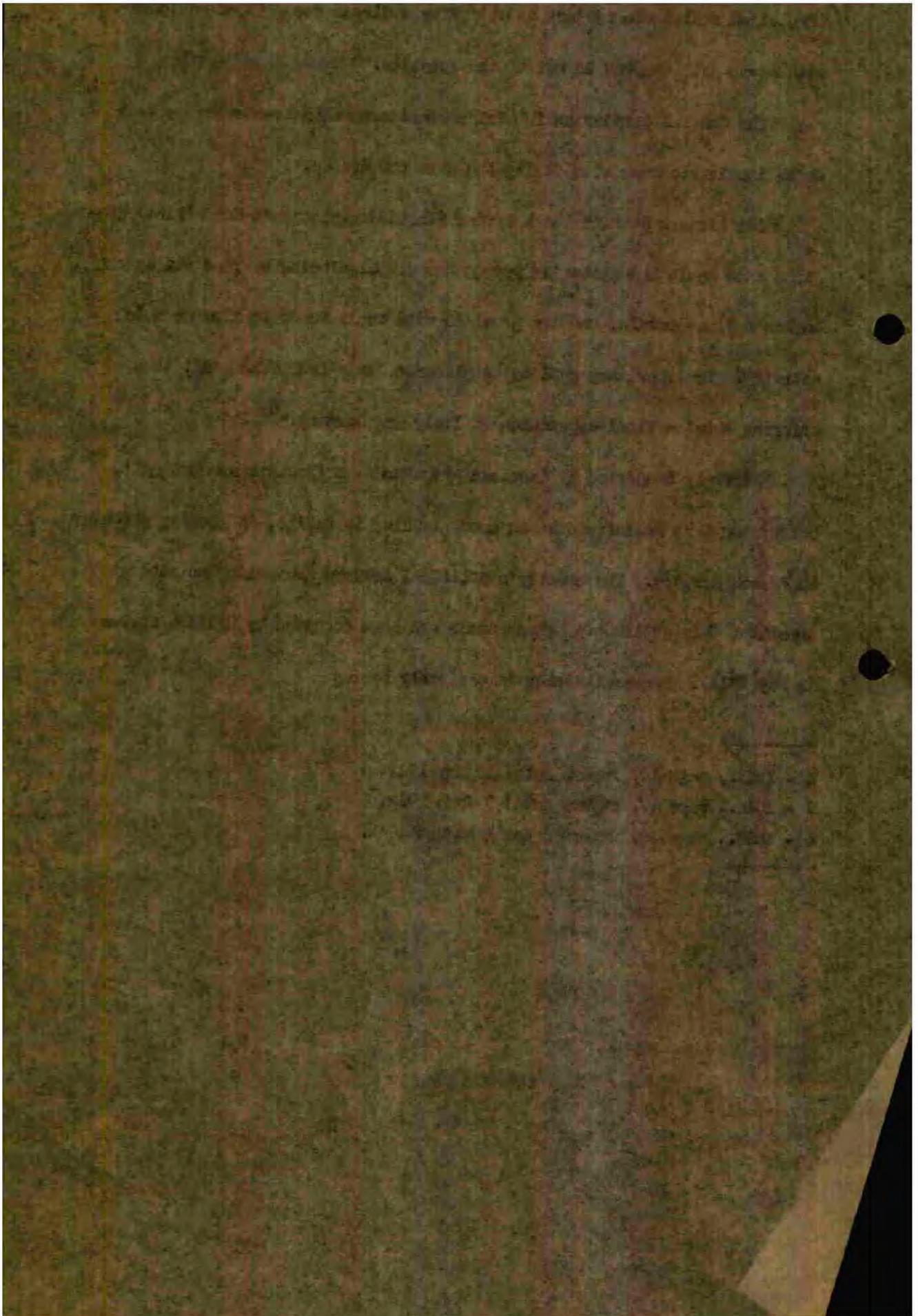
"The Liaison Command North Africa (Verbindungsstab Nordafrika) confirms once again the agitating propaganda campaign being carried out by the American vice-consuls, who are provided with ample funds to finance this activity. Their primary goal is to alienate Italy from Mussolini, thus bringing about a final separation of Italy and Germany."⁶

"Strongly supported by American propaganda, a 'Madagascar Movement', contending that resistance to an enemy landing is futile, is growing stronger in French Morocco. The country's political leaders are making no attempt to combat this attitude." (Madagascar had been occupied by British forces in May 1942). "General Nogues is obviously basing

4 - Ibid., page 14, report dated 10 May 1942.

5 - Ibid., page 17, report dated 9 June 1942.

6 - Ibid., page 19, report dated 1 August 1942.



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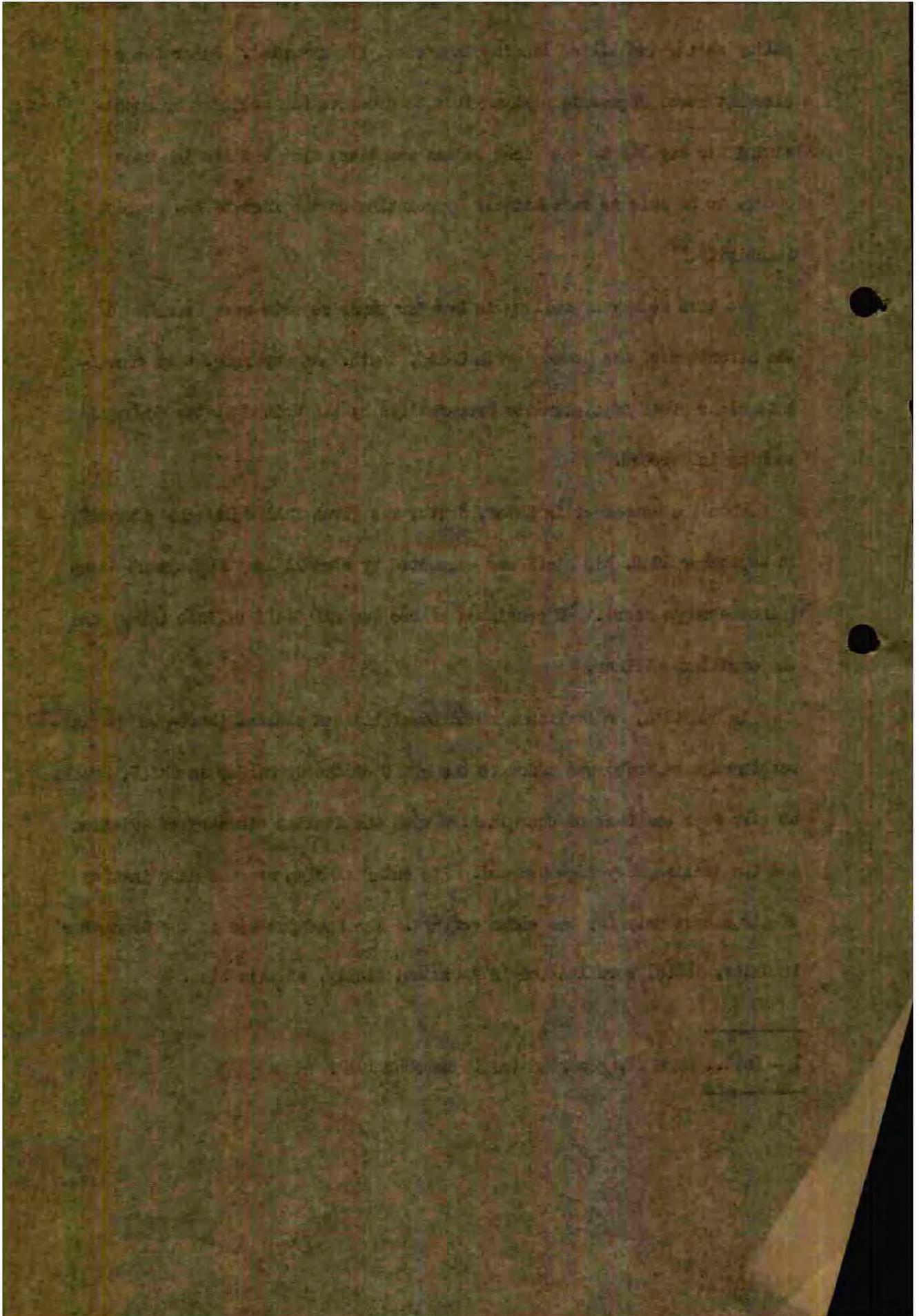
his appraisal of the situation on the assumption that the coming winter may involve the Laval government in internal difficulties which Laval may be unable to master in the event of any additional pressure in the foreign policy sector (an Allied landing in Africa, for example). Under these circumstances, Nogues is most anxious to preserve his position by emphasizing his loyalty to the Vichy regime and then, when the landing does occur, to be able to save himself by pointing to the fact of his present inactivity."⁷

We have no way of telling in how far these reports were brought to the attention of the Commander in Chief, South. At any rate, they constitute clear proof of systematic preparations by the United States for a landing in Morocco.

When the Commander in Chief, South, was given full Wehrmacht authority in September 1942, his staff was augmented by a small Army Employment Group (Einsatzgruppe Heer). It consisted of one General Staff officer (Army) and one auxiliary officer.

In addition, an Italian air and naval liaison element (Luft- und Marineverbindungskommando) was added to the staff of the Commander in Chief, South, to take over the task of coordination with the Italian Ministry of Aviation and the Italian Navy High Command. Its chief mission was the coordination of air escort duty for the ocean convoys. The headquarters of the Commander in Chief, South, were located in Taormina, Sicily, at this time.

7 - Ibid., page 21, report dated 10 October 1942.



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It had now become the mission of the Commander in Chief, South, to direct the coordination and employment of all German armed forces in the event of an Allied landing in the Mediterranean theater, and to utilize those forces to repulse such a landing^B.

A great deal of thought was devoted to the possible targets of an Allied landing.

A landing in southern France was considered possible, since a successful operation there would be bound to have the fastest and most significant effect on the over-all military situation.

A landing in the Marseille area would have the advantage that an air base on the Spanish island of Mallorca, only 250 miles away, could be taken in the same operation. A landing any further east, on the other hand, would bring the invaders into that part of southern France occupied by Italian forces - a weak point, in other words. This would probably mean that the island of Corsica would be seized as a base from which to cover the flank of the landing force. A further argument against a landing in southern France was the fact that the French government would be bound to object. Moreover, in the event of a landing there, the Allied troops would have to reckon with fairly quick involvement with strong units of the German Wehrmacht.

B - The Campaign in Tunisia (Der Feldzug in Tunesien), study prepared by General der Flieger Deichmann in 1947; Karlsruhe Document Collection; (the present study is greatly indebted to General Deichmann's presentation).

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Judging from the data available to them, German military leaders regarded it as doubtful that the Allies could have at their disposal the strong troops and technical equipment needed to carry out an invasion in the south of France.

A landing in Greece seemed more probable. The critical situation of the Russian ally could best be helped from the Balkans; and the partisan units fighting in Greece could be relied upon to furnish active support.

The airfields which would fall to the Allies in the event of a successful invasion in Greece would enable them to carry out attacks on the Rumanian oilfields as well as on important traffic centers in the rear area of the German forces.

The factors arguing against a landing in Greece were the very poor network of roads and the difficult terrain, in which even relatively weak German forces would be able to slow down an advance effectively. In addition, both the landing itself and the extensive supply operations required to maintain it would have to be carried out via the Suez Canal.

In connection with a possible landing in Greece, it was expected that the Allies -- perhaps as an opening thrust --

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would seize the island of Rhodes, which was occupied by the Italians. This would also lead to the "isolation" of Crete by cutting off its supply line.

After weighing these factors carefully, the Commander in Chief, South, came to the conclusion that Greece would not, after all, be the scene of the Allied landing.

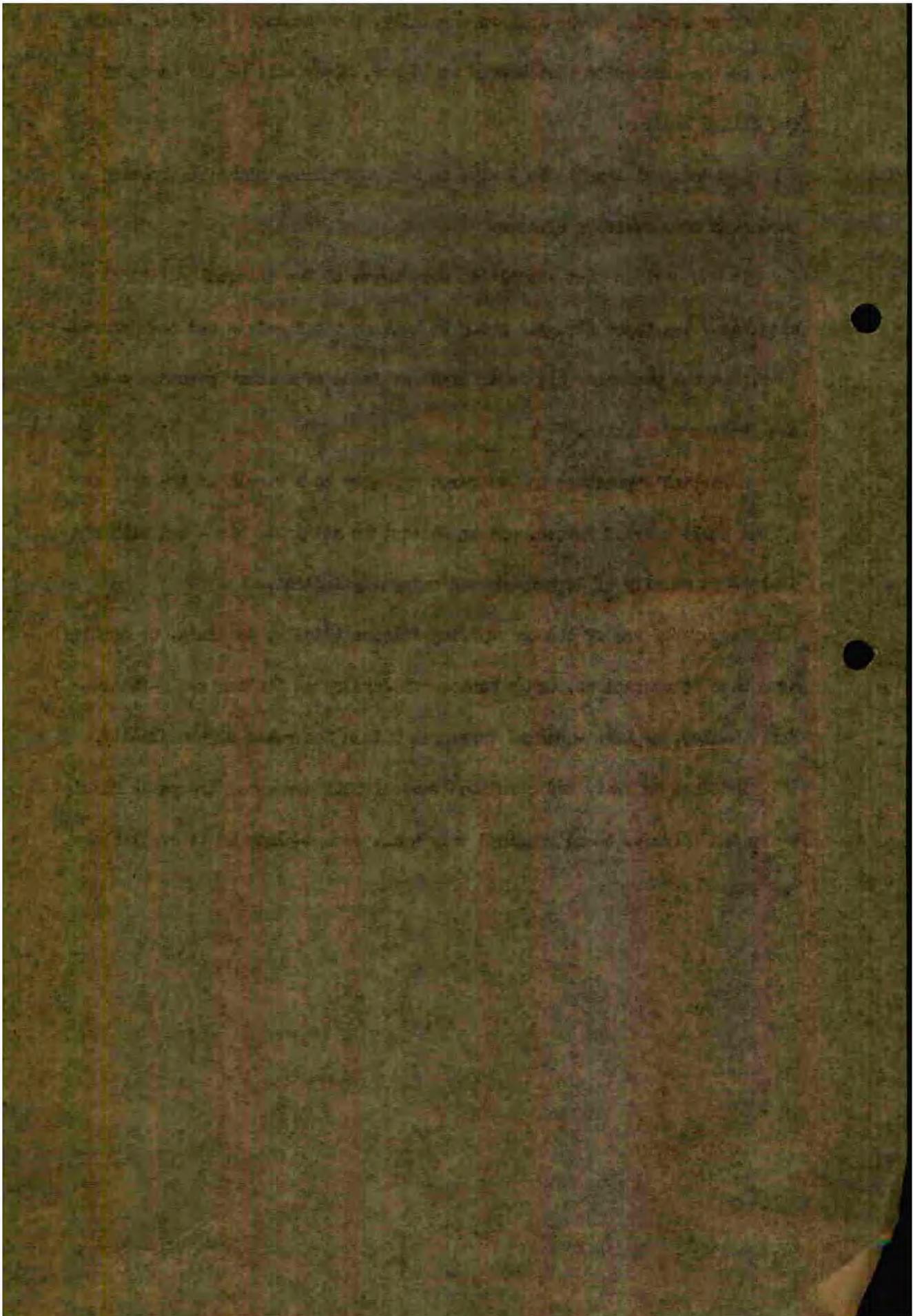
A successful landing in Italy, on the other hand, might be expected to have even more decisive effects.

It was certain that the Allies were aware of the internal political situation, the tense struggle going on between the Fascists and the Monarchists, and the war-weary and indifferent attitude of a large percentage of the Italian population.

Mussolini's prestige had suffered markedly as a result of the defeats of the Italian armed forces, and an attempt to eliminate him - and with him Italy - as an ally of Germany seemed eminently logical.

Seizure of one of the surrounding islands (Sicily, Sardinia, or Corsica) as a base of operations, and a subsequent landing on Italian soil - near Bari, Naples, or Rome - seemed very much within the realm of possibility.

Inasmuch as Italy had committed herself with her crack troops in Russia or on the islands, there remained only weak, second-class units available for the



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defense of Italy proper. There were no full German units at all in Italy at this time. The only German soldiers there were a large number of men returning from leave, convalescents, and replacement troops waiting in southern Italy for their departure to Africa to join Rommel's Panzer Army.

The nearness of Malta, from which Allied forces could provide cover for the aircraft carriers of the invasion fleet, was strongly in favor of a landing in Sicily.

The seizure of Sardinia would have provided the Allies with a base from which to carry out a landing in central Italy, and this plan was considered feasible by the Commander in Chief, South. This plan would eliminate, for all practical purposes, the danger of interference by the Italian forces still left in the south, and a thrust to the north, into the industrial area and perhaps even to the Alps beyond, could be carried out before Germany would have time to transport the necessary defense force to the scene of action.

In the event that the Allied commanders might be unwilling to accept this risk, the chances of a landing on the spur of the Italian boot would become even greater, with all or a part of the landing fleet approaching from the eastern Mediterranean. If the landing force should approach from Alexandria and Gibraltar simultaneously, it would mean a secondary landing on the spur of Italy.

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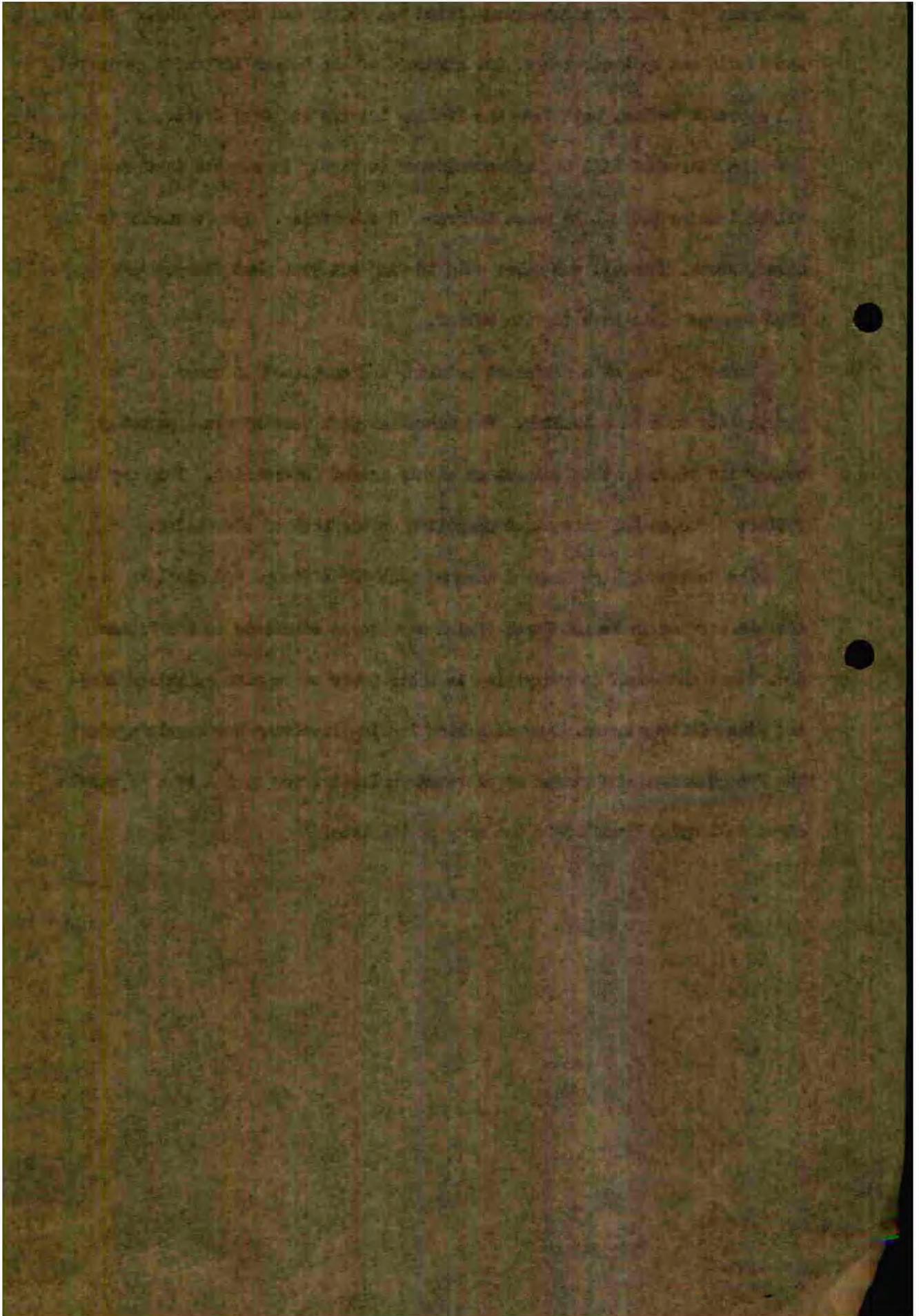
coupled with a main landing in central Italy.

From the Allied point of view, the most serious obstacle to all these plans was the risk of endangering Allied sea routes and supply lines. Within the limits set by their range, the aircraft of the German Luftwaffe dominated the approach routes, both from the Italian islands and from Crete.

The Wehrmacht High Command considered it highly improbable that an Allied landing would take place in French North Africa. The Commander in Chief, South, however, was never able to find out just what reasons the High Command might have for its belief.

Mussolini was of a different opinion, and continued to consider the possibility of such a landing. The Wehrmacht High Command was apparently basing its views in this respect on highly secret information. This may well reflect a successful attempt at deception on the part of the Allies.

The Wehrmacht High Command assumed that the officers and civilian officials serving in French North Africa were loyal adherents to the Petain government and would do everything in their power to repulse an Allied landing with military means. And an Allied landing involving a struggle against the French troops was viewed as extremely unlikely, for such a turn of events might well drive France into the arms of the Axis!



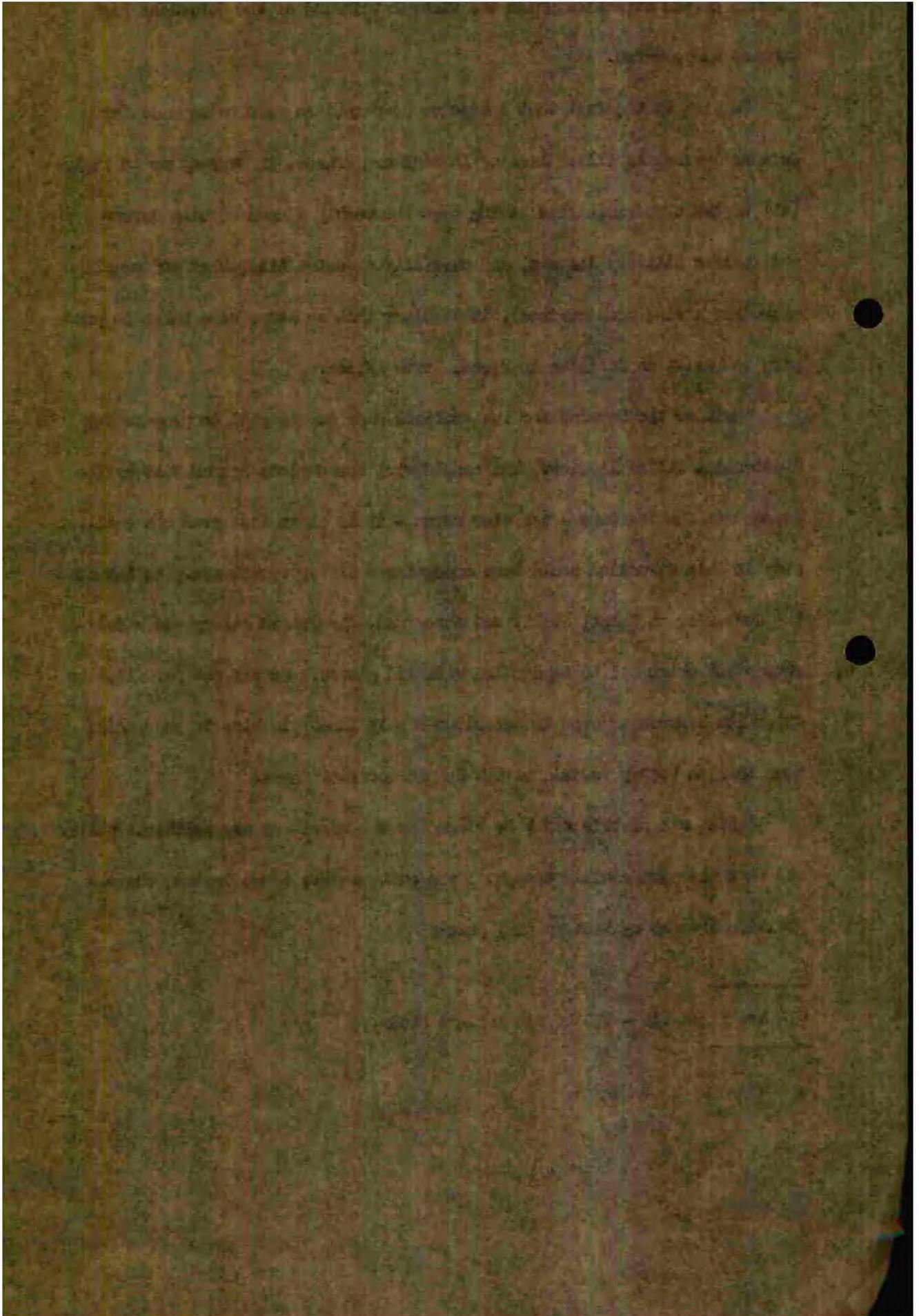
The German Luftwaffe Control Commission reports cited in the preceding pages⁹ were apparently never taken seriously, since they did not correspond to the picture of the situation which the wishful thinking of the Wehrmacht High Command had created.

In view of the fact that intensive preparations were being made for defense against an Allied landing in southern France, in Greece, or in Italy (all of these possibilities having been thoroughly discussed with German and Italian military leaders, and carefully executed timetables and practice exercises having been devised), it is clear that no steps were taken to prepare to resist an invasion in French North Africa.

"Neither the Germans nor the Italians made any attempt to prepare for a potential Allied landing. And considering the obvious hatred felt by the French for the Italians - and vice versa - it is clear that even the smallest step in this direction would have encountered bitter resistance. As far as the Commander in Chief, South, was concerned, the French colony was a delicate plant which had to be handled with kid gloves. He was not permitted to enter its harbors or even to establish supply lines via Bizerte and Tunis, much less to occupy Tunisia with a German security force.

"While all of this might be viewed as the result of top political policy and thus incomprehensible enough, I was quite unable to understand the opposition brought against my own, purely

9 - See pages 535 - 538 of the present study.



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military recommendation that at least one division be assigned to Sicily to be ready for any potential hand-to-hand combat. This extremely limited reinforcement of the German air units would, in view of the restricted maximum range of their aircraft, in no case have been able to prevent a landing or to contain or destroy already landed enemy troops without the additional help of paratrooper or Army forces."¹⁰

The views of Feldmarschall Kesselring, as cited above, are eminently sensible, inasmuch as there were fully operable German units only in the Balkans and on Crete. Some of these units were part of the security battalion assigned to protect the railways. Together with Italian units, they were employed to the last man in maintaining some sort of occupation authority in the face of strong partisan resistance. Thus they could hardly be considered to be free for commitment elsewhere.

In the final analysis, the air units were given very limited reinforcement in the form of torpedo squadrons. The only tangible improvement was in their ground organization, which - in view of their anticipated field of operations - was augmented, brought up to date, and fitted with the equipment which it presumably would need.

The assignment of the German naval forces to the area did represent a gain in personnel strength for the Commander in Chief, South. These naval units had

10 - Kesselring, Albert, op. cit., page 188.

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the following elements at their disposal in the Mediterranean areas:

1 destroyer (Heraeus)

15 submarines (approximately)

1 motorboat flotilla (about six boats)

1 mine sweeper flotilla (about twelve boats)

1 or 2 landing flotillas.

In October 1942, the staff of the Commander in Chief, South, was transferred to Frascati, near Rome, since the crisis in Africa made it highly desirable that Feldmarschall Kesselring, by his presence in Rome, exert even stronger pressure on the Italian Supreme Command (Comando Supremo) in respect to the furthering of supplies to North Africa. Nominally, the Commander in Chief, South, was responsible only for providing air cover for the supply transports, which were under the direct command of the Supreme Command (ultimately under that of the Italian Navy). Nevertheless, the best interests of the German-Italian Panzer Army required Feldmarschall Kesselring's constant intervention with the Italian command headquarters.

From September 1942 on, the Intelligence Branch of the Wehrmacht High Command (O.K.W./Abwehr) began to issue daily reports which included agents' stories of an imminent landing in the Mediterranean area.

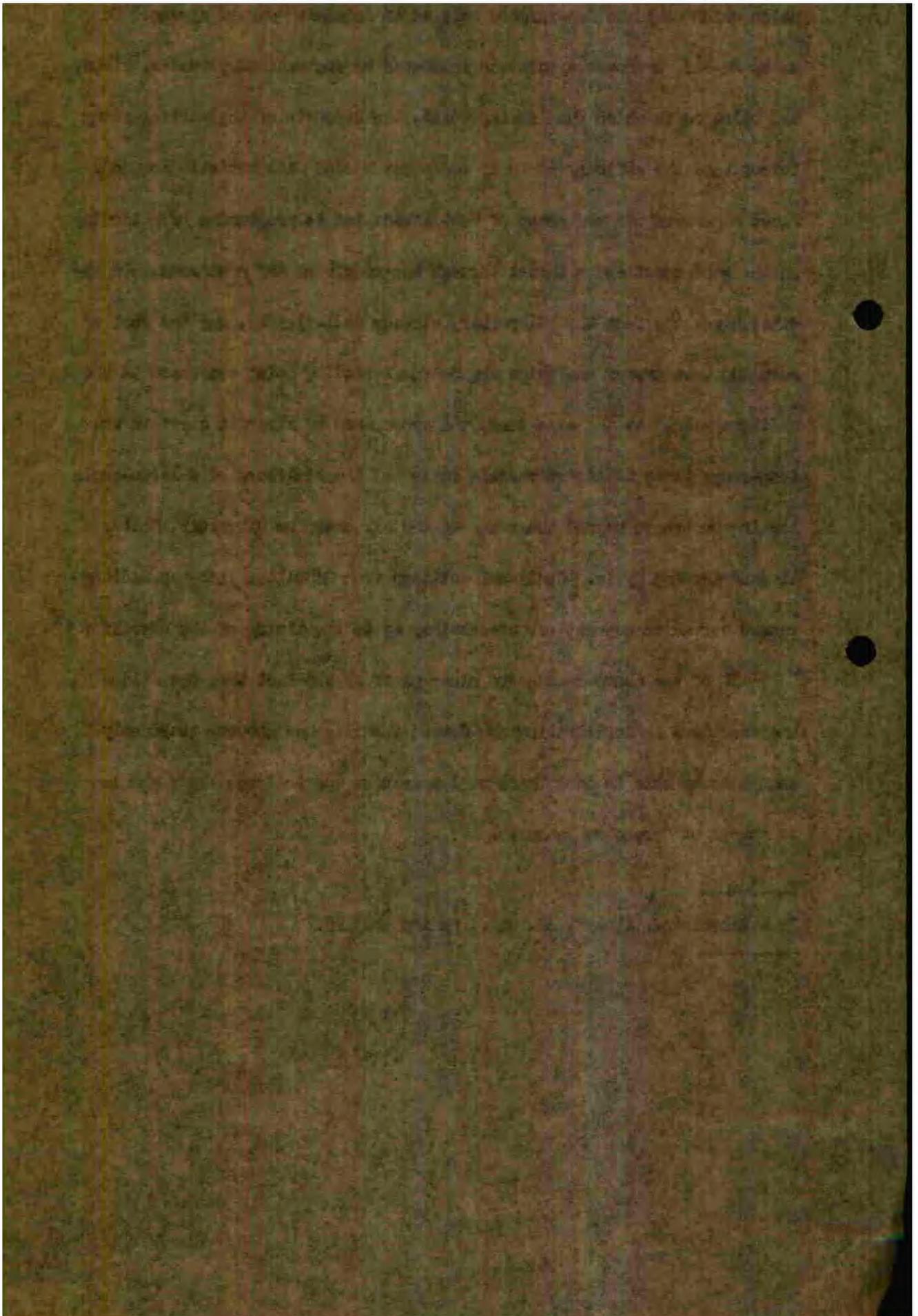
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Feldmarschall Kesselring has the following to say in this connection:

"The Allied invasion in North Africa was preceded by a propaganda campaign which could be interpreted only as an intensive war of nerves. For weeks on end, my headquarters was inundated by contradictory rumors, views, and opinions in which the landing point, the strength of the participating forces, and the efficacy of their equipment varied with artistic abandon. Fleet maneuvers off the coast of West Africa led to prophecies of a landing on the west coast and a thrust through the middle of the continent. On the other hand, the fact that Gibraltar, already well-staffed, was the goal of more and more troops and ships argued for a landing point somewhere in the Mediterranean. At the same time, the appearance of aircraft carriers and long-range troop transport vessels indicated the likelihood of a large-scale landing somewhere beyond the range of the air bases on Gibraltar, Malta, Alexandria, and Syria. Continual sailings from Gibraltar into the Mediterranean served to augment our uncertainty as to the timing of the operation."¹¹

All of the above represents clear proof of the fact that the Allies had succeeded in infiltrating the German intelligence network thoroughly enough to be able to mask their real operation and to force their enemies to embark on erroneous measures.

11 - Kesselring, Albert, op. cit., pp. 185 and 186.



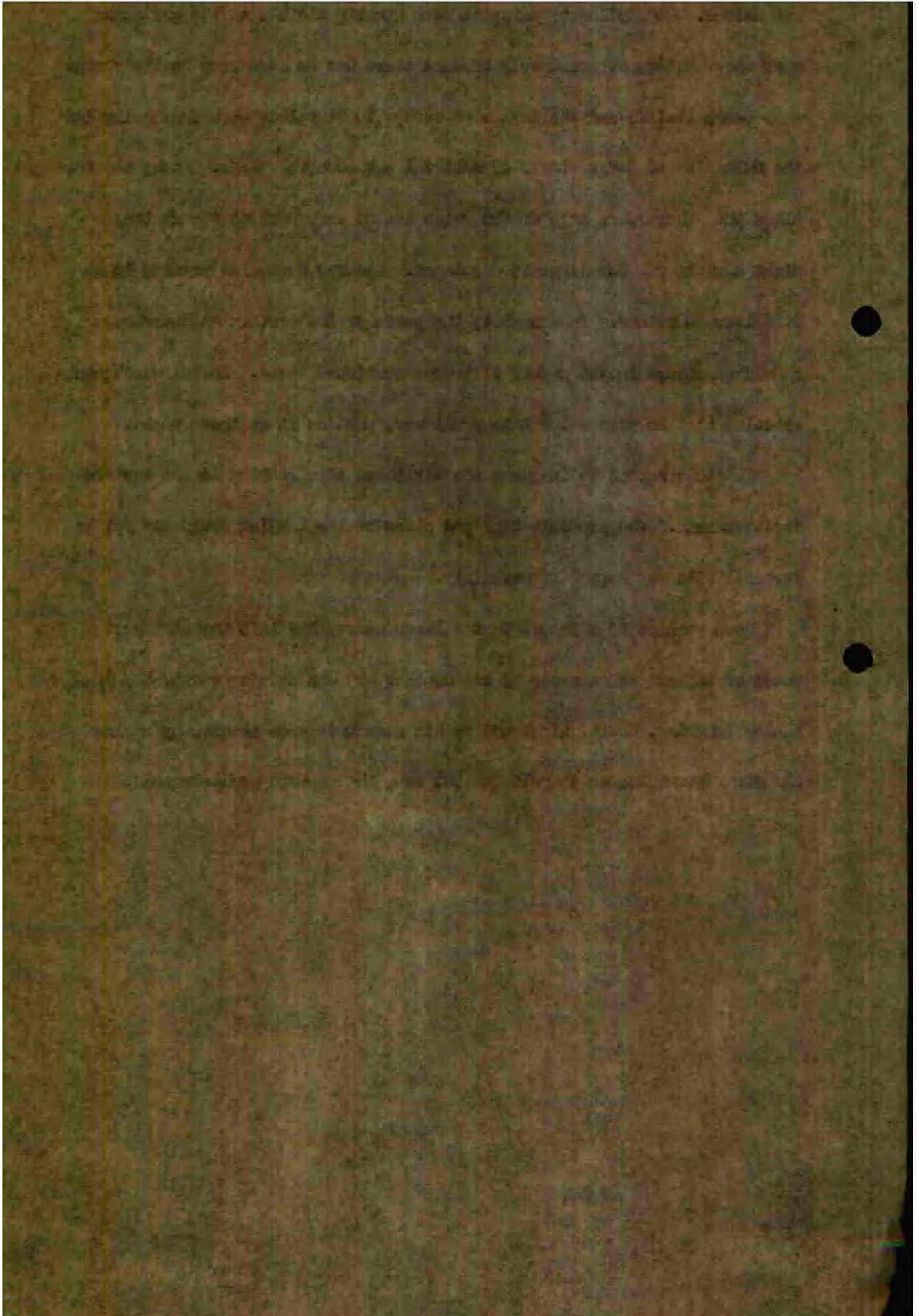
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During the month of October, aerial reconnaissance of the ports of southwestern England revealed the presence of more merchant shipping than was normal. Huge piles of material were clearly visible on the quais and near the warehouses, presumably because there was no more room in the sheds.

Ocean traffic and the influx of troops to Gibraltar were increasing and the unloading of large stocks of material was observed there. Among the supplies put ashore were huge crates which looked very much as though they might contain fighter aircraft fuselages. Tankers were also putting in at Gibraltar to unload. In contrast, the ports of the eastern Mediterranean showed no change in the number of troops stationed there. Aerial photographs revealed that no more ships than usual were putting in at these ports.

All this seemed to increase the likelihood of a landing in the western Mediterranean. The probable time and place of the landing could not yet be forecast with any degree of certainty.

Upon receipt of a report that a large convoy had left the northwest coast of England under cover of bad weather and was heading south, the Commander in Chief, South, tightened up his reconnaissance network by having his air reconnaissance patrols fan out over the western Mediterranean.



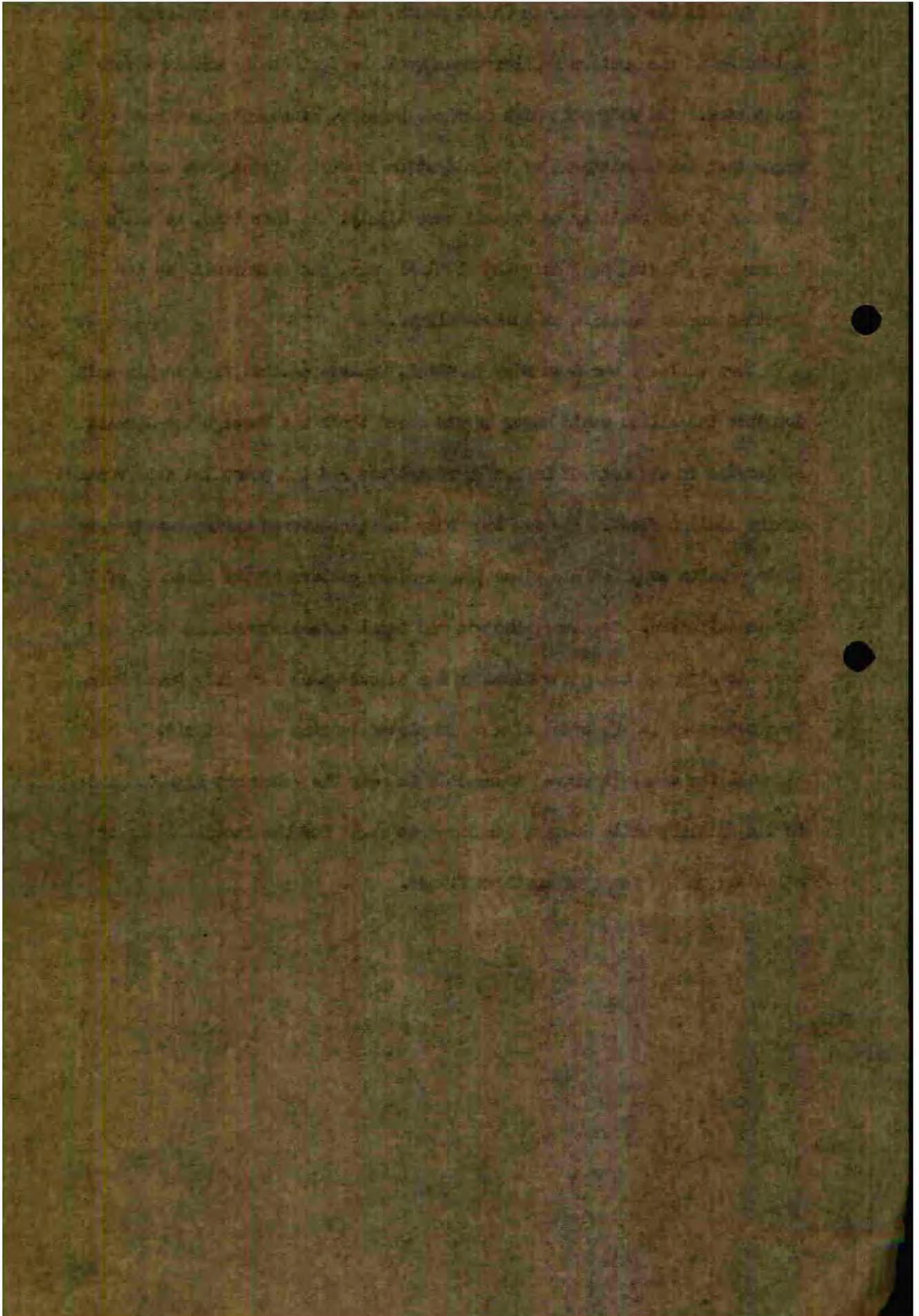
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At the same time a submarine patrol report was received, indicating a large convoy in the western Atlantic, moving towards the east.

By then the Commander in Chief, South, had come to the conclusion that a landing in the western Mediterranean would be forthcoming within a very short time. The Wehrmacht High Command, however, stubbornly continued to argue that the development of the situation in North Africa made an Allied invasion in the vicinity of Tripoli most likely. At this time, Rommel's Panzer Army, having been defeated at El Alamein, was withdrawing to its Egyptian border position at Sollum-Halfaya.

Nevertheless, the Commander in Chief, South, remained firm in his opinion that the Allies would never try to force their way through the Straits of Messina in the face of Luftwaffe resistance and the potential intervention of the Italian fleet. The fighting they had encountered during convoy duty to keep Malta supplied had given them a clear picture of the strength of the German Luftwaffe. Moreover, the air and naval establishments on Malta had shown no signs of being increased to the extent which certainly would have been necessary in the event of a contemplated landing near Tripoli.

All the same, it proved impossible to sway the Wehrmacht High Command in its opinion, while Goering continued to argue for the inevitability of a landing on the coast of southern France.



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The next report of any significance indicated that a number of military and merchant vessels, their lights dimmed, had moved through the Straits of Gibraltar during the night of 6/7 November. These were sighted by German aerial reconnaissance patrols on the following day.

The most important intelligence of all, from the point of view of German leaders, was the report that a large and heavily protected convoy had halted, facing east, at the approximate latitude of Algiers, while a secondary convoy was approaching Oran. On 8 November, two messages were received simultaneously or in very close succession, one from German aerial reconnaissance and the other from a French radio transmitter in North Africa. Both reported that there was fighting going on in Oran and in Algiers. The mask had been lifted.

The Commander in Chief, South, although freed at last of the tantalizing uncertainty of the preceding months, was now faced with a number of extremely difficult problems.

A new danger-point had arisen in the west, in Algiers; not only did he lack the forces with which to eliminate it, but he was prevented by political considerations from occupying French colonial territory in neighboring Tunisia. Rommel's defeated Army was no longer capable of changing the course of events in the east; it would be amazing enough if it managed to escape encirclement.

and pursuit by the far stronger enemy.

Thus the only possible answer to the Allied landing was to employ the Luftwaffe over Algiers and to send the submarines out against the Allied transport fleet. Oran lay outside the range of the available air forces.

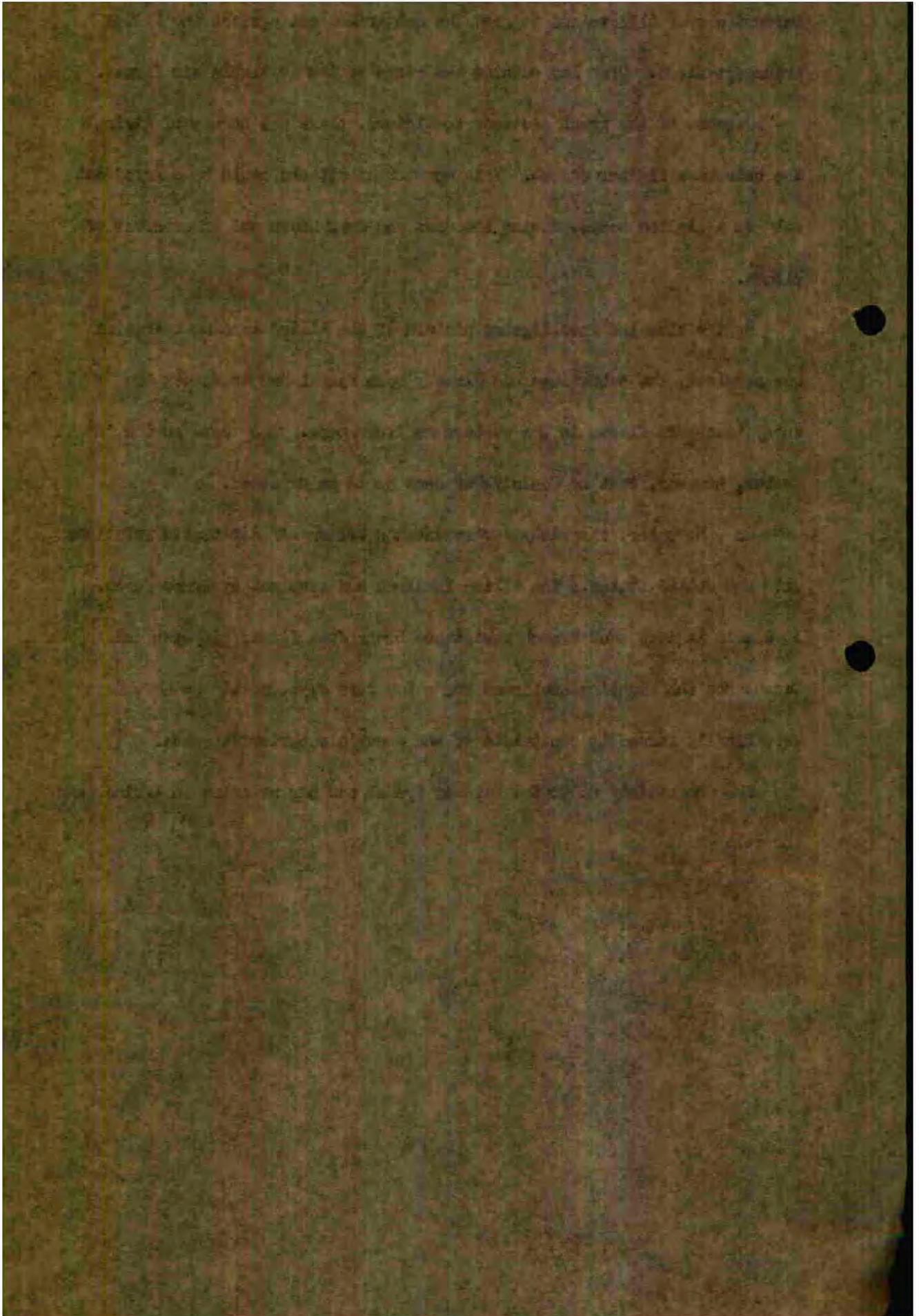
Because of the great distance to Algiers, there was no way of giving the bombers a fighter escort. This meant that attacks could be carried out only on a limited scale, during the dawn and dusk hours and under cover of clouds.

By the time the intelligence picture of the Allied landing operation was complete, the submarines had already been dispatched to attack the enemy transport fleets in the western Mediterranean. They were so few in number, however, that no decisive success could be expected.

On 9 November, the Vichy government had broken off diplomatic relations with the United States. The Allied landings had been met by armed force.

It was in Algiers that French resistance broke down first; in Oran and Casablanca the fighting continued for a few more days, until the defenders were finally forced to capitulate to the enemy's superior strength.

The uncertainty as to the fate of France and her colonies in Africa, and the role



played by some of her top-ranking officers in this connection were factors conducive to the success of the Allied landing.

The American General Clark, for example, had landed secretly by submarine in Algiers towards the end of October and had discussed the details of the capture of North Africa with certain pro-Allied French staff officers¹².

In accordance with instructions from the Wehrmacht High Command, the Commander in Chief, South, was to make preparations for the transfer of a fighter group, with all its necessary ground personnel, to support the defensive battle being fought by the French forces in Tunisia. The Wehrmacht High Command, however, reserved the right to give the final order to start the transfer operation.

The Commander in Chief, South, was well aware of the poor relationship prevailing between the Italians and the French, and the acute tension characterising their association in Tunisia was no secret to him. As a result, there was a very real danger that the French would refuse to cooperate in any joint action involving the participation of Italian forces.

In a conference with Mussolini, Feldmarschall Fesselring secured the promise that Italy would not send any troops into Tunisia.

During the night of 8/9 November, a message was received from the Wehrmacht High Command to the effect that

12 - Goerlitz, Walter, *op. cit.*, Volume I, page 376, and Richards, Denis, *op. cit.*, Volume II, page 248.

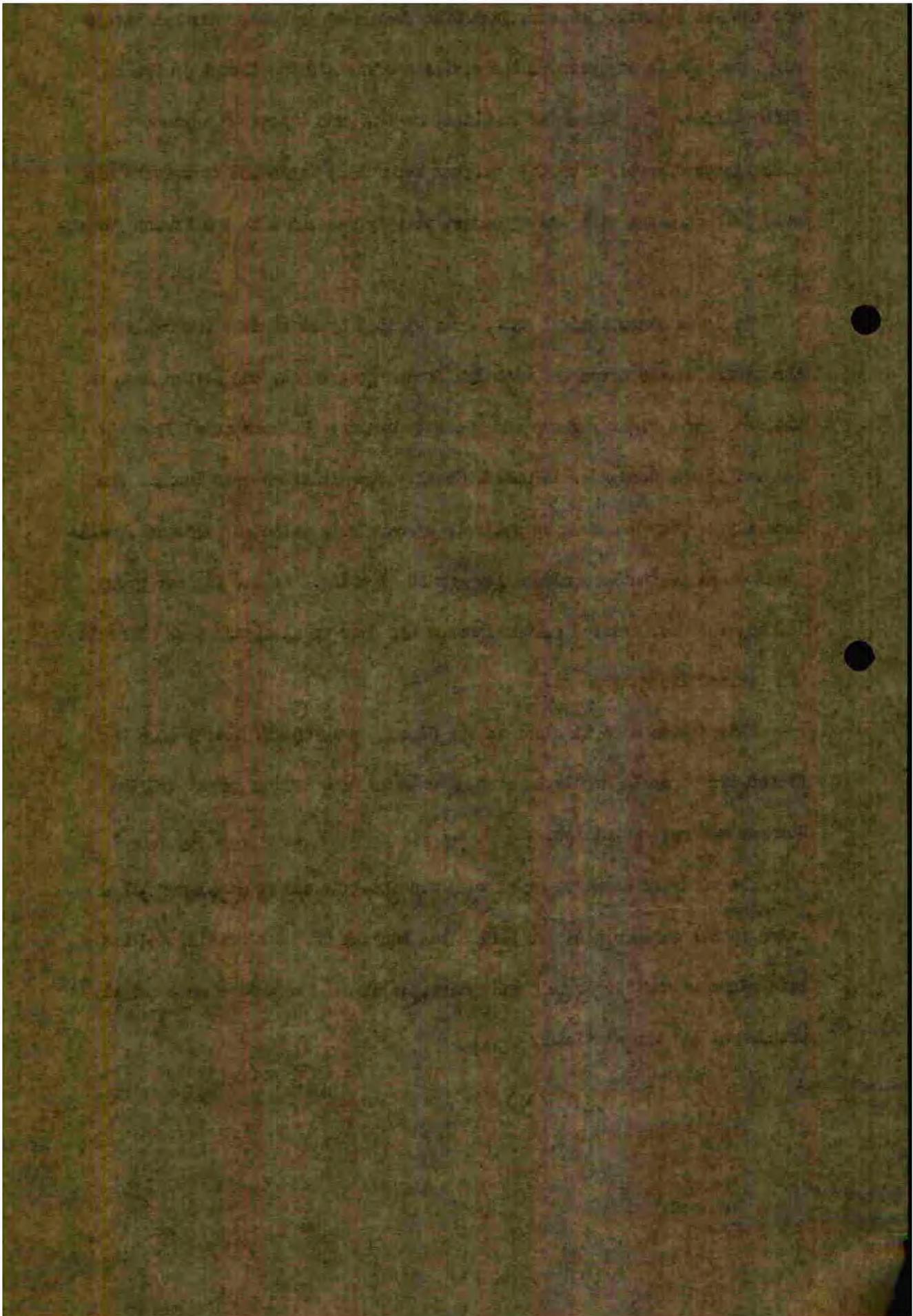
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the French government had informed the Resident General of Tunis, Admiral Esteva, of the impending transfer of German fighter aircraft to Tunis. It was not yet certain, however, just what degree of influence Marshal Petain might be able to exercise on the civilian officials and troops in French North Africa. The Commander in Chief, South, was therefore advised to communicate directly with the Resident General in Tunis and to present his case in accordance with the agreement already reached with the French government.

On 9 November, Admiral Esteva was visited by an officer who explained the nature of the agreement with the French government, and before noon on the same day a fighter group and security company (Wachkompanie) from the command of the Commander in Chief, South, were airlifted into Tunis. The security company was made up entirely of carefully selected personnel, well-trained and perfectly equipped for ground fighting. As the fighter group landed, a French armored reconnaissance car drew up alongside each aircraft and trained its guns on it.

This action made it clear to the Commander in Chief, South, that the French troops could hardly be counted upon to make common cause with the Germans against the Allies.

The security company, armed with machine-guns and antitank guns, had taken up its defense position behind the hangars of the airfield, and had laid mines around the French reconnaissance cars. The latter were quickly withdrawn, and the airfield



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was left in German hands.

In consideration of the facts that the major part of a French division was stationed at Tunis and that the military port of Biserte was occupied by a fairly strong French garrison, efforts were made to gain time through negotiations while reinforcing the German troops to such an extent that the French would not dare to offer active resistance.

The congestion of troops in Africa caused by the withdrawal of Rommel's Army had been exploited to form new fighting units, some of which were brought to Biserte by Italian torpedo boats and some of which were flown into Tunis. In this way, two German forces were formed to capture the port of Biserte and the airfields of Tunis.

The first reinforcement group consisted of two parachute regiments (without their jump equipment) from Germany. They were particularly suitable for air transport because of the fact that their heavy weapons could be disassembled for shipment. On 16 November the Regiment Koch, with two battalions, arrived in Tunis.

Command over all the troops arriving in Tunis was entrusted to a colonel appointed by the Wehrmacht High Command.

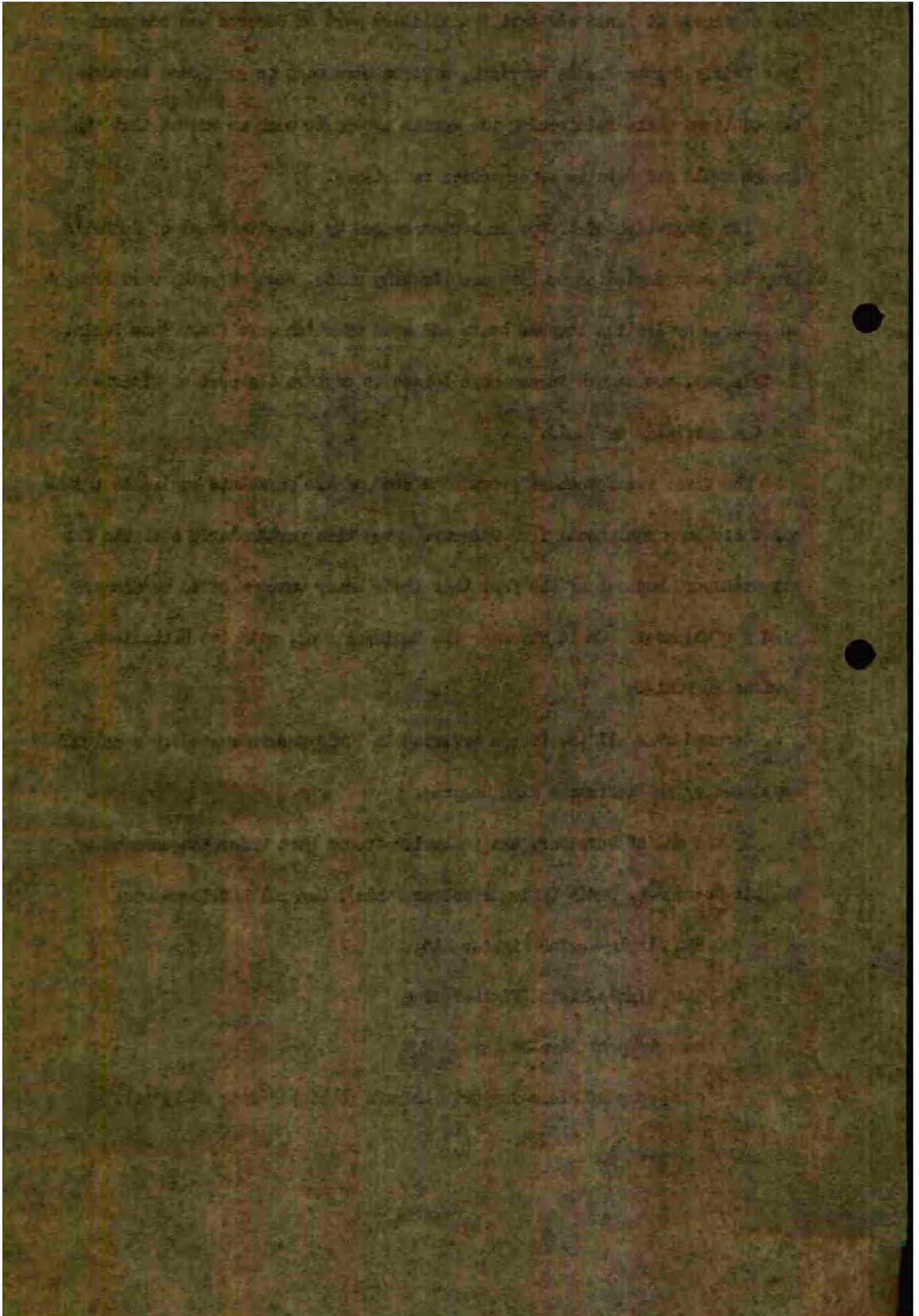
By the end of November, the following troops were under the command of the Air Commander, Tunis (Fliegerführer Tunis), General Harlinghausen:

53d Single-Engine Fighter Wing

51st Single-Engine Fighter Wing

one group of dive-bombers

one group of close-support aircraft (equipped with FW-190's).



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It was Feldmarschall Kesselring's intention to extend the new bridgehead towards the west as rapidly as possible. The mountainous terrain, with its easily-held passes in western and southern Tunisia, was conducive to his plan.

Negotiations in Tunis had begun not unfavorably; Admiral Esteva was clearly loyal to the Vichy regime. General Barro, however, the Minister of War and at the same time commander of the French divisions, seemed unenthusiastic about the measures taken by the German commanders, although he refrained from stating his objections openly.

When Germany's representatives, in reply to a direct question from the French officials, explained that no Italian troops would be employed in Tunisia, the French officers promised to provide billets and food for the German troops. At this point they admitted that they were acting on explicit instructions from Marshal Petain.

Ambassador Rehn and Consul Moellhausen, from the Foreign Office (Auswaertiges Amt) were of very great assistance in the frequently difficult discussions with the French. On 13 November, the French promptly broke off the negotiations (which had promised to be even more fruitful) when - about at noon - an Italian fighter group landed in Tunis and Italian forces debarbed

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from torpedo boats in Biserte.

The German representatives were accused of having broken their word.

The French Division Barre left Tunis for Beja.

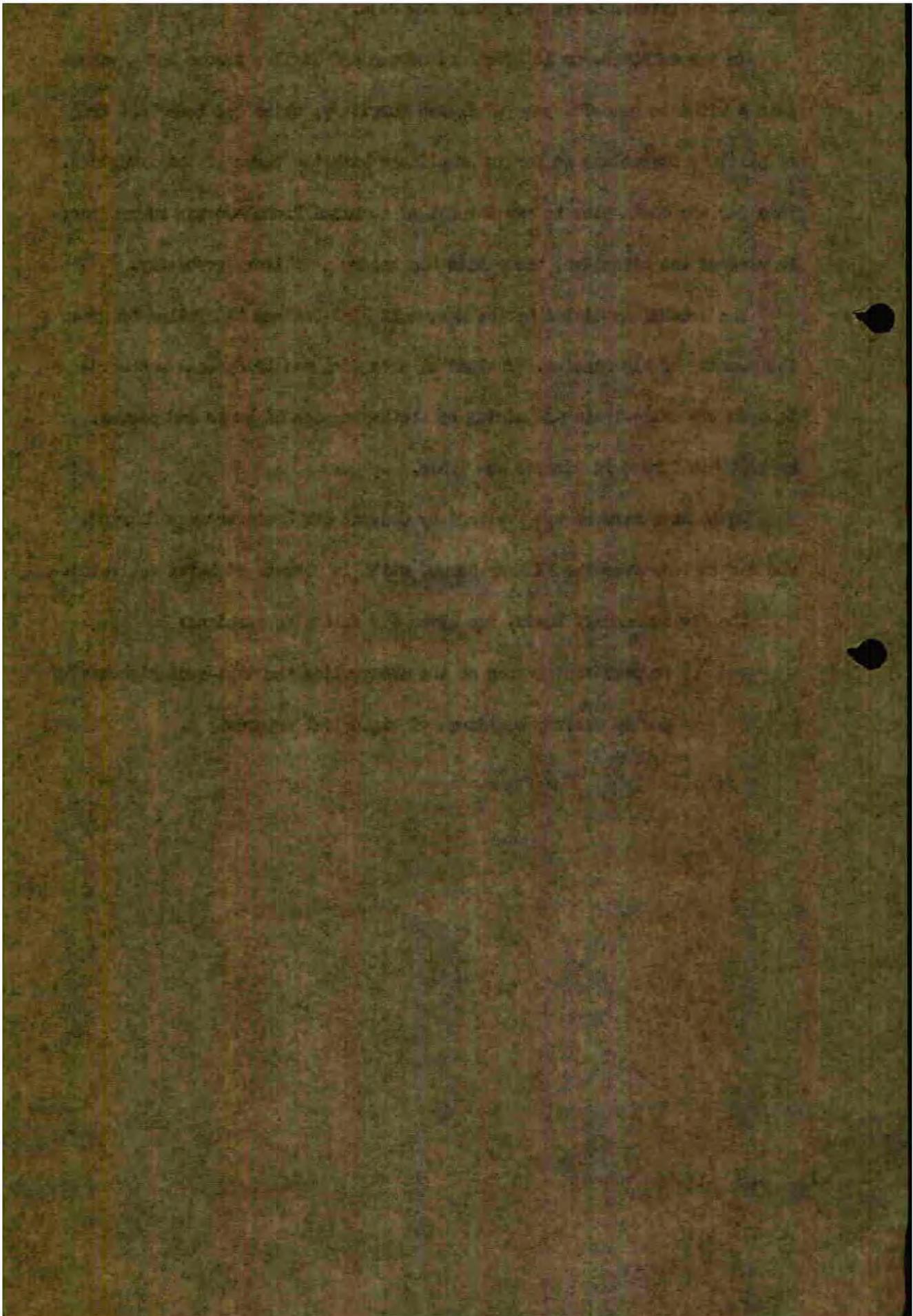
In the meantime, on 11 November, German and Italian troops had advanced into a hitherto peaceful zone of French territory, which had been kept free of military operations so far in compliance with the terms of the armistice. This was the death-blow to any thought of combined French-German operations; in view of the situation, occupation had become a military necessity.

The colonel appointed by the Wehrmacht High Command had failed to grasp the meaning of his mission. Instead of extending the bridgehead westwards towards the Calle-Thala and mining or destroying the highways and passes, he kept his forces in Biserte and Tunis.

On 16 November, he was replaced by General der Panzertruppen Mehring, who was to take over the XI Army Corps, still in process of being activated.

The Air Commander, Tunis, was given the following missions:

- a) to stop the advance of the enemy along the east-west highways and to destroy buildings of historical interest;



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- b) to support the advance of his own troops; and
- c) to set up fighter aircraft defenses for the port of Bizerte and the airfields at Tunis.

In addition, he was to follow any orders issued by the Second Air Fleet with respect to:

- d) providing air cover for friendly ocean convoys and air transports approaching the coast; or
- e) providing daylight fighter escorts for the heavy bomber units taking off from Sardinia and Sicily for operations in the Tunisian theater.

After the capture of Bone, on 12 November, by two Allied paratrooper companies, the Allies shifted all unloading operations to Bengie and Bone. Both cities were immediately raided by German bombers.

The Luftwaffe also took steps to combat enemy day and night fighter activity at Maison Blanche (Algiers), Bengie, and Bone.

German speedboats were also transferred from Sicily to Bizerte in order to protect the Axis sea lanes and to attack the enemy landing force.

The Allied Landing

The pressing difficulties in which Russia found herself in the summer of 1942 required definite measures on the part of the Allies, the United States and

Great Britain.

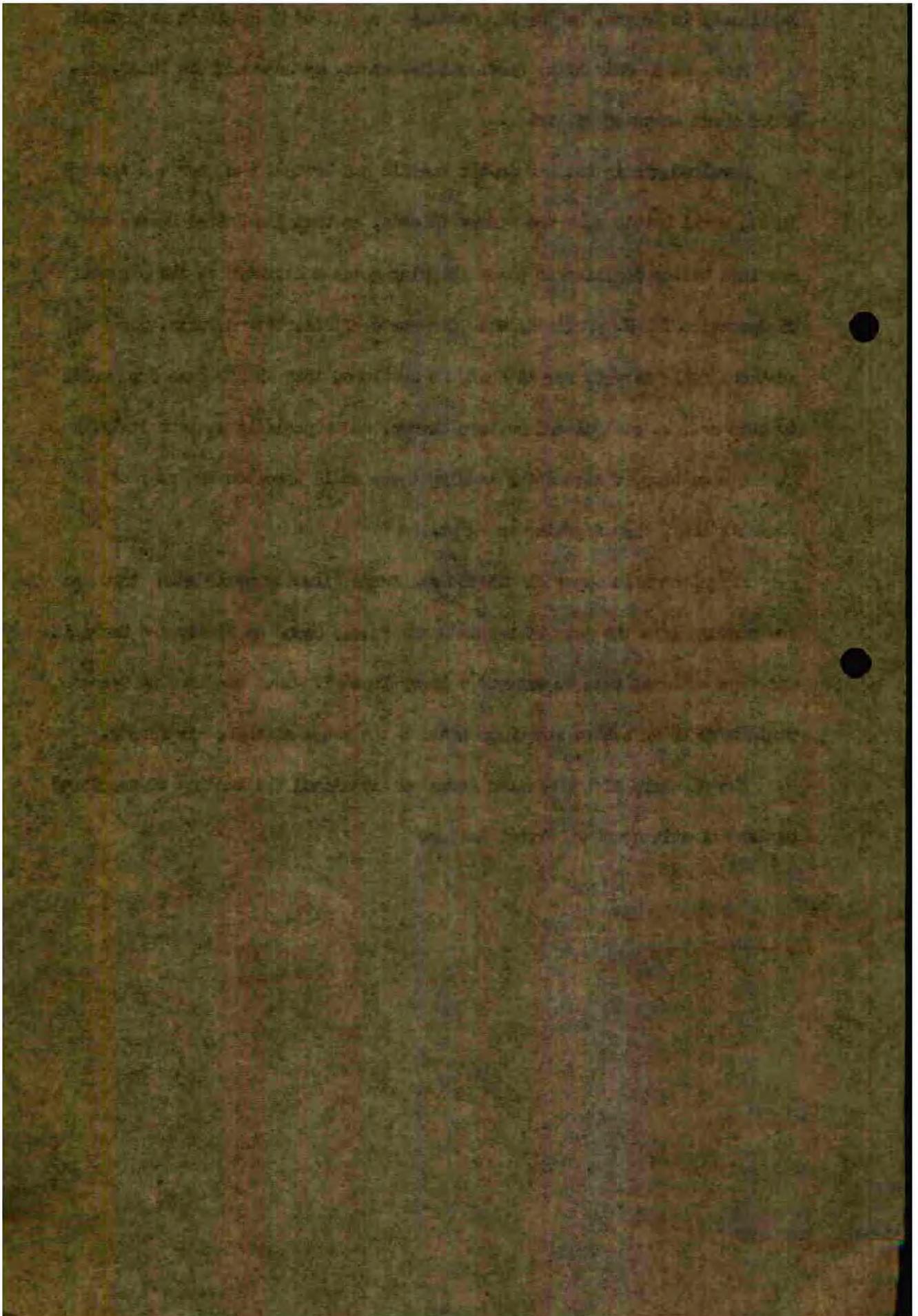
The long-cherished plans for the establishment of a second front on the Continent, in France, had broken down as a result of Churchill's objections.

Thus, on 30 July 1942, President Roosevelt, as Commander in Chief, decided on an invasion of Africa.

Developments in the war in the Pacific had brought the American victory in the naval battle near the Midway Islands, so that the United States was now in a better position to place shipping space and troops at the disposal of Operation TORCH. Tunisia, with its ports of Bizerte and Tunis, was the most desirable target, for it could be developed into an air base from which to move against central and eastern Europe, and especially against Italy. At the same time, a successful landing there would threaten the rear of Rommel's Army, then fighting in Egypt.

Any attempt to approach Bizerte and Tunis directly would mean "throwing the convoys into the jaws of the Axis air forces based on Sicily and Sardinia and thus exposing them to extremely heavy losses". Thus the landing forces would have to go ashore somewhere outside the range of these air forces.

The planners of the African invasion envisioned the landing of one force on the Atlantic coast of French Morocco



and of two additional forces on the Mediterranean coast of French North Africa.

In order to placate French resistance to the seizure of the ports, it was decided that TORCH should be principally an American undertaking, with an American commander (Eisenhower) at its head. It was also agreed that American troops should be the first to go ashore¹³.

The attitude of Spain was still an uncertain factor. Acting independently or under the influence of Germany, it was possible that France might decide to block the Straits of Gibraltar. The airfield there was completely at the mercy of Spanish artillery.

It was for this reason that Eisenhower placed great emphasis on the landing of the Western Task Force on the Atlantic coast. There was no way of destroying contact between Casablanca and America.

Consideration also had to be given to the fact that a concentration of US strength in French Morocco was bound to affect Spain's attitude.

The Western Task Force, which was to capture Casablanca, was to be made up of American troops, the detailed planning for the operation was done in Washington.

13 - The Army Air Force in World War II.
