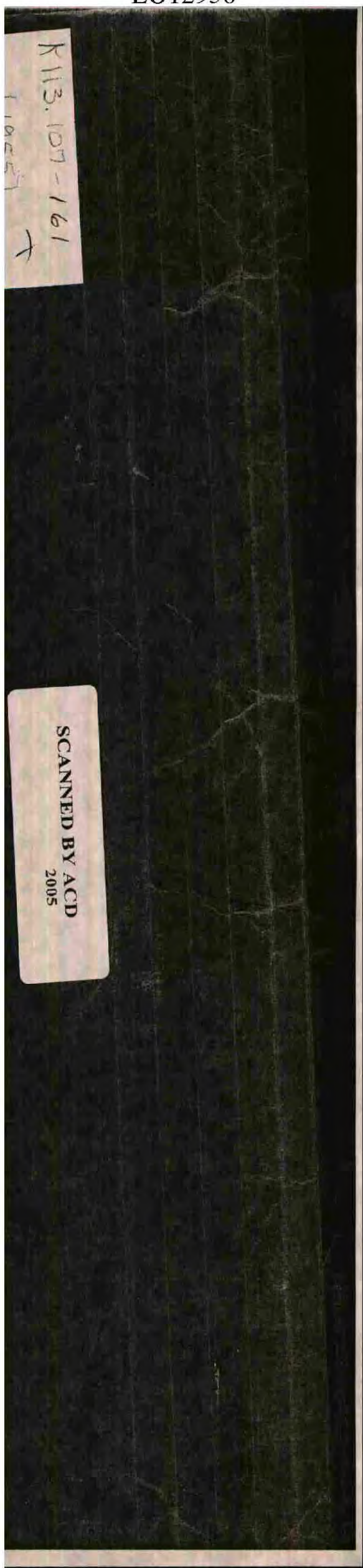
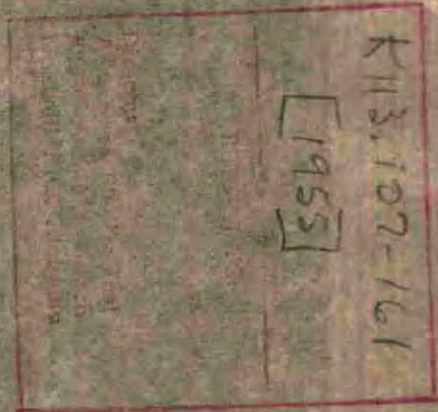




1. TITLE
2. TORCH
3. TUNISIAN Campaign
4. GERMAN AIR FORCE - Mediterranean Campaign
5. POLITICAL - Military Relationships
6. AIRFIELDS - CONSTRUCTION - Mediterranean Theater
7. Supply and Maintenance - Mediterranean Theater
8. Airfields - AFRICA
9. WEATHER - AFRICA
10. GERMAN AIR FORCE - SUPPLY AND MAINTENANCE
11. GERMAN AIR FORCE - STATISTICS
12. GERMAN AIRCRAFT
13. ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENSES GERMAN
14. AIR GROUND SUPPORT, GERMAN
15. COMMUNICATIONS, GERMAN
16. SATIN
17. AIR FORCE ORGANIZATION - COMMAND
18. CASABLANCA CONFERENCE
19. German Armed Forces

- 1 -



P.R.C.

THE GERMAN AIR FORCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

TREATER OF WAR by

Lt.Gen. (General G. Flioger) (Retired)

Hellmuth Felmy

8-11115-11



- 2 -

Introduction

The Cultural and Political Significance of
the Mediterranean and Its Border States

Chapter One

The Political Power Relationships in the
Mediterranean Basin before the Beginning
of World War II

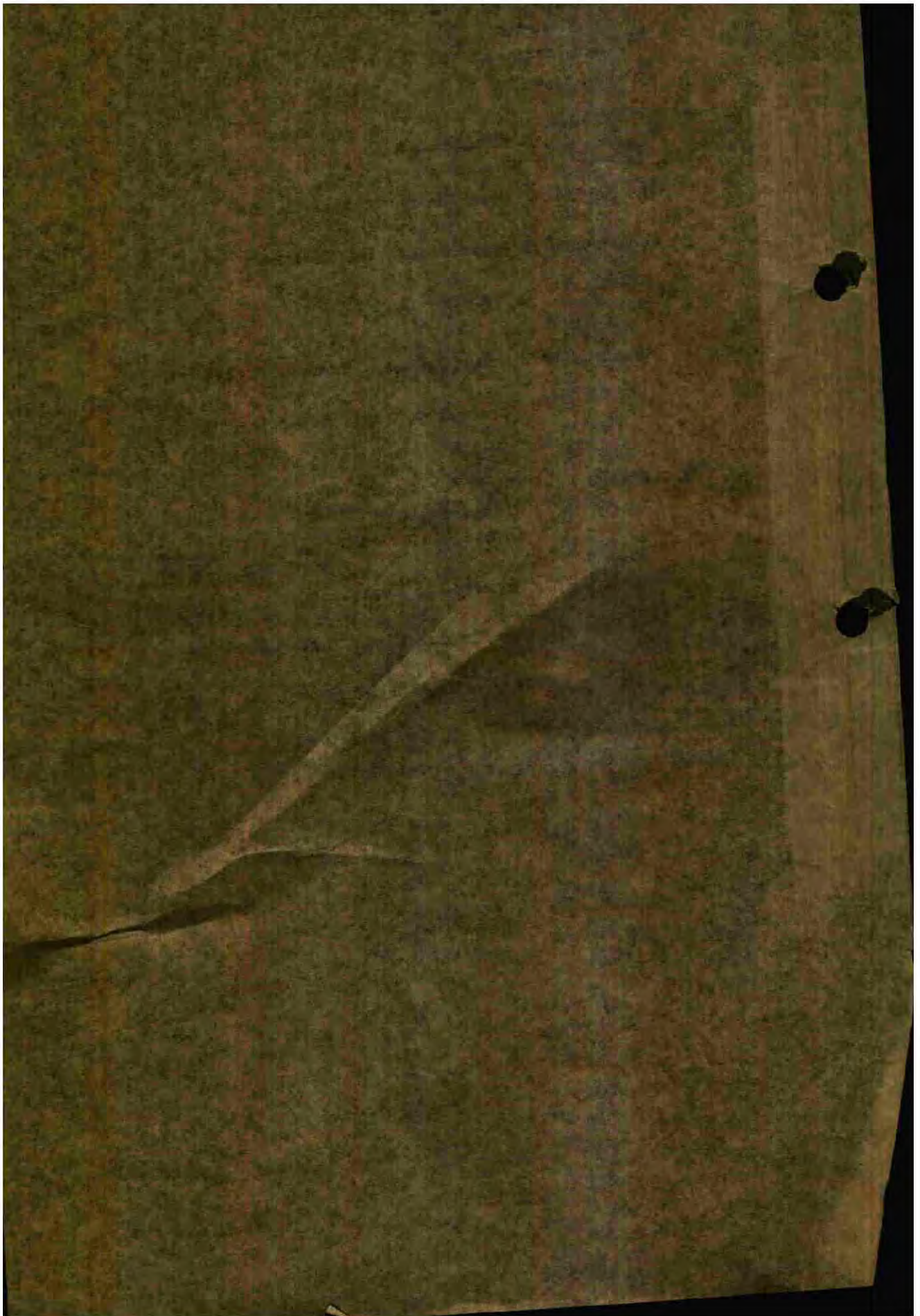
Section One: Great Britain, France, Italy,
Greece, Turkey, and Spain

Section Two: The March toward Rome. The
Abyssinian Crisis.

Germany and Italy.

The Spanish Civil War.

The Occupation of Abyssinia.



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INTRODUCTION

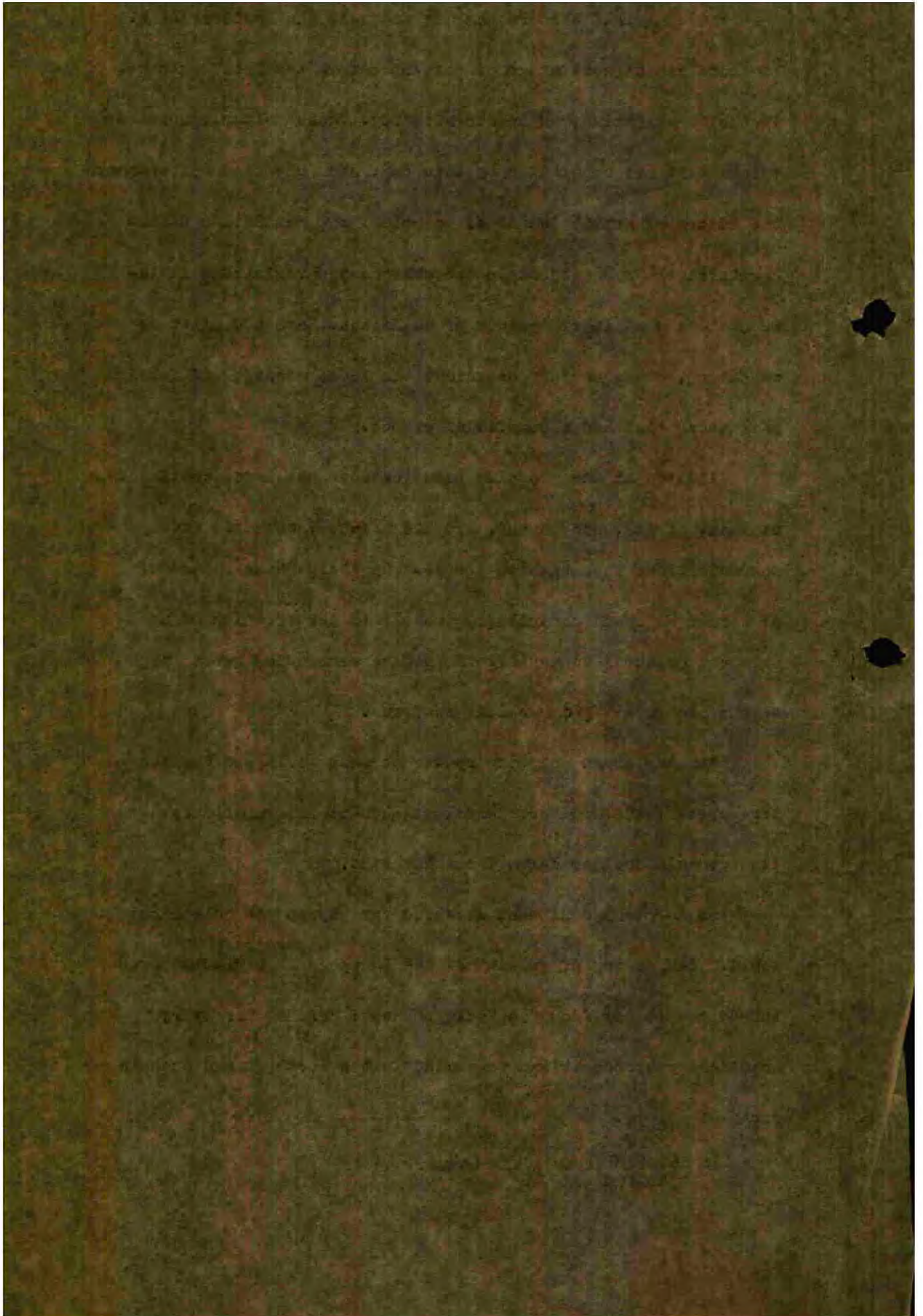
The classical culture has its roots in the Mediterranean. It found its highest stage of development in the Greek culture, in the Roman Empire, and in Christianity. These cultures created values that are recognized to this day, and made the Mediterranean of the center of attraction ~~is~~ all peoples. The domination of the Mediterranean was subject to the changes and variations in the economic and military systems of coalition. Wars and military campaigns, commerce and communications added strange and foreign influences that had a beneficial effect.

Situated at the crossing point between the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, art and science, commerce and communications reached high levels. The "holy Roman Empire of German Nations" contributed greatly to the creation of a European cultural community. The Mediterranean had grown far beyond its purely geographical confines.

When the ocean shipping routes to East India and America were opened, the Mediterranean lost much of its importance. Its economic decline dates from that time.

The European continent extended far beyond the "classical world." The center of gravity of ~~the~~ European ^{progress} ~~movement~~ moved away ~~from~~ completely from the Mediterranean; ~~therefore~~ for every practical purpose it was relocated in the northern and oceanic parts of Europe.

The industrial ^{era} ~~age~~ had begun.



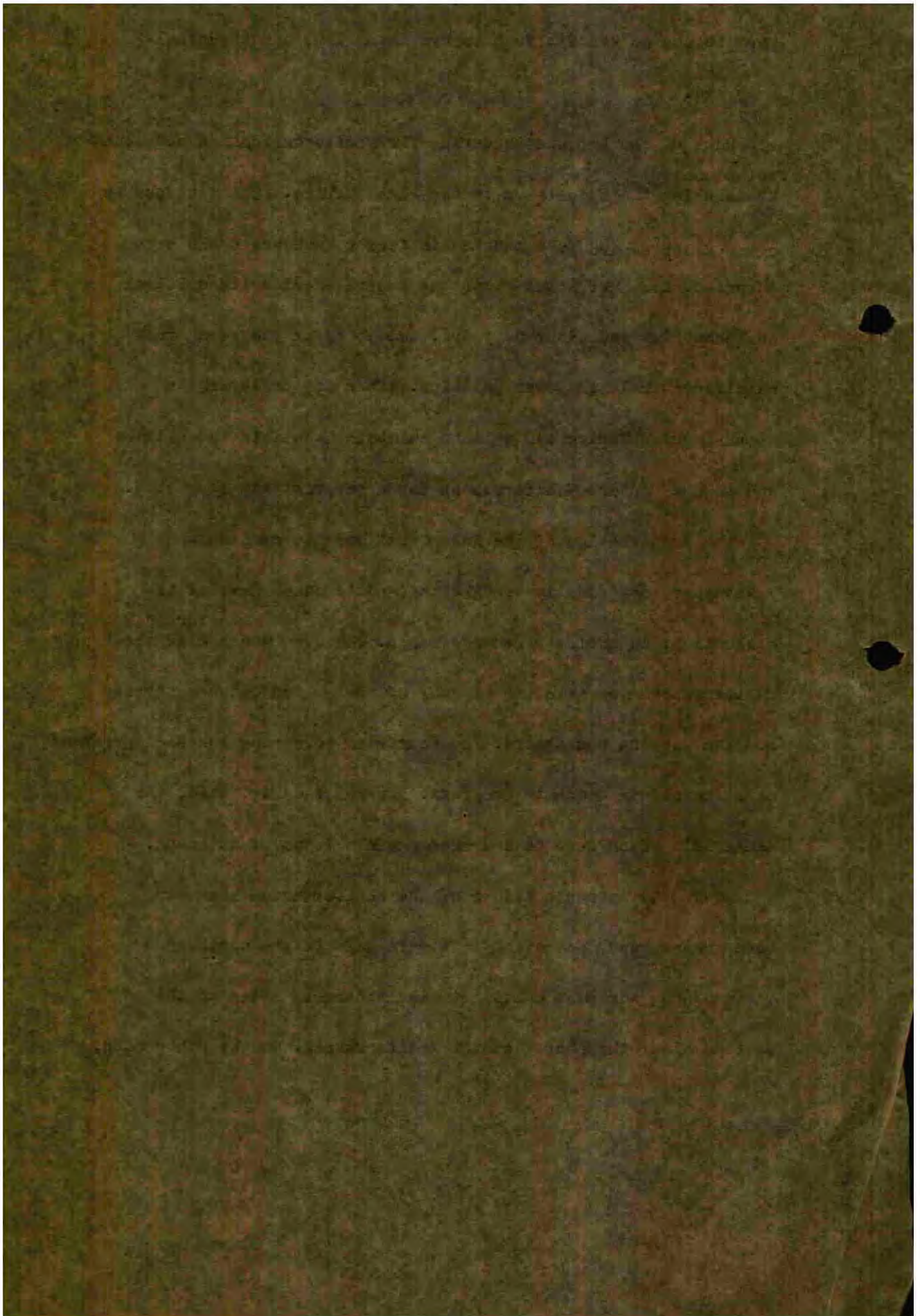
- 4 -

The countries bordering the Mediterranean lacked almost completely the two most important natural resources required for industrial development: coal and iron. For this reason they had at first no part in and no benefit from modern inventions and technical progress.

None of the nations bordering the Mediterranean had ~~been able~~ to assume ~~the succession~~ the succession to the Roman Empire. Arab attempts to extends the empire even beyond its former boundaries had been thwarted. The East Roman-Byzantine Empire exerted its cultural influence for one thousand years, but it never played a truly significant role in power politics. After its collapse, the Osman-Turkish Empire was able to maintain itself in the Balkans and in the Eastern Mediterranean for a surprisingly long time.

The construction of the Suez Canal and its opening on 7 November 1869 finally brought the Mediterranean out of its stagnation. An entirely new era began. The Suez Canal ~~turned~~ the Mediterranean Sea into the highway of navigation between Europe and the Eastern hemisphere. The countries bordering the Mediterranean made tremendous economic progress. But politically, also, the old cradle of culture became once again a focus of interest.

Once the narrow confines of the Mediterranean area had been transcended, decisions that were made in the northern parts of the European continent simultaneously affected the nations along the shores of the Mediterranean. On the other hand,



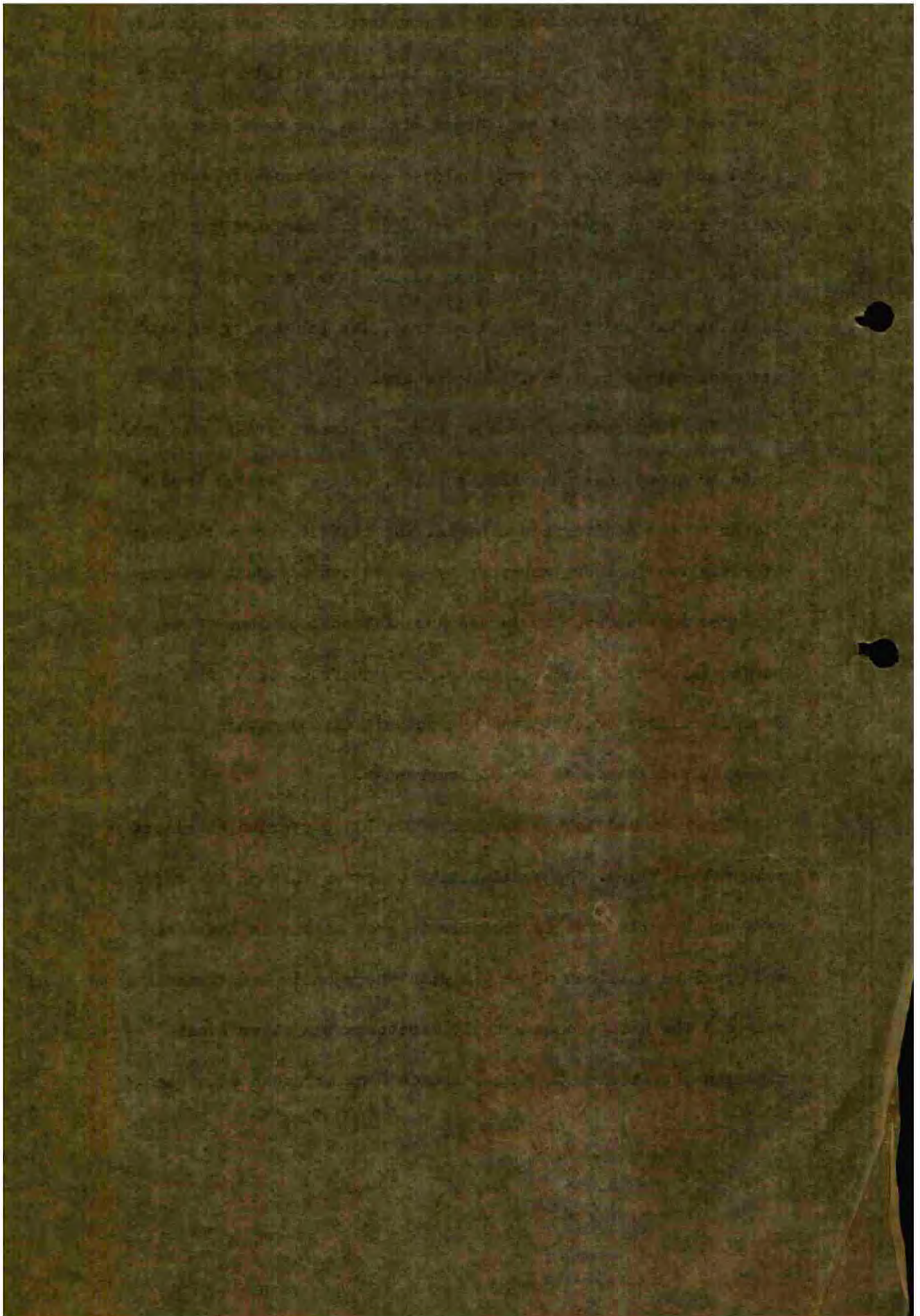
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the problems of the Mediterranean basin began to affect the policies of the entire European continent progressively.

The Mediterranean area's importance in the economic and strategic spheres led to frequent conflicts of interest among the great European nations. Great Britain, the most powerful naval and commercial power, employed the "balance-of-power" policy that had proved so successful in the northern parts of Europe also in the Mediterranean basin. Thus, a status of equilibrium was maintained in that area, the continuity of which was ascertained by force, if necessary.

The construction of major tunnels, thus enabling the railroads to cross under the Alpine peaks, brought Central Europe closer to the Mediterranean basin. The traffic across the body of water was further increased by the export of wheat and oil produced in southern Russia and Romania; most of these goods passed through the Mediterranean. The construction of the Baghdad railway brought even Mesopotamia (Iraq) within reasonable distance of the Mediterranean.

In Egypt and in the Sudan the British performed excellent cultural services. The availability of water through the major dams on the Nile made it possible to grow cotton in that area and provided millions of people with their daily bread. Then only did the Nile become a truly Mediterranean river whose riparian territories thus also became Mediterranean countries.



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The economic expansion of the world powers after the beginning of the 20th century eventually led to power groupings and coalitions of common interests which caused the outbreak of World War I. The Mediterranean area, also, suffered in the course of that war.

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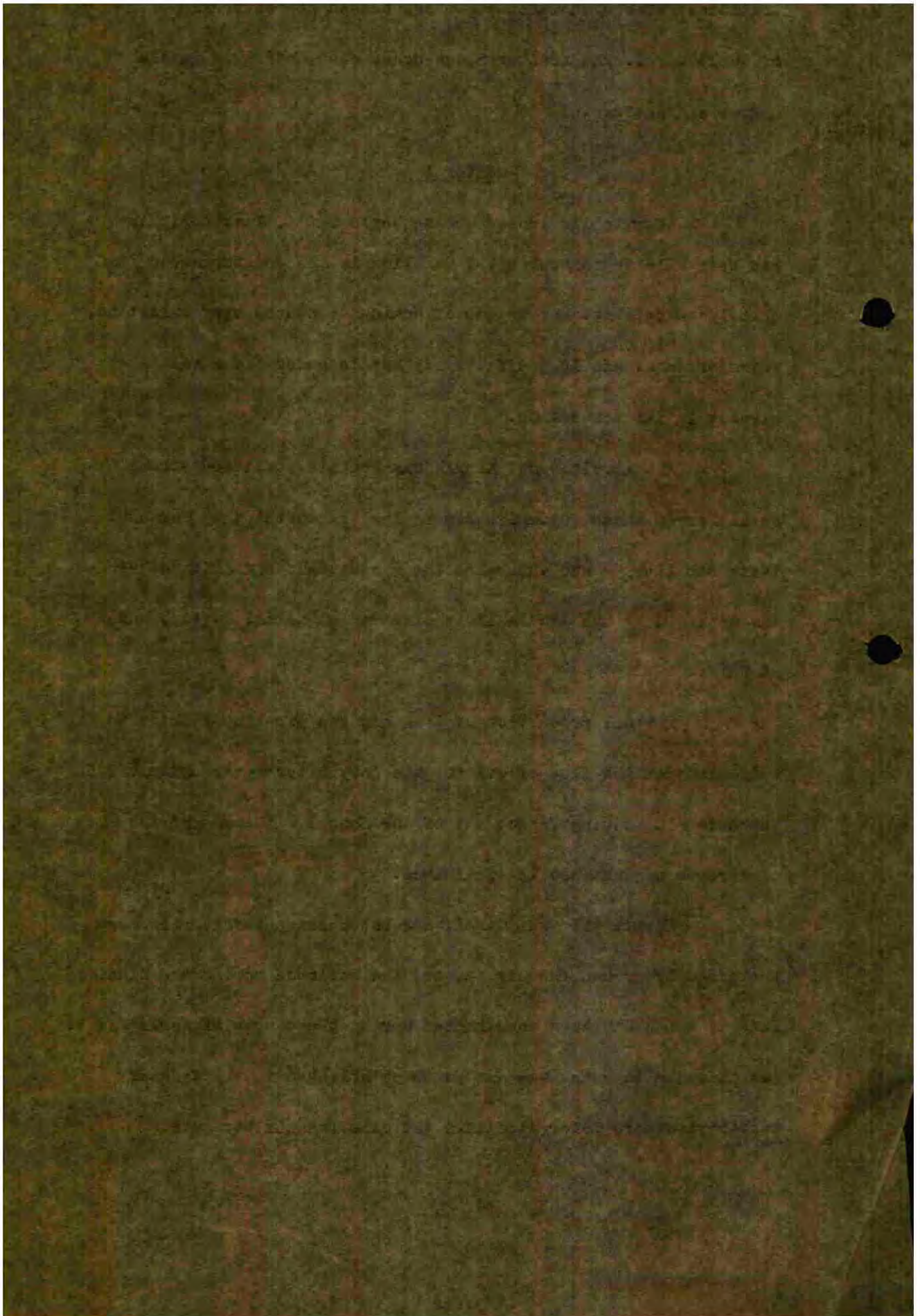
Chapter I

Despite its losses during World War I, Great Britain had been able to reinforce its position in the Mediterranean quite considerably. The League of Nations mandates over Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq effectively supplemented the naval bases already in its possession.

In Gibraltar and Alexandria Britain stationed strong naval forces whose dominance was no longer contested by Germany. Their mobility -- and thus also their strategic significance -- was enhanced by the availability of ports on Malta, Cyprus, and at Haifa.

The oil production of Iraq and the pipeline leading to Haifa assured the flow of oil for the Navy after Great Britain had succeeded in keeping France out of the Mosul oil lands at the conference of San Remo in April 1920.

Egypt, the Suez Canal, and the mandate territories were protected by ground and air forces; the railroad across the Sinai Desert, which had been constructed during the course of World War I, was extended to Gaza. New air bases established in the mandatory territories were integrated into the existing air base system.



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linking Gibraltar and the Mediterranean islands with Egypt. The air communications across the African continent led to East and South Africa via the Sudan. The newly established British-Arab bastion between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea protected simultaneously also the access to India. After its acquisitions of territories along the Mediterranean, Great Britain had become vulnerable also to ground attacks, which previously had not been the case to the same extent.

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The revolts in Iraq and particularly in Palestine created the first dangers, which also carried over to the Arab nationalists in Egypt. Great Britain had promised the Arabs the establishment of an independent kingdom and had not kept its promise. (Letter of McMahon to the Sherif Hussein of Mecca in October 1915). Moreover, Britain had opened a national home in Palestine for the Jews; these settled there and competed with the native Arab population, thus creating additional areas of conflict. (Balfour declaration of November 1917.) These measures contributed greatly to Great Britain's loss of prestige in the eyes of the Mohammedans.

But British policy was obvious to anybody: the Mediterranean belonged to its innermost sphere of interest, and Britain was intent on safeguarding its predominance in this area.

After World War I France had acquired full possession of Morocco. The formation of its North African Empire -- La France d'outre mer -- which extended from Tunisia to the Atlantic was



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thus completed. The Railroad from Tunisia to Algeria was extended via Fez to Casablanca.

The "Force Noir" (Black or Colored Force), which France maintained in its colonial territories, represented a formidable combat strength. It could be used as a political ^{pawn} KKKI at a given moment.

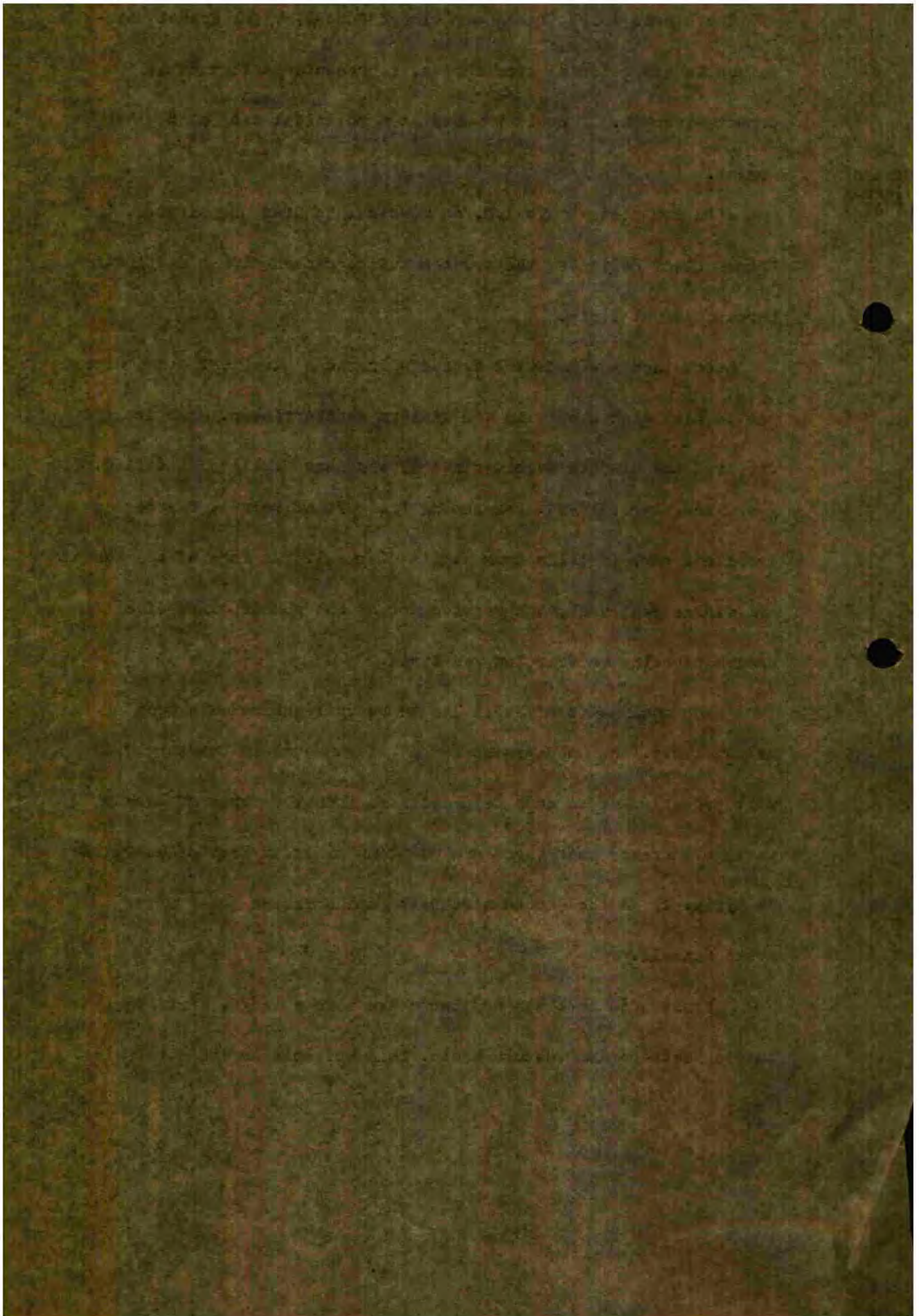
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With its ports at Toulon, on Corsica, in Oran and Bizerta, the French fleet dominates the western Mediterranean with a distinctive threat against Italy.

Ever since the medieval crusades France's strongest compulsion was to play also a role in the eastern Mediterranean. When it received the mandate over Syria this wish was finally fulfilled. (San Remo, April 1920). Possessing the port of Beirut, France has excellent port installations at its disposal. The loss of the Mossul oil fields was partly compensated for by the construction of a branch pipeline to Tripolis and Syria.

The occupation of Syria led to heavy fighting with Arab nationalists. The twoday bombardment of Damascus in October 1925 will probably not so soon be eradicated from the "book of bloody revenge." France must therefore maintain a strong army of occupation in Syria. It is the second strongest Mediterranean power after Great Britain.

Italy juts into the Mediterranean like a wedge, dividing it into an eastern and western basin. This reflects on its strategic



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balance. As a result, the Italian Navy is based on the Gulf of Taranto, permitting its employment on either side of the Mediterranean Sea.

From the south the Straits of Messina leads to the Italian peninsula; it is secured by fortifications along the southeast coast of Sicily. The small islands of Pantelleria and Lampedusa form advance posts against any threat from the direction of Tunisia. Sicily and Sardinia give flank protection to the access to the Tyrrhenian Sea. The northern flank between Corsica and the Italian mainland is unprotected.

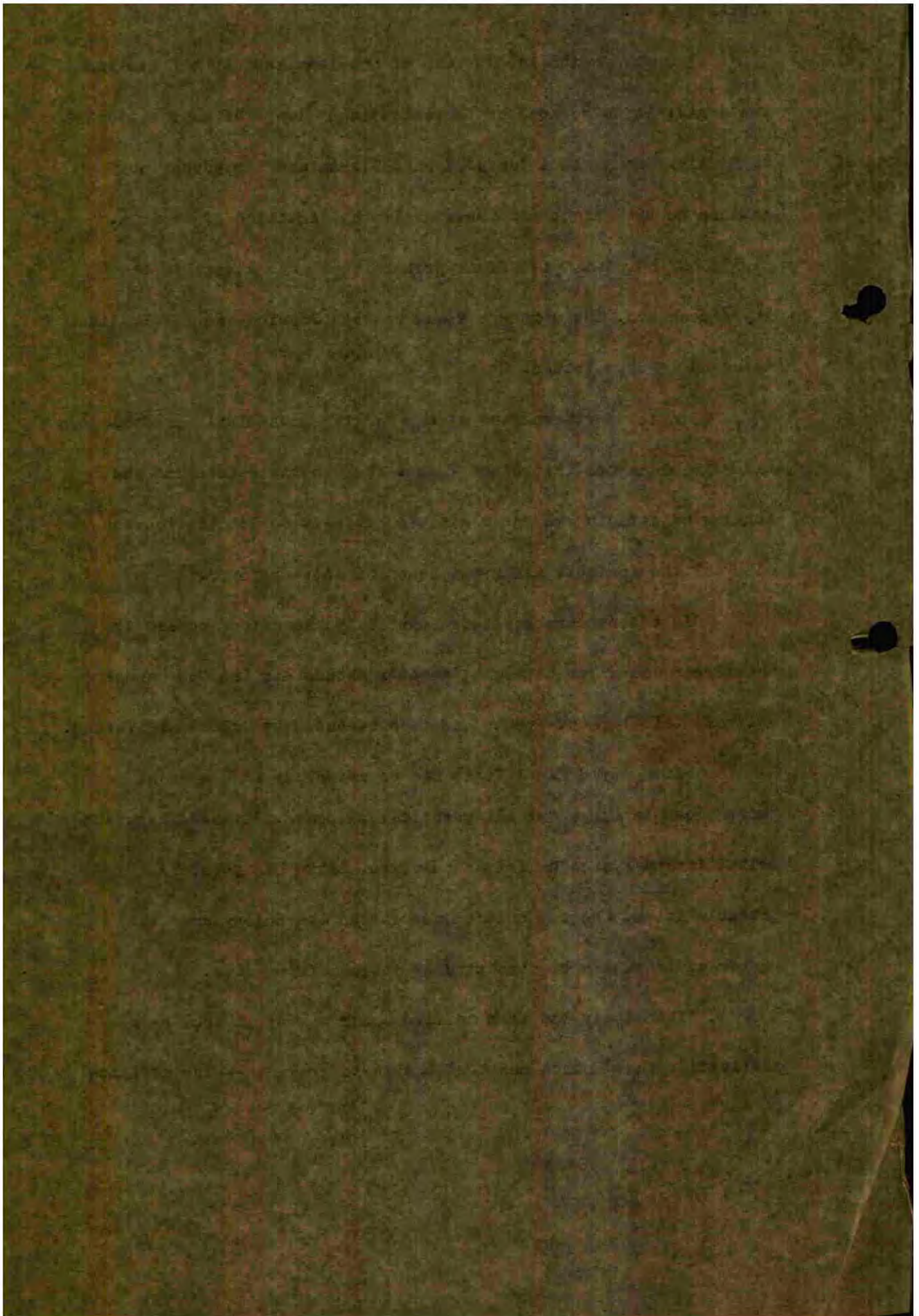
In the northern part of the Mediterranean Italy predominates since it possesses Trieste and Fiume. The central sector and the Straits of Otranto are not dominated by Italy so long as the east coast of the Adriatic is in the hands of another power.

In the eastern Mediterranean Italy had gained access to the Aegean Sea after having taken over Rhodes and the Dodecanese Islands; this turn of events had been resented by Greece and Turkey.

After World War I Italy had to reconquer its colonial possessions in Libya for all practical purposes. Situated between Britain's and France's African colonies, Libya had strategic potentialities. The communications between the colony and Italy proper could easily be disrupted by attacks from Malta.

After Italy had been unified under a king in 1861 -- a unification that France had been unable to prevent -- the affinity

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to the "Latin sister" changed with the political situation of the moment. Both France and Italy were situated along the shores of the western Mediterranean. The Roman Empire had formerly colonized Gaul, but since then the former Roman colony had risen to great power.

Exhausted by World War I and internally divided by political strife, Italy ranked third behind Britain and France as a Mediterranean power.

Greece had achieved its independence only in the 19th century after it had rid itself of Turkish domination in 1829. It gave up its neutral status during World War I. Venizelos was able to make his country join the Allies against the opposition of the royal family.

Greece, with its irregular coastline and Aegean Islands and Crete blocks the entrance to the eastern Mediterranean. In the west the Ionian Islands block the Straits of Otranto. If opposed by the more powerful Italy, Greece alone is impotent in the Dodecanese Islands and along the Adriatic Sea.

To maintain the balance of power, Great Britain therefore protects Greece. Supported by the British, Greece directed its expansionist drives against weakened Turkey, pursuing objectives based on outdated ideologies. Greek forces advanced via Smyrna into the interior of Anatolia and suffered a disastrous defeat near Sakischehir on 26 August 1923. Smyrna was retaken by the Turks

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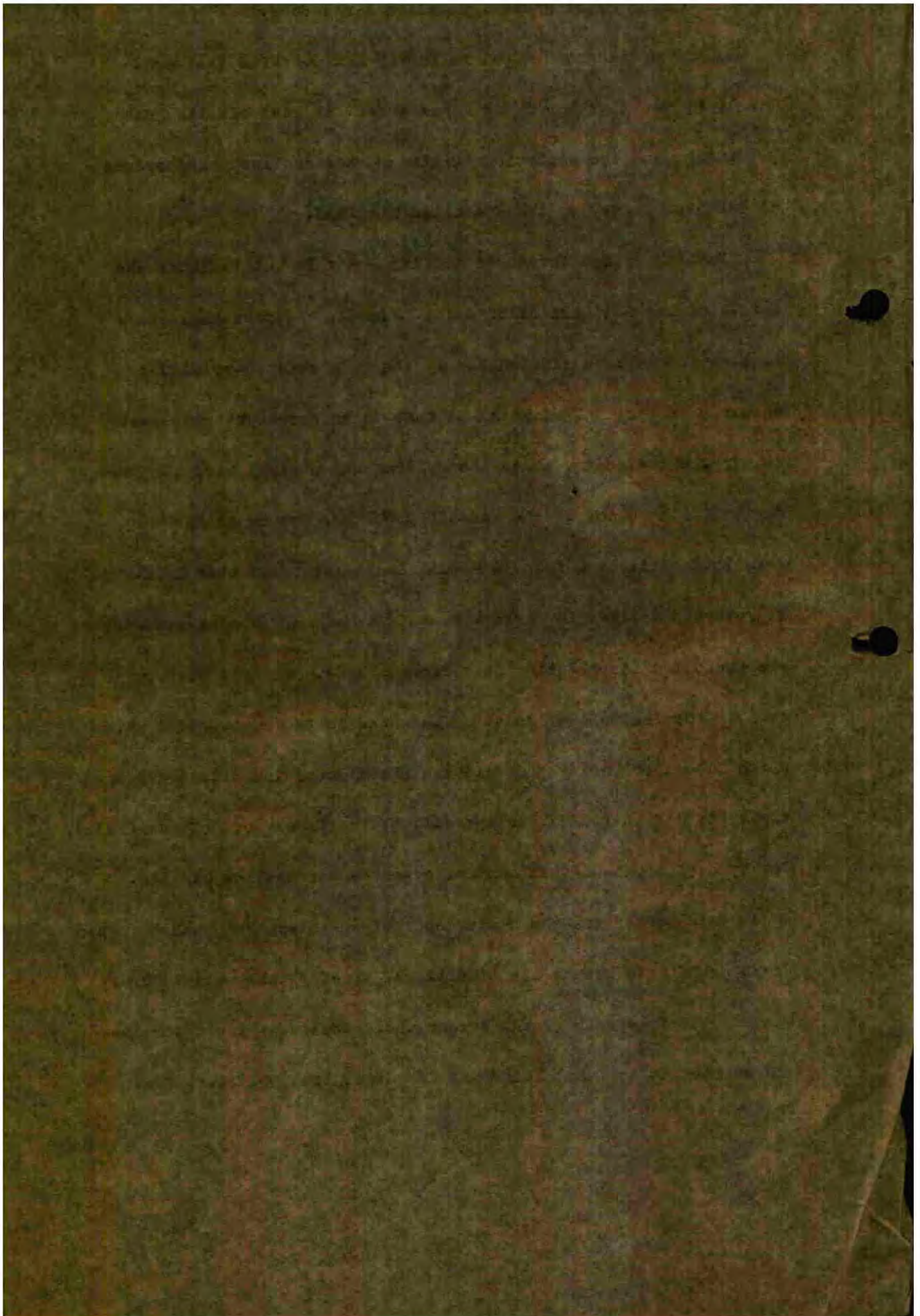
Erzincan on 26 August 1922. Smyrna was retaken by the Turks

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some two months later. The dream of a greater Greece had been dreamed in vain. The impoverished country is no longer capable of maintaining major ground, naval or air forces.

Of all Mediterranean powers Turkey had suffered the worst losses by the time World War I had ended. It lost all its Arab provinces, and the victorious Allied powers confined the borders of defeated Turkey to the Anatolian highland.

But Turkey was fortunate to ^{have} ~~FINZ~~ General Mustafa Kemal who initiated its national reformation. Russia, the perennial enemy of Turkey, had been sidetracked by the Bolshevist Revolution; as early as spring 1921 Kemal EM came to an agreement with that country. The disdain, which the British had shown toward the French during the solution of the mandate problems, France answered by retaliating with the Franklin-Bouillon Pact of October 1921. It returned Cilicia to Turkey. Mustafa Kemal had thus created the prerequisites for refuting the Greek demands. Turkey's victory over Greece led to the Treaty of Lausanne in the summer of 1924, which liberated Turkey from all the shackles of the dictated peace treaty of Sevres (1920). As a result of the Treaty of Montreux (1936), Turkey even obtained full control over the Dardanelles Straits. Once again Turkey was the "gatekeeper of the Black Sea" which forced Great Britain to resume its traditional pro-Turkish policy. Turkey has relatively strong ground forces and, because of the determined course steered by Kemal Pasha and his consistent policies, that



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country has become an important power in the Mediterranean.

Since the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, Spain plays only an insignificant role in the Mediterranean. After having lost its rich overseas possessions in central and south America, Spain was impoverished and had become impotent.

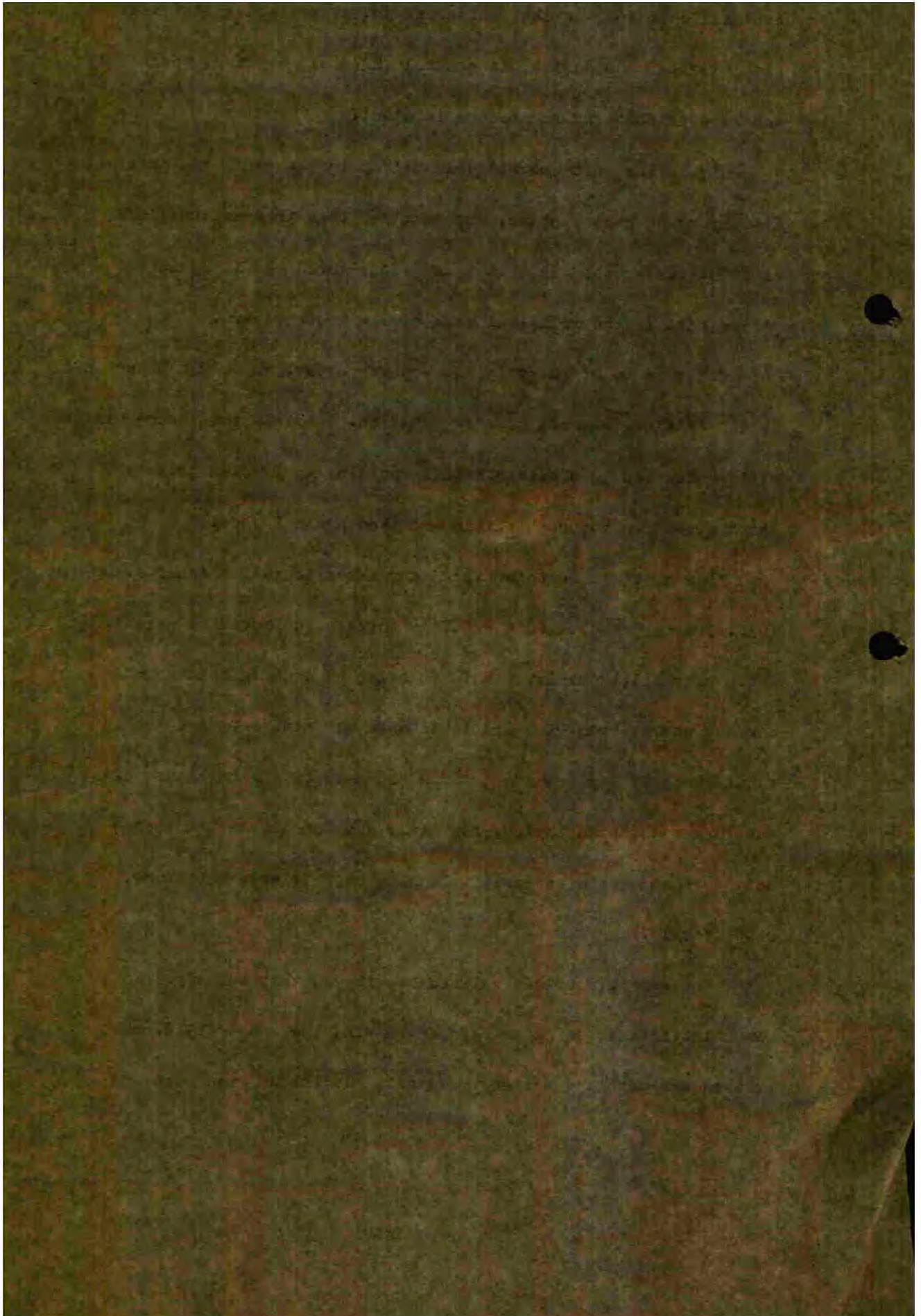
Only in the Moroccan Rif area did Spain possess a protectorate; its important port Tangier, however, had been internationalized in 1904. During the first 10 years after World War I, Spain was only a pawn in the political game of the major powers.

The balance of power in the Mediterranean, which was supervised by the British, was not of long duration. In Italy the inner-political differences led to ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ vacillating foreign policies, which sometimes favored Britain and then again France.

At sea, Great Britain barred any expansionist tendencies. On land, France had created the Little Entente, composed of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, in order to counteract Germany and Austria. The Little Entente was also supposed to bar simultaneously any demands Italy might make on the territory of the former Austrian Empire, for Italy and Yugoslavia had become neighbors along the Adriatic by taking over Trieste and Fiume, respectively.

The economic crisis weighed heavily on that country. The Communist influences gained ground. During the summer 1922, when strikes and sabotage became prevalent, conditions grew more and

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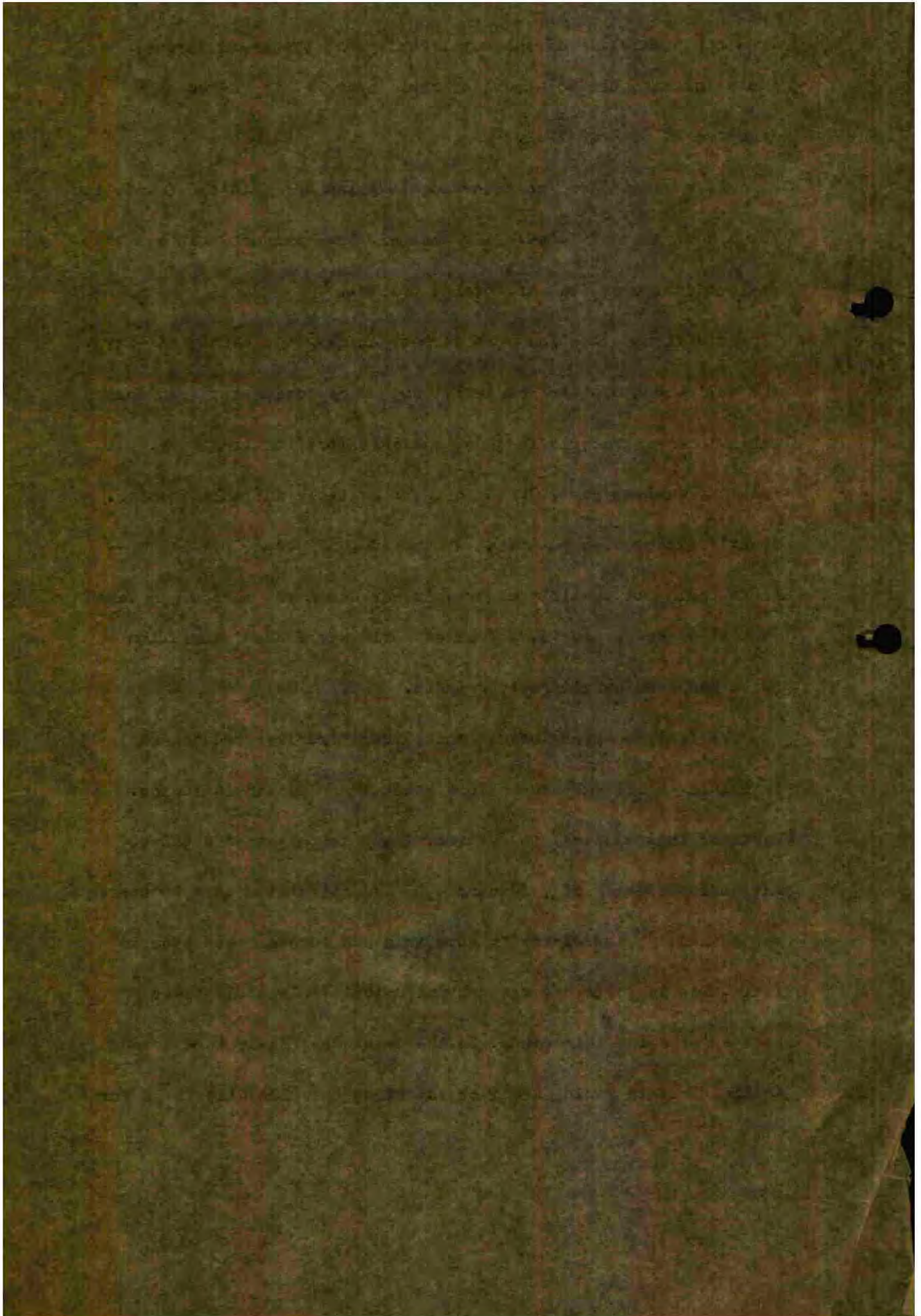
more intolerable. Applauded by the active elements of the Italian people, who were anxious to live in peace and order, and benefiting from the neutrality of the royal family and the armed forces, Mussolini was able to assume supreme power by his "march on Rome" on 28 October 1922.

He consolidated the domestic situation and laid the foundation for a modern armed force. To Mussolini, the Mediterranean was the real objective of Italian foreign policy.

His first attention went to reorganizing the colony of Libya. The well-known minister of aerial communications Balbo transformed Libya into a strategic fortress and colonized its territory. But only the eastern part, Cyrenaica, was suitable for colonization. Italy's excess of population -- some 400,000 people per annum -- Libya could not possibly absorb. In earlier days America had taken in most of these people, but after World War I the immigration quota had been considerably reduced.

The Italian expansionist policy ^{was} therefore directed toward Abyssinia, which had once before been under Italian influence. North of that country, in Erytrea, Italy had a jump-off point. The Roman Treaties of 7 January 1935 had stipulated that France was abandoning its claims on Abyssinia and turning them over to Italy. But in Paris one was convinced that Italy would never take up arms for this cause. In the event that Italy took armed action, Britain would surely object since the Blue Nile flows across

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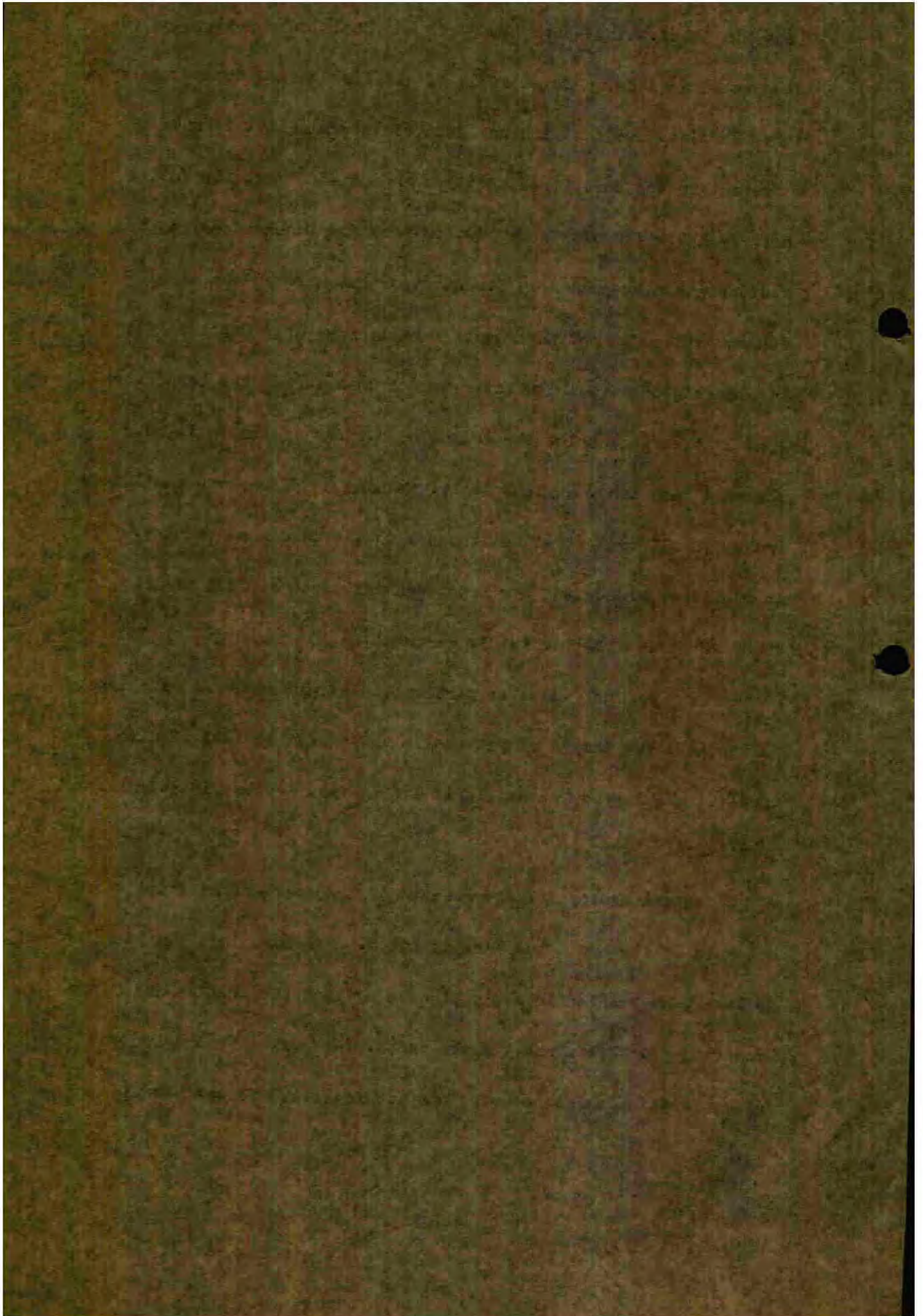


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Tana Lake in the western part of Abyssinia. The Ual-Ual incident in December 1934 gave Mussolini the desired opportunity to carry out his plans. Since both Abyssinia and Italy were members of the League of Nations, this assembly was first asked to arbitrate the conflict. The decision was delayed interminably. To show its interest in the case, Great Britain assembled almost its entire navy -- 144 ships with some 800,000 tons displacement -- in the Mediterranean by autumn 1935. But even this tremendous naval demonstration did not intimidate Mussolini -- on 3 October 1935 he crossed the Abyssinian river Magreb that formed the border. Upon British proposals, the League of Nations thereupon imposed economic sanctions against Italy. As many as 52 nations completely broke off all commercial relations with the condemned country. In addition, France put its Mediterranean ports and its entire armed force at Great Britain's disposal.

Germany had no reason to participate in the economic sanctions. It had left the League of Nations in the autumn of 1933. Italy received all the raw materials it lacked from Germany in sufficient quantities.

Mussolini employed large amounts of manpower and materiel not only in Abyssinia but also in Libya. Once Abyssinia had been defeated, he planned to apply pincers against the British and Egypt by moving from Libya and via the Sudan. This was a seemingly fantastic plan, which nevertheless was feasible and which would



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have put the entire burden of the land battle upon Great Britain. Against all prognostications, Abyssinia was defeated within a very short time by the Italians who used the most modern weapons of the day in conducting their offensive. On 5 May 1936 General Badoglio entered Addisabbeba.

But a very significant political event had taken place on the European continent even before the end of the Abyssinian War. The close interrelationship between Europe and the affairs of the Mediterranean became only too obvious at that time. On 7 March 1936 Germany invalidated the Locarno Treaty of 1925-26 and marched its troops into the so-called demilitarized zone of the Reich territory, the status of which resulted from the Versailles Treaty. France felt particularly threatened; its European interests prevailed over Mediterranean considerations, so that it turned away from the Mediterranean. Great Britain lost its partners and had to rely on itself. The sanctions, which the League of Nations was supposed to apply against Germany upon France's demands, were opposed by Great Britain. Its interests in the Mediterranean, not those on the European continent, had been affected. But the British were not sufficiently strong for an attack on the Italians in Abyssinia and Libya. The League of Nations action failed.

But Mussolini was intelligent enough not to exaggerate after his victory in Abyssinia. He made concessions to the Western Powers. As a result, the tension relaxed. The Abyssinian War had

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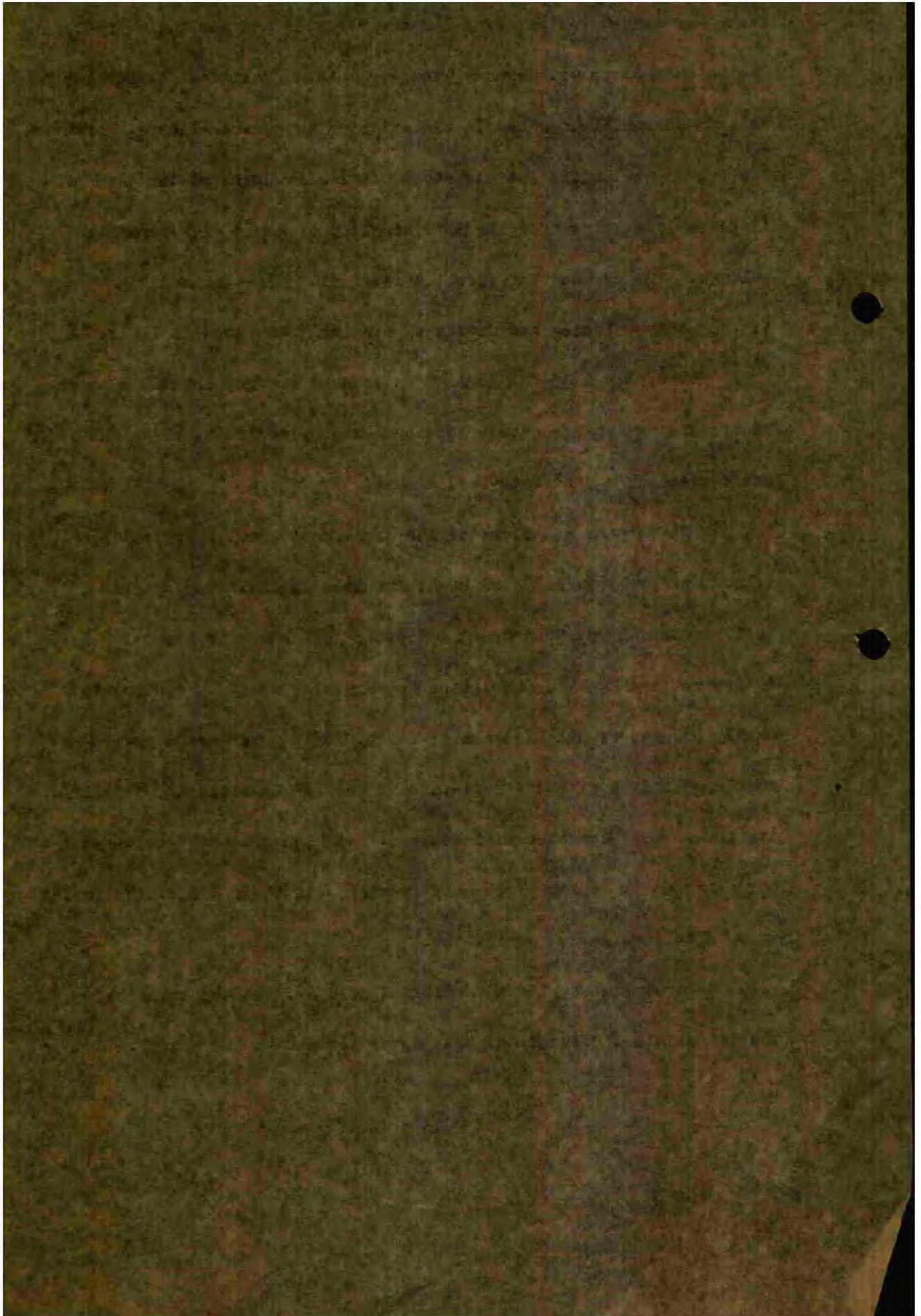
demonstrated two facts very clearly to Mussolini: to join the Western Powers in Mediterranean conquests seemed hopeless because Italy had become too powerful for their liking and was thus threatening the balance of power. Germany, however, had no political objectives in the Mediterranean since it was situated in central Europe. Moreover, the two countries did not compete economically. Both nations had profited for centuries from the intermingling of Roman with Germanic culture. Germany was therefore the ideal ally since in addition its domestic policies had developed similarly to those in Italy.

In October 1937 the Berlin conferences brought about the basic understanding and agreements between Germany and Italy, which Mussolini has designated as the Rome-Berlin Axis.

A few months later, after the excitement about Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia had died down, the Spanish Civil War started in the summer 1936. This brought about a new crisis in Europe.

France refused Italy's suggestion to maintain "absolute neutrality" mainly because of its distrust of Italy. Its popular front government sympathized with the "anti-fascist revolt" in Spain and supplied its ideological comrades with weapons. The "Red Brigades" received communist party members from many countries in their ranks. The Soviet Union also gave active assistance.

General Franco, the old colonial soldier, was supported by the conservative elements of the population and by the church. He



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moved up his "mauros" from the Spanish protectorate in the Rif area to give him support. Both Mussolini and Hitler, as absolute opponents of communism, sent volunteers and equipment, namely the "Black Shirt" units and the "Legion Condor." With their support General Franco was able to suppress the revolt in the spring 1939 after long and bloody fighting.

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Great Britain's efforts to prevent an expansion of the Spanish conflict were successful (Nonintervention Commission, London, 1936). In summer 1937 Great Britain concluded a "gentleman's agreement" with Mussolini, according to which the status quo was to be maintained in the Mediterranean. The danger of a general war had been avoided.

The bottling-up process that France applied to Italy in the Adriatic with the assistance of the Little Entente, led to tension between Italy and Yugoslavia in the Triest area, where a number of incidents occurred. The conflicts within the "United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes" with its mixture of various peoples also carried over into the adjacent Albania, a state that had retained its identity from the time of the Balkan Wars.

It was of decisive significance for Italy that no unfriendly power dominate Albania; since that country controlled the exit from the Adriatic to the Ionian Sea. After Great Britain had given its approval, Mussolini concluded the Tirana Treaties in 1926 and 1927 with the later King Ahmed Zogu of Albania who received some money



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as a reward. Albania's territorial integrity was guaranteed by Italy, which also promised every possible assistance. Soon Albania became economically and militarily dependent upon Italy. During the following years Albania remained a hotbed of revolt, where the divergent interests of Italy and Yugoslavia -- and thus also those of France -- conflicted.

After Abyssinia had been integrated into the Italian Empire and Germany had regained its independence on the European continent, the two countries became closely related. As a logical consequence Great Britain and France became partners in the Mediterranean and on the European continent.

Hitler's invasion of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939 drove the European crisis situation to another high point. Mussolini took advantage of this diversion and occupied shortly afterward the country of Albania.

Once again the course of events had shown the close links between European policies and the interests of the countries bordering the Mediterranean.



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Chapter Two

Italy's Offensive along the French Alpine Front

The Diversionary Operation against Greece



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Chapter 2. The War Spreads to the Mediterranean

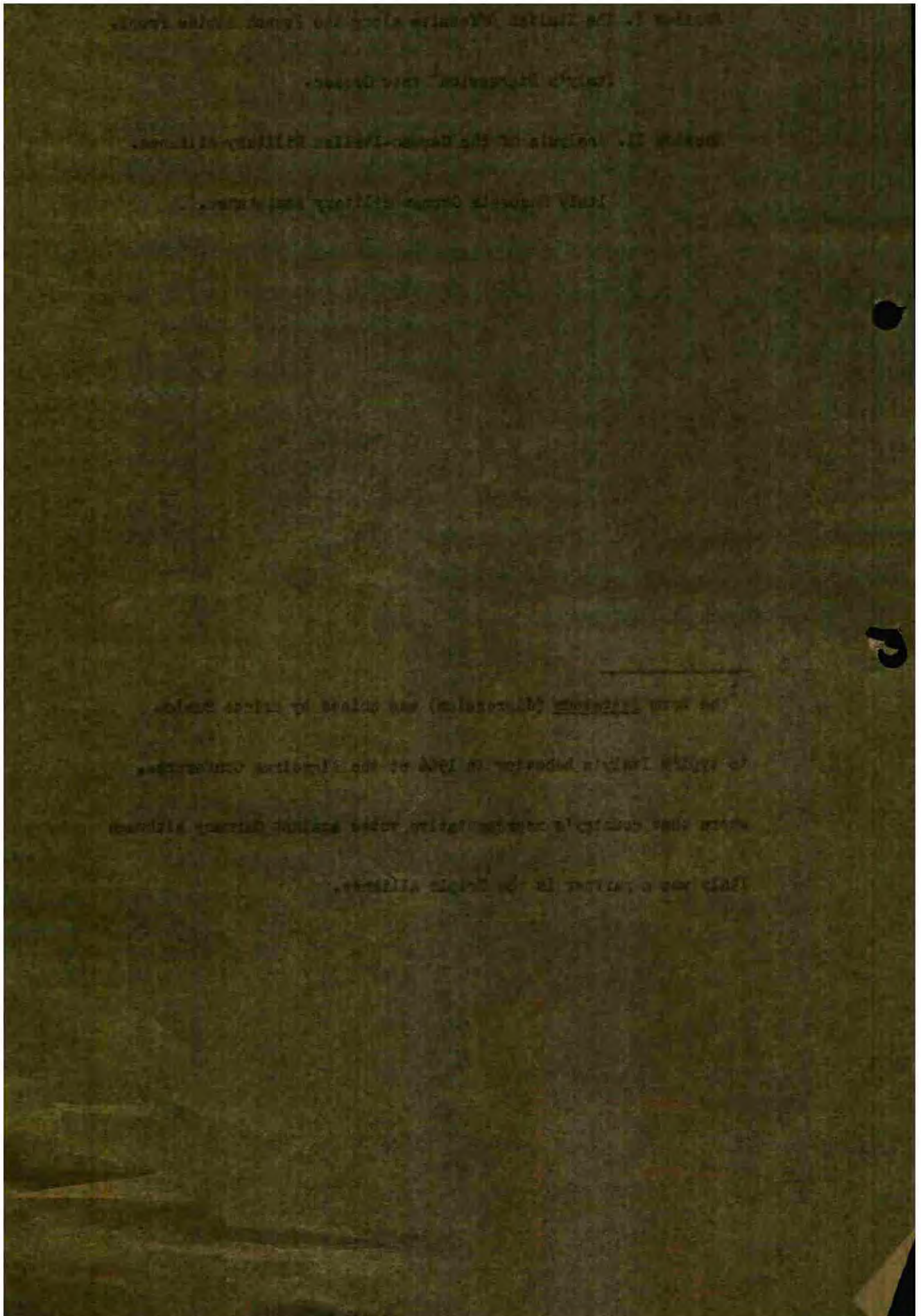
Section I. The Italian Offensive along the French Alpine Front.

Italy's Digression¹ into Greece.

Section II. Analysis of the German-Italian Military Alliance.

Italy Requests German Military Assistance.

¹ The term Extratour (digression) was coined by Prince Buelow to typify Italy's behavior in 1906 at the Algeiras Conference, where that country's representative voted against Germany although Italy was a partner in the Triple Alliance.



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Section I: The Italian Offensive along the French Alpine Front.Italy's Digression into Greece

The so-called Pact of Steel -- a military alliance between Germany and Italy -- was concluded on 22 May 1939. This pact, however, did not make any provision for the case of war.

Mussolini's intervention failed to prevent the outbreak of the German-Polish conflict. The surprising sequence of victories won by German arms in Poland, Norway, and France subsequently worried Mussolini who had misgivings as to Italy's future role in the New Europe.

Up to that time Italy had stood aside, but Mussolini did not want to lose out at the time the fruits of victory would be shared. He expressed his ideas on this subject as follows: "I need a few thousand dead to justify my presence at the peace table."²

This attitude explains Italy's entry into the war, for which the German military were totally unprepared.

Actually, Mussolini had no strategic objective in the Mediterranean theater, the Mare Nostrum, that was of such vital importance to Italy. He simply wanted to take advantage of the collapse of France to achieve a cheap victory.

² Raymond de Balot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, p. 50



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Badoglio characterized Mussolini's attitude as follows:

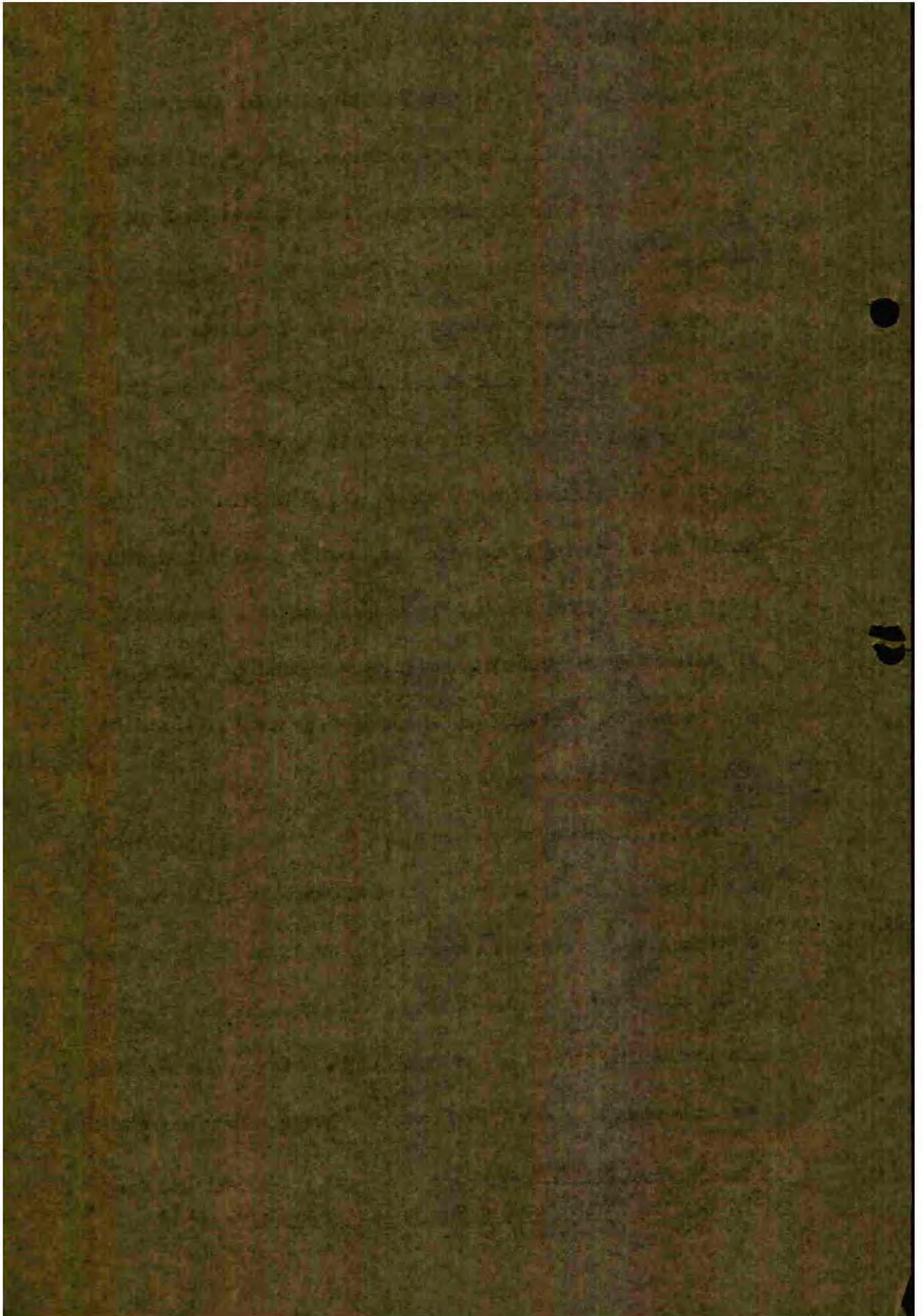
"He was possessed by the fear (or notion) that he might be left out when the victors distribute the booty."³

From a military point of view the Italian attack along the French Alpine front was completely senseless. Moreover, the attack bogged down after minor initial successes. On the other hand, victory was within Italy's reach in Egypt.

Since Balbo's death on 10 June 1940, Marshal Graziani had become the commander in chief in Libya. The Italian Tenth Army was slow in getting started. It was not until 16 September 1940 that General Bert's eight divisions reached Sidi el Barrani. The British carried out a delaying action which was based on Marga Matruh. After having reached Sidi el Barrani, the Italians stopped their advance and switched to the defensive. Meanwhile, they built up their lines of communication. Graziani's urgent requests for tanks and motorized reinforcements went unheeded.

Instead, Mussolini launched an attack on Greece on 28 October 1940, much to the surprise of his German ally. In Greece, Mussolini hoped to attain a quick victory that would permit him to expand his influence in the Balkans and later also in the Aegean. Because of the unexpectedly strong resistance offered by the Greeks in the Epirus Mountains, whose average elevation is about 6,600 feet, the Italian offensive ground to a halt as early as 6 November 1940.

³P. Badoglio, Italy and World War II. Memoirs and Documents (Munich and Leipzig, 1947), p. 31.



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This digression was not based on rational thinking. Instead of concentrating all the forces on an attack against Egypt in order to ascertain victory at a decisive point, Italy opened a new theater of war.

In this connection Ciano noted in his diary: "the Duce was furious that German troops alone were occupying the Romanian oilfields."⁴ Actually, Mussolini had not been notified in time that a German military mission had been dispatched to Romania on 30 October 1940. Now, he in turn wanted to surprise his ally. Ciano asserted that Greece was invaded because Hitler had entered Romania.⁵ Badoglio's statement that "the evil spirit of this (the Greek) campaign was Ciano,"⁶ seems to be closer to the truth and invalidates Ciano's assertion.

Italy was incapable of conducting simultaneous military operations in three theaters of war, i.e. in Abyssinia, Libya, and Greece. This dissipation of forces led General Badoglio, the Chief of Staff of the Comando Supremo, to resign on 26 November 1940.

The illusion of a quick victory in Greece had hardly vanished, when the Italian fleet suffered a crippling blow in the night of

⁴Ciano, His Diaries, 1939-1943 (Ciano Papers), Second Edition, (New York, 1947), p. 277.

⁵Ibid., p. 278.

⁶Badoglio, op. cit., p. 44.



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11 - 12 November 1940 in the Gulf of Taranto. British torpedo bombers put three battleships and two cruisers out of commission. The British had thus attained definite naval superiority.

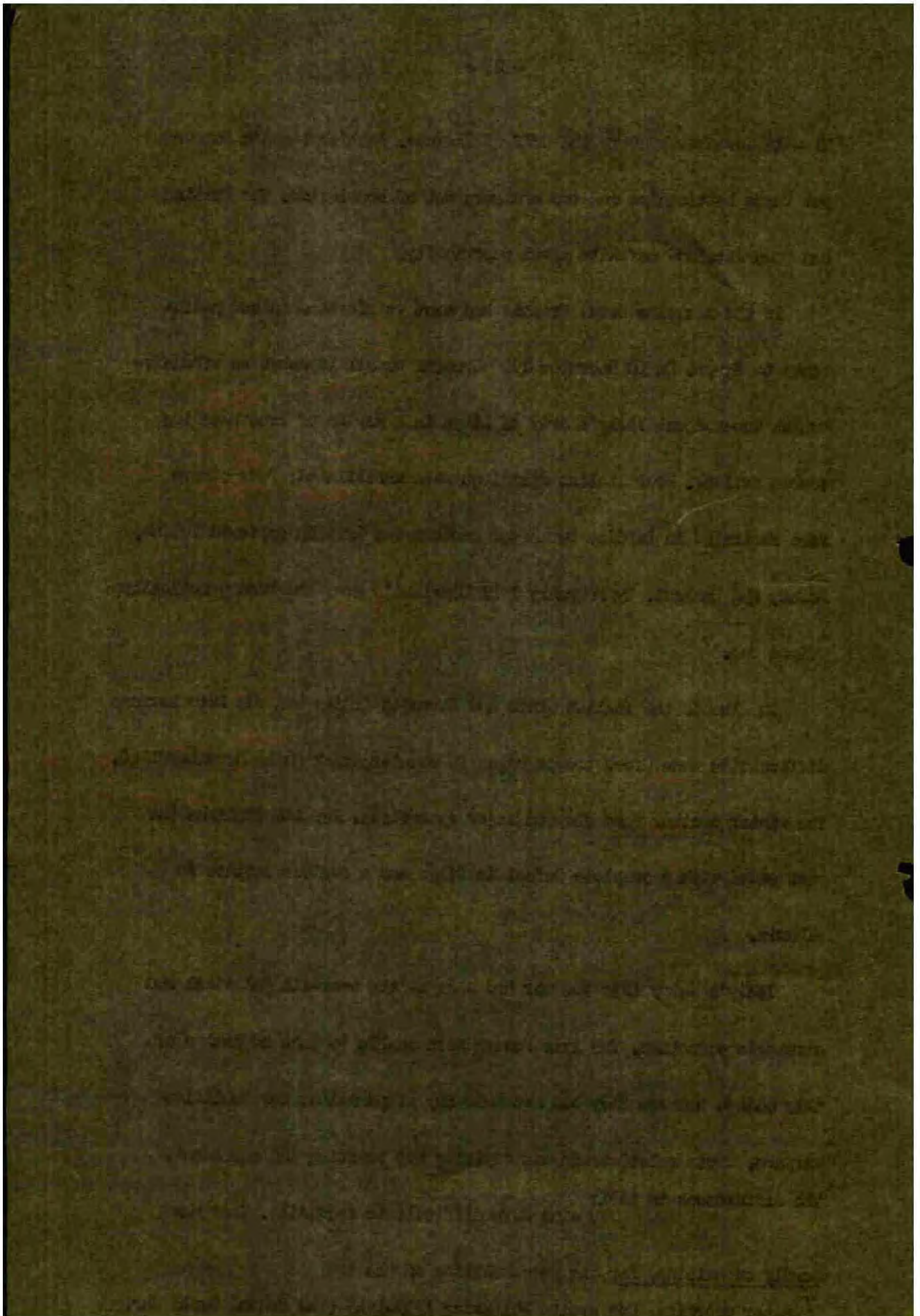
In the meantime Great Britain had sent reinforcements and medium tanks to Egypt. On 18 December 1940 General Wavell launched an offensive which knocked out Italy's Army of Libya in a series of breath-taking combat actions. Four Italian divisions were annihilated; four others were encircled in Bardia. One after another the British captured Tobruk, Derna, and Bengasi. By February 1941 Graziani's army had been practically wiped out.⁷

In Albania the Italian Ninth and Eleventh Armies had run into serious difficulties when Greek troops began to counterattack on 18 November 1940. The winter weather then stopped major operations. For the Italians the year ended with a complete defeat in Libya and a serious setback in Albania.

Italy's entry into the war had changed the over-all political and strategic situation. The Axis Powers were unable to take advantage of this change because they had not made any preparations for coalition warfare. Their relationship was anything but trusting and confident. The differences in their aims were difficult to reconcile. This was

hardly surprising, for the personalities of the two

⁷ Walter Coorlitz, *Der zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945* (The Second World War, 1939-45), (Steingrabenverlag, Stuttgart, 1951), p. 108.



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dictators differed in so many ways. While Mussolini must be credited with more profound understanding of the ramifications of international politics, the Duce overestimated the military prowess of the Italian people in a very dangerous manner. Hitler, who was younger, had a more dynamic personality, but his political vision was confined to the limits of the European continent. Since the beginning of the war he had won unexpected victories that enhanced tremendously the mystic belief in his own mission; Mussolini, however, had meanwhile been completely overshadowed. With Hitler apparently having assumed the dominant position in Europe, Mussolini was obsessed with inferiority complexes; these were probably noticed by Hitler, who knew only too well that Mussolini was really the only person who could guarantee the continuity of the Axis partnership. For this reason, Hitler restrained himself in order to preserve his ally's prestige; he thus let matters drift, which would have required immediate decisive action. Italy's entry into the war therefore did not result in military coordination since each partner conducted his military operations according to his own devices.

The German General Staff was well aware of Italy's military weakness. By giving Hitler an objective description of Italy's military potential, multiple efforts had been made to reorient the Fuehrer's disastrous political alliances and military policies. But the memorandum, in which the German military attaché in Rome during 1938-39 analyzed these factors in detail, was withdrawn from circulation and destroyed as ordered by Hitler in person.⁸

⁸ E. von Hintelen, *Mussolini als Bundesgenosse. Erinnerungen des deutschen Militärattachés in Rom 1936-1943*, (Mussolini as Ally. Memoirs of the German Military Attaché in Rome, 1936-43), (Tübingen, Wunderlich, 1951), pp. 55-6.

[The body of the document is extremely faded and illegible. It appears to be a multi-paragraph letter or report. Two binder holes are visible on the right side of the page.]

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Actually, in April 1939 Mussolini himself had explained in a memorandum that Italy would not be ready to wage war before 1943.⁹ It was therefore unreasonable to include Italy as a positive factor in German military planning.

So far as I know, Italy was only supposed to announce the mobilization of its forces at the time Germany invaded Poland. This gesture was designed to demonstrate the unity of the Axis Powers. However, the Italian king refused to approve this measure, and Mussolini in turn made immediate use of this refusal. He declared that Italy's entry into the war — which had not even been asked for — would be contingent upon deliveries of war material, which far exceeded Germany's availabilities.¹⁰

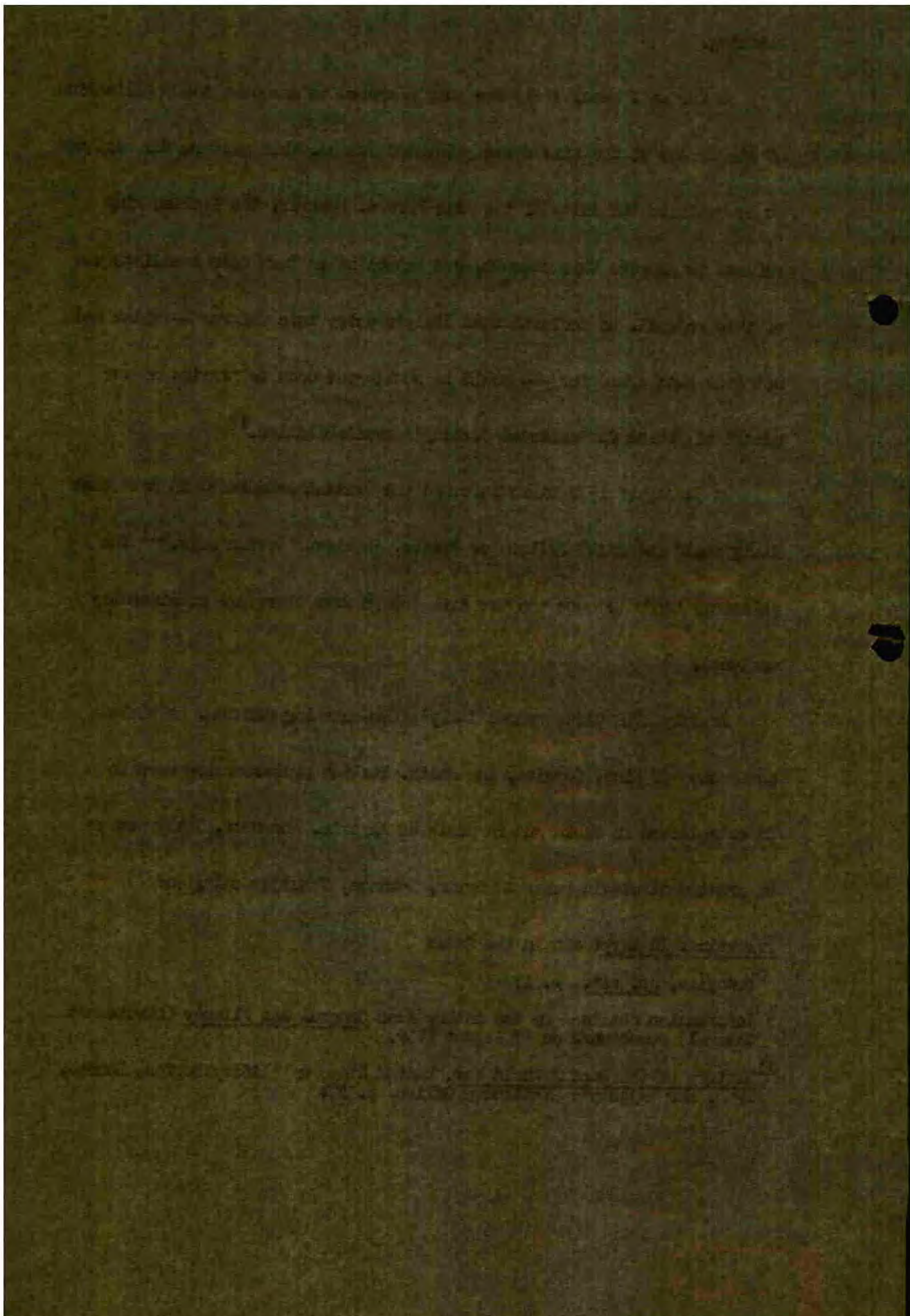
On 31 August 1939 Ciano informed the British ambassador in Rome that Italy would not fight Britain or France, "whatever Berlin says."¹¹ The political bonds between the two Axis Powers were therefore considerably weakened.

In July 1940 Ciano voiced Italy's far-reaching demands. He wanted possession of Nice, Corsica, and Malta. Italian protectorates were to be established in Tunis and in parts of Algeria. Moreover, Italy was to be granted strategic bases in Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Palestine. In Egypt and in the Sudan

⁹ Badoglio, *op. cit.*, p. 17

¹⁰ Information obtained by the author from General der Flieger (Lieutenant General) Janschussek on 27 August 1939.

¹¹ History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series, London, 1954, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, p. 42.



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Italy wanted to take Great Britain's place.¹² Mussolini's demands for French territory compromised any possibility for closer German-French relations. Did Italy believe that it could conduct the Mediterranean war against Britain without any assistance? In any event, in July 1940, Italy did not undertake any action toward realizing its far-reaching objectives. On the other hand, Ciano took advantage of every possible opportunity to prevent closer German collaboration with France because he was afraid that such an improvement in the relations of those two countries would take place at Italy's expense.¹³

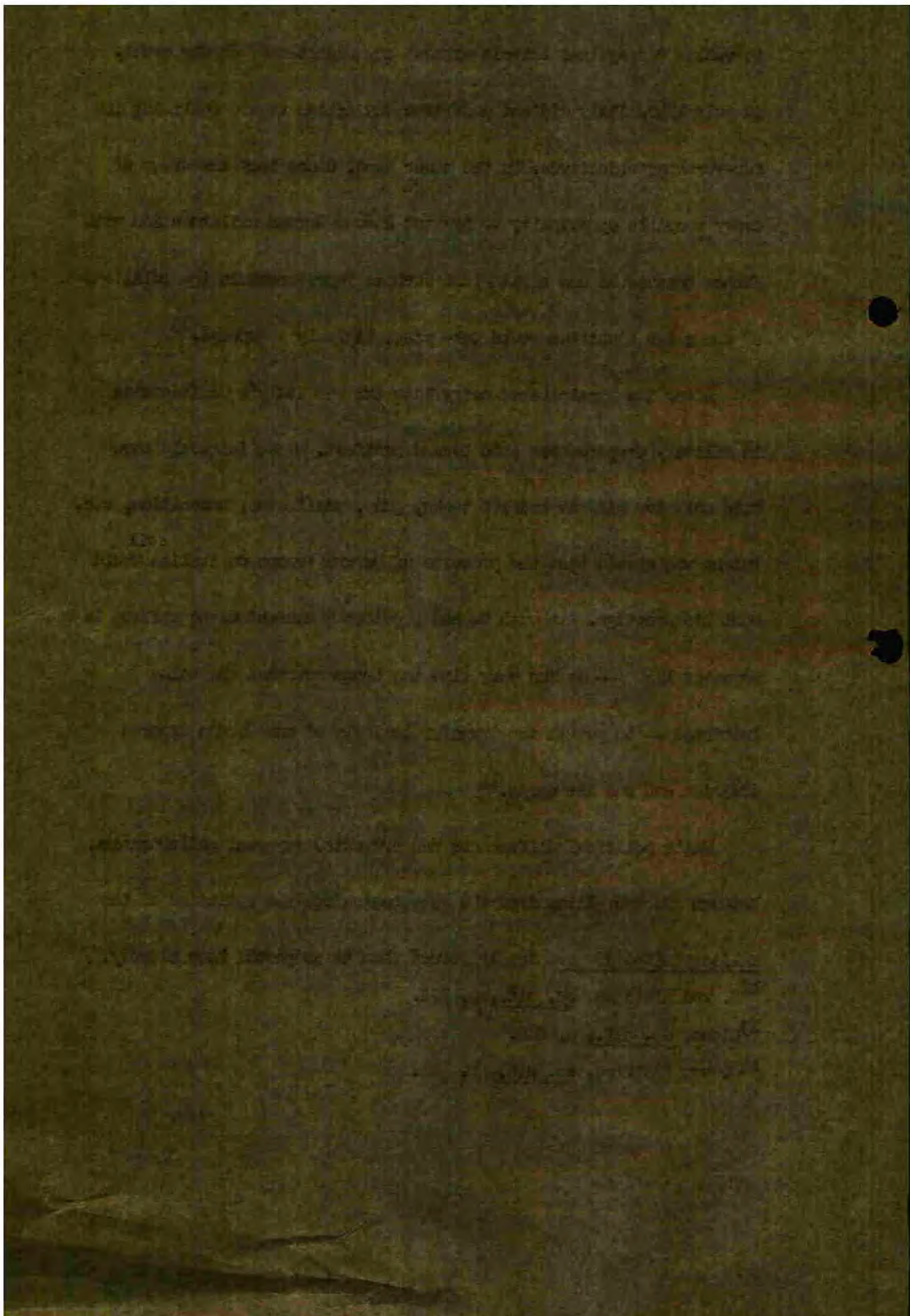
After its precipitated entry into the war Italy's deficiencies in military preparedness soon became manifest. Mussolini would have been only too glad to receive tanks, guns, small arms, ammunition, etc. But he was afraid that the presence of German troops on Italian ^{soil} would hurt his prestige. Although he had previously consented, he refused in November 1940 -- at the very time the troop movement was being initiated -- to permit the transfer to Italy of one German armored division and one air corps.¹⁴

While political differences had prevented any real collaboration between the two allies from the very beginning, the realities of the military situation eventually forced them to cooperate more closely.

¹²E. von Rintelen, op. cit., p. 102.

¹³Ciano, op. cit., p. 280.

¹⁴E. von Rintelen, op. cit., p. 101.



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The Italian Army's basic weakness that soon became only too obvious was its faulty military system. Italy had an Army of cadre divisions with 3,000 men each. Equipment and weapons were completely out-of-date. There was not a sufficient number of training instructors; the territorial-army type of organization led to frequent shifting of noncommissioned officers at company level. The selection of reserve officer replacements was equally unsatisfactory. Upon college graduation students qualified automatically for a commission in the Reserve without any thorough previous training. As soon as the Army was mobilized, the few Regular Army officers on troop duty were immediately transferred to senior staff positions. The Army was therefore short of experienced noncommissioned and company-grade officers.¹⁵

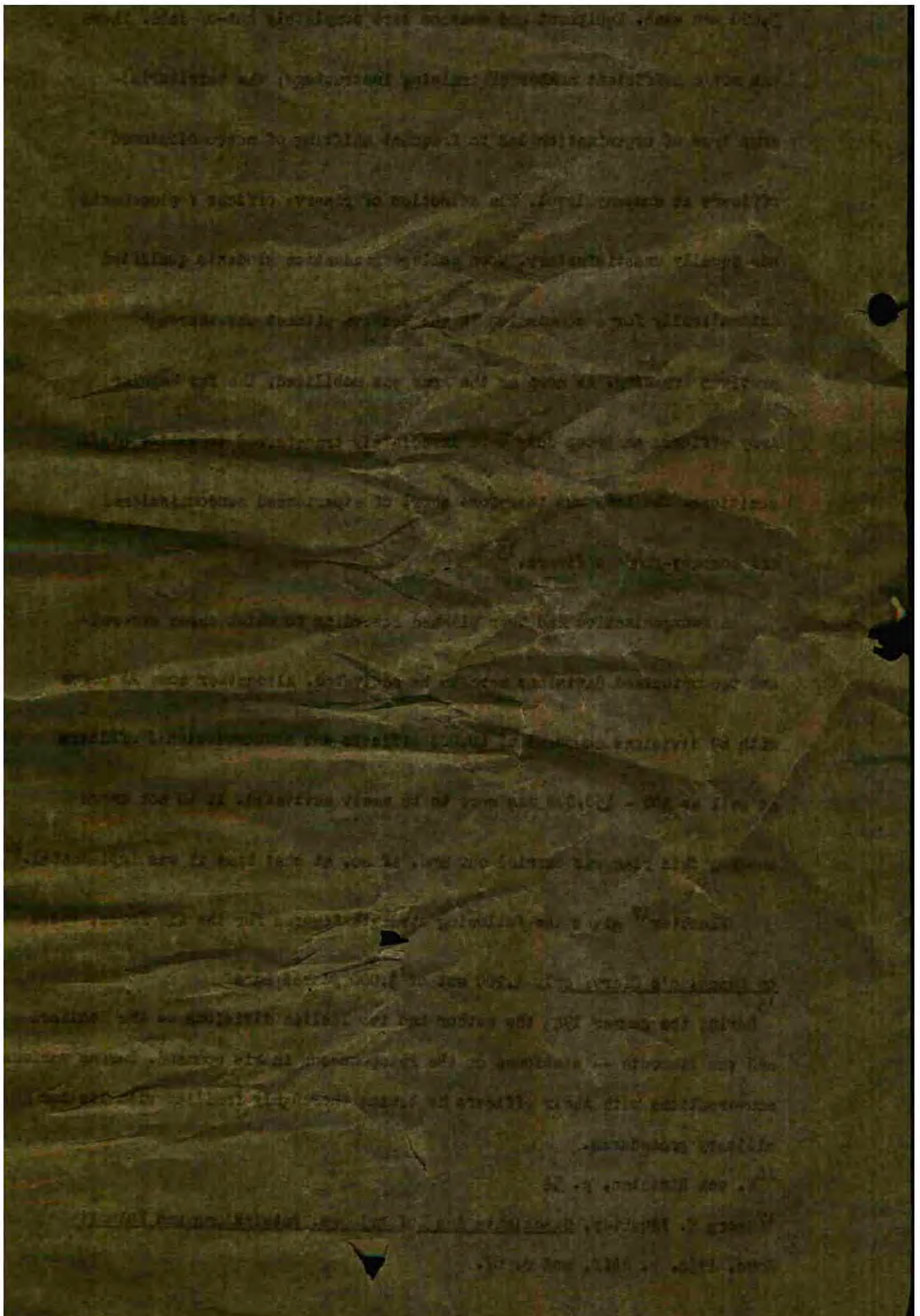
A reorganization had been planned according to which three armored and two motorized divisions were to be activated. Altogether some 24 corps with 69 divisions composed of 40,000 officers and noncommissioned officers as well as 300 - 450,000 men were to be newly activated. It is not known whether this plan was carried out and, if so, at what time it was implemented.¹⁶

Fluchter¹⁷ gives the following strength figures for the Air Force, based on Badoglio's diary: only 1,200 out of 3,000 planes were

¹⁵ During the summer 1943 the author had two Italian divisions as the Cagliari and the Piemonte -- stationed on the Peloponnesus in his command. During various conversations with their officers he became thoroughly familiar with Italian military procedures.

¹⁶ E. von Rintelen, p. 54

¹⁷ Georg W. Fluchter, Geschichte des Luftkrieges. Entwicklung und Zukunft, Bonn, 1954, p. 84ff. and p. 87.



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supposed to have been ready for commitment.¹⁸

The most powerful and proudest element of the Italian Armed Forces was the Navy. It consisted of 6 modern battleships, 7 heavy and 12 light cruisers, 60 destroyers, 68 torpedo boats, and 111 submarines of various types. The Italian fleet had numerical superiority over the British Mediterranean fleet. According to Admiral Raichold, the Italian Navy limited its activities to conducting exclusively defensive operations in the central Mediterranean. This fact was partly to be attributed to its complete inexperience in carrying out night operations.¹⁹

Italy's overseas forces consisted of 215,000 men in Libya under the command of Marshal Balbo and 200,000 men in Abyssinia, where the Duke of Aosta commanded. For the top-level command organization of the Italian Armed Forces as of 10 June 1940, see Appendix No. 1.

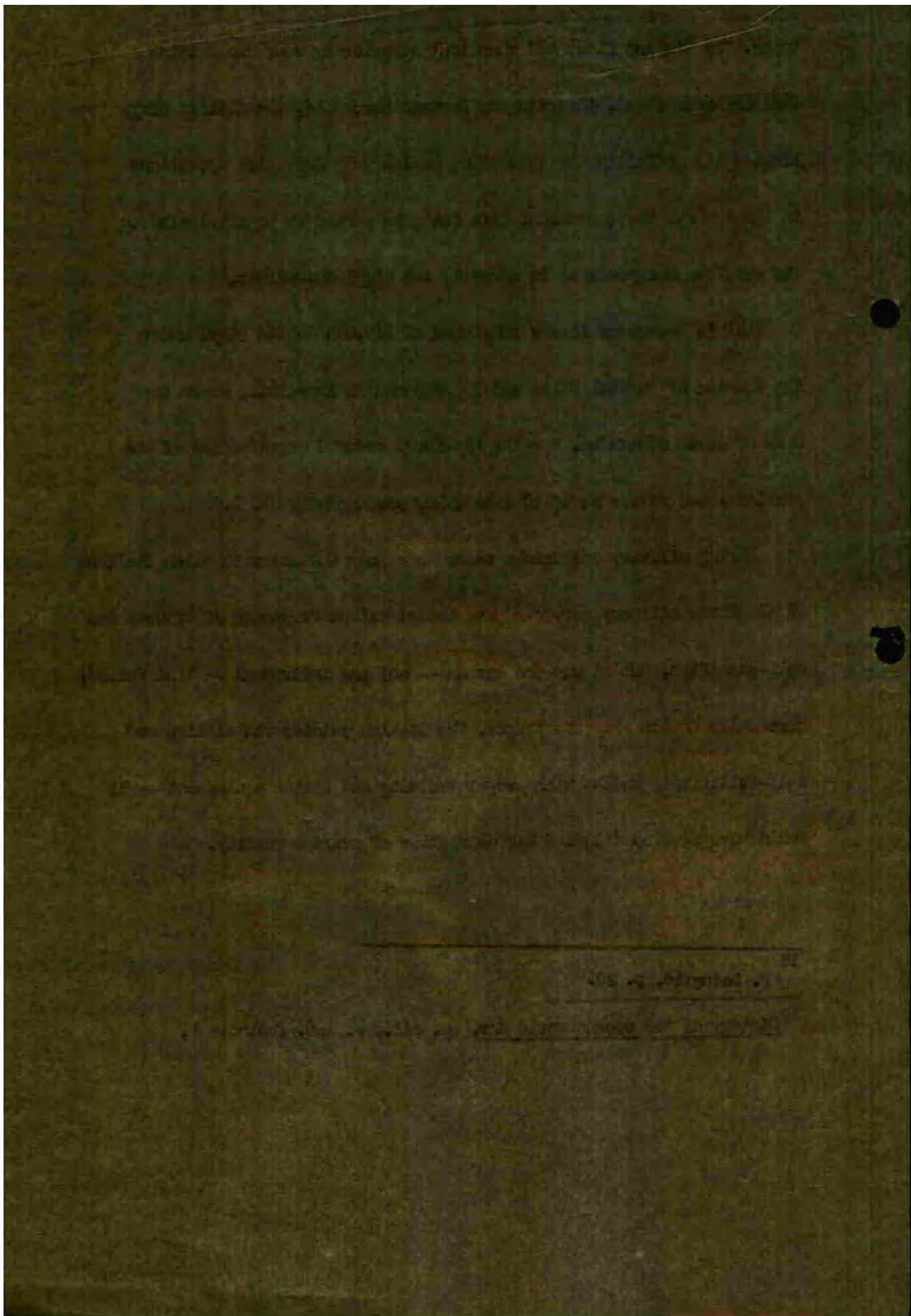
During military operations there were many instances in which Italians of all three military services gave individual performances of bravery and self-sacrifice. But it was the system -- not the individual -- that failed, especially as the war grew longer. The Italian soldier was willing and self-sufficient, and -- with proper training and better equipment -- he would have developed into a useful fighter of average quality.

¹⁸

P. Badoglio, p. 20.

¹⁹

History of the Second World War, op. cit., p. 116, footnote 1.



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The digression into Greece apparently did not convince Hitler of the military ineffectiveness of his ally, even though he disapproved of the Italian attack in the Epirus Mountains at the beginning of the winter season and anticipated grave consequences. His displeasure found its expression in a letter he sent to the Duce on 20 November 1940.²⁰ Hitler clearly indicated the psychological and military consequences that would arise as a result of the Italian intervention in the Balkans, enumerating not only enemy measures but also probable Russian and neutral steps. He was particularly perturbed over the fact that the British would now be able to reach the Romanian oil fields from Greek air bases. The cities and ports of southern Italy seemed no less vulnerable to him.

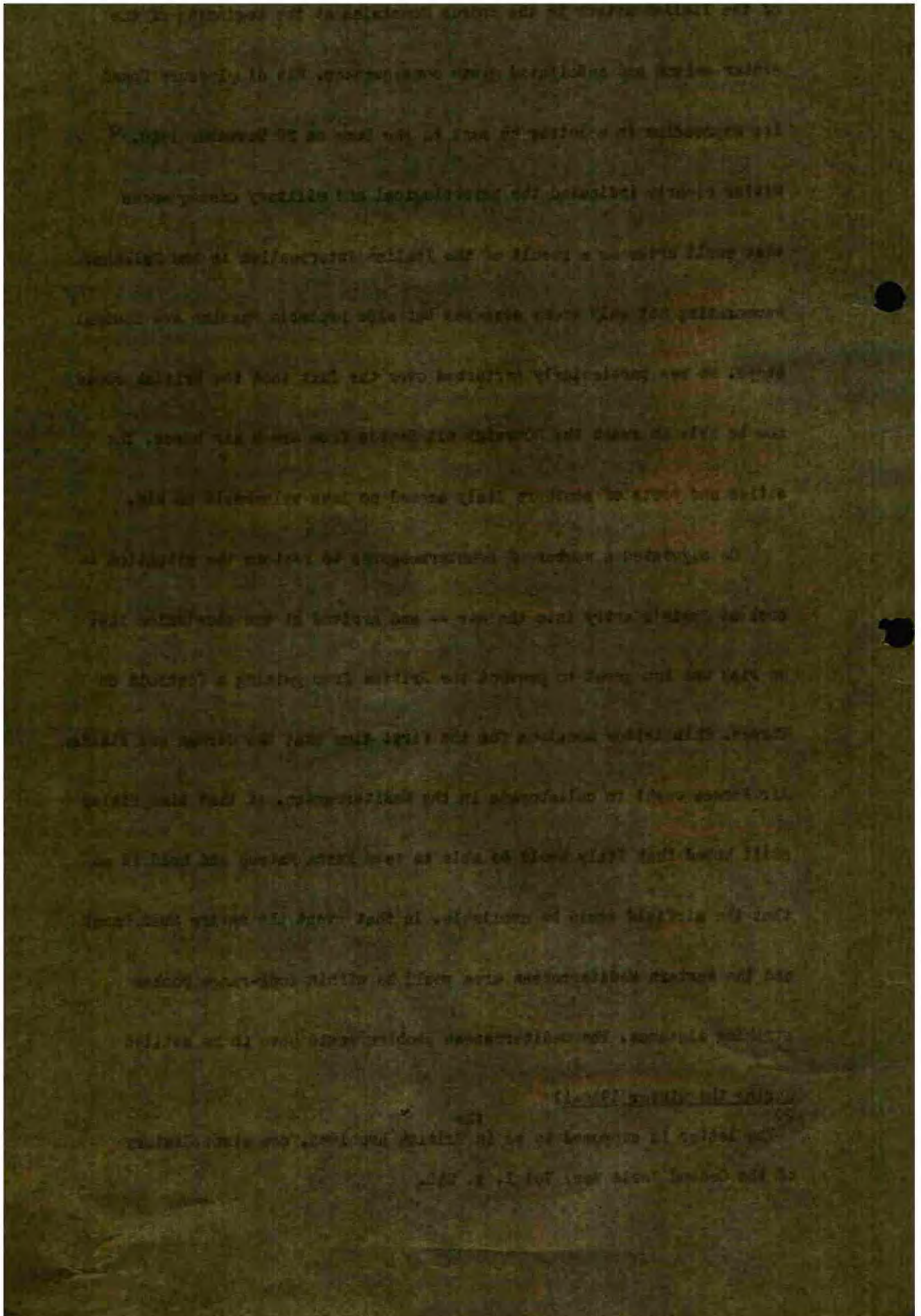
He suggested a number of countermeasures to restore the situation -- such as Spain's entry into the war -- and arrived at the conclusion that no risk was too great to prevent the British from gaining a foothold on Thrace. This letter mentions for the first time that the German and Italian Air Forces ought to collaborate in the Mediterranean. At that time Hitler still hoped that Italy would be able to take Marsa Matruh and hold it so that the airfield would be available. In that event the entire Suez Canal and the eastern Mediterranean area would be within long-range bomber striking distance. The Mediterranean problem would have to be settled

during the winter 1940-41

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the

The letter is supposed to be in British archives, see also: History of the Second World War, Vol I, p. 240.

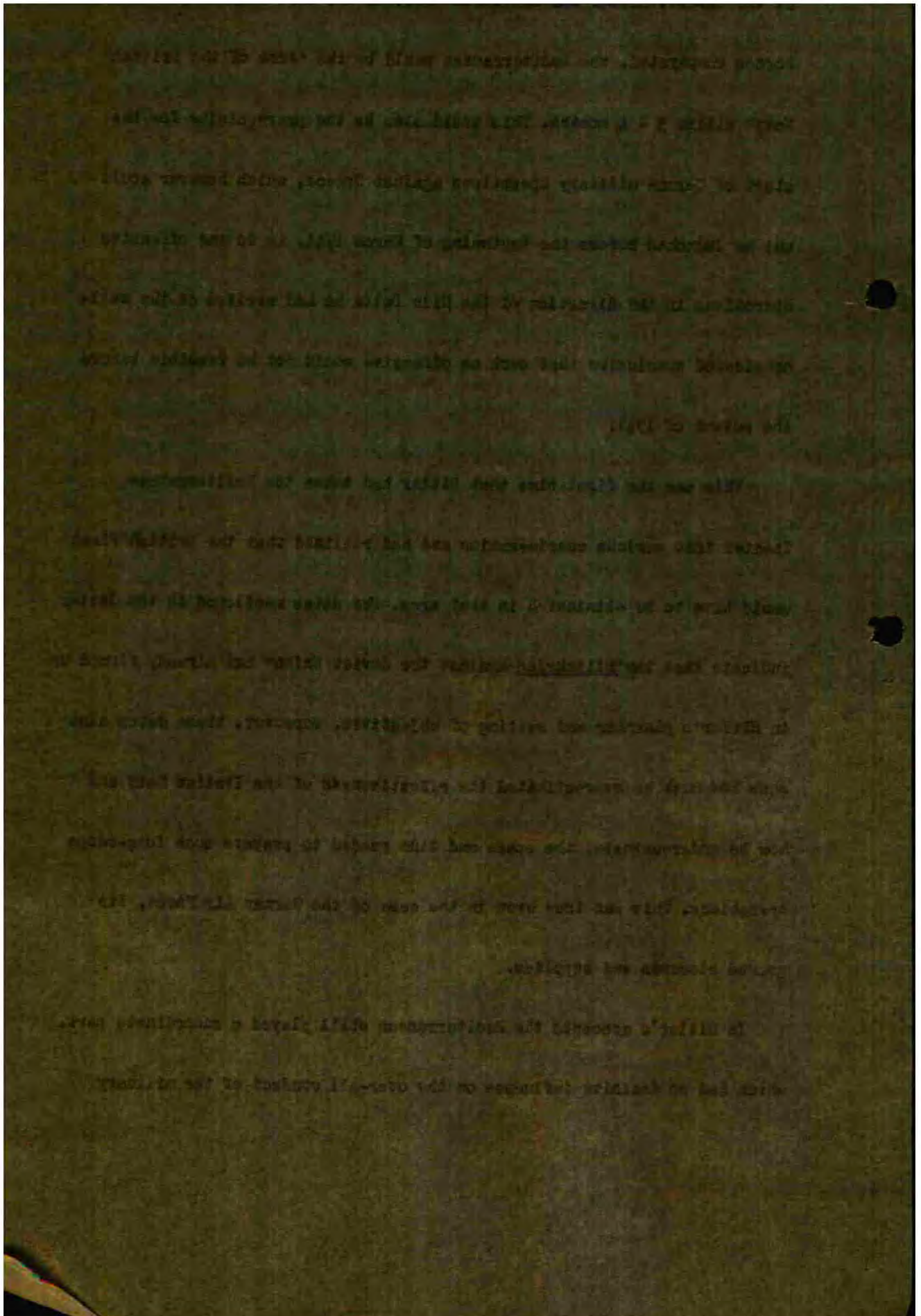


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because at that time "it would also be most suitable to commit German forces." But he wants his troops to "be returned" by the beginning of May at the latest. Hitler was convinced that, if the German and Italian Air Forces cooperated, the Mediterranean would be the "tomb of the British Navy" within 3 - 4 months. This would also be the prerequisite for the start of German military operations against Greece, which however could not be launched before the beginning of March 1941. As to the offensive operations in the direction of the Nile Delta he had arrived at the well-considered conclusion that such an offensive would not be feasible before the autumn of 1941.

This was the first time that Hitler had taken the Mediterranean Theater into serious consideration and had realized that the British Fleet would have to be eliminated in that area. The dates mentioned in the letter indicate that the "Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union" had already firmed up in Hitler's planning and setting of objectives. Moreover, these dates also show how much he overestimated the effectiveness of the Italian Navy and how he underestimated the space and time needed to prepare such long-range operations. This was true even in the case of the German Air Force, its ground elements and supplies.

In Hitler's concepts the Mediterranean still played a subordinate part, which had no decisive influence on the over-all conduct of the military



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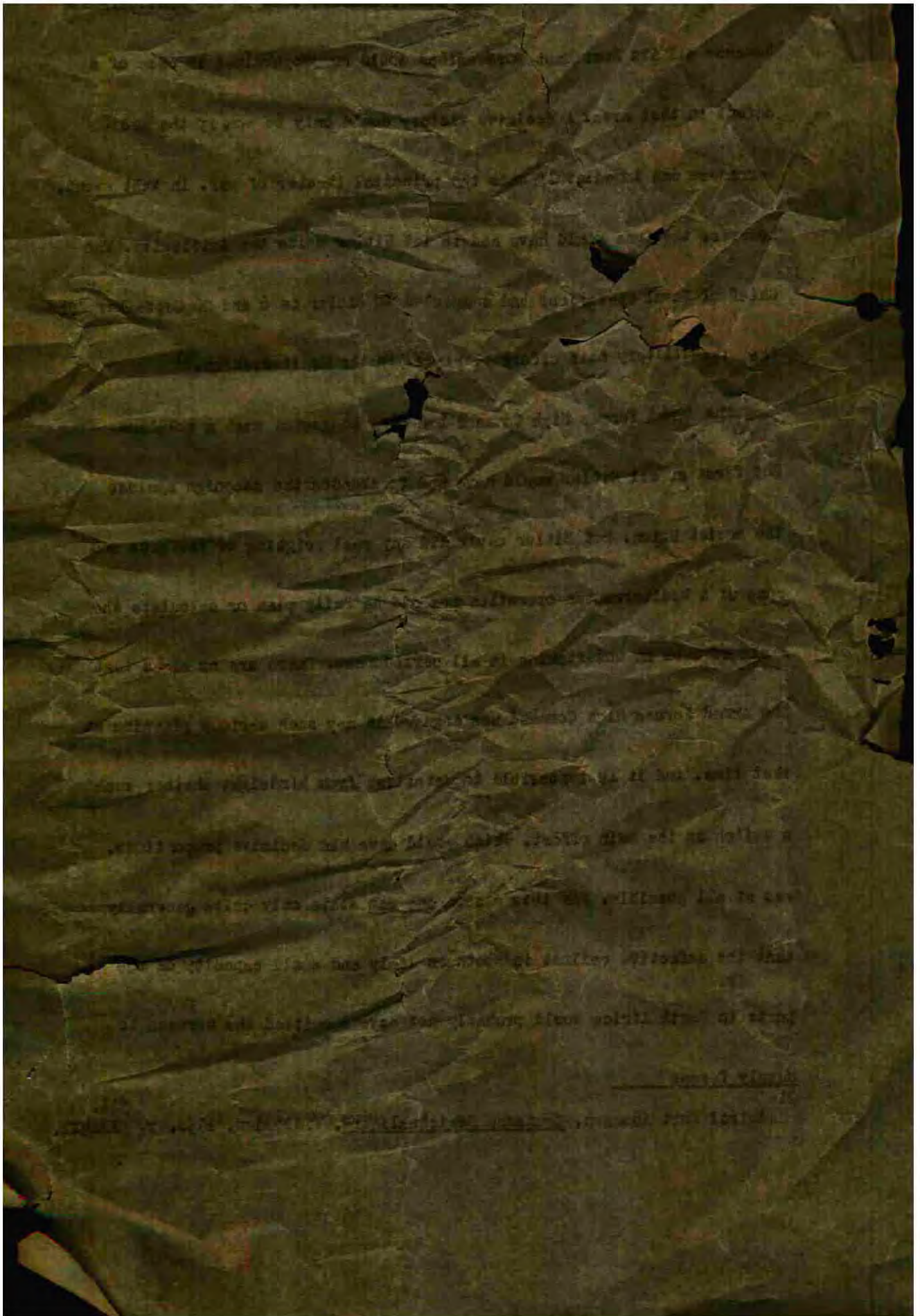
operations. He believed that with Italy's assistance the British Mediterranean Fleet could be crushed with the greatest of ease. He had not realized that Great Britain would suffer a death blow in the Mediterranean because all its Near East possessions would be jeopardized in case of a defeat in that area. A decisive victory could only be won, if the Mediterranean was immediately made the principal theater of war. In that event, however, the Axis would have had to let Hitler seize the initiative. The Chief of Naval Operations had suggested to Hitler on 6 and 26 September 1940 that the military main effort be placed in the Mediterranean.²¹

The Armed Forces High Command had also suggested such a solution. But first of all Hitler would have had to abandon the campaign against the Soviet Union. But Hitler never did any real weighing of the pros and cons of a Mediterranean operation nor did he fully plan or calculate the risks of such an undertaking in all seriousness. There are no signs that the Armed Forces High Command was engaged in any such serious planning at that time. And it is impossible to establish from hindsight whether such a switch in the main effort, which would have had decisive proportions, was at all possible. For this reason one can state only quite generally that the defective railnet in southern Italy and small capacity of the ports in North Africa would probably not have permitted the Germans to

supply forces

21

Admiral Kurt Assmann, Deutsche Schicksalsjahre, Wiesbaden, 1950, p. 341.



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supply the minimum forces needed for such an operation, namely one armored army and two air fleets. Another decisive point to be considered would have been the shortage of shipping space; of equal importance was the safety of naval convoys which the German Navy would have been unable to secure.²²

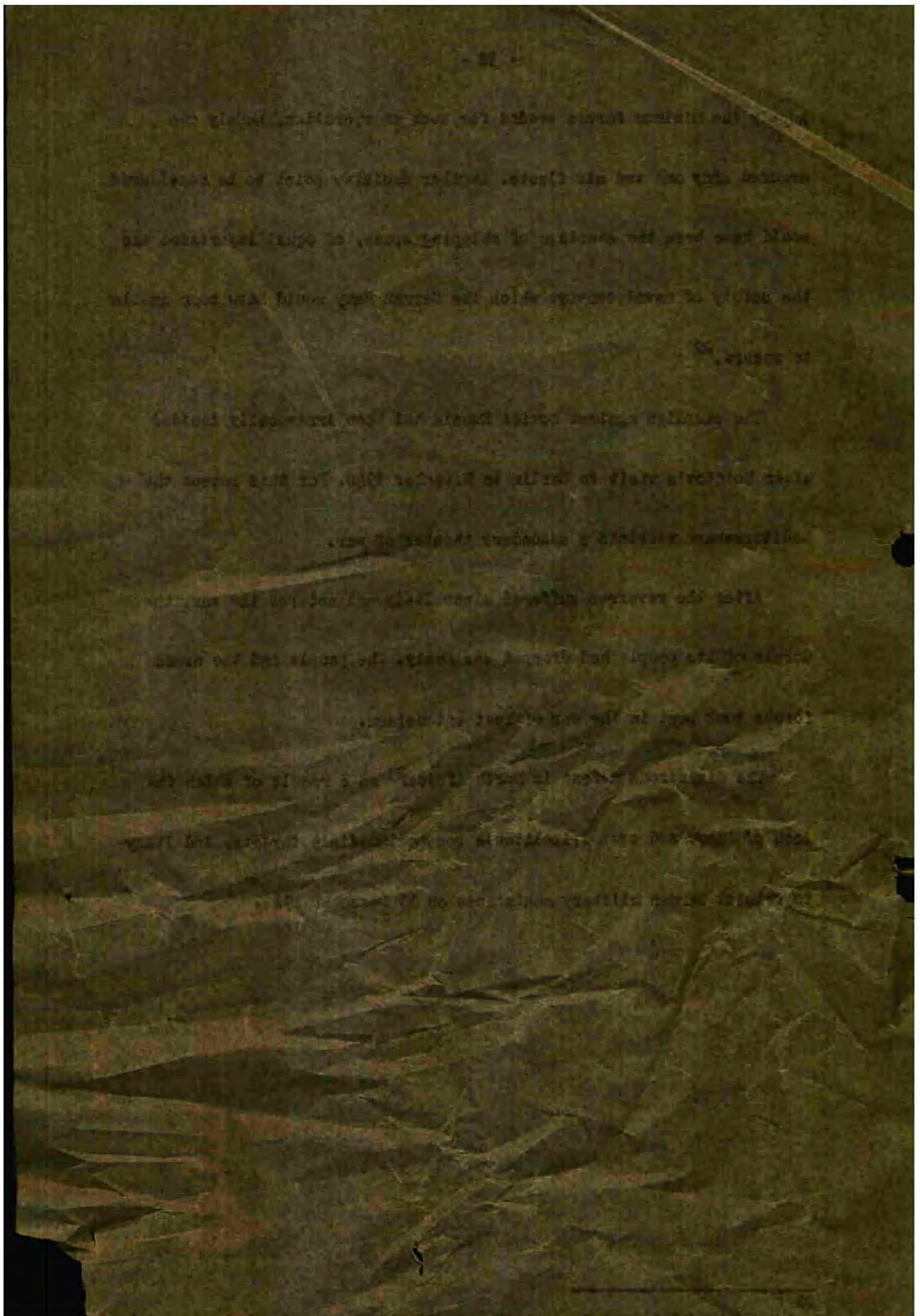
The campaign against Soviet Russia had been irrevocably decided after Molotov's visit to Berlin in November 1940. For this reason the Mediterranean remained a secondary theater of war.

After the reverses suffered since Italy had entered the war, the morale of its people had dropped seriously. The people and the armed forces took part in the war without enthusiasm.

The disastrous defeat in North Africa,²³ as a result of which the loss of Libya and even Tripolitania became immediate threats, led Italy to request German military assistance on 19 December 1940.

²² Letter OKW/1848, Chief, Armed Forces Operations Staff, Chefsache, dated 13 August 1940.

²³ Von Rintelen, p. 116.



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Chapter 3. The Intervention of the German Air Force

Section I. The German Air Force Mission in Romania

Section II. The Commitment of X Air Corps in Sicily. Its

Order of Battle and Ground Organization.

Section III. Air Brigade Commander Africa. German Air

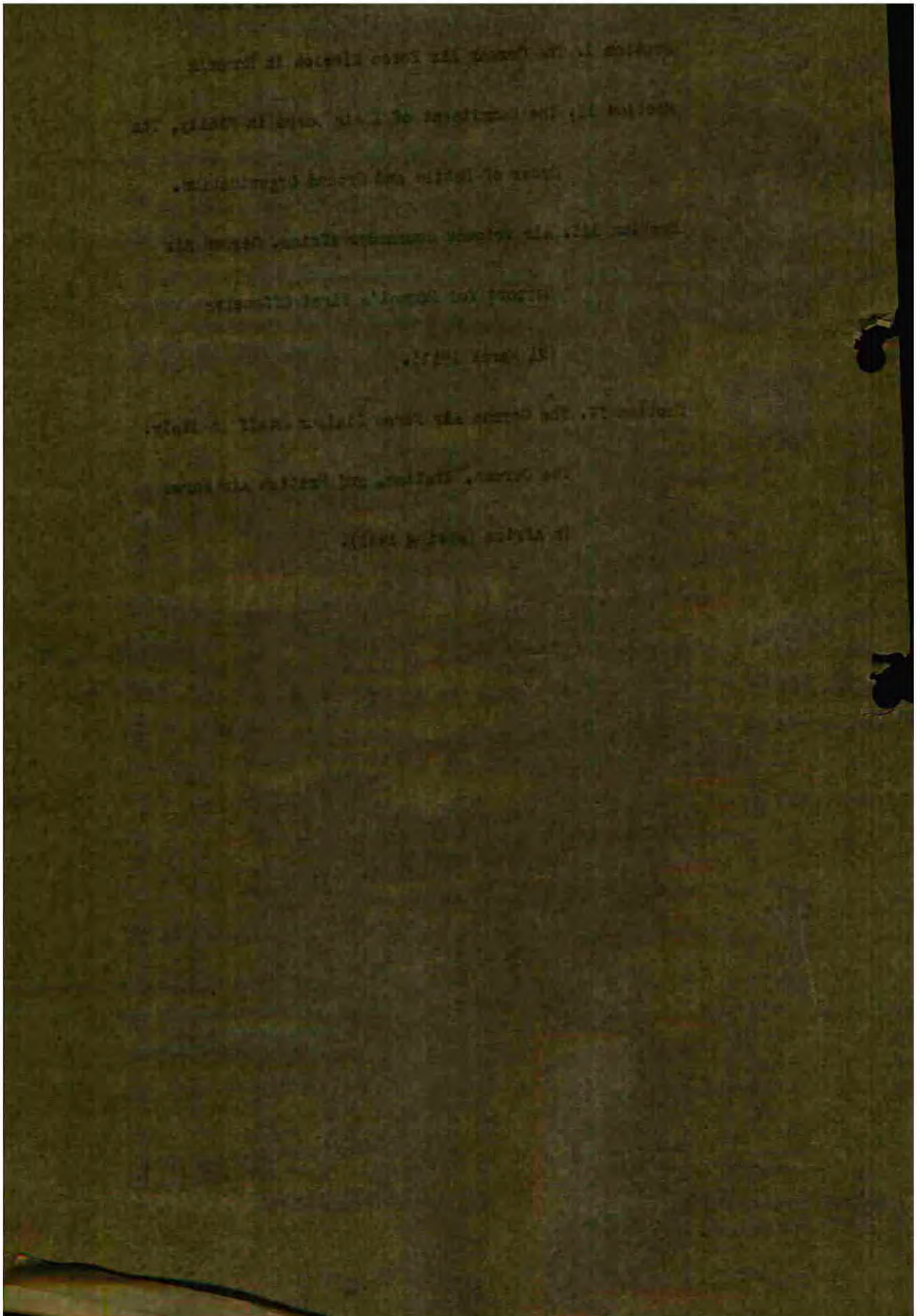
Support for Rommel's First Offensive

(24 March 1941).

Section IV. The German Air Force Liaison Staff in Italy.

The German, Italian, and British Air Forces

in Africa (Spring 1941).



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Section I. The German Air Force Mission in Romania

The Balkans were within Germany's, Russia's, and Italy's sphere of interest. By using a system of bilateral pacts, Hitler attempted to integrate the southeast of Europe into the German economic system. Romania with its oil and grain surplus was of the greatest value to Germany. At a very early stage these German efforts toward economic integration began to conflict with Soviet Russian plans.

On 20 June 1940 Soviet Russia asked Romania to relinquish Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. The Germans, from whom Romania expected support, refused to intervene and advised Romania to concede. At the same time Germany requested Romania to come to an agreement with Hungary and Bulgaria which also had justified claims to Romanian territory that they had lost in 1919.

Germany and Italy settled the Romanian-Hungarian and Romanian-Bulgarian territorial differences by the Vienna Arbitration Award of 28 August 1940. Soviet Russia was displeased about the Award because it had not been consulted. This Russian annoyance gave room to uneasiness when the Germans sent a military mission to Romania after they had been asked to do so by that country's government.

General der Kavallerie (Lt. Gen.) Hansen was appointed chief of the Armed Forces mission which consisted of a number of training teams as well as other units. The Air Force mission was under the command of General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Speidel who was directly responsible to the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe.

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The German Air Force mission arrived in Bucharest on 10 October 1940.

Its mission was twofold:

- A. To organize the active and passive air raid protection facilities and to defend the Romanian oil fields against air attacks; and
- B. To train and reorganize the Romanian Air Force, both the flying and antiaircraft units. This activity was to conceal the real German plans for military operations.

The following were designated as air defense areas:

1. The oil production and oil refining facilities at Ploesti;
2. The oil dump and port installations at Constanta;
3. The bridge across the Danube near Cernavoda with its pipe-line;
4. The oil tank and port installations at Giurgiu on the Danube; and
5. The air bases used by the Luftwaffe mission.

The forces available to carry out this mission were as follows: One reinforced flak division, two separate antiaircraft regiments with various attached units; one fighter group equipped with Messerschmidt 109's; Air Force signal units to maintain the aircraft warning service; special air raid protection units to fight oil fires; and construction units for a total of approximately 50,000 men (According to Lt. Gen. Speidel).

According to Greiner the mission in Romania was composed of one fighter group, 16 flak batteries, 10 fire fighting companies, and the 22d Air

Landing Division, which were billeted in the vicinity of Bucharest and Ploesti.

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Greiner (?), Oberste Wehrmachtsfuhrung (??), p. 386.

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According to Gessleritz the "training units" of the military mission were composed of one armored division as well as fighter and antiaircraft units.²⁵

Oberst (Col.) Schlieter states that the Luftwaffe mission was composed as follows:²⁶

a. From 29 March to May 1941: Group III of the 52d Fighter Wing.

b. After 1 May 1941: Group III of the 52d Fighter Wing as well as

the following units subordinate to the Luftwaffe mission and/or

to the Commander in Chief of the Army. The staff of the 22d Division

with the 16th, 47th, and 66th Infantry Regiments; the 22d Artillery

Regiment, the 22d Flak Battalion (Motorized), the 22d Reconnaissance

Battalion, and divisional supply troops.

During November 1940 Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia joined the Tripartite

Pact that had been concluded on 27 September 1940. (Bulgaria adhered on 1 March

1941). After Directive 20 had been issued on 13 December 1940, seven divisions

that formed the nucleus for the Twelfth Army under Field Marshal List,

assembled for Operation MARITA in southern Romania.

On 18 December Hitler issued Directive 21 according to which Soviet Russia

was to be defeated in a "lightning campaign" even before the end of the

war with Great Britain (Operation BARBAROSSA).

As a result of these directives the Luftwaffe mission in Romania had

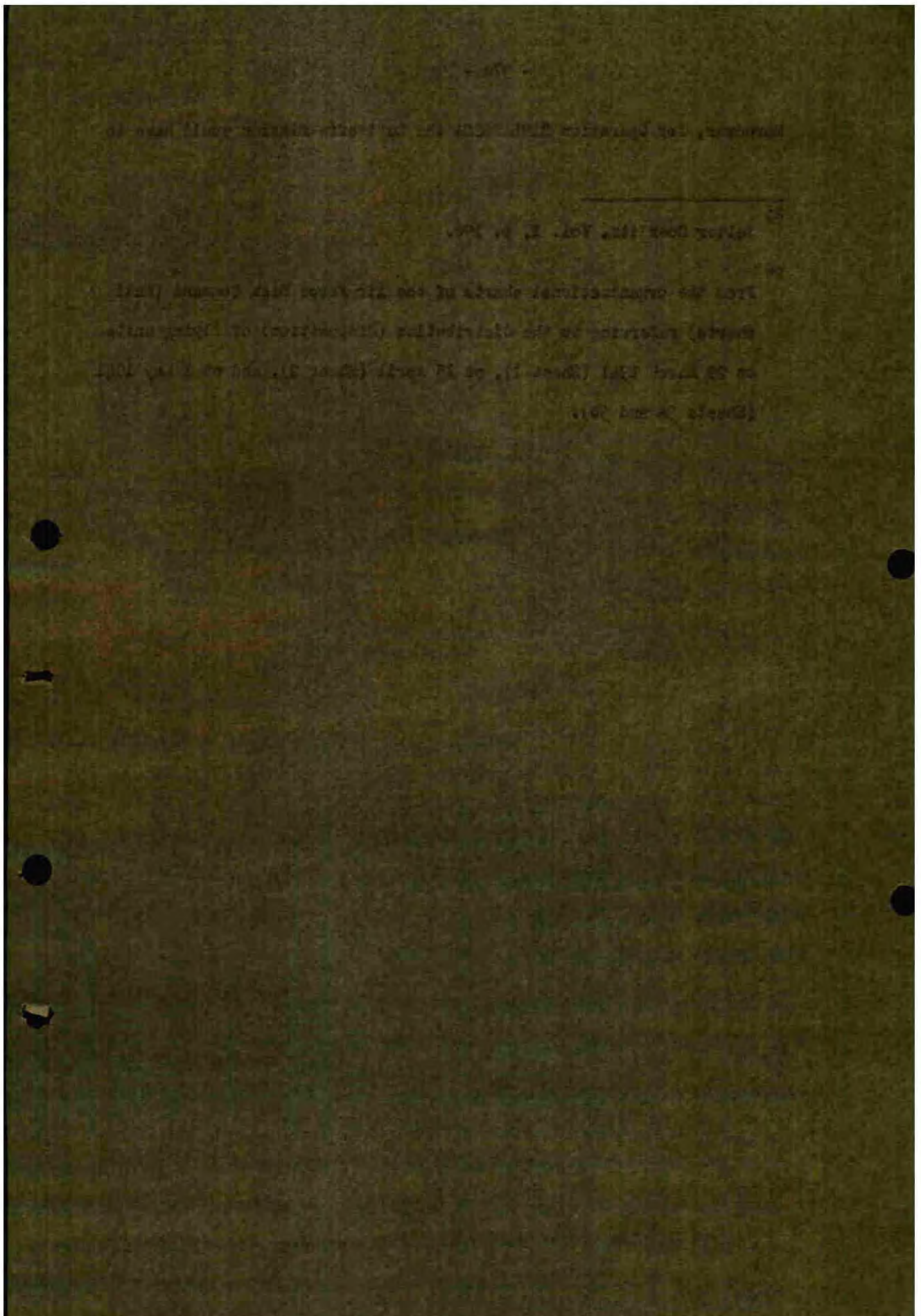
to set up an air force ground organization for German bombers and fighters.

- 37a -

Moreover, for Operation BARBAROSSA the Luftwaffe mission would have to

25 Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, p. 196.

26 From the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (Wall charts) referring to the distribution (disposition) of flying units on 29 March 1941 (Sheet 1), on 15 April (Sheet 2), and on 1 May 1941 (Sheets 3a and 3b).

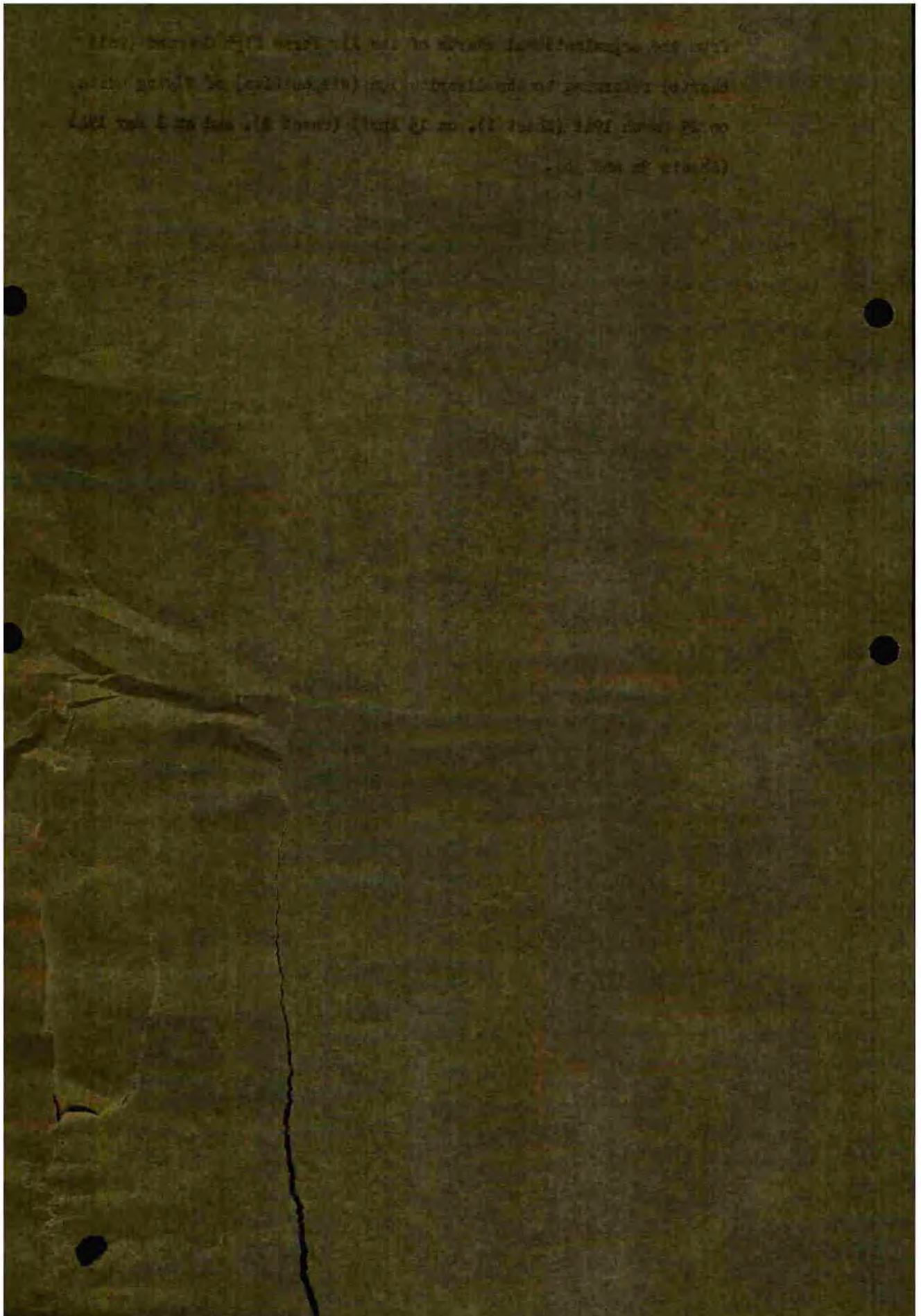


- 37a -

Moreover, for Operation BARBAROSSA the Luftwaffe mission would have to

²⁵ Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, p. 196.

²⁶ From the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (Wall charts) referring to the distribution (disposition) of flying units on 29 March 1941 (Sheet 1), on 15 April (Sheet 2), and on 1 May 1941 (Sheets 3a and 3b).



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assume the functions of a front line air force command echelon.

In addition, the establishment of a German air warning net in Bulgaria was needed before the Twelfth Army could assemble. (Data from Lt. Gen. Speidel.)

In February 1941 Bulgaria agreed to let List's forces enter the country. A new theater of war was to be created; German forces had penetrated deep into the Balkans, and the Romanian and Bulgarian Black Sea coastal areas came under German control. These events became known to the Russians.

In his New Year's message Stalin had declared that Russia had mobilized its forces and that it would be ready. This attitude was caused by worry rather than by aggressiveness. When the German Ambassador in Moscow, Count von der Schulenburg, informed the Russian Foreign Commissar on 28 February 1941 that German troops had entered Bulgaria, Molotov declared: "This measure violates the security of the Soviet Union."²⁷

The system of political agreements with the Eastern European countries, which Hitler had originally envisioned, had developed into a threat but did not necessarily have to lead to war with the Soviet Union."²⁸

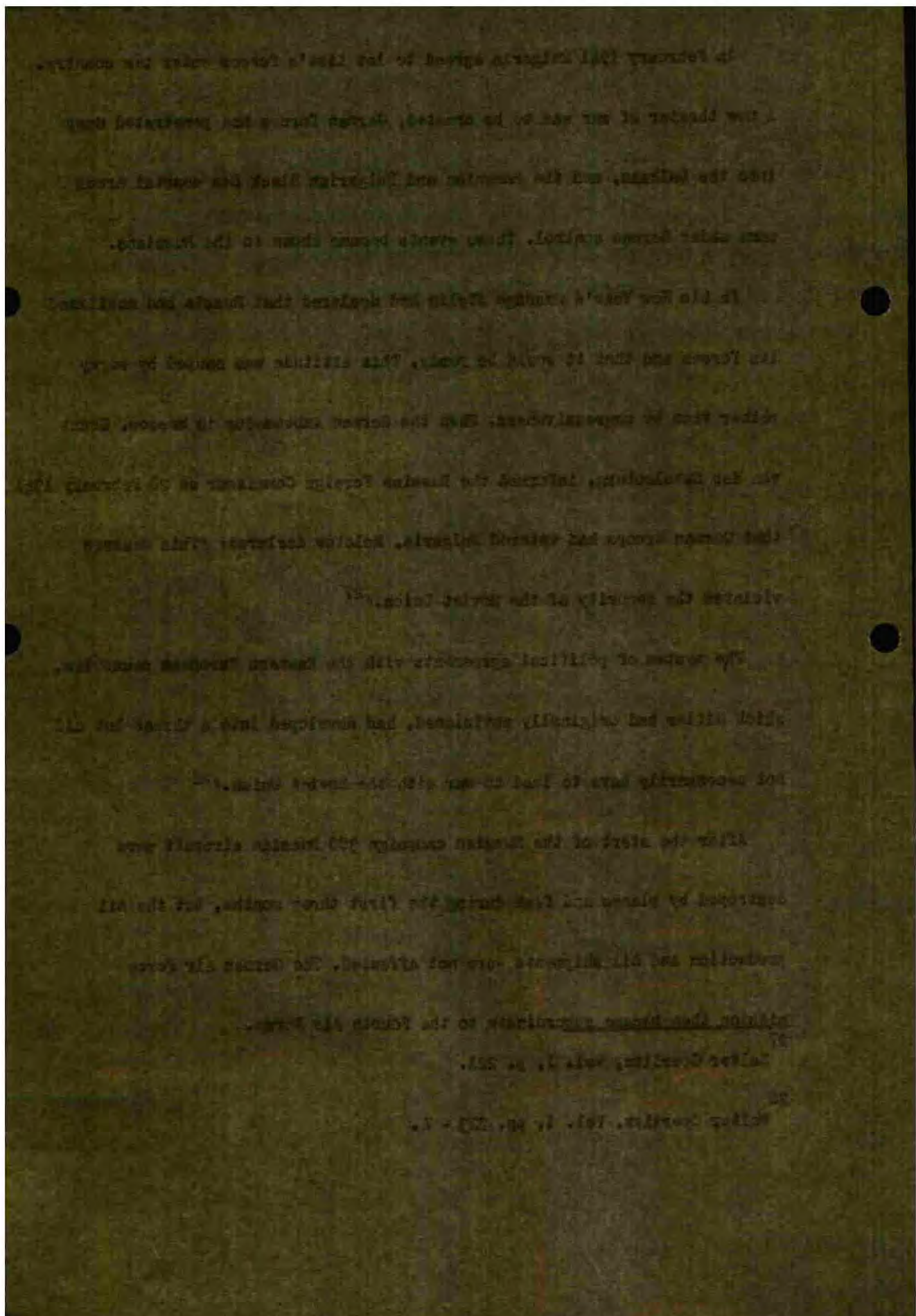
After the start of the Russian campaign 300 Russian aircraft were destroyed by planes and flak during the first three months, but the oil production and oil shipments were not affected. The German Air Force mission then became subordinate to the Fourth Air Force.

²⁷

Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, p. 221.

²⁸

Walter Goerlitz, Vol. I, pp. 223 - 4.



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Section II. The Commitment of X Air Corps in Sicily. Its
Order of Battle and Ground Organization. The Enemy Forces.
The Struggle for Malta and the German Efforts to Intercept
British Convoys.

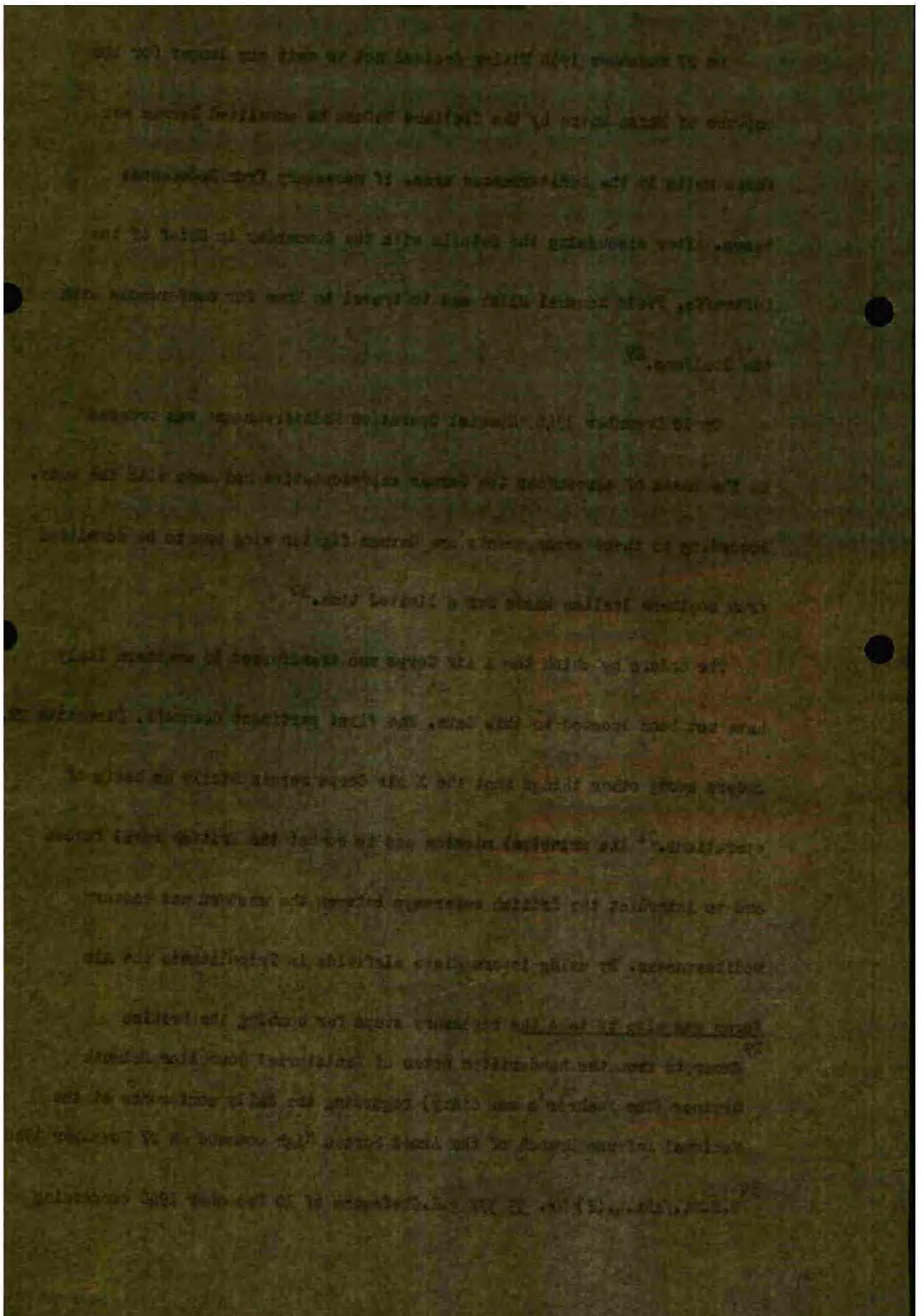
On 27 November 1940 Hitler decided not to wait any longer for the capture of Marsa Matru by the Italians before he committed German air force units in the Mediterranean area, if necessary from Dodecanese bases. After discussing the details with the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, Field Marshal Milch was to travel to Rome for conferences with the Italians.²⁹

On 10 December 1940 "Special Operation Mediterranean" was ordered on the basis of agreements the German representative had made with the Duce. According to these arrangements one German fighter wing was to be committed from southern Italian bases for a limited time.³⁰

The orders by which the X Air Corps was transferred to southern Italy have not been located to this date. The first pertinent document, Directive 22, orders among other things that the X Air Corps retain Sicily as basis of operations.³¹ Its principal mission was to combat the British naval forces and to interdict the British waterways between the western and eastern Mediterranean. By using intermediate airfields in Tripolitania the Air Force was also to take the necessary steps for bombing the British

²⁹ Excerpts from the handwritten notes of Ministerial Councilor Helmuth Greiner (The Fuehrer's war diary) regarding the daily conference at the National Defense Branch of the Armed Forces High Command on 27 November 1940.

³⁰ W.F.St./Aht.L.(I) Nr. 33 392 g.K.Chefsache of 10 December 1940 concerning



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(Continuation of Footnote No. 30)

the commitment of German air force units in Italy (Special Operation Mediterranean).

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O.K.W./W.F.St.Abt.L. Nr. 44 018/41 G.k.Chefs of 11 January 1941.
Directive 22 (Assistance of German Forces in Operations in the Mediterranean).



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supply ports and bases along the coast of western Egypt and the Cyrenaica, and thus give direct support to Army Group Graziani.

For the defense of Tripolitania the Commander in Chief of the Army was to activate a so-called blocking unit -- the 5th Light Division -- which was to be committed against the British armored divisions.

By order of 20 January 1941, No. 440 18/40, classified TOP SECRET, the measures ordered in Directive 22 were given the code designation SUNFLOWER (Sonnenblume).

The transfer of X Air Corps got underway by mid-December. The corps had been stationed in Norway where it been committed against British naval forces and shipping. The general commanding X Air Corps, General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Geisler, as well as his chief of staff, Oberst i.G. (Col.) Herlinghausen, had been naval officers so that they were well qualified for their new mission. The X Air Corps was directly subordinate to the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe.

In accordance with the combat mission Malta was the most important objective because British naval and air forces stationed on the island were able to bar communications between Sicily and Tripoli at any time. Moreover, Malta served as support base for convoys traveling from Gibraltar to Alexandria. The following units were assigned to X Air Corps from

³²
1 January - 8 February 1941:

³²
From the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (wall charts) pertaining to the disposition of flying units on 1 January, 20 January, and 5 February 1941 (Sheet 1), on 9 and 25 February and 18 and 29 March 1941 (Sheet 2), and on 15 April and 1 May 1941 (Sheet 3).

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Staff of X Air Corps:

At Catania, later at Taormina.

Reconnaissance units:



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with a mobile intercept company.³³

On 9 February the following new flying units were assigned to X Air Corps:

Bombers: 3d Group of Bomber Wing 30, equipped with Junkers 88 A-5 at Gerbini.

Dive Bombers: The staff as well as the 2d and 3d Groups of Dive Bomber Wing 1,

equipped with Junkers 87, model Bw.R at Trapani.

Fighters: 1st Group of Fighter Wing 27,³² equipped with Bf 109 D-7/N.)

The British had naval superiority in the Mediterranean and aerial superiority in North Africa. On 10 June the British had approximately

200 airplanes in Egypt, while the Italians had 282 aircraft in Libya alone.³⁴

Other sources estimated the Italian air strength in Libya at 300 bombers,

fighters, and dive bombers, excluding reconnaissance planes.³⁵

On 8 December 1940, when they started their offensive, the British had

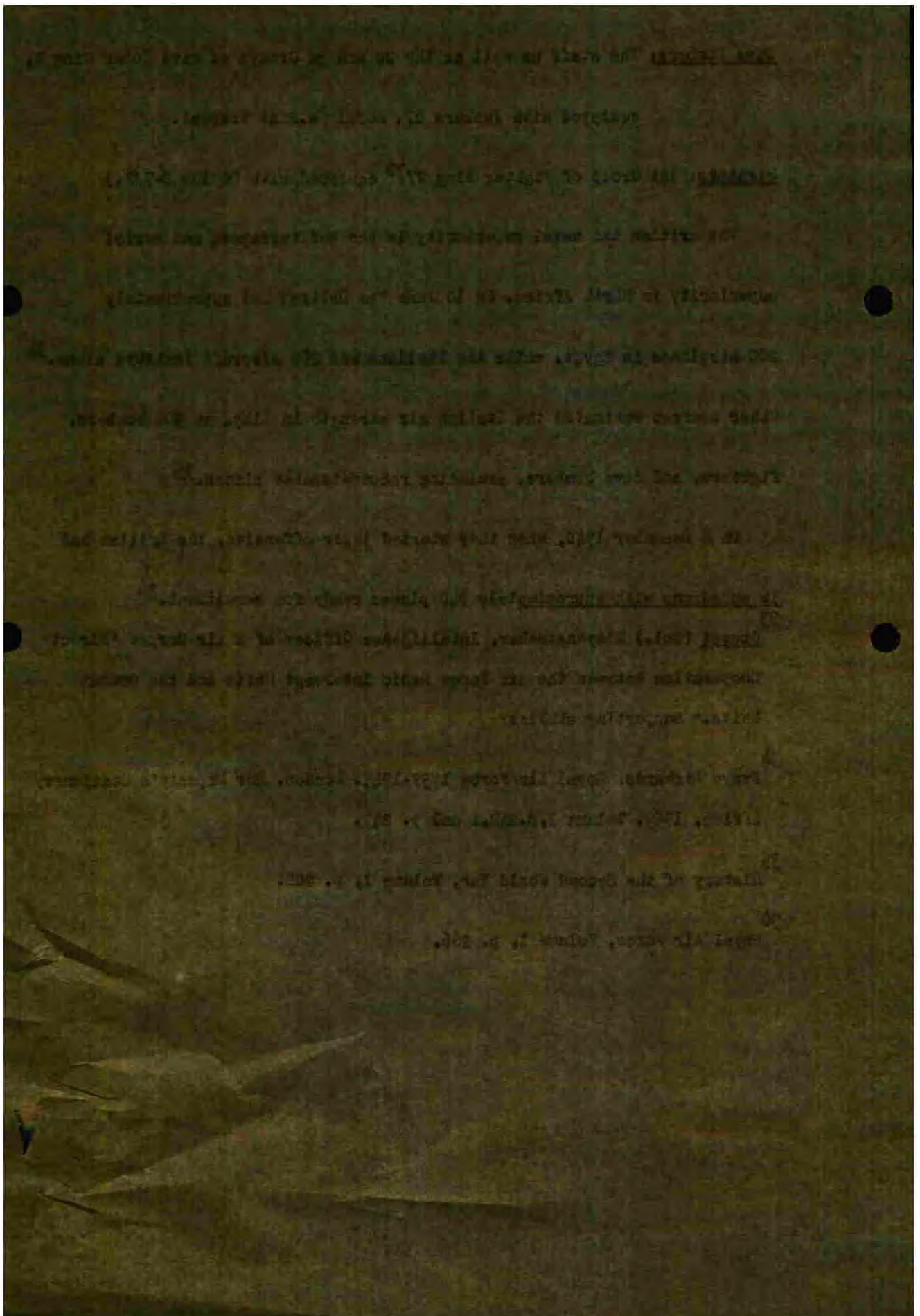
16 squadrons with approximately 240 planes ready for commitment.³⁶

³³ Oberst (Col.) Kleyenatueber, Intelligence Officer of X Air Corps: "Direct Cooperation between the Air Force Radio Intercept Units and the Combat Units." Supporting studies?

³⁴ Denys Richards: Royal Air Force 1939-1945. London. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953. Volume I, p. 242, 1 and p. 243.

³⁵ History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 208.

³⁶ Royal Air Force, Volume I, p. 266.



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In addition, the British had transferred four squadrons of bomber and fighter planes -- the 30th, 84th, 211th, and 80th Squadrons -- to Greece at the end of October 1940. The 112th Squadron turned its fighter planes ~~HERE~~ ^{over} to the Royal Greek Air Force at the ~~end~~ ^{beginning} of December.³⁷

In Malta the following forces were available on 11.IV.1941:

- No. 830 Squadron, Fleet Air Arm, 12 Swordfish Torpedoes;
- No. 261 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 16 Hurricanes (and 4 in reserve);
- No. 148 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 16 Wellingtons (and 4 in reserve);
- No. 228 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 4 Sunderland flying-boats (and 2 in reserve);
- No. 431 Flight, Royal Air Force, later redesignated to:
- No. 69 Squadron, Royal Air Force, 4 Glenn Martins for reconnaissance (and 1 in reserve).³⁸

The considerable forces of the aircraft carriers Ark Royal, Illustrious, and Eagle -- some 150 aircraft belonging to the Fleet Air Arm -- were occasionally committed in conjunction with Air Force attack units.

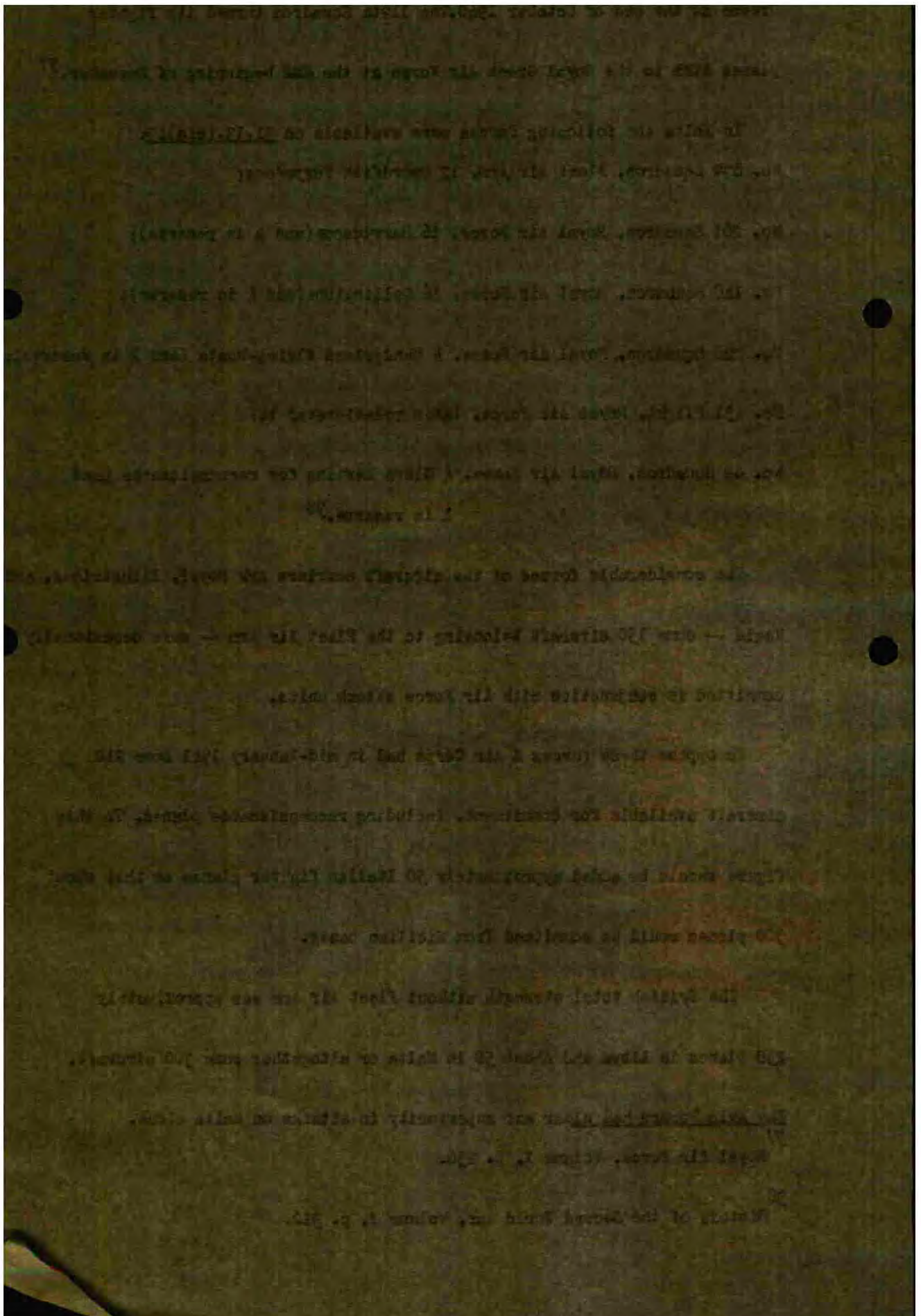
To oppose these forces I Air Corps had in mid-January 1941 some 240 aircraft available for commitment, including reconnaissance planes. To this figure should be added approximately 50 Italian fighter planes so that about 300 planes could be committed from Sicilian bases.

The British total strength without Fleet Air Arm was approximately 250 planes in Libya and about 50 in Malta or altogether some 300 aircraft.

The Axis Powers had clear air superiority in attacks on Malta alone.

³⁷ Royal Air Force, Volume I, p. 256.

³⁸ History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 312.



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During the noon hours of 10 January 1941 the German units obtained their first major success. A convoy coming from Gibraltar was being taken under the protection of Admiral Cunningham's Alexandria-based fleet, when the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* was attacked west of Malta, suffering heavy damages.³⁹ The attacks were made with great skill and determination and were quite unlike anything the fleet had experienced at the hands of the Italians.³⁹ The *Illustrious* was hit 6 times, the bombs damaged the flight deck, 9 planes were destroyed, and half the guns were put out of action. The ship's forward and aft were set afire. At about 1600 the aircraft carrier received another hit on its way to La Valetta which it reached nevertheless toward 2100. The total losses were 126 killed and 91 wounded.³⁹

The following day -- 2 January(sic) -- at about 1500 the cruiser *Southampton*, guarding part of the convoy from Gibraltar, was so badly damaged halfway between Sicily and Crete that the British were forced to abandon the ship in the evening and sink it afterward.⁴⁰

During the following days the X Air Corps concentrated its attacks, which were occasionally obstructed by bad weather, on the aircraft carrier anchored at La Valetta and the airfields Hal Far and Luqa on Malta. These attacks, taking place on 16, 18 and 19 January 1941, did not however

³⁹ History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 319.

⁴⁰ Volume I,
History of the Second World War, p. 320.

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prevent the *Illustrious* from leaving port.

The aircraft carrier left La Valetta during the night of 23 January and arrived at Alexandria on 25 January at midday. The repair crews at Malta performed a remarkable feat which was complicated by the fact that the *Illustrious* suffered additional damage while the repair work was underway.⁴¹

Even though the *Illustrious* was not sunk, the commitment of X Air Corps had far-reaching consequences. The convoy traffic across the Mediterranean was temporarily interrupted because of the inavailability of the aircraft carrier, and urgently needed supplies destined for Greece had to be re-routed via North Africa. British Royal Air Force replacements and supplies had to be detoured via Takoradi.⁴²

At that time the X Air Corps planned to paralyze the supply traffic via the Suez Canal. Initial plans called for Rhodes as attack base. But Rhodes was so short of supplies that it could not be used for that purpose until February. When agents reported that a major convoy was moving from Aden to Suez, it was decided to attack immediately.

Tobruk was under siege, with the capture of the fortress by the British an imminent threat so that only Benghazi would be available for a limited time. The distance from there to Suez was about 700 miles, which was beyond the range of Heinkel 111 planes. An additional difficulty was that Benghazi had no meteorological service or other ground installations that could be used as accessories. A Junkers 52 equipped with a radio set and DF equipment⁴¹

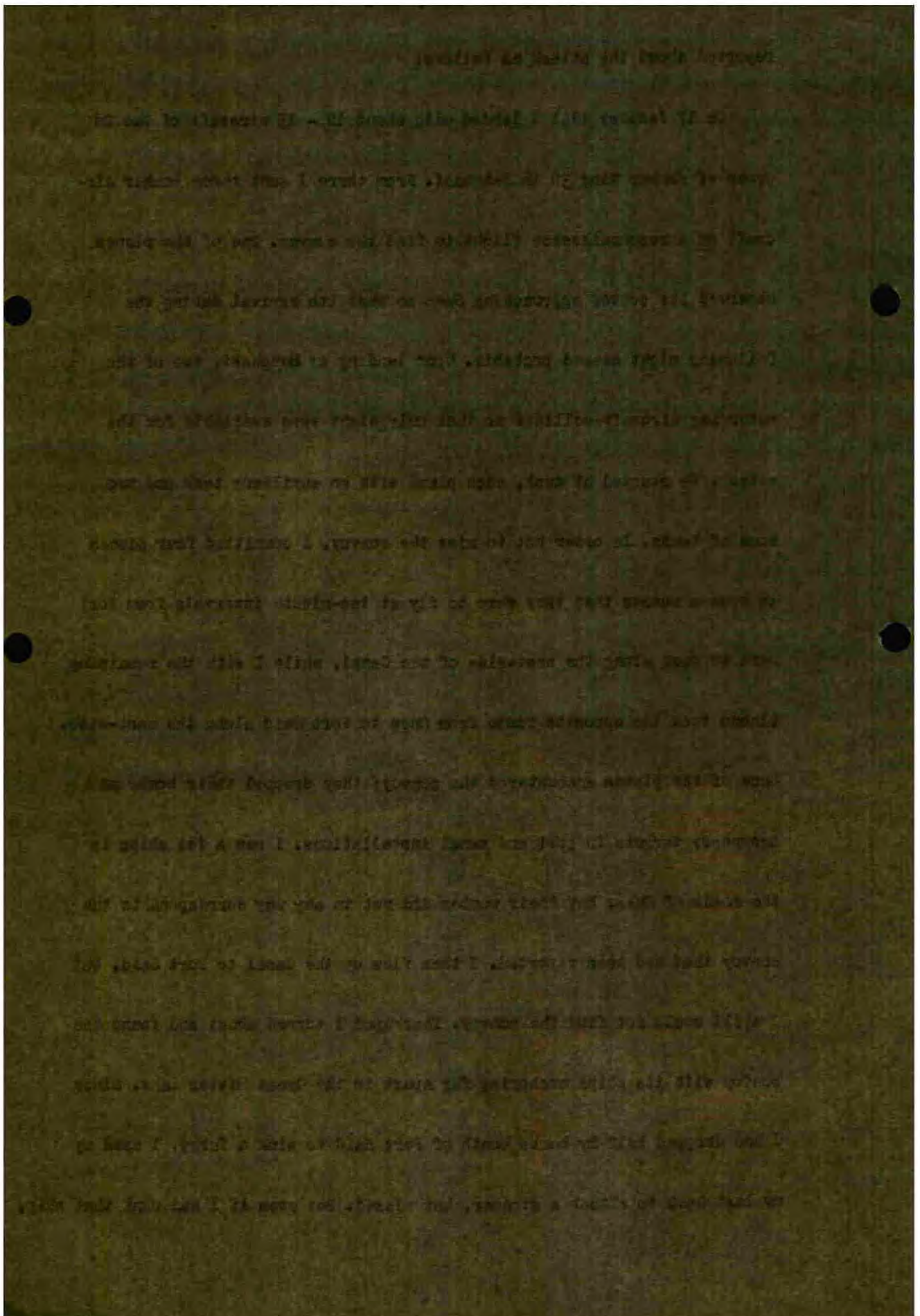
⁴¹ History of the Second World War, Volume I, pp. 321-3.

⁴² History of the Second World War, Volume I, pp. 323-4.

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had to serve as a substitute for a ground radio station. Colonel Harlinghausen requested and received permission to take personal charge of the attack, because he had a particularly sound navigational background. He reported about the attack as follows:

"On 17 January 1941 I landed with about 12 - 15 aircraft of the 2d Group of Bombar Wing 30 in Benghazi. From there I sent three bomber aircraft on a reconnaissance flight to find the convoy. One of the planes observed the convoy approaching Suez so that its arrival during the following night seemed probable. Upon landing at Benghazi, two of the returning aircraft collided so that only eight were available for the attack. We started at dusk, each plane with an auxiliary tank and two tons of bombs. In order not to miss the convoy, I committed four planes in such a manner that they were to fly at ten-minute intervals from Port Said to Suez along the west-side of the Canal, while I with the remaining planes took the opposite route from Suez to Port Said along the east-side. None of the planes encountered the convoy; they dropped their bombs on secondary targets in port and canal installations. I saw a few ships in the roads of Suez, but their number did not in any way correspond to the convoy that had been reported. I then flew up the Canal to Port Said, but I still could not find the convoy. Thereupon I turned about and found the convoy with its ships anchoring far apart in the Great Bitter Lake. Since I had dropped half my bombs south of Port Said to sink a ferry, I used my last bomb to attack a steamer, but missed. But even if I had sunk that ship,



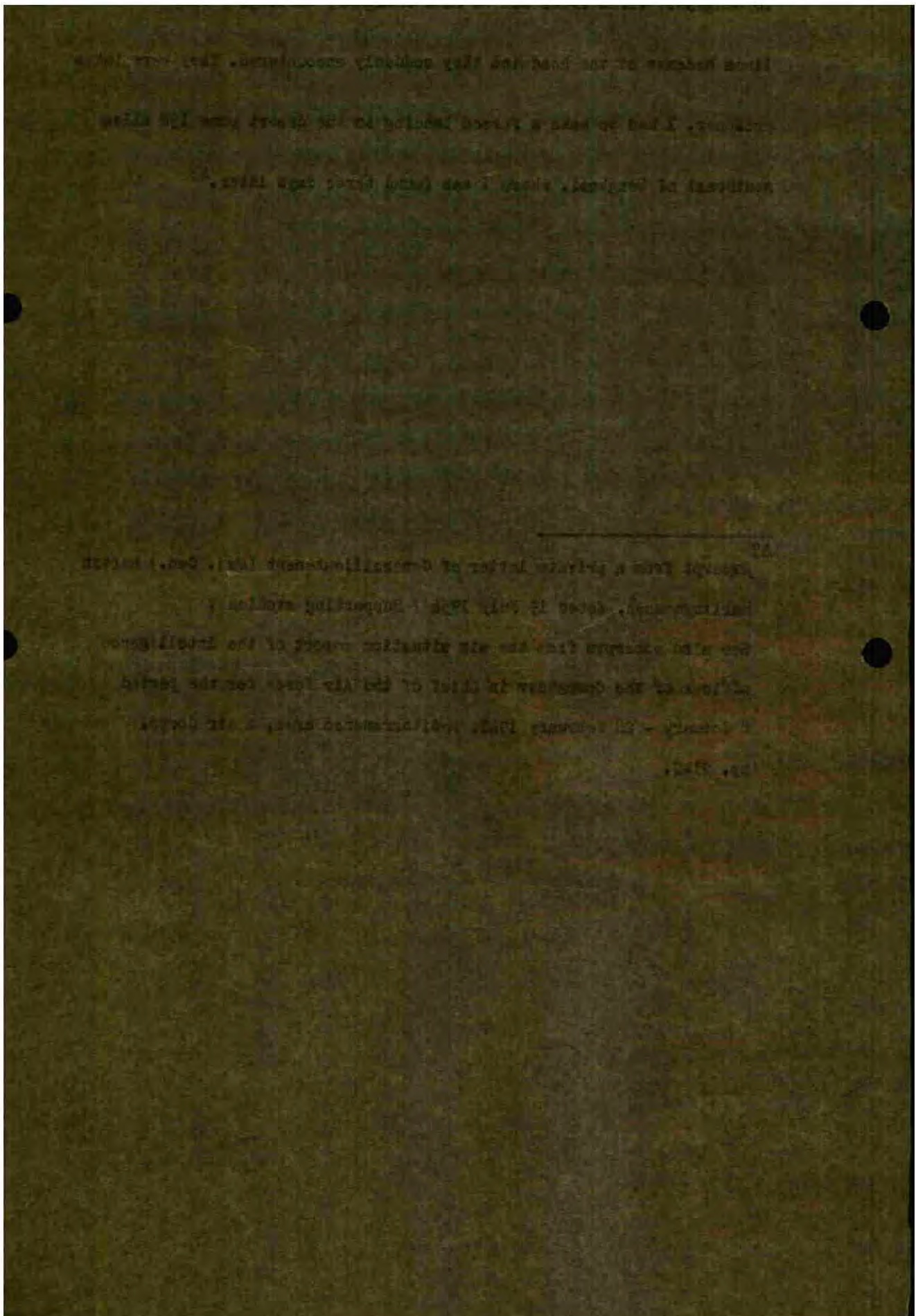
- 47 -

it would not have blocked the Canal. The attack was therefore unsuccessful. On the other hand, only one out of the eight planes returned undamaged to Benghazi; three crews had to make emergency landings behind the British lines because of the headwind they suddenly encountered. They were taken prisoner. I had to make a forced landing in the desert some 150 miles southeast of Benghazi, where I was found three days later.⁴³

⁴³

Excerpt from a private letter of General Lieutenant (Maj. Gen.) Martin Harlinghausen, dated 19 July 1954: Supporting studies?

See also excerpts from the air situation report of the intelligence officer of the Commander in Chief of the Air Force for the period 8 January - 28 February 1941, Mediterranean area, X Air Corps, pp. 21-2.



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Section III. Developments in the North African Situation during

February and March 1941. Air Brigade Commander Africa.

German Air Support for Rommel's First Offensive (24 March - 6 April 1941).

After much hesitation the Duce agreed to the transfer of an additional German armored division -- the 15th Panzer Division -- that was to join the 5th Light Division in North Africa. General Gariboldi had replaced Marshal Graziani as the Supreme Commander of the Italian and German forces in Tripolitania. Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) Rommel was appointed commander of the "German Africa Corps"; he arrived in Tripoli on 13 February 1941. The Italian High Command had transferred the armored Ariete and the motorized Trento Divisions to Africa from 17 January - 20 February 1941. Elements of the German 5th Light Division were moved in conjunction with the Italian forces. The 15th Panzer Division was to follow later.

Originally, Marshal Graziani had intended to stop the British advance along the coast near Misurata (170 miles east of Tripoli) and farther to the south of that town. He also wanted to station two divisions near the Tunisian border. The German liaison officer with the Comando Supremo, Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) von Rintelen had a private conversation with Mussolini on 9 February 1941, during which he convinced the Duce that Tripolitania would have to be defended as far to the east as possible. First, the British advance had bogged down

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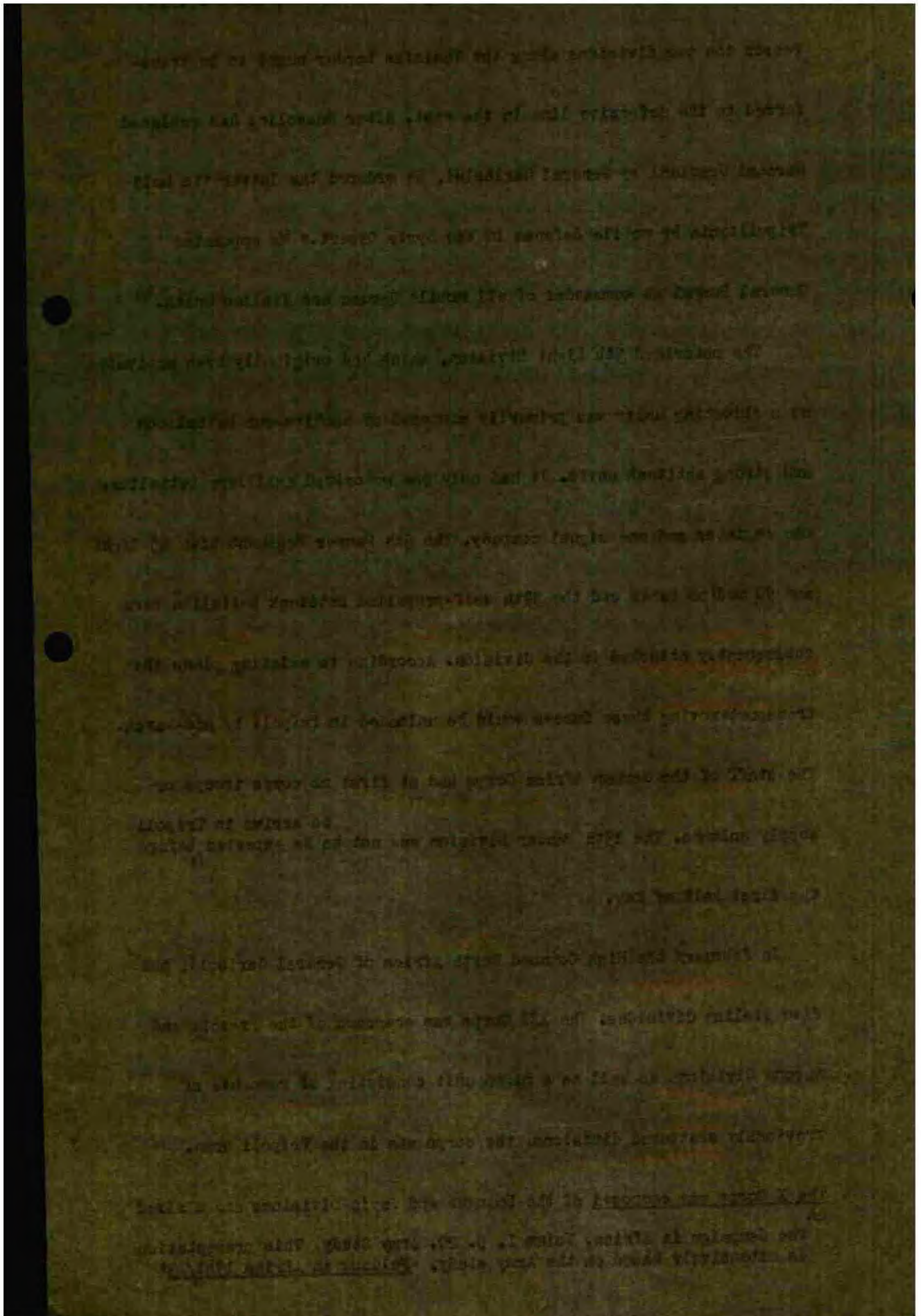
- 49 -

because a new supply base would have to be established before the offensive could be continued into Tripolitania. Moreover, the French in Tunisia would not attack before Tripoli had fallen, and for this reason the two divisions along the Tunisian border ought to be transferred to the defensive line in the east. After Mussolini had replaced Marshal Graziani by General Gariboldi, he ordered the latter "to hold Tripolitania by mobile defense in the Syrte Desert." He appointed General Rommel as commander of all mobile German and Italian units.⁴⁴

The motorized 5th Light Division, which had originally been activated as a "blocking unit" was primarily composed of machine-gun battalions and strong antitank units. It had only one motorized artillery battalion, one engineer and one signal company. The 5th Panzer Regiment with 45 light and 90 medium tanks and the 39th self-propelled antitank battalion were subsequently attached to the division. According to existing plans the transports moving these forces would be unloaded in Tripoli by mid-March. The staff of the German Africa Corps had at first no corps troops or supply columns. The 15th Panzer Division was not to arrive in Tripoli to arrive in Tripoli before the first half of May.

In February the High Command North Africa of General Gariboldi had five Italian divisions. The XXI Corps was composed of the Brescia and Savona Divisions as well as a mixed unit consisting of remnants of previously shattered divisions; the corps was in the Tripoli area.

⁴⁴ The X Corps was composed of the Bologna and Pavia Divisions and a mixed
The Campaign in Africa, Volume I, p. 20. Army Study. This presentation is extensively based on the Army study, "Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43"



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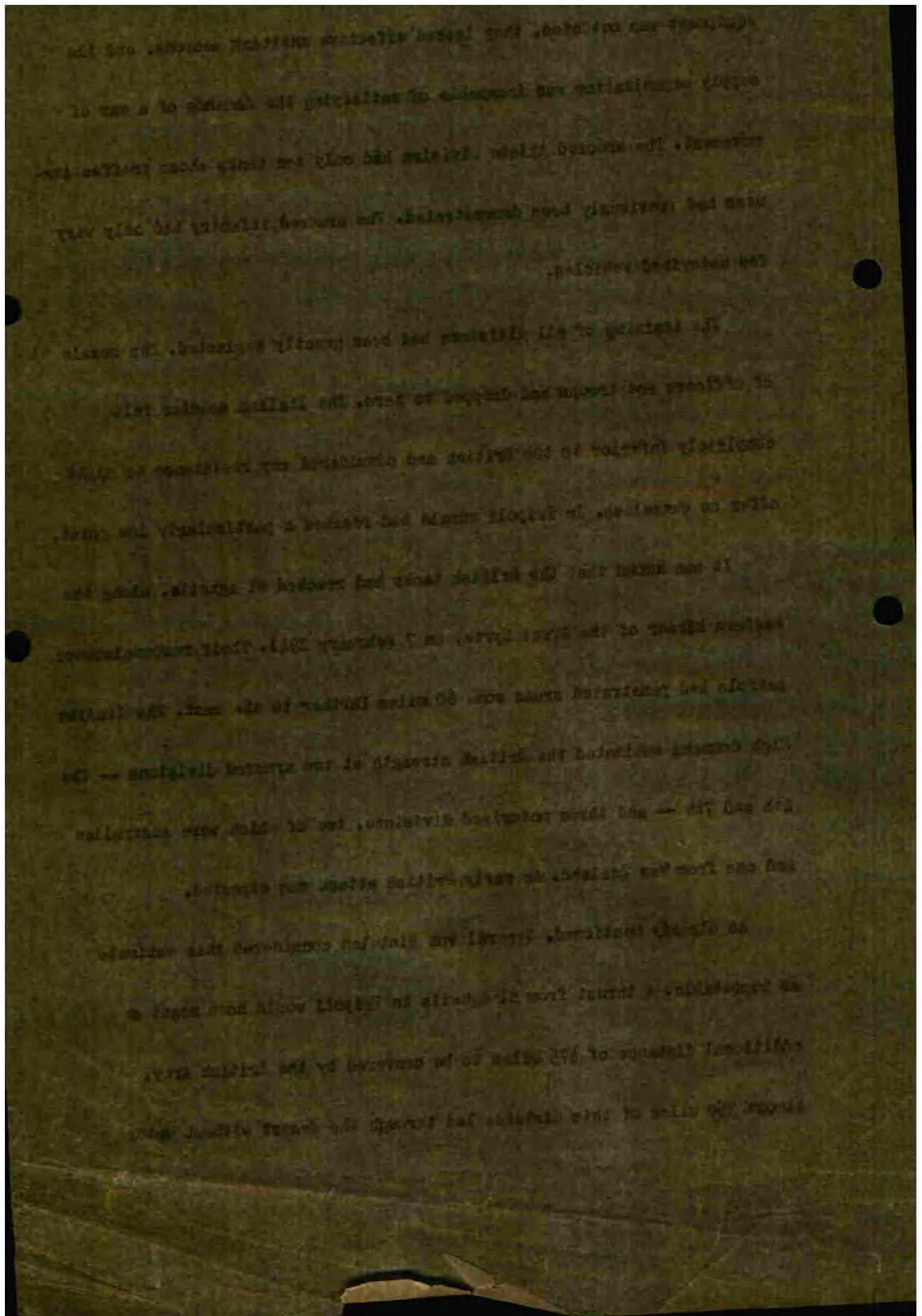
unit committed in what might be called an advance position east of the town of Syrte, with the armored Ariete Division behind it.

The combat efficiency of these Italian units was very limited. Their equipment was outdated, they lacked effective antitank weapons, and the supply organization was incapable of satisfying the demands of a war of movement. The armored Ariete Division had only ten tanks whose ineffectiveness had previously been demonstrated. The armored infantry had only very few motorized vehicles.

The training of all divisions had been greatly neglected. The morale of officers and troops had dropped to zero. The Italian soldier felt completely inferior to the British and considered any resistance he might offer as senseless. In Tripoli morale had reached a particularly low point.

It was known that the British tanks had reached El Agheila, along the eastern border of the Great Syrte, on 7 February 1941. Their reconnaissance patrols had penetrated areas some 60 miles farther to the west. The Italian High Command estimated the British strength at two armored divisions -- the 4th and 7th -- and three motorized divisions, two of which were Australian and one from New Zealand. An early British attack was expected.

As already mentioned, General von Rintelen considered this estimate as improbable. A thrust from El Agheila to Tripoli would have meant an additional distance of 475 miles to be covered by the British Army. Almost 350 miles of this distance led through the desert without water



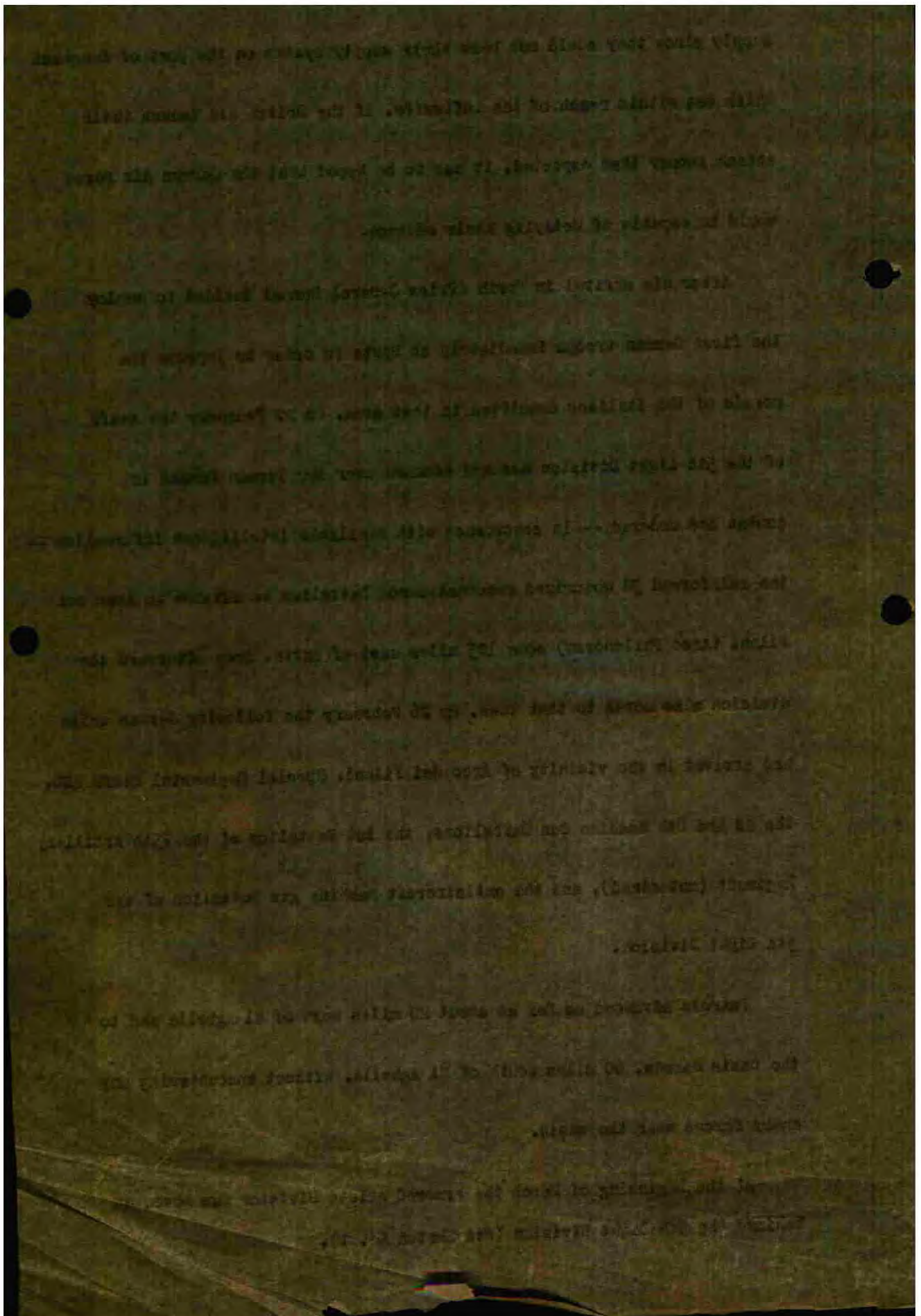
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or inhabited place. During a two-month offensive the British had advanced more than 600 miles and had suffered personnel and materiel losses that would have to be replaced. Their main difficulty would be in the field of supply since they could not base their supply system on the port of Benghazi which was within reach of the Luftwaffe. If the British did launch their attack sooner than expected, it was to be hoped that the German Air Force would be capable of delaying their advance.

After his arrival in North Africa General Rommel decided to employ the first German troops immediately at Syrte in order to improve the morale of the Italians committed in that area. On 22 February the staff of the 5th Light Division assumed command over the German forces in combat and ordered -- in accordance with available intelligence information -- the reinforced 3d motorized reconnaissance battalion to advance to Arco dei Fileni (Arco Philenorum) some 105 miles east of Syrte. Soon afterward the division also moved to that town. By 26 February the following German units had arrived in the vicinity of Arco dei Fileni: Special Regimental Staff 200, the 2d and 8th Machine Gun Battalions; the 1st Battalion of the 75th Artillery Regiment (motorized), and the antiaircraft machine gun battalion of the 5th Light Division.

Patrols advanced as far as about 20 miles west of El Agheila and to the Oasis Marada, 60 miles south of El Agheila, without encountering any enemy forces near the oasis.

At the beginning of March the armored Ariete Division was moved up behind the 5th Light Division (See Sketch No. 1).



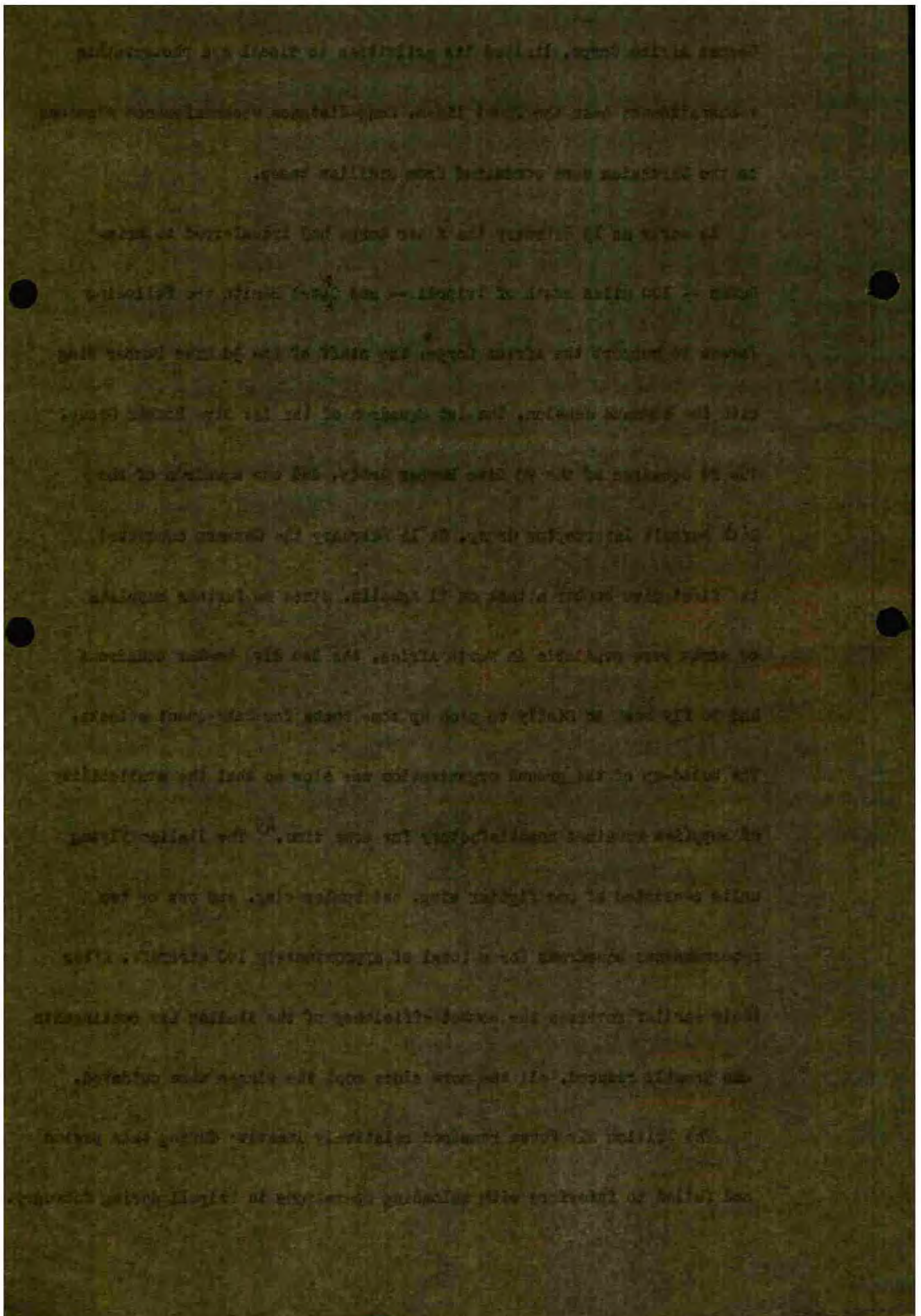
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During this period the enemy forces remained passive, displaying only minor reconnaissance activities.

The 2d Squadron of Heinkel ^{126's} 14 (7), which was subordinate to the German Africa Corps, limited its activities to visual and photographic reconnaissance near the front lines. Long-distance reconnaissance missions in the Cyrenaica were conducted from Sicilian bases.

As early as 13 February the X Air Corps had transferred to Brix-Dafan -- 100 miles south of Tripoli -- and Castel Benito the following forces to support the Africa Corps: The staff of the 3d Dive Bomber Wing with the command echelon, the 1st Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group, the 2d Squadron of the 2d Dive Bomber Group, and one squadron of the 26th Pursuit Interceptor Group. On 14 February the Germans conducted the first dive bomber attack on El Aghella. Since no further supplies of bombs were available in North Africa, the two dive bomber squadrons had to fly back to Sicily to pick up some bombs for subsequent attacks. The build-up of the ground organization was slow so that the availability of supplies remained unsatisfactory for some time.⁴⁵ The Italian flying units consisted of one fighter wing, one bomber wing, and one or two reconnaissance squadrons for a total of approximately 100 aircraft. After their earlier reverses the combat efficiency of the Italian air contingents was greatly reduced, all the more since most the planes were outdated.

The British Air Force remained relatively inactive during this period and failed to interfere with unloading operations in Tripoli during February.



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In order to guarantee effective air support in North Africa,

45

Walter

Oberstleutnant (Lt. Col.) Enneser, II./Stuka² auf Sizilien;

B.1. - 12.2. und in Afrika: 13.2. - 18.10.41; Karlsruhe Collection,

pp. 17 - 18.

* Sketch No. 2.



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The agency "Air Brigade Commander Africa" was established on 20 February and Generallieutenant (Maj. Gen.) Froehlich with a corresponding staff was appointed to that position. He arrived at Syrte at the beginning of March; for the time being he remained under the tactical command of X Air Corps which made available the aircraft he needed. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe had outlined his mission as follows:

"The Air Brigade Commander Africa will direct and commit the elements of the German Air Force employed in the African theater of war -- such as flying and antiaircraft units -- in a manner that will guarantee maximum support of the Army units employed in that area."⁴⁶

The following flying units were assigned to him:

and after
On 25 February -- Dive Bomber Units: The staff of the 3d Dive Bomber Wing.

the 1st Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group, the 2d Squadron of the 2d Dive Bomber Group.

Fighter Units: The 1st Squadron of the 27th Fighter Group.*

On and after 1 May: Reconnaissance Units: One pair of aircraft from the 1st Squadron of F 121's.

Bomber Units: One third of the 3d Squadron of the First

Air Command (X).

⁴⁶
Generallieutenant (Maj Gen.) Froehlich, "Fliegerfuehrer Afrika," p. 4. Karlsruhe Collection.

* Translator's Note: This information is in contradiction with that given on previous page: The arrival date indicated there is 13 February and the fighter unit has a different designation.

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Dive Bomber Units: The 3d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Wing from 10 April to 8 May, and the 2d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Wing after 8 May.⁴⁷

In addition, the following units were subordinate to the Air Brigade

Commander Africa: Air Force Signal Units: the 3d Battalion of the 40th

Air Force Signal Regiment and the 11th Company of the 30th Air Force Signal Regiment; the 2d Air Force High Command Signal Platoon; and indistinctly designated elements of the 6th Air Force Command Signal Regiment with three air force signal companies (?).

Antiaircraft Units: 81st Flak Battalion, the 2d Battalion of the 25th Flak Regiment, the 114th Reserve Flak Battalion as well as flak transport and POL trucking units and medical units.

The Air Force Commander attached to the Africa Corps had control over the following units: The 2d Squadron of Henschel 126's /14 (Tr. ?),

and a special messenger squadron, the 1st Battalions of the 18th and 33d

Flak Regiments, the 9th and 10th Companies of the 25th Flak Regiments,⁴⁷

Feldzeugführer Afrika for the time from 25 February to 19 June 1941

(The sources used were the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command (wall charts) pertaining to the disposition of flying units) Sheet 1 (Karlsruhe Collection).

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as well as one flak special equipment repair shop, which was motorized.⁴⁸

The following airfields were immediately available: Bir Dufan, situated some 100 miles southeast of Tripoli, Syrte, and Castel Benito, near Tripoli.

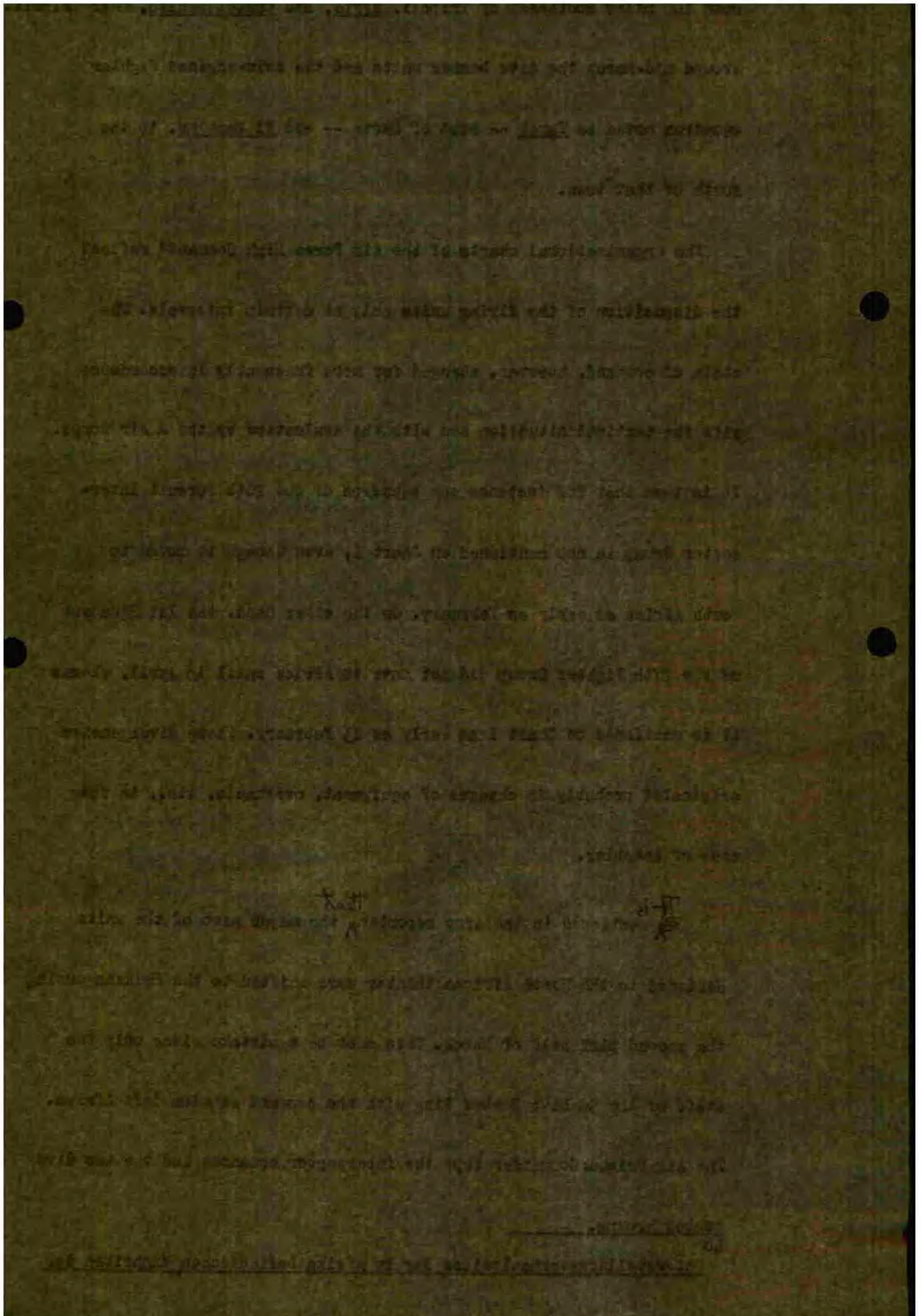
Around mid-March the dive bomber units and the twin-engined fighter squadron moved to Tamet -- west of Syrte -- and El Machina, to the south of that town.

The organizational charts of the Air Force High Command⁶ reflect the disposition of the flying units only at certain intervals. The chain of command, however, changed far more frequently in accordance with the tactical situation and with the evaluation by the X Air Corps. It is thus that for instance one squadron of the 26th Pursuit Interceptor Group is not mentioned on Chart 1, even though it moved to North Africa as early as February. On the other hand, the 1st Squadron of the 27th Fighter Group did not move to Africa until 15 April, whereas it is mentioned on Chart 1 as early as 25 February. These divergencies originated probably in changes of equipment, overhauls, etc., in the zone of interior.

^{It is} mentioned in the Army reports^{that} the major part of the units assigned to the North African theater were shifted to the Balkans during the second ~~half~~ half of March. This must be a mistake since only the staff of the 3d Dive Bomber Wing with the command echelon left Africa. The Air Brigade Commander kept the interceptor squadron and the two dive bomber groups.

⁴⁸

Unterstellungsverhältnisse der in Afrika befindlichen Einheiten der



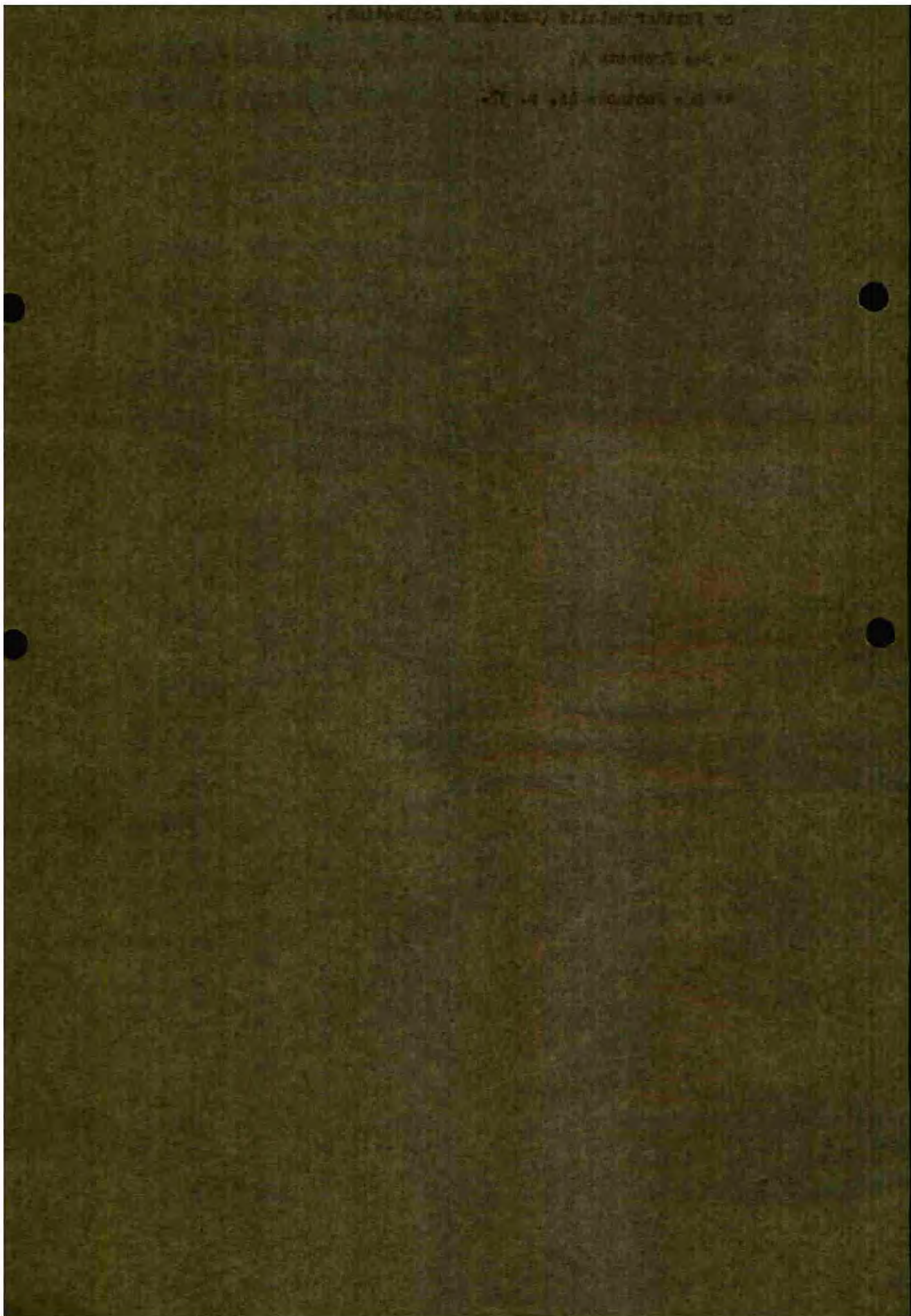
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(Continuation of footnote 48)

Luftwaffe Anfang 1941 (Order of Battle of the Luftwaffe units employed in North Africa at the beginning of 1941) without date or further details (Karlsruhe Collection).

* See Footnote 47

** See Footnote 44, p. 37.



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(Enneccerus p. 18, Footnote 45)

Apparently, the cooperation between the German Africa Corps and the X Air Corps was anything but close. The above Army manuscript never mentions the intervention of X Air Corps during the period 1 March - 7 April in the Tobruk-Benghazi-El Agheila area where the flying units were very active.⁴⁹

General Cariboldi had meanwhile given in to Rommel's urging and had moved the armored Ariete Division and the partly motorized Brescia Division up to Arco del Fileni. Eventually he even agreed to putting the Brescia Division under Afrika Corps control so that Rommel could pull the bulk of the 5th Light Division out of the forward area.

There still was no accurate information on enemy strength. British inactivity led to the conclusion that the enemy forces were weaker than the Italian High Command had assumed. On the other hand, the Royal Air Force had recently made more numerous and successful attacks on the unloading operations in Tripoli. So far, damages to airfields had been minor.

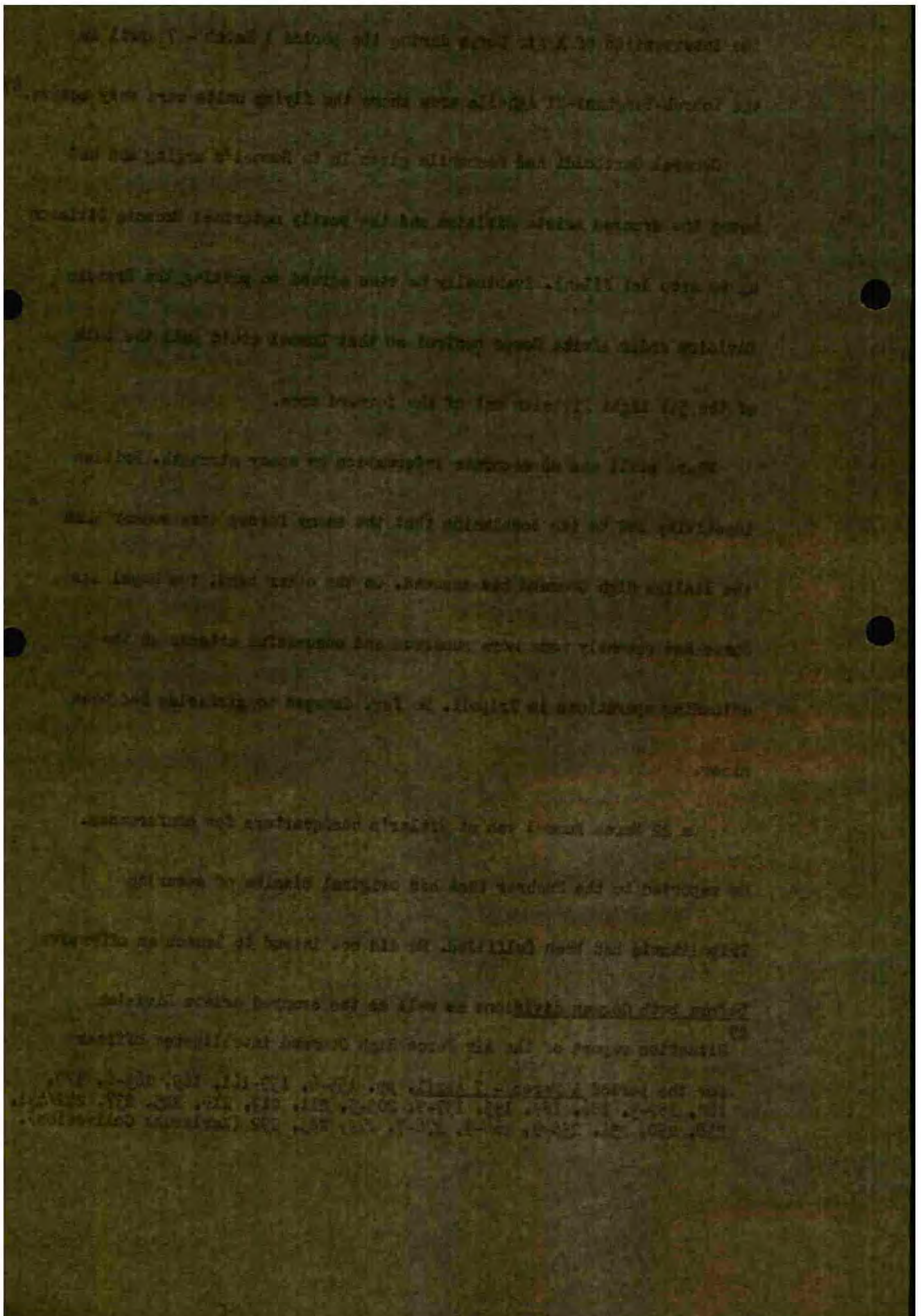
On 22 March Rommel was at Hitler's headquarters for conferences.

He reported to the Fuehrer that his original mission of securing Tripolitania had been fulfilled. He did not intend to launch an offensive

before both German divisions as well as the armored Ariete Division

⁴⁹ Situation report of the Air Force High Command intelligence officer

for the period 1 March - 7 April, pp. 155-6, 159-161, 163, 165-8, 170, 180, 182-3, 186, 189, 195, 197-9, 203-5, 211, 213, 219, 225, 237, 242/431, 248, 250, 254, 258-9, 268-9, 276-7, 279, 285, 292 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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and the motorized Trento Division had been fully assembled. The date for launching such an offensive was not determined during that conference. On the following day Rommel reported to Mussolini, giving him the same information, whereupon he flew back to North Africa.

The 5th Light Division had meanwhile prepared a reconnaissance thrust on El Agheila. Rommel was in full agreement with this plan; he made Gbatit, (Lt.Col.) Freiherr von Wechmar and his reinforced motorized artillery battalion responsible for the capture of El Agheila on 24 March.

At that time neither the German nor the Italian military authorities knew that the British had begun in mid-February to withdraw considerable forces from Libya in order to move them to Greece.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore had also been forced to transfer four fighter and bomber squadrons -- the 11th, 33d, 113th, and 112th -- to Greece; these were followed by the 208th on 6 April. Only four squadrons remained in Libya: the 3d and 73d Fighter Squadron, the 55th Bomber and Long-Distance Reconnaissance Squadron, and the 6th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron.

Although British reconnaissance crews reported the presence of German along the front line, Cairo headquarters doubted that major units were thus committed. On 2 March, when the British ascertained that a German armored brigade had already arrived in Africa and that reinforcements were following, General Wavell reported to London that a major German offensive before the end of the summer was unlikely because of the long distance from Tripoli to Benghazi, the scarcity of Axis shipping space, and the

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approaching hot season.⁵⁰

Rommel, however, realized instinctively how weak the British really were after the IAKHMI reconnaissance thrust in force on El Agheila had succeeded. He captured Marsa el Brega on 31 March and Agadabia on 2 April against stiffening British resistance.

The German success at Agadabia opened the way into the Cyrenaica. Moreover, major combat efficient enemy units had been severely defeated during this engagement. The British lost quantities of materiel and were withdrawing to Benghazi.

Rommel
On 2 April had to make an important decision. Was he to follow Gariboldi's orders and his own plans that he had submitted to Hitler only a few days ago? In that case he would have to stop the offensive and wait until the Italians had moved up and the 15th Panzer Division had arrived. Or was he to take advantage of his victory by pursuing the defeated British forces immediately and destroying them before they had time to build up a defensive position? Was he to launch the pursuit in a frontal attack on Benghazi or was he to move across the unknown desert and attempt to overtake the British by a thrust on
Ain-el-Gazala? The latter decision, which ~~unrepeatedly~~ appealed to him more than the others, was adopted by Rommel who issued the corresponding orders on the battlefield of Agadabia on 2 April.

⁵⁰

Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, pp. 284, 286-7.

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While relatively weak forces, consisting of the 3d motorized Artillery Battalion and the partly motorized Brescia Division launched a pursuit via Benghazi toward Derna, the bulk of the forces, namely the 5th Light Division and the 5th Panzer Regiment, advanced in two columns across the desert via El Mechili (Mekili) in the direction of the Via Balbia to cut off the British troops' withdrawal. Benghazi was captured as early as 4 April, but in front of Derna the enemy forces offered strong resistance in order to cover the withdrawal movement. At the same time the advance across the desert presented far greater difficulties than Rommel had expected. The 5th Panzer Regiment lost its way and bogged down when its supply vehicles were stopped by low-level air attacks and were later unable to find the regimental combat vehicles.

The Germans were unable to seize Mekili until 7 April when they overcame the last resistance after heavy fighting. They captured 2,000 prisoners, including 5 generals. The most prominent of these were the Commander of the British VIII Corps, General Neame, and the Commander of the British 7th Armoured Division, General O'Connor. The great booty of motor vehicles, POL, and rations permitted the Germans to continue the operation sooner than could otherwise have been expected. When the 5th Light Division finally reached TMIMI, west of Ain-el Gazala, on 8 April, the bulk of the British forces had escaped the trap. Derna with its airfield had been captured the day before.

The 2d Reconnaissance Squadron (H) M., commanded by OBSTIE. (Lt.Col.) Heymors, gave extremely valuable assistance during this fighting, particularly

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at Mechili, by performing reconnaissance missions without letup even during unfavorable weather. The dive-bomber group supported the ground operations with only weak elements until 2 April. Soon after the start of the operation the group was moved to Arco dei Fileni and after the fall of Benghazi to the Benina airfield, some 10 miles east of Benghazi. During the rapid pursuit in the direction of Mechili the dive bombers could not be committed because of the defective ground organization.*

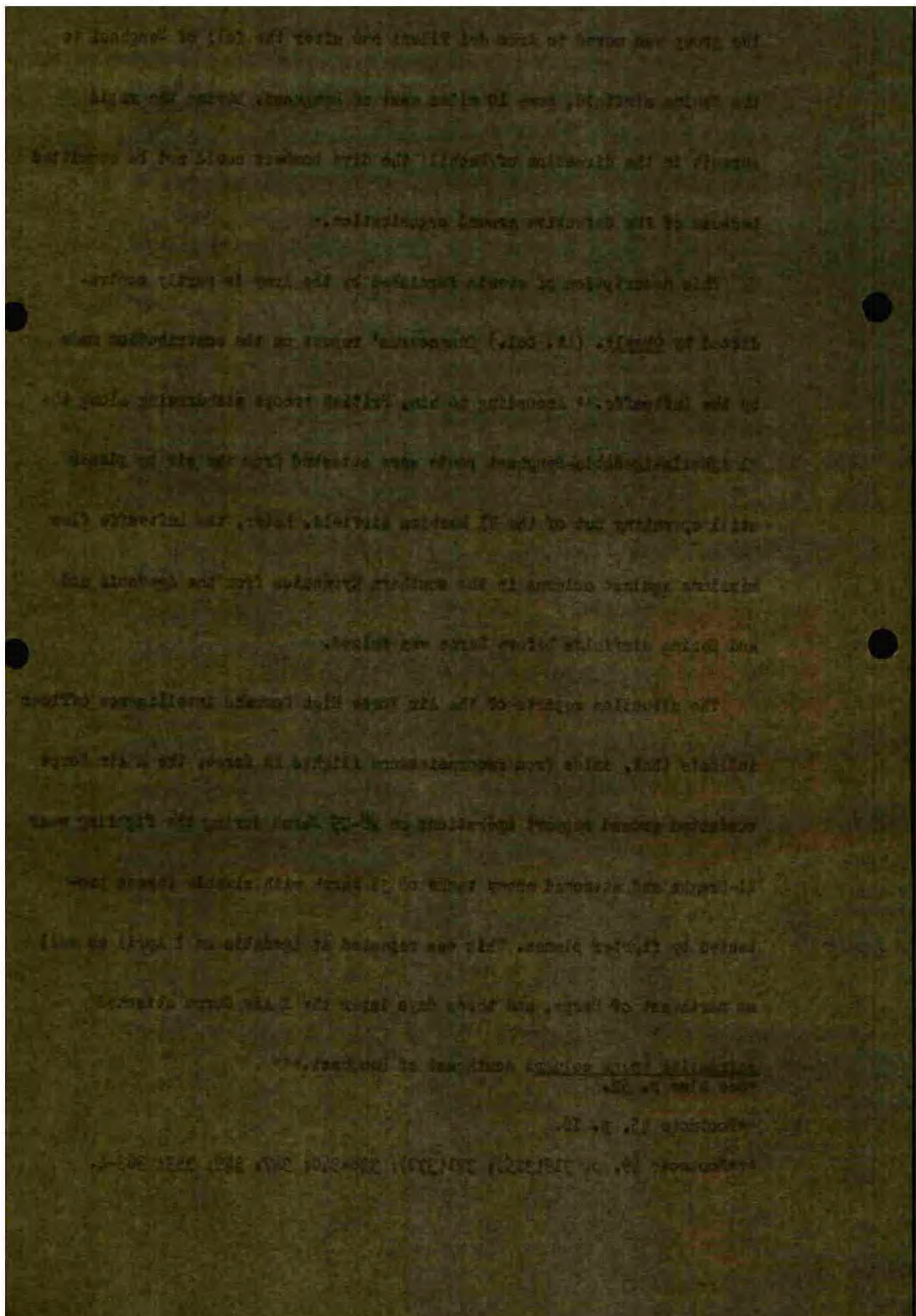
This description of events furnished by the Army is partly contradicted by Ghatli. (Lt. Col.) Ennecerus' report on the contribution made by the Luftwaffe.** According to him, British troops withdrawing along the El Agheila-Agedabia-Benghazi route were attacked from the air by planes still operating out of the El Machina airfield. Later, the Luftwaffe flew missions against columns in the southern Cyrenaica from the Agedabia and Benina airfields before Derna was seized.

The situation reports of the Air Force High Command intelligence officer indicate that, aside from reconnaissance flights in force, the X Air Corps conducted ground support operations on 28-29 March during the fighting near El-Brega and attacked enemy tanks on 31 March with sizable forces protected by fighter planes. This was repeated at Agedabia on 1 April as well as northeast of Brega, and three days later the X Air Corps attacked retreating enemy columns southeast of Benghazi.***

*See also p. 52.

**Footnote 45, p. 18.

***Footnote 49, pp 319(325); 321(332); 338-340; 347; 349; 353; 363-4.



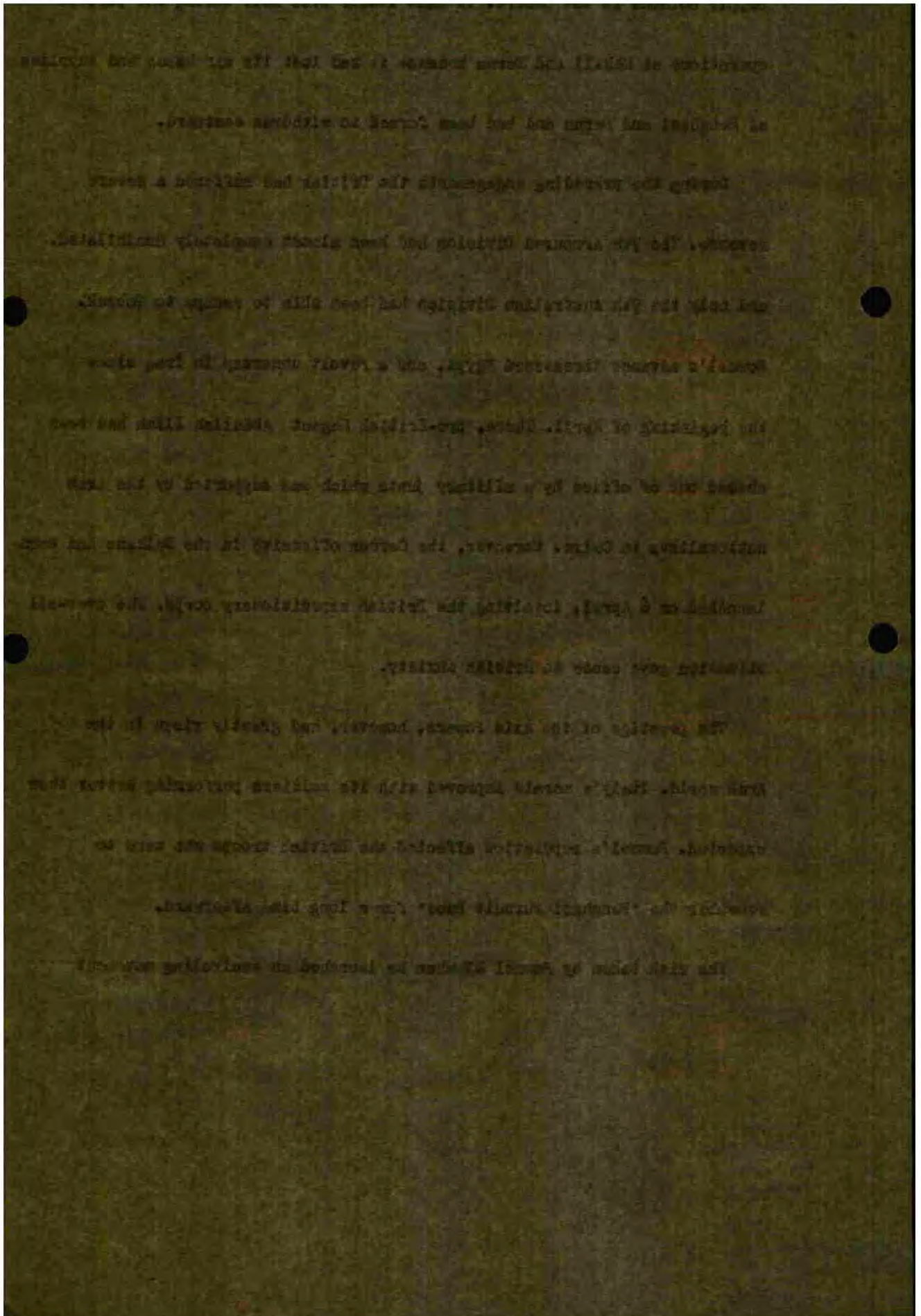
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The British Air Force had strongly intervened in the fighting at Marsa-el-Bregha and at Agedabia and had inflicted serious damage on the supply columns in the desert. It made itself less felt during the pursuit operations at Mekili and Derna because it had lost its air bases and supplies at Benghazi and Derna and had been forced to withdraw eastward.

During the preceding engagements the British had suffered a severe reverse. The 7th Armoured Division had been almost completely annihilated, and only the 9th Australian Division had been able to escape to Tobruk. Rommel's advance threatened Egypt, and a revolt underway in Iraq since the beginning of April. There, pro-British Regent Abdullah Iliah had been chased out of office by a military junta which was supported by the Arab nationalists in Cairo. Moreover, the German offensive in the Balkans had been launched on 6 April, involving the British expeditionary corps. The over-all situation gave cause to British anxiety.

The prestige of the Axis Powers, however, had greatly risen in the Arab world. Italy's morale improved with its soldiers performing better than expected. Rommel's reputation affected the British troops who were to remember the "Benghazi Pursuit Race" for a long time afterward.

The risk taken by Rommel ~~XX~~ when he launched an encircling movement



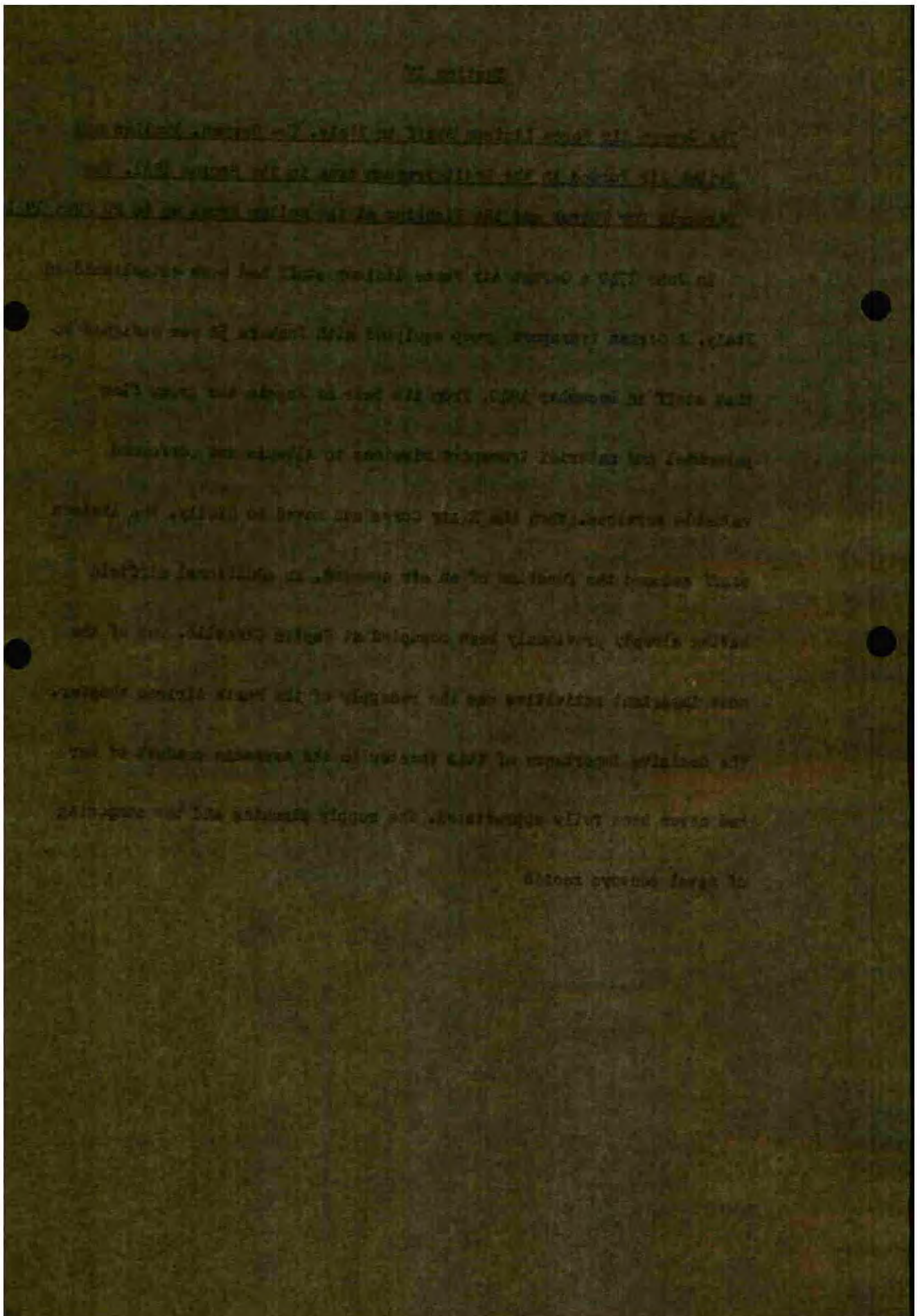
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across the desert had been crowned with success. Despite all the difficulties encountered in the desert, the German soldiers had performed excellently and had gathered valuable experiences.

Section IV

The German Air Force Liaison Staff in Italy. The German, Italian and British Air Forces in the Mediterranean Area in the Spring 1941. The Struggle for Tobruk and the Fighting at the Sollum Front up to 20 June 1941.

In June 1940 a German Air Force liaison staff had been established in Italy. A German transport group equipped with Junkers 52 was assigned to that staff in December 1940. From its base at Foggia the group flew personnel and materiel transport missions to Albania and performed valuable services. When the X Air Corps was moved to Sicily, the liaison staff assumed the function of an air command, an additional airfield having already previously been occupied at Naples Cancelli. One of the most important activities was the resupply of the North African theater. The decisive importance of this theater to the overseas conduct of war had never been fully appreciated. The supply planning and the composing of naval convoys rested



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with the Italian Navy and the supply and logistics agencies in Rome.

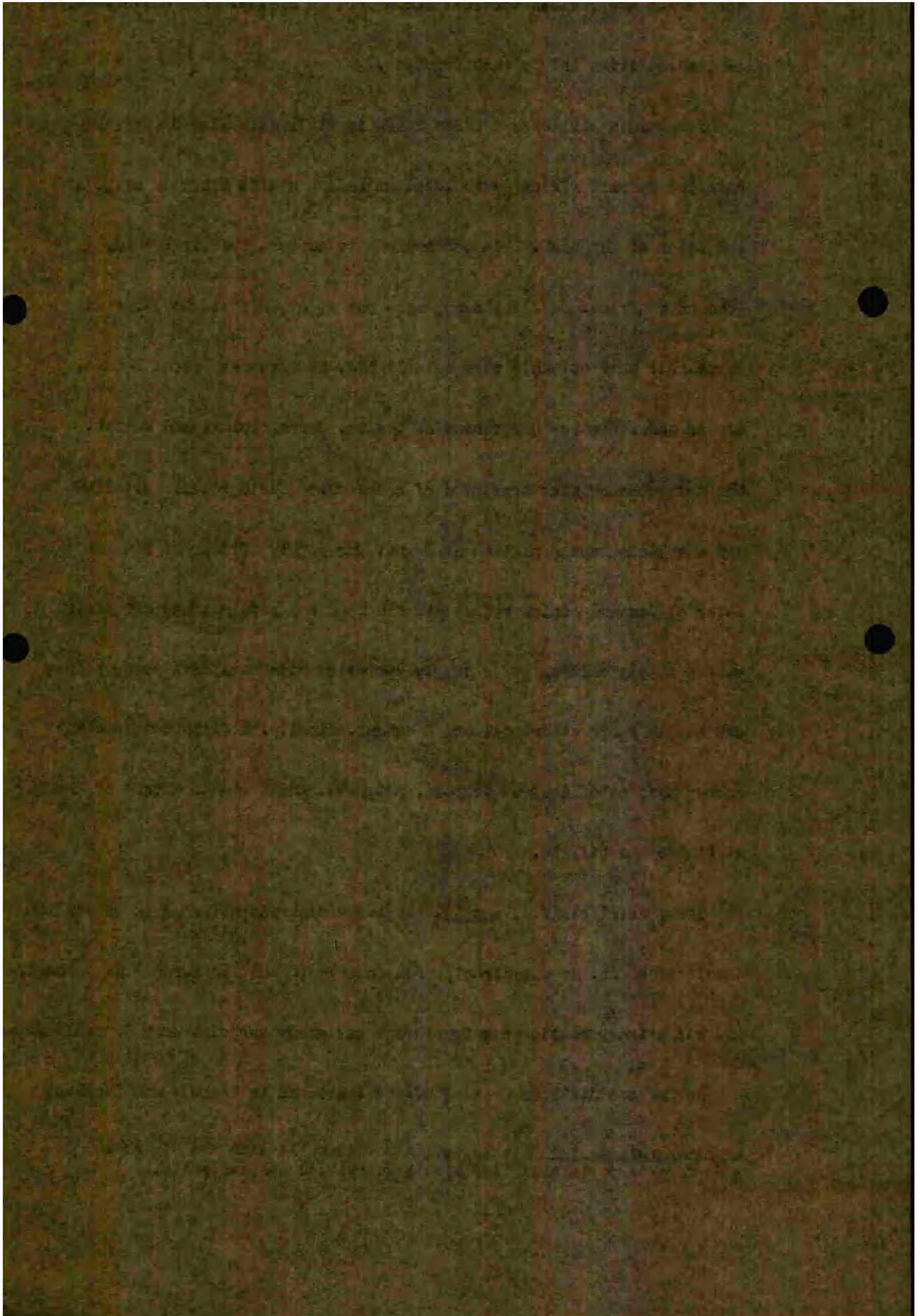
The air protection of the convoys, however, was the responsibility of the German and Italian tactical commanders in Sicily. This division of responsibilities led to much friction.

The German Air Force Liaison Staff in Italy established an "Air Materiel Command Africa" with local unloading staffs first in Tripoli and later at Benghazi. This command was to support the Air Brigade Commander Africa. Gasoline dumps were set up at Tripoli and later at Derna. Air Base commands were established, at first at Castel Benito, and as the offensive progressed at Benina, Derna, Timi, and Gumbut. The maintenance units consisted of a motorized field repair battalion and a vehicle repair platoon at Derna. The supply officer of the Air Materiel Command Africa had at his disposal one supply transport staff with 6 supply columns and 2 supply companies with equipment issue points and supply dumps at Tripoli and Benghazi. Finally, a field construction agency with suboffices at Tripoli, Benghazi, and Derna took care of the airfields and billets.

The special staff of Hauptm. (Capt.) Bleich was attached to an Italian desert squadron. He was directly responsible to the Air Force High Command, and his primary mission was to prevent any enemy surprise from Central Africa.*

German sea distress area squadrons stationed in Tripoli and Benghazi were subordinate to I Air Corps; in addition, Italian sea distress

* No reports pertaining to Bleich's activities are available.



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squadrons were responsible for rescue operations.⁵¹

There were two bottlenecks through which all supplies had to pass.

First, the sea voyage from Naples and then the ever longer distances on the African continent. Except for the short lines from Benghazi to Sollum in the south and Barca in the East, there were no rail communications; the entire traffic had to use the improved Via Balbia or cross the desert. The distance along the coastal road from Tripoli to Benghazi is about 600 miles, and from there to Sollum along the Via Balbia also along the coast it is almost 400 miles. The total distance is therefore nearly 1,000 miles. Since the desert has nothing to offer except for a few water holes, the volume of supplies needed to maintain the flow of equipment and rations ^{was} ~~is~~ tremendous. Transport planes were frequently used to move supplies by air; during these supply missions the Italians showed that they were unable to fly blind (only by instruments).

Desert flying presented no technical difficulties. Filters built into the intake tube could not fully prevent fine dust from penetrating into the motor. The best thing to do was to clean gasoline, air, and oil filters every two days. Ammunition also had to be frequently taken out of magazines and cleaned with gasoline if one wanted the casing to remain intact. The

⁵¹ Genl. Luftwaffe (Lt. Gen.) Ritter von Pohl, Verbindungsstab der deutschen Luftwaffe bei der Kgl. Italienischen Luftwaffe (German Air Liaison Staff in Italy), pp. 1-3; 5-7; 9 (Karlsruhe Collection).

See also Footnote 48, p. 56.

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most exacting strain for the crews was the temperature in the cockpit which rose to almost 158°F on hot days.

Because of continuous attacks on Malta and the air protection offered in the Tripoli area only 20,000 out of 220,000 tons of supplies were lost during February and March 1941.⁵²

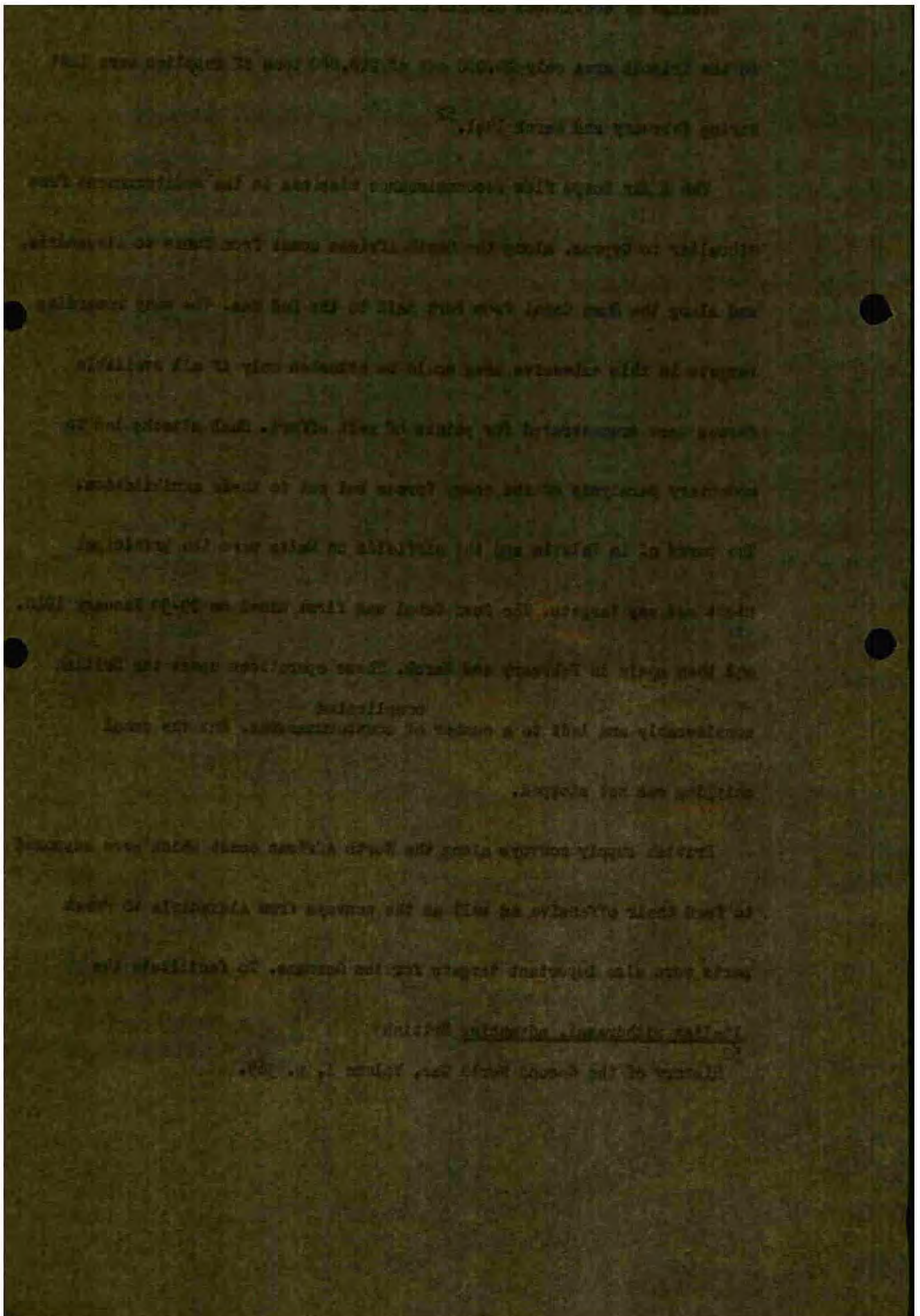
The I Air Corps flew reconnaissance missions in the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Cyprus, along the North African coast from Tunis to Alexandria, and along the Suez Canal from Port Said to the Red Sea. The many rewarding targets in this extensive area could be attacked only if all available forces were concentrated for points of main effort. Such attacks led to momentary paralysis of the enemy forces but not to their annihilation. The ports of La Valetta and the airfields on Malta were the principal night and day targets. The Suez Canal was first mined on 29-30 January 1940, and then again in February and March. These operations upset the British considerably and led to a number of ^{complicated} countermeasures. But the canal shipping was not stopped.

British supply convoys along the North African coast which were supposed to feed their offensive as well as the convoys from Alexandria to Greek ports were also important targets for the Germans. To facilitate the

Italian withdrawal, advancing British

⁵²

History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 369.



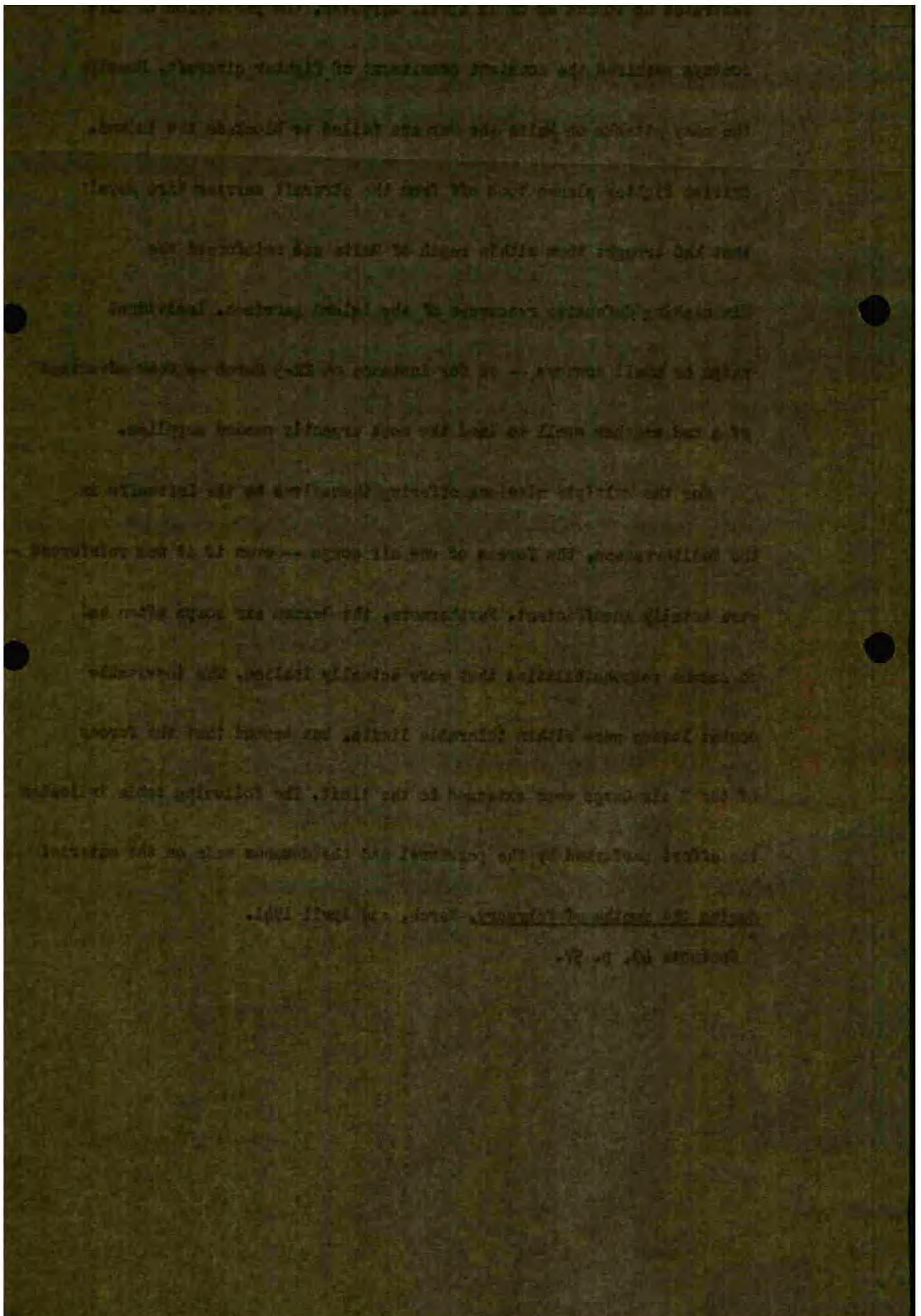
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armored points and their supply dumps were attacked from the air.^{*}

After Rommel's successful advance the German air attacks were concentrated on Tobruk as of 12 April. Moreover, the protection of Axis convoys required the constant commitment of fighter aircraft. Despite the many attacks on Malta the Germans failed to blockade the island. British fighter planes took off from the aircraft carrier "Ark Royal" that had brought them within reach of Malta and reinforced the diminishing defensive resources of the island garrison. Individual ships or small convoys -- as for instance on 22-3 March -- took advantage of a bad weather spell to land the most urgently needed supplies.

For the multiple missions offering themselves to the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, the forces of one air corps -- even if it was reinforced -- were totally insufficient. Furthermore, the German air corps often had to assume responsibilities that were actually Italian. The inevitable combat losses were within tolerable limits, but beyond that the forces of the I Air Corps were extended to the limit. The following table indicates the effort performed by the personnel and the demands made on the materiel during the months of February, March, and April 1941.

^{*} Footnote 49, p. 57.



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The monthly average performance was:

1,061 hours of flying, with 1,244 as top performance for the 2d Squadron

of the 26th Bomber Group;

1,377 hours of flying, with 1,516 hours as top performance for the 3d

Squadron of the 26th Interceptor Group;

2,770 hours of flying, with a top performance of 3,688 hours for the

3d Squadron of the Special Purpose Transport Group.

In evaluating these figures one must consider that the number of planes that were ready for commitment was about 50 percent ~~of~~ of the normal strength.⁵³

During the period 1 February - 30 April 93,000 tons of enemy shipping were sunk and 359,000 tons damaged. These figures were very carefully examined and partly substantiated by aerial photographs.

The Army General Staff realized as early as the end of 1940 that the North African theater would drain its resources and left no doubt that the over-all significance of the operations in that area was only that of a delaying action.⁵⁴

This "struggle for gaining time" had certainly been won by the I Air Corps, which, however, was incapable of forcing a decision.

The Royal Italian Air Force had so far not demonstrated the power and

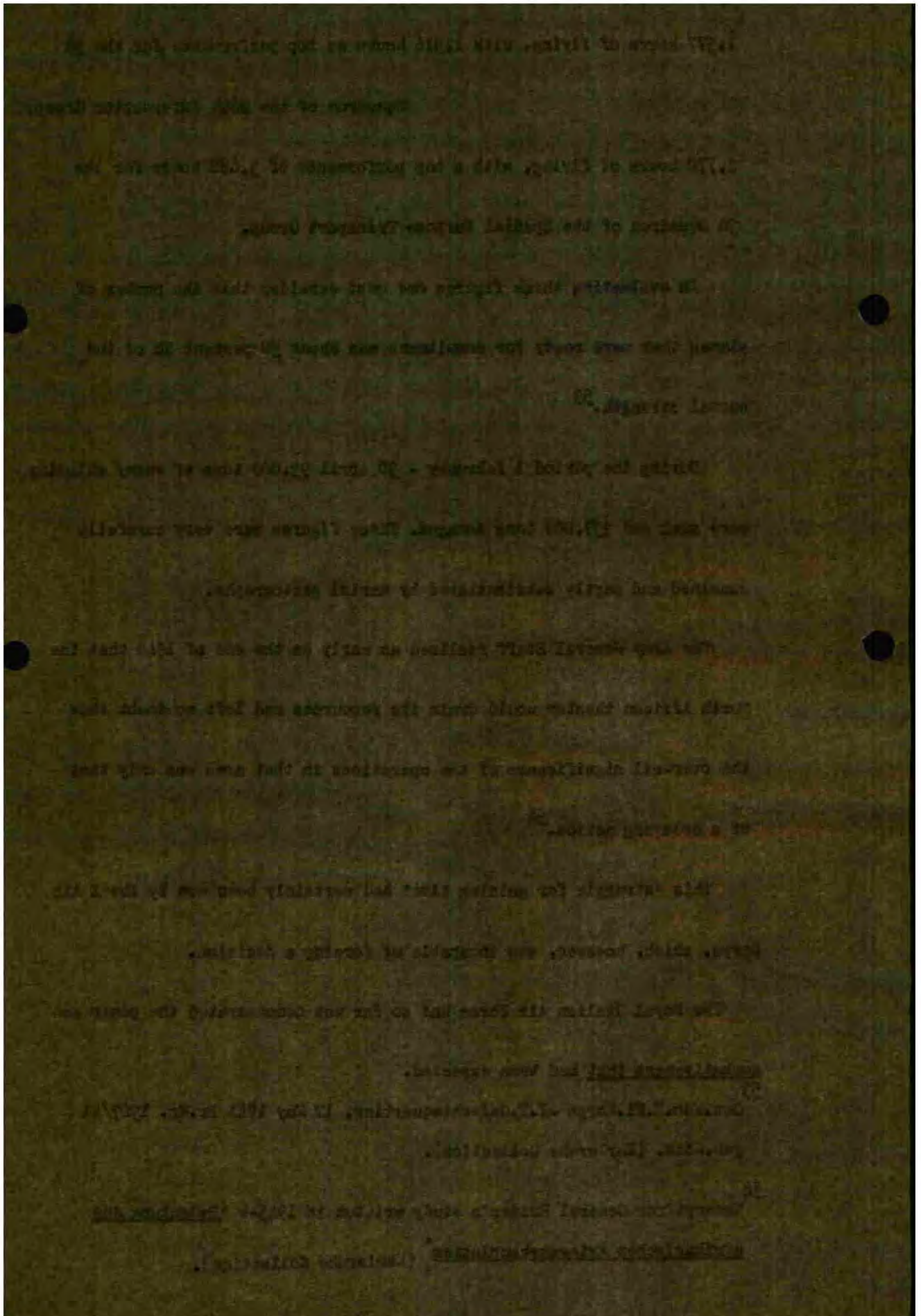
combativeness that had been expected.

⁵³

Gen.Kdo.X.Fl.Korps -I.T.Gefechtsquartier, 12 May 1941 Nr.Nr. 1307/41
gen.Kdos. (Karlsruhe Collection).

⁵⁴

Excerpt from General Halder's study written in 1945-6 "Bedeutung des afrikanischen Kriegsschauplatzes" (Karlsruhe Collection).



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Only some of the fighter planes, such as the Fiat G.50's and the Macchi C.200's, the three-engine bombers of the Savoia S.79, S.84, and Cant Z.1007 B types, and the Cant Z.506 B torpedo bomber were equal to German or British aircraft. The technical instruments of the average Italian plane was not up to date, and the crews lacked experience in formation flying and in conducting coordinated attacks. Despite all efforts no uniform radio traffic control for the Italo-German conduct of operations -- neither for air-to-air nor for air-to-ground communications -- was ever established.*

There were not only the linguistic difficulties but also a certain amount of passive resistance on the part of the Italian staffs, which disrupted efforts at close cooperation from the very beginning. Air power was employed mainly according to Italian principles of war; in Abyssinia, Libya, and Albania the Italian Air Force was almost immediately outmaneuvered by the British. The Italian airplane production was incapable of immediately replacing losses suffered in combat. As a result the air force personnel, similarly to that of the Navy, suffered from inferiority complexes that were difficult to overcome. In cooperation with German units the Italian crews proved, however, that they were capable of performing well. Hauptmann (Captain) Mahlke, for instance, mentioned an air battle near Malta in which the Italian Macchi fighters intervened with extraordinary skill. At altitudes of only about three feet above the water level -- their unwieldy draft made the water splash behind them -- they got below

* Footnote 51, p. 66.

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the Spitfires and scored within a short time a remarkable number of kills. (According to the author, the Macchi fighters brought down seven planes.)⁵⁵

Later, in North Africa, Mahlke's dive-bomber group was reinforced by the Italian dive-bomber squadron "Piciatelli." After an initial failure during which the Piciatelli Squadron did not come down on its target, the Italian crews followed their German leaders willingly during the second attack. "After landing his plane the Italian squadron commander ran toward the German group commander and declared with overwhelming emphasis that the Italian had finally taken part in a real dive-bomber attack. They had properly aimed at their target and hit it because they had gotten sufficiently close to it, etc." From then on the Italian squadron was considered as fully capable of any future commitment and could be assigned targets accordingly.⁵⁶

Hutm. (Capt.) Mahlke also reports the remarkable performance of an Italian commercial plane that saved German airmen in distress at sea.

"During the withdrawal of troops to Trapani, Leutnant (Lieutenant) Nordmann

had to make a forced landing at sea at the latitude of Pantelleria in the
⁵⁵

Helmut Mahlke, "Der Einsatz der III./Sturzkampfgeschwader 1 im Mittel-
meeresgebiet", p. 41. (Karlsruhe Collection).

⁵⁶

Helmut Mahlke, op. cit., pp. 56-7 and pp. 63-4, as well as Stoll-Barberich, "Der Einsatz der III./Stuka 1 im Mittelmeerraum", pp. 13-4 (Karlsruhe Coll.)

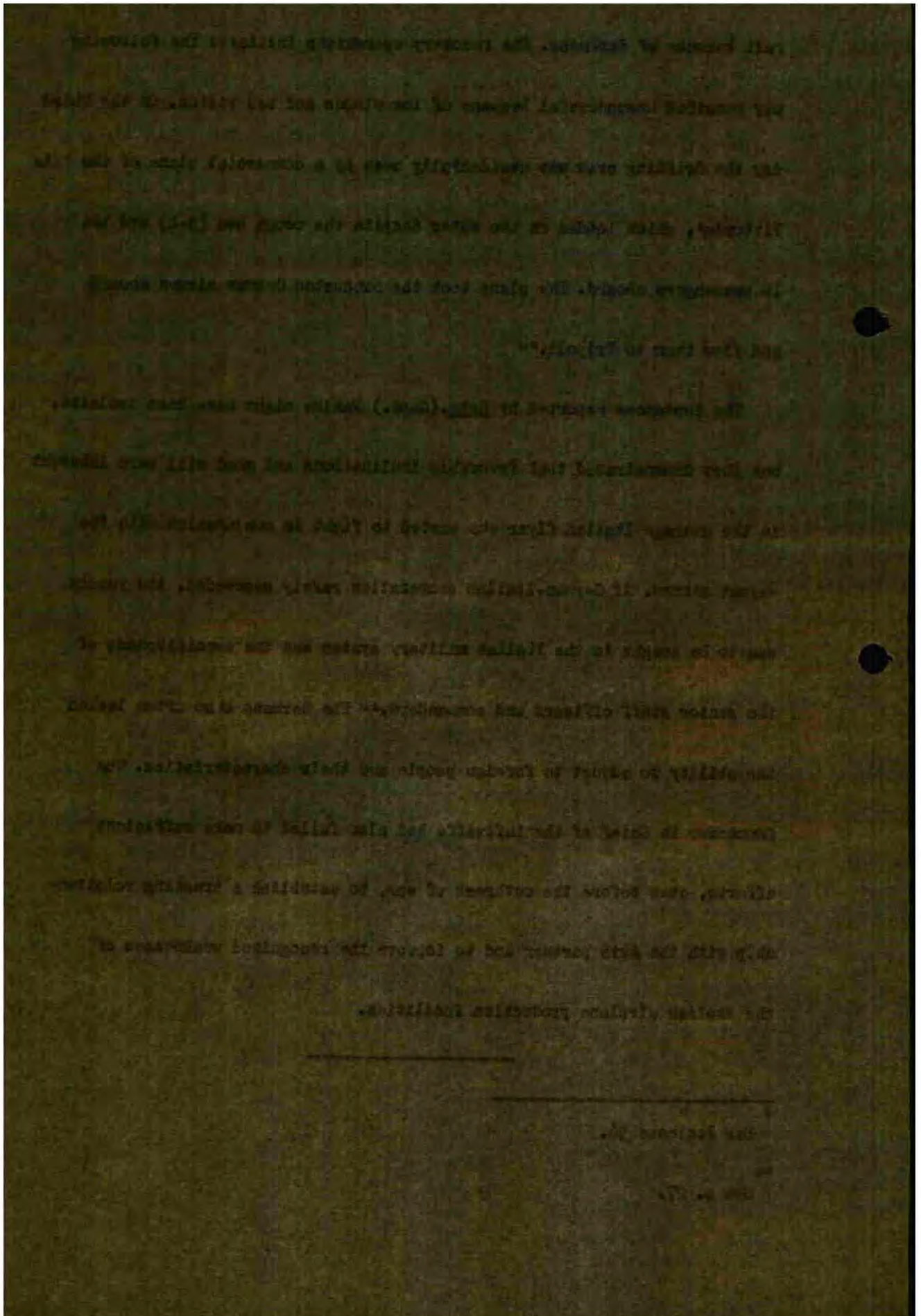
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Mediterranean. An accompanying Junkers 52 dropped a life raft that Lt. Nordmann and the radio operator reached after swimming some distance. The air rescue planes that were immediately sent out were unable to find the raft because of darkness. The recovery operations initiated the following day remained unsuccessful because of low clouds and bad vision. On the third day the drifting crew was accidentally seen by a commercial plane of the "Ala Vittoria", which landed on the water despite the rough sea (3-4) and the 16 passengers aboard. The plane took the exhausted German airmen aboard and flew them to Tripoli.**

The instances reported by Hutm. (Capt.) Mahlke might have been isolated, but they demonstrated that favorable inclinations and good will were inherent in the average Italian flyer who wanted to fight in conjunction with the German airmen. If German-Italian cooperation rarely succeeded, the reason was to be sought in the Italian military system and the sensitiveness of the senior staff officers and commanders.** The Germans also often lacked the ability to adjust to foreign people and their characteristics. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe had also failed to make sufficient efforts, even before the outbreak of war, to establish a trusting relationship with the Axis partner and to improve the recognized weaknesses of the Italian airplane production facilities.

* See Footnote 56.

** See p. 27.



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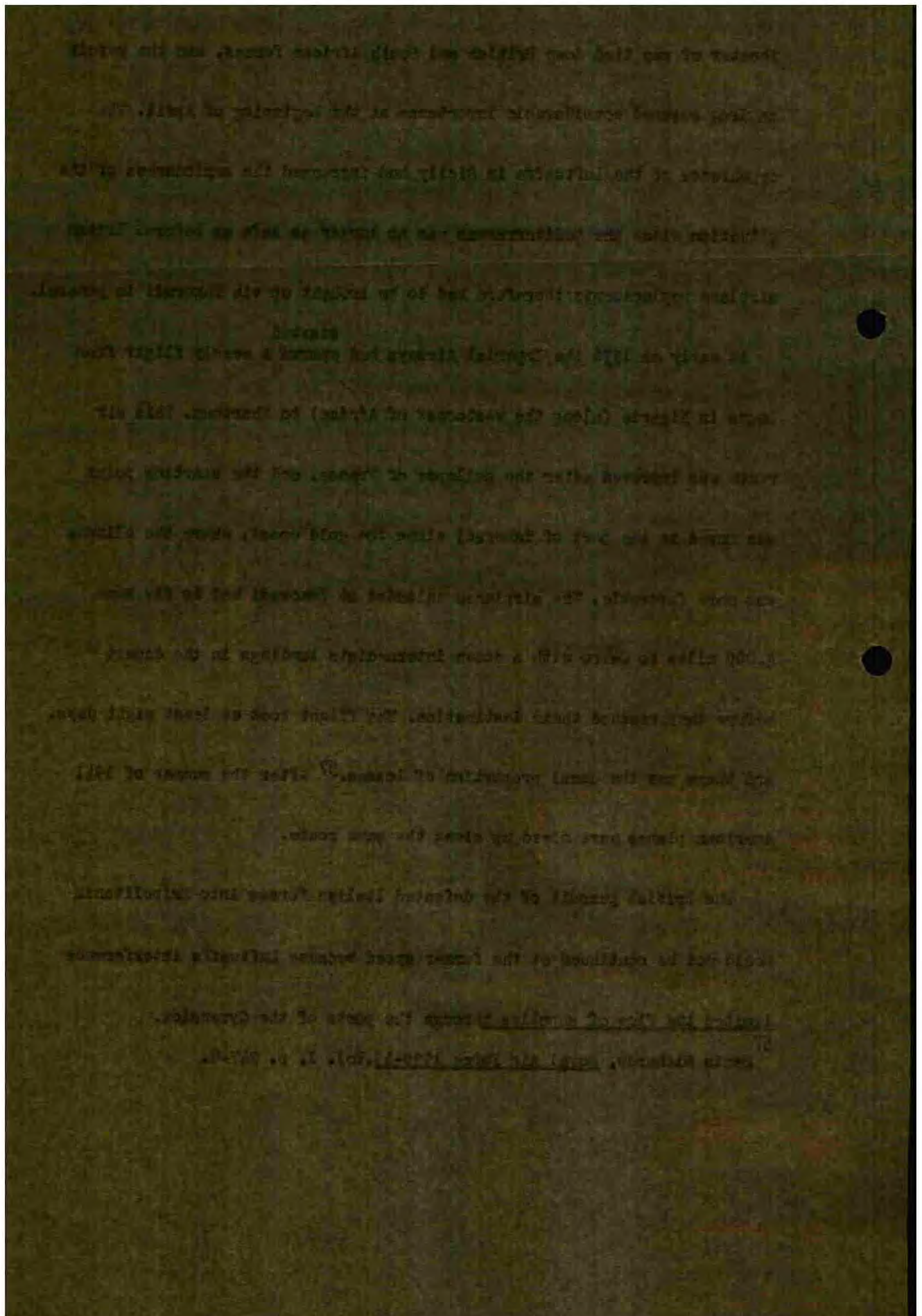
The British were unable to take advantage of their victories over the Italians in the Cyrenaica because they had to transfer sizable forces at the decisive moment, when they had to support Greece. The Abyssinian theater of war tied down British and South African forces, and the revolt in Iraq assumed considerable importance at the beginning of April. The appearance of the Luftwaffe in Sicily had increased the seriousness of the situation since the Mediterranean was no longer as safe as before. British airplane replacements therefore had to be brought up via Takoradi in general.

As early as 1936 the Imperial Airways had ^{started} ~~started~~ a weekly flight from Lagos in Nigeria (along the westcoast of Africa) to Khartoum. This air route was improved after the collapse of France, and the starting point was moved to the port of Takoradi along the gold coast, where the climate was more favorable. The airplanes unloaded at Takoradi had to fly some 4,000 miles to Cairo with a dozen intermediate landings in the desert before they reached their destination. The flight took at least eight days, and there was the usual proportion of losses.⁵⁷ After the summer of 1941 American planes were moved up along the same route.

The British pursuit of the defeated Italian forces into Tripolitania could not be continued at the former speed because Luftwaffe interference limited the flow of supplies through the ports of the Cyrenaica.

57

Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Vol. I, p. 247-8.



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Securing the line of communications from Alexandria to Greece also required sizable forces. The mining of the Suez Canal gave rise to serious concern because all traffic arteries passed through the canal.

A great variety of expedients had to be used to protect British shipping.⁵⁸

The Royal Air Force had done its best to avert disaster. During March and the first days of April it had frequently bombed the port installations in Tripoli and the German airfields in the Syrte area. During the German advance into the Cyrenaica British planes had given the ground forces their utmost support. Their numerical weakness* and the loss of their airfields in the Cyrenaica had contributed to reducing their effectiveness. The only assets remaining in British hands were Malta and Tobruk, both under heavy German-Italian pressure. "The unsinkable aircraft carrier Malta" and the former Italian fortress Tobruk were to attain decisive importance during the further course of the war.

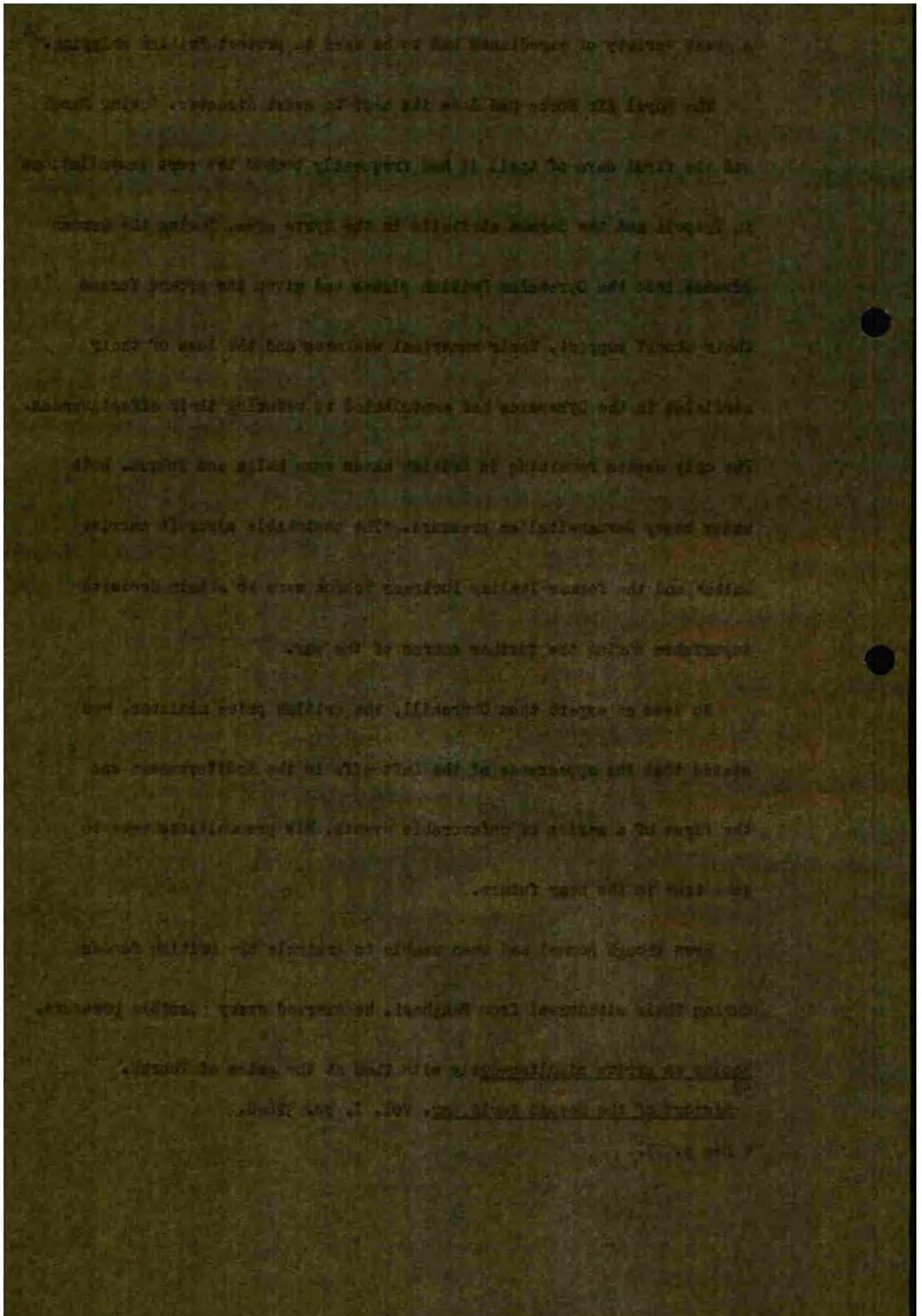
No less an expert than Churchill, the British prime minister, had stated that the appearance of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean was the first of a series of unfavorable events. His premonitions were to come true in the near future.

Even though Rommel had been unable to encircle the British forces during their withdrawal from Benghazi, he exerted every possible pressure, hoping to arrive simultaneously with them at the gates of Tobruk.

⁵⁸

History of the Second World War, Vol. I, pp. 325-8.

* See p. 57.



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He probably believed that the defeated British troops would be incapable of defending the fortress for any length of time. Such ideas might have motivated him in ordering General von Kirchheim to capture Tobruk with hastily assembled forces by a coup de main on 9 April. The attempted coup de main failed.

With all the stubbornness and tenacity peculiar to Rommel, he made repeated efforts to seize the fortress by head-on attacks that weakened the combat efficiency of his troops quite considerably. On the other hand, his attempts to seize the fortress by surprise on 9 April and during the following days were fully justified.

But after 12 April Rommel ought to have realized that the British had established themselves firmly in Tobruk and had decided to offer strong resistance. At the same time, his weak forces with their shortage of artillery would be incapable of breaking through the pillbox line. Why detailed sketches of the fortifications, which must have been in Italian hands, were not submitted to him can only be explained by the precipitated manner in which events developed since 24 March.

Rommel probably also was not aware of the fact that aerial photographs of Tobruk were available; it may be presumed, however, that these photographs covered the port area but not the defensive belt facing landward. No orders were issued at that time to the Luftwaffe to produce photographic data of the defensive installations facing the German ground forces. For these reasons the attack launched by the 5th Light Division, including its subordinate 5th Panzer Regiment, on 14 April

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was no longer justified, quite apart from the fact that the troops had not been given sufficient time to prepare for the attack.

The last attack, launched in the evening of 30 April by major armored infantry elements of the 15th Panzer Division across more favorable terrain from the southwest, failed for the same reasons as the attack of 14 April although the attackers emerged from a sector that had hitherto been defended by the Italians. This attack led to the seizure of a sizable part of the outer defensive belt but bogged down in front of the second position, the existence of which was unknown to the attackers. Even so the German forces repelled all enemy counter-thrusts in their newly won defense line.

When the orders for that attack were being issued in the morning of 29 April, the Commanding General of the 15th Panzer Division, General von Frittwitz, had raised several objections. He asked for time to carry out reconnaissance missions and to initiate the attack forces in the terrain. He also wanted a rest period for the units that had been moved up by air. In addition, he asked that the 2d Battalion of the 33d Artillery Regiment be assigned to the division to give direct support to the attack forces. Finally, he requested that the attack be delayed until the evening of 2 May so that the 2d Battalion of the 15th Rifle Regiment which was moving up could be employed as divisional reserve after its arrival. Why Rommel did not accept these justified ^{suggestions} ~~arguments~~ is difficult to explain. In so doing the "tactician Rommel" acted against his own principles and overstrained the troops that were at his disposal.

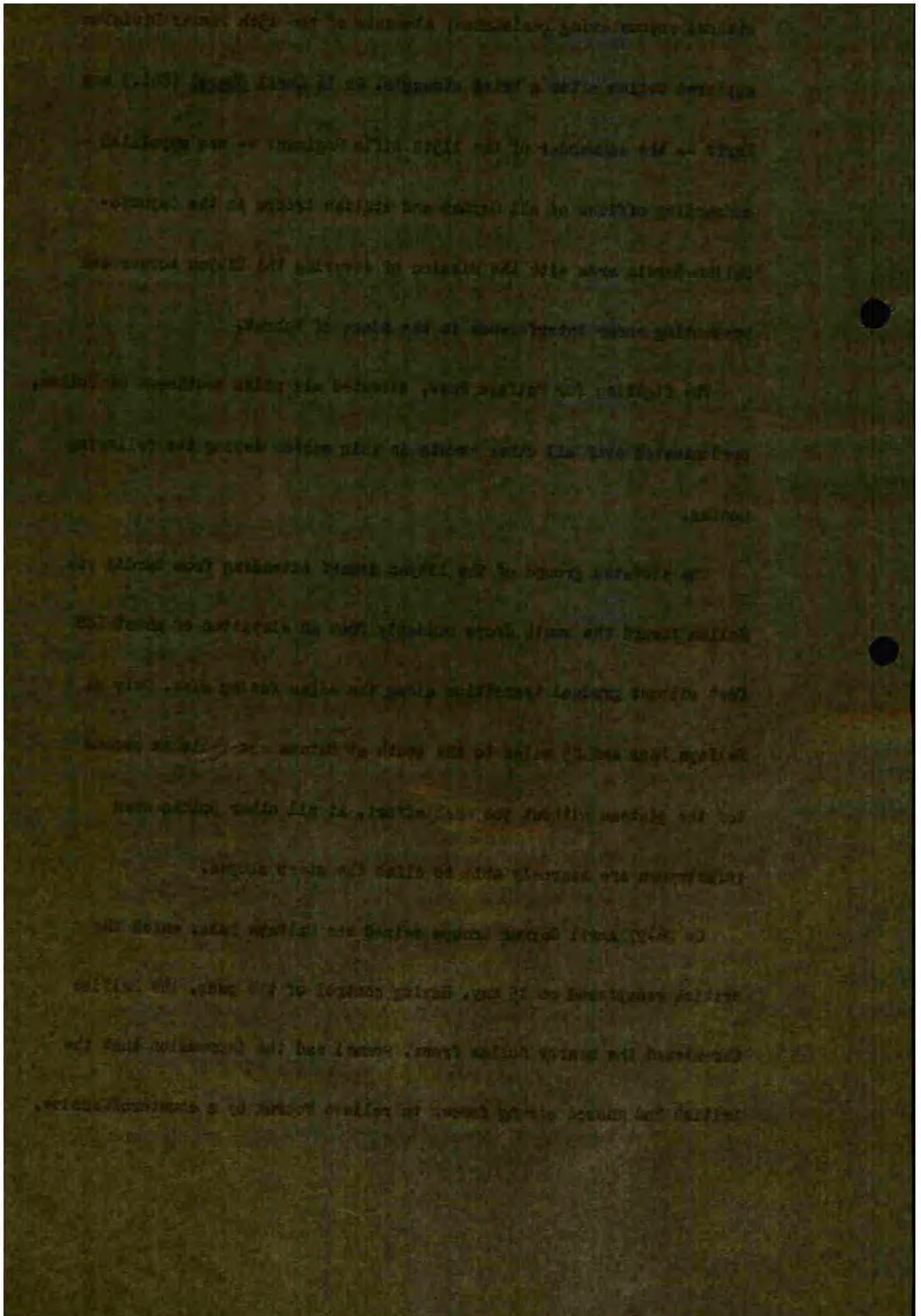
- 75 -

During his attempts to seize the fortress by a coup de main Rommel had not forgotten to secure his east flank along the Egyptian border. As early as 12 April the 3d motorized Artillery Battalion reached Bardia without encountering resistance; elements of the 15th Panzer Division captured Sollum after a brief struggle. On 14 April Oberst (Col.) von Berff -- the commander of the 115th Rifle Regiment -- was appointed commanding officer of all German and Italian troops in the Capuzzo-Sollum-Bardia area with the mission of covering the Libyan border and preventing enemy interference in the siege of Tobruk.

The fighting for Halfaya Pass, situated six miles southeast of Sollum, predominated over all other events in this sector during the following months.

The elevated ground of the Libyan desert extending from Bardia via Sollum toward the south drops suddenly from an elevation of about 600 feet without gradual transition along the edges facing east. Only at Halfaya Pass and 25 miles to the south at Batuna can vehicles ascend to the plateau without too much effort. At all other points even infantrymen are scarcely able to climb the steep slopes.

On 26-27 April German troops seized the Halfaya Pass, which the British recaptured on 15 May. Having control of the pass, the British threatened the nearby Sollum front. Rommel had the impression that the British had massed strong forces to relieve Tobruk by a counteroffensive.



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He dispatched all troops he could somehow spare as well as every available tank to the Sollum front. On 27 May the Germans recaptured once more the Halfaya Pass and occupied it with major forces.

The hard and costly fighting near Tobruk had meanwhile calmed down, and the Germans had tightened the ring around the fortress. The motorized Trento Division and the Pavia and Bologna Divisions had arrived in full strength by mid-May in addition to major elements of the 15th Panzer Division. Rommel was thus able to withdraw the bulk of the 5th Light and armored Ariete Divisions from frontline employment and finally form reserves from the units he had pulled out.

Since the beginning of June all signs pointed to further strengthening of the British forces along the Egyptian border. The number of motorized vehicles observed by the Germans exceeded 1,000. The 15th Panzer Division commanded by Oberst (Col.) Neumann-Silkow took preparatory steps to repel the attack that was to be expected within a short time. The division had constructed a system of strong points* that were to be defended by their occupants. The mobile forces of the division had been assembled between Capuzzo and Bardia under the commander of the 8th Panzer Regiment. They consisted of the 8th Panzer Regiment with 2 tank battalions and a total of 80 - 85 tanks, one reinforced motorized rifle company, one reinforced motorcycle company, the staff and one company of the 33d Antitank Regiment, and one medium and one light antiaircraft battery.

* See Sketch 3.

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The opposing forces were estimated to consist of 150 - 200 tanks, with the number of the motorized vehicles having meanwhile risen to almost 2,000.

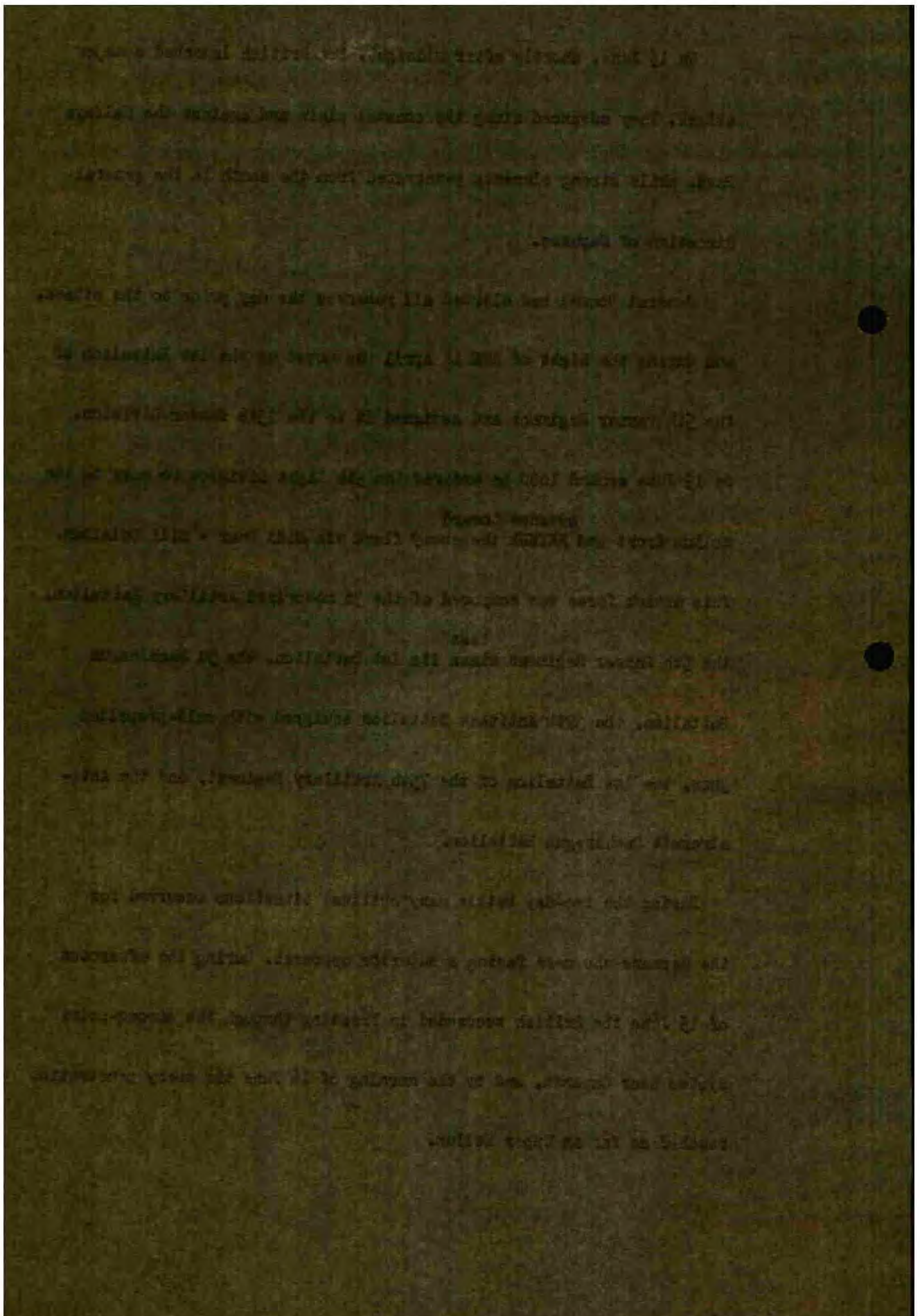
On 15 June, shortly after midnight, the British launched a major attack. They advanced along the coastal plain and against the Halfaya Pass, while strong elements penetrated from the south in the general direction of Capuzzo.

General Rommel had alerted all reserves the day prior to the attack, and during the night of 14/15 April he moved up the 1st Battalion of the 5th Panzer Regiment and assigned it to the 15th Panzer Division.

On 15 June around 1000 he ordered the 5th Light Division to move to the advance toward Sollum front and ~~XXXXXX~~ the enemy flank via Sidi Omar - Sidi Suleiman.

This attack force was composed of the 3d motorized Artillery Battalion, less the 5th Panzer Regiment ~~minus~~ its 1st Battalion, the 3d Machinegun Battalion, the 39th Antitank Battalion equipped with self-propelled guns, the 1st Battalion of the 75th Artillery Regiment, and the Anti-aircraft Machinegun Battalion.

During the two-day battle many critical situations occurred for the Germans who were facing a superior opponent. During the afternoon of 15 June the British succeeded in breaking through the strong-point system near Capuzzo, and by the morning of 16 June the enemy penetration reached as far as Upper Sollum.



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Now the Halfaya Pass was also threatened from the rear. A bitter struggle for the pass had been waged throughout this period, with the German garrison still holding out despite growing shortages of water and ammunition.

The counterattack, which the reinforced 8th Panzer Regiment launched in the morning of 16 June in the direction of Capuzzo, failed with the German forces suffering considerable losses. The regiment withdrew and assembled in its former staging area. The fate of the 5th Light Division was unknown since it had been impossible to reestablish signal communications with the division. If the British massed all their forces for an attack on Bardia, their breakthrough in the direction of Tobruk would in all probability be successful.

In this critical situation Oberst (Col.) Neumann-Silkow decided at about 1000 to risk everything and commit the reinforced 8th Panzer Regiment in an afternoon attack against the enemy west flank north of Sidi Omar. This daring decision seemed justifiable because he hoped that this move would permit his forces to operate in conjunction with the 5th Light Division after all.

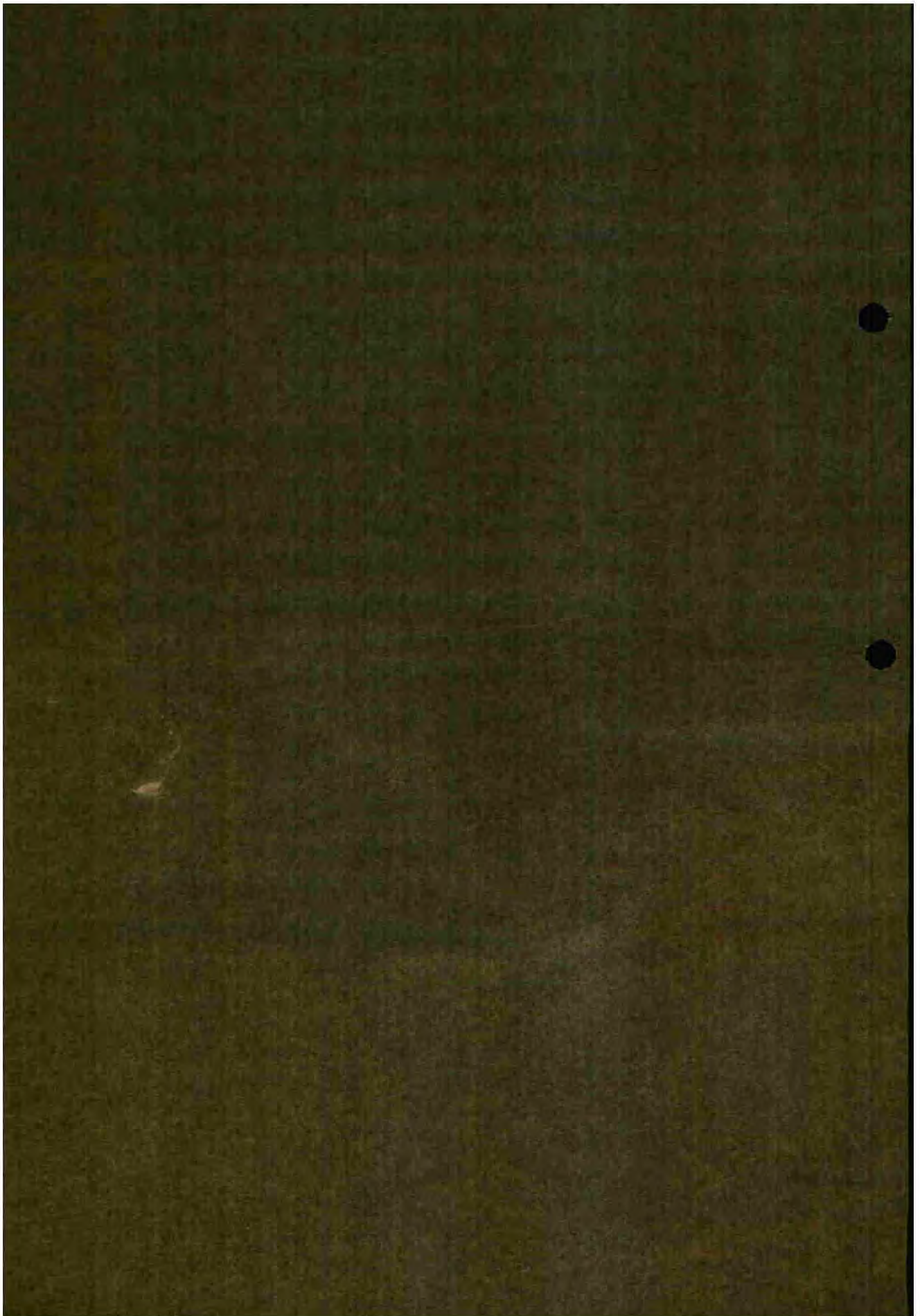
Against all expectation the British remained inactive in their captured strong points during the afternoon so that the critical situation seemed to have passed by the evening.

On the afternoon of 17 June the tension finally relaxed since the enemy forces were driven back between Sidi Sulciman and Bir-Chirba,

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while the reinforced 5th Panzer Regiment of the 5th Light Division
advanced as far as Halfaya Pass. The battle had been won.

However, no major elements of the British forces had been

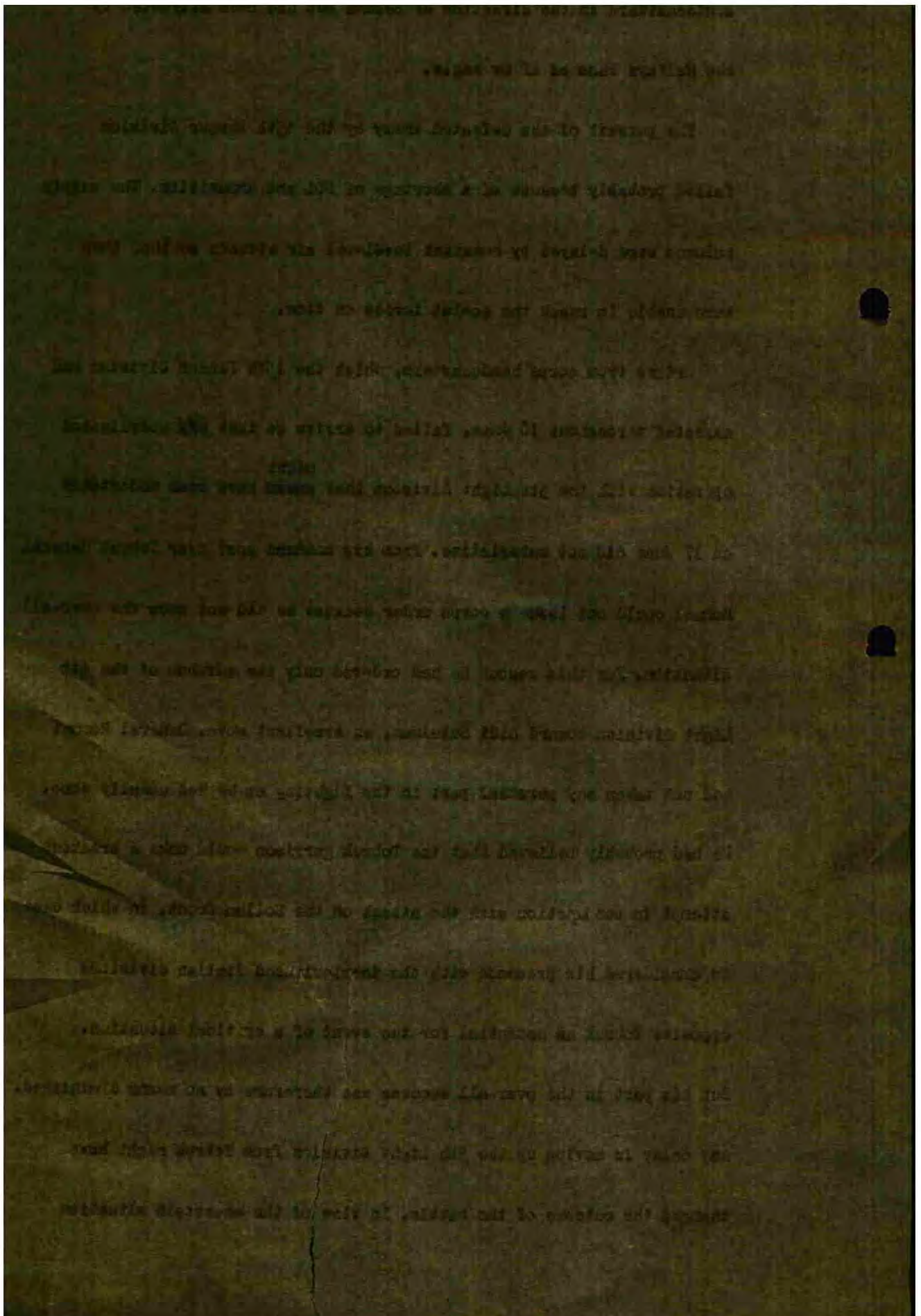


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encircled or cut off during their withdrawal because the 5th Light Division -- ignorant of the over-all situation -- had not advanced southeastward in the direction of Batumi but had been attracted by the Halfaya Pass as if by magic.

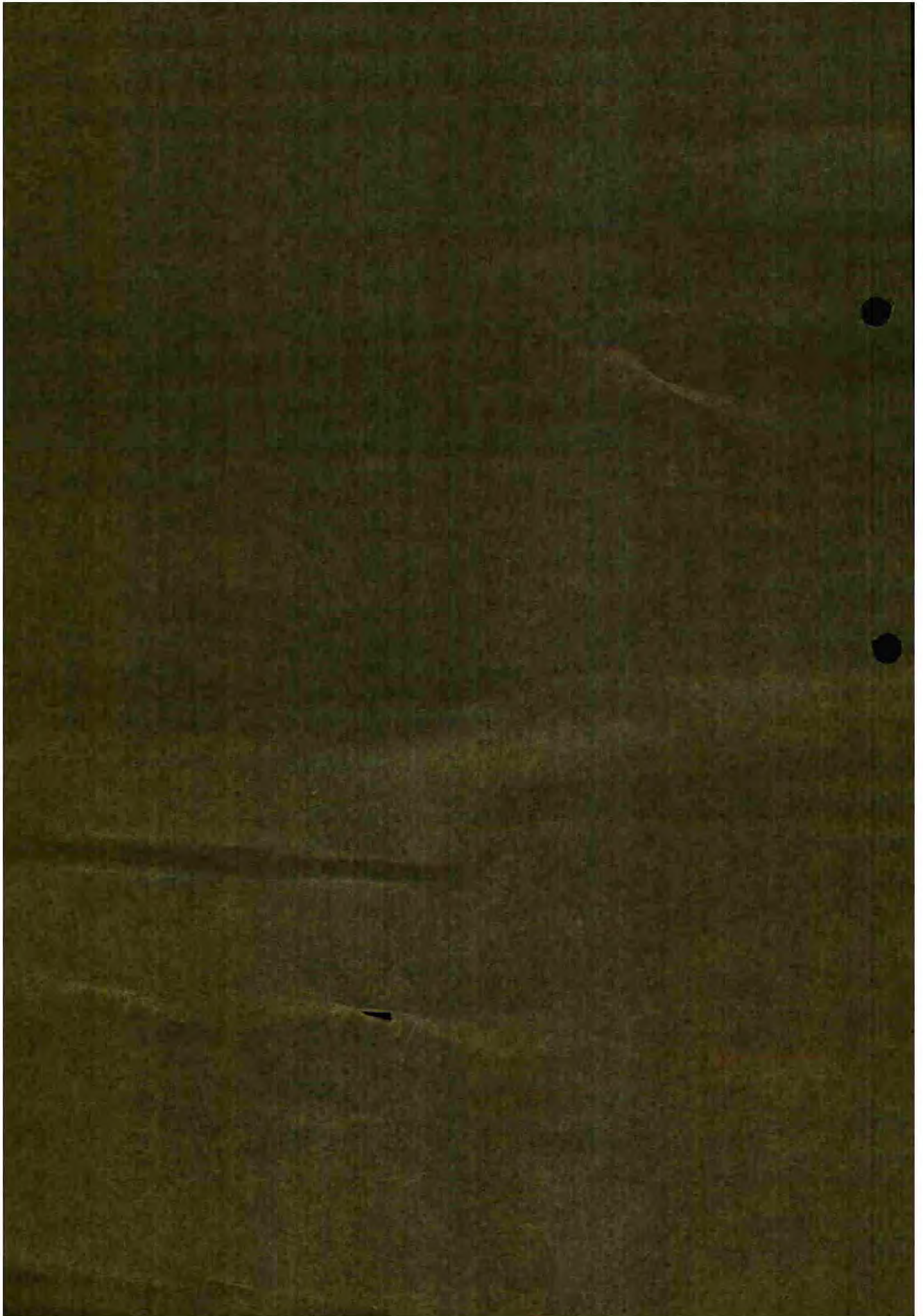
The pursuit of the defeated enemy by the 15th Panzer Division failed probably because of a shortage of POL and ammunition. The supply columns were delayed by constant low-level air attacks so that they were unable to reach the combat forces on time.

Orders from corps headquarters, which the 15th Panzer Division had expected throughout 16 June, failed to arrive so that any coordinated operation with the 5th Light Division that ^{might} ~~could~~ have been undertaken on 17 June did not materialize. From his command post near Tobruk General Rommel could not issue a corps order because he did not know the over-all situation. For this reason he had ordered only the advance of the 5th Light Division toward Sidi Suleiman, an excellent move. General Rommel had not taken any personal part in the fighting as he had usually done. He had probably believed that the Tobruk garrison would make a breakout attempt in conjunction with the attack on the Sollum front, in which case he considered his presence with the inexperienced Italian divisions opposite Tobruk as essential for the event of a critical situation. But his part in the over-all success was therefore by no means diminished. Any delay in moving up the 5th Light Division from Tobruk might have changed the outcome of the battle. In view of the uncertain situation



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opposite Tobruk, Rommel's decision to relinquish his reserves was
surely a difficult one to make.



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Even though the battle of Sollum did not lead to the annihilation of the enemy forces, it turned out to be a major success. The British had failed in encircling the German troops providing flank cover along the Sollum line and in relieving the fortress Tobruk. They suffered a serious setback in the attempt of achieving both, and their losses of materiel were heavy. They started the attack with 300 tanks, and -- according to their own data -- they had only 40 left at the end.

The splitting up into six separate "forces" transcended the tactical ability and training in mobile conduct of operations of their intermediate commanders. If two of their forces (combat teams) had pinned down the ^(Germans) enemy by attacks along the coastal plain and at Halfaya Pass, the other four forces would probably have succeeded in making a breakthrough toward Bardia from the south, had they been under Unified leadership.

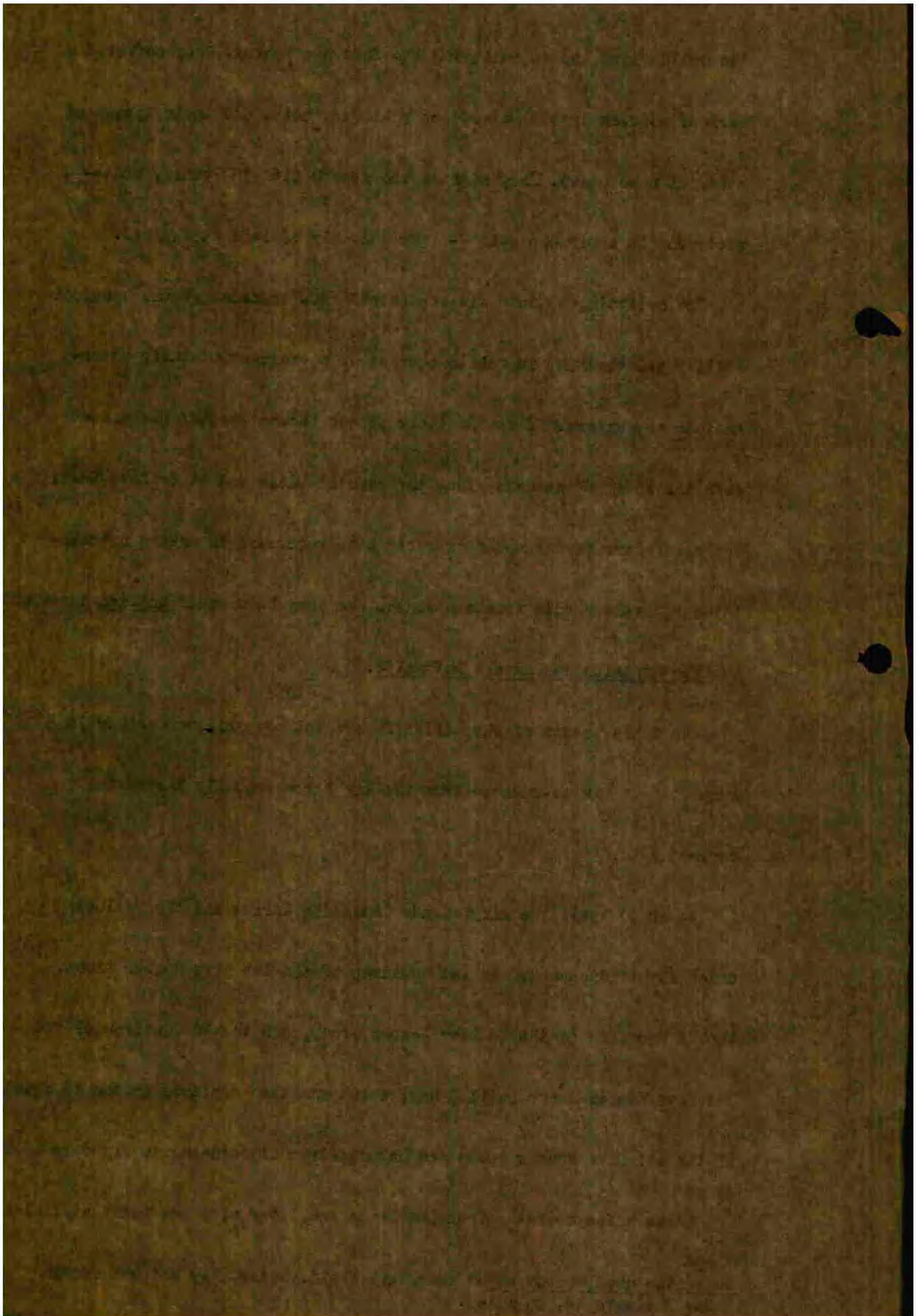
The Contribution of the Luftwaffe.

The achievements of the Luftwaffe are not properly emphasized in Army study.* The co-authors from the Air Force probably lacked the correct data.

As of 10 April the Air Brigade Commander Africa had the following units at his disposal: The 1st Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group, the 2d Squadron of the 2d Dive Bomber Group, and the 3d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group until 6 May, which was then replaced by the 2d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber group and one squadron of twin-engine fighters (# 26).

These units operated from the Derna and later also the Tmimi airfields; they also used Gambut as an emergency field. Since they had not enough

* See Footnote 44, pp 191-5.



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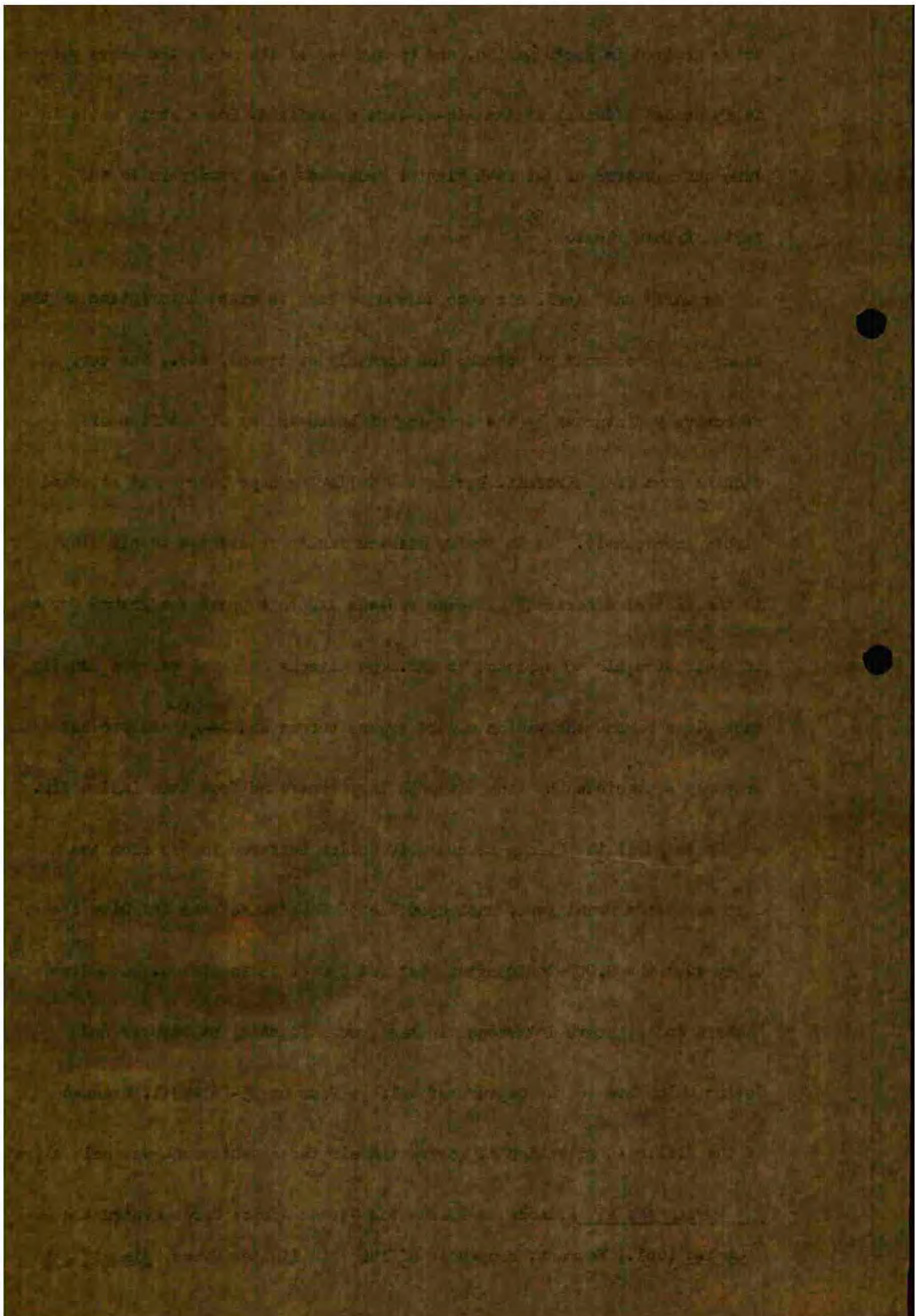
transportation capacity at their disposal, they were unable to quickly switch from one airfield to the next.

By mid-April the first flights of the 1st Squadron of the 27th Fighter Group arrived in North Africa, and by the end of the month the group was fully combat efficient at the Ain-el-Gasala airfield. For a short while in June one squadron of the 26th Fighter Group was also available to the North African theater.

As early as 7 April air reconnaissance gave an exact description of the enemy situation west of Tobruk; the assembly of troops, etc., was very effectively disturbed by the dropping of bombs and by direct fire of machine guns from aircraft. During the following days Tobruk was attacked almost incessantly. The Luftwaffe mission was to reduce the supply flow to the encircled fortress by ocean vessels and to support the ground forces in their struggle to approach Tobruk. The attacks on naval vessels usually took place beyond the vision of the ground forces and ^{were} ~~was~~ therefore not properly appreciated by them although they benefited from them indirectly.

On 18 April the German forces near Sollum suffered losses from the fire of medium naval guns, whereupon the 3d Squadron of the 1st Dive Bomber Group sank the 8,000-ton monitor that had caused these losses. Both dive bombers and fighters intervened in the ground fighting at Capuzzo and Sollum which led to the capture of Halfaya Pass on 25-26 April. Because of the difficult situation at Tobruk the air force assistance was only slight

During the air attacks on Tobruk the German Africa Corps designated
⁵⁹ Oberst (Col.) Neumann, commander of the 77th Fighter Group, Einsatz der

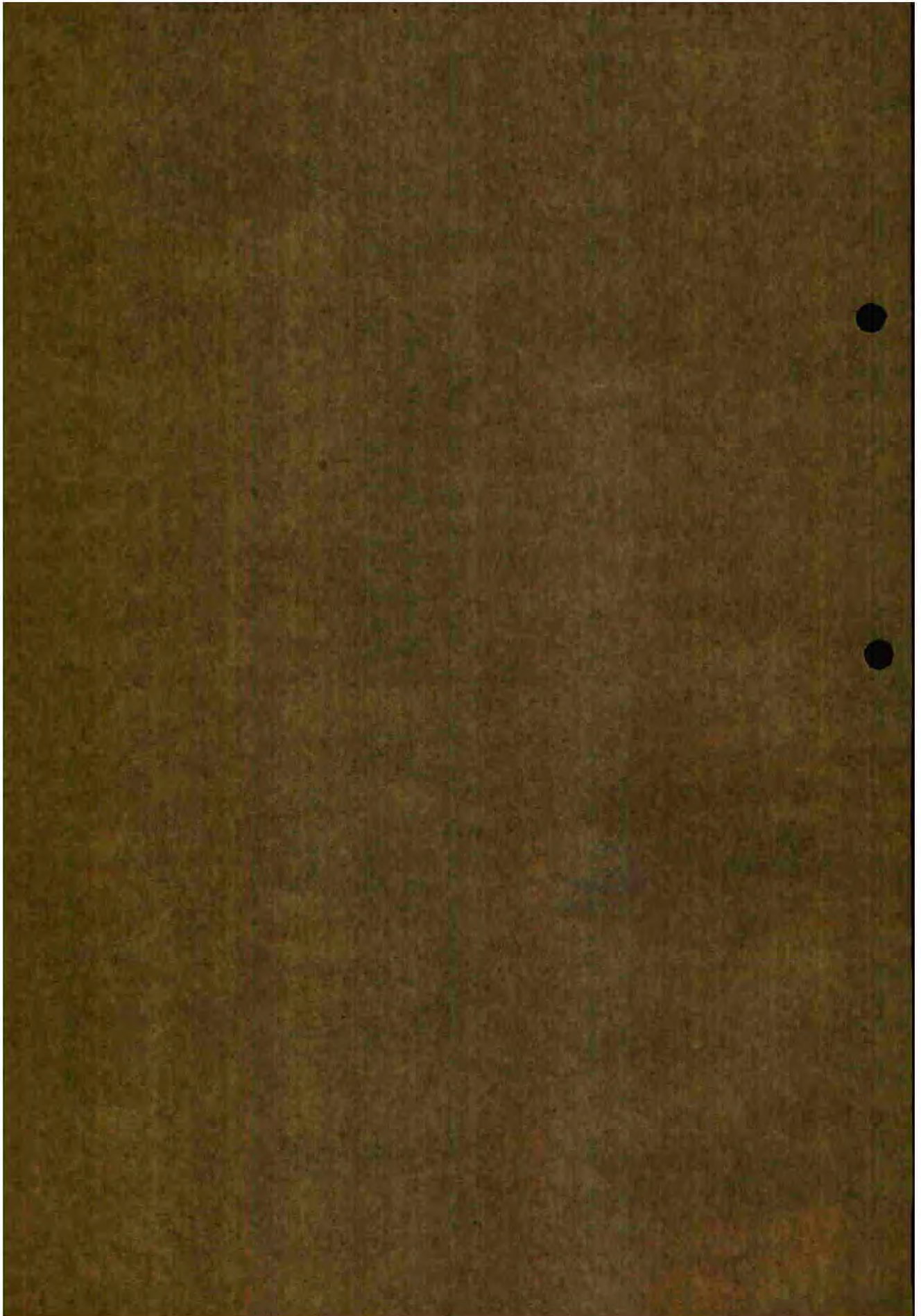


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(Continuation of Footnote # 59)

fliegenden Verbaende in Nordafrika, pp. 1-2 (Karlsruhe Collection).

⁶⁰ Lagebericht des Ob.d.L. Ic, 8 - 22 April 1941, pp. 379 (383), 398, 400, 406, 421, (424), 437, 439, 441, 457. (Karlsruhe Collection).



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such aerial targets as battery positions, strong points in the defensive positions, etc./ After 20 April the air attacks gradually became stronger until they reached a certain ~~climax~~ ^{climax} on 30 April, on which day 63 dive bombers and fighters participated. This continued until 4 May. After that, the waterpumping system of the fortress as well as the distillation plant and the vessels in the port were the main targets. Eventually, the British were unable to land except during the ~~next~~ ^{few} hours of darkness.

During the defensive fighting that ended in the loss of Halfaya Pass, dive bombers and fighter intervened frequently on 15 and 17 May.⁶¹

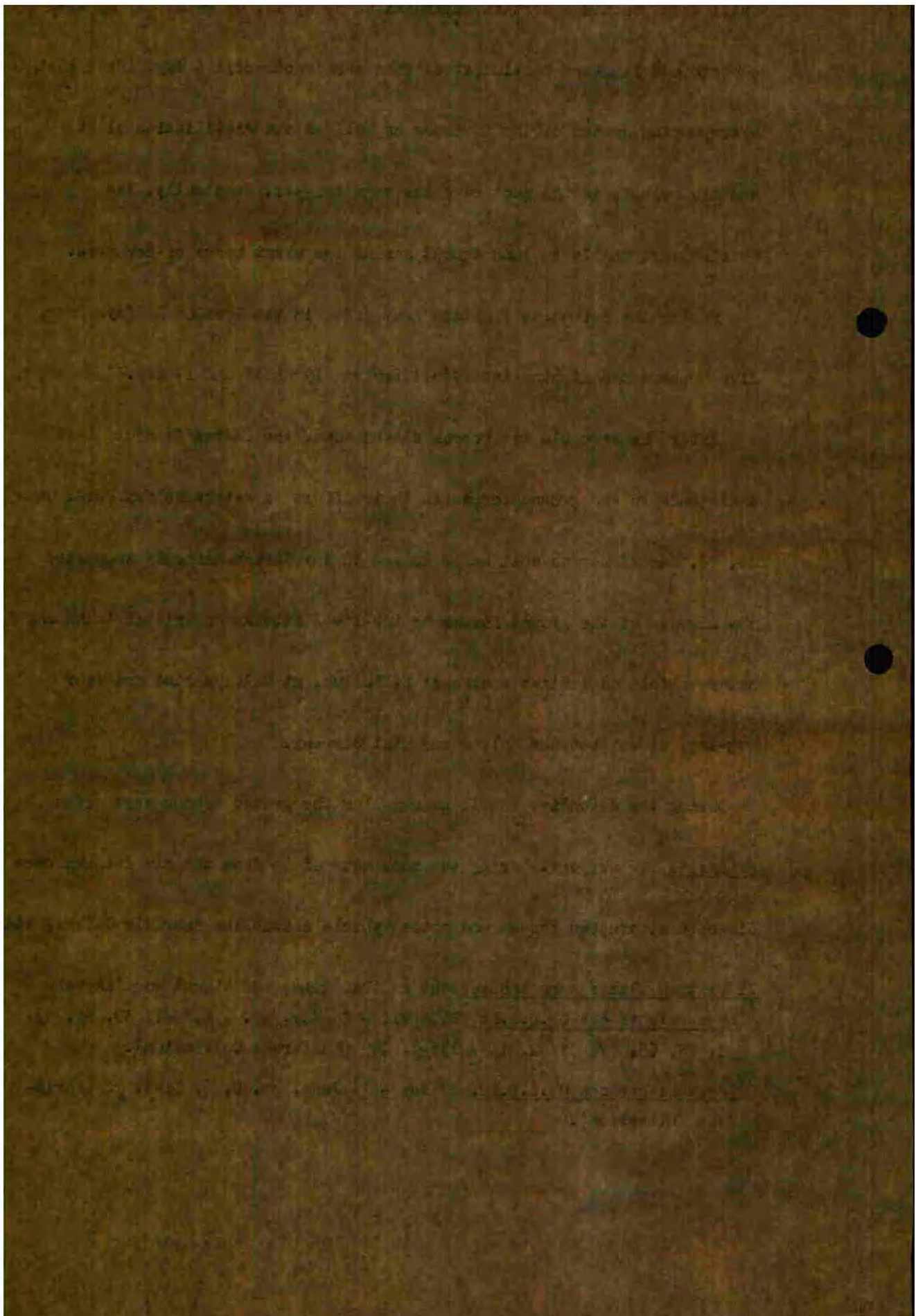
After the struggle for Tobruk slowed down, the Luftwaffe could lend assistance to the ground forces in their effort to retake Halfaya Pass. On 25, 26, and 27 May as well as on 28 and 30 May German aircraft supported the advance of the ground forces by low-level attacks on British tanks and motor vehicle assemblies southeast of Sollum, at Halfaya Pass and near Bul-Bug, midway between Sollum and Sidi Barrani.⁶²

During the defensive battle near Sollum the ground forces were given extensive air support. During the noon hour of 15 June the air attacks were directed at armored forces and motor vehicle assemblies near Bir Chirba, and

11 British planes were knocked out at that time; additional sorties were

⁶¹ Lageberichte des Ob.d.L.Ic, 23 April - 26 May, pp. 1, 6, 20-1, 30, 39, 45, 52, 58, 65, 77, 92/92, 118, 136-7, 149 (Karlsruhe Collection).

⁶² Lageberichte des Ob.d.L.Ic, 27 May - 15 June, pp. 2, 6, 11-2, 22 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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flown during the afternoon hours against enemy troops in jumpoff positions near Bir Chirba and Capuzzo.

On 16 June 51 bombers flew continuous missions during the fighting at Capuzzo, Sidi Omar, Sidi Suleiman, and south of Halfaya Pass. On 17 June 80 bombers ^{and fighters} again flew support missions during which they knocked out 14 Hurricanes. On 19 June all flying ceased because of sand storms, and the next day troops and an assembly of 80 motor vehicles were effectively attacked near Bugbug. Italian dive bombers and fighters participated in these operations with considerable success.⁶³

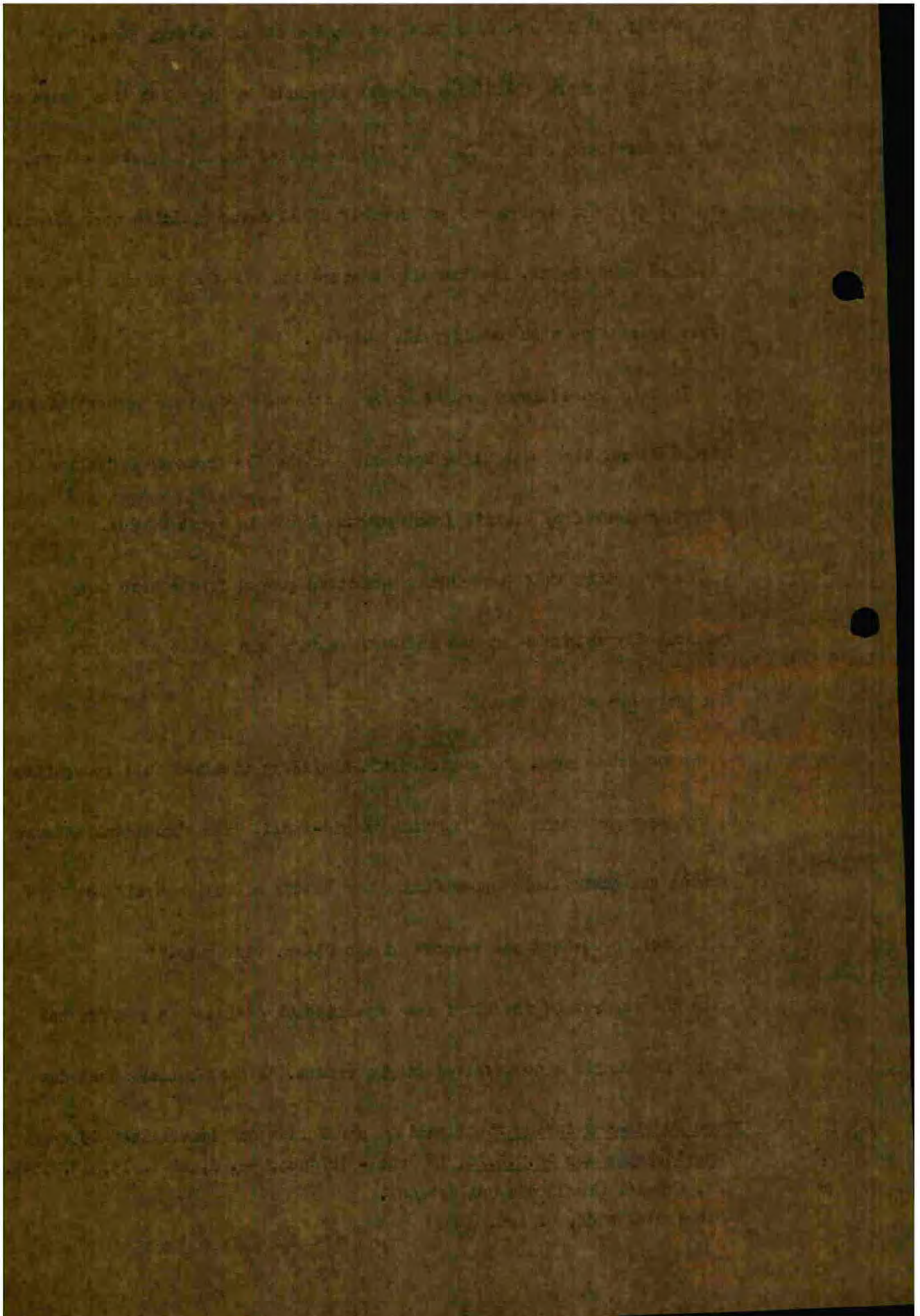
In this connection it ought to be mentioned that, upon request of the Africa Corps, the 104th Rifle Regiment and the 35d Engineer Battalion were transferred by airlift from southern Italy to North Africa.

The assertion that the heavily committed ground forces were not sufficiently supported by the Luftwaffe during the battle of Sollum can therefore not be upheld.

On the other hand, the antiaircraft artillery received full recognition by the Army ever since the fighting in mid-April. "The successful defense against the enemy tank forces during the battle of Sollum would not have been possible without the support of the 88-mm. flak guns."⁶⁴

In the reports of the air force intelligence officer the performance of the flak units also received proper credit. "A flak battery shot down three Hurricanes during the fighting near Sollum and immobilized 99 enemy ⁶³ Lageberichte des Ob.d.L.1c, 16 June - 30 June, pp. 2, 10-1, 13, 15, 18-9, 21, and 26. (Karlsruhe Collection).

⁶⁴ See Footnote 44, p. 195.



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tanks. In addition, the battery took 79 prisoners and captured 3 anti-tank guns, a prime mover, and 23 trucks.*

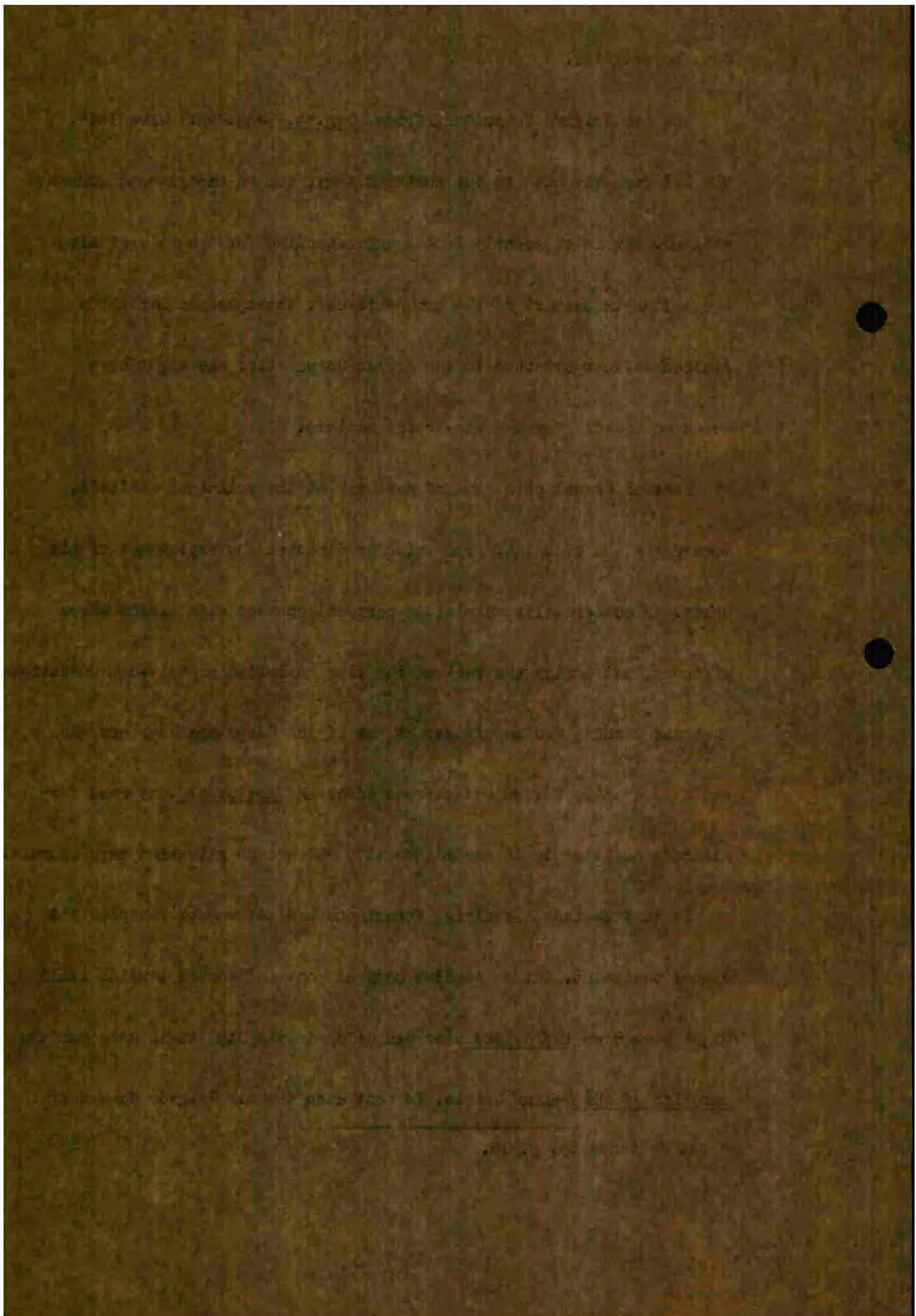
The Army recriminations regarding insufficient cooperation do not seem unjustified.

The Air Brigade Commander Africa, Gen.^{Lt.} (Maj.Gen.) Froehlich, who had formerly been in the Austrian Army, was an experienced combat officer. But he apparently lacked understanding for the role of air operations in support of the ground forces. There was no Luftwaffe liaison officer attached to the Africa Corps staff who might have acted as coordinator for air-ground matters.

General Froehlich's command post was at the principal airfield, toward the end at Derna, from which he directed the employment of his units. He occasionally maintained personal contact with Africa Corps officers, but during the rest of the time he relied on tele-communications. What was lacking was an officer at the Africa Corps headquarters who could constantly advise and express ideas and anticipate the need for aircraft commitments in accordance with the ground situation developments.

It is true that the flying formations had not enough vehicles and signal equipment, but an advance command post and combat landing field might have been improvised near Gambut or in the Sidi Azels area for the duration of the Sallum battle. In that case the Air Brigade Commander

* See Footnote 63, p. 18.



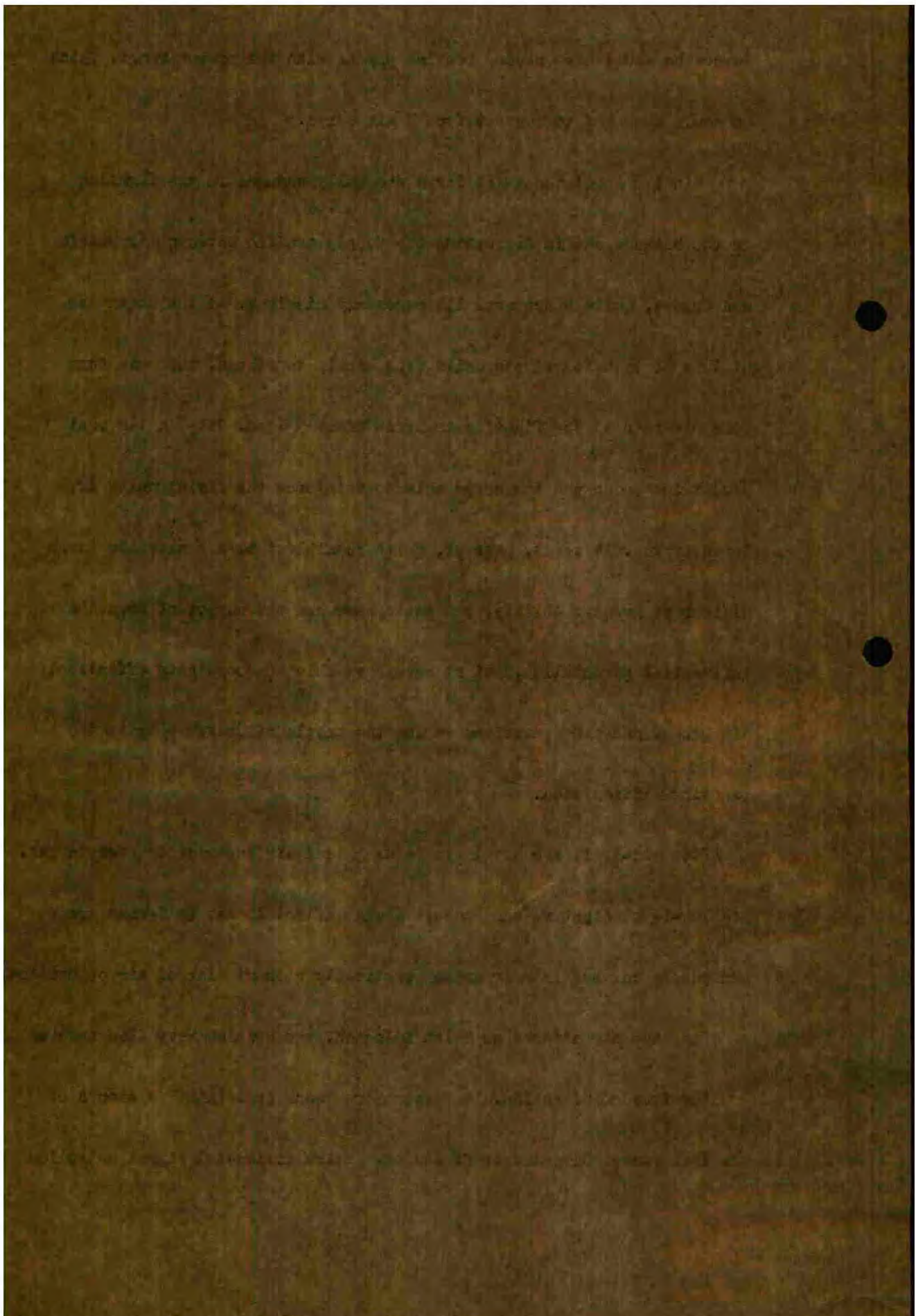
- 85 -

Africa would have been able to maintain closer contact with the 15th Panzer Division and might also have been in a position to establish the whereabouts of the 5th Light Division. To pursue the defeated British Forces he would have needed bombing planes with the proper range, which he would have had to request from X Air Corps.

Since 6 April the X Air Corps was fully engaged in the fighting in the Balkans and in disrupting the supply traffic between Alexandria and Greece, quite apart from its secondary missions. At the beginning of June it transferred its units from Sicily to Athens, which in turn were diverted by the fighting in Syria after 9 June. Only in the most urgent instances was the corps able to reinforce the flying units in North Africa. It seems, however, quite possible that a senior Air Force officer of greater ability, who would have had the support of Rommel's influential personality, might have been able to coordinate effectively all ground and air operations during the battle of Sollum despite the existing difficulties.

After mid-April the Royal Air Force gained air superiority over Tobruk. Its low-level fighters and bombers could inflict losses on German troops and supply columns in rear areas practically without risk of air opposition.

After the air attacks on Malta relented, the British Navy also enjoyed greater freedom of action. Its destroyers sank on 16 April elements of the 15th Panzer Division staff and the entire divisional signal battalion



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as well as the staffs of the 33d Artillery Regiment and the 115th Rifle Regiment.

The campaign in Abyssinia had meanwhile ended, and the British troops employed in that area as well as reinforcements from Britain were moved up to the Egyptian frontline.⁶⁴

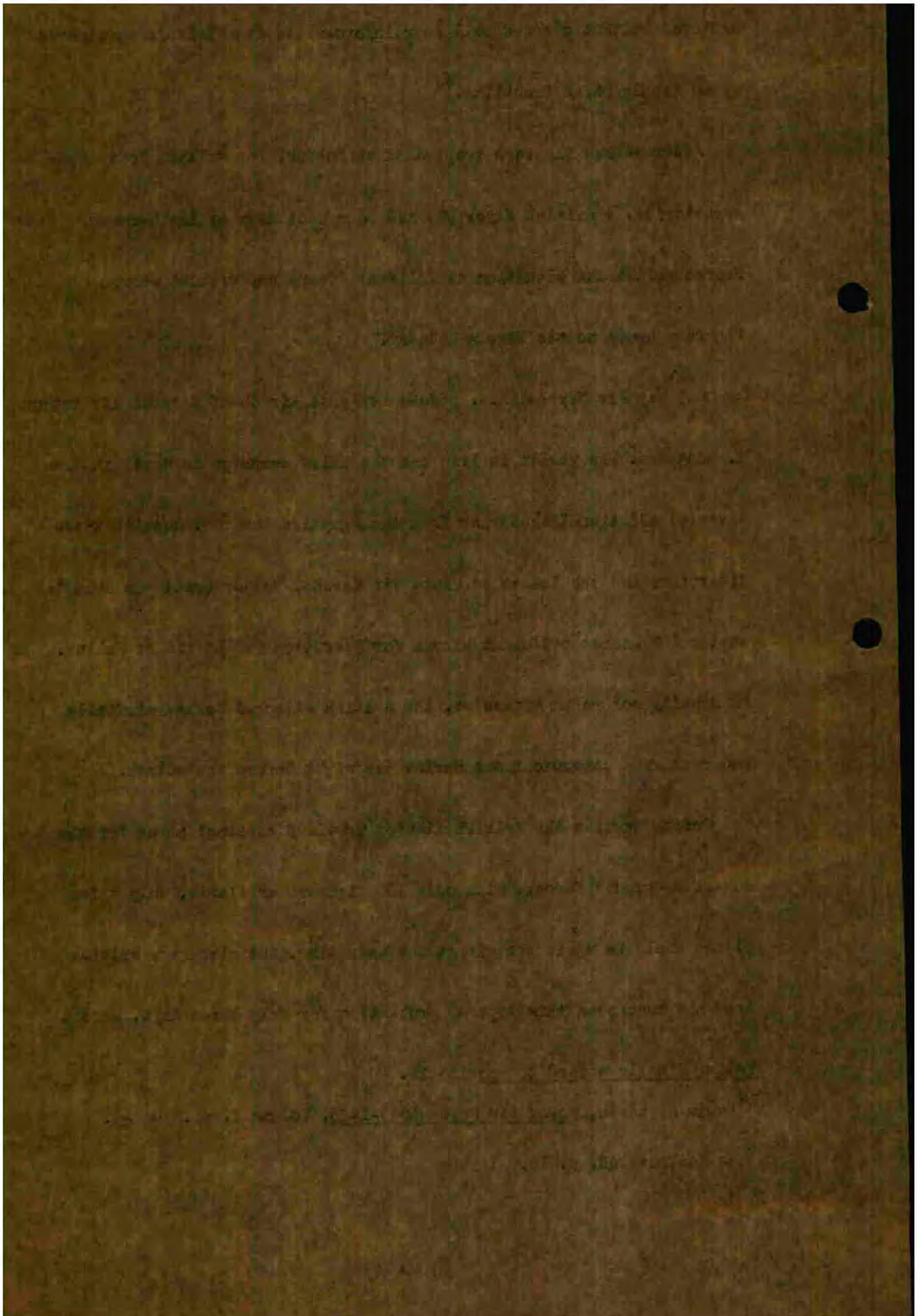
After German fighters reappeared at Tobruk, the British lost their superiority. A British flyer who had been shot down by the Germans characterized the situation as follows: "Every day without German fighters above us was like a holiday."*

On 3 May Air Marshal A.W. Tedder replaced Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur M. Longmore. The revolt in Iraq and the brief campaign in Syria in June diverted additional squadrons from the Egyptian theater. Despite these diversions and the losses at Crete Sir Marshal Tedder (sic) was able to muster 200 combat efficient planes for Operation BATTLE AXE at Sollum. As usually before an offensive, the British attacked German airfields and rear area communications during the night before the attack.

During daytime the British fighter provided constant cover for the advancing ground forces. With only 100 fighters available, only a few planes could be up in the air at the same time. But since the British Army had requested this type of protection for only three days, Marshal Tedder finally agreed to provide it.

⁶⁴ Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-1945, Volume I, pp. 304 -5.

* See Footnote 46, p. 10.



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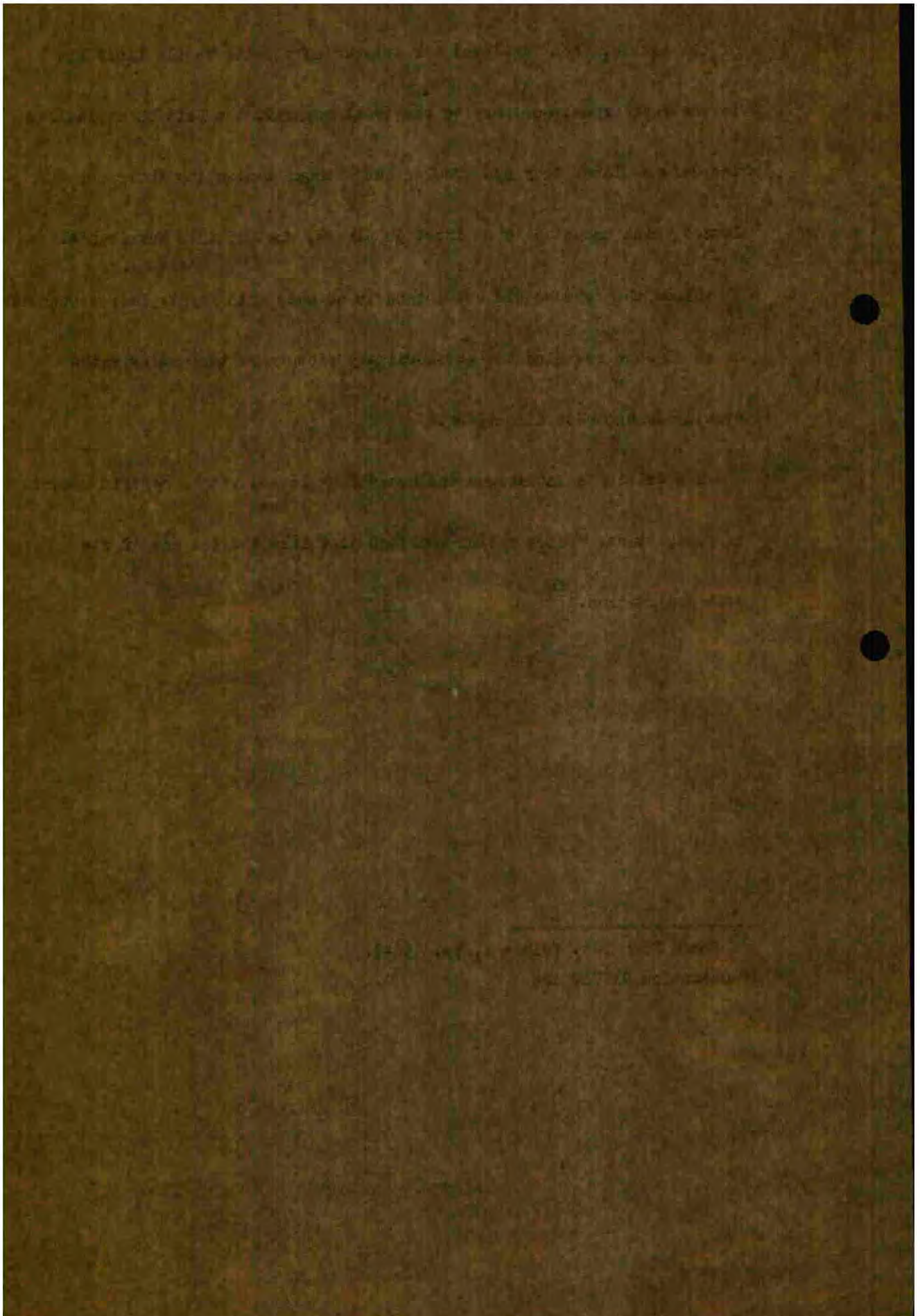
Operation BATTLE AXE was supposed to result in the relief of Tobruk, and the British advance from 14 - 16 June took place under a "fighter umbrella." The German ground forces suffered, above all at the beginning of the battle, from low-level air attacks on the EEE battle field and in the rear areas. Contrary to the usual reports, the British emphasised the German planes they had knocked out without mentioning their own losses which amounted to at least 50 planes, most of them Hurricanes.

Since the Germans did not intend to advance into Egypt, "air reconnaissance on 18 June revealed the extraordinary picture of two armies withdrawing in opposite directions."

The British acknowledged the heavy tank losses with a certain amount of resignation. "The operation" vanished just like the weapons of its code designation."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Denis Richards, Volume I, pp. 336-7.

* Operation BATTLE AXE



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CHAPTER FOUR

The German Air Supremacy in the Mediterranean Area

Section I. The Commitment of the German Air Force in the Balkan
and Greek Campaign.

Section II. End of Fighting on the Greek Mainland. Preparatory Attacks
Flown against Crete by VIII Air Corps. The Strategic
Importance of Crete in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Section III. The Seizure of Crete. Its Exploitation by the Germans.
German Air Intervention in Syria and Iraq.

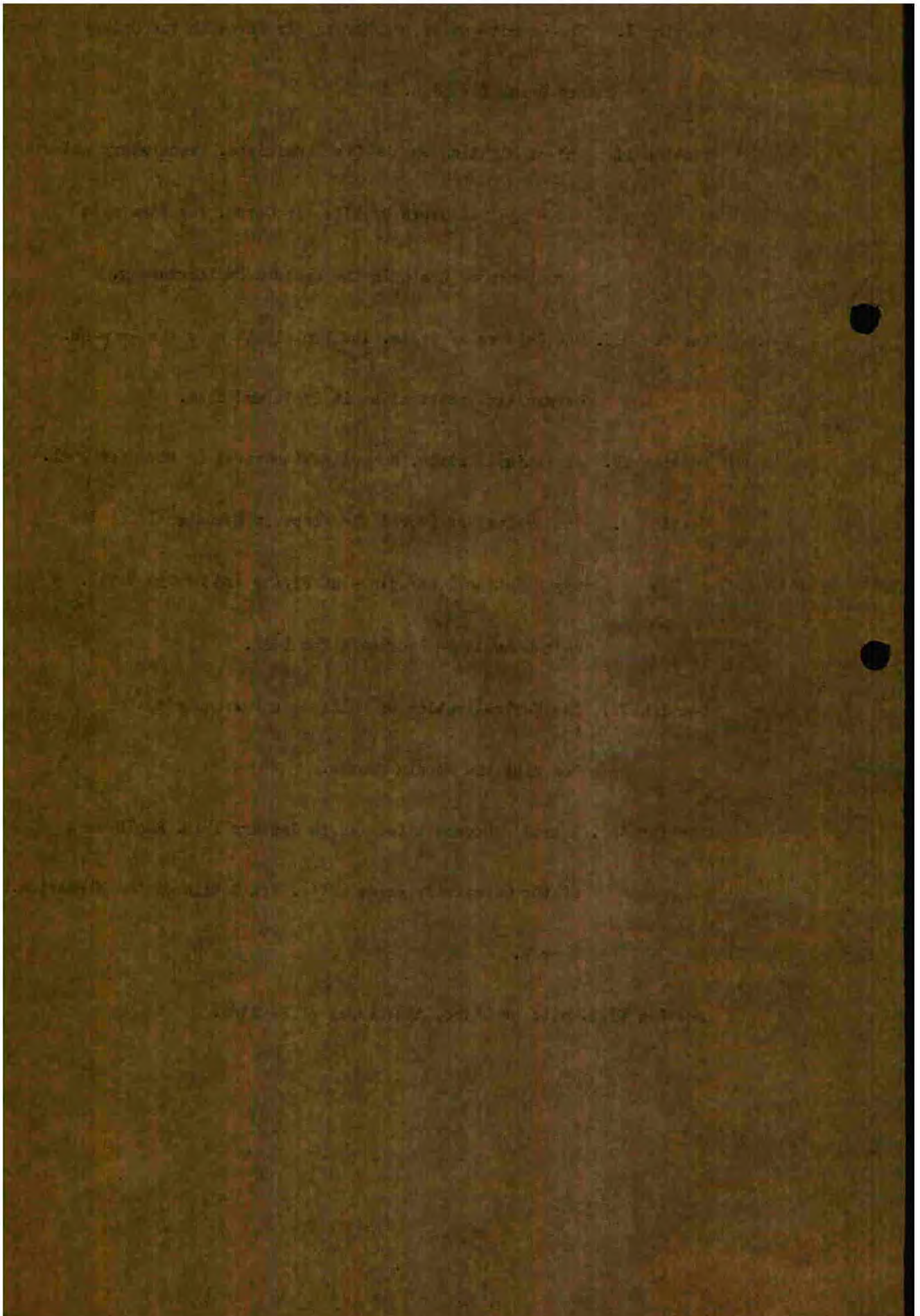
Section IV. Logistical Crisis. Rommel's Withdrawal in November 1941.

Section V. The Arrival of Second Air Force in December 1941; Its
Organisational Structure of Flying and Ground Units.
C-in-C South -- Prospects for 1942.

Section VI. The Neutralization of Malta as a Prerequisite for
Securing the Supply Routes.

Section VII. Rommel's Second Offensive in January 1942. Employment
of the German Air Force Units. The Battle of the Marmarica.
Tobruk.

Section VIII. Malta or Cairo, the Causes of Decline.



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Section I.The Commitment of the German Air Force during the Balkan and Greek Campaign

Great Britain reacted promptly to the Italian declaration of war presented to Greece on 28 October 1940. The British took over Suda Bay on Crete and secured this naval base. In addition, they transferred the 30th Squadron -- a mixed bomber-fighter unit -- to Eleusis airfield in order to protect Athens. Other British units were transferred during the month of October and subsequent months.*

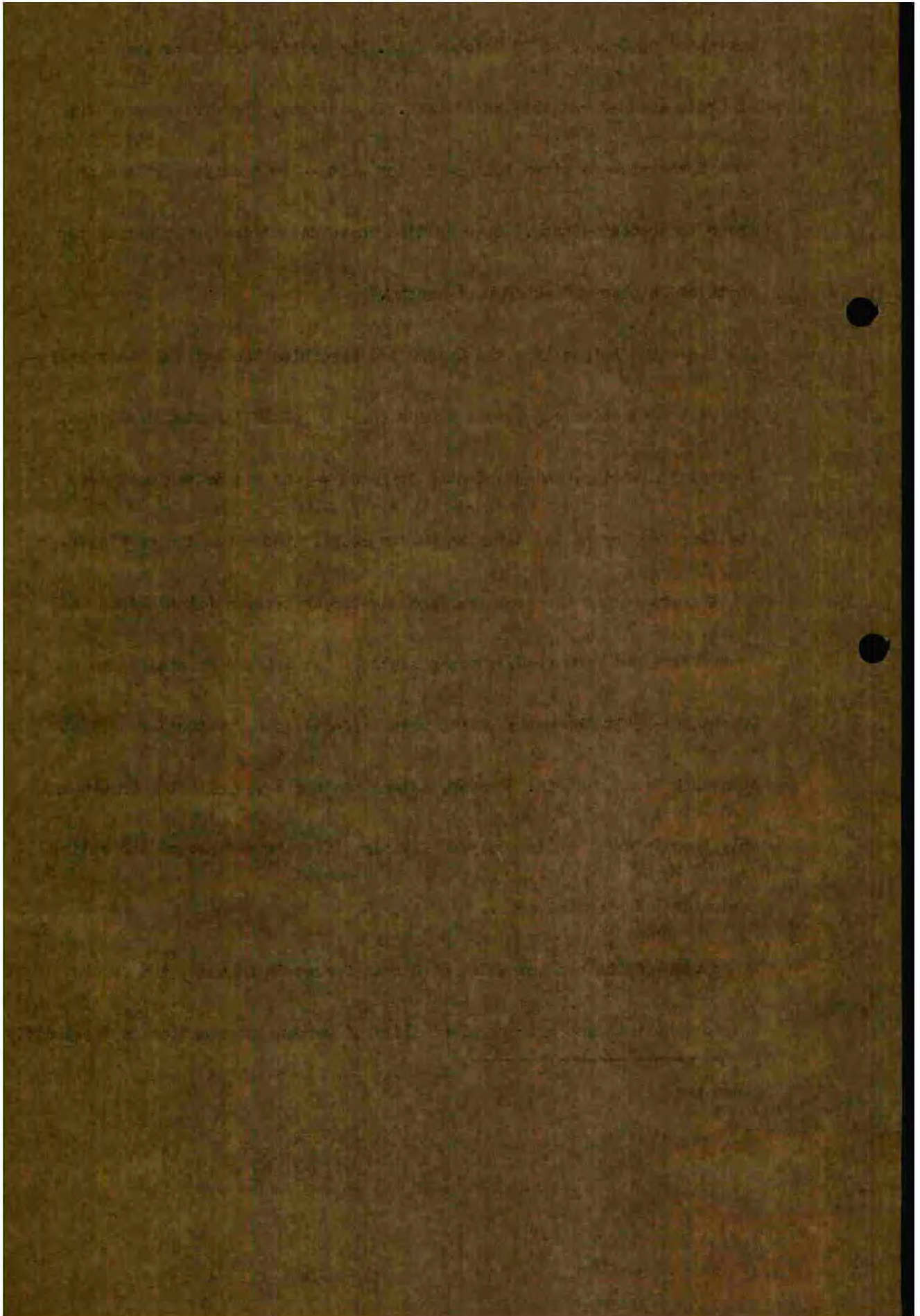
Along the Epirus line the Greeks had assembled the bulk of their Army -- the West Macedonian and Epirus Armies composed of 12 infantry divisions, 1 cavalry division, and 3 infantry brigades -- and had driven back the Italians far beyond the Albanian border despite the hardships of winter.

The area along the southern Yugoslav border between Lakes Doiran and Prespa remained uncovered, whereas south of the Rhodope Mountains the Greeks had built the Metaxas Line which offered sound protection against an attack from Bulgaria. However, aside from fortress units the Greeks had only four ~~infantry~~ badly equipped divisions for the defense of the entire border area facing Bulgaria.

In view of the concentration of German forces in Romania, the Greeks had to take into account the possibility of German intervention, a possibility

 *

See page (?)



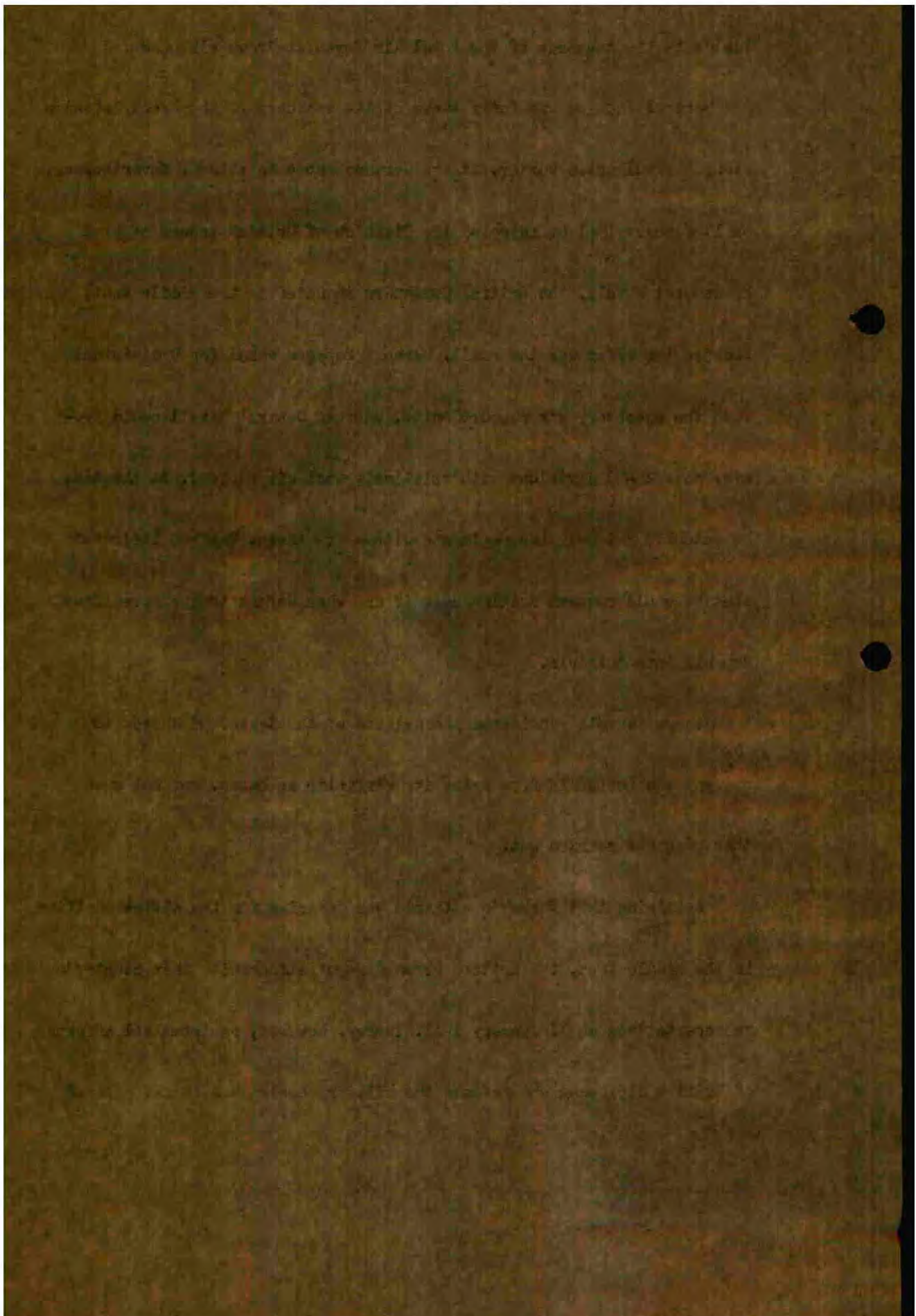
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that loomed ever larger the more unfavorable the Italian position in Albania became and the greater the threat presented to the Ploesti oil fields by the presence of the Royal Air Force at Greek air bases.

Marshal Papagos was fully aware of the weakness of the Greek defenses along the Bulgarian border, if the Germans chose to attack. Nevertheless, on 13 January 1941 he rejected the dispatch of British troops offered by General Wavell, the British Commander in Chief in the Middle East, because the offer was too small. Marshal Papagos asked for 9 divisions with the necessary air support units, whereas General Wavell could promise only 2 - 3 divisions with relatively weak air support. At the time he actually had only two regiments with a few tanks. Papagos indicated that he would request British help if and when German troops moved from Romania into Bulgaria.

General Wavell considered the seizure of the island of Rhodes to prevent the Luftwaffe from using its airfields as bases. But not even this plan was carried out.

Realizing that Turkey's attitude was decisive for the Allied position in the Middle East, the British resumed negotiations with that country's representatives on 31 January 1941. Turkey, however, resisted all efforts of British diplomacy and refused the military assistance it was offered,



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asserting very definitely that it would remain neutral.

During a second meeting in Athens on 22 February 1941, which was attended by the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Dill, in addition to General Wavell, the discrepancy of concepts regarding a common British-Greek conduct of operations became manifest once again.

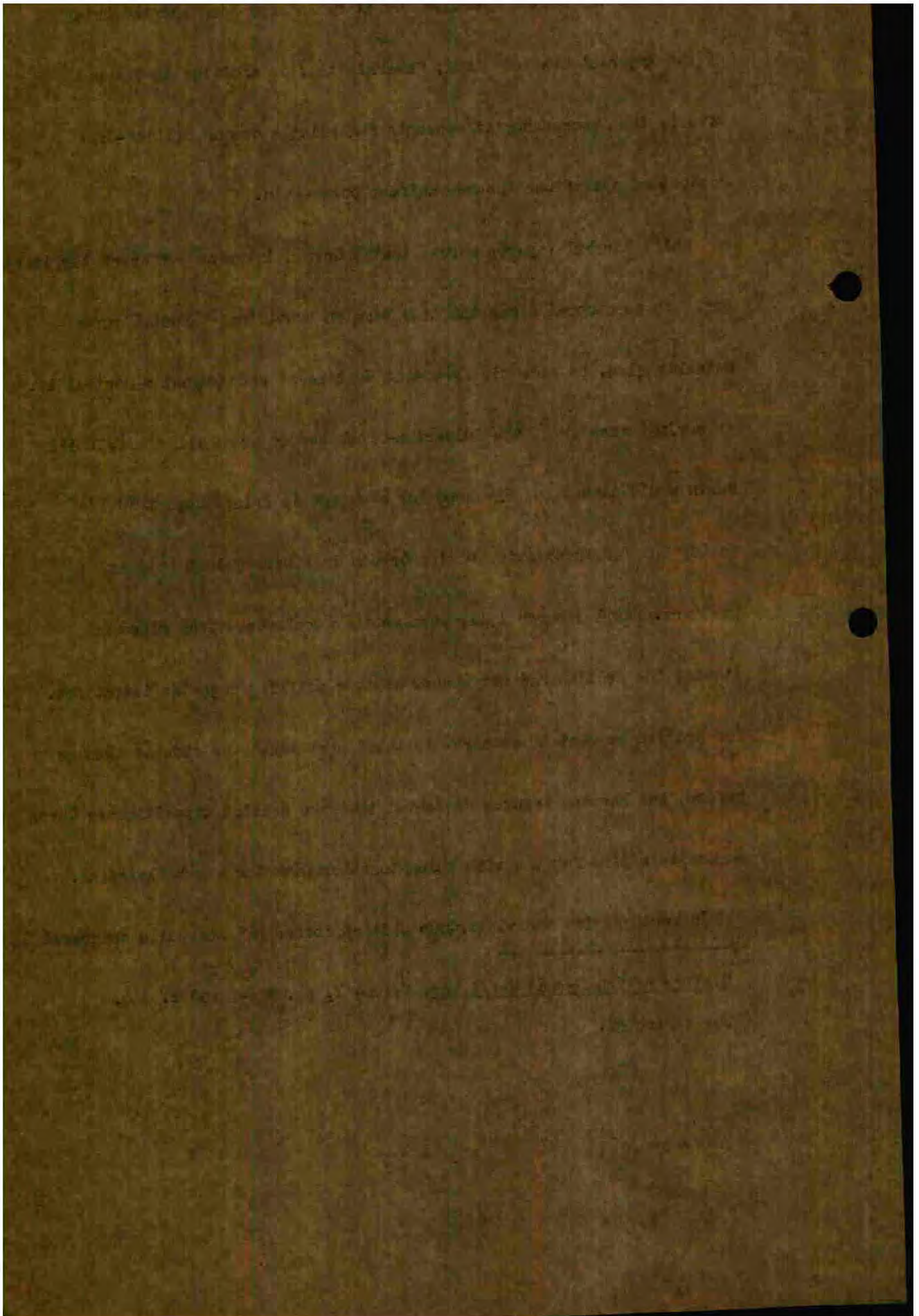
While Marshal Papagos agreed that a German invasion of Greek territory ought to be stopped along the line Vernaion Mountains - Mount Olympus - Kaimaktsalan, he made his agreement contingent upon Yugoslav neutrality.* An early surrender of the Bulgarian-Greek border areas and the Saloniki Basin would cancel out any hope for a change in Prince Regent Paul's policy and for Yugoslavia joining Greece in a war against both Axis partners. Until 2 March 1941, when another conference took place in Athens, the British had not succeeded in clarifying Yugoslav intentions. The British request to withdraw to the "short line" was refused then as before, but Marshal Papagos consented that the British Expeditionary Corps occupy this line for the time being together with two Greek divisions.

In North Africa the victorious British forces had meanwhile conquered

66

History of The Second World War, Volume I, pp. 340-3 and p. 346.

* See sketch #1.



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the Cyrenaica. The British had to decide whether they ought to drive the Italians from their last strong points in Tripolitania and thus definitely liquidate the Italian colonial empire in North Africa or whether they ought to keep their promise to Greece. After German troops entered Bulgaria on 2 March, they decided to give assistance to threatened Greece.

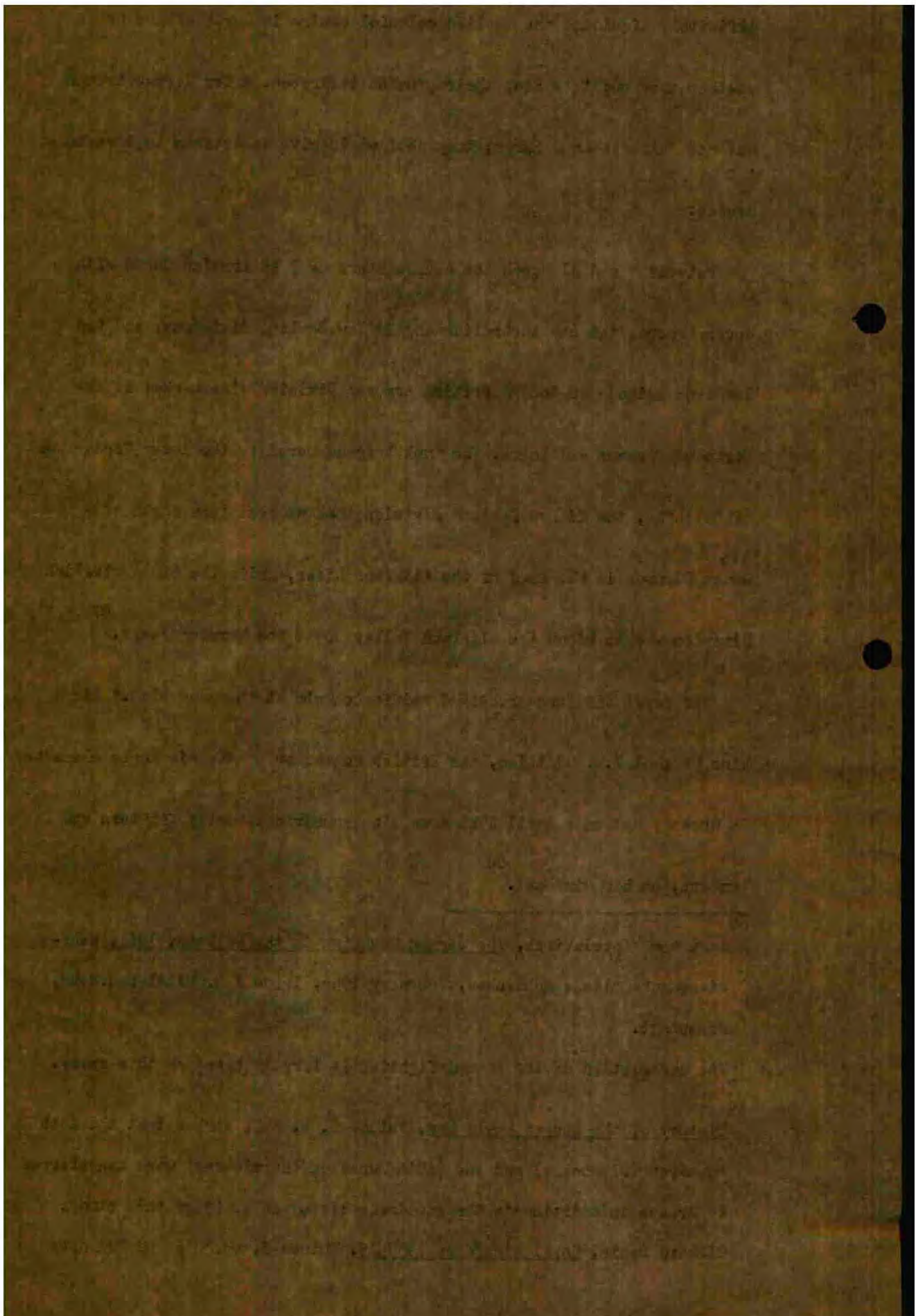
Between 7 and 31 March the headquarters of I Australian Corps with corps troops, the 6th Australian and 2d New Zealand Divisions, and the 1st Tank Brigade of the 2d British Armored Division disembarked at the ports of Piraeus and Volos. The tank brigade moved to the lower Vardar west of Salonika, the 2d New Zealand Division took up positions north of Mount Olympus in the bend of the Aliakmon River, while the 6th Australian Division was to block the Aliakmon Valley up to the Vermion Range.

The Royal Air Force received reinforcements at the same time.* Air Vice Marshal J.H. D'Albiac, the British commander of the Air Force elements in Greece, had on 6 April 1941 some nine squadrons, mostly fighters and bombers, at his disposal.

⁶⁷
Kurt von Tippelskirch, The German Campaign in the Balkans, 1941, Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau, February 1955, Issue # 2. Mittler u. Sohn, Darmstadt.

The description of the ground fighting is largely based on this essay.

⁶⁸
History of the Second World War, Volume I, p. 365, states that the 45th Squadron (Blenheims) and the 247th Squadron (Hurricanes) were transferred to Greece in addition to the squadrons listed on p. 57 of this study. Richard Denis, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, pp. 256 and 284 does

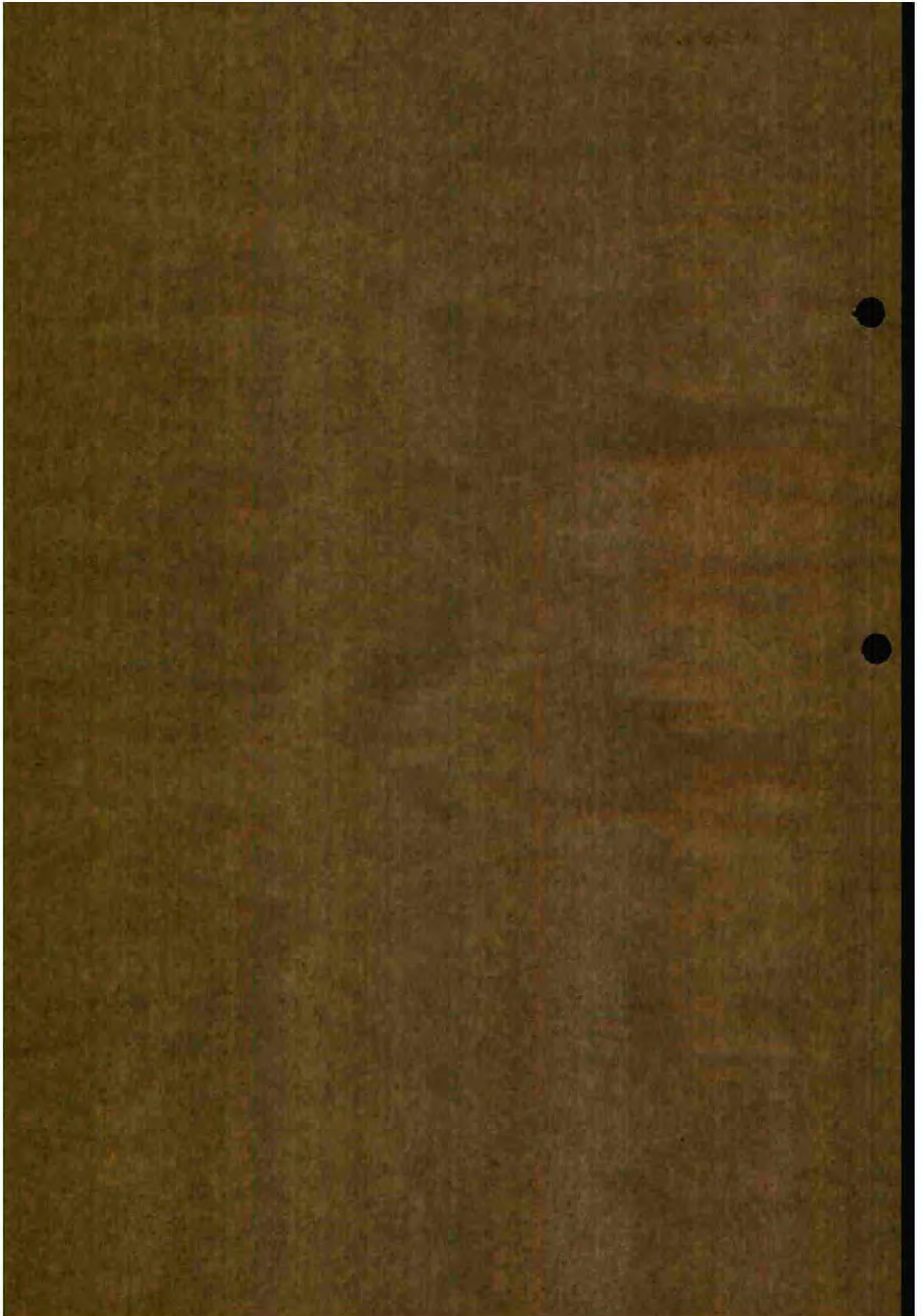


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(Continuation of Footnote # 68)

not make any such statement. The total strength of the Royal Air Force has therefore been assumed at 11 squadrons.

* See p. 57



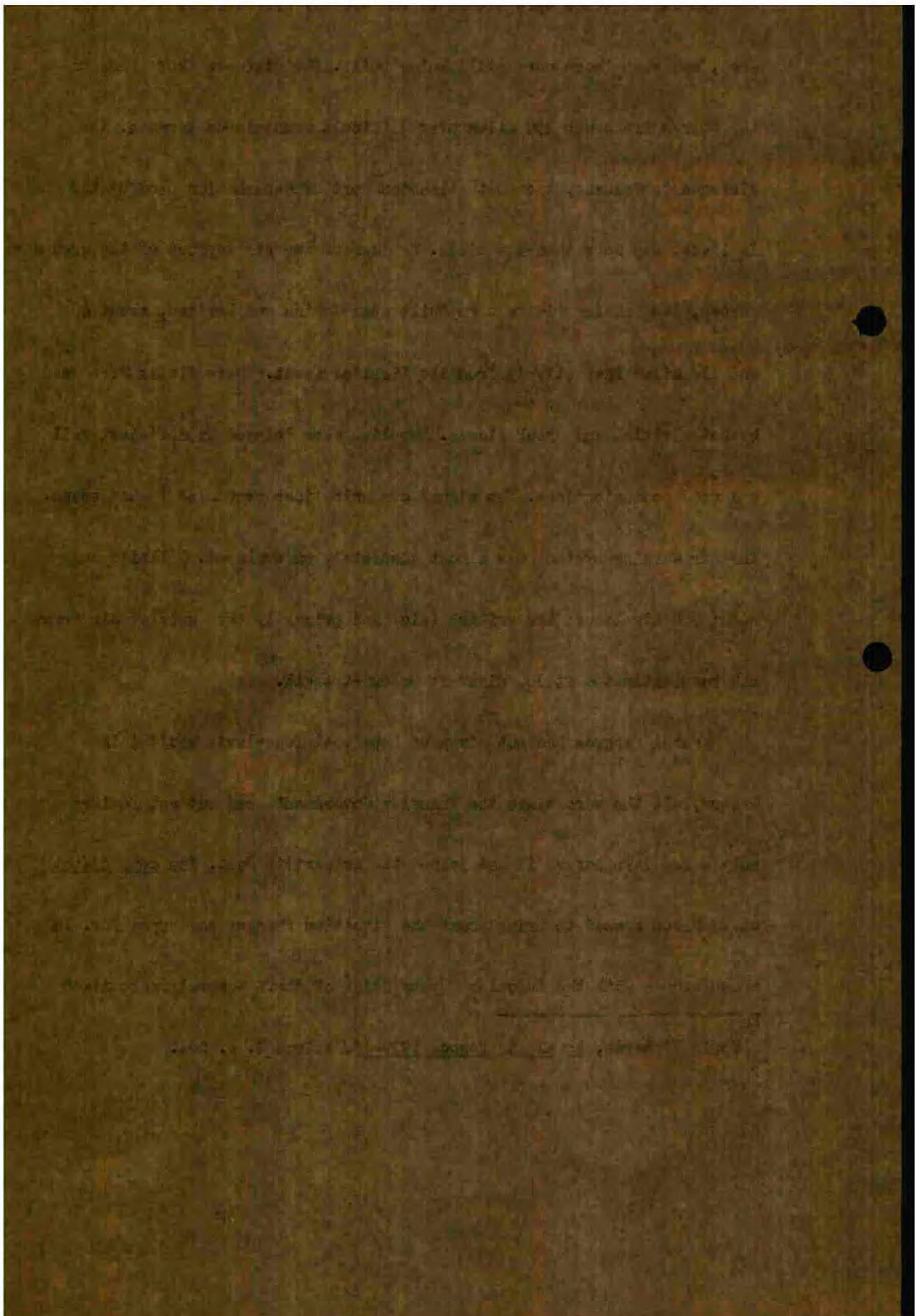
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The shortage of airfields and the unfavorable weather hampered the employment of the Royal Air Force from the outset. The only all-weather runways in existence were ^{at} the Tatoi and Eleusis airfields in the Athens area, and even these were still being built. The distance from there to the Epirus front was 250 miles over difficult mountainous terrain. The distance to Valona, the south Albanian port of debarkation used by the Italians, was more than 300 miles. To improve the air support of the ground forces, two landing fields were built near Janina and Larissa, about 40 and 110 miles respectively from the fighting front. These fields were used by both British and Greek planes. Supplies were delayed by deficient rail and road communications. The signal communications were also in bad shape. The air warning system was almost completely undeveloped. D'Albiac had about 200 airplanes; the British (sic) and primarily the Yugoslav Air Force had been estimated at 100 aircraft below strength.

Marshal Papagos had not given up hope that Yugoslavia would join Greece, all the more since the Yugoslav Government had put out feelers only a few days before it had joined the Tripartite Pact. The coup d'etat of 27 March seemed to bring about the situation Papagos had hoped for. In a conference with the Yugoslav Deputy Chief of Staff General Jankowitsch

69

Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, p. 294.



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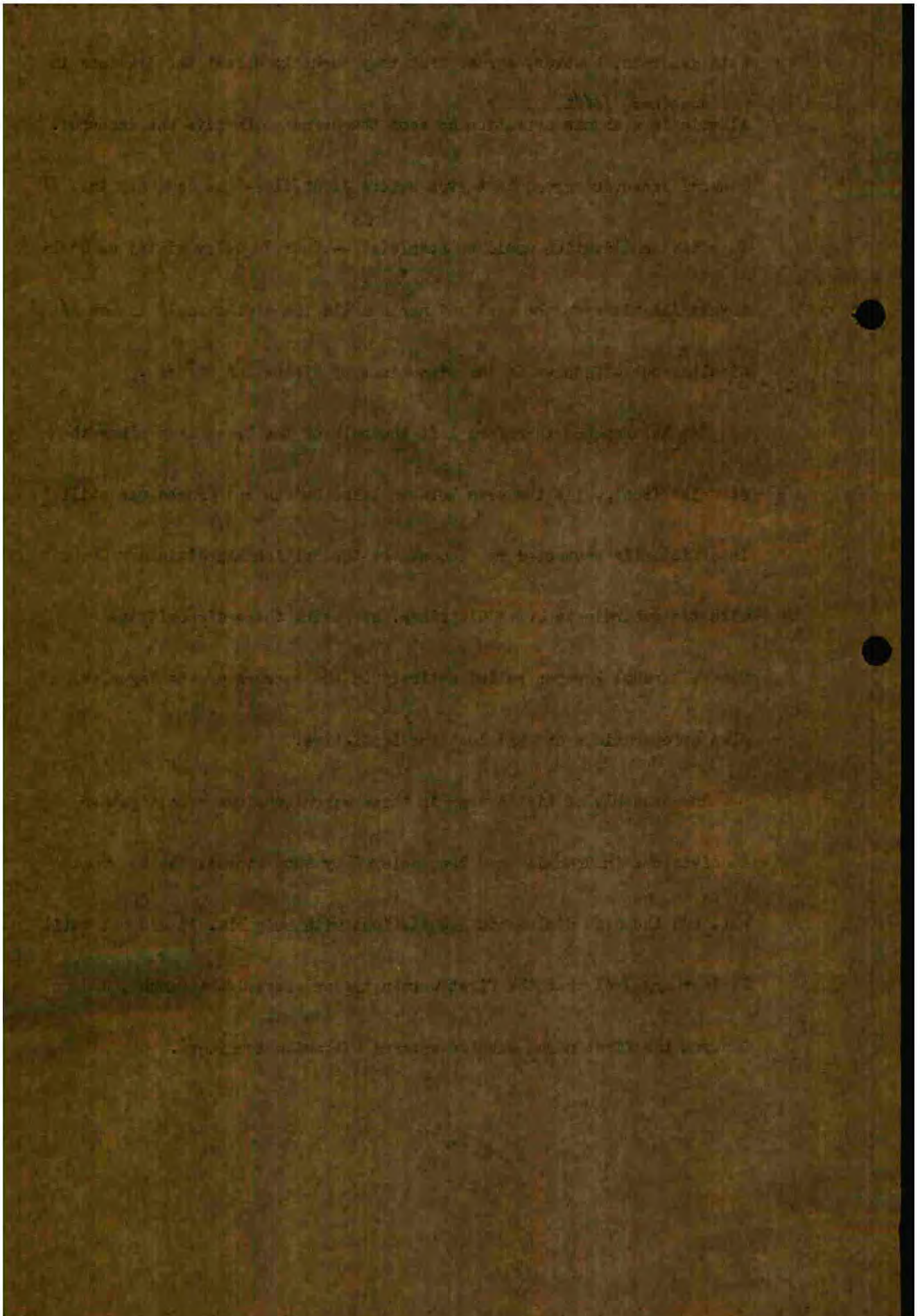
that took place during the night of 3-4 April, Marshal ~~XXXXX~~ Papagos was unable to make Yugoslavia abandon part of its territory in the south so that particularly strong force could be assembled along the Greek border.

Both generals, however, agreed that they ought to defeat the Italians in combined ~~XXXXX~~ ~~XXXXX~~ Albania in a ~~XXXXX~~ operation as soon the German offensive was launched.

General Jankovic agreed that even before 12 April -- the day when the Yugoslav mobilization would be completed -- four Yugoslav divisions would invade Albania from the east and north while the Greeks would launch a simultaneous offensive in the directions of Tirana and Durazzo.

Marshal Papagos therefore left the bulk of the Greek Army along the Albanian front, while the area between Lakes Doiran and Prespa was still insufficiently protected by elements of the British Expeditionary Corps with two subordinate Greek divisions. By making these dispositions of forces Marshal Papagos relied entirely on the success of the Yugoslav plan of operations and had lost the initiative.

The assembly of List's army in three march echelons of altogether 18 divisions in Romania had been delayed by snow storms, the bad road net, and the slow diplomatic negotiations with Bulgaria. It was not until 28 February 1941 that the first German troops crossed the Danube, and on 2 March the first march echelon entered Bulgarian territory.



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After Bulgaria had joined the Tripartite Pact on 1 March 1941, that country feared Turkish intervention and had therefore massed five divisions along the Bulgarian-Turkish border. On 4 March Hitler addressed a message to the Turkish President Ismet Inönü in which he pointed to the traditional German-Turkish friendship. The Turkish statesmen did not deny the existence of this tradition, but refused any closer ties. On the other hand, their potential worries about a German-Bulgarian attack were dispelled through this diplomatic exchange.

70

The VIII Air Corps, forming part of the Fourth Air Force, was in Romania, while additional flying units were assembled in Austria by the end of March.

Directive No. 18 of 12 November 1940 had stated that the Greek territory north of the Aegean and the Saloniki Basin were to be seized. Moreover, the necessary prerequisites for the employment of German flying units against objectives in the eastern Mediterranean -- primarily the British air bases from which the Romanian oil fields were threatened -- were to be created. The launching of the offensive was now scheduled for 1 April.

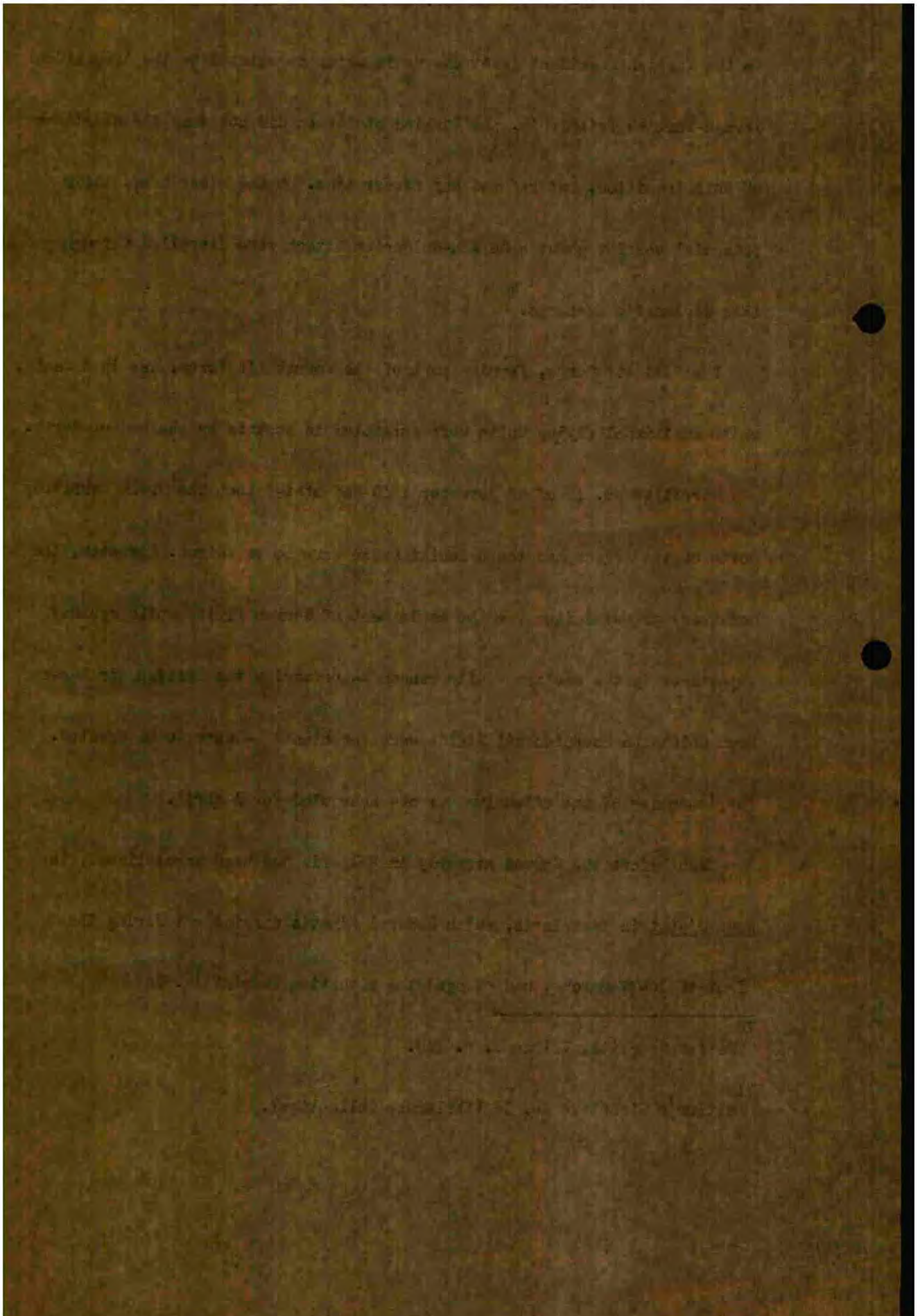
Even before the German assembly in Bulgaria had been accomplished, the coup d'état in Yugoslavia, which General Simovic carried out during the night of 26-27 March, had changed the situation completely. In

70

Walter Goerlitz, Volume I, p. 249.

71

Hitler's Directive No. 18 (Karlsruhe Collection).



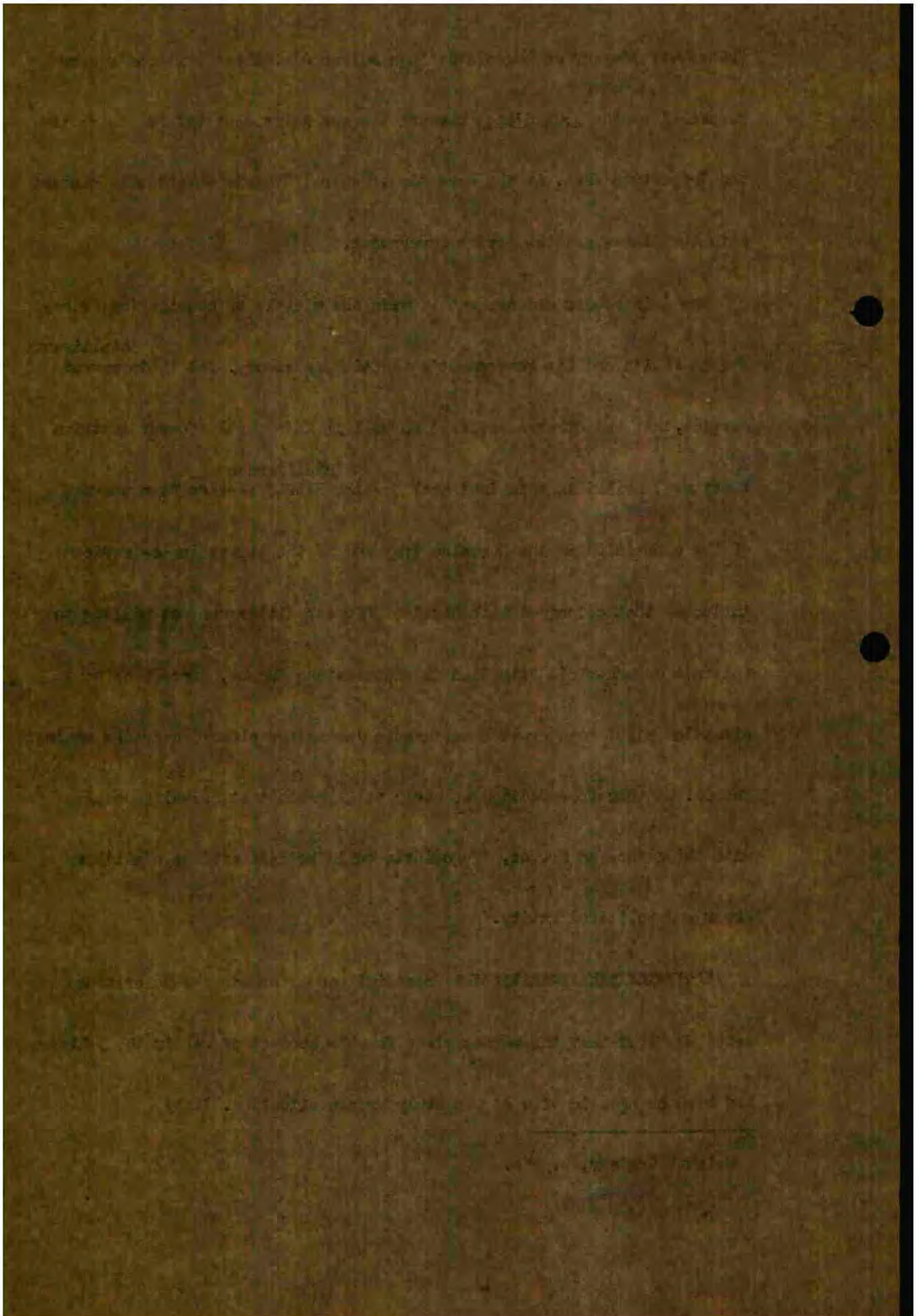
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Vienna the Yugoslav Government had signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March. The Axis Powers had guaranteed Yugoslav sovereignty and the inviolability of its frontiers, and had promised not to demand transit rights for military transportation across Yugoslavia in a Balkan war. These agreements were cancelled by the coup d'etat because the new government refused to ratify the Tripartite Pact. At the same time, General Simovic established contact with the Allies and the Soviet Government.

The Axis Powers had apparently made the mistake of considering Prince Regent Paul's and his government's position as secure. Had their ~~secret~~ intelligence service, that had otherwise worked so well in this partly former Austrian territory, failed in this instance? Had the ~~SECRET~~ intelligence service been unaware of the opposition in the Yugoslav Army and of the strong Anglo-American influence that coincided with Russian efforts? Hitler was not willing to tolerate an uncertain situation in southeastern Europe, since such a situation might have grave consequences during the planned campaign against Russia. He therefore decided as early as 27 March that, simultaneously with the attack on Greece, "Yugoslavia would be destroyed as a military power and political entity."

~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Mussolini was informed by a memorandum dated 28 March that the German plans for the conduct of war in the Balkans had been changed in view of the newly arisen situation. Italy

72
Helmuth Greiner, p. 386.



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therefore moved four of its divisions stationed in Albania to the northern and eastern borders of that country as a protection against Yugoslav invasion.

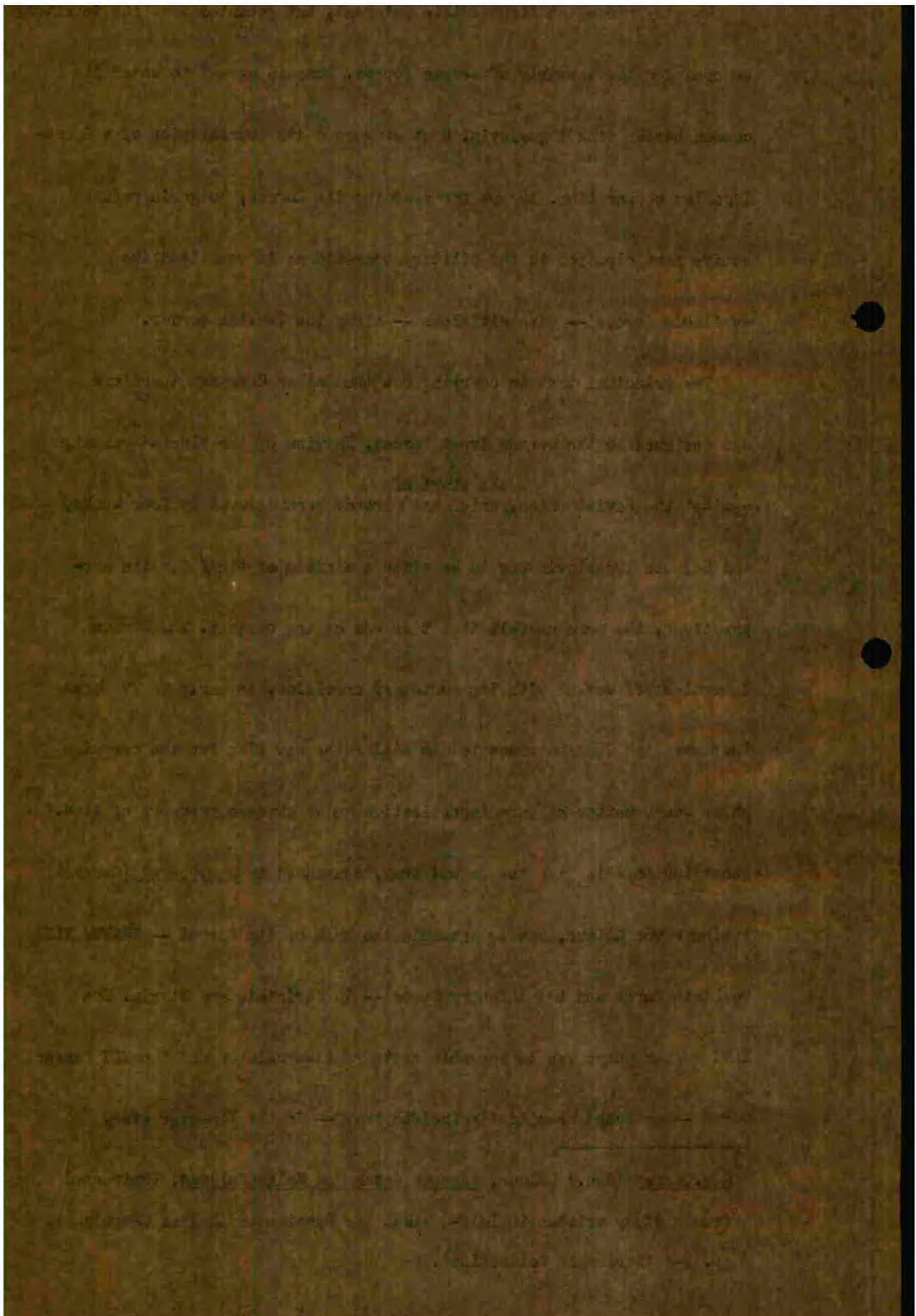
Hungary showed at first little interest, but accepted that its territory be used for the assembly of German forces. Romania agreed to cover its common border with Yugoslavia, but expressed its apprehension of a Russo-Yugoslav cooperation. Except for guarding its border, Bulgaria refused active participation in the military operations; it committed its available forces -- five divisions -- along the Turkish border.

The principal task in carrying out the Balkan Campaign therefore was assigned to the German Armed Forces. In view of the planned campaign against the Soviet Union, ^{the start of} which had already been delayed by four weeks, and because Yugoslavia was to be given a minimum of time⁷³ for its preparations, the Germans felt that time was of the essence. The German General Staff worked with its customary precision. As early as 29 March the Army High Command presented to Hitler the new plan for the campaign which was "a matter of pure improvisation under extreme pressure of time."

According to this plan the Second Army, commanded by Gen. Oberst (General) Freiherr von Weichs, was to assemble the bulk of its forces -- ~~XXXXXX~~ XLIX Mountain Corps and LII Infantry Corps -- in Carinthia and Styria. The XLVI Panzer Corps was to assemble south of Lake Balaton and the XLI Panzer Corps -- detached from List's Twelfth Army -- in the Temesvar area.

73

Gen. Oberst (Gen.) Halder, Angaben ueber den Balkanfeldzug, (Extracted from a study written in 1945-6 about the Russian and Balkan Campaigns), pp. 3-4 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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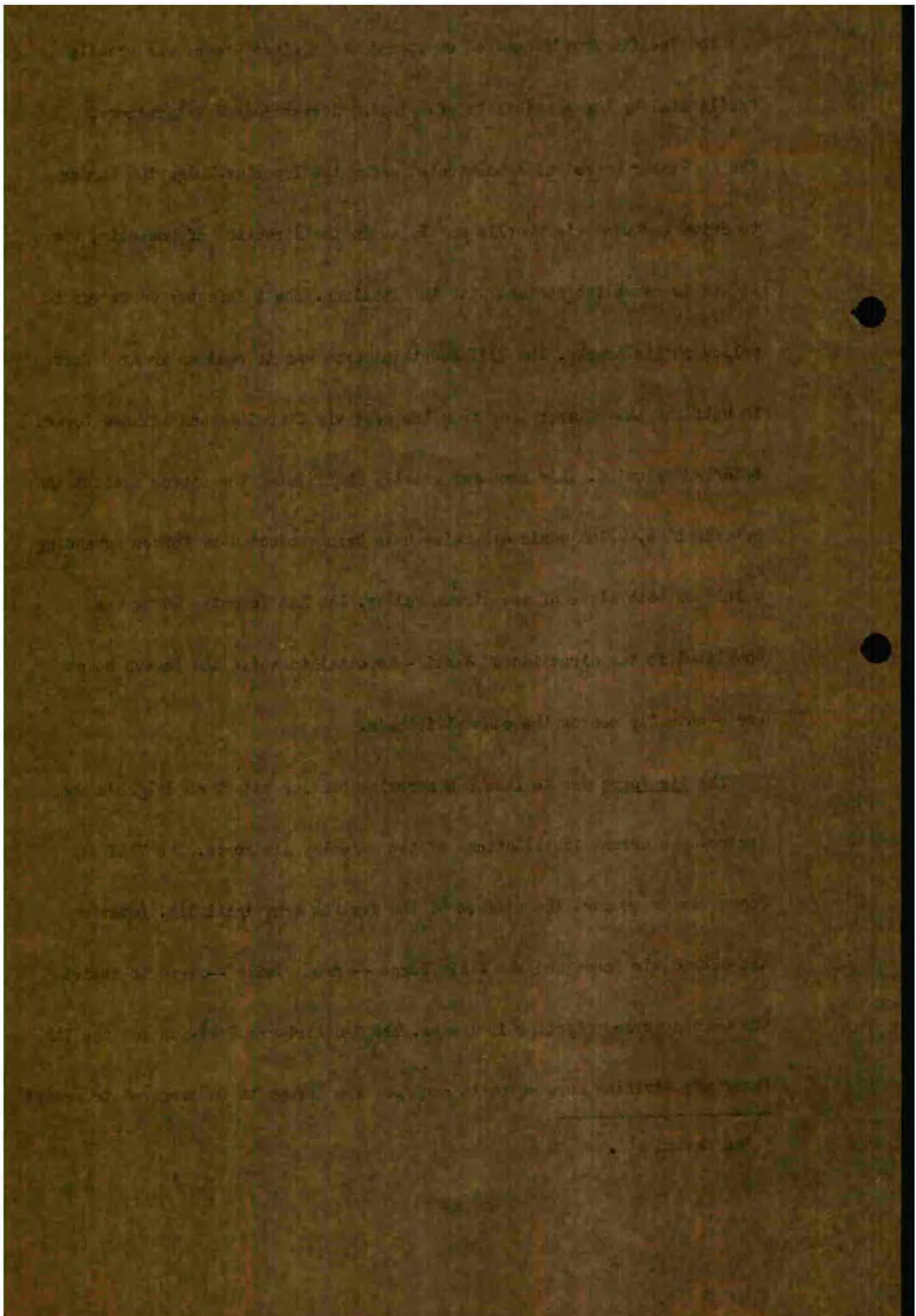
The Second Army was to invade the northwestern part of Yugoslavia and make a concentric attack on Belgrade in conjunction with the First Panzer Group under Gen.Oberst (Gen.) Von Kleist.*

The Twelfth Army's conduct of operations against Greece was greatly facilitated by the possibility of swinging across Yugoslav territory.

The XL Panzer Corps was concentrated along the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border to drive westward via Skoplje and Veles in the direction of Monastir, where it was to establish contact with the Italians. The I Infantry Corps was to follow in its tracks. The VIII Mountain Corps was to send an armored force to outflank the Metaxas Line from the west via Strumitza and advance toward ~~SAIGAKKI~~ Salonika. This maneuver greatly facilitated the attack against the Metaxas Line, which would otherwise have been conducted by forces advancing mainly on both sides of the Struma Valley. The XXX Infantry Corps was committed in the direction of Xanti - Komotini to seize the Aegean coast and eventually occupy the coastal islands.

The Air Force was to launch a surprise bombing attack on Belgrade and destroy the ground installations of the Yugoslav Air Force. The VIII Air Corps was to support the advance of the Twelfth Army initially. Later on, the Fourth Air Force and the I Air Corps -- from Sicily -- were to assist the German forces fighting in Greece. The 22d Airborne Division and the 7th Parachute Division were moved to southeastern Europe to be prepared to assist

* See Sketch # 2.



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in the occupation of the islands belonging to Greece or in other missions.

The air attack on Belgrade was to take place on 6 April, on the same day on which Twelfth Army was to launch its south and westward drives, while First Panzer Group was to start on 8 April and Second Army on the 12th of that month. Eventually both of these jump-off dates could be advanced.

After full mobilization the Yugoslav Army had the numerically remarkable strength of almost one million men. Its equipment was outdated, and the Yugoslavs had almost no modern weapons that might decisively influence the course of battle. The extended borders were without continuous lines of fortifications, although pillboxes had been constructed in certain places; none of the pillboxes had armor-plated cupolas. The Yugoslav Air Force had 357 combat-efficient aircraft on 15 February 1941; 32 of these were reconnaissance planes, 171 bombers, and 154 fighters, some of which were of German make, such as Messerschmitt 109's and Dornier 17's.⁷⁴

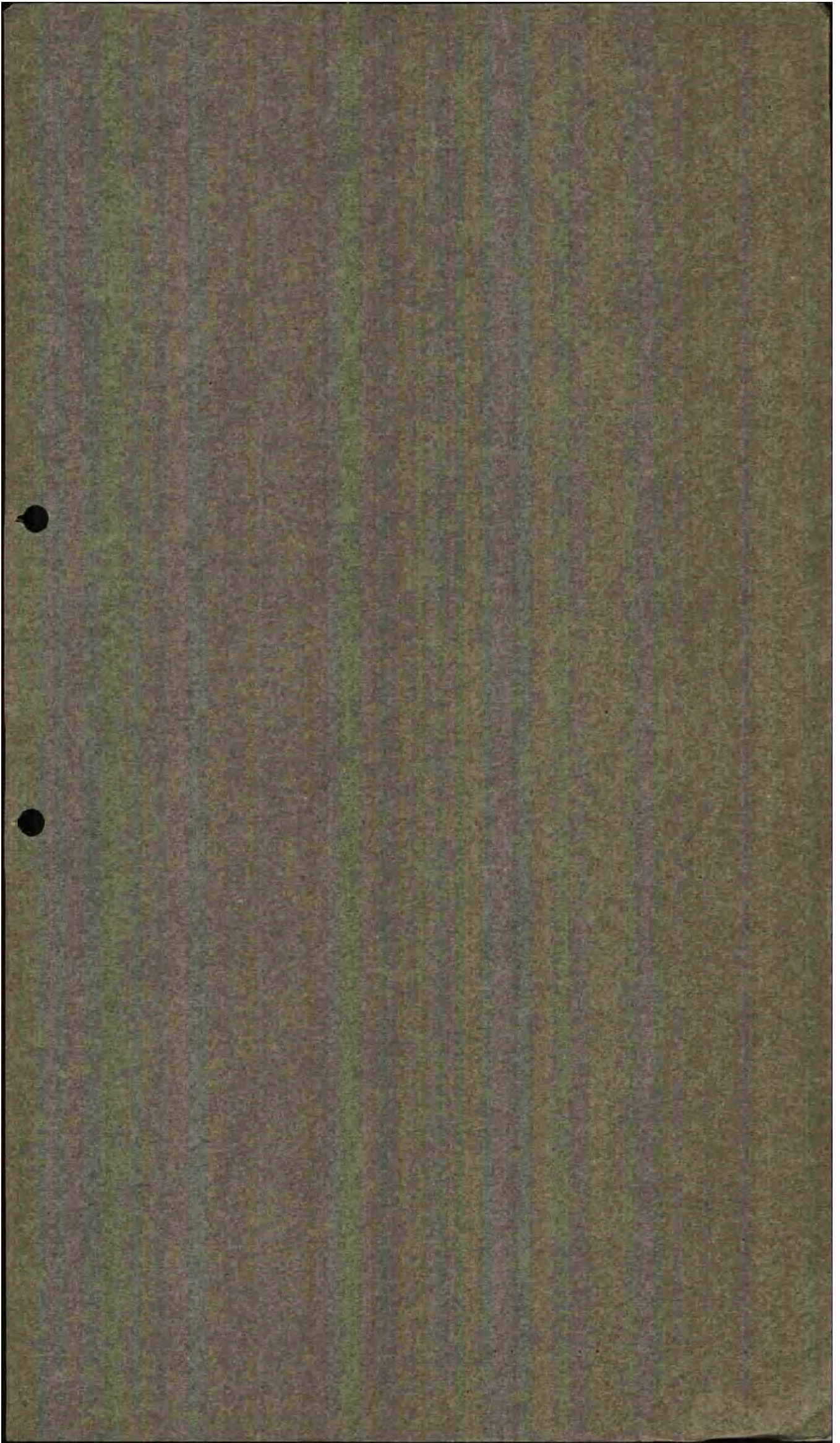
The following disposition of forces was planned once the assembly was accomplished:

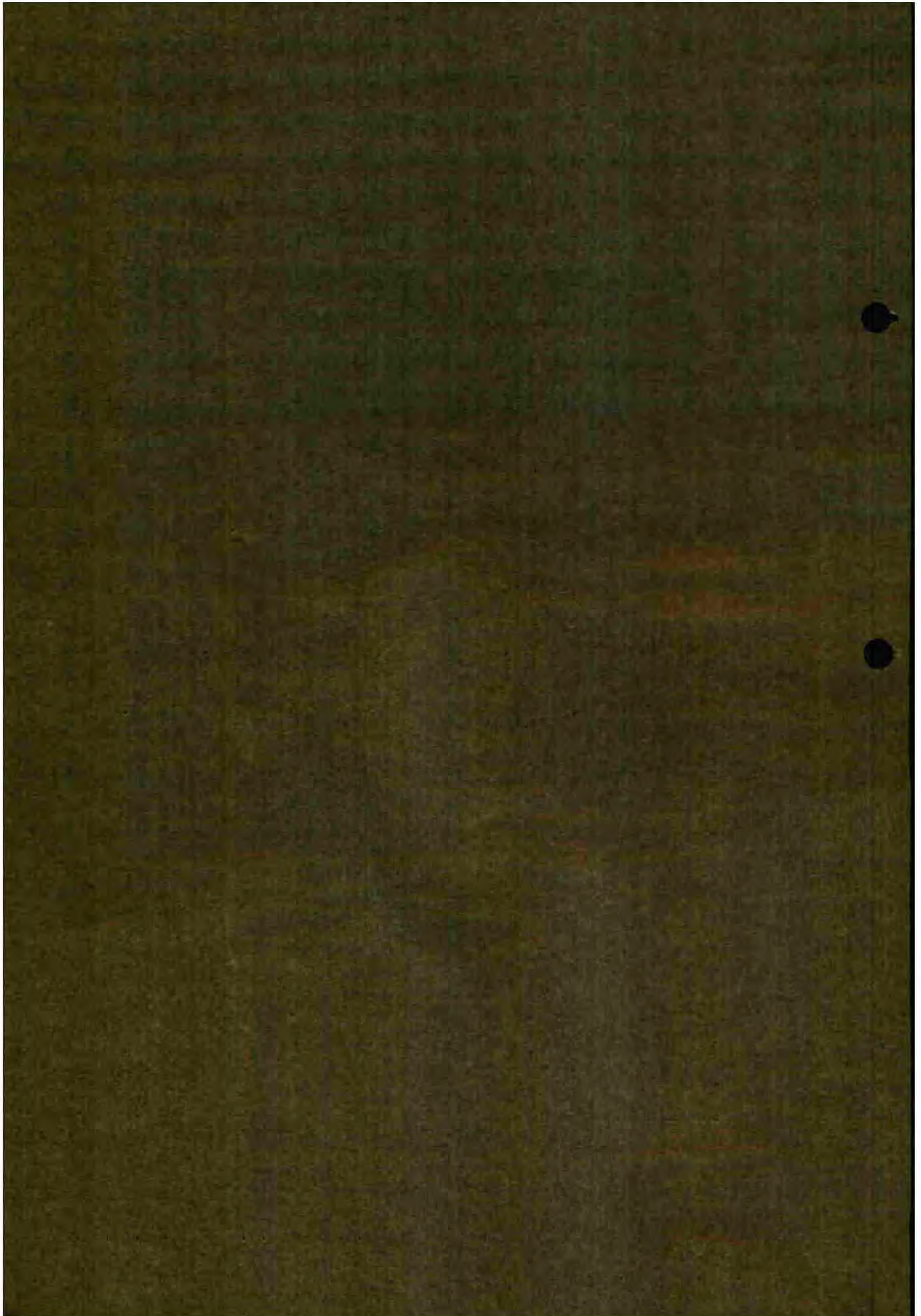
In the south under Third Army Group, the Third Provisional Army and the Fifth Army were to be employed along the eastern front and the Third Army was to be deployed along the Albanian border; total strength -- 11 divisions.

⁷⁴

Air Force High Command Intelligence Estimate of 15 February 1941, "Dislokationskarte der jugoslawischen Luftwaffe". (Karlsruhe Collection).

The German-make planes shot down and/or destroyed on the ground are mentioned in the extracts from Air Force High Command reports "Der Einsatz der deutschen Luftwaffe im Feldzug in Jugoslawien vom 6.4. bis 17.4." on pp. 4, 6, 8, 13, 16, 24, 32, 34. (Karlsruhe Collection).





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East of Belgrade, directly subordinate to the Yugoslav Army Command, stood the Sixth Army, composed of one cavalry and four infantry divisions.

Deployed in the northeastern provinces under the command of Second Army Group were the First and Second Armies, consisting of one cavalry and six infantry divisions.

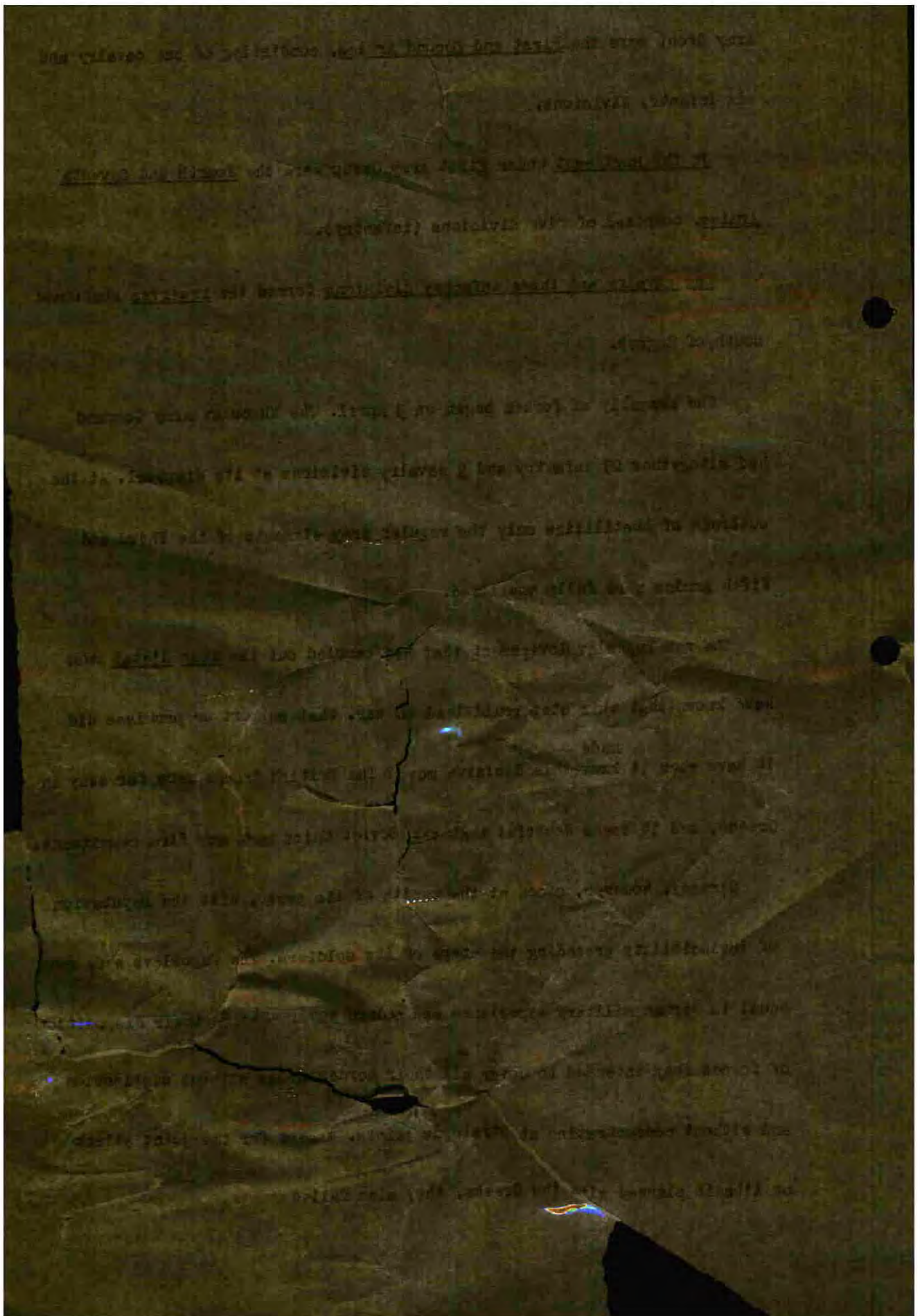
In the northeast under First Army Group were the Fourth and Seventh Armies, composed of five divisions (infantry).

One cavalry and three infantry divisions formed the reserves stationed south of Zagreb.

The assembly of forces began on 3 April. The Yugoslav Army Command had altogether 29 infantry and 3 cavalry divisions at its disposal. At the outbreak of hostilities only the regular Army elements of the Third and Fifth Armies were fully mobilized.

The new Yugoslav Government that had carried out the coup d'etat must have known that this step would lead to war. What support or promises did it have when it ^{made} ~~took~~ this decisive move? The British troops were far away in Greece, and it seems doubtful that the Soviet Union made any firm commitment.

Germany, however, stood at the zenith of its power, with the reputation of invincibility preceding the steps of its soldiers. The Yugoslavs were not equal to German military experience and modern equipment. By their disposition of forces they intended to cover all their border areas without distinction and without concentrating at strategic points. Except for the joint attack on Albania planned with the Greeks, they also failed



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to coordinate their strategy with that of their allies. The Yugoslav plan and disposition of forces therefore carried the seeds of failure from the outset. In fact, the catastrophe that befell the Yugoslav Army was thereby made inevitable.

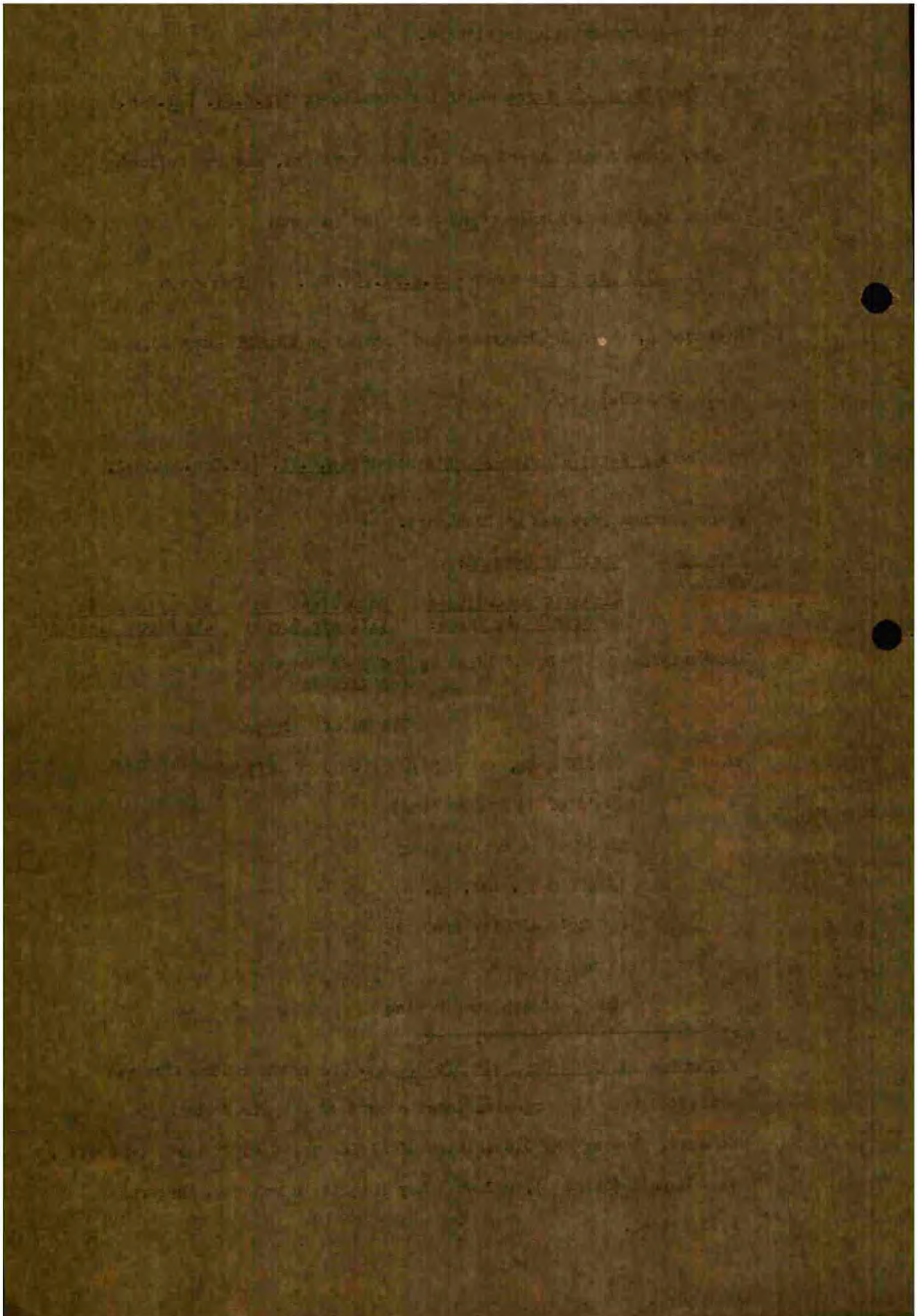
The Fourth Air Force under the command of Gen.d.Fl. (Lt.Gen.) Loehr, whose headquarters was located at Vienna, had the following senior staffs and headquarters under its command:

The VIII Air Corps under Gen.d.Fl. (Lt.Gen.) Freiherr von Richthofen, whose headquarters was located at ~~KIENNA~~ Gorna Djumaja south of Sofia; and

The Air Force Mission Romania under Gen.d.Fl. (Lt.Gen.) Speidel, whose command post was at Bucharest.

<u>Type of Unit:</u>	<u>Chain of Command:</u>		
	<u>Directly Subordinate to Fourth Air Force:</u>	<u>Subordinate to VIII Air Corps:</u>	<u>Subordinate to Air Force Mission:</u>
Reconnaissance	4th Sq of 121st Gp	(2d Long Range Sq) (of 11th Gp)	
		7th Sq of <u>Luftgau 2</u>	
Bombing	(Staff & Hq, 1st & 3d) (Gp's of 2d Bomber Wing) 3d Gp of 3d Bomber Wing (Staff & Hq, 1st, 2d, &) (3d Gp's of 51st Bomber) (wing) 2d Gp of 4th Bomber Wing	1st Gp of <u>Luftgau 1</u>	

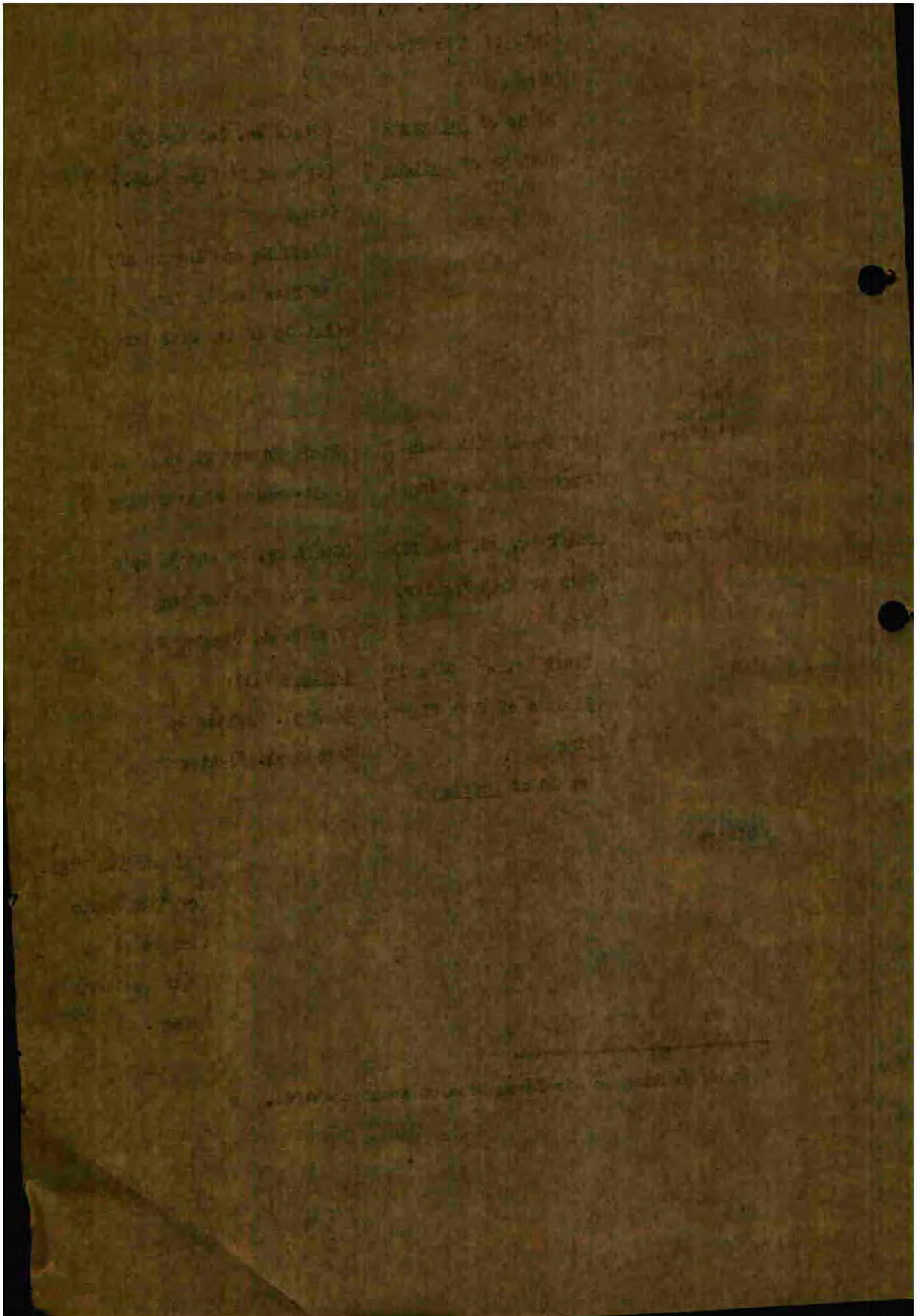
Verbaende waehrend des Balkanfeldzuges. The above information was extracted from the organizational charts of the Air Force High Command, showing the disposition of flying units on 29 March (Chart 1), on 15 April (Chart 2), and on 1 May (Charts 3a and 3b), Karlsruhe Collection).



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Type of Unit:	Chain of Command:	Subordinate to VIII Air Corps:	Subordinate to Air Force Mission:
Dive Bomber	(Staff Hq. 1st, 2d, and 3d) (Gp's of 77th Dive Bomber) (Wing	(Staff Hq. 1st and 3d)	
	2d Gp of <u>Luftgau 2</u>	(Gp's of 2d Dive Bomb.)	
	10th Sq of <u>Luftgau 2</u>	(Wing	
		(Staff Hq and 1st Gp of)	
Twin Engine Fighters	(1st Gp of 26th Twin-)	(Staff Hq and 2d Gp of 26th)	
	(Engine Fighter Wing)	(Twin-Engine Fighter Wing)	
Fighters	(Staff Hq. 2d, and 3d)	(Staff Hq. 2d and 3d Gp's)	
	(Gp's of 54th Fighter)	(of 27th Fighter Wing)	
	(Wing	27th Repl. Fighter Gp	
	(Staff Hq. and 2d and)	<u>Luftgau VIII:</u>	
Others	(3d Gp's of 77th Fight.)	3d Repl. Fighter Gp	
	(Wing	54th Repl. Fighter Gp	
	1st Gp of <u>Luftgau 2</u>		(3d and 4th Plat.)
			(of 13th Radio
			(Intercept Sq
			(76th Weather)
			(Rescn. Sq

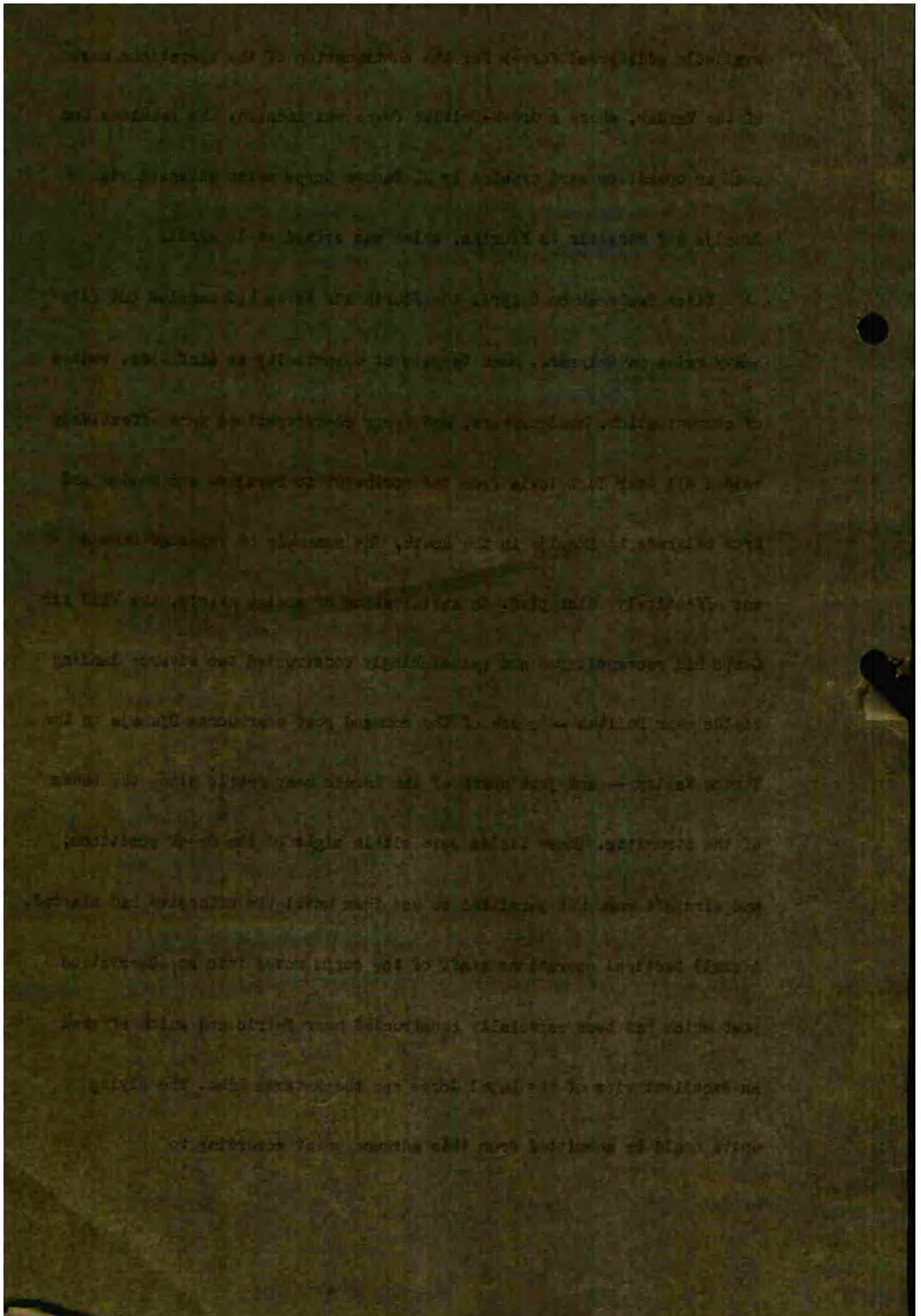
Subordination to Air Force Mission seems doubtful.



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The initial move of the Yugoslav and Greek campaigns was made by Twelfth Army in the early morning hours of 6 April. As early as 9 April the Greek Army east of the Vardar offered its capitulation. This surrender made available additional forces for the continuation of the operations west of the Vardar, where a Greek-British force was located. The premises for such an operation were created by XL Panzer Corps which advanced via Skoplje and Monastir to Florina, which was seized on 10 April.

Since daybreak on 6 April the Fourth Air Force had carried out five heavy raids on Belgrade. Such targets of opportunity as airfields, routes of communication, headquarters, and troop concentrations were effectively raided all over Yugoslavia from the northwest to Sarajevo and Montar and from Belgrade to Skoplje in the south. The assembly of Yugoslav forces was effectively disrupted. In anticipation of coming events, the VIII Air Corps had reconnoitered and painstakingly constructed two advance landing fields near Belitsa -- south of the command post near Gorna Djumaja in the Struma Valley -- and just north of the border near Petric along the banks of the Strumitsa. These fields were within sight of the Greek positions, and aircraft were not permitted to use them until the offensive had started. A small tactical operations staff of the corps moved into an observation post which had been especially constructed near Petric and which offered an excellent view of the Rapel Gorge and the Metaxas Line. The flying units could be committed from this advance point according to



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the personal observations made by the staff. About four medium antiaircraft batteries were pulled out of the antiaircraft defense system and committed on both sides of the Struma, just north of the Rupel Gorge, and their guns fired directly at the Metaxas Line fortifications.⁷⁶

When the attack started the VIII Air Corps concentrated its efforts on this sector.

The I Air Corps, operating from Italian fields, assisted the Fourth Air Force by attacking the port of Piraeus for the first time during the night of 7 April.⁷⁷

On 9 April the Second Army also jumped off from its assembly areas, destroyed the opposing enemy forces, and committed the bulk of its forces for an advance on Sarajevo via Zagreb. In the Ljubljana area the Yugoslav Seventh Army was encircled by Italian and German forces.

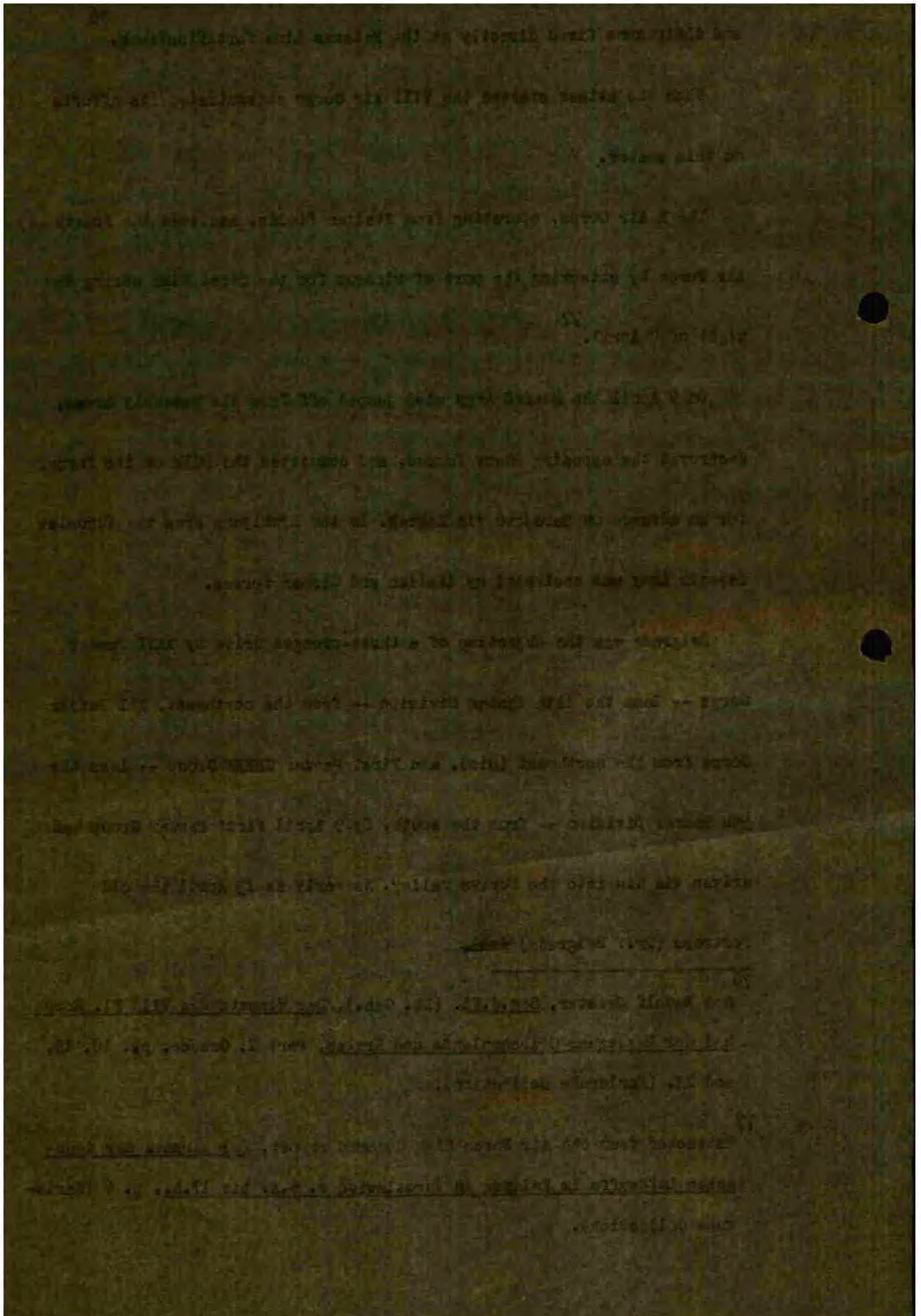
Belgrade was the objective of a three-pronged drive by XLVI Panzer Corps -- less the 14th Panzer Division -- from the northeast, XII Panzer Corps from the northeast (sic), and First Panzer Group -- less the 5th Panzer Division -- from the south. By 9 April First Panzer Group had driven via Nis into the Morava valley. As early as 13 April the old fortress (Tr.: Belgrade) ~~was~~

76

See Rudolf Meister, Gen.d.Fl. (Lt. Gen.), Der Einsatz des VIII Fl. Korps bei der Besetzung Griechenlands und Kretas, Part I, Greece, pp. 18, 19, and 22. (Karlsruhe Collection).

77

Extracted from the Air Force High Command report, Der Einsatz der deutschen Luftwaffe im Feldzug in Jugoslawien v. 6.4. bis 17.4., p. 6 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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was captured by the Germans who thus took possession of Yugoslavia's capital; the government had apparently fled to Sarajevo.

The Fourth Air Force had continued during the entire period its bombardments of Belgrade and its demoralizing attacks on airfields, means of communication, and troop concentrations. The VIII Air Corps had committed the bulk of its ground support units to assist the LX Panzer Corps and First Panzer Group as of 8 April. On 10, 11, and 12 April air activities were greatly restricted by snow flurries and low clouds above the Balkan Mountains. Nevertheless, the VIII Air Corps succeeded in moving up some of its elements into the Skoplje - Monastir area and in resupplying them despite the difficult logistical situation.

The X Air Corps made two successful attacks on shipping in the Bay of Salamis during the night of 12 April.

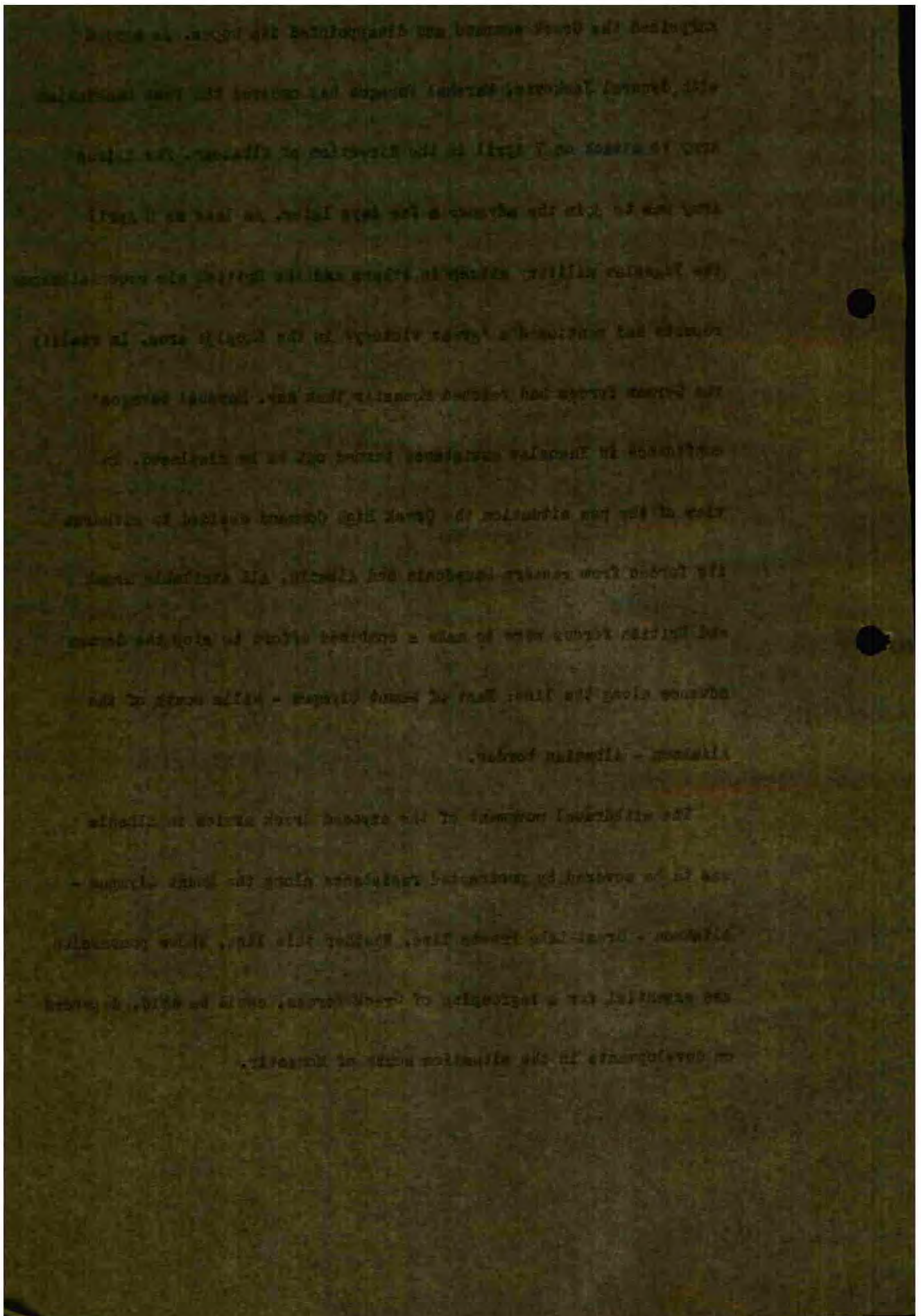
The Army High Command assumed -- correctly -- that British-Greek forces were holding the line Katerini-Edessa-Lake Prespa. The Twelfth Army plan to encircle these forces by one pincer movement west of the Aliakmon and the other from Salonika in the direction of Mount Olympus -- launched by VIII Mountain Corps with four divisions -- had the Army High Command's full approval. This maneuver would force the British out of their fortified positions. At Florina the XL Panzer Corps, which had previously been reinforced by the 5th Panzer Division of

- 106 -

First Panzer Group, encountered British forces for the first time on 10 April.

This rapid development along the flank of the Allied position surprised the Greek command and disappointed its hopes. As agreed with General Jankovic, Marshal Papagos had ordered the West Macedonian Army to attack on 7 April in the direction of Elbasan. The Epirus Army was to join the advance a few days later. As late as 8 April the Yugoslav military attack in Athens and the British air reconnaissance reports had mentioned a "great victory" in the Skoplje area. In reality the German forces had reached Monastir that day. Marshal Papagos' confidence in Yugoslav assistance turned out to be misplaced. In view of the new situation the Greek High Command decided to withdraw its forces from western Macedonia and Albania. All available Greek and British forces were to make a combined effort to stop the German advance along the line: East of Mount Olympus - hills south of the Aliakmon - Albanian border.

The withdrawal movement of the exposed Greek armies in Albania was to be covered by protracted resistance along the Mount Olympus - Aliakmon - Great Lake Prespa line. Whether this line, whose possession was essential for a regrouping of Greek forces, could be held, depended on developments in the situation south of Monastir.



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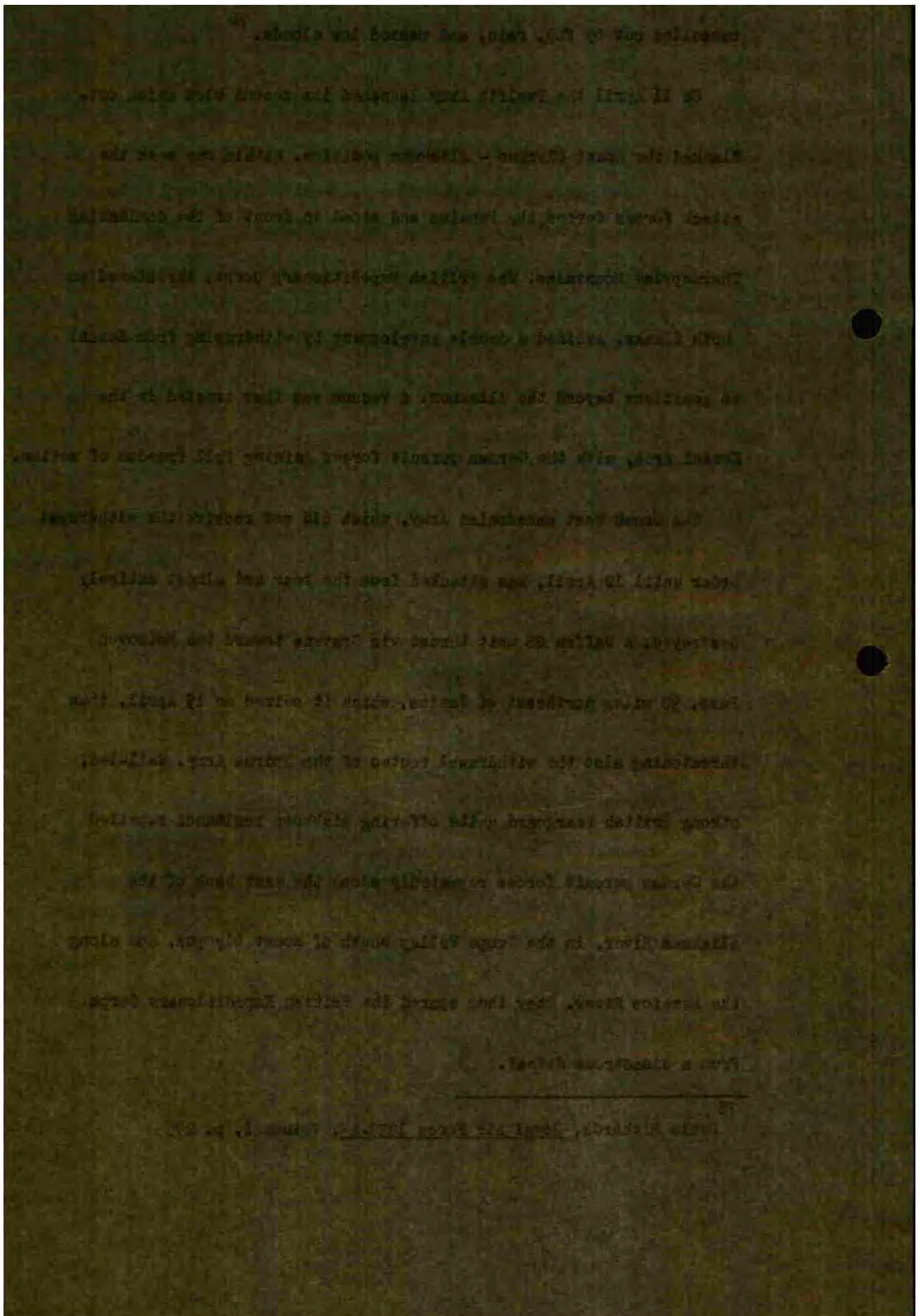
The British and Greek Air Forces had so far been incapable of stopping the German advance. D'Albiac was also hampered in employing his forces during the bad-weather period of 10-12 April. All his efforts were cancelled out by fog, rain, and massed low clouds.⁷⁸

On 11 April the Twelfth Army launched its second blow which outflanked the Mount Olympus - Aliakmon position. Within one week the attack forces ~~forced~~^{crossed} the Peneios and stood in front of the dominating Thermopylae Mountains. The British Expeditionary Corps, threatened on both flanks, avoided a double envelopment by withdrawing from Kozani to positions beyond the Aliakmon. A vacuum was thus created in the Kozani area, with the German pursuit forces gaining full freedom of action.

The Greek West Macedonian Army, which did not receive the withdrawal order until 12 April, was attacked from the rear and almost entirely destroyed. A Waffen-SS unit thrust via Gravina toward the Metsovon Pass, 30 miles northeast of Janina, which it seized on 19 April, thus threatening also the withdrawal routes of the Epirus Army. Well-led, strong British rearguard units offering stubborn resistance repelled the German pursuit forces repeatedly along the east bank of the Aliakmon River, in the Tempe Valley south of Mount Olympus, and along the Peneios River. They thus spared the British Expeditionary Corps from a disastrous defeat.

⁷⁸

Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, p. 295



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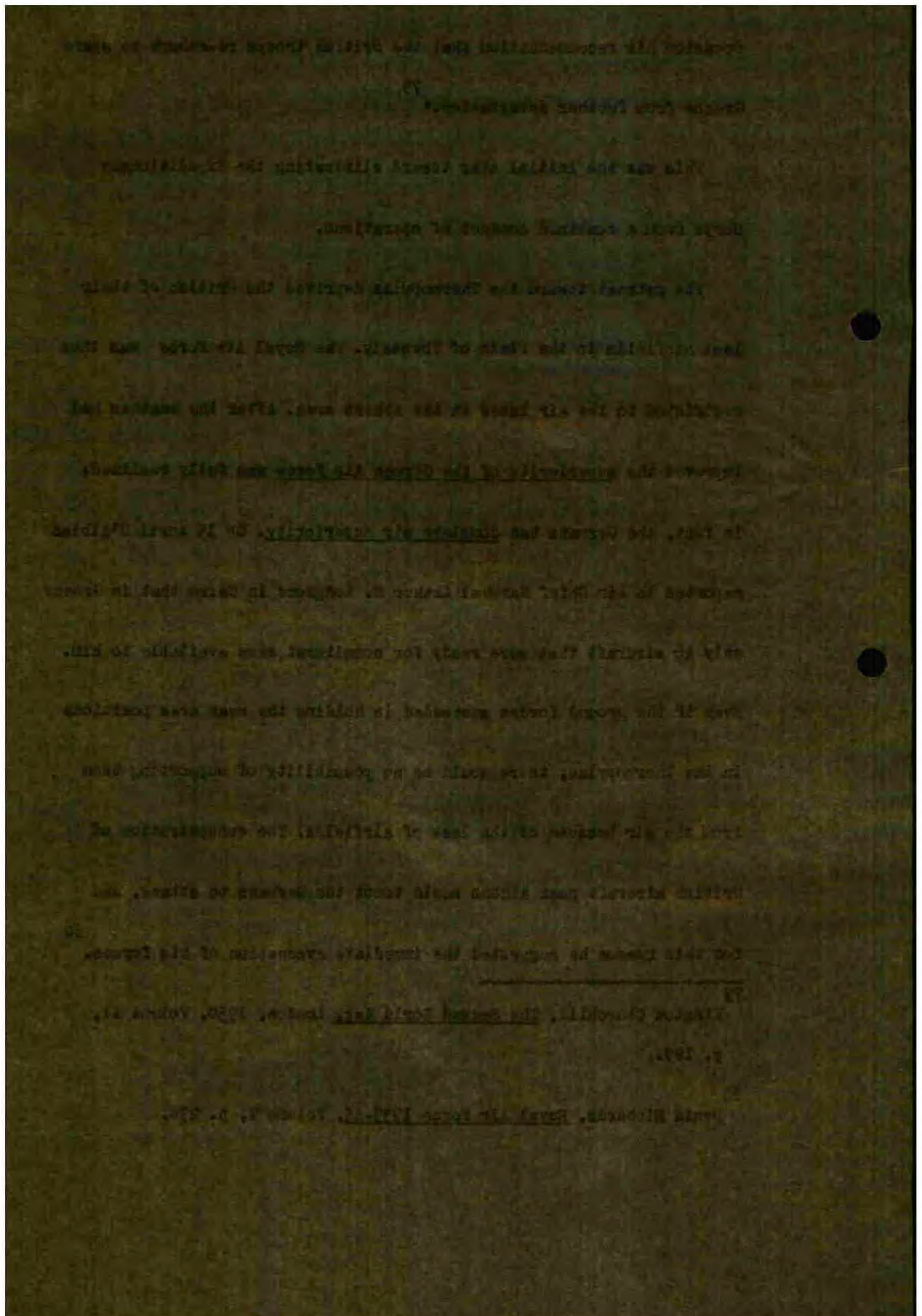
General Wilson, the commanding general of the British Expeditionary Corps, and Marshal Papagos agreed on 16 April to withdraw to the Thermopylae position. Moreover, "Marshal Papagos repeated on this occasion his recommendation that the British troops re-embark to spare Greece from further devastation."⁷⁹

This was the initial step toward eliminating the Expeditionary Corps from a combined conduct of operations.

The retreat toward the Thermopylae deprived the British of their last airfields in the Plain of Thessaly. The Royal Air Force was thus restricted to the air bases in the Athens area. After the weather had improved, the superiority of the German Air Force was fully realized; in fact, the Germans had complete air superiority. On 15 April D'Albino reported to Air Chief Marshal Arthur M. Longmore in Cairo that in Greece only 46 aircraft that were ready for commitment were available to him. Even if the ground forces succeeded in holding the rear area positions in the Thermopylae, there would be no possibility of supporting them from the air because of the lack of airfields. The concentration of British aircraft near Athens would tempt the Germans to attack, and for this reason he suggested the immediate evacuation of his forces.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Winston Churchill, The Second World War, London, 1950, Volume II, p. 199.

⁸⁰ Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, p. 298.



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The Yugoslav forces opposite Second Army offered only sporadic resistance, most of their units having disintegrated. In their advance the Second Army units encountered only isolated centers of resistance.

Even before Belgrade had been captured, Second Army therefore made every effort to commit all available forces on a concentric attack on Sarajevo. In the inaccessible wooded hills of Bosnia the Serbian splinter units had to be rapidly destroyed or else they might re-form.

The Fourth Air Force was able to concentrate its attacks with added impact on such targets of opportunity as airfields, lines of communication, and troop concentrations in the Mostar-Sarajevo-Belgrade area because the enemy resistance in the air and on the ground had been greatly reduced. On 13 April the VIII Air Corps employed strong forces for attacks on the enemy forces withdrawing in front of the Twelfth Army and succeeded in destroying elements of the West Macedonian Army. For the first time VIII Air Corps units also attacked naval vessels concentrated in the port of Volos. The X Air Corps mined during the night of 13-14 April the port of Volos and attacked shipping in the Bay of Eleusis and the port of Piraeus.

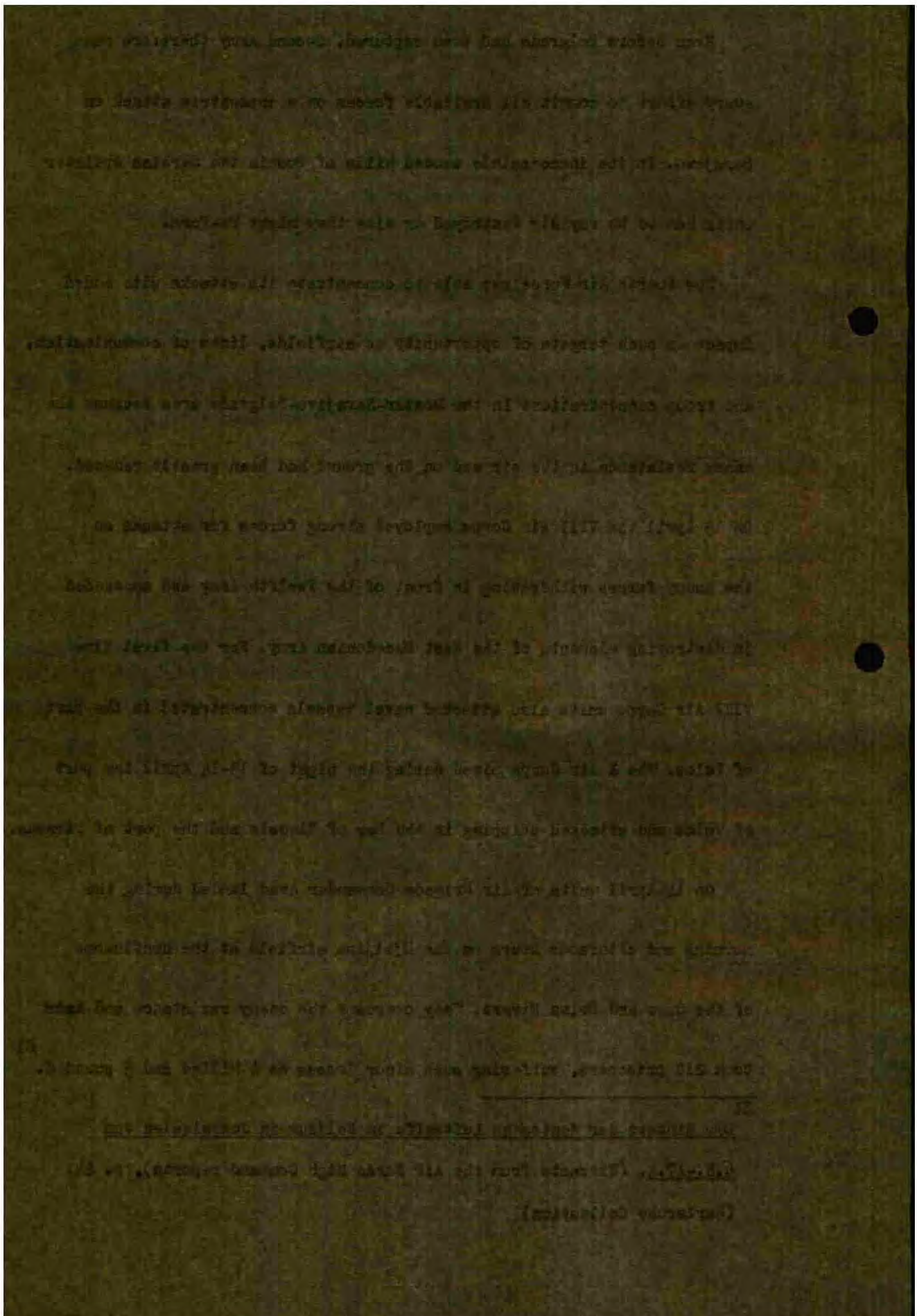
On 14 April units of Air Brigade Commander Ared landed during the morning and afternoon hours on the Bjeljina airfield at the confluence of the Save and Drina Rivers. They overcame the enemy resistance and ~~and~~ took 210 prisoners, suffering such minor losses as 4 killed and 3 wounded.

81

Der Einsatz der deutschen Luftwaffe im Feldzug in Jugoslawien vom

6.4.-17.4. (Extracts from the Air Force High Command reports), p. 44.

(Karlsruhe Collection)



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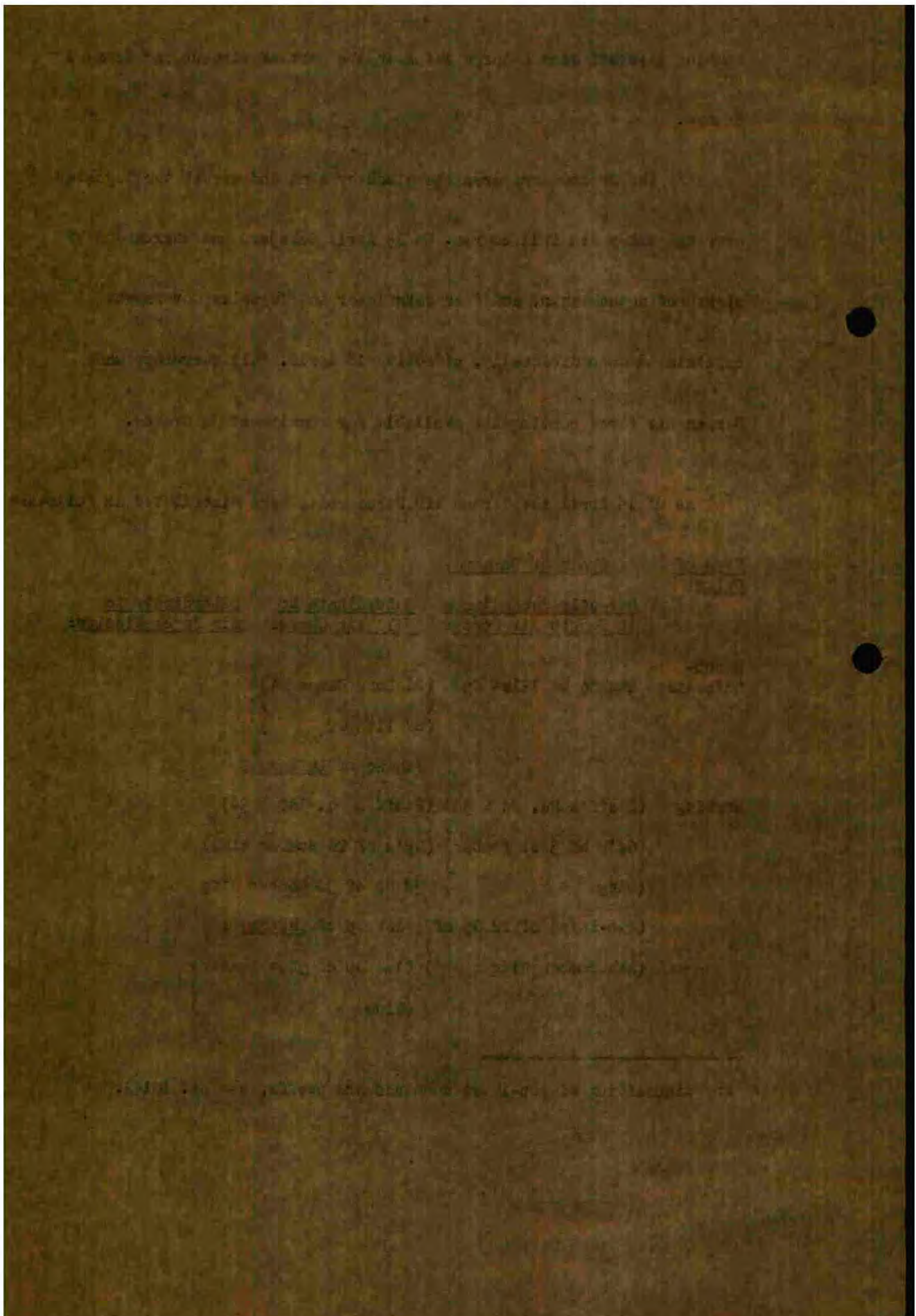
After the weather had improved, the VIII Air Corps, flying several missions from advance airfields, dealt the retreating columns in the Servia area -- about 12 miles southeast of Kozani -- some devastating blows. Bombing aircraft sank 4 large ships in the port of Piraeus and damaged 8 more.

In the Second Army area the disaster that had struck the Yugoslav Army had taken its full course. On 19 April Sarajevo was surrounded by spearhead detachments, and four days later the Yugoslav Government capitulated unconditionally, effective 18 April. This surrender made German air force contingents available for commitment in Greece.

As of 15 April the German Air Force units were distributed as follows:*

<u>Type of Units:</u>	<u>Chain of Command:</u>		
	<u>Directly Subordinate to Fourth Air Force:</u>	<u>Subordinate to VIII Air Corps:</u>	<u>Subordinate to Air Force Mission:</u>
Recon-naissance	4th Sq of 121st Gp	(2d Long Range Sq) (of 11th Gp)	
		7th Sq of <u>Luftgau 2</u>	
Bombing	(Staff & Hq, 2d & 3d) (Gp's of 51st Bomber Wing)	(Staff & Hq, 1st & 3d) (Gp's of 2d Bomber Wing) 3d Gp of 3d Bomber Wing	
	(Two-third of 2d Gp of 4th Bomber Wing)	1st Gp of <u>Luftgau 1</u> (1st Gp of 51st Bomber Wing) (Wing)	

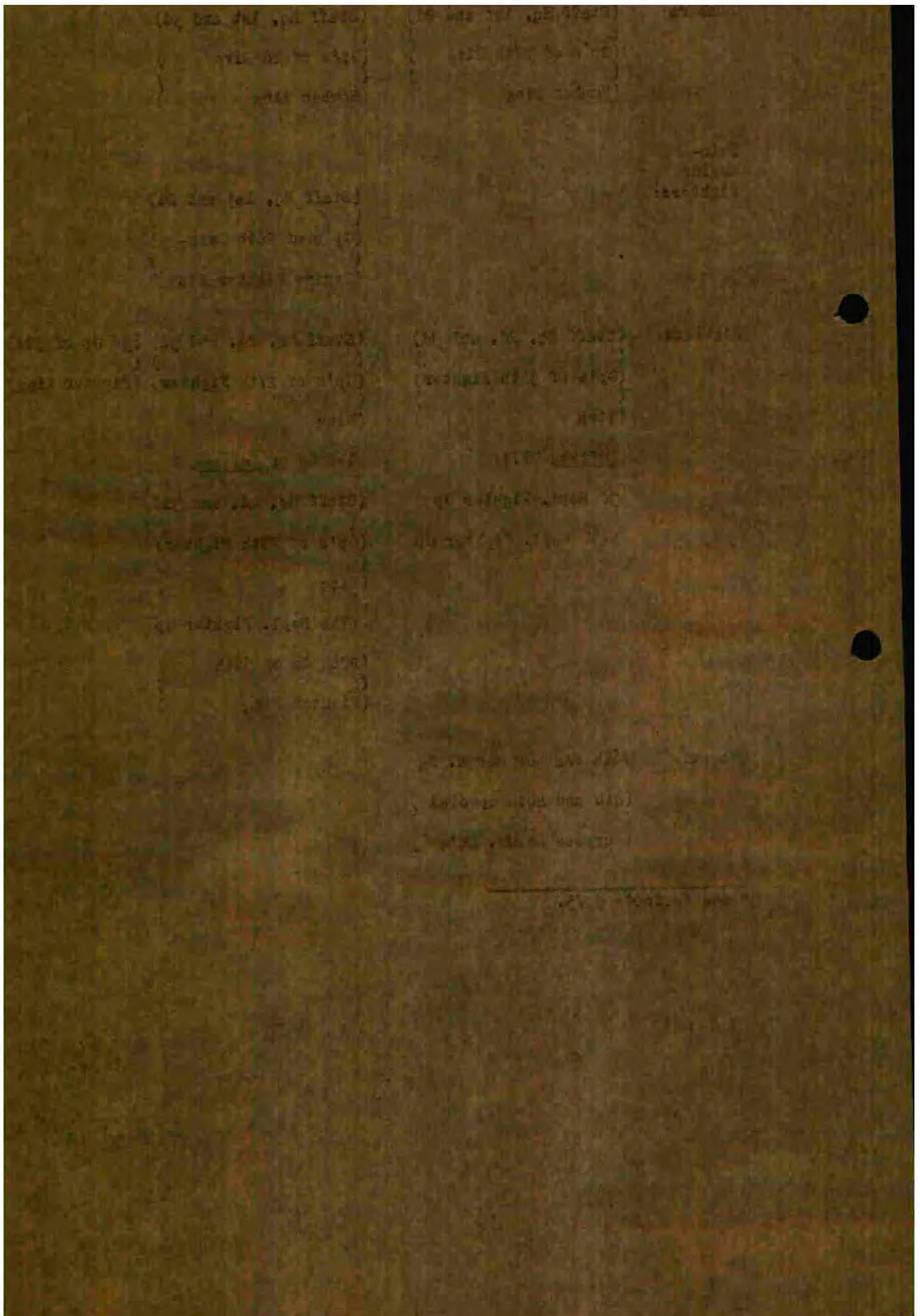
* For disposition of top-level commands and staffs, see pp. 101-2.



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<u>Type of Unit:</u>	<u>Chain of Command:</u>		
	<u>Directly Subordinate to Fourth Air Force:</u>	<u>Subordinate to VIII Air Corps:</u>	<u>Subordinate to Air Force Mission:</u>
Dive Bombers:	(Staff Hq. 1st and 2d) ((Gp's of 77th Dive ((Bomber Wing	(Staff Hq. 1st and 3d) ((Gp's of 2d Dive ((Bomber Wing	
Twin-Engine Fighters:		(Staff Hq. 1st and 2d) ((Gp's of 26th Twin- ((Engine Fighter Wing	
Fighters:	(Staff Hq. 2d, and 3d) ((Gp's of 54th Fighter) ((Wing	(Staff Hq. 2d, and 3d) ((Gp's of 27th Fighter) ((Wing	(3d Gp of 52d) ((Fighter Wing)
	<u>Luftgau VIII:</u>	1st Sq of <u>Luftgau 2</u>	
	3d Repl. Fighter Gp	(Staff Hq. 2d, and 3d) ((Gp's of 77th Fighter) ((Wing	
	54th Repl. Fighter Gp		
		27th Repl. Fighter Gp	
		(20th Gp of 56th ((Fighter Wing	
Others:	76th Weather Recon. Sq (4th and 40th Special) ((Purpose Recon. Sq's)		

* See Footnote # 75.

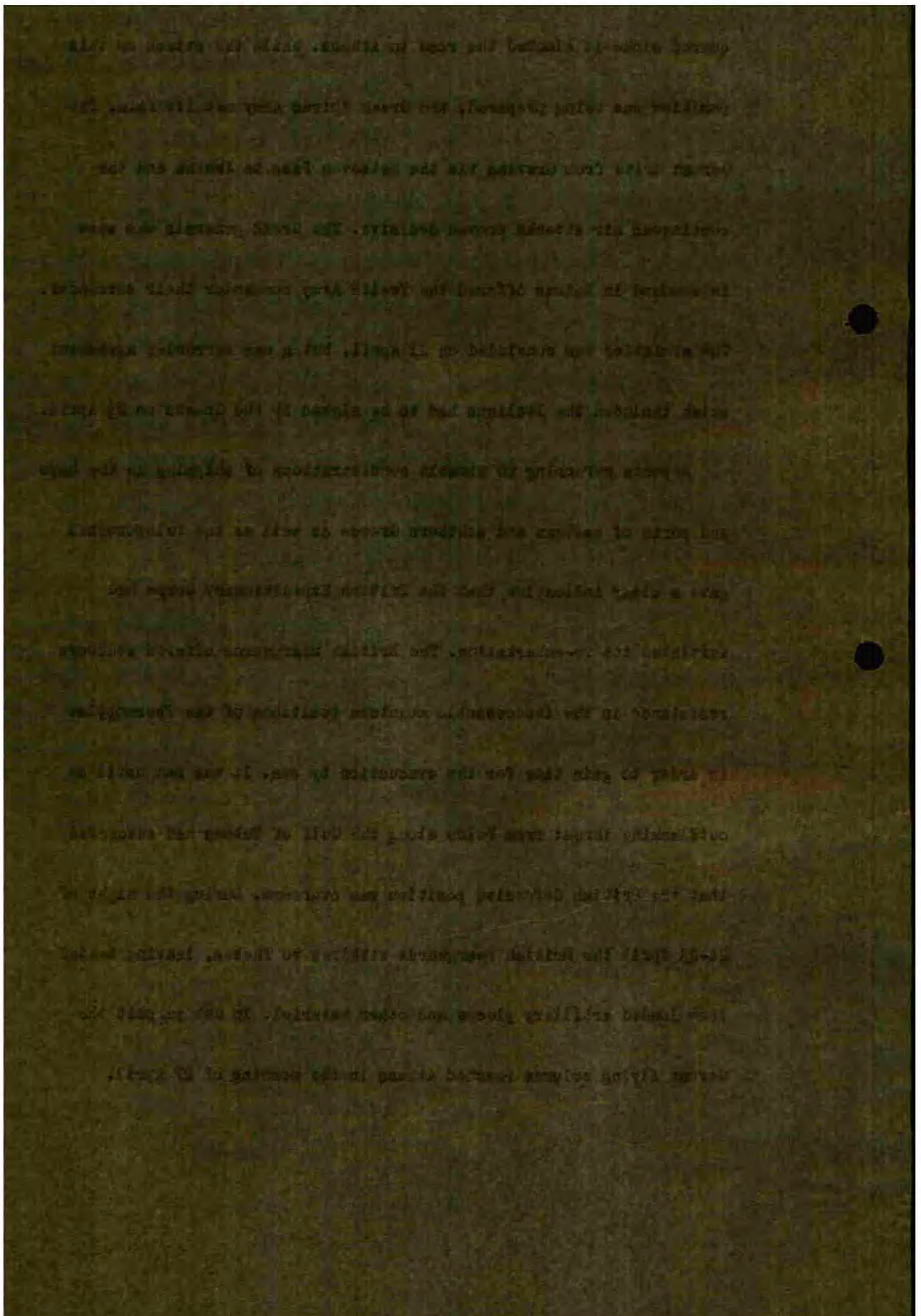


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The main effort had thus been clearly shifted to VIII Air Corps.

The Twelfth Army was now faced by its most difficult task in the Balkan Campaign. The dominating Thermopylae position had to be conquered since it blocked the road to Athens. While the attack on this position was being prepared, the Greek Epirus Army met its fate. The German drive from Grevena via the Metsoven Pass to Janina and the continuous air attacks proved decisive. The Greek generals who were in command in Epirus offered the Twelfth Army commander their surrender. The armistice was concluded on 21 April, but a new surrender agreement which included the Italians had to be signed by the Greeks on 23 April.

Reports referring to sizable concentrations of shipping in the bays and ports of eastern and southern Greece as well as the Peloponnese gave a clear indication that the British Expeditionary Corps had initiated its re-embarkation. The British rearguards offered stubborn resistance in the inaccessible mountain positions of the Thermopylae in order to gain time for the evacuation by sea. It was not until an outflanking thrust from Volos along the Gulf of Euboea had succeeded that the British defensive position was overcome. During the night of 24-25 April the British rearguards withdrew to Thebes, leaving behind them loaded artillery pieces and other materiel. In hot pursuit the German flying columns reached Athens in the morning of 27 April.



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The remnants of the Expeditionary Corps fled via Corinth to the Peloponnese in order to reach the embarkation ports offering a chance of escape after all.

Section II.

End of Fighting on the Greek Mainland. Preparatory Attacks

Flown against Crete by VIII Air Corps. The Strategic Importance of Crete in the Eastern Mediterranean.

D'Albiac apprehensions that the concentration of his flying units in the Athens area would prove disastrous were fully justified. Since the weather had improved on 18 April, the German Air Force made full use of its superiority in attacking the British-held airfields. However bravely the British fighters that were still left would fight, their defeat was inevitable. The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Corps was underway since 17 April. The embarkation of troops was to take place in small ports and bays of the Attica and Peloponnese coast; it was originally scheduled for 28 April.

After the Greek armies had surrendered on 21 April, the British decided to re-embark the first units already during the night of 24-25 April.

The Royal Air Force withdrew six squadrons to Crete as early as 22 and 23 April; they were the 30th, 84th, 211th, 11th,

Section II

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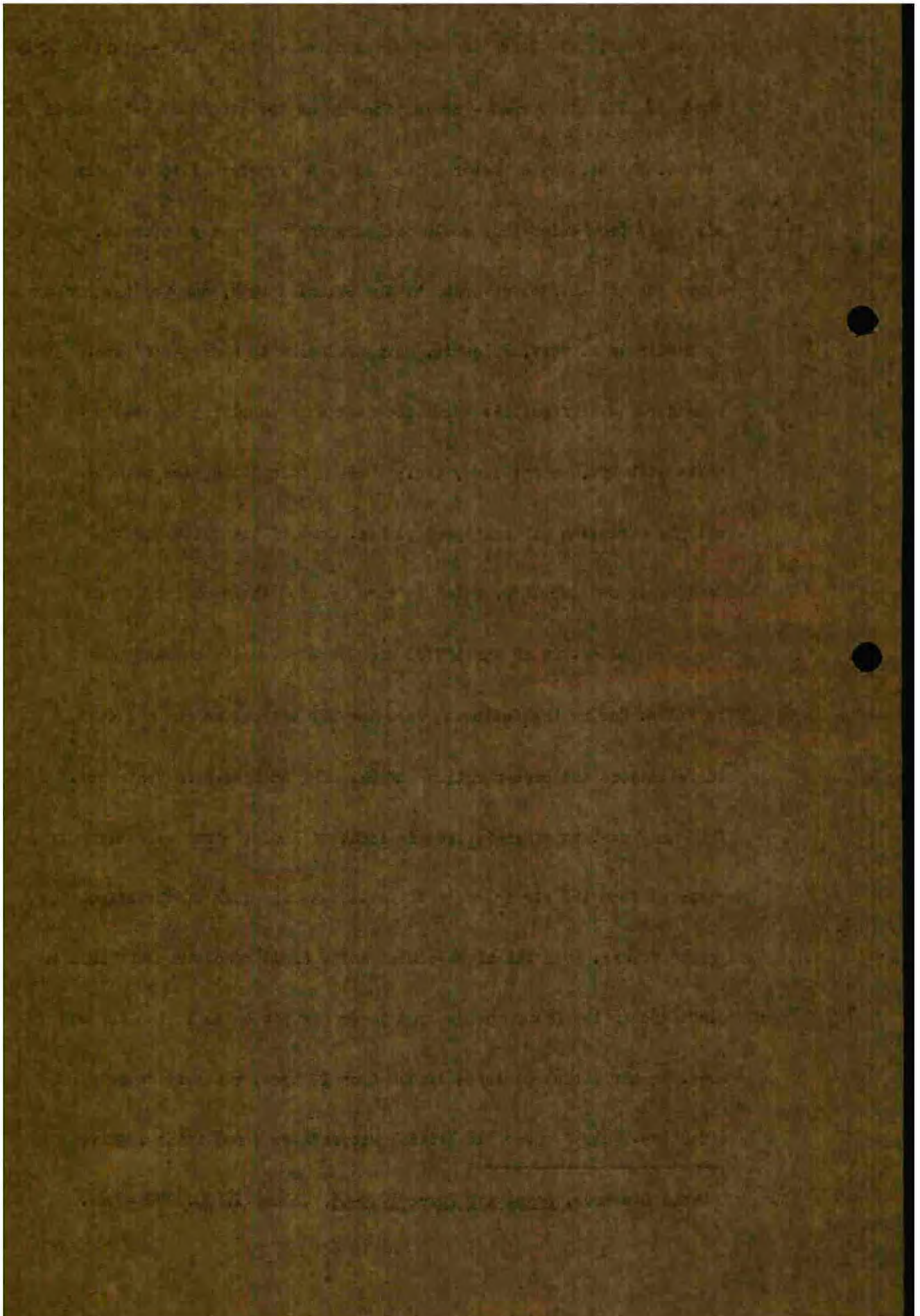
- 114 -

119th, and 112th Squadrons. Three other squadrons -- the 80th, 33d, and 208th -- were transferred to Argos in the Peloponnese on the afternoon of 22 April in order to protect the troops embarkation near Nauplia. 82

The Fourth Air Force had moved its close combat units -- particularly those of VIII Air Corps -- as far forward as the ground fighting would permit. The strategic bomber units had been transferred to Salonika air bases from which they could hit shipping on the way to Crete. Since there was not sufficient space at the Salonika base, some of the bombers had to remain in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, using Salonika as a jump-off base. Considerable difficulties were encountered in supplying all flying units with POL, ammunitions, etc.; these difficulties were overcome only by employing air transport planes. Some of the units had to find their own supplies, which in turn reduced the number of their flying missions. On 22 April VIII Air Corps moved its command post to Velos. During the following days the air attacks on enemy ground installations and concentrations of shipping increased in vehemence. The enemy centers of resistance in front of Twelfth Army were strongly attacked from the air in order to facilitate the task of the attacking ground forces. Even the close-combat units could reach the last British airfields on the Peloponnese from their new air bases in the Larissa area. An air attack on Argos launched on 23 April was particularly effective. Only 7 out of 18 British aircraft remained intact, quite

82

Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, pp. 298 - 300.



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apart from the losses suffered by the Greek Air Force. The remaining British planes withdrew to Crete on 23 April.*

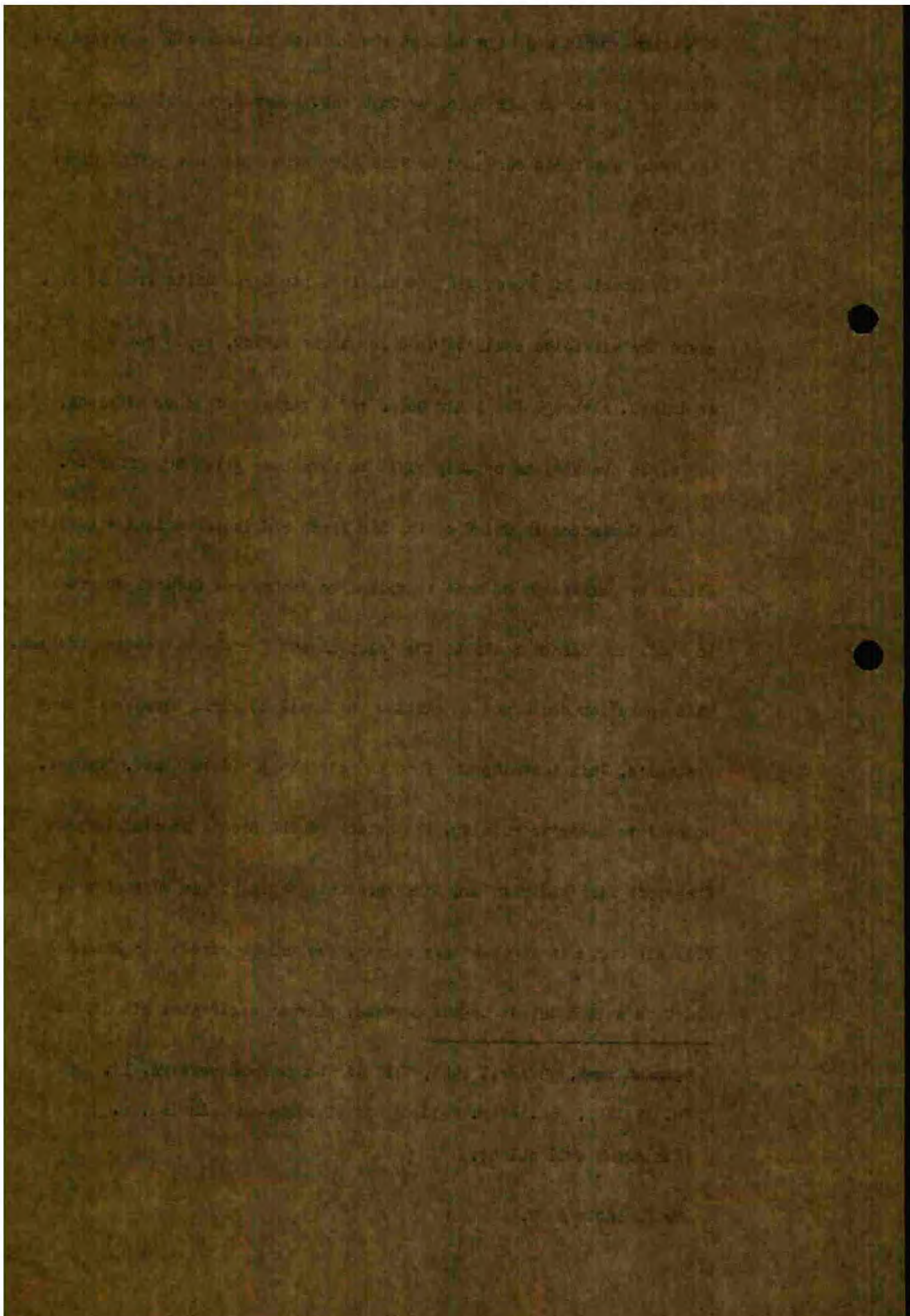
The Germans knew that the evacuation operations took place by night in distant ports and bays so that the British ships would be beyond the reach of the German Air Force by daybreak. However, the condition of the Greek airfields occupied by VIII Air Corps would not permit night flying.⁸³

Why Fourth Air Force did not commit X Air Corps units from Sicily, where the airfields could be used for night flying, could not be explained. Although the X Air Corps had a variety of other missions, the night evacuations by ship ought to have been given top priority.^{British}

The Commander in Chief of the Air Force had insisted that a surprise attack by paratroops be made to seize the Isthmus of Corinth in order to block the escape route to the Peloponnese for the retreating British. This operation could not be carried out until 26 April because of many obstacles. This "envelopment from the air" happened too late, however, to achieve decisive results. The attack of the Second Special Purpose Transport Wing and reinforced 2d Parachute Regiment was supported by VIII Air Corps in an exemplary manner. The bridge across the Isthmus had been seized intact by the Germans, when an accidental hit exploded

⁸³ *Combat report*
 Command post, 30 April 1941, VIII Air Corps Headquarters, Io.
 No. 1991/41, geh. Betr. Feldzug Griechenland-Jugoslawien, p. 3
 (Karlruhe Collection).

* See Footnote # 82.



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84

the demolition charge.

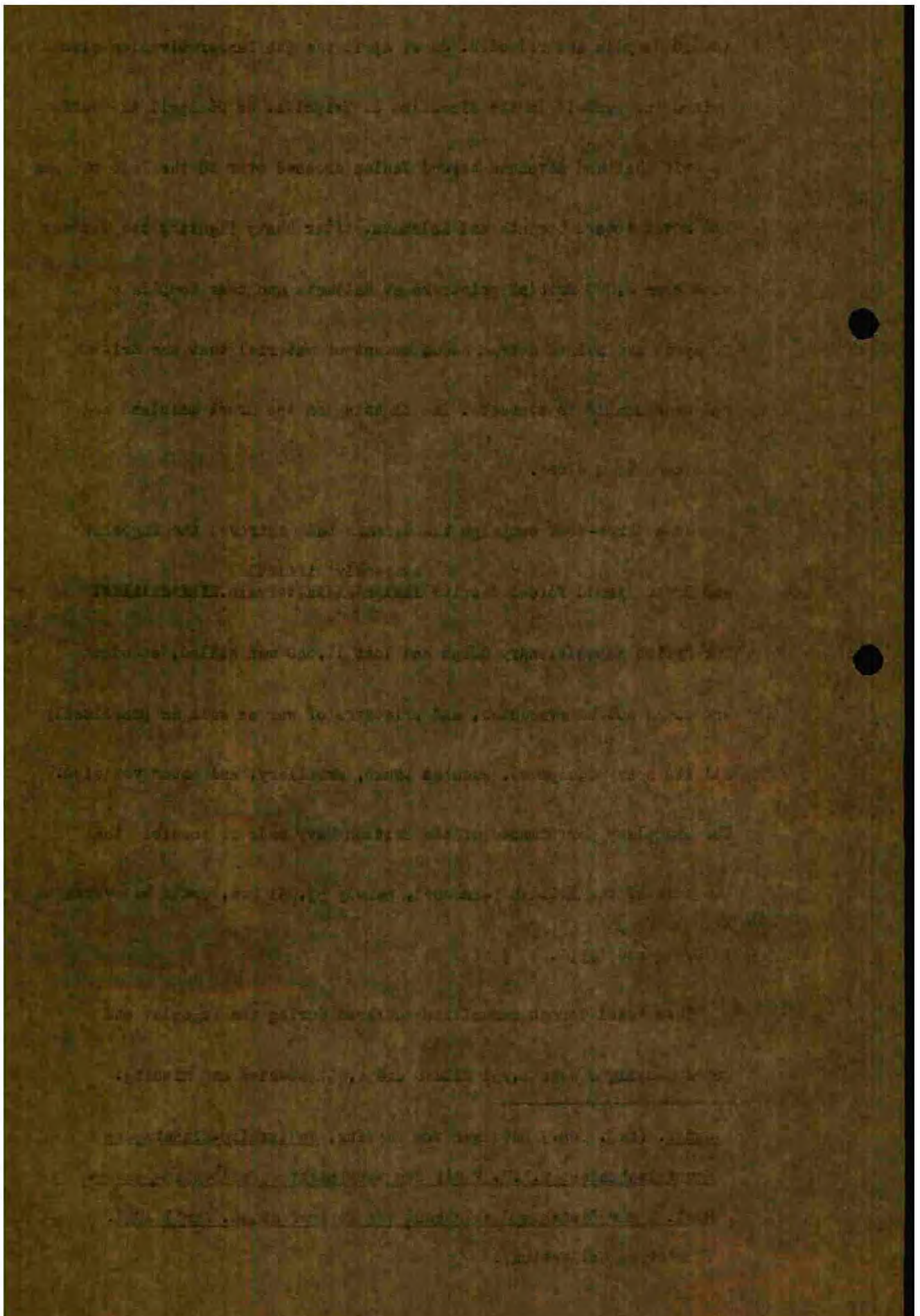
Even so the Germans were able to capture some 2,000 British prisoners and many motor vehicles that helped them to move faster toward Nauplia and Tripolis. On 27 April the 5th Panzer Division also joined the pursuit in the direction of Tripolis. On 26 April the Waffen-SS unit that had advanced beyond Janina crossed over to the Peloponnese and moved toward Corinth and Kalamata. After heavy fighting the Germans took some 8,000 British prisoners at Kalamata and near Nauplia on 28 April and seized a tremendous amount of materiel that the British had been unable to evacuate. The fighting on the Greek mainland had thus come to a close.

In a three-week campaign the Germans had destroyed the Yugoslav and Greek Armed Forces despite extremely difficult ~~terrain~~ terrain. The British Expeditionary Corps had lost 11,840 men killed, wounded who could not be evacuated, and prisoners of war as well as practically all its heavy equipment, such as tanks, artillery, and motor vehicles. The exemplary performance of the British Navy made it possible that the bulk of the British personnel, namely 53,051 men, could be evacuated to Crete and Egypt.

The total German casualties suffered during the Yugoslav and Greek Campaigns were 1,251 killed and 4,407 wounded and missing.

84

Genlt. (Maj. Gen.) Ruediger von Heyking, Fallschirm-Einsatz des Kampfgeschwaders z.b.V. 2 mit dem verstaerkten Fallschirm-Jaeger-Regt. 2 zur Einnahme des Isthmus von Korinth am 26. April 1941.
(Karlsruhe Collection).



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The almost complete elimination of the opposing air forces and the never-ceasing demoralizing low-level air attacks against staff headquarters, troop concentrations, and lines of communication contributed decisively to the German military success. The VIII Air Corps had a major part in this success.

Its composition as a "close-support corps; exclusively for the purpose of assisting the Army ground forces, was based on the German experience in previous campaigns of World War II. It had far more dive bomber units, twin-engine fighters, and ordinary fighters than the average air corps. The following additional units were assigned to the VIII Air Corps to facilitate its close-support mission:

105th Transport Group, equipped with Junkers 52;

999th Flak Regiment with I Battalion/6 and I Battalion/19 (999); and

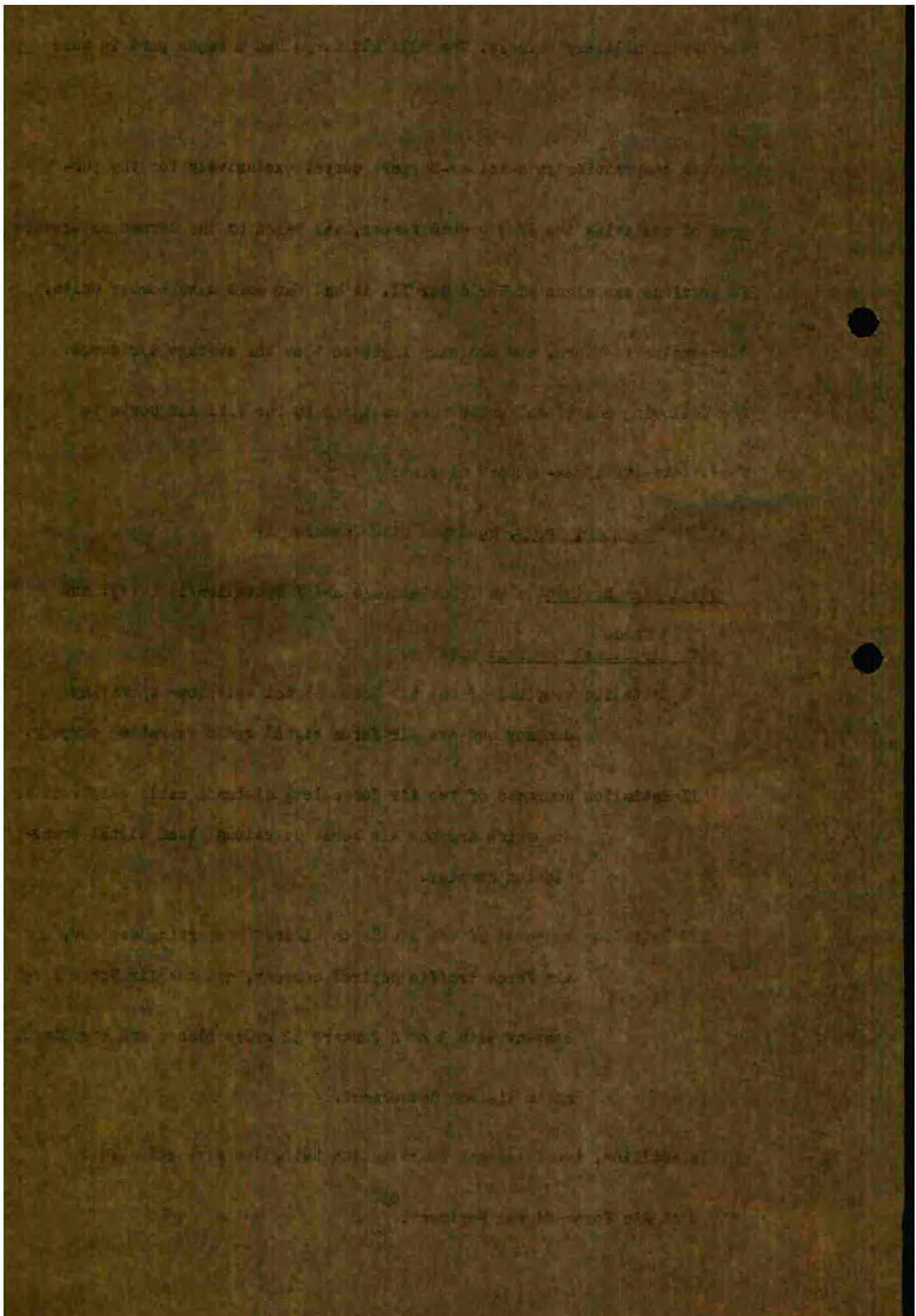
Force
88th Air Signal Regiment with

I Battalion composed of one Air Force signal telephone operating company and one Air Force signal radio operating company.

II Battalion composed of two Air Force long distance cable construction companies and one Air Force directional beam signal transmission company.

III Battalion composed of one Air Force aircraft reporting company, one Air Force traffic control company, and one Air Force flight company with 3 or 4 Junkers 52 radio planes and one Storch radio liaison detachment.

In addition, two telegraph construction battalion were attached to the 88th Air Force Signal Regiment.



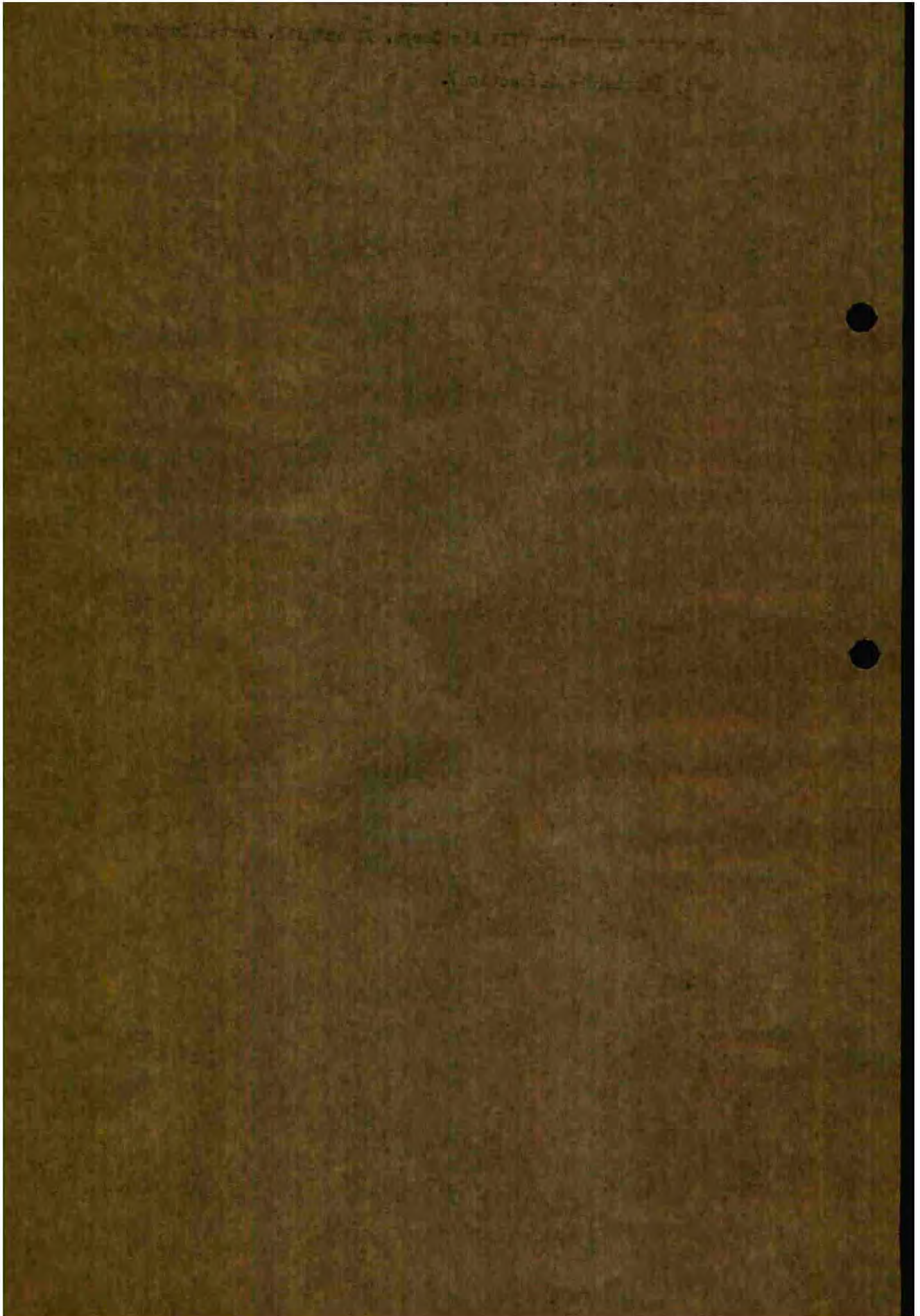
- 117a -

The flak regiment was also committed for ground combat whenever necessary.

85

Oberst (Col.) H.W. Deichmann, Balkan Feldzug des VIII. Flieger-Korps.

The units composing VIII Air Corps. II and III. Parts (In front of text) (Karlsruhe Collection).

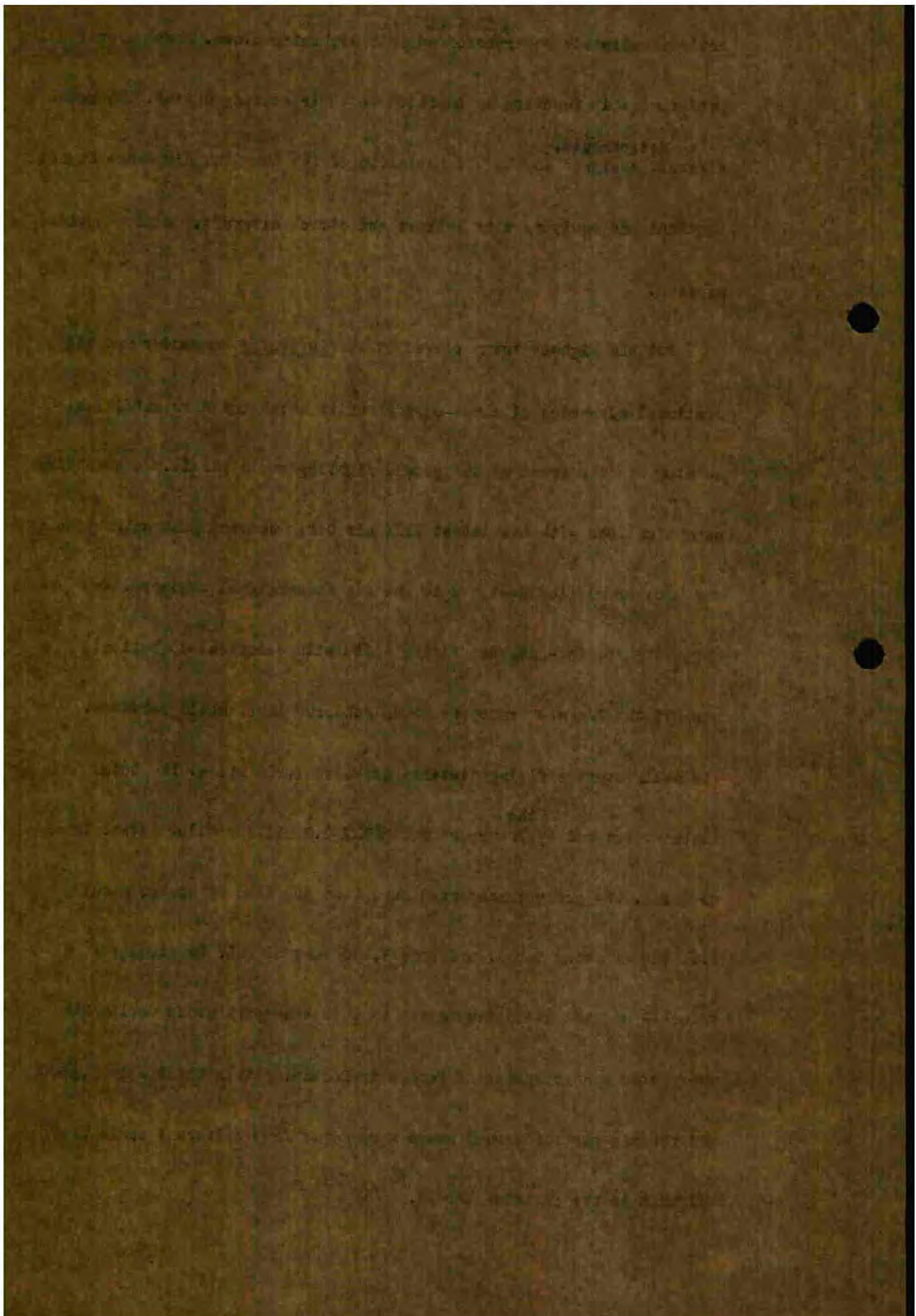


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By assigning the appropriate signal units and equipment to the VIII Air Corps, the latter was above all able to maintain close contact with the advancing armored spearheads so that reconnaissance information could immediately be ^{exploited by telling} ~~transformed into lightning~~ blows. These signal units performed this function in addition to their routing duties. The radio detachments, aircraft assigned to the III Battalion of the the 38th Air Force Signal Regiment and equipped with Junkers and Storch aircraft, deserve special mention.

But the highest trump played by the Luftwaffe commander was his continual advancing of close-support units which moved to airfields as close to the front as the ground fighting would permit. To establish communications with the latest VIII Air Corps command post without delay was another mission assigned to the air force signal regiment. In supplying the far-advanced flying units with essential logistical support the Junkers transport group rendered inestimable services. Its daily average flying distance exceeded 1,200 miles. The total distance covered by ^{the} Transport Group ~~XXX~~ ^{was} 1.2 million miles flown. In so doing, the group transported more than 500 tons of bombs, about 1.8 tons of other cargo, and some 1,650 tons of POL. Particularly valuable was the assistance given by this transport group during the unexpected concentration of forces in Serbia. Within three days 7,300 men forming part of ground crews were moved from different parts of Bulgaria to the Yugoslav border.

86



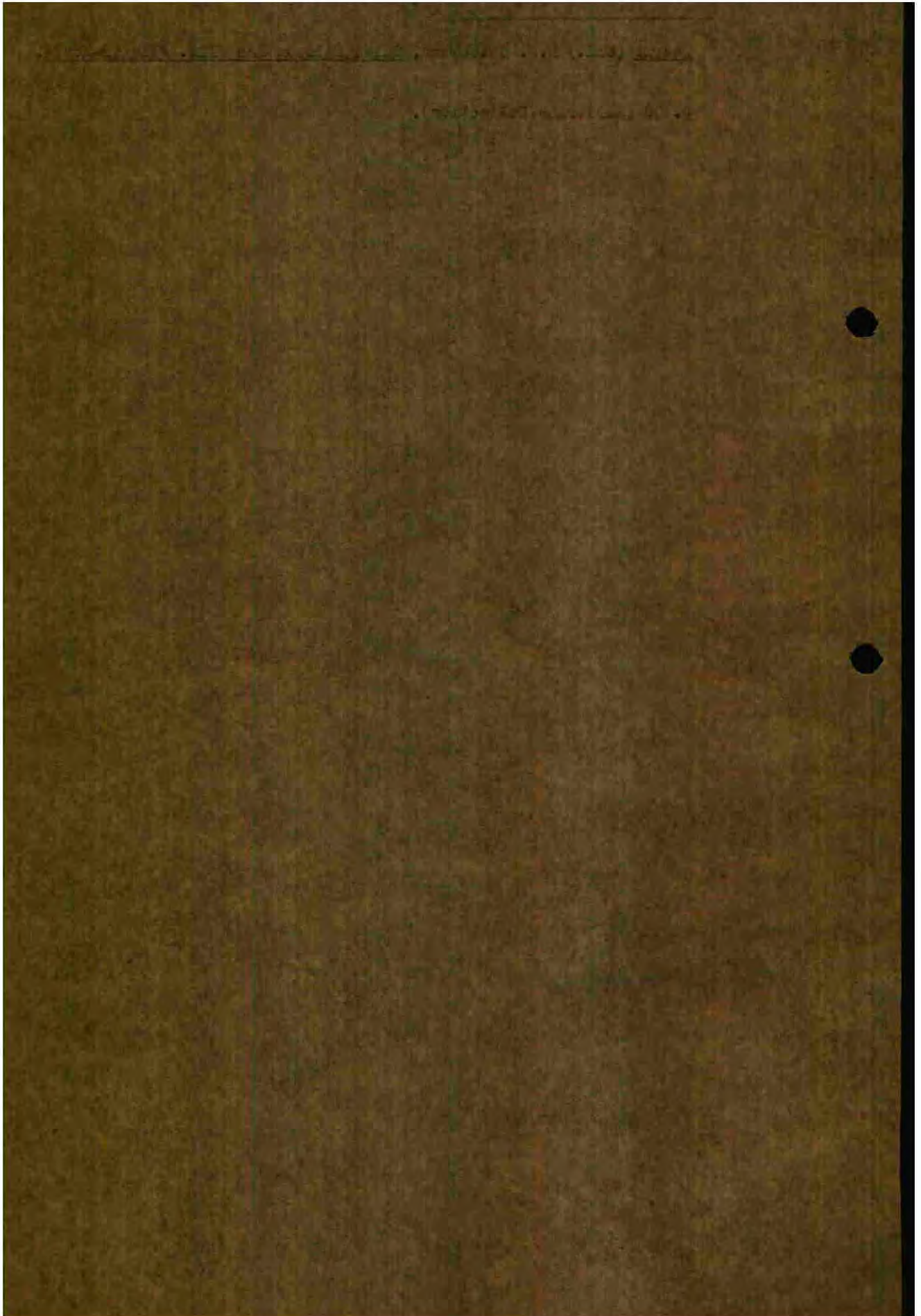
- 118a -

The abundance of signal equipment made it possible that after
21 April three mixed combat groups, composed of fighter and dive-
bomber aircraft,

86

Oberst (Col.) H.W. Deichmann, Balkanfeldzug des VIII. Flieger-Korps,

p. 48 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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were formed to operate independently in their individual combat zones and in ~~now~~ direct cooperation with the ~~IX~~ respective Army units they supported. Only the complementary employment of bombing aircraft and their attacks on British shipping was controlled by XI Air Corps. This was a command organization that was subject to much discussion at the time but served its purpose in the Greek theater of war. ⁸⁷

Apart from the X Air Corps operating from Sicilian bases, the ^{played} VIII Air Corps ~~was~~ an outstanding role in sinking British shipping after 13 April. The east coast ports of Volos, Chalkis, Laurion, etc., were ideally situated for such air raids, which were later extended to the south coast of Greece, the port of Piraeus, and Nauplia, Monemvasia, and Kalamata on the Peloponnese. From bases near Salonika the bombing aircraft also reached ships leaving for Crete and Suda Bay on Crete.

During the period 14 - 26 April the X Air Corps ~~sank~~ 120 commercial vessels with a total tonnage of 559,000 tons and 5 war ships. During the period 13 - 29 April 129 commercial vessels with 701,500 tons and 10 war ships were damaged. ⁸⁸

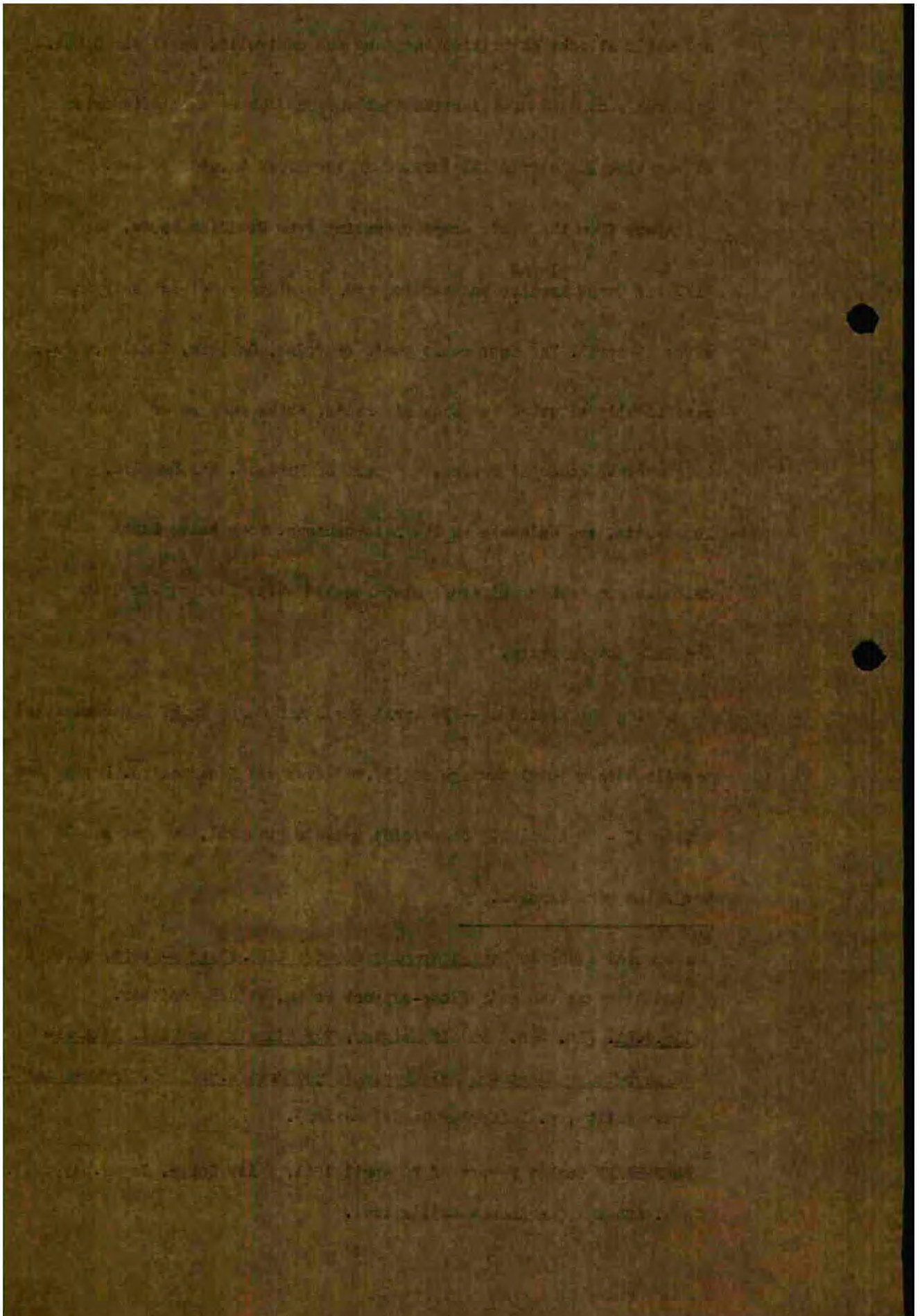
⁸⁷

A special study on Einsatzgrundsaetze des VIII. Flieger-Korps, which at that time was the only close-support corps, will be written.

Geb.-d.Fl. (Lt. Gen.) Rudolf Meister, Der Einsatz des VIII. Flieger-Korps bei der Besetzung Griechenlands und Kretas. Teil I. Griechenland. Introduction, p. 4 (Karlsruhe Collection).

⁸⁸

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Combat report of 30 April 1941, X Air Corps, Ic Nr. 1996/41. geh. Annex 1 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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According to the daily reports of the Air Force High Command 114 enemy planes were shot down and 340 were destroyed on the ground during the period 6 April - 1 May 1941. During that time the Germans lost 58 aircraft. In a separate casualty list the VIII Air Corps gave its total losses of flying personnel suffered in Greece and Crete up to 1 June 1941 as 172 dead, 141 missing, and 155 wounded.⁸⁹

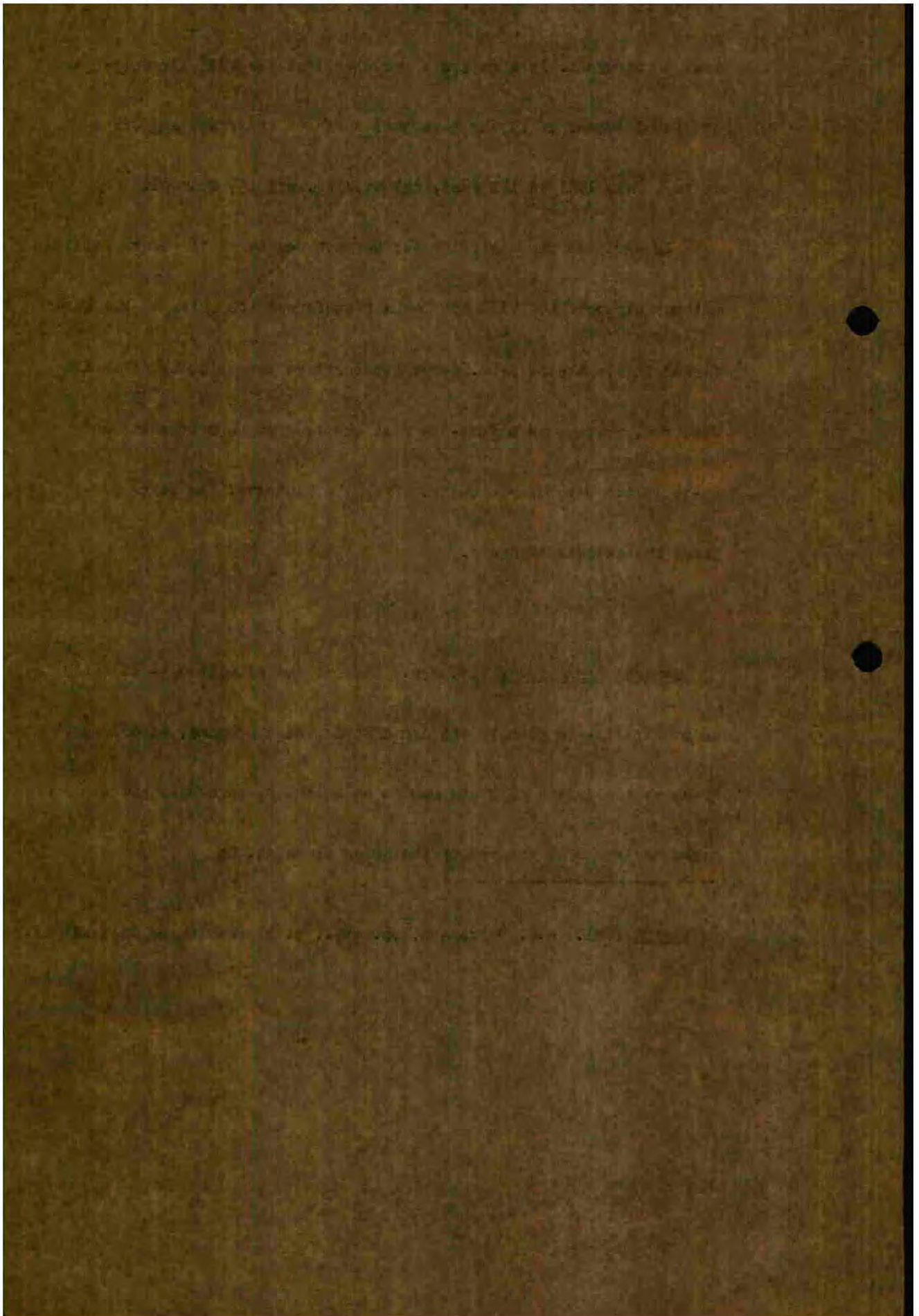
As early as one day after the Germans had taken the Greek capital without struggle, the VIII Air Corps transferred its units to the airfields in the Athens area. Corps headquarters was established in ~~XXX~~ Phaleron, whereupon a four-day rest was ordered to reorganize and re-equip the subordinate units. After that interval the corps prepared the assault of Crete.

* * *

General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Student had submitted -- as early as mid-April -- a plan to the Armed Forces High Command, according to which the island of Crete was to be seized by parachute and airborne troops at the end of the Greek campaign. On

⁸⁹

Oberst (Col.) H.W. Deichmann, op. cit., p. 47 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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21 April Hitler gave the Fourth Air Force the mission to carry out the operation for which purpose the necessary Army and Navy elements were attached to that headquarters. The attack was to be launched on 15 May.

As of 1 May 1941 the Fourth Air Force was composed of the following units:

Fourth Air Force Headquarters, with command posts at Vienna and Sofia, later at Athens, commanded by Gen.Oberst (General) Loehr.

Subordinate Senior Staffs:

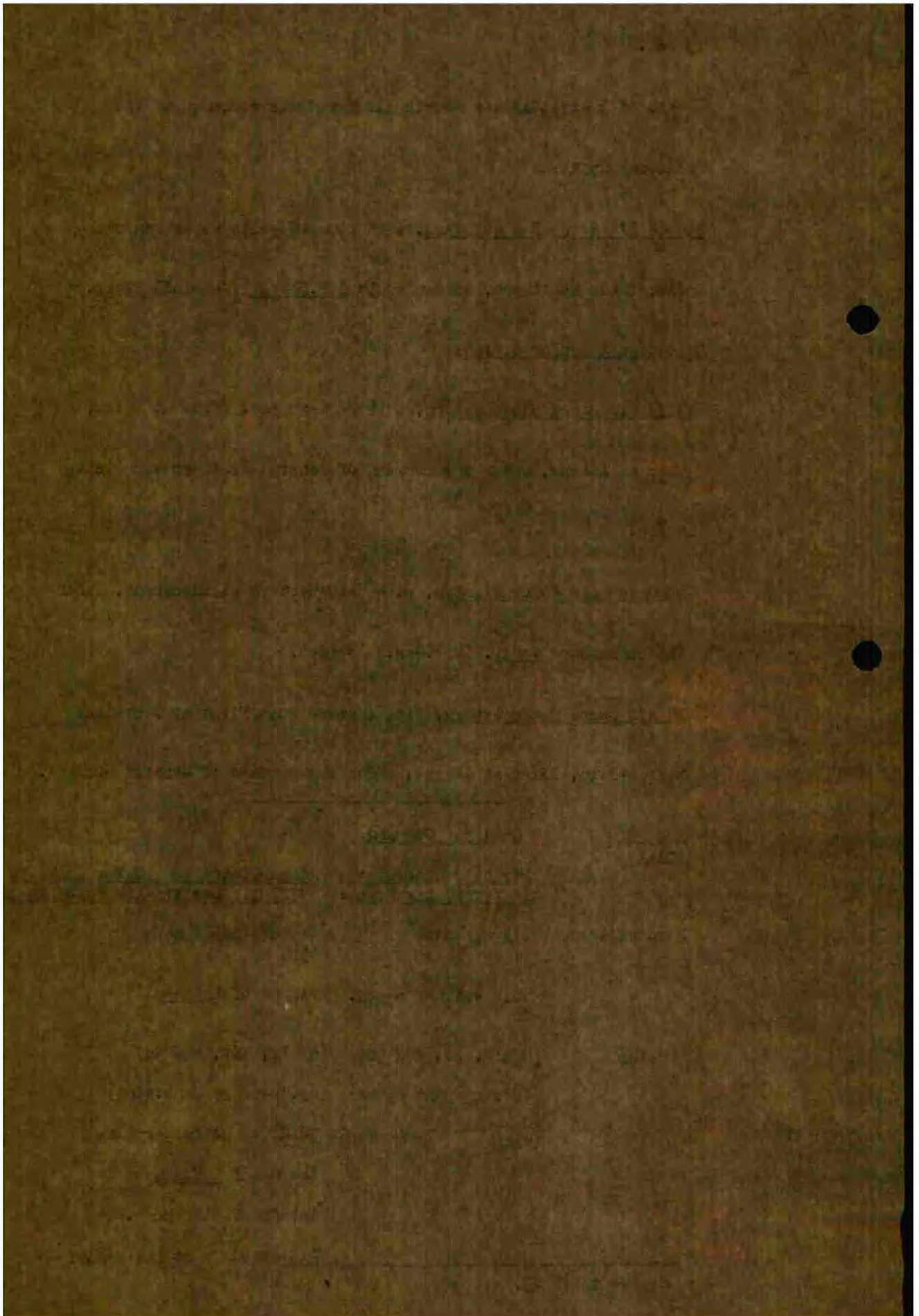
VIII Air Corps Headquarters, with command post first at Voles, then at Athens, under the command of General Freiherr von Richt-
hofen.

Romanian Air Force Mission, with headquarters at Bucharest, under the command of Genlt. (Maj.Gen.) Spidel.

II Air Corps Headquarters, with command post first at Tempelhof near Berlin, later at Athens, under the command of General Student.

<u>Type of Unit:</u>	<u>Chain of Command:</u>	
	<u>Directly Subordinate to Fourth Air Force:</u>	<u>Subordinate to VIII Air Corps: Subordinate to Air Force Mission</u>
Reconnaissance	4th Sq/121st Gp	2d Long-Range Sq/ 11th Gp
	76th Weather Recon. Sq	7th Sq of <u>Luftgau 2</u>
Bombing	(Staff, 2d, and 3d)	(Staff, 1st, and 3d)
	(Gp's of 51st Bomber)	(Gp.'s of 2d Bomb.Wing)
	(Wing	3d Gp of 3d Bomber Wing
		1st Gp of <u>Luftgau 1</u>
		1st Gp of 51st Bomb.Wing
		2/3 of 2d Gp of 4th Bomb.Wing

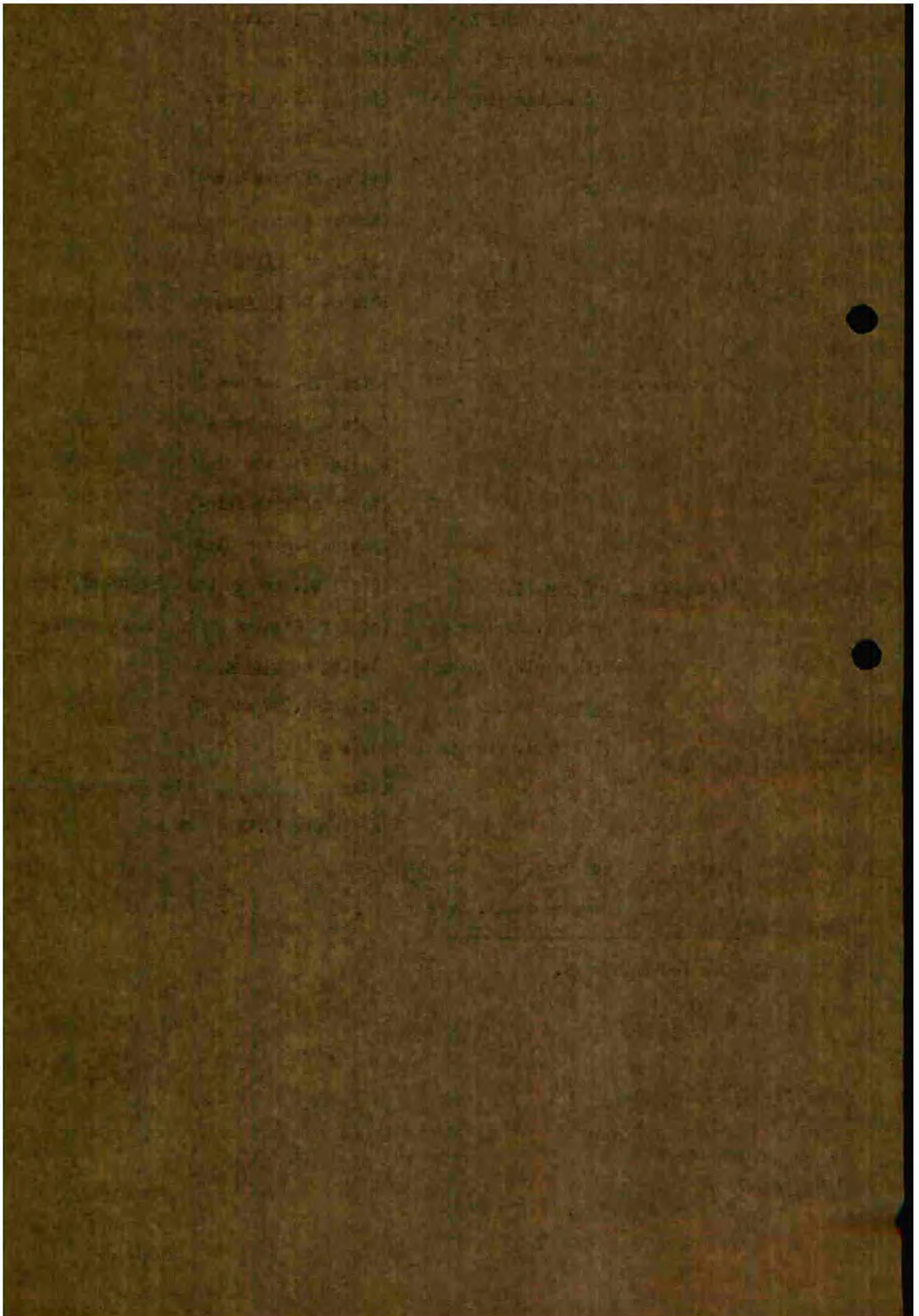
* See Footnote 75.



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<u>Type of Unit:</u>	<u>Chain of Command:</u>		
	<u>Directly Subordinate to Fourth Air Force:</u>	<u>Subordinate to VIII Air Corps:</u>	<u>Subordinate to Air Force Mission:</u>
Dive Bombers:	(Staff Hq, 1st and 2d) ((Gp's of 77th Dive ((Bomber Wing)	(Hq, 1st and 3d) ((Gp's of 2d Dive) ((Bomber Wing)	
	3d Bomber Wing Hq	(1st Gp of 3d Dive) ((Bomber Wing) (3d Gp of 77th Dive) ((Bomber Wing) 2d Gp of <u>Luftau 2</u> 10th Sq of <u>Luftau 2</u>	
Twin-Engine Fighters:		(Staff Hq, 1st and 2d) ((Gp's of 26th Twin- ((Engine Fighter Wing) (2d Gp of 76th Twin- ((Engine Fighter Wing)	
Fighters:	<u>Luftau VIII</u> 3d Repl. Fighter Gp 27th Repl. Fighter Gp <u>Luftau XVII</u> 77th Repl. Fighter Gp	(Staff Hq, and 2d Gp) ((of 27th Fighter Wing) 1st Sq of <u>Luftau 2</u> (Staff Hq, 2d and 3d) ((Gp's of 77th Fighter) ((Wing) 4 Junkers 52, Type "Kaiser"	(3d Gp of 52d) ((Fighter Wing) ((((((
Others:	(4th and 40th Special) ((Purpose Recon. Sq's)		

* See Footnote # 75.



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Units of XI Air Corps:

Reconnaissance squadron.

Transport squadron. (troop carriers)

Transport company.

1st Air Force Signal Battalion.

Parachute antiaircraft machine gun battalion.

Supply headquarters.

Parachute medical battalion.

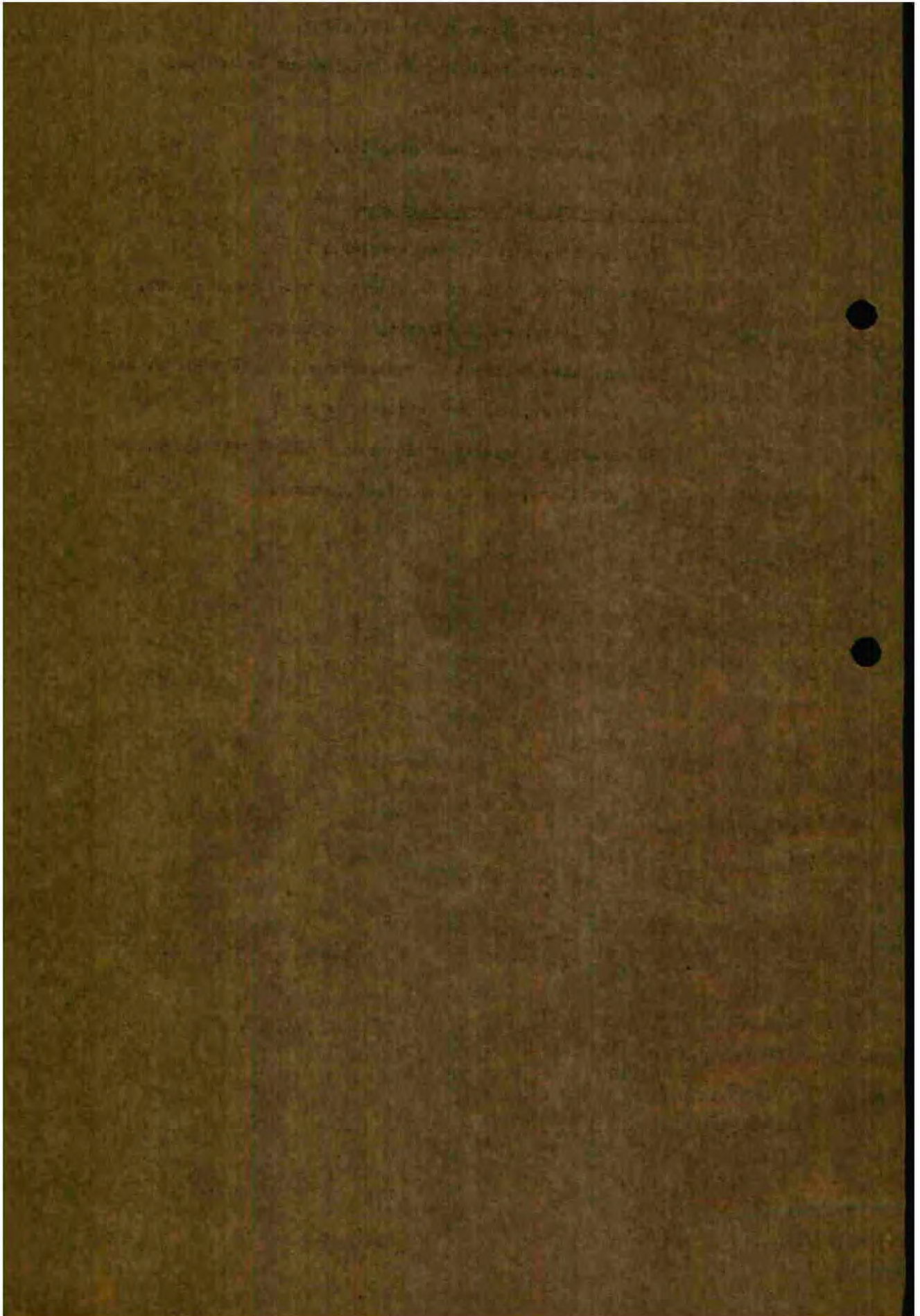
7th Airborne Division Headquarters:

Transport squadron (troop carrier);

1st Parachute Regiment Headquarters with 3 battalions, one
artillery, and one antitank company;

2d Parachute Regiment Headquarters with 3 battalions, one
artillery, and one antitank company;

3d Parachute Regiment Headquarters with 3 battalions, one
artillery, and one antitank company;



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7th Airborne Division (Continued):

Parachute Machine Gun Battalion;
 Parachute Engineer Battalion;
 Parachute Antitank Battalion;
 Parachute Artillery Battalion; and
 Parachute Signal BATTALION Company.

Staff and headquarters of one assault regiment with signal platoon;

1st Battalion, with signal platoon, three assault and one heavy
 weapons companies;

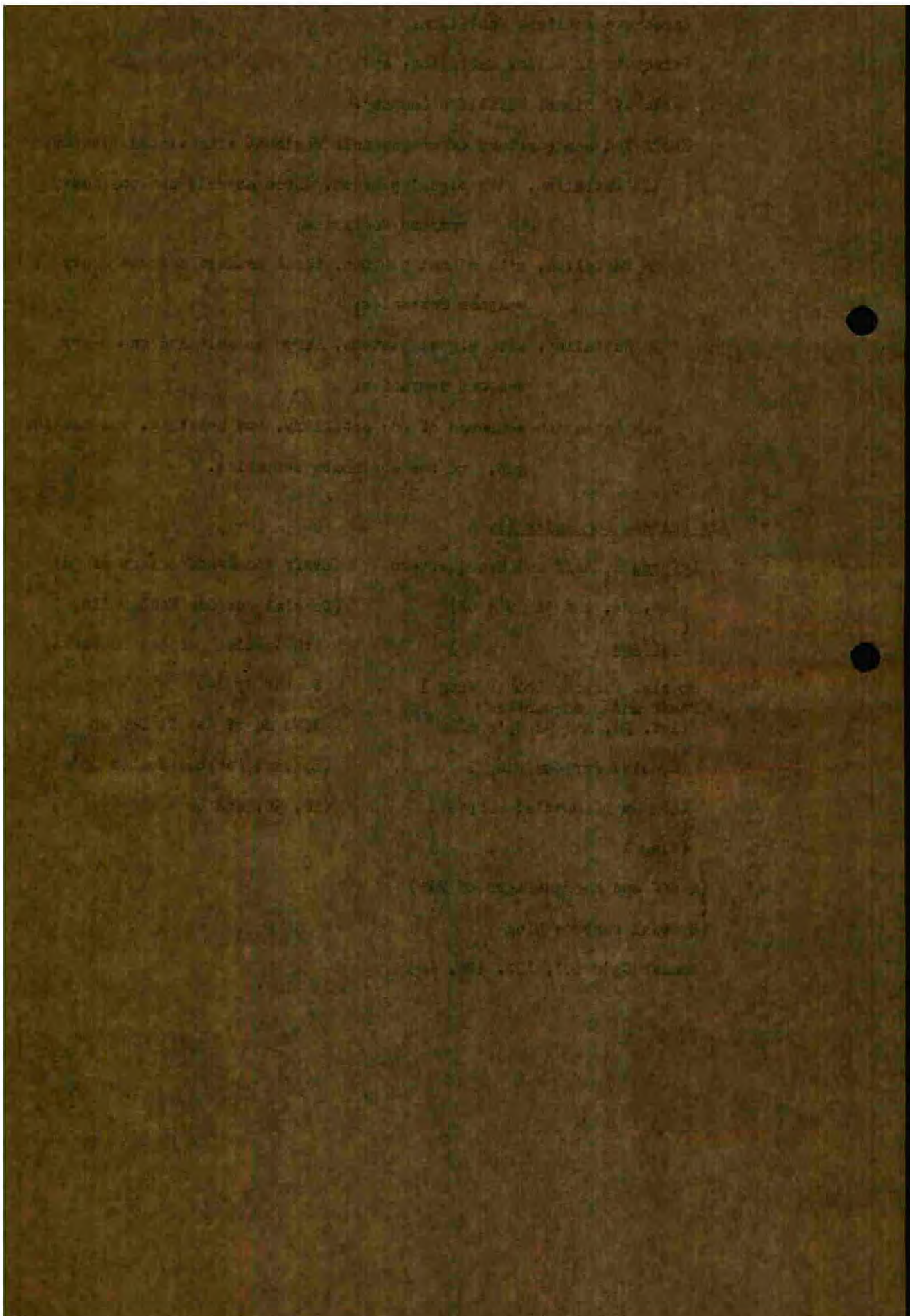
2d Battalion, with signal platoon, three assault and one heavy
 weapons companies;

3d Battalion, with signal platoon, three assault and one heavy
 weapons companies;

4th Battalion composed of one artillery, one antitank, one machine
 gun, and one engineers companies.

Air Brigade Commander XI:

<u>Luftgau 1</u> , Staff and Headquarters	(Staff and Headquarters of 3d)
(1st, 2d, and 3d Gp's of)	(Special Purpose Bomber Wing)
(Luftgau 1)	9th Special Purpose Bomber Gp
Special Purpose Bomber Wing 1	Bomber Gp 106
Staff and Headquarters	172d Sq of 1st Bomber Gp
(1st, 2d, and 3d Gp's of)	(Special Purpose Bomber Gp's)
(Special Purpose Wing 1)	(40, 50, and 60)
(4th Gp of Special Purpose)	
(Wing 1)	
(Staff and Headquarters of 2d)	
(Special Purpose Wing)	
Bomber Gp's 101, 102, 104, 105	



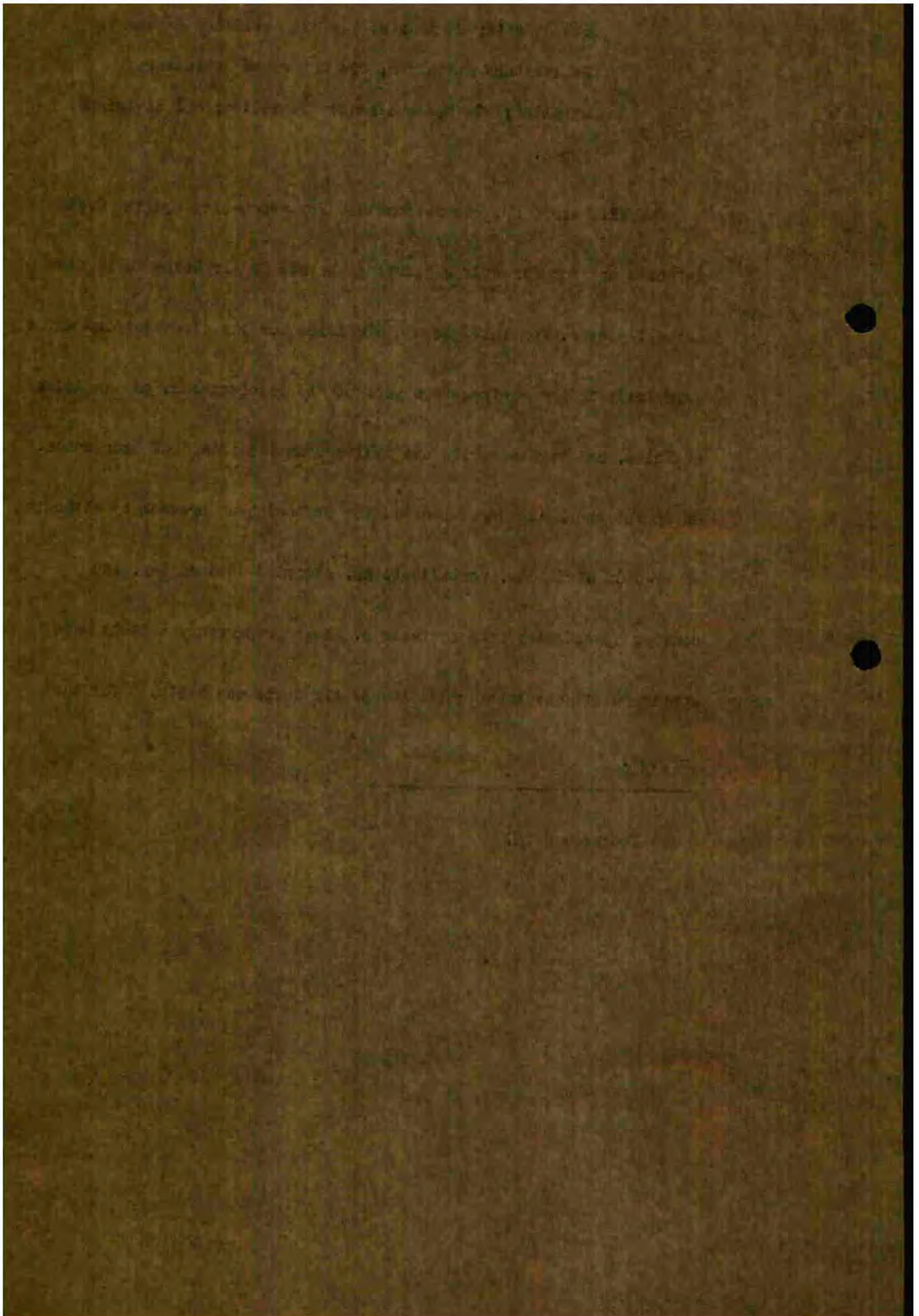
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Subordinate to the Air Force Mission and the Air Force High Command
Respectively:

22d Division Staff and Headquarters, with the 16th, 17th, and
66th Infantry Regiments; the 22d Artillery Regiment;
22d Antitank Battalion; 22d Motorized Antiaircraft
Battalion; 22d Reconnaissance Battalion; and divisional
troops.

The VIII Air Corps was responsible for "softening-up" the Crete
defenses and for directly supporting the NEW XI Air Corps during the
assault proper. For this purpose airfields for the close-support units
were built in the southeastern part of the Peloponnese, on the island
of Holos, and together with the Italians on the island of Scarpantos.
On 15 May the X Air Corps started the softening-up process by attacking
enemy-held airfields, fortifications, shipping in Suda Bay, and
convoys approaching from Alexandria. These preparatory attacks were
continued without letup until the XI Air Corps was employed for that
purpose.

See Footnote # 75.

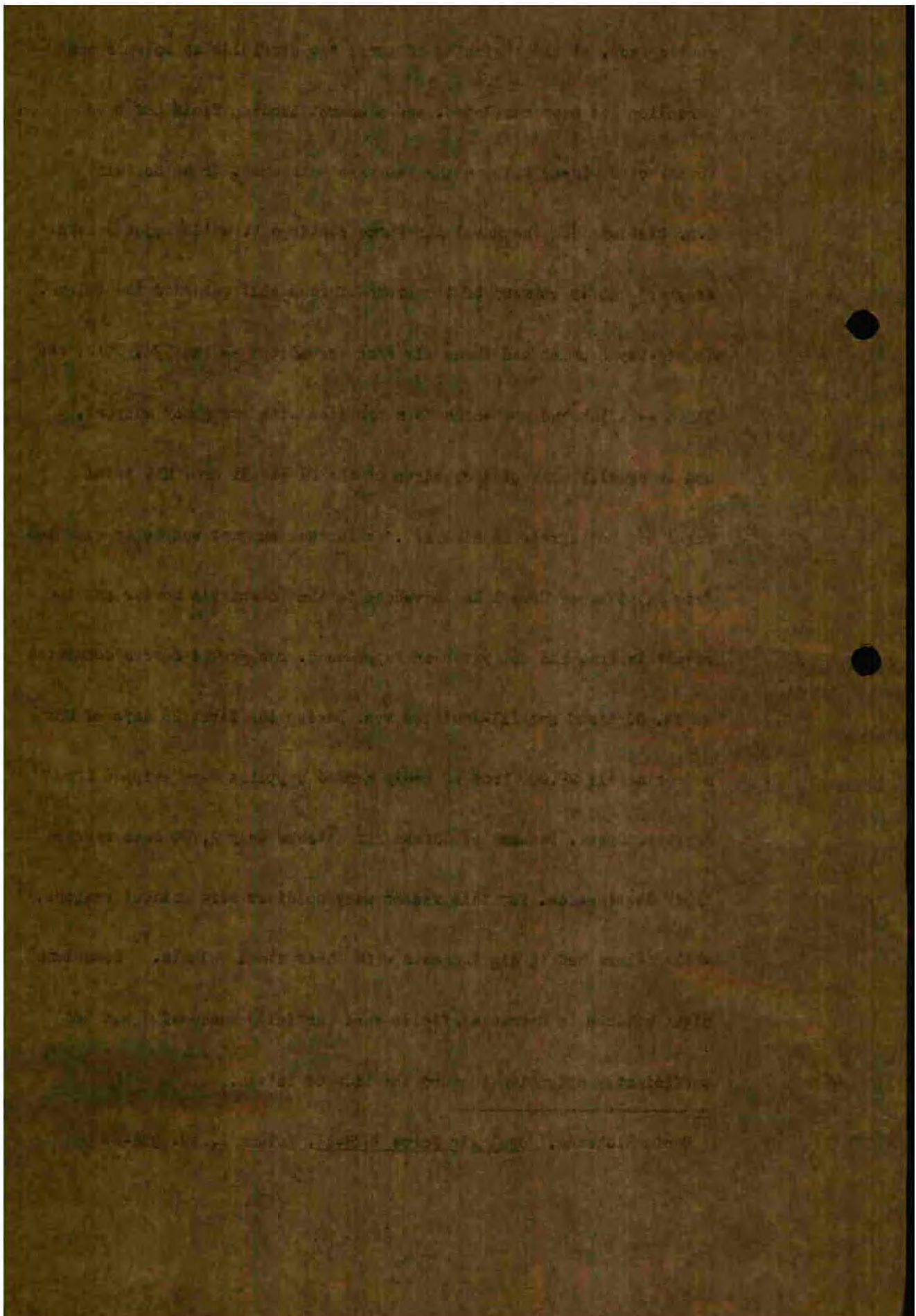


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Owing to their excellent intelligence network in Greece the British counted on German airborne landings in Crete after 26 April and made every effort to prepare the island's defenses against such a contingency. At the beginning of April two airfields at Malemes and Heraklion had been completed, and a combat landing field had been constructed midway between the two near Rethymon. Group Captain G.R. Beamish led the Royal Air Force contingent, while Major General Freyberg was in command of the ground forces that defended the island. In mid-May Beamish had three Air Force squadrons -- the 33d, 80th, and 112th -- which had meanwhile been provided with emergency support, and an equally exhausted squadron of the Fleet Air Arm; his total force did not exceed 24 aircraft. No further support was to be expected from Egypt since Rommel had advanced to that country's border and the revolt in Iraq had not yet been suppressed. The ground forces consisted of 28,500 tired and ill-equipped men. During the first 20 days of May approximately 27,000 tons of badly needed supplies were shipped from Egypt to Crete. Because of German air attacks only 2,700 tons reached their destination. For this reason many soldiers were without weapons, while others had to dig trenches with their steel helmets. Occasional night attacks on German airfields were partially successful but not sufficiently effective to turn the tide of battle.

90

Denis Richards, Royal Air Force 1939-45, Volume I, pp. 324-6.



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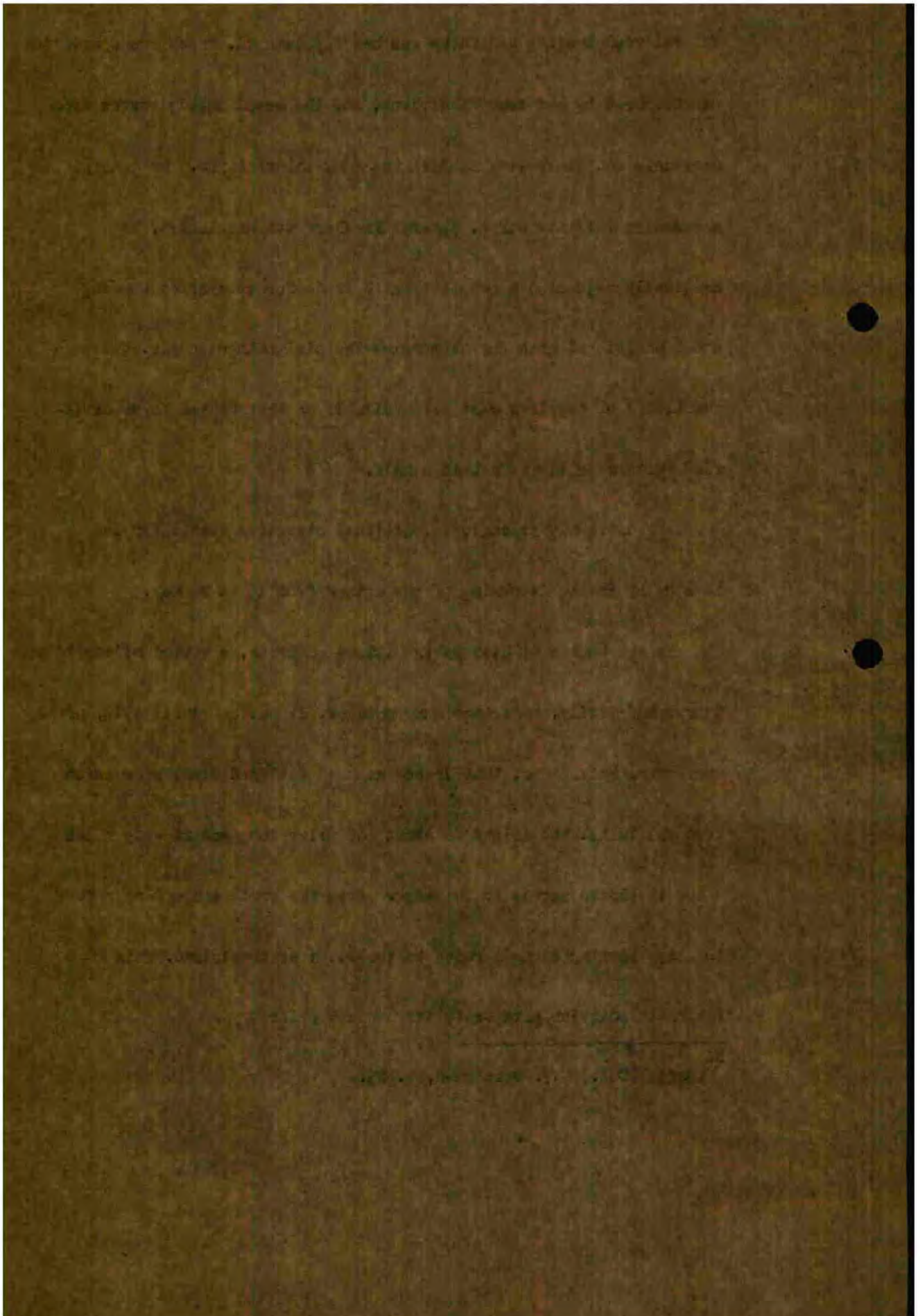
The logistical problems that confronted the Fourth Air Force were extremely serious: how were the tremendous quantities of POL, bombs, ammunition, etc., that would be needed, be moved up in time? The railroad leading to Athens was heavily damaged, truck transportation was hampered by bad road conditions, and the naval supply routes from Constanza and Italy were subject to enemy interference. The general commanding VIII Air Corps, General Freiherr von Richthofen, had originally requested 8 complete basic loads for saturation bombing and 8 additional ones for supporting the airlandings proper. These quantities of supplies were not available so that he had to be satisfied "with a little more than a half."⁹¹

The extremely precarious logistical situation eventually led to a delay in the launching of the attack from 15 to 20 May.

In the course of history the island of Crete, situated midway between Cyprus and Sicily, underwent many changes. It was not until 1913, after the Second Balkan War, that Greece assumed full and final possession from the Turks. The island is about 160 miles long and 20 - 25 miles wide; it blocks access to the Aegean from the south and ^{also} offers refuge to ships passing along a route to the south of the island. This favorable position gave Crete its ancient priority from

⁹¹

Oberst (Col.) H.F. Deichmann, p. 29.



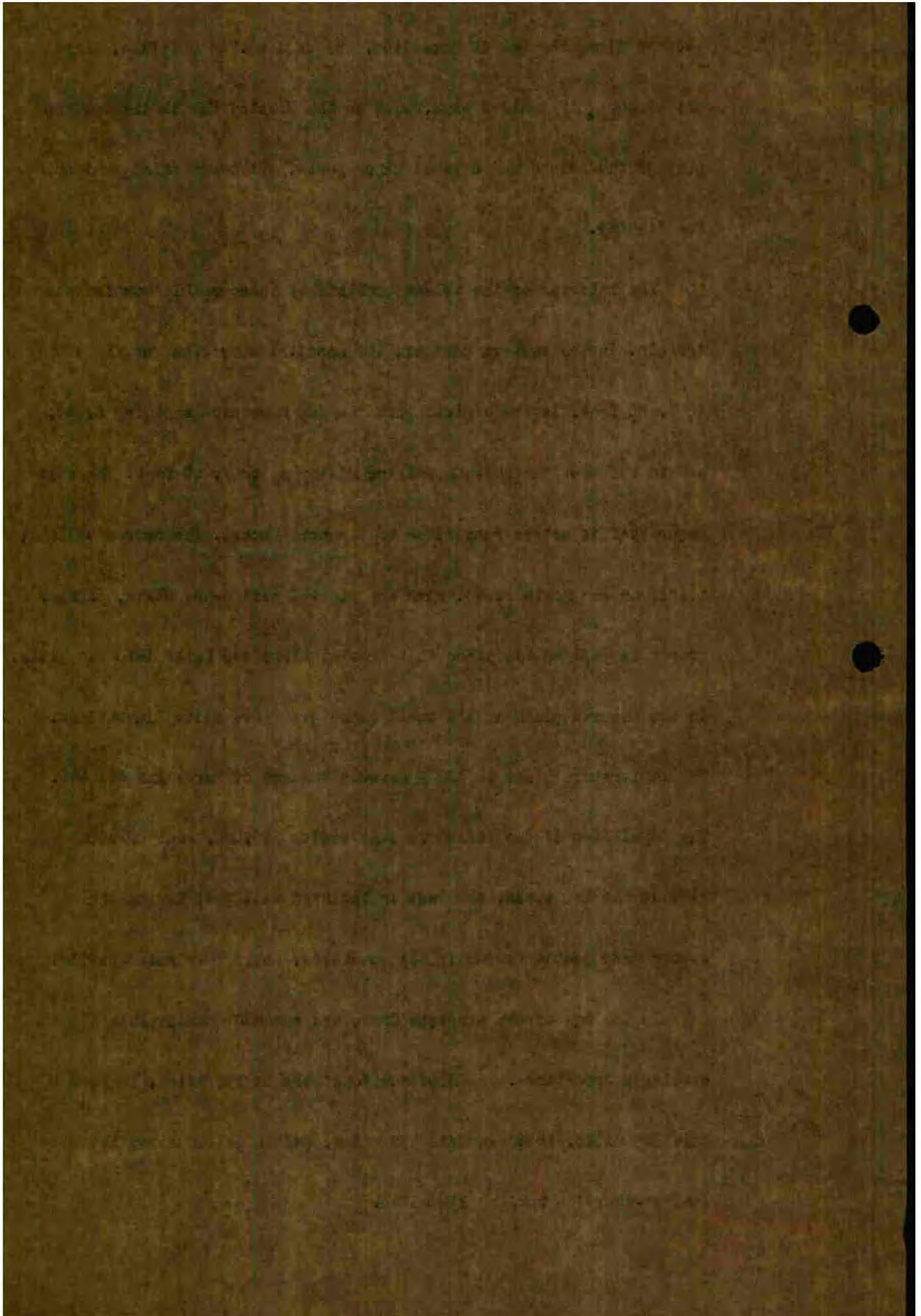
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the days of the sailing vessel.

Suda Bay, situated about midway ~~between~~ along the north coast, is a good natural port that makes Crete accessible also to large ships. Located along the Bay is Hiraclion, the capital. In addition, there are a number of smaller bays, such as the Mirabel Bay in the eastern part of the island and several minor ports, which are mainly suitable for fishing.

The interior of the island consists of inaccessible mountainous terrain. In the eastern part are the Lassithi Mountains ranging up to 6,600 feet, in the central part the Ida Mountains reaching 8,280, and in the west the White Mountains rising up to 7,600 feet. The sole major traffic artery runs close to the north coast. The narrow valleys, mainly on the north coast, ~~are~~ are planted with dense olive ^{and} orange groves as well as vineyards that grow on terraces built into the hills. In the Messara plain in the south there are dense olive plantations. The temperature rises to 122°F between the end of March and October. ^{total} The population of the island is just below 390,000, most of whom live in the few towns, the rest in isolated villages; during the summer many people reside in the mountains, where they raise cattle.

In the age of the airplane Crete had assumed considerable strategic importance. The distance to Athens is 190 miles, to Port Said 515 miles, to Alexandria 390 miles, and to Sallum (along the Italian-Egyptian border) 235 miles.



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From Crete air bases one can control large segments of Turkey, Greece, the Balkans, and Italy to the north and Egypt and the African continent to the south as well as the sea routes leading to the above destinations.

For this reason, it was logical the Great Britain would make every effort to achieve a firm foothold on Crete after it had been defeated on the Greek Peninsula. Tobruk, though far to the rear of Rommel's army, was still in British hands. German supply routes were extremely vulnerable to attacks from Tobruk and Crete. On the other hand, the conquest of Greece by the German Armed Forces would not have been a full achievement without the seizure of Crete. The shorter lines of communication to Rommel's army at Sallum also offered important advantages to the Germans.

Possession of Crete was decisive for supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean.

Section III.

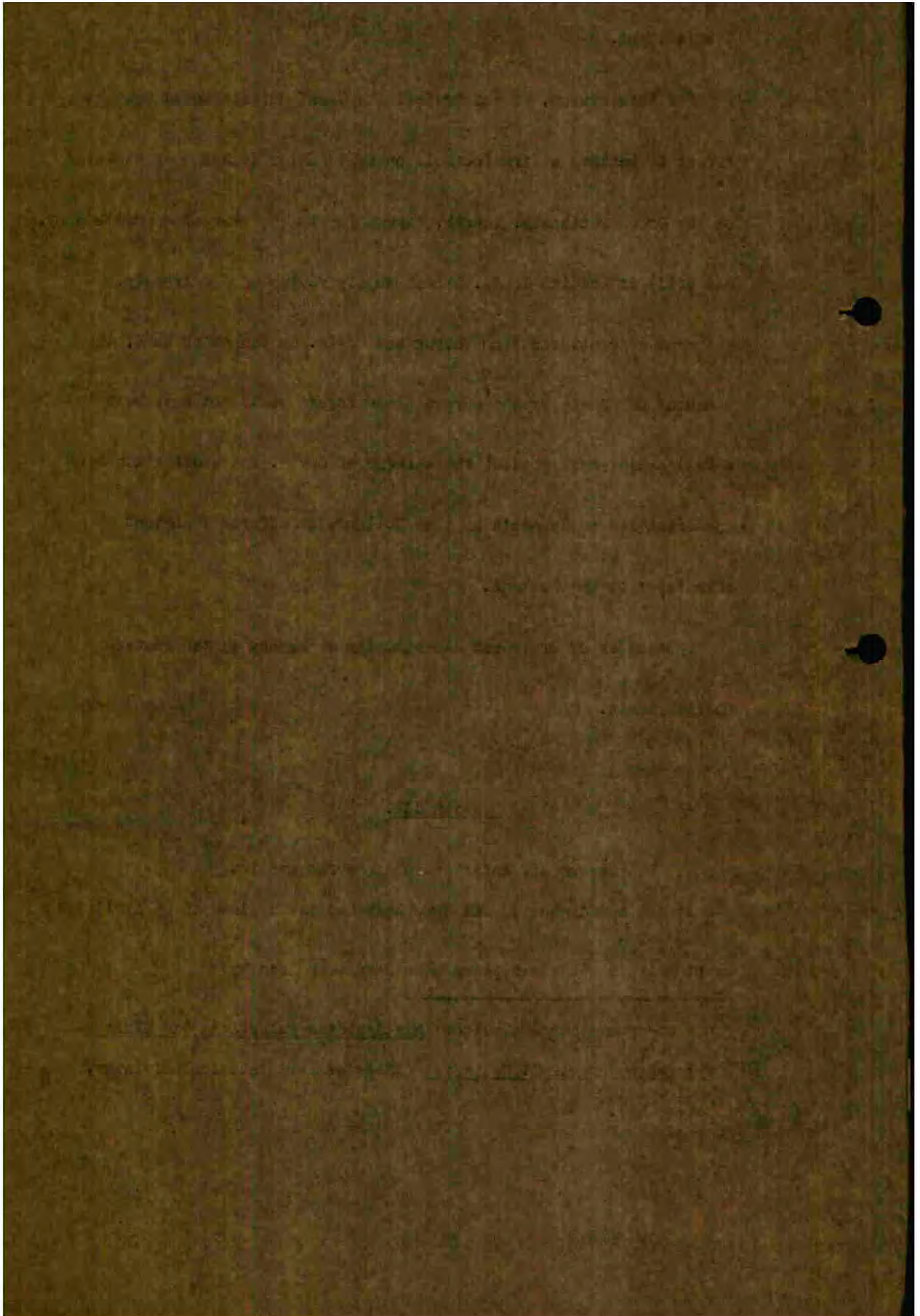
92

German Air Intervention in Syria and Iraq

At the conference of San Remo that had taken place on 25 April 1920 Great Britain had been given a mandate over Iraq by

92

See study by the same author: Die deutsche Ausnutzung der Eingeborenen-Bewegung im 2. Weltkrieg (Files of the Historical Division, Karlsruhe).



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the Supreme Council of the League of Nations. The British policy applied to Iraq was better than in Palestine, so that Iraq was eventually admitted to the League of Nations as an "independent state" on 3 October 1932.

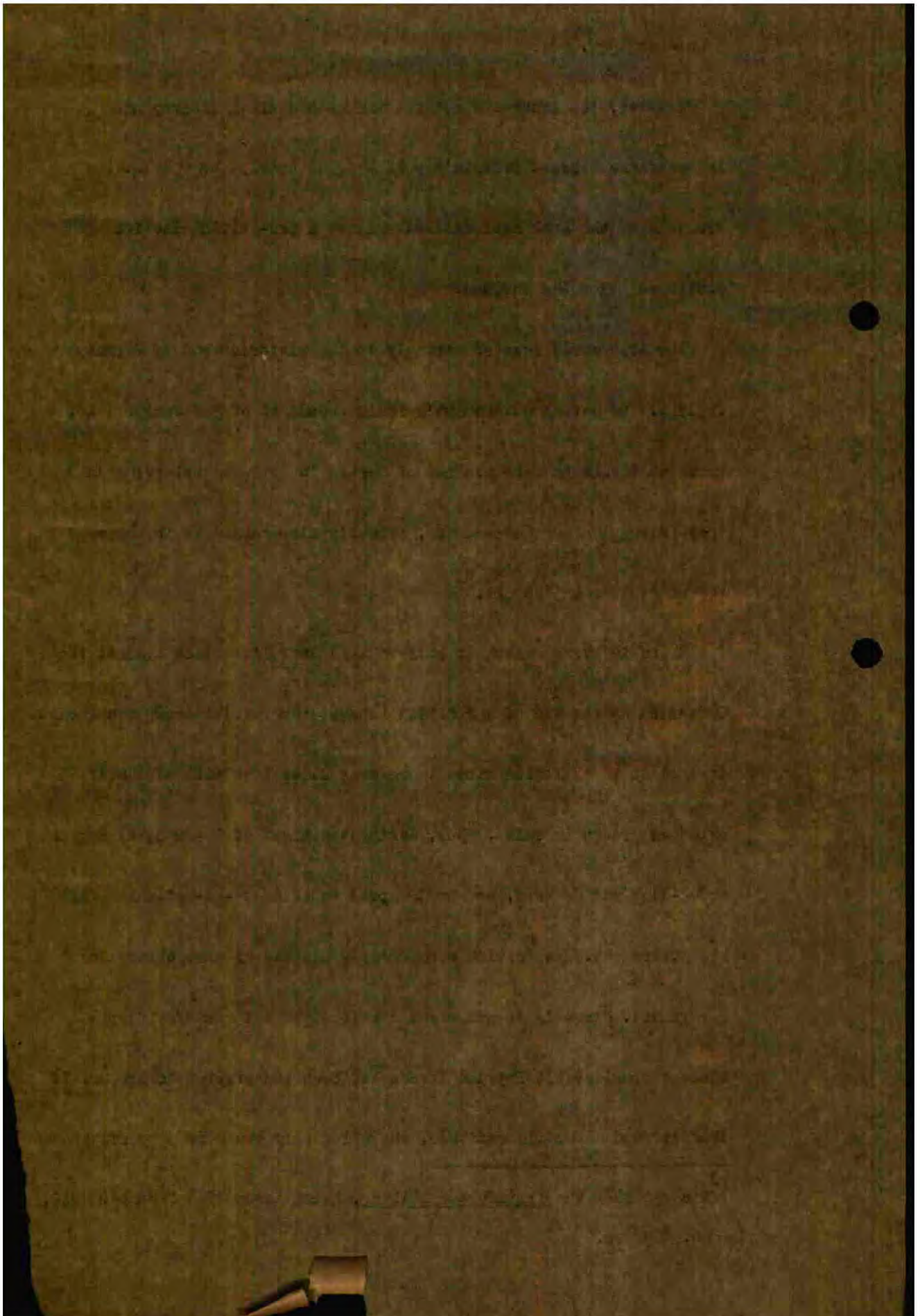
However, the Arabs did not get the much desired liberty and independence because Britain's yoke weighed heavily ^{upon} over Iraq. The struggle of the Arab nationalists against a pro-British faction continued below the surface.

The Arab world reacted strongly to the victories won by Germany in 1940. The German Government's radio broadcast of 5 December 1940, by which the Arabs were assured of Germany's full understanding in their struggle for independence, probably also raised their hopes for active German support. ⁹³

There is every reason to believe that Rommel's attack against the Cyrenaica at the end of March 1941 brought the revolutionary tendencies in Iraq to an explosion since there were close ties with similarly oriented groups in Cairo. Thus, during the night of 1 - 2 April Regent Abdul-Ilah was deposed, and on 12 April Raschid Ali-al-Gailani formed his government. The British were greatly alarmed by that change in government. Rommel's attack might develop into a threat for Egypt because considerable British forces had been transferred to Greece. If Iraq adopted a hostile attitude, the oil supply would be jeopardized and

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Excerpt from the Frankfurter Zeitung, Reich Issue of 6 December 1940, No. 623/624.



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~~AND~~ the laboriously acquired position, held by the British Empire on the Arabian Peninsula, would be endangered.

The British reaction was accordingly prompt: during the fighting for the combined sea and land airfield at Habbaniya west of Baghdad, the Royal Air Force achieved supremacy on 5 May, mainly because of indecisive Iraqi leadership.

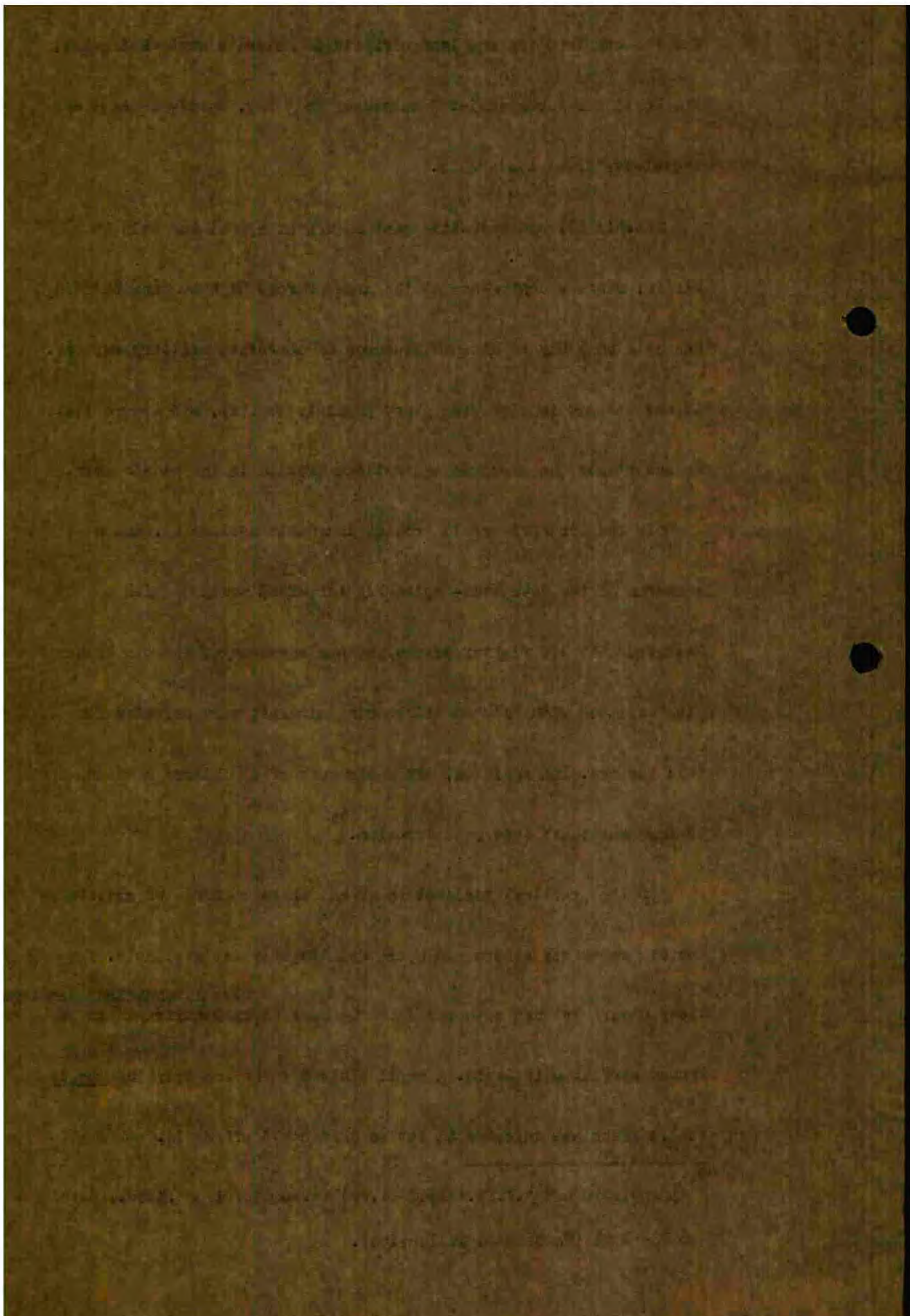
Raschid Ali had meanwhile sent an urgent appeal for help to Berlin, where a conference at the Armed Forces High Command building was held on 6 May to discuss measures of immediate military support. It was decided to give Iraq every possible support, and beyond that to accentuate the struggle against the British in the Middle East.

Only the Air Force could provide immediate assistance, and a ^{Wing} squadron of the 76th Twin-Engine Fighter ~~GROUP~~ equipped with Messerschmidt 110 fighter planes and one squadron of the 4th Bomber Wing equipped with Heinkel 111 bombing aircraft were selected for this purpose. In addition, the assignment of a military mission ⁹⁴ to Iraq was taken into consideration.

For the practical realization of all these measures of assistance the air route via Athens and Syria was the only one available. The Vichy Government had authorized the Germans to ^{make intermediate landings} ~~land their aircraft~~ at French airfields in Syria. A small liaison staff commanded by Oberst (Col.) Junck was selected to act as "Liaison Staff Syria."

94

Appendix to GNM/W.F.St. Abt.L (I.op) Nr. 00830/41 geh.Kdos., dated 6 May 1941 (Washington Collection).



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The transfer of the two squadrons, which had to be withdrawn from the Greek theater without notice or preparation, turned out to be extremely complicated.⁹⁵

"The transfer order reached the bomber squadron on 8 May on Rhodes, where the planes, ^{each} loaded with 2,200 lbs. ^{of} bombs, stood ready for their first commitment against the Suez Canal. For technical reasons the squadron was first redeployed to Zilistea in Romania, where it was rehabilitated. Bad weather conditions delayed the start so that 8 planes reached Tatou airfield near Athens as late as 11 May, with one plane crashing up during the landing."

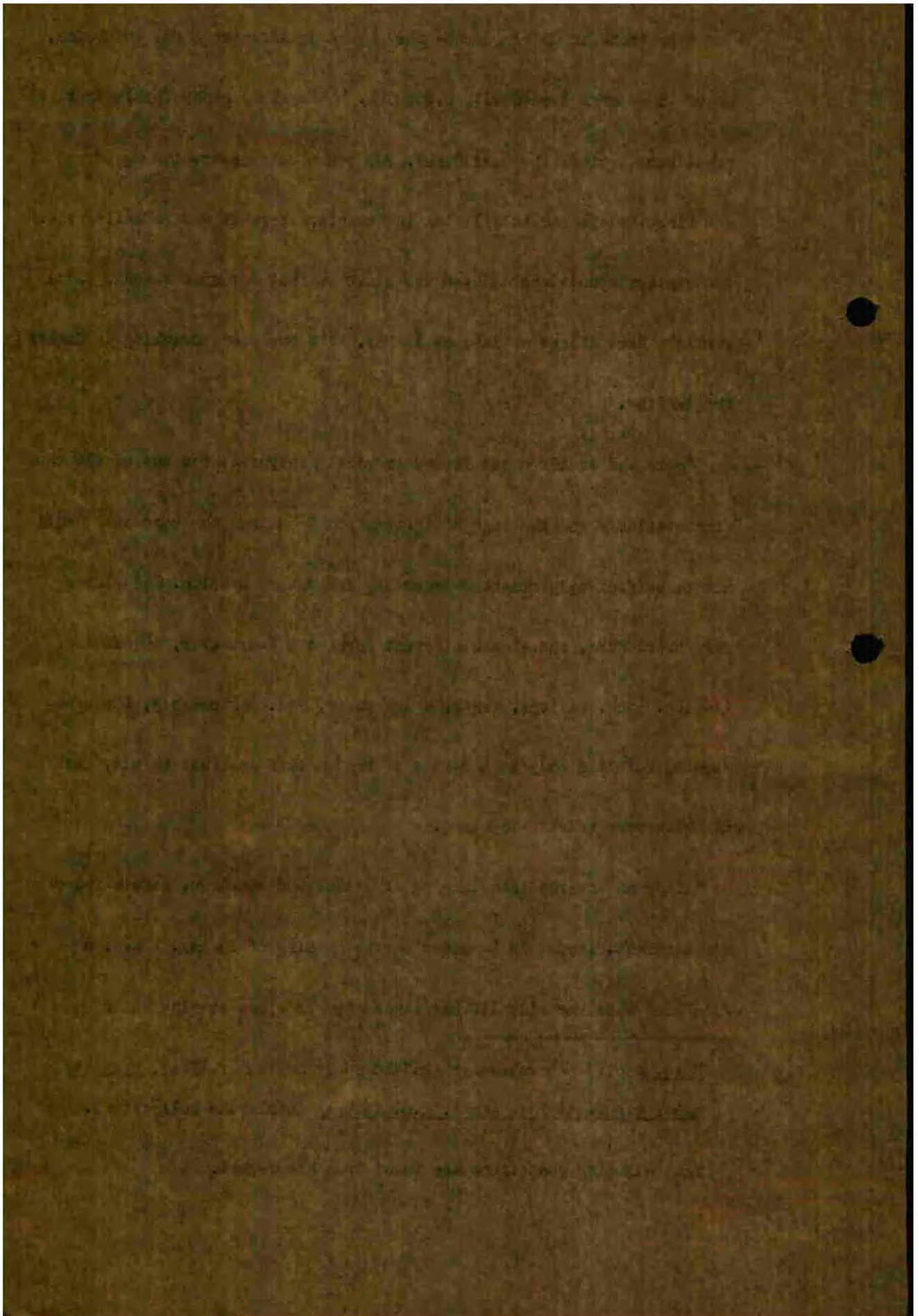
"Here the squadron was issued tropical equipment; because of the short time available and the lack of information from Iraq, the personnel could not be sufficiently oriented regarding ^{their} future mission. The planes were overloaded, since each aircraft carried a 6-man crew, 16 bombs of 110 lbs. each, rations, tents, spare parts, etc. Fortunately, the overloading resulted only in a series of broken skid and tail wheels, most of which were quickly repaired."

"After an intermediate landing at Rhodes the squadron, consisting of six aircraft, landed in Damascus on the morning of 15 May. There, a flight of Messerschmidt 110 had landed the previous evening under

95

Rptm. (Capt.) Schwanhaeuser (killed on 16 September 1941), Bericht ueber die Taetigkeit der L. K.G. im Irak (Karlsruhe Collection).

The following quotations are taken from his report.

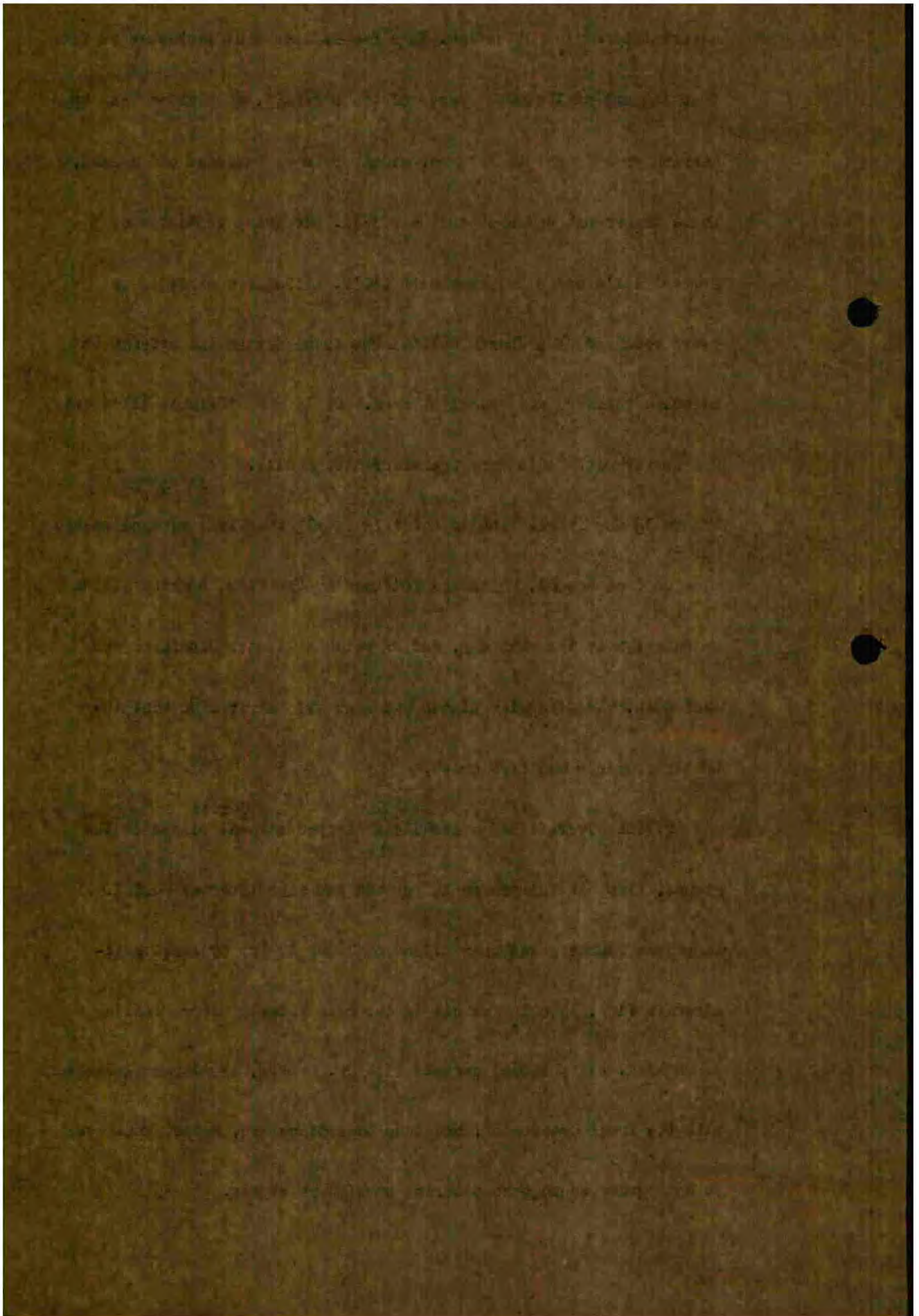


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the command of Lt. Woerner. He informed me that Dr. Rahn, the representative of the Reich Government with General Dentz at Beirut, had advised him not to continue his flight to Baghdad because of the uncertainty of the situation. In a ^{stifling} deadly heat that prevented us from touching any of the metal parts of the aircraft, we started that same morning on a flight to Palmyra, midway between Damascus and Mossul, where the French had a support airfield. Our group consisted of 5 Heinkel 111's and 3 Messerschmitt 110's. At Palmyra airfield we were received by a French colonel who spoke German and offered us adequate quarters and excellent food." On 15 May 3 Heinkel 111's and 3 Messerschmitt 110's were transferred to Mossul.

On 15 May it was finally possible to fly the first reconnaissance mission from Mossul, which was followed by the first bombing attack on Habbaniya on the next day, during which a Gloster Gladiator was shot down. The straggler planes had meanwhile arrived so that the bomber squadron had five crews.

British aircraft had meanwhile destroyed several ^{German} planes on the ground, first at Palmyra on 14 May and two days later at Mossul. Major von Blomberg had been killed on 11 or 12 May by Iraqi anti-aircraft fire, when he was hit in the neck shortly before landing at Baghdad. All personal contact with Dr. Crobba, the German Ambassador with the Iraqi Government, had thus been disrupted, a fact that was to have grave consequences during subsequent events.



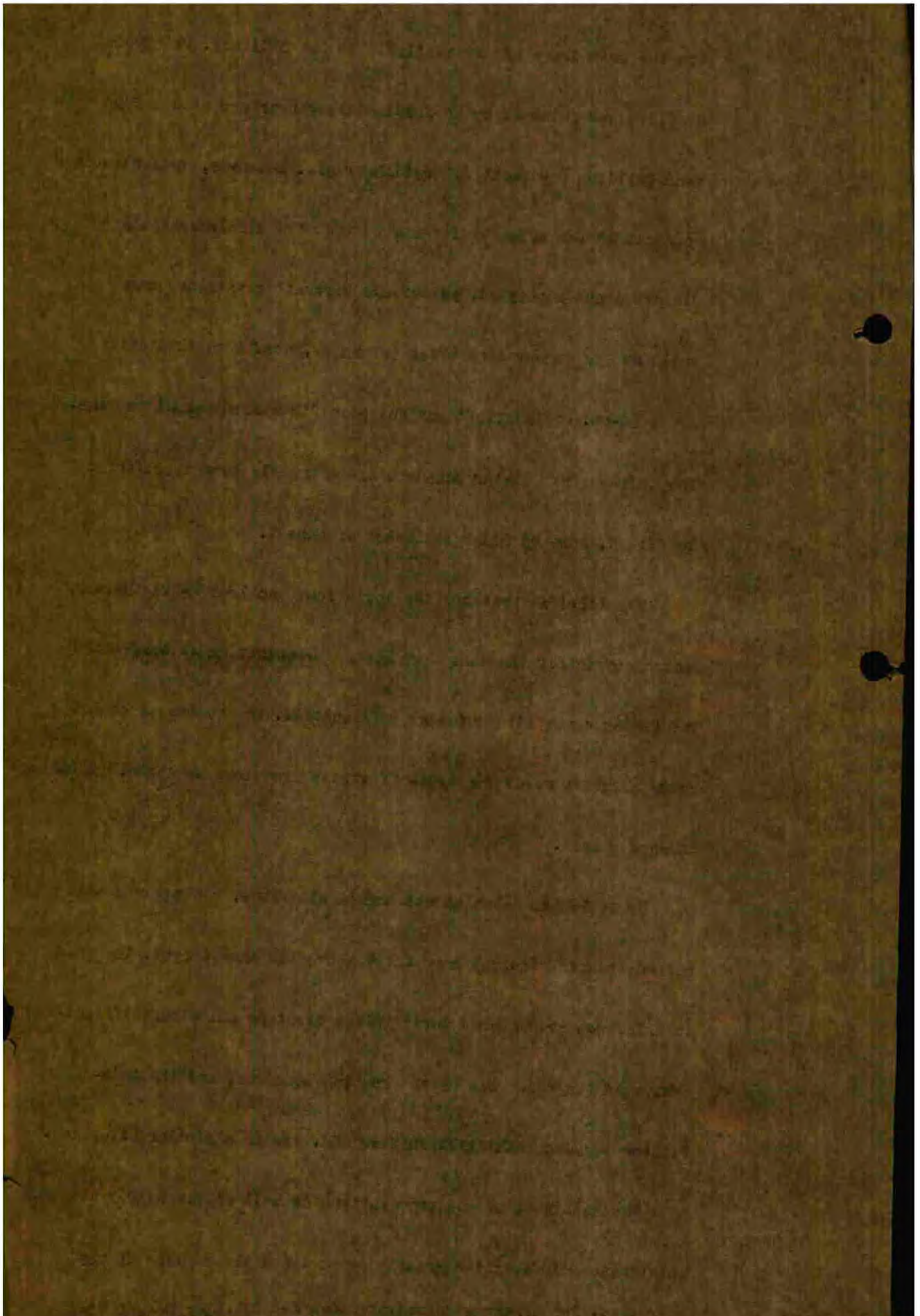
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On 15 May Oberst (Col.) Junck had also arrived in Mosul who was assisted by Oblt. (1st Lt.) Pawelko -- a reserve officer who had formerly been legation secretary in Baghdad and who was now the only Iraqi expert available to the military. The Mosul airfield was enlarged by an Iraqi entrepreneur who used modern road building equipment of British origin. Moreover, some clearings were cut in the adjacent forests so that the airplanes could be dispersed and concealed, camouflage aircraft revetments were built on the maneuvering areas (runways), etc. A radio station and a 20-mm. antiaircraft gun had been flown into Mosul on time. The twin-engine fighter squadron had meanwhile been transferred to Kirkuk, some 95 miles southeast of Mosul.

The terrific heat and the logistical problems -- the Germans lacked completely the customary ground organization -- confronted the flying crews with unusual difficulties. The number of combat ready aircraft ready for take-off varied from zero to three, excluding damaged planes.

Up to 29 May Hobaniya was bombed six times, and seven armed reconnaissance missions were flown above the same target. The enemy interference encountered during these missions and other difficulties exhausted the resources of the bombing squadron, and the twin-engine fighter squadron ~~was also in a similar situation~~ was in a similar situation.

*The hastiness of the preparations as well as the supply and maintenance difficulties greatly jeopardized the success of the operation. The transport squadron commanded by Major Rother flew



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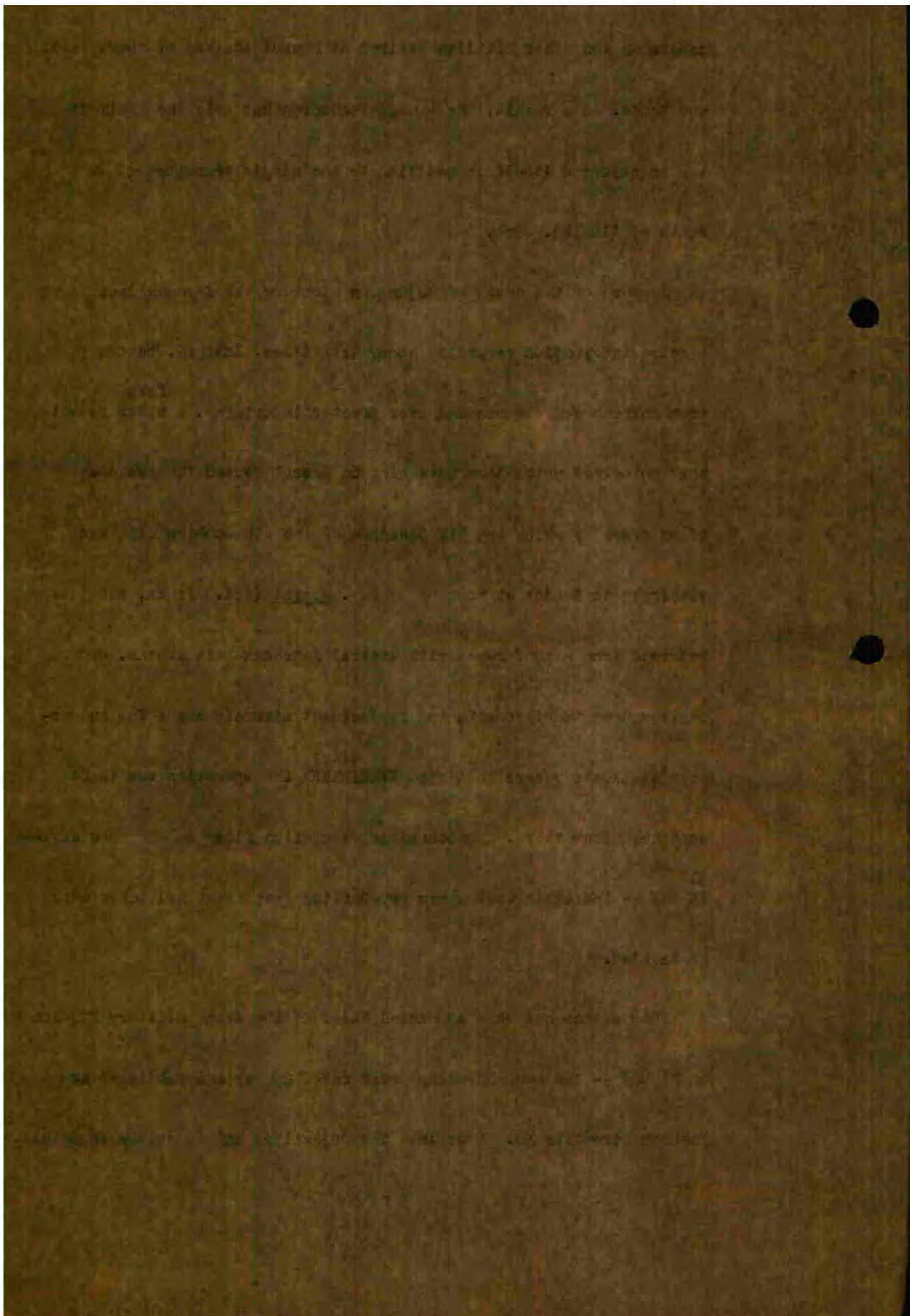
52's

supply missions with Junkers ~~52's~~ and Junkers 90's from Tatoi airfield via Rhodes and Aleppo. To the regrets of the crews, however, officials from the Armed Forces High Command in civilian clothes as well as cameramen and other civilian arrived at Mossul instead of spare parts and bombs. As a result, the bombing squadron had only the bombs it had transported itself in addition to one single transport of 72 bombs of 110 lbs. each.

Because of the death of Major von Blomberg the Germans lacked precise information regarding enemy activities. Instead, rumors from unknown sources assumed ever greater importance. A ~~WRONG~~ ^{false} report that motorized units were advancing on Mossul caused the issuance of an order by which the 4th Squadron of the 4th Bombing Wing was withdrawn to Rhodes at noon on 29 May. Oberst (Col.) Junck, who just returned from a conference with General Jeschonnek in Athens, ordered the squadron together with two replacement aircraft and a few Messerschmitt 110's to return to Aleppo ~~BECAUSE~~ ^{since} the operation was to be continued from there. A reconnaissance mission flown on the same day -- ³¹ ~~30~~ May -- indicated that a new pro-British government had taken over at Baghdad.

This author had been appointed Chief of the Iraqi Military Mission on 21 May -- the corresponding order dated 23 May and published as Fuehrer Directive No. 30 defined the objectives and functions in detail.

96

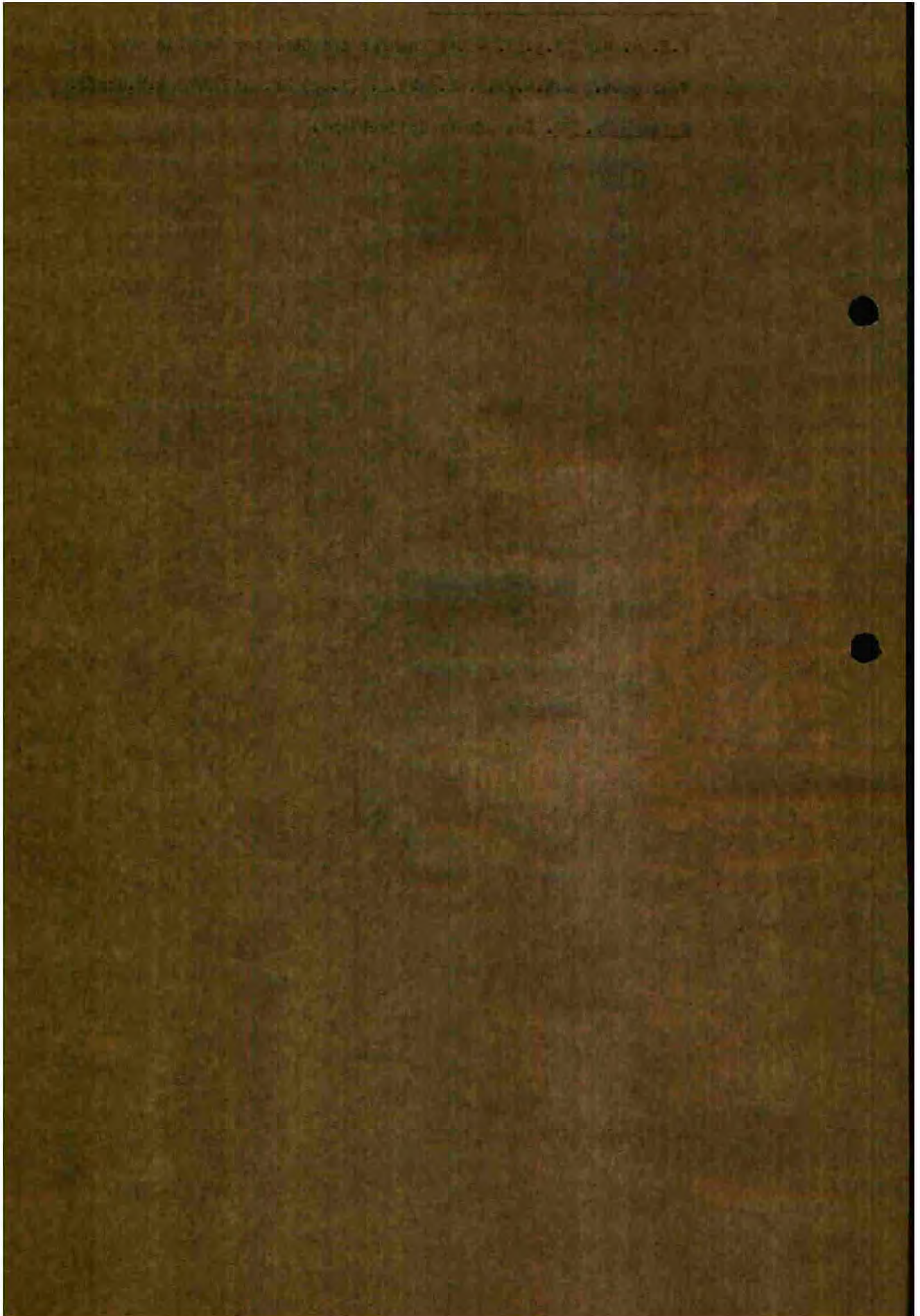


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Accompanied by his chief of staff, the chief of the military mission arrived in Athens on the evening of 28 May, after having initiated the activation of the mission in Berlin. When

96

F.H.Qu. den 23.5.41. - Der Fuehrer und Oberster Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht. O.K.W./W.F.St./Abt.L. (I.op) Nr. 44772/41 g.k.Chefs. Weisung Nr. 90. (Karlsruhe Collection).



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he reported before his departure to Feldmarschall (Field Marshal) Keitel on or about 26 May, the latter told him: "The Armed Forces High Command was completely surprised by the Arab insurrection."

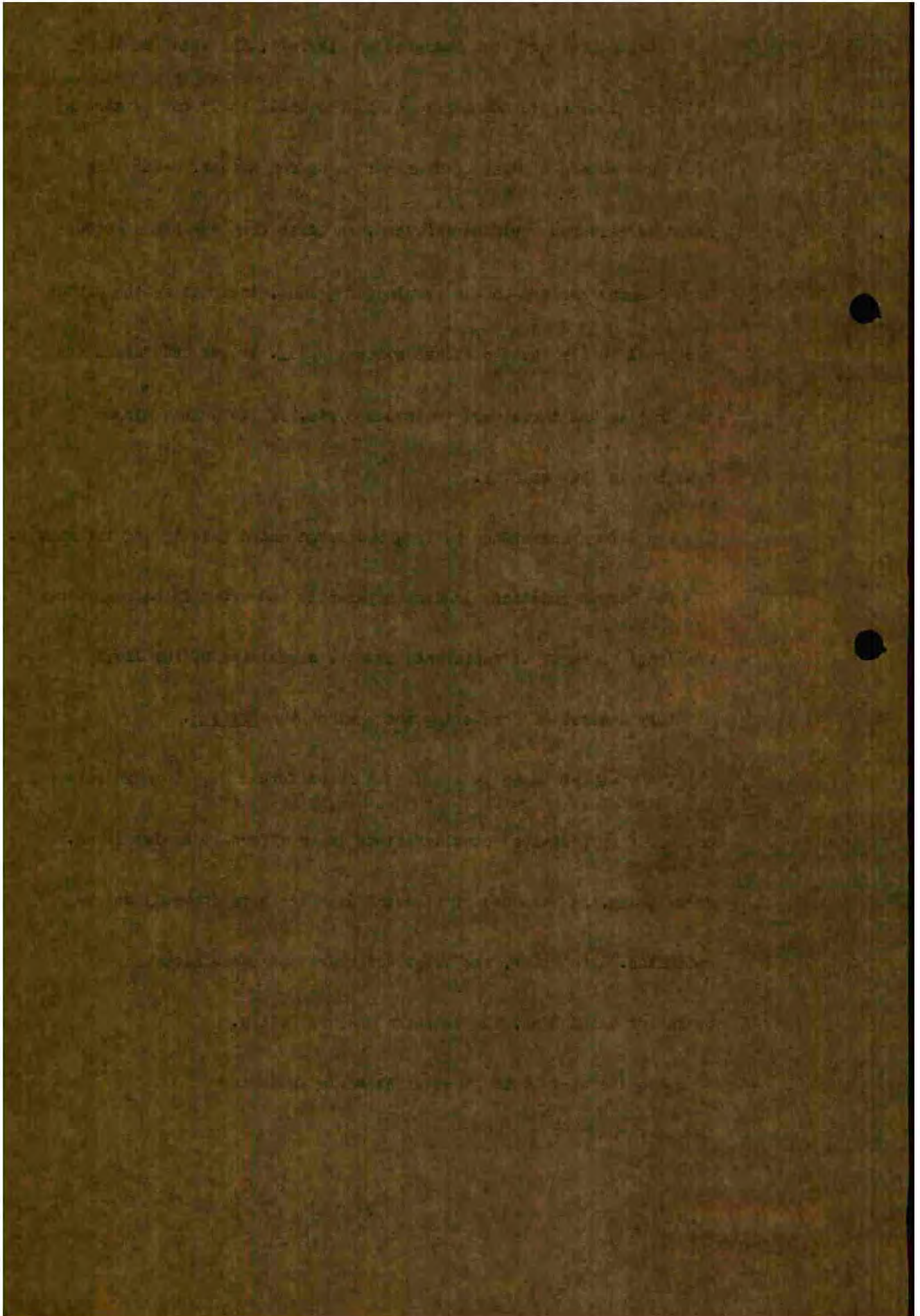
Since he had not been assigned an aircraft, the chief of the military mission did not arrive at Aleppo until early on the morning of 1 June aboard a plane of Transport Squadron Rother. Before the intended measures could be enforced, an order from the Armed Forces High Command arrived on the evening of 3 June, instructing the German personnel to fly back to Athens without delay. It was understood that the British had threatened to invade Syria, if the German airmen remained in that country.

The German assistance to Iraq had ~~never~~ ended quickly and infamously.

The German political leaders apparently had wrong ideas regarding the Iraqi strength of resistance and the capability of the Iraqi military leaders of conducting war against the British.

The measures taken by the German Armed Forces High Command were dominated by political considerations in an effort to assist Iraq. In so doing, the elements of time and distance were probably underestimated. Altogether, the Iraqi adventure was overshadowed by Operation BARBAROSSA, the campaign against Russia.

But quite apart from these unfavorable factors



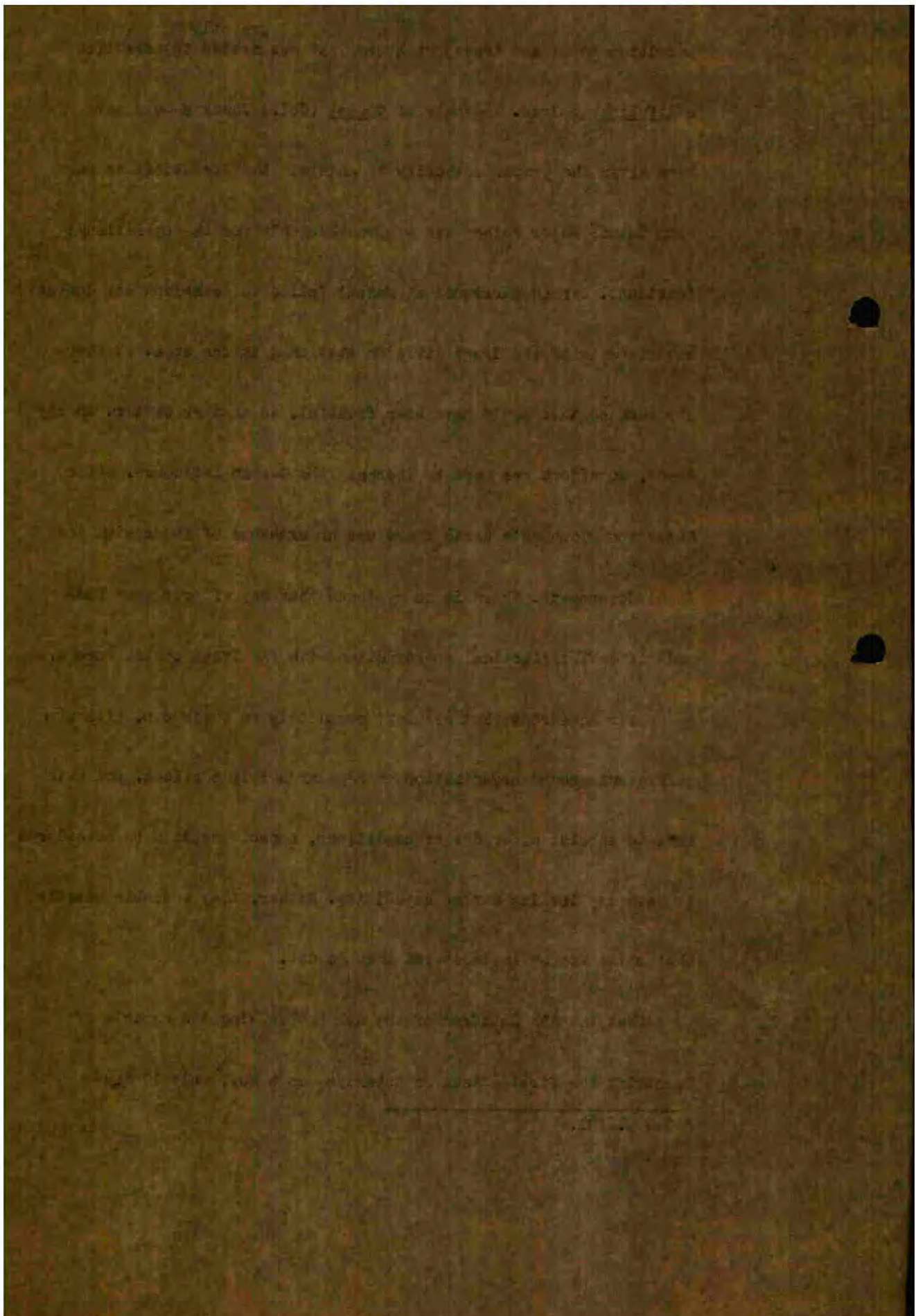
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the Liaison Staff Syria lacked the strong and determined leadership needed in such an extremely difficult situation. This lack of determination was manifested at Tatoi, where unauthorized personnel were permitted to misuse transport space that was ^{urgently} needed to establish a lifeline to Iraq. A deputy of Oberst (Col.) Junck should have been given the proper authority to maintain the logistical support from Tatoi; Major Rother was responsible only for the operational functions. German personnel at Mossul failed to establish any contact whatsoever with the Iraqi division stationed in the area. Whether any such contact would have been fruitful, is another matter. In any event, no effort was made to increase the German influence. After Major von Blomberg's death there was no exchange of ideas with the Iraqi Government. There is no evidence that any efforts were ~~made~~ made to achieve tactical coordination with the Iraqi combat forces.

Air squadrons that are left completely on their own, without sufficient ground organization or regular supply services, and which have to subsist under desert conditions, cannot possibly be considered to have any lasting combat capability. Rather, they resemble meteors that shine for an instance and then go out.

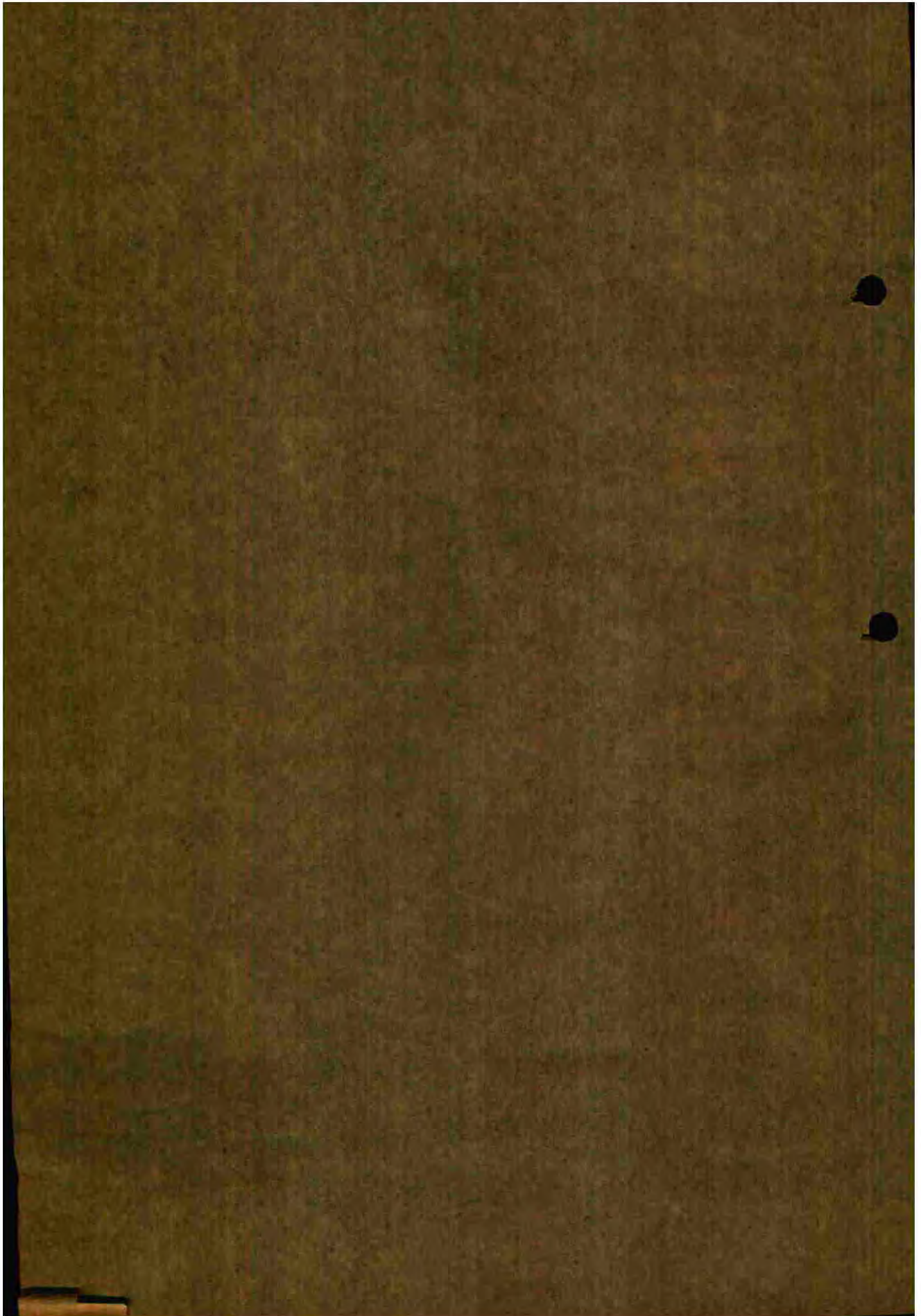
That the 4th Squadron of the 4th Bomber Wing was capable of launching the first attack on Habbaniya on 16 May, only 10 days

* See p. 131.



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after the Berlin conference, remains nevertheless a remarkable
performance.



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Section IV.

Developments in Libya and Egypt up to Mid-November. The Logistical Crisis. The Fighting for Tobruk. Withdrawal from the Ain-elGazala to the Marsa el-Brega Position near the End of the Year.

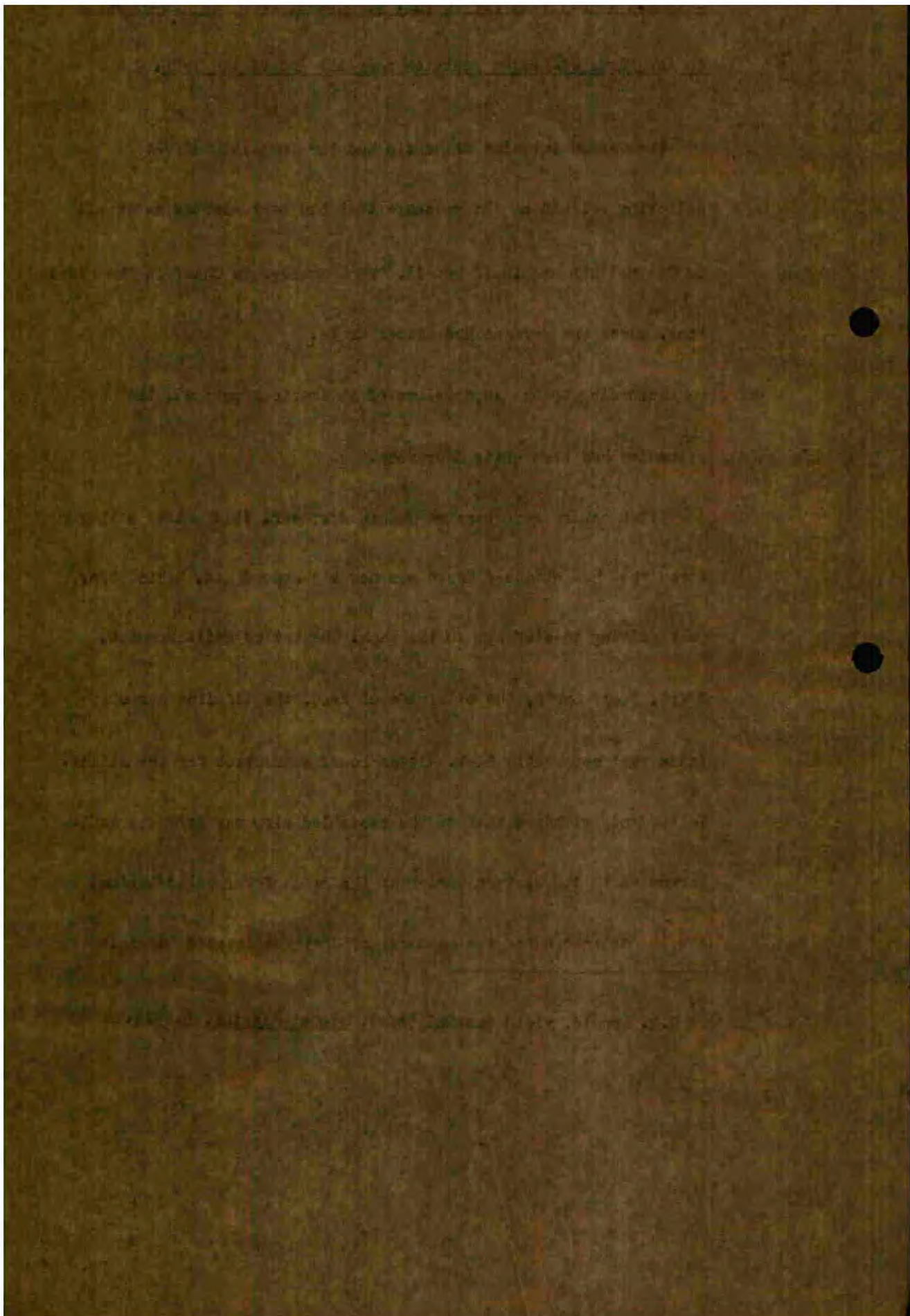
The German invasion of Russia had the immediate effect of relieving Britain of the pressure that had been exerted above all on General Sir Archibald Wavell, the Commander in Chief in the Middle East, since the Germans had seized Crete.

According to the impressions of an American general, the situation had been quite desperate.

"This entire concentrated German airpower, this entire airborne force that had attacked Crete was now all around him, behind him, just waiting to stab him in the back. The entire Mediterranean, Egypt, Suez, Syria, the oilfields of Iraq, the lifeline across to India were apparently lost. Hitler found a solution for the Allies. He suddenly withdrew most of the assembled airpower from the Mediterranean to the eastern border of the Reich for rehabilitation, and three weeks after the conquest of Crete he invaded Russia."⁹⁷

⁹⁷

H.H. Arnold, Field Marshal (sic), Global Mission, p. 324.



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This was a truly a decisive step of the German Chief of State, the full significance of which was not revealed until the later course of the war.

Nevertheless, the skeptical British believed that the Russians would collapse within a short time. This estimate was based on the successes hitherto achieved by the German Armed Forces. For this reason the British took immediate military and diplomatic steps to secure their flank that was threatened in Syria and Iraq. Turkey was informed of the British intentions, and closer relations were established with the Turks. This was not altogether unjustified, since the German plans for operations to be undertaken after Russia's defeat envisaged a thrust across Turkey, possibly also across the Caucasus, against the Achilles heel of the British Empire, the Middle East.

After the battle of Solun,^V an equilibrium of forces had somehow been established in Libya. To end this state of apparent equality and to gain the upper hand, was the objective of each one of the two adversaries.

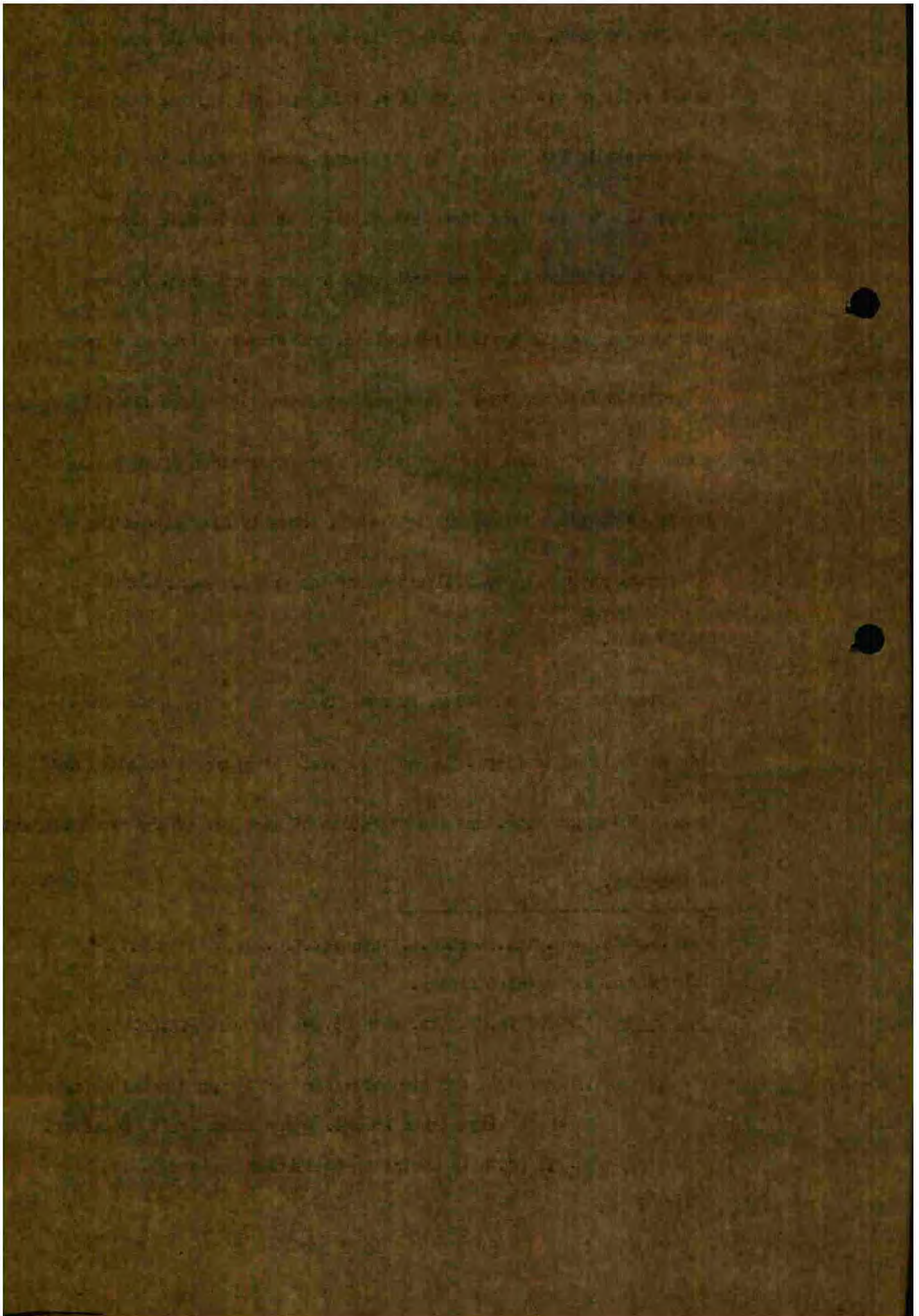
98

O.K.W./1864 geh. Kdos. Oberkdo.d. Wehrmacht.F.H.Qu., den 30.6.1941, Chefsache, nur durch Offizier.

Reference: O.K.W./H.F.St./Abb. 1 (1a op.) Nr. 44886/41 S.K.Qu. v.

11 June 1941 and directive for the German General Attached to the Italian Armed Forces. Ref.: ~~XXXX~~ Draft of Directive No. 32 (Both in Karlsruhe Collection Archives).

*Page 77



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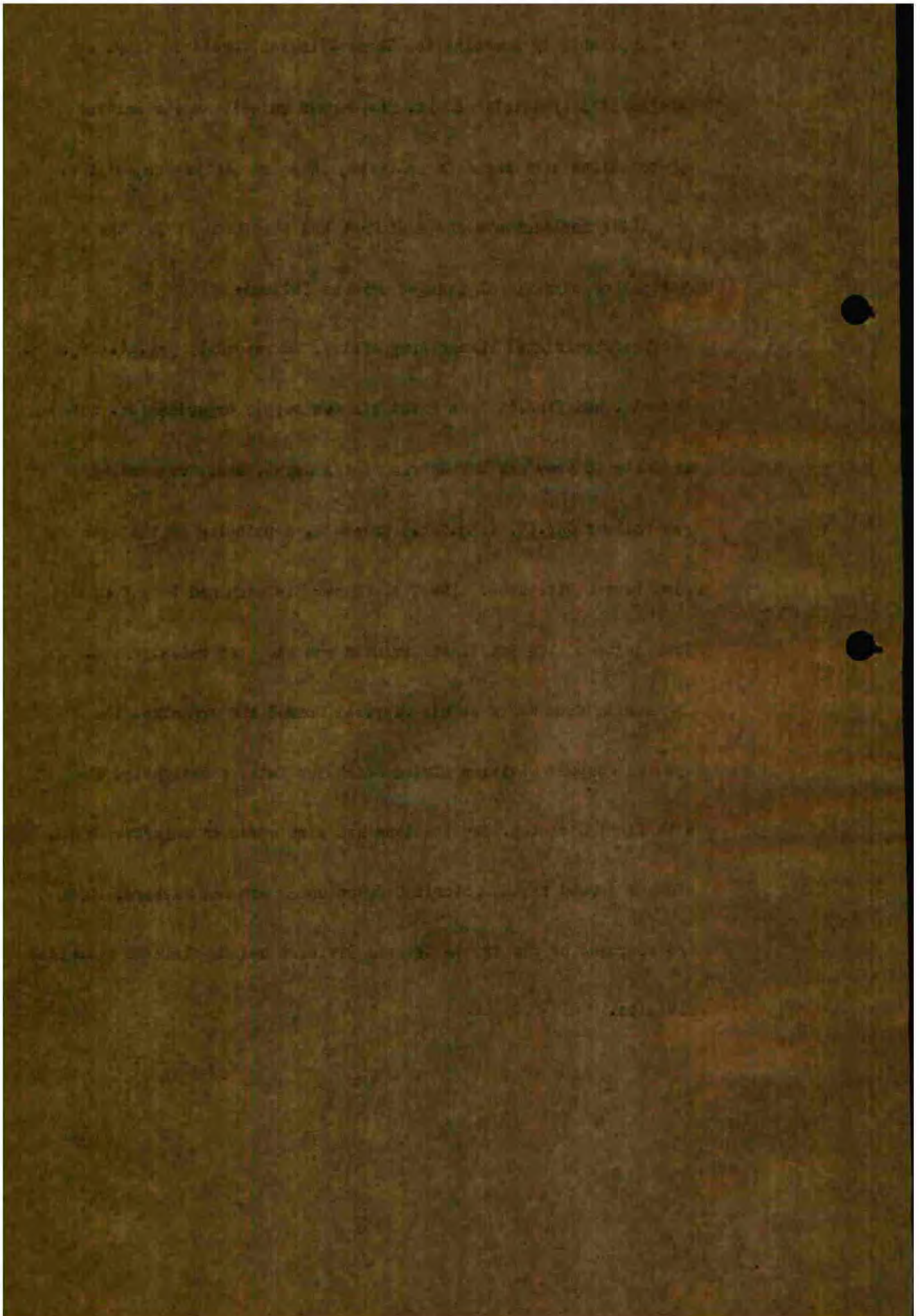
an

The conquest of Tobruk was essential prerequisite for the continuation of the German drive into Egypt. In view of the overall situation the British could counter the threat to their hold on Egypt only by smashing the German-Italian forces in Libya at the earliest possible moment. The German as well as the British preparations were based on achieving these respective objectives.

After replacements and equipment had been brought in, the various organizational changes were as follows:

The Provisional Panzer Army Africa, commanded by Gen.Lt. (Maj.Gen.) Rommel, had finally been given its own supply organization. Subordinate to army was the German Africa Corps, whose commanding general was Gen.Lt. (Maj.Gen.) Gruenell, consisting of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions. (The 21st Panzer Division had been formed from units of the 5th Light Division ^{that} and had been redesignated.)

Partly from units at his disposal Rommel had organized the Special Purpose Division Africa which was later redesignated the 90th Light Division. The Italians had also moved in reinforcements, and had formed the XX Motorized Corps under General Gambara, which was composed of the Ariete Armored Division and the Trieste Motorized Division.



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On 15 August 1941 Panzer Group (Provisional Army) Africa assumed command over the German Africa Corps, including the army troops, and over the Italian X and XXI Corps. However, General Bastico, the successor of General Gariboldi, retained control over the Italian XX Motorized Corps.

The Air ^{Group} Brigade Commander Africa received in addition to the previously assigned units* in July 1941 the entire 3d ^{Group} ~~Wing~~ of Luftgau 1, of which he had controlled only one squadron, and in September 1941 the 2d ^{Group} ~~Wing~~ of the 27th Fighter Wing. ⁹⁹

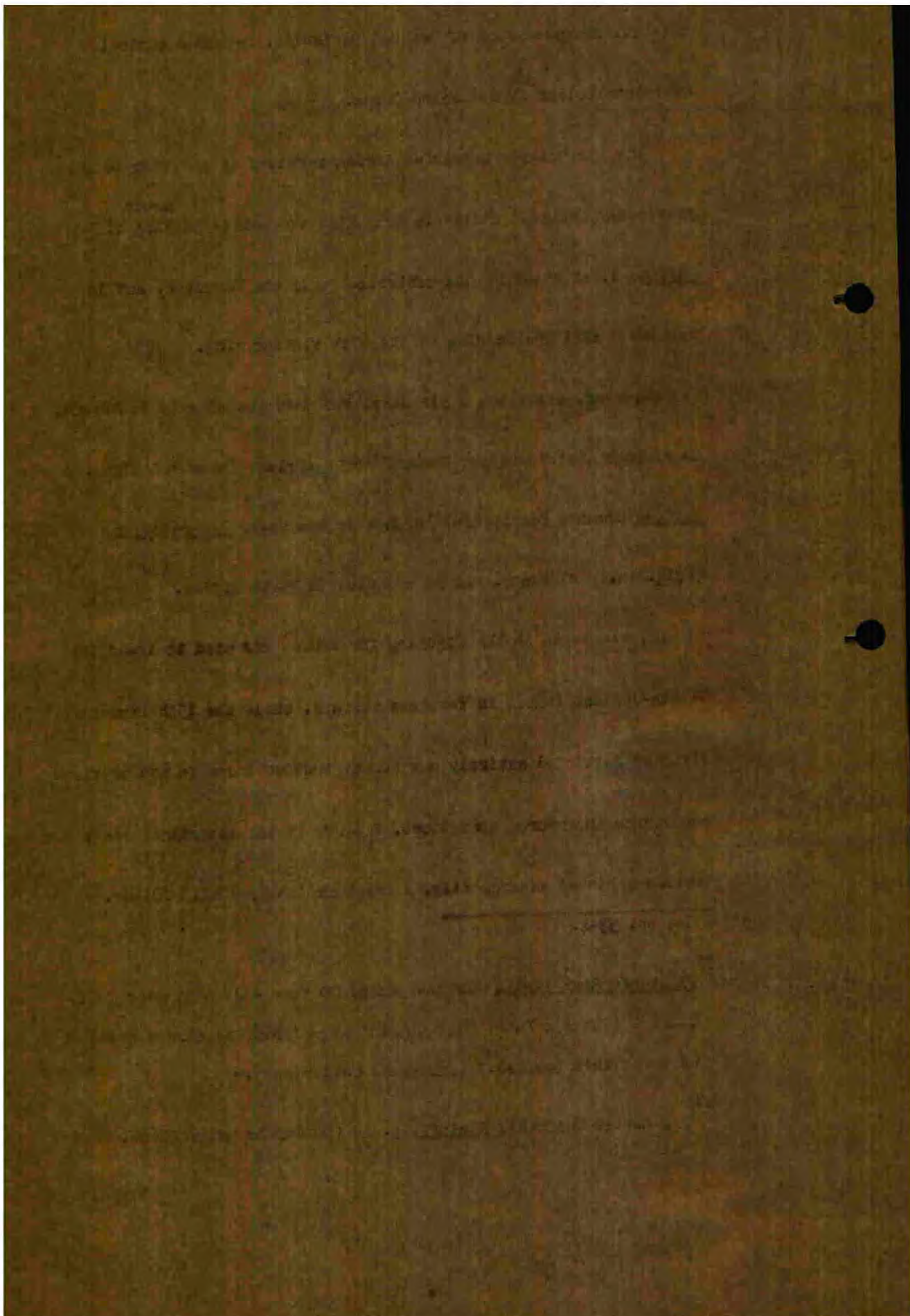
Moreover, after the X Air Corps had been transferred to Greece, an Airport Administrative Command North Africa, later redesignated Luftgau Command for Special Purpose Africa under Generalmajor (Brig.Gen.) Osterkamp, was established in North Africa. ¹⁰⁰

The slow-down in the fighting for Tobruk was used to train the German-Italian forces in Fortress warfare, while the 15th Panzer Division developed entirely new combat tactics based on its previous experience in armored operations. Because of the importance these tactics achieved subsequently, a brief explanation will follow.

* See pp. 53-4.

⁹⁹ Fliegerführer Afrika for the period 20 June - 19 September 1941. Chart 2 (The Air Force High Command organizational charts were used for this purpose.) (Karlsruhe Collection).

¹⁰⁰ Max Ritter von Fohl, Italuft, p. 10 (Karlsruhe Collection).



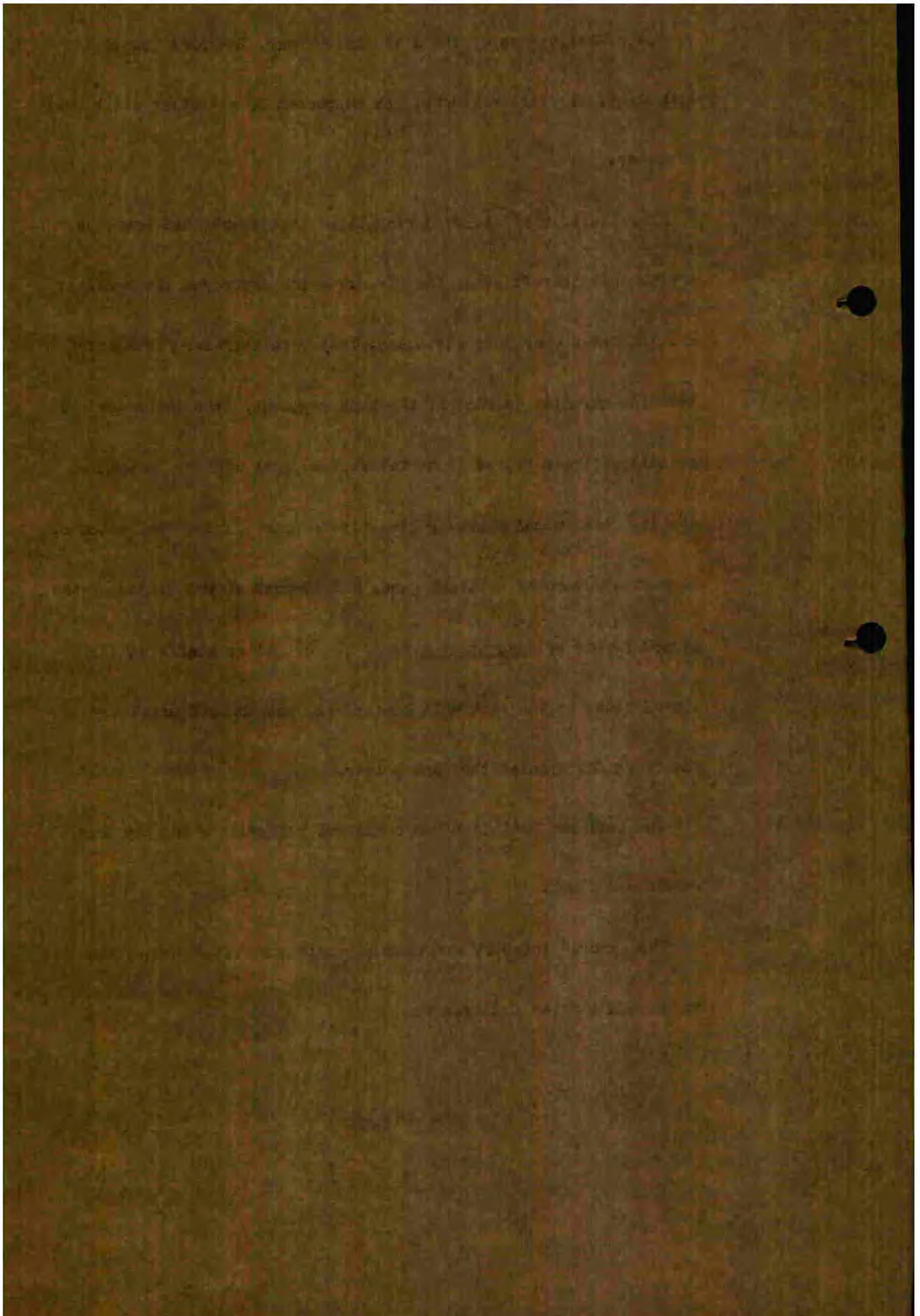
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The desert terrain permitted often to ~~unmask~~ fan out the marching formations instead of the customary movements in march columns. These "fan formations" made it possible to immediately bring the full combat effectiveness of the division to bear. The most powerful component, the tank regiment, was supported by all other divisional elements.

Particularly effective during these engagements had been the medium antiaircraft guns, the 88-mmgs which destroyed the heaviest British tanks over long distances. They were therefore integrated into the marching columns of the tank regiment. Even the motorized artillery pieces proved to be valuable support weapons in armored combat. Their mission was to give fire support during tank attacks, to neutralize enemy antitank guns, and to protect the flanks of the attack forces by concentrated fire. The artillery staffs usually stayed close to the tank unit commanders; the armored artillery observers accompanied the tank points.

The antitank battalion was committed primarily along the most threatened flank.

The armored infantry and armored engineers formed one or two combat teams which followed the

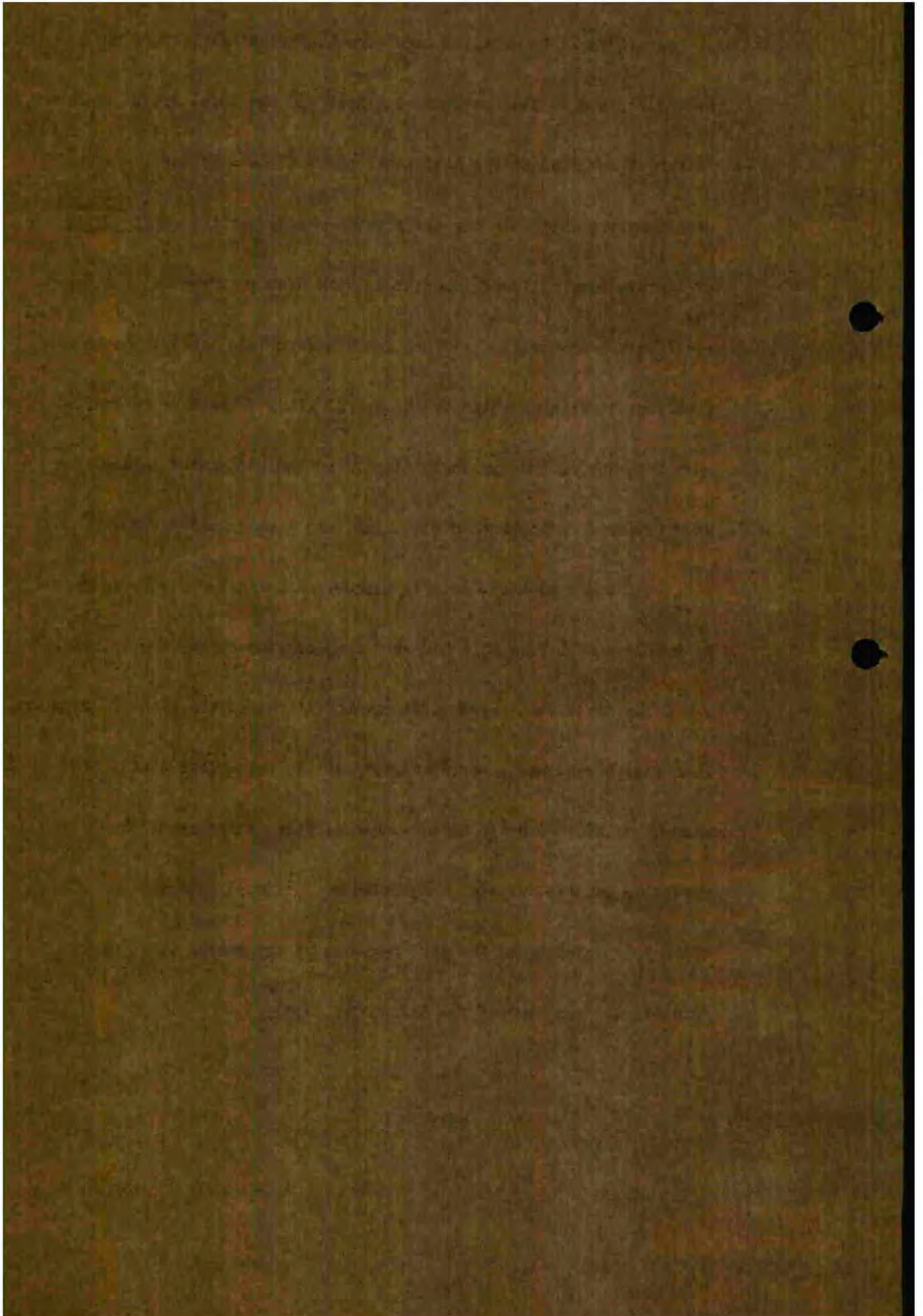


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armor as closely as possible.

The most difficult problem involved in these new tactics was ^{control} the ~~conduct~~ of operations. The monotonous terrain of the desert and the particularly bad Italian maps were the principal factors why useful reports on the position of a unit and the local situation were so rarely received at the divisional command post. It was therefore necessary that not only the division commander but the entire staff ^{operations} ~~entire staff~~ ^{behind} of the division followed immediately the tank regiment so that they could survey the battlefield and issue orders immediately. The command functions were facilitated by the use of ultra short wave and medium wave frequencies and ^{of} extremely simplified radio computer tables. The ^{inter-tank} ~~enemy~~ ~~armored~~ radio ~~kniffler~~ communications were simultaneously monitored and evaluated. In this manner, enemy measures were countered by the Germans before they had even been carried out by the British.

The divisional supply officer, who maintained the flow off supplies from rear areas, had a representative in the operations staff, with whom he maintained radio contact. Undesirable delays caused by refueling and replenishing ammunition were reduced by moving up the supply echelons of the tank regiment at the proper time and by bringing up even some of the divisional supply



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column elements.

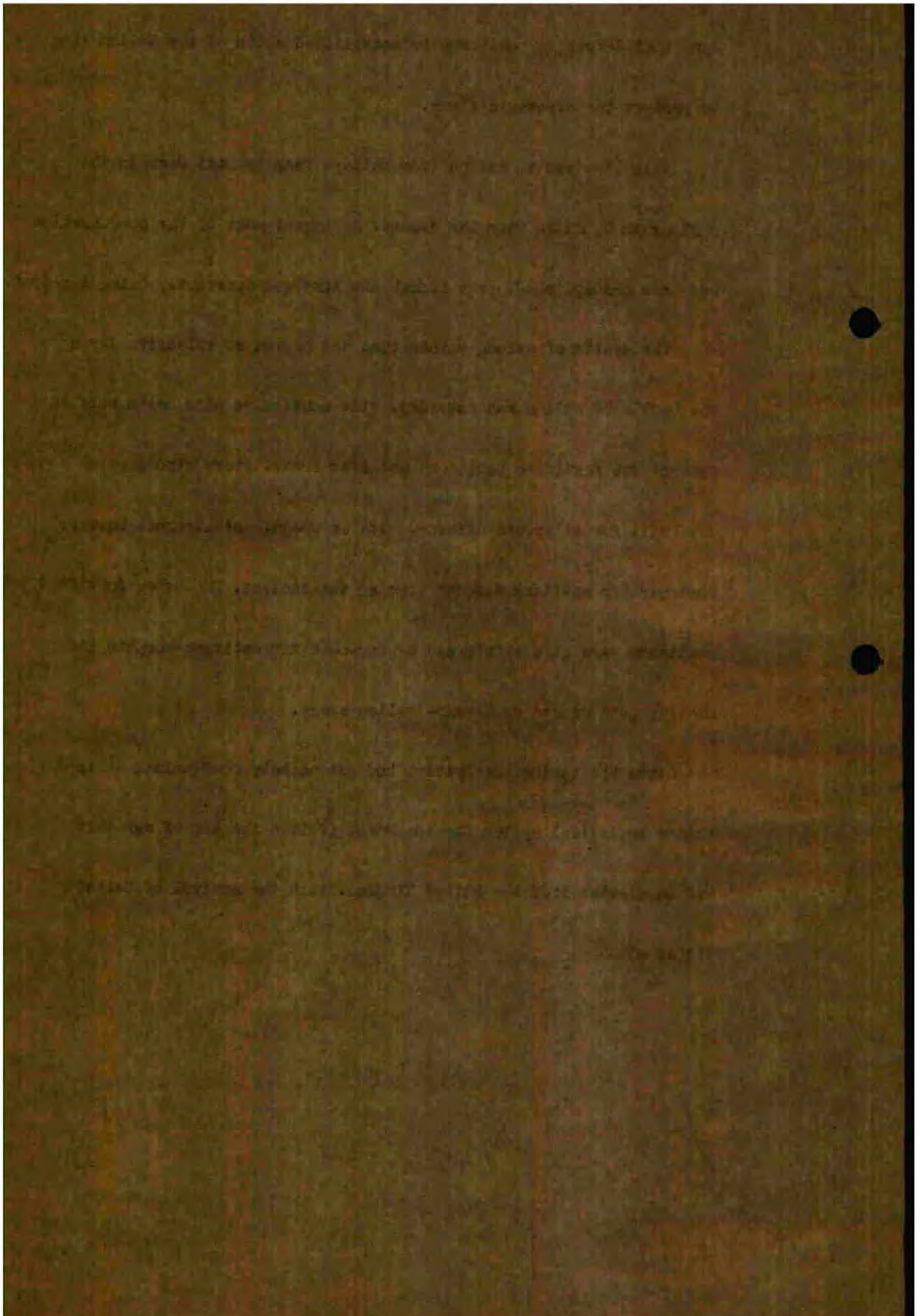
* * *

It was Rommel's intention to seize Tobruk as early as September. To hamper the expected major British attack, he ordered at the end of June that defensive positions be established south of the Sollum line to protect the strategic flank.

This line was to extend from Halfaya Pass to Sidi Omar in the over west ~~up to~~ 25 miles into the desert. By August most of the construction had been accomplished, even though the line was constantly being improved.

The system of strong points that had proved so effective during the battle of Sollum was extended. Wide continuous mine belts were to protect the fortified positions and rear areas. Every strong point was built for all-round defense, with an 88-mm. antiaircraft battery employed for antitank defense forming the nucleus. The other fortified positions were also reinforced by dug-outs for antitank weapons and machine guns manned by German-Italian crews.

Since the spring the British had extensively reorganized their entire logistical system for the North African theater of war that was so distant from the United Kingdom. With the arrival of United States aid



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(Lend-Lease Act of 11 March 1941) the buildup of supplies became more and more extensive.

In June 1941 a total of 11 U.S. ships arrived at Suez, by July there were as many as 32, and after that the monthly average was 16 ships until the end of 1941.

By the end of July nearly 10,000 trucks were unloaded as well as 84 Stewart tanks, 164 fighters, 10 bombing aircraft, 24 three-inch antiaircraft guns, and a great quantity of maintenance machines and equipment, road and harbor construction equipment, and supplies to satisfy all kinds of requirements. An airlift across the Atlantic linking Brazil and Africa was established, and 20 transport planes were sent to Takoradi. The first American bombing squadrons arrived in Egypt by October, having followed the new transatlantic route. 101

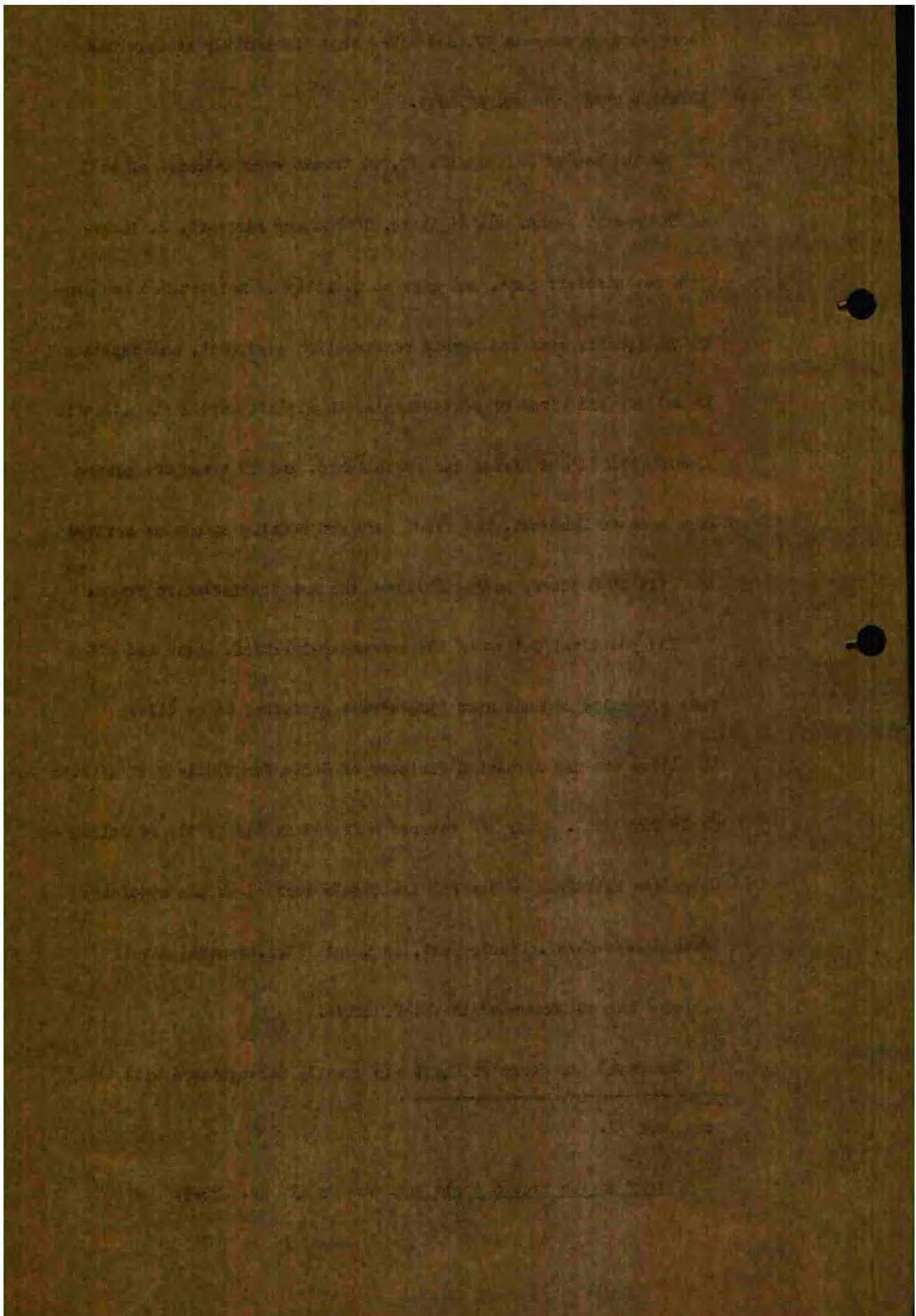
The political duties of the commander-in-chief, which had often made excessive demands upon him, were transferred to Mr Oliver Lyttleton who was appointed Minister of State for Middle East Affairs on 28 June 1941. After the reverse suffered in the battle of Sollum -- Operation BATTLEAXE -- General Sir Claude Auchinleck was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, on 5 July 1941. General Wavell replaced him as Commander-in-Chief, India.

The Royal Air Force in Egypt was greatly strengthened with the

See page 71.

101

History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 232-3.



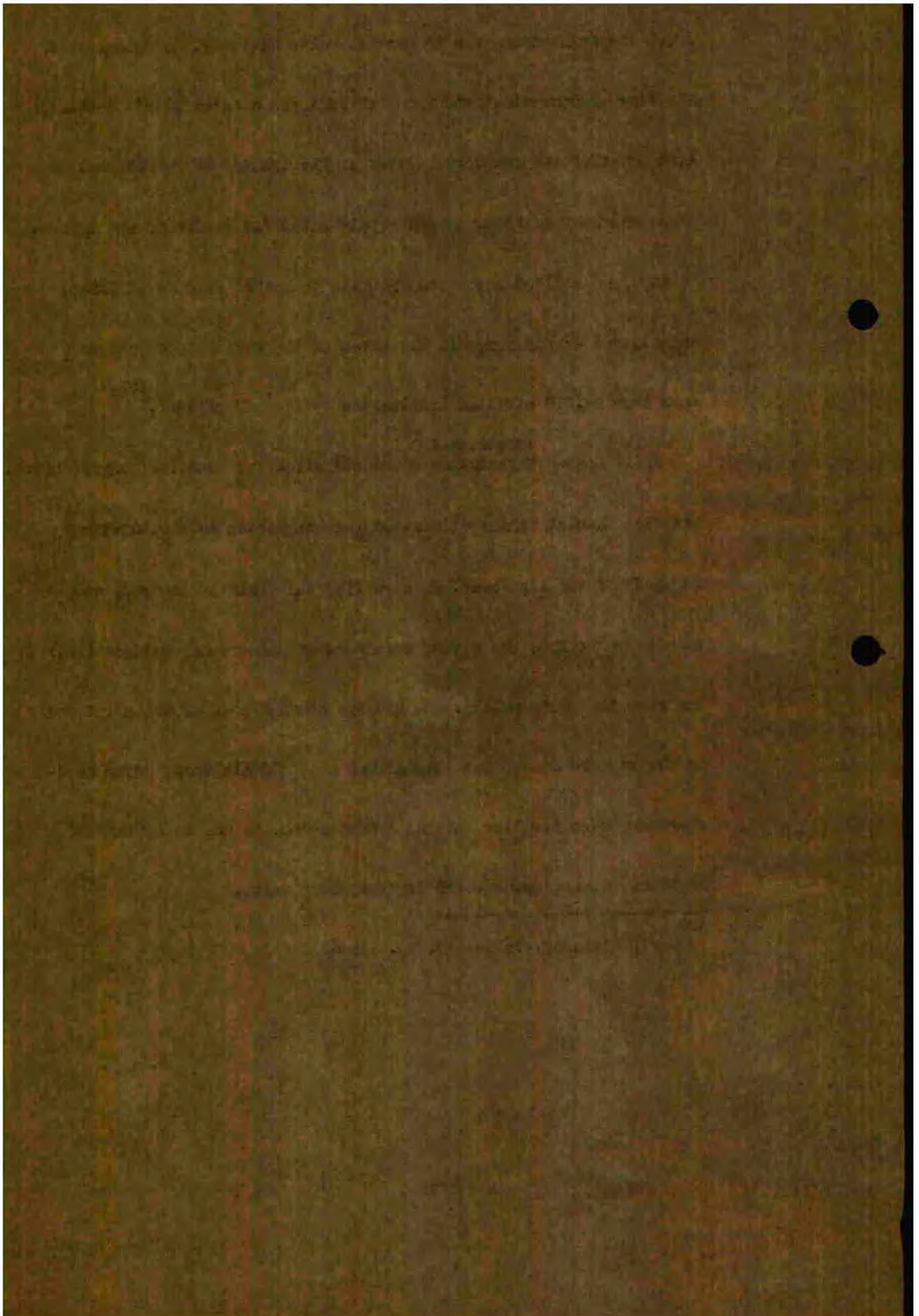
- 147 -

arrival of Air Vice Marshal G.G. Dawson in the North African theater. He had been with the Ministry of Aircraft Production, and his former chief, Lord Beaverbrook, had sent him to Egypt. Dawson was beyond doubt the outstanding man in Beaverbrook's ministry. He reorganized the line of communications from Takoradi and created within a short time an effective recovery service in the theater of operations. He organized many maintenance and repair shops for airframes and engines. He employed skilled engineers from the technical schools in Cairo, established supply dumps in the caves of the royal tombs, and used more than 23,000 civilian auxiliaries by the end of 1941.

While Dawson ^{established} ~~organized~~ a sound and effective technical organization, Air Vice Marshal Tedder eliminated the weaknesses in the ^{intermediate} ~~theater~~ commands of the Air Force. He clarified the chain of command, and took steps to free the flying squadrons of unnecessary ballast (Tr.: ?) and make them more mobile. The advance command post of the Air Force in the western desert was established at the 204th Group ~~HEAD~~ headquarters under Air Vice Marshal A. Cunningham. He was in command of fighter, reconnaissance, and light bombing units.

102

Denis Richards, Volume II, pp. 164-6.

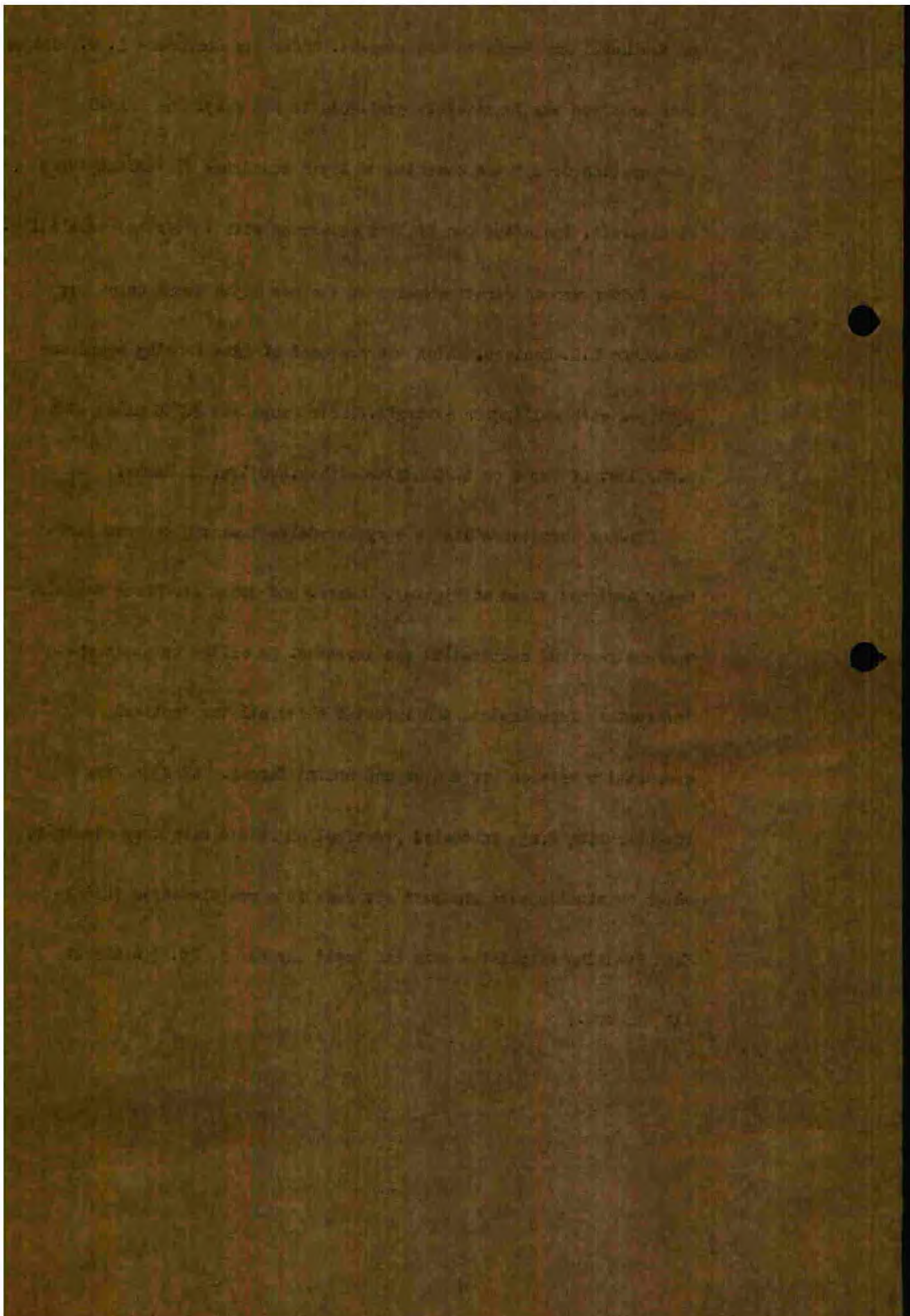


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The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, had asked for direct cooperation between naval and air forces. This request was satisfied by attaching the 201st Group of the Royal Air Force to his command. Under Air Commodore L. H. Slatter, this squadron was immediately available to the Navy. The "Naval Co-operation Group" was composed of seven squadrons of various types of aircraft, including two fighter squadrons with long-range capability.

Tedder was in direct command of the new 205th Group under Air Commodore L.L. Macleod, which was composed of five bombing squadrons equipped with Wellington aircraft. (Their range was 2,250 miles with 1,000 lbs. of bombs or 1,200 miles with 4,400 lbs. of bombs.)

Tedder instituted also a very intensive training program for newly assigned crews at fighter, bomber, and other Air Force schools, where air-ground cooperation was stressed. He called on experienced instructors from England and improved above all the tactical cooperation between air and ground combat forces. The 253d Wing (Co-operation Wing) conducted practical exercises with Army elements, which eventually were summarized set down in a new directive (Middle East Training Pamphlet - Army and Royal Air Force, No. 3 - Direct Air Support.)



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At the end of July 1941 Auchinleck and Tedder had a long conference with Prime Minister Churchill in London. During this meeting Churchill stated that he felt British air superiority had been wasted during the battle of Sillun. On 5 September Churchill personally issued directives for the employment of air forces during the impending offensive. These instructions stipulated that air supremacy over the battlefield had to be achieved even at the expense of protecting the ground forces. By defeating the enemy air forces, the Royal Air Force would contribute directly to the over-all success.

103

During the seven months from January to July 1941 the daily average of troops transported to the Middle East exceeded 1,000 men. These troops originated from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, India, and South Africa.

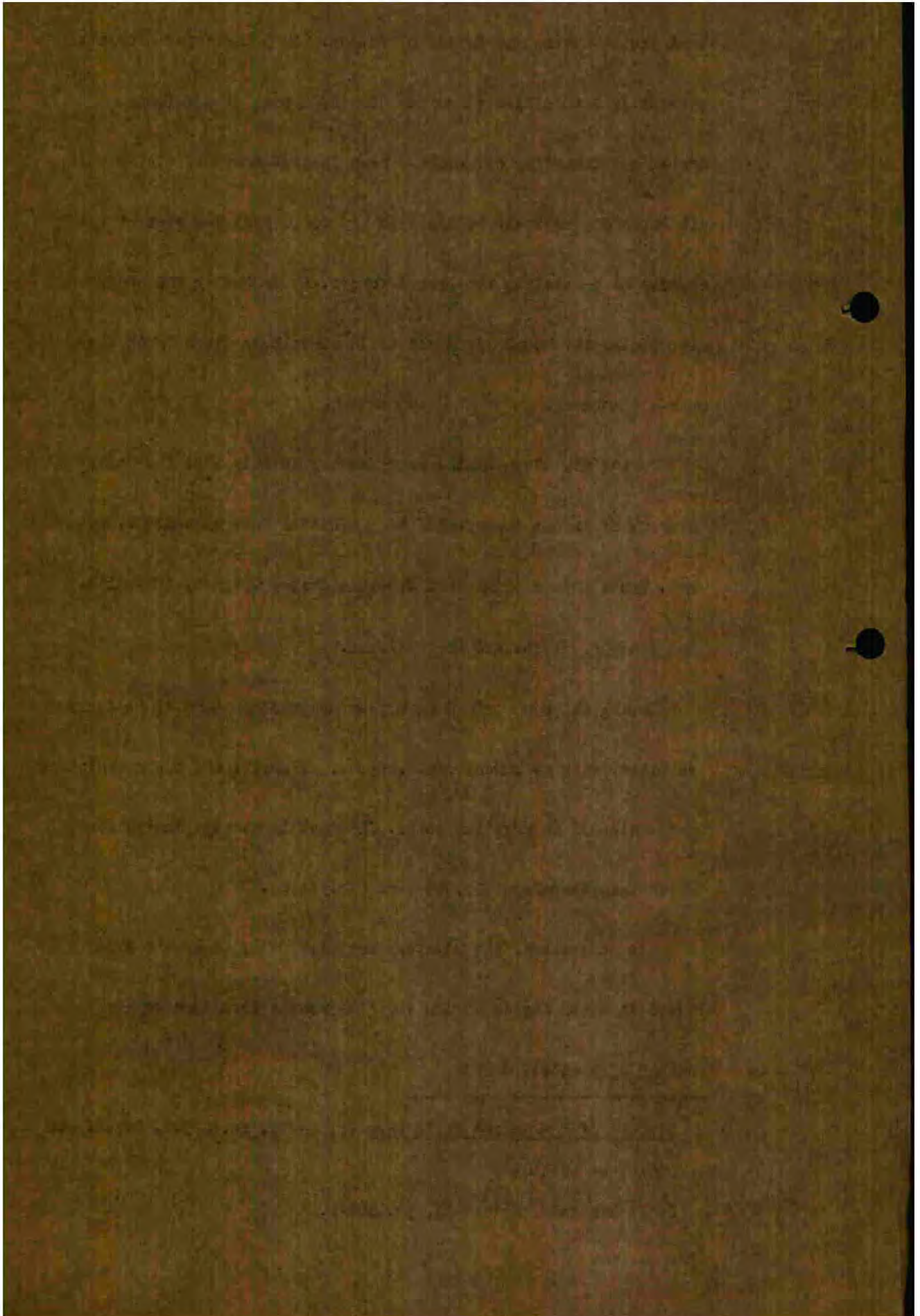
During the same period more than one million tons of military supplies, such as ammunition, weapons, aircraft, and motor vehicles, were unloaded in Egyptian ports. The monthly average during five months was therefore 150,000 tons (Tr.: sic).

In comparison, the military supplies unloaded by the Axis Powers in North Africa during the five months from June to October 1941 totalled only

103

History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 277-8, 287-8, and 294-5, as well as
Denis Richards, Volume II, pp. 160-2.

*See p. 86.



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413,986 tons of military supplies and POL, with a monthly average of
 104
 52,677 tons.

These quantities were barely sufficient for satisfying the needs of the German-Italian troops because the supply dumps and the transport columns along the Via Balbia were exposed to frequent air attacks.

By the beginning of October the infantry elements of the Special Purpose Division Africa had all been flown in without heavy weapons, or transport and supply vehicles which were to be brought in by ship. The military capabilities of these troops were meanwhile limited.

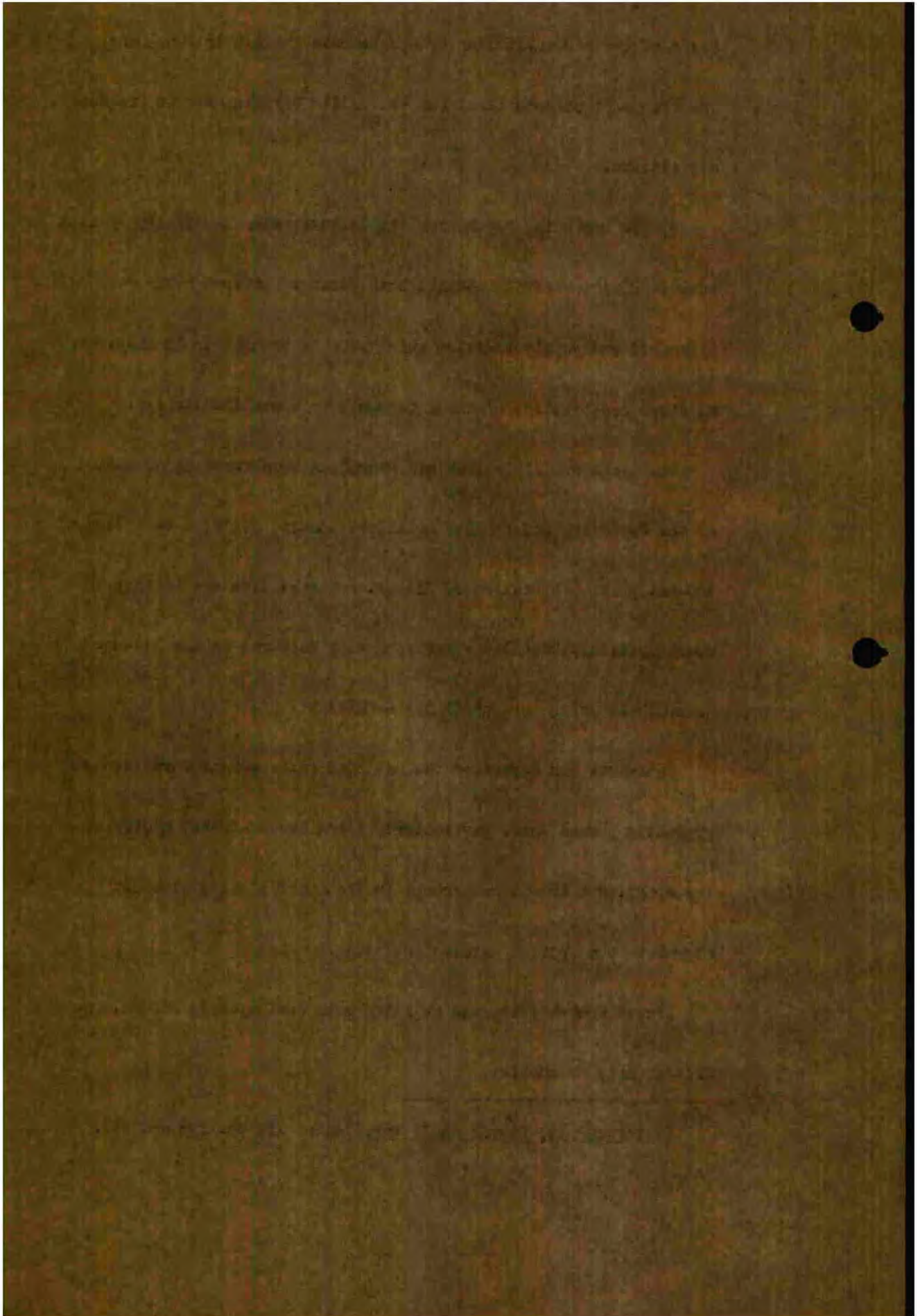
The siege artillery that had meanwhile been moved up consisted of the following units: 104th Artillery Command Staff; 1 battalion of 100-mm. guns; 1 battalion of 210-mm. mortars, less one battery; 2 coast artillery battalions equipped with captured French 150-mm. guns. These units were still not sufficient.

In August and September the besieged fortress garrison was gradually pushed back, particularly along the southeast sector of the front. But the German troops in the other sectors also got closer to the British advance positions.

Around Tobruk there was relative calm during early autumn. The British made no sorties.

104

History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 223 and 251.



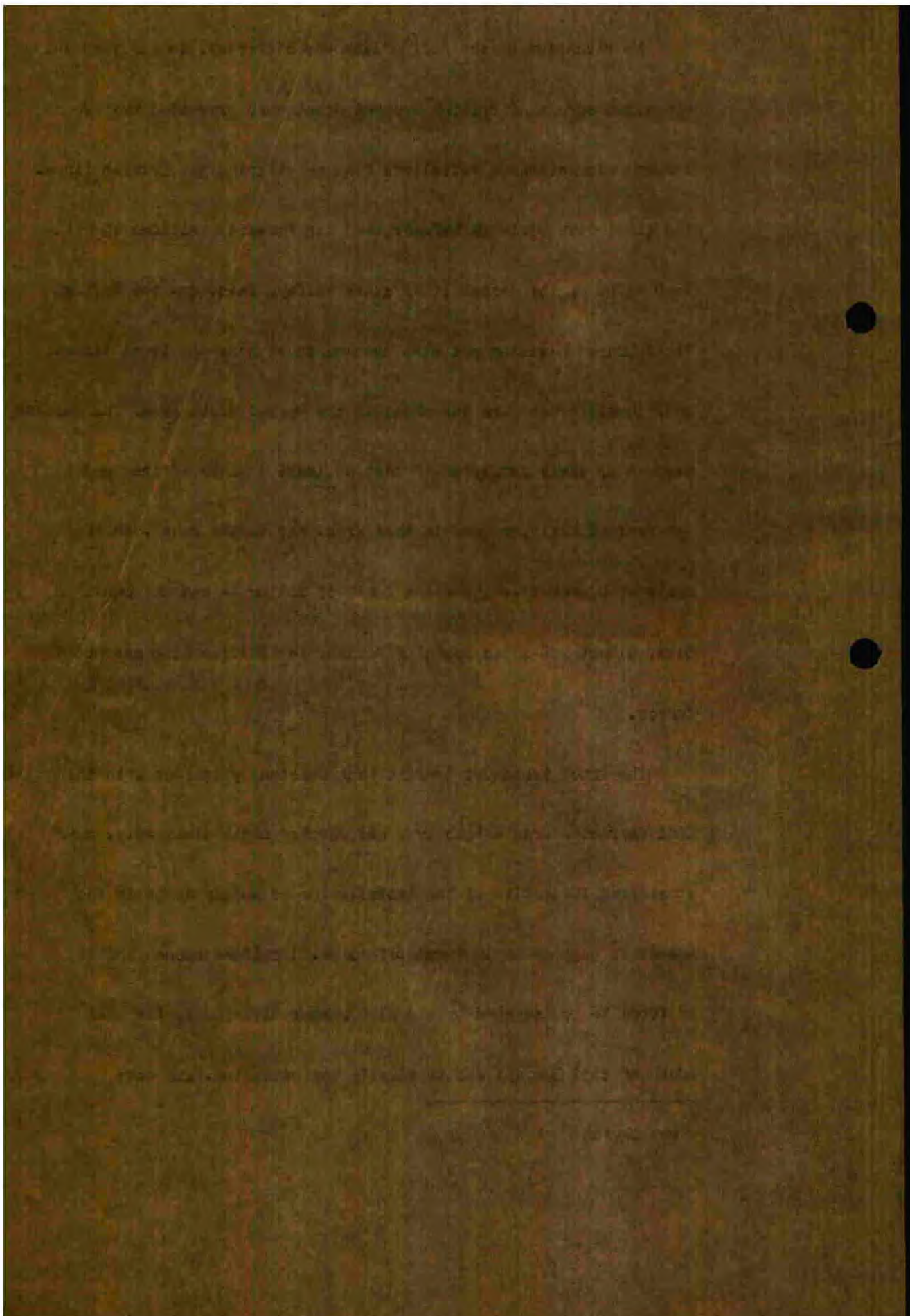
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The 9th Australian Division had been replaced by the 70th British Division. The garrison of the fortress had been reinforced by about 70 medium tanks and Polish troop units.

The situation at the Sollum line was different. As early as July the dense screen of British armored scout cars prevented the two German reconnaissance battalions from penetrating the British lines. The 4th Indian Division had advanced its forward positions to within 6 miles of the German lines along Halfaya Pass, and the British 7th Armoured Division was also assumed to be near the front lines. Additional forces were assembled in the Marsa Matruh area. The Germans assumed as early as September that at least 1 South African and 1 New Zealand division were in that area. Far to the south, in the oasis of Djarabub -- 150 miles south of Sollum -- and the oasis of Siwa, almost 200 miles south of Sollum, the British also assembled forces.

The truck transport traffic that constantly increased in the Sidi Barrani - ^{S/}Marsa Matruh area and farther south since July, was considered indicative of the installation of supply dumps in the desert to support an imminent offensive. A reconnaissance thrust in force to be launched by the 21st Panzer Division in the area south of Sidi Barrani was to clarify the situation. (The code

* See sketch

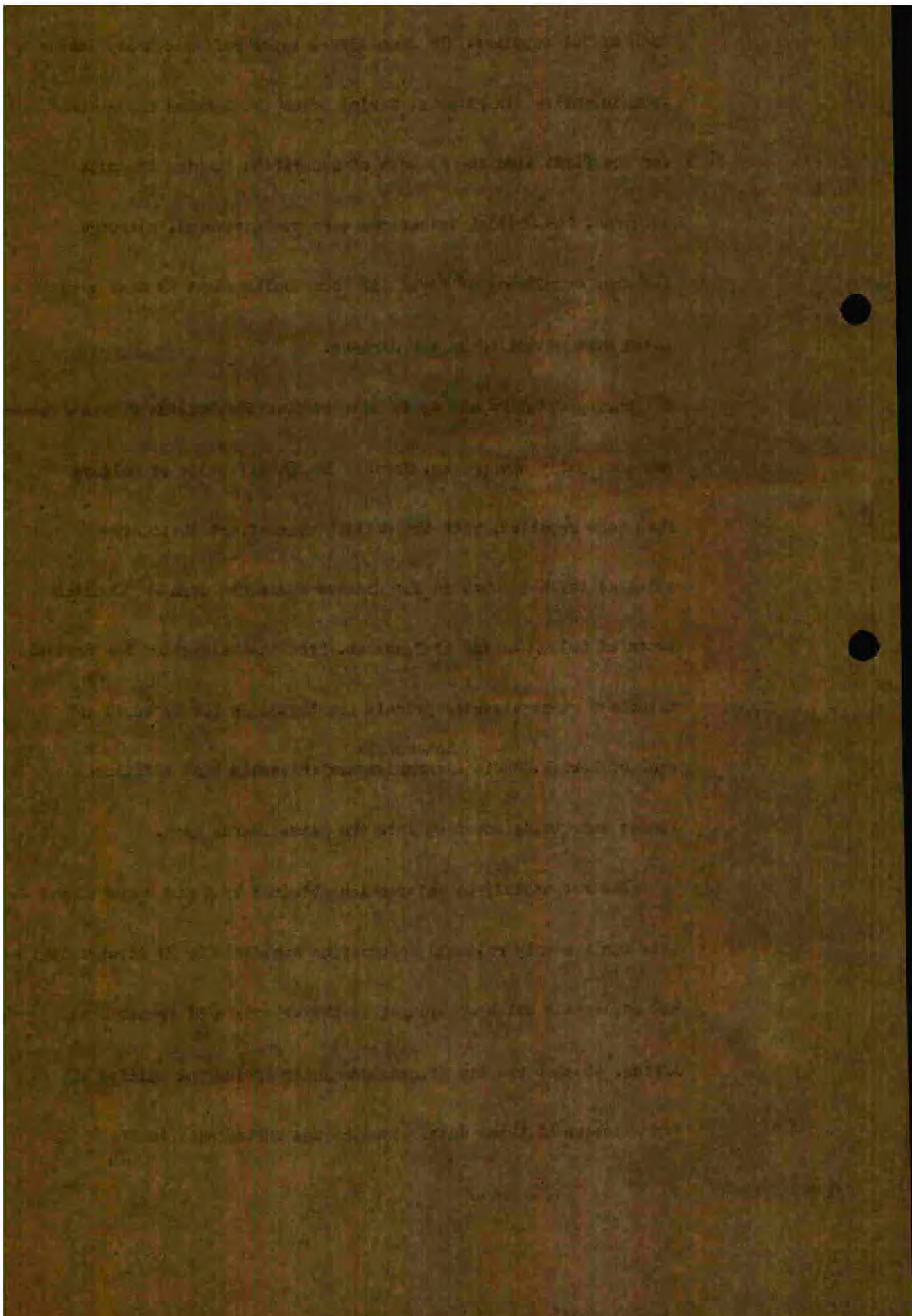


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designation for the operation was Midsummernight's Dream (Sommer-nachtraum). The operation started during the night of 13-14 September and was a failure because ~~IMI~~ of poor leadership and lack of POL supplies. The immobilized tanks suffered heavy losses from intensive air attacks, during which the Germans experienced for the first time the effects of saturation bombing in quick sequence. The British intentions were not uncovered, although the mass commitment of Royal Air Force units ought to have been given more attention by the Germans.

During October/ and up to mid-November the British reconnaissance was constantly stepped up. Thrusts in the direction of Halfaya Pass were repelled, with the British main effort obviously situated farther south in the Ridotta Maddalena area -- 50 miles south of Sollum -- and at Bjarabub. From that direction the British motorized reconnaissance patrols penetrated as far as south and intercepts west of Tobruk. Radio ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ indicated that additional forces were being moved up into the Marsa Matruh area.

The reconnaissance information obtained by X Air Corps planes -- this was the only reliable information available by 27 October 1941 -- had apparently not been brought to the attention of Panzer Group Africa. Whether the Air Brigade Commander Africa had omitted the transmission of these data, since he was subordinate to



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X Air Corps, cannot be established.

On the other hand, it is possible to disprove the assertion that the construction of the new rail line from Marsa Matruh westward to Sidi Barrani had not been observed from the air.¹⁰⁵

On 19 September it was reported for the first time that a train consisting of 58 cars was moving westward near Sidi Barrani.¹⁰⁶ This report obviously confused Marsa Matruh with Sidi Barrani. The fact that the rail line was under construction from Marsa Matruh to Sidi Barrani was confirmed by the report of 11 October.¹⁰⁷ On 19 October air reconnaissance reported that the new tracks leading to Sidi Barrani had been completed to a distance 25 miles west of Marsa Matruh.¹⁰⁸

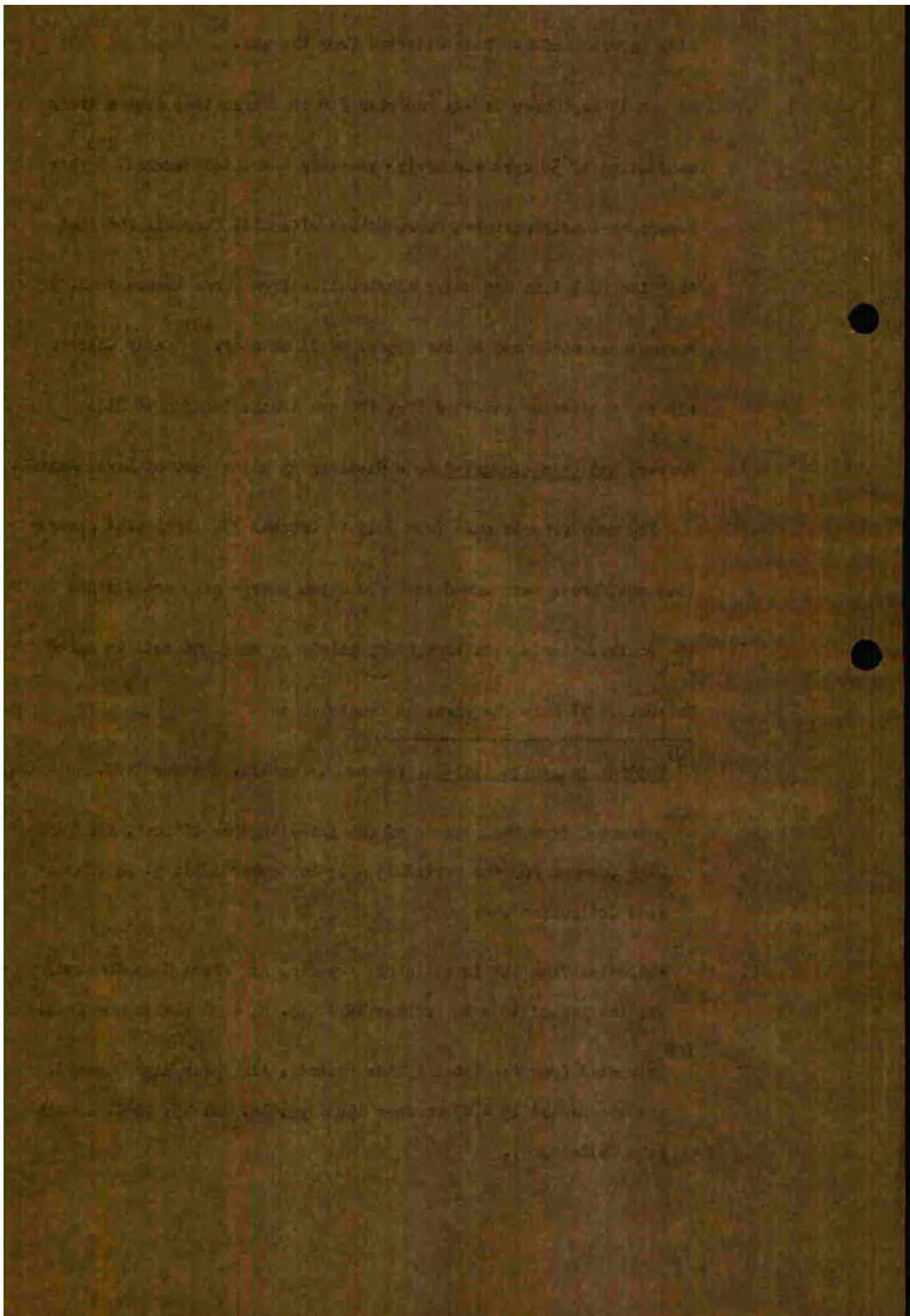
The many reports made from July to October 1941 indicated clearly that new forces were moved into the Marsa Matruh area and farther to the south. Materiel was brought up mainly by ship and rail to Marsa Matruh. On 27 July the first 60 trucks or so

¹⁰⁵ Feldzug in Afrika 1941-43, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 3, pp. 58 & 82.

¹⁰⁶ Extracted from the reports of the intelligence officer, Air Force High Command for the period 15 - 25 September 1941, p. 24 (Karlsruhe Collection).

¹⁰⁷ Extracted from the intelligence reports, Air Force High Command, for the period 10 - 18 October 1941, pp. 24 & 36 (Karlsruhe Coll.)

¹⁰⁸ Extracted from the intelligence reports, Air Force High Command, for the period 19 - 27 October 1941, pp. 14, 12, 15, 20-1. (Karlsruhe Collection).



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were sighted along the desert tracks between Djarabub and Gabr-Saleh, some 30 miles west of Sidi Qmar. Another report made on 30 July mentioned 240 trucks sighted in the Gabr-Saleh - Bir Khausa -

109

Bir Quatrani area. On 7 October about 600 trucks, grouped in several columns, were counted in the Marsa Matruh - Bir Mella -

110

Sidi Qmar area. On 14 October air reconnaissance reported the construction of a refueling installation for barreled POL near

Bir-el-Atasch. On 19 October approximately 600 trucks were identified in various groups as well as 7 tanks, all of them located in the Bir-Kereys - Bir Fued - Siwa - Djarabub - Gasr-el-Abid (10 miles south of Sidi Qmar) area.

The use of the railroad connecting El Alamein with Marsa Matruh was also on the increase. On 20 October 991 rail cars were counted, with only 2 trains pulling 92 freight cars moving eastward (Photo-interpretation).

The airfields between the Nile and the west Egyptian border were under constantly surveillance, showing a high rate of occupation, even though the turnover was great. Photointerpretation of 8 October indicated 198 fighter and 79 bombing aircraft. on 22 October the figures were 137 single-engine and 100 twin-engine planes.

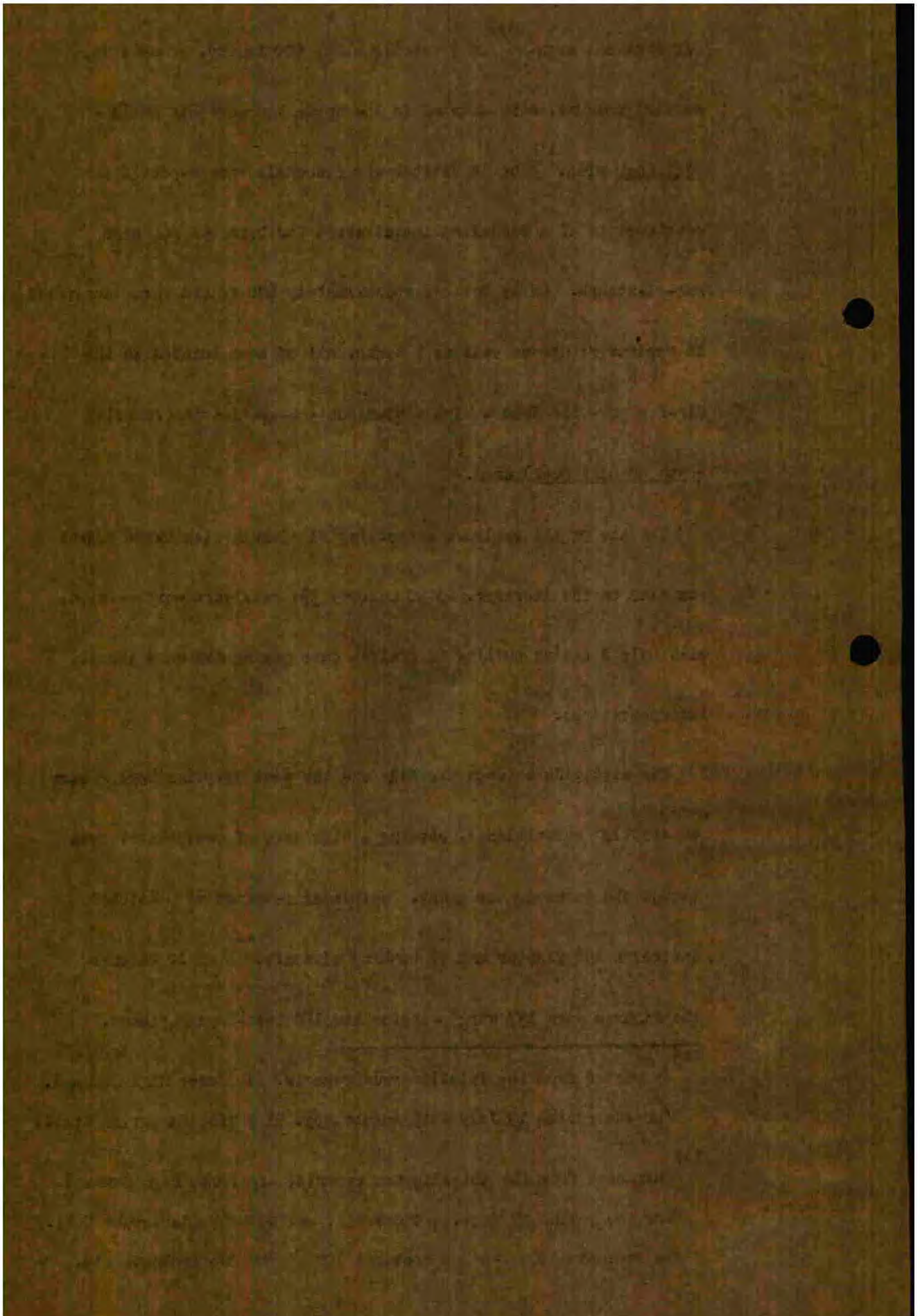
109

Extracted from the intelligence reports, Air Force High Command, for the period 13 July - 19 August, pp. 91 & 106 (Karlruhe Coll.)

110

Extracted from the intelligence reports, Air Force High Command, for the period 27 Sept. - 9 Oct. 41, pp. 65 & 68 (Karlruhe Coll.)

* See Footnote 107; ** See Footnote 108; *** See Footnote 110.



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The above-mentioned reports indicate that the other preparations for an attack in November had also been observed by the German air reconnaissance, even though this assertion cannot be proved. But apparently the available important reports had not been transmitted to Rommel's Panzer Group by 27 October, since the reports (Tr: Army) mention a strategic surprise.

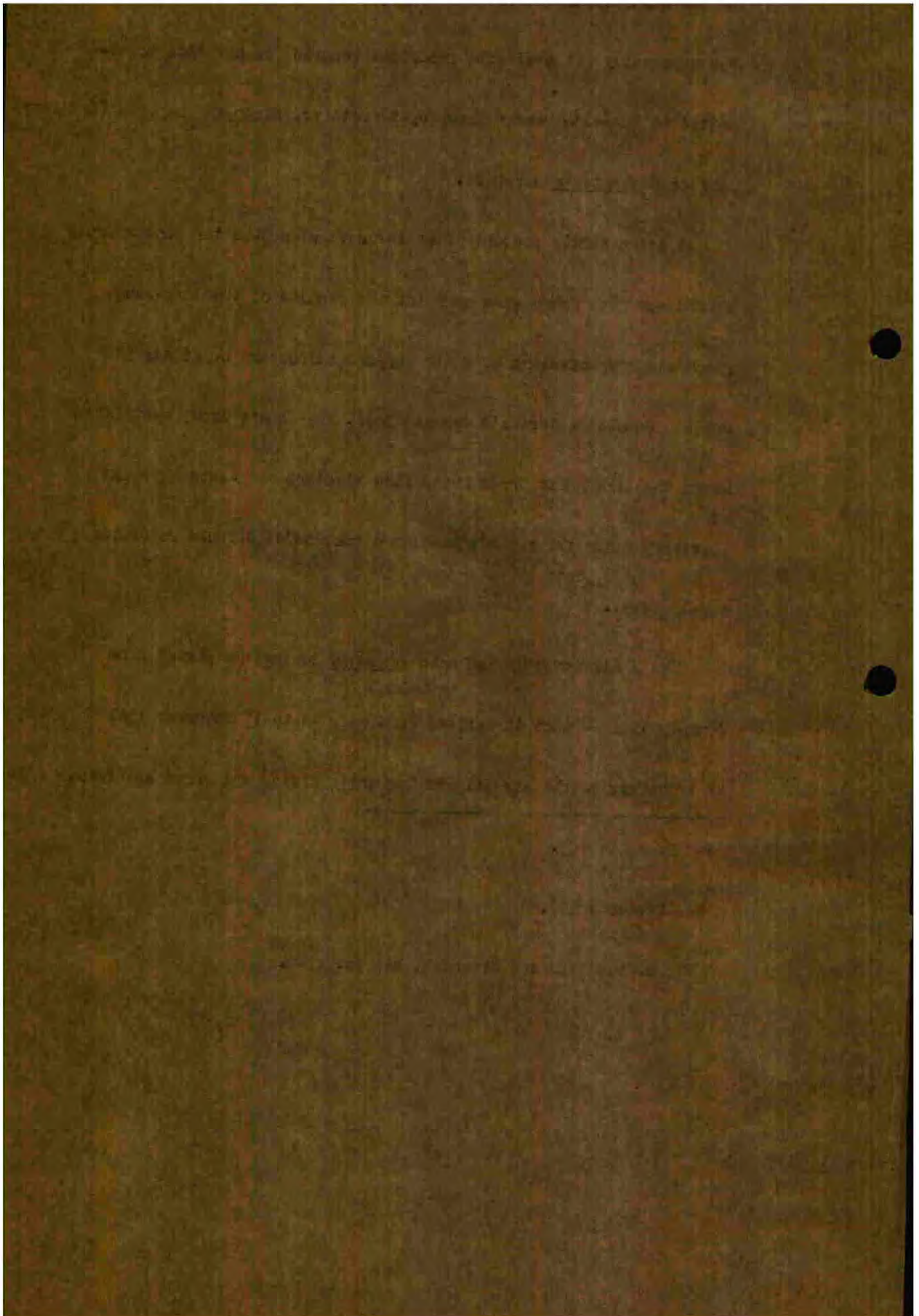
It seems hardly possible that for several months the Panzer Group should not have asked even once for the results of the long-range reconnaissance missions at X Air Corps headquarters or at Air Brigade Commander Africa's command post. The Panzer Group must have known that the X Air Corps units flew missions deep into Egyptian territory since the reports mentioned successful attacks on British supply bases.

The X Air Corps had been weakened during the period from January 1941 -- when it arrived in Sicily -- to 15 November 1941 by transfers to the Air Brigade Commander Africa and other agencies.

*See Footnote 105.

See Footnote 127.

For composition and strength, see pp. 41-2.



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The corps had lost 2 bomber groups -- the 3d of Luftgau 1 and the 3d of the 30th Bomber Wing -- 2 dive bomber groups -- the 1st of the 1st Dive Bomber Wing and the 2d of the 2d -- 1 fighter group (1st Group of 27th Fighter Wing), and 1 twin-engine fighter squadron (7th Squadron of 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing). To replace these losses the corps had received only the command echelon and 3d Group of the 27th Fighter Wing. ¹¹¹ The corps' mission, however, had been enlarged during the summer. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

At times X Air Corps units covered the waterways south of Beirut to reduce the pressure on the French troops in Syria; during these operations the Royal Navy suffered losses. ¹¹² Moreover, some ships were attacked outside the port of Famagusta as well as airports on Cyprus proper. The oil refinery in Haifa was bombed several times and hits were scored.

Continuous air attacks were made on the Suez Canal zone from Port Said all the way to the Red Sea, since almost all the supplies for the forces in Egypt passed through this shipping channel.

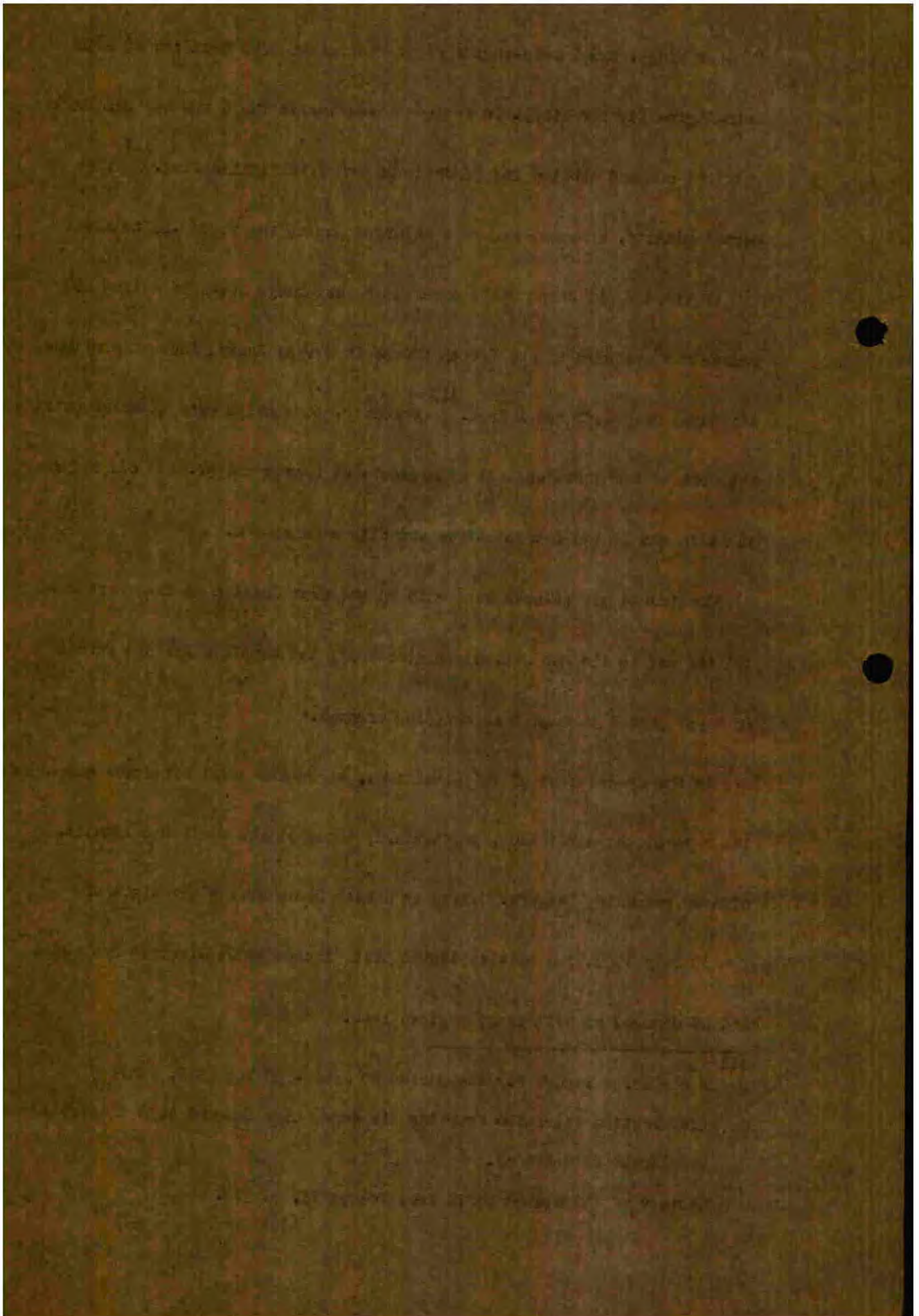
In the desert west of the Canal zone, where the Royal Air Force assembled its forces, the airfields, particularly those at Abu Sueir and Ismaila, offered rewarding targets. During ^{German} an attack flown during the night of 9 - 10 July 1941, the British listed their losses as 26 aircraft destroyed and 49 damaged as well as 45 engines lost.

¹¹¹

X Air Corps report for the period 20 June - 30 Nov 1941, Chart 5
(Information extracted from the Air Force High Command wall charts)
(Karlsruhe Collection).

¹¹²

History of the Second World War, Volume II, p. 210.



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The 102d Maintenance Unit had ceased to exist.

The flow of supplies from Alexandria to Marsa Matruh and above all to Tobruk was severely disrupted by bombing attacks, and almost daily missions were flown against the port and fortifications of Tobruk.

The X Air Corps had an additional heavy responsibility, namely the protection of friendly convoys and the fighter cover ~~that~~ ^{unloading operations at} had to be provided for the ~~discharge ports of~~ Tripoli and Benghazi.

The German Navy had pointed out on 19 August that naval tonnage losses were increasing steadily, having risen to 73 percent by

114

31 July.

The Armed Forces High Command therefore issued the following order: "The X Air Corps will immediately concentrate on protecting the convoys ^{moving} along the west coast to Benghazi and Lerna as well as the coastal traffic between these two ports. For particularly important convoys moving from Italy to Tripoli the X Air Corps will provide air protection that will overlap by temporary transfer of fighter units to Sicily and/or North Africa. The X Air Corps has full authority to make decisions, which in case of doubt will be referred to the Armed Forces High Command. A transfer of X Air Corps to neutralize Malta is out of question.

113

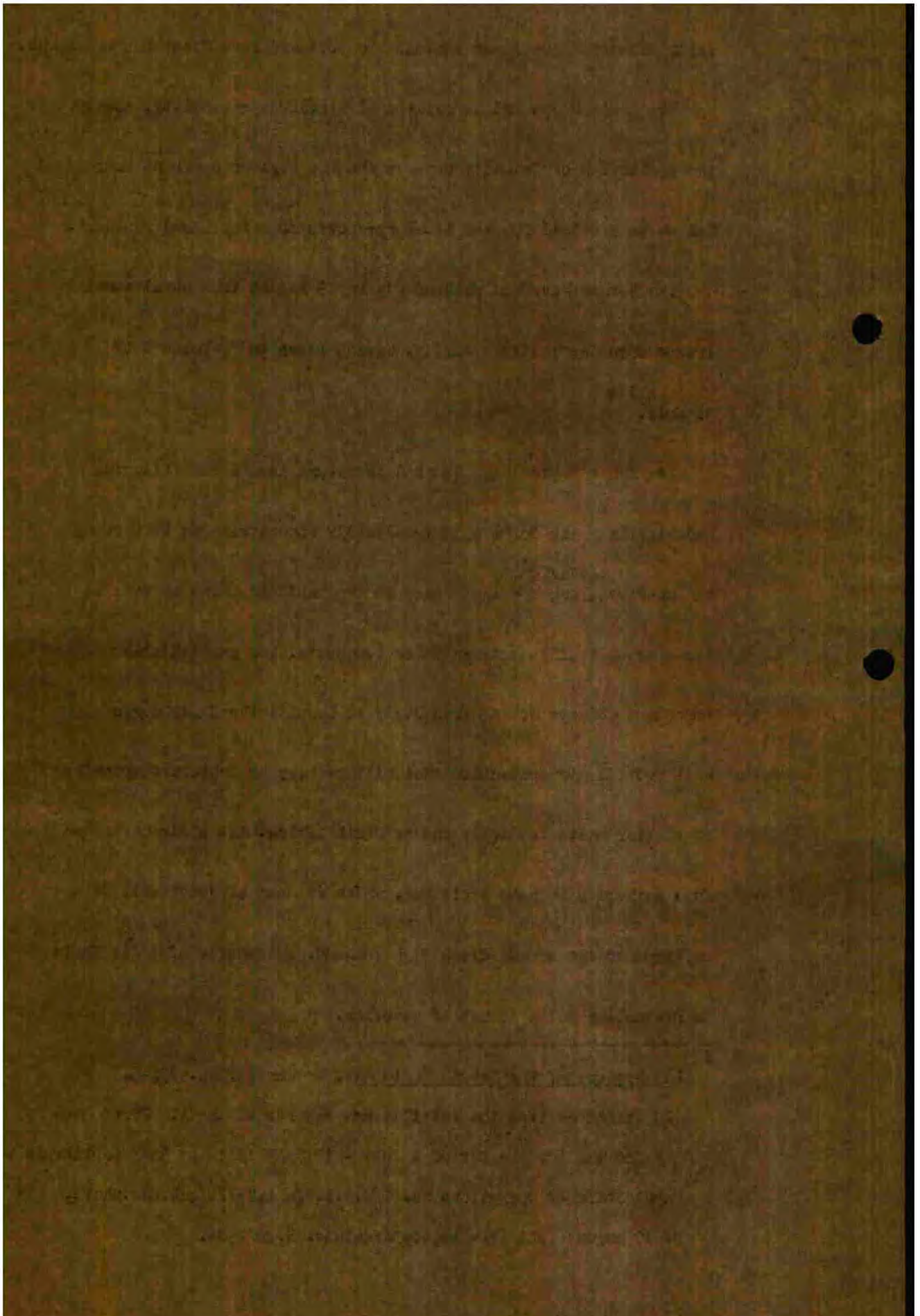
(1) History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 292-3.

(2) Extracted from the intelligence reports of the Air Force High

Command for the period 1 July - 12 July 1941, pp 52-3 (Karlruhe C.)

114

Naval Staff of Operations No. 1/S.K.L. Ia 1421/41 gch.Kdo.Chefs. of 19 August 1941 (Washington Archives, H.22/250).



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Contact immediately the Armed Forces Chief of Transportation to
 115
 organize convoy protection."

This order led to the commitment of fighter and bombing aircraft
 in defensive operations that did not correspond to their characteristics.
 Moreover, the attacks on enemy shipping and the Canal zone were
 hampered by this new requirement.

"The X Air Corps attempted too much, with the result that none
 of the missions, which might have been successful, was really carried
 out properly. The corps had the choice of either resuming the attacks
 on Malta or continuing its raids on Suez and the rear area installations
 and line of communication in Egypt nevertheless, the
 116
 corps caused much sorrow to the British military authorities."

But the X Air Corps could not be blamed for this ^{dissipation} ~~dispersion~~ of
 effort, since the Armed Forces High Command and the Air Force High
 Command were responsible for it.

"If the Axis Powers had set up a really effective unified
 command for the conduct of operations in the Mediterranean area,
 such a command would have assigned the Air Force a mission that
 would have given such strategic points as Malta and Suez their
 proper emphasis."

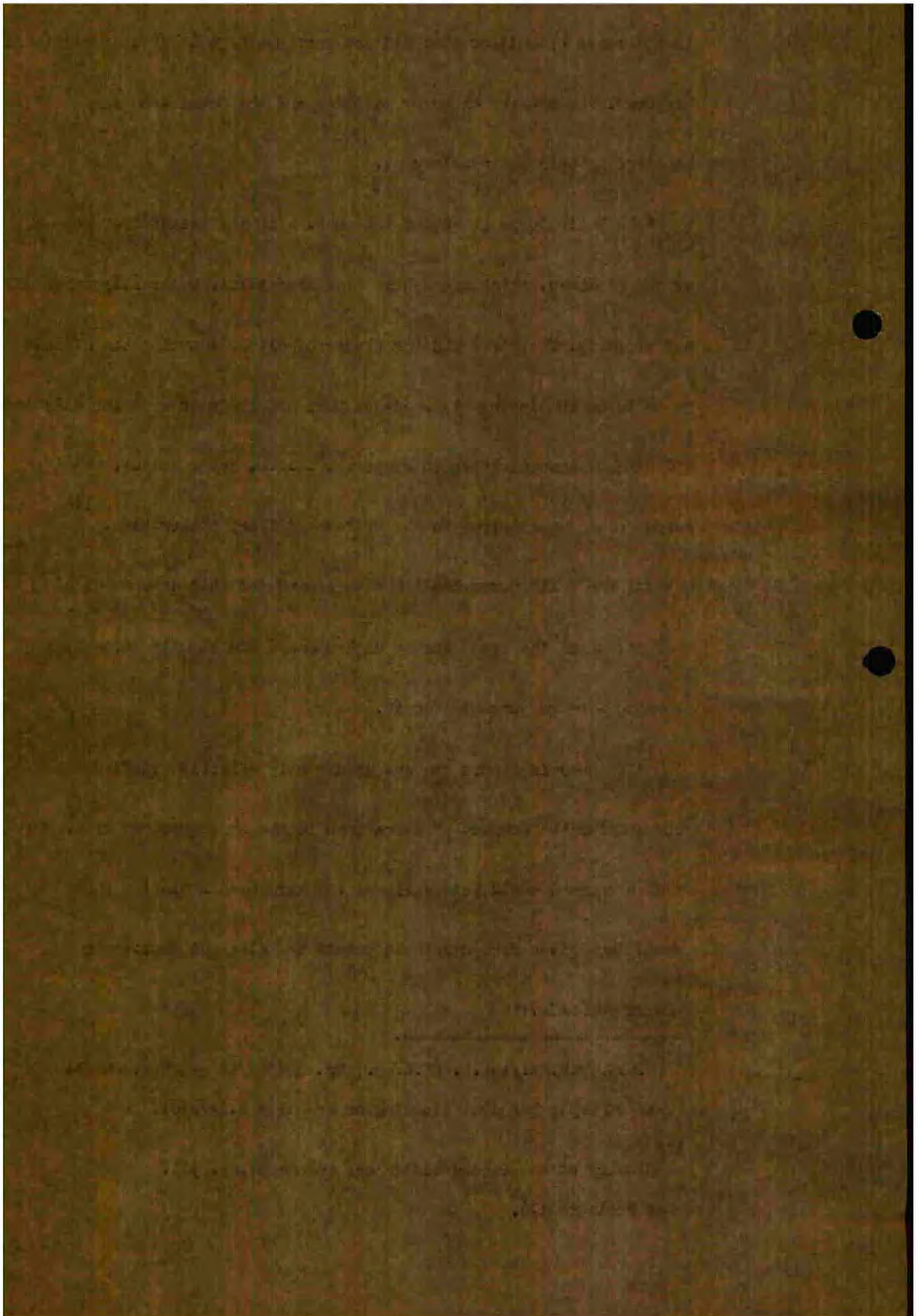
115

O.H.W./W.F.St./Abt.L. (I.L.op.) Nr. 441566/41 geb.Kdo. Chofs.
 of 20 September 1941 (Washington Archives H.22/250).

116

History of the Second World War, Volume II, p. 301.

* See Footnote 116.



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This British criticism touches upon the crucial question, the "parallel wars" (~~the~~ in contrast to ^{combined} ~~joint~~ strategic planning), conducted by Hitler and Mussolini.

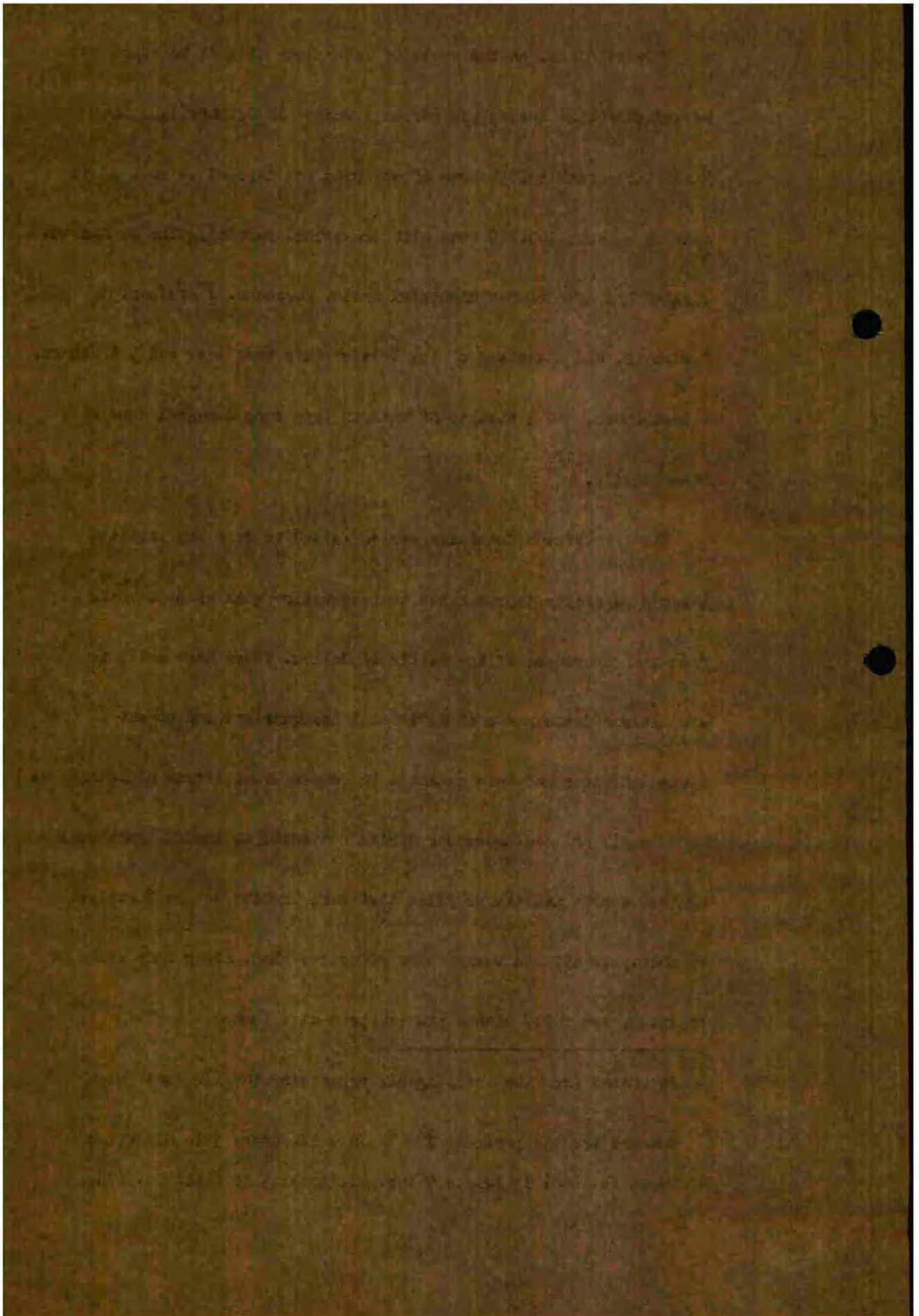
Nevertheless, on the basis of incomplete data it has been established that during the period 1 June - 10 October 1941 the X Air Corps sank 43,055 tons of shipping and damaged -- most of it heavily -- some 160,210 tons with occasional participation of Italian fighter and dive bomber ~~units~~ units. Moreover, 1 cruiser, 1 destroyer, and 1 gunboat of the British Navy were sunk and 5 cruisers, 6 destroyers, and 1 warship of unknown type were damaged, some of them heavily.

The Air Brigade Commander Africa failed to draw any positive lessons regarding improvements in cooperation with armored units from the experience of the battle of Sollum. There were still no air liaison detachments at divisional headquarters, and no air liaison officer had been assigned to Panzer Group Africa headquarters.

The Air Brigade Commander Africa continued to employ his forces against Tobruk and the supplies that were brought to the fortress by ship. His efforts became more effective when, after four weeks of training, two fully manned and equipped dive bomber

117

Extracted from the intelligence reports of the Air Force High Command for the periods: 1 - 12 July 41, Annex 5 to Situation Report No. 668; 13 July - 9 Aug. 41, Annex 5 to Report No. 675;

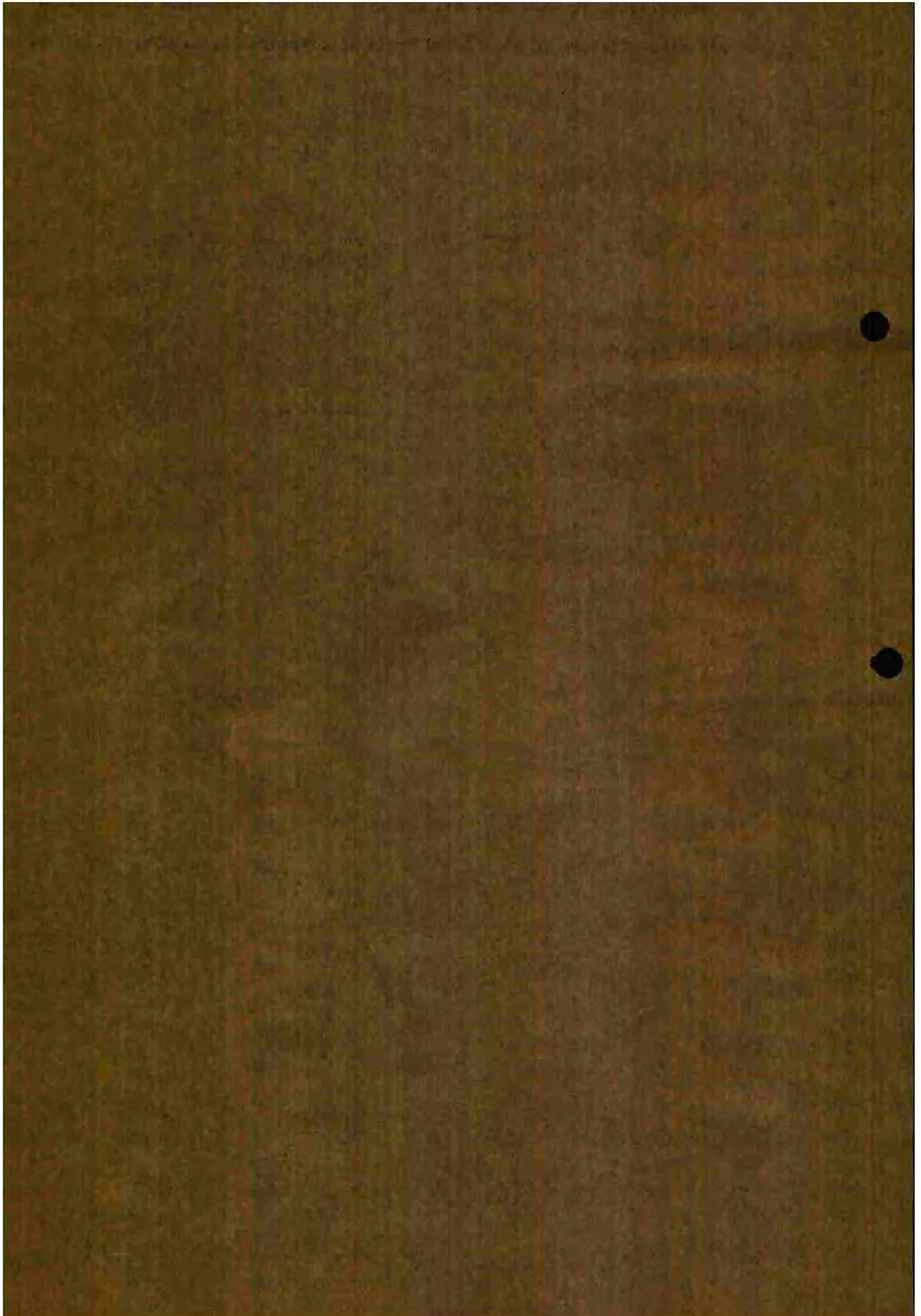


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(Continued)

Footnote 117 continued:

4 Sept. - 14 Sept. 41, Annex to No. 729; 15 - 25 Sept. 41, Annex
to No. 740; 10 - 18 Oct. 41, Annex to No. 767 (Karlsruhe Collection).
See also: History of the Second World War, Volume II, p. 278, pp. 297-8.

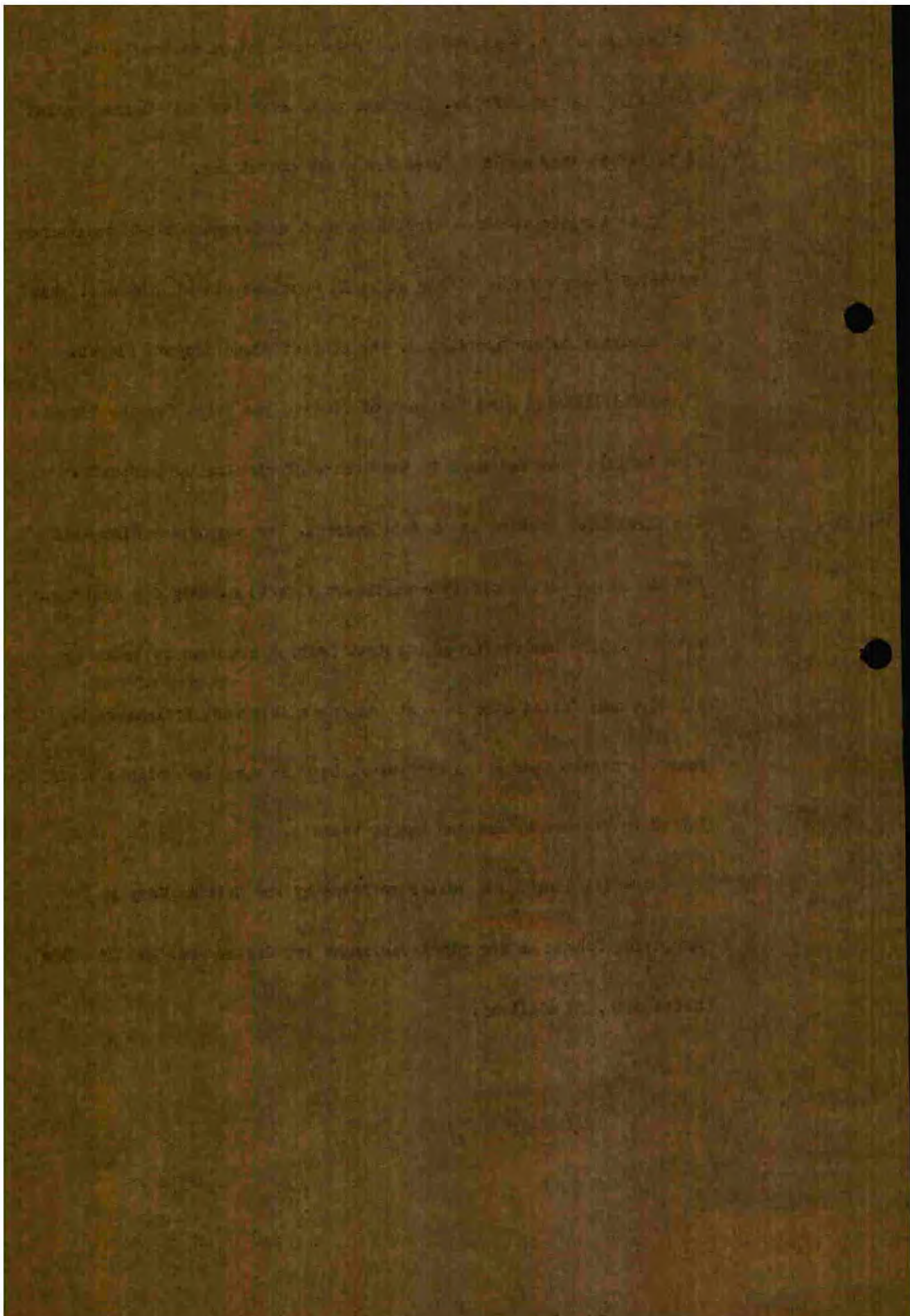


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squadrons were capable of conducting night operations, their Junkers 88's having been equipped with the necessary instruments for night flying. Furthermore, the Italian Fifth Squadra (Air Force) attached one torpedo squadron, equipped with three-engine Savoia aircraft, to Air Brig^{ade} Command Africa. They had to be equipped with German radio sets before they could be used for night operations.

The torpedo squadron started as soon as German air reconnaissance reported enemy convoys within about 25 nautical miles' distance. When the Savoia squadron approached, the contact plane dropped flares. These facilitated also the task of finding the ships for the German dive bombers that followed in the tracks of the Italian aircraft. The first such mission was a full success. The convoy was dispersed and the ships turned off in a northeast direction. Only one destroyer entered Tobruk harbor for 20 minutes. British attempts to break the air blockade failed also in most instances when fast freighters or remodelled passenger ships were used. Only on very dark nights could Tobruk be reached by British supply vessels.

Churchill listed the losses suffered by the British Navy in supplying Tobruk as one minelayer, ~~many~~ two destroyers, and 22 other ships ~~sunk~~. In addition,



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18 ships were heavily damaged. He also mentioned that 9 freighters
 118
 and 2 hospital ships were either sunk or damaged.

During this period the 2d Group of the 2d Dive Bomber Wing
 was based on Tnimi airfield, and the 1st Group of the First Dive
 Bomber Wing ^{at} ~~on~~ Derna. The 1st Group of the 27th Fighter Wing was
 at Ain-el-Gazala and the twin-engine fighter squadron at Derna (?).
 Gumbut was frequently used as jump-off base. The squadrons did
 not have sufficient trucks, and any displacement therefore required
 119
 2 or 3 trips by the same trucks.

No further information on the activities of the units sub-
 ordinate to Air Brigade Commander Africa ^{is} ~~XXXXXXXX~~ available. His
 cooperation with the Italian 5th Squadra was limited to isolated
 instances.

The race for time was won by the British. They had rightly
 realized that the decision at Tobruk was exclusively dependent
 on the arrival of supplies by ship. The Germans, however, made
 every effort to disrupt this flow of supplies.

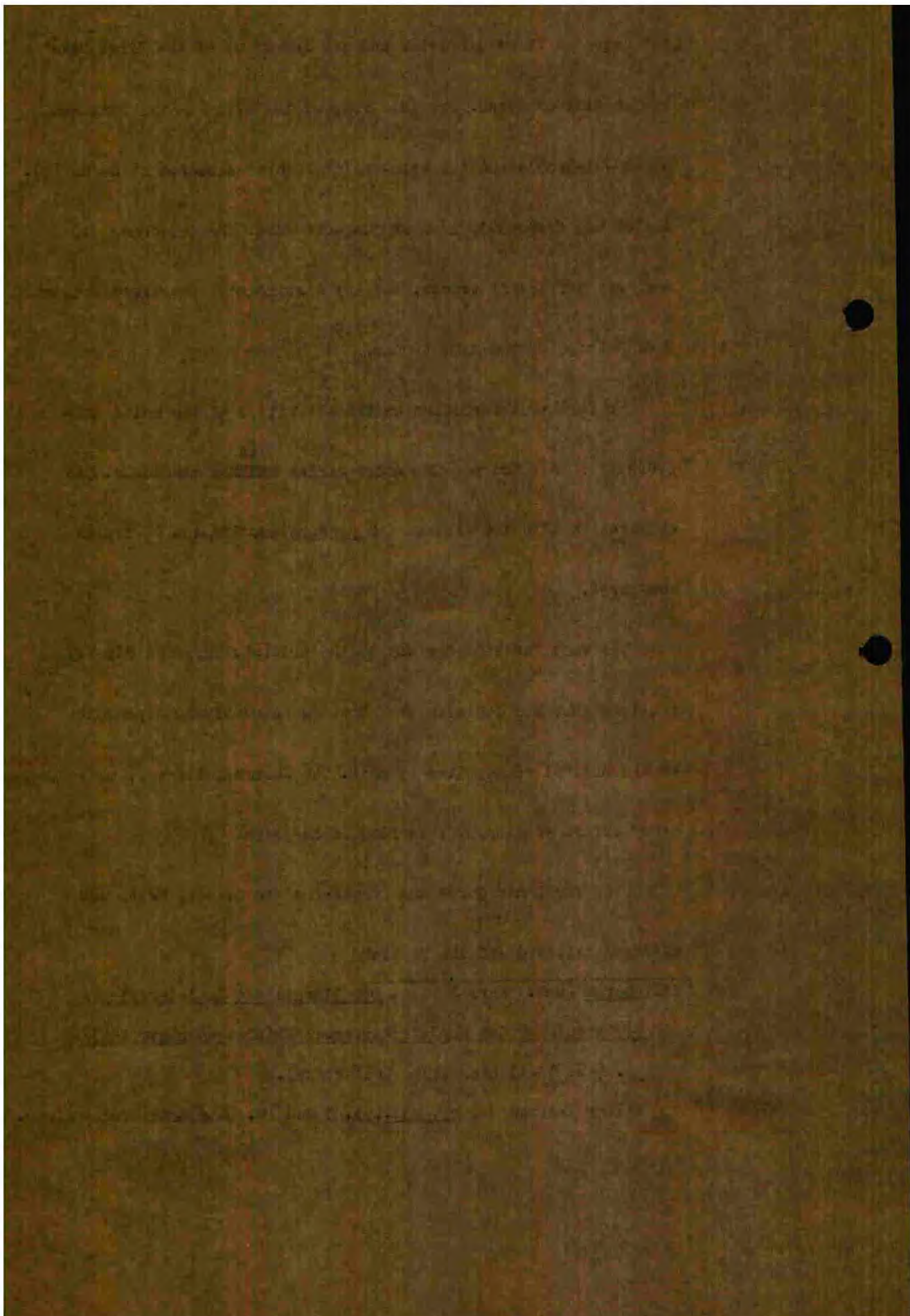
After the I Air Corps was transferred to Greece, Malta was
~~XXXXXXXX~~ relieved and the British

118 Oberst (Col.) Karl Christ, Der Einsatz der Schlachtflieger-
Verbände auf dem nordafrikanischen Kriegsschauplatz 1941/42.

pp. 4-8, 10-11 (Karlsruhe Collection).

119

Walter Ennecerus, op. cit., pp. 5 and 10. (Karlsruhe Collection).



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took every possible step to revive and strengthen its capability to resist. The reason was that Malta was the best base for disrupting the shipping between Italy and North Africa.

The re-supply of Malta from Alexandria was jeopardized since the passage between Crete and Cyrenaica -- the bomb alley -- had become so risky.

This was all the more important since the British Navy had suffered such severe losses in the fighting for Crete. One aircraft carrier -- the "Formidable" -- and 3 battleships had been put out of commission, while 3 cruisers and 6 destroyers had been sunk. In addition, 6 cruisers and 7 destroyers had been damaged. The last two battleships -- the "Queen Elizabeth" and the "Valiant" -- were actually confined to Alexandria for lack of destroyers.

For these reasons reinforcements of personnel and supplies had to be brought from ~~MAJOR~~ Gibraltar to Malta.

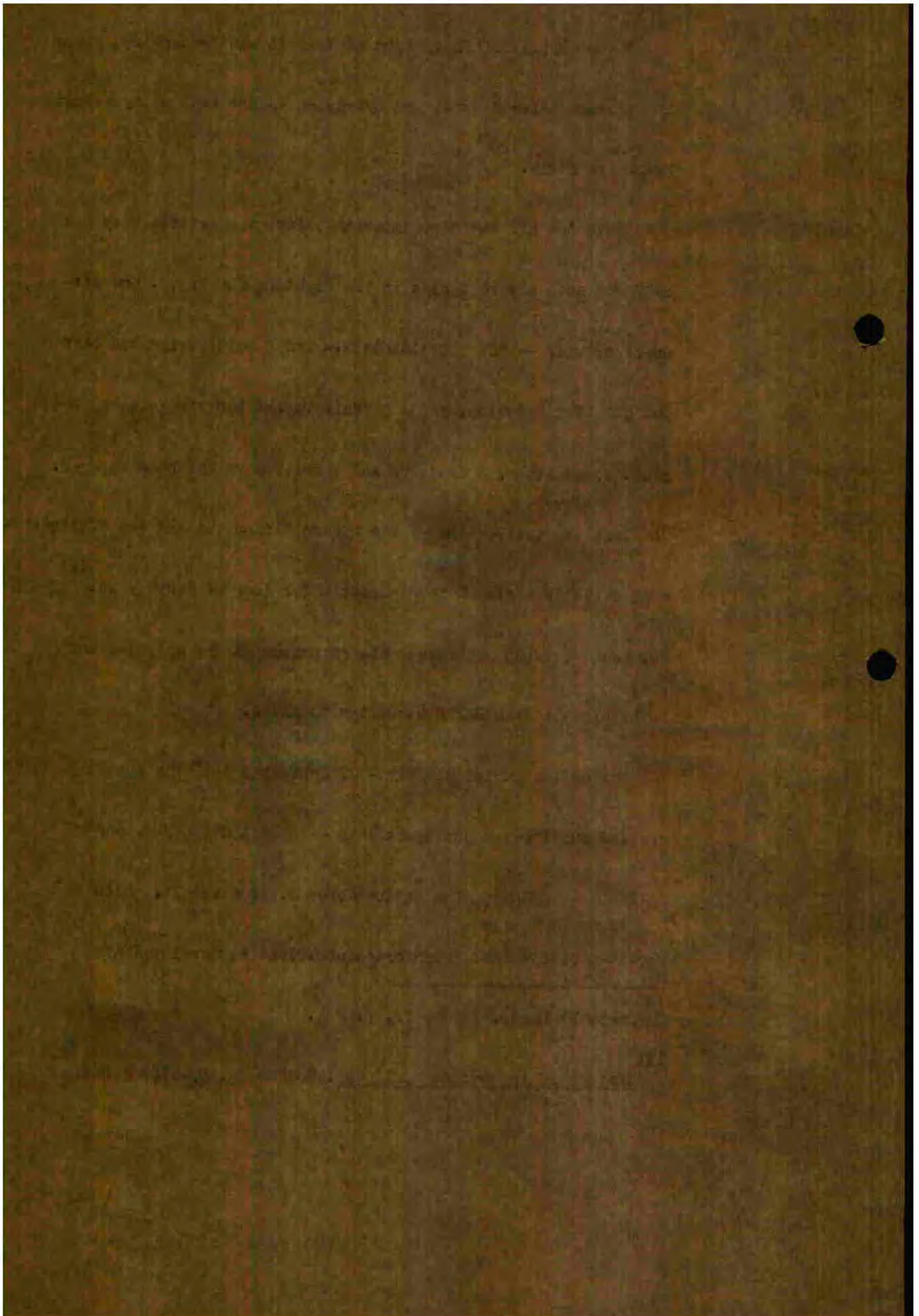
During the period 31 July - 27 September 1941 the British carried out three major operations -- SUBSTANCE, STYLE, and HALHERD -- employing the entire Force H. As a result, Malta received considerable reinforcements. Italian naval and air

120

Denis Richards, Volume II, p. 204.

121

History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 147 & 266.



- 162 -

force units inflicted losses but were unable to prevent the bulk of the convoys from reaching their objective.

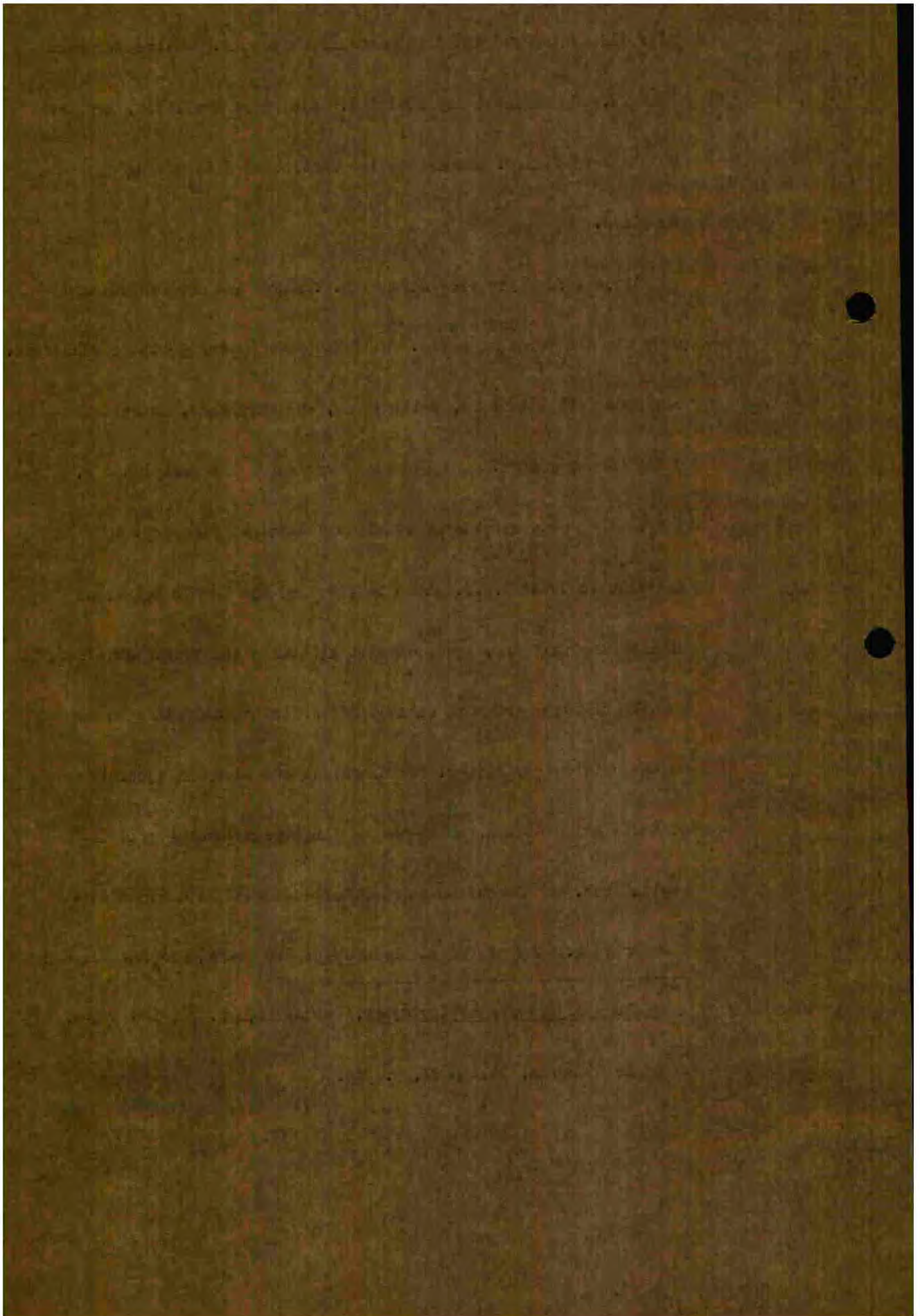
The Malta garrison had thus grown to 13 battalions equipped with 112 medium and 118 light antiaircraft guns. Rations for more than 22,000 men until May 1941 (Tr.: sic) were available, and the depots were filled. Submarine also participated in moving up
122
supplies.

Since 1 June Air Vice Marshal R.P. Lloyd had assumed command
elements
over the Air Force at Malta. On 11 November he had 5 bomber squadrons, equipped with Blenheims, Wellingtons, and Marylands, as well as 3 fighter squadrons, equipped with Hurricanes and Mark I and II, the latter being capable of commitment as night fighters. In addition to these R.A.F. units he also had two bomber squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm, equipped with Albacores and Swordfish aircraft.
123

The British were thus capable of inflicting crippling blows on the Axis supply system. The Swordfish and Blenheim aircraft attacked ships at sea, while the Wellingtons raided the port installations. The Swordfish carried torpedoes and laid mines outside Tripoli. Many of the Blenheim crews had learned ^{over} the North Sea

122
History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 266 and 274-6.

123
Denis Richards, Volume II, p. 383.



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how to attack ships at mast level.

The Wellington bombers stationed in Egypt (Group 205) attacked mainly Benghazi, the port of destination of supplies from Greece and Crete. During the period mid-June to mid-October Tripoli had 72 heavy air raids, Benghazi ¹²⁴ 102.

To weaken the German Air Force in North Africa, the British conducted daylight raids on Gambut and night raids on Gazala, Tmimi, Martuba, and Benina. The daylight raids were carried out by the squadrons of the Western Desert Group, the night raids by the bombers of the 205th Group. During these raids the supply dumps near the front line and the transport columns on the Via Balbia were also subjected to attacks.

From June to October 1941 the Axis Powers lost 40 ships for a total tonnage of 178,577 metric tons, 14 of which were sunk by submarines, 24 by bombs from the air, 1 hit a mine, and 1 sank for reasons unknown.

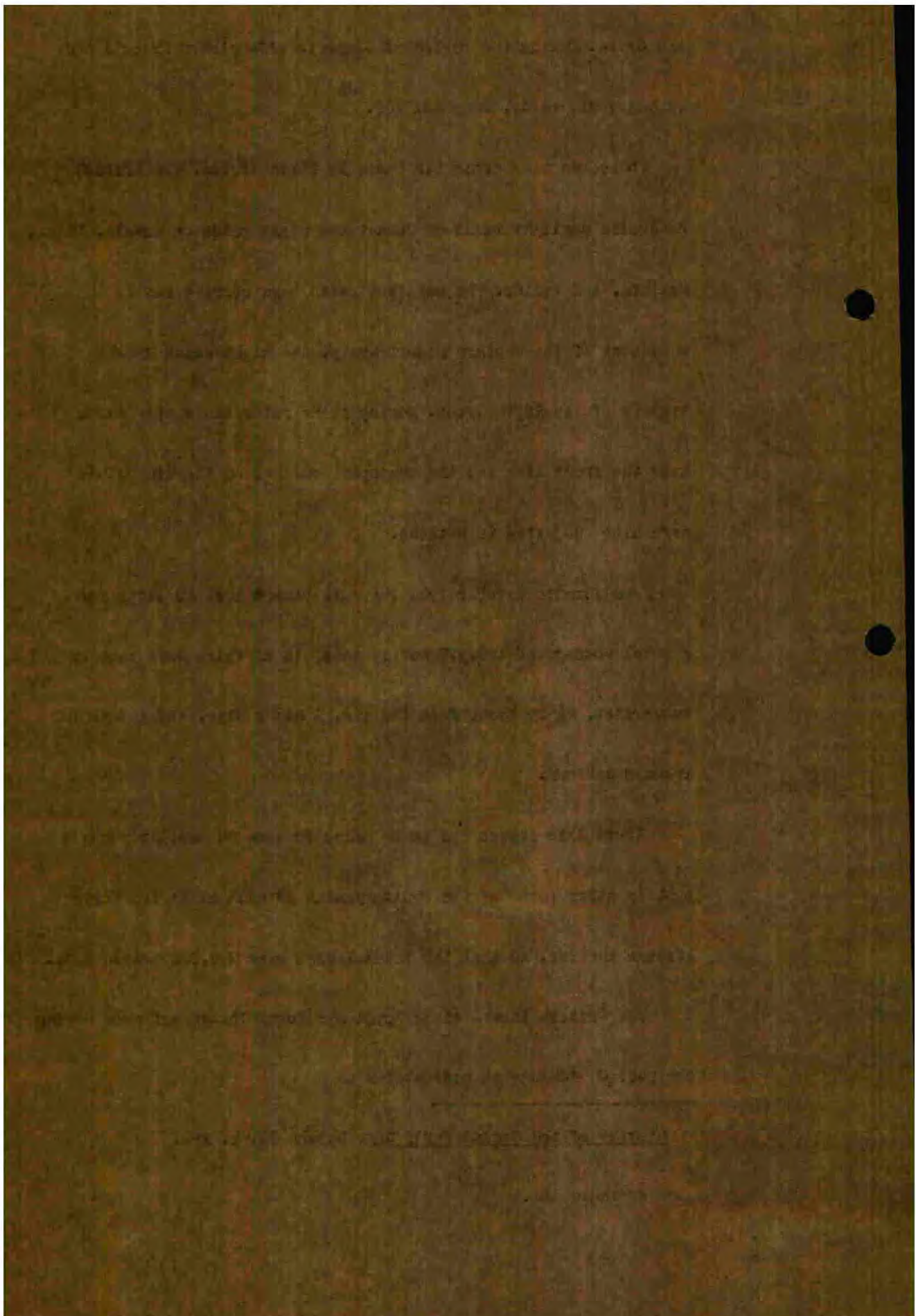
These Axis losses had to be added to some 90 smaller vessels sunk in other parts of the Mediterranean as well as in the North African theater, so that the total losses were 270,000 metric tons.

The British listed their Royal Air Force losses suffered during the period mid-June to mid-October as

¹²⁴

History of the Second World War, Volume II, p. 296.

See Footnote 104.



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195 aircraft shot down and 48 destroyed on the ground. They
 estimated the Italian losses at 89, the German ones at 81 planes.¹²⁵

According to German sources the number of aircraft lost from
 the beginning of June to the end of October was 110, while 41
¹²⁶
 were damaged.

The data regarding the strength of the German and Italian Air
 Force units are at variance. The German Army states that there were
 140 German and 220 Italian combat aircraft, excluding transport
 planes, which would amount to about 14 German and 22 Italian
¹²⁷
 squadrons.

By 15 November the strength of the German Air Force units
¹²⁸
 had risen to 16 squadrons.

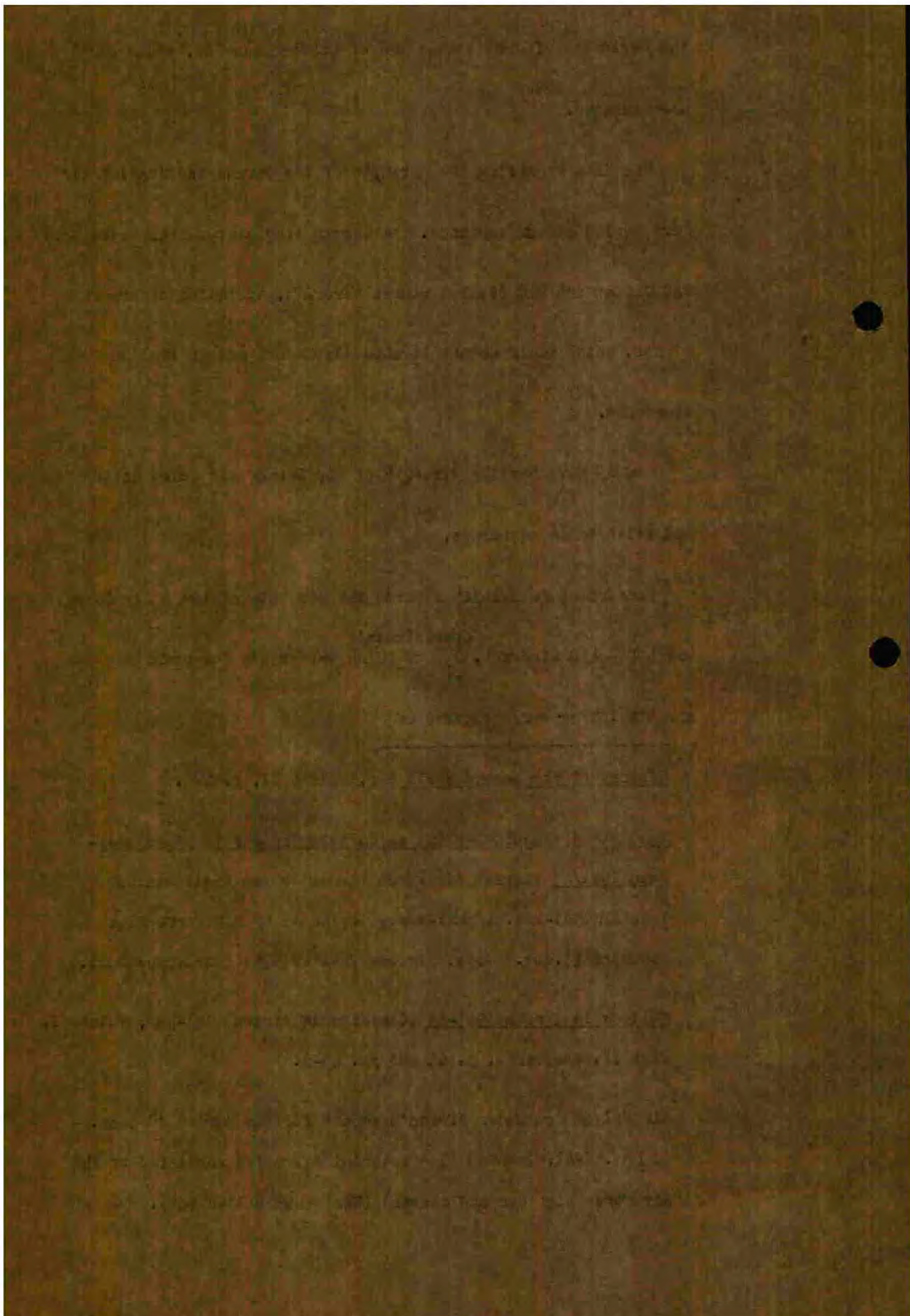
According to British reports the strength of the X Air Corps
 was 400 - 450 aircraft, ^{approximately} 250 of which were ready for commitment at
 any time. They were composed of

¹²⁵
History of the Second World War, Volume II, p. 298.

¹²⁶
Verluste der deutschen Luftwaffe beim Einsatz im Mittelmeer-
 raum 1941/42 (German Air Force Losses in the Mediterranean
 Theater, 1941-42). A post-war study based on Air Force High
 Command (6.Abt.) data, African Theater 1941 (Karlsruhe Coll.)

¹²⁷
Feldzug in Afrika 1941-43 (Campaign in Africa 1941-43), Volume I,
 Part II, Chapter 2, p. 42 and pp. 43-4.

¹²⁸
 Air Brigade Commander Africa's report for the period 20 Sept. -
 21 Nov. 1941, Sheet 3 (The material extracted consisted of the
 Air Force High Command charts) (Karlsruhe Collection).



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about 30 single-engine fighters (Messerschmitt 109's) and an equal number of twin-engine fighters (Messerschmitt 110's), as well as 80 dive bombers (Junkers 87's) and 50 - 60 long-range bombers (Junkers 88's and Heinkel 111's). There were also about 50 coastal aircraft in the Aegean Sea -- Heinkel 60's -- where there were also 6 Fokke-Wulf 200's capable of long-distance flights. The X Air Corps also had more than 80 transport planes of the Junkers 52 type.

In general the Messerschmitt 109's and the Junkers 87's were in North Africa, about 75 percent of the bombers capable of long-distance flights were based in the Aegean, and the Messerschmitt 110's were shared by the two theaters. The North African theater therefore had 14 squadrons and the Aegean 11.

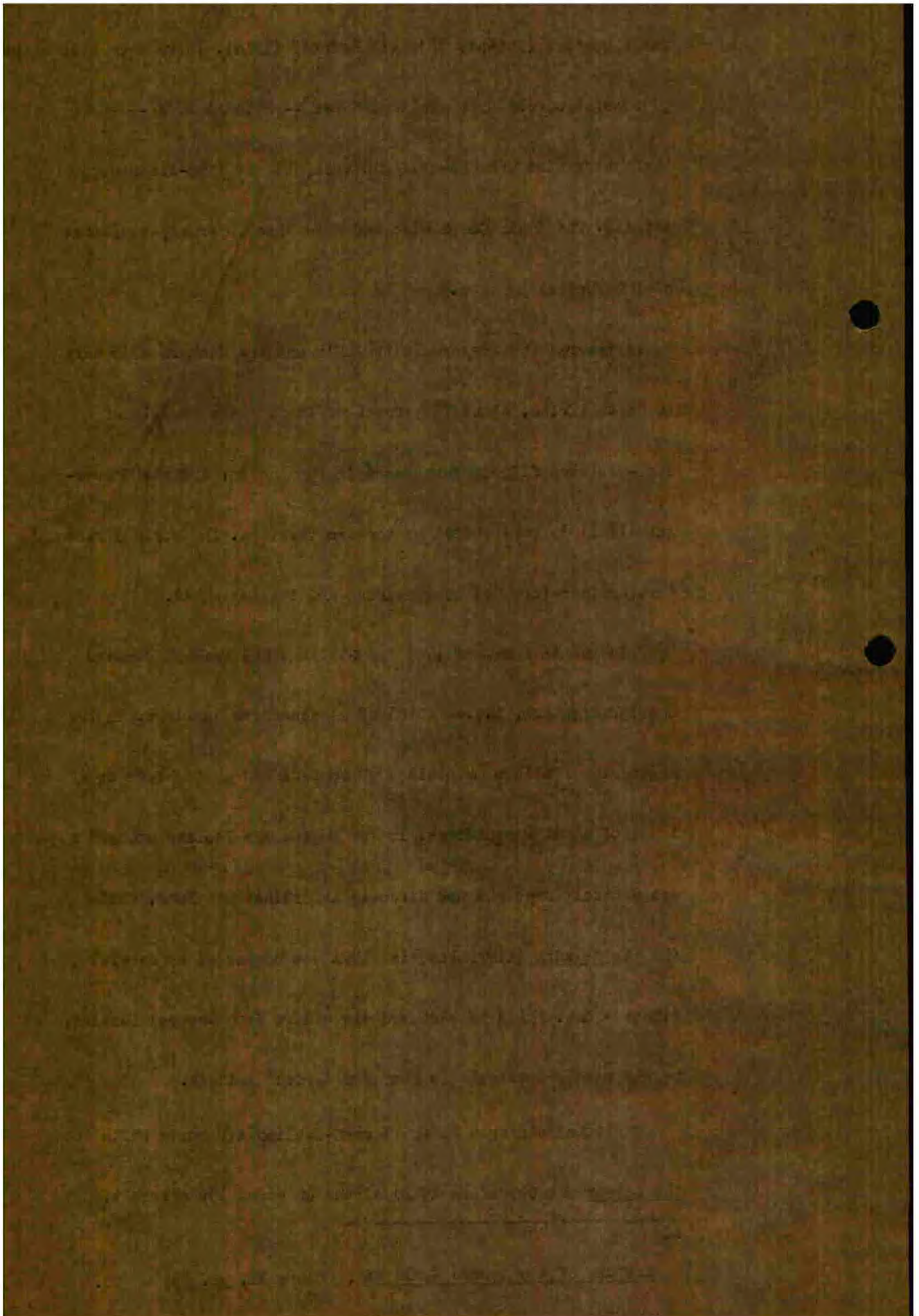
In the late summer 1941 the Italians had some 73 bombers and 137 fighters, i.e. a total of 21 squadrons in Libya. In the Aegean the Italians maintained 37 bombers and 46 fighters or a total of about 8 squadrons. In the Aegean the Italian commander was General Longo who was directly subordinate to Rome, while the 5th Squadra (Air Force) in Libya was commanded by General Aimone - Cat. While he received his orders from General Bastico, he was also subordinate to Rome for certain matters.

129

The total strength of the German-Italian Air Force units in the Aegean was therefore 19 squadrons or about 190 aircraft.

129

History of the Second World War, Volume II, pp. 299 - 300.



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and in Africa 35 squadrons or approximately 350 aircraft, excluding transport planes.

Most of the Italian aircraft were outdated.

The Royal Air Force in Egypt had by mid-August 49 squadrons with 722 aircraft, 550 of which were the most recent models. By mid-October these strength figures had risen to 52 squadrons with no fewer than 780 ~~modern~~ late-model aircraft. These figures did not include the squadrons stationed at Malta. ¹³⁰

According to another study the Royal Air Force Headquarters Egypt controlled in the Egyptian Theater -- excluding Aden, East Africa, Iraq, Palestine, Transjordan, and Malta -- under Tedder's command:

Headquarters Egypt: 19 squadrons; Western Desert Group: 32 Squadrons; Total: 51 squadrons of various types, primarily fighters and bombers. ¹³¹

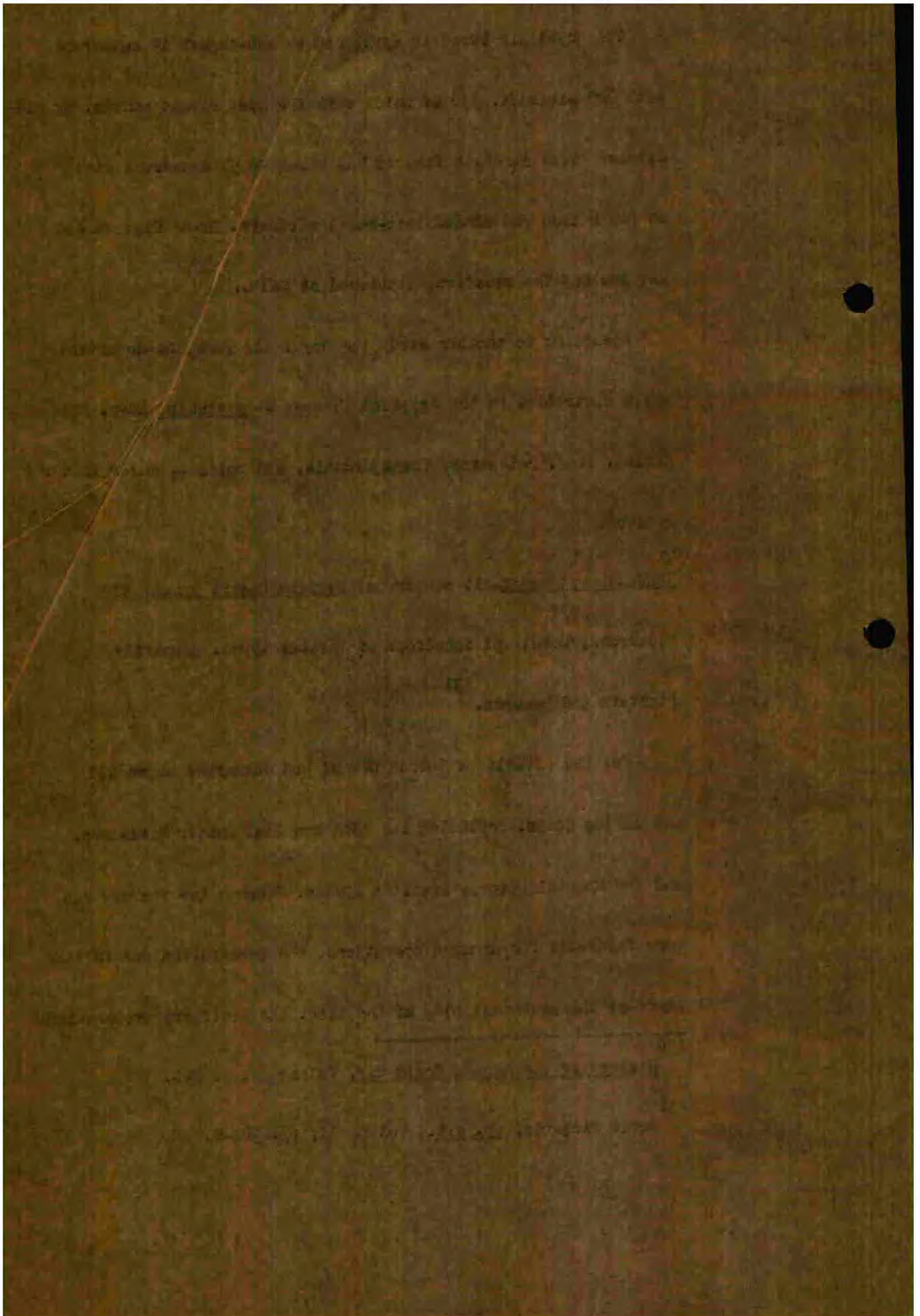
For the assault of Tobruk Rommel had earmarked above all the Africa Corps, including the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, and the Special Purpose Division Africa. Because the terrain was more favorable for armored operations, the penetration was to take place at the southeast side of the line. The artillery preparations

¹³⁰

History of the Second World War, Volume II, p. 290.

¹³¹

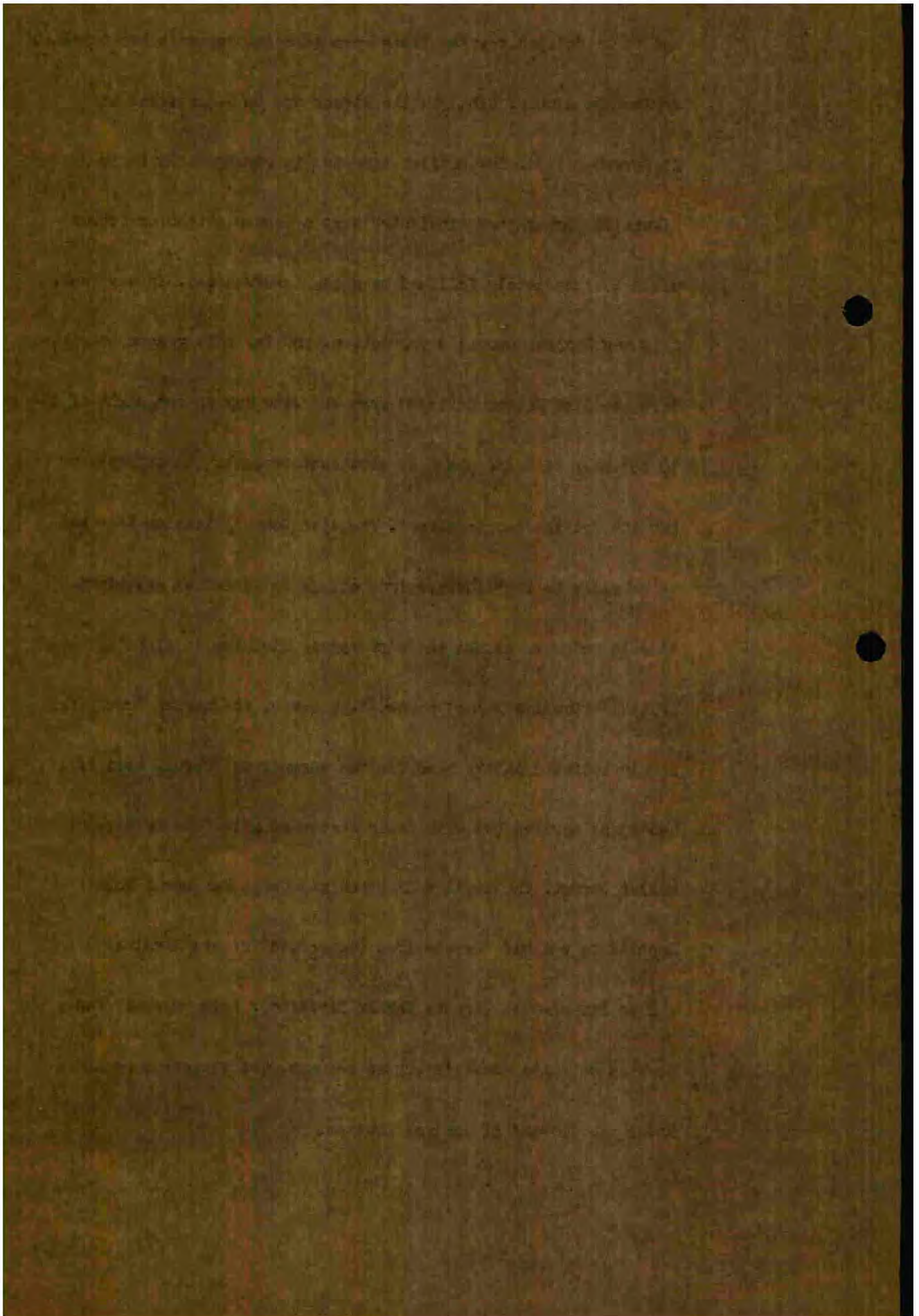
Dennis Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 382-4.



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started at an early moment, with artillery positions being surveyed and constructed.

The attack, which had originally been scheduled for September, had to be delayed several times because reinforcements and supplies arrived so slowly. Finally, the attack was to be launched on 21 November 1941. The British increase in strength and their offensive preparations indicated that a German attack on Tobruk would be immediately followed by a counteroffensive. In any case, this was General Rommel's assumption, and for this reason he withdrew the 21st Panzer Division from the line during the night of 15-16 November 1941 and moved it southeast of Gambut to be prepared for the British counterthrust. The 15th Panzer Division also had to be ready to be withdrawn from ^{the} attack on Tobruk at any given time in order to assist the 21st Panzer Division in stopping the British offensive Rommel expected. However, the German commander firmly believed in the need for the assault on Tobruk, even if it had to be carried out with fewer forces or after the British relief thrust. The Italian XX Motorized Corps was moved from Mechili to the Mir Hacheim area (Motorized Trieste Division) and to Bir-el-Gubi (^{Armored} ~~Trieste~~ ^{Ariete} Division). This movement was carried out upon Rommel's urgent request, but the corps remained under the command of General Bastico.



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In carrying out the assault, strong Luftwaffe elements were to dive-bomb the pillboxes in the zone of attack, the British artillery positions, and the command posts, and thus facilitate the penetration of the ground forces.

After a three-hour artillery preparation the daylight assault was to begin, with various deceptive and diversionary maneuvers being planned.

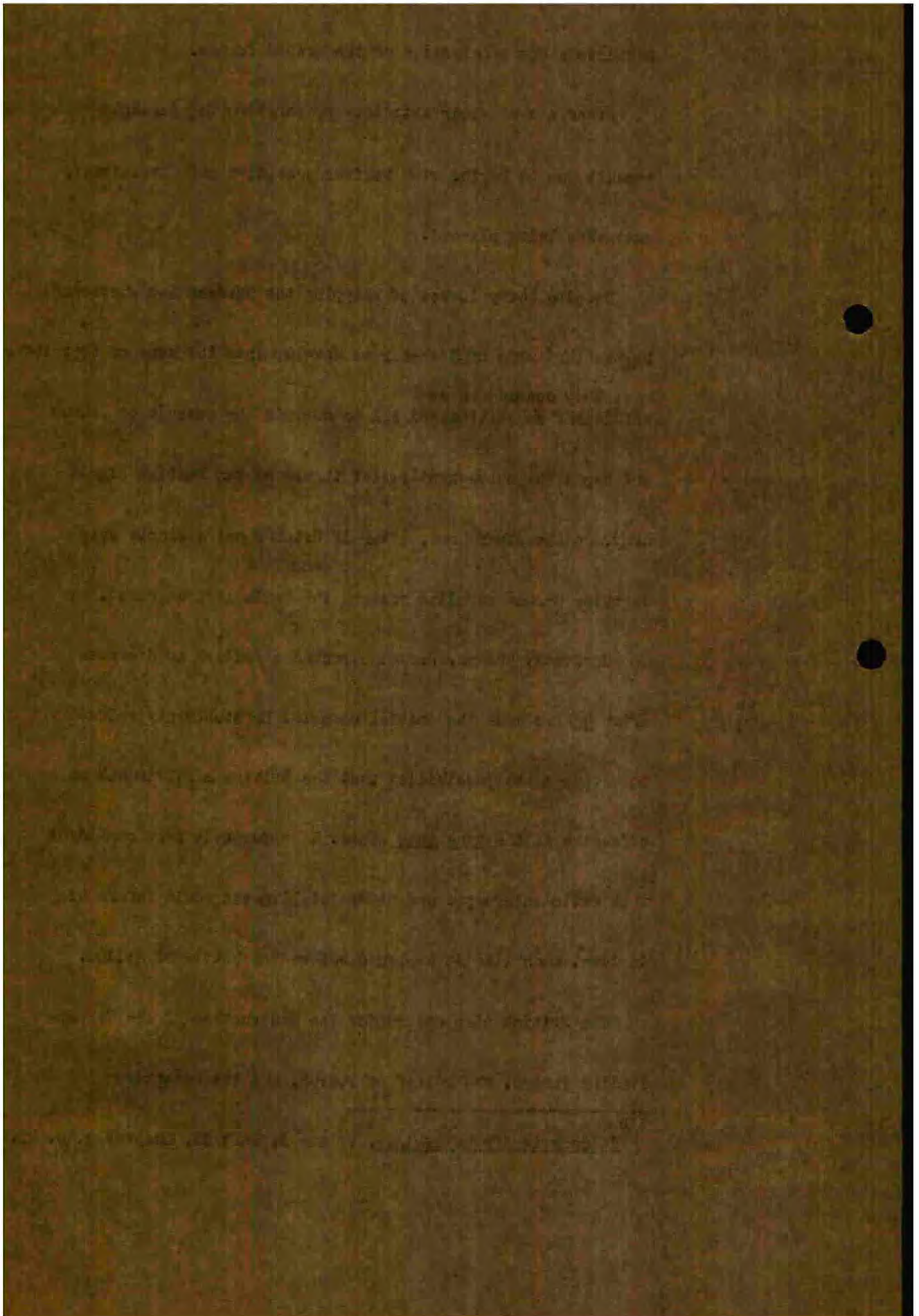
Despite heavy losses of shipping the Germans had succeeded by the beginning of November to move up into the zone of operations what they considered as sufficient ammunition and POL to sustain the assault on Tobruk and repel the subsequent relief thrust of the British Eighth Army. On the other hand, after 18 October not a single ship carrying German supplies reached the North African coast.¹³²

Curiously enough, Rommel expected a British countermove after he had made the initial assault. He stubbornly refused to envisage the possibility that the British might launch an offensive at the time they chose. He apparently felt confident that radio intercepts and other intelligence would inform him in time, much like it happened before the battle of Sollum.

The British plan called for the destruction of the German-Italian forces, the relief of Tobruk, and the recapture

¹³²

Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 2, p. 47.



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of the Cyrenaica. Operation CRUSADER was to be the initial step to finally kicking the Italians out of Tripolitania and thus also out of Africa.

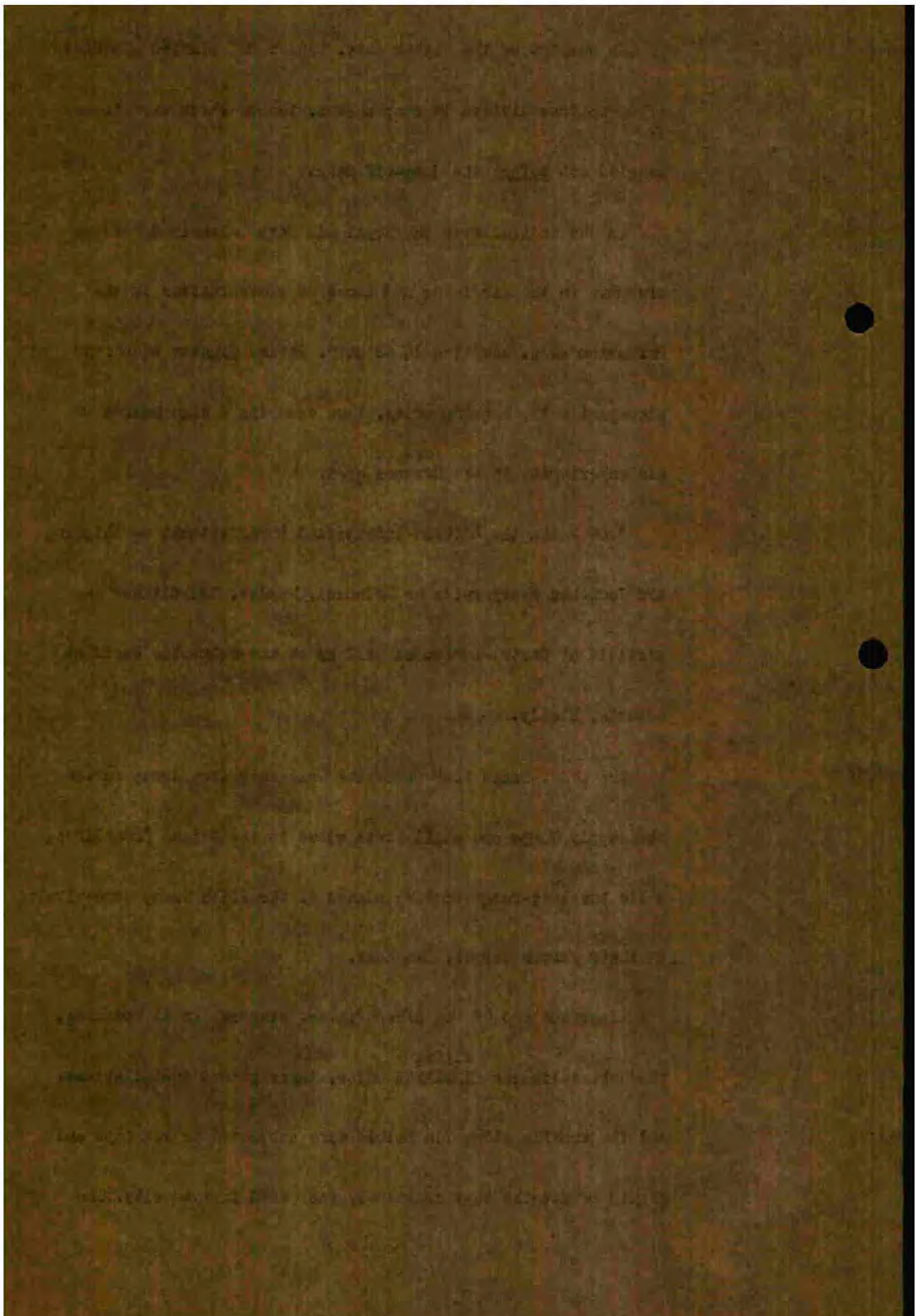
In support of the Eighth Army, Tedder had planned a series of operations divided in four phases, two of which were to be carried out before the jump-off date.

As the initial step the Royal Air Force exercised heavier pressure on the airfields and lines of communication in the Marmarica area, starting 14 October. Entire fighter squadrons accompanied the bombing units, thus assuring a high degree of ^{forward} air superiority in the ~~Marmarica~~ area.

From Malta the British intensified their attacks on shipping and launched heavy raids on Brindisi, Naples, Tripoli and the airfield at Castel-Benito as well as on the submarine basis at Augusta, Sicily.

The short-range bombers of the Western Desert Group raided the supply dumps and small ports close to the German frontlines, while the long-range bombing planes of the 205th Group concentrated on their former target, Benghazi.

After the end of the second phase, starting on 11 November, ^{flying} the German-Italian ~~KINKEWEN~~ units, their ground installations, and the traffic along Via Balbia were subjected to six days and nights of attacks that constantly increased in intensity. The



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Luftwaffe was put on the defensive, and the entire German supply system was considerably weakened; the British air reconnaissance had meanwhile obtained an accurate picture of the German intentions. The Eighth Army had moved into its jump-off positions; it launched its offensive during the night of 17-18 November 1941 without having been observed or disturbed by German planes.

133

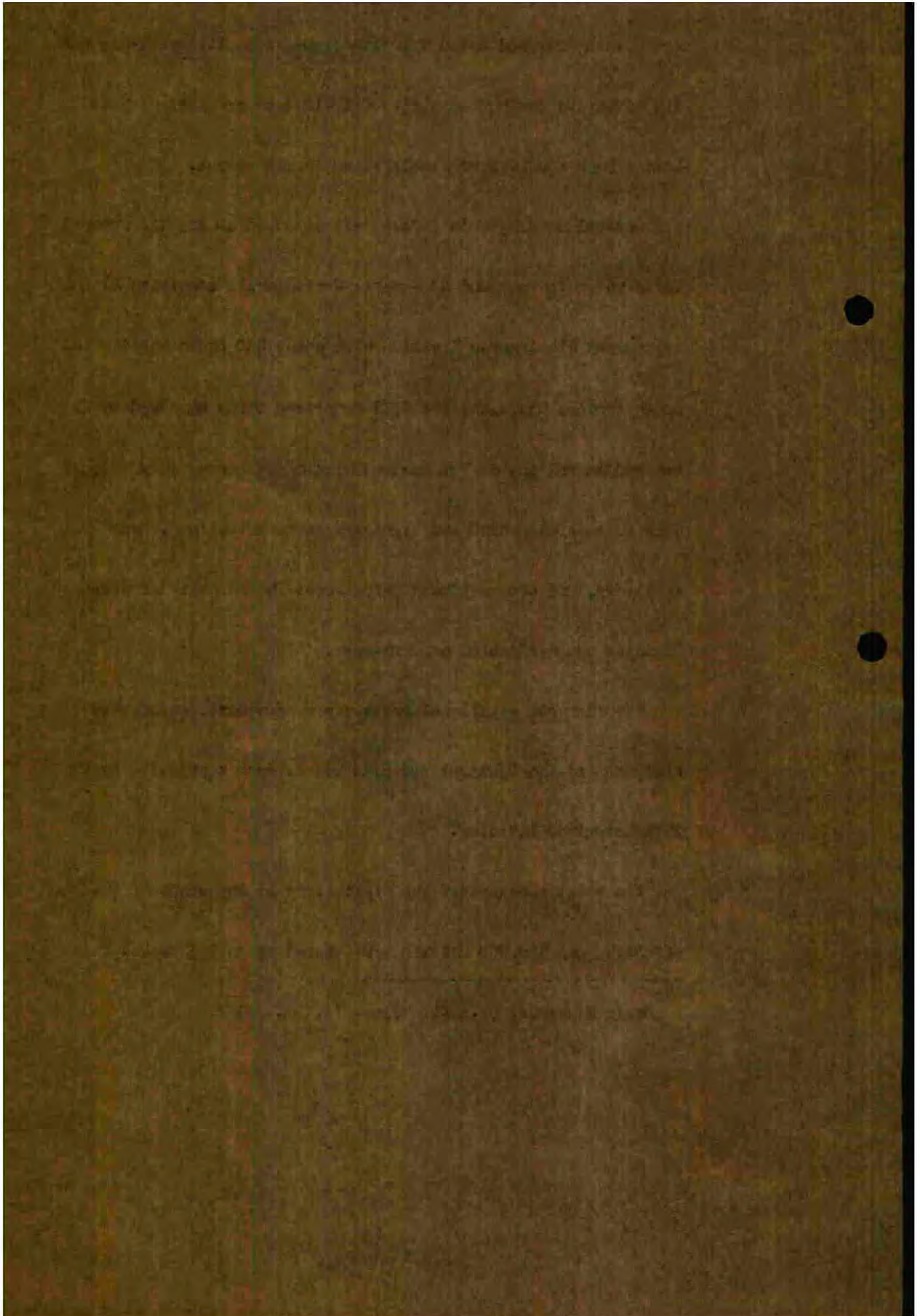
General Cunningham's forces were composed of The XXX Armored Corps under the command of General Norris which consisted of the reinforced 7th Armored Division with about 450 tanks and the 1st South African Division; the XIII Motorized Corps composed of the 4th Indian and the 2d New Zealand Divisions; strong army troops, such as several medium and light army tank battalions, army artillery, and army antitank battalions. The 2d South African Division was designated army reserve.

The elements capable of cross-desert movement, which were stationed at the Djarabub and Siwa Oases, were controlled by the 29th Motorized Division.

The total strength of the Eighth Army at the start of the offensive was 130,000 men who were backed up by 755 tanks. This

133

Denis Richards, op.cit., Volume II, pp. 171-2.



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meant that the British forces were far superior to Rommel's army estimated at 83,000 men and approximately 440 tanks, of which only 250 - 300 were capable of commitment. The British superiority was even greater in other equipment such as artillery, antitank guns, and armored reconnaissance vehicles. ¹³⁴

While the XIII Motorized Corps was to launch the secondary attack on the extended Sollum line, the XXX Armored Corps was to move across the desert plateau near Ridotta Maddalena and, thrusting via Gabr Saleh toward Sidi Resegh, was to establish contact with Tobruk. East and West of Maddalena the British had built two emergency landing fields for the Western Desert Group, on each side.

On the evening of 15 November the German-Italian troops moved into the jump-off positions for the assault of Fortress Tobruk. The 21st Panzer Division moved into its assembly area around Gaser-el-Arid, south of Trigh Capuzzo. The 3d and the 33d Motorized Artillery Battalions were attached to the division; they formed Reconnaissance Group von Wechmar, which was given the mission to reconnoiter the Gabr-Saleh area and south of Sidi Omar.

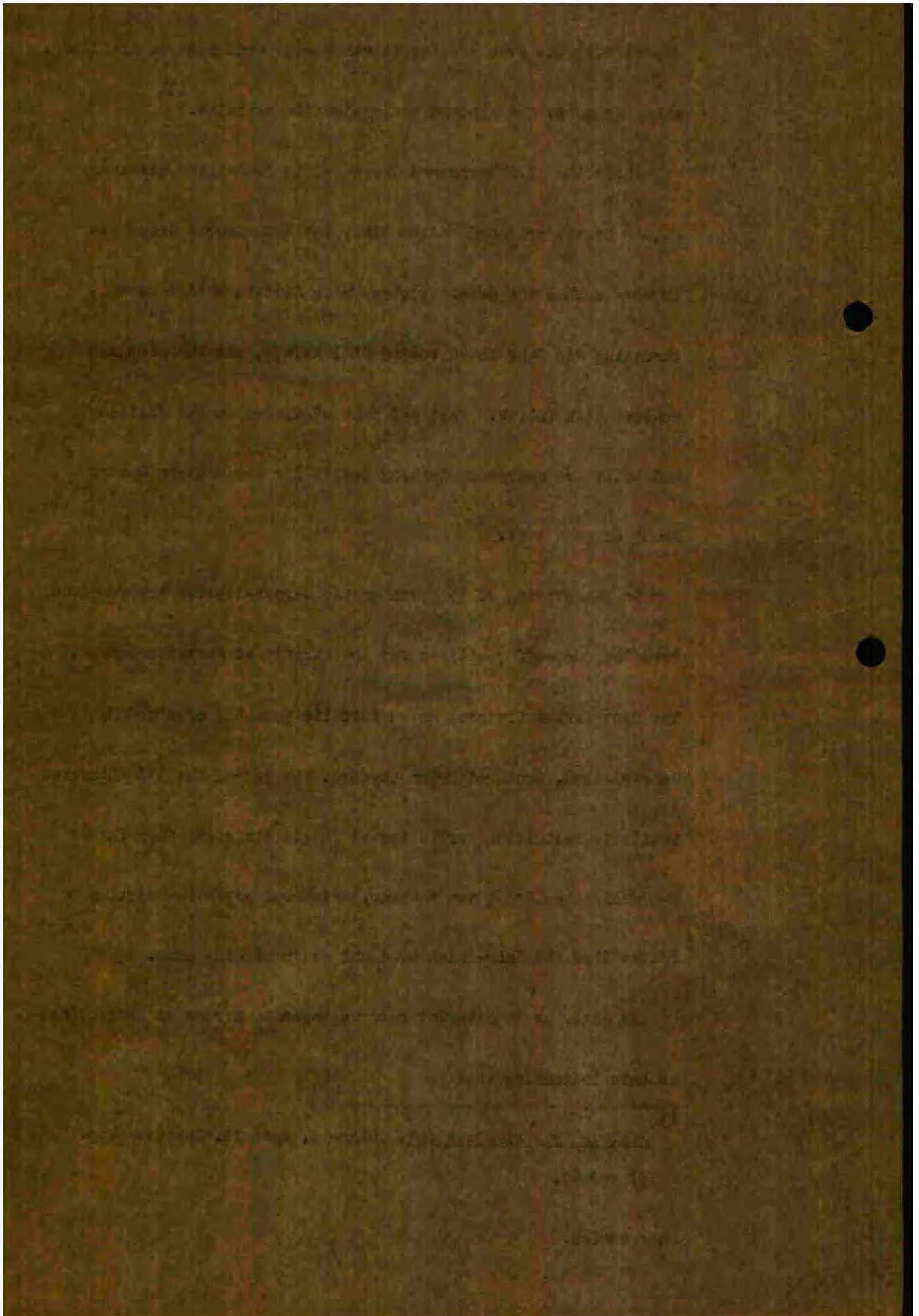
As early as 16 November reports began to arrive in increasing numbers indicating that

¹³⁴

Feldzug in Afrika 1941/42, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 3, pp.

57 and 60.

* See sketch.



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the British were advancing from Fort Maddalena toward the west and were pushing back the reconnaissance group. During the night of 15-16 November the British launched some air attacks of extraordinary ~~XXXXXX~~ vehemence against the area west of Bardia; these attacks were obviously directed at the 21st Panzer Division.

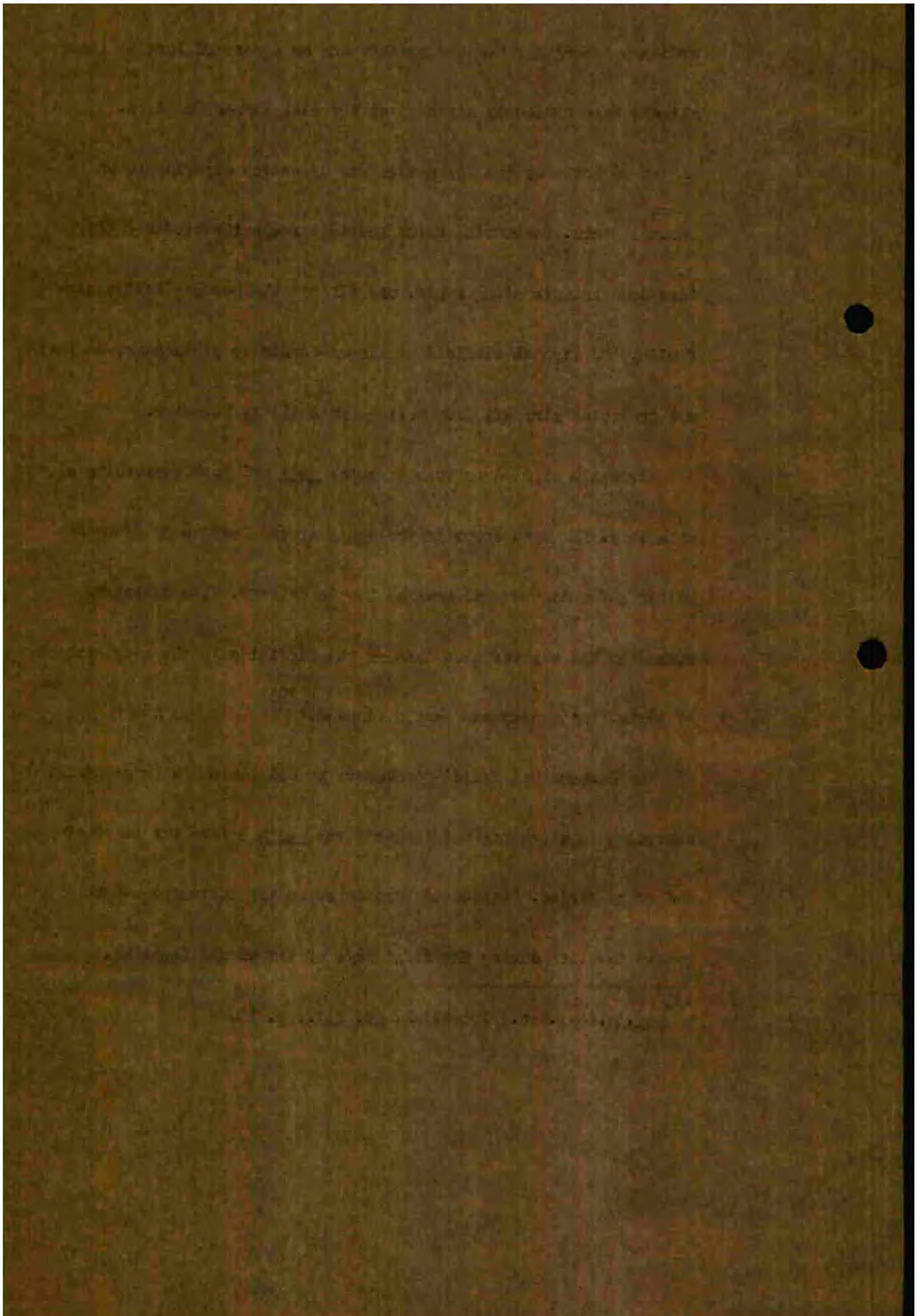
On 16 November the Marmarica and Cyrenaica experienced an unusual storm. Torrential rains poured through the eroded wadis, tore down bridges along roads, and flooded the German-Italian airfields, the fighter airfield at Ain-el-Gazala in particular, so that mud prevented aircraft from taking off until 19 November.

*Suddenly, high waves tore down the wadi and took everything along with them. The tent camps in the wadis around Derna were flooded within a few minutes and several people drowned. This disaster caused by bad weather also damaged the airfields in the neighborhood of Derna. The runway was partly flooded.*¹³⁵

The Germans had failed to observe an old custom in these parts, according to which one had to leave the wadis before the start of the rainy period. Because of that omission the Luftwaffe had to remain inactive during the first days of the ground fighting.

¹³⁵

Gen. Lt. (Maj. Gen.) Froehlich, op. cit., p. 15.



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The British airfields were situated in more favorable locations and did not suffer nearly as much.

"The terrible weather, torrential rains, low clouds, and sand storms continued throughout 18 November."¹³⁶

On 17 November the British launched a large-scale commando raid during the evening hours. They attacked the command post of the Panzer Group near Bada Litoria; General Rommel and his staff were absent or else they would have perished.

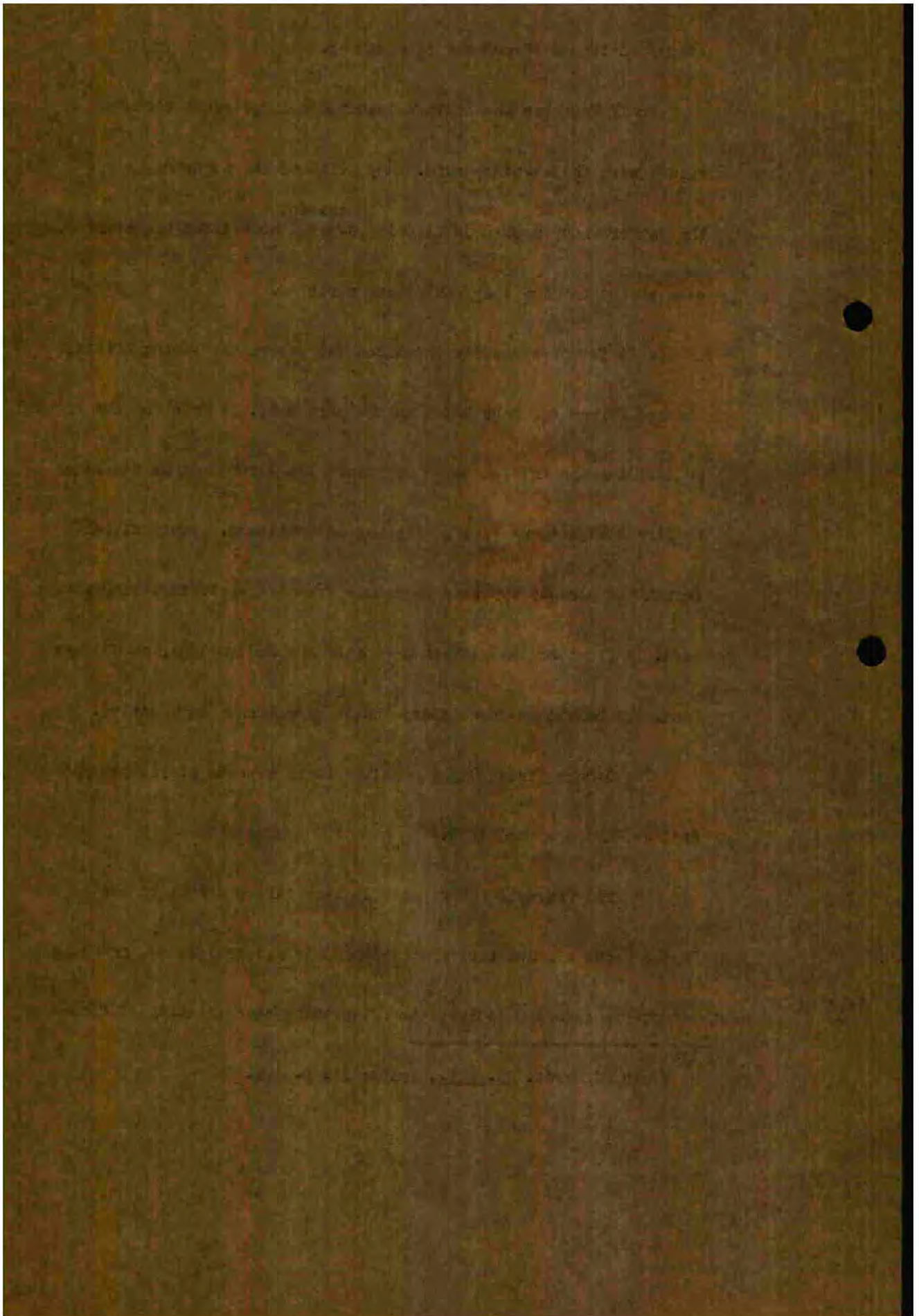
On 18 November reports announced the advance of strong British armored forces via Gabr Saleh to the northwest. In front of the western sector of the Sollum line the British moved up toward the strong points and began to direct adjustment fire at the German positions. Other British forces had already bypassed Sidi Omar from the west, thrusting northward. In front of the eastern sector of the Sollum line, at Halfaya Pass, the British reconnaissance units also became more active.

The German Africa Corps received these reports at its command post at Bardia around 1700.

General Cruewell had repeatedly been informed ~~EREM~~ by the Panzer Group headquarters that neither air reconnaissance nor radio intercepts gave any indications of an enemy concentration of forces

¹³⁶

Denis Richards, *op. cit.*, Volume II, p. 174.



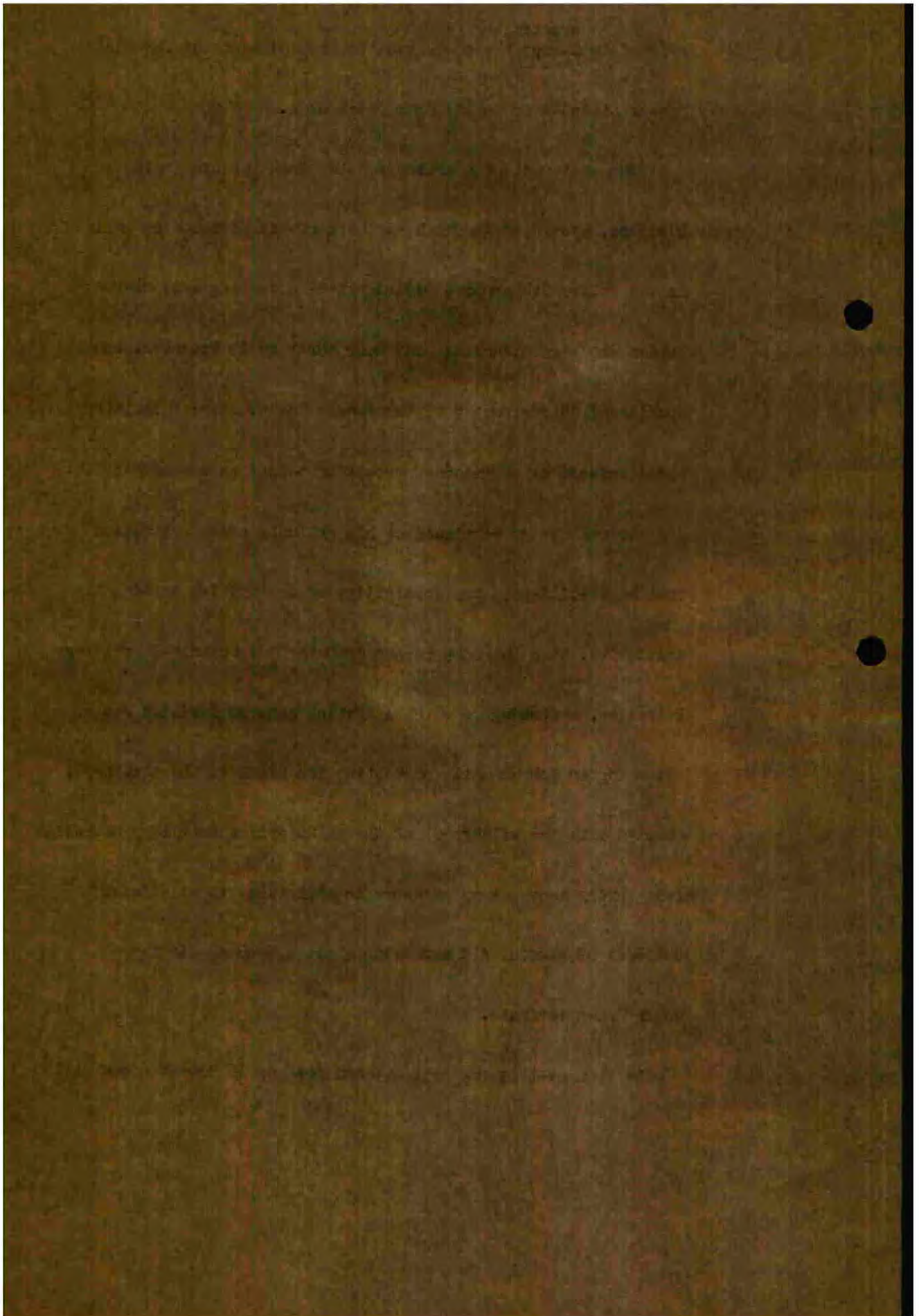
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near the border. As late as 2000 on 18 November, General Rommel still expressed the opinion that the British advance was merely a minor harassment operation. One ought not grow nervous. And he ^{approve} refused to ~~accept~~ the suggestion to move elements of the 21st Panzer Division up to the Gabr Saleh area.

The statement of a prisoner taken from the 4th Indian Division, according to which elements of his division as well as the entire 7th Armored Division were advancing west of the border and were attacking Sidi Omar early on 19 November, was considered untrustworthy by the Panzer Group, where this information was dismissed as an intended deception passed on by the British.

Rommel was so convinced of his estimate of the situation that he still denied the possibility of the British seizing the initiative. Even the noon report from the 33d Motorized Artillery Battalion, according to which a British armored division was advancing on Tobruk while protecting its flank to the northeast, coupled with the withdrawal of the 3d Motorized Artillery Battalion moving under heavy enemy pressure to Sidi Aziz, 10 miles ~~west~~ southwest of Bardia, did not bring about any change in the Panzer Group estimate.

^{that}
The statement ~~of~~ the prisoner had made on 18 November was still



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being considered as false or at least as greatly exaggerated.

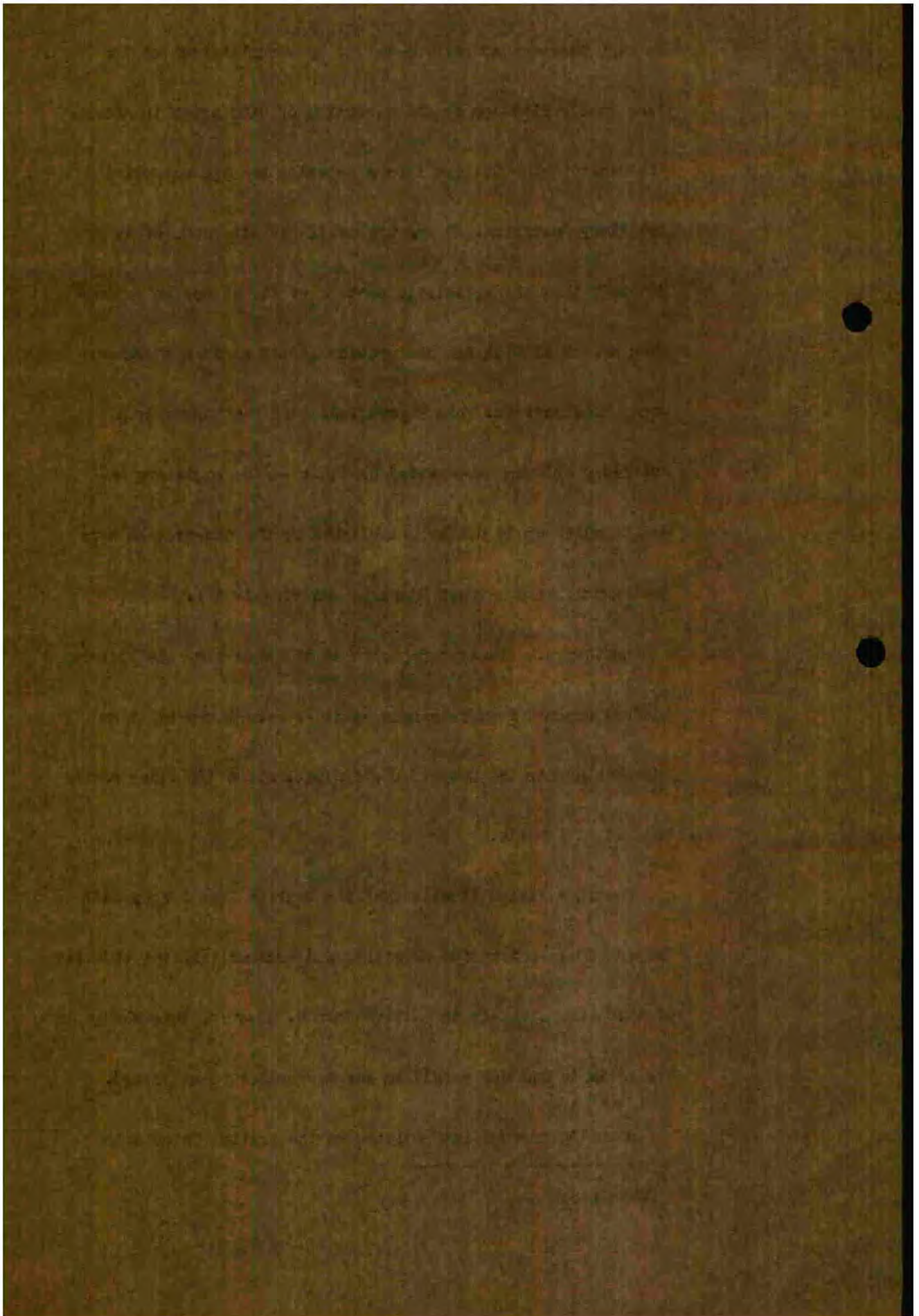
But around noon Rommel issued orders to move up the 15th Panzer Division into its assembly area south of Trigh Capuzzo. He also approved an armored thrust by a combat team of the 21st Panzer Division in the direction of Gabr Saleh in order "to destroy" the British forces opposing the 33d Motorized Artillery Battalion. It was not until the afternoon of 19 November that the optimistic concept of the situation exploded, when around 1700 an air observation report arrived at Panzer Group Headquarters. This report indicated that three long motorized columns accompanied by tanks -- the beginning and end of which could not be established by the observer -- were moving northward between Djarabub and Bir-el-Gubi.

Another air observer reported at the same time that several hundred armored reconnaissance vehicles were advancing from Djarabub across the desert toward Gialo, about 150 miles southeast of El Aghaila.

Rommel realized finally that the British Eighth Army had jumped off to a decisive offensive and assumed that the objective of this offensive was to relieve Tobruk. However, this change in his estimate did not result in any new orders being issued.

Rommel's preconceived opinion on the British intentions

See sketch



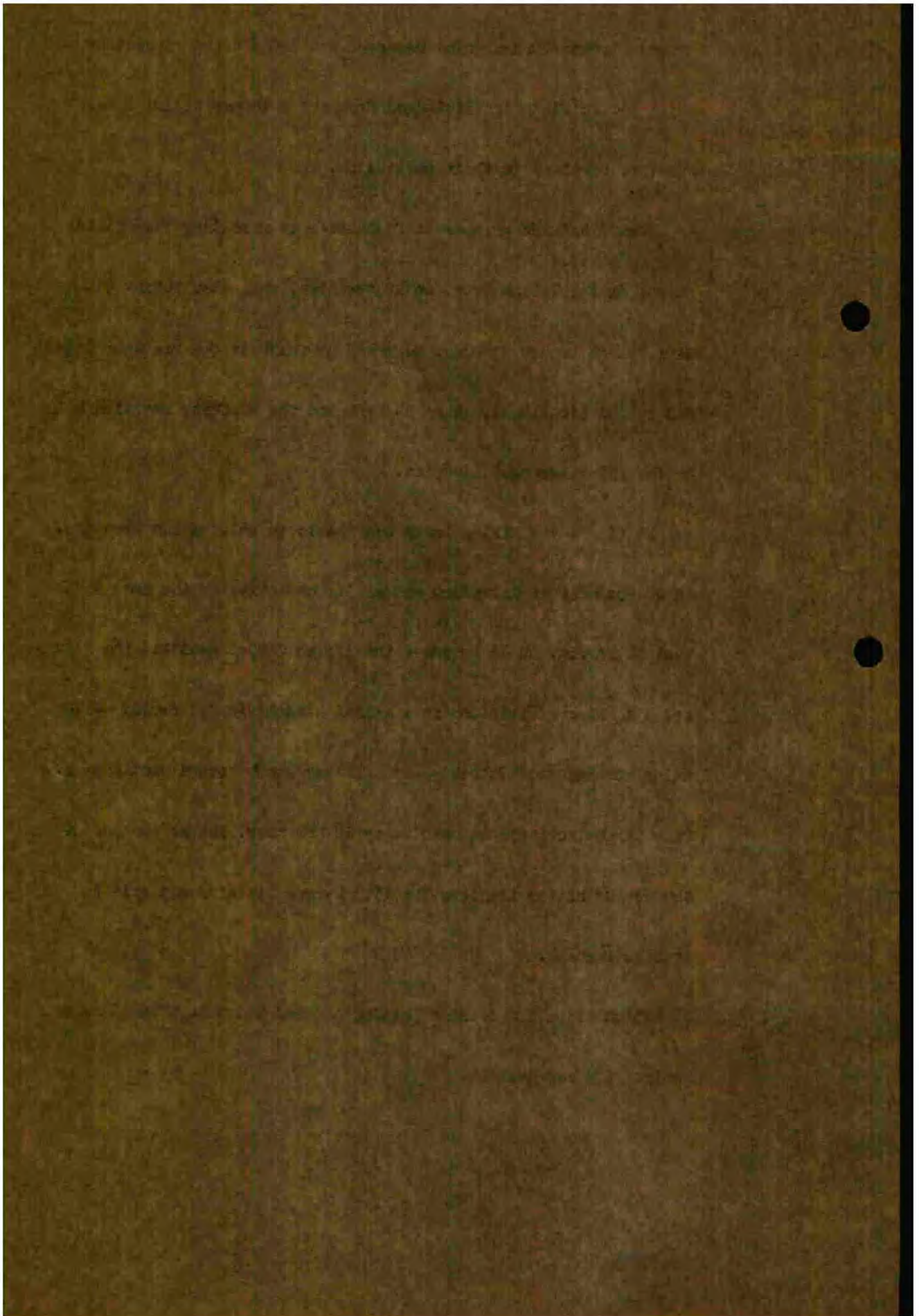
- 176 -

led to an extremely dangerous situation for the Panzer Group, which was aggravated on 20 and 21 November, when the Tobruk garrison made a sortie and broke the ring of encirclement around the fortress. Rommel personally assembled reserves and led a counterthrust by which the British were dislodged from the Belhamed hills; Dada, however, remained in their possession.

Rommel had the greatest difficulties in repelling the British attack on the Tobruk front on 22 November, when they thrust via Sidi Rezegh toward El Dada. He moved up fresh troops via Gabr Saleh and behind Bir-elGubi, where he bypassed the blocking position held by the Ariete Armored Division.

At first, the Africa Corps was unable to relieve the pressure. On 20 November it ~~did not~~ missed its objective in the area southwest of Bardia. On 21 November the Africa Corps committed the 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions in a relief attack via Sciafatiuf -- 30 miles southeast of Tobruk -- and farther south toward Sidi Rezegh. This thrust achieved no results by 22 November. But at the end of the day of bitter fighting the 15th Panzer Division was able to score a success.

On an elevation between Sciafatiuf and Sidi Rezegh the Germans encircled after dusk the



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4th Armoured Brigade, capturing 50 almost undamaged tanks and 19 officers as well as 250 enlisted men.

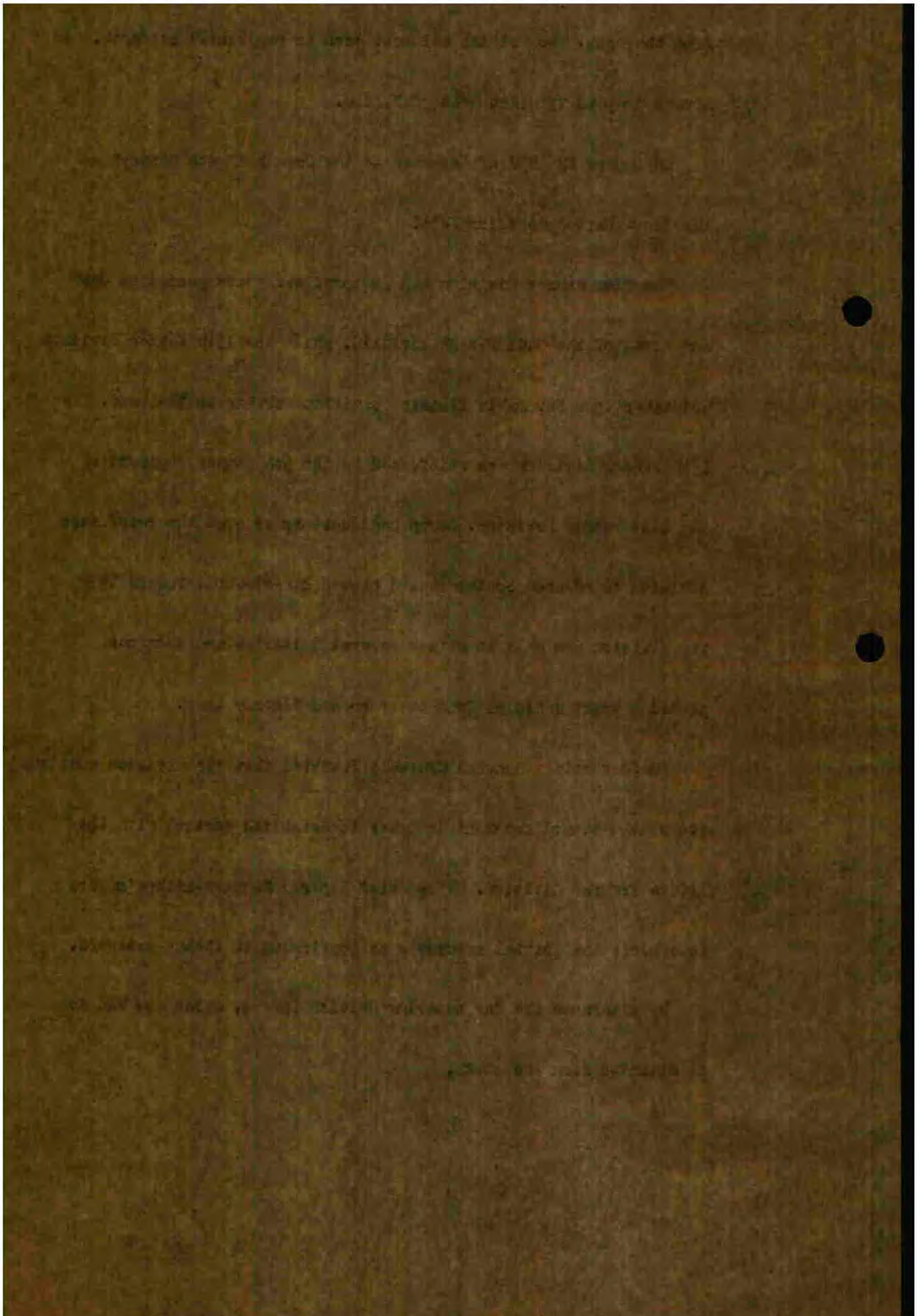
During the 22 November new danger threatened the German forces from the east. Two British columns, each in regimental strength, had advanced up to 25 miles west of Bardia.

On Sunday the 23d of November -- the German "Death Sunday" -- ^{was} the long-awaited ^{day of} decision, ~~fall~~.

The 21st Panzer Division had prepared defensive positions west and north of the Sidi Resegh airfield, while the 15th Panzer Division had taken up a favorable flanking position farther to the east. The 15th Panzer Division was reinforced by the 5th Panzer Regiment of the 21st Panzer Division. Corps headquarters ordered the reinforced division to advance southwestward toward Bir-el-Gubi. Toward 0730 the division was able to attack several batteries and numerous parked support vehicles from the rear and destroy them.

Unfortunately General Crueswell insisted that the division continue its southwestward movement in order to establish contact with the Ariete Armored Division. He rejected General Neumann-Silkow's idea to exploit the initial successes by continuing to attack westward.

By afternoon the far superior British forces, which now had to be attacked from the south,

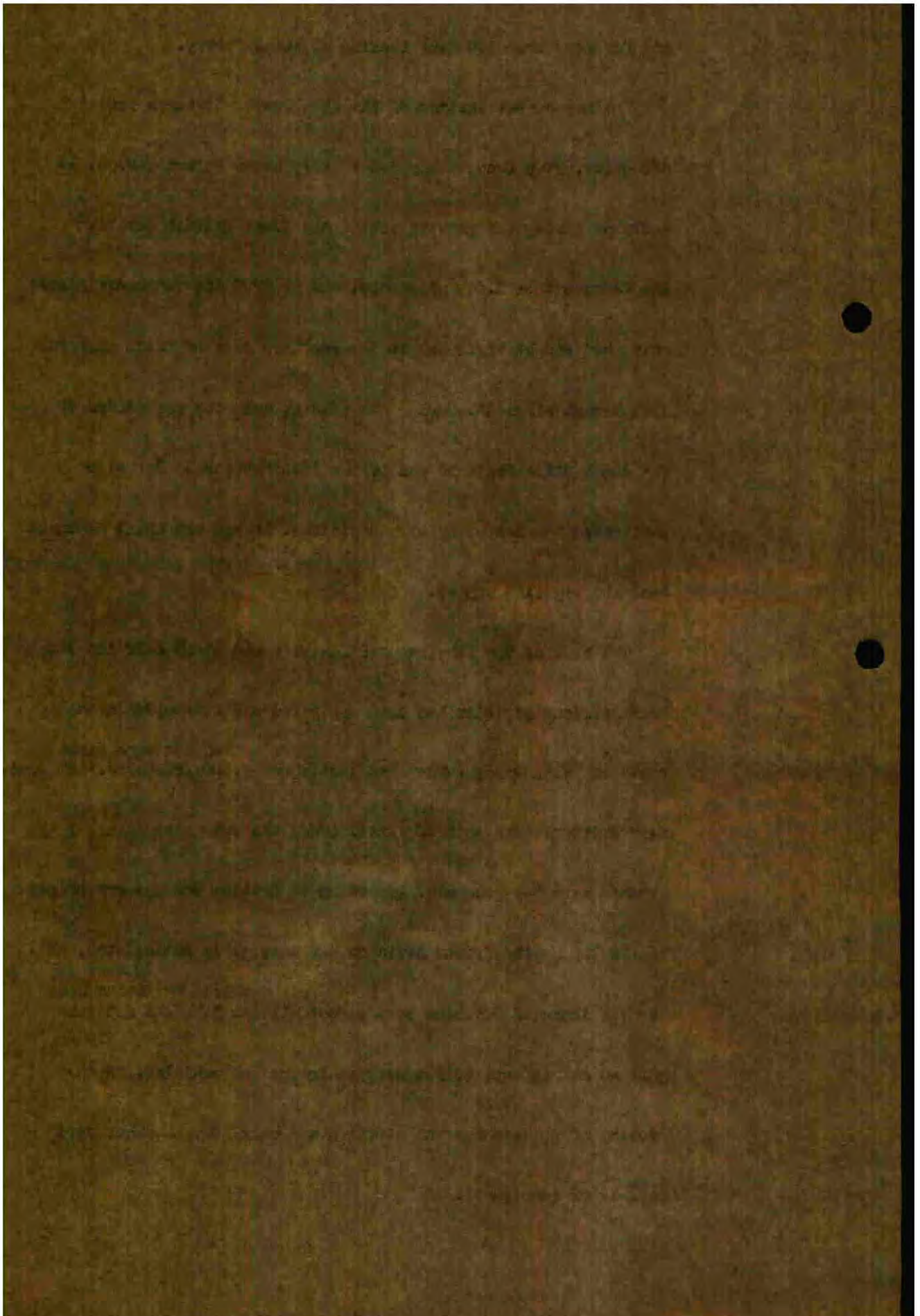


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were fully prepared for ^{the attack} defense. Having established a system of defense in depth, extending over a distance of more than six miles, the British expected the German assault with more than 100 tanks and far more than 100 guns backing up the infantry.

The new combat tactics of the 15th Panzer Division proved effective, even though they led to very heavy German losses. As early as during the penetration of the first British position the Germans took 1,000 prisoners, and by 1700 the tough divisional units had fought their way to the southern edge of hills near the Sidi Resegh airfield. During the evening dusk the thin lines of the 115th Rifle Regiment and of the 15th Motorcycle Battalion penetrated the second British positions. It was not until darkness that the fighting abated.

The bulk of the 7th Armoured Division and about half the 1st South African Division had been encircled and destroyed in the area south of Sidi Resegh. They had lost about 3,000 ^{men who were taken} prisoners, 120 guns, many antitank guns, and 80 tanks. Among the prisoners taken by the Germans were two generals. According to British sources one brigade of the 1st South African Division was completely annihilated, while the 7th Armoured Division lost almost all its ^{artillery pieces and} ~~antitank~~ antitank guns as well as most of its service troops and vehicles. On the evening of 23 November the division had only 40 tanks that were capable of commitment.



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On the other hand, the 15th Panzer Division also had only 50 tanks, but the division had succeeded in forcing the British to give battle with reversed front.

After six days of fighting along the Sollum line, the German strong point at Sidi Omar was still held by its defenders and so was Halfaya Pass. A major portion of the line, however, had been broken through by strong British forces -- the 2d New Zealand Division reinforced by the 1st Tank Battalion (Army troops) -- which bypassed Sidi Omar, captured Capuzzo, and advanced along the Via Balbia toward the west in the direction of Tobruk. In so doing the British forces threatened the supply dumps and tank maintenance and repair shops of the Africa Corps in the Gambut area.

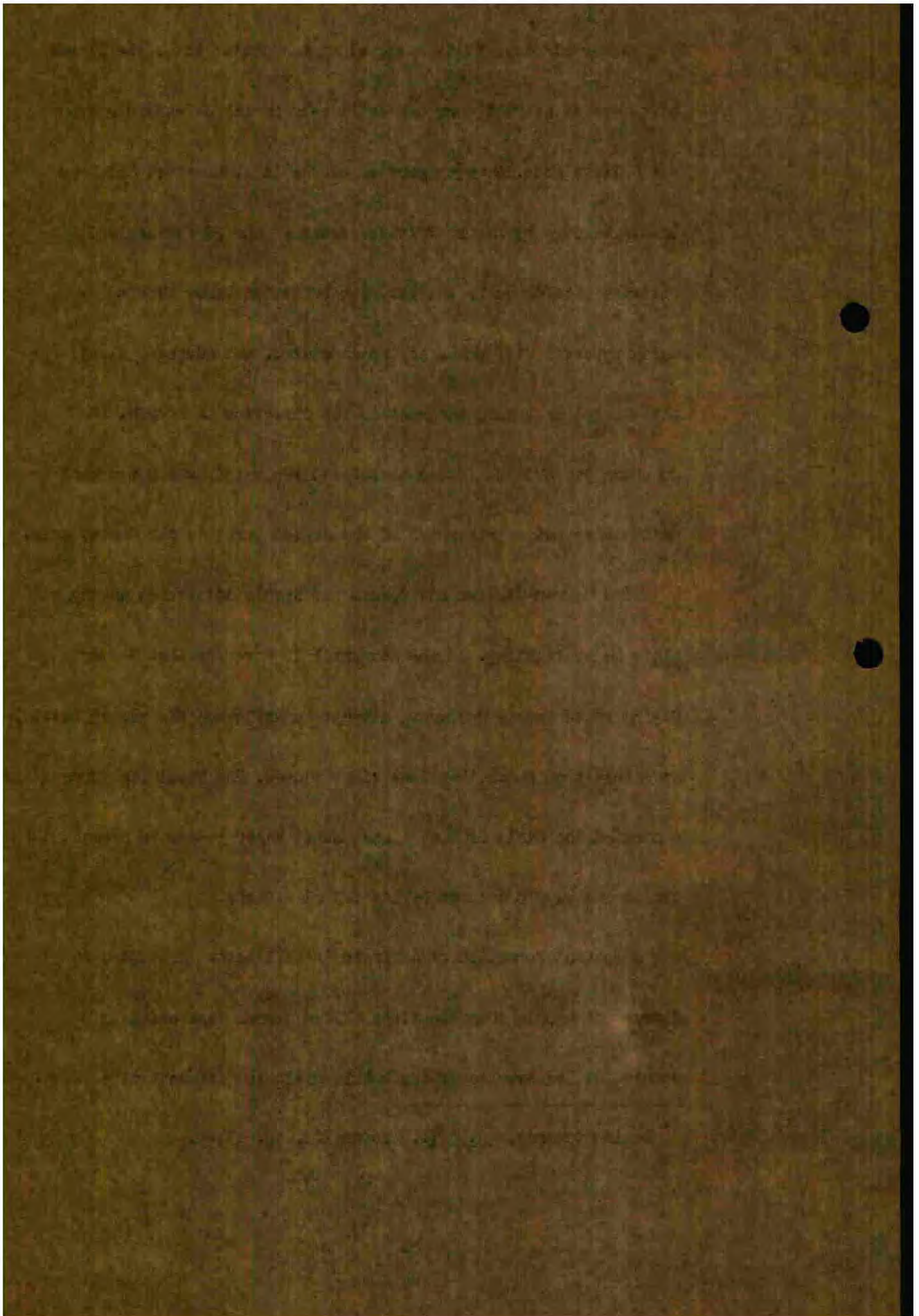
The German-Italian air forces had hardly intervened during all this heavy fighting. It was not until 20 November that German flying units made a desperate attempt to influence the ground battle, as a result of which they lost eight planes. The Royal Air Force dominated the field of battle and caused heavy losses to German troops and supply columns by low-level attacks.

A special formation of 6 "Winston's Wellington" attempted to disrupt the radio communications of the German tank units by passing at low level over the battle field in different directions.

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Denie Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 174-5.

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The army commander and his staff greatly missed air reconnaissance information which was almost completely absent. They were absolutely in the dark, since ground reconnaissance patrols were barely capable of penetrating ^{the Ben-Hadu Gues}.

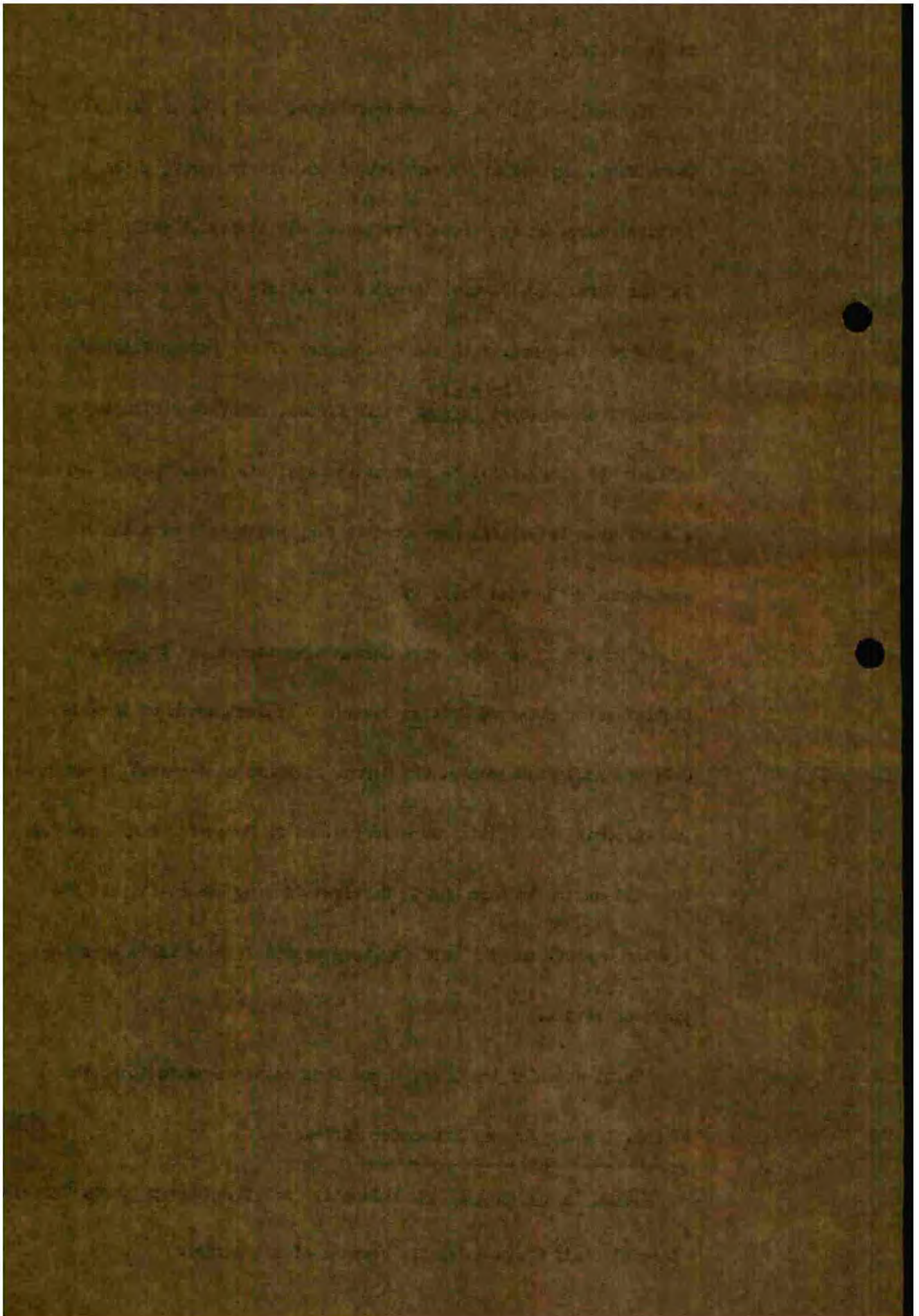
The newly appointed Commander-in-Chief South, Field Marshal Kesselring, arrived at Panzer Group headquarters during these critical days. He immediately requested air transport units from the Air Force High Command in order to satisfy the most urgent supply requirements. With the concurrence of the Panzer Group commander he employed Special Luftwaffe Staff Africa, reinforced with supply units of the Luftwaffe, to protect the Agadebia area. Special Unit 288, a reinforced battalion, was moved to Benghazi by air with the assistance of Special Staff F.

On 21 and 22 November some German dive-bomber and twin-engine fighter units attacked British motorised columns south of Bir-el-Gubi and inflicted losses. The German fighters also gradually succeeded in overcoming the British superiority. On 22 November they shot down 10 multi-engine bombers and 14 Curtiss's during escort flights and fighter sweeps, and the next day they scored 12 more kills over the field of battle.

On 21 November the X Air Corps sent reinforcements to North Africa. The Air Brigade Commander Africa

¹³⁶
Feldzug in Afrika 1941/42, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 3, pp. 126 -133.

Special Staff F was under the command of the author.



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now had at his disposal one full bomber and one full dive-bomber wing, and after 1 December also an entire fighter wing. ¹³⁹

Instead of exploiting his major success of 23 November and completing the enemy defeat near Sidi-Reseigh, General Rommel made mistakes that seem totally incomprehensible.

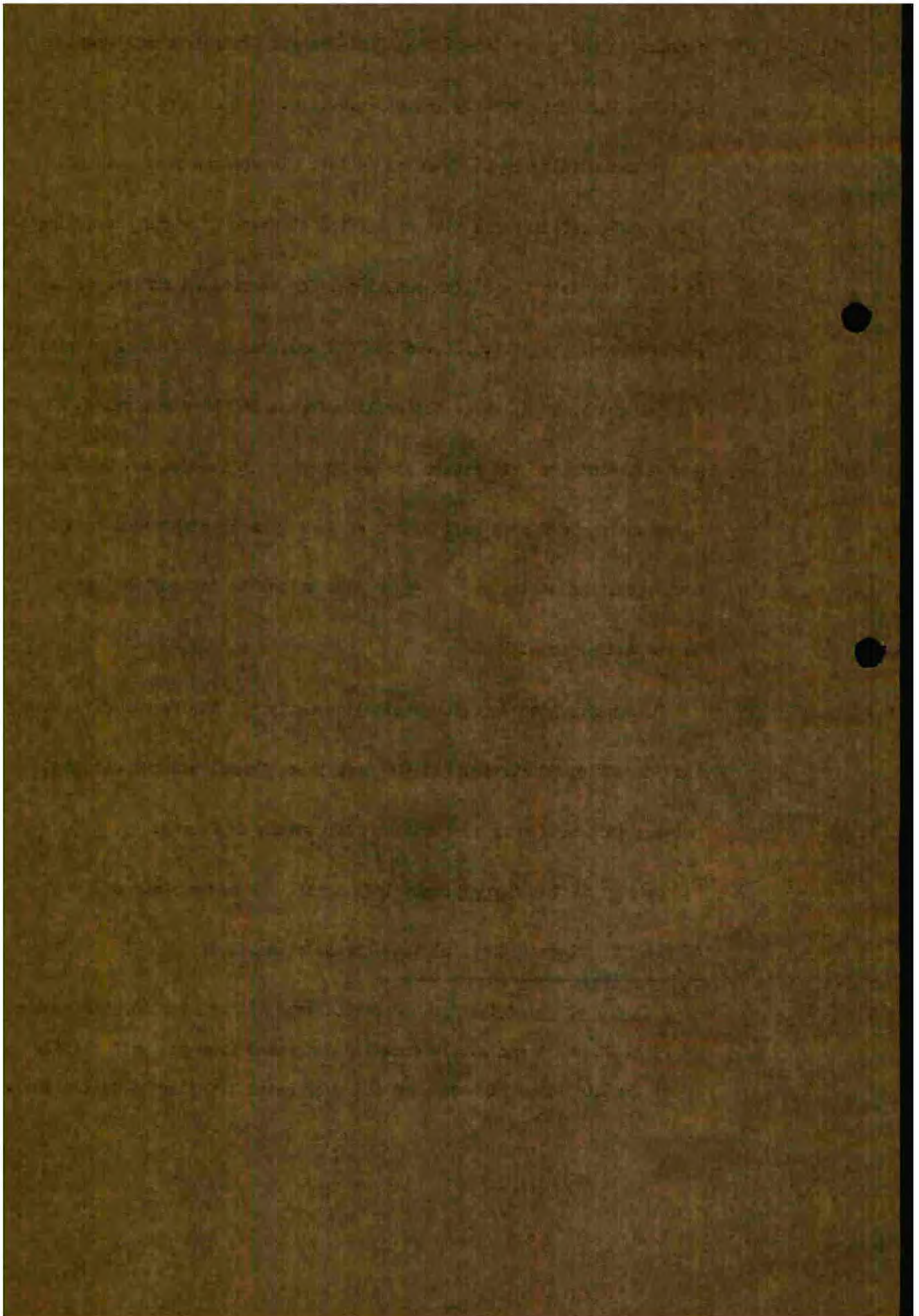
On the morning of 24 November he left his command post with only a few staff officers and without sufficient means of signal communication in order to visit the Sollum positions. The operations officer of the Panzer Group, Obstlt. i.G. (Lt. Col.) Westphal, was given the responsibility for the entire area, where the British forces had been encircled. ~~XX~~ Rommel anticipated his return for 25 November at the latest. He planned to pursue the defeated British forces during their withdrawal to the southeast, and at the same time he also wanted to destroy the enemy in the Sollum area.

To achieve both operations simultaneously the two panzer divisions lacked sufficient forces, all the more since Rommel had not obtained precise information on the British disposition of forces.

On 24 November Germans tanks infiltrated the advance command post of the XXX Armoured Corps at the Gabr Saleh airfield

¹³⁹

Fliessführer Afrika for the period from 21 November to 20 December 1941, Sheets 3 and 4. (Information extracted from the wall charts of the Air Force High Command order of battle)(Karlsruhe Collection).



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at a time, when General Cunningham was in conference with General Norris. Elements of the 108th Squadron and the Blenheim aircraft of the army commander left the airfield hastily. The entire headquarters was turned upside down, and for awhile the command functions were neglected. "There followed an extremely fascinating period, which as a study in panic, complete confusion, and disorder is probably unexcelled in military history." (Tr.: No source given in text.)

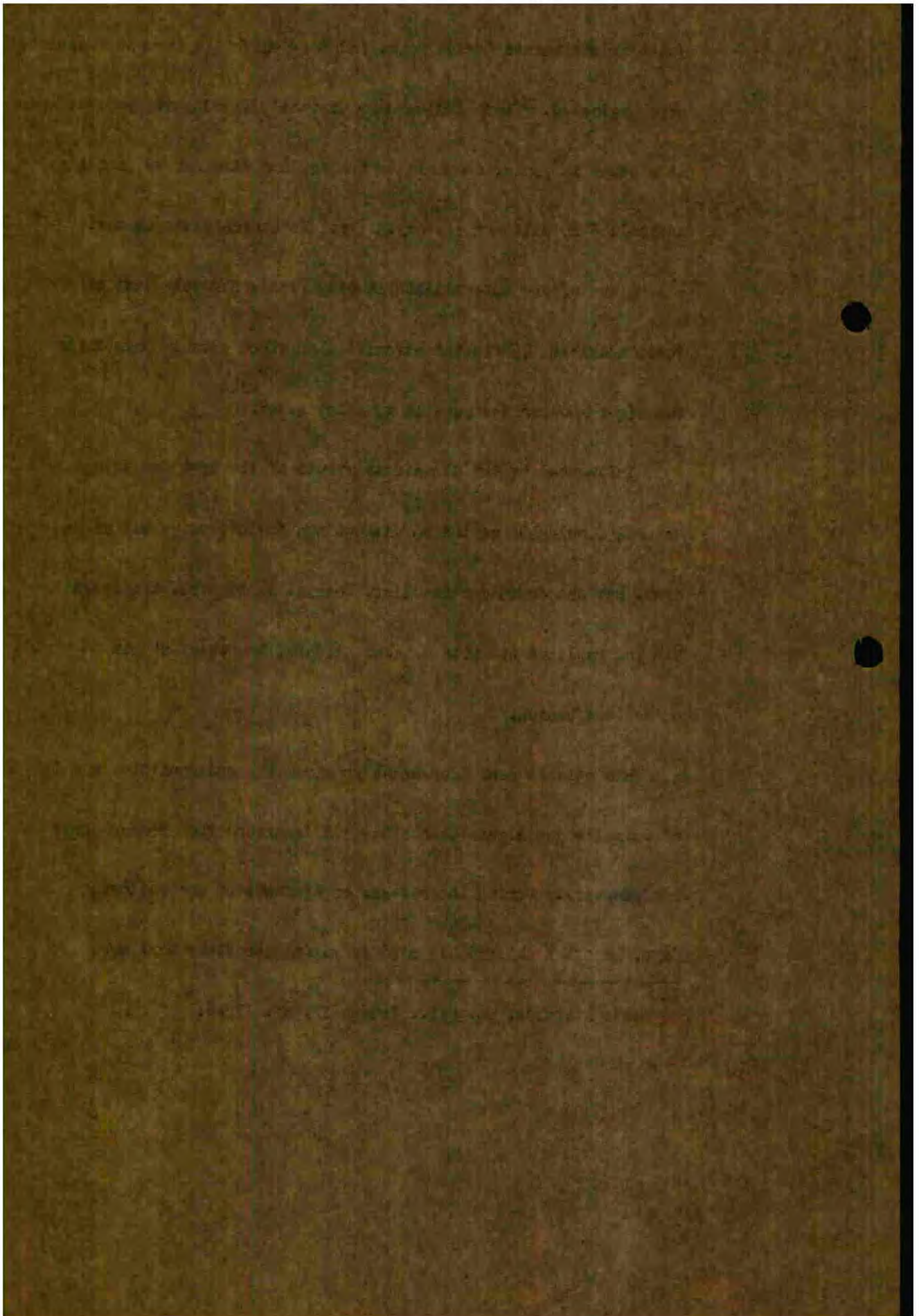
On one of the intermediate landing fields directly east of Fort Maddalena 175 fighter aircraft that stood closely massed for the night escaped destruction by coincidence.

Influenced by the disastrous events of the last few days General Cunningham wanted to discontinue the offensive and withdraw. But the Commander-in-Chief, General Auchinleck, dismissed him and replaced him with General Ritchie, the chief of his operations branch.

This episode near Gabr Saleh remained the only positive result of Rommel's decisions taken after his departure from Panzer Group headquarters. During the see-saw engagements of the following days, he often changed his mind in making decisions that were

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 175-6.



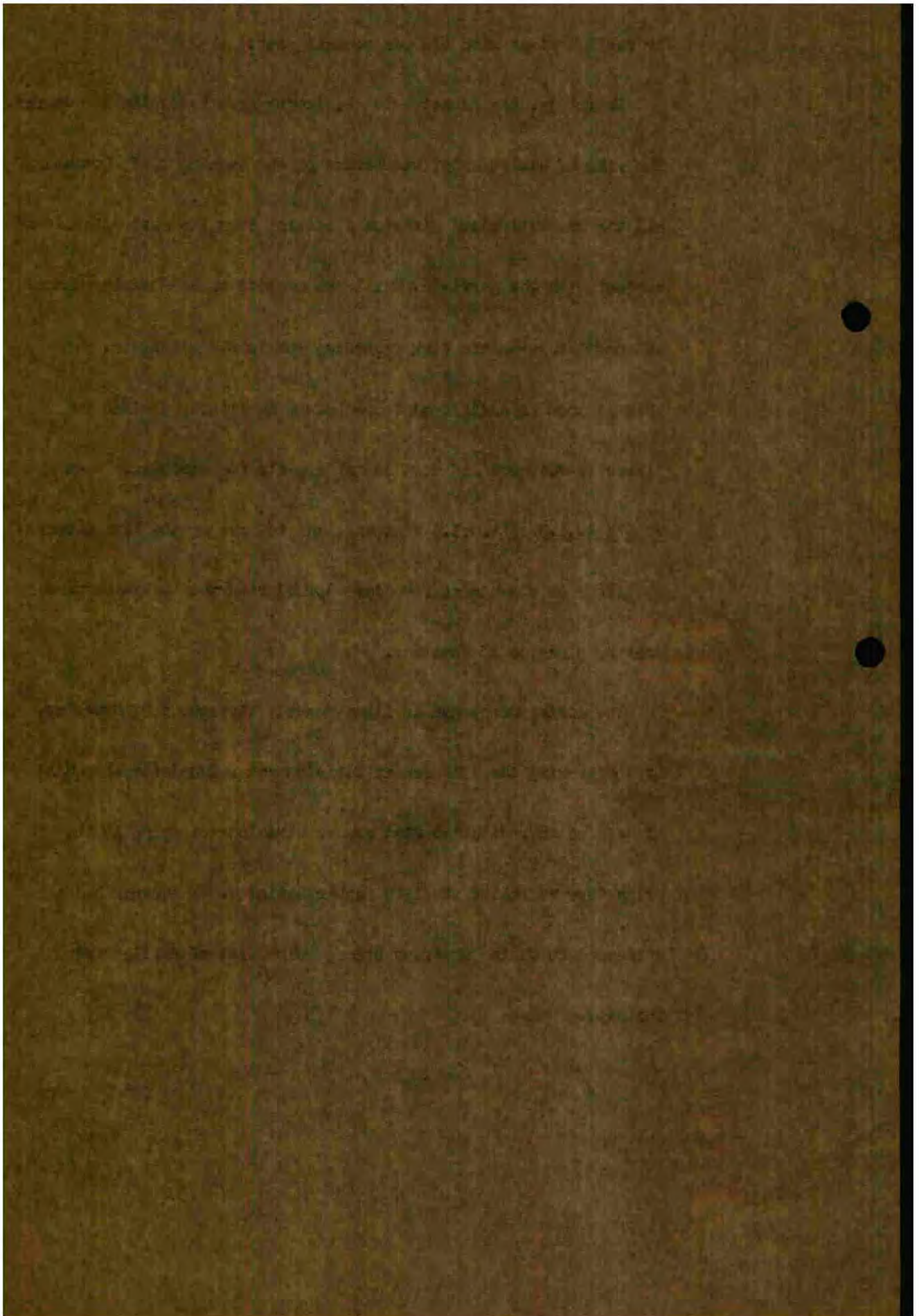
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based on wrong assumptions. The logistical difficulties increased, but despite this fact he assigned impossible missions to isolated elements and subjected them to unnecessary losses. He had no air or radio contact with his own command post.

Meanwhile, the disaster in the Tobruk area had taken its course. The ring of encirclement was broken on the evening of 25 November, and the 2d New Zealand Division attacking from the east established contact with the garrison. Until the morning of 26 November Rommel was completely in the dark regarding the Tobruk situation. Even then it took 24 additional hours before he finally decided to listen to the more and more urgent appeals for assistance made by Obstlt.i.G. (Lt.Col.) Westphal, and to move up the Africa Corps.

After an absence of five days Rommel returned to his command post by plane on 28 November.

The Africa Corps had to fight heavily throughout 27 November. By the evening the 15th Panzer Division had reached the area east of Sidi Barrani, with the 21st Panzer Division moving up to the Trigh Capuzzo behind the 15th Panzer Division. The former had not succeeded in taking an enemy strong point west of Bardia during the day.



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"In retrospect Rommel's thrust to the Sollum line appears like a nightmare. As a matter of fact, it constituted the turning point of the entire campaign in North Africa."

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During the following days the Germans succeeded in destroying the 2d New Zealand Division after heavy, see-saw fighting during which they had to make an all-out effort. The New Zealand division lost 2,500 men taken prisoner, 45 artillery pieces, and a major part of its equipment.

The rehabilitated 7th Armoured Division which had been committed by the British in a relief thrust from the south, could not change the outcome of the battle, although it had three times as many tanks as the Germans.

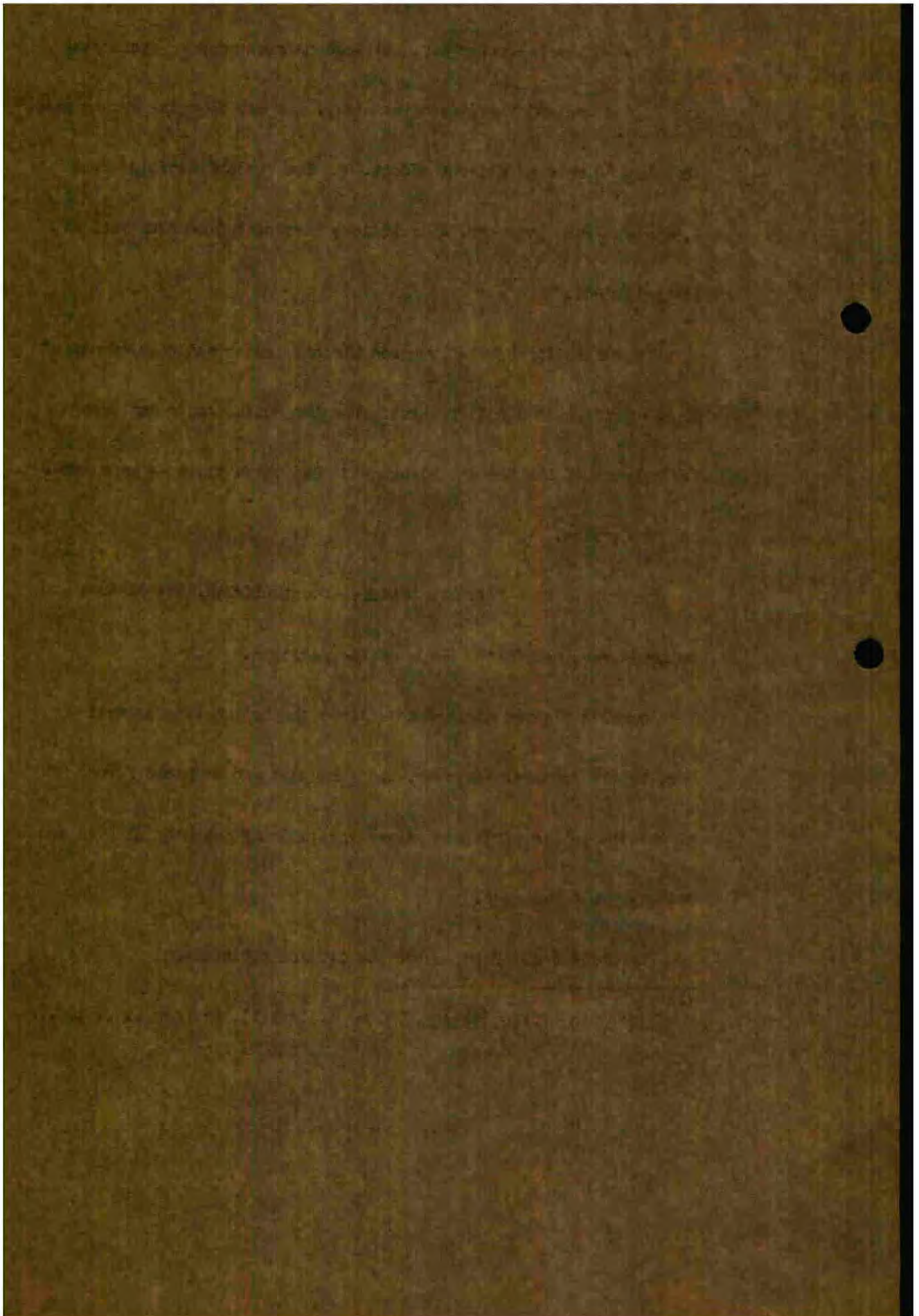
The ring around Tobruk was almost reestablished, but El Duda and Belhamed remained in the hands of the garrison.

Rommel's renewed attempt to relieve the Sollum line as well resulted in failure. Moreover, the exhausted and weakened forces of the two panzer divisions proved incapable of retaking El Duda and Belhamed on 4 December.

The British Air Force saved the difficult situation

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Feldzug in Afrika 1941/42, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 4, p. 174.



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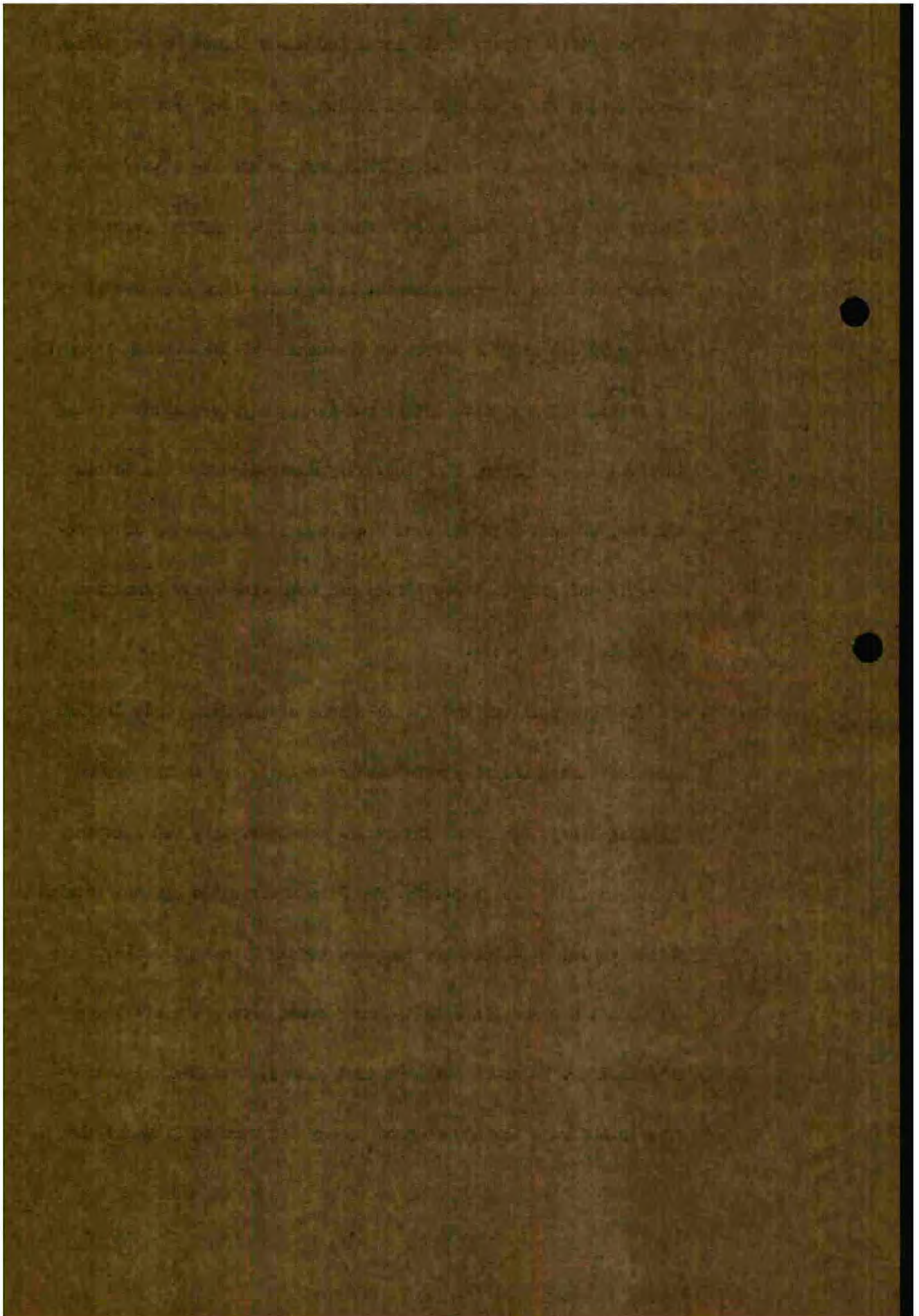
of the IXX Armoured Corps near Sidi Rasagh. By well-planned flying missions the Royal Air Force units almost achieved air superiority.

The British flying units inflicted heavy losses on the Africa Corps during its advance toward Sollum, and at the same time lent support to the sortie of the Tobruk garrison and the attack of the 2d New Zealand Division against the rear of the ^{Axis} ~~German~~ forces forming the ring of encirclement. Being under fire from two sides had a very detrimental effect on the morale of the Italian troops.

^{Strong} British flying units intervened during daytime almost without interval in the ground fighting. They controlled the Via Balbia all day, so that Axis vehicles could use it only during darkness.

Axis shipping to North Africa had been completely paralyzed by the Royal Air Force.

The German fliers had little chance of equalizing this British air superiority, and they were unable to intervene in the ground fighting except for short intervals. Moreover, they had lost the Gambut airfield for jump-offs. The German air raids against British supply vehicles, which were launched by night, had no decisive influence. Cooperation with the Army headquarters was still unsatisfactory. To carry out a radical change, Field Marshal Kesselring established the new command agency Air Command Libya at the



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beginning of December and appointed as chief Obstlt.i.C. (Lt.Col.)

fully ^{officer} Heymer, a qualified ^{officer} who had experience in the North African theater. Up to that time he had been in command of the Army reconnaissance squadron of the Panzer Group.

Field Marshal Kesselring gave Heymer the principal mission of revitalizing the supply system across the Mediterranean. To carry out this mission, the arrival of II Air Corps in North Africa would be necessary; this air corps was being transferred from Russia.

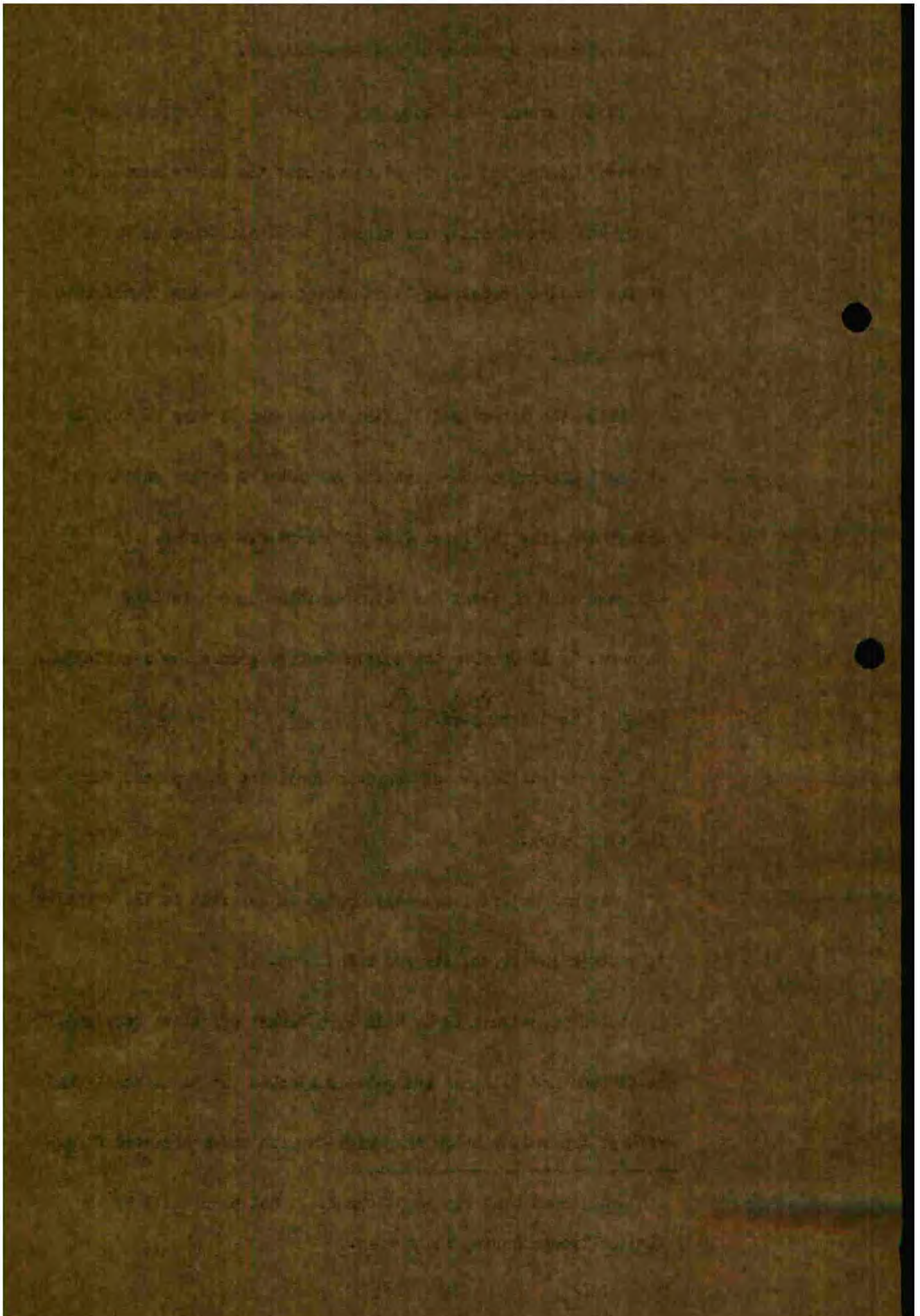
While the German and Italian troops had 14 days of supplies at the beginning of the fighting for Tobruk, severe shortages occurred during the first days of December. Moreover, the wear and tear on tanks and motor vehicles caused serious concern. By 18 October the supply traffic across the sea ~~XXXXXXXX~~ began to be interrupted.

The serious losses of manpower could not be replaced for the time being.

Men and materiel urgently needed an interval in the fighting to recover the ^{it} capability for commitment.

Tobruk continued to be held by a combat effective garrison, ^{while} the El Dada and Belhamed bridgeheads blocked the "Axis Road" and ~~and~~ kept the valley below the Trigh Capuzzo under observed fire.

A 41-mile road that bypassed Tobruk. It had been built by the Italian troops during the summer.



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South of Tobruk the 7th Armoured Division, which was continually being reinforced, threatened the German flank. British air superiority was a great handicap to the German command and troops.

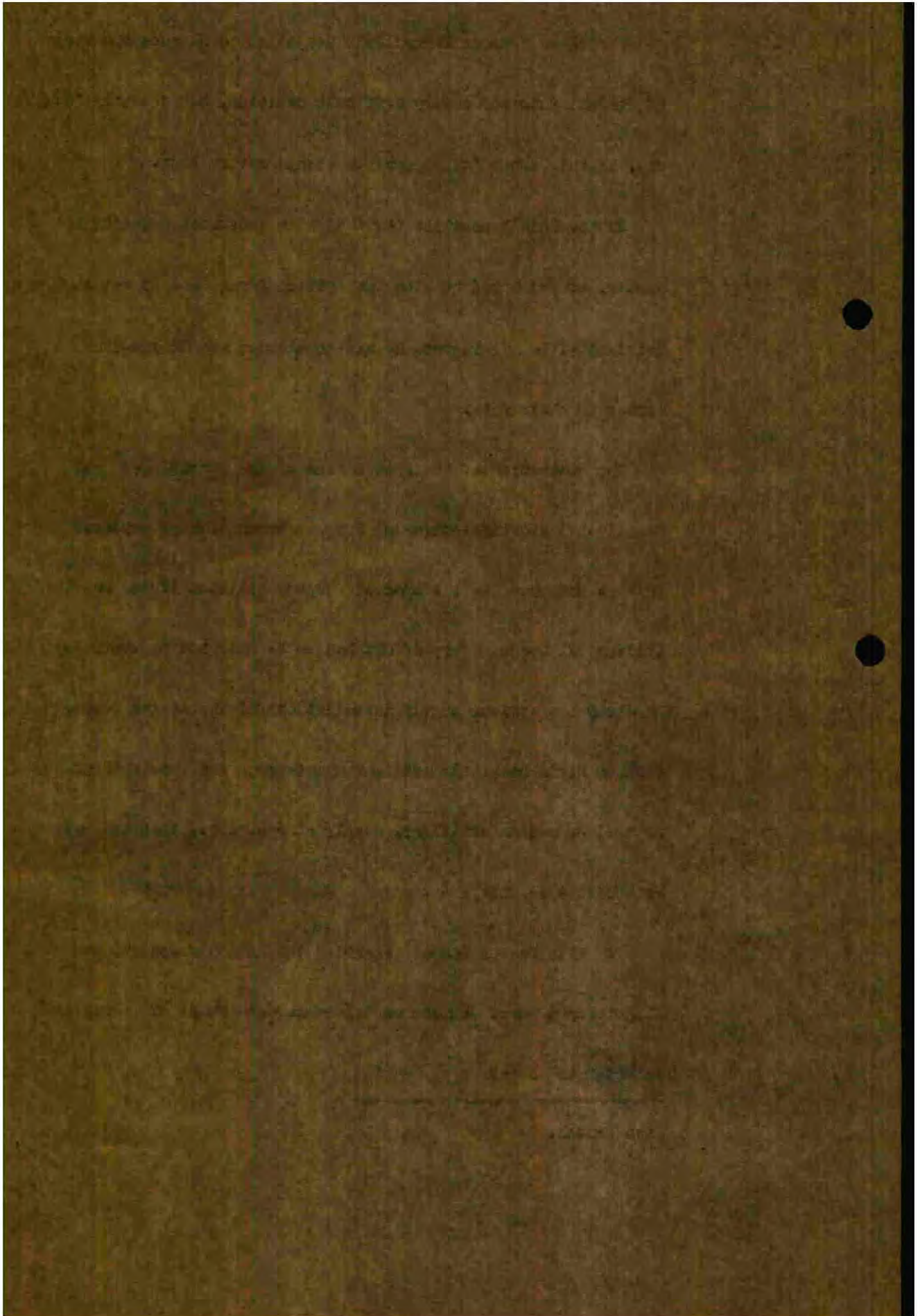
For these reasons Rommel felt compelled to abandon the siege of Tobruk; this was a very difficult decision, but the only feasible one, if the German forces were to escape destruction.

In the Gazala position that had been constructed during the summer, Rommel hoped to stop the British forces and to regain the initiative. To his regret, he had to abandon the Sollum line forces to their fate.

The evacuation of the east sector of the Tobruk area^{*} was complicated and time-consuming for the German forces employed in that sector zone -- the Special Purpose Division Africa and the Italian XXI Corps. Every effort had to be made not to leave to the enemy the various supply installations of the Africa Corps, such as field hospitals and tank maintenance and repair shops, as well as medium artillery, supply stores, etc., that had been established in that area.

For this reason Rommel assembled the Africa Corps and the XX Motorized Corps Gambia on 5 December southwest of Tobruk in order to launch

^{*} See sketch.

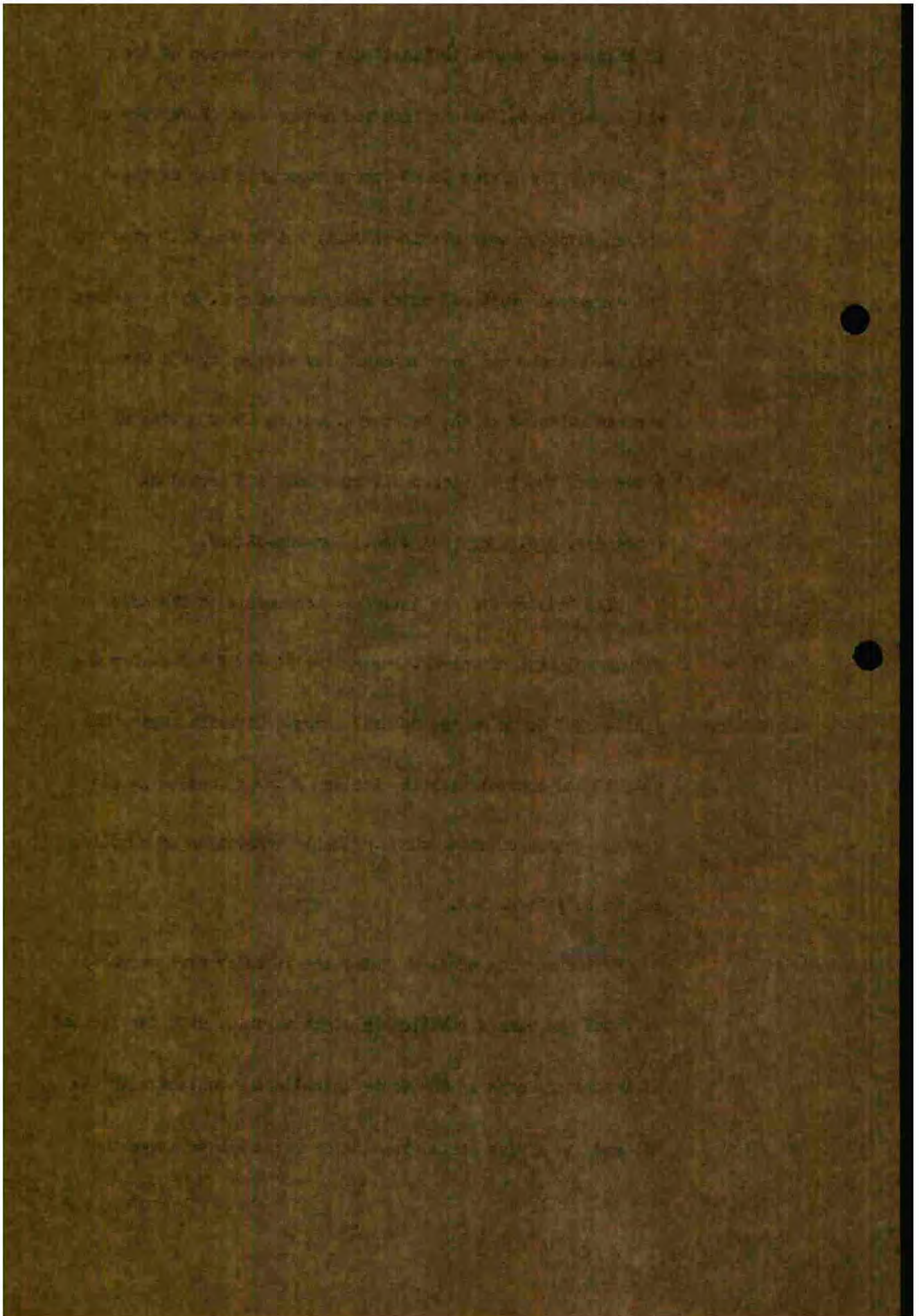


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a thrust to the southeast in the direction of Bir-el-Gubi, where he assumed the bulk of the British XIII Corps was located. This thrust had two purposes: First, to clarify the situation in this area, second to facilitate the evacuation of troops and supply installations from the sector east of Tobruk. On 5 December the Africa Corps forces overran a camp of the 4th Indian Division west of Bir-el-Gubi, but on the following day the Germans encountered major enemy resistance. By 7 December British attacks had been successfully stopped by the Germans who had switched to the defensive. During the fighting on 6 December the 15th Panzer Division lost its excellent commander, Gen. Major (Brig.Gen.) Neumann-Silkow.

The British did not interfere too much with the Axis withdrawal east of Tobruk. During the night of 8 December the Italian XII Corps and the Special Purpose Division Africa XXX established contact with the Italian X Corps located in the western sector outside Tobruk. Sizeable quantities of supplies had to be left behind.

By the morning of 11 December the infantry were supposed to reach the Gazala position in night marches, with the Italian XI Motorized Corps in the south establishing contact with the XXI and the Africa Corps. The Africa Corps was to cover the



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retrograde movement with its forces echeloned in depth toward the southeast.

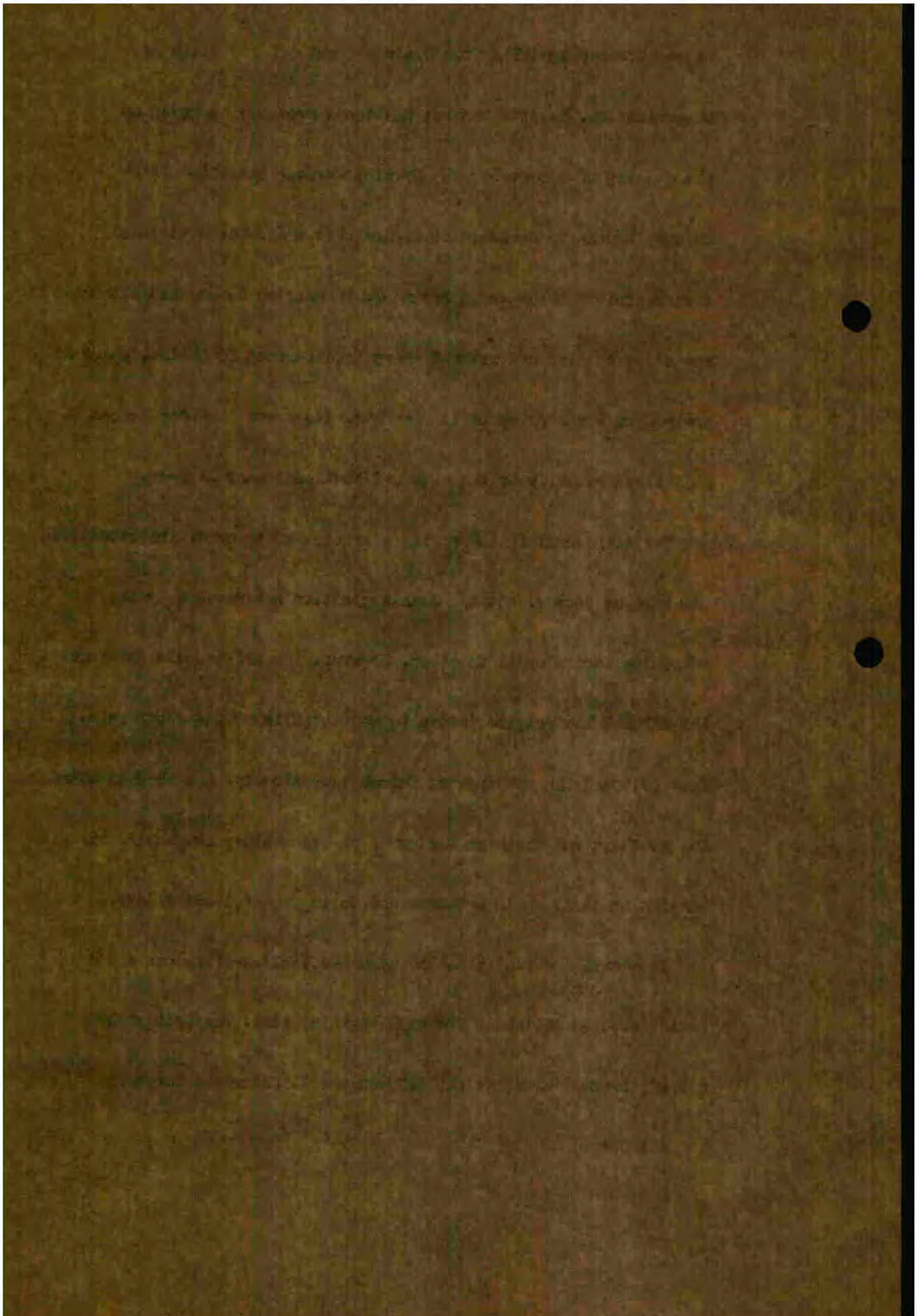
Rommel was afraid that the cross-desert forces of the enemy might threaten Agadabia from Gialo and cut off his lines of communication. Despite General Bastico's protests he moved on the evening of 9 December the Special Purpose Division Africa on army trucks to Agadabia to secure that area. The divisional forces arrived there on 13 December. The Africa Corps had withdrawn according to plan and without enemy interference to Chelma, where it arrived on the morning of 11 December. Its reconnaissance forces maintained security to the east and southeast near Signale.

The withdrawal in the northern sector led to critical situations and serious losses, but the Gazala position was reached by the remaining forces on 11 December. However, the British did not grant

Axis troops
the ~~XXXXXX~~ the respite needed to get established and recuperate.

They followed the withdrawing forces very closely, and they attacked their the southern and northern sectors of the line along its entire extension as early as 12 December and during the following days.

It seemed doubtful that the weakened Italian divisions could resist such an onslaught for any length of time. The British had already broken through a gap between the XX Motorized Corps and the XXI Corps



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and had established themselves in the rear of the two corps in the Bir-Temred area.

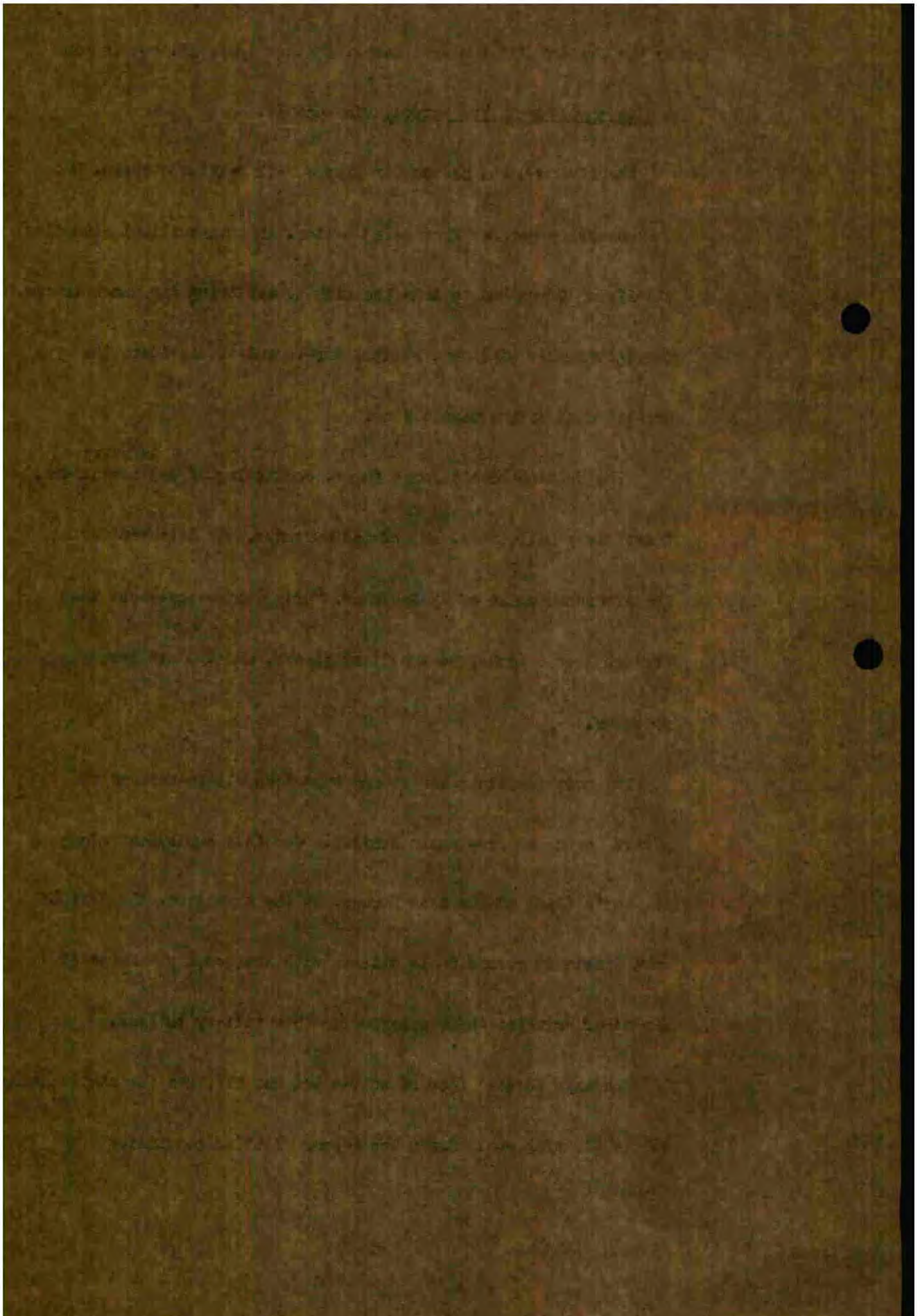
the
In the south there was still a threat of a close-in envelopment by the British XXX Armoured Corps. ^{unless} this corps ~~was~~ launched a wide envelopment and pursuit via Mechili.

The Africa Corps had so far stopped all British attacks, but the adversary was far from being beaten. In this critical situation the Africa Corps had to take the risk of employing its shock troops, the 15th Panzer Division, against Bir-Temred to liquidate the breakthrough of the Gazala line.

The British breakthrough forces, consisting of 2-3 ^{infantry} battalions, 2 artillery battalions, and 10 medium tanks, was defeated during the afternoon hours of 15 December. During this engagement the British lost 6 tanks, 26 artillery pieces, and 800 men taken prisoner.

The most immediate threat had thus been eliminated, and the Africa Corps was once again available for full employment along the south flank of the Axis forces. At the same time, the British were liable to resume their attacks with increased vehemence at any time, bringing their superiority in artillery to bear.

The Axis forces' flow of supply was cut off, and the continuation of the fighting would drain the German fighting capability



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and exhaust the supply reserves.

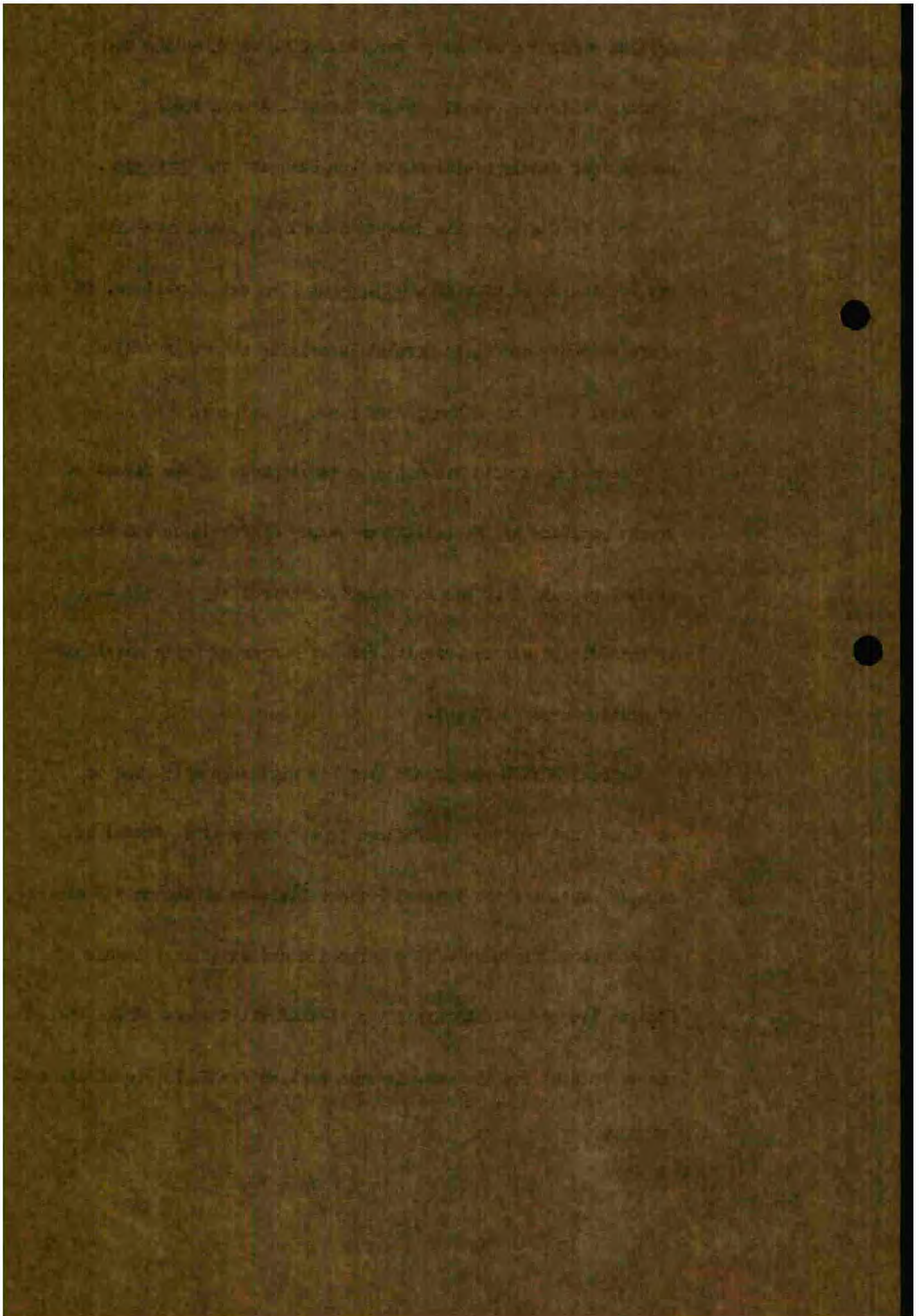
For these reasons and on the basis of an air reconnaissance report, according to which on the morning of 15 December strong British armored contingents were advancing south of the Der Matrim hills via Signale toward Mechili, Rommel decided to abandon the Gazala position and thus evacuate the Cyrenaica.

When he declared this intention during a conference with the Italian Chief of Staff, Gen. Oberst (General) Cavallaro, in whose company were Field Marshal Kesselring and other Italian generals, there was a sharp difference of opinion.

Rommel motivated his decision to withdraw to the Marsa el-Brega position by the well-known supply difficulties and the gradual paralysis of the Axis fighting capability as well as by the British air superiority and the danger of being enveloped by British armored forces.

Bastico
General ~~XXXXXX~~ was afraid that his divisions which had to march on foot would be sacrificed to the enemy since Rommel had already evacuated the Special Purpose Division Africa on 9 December.

A second surrender of the Cyrenaica and additional losses of
extinguish
Italian troops would ~~XXXXXX~~ the ~~XXXXXX~~ willingness of the Italian people to continue the war. He even went so far ~~XX~~ in his excitement



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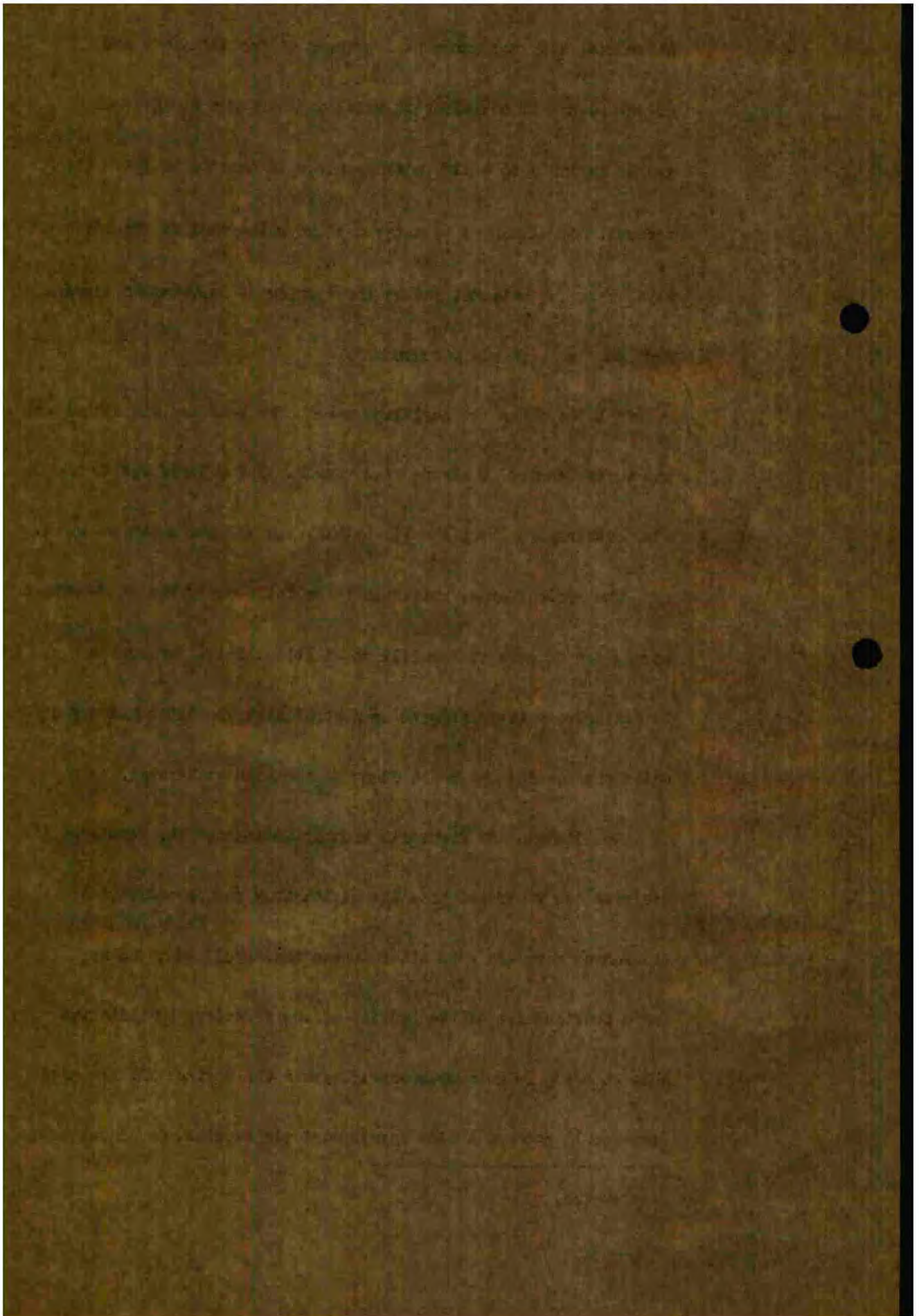
as to interdict such a withdrawal in his role as commander-in-chief. Field Marshal Kesselring intervened at this point and suggested that the speed of the withdrawal be regulated in accordance with the march performances of the Italian I and XII Corps. Losses of antiaircraft artillery suffered by the rear guards during such a slow withdrawal would have to be taken into account. Rommel agreed to carry out the withdrawal in accordance with these suggestions, and on the evening of 16 December General Bastico also gave his concurrence.

On 16 December the positions were to be held and the withdrawal was to be secured by strong rear guards.* The I Corps was to use the northern branch of the Via Balbia, the XII Corps the southern.

The Africa Corps, which was to be followed by the XX Motorized Corps, was to move via Mechili to El Abiar. The flying units were to concentrate their efforts on neutralizing the British armored units threatening the south flank of the Axis withdrawal.

Despite all the arguments brought up against it, Rommel's decision was the right one. The Eighth Army had in addition to the Tobruk garrison also other forces that could be moved up for a continuation of the British offensive before the Axis was able to bring in reinforcements. Whether the British XXX Armoured Corps would attempt a wide envelopment via Mechili, could not be

* See sketch.



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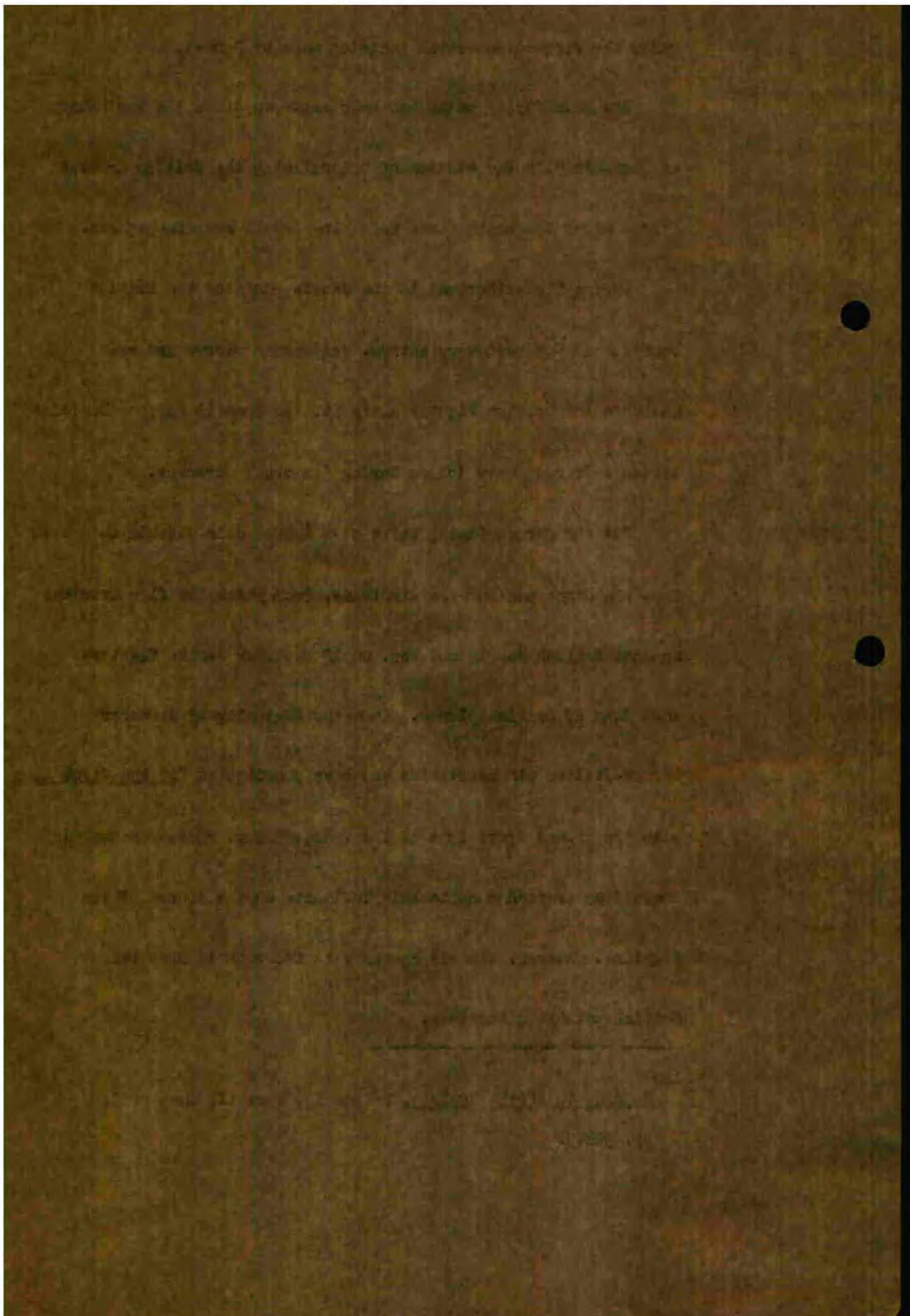
established with any certainty on 15 December. But the old principle, that the opponent always will take that action which will put friendly forces in the most difficult situation, justified under the circumstances the decision made by Rommel.

The Axis flying units had been employed since the beginning of December with the mission of neutralizing the British armored forces along the south flank near Bir-el-Gubi and Bir-Nacheim.

During the withdrawal to the Gazala position the British bombers had not been very active. While sand storms and rain hampered the British fighter aircraft, the Special Purpose Division ^{nevertheless} Africa suffered heavy losses during its truck movement.

But the German flying units also scored considerable successes from the Derna and Maturba airfields, from which they flew missions against British supply columns. On 12 December German fighters shot down 23 British planes. Since the beginning of December German-Italian air activities had been coordinated for the first time with the ground operations of the Panzer Group, whereupon the air operations exerted a noticeable influence on the course of the fighting. However, the Air Forces were too weak to stop the British pursuit altogether.

¹⁴²
¹⁴³ Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 5, pp. 304-5.

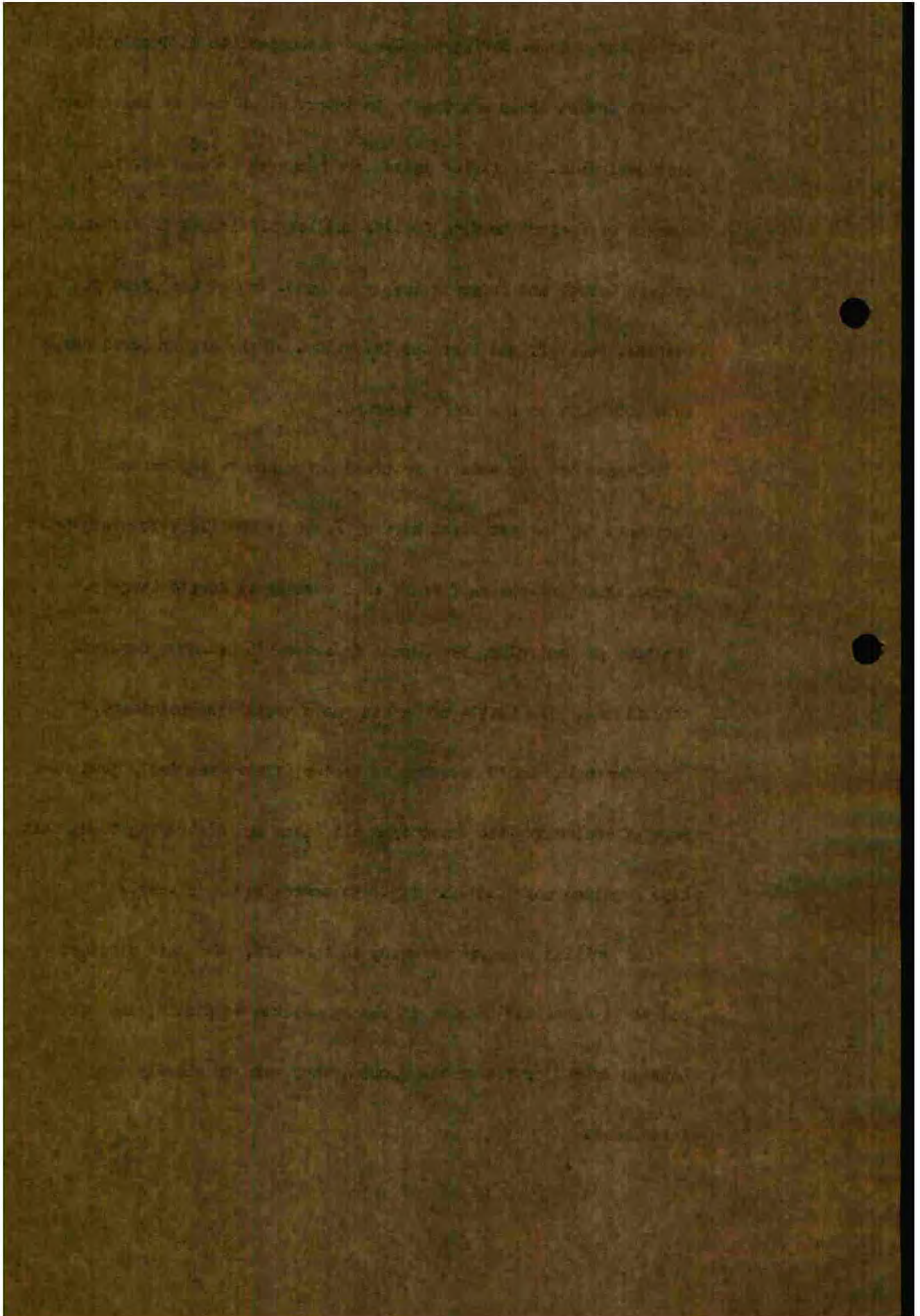


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The British flying units had forced the German troops advancing on Bardia to turn about and withdraw, and on 4 December they had made attacks in force during the fighting for El Duda and the Belhamed area. During the German withdrawal to El Gazala the Western Desert Group was unable to intervene as much as would have been desirable. The flying units were hampered by ^{bad} weather, the absence of forward landing fields, and the difficulty of distinguishing between German and friendly supply columns. One of the principal reasons, however, was that the intentions of the XXX Armoured Corps were not known to the bomber command.

"Damned hot day today," reported Coningham to Tedder on 10 December, "my hardest fight here up front is the fight for targets. Needed three-and-one-half hours this morning to locate targets." The hope of encircling the German forces on 16 December remained unfulfilled. "The battle of Gazala was a great disappointment," wrote Coningham on 17 December to Tedder. "There was fully justified hope of encircling the enemy from all sides and destroying them; this hope remained unfulfilled." (Tr.: No source given in text.)

The British bombers were ready to take off, but their missions had to be cancelled because it was impossible to distinguish between friend or foe on the ground, they were so closely interlaced.



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The British fliers also missed an opportunity of raiding the Derna and Maturba airfields, where the German aircraft were crowded together.

On the other hand, the British continued their raids on Axis shipping without letup.

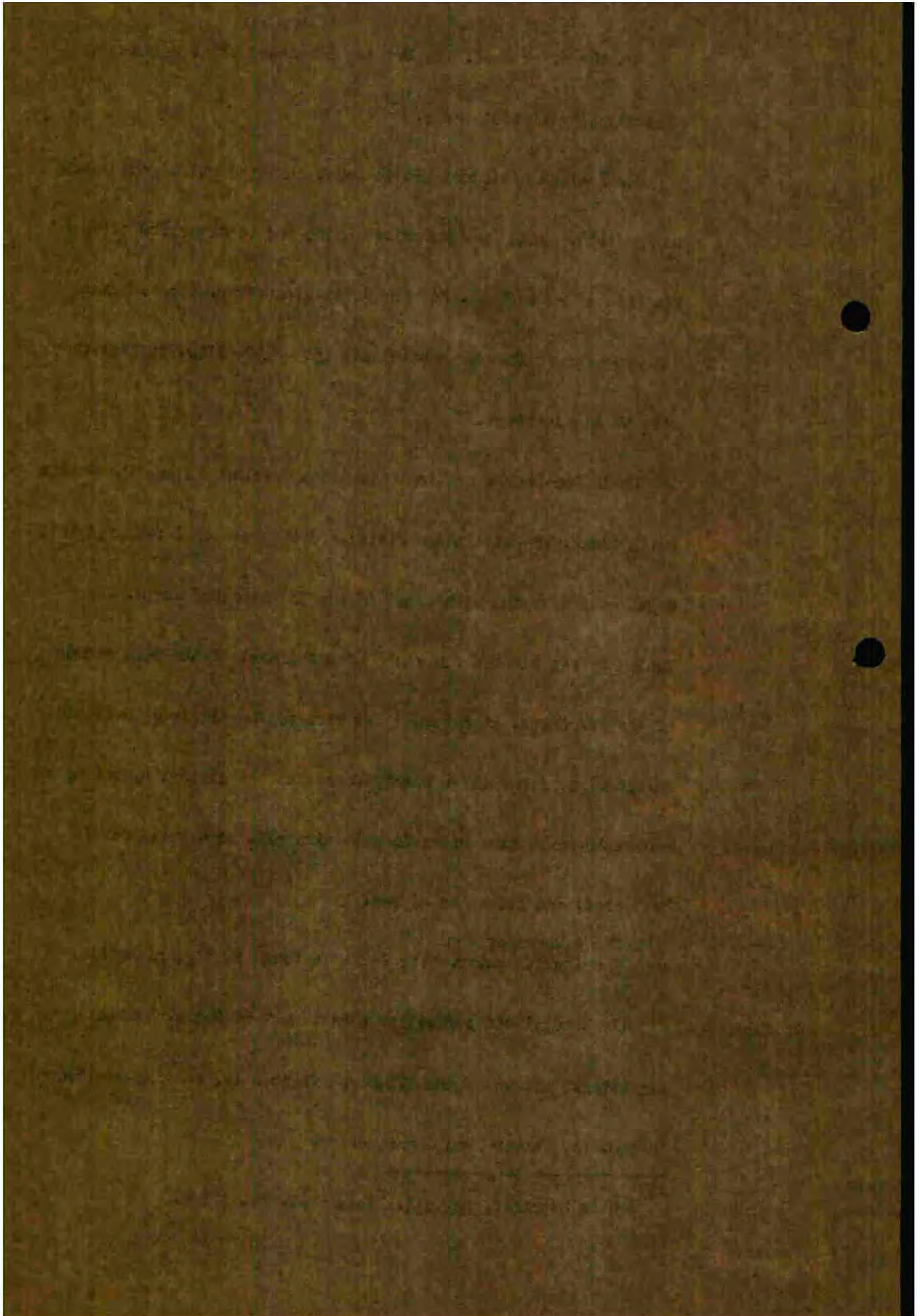
The Italian divisions had to march some 350 miles from Gazala to Agadabia, while the motorized units had to cover 280 miles via Mechili - Benghazi. For the British, however, the distance via Tengeder to Mars or Antelat was 150 - 190 miles, so that they were at an advantage.

On 18 December a critical situation developed along the German north flank. The 4th Indian Division drove west of Bir-Tenrad into a gap caused by the withdrawal of the XX Motorized Corps. The Indian forces blocked the route of withdrawal of the rear guards of the XXI Corps, then turned eastward to the airfields near Maturba, surprised the security forces at the airfields, and captured several unserviceable aircraft, some antiaircraft batteries, and prisoners of war.

On 20 December
The Italian units, which fought a tough rear guard action, finally brought the pursuit to a halt west of Derna. British air attacks hit the X and XXI Corps frequently, causing serious losses. The Panzer Group headquarters

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See is Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 178-9.



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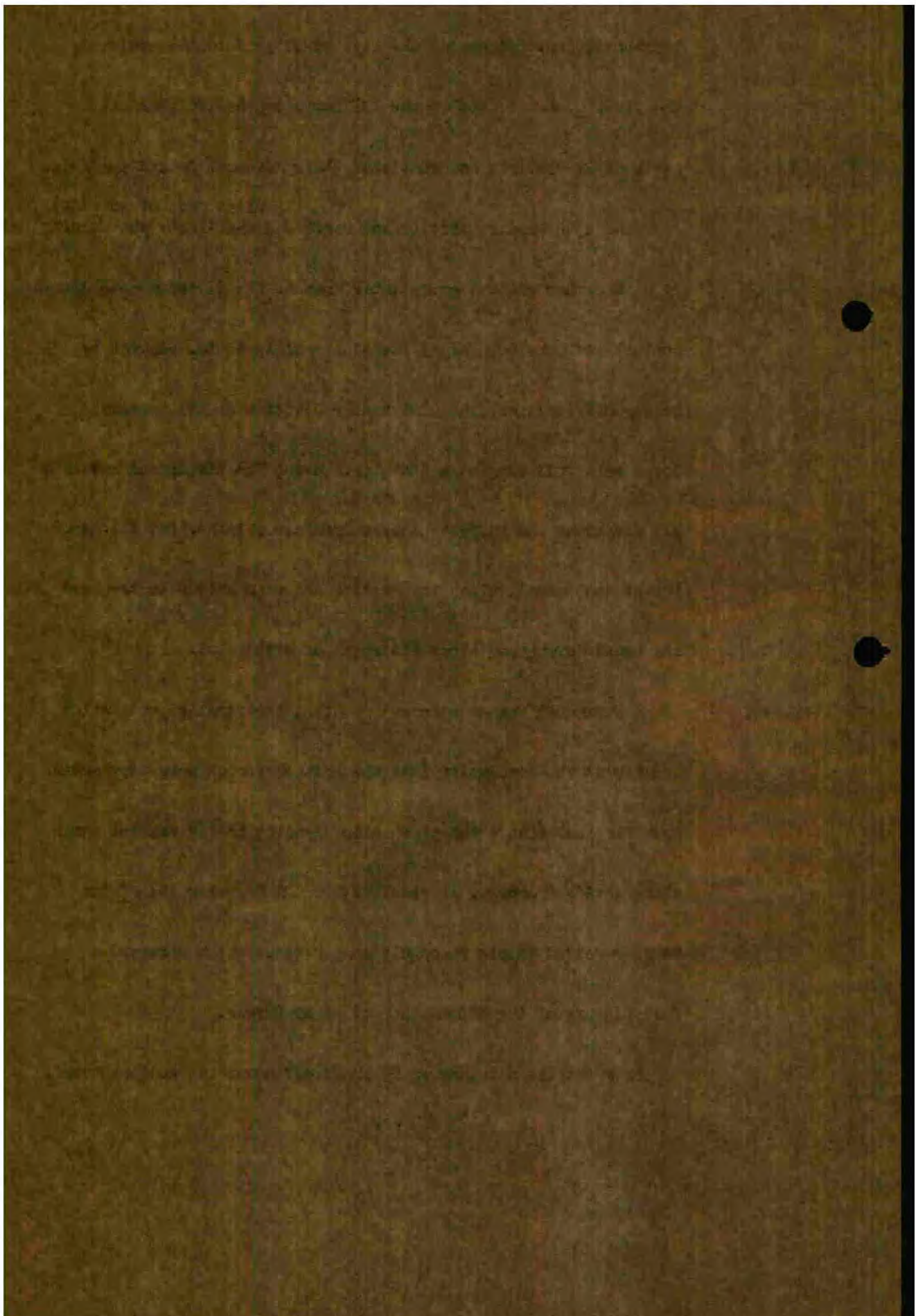
tried to accelerate the retrograde movement of the two corps by all means. In addition to Italian truck columns, German truck units that could be spared were also made available for shuttle transportation. Because of the high march performance achieved, the first combat troops of the XXI Corps reached Benghazi as early as 21 December and continued their movement toward Agadabia.

(15 miles west of Antelat)

The 15th Panzer Division had reached Sid-Salah by the evening of 21 December without enemy interference. The division established contact with the 90th Light Division near Agadabia. Plagued by supply difficulties, the 21st Panzer Division and XI Motorized Corps were following at a distance. During the withdrawal movement all divisions had suffered losses from air attacks. But the major threat had passed, since the British had been unable to trap ~~and~~ the Panzer Group and block its route of withdrawal.

During 21 December Rommel received the first reports which led him to the conclusion that the British forces were approaching from the east toward the steep slope leading to the coastal plain along a wide frontage. At about 1230 on 22 December the Africa Corps received an air reconnaissance message which conveyed a full picture of the disposition of enemy forces.

From Antelat a column of 25 tanks was advancing southwestward,



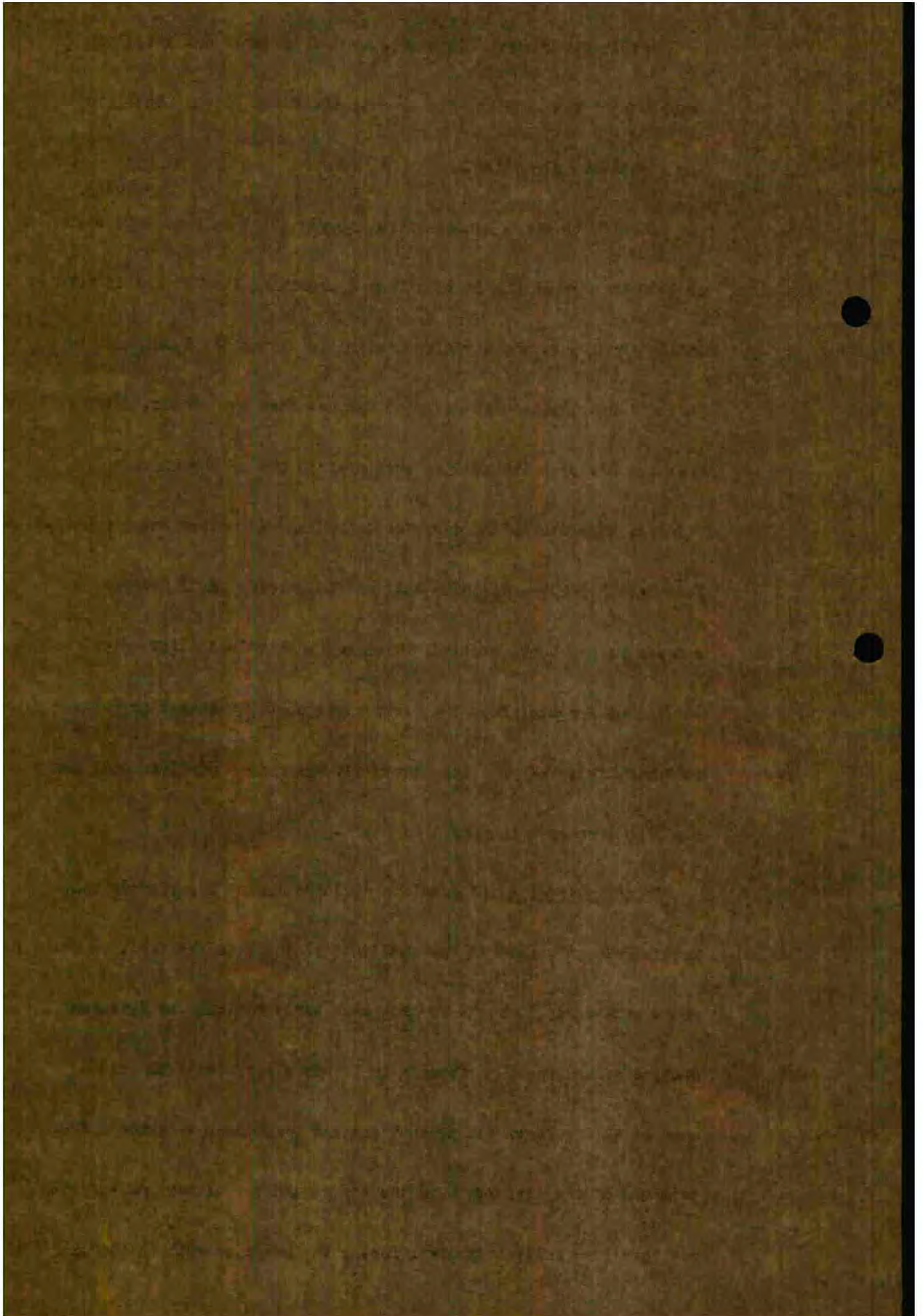
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north of Antelat another column of 30 tanks and several self-propelled artillery batteries was descending into the coastal plain and approaching the Via Balbia,

while other march columns protected by tanks and artillery were moving via Msus and the area to the north of that locality in a westward direction.

The Africa Corps headquarters ordered the 15th Panzer Division at 1400 to prevent the British from approaching the Via Balbia between Antelat and Msus. The division decided to attack the march column in the center, which had advanced farther than the others. After that the division intended to turn against one of the adjacent columns, with the latter decision depending on further developments. It was fortunately for the division that on the morning of 22 December a company of new tanks arrived, which had been unloaded five days earlier at Benghazi from the first naval convoy ^{having reached} ~~that had arrived~~ in North Africa after a long interval. The number of divisional tanks was thus increased to more than 40.

Radio intercepts informed the division during its advance that British elements were in the immediate vicinity to the east. On this short winter day it began to grow dark early so that the division stopped its advance, preferring to launch a surprise XXXI raid at dawn on 23 December. All precautions had been taken to conceal the presence of the division from the enemy, and the element of surprise was therefore fully preserved. During the surprise raid the Germans



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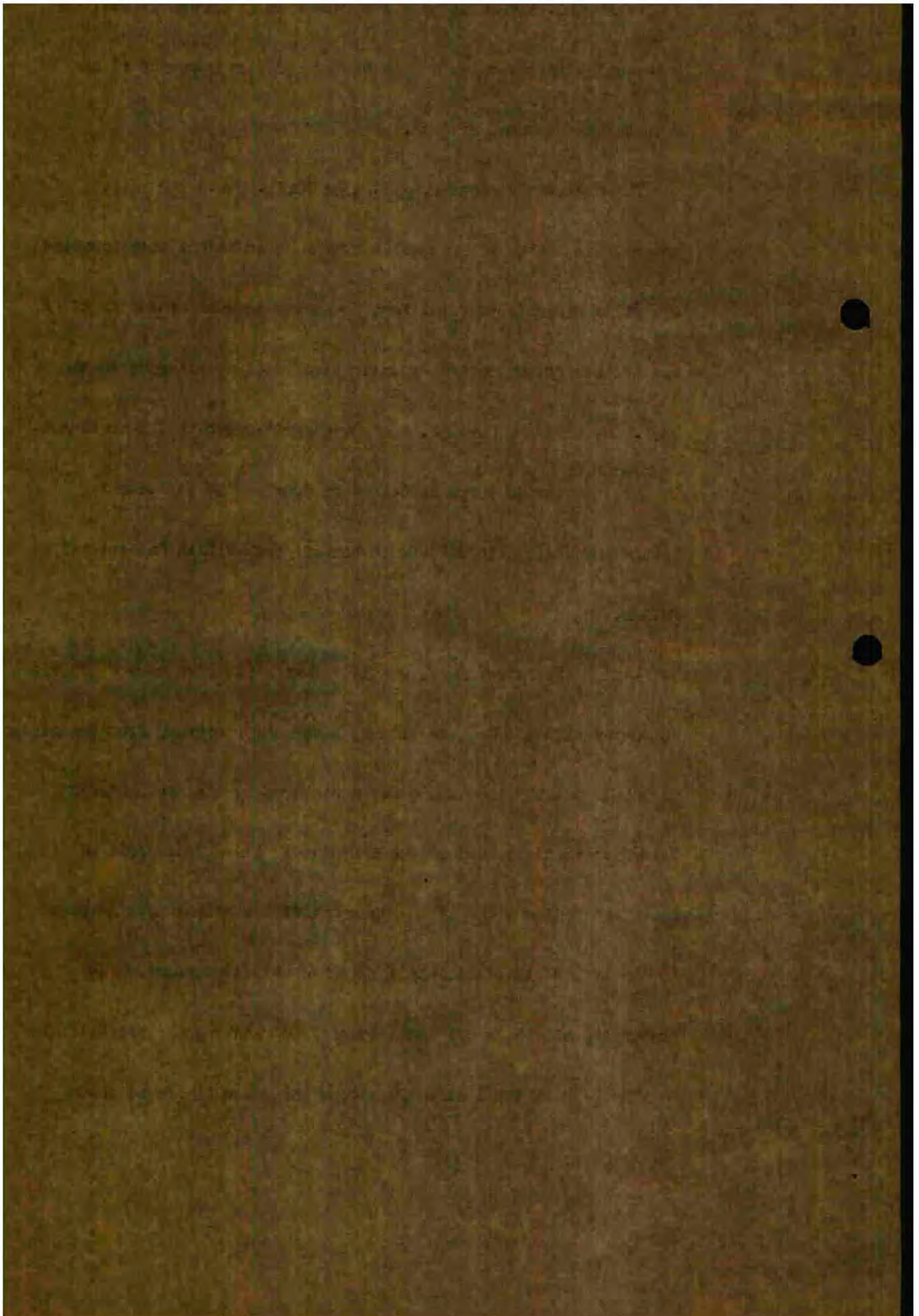
overran two batteries before the gun crews had time to fire a single shot. After a brief struggle the remaining British troops fled eastward. According to statements from prisoners of war, the enemy units involved in this encounter were the remnants of the British 4th Armoured Brigade.

The division commander, Gen. Major (Brig. Gen.) von Vaerst, ordered his troops to pursue the enemy. In so doing, they occupied the ridge without struggle. From there the Germans wanted to attack the British column in the vicinity of Antelat by a thrust in the rear. The British, however, had already withdrawn to the northeast.

At 1400 Africa Corps headquarters ordered the division to return immediately to Sidi-Baleh because the British had entered Spiluk.

During its return march the 15th Panzer Division made a surprise encounter with two British columns advancing southward from Seelaidine; they had probably been asked for assistance by the 4th Armoured Brigade. One of the columns was immediately dispersed, while the other was stopped. The 15th Panzer Division continued its movement to the area south of Sidi-Baleh; it had actually succeeded in preventing all three British columns from reaching the Via Balbia.

The bulk of the Italian XXI Corps had meanwhile moved into



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the positions prepared near Agadabia, and by 24 December the arrival of the very last elements of the Italian X Corps in those positions was ~~also~~ also to be expected.

The Africa Corps, including its two divisions and the Italian XI Motorized Corps assembled the same day around Sidi-Saleh, and during the night of 24 - 25 December it moved into the area southwest of Agadabia.

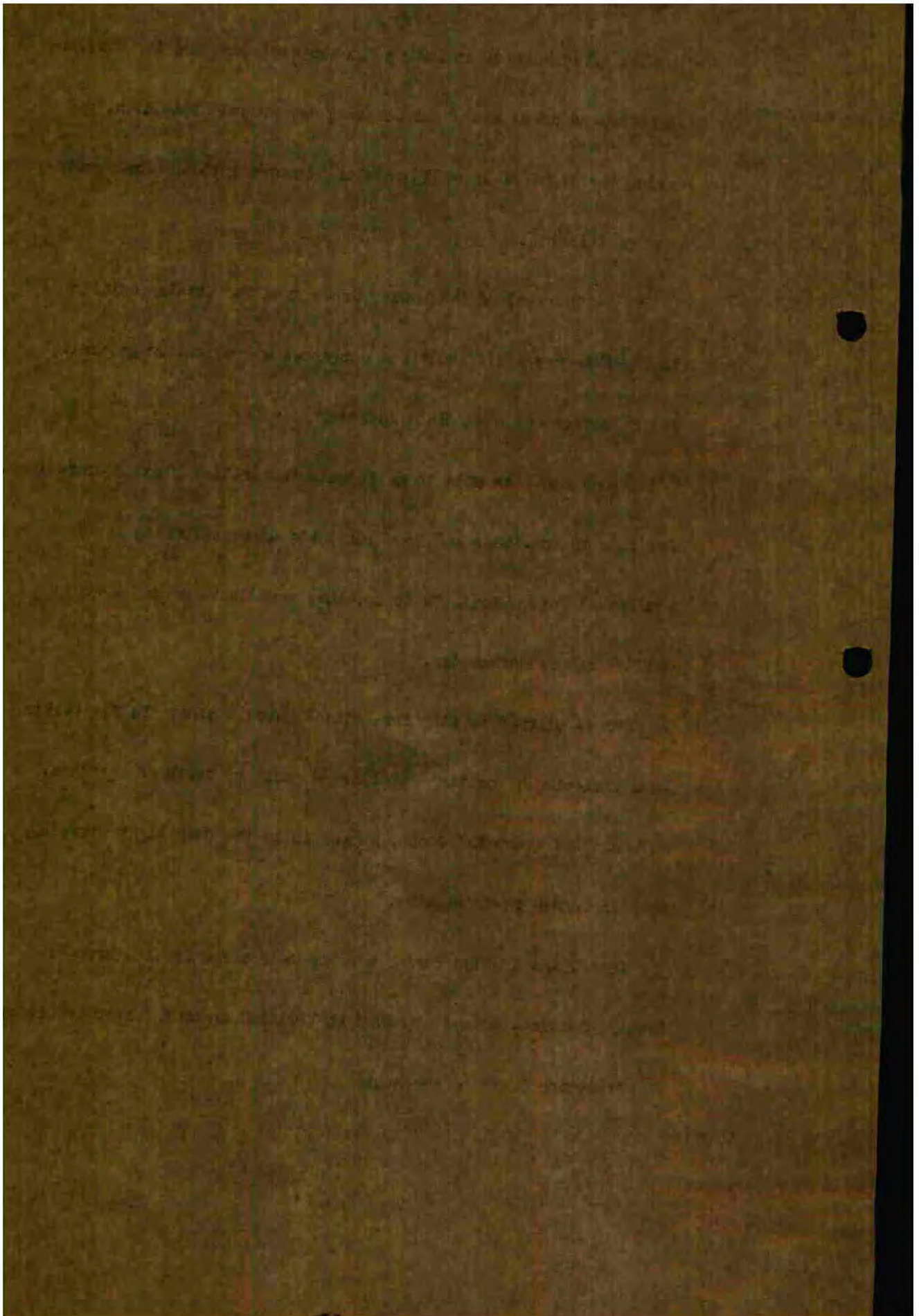
The withdrawal of the Panzer Group from the Gazala position to Agadabia was a difficult and dangerous operation. In general, the operation was a complete success.

Rommel had been able to anticipate the British plan of operations. For this reason, ^{British} they had been incapable of transforming the withdrawal into a rout. To do so, they would have needed a truly skilled armored commander.

Rommel planned to stop the British pursuit along the Via Balbia in a semi-circle position established east and north of Agadabia.

Here the X and XXI Corps, supported by the 90th Light Division, were to regain their stamina.

Later, the Italian forces were to be removed to the Marsa-el-Brega position. Rommel expected the British armored forces to attempt an enveloping drive to the south



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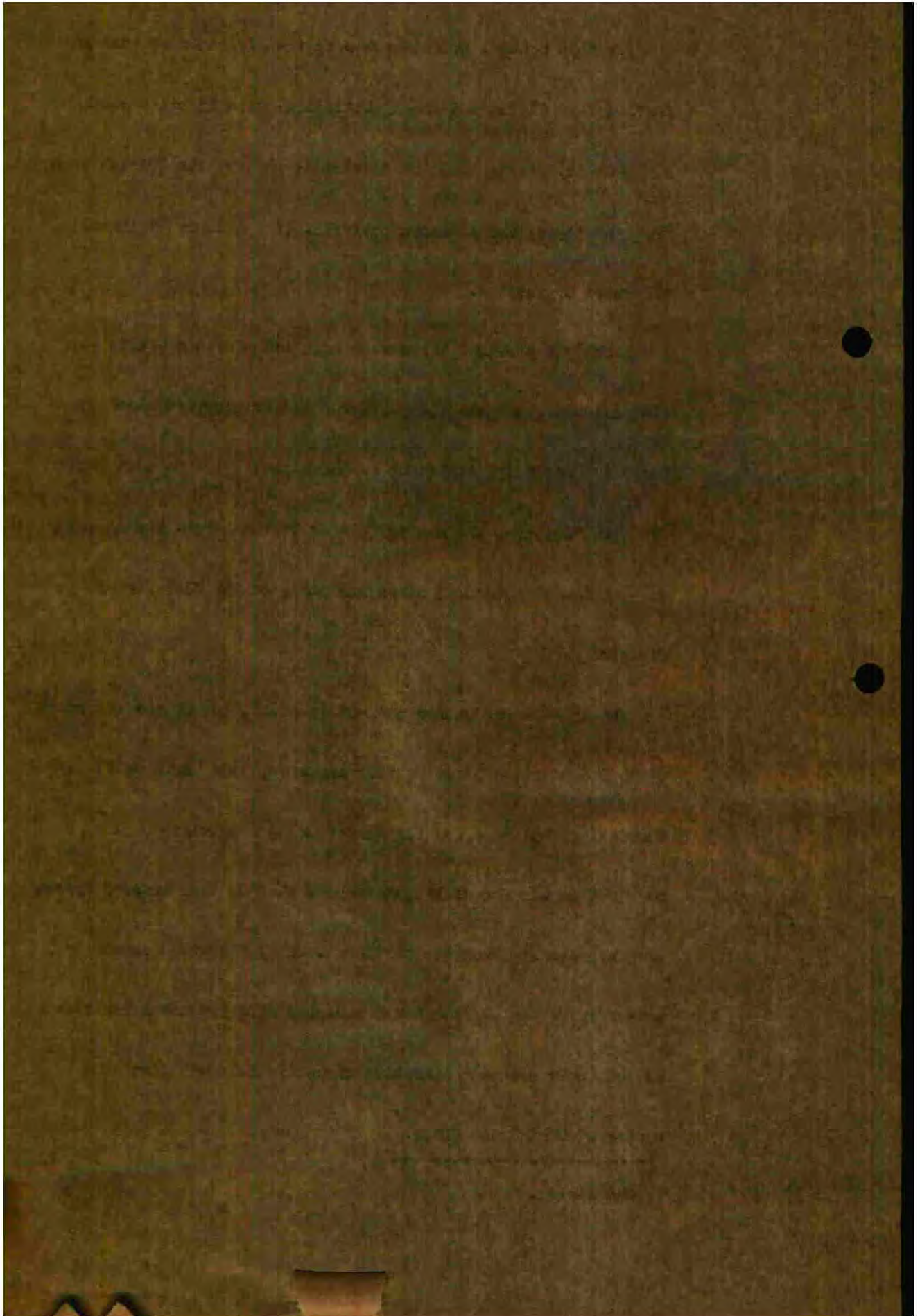
by which they would outflank the Agedabia position. This would give them free access to the Via Balbia.

For this reason, Rommel assembled the Africa Corps east and northeast of Gafia and the XX Motorized Corps 15 miles south of Agedabia, giving them the mission to prevent the British armor from enveloping the Agedabia position, if necessary by launching offensive operations.

Along the elevated terrain on both sides of the Gafia -- El-Bassiat highway the 15th Panzer Division occupied strongly fortified defensive positions on the right, with the 21st Panzer Division taking up the sector farther to the north. The assembly area of the XX Motorized Corps was north of the 21st Panzer Division.

The 25 December passed without incident, but on the afternoon of 26 December the first British tanks appeared north of El-Bassiat. On the same day the Panzer Group headquarters also received an air reconnaissance report that British armored forces were approaching from the northeast. On 27 ~~December~~ December an attack by ^{of} strong British forces equipped with 500 motor vehicles and 60 tanks seemed to threaten directly the north flank and center of the Africa Corps.

See sketch.



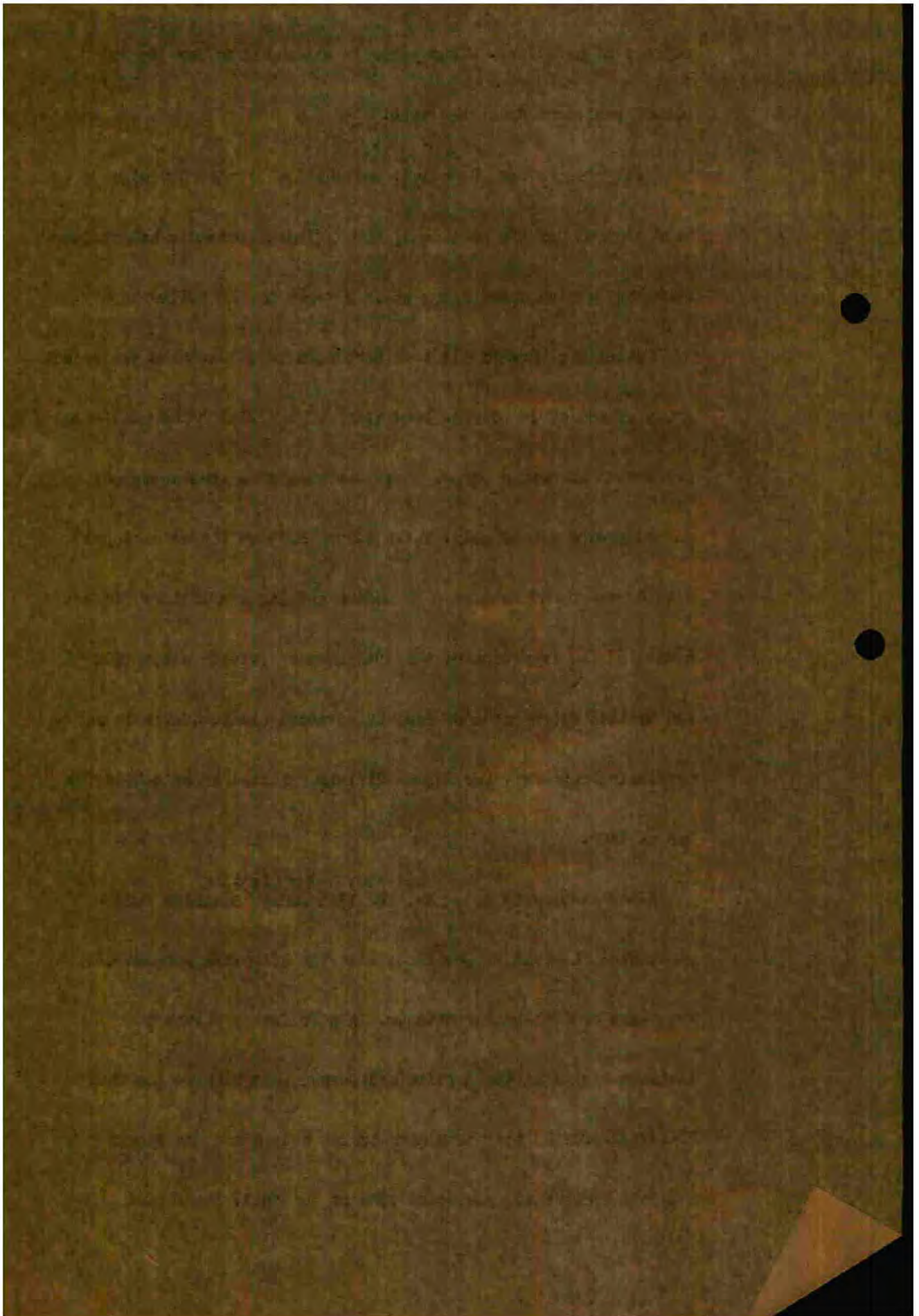
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Strong British armored elements had also moved up to the south flank and opposite the front line of the 15th Panzer Division. As early as 1130 these forces ~~XXXXXXXX~~ began to attack with the support of artillery. Minor elements attempted to envelop the German positions from the south.

All attacks were repelled, and the 15th Panzer Division held control of its positions; the division commander believed that the British would renew their attacks on the following day.

During the tank battle that developed on 28 December, the attack group of the Africa Corps, consisting of the 21st Panzer Division and the XX Motorized Corps, which was advancing southeastward, gained ground very slowly. While strong British forces equipped with 60 tanks and supported by medium and light artillery pieces assaulted the frontline of the 15th Panzer Division since 0900 and British reconnaissance elements advanced toward Gfafia in an enveloping movement, the German division started an attack of its own at 1100.

and some heavy fighting
After destroying 25 tanks, the 15th Panzer Division forces penetrated the British positions with the effective support of two waves of dive-bomber attacks. In a follow-up thrust the division dislodged the British and pushed them back to the Wadi El-Faregh. During the third dive-bomber attack the 8th Panzer Regiment reached the southeast side of the Wadi. The pursuit



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was stopped only when darkness set in.

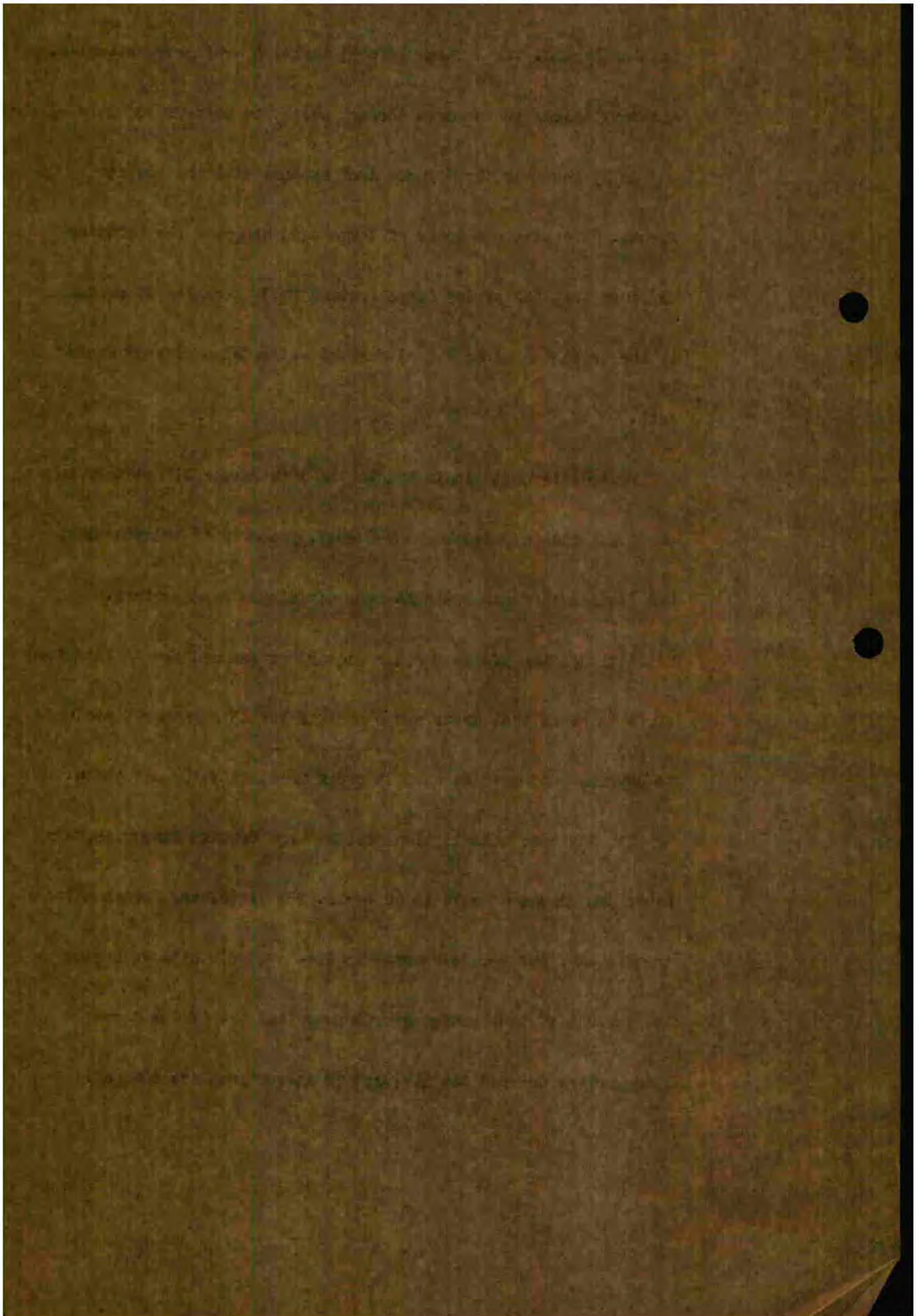
The 21st Panzer Division reached the northern edge of the Wadi toward the evening, while the XI Motorized Corps was even farther behind. The British left 55 tanks, 4 artillery batteries, and many trucks in the area through which the Germans had pursued them.

On 29 December the Germans lost contact with the British forces. Extensive stretches of loose sand hampered the pursuing units so that the Africa Corps decided on 30 December to switch to the defensive along the El-Hassiat -- Agadabia highway facing east.

Radio intercepts indicated to the 15th Panzer Division during the night that a British armored unit, probably of brigade size, was located some six miles XX from divisional headquarters.

Although the Africa Corps headquarters assumed the XI Motorized Corps to be in that area, corps ordered the 15th Panzer Division to advance northward at dawn in order to clarify the situation.

The division actually ran into a large British camp with many tents and trucks as well as 60 tanks. The divisional forces attacked immediately, but were subjected to low-level air attacks during the pursuit of the British garrison so that the Africa Corps headquarters ordered the division to discontinue its advance.



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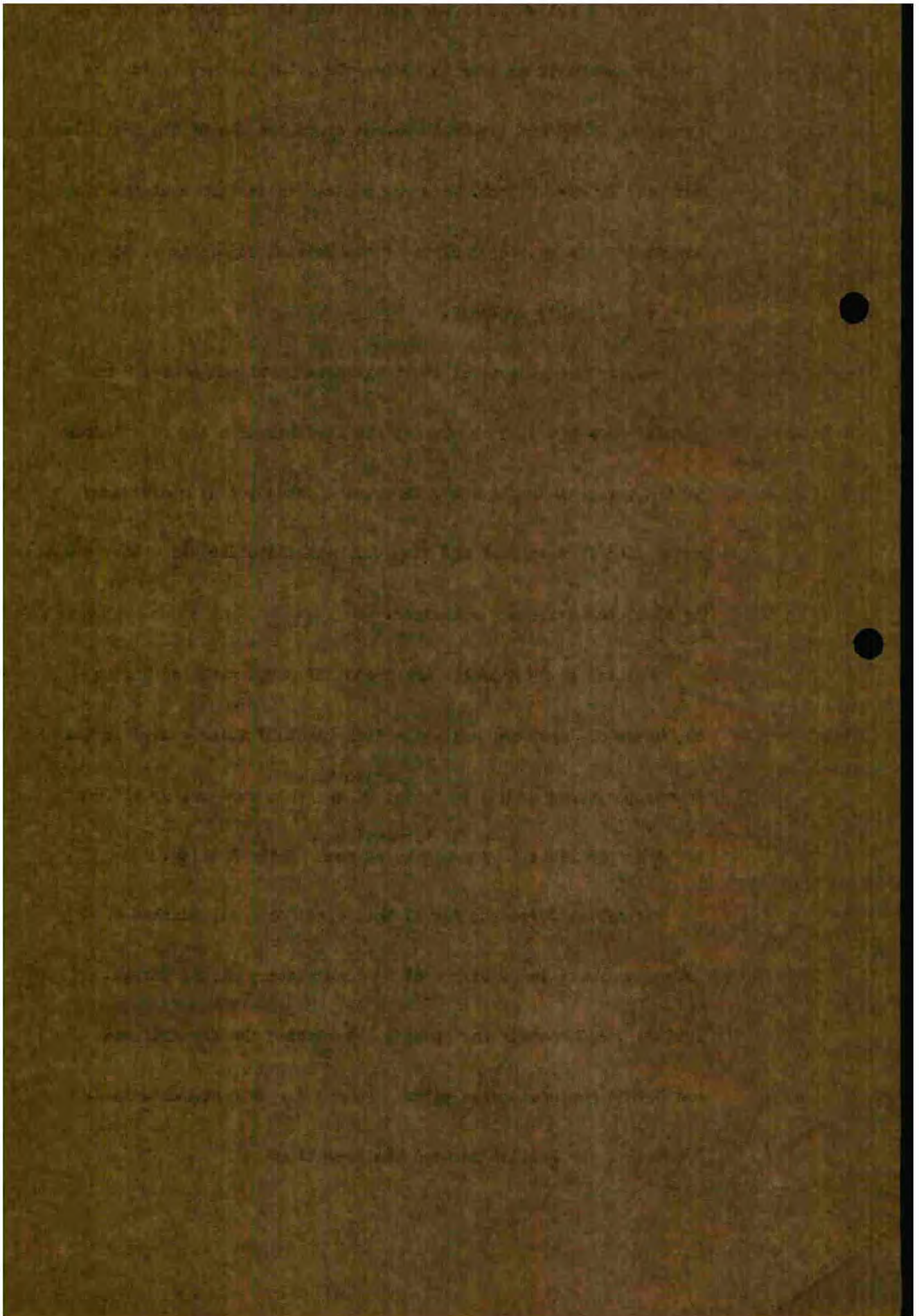
During the brief engagement the British 7th Armoured Division lost 15 additional tanks.

British prisoners of war stated that the brigade had received tank replacements as late as 29 December. But the new tanks were manned by ~~XXXXXX~~ two-to-three-man crews because of the heavy losses suffered by the British. This was a clear indication that the 7th Armoured Division, the nucleus of the British Eighth Army, had been considerably weakened.

Despite the successful counterattacks mentioned above, Rommel persisted in his plan to give up the Agadabia area and to withdraw to the Marag-el-Breghe zone. There, the exhausted Axis divisions would find firm support and time for rehabilitation since they would be close to their supply sources.

Starting on 25 December the X and XXI Corps withdrew during the hours of darkness, while the 90th Light Division stayed in its former positions around Agadabia. ^{Extensive} Mine fields were set up in front ^{impending} of these positions to impede the advance of the British.

The Africa Corps and the XX Motorized Corps established a defensive frontline facing east by constructing strong points. Artillery and antiaircraft pieces interdicted the forward area, and German reconnaissance patrols roamed far into no-man's land. Gradually, the British resumed their cautious



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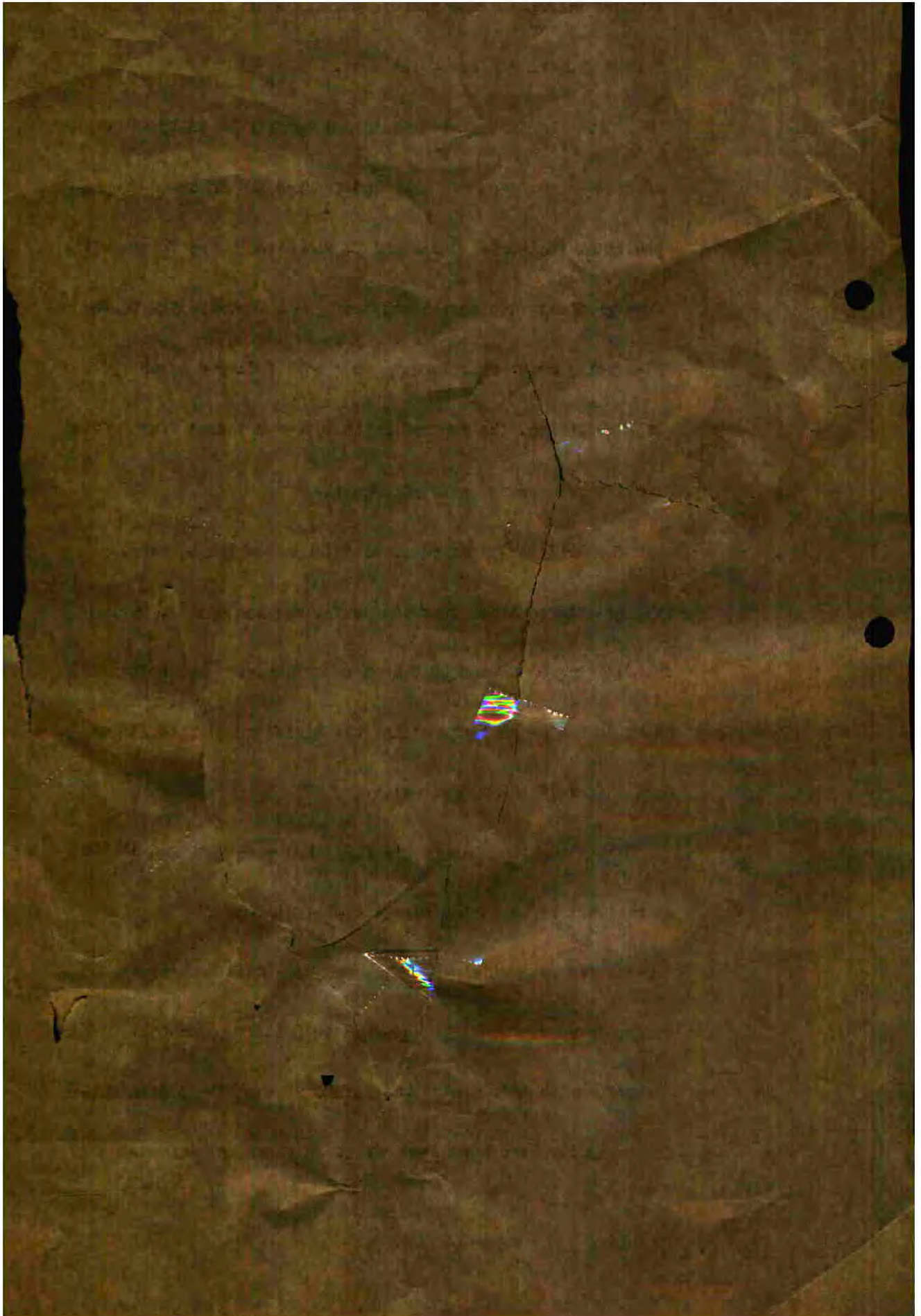
advance, but combat activities were restricted to artillery duels and frequent air attacks. At the same time, British armored reconnaissance patrols passing south of the Wadi El-Faregh penetrated far to the west.

Since the Axis forces would not be ~~INTERFERED WITH~~ in danger of being enveloped once they had reached the Marsa-el-Brega position, the Africa Corps and XX Motorized Corps forces withdrew gradually during the night of 5 - 6 January 1942 to the El-Aghella area. On 8 January they were followed by the 90th Light Division. The armored units suffered losses from British air attacks during their withdrawal.

had
The British 7th Armoured Division attempted to envelop the Agadabia position from the south, but had failed. During the fighting on 28 and 30 December the division had suffered heavy losses -- in tanks alone, the division had lost 110 or more than half its T/S strength.

Even though the German Air Force had been hampered in its operational capabilities during the withdrawal of the ground forces, its reconnaissance units had been able to keep the Panzer Group headquarters informed on British movements.

After the Axis ground forces had reached the coastal plain, The Royal Air Force had less effect on their operations.



- 205 -

"For the first time since the beginning of the autumn campaign the division headquarters was visited by liaison detachments of the Air Brigade Commander Africa who discussed dive-bomber support for the ground forces attack." The dive-bomber groups adapted themselves skilfully to the mobile conduct of operations of the 15th Panzer Division. On the other hand, the 8th Panzer Regiment made most effective use of the dive-bomber assaults.

"While the last bombs were still dropping on their targets, the 8th Panzer Regiment drove right through the Wadi El-Faregh and broke the enemy resistance along its eastern edge." ¹⁴⁴

The air supply of the German forces isolated along the Sollum line presented difficult problems. Because of the British counter-measures the Germans suffered heavy losses without being able to improve the situation of the encircled garrisons.

On 19 December the Air Brigade Commander Africa had to release the 3d Bomber Group of Luftgcn 1. On the other hand, he now had the entire 3d Group of the 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing, the 3d Dive-Bomber Wing, and the 27th Fighter Wing at his disposal.*

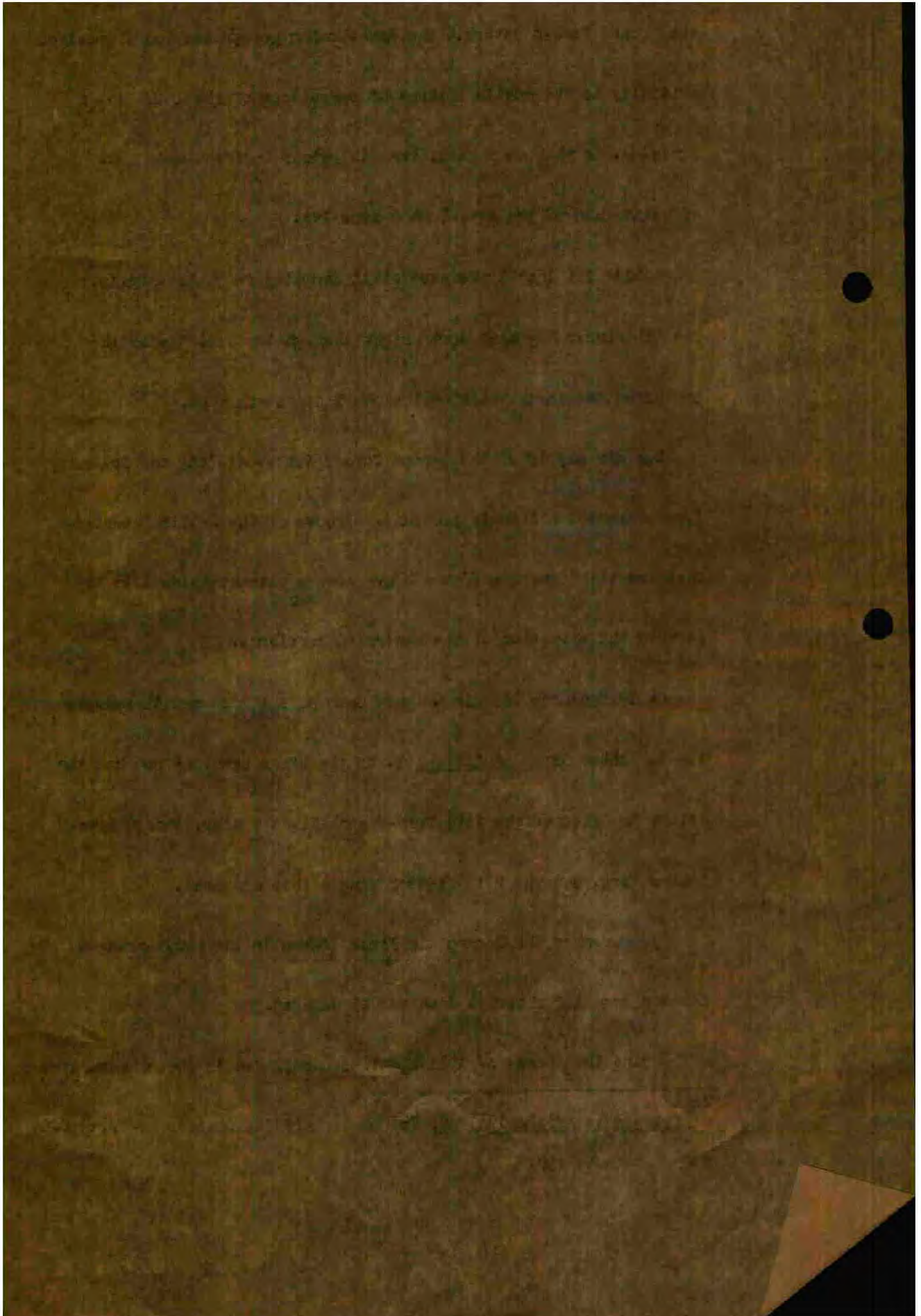
In December the German Air Force losses in the Mediterranean theater were 182 aircraft lost and 29 damaged.

During the course of 1941 the losses suffered in the same theater

¹⁴⁴

Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 6, pp. 338-9.

* See Footnote 139.



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amounted to 547 planes lost and 141 damaged. Of the aircraft lost 144 were bombers, 112 fighter-bombers, and 85 day or night fighters.*

No exact details concerning the activities of the German Air Force during the withdrawal or information about the commitments of its units during that period are available at this time.

British sources did not provide any loss figures.

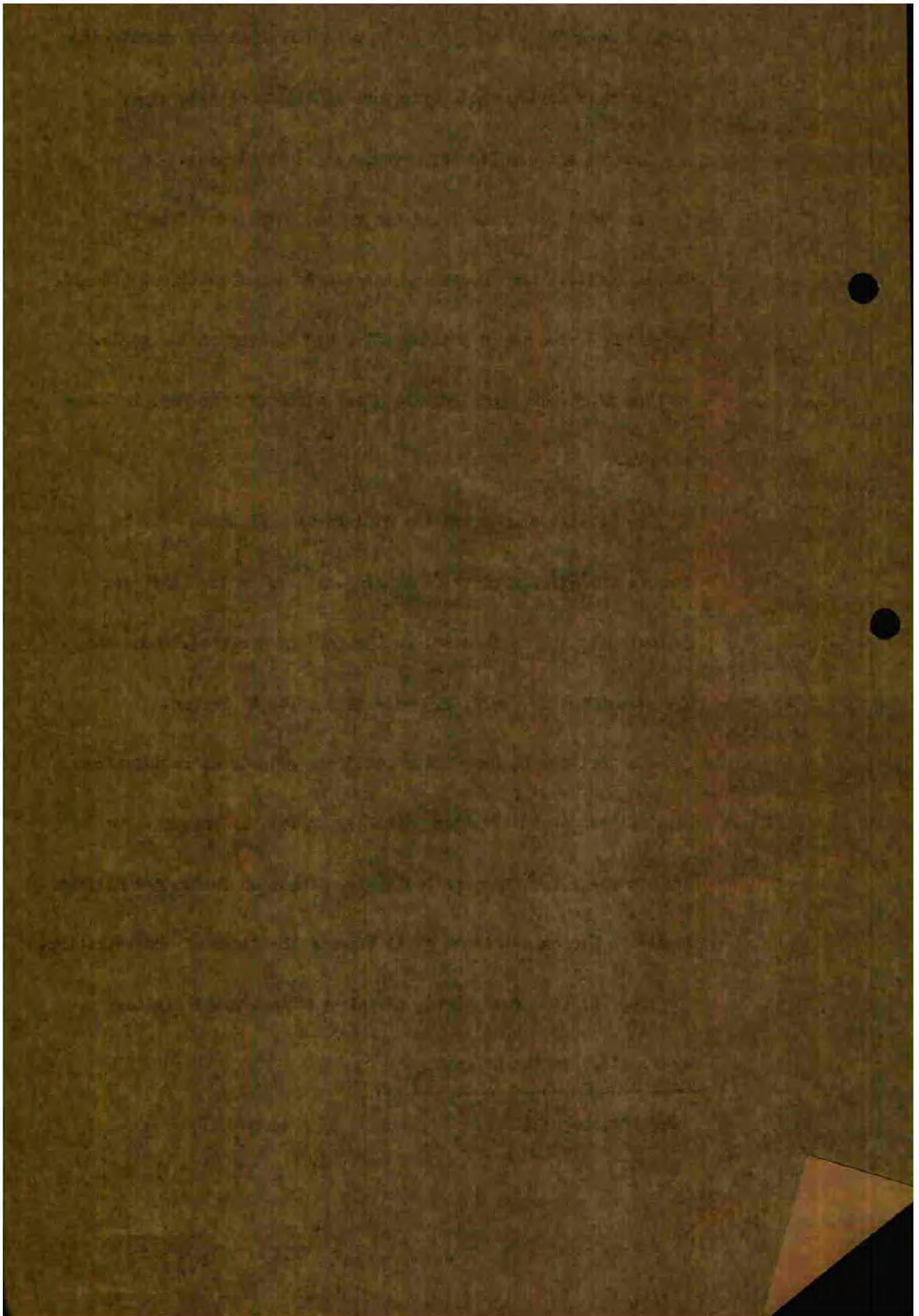
The Royal Air Force found during the withdrawal from the Gazala position more rewarding targets in the mountainous terrain, where the German march columns often had to stay on the roads. For the first time American Kittyhawk aircraft took part in these attacks.

The British airmen had the satisfaction of being able to examine the effects of their bombing attacks on the airfields abandoned by the Germans and on the port of Benghazi. Among the 450 aircraft they found, 229 were alleged to be German.

The British bombing units could not advance as rapidly from base to base as the fighter units did during the pursuit. The bombers therefore concentrated their efforts on Bardia and Halfaya, where the German garrisons still blocked the lines of communication.

The British moved strong antiaircraft and night fighter forces close to the German

* See Footnote 126.



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soon made
strong points and thus ~~neutralized~~ the German air supply attempts
ineffective.

After 400 sorties Bardia surrendered on 2 January 1942;
since mid-September the garrison had been under constant attack
by the 2d South African Division, strong army artillery units, and
~~XXXXXX~~ armored elements.

The garrison of Halfaya, commanded by Major Bach, continued
to offer stubborn resistance. Even a falsified order from Rommel,
instructing the garrison to surrender, which had been dropped by
a Wellington aircraft, missed its purpose.

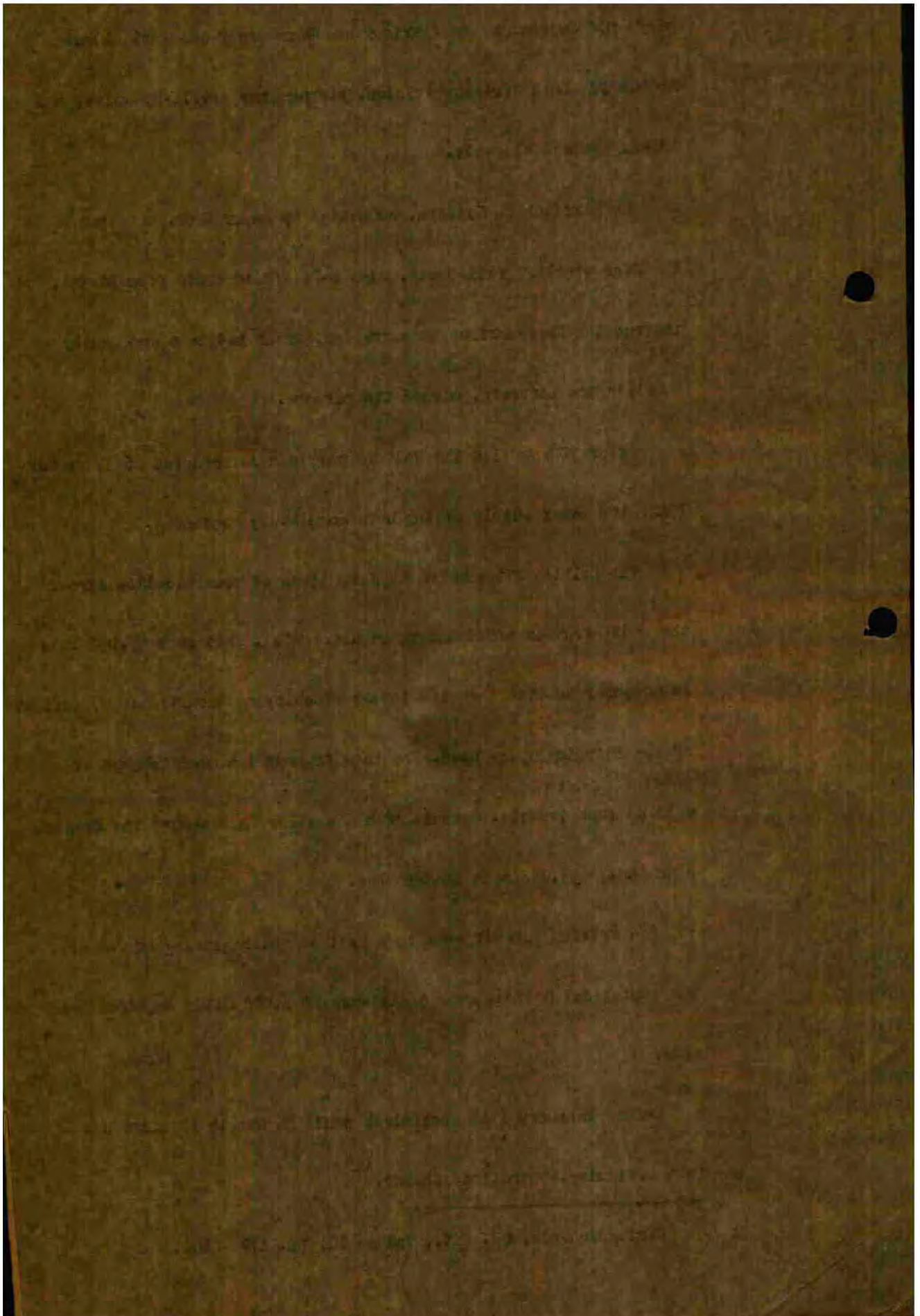
After 300 sorties the Halfaya garrison surrendered on 17 January
1942, its water supply having been completely exhausted.

The British attacks on the Axis lines of communication across
the Mediterranean continued to be successful. They sank 39,000 tons
in November so that the Axis losses of shipping amounted to 77 percent
of the shipping space used. The loss figures included damaged as
well as sunk vessels. Because of bad weather, in December the British
sank "only" 35,000 tons in December.

The British pursuit came to a halt at the beginning of January.
The logistical buildup over a distance of 1,000 miles required some
time.

Before February 1942 Auchinleck would be unable to start his
next offensive, Operation ACROBAT. ¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵
Denis Richards, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 179 - 181.



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Author's Note on the Availability of Source Material

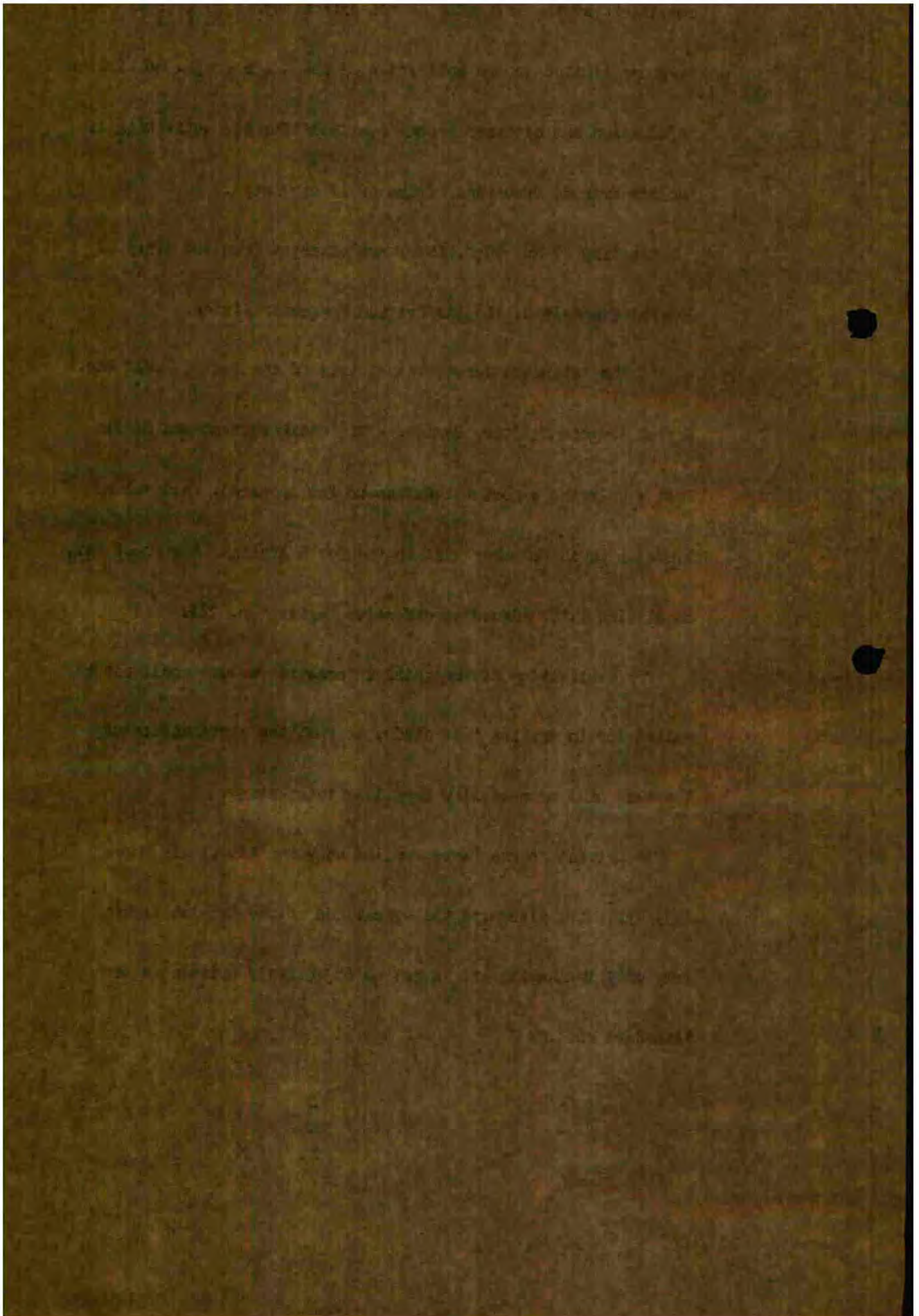
The German sources that provide detailed information on the commitment of the Luftwaffe do not extend beyond 27 October 1941. They are limited to the activities of the X Air Corps. No similar information has hitherto become available for the activities of the Air Brigade Commander Africa or II Air Corps.

Starting 27 May 1942, there are excerpts from the diary of General von Waldau, the Air Brigade Commander Africa.

Of the "standard work" "The History of the Second World War," United Kingdom Military Series, - The Mediterranean and Middle East - only the second volume has so far appeared. This volume leads up to 18 November 1941 in the North African Theater of War, concluding with: "Crusader offensive begins," p. 331.

The publication of the third informative volume could not be waited for in writing this study, so that the continuation of the text will of necessity seem less interesting.

As British source there remains only the "Royal Air Force 1939/45" which discusses the operations of the British Eighth Army only in passing and is not as objectively written as the "standard work."



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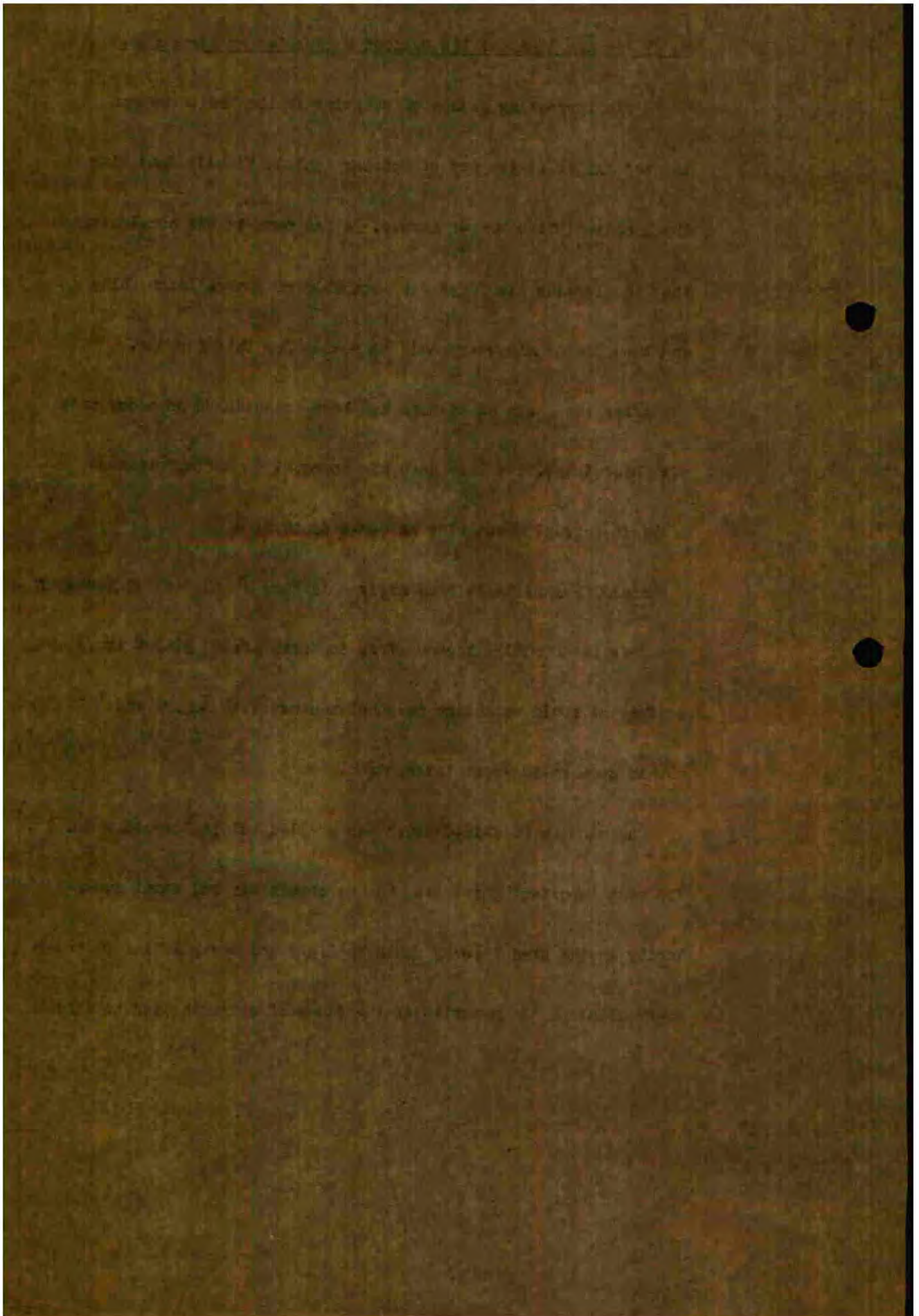
The Commander-in-Chief, South: The Arrival of Second Air Force in December 1941. Its Organizational Structure of Flying and Ground Units. Prospects for 1942. Rommel's Surprise Offensive on 21 January 1942 and Its Support by the German Air Force.

The increasing losses of shipping in the Mediterranean induced Hitler at the end of October 1941 to finally deal with the problem in the proper manner. He had ^{arrived at} ~~come to~~ the conclusion that the Italian Air Force was incapable of neutralizing Malta and that German airpower would be needed for this purpose.

After the chain of command had been established in accordance with his wishes, the Duce gave his approval to the appointment of Field Marshal Kesselring as C-in-C South.

Field Marshal Kesselring arrived in Rome at the end of November and left for Rommel's headquarters in North Africa almost immediately so that he could establish personal contact with Rommel and obtain some on-the-spot information.

The mission of C-in-C South was spelled out in Directive No. 38. Its most important point was that he obtain air and naval superiority in the area between southern Italy and North Africa in order to reestablish the security of the lines of communication to Libya



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and Cyrenaica. The prerequisite for achieving this objective was the neutralization of Malta. Other missions mentioned in the directive were: To ~~cooperate with~~ cooperate with the German and allied forces in North Africa, to stop enemy movements through the Mediterranean, and to cut off the resupply of Tobruk and Malta in close cooperation with the German and Italian naval forces available for these missions.

To achieve these objectives, the II Air Corps was transferred from the Russian theater and the C-in-C South was given direct command of I Air Corps, the Air Brigade Commander Africa, and the Air Commander, Italy.

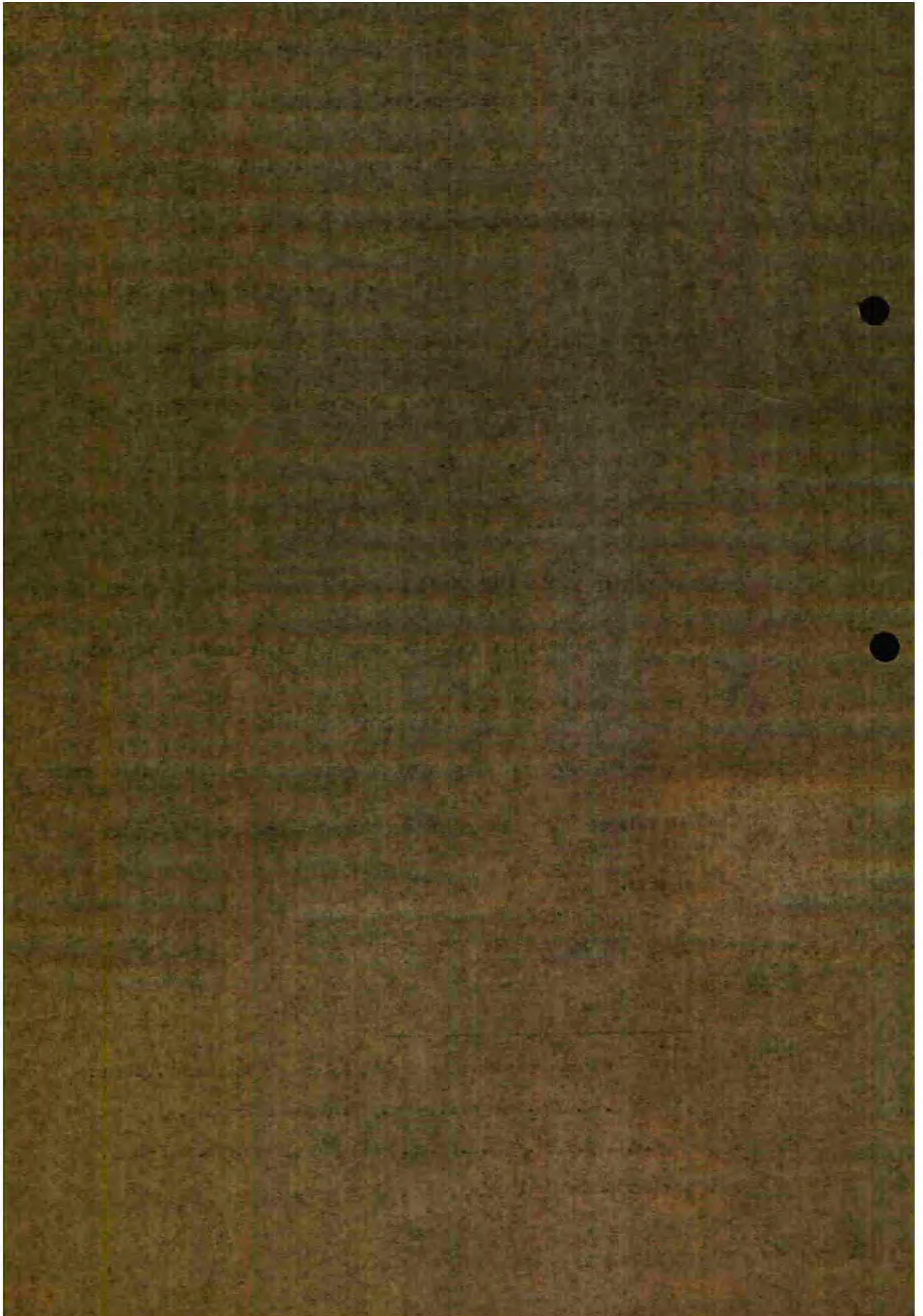
The critical point of the battle of Tobruk, which was reached precisely at the time Field Marshal Kesselring was in North Africa, illustrated only too well the paramount importance of logistics in the ~~HEER~~ North African theater of war.

Ever since the first days of December he devoted his attention to this decisive problem of reviving the transoceanic supply system.

Little could be achieved by taking purely defensive measures as they had been taken heretofore.

146

Der Fuehrer und Oberster Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht. Wf. Qu. den 2.12.1941. (Directive No. 38, dated 2 Dec 41).
O.K.W./W.F.St./Abt.L.(I.op.) 441 980/41 geh.Kdo.Chefsache.
(Karlsruhe Collection).



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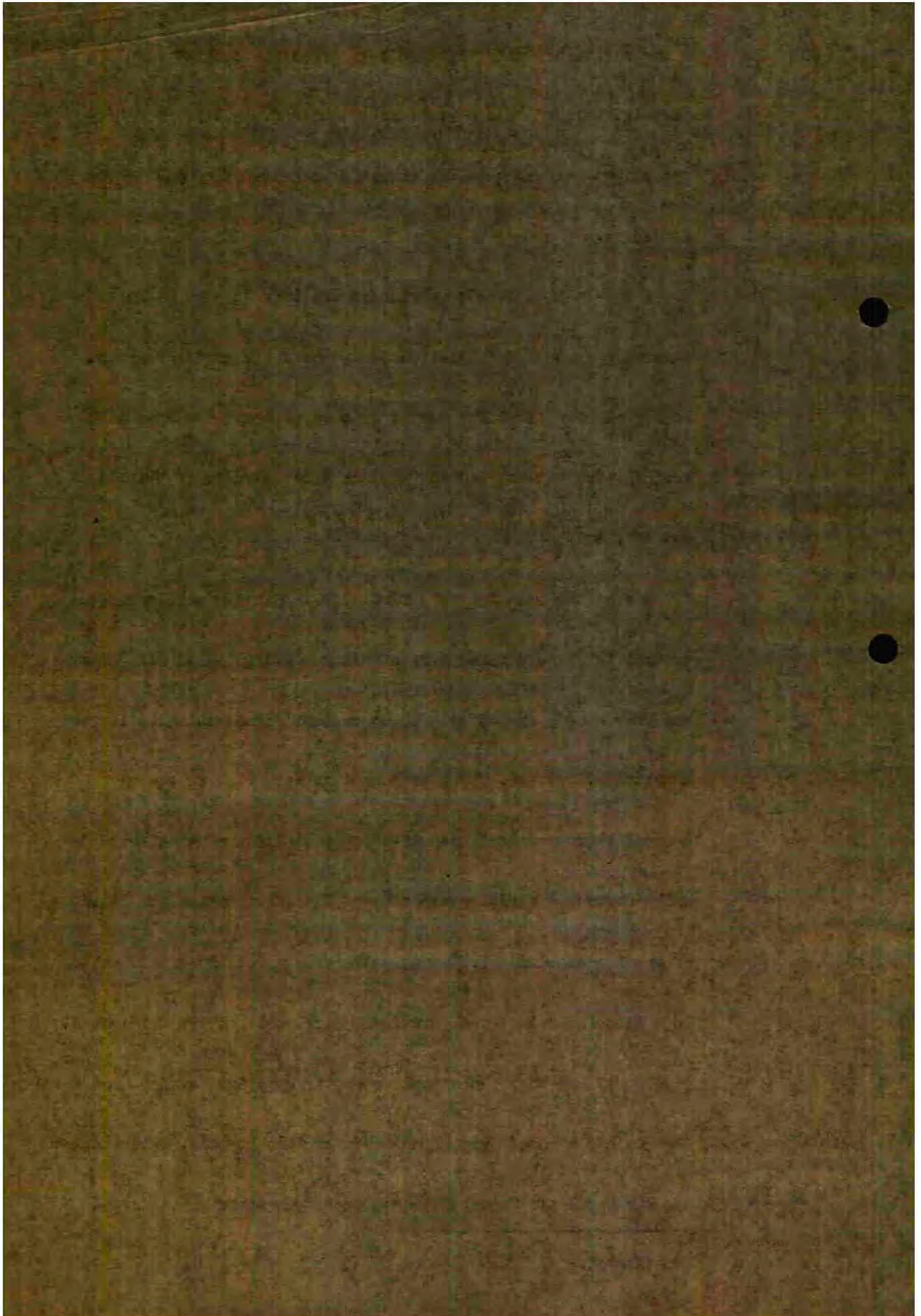
Only by conducting offensive operations against Malta could the situation be improved. Oberst (Colonel) Roth was appointed the Air Commander Sicily; he was a very experienced commander of a fighter-bomber wing that had been effective against naval targets. Until II Air Corps assumed command, he conducted his operations according to the orders he received from the Second Air Force.

The C-in-C South also persuaded the Duce to employ the carefully preserved Italian battle fleet for securing convoys. On 17 December the first convoy in several months reached the North African coast, and the vessels were unloaded in Tripoli and Benghazi.

During the mean time the airfields in Sicily¹ were enlarged so that they would be capable of accommodating the II Air Corps, and they were equipped with the necessary signal installations, ammunition, and fuel. These preparations were time consuming because there were only single-track rail lines south of Naples and because the carrying capacity of the ferry across the Straits of Messina was limited. German anti-aircraft batteries were moved to Naples to protect the port from which most convoys originated.

On 22 December the attacks on Malta were intensified, and from then on 200 aircraft were committed for this purpose. Their target was the Royal Air Force. Repeated bombing attacks were carried

¹ See sketch.



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out against the fighter airfields at Hal Par and Takali,^o the bomber airfield at Luga, and the naval aircraft station at Kalafrana.

During the first days of January 1942 the Germans flew some 500 sorties. At the same time heavy rain storms transformed the partly damaged airfields into swampy terrain. All squadrons had to be concentrated at the Luga airfield that was also damaged but had a better drainage system.¹⁴⁷

On 21 November 1941 the II Air Corps had been transferred to air bases in Germany, where it was rehabilitated and reequipped. Corps headquarters was set up at Dresden, and during the course of December the corps units were transferred by air from Germany to Sicily.

The information regarding the order of battle and chain of command during December 1941 varies. It cannot be established which units were directly subordinate to Second Air Force and which were commanded by II Air Corps, nor can it be stated how the various units were distributed over the airfields in Sicily. To give as complete information as possible, orders of battle for the I Air Corps and Air Commander Africa as of 20 December 1941 have been added.^{**}

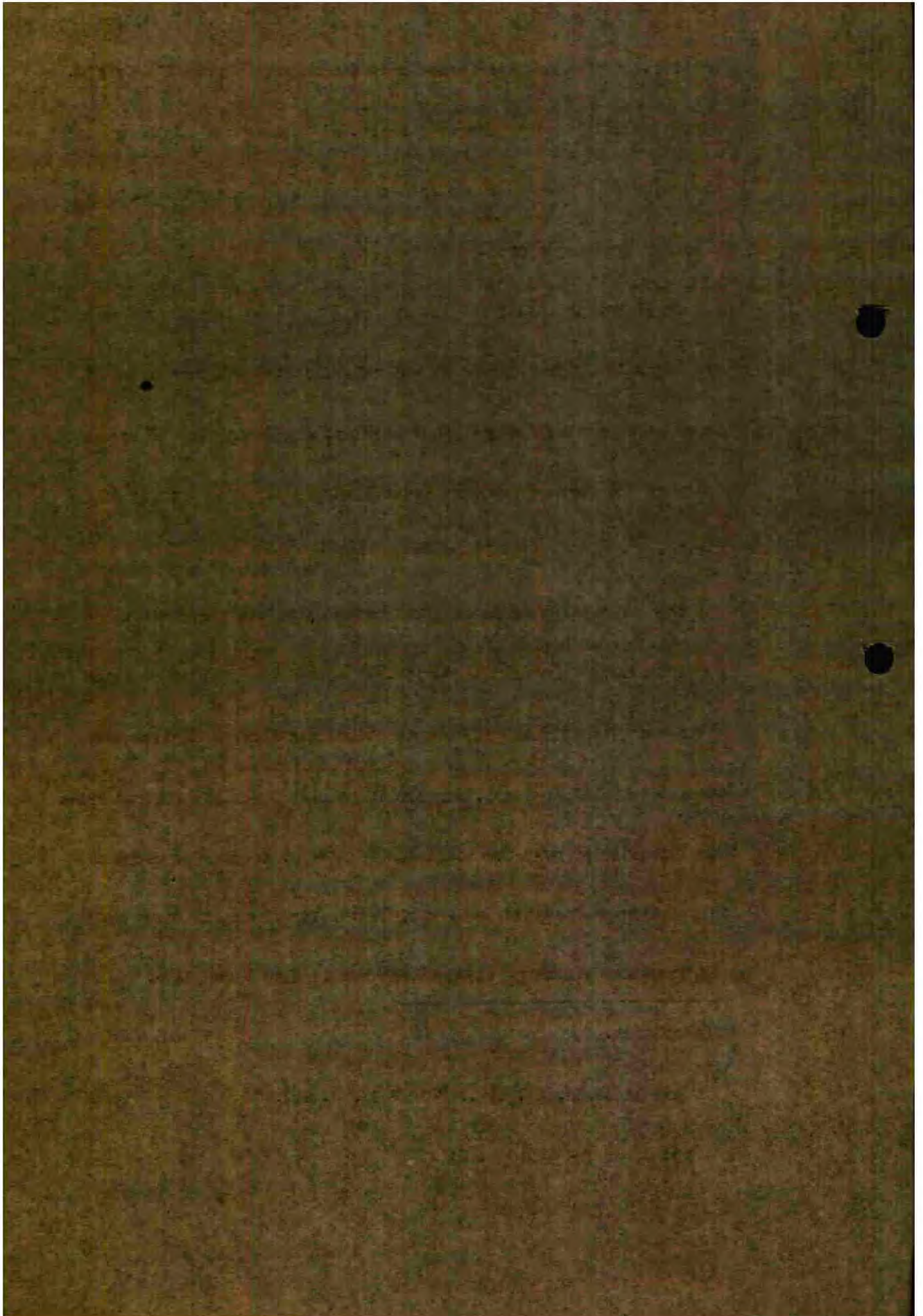
* See sketch.

¹⁴⁷

Denis Richards, op. cit., Volume II, p. 182.

**

Appendices I - IV to p. 211.



Appendix I to p. 311

Units Directly Subordinate to Second Air Force during the

Period I - 20 December 1941

Reconnaissance Units:

As of 20 December 1st Squadron of 122d Group

Bomber Units:

606th Bomber Group

as of 20 December Headquarters, 26th Bomber Wing

as of 20 December 806th Bomber Group

as of 20 December 1 Group (Cannot be identified because of bad print)
Perhaps 2d Group of 77th Bomber Wing ?

Five Bomber Units:

None

Night Fighter Units:

1st Group of the 2d Night Fighter Wing

4th Squadron of the 2d Night Fighter Wing

Fighter Units:

Headquarters, 53d Fighter Wing

3d Group, 53d Fighter Wing

as of 10 December 1st Group, 53d Fighter Wing

as of 10 December 2d Group, 53d Fighter Wing

Units Taken out of Combat and Other Units:

Headquarters, 122d Reconnaissance Group and 2d Squadron,

122d Reconnaissance Group;

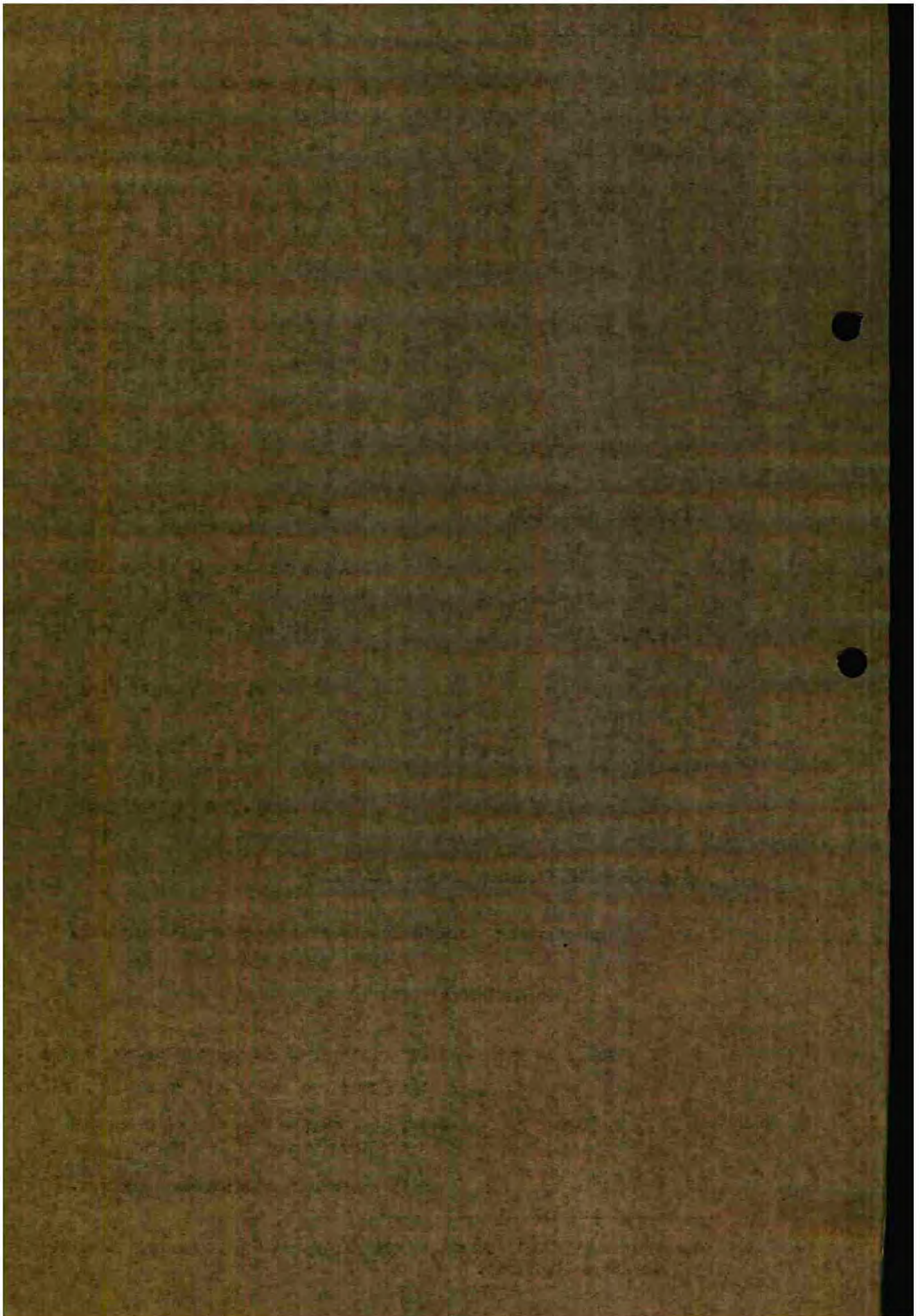
as of 10 December: 2d Squadron, 125th Reconnaissance Group;

as of 20 December: this squadron was transferred to X Air Corps.

as of 10 December: Hq, 26th Bomber Wing - transferred to X Air Corps as of 20 December.

26th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron.

Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command, Sheet 8. (Karlsruhe Collection).



Appendix II to p. 211Units Subordinate to II Air Corps during the Period 1 - 20 Dec 41*Reconnaissance Units: 1st Squadron, 122d Group until 19 Dec.

Bomber Units: Headquarters, 54th Bomber Wing

1st and 2d Groups, 54th Bomber Wing

806th Bomber Group until 19 Dec.

Hq, 1st, 2d (Until 19 Dec.), and 3d Groups of 77th Bomber Wing

Dive-Bomber Units: Hq, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing and 3d Group, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing (Until 20 December only the personnel were available.)

1st Group, 2d Dive-Bomber Wing

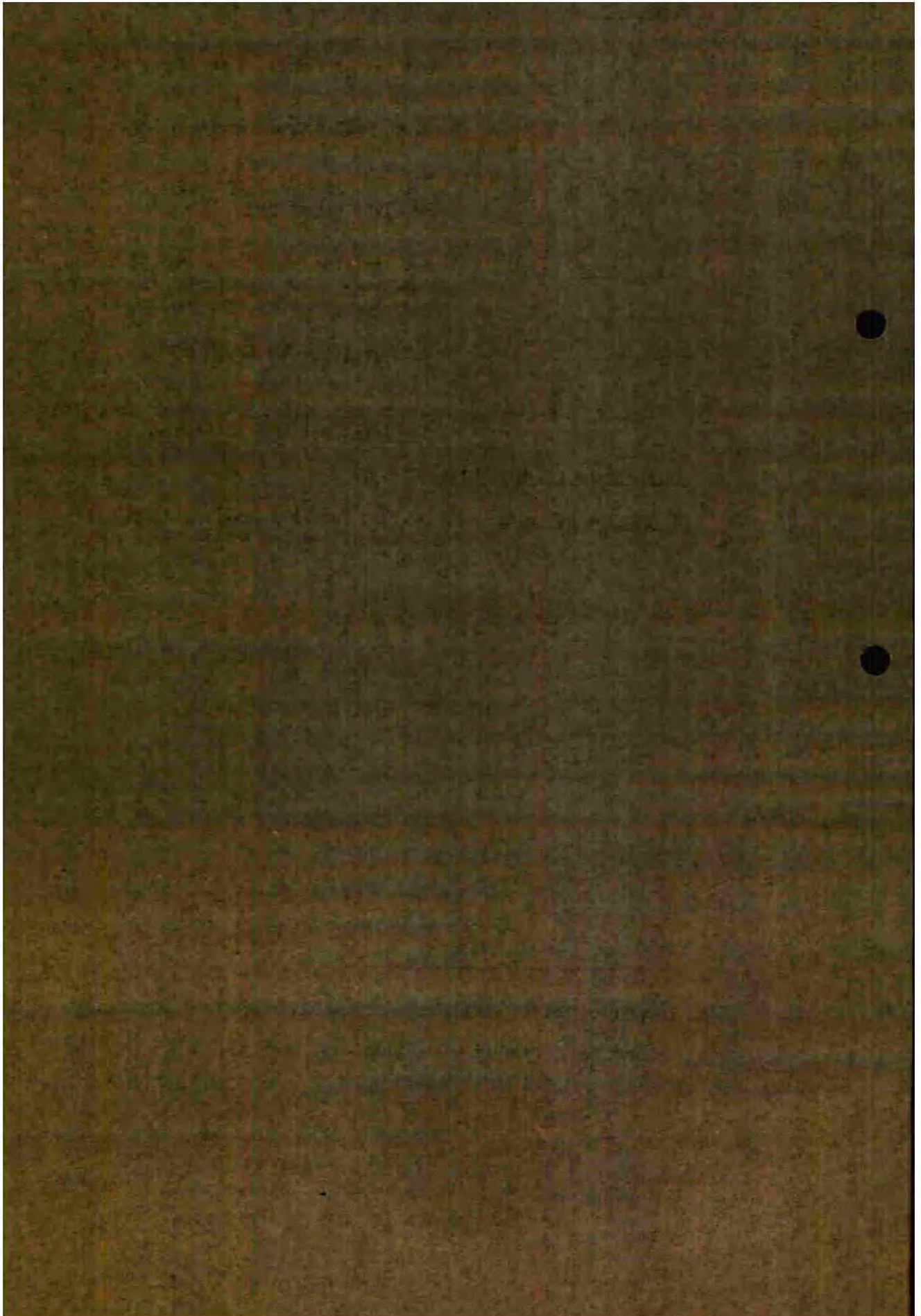
As of 20 December: 6th Squadron, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing (only the personnel were available.)

Twin-Engine Fighter Units: None.

Single-Engine Fighter Units: Hq, 1st (until 9 Dec.), 2d, and 3d Groups of the 3d Fighter Wing

Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command.

Sheet 9. (Karlsruhe Collection).



Appendix III to p. 211Units Subordinate to X Air Corps on 20 December 1941

Reconnaissance Units: 126th Reconnaissance Group
 1st Squadron, 121st Reconnaissance Group,
 less two aircraft.
 2d Squadron, 123d Reconnaissance Group.
 3d Squadron, 125th Reconnaissance Group.

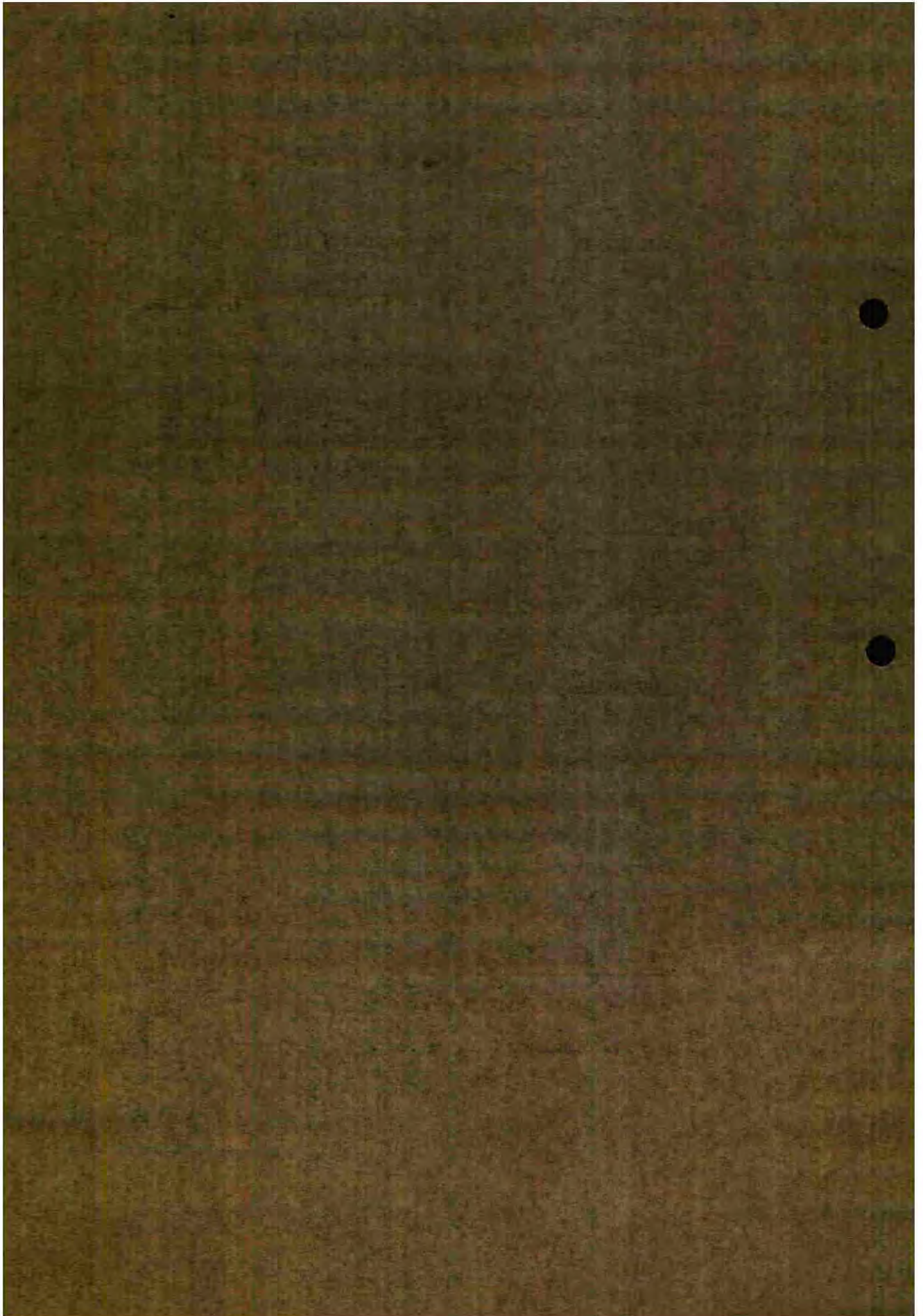
Bomber Units: Headquarters, Luftgau 1
 1st, 2d, and 3d Groups, Luftgau 1
 2d Group, 26th Bomber Wing
 1st Squadron, 28th Bomber Wing
 (After 10 December redesignated
 7th Squadron, 26th Bomber Wing)

Five-Bomber Units: None.

Twin-Engine Fighter Units: None.

Fighter Units: None.

Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command,
 Sheet 7. (Karlsruhe Collection).



Appendix IV to O. 211Units Subordinate to Air Commander Africa on 20 December 1941:*

Reconnaissance Units: Africa Flight of 1st Squadron, 121st Reconnaissance Group.

Bomber Units: None.

Dive-Bomber Units: Headquarters, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing;

1st Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing;

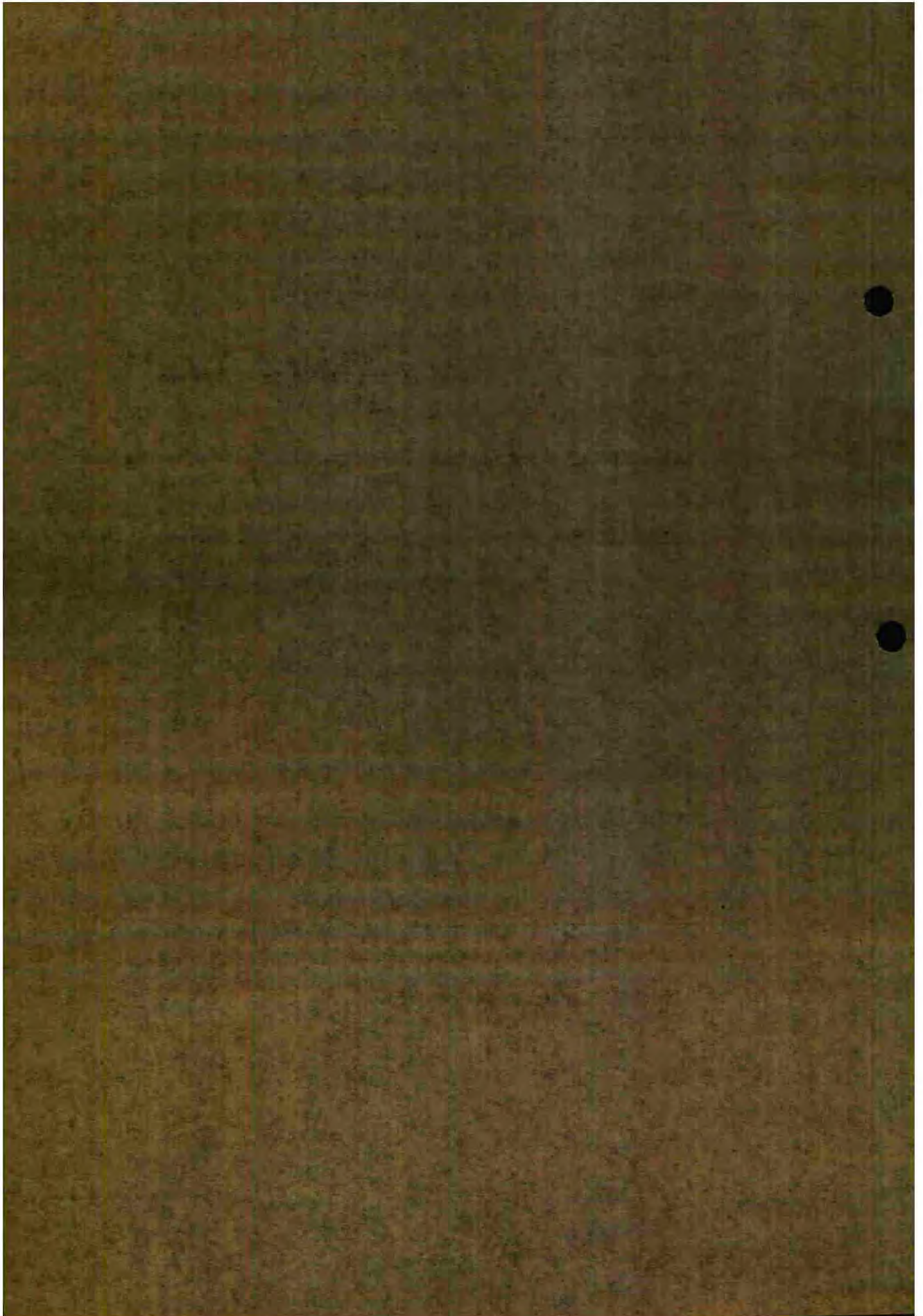
2d ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing (Formerly 1st Group, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing);

3d Group, 3d Dive-Bomber Wing (Formerly 2d Group, 2d Dive-Bomber Wing).

Twin-Engine Fighter Units: 3d Group, 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing.

Fighter Units: Headquarters, 1st, 2d, and 3d Groups of the 27th Fighter Wing.

Order of Battle Wall Charts of the Air Force High Command,
Sheet 1 (Karlsruhe Collection).



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Only for the period after 10 January 1942 monthly "Tables of Flying Units in the Mediterranean and North African Theater" are available.

On 10 January 1942 the total number of aircraft available was 523, of which 297 were ready for action. These monthly statistics, however, do not indicate which units were subordinate to the II and I Air Corps as well as to the Air Commander Africa, respectively.*

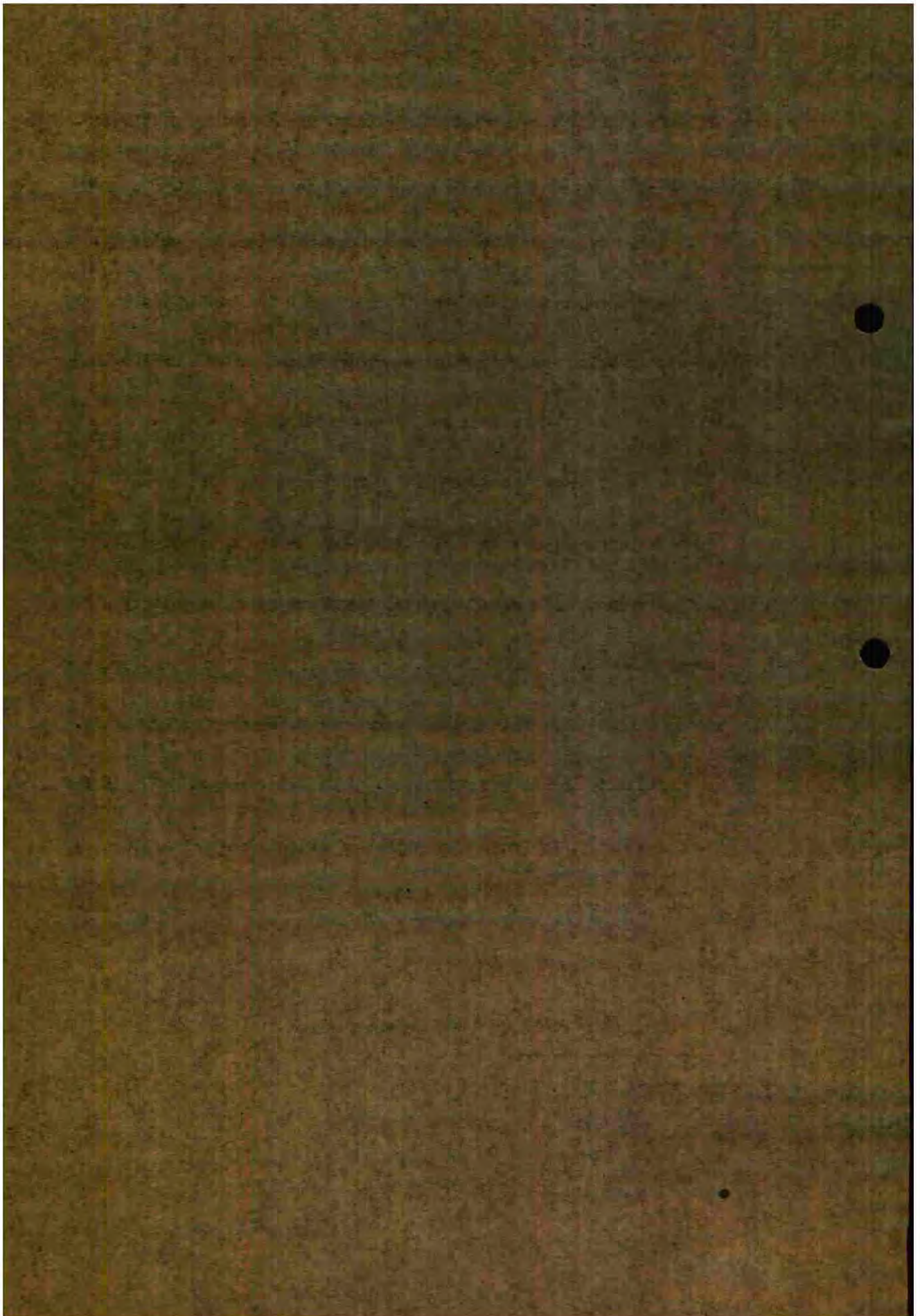
The prospects for 1942 were favorable for the Luftwaffe. The assault on Malta had gained in power and volume so that another major Axis convoy reached Tripoli on 5 January 1942.

Moreover, since the autumn of 1941 German submarines had resumed their attacks on the British Navy in the Mediterranean.

On 13 February the aircraft carrier ~~ROYAL~~ Ark Royal was hit by a torpedo from U. 18 (Submarine No. 18) east of Gibraltar; the damage was so serious that the aircraft carrier sank soon after being hit. The battleship Barham was sunk by U. 335 (Submarine No. 335) off the Lebanese coast. In front of the port of Tripoli the British cruiser Neptune struck a mine, while the cruiser Galathea was hit by a submarine torpedo on 14 December.

During the night of 18-19 December three Italian

* Appendix V to p. 212.

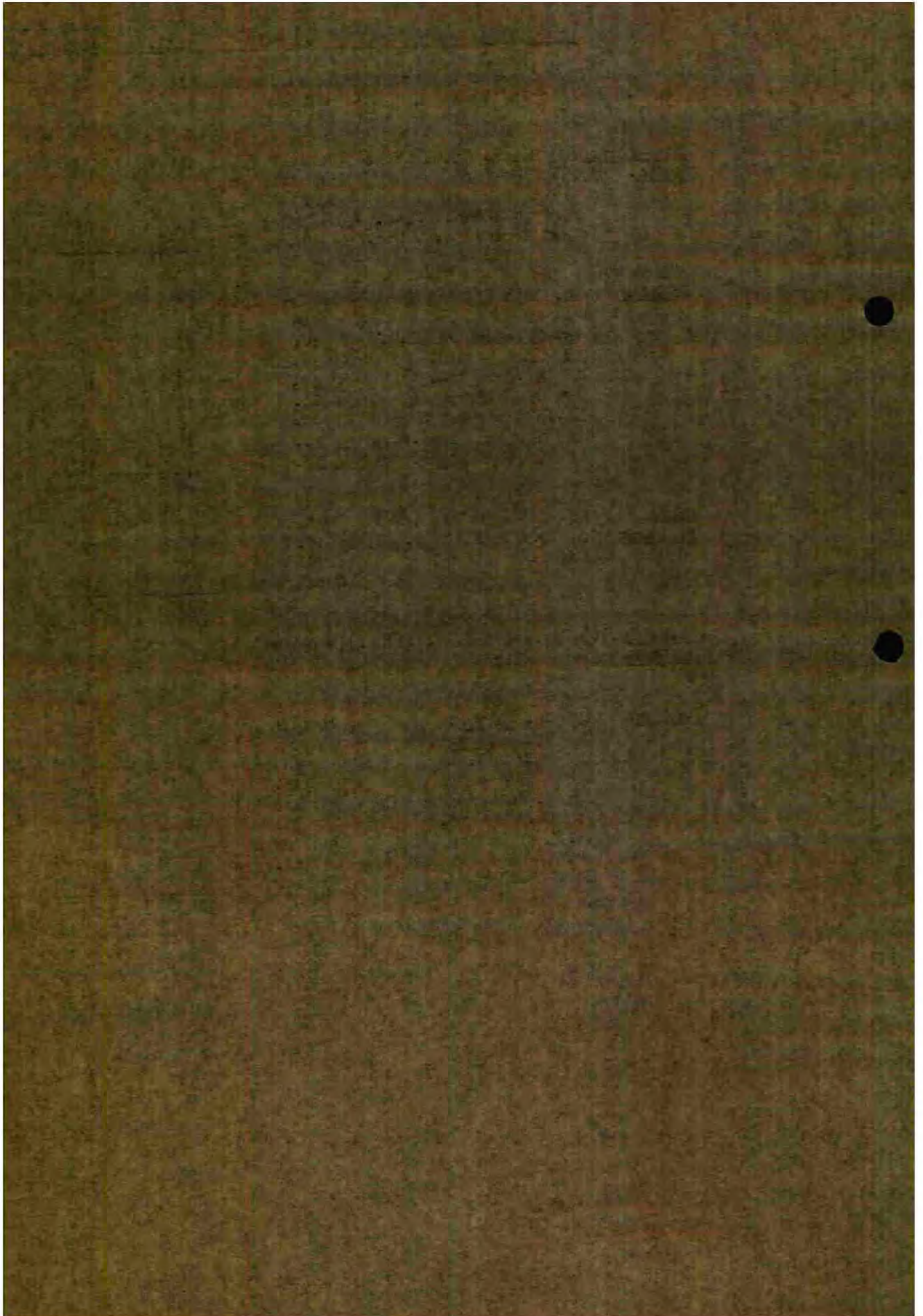


Appendix V to p. 212

Sheet 1

List of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and in
North Africa.Status of 10 January 1942*

Unit	Type of Aircraft	Number Avail.	Ready for Action
<u>Close-in</u> (2d Sq./Radio Intercept)(Messerschmitt)		16	4
<u>Recon.</u>) (14th Ps (P)) (110 and) (Heinkel 126)			
<u>Long-range</u> (2d Recon. Gp. Air Force)(Junkers 88)		13	11
<u>Recon.</u>) (High Command) (and Dornier) (215)			
1st Sq./121st L.R. Rec. Gp)(Junkers 88		4	3
1st Sq./122d L.R. Rec. Gp)(Junkers 88		10	8
		27	22
<u>Fighter</u> Hq. 27th Fighter Wing (Messerschmitt)		3	2
(109)			
1st Gp./27th Fight. W. id.		22	7
2d Gp./ id. id.		25	7
3d Gp./ id. id.		17	10
1st Gp./Flensburg Hq. id.		10	4
Hq./29d Fighter Wing id.		6	6
1st Gp./53d Fight. Wing id.		36	19
2d Gp./53d Fight. wing id.		37	31
		156	86
<u>Night</u>) Hq. 2d Night Fighter W. Junkers 88		3	3
<u>Fighters</u>) 1st Gp./ 2d Night F. Wing id.		16	9
2d Gp./ id. (id. &) (Messerschm. 110)		71	16
		50	28
<u>Twin-Eng.</u>) (3d Gp./26th T.-F. Fight.)(Messersch.)			
<u>Fighters</u>) (wing) (110)		18	6
<u>Bombers</u> 1st Gp./Luftwaffe 1 Junkers 88		29	15
2d Gp./Luftwaffe 1 id.		29	14
3d Gp./ id. id.		9	4
606th Bomber Gp. id.		19	11
2d Gp./26th Bomber wing Heinkel 111		26	9
7th Sq./ id. id.		6	2
Hq./54th Bomber wing Junkers 88		1	1
1st Gp./ 54th Bomber wing id.		16	11
606th Bomber Gp. id.		11	2
		146	69
		413	215



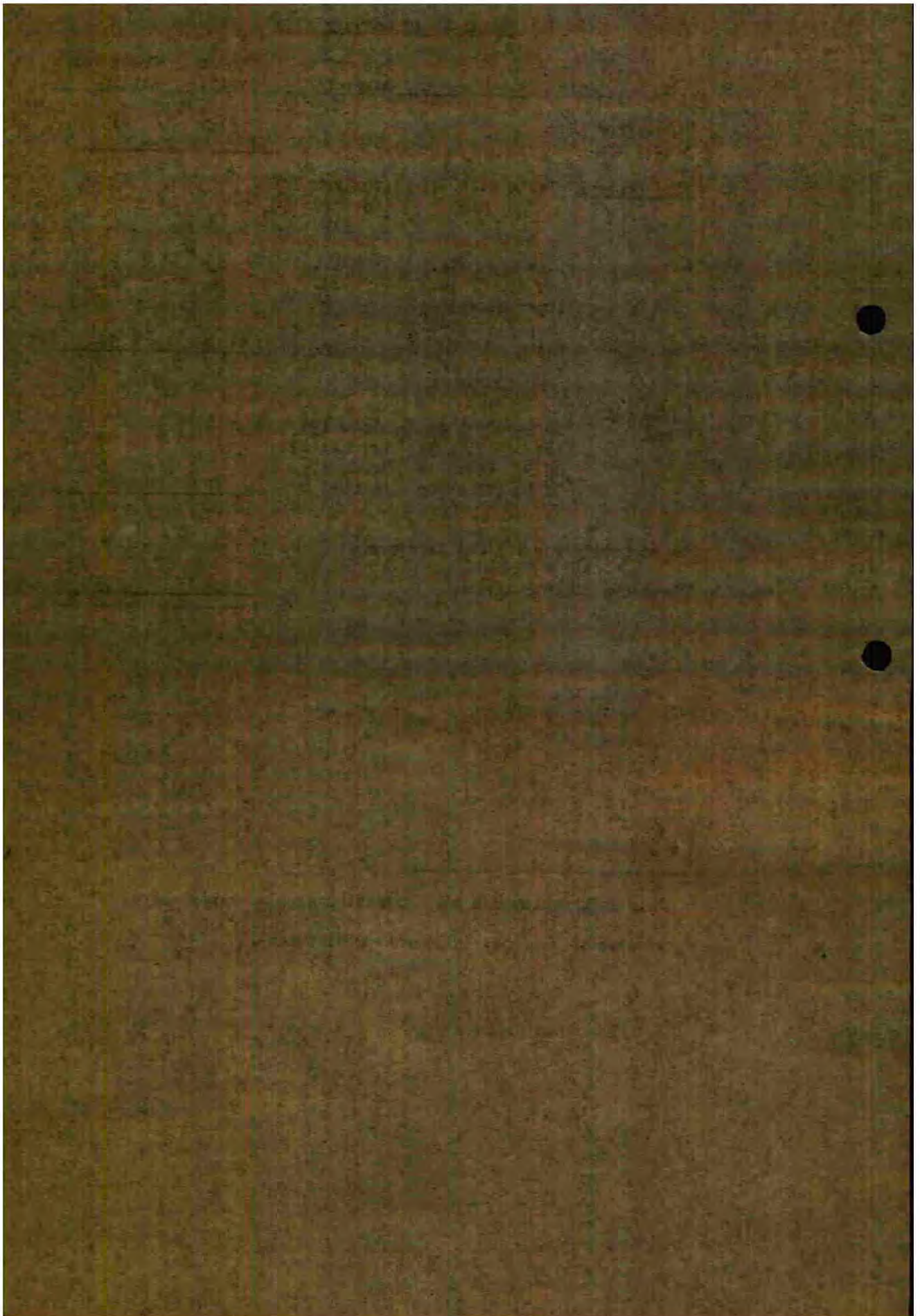
Appendix V to p. 212

Sheet 2

List of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and inNorth Africa.Status of 10 January 1942*

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Type of Aircraft</u>	<u>Number Avail.</u>	<u>Ready for Action</u>
Totals from previous p.		413	215
<u> Dive Bombers</u> Hq/3d D.-B. Wing (Junkers 87) (Messerschm.) (110)		4	3
1st Gp/ id. id. id.		25	23
2d Gp/ id. id. id.		31	19
(Operational Sq) (Repl/1st D.-B.) (Wing) id.		12	10
		72	55
<u> Naval Air-)</u> <u> craft</u>)			
2d Sq/125th Gp Arado 196		9	8
1st Sq/126th Gp Heinkel 60		12	9
2d Sq/ 126th Gp Arado 196		7	5
3d Sq/ 126th Gp Heinkel 60		10	5
		38	27
Grand Totals for the Mediterranean) Theater and North Africa)		529	297

This information has been extracted from situation maps
located in England. (Karlsruhe Collection).



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"Two-Men Torpedoes" entered the port of Alexandria, inflicted heavy damages on the battleships "Queen Elizabeth" and "Valiant", and sank a tanker.

These Axis successes destroyed the British naval superiority since "there was not a single battleship on the Mediterranean Sea."¹⁴⁸

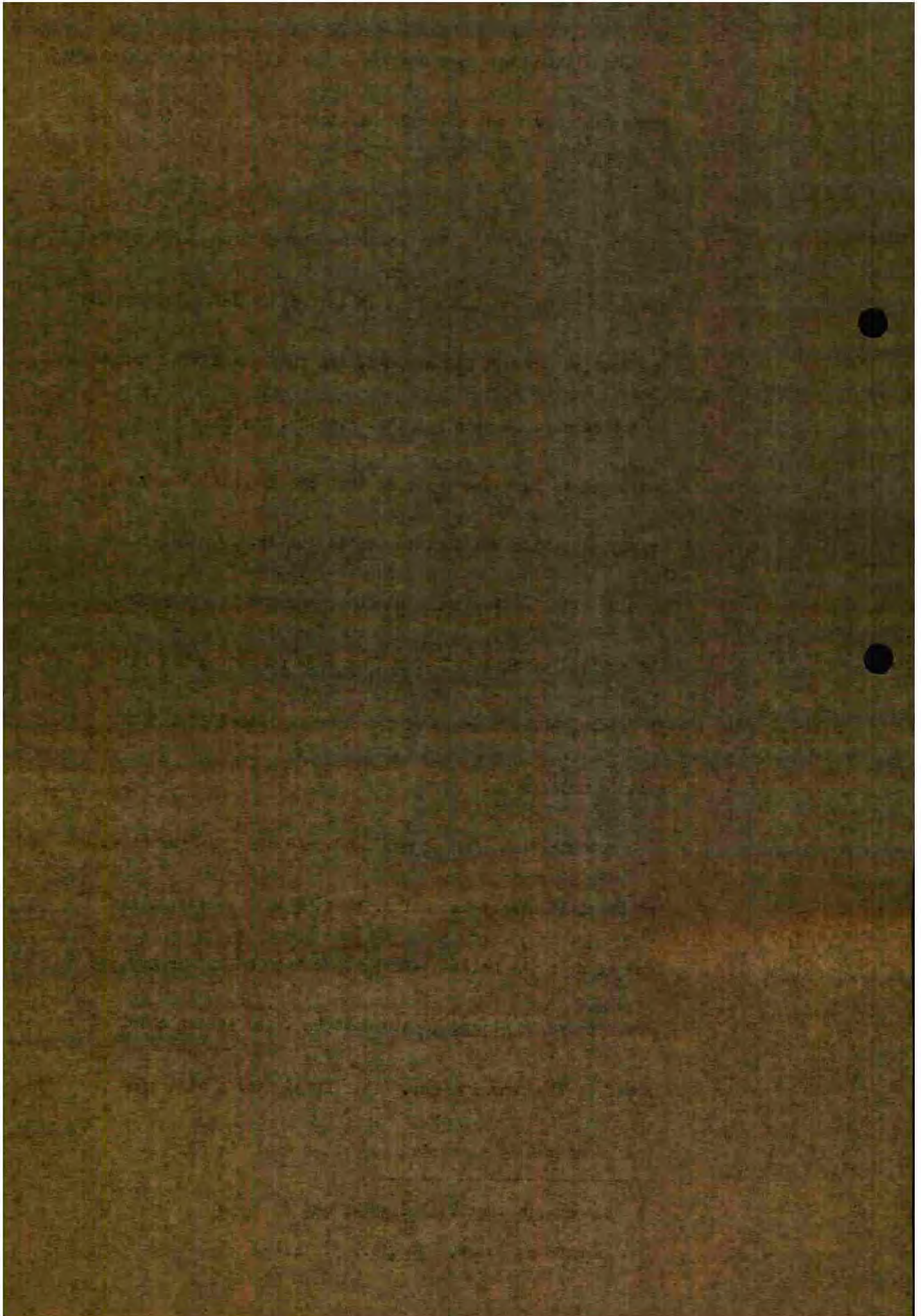
On 11 January 1942 the units of Panzer Group Africa were prepared to defend themselves in the Marsa-el-Brega position. The British pursuit had stopped, and the Axis divisions had thus been able to gain respite. Finally, the supply system had begun to function again so that the ammunition and POL supply situation had improved considerably. By mid-January the logistical situation could be described as favorable. The arrival of equipment for four tank companies had raised the combat effectiveness of the German armored divisions quite considerably.

Nevertheless, Rommel was concerned over the numerical weakness of his combat units, when he made an inspection flight over the Marsa-el-Brega position on 12 January, accompanied by Oberst (Col.) Westphal, the acting chief of staff of the Panzer Group. Distributed over a wide area and separated by extensive gaps that could hardly

¹⁴⁸

Asmann, op. cit., pp. 353-4 and

Raymond de Belot, op. cit., p. 141-2.



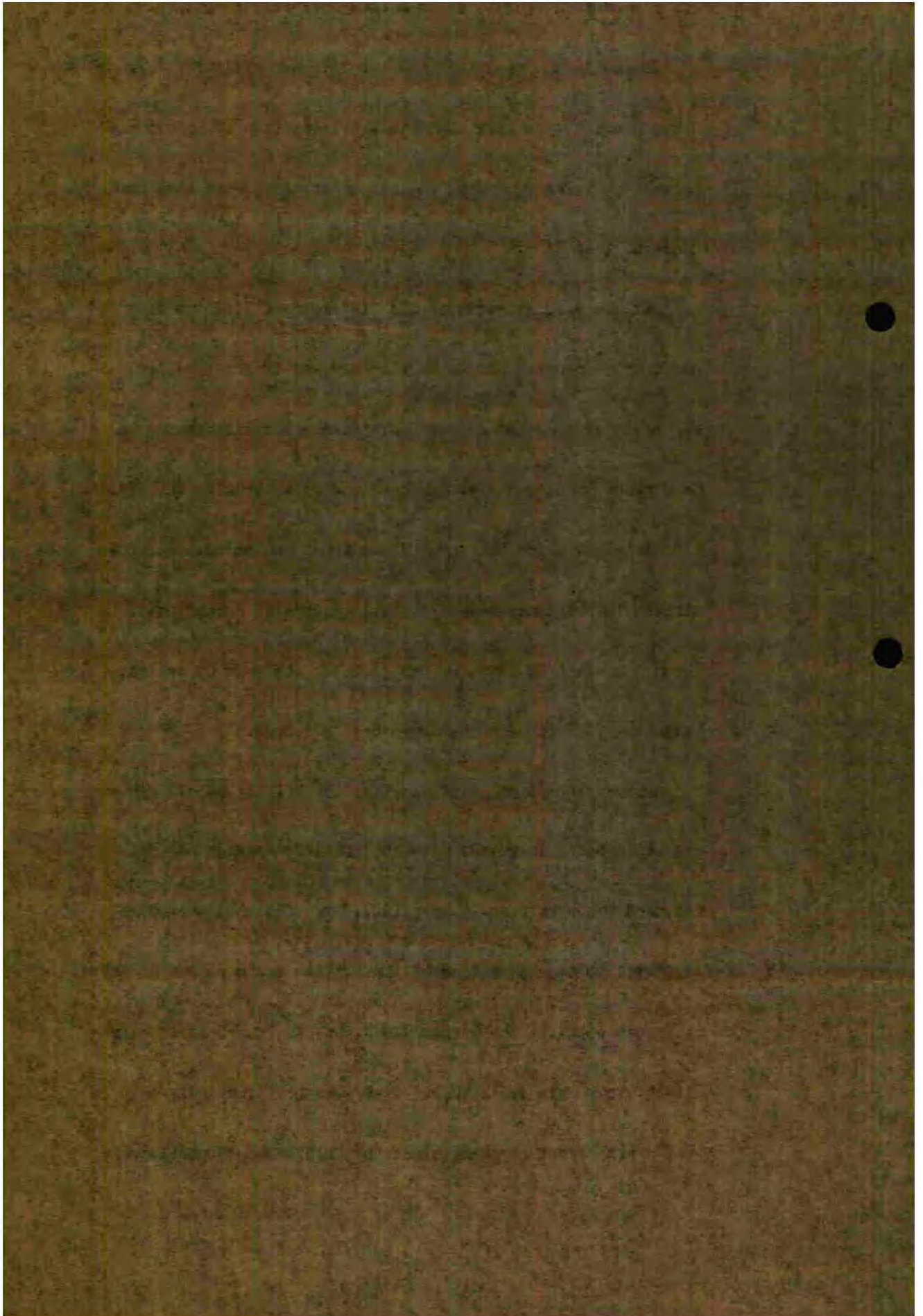
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be kept under surveillance, the German divisions held a series of strong points. It seemed doubtful that they would be able to offer sustained resistance to a concerted British attack.

It was to the credit of the intelligence officer at Panzer Group Headquarters that the British disposition of forces was correctly evaluated during the situation conference that took place at that time.

Only forward elements of the 7th Armoured Division had cautiously advanced as far as the Marsa-el-Brega position; the newly arrived 1st Armoured Division was still assumed to be northeast of Agadabia. Benghazi was being held by the Indian 4th Division, which had moved its outpost southward. The South African 1st Division seemed to be concentrated around Marsa, the New Zealand 2d Division was probably still in Cyrenaica, while the 70th Division had remained in Tobruk.

Another important point was that the British supply system was still being improved, with the port of Benghazi not yet restored to operations. Gherst (Col.) von Westphal therefore suggested to take advantage of the British weakness and dispersal of forces opposite the German lines, and to launch an immediate attack. To remain in the Marsa-el-Brega position would only weaken the German chances, since the British would probably be

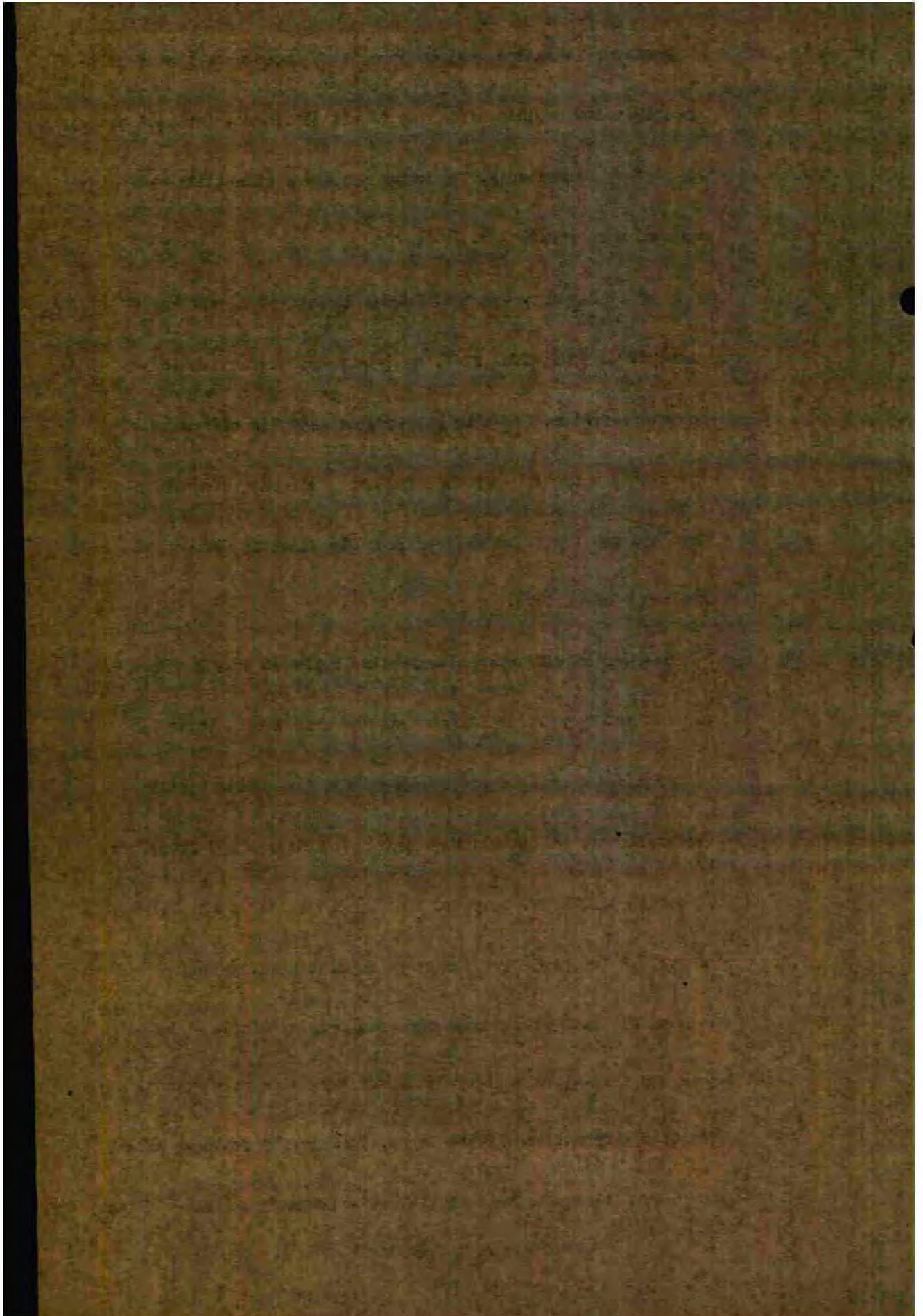


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ready to attack by the beginning of February. At that time a German attack against superior British forces would be far more difficult. Rommel was at first quite concerned about this suggestion; he raised serious objections because of the unsatisfactory motor vehicle situation of all divisions, but particularly ^{that of} the armored ones. The motor vehicle availability had reached a desperate low.

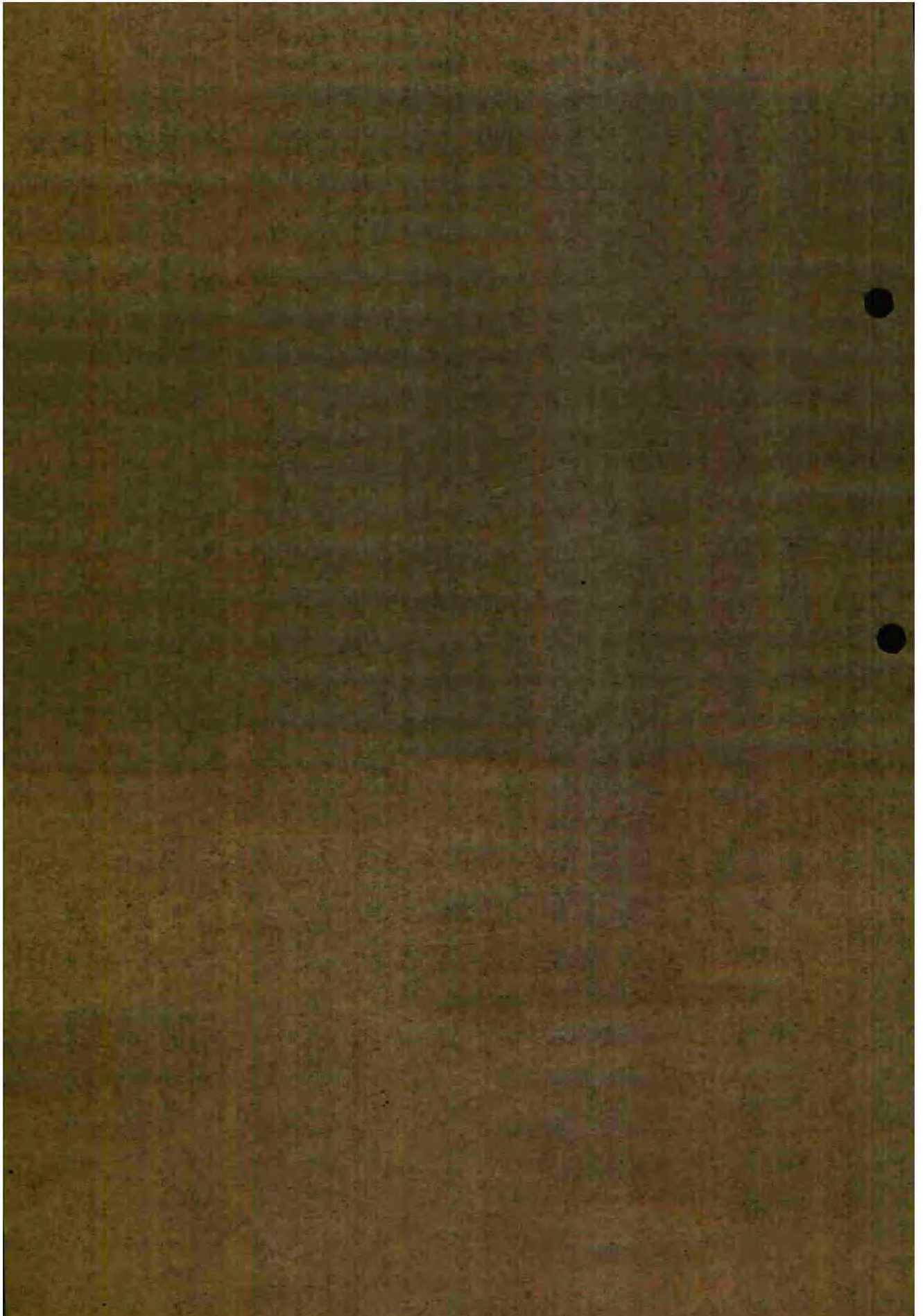
By 13 January, however, Rommel had accepted Westphal's concept. As an initial step, he took every precaution to achieve surprise. For this purpose, he kept his offensive intentions secret, by withholding any pertinent information from his own troops as well as from his superior German and Italian headquarters.

The German air reconnaissance had reported only a few hundred motor vehicles in front of the Axis lines, while reconnaissance patrols on the ground had met solely British reconnaissance ~~in~~ battalions reinforced by tanks and artillery. It was in that area, however, that Rommel believed the bulk of the 7th Armoured Division to be concentrated. He wanted to encircle this division in the area west of Gfafia ^{from the} toward the ^{toward the} Mediterranean coast or destroy ^{it} by launching a wide envelopment. For this purpose, the Africa Corps, forming the southern attack force, was to advance between the Wadi-el-Faregh and Bir-el-Ginn



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toward the northeast, while Group Marx, forming the northern
the northern attack force, was to thrust along the Via Balbia
also toward the northeast.



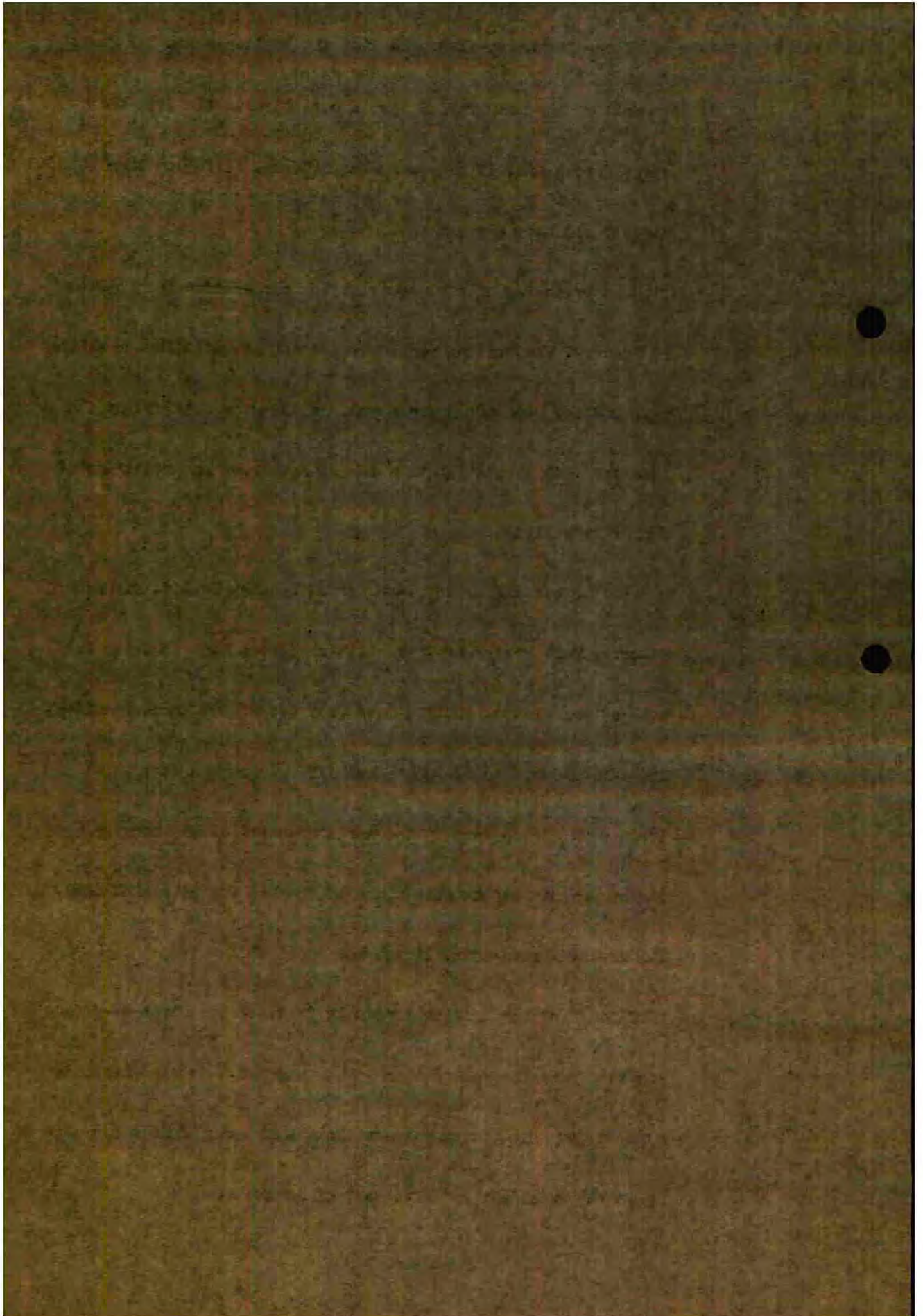
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Group Marx was composed of the mobile elements of the 90th Light Division and the Italian XX Motorized Corps, reinforced by tanks from the 21st Panzer Division.

Along the Marsa-el-Bregha line the Italian I and XIII Corps as well as the Motorized Corps Gambera were to tie down the enemy forces and, if they were to withdraw, to follow them closely and keep abreast of them.

The beginning of the German attack was ^{scheduled} decided for 0530 on 21 January. The written order was not issued until the preceding day, and the Commando Supremo and the OKW were notified at the same time. At about that time the Panzer Group was redesignated Panzer Army Africa.

The German offensive plans for 21 January failed. Without offering much resistance, the British forces had withdrawn from both attack groups, putting down only occasional harassing fire. The Africa Corps to the south had literally bogged down in the loose sand; Group Marx in the north advanced slowly because the swampy terrain on both sides of the Via Balbia ^{delayed} ~~hindered~~ its ~~movements~~ movements. It was not until the evening that Rommel realized that the British forces in front of the Marsa-el-Bregha position were far weaker than he had assumed. Air reconnaissance reports gave him the impression that major enemy forces had linked up in the area east and southeast of Agadabia.



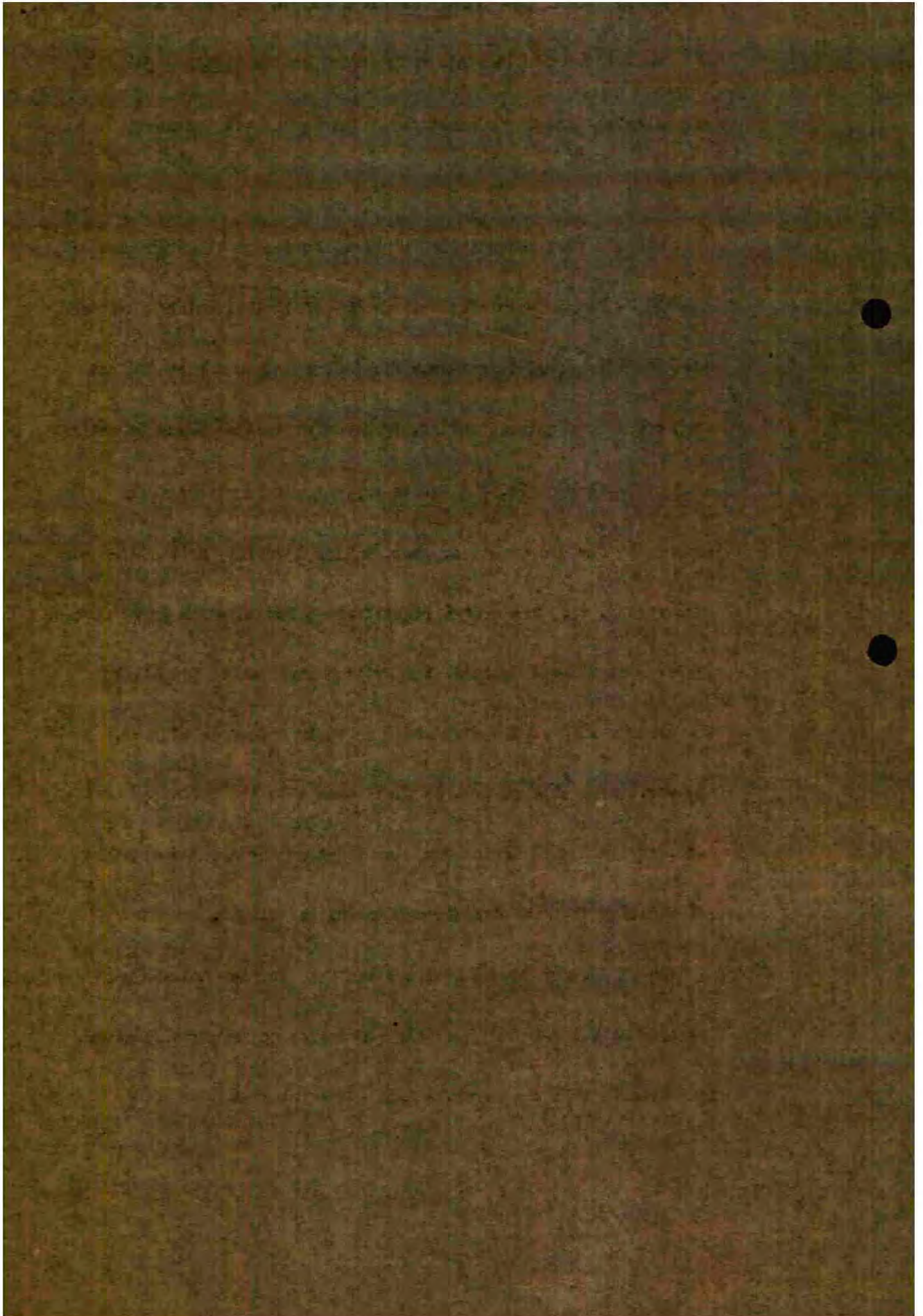
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He could destroy this enemy force only if strong Axis units reached the Saunnu - Antelat area via Agedabia at an early time and cut off their ^{British} rear-line communications to the north and northeast..

He decided to place his main effort on the left and put all his strength into a northeast thrust along the Via Balbis via Agedabia.

Rommel's plan to encircle the enemy forces in the area east of Agedabia - Saunnu - Antelat was unsuccessful. The isolated British ^{caught} elements were completely ~~thrown~~ off balance so that they did not even consider counterattacking, their only reaction being to retreat as fast as they could. The Panzer Army troops continued their advance by day and night, so that, taking advantage of the element of surprise, they ^{had driven} ~~had driven~~ right through far superior enemy forces. Wherever fighting developed, the British were put to flight; ~~and~~ the Germans inflicted heavy losses on their opponents without, however, being able to prevent their escape to the north and northeast. ~~and~~ The Africa Corps at least captured numerous tanks and vehicles that had dropped out during the flight.

On 21 January Rommel realized that the British had escaped the trap he had set for them. Air reconnaissance reports, however, indicated that in the Saunnu - Saun - Antelat area



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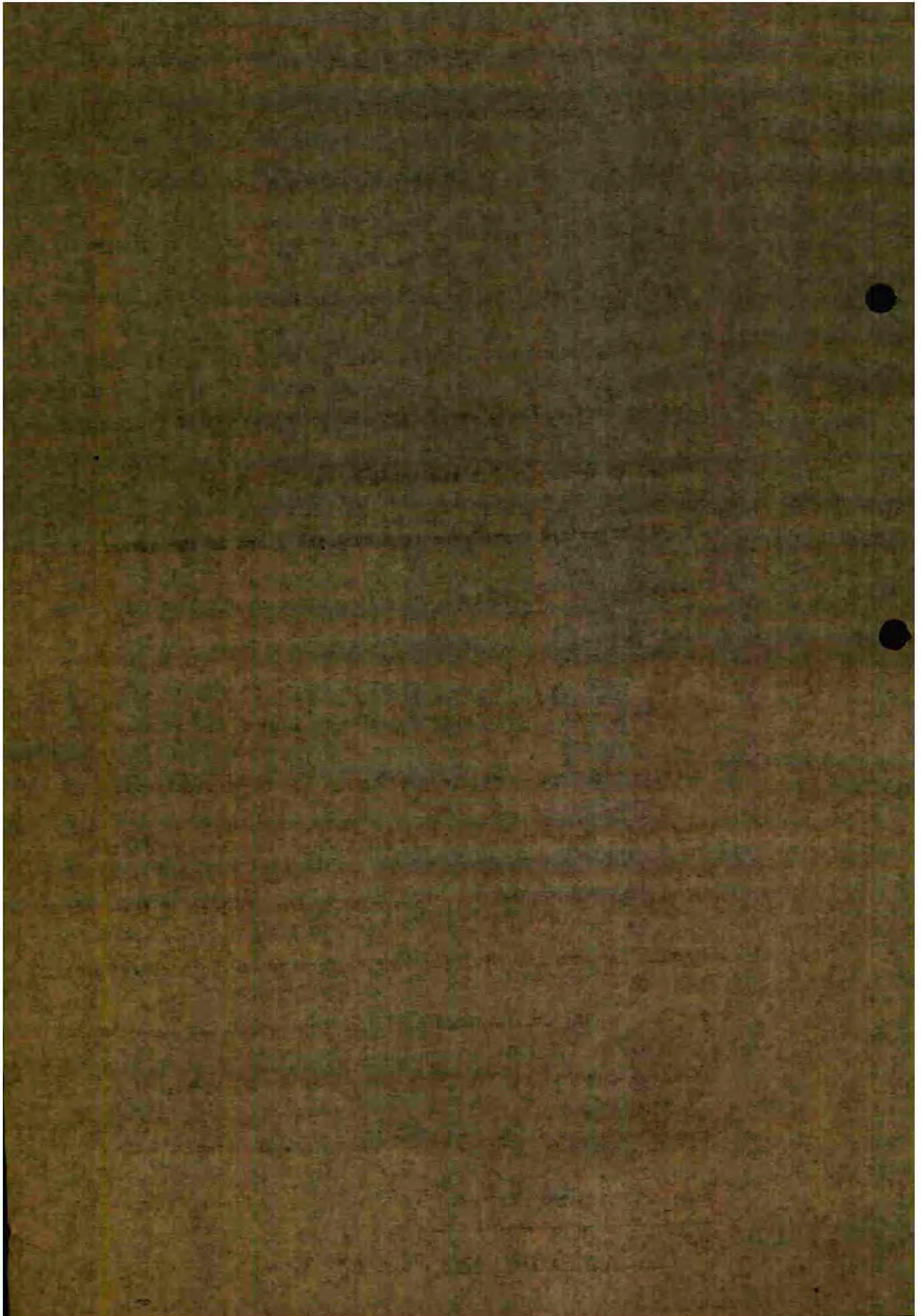
there were still some major British forces, namely 150 tanks, approximately 2,000 motor vehicles, and many supply dumps. On 25 January Rommel therefore ordered the Africa Corps to launch the pursuit in the direction of Mers in order to complete the defeat of the enemy forces. For this purpose, the 21st Panzer Division was given the mission of thrusting from Saunnu toward Bir-el-Malek (southeast of Mers), the 15th Panzer Division was to advance farther to the left from the area west of Saunnu toward St. Mers, and the 2d Machine Gun Battalion was to move from Antelat to Mers. Group Darr was to follow the 2d Machine Gun Battalion from Agdebia via Antelat. The 90th Light Division and the XX Motorized Corps were to secure the flank of the advancing units against the British forces that still remained in the Benghazi area.

The thrust toward Mers hit the enemy forces just as they were settling down and went straight through the fleeing columns. The 8th Panzer Regiment captured 12 aircraft that were ready to take off at the Mers airfield and overran the command post of the British 1st Armoured Division 6 miles farther to the north. However, the bulk of the British forces escaped once again. The 15th Panzer Division captured on this day a particularly rich booty: 85 mostly undamaged tanks, 45 artillery pieces, 190 trucks, and about 200 prisoners of war.

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Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43, Vol. I, Part II, Chapter 6, p. 388.



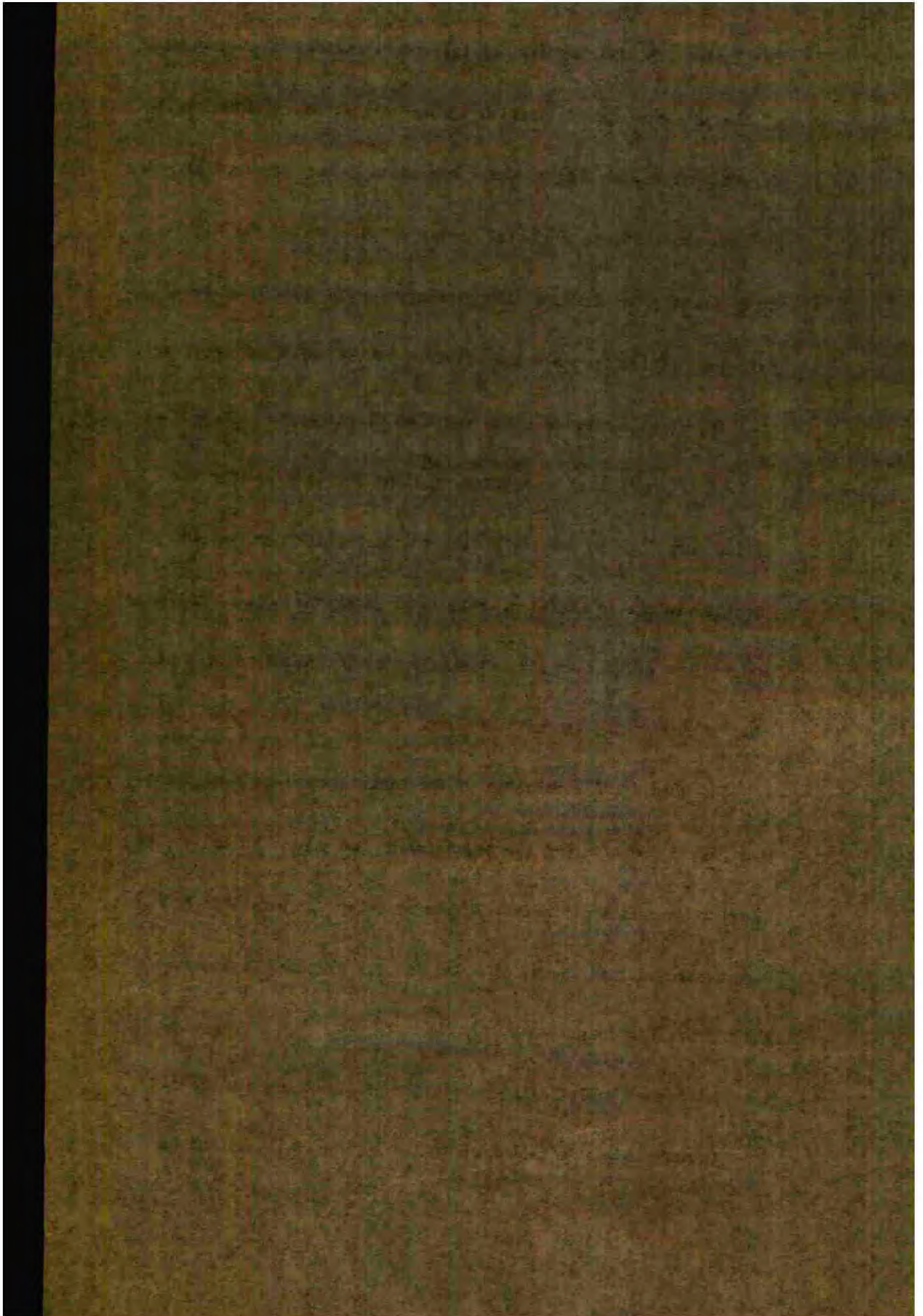
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The 2d Machine Gun Battalion pushed back superior enemy forces toward the northeast, reaching Msus toward 1500. The units committed north of Agedabia were not engaged in combat on that day. The Indian 4th Division did not intervene; instead of taking some of the pressure off the British armored units, the division withdrew to Solluk. The Africa Corps assembled around Msus and Bir-el-Melaz, where it was subjected to air attacks during the night. On 26 January the Germans did not continue the pursuit of the defeated British forces which withdrew to the north and northeast.

The great number of motor vehicles of all types captured by the Germans were used to ^{make up for} ~~replace~~ existing shortages within the Africa Corps and to provide mobile transportation for the 90th Light Division. In addition, voluminous stocks of POL, ammunition, and rations as well as several tank repair and maintenance shops were seized in the vicinity of Msus.

The successful conclusion of the tank battle near Msus meant that Rommel had attained the objective he had wanted to achieve by launching a counteroffensive. The enemy attack preparations had been destroyed, and the British 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions had suffered serious losses.

But Rommel resisted the temptation of thrusting via Mechili in a manner similar to that used in the spring of 1941, when he

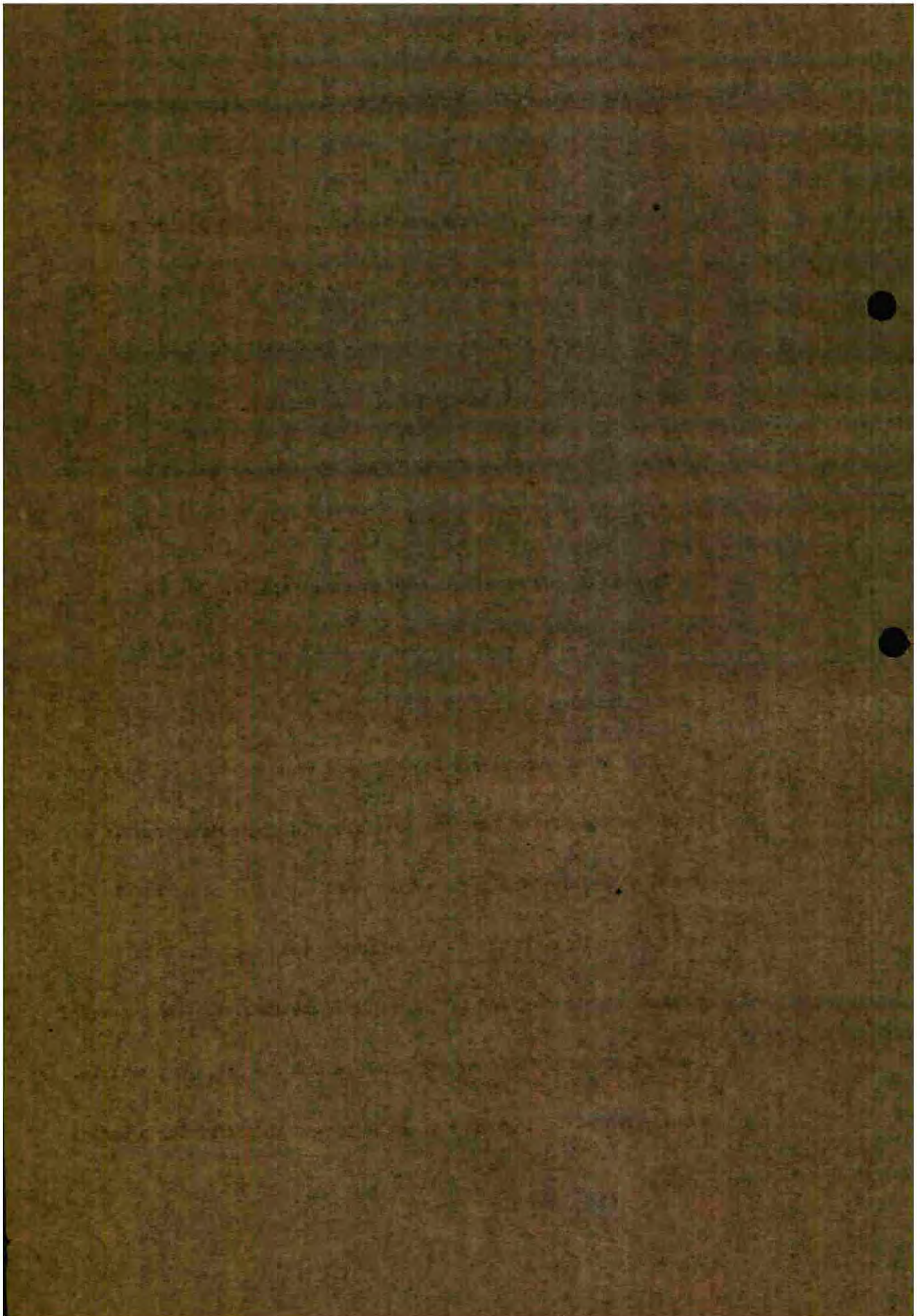


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drove the British out of Cyrenaica. The POL supplies were insufficient for such an extensive operation, quite apart from the fact that, contrary to the preceding year, the British had some undefeated divisions in the eastern part of Cyrenaica and Narmarica. Rommel therefore decided to conduct further operations on a step-by-step basis.

The seizure of Benghazi, however, was an objective that Rommel wanted to attain at any price, even against the decision of the Commando Supremo. After all, possession of this port was crucial for the German logistical buildup. On the other hand, there were major enemy forces in Benghazi and in the area south of the city toward Solluk, so that Rommel considered a frontal attack from the south as unprofitable. Only an envelopment from the east would effectively cut off major enemy elements.

The latest experience demonstrated that it would be inadvisable to employ the Africa Corps in this almost impassable terrain. Rommel therefore decided to employ weak but very mobile forces for the envelopment effort. He selected Group Marx for this purpose; it was composed of two rifle battalions, the two motorized reconnaissance battalions, one antitank and one artillery battery. Rommel planned to lead this group in person in performing a daring



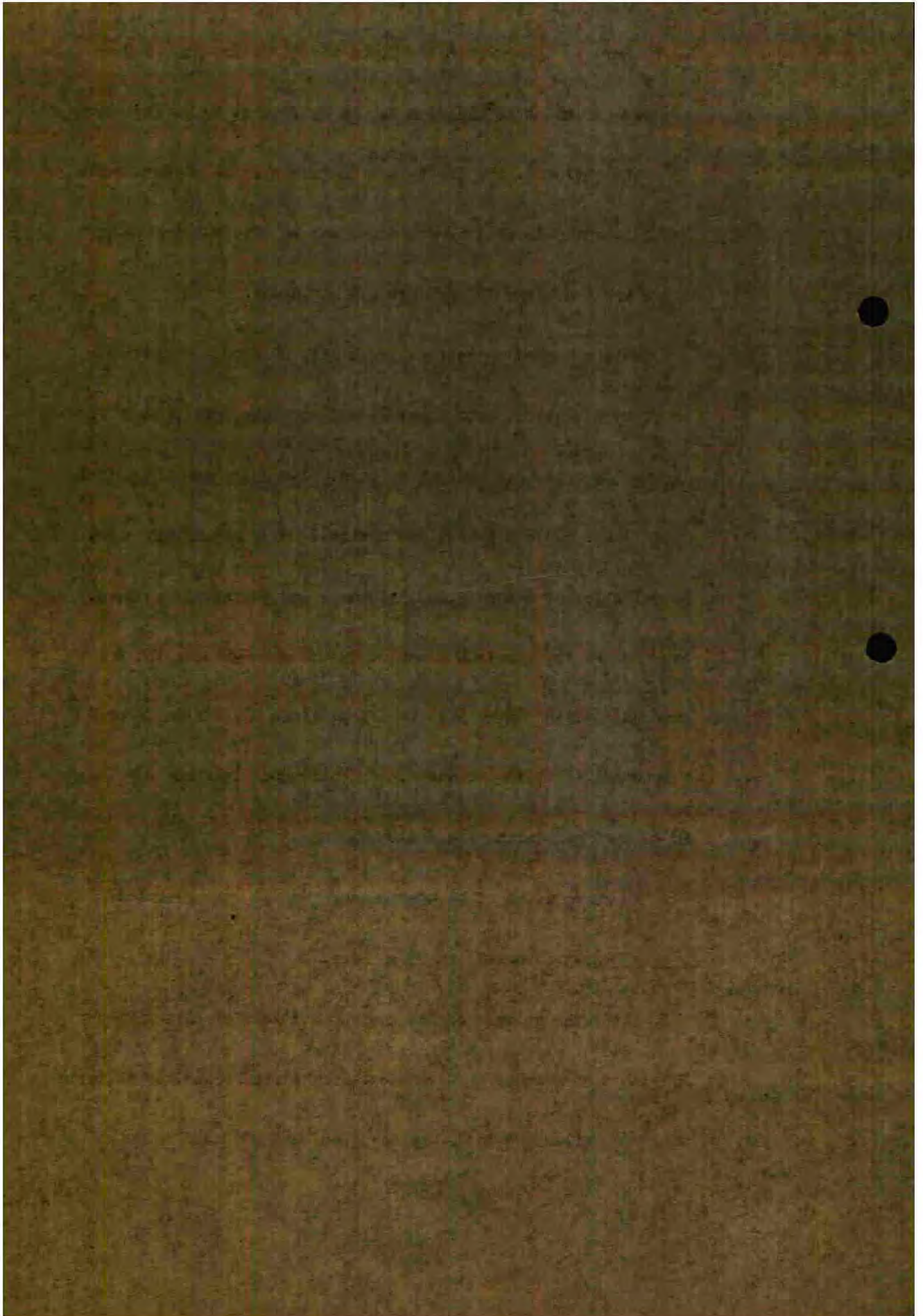
- 221 -

night movement; he intended to reach El-Raghina by the early morning of 28 January and to seize nearby Benghazi by a coup de main. The 90th Light Division and elements of the IX Motorized Corps were to attack from the south toward Solluk and farther eastward in order to tie down the enemy forces. By moving strong ^{Corps} elements eastward, the Africa was to make a feint attack toward Mechili, while in reality the corps was to stay put near Marsa and cover the flank facing east and northeast.

Despite Rommel's instinctive ability of finding expedients in every situation, Group Mark bogged down completely on 26 January ^{night} during its drive across soaked ^{sand} dunes. El-Raghina was not seized until 1600, while Benghazi was captured on 29 January at noon. Rommel's forces seized 1,000 prisoners and 300 motor vehicles, but most of the garrison escaped. On the same evening the Ariete Armored Division moved into the city. Along the Africa Corps outposts the British conducted reconnaissance in force on 26 January and during the following days.

In recognition of his performance Rommel was ^{promoted to} ~~appointed~~ Generaloberst (General) on 29 January.

After the seizure of Benghazi Rommel felt certain that the British were evacuating Cyrenaica. On the other hand, he believed that the British would defend the area west of Tobruk



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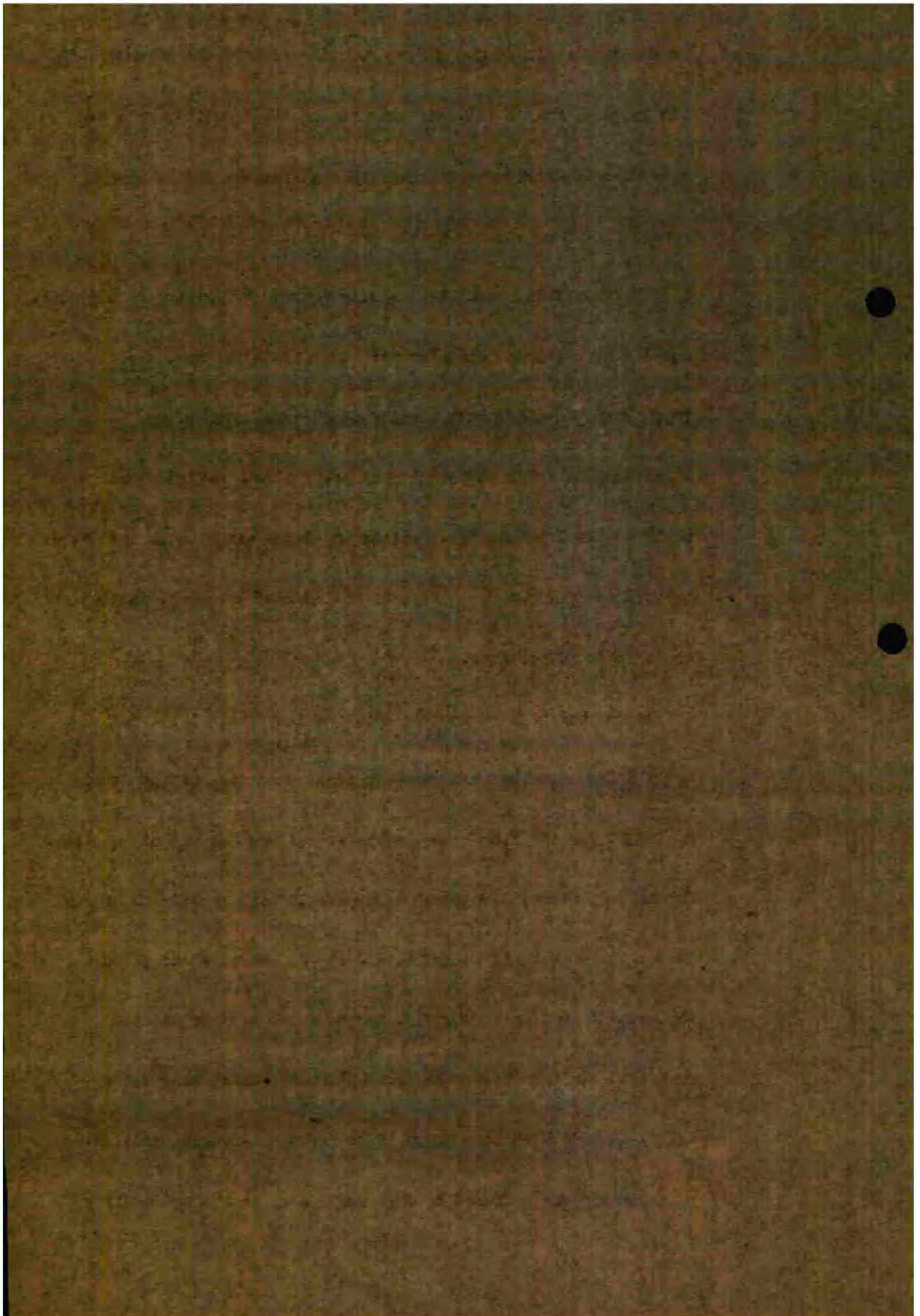
and that they would concentrate all available divisions for the defense of the Gazala position.

Because of existing shortage of ^{fuel} POL, Rommel was unable to employ the Africa Corps for a continuation of the pursuit via Tengedar or Mechili. For this reason, he committed only two weak motorized brigades to maintain the pressure on the enemy forces via Barca toward Martuba and Derna.

The Via Balbia had been heavily damaged by British demolitions, set off at suitable points in the mountainous terrain, where tough rear guard elements blocked the German advance. On 4 February the German pursuit was brought to a definite halt south of the Ummi defile. British low-level air attacks inflicted heavy losses of motor vehicles on both German brigades, particularly on their supply columns.

Rommel had been correct in assuming that the British XXXI would offer sustained resistance against an attack of the Gazala position. For the time being, a head-on attack was out of question. But to prevent any disagreeable surprise, Rommel moved the Africa Corps, the 90th Light Division, and the XI Motorized Corps to the Mechili area on 6 February. The Commando Supremo did not authorize him to move up the X and XXI Corps until many weeks later. It held back both corps in the Marsa-el-Brega position.

The reverse suffered by the Panzer Army at the end of 1941



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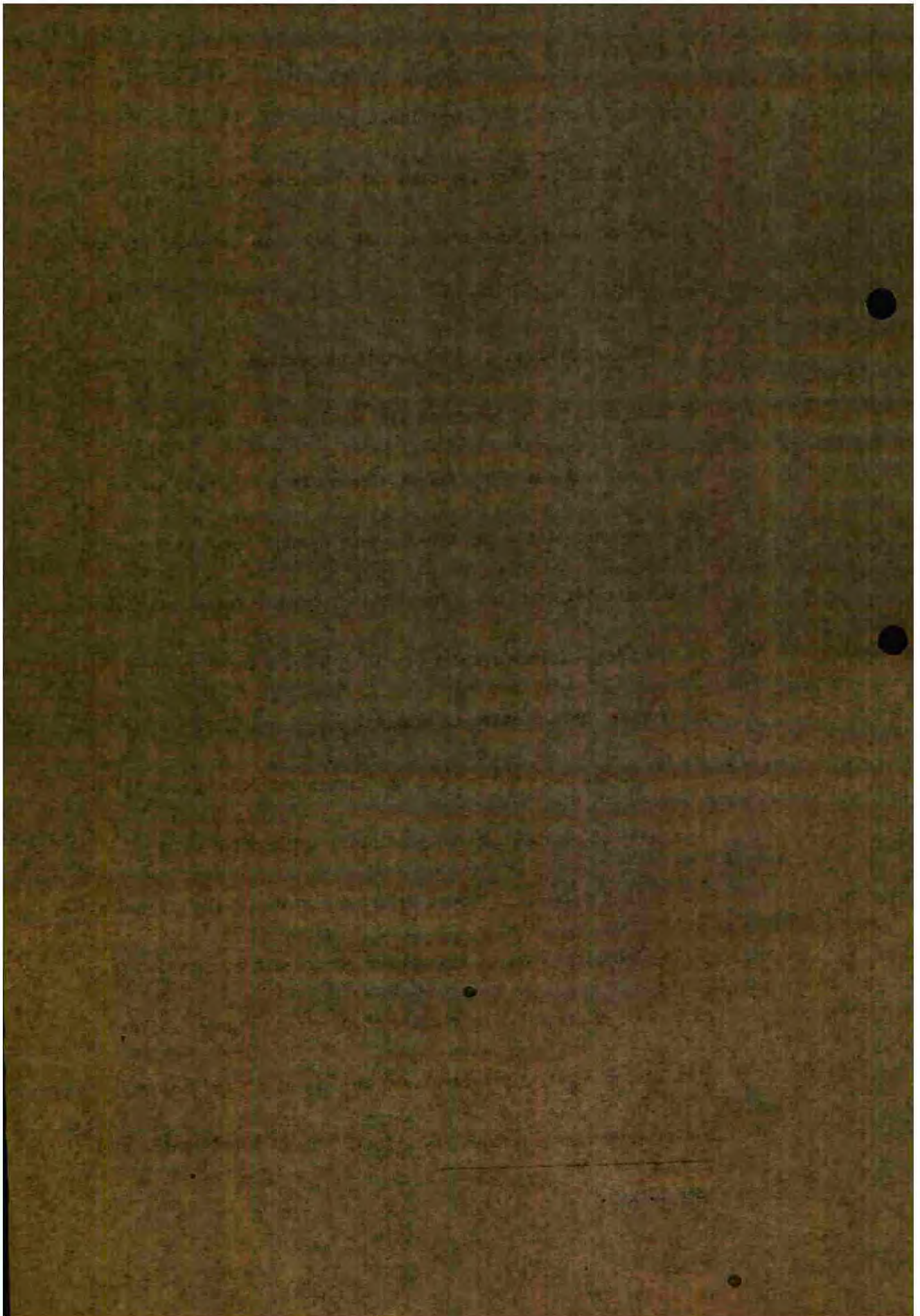
had thus been effaced. Although on the defensive, Rommel had been able to defeat the superior Eighth Army before the British were capable of assembling their forces for an offensive. Rommel had inflicted heavy losses on his adversary and, in pursuing him, had once again seized the Cyrenaica.

Before being able to conduct ~~TAHERHET~~ a more far-reaching operation, the Axis divisions would need an extended rest so that they could rehabilitate and supply their units.

The improvement in the logistical position at the beginning of the year had also benefited the Italian Air Force whose strength had risen to about 190 aircraft. The units subordinate to the Air Commander Africa had already been rehabilitated in December.^o Unfortunately, detailed information on the air force activities in the North African theater for the period covered in this section of the narrative is missing.

According to Army reports the German Air Force units had been able to provide generally accurate information on the British disposition of forces before the start of the offensive. During the first days of the advance ground-air cooperation was extremely successful. The commitment of strong fighter units; that almost completely neutralized the effect of the British air intervention on ground operations, brought considerable relief

^o See p. 205.



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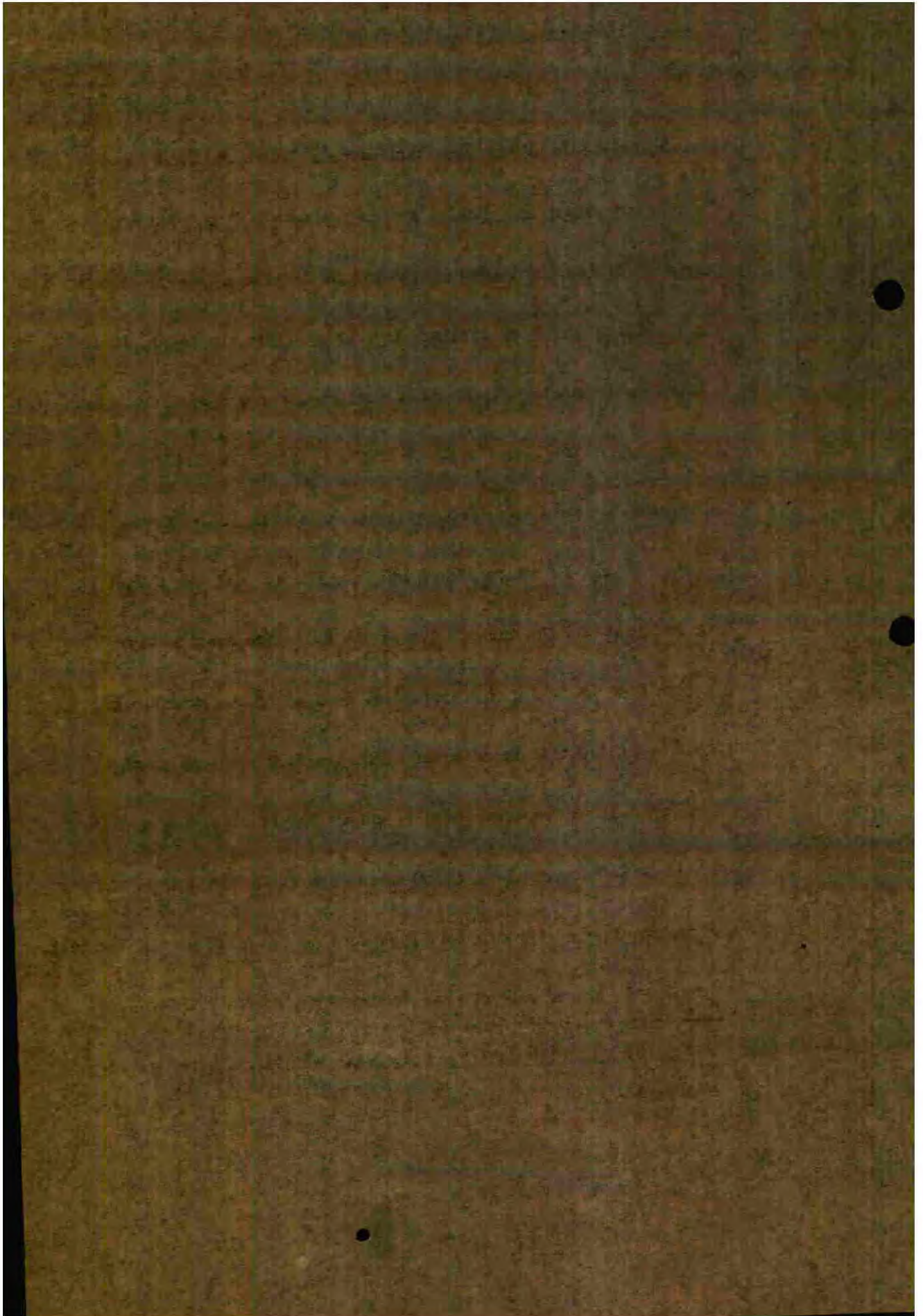
to the Axis troops. Even on 25 January, when the British Eighth Army was in the most critical situation, the Royal Air Force ~~XXXX~~ aircraft intervened only by night with a correspondingly lesser effect.

The German Air Force made an essential contribution to the favorable issue of the tank battles near Saunnu and Msus by reporting at an early moment the whereabouts of the British armored forces. By launching concentrated attacks, in which the X Air Corps also participated, the German flying units did their share to dissipate the combat effectiveness of the British armor. On the other hand, the breakout of the British 1st Armoured Division was not discovered until it was too late.

The Axis air units played only a minor role in the thrust on Benghazi and the pursuit across the Cyrenaica because they had to move up to forward airfields. Because of the shortage of motor vehicles this transfer of airfields took too long so that the Royal Air Force achieved a temporary but overwhelming superiority from 4 - 6 February along the eastern edge of the Cyrenaica. This situation changed for the better as soon as the airfields at Benghazi, Derna, and Martuba were once again used by German aircraft. 150

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Feldzug in Afrika 1941/42, Volume I, Part III, Chapter 6, pp. 409-410.



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Since mid-January the units of Air Commander Africa were based on El-Aghella and Arco Philonorum, after mid-February on the Derna, Martuba, Tini (??), and Benina airfields. The headquarters of the Air Commander Africa was located in the vicinity of Derna on or about 10 February.

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There are no sources available to indicate whether the Air Commander Africa really used all means at his disposal to pursue the British, just like the ground forces. Would it not have been possible to improvise advance landing fields for fighter aircraft near Antelat and Maus at the right time by employing transport planes?

In the entire Mediterranean theater the Luftwaffe lost 112 aircraft during January and February, whereas 27 were damaged.

British

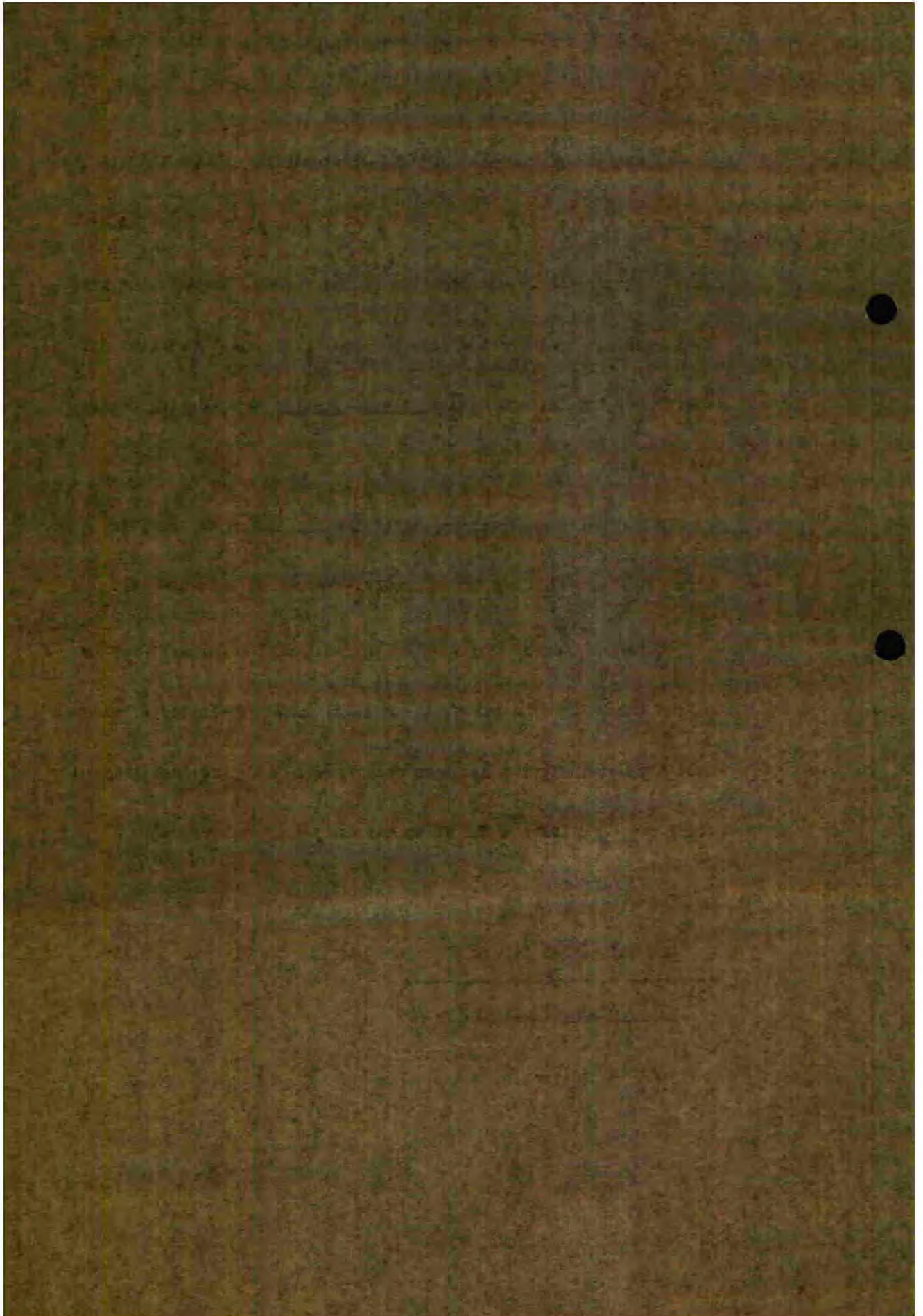
When the pursuit bogged down in front of the Marsa-el-Brega at the beginning of January, the British Commander-in-Chief believed that the German forces had been so seriously defeated that they would not constitute a threat to his army within foreseeable time.

Rommel's sudden attack therefore hit him when he was totally

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Fliegerfuhrer Afrika, p. 16.

See Footnote 126.



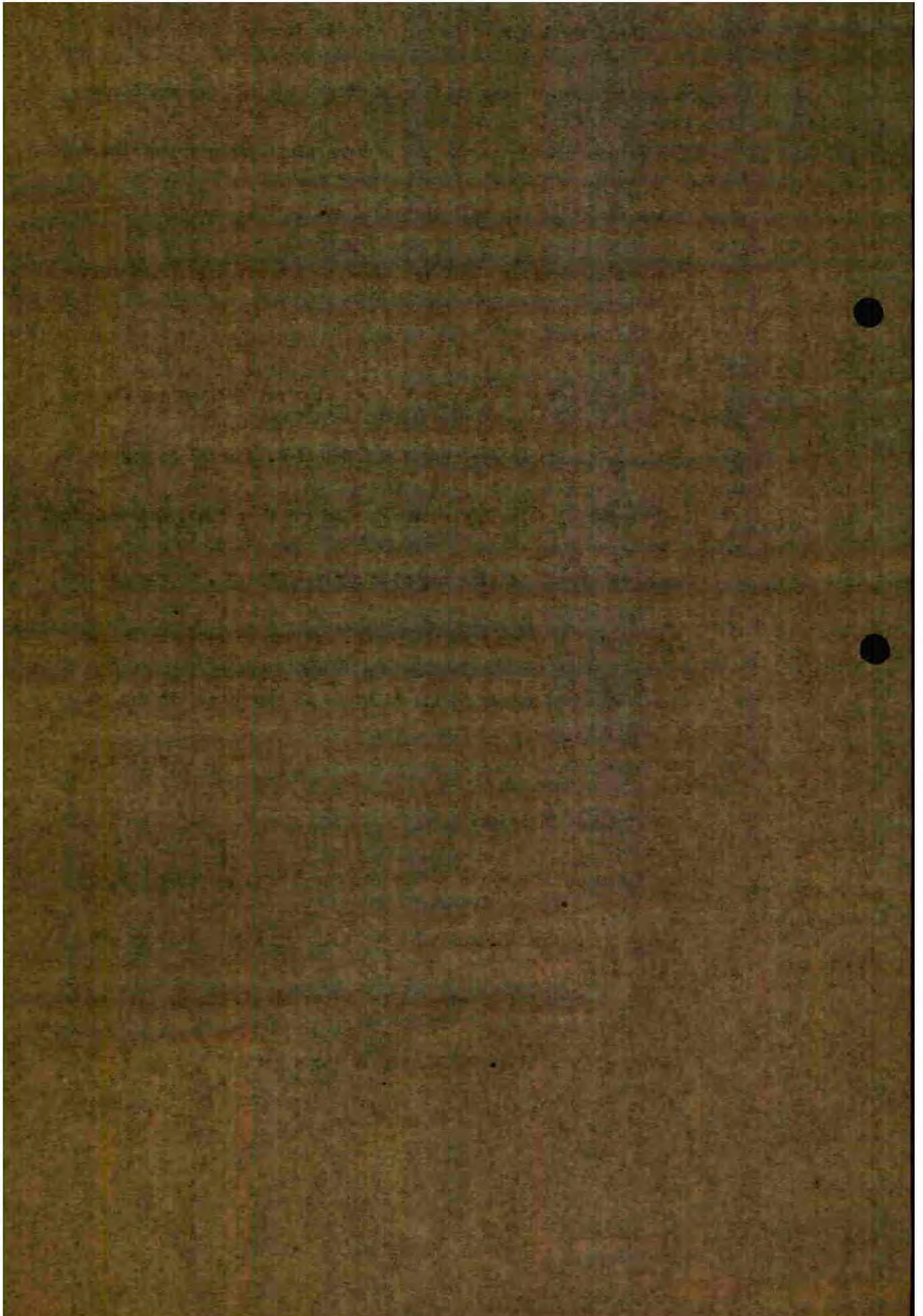
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unprepared and caught him by surprise. "On 21 January," reported Auchinleck, "the unexpected happened, and without any previous notice the enemy began his advance." (Tr.: No source)

The British air units were equally unprepared for such a surprise move. It was their misfortune that the reconnaissance planes were unable to use the advance airfields near Antelat. Heavy rainfall had made them useless, so that shortly before the German offensive half the fighter aircraft were transferred back to Mena.

The "Western Desert Group" was also not fully ready for action. Its supply system did not function, several squadrons had to be pulled back for transfer to the Near East, and technical problems arose with the recently arrived Bostonns, which also contributed to weakening the Group. Another unfortunate factor was that a new supply unit, which had no experience in desert warfare, had just replaced the one that had formerly served the 7th Armoured Division.

At first, Rommel's thrust was given active support by the German flying units. For two days the German dive bombers and Messerschmitt 109's dominated the battlefield. The arrival of German troops at Antelat on 22 January in the afternoon

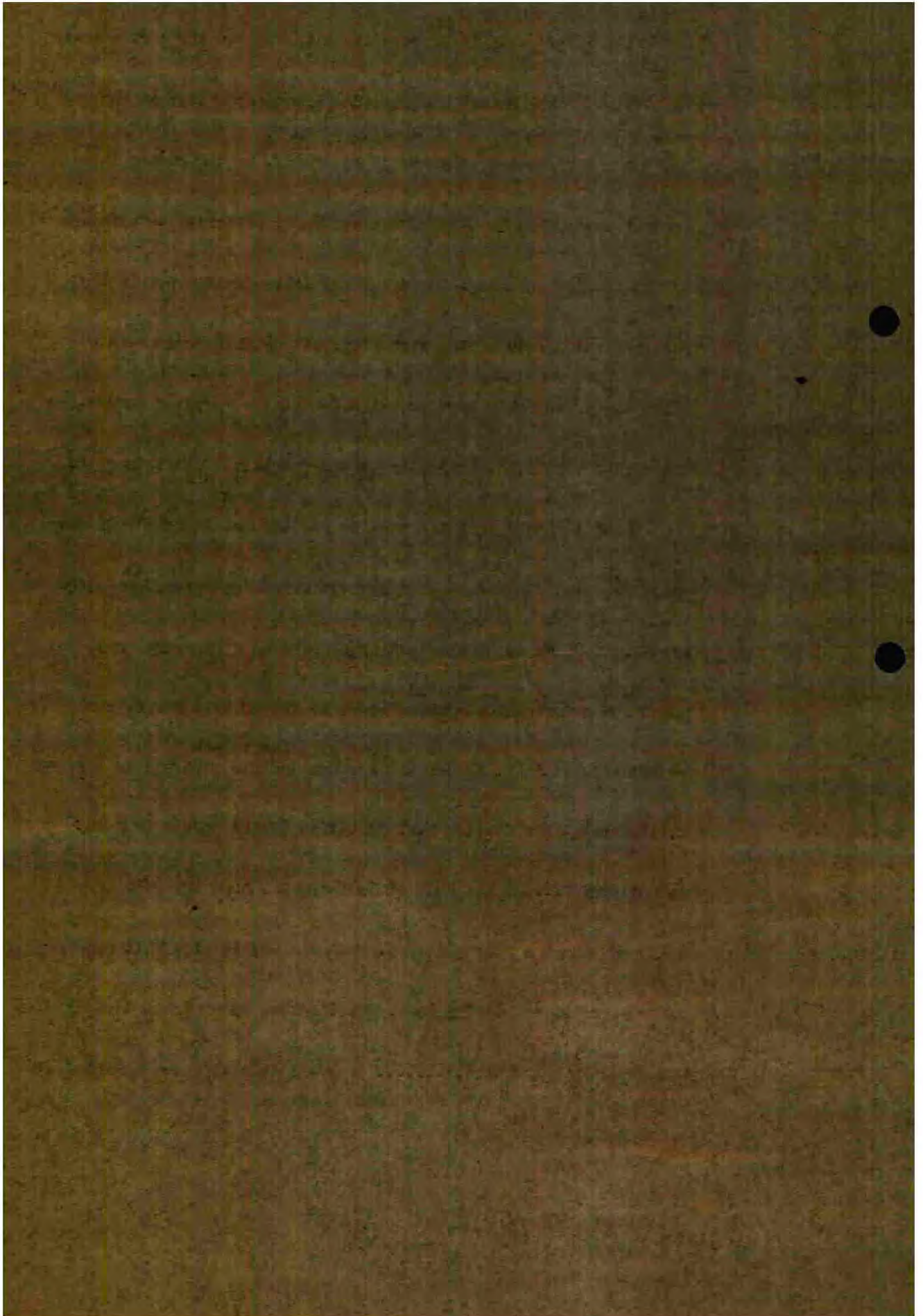


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was totally unexpected and increased the existing confusion. While the airfield was evacuated at the last possible moment, six unserviceable aircraft fell into German hands. On 23 January the British were able to improve the situation in the air, whereas the German ground attack had ^{however,} gained such momentum that it was much more complicated to bring it to a halt. In the evening the general commanding the XIII Corps asked for authority to withdraw to Mchili, if necessary. Coningham had little confidence in the future developments of the situation, and he therefore moved his maintenance and other service units behind the Egyptian border. The fighter and light bomber units were excluded from this move.

Auchinleck who was at that time in Cairo could hardly believe these reports. Alarmed by what he considered the "premature withdrawal," he flew to Ritchie's headquarters on 25 January and

Ritchie ^{general retreat} urged NEB to retract the order given by the ~~the~~ XIII Corps, much to Tedder's delight. Tedder who accompanied NEB ^{Auchinleck} reported to Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles F.A. Portal in London on the next day as follows: "... as a result of last night, I hope that the Army will now launch a counterattack. The only way to stop this nonsense ^{is to} ~~consists of~~ hitting back. Our fighters under Group Captain Cross are in a bad mood, it seems that they are at this



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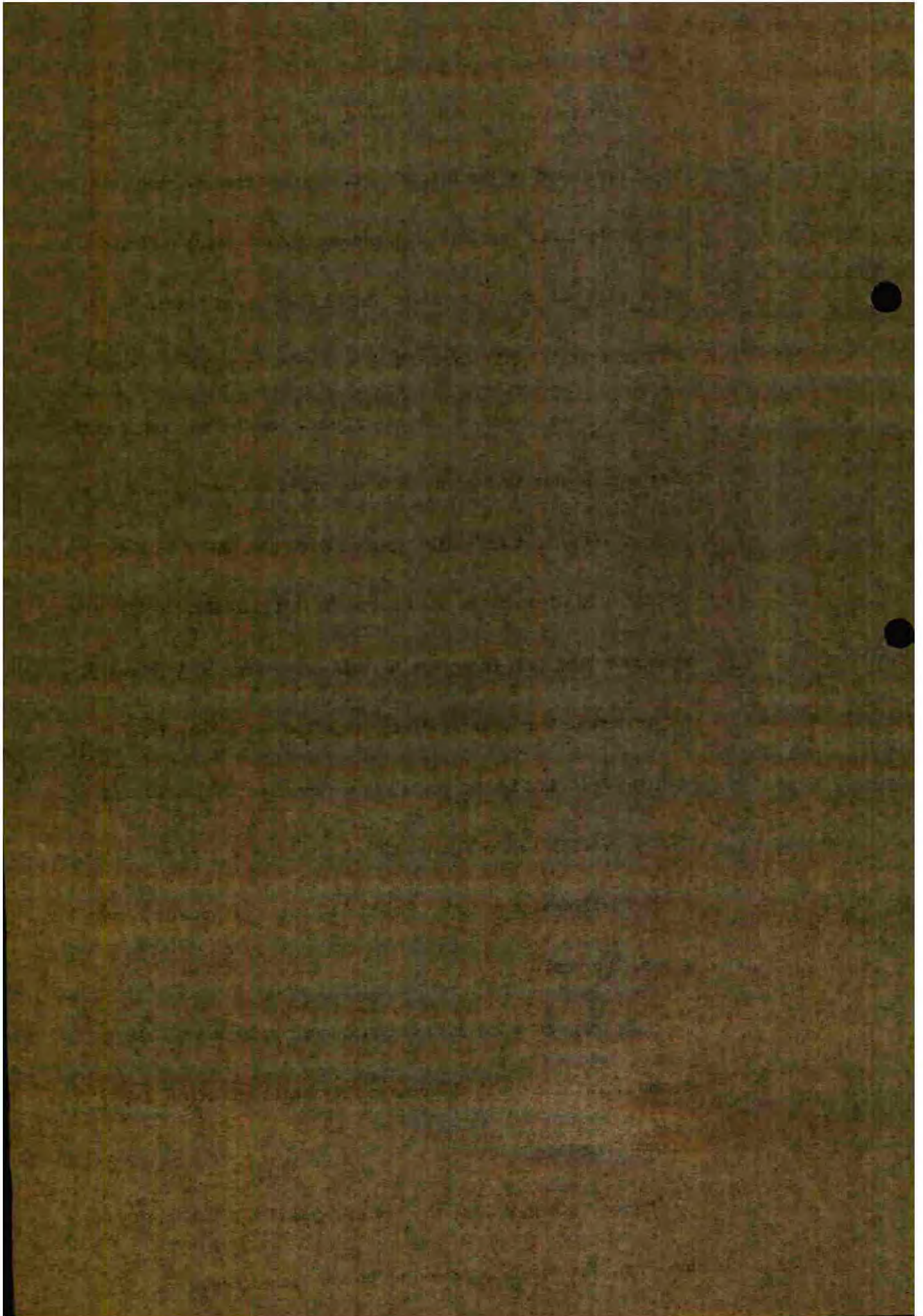
time the decisive and equalizing power."

Flying out of Mechili, they attacked during the following days the advancing German troops and destroyed or damaged 120 trucks.

As Rommel approached Benghazi, the airfield at Benina had to be evacuated by the British who, in the process, abandoned also Mechili much earlier than necessary. The scare suffered at Antelat was still prevalent in the XIII Corps ranks. Based on Gazala the fighter aircraft were unable to support the most forward combat areas; on the other hand, the German flying units were also unable to keep up with the rapid advance of Rommel's troops. For almost an entire week no dive bombers or Messerschmitt 109's were to be seen above the battlefield. Cunningham's squadrons took full advantage of this situation: on 5 February, for instance, they destroyed more than 100 motor vehicles. By then the British fighter units had returned to the Gambut and El-Adem airfields. The light bombers also proved very effective, and the Wellingtons of Group 205 bombed once again their former target, Benghazi.

The squadrons based on Malta, though under heavy Axis pressure, inflicted all the damage they could on German and Italian shipping.

However disappointing the end of Operation CRUSADER might have been, the Gazala position up to Bir Hacheim was



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firmly held by the British. Moreover, they had made sufficient territorial gains to be able to defend Egypt on the ground and in the air.

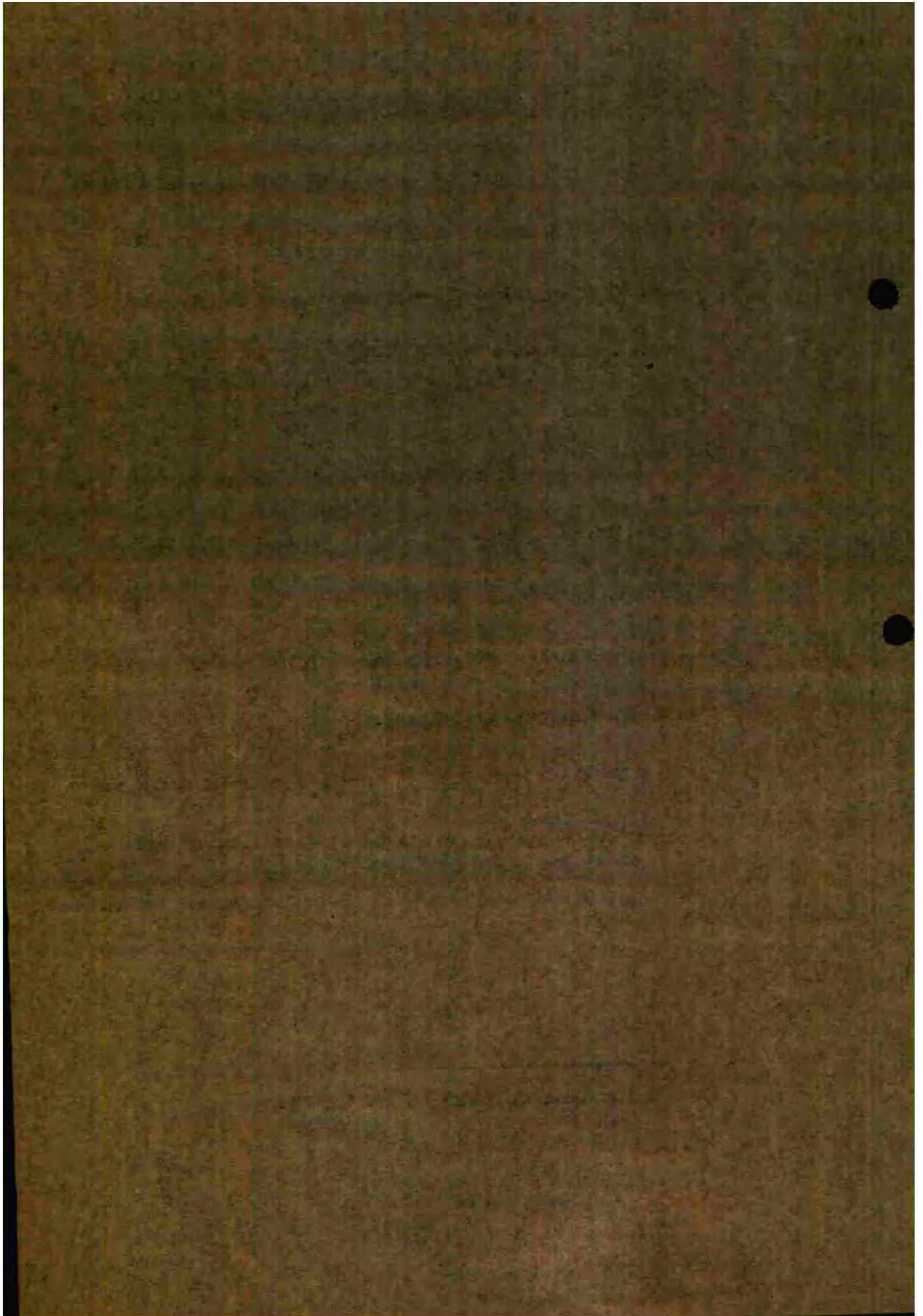
Dawson's new ground organization for the Royal Air Force had proved extremely effective. Between mid-November and mid-March the maintenance and repair shops received 1,035 aircraft in damaged condition, which had been evacuated from about 100,000 square miles of desert territory. During the same period, 800 aircraft were returned to the squadrons as ready for service.

During the period 18 November to 14 February 1942 Tedder's units, including those stationed at Malta, flew almost 16,000 sorties. In evaluating these figures one must remember that almost 300 aircraft were transferred to the Far East from the end of December to mid-February.

While the British lost 575 airplanes in aerial combat and on the ground, they -- in conjunction with antiaircraft units -- shot down 325 German aircraft and an equal number of Italian ^{ones}¹⁵².

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Denis Richards, Volume II, pp. 184 - 91

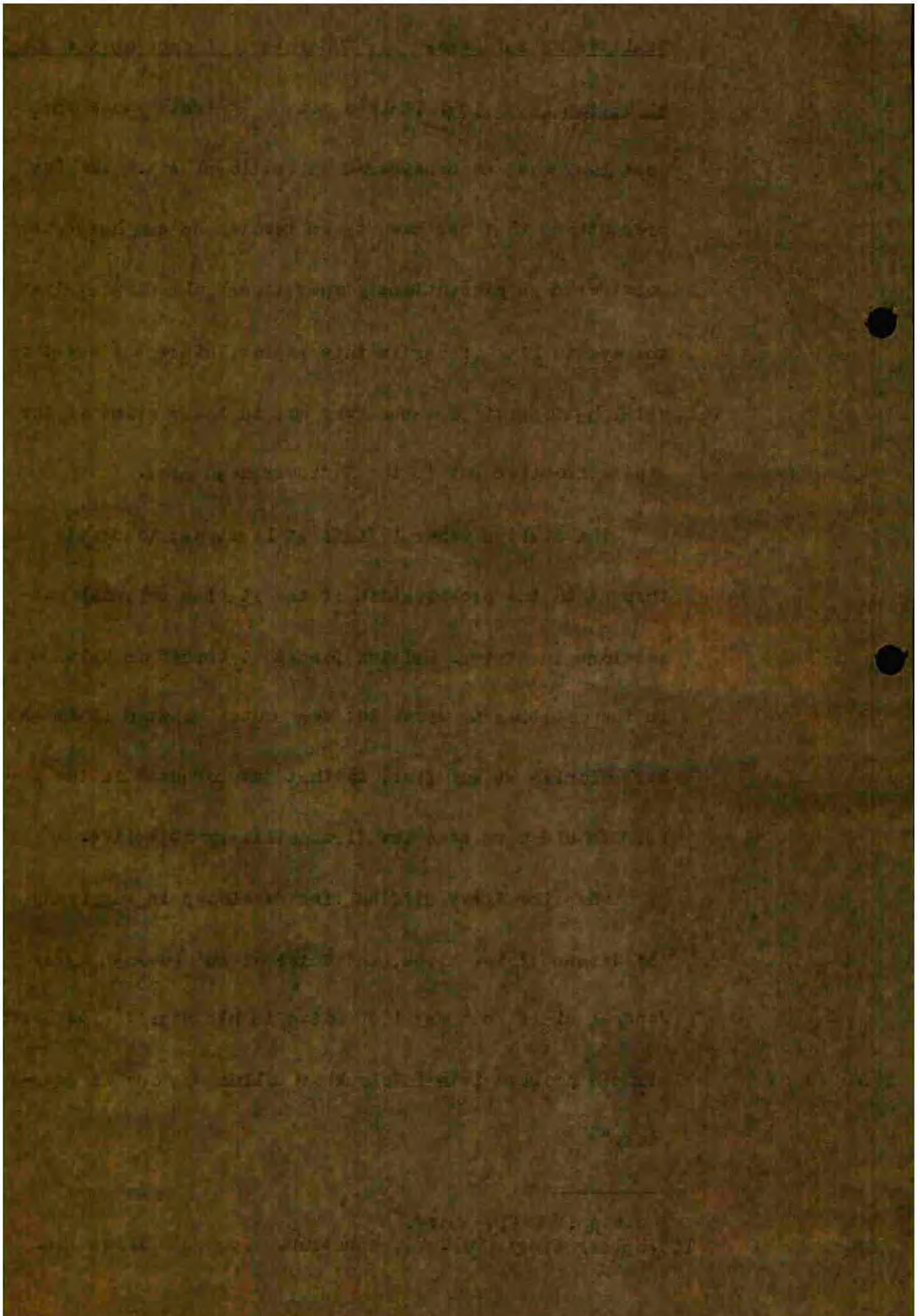


6. The Fundamental Importance of Logistics in Planning Military Operations; Action by Second Air Fleet Neutralizes Malta; German Air Supremacy; Impact on the Supply Situation in Africa. Italy's attack against France on 10 June 1940 must be considered an emotional act.* The few precautions that had been taken beforehand can hardly be considered as precautionary operational planning against the eventuality of war in this region, since the areas of vital national importance were not in the regions of the Alpine frontier but in the Mediterranean area.

The Italian General Staff at least had to devote thought to the preservation of the Italian colonial possessions in Africa. British forces stationed on Malta were in the position to close the sea routes between Italy and her colonies at any time, so that the conquest of the island should have been the first military objective.

When the first difficulties developed in supplying the German Africa Corps, the Chief of the (German) Army General Staff on 8 May 1941 noted in his diary: "The North African problem is not Tobruk or Sollum but one of supplies."¹⁵³

* See pp. 20-21, above.
153. Halder Diary, Vol. VI, Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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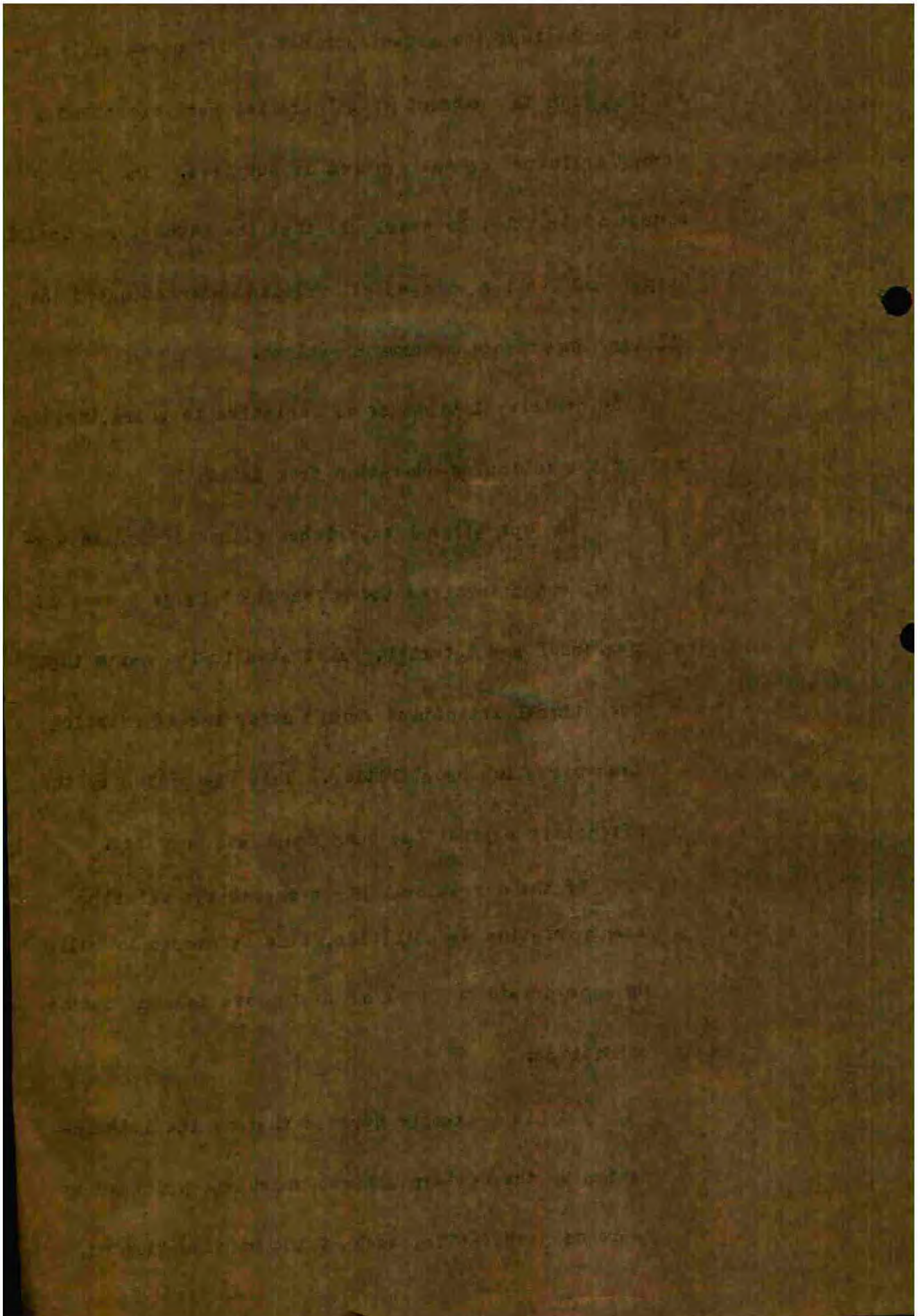
However, the Wehrmacht High Command failed to draw the logical conclusions from this realization. There can be no doubt that the organizational errors necessarily resulting from the conduct of a "parallel war" exercised a strong influence on the problem of supplies. The real source of trouble, however, was that the highest responsible German and Italian command authorities underestimated the military importance of communications.

The decisive importance of logistics is characterized best by the following quotation from TESKE:

The operational experience gained in modern warfare, which involves the movement of large masses of personnel and materiel, culminated in the maxim that operational intentions should never exceed existing transportation capabilities. This was proved by the offensives against the Suez Canal and Murmansk.

If the operational plans exceed the existing transportation capabilities, time is needed to build up appropriate supplies or to improve transportation conditions.

A typical example here is that of the 1944 invasion by the Western Allies, which was preceded by years of preparation, such as the construction of



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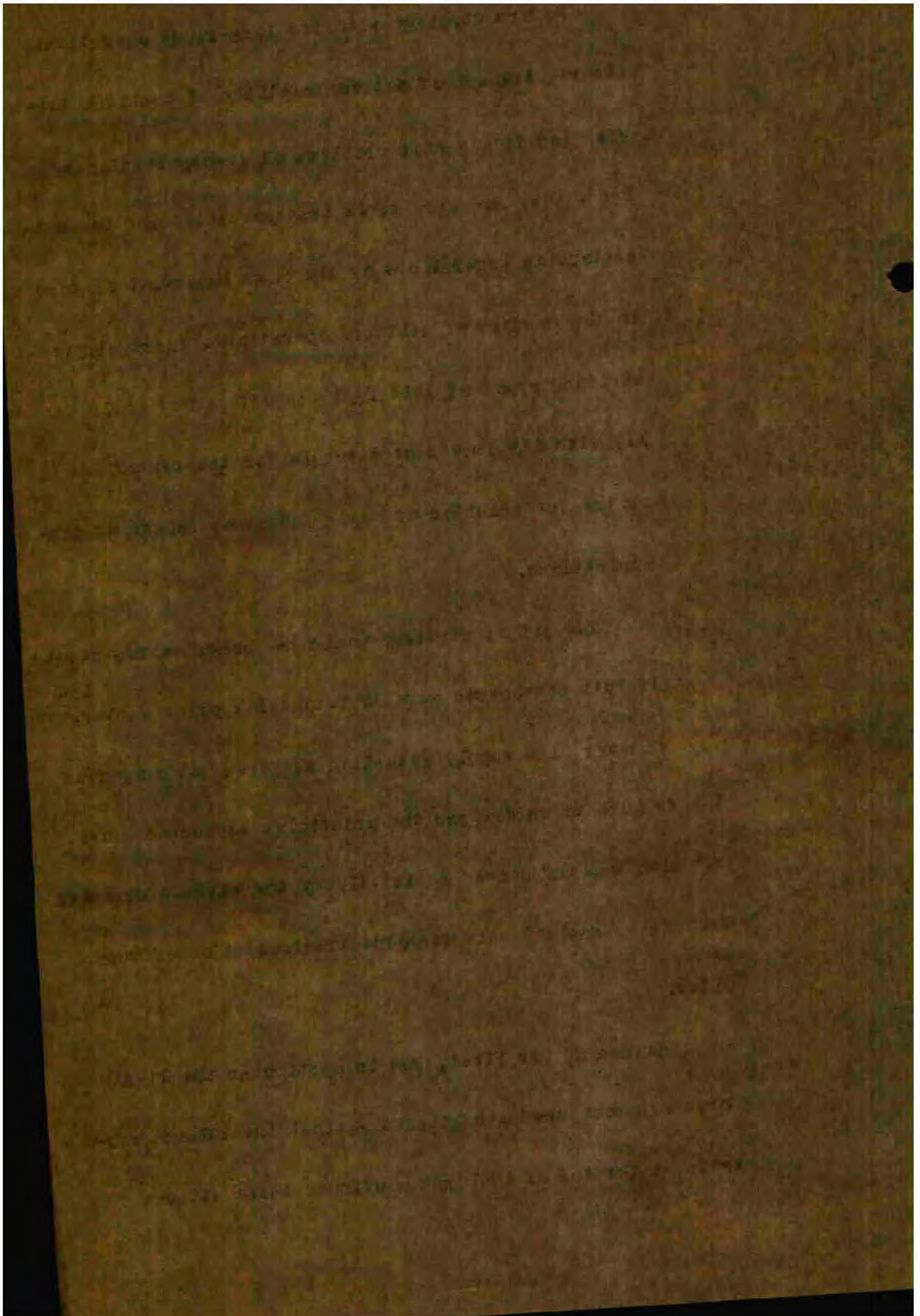
a fleet of landing ships, artificial ports, a fuel pipeline, and so forth.

Modern strategy with its long-range operations, its requirement of extreme mobility of tactical forces, and its gigantic problems of transportation by land, sea, and air, makes transportation and communications in general one of the most important factors in the conduct of military operations. Increasingly striking proof of this fact was offered by World War II, with its incessant struggle for the control of or the interdiction of major and minor routes of communications.

The art of strategy would be doomed to degenerate if this phenomenon were to become its prime factor. 154

However, the supply situation suffered not only from the failure to understand the principles expounded above, but also was influenced decisively by the attacks directed from Malta against Axis seaborne transportation of supplies.

The Second Air Fleet, and in particular the II Air Corps had commenced its attacks against the island fortress at the end of 1941 and continued these attacks

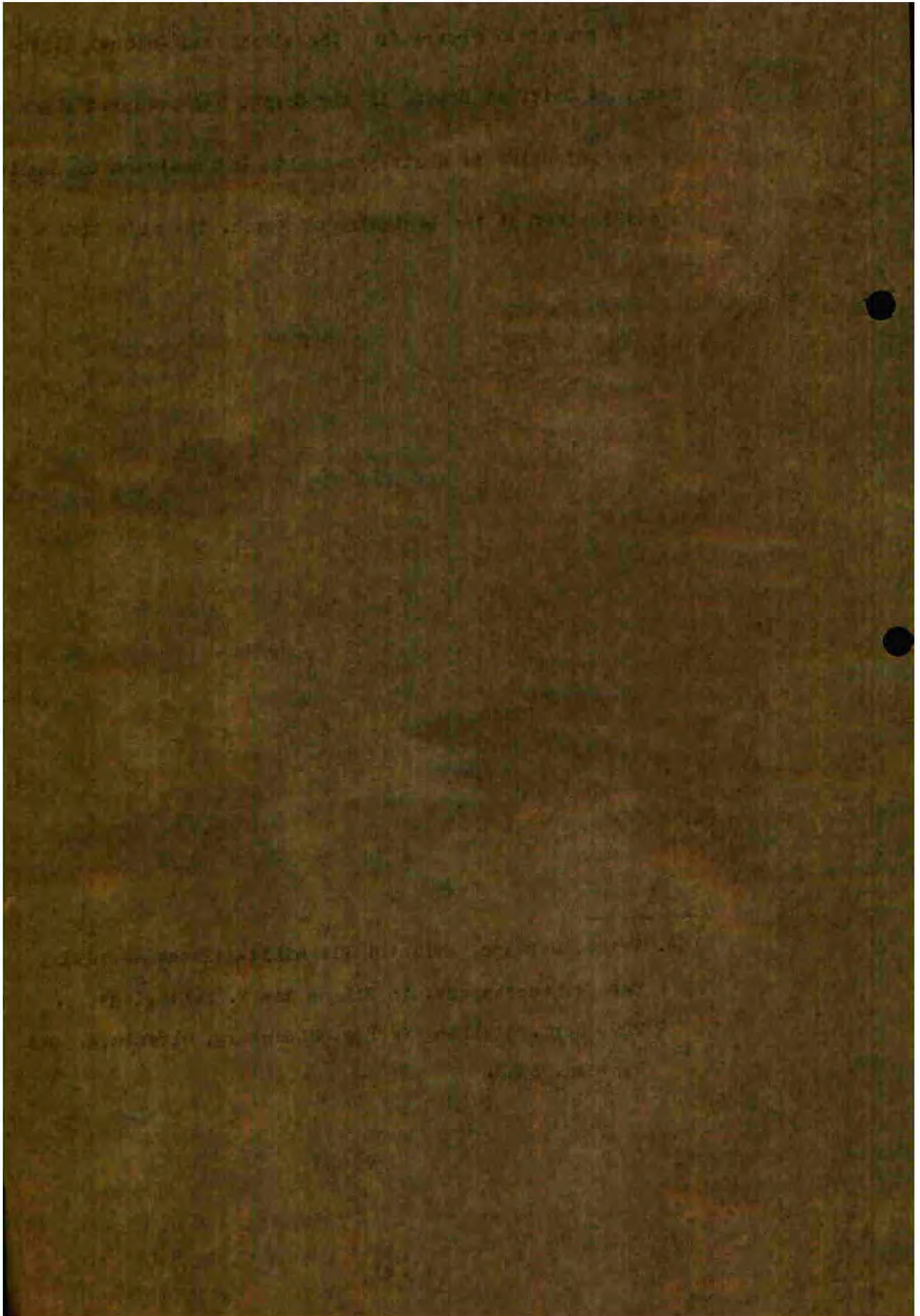


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with growing intensity and in mounting force as the months passed.

Pursuant to orders from the air fleet, Colonel Deichmann, as Chief of Staff, II Air Corps, had prepared plans for an offensive to neutralize Malta and designed to commence approximately at the beginning of March. The objective was

154. Teske, Hermann, Colonel: Die militärische Bedeutung des Verkehrswesens; in Bilanz des 2. Weltkriegs, p. 229, Gerh. Stalling Verlag, Oldenburg, Oldenburg, and Hamburg, 1953.



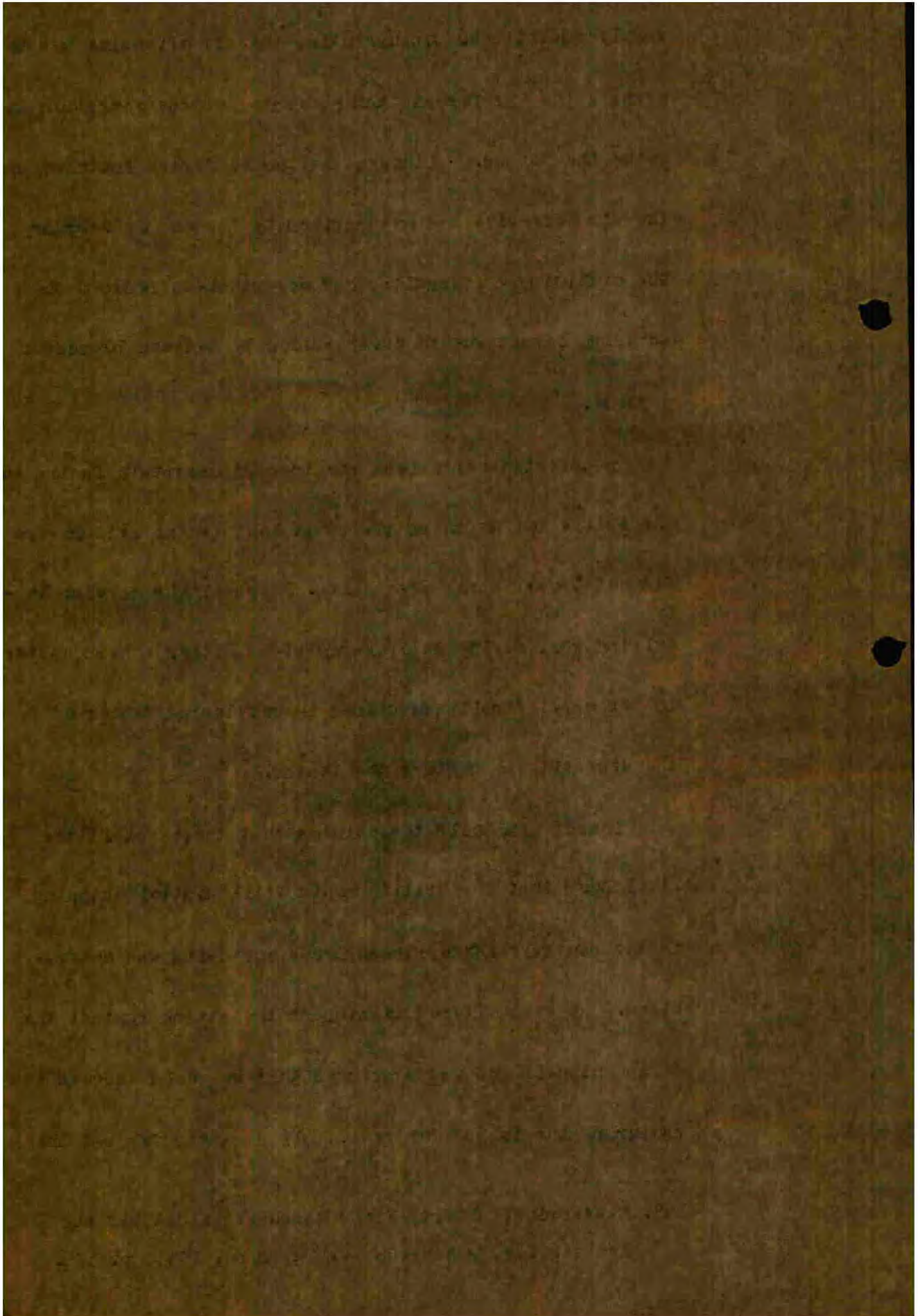
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to eliminate the hostile air and naval forces stationed at Malta together with their repair and maintenance and supply facilities. Concurrently, the air offensive was to prepare the way for an Italo-German airborne operation to seize the island. Although the bomber forces intended for the air offensive had not arrived by the end of February, the preliminary operations had nevertheless reduced the shipping losses due to enemy action by between 70 and 80 percent.

Supplies nevertheless remained an uncertain factor in the battle for Northern Africa as long as the Axis powers did not have control over Malta. It was Field Marshal Kesselring who, during an oral report at Hitler's headquarters in February, finally succeeded in convincing Hitler of the necessity to capture the island.¹⁵⁵

Bommel also held the opinion that there was little likelihood that the British could still control shipping in the central Mediterranean areas once Malta was neutralized. He even offered to conduct the attack against the island himself and was convinced that he would succeed in capturing the island fortress. All he asked for was the

155. Kesselring, Albert, Field Marshal: Soldat bis zum letzten Tag, Athenaeum Verlag, Bonn, 1953, p. 148.



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necessary troops and adequate naval and air support.

On 13 February Grand Admiral Raeder also drew Hitler's attention to the changed situation in the Mediterranean and urgently stressed the necessity to capture Malta. However, Hitler was doubtful about Italian cooperation in the attack and had his mind on plans for the coming summer

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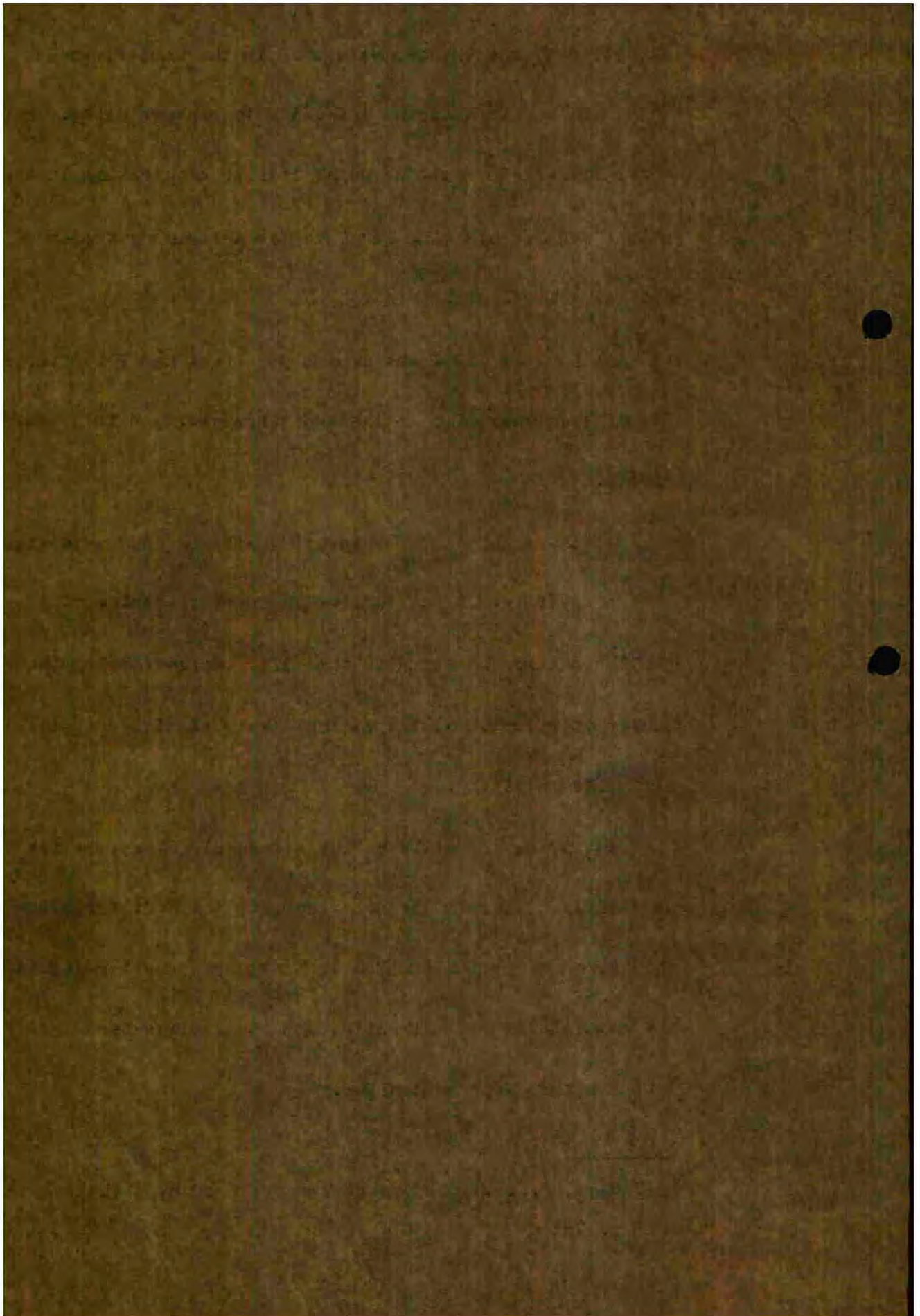
offensive in Russia.

On 14 March 1942 the Second Air Fleet had 701 aircraft, 398 of them operable, in the Mediterranean,* and in Northern Africa.

Of the total of 701 aircraft available, 352 were stationed on Sicily. Of this number 229 were operable. The compilation for 14 March is the first source showing the number of aircraft of the various types stationed on the airfields on Sicily.**

The order of battle of the Second Air Fleet, so far as its flying forces are concerned, in the Mediterranean Theater on 4 April 1942 also is shown by a chart revealing the distribution of all units and the various headquarters by which they were controlled.***

156. Hart, R.H.E.: The Rommel Papers, London, Collins 1953, p. 288



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156--cont.

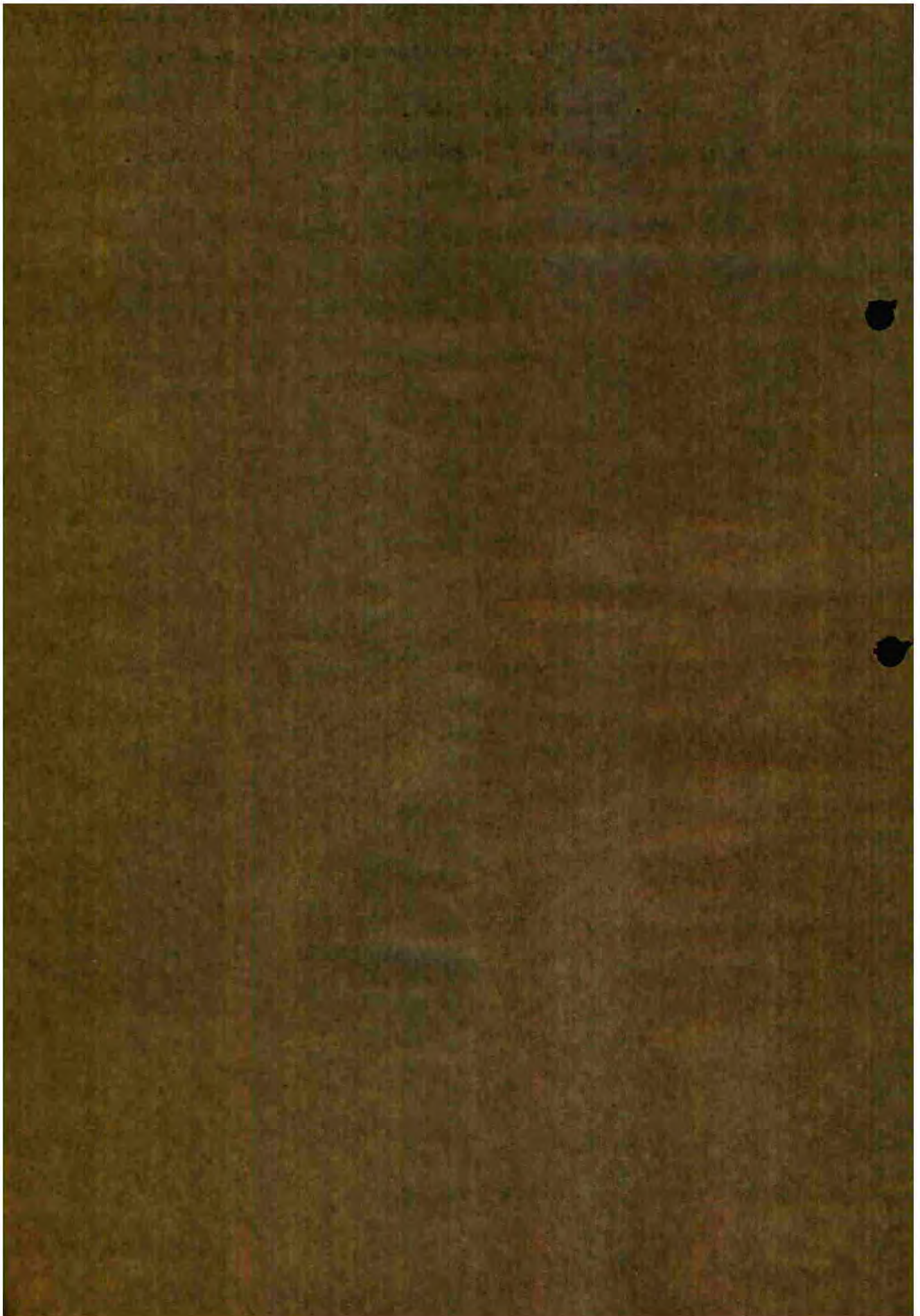
Rommel, Erwin: Krieg ohne Hass, Verlag Heidelberger
Zeitung, Heidenheim/Brenz, 1950, p. 229.

157. Asmann, pp. 356-7.

" Appendix 1 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

" " 2, " " "

" " 3, " " "



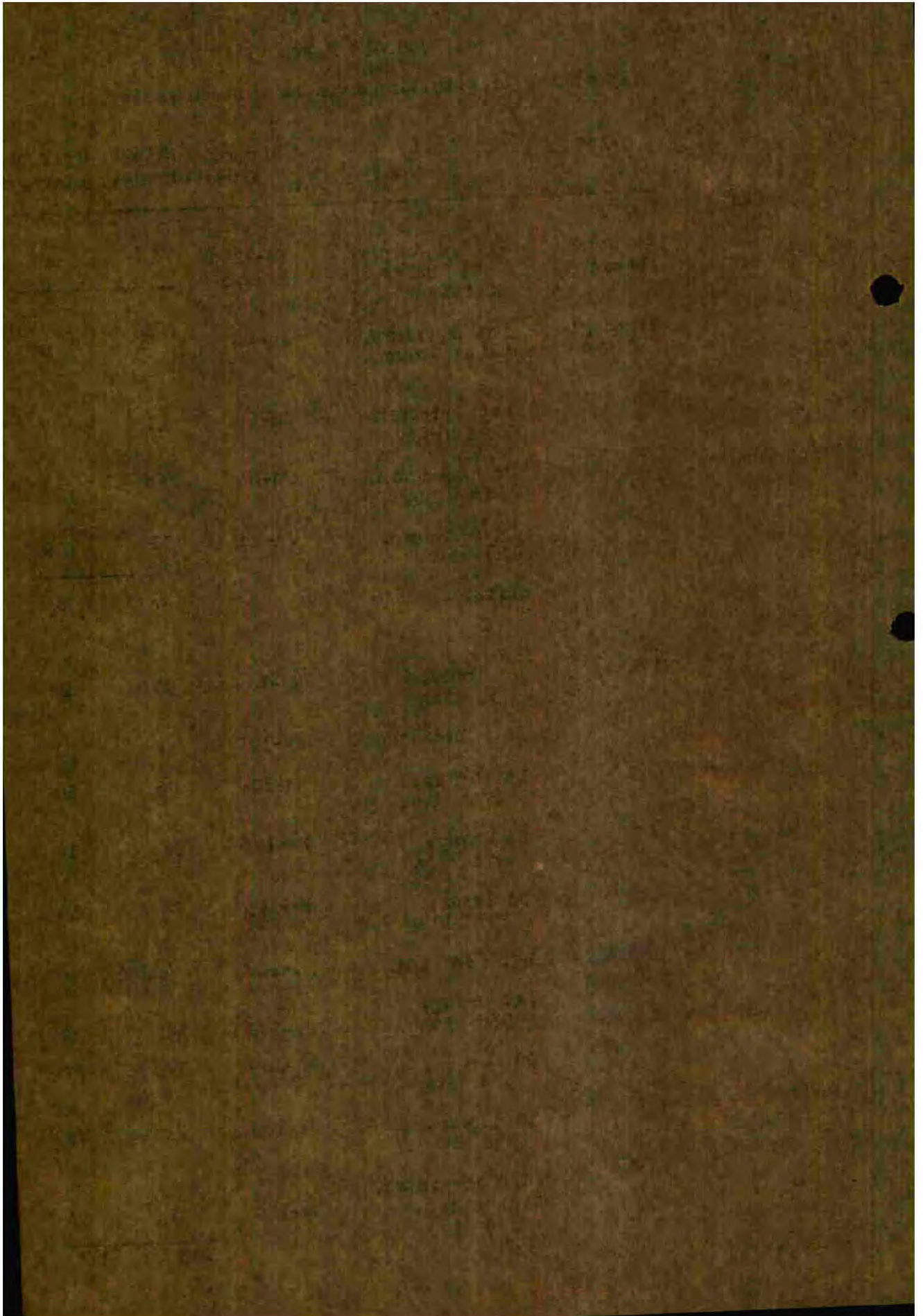
Appendix 1 to page 234.

GERMAN AIR FORCES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN
AND AFRICA

STATUS 14 March 1942

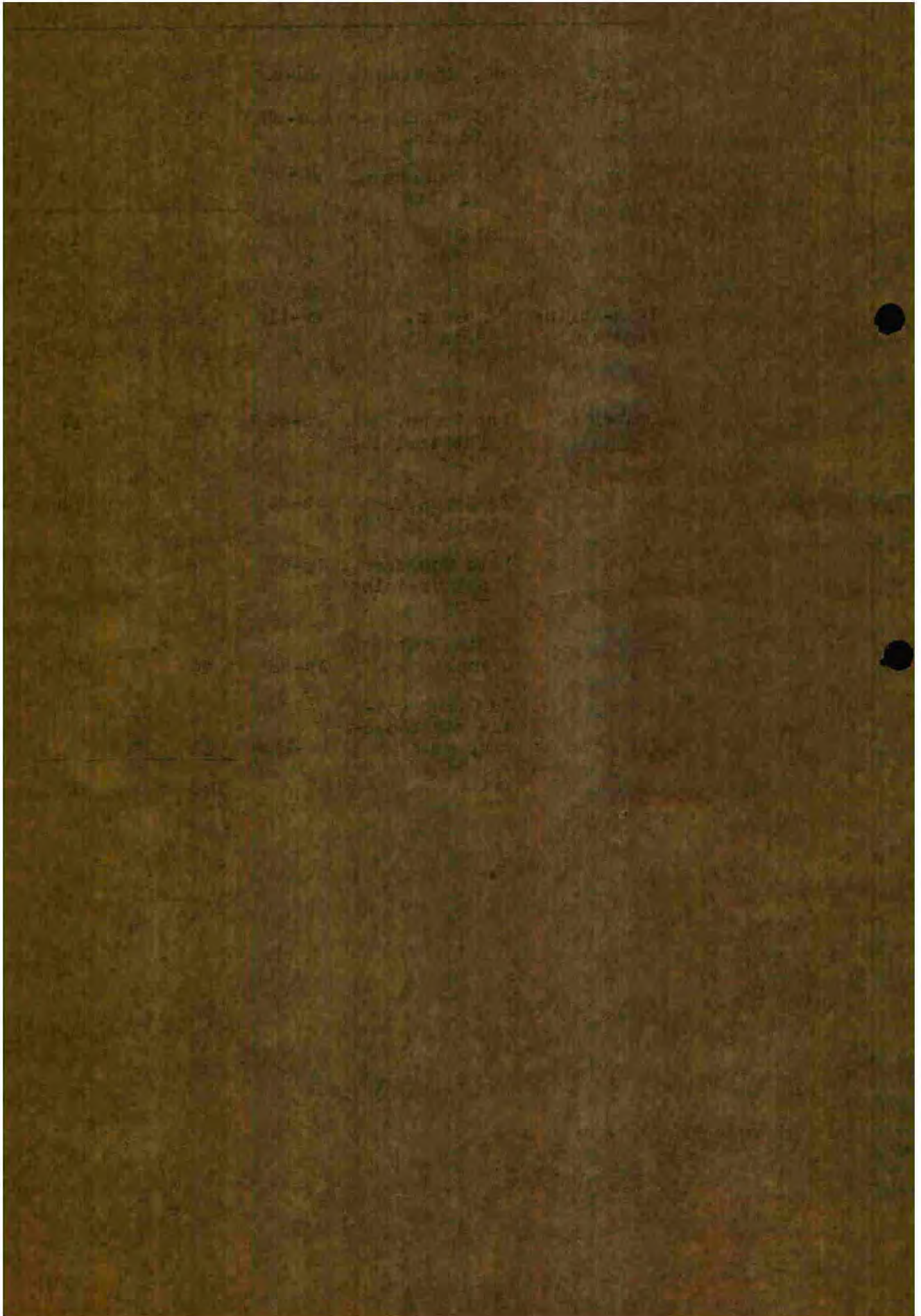
(According to Situation Maps in British Possession)

Type	Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Tactical Recon	2d Squadron w/ 14th Panzer Division	Me-110:	16	9
		Me-109		
Strategic Recon	1st Squadron, 121st Group	Ju-88	8	3
	1st Squadron, 122d Group	Ju-88	11	7
	2d Squadron, 122d Group	Ju-88	6	4
	2d Squadron, 123 Group	Ju-88	11	6
	Total		36	20
Fighter	2d Group, 3d Wing	Me-109	39	25
	HQ, 27th Wing	Me-109	1	1
	1st Group, 27th Wing	Me-109	26	10
	2d Group, 27th Wing	Me-109	31	14
	3d Group, 27th Wing	Me-109	28	14
	HQ, 53d Wing	Me-109	4	4
	1st Group, 53d Wing	Me-109	35	32
	2d Group, 53d Wing	Me-109	39	27
	3d Group, 53d Wing	Me-109	32	29
	Fighter-Bomber Squadron, 53d Wing	Me-109	8	8
	Total		243	164



Appendix 1 to page 234Axis aircraft strength, status 14 March 1942, continued.

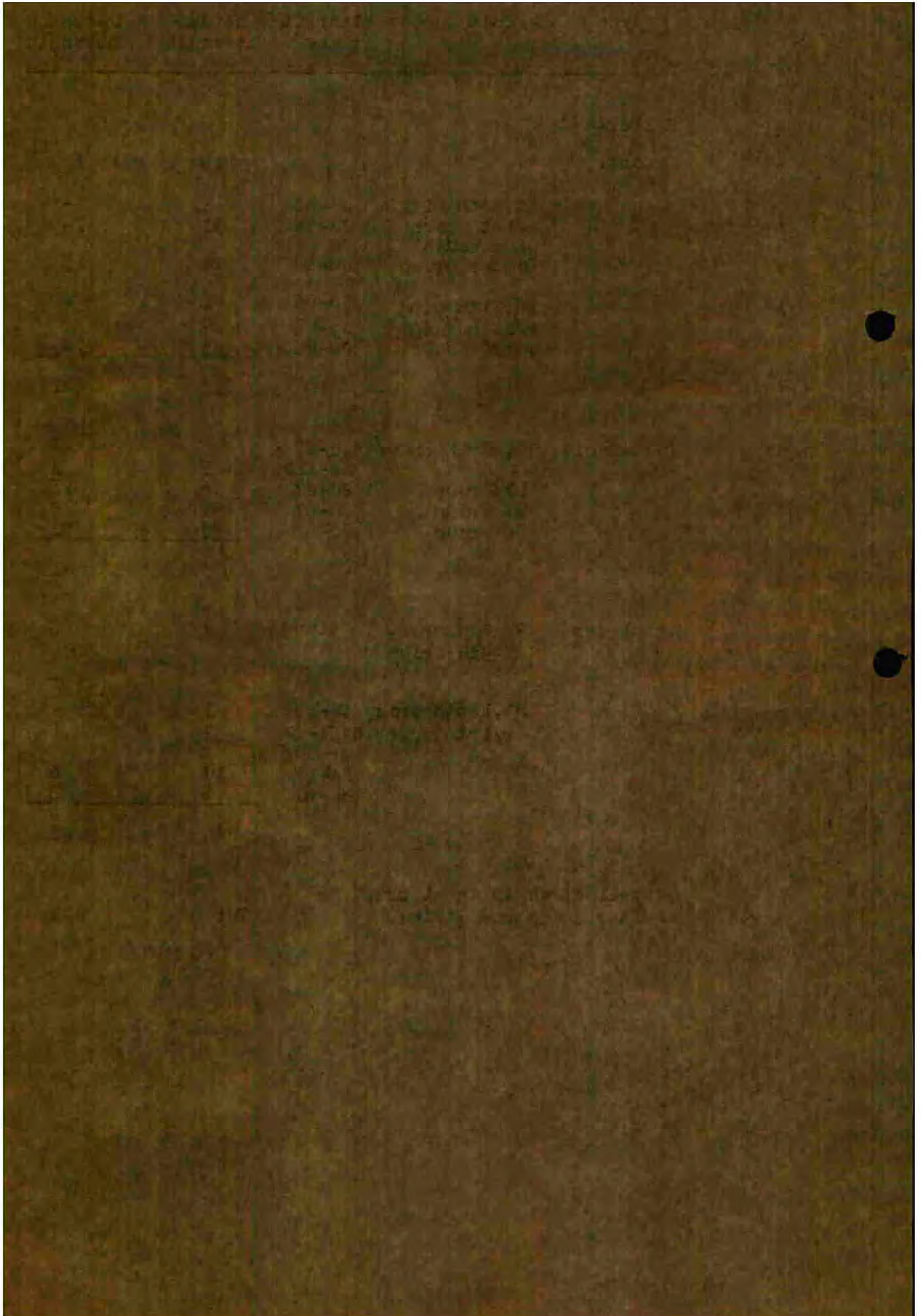
Type	Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Night Fighter	HQ, 2d Wing	Ju-88	4	4
	1st Group, 2d Wing	Ju-88	11	5
	4th Squadron, 2d Wing	Ju-88	3	1
	Total		18	10
Twin-Engine Fighter	3d Group, 26th Wing	Me-110	28	17
Bomber	1st Group, 1st Training Wing	Ju-88	29	17
	2d Group, 1st Training Wing	Ju-88	31	16
	12th Squadron, 1st Training Wing	Ju-88	6	4
	606th Bomber Group	Ju-88	24	18
	2d Group (mi- nus 6th Squad- ron), 26th Wing	He-111	18	5
	Total		108	60



2

Appendix 1 to page 234Axis aircraft strength, Status 14 March 1942, continued.

Type	Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Bomber--				
cont.			108	60
	HQ, 54th Wing	JU-88	1	-
	w/1st Group	JU-88	31	14
	plus 800th			
	Bomber Group	Ju-88	24	13
	HQ, 77th Wing	JU-88	1	-
	w/II Group	Ju-88	27	8
	& III Group	JU-88	23	12
			215	107
Dive-Bomber	HQ, 3d Wing w/	JU-87 &		
		Me-110	5	3
	1st Group	JU-87	36	18
	2d Group	JU-87	39	2
	3d Group	JU-87	25	20
			105	43
Seaplanes	2d Squadron,	AR-196	9	6
	125th Group			
	HQ, 126th Group	BV-138	1	-
	w/1st Squadron	He-60	9	8
	2d "	Ar 196 &		
		He-60	13	8
	3d "	He-60	8	6
			40	28
Overall strength in aircraft in				
Mediterranean and Africa			701	398

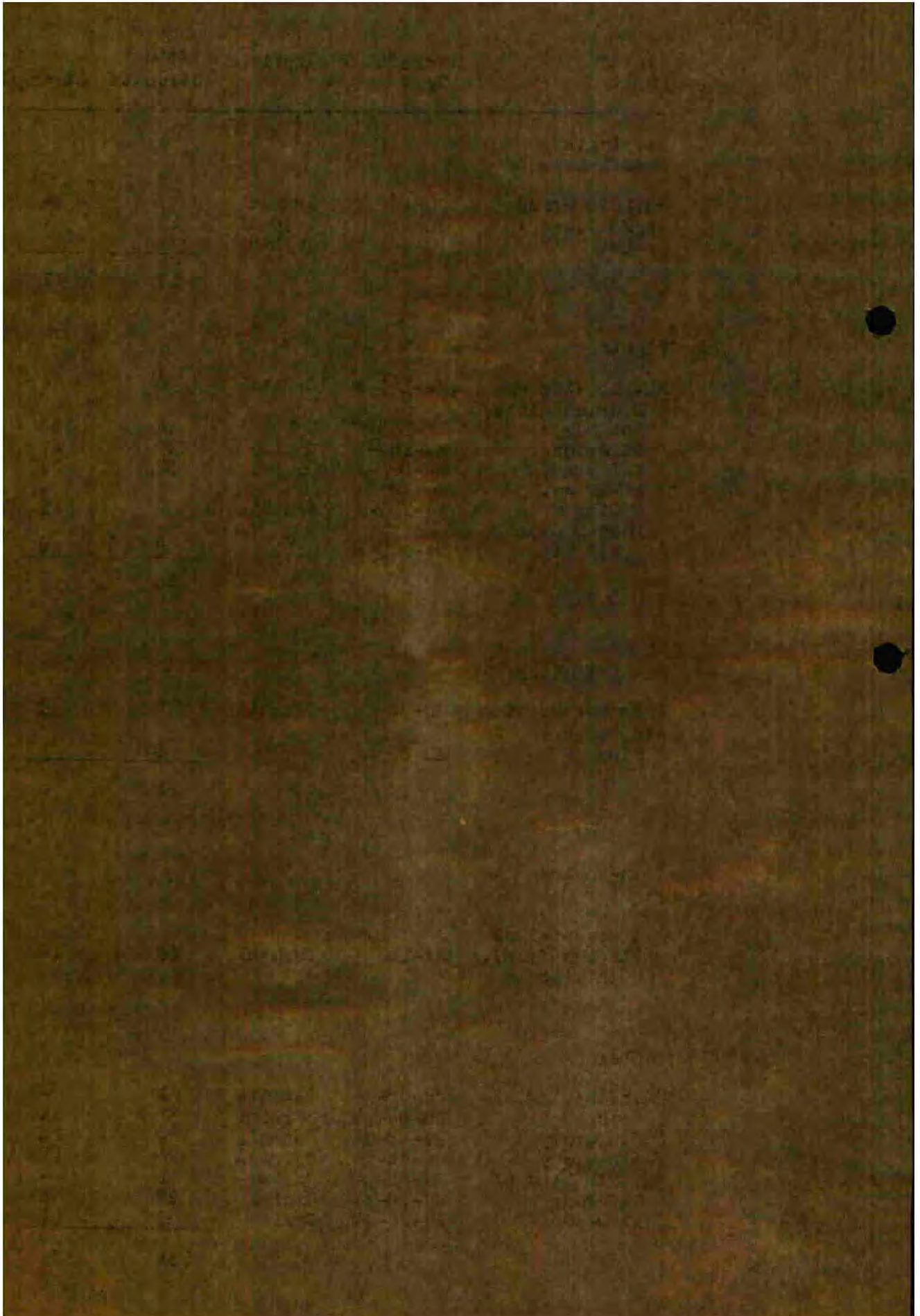


Appendix 2 to Page 234

GERMAN AIR FORCES STATIONED ON SICILY

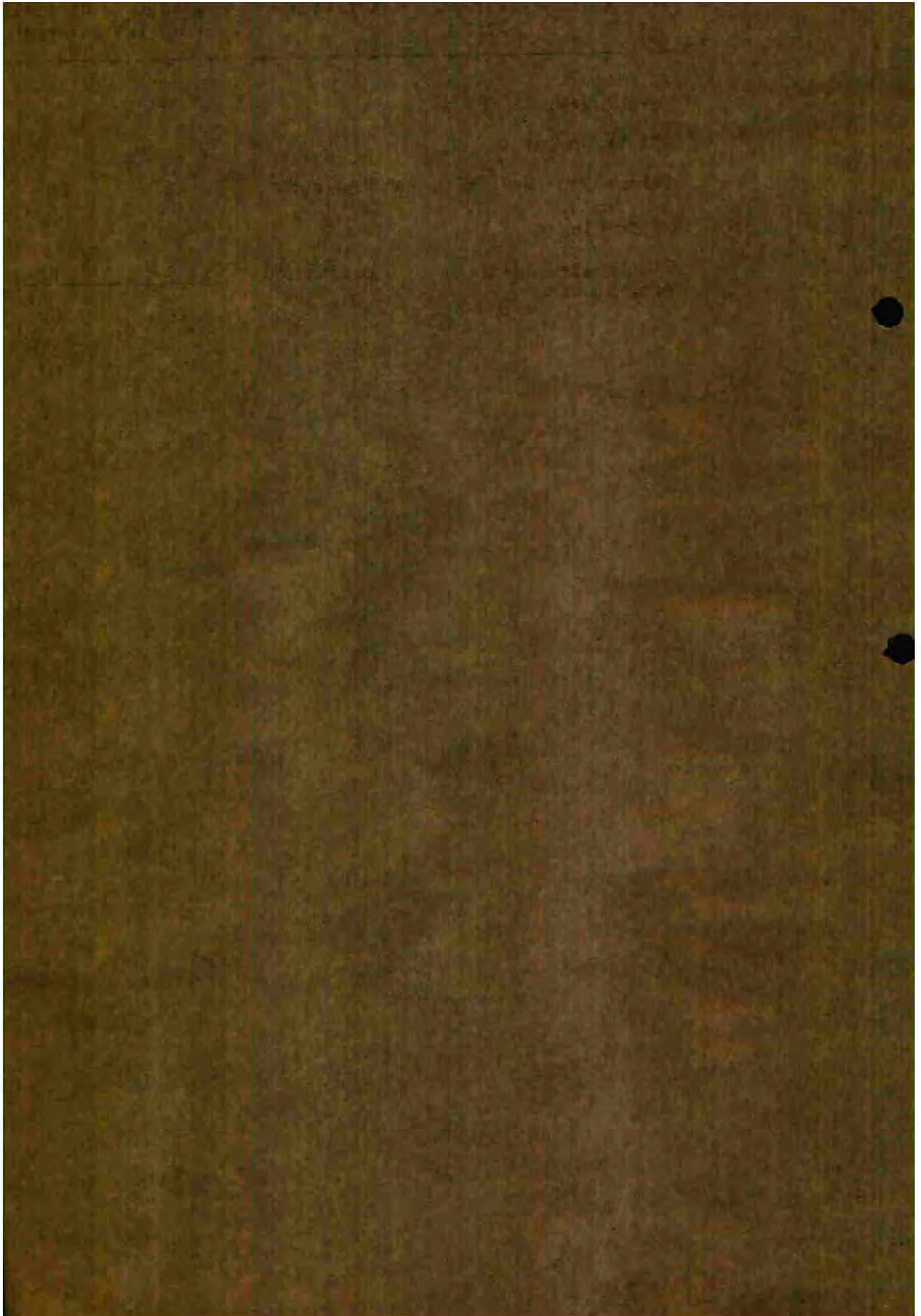
Status 14 March 1942

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Airfield	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Strategic Reconnaissance				
HQ, 122d Group	JU-88	Trapani	6	4
w/2d Squadron & 1st "	JU-88	Trapani	11	7
	JU-88	Gerbinì		
			17	11
Fighter				
HQ, 53d Wing w/ I Group minus 1st Squadron	Me-109-F	Comiso	4	4
II Group	Me-109-F	Gela	24	22
III Group	Me-109-F	Comiso	39	27
II Group, 3d Wing	Me-109-F	Comiso	32	29
10th Squadron, 53d Wing	Me-109-F	San Pietro	39	25
	Me-109-F	Gela	8	8
			146	115
Night Fighter				
I Group, 2d Wing 4th Squadron, 2d Wing	JU-88	Catania	11	5
	JU-88		3	1
			14	6
Twin-Engine Fighter				
III Group (minus 7th Squadron), 26th Wing	Me-110	Trapani	19	12
Bomber				
HQ, 54th Wing w/ I Group	JU-88-A4	Catania	1	-
806th Group	JU-88-A4	Gerbinì	31	14
606th Group	JU-88-A4	Catania	24	13
HQ, 77th Wing w/ II Group	JU-88-A4	Catania	24	18
III Group	JU-88-A4	Comiso	1	-
	JU-88-A4	Comiso	27	8
	JU-88-A4	Comiso	23	12
			131	65



Appendix 2 to Page 234.German Air Forces on Sicily, Status 14 March 1942, cont.

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Airfield	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
Dive-Bomber				
III Group (mi				
(minus 9th Squadron), of 3d Wing	Ju-87-D	San Fancrazio	18	15
9th Squadr ron, 3d Wing	Ju-87-D	San Pietro	7	5
			25	20



Appendix 3 to Page 234

SECOND AIR FLEET (MEDITERRANEAN)

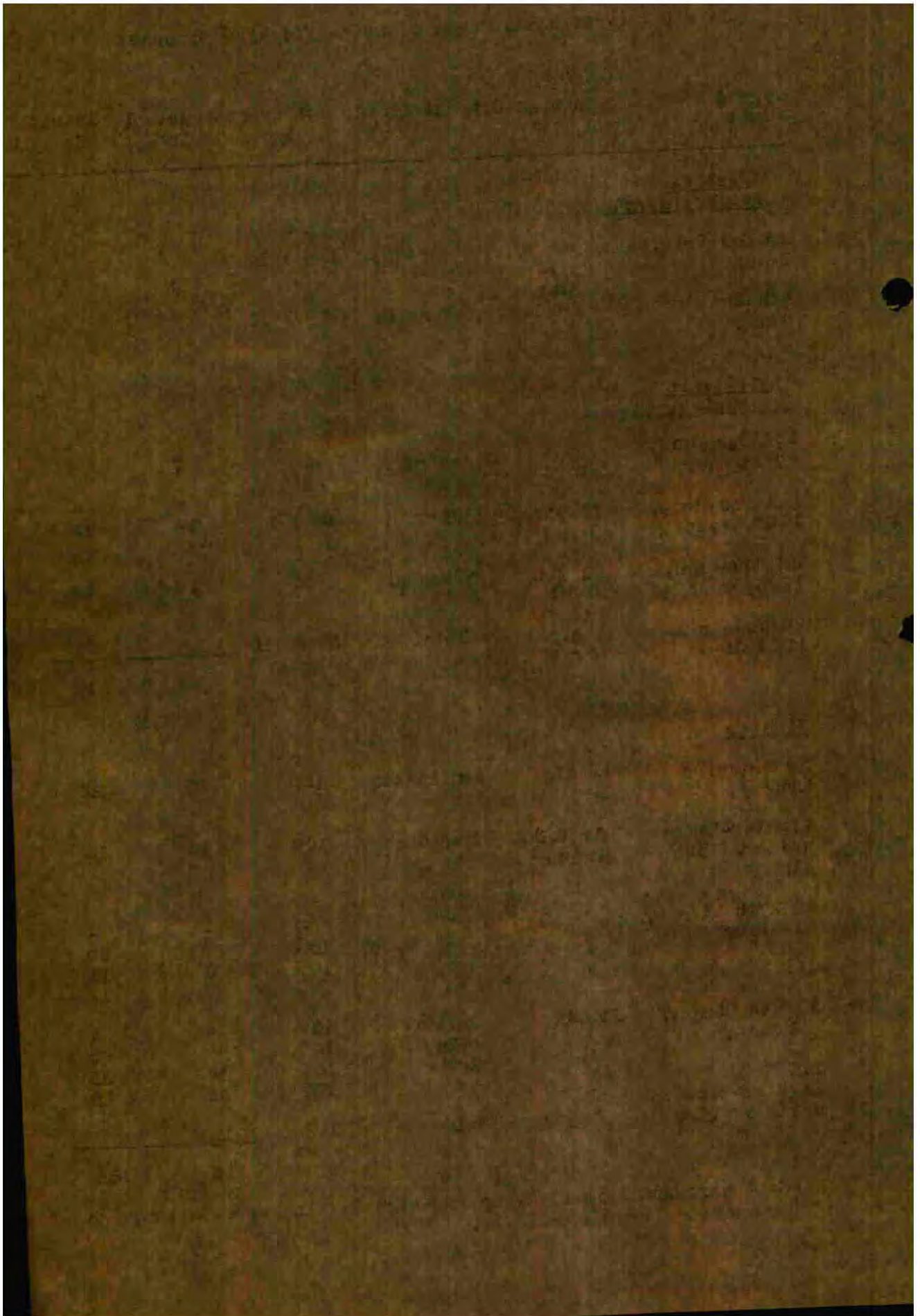
ORDER OF BATTLE (AIR FORCES)

4 April 1942

(According to Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command)

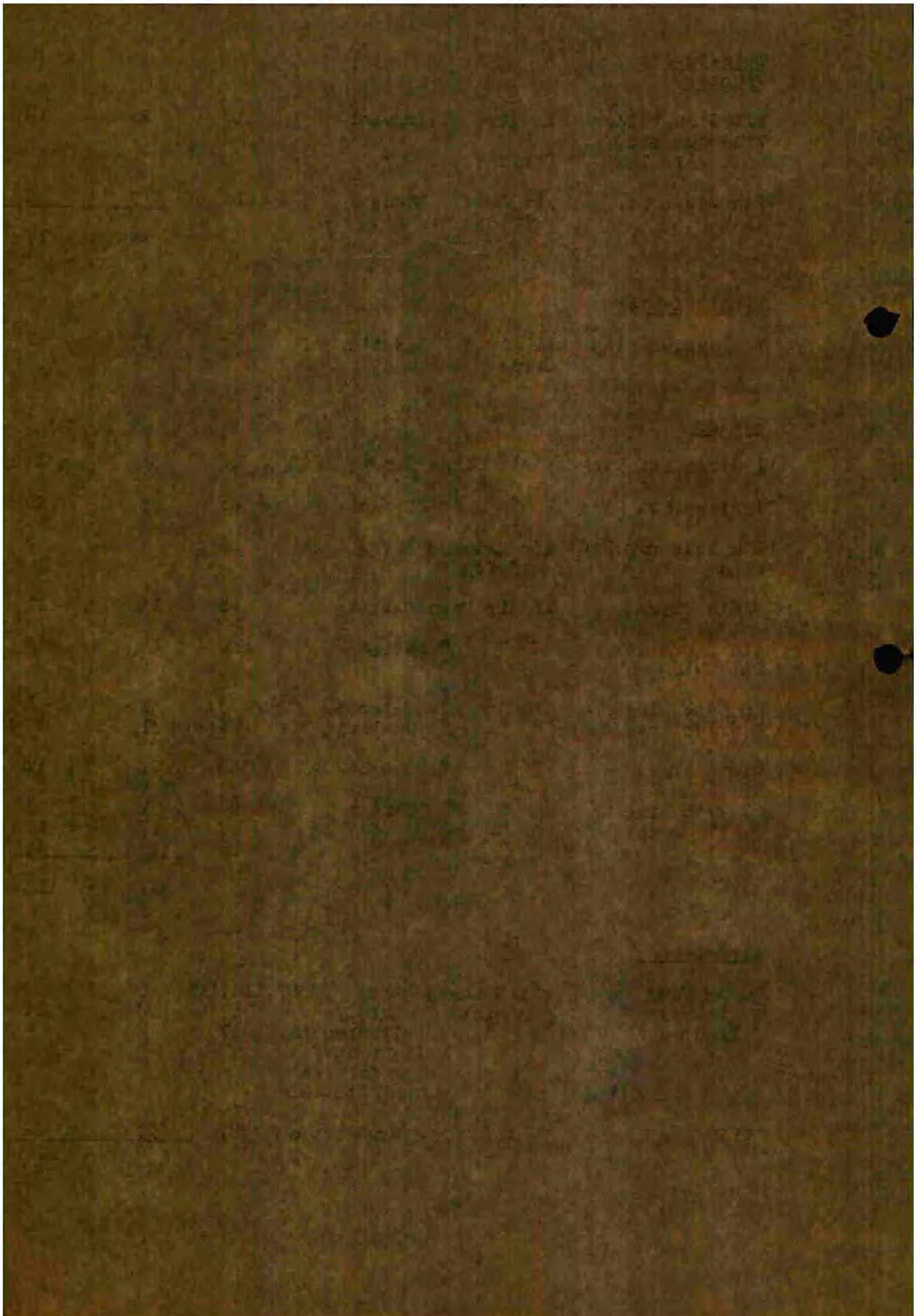
Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
<u>Tactical Reconnaissance</u>					
Re					
2d Squadron, 14th Group	IAC w/ Panzer Army	Martuba	109 & 110	14	6
4th Squadron, 12th Group	Africa	Martuba	109 & 110		
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>					
1st Squadron, 121st Group	as above	Lerna	88	7	5
1st Squadron, 122d Group	II Air Corps	Gerbinì	88 & 109	14	10
2d Squadron, 122d Group	HQ Air Fleet	Trapani	88	12	10
2d Squadron, 123d Group	X Air Corps	Tatoì	88 & 110	13	4
				46	29
<u>Fighter</u>					
2d Group, 3d Wing	II Air Corps	San Pietro	109	25	22
Fighter-bomber units of 3d Wing	Air Comd Africa	Martuba	109	10	10
HQ 27th Wing w/ I Group	"	"	109	-	-
II "	"	"	109	26	12
III "	"	"	109	30	11
			109	27	12
HQ 53d Wing w/ I Group	II Air Corps	Comiso	109	4	4
II "	"	Gela	109	34	28
III "	"	Comiso	109	34	23
Fighter-bomber units of wing	"	"	109	32	25
		Gela	109	10	7
				212	154

Note: 4 aircraft from II Group, 3d Fighter Wing were detached to operate from Pantelleria.



Appendix 3 to Page 234--continued

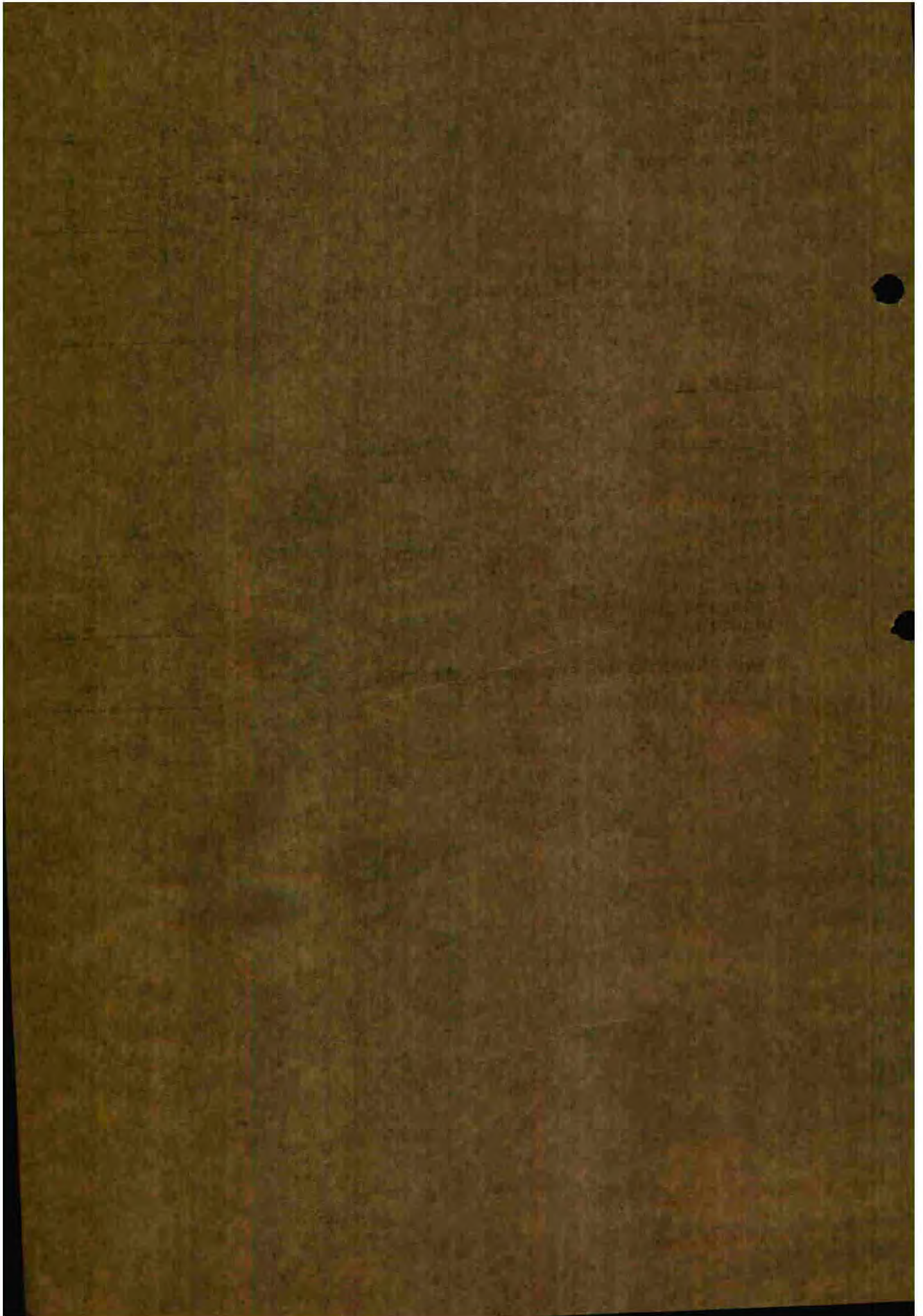
Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Aircraft Type	Strength Actual	Operable
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>					
III Group(minus 7th Squadron), 26th Air Wing	II Air Corps	Trapani	110	20	13
7th Squadron, 26th Wing	Air Comd Africa	Berna	110	9	5
				29	17
<u>Night Fighter</u>					
I Group, 26 Wing	II Air Corps	Catania	88	17	11
<u>Bomber</u>					
I Group, 1st Wing	X Air Corps	Candia	88	31	12
II Group, 1st Wing	II " "	Catania	88	35	20
12th Squadron, 1st Wing	Air Command Africa	Berna	88	9	2
806th Group	II Air Corps	Catania	88	16	11
4th Squadron, 26th Wing	X " "	Kalamaki	111	14	5
HQ 54th Wing w/ I Group	II " "	Catania	88	1	1
	" "	Gerbin	88	31	20
806th Group	" "	Catania	88	27	16
HQ 77th Wing w/ II Group	" "	Comiso	88	1	1
III "	" "	"	88	17	10
				25	15
				207	113
<u>Five-Bomber</u>					
HQ 3d Wing w/ I Group	Air Command Africa	Berna	87, 110, 111	5	4
II Group	"	Martuba (withdrawn to Italy on 7 Apr for re- habilitation)	87	32	16
			87	8	-
III "	II Air Corps	San Pietro	87	35	22
				80	42



Appendix 3 to Page 234--continued

Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Aircraft Type	Strength Actual	Strength Operable
<u>Seaplane</u>					
2d Squadron, 125th Group	X Air Corps	Skaramanka	198	9	8
HQ 126th Group w/ 1st Squadron	"	"	138	1	-
2d	"	"	HE-60, FI-8	9	6
3d	"	Kavalle	196, He-60	10	5
		Skaramanka	FI-8, He-60	8	6
				37	25
Overall strength in aircraft (Excluding Transport Units)				542	397

<u>Transport</u>					
3d Group, 1st Sp Purposes Wing		Brindise & Trapani	52	28	18
II Air Corps Transport Squadrons	II Air Corps	Reggio & Calabria	52	16	12
X Air Corps Transport Squadron	X Air Corps	Athens	52	6	4
Total strength in transport aircraft				50	34



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The II Air Corps had 378 aircraft stationed on Sicily, approximately 50 percent of the bombers and 50 percent fighters. Of the total number 258 were operable.*

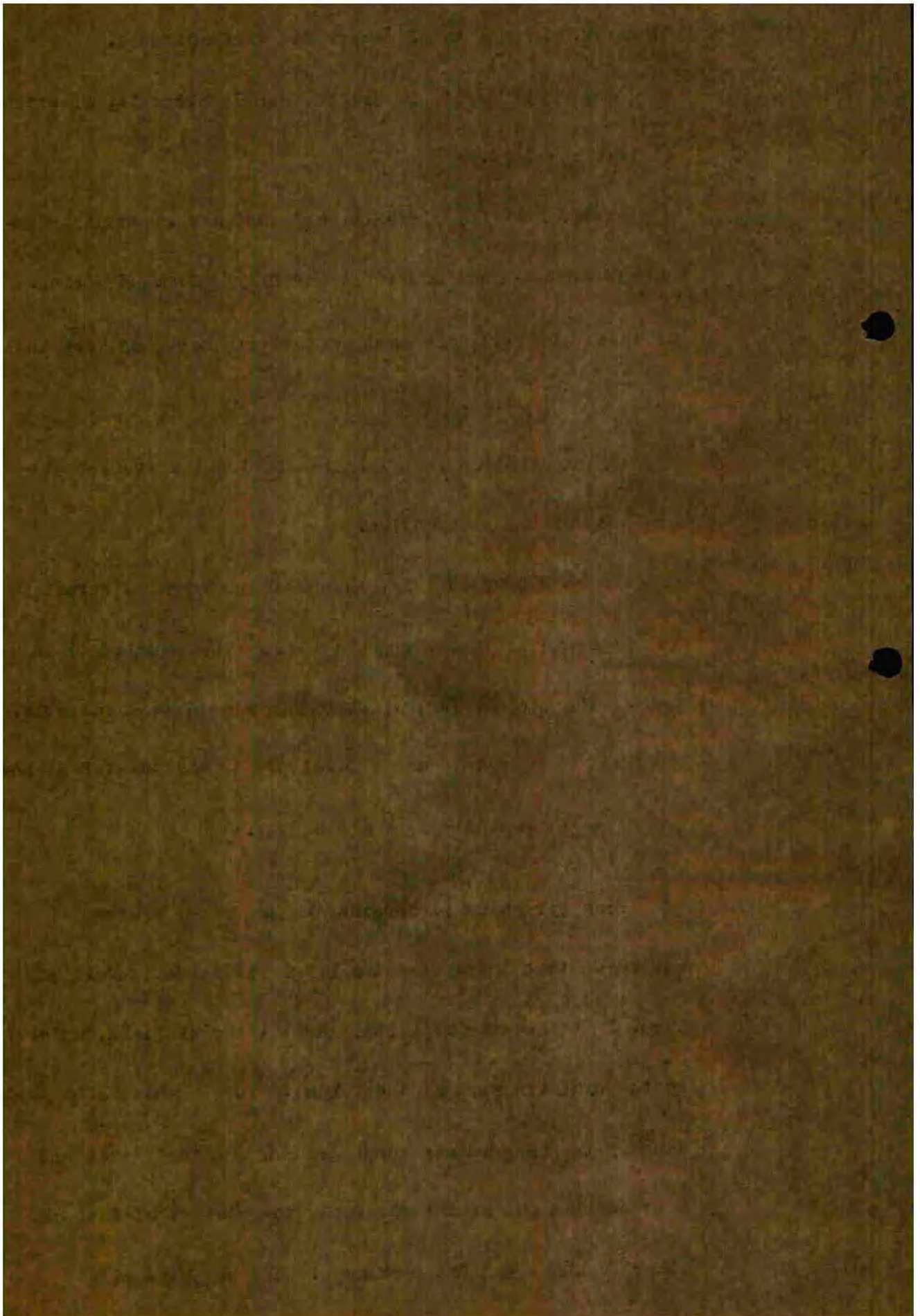
The X Air Corps, in Greece, had 95 aircraft, of which 45 were operable.**

A total of 169 aircraft were assigned to support Panzer Army Rommel and under command by Air Command Africa. Of these aircraft, the most of them fighters, 85 were in operable condition.***

No compilation is available showing the Italian aircraft committed at the time.

By 13 April, finally, the total number of aircraft stationed in the Mediterranean theater had mounted to an actual strength of 742, of which number 467 were operable. This was the largest number committed in the theater at any one time during this phase of the war.****

From air photo reconnaissance and other sources it was known that there were two large airfields, Takali and Luqa, in the center of Malta, and a third airfield, Hal-Far, in the southern part of the island. It was known also that some of the hangars were underground, and that caves had been blasted out of the rocks for the storage of fuel and other supplies and for workshops. The seaplane base

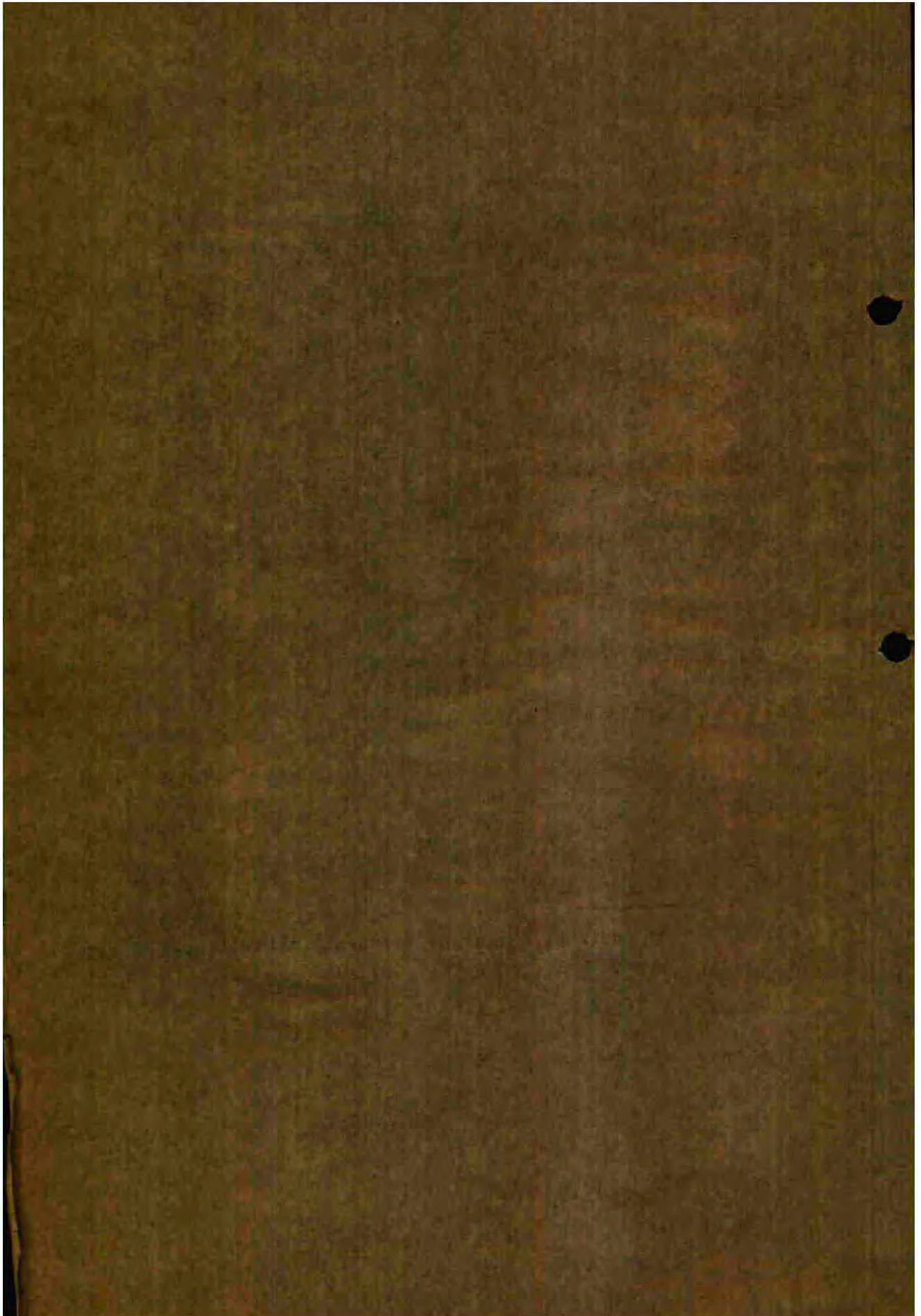


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of Kalafrene was in a bay in the vicinity of Hal-Far.

Appendix 1, (Kerlsruhe Document Collection).

22-23	"	2	(	"	"	"
22-24	"	3		"	"	"
22-25	"	4		"	"	"



Appendix 1 to Page 235

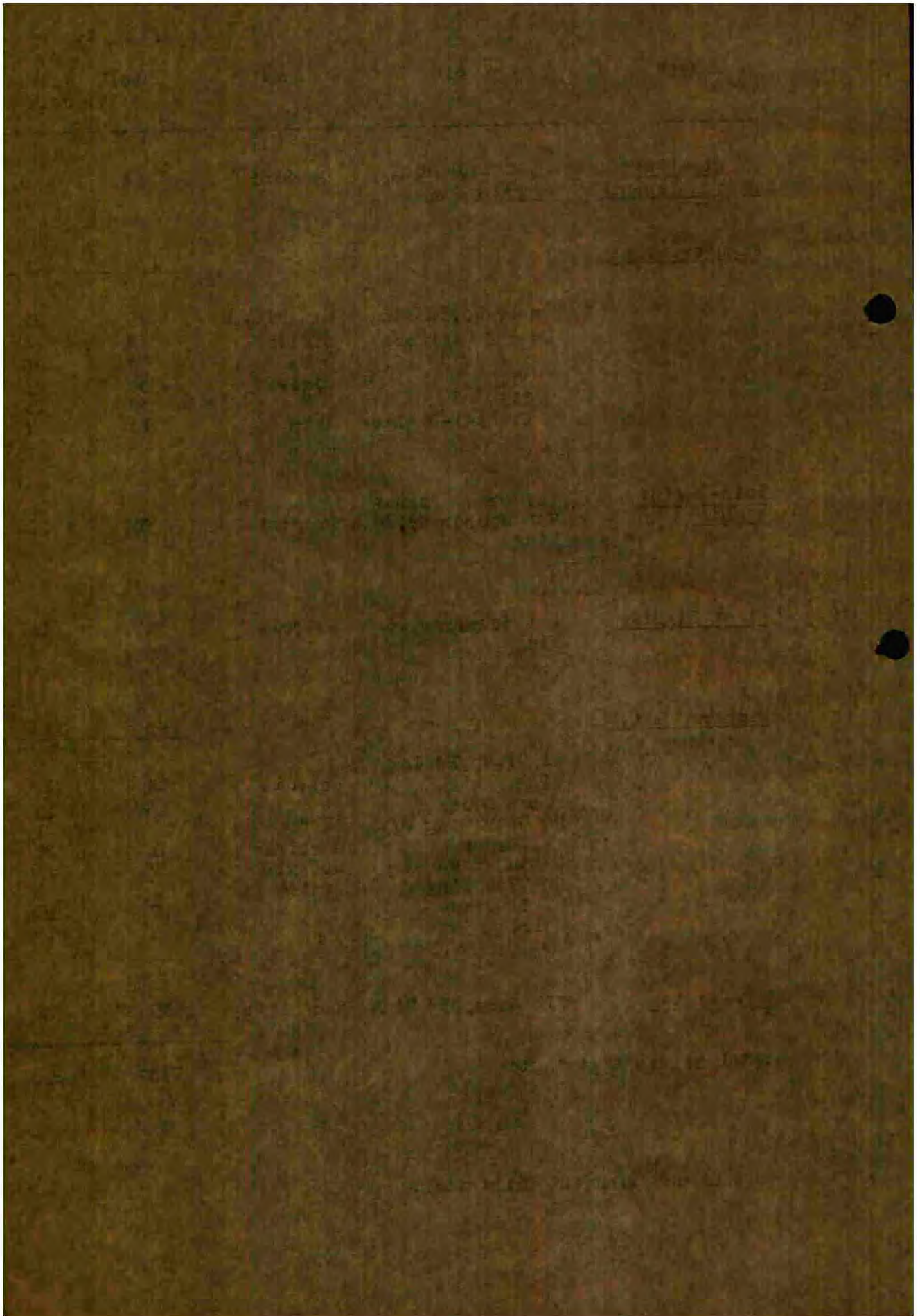
II AIR CORPS

Strength in Aircraft on 4 April 1942

(From Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command) *

Type	Unit	Base	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>	1st Squadron, 122d Group	Gerbinì	14	10
<u>Fighter Total</u>			<u>139</u>	<u>109</u>
	2d Group, 3d Wing	San Pietro	25	22
	HQ 53d Wing w/ I Group	Comiso	4	4
	II "	Gela	34	28
	III "	Comiso	34	23
	III "	"	32	25
	Fighter-Bombers	Gela	10	7
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>	III Group (minus 7th Squadron), 26th Trapani Wing		20	12
<u>Night Fighter</u>	1st Group, 2d Wing	Catania	17	11
<u>Bomber Total</u>			<u>153</u>	<u>116</u>
	II Group, 2d Wing	Catania	35	20
	606th Group	"	16	11
	HQ 54th Wing w/ I Group	"	1	1
	806th Group	Gerbinì	31	20
	HQ 77th Wing w/ II Group	Catania	27	16
	III "	Comiso	1	1
	III "	"	17	10
	III "	"	25	15
<u>Dive-Bomber</u>	III Group, 3d Wing	San Pietro	35	22
<u>Total aircraft strength</u>			<u>378</u>	<u>258</u>

* Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Appendix 2 to Page 235

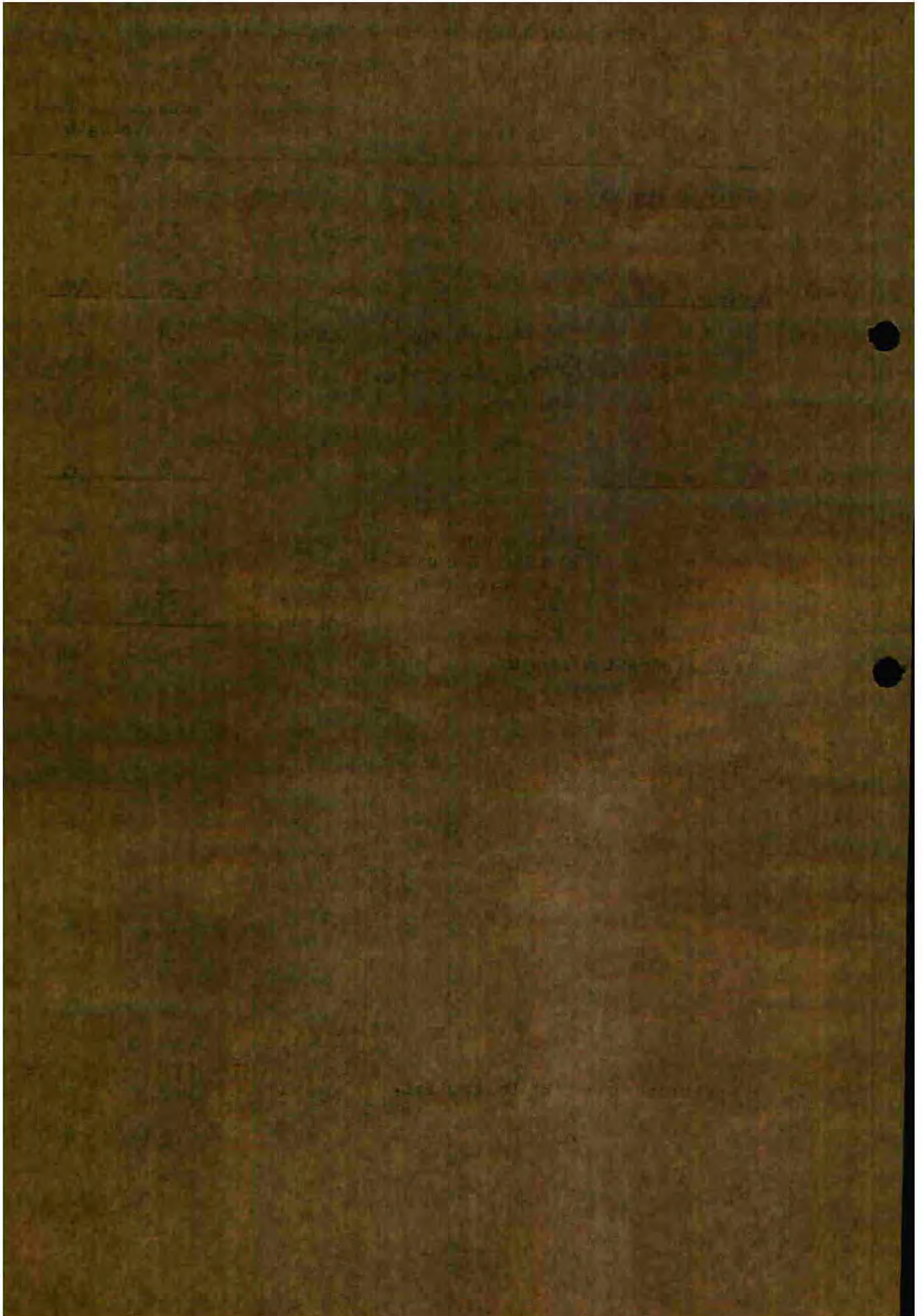
X AIR CORPS

Strength in Aircraft on 4 April 1942

(From Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command)*

Type	Unit	Base	Actual Strength	Operable
<u>Strategic</u>				
<u>Reconnaissance</u>	2d Squadron, 123d Wing	Tatoi	13	4
<u>Bomber</u>	<u>Total</u>		<u>45</u>	<u>17</u>
	1 Group, 1st Ing Wing	Condia	31	12
	4th Squadron, 26th Wing	Kalamaki	14	5
<u>Seaplane</u>	<u>Total</u>		<u>37</u>	<u>25</u>
	2d Squadron, 125th Group	Skaramanga	9	8
	HQ 126th Group w/ 1st Squadron	"	1	-
	2d "	"	9	6
	2d "	Aawalla	10	5
	3d "	Skaramanga	8	6
<u>Total aircraft strength</u>			<u>96</u>	<u>46</u>

* Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Appendix 3 to Page 235

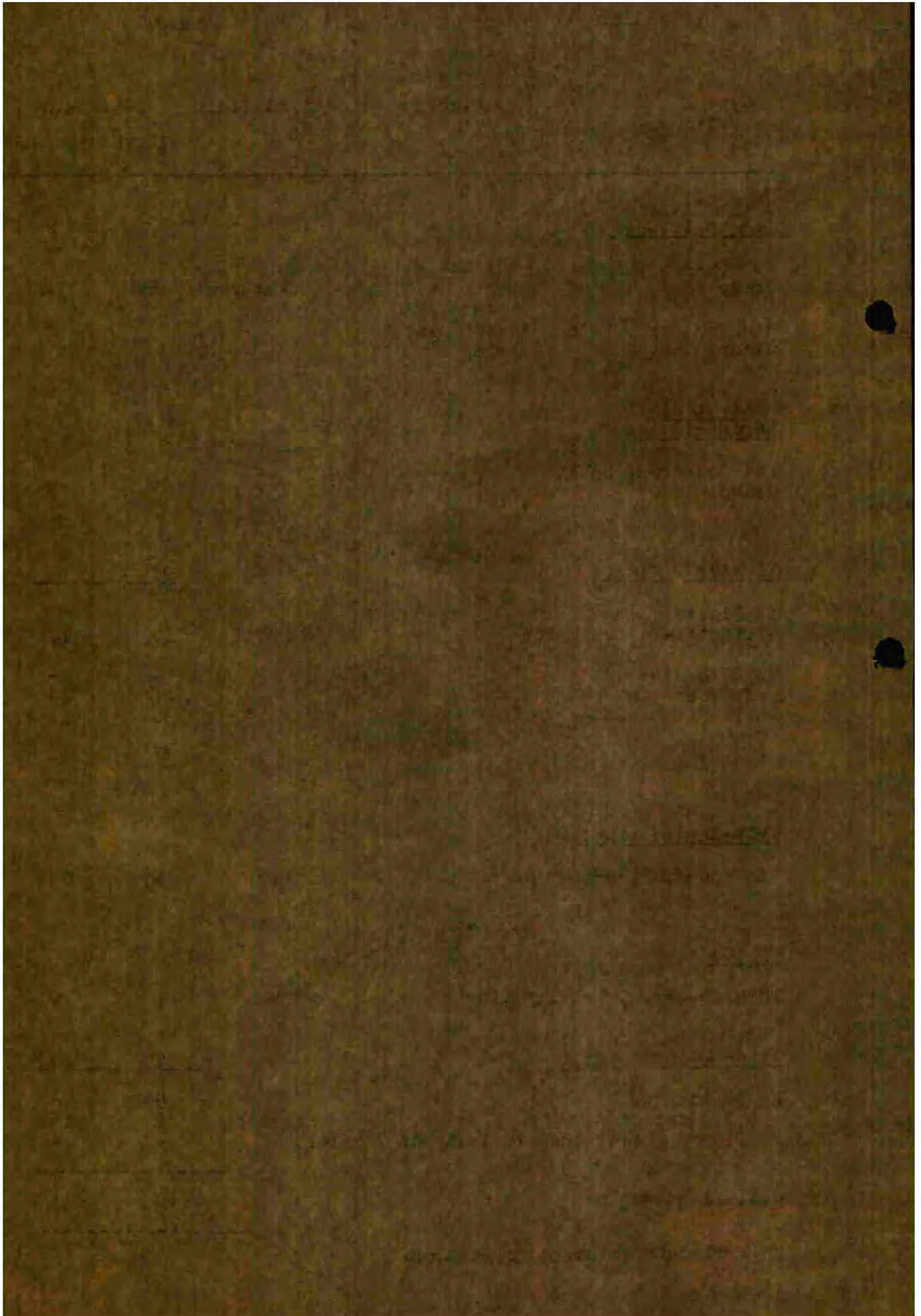
AIR COMMAND AFRICA AND PANZER ARMY AFRICA

Aircraft Strength on 4 April 1942

(From Situation Maps of Luftwaffe High Command)*

Type & Unit	Assigned to	Airfield	Strength	
			Actual	Operable
<u>Tactical Reconnaissance</u>				
2d Squadron, 14th Group	Tactical Air Command w/ Panzer Army Africa	Martuba)	14	6
4th Squadron, 14th Group		")		
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>				
1st Squadron, 121st Group	"	Berna	7	5
<u>Fighter Total</u>			<u>93</u>	<u>45</u>
3d Fighter Wing fighter-bomber units		Martuba	10	10
HQ 27th Wing w/ I Group		"	26	12
II "		"	30	11
III "		"	27	12
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>				
7th Squadron, 26th Wing		Berna	9	5
<u>Bomber</u>				
12th Squadron, 1st Eng Wing		Berna	9	2
<u>Five-Bomber Total</u>			<u>37</u>	<u>20</u>
HQ 3d Wing w/ I Group		"	5	4
II " (returned to Italy on 7 April)		Martuba	32	16
			-	-
Overall strength			169	83

* Karlsruhe Document Collection.



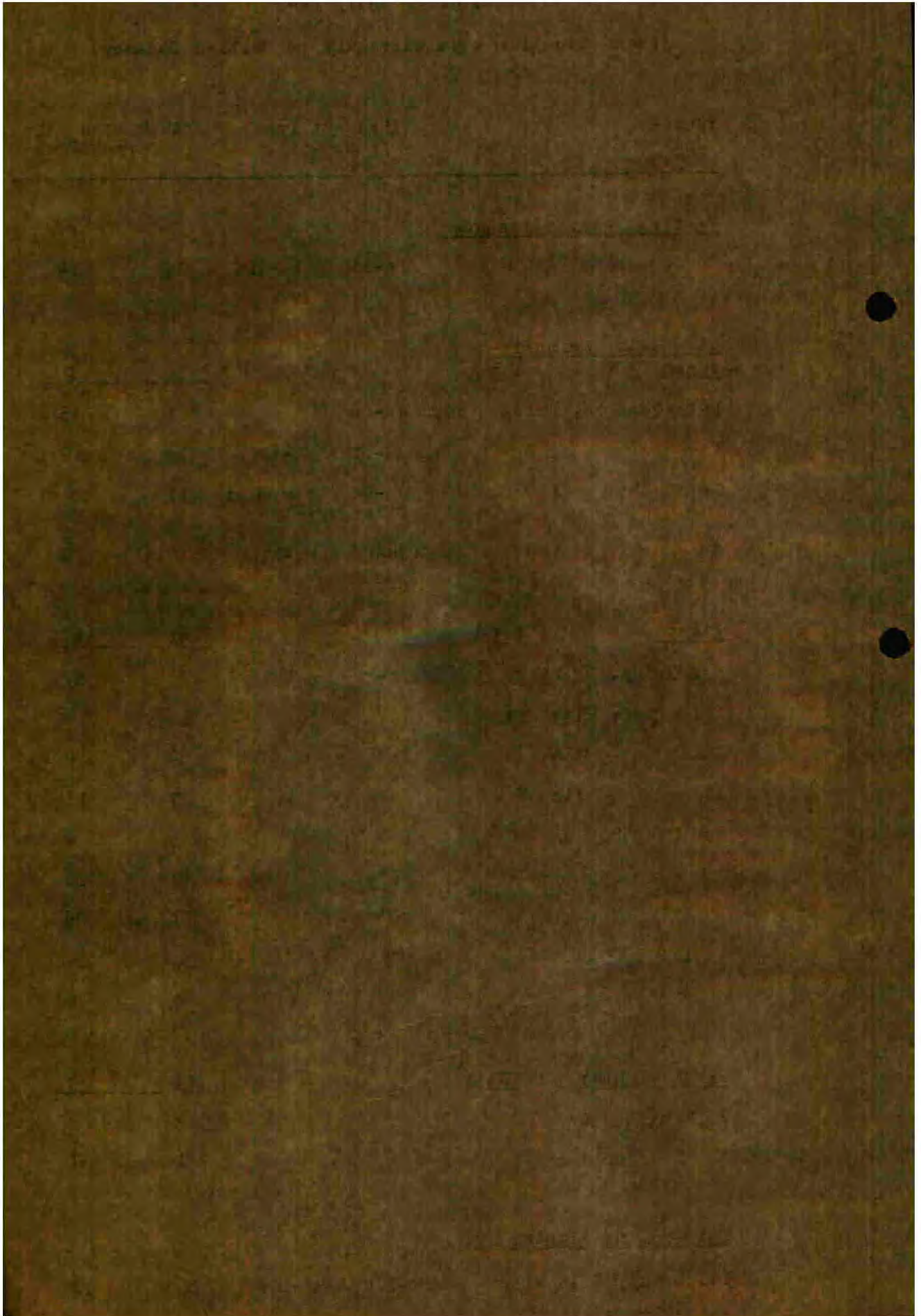
Appendix 4 to Page 235.

GERMAN AIR FORCES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND AFRICA

Status 16 April 1942

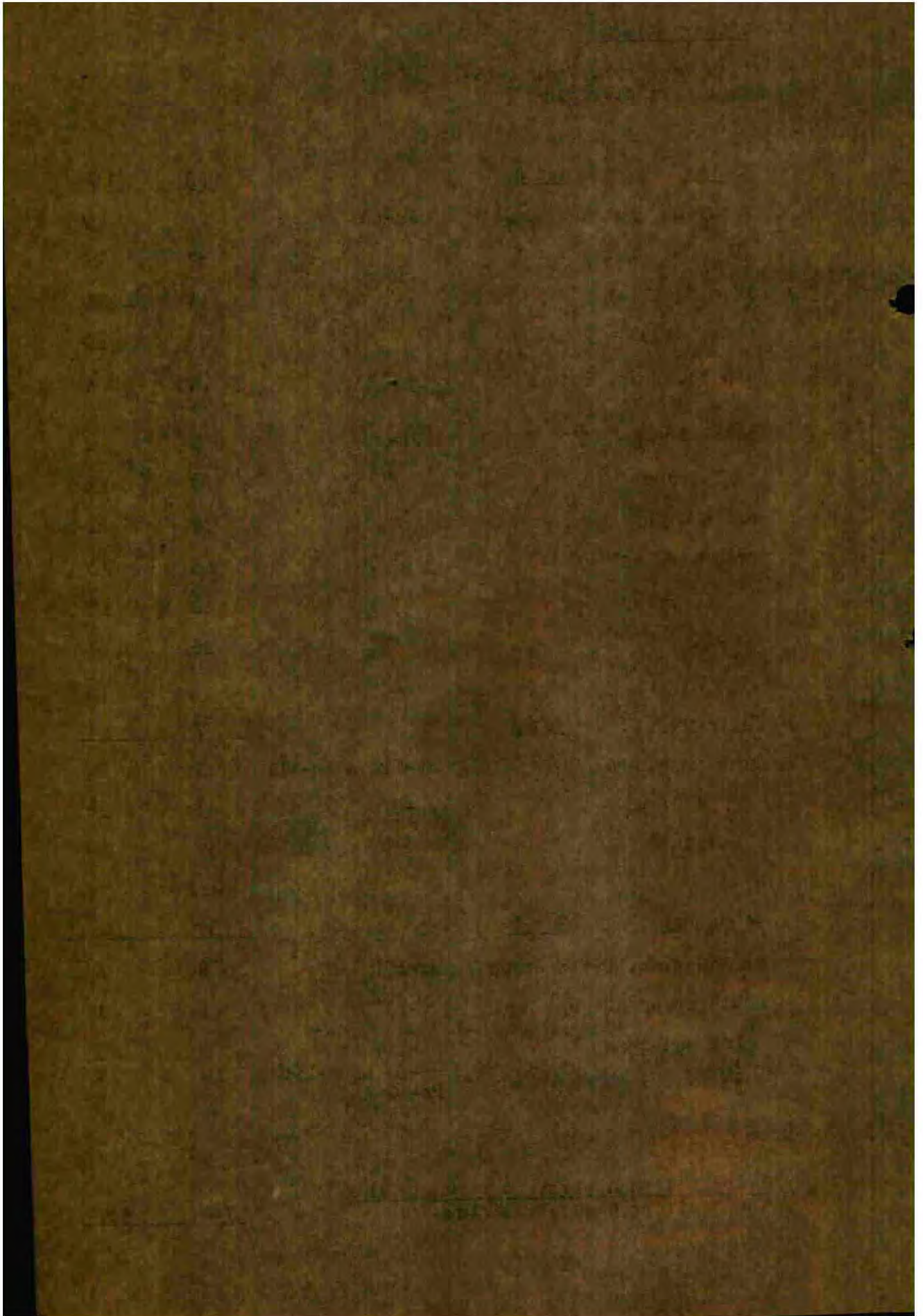
(From Situation Maps Currently in British Custody)

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual	Operable Strength
<u>Tactical Reconnaissance</u>			
2d Squadron, 14th Group	Me-110 & Me-109	19	14
<u>Strategic Reconnaissance</u>			
	<u>Total</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>31</u>
1st Squadron, 121st Group	Ju-88	6	5
1st " 122d "	Ju-88 & Me-109	16	12
2d " 122d "	Ju-88 (Second Air Fleet, Triestini)	11	10
2d " 123 "	Ju-88 & Me-110	17	4
<u>Fighter</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>241</u>	<u>167</u>
II Group, 3d Wing	Me-109	34	27
I Group, 27th Wing	"	33	19
II " 27th "	"	34	19
III " 27th "	"	27	11
53d Wing HQ w/	"	5	4
I Group	"	40	33
II "	"	31	26
III "	"	30	24
Fighter-Bomber Squadron	"	7	4
<u>Night Fighter</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>9</u>
2d Wing HQ w/	"	3	2
I Group	"	21	7
<u>Twin-Engine Fighter</u>			
III Group, 26th Wing	Me-110 & Me-109	30	12



Appendix 4 to Page 235--continued

Type & Unit	Aircraft Type	Actual Strength	Operable Strength
<u>Ground Attack</u>			
10th Squadron, 26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing	Do-17	6	-
<u>Bomber</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>258</u>	<u>162</u>
I Group, 1st Ing wing	Ju-88	28	17
II " 1st " "	"	37	22
IV " 1st " "	"	44	21
606th Group	"	22	19
4th Squadron, 26th Wing	He-111	14	4
54th Wing HQ w/	Ju-88	3	2
I Group	"	27	18
606th Group	"	30	21
77th Wing HQ w/	"	3	3
II Group	"	22	15
III "	"	28	20
<u>Dive-Bomber</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>77</u>	<u>54</u>
3d Wing HQ w/	He-110 & He-111	2	1
I Group	Ju-87	43	25
III "	"	32	28
<u>Seaplanes</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>18</u>
2d Squadron, 125th Group	Ar-196	9	6
126th Group HQ w/	Ev-138	1	1
1st Squadron	He-160	9	5
2d "	He-60 & Ar-196	10	2
3d "	He-60	8	4
<u>Overall German aircraft strength in the Mediterranean and Africa</u>		<u>742</u>	<u>467</u>



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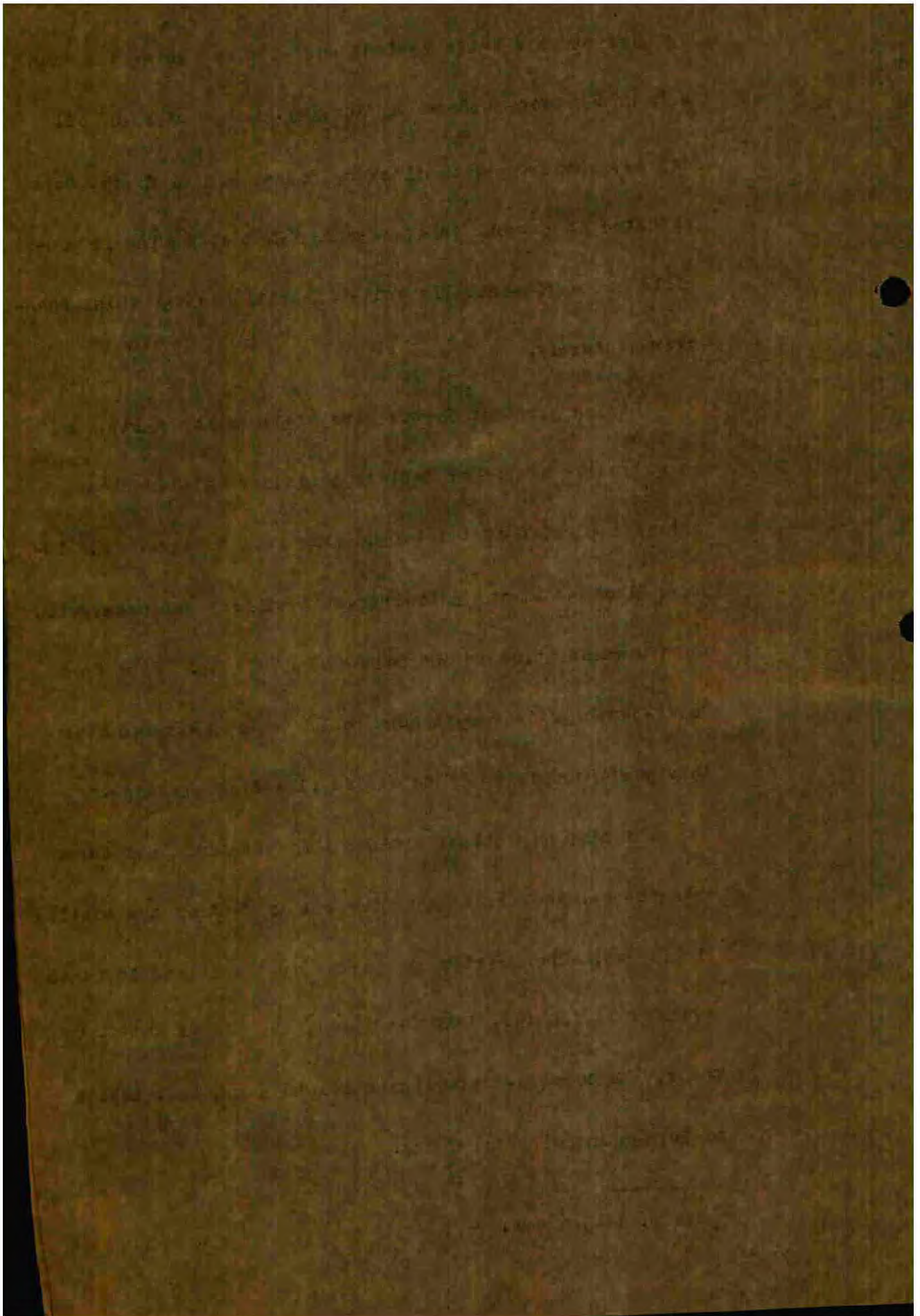
The radar system on the island was well developed.

The number of cruisers, destroyers, and torpedo boats in port at La Valette varied, and at times as many as ten submarines were anchored in the bay. Large coal and oil depots, ship repair facilities, docks, and so forth, were situated at a small inlet near La Valette, making it possible to service sizable units of British naval ships whenever necessary.

Strong garrison forces were stationed on Malta, and an extensive system of defense positions existed clear across the waist of the island from west to east. The island also had strong antiaircraft artillery defenses, with main concentration in the port of La Valette. Fire from forty-seven antiaircraft guns could be concentrated over this port, supported by defensive fire from warships."

The plan of attack divided the operation into three main phases. The first objective was to destroy the hostile air forces. The British air forces on the island included a number of fighter, torpedo-bomber, and bomber units. Of these, the torpedo-bombers constituted a constant threat to German shipping to Africa.

* See p. 162, above.



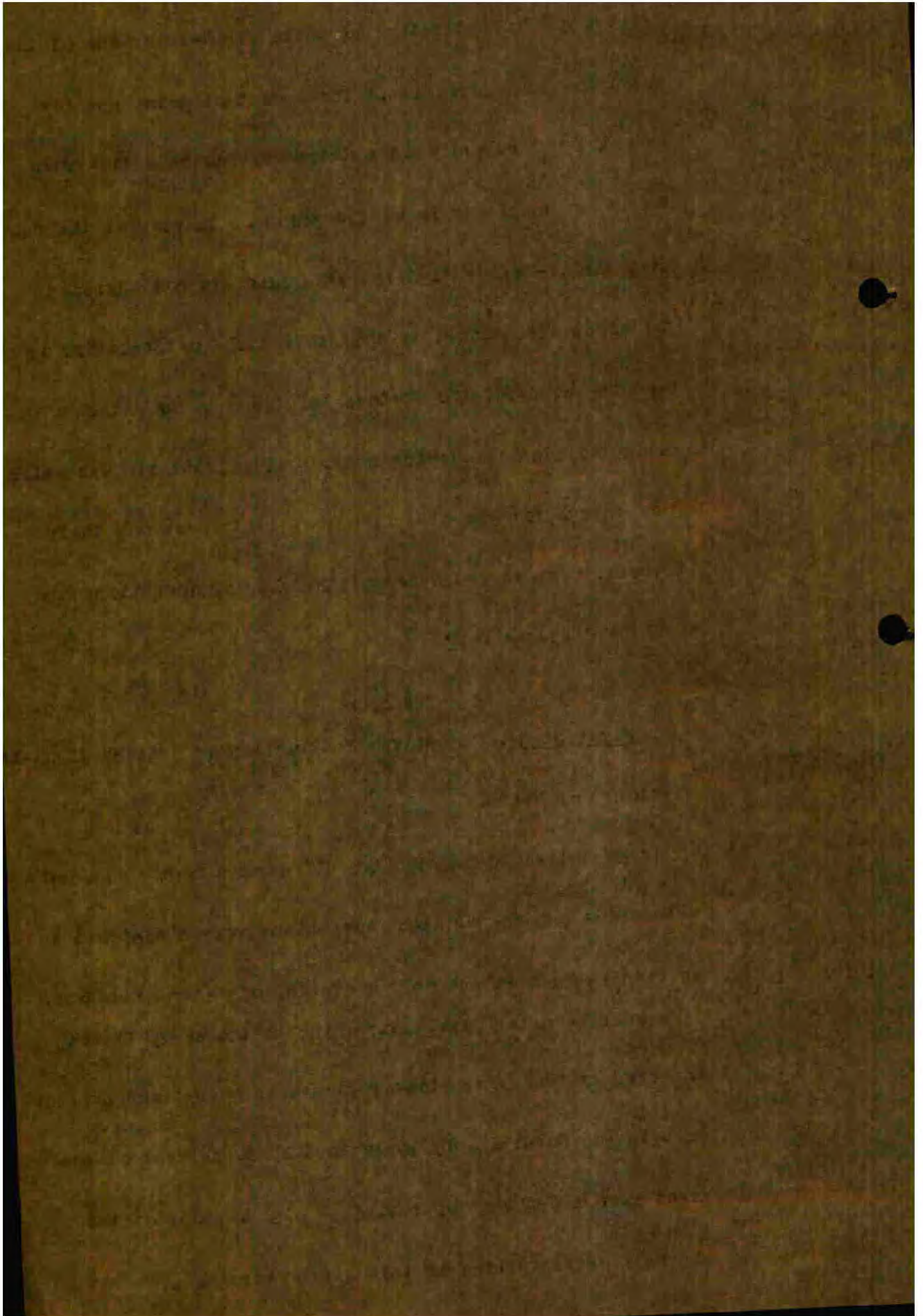
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The first requirement was to destroy the British fighters. One favorable circumstance here was that the British had concentrated all their fighters on one of the three existing airfields. The important point was to take them by surprise in a sudden attack at a time when they were unable to leave the ground. In view of the fact that single-seater fighters as a rule are not equipped for night operations, so that they could not take off or land in the dark, the obvious solution was to attack them during morning or evening dusk, while visibility was still good enough for the attacking bombers to make out their targets. The three phases of the plan of operations now will be discussed.

PHASE 1

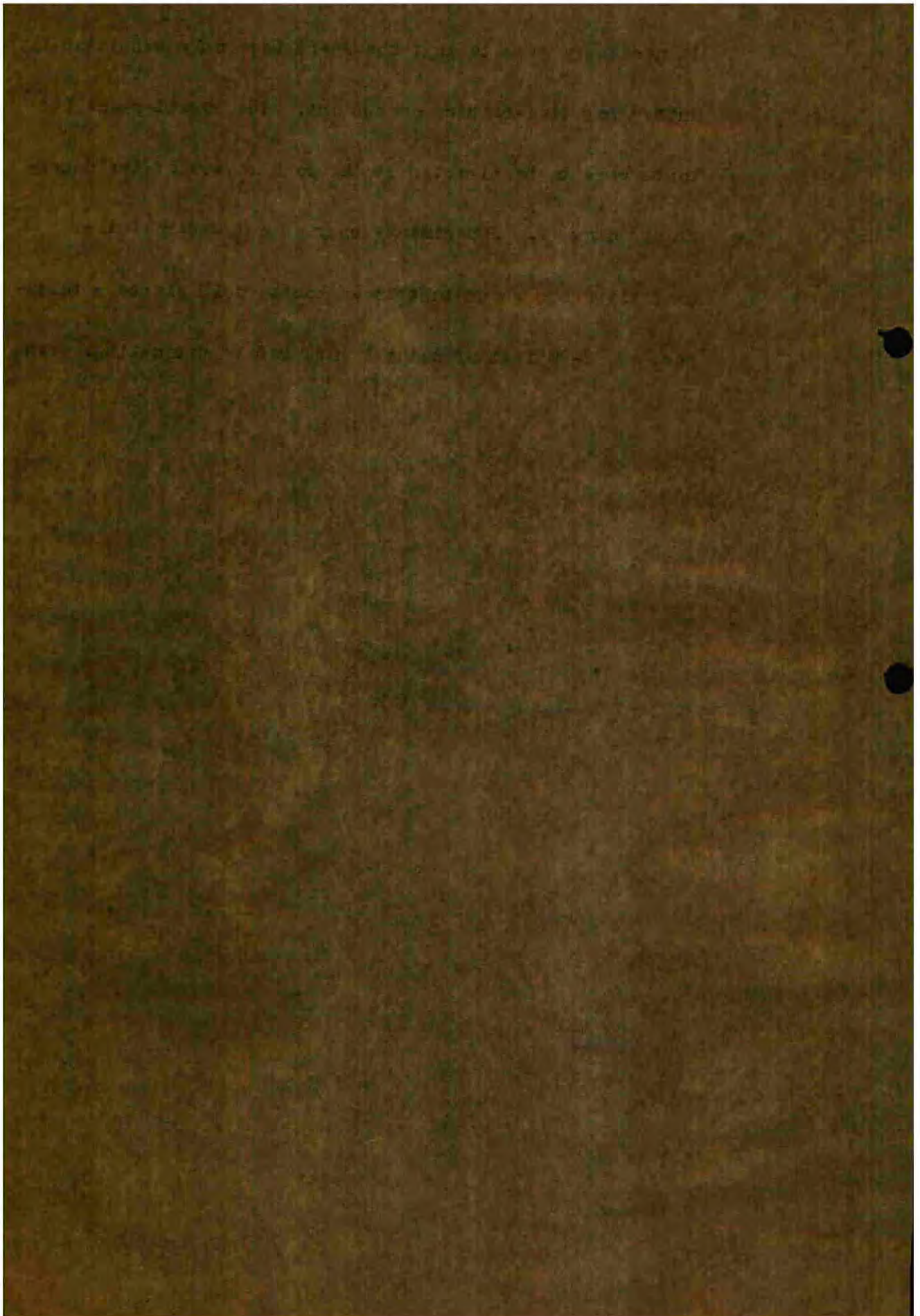
First Stage. Objective: Destruction of British fighters stationed on Malta.

To achieve this objective all German bomber squadrons with crews capable of night operations were dispatched in an evening dusk attack on the evening of D-Day minus one. It should be noted here that, owing to the heavy losses incurred by the German bomber forces in operations against Britain and Russia, only approximately 30 percent of the crews were capable of operating at night. Some of the aircraft participating in this attack were to use



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rocket-propelled armor-piercing and oil bombs in a dive-bombing strike against the underground hangars. Here it is necessary to note that the Ju-88 were only conditionally suited for dive-bombing operations. The rocket-propelled bombs were to be directed at the rock covers of the underground hangars. Experiments carried out under similar conditions had shown that these bombs could pierce a thickness of 36-49 feet of natural rock before detonating. Even



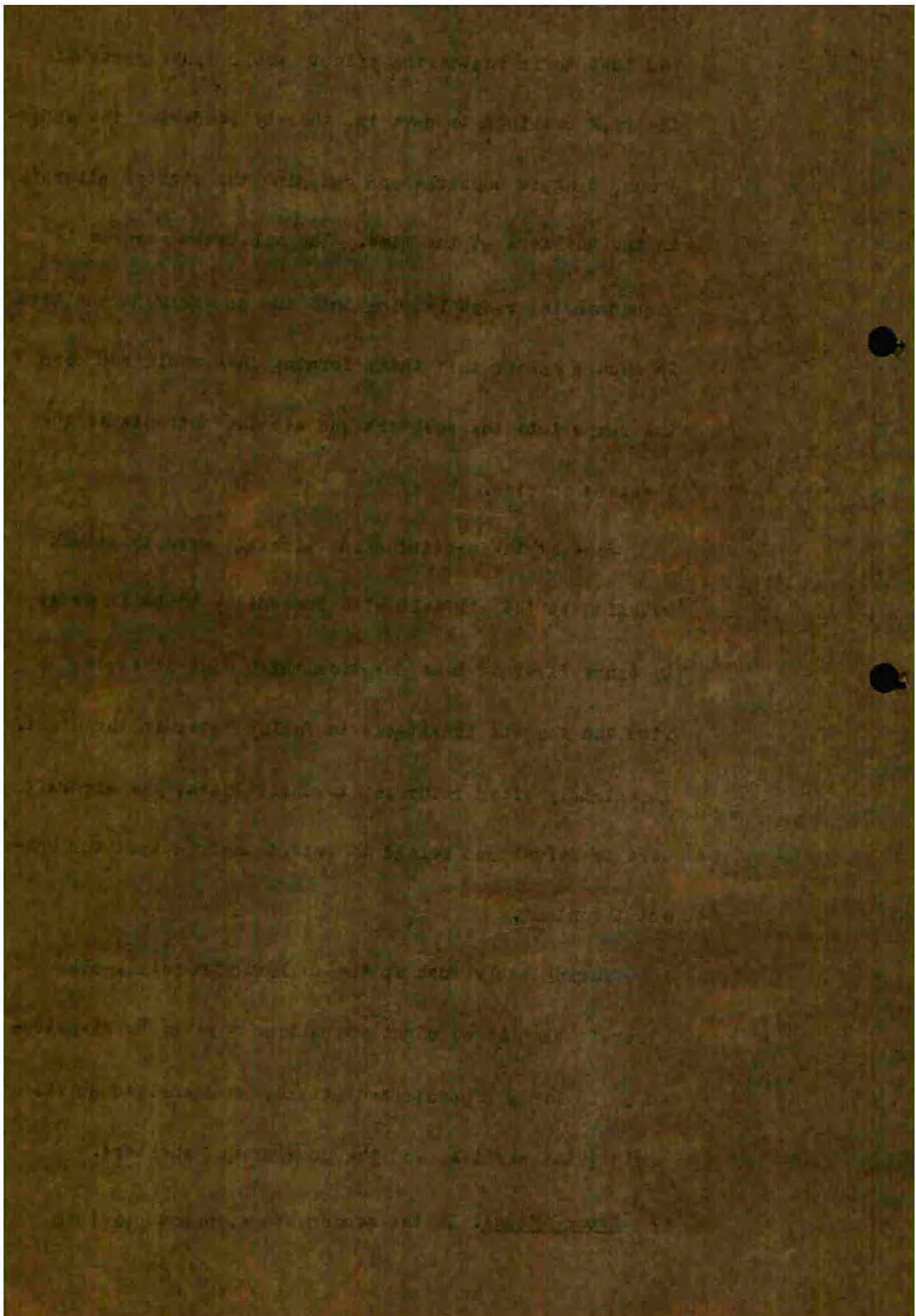
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though it thus had to be assumed that they would not penetrate into the underground shelters, the possibility existed that their shattering effect would cause parts of the rock ceilings to cave in, thereby rendering the underground hangars unusable and damaging the fighter aircraft in the shelters at the time. The oil bombs were to be placed on the ramps leading into the underground shelters in such a manner that their burning fuel would run down the ramps into the shelters and set the contents of the shelters on fire.

Some of the participating aircraft were to attack building at the airfield with incendiary bombs in order to cause fires of some duration which make it easier to find the targets in attacks to follow later in the night. Immediately after returning to their bases, the aircraft were to refuel and reload to repeat their attack throughout the night.

During early dusk on the following morning, all aircraft capable of night operations were to be dispatched again for a concentrated attack, as described above, against the airfield and the underground shelters.

Second Stage. In the second stage, plans provided



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for a repetition of the concentrated attack by all German aircraft against the same airfield.

Depending on the results achieved, the decision then was to be made whether all forces were to continue attacks against the airfield, or whether elements could be used to commence operations against the other airfields on the island.

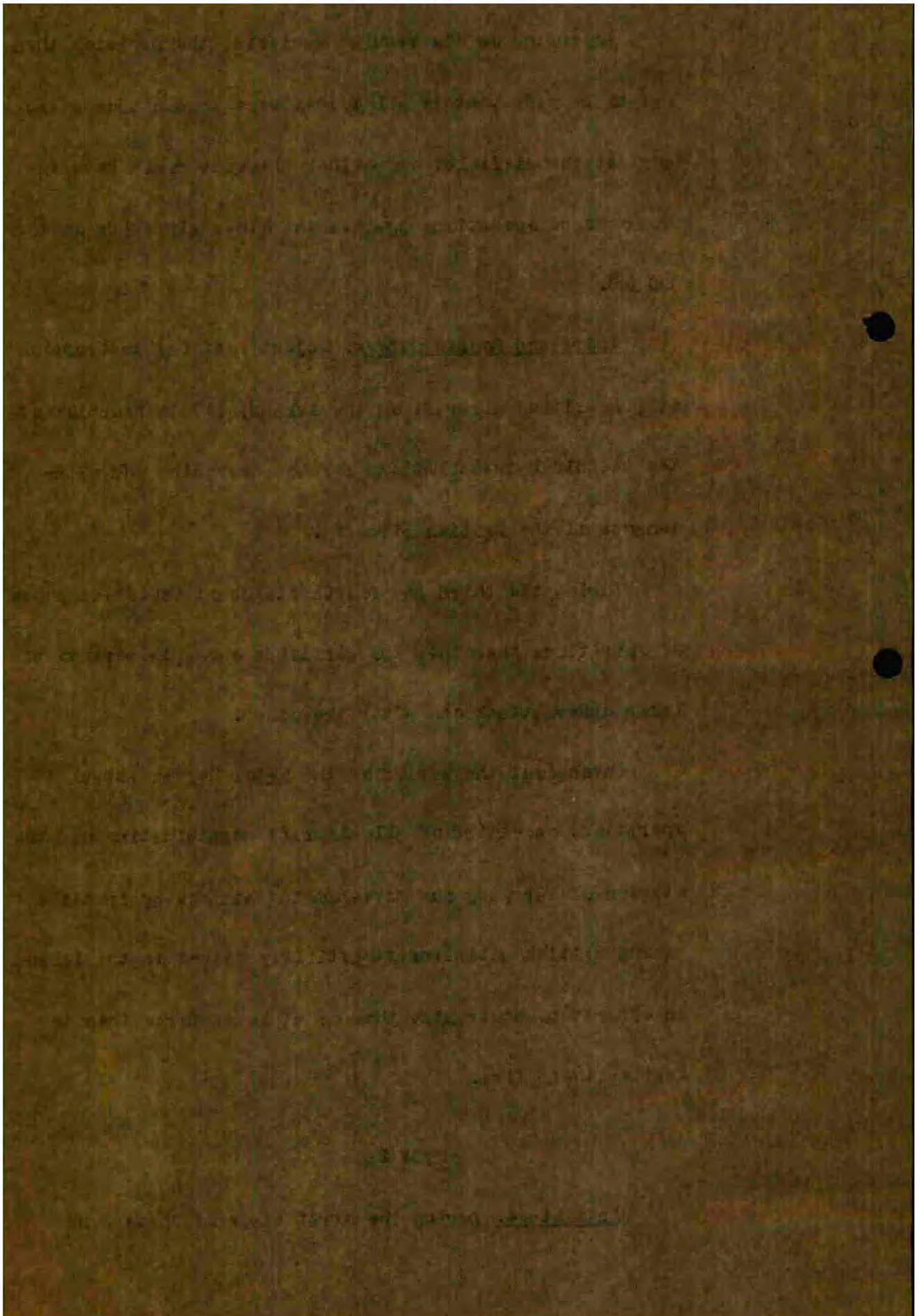
Third and Fourth Stages. Objectives: (a) Destruction of all British aircraft on the island; (b) Destruction of the technical installations for the servicing and maintenance of the British aircraft.

During the third and fourth stages of the first phase of operations the other two airfields on Malta were to be taken under attack one after the other.

Throughout the period of the major German attack operation, one-third of all aircraft participating had the mission of carrying out dive-bombing attacks against the strong British antiaircraft artillery forces on the island in efforts to neutralize them or at least force them to scatter their fire.

PHASE 2

First Stage. During the first stage of Phase 2 of

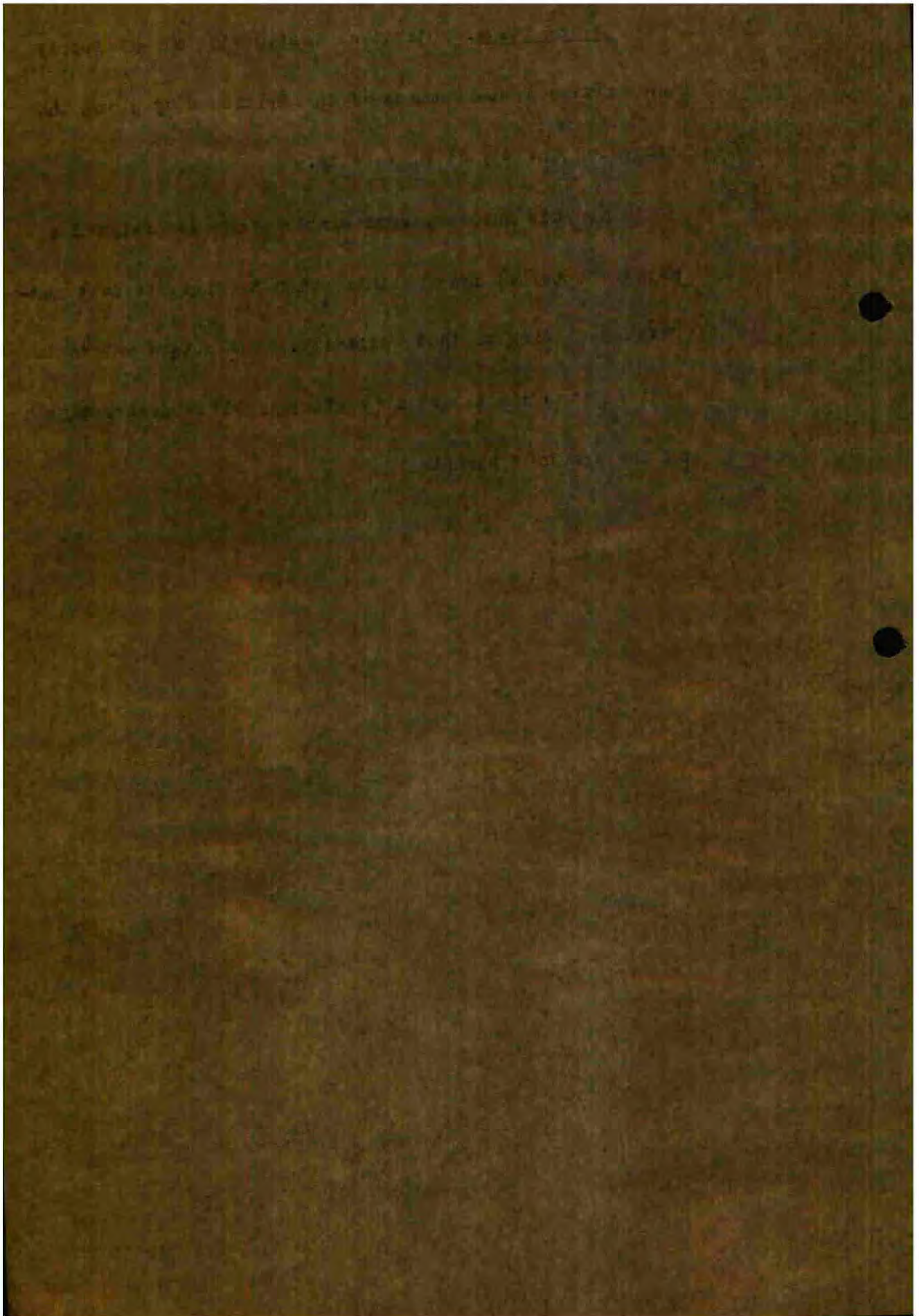


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the operation, the plan of attack provided for bombing attacks against British naval ships in port.

Second Stage. Objective: Destruction of all supply and service installations of the British Navy along the shores of the Bay of La Valette.

For this purpose, each bomber wing was assigned a permanent target area, within which the targets were numbered according to their priority. The attack was to be shifted to a new target only after complete destruction of the previous target.



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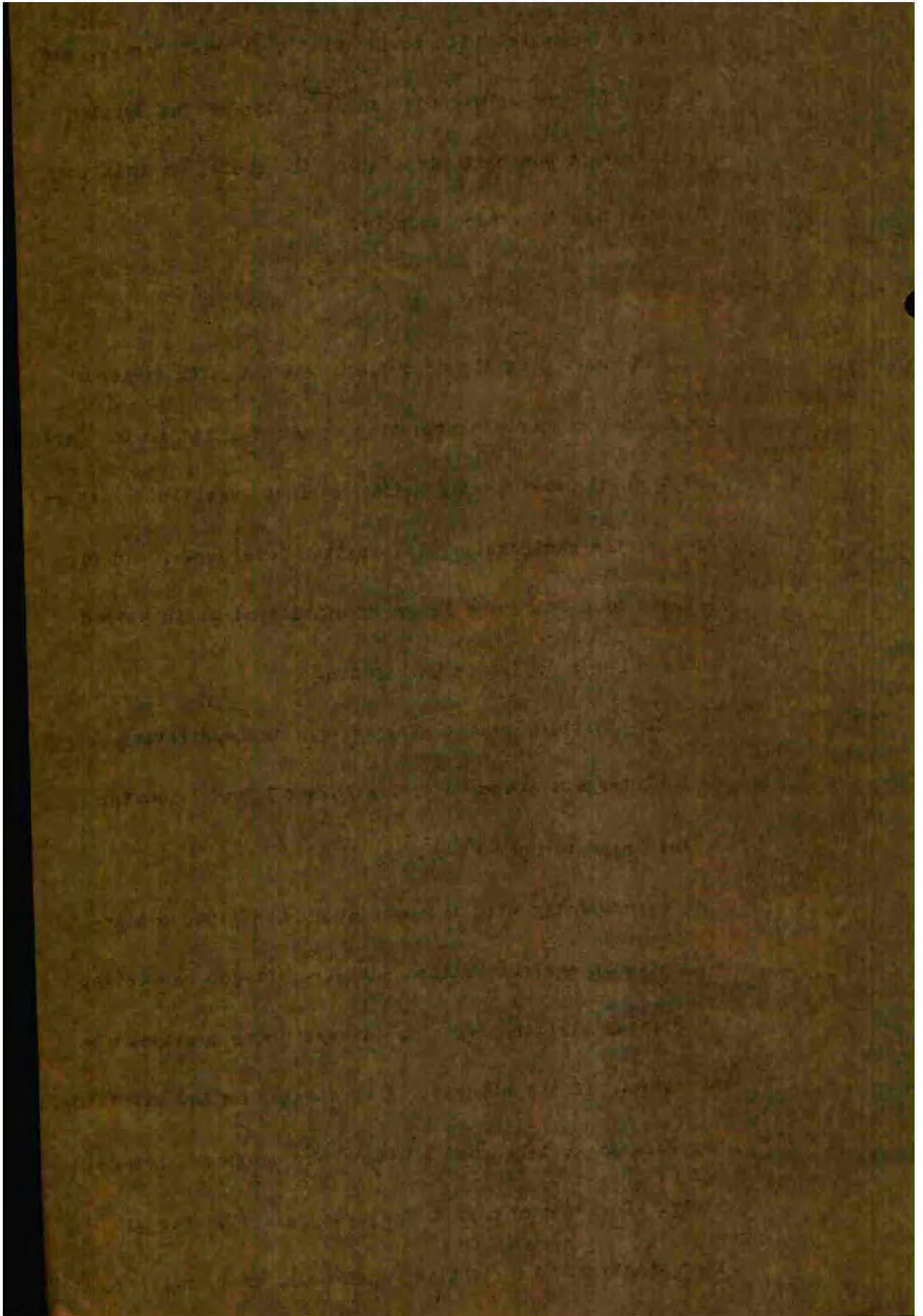
The purpose in assigning separate target areas was to enable the participating bomber crews to really familiarize themselves with their relatively small areas, and to acquaint themselves with the ^{precise} location of the British antiaircraft gun batteries along the route, so that they could attack them successfully.

PHASE 3

In Phase 3 of the operation, which was to commence only after complete destruction of all targets in the port area, plans provided for action against specific targets-- such as the residence of the British Governor--, and for attacks to destroy the large quantities of grain stored under a large square in La Valetta.

In addition, repeat attacks were to be directed against targets attacked during Phases 1 and 2 insofar as this appeared necessary.

Concurrently with the previously mentioned continuous attacks against British antiaircraft gun batteries, the British airfields were to be kept under constant observation. If new aircraft were detected on the airfields, they were to be taken under attack and destroyed immediately. Such action was to be given priority over all other missions. In addition, action was to be taken to



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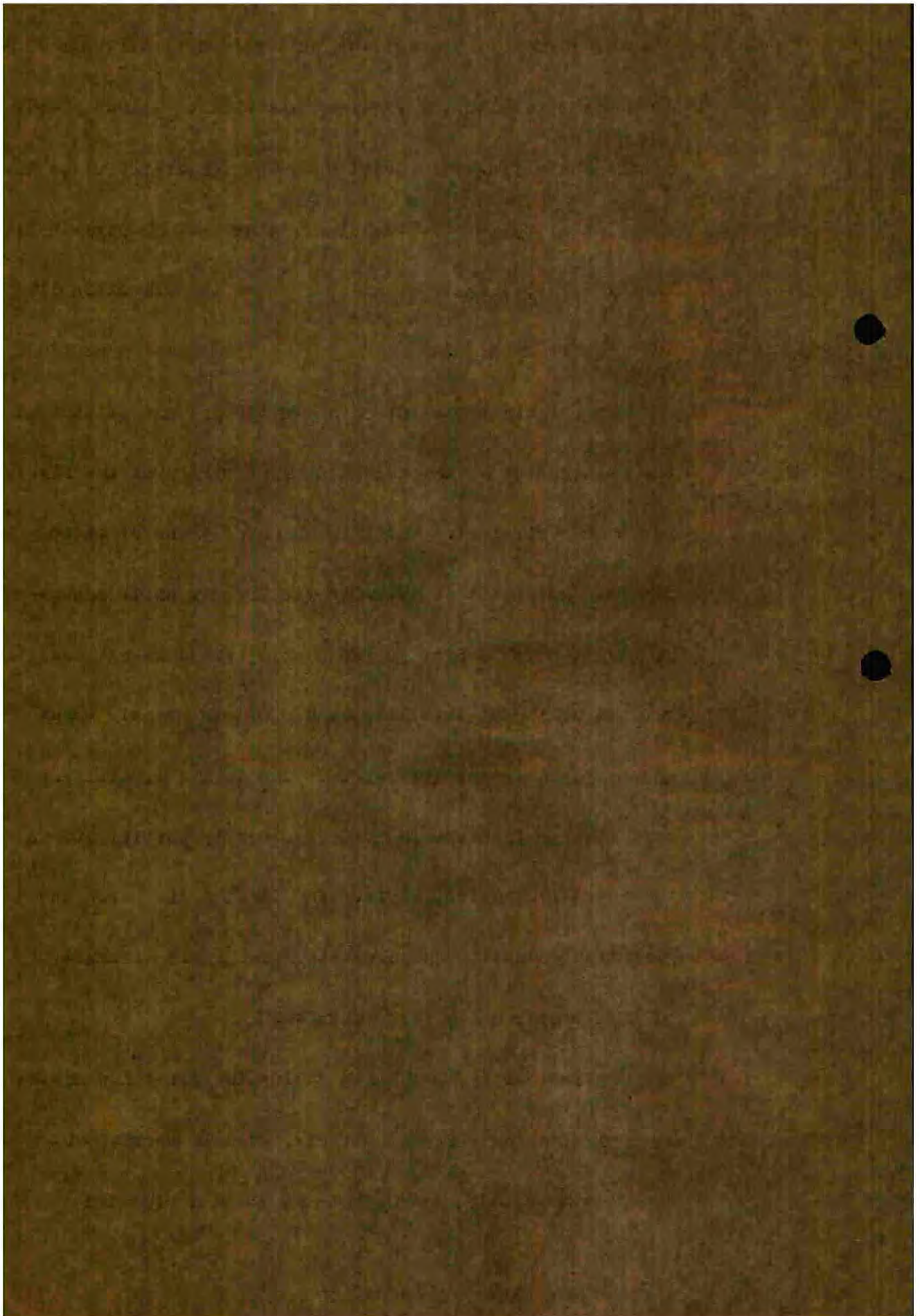
prevent the arrival of supply ships at Malta.

The plan of attack provided for the commitment of fighter forces to protect the bomber forces while airborne in accordance with the requirements of the various phases of the operation. The target area was relatively close to the fighter bases, the average distance being approximately ninety miles, a fact which facilitated the execution of the fighter mission.

One highly important point in the plan of attack was the maintenance of the technical operability of the fighter and bomber aircraft. For this purpose plans provided for the assignment of twice as many repair units and replacement parts depots as was customary. This was possible because of the availability of hangars and repair shops and so forth on the airfields on the island of Sicily.

Italian fighters and bombers were to participate in the operation against Malta. The Italian Air Force had good fighter units equipped with fairly good aircraft, but its bomber units were outdated.

Operations against Malta during the first few months had shown that small unit attacks, even if carried out almost continuously, incurred heavy losses. For this



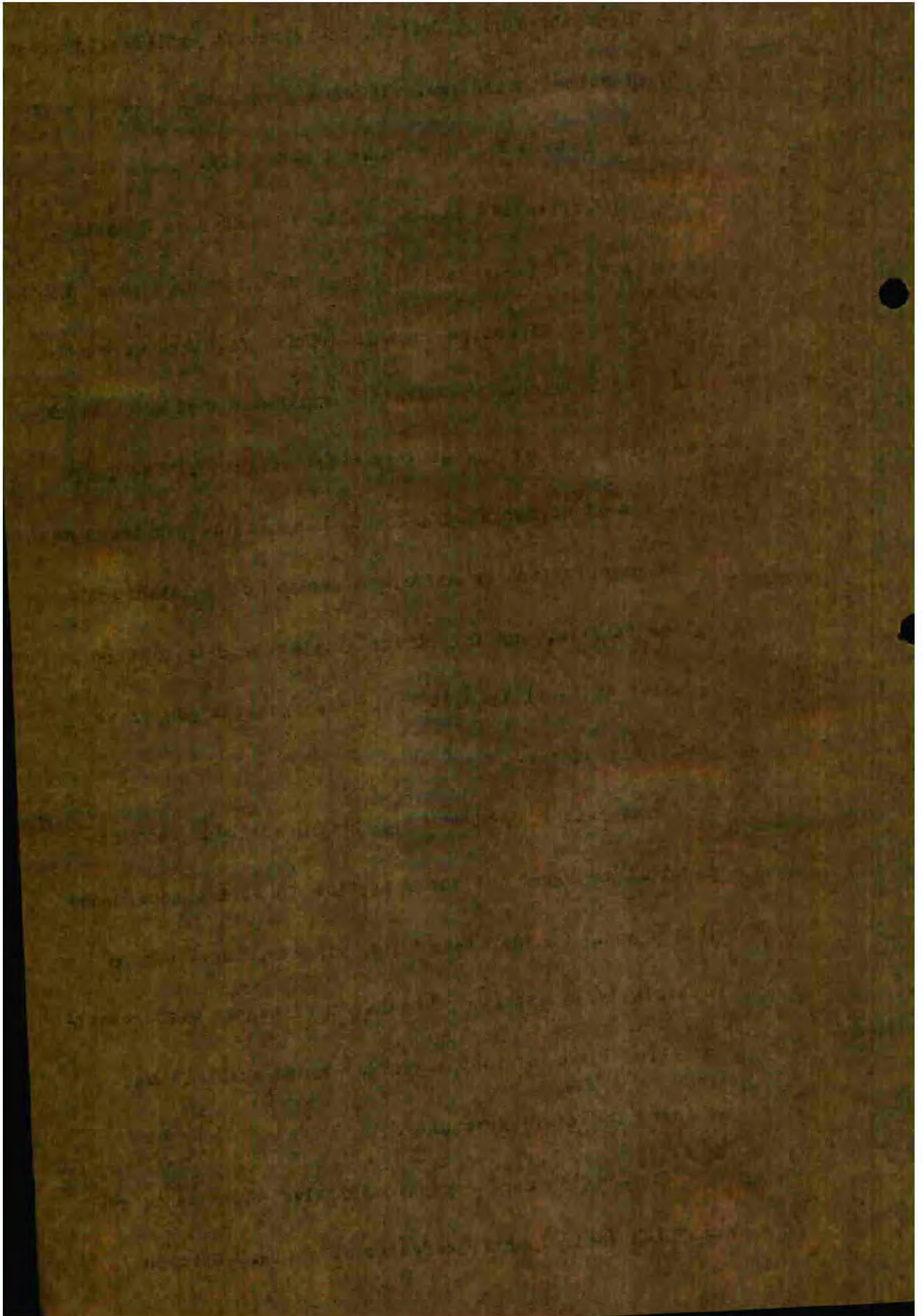
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reason the II Air Corps planned to commit all operable aircraft simultaneously in concentrated attack, in order to force the strong British antiaircraft artillery forces to disperse their fire. These concentrated attacks were to be repeated twice or three times daily.

The offensive against Malta commenced on 2 April . Very soon it became evident that the night and dusk attacks had been so effective that no British fighters were able to operate during the first concentrated daylight attack or during any of the attacks which followed. The large numbers of German aircraft attacking at one and the same time complicated the uniform direction of British antiaircraft fire, and the direct attacks by dive-bombers against the antiaircraft batteries made the gun crews extremely uneasy.

The results achieved, as just described, made it possible to carry out the operation in strict accordance with plans. On the other hand, however, there was no possibility to ascertain whether the attacks with rocket-propelled bombs against the underground shelters had achieved the desired results.

The British made repeated abortive attempts to re-establish their fighter defenses on Malta. British

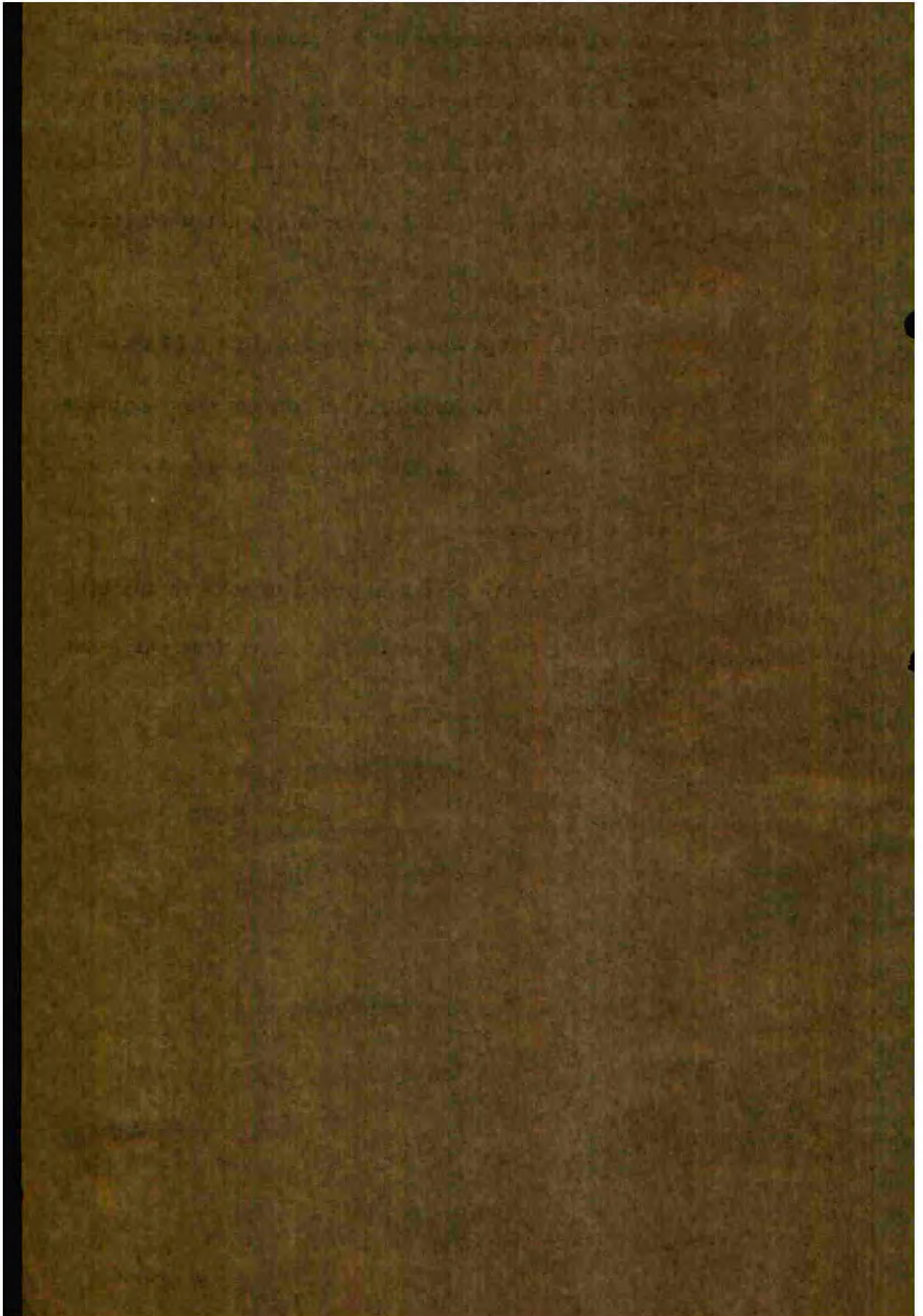


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fighters taking off from aircraft carriers cruising outside the range of German bombers did succeed in reaching the island, but were destroyed on the ground shortly after landing. Each time the German Command received timely warning when aircraft carriers were on their way from Gibraltar or were entering the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar.

On two occasions the operation against Malta was halted because of reports that British convoys were approaching the island. In each case the convoys were taken under successful attack.

We for our part endeavored to move in supplies for Malta from the east. In January four ships got



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through, but the February convoy of three ships succumbed to air attacks. In March Cruiser Naiad, Admiral Vian's Flagship, was sunk by a submarine. Now, in May the island was threatened by starvation.

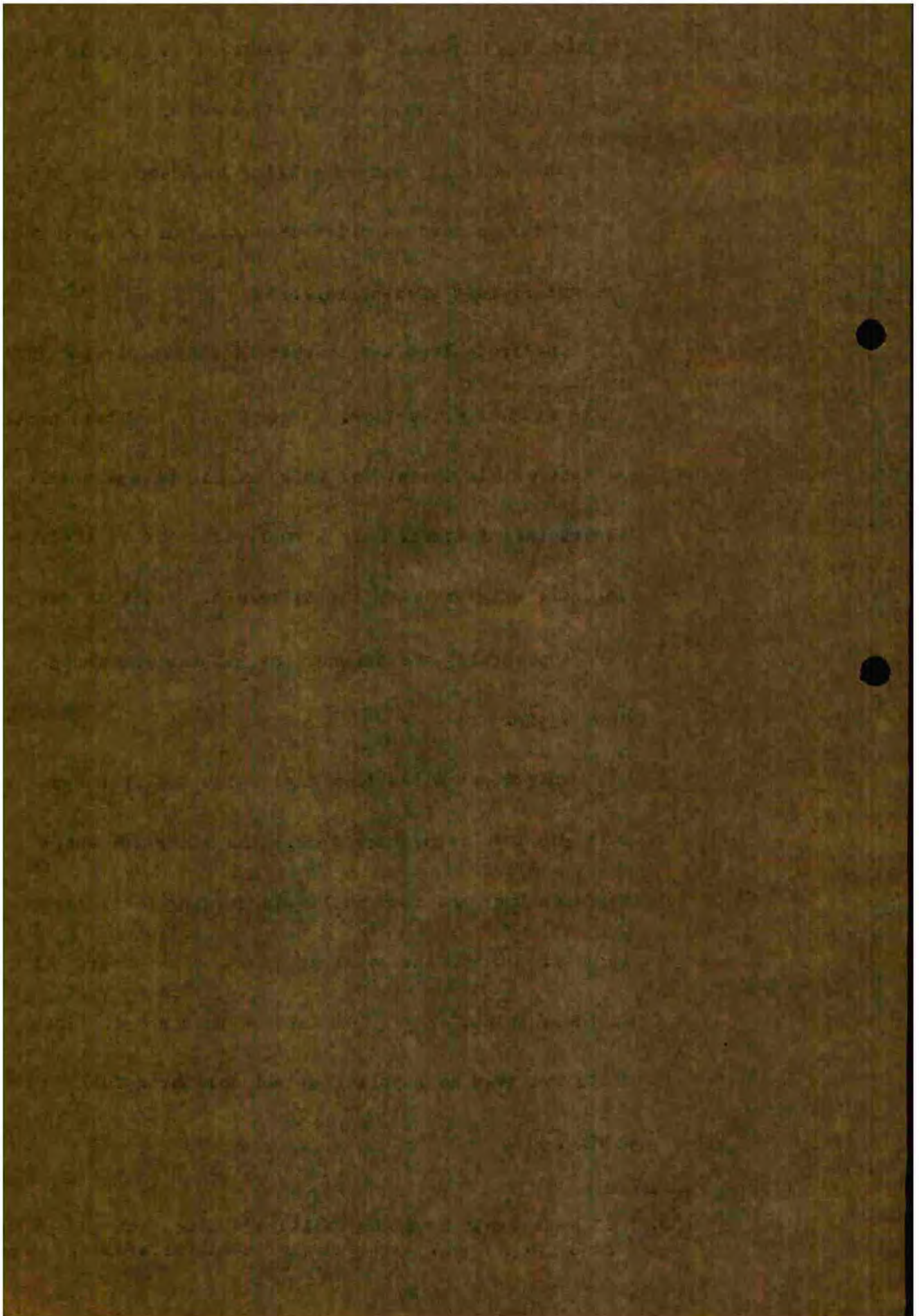
The Admiralty proved willing to accept any risk in efforts to move supplies through. On 20 March four freighters left Alexandria....

The freighters had to cover the last stretch to Malta without protection. Admiral Vian had been unable to take on oil there, for which reason he was unable to escort them farther. Only a small fraction of their valuable cargo reached the defenders. While the ships were approaching the island, the attacks commenced once again.

Only eight miles from their goal the *Glan Campbell* and the *Breconshire* sank. The other two ships suffered the same fate while discharging their cargo in port. Out of the total of 26 000 tons aboard all of these ships, only 5 000 tons reached shore. Then Malta received no supplies at all for three full

158
months.

158. Malta--Excerpts from Churchill: *Die Sturmflut aus Japan*, pp. 346 ff. Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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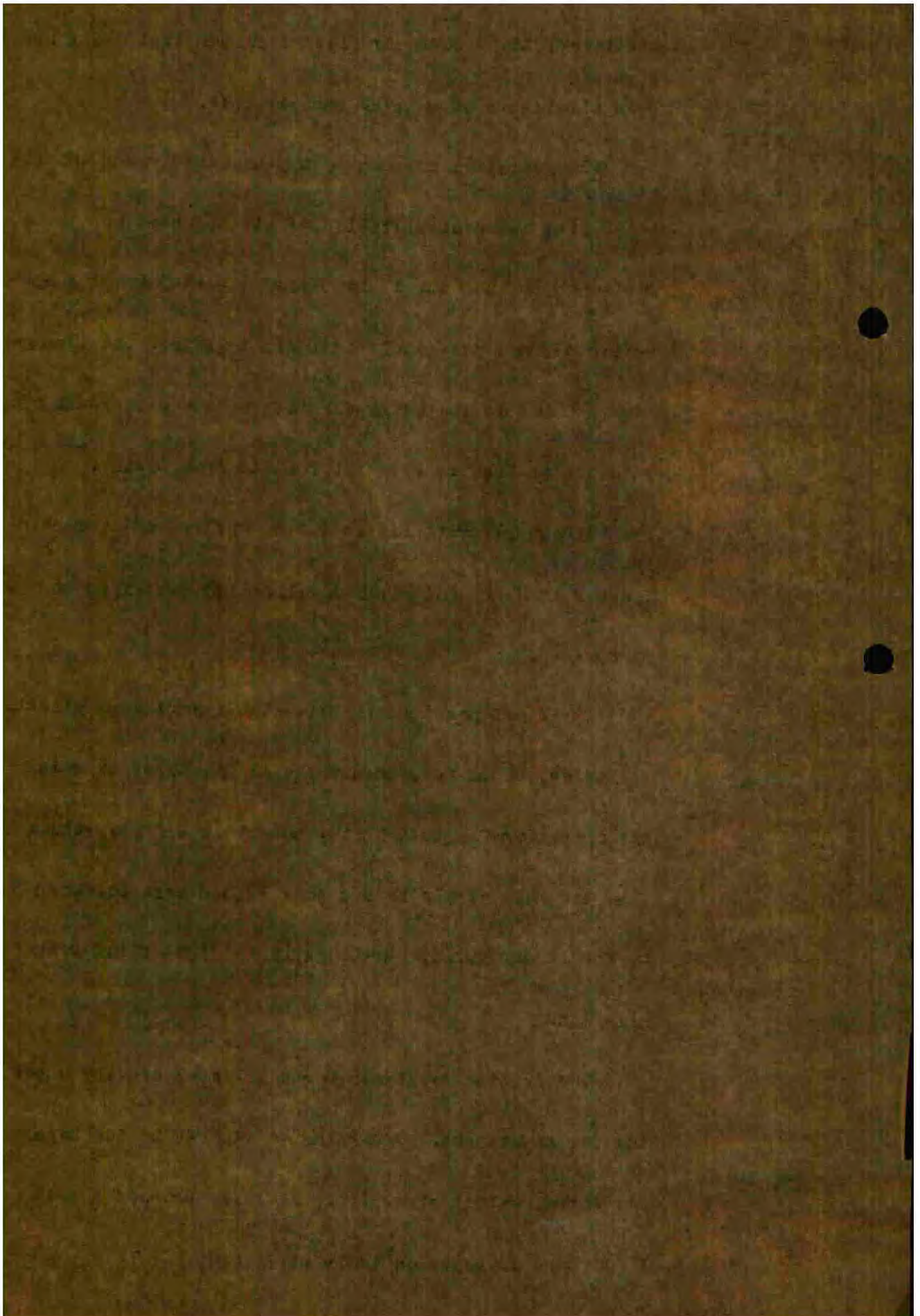
On 10 May, after its units had flown a total of 11 000 missions in which all important targets had been destroyed, the Second Air Fleet reported that Malta had been eliminated as a naval and air base.

The operation planned to capture the island immediately after the neutralization of its defenses had to be postponed because the Italian troops slated for the operation had not yet completed their training. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe ordered the withdrawal of a number of fighter and bomber units from Sicily. 159

German aircraft losses in the entire Mediterranean Theater in March and April totalled 173 destroyed and 68 damaged.

It is not possible to determine from the compilation of losses, how many aircraft the II Air Corps lost in its operations against Malta, but it is safe to assume that the bulk of the losses just stated were suffered by the II Air Corps, particularly in fighter and bomber aircraft.

The British Royal Air Force suffered heavily under the German attacks. According to reports by the Royal Air Force, German aircraft in February dropped almost 1 000 tons of bombs on their airfields, but in March

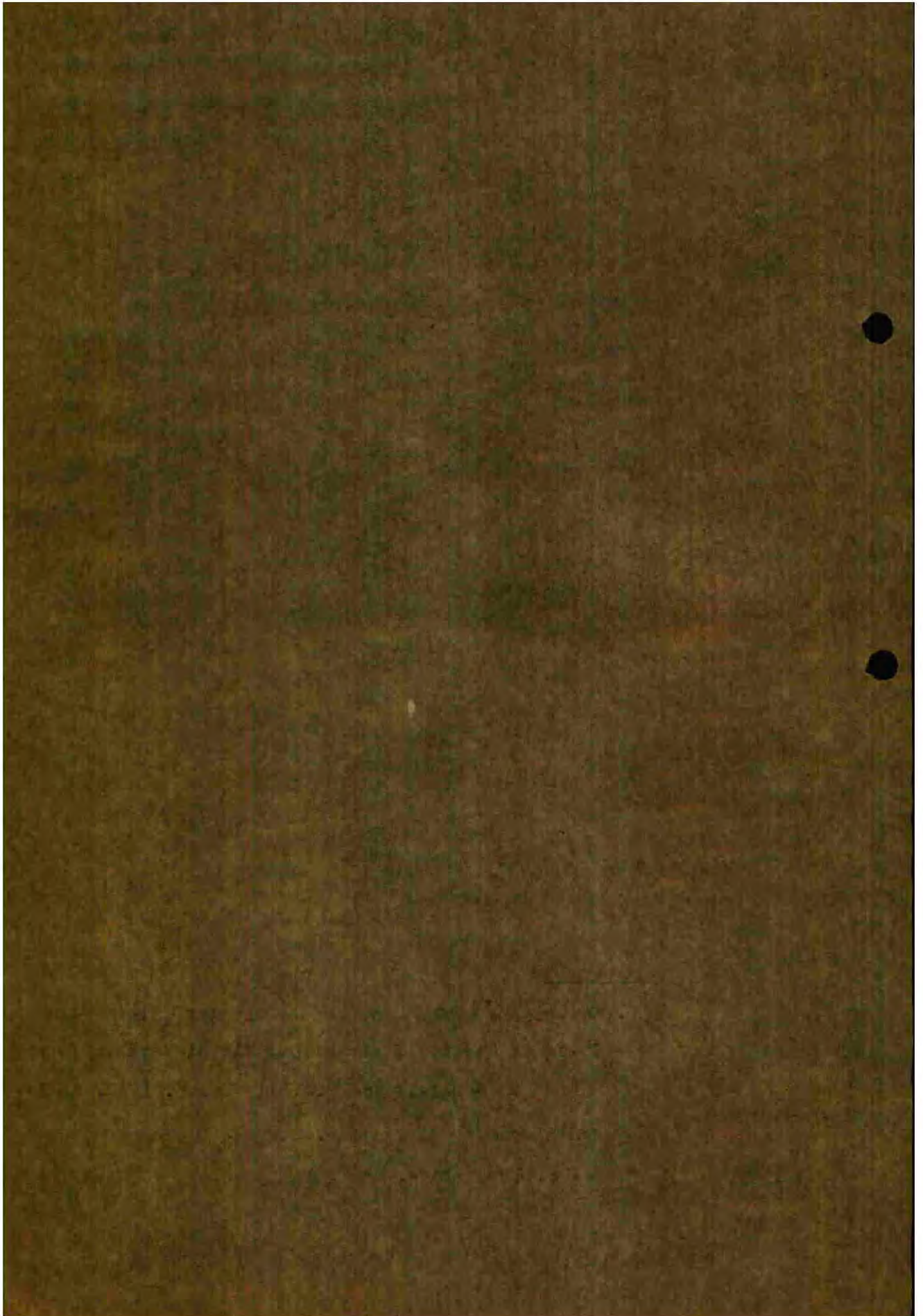


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the attacks increased in intensity. On 7 March, fifteen

159. Reichmann, Paul, General der Flieger, at the time
Chief of Staff, II Air Corps: *Die Niederkaempfung
Maltas in der Zeit von 2.4. bis 11. 5. 1942.* Karlsruhe
Document Collection.

* See p. 126, above.



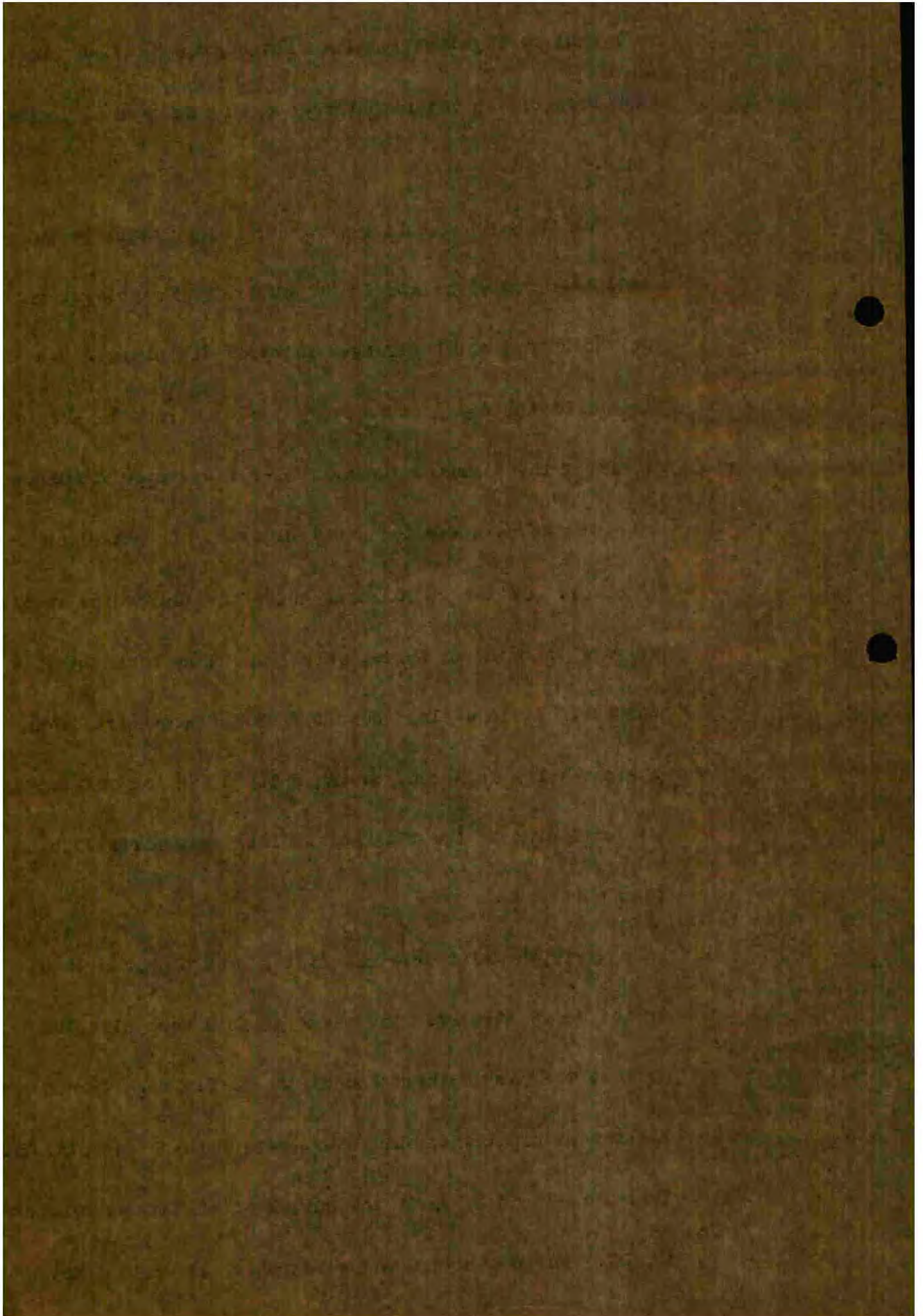
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Spitfires from an aircraft carrier succeeded in arriving on Malta to reinforce the defenses. By mid-March, however, only thirty fighters remained intact, the British bombers had been driven out with the exception of a small handful.

On 20 March Takali came under heavy attack by an estimated number of 143 Ju-88 bombers and fighters, on 21 March by a still stronger force of 218 planes. On the following day another heavy attack struck Takali, destroying the barracks there. Hal-Far was more fortunate.

On the next day the enemy diverted his attention to a convoy. Of the 26 000 tons which the four ships involved were to bring to Malta, only 5 000 tons could be discharged. It is estimated that 2 850 attacks were flown against Malta in March, during which 2 174 tons of bombs screamed down to their targets. Sixty Axis aircraft had been shot down.

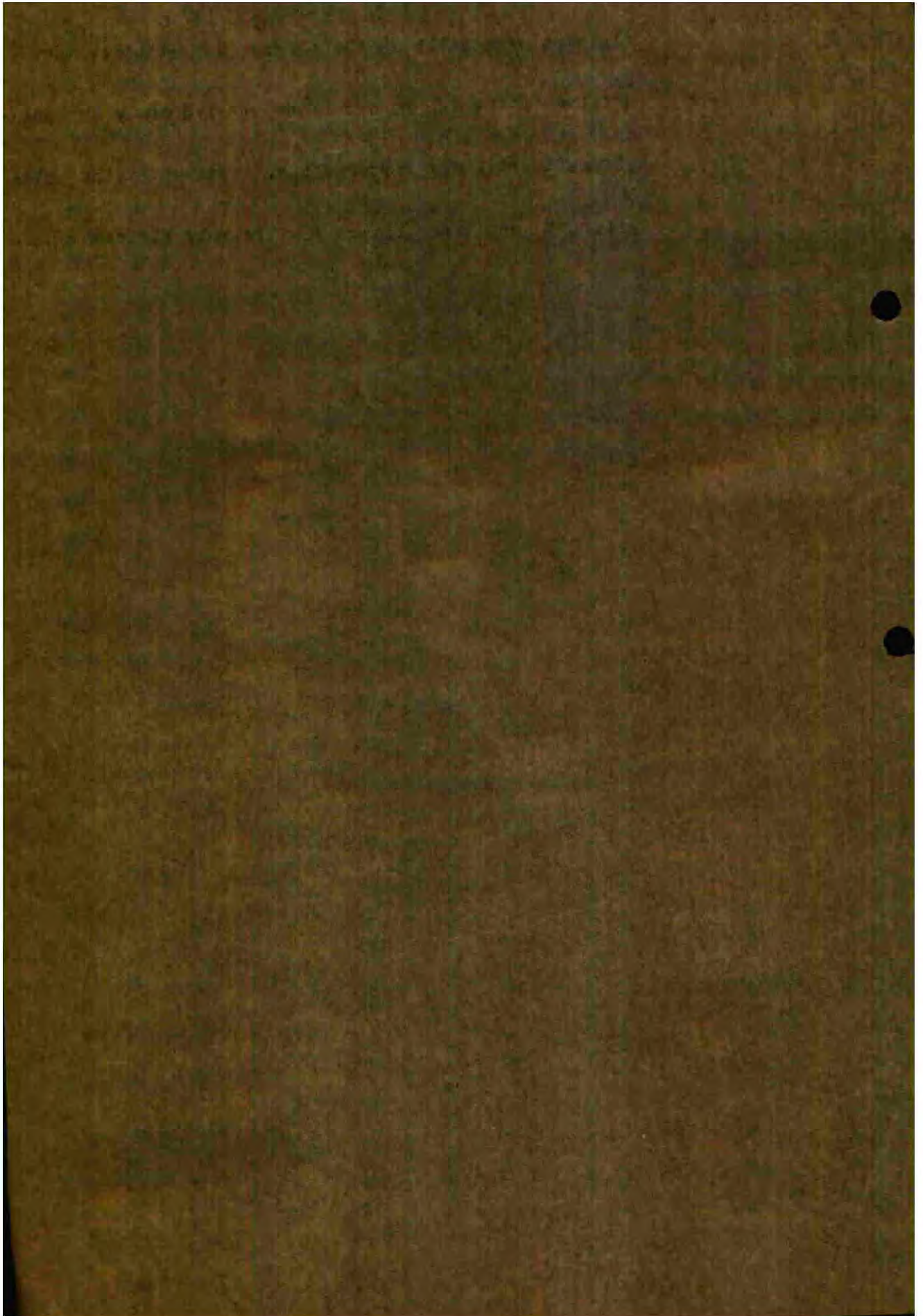
April, the most terrible month, brought no surcease in the enemy attacks. Now these attacks were directed more at the port rather than at the airfields. Two hundred attacks within twentyfour hours were nothing exceptional. Twice, on 7 and 20 April the number of attacks even mounted to 300. The destroyers and submarines, as well as the



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bombers were compelled to leave Malta.

When Tedder flew to Malta in mid-April only six fighters were still on the island, and at times the defense of the island had to be carried on by the anti-aircraft artillery forces alone. Frequently the anti-aircraft guns were allowed to fire only fifteen rounds

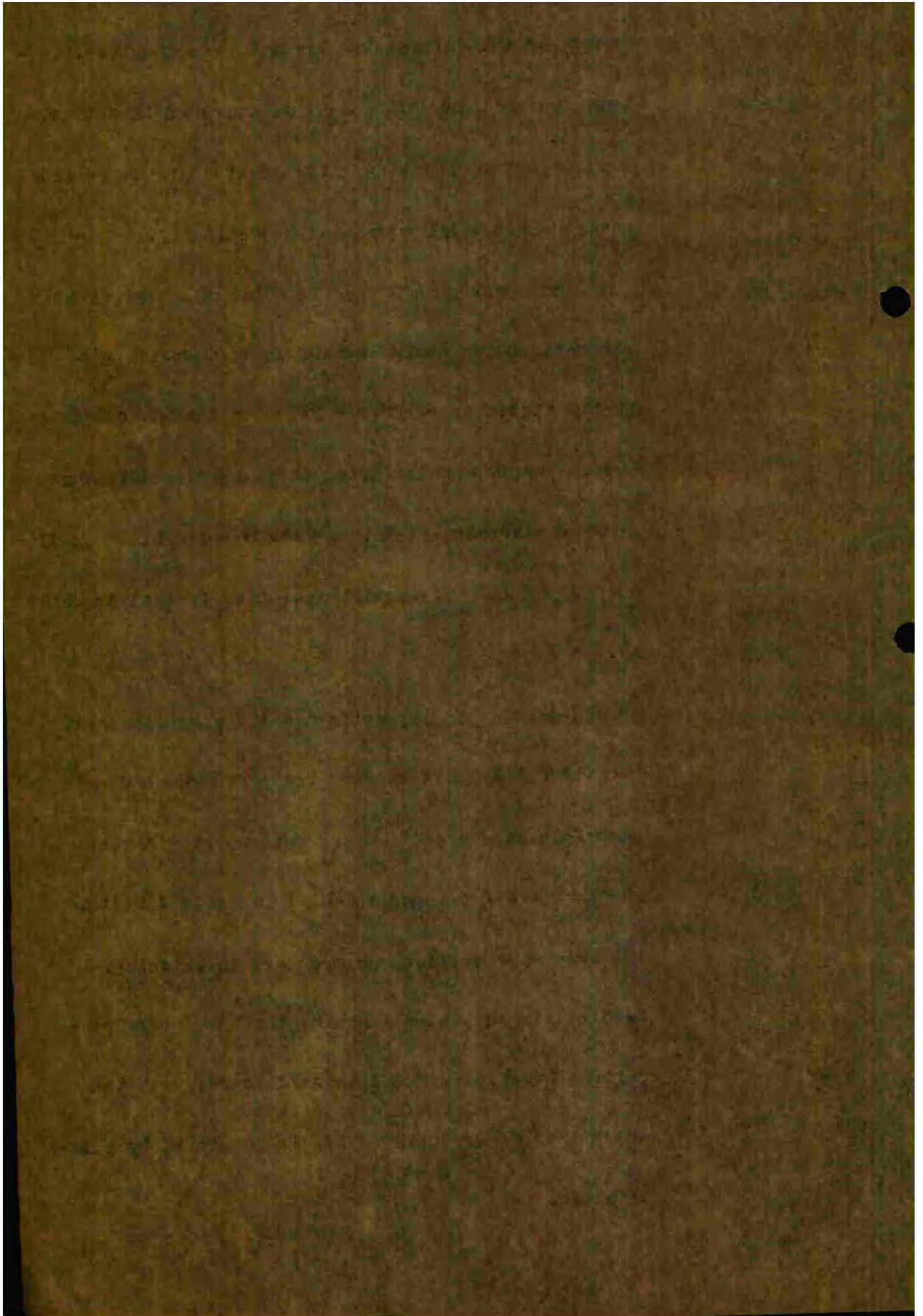


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and that only in response to specific orders. At that time our airfields resembled a crater landscape, the docks and the surrounding areas were a shambles. Valetta was nothing but a mass of crumbled limestone, from which the imposing ruins of its baroque edifices nevertheless still stood out majestically.

Once again, on 20 April, 47 of our best fighter aircraft, which could measure up to Kesselring's Me-109 fighters, reached Malta with the aid of the Wasp. Twenty minutes after their landing they came under continuous attack. On the morning of 21 April only 27 of them were still operable, by evening only 17.

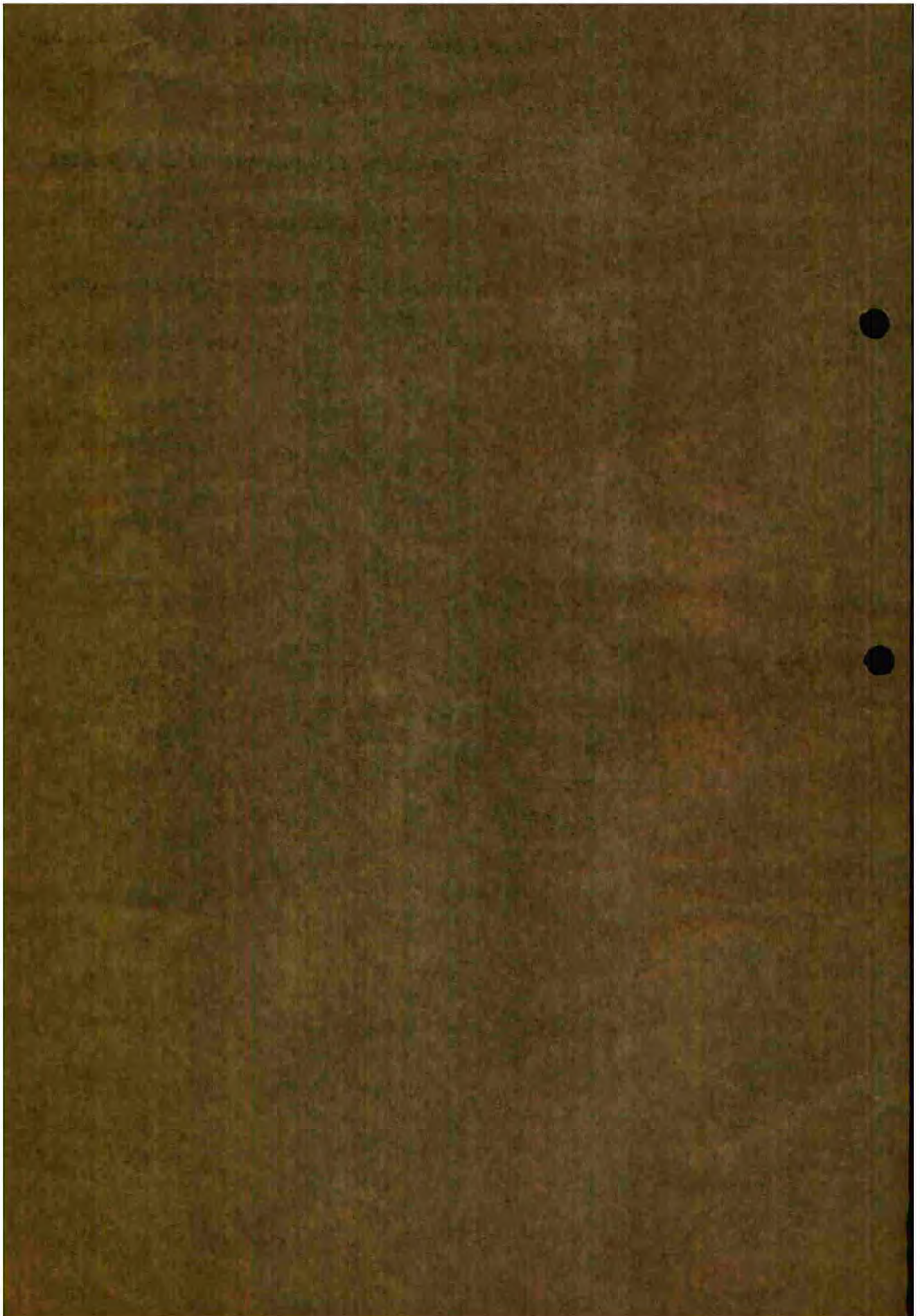
According to our estimates the enemy in April had flown 4 900 attacks and dropped 6 728 tons of bombs. On an average the air raid warning sirens shrieked every two and one-half hours in Valetta. But even more serious dangers were threatening. At Gerbini, in the Catania Plain, the enemy were preparing three runways for cargo gliders, with the intentions of capturing Malta in an attack by paratroopers.



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At a conference between Hitler and Mussolini at the end of April at the Berghof, the two dictators worked out their program for the continuation of their operations.

Because the Luftwaffe was too weak to strike in Libya and at Malta simultaneously, what was left of the Cyrenaica was to be captured at the end of May or the beginning of June; plans provided for the



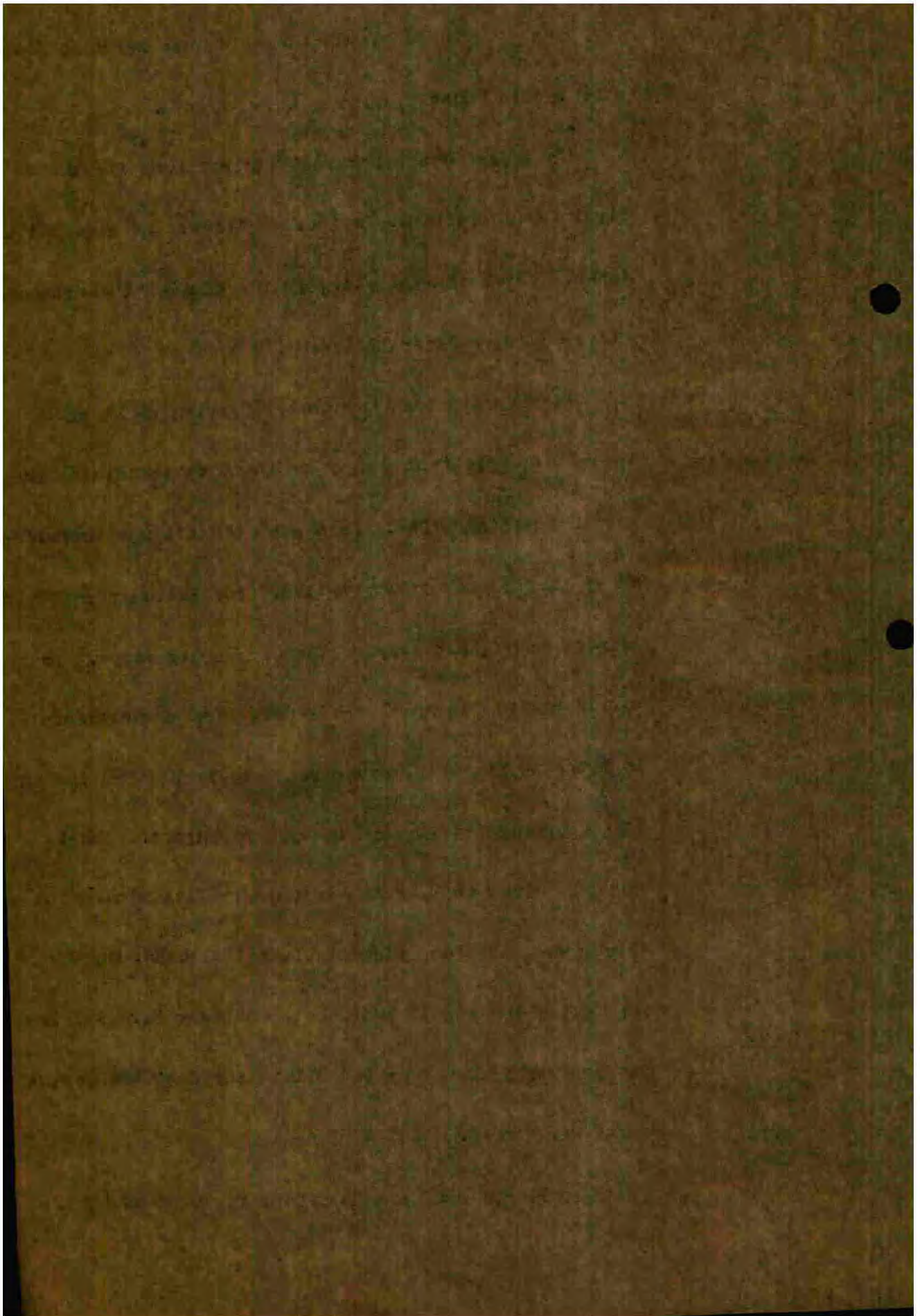
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capture of Malta between mid-July and mid-August. After that, at a time still to be fixed, the invasion of Egypt was to commence, and the triumphal march to the Nile and the Suez Canal was to be opened.

On 4 May Keitel issued the directives for the first two operations. Besides engineers and some thirty tanks, Kesselring was assigned the entire 7th Parachute Division under General Student.

The threat of an invasion, alarming as it was, was not the greatest danger or the most immediate danger threatening Malta. From now on Malta was threatened by the specter of starvation. The February and March convoys had fallen prey to the German Air Force. No convoy arrived in April, and there were no prospects that the supply ships would reach their destination in May. Malta had to rely on its own resources. What could be moved in by submarines or by fast minelaying ships, such as the daring Minelayer *Welschman*, could only delay the end at best, but not avert it. Failing the arrival of new supplies within the next two months Malta was doomed.

Our guns had to remain silent for want of



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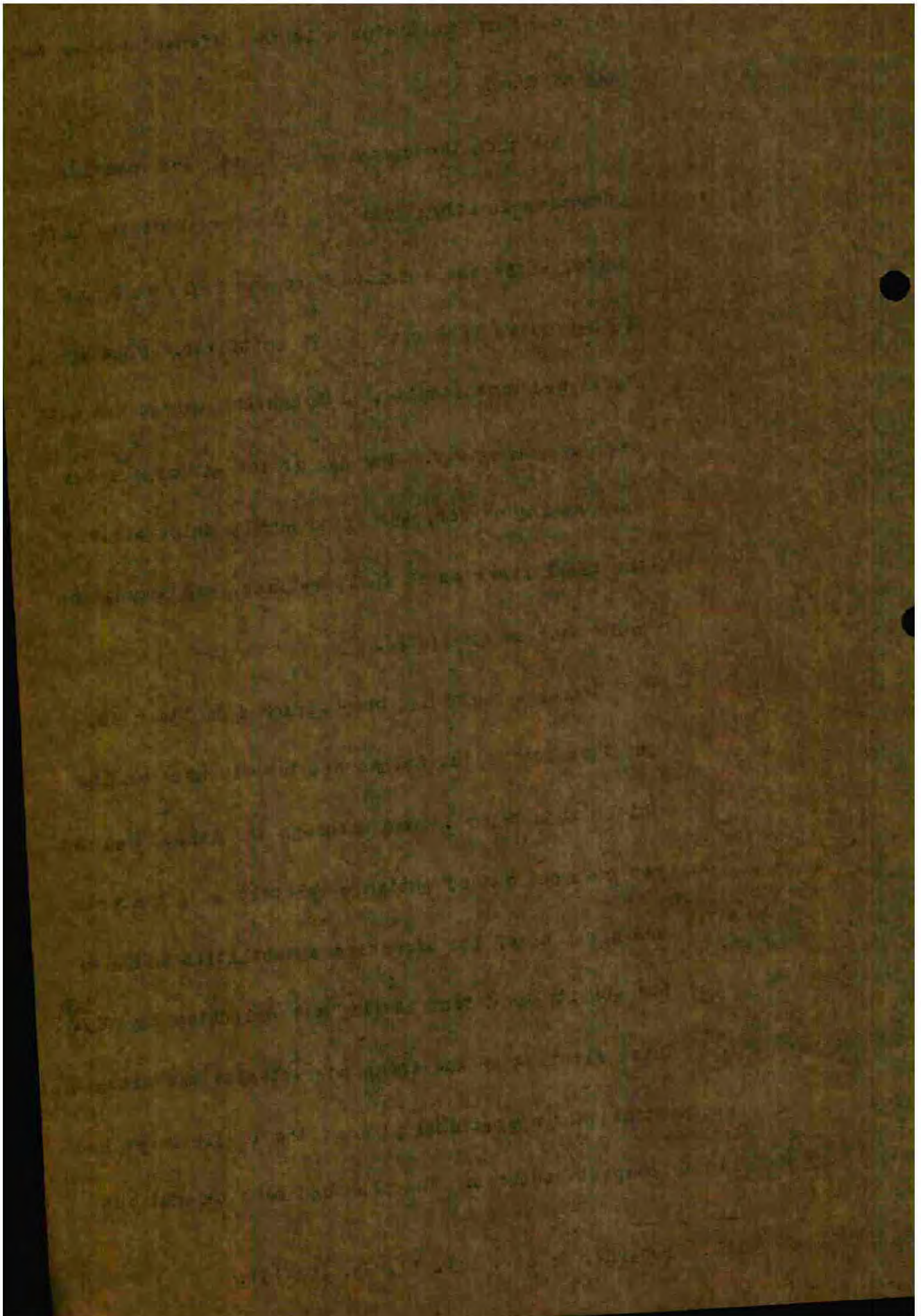
ammunition, our aircraft stood idly on the ground because fuel was lacking, and our men wasted away and could not participate in the defense because they had no food.

But then the campaign in Russia and Rommel's offensive in Libya drew away the forces of the Luftwaffe, while the carriers Wasp and Eagle on 9 and 18 May moved in a total of 79 Spitfires. Once again Malta had some respite, although the threat was not over by a long way. The day of the airborne invasion was drawing nearer, and if no supply ships arrived the small reserves in fuel, rations, and ammunition would soon be exhausted.

Malta's sword had been struck from its hand, and from now on the island had to rely more on its shield than before. And although the island had not yet been put out of action completely as a bomber and naval base, its offensive capabilities and also its ability to defend itself were dwindling rapidly. ¹⁶⁰

These findings by the enemy characterize the situation; at the time; the operational plan of the II Air Corps had led to complete success. The plan had been thought out

¹⁶⁰. Richards, Dennis, Vol. II, pp. 191-198.



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and logically executed. Air supremacy over Malta, and thereby over the central areas of the Mediterranean Theater had passed to the Axis Powers. The heavy losses inflicted on the surface units of the British Navy also had their effect,*so that supply traffic between Italy and Africa were hardly interfered with any longer by the enemy.

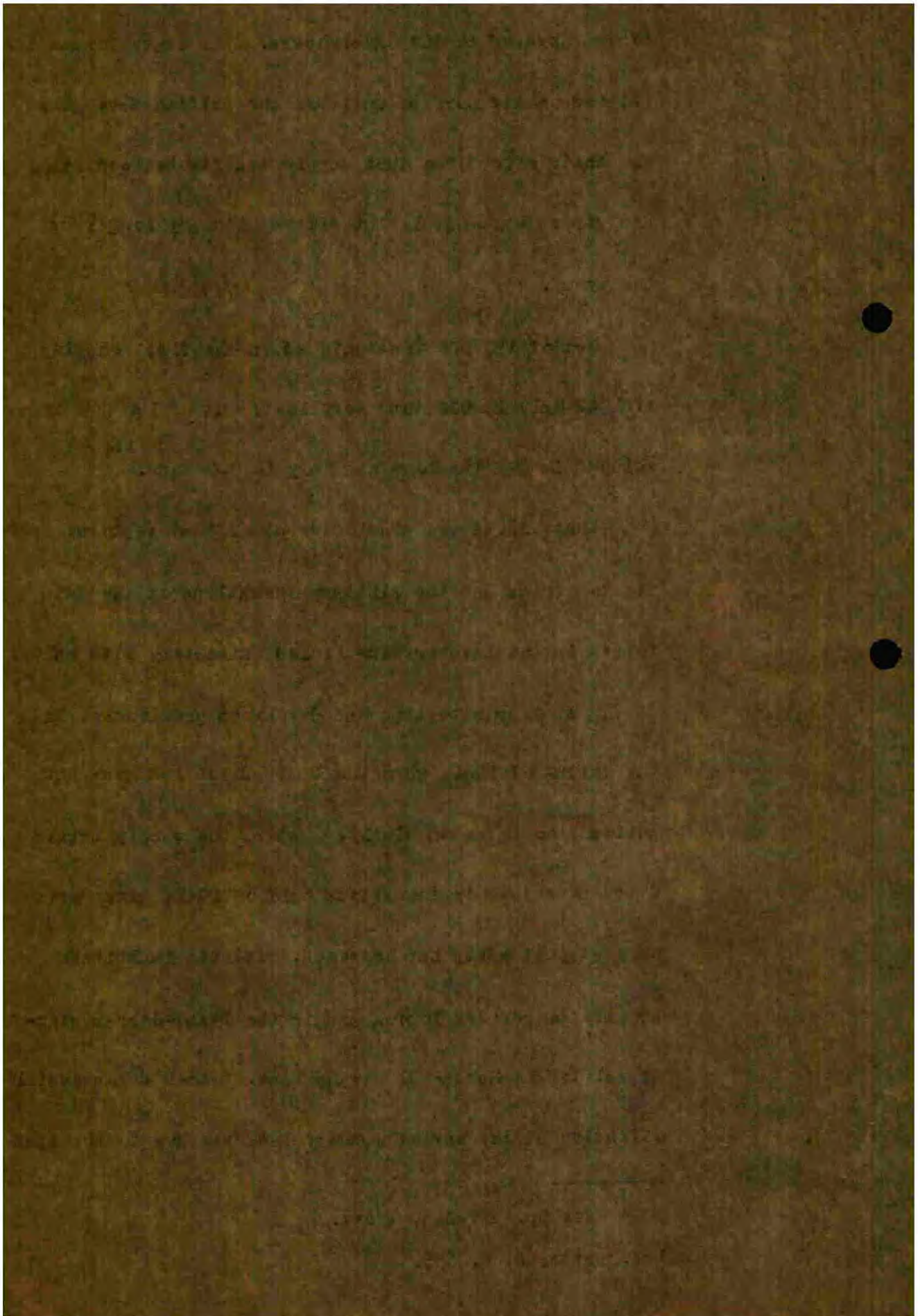
Out of 190 000 tons shipped in the first quarter of 1942 only 16 000 tons were lost; out of 170 000 tons shipped in May the loss was only 10 000 tons.¹⁶¹

These facts are conclusive proof that seaborne traffic to Africa and the military operations of the Axis forces in the theater were linked intimately with Malta.

A similar situation had developed previously, in the spring of 1941, when the X Air Corps had gone into action from bases on Sicily. Later, the supply crisis which developed in the second half of 1941, after pressure against Malta had lessened, resulted in British ability to relieve Tobruk and in the Italo-German withdrawal to the Marsa- El Bregha line. Rommel's successful offensive at the end of January 1942 was due to the fact

* See pp. 212-213, above.

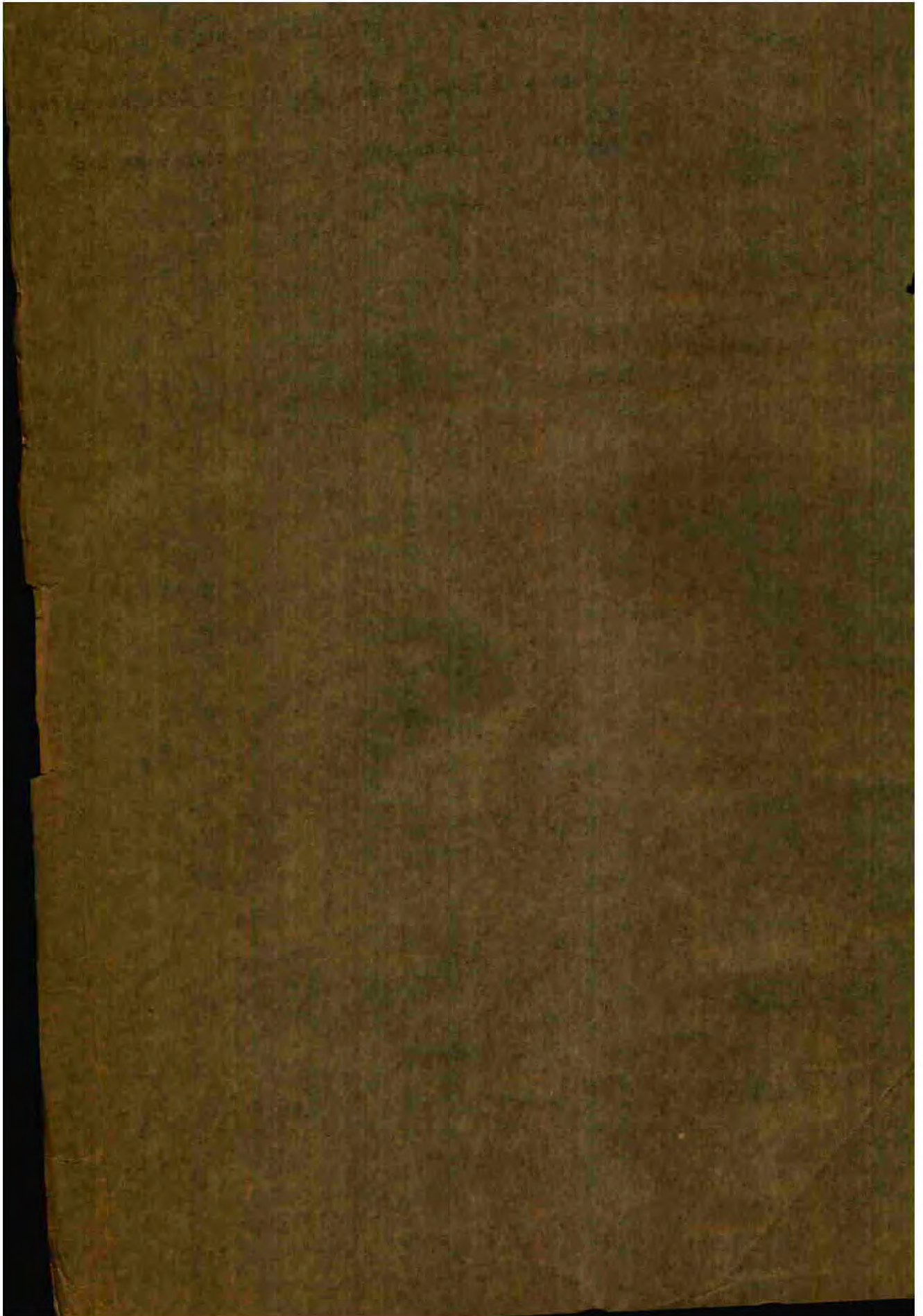
161. Asseman, p. 355.



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supplies were set moving at the turn of the year.

The II Air Corps now had put Malta out of action, and the favorable supply situation of the Axis forces in the spring of 1942 enabled Rommel to launch his offensive against the strongly developed British positions at the western borders of the Marmarica.



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Section VII

The Battle in the Marmarica Area -- The Interception of Convoys --
The Capture of Tobruk -- The Commitment of the Air Force -- Rommel's
Thrust toward Egypt -- Did the Luftwaffe Fail?

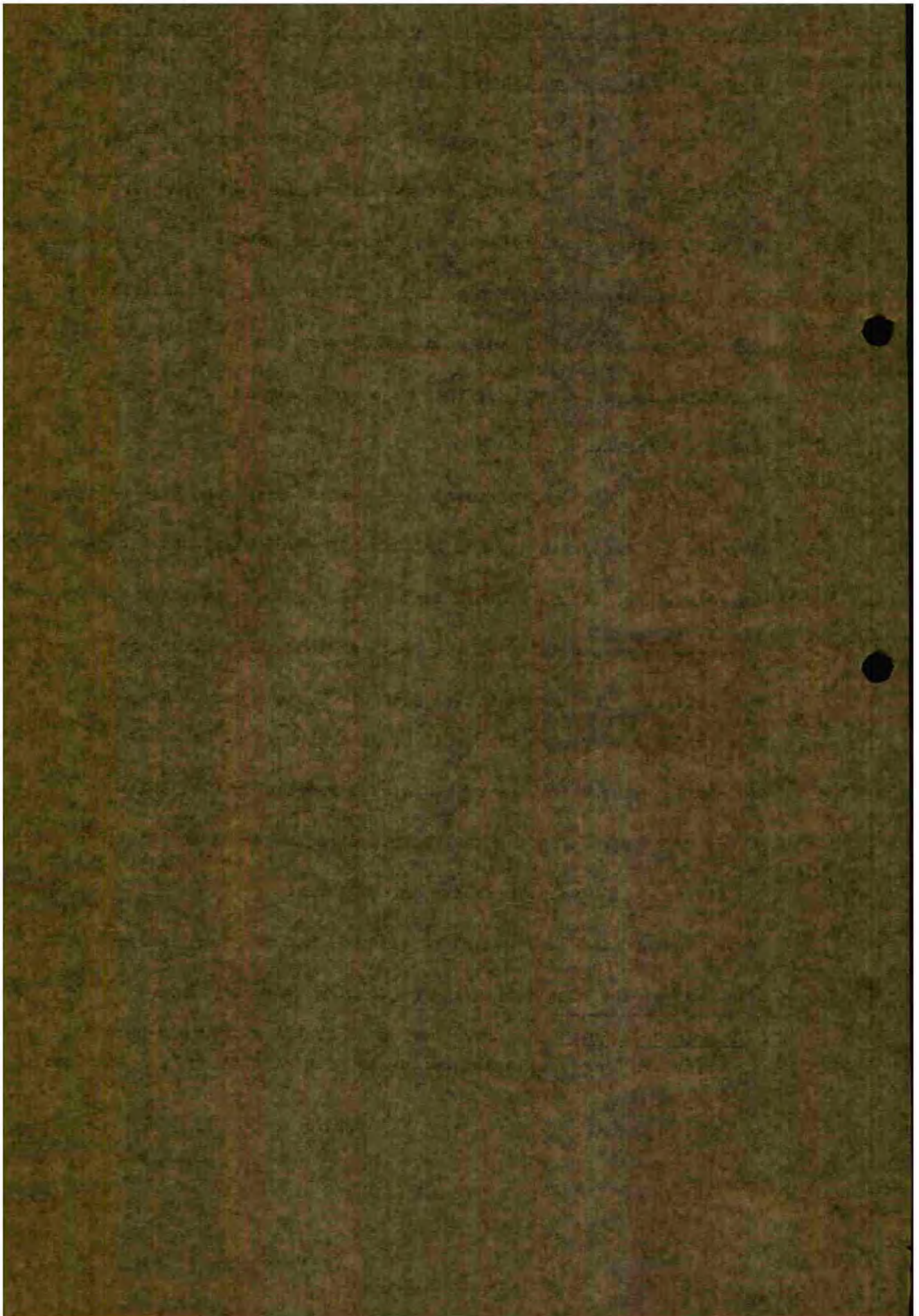
In their defensive position between Ain-el-Gazala and Bir Hacheim the British had built a number of "boxes" that were protected by barbed wire obstacles and dense mine belts.

These were adroitly established all-around positions, like small fortresses, the defenders of which were equipped with all essentials for a long siege; they also had their own artillery pieces and tanks.

Such a "box" was situated near Gazala, where the 50th British Division and the South African 1st Division were stationed along the coast. The British 150th Brigade held the "box" position near Got-el-Baleb in proximity of the Trigh-el-Abd. The southernmost such defensive position situated near Bir Hacheim was held by the Free French 1st Brigade commanded by General Koenig. Somewhat distant from the main line of resistance was the British 201st Guards Brigade holding the Knightsbridge position and the Indian 5th Division at El Adem, both dug in similarly.

These defensive "boxes" (positions) had the dual function of surveying the mine fields and preventing the enemy from

* Translator's Note: The term "box" used by the author has been retained in the translation because of its significant connotation.



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opening a gap across the mine fields without any opposition. In addition, these "boxes" -- like medieval castles -- played the role of points of resistance, which a carefully advancing enemy would be forced to eliminate. Otherwise, he would run the risk of being attacked in the rear or having his lines of communication cut by diversionary attacks from the garrisons of the fortress positions. According to the British plan, the German forces, engaged in combatting the "boxes," would be attacked by British armored forces held in jump-off positions far from the "boxes." Once the Germans had been forced to engage in armored combat on terrain chosen by the British, the latter could assume the attack at the appropriate moment.

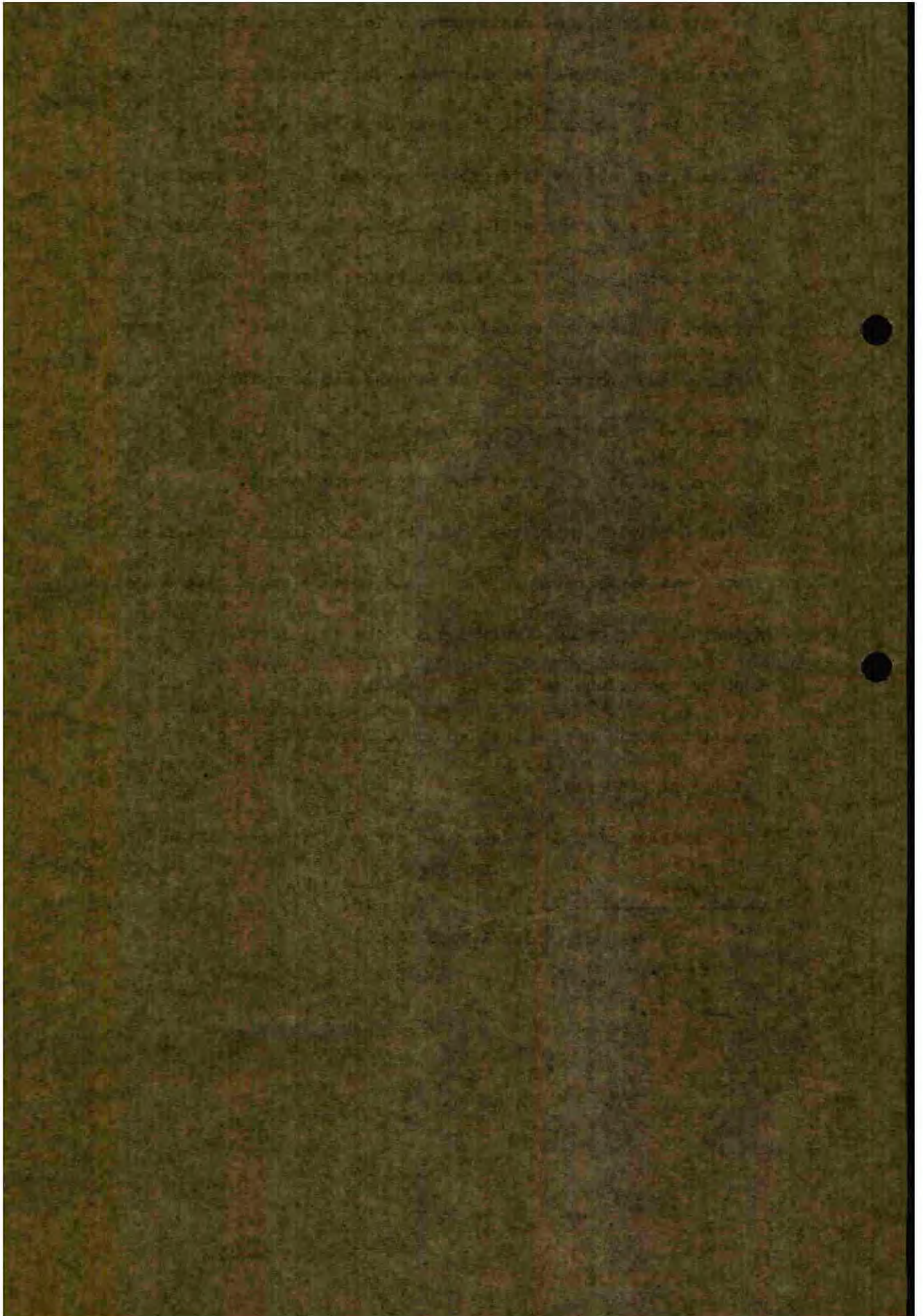
The British therefore hoped that the Gazala position would form a well-integrated defensive system that would give them the opportunity to conduct surprise attacks and, if necessary, fall back on the defensive "boxes." They assumed that the Gazala position would become another Scapa Flow, this time for the British Eighth Army.

Annexes 1* and 2** show the strength figures of the two opponents.

162 Young, Desmond, "Rommel," p. 142.

* Annex 27.

** Annex 28.



Annex 1a to Page 2521. German Army Units

German Africa Corps with 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, and
the 90th Light Division (Motorized), and
one rifle brigade, and
corps troops.

2. Italian Army Units

XXI Corps with Brescia and Savona Divisions;

I Corps, including Bologna and Pavia Divisions;

Bruto Motorized Division (p. 76);

XX Motorized Corps with Ariete Armored Division and Trieste
Motorized Division;

The Littorio Armored Division was moved up during the battle
on about 15 June.

3. German Flying Units, Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander)Africa*

27th Fighter Wing with 130 Messerschmidt 109's

XXXX 3d Dive-Bomber Wing with 56 Junkers 87's

26th Twin-Engine Fighter Wing with 28 Messerschmidt 110's

12th Squadron of Luftwaffe Area Command w/ 13 Junkers 88's

2d and 4th Squadrons of 14 (H) with 7 Messerschmidt 110's

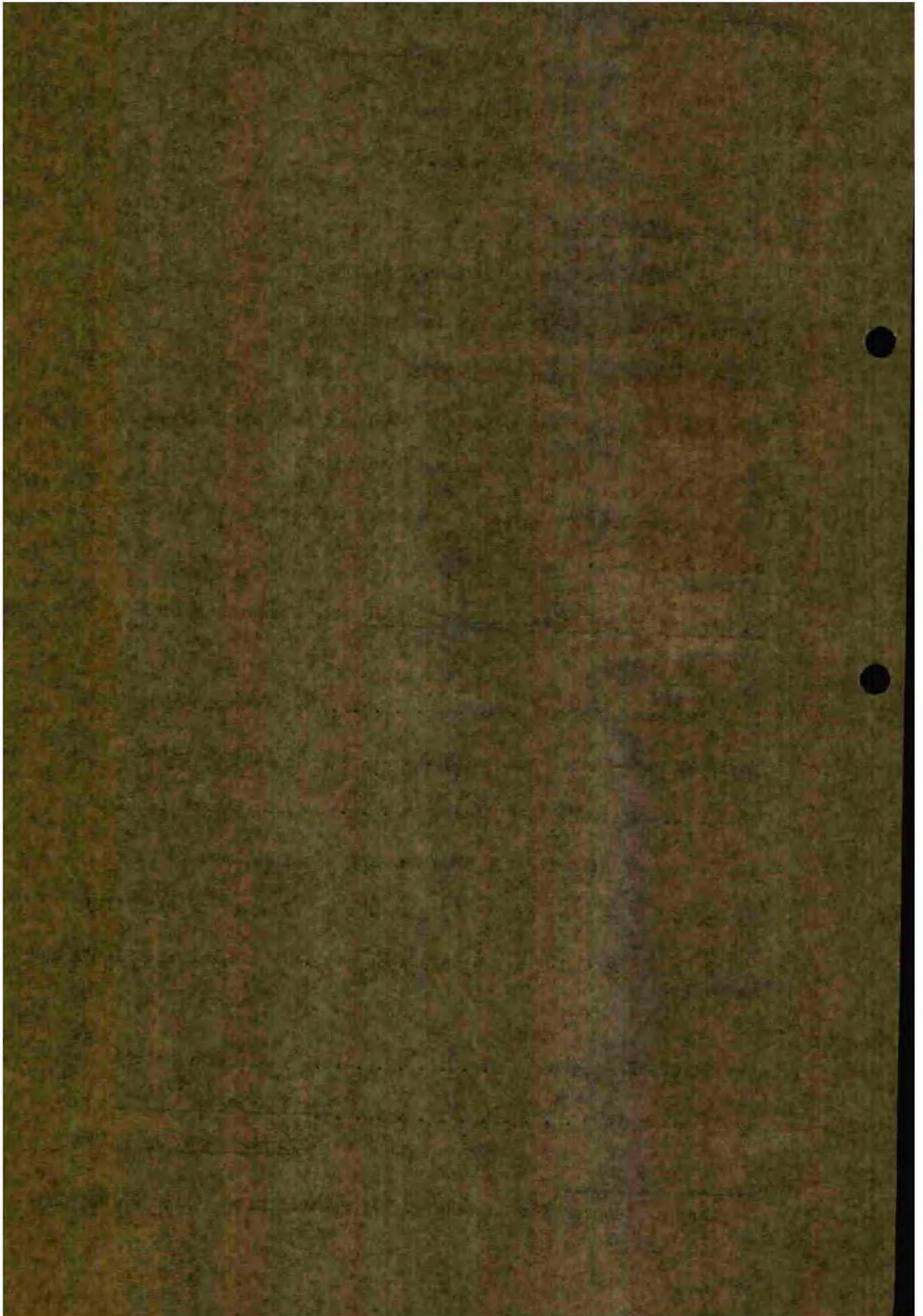
1st Squadron of 121st Long-Range Recon Gr .17 Messerschmidt 109's and
11 Junkers 88's

Desert Rescue Squadron 7 Fieseler Storch's

Other Aircraft 1 Helinkel

Total 270 Aircraft

* Diary of General von Waldan, p. 143, Actual Strength on 26 May 1942.



Annex 1b to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)

1. The following units had been assembled for the attack of
26 May 1942:*

a. German Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander) Africa:

1 dive-bomber wing with 5 groups	93 aircraft
5 fighter groups	158 "
1 twin-engine fighter group	25 "
1 fighter-bomber squadron	12 "
1 short-range and 1 long-range rec. squ.	20 "
	<u>308 aircraft</u>

b. Italian Fliegerfuhrer (Air Force Commander):

1 ground-support wing	90 aircraft
1 fighter wing	75 aircraft
reconnaissance, etc.	20 "
	<u>185 aircraft</u>

Total 493 aircraft

Of which the fully operational aircraft numbered
approximately 320

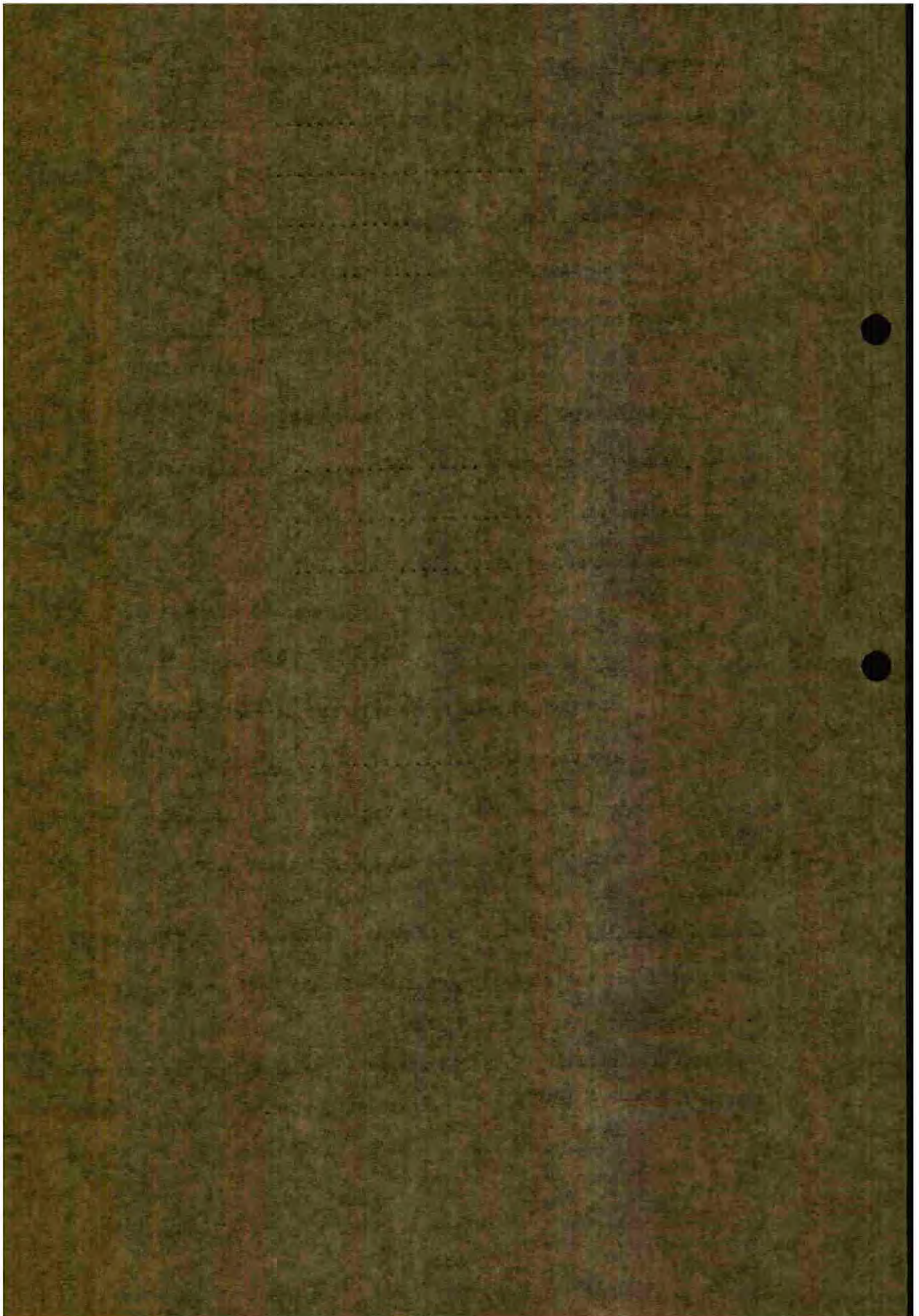
As of 10 January 1942 the 135th Flak Regiment was stationed
in Africa, including 12 medium and 12 light batteries.**

* Feldzug in Afrika (Campaign in Africa), Volume 2, Part V, Annex 5.

** Distribution of Antiaircraft Artillery in the Mediterranean Theater

3. Africa

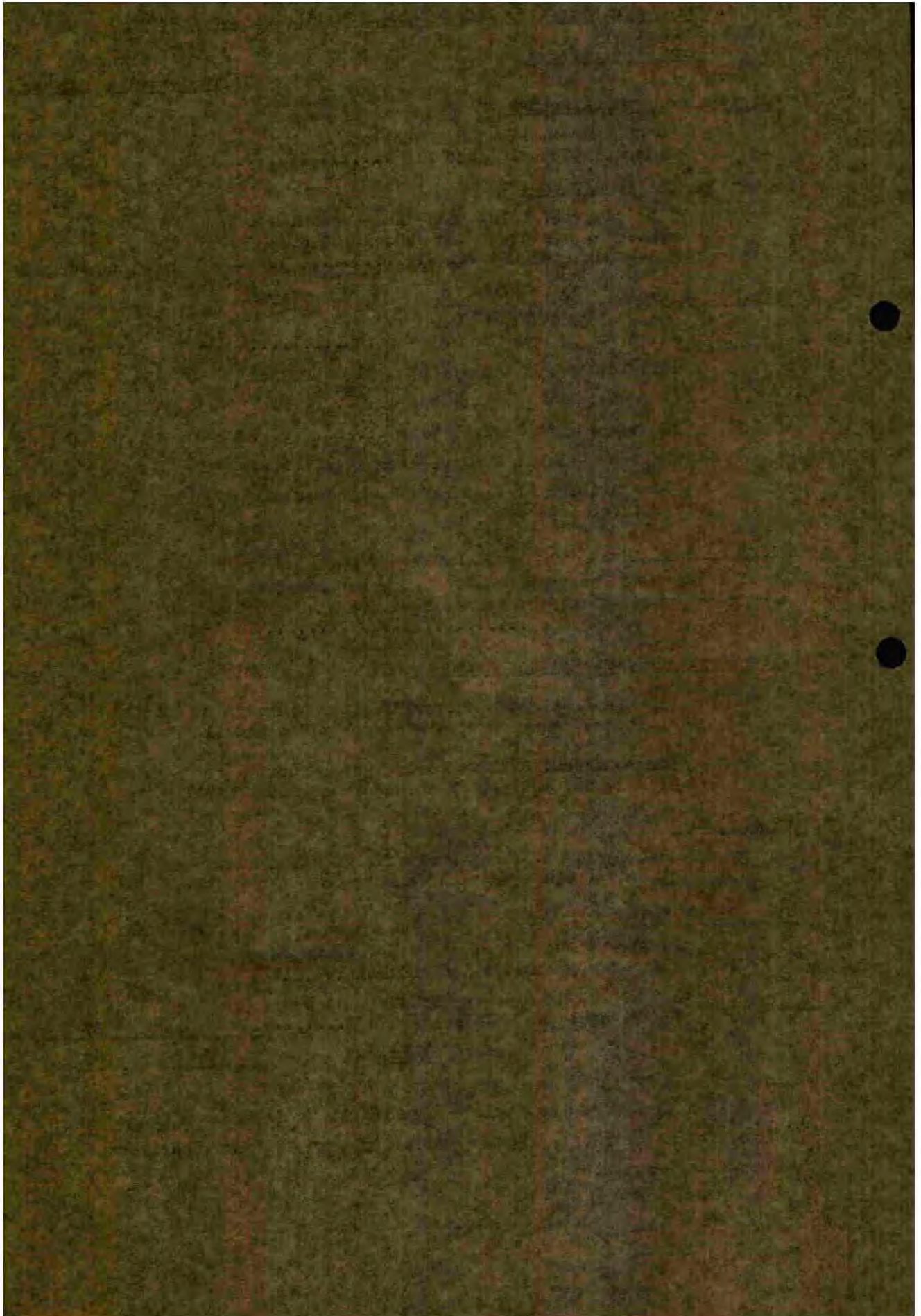
Antiaircraft Artillery in North Africa (General data from various
sources), both in Karlsruhe Document Collection.



Annex 1c to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)Flying Units of Second Air Fleet on 23 May 1942*a. Fliegerführer (Air Force Commander) Africa and PanzerArmy Headquarters

	<u>TO Strength</u>	<u>Actual</u>
<u>Short-Range Reconnaissance</u>		
4th Squadron, 12th (H) Martuba Messerschmidts 109 and 110	21	10
<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance</u>		
1st Squadron, 121st Long-Range Recon. Gp. at Derna, equipped with Junkers 88 and Messerschmidts 109	13	11
<u>Fighter Units</u>		
Hq, 27th Fighter Wing at Martuba,	-	-
1st XXXXXXXXXX Group, 27th Fighter Wing	34	29
2d Group, 27th Fighter Wing	31	27
3d Group, 27th Fighter Wing	30	11
Fighter Bombers, 27th Fighter Wing	10	5
(All stationed at Martuba and equipped with Messerschmidts 109)		
<u>Night Fighter Unit</u>		
as of 10 May: 2d Squadron, 2d Night Fighter Wing, stationed at Derna, equipped with Junkers 88	9	5
<u>Twin-Engine Support Fighter Units</u>		
7th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, at Derna, equipped with Messerschmidts 110	12	5
9th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, at Malenka, equipped with Messerschmidts 110	11	4
<u>Bomber Unit</u>		
12th Squadron, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Berca, equipped with Junkers 88	17	7
<u>Dive Bomber Units</u>		
Hq, 3d Dive Bomber Wing, at Derna, equipped with Messerschmidts 110 and Heinkel 111	2	-
1st Group, 3d Dive Bomber Wing, at Derna South, equipped with Junkers 87	44	37
<u>Totals</u>	<u>234</u>	<u>147</u>

*Strength Analysis of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater
and in Africa (Extracted from Situation Maps in England), Karlsruhe
Document Collection.



Annex 1d to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)Flying Units of Second Air Fleet on 20 May 1942b. II Air Corps and Headquarters, Second Air FleetLong-Range Reconnaissance Units

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>YO</u>	<u>Actual</u>
Hq, 122d Long-Range Recon. Gp., at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	3	2
2d Squadron, 122d Long-Range Recon. Gp., at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	13	6
1st Squadron, 122d Long-Range Recon. Gp., at Catania, equipped with Messerschmidts 109 and Junkers 88	13	10

Fighter Units

Hq, 23d Fighter Wing	6	5
2d Group, 23d Fighter Wing	40	18
5d Group, 23d Fighter Wing	11	5
Fighter Bombers, 23d Fighter Wing	12	6

(All stationed at Comiso and equipped with Messerschmidts 109)

Night Fighter Units

Hq, 2d Night Fighter Wing	4	12
1st Squadron, 2d Night Fighter Wing (less 2d Squ)..	20	12

(Both stationed at Catania and equipped with Junkers 88)

Twin-Engine Fighter Units

Hq and 3d Group, 26th Support Fighter Wing (less 7th and 9th Squadrons), equipped with Messerschmidts 110	16	9
10th Squadron, 26th Support Fighter Wing, equipped with Dorniers 17	8	6

(Both stationed at Trapani)

Bomber Units

600th Bomber Group, stationed at Catania	29	17
806 Bomber Group, stationed at Catania	27	13
Hq, 54th Bomber Group, stationed at Catania	3	2
1st Squadron, 54th Bomber Group, at Comiso	27	14

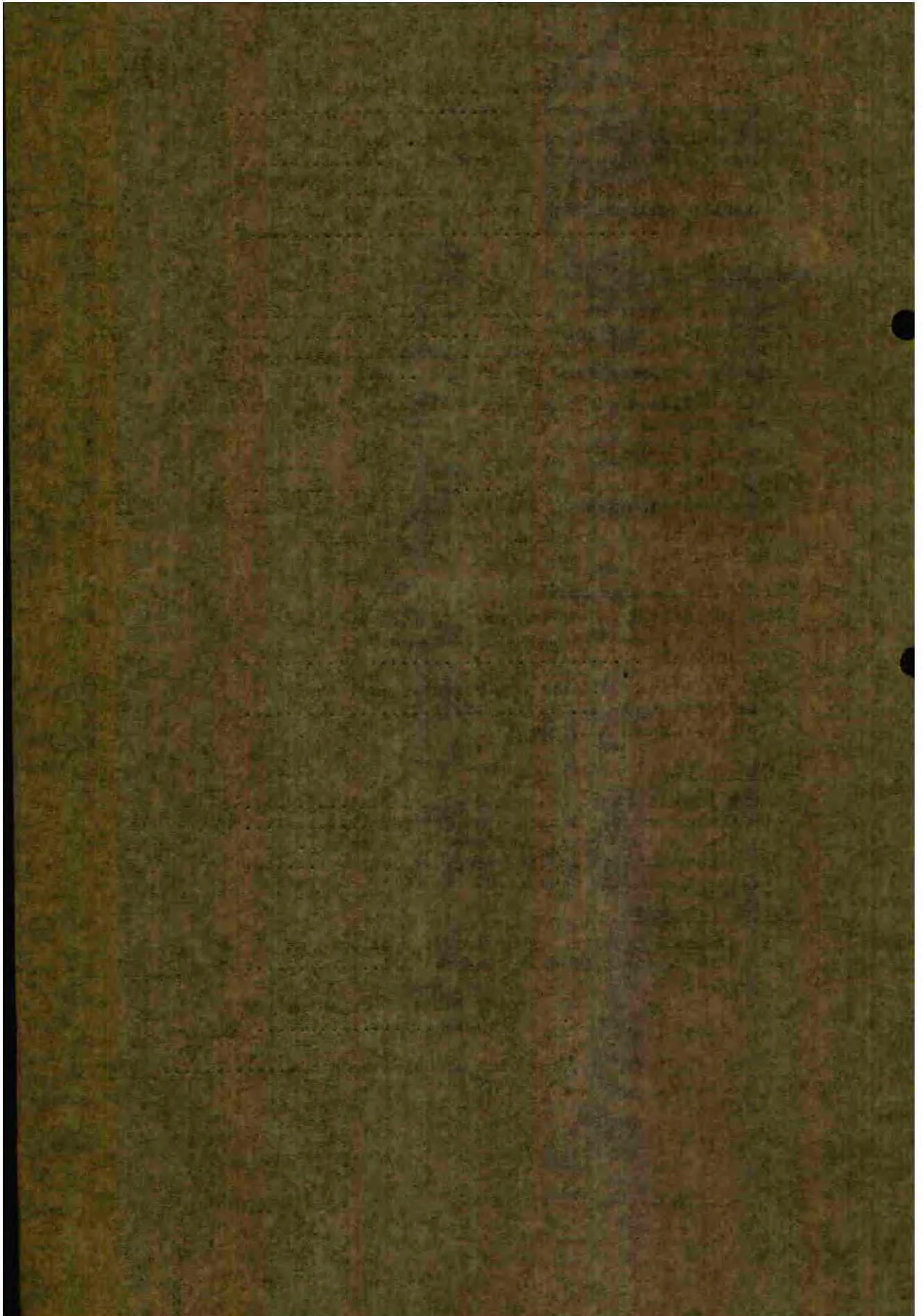
(All equipped with Junkers 88)

Dive Bomber Units

3d Squadron, 3d Dive Bomber Group, stationed at San Pietro, equipped with Junkers 87	25	17
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Total Table of Organization

Strength 244Total Actual Strength 148



Annex 1e to Page 252(German Flying Units Continued)Flying Units of Second Air Fleet on 20 May 1942a. X Air CorpsLong-Range Reconnaissance Units

	<u>T/O</u>	<u>Strength</u> <u>Actual</u>
2d Squadron, 123d Long-Range Recon. Group, stationed at Kastelli on Crete, equipped with Junkers 88	13	6

Bomber Units

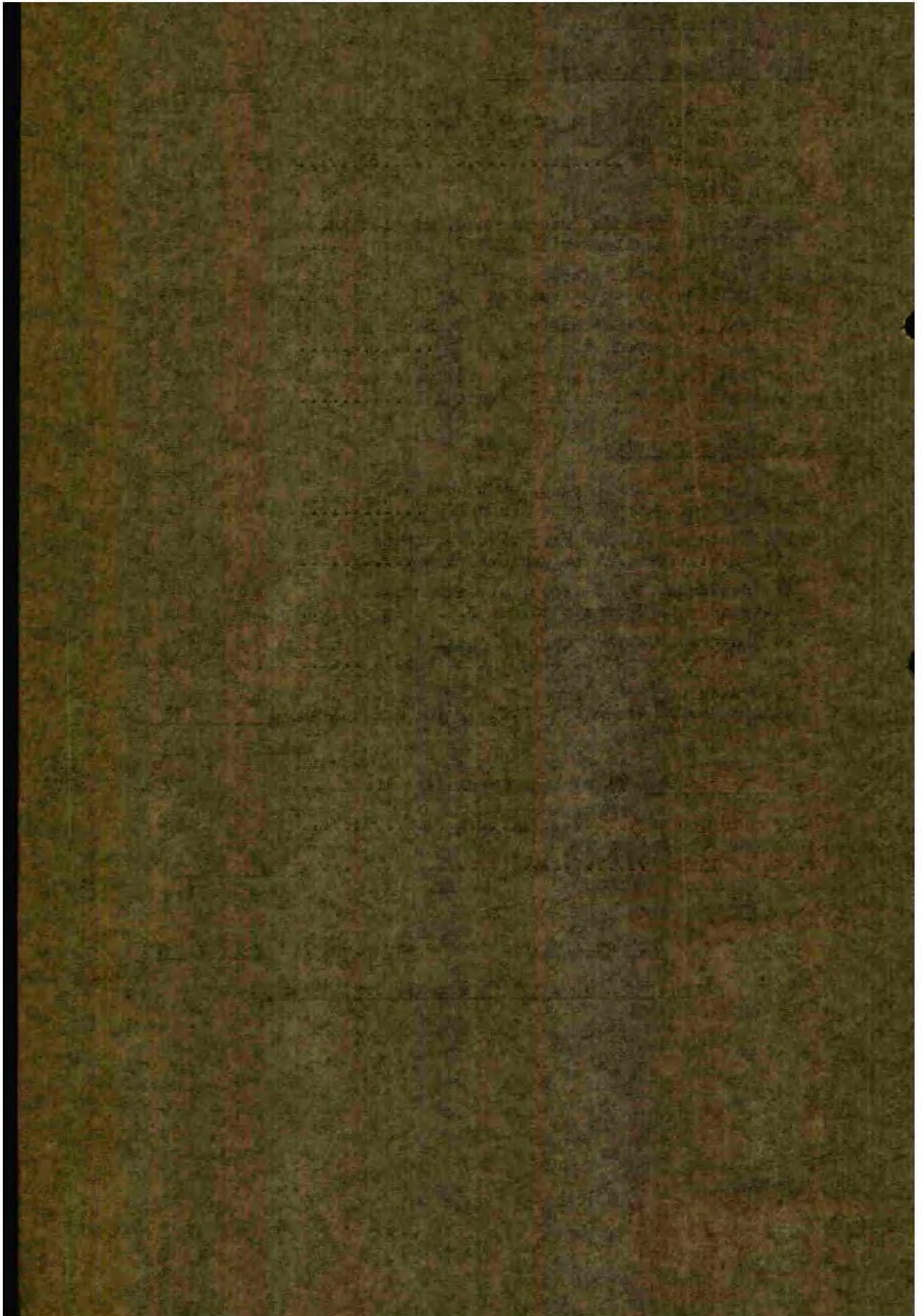
Hq, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Eleusis, XXXXXXXXXX equipped with XXXXXX Junkers 88....	1	1
1st Group, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Iraklion (Crete), equipped with Junkers 88 .	29	16
2d Group, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Eleusis, equipped with Junkers 88	31	15
2d Group, 100th Bomber Wing, stationed at Kalanaki, equipped with Heinkels 111	25	12

Naval Aircraft Units

2d Squadron, 125th Group, stationed at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado 196	8	4
Hq, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with B.V. (Translation unknown) 138	1	1
1st Squadron, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with Heinkels 60 and F.T.'s (10.)8 ...	15	11
2d Squadron, 126th Group, at Kavalla, equipped with Arado 196 and Heinkel 60's	13	4
3d Squadron, 126th Group, at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado 196, F.T. 8, and Heinkel 60s	16	10
	<u>152</u>	<u>80</u>

a. <u>Fliegerführer</u> (Air Force Commander) Africa ..	234	147
b. II Air Corps	244	148
c. X Air Corps	152	80
	<u>630</u>	<u>375</u>

On 20 May 1942 the Second Air Fleet had 375 aircraft
out of 630, which were ready for take-off.



Annex 2A-36 Page 22

1. British Army Units*

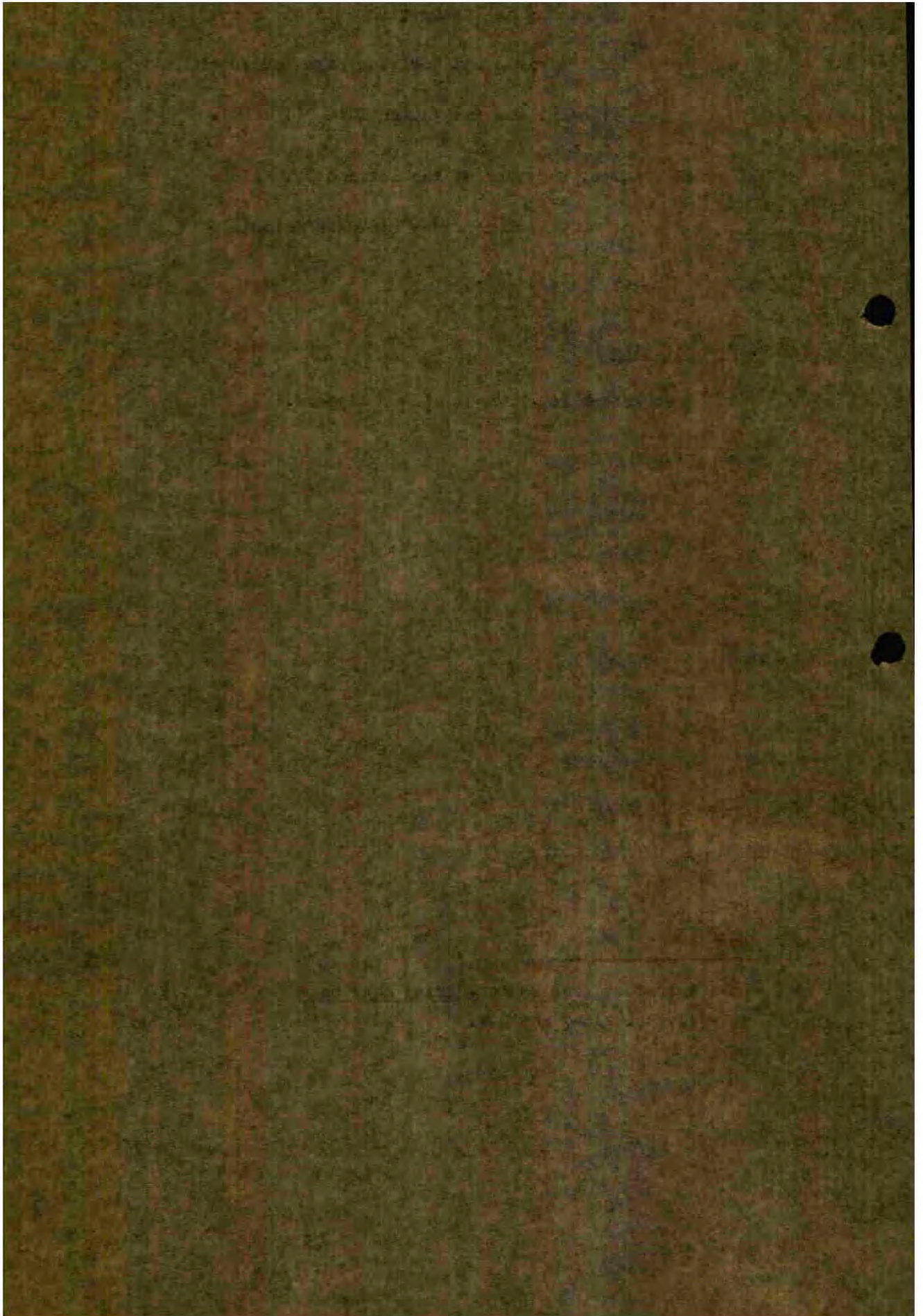
XIII. Corps, composed of 4 motorized divisions (which are designated as the British 50th Division, the South African 1st Division, the Indian 4th Division, and the Indian 10th Division).

XXX Armored Corps, composed of the 1st and 7th Armored Divisions and 4 separate motorized brigades.

2. French Units

Free French 1st Brigade at Bir Hacheim.

* Data extracted from Rommel, Erleb ohne Hass (War without Hatred), pp. 116-7 and 141.



Annex 25 to Page 232British Air Force Units

No compilation of British Air Force strength as of 26 May 1942 is available.

In November 1941 Air Marshal Tedder had 51 squadrons with approximately 765 aircraft at his headquarters and with the Western Desert Group. (Aircraft stationed at Aden, in East Africa, Iraq, Palestine-Transjordan, and Malta are not included.) Page 166.

Around the end of 1941/beginning of 1942 some 20 squadrons with about 300 aircraft were transferred to the Far East. (Richards, Volume II, p. 189)

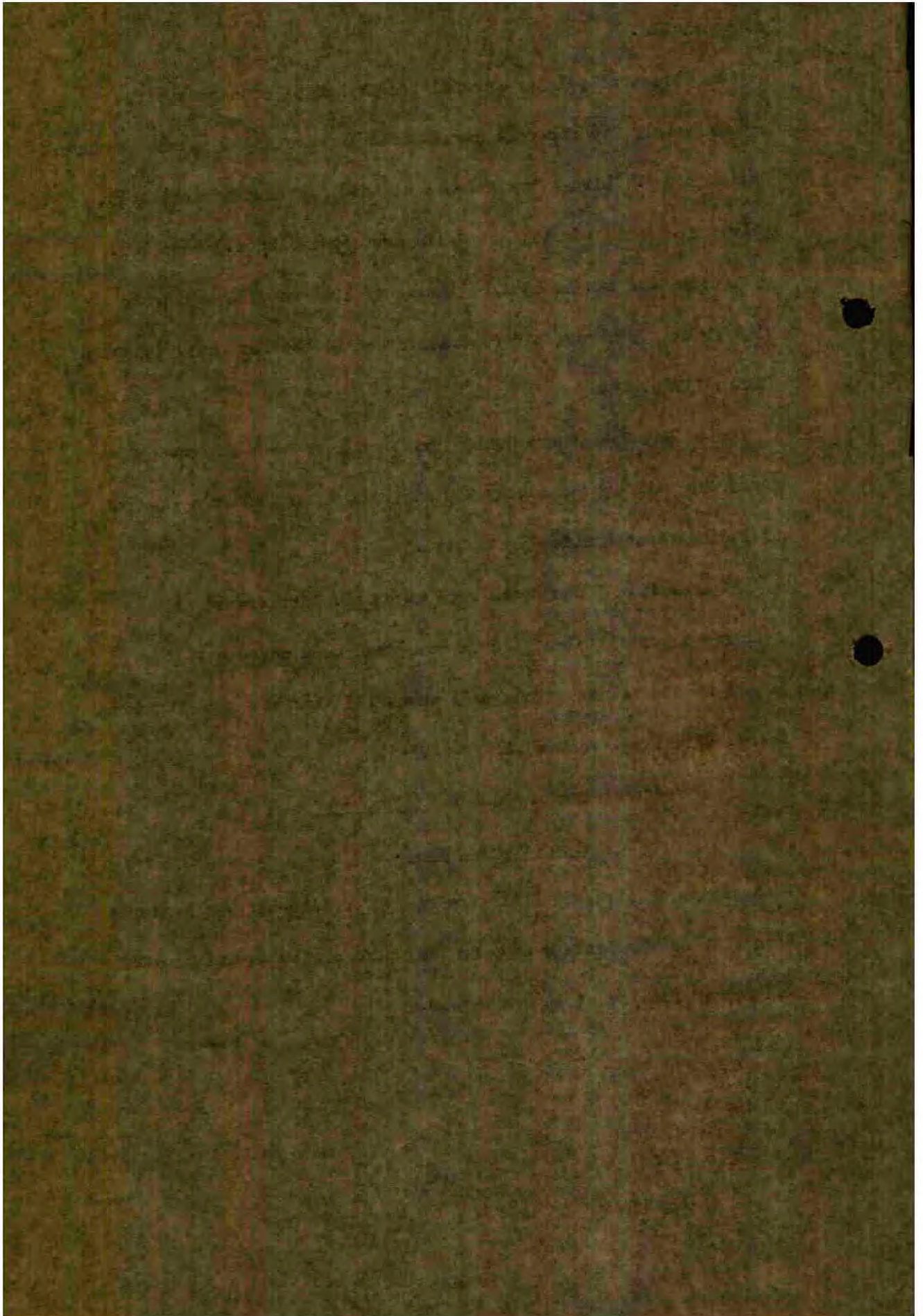
On 26 May 1942 there would therefore have been at least 30 squadrons with approximately 450 aircraft under Tedder's command, excluding those stationed at Malta.

At that time 5 squadrons were at Malta. Furthermore, 100 Spitfire aircraft (about 6 squadrons) had been moved onto the island so that 11 squadrons with about 165 aircraft were stationed there. (Richards, Volume II, pp. 203-5)

Tedder therefore had on 26 May 1942

about 600 aircraft.

Their ratio of aircraft that were ready for take-off was higher than that of the Germans because they were closer to maintenance and repair facilities in rear areas.



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Rommel made the following comments on this subject:

"Many German and all Italian units were greatly understrength; the 90th Light Division, for instance, entered the major battle with average company strengths of only 50 men."

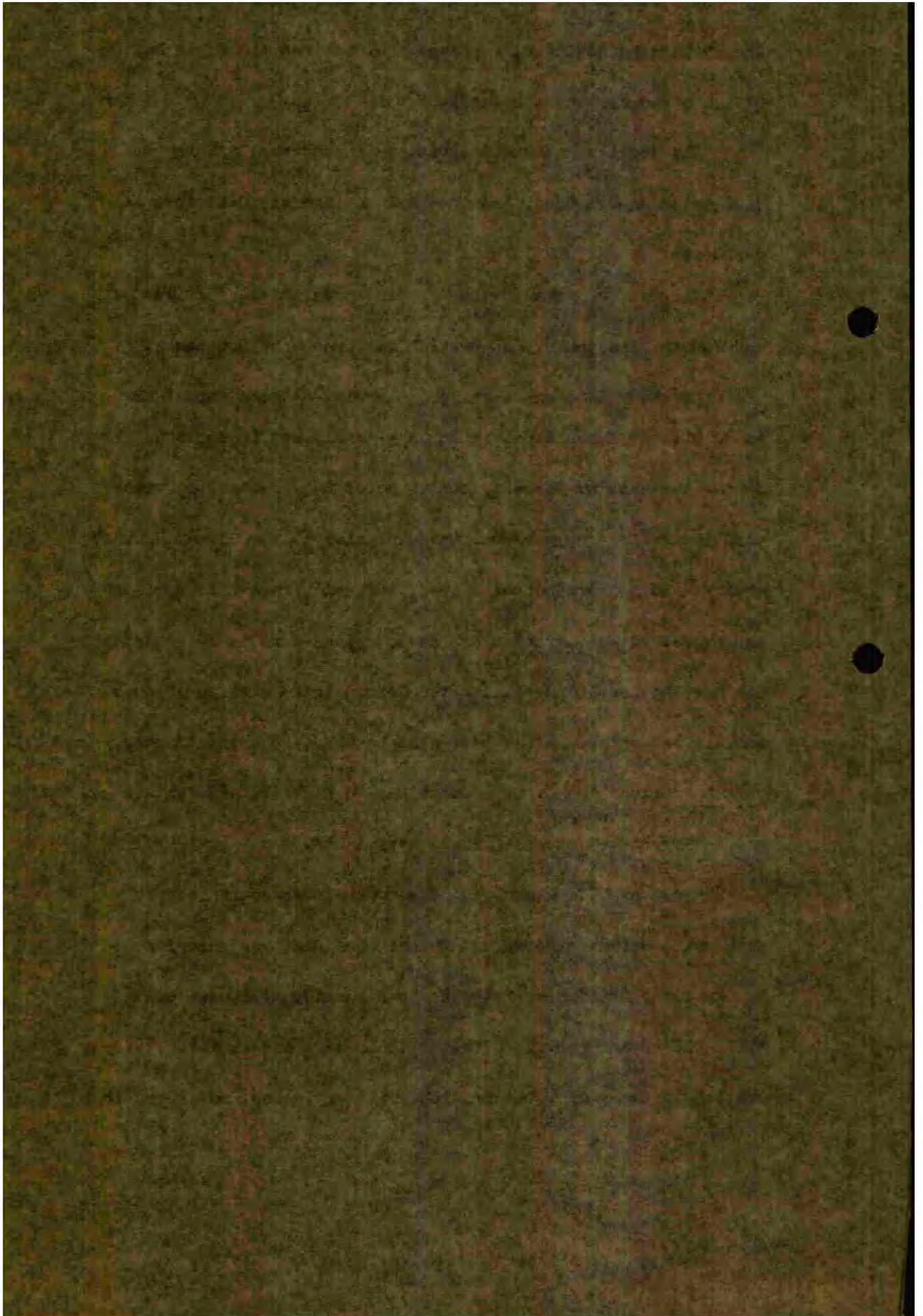
"The Italian motorised divisions should really have been designated as brigades, and the Italian infantry divisions as regiments."

"Whereas the Axis forces went into combat with 320 German and 240 Italian tanks, the British mustered some 900 tanks."

"Our Mark IV tanks with long barrels -- there were four tanks without ammunition available -- could not be employed during the battle. The American tanks of the Grant type, which made their first appearance, were inferior to the German Mark IV equipped with short barreled guns, both with regard to mobility and speed. But the Grant tanks nevertheless were at an advantage because they could immobilise the German tanks with their short barrels before the latter were able to pierce the thick armor of the American tanks. We Germans had 40 Mark IV tanks with short barrels to match 160 Grant-type tanks."

"Our Mark III tanks, which were the most common model with which German armored units were equipped, was superior to the other British tank types whose gunning equipment was still the 40-mm. gun. The Italian tanks were inferior to the British in every way. The British artillery, also, was superior

End of
German
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to ours at a ratio of eight to five."

"The German-Italian air forces were probably about even with the R.A.F. at the outset, but later on the relationship of strength changed considerably." 163

Rommel's plan called for a feint attack launched by the Italian X and XXI Corps in the central and northern sectors of the Gazala position. There, the British were to be tied down, and various kinds of deceptive maneuvers were to be performed for this purpose. The command of the troops engaged in this maneuver was held by General der Panzertruppen (Lt. Gen.) Cruesell.

The German Africa Corps and the WM Italian XX Corps were to bypass Bir Hacheim from the south and thrust via Acroma in the rear of the Gazala position toward the coast. Rommel intended to cut off the divisions holding the Gazala position and the armored forces assembled in that area, to sever their lines of communication, and to annihilate them.

For this purpose the 90th Light Division, including the three reconnaissance battalions, had been instructed to advance into the Belhamed- Elc Adem area in order to prevent the withdrawal of the Tobruk garrison and the moving up of reinforcements into

163

Erwin Rommel, Krieg ohne Hass (War without Hatred), pp. 116-3 and 124-6, published by Heidenheimer Zeitung, Heidenheim/Brenz, 1950. The description of the ground fighting is largely based on this book.



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the Acroma area.

In an effort to simulate the approach of massed armored units near El Adon, the 90th Light Division had been equipped with several "dust makers."

As a follow-up of the annihilation of the British forces in the Marmarica battle, the plans called for the rapid conquest of the fortress Tobruk.

"My freedom of operations had been limited by the Duce who had ordered me not to advance beyond the Egyptian border. Even before the start of the offensive, Malta was supposed to be captured by German-Italian parachute and glider troops. But for some reason that is difficult to understand, our superior headquarters dropped this plan. For this reason and in view of the steady increase in British forces, we fixed the date for the start of the offensive as 26 May." **

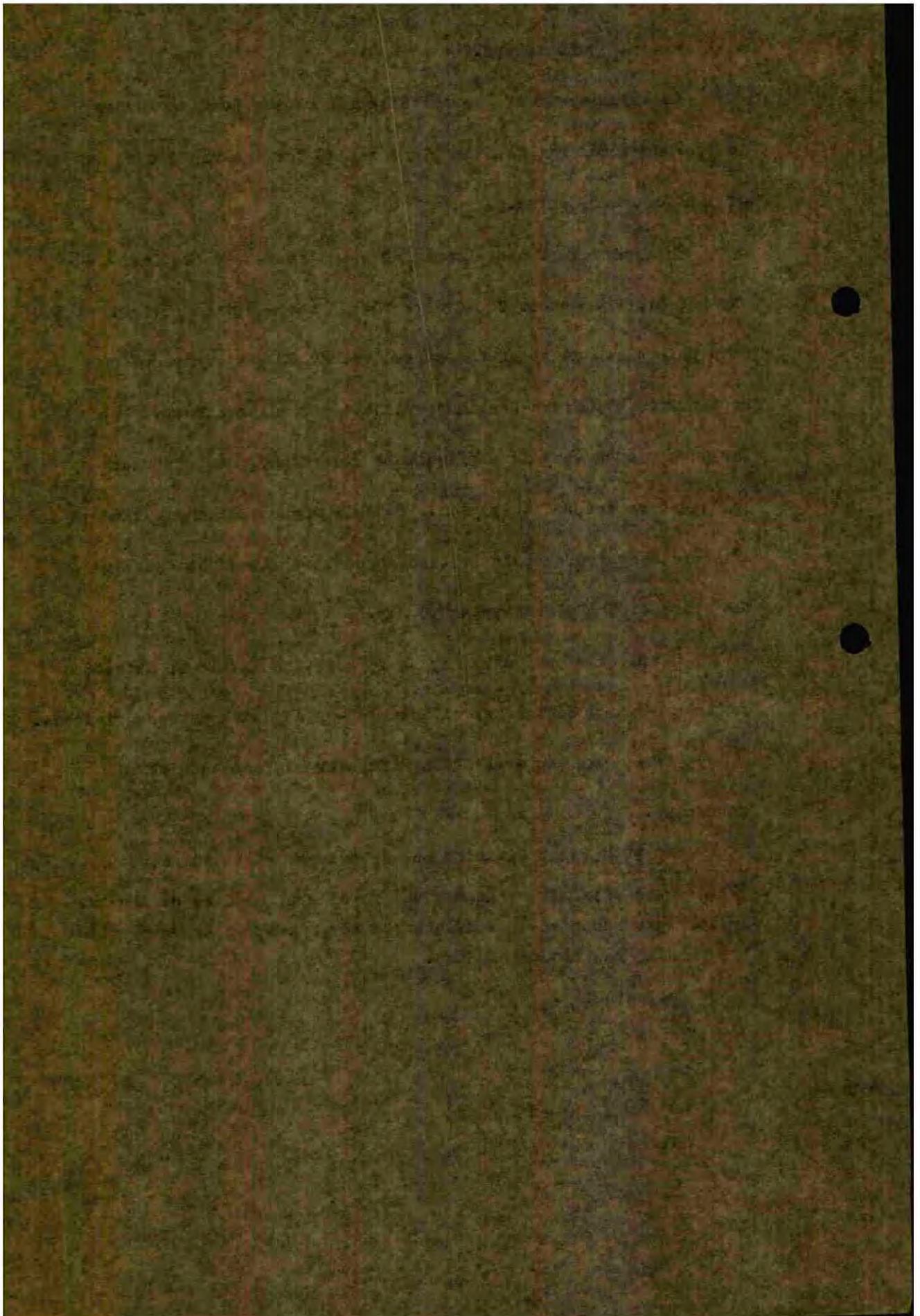
During the period 26 May to 15 June the battle of attrition in the western desert raged without let-up and with extreme violence.

"On 27 May the outflanking maneuver had a chance of succeeding."

The 90th Light Division on the extreme right advanced

These were aircraft engines with propellers, mounted on trucks, which were supposed to simulate the advance of an armored unit by raising big clouds of dust.

** See footnote 153.



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up to El Adem, while the two panzer (armored) divisions, closer to the focal point of the attack movement, fought their way to the north toward Acroma."

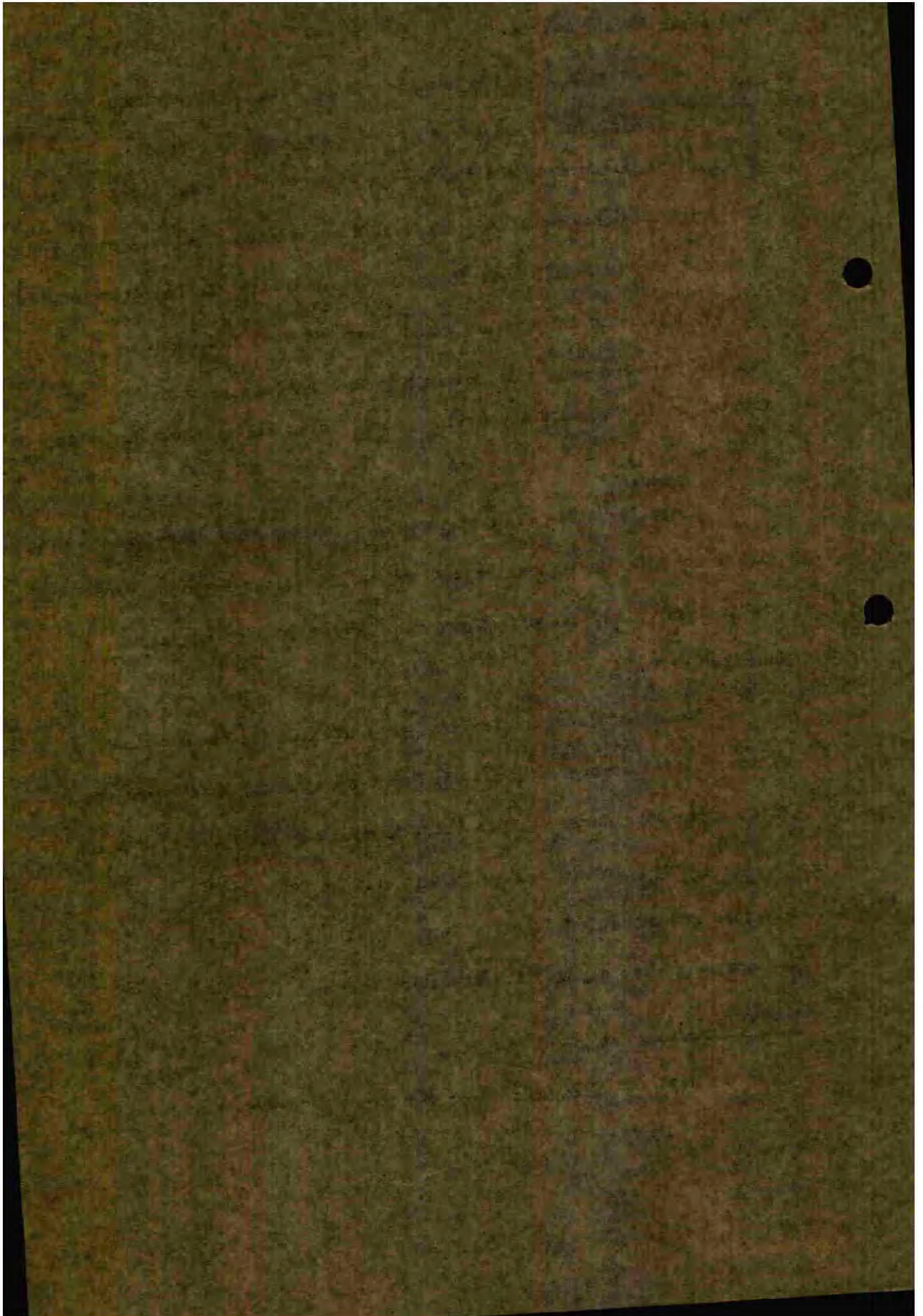
"But near El Adem the advance of the 90th Light Division came to a halt, and the armored divisions did not get beyond Knightbridge. Here, where the Acroma - Bir Hacheim road crosses the Trigh Capuzzo, ~~developed~~ a battle of attrition developed over a period of time. With some interruptions but with fierce determination the two opponents fought each other over the next few days. The Italian were meanwhile not making much headway in their frontal attack against the British mine fields and in their assaults at Bir Hacheim." 164

Rommel's attack plan on Acroma, which had been conceived with incredible daring, failed. Although the axis forces achieved tactical surprise, the effect produced resembled a sting into a hornets' nest.

The reason for the failure was above all the underestimation of the British armored forces; the Grant-type tanks, which made their first appearance during this battle, immobilized more than one third of the German tanks and knocked them out. The 90th Light Division was separated from the German Africa Corps during the course of the day and its situation worsened rapidly in the evening.

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Denis Richards, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 189 - 199.

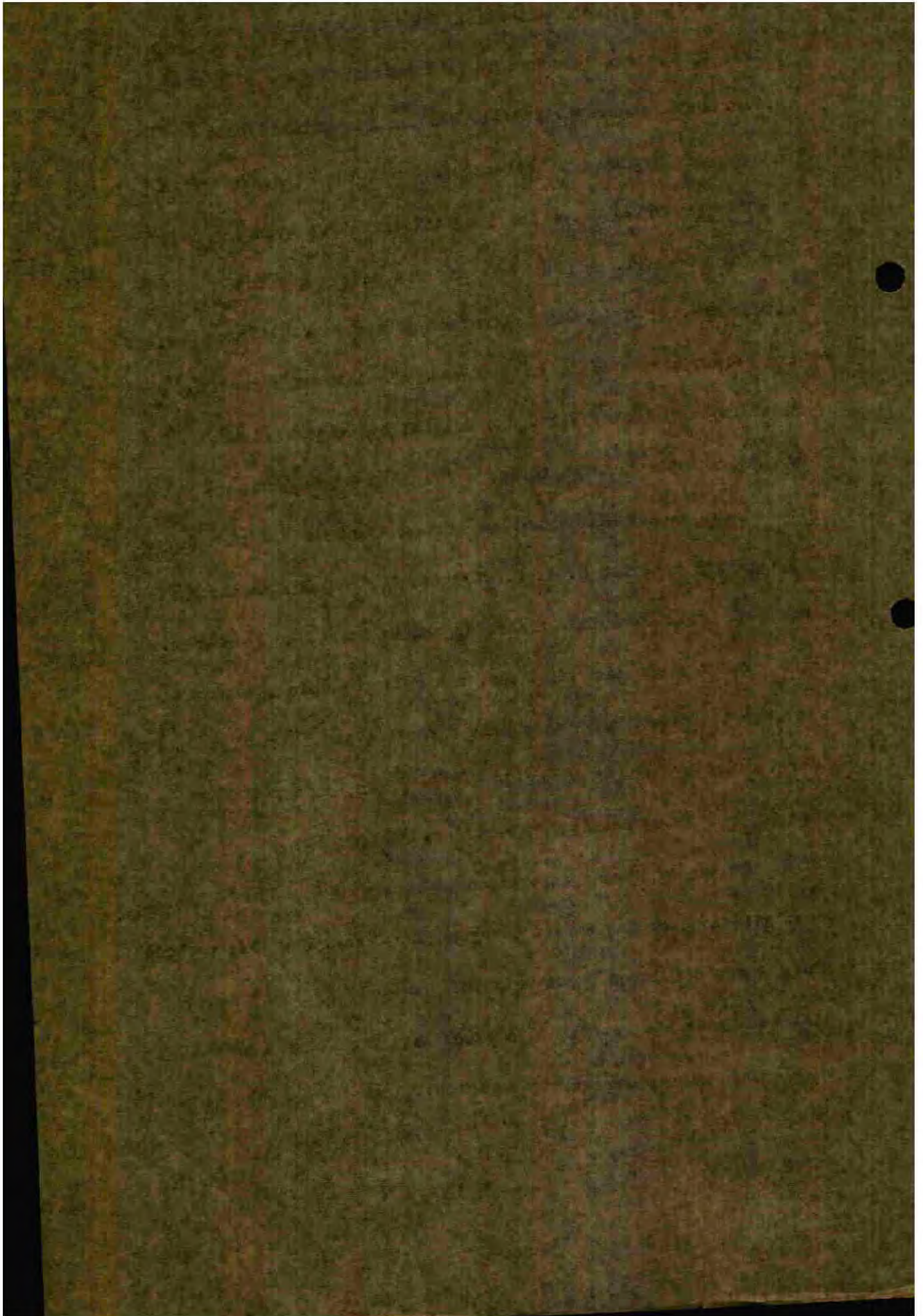


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In addition, the supply of gasoline and ammunition for the armored divisions had been interrupted. Over the extended and insecure lines of communication the supply columns were dispersed by attacks launched by fast British units, with the R.A.F. doing the rest. Rommel, who had his command post up front, had furthermore lost contact with the Headquarters of the German Africa Corps and the Italian attack grouping under General Gruesell. He and his staff frequently got into awkward situations. By 28 May the situation of the German Africa Corps had become very serious and an acute shortage of ammunition and gasoline made itself felt. The British had assembled almost all their available armored forces north of Trigh Capuzzo and rolled one attack after another against the German Africa Corps. At the same time the R. A. F. directed its attacks mainly against the 90th Light Division, inflicting heavy losses on this unit.

Under these circumstances, the only possible solution was to stop the attack in a northerly direction and to withdraw the German forces at daybreak on 30 May in order to regroup them for defense along a shorter front line.

It was of utmost importance to open a secure line of communication for the forces covering the flank. For this purpose the Germans committed those units of the 90th Light Division that had meanwhile been able to break away from combat as well as elements of the German Africa Corps; these forces were to



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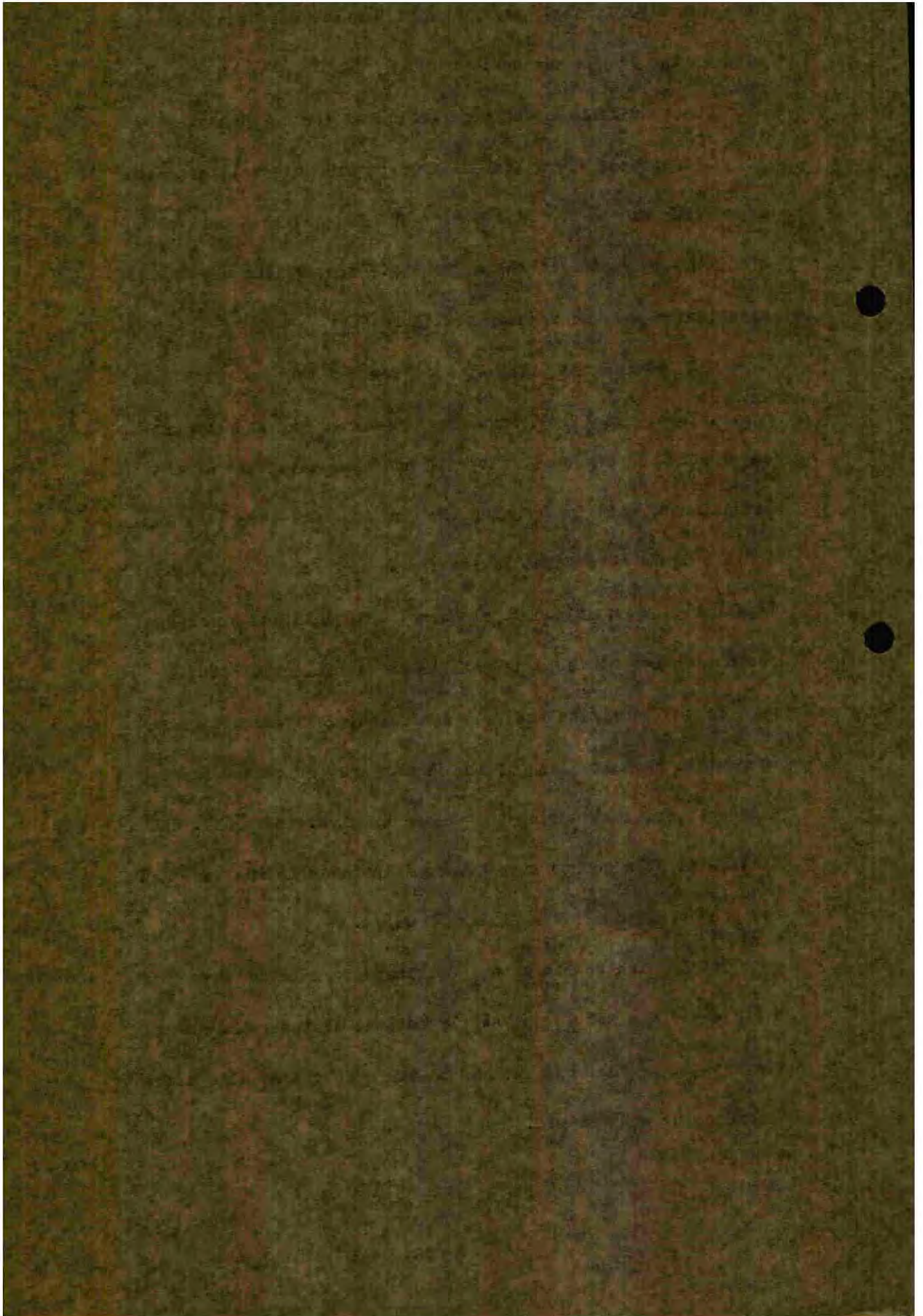
make a gap across the mine fields. In the course of these attempts the Germans found out that near Get-el-Ualeb, in one of the "boxes" (defensive positions), strong British units supported by tanks blocked the German advance.

These British forces were encircled during 30 May.

Elements of the X Italian X Corps had meanwhile succeeded in getting across the mine fields and in forming a bridgehead along the east side on the mine belt. However, the gap in the mine fields was under enemy artillery fire.

The British had followed the German withdrawal with many hesitations, probably because this maneuver had happened unexpectedly. In any case, they did not take advantage of the situation by quickly pursuing the Germans, and they left the 150th Brigade near Ualeb to its fate. On 1 June the Germans captured there some 3,000 prisoners, 101 tanks and armored reconnaissance vehicles as well as 124 artillery pieces; much of the equipment had been destroyed. This success helped to restore the situation of the Panzer Army which had been extremely critical during the preceding days. Above all, ~~THE~~ a ~~RELIABLE~~ secure line of communications to the west had now been created via the Italian X Corps.

But British combat groups continued to make sorties from Bir Hacheim against German supply columns that were advancing via Retonda Segnali and farther to the north; they also mined the roads at many points.



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For this reason, the Germans felt that this strong point would also have to be eliminated. On 2 June the assault on Bir Hacheim was launched by the motorised Trieste Division in the northeast and the 90th Light Division in the southeast.

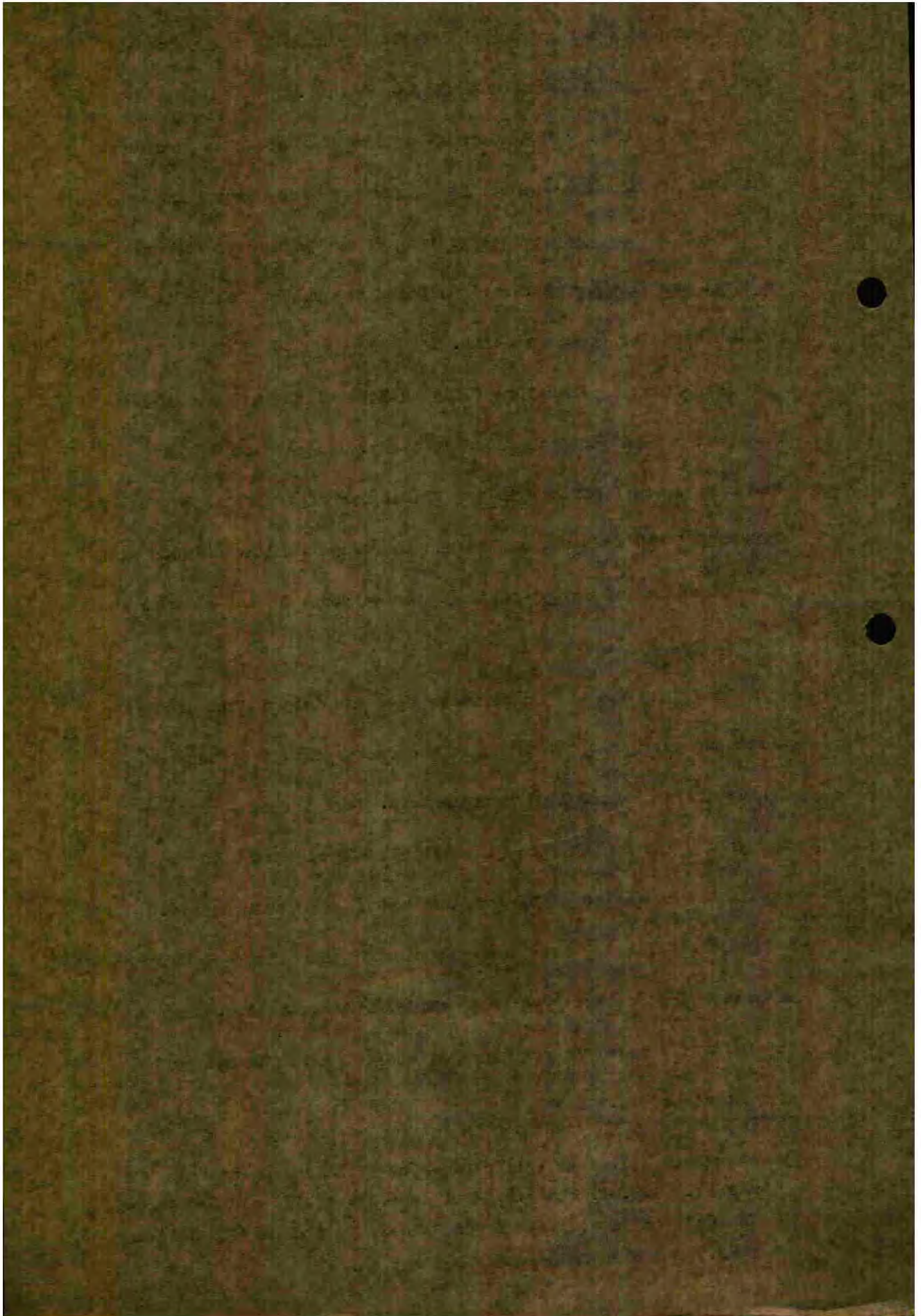
The activities of the German-Italian Air Forces in connection with the ground fighting of the Panzer Army are described in the diary of the Fliegerfuehrer (Air Force Commander) Africa, General der Flieger (Lt.Gen.) Hoffmann von Waldau, which is quoted here for the first time.¹⁶⁵

This diary is therefore fully authentic; the air situation is often quoted verbatim from the diary. General von Waldau had been a staff officer in the Operations XXIII Branch of the Luftwaffe High Command, and he was therefore well acquainted with the principles of air operations. Furthermore, he was able to converse in Italian.

On 27 May the Air force units flew missions in the area north and northwest of Acroma in accordance with instructions received from Panzer Army headquarters. Near El Adem, where the ground forces had meanwhile established contact with the enemy, the selection of targets had become more complicated. During the following days the estimates of the ground-fighting situation were entirely based on aerial reconnaissance, since the Luftwaffe headquarters had lost contact with the Panzer Army headquarters.

165

"Tagebuch III. Teil (Fliegerfuehrer Afrika) des Generals von Waldau. 27.5.42. bis 8.8.42" (Diary, Part III, of Air Force Commander Africa, General von Waldau. From 27 May to 8 August 1942.) . Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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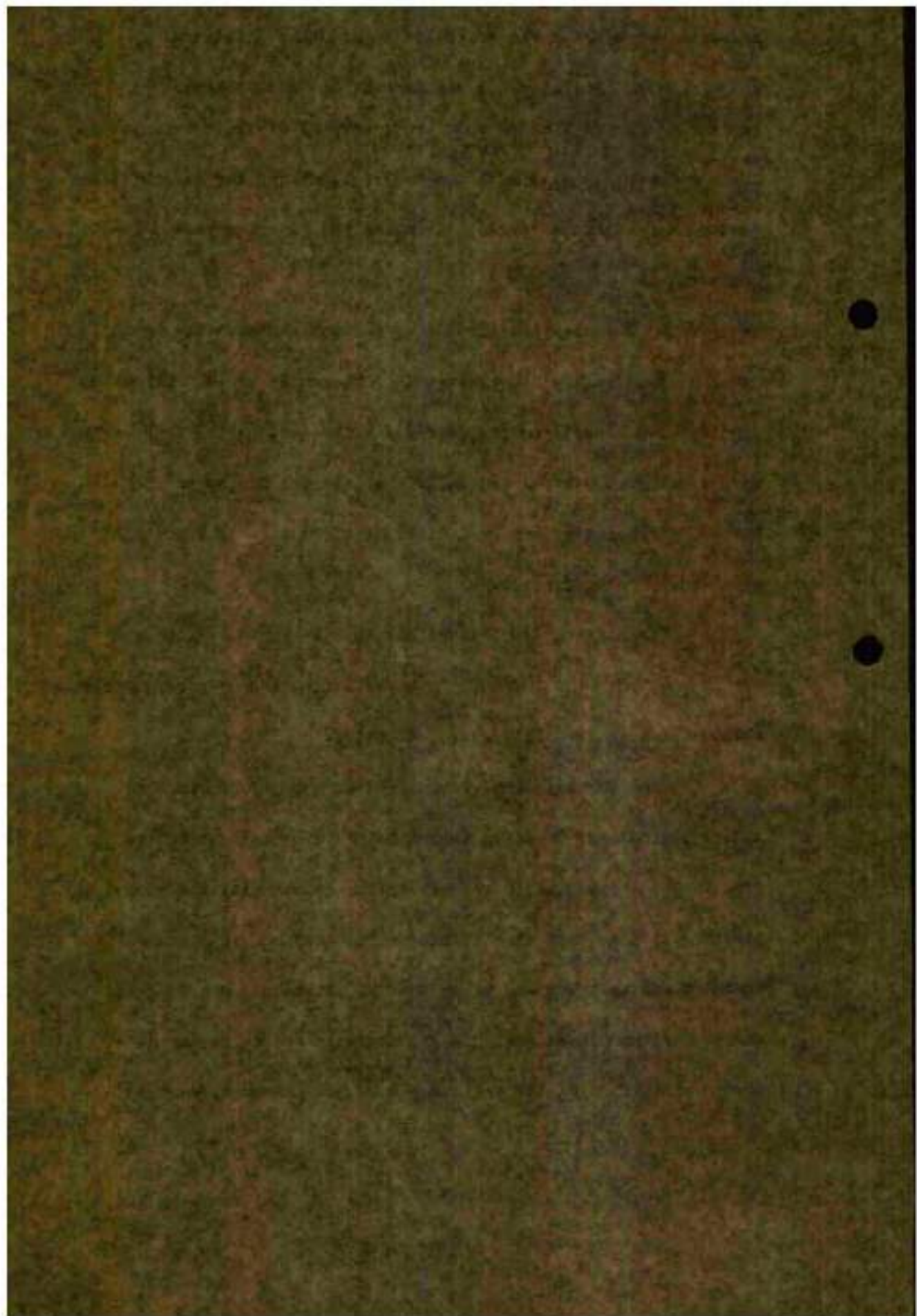
The complete ignorance of our own plans and the very obvious regrouping of the enemy forces made it mandatory to be extremely careful in the selection of attack objectives.

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 I Corps was characteristic for the confusion that reigned concerning the over-all situation. During this surprise thrust General Crueswell, 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 ~~uncoordinated~~ 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, ordered



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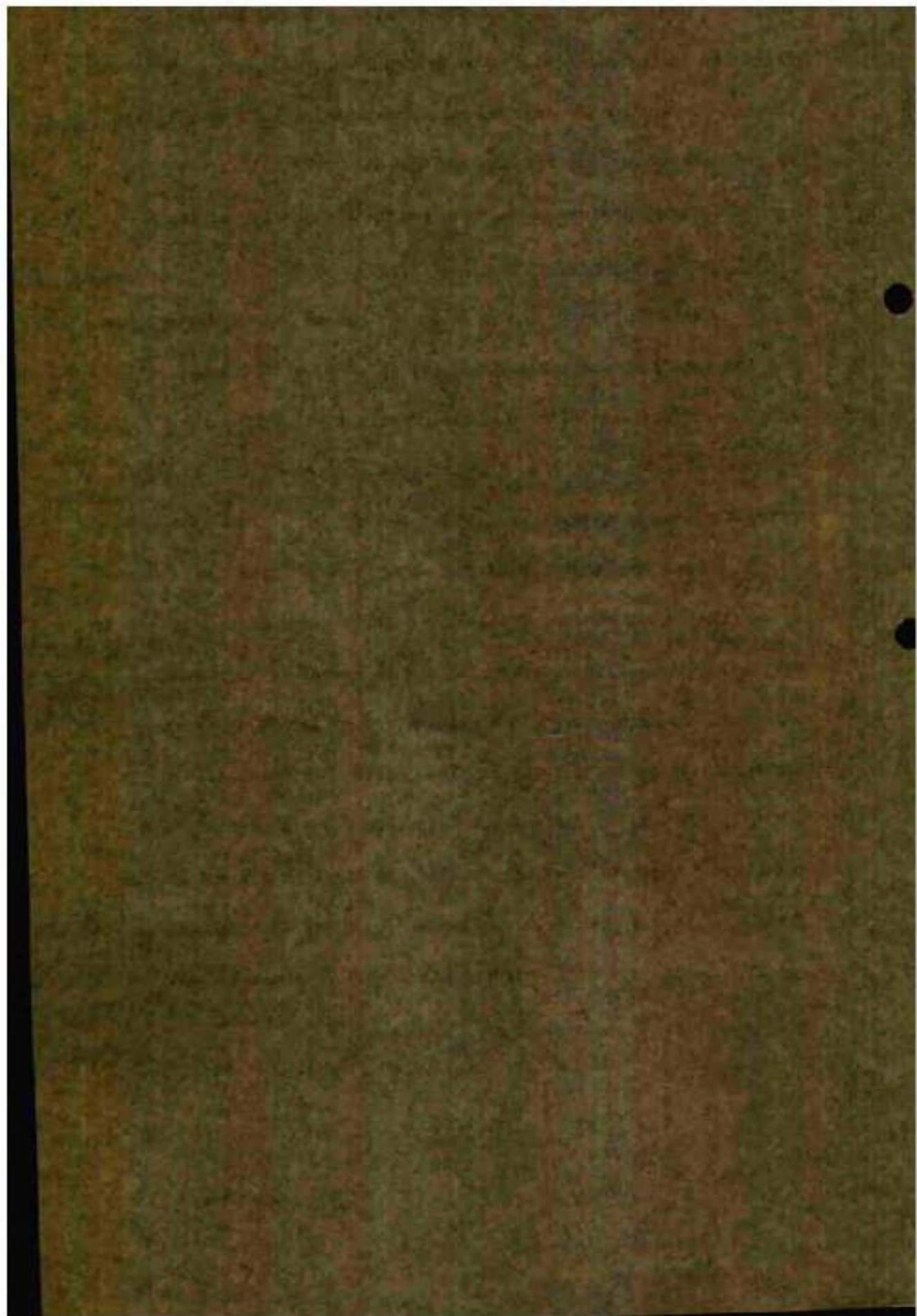
combat moves so fast that operations orders requiring air support usually arrive too late to be effective. Data transmitted via radio are therefore often outdated insofar as their tactical relevance to the enemy situation is concerned. One must emphasize in this connection that air operations conducted without complete ground combat intelligence imposed tremendous mental strain upon the air unit commanders, thus completely justifying the Very High Forward Looking 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 west of Bir Harwat, while the northern group was slowly moving southward under the protection of tanks about 6 miles northwest of Adroma.

The main effort of the Luftwaffe was directed against these two groupings; the Germans flew 326 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 Adra and the Italians flew assaults on Adroma. The enemy



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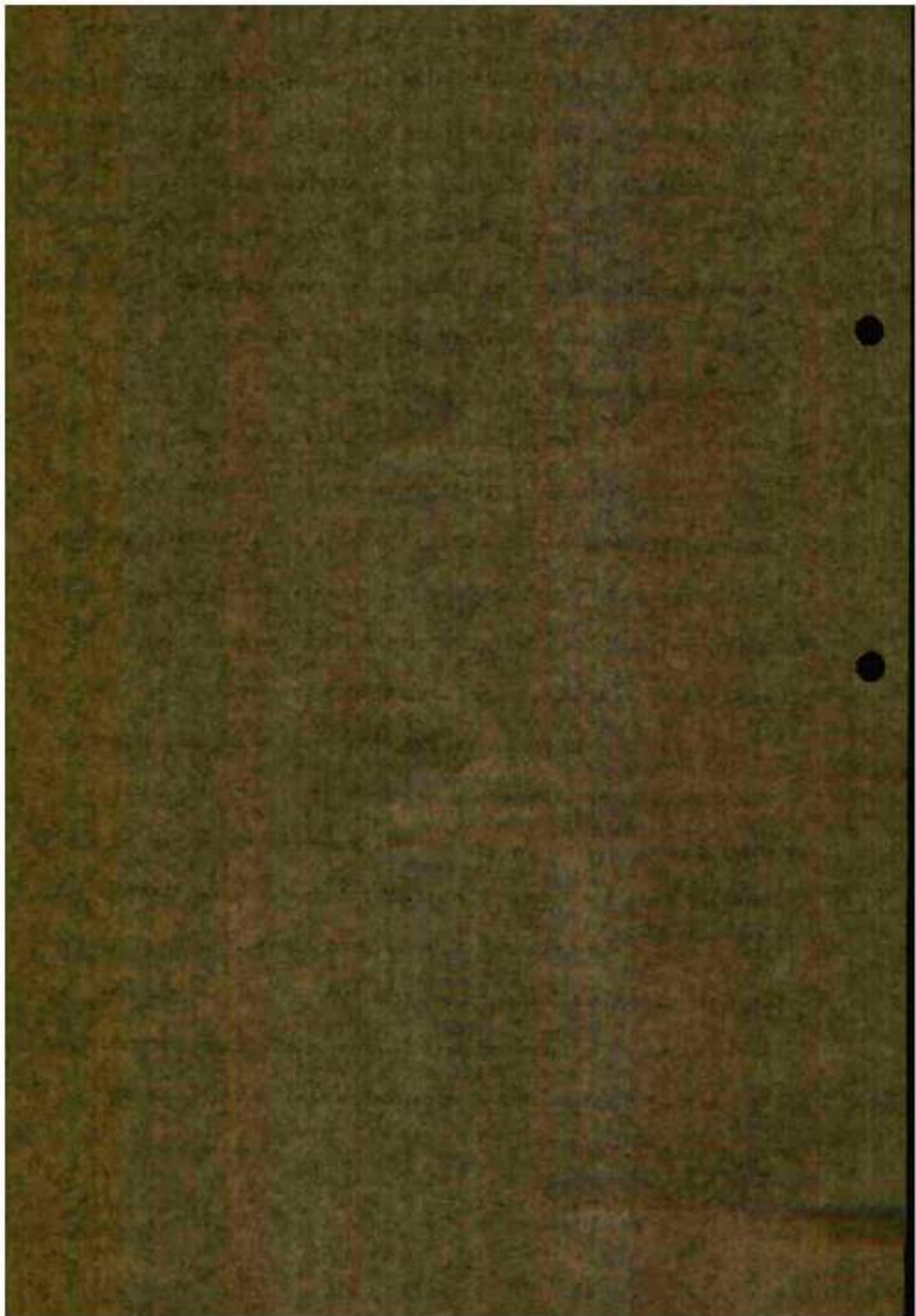
force that had been encircled near Ualsb was also softened up by dive bomber attacks.

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 ^{and} new fortified positions ~~INCHES~~ to assume the offensive at the most propitious moment for gaining 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 ~~ARMY~~ 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 Seggali - Rotondo Siguali. The daring missions flown by ^{Squadron} the 3d WING 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 Salden 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 ~~1942~~ with two divisions on line, and it had asked for maximum air support for this occasion.

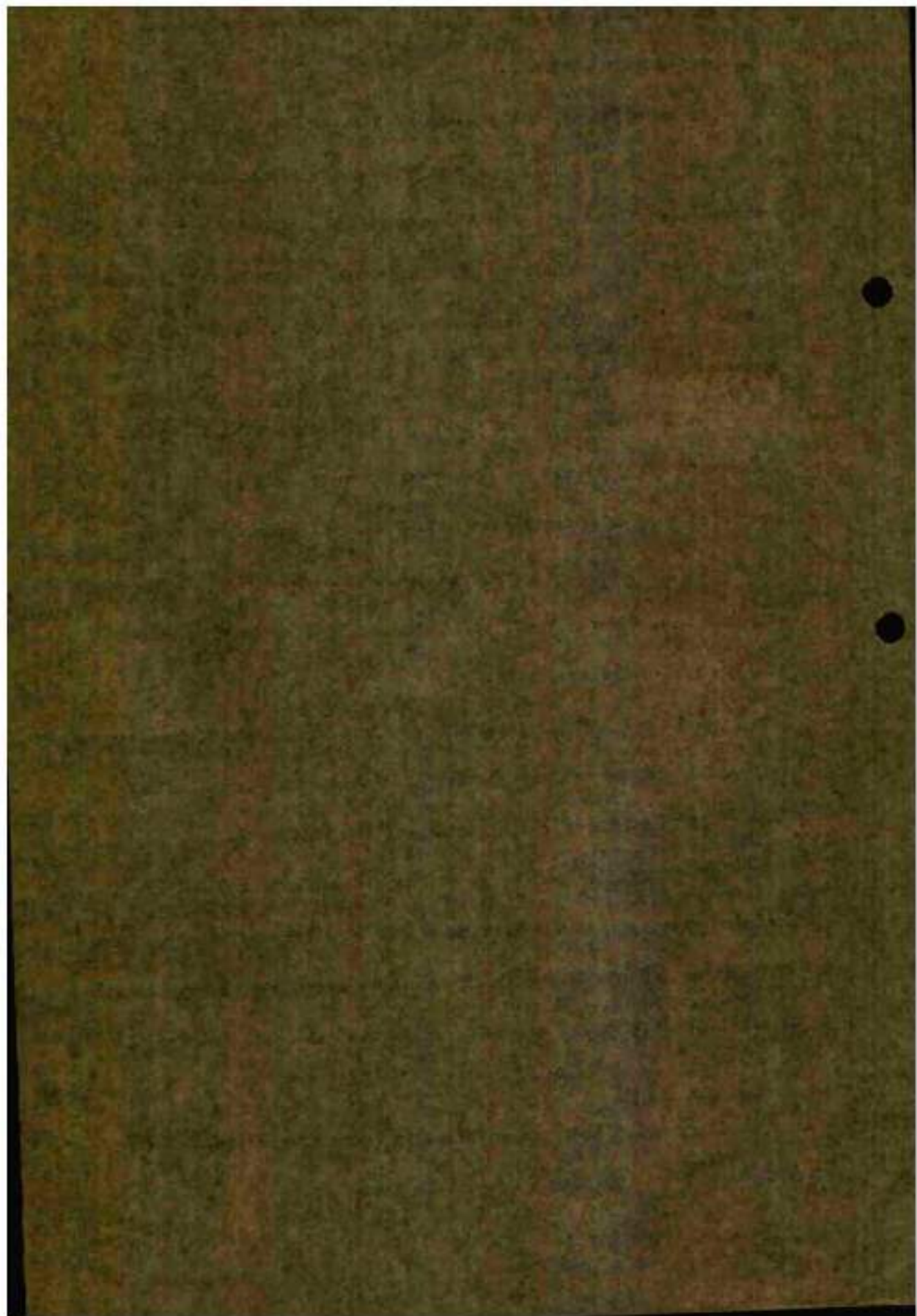
As shown by experience, the British had up to then established a routine of flying only one morning and one evening mission, which however were flown by a force embodying all available aircraft. The British units had orders to avoid combat with German fighter aircraft, except with those which were engaged 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 547.47 ^{metric} tons of bombs. The German losses amounted to 14 aircraft (4 Messerschmitts 109, 4 Messerschmitts 110, 5 Junkers 87, and 1 Junkers 88); no figures on Italian losses are available.

It is not without interest to cite Field Marshal Rommel'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 ^{maneuver} landing from the sea of a small, but selected, landing force.

* This information had been verified by radio intercepts.



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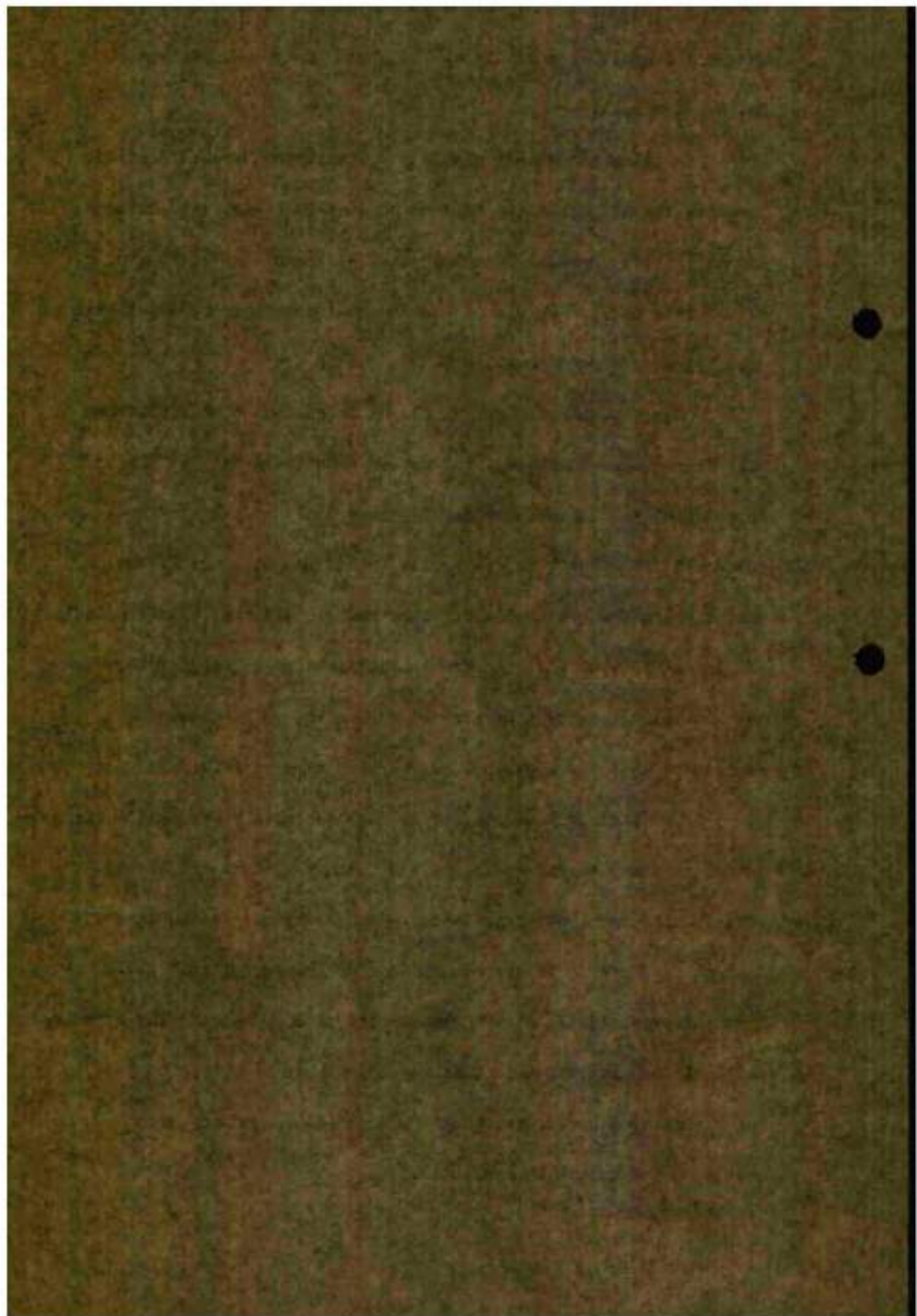
" ... Field Marshal Rommel intended to lead the forces employed on the enveloping flank, but wanted to remain in charge of the over-all conduct of operations. The front line commander was Lt. Gen Crueswell."

"The plan proper was simple and clear, and Marshal Bastien 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 HMY Crueswell, 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 HMY Crueswell'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 refused to answer questions and cannot be contacted."



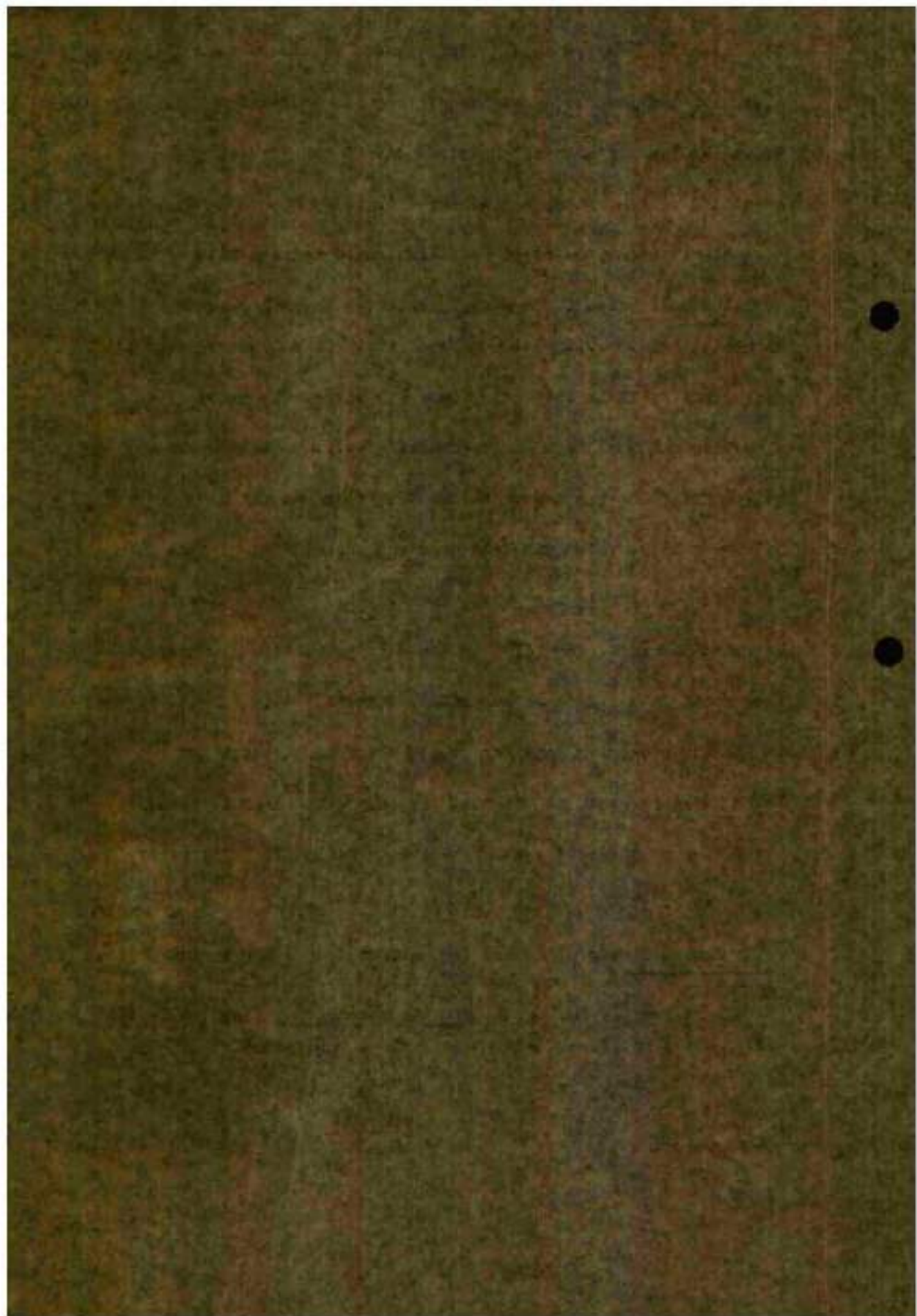
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"However dynamic Rommel's presence at the outflanking movement's focus might have been, he was very exposed to and too directly involved in the vicissitudes of the battle. One must have listened to eyewitnesses in order to realize what the situation 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 when I asked for a meeting wherever and whenever 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

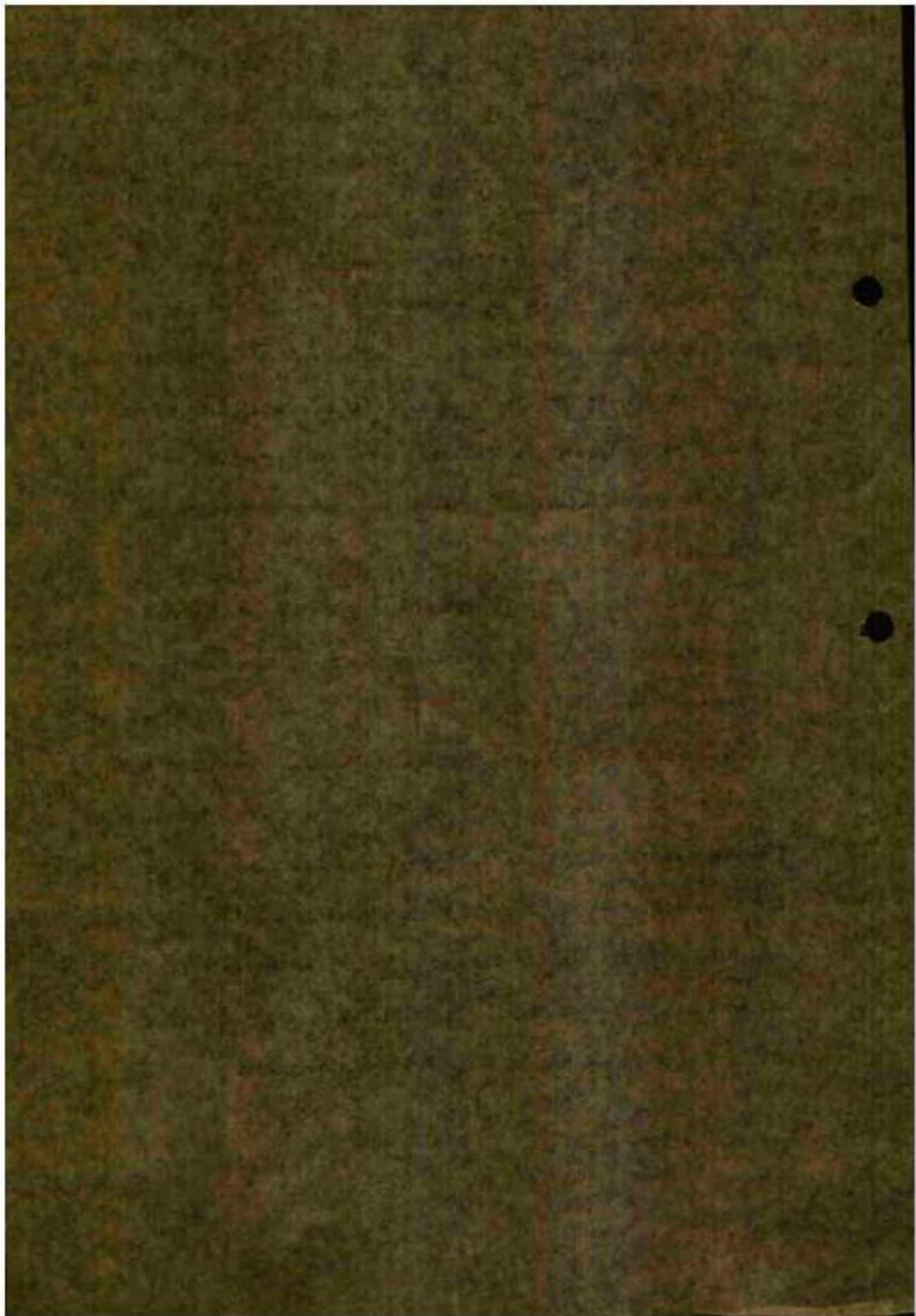
166
 Albert Kesselring, Soldat bis zum letzten Tag (Soldier to the bitter end), pp. 170-2. Athenäum Verlag, Bonn, 1953.



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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 than four squadrons available,
assaulted the supply columns in the rear of the armored divisions
and put about 400 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-Bachlein. 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.
They, 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 Austins 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 Coningham had to switch to the defensive.

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

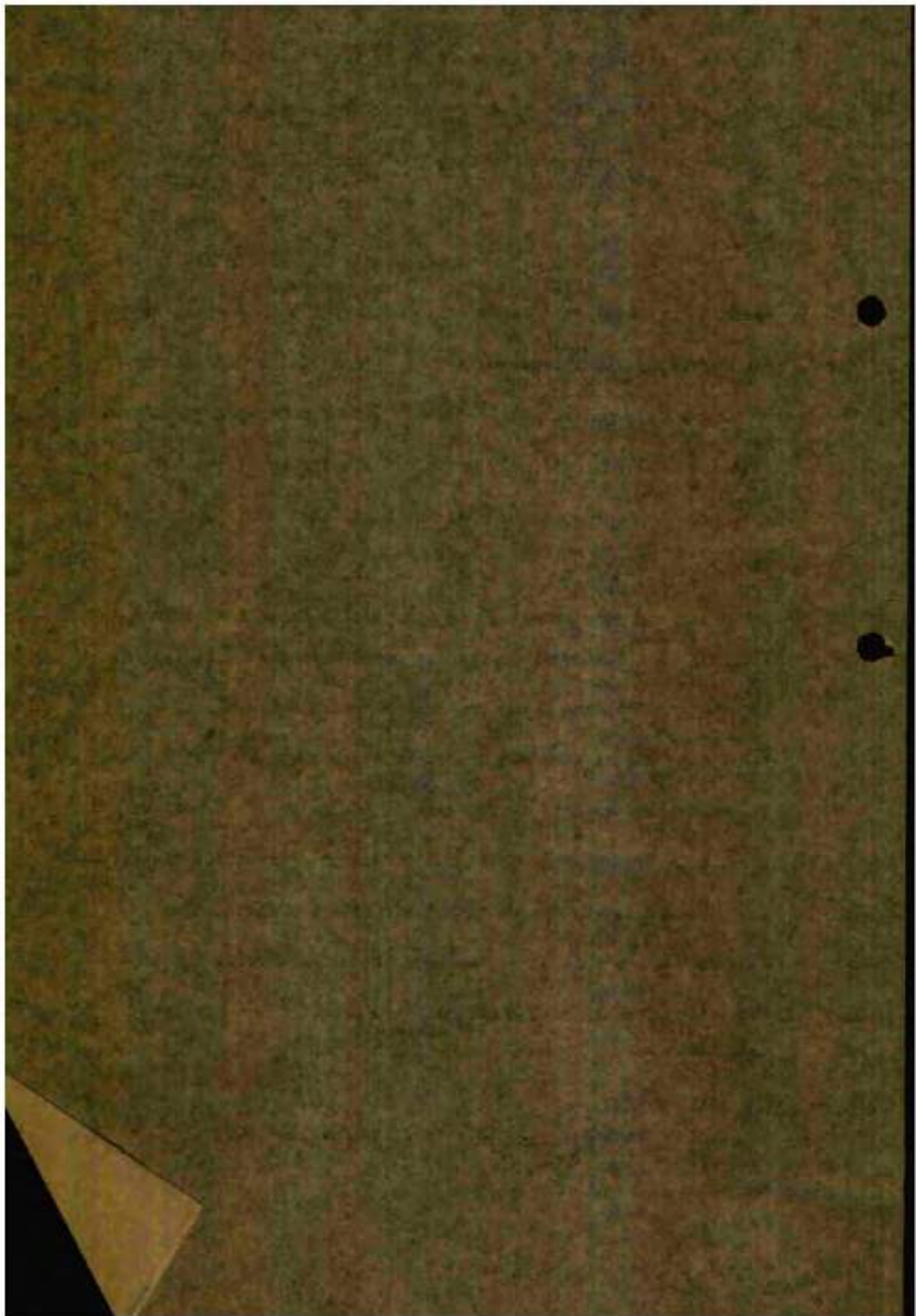
Three days passed until General Ritchie proceeded to attack. This interval was extremely useful to the German Africa Corps which could thus repair some of the many tanks that had dropped out or been damaged.

"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 saw 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." "I...." When the attack finally jumped off on 5 - 6 June, it was already

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WHEATON

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



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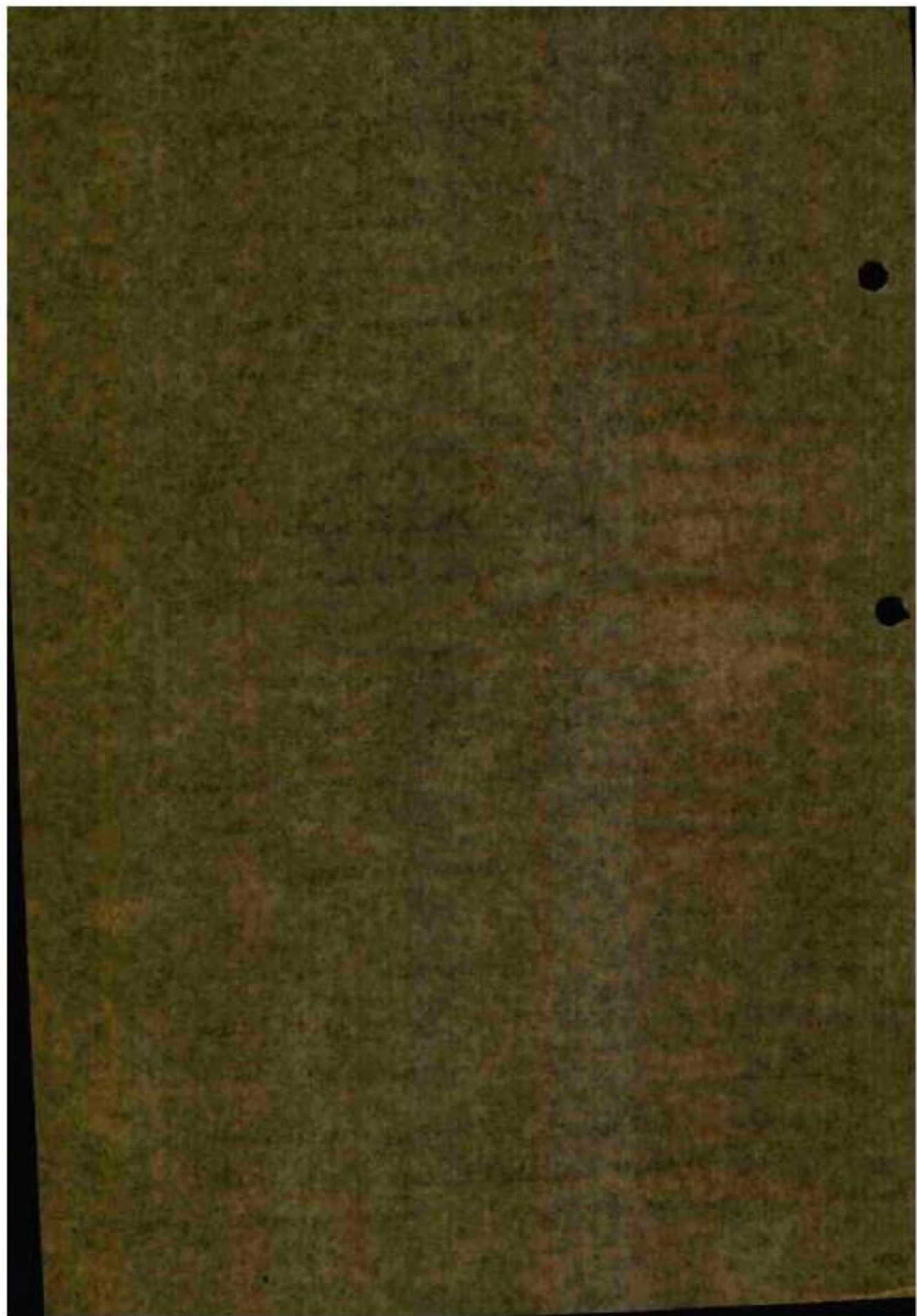
three days later. The strong point of the 150th Brigade had been captured by the Germans." "The 5th of June was the turning point of the battle, even though the British had lost their chance for a complete victory already three days before." 163

The Panzer Army expected an attack either against the frontal sector of its divisions in the center or against the encircling forces near Bir Hakeim. For those reasons the 15th Panzer Division was assembled south of Bir Hakeim 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 Galeb. 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.

General led Combat Group Wola, 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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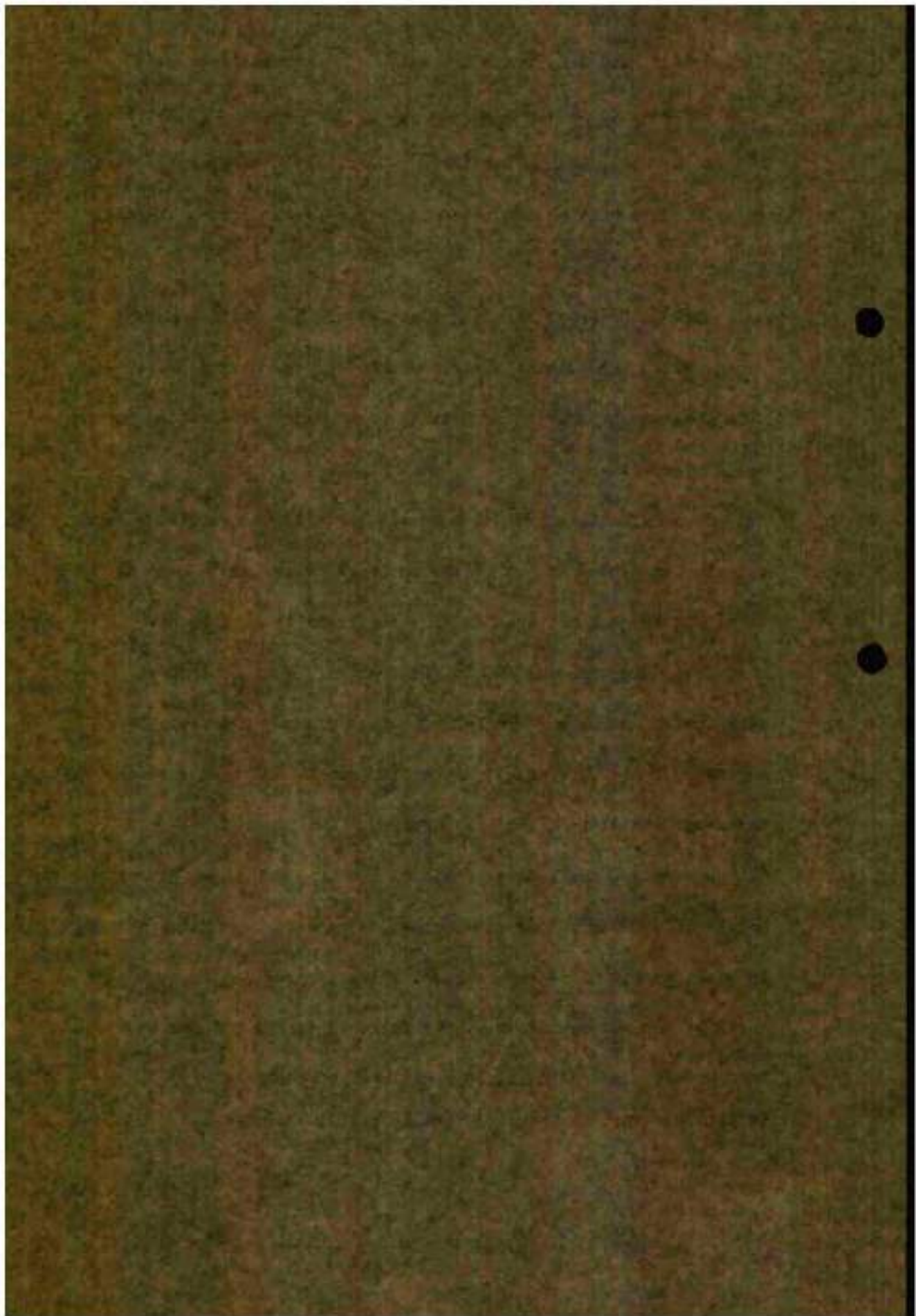
moved along the left flank of Focvel's force; its mission was to envelop the enemy forces from the north. On 5 June the bulk of the 21st Panzer Division, which had hitherto been unable to disengage from British attacks, could gain ground by advancing to the east.

On the other hand, Combat Group Wala, which had been enveloped by British forces, had to withdraw to Bir-Sarnat 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 Michals had not been able to make up his mind whether to pull his divisions out of the northern sector of the Gassala front and to assemble them in time for flexible employment. With their 800 guns and 200 to 300 armored reconnaissance vehicles and machine gun carriers whose forces could have carried considerable weight and would probably have stopped the eastward thrust of the 21st Panzer Division.

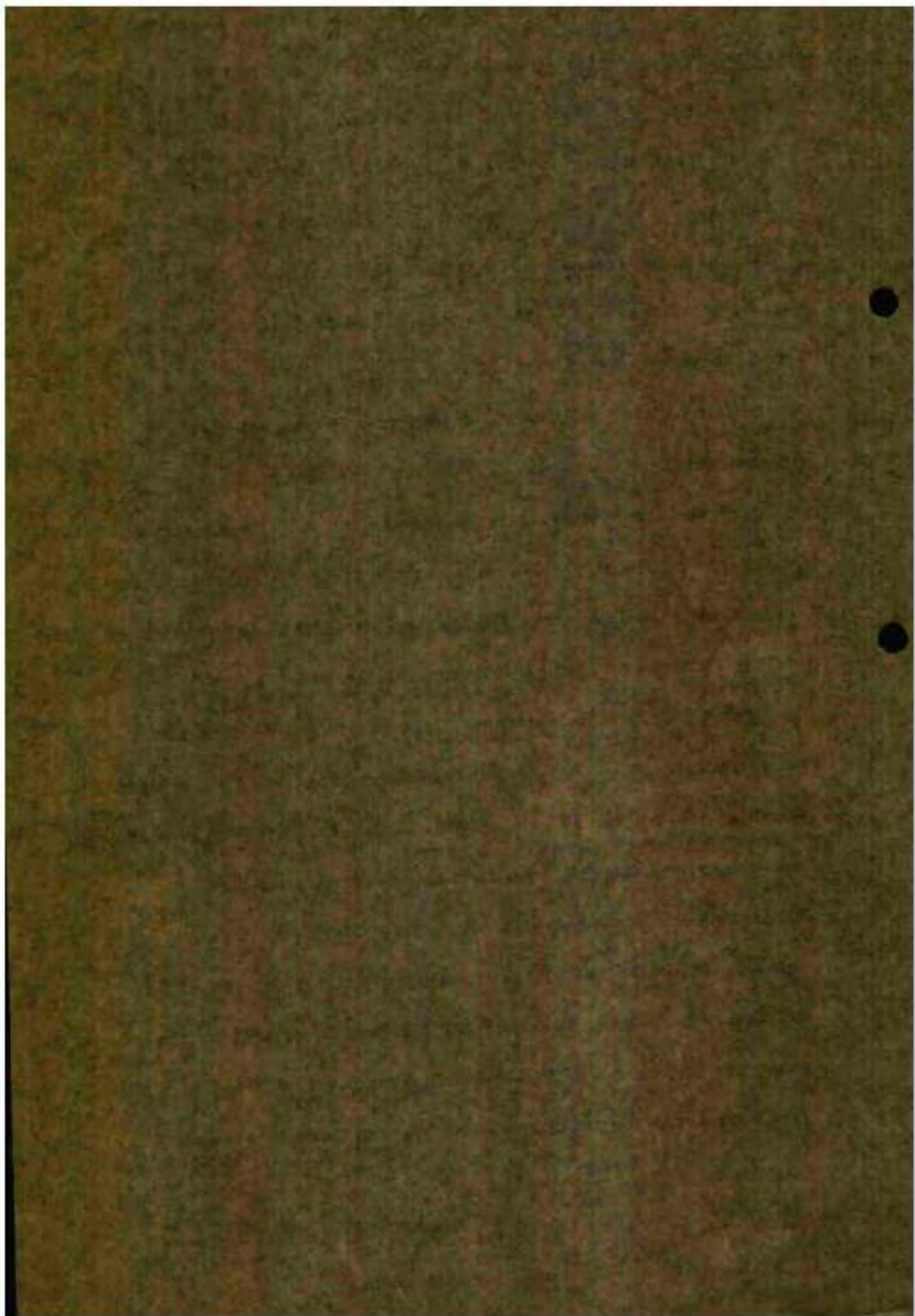
Meanwhile, the Trieste Division and the 90th Light Division had begun to attack near Bir-Hachem, supported by rolling attacks in waves of the dive-bomber units. There a struggle of extreme severity had gotten underway. The French defended themselves in cleverly constructed field positions and close combat 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 30th Light Division's advance guards reached points that were still some 900 yards from the fortress 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 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 General (Col.) Bunde succeeded in penetrating ^{deeply} into this 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 peering the fortress, the Germans found that the defensive positions around Bir-Hacheim consisted of about 1,000 pillboxes for infantrymen and heavy weapons as well as



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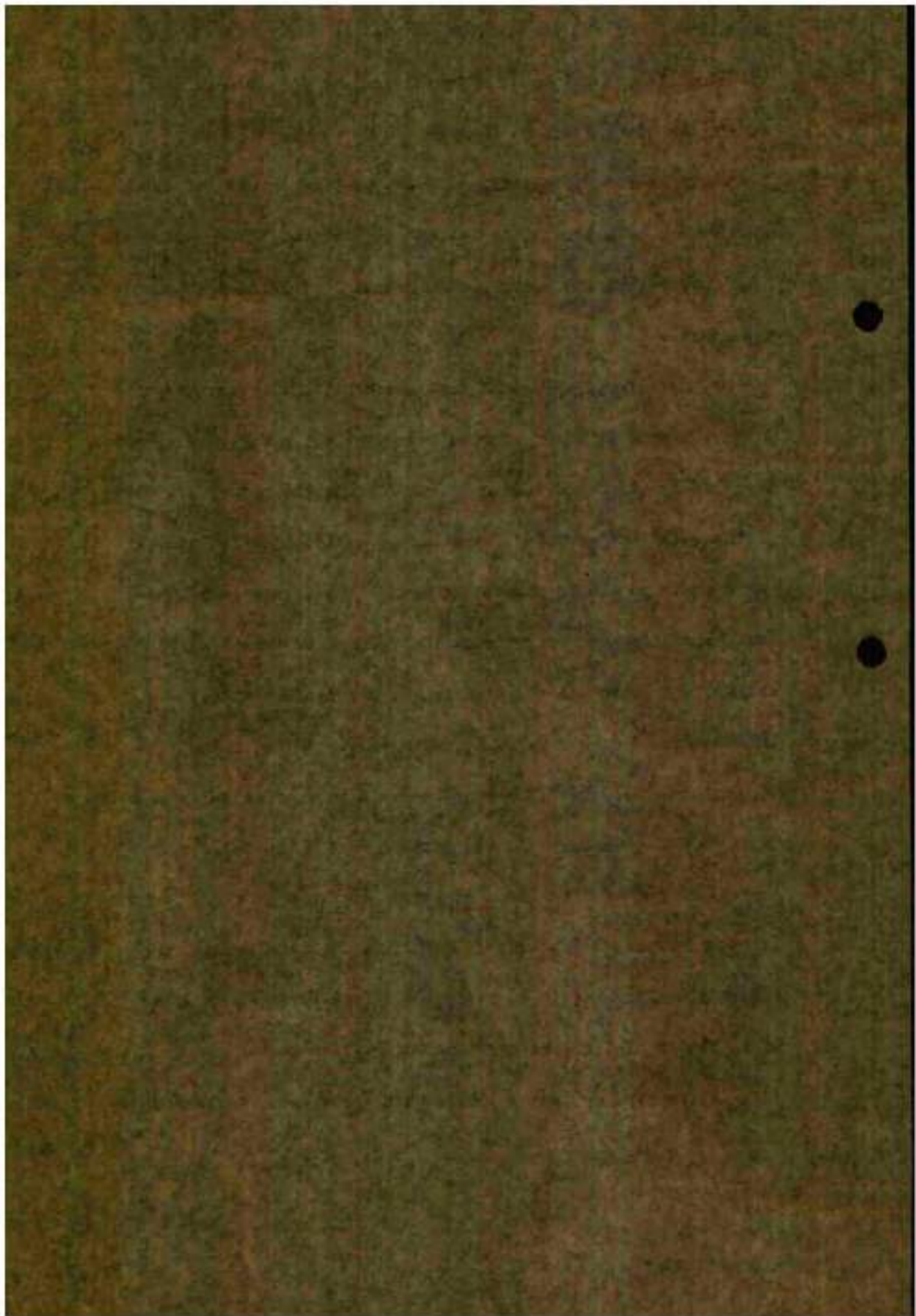
various other facilities. Under the courageous leadership of General Koenig the garrison had been able to resist the German assaults for almost 10 days. Now the divisions MIAH engaged in the struggle had become free to participate in the decisive battles of the campaign.

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 Schell, however, refused categorically -- despite Field Marshal Kesselring's admonitions -- for the time being 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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attacks on British armor assemblies, etc., were continued with noticeable success in the area northwest of El-Suez. During a conference with Panzer Army headquarters personnel on 7 June Field Marshal Kesselring had arranged for the following general time schedule:

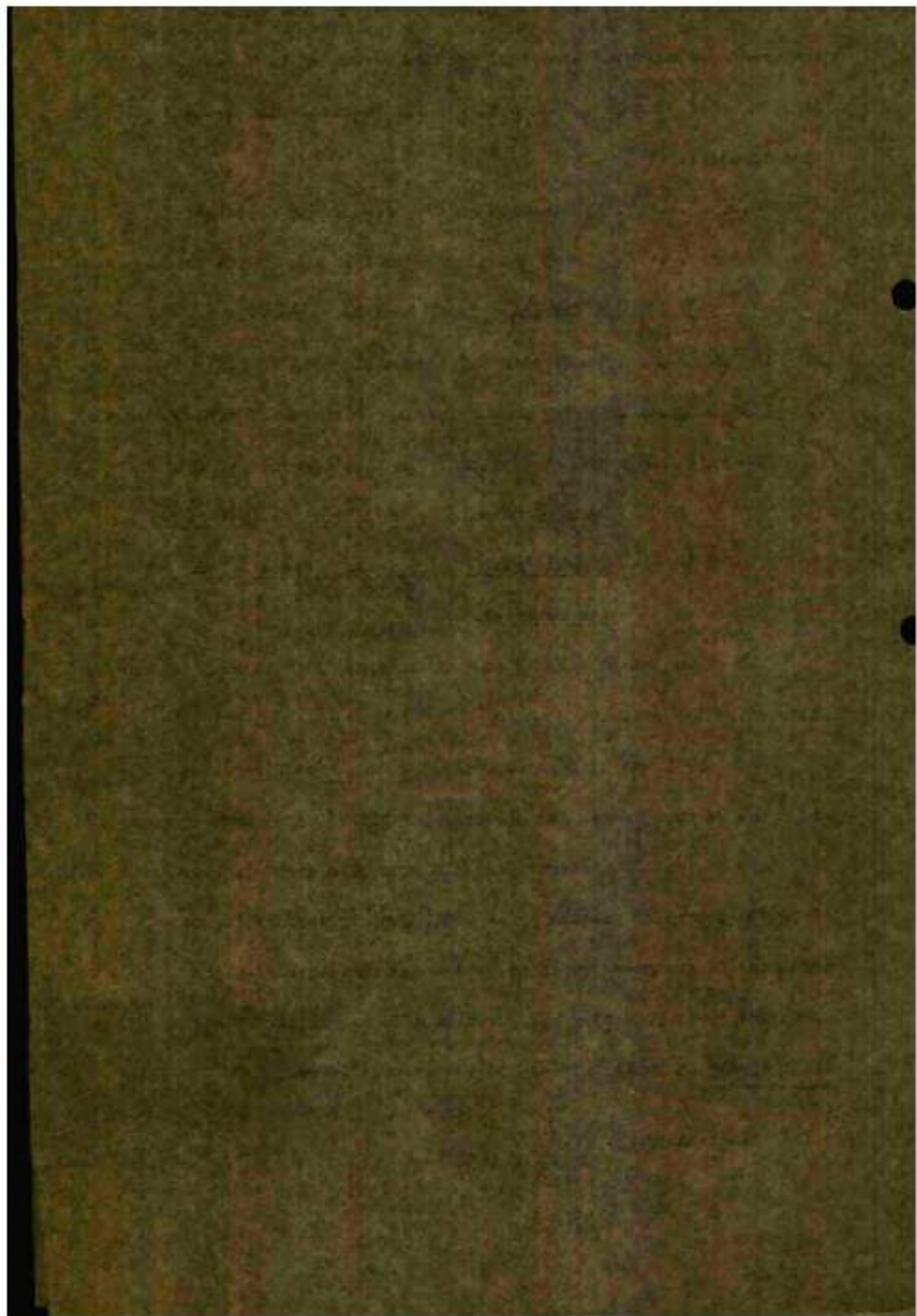
- 8 June Elimination of the El-Machala resistance;
- 9 or 10 June Thrust and advance to the coast while forming a defensive front toward the east.
- 10 - 14 June Penetration of the Gazala positions.
- 15 - 20 June Moving up the infantry divisions toward the east.
- 18 - 22 or 23 June Attack on Tobruk; in this connection Field Marshal Kesselring mentioned the 25 June as the ultimate target date for the seizure of the fortress.

Reconnaissance patrols were to advance into the area south and east of El-Gohi.

air

On the basis of this schedule the attack on El-Machala was prepared for 8 June. The concentrated efforts of 45 Junkers 87, 3 Junkers 88, and 10 Messerschmidt 110 protected by 15 fighter aircraft took place punctually at 0621. The air assault forces attacked the fortress proper and the areas immediately to the north and east, producing maximum mass effect. But the attack did not help in paving the way of the ground forces.

Von Walden Diary, p. 27.



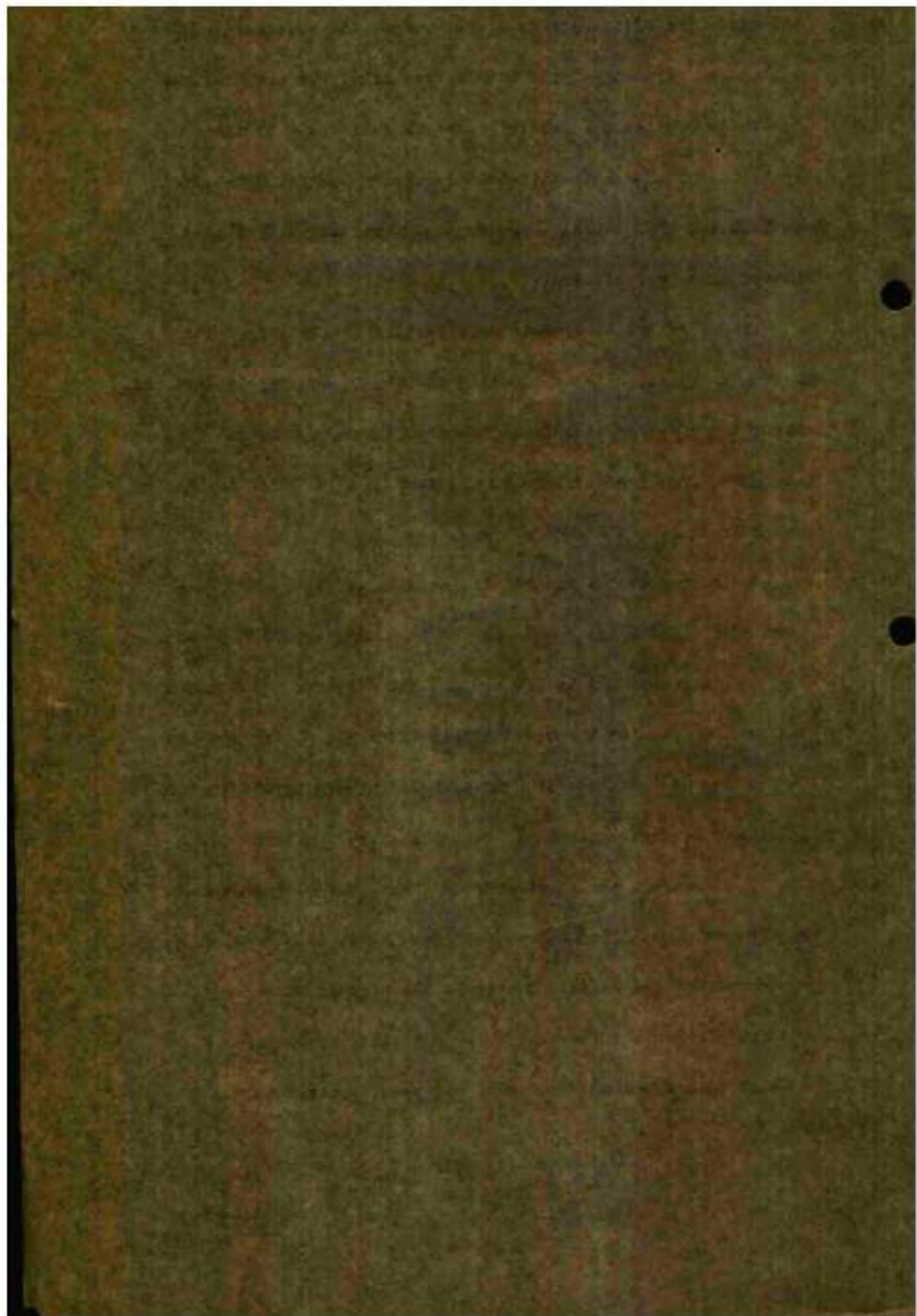
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According to the time schedule the enemy forces west of Acrem were to be attacked on 9 June in order to initiate the offensive of the German Africa Corps, the objective of which was the penetration of the Gambia frontline. The preparations for these operations, however, were cancelled out by renewed requests for immediate dive-bomber support against Bir-Gachein 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 ^{afternoon} at Panzer Army Headquarters on the ~~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 series in strength against Bir-Gachein were not being exploited by the ground assault forces because they were too weak, these attacks



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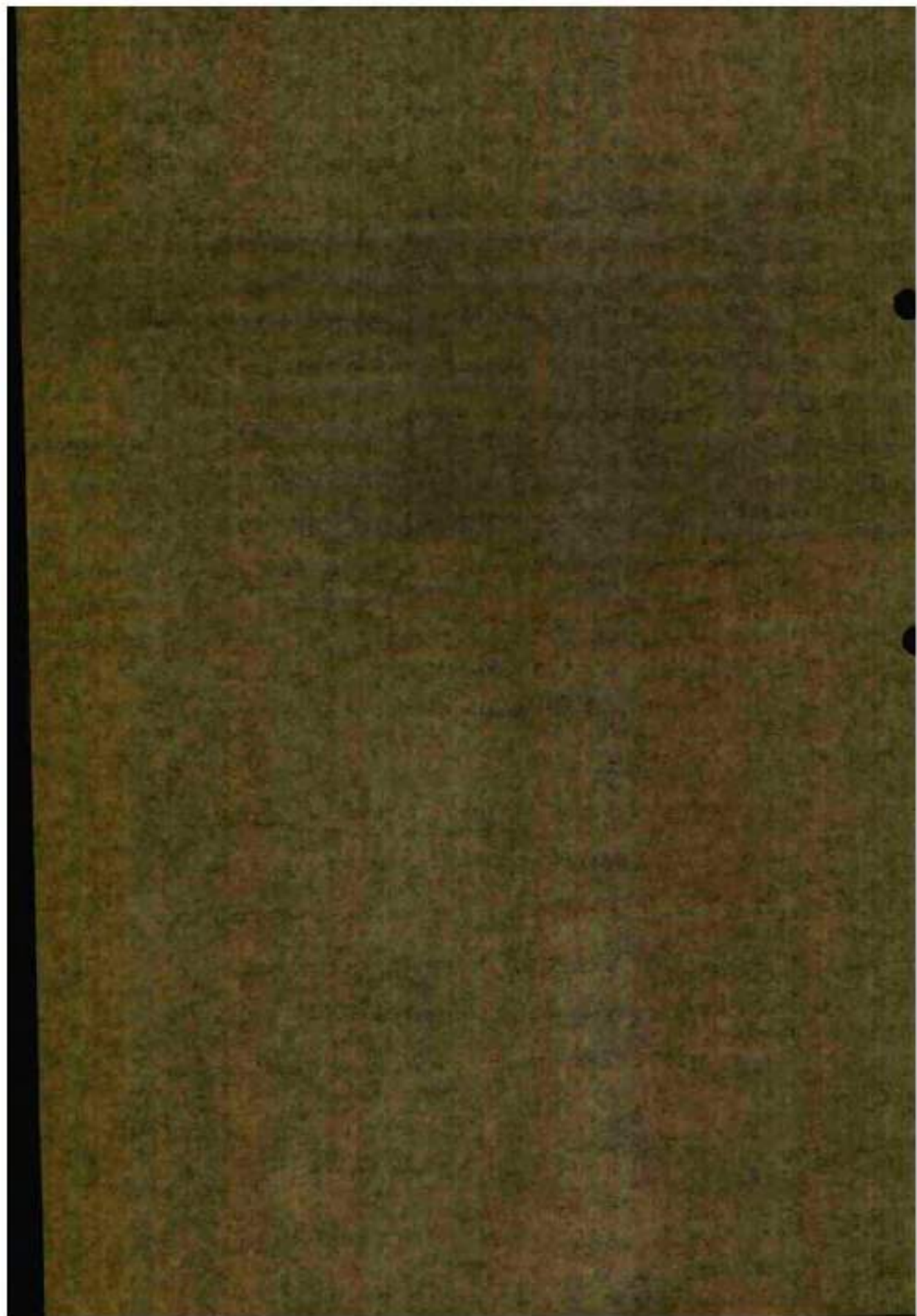
remained without effect. They led to the premature attrition of the Luftwaffe and to the superiority of the Royal Air Force at the decisive points.

The Panzer Army headquarters upheld their plan to first penetrate the Garsia 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 32 dive-bombers at 1900, dropping their bombs on enemy battery positions at the main nest of resistance one mile north of Bir-Hacheim.

In the evening General von Salden reported to Generaloberst Rommel that to this day 1,630 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 THREE 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 74 Junkers 88 dropped 139.79 tons of bombs. They were protected by 168 Messerschmidt flying escort missions. During the air combat 1st Lieutenant Wernicke achieved four more victories, bringing his total of enemy planes shot down to 31.

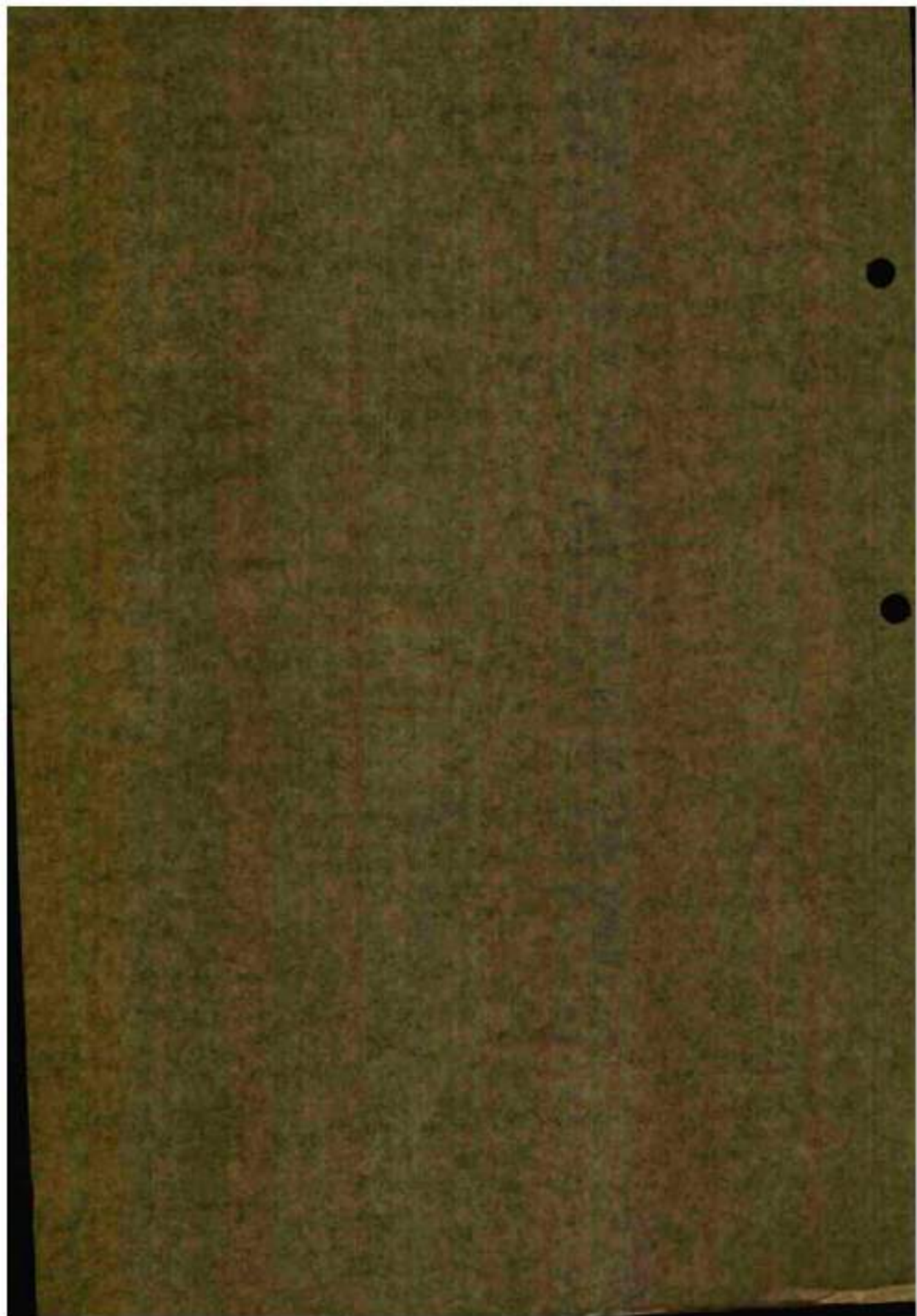
Reconnaissance reports indicated strong concentrations of enemy vehicles near El-Aden and Suda. ¹⁶⁹

In the morning hours of 11 June German aircraft established that the area around Bir-Nachala 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 1500. The main effort of the attack was directed against the area between El-Aden and Suda.

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

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Von Maltzen Diary, pp. 60-4. Earlsboro Document Collection, Appendix 29.



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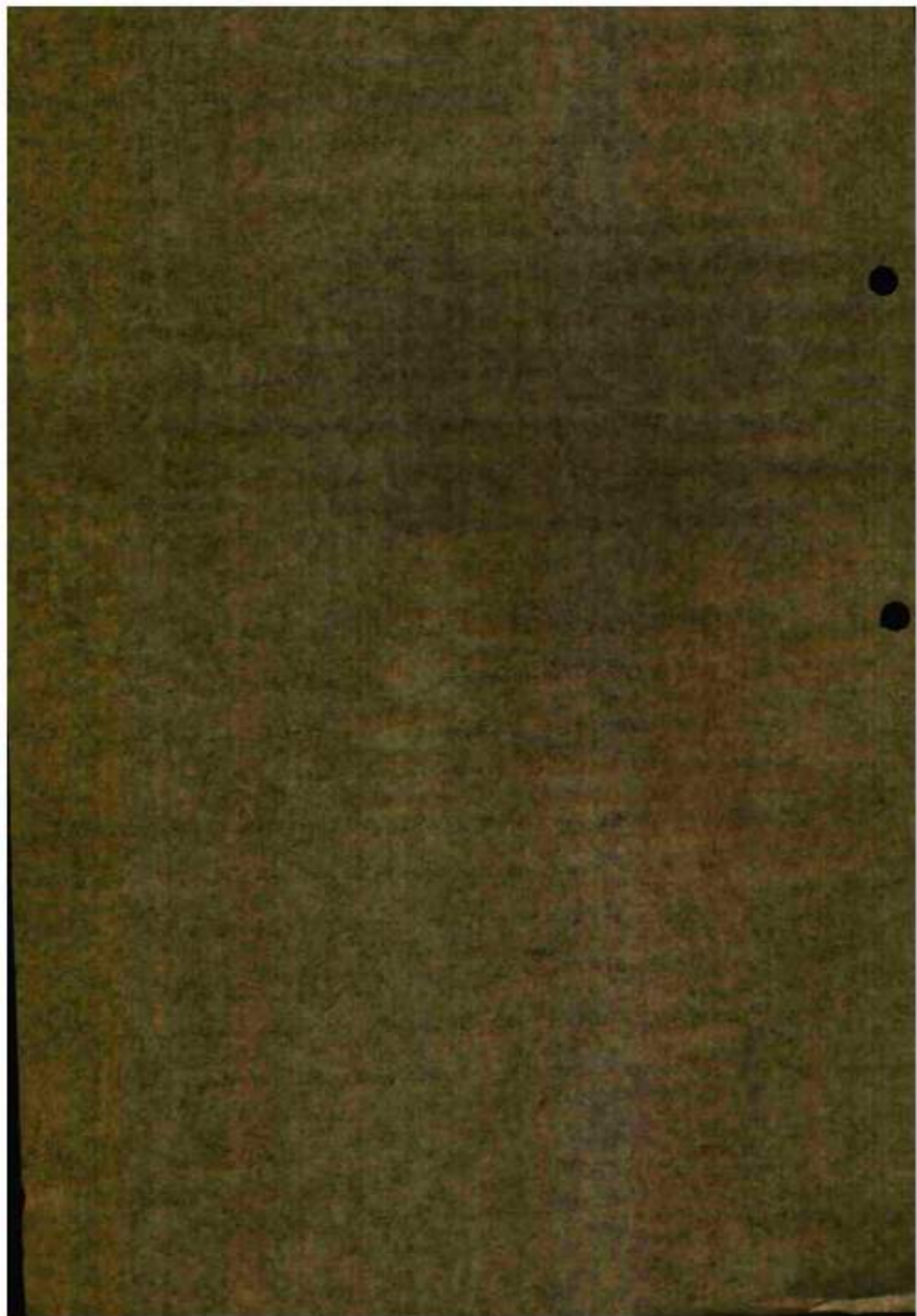
The British Air Force first placed its main effort on supporting and supplying Bir-Hacheim. Cunningham's fighters decided according to their commander's own words "to adopt the Free French and their fortress." On 3 June the British fighters flew therefore more than 100 sorties; around noon some Fieschets of the 5th Squadron downed 2 Stukas at a loss of 3 British aircraft. South of the fortress some 40 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 Cunningham a radio message saying: "Well done, thanks for the Royal Air Force." He immediately replied: "Thank you for the report, you have done well, top."

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

On 8 June, when it had become obvious that Rommel had made up his mind to eliminate 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 7th 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.

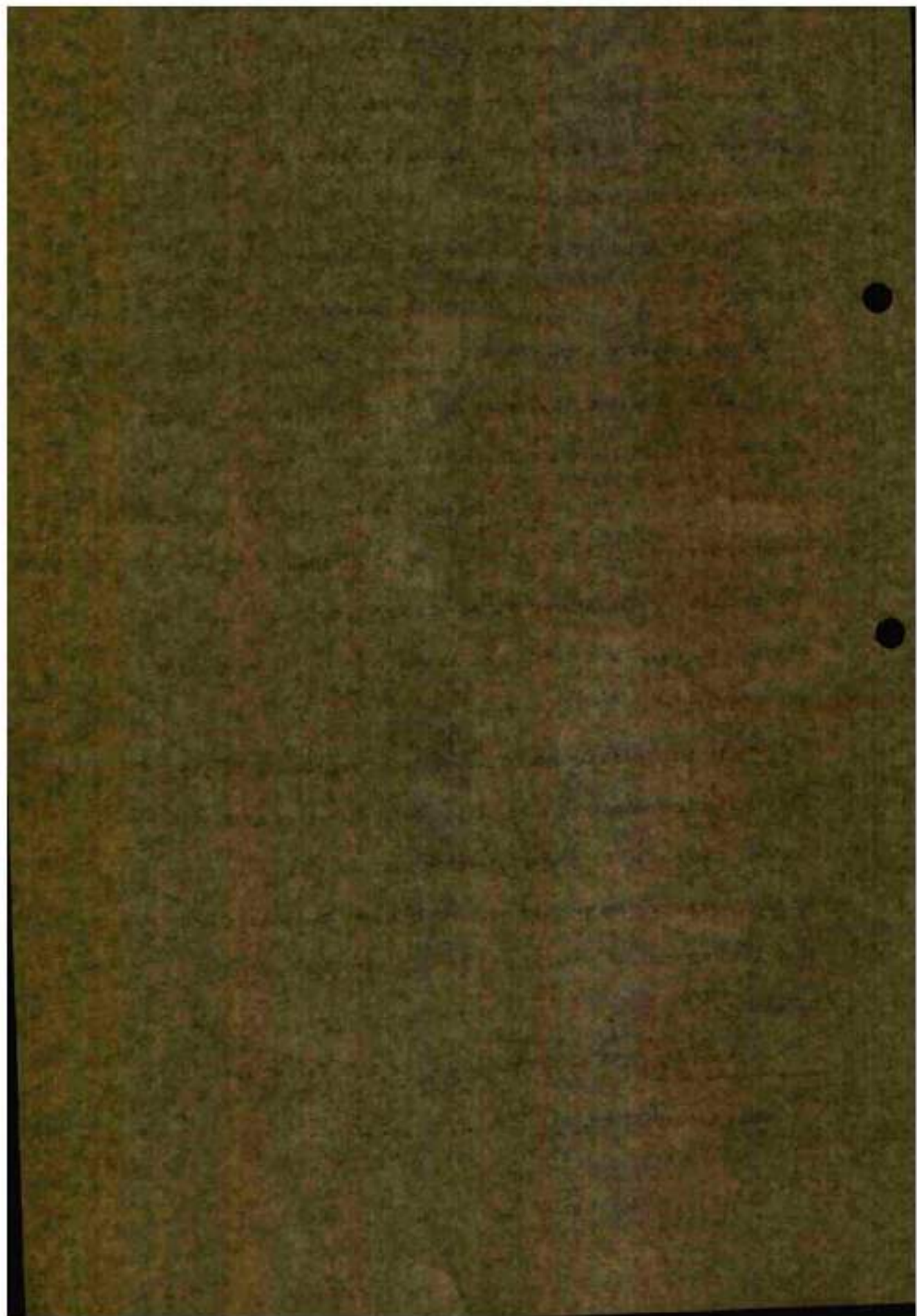
On 10 June the Hurricanes and the first Spitfire squadron that appeared in the desert saved the garrison from being overwhelmed by the German assault forces, but two subsequent thrusts reached their objective. During the night of 10-11 ~~REVENUE~~ June the surviving defenders evacuated the fortress upon 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-Hacheim 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 EX that the Germans had prearranged for the execution of their offensive.¹⁷⁰

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

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



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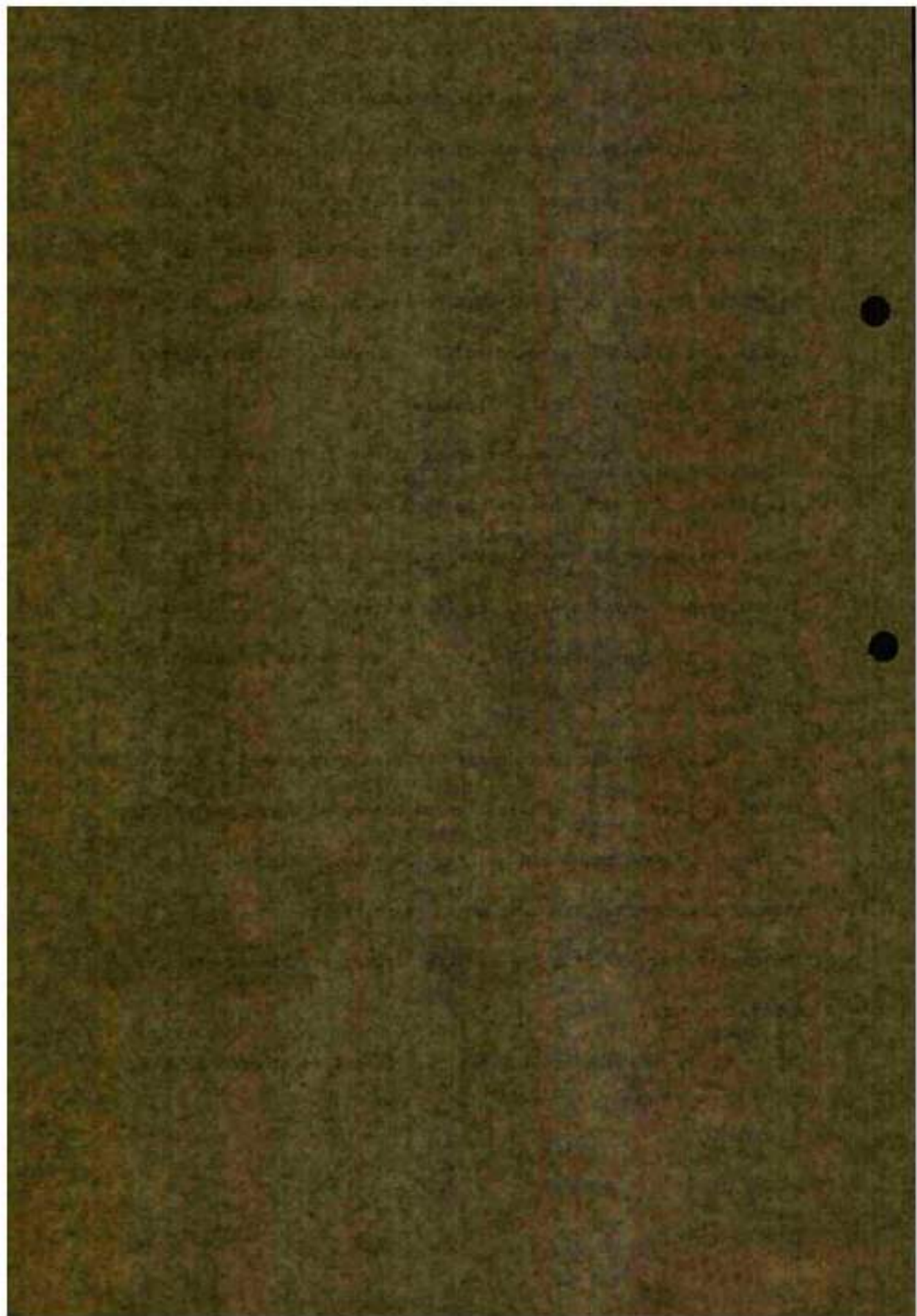
and the 90th Light Division as well as the 3d and 53d Reconnaissance Battalions, led by Rommel, reached the area south and southwest of El-Aden on the MARS evening of 11 June.

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-Aden was occupied by the 90th Light Division. In the main defensive position of the El-Aden wastes, at El-Dabai, 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} KILPAT 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 stopped up the elevations toward the west, while the Italian XI Motorized Corps pushed the British into the area north of Erigh Capusso. During the evening hours, after the sand storm had relaxed 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.

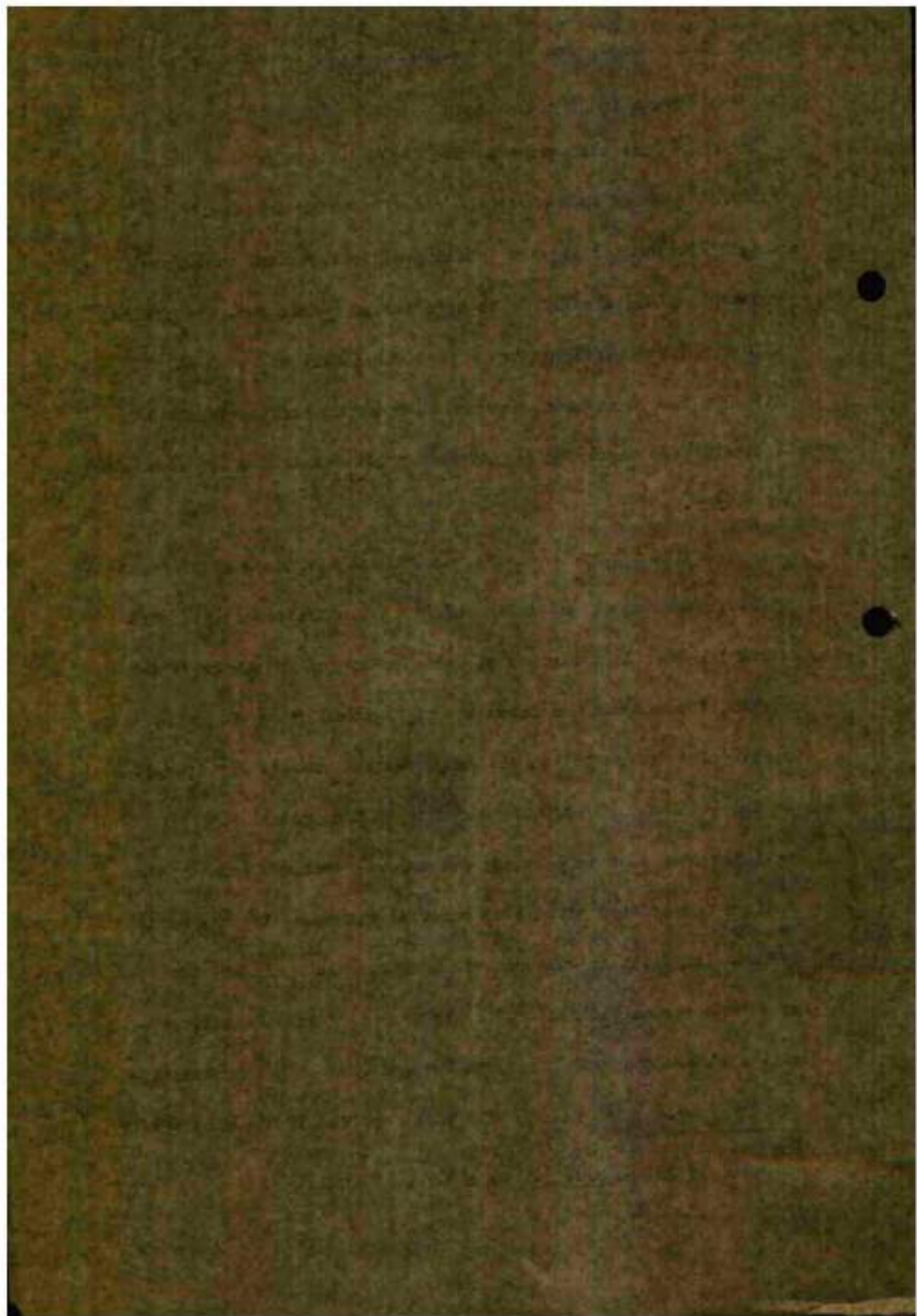
"On 13 June, when darkness fell, we had lost the major part of our armored forces." 171

On 14 June the German Africa Corps was supposed to seize Asroma 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 Asroma, 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 Asroma, 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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Reynold Young, op.cit., p. 148.

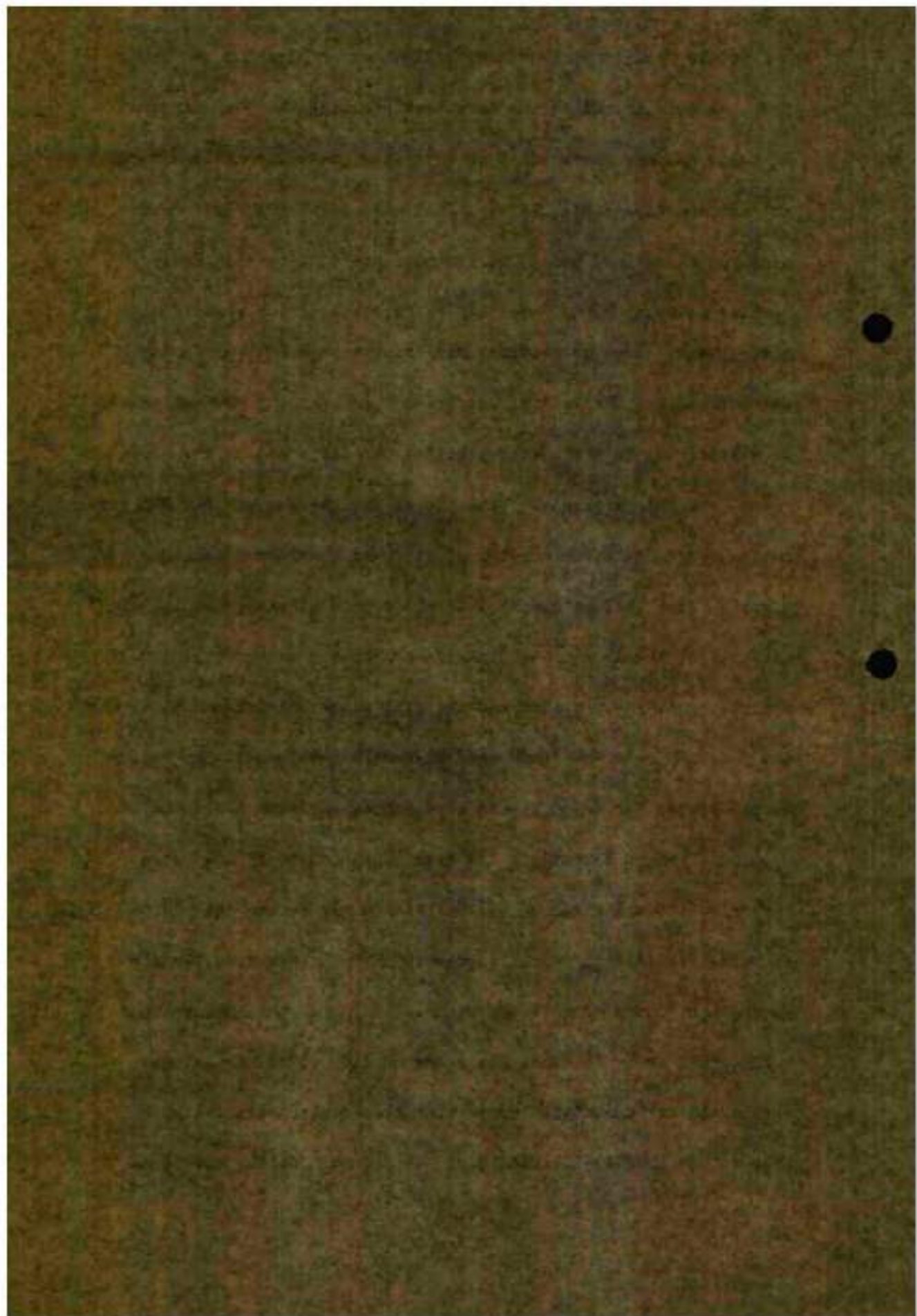


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to intervene actively in the further fighting in the Marmarica area.

On the morning of 15 June the 21st Panzer Division was moved from the area around Acorona 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-Meneh, 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 WZ 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 stocks of shells dating back to November 1941, which were now put to use. The essential



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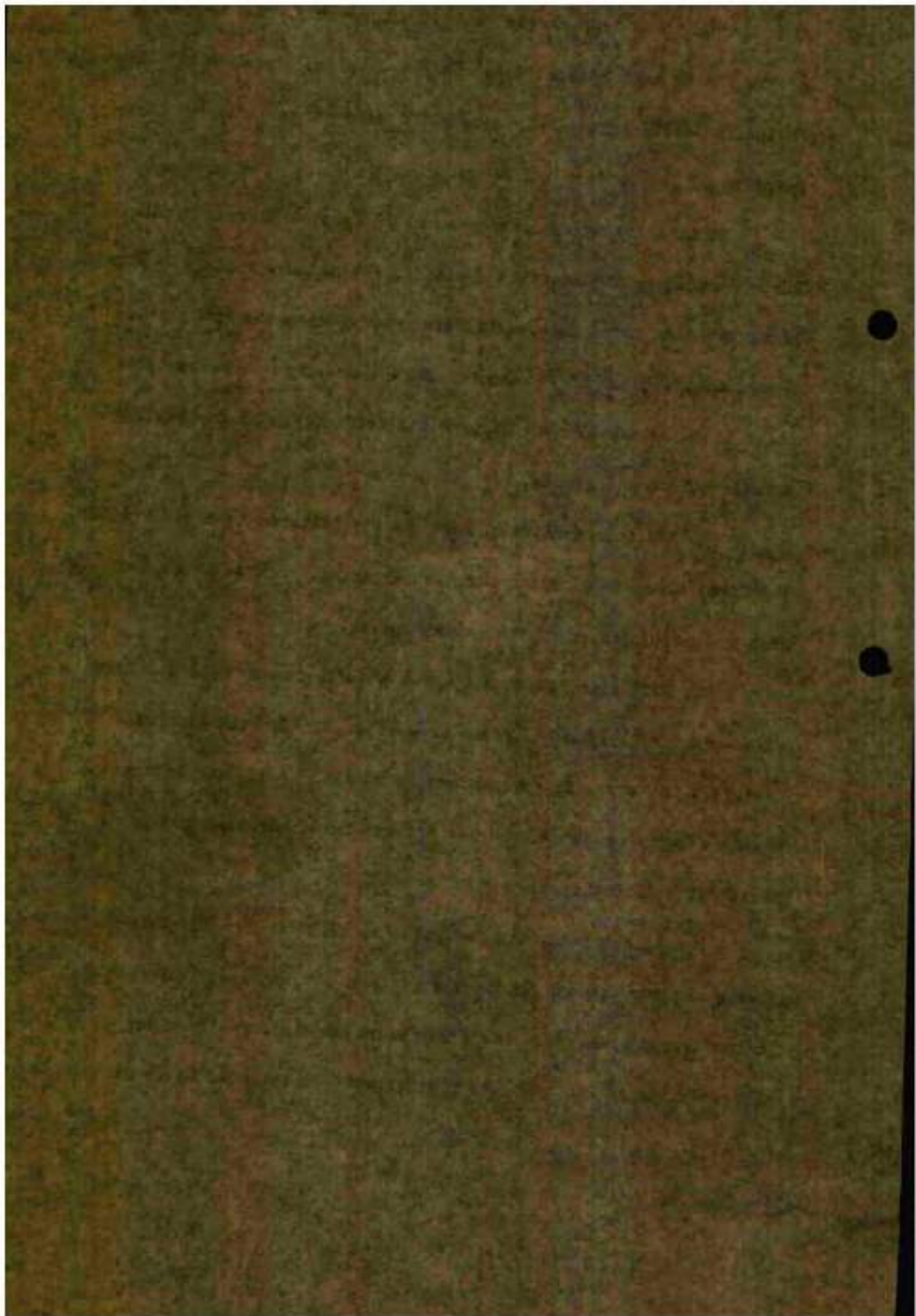
movements for closing the ring of encirclement around the fortress from the west had been carried out simultaneously. The command post of the Panzer Army headquarters was moved to the strong point El-Batian, which had previously served the same purpose for the headquarters of the British XXX Corps.

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 ~~XXX~~ just arriving, were to cover the west and south flanks of the attack forces.

^{was} The Luftwaffe ~~XXX~~ finally ~~XXX~~ able to concentrate its main effort on the El-Adem -- Aerona 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 Aerona 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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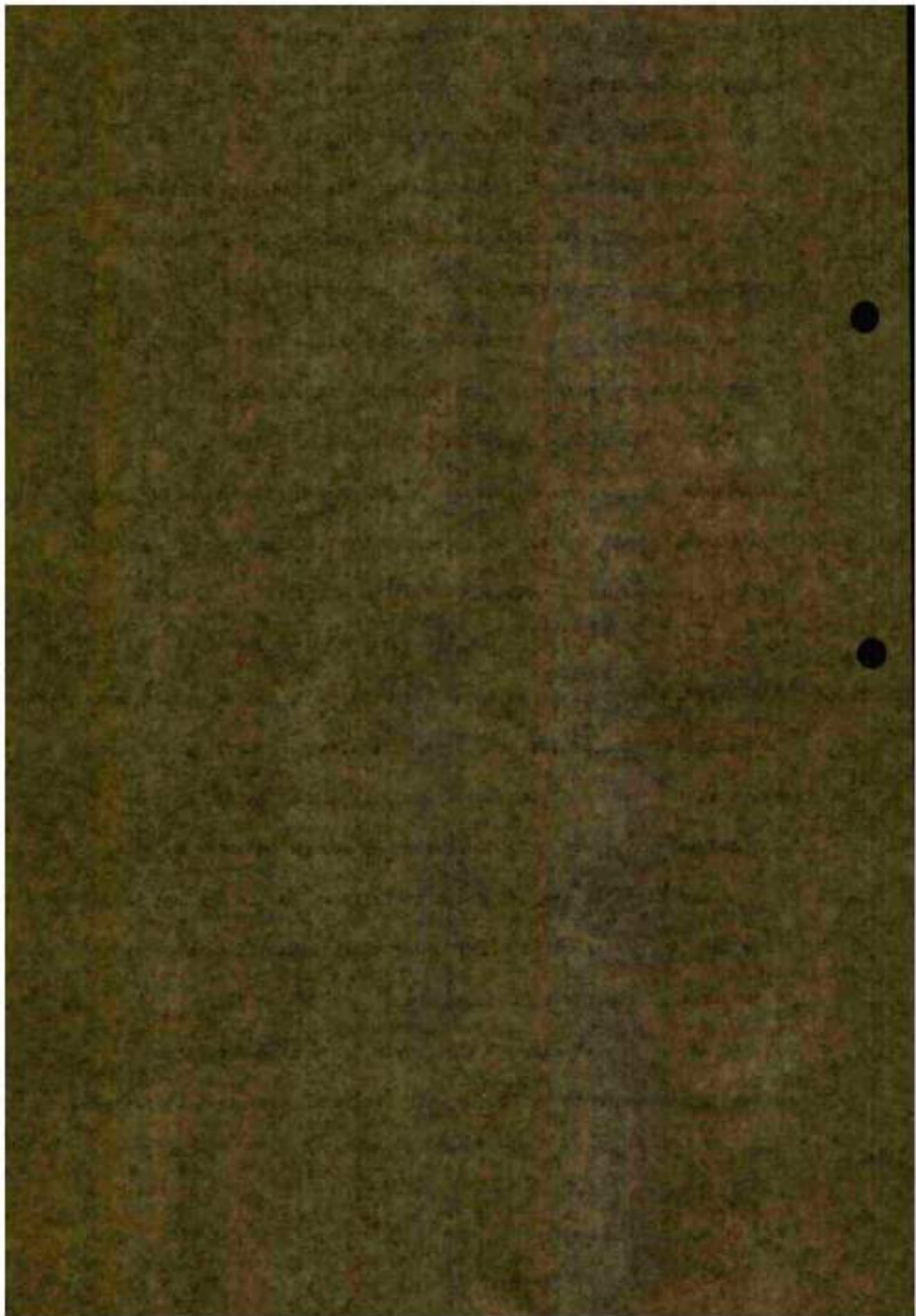
so that the Air Force Commander was under the impression that the Army requests for air support were not based on concepts of joint formation of main effort. These requests pertained to constant strong fighter protection; dive-bomber sorties at short notice against specific targets, without indicating 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 availability 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-Aden. 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.



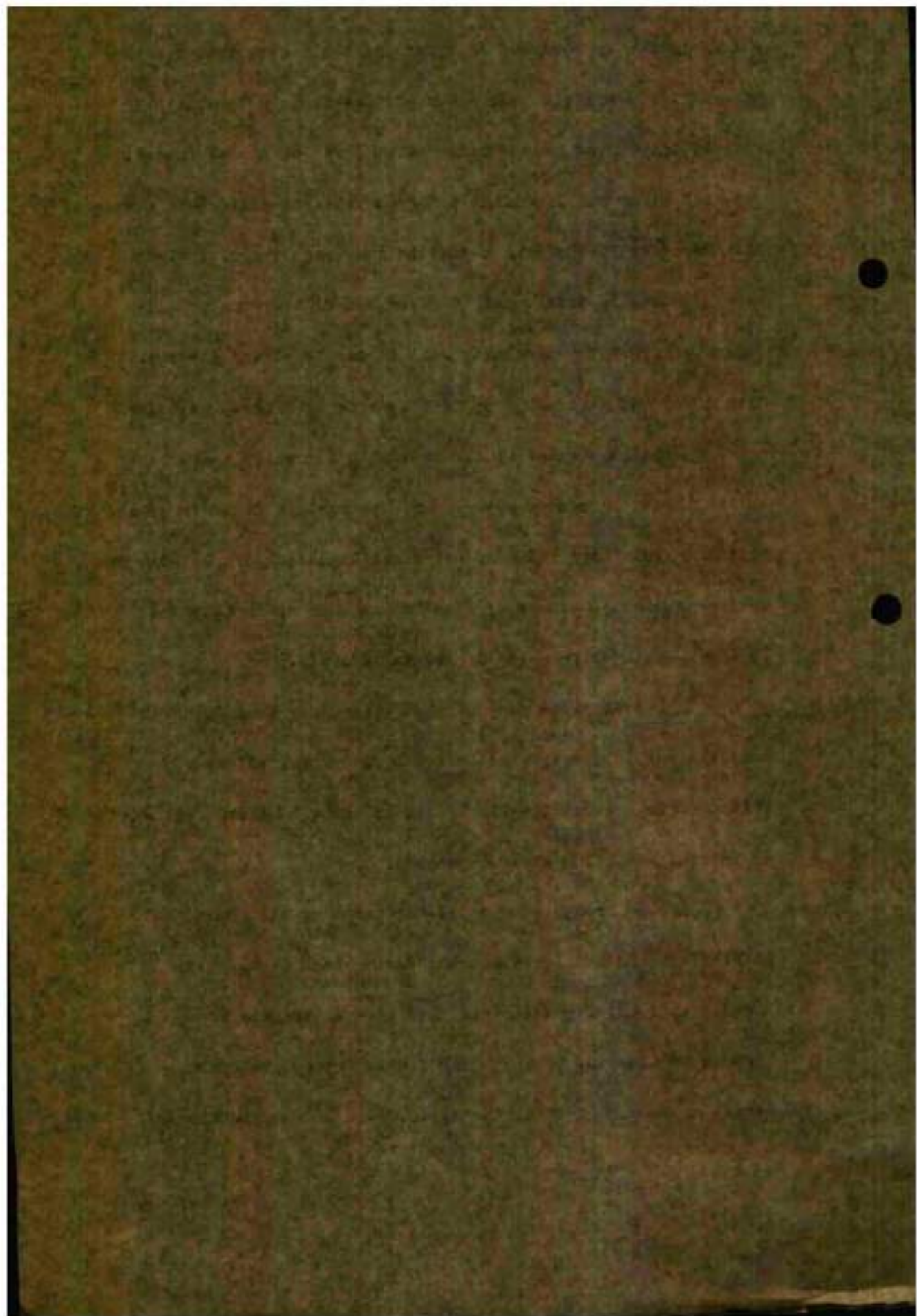
- 283 -

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 track concentrations along the Gazala front, with fighter and fighter-bomber aircraft performing particularly well during low-level attacks. Altogether 590 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 8d Group 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 Elencio. During a GEM fighter sweep above the Panzer Army near El-Afen, the R.A.F. lost six Curtiss aircraft



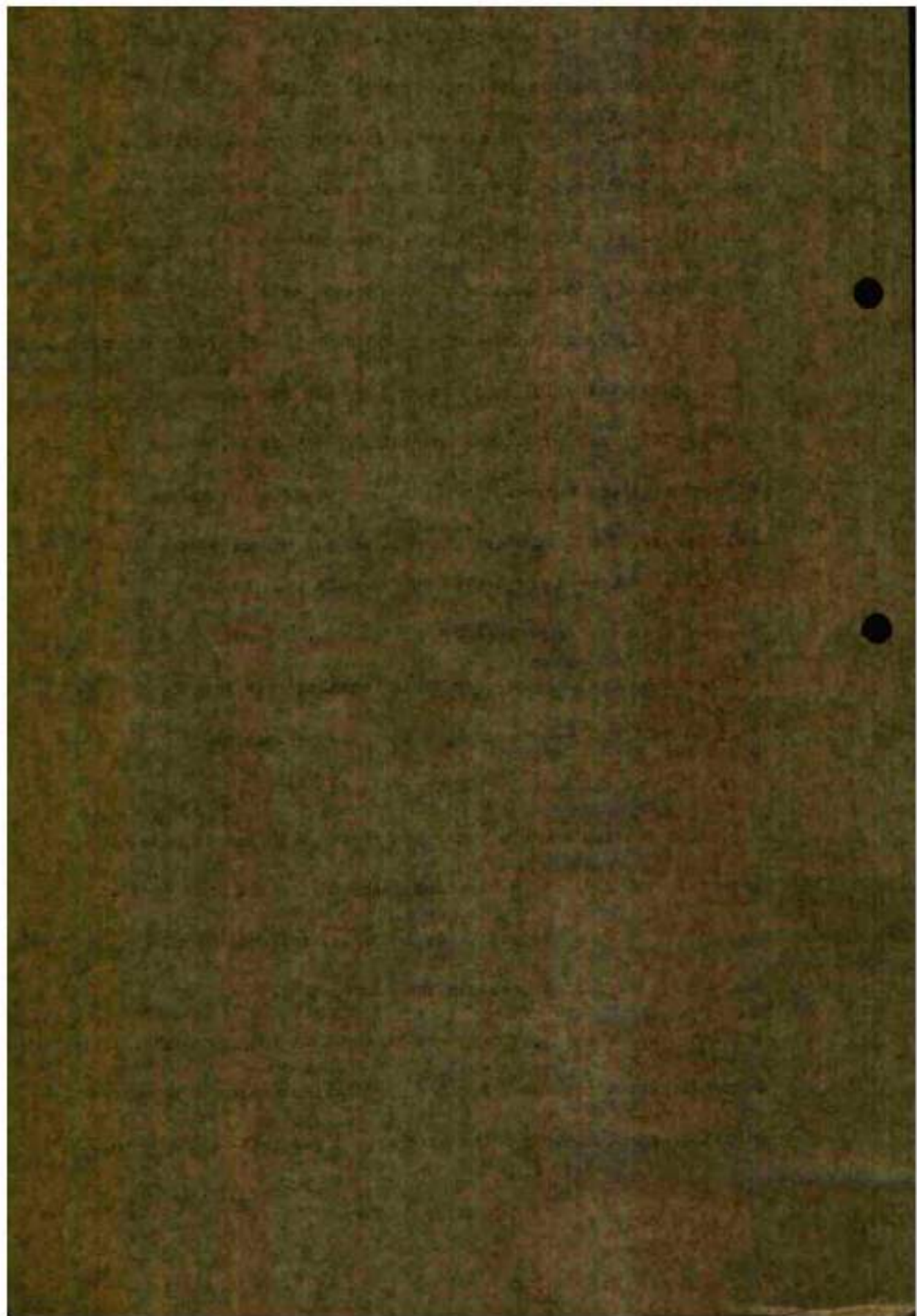
- 264 -

with 1st Lt. Marnsille 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-Adon 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-Beneh and shot down 9 aircraft. Fighter-



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End of C.
p. 234

bombers attacked trucks within the Tobruk perimeter and the British fighter airfields near Gambut, hitting two British XXI 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-Gohi 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. Marneille obtaining his 101st victory.

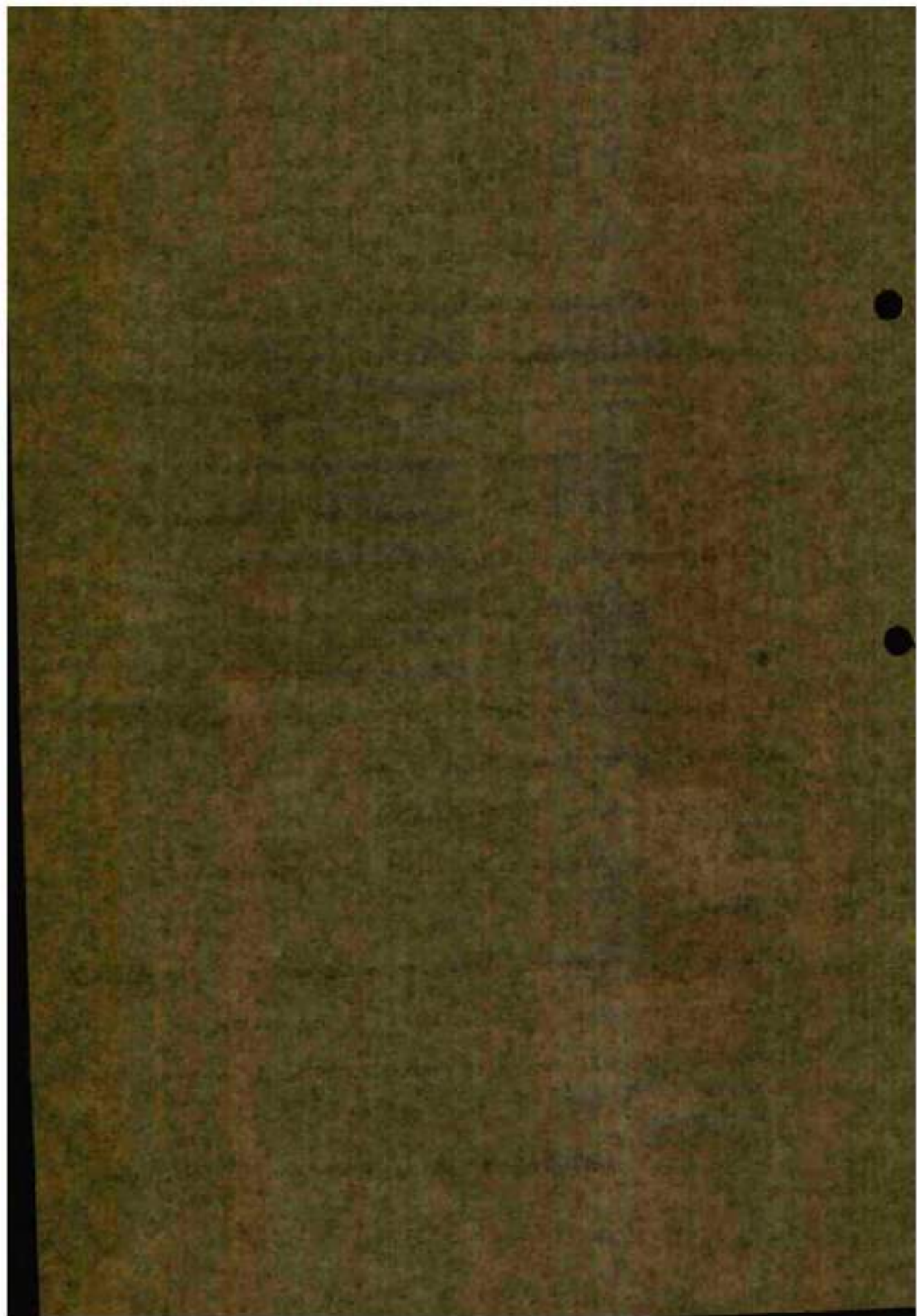
On the Gamala airfield that had just been occupied by the Luftwaffe, the 27th Fighter Wing was attacked by low-level aircraft around 1400, which led to a loss of seven aircraft.

The forward displacement of fighters to El-Iden that had been ordered by the Supreme Commander South (C.E. Gued) 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 0800.

b. The attack sectors for the 3d Dive-Bomber Wing are determined.



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End of S.
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.B. 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.

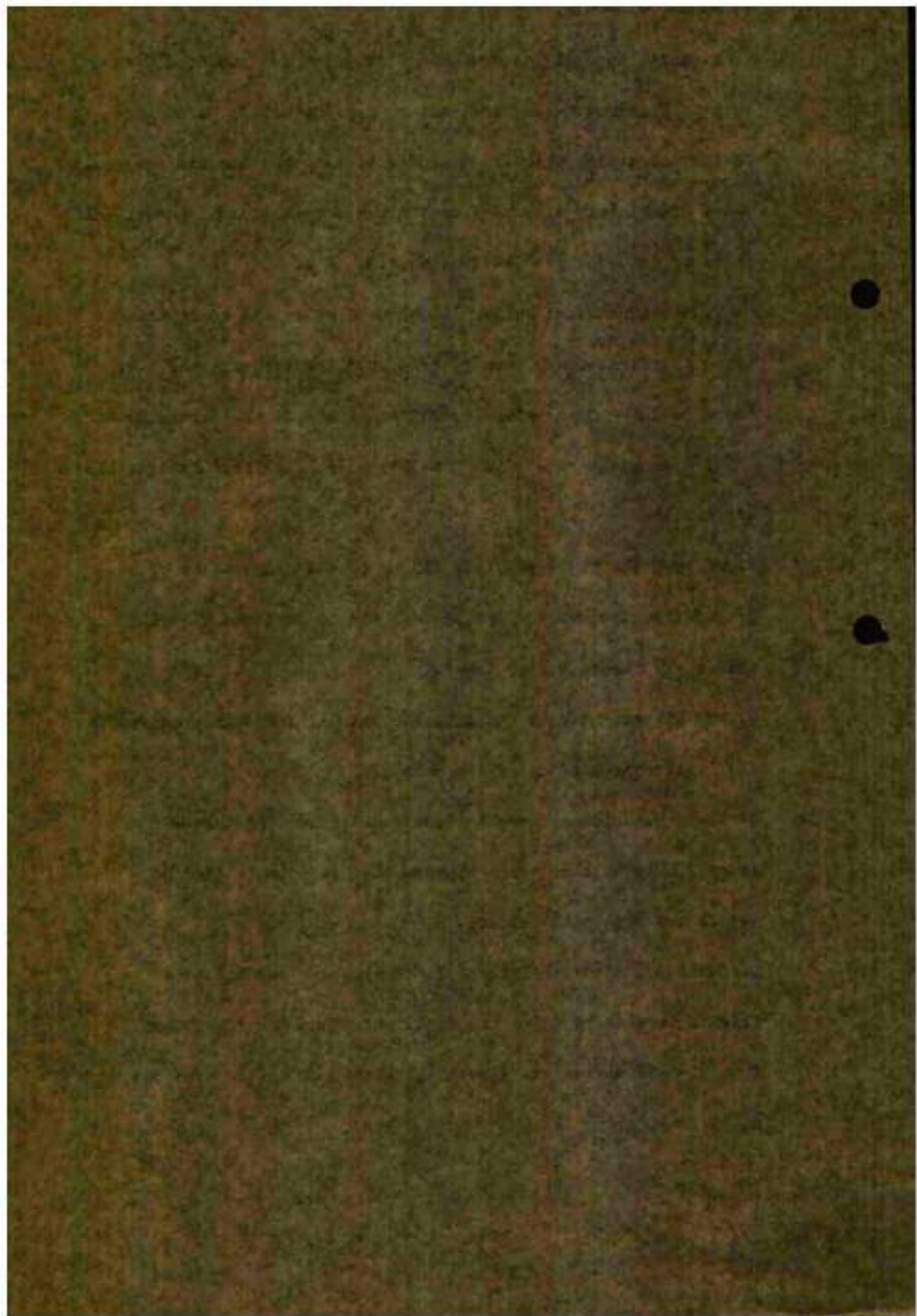
g. Commitment of Italian Cant E against flak positions at the airfield and port.

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-Gebi to Gambut. A weather detachment was to move out on 19 June.



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End of 3.
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6. General Bearel considered it feasible to displace forward some air force supplies to Hidi-Begagh, 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

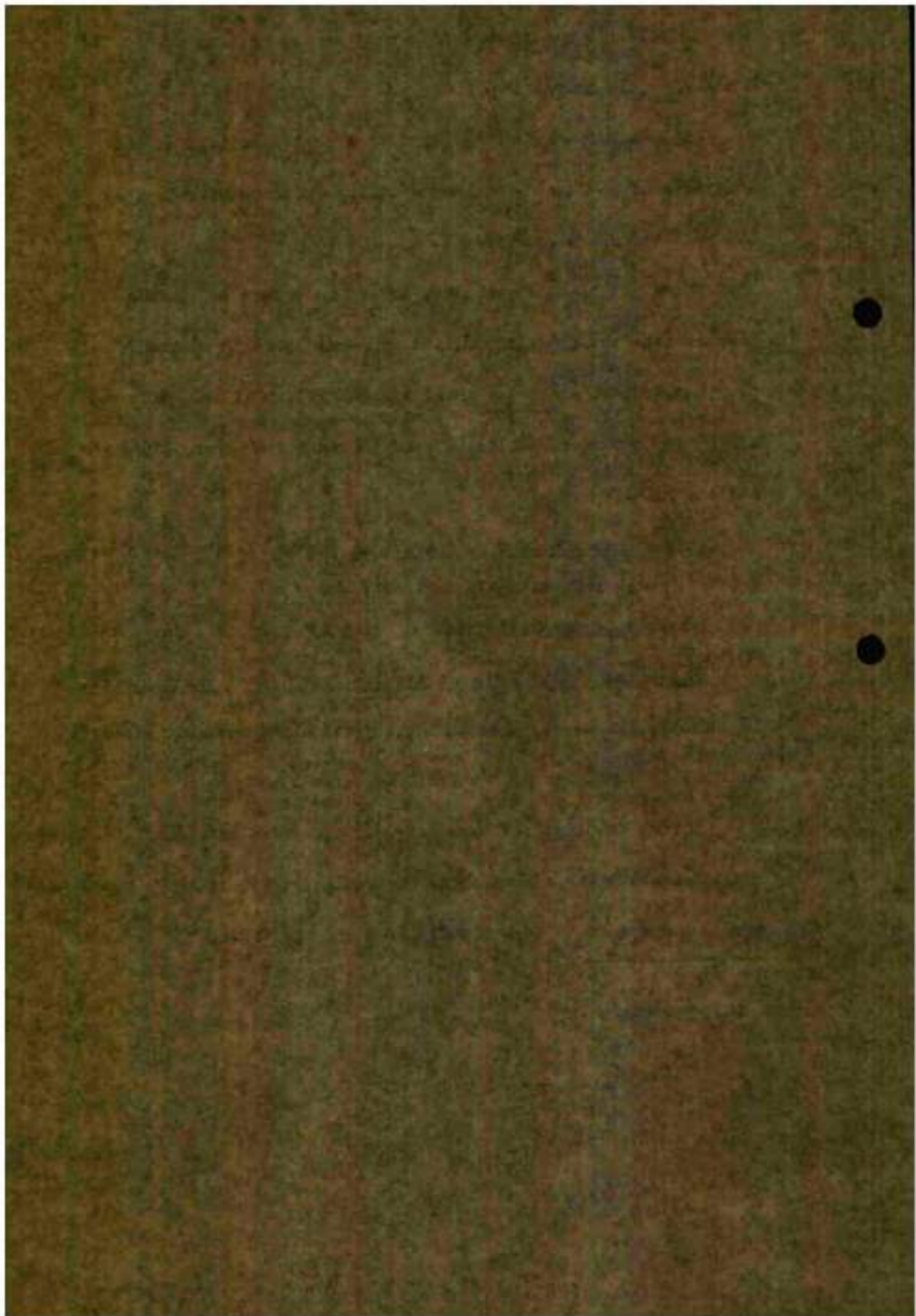
in the Hile area: 13 squadrons with 235 aircraft, for a total of:

55 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 the Iraqi areas.

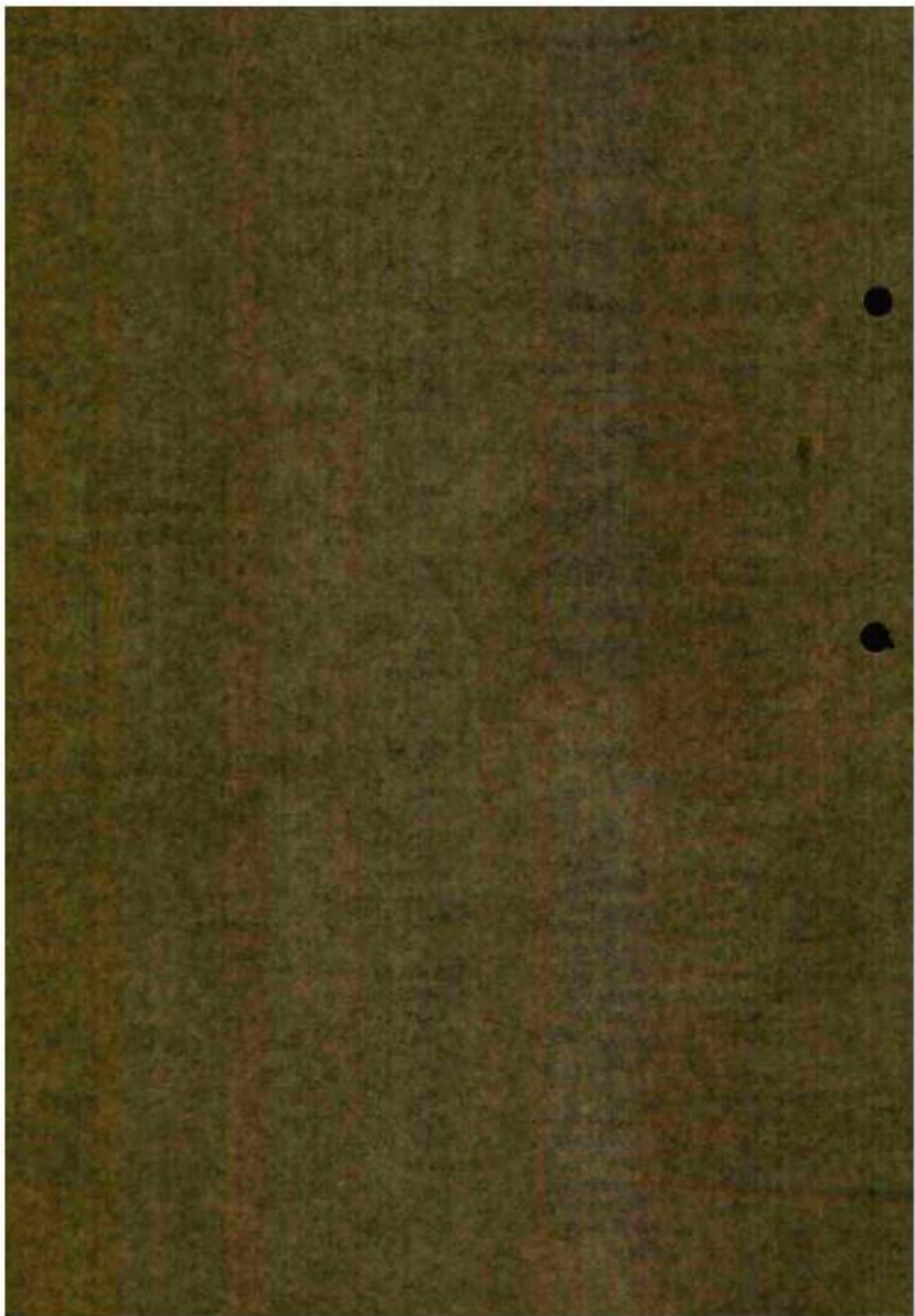
During the last few days only six squadrons had been committed above the combat area, the remaining frontline squadrons were probably being deployed and shifted.

See Appendix 30.



Annex 3 to Page 287 (appendix 30)

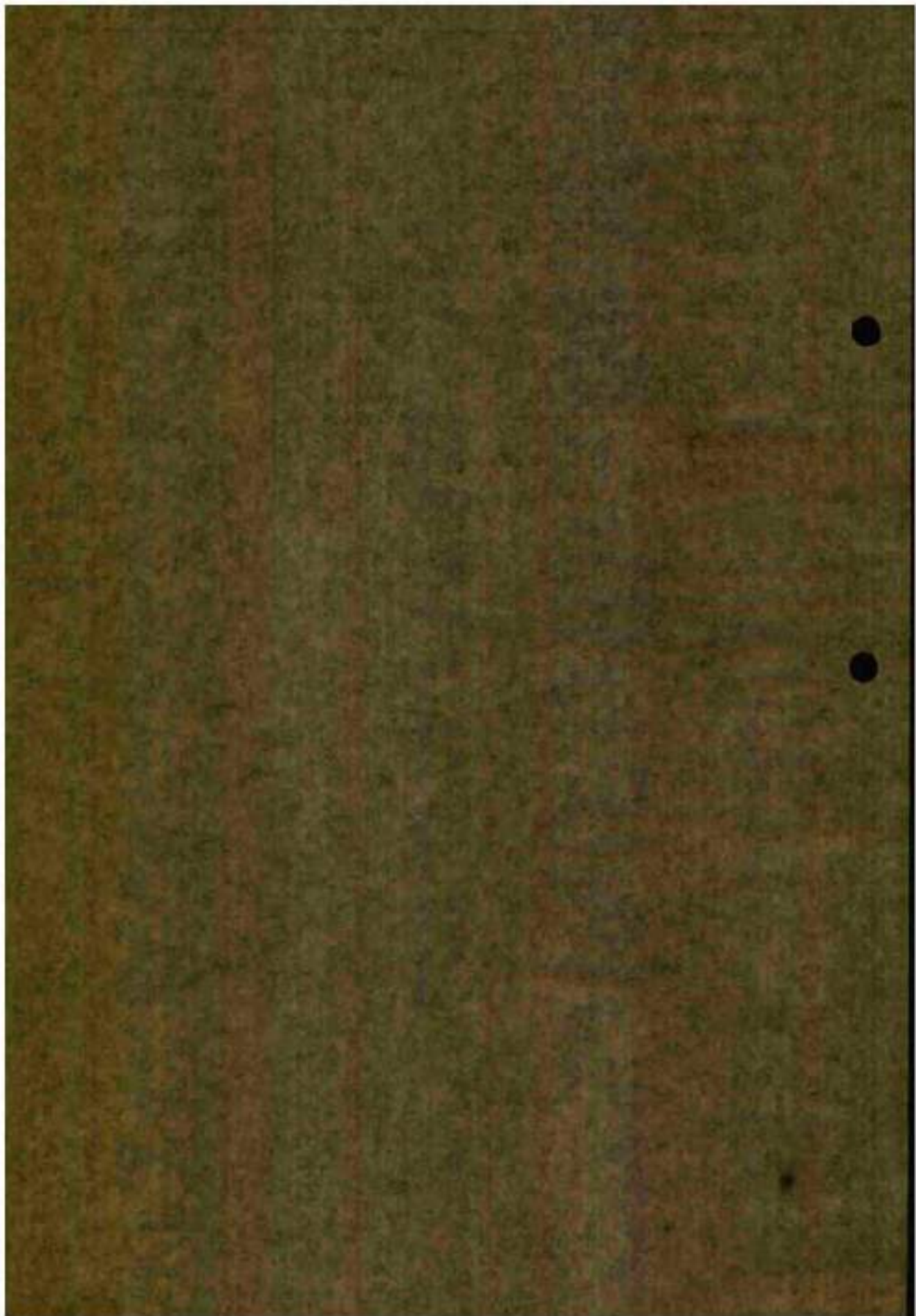
Time	Unit	Target	Observations
<u>H-hour</u>			
plus 2 min.	3d Bomb. Wing	R.49 - R.59	Continuous reconnaissance above Teluk, every 2 minutes after H-hour
	First Luftwaffe Area Command	R.61 - R.71 Battery positions F.10; L.8	
+ 15 Minutes	3d Bomb. Wing	Battery positions in J.51	
+ 20 min.	6 Junkers 87	L.6	
Between H + 20 and 30 minutes	3d Group, 26th Twin-engine Fighter Wing 3 Messerschmitt 110	Battery positions B.8; 9; C.9, 11	
Between H + 30 and 40 minutes	3 Messerschmitt 110	Same target	Alternative target around and southeast of road fork B.41
Between H + 50 and 60 minutes	3 Messerschmitt 110	Same target	Point of main efforts; Identified batteries.
Between H + 70 and 80 minutes	3 Messerschmitt 110	Same target	
Until H + 90 minutes	Batteries East	Batteries in H.3, 4, 5, 6 and Area D.3; B.4; B.3, 4, 5, 6; C.3, 4, 5	Alternate targets around and southeast of road fork B.4
Between H + 90 and 100 minutes	3d Dive-Bomber Squadron 9 Junkers 87	Battery positions F.3; L.4.	Alternate targets southeast of road fork
Between H + 100 and 120 Min. (?)	3d Dive-Bomber Squadron 1 Junkers 87	Battery positions H.4; L.3	area D.3, 4 B.3, 4, 5, 6 C.3, 4, 5
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	



Annex 2 to Form 252 (Appendix 30)

Page 2

Time	Unit	Target	Observations
Between H + 140 AMH and 150 minutes	First Luft- waffe Area Command 9 Junkers 88	Fortified positions in D.3; 4	Alternate target Fort Solara, battery positions and the area west of road fork D.4
Between H + 150 and 160 minutes	First Luft- waffe Area Command 9 Junkers 88	Fortified positions in C.3, 4, 5, and 6.	
Between H + 160 and 170 minutes	First Luft- waffe Area Command 9 Junkers 88	Fortified positions in B.3, 4, 5, and 6.	
Between H + 170 and 180 minutes	First Luft- waffe Area Command 9 Junkers 88	Fortified positions in B.3, 4, 5, and 6.	



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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 126 ready for service;
- b. II Air Corps had 120 aircraft, with 78 ready for service; and
- c. X Air Corps had 161 aircraft, with 93 ready for service. The total authorized strength was therefore 614 aircraft, of which 397 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 Aden - Adroma area, thus preventing them from breaking through to the coast.

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

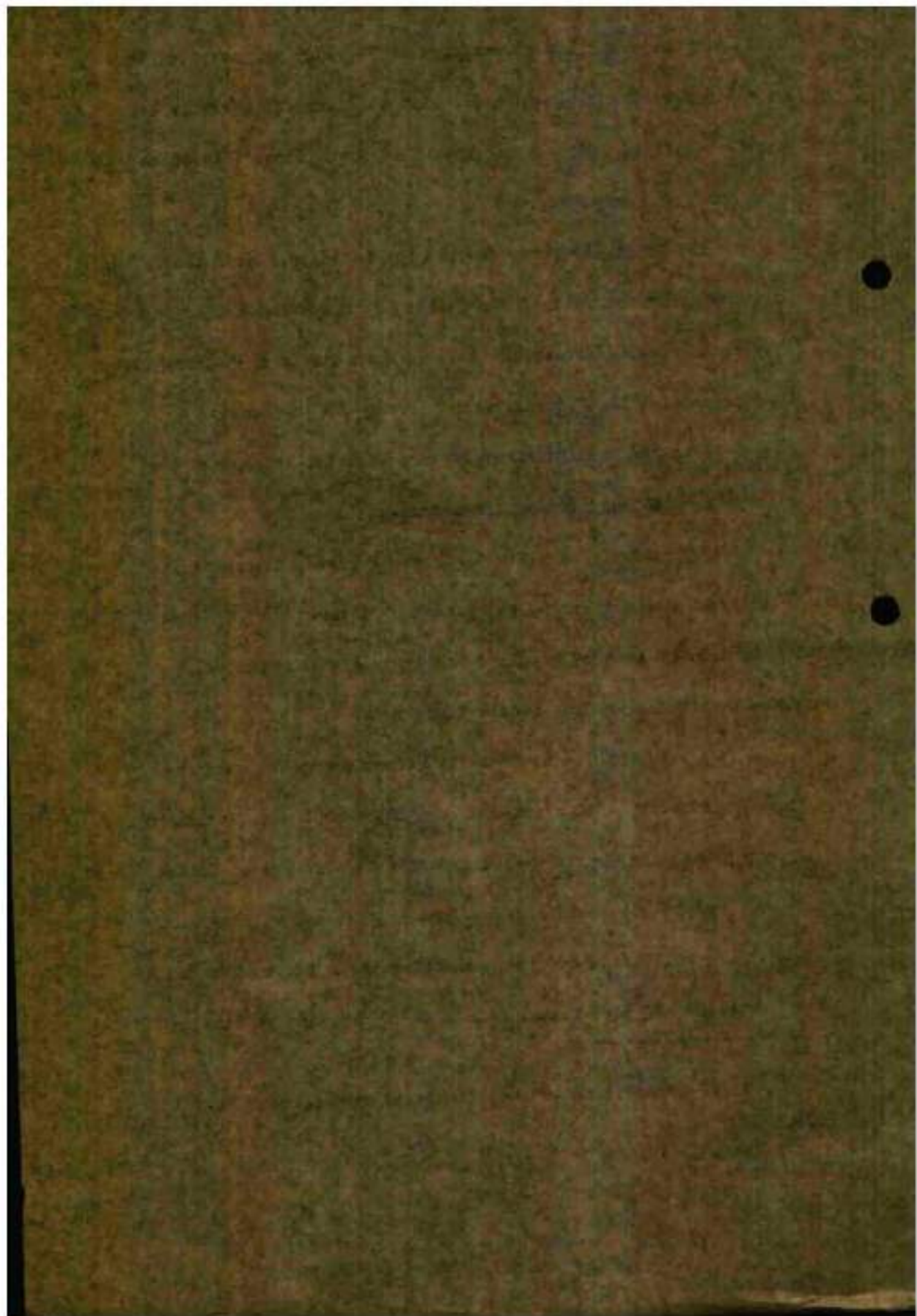
The resupply of Malta had been of grave concern to the British War Cabinet during the past few months.^{**} On 20 March the last 5,000 tons of supplies had arrived on the island, and since then Malta had not received any more.

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.

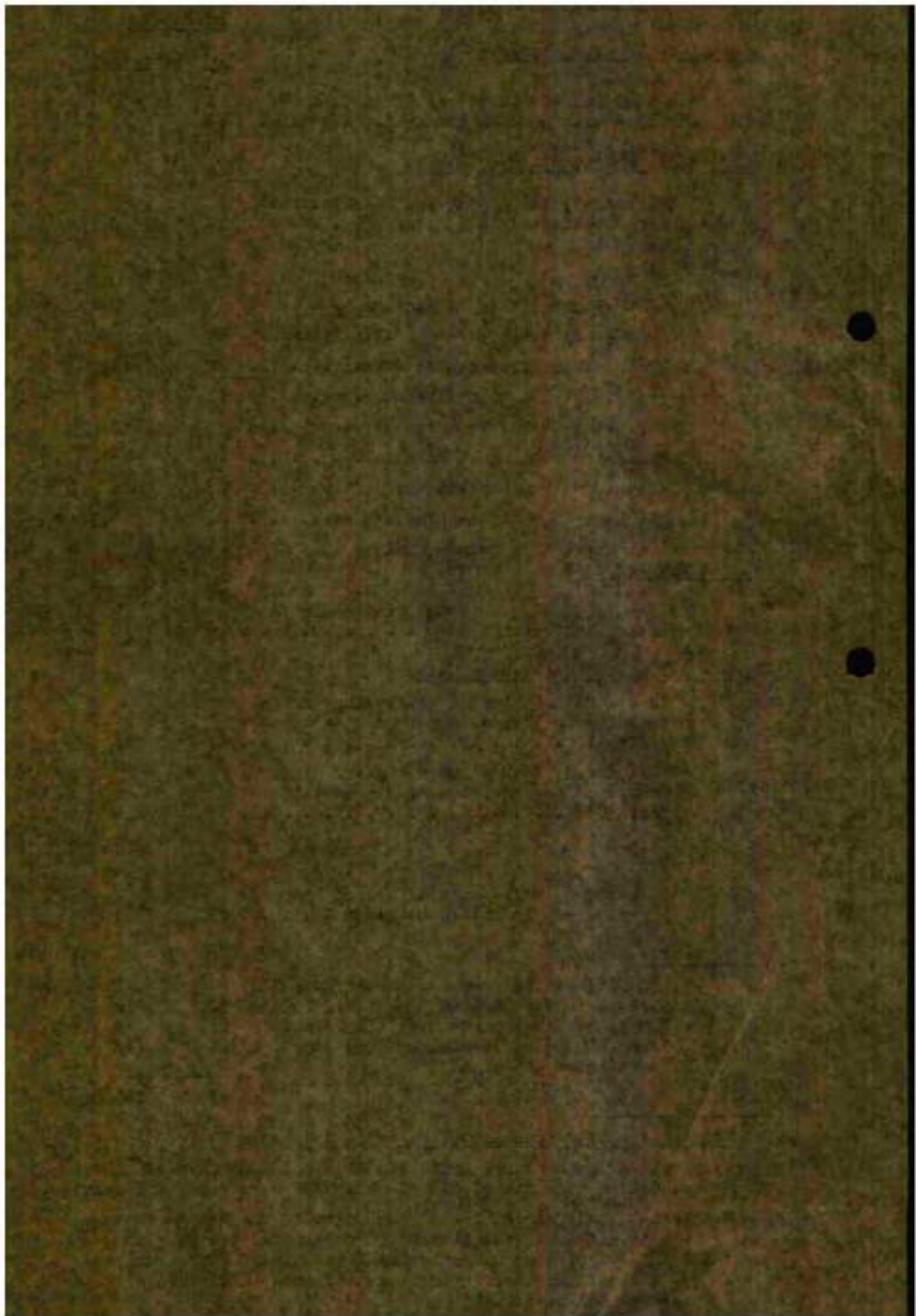


Annex 4a to Page 258a. Air Force Commander Africa and Panzer Army Headquarterson 20 June 1942*

	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>20</u>	<u>Actual</u>
<u>Short Range Reconnaissance</u>		
4th Squadron (H)/12 (I) at Hartuba, equipped with Messerschmidts 109 and 110	23	13
<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance</u>		
1st Squadron, 121st Long-Range Recon. Grp. at Berna, equipped with Junkers 88	12	9
<u>Fighter Units</u>		
Hq, 27th Fighter Wing at Hartuba	1	0
1st Group, 27th Fighter Wing at Hartuba.	29	10
2d Group, 27th Fighter Wing at Hartuba.	22	14
3d Group, 27th Fighter Wing at Hartuba.	21	12
27th Fighter-Bomber Squadron at Berna	9	3
27th Fighter Command at Malaga	5	3
3d Group, 53d Fighter Wing at Hartuba	26	18
53d Fighter-Bomber Squadron at Hartuba	7	4
(All equipped with Messerschmidts 109)		
<u>Night Fighter Unit</u>		
1st Group, 2d Night Fighter Wing at Berna equipped with Junkers 88	28	10
<u>Twin-Engine Support Fighter Units</u>		
3d Group, 25th Support Fighter Wing, none- where in North Africa, equipped with Messer- schmidt 110	47	16
10th Squadron, 25th Support Fighter Wing, somewhere in North Africa, equipped with Boulton 17's	9	6
<u>Bomber Units</u>		
12th Squadron, First Luftwaffe Area Command, at Berna, equipped with Junkers 88	13	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 Berna)		
	<u>333</u>	<u>186</u>

Composition of Second Air Fleet on 20 June 1942

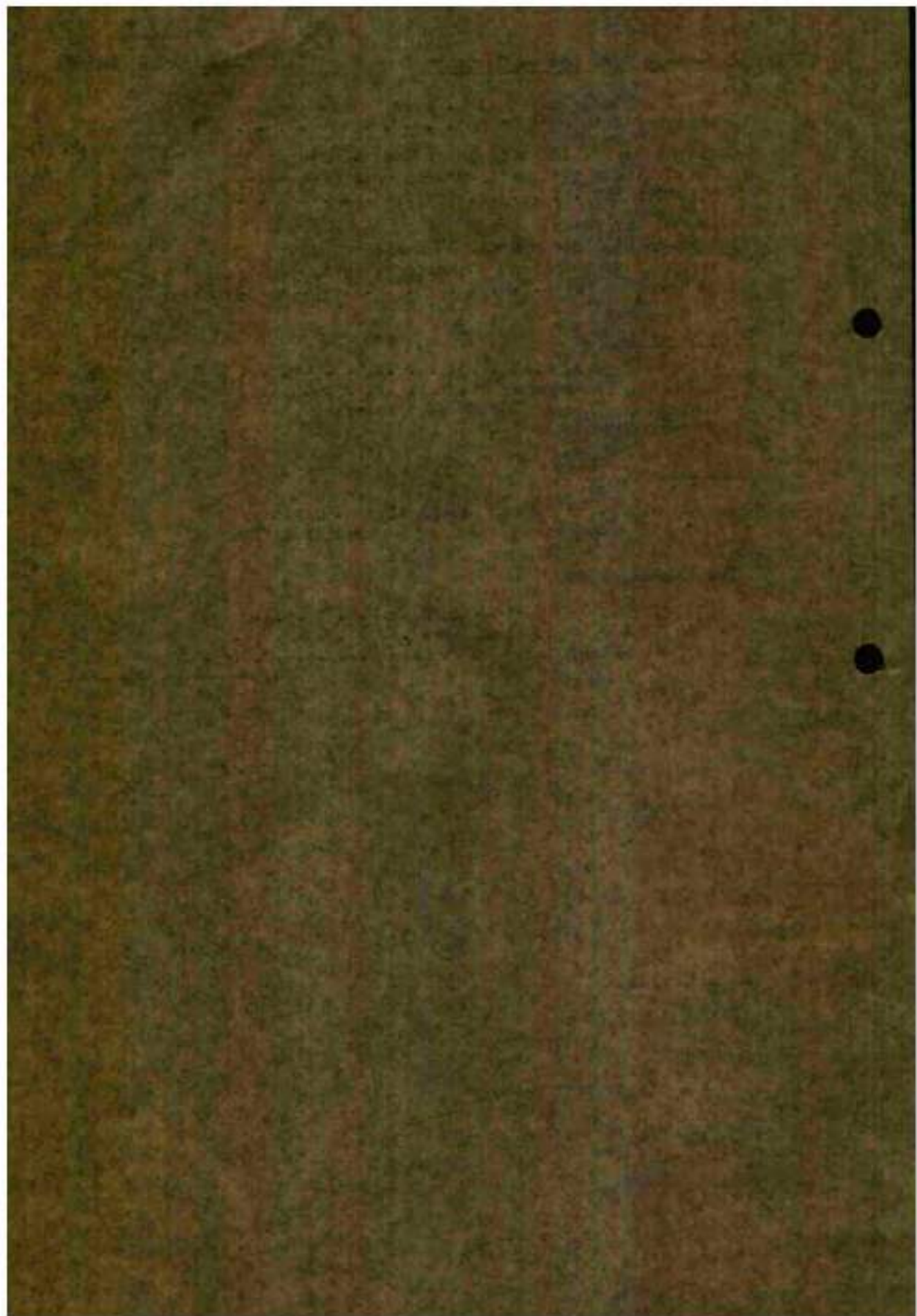
- a. Situation maps of the Luftwaffe High Command indicate an authorized strength of 614 of which 337 were ready for service.
- b. Strength Analysis of the Flying Units in the Mediterranean Theater and in Africa (Extracted from Situation Maps in England) indicates an authorized strength of 607 of which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



Annex 4b to Page 288D. II Air Corps and Second Air Fleet, Respectivelyon 30 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
(Second Air Fleet)		
2d Squadron, 122d Long-Range Reconnaissance Group at Trapani, equipped with Junkers 88	13	7
<u>Fighter Units</u>		
Hq, 53d Fighter Wing	4	4
2d Group, 53d Fighter Wing	27	17
(Both at Comiso and both equipped with Messerschmidts 109)		
<u>Night Fighter Units</u>		
Hq 1st 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	25	16
Hq, 34th Bomber Group at Catania	2	2
	120	78

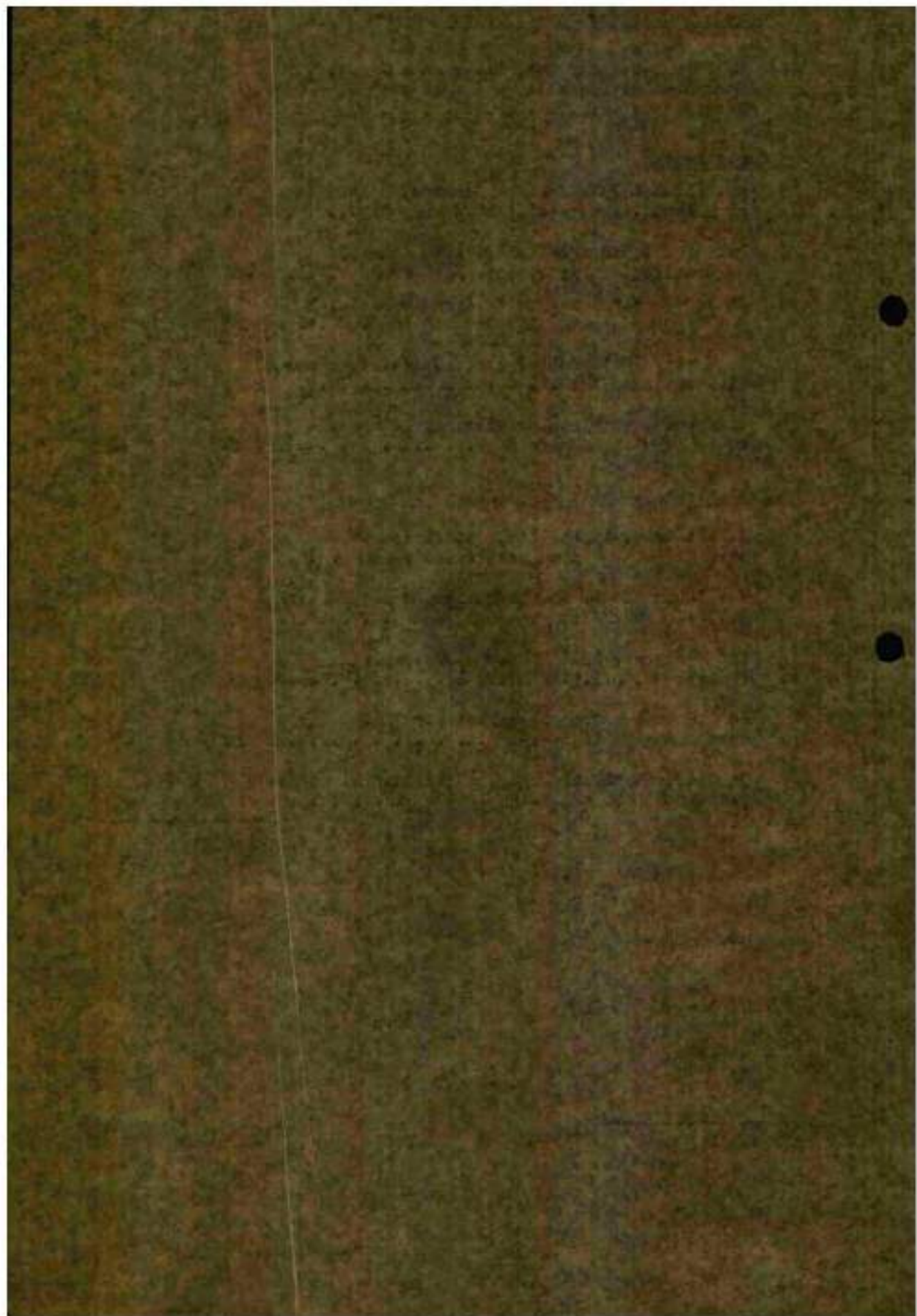
* See Footnote 4a



Annex 4c to Page 208c. U. S. Air Corps as of 30 June 1942

<u>Long-Range Reconnaissance Units</u>	<u>Strength</u>	
	<u>Authorized</u>	<u>Actual</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 Albusia, 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 Fato, equipped with Heinkel 111	20	14
1st Group, 50th Bomber Wing, at Albusia, equipped with Junkers 88	25	19
<u>Naval Aircraft Units</u>		
2d Squadron, 125th Group, stationed at Skaramanga, equipped with Arado 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 F.V. 8 (777)	11	3
2d Squadron, 126th Group, at Fawilla, 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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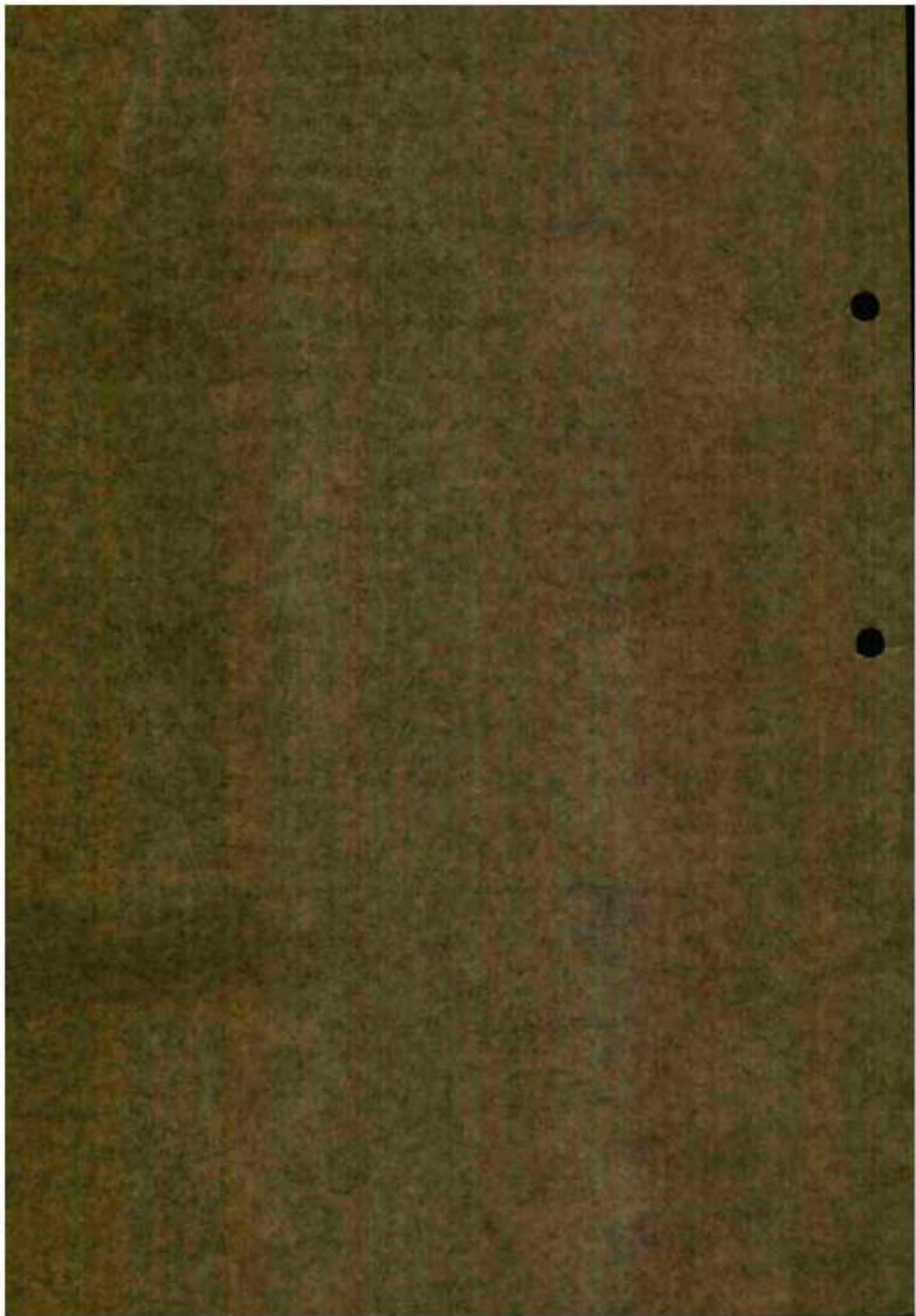
them without let-up every night up to 11 June. The fighter aircraft stationed on Malta had increased to more than 100 Spitfires, which had been moved in by the aircraft carrier "Eagle." Other British aircraft had also been transferred to Malta, and some 60 of the latter were ready for service.

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 ~~very~~ 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

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

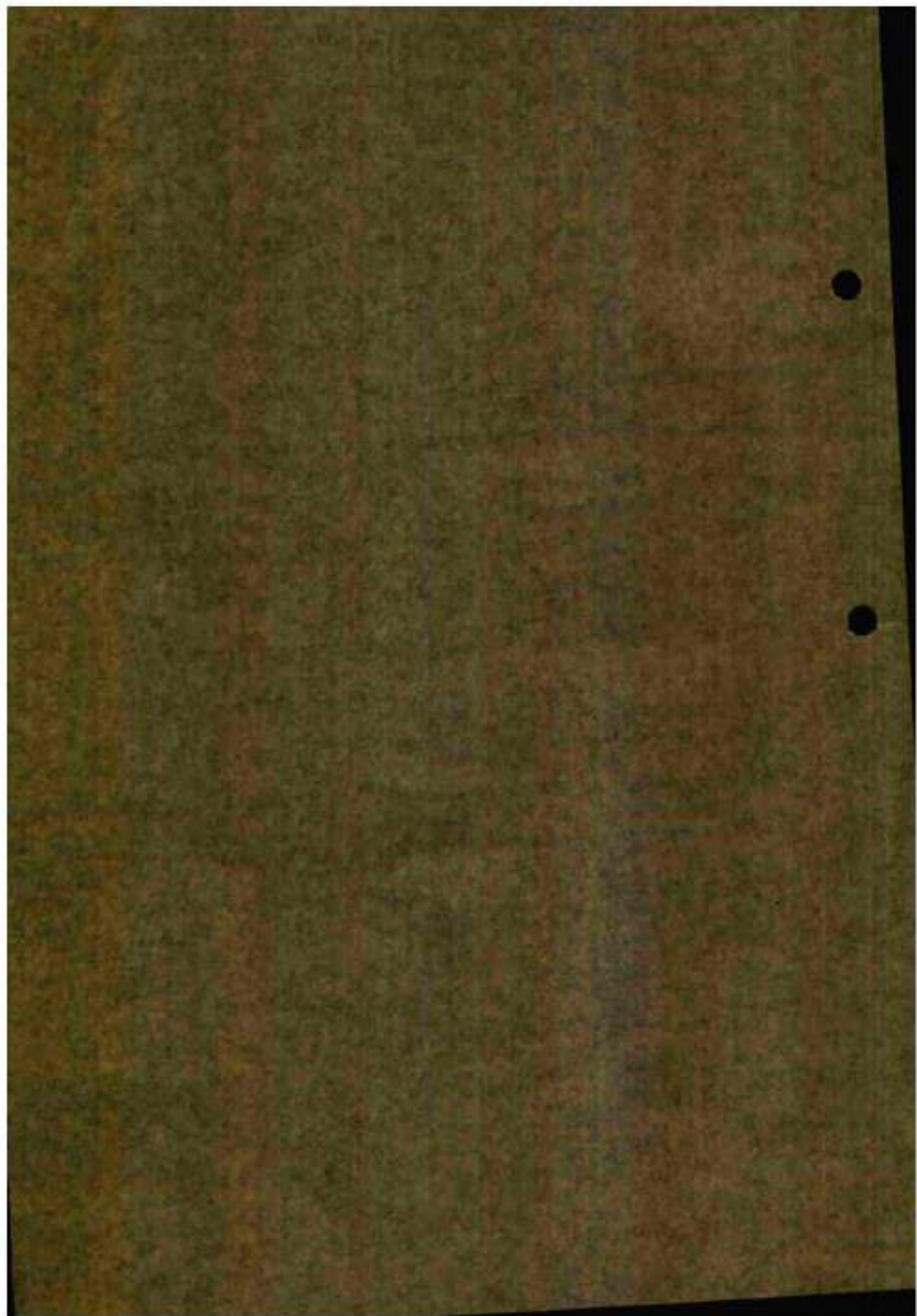


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the Atlantic. They were escorted by the antiaircraft cruiser "Galio" and nine destroyers. Admiral Curtie had his command post on the battleship "Malaya"; the aircraft carriers "Eagle" and "Argus", 3 cruisers and 8 destroyers were ready and available 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 gun were superior to the British in range, and before the British succeeded in chasing the Axis forces -- not without losses to them -- the destroyer "Bedouin" 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 VESUVIUS -- 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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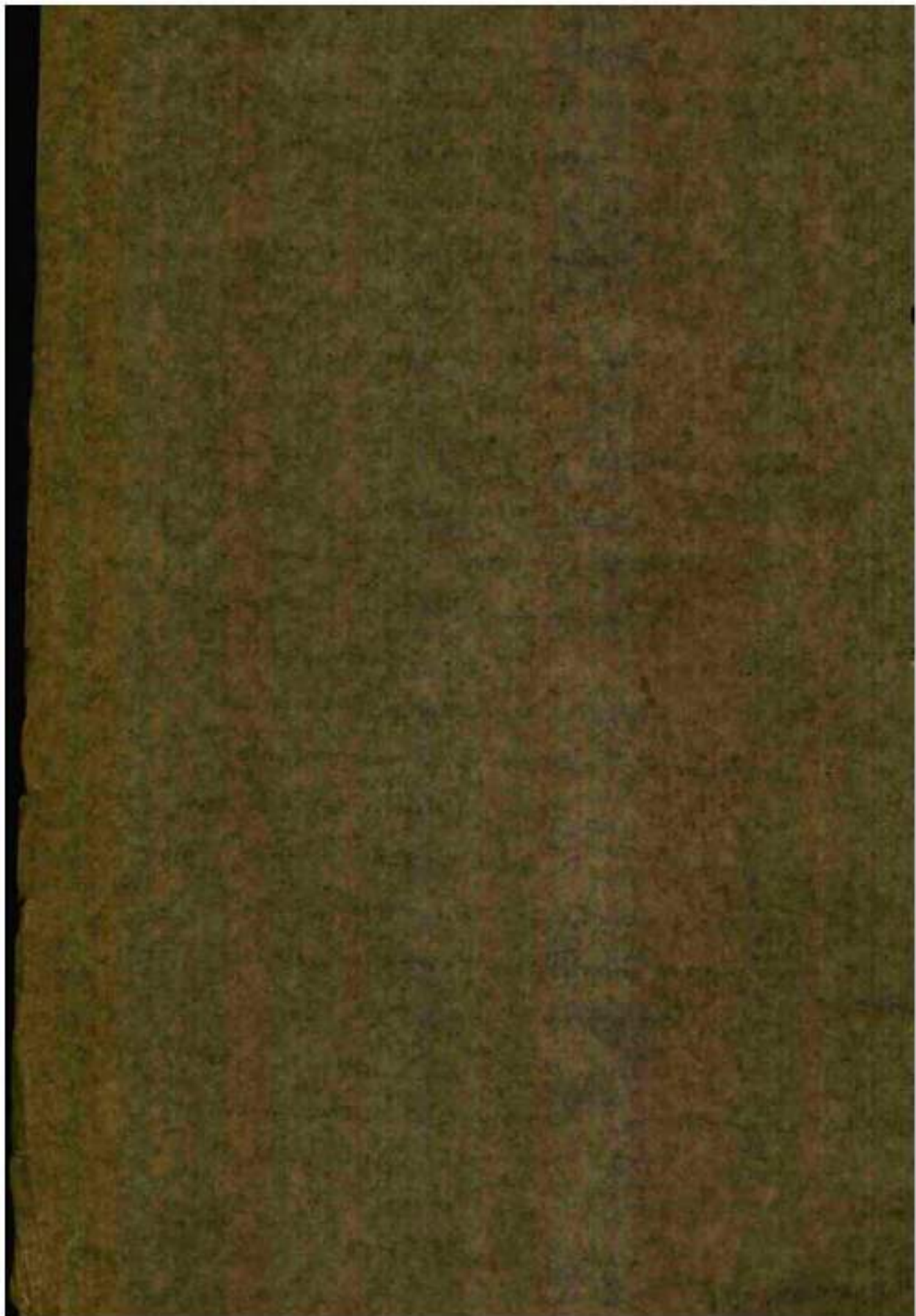
than when he had won his victorious engagement in March.

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 Vice received a radio message that the enemy fleet, including two battleships of the "Littorio" 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 19 June appeared inevitable. Convoy and escort vessels were forced to return to Egypt. The cruiser "Hermion" had meanwhile been sunk by a submarine, while 3 destroyers and 3 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 convey attempted to force its way from that side until November of 1942.

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

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

The air bases around Ghat 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 B.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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174
 sizable forces were controlled by the Axis powers.

Kessel hoped that the thrust on Tobruk -- a pincer movement -- would surprise his adversary. Outside the fortress to the west of the Egyptian border, there were no sizable British armored forces.

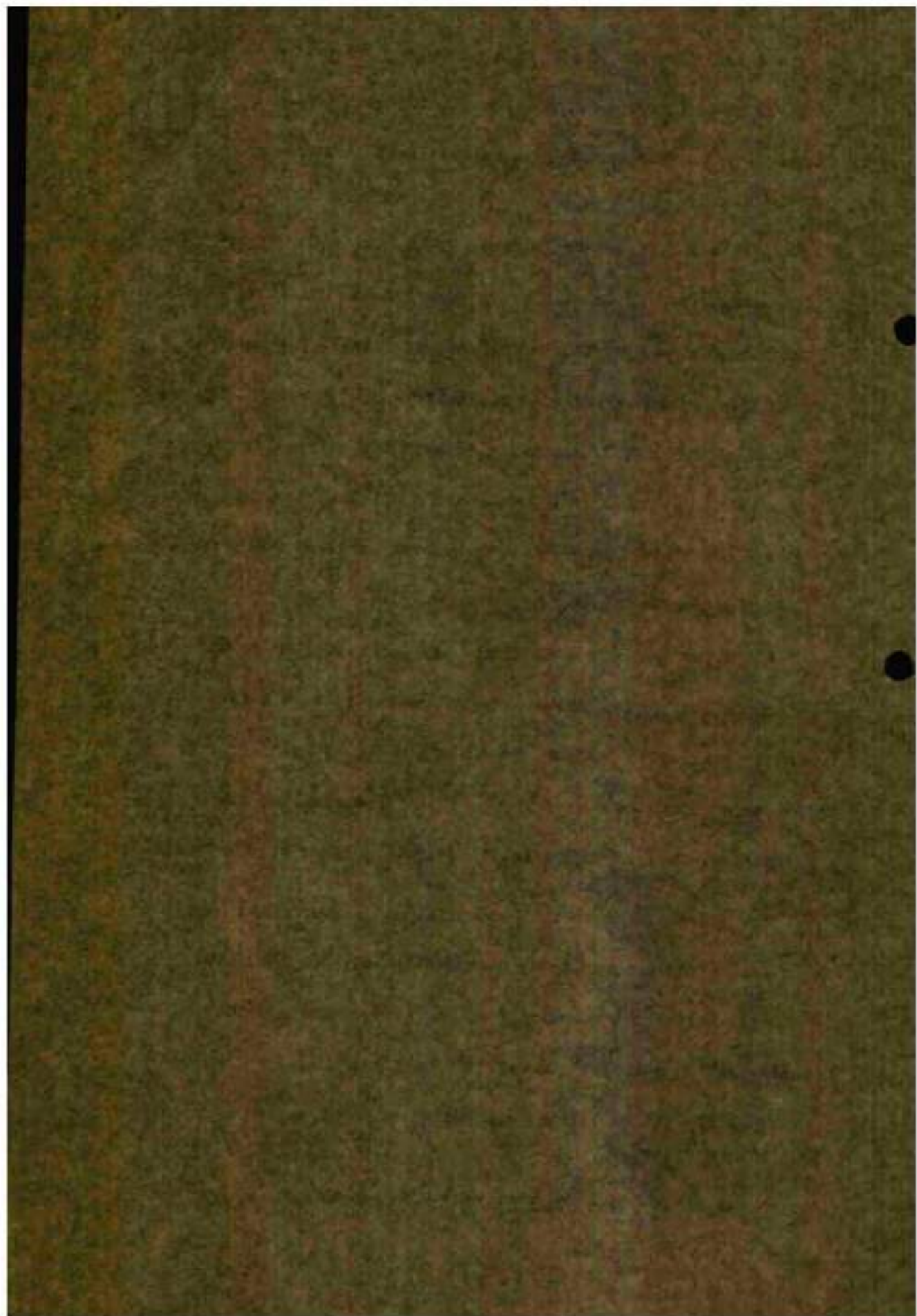
It was believed that because of the swiftness of the fighting after 22 June, the staffs and combat units had been unable to plan a systematic defense of Tobruk. The garrison consisted of the reinforced South African 2d Division, the Indian 11th Brigade, two battalions of the Guards Brigade, a few armored battalions led by the 32d Indian 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 entire 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

174

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



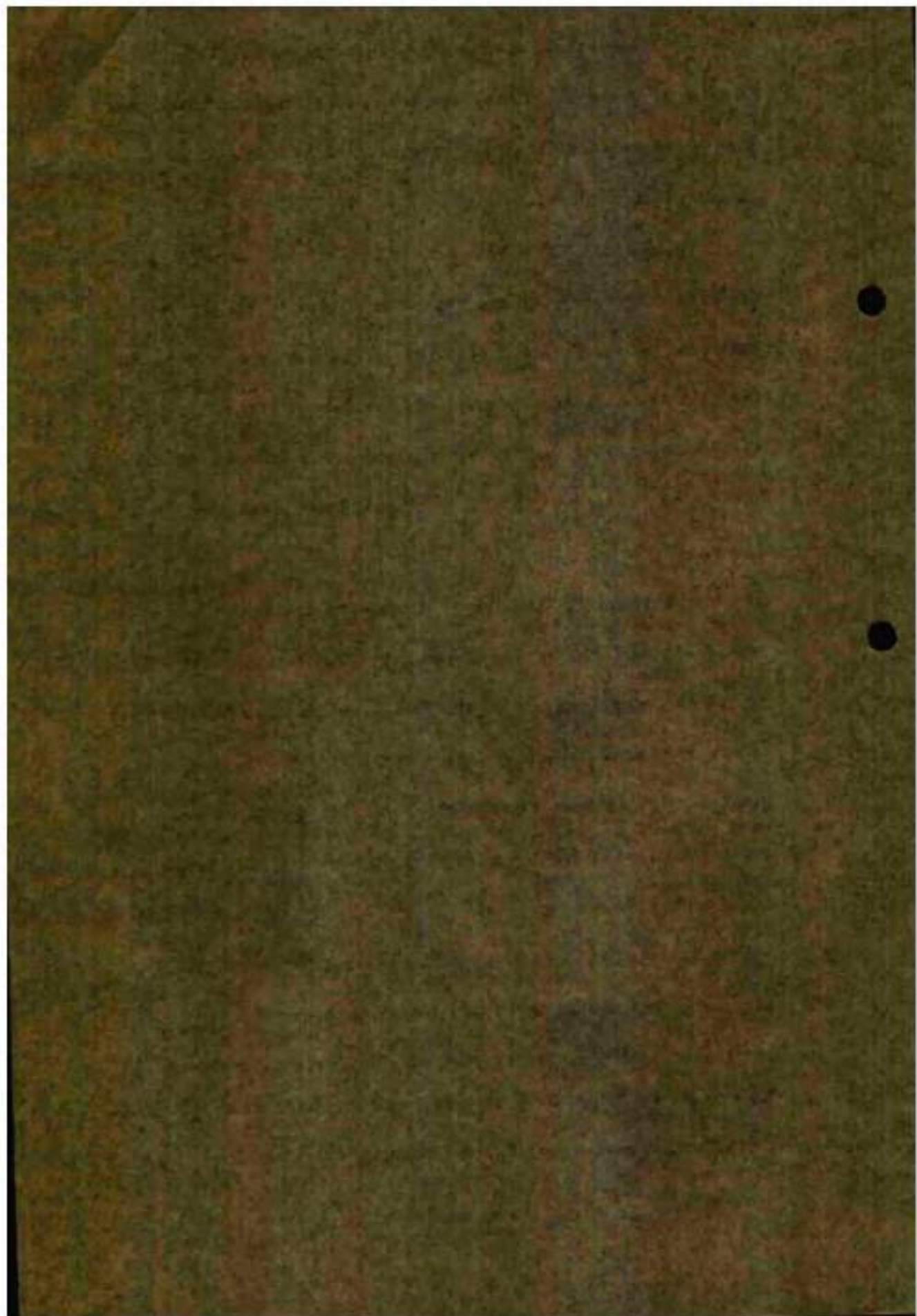
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and barbed wire entanglements. Behind the outer belt of fortifications, which in most instances was constituted by several concentric lines, there were strong artillery positions, field positions, and several individual fortresses. Most of these fortifications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

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

As soon as the infantry had overcame 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-Medaw 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 shrapnel and weapons of the defenders. Soon after bomb



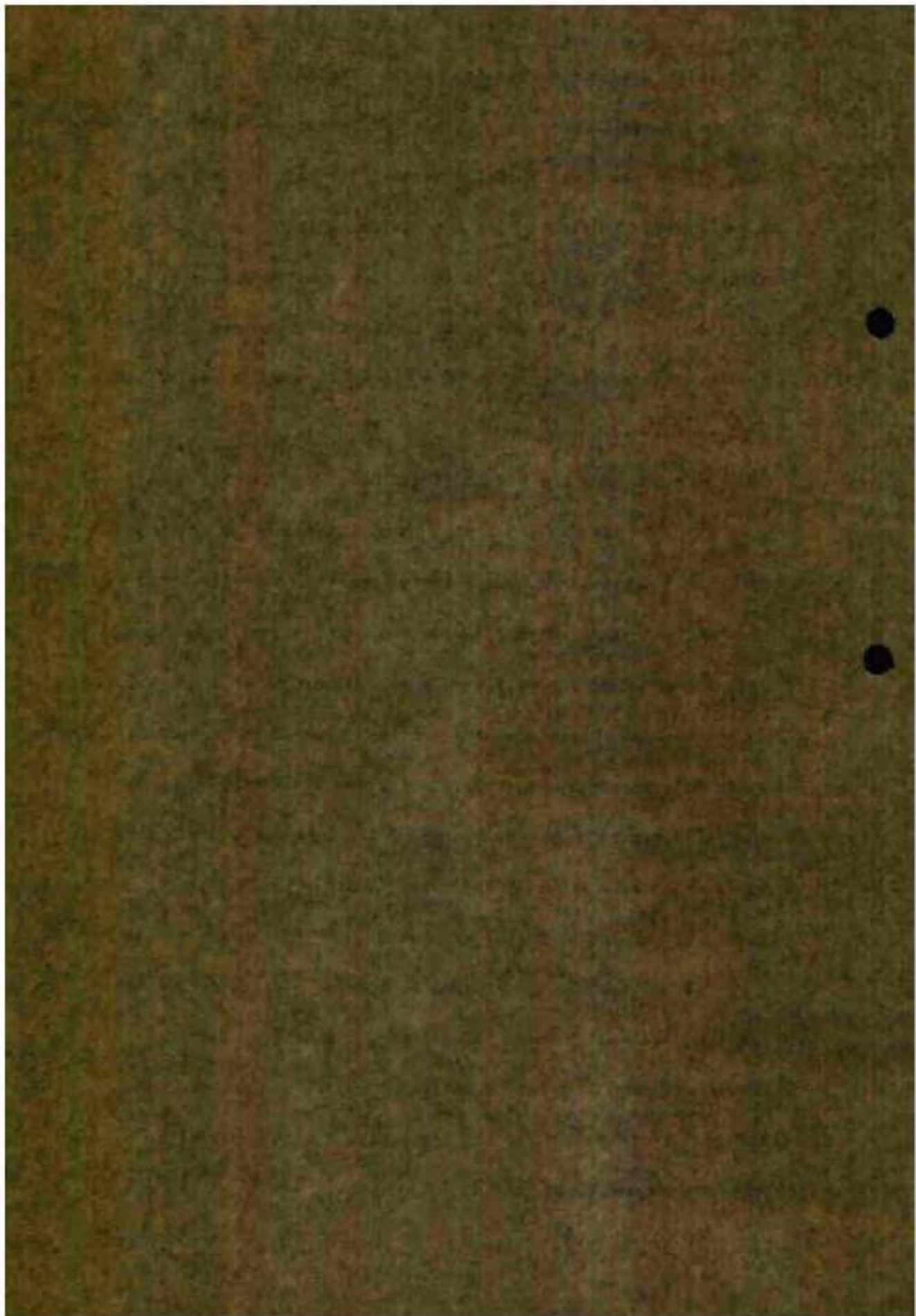
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tore into the barbed wire entanglements. Directly after the Luftwaffe assault, the infantry units of the German Africa Corps, the 15th Rifle Brigade, and the Italian XI Corps began their advance. During the preceding night some gaps had already been 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 mine 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 Sirsi-ghand after having immobilized some 50 British tanks in tough actions. The Filastine 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 Fortress Filastine also offered to surrender, while the axis forces took Fortress Elaro 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 African Corps already in the afternoon.

At 0940 on 21 June General Klopfer, 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.

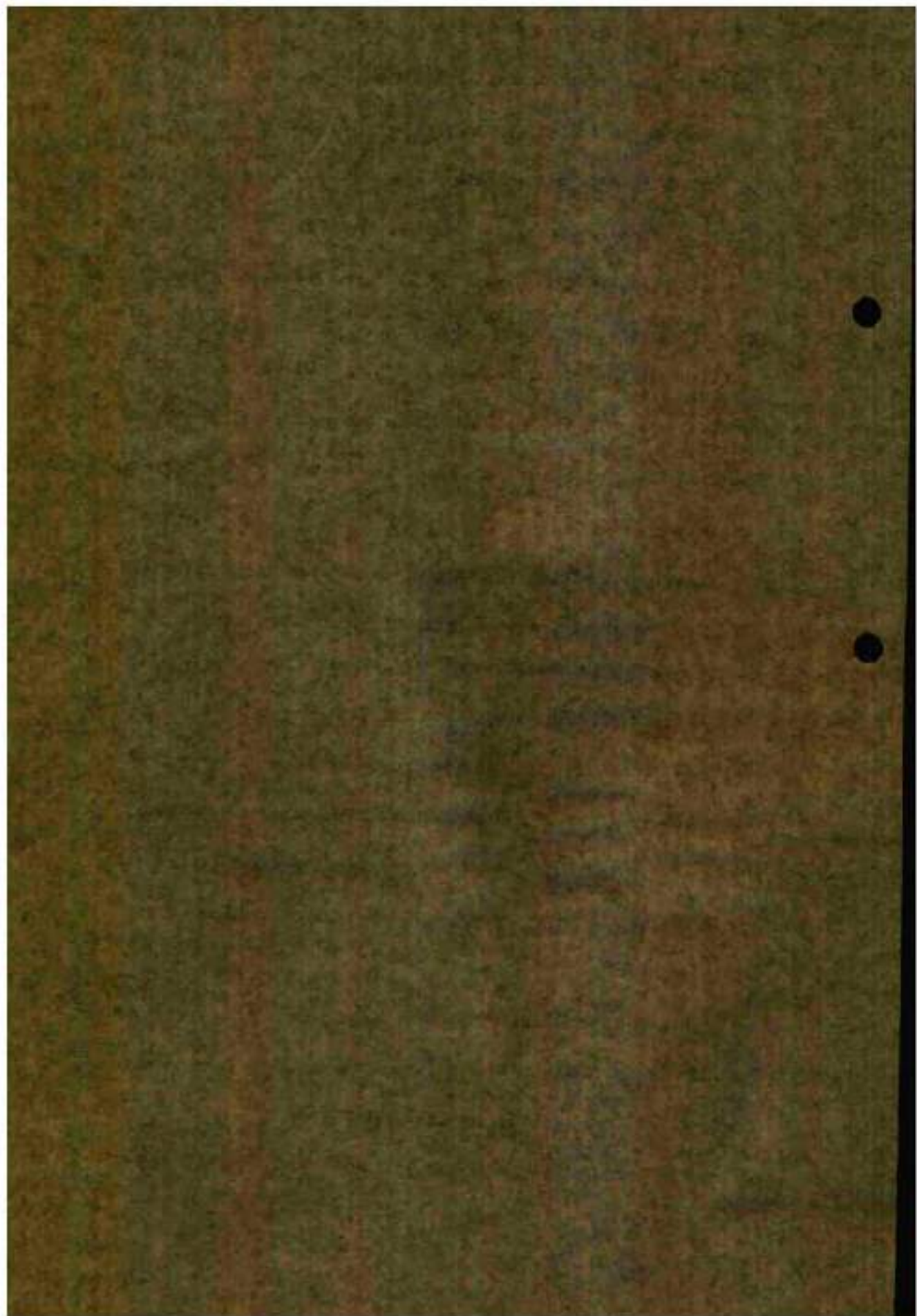
The Luftwaffe was able to score direct hits on practically all pillboxes in the planned target area, when it started the day off early in the morning of 20 June. Thus, the ground forces attack was given the necessary impetus. The continuous bombardment of the batteries that had been well marked by the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

Since no British fighters appeared over the battlefield, the fighter attacks of the Luftwaffe took place without incident. The total number of sorties flown was 365, with the Italians flying an additional 177.

By 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 material had left their traces on the Axis troops.

Even so Rommel believed that he should call 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



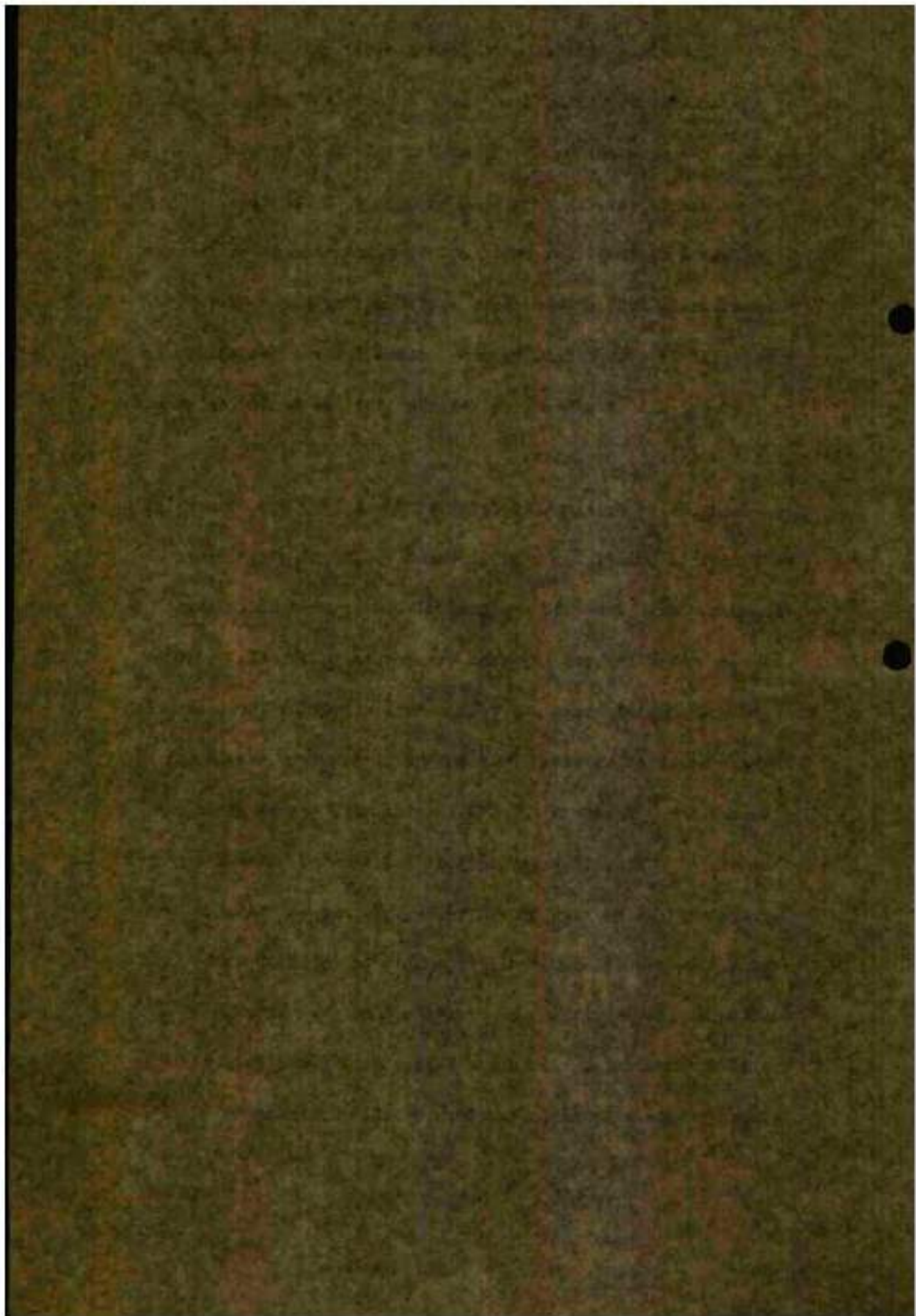
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material of all types guaranteed in his opinion the flow of supplies for the continuation of the offensive.

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 Marmarica fighting were destroyed -- this seemed quite feasible -- the British would be unable to mobilize any additional forces within the Egyptian theater. Without ^{real} any ~~real~~ 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.

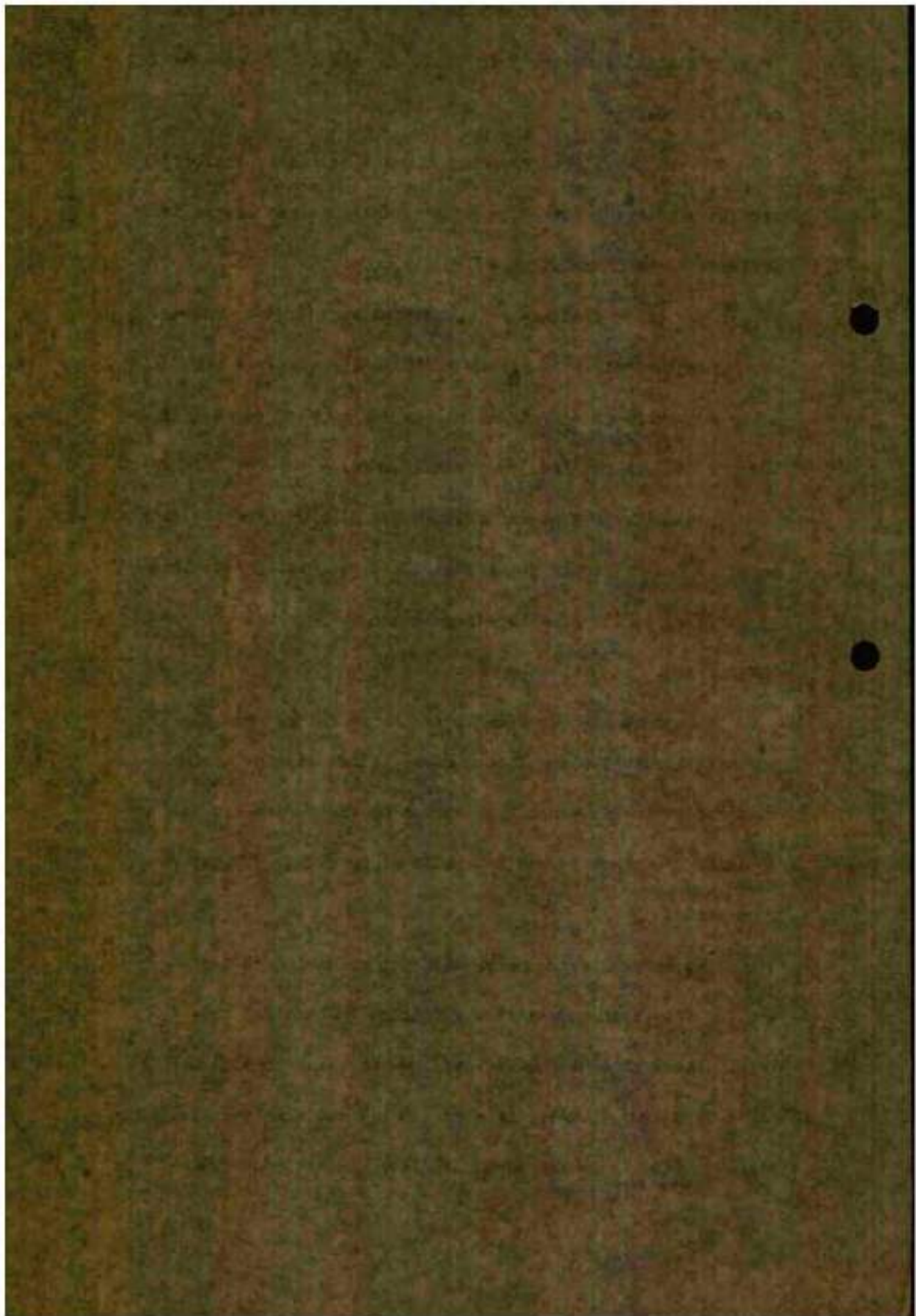
Under these circumstances, extreme speed was essential.

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-organizing so that it was incapable of providing fighter protection.

The German Africa Corps with its remaining 30 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.

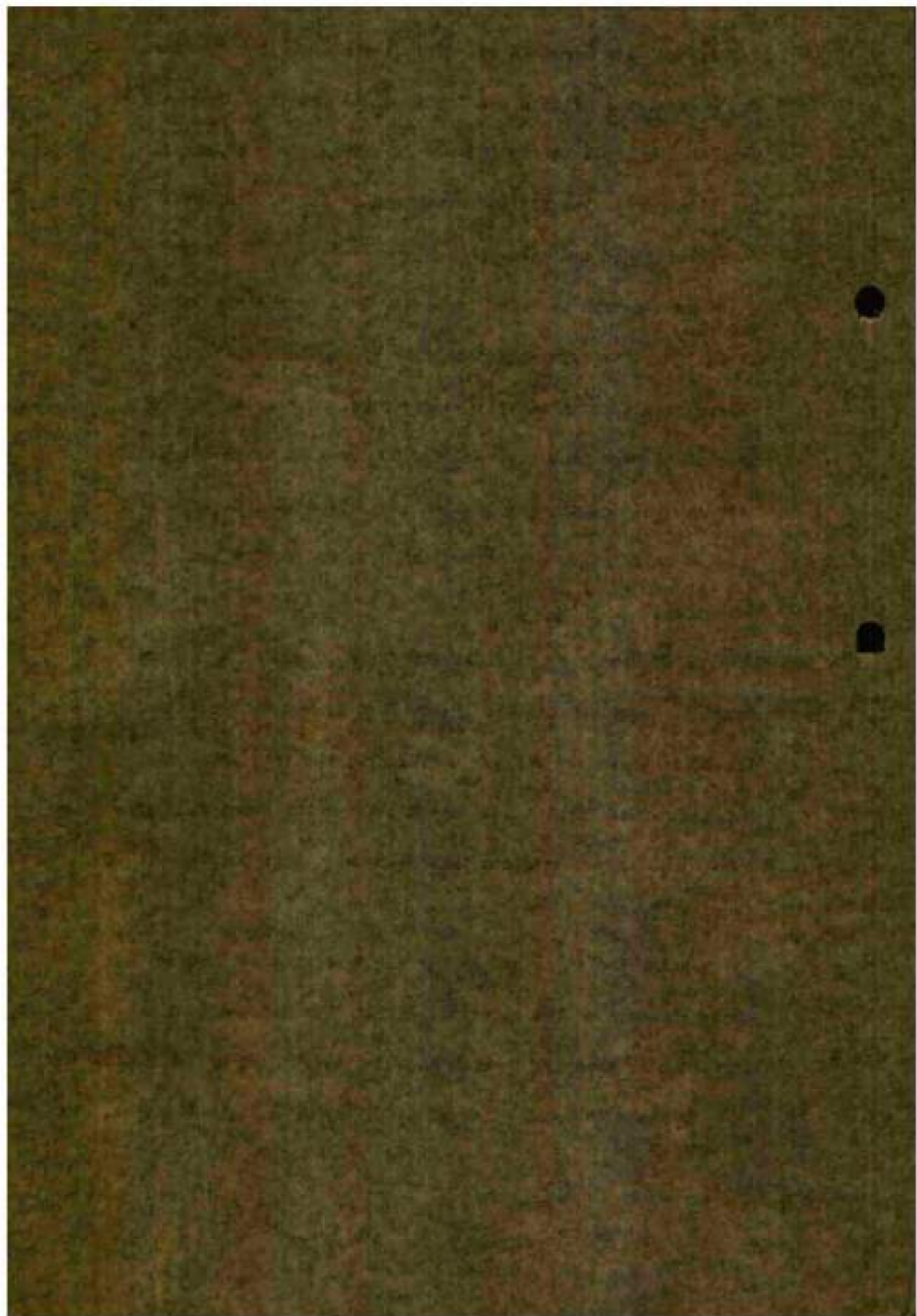
Despite all handicaps the Panzer Army succeeded in approaching the Marsa-Matruh area within six miles distance on 26 June. The British had dug in along the line Bir-Khala -- Marsa-Matruh, but during the evening hours the 90th Light Division penetrated farther north and cut off the coastal road to the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

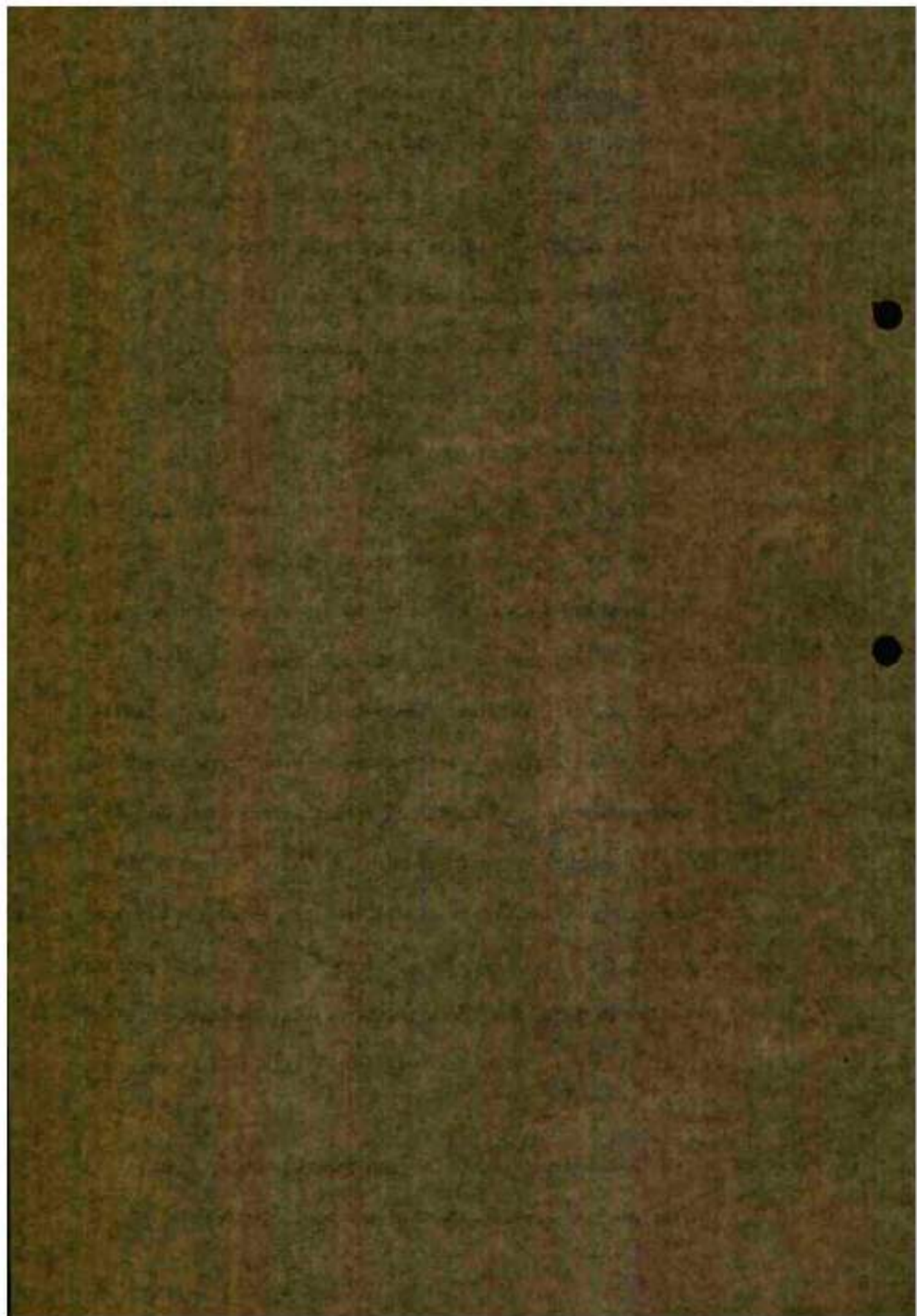


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the 580th Reconnaissance Battalion, Combat Flight Kiehl, and the elements of the Italian I and XII Corps which had had been moved up by truck, assembled for the attack and jumped off. The tough struggle lasted through the night but by early morning 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 position 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 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 Mersa-Matruh area and farther to the east.

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

On 25 June the fighter aircraft concentrated their main effort

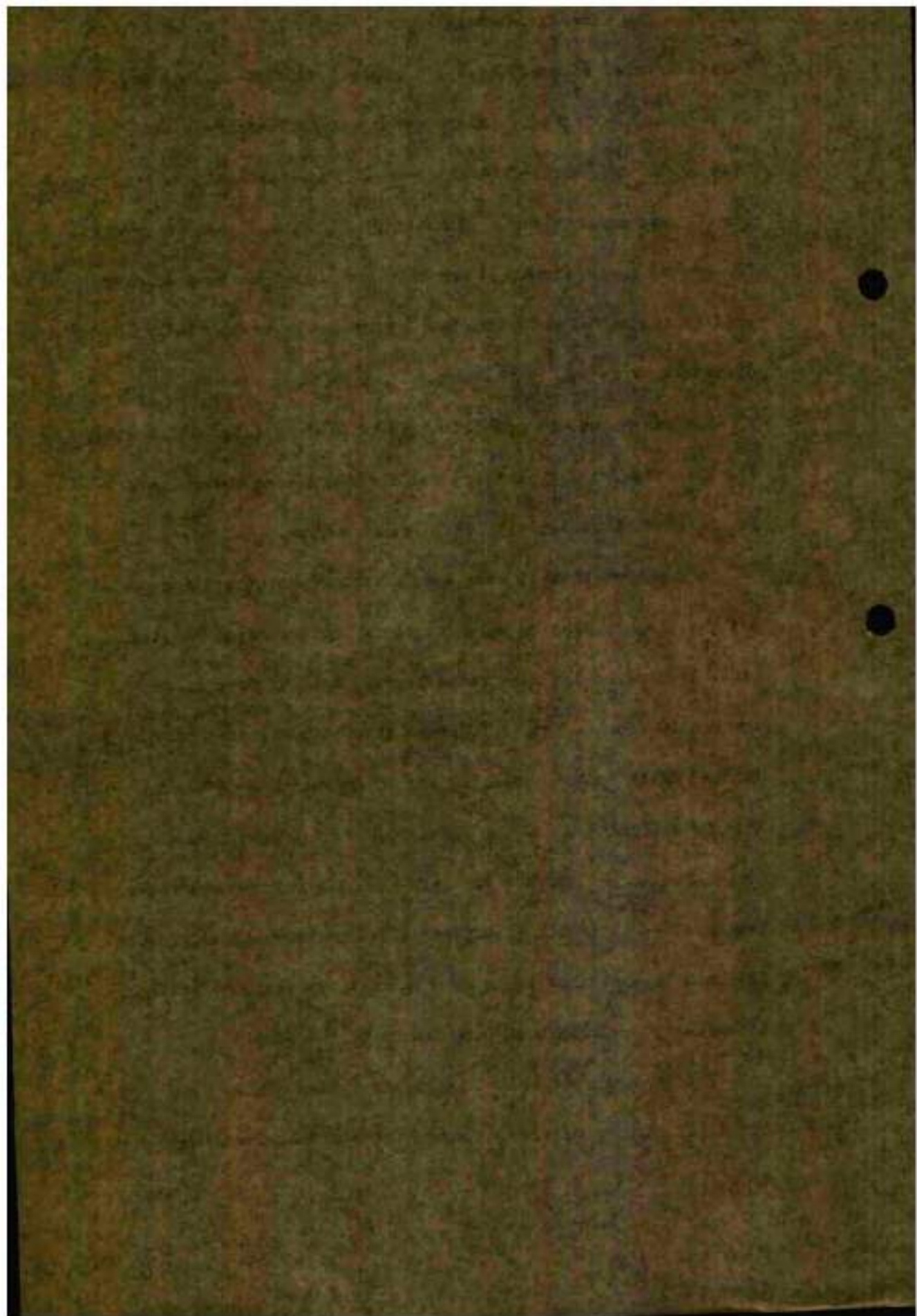
- 301 -

blowing up their supply dumps. The points of the 15th Panzer Division had already advanced beyond El-Gaba. 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-Massein 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 Command 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



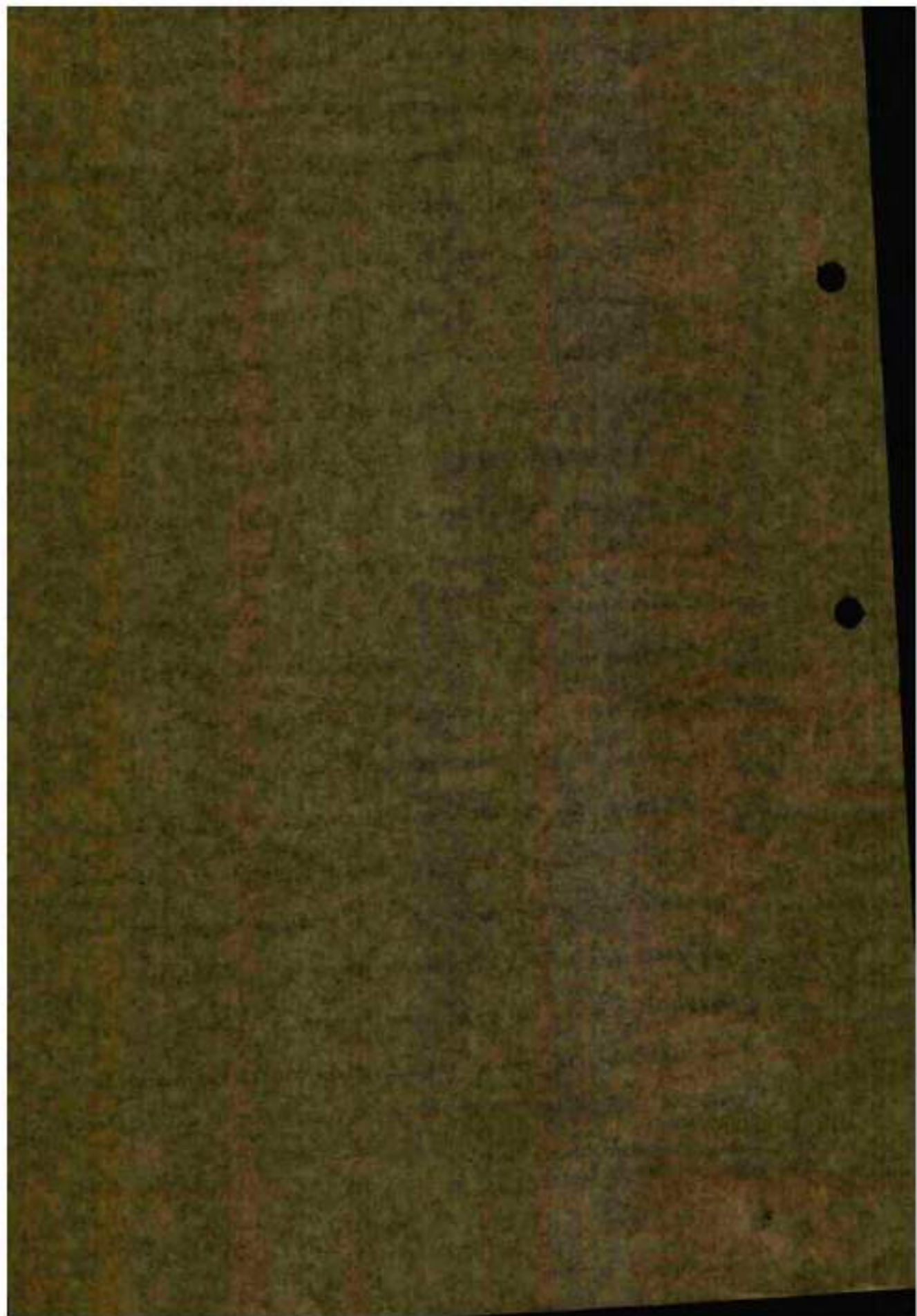
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on protecting the air space above the Panzer Army, which had to suffer from heavy and frequent low-level and bombing attacks by British aircraft approaching from the Marsa-Matruh area. Altogether 19 British aircraft were shot down.

On 25 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 Marsa-Matruh. Some 29 enemy aircraft were shot down.

British fighter-bombers inflicted serious personnel and material damages during an attack on Shternant, 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 Cavalliere and Bettig; they conveyed the Duce's approval for continuing the offensive. The Comando Supremo was willing to provide 900 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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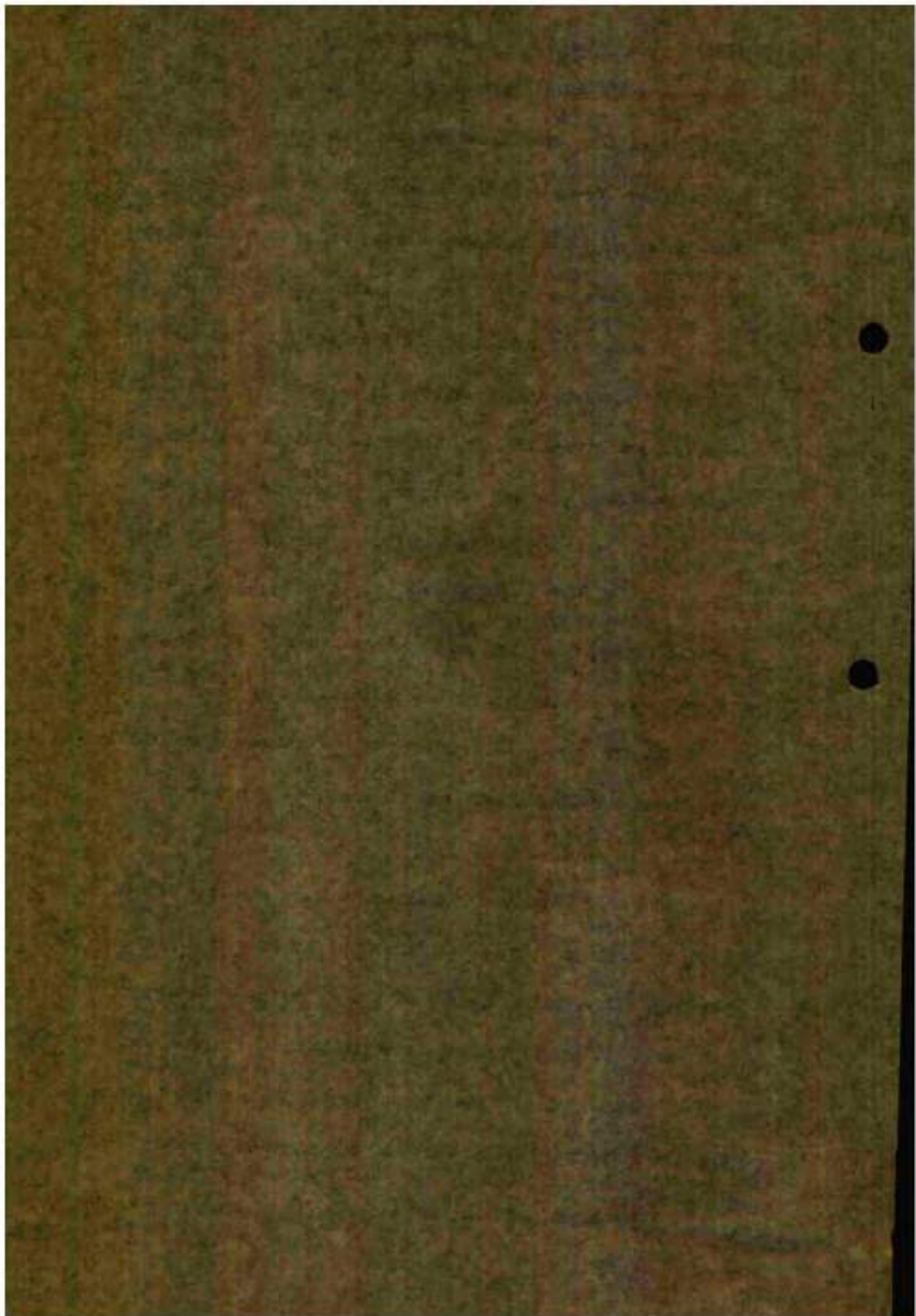
On 28 June the Luftwaffe flew free sweeps above the Panzer Army as well as one joint sortie with Italian units against enemy assemblies and railheads in and around Marsa Matruh. These operations were based on reconnaissance information provided by German aircraft. Upon requests received from the Panzer Army Headquarters, strong enemy concentrations southeast of Marsa Matruh were attacked at 1830. This attack had been delayed for lack of a XXX 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 Basmah (7) area.

The army continues its eastward drive with the German Africa Corps jumping off at 1600 from the area southeast of Taba toward El-Mueair and with the Italian XI 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 XII Italian Corps moved via El-Daba to the east.

After having established contact, the Panzer Army head-



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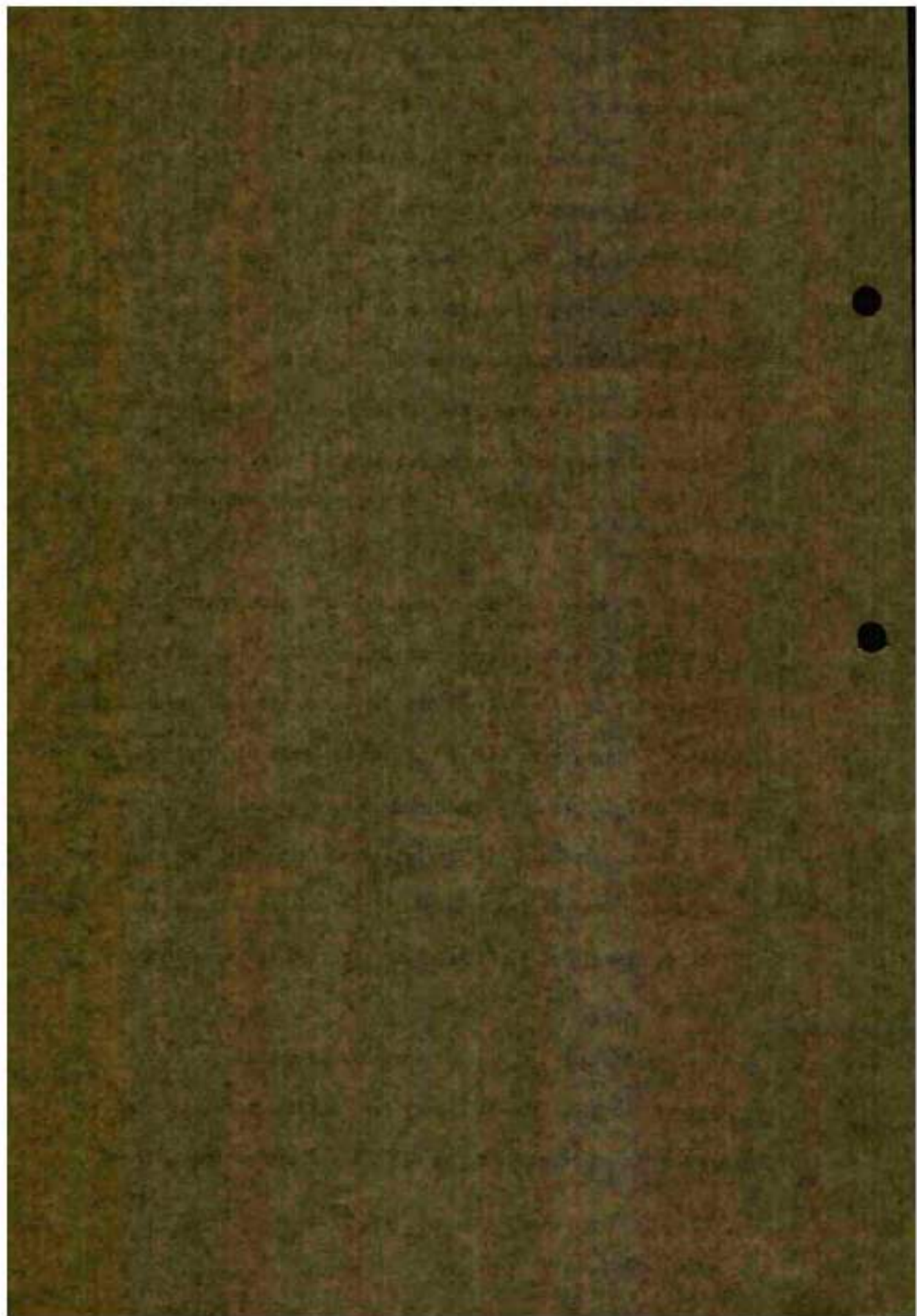
quarters indicated that it plans to launch a deceptive attack against the south portion of the El-Alamein position on 30 June; this was to be followed by a penetration in the center. The northern front was to be collapsed by a thrust to the north-east. For this purpose the Luftwaffe was to provide strong support in the south and subsequently in the center. The instruction wing was to provide ^{be} with 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 XII 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.

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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.

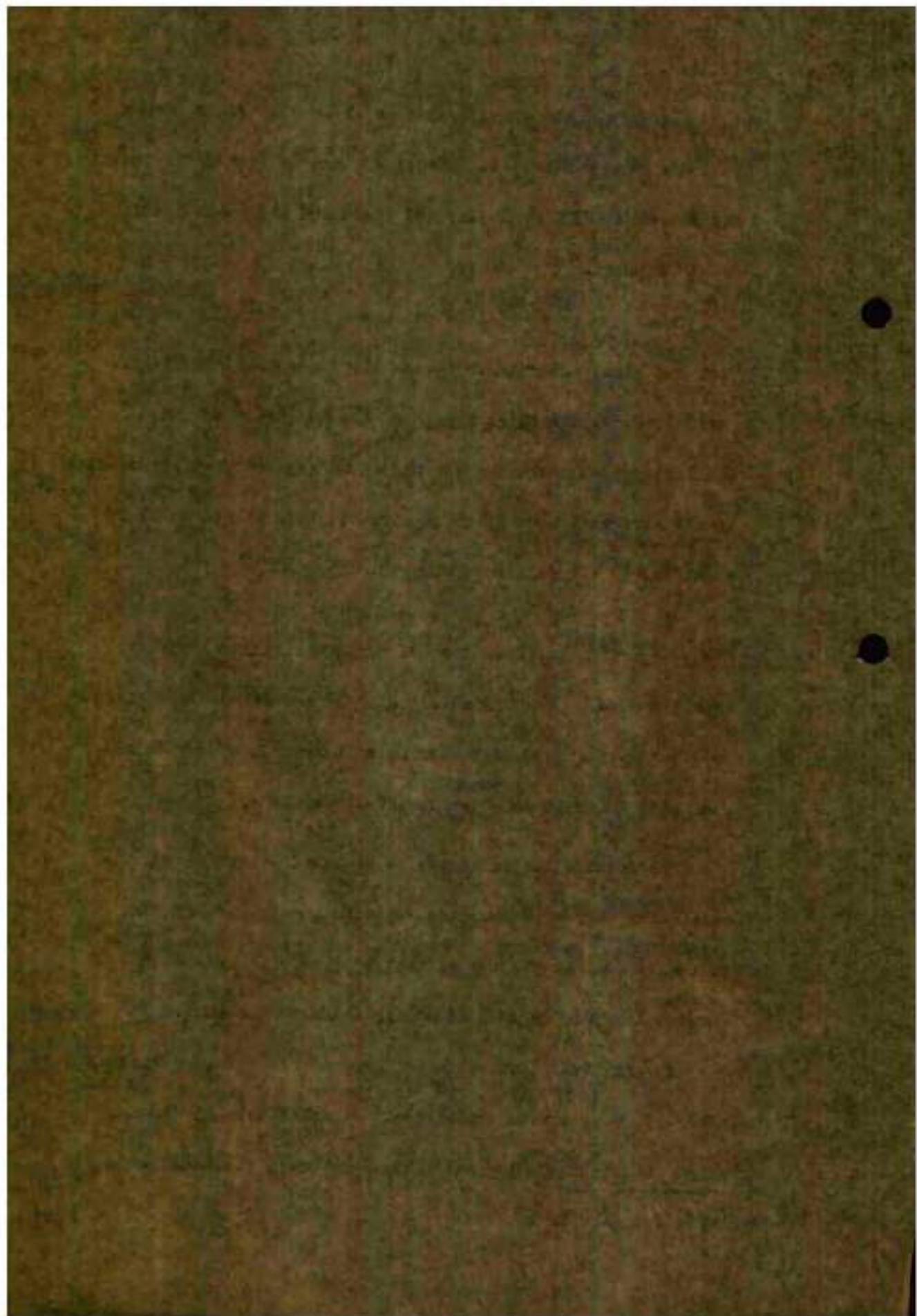
special
There are no statistics on German air victories and losses for the units subordinate to the Air Force Commander Africa until 30 June. The total losses of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean theater for the months of May and June amounted to 248 aircraft, most of which were fighters and bombers;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



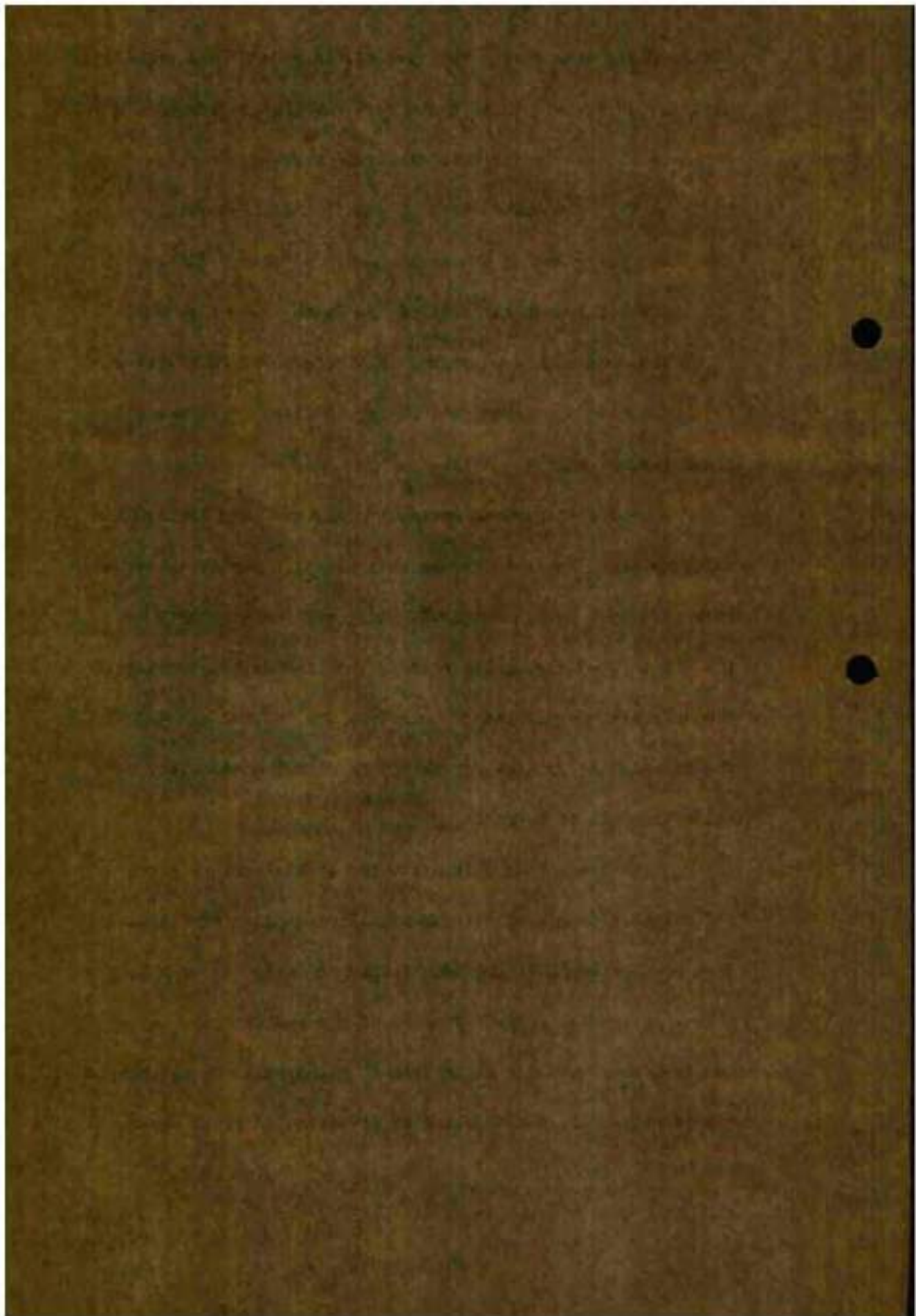
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extraordinary effect produced by these air attacks can be gathered from the entries in the war diary of the German Africa Corps made during this period. They mentioned repeatedly that the German air force units were nowhere to be seen and complain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

The Wellington aircraft of the 203th 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 Cunningham'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 Gassala position. The surprise was all the greater that the Luftwaffe had let the withdrawing British forces escape almost unharmed, 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."

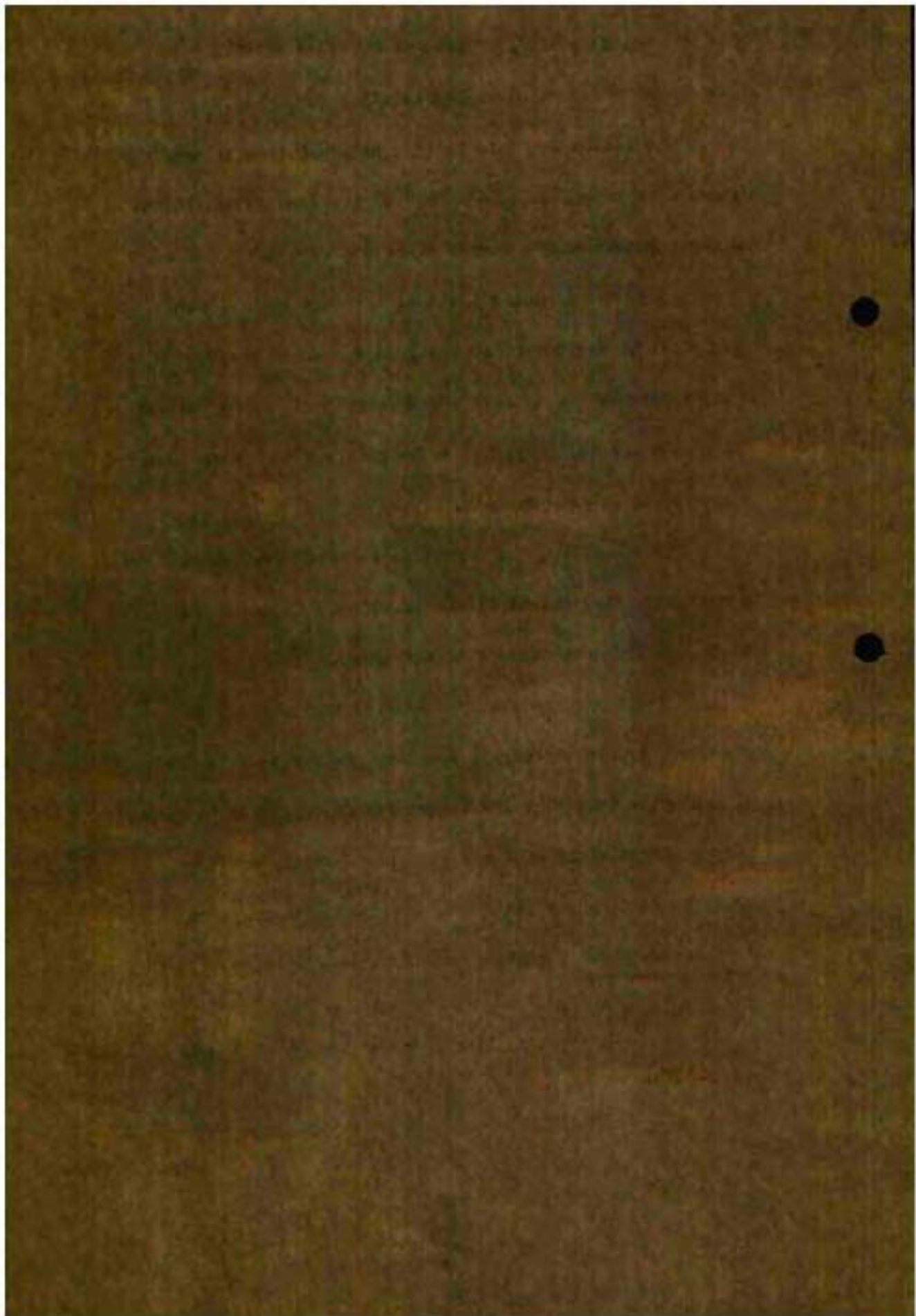
The reason for this failure of the Luftwaffe was assumed to have been caused by two different facts. First, a great number of the German squadrons were incapable of keeping up with Rommel's advance. Although he had asked for complete air cover for his troops and had expected to receive it, he had ^{constantly} 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 motorized British

175

Denis Richards, GR. CAT., Vol. II, pp. 110 - 3; and p. 113.



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squadrons (Author's parenthetical note: streamlined squadrons).

Furthermore, thanks to the activities 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.

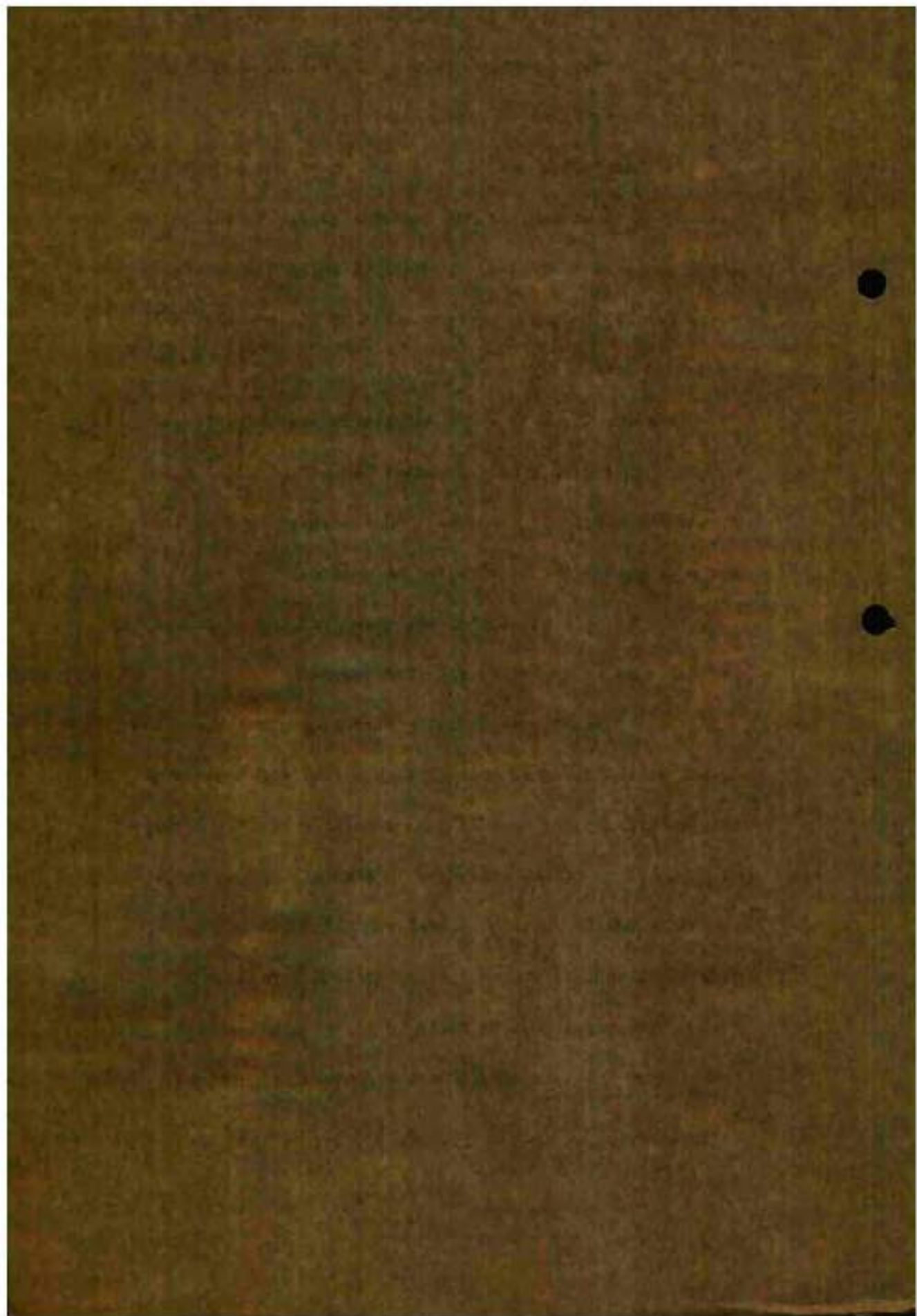
In advancing into enemy territory, the pursuer must move up his entire ground organization and needs time to repair the airfields the enemy has evacuated so that they are once again in condition for take-offs.

The friendly air forces was therefore not 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 missed sorties of the Luftwaffe?

The diary of the otherwise so ~~MINUTELY~~ astute leader of the Luftwaffe forces, General von Seldau, 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. 32, 55, 38, 59, 69, 80, and 83.



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

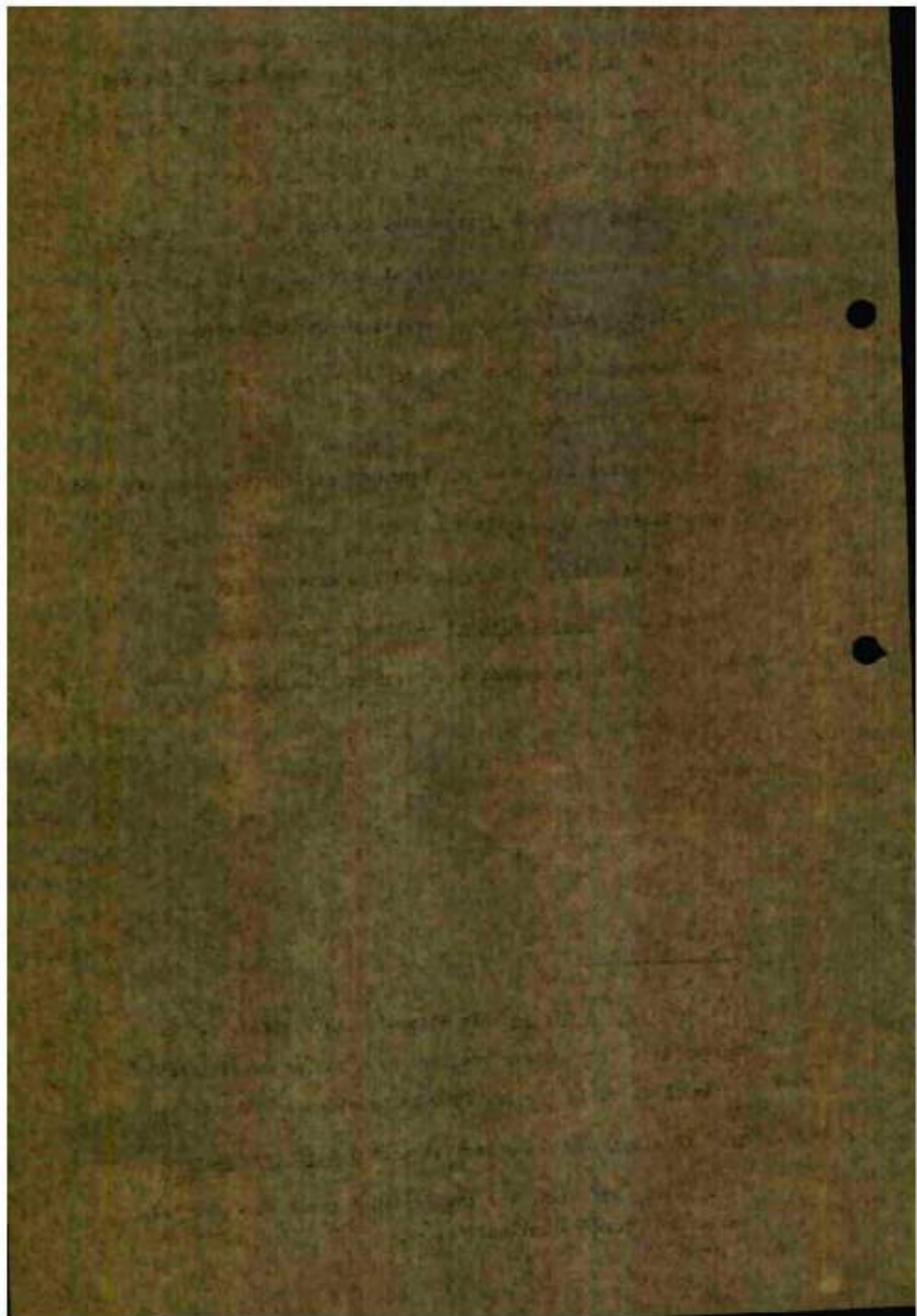
"No logistical planning for an advance into Egypt had been under consideration, and the means of transportation for such an operation were also not available." 176

When the Armed Forces High Command and the Commando 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.)

176

Luftlage in Afrika (Air Situation in Africa), p. 12. Survey based on a study prepared by a number of officers after IREX World War II. (The information pertaining to the air situation was contributed by General der Flieger (Lt. Gen.) Seidemann, for the period 3 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
25 June 1942 near El Al Harrani. 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

also

The Comando Supremo 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

¹⁷⁷

Siegfried Westphal, General der Kavallerie i.R. (Lt. Gen. Ret.)
Schicksal Nordafrika (North Africa, The Fateful), p. 198.
 Europa-Contact Verlags G.m.b.H., 1954, Dossingen/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 Oberaufsberg (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 Kennelring also confirmed the information given by Generals Westphal and Hintelén:

"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

Ernst von Hintelén, 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 plans. 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, ~~INSTEAD~~ 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

Rommelring, 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." "XXXXXXXXXXXX, we XXXXXXXX
determined that D-day would be 26 May, mainly because the
British forces constantly grew in strength."

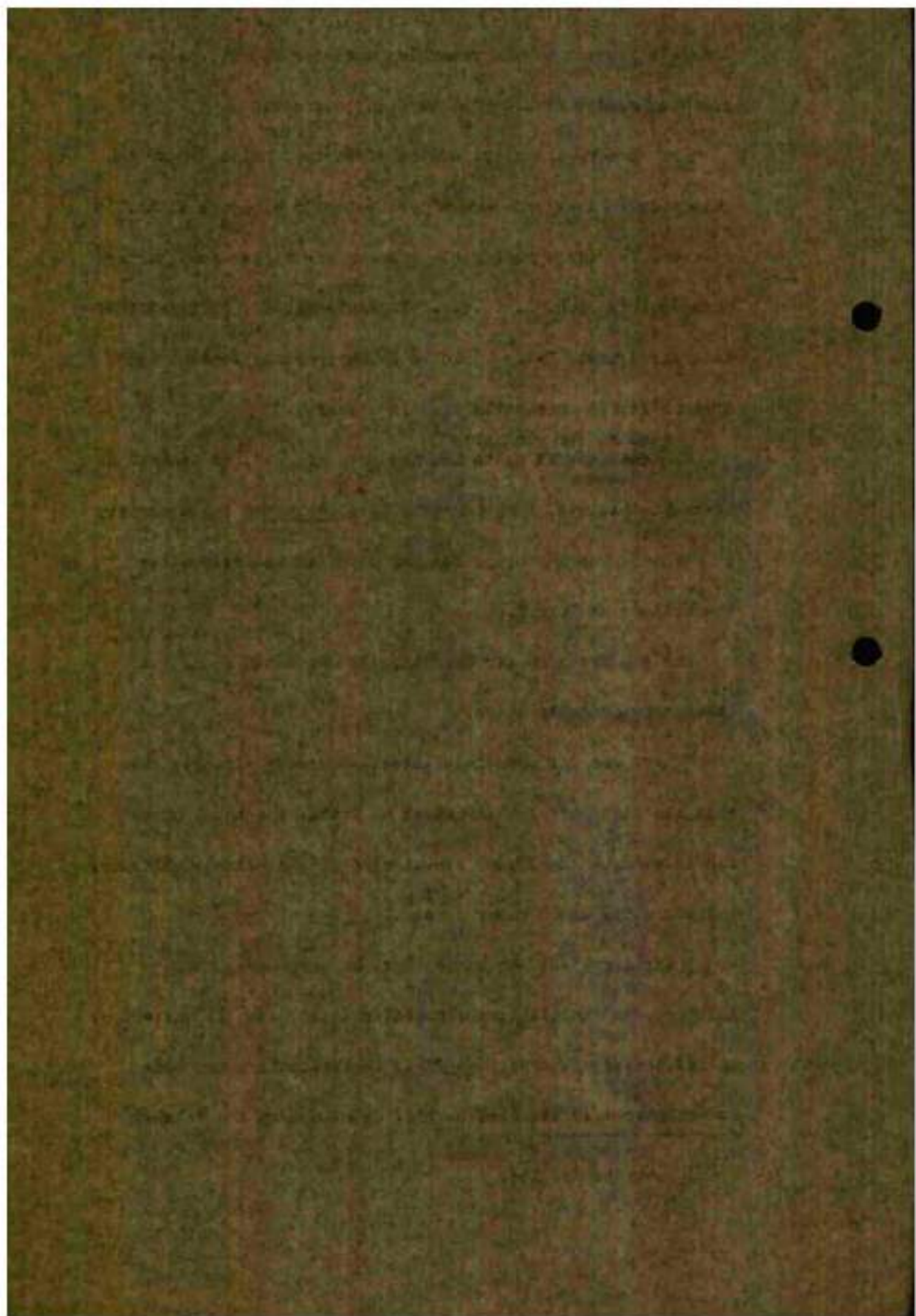
plans for conquering
The XXXXXXXXXX Malta had not been dropped, as Rommel
seemed to believe, they had only been postponed for a variety
of reasons, and the operation was supposed to begin after
the seizure of Tobruk.

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 Generalplan (Maj Gen) Conrad, the Fliker- 180
Kurt Student, Generalplan (Gen., Met.), Der beab-
achtete 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 ~~XXXX~~ 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 240'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.: Sturzfallechirnausbildung), 300 small 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 Morn 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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General Hauler and Buchholz. Then I visited the selected
 airfields in the company of these gentlemen, including the
 command posts, southwest of Catania, west of Pace 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." 151

Field Marshal KME Kesselring had the following comment
 with regard to the plans for the attack operations on Malta:

151

Gerhard Conrad, Gen.Lt.A.D. (Maj.Gen.,Ret.) Vorbereitungen
 fuer den künftigen fliegerischen Einsatz der Fallschirm- und Luft-
 lande-Verbände bei dem beabsichtigten Unternehmen Malta, Juni 42

(Preparations for the Commitment of Parashute and Airborne Units
 for the Planned Operation Against Malta, June 1942). Karlsruher
 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 Kameke. 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" (Ginaster -- 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 ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ 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.

5. 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
182

Kesselring, op. cit.: pp. 173-4.

See page 259.

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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.

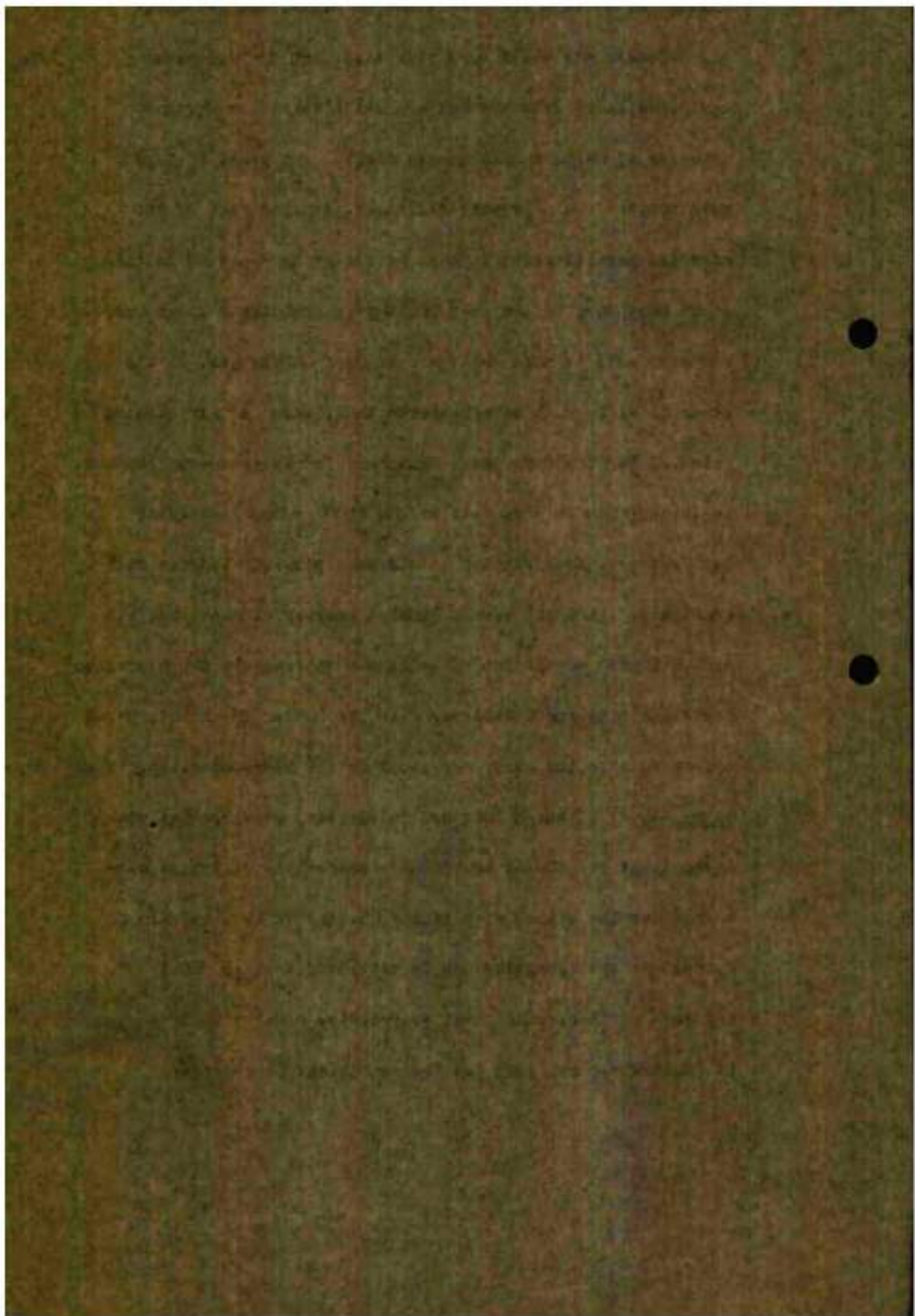
Count Ciano, the Foreign Minister, made the following comments on this subject in his diary entry of 12 May 1942:

"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 Cassaro 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 Loerner 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 Cariani. 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-~~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.

183

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-Qmar -- Halfaya -- Sollum was not to be passed¹ 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."¹³⁴

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 ~~EXPERIENCE~~ 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. Mommsen's Concept

"Contrary to the ideas he expressed in February and in contrast to his operational plans of April,* Field Marshal Mommsen 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 ~~as required~~ 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. 163)

..

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 force ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ would ~~XXXX~~ ~~XX~~ 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 ~~ANY~~ 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. ~~His~~ forceful personality, ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ was only too pleased by Hitler's letter. He had disliked signing the order of the Commando 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 organisational 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. 173.

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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 REMMAH 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 ^{was} to the question "Malta or Cairo?" It is ^{was} 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 Fallschirjjaeger" (The German Paratrooper) No. 11/1936, 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 and did not take into account the strategic factors of a consistent conduct of operations.

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 Brauchitsch: "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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manifest 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 Commando 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 Kessel's public relations campaign for an offensive

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Dr. Karlheinz Luftwaffe-Generalmittelbauer (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 Bruchitsch, 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 ^{would} ~~MI~~ 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~~ "Urota" 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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Kennelring, 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.* Not 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.**

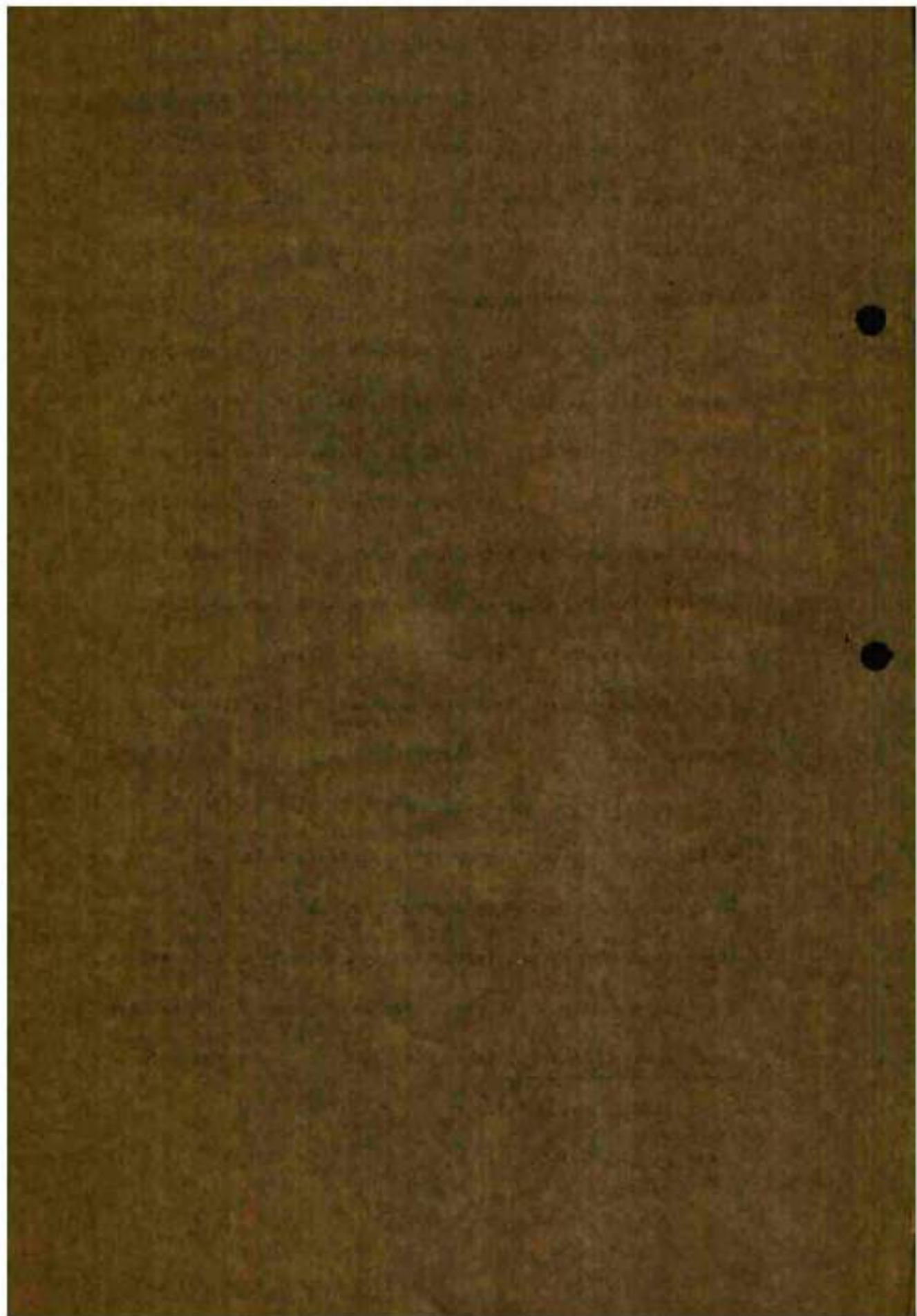
The enemy army had been defeated and its elements were engaged in full retreat.

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 REPORT pp. 332-3.

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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; further-
 more, its ground organization and signal communications had
 to be established.

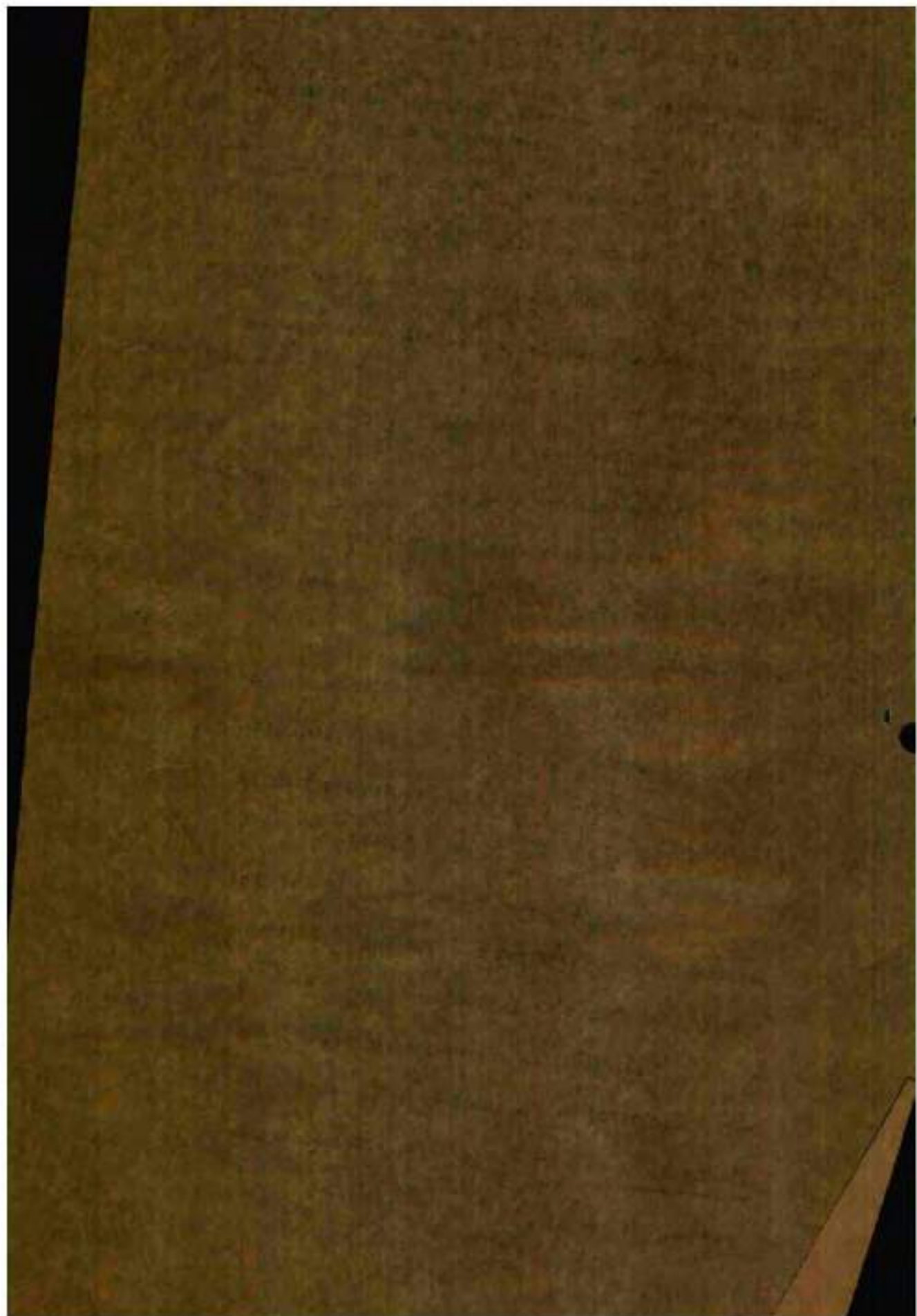
This meant a heavy handicap for the German field command
 and should have been taken into account by Rommel. One look
 at the map indicated that between El-Alamein and the
 Qatara depression there was a position that could not
 be enveloped.

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

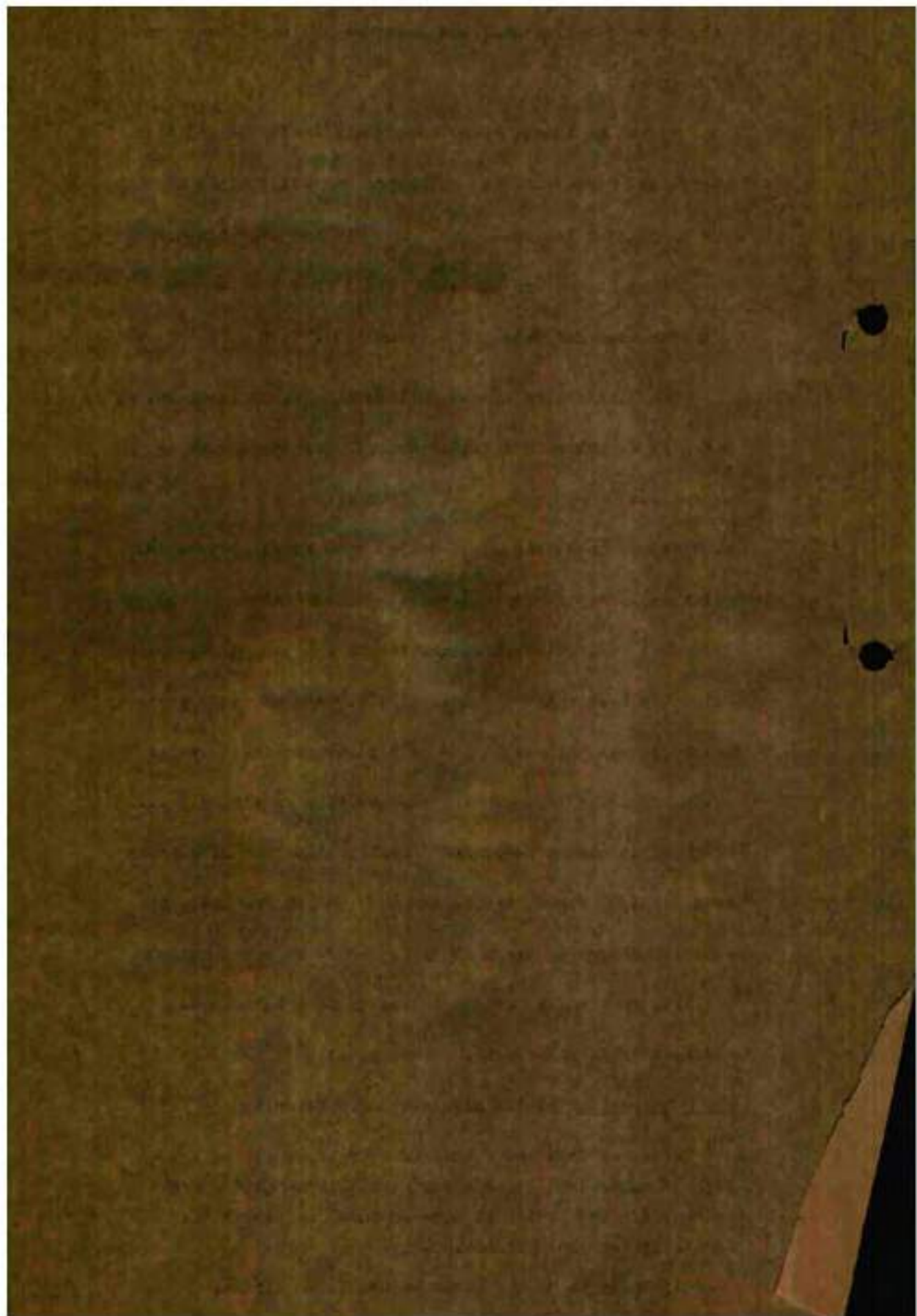
The German Army issued an intelligence bulletin No. 4, dated 11 November 1941, which stated under paragraph 6c as follows:

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~~ 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 3a of the first volume North Africa.



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and not the source of the entire Alamain position.

Whether the Field Marshal still remembered these data can no longer be established. Since he used to minimize 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.)

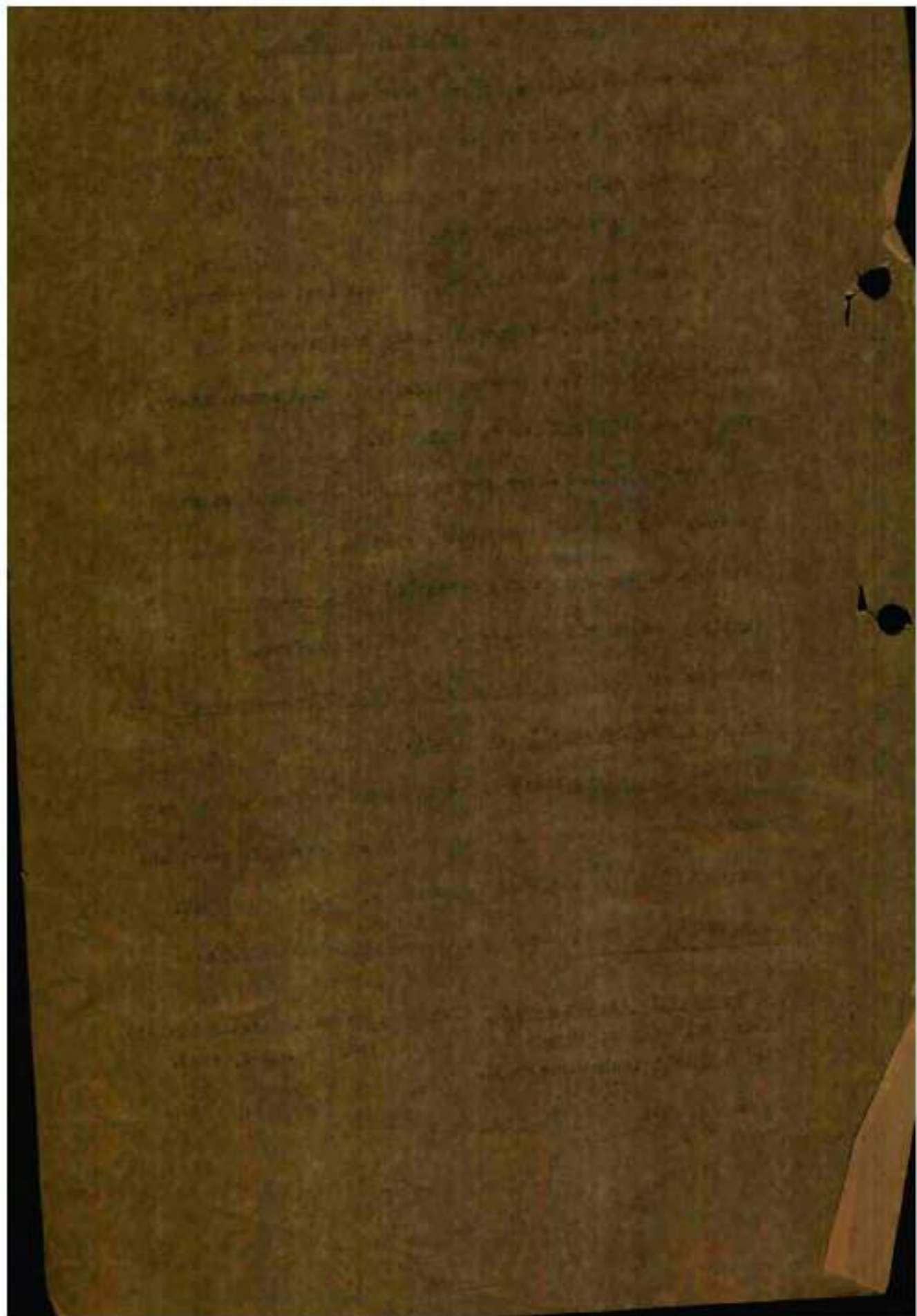
Even though the photo map of June 1942 arrived too late in the field, one might assume that its contents were known at Panzer Army headquarters. That headquarters was responsible for its distribution.

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 1941/42 (Campaign in North Africa 1941-3), Volume II, Part 4, Appendix 20/ Africa 1942, pp. 1-2, Study MS-23 (Historical Division).

* See page 300.



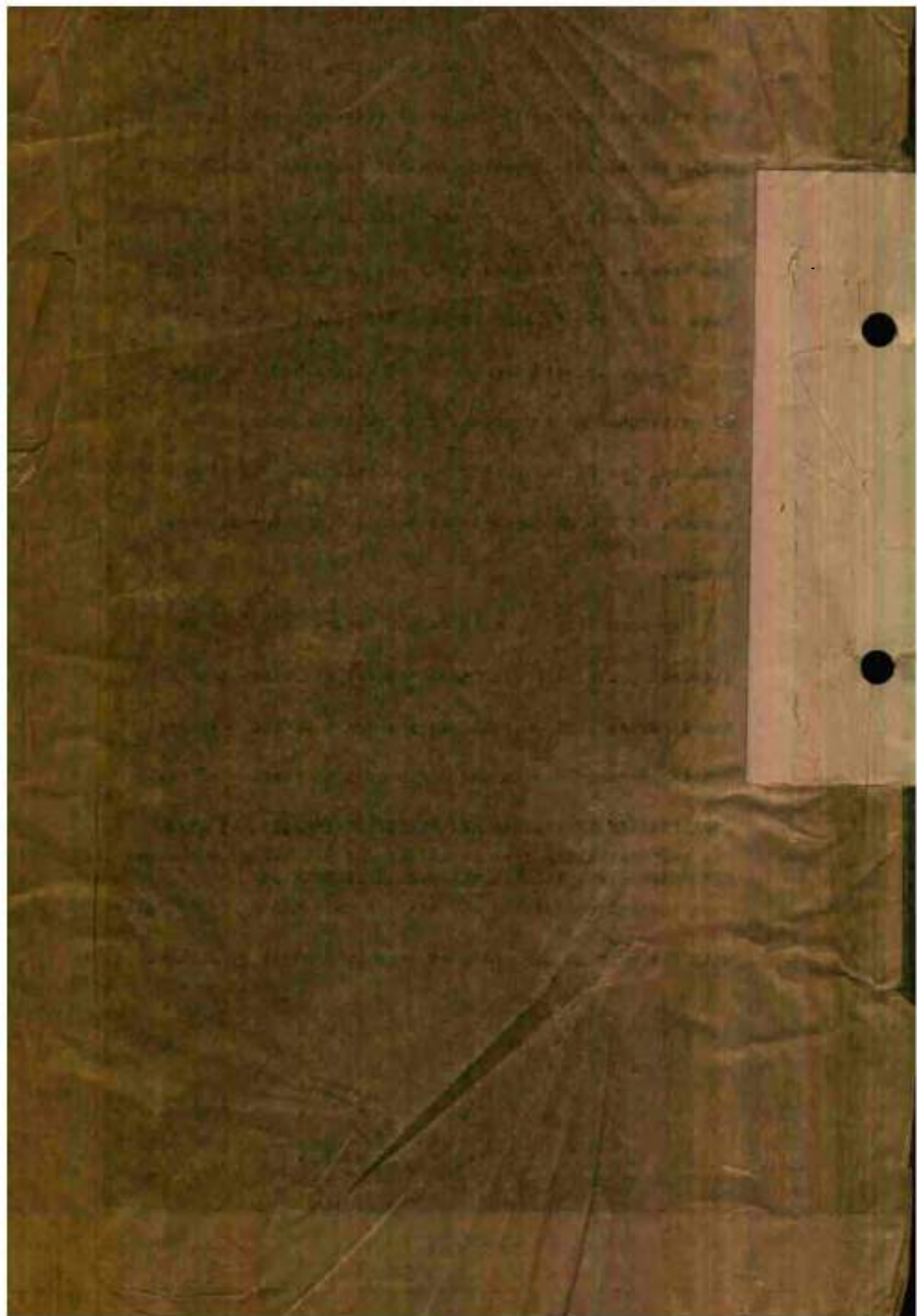
overextended, even though the men followed Rommel's orders with complete devotion and by an extreme effort of willpower.

But the exhaustion of his soldiers, their thin ranks, the ridiculously small number of tanks and guns they were still capable of directing against the enemy, could not be compensated for simply by the enthusiasm of the commanders and troops. In the final analysis, it was this hard fact that led to the failure of Rommel's plans.

To have ignored the limits of capability and combat effectiveness is a reproach from which Rommel cannot be absolved. The effect of his wrong decisions after the capture of Tobruk began to show in the not too distant future.

By approving Rommel's thrust toward Cairo and by abandoning its plan for the conquest of Malta, the Armed Forces High Command dug the grave of the German-Italian Panzer Army in the North African theater of war.

The responsibility for the defeat and all its consequences that made themselves felt in the over-all situation rests fully with the Supreme Commander of Germany's military forces.



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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
Air-Operations
Africa
North Africa
Marsell, Africa

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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.

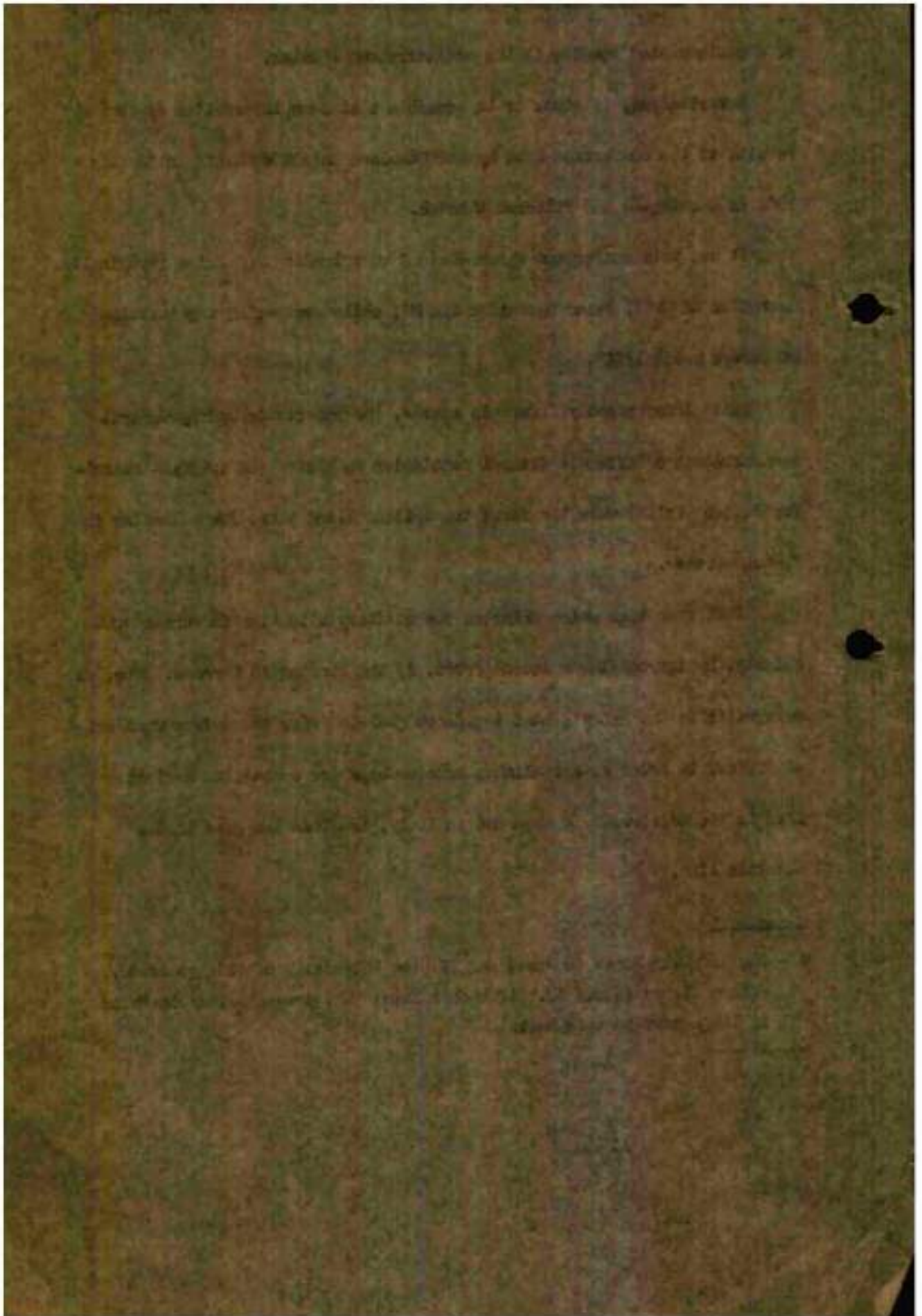
Nevertheless, it seems to be possible that some information as to the results of the conference held by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 30 July 1942 in Washington had filtered through.

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

Quite independently from this source, the reports issued by General von Huchlisch'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

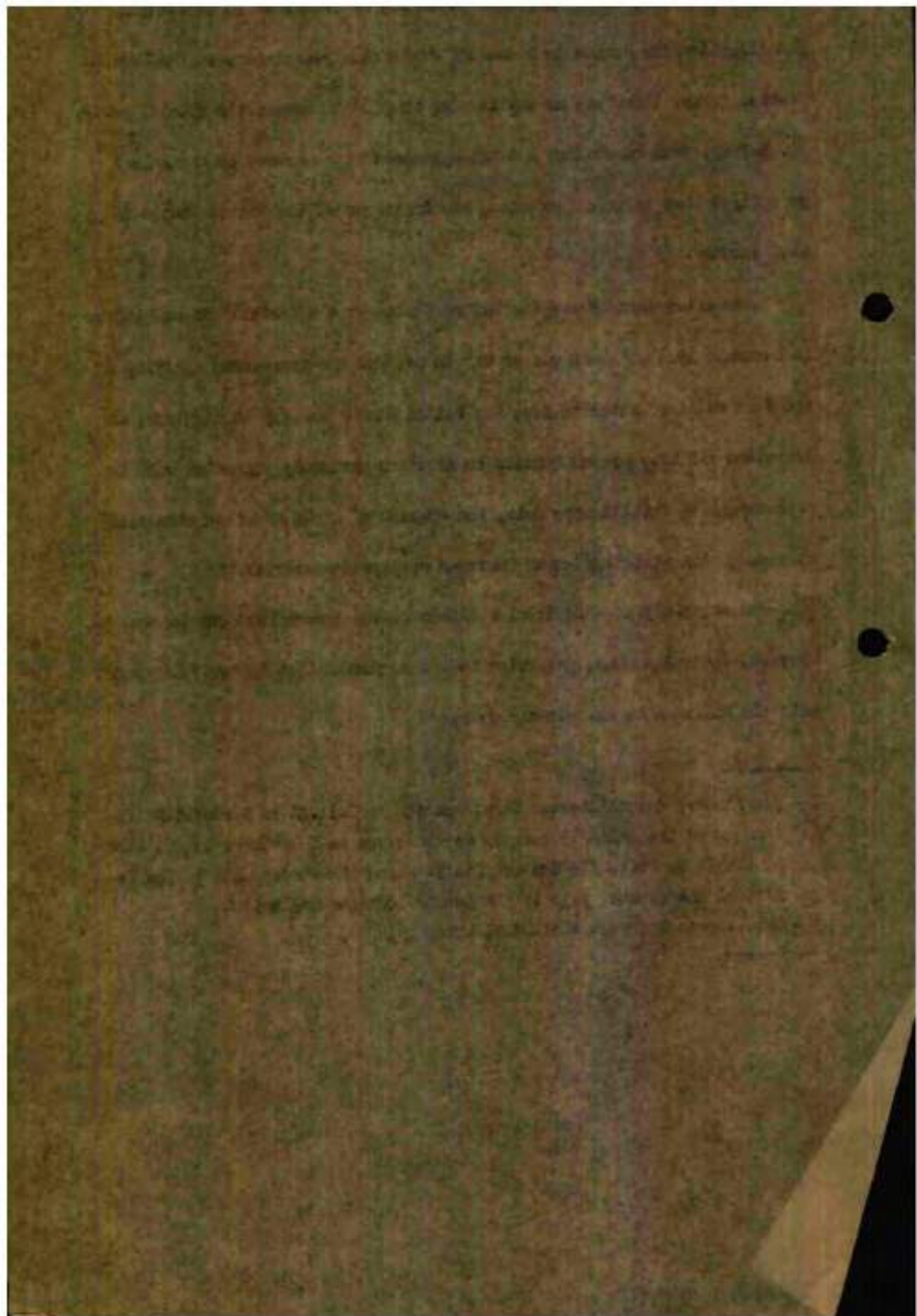
The armistice of 22 June 1940 could not be construed as sufficient justification for France to break off diplomatic relations with the United States. Thus, there was no way to stop President Roosevelt's special envoy, Mr. Murphy, from concluding a trade agreement with Morocco in April 1941 as a first 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 Fez, 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 3, 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

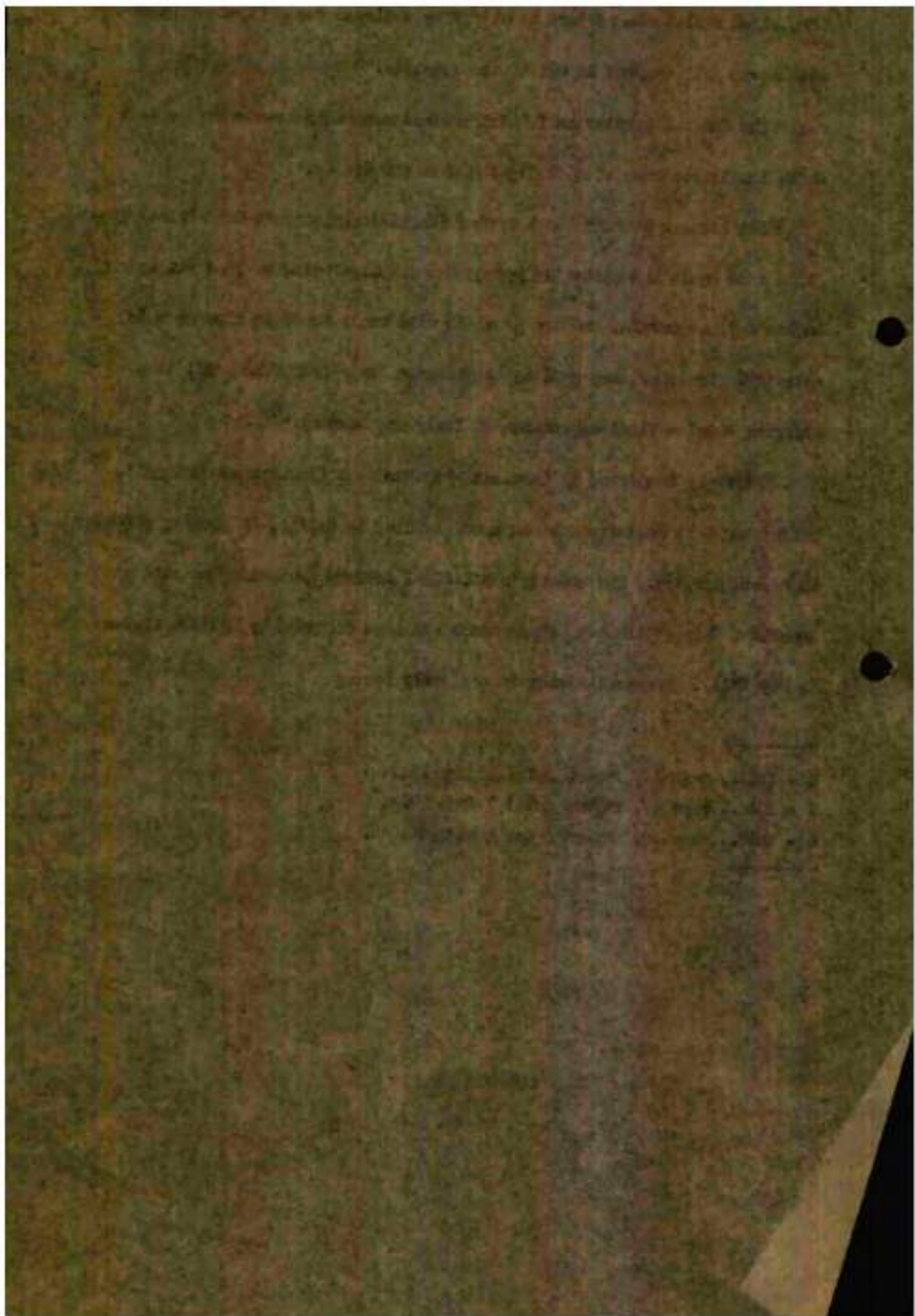
"The Liaison Command North Africa (Verbindungsstab Nordafrika) confirms once again the agitating propaganda campaign being carried out by the American vice-consuls, who are provided with ample funds to finance this activity. Their primary goal is to alienate Italy from Mussolini, thus bringing about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

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.



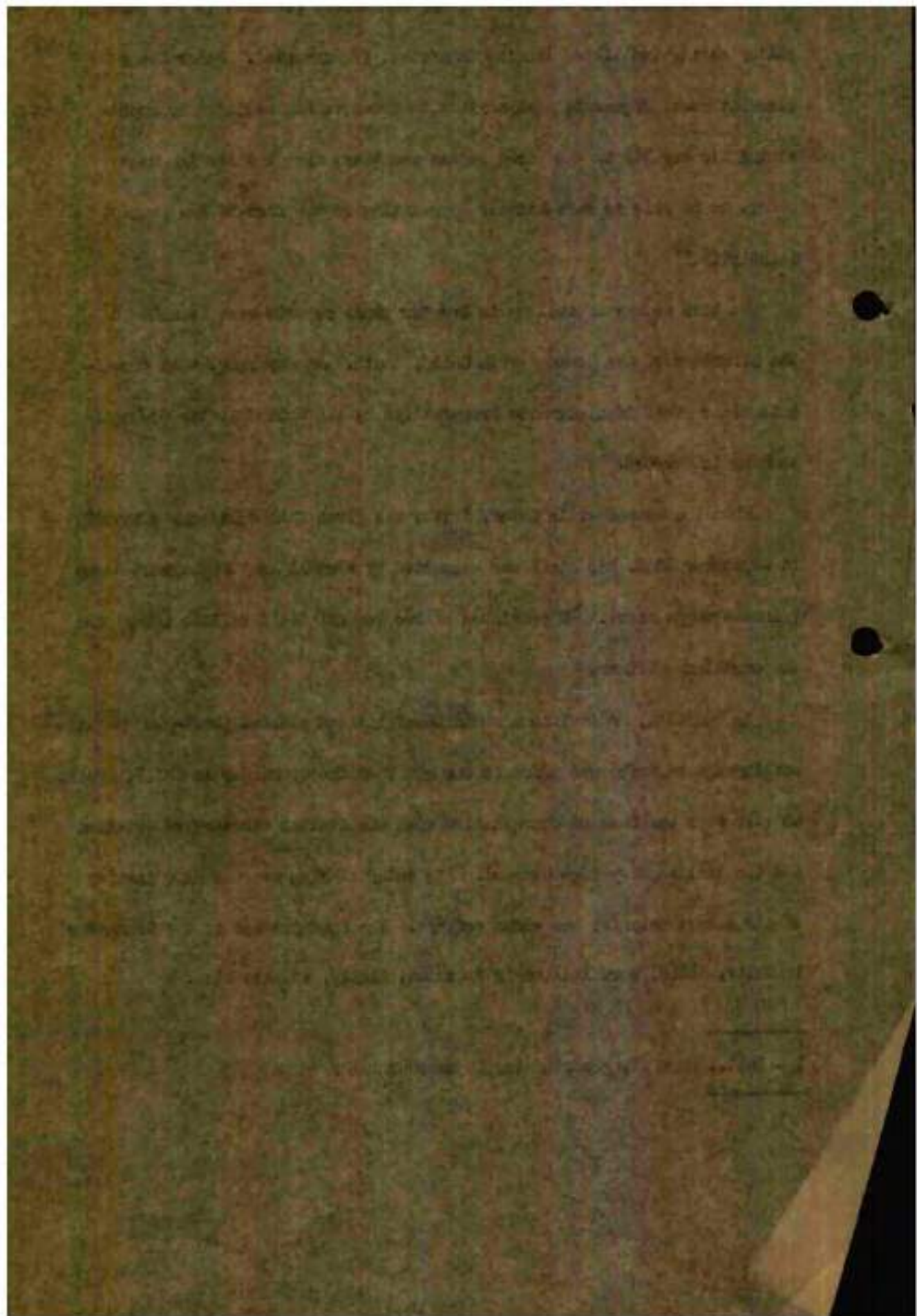
his appraisal of the situation on the assumption that the coming winter may involve the Laval government in internal difficulties which Laval may be unable to master in the event of any additional pressure in the foreign policy sector (an Allied landing in Africa, for example). Under those circumstances, Rogues 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 Marine-Verbindungskommando) 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.



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 these forces to repulse such a landing⁶.

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.

6 - The Campaign in Tunisia (Der Feldzug in Tunesien), study prepared by General der Flieger Deichmann in 1947; *Harvard 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 Hungarian 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.

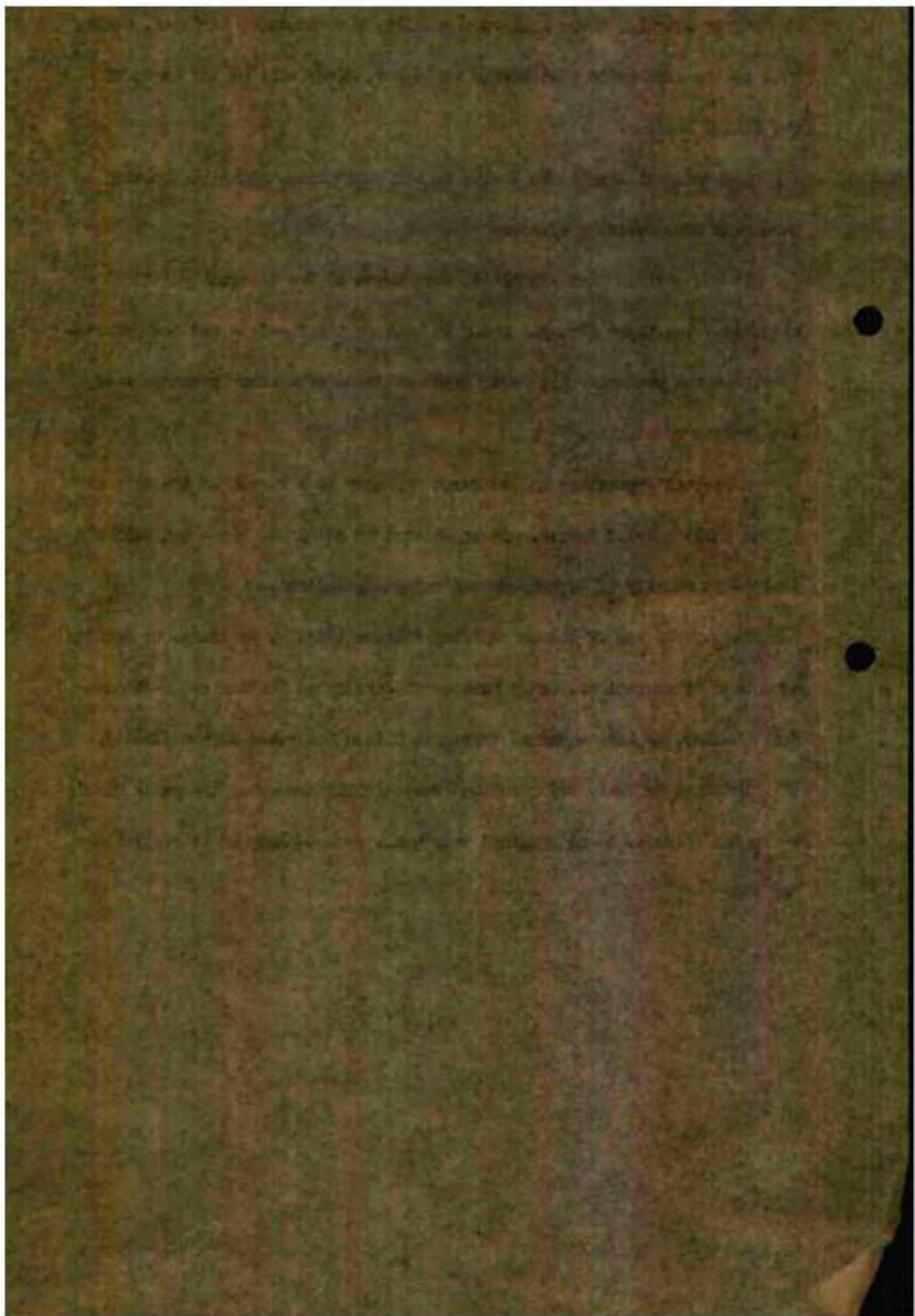
A successful landing in Italy, on the other hand, might be expected to have even more decisive effects.

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 narrowness 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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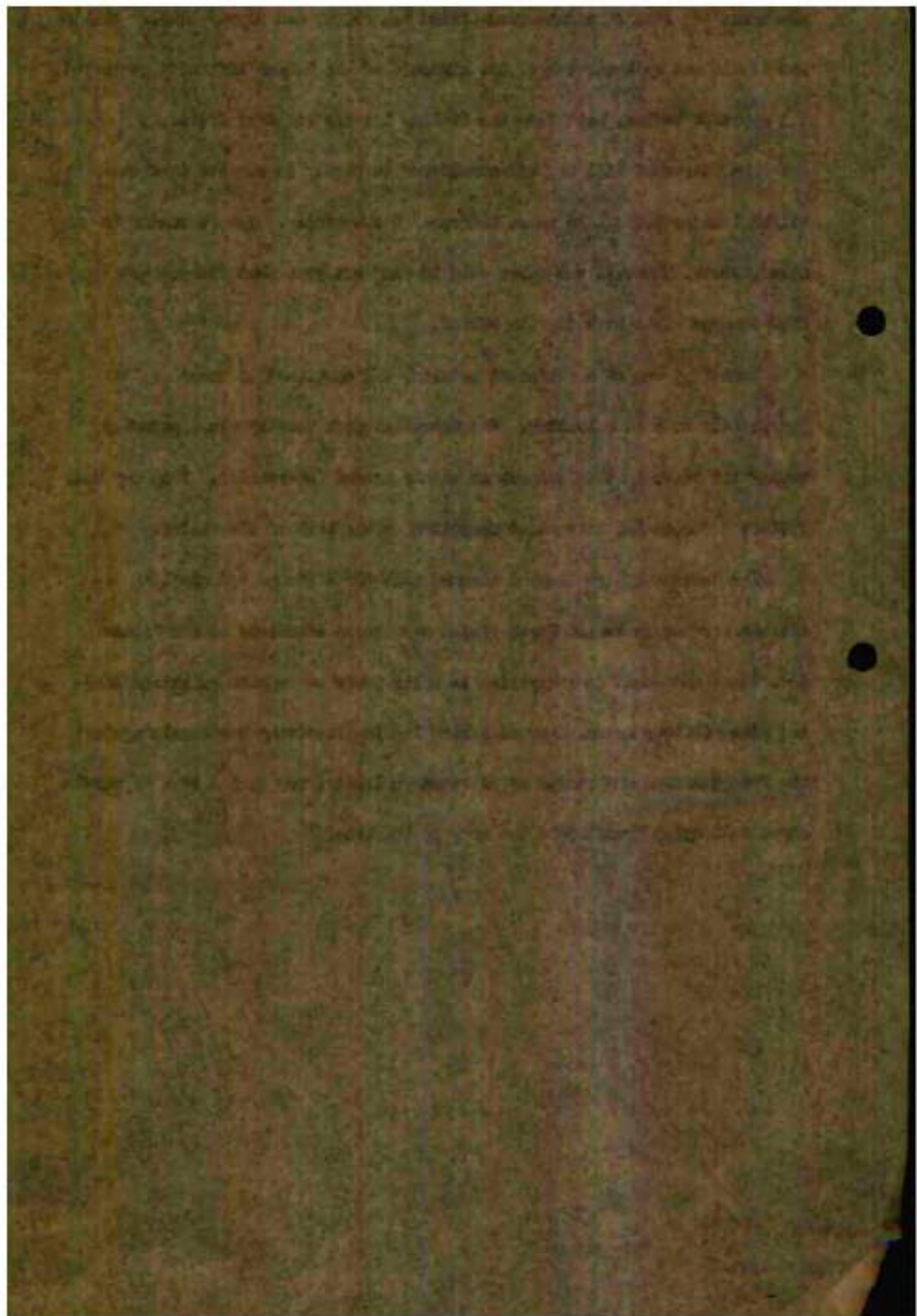
coupled with a main landing in central Italy.

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!



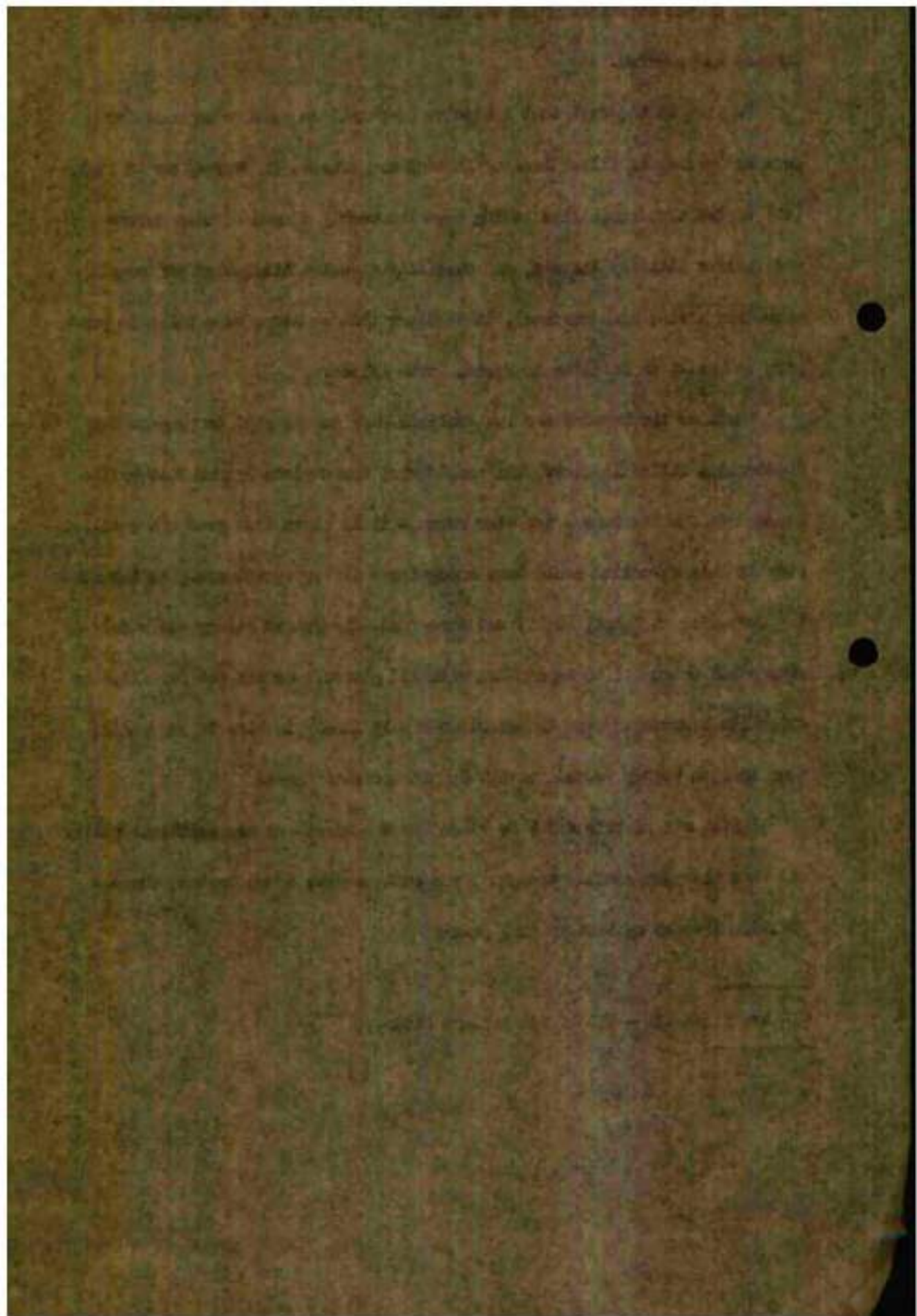
The German Luftwaffe Control Commission reports cited in the preceding pages⁹ were apparently never taken seriously, since they did not correspond to the picture of the situation which the wishful thinking of the Wehrmacht High Command had created.

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 (Romano)
- 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 (D.L.W./Abwehr) began to issue daily reports which included agents' stories of an imminent landing in the Mediterranean area.

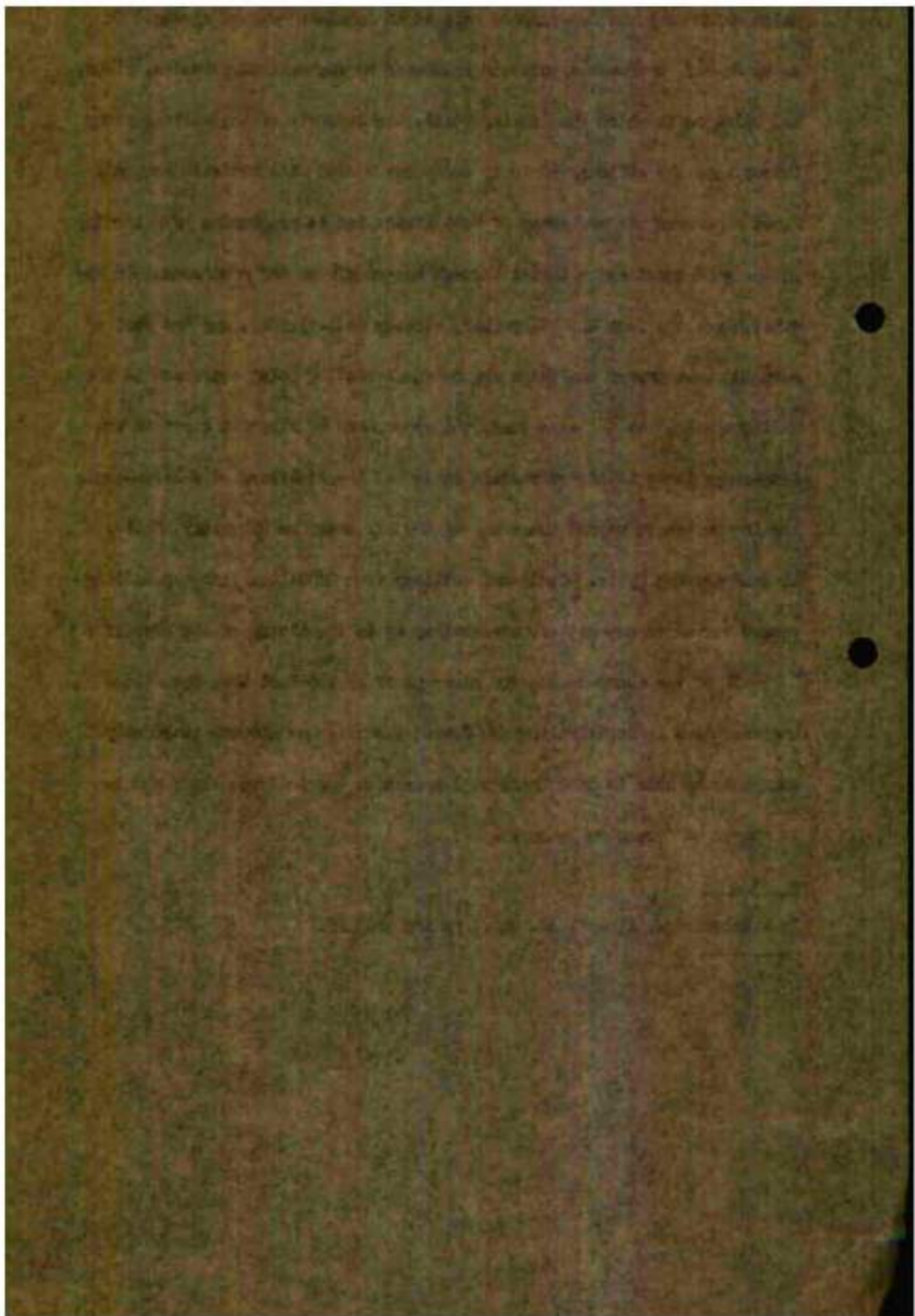
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Feldmarschall Kesselring has the following to say in this connection:

"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. Continued 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.



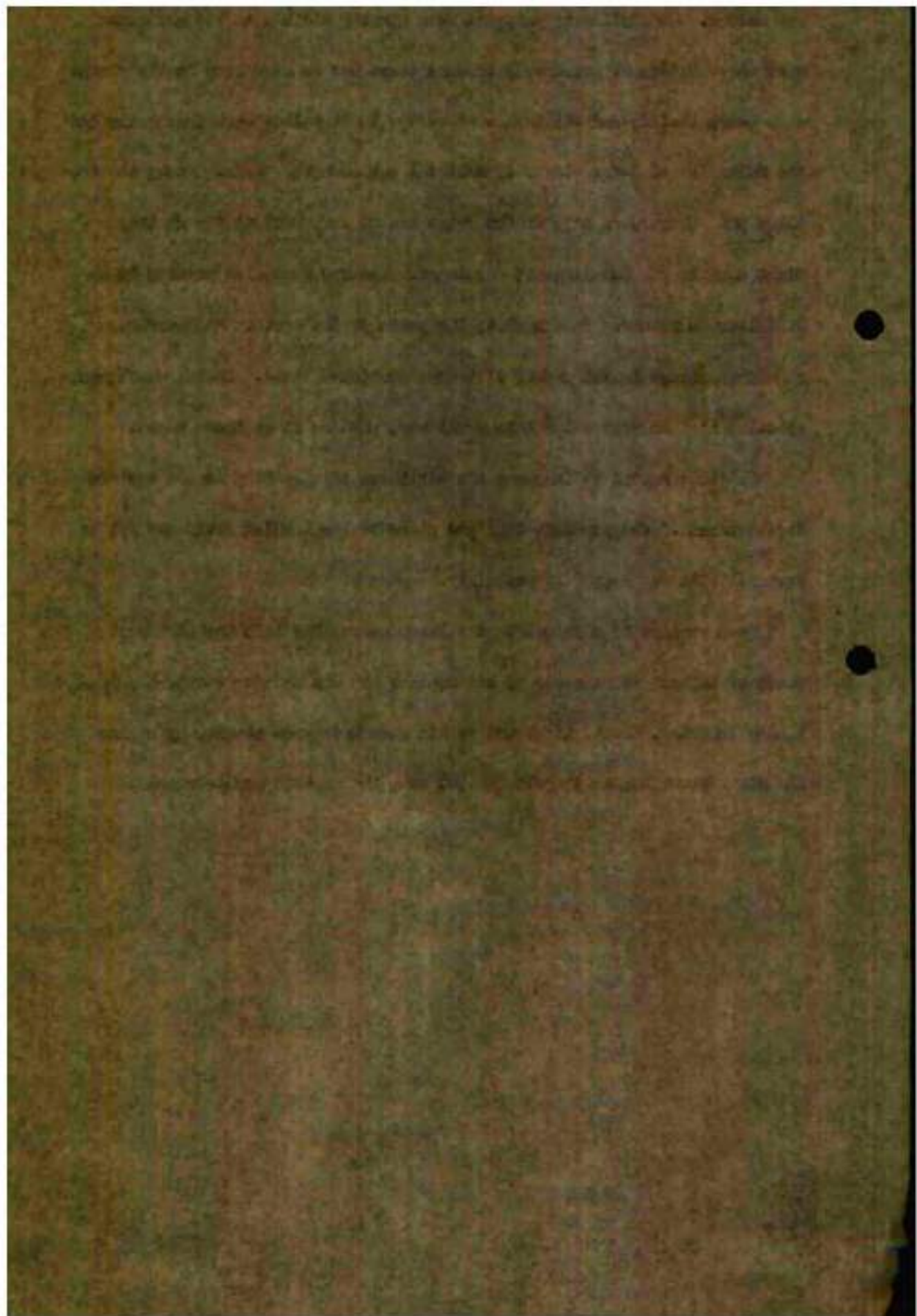
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During the month of October, aerial reconnaissance of the ports of southwestern England revealed the presence of more merchant shipping than was normal. Huge piles of material were clearly visible on the quais and near the warehouses, presumably because 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.



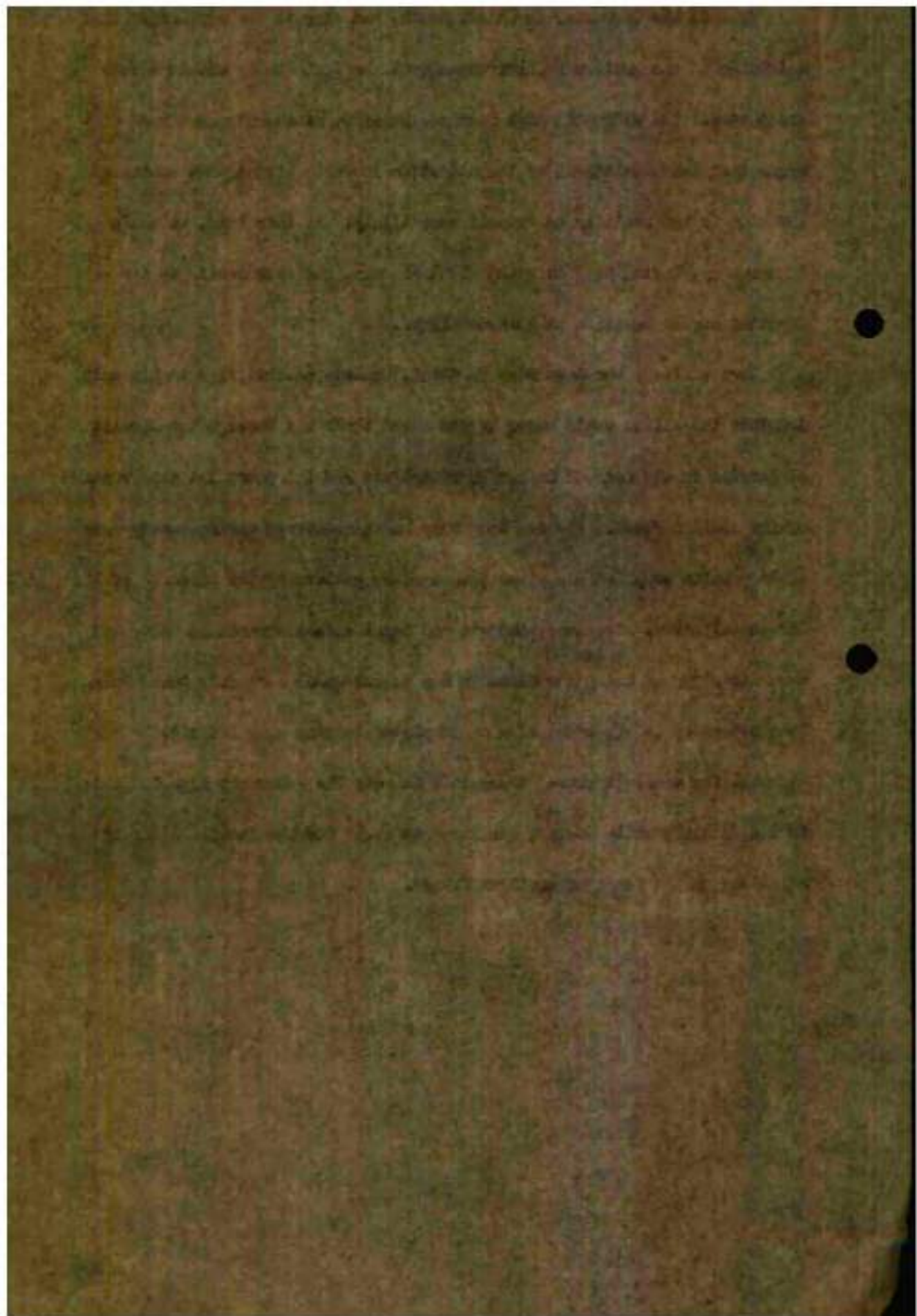
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At the same time a submarine patrol report was received, indicating a large convoy in the western Atlantic, moving towards the east.

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.

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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.

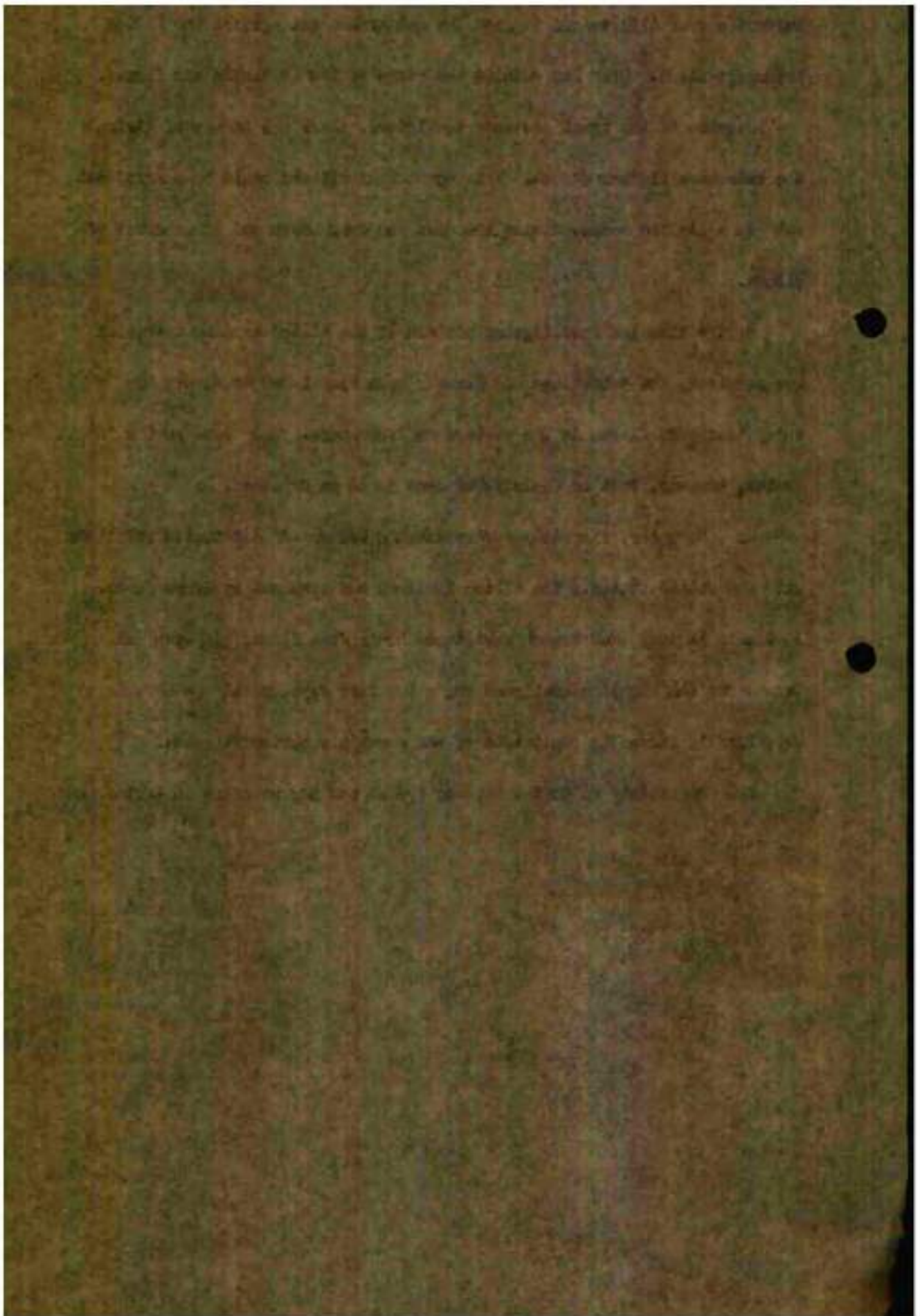
Because of the great distance to Algiers, there was no way of giving the bombers a fighter escort. This meant that attacks could be carried out only on a limited scale, during the dawn and dusk hours and under cover of clouds.

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 characterizing 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, Field-Marshal Keitel 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 243.

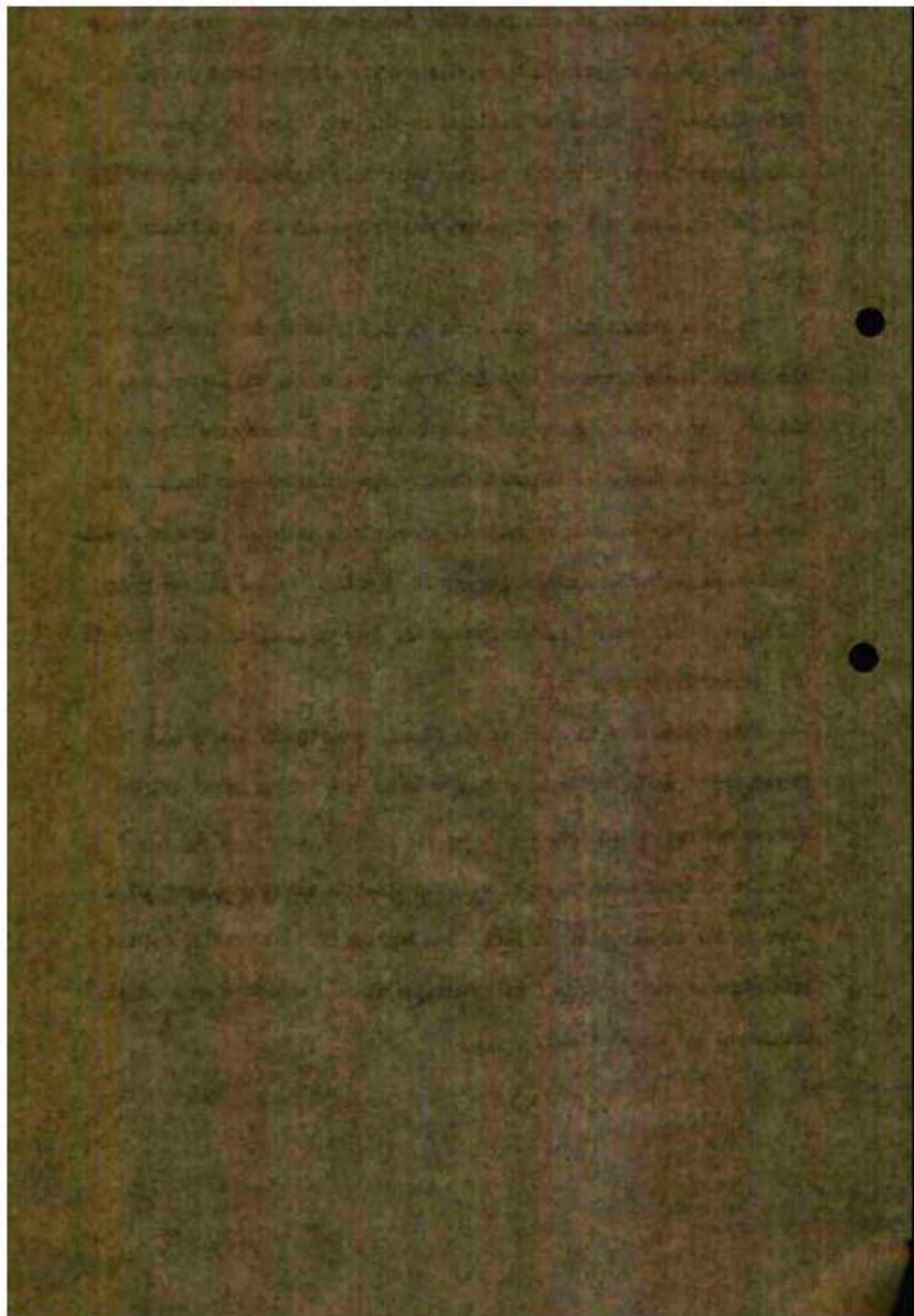
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the French government had informed the Resident General of Tunis, Admiral Esteva, of the impending transfer of German fighter aircraft to Tunis. It was not yet certain, however, just what degree of influence Marshal Petain might be able to exercise 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 Bizerte 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 Bizerte 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 Bizerte 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 colonial appointed by the Wehrmacht High Command.

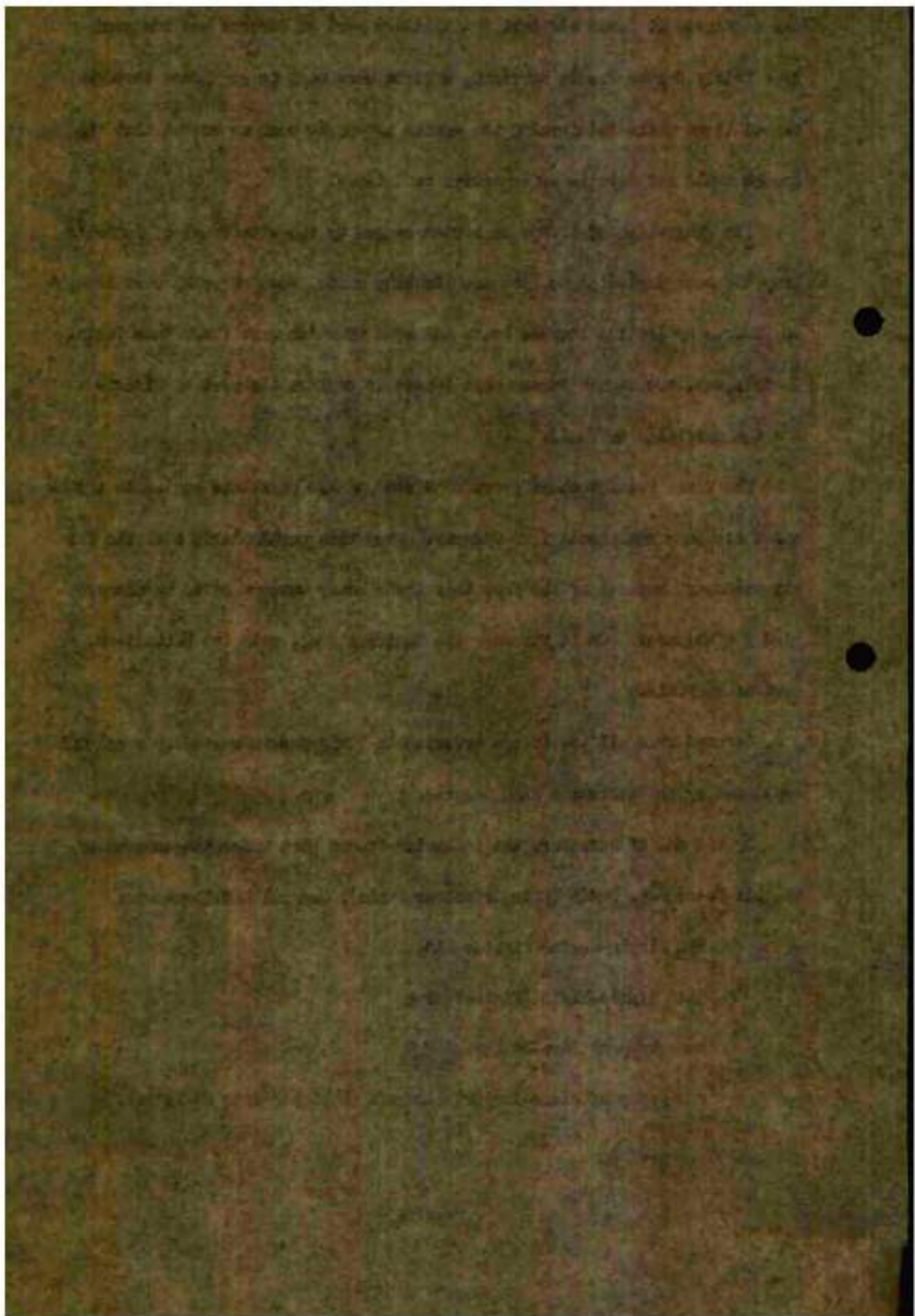
By the end of November, the following troops were under the command of the Air Commander, Tunis (Fliegerführer Tunis), General Harlinghausen:

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 Folderschall 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 Rahn and Consul Heilhausen, from the Foreign Office (Aufwartiges 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 debarked.

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from torpedo boats in Bizerte.

The German representatives were accused of having broken their word.

The French Division Barre left Tunis for Beja.

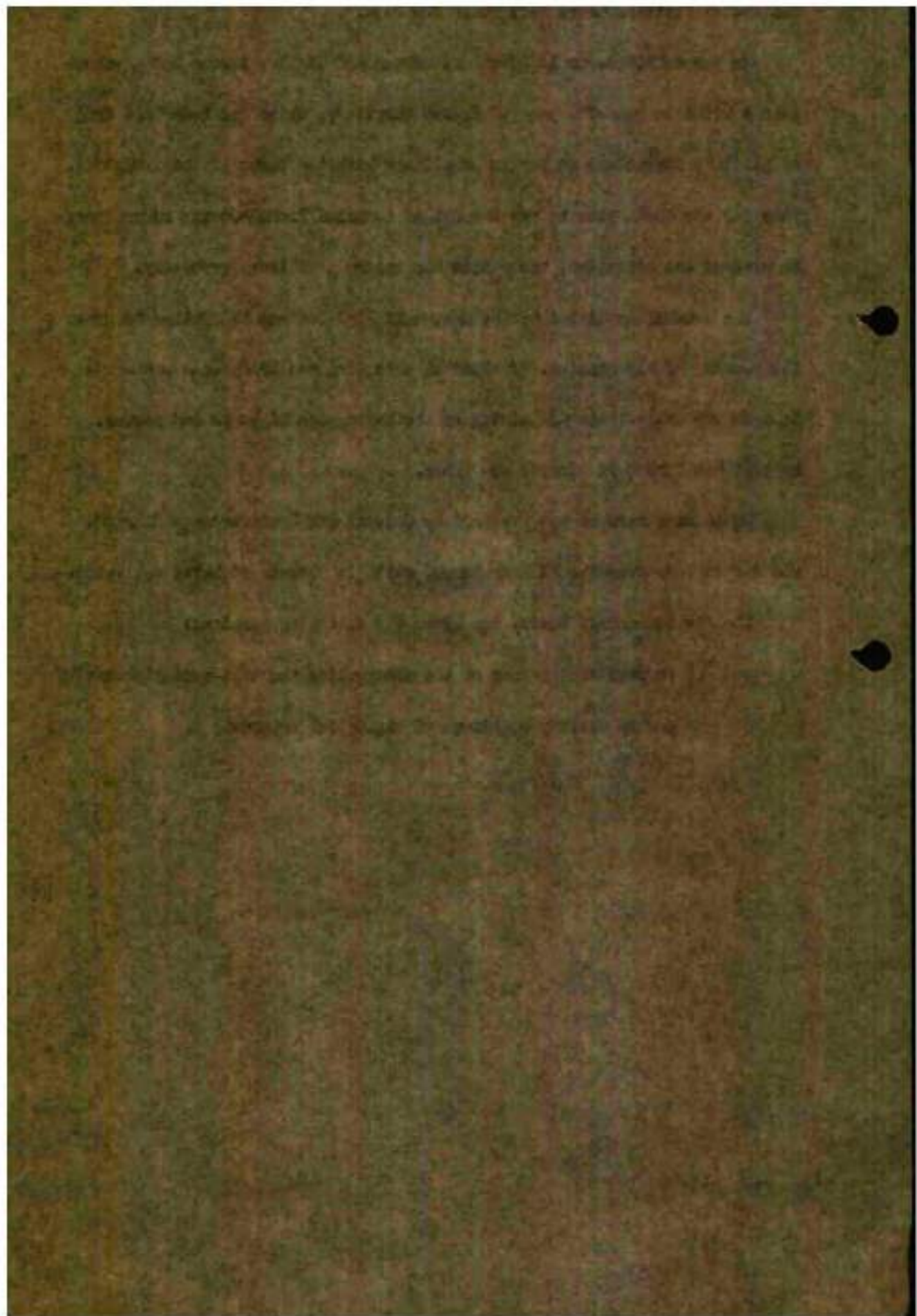
In the meantime, on 11 November, German and Italian troops had advanced into a hitherto peaceful zone of French territory, which had been kept free of military operations so far in compliance with the terms of the armistice. This was the death-blow to any thought of combined French-German operations; 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 Galle-Thala and mining or destroying the highways and passes, he kept his forces in Bizerte and Tunis.

On 16 November, he was replaced by General der Panzertruppen Mahring, 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 Bengis 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), Bengis, 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.

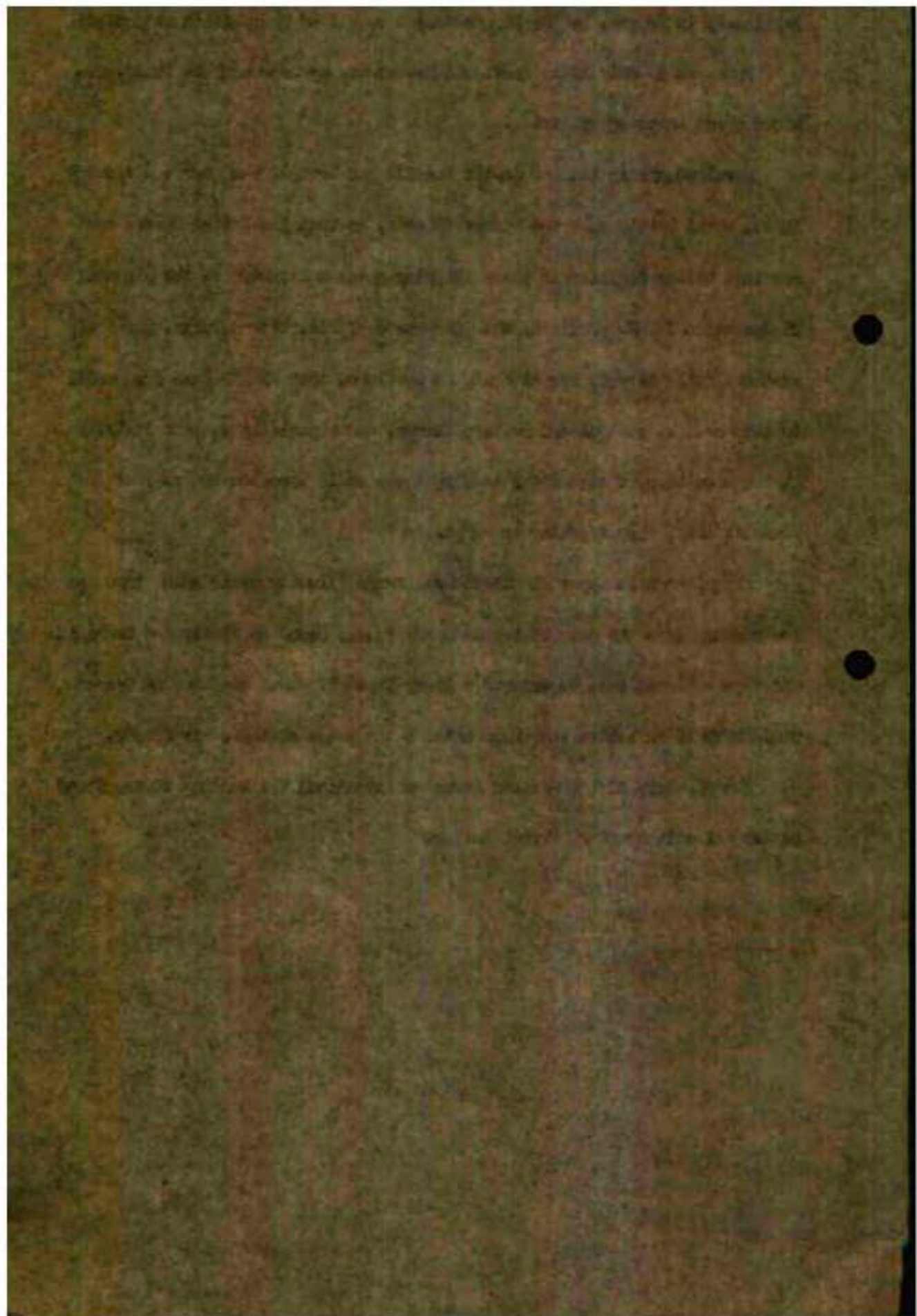
The long-cherished plans for the establishment of a second front on the Continent, in France, had broken down as a result of Churchill's objections.

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.

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The Center Task Force was also composed of American troops. It was to be transported from England and to land at Oran under the protection of British naval forces.

The Eastern Task Force was a combined group made up of British and American units, with the British in the majority. It was also to be transported from England, and its mission was to take Algiers. The Eastern Task Force was to be supported by a special element of the Royal Air Force, the Eastern Air Command, under the command of Air Marshal Sir William Walsh.

The Twelfth Air Force, under Major General Deolittle, was set up to support the operations of the two American groups, the Center and Western Task Forces. Since there was a shortage of well-trained crews in the United States, the Eighth Air Force released some of its own personnel to fill key positions in the new formation. The Eighth Air Force, under Major General Karl Spaatz, had been training crews for daylight high-altitude bomber raids from bases in England, and now took over the task of training the rest of the personnel brought over from the United States for the Twelfth Air Force.

On 23 September, Major General Deolittle assumed command of his air fleet. The following elements were under him:

XII Bomber Command (Colonel Claude E. Duncan),

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XII Fighter Command (Colonel Thomas W. Blackburn), and

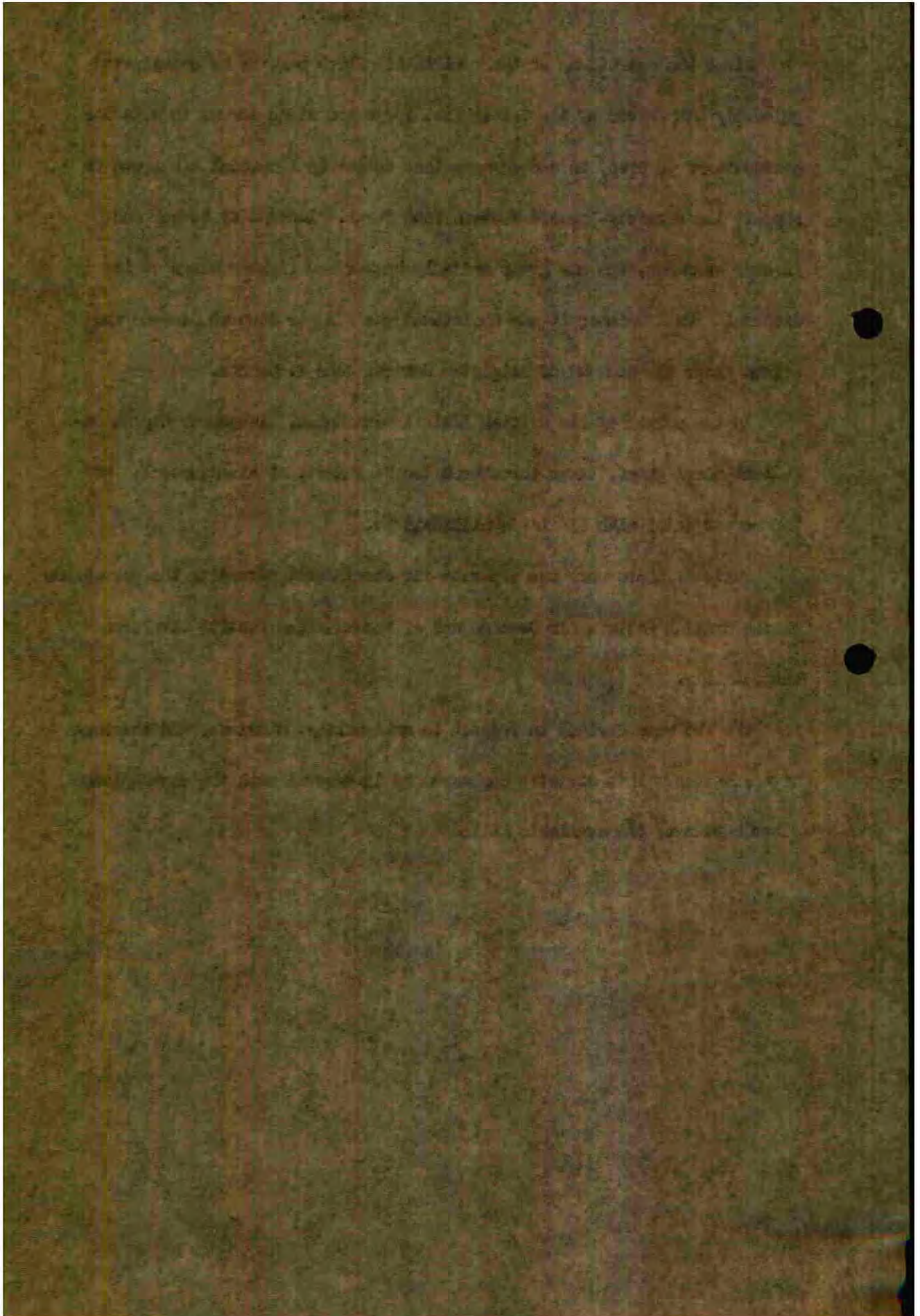
XII Air Force Service Command (Colonel Harold A. Bartron as of
4 October).

Since the operations of the Twelfth Air Force were to be coordinated primarily with those of the Center Task Force and since it was to make its headquarters in Oran, it seemed expedient to set up a special air group to support the remotely-located Western Task Force. Instead of bomber and fighter commands, the new group had only bomber and fighter wings at its disposal. On 1 October it was christened the XII Air Support Command and placed under the command of Brigadier General John K. Cannon.

In the person of the British Admiral Cunningham, Eisenhower had an excellent naval chief, known throughout the Near East, at his disposal; he had no air chief with similar qualifications.

Instead, there were two separate air commanders, directing the operations of the British Eastern Air Command and of the American Twelfth Air Force respectively.

The two were divided in respect to nationality, missions, and theaters of operations. This division corresponded in general with the contemplated distribution of the available Allied



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forces between the American Fifth Army and the British First Army.

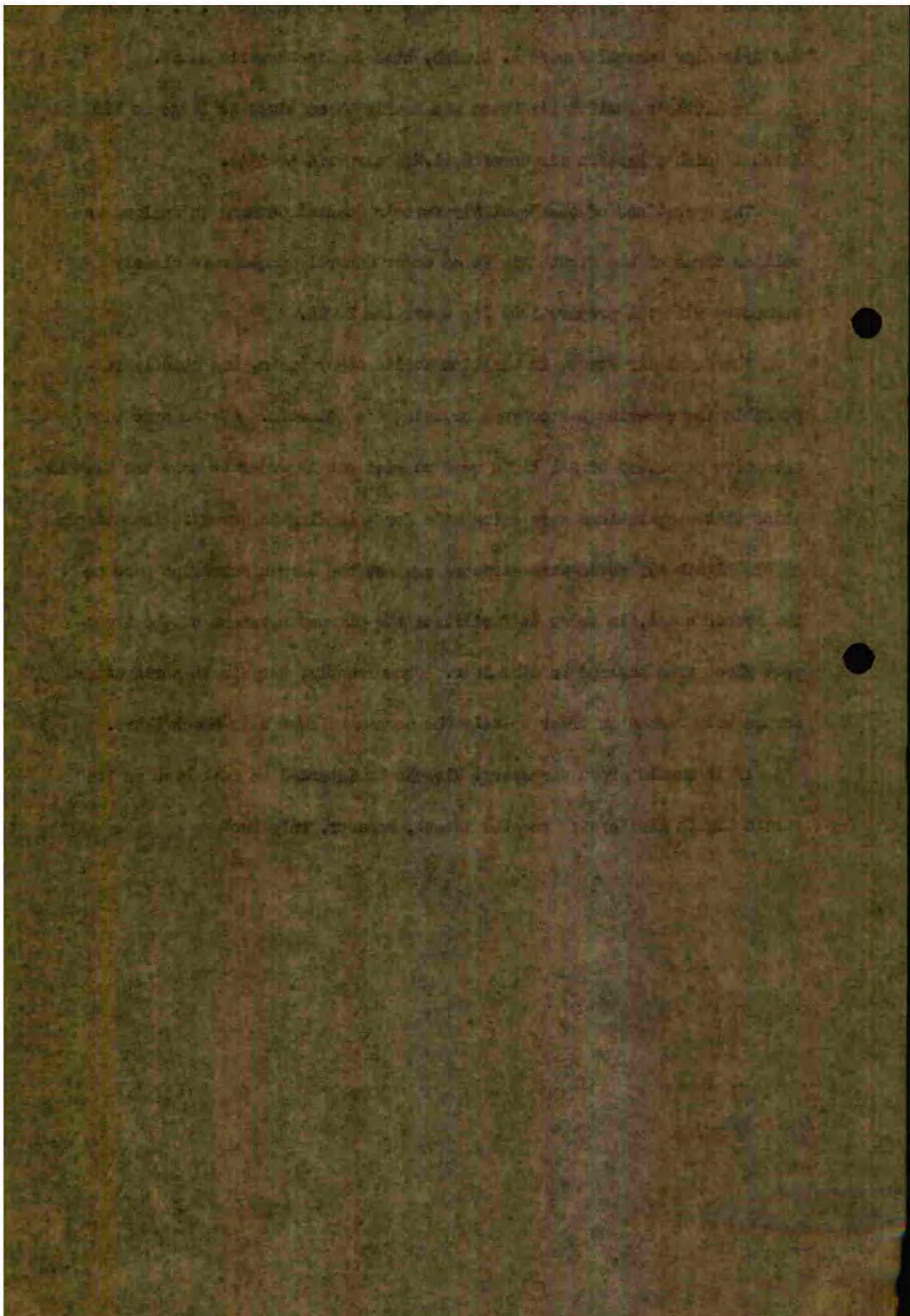
Both air commanders were directly subordinate to Eisenhower, and coordination of their operations was entrusted to Air Commodore A. P. M. Sanders and Brigadier General Howard A. Graigh, both on Eisenhower's staff.

Declittle's Twelfth Air Force was nearly three times as large as Air Marshal Walsh's Eastern Air Command (1,244 aircraft to 454).

The operations of the Royal Air Force's Coastal Command in England as well as those of the Eighth Air Force under General Spants were closely connected with the preparations for Operation TORCH.

The Royal Air Force, in addition to its other tasks, was chiefly responsible for covering the convoys crossing the Atlantic. At the same time, deceptive maneuvers of all kinds were carried out in order to make the Germans think that preparations were being made for a landing in Norway. The attacks by the Eighth Air Force were directed against the German submarine pens on the French coast, in order to facilitate the planned movement of the transport fleet from England to Gibraltar. Concurrently, targets in northwestern Europe were bombed in order to hold the German Luftwaffe in check there.

If it should prove necessary, Eisenhower intended to fall back on the entire Eighth Air Force; for the moment, however, only two



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heavy bomber groups (the 91st and the 103d) were earmarked for duty in Africa. The P-38's of the 78th Group were retained in England as a fighter reserve.

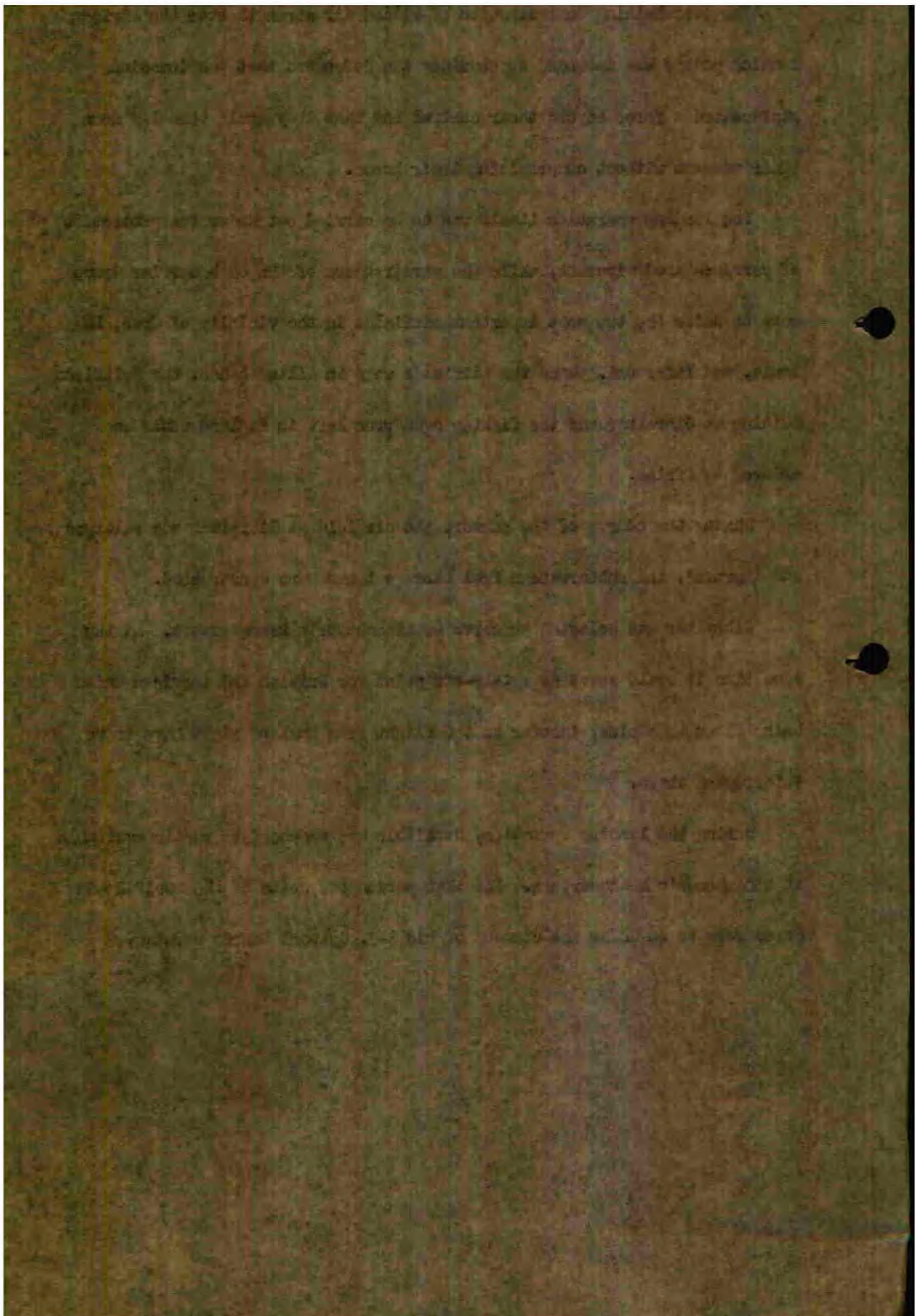
The overwhelming demonstration of Allied air strength over the African landing points was intended to convince the defenders that the invasion represented a force beyond their control and that they could thus lay down their weapons without compromising their honor.

The landing operation itself was to be carried out under the protection of carrier-based aircraft, while the paratroopers of the 60th Carrier Group were to seize the two most important airfields in the vicinity of Oran, La Senia, and Tafaraoui. Once the airfields were in Allied hands, the Spitfires waiting at Gibraltar and the fighter squadrons left in England could be ordered to Africa.

During the course of the summer, the airfield at Gibraltar was enlarged and improved, and subterranean fuel storage tanks were constructed.

Gibraltar was selected to serve as Eisenhower's headquarters. At the same time it would serve as a take-off point for British and American units being flown to Africa, insofar as the flight from England might have to be interrupted there.

During the landing operation, Doolittle was supposed to remain available at Eisenhower's headquarters. For that period the units of the Twelfth Air Force were to be under the command of his A-3, Colonel Lauris Norstad,



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and those of the Air Support Command in Casablanca under General Cannon. Both were under the commanders of the respective landing forces as regarded the coordination of operations. Later on, Deolittle planned to set up his headquarters at Oran and resume command of the Twelfth Air Force and - later - of the XII Air Support Command as well. He was to await further orders from Eisenhower regarding their subsequent missions.

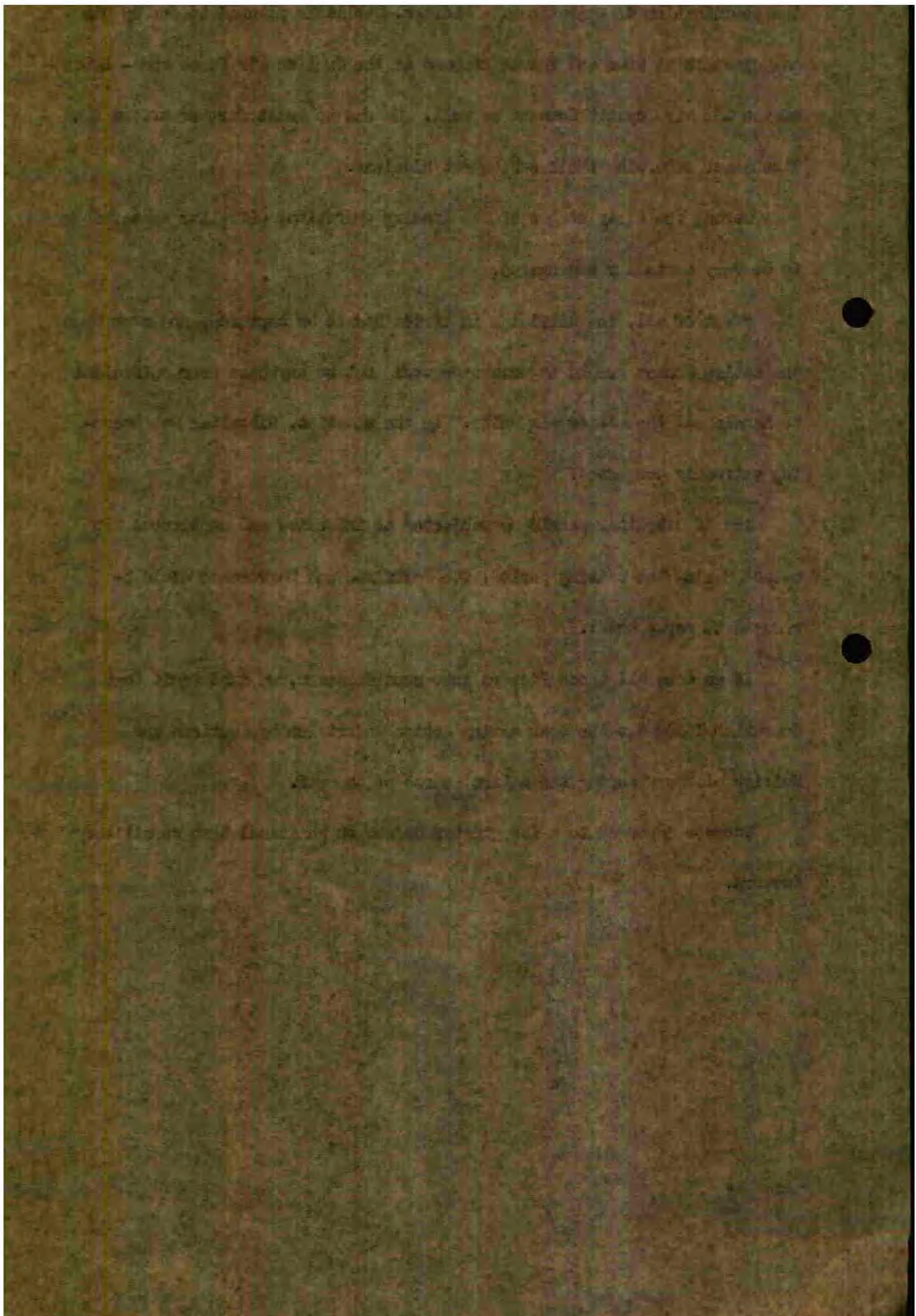
During the early stages of the landing operation, Gibraltar appeared to be very seriously endangered.

First of all, the airfields in Africa had to be captured, and even then the entire French ground organization would not be anywhere near sufficient to handle all the Allied air units. In the meantime, Gibraltar was becoming extremely congested.

And if Gibraltar should be subjected to intensive and continuous air attack during the waiting period, the Spitfires and Hurricanes could be reduced to scrap metal.

If we take all these factors into consideration, we must admit that Operation TORCH was the most daring action undertaken by American and British planners during the entire course of the war.

Success depended to a far greater degree on political than on military factors.



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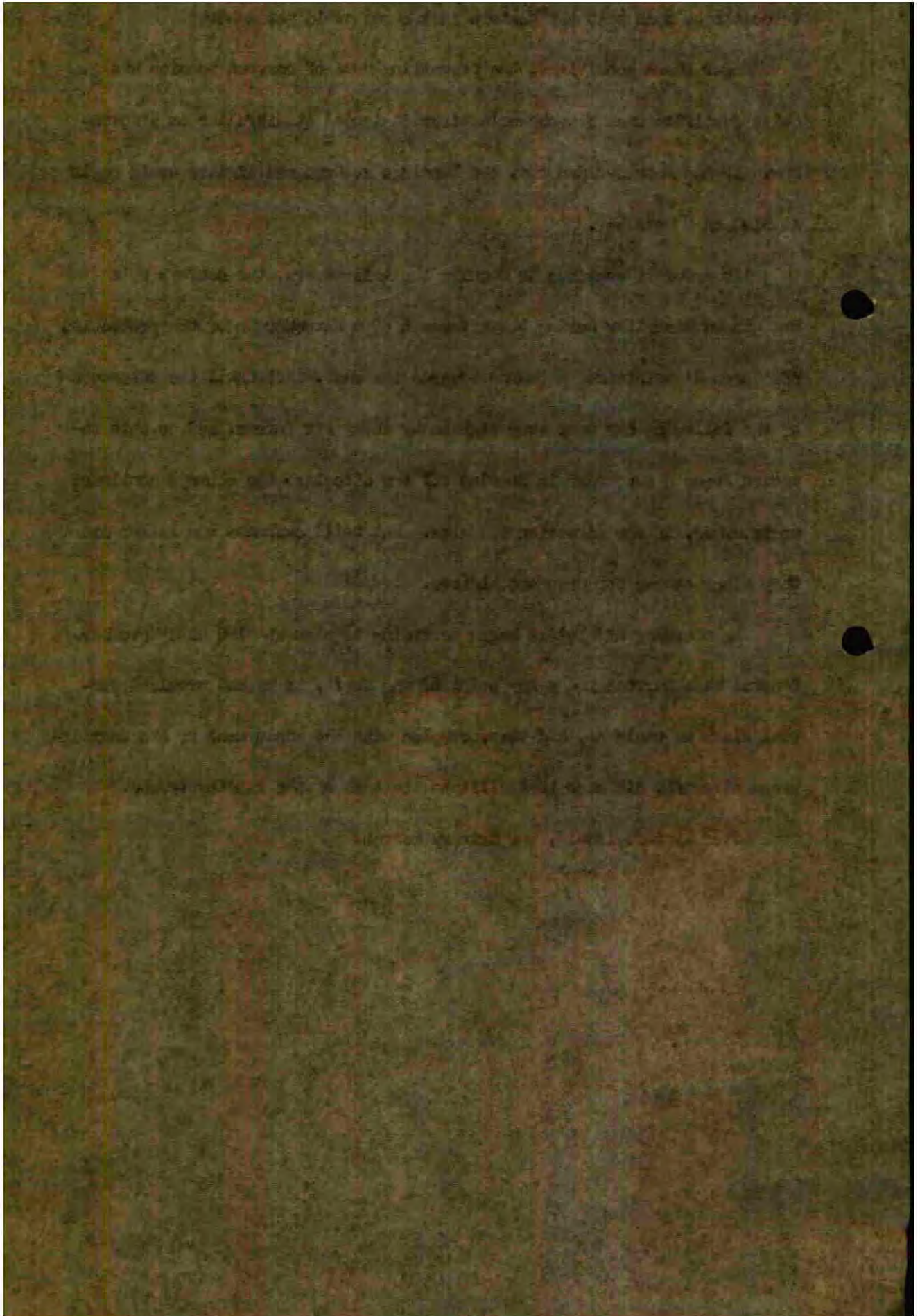
Would the French offer resistance and, if so, how stubborn would it be? Had secrecy been maintained? Would Spain intervene? Would the weather forecasts be such that the Western Task Force could get ashore?

Under these conditions, the prevailing mood of nervous tension was quite justified when Eisenhower's aircraft landed at Gibraltar on 5 November. It had been decided that the landings at Oran and Algiers would begin at 0100 on 8 November.

"In order to continue to deceive the Axis powers, the convoys which had passed Gibraltar during the afternoon of 6 November under the protection of 'Force H' maintained a course towards the east. Not until the afternoon of the following day were they sighted by enemy air forces, and on this occasion Force H succeeded in drawing off the attacks; the convoys continued undisturbed, in the direction of Malta. Not until darkness had fallen did they alter course for Oran and Algiers.

The storming of Algiers began according to plan at 0100 on 8 November. General Mast surrendered a key point of the fort, as he had promised General Clark he would do, and this, coupled with the employment of the carrier-based aircraft, did much to facilitate the task of the landing troops.

After Algiers itself, the primary targets



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were the airfields at Maison Blanche and Blida.

Maison Blanche, ten miles southeast of Algiers, surrendered quickly to an American assault group, and by 0900 eighteen Hurricanes from the 43d Squadron had already landed there. Almost simultaneously, a Royal Air Force maintenance group arrived on the scene, having covered the distance from the landing point to Maison Blanche in a little under three hours.

Shortly afterwards Blida, fifteen miles southeast of Algiers, was seized by four Martlets (Grumman F₄F's) from the naval air force.

Sporadic resistance flared up from time to time, but during the course of the afternoon the ship-based guns and the armaments of the carrier-based aircraft succeeded in bringing still another important fortress under control. The 81st and 242d Squadrons landed at Maison Blanche to provide additional air reinforcement.

Negotiations with the French were complicated by the unexpected presence of Admiral Darlan. Fortunately, the unbidden guest soon agreed to be reasonable and, while negotiations were still going on, he called a halt to the resistance in Algiers.

The local fighting, then, had been brought to a successful close, but there was still a shadow

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over the over-all operation."¹⁴

Oran was to be encircled by landings to the east and west of the city. Then, supported by naval artillery, the landed troops were to storm the town.

Top priority was to be given to the capture of the airfields at La Senia and Tafaraoui by armored troops.

Until such time as the Twelfth Air Force could get into action, the landings would have to be covered by carrier-based aircraft. These aircraft were also supposed to carry out a raid on La Senia at daybreak in the hope of destroying the backbone of the French air forces.

At the appointed time, two companies of a special unit (assault troops) fought their way into Arzew and succeeded in smothering enemy resistance. As a result, the 1st Infantry Division was able to capture the city by 0745. The way to Oran, however, was still blocked by French units stationed at Saint Cloud.

In the meantime another fighting unit (the 26th R.C.T.) had landed successfully at Les Andalouses, but was prevented by French artillery from taking the decisive ridges of the Jebel Mounjado, from which Mers-el-Kebir and Oran could be held under fire.

14 - Richards, Denis, op. cit., Volume II, pp 248 and 249, and The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume II, page 69.

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The western flank of Task Force B had encountered considerable difficulty in locating its appointed landing area. Once on shore, however, it quickly captured Lournal and moved on during the afternoon into the Misserghin area.

The coastal batteries of Oran were firing on the 'Rodney', and French destroyers were engaged in a hopeless battle with the British fleet.

In the meantime, the eastern flank of Task Force B had broken through via the 1st Infantry Division bridgehead at Arsen and pushed on through St. Barbe-du-Thalat. Towards noon, after a brief but savage struggle, it captured the Tafaraoui airfield, thus opening the way for the Twelfth Air Force units.

The 31st Group, originally scheduled for Casablanca, was the first to be ready for take-off in Gibraltar, and Deolittle ordered it deviated to Tafaraoui. It took off with an escort of two Spitfire squadrons.

Its landing at Tafaraoui, at about 1700, was carried out in the face of French artillery fire, which was soon put down, and an unexpected attack by four Dewittines, which had been erroneously identified as Hurricanes. Three of these were shot down.

In order to bring the paratroopers to Maison

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Blanche, Bone, and - if feasible - as far forward was Tunis as soon as possible, Eisenhower had given Bentley's C-47 wing permission to start from southwestern England on the afternoon of 7 November. His plan was doomed to failure by a number of unfortunate mishaps during the flight.

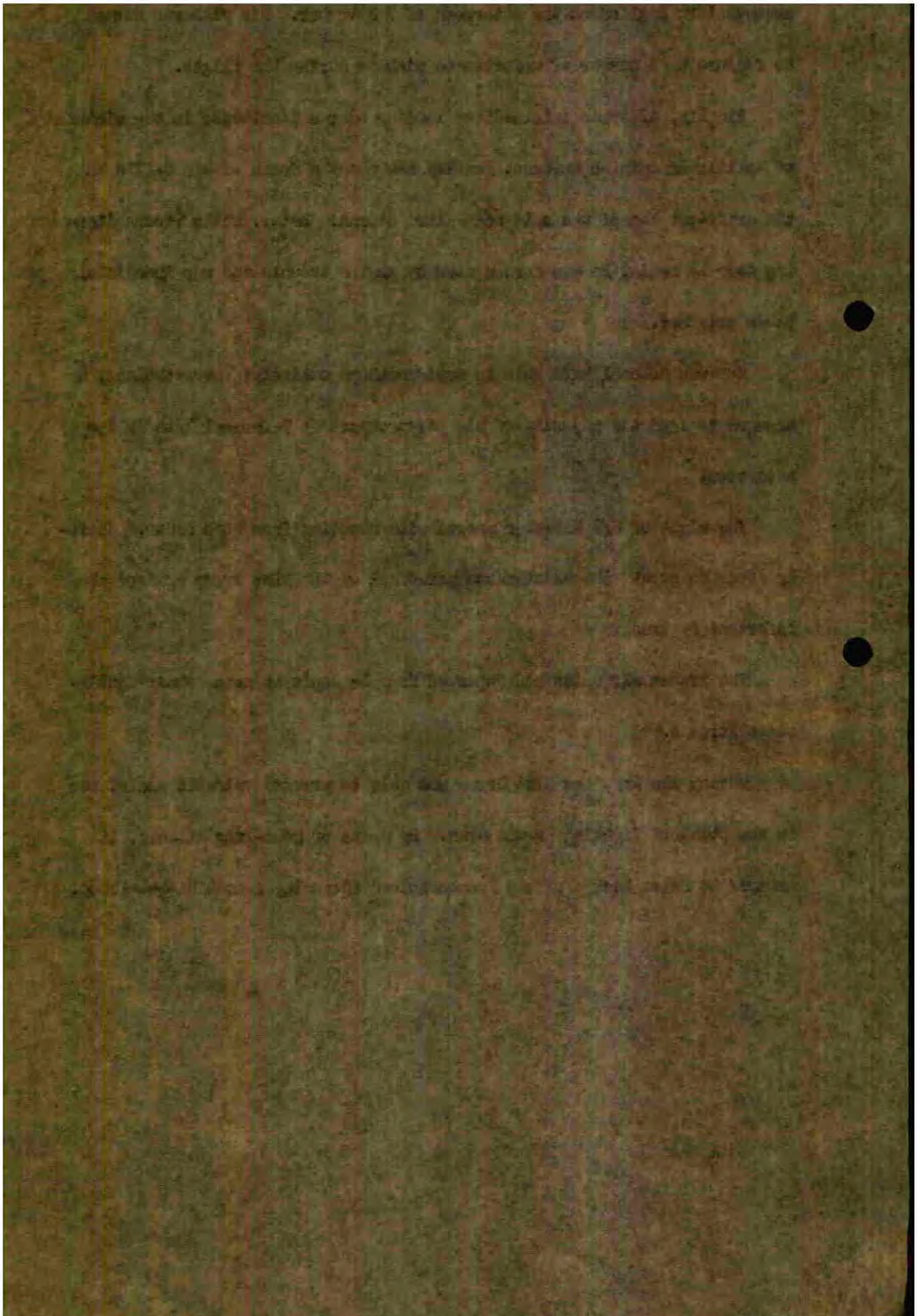
Finally, after an intermediate landing near a lighthouse in the vicinity of Mellila in Spanish Morocco, Bentley saw about a dozen of his C-47's on the dried-out bed of the salt sea Salakra d'Oran. Later, while reconnoitering over La Senia, he was forced down by engine trouble and was immediately taken prisoner.

Nor was Colonel Raff able to avoid mishaps entirely; nevertheless, he managed to land the majority of his paratroopers at Tafaraoui late in the afternoon.

The night of 8/9 November passed with shooting from both sides. Shortly after daybreak, the maintenance personnel of the 31st Group arrived at Tafaraoui by truck.

The French air units had departed from La Senia at noon, their destination Morocco.

During the day, the 31st Group was able to provide valuable assistance in the stubborn fighting around Oran. By means of hour-long attacks, it managed to force back a strong French column advancing from Sidi-bel-Abbes.



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In conjunction with the naval forces, it also participated in the attacks on the French coastal batteries. A total of forty-five sorties were flown during the day. Doolittle landed at Tafarnout during the course of the afternoon.

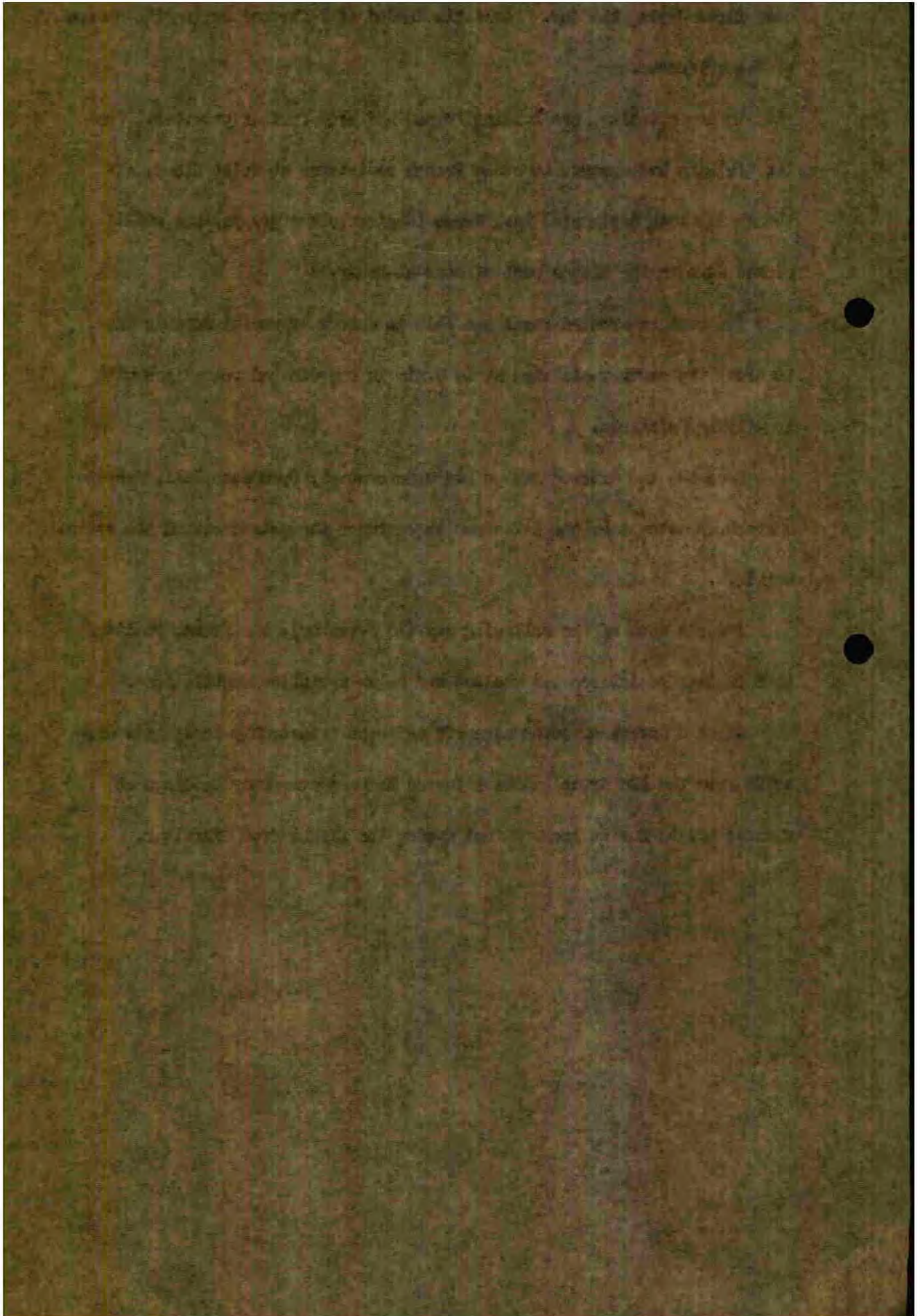
In the meantime, the landing forces had made further progress. The 1st Division had managed to evade French resistance at Saint Cloud, although its 18th Regimental Task Force (Regimentskampfgruppe) was still pinned down on the slopes west of Mers-el-Kebir.

The western armored force was able to detour around Miaserghin and to break the enemy resistance at La Senia in coordinated operations with low-flying Spitfires.

Once the two armored groups had made contact, Oran soon fell, despite a stubborn attempt by the defenders to entrench themselves behind the street barriers.

Towards noon of the following day (10 November), the French realized that further resistance was useless and began armistice negotiations.

Since 8 November, seven aircraft had been irrevocably lost; six aircraft from the 52d Group had been forced to make emergency landings at various points due to lack of fuel during the flight from Gibraltar.



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On 10 November, only twenty C-47's of the 60th Group were ready for commitment.

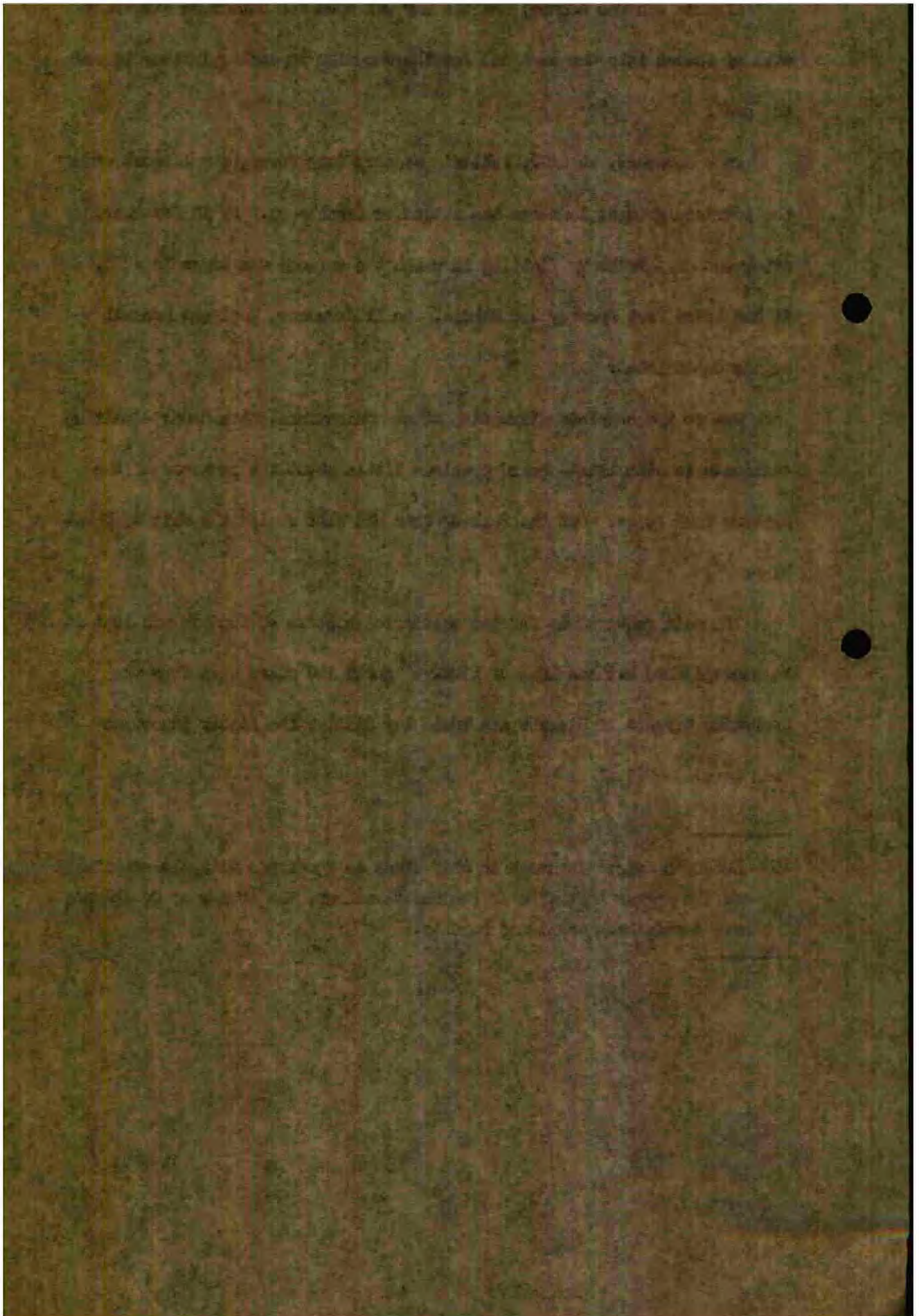
Algeria was now secure, and the way was open for continued air transport of forces into the area and for the campaign impending further towards the east.

On 8 November, at 0400, Patton's Western Task Force, the largest of the American groups, launched the attack on Casablanca. By 10 November, after two days of heavy fighting in which the outcome was unpredictable, it had taken Port Lyautey and Mohdia. On 11 November, Resident General Nogues capitulated.

Due to the complete disruption of communications, Eisenhower - waiting anxiously in Gibraltar - heard precious little about the progress of the Western Task Force. But the fall of Oran had also sealed the fate of Casablanca¹⁵.

The main requirement for the successful capture of Tunisia was that it be accomplished without loss of time. A scant 100 miles away from the beckoning targets of Bizerte and Tunis lay Sicily, the highly important Axis base.

15 - Author's Note: Inasmuch as this study is concerned with the commitment of the German Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, the events at Casablanca have merely been mentioned briefly.



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And on 9 November, German fighters, bombers, and troop-laden Ju-52's took off from Sicily for El-Glenina, where they were welcomed at the command of the Resident General, Admiral Jean Pierre Esteva.

During the following days, more and more forces were brought, by both sea and air transport, to Biserte and the nearby airfield, Sidi Ahmed.

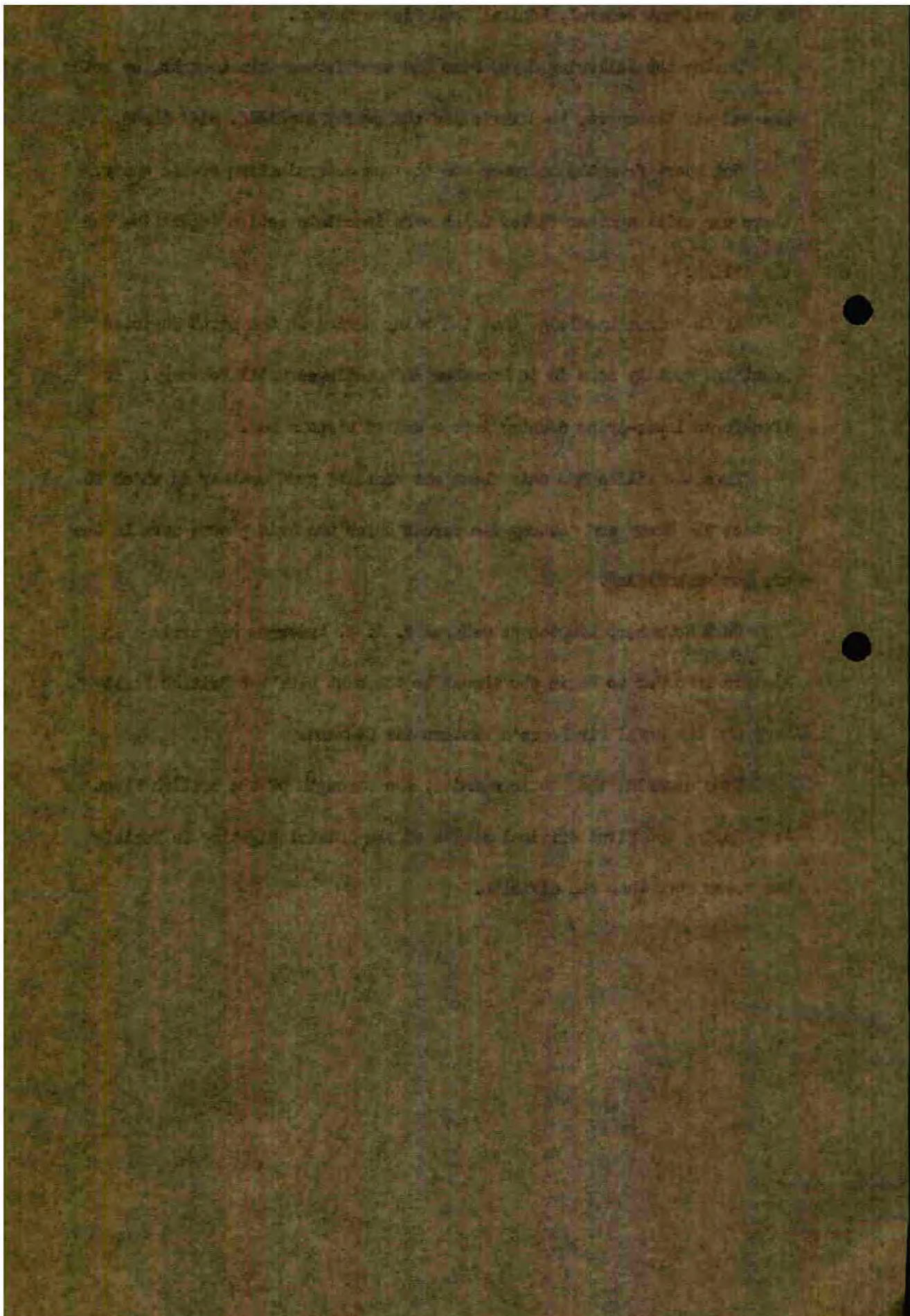
But apart from the nearness and obvious determination of the enemy, there was still another factor which made immediate action imperative for the Allies.

It is common knowledge that the rainy period in the north Tunisian mountains usually sets in in December and continues until February. It transforms lower-lying country into a sea of viscous mud.

Thus the Allies had only about one month of good weather in which to contact the enemy and destroy the forces which the Axis powers were in the process of building.

On 9 November, Lieutenant General K. A. M. Anderson had arrived in Algiers in order to begin the thrust to the east with the British First Army and the Royal Air Force's Eastern Air Command.

Even counting the American units, the strength of the British First Army during the first critical stages of the initial fighting in Tunisia was never more than one division,



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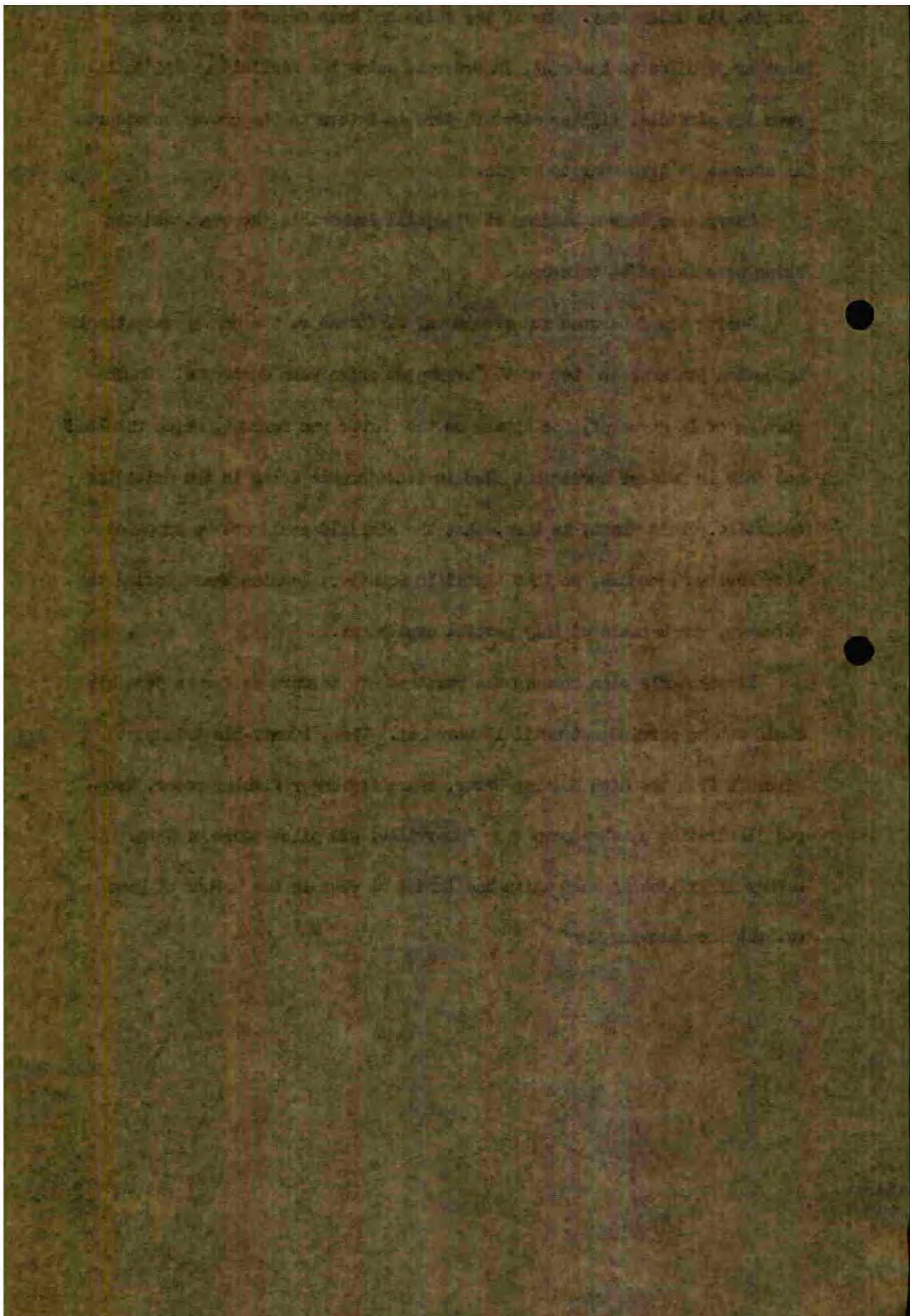
with a single armored regiment.

As early as 10 November, a convoy left Algiers to take the harbor of Bone, 115 miles away. One of the ships had been ordered to proceed another 30 miles to the east, in order to seize the airfield at Djidjelli. From the airfield, fighter aircraft were to return to the convoy as escorts as soon as it drew near to Bone.

Heavy seas made a landing at Djidjelli impossible, however, and the ships were forced to turn back.

During the afternoon and evening of 11 November, the convoy was attacked by German bombers, and two of the transport ships were destroyed. On the morning of 12 November, the attack on the harbor was renewed, which resulted not only in further losses but also in considerable delay in the unloading operation. This meant, in turn, that the airfield could not be supplied with fuel on schedule, so that the 154th Squadron, landing there during the forenoon, was capable of only partial employment.

Eisenhower's plan to move the paratroopers forward as far as possible could not be carried out until 12 November. Then, twenty-six transport aircraft from the 64th US Army Group, operating under fighter cover, dropped 312 British paratroopers over Duserville, six miles south of Bone. A number of British assault units had landed at dawn in the harbor of Bone without encountering any



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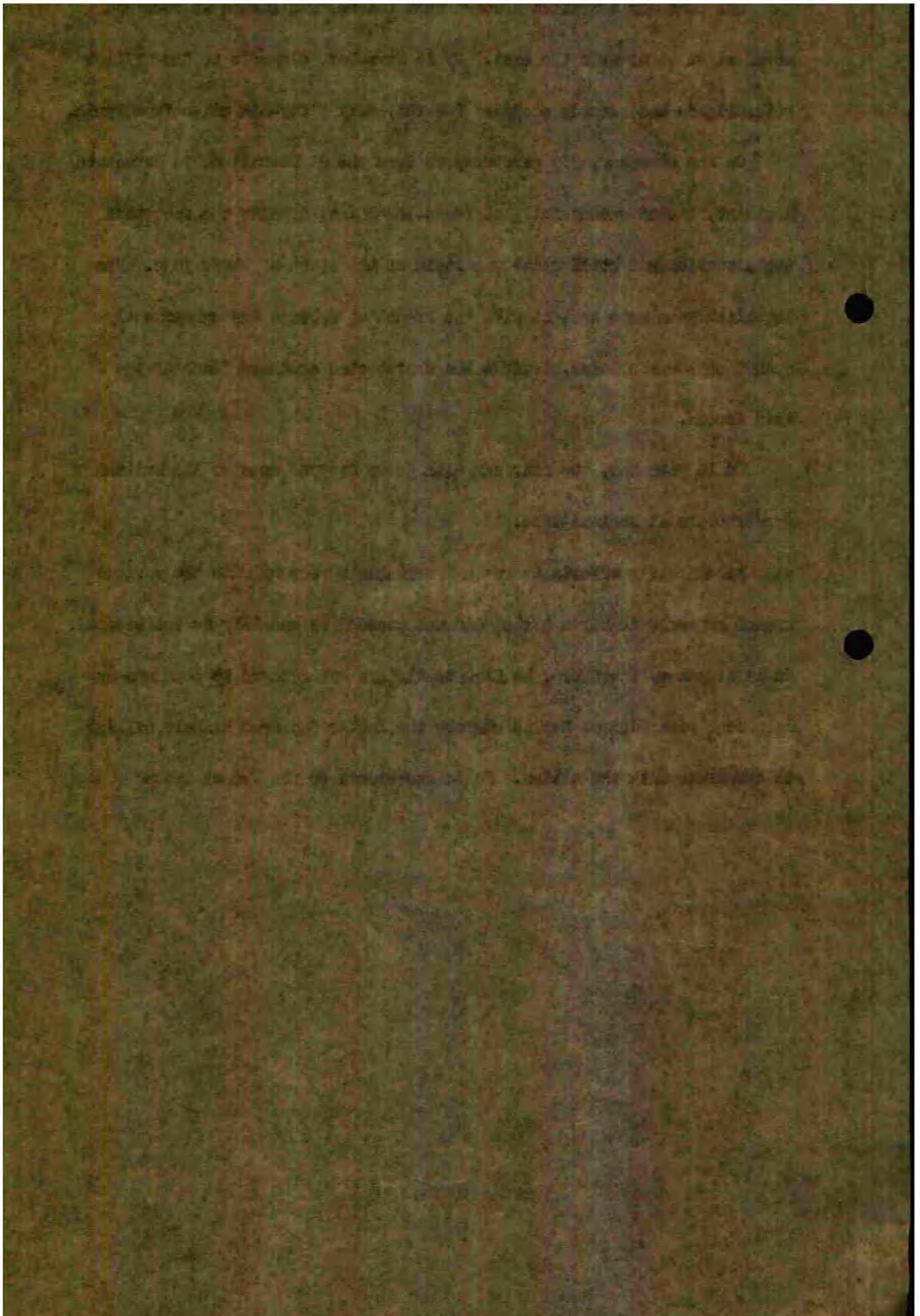
opposition. As night fell, however, German aircraft began to bomb the airfield as though they wanted to force its evacuation.

The next day a British armored unit (Blade) was landed in Bone and moved right on towards the east. By 15 November, elements of the British 36th Brigade had already occupied Tabarka, only fifty-six miles from Tunis.

On the same day, 350 paratroopers from the 2d Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, landed successfully at Yank-les-Bains, despite the fact that the situation was still quite uncertain at the start of their jump. The battalion soon made contact with the French at Tebessa and subsequently pushed on towards Gafsa, towards the unprotected southern flank of the Axis forces.

On 16 November, the American 64th Group dropped another 384 British paratroopers at Souk-el-Arba.

Eisenhower's efforts to reach a workable agreement with the various French generals in North Africa did not proceed as smoothly as anticipated. On 13 November, therefore, he flew to Algiers and managed to conclude an agreement with Admiral Darlan whereby the latter declared himself willing to cooperate with the Allies. He issued orders to the French troops



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to open resistance against the German forces.

In Tunisia, after a good deal of inconclusive fighting on both sides, important elements of the Division Barre had gone over to the Allies and had pledged themselves to cover the assembling of the British 78th Division.

"In the meantime, Feldmarschall Kesselring had had time to report to the Fuehrer Headquarters regarding his evaluation of the situation and his intentions.

He estimated Allied strength in French North Africa at nearly five divisions (based on a transport capacity of approximately 700,000 tons). This total was augmented by units of undetermined strength recruited from the French colonies. These units, however, were poorly equipped and without adequate weapons.

Kesselring realized that the enemy would begin to move forward as soon as possible in order to be sure of capturing Tunisia -- specifically Bizerte and Tunis -- before the Germans could dispatch stronger forces to these points.

There was another, even graver danger, however; it was entirely possible that the enemy might succeed in wedging himself between the German forces in northern Tunisia and Rommel's Panzer Army. This might happen at any one of the totally unprotected areas of Sousse, Sfax, or Gabes.

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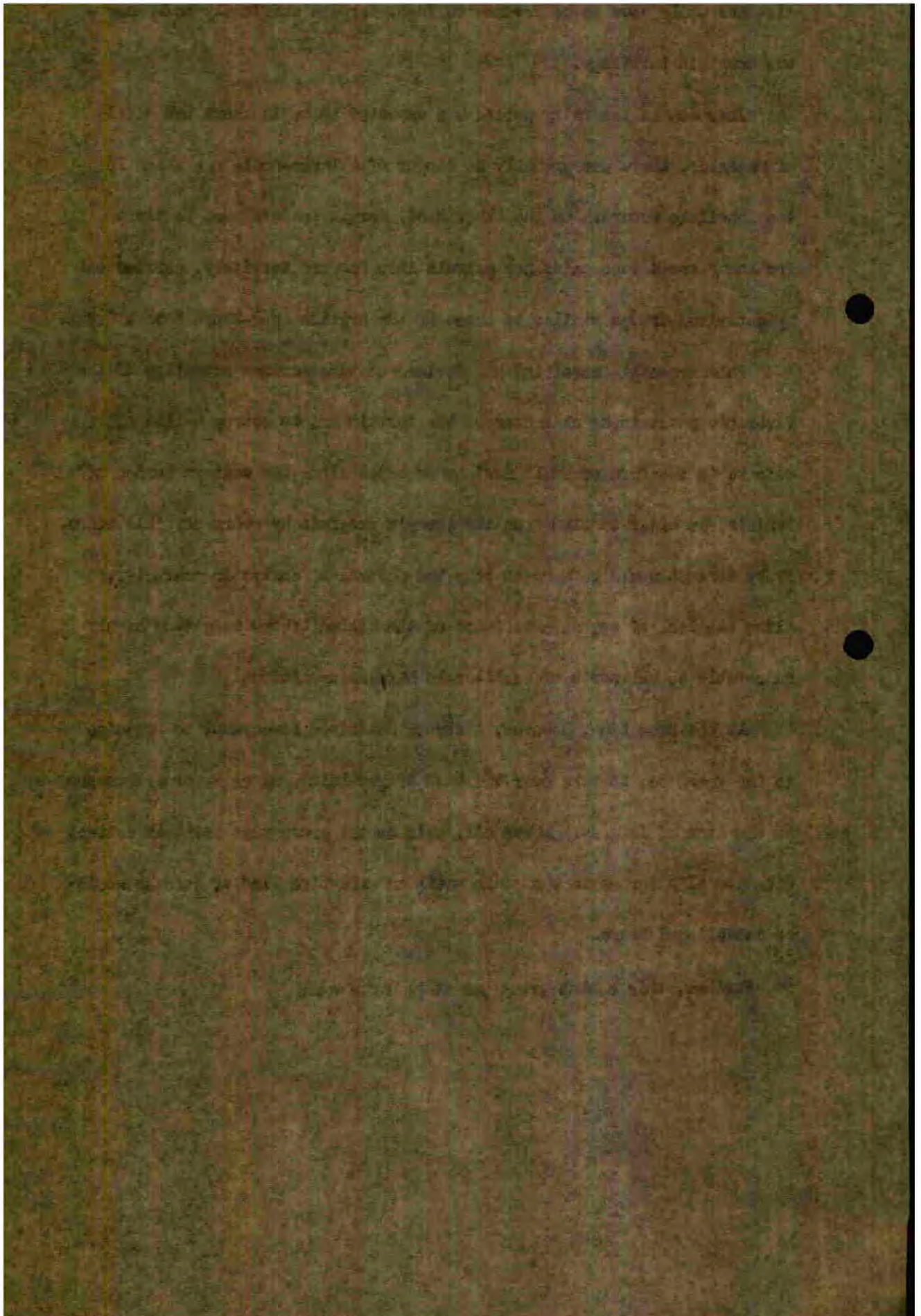
On the other hand, the enemy would have to cover a distance of 375 to 500 miles between his point of landing and his targets. Much of this distance would have to be covered on foot, through unfriendly and dangerous mountain territory.

Inasmuch as the rainy period was expected to begin about the middle of December, there was probably no danger of a large-scale operation in the immediate future. On the other hand, German leaders must be alert for enemy armed reconnaissance patrols into forward territory, carried out by motorized troops similar to those of the British Long-Range Desert Group.

Feldmarschall Kesselring had decided to take maximum advantage of the favorable mountainous character of the terrain and to set up a line of defense in the form of small resistance bases along the western border of Tunisia, in order to slow down the enemy's progress by every possible means. Every attempt would be made to keep the defense offensive in character, since the lack of combat experience of the Allied troops made them highly vulnerable to all sorts of small-scale harrying actions.

At the same time, however, a strong motorized force must be organized in the rear area to take over the task of repulsing any enemy breakthroughs on the line of defense. Above all, this combat group must maintain contact with Rommel's forces in the south until an effective line of defense could be established there.

Further, this combat group was to be reinforced



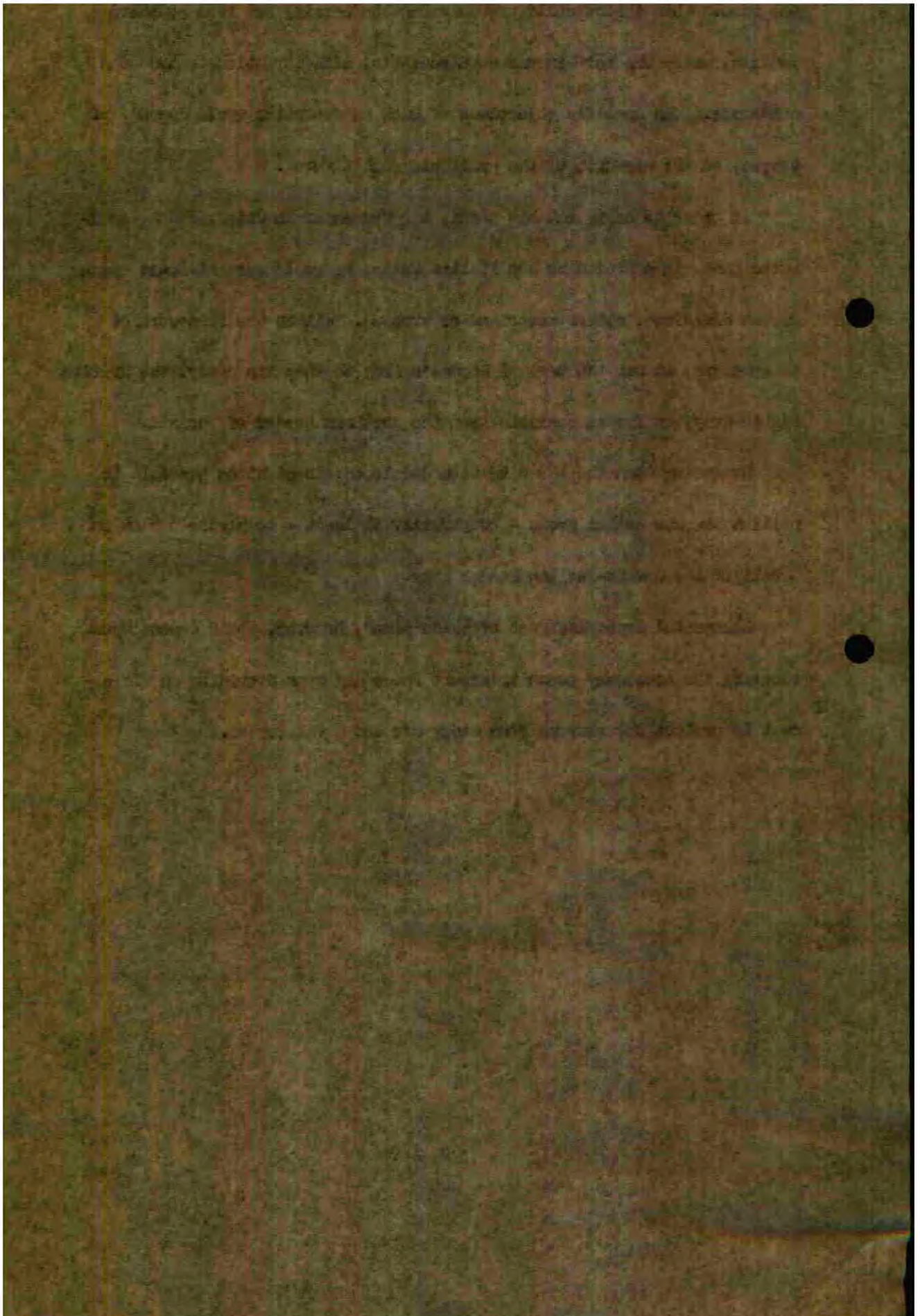
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as rapidly as possible to the point where it would be capable of launching an attack against the rear or flank of the Allied divisions advancing from the west. This thrust could probably best be carried out from southern Tunisia, where the terrain was most suitable, with direction towards the northwest. The specific objectives of such an operation would depend, of course, on the strength of the available combat force.

In order to carry out his plans, the Commander in Chief, South, estimated that, in addition to the Italian units, he would need at least five German divisions, either motorized or armored. Within the framework of these plans, it was the task of Rommel's Army to keep its enemy, the British Eighth Army, as far as possible from the southern border of Tunisia.

Depending upon how the situation developed, it might be possible to utilize the new combat group - temporarily at least - to strike a blow on behalf of the German-Italian Panzer Army.

Successful accomplishment of these plans, however, would depend upon securing the necessary ocean transport space and upon providing an air escort to protect the convoys from enemy air and naval forces.



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The Wehrmacht High Command was in agreement with Kesselring's views and approved his plans. He was promised seven armored divisions for his operations, and the Wehrmacht High Command offered to assume the responsibility of transporting them by ship from Italy to Africa.

The transport of the troops to Italy was to be organized at once. The Commander in Chief, South, was to be responsible for coordinating the dates of transport to Italy with the transport facilities available from Italy to Africa. The first formation to get under way was the 10th Panzer Division, in late November 1942.

Feldmarschall Kesselring's evaluation of the military situation and his plans for further operations in Tunisia are indicative of his farsightedness and daring, and the assurance of reinforcements by the Wehrmacht High Command was a sign of the confidence he inspired.

Kesselring had been in the Mediterranean theater for a year and knew it well. He was fully aware of the decisive importance of effective over-water supply lines for the conduct of military operations.

During a conference with Rommel on 24 November 1942 in Area dei Fileni, he made the following remark:

"In the last analysis everything depends on supply; true enough, it is not an extensive organization, but even so both the air and sea situations

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are not unfavorable, especially as long as the British air and naval forces are occupied by the invasion and Eisenhower and Montgomery have not yet begun to coordinate their operations in respect to locality."¹⁶

Kesselring had only a limited time in which to carry out his preparations; the latest possible deadline would be about the end of February, when the rainy season came to an end.

In the meantime, regardless of the situation on the ground, the overwhelming superiority of the US air forces based in Algeria and of the British air and naval forces operating from Malta was bound to have serious effects on the German ocean transports. If Kesselring could succeed in establishing his line of defense along the western border of Tunisia, if his new mobile combat group could be ready for action behind the front - both by the end of the time limit set - and if Rommel's Panzer Army could drag out the pursuit action of the British Eighth Army that long, then this "va banque" gamble for Tunisia might have a chance to succeed.

In any case, Feldmarschall Kesselring had no other alternative if he wished to avoid a catastrophe in the African theater of operations. Everything depended on making the best possible use of the period ^{of} grace allotted to him and on acting with the greatest possible speed.

The Wehrmacht High Command, however, seemed unable to comprehend the urgent importance of acting

16 - See also pages 491 and 492 of the present study.

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without delay, or to realize the inevitable ramifications of such a policy. The very alacrity with which Germany's top military leaders engaged to transport seven armored divisions across the sea from Italy to Africa shows how superficially they had concerned themselves with the problems of the Mediterranean theater of operations.

Were they completely unaware of the influence which the island fortress of Malta had always been able to exercise on ocean traffic to Africa?

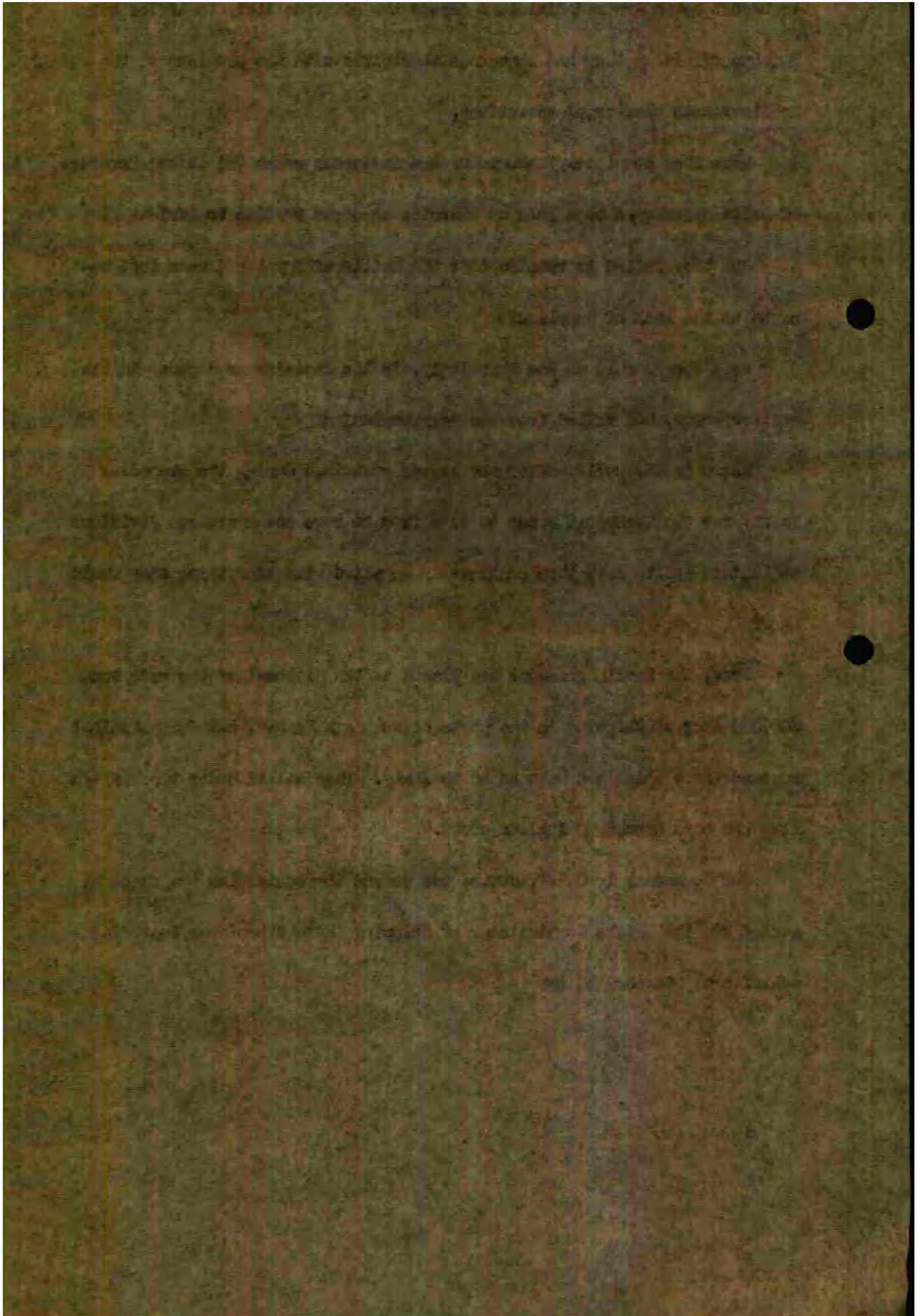
Had they failed to realize that the battle of Egypt had been lost because of the lack of supplies?

Were they unable to see that Italy, in its capacity as a power in the Mediterranean, had failed from the very beginning?

Where in the world, after the losses sustained during the preceding years, was the transport space to come from to move seven armored divisions to Tunisia and to keep them continually supplied with everything they would need?

True, the Laval Agreement had placed at the disposal of the Axis some 600,000 tons of shipping in the ports of southern France, but for political reasons these ships had been ceded to Italy. They sailed under the Italian flag and were manned by Italian crews.

The Commander in Chief, South, was forced to requisition the space he needed via the Reichs Commissioner of Shipping (Reichskommissar fuer die Schifffahrt) attached to the



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Italian Navy High Command. Inevitably, this led to friction and delays, since the Italians naturally laid claim to what they considered their fair share - and this share had been very generously calculated.

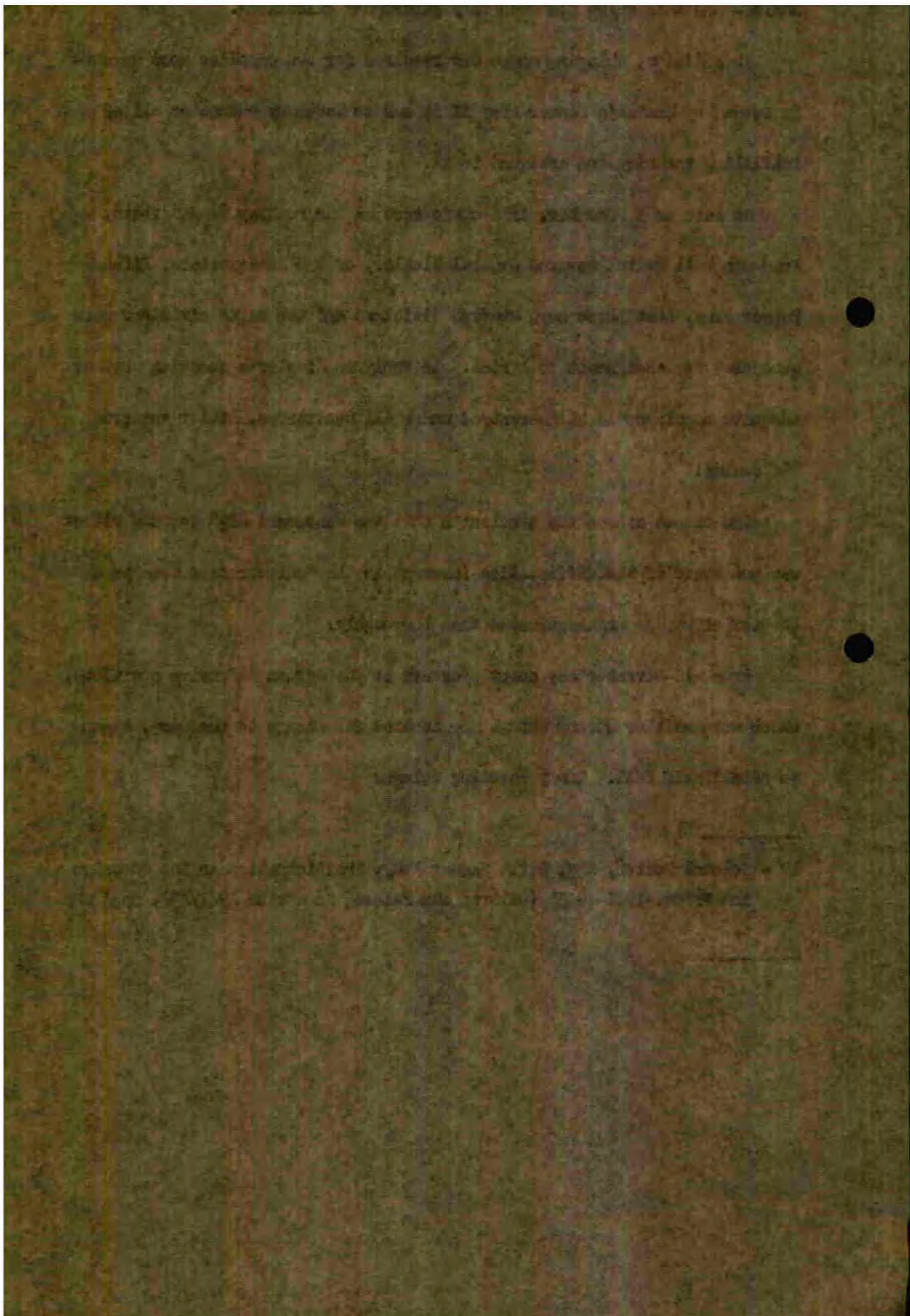
In addition, shipping space was required for the supplies most urgently needed by Rommel's Panzer Army if it was to have any chance at all of fulfilling the missions assigned to it.

As late as 3 December, in a conference at the Fuehrer Headquarters, Feldmarschall Keitel assured General Ziegler, of the Headquarters, Fifth Panzer Army, that three more armored divisions and two rifle divisions were scheduled for assignment to Africa. In reply to Ziegler's question whether adequate supply could be guaranteed under all conditions, Hitler answered "Of course!"¹⁷

One cannot escape the conclusion that the Wehrmacht High Command either was not aware of the difficulties inherent in the Mediterranean area as a theater of war or underestimated them thoroughly.

From mid-November on, enemy pressure on the German defensive positions, which were neither strong enough nor located far enough to the west, began to make itself felt. Enemy marching columns

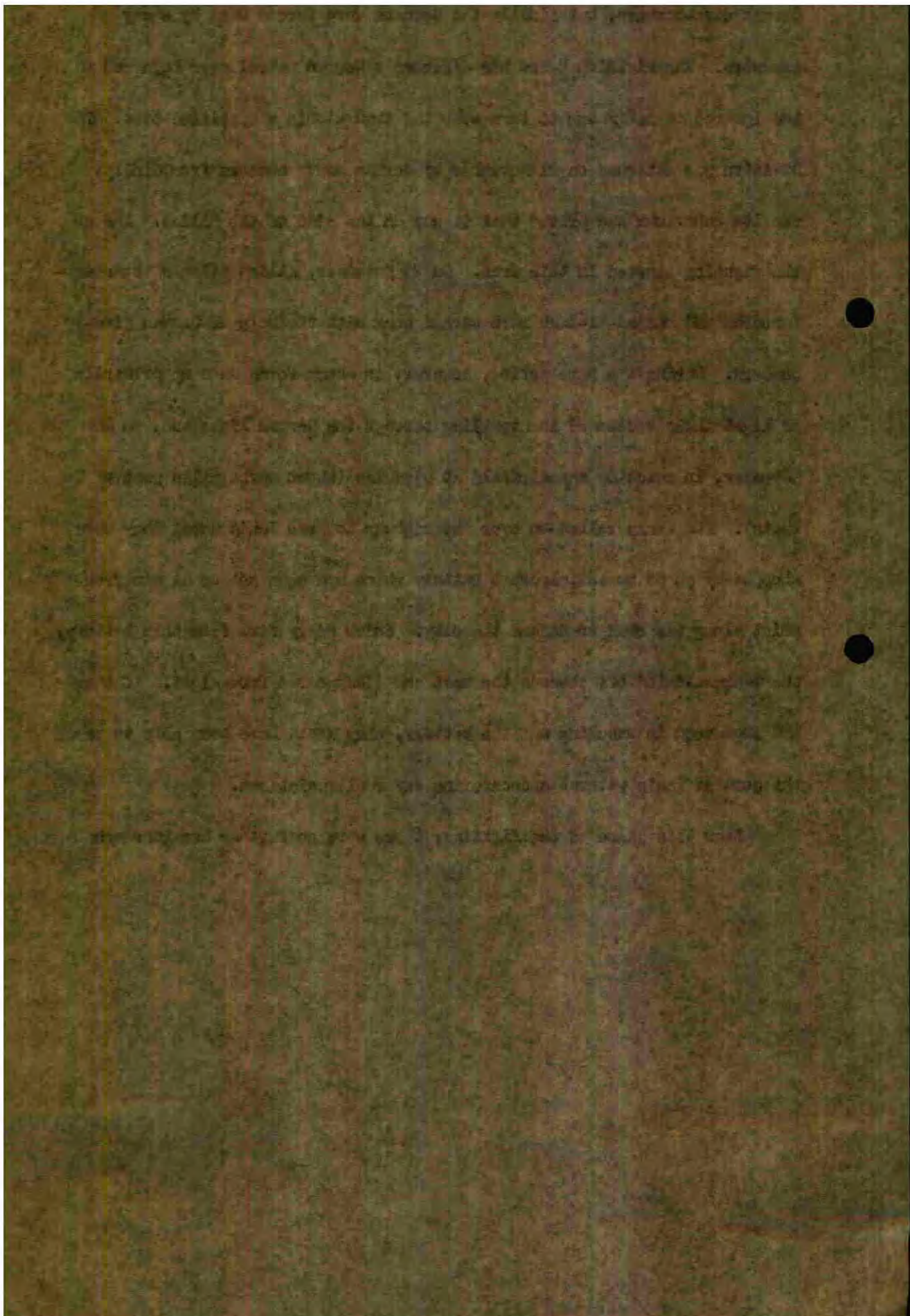
17 - Colonel ^wPenton, Hqs, Fifth Panzer Army, "Participation in the Campaign in Africa, 1941-1943" (Beitrag zum Feldzug in Afrika 1941/43), pp 4 and 5.



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moving along the two main highways of northern Tunisia east of Bone and in the vicinity of Senk Abras were subjected to continual strafing attacks by German dive-bombers, but finally the Germans were forced back by enemy pressure. The Division Barre had disarmed a German patrol near Baja and had ignored an ultimatum to turn over the town within a specified time. The Division was attacked on 21 November by German heavy bombers from Sicily, for its behaviour had proved that it was on the side of the Allies. And so the fighting started in this area. On 23 November, Allied attacks on Mateur-Tebourba and Medjes-el-Baab were turned back with the help of German dive-bombers. During the same period, however, an enemy force made up primarily of light tanks succeeded in breaking through the German lines and, on 26 November, in reaching the airfield at Djedeida (about seven miles west of Tunis). The tanks rolled on over the highway towards Tunis until they were stopped by an 88 mm antiaircraft battery which had been set up at a narrow point along the road to defend the city. Under heavy fire from this battery, the tanks wheeled off towards the west and disappeared from sight. If they had succeeded in knocking out the battery, they would have been able to reach the port of Tunis without encountering any real resistance.

After this phase of the fighting, there were no further breakthrough



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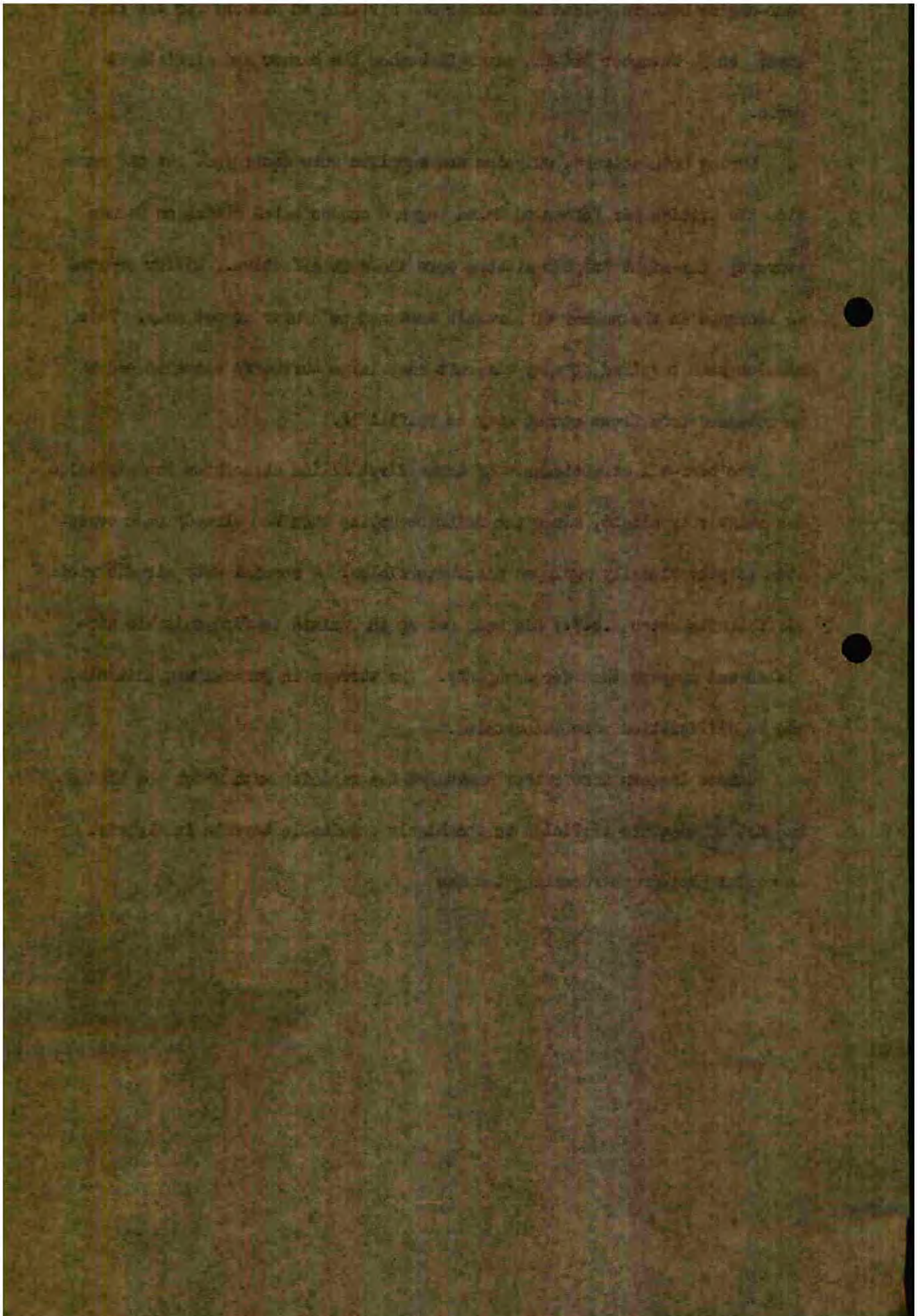
attempts made by the Allies for some time.

On 29 November, however, an American force consisting of about forty four-engine bombers raided the harbor and airfield at Bizerte for the first time; on 30 November British aircraft bombed the harbor and airfield at Tunis.

During both attacks, shipping and supplies were destroyed. At the same time the British air forces on Malta began a concentrated attack on German convoys; the night torpedo attacks were the most effective. Hitler ordered an increase in the number of aircraft assigned to convoy escort duty. This mission soon required so many aircraft that large Luftwaffe elements had to be released from front combat duty to fulfill it.

The over-all effectiveness of these first Allied attacks on the airfields was relatively slight, since the units occupying them had already been evacuated to provisionally equipped alternate fields. A special duty air district staff (Luftgaustab s.b.V.) had been set up in Tunisia to find suitable airfields and prepare them for occupancy. The terrain in general was suitable, and no difficulties were encountered.

German leaders were rather amazed at the rapidity with which the Allies had set up adequate airfields in the highly unsuitable terrain in Algeria. An aerial photograph revealing the use



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of wire screens as flooring cleared up the mystery.

In order to facilitate the accomplishment of its many and varied missions, the staff of the Commander in Chief, South, had been reorganized and entirely separated from the former staff of the Second Air Fleet. Apart from the fact that their Commander in Chief and Chief of Staff were the same, the two groups no longer had anything to do with one another¹⁸.

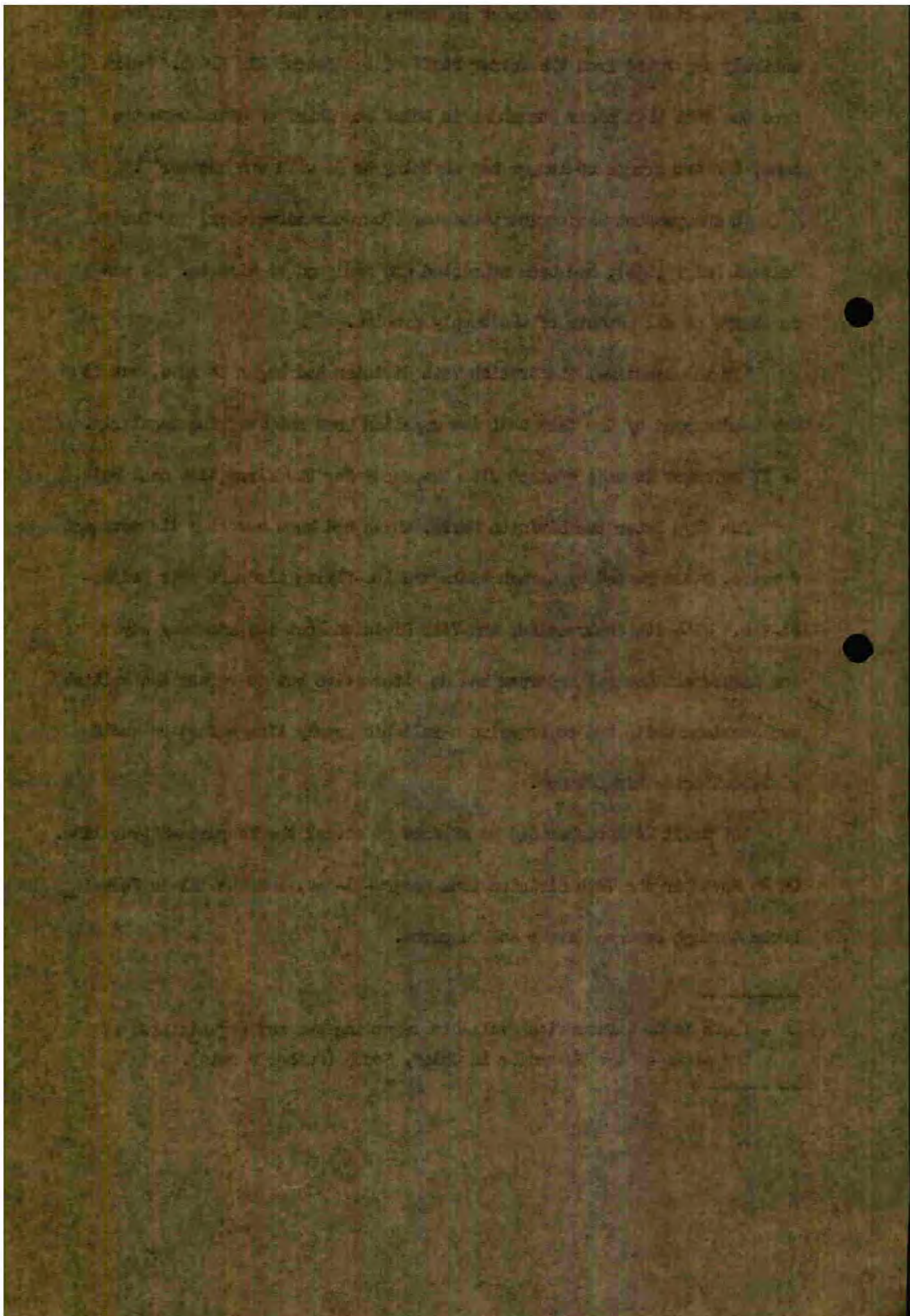
An independent Senior Quartermaster (Oberquartiermeister) for Tunisia, Colonel Heigl (GSC), had been appointed and assigned to Bizerte. He was in charge of all aspects of the supply problem.

"In the meantime, the British 78th Division had begun to move, but it was handicapped by the fact that its supplies were not arriving regularly. On 17 November it made contact with the enemy for the first time near Beja.

Two days later the Division Barre, which had been covering its movement forward, was defeated by German tanks and low-flying aircraft near Medjes-el-Bab. With its destruction, the 78th Division lost its advanced cover, and Lieutenant General Anderson had no alternative but to reform the British and American units and to organize a reliable supply line before he could risk continuing his advance.

Not until 24 November did he advance to attack the Tebourba-Mateur line. On 26 November the 78th Division took Medjes-al-Bab, and the 'Blade Force' broke through between Mateur and Tebourba.

18 - There is no information available regarding the new organization of the staff of the Commander in Chief, South (author's note).



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During the night of 26 November, Tebourba fell into Allied hands, and all attempts by the enemy to regain it were successfully repulsed. On 28 November advance battalions pushed forward into Djedeida, from which the casbah of Tunis was plainly visible.

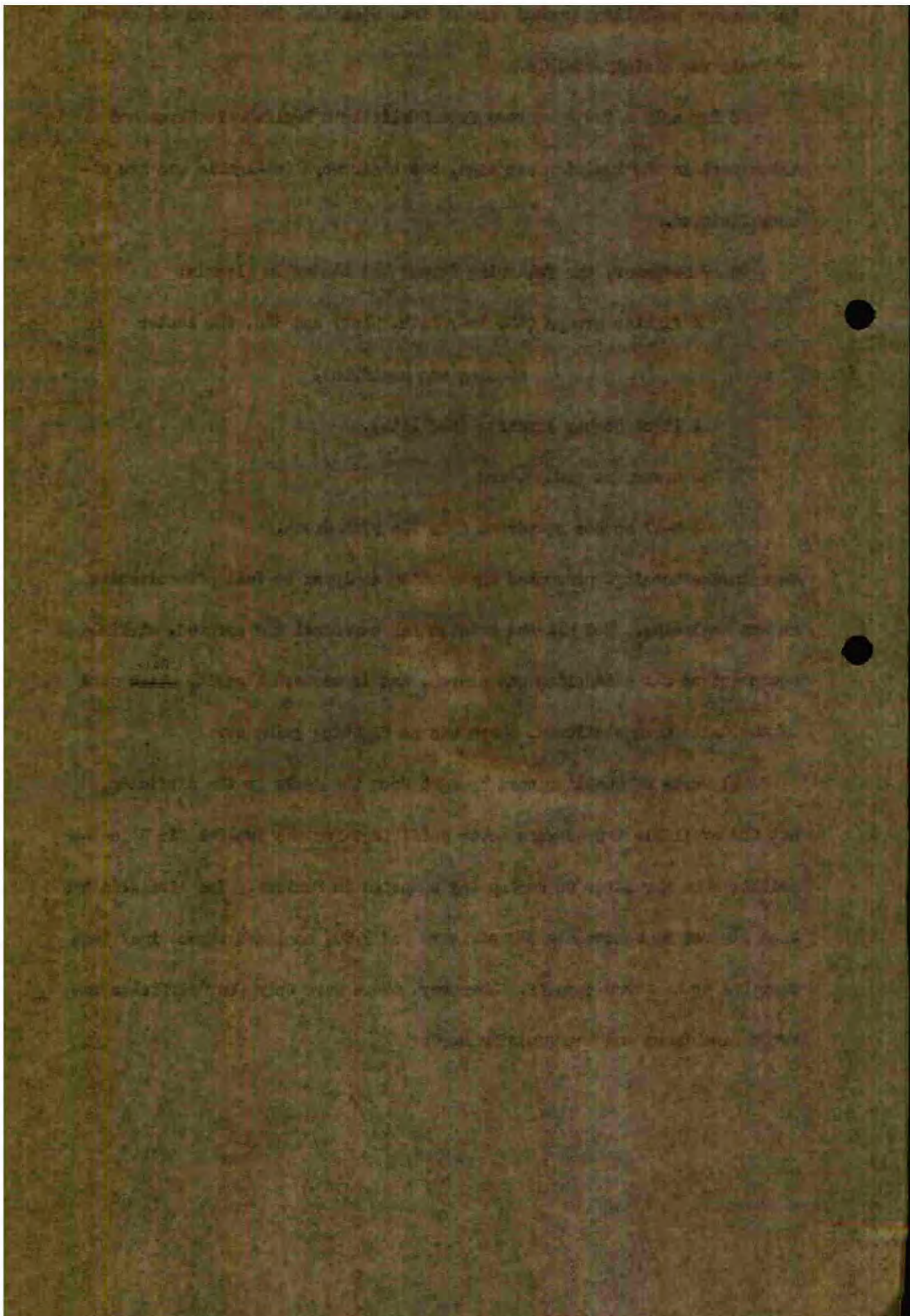
So far only a few squadrons from Deolittle's Twelfth Air Force had taken part in the Tunisian campaign, but their work in Algeria was now almost finished.

On 19 November, the following forces had landed in Algeria:

- 4 fighter groups (the 1st, 14th, 31st, and 52d, the latter missing one squadron),
- 1 light bomber squadron (the 15th),
- 2 transport groups, and
- 2 B-17 bomber squadrons from the 97th Group.

Certain shortcomings prevented their being employed to full effectiveness in the beginning. Not all the maintenance personnel had arrived, airfield equipment of all categories was scarce, and in western Algeria, ^{where} most of the units were stationed, there was no fighting going on.

All sorts of supplies were brought from the docks to the airfields, but the available trucks were never sufficient for the Twelfth Air Force - neither then nor later on during the campaign in Tunisia. The airfields had been planned to accomodate 300 officers and 3,000 men, and three times that many had to be taken care of. Moreover, there were only four airfields between Casablanca and the Tunisian border



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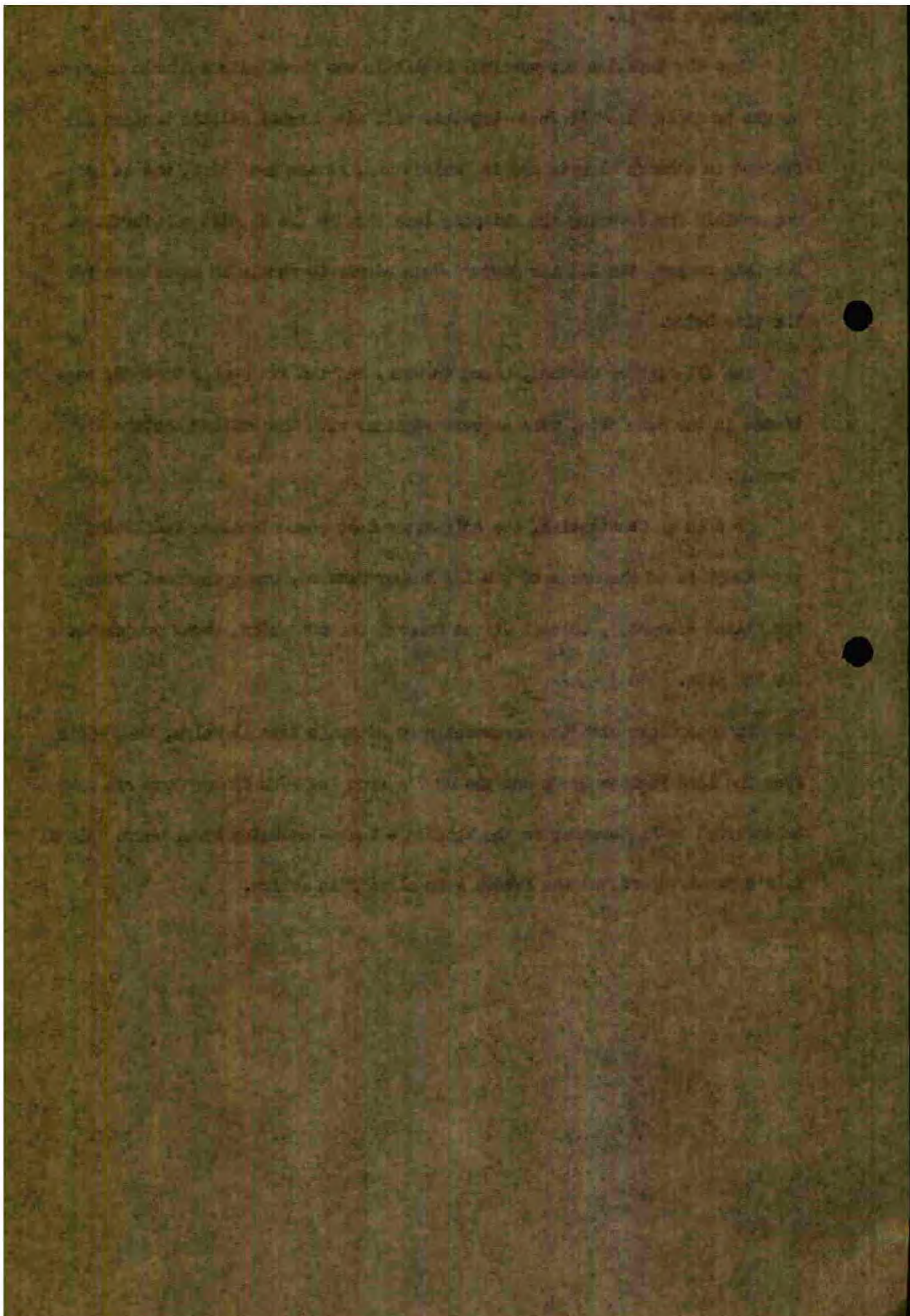
which were equipped with all-weather runways (Port Lyautey, Tafaraoui, Maison Blanche, and Bone). This situation became painfully clear as soon as the rainy season set in.

Once the invasion was secured, Deolittle was faced with a double mission. He was to employ his Air Force together with Air Marshal Welsh's Eastern Air Command in eastern Algeria and in Tunisia and, at the same time, was to be responsible for covering the shipping lane through the Straits of Gibraltar. For this reason, the XII Air Support Command was to remain in Casablanca for the time being.

The XII Fighter Command, based in Oran, and the XII Bomber Command, stationed in the Bone area, were to work together with the British Eastern Air Command.

As soon as Constantine, the only area whose communications facilities were adequate to the needs of the XII Bomber Command, was pronounced free for Allied occupancy, Colonel Claude Duncan, the commander, began preparations for the move.

In accordance with the agreement made with Air Marshal Welsh, the P-38's from the 14th Fighter Group and the DB-7's from the 15th Bomber Squadron were transferred on 21 November to the Tabessa - Youks-les-Bains area, where Colonel Raff's paratroopers and the French were already in action.



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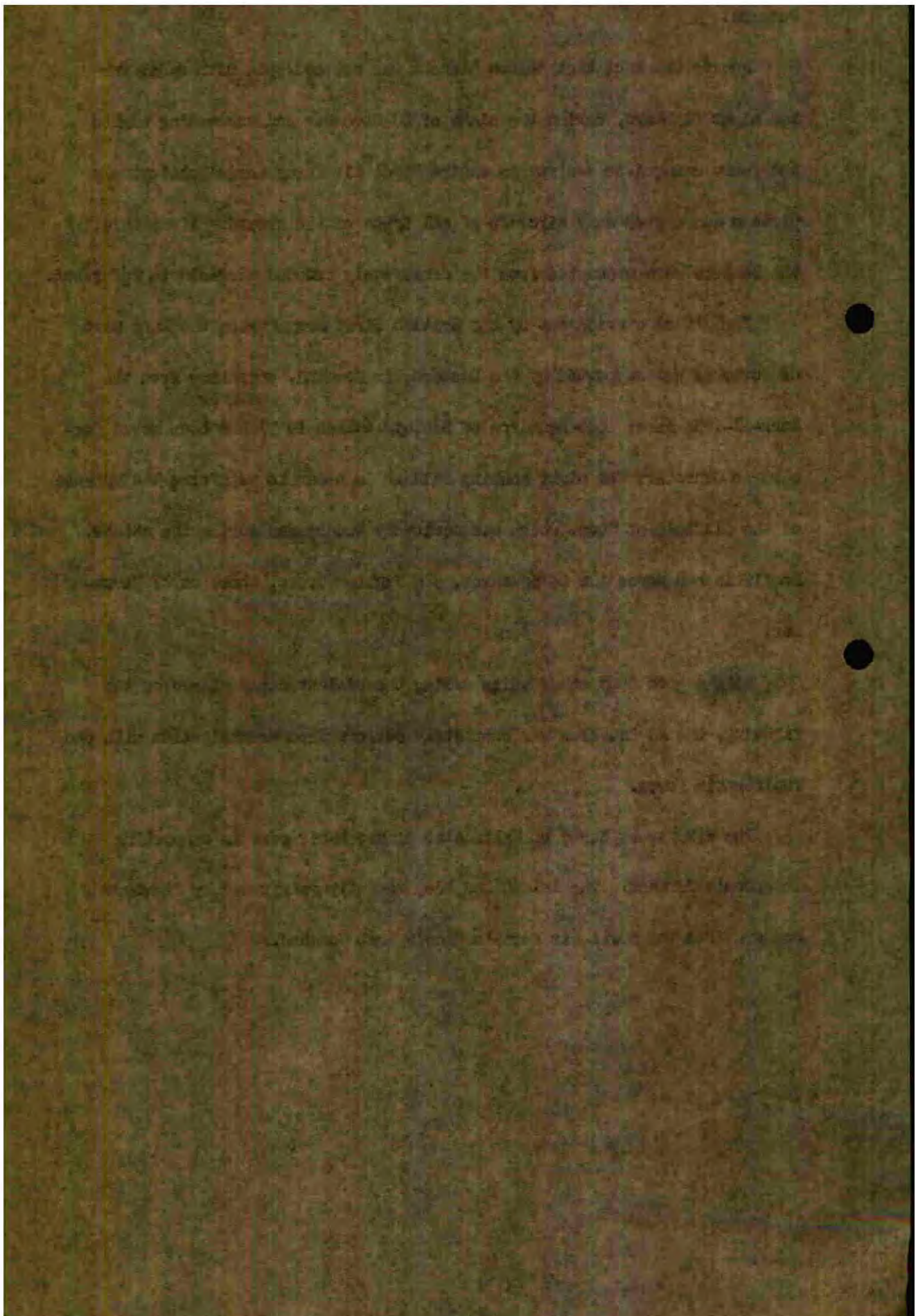
Colonel Duncan decided to leave the two Spitfire groups (both American units) in Oran for the time being as a reserve force for the Eastern Air Command.

Due to the fact that Maison Blanche was not equipped with radar for the night fighters, during the night of 20 November and succeeding nights the enemy managed to destroy an entire Royal Air Force aerial photography platoon and a good many aircraft of all types on the ground. After this, the bombers were evacuated from the dangerously crowded airfield to Tafaraoui.

The attack carried out by the British First Army during the last part of November was supported by the Eastern Air Command, operating from the Souk-el-Arba area; one squadron of Dialsys (Blenheim V) had been moved forward to Canrobert for night bombing raids. In order to reinforce the defense of the airfield at Bone, which was seriously endangered during the attack, Doolittle had moved the 2d Squadron, 52d Fighter Group, there on 27 November.

Like a good many other units during the violent early stages of the fighting, the 2d Squadron was completely cut off from communication with the Twelfth Air Force.

The air forces based on Malta also played their part in supporting Anderson's advance. The island had been recently reinforced by fighters and bombers from the Royal Air Force's Middle East Command.



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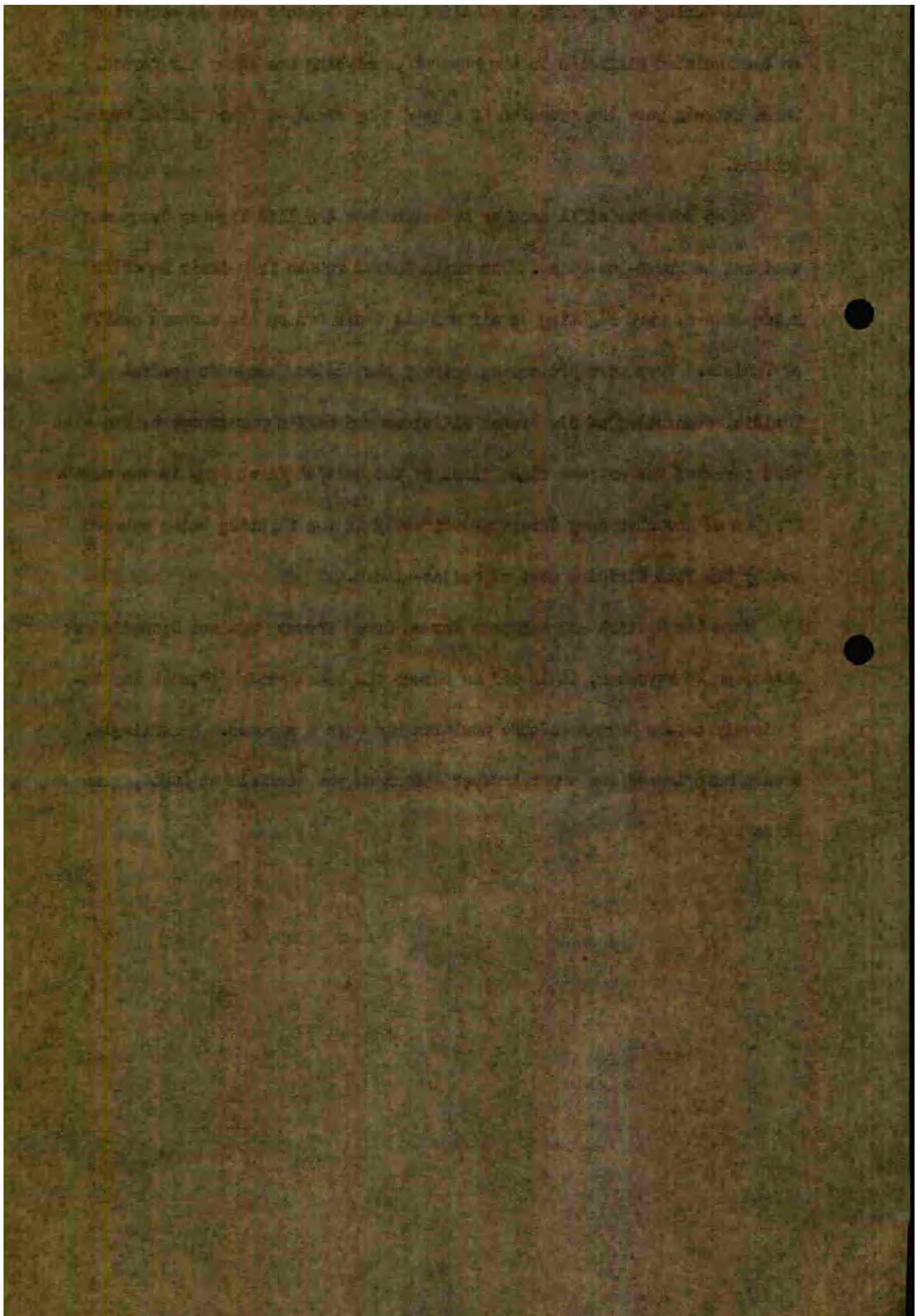
The attacks from Malta were directed primarily against Axis ports and airfields and against German and Italian air and sea transports to Tunisia.

All during this period, the Allied bombing attacks were concentrated on the Tunisian airfields in the hope of paralyzing the enemy air forces. These attacks were the occasion of a good many evenly-matched aerial combat actions.

On 25 November still another squadron from the 14th Fighter Group was assigned to Youks-les-Bains. The units there, remote from their superior headquarters, were fighting an air war all their own on the eastern coast of Tunisia. They were protecting thereby the Allied forces in central Tunisia, consisting of six French divisions and Raff's paratroopers, and also were covering the extreme right flank of the British First Army in the north.

On 27 November they intervened directly in the fighting being carried out by the 78th Division east of Medjer-el-Bab.

When the British and American forces moved forward against Djadeida and Mateur on 23 November, it looked as though the breakthrough through the ingeniously set-up German defense position had been a success. Accordingly, orders were issued for a paratrooper attack on the airfield at Oudna, nine miles south



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of Tunis, the attack to take place on 29 November.

Once the Oudna airfield was captured, the paratroopers would be able to enter Tunis from the south and - if conditions were favorable - join the advance of the First Army.

Between 1330 and 1400, 530 men from the British 1st Paratrooper Brigade, under the personal command of Colonel P. L. Williams, were landed at Depienne, nine miles northeast of Pont du Fahs. "There was no enemy resistance in the air, and all forty-four C-47's returned safely. This was unfortunately not true of the paratrooper brigade. What was left of it managed to regain the Allied lines (which had not been able to advance as planned) five days later. The survivors reported that Oudna was heavily defended, with tanks and armored reconnaissance cars taking part in the fighting." This was the last large-scale paratrooper undertaking during the campaign in North Africa¹⁹.

The thrust to Tunis had run aground. As it turned out, Djedeida had not been entirely in Allied hands, and the 36th Brigade was still engaged in combat northwest of Mateur.

Welsh ordered continued attacks on the airfields being used by the enemy in an attempt to break

19 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 87.

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down German air superiority at the front. In the meantime, Anderson was making preparations to resume the offensive as soon as Combat Command B, American ^{1st} First Armored Division, should arrive in the area²⁰.

The German-Italian troops had thrown back the Allied advance on Bizerte and Tunis; however, they had not succeeded in blocking the mountain passes along the Tunisian-Algerian border. At the end of the November fighting, their defence line ran along the eastern foothills, which naturally meant that the operational area lacked the requisite depth. Thus it was vital that the bridgehead be extended westward as soon as possible. As soon as the new reinforcements were ready for action, the first blow was struck against the important rail and highway center of Tebourba.

In a battle which lasted from 1 through 5 December, the British 11th Brigade was defeated there and suffered heavy losses in both personnel and material. On 11 and 12 December, German forces stormed the Allied bridgehead known as Long Step Hill, located north and south of the Medjerda sector and one of the most important points in the Allied line. The defending force was dispersed and all its attempts at a counterattack frustrated.

In the meantime a task force from the 10th Panzer Division had been placed on alert to help meet the momentarily expected

20 - See Appendix _____ for a summary of Allied losses in transport shipping capacity during the landing operation in November.

Assmann, op. cit., page 315.

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Allied thrust towards the coast. This force was to keep the Allies in check, thus securing the land supply line to Rommel's Panzer Army.

By this time all the Axis troops stationed in Tunisia had been made subordinate to the Fifth Panzer Army, under the command of Generaloberst von Arnim since 9 December.

As of mid-December the Fifth Panzer Army Command had the following components at its disposal:

British Group

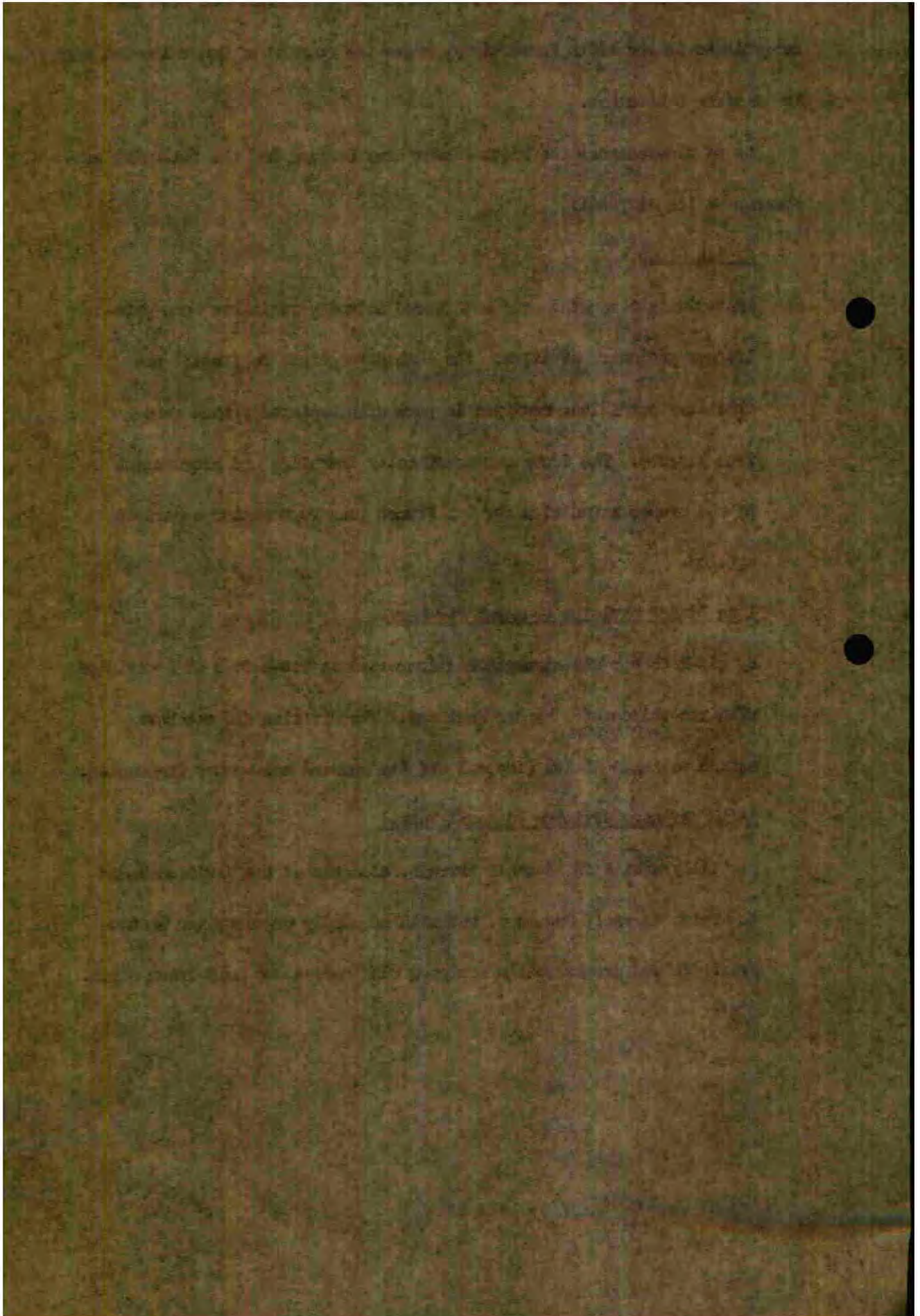
Approximate strength: one reinforced infantry regiment; one para-trooper-engineer battalion; the 10th Bersaglieri Regiment; one artillery battalion, equipped in part with captured French guns from Bizerte. The Group was practically immobile, and procurement of the proper ammunition for the French guns represented a serious problem.

10th Panzer Division (General Fischer)

By mid-December its strength had increased to two-thirds of a division with two-thirds of a Panzer Regiment. The Division did not have enough vehicles at its disposal and its command set-up was inadequate.

334th Infantry Division (General Weber)

Partially mobile in mountain terrain, elements of the Division began to arrive in early December, but with no supply organization whatsoever. It was provisionally equipped with horses and mule-drawn carts.



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Parachute Regiment Koch

This consisted of three almost complete battalions. Its command set-up as well as its supply organization were inadequate. The Regiment was inexperienced in the planning and conduct of joint operations with other Wehrmacht branches.

501st Tiger Battalion

At first the Battalion was made up of only four tanks; it was assigned to defend Bizerte and Tunis.

Personnel Replacement Battalions

These were committed along the supply line as far as Gabes, as well as in the fighting being carried out by the 10th Panzer Division.

90th Reconnaissance Battalion

Its strength was approximately that of one modern reconnaissance company, equipped with armored reconnaissance cars and mobile artillery, and reinforced by a few mobile reserves assigned to the Headquarters, Fifth Panzer Army.

The Italian Division Superga

This consisted of two regiments, some two-thirds of which had arrived in the theater by mid-December. It was equipped with only small-caliber artillery and had practically no vehicles available for supply transport. It was later reinforced by German replacement battalions.

The Italian Brigade Imperiali

The Brigade was made up of several Italian reconnaissance units, combined with a few German units, units from the Division Superga, and

elements from the German replacement battalions. The Italian troops were partially motorized, the German units had no vehicles at all with the exception of a few bicycles (which belonged to the equipment of the reconnaissance battalion of the 334th Infantry Division, which was sent into action near Maknassy).

20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division (General Neuffer)

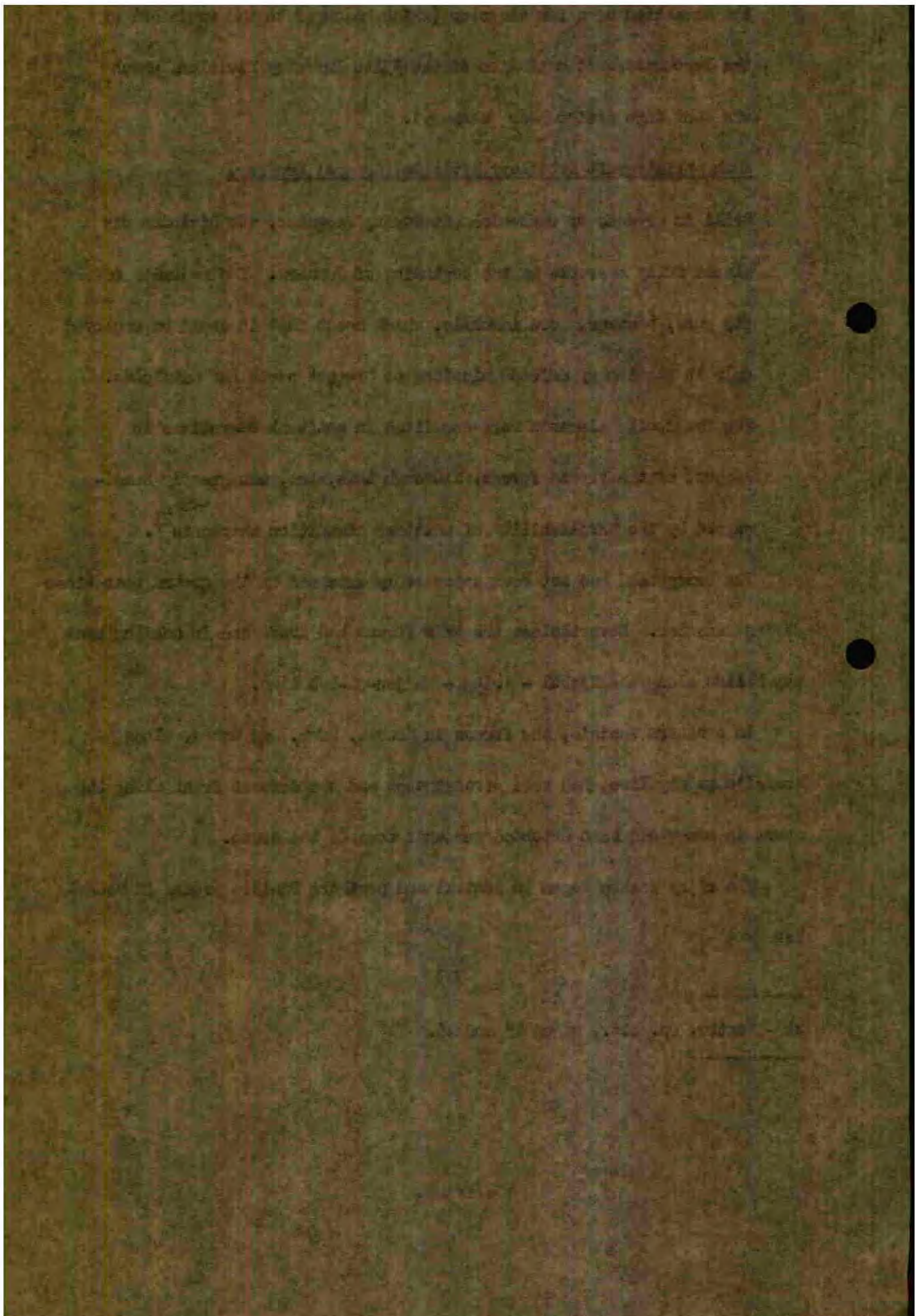
Still in process of replenishment during December, the Division was almost fully operable by the beginning of January. The majority of its guns, however, were immobile, which meant that it could be employed only in stationary defense missions to protect ports and airfields. The few mobile elements were committed in antitank operations in support of the ground forces, although this, too, was greatly handicapped by the unreliability of antitank ammunition shipments²¹.

The bridgehead had not been appreciably extended by the ground operations during December. Nevertheless the Axis forces had succeeded in holding back the Allies along the Djebel - Abiod - Medjes-el-Bab line.

In southern Tunisia, the forces in Sousse, Sfax, and Gabes, along Rommel's supply line, had been strengthened and the defense front along the mountain range had been extended somewhat towards the south.

The rainy season began in central and northern Tunisia around 10 December

21 - Postow, op. cit., pages 15 and 16.



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and made operations in the mountainous areas extremely difficult. Vehicle movements off the established highways became next to impossible.

Employment of the German and Italian Air Forces

during December

II Air Corps

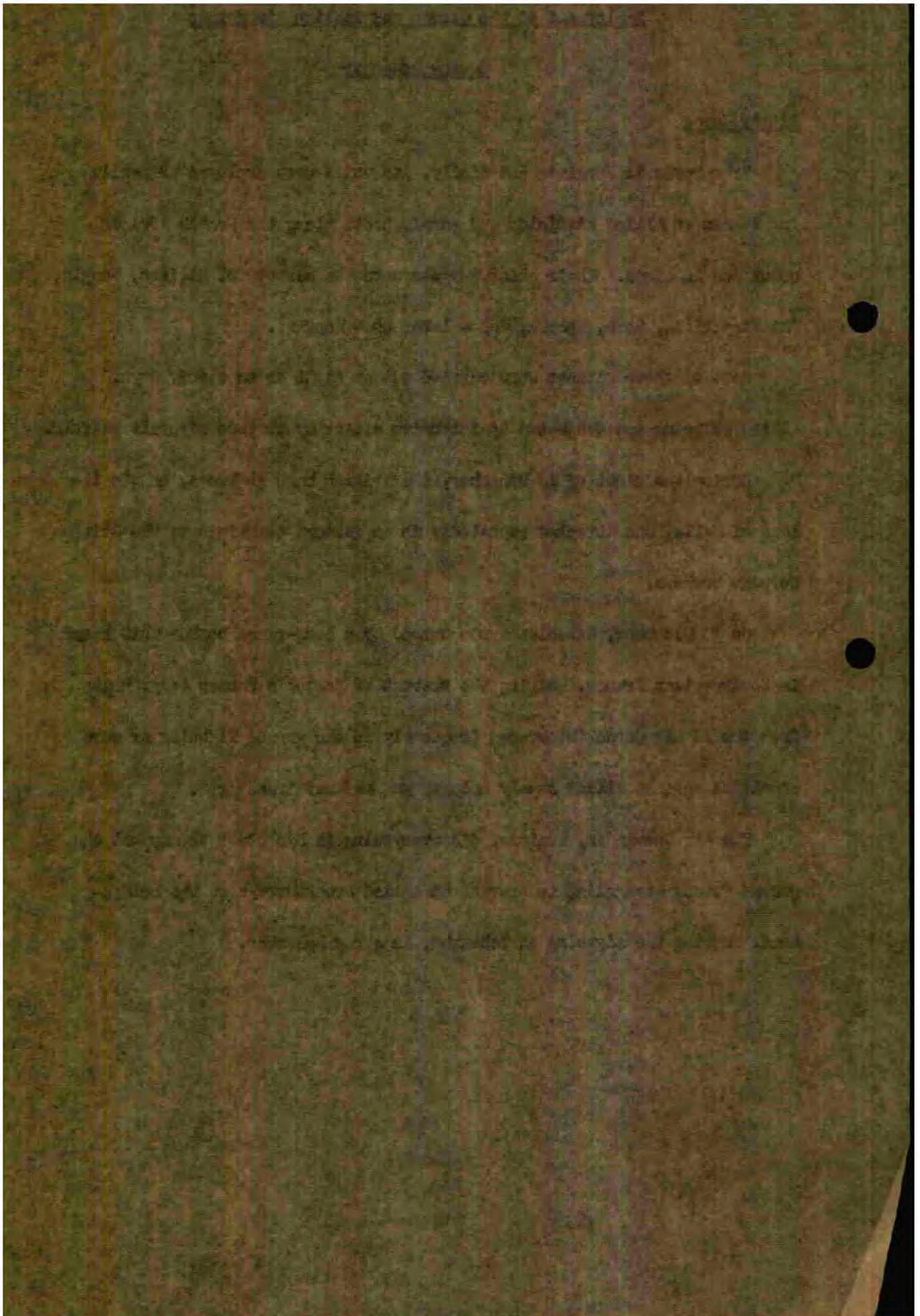
From bases in Sardinia and Sicily, its units were employed primarily in attacks on Allied airfields and supply posts along the French African coast and in Libya. Their chief targets were the harbors of Algiers, Bône, Philippeville, Bone, Tobruk, and - later on - Bengasi.

Most of these attacks were carried out at night or on cloudy days. Allied shipping was subjected to intensive attack by torpedo aircraft patrols.

During the night of 18 December, the British base at Luqa, on the island of Malta, was attacked repeatedly in an attempt to eliminate the British torpedo bombers.

On 30 December, Casablanca was bombed by a long-range bomber unit based in southwestern France. During the retreat of Rommel's Panzer Army, units from the II Air Corps intervened frequently in the ground fighting or were committed against Allied supply columns and railway transports.

The Air Commander, Tunisia, did everything in his power to support the ground forces struggling to prevent an Allied breakthrough at the bridge-head. During the fighting at Tebourba, in early December,



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the role played by the dive-bomber group was decisive (based on the testimony of prisoners of war).

The German fighters, however, failed to achieve the hoped-for success in terms of enemy aircraft downed in their encounters with the Allied four-engine bombers. It was not realized until much later that their airborne armaments were simply not strong enough to penetrate the armor plating of the bombers. Furthermore, the fighter pilots found it extremely difficult to identify the enemy bombers in time, since they flew at a very high altitude.

It was for the latter reason that the Headquarters, Second Air Fleet, did all in its power to set up a fighter aircraft control center based on radar as soon as they could.

The antiaircraft artillery forces also failed to achieve maximum effectiveness against the Allied bombers, again as a result of the latter's high flight altitude.

General Anderson's planned offensive was never carried out. The soundly defeated Blade Force had to be withdrawn from Tebourba; it was replaced by the Combat Command B, from the American 1st Armored Division.

Anderson reported to Eisenhower that a temporary retreat was absolutely necessary unless Tunis and Bizerte could be taken within the next few days.

There were three decisive factors, as General Anderson's report continued - supply, enemy air

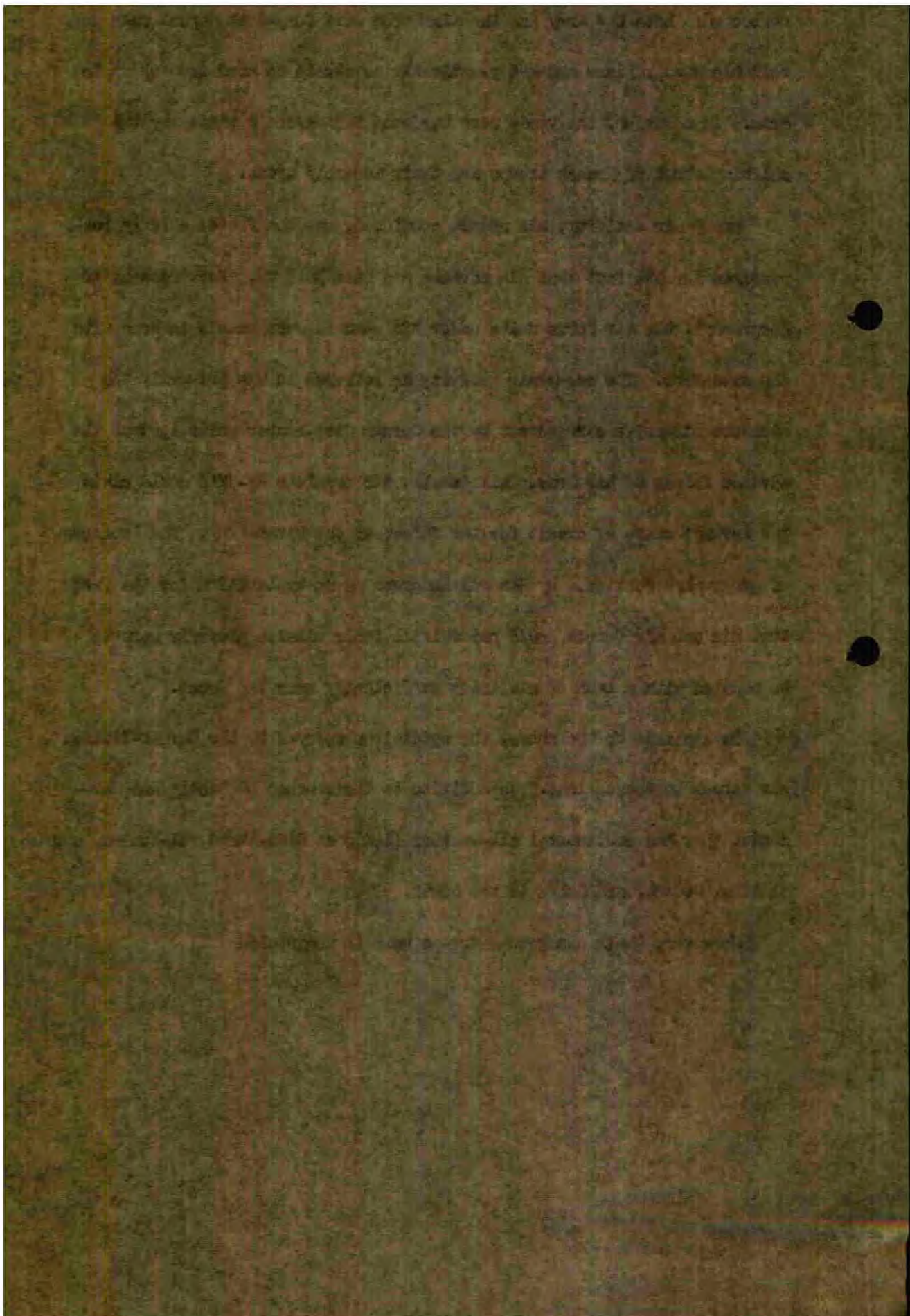
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activity, and the rapid increase in the enemy's strength. In an effort to reach Tunis as rapidly as possible, standard troop supply measures had been neglected; both the Army and the Air Force were forced to depend upon unreliable supply lines and had practically no stocks on hand from which to draw. In addition, the roads were burdened far beyond capacity by the shifting about of French troops and their assembly areas.

Enemy air activity, his report continued, was the factor chiefly responsible for the fact that his advance had been held up. For "reasons of geography", the Air Force units under his command were unable to cope with the situation. The enemy air activity he referred to was primarily the stubborn offensive carried out by the German dive-bomber units against the advance forces of his Army. All in all, the obsolete Ju-87's could claim the largest share of credit for the defeat of the First Army. The "reasons of geography" mentioned by General Anderson as an explanation for the fact that his own air forces could not fulfill their mission properly were to be equated with a lack of airfields sufficiently near the front.

In contrast to the above, the conditions enjoyed by the German-Italian air forces were excellent. In addition to their bases on Sicily and Sardinia, they had continental all-weather fields at Sidi-Ahmed, El-Aonina, and at Sfax, Sousse, and Gabes in the south.

Moreover, their own ground troops were in undisputed



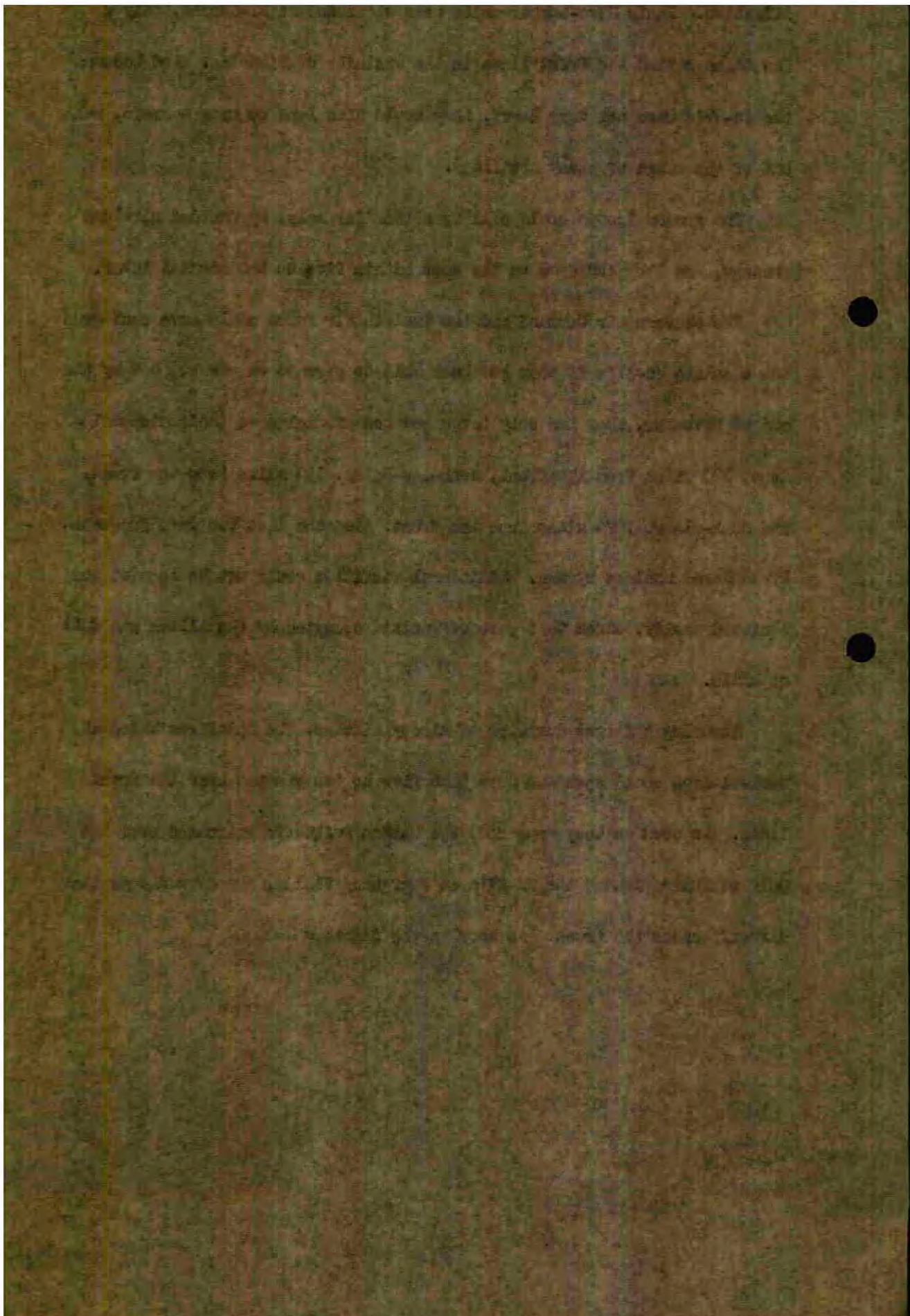
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possession of the Tunisian plains, and a good many sites there were eminently suited for utilization as emergency landing fields - almost without modification. Their dive-bomber units were stationed at El-Aenina, only a few miles behind the front lines in the vicinity of Djedaida. And because the Ju-87's were not very heavy, they could also land on open terrain, well out of the range of enemy artillery.

The ground troops could call upon them for help, by uncoded wireless message, and they could be on the spot within five to ten minutes later.

The Eastern Air Command and the Twelfth Air Force could have shot down the obsolete Ju-87's if they had been able to operate en masse. But by the end of November, they had only three advance airfields at their disposal - Bone, 120 miles from the front, Jonk-les-Bains, 150 miles from the front, and Senk-el-Arba, 70 miles from the front. And the last two were frequently rendered useless by mud. Additional airfields could not be located and equipped easily, since that part of Tunisia occupied by the Allies was full of hills.

Assuming a flight duration of ninety minutes, the Spitfires based at Senk-el-Arba could spend no more than five to ten minutes over the front lines. As soon as they appeared, the German Luftwaffe retreated over the Gulf of Tunis, landed the Ju-87's at emergency fields, and camouflaged the aircraft under the trees. As soon as the fighters



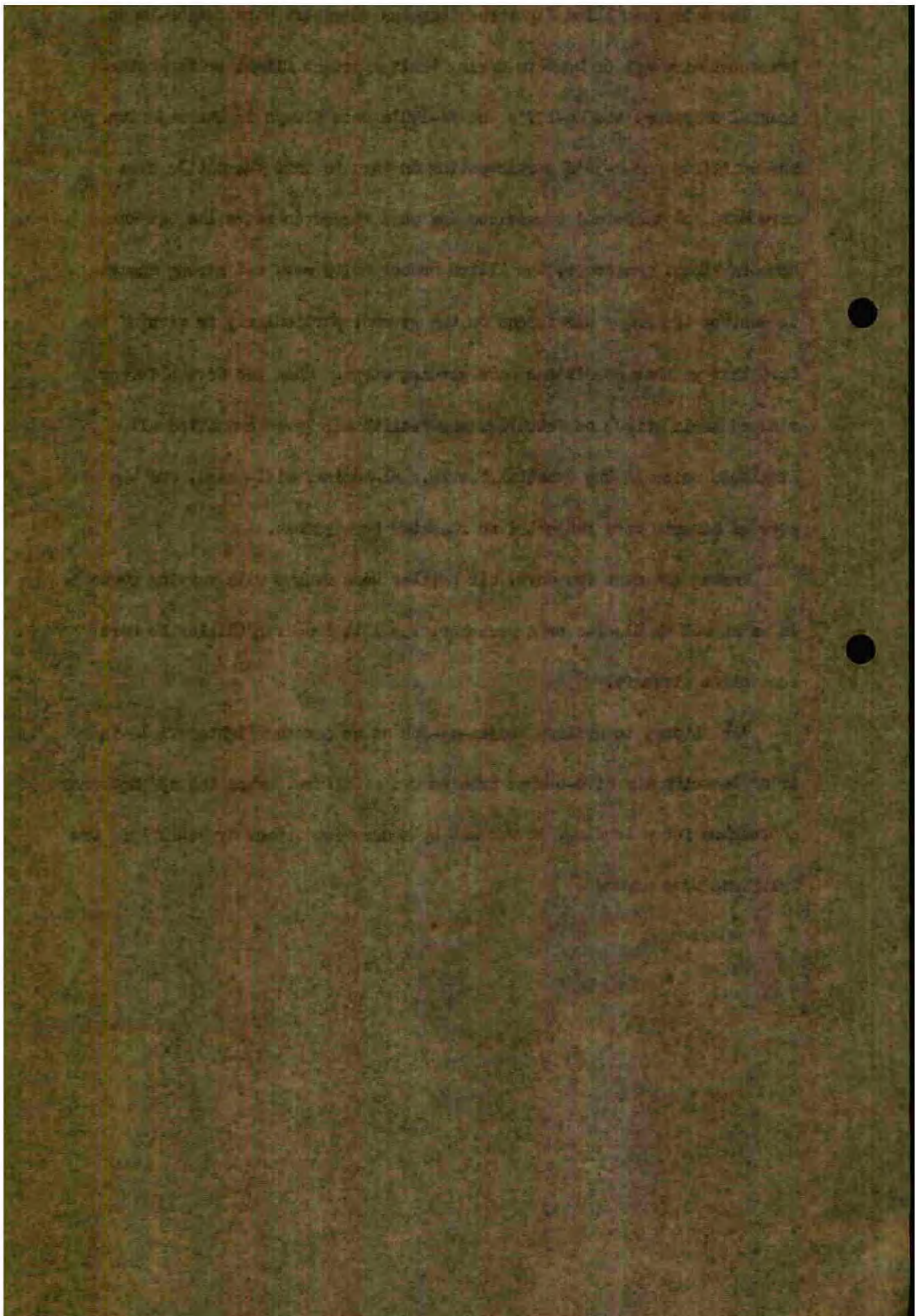
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had disappeared behind the hills in the west, the German bombers resumed their operations.

Whenever the Allied fighters attempted to escort paratrooper-laden transport aircraft or bombers during their approach flight or to protect coastal shipping, the Me-109's and Fw-190's were always in the majority. The Spitfires and P-38's participating in thrusts into the battle area were hard put to defend themselves and were forced to leave the German bombers alone. Moreover, the Allied bomber units were not strong enough to destroy the enemy air forces on the ground, particularly in view of the fact that weather conditions were growing worse. When the German forces resumed their attack on Tebourba, the Twelfth Air Force committed all available units in the doubtful battle. El-Aouina, Sidi-Ahmed, and the port of Bizerte were subjected to repeated bombardment.

During the next few days, air battles were fought with varying success. In an attack on Bizerte on 4 December, the 18th Squadron (Bisley bombers) lost eight aircraft.

The attempt to utilize Medjer-el-Bab as an advance fighter field in order to solve the dive-bomber problem was a failure. When the 93d Squadron approached for a landing, it was met by a surprise attack by Me-109's; two Spitfires were downed.



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immediately, while the rest, heavily damaged, were barely able to make their way back to Sank-el-Arba.

On 6 December, there was another breakthrough on the Allied front.

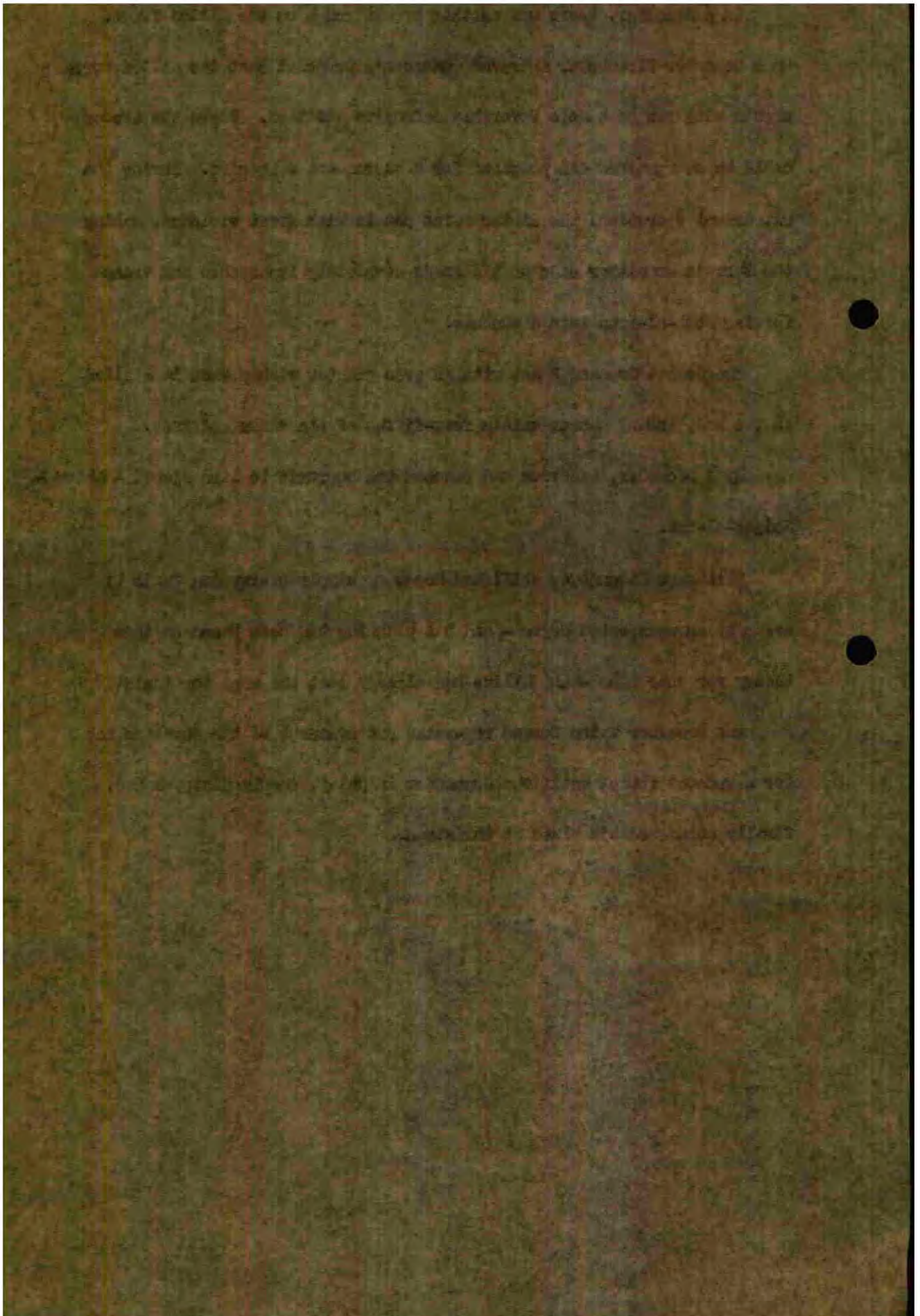
On 8 December Eisenhower approved Anderson's proposal that the Allied force should withdraw to a more favorable defensive position. There the troops could be reorganized and prepared for a subsequent offensive. During the withdrawal operation, the winter rains set in with great violence, making the terrain on either side of the roads completely impassable and transforming Sank-el-Arba into a mudhole.

The Combat Command B met with an even greater mishap when it stalled in the mud, losing approximately four-fifths of its tanks and guns.

By 4 December, Anderson had reached the approximate line Djebel - Abied - Medjes-el-Bab.

"Although Eisenhower still had hopes of simply overrunning Tunis by means of an unexpected drive - and his planning had been based on this theory for some time - the Allies had already lost the race for Tunis.

The December rains forced repeated postponement of the deadline set for a renewed attack until the Commander in Chief, deeply disappointed, finally abandoned his plans at Christmas.



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The continuous rains which had held the Eastern Air Command and the Twelfth Air Force at their bases made it possible for the enemy to build up his strength with maximum security.

As Eisenhower has put it so succinctly, the supply marathon had begun with a vengeance. Operation TORCH was simply not destined to be a complete success."²²

Even in early November, the Allied bomber forces had begun to intensify their attacks on Axis supply ports in Tunisia, Sicily, and central Italy. For the first time, the north Italian industrial region had been subjected to a heavy raid by four-engine bombers. The raid had serious political repercussions and made German assistance urgently necessary.

The Allied air forces assigned to support ground fighting in Tunisia were obviously seriously handicapped by the fact that their airfields could not be adequately improved and equipped because of the rain.

The basic problem of the conduct of operations in Africa had resolved itself - far sooner than the Commander in Chief, South, had anticipated - to the problem of protecting the sea routes.

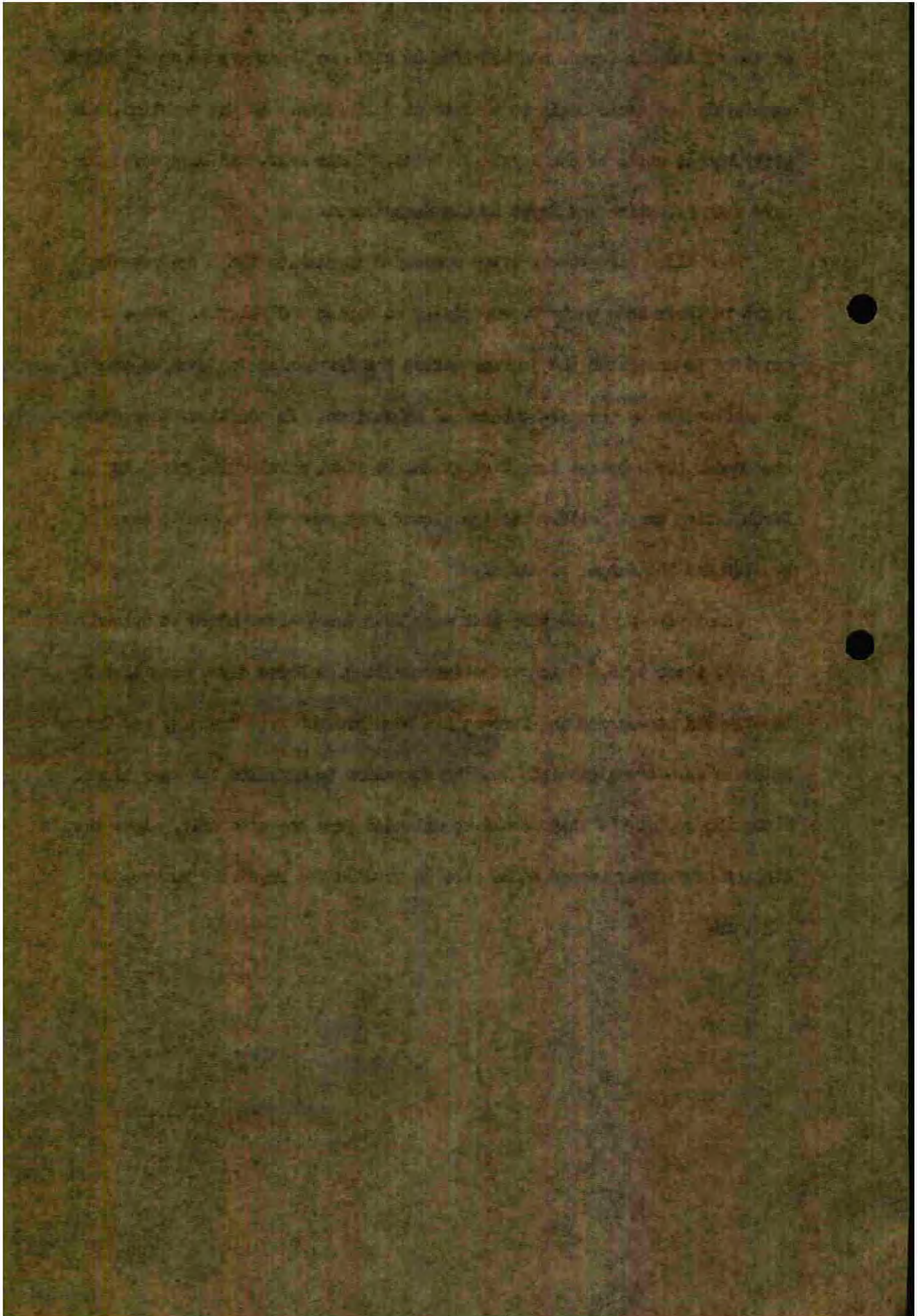
22 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 91.

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By early December it was already clear that troop and supply transports to Africa could no longer be adequately accomplished with the usual large-capacity ships. The situation was bound to develop into a crisis as soon as the Allied air forces had had time to build up their ground organization completely and could begin to operate at full force. In the meantime, the heavy bomber units of the Royal Air Force, Middle East, had been moved forward from Palestine and Egypt to the Gambut area.

The Allied air attacks often succeeded in sinking the large vessels right in their home harbors, especially at Naples and Palermo. Those that survived to undertake the journey across the Tyrrhenian Sea were exposed to destruction by torpedo-bombers and submarines. In addition, they operated under the constant threat of attack by light naval units based in North Africa or at Malta. And the closer they came to the coast, the greater was the danger of mines.

Ships of over 1,000 tons took more than twenty-four hours to unload in port, those of 5,000 tons sometimes as long as three days, even though experienced stevedores and foremen had been brought from Hamburg, and German soldiers were organized into loading companies to expedite the operations. Along the quays, the ships could be unloaded from one side only, since the Italian Navy never seemed to be able to provide the requisite number of lighters.



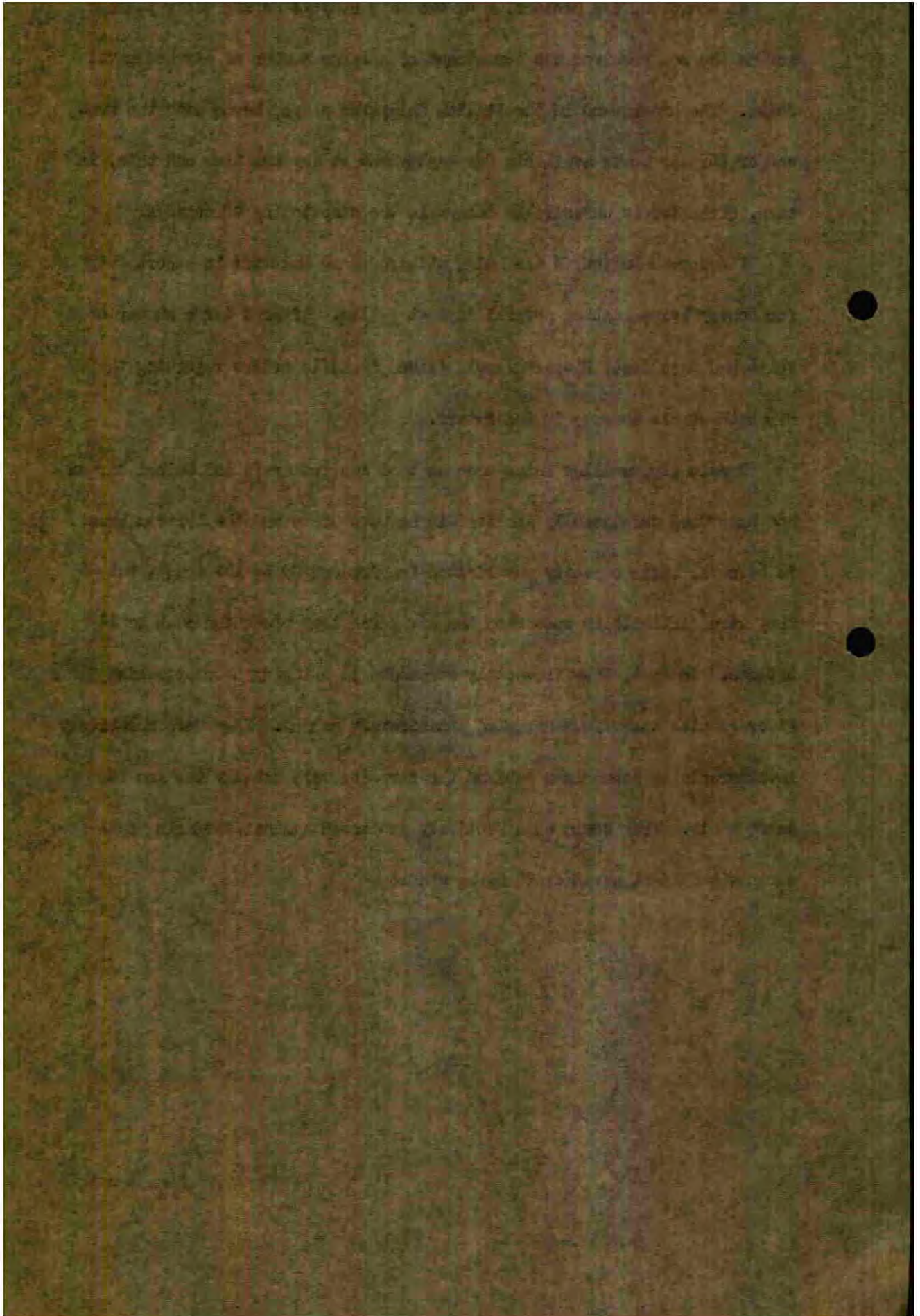
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The length of time needed to unload naturally made these ships more vulnerable to Allied air attack, and many were sunk with all their cargo.

In addition, the protection of the ship convoys during their passage across the sea required the commitment of a large number of air and naval units. The breakdowns in the Italian shipyards played havoc with the number of torpedo boats available for employment at any one time and this, in turn, often led to undesirable delays in the dispatching of convoys.

The German Luftwaffe was being utilized more and more in escort duty for convoy trips lasting several days at a time. After a large number of ships had been lost, Hitler himself issued specific orders regarding the strength of air escorts in the future.

Previously, smaller ships such as tank landing craft and Seibel barges had been used successfully for traffic between Crete and the African coast. To be sure, their capacity was limited (payload of 80 to 100 tons), but they were difficult to spot from the air since they presented such small targets. In fact, they frequently succeeded in bringing down attacking aircraft with their four-barreled antiaircraft cannon. They were relatively invulnerable to submarines because the torpedoes were usually too low to score a hit. They could be effectively protected against surfacing submarines and light naval craft by an escort



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of Seibel combat barges armed with 88 mm antiaircraft artillery. Loading and unloading operations, even outside the harbor, could be completed easily within about two hours.

On 8 December, then, in view of the seriousness of the situation, the Commander in Chief, South, requested that as many small vessels as possible be placed at his disposal. When the French forces at Biserte were disarmed, three French destroyers had fallen into German hands. At Hitler's orders, these had been turned over to the Italians. They were unavailable for commitment during the fighting in Tunisia because the Italians did not want to take any chances on losing them.

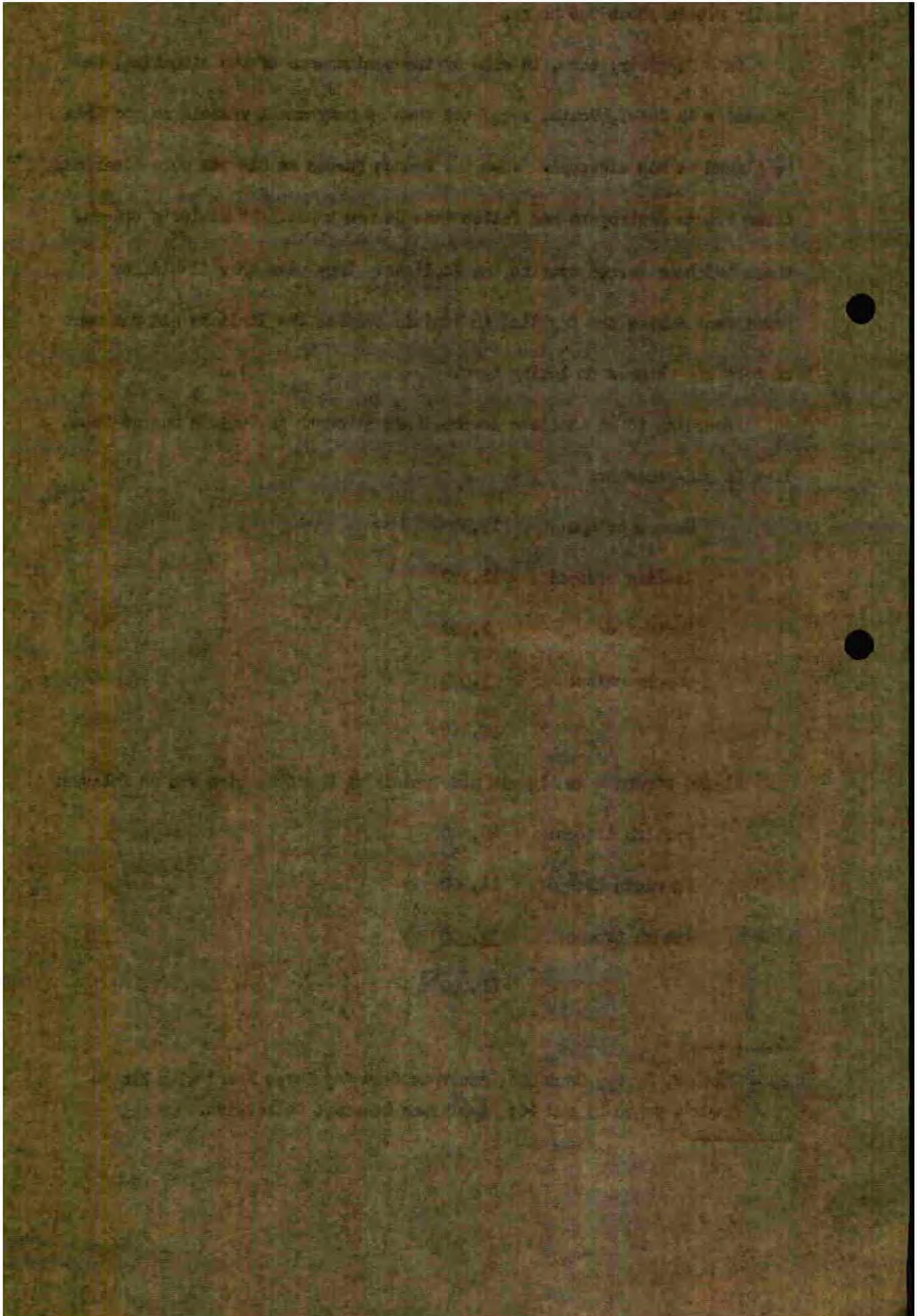
According to an American source, Axis strength in Tunisia was as follows in mid-December:

German troops:	19,500
Italian troops:	11,250
Luftwaffe:	2,500
supply units:	<u>5,000</u>
	38,250

Allied strength in Algeria and Tunisia at the same time was as follows:

British troops:	20,000
American troops:	11,000
French troops:	<u>30,000</u>
	61,000 ²³

23 - Butcher, Harry, Capt USA, excerpts from "My Three Years with Eisenhower", pages 65 and 66; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

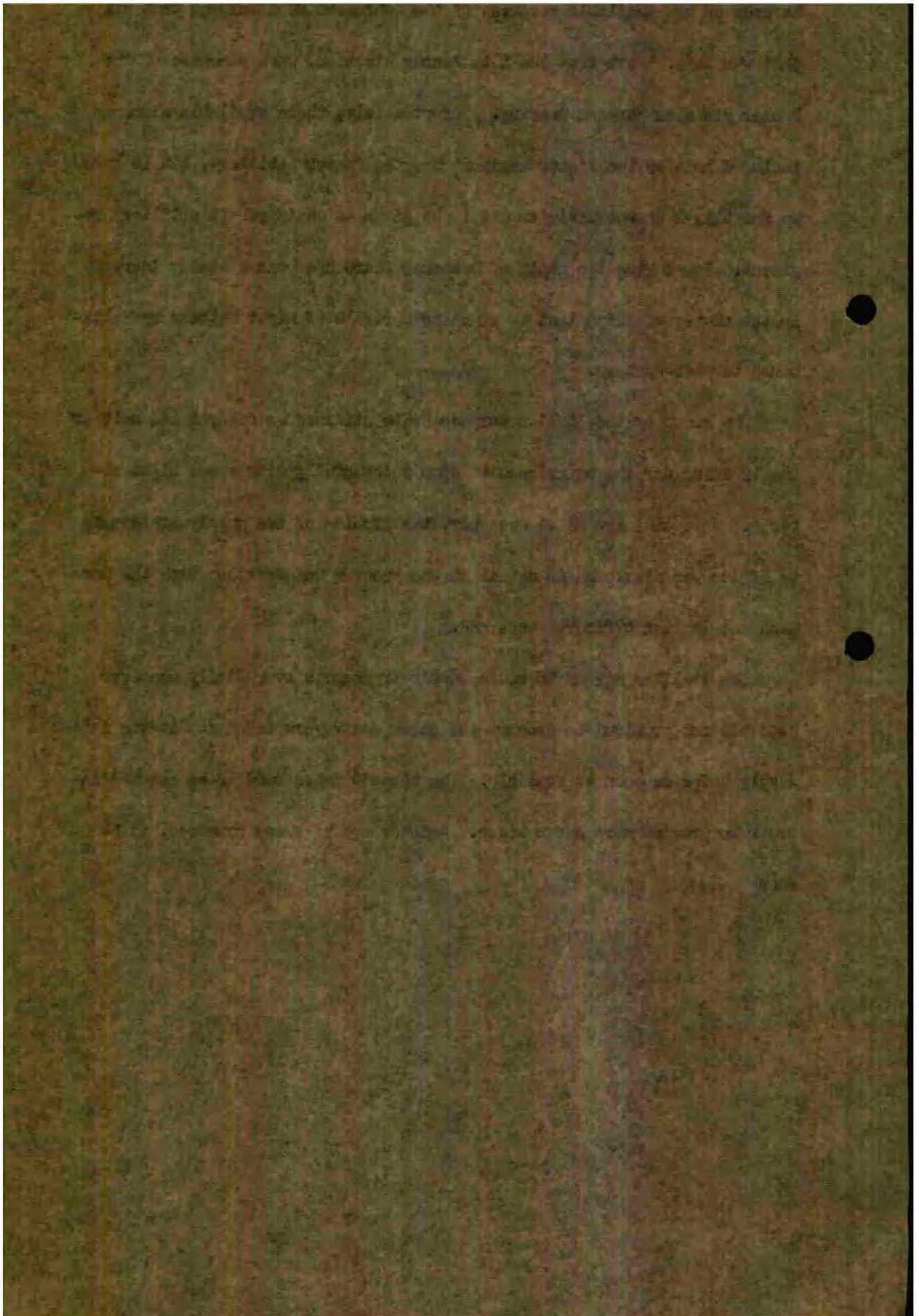


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The chances of furnishing the divisions needed for the operations in Tunisia seemed very slim. The battle of Stalingrad had already made such inroads on the available reserves of the Wehrmacht High Command that all that was left, apart from the 10th Panzer Division, were elements of the Panzer Division Hermann Goering. Unfortunately, these available elements included neither the Panzer regiment nor the Panzer artillery, but to make up for this lack the Division was to be given an antiaircraft artillery regiment. For during the month of December there had been a steady increase in the number of ships lost en route as a result of night attacks by Malta-based torpedo-bombers.

The crews of the Italian torpedo boats utilized as escorts had neither the training nor the experience to cope successfully with these night attacks. Some time around 20 December, the problem of the supply transports to Africa was discussed in detail at the Fuehrer Headquarters with the German and Italian officers concerned.

The Italians agreed to route supply transports over Sicily whenever possible and promised to convert the three destroyers taken at Biserte into supply ships as soon as feasible. The torpedo tubes were to be removed in order to provide more cargo space. Neither one of these promises, as it soon



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turned out, was kept.

During the conference it was also decided to turn over the construction of additional small vessels to the Italian shipyards, which were not working up to full capacity.

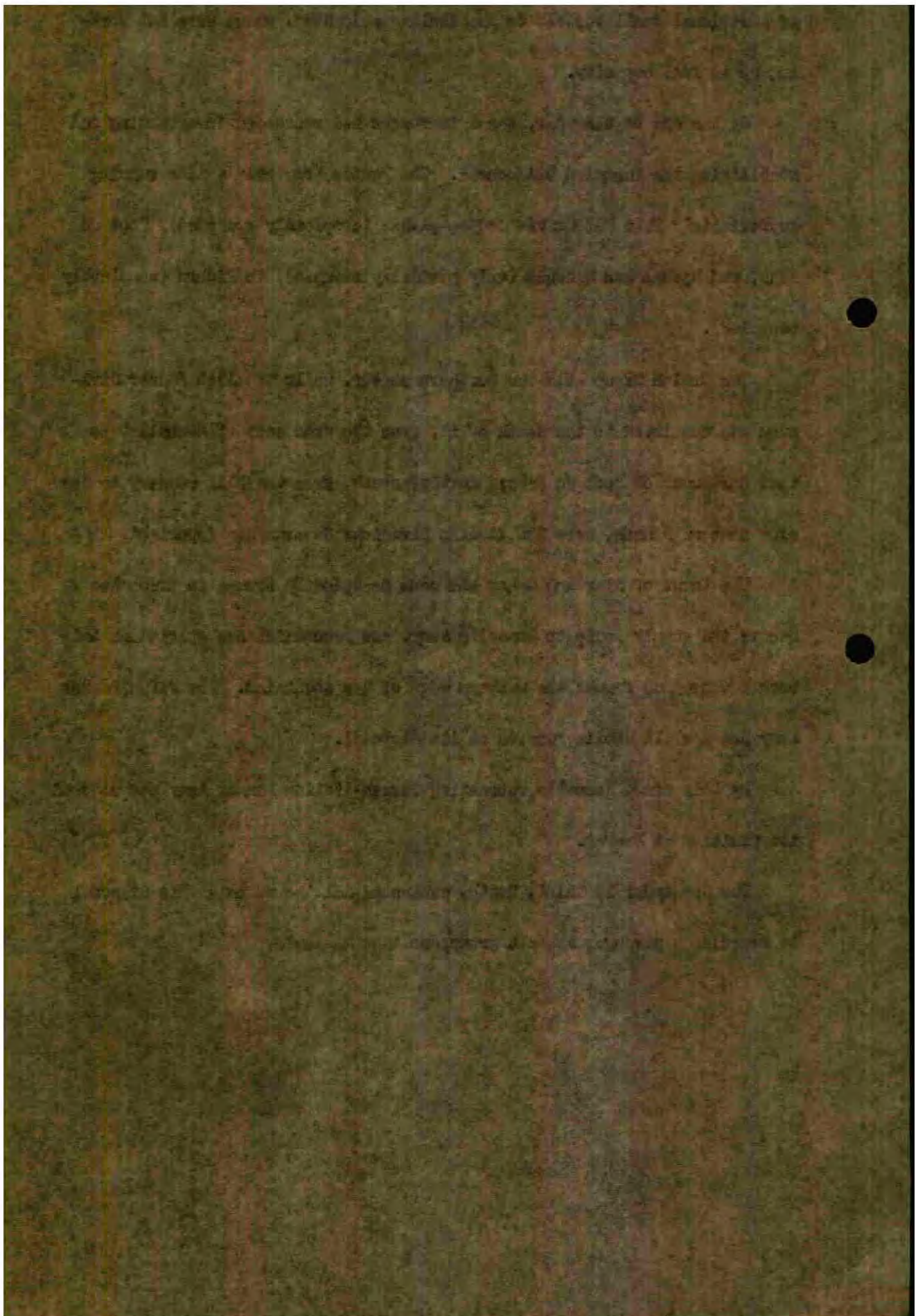
By the end of the year, the Axis forces had succeeded in extending and stabilizing the Tunisian bridgehead. The Panzer Army held a line running approximately from Mateur via Medjes-el-Bab (completely occupied), Pont du Fahs, and Djebel Ben Dabouss (only partially occupied) to Pishon (completely occupied).

The Broich Group held the northern sector, while the 10th Panzer Division was committed to the south of it, from the area east of Goubellat to that northwest of Pont du Fahs; further south, from the hill country to the area east of Pishon, were the Italian Divisions Superga and Imperiali.

The towns of Sfax and Gabes had been occupied by troops in order to secure the supply route to Rommel's Army, and reconnaissance operations had been advanced as far as the western edge of the mountains. The Fifth Panzer Army had a small mobile reserve at its disposal.

By this time, Rommel's retreating German-Italian Panzer Army had reached its position at Buerat.

The Commander in Chief, South, exhausted all the means at his disposal to organize a stronger assault group, so that he could



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go over to the offensive as soon as possible. He was well aware of the fact that the bridgehead was far too shallow to withstand a serious attack.

Contrary to expectations, the Allies had not pushed forward to the coast in southern Tunisia; an advance by way of Kairouan to either Sousse or, further south, to Sfax had been anticipated.

Such a move would easily have enabled them to cut off Rommel's Army completely.

In the fighting in Tunisia, the initiative had so far lain with the German forces, whose fate, however, depended exclusively on whether or not they could continue to maintain their supply lines on the sea and in the air.

And the chances of their being able to do so had decreased perceptibly during the last month of operations.

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Transport Ships Sunk by Submarines²⁴

- 7 November - Transport ship Stone, east of Gibraltar
- 10/11 November - Viceroy of India; Browning
- 12 November - Edward Rutledge; Tasker H. Bliss; Hugh L. Scott
- 12/13 November - Ettrick; Almac
- 13 November - Maron
- 14 November - Warwick Castle

Transport Ships Sunk by the Luftwaffe

- 8/9 November - Leedstown
- 11/12 November - Karanja; Awatea; Cathay; Glenfiles; Narkunda

Destroyers Sunk by Submarines

- 10 November - Martin; Hambledon; Tanker Winoaki damaged
- 12/13 November - Depot Ship Hecla
- 13 November - Isaac Sweers
- 14/15 November - Avenger

Destroyers Sunk by the Luftwaffe

- 11 November - Tynwald

24 - Assmann, op.cit., page 315.

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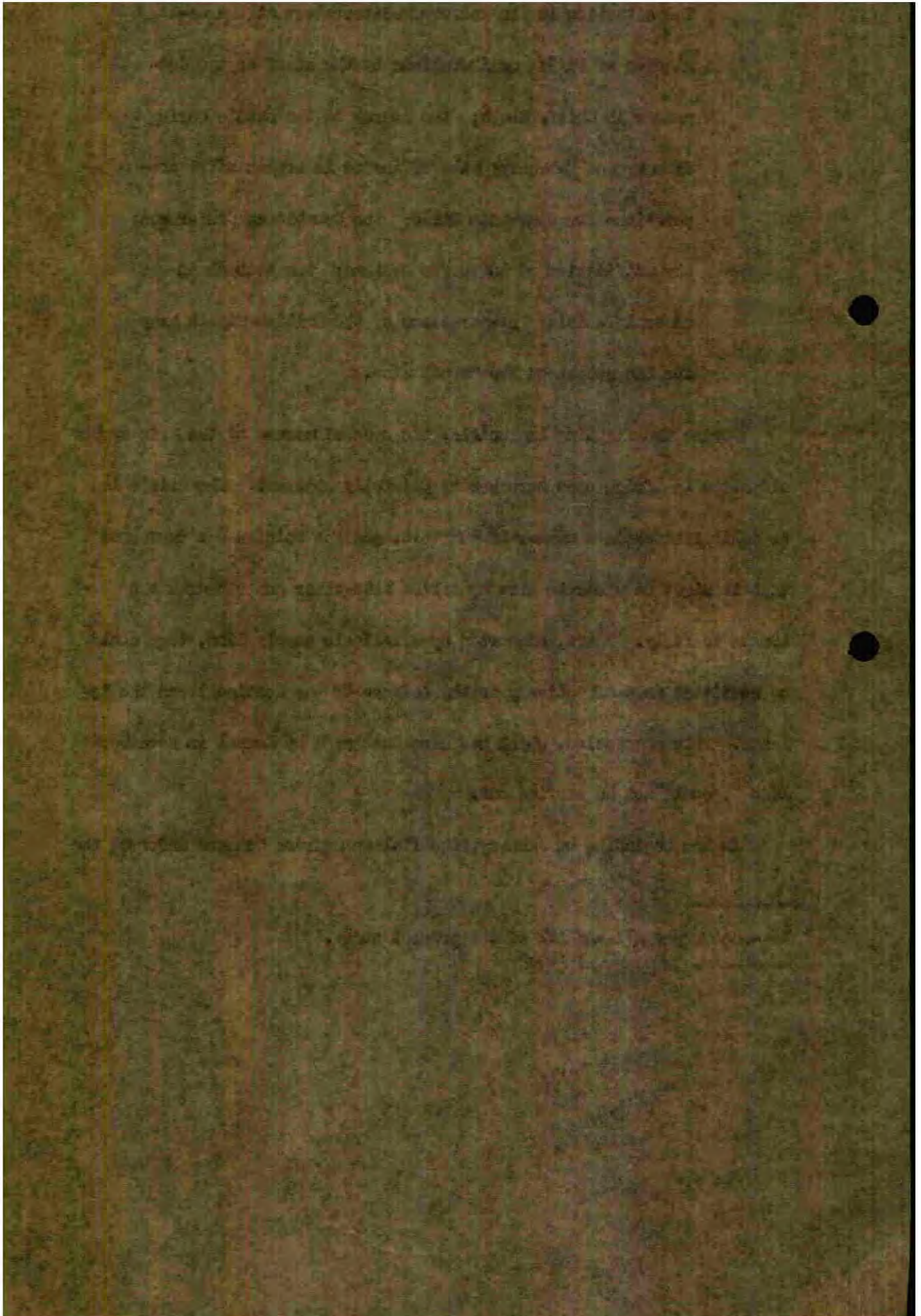
Section 5

The situation in the western Mediterranean at the beginning of 1943; deliberations by the staff of the Commander in Chief, South; the course of the battle during January and February; the offensive is broken off; preparations for Operation SATIN; the Casablanca Conference; the unification of Luftwaffe command; the setback in central Tunisia; preparations by the British Eighth Army for the attack on the Mareth line.

During the fighting in Tunisia, the precariousness of the Axis supply situation in Africa once more became painfully apparent. The crisis led to deliberations in a number of quarters, and the opinion was expressed that it might be wiser to give up Africa altogether and withdraw the troops to Italy. There, supported by a reliable supply line, they could be committed more effectively in the defense of the Continent and the islands. This suggestion, which had also been made by Rommel in November 1942²⁵, could not be carried out.

In the beginning of January, the Italian Supreme Command informed the

25 - See pages 471 and 472 of the present study.



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Wehrmacht High Command that the decision had been made to withdraw from Tripolitania, but that the state of public opinion in Italy demanded that Tunisia be held at all costs.

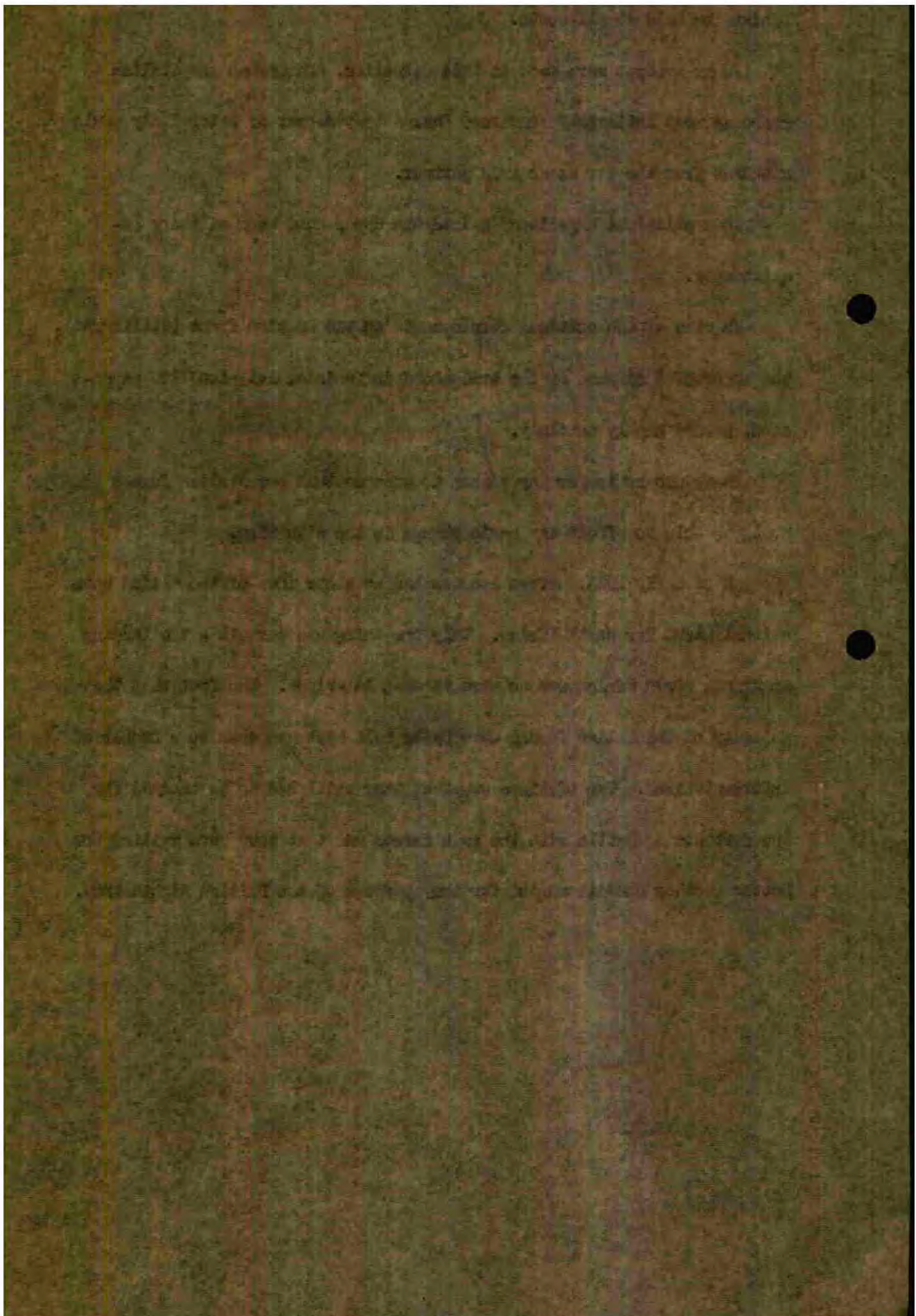
If no attempt were made in this direction, the German and Italian agencies most intimately concerned feared that sooner or later Italy would withdraw from the war as an Axis partner.

Thus political expediency gained the upper hand over military requirements.

In view of the critical developments on the Russian front (Stalingrad), the successful defense of the bridgehead in Tunisia, let alone its expansion, seemed highly unlikely.

There was no longer any reason to suppose that the Italian forces would be able to effect any basic change in the situation.

As of early 1943, German leaders had no clear idea of the Allied operational plans for North Africa. Only one thing was certain - the landing in French North Africa was no more than an interlude. The fact that the majority of the Allied forces were being held back was open to a number of interpretations. One of these was that they still had to be trained for the forthcoming battle with the Axis forces and that they were waiting for better weather conditions and for the approach of the British Eighth Army.



In addition, the question of potential intervention on the part of Spain seemed to be still unresolved. It was also possible that supply difficulties might be the reason for the hesitation displayed by the Allies.

The interpretation fostered by the Wehrmacht High Command, however - namely that the Allies had no intention of attacking the forces in Tunisia directly but wished to utilize their assumed avowal of this goal to mask an invasion of Europe - seems to be entirely unfounded.

The Allies already had a firm and reliable base in Africa, and it was by no means certain that they would be successful in obtaining such a base in southern France, Italy, or on any of the Mediterranean islands. Accordingly, the Commander in Chief, South, was justified in assuming that the drive to capture Tunisia would be continued.

A landing in Italy, of course, would automatically have brought the resistance in Africa to an end, since it would have cut the Axis forces off from their source of supply. Recognition of this fact was by no means new; the Allies had been aware of it since before the invasion in November. Nevertheless, for very significant reasons²⁶, they were unwilling to accept the risks involved.

The air situation was clearly weighted in favor of the enemy, thanks to his numerical superiority. German radio intelligence had confirmed the presence in the eastern Mediterranean, including Malta, of

26 - See page 553 of the present study.

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more than 700 single-engine fighters, 600 bombers, 245 reconnaissance aircraft, and 200 transport aircraft; the same source indicated that there were some 500 single-engine fighter aircraft, 330 bombers, and 700 transport aircraft present in the western Mediterranean. Approximately 30 - 40% of these were available for immediate operation²⁷.

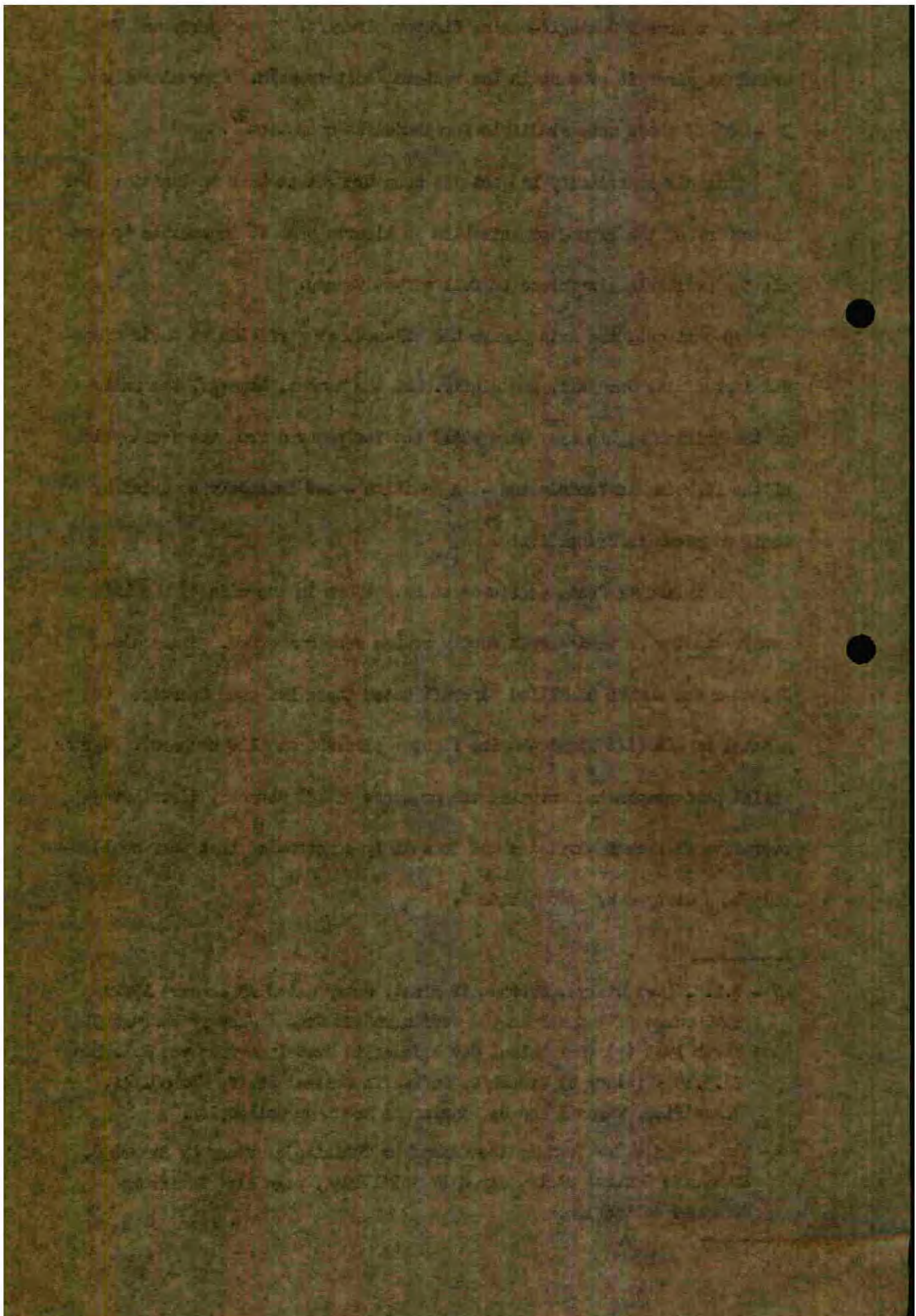
This air superiority had not yet been brought to bear in Tunisia; the inadequacy of the ground organization in Algeria made it impossible to commit the available air forces to full effectiveness.

In contrast, the Axis powers had all-weather airfields at their disposal in Tunisia, Sardinia, and Sicily. At the moment, however, the units of the British Eighth Army were still too far removed from the focal point of the fighting in Tunisia and - in addition - too intensely occupied by their missions in Tripolitania.

The island of Malta continued to be a thorn in the side of the Axis powers insofar as their ocean supply routes were concerned. Since mid-December the number of Allied aircraft based there had been increased to a total of 226 (126 single-engine fighter aircraft and 100 bombers). German aerial photographs had revealed the presence of 281 "boxes", distributed over five different airfields and so solidly constructed that they could only be destroyed by direct hits²⁸.

27 - K.T.B. (War Diary), Second Air Fleet, entry dated 13 January 1942: The Course of the War in the Mediterranean from 1 January through 31 March 1943 (?) (Der Ablauf des Krieges im Mittelmeerraum von 1.1. bis 31.3.43); study by Branch 8, Luftwaffe General Staff, No. 891/44, Classified, pages 1 and 2; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

28 - The Struggle for Tunisia (Der Kampf um Tunisien); study by Branch 8, Luftwaffe General Staff, dated 17 April 1944, page 11; Karlsruhe Document Collection.



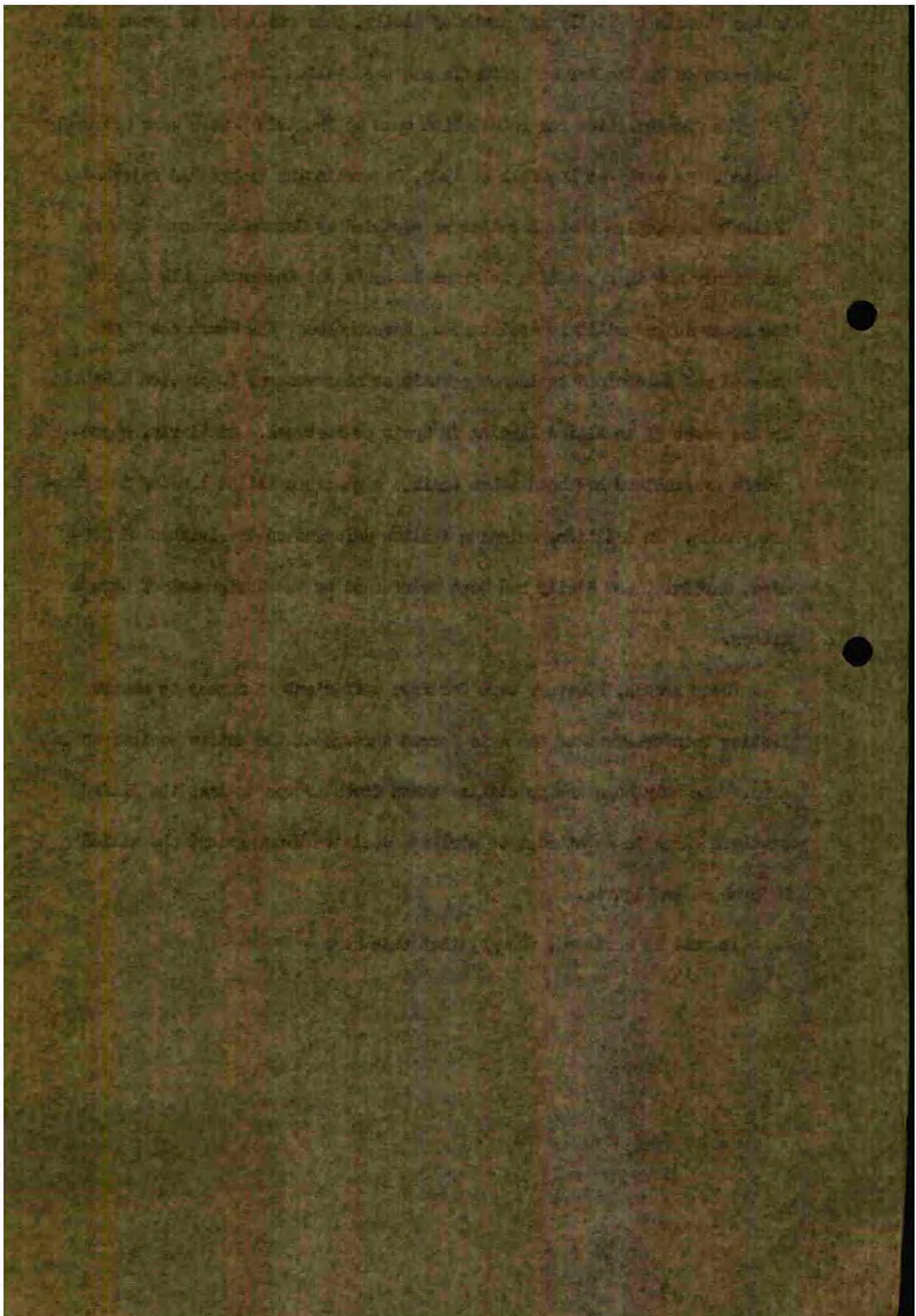
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In the western Mediterranean, the Allies ruled the seas from a point roughly opposite Algiers to the area around Malta. East of Algiers, however, in the Straits of Sicily and south of Sicily, they still had to reckon with intervention by the German Luftwaffe and the Italian fleet.

The possibilities for retaliation upon to the Axis powers were extremely limited. As early as the fall of 1940, Generalissimo Franco had rejected Hitler's suggestion that Gibraltar be occupied by German forces; Germany was simply not in a position to grant Franco's not inconsiderable demands for economic and military assistance. Nevertheless, the Wehrmacht High Command was determined to launch certain countermeasures (Operation GISELA) in the event of an Allied landing in Spain or Portugal. Similarly, appropriate precautions had been taken against a possible Allied landing in southern France. In addition, existing Italian defenses on the islands of Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily had been reinforced by the assignment of German troops.

These troops, however, were far from sufficient in number to ensure lasting reinforcement of the Axis forces throughout the entire Mediterranean area. The only hope was to utilize these fresh troops against the Allied southern flank in an attempt to strike a decisive blow against the Allied bridgehead in Algeria.

It must be admitted, though, that this hope -



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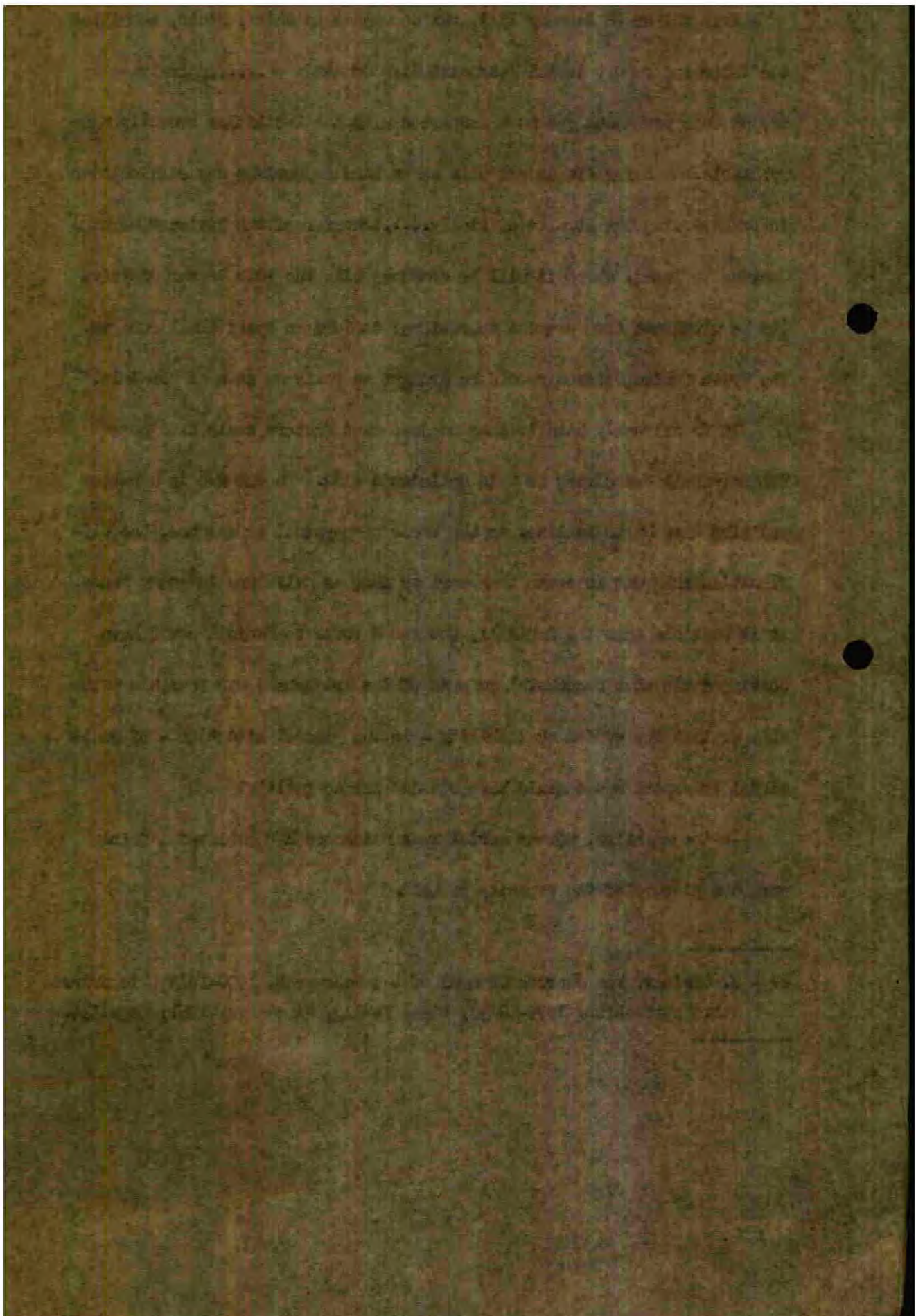
from the point of view of the available transport facilities -- was fairly illusory from the very beginning.

Even so, on 12 January 1943, the Commander in Chief, South, submitted the following report to the Wehrmacht High Command: ".....approximately 60,000 tons per month can be transported with the facilities recently made available. A Luftwaffe escort will be on hand to obviate any difficulties in transversing the Straits of Sicily.....transfer of the Division Hermann Goering to Tunis, where it will be combined with the 10th Panzer Division (to be withdrawn from present operations) to form an operational reserve. The 999th Africa Brigade should be brought to Tunis as soon as possible."²⁹

It is extremely hard to imagine just what factors could have moved Feldmarschall Kesselring to this optimistic view. No one was in a better position than he to realize, on the basis of personal experience, the difficulties inherent in ocean transport as long as Malta was in enemy hands. Is it possible that the radically shortened route to Tunisia could have convinced him that successful defense of the bridgehead was feasible after all, or that the sudden availability -- in the present situation -- of additional transport space could have blinded him to reality?

In the meantime, German aerial reconnaissance had achieved a fairly accurate picture of the capacity of Allied

29 - H. Greiner, *The Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht, 1939-1943* (Die oberste Wehrmachtfuehrung 1939-1943), Iduna Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1951, page 434.



shipping newly arrived in the western Mediterranean.

The results of German radio monitoring activity indicated that the enemy forces must be composed, at the very least, of five American divisions (1st and 2d Armored Divisions; 1st, 3d, and 9th Infantry Divisions) and one or two British divisions (elements of the 4th, 56th, and 78th Divisions)³⁰.

In addition, the presence of five or six French divisions had been confirmed.

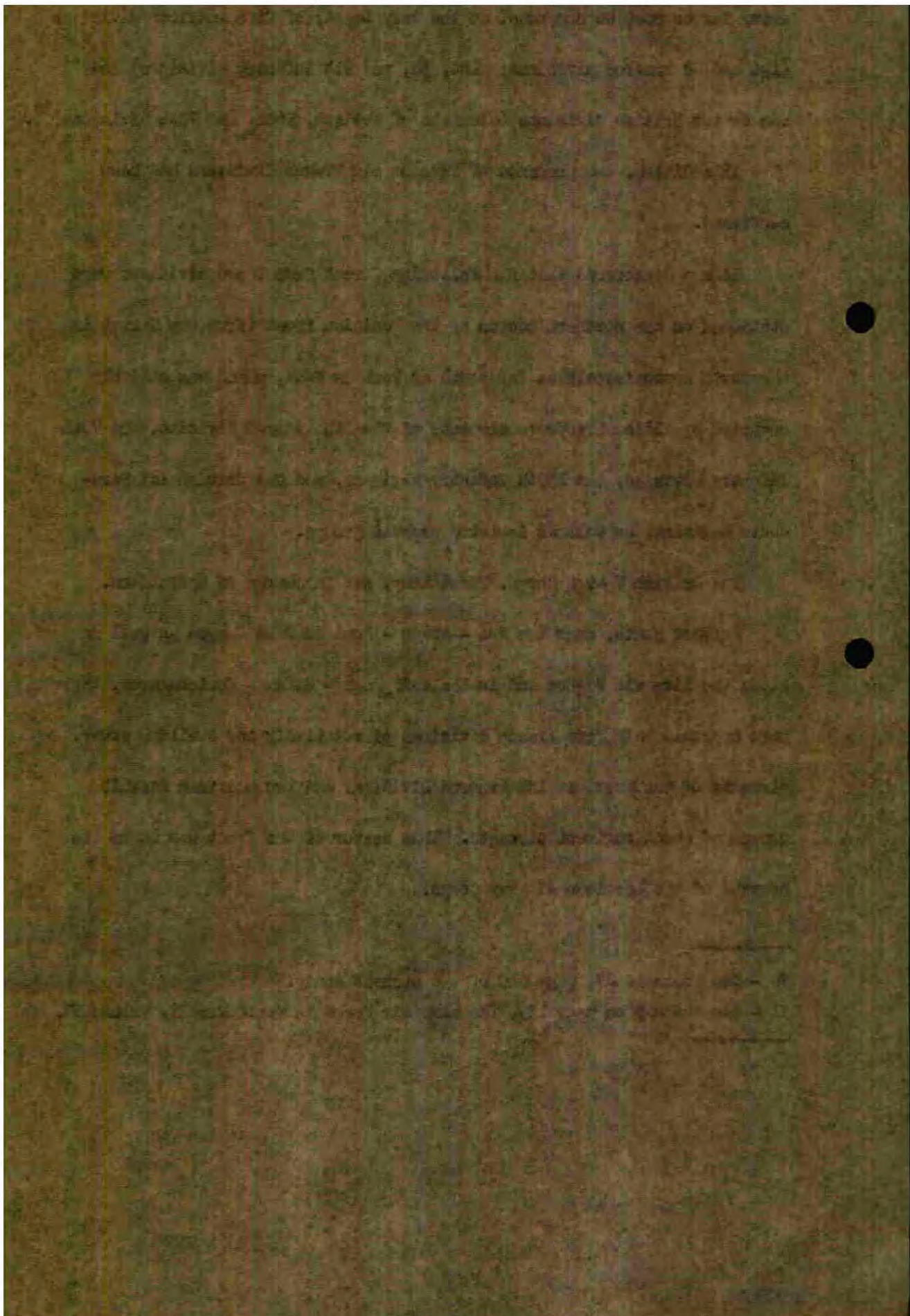
It was discovered that the following forces from these divisions were stationed on the northern sector of the Tunisian front (from Cap Serrat in the north approximately as far south as Pont du Fahs, which was entirely occupied by Allied troops): elements of the 6th Armored Division, the 78th Infantry Division, the 139th Infantry Regiment, and the British 1st Parachute Regiment, as well as isolated assault groups.

The British V Army Corps, First Army, was in charge of operations.

Further south, near the Bou - Arado - Pont du Fahs³¹ area as well as along the line via Pichon and in the Faid Pass - Gafsa - Feriana area, there were approximately five French divisions of relatively low striking power, elements of the American 1st Armored Division, and two American assault groups of about regiment strength. This sector of the front was under the command of the American II Army Corps.

30 - See Footnote 27, page 610 of the present study.

31 - See the map on page 133, The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.



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Thus, the over-all strength of the Allied forces committed on the Tunisian front was as follows:

3 British divisions

1 American division

3 French divisions.

Additional Allied forces in about equal strength were being held back in the rear areas of Algeria and Morocco. German aerial reconnaissance revealed the presence of troop billets and training activity.

It could be assumed with certainty that the Allies would drive forward towards the Tunisian coast as soon as the opportunity should present itself.

There were two possible methods of accomplishing this - a breakthrough west of Tunis, or an offensive in southern Tunisia, in the general direction of Sousse and Sfax.

A breakthrough on the Axis front west of Tunis would have brought the Allied forces into the extensive plains, where their superior armored units could be employed most effectively. The German defensive line followed the line of the mountains and was lacking in depth.

Seizure of the harbors of Tunis and Bizerte would have ended the war in North Africa with a minimum of delay. Even

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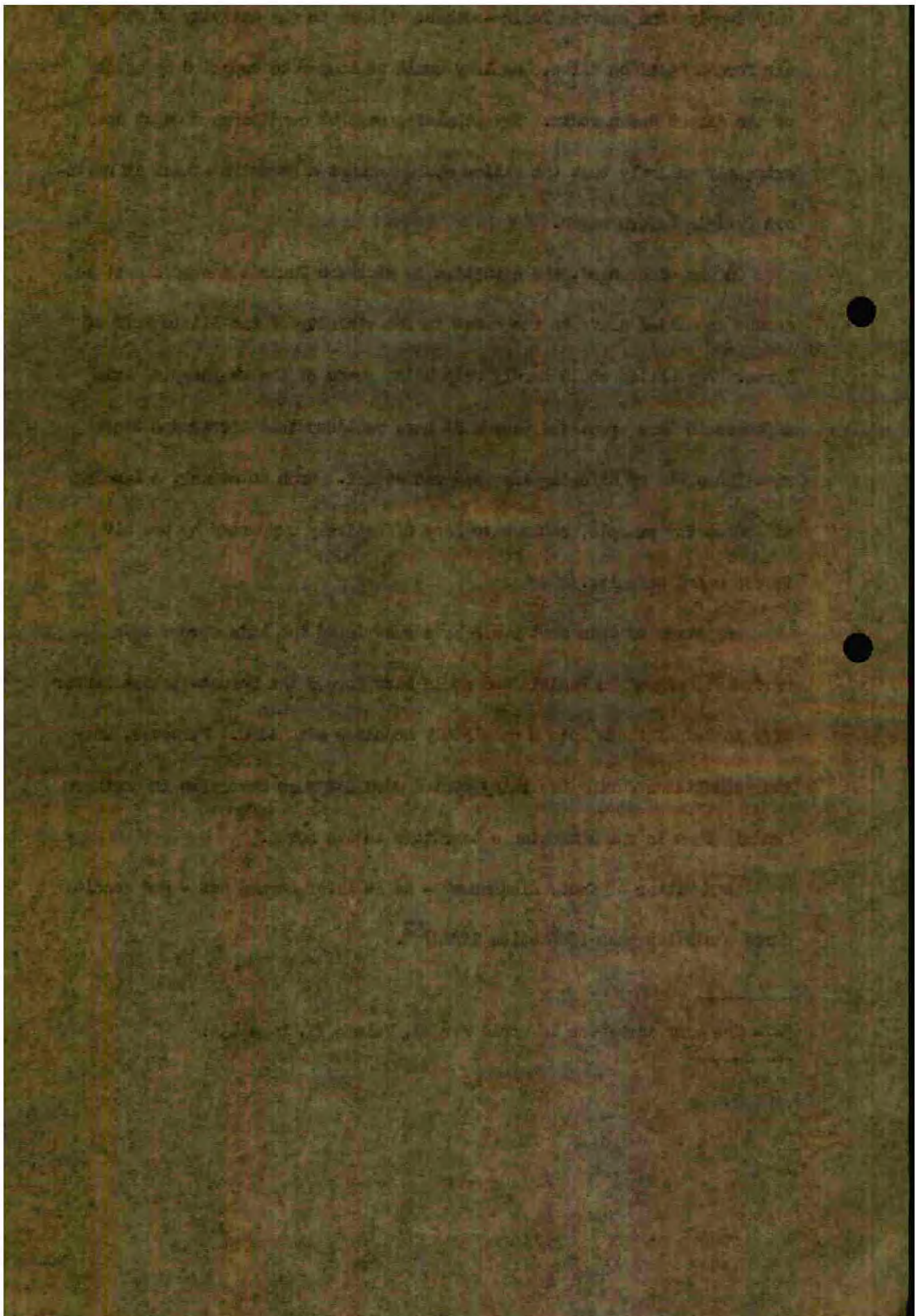
the German-Italian Panzer Army, which was still holding its position near Buerat as of early January, would have been forced to capitulate since its only supply line ran via Tunis - Gabes. Thanks to the activity of enemy air forces based on Malta, the Army could no longer be supplied by means of the direct ocean route. Nevertheless, weather conditions made it seem extremely unlikely that the Allies would attempt a decisive attack in northern Tunisia before March.

On the other hand, the situation in southern Tunisia seemed almost to demand an Allied drive to the coast in the vicinity of the Little Gulf of Syrte. The Allies could hardly help being aware of the weakness of Axis defenses in this area, and they must have realized that the troops there were incapable of offering any real resistance. Such an attack, a landing at Sousse for example, could have been effectively supported by the air forces based on Malta.

An attack of this sort would have restricted the Axis forces to a narrow bridgehead in Tunisia and would have forced the German-Italian Panzer Army in Tripolitania into a completely hopeless situation. Moreover, weather conditions during the rainy period were far more favorable in southern Tunisia than in the mountainous territory to the north.

As a matter of fact, Eisenhower - as it later turned out - had considered a similar plan (Operation SATIN)³².

32 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 135.



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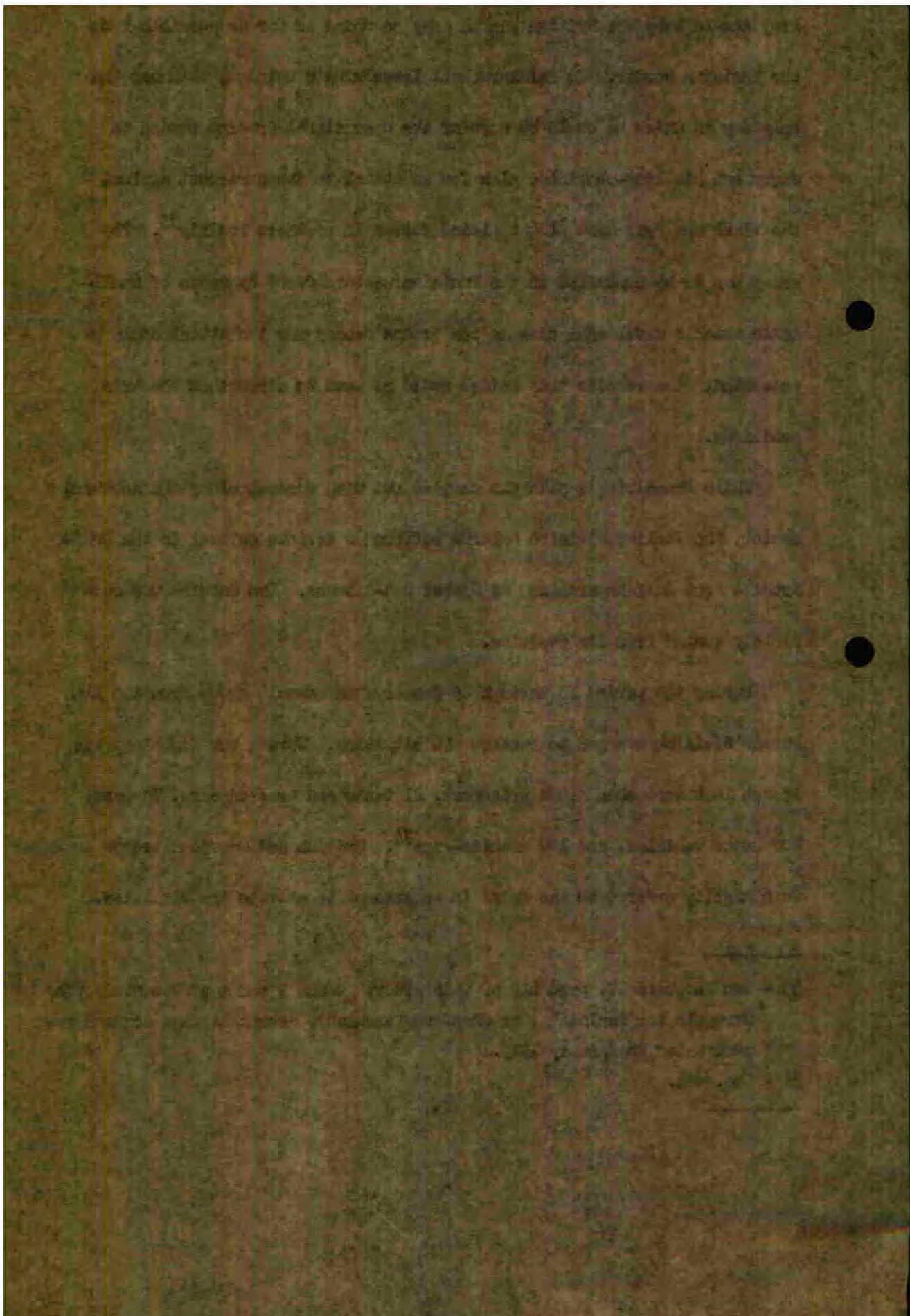
Realising this situation, the Commander in Chief, South, submitted a proposal to the Italian Supreme Command to the effect that Rommel's Panzer Army should keep the British Eighth Army occupied as far as possible from the Tunisian border. In Feldmarschall Kesselring's opinion, this was the only way in which he could be sure of the operational freedom needed to carry out his long-cherished plan for an attack to the northwest against the flank and rear area of the Allied forces in northern Tunisia³³. The enemy was to be contained on the Tunisian western front by means of small-scale attacks until such time as the troops needed for the attack could be assembled; the respite thus gained would be used to strengthen the Axis positions.

While Kesselring's plan was carried out with success along the northern sector, the Italian Division Superba suffered a serious setback in the Bou - Arada - Pont du Fahs area and at Djebel Bou-Dabous. The Superba was completely routed from its position.

During the period 18 through 25 January, an assault group from the 11th Panzer Division managed to restore the situation. During the fighting, the French lost more than 4,000 prisoners, 21 tanks and armored cars, 70 guns, 200 motor vehicles, and 100 machine-guns³⁴. British and American troops were hastily ordered to the front in an attempt to salvage the situation.

33 - See Footnote 27, page 610 of this study; pages 3 and 4 of the study "The Struggle for Tunisia" (Der Kampf um Tunesien), Wehrmacht High Command report dated 26 January 1943.

34 - Loc. cit.



On 13 January 1943, the 21st Panzer Division of Rommel's Panzer Army was dispatched to Gabes in order to secure the rear-area supply route to Tripolitania³⁵.

Encouraged by the success of the 10th Panzer Division, the 21st moved forward on 31 January to seize the narrow passage near Faid, which was also occupied by French troops. The Division stormed Faid and the nearby mountain passes, throwing back counterattacks by the American Combat Command A, hurrying up from its position at Sbeitla. By the time the fighting was over, the 21st Panzer Division had captured 1,047 prisoners and captured or destroyed 25 armored vehicles, 20 guns, 8 grenade-launchers, 54 machine-guns, 70 trucks, and 5 aircraft³⁶. During the night of 1/2 February, the 2d Panzer Division was withdrawn to Maknassy in order to obviate the danger of its being encircled from the south.

On 7 February the Sened position, west of Maknassy, which had been lost to the enemy during the night of 1/2 February, was regained and the Axis positions advanced in the direction of Gafsa. The dive-bomber units contributed materially to the success of the operation³⁷.

German leaders were alarmed at the strength of the Allied forces in the Faid area. They

35 - See page 506 of the present study.

36 - See Footnote 26 (translator's note: should this not be 277); pages 10 and 11, War Diary, Second Air Fleet report dated 3 February 1943.

37 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 142 and 143.

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could only conclude that these forces represented the nucleus for the long anticipated drive towards the eastern coast of Tunisia.

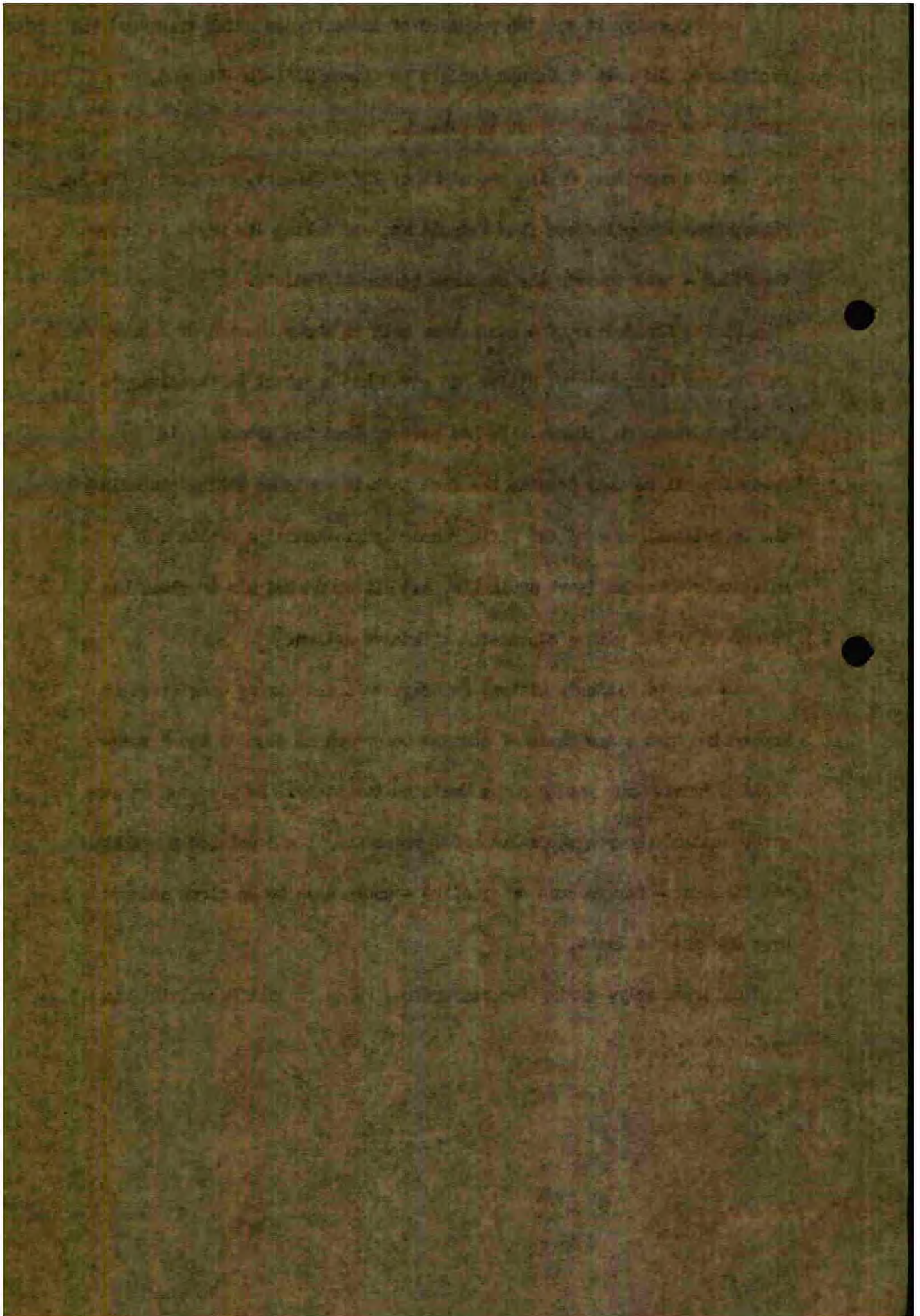
Consequently, it was the presence of these forces which triggered the decision on the part of German leaders to attack Sidi-Bou-Sid and, as a result, the subsequent thrust to Tebessa.

In the meantime, during the night of 22/23 January, the German-Italian Panzer Army had withdrawn from Tripoli and was making its way - in loose formation - back towards the southern border of Tunisia.

During the course of a conference held at about the end of January at the Fuehrer Headquarters, Hitler had given his approval to Kesselring's plan to advance on Tebessa. He had ordered that the attack be led by Feldmarschall Rommel, despite the fact that it would be taking place in the operational area of the Fifth Panzer Army. Rommel's health made a relatively extended leave advisable, and Hitler wanted him to close his career in Africa with a successful offensive action.

In view of Hitler's wishes, Feldmarschall Kesselring considered it imperative that a new chain of command be set up as soon as the German-Italian Panzer Army should enter Tunisian territory. He proposed an army group command (Heeresgruppe-Kommando) under Rommel and pointed out that the Italians - for reasons of prestige - would have to be given command over one army at least.

Unfortunately, during the conference, Feldmarschall Kesselring was unable to



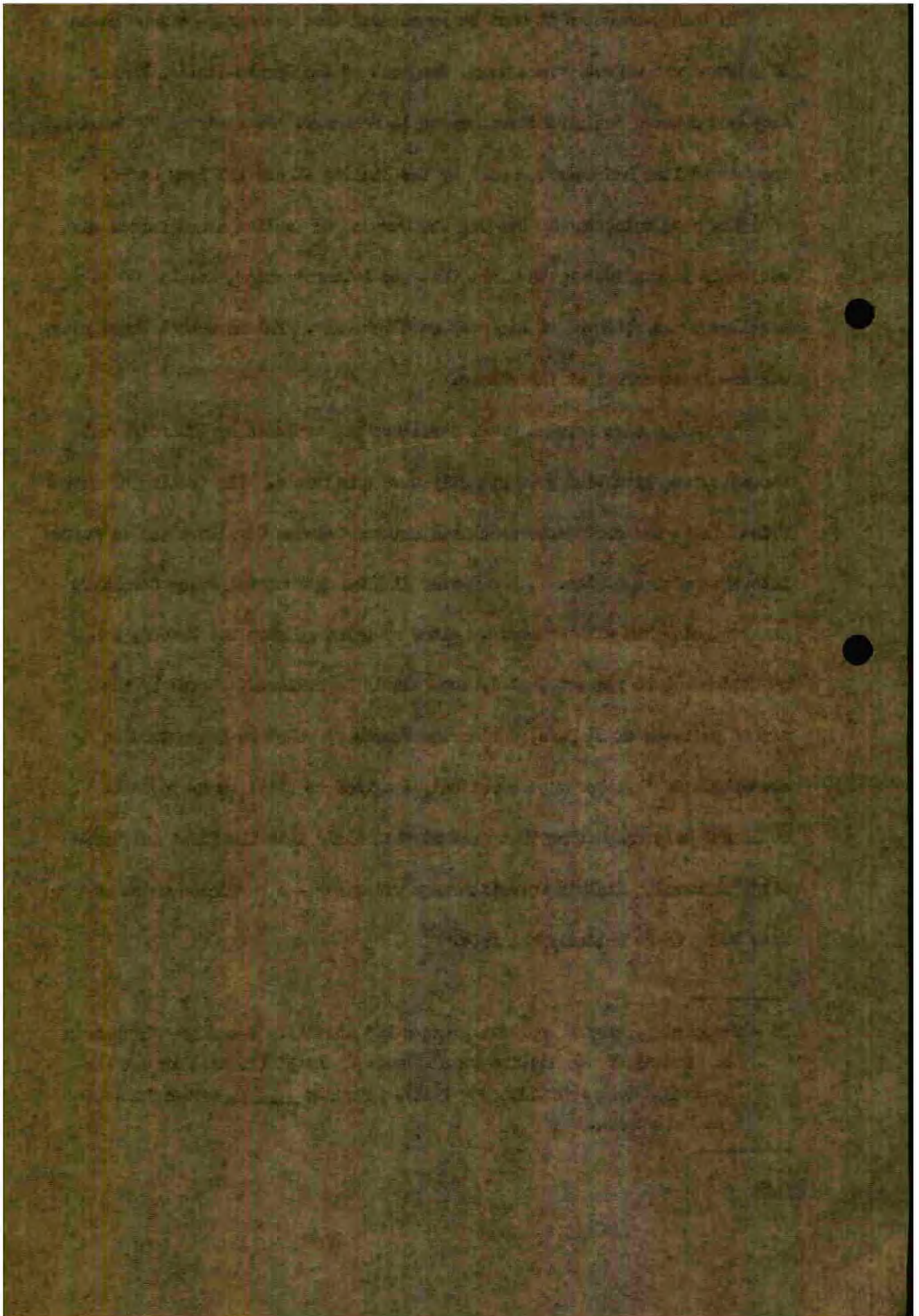
obtain a final decision from the Wehrmacht High Command concerning the new chain of command.

In this connection it must be remembered that a clearly-defined chain of command was urgently necessary, inasmuch as the German-Italian Panzer Army had entered Tunisian territory on 12 February. As early as 27 January, the Mareth line had been occupied by the Italian XX and XXI Army Corps.

The good relationship between the German and Italian armed forces was seriously jeopardized by the fact that the latter's chief, Marshal Count Cavallero, was relieved of his post on 6 February. Feldmarschall Kesselring was deeply concerned at the change.

"From the time Marshal Count Cavallero was replaced by Generaloberst Ambrosio, the situation grew steadily more unbearable. The feeling of mutual friendliness and confidence which had existed between Cavallero and me turned into the exact opposite. I had warned Il Duce against relieving Cavallero and replacing him with Ambrosio. Since my warnings were not heeded, I had no choice but to request that I, too, should be relieved. Moved by the urgent protests of Il Duce, during the course of which he guaranteed an atmosphere of 'brotherly cooperation', I agreed to withdraw my request. I could not help suspecting that even at that early date the first deliberations concerning Italy's defection were under way - a suspicion which we know today to be entirely accurate."³⁸

38 - Kesselring, Albert, op. cit., pages 213 and 214. See also "Changes in the Command of the Italian Armed Forces in 1943" (Wechsel in der italienischen Wehrmachtsführung 1943), Appendix ____; Karlruhe Document Collection.



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The assault group which was to carry out the drive to Tobessa was formed from elements of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The group was to come under the command of the staff of the Army Corps. The 10th Panzer Division had been withdrawn from the front line being held by the Fifth Panzer Army, where it was replaced by the non-mobile elements of the Division Hermann Goering. The latter had begun to arrive in Tunisia during the second half of January.

Generaleoberst von Arnim, Commander in Chief, Fifth Panzer Army, considered extensive operations along the enemy flank and rear area, as conceived by Feldmarschall Kesselring, to be completely incapable of accomplishment. He did^{not} share the optimism felt by the Commander in Chief, South, and in his sobering analysis of the situation pointed out the following unfavorable factors:

insufficient troops to handle a front 250 miles in length;
 shortage of ammunition; and
 inadequate supply transport facilities.

He also stressed the fact that since the end of January it had become increasingly obvious that the Wehrmacht High Command had no intention of keeping the various promises it had made. Normal supply shipments were not even sufficient to meet the daily requirements of the Fifth Panzer Army³⁹.

These objections were undeniably justified.

39 - See page 581 of the present study.

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Generaloberst von Arnim felt that the most that could be hoped for with the inadequate troops available was a temporary improvement in the situation, to be brought about by means of smaller-scale tactical actions.

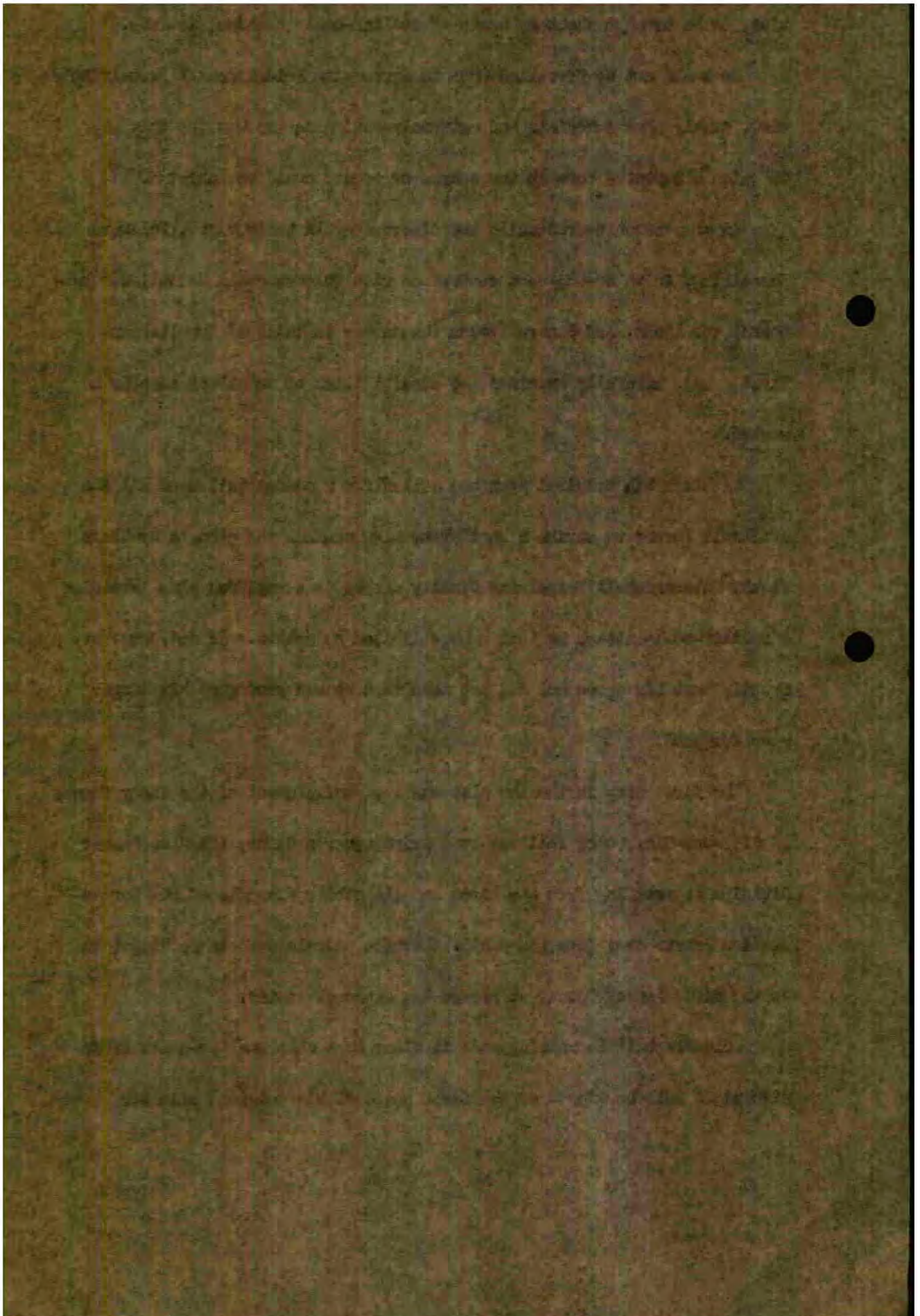
He could not be prevailed upon to agree with Feldmarschall Kesselring's view, namely that immediate and extremely daring action was the only way in which a decisive turn in the course of events could be achieved.

In an attempt to reconcile the discrepancy in their views, Feldmarschall Kesselring, in an on-the-spot conference with Feldmarschall Rommel, Generaloberst von Arnim, and General Messe (Commander in Chief of the Italian First Army), carefully examined the possibilities of an attack such as he wanted.

Although his original plan had called for a concentration of all the available forces to strike a shattering blow against the enemy's southern flank, Feldmarschall Kesselring finally agreed to a modified plan involving a smaller-scale attack against a more limited objective. He did, however, specify that his agreement did not mean that he was giving up his larger plan for good.

The first step in the new plan was the encirclement of the enemy forces at Sidi-Bou-Sid, to be followed by a drive towards Gafsa, the 21st Panzer Division approaching from the north and the mobile elements of the German-Italian Panzer Army from the south. Advance patrols were to be dispatched in the direction of Tescur to secure the approach routes.

Feldmarschall Kesselring made it clear that this smaller-scale offensive might well be viewed as the first phase of his original plan for



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an action leading up to and beyond Tebessa⁴⁰.

Feldmarschall Kesselring discussed all the details connected with the conduct of operations with the commanders in chief of the armies and conferred with them regarding the new chain of command made necessary by the change in plans.

In order to free Feldmarschall Rommel to take charge of the attack, a newly-established staff under General Messe would have to assume command on the Tunisian southern front - and this well before the beginning of operations. The Commander in Chief, South, considered it imperative that Feldmarschall Rommel already be in command of all the Axis forces in Tunisia prior to the beginning of the attack; the Wehrmacht High Command, however, was of another opinion.

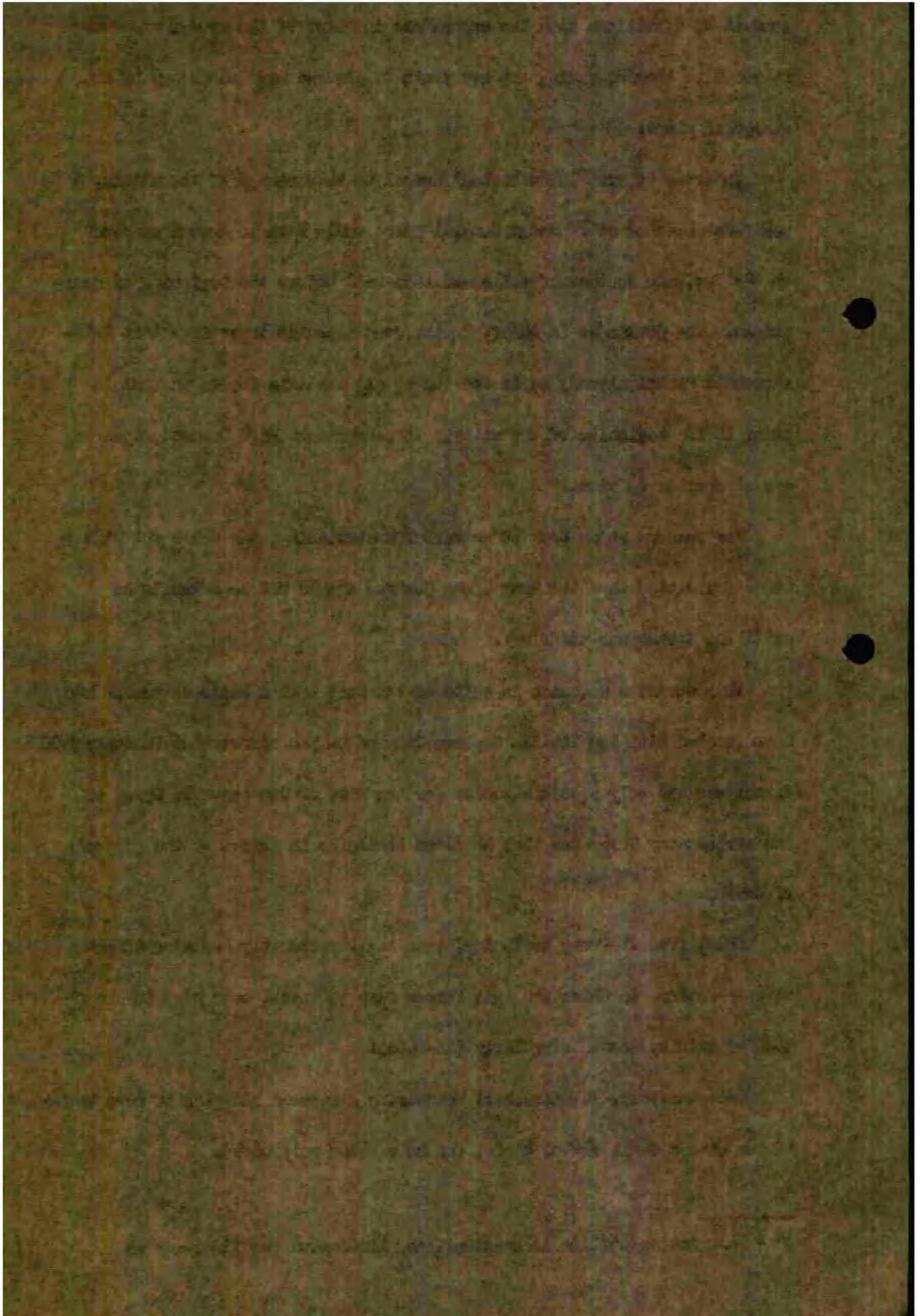
For reasons which seem to be rather unconvincing, the Wehrmacht High Command insisted that the Army Group Command should not be established until the attack was under way.

This decision was made in spite of the fact that a basic agreement had been reached with the Italian Supreme Command to the effect that Feldmarschall Rommel was the only possible choice for the post of Commander in Chief of the Africa Army Corps and that he alone should be in charge of the planned offensive.

Thus, from its very beginning, this last, presumably decisive offensive operation, in which the Axis forces were to appeal once more to the gods of battle, seemed singularly ill-fated!

Unfortunately, Feldmarschall Kesselring abandoned his plan to move to Africa with a small combat staff, for he was the only person

⁴⁰ - This interpretation is substantiated by General der Flieger Paul



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Footnote 40 (cont)

Deichmann in Appendix _____ of this study. At the time in question, General Deichmann was Chief of Staff with the Commander in Chief, South.

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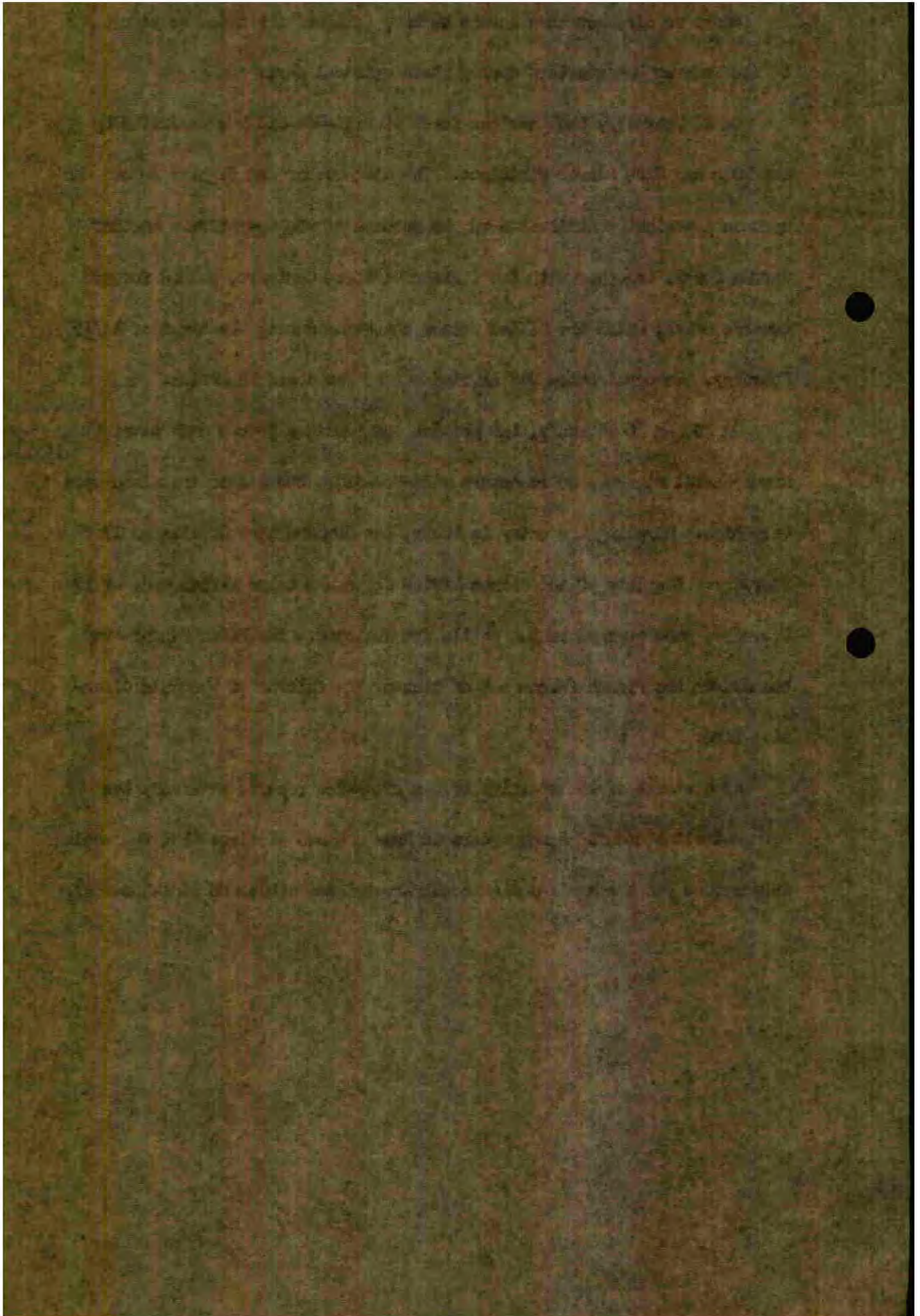
who could have solved any unforeseen difficulties in the conduct of operations by on-the-spot decisions. He knew how much was at stake!

Under no circumstances should he have followed the order to report to the Fuehrer Headquarters during these critical days.

On 14 February, the American force at Sidi-Bou-Sid was encircled by the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The dive-bomber and fighter forces had made an important contribution to the success of the operation. Another German force, together with the Italian Division Contarino, pushed forward towards Gafsa, which the Allied forces abandoned during the night of 14/15 February. Reconnaissance was carried out as far ahead as Farina.

On 15 and 16 February, the British and American forces made several unsuccessful attempts to recapture Sidi-Bou-Sid; the losses sustained were very high. Pursuing the enemy in tanks, the Germans took Shatila on 17 February. Elements of the German Africa Corps had taken Farina and, by 17 February, were engaged in the battle for Thalepne. The Fifth Panzer Army had driven the French forces out of Pichon, the fulcrum of the Axis offensive line.

As a result of the scarcity of the situation reports received, the German-Italian command headquarters in Rome assumed at first that the action in progress was the small-scale locally-restricted attack on Sidi-Bou-Sid.



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which had been discussed with Feldmarschall Kesselring. It was not until 16 February that the replies to their requests for more detailed information made it clear that the entire front was in motion!

Since Feldmarschall Kesselring was still at the Fuehrer Headquarters on 17 February, no decision could be made as to coordination of the objectives of the two Armies involved in the attack.

"Rommel wants to go on to Tebessa, and the Fifth Panzer Army, because it is short of troops, insists on Mateur", reports Colonel Pontow in his contribution to this study⁴¹.

It was not until 18 February that Feldmarschall Kesselring, who had returned to Rome in the meantime and conferred with Il Duce, finally determined a new and unequivocal chain of command.

The 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, as well as those elements of the German Army Corps already in action, were placed under the command of Feldmarschall Rommel to continue the offensive along the Sbeitla - Tebessa line towards Le Kef.

Generaloberst von Arnim was to continue harassing the enemy by means of repeated raids into his territory, holding his forces ready at the same time for a broad-front offensive between the coast and Pont du Fahs.

A landing at Tabarka, to be carried out with the Naval Command, Tunisia (Marine-Kommando Tunesien), was in process of preparation. The Second Air Fleet was to provide a paratrooper force to destroy the bridge at Le Kef before the

41 - Pontow, op. cit., pages 49 and 50.

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landing began.

On 19 February, the Hassorine Pass was captured and the Axis forces set off in pursuit of the defeated army, one group in the direction of Thala and a second group in the direction of Tebessa.

Allied reinforcements, however, brought to the scene of action with a minimum of delay, blocked all points of access to the mountains.

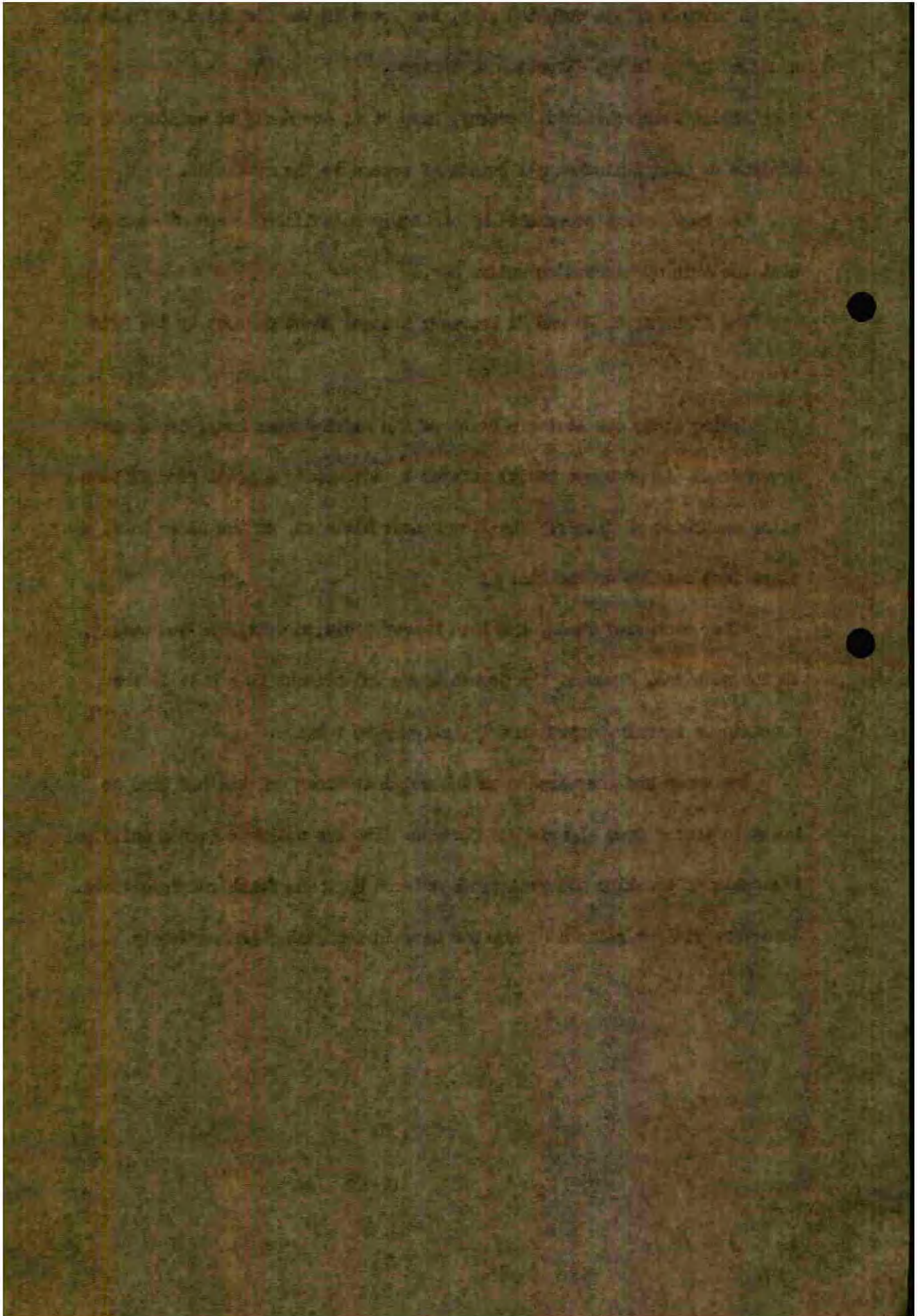
The regroupings occasioned by the newly established chain of command cost the Axis commanders an entire day.

The fighting on 20 and 21 February brought scant success to the Axis troops.

Moving along the southern flank of the Fifth Panzer Army, the Combat Group Buhse (Kampfgruppe Buhse) managed to advance to a point some fifteen miles southwest of Matour. The 21st Panzer Division, on the other hand, was stuck fast outside of Sbeitla.

After capturing Thala, the 10th Panzer Division continued its attack. In the meantime, however, the Combat Group was brought to a halt in the mountainous terrain, approximately half-way to Tebessa.

The enemy had recovered from the original shock and had had time to bring in troops from Algeria and Morocco. And the weakened German units were incapable of breaking the resistance offered by these fresh reinforcements. Moreover, violent rains had made the terrain impassable and seriously



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limited the maneuverability of the tanks.

During a conference with the Commander in Chief, South, on 22 February at his headquarters on the Kasserine Pass, Feldmarschall Rommel recommended that the attack be broken off and the troops withdrawn to the positions they had held prior to the offensive.

In view of the situation on the Harath sector of the front, which might well require the intervention of motorized units, the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian Supreme Command agreed to Rommel's proposal. On 23 February, the Army Group Africa was finally established, with Rommel as its commander in chief. It was made up of the following:

Hqs, Fifth Panzer Army (Generaloberst von Arnim),

German-Italian Panzer Army (General Messe)⁴².

By 25 February, having destroyed the railway lines and mined the highways after them, the Axis forces had withdrawn as follows:

10th Panzer Division - Sidi-Bou-Sid area and the area to the north

of the town;

21st Panzer Division - Sbeitla area and the area northwest of the town;

Combat Group Buhae - Gafsa area.

The enemy continued in pursuit as far as the Kasserine - Thalepte line.

The offensive operation, which had been launched with such high hopes, had had no tactical effect whatsoever. Nevertheless, in Feldmarschall Kesselring's opinion, the American forces and certain elements of the British Army had taken such a beating that

42 - See Appendix _____, which makes this "double subordination" graphically clear.

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it would probably be four to six weeks before the Allies would be able to launch their anticipated large-scale attack.

In addition to the extremely high losses suffered by the Allies in terms of dead and wounded, almost 4,000 prisoners, 235 tanks, 169 armored reconnaissance cars, and 160 guns and self-propelled gun-mounts were captured⁴³.

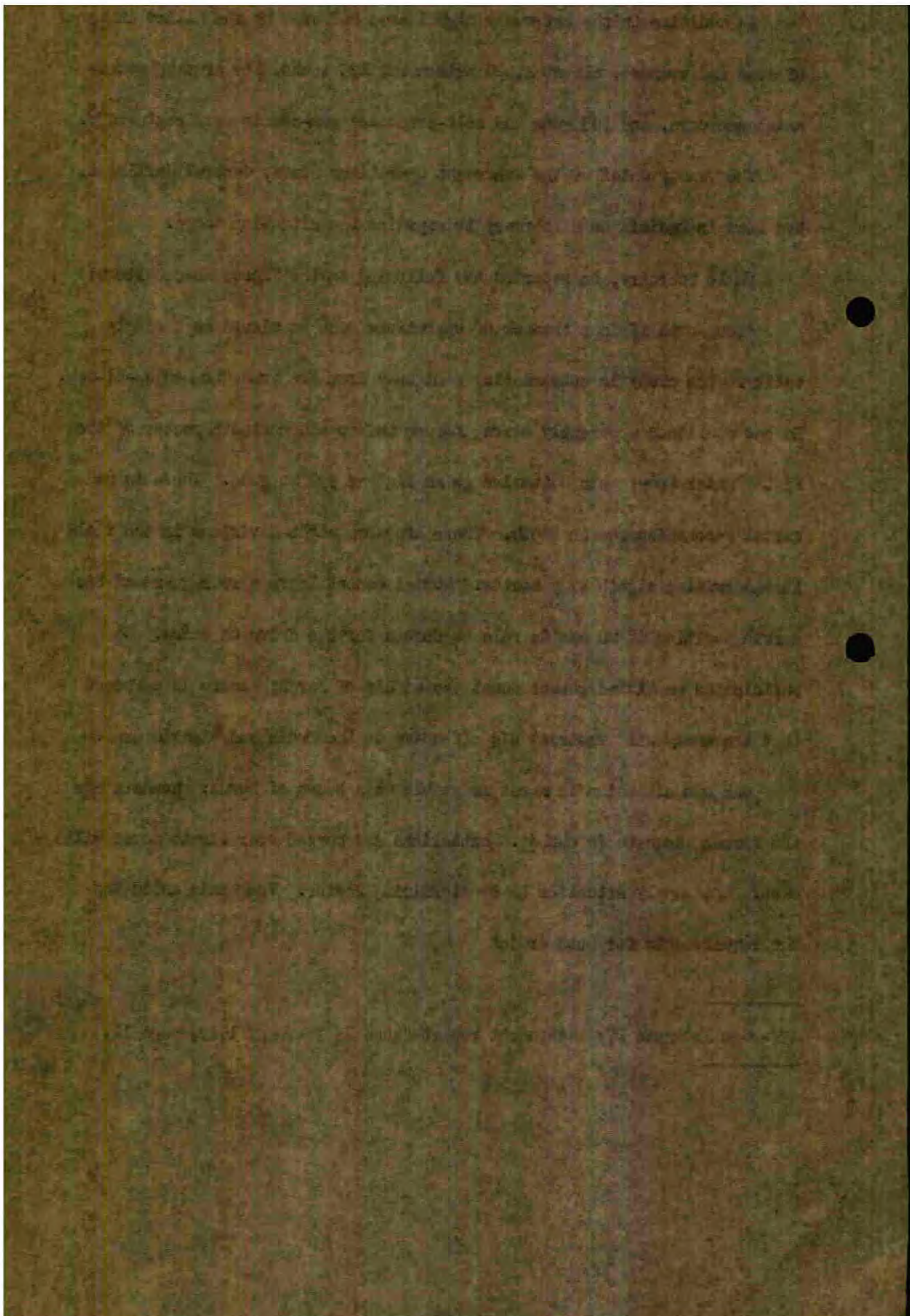
The Deputy Chief of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff, General Warlimont, had been in Tunisia on 8 February to appraise the situation there.

On 16 February, he reported the following to the Führer Headquarters:

"The North African theater of operations must be viewed as a single entity. The enemy is constructing a highway from Bou Arada to Medjes-el-Bab. He has stationed apparently strong forces before the northern sector of the Fifth Panzer Army; his batteries go as high as 390 mm guns. There is no aerial reconnaissance in depth. There are some eight divisions in the field in the British Eighth Army Sector. Rommel cannot leave a rear guard at his Mareth position if he has to release forces for the drive on Gafsa. He anticipates an Allied attack about the middle of March; there is a chance that the enemy will restrict his offensive to the Tunis and Bizerte area.

Our own situation is about as stable as a house of cards; nowhere are the forces adequate in number. Battalions are spread over six to seven miles each. The supply situation is a determining factor. Von Arnim estimates the requirements for both armies

43 - See Footnote 27; Wehrmacht report dated 25 February 1943, page 11.



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at 150,000 tons per month for four months (Fesselring, on 12 February, set this figure at 60,000 tons per month; right now, the lowest possible estimate, including the required extra margin for safety, is 90,000 per month). The maximum capacity available to the Italian Supreme Command is 80,000 tons per month, and this includes the anticipated loss of 20,000 tons per month due to enemy destruction of shipping! There are about 400 Navy barges and Seibel barges available - a drop in the bucket! Our strategic and tactical goals must be tailored to fit the supply situation....."⁴⁴

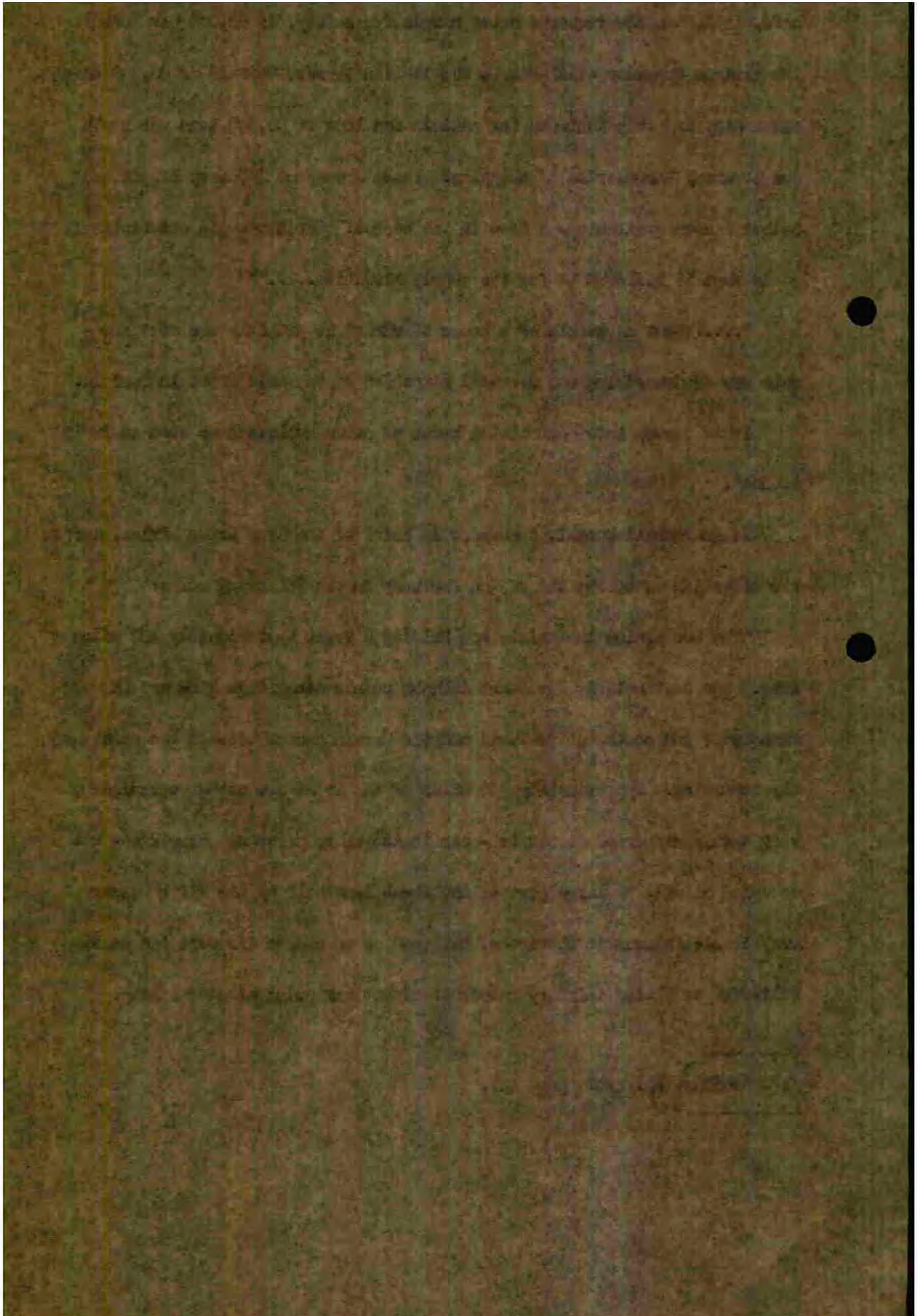
".....about as stable as a house of cards" is probably the most accurate way of describing the over-all situation of the Axis front in Tunisia.

It is common knowledge that a house of cards collapses as soon as it is touched.

Feldmarschall Rommel, commander in chief of the Army Group Africa, assessed the situation as of the end of the February in the following words:

"The two Armies in Tunisia are holding a front approximately 390 miles long. The particularly important defense points along this line are the areas west and southwest of Tunis and the Mareth sector between the coast and the mountains. Approximately 350 miles of the front are either occupied by very thinly dispersed forces or - due to the acute personnel shortage - not occupied at all. A large part of the front line held by the Fifth Panzer Army is mountainous in character, but even so we cannot discount the possibility of an Allied infantry attack at almost any point along the line.

⁴⁴ - Greiner, op. cit., page 437.



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If successful, such an attack would result in an Allied breakthrough to the weakly occupied passes.

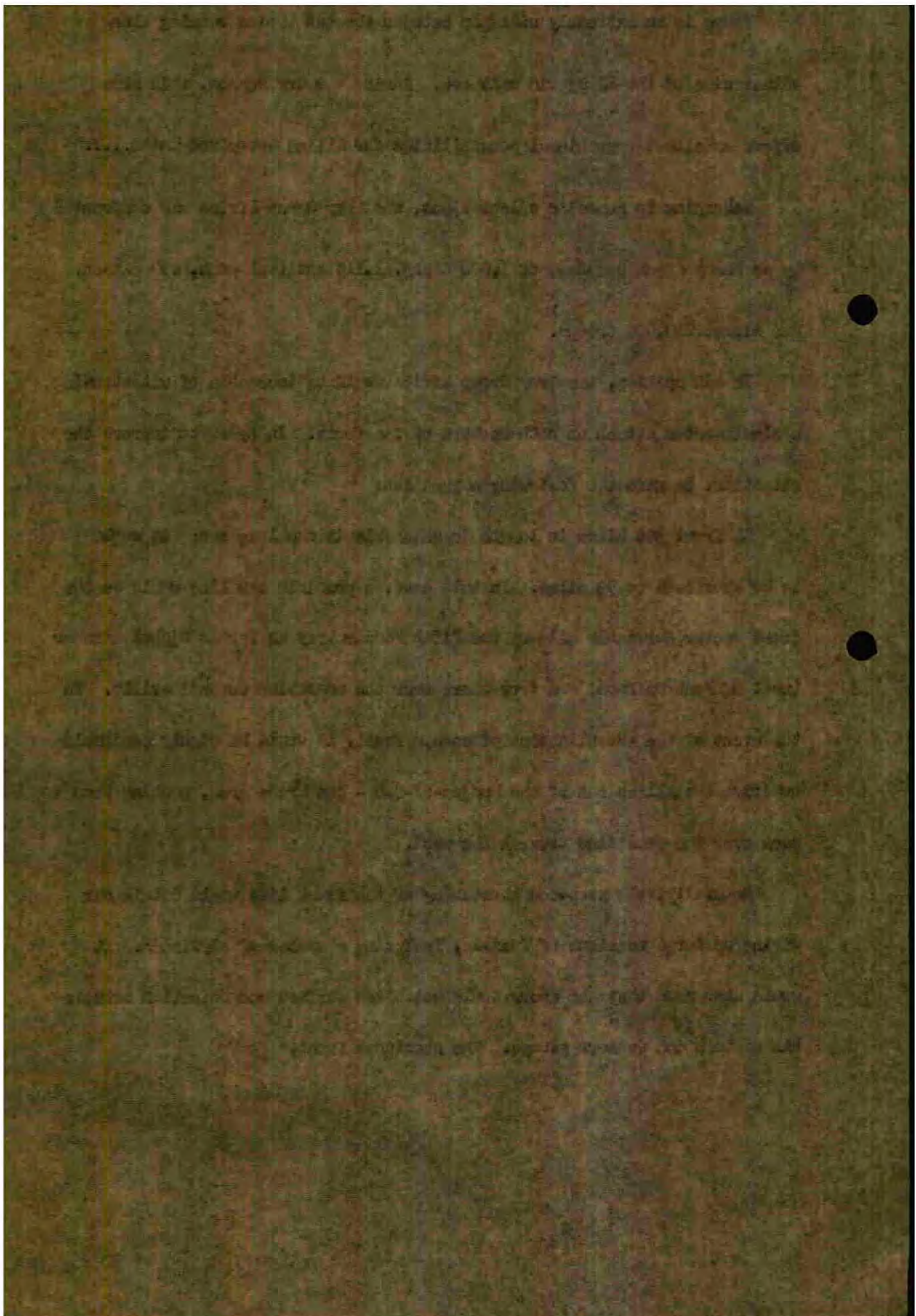
There is an extremely wide gap between the two Armies running along either side of the El Djerid salt sea. During the dry season, this area offers excellent operational possibilities for Allied motorized units....."

According to Rommel's calculations, the Army Group Africa was confronted by an enemy force composed of 1,600 tanks, 1,110 antitank guns, 850 cannon, and almost 210,000 troops.

In his opinion, the Army Group Africa would be incapable of withstanding a simultaneous attack on both sectors of the front. In order to improve the situation, he made the following suggestion:

"A front 390 miles in length is untenable in the long run; it ought to be shortened to 93 miles. In this case, a possible new line would be the front sector currently held by the Fifth Panzer Army as far as Djebel Mansour (west of Pont du Fahs) and from there over the mountains to Enfidaville. In the event of the establishment of such a front, it would be highly desirable to drive the Allies out of the Medjer-el-Bab -- Bou Arada area, pushing them back over the mountains towards the west.

Naturally, the proposed shortening of the front line would entail our giving up large sections of Tunisia, including a number of airfields. It would also mean that the enemy could establish surface communication between his eastern and western groups. The shortened front,



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however, would be advantageous in that it could presumably be held longer than the present one.

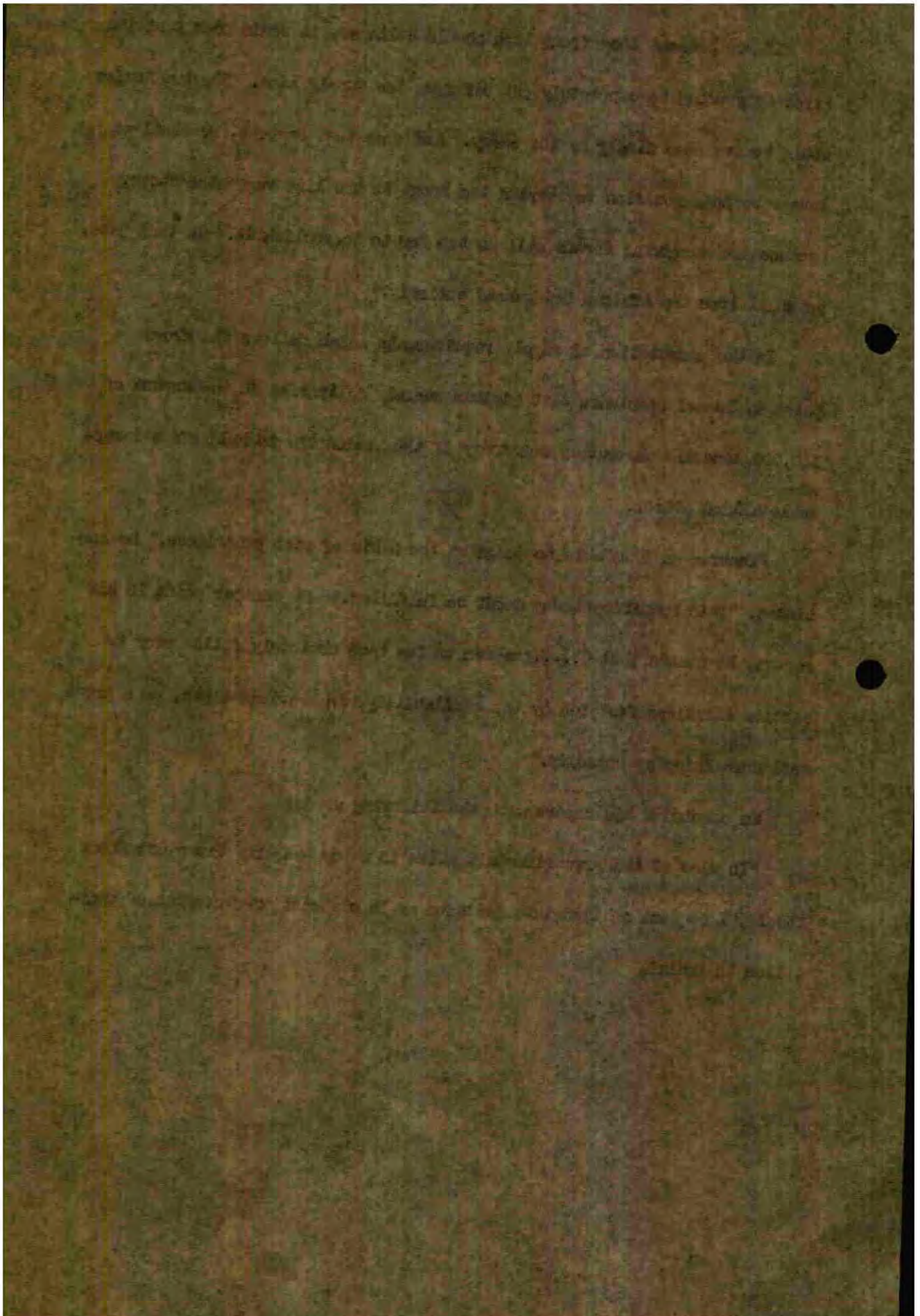
If our present long front line should collapse, it would mean that the First Army would be completely cut off from the supply line. The two Armies would be overcome singly by the enemy. And once that happens, we shall no longer be in a position to shorten the front to the line suggested above, because the surviving forces will be too few to accomplish it. In that case, we shall lose the African bridgehead entirely."

In the computation of supply requirements which follows the above passage, Rommel concludes that minimum monthly deliveries in the amount of 140,000 tons are absolutely necessary if the Armies are to hold off a large-scale Allied attack.

"Insofar as I am able to judge on the basis of past experience," he continues, "this requirement can never be fulfilled." At another point in his report, he states that ".....the men on top have obviously fallen prey to certain illusions fostered by the availability, in previous times, of a great deal more shipping capacity."

He concludes his report with the following words:

"In view of the precarious situation in which the Army Group now finds itself, I request an immediate decision as to the continued conduct of operations in Tunisia



in terms of long-range planning. We must count on the beginning of the enemy's full-scale offensive as soon as the moon is full."⁴⁵

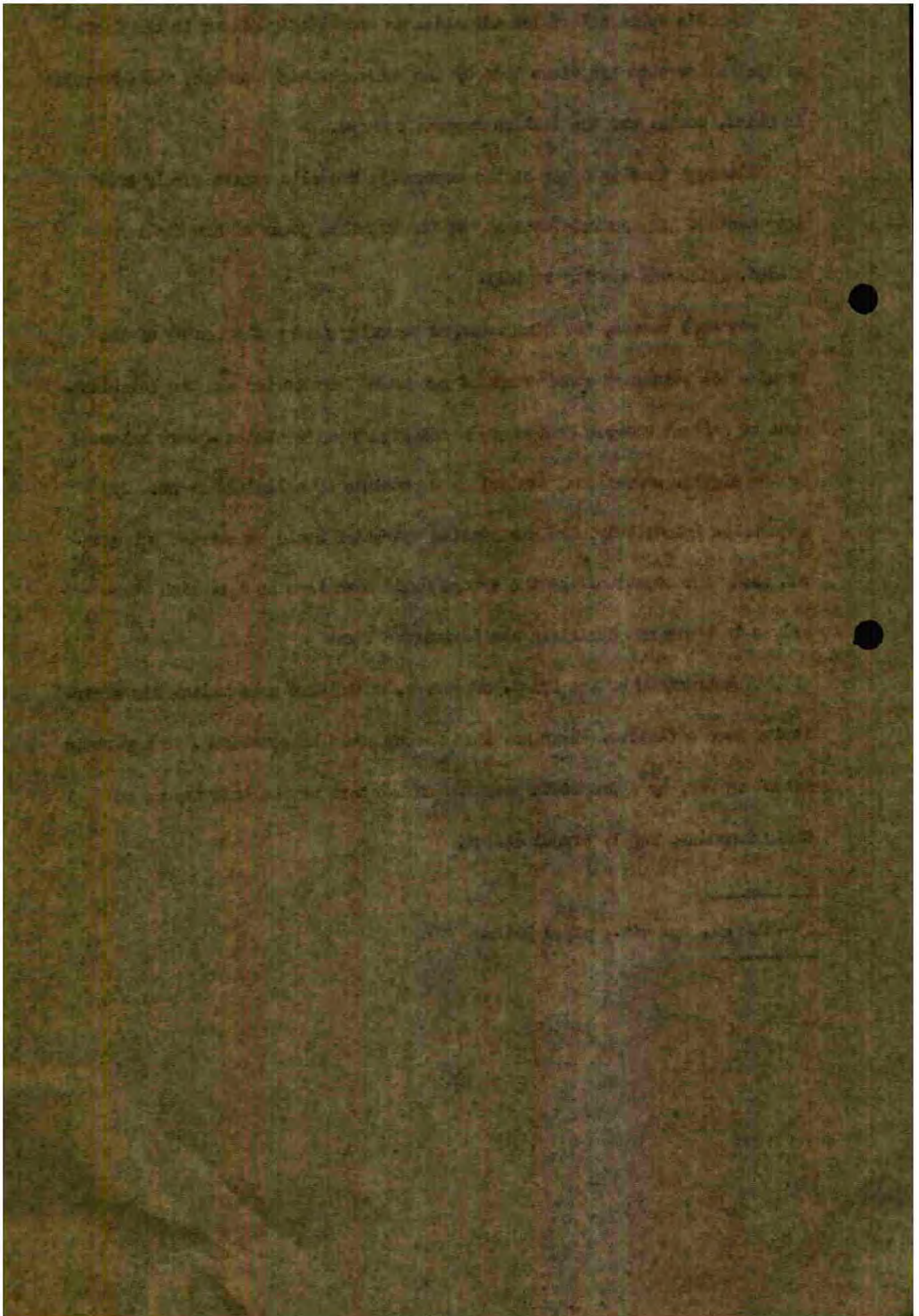
Rommel's appraisal of the situation is undoubtedly closer to the facts of the matter than the views held by the Wehrmacht High Command, the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian Supreme Command.

Although this is never stated expressly, Rommel's report surely took into account his accurate estimate of the fighting power of his Italian allies, which was sinking rapidly.

For this reason, the disadvantages accruing from a shortening of the front - the voluntary abandonment of extensive territories and the establishment of contact between Montgomery's and Eisenhower's armies - were balanced by the tighter operational control made possible by a limited front. If undertaken immediately, the contracting operation could be carried out without enemy intervention, and the troops would have time to establish themselves in their new positions and to improve them.

A contraction of the front, of course, would also make Allied air superiority more effective. Even so, this factor could be countered, to a certain extent anyway, by appropriate measures on the part of the Axis troops and their immediate supply organizations.

45 - Rommel, op. cit., pages 368 and 370.



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The much weaker German Luftwaffe could not, in any case, hope to destroy Allied air supremacy.

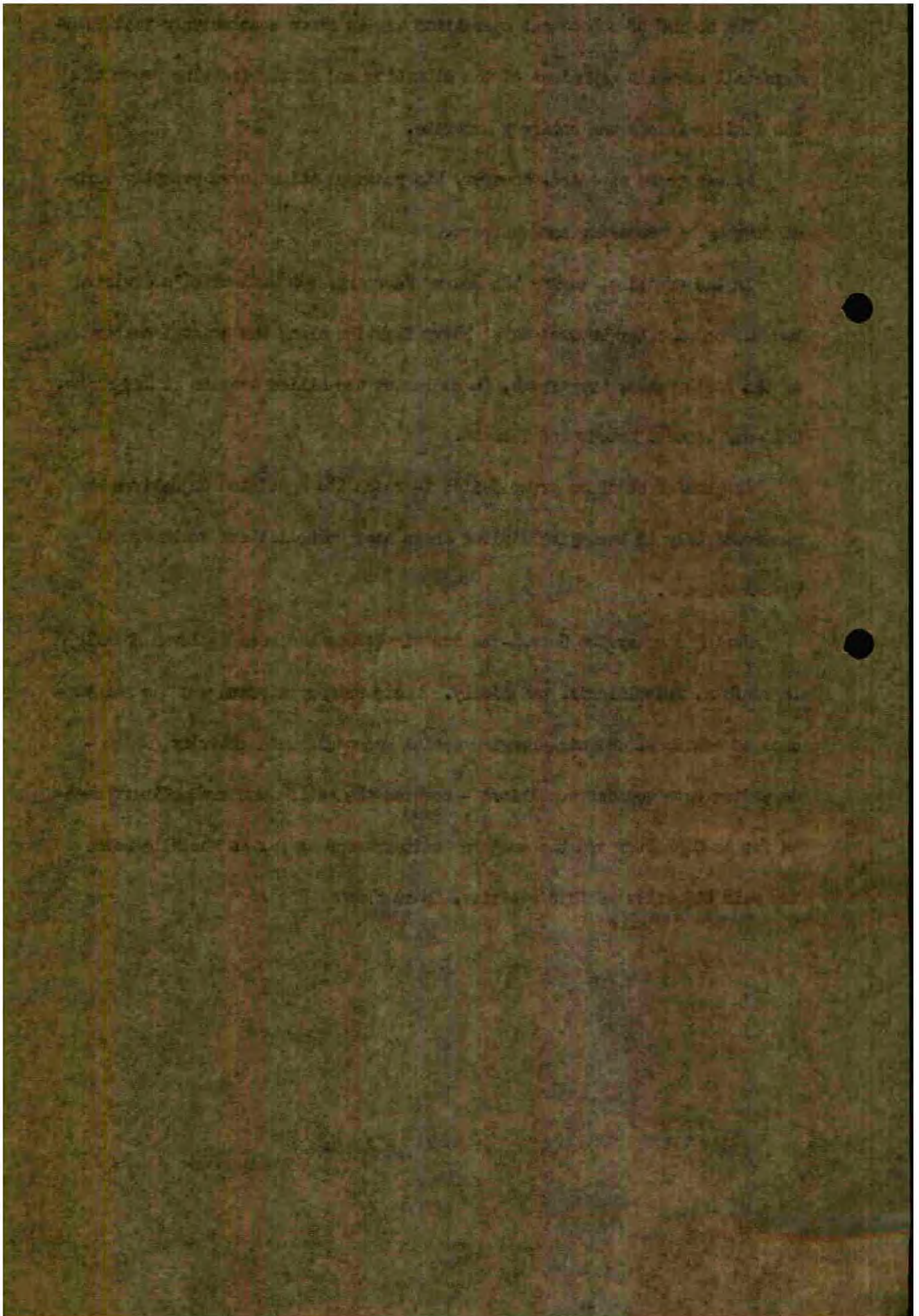
The course of subsequent operations was to prove conclusively that Field-marshal Rommel's appraisal of the situation and of the fighting power of the Italian forces was entirely accurate.

As was to be expected, however, his recommendations were promptly turned down by his superior headquarters.

In the meantime, during the end of February, von Manteuffel's division had succeeded, after several days' heavy fighting along the coastal sector of the Fifth Panzer Army front, in capturing the Allied station at Sedjenane, half-way between Mateur and Tabarka.

The weaker southern group failed to reach its appointed objectives and succeeded only in occupying limited areas near Goubellat and southwest of Djebel Mansour.

During January the German-Italian air forces had been employed chiefly in Tunisia, Tripolitania, and Sicily. Their primary mission was the maintenance of continual and wide-ranging aerial reconnaissance activity, which - depending upon weather conditions - covered the entire western Mediterranean as far as Gibraltar and the eastern Mediterranean as far as the Nile Delta. The main objective of this activity, apart from



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weather reconnaissance, was careful observation of the coastal waters, the coast itself, and the front lines, in order to obtain accurate data for the planning of operations. The long-range employment of bomber, dive-bomber, and fighter-bomber units was directed principally against enemy supply movements, enemy bases along the North African coast, and enemy airfields in the rear area. The port of Bone, for example, was bombed repeatedly during the course of January (on the 1st, 2d, 7th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, and 23d), resulting in the destruction of Allied convoys as well as of individual vessels.

During January a total of 17 ships with a gross tonnage of 108,000 and 2 destroyers were sunk, and 42 ships with a gross tonnage of 180,000, 1 cruiser, 2 destroyers, and 2 patrol boats were damaged⁴⁶.

Bomber, close-support, dive-bomber, and fighter aircraft were also employed in direct and indirect ground-support missions. The role they played in successful offensive and defensive actions in the Tunisian and Tripolitanian areas of operation was a significant one.

Their direct intervention in the ground fighting at Fondouk (3 January), Jafna (5 January), Bou Arada (13 January), and

46 - See Appendix ____.

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in the counterattack carried out by the 10th Panzer Division (Operation EIL-BOTE (Express)) from 18 through 24 January resulted in high personnel and materiel losses for the enemy and provided continual relief for the Axis forces on the ground. The single and twin-engine fighter units had a two-fold mission to perform within the framework of air defense operations. In the first place, they were responsible for surveillance and protection of the airspace over the Tunisian and Tripolitanian theaters, and in the second place, it was their task to secure the German-Italian convey routes between Sicily and Africa.

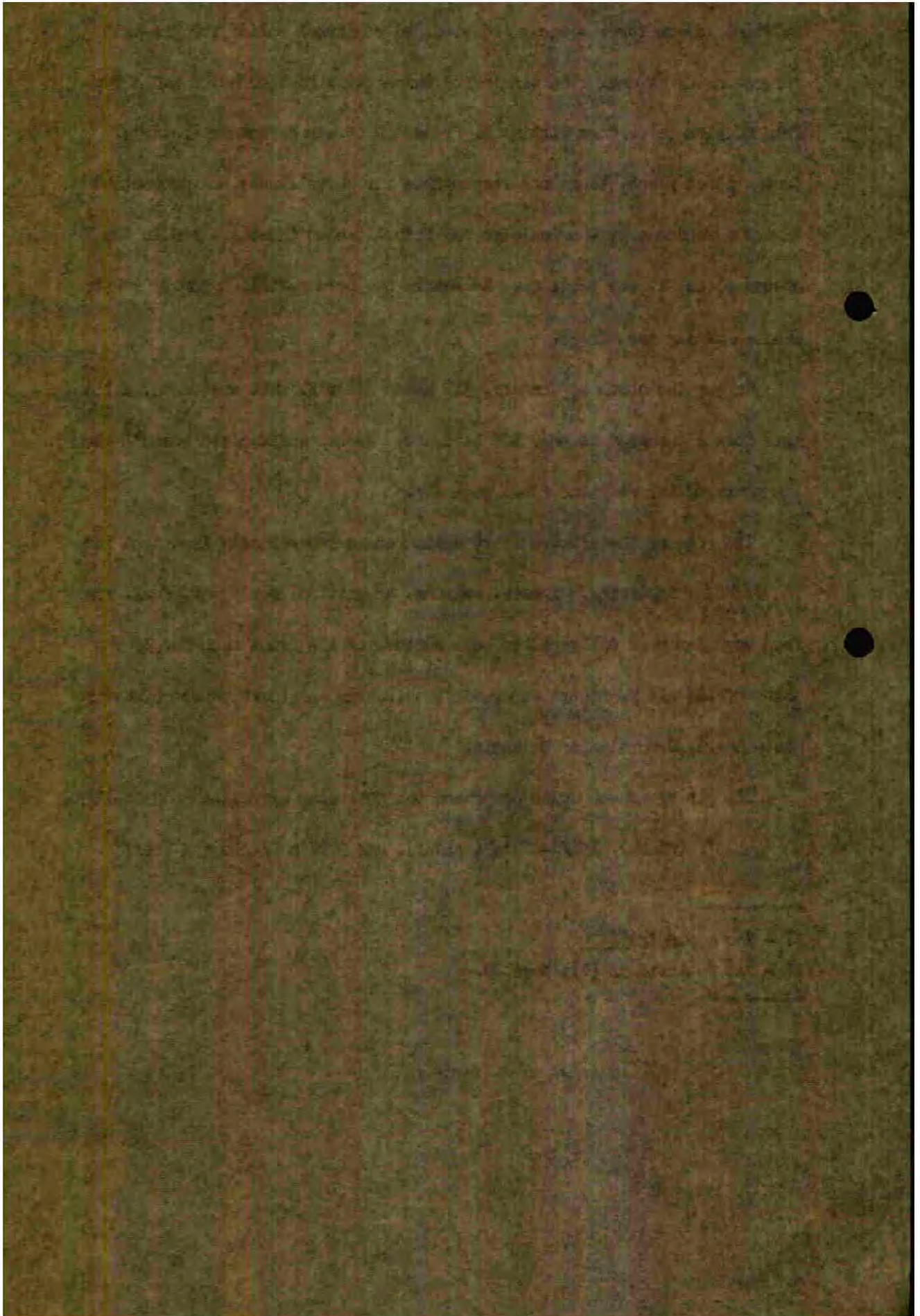
During the month of January, 316 enemy aircraft were shot down, while Axis losses amounted to only 105 aircraft. The Appendix cited below⁴⁷ gives a summary of the missions flown each day.

The role of the air transport units became increasingly important for the fighting in Africa. Troops, weapons, ammunition, equipment, fuel, and food supplies were delivered to both sectors of the front each day by the units of the Air Transport Commander (Mediterranean) (Lufttransportführer Mittelmeer), Generalmajor Buchholz.

The air transport units comprised the following aircraft: 400 Ju-52's, 20 Me-323's (Giant), 15 Ju-200's (Condor), and 3 He-111's (Heinkel und Voss)⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ - See Appendix ____.

⁴⁸ - See Footnote 51 (?), page 28.



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During the month of January, they delivered the following troops and supplies: 15,816 troops, 4,742 tons of weapons and ammunition, 5,155 cubic feet of fuel, 8.5 tons of food, two 100 mm guns, and two prime movers⁴⁹.

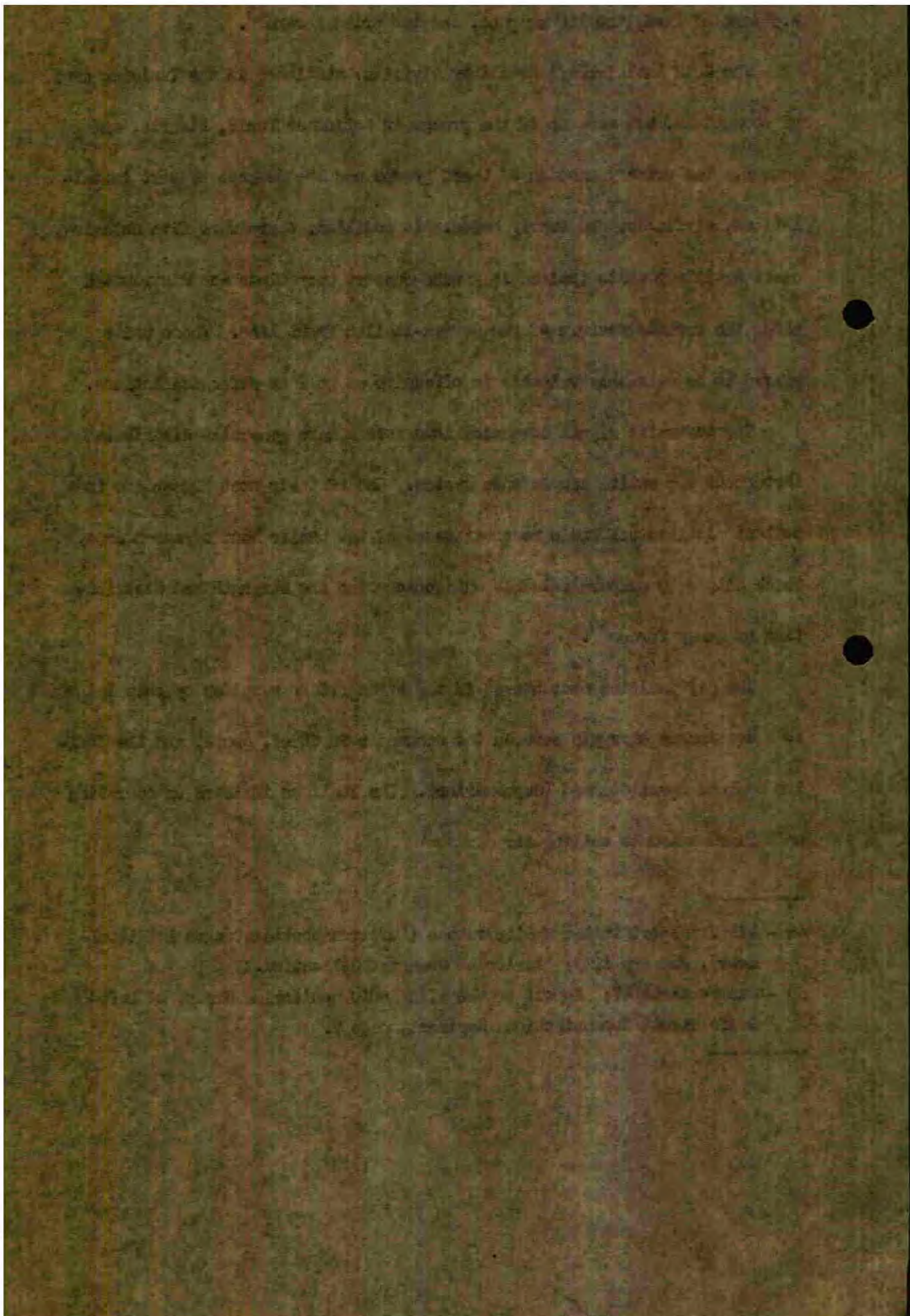
The 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division, stationed in the Tunisian area of operations, was made up of the groups in action at Tunis, Bizerte, and Sousse. The primary mission of these groups was the defense of port installations, airfields, and supply bases. In addition, there were five antiaircraft artillery units trained in ground-support operations and distributed along the various sectors of the German-Italian front line. These units proved to be extremely valuable in offensive as well as defensive actions.

The Luftwaffe signal communications forces were generally distributed throughout the entire air defense system. One of their most urgent and important missions was radio reconnaissance of the entire Mediterranean area, which helped to procure valuable data concerning the strength and distribution of enemy forces⁵⁰.

The difficulties encountered in the transport of supplies by ship led to a continuous struggle between the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian Supreme Naval Command (Supermarina). The Italians insisted on operating on a fixed schedule calling for

49 - Air Transport in the Mediterranean (Lufttransportleistungen in Mittelmeer), January 1943; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

50 - See Footnote 27; Report of the IIId Radio Monitoring Group, 2d Luftwaffe Signal Communications Regiment, page 7.



a convoy sailing every three days, with an average of nine days allowed for each crossing, and they refused to permit any variation in this procedure. In addition, the schedule called for the departure of a slower convoy, composed of supply ships only, every four or five days⁵¹. In view of the precariousness of the supply situation, this schedule was far from adequate. If a single tanker failed to depart on schedule, for example, it might mean a fuel crisis in Tunis⁵². This basic inadequacy was further augmented by weather conditions, which often forced all classes of ships, troop-laden destroyers, freighters, motor-driven sailboats, tankers, and barges, to delay their departure, to reverse course en route, or to interrupt their journey⁵³.

As early as December 1942, the Italian transport fleet of 140,000 gross tonnage had been reduced to twenty-six ships with a total capacity of 84,620 gross tons by destruction or damage inflicted by enemy action⁵⁴.

Losses due to enemy air force and submarine activity were also high in January⁵⁵ (only eleven out of thirty-three Italian destroyers were seaworthy, for example⁵⁶), chiefly because the convoys could not be given adequate air cover. There was very little prospect of these ships' being repaired rapidly due to the remoteness of the shipyards - in Genoa and Trieste - and the shortage of skilled labor⁵⁷.

The role played by the paratrooper sabotage units, which

51 - War Diary, Second Air Fleet, entries dated 1, 10, 22, 23, 30, and 31 January 1943.

52 - Loc. cit.

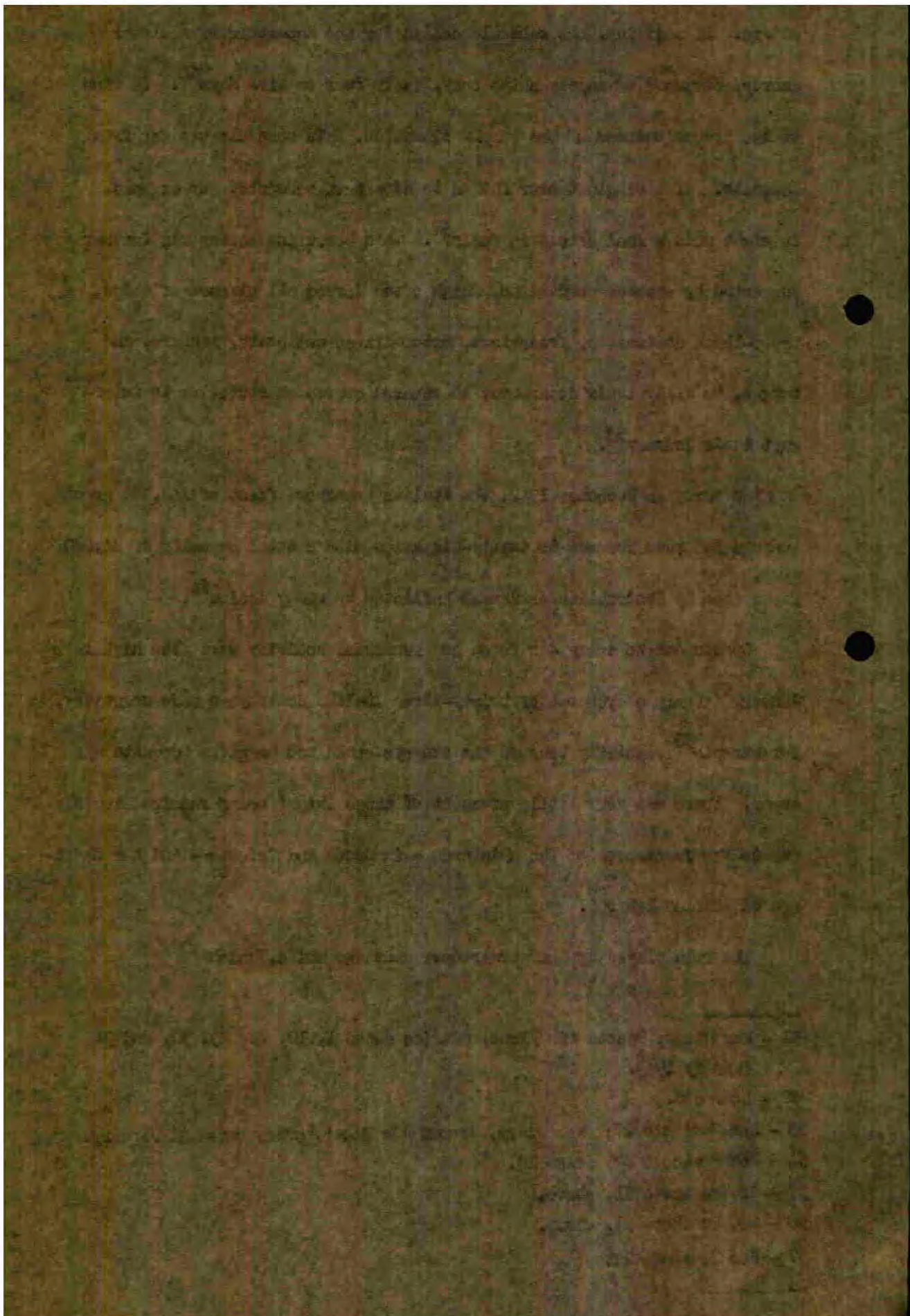
53 - See Footnote 27; War Diary, Second Air Fleet, entry dated 31 January.

54 - See Footnote 27; page 18.

55 - See Footnote 51, above.

56 - See Footnote 51, above.

57 - See Footnote 27.



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were sent into action for the first time in December, will be described in greater detail at the time their missions are discussed.

During January, the enemy air forces carried out frequent attacks on the port installations at Tunis and Bizerte as well as on Axis airfields. The cities of Ferryville, Sousse, Sfax, Mairouan, and Gabes were also subjected to bombardment. The majority of the enemy air activity at the front was directed against Fondouk (4 January), Jofna (5 January), and Bou Arada (19 January).

Other favorite targets during this period were the German-Italian supply transports in the Mediterranean between southern Italy and Africa, including the supply bases at Naples and on the island of Sicily.

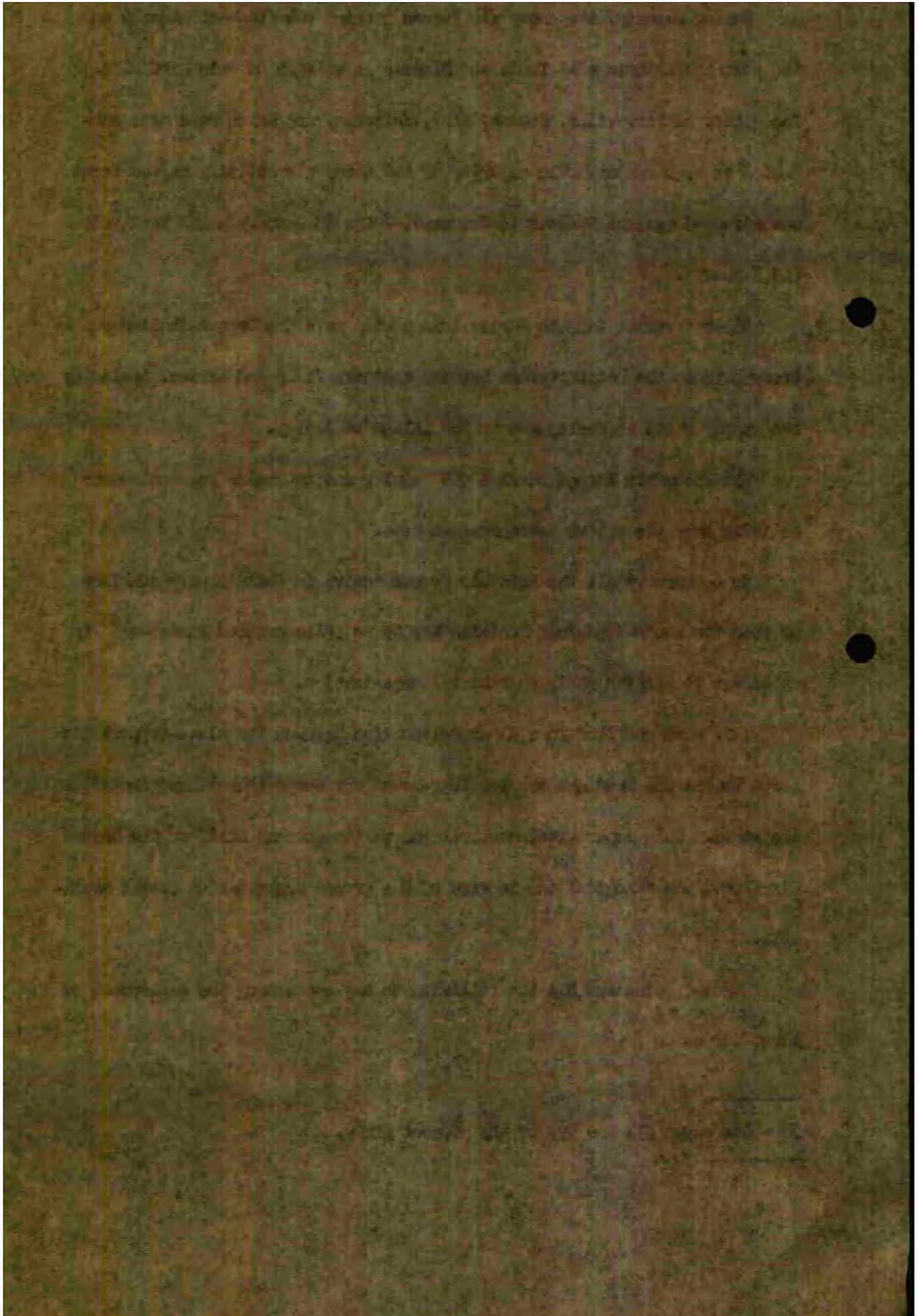
The enemy air forces carried out regular and intensive reconnaissance activity over the entire Mediterranean area.

On 6 February all the Axis air forces active in Tunisia were combined to form the newly-organized Tunisian Air Corps (Fliegerkorps Tunesien)⁵⁸ in an effort to tighten their operational organization.

This move resulted in a clear delineation between the close-support air corps on the one hand and the two long-range air corps (the II and the X), on the other. This separation, most welcome to the command staff of the Second Air Fleet, was a logical one in view of the ground organization forces available.

General Seidenmann has the following to say concerning the employment of these air corps

⁵⁸ - See pages 532 and 533 of the present study.



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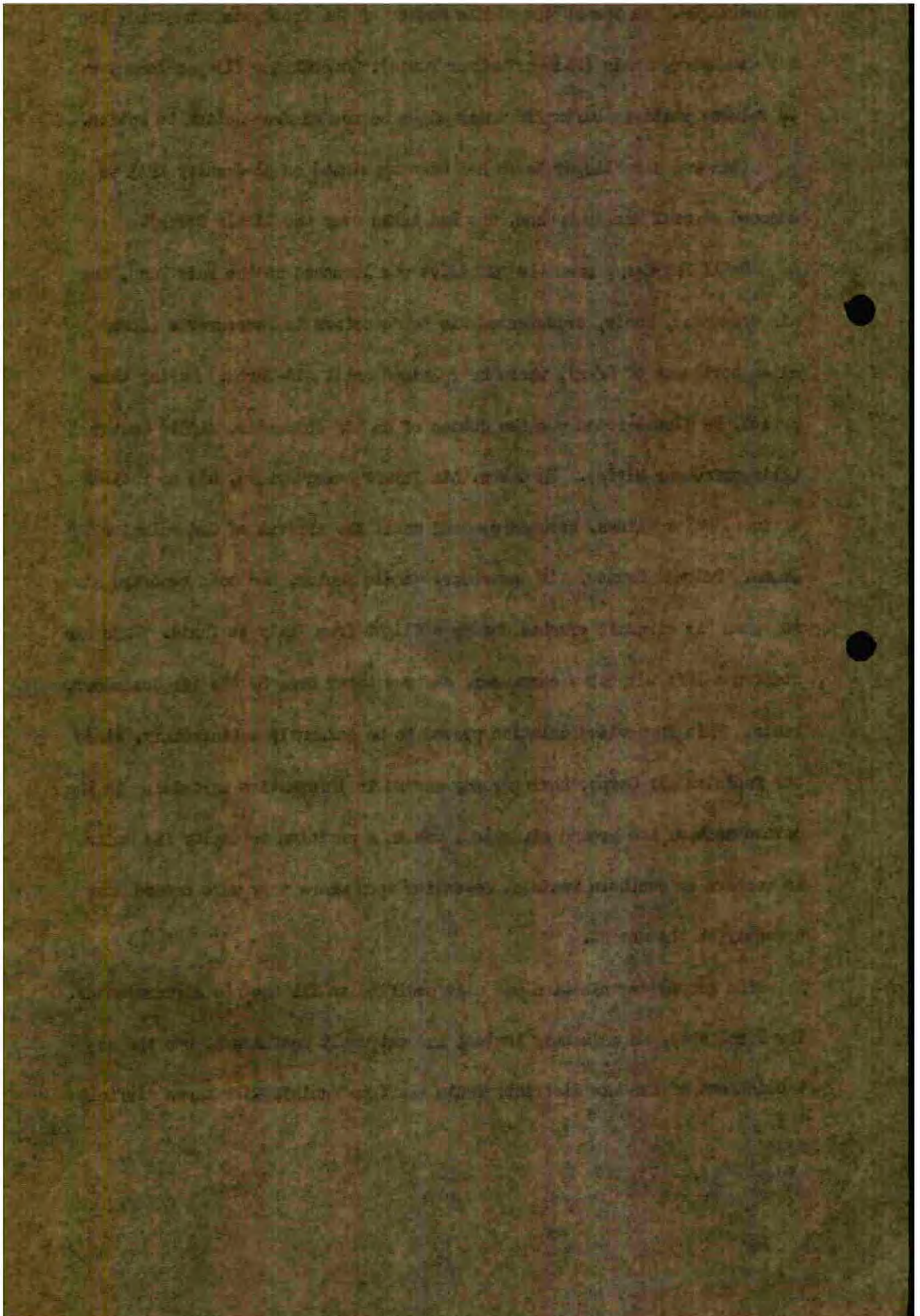
in Tunisia.

"The operational plans for the units in the north and at Marath remained unchanged. As far as the middle sector of the front was concerned, the Air Commander, Tunis (Fliegerführer Tunis), General der Flieger Kesch, was to release whatever Luftwaffe units might be needed from action to action.

(General der Flieger Kesch had been appointed on 31 January 1943 to succeed General Harlinghausen, who had taken over the II Air Corps).

On 14 February, when the offensive was launched at the Faid Pass, the Air Commander, Tunis, transferred his headquarters to Fauconnerie (forty miles northwest of Sfax), where he remained until mid-March. During this period, he also carried out the duties of an Air Commander, Middle Sector (Fliegerführer Mitte). In Gabes, his former headquarters, his operations officer, Major Wildau, assumed command until the arrival of Generalmajor Hagen. Colonel Grunow, Air Commander, Middle Sector, had been reported missing when his aircraft crashed during a flight from Italy to Tunis. Thus his staff was left without a commander, and was taken over by the Air Commander, Tunis. This improvised solution proved to be eminently satisfactory, since the Tunisian Air Corps, having ready access to information pertaining to the development of the ground situation, was in a position to employ its units in western or southern Tunisia, depending upon where they were needed most urgently at the moment.

The ground organization was also modified to fit the new circumstances. The first step, an eminently logical and extremely useful one, was the establishment of the Air District, Tunis (Luftgau Tunis), with three airfield



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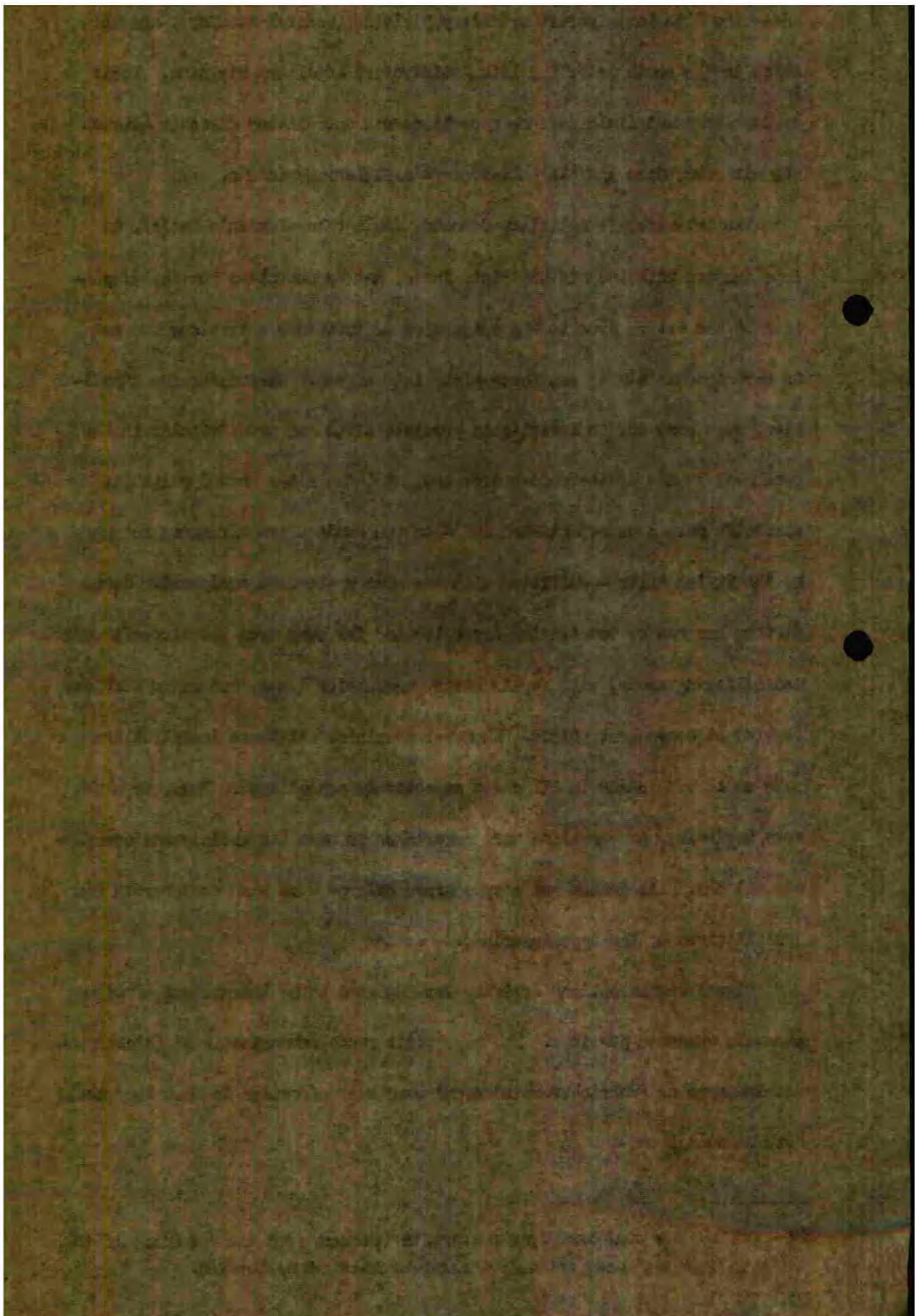
area sections (Flughafenbereichs-Kommandos)⁵⁹.

All the antiaircraft artillery units in the north were consolidated under the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division (General Neuffer), and all those in the south under the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division. Their employment in airfield defense operations was coordinated directly between the air commanders and the antiaircraft artillery divisions.

The Antiaircraft Artillery Command, Tunis (Flak-Kommando Tunis), in coordination with the Air District, Tunis, set up new plans for the adaptation of the entire area to the exigencies of Luftwaffe operations and set to work immediately to put these plans into effect. Reconnaissance expeditions were sent out to investigate possible sites for new airfields in the south and in the Mediterranean area and, at those sites deemed suitable, airfields were soon established and - on the basis of requirements set up by the flying units - outfitted with the most up-to-date equipment. Most of them had one or two taxiing areas located far away from the aircraft park and billeting areas, with repair shops, ammunition dumps, and radio stations located at convenient points. Whenever possible, all these installations were subterranean and in all cases effectively camouflaged. Thus, from the very beginning, preparations were undertaken to meet the anticipated enemy air attacks. The desert and steppe areas offered more than enough room for installations of the type described.

Signal communications activity was designed to be independent of wire channels whenever possible. The new "radio range communications" (Richtfunkverbindungen or Funkrichtverbindungen) were most effective in that they saved both personnel and

59 - Details are contained in the Appendix (excerpt from the War Diary of the Air District Headquarters); Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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maintenance time and labor. The communications network was designed in such a way that connections could be restored by means of change-over switching with no loss of time in the event of damage to or destruction of any element of the system. As a matter of fact, these special networks were often enough the only remaining means of communication in a critical situation, and frequently they were the determining factor in the successful outcome of certain Army ground operations. In order to counter enemy penetration flights over Axis-occupied territory, several radio navigation stations equipped with Freya instruments and a number of aircraft reporting posts were set up; terrain conditions being what they were, approaching enemy aircraft units could be identified at a distance of approximately 160 miles. Thus the enemy never succeeded in staging a surprise attack. Due to the fact that air assembly operations took relatively long, enemy units could always be recognized one to two hours ahead of time. As a result, German antiaircraft defense facilities, including the fighter aircraft, could make the necessary preparations in plenty of time. The ground organization also had time to carry out the measures predetermined in the event of an alarm, dispersment of important objectives, camouflaging, etc. All in all, as a result of these conditions, the losses suffered during enemy attacks on airfields were held to a reasonable level.

Coordination with the Army was also reorganized as a result of the appointment of air liaison officers (Flieger-Verbindungs-Offisiere).

The Air Corps maintained liaison with the Army Group Africa, the office of the Commander in Chief, South, and the Italian II Air Corps, as well as with the Antiaircraft Artillery Command and with the Air District Command, Tunis.

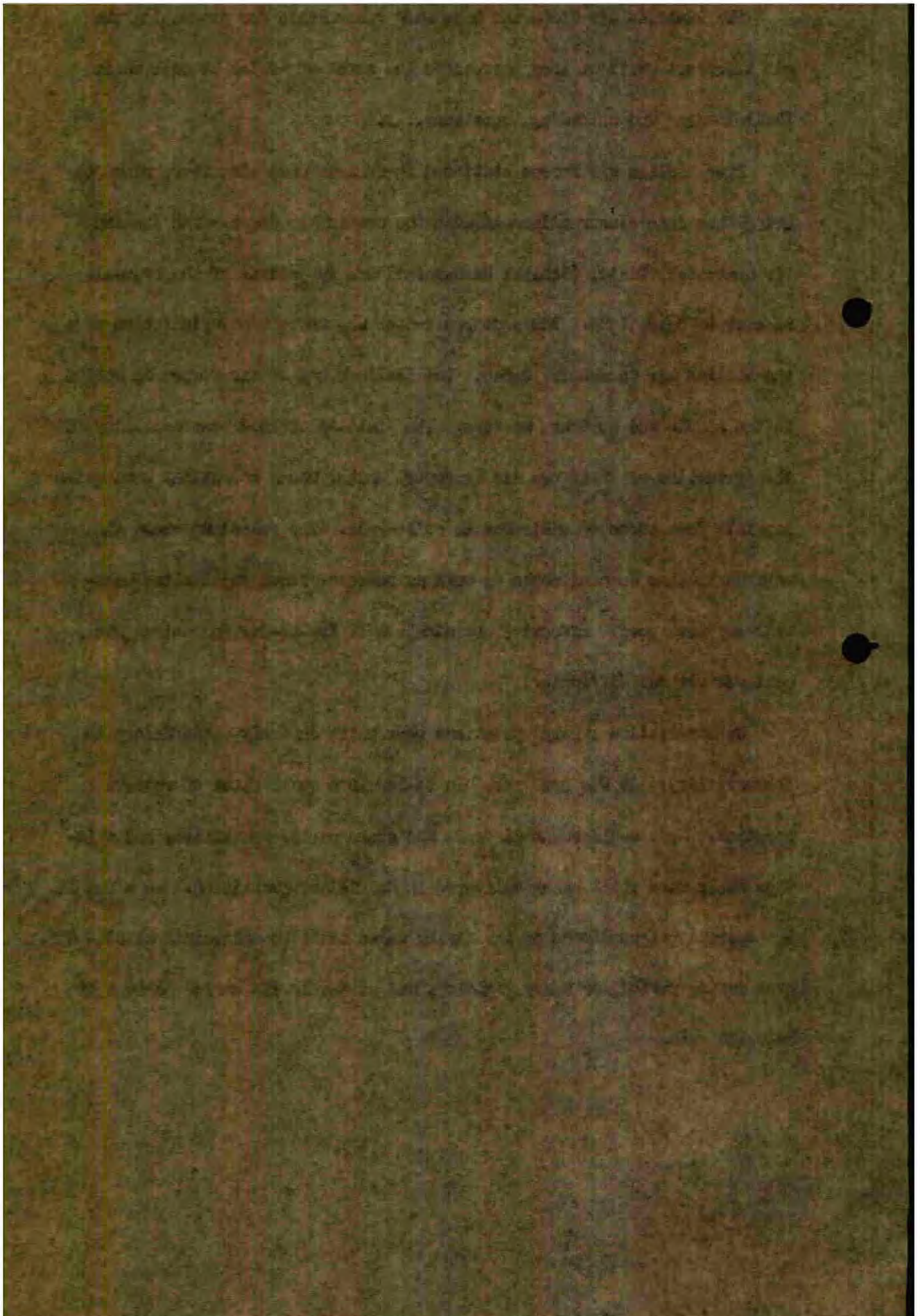
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The Air Commander, Tunis, maintained liaison with the Fifth Panzer Army, and the Air Commander, Gabes, with the Italian First Army.

The Tunisian Air Corps had been made responsible for protecting the air transport units as they approached the coast of Africa as well as in their loading and unloading operations....."

"The Italian air forces stationed in Tunisia were also reorganized to bring them into closer alignment with the German Air Corps. The Italian Air Commander, Tunis, (General Barnasconi) was in command of the over-all theater of operations. The southern sector was under the jurisdiction of the Italian Air Commander, Gabes; the Italians had no air forces in action in the middle and northern sectors. The Italians assumed responsibility for the protection of their own air transport units, whose operations were quite separate from those of their German colleagues. The relations among the various Italian command posts as well as between German and Italian headquarters were good. Effective coordination of day-to-day operations was achieved without difficulty.

German-Italian supply operations were still entirely satisfactory in February 1943; it was even possible to lay in a small stock of reserve supplies. Even replacement aircraft and spare parts, ammunition, and aviation fuels were still being delivered in sufficient quantities. As a result, the operational readiness of the flying units could be maintained at 50 - 60%, even during periods of heavy fighting, and at nearly 75% during periods of relative calm.



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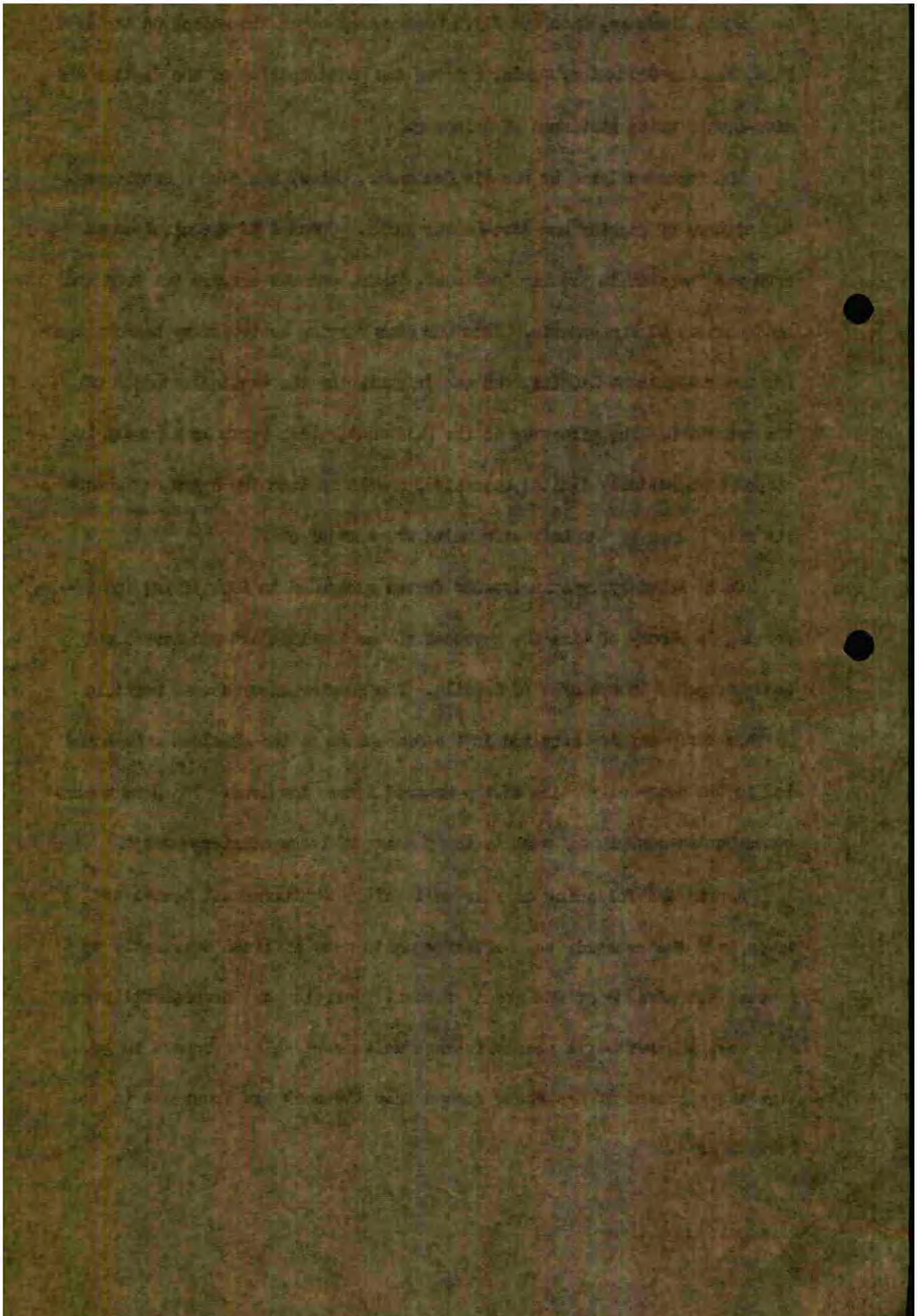
Surface motor vehicles, as was always the case in Africa, were the only items which were in short supply.

On 14 February, when the Fifth Panzer Army began its attack on the Faid Pass, the Air Commander, Tunis, ordered the participation of the fighter and dive-bomber units stationed at Mairoun.

The force assigned by the Air Commander, Gabes, was also a heterogeneous mixture of fighter and dive-bomber units. Command of the missions as such was invested in the Air Commander, Tunis, and was carried out from the headquarters at Fmsonnerie. This was also serving as temporary headquarters for Generalleutnant Ziegler, who was in charge of the tactical aspects of the operation. The offensive at the Faid Pass, which began as a purely local attack on a strictly limited objective, developed into the drive on Tebessa. The role played by the Luftwaffe units was a major one.

On 14 February, reconnaissance forces succeeded in identifying and reporting in plenty of time the approach of the American armored forces and their assembly in the area of Sbaitla. The countermeasures made possible by this early warning resulted in the disruption of the American attack and led to the near-destruction of the armored forces involved. The German dive-bomber units contributed much to the success of these countermeasures.

During the following days as well, after Feldmarschall Rommel had taken over the command, the Luftwaffe units were utilized constantly to support the advance of the ground forces. Carrying out several flights each day, the Luftwaffe reconnaissance units were able to report in good time the approach of new enemy forces from the northern front and in the Tebessa area.



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The closer the German troops came to Tebessa, the more active and alert the enemy air forces became.

They flew countless low-level attacks, and it was not always possible to counter these effectively due to the fact that the German air units were stationed too far behind their own lines. Steps had been taken to move them forward to Sbeitla and Thalepte, but so far only a few of these transfers had actually taken place, for the order to cease operations came through before the rest could be gotten under way. The Axis air units ^{were} still covering the withdrawal of the troops to their original positions, but apart from the aerial combat necessitated by this activity, there were no further large-scale air engagements.

In the south, the British were drawing closer and closer to the Mareth line. The progress of their advance and the deployment of their forces were kept under constant surveillance (both visual and photographic reconnaissance). At the same time, the Axis reconnaissance forces extended the range of their activity to include Halut, in the south, and the area lying southwest of Youssef - Kebili.

In addition, long-range reconnaissance missions were flown to keep the harbor at Tunis, which the British had started using immediately, under observation. The Axis air units carried out daily close-support missions against the port and its installations. The II Air Corps even resorted to night bombardment attacks in an attempt to make its activity more effective.

During the last days of February, the Air Commander, Tunis, was busy providing support for the offensive being carried out by the Fifth Panzer Army on the northern sector of the front.

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During these operations, the Axis dive-bomber forces were extremely successful in their struggle against enemy artillery and armored forces."⁶⁰

According to data provided by the radio monitoring service, the total strength of the Allied forces amounted to 2,769 aircraft as of Mid-February.

Ninety-five of these were stationed in Gibraltar, 740 in French North Africa, 244 in Malta, and 1,690 in the area between Tripolitania and Egypt.⁶¹

In contrast to the above, the strength of the German Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean theater as of 20 February 1943 was no more than 837 aircraft, some 551 of which were actually capable of immediate commitment.⁶²

The superior numbers of the enemy air forces confronted the Axis aerial reconnaissance units with very difficult problems. The long-range reconnaissance units, for example, in addition to their routine coverage of the Sicilian Straits, had to expand their operations to include the sea lanes and ports along the coast of North Africa.

The close-range reconnaissance units were occupied primarily with tactical and combat reconnaissance over and beyond the enemy lines.

As far as long-range bomber operations were concerned, the Second Air Fleet had

60 - General der Flieger Seidenmann, excerpts from "Employment of the Tunisian Air Corps during the Period 6 February through 13 May 1943" (Bilanz des Fl.K. Tunis von 6.2. bis 13.5.43), pages 2 through 11; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

61 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 15 February 1943 (see Footnote 27, page 9 of the source detailed there).

62 - See Appendix _____ for details.

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ordered naval targets as their chief objective. In addition to supply convoys, the main effort was to be directed against the enemy ports of Algiers, Bone, Tripoli, Bengasi, and Tobruk.

The long-range bomber forces were to be employed against ground combat objectives only in situations in which the ground forces were too weak to ward off enemy attacks during their initial, developmental, or conclusive phases⁶³.

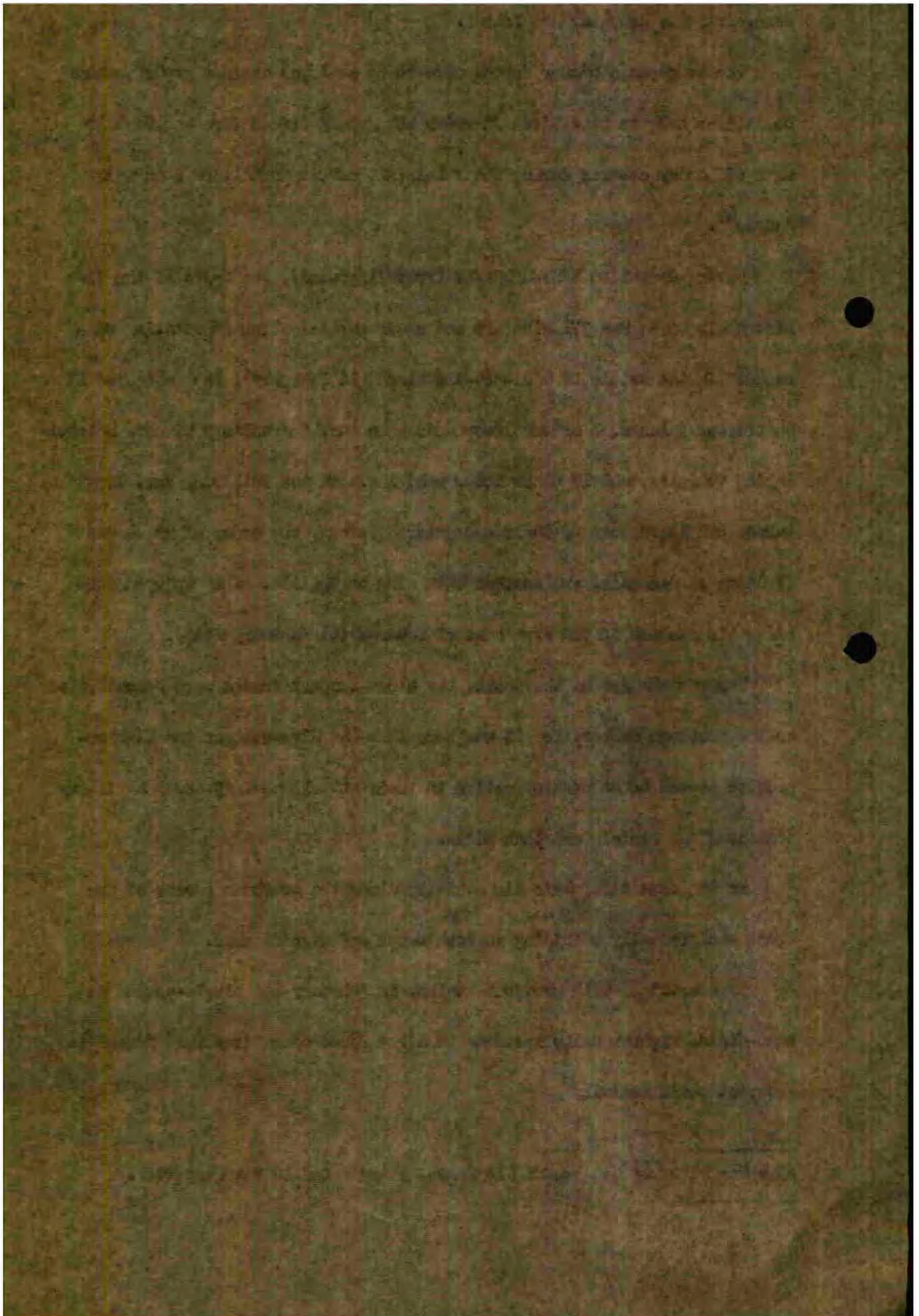
During Operation SPRING BREEZE (Fruehlingswind), the units of the Tunisian Air Corps had 371 aircraft and crews participating in rotating missions. In the battle of Sidi-Bou-Sid alone (14 February), they destroyed 11 Spitfires, 5 tanks, 1 armored reconnaissance car, 3 artillery pieces, 8 track-laying vehicles, and 17 other motor vehicles. On the following day, they turned out in support of their own armored forces, one group of which was fighting at Sadaguis, and another advancing on Sbeitla. They enjoyed considerable success in the area east of Tebessa (21 February 1943).

Towards the end of the month, the close-support forces were concentrated on the northern sector, for it was here that the dive-bombers and fighter-bombers proved to be most effective in their attacks against enemy artillery positions and vehicle and tank parks.

At the same time, Axis air activity along the southern sector of the front was gradually subsiding in both scope and significance.

In comparison with previous months, in February the single-engine and twin-engine fighter units assigned to air defense operations were forced to restrict their activity

63 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 19 February 1943.



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to more closely limited attacks as a result of the increasingly tighter concentration of their own forces. This proved to be an advantage insofar as fighter cover for the ground fighting was concerned as well as in respect to the providing of air cover for the sea lanes.

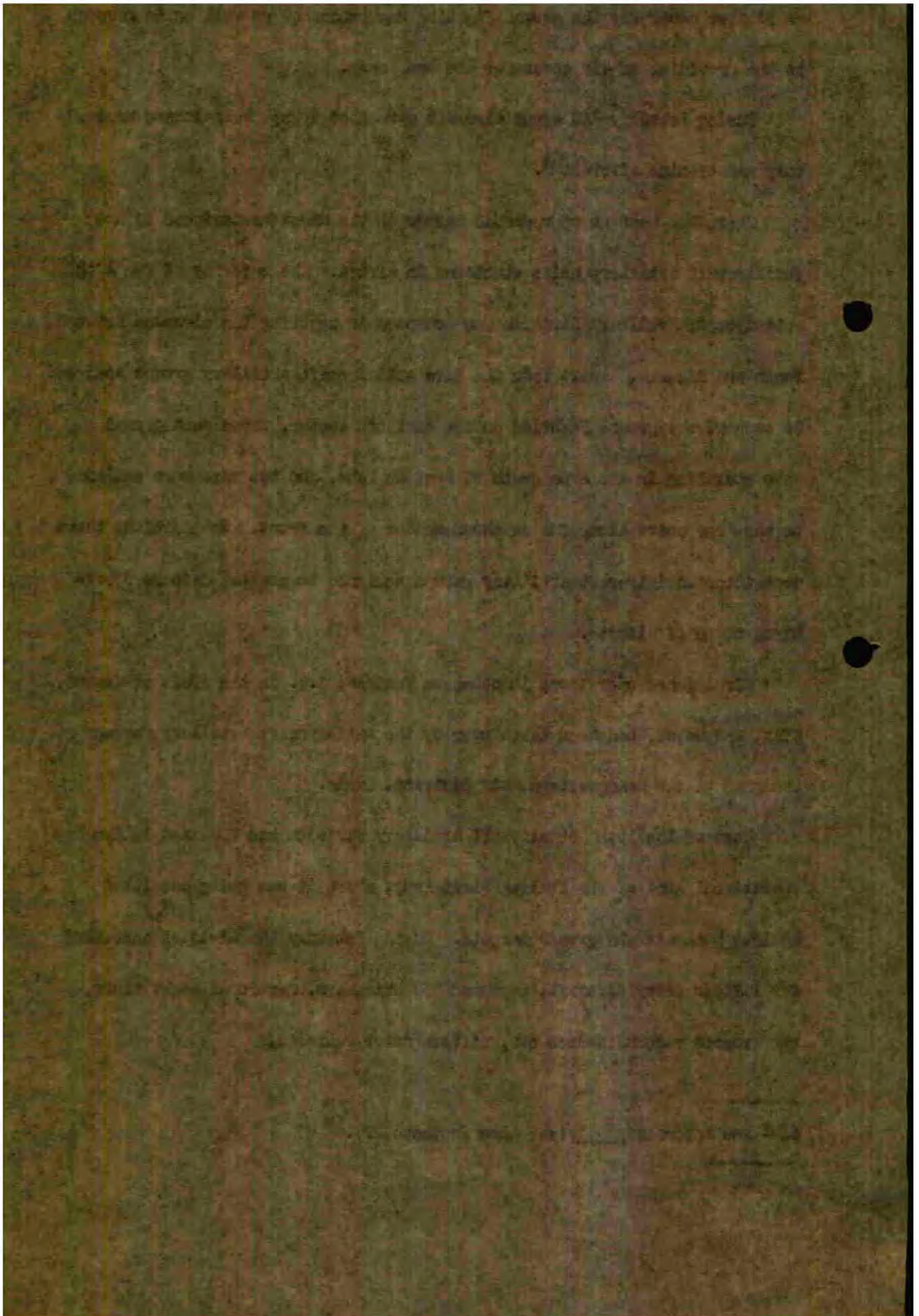
During February 240 enemy aircraft were shot down; Axis losses were only ninety-nine aircraft⁶⁴.

There had been no appreciable change in the missions assigned to the antiaircraft artillery units stationed in Africa. The majority of the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was occupied in securing the airspace between Tunis and Biserte. Apart from the five antiaircraft artillery groups assigned to support the ground fighting on the northern sector, three such groups were operating in the area south of Pont du Fahs, and two more were assigned to the Army units along the southern sector of the front. In addition, there were three antiaircraft artillery groups assigned to coastal defense operations north of Biserte.

Air defense operations in southern Tunisia, i.e. in the areas of Sousse, Sfax, and Gabes, had been taken over by the antiaircraft artillery forces assigned to the Headquarters, Air District, Tunis.

Most of the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division had remained in the operational area of the Italian First Army, where it was being committed against both air and ground targets. During February the Division accounted for fifteen enemy aircraft, captured 252 prisoners, destroyed eight tanks, one armored reconnaissance car, fifteen motor vehicles,

64 - See Appendix _____ (see also Footnote 27).



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two antitank guns, several grenade-launchers and machine-gun nests, as well as a number of observer posts⁶⁵.

The Luftwaffe signal communications forces continued to improve their "Win-interference stations"^{*}. They often succeeded in jamming the reports of enemy reconnaissance pilots regarding Axis ship movements⁶⁶. In addition, with the assistance of radio monitoring activity, it was possible to keep Allied troop movements in the Mediterranean area under constant surveillance⁶⁷.

The supply situation continued to be critical; Axis losses were relatively high.

During February, the German Luftwaffe succeeded in sinking two Allied merchant vessels with a total gross tonnage of 13,000 and in damaging ten ships with a total gross tonnage of 63,000⁶⁸.

Altogether, during the month of February, the German and Italian Navies and air forces managed to sink thirty-one merchant vessels (total gross tonnage 189,000), three destroyers, one cruiser, one submarine, and one torpedo-boat. They damaged thirteen merchant ships (total gross tonnage 60,000) and one light cruiser⁶⁹.

During the month of February, the air transport forces delivered 11,229 troops, 3,973 tons of weapons, equipment, and ammunition, 10,630 cubic feet of fuel, and 240.8 tons of supplies⁷⁰.

65 - War Diary of the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division.

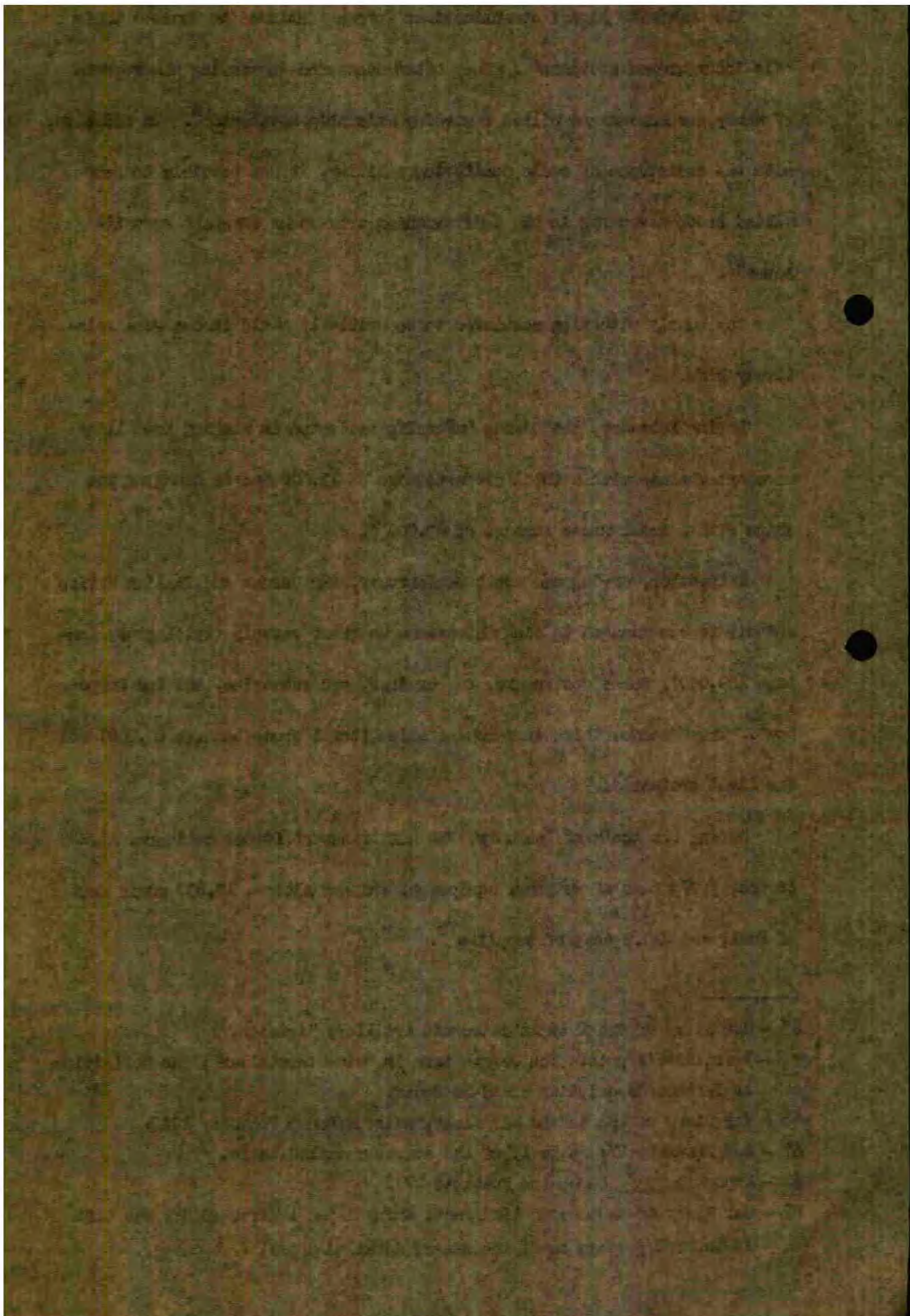
* - Translator's note: The German term is "Win-Störstellen"; no definition or further description could be found.

66 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 5 February 1943.

67 - See Footnote 27; page 15 of the source detailed there.

68 - Appendix _____ (see also Footnote 27).

69 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 1 March 1943; see also Footnote 27; page 16 of the source detailed there.



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70 - See Footnote 49, Appendix for the month of February.

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During the same month, the following supplies were unloaded from ships reaching Tunisian harbors: 34,000 tons of war material, 14,500 tons of fuel, 200 motor vehicles (excluding tanks and guns), and 33,800 troops⁷¹.

The Luftwaffe General attached to the Royal Italian Air Force (General der deutschen Luftwaffe beim Koeniglich-italienischen Luftwaffe), General der Flieger Ritter von Pohl⁷², had under his command the units and headquarters stationed in Italy (listed in the Appendix⁷³).

During February, the main effort of the enemy air forces was directed against southern Tunisia and the central Mediterranean.

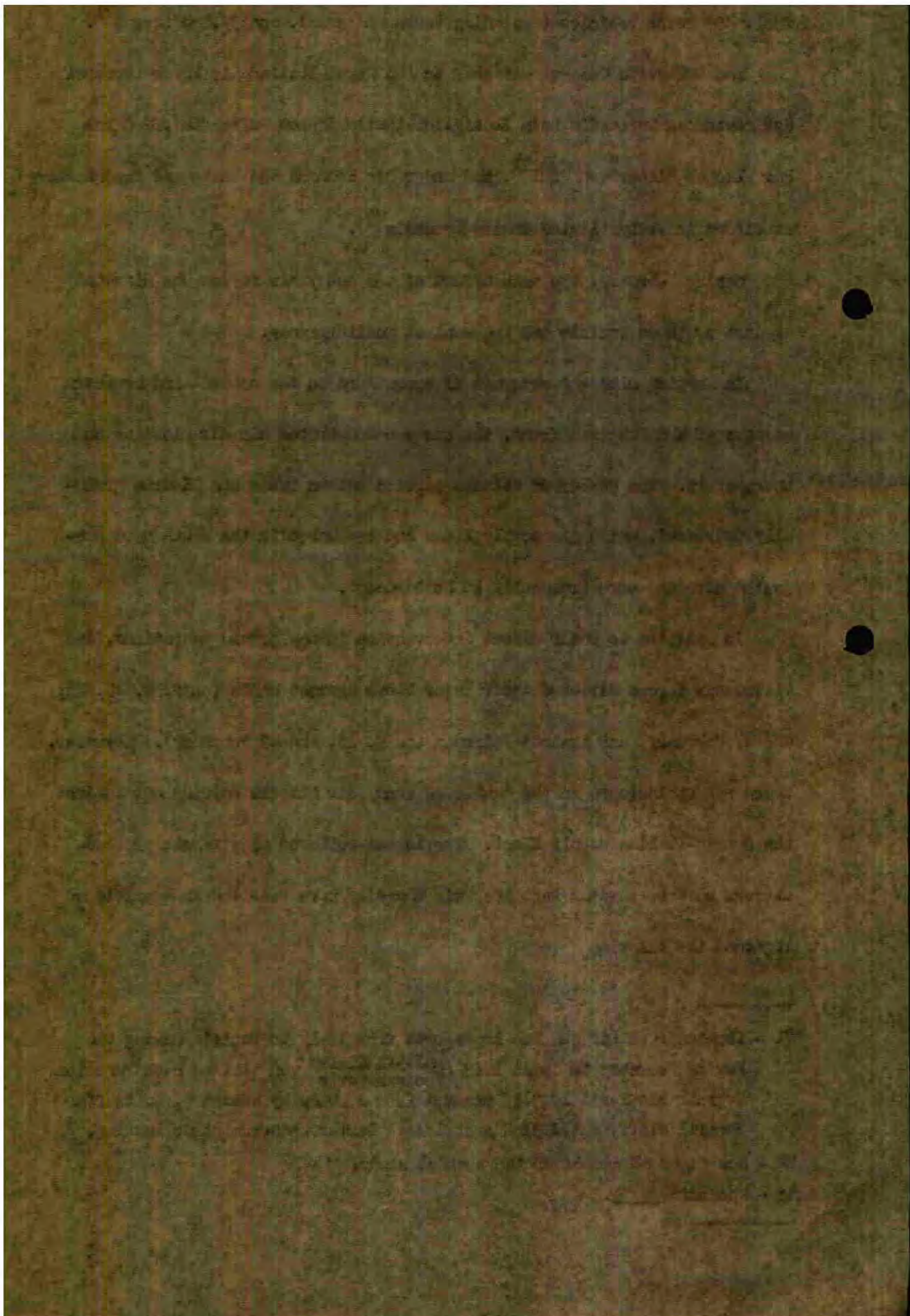
In keeping with the progress of operations on the central and southern sectors of the Tunisian front, the enemy concentrated his air missions on these areas. The number of attacks carried out on Tunis and Bizerte gradually decreased, while the supply lines and the bases in the south were subjected more and more frequently to bombardment.

In addition to their direct intervention in the ground operations, the Allied air forces directed their major blows against Gabes (on 3, 8, 25, 26, and 27 February) and against Kairouan (on 9, 15, and 23 February). Moreover, there was an increase in the number of enemy air attacks carried out against the German-Italian supply fleet. The losses suffered as a result of these attacks were so serious that they might easily have resulted in a crisis as regarded the shipping

71 - The Ratio of Air and Sea Transports from Italy to Tunisia during the Period February to April 1943 (Lufttransporte von Italien nach Tunesien, Februar bis April 1943); excerpt from a study by Branch 8, Luftwaffe General Staff, dated 31 August 1944; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

72 - See pages 62 and 64 of the present study.

73 - Appendix ____.



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space available⁷⁴.

The Axis bases on Sicily, especially Palermo (attacked on 4, 6, 9, 15, and 23 February), were also raided ⁸far more frequently than during January. In addition, both Turin and Milan were subjected to terror raids on 15 February.

In the rest of the Mediterranean area, including Crete and Greece, enemy air activity was restricted to reconnaissance and harassment flights.

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After his failure on the northern sector of the Tunisian front in December 1942⁷⁵, Eisenhower turned his attention to the preparation of a large-scale attack which was to be launched from central Tunisia.

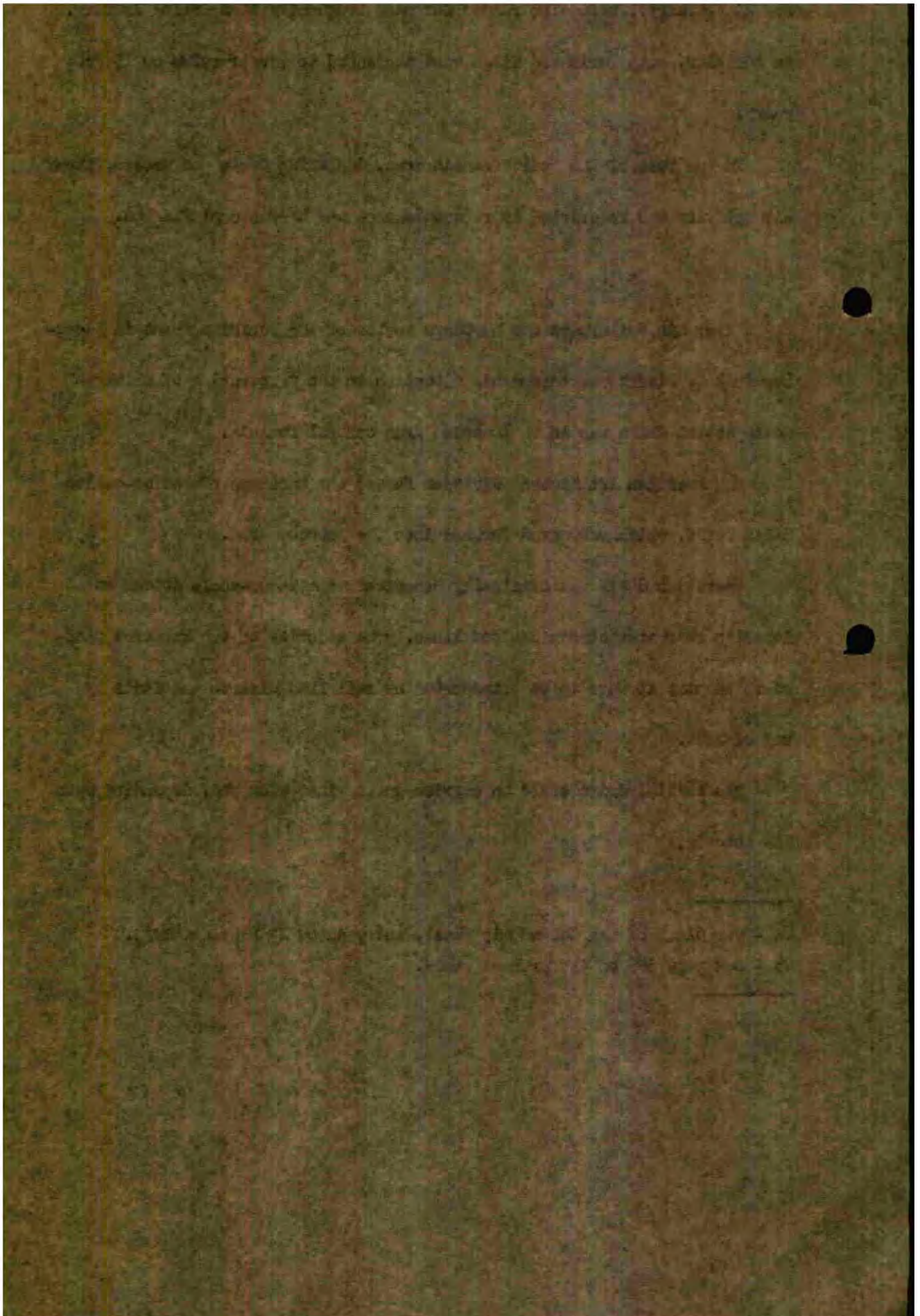
The American 1st Armored Division formed the backbone of the so-called SATIN force, which was moved forward into the Tebessa area.

Operation SATIN was originally conceived as a large-scale attack on Rommel's rear area communications lines. The majority of the supplies needed to support it were to be transported by rail from Bizerte and Tunis by way of Sfax.

The initial drive could be carried out against Sfax and, depending upon its outcome,

74 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 23 February 1943.

75 - See page 599 of the present study.



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then be directed towards the north against Sousse or towards the south against Gabes. Another possibility was to start with the seizure of Kairouan and then move on to attack Sousse. The plan did not envision the permanent occupation of the cities along the coast. The operation was to be launched on 23 January.

The American plan was not without risks.

In the first place, its success depended upon the outcome of a simultaneous attack by the British Eighth Army on the Mareth line. And there was every reason to expect that Rommel, utilizing the old French fortifications there, would decide to offer stubborn resistance.

Even if this should not be the case, Rommel would still be able to release sufficient forces to endanger the southern flank of Operation SATIN and to jeopardize its communications line to Algeria.

The northern flank of the Operation was equally vulnerable, since it was no secret that Axis armored units were concentrated in the area around Kairouan.

Eisenhower was forced to admit reluctantly that there was a chance that Anderson's British First Army might very well become involved in local fighting and, as a result, be beaten or -- at least -- tied down there. On the other hand, he was counting on utilizing Anderson's forces for his decision-seeking offensive in the spring.

Once Operation SATIN left the railway center of Tebessa, all its supplies would have to be transported about 150 miles

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by truck as far as the coast. Trucks were in extremely short supply, but there was a chance that the situation could be relieved to some extent by the supply convoys servicing the central and eastern sectors.

There was a further difficulty in the form of the French-held sector of the front, which had acquired paramount importance in the meantime as the only line of contact between the British First Army and the American II Army Corps.

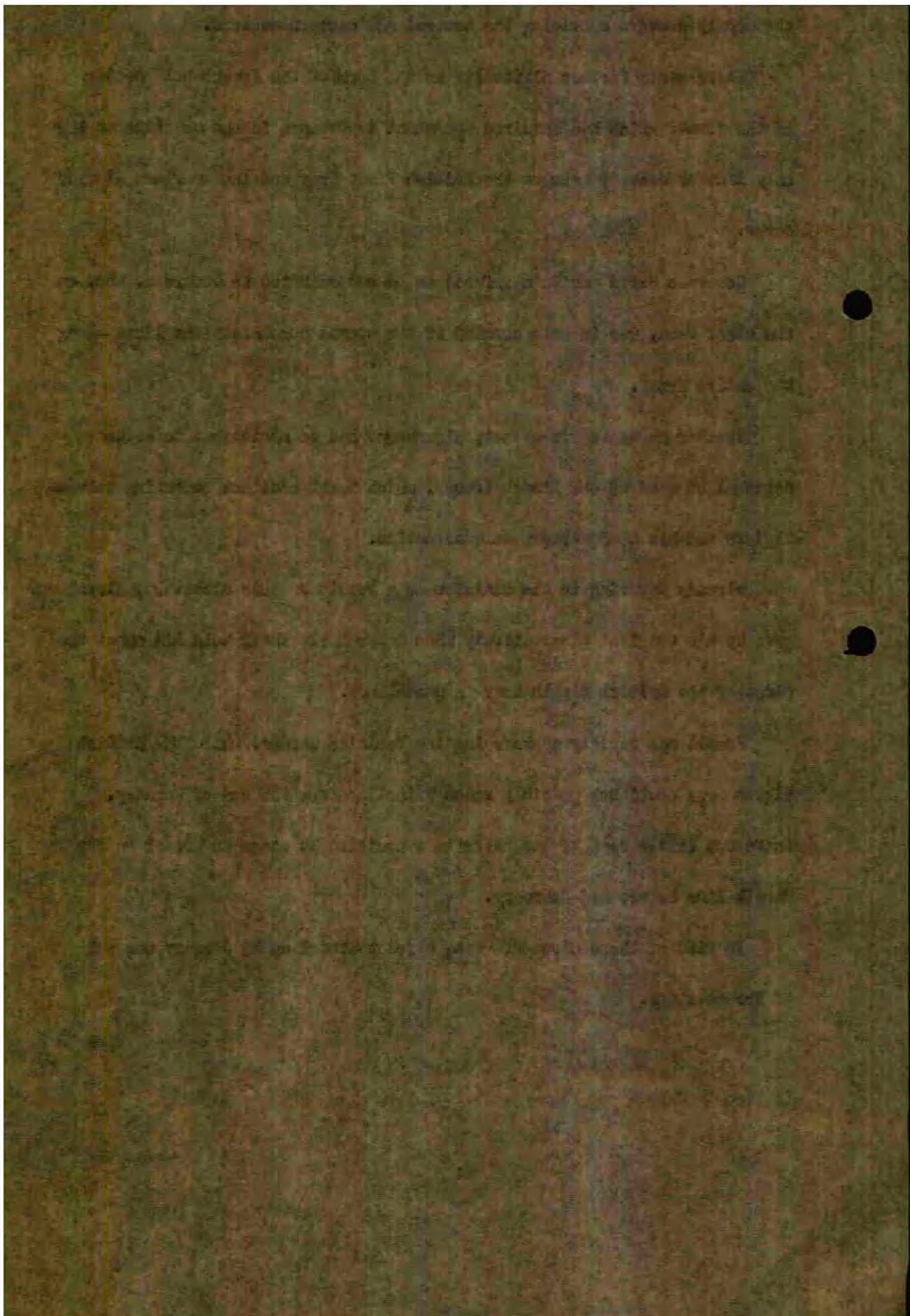
Generals Barre and Juin refused to be subordinated to Anderson, who, on the other hand, was in sole command of the signal communications lines along the entire front.

Whether he wanted to or not, Eisenhower had no choice but to assume personal command of the French troops, which meant constant commuting between Algiers and his headquarters at Constantine.

Already wavering in his decision as a result of this situation, Eisenhower gave up his original plan entirely when General Alexander told him about the plans of the British Eighth Army in Casablanca.

Rommel was rapidly approaching the Tunisian border, while the British Eighth Army could not possibly reach Tripoli before the end of January. There was little hope of its being in a position to stage an attack on the Mareth line before mid-February.

In view of these circumstances, a joint attack on 23 January was out of the question.



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If Eisenhower had stuck to his plan, Rommel would have had complete freedom to attack the southern flank of Operation SATIN. Therefore Eisenhower decided to give up the drive to the coast. Nevertheless, he refused to limit himself to purely defensive operations in central Tunisia, but ordered the II Army Corps to carry out whatever offensive actions it could against Axis rear area installations without exposing itself to engagement with strong Axis forces.

On 17 January, he radioed the commanders in chief of the Middle East to rescind their orders for convoy operations to Sfax and Gabes.

In retrospect, the risk which Operation SATIN would have entailed in a drive to the coast seems to have been overestimated. The coordination of the beginning of the British Eighth Army's offensive against the Mareth line (23 January) with the start of Operation SATIN seems an artificial and unnecessary precaution.

For it is extremely unlikely that both forces could actually have started operations at the same time. It is incredible that Eisenhower's staff should have been so poorly informed about the progress of the British forces in Tripolitania in early January.

At this time there was no chance whatsoever that Rommel could have mustered sufficient forces to endanger in any way the southern flank of Operation SATIN. Is it not possible that Rommel's almost legendary reputation as a military wizard may have played a role here?

Actually, the intelligence that enemy armored units

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were being assembled in an area which would permit them to become a threat to the northern flank of the Allied force should have been reason enough to order an attack on Kairouan simply to clarify the situation!

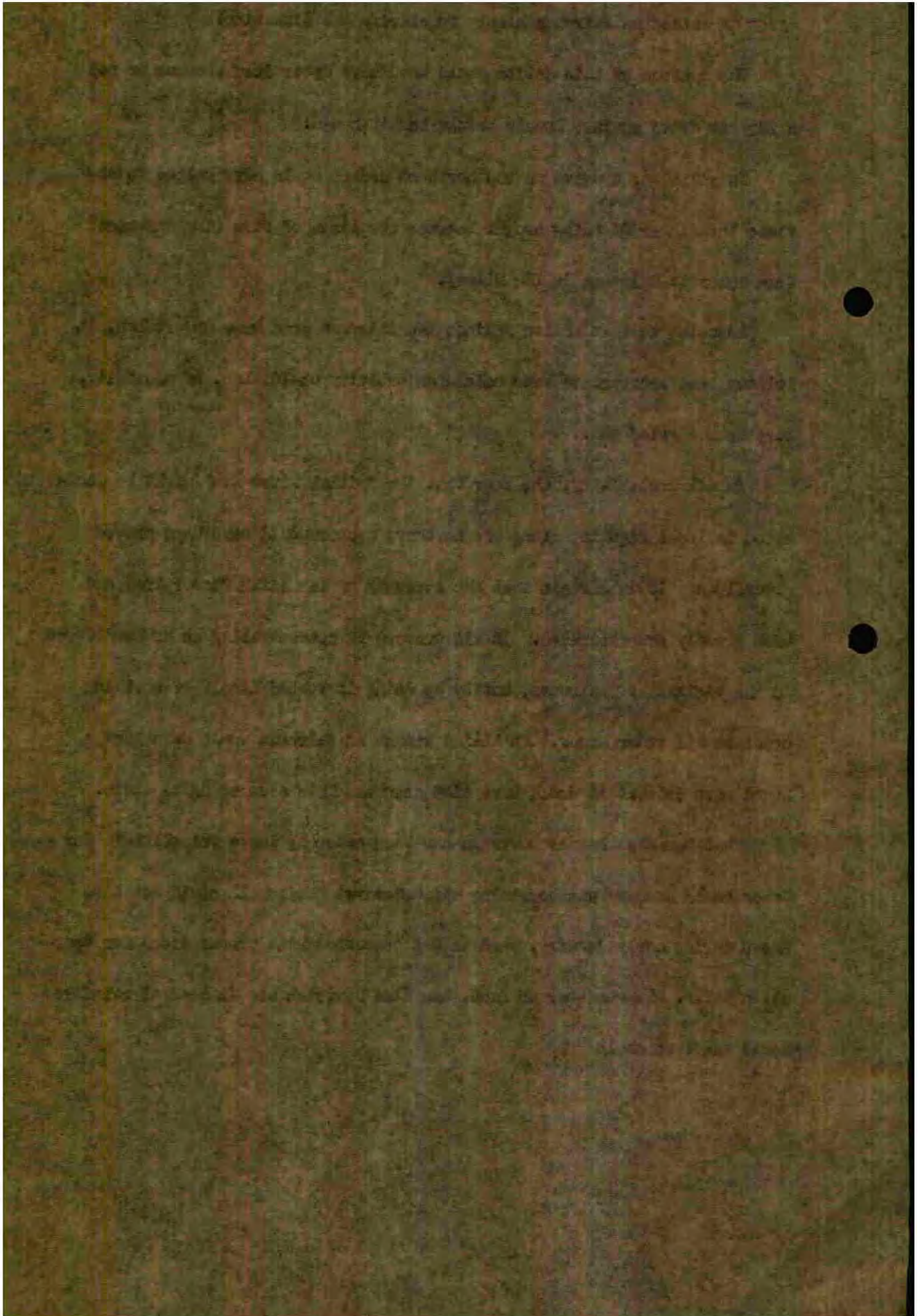
The outcome of this action could then have determined whether or not a further drive against Sousse should be attempted.

In addition, a drive on the northern sector would have helped to obviate the danger of being caught between two lines of fire (the distance from Gabes to Kairouan is 120 miles).

Assuming that an action against the Kairouan area were undertaken, it follows that appropriate reconnaissance activity would also, of necessity, have been carried out.

In all probability, the fear that the British First Army might be decimated in local fighting along the northern sector would have been proved groundless; it is certain that the strength of the Fifth Panzer Army had been greatly overestimated. It did succeed in concentrating an armored force in the vicinity of Kairouan, but by so doing it robbed itself of striking power in all other areas. An Allied attack on Kairouan would have been a sound move in that it would have tied down the Axis armored units there.

That the 21st Panzer Division had been ^{ed} ordered to leave Tripolitania for Gabes on 13 January was something which General Fredenhall could not have known during early January, when he was concerned with preparations for Operation SATIN. As a matter of fact, the 21st Division was in need of reinforcements and thus could



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not get back into operations until 30 January, when it was sent into action near Faussemarié.

It is quite another question whether these reinforcements, inexperienced and unused to combat as they were, should have been permitted to participate in a special mission so far removed from the front.

A mobile war of the type which would undoubtedly have developed during the course of any offensive against Maironan makes extremely high demands on the power of decision and the flexibility of leaders of all ranks. Tactical coordination of the operations of the various weapons branches participating provides the basis for success.

And without a doubt all of these conditions obtained in the case of the enemy.

It was this fact which represented the greatest risk for Operation SATIN. So much for theoretical considerations.

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In the meantime, the Casablanca Conference had gotten under way on 14 January.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff reached a number of important agreements relative to the continuation of the campaign in Tunisia and to further operations in the Mediterranean.

This was the first instance of top-level conference and combined planning since the original landing in November (Operation TORCH).

The British agreed to abandon their favorite plan - the capture of Sardinia as the next objective of Allied operations.

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The conference partners finally agreed on an offensive against Sicily (Operation HUSKY), which was to be launched in June or July.

In keeping with the operational decisions taken and in view of the fact that the middle eastern and northwestern theaters of operation were gradually becoming parts of a single, over-all theater of war, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered a new chain of command for the Mediterranean theater.

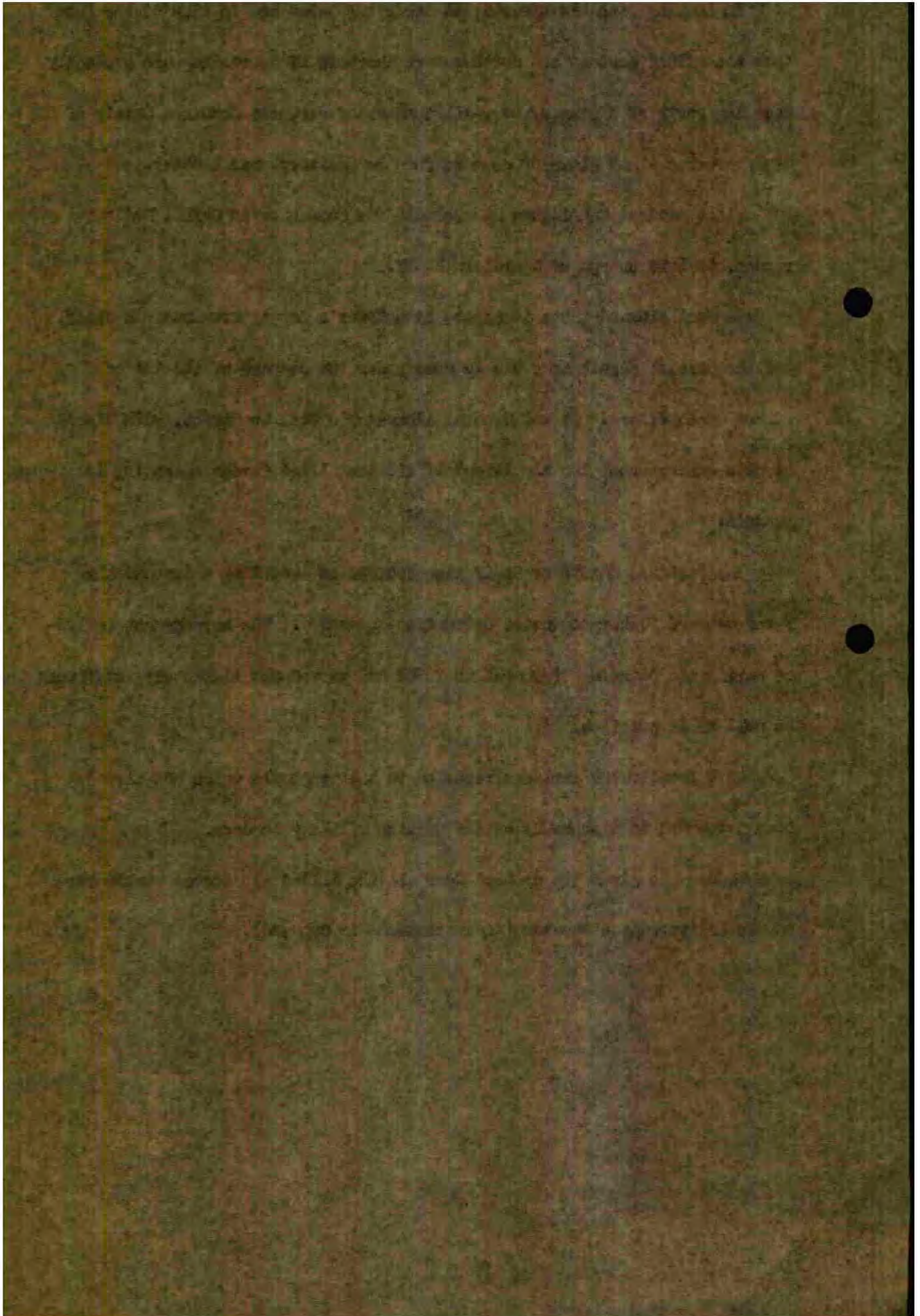
Fleet Admiral Cunningham was selected as Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, to take charge of Operation HUSKY.

General Alexander was to become Eisenhower's Deputy Commander in Chief, and the British Eighth Army was to come under the command of the Allied Forces Headquarters. It was General Alexander's task to direct, with Eisenhower's concurrence, the commitment of all the Allied forces operating in Tunisia.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff also decided to establish a Supreme Air Force Command (Uebergeordnetes Luftwaffen-Kommando). The arrangement followed during the planning of Operation TORCH had proved unsatisfactory, in theory as well as in practice.

As a result, the partners resorted to the proposals which had already been presented to Eisenhower by the British military leaders.

Tedder was given top command over all the Allied air forces stationed in the Mediterranean theater (Mediterranean Air Command).



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The commanders of the subordinate air forces headquarters and the organization of their staffs can be seen in the Appendix⁷⁶.

This decision, with all its ramifications, represented a turning point for the Allied air forces. It created a firm and unequivocal chain of command, not only for use during combat operations against the enemy, but also in respect to the ground organization, maintenance and supply services, and the personnel training and replacement units.

The assignment of officers from both nations to a single staff was a new development for the Allied air forces. This step not only helped to widen the horizon of each individual but also contributed to mutual understanding.

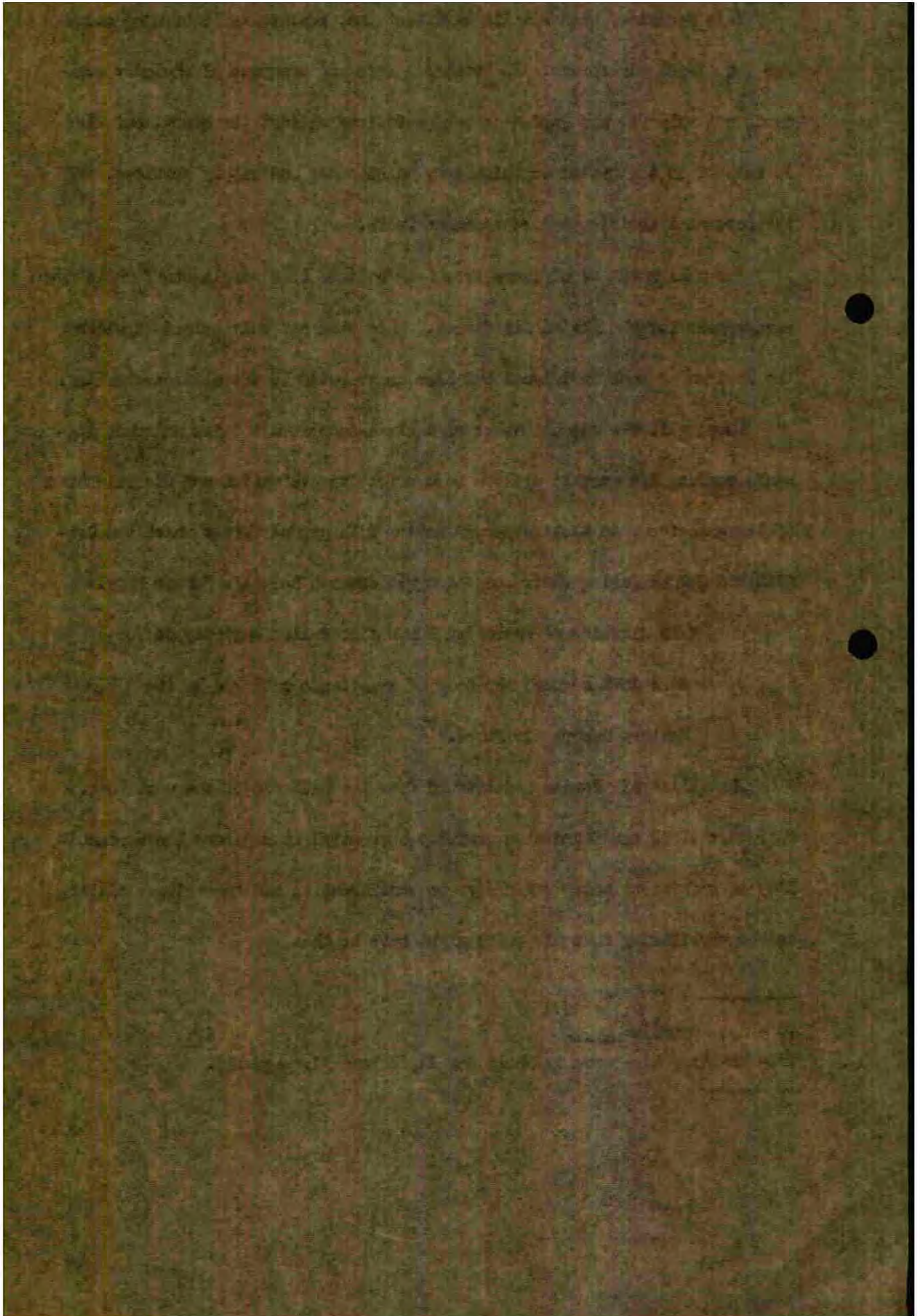
Above all, the establishment of a close-support air corps under Cunningham's command did much to promote more effective evaluation and dissemination of the experience in tactical coordination with ground forces which the British had gained during their long struggle against Rommel's Panzer Army.

"The planning of Operation TORCH also failed entirely to take into account the body of experience gathered by the Western Desert Air Force."⁷⁷

The Allied air forces had learned from the setbacks of the past year. Operation TORCH had found them woefully unprepared as regarded the availability of sufficient motor vehicles; no consideration had been given, either, to the possibility that air units might have to be

76 - See Appendix _____.

77 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 165.



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committed so far to the east of their bases.

Their main air base was located in the Oran - Casablanca area, and it was here that the four engineer battalions (the 809th, 814th, 815th, and 817th) were first set to work on airfield construction.

Unfortunately the two construction battalions of the Eastern Air Command had failed in their attempt to build usable airfields on the swampy terrain until they finally found sandy subsoil in the Souk-el-Khamis region⁷⁸.

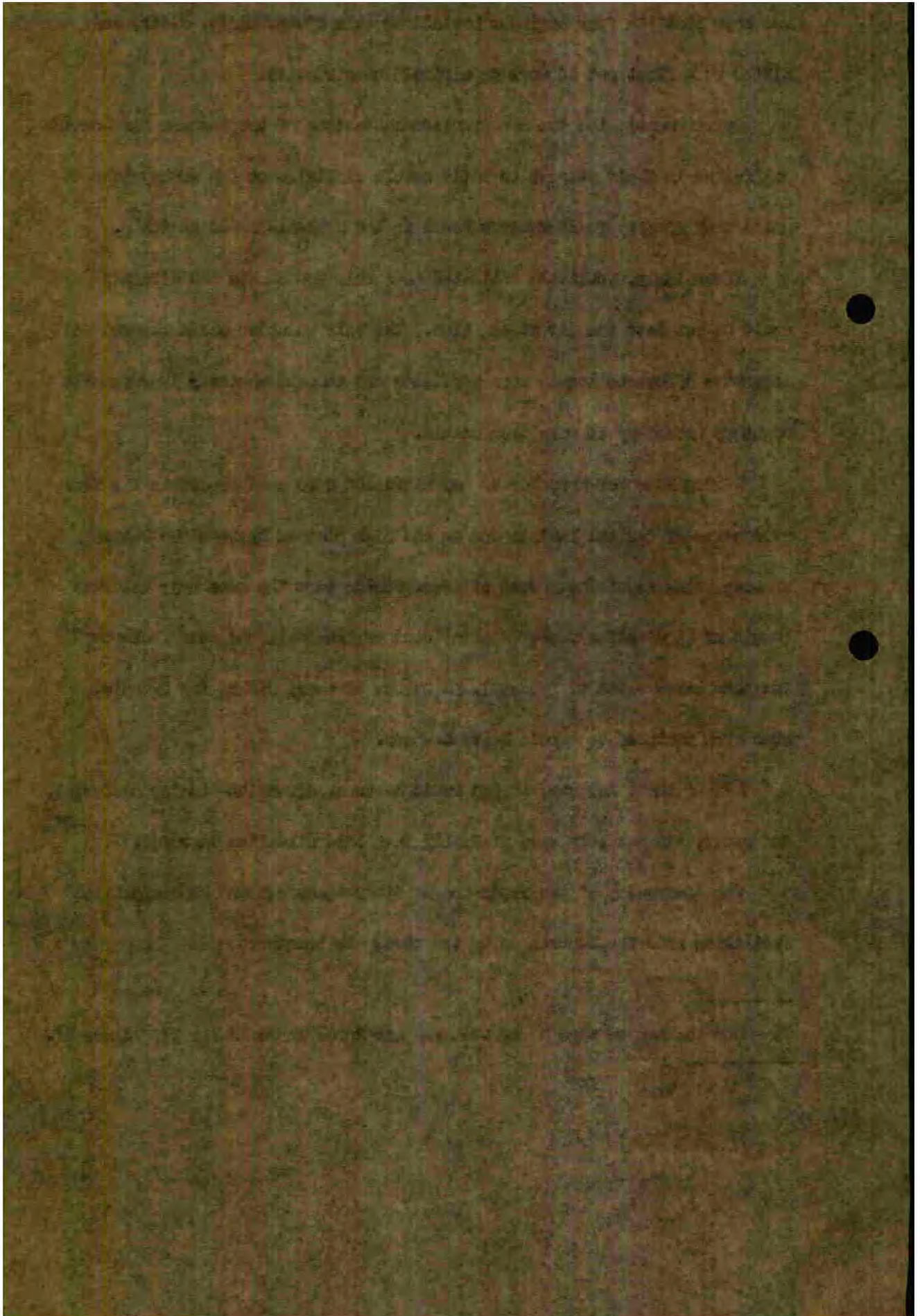
Accordingly, Doulittle estimated that only 200 of his 600 aircraft could be put into the air at one time. The only solution was a renewed and intensive effort to locate more airfields and to make whatever improvements might be necessary to make them usable.

During December a number of new airfields were constructed in the more arid parts of central Tunisia and on the high plateau between the Sahara and the Atlas Mountains. Some of these fields were the ones near Telergma (south of Constantine), near Biskra (west of Tebessa), and near Thalepto (sixteen miles south of Tebessa). A number of them, Biskra for example, were even equipped to handle heavy bombers.

All of them, however, lacked radio beacons, direction-finding equipment, and radar; it was only very gradually that this situation improved.

The inadequacy of the roads and of other transport and communications facilities made the importance of the three air transport

⁷⁸ - See the map on page 80 of the Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.



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groups all the greater.

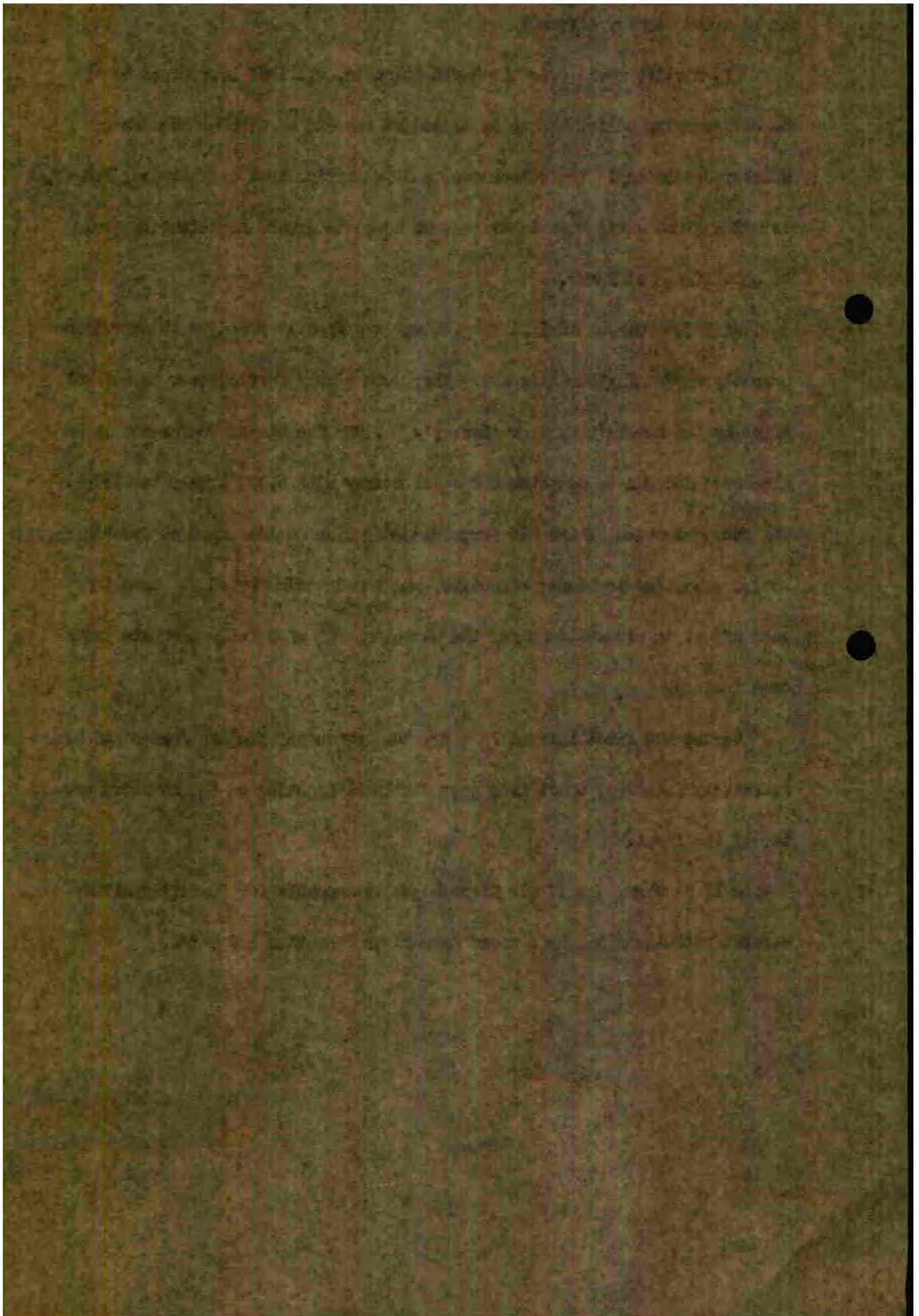
Shipments of aircraft from home were also fairly irregular, especially as regarded fighter aircraft.

The airlift route over the North Atlantic, utilized heretofore by the bomber ferrying units, had to be closed at the end of October because of weather conditions. The detour over central Africa took a great deal longer, for it was not until much later that an adequate ground organization could be established at Dakar.

With the help of Admiral King, a way was finally found to transport the urgently needed fighter aircraft. They were simply ferried over in several trips by the aircraft carrier 'Ranger'. At the Casablanca Conference it had also been decided to dispatch a special convoy with 5,000 trucks to Africa. The reorganization of the air force command, also decided upon at Casablanca, needed some time to become effective, and the interim period was used to good effect in preparations for the establishment of a fully adequate ground organization.

During the first half of January, the German and Italian forces had been relatively inactive, apart from sporadic local fighting on the northern sector of the front.

On 17 January, the II Air Corps began to assemble for Operation SATUR; several battalions had been moved forward to Elsecrine and Gafsa.



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Along the Malmasy - Foudouk front, the II Air Corps faced a strong German-Italian division equipped with 100-115 light and medium tanks; north of Kairoan was the 10th Panzer Division.

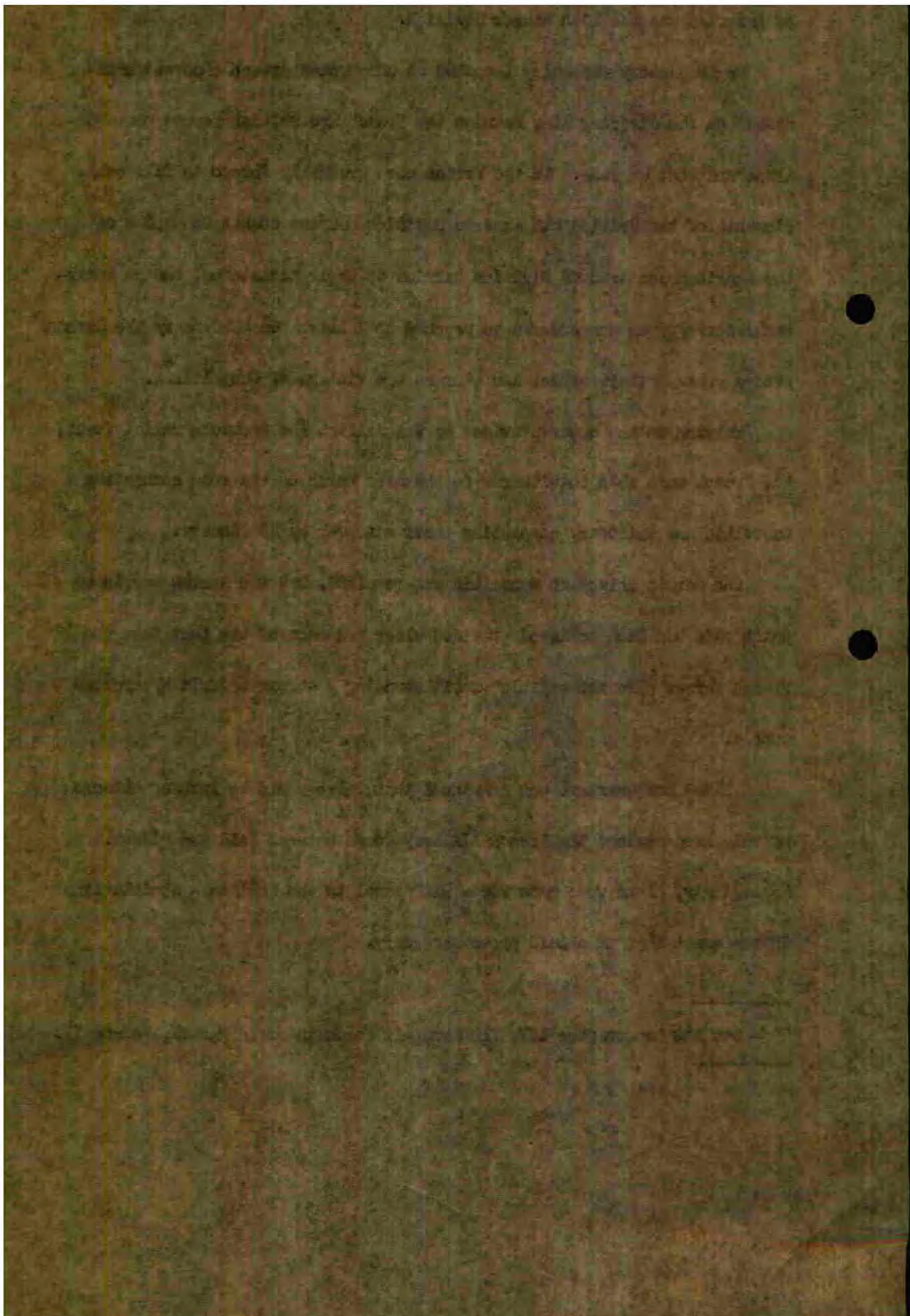
On 18 January the enemy launched an unexpected attack (Operation EL-PRESS) on the dividing line between the French and British forces near Bou-Araba and Pont du Faks. As the French were gradually forced to fall back, elements of the British 6th Armored Division and the Combat Command B of the American 1st Armored Division hurried to their assistance, and an American reserve group was ordered to proceed to Maktar. On 20 January the German troops renewed their attack and stormed the village of Ousseltia⁷⁹.

Relying on the cover provided by the British and American relief force, the French were able to withdraw to the area north of the road connecting Ousseltia and Kairoan, completing their maneuver by 23 January.

The German attack on Ousseltia was repulsed, but the narrow margin by which this had been achieved provided clear evidence of the fact that the French forces were not capable of withstanding a strong assault by armored troops.

Allied headquarters was convinced that there would be further attacks of this kind against the French XIX Army Corps between Faid and Pichen. Accordingly, plans were made for a withdrawal to the Feriana - Sheitla line in the event that it should prove necessary.

79 - See the map on page 197, The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume II.



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As a precautionary measure, Anderson was ordered to hold in readiness the mobile reserves stationed immediately south of his sector of operations. A number of French units were withdrawn from action, and at the same time fresh British and American troops were moved up to the front as rapidly as possible.

As soon as the fighting at Gusseltia began to subside, the II Army Corps started to regroup. Combat Command B was sent back to Feriana, while Combat Command C (composed of a single field artillery battalion) was ordered south to reinforce the Allied troops at Gafsa.

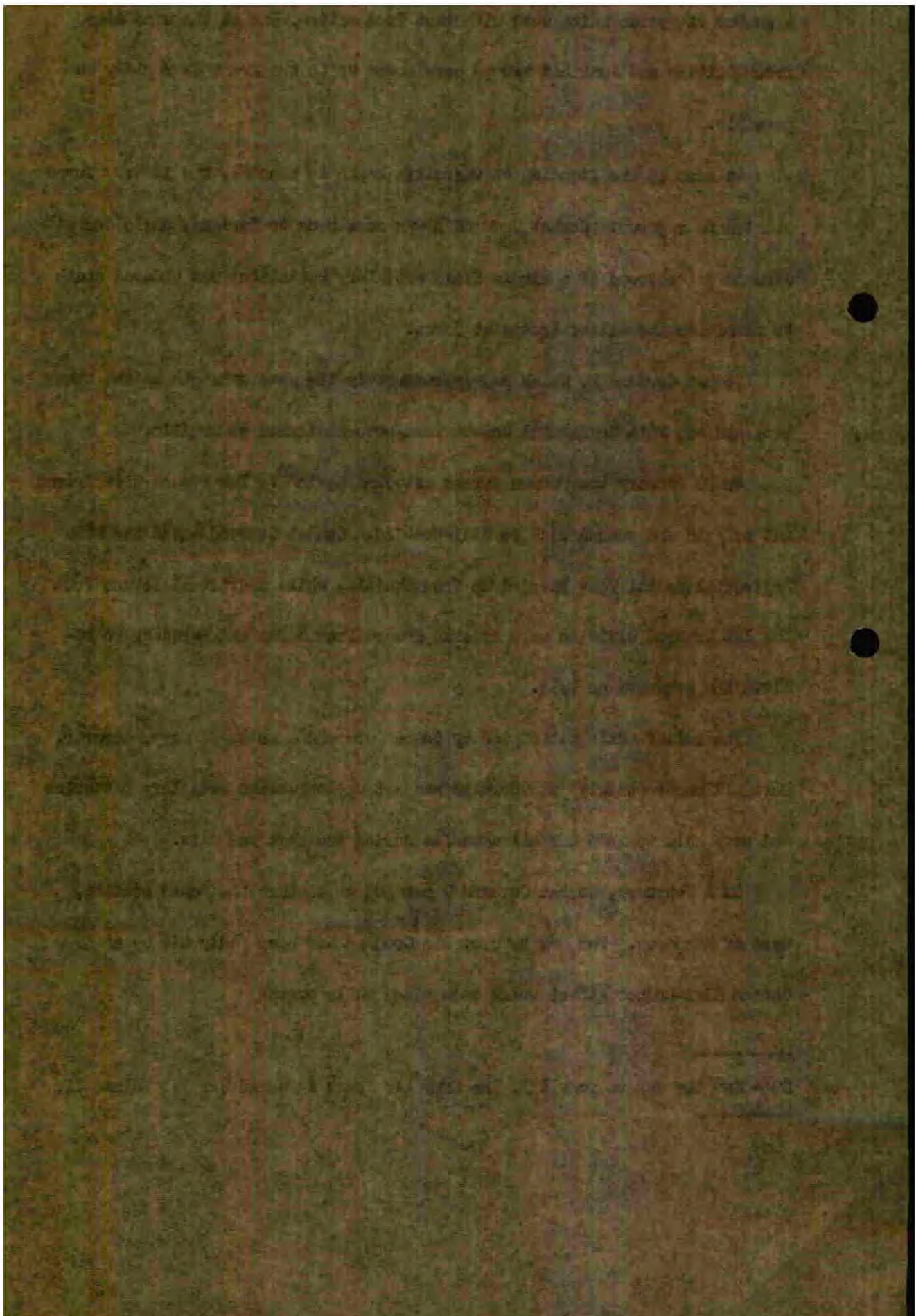
Combat Command A, which had approximately the same strength as the other two, and the 26th Regimental Combat Team were stationed at Sbaitla.

On 30 January the German forces attacked again⁸⁰. The French were driven out of Faïd and pushed back to Sidi-Bou-Sid. Combat Command A and the 26th Regimental Combat Team hurried up from Sbaitla, while additional forces from the 1st Armored Division were ordered forward from Gafsa and Maknassy to relieve the pressure on Faïd.

The relief actions attempted by Combat Command A on 31 January, however, were all unsuccessful; the Germans had set up long-range artillery batteries and were able to hold off all assaults during the next few days.

On 1 February, Combat Command D managed to capture the Sened station, west of Maknassy. The day before, the Command had been badly hit by a German dive-bomber attack which took place while troops

80 - See the map on page 133, The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.



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were being unloaded. The trucks waiting to carry them on to their final destination were too closely concentrated. This was the only occasion on which the German dive-bombers were able to inflict serious losses on the American forces.

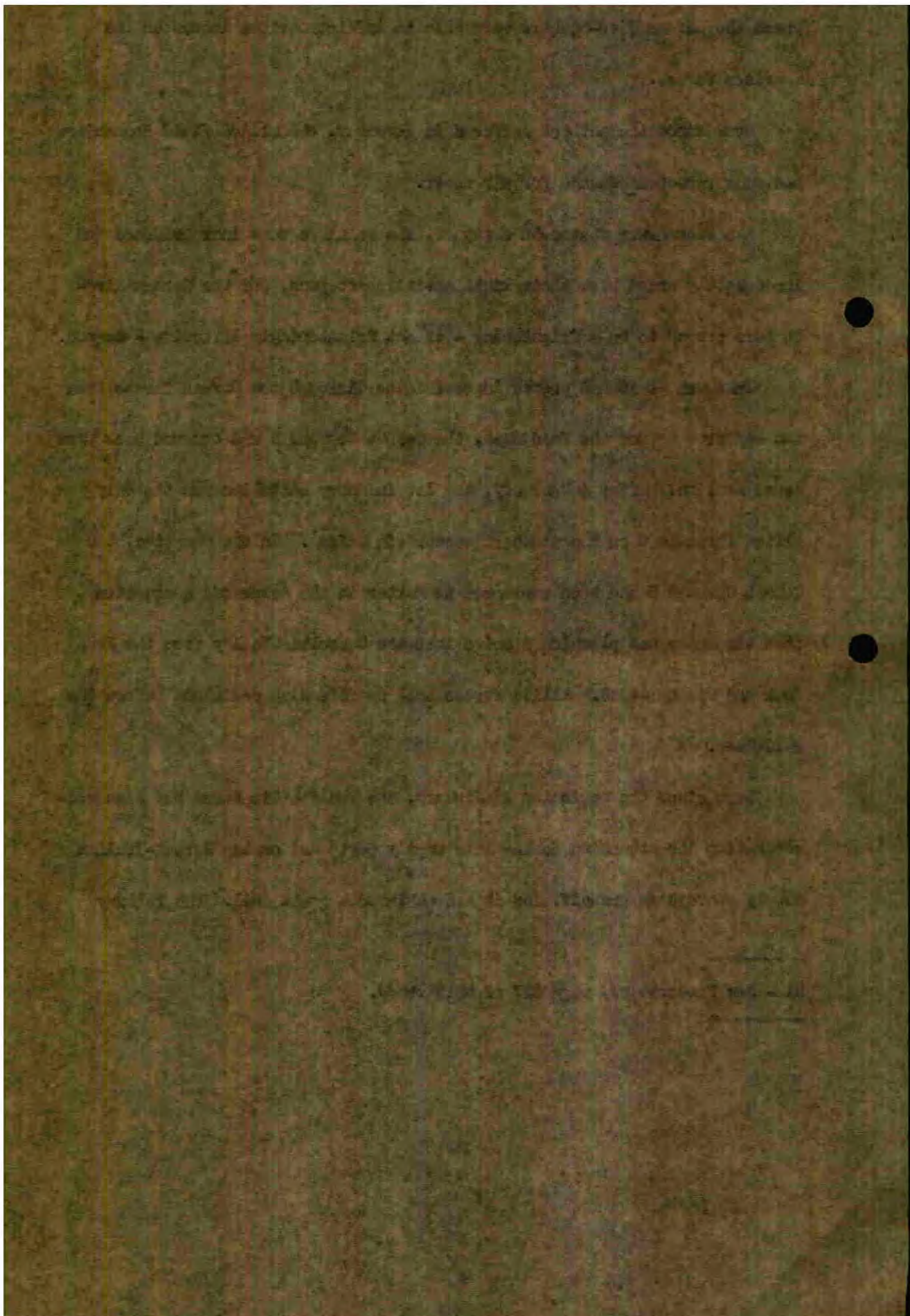
Ever since the setback suffered in November, the Allied field commanders had made repeated demands for air cover.

"As Eisenhower stated in a report, the soldiers were inexperienced and inadequately armed with their light antiaircraft guns, for the German dive-bombers proved to be a frightening - if not frighteningly effective - weapon."⁸¹

Inasmuch as it had proved impossible to dislodge the German forces from the key area around the Faid Pass, the Combat Command D was ordered back from Sened Station. After 4 February, the 1st Infantry Battalion was the only Allied force left on the southern sector (in Gafsa). In the meantime, the Combat Command B had been reordereed to Maktar in the erroneous assumption that the enemy was planning a drive into the Ousseltia Valley from the Fendouk and Pichon areas. Allied forces took up defensive positions before the Faid Pass.

Ever since the beginning of January, the Twelfth Air Force had been concentrating its attention on the Axis supply ports and on the German-Italian supply convoys in transit, and it had achieved a great deal. The railway

81 - See Footnote 37, page 617 of this study.



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lines to Gabes and to the bases at Sousse and Sfax had also been bombed. The Allied heavy and medium bombers had scored a definite success in their attack on the airfield at El Aouina on 22 January. They hit an ammunition dump, which went up in flames, killing and injuring a large number of personnel.

Bomber and fighter aircraft from the XII Air Support Command intervened in the fighting at Bou-Arada, Pont du Fahs, Ousseltia, and the Faïd Pass, providing valuable support for the Allied ground troops. Not only did they manage to bring down a number of enemy aircraft, but they also succeeded in destroying enemy tanks and motor vehicles. They even attacked Rommel's airfields in the Medenine area.

The War Department regulations dealing with air support activity (Field Manuals 31-35, 9 April 1942) proved to be totally unsuited to conditions in Africa. The main reason for this was the fact that, in Africa, the pilots were under the orders of the troop commanders on the ground, and these - understandably - were primarily interested in obtaining adequate local air cover for their own units. Consequently, during the first three days of the operations around Ousseltia, the XII Air Support Command did not fly a single mission over the operational area; nor was the activity over its own front particularly lively.

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On one occasion, the II Army Corps, to which the XII Air Support Command was subordinated, turned down a French request for aerial reconnaissance services with the observation that it was "not assigned" to the area concerned and thus had no interest in developments there.

As it happened, the operational areas assigned to the American and French forces were separated by some sixty miles of extremely difficult terrain. On the other hand, a distance of this kind was no problem at all for General Craig's air units⁸².

After the setback at Faid, the II Army Corps front and the adjacent French-held sector to the north were characterized by an almost uncanny lack of activity for quite a while.

As of mid-February, the Axis forces held more favorable positions than any they might expect to gain during the subsequent course of the campaign. The British Eighth Army was still being held back by the fortifications of the Mareth line. In addition, its operations were handicapped by bad weather and by the necessity of securing its supply lines through Tripolitania before undertaking any extensive action.

This period of respite before Montgomery was in a position to begin his attack gave the Axis forces an opportunity to strike a decisive blow against the poorly-equipped French units in the eastern Dorsal range or against the

82 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 137 and 139-140.

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sadly inexperienced II Army Corps east of Tebessa.

"On 14 February the enemy began an attack which, if it had succeeded in its entirety, would have carried the Axis forces through the Dorsal Mountains and enabled them to capture Le Kef.

Then, if the attack had been carried on towards the north in the direction of the Mediterranean, it would have cut off the Allied forces which were holding the front before Tunis and Bizerte.

Ultimately, this drive forward would have served to protect the Axis flank during the inevitable assaults on the Mareth line by the British Eighth Army.

The main attack was directed against Sidi-bou-Sid, while a secondary offensive developed from the Maknassy area."⁸³

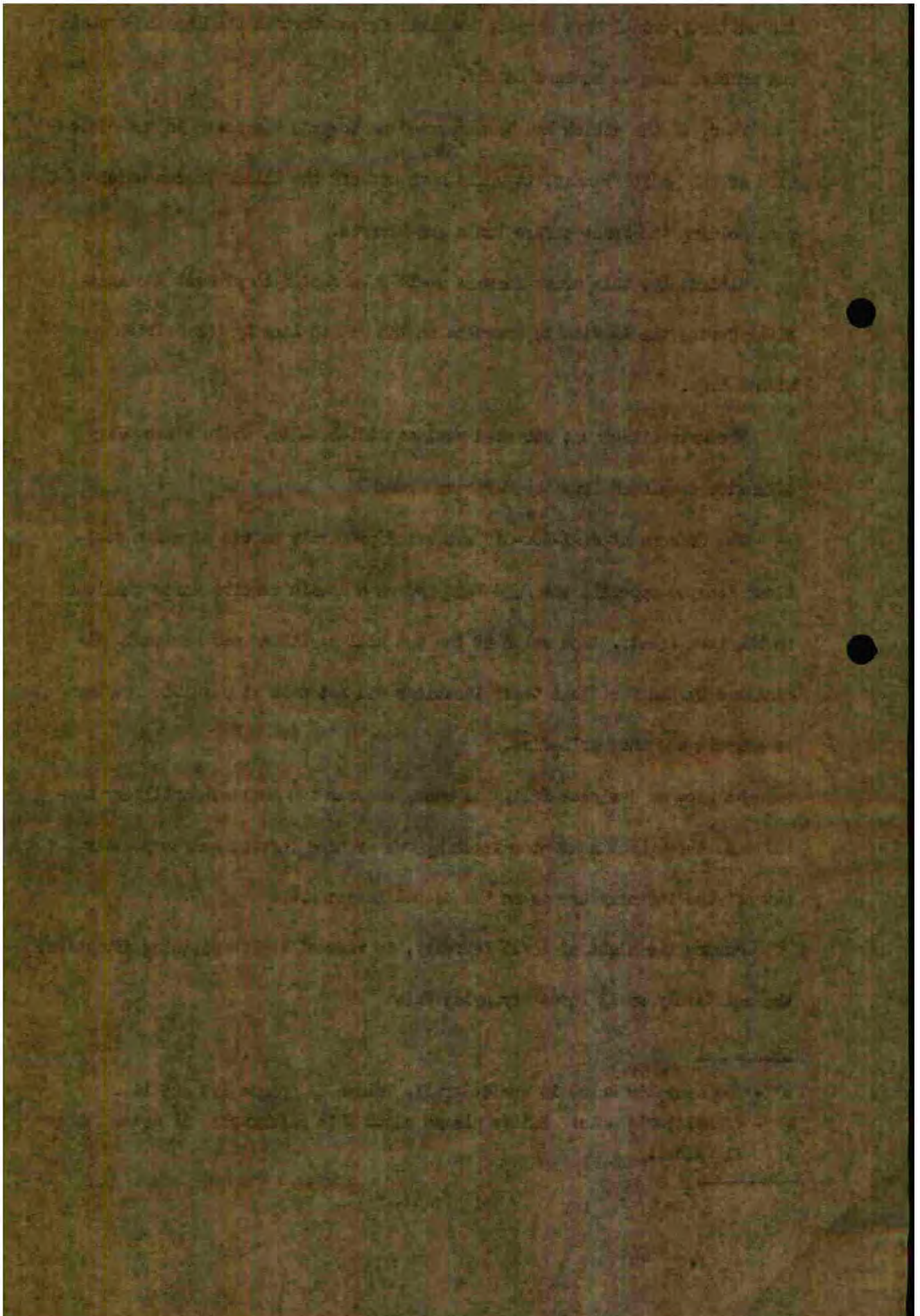
The defense of Sidi-Bou-Sid was based primarily on two mountain positions located opposite the Faid Pass and on a mobile reserve force stationed in the town itself. The value of the two hill positions was seriously diminished by the fact that their locations did not make it possible for them to support one another's fire.

As soon as darkness fell, the enemy overran two American artillery battalions, threw back a counterattack by our armored forces, and completely cut off the infantry troops on the Djebel Lessouda.[†]

During the night of 14/15 February, in view of the threatening situation, the relatively small force occupying Gafsa

83 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 153 and 154.

† - Translator's note: Editor please check this paragraph; it seems rather illogical!



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withdrew to Fariana.

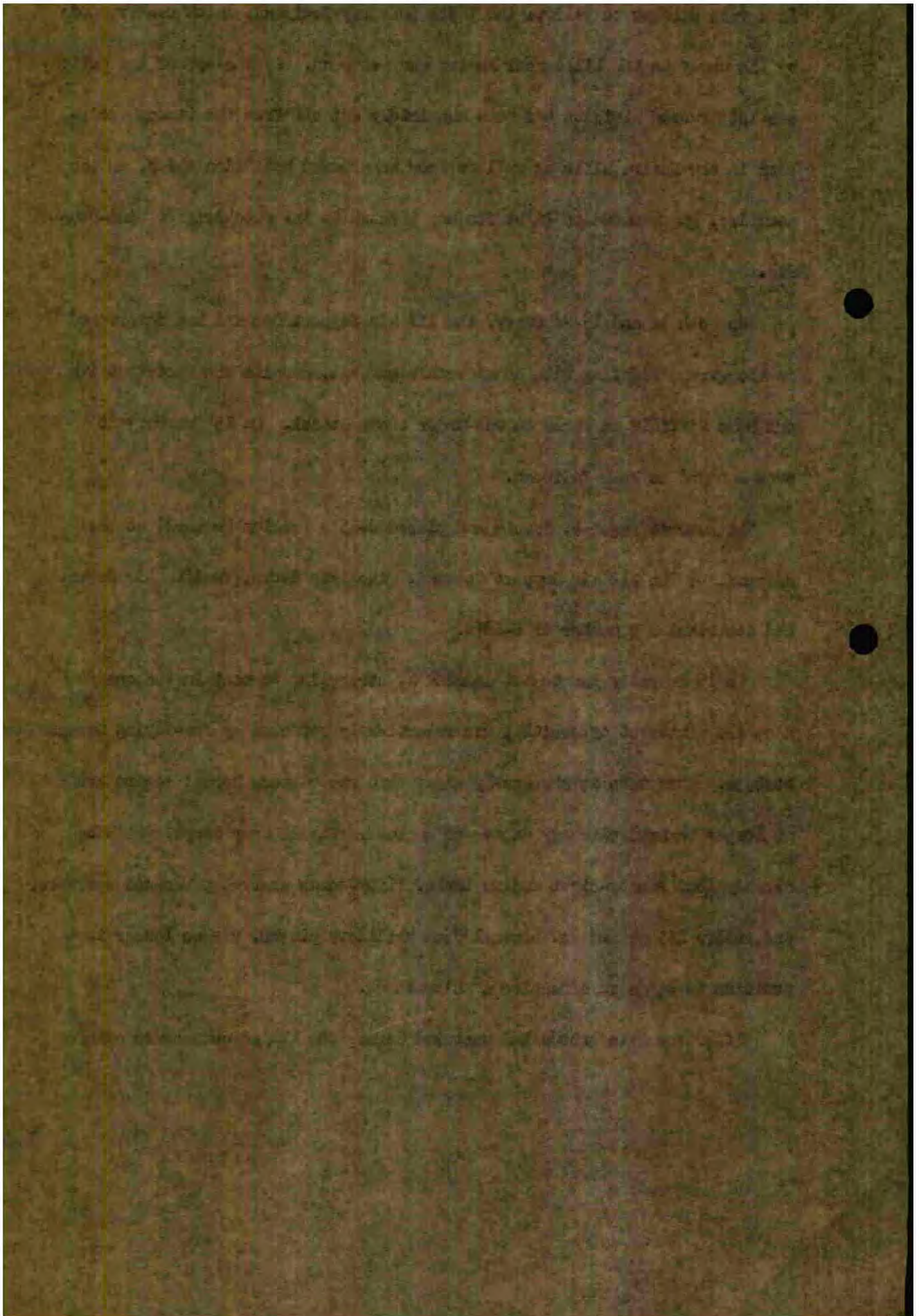
On 15 February the American 1st Armored Division lost a good many tanks in a vain attempt to relieve the 168th Infantry Regiment, which was trapped by the enemy in the hills near Ksaira and Lessouda. By the end of the action, the 1st Armored Division had been completely cut off from the troops encircled in the Ksaira hills as well as from an armored battalion which, in the meantime, had managed to fight its way through to the outskirts of Sidi-Bou-Sid.

On both 14 and 15 February, the XII Air Support Command had intervened in the ground fighting with considerable success, despite the fact that its own home airfield at Thalepte was under enemy attack. On 15 February it even managed to bomb Kairouan.

At Ruter's request, Spaatz had placed B-26's (medium bombers) at the disposal of the XII Air Support Command. The 12th Group, Twelfth Air Force, had contributed a number of B-25's.

On 16 February the Combat Command A, struggling to contain the enemy east and southeast of Sbeitla, was relentlessly attacked by low-flying German bombers. This made it abundantly clear that the eastern Dorsal region could no longer be held with any degree of success. The II Army Corps, which had already lost ninety-eight medium tanks, fifty-seven armored personnel carriers, and twelve 155 mm and seventeen 105 mm artillery pieces, was no longer in a position to stage an effective counterattack.

After the Axis troops had captured Gafsa, the Allied commanders ordered



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that the Messerine Pass be prepared as a defensive position. The II Army Corps hoped to be able to hold the Feriana - Sbaitla line until the Pass position was ready.

owing to military necessity, the XII Air Support Command had no alternative but to evacuate all five of its advance airfields during the week of 13 - 21 February. It is worthy of note that it was able to maintain a remarkably high degree of operational readiness in the process.

Ever since the first German attack on the Faid Pass, the Allied leaders had made plans for an emergency evacuation of Sbaitla and Thalepte.

The evacuated units were to be accommodated in Jemla-las-Bains, Tobessa, and Le Kouif. The airfield at Sbaitla was abandoned on 14 February, and during the night of 15/16 February, the enemy troops forced their way into the town itself.

In the meantime, all the necessary preparations had been made to evacuate Thalepte; everything that could not be transported was destroyed. In this way the Allies lost some 228,000 liters (59,280 gallons) of gasoline and eighteen aircraft, only five of which were so badly damaged that they could not have been repaired. The airfield had to be abandoned on 17 February.

During the course of the following day, the II Army Corps reached the Dorsal Mountains and began to build up the Dernaia - Sbiba line for defensive operations.

The survivors of the Combat Command A, detouring around enemy positions, managed to reach Sbiba, where they joined elements of the British First Army and 34th Division.

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The Combat Command B was dispatched into the area southeast of Tebessa, and the three highway approaches were blocked by the forces which had previously occupied Gafsa.

The Allies had done their best to make the Masserine Pass position the strongest of all, for it lay at the point of intersection of the routes to Tebessa (to the west) and Thala (to the north).

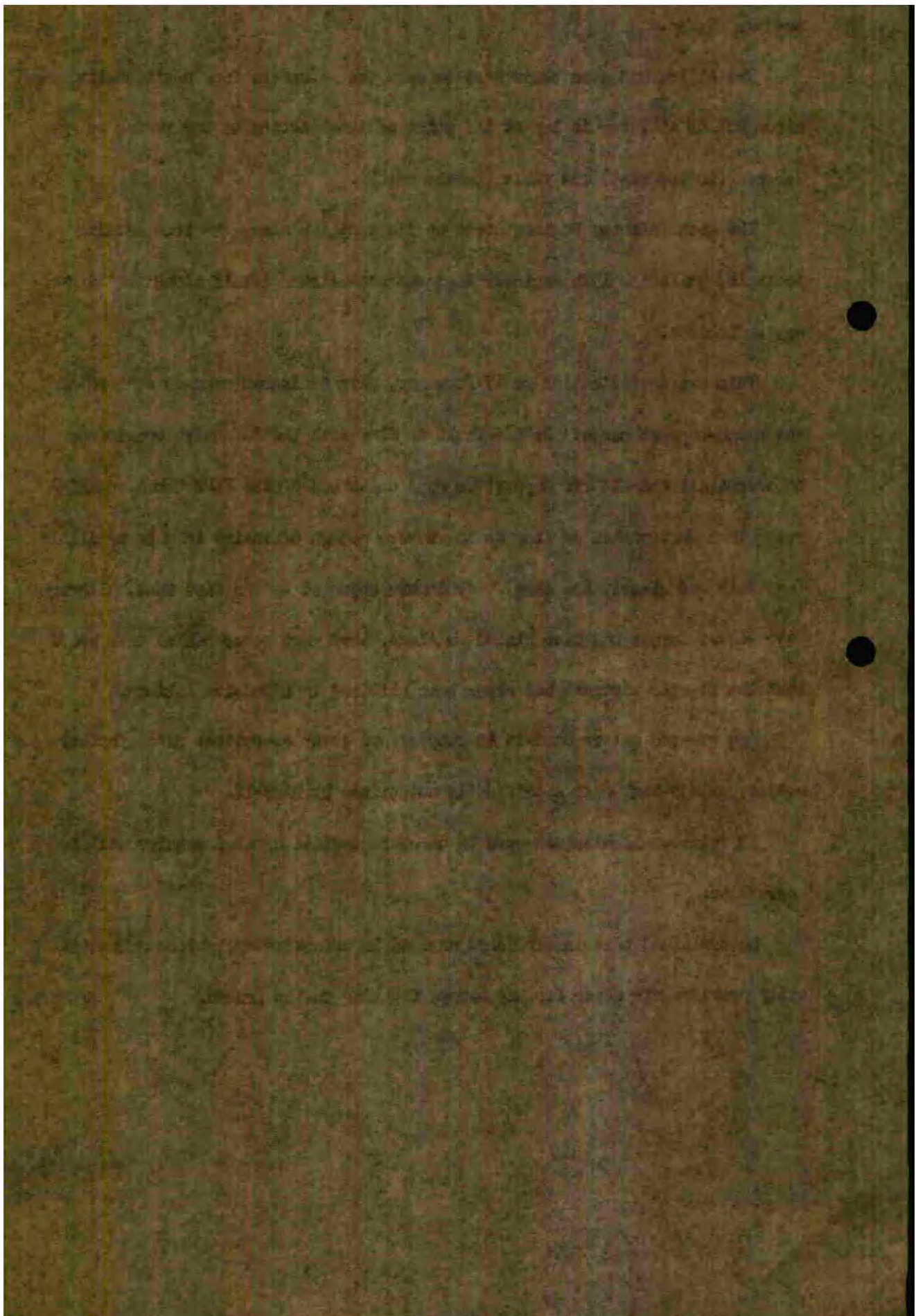
The 26th Infantry Regiment took up its position along the road leading to Thala, while the 19th Engineer Regiment established itself along the highway to Tebessa.

This was the situation on 17 February, when Coningham assumed command of the close-support corps. He had fault to find with the defensive operations of almost all the XII Air Support Command units and of the 242d Group, considering them unwarranted as long as there were enough offensive targets available (and this was clearly the case). Coningham objected to the fact that, although the bomber forces had been placed on alert, they were never called upon and that the fighter aircraft had never been utilized in offensive actions.

"He ordered all commanders to stop ground cover operations until further notice, unless they were specifically authorized by himself.

In future, all missions were to be characterized by an intensive will to aggression.

He explained that an air force engaged in offensive operations automatically provides air cover for the troops fighting on the ground.



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Even the armored forces were expected to do without air cover; in his opinion, enemy troop assembly areas and vulnerably located vehicle parks were the best targets."⁸⁴

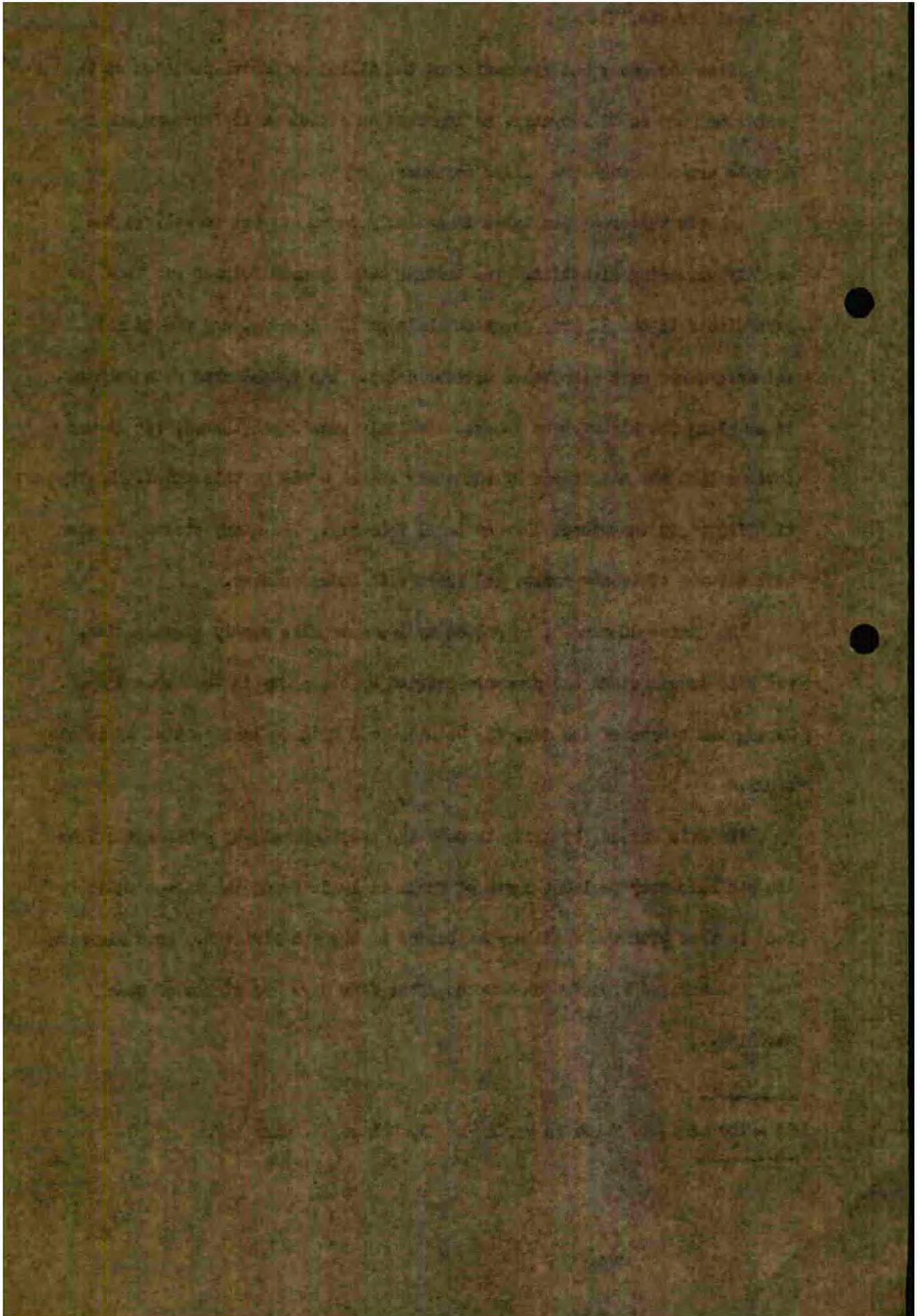
After the enemy had reconnoitered the Allied defensive position on the Kasserine Pass on 18 February, he launched an attack on 19 February and managed to break through the Allied defenses.

Drastic measures were taken immediately in an attempt to salvage the rapidly worsening situation. The British 26th Armored Brigade was made subordinate to the II Army Corps at Thala on 19 February, and additional reinforcements were dispatched without delay. The established defense positions along the highways to Tobessa and Thala were strengthened, for it was obvious that the main focus of the enemy attack would be this point. Heavy fighting raged throughout the day on 21 February. The enemy stormed Tobessa with a force of twenty tanks, and Thala with twice as many.

The Combat Command B, supported by its extensive supply organization, was able to withstand the pressure exerted by the enemy in the Tobessa area. During the course of the day, the 26th Armored Brigade lost a total of twenty tanks.

The Axis forces, breaking through the position held by a battalion from the 5th Leicester Regiment south of Thala at 1945, found themselves suddenly face to face with the artillery batteries of the 9th Division. This Division had just arrived from French Morocco after four days and nights of steady marching.

84 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 157.



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On 21 February, rain and fog made effective commitment in the air impossible, although a force of Hurribombers did succeed in raiding the enemy advanced columns. On 22 February, the airfield at Tebessa had to be abandoned because it was inundated with mud. Le Kouif and Kalaa Djerdja were evacuated as soon as the enemy forces began to storm Thala.

22 February was the day of decision. The Axis forces had reached the peak of their military effectiveness.

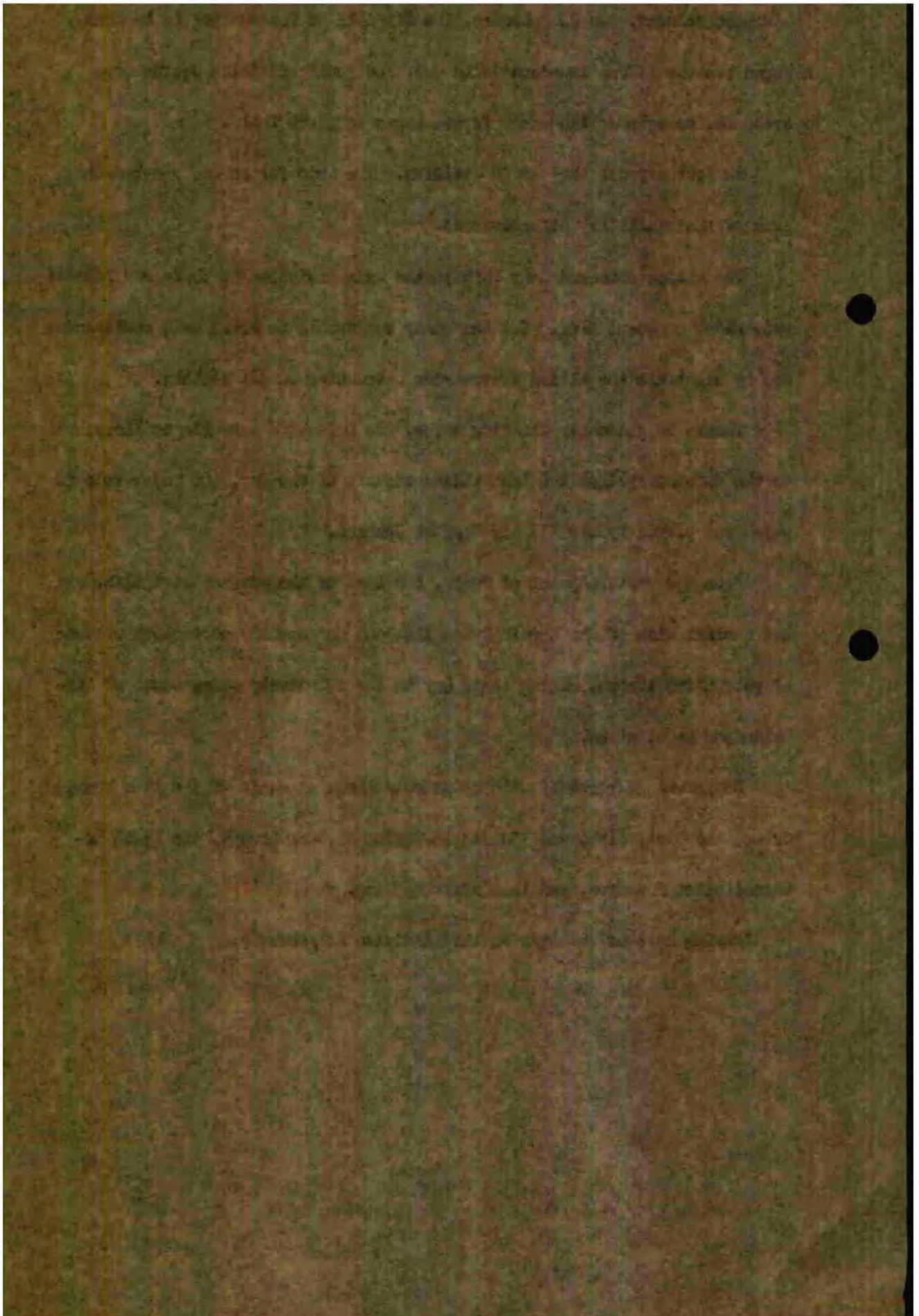
The Allies attacked near Sbiba; the Axis positions at Thala and Tebessa were under constant fire. Yet the enemy was unable to break Axis resistance, and by nightfall the Allied troops were retreating on all sectors.

Thanks to gradually clearing skies, the Luftwaffe was able to contribute to the defense against the last Allied assault of the day, the major role in which was played by the XII Air Support Command.

From the vantage-point of Jouks, the last of the advance airfields, one had a clear view of the seemingly endless and dangerously portentous columns of retreating troops, making their way to the relatively safer towns of Ain-Baida and Constantine.

Jouks was overcrowded with relatively large elements of the 47th Bomber Group, the 31st, 81st, and 33d Single-Engine Fighter Groups, the 154th Reconnaissance Squadron, and the Lafayette Wing.

During most of the time on this decisive 22 February,



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the staff of the XII Air Support Command, which was making preparations for a regrouping of its forces, was completely cut off from communication with its subordinate units. Nevertheless, orders were transmitted by radio to the effect that all available fighter units were to be assigned immediately to operations at Thala.

Weather conditions, however, were hardly conducive to a large-scale air operation. Jouks, for example, was covered by low-lying clouds, with intermittent showers lasting until the late afternoon.

This "hide and seek" weather was responsible for the fact that one squadron of B-17's lost its way and very kindly unloaded its bombs over Souk-el-Arba.

During the next few days, the Italian and German forces continued their withdrawal, for their tanks were badly needed in the south, where the British Eighth Army was ready to start its preliminary grouping for the attack on the Mareth line.

Von Arnim took advantage of the fact that the northern sector of the front seemed to be fairly weak to drive forward against the Mateur - Sedjenane sector.

As it turned out, an attack on the Masseurine Pass was the best possible method of frustrating the Allied plans for the near future. Nevertheless, the partial success achieved there by the Axis troops was not quite sufficient.

The battle had been characterized by encouraging signs of more effective air-ground coordination.

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No longer did each air unit limit itself to the narrow sector assigned to its own corps or army commander. Heavy bombers and B-24s from the Eastern Air Command appeared over Thala and Tabessa, and the full weight of the Allied strategic bomber arm was thrown into the decision-seeking battle.

In the meantime the British Eighth Army and the Western Desert Air Force had carried out a sham attack on the Maroth line.

The 205th Group, Royal Air Force, bombarded both the city of Gabes and the airfield on its outskirts; light bombers attacked the positions of the Maroth line itself. The fighters and fighter-bombers had been moved forward to the airfields in the vicinity of Medenine, where their activity kept the enemy air units at Bordj-Boual, Gabes, and Tabaga on constant alert.

All in all, it was a favorable omen for the newly-created "supreme command" of the Allied air forces.

After the seizure of Tripoli on 23 January, Montgomery could afford to send only one division forward, since the supply situation was bound to remain critical until such time as the port installations could be repaired and put into operation⁸⁵.

In the beginning, everything went according to plan - until the enemy blocked the access to Zuara, a small city located on the coast south of the Tunisian border.

Zuara was not taken until 30 January, and even after its capture

85 - See the map on page 101, The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II.

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the British Eighth Army was still confronted by Ben-Gardane, a relatively strong outpost of the Mareth line fortifications.

At this point the rains began, and Gardane could not be taken until 15 February.

With the help of General Leclerc's Free French troops, which had been placed under the command of the British Eighth Army and which were advancing slowly from Halut towards Ksar-Philane, Montgomery was able to take Medenine, with its extremely important airfields, as well as Fom-Tatahouine.

Ever since the beginning of his advance from Egypt, Montgomery had been extremely careful to protect his troops against unexpected setbacks. It was due to his caution in this regard that his Army moved forward so slowly and methodically. He never permitted it to advance unless he had sufficiently strong forces on hand to meet any surprise attack by the enemy.

During the battle at the Kasserine Pass, the British Eighth Army was supposed to show itself in full strength in front of the Mareth line. Actually, however, only two divisions appeared; the supply situation was so precarious that only these two were allowed to move forward.

During the early part of March, Montgomery unexpectedly came up against the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions plus elements of the 10th Panzer Division, so that he had no choice but to order the New Zealand troops to leave Tripoli and come to his assistance.

The original fortifications along the Mareth line had been built by the French to protect Tunisia

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against the danger of an Italian offensive from Libya.

The main line of defense was approximately twenty-five miles long, extending from Zarut (on the coast, approximately twenty-five miles southeast of Gabes) as far as the rugged hills of the Matmata range in the southwest.

The fortifications consisted of concrete bunkers and artillery positions, tank traps, fields of barbed wire, and minefields. In addition, the most important section of the line was protected by a row of carefully camouflaged positions radiating out from the center line.

The builders of the Mareth fortifications had obviously realized that it was almost out of the question for an enemy force to detour around them west of the Matmata Mountains. The flanking movement required to negotiate such a detour was practically unfeasible in that it would lead the force attempting it over nearly 150 miles of completely waterless desert.

During the preparations for the coming struggle, the Long Range Desert Group reconnoitered the terrain and reported that it would be extremely difficult, although not entirely impossible, to detour around the Mareth line.

The fortifications were being defended by three Italian divisions, plus the 90th Light and the German 164th Divisions, stationed in the hills on the southwest flank of the line.

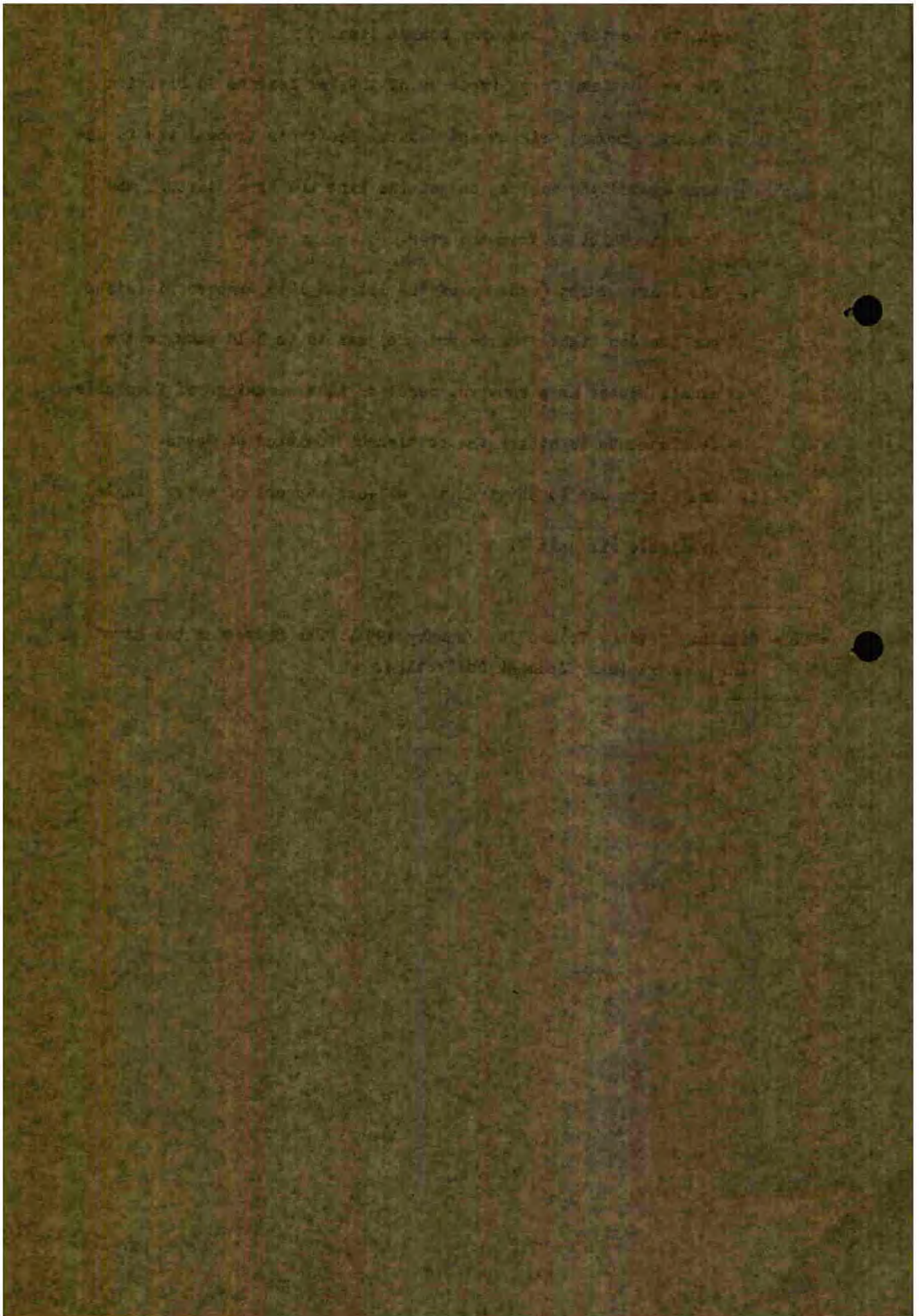
The Allies planned to launch their main attack about 20 March, by which time their supply organization was expected to be in a position to guarantee continuing delivery of the material needed for the operation.

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The plan adopted by the British Eighth Army envisioned the following four phases of activity:

1. The XXX Army Corps was to attack the Italian forces along the coastal sector of the Army combat line.
2. The New Zealand Corps (made up of the New Zealand 2d Division and 8th Armored Brigade and General Leclerc's troops) was to detour around the western end of the line and break through the Matmata positions from the rear.
3. The I Army Corps (made up of the 1st and 10th Armored Divisions and the 4th Light Armored Brigade) was to be held back on the middle sector as a reserve, ready to take advantage of favorable developments to attack the bottleneck position of Gabes.
4. The attack was to be given the all-out support of every single available air unit⁸⁶.

86 - Military Review, Volume 10, January 1951, "The Battle of the Mareth Line"; Karlsruhe Document Collection.



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Section 6

The battle for the Mareth line and the positions along the salt sea; the withdrawal to the Enfidaville position; the employment of the Luftwaffe in these actions; the factor of Allied air supremacy; the offensive of the British Eighth Army against the Enfidaville position; the shift of emphasis on the Tunisian western front; Allied attacks on the front sector held by the Fifth Panzer Army; Allied air superiority; the collapse of the western front; the last mission of the Tunisian Air Corps; the capitulation of the Army Group Africa.

At the conclusion of the fighting at Tebessa, the Army Group Africa had the Fifth Panzer Army on the northern sector of the Tunisian front and the German-Italian Panzer Army under General Messe on the Mareth line in the southeast. The total strength of the Axis troops was approximately 30,000⁸⁷.

There was a wide gap between the inner flanks of the two armies, a gap which was secured only inadequately by relatively weak advanced forces and, east of Gueltar, by the Italian Division Centauro.

In the meantime the Fifth Panzer Army had acquired some reinforcements -- elements of the Division Hermann Goering and one 999 division (experienced troops). The commander of the latter division, together with his staff, had been shot down during the flight to their new area of operations⁸⁸.

The Fifth Panzer Army had the following troops stationed on the northern sector of the front:

Division von Manteuffel:

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Luftwaffe Regiment Barenthin (two paratrooper battalions and one heavy infantry battalion);

9th Paratrooper Engineer Battalion (Witsig);

3d Battalion (Tunisian troops);

30th Replacement Battalion⁸⁹;

one artillery battalion consisting of four batteries;

one battalion with 105 mm guns from the 190th Artillery Regiment;

one signal communications platoon;

one understrengthed antiaircraft artillery combat team;

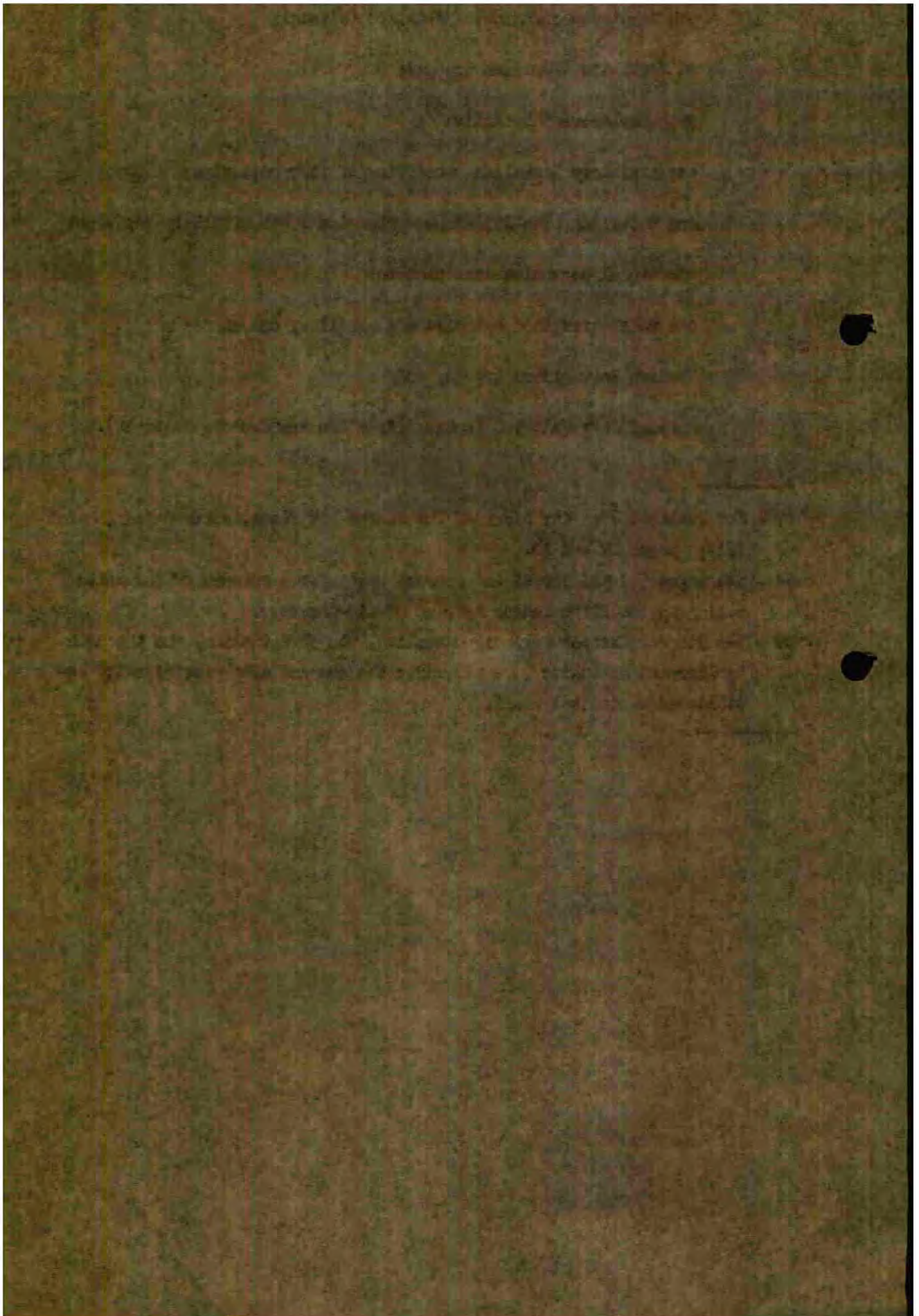
Italian Bersaglieri troops; and

Special Duty Unit von Eschman (from the Brandenburg Regiment).

87 - See Footnote 27; War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 4 March 1943; pages 17 and 18.

88 - See pages 564 and 566 of the present study for a summary of the units making up the Fifth Panzer Army as of mid-December.

89 - The 9th Paratrooper Engineer Battalion, the 3d Battalion, and the 30th Replacement Battalion were all under the command of a provisionally established regimental staff.



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The following force was assigned to the middle and southern sectors:

Combat Group WEBER

Brigade Lang;

47th Infantry Regiment (Motorized) and 504th Panzer Battalion;

334th Infantry Division;

Division Hermann Goering (not yet up to full strength); and

four artillery battalions, comprising twelve batteries⁹⁰.

During the early days of March, the Division von Manteuffel had carried out successful raids along the coastal sector⁹¹, during the course of which the enemy lost 2,100 prisoners, 68 tanks and armored reconnaissance cars, and 36 artillery pieces⁹². In the few days following 6 March, it reached the area around Djebel Abied, west of Tabarka⁹³.

A German Chief of Staff, Colonel Bayerlein, had been assigned to the staff of General Giovanni Messe's Army. This Army was composed of the following elements:

Command Headquarters, Italian XX Army Corps, including Corps artillery;

Command Headquarters, Italian XXI Army Corps, including Corps artillery;

Italian Division Giovanni Fusiati;

Italian 16th Division Pistoia;

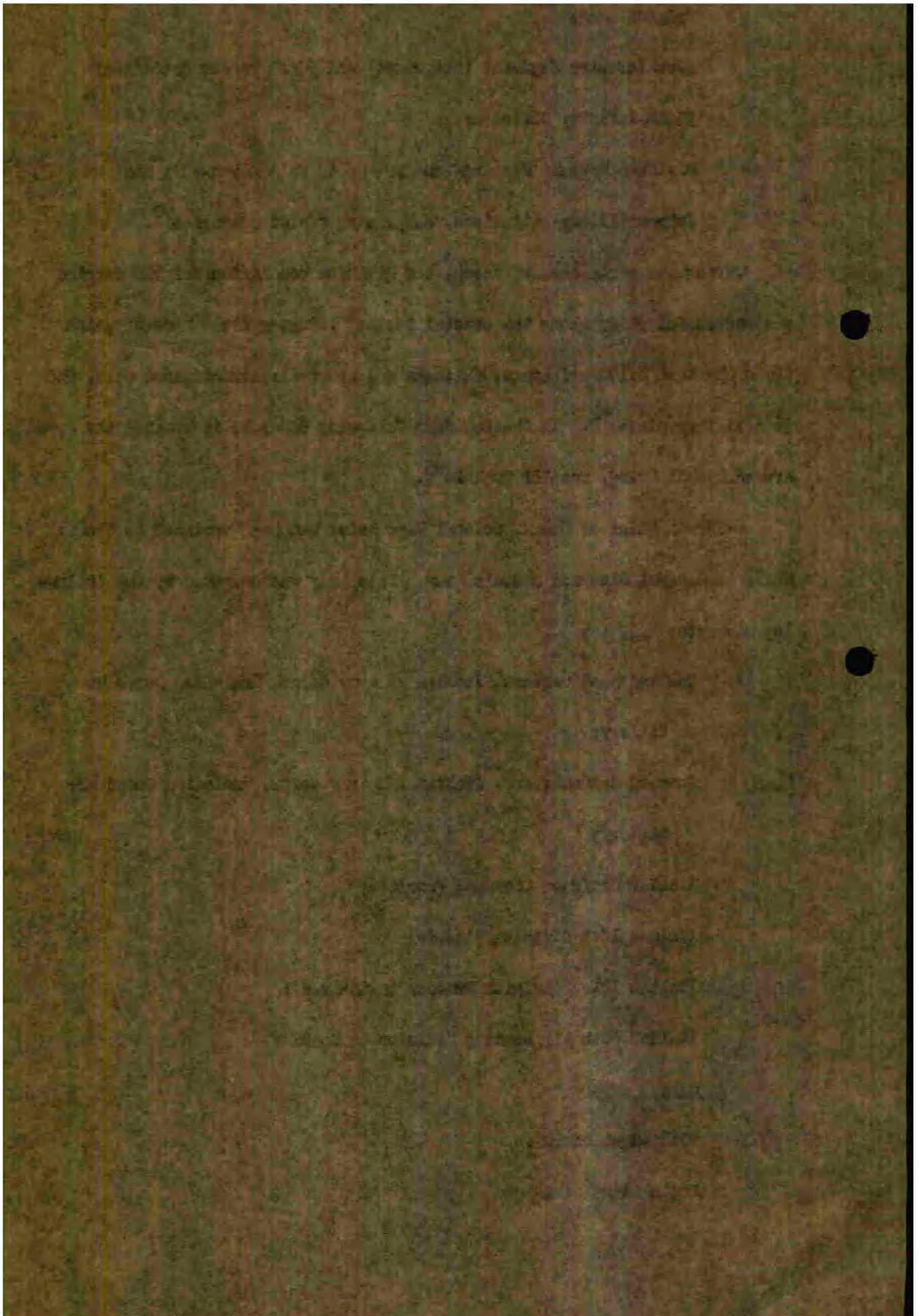
Italian 101st Division Trieste (Motorized);

Italian 80th Air Landing Division La Spezia;

German troops:

90th Light Division;

164th Light Division;



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15th Panzer Division; and

Luftwaffe Rifle Brigade Nicolai.

Of these forces, three Italian divisions (the Giovanni Fascisti, the 16th Division Pistoia, and the 101st Division Trieste) had been assigned to the Mareth line since mid-January as a security force, its task to build up the fortifications of the line⁹⁴.

The German 90th and 164th Light Divisions and the Italian 101st Division Trieste had been assigned the task of holding back the British Eighth Army in its attempt to reach the outskirts of the Mareth line positions.

During the second half of February, the Allied 51st Division and 7th Armored Division had succeeded in pushing back the Axis advance forces towards the south. In addition they had captured the outpost positions of El-Gardane and Medenine, with their well-equipped airfields, and the Four Tatahouine Pass.

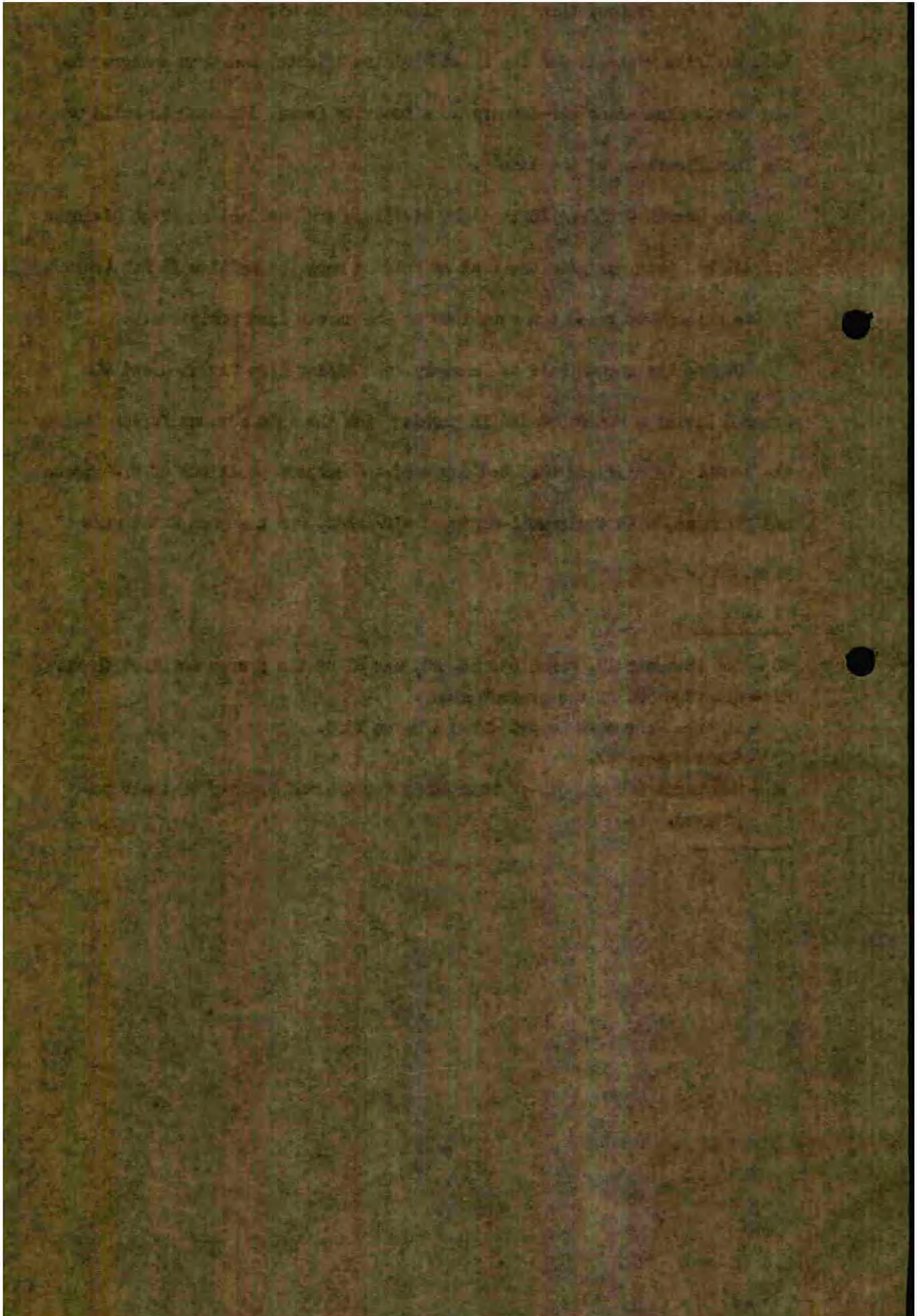
90 - See Footnote 17, pages 63, 64, 80, and 81 of the source detailed there.

91 - See page 588 of the present study.

92 - See the Wehrmacht Report dated 4 March 1943.

93 - See Footnote 27.

94 - See pages 609 and 610 of this study for a brief summary of their positions.



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The majority of the British Eighth Army forces, however, still lagged fairly far behind, as a result of supply difficulties. Thus, the plan of interfering in their assembly operations with numerically superior troops seemed to give promise of success.

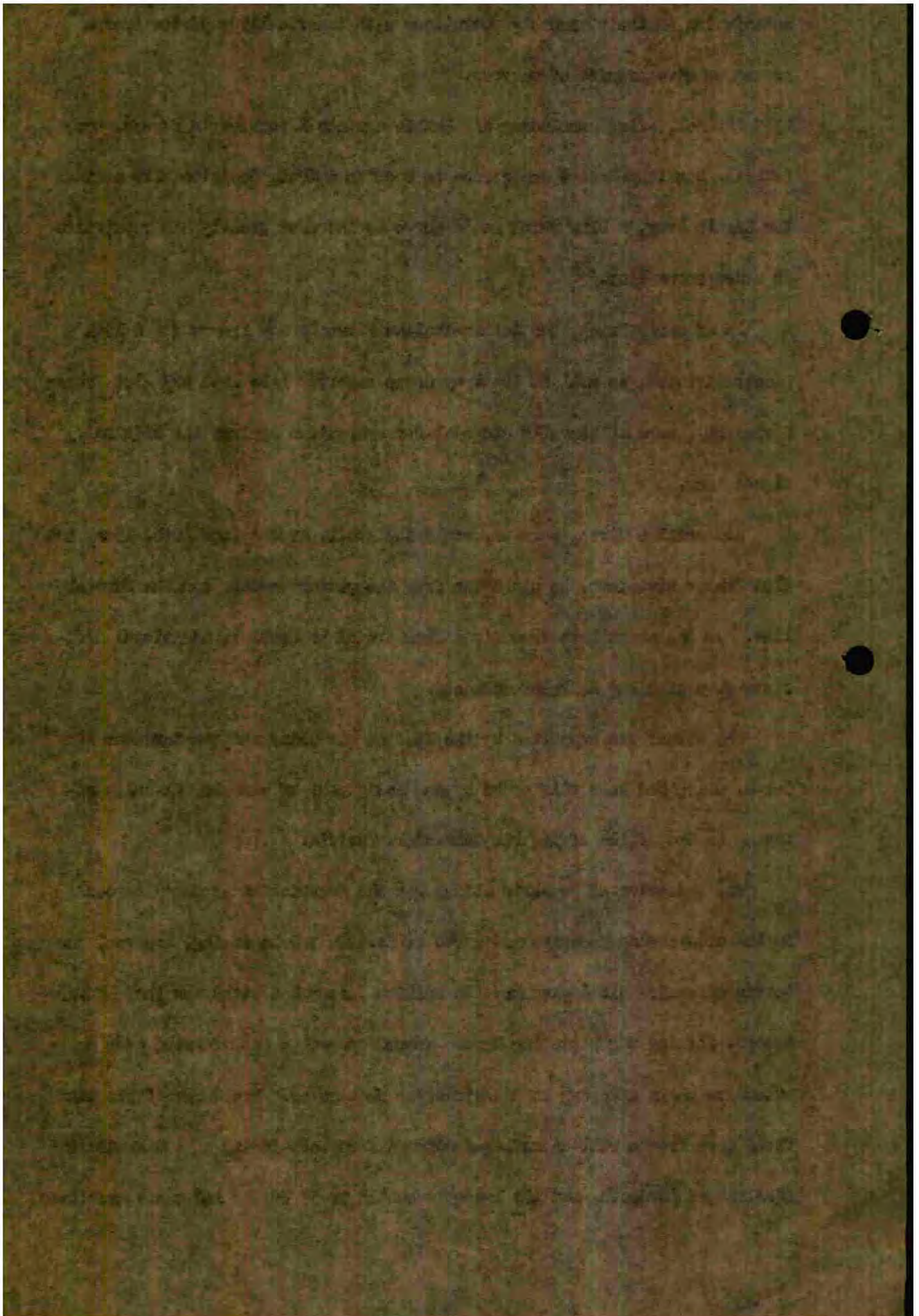
"Rommel, after concluding his battle against Eisenhower's forces, was to bring his long desert experience to bear in a last, decisive blow against the Eighth Army, a blow which would serve to increase greatly his reputation as a desert warrior."⁹⁵

As of early March, the German-Italian First Panzer Army and the 15th Panzer Division, as well as the Army Group reserves (the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions), were at Rommel's disposal for operations against the British Eighth Army.

Not until 6 March, however, could the mobile troops (the 10th, 15th, and 21st Panzer Divisions) be withdrawn from the western sector and the Mareth line. In the event that Rommel's attack proved successful, additional divisions were promised as reinforcements.

The attack was supported by the Italian air units and the Tunisian Air Corps, which had been reinforced by the assignment of a number of units attached to the office of the Air Commander, Tunisia.

The objective of Rommel's attack was the destruction of enemy forces in the area around Medenine and north of it. In the beginning, however, the German offensive hit a vacuum; the British forces had withdrawn their advance troops, forcing the attacking German armored force to push forward over an extensive plain offering no terrain cover whatsoever. The German force was fired upon from a well-camouflaged defense front consisting of 400 antitank guns ranged in depth, and its losses amounted to 52 of the 140 tanks committed.

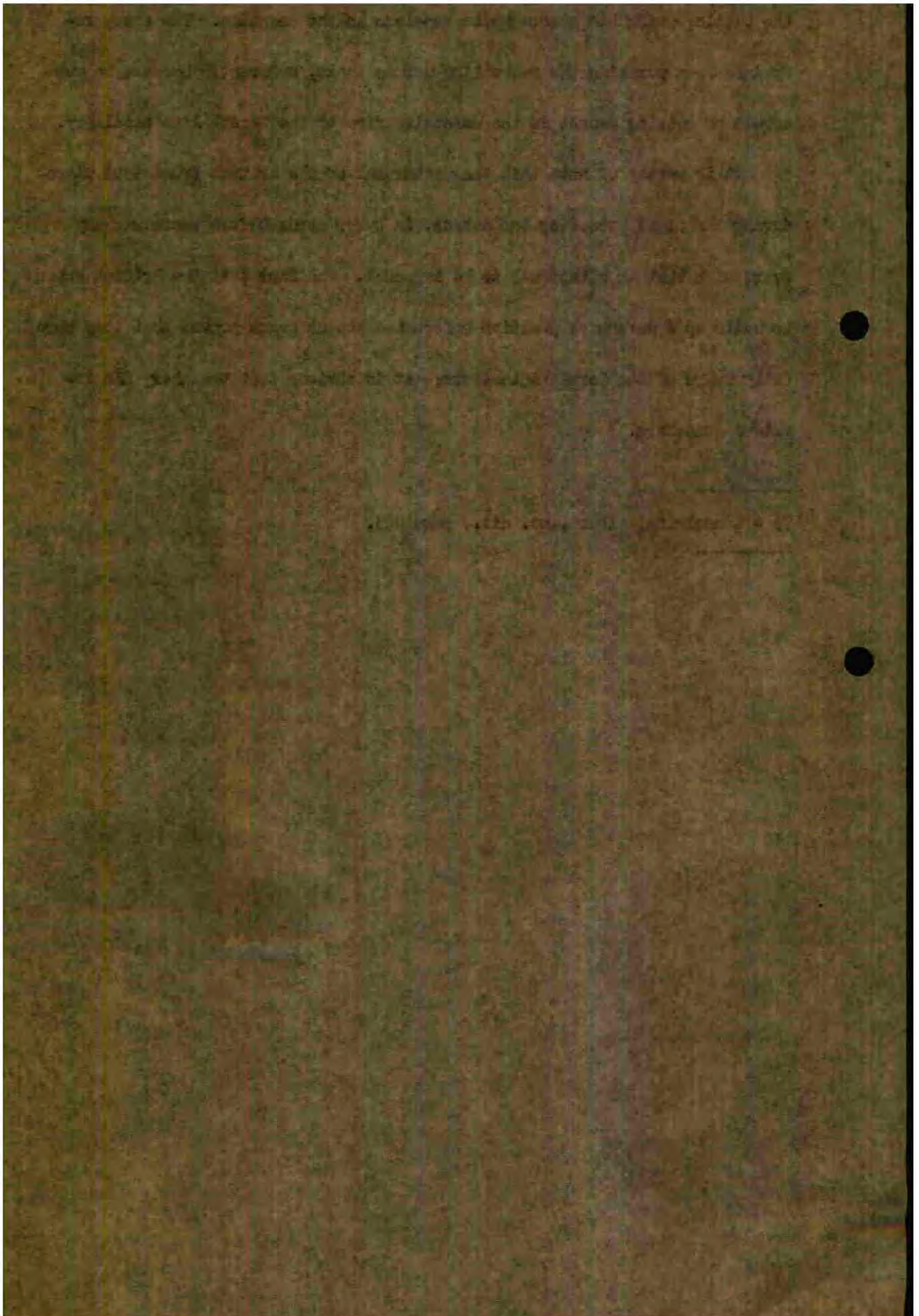


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This assault group of tanks was obviously gravely handicapped by inadequate German artillery cover, and Feldmarschall Rommel decided to break off the battle, which had become quite hopeless in the meantime. The enemy refrained from pursuing the retreating German tanks, apparently because he was afraid of getting caught in the defensive fire of the Mareth line artillery.

It is worthy of note that the withdrawal of the British front took place during the night preceding the attack, in other words before there was any overt sign that an attack was to be launched. The fact that the British began to build up a defensive position before the attack began proves that they were fully aware of the German intentions; it is obvious that treachery was involved somewhere.

95 - Kesselring, Albert, op. cit., page 205.



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The outcome of the attack at Medenine was catastrophic. Instead of the anticipated weakness of the enemy forces, the deciding factor turned out to be the weakness of the German Panzer units, a factor which was to play a significant role in the subsequent fighting on the Mareth line.

Feldmarschall Rommel's declining health forced him to take an extended leave of absence. Generaloberst von Arnim assumed command over the Army Group Africa. At Hitler's order, Rommel's departure from Africa was kept secret in order to deceive the enemy.

The Mareth line was strongest in the southeast; Wadi Ziguan was being held by a fairly strong armored force.

The western sector was composed of mountain ridges some sixty miles in length, running from south to north, extending from Fom Tatahouine towards Toujane, in the north. This sector, too, was relatively easy to defend as a result of the mountainous character of its terrain.

The natural strength of the Mareth position had been enhanced by man-made fortifications. Some of these had been deprived of their value by the fact that the Italian armistice commission had insisted that the stationary guns mounted in the artillery niches be torn out and removed.

The weakness of the Mareth line lay in the fact that it was possible for an enemy force to encircle it in the northwest by approaching through the narrow passage between Djebel Tabaga and Djebel Melab. In order to reach this point, however, a 125-mile march through the waterless desert along the western slopes of the Matmata Hills was necessary. Shortly before the war began, the French had hastily constructed a road block at Djebel Tabaga.

The Commander in Chief, South, was well aware -- both from French sources and from the results of German reconnaissance -- that the terrain was negotiable,

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though difficult; he assumed that the British would take this fact into consideration.

In the meantime, German and Italian reconnaissance units, together with the Italian Sahara Group Mannerini (consisting of five motorized battalions with a total of eight batteries), were securing the open southwest flank.

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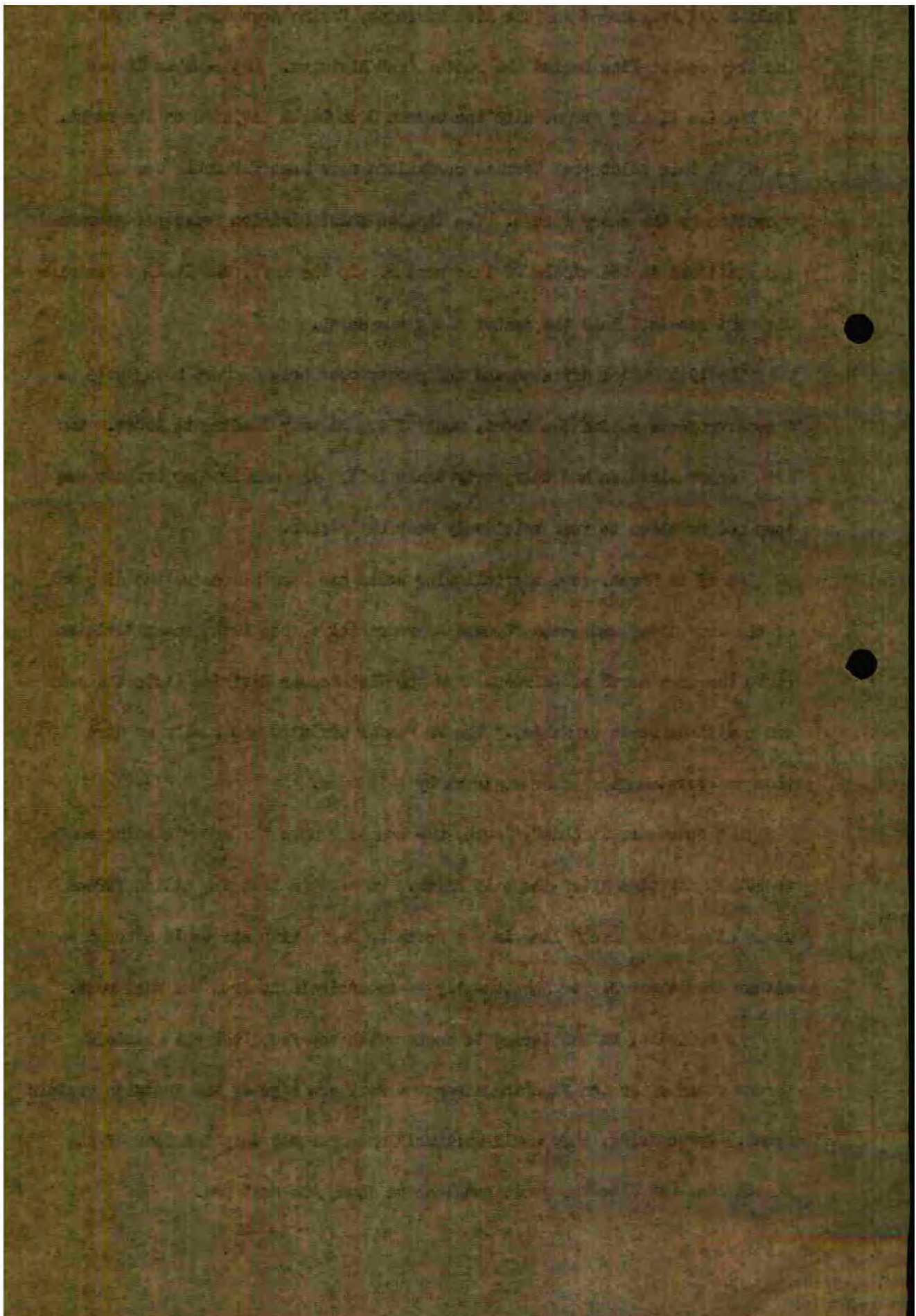
As of 10 March, the southern spur of the 164th Light Division was established on the southeast sector of the Mareth line, facing east. The Italian XXI Army Corps and the 16th Division, facing southeast, ^{were} holding the Army combat line behind the 164th Light Division. Adjacent to it was the Italian XX Army Corps, with the German 90th Light Division on its right. It was at this point that terrain conditions were most favorable for an operation by the enemy forces. The Italian 101st Division Trieste (Motorized) was stationed in the middle of this sector. To the left, the Italian Division Giovanni Fascisti held the sector along the coast.

The 15th Panzer Division and the paratrooper brigade were being held as a reserve force behind the front, west of the highway leading to Gabes. The 15th Panzer Division had only forty tanks left; the paratrooper brigade was composed of three to four relatively weak battalions.

As of 10 March, too, the following units had been placed at the disposal of the Army Group and moved forward appropriately: the 10th Panzer Division (into the area north of Maironan) and the 21st Panzer Division (into the salt sea positions north of Gabes). The 2d Panzer Division was really no more than an overstrength Panzer regiment by this time.

The Commander in Chief, South, was counting upon the enemy's being ready to attack any time after about 15 March. He assumed that the Allied forces would attack the Mareth line in the south to begin with and would attempt -- either simultaneously or subsequently -- to encircle it from the northwest.

In addition, he was forced to reckon with the fact that the American forces would enter the fighting along the southern edge of the Tunisian western front. By so doing, they would seriously endanger not only the rear of the Mareth line but also the positions located along the salt sea.



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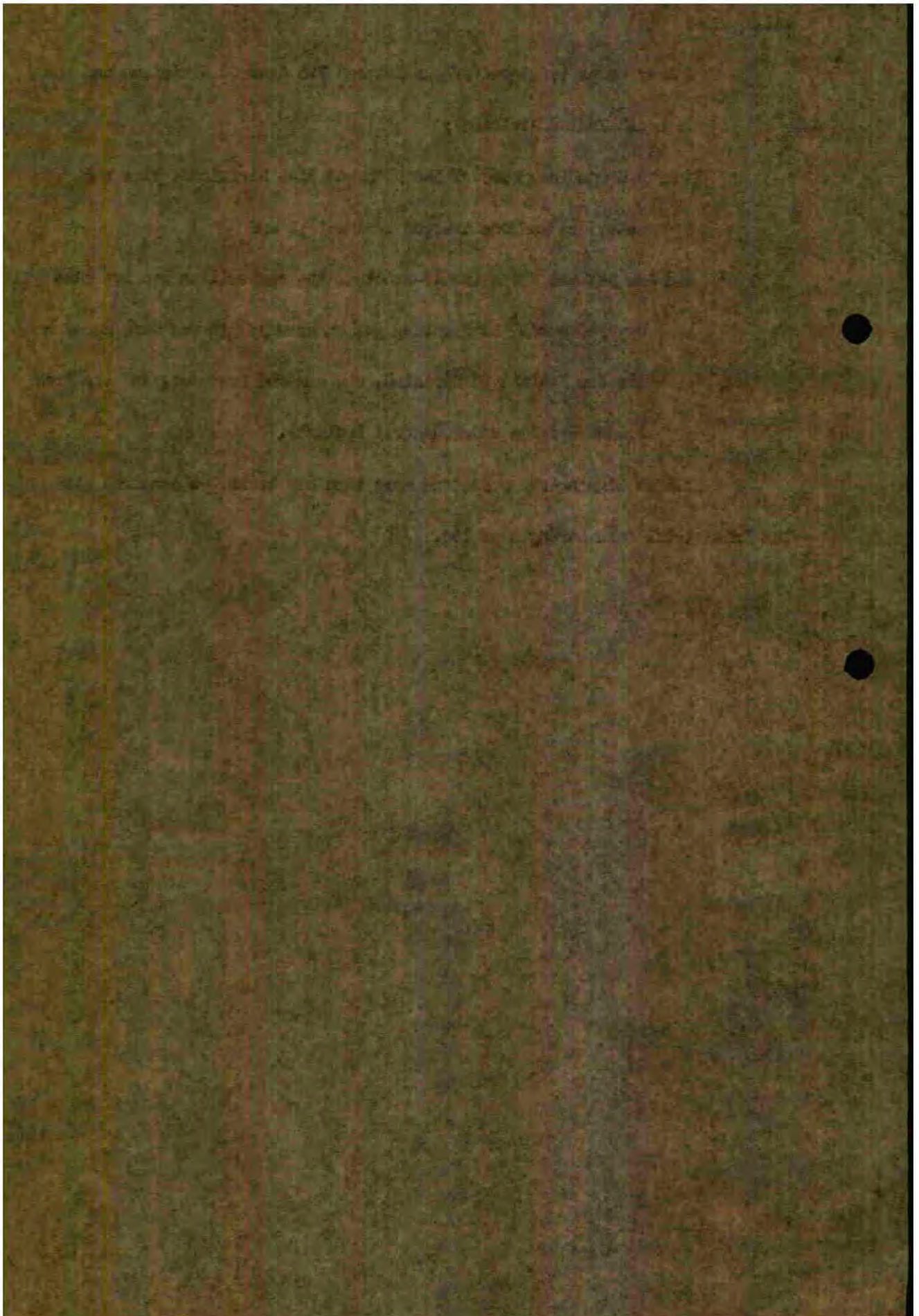
The British Eighth Army, engaged in its final regrouping before the attack, had at its disposal the following units, already known to Axis intelligence:

X Army Corps (composed of the 1st and 7th Armored Divisions and the 4th Indian Division);

XII Army Corps (composed of the 50th and 51st Divisions, plus one motorized and one armored regiment); and

The New Zealand Corps (newly-created, its composition was not discovered until the fighting got under way; it was made up of the New Zealand 2d Division, one armored regiment, and the Free French Brigade under General Leclerc).

The British Eighth Army possessed more than 600 tanks, as compared with the Axis' total tank strength of 150.



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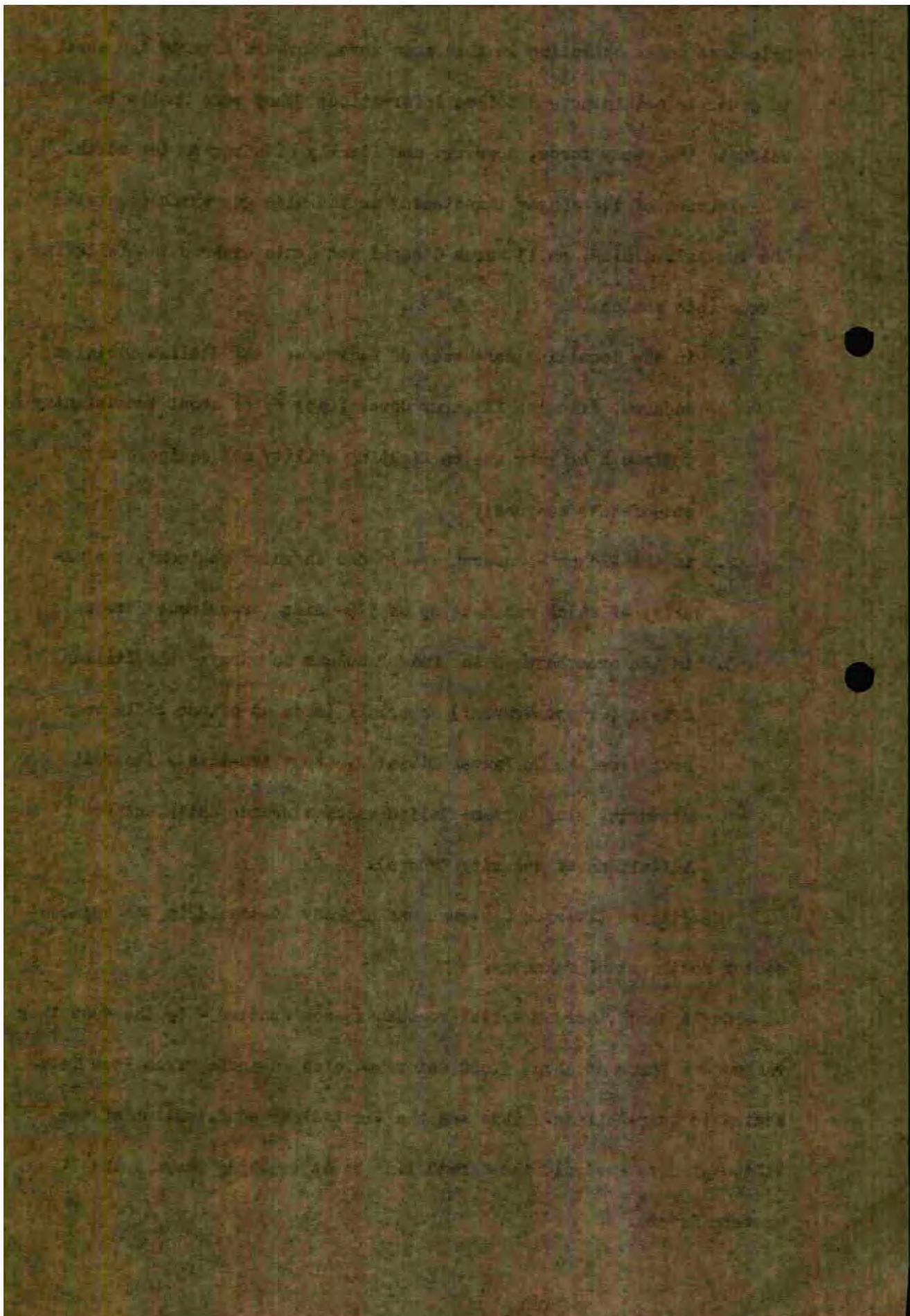
On 10 March, an enemy marching column with approximately 500 tanks was observed to be advancing in the direction of Ksar-Rhilane; it was apparently Leclerc's Free French Brigade⁹⁶. The German-Italian reconnaissance units operating in this area moved forward towards the south in order to obtain more detailed information; they were unable to relocate the enemy force, however, and finally withdrew to the north.

In view of the danger threatening in the wide gap which separated the two Axis armies, on 13 March General von Arnim ordered the following forces into action:

1. in the mountains northwest of Kairouan: the Italian Division Superba, from the XXX Army Corps (made up of about two infantry regiments of very uneven fighting ability and equipped with out-of-date weapons);
2. in the Pichon - Fondouk area: one infantry regiment, the majority of which was made up of 999-units (experienced troops);
3. in the area between the Faid Pass and Maknassy: the Italian Grusse (Gruppe-Group ?) Imperiali (made up of one rifle regiment from the 2d Panzer Division, about two-thirds its full strength, plus German-Italian reconnaissance units and two battalions of security troops).

The Italian Division Centauro was already stationed in the adjacent sector southwest of Maknassy.

On 18 March, German aerial reconnaissance spotted - by the dust they raised - a force of about 3,000 motor vehicles advancing from Fom Tatahouine to Ksar-Rhilane. This was the first clear confirmation of the Allied plan to encircle the Mareth line by approaching through the western desert.



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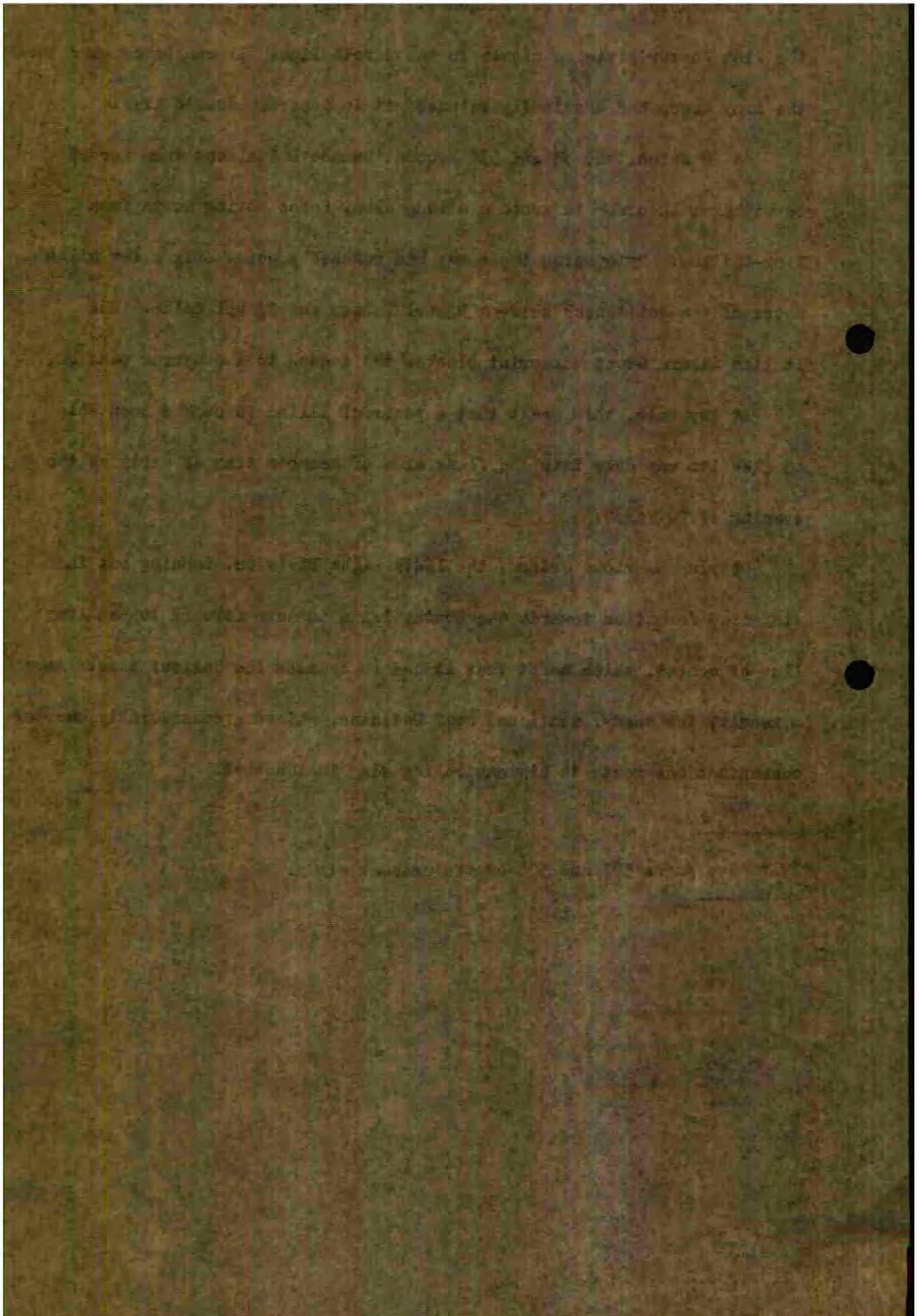
There is nothing on record to indicate whether or in how far the Army Group Africa and the German-Italian First Panzer Army reacted to this threatening bit of intelligence. The only action taken was to move the 21st Panzer Division closer to the Mareth line. It can be assumed that the Army Group had previously released it to General Messe's Army.

On 20 March, the 3d and 35d Reconnaissance Battalions were forced to withdraw in order to avoid a strong enemy force moving north from Ksar-Rhilane. By evening the enemy had reached a point only a few miles short of the bottleneck between Djebel Tabaga and Djebel Melab. The Italian Sahara Group Mannerini blocked the access to the narrow passage.

At any rate, this meant that a powerful Allied force had been able to make its way deep into the flank area of Messe's Army as early as the evening of 20 March.

Obedying previous orders, the 164th Light Division, fanning out in staggered formation towards the south, began to move forward to the Army line of combat, which meant that it had to abandon the Hallouf Pass. As a result, the enemy, stationed near Medenine, gained a considerably shorter communications route to his encircling wing in the west.

96 - See pages 507 and 508 of the present study.

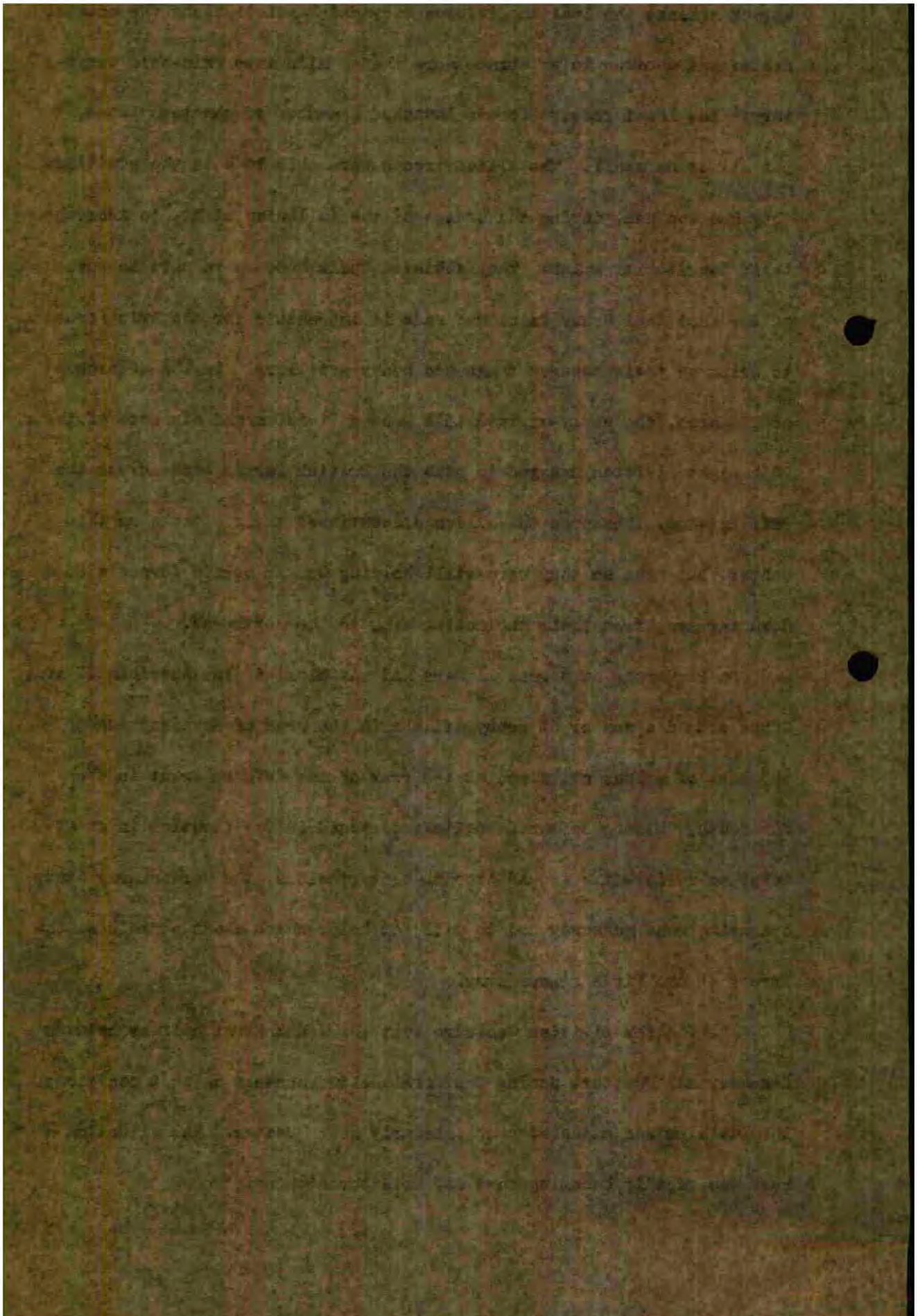


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During the night of 20/21 March, after lengthy preliminary artillery fire, the British 50th Division, XXX Army Corps, carried out an attack against the Italian Division Giovanni Fascisti along the coastal sector and managed to penetrate more than a mile into Axis-held territory. The local reserve forces launched a number of counterattacks, but all to no avail. The Allied troops were able to hold the positions they had won and, during the course of the following night, to increase their territorial gains. They achieved their success in part because of the fact that heavy rains had made it impossible for the Axis forces to bring up their reserve tanks and heavy artillery. On the afternoon of 22 March, the newly-arrived 15th Panzer Division and elements of the 90th Light Division managed to push the British forces back across the Wadi Zigmaou. Hereupon the Allies discontinued their attacks on this sector, but even so they were still holding German mobile forces tied down far away from their encircling wing to the northwest.

On 21 March, as German leaders had anticipated, the American II Army Corps staged a number of decoy attacks in the area of Maknassy and to the east of Gafsa, all aimed at the rear of the defense front in the far south. Strong Luftwaffe units intervened in the fighting in an attempt to relieve the ground troops. Nevertheless, the German Army Group operating near Maknassy had to call for help, which meant a drain on the forces of the Fifth Panzer Army.

The Italian Division Centauro lost the Gened Pass, halfway between Maknassy and Guettar, during the first Allied assault on that position; the Division was attacked simultaneously near Guettar. The situation here was rapidly becoming more and more threatening.

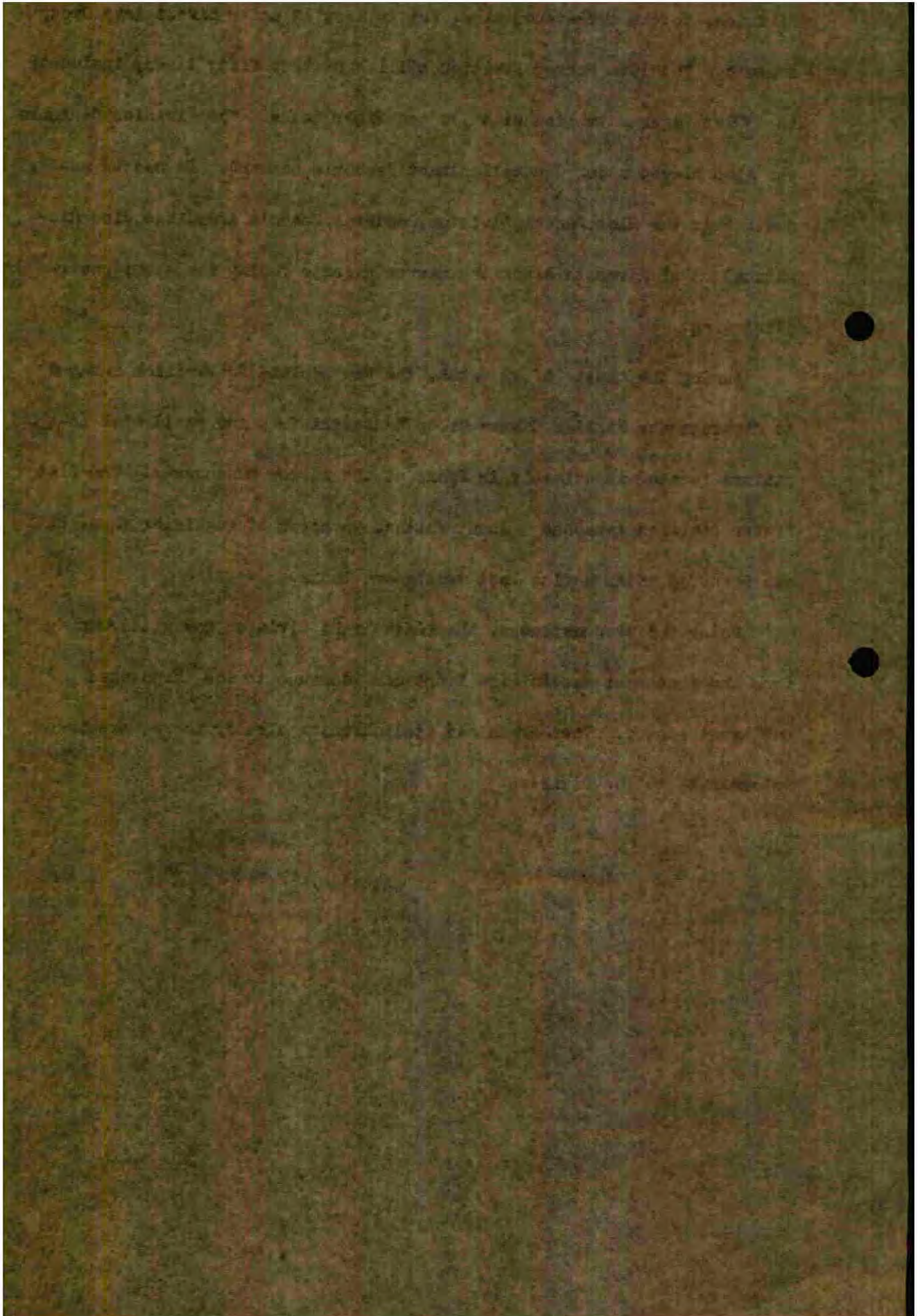


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On 21 March, the Army Group decided to assign Generallieutenant Cramer's staff, together with its last reserve force, the 10th Panzer Division, to the threatened area, but to keep it under direct Army Group command. The 10th Panzer Division still had about fifty tanks, including the 501st Tiger Battalion with its ten Tiger tanks. The Division Centauro was also placed under Generallieutenant Cramer's command. It can be assumed that the 21st Panzer Division, General Messe's Army, was also dispatched on 21 March to block the narrow passage facing the enemy encircling wing.

During the course of 22 March, the New Zealand 2d Division managed to dislodge the Italian Sahara Group Mannerini from two small hill positions located immediately in front of the narrow passageway. The 21st Panzer Division launched a counterattack in hopes of regaining them, but was rebuffed after having lost twenty-one tanks.

Under the circumstances, the 164th Light Division was withdrawn from the southeast Mareth line front and assigned to the threatened northwest sector. The German and Italian units already there were made subordinate to the Division.



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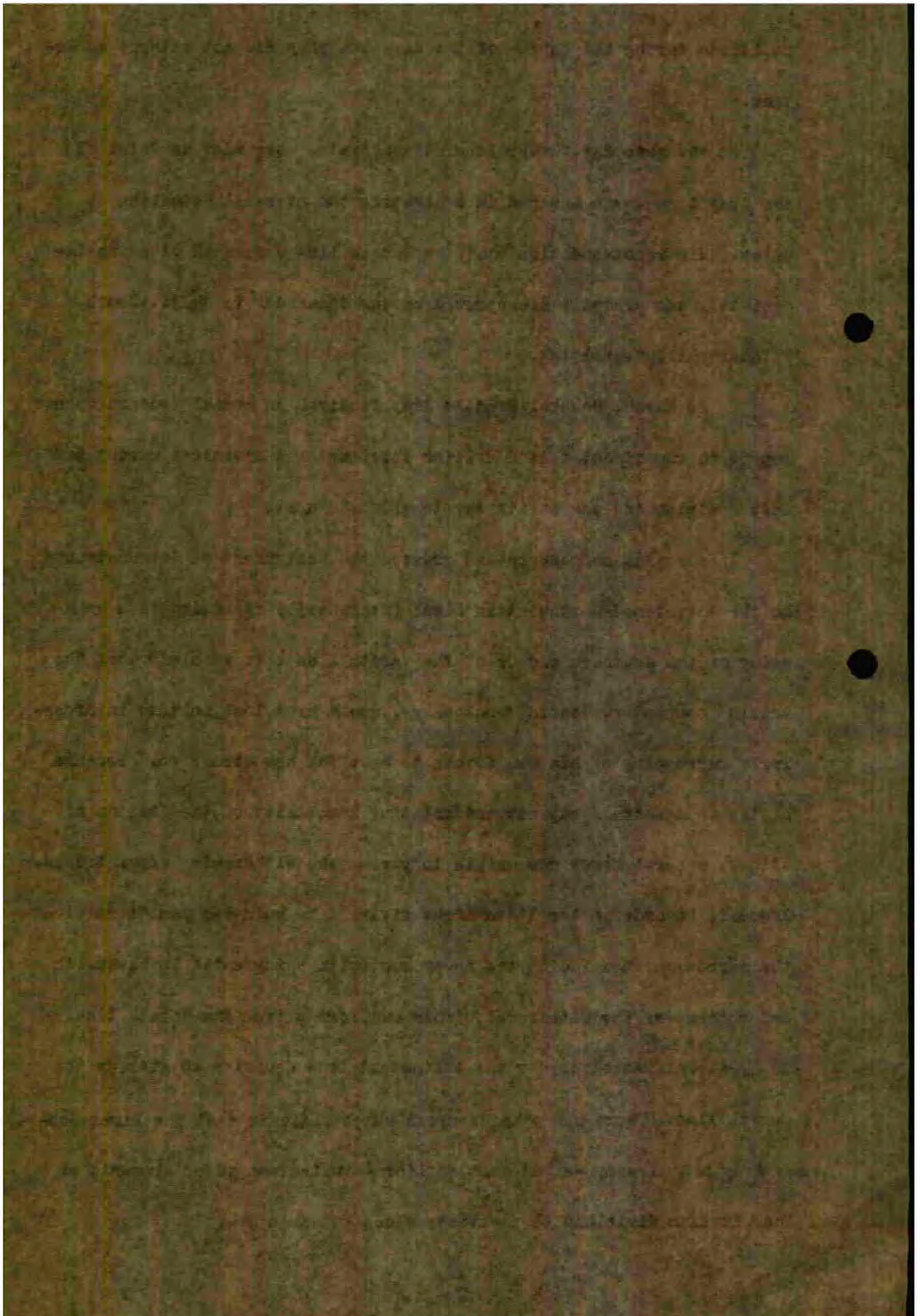
On 23 March the 164th Light Division took over the right wing of the defense front at the pass south of Djebel Tabaga, replacing the 21st Panzer Division. A large number of British tanks reconnoitered the Axis positions during the course of the day, but they did not attempt an attack.

On the same day, Generaloberst von Arnim, Commander in Chief of the Army Group, was engaged in evaluating the over-all situation at Gabes. His recommendation that the Mareth line should be given up immediately was promptly disapproved by the Commander in Chief, South, Feldmarschall Kesselring.

On 24 March, General Messe's Army received an aerial reconnaissance report to the effect that a British force several divisions strong had left Medenine and was on its way towards the west.

If the Axis commanders had ordered the assignment of German troops to the threatened northwestern flank (necessarily resulting in a weakening of the southern sector of the Mareth line), it is clear that the British commander, General Montgomery, would have lost no time in ordering a regrouping of his own forces to meet the new situation. Because of the inadequate equipment and relative immobility of the Italian divisions, General Messe was unable to pursue the withdrawing enemy troops. Instead, he ordered the 164th Light Division to hold its positions along the narrow passage facing the enemy encircling wing until 26 March, in order to cover the withdrawal of his own forces from the Mareth line.

General Messe's order was tantamount to a decision to give up the Mareth line. There are other sources which indicate that the First Panzer Army had already -- and much earlier -- withdrawn major elements of four Italian divisions to positions along the salt sea.



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On 22 March, the Lang Group (made up of four provisionally organized battalions from various sources, including a number of Tiger tanks, artillery batteries, and two 88 mm antiaircraft artillery battalions) was successful in its attempt to repulse an attempted enemy breakthrough on the southern sector of the Tunisian western front near Maknassy.

It was only due to Colonel Lang's far-sighted efficiency that a serious catastrophe was avoided on this sector. Colonel Pontow makes special mention of the bravery displayed by General Imperiali during the fighting here⁹⁷.

In the area east of Guettar, Axis forces also managed to prevent further territorial gains by the enemy troops.

97 - See footnote 17, page 95 of the source cited there.

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During the course of the following days, the pressure exerted by enemy forces east of Maknassy became steadily more intense; their attacks were countered by Axis defensive operations of varying success.

Farther to the south, in the area assigned to the German Army Corps, the fighting was strictly local. The Axis forces attempted an attack some ten miles east of Guettar, but it failed.

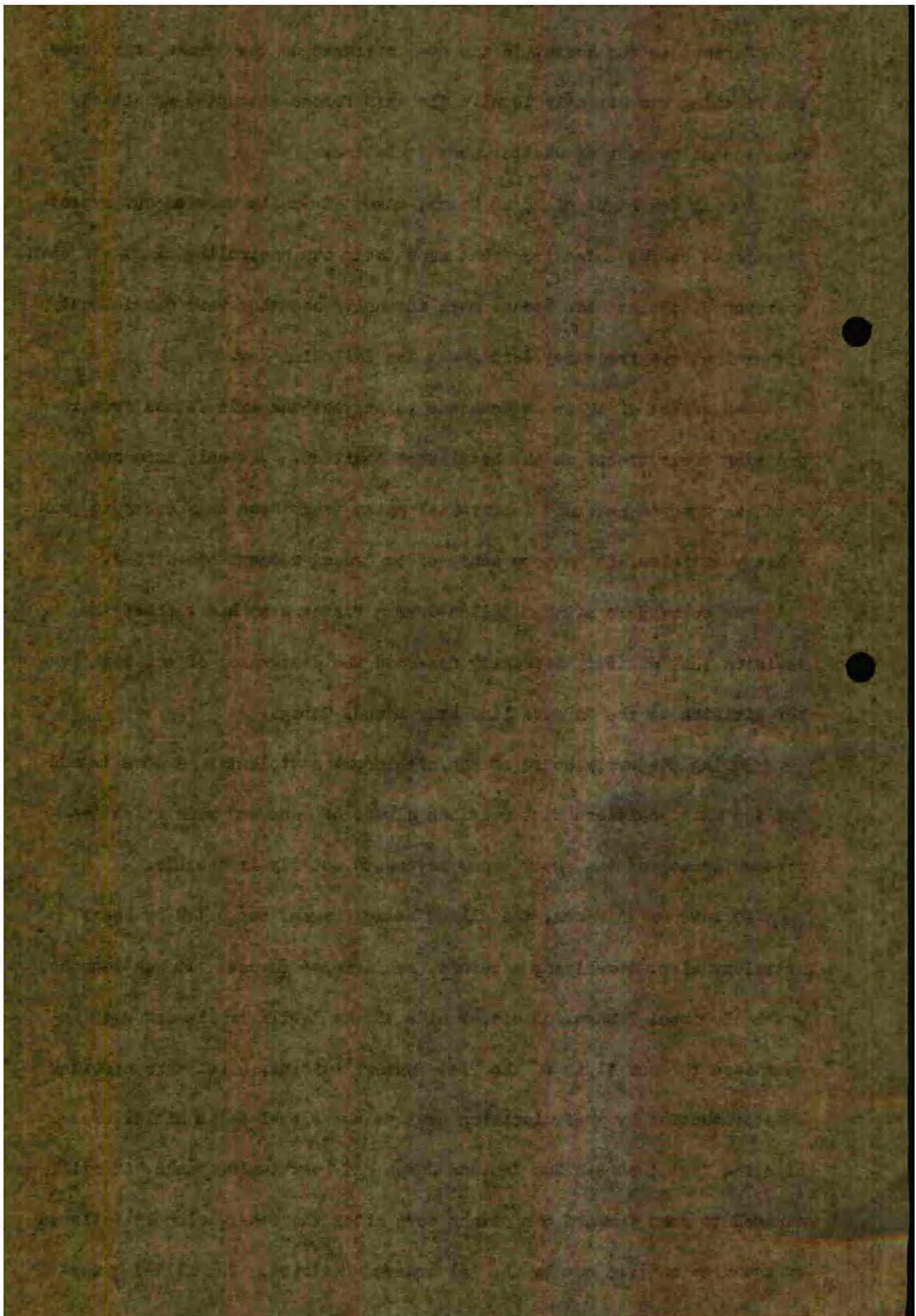
During the night of 25/26 March, enemy air units carried out repeated attacks on the defensive front near their own encircling wing. As dawn approached, the attacks became more intensive and they were carried out with relentless frequency throughout the following day.

One effect of these attacks was to prevent the Axis forces from regrouping their troops in the bottleneck position. The only Axis unit which managed to make any territorial gains (and these only sporadic) was a heavy antiaircraft battery assigned to ground-support operations.

The commanders of the Italian-German Panzer Army had reached the decision that military necessity demanded the assignment of the 15th Panzer Division to the defense line near Djebel Tabaga.

During the early hours of the afternoon, a violent sandstorm inundated the Axis positions with swirling clouds of sand and made effective reconnaissance of the enemy troop movements utterly impossible.

At 1800 on 26 March, the Allied attack began, supported by heavy artillery fire, low-flying aircraft, and armored forces. It was launched south of Djebel Tabaga, on either side of the Kebili trail, and even encompassed the positions of the 21st Panzer Division, which were afforded some protection by their location next to the Djebel Melab hills. Despite the fact that the New Zealand Corps had lost twelve tanks, it still managed to send forward one attack wave after the other, closely followed by assaults carried out by the 1st Armored Division. The Allied troops

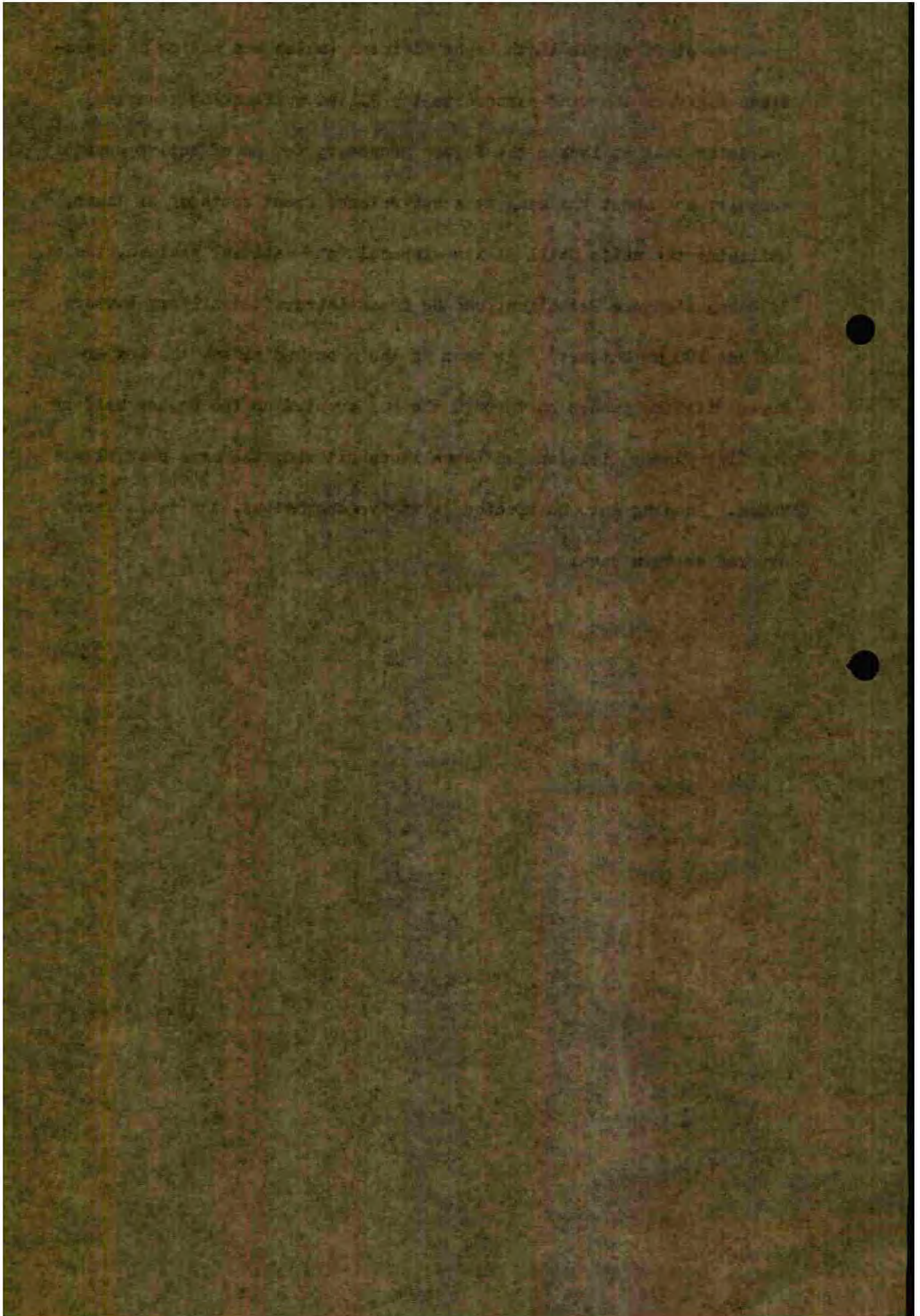


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succeeded in penetrating approximately three and one-half miles into Axis-held territory and in eliminating German artillery.

The attack was interrupted temporarily by the coming of darkness.

The staff of the 164th Light Division (which was acting as operations staff on the wing exposed to the Allied outflanking maneuver), realizing that it lacked the forces necessary for an effective counter-assault, set about building up a new defense front south of El Hamma, utilizing the units still at its disposal (one antitank platoon, the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, one 88 mm antiaircraft artillery battery, and one 100 mm battery). As soon as the moon had risen, the 1st Armored Division pushed on through the gap created on the sector held by the 21st Panzer Division and began reconnoitering the area near El Hamma. Running into unexpected defensive operations, the tanks were ordered to turn back.



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On the afternoon of 26 March, the 15th Panzer Division arrived on the scene of action. Coordinating its operations with those of the 21st Panzer Division (i.e. the remnants thereof, which had no more than twenty-five tanks at their disposal) and moving forward from a position protected in the rear by the foothills of Djebel Melak (sic - Melab?), it succeeded in checking the enemy troops and thus preventing the encirclement of the German-Italian First Panzer Army.

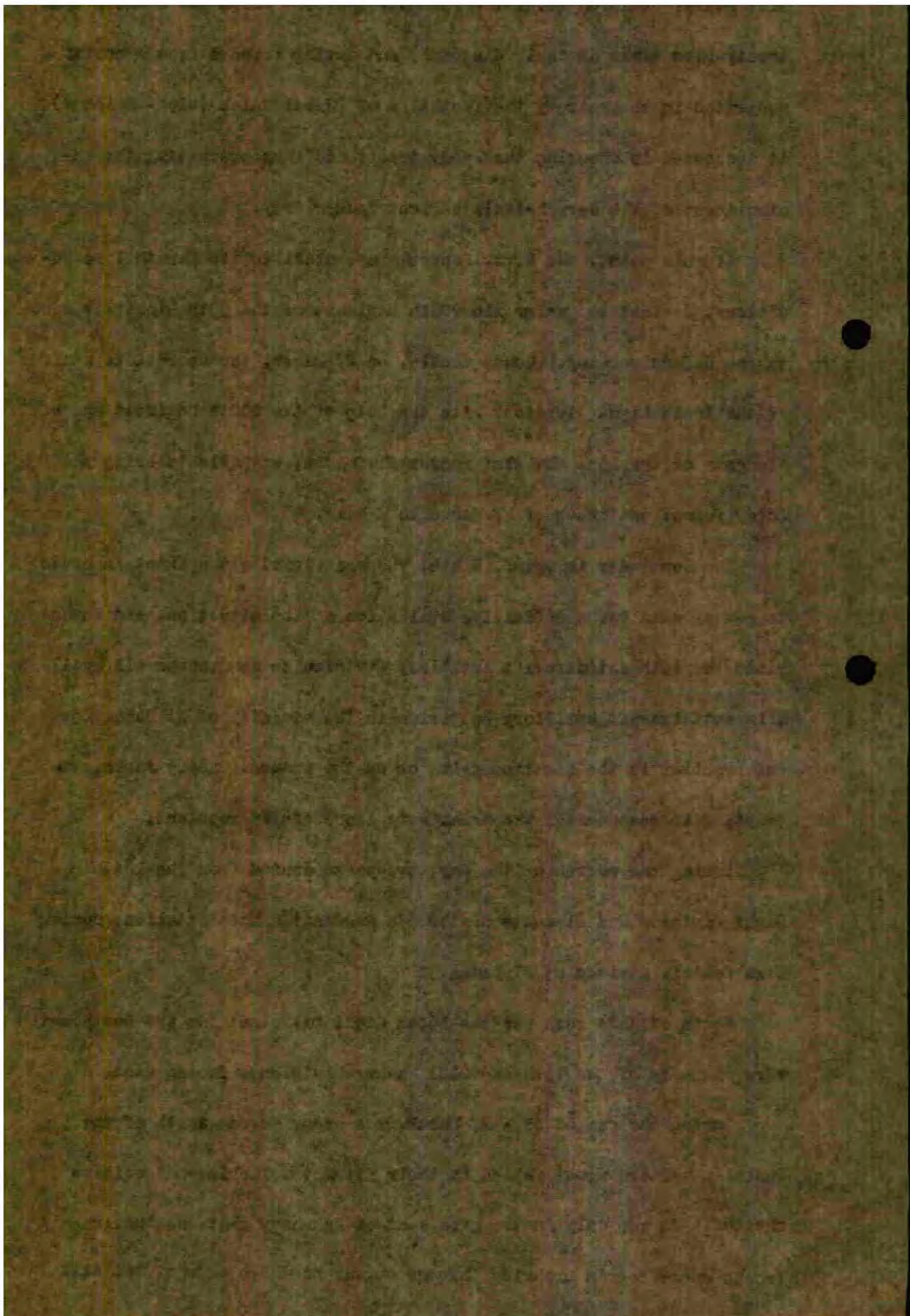
At this point, the First Panzer Army, still in its Mareth line positions, decided to assign the 200th Regiment of the 90th Light Division to the defensive wing. Consequently, on 27 March, the operations staff of the 164th Light Division, with the help of the 200th Regiment and of elements of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, was able to bring the enemy forces southwest of El Hamma to a halt.

The Commander in Chief, South, who was visiting the front in order to gather data for a definitive evaluation of the situation, had authorized the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division to commandeer all available antiaircraft artillery batteries in the vicinity of El Hamma for intervention in the fighting going on on the ground. Enemy tanks, attempting to reconnoiter the area, were successfully repulsed.

During the course of the day, troops separated from the 164th Light Division and elements of the 33d Reconnaissance Battalion, coming from Kebili, arrived at El Hamma.

South of this town was the 164th Light Division; to the southeast were elements of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, facing west.

During the period 25 - 27 March, the enemy forces south of the Tunisian western front failed in their attempt to achieve a decisive success. It was only in the area east of Maknassy that the American troops succeeded in breaking through on the northern edge of the Axis



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position along the ridge.

During the night of 27/28 March, the troops still left on the Mareth line began their withdrawal to the positions along the salt sea.

Thanks to the fact that the enemy failed to realize that a withdrawal movement was in progress, and to the fact that this withdrawal ran exactly according to plan, it was possible to pull back the troops operating at El Hamma during the same night. The 164th Light Division made its escape by detouring to the north, while the 15th Panzer Division, with the 21st Panzer Division under its command, withdrew via the highway to Oudref, thirteen miles northwest of Gabes.

The 90th Light Division, functioning as a rear guard force, marched on over the coastal highway leading through Gabes.

On the morning of 28 March, the enemy pushed forward, concentrating his forces along the coastal highway. His operations were effectively handicapped by mines and roadblocks, however. The British I Army Corps, advancing via El Hamma, was held back by severe sandstorms. Even so, the 1st Armored Division and the New Zealand 2d Division managed

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to reach Gabes during the course of the evening. Elements of the 15th Panzer Division were holding the narrow passage near Oudref, which was attacked by the enemy during the late hours of the evening.

During the afternoon of 28 March, south of the the Tunisian western front, the Combat Group Lang succeeded in regaining the northern sector of the ridge, which had been lost the day before. One regiment from the 10th Panzer Division, however, had been ordered on alert in El Guettar, to be ready for emergency developments. Thus, German leaders assumed that the situation on their sector of the front was secure for the immediate future.

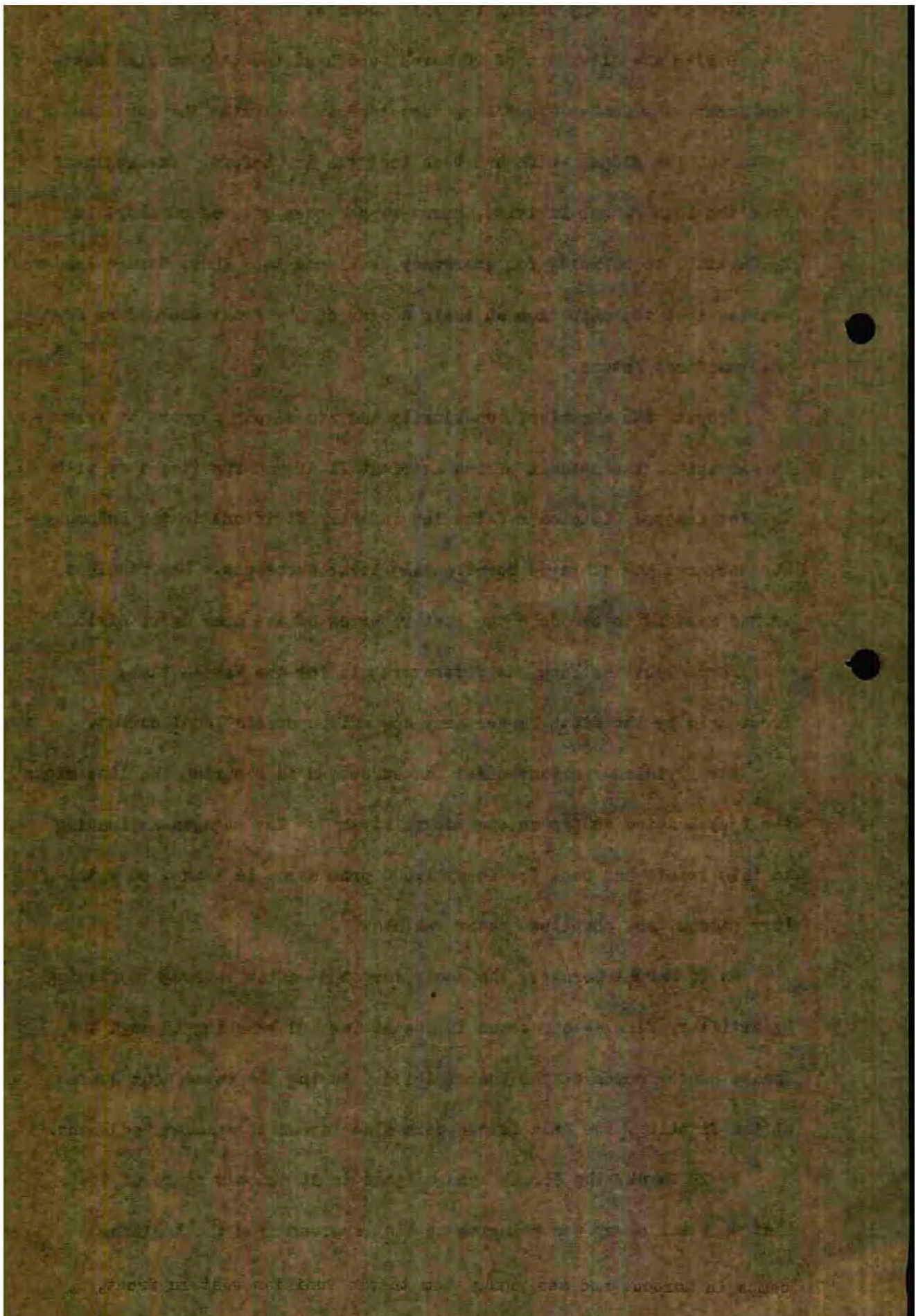
Despite its numerical superiority and its strong support by friendly air units, the assault of the American II Army Corps (together with the 1st Armored Division and the 1st Infantry Division) in the Maknassy - Guettar area had achieved no more than local successes. Nevertheless, it had managed to tie down the last reserves of the Army Group Africa.

Throughout the long and severe struggle for the Mareth line, the front held by the Fifth Panzer Army saw only sporadic local combat.

The Division von Manteuffel had succeeded in securing the line along the Djebel Abiod as far as the Zouara River⁹⁸. The engagement leading to this result had cost the enemy 1,600 prisoners, 16 tanks, 30 artillery pieces, and countless motor vehicles⁹⁹.

On 28 March, however, the enemy forces -- after thorough softening by artillery fire -- succeeded in assaulting and breaking through the Zouara sector north of the Djebel Abiod. During the subsequent course of the fighting, the Axis forces were also forced to abandon Sedjenane.

By 29 March, the German headquarters in Africa was aware of the fact that the enemy was bringing up his reserves from the training camps in Morocco and assigning them to the Tunisian western front,



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ready for action against the Fifth Panzer Army. Since the weather was improving rapidly, Axis leaders had no alternative but to prepare for strong enemy attacks.

The troops required for continuation of the battle on the northern sector could be recruited only from General Messe's Army.

The salt sea position, which they were expected to defend, was extremely strong by virtue of its geographic location; its only disadvantage was its relatively narrow width. In the west, it was bounded by the barely negotiable salt swamps; in the east, by the sea.

98 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 19 March 1945.

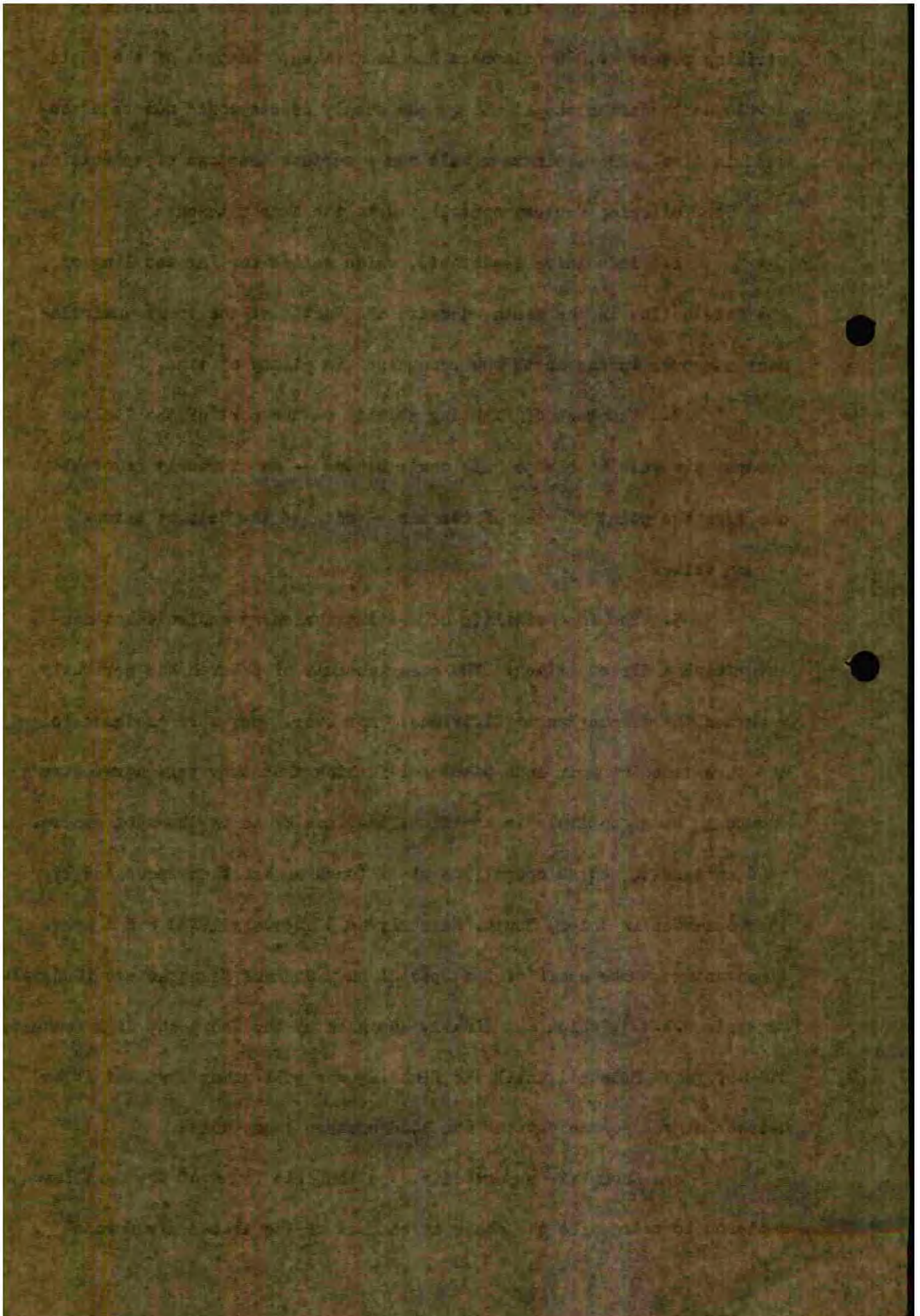
99 - See footnote 27, page 18 of the source cited there.

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During the course of a single week, the Mareth line had collapsed. And the personnel and materiel losses inflicted on the enemy were relatively slight. The Axis, on the other hand, had lost considerable striking power; 6,000 prisoners had been taken. Because of the rapid developments during the fighting, the supply depots could not be evacuated in time. The ultimate result was a serious shortage of ammunition.

The following factors contributed to the Axis setback:

1. Indecisive leadership, which relied for far too long on the Mareth line in the south, despite the fact that the enemy encirclement maneuver in the north was recognized in plenty of time.
2. The lack of fighting ability on the part of the Italian troops, who were unable to hold their sector -- an extremely favorable one from the point of view of terrain -- without the help of strong German units.
3. The impossibility of meeting the enemy encirclement maneuver with a direct attack. The enemy assault of 6 March had seriously weakened the German Panzer Divisions; moreover, they were assigned to the threatened wing in such piecemeal fashion that they were never strong enough to be effective. In addition, the lack of an on-the-spot general headquarters to act as operations staff (such as had been requested by the Commander in Chief, South, as early as 3 February 1943) was a grave disadvantage. The staff of the Special Duty Command Headquarters (General-kommando s.b.V.), which was finally assigned by the Wehrmacht High Command, did not reach Frascati until the fighting was well under way, and it had neither signal communications nor headquarters troop units.
4. Enemy air superiority, the tangible fruit of the Casablanca decision to reorganize the chain of command of the Allied air forces¹⁰⁰.



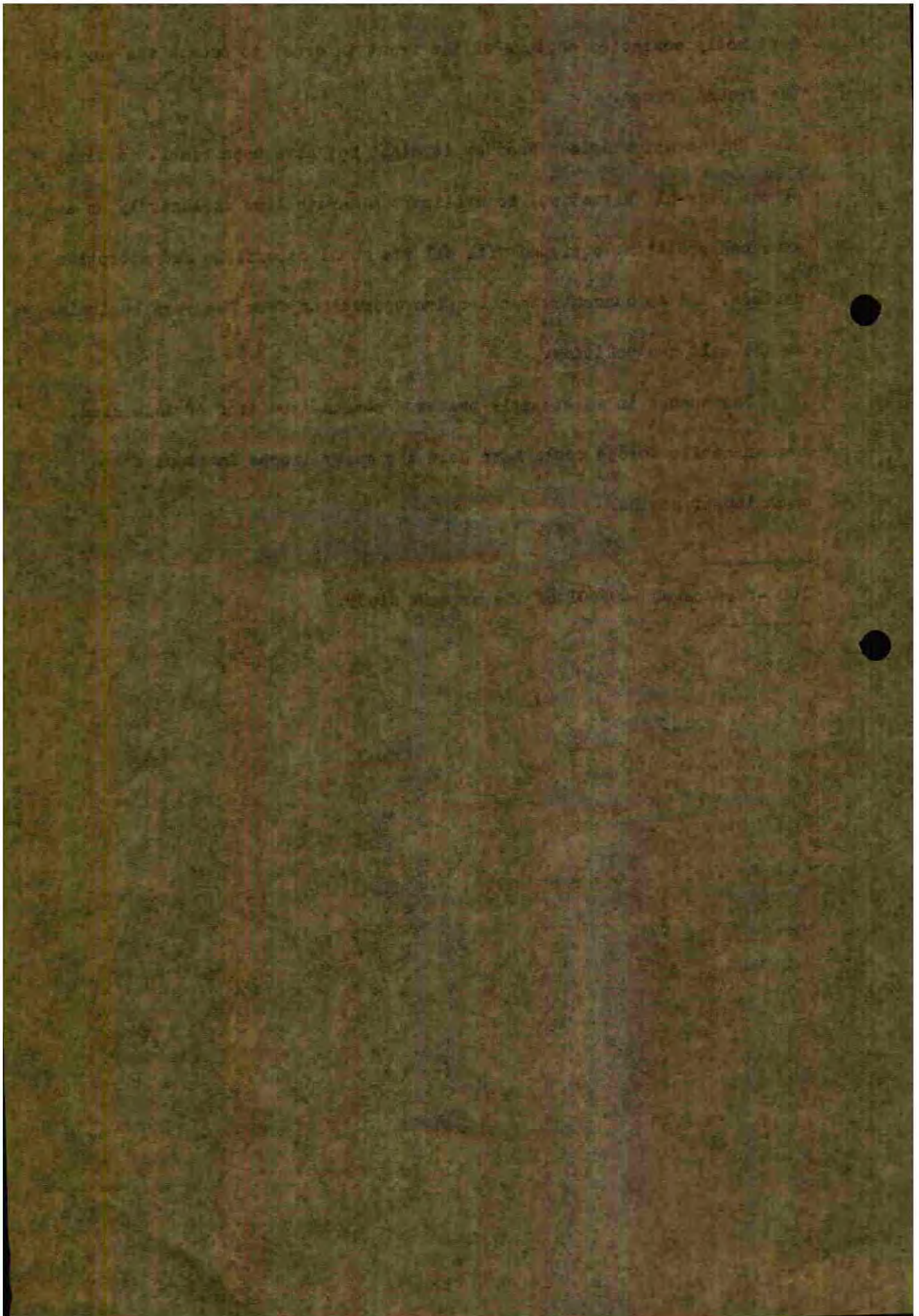
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For the first time in combat, the British made use of the air liaison officers assigned to their staffs in the front-line area. Utilising radio communication, these liaison officers guided the air units to the most hotly contested sectors of the front in order to smooth the way for the ground forces.

The question arises whether it might not have been wiser, in view of the over-all situation, to utilize the Mareth line exclusively as an advanced position, equipped with all the usual camouflage and deception devices, and to concentrate defensive operations from the very beginning on the salt sea position.

Entrenched in an expertly prepared advance position of this kind, German mobile forces could have held the enemy troops in check for a much longer period.

100 - See pages 600/601 of the present study.



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For the enemy had no choice but to attack the salt marsh position from the front; there was no way in which it could be encircled and thus eliminated as a danger.

In addition, from the Axis point of view, the inclusion of the salt marsh position in the line of defense would have been most advantageous in that it would have given the latter additional depth.

On 10 March 1943, the authorized strength of the Second Air Fleet in the Mediterranean area was 1,111 aircraft, 670 of which were capable of immediate employment.

Of this total, the Tunisian Air Corps possessed 386 aircraft, 229 of which were ready for commitment.

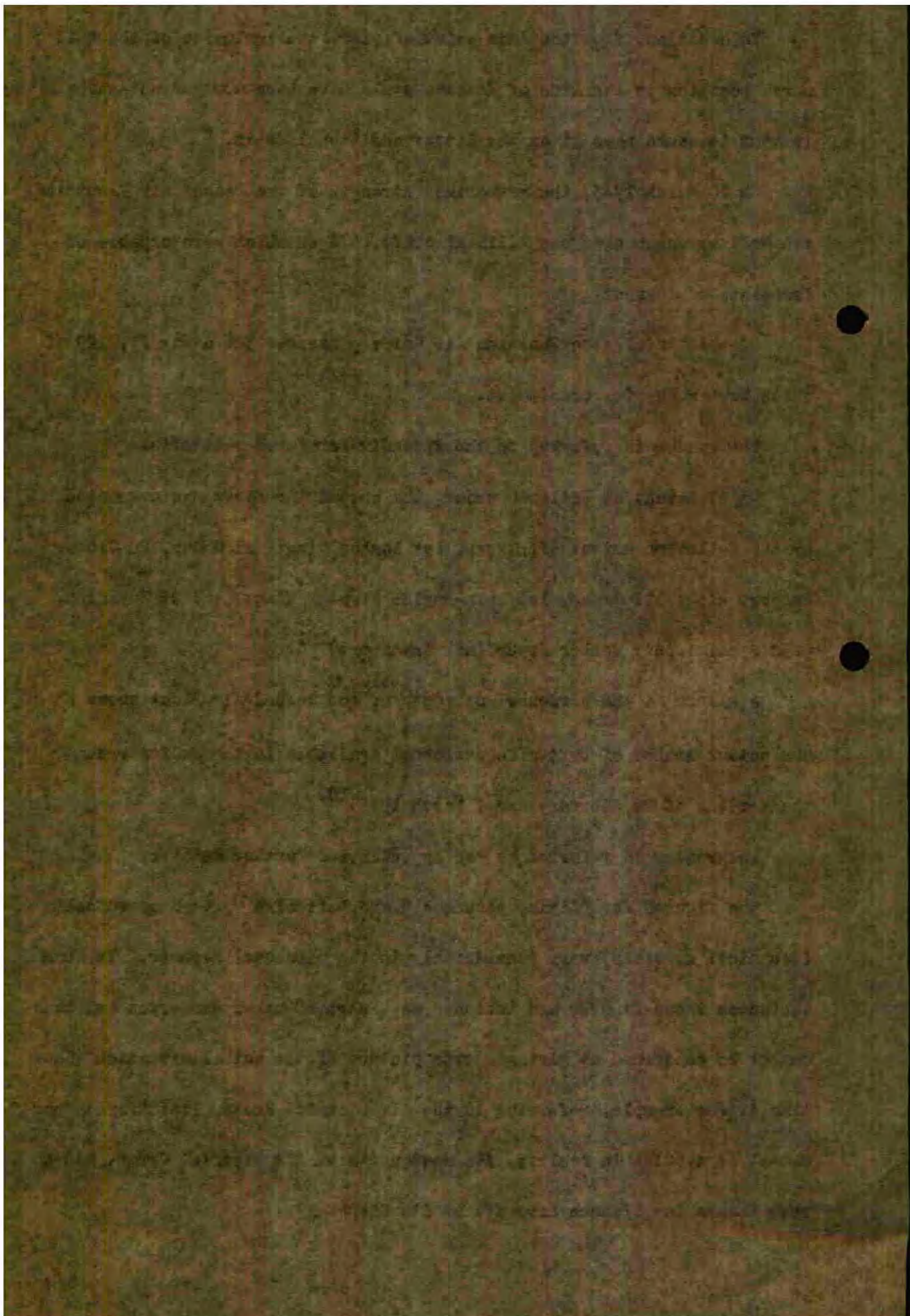
The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

On 27 March, at Hitler's order, the Second Air Fleet was augmented by the following units: II Group, 1st Bomber Wing; II Group, 2d Close-Support Wing; II Group, 1st Twin-Engine Fighter Wing; and 2d Squadron, 323d Special Duty Bomber Group (air transport)¹⁰¹.

A glance at the personnel strength/^{tables} of the Second Air Fleet shows us the actual number of Luftwaffe personnel available in the Mediterranean theater (as of 22 February and 7 March 1943)¹⁰².

The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

The figures for "flying personnel" and Luftwaffe "ground personnel" (technical services) vary considerably in the personnel reports. In some instances these figures are included as a part of other summaries and thus cannot be construed as giving a true picture of the actual situation (Section d, for example, referring to the Air District Crete, lists flying personnel at 4,661; in reality, the Headquarters, Air District Crete, had no more than a few liaison aircraft at its disposal).



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As far as the Italian mainland is concerned, the reports indicate a ratio of approximately 5.5 ground personnel to one member of the flying force. In Tunisia and North Africa, however, the ratio was almost 1:13.

The personnel reports also fail to give any clear indication of what percentage of the assigned ground personnel was actually at work in the aircraft servicing and repair depots at a given time or of the kind of equipment at their disposal.

101 - General der Flieger Paul Reichmann, op. cit., Part IV, Chapter IV, page 1.

102 - The Strength of the German Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean Theater (Stärke der deutschen Luftwaffe im Mittelmeer), Luftwaffe Operations Staff, Reports Branch, 30 March 1945; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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The aerial reconnaissance activity carried out in the Mediterranean theater was divided among the three air corps of the Second Air Fleet. The II Air Corps, based on Sicily, was responsible for operational reconnaissance in the western Mediterranean, including weather reconnaissance and reconnaissance of the activity going on in the ports held by the enemy.

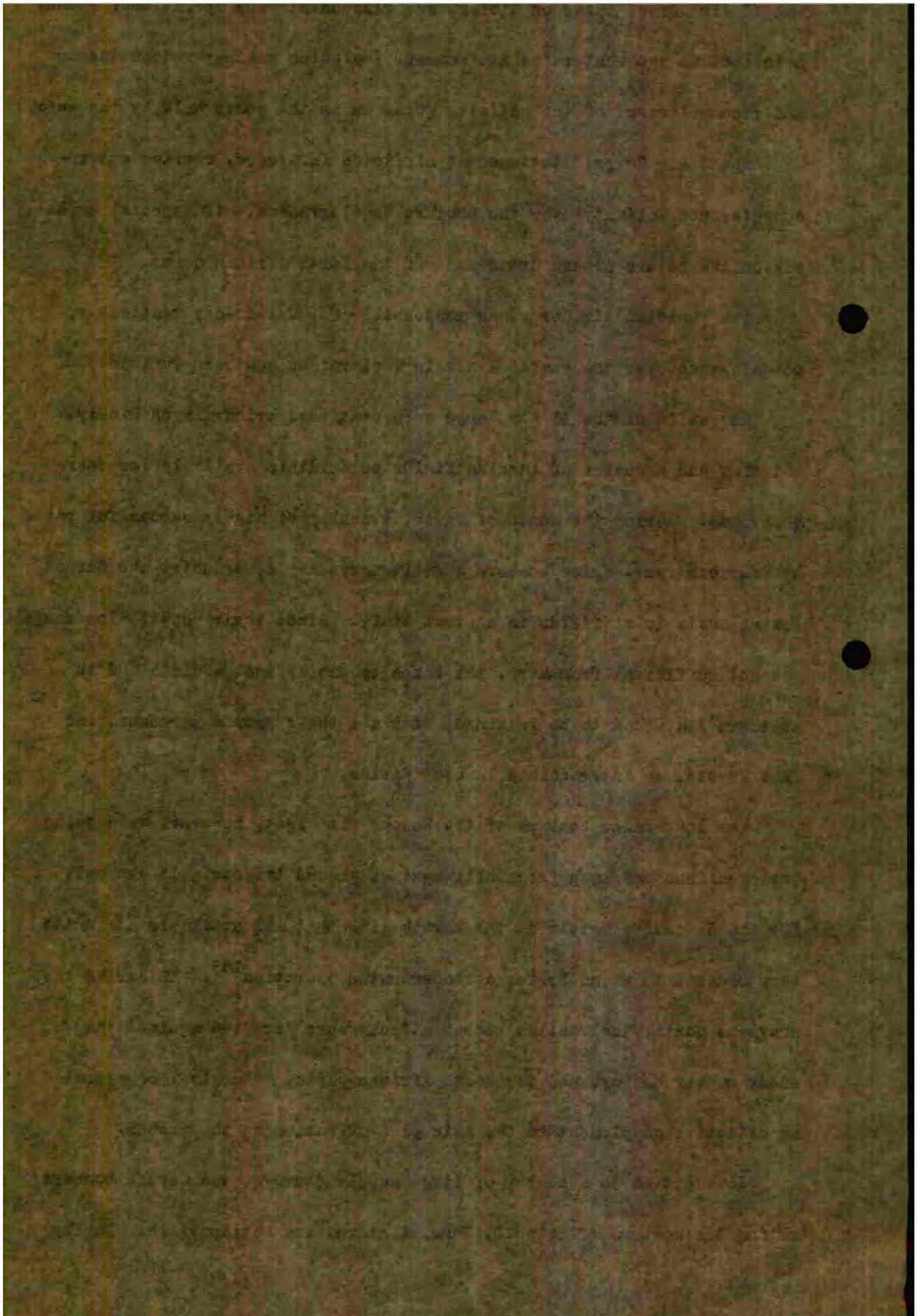
The I Air Corps, stationed at airfields in Greece, carried out reconnaissance activity over the eastern Mediterranean, with special emphasis on the waters around Crete and off the North African coast.

The Tunisian Air Corps was responsible for day-to-day tactical reconnaissance over the combat lines in western and southern Tunisia.

The units of the II Air Corps were stationed primarily on Sicily, but they had a number of landing fields on Sardinia available for emergency use. During the month of March, a number of highly successful raids by American four-engine bombers made it necessary to transfer the German bomber units to airfields in central Italy. Since their penetration range was not sufficient from here, the bases on Sicily and Sardinia and in southern Italy had to be retained, with all their ground personnel and fuel depots, as intermediate landing fields.

The long-range bombers of the Second Air Fleet, however, were being employed less and less frequently against ground targets. It was only for the defensive battle on the Mareth line that all available air units were ordered to stand by for a concentrated operation¹⁰³. As during the previous month, the routine bomber attacks were directed against the enemy supply convoys and the North African ports. Thus they represented an effective supplement to the Axis plan of action on the ground.

In addition to a number of large supply convoys, the German bombers raided the harbors of Tripoli, Bone, Algiers, and Philippville. During



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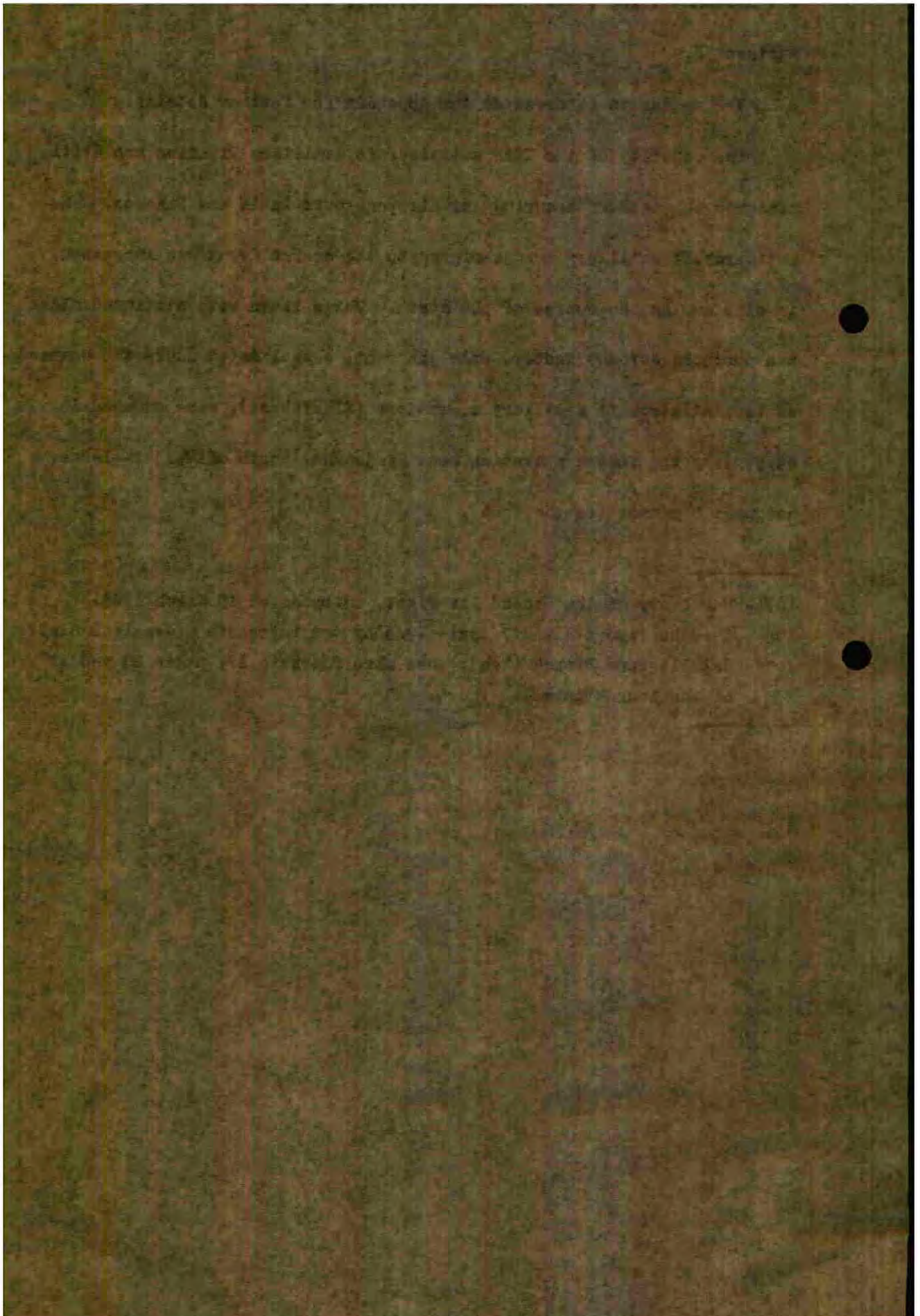
the month of March, they sank a total of six merchant ships (total tonnage 39,700), one submarine, and one escort vessel, and damaged thirty-one merchant ships (total tonnage 164,000), one destroyer, and two submarines¹⁰⁴.

The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

The majority of the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was still assigned the task of securing the airspace over Tunis and Bizerte. The antiaircraft artillery team assigned to the combat front was increased in size during the course of the month. Three teams were stationed along the northern defense sector, while the rest, consolidated under the command of two antiaircraft artillery commanders (Flakführer), were engaged in supporting the forces operating near Sedjenane, north of Medjes-el-Bab, and near Hammamet (to the east),

103 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 15 March 1943.

104 - See the report dated 7 April 1943 by the Luftwaffe Operations Staff, Intelligence Branch (Sea); see also footnote 27, pages 20 and 22 of the source detailed there.



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as well as south of Pont du Fahs, near Faïd, and west of Messouna¹⁰⁵.

The 57th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment, stationed in the Naples area, and the 134th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment, on Sicily, were responsible for securing the airspace over southern Italy.

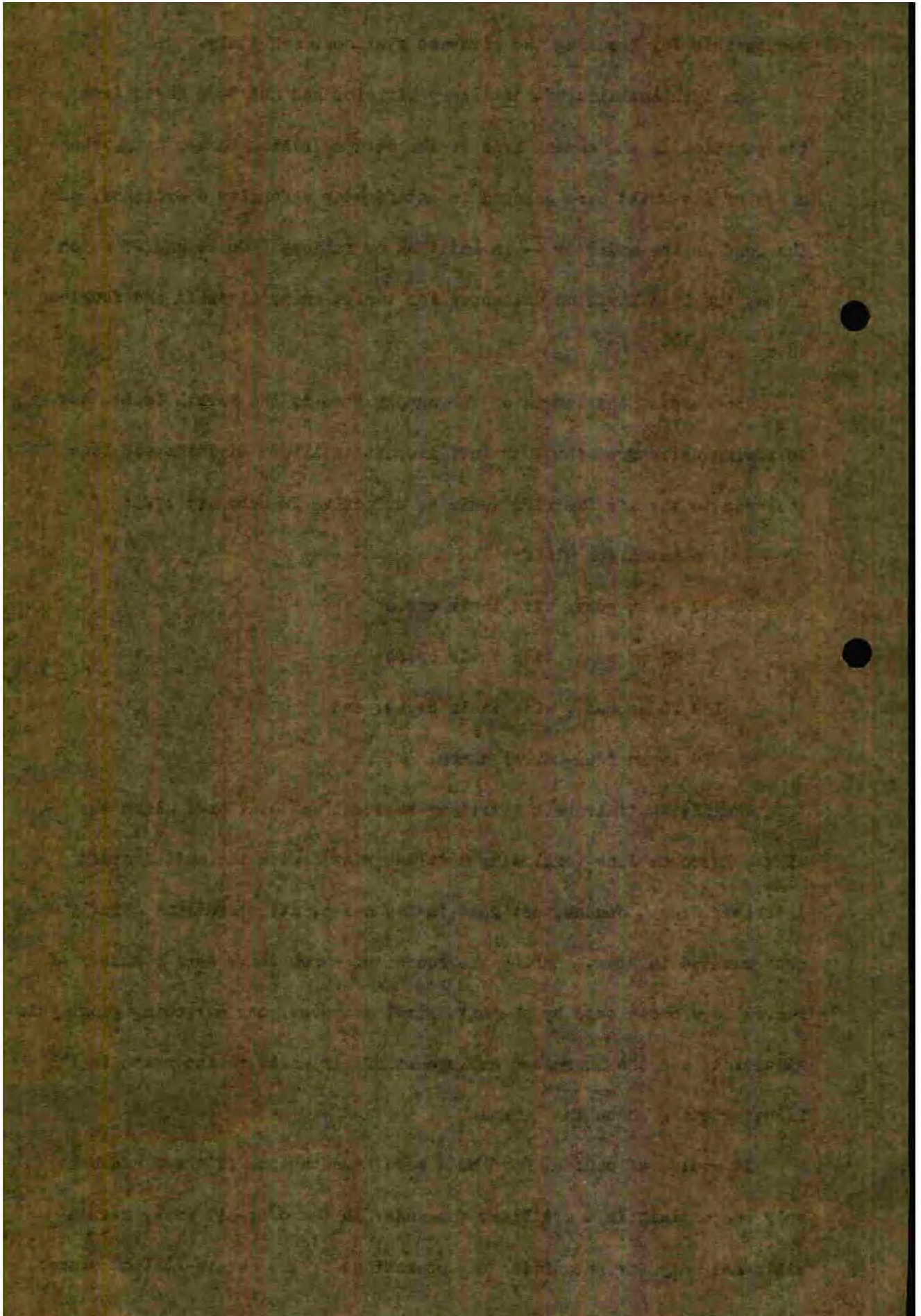
The 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division had not been moved from its position in the combat area of the German-Italian Panzer Army, where a few of its units were engaged in antifighter defensive operations, and the rest -- the majority -- in antitank operations. On 26 and 27 March alone, the 19th Division accounted for twelve enemy aircraft and fourteen enemy tanks¹⁰⁶.

"Because of the length of the supply line to the Mareth front, the following units from the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division had been assigned to the Air District Tunisia, effective 22 February 1943:

- 6 battalion staffs;
- 72 88 mm guns, with their crews;
- 12 37 mm guns, with their crews;
- 142 20 mm guns, with their crews; and
- 36 20 mm four-barrel canon.

The 66th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment was stationed along the Sfax - Kairouan line (excluding settled areas), with the Antiaircraft Artillery Group, Sousse, assigned in the north, its operations chiefly concentrated in Sfax. During the course of March there were a number of regroupings occasioned by the withdrawal maneuver, the narrowing geographic situation, and the increased employment of air units to intervene in the fighting going on on the ground.

It would, of course, have been more advantageous if there had been only one antiaircraft artillery commander in the over-all area, responsible not only for supporting the operations of the German-Italian Panzer



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Army but also for antiaircraft artillery operations for the entire rear area under the jurisdiction of the Air District staff.

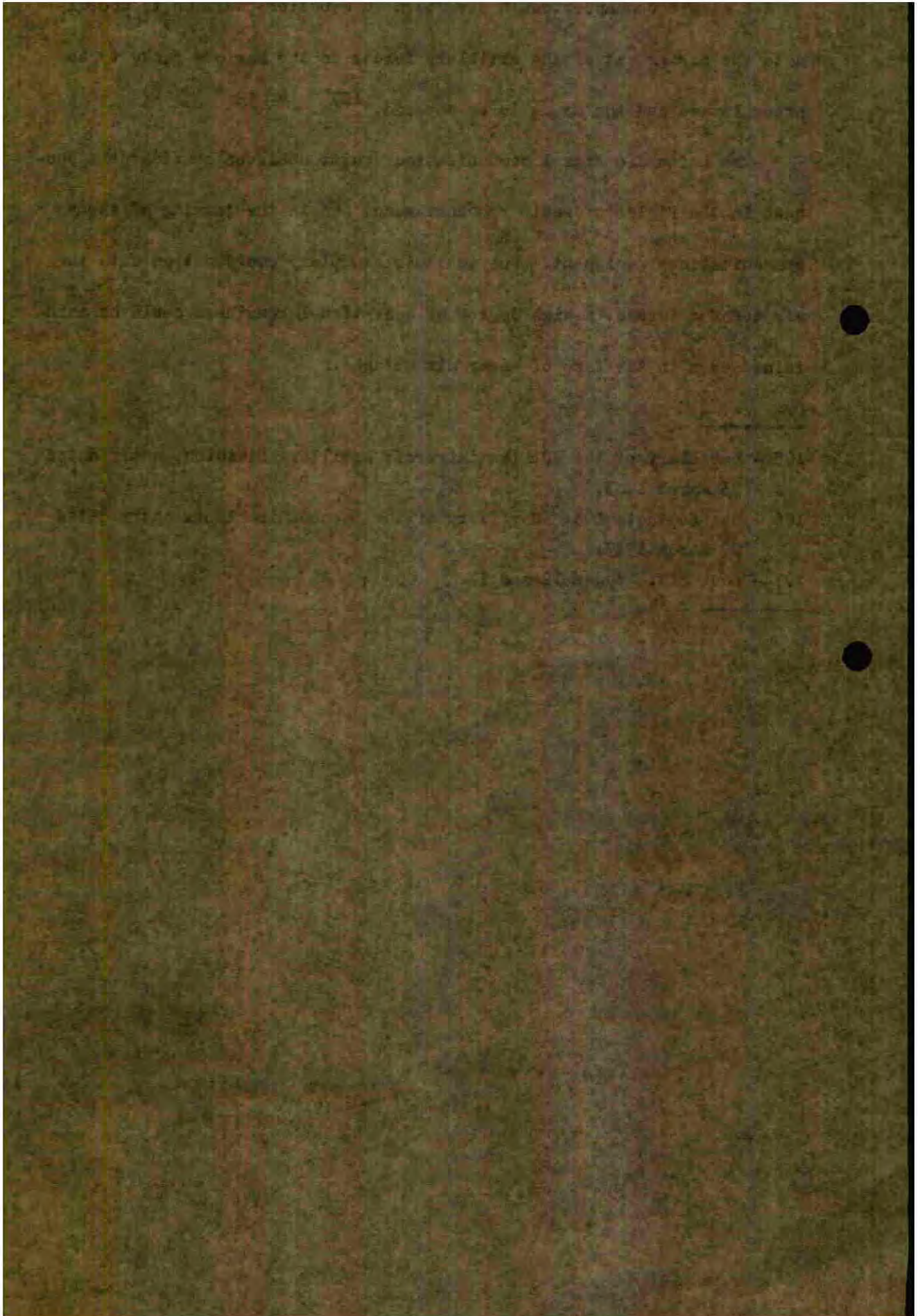
A single commander would have been in a better position to coordinate the assignment of the artillery forces to the various tasks to be accomplished and the areas to be covered."¹⁰⁷

The Luftwaffe signal communications units achieved considerable success in the fields of radio reconnaissance and in the jamming of enemy communications equipment. Due to their exemplary coordination with the air defense forces, a high degree of operational readiness could be maintained even in the face of enemy air attacks.

105 - War Diary of the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division, entry dated 23 March 1943.

106 - See footnote 103; War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 29 March 1943.

107 - Loc. cit., pages 12 and 13.



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The numerical strength of the Allied air forces in the Mediterranean was increasing steadily. By the end of March, the Allied air units had a total of 4,547 aircraft, 3,867 of which were based in North Africa alone. In addition, there were 180 at Gibraltar, 240 on Malta, 40 on Cyprus, and 220 in the Levant¹⁰⁸.

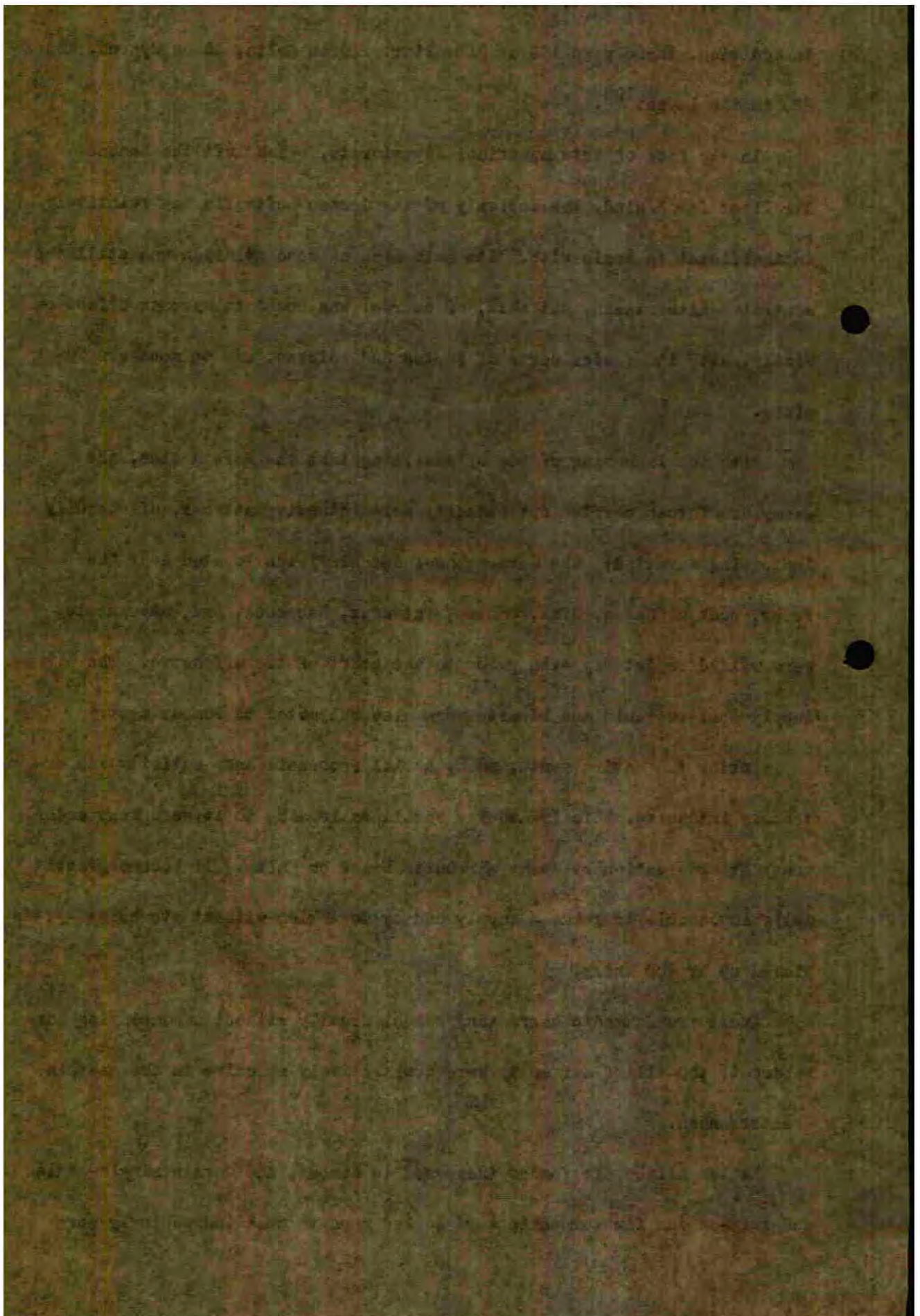
In the face of this numerical superiority, which left the Second Air Fleet far behind, the activity of the German Luftwaffe was relatively insignificant to begin with. Its main area of concentration was still the central Mediterranean, and this, of course, was bound to have an effect on Sicily, with its feeder ports of Naples and Palermo, and on southern Tunisia.

With the launching of the offensive against the Mareth line, the enemy air forces carried out steadily more intensive attacks, of steadily increasing duration; the German bases and airfields located near the front, such as Gabes, Sfax, Sousse, Fatnassa, Messoune, and Fauconnerie, were raided repeatedly even prior to the start of the offensive. The supply centers Tunis and Bizerte were also subjected to bombardment.

During the entire month, enemy aerial reconnaissance activity was extremely intensive. Sicily and the sea lanes leading to it were kept under constant observation by enemy air units based on Malta. It became practically impossible to guide a supply convoy to Africa without its being picked up by the enemy.

Apart from sporadic harassing raids, usually without accompanying bombardment, the Allied air units were comparatively inactive in the eastern Mediterranean.

As the Allied air forces increased in number, the German single-engine and twin-engine fighter units were called upon to meet increasingly more



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difficult challenges. The supply bases and intermediate landing fields on Sicily and in southern Italy required constant and effective cover. In addition, a large number of single-engine and twin-engine fighters were needed to carry out escort duty for the bomber and air transport units as well as for the supply ships operating between Italy and Africa. During the month of March, 209 enemy aircraft were shot down, while German losses amounted to only 160 aircraft.

The reader is referred to the Appendix for further details.

108 - Second Air Fleet, Intelligence Branch, Report "Situation in the Mediterranean Area" (Lage in Mittelmeerraum), dated 31 March 1943.

Despite the unremitting efforts of the Commander in Chief, South, the difficulties encountered in the maritime situation in the Mediterranean theater proved impossible to ameliorate. The enemy mining activity, his employment of submarines and Malta-based air and light naval units, all represented a constant source of danger for the Axis supply shipments.

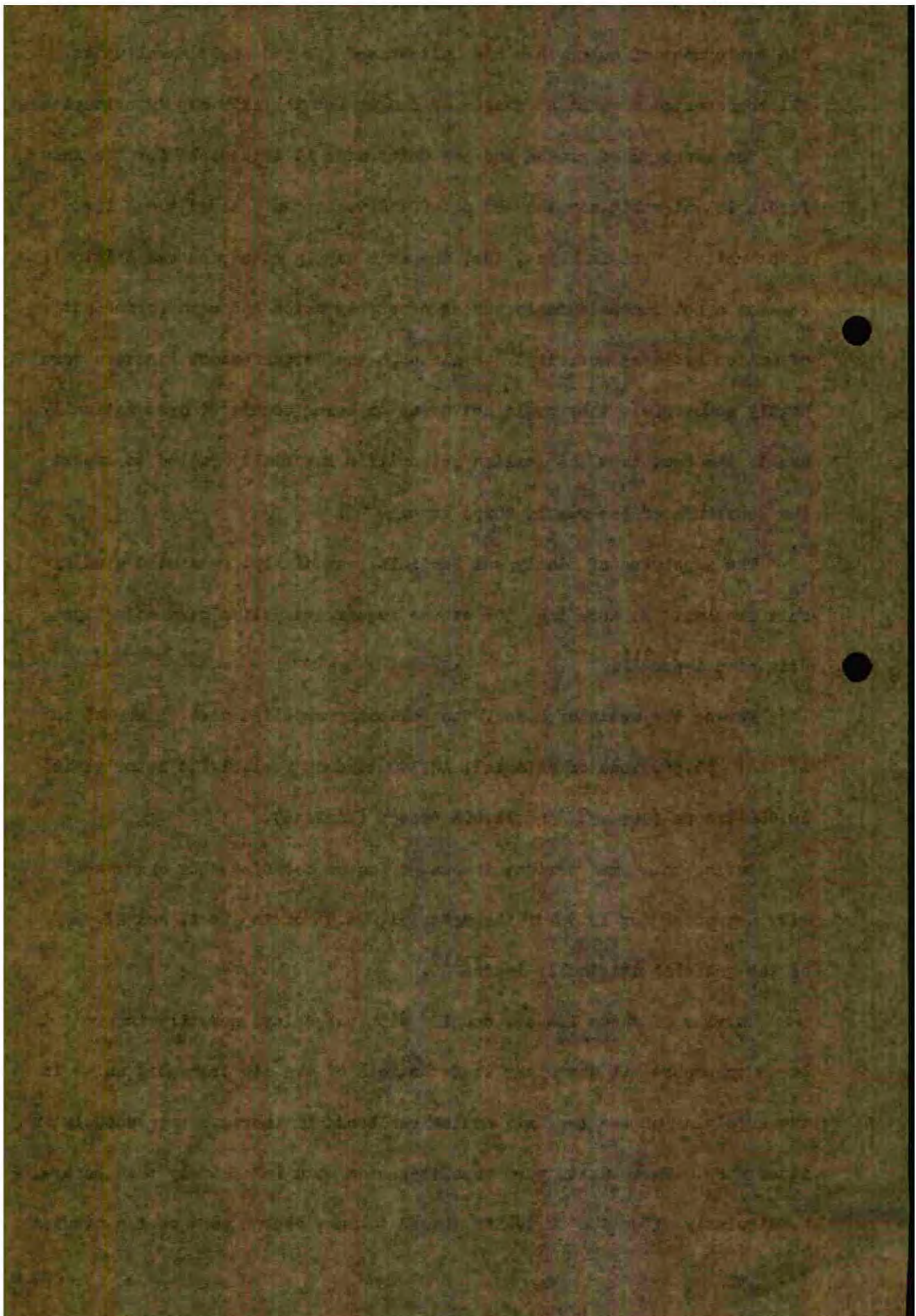
The shortage of ground and air units made it impossible for the Axis forces to entertain any thought of offensive action against the Allied naval units. Thus in March, too, the Axis supply situation was critical, because a not inconsiderable number of supply ships had been forced out of action by enemy activity¹⁰⁹. Although the German escort fighters were highly successful, they could not count on being committed systematically, due to the fact that the Italian authorities invariably failed to report the departure of the supply ships in time¹¹⁰.

The supplying of Sicily and Sardinia, especially, presented a difficult problem. No more than 50% of the required supplies were actually delivered there¹¹¹.

During the month of March, the following supplies were delivered in Africa: 35,380 tons of materiel, 14,300 tons of fuel, 1,114 motor vehicles, 19,000 troops (German), and 11,000 troops (Italian).

During this same period, the cargo losses occasioned by enemy activity accounted for 13.5% of the materiel, 26.9% of the fuel, and 27.9% of the vehicles originally loaded¹¹².

In view of these losses, coupled with the delays normally inherent in ocean transport, it was clear that the role of the air transport units in the supplying of the two Axis armies was bound to increase tremendously in importance. These units were committed even more intensively than before, particularly after the Luftwaffe agreed to take over a part of the mission



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of supplying the island of Sardinia.

Plans had been made to increase the effectiveness of the air transport units by means of alternate crews, day and night shifts, and the assignment of additional transport aircraft¹¹³.

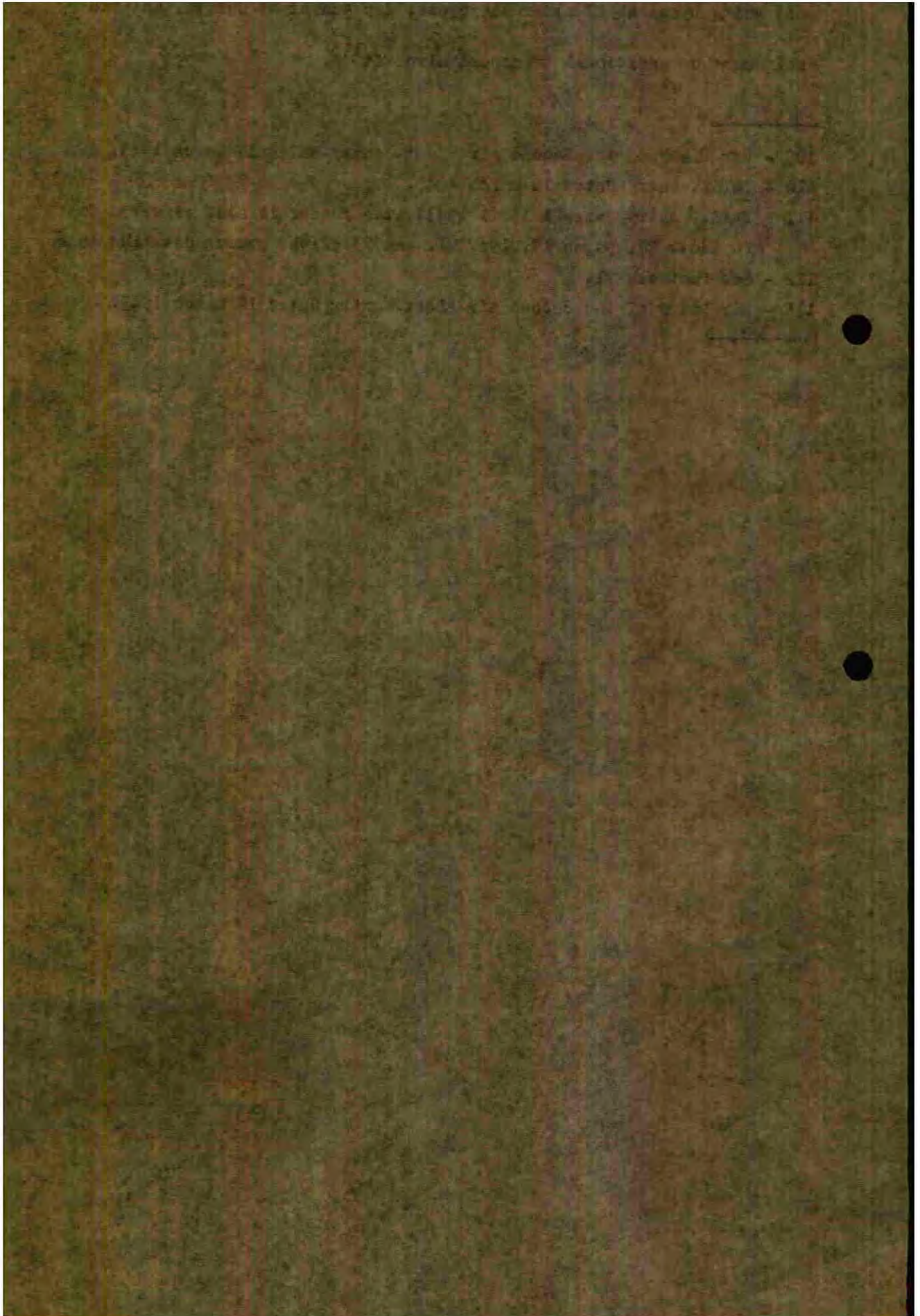
109 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 17 March 1943.

110 - Ibid., entry dated 18 March 1943.

111 - Ibid., entry dated 1 April 1943; the reader is also referred to footnote 27, pages 19, 19a, 21, and 23 of the source detailed there.

112 - See footnote 71.

113 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entry dated 12 March 1943.



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If the problem of the moment (i.e. that of the fuel supply) was to be solved, there was no way out but to assign the bomber aircraft to air transport duty temporarily¹¹⁴.

In any case, it was already painfully clear that the war in Africa would be facing a severe crisis without the constant aid of the air transport forces¹¹⁵.

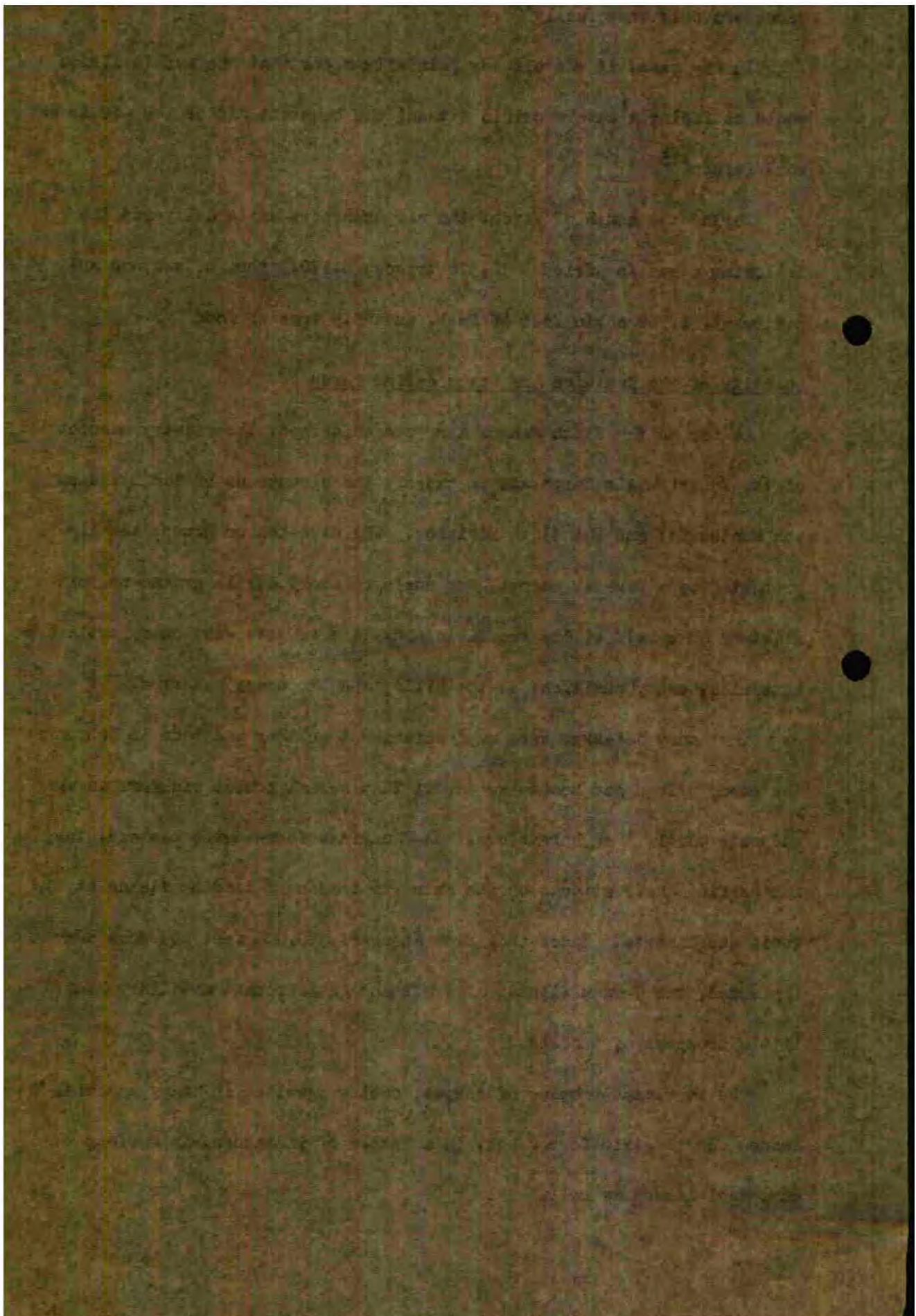
During the month of March, the air transport units delivered the following items in Africa: 12,320 troops, 8,130.7 tons of weapons and equipment, 1,588 cubic feet of fuel, and 25.9 tons of food¹¹⁶.

Activity of the Tunisian Air Corps during March

As far as the Fifth Panzer Army was concerned, the primary mission of the Tunisian Air Corps was to support the operations of the Division von Manteuffel and the 334th Division. The dive-bomber group, heavily protected by a fighter escort, was employed every day in ground-support missions on behalf of the two Divisions. Its targets were enemy artillery batteries, enemy positions in the hills, and the enemy reserves.

The enemy defenses were much stronger than they had been in February; the enemy pilots had become so expert that aerial combat was more savage and more costly than heretofore. The American four-engine bombers, too, intensified their attacks on the Axis air transport landing fields at Tunis and Biserte. Since they flew at nearly 30,000 feet and were heavily armed, the German fighter aircraft and antiaircraft artillery had little prospect of success.

The American practice of carpet bombing resulted in heavy material losses for the Axis forces and, in a number of instances, in serious personnel losses as well.



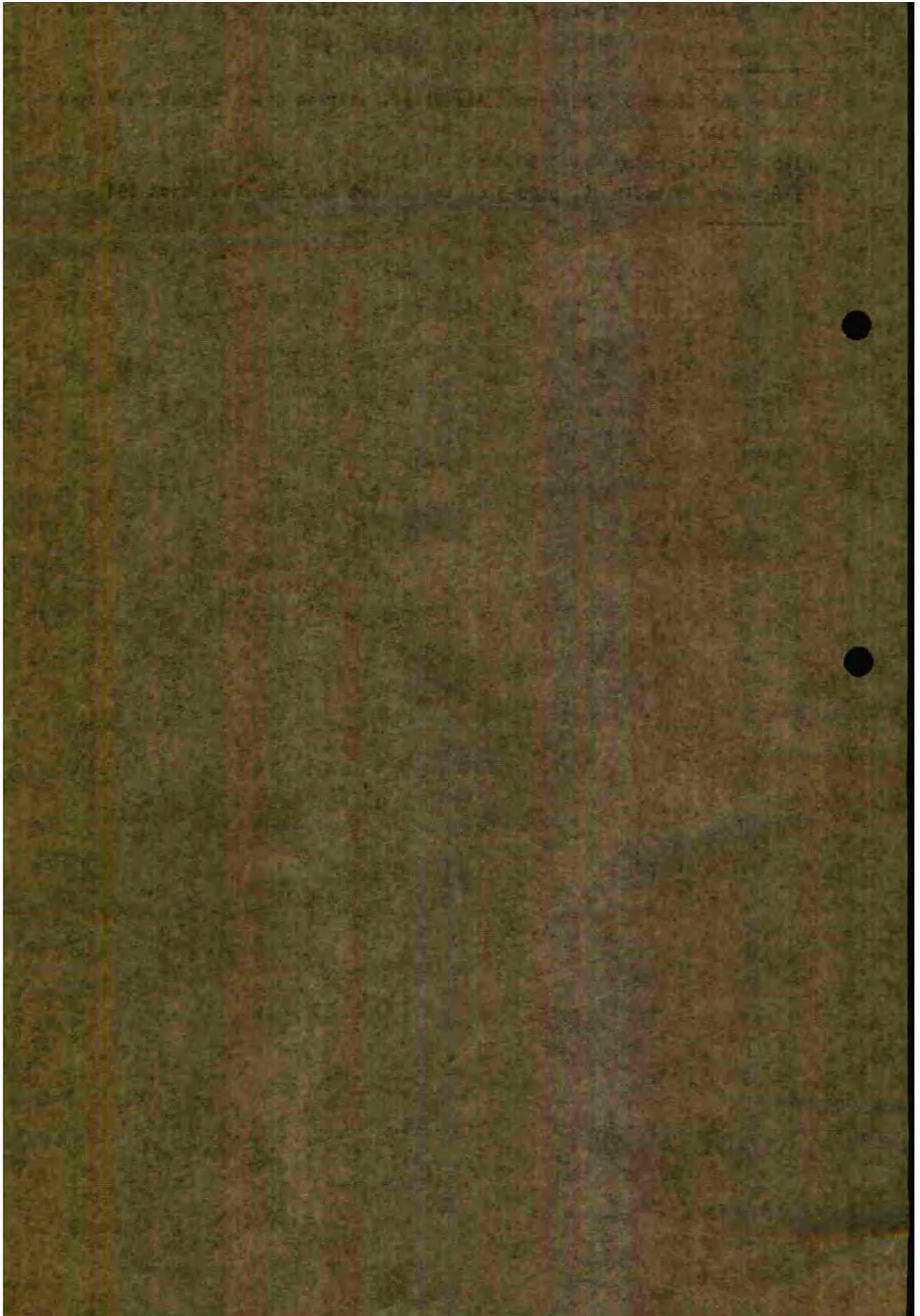
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The regularity of the American attacks (carried out invariably during the noon hours) made the task of the German air transport units much easier -- they simply scheduled their flights for an earlier hour.

114 - War Diary of the Second Air Fleet, entries dated 29 and 30 March 1943.

115 - Ibid., entry dated 30 March 1943.

116 - See footnote 49, page 3 of the report dealing with March 1943.



The German fighter units were terribly overburdened by the daily fighter forays, the escort duty for dive-bomber and reconnaissance missions, and the task of covering the approach and landing of the air transport units. The pilots were near exhaustion and their machines soon in need of overhauling, despite the fact that the delivery of new aircraft and instruments was still functioning smoothly.

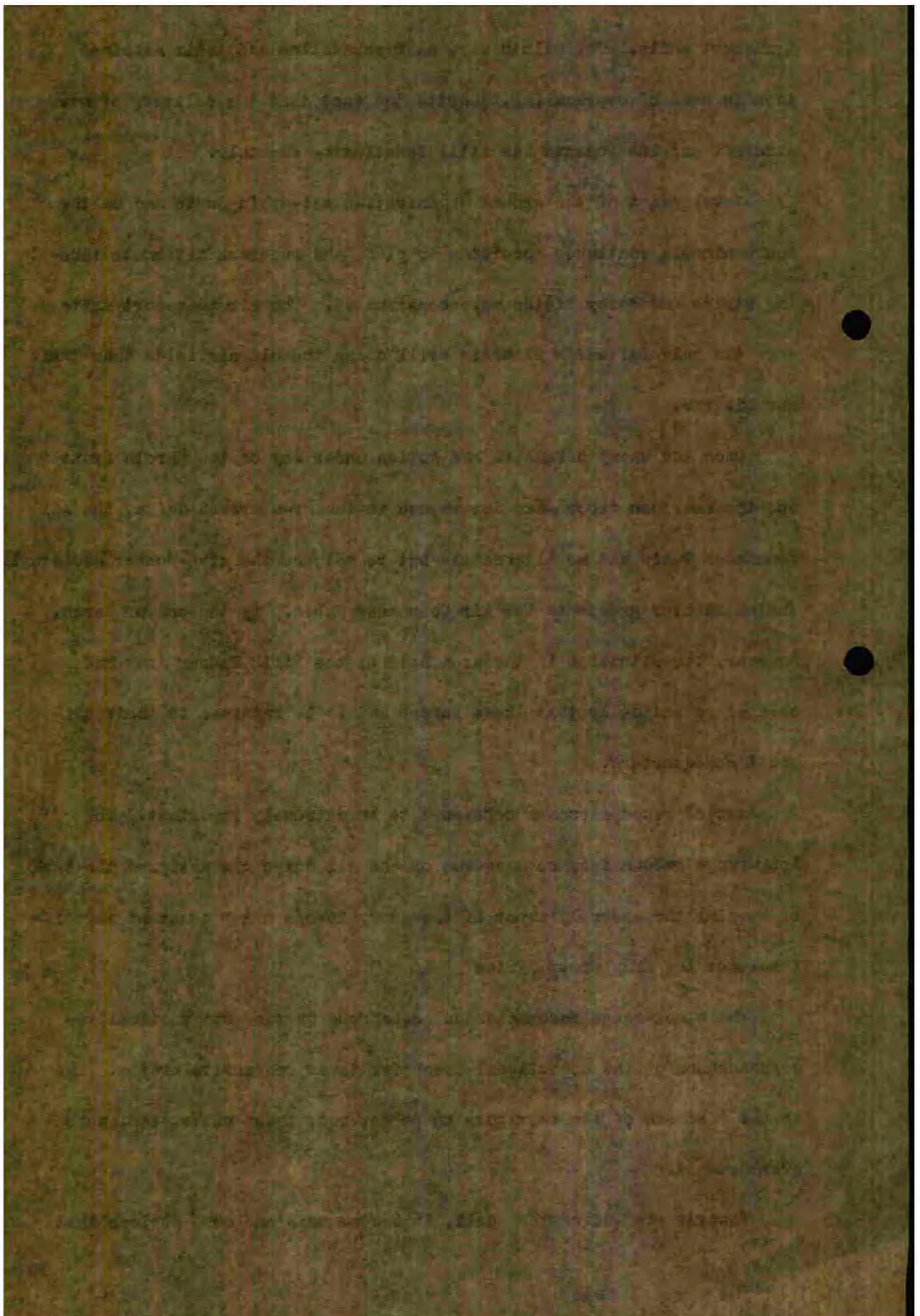
Development of the ground organization set-up in Tunis and on the Bon peninsula continued according to plan, and numerous alternate landing strips and decoy fields were constructed. The air transport units were the only Luftwaffe elements still using the old airfields near Tunis and Biserte.

Once the enemy offensive had gotten under way on the Mareth front and the American troops had intervened in the area around Gafsa, the Air Commander Tunis had no alternative but to release the dive-bomber and single-engine fighter groups to the Air Commander Gabes. By the end of March, however, the situation in the area held by the Fifth Panzer Army had changed so radically that these forces had to be returned to their original headquarters.

Aerial reconnaissance continued to be extremely important. The long-range reconnaissance squadron of the Air Corps was assigned the task of keeping the assembly areas of the enemy forces under constant surveillance for the Army Group Africa.

The close-range reconnaissance squadrons carried out tactical reconnaissance of the operational areas for their respective armies. Due to the vastness of the territory to be covered, these units, too, were overburdened.

Towards the end of the month, it became more and more obvious that



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technologically obsolete aircraft such as the Ju-87 dive-bomber and the HS-129 antitank support aircraft could no longer be employed effectively in view of the air superiority enjoyed by the enemy. In mid-April they were withdrawn from action in Tunisia.

On the Mareth front, it was extremely important to Axis leaders to discover just when the British Eighth Army considered itself prepared to attack. In early March the only noticeable change in the normal situation was the gradual moving forward of stronger forces.

The Commander in Chief, South, considered the time favorable for an attack, to be launched from the southern sector of the Mareth line, which could destroy the assembly points of the enemy forces before the latter could get into action.

He ordered the assignment of all the available air units under the Air Commander, Gabes, to this new mission. On 6 March, German dive-bombers and fighters, together with Italian air squadrons, carried on an all-out attack against enemy artillery positions and tank parks, as well as against the heavily congested airfields in the Medenine area.

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After a short time, Feldmarschall Rommel broke off the attack, because his Panzer divisions had run into a well-prepared defensive front and had suffered heavy losses.

During the days that followed, both sides intensified their aerial reconnaissance activity. At the same time, the number of American four-engine bomber raids on the airfields in the Gabes area increased steadily.

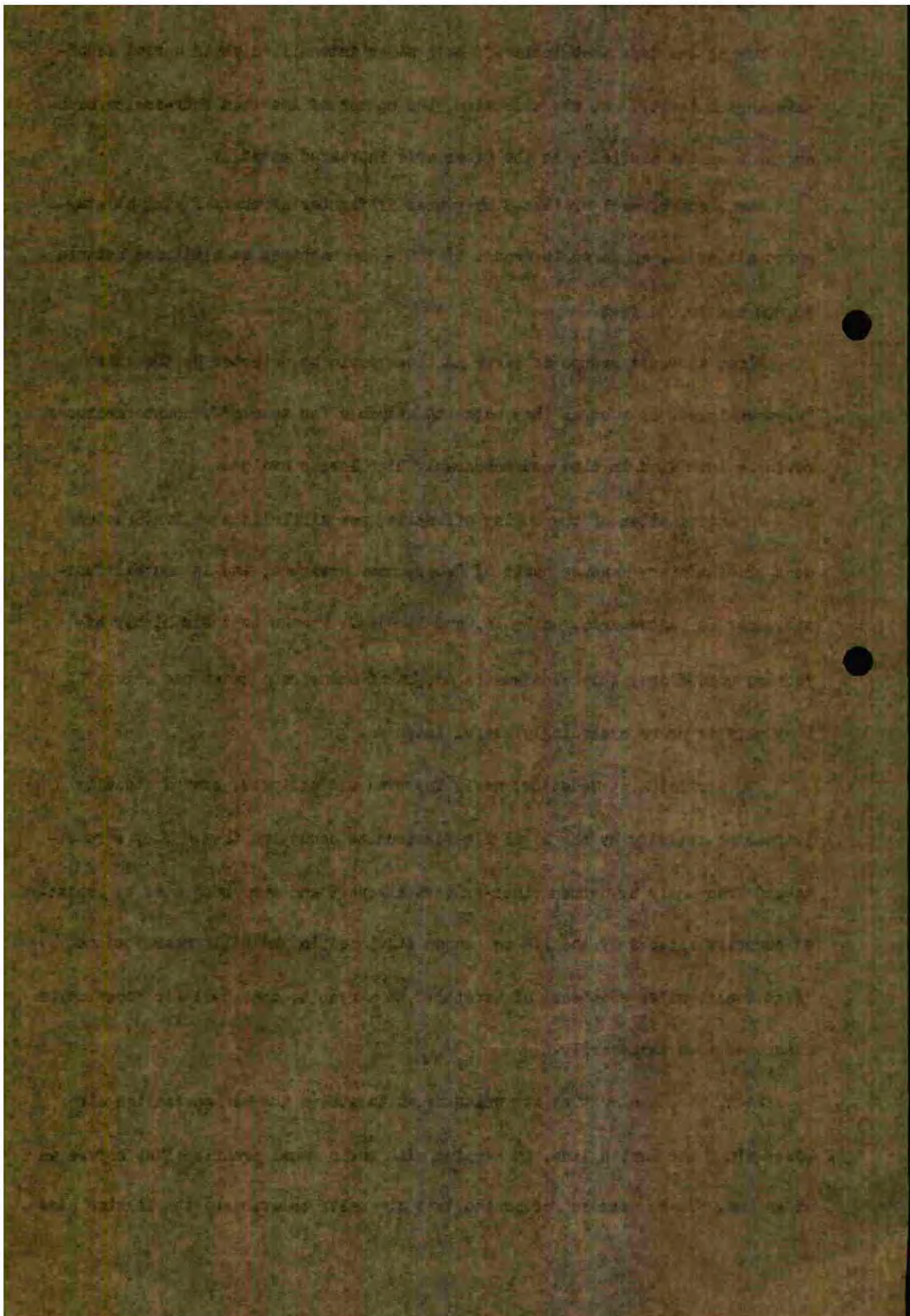
The bombers, well protected by swarms of fighter aircraft flying at staggered altitudes, appeared in groups of 200 - 300 machines at altitudes between 20,000 and 30,000 feet.

Since aircraft groups as large as these could be detected by the Axis Freya equipment as soon as they began to assemble for take-off, countermeasures could be initiated in time and unbearably high losses avoided.

In anticipation of the coming offensive, new airfields were constructed as a precautionary measure north of Gabes, near Messouna, and in central Tunisia, near La Fauconnerie, La Smala, and El Djem. Thanks to their highly effective camouflage, they escaped the notice of enemy reconnaissance aircraft. They were to prove exceedingly useful later on.

The airfields at Medenine, newly improved and equipped, showed steadily increasing activity by the Royal Air Force units occupying them. They were attacked frequently by German close-support aircraft and were subjected to repeated surprise attacks by the 170 mm cannon stationed in the hills near Toujane (some twelve miles southwest of Mareth). As a result, the Royal Air Force units abandoned them temporarily.

Then, too, the British air units began to attack the German-Italian air bases along the Mareth line, in keeping with their usual practice just before an offensive. These attacks forced the Axis air units to evacuate the fighter base



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located nearest the enemy lines.

In coordination with the British attacks, American close-support units from the west began to intervene more and more frequently. During an attack of this kind on 13 March, the 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wing managed to bring down fourteen of a total enemy force of eighteen Aerocobras. Obviously, coordination with the British escort fighters had been muffed.

From the middle of March on, both sides increased their air activity over the Mareth line. Aerial reconnaissance continued as before; in addition, "anti-artillery" air units were pressed into service against enemy batteries, and fighter-bomber raids were carried out relentlessly against promising targets.

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On 17 March, German reconnaissance discovered that the enemy was moving a fairly large force through the Matmata Mountains from Fom Tatahouine towards the northwest. This meant that the northern sector of the Mareth line position might well be in danger of encirclement. Fighter-bombers and dive-bombers were sent up to disrupt the enemy movements, which were kept under steady surveillance from this point on.

Large numbers of Royal Air Force transport aircraft were employed to supply the New Zealand forces making up the encircling wing. The troops were housed in camps constructed in the desert near Soltane and Bir Rhezene (thirty miles southwest of El Hamma). Naturally, every effort was made to disrupt the enemy air supply operation, but in the long run this proved to be impossible. The British transport aircraft were well protected by strong fighter escorts, and the desert camps turned out to be extremely well guarded by highly effective antiaircraft artillery.

During the last few days, the American bombers had increased the frequency and intensity of their attacks on the Axis airfields, which meant that more and more German fighters were tied down in an effort to combat them. As a result, it was impossible to spare additional fighter aircraft to join in the harrassing action against the enemy encircling force.

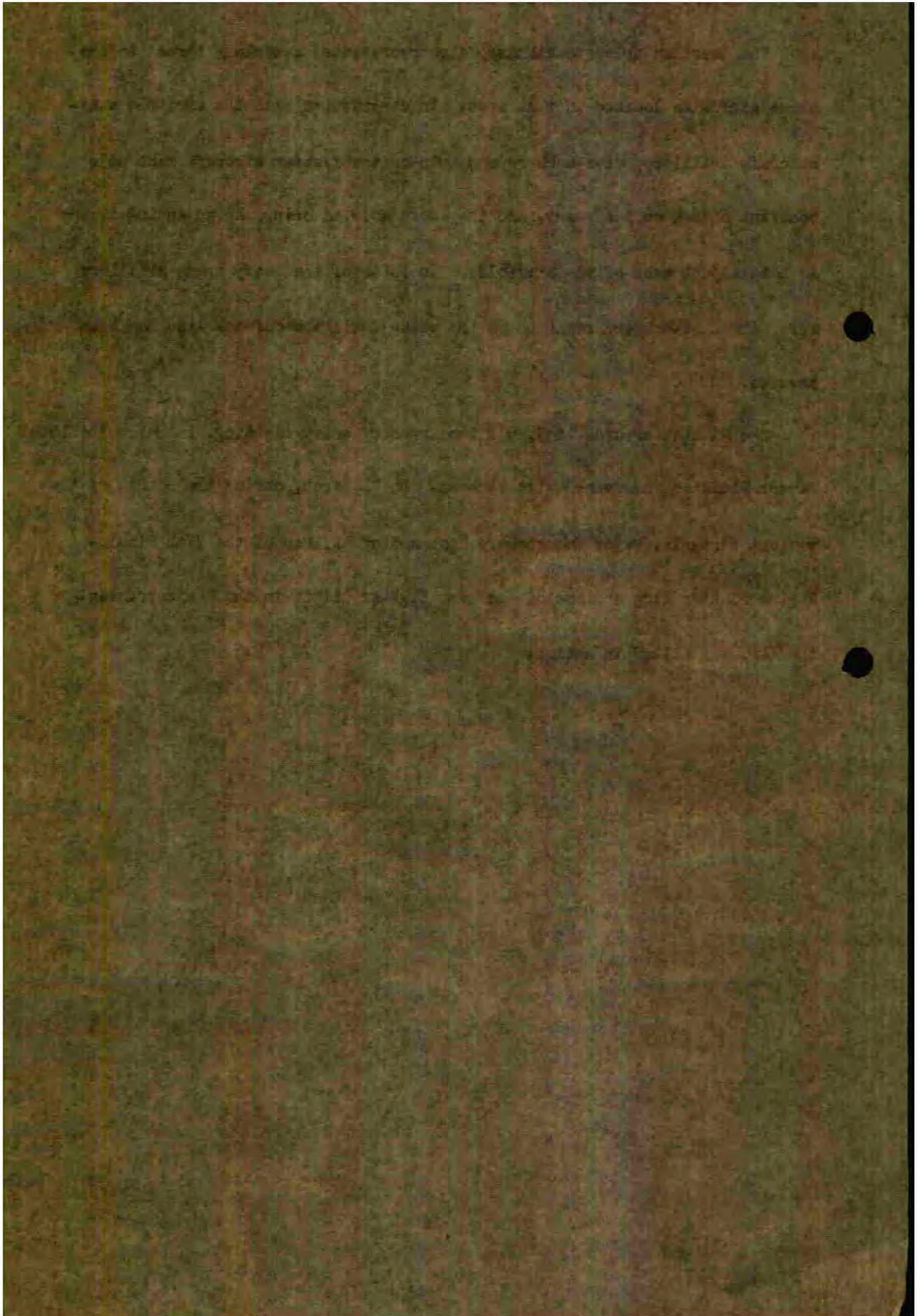
The long-awaited British offensive began during the night of 20/21 March on the coastal sector of the Mareth line in both the north and the south (the encircling wing), the Allied forces pushing forward from Maknassy and Gafsa at the same time. It was supported by repeated bombardment of the Axis ground organization system, making heavy losses inevitable. Axis antiaircraft artillery defenses were necessarily dissipated by the fact that they had to be assigned to so many focal points located far apart from one another.

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The German dive-bombers and close-support aircraft were untiring in their activity against the enemy's advance troops, all in an effort to gain a respite for the forces fighting on the ground.

The American drive to Maknassy also represented a serious threat to the three airfields located in that area. In conjunction with the airfield anti-aircraft artillery, dive-bombers and twin-engine fighter aircraft kept up a constant attack on the enemy, and they were able to bring the advancing troops to a halt just west of the airfields. In spite of the heavy enemy artillery fire, the dive-bombers remained on the scene until the defense line had been secured.

The El Guetter area, too, was the scene of heavy fighting, in which the 10th Panzer Division intervened with success. On 24 March, during the course of the violent struggle, Major Muencheberg, Commanding Officer of the 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wing and one of the best fighter pilots in the Mediterranean theater, was killed in action.



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On 25 March, the German counterthrust against El Guettar was supported by means of air attacks on the American tank and vehicle parks.

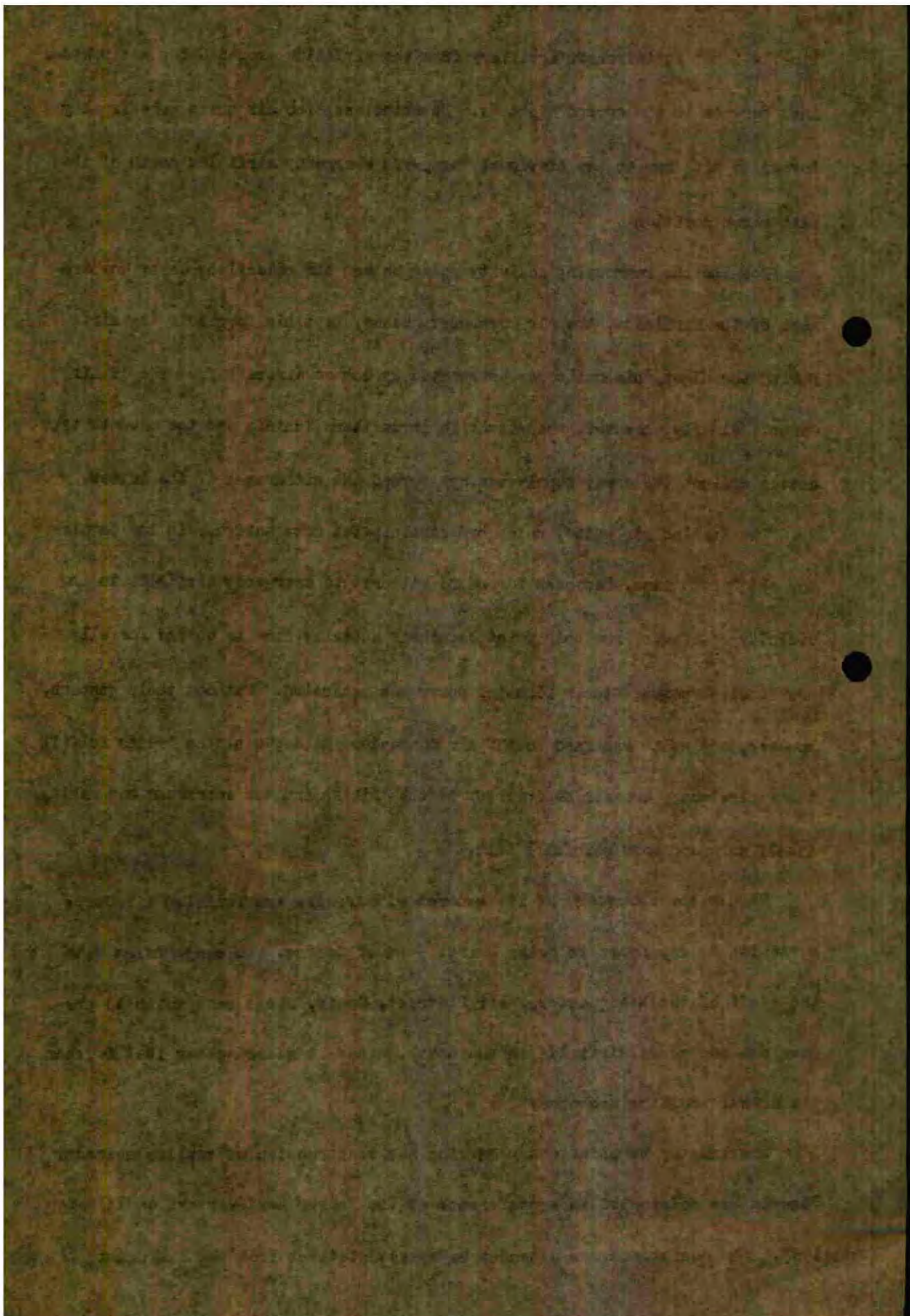
As enemy tanks began to get through on the encirclement wing of the Mareth line, all the antiaircraft artillery from the airfields around Gabes was pressed into service in the ground fighting. Nevertheless, the air units were finally forced to withdraw to the previously prepared emergency airfields north of the salt marsh position.

Despite the regrouping activity going on and the relentless enemy bombardment of the airfields, the Air Commander, Gabes, kept his forces in the air. During the night, his units were supported by bomber aircraft from the II Air Corps. Finally, however, the situation in northern Tunisia and the need to take action against the enemy supply convoys forced the withdrawal of the latter.

The Italian air units, which had participated most actively in the battle for the Mareth line, had been forced to withdraw to emergency airfields in the vicinity of Sfax. From this point on, their activity came to an end for all practical purposes; their fighting power was exhausted. Without their support, however, the units assigned to the Air Commander, Gabes, could no longer fulfill their missions; the air superiority of the British and the Americans was making itself more and more painfully felt.

Within the framework of its general withdrawal, the Tunisian Air Corps moved its headquarters to Kalan Srira, west of Sousse. In conjunction with the staff of the Headquarters, Air District, Tunis, steps were taken to prepare new emergency airfields in the north, since it seemed clear that further withdrawal would be necessary¹¹⁷.

The lengthy negotiations regarding the construction of smaller merchant vessels had culminated in a conference at the Führer Headquarters on 14 March 1943. The conference was attended by representatives from the Wehrmacht



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Operations Staff and by the Commander in Chief, South.

Hitler had finally reached the reluctant decision to "present the Italians with the alternatives of either contributing all the means at their disposal or losing Tunisia and, with it, Italy as well."

117 - Seidemann, Hans, op. cit., pages 10 through 23.

The agreement reached on 17 March between the Royal Italian Navy and German leaders included among other provisions the decision that Vice Admiral Huge was to be made subordinate to the Italian Admiral Riccardi and was to be integrated into the Italian naval staff in order to exert whatever influence he could in supply operations. Despite his best efforts, however, he was unable to do anything about the all-time low to which ocean supply transport had sunk. Hitler's decision to force Mussolini to draw on his last reserves came too late to do any good¹¹⁸.

In an attempt to disrupt Allied supply operations on the western sector of the Tunisian front, already rendered difficult by the inadequate highway and rail networks, paratrooper sabotage units had been active behind the Allied front lines ever since December 1942¹¹⁹.

The Commander in Chief, South, had ordered the formation of the "Schacht Commando" (Kommando Schacht) for this purpose. Major Schacht came from the 1st Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, and had participated in the occupation of Crete. The following troop elements were placed under his command:

1. 1st Parachute Company of the Engineer Battalion Witsig;
2. Especially trained troops (the von Köhnen Battalion) from the Infantry Regiment Brandenburg, plus volunteers from the German-Arabian Training Battalion (including German-speaking Arabs and non-commissioned officers from the former French Foreign Legion); and
3. The necessary aircraft and their crews (six Ju-52's for the transport of the parachute forces and three He-111's to tow the twelve gliders assigned to transport those forces not trained in the art of jumping).

Major Schacht and his forces were placed under the command of General Harlinghausen, the Air Commander, Tunis, whose reconnaissance forces also flew the missions needed to obtain reliable aerial photographs of the most important points to be blown up. Major Schacht received the other data he needed from

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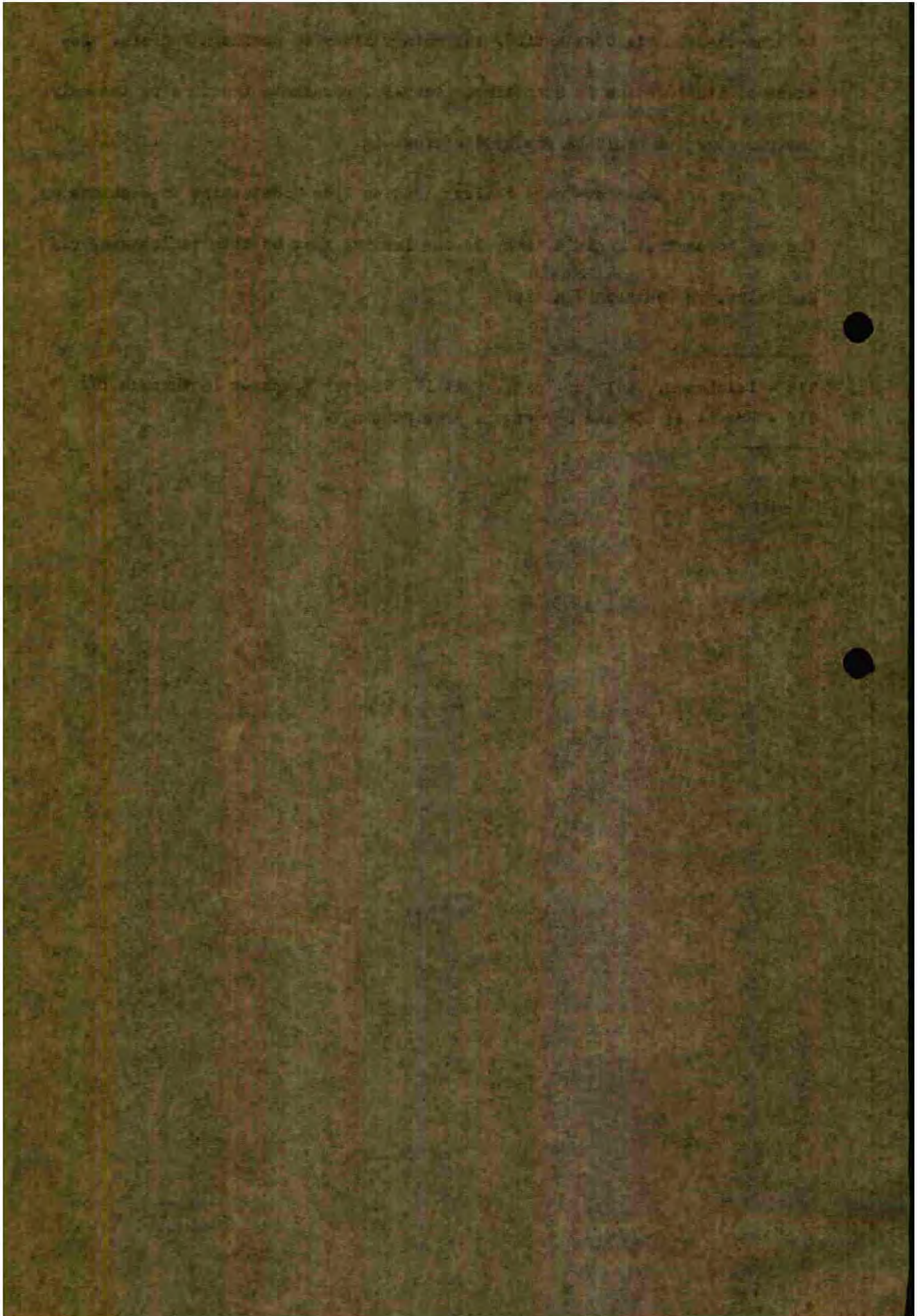
the Intelligence Branch, Fifth Panzer Army, and from other intelligence agencies.

The most important target was the standard-gauge railway from Algiers to Souk-el-Arba via Constantine, the main railway to northern Tunisia. Because of its location in mountainous terrain, parachute troops were the only instrument which could be employed against it.

There was a narrow-gauge railway leading from Constantine to Meskiana on the way to central Tunisia, and the one leading from Sbeitla to Tebessa, via Kasserine, in southern Tunisia.

118 - Deichmann, Paul, op. cit., Part IV, Chapter V, pages 16 through 18.

119 - See pages 636 and 637 of the present study.



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Because of the lively enemy air activity during the daylight hours, the Axis air forces were restricted to night missions -- five days before and five days after full moon.

"In late December 1942, in accordance with their orders, the Axis air units carried out the first missions along the northern railway. Unfortunately, however, weather conditions were against them. On three different occasions the transport aircraft reached their target points on either side of Gardinau -- in all three instances, cloud masses backed up in the valleys made ground orientation impossible and, as a result, the paratroopers were unable to make their jump.

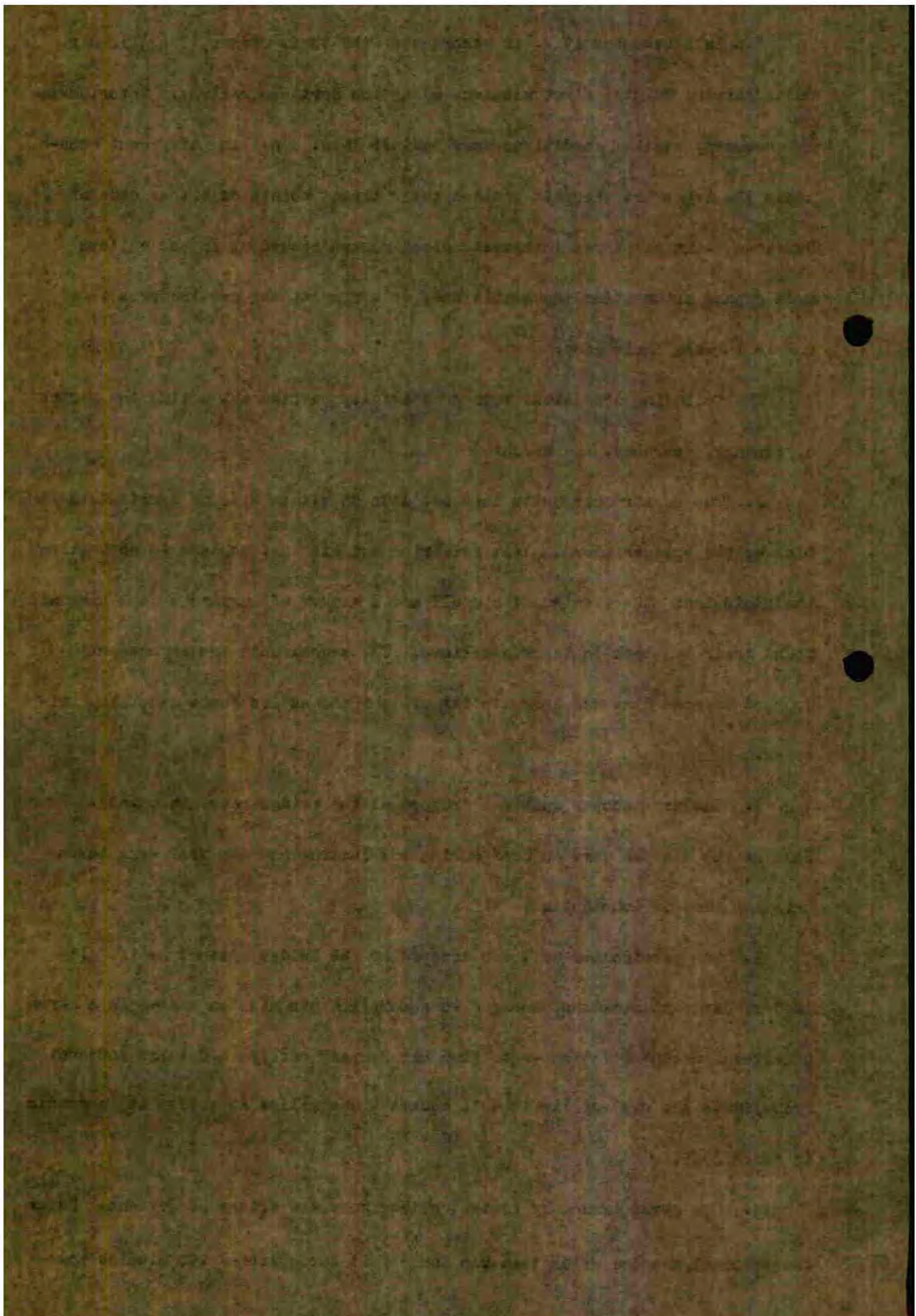
The following operations were successfully carried out during the months of January, February, and March:

1. Two paratrooper units were set down on either side of Gardinau to blow up the bridges there. 1/Lt Friedrich and his unit managed to accomplish their mission; the lieutenant himself and a number of survivors from his unit found their way back to their own lines. The second unit was erroneously dropped at some distance from its target, and the entire force was taken prisoner.

2. One paratrooper unit was dropped at the bridge near Ain Regada. Some of its members were injured during the landing and the rest were taken prisoner west of Constantine.

3. One paratrooper unit was dropped at the bridge west of Setif. Its leader, Sergeant Beckmann, managed to accomplish his mission and -- in a march of several weeks' duration -- to lead his company safely to Spanish Morocco. Promoted to the rank of lieutenant, Beckmann was killed in action in Pomerania in March 1945.

4. One group landed by freight glider near the bridge at Periana. Under the personal command of Captain von Köhnen, it accomplished its mission and



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returned in full strength to its own lines.

5. One group landed by freight glider at the bridge near Kasserine. It succeeded in fulfilling its mission, but was finally captured by the Americans.

6. One group landed by freight glider at the bridge near Menkiana. It completed its mission successfully. It was supposed to be picked up by a Ju-52, but the radio communications center transmitted an erroneous code designation to Biserte and the aircraft failed to appear. The group was finally taken prisoner by the French.

7. A special duty SD unit was landed by Ju-52 in the vicinity of Biskra. The Biskra airfield was its target. The approach flight of a second group, scheduled to land near the railway bridge north of Biskra, had to be cancelled because the He-111 which was towing the freight glider developed engine trouble. The glider managed a successful emergency landing just behind the Axis lines.

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8. The planned assaults on the bridges south of Bone and near La Calle had to be called off, since radar-guided enemy night fighter defenses were observed from mid-March on.

9. Concurrently with the carefully planned sabotage actions of the Schacht Commando, a large number of explosions and fires (set by explosives up to six lbs.) were instigated by Arabs in the enemy rear area. In a number of cases, explosives were planted in railway locomotives, to set off plastic-covered bombs in the form of coal bricks, but there is no information available regarding the effectiveness of these attacks."¹²⁰

As of mid-March, the Axis air units were forced to discontinue their missions. As the weather gradually improved, the Allied air forces were able to develop their full potential, even in night operations.

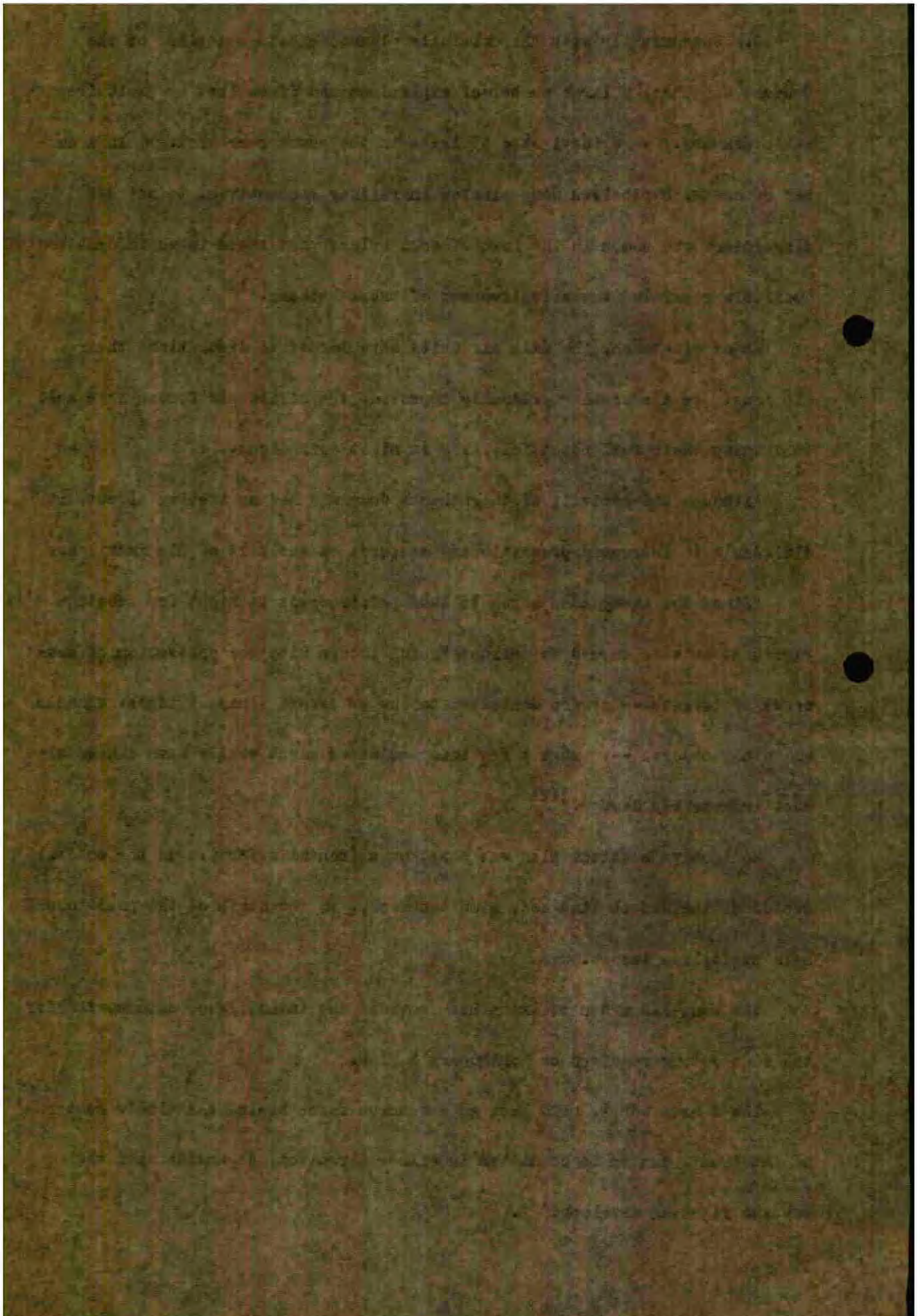
Although the activity of the Schacht Commando had no lasting effect, it did result in increased precautionary measures on the part of the Americans.

"Since the enemy soon began to land paratroopers at night for sabotage missions, we were forced to entrust French troops with the protection of hundreds of targets -- sewers converted to use as escape lines, bridges, tunnels, and other objects --, where a few enemy soldiers might easily have caused almost irreparable damage."¹²¹

Montgomery's attack plan was based on a frontal offensive on the coastal sector of the Mareth line and, simultaneously, to the north of the positions held by Italian troops.

The Long-Range Desert Group had provided the intelligence data needed for the wide detour required by Montgomery's plan.

The I Army Corps, held back as a reserve force behind the middle sector of the front, was to be committed in either direction, depending upon the way the fighting developed¹²².



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Montgomery's plan was a bold but extremely logical one, one which offered prospects of success considering the British numerical superiority in tanks, the fact that the British forces were fully motorized, and the fact that the Allied air forces enjoyed near-supremacy in the area.

120 - Major Gerhard Schacht a.D., "Harassing Missions in the Enemy's Rear Area in North Africa during the Spring of 1943" (Feindrückwärtige Zerstörereinsätze in Nordafrika während des Frühjahrs 1943), Karlsruhe Document Collection.

121 - Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, German Edition, Amsterdam, 1948, page 151; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

122 - Military Review, 1951, loc. cit.; the author is indebted to this source for much of the material presented in this section of the present study.

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In addition, Montgomery's plan was favorably and purposefully supported by the intervention of the American II Army Corps, advancing from the Maknassy - Gafsa area, which helped to tie down and thus neutralize a fairly large German force. The fact that British defensive operations in the area immediately in front of the coastal sector on 6 March were crowned with success was another point in favor of an ultimate Allied victory.

On 10 March, when Leclerc's Free French Brigade, on the march from Ksar-Rhilane towards the north, was attacked by German troops, the Western Desert Air Force intervened to prevent an Allied defeat. At the same time, the air units were able to disrupt Axis aerial reconnaissance activity over the assembly area of the New Zealand troops near Fom Tatahouins.

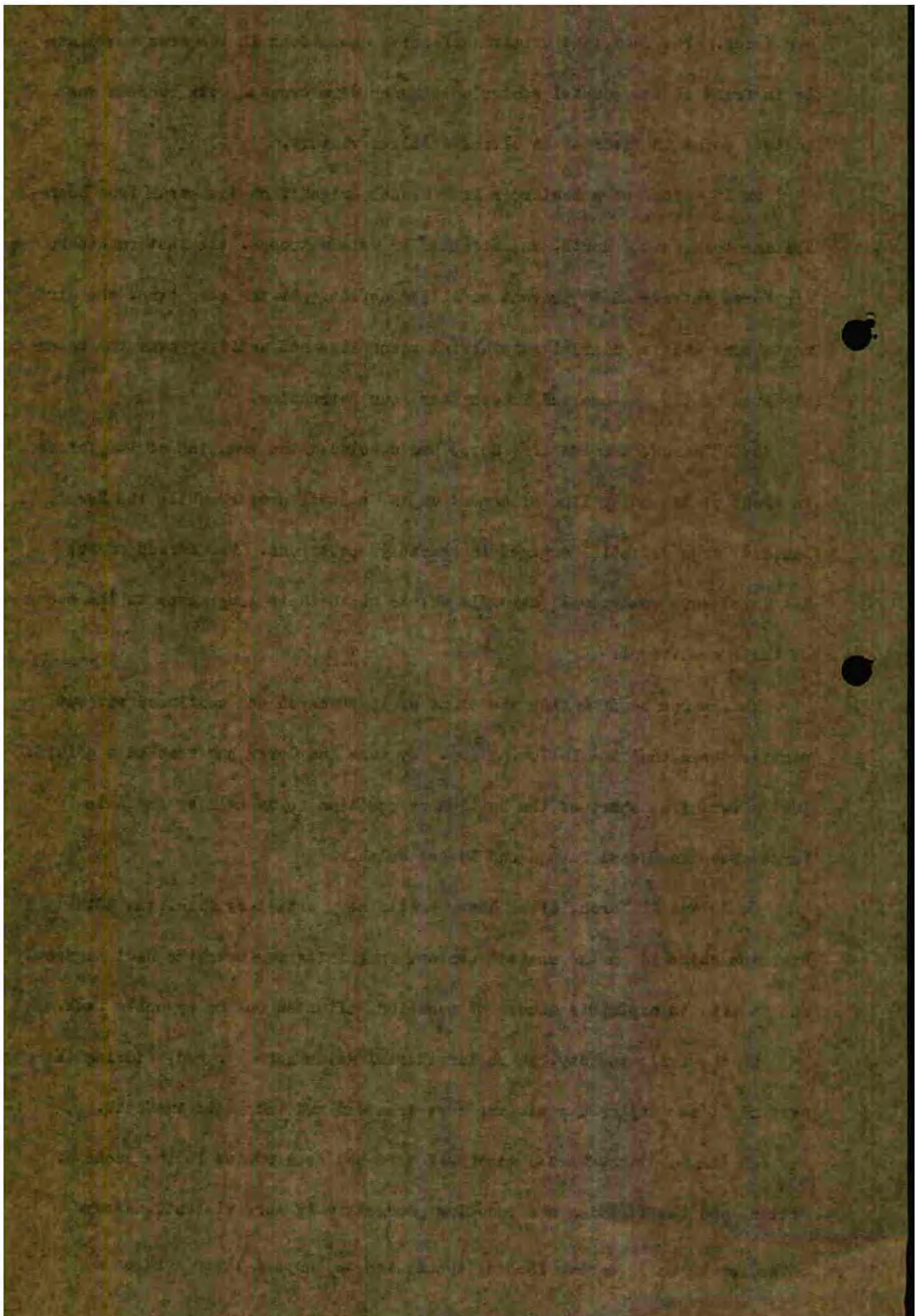
By 15 March, the XXX Army Corps had concluded the grouping of its forces in front of the enemy line of combat on the coastal sector, while the New Zealand Corps was still engaged in assembly operations. The forces of the XXX Corps were ready, well camouflaged, to begin their long march to the scene of their commitment.

This march began during the night of 19/20 March and continued without respite throughout the following day. By dusk the Corps had reached a point just a few miles short of the bottleneck position being held by the Axis forces between Djebel Tabaga and Djebel Melab.

On 20 and 22 March, after heavy preliminary artillery fire, the 50th Division attacked on the coastal sector, fought its way over the Wadi Zizacu, and managed to capture a number of positions situated on the opposite bank.

On the following day, these territorial gains were secured; during the next night the captured positions were expanded and increased in depth.

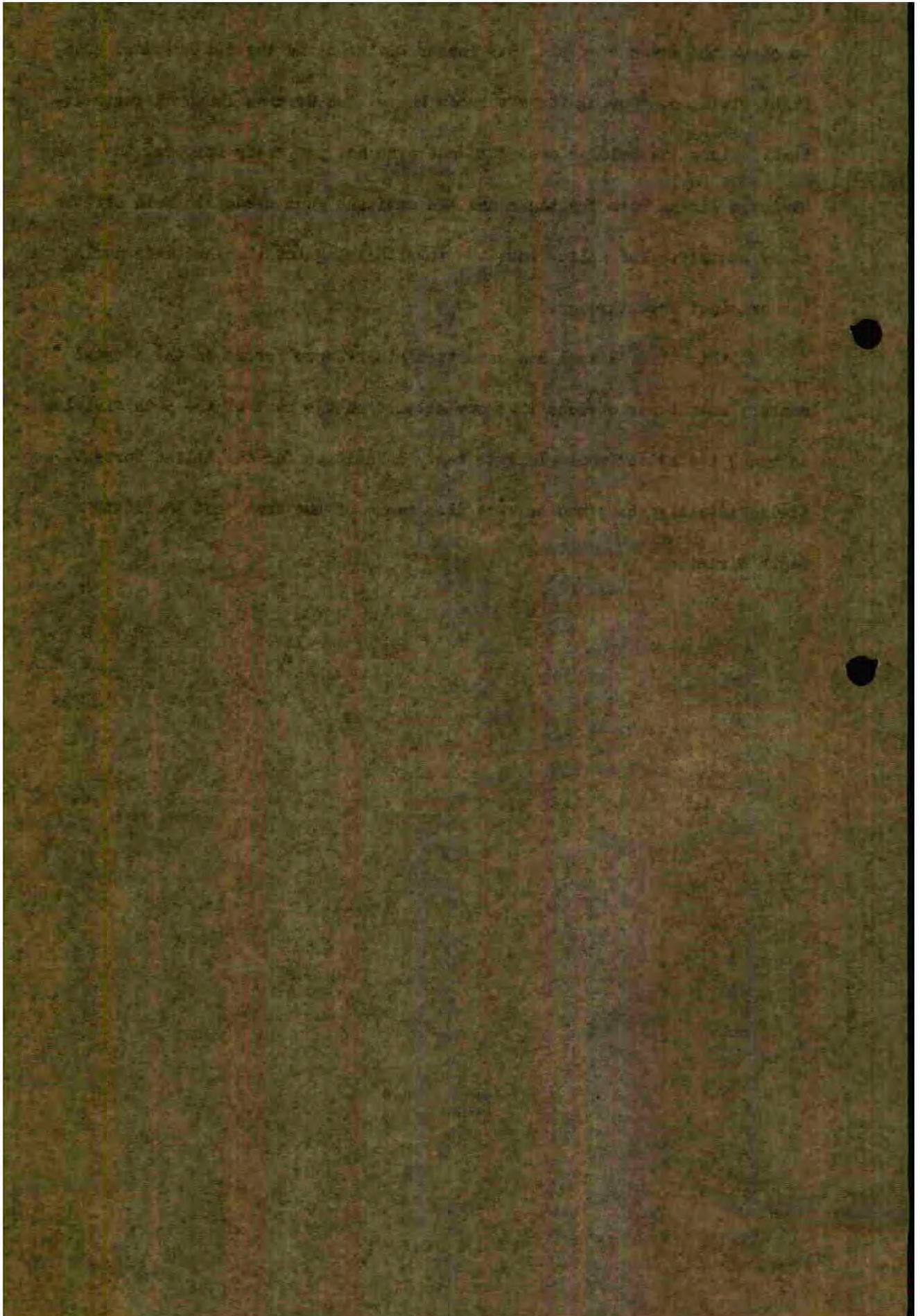
In the meantime, German reserve forces had been rushed to the scene of action, and the fighting was becoming progressively more violent. Heavy rains set in on 22 March, forcing the Allies to suspend their work on a



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number of bridges over the Wadi Zigmaou, bridges which were to facilitate the movement of tanks and heavy weapons to the area of operation. The Western Desert Air Force had also been handicapped by the rain in its efforts to check the advance of the 15th Panzer Division and the 1st Brigade, 90th Light Division. During the afternoon hours, the Germans launched their attack. Since the bridges over the Wadi were not yet ready for use, the 50th Division lacked both the tanks and the antitank guns needed to hold off the enemy assault. The Allies lost the territorial gains they had made during the original breakthrough.

By this time, Rommel had committed his reserve forces on the coastal sector, and it was obvious that any attempt on the part of the 50th Division to renew its attack would lead to heavy casualties for the Allied forces. Allied intelligence agencies were also aware of the fact that the 164th Light Division



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had been pulled out of its station in the combat line and assigned the task of checking the advance of the New Zealand Corps on the encirclement wing.

General Montgomery decided immediately to break off the attack on the coastal sector, but to keep the enemy forces tied down there by means of a series of decoy assaults.

In the meantime, Montgomery wanted to take advantage of the success achieved by the encirclement action before Rommel should be in a position to move his reserve forces to that area. Accordingly, Montgomery ordered the following regroupings, to take place during the night of 23/24 March:

1. The 50th Division was to withdraw behind the Wadi Zigzaou;
2. The 4th Indian Division was to move forward from Medenine to the Hallouf Pass, in order to open a communications line between the two original directions of attack. This was intended to facilitate the transfer of forces from one end of the operational theater to the other. There was also the chance that the 7th Armored Division might be brought in to join the encirclement wing;
3. The X Army Corps and the 1st Armored Division were to continue moving forward to join the New Zealand Corps.

In the meantime, the 21st Panzer Division and the 164th Light Division had been sent to reinforce the Italian troops holding the mile-wide passage against the New Zealand Corps.

The task confronting the British troops consisted in breaking through this stubbornly defended bottleneck as rapidly as possible and in holding the way into the more easily negotiable terrain beyond open for the armored units.

The suggestion that Djebel Tabaga might be circumvented was disapproved in view of the fact that any such outflanking movement would place it between two sections of the attacking force, thus making it impossible for either

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side to support the other's fire.

The only solution was to take advantage of the enormous striking power of the Allied air forces.

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By means of concentrated and repeated bombardment attacks, the will to resist of the Axis troops was to be so badly undermined that they would no longer be able to withstand a full-scale attack on the ground.

During the night of 25/26 March, the German-Italian positions were bombarded savagely. The attacks began again at daybreak and reached their climax at about 1500.

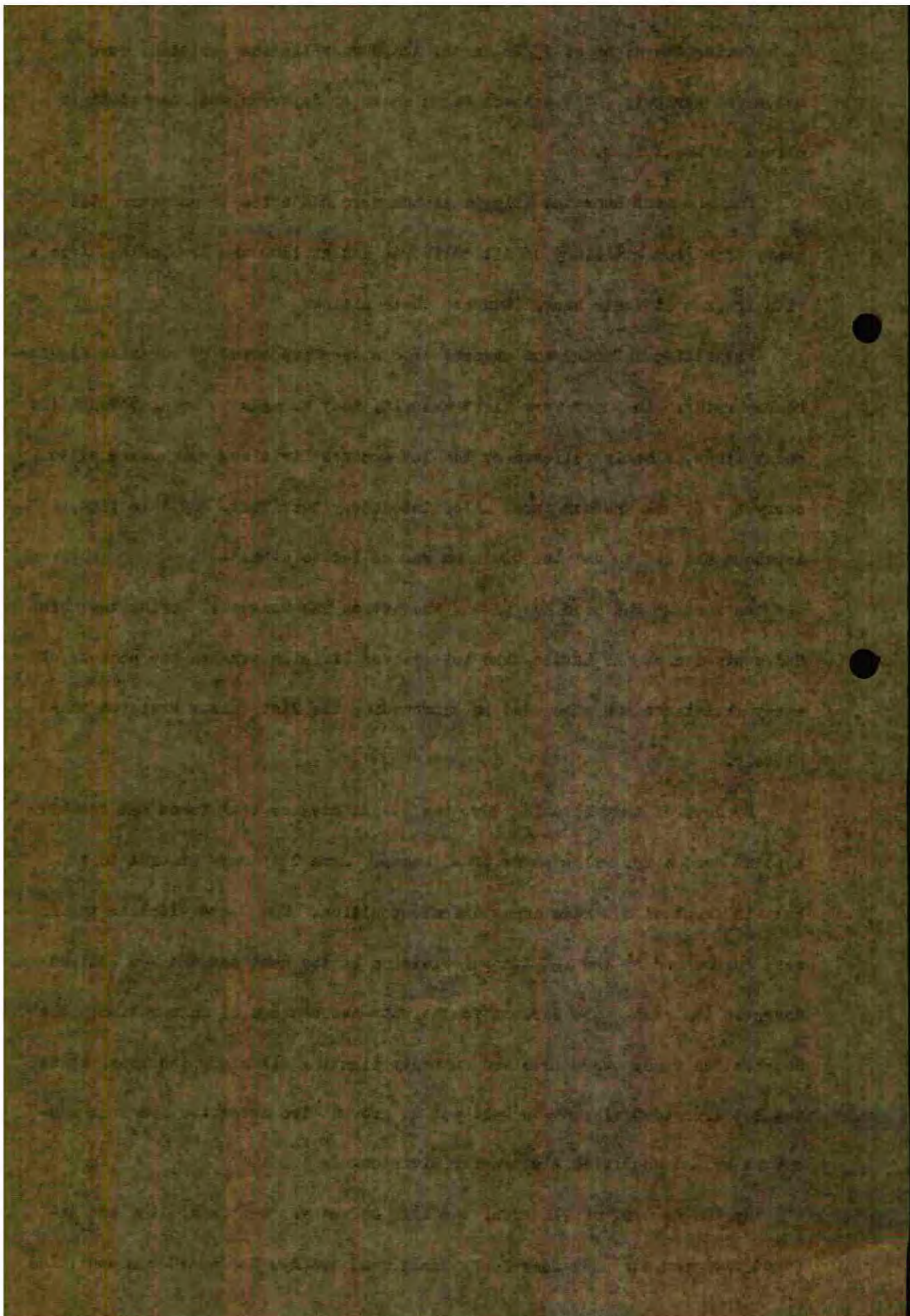
For the next hour the Axis positions were subjected to uninterrupted heavy fire from artillery of all calibers, and at 1600 the New Zealand troops, with the sun at their back, launched their attack.

The Allied infantry and armored troops were supported by repeated fighter-bomber raids. In their very first assault, they managed to break through the enemy lines, closely followed by the 1st Armored Division, which managed to carry the attack another three miles into enemy territory. By this time, darkness had set in and the Division was called to a halt.

As soon as the moon had risen, the attack was renewed. During the noise and confusion of the battle, the 1st Armored Division overran the pockets of enemy resistance and succeeded in surrounding the 21st Panzer Division completely.

By dawn of the following day, the Allied advance task force had reached a point just a few miles short of El Hamma. Here they were brought to a halt in front of a strong enemy defense position. The German-Italian troops were surrounded by the 1st Armored Division in the west and the New Zealand Corps in the east. The Germans fought with the courage of desperation; the New Zealand troops were involved in heavy fighting all along the line, while the 1st Armored Division was hard put to prevent two attempted breakout maneuvers by the encircled 21st Panzer Division.

By the evening of 27 March, the Axis defeat was complete; the 1st Armored Division advanced towards El Hamma, and the New Zealand Corps continued



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its thrust in the direction of Gabes.

In the meantime, decoy attacks were carried out at the front sector being held by the XXX Army Corps; the appearance of the 7th Armored Division during these attacks helped to increase the enemy's uneasiness. The 4th Indian Division was making excellent progress and had already established the planned line of communication.

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During the night of 27/28 March, the Axis troops withdrew in good order from the Mareth line positions back to Gabes. The XXX Army Corps set out in pursuit early the next morning but -- as always -- ran into mines, boobytraps, and road damage. The other flank, the X Army Corps, was held up by violent sandstorms in the vicinity of El Hamma.

Thus the German-Italian units were able to make their escape before the enemy had a chance to close the gap between Gabes and El Hamma.

The battle of the Mareth line was the most difficult operation carried out by the British Eighth Army since El Alamein. Once again, Rommel's tank forces and the 164th Light Division had sustained extremely high losses of both personnel and materiel.

The most striking characteristic of the battle was perhaps the intensity of the destructive blows delivered by the Allied air forces in support of the attack being carried out on the ground.

Once again the key to success had lain in the close coordination of the two military branches during the preparation and execution of their common mission. For the first time, Royal Air Force liaison officers had been employed as forward observers. They maintained wireless contact with the bomber units and kept the latter informed of the progress of the battle.

During the Mareth line battle, air superiority was clearly on the side of the Royal Air Force, and the enemy was able to do nothing to eliminate it. Another important lesson to be learned was apparent from the fact that Montgomery never once allowed the initiative to leave his own hands, not even when the German 15th Panzer Division gained the victory over the British 50th Division.

On the contrary, he reacted immediately to the new situation by shifting his point of main effort from the coastal sector to his unprotected flank.

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Rommel was unable to redirect the 15th Panzer Division and the 90th Light Division to El Hamma in time to meet the renewed attacks of the New Zealand Corps and the X Army Corps. Rommel's mistake is closely connected with the fact that the British Eighth Army managed to retain the initiative -- he missed the chance to establish an effective point of main effort with his own armored forces. The 10th Panzer Division remained in western Tunisia; the 15th Panzer Division was thrown (but too early) into the battle on the coastal sector; and the 21st Panzer Division was utilized to reinforce Axis defenses southwest of El Hamma.

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A further significant factor was the rapidity and determination with which the encircling movement was executed. It was enough that detailed intelligence gathered by the Long Range Desert Group showed that a march through the desert was not impossible.

Determination, effective leadership, and a smoothly functioning supply system facilitated the forced march of the motorized units. It was their rapid negotiation of this extremely difficult terrain which enabled the British Eighth Army to encircle and wear down the Axis forces.

Once again Rommel had ordered the withdrawal of his forces from their original positions in plenty of time, and once again he had tried every trick he knew to frustrate -- at least for the moment -- immediate pursuit by the X Army Corps. ^{Rommel's} ~~His~~ military vision and firm leadership had made it possible for ^{him} ~~Rommel~~ to bring the majority of his troops safely out of a menacing situation.

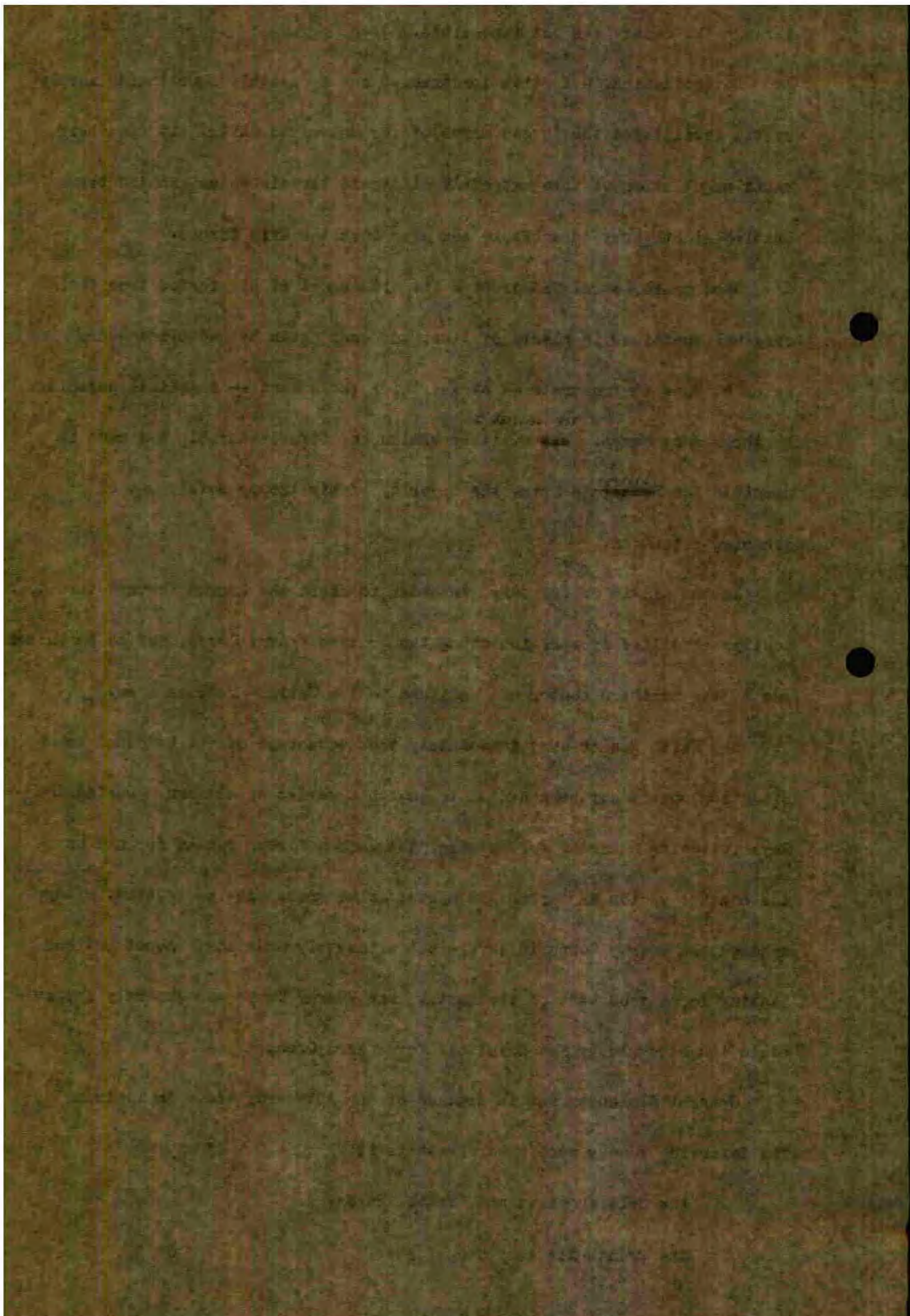
In the middle of February, in order to check the German forward thrust, additional Allied troops, including the British V Army Corps, had to be pulled out of the northern sector and assigned to the Thala - Tebessa area.

The Fifth Panzer Army immediately took advantage of the weakened enemy situation on the northern sector to launch a series of attacks. During the days following 6 March, for example, the German forces pushed forward on the coastal sector as far as the Djebel Abiod area, east of Tabarka. They engaged the V Army Corps in savage but ultimately undecided combat actions lasting for a good part of the month. The V Army Corps was expertly supported in its struggle by the Royal Air Force 242d Group.

General Alexander was in command of the 18th Army Group in Tunisia¹²³; The following forces were subordinate to it:

the British First and Eighth Armies,

the French XIX Army Corps, and



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the American II Army Corps.

It was General Alexander's most cherished desire to sort out the confusion of British, French, and American units which had come about during the battle for Tabessa, and to establish an Army Group reserve force.

In northern Tunisia, General Anderson was still in command of the British First Army; in central Tunisia General Patton had recently assumed command of the American II Army Corps, which had been made considerably stronger in the meantime.

123 - See page 655 of the present study.

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Nevertheless, generally speaking, the Allies -- still north of the Mareth line -- viewed the period around the first of the month as a period of preparation for the full-scale offensive to come. They hoped to be in a position to drive the Axis forces out of the southern Mediterranean once and for all.

Fresh troops were arriving, training activity was intensified, and progress was being made in the local fighting and in the final preparation of the positions.

The ultimate objective of the campaign was to defeat the Axis forces in Tunisia at the earliest possible date.

If this was to be accomplished, it was imperative that Montgomery's Army force its way through the narrow gap north of Gabes onto the coastal plateau, where -- in coordination with the II Army Corps -- it could bring its mobility and striking power to bear most fully.

Until the Eighth Army achieved this breakthrough, it was the task of the American II Army Corps to prevent the enemy reserve forces from intervening along the Mareth line. The Mareth line was generally considered to be a hard nut to crack -- even for the British Eighth Army!

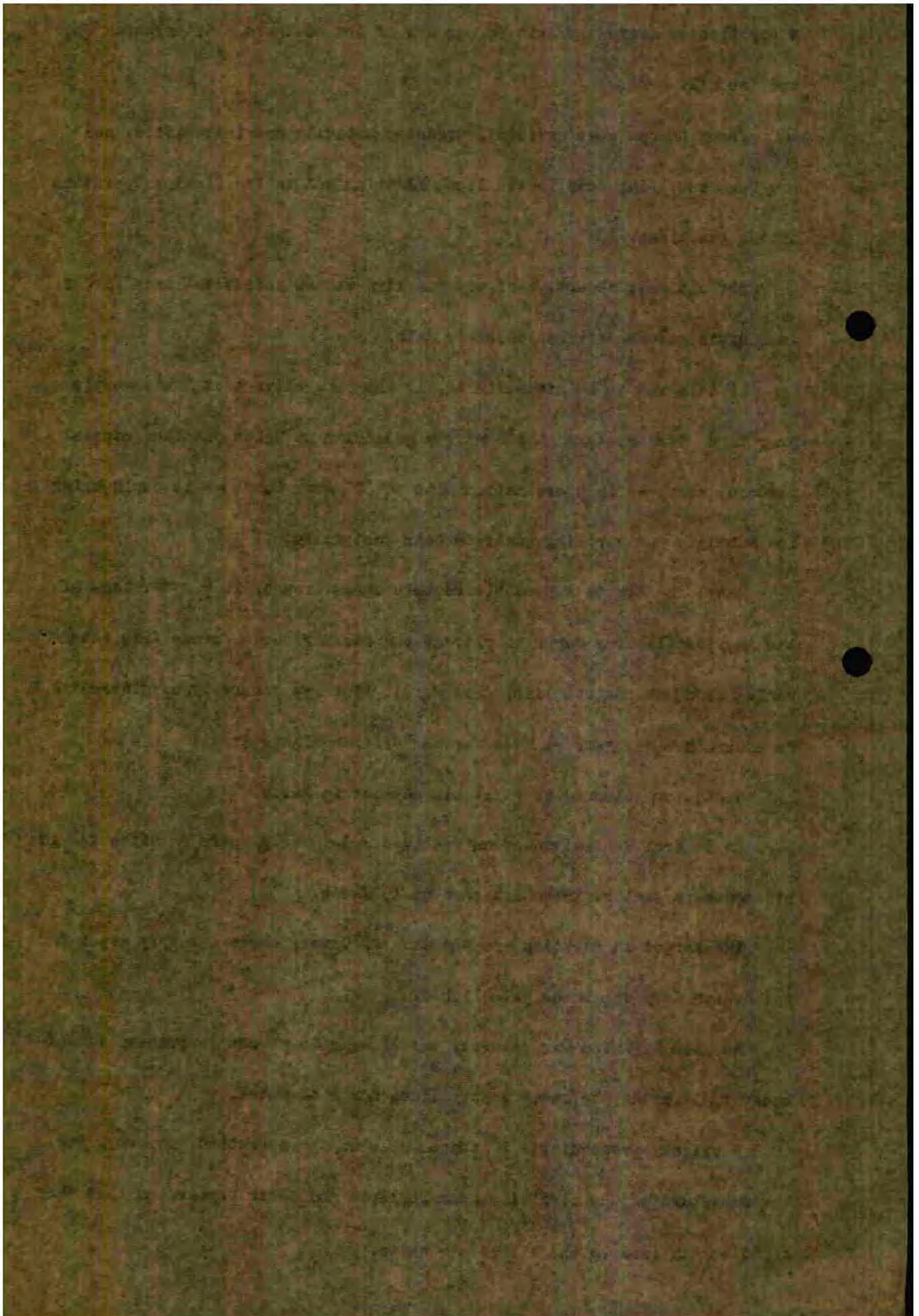
Montgomery planned to start his advance in March.

On 1 March General Anderson received orders to prepare an offensive in his southern sector, to be launched on 15 March.

The target in question was the town of Gafsa, where a supply depot for the Eighth Army was to be established.

As soon as Gafsa was secured, the II Army Corps was to push on to Maknassy to threaten the enemy supply lines north of Gabes.

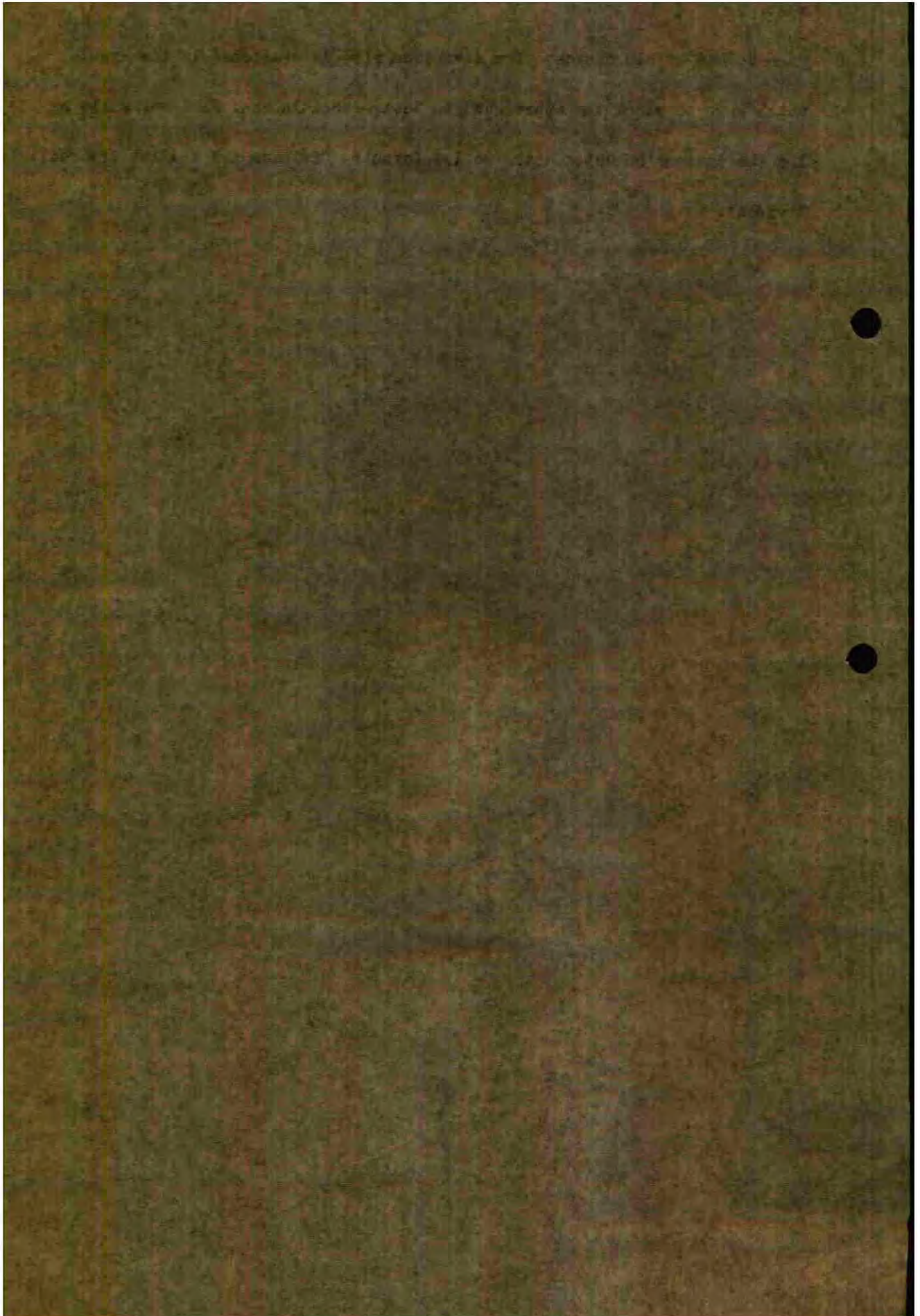
A primary prerequisite to the success of the operation, however, was the recapture of the airfields near Thelepte and their repair, so that they might be utilized by the Allied air units.



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This phase of the operation was given the code designation WOP, and General Patton with his II Army Corps was to be in charge of its accomplishment.

He had at his disposal two divisions, already stationed in the area, which were to block the approaches to Robaa, Sbeitla, and Feriana, while he led the advance on Gafsa with the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division.



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Once Gafsa was taken, the II Army Corps was to launch a series of attacks on Maknassy, in accordance with orders from the 18th Army Group.

The following air forces were assigned to Operation WOP: Williams' XII Air Support Command, with three single-engine fighter groups and one close-range reconnaissance squadron, based on the airfields near Thelepte; and a part of the tactical bomber fleet, to be committed from the airfield at Zouks.

Both the XII Air Support Command and the strategic bomber fleet were in a position to seize and maintain air superiority over the enemy air units.

The offensive of the Eighth Army was planned for three or four days after Operation WOP had gotten under way.

During the night of 16/17 March, Patton launched his attack with the 1st Armored Division and the 1st Infantry Division. Gafsa fell on 17 March, and on the following day the 1st Armored Division pushed forward towards Sened, being halted temporarily by heavy rains. On 21 March, the attackers captured Sened Station. Moving forward, along the highway, they occupied Maknassy on 22 March. By the following day they had reached the pass on the other side of Maknassy.

In the meantime the 1st Infantry Division advanced in a southeasterly direction and, finding El Guettar ~~to be~~ free of enemy forces, began to prepare it as a defensive position. The enemy attacked there with tanks and infantry on 23 March, but the British troops managed to throw them back. Thus the situation was restored on the front sector of the II Army Corps.

During the first two days the strategic bomber fleet and the XII Air Support Command had to be restricted to direct intervention in the ground fighting. Prior to the fall of Gafsa, the 12th Group (B-25's) plastered the town with bombs, and since no enemy aircraft were committed in defense, the Allied fighters were sent up against ground targets. Afterwards they

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carried out reconnaissance missions and low-level attacks, but somewhat less frequently due to the fact that they were needed for escort duty with tactical and strategic bomber units. On 23 March, when the Axis forces staged their counterattack against the II Army Corps, the strategic bomber fleet concentrated its efforts with lasting effectiveness on the enemy troop assembly area east of El Guettar.

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The Casablanca decision to reorganize the Allied air forces¹²⁴ meant a tremendous increase in the duties of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, their commander in chief in the Mediterranean, and not all of these new duties were directly connected with his own specific mission. As regards the conduct of military operations in northwest Africa, he was subordinate to the Headquarters, Allied Forces (H.Qu. der Alliierten Streitkräfte). He was responsible for the coordination of the air force operations with those of the two armies in Tunisia as well as for the air defense of Allied shipping convoys and their ports and supply bases.

The goal of operations against the enemy air forces was not only to facilitate the advance of the ground forces in the struggle for Tunisia, but also to eliminate the enemy's sources of supply in Sicily. Allied planners hoped that this would force the German Luftwaffe to withdraw a large number of its air units from the Russian front during the summer campaign.

By destroying the enemy's land, sea, and air supply lines, Tedder's long-range bombers were to be in a position to keep the enemy bridgehead in Tunisia isolated and at the same time to frustrate any attempt to build up a system of defense for Sicily.

The following air units were assigned to the Mediterranean Air Command for the accomplishment of this difficult task:

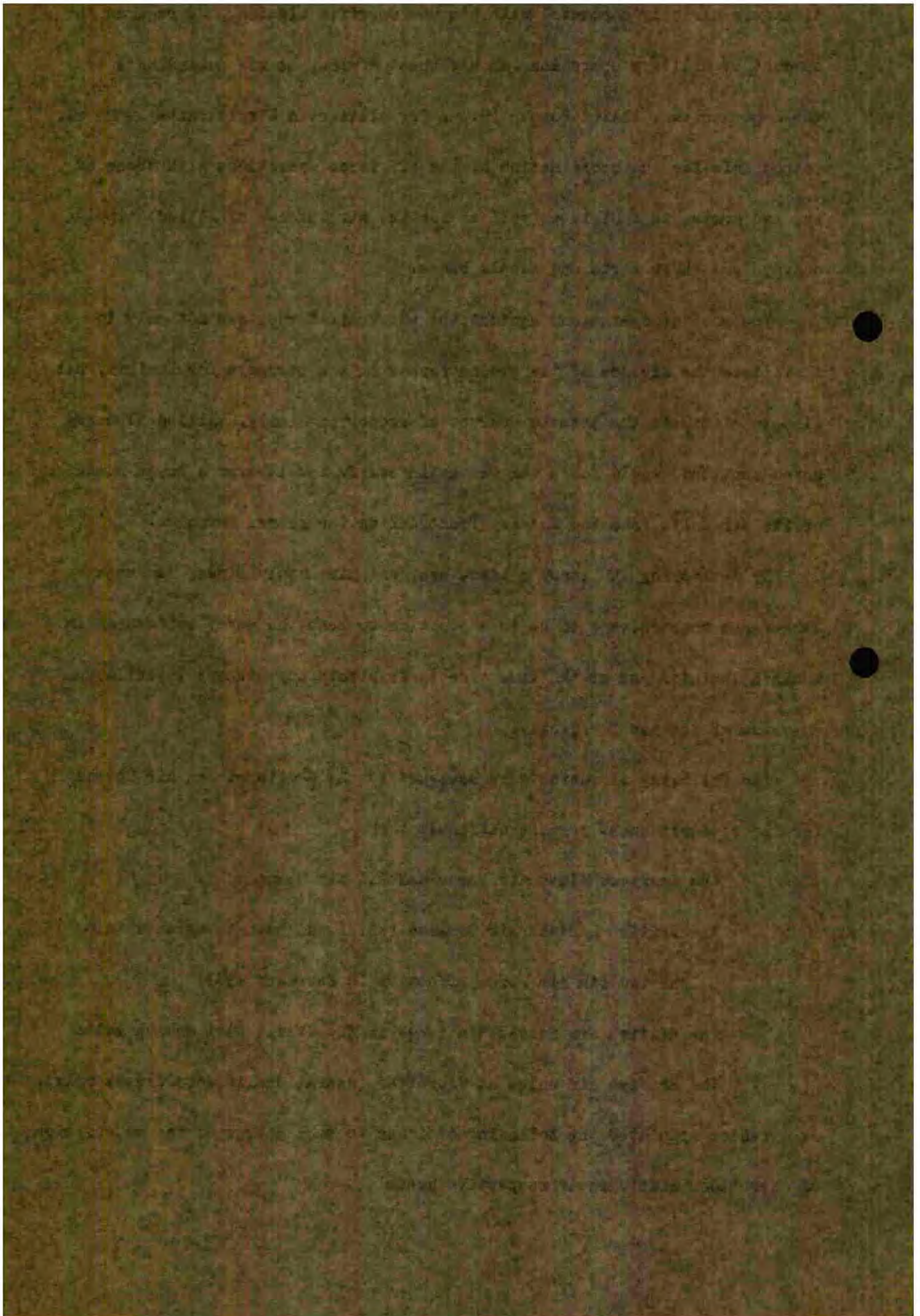
the American Ninth Air Force and XII Air Command

the British Eastern Air Command (which had been integrated into the Twelfth Air Force effective 18 February 1943)

The British air forces stationed in the Middle East and on Malta

the British air units at Gibraltar (operationally subordinate only).

Tedder appointed the following officers to take charge of the supervision of operations within their respective areas:



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Northwest Africa Air Force (Major General Spaatz),

Middle East Air Command (Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas),

Royal Air Force Malta Air Command (Air Vice Marshal Sir Keith Park).

The air commands under Spaatz represented a new factor in the organization of the Allied air forces. The experience gathered during the preceding winter had proved that the fighter control method employed by the Americans heretofore was incapable of adaptation to the multifarious missions required in the African theater. The fighters were expected to take over the air defense of the ports and of the supply convoys, to protect the bomber aircraft against air attack by enemy fighters, and to participate in joint operations with the forces fighting on the ground.

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The bomber wings were no longer permitted to be employed independently by their own commanders. They were required to take on such diverse tasks as eliminating enemy submarines and bombarding enemy shipping convoys, carrying out attacks against remotely located targets, and -- over the battlefields themselves -- destroying enemy artillery batteries and tank and troop assembly points.

Under the new system, General Spaatz was given supreme command over the strategic bomber fleet, the close-support fighter corps, and the coastal air units. These were the three combat instruments which he would need if he was to meet effectively the demands made upon him.

In his hand lay the weapon which the Allies hoped would decide the air war -- and thus the campaign -- in Tunisia.

Without a doubt, the most difficult part of this over-all mission fell to Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, who had been placed in command of the close-support air corps. At this time, the situation in central Tunisia was extremely critical.

Coningham's views in connection with the coordination and the liaison activity between the air forces and the ground troops deviated widely from those held heretofore, and consequently both the air units and the ground forces required thoroughgoing reorientation if they were to operate effectively together to achieve their common goal. In the first place, the 242d Group and the XII Air Support Command had to be brought up to the standard achieved by the Western Desert Air Force. Understandably they were still far behind it in respect to both experience and equipment.

Coningham transferred his headquarters to Souk-el-Khemis, in the vicinity of the advance headquarters of the 18th Army Group and that of General Anderson's First Army.

Major General James Doolittle was in command of the strategic bomber

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fleet, which was also made subordinate to Major General Spaatz. Doolittle had at his disposal the American XII Bomber Command and two British Wellington squadrons, which were protected by his own escort fighters. All of these forces were based on the airfields in the vicinity of Constantine^e, and it was this area which Doolittle selected for his headquarters. The Coastal Air Command, under the command of Air Vice Marshal Hugh P. Lloyd, was also at Spaatz' disposal.

The Coastal Air Command was made up of the 323d, 325th, and 238th Royal Air Force Wings, the headquarters staff of the American XII Fighter Command plus the headquarters squadron, and the American 350th Single-Engine Fighter Group (P-39's).

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Lloyd's headquarters were at the St. George Hotel in Algiers, in the same office as was used by Admiral Cunningham, with whom he was expected to work very closely. It was to this office that all communications came, and the data on the positions of Allied and enemy ships were posted continually on the briefing maps.

The Coastal Air Command was responsible for the air defense of North Africa, for naval reconnaissance, for antisubmarine operations, and -- finally -- for the protection of its own convoys and the destruction of those of the enemy. Somewhat later, the coastal units were transferred from Agadir to Bone.

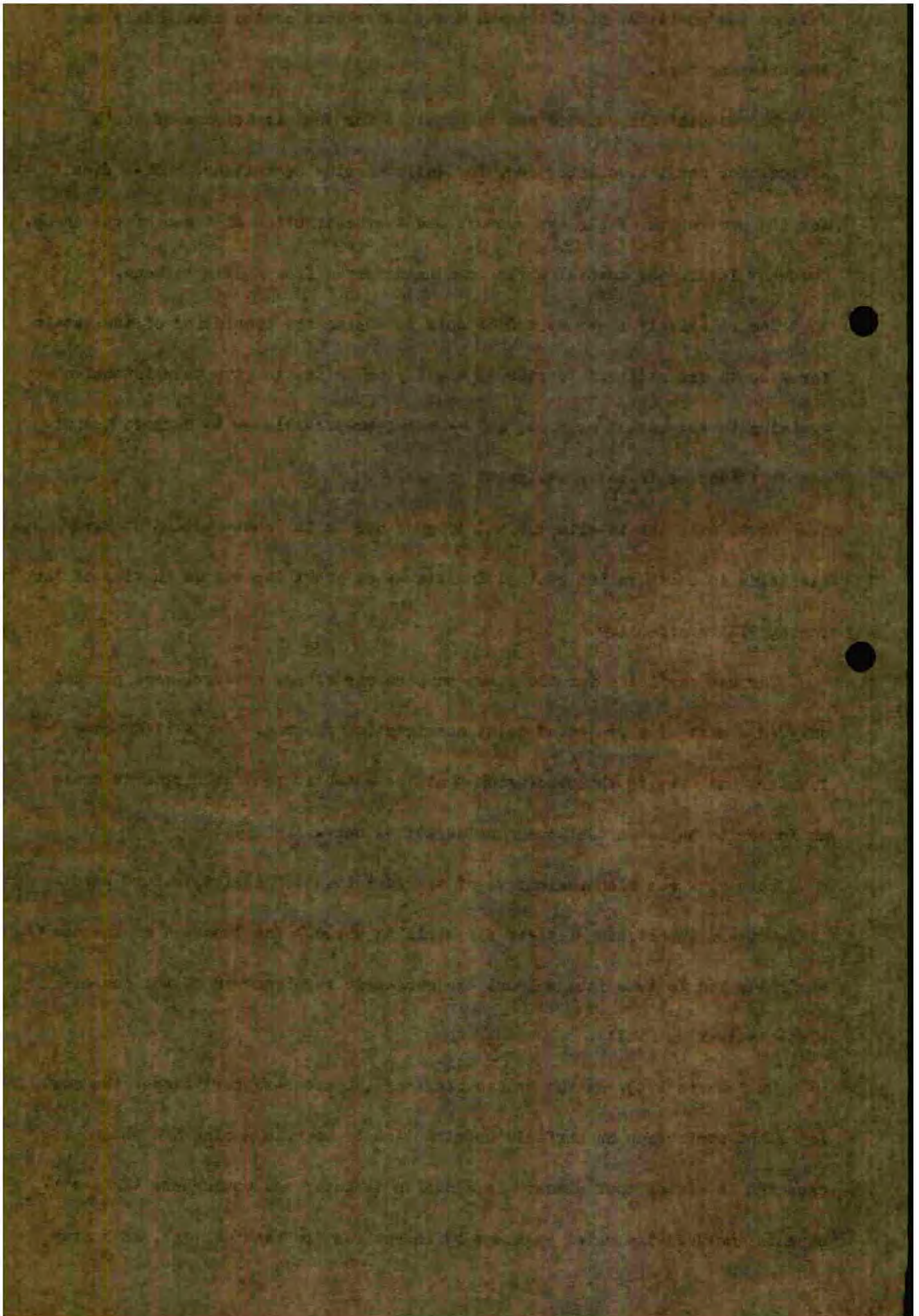
The relatively short period of calm following the conclusion of the battle for Tebessa was utilized to refresh the flying units, to give them intensive training in the newest methods, and -- whenever possible -- to correct technical deficiencies in their equipment (radar).

Above all, the interim was put to good use in the construction of new airfields in northern and central Tunisia -- of great importance in view of the coming Allied offensive.

The new airfields for the close-support air corps, however, were planned only as a part of a projected joint construction program. The Allied headquarters had come to the conclusion that the establishment of airfields could no longer be based on tactical considerations only.

This view was also indicative of the fact that top Allied leaders were aware of the importance of their air striking power. The location of the new airfields had to take into account the strategic requirements of the contemplated attack on Sicily.

On 3 March 1943, at the headquarters of the close-support corps, the most important conference on airfield construction to be held during the entire campaign in Africa took place. In addition to Kuter and Cunningham, the participants included the chief engineer officers from the headquarters, 18th Army



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Group, from the First Army, and from Tedder's staff.

A scant two days later, orders were issued to the effect that thirteen airfields nearer the front were to be made ready to accomodate the close-support corps by 13 March, and another fifteen were to be prepared for long-range bomber forces in the areas south and east of Constantin^g.

Construction of fields in the rear area was relegated to second or third-place priority.

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After a slight disagreement with the First Army, to which the British airfield construction troops were subordinated, the Allied headquarters finally decided in favor of Tedder. This decision put an end to the haggling which had been going on for the past six months.

The view had finally prevailed that a uniform policy of airfield construction was just as important as a uniform policy of command for the joint Allied air forces.

In June 1942, in order to relieve the extremely critical situation of the British Eighth Army, a number of American bomber units originally slated for the China-Burma-India theater had been deviated from India to Egypt. These later formed the nucleus of the Ninth Air Force; in the beginning they made up only the detachment "scratched together" by Colonel L. H. Brereton in India. Under his command, these units played an important role in the operations of the British Eighth Army during the summer and fall of 1942 by their many successful attacks on enemy convoys and on the Axis supply ports on the North African coast.

On 12 November 1942, the Ninth Air Force was officially established; nine more American bomber groups were slated to join it.

In May 1942, Allied leaders meeting in London had concluded an agreement to the effect that the following air units should be dispatched to the Middle East, to arrive there on approximately the dates given below:

1 Sep 1942: 1 single-engine fighter group and 1 medium bomber group
 1 Oct 1942: 1 heavy bomber group and 1 single-engine fighter group
 end of 1942: 1 medium bomber group
 1 Jan 1943: 2 single-engine fighter groups
 1 Apr 1943: 2 single-engine fighter groups

TOTAL: 3 bomber groups and 6 single-engine fighter groups.

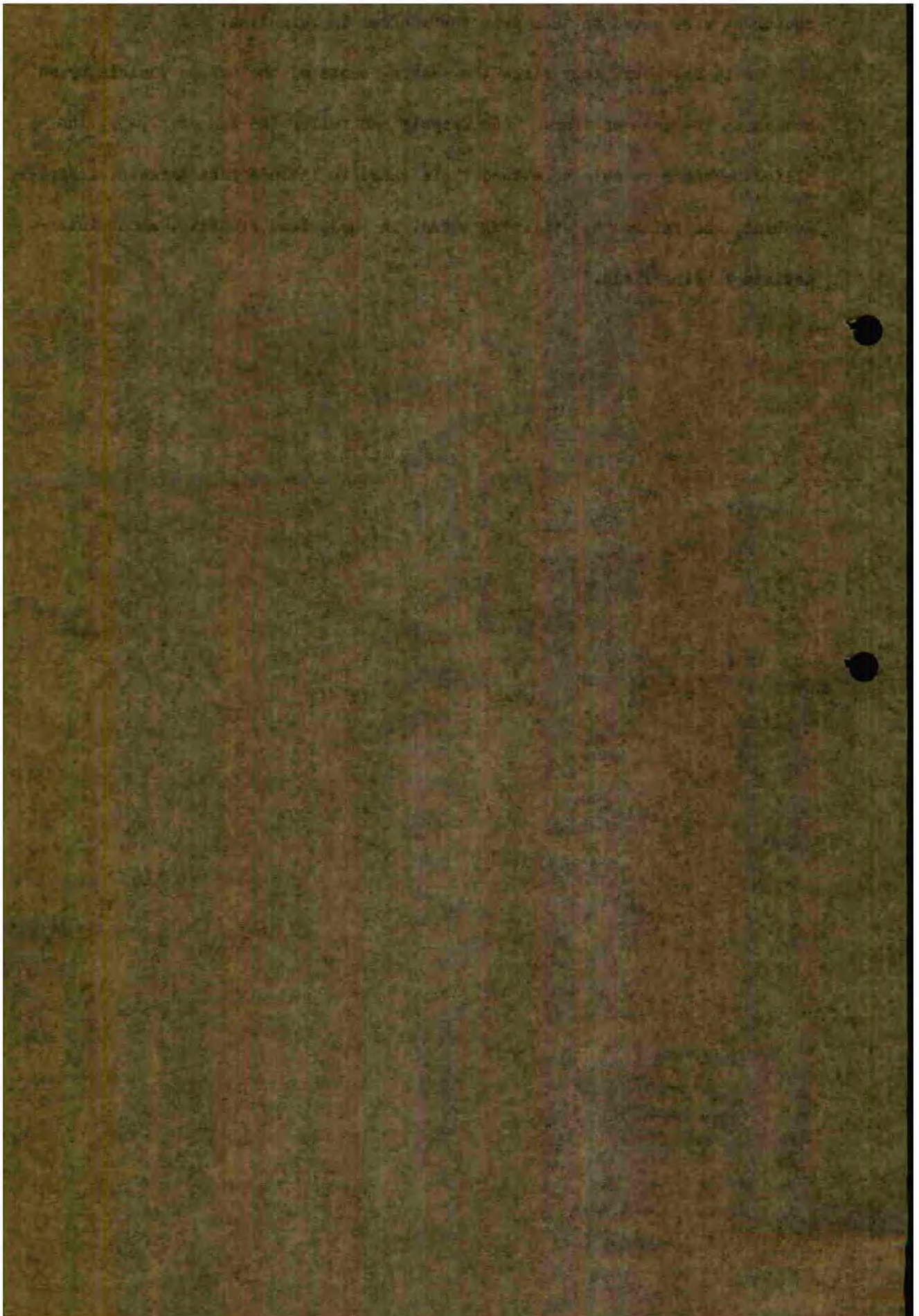
At the same time, the necessary preparations had been made to transfer in

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ample time the ground organization elements needed to service these groups.

As soon as the airfields around Tobruk fell into the hands of the British Eighth Army on 15 November 1942, a number of Ninth Air Force bomber squadrons were moved to them from their bases in Palestine.

On 15 December, they fired the opening shots of the war on Tunisia by an attack on the town of Sfax. Once Tripoli had fallen (23 January 1943), the Allied bomber were able to extend their range to include such targets as Naples, Messina, and Palermo by utilizing Lucca, on the island of Malta, as an intermediate landing field.



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By the end of January, all the bomber units of the Ninth Air Force had been moved forward to Gambut. Only the repair depots were left behind in Egypt to finish the jobs presently on hand.

Ever since 6 February 1943, Colonel Brereton had been exercising command over the American army forces in the Middle East (as Lieutenant General Frank M. Andrews' successor) as well as over the Ninth Air Force.

The reorganization of the Allied air forces in the Mediterranean¹²⁴ had resulted in the consolidation of all air units east of the Libyan/Tunisian border in the Middle East Command, under Air Marshal Douglas. The only unit exempt from this consolidation order was the Western Desert Air Force, which was subordinate to Coningham's close-support air corps.

Accordingly, those elements of the Ninth Air Force which had been working together with the Western Desert Air Force also came under Coningham's command.

This applied also to Strickland's Desert Air Task Force Headquarters, which was redesignated Desert Air Task Force, Ninth Air Force. Strickland remained in command.

(In the fall of 1942, an American advanced liaison staff joined the Western Desert Air Force in order to evaluate the experience gathered during the employment of American air units.

The newly-established element was designated Desert Air Task Force Headquarters on 22 October. Brigadier General Aubrey C. Strickland was named as its chief of staff¹²⁵).

On 23 February, the new headquarters' 57th Fighter-Bomber Group (P-40's), based at Zuara, had already participated in a series of attacks on enemy airfields near Mareth and Gabes. Like the pointed maneuvers of the British Eighth Army in the direction of the Mareth line, these attacks were intended to distract the enemy's attention from Kasserine.

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On 1 March, elements of the 57th Fighter-Bomber Group moved to one of the newly-prepared airfields south of Medenine, where they were joined the following evening by the entire Royal Air Force 244th Single-Engine Fighter Wing.

124 - See page 655 of the present study.

125 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 34.

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Soon thereafter, both units were chased off the airfield by expertly directed German artillery fire. The German batteries were shooting from well-camouflaged positions affording excellent visibility, located in the nearby Matmata Mountains. They also carried out reconnaissance activity with armored cars.

As a result of these developments, the entire 57th Fighter-Bomber Group remained at Zuara until 9 March, when it was transferred to an airfield southwest of Ben-Gardane. Here the 57th Group served as a training unit for the 79th Fighter-Bomber Group, which was scheduled to go into action very soon.

While the 57th Group was still at Zuara, it was joined by one squadron from the 324th Fighter-Bomber Group, which remained with it throughout the campaign in Tunisia. The other two squadrons of the 324th Group were made a part of the 79th Fighter-Bomber Group.

The remaining two squadrons of the 12th Fighter-Bomber Group were transferred to the command of the close-support corps in Algeria.

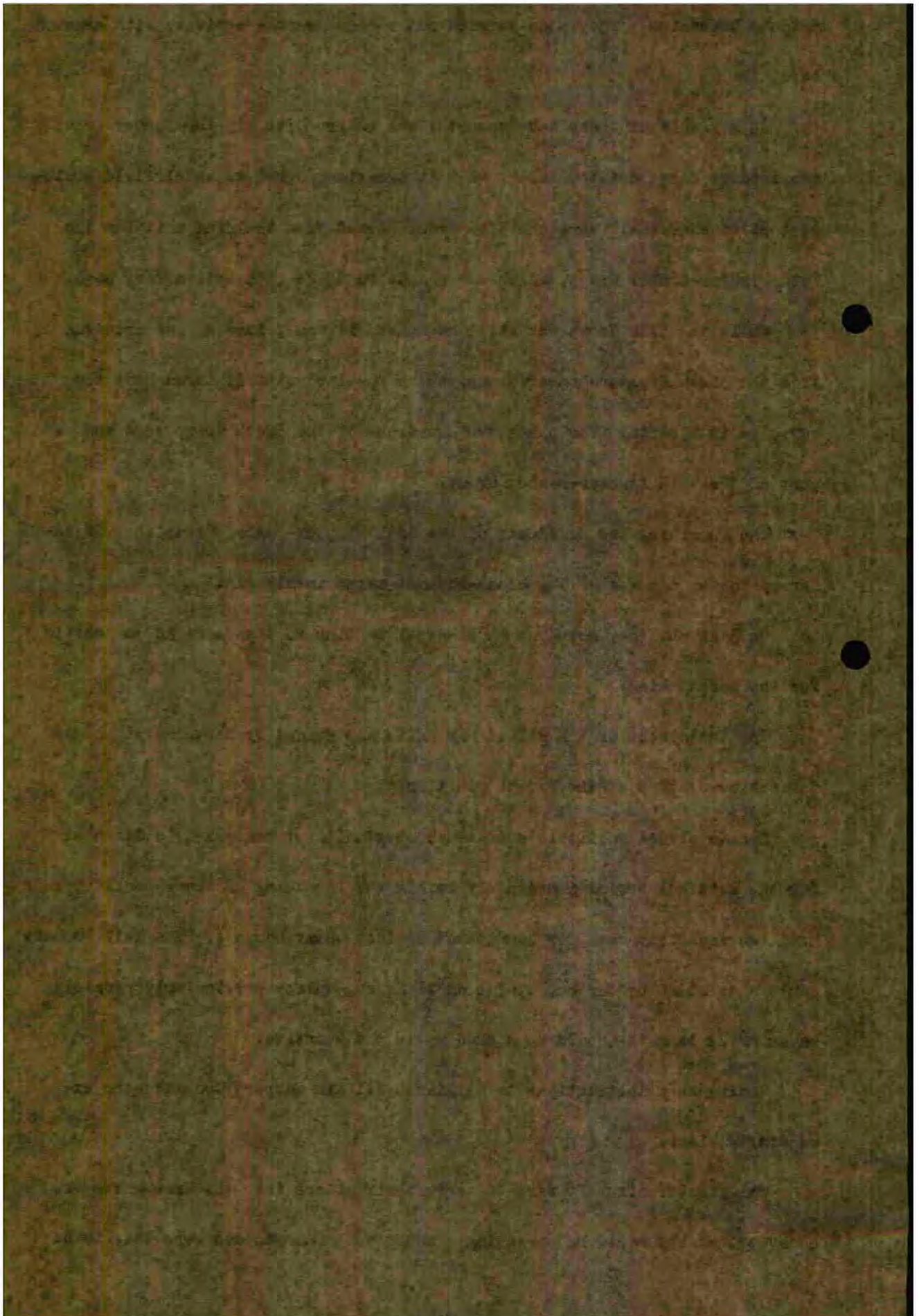
On 3 March, they moved up to El-Assa, in time to take part in the battle for the Mareth line.

The deployment of the Allied air units was guided by Montgomery's plans for the occupation of the Mareth position.

Spaatz placed Doolittle's medium bomber units at Montgomery's disposal for the critical period immediately before the launching of the attack. Spaatz held two squadrons back for commitment against enemy convoys. The B-17 bombers would also stand by for employment on 21 March, unless particularly promising enemy naval targets should be picked up in the meantime.

Cunningham's instructions to Williams' XII Air Support Command were exceedingly clear.

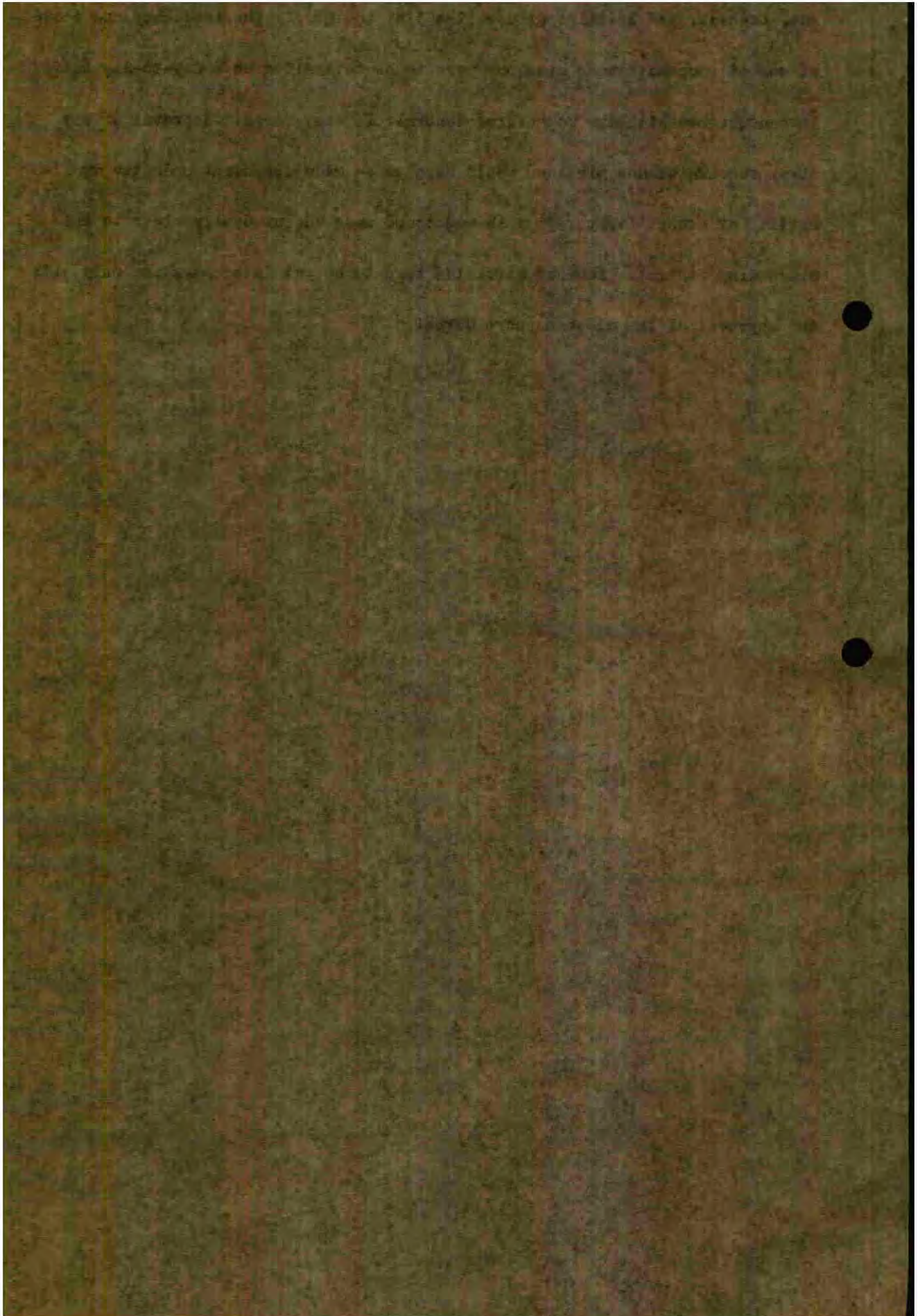
The fighter aircraft were to carry their attack into the area where the enemy presumably would be operating; under no circumstances were they to be



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utilized as air cover for the Allied ground forces, unless the latter should be subjected to constant harassing by enemy air units.

The 81st Group (P-39's) was to be employed in attacks on ground targets, not, however, the Spitfire groups (the 31st and 52d). The frequency and scope of combat reconnaissance missions were to be determined on a day-to-day basis, in concurrence with the Commanding General, II Army Corps. Approval of any other reconnaissance missions would have to be made dependent upon the availability of escort fighters; this was to be made unequivocally clear to the Commanding General. Advance airfields were to be put into operation only with the approval of the close-support corps.



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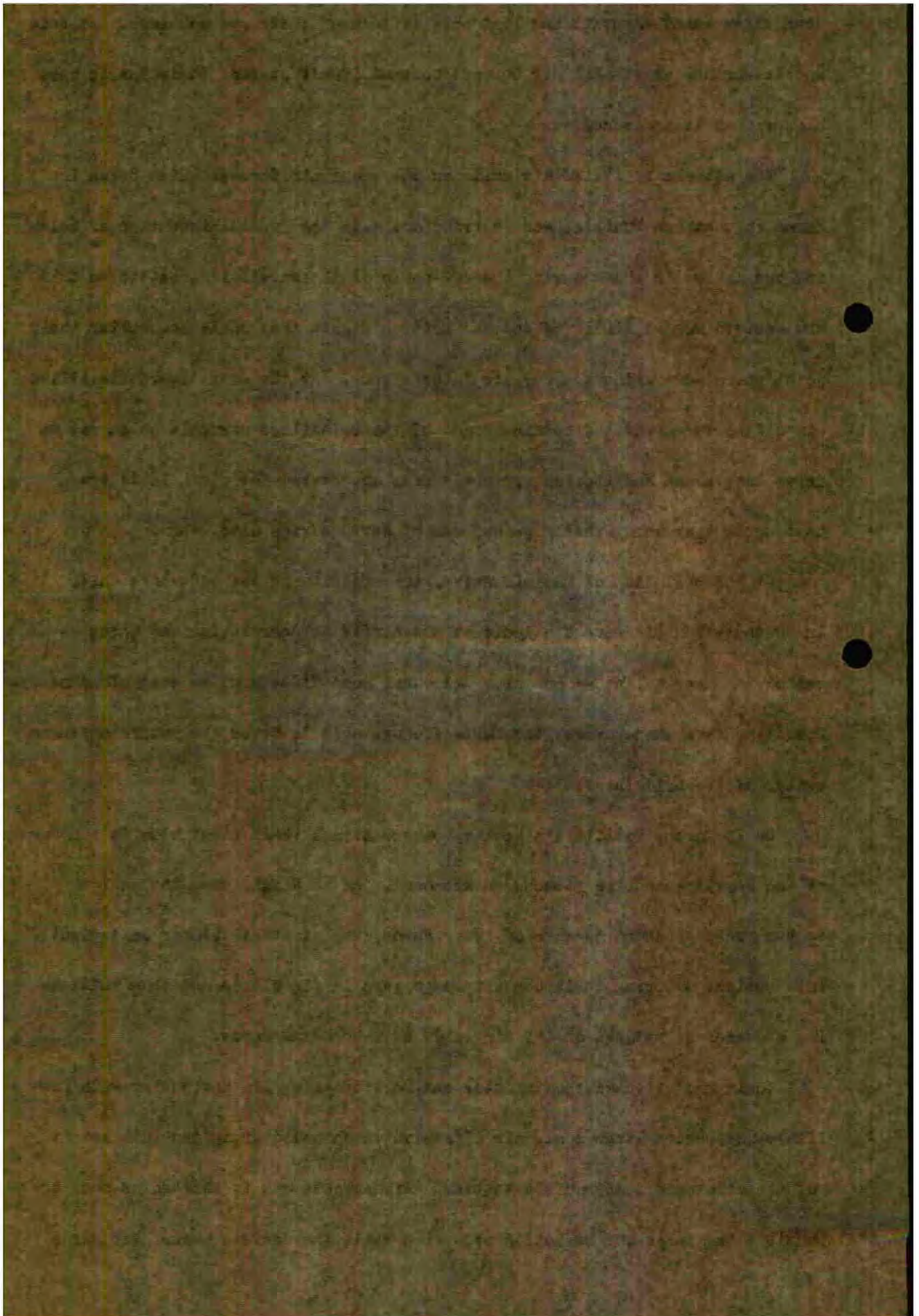
The offensive employment of fighter aircraft deviated considerably from the conduct of operations followed by the XII Air Support Command at Faid and Kasserine. During the period 23 March through 3 April, the fighters brought down sixty enemy aircraft and lost only fifteen of their own machines. At Faid and Kasserine, as the XII Air Support Command itself stated, their losses were higher than their successes.

The attacks by Allied air units on the enemy air forces, which began in March in southern Tunisia, were carried out with the general intention of holding the latter in check during the WOP-phase of the Mareth line battle so that the Western Desert Air Force and the British Eighth Army could accomplish their joint operations without enemy air interference. At the same time, this Allied air offensive marked the opening round of the relentless struggle which was to drive the German and Italian air units from one bombed-out airfield to the next until they were finally pushed out of North Africa altogether.

At the beginning of the offensive, the majority of the Luftwaffe units in southern Tunisia were stationed at the airfields near Tabaga and Gabes -- behind the Mareth line -- and near Mezzouna, some fifteen miles east of Maknassy. Operating from these bases, the Luftwaffe was able to cover the entire southern sector of the bridgehead.

On 15 March, Doolittle's medium bombers struck their first blow in the form of two heavily-escorted attacks on Mezzouna. On 18 March, when the medium bombers were grounded because of heavy rains, the strategic bomber units went into action, dropping their bombs through gaps in the clouds and thus initiating a series of attacks on the airfields at Tabaga and Gabes.

Cunningham selected the targets, and, coordinating his basic plan with Doolittle, ordered a large-scale air offensive which would bring the full weight of the strategic bomber units to bear. His purpose was to shorten as much as possible the lulls in the action occurring while the Western Desert Air Force



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was refueling or rearming. On 20 March, Deolittle's medium bombers raided Gabes and Tabaga. On 21 March they were augmented by seventy-six more B-17's, and during the following three days they carried out a total of 281 sorties against these two targets.

The enemy evacuated Mezouna and Gabes first, but even Tabaga could not be held for much longer. When the Luftwaffe abandoned it to withdraw to Sfax and La Fauconnerie, twenty-eight damaged aircraft were left lying on the field.

By nightfall on 20 March, the New Zealand Corps had almost completely encircled the 27,000 enemy troops and 200 tanks which were holding the positions southwest of El Hounna. The Western Desert Air Force had concentrated its fighter-bombers over this area, while saving the light

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and medium bombers for ground support operations to relieve the hard-pressed infantry troops fighting on the coastal sector. On the coastal sector, too, the P-40's and B-25's intervened on behalf of the 50th Division on 22 March, when they bombed enemy troop assembly points. On the same day, the Hurricane II-D's (Tankbusters) also claimed one of their most impressive victories -- they knocked out nine tanks of an enemy group fighting against the New Zealand Corps.

Even after the British 1st Armored Division appeared on the scene at the encirclement flank, the situation did not seem particularly favorable. The enemy had laid extensive mine-fields, possessed several good observation posts, and had antitank guns mounted in the hills overlooking the narrow passage.

In addition to Italian troops, the 21st Panzer Division was on hand, reinforced by the 15th Panzer Division and the 164th Light Division.

In view of the situation, the Allied army staff conferred at length with Broadhurst, Commander of the Western Desert Air Force. Broadhurst suggested a tightly-concentrated low-level air attack, to be carried out during the day against a narrow sector of the enemy front. The effectiveness of such an attack would be heightened by the fact that the enemy forces were not protected by trenches and that their antiaircraft artillery was weak.

Then, protected by a moving barrage, the tanks and infantry would try to break through the gap before the enemy could bring up his reinforcements.

The proposed low-level attack represented a sharp departure from the usual methods of the Western Desert Air Force. Heretofore it had apparently been wary of the potential losses inherent in such a direct encounter with the enemy, fearing that they would jeopardize its ability to maintain its air superiority.

In preparation for the attack, every single available bomber was sent out against the enemy tanks during the two nights preceding the battle.

On the morning of 26 March, the take-off fields were incapacitated by

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violent sandstorms, but the weather cleared during the course of the afternoon and the attack (carried out by the 57th and 79th Fighter-Bomber Groups) descended upon the enemy at El Hama from a sunny, though still slightly hazy sky. The attack was led by three light bomber squadrons with fighter escort, followed by the Tankbusters. These were followed at fifteen minute intervals by Kitty bombers in groups of two and one-half squadron strength, appearing

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over the battlefield to bomb special targets and to direct their airborne armaments against the enemy artillery positions.

Carried out in low-altitude flight, the attack was an unqualified success. And the moving barrage of fire provided a highly effective lane of cover.

The Spitfires kept a constant watch to see that no enemy aircraft appeared in the sky, but the close-support corps was holding the enemy air units close to their home areas. After the two and one-half hours of heavy bombardment, eleven Allied pilots were reported missing.

On 26 March, heavy sandstorms kept the Allied air units on the ground, but to make up for this the P-40's participated in 418 bombardment and low-level harassment missions on 29 March against Axis traffic on the coastal highway as far north as Mahara. The airfields at Zitouna, Oudref, and Sfax were also raided.

In retrospect it must be conceded that these low-level attacks were helped considerably by the fact that the targets along the Mareth line were almost completely without cover.

There were enemy night bomber units stationed at the airfield near Sfax, but since it lay beyond the range of the XII Air Support Command's escort fighters, the field was assigned to the Western Desert Air Force as soon as the ground situation permitted. After 30 March, the strategic bomber units which had carried out the attacks on La Fauconnerie gradually discontinued their raids. The airfield was strongly reinforced with antiaircraft artillery brought up from the abandoned air bases in the south.

The Allied air forces had brought their full numerical superiority to bear during the recent operations.

The strategic bomber units continued to divide their attention fairly equally between attacks against the enemy air forces and operations over the

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field of battle.

Once the withdrawal from the Mareth line to Wadi Akarit had gotten under way, the Allied air units were confronted with an increasing number of re-warding targets, which were attacked in effective coordination between the strategic bombers and the light bombers of the Western Desert Air Force.

From the opening attack of Operation WOP to the withdrawal to Wadi Akarit, a total of fourteen tanks and 129 motor vehicles were destroyed.

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The British evaluation of the performance of the Tunisian Air Corps during the Mareth line fighting was extremely objective.

"German tactical air support in North Africa proved to be unexpectedly flexible and effective, and even after three weeks of uninterrupted operations, (following the start of the Eighth Army offensive against the Mareth line on 19 March), the enemy air units still had an aircraft strength of more than 300 machines, 60% of which were capable of immediate employment.

Subject to the restrictions imposed by their limited strength, the Luftwaffe units carried out their assigned missions with success. Whenever they were involved in operations, the majority of the pilots revealed their eagerness to do a good job. Even if they had had air units of the strength which we had, the German armies could not have had better support. The history of these Luftwaffe units is a classic example of what can be accomplished by relatively weak forces of high morale and exceptional efficiency in a struggle against a numerically superior enemy."¹²⁶

While the Ninth Bomber Force (?), based at Benghazi, was carrying out operations against the Axis supply shipments coming from the harbors on Sicily and in Italy, Spats and his forces were caught in a desperate battle to close off the funnel at the western edge of his sector. The long-range bombers and the Coastal Command were available to him for this mission, and they had two main targets to combat -- the supply ports and the convoys.

As of 1 March, the target priority list advocated by Doolittle was as follows:

1. Ships coming from Sicily or Italy and proceeding in a southerly or westerly direction
2. Ships coming from Tunisia and proceeding in a northerly or wasterly direction
3. Luftwaffe targets and Axis airfields
4. Transportation and communications centers in Tunisia.

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As far as naval targets were concerned, top priority was accorded to tankers.

During the course of the month, these guidelines were changed twice -- once on 16 March, when the heavy bomber units were ordered to concentrate exclusively on naval targets, and again on 24 March, when instructions were issued to the effect that the tankers were to be given top target priority.

126 - The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force, section dealing with the fighting in the Mediterranean during 1943/44, Chapter 11, pages 16/17; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

NOTE: The author is not responsible for the German translation appearing in the text.

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This order was interpreted to mean that attacks on ships lying in a harbor, or on a harbor itself, were considered more important than attacks on enemy air units.

The Allied air forces experimented constantly to determine the best possible altitude at which to release their bombs. The information gained through this activity was applied with considerable success during the combined high-altitude/low-altitude attacks. On 12 March, for example, three Seibel barges out of a group of eleven were sunk and three damaged.

Only a few of the Coastal Command aircraft had a wide enough range to threaten the alternate routes taken by Axis shipping. One naval air squadron, the Albacore, was transferred to bases as far to the east as possible, so that it could reconnoiter the ocean traffic in the Bay of Bizerte.

The torpedo firing mechanisms were removed from the aircraft of a Marauder squadron (B-26's). This squadron was made responsible for long-range reconnaissance of the waters surrounding Corsica and Sardinia and off the Italian coast as far east as Naples and the Straits of Messina.

During the month of March, these reconnaissance aircraft discovered an enemy convoy in the Tyrrhenian Sea on its way to Africa, and provided Doolittle's long-range bombers with enough data to enable them to attack it in the Sicilian Straits. In addition to the Coastal Command aircraft, Doolittle had his own long-range reconnaissance unit (made up of P-38's) and also had access to the British reconnaissance forces based on Malta. All of these kept him provided with information on any promising targets.

On 22 March, twenty-four B-17's from the 301st Bomber Group succeeded in setting off an explosion in the harbor of Palermo, which devastated nearly thirty acres of docks, sank four freighters, and destroyed two coastal patrol ships, which were hurled against a demolished breakwater wall.

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The Tunisian harbors also claimed a share of the attention of the enemy heavy bombers. The Wellingtons had selected the port of Bizerte as their particular preserve, and had attacked it incessantly. On 24 March, Ferryville was also hit; the "Citta di Savona", which was unloading a cargo of ammunition, exploded and sank.

La Goulette, Tunis, and Sousse were also bombarded during March¹²⁷.

127 - Author's note: In view of the large number of Allied attacks on convoys, harbors, and airfields, only the most important have been selected for mention here.

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For some time now, the extensive employment of air transport had represented the last resort of the Axis in the war in Africa, in Egypt and Libya, as well as in Tunisia. The first German troops to arrive had been brought by Ju-52's, and the transport service from Sicily and Italy had increased greatly in efficiency since its inception. By the end of 1942, the air transport units were carrying out twenty to fifty roundtrip flights a day; by mid-March 1943, they were already making one hundred landings daily in Tunis, and during the early part of April this number increased to one hundred and fifty¹²⁸.

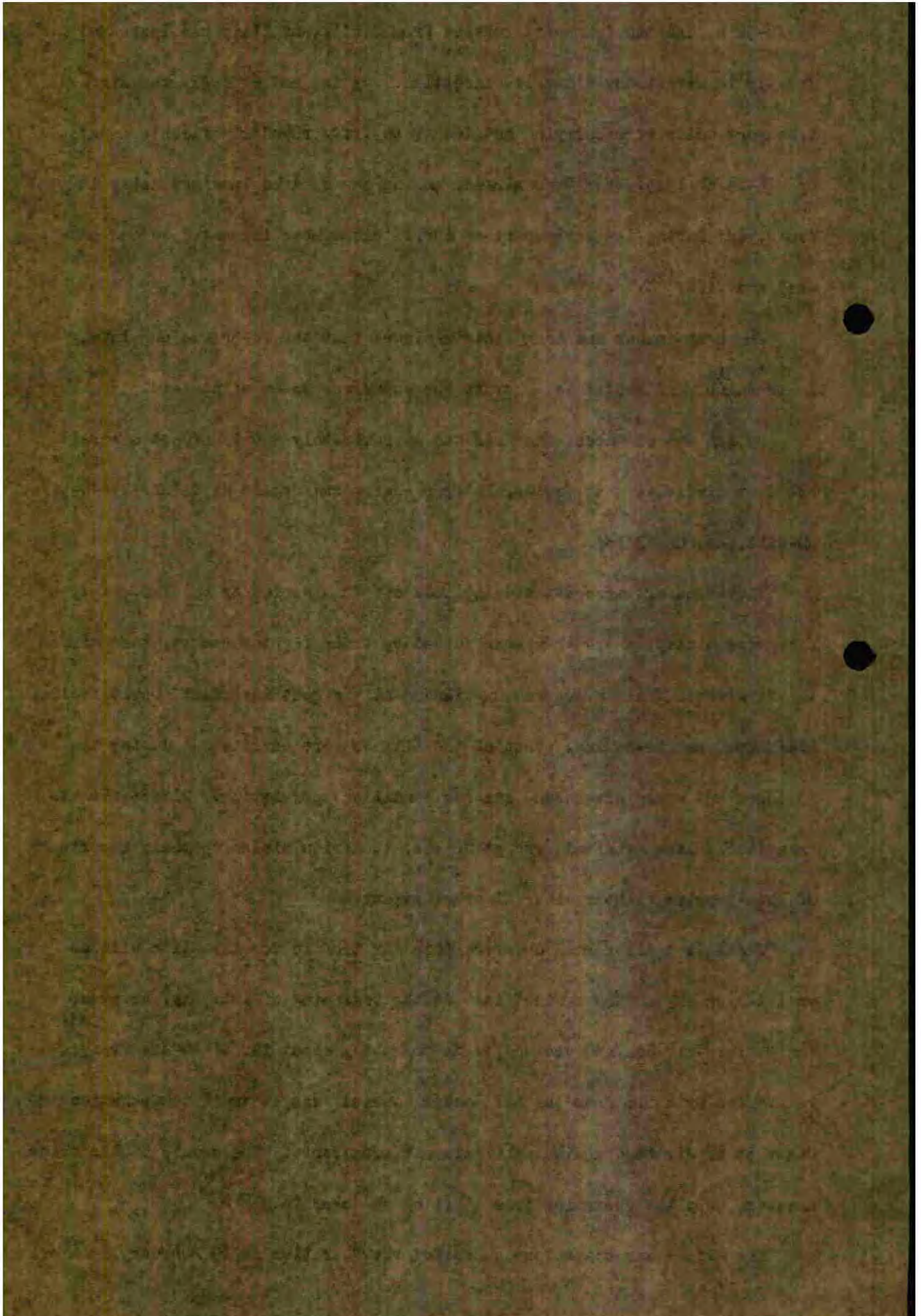
The army forces had long since realized that the Ju-52 was absolutely indispensable if resistance against the enemy was to be maintained.

By the end of March, the Axis had approximately 500 transport aircraft based at airfields near Naples, Palermo, Bari, and Reggio di Calabria (Ju-52's, SM-82's, and Me-323's).

The transport aircraft usually took off from Naples or Palermo. They flew over Sicily, where they were joined by their fighter escort, then across the Straits to Tunisia, where they landed at the most important supply fields, Sidi Ahmed and El-Aouina. Most of the flights were carried out during the forenoon and early afternoon, weather conditions permitting. Direct flights from the Italian mainland (except Naples) to Africa picked up their escorts of about twelve fighter aircraft over Trapani.

The Allied air forces observed this air traffic for some time without undertaking any action against it. At the beginning of February, however, the Eastern Air Command decided to do something about it. The 242d Group, reinforced by units from the XII Bomber Command, was assigned to Operation FLAX, to be directed against the Axis air transports. The crisis at Kasserine, however, kept the Operation from starting on schedule.

The Allied air commanders cancelled the Operation on 19 February. Later,



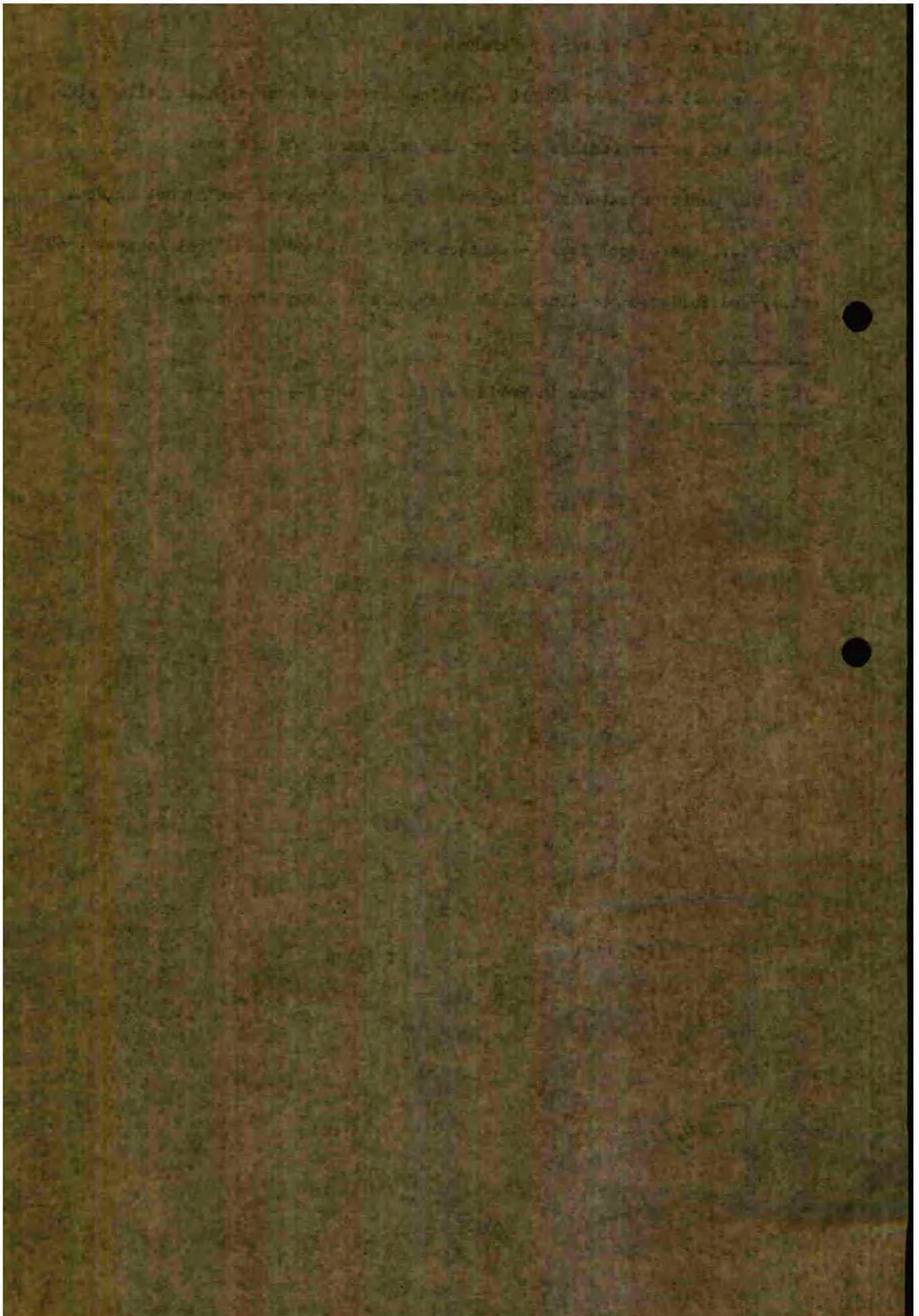
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Doolittle was placed in charge of combatting the enemy air transport activity. The enemy flights were carefully watched with the help of radar and aerial photographs and an enormous amount of data from a number of sources were filed away for future reference.

The salt marsh, or Akarit position, which was some eighteen miles wide, blocked the narrow passage between the salt marsh and the sea.

The position extended along the southern slopes of the Djebel Haidoui (950 ft.), the Djebel Tebaga-Fatmassa (900 ft.), and the Djebel Roumana (560 ft.), and followed the line of the Wadi Akarit along the coast.

128 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 189.



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The first two points named above (Djebel Haidoui and Djebel Tebaga-Fat-massa) fall off steeply to the south and rise about 600 ft. above the plains northwest of Gabes. The strip of coast between Djebel Roumana and the sea is about five miles wide and at this point the Wadi Akarit represents a serious obstacle, which, however, is not entirely invulnerable to attack by armored forces.

In the west, the position could not be encircled by motorised troops, however, inasmuch as the salt marshes of El-Pad-El-Fedjed were negotiable only after a long period of drought -- and this condition, of course, did not obtain in March and April 1943.

German and Italian engineer units had been working for some time to prepare the position for defensive operations.

As of 28 March, the following Axis troops had taken up their positions along the salt marshes:

Western sector: the Italian XXI Army Corps together with the 16th Pistoia Division and the Air Landing Division La Spezia; the German 164th Light Division was also subordinate to the XXI Army Corps. Illogically, the 164th Light Division had been assigned to the right wing, where terrain conditions made it fairly certain that the enemy would not attempt an attack.

Eastern sector: the Italian XX Army Corps together with the 101st Division Trieste (Motorized), the Division Giovanni Faccioli, and the 90th Light Division.

Strong combat patrols had been posted some three miles in front of the combat line.

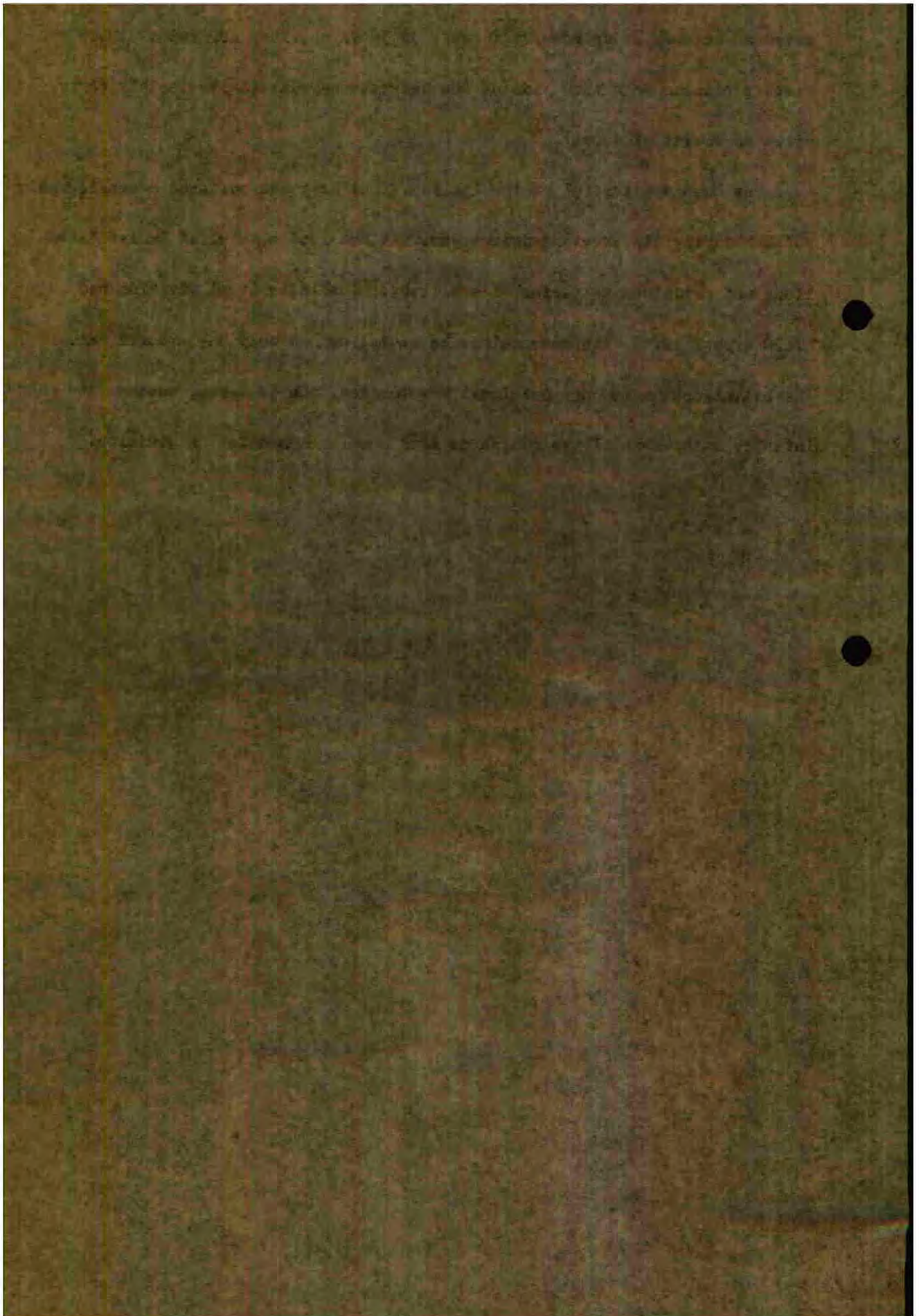
The Sahara Group Mannerini had taken over the task of covering the area lying between the western wing of Messe's Army and the southern sector of the

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western Tunisian front as far as the region east of El Guettar, which was being held by the von Broich Group (10th Panzer Division).

The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions had been pulled back and were being saved as an army group reserve force. On 30 March, they arrived at their alert positions on either side of the Gebket-en-Houal (approximately forty miles northwest of Gabes).

The combat potential of the Italian First Army had suffered a considerable setback during its previous operations; it had lost a total of twelve battalions and seventeen batteries of artillery. The 164th Light Division had only 1,100 troops left; its reconnaissance battalion had only one armored car. The battalions had been provisionally motorized. On 30 March, another two infantry battalions of two companies each were assigned to the Division.



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On 30 March the Army Group Africa received orders from the Italian Supreme Command which, on the surface, stated that the Tunisian western front and the salt marsh position were to be defended, but at the same time made it clear that these points could and should be abandoned as soon as there should be any threat of a tactical breakthrough in the south.

Generaleoberst von Arnim, Commander in Chief of the Army Group Africa, gave the following evaluation of the situation:

"On the western front there is no immediate danger as far south as Maknassy.

Maknassy and its vicinity represent the critical point strategically; thanks to the Combat Group Lang, however, the situation there is stable.

As far as the rest of the western front is concerned, it is clear that developments at El Guettar, where the enemy attack is anticipated on about 30 March, must be watched very carefully.

The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions will be ready for immediate employment as soon as adequate fuel supplies have been received.

Considering the exceedingly low combat efficiency of the Italian troops, which has recently been substantiated once more, it is doubtful that they will be able to withstand an enemy attack for very long. The Army Group Africa will hold out until the very last minute.

A step-by-step retreat from the salt marsh position, however, as envisioned by the Italian Supreme Command, could hardly have much chance of success. On the contrary, the fact that the terrain gradually widens like a funnel towards the north is far more likely to enable the enemy to pursue our withdrawing troops, especially in view of the excellent network of roads in that area."

On the southern sector of the western Tunisian front, in the Maknassy area, 30 March passed uneventfully -- to the surprise of the Axis leaders. The only enemy activity noted took the form of tank patrols along the road

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leading from Gafsa to El Guettar.

The advance troops posted just before the salt marsh position were forced back to their base position. Although enemy activity was noted, the Axis troops were forced by the acute shortage of ammunition to let it proceed without interruption¹²⁹.

During the period from 1 through 3 April, the enemy sent out armored reconnaissance patrols along the entire front line. One of these patrol groups managed to capture -- temporarily -- the Axis position on the Djebel Roumana, which was defended by the Italian Division Trieste. In a counter-attack on the following day, a regiment from the 90th Light Division recaptured the position, albeit at the cost of heavy losses.

129 - See Footnote 17; page 104 of the source detailed there.

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On 5 April, Feldmarschall Kesselring, Commander in Chief, South, had arrived in Africa in order to see the situation for himself. On the evening of 6 April, the day of his return to Frascati, he transmitted his report to the Wehrmacht High Command.

He stressed the fact that the salt marsh position, if properly defended, was "practically unassailable". As of the moment, he continued, Italian divisions were holding the harbors which represented the key to possession of the entire position. In view of the acknowledged inefficiency of the Italian troops, however, he had ordered them replaced by German units. Since the German units were still under way, the change could not become effective for another twenty-four hours.

In the meantime, the catastrophe which was to frustrate completely the plans of the Commander in Chief, South, had begun.

During the night of 5/6 April, a Gurkha battalion stormed the Djebel Tebaga-Fatmassa in a surprise attack, without any previous artillery softening whatsoever, and drove off the defending Italian troops. At 0415, approximately 500 guns opened fire, marking the beginning of a full-scale attack on the heart of the salt marsh position. By 1000 on the following morning, the Italian First Army had received definite confirmation of a successful enemy breakthrough on the sector held by the Divisions Trieste and La Spezia. Furthermore, the enemy had succeeded in widening the breakthrough gap at the Djebel Tebaga-Fatmassa position and in overrunning the nearby Djebel Roumana position. The behavior of the Italian divisions in terrain of this kind, so ideally suited to defensive operations, left German leaders grimly convinced that they had been deliberately betrayed.

This interpretation is substantiated by the following:

"Another point worthy of mention is the fact that the Italians are apparently eager to surrender and sometimes did so in entire companies. There is

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at least one authenticated instance in which a whole truckload of Italian officers, in gala uniforms and with a cock's feather on their helmets, drove off happily to the prisoner-of-war camp....."¹³⁰

In Rome, General Ambrosio, Chief of the Italian General Staff, refused to fly to Africa with Feldmarschall Kesselring. Kesselring had requested him to use his personal influence to urge the Italian officers and troops to do their very best.

In the meantime, the enemy had managed to negotiate the obstacle represented by the hilly terrain; fresh forces, brought up from the rear area, poured through the gap to the broad plains lying to the north.

¹³⁰ - Harry C. Butcher, op.cit., Part I, page 102 (German edition; page 278 in the original), data pertaining to 8 April 1943; Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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The last desperate countermeasures initiated by the German forces came too late to be effective. When it became clear that the ports lost to the enemy could not be regained -- since the available troops were numerically inadequate -- the Army Group Africa had no alternative but to abandon southern Tunisia.

If the German forces had remained any longer in their position after the enemy breakthrough, they would have inevitably been isolated by the fully motorized enemy troops.

The Commander in Chief, South, concluded the report he submitted to the Wehrmacht High Command on the evening of 7 April with the following statement: "This means that we have lost Tunisia!"

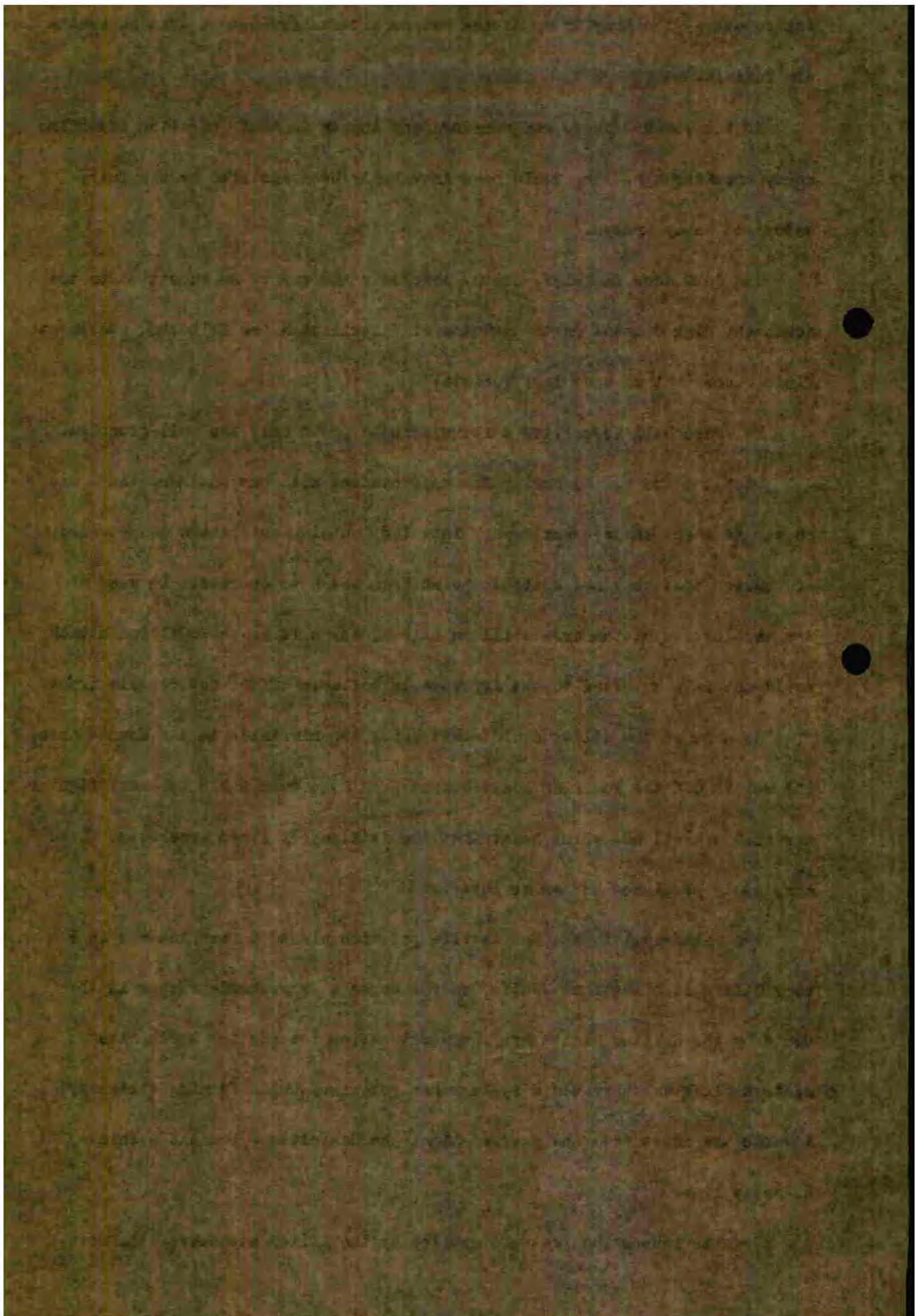
Feldmarschall Kesselring's fears were to prove only too well-grounded.

Once the two Allied armies had made contact with one another, there was no way to check their breakthrough into the Tunisian bridgehead -- provided, of course, that they had a stable point from which to operate. In view of the shallowness of the area still in Axis hands, a large-scale Allied attack could not help but lead to the irrevocable collapse of the entire Axis front.

As soon as the Allies could start using the airfields in the Sousse area, the waters off the Tunisian coast became even more vulnerable to enemy fighter aircraft operations, which meant that the Axis supply lines were bound to be completely paralyzed sooner or later.

The withdrawal to the Enfidaville position placed German leaders in a very difficult situation. While General Messe's Army, hard-pressed in the south by the British Eighth Army, was retreating towards the north, its western flank was threatened by American motorized units forcing their way towards the coast from the passes along the Ousseltia - Fondouk - Paid - Maknassy line.

Despite increasing pressure applied by the Allied attackers, the move-



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ments of the Fifth Panzer Army and Messe's First Army had to be very carefully coordinated.

The retreat from the salt marsh position began during the night of 6/7 April. Most of the Italian troops, at least the mobile units, were sent ahead to the Enfidaville position to secure it for the rest of the forces to come.

The German units took over as a rear guard force, establishing themselves on a temporary defense line between Sebkwat-an-Noual and Gekhira along the coastal highway.

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Simultaneously, also on the southern flank of the Fifth Panzer Army, the Combat Group von Broich moved from the El Guestar area back to the narrow passage northwest of Sebket en Noual. In this way they prevented the Allied forces in western Tunisia and the British Eighth Army in the south from making contact with each other.

The British Eighth Army followed in hot pursuit with tanks and artillery, but succeeded only in overrunning the Italian Sahara Group near Sebket en Noual.

Attempts by the American II Army Corps to drive through the Axis western defense line in the Maknassy - Sened area failed to bring success.

On 7 April, the British V Army Corps launched a series of attacks on the Beja - Medjes-el-Bab sector of the Fifth Panzer Army's line. The attacks lasted nearly two weeks.

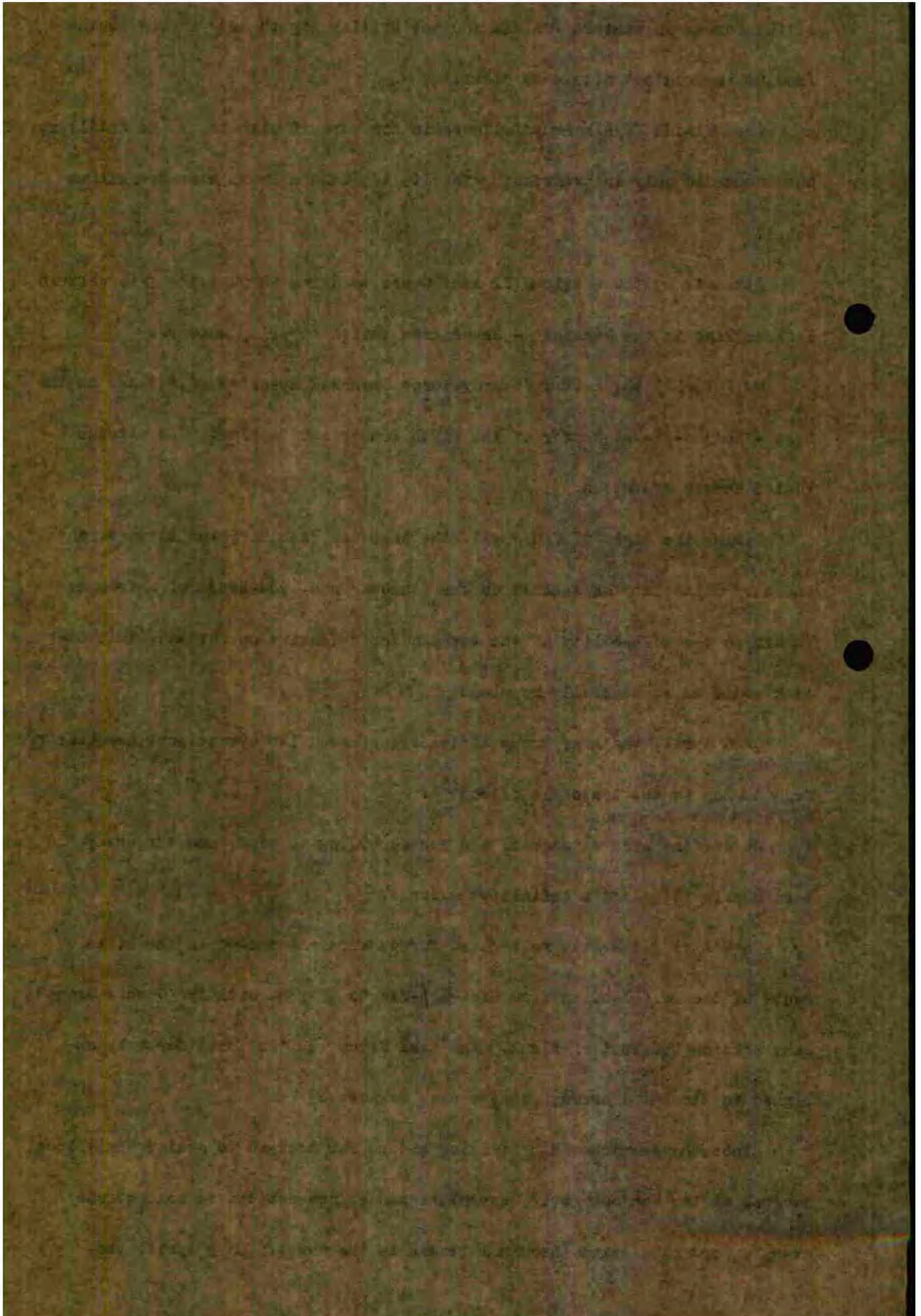
During the night of 7/8 April, the American 34th Division threw strong infantry units into an assault on the Fondouk Pass, southwest of Kairouan. Thanks to the suitability of the terrain for defensive operations, this attack could be successfully repulsed.

On 8 April, the Army Group Africa transferred its operational headquarters from Sousse to the peninsula of Bon¹³¹.

So far the Axis withdrawal had run according to plan, and the enemy had been unable to record a definitive success.

On 9 April, the Axis rear guard forces were entrenched in the hills south of the road leading from Sidi-bou-Sid to Agareb, with the Combat Group Lang holding the western flank. The Lang Group was the force formerly assigned to block the narrow passage near Maknassy.

Since the American 34th Division had so far managed to achieve only local success at the Fondouk Pass, General Alexander now decided to concentrate every effort on a drive through Kairouan to the coast. On 9 April, the



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British 6th Armored Division attacked in an attempt to force a breakthrough.

Its most advanced regiment ran into an extensive mine-field, which was guarded by antitank cannon mounted in the surrounding hills. The Allied attackers lost seventy-six Sherman tanks and were unable to make more than a very few territorial gains.

131 - See Footnote 17; page 108 of the source detailed there.



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It was the Combat Group Lang, again, which was largely responsible for the defensive success. It had been relieved of its assignment as a rear guard force and arrived just in time to go into action on 9 April east of the bottleneck position.

In view of the threatening developments in the Fondouk area and the growing pressure being applied by the pursuing enemy forces, German leaders decided to surmount, in one long leap, the obstacle presented by the open terrain between Sidi-bou-Sid - Sfax and Kairouan. This maneuver took place during the night -- with no enemy interference whatsoever -- and by the morning of 10 April, the following forces had established themselves in their new rear guard positions:

10th Panzer Division: near Kairouan

15th Panzer Division: east of Kairouan, near El Djem

164th Light Division: west of El Djem

90th Light Division: near La Ghebbia, on the coast highway.

The British Eighth Army occupied Sfax on 10 April and contented itself with merely carrying out armored car reconnaissance beyond this point.

Armored elements of the British IX Army Corps, on the ^{other} ~~same~~/hand, which had broken through the enemy lines near Fondouk, managed to reach Kairouan. They were evidently too weak to continue their drive through to the coast.

Due to strong enemy pressure at Kairouan, the Combat Group Lang was withdrawn on 11 April, with orders to make its way around the 10th Panzer Division to a position west of Sebkret Kelbia.

The 164th and 90th Light Divisions were transferred into the areas southwest of Enfidaville and northwest of Sousse, respectively.

Thanks to the flexibility of their leaders and to the high morale and combat experience of the troops, the difficult withdrawal was accomplished with relatively few casualties. One German and nine Italian battalions, none

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of them even partially motorized, were taken prisoner by the enemy.

If General Alexander had decided earlier to commit his numerically superior forces in a breakthrough attempt via Kairouan to the coast -- and this would have been a conceivable decision in view of the military situation -- then the Enfidaville front could never have been established.

On the northern sector held by the Fifth Panzer Army, the air situation was deteriorating steadily in favor of the Allied air forces.

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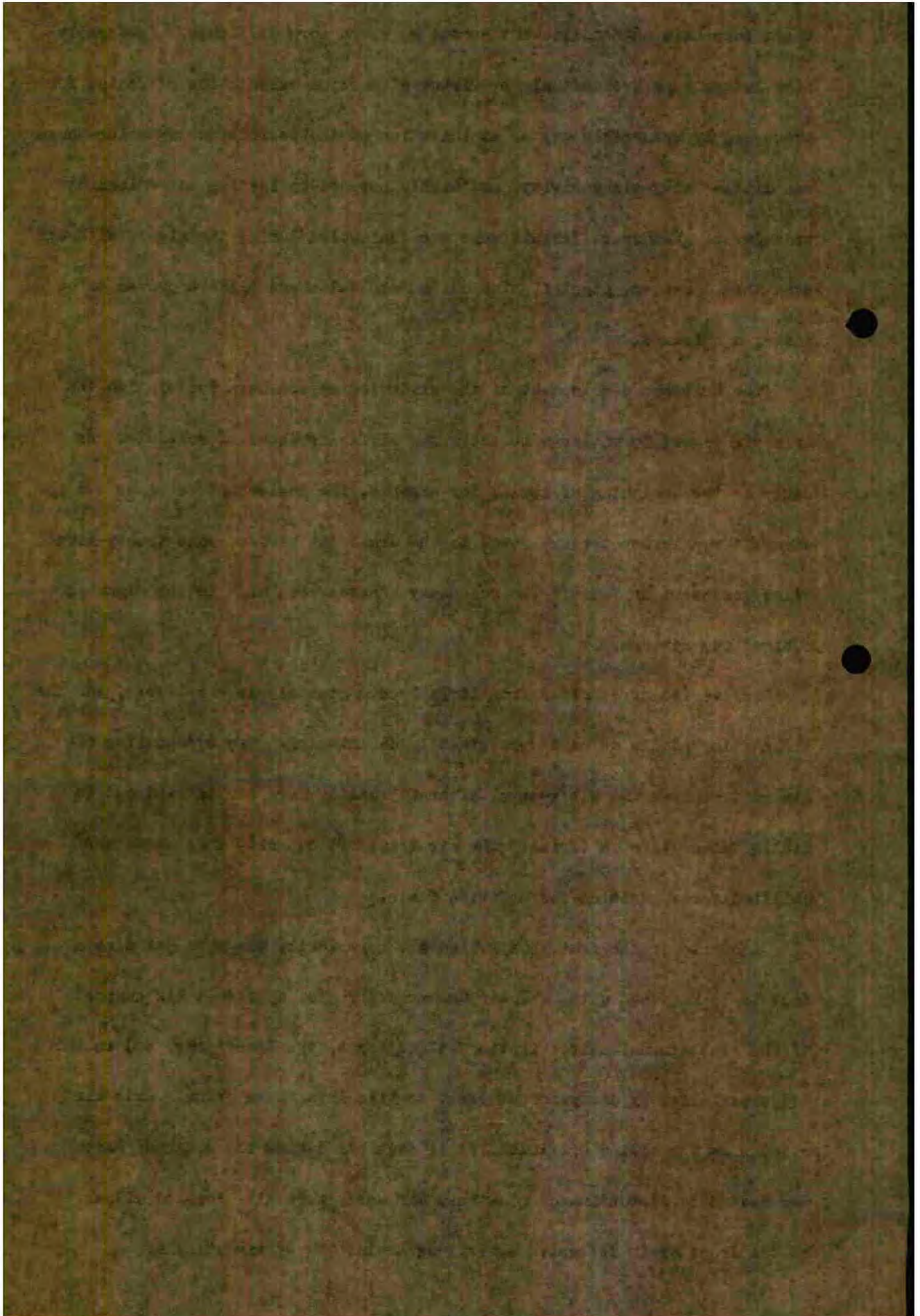
Enemy air attacks by increasingly stronger forces were a daily occurrence; the Axis fighter units were gradually forced on the defensive.

As a result, Axis air transport operations were greatly endangered and their successful accomplishment became more and more difficult. Unbearably high losses were avoided only by virtue of careful calculation of routes for these highly vulnerable units, exploitation of the periods during which there was little enemy air activity, and highly speeded-up loading and unloading procedures. Transport flights were even scheduled during the night, although even then the enemy night fighter units from Malta and Algiers proved to be rather a nuisance.

The critical development of the situation in southern Tunisia led the Axis air forces to withdraw to their new airfields ahead of schedule. As early as the beginning of April, for example, the logistical services and the aircraft repair depots were moved to the Grombalia plains, some twenty-five miles southeast of Tunis. The necessary changes were made in the signal communications network.

Deliveries of supplies from Italy became steadily less reliable, and the already low stocks on hand were steadily diminishing. The overhauling of aircraft engines and all general aircraft repairs were now carried out in Sicily rather than in Africa. The air transport capacity thus saved was utilised for ammunition and aviation fuels.

In spite of the fact that Allied air superiority was more and more a fact to be reckoned with, the Air Commander, Tunis, continued his support of the stubborn defensive fighting at Jedjenane, the Djebel Ang, and in the Medjerda Valley by carrying out daily sorties into these areas. Axis air attacks on the Allied airfields, still feasible during the month of March, now had to be discontinued. The Axis air units were all occupied either at the front or in defensive operations against enemy air attacks.



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The Tunisian Air Corps had been forced to withdraw the units of the Air Commander, Gabes, to the provisionally equipped airfields in the Sfax - La Fausconnerie area and -- in the north -- near La Smela and El Djeu after the abandonment of the Mareth line by the Axis forces and the threatening encirclement by Allied troops advancing from Gafsa. These airfields, however, lay approximately sixty miles behind the front. Unfortunately the Allied drive to Maknassy had rendered the three airfields near Messoune completely useless.

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The Air Commander, Gabes, was redesignated the Air Commander, South, and his headquarters was moved to La Fauconnerie. The Air District Headquarters deactivated the Airfield Command Gabes, a part of which returned to Italy and the rest of which was attached to the Airfield Command Tunis.

The operational areas of the two Air Commanders were defined in a new regulation; according to it, the boundary between their areas of jurisdiction ran from Enfidaville to Tebessa.

The Air Commander, South, committed his units over El Guettar and Maknassy, but his main mission was the disruption of the British regrouping operations in the bottleneck position near Gabes. Bomber units belonging to the II Air Corps were also ordered from Sicily to take part in this mission. The enemy air forces kept up constant attacks on the German airfields. The damage, however, was not too serious; the new, widely spaced airfield buildings proved to stand up well under attack.

A number of airfields, as a matter of fact, were never even recognized as such by Allied reconnaissance.

The Italian air units were playing a less and less important role in operations. Their airfields were too crowded and their antiaircraft artillery performed very poorly. On more than one occasion, enemy low-flying attacks managed to destroy entire Italian squadrons on the ground.

After the salt marsh position had been lost, the Italian units withdrew to the areas around Sfax and, further south, near Graiba. The corps staff established its headquarters in the Sousse area.

The breakthrough into the salt marsh position and the subsequent decision to abandon central Tunisia did not find the Luftwaffe unprepared. The units were quickly and systematically withdrawn to the north. As a result they were able to continue their task of supporting the operations of General Messe's rear guard forces and of covering the retreat of those elements

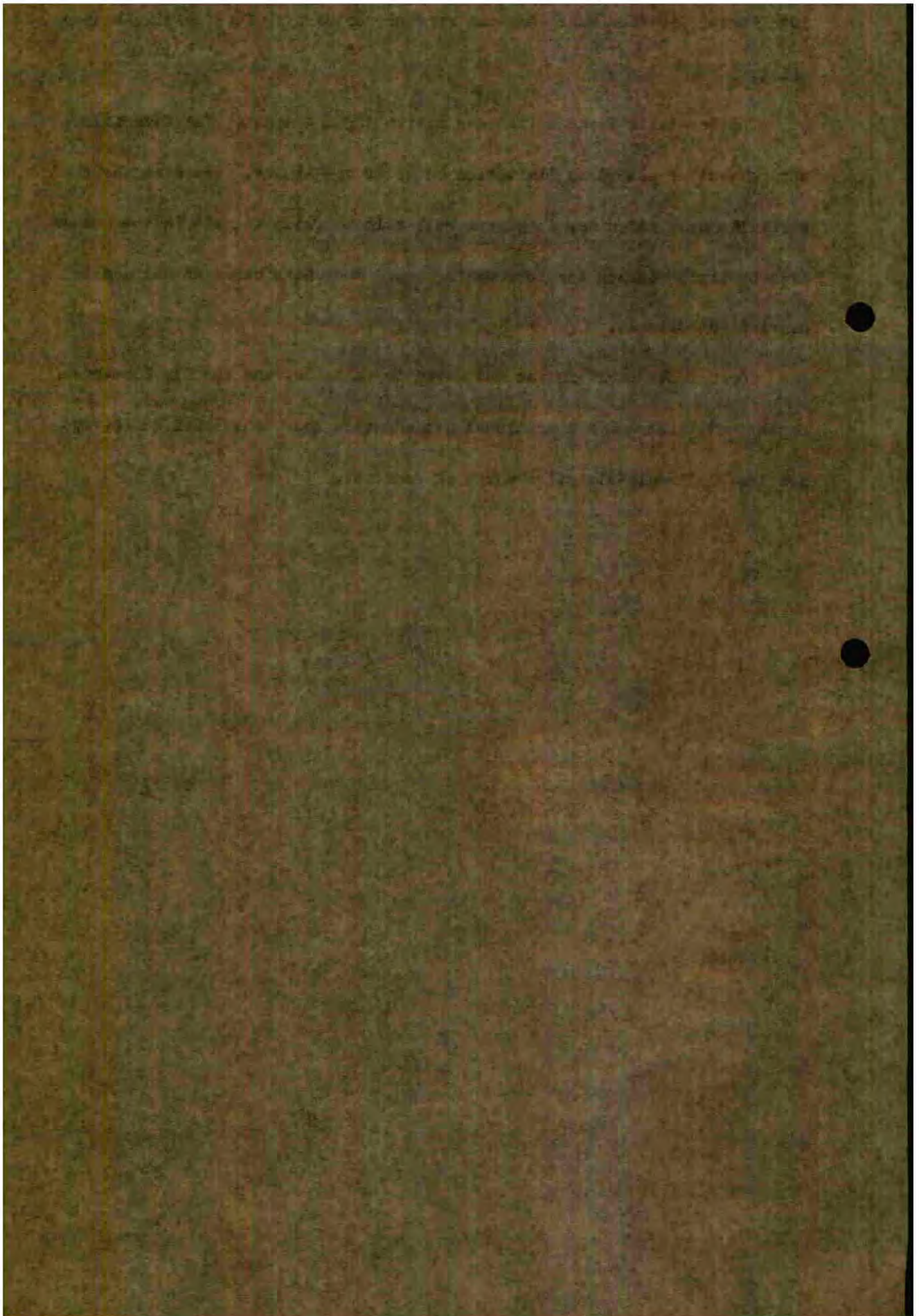
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withdrawing to the north.

The close-support forces (III Group, 1st Close-Support Wing) continued to attack the enemy's advance patrols; the defensive operations of the 10th Panzer Division near Kairouan were supported by Luftwaffe dive-bomber units.

The Royal Air Force units were active day and night. The favorable spring weather placed no limitation on their commitment. Based at their airfields near Medenine, they were well able to reach targets in the Sousse area by flying across the intervening sea. The units based on Malta also carried out attacks.

General Headquarters was now moved to Carthage, and the Air Commander, South, established his operational headquarters near Mensel bou Zeffa, approximately twenty-six miles north of Hammamet.



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On 8 April, the Axis air forces had to abandon their well-equipped airfields near La Fauconnerie in order to evade advancing British armored forces. On 10 April, the fields at La Smela and El Djem had to be evacuated, and soon afterwards Msaken suffered the same fate.

The evacuation of Msaken meant that the Axis forces had been driven out of all their airfields south of the Enfidaville position. From now on, General Messe's Army could be supported only from the airfields located in the vicinity of Tunis. The majority of the Axis air activity was directed against Kairouan and the area directly north of it. The Italian air units had withdrawn to the plains of Grombalia, but because their ground organization was not yet ready for employment, they took very little part in operations¹³².

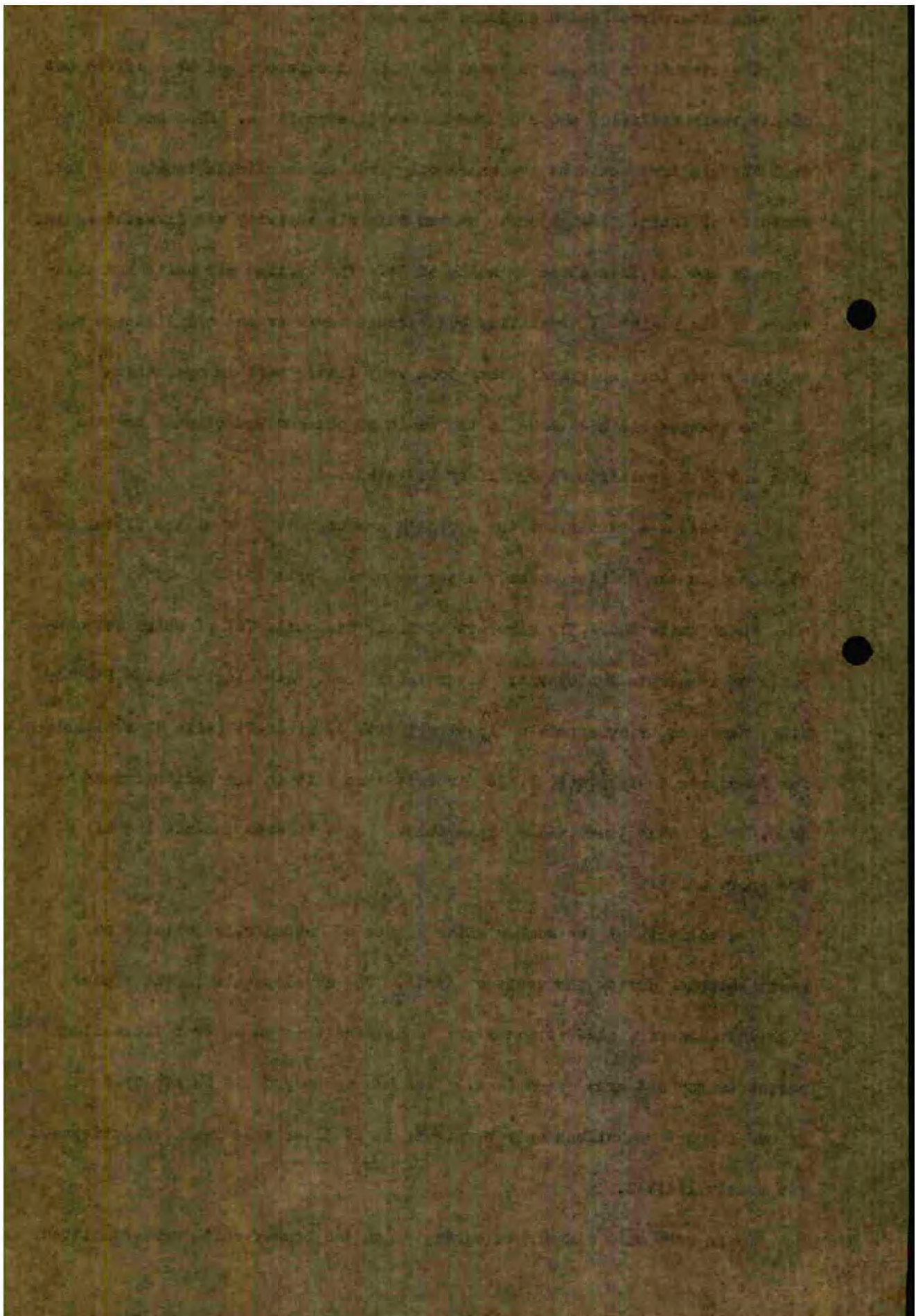
No changes had been made in the chain of command established for the 19th and 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Divisions.

We possess a summary of the strength and organization of the flying units stationed in the Mediterranean theater as of 10 April 1943.

These units had 1,377 aircraft at their disposal, 767 of which were capable of immediate employment. After the I Group, 4th Single-Engine Fighter Wing, had been transferred to ^DPle_{st}i with its 49 aircraft (with 41 available for immediate employment), 1,328 aircraft were left in the Mediterranean area, 726 of them immediately employable. These figures include the air transport units.

The activity of the bomber units was to be concentrated chiefly on enemy shipping during the month of April. The developments in the ground fighting, however, made it necessary to utilize them to an ever increasing extent to support army operations. Inasmuch as they could be employed in ground-support operations only by night, it is clear that their effectiveness was fairly limited.

There were only six nights during which the bomber units were committed



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in accordance with the original plan; during three of these nights, bomber and torpedo-bomber aircraft attacked enemy shipping convoys, and during the other three, the harbors of Philippeville, Algiers, and Bone.

An attack by Allied four-engine bombers carried out on Easter Sunday on the airfields at Grosseto, which housed both the torpedo-bomber squadrons and the torpedo-bomber school, was devastatingly effective. The Italian aircraft reporting service had failed to report the approach of the enemy aircraft; the torpedo-bombers were put out of action for months as a result.

132 - Hans Seidemann, *op.cit.*, pages 23-29.

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Axis ocean supply transport became steadily more unreliable; not even during March were the Italians able to fulfill the quota they had promised -- 80,000 tons per month for the African theater. To an ever greater degree, the Allied air attacks on Axis harbors and railway networks resulted in disastrous destruction of facilities and consequent delays.

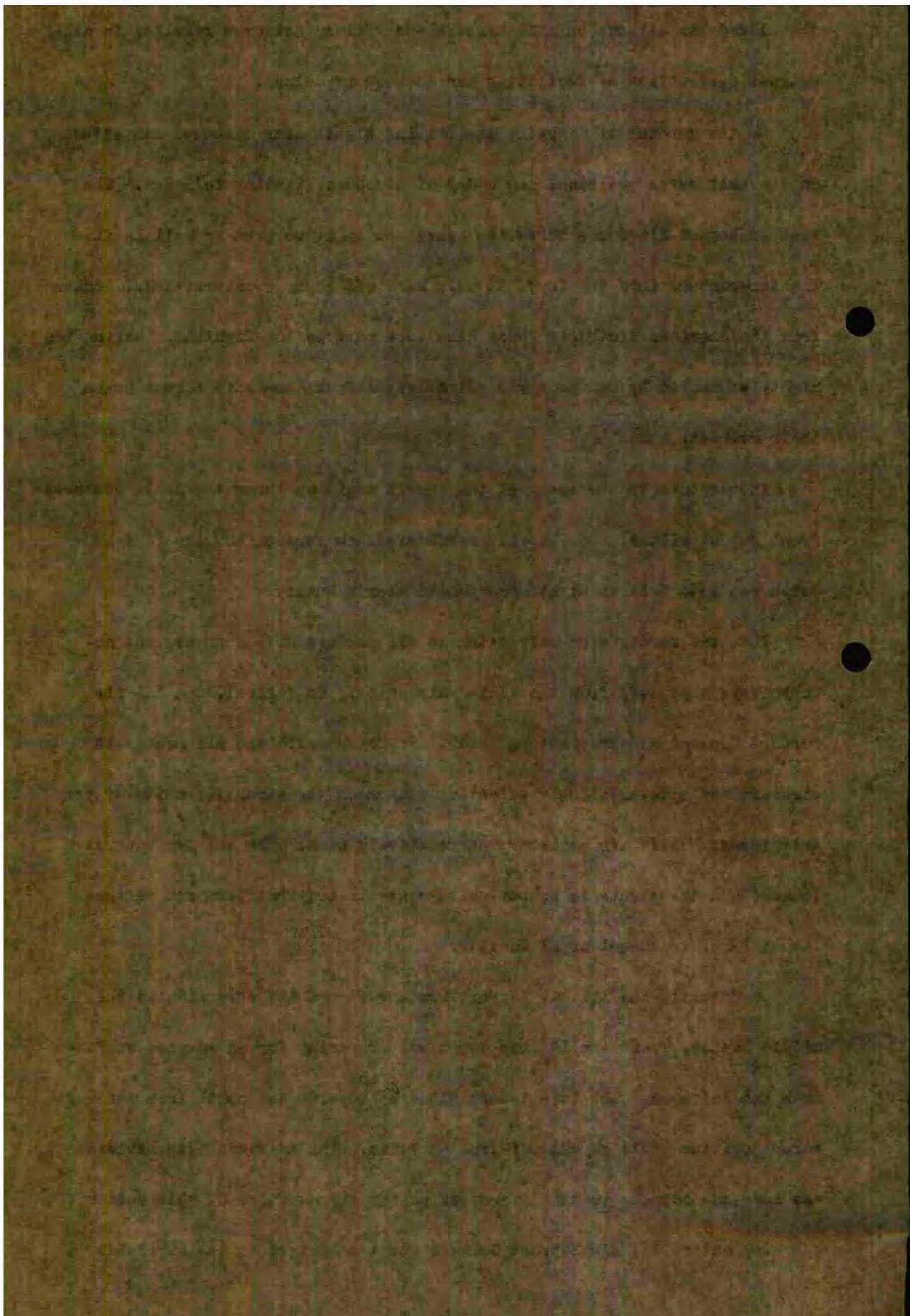
On the morning of 6 April, the British Eighth Army launched its attack on the salt marsh position, and a day of stubborn fighting followed. The Western Desert Air Force threw its heavy and light bombers as well as its fighter-bombers into the fray, to help ward off enemy counterattacks. Units from the American Ninth Air Force also took part in the fighting. During the night, exhausted by Montgomery's relentless attack, the Axis forces began their retreat.

The capture by the enemy of the Akarit position threw the whole southern front out of kilter. On 7 April, reconnaissance forces from the II Army Corps ran into British Eighth Army units near Maknassy.

The Axis forces were retreating on all sectors of the front, and nowhere were they safe from the Allied air units. On 7 April, the XII Air Support Command and the Western Desert Air Force mobilized all available aircraft for a devastatingly effective attack on the straggler units of the Axis forces. Axis air activity was relatively weak. The XII Air Support Command and the strategic bomber units concentrated their efforts on the Chemsî Pass, southeast of El Guettar.

On 8 April, the XII Air Support Command turned its attention to the middle sector, where the IX Army Corps was preparing for an advance on Fondouk and Kairouan. The Axis troops ^{ing} withdrew/towards the north from the salt marsh position could be cut off from Kairouan. The American 34th Division was made subordinate to the IX Army Corps for the duration of this action.

The entire XII Air Support Command was transferred to the airfields



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around Sbeitla. The attack began on 8 April, the Pass was captured on 9 April, and the attackers reached Kairouan on 11 April. Even so, the Axis forces, with the help of hastily summoned reinforcements, were able to hold them off long enough to permit their own troops to withdraw to the area north of Kairouan without interference.

The Allied coordination of ground and air operations was not all it might have been on this occasion. The IX Army Corps had had no experience in the technique of coordinating joint objectives in the face of enemy action.

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Communication was inefficient. Definitely scheduled bomber attacks were called off at the last minute, and when it was finally decided to employ the bomber units after all, it was too late for them to carry out their missions effectively.

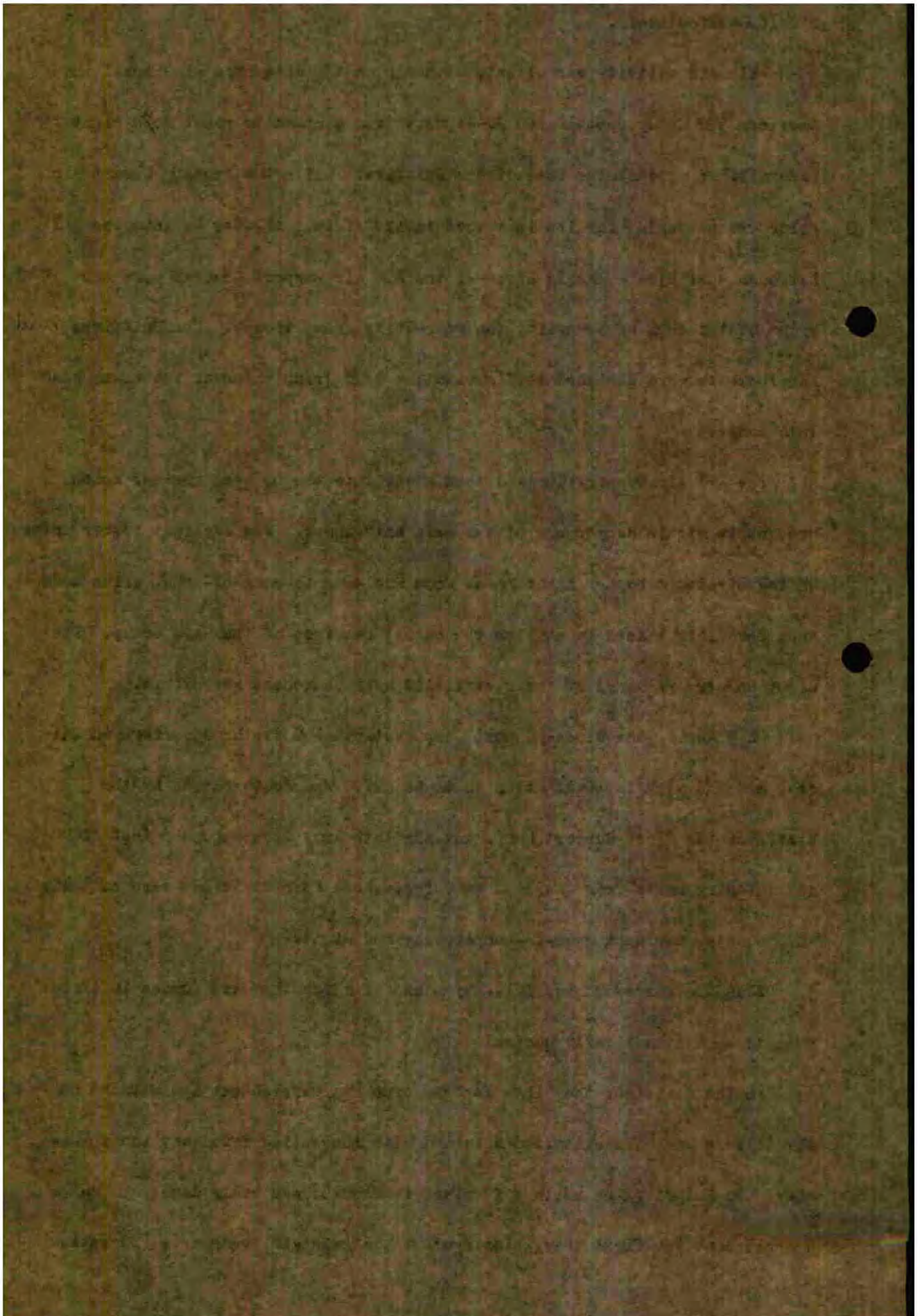
Axis air activity was slight, although on the afternoon of 9 April the American 52d Group spotted two Ju-88 units and managed to shoot down ^{up} eight aircraft, as against the loss of one Spitfire. While the Western Desert Air Force was preparing for its last move in the African theater -- into the Kairouan - El Djem - Hergla area --, the XII Air Support Command bore the brunt of the task of harassing the retreating enemy troops. Its Spitfires *and* Hurribombers were assigned to fly with the 242d Group whenever the enemy came into range.

The XII Air Support Command then moved into the Le Sers region, which brought it within easy range of the Axis bridgehead. The daylight bomber units of the strategic bomber fleet moved from Thelapte to Souk-el-Arba, which made them favorably placed to utilize the escort services of the 242d Group. The night bombers remained at their airfields near Canrobert and Biskra.

On 9 April, the Close-Support Corps established its headquarters in Haïdra, and one week later it moved on to Le Kef. The route chosen by the staffs of the Close-Support Corps and the 18th Army Group crossed that of the infantry units from the II Army Corps, whose four divisions were on their way to Beja, moving bumper-to-bumper, day and night.

Thus the framework was laid, by means of which the Axis forces in Africa were to be systematically encircled.

In the meantime, the Ninth Bomber Force had carried out its attacks on the islands and on the Italian mainland with increasing frequency and intensity. On 1 April, the railway terminal in Messina was badly damaged; on 5 April came the first heavy blow against the Axis air transports (Operation



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FLAX).

At about 0800, a few miles northeast of Cap Bon, a group of twenty-six P-38's (assigned to keep the Straits under surveillance) managed to bring down eleven aircraft of a Luftwaffe force consisting of 50-70 Ju-52's, 20 Me-109's, and 4 FW-190's. Only two P-38's were lost in the process.

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At about the same time, a B-25 unit managed to sink two Seibel barges and one destroyer. The escorting 82d Group brought down fifteen enemy aircraft, which were flying without escort. Soon thereafter the unloading stations at Sidi Ahmed and El-Aouina were raided with fragmentation bombs.

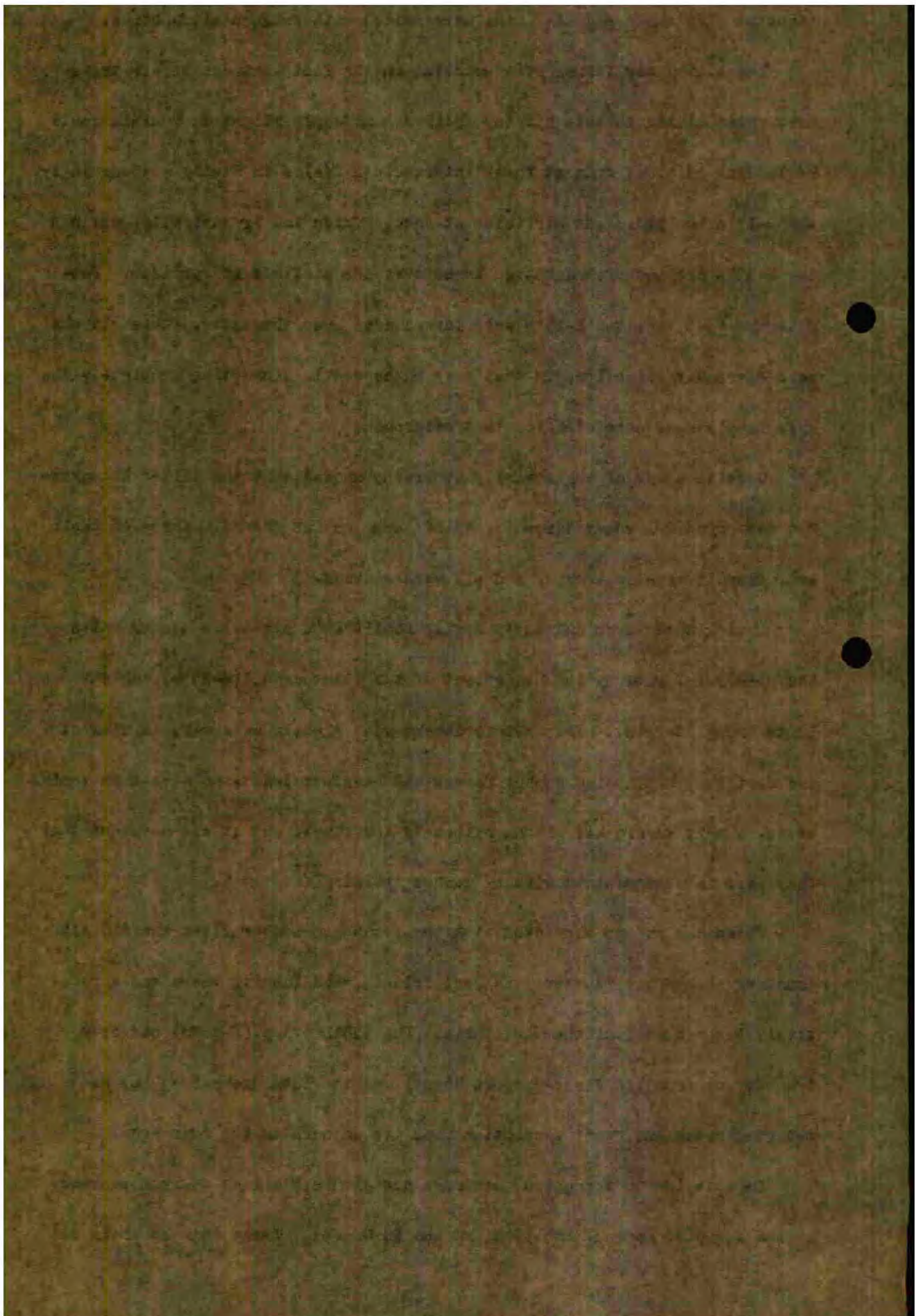
The Allied air forces were counting on the fact that German air transport units slated to take off for their second daily flight to Tunisia would be landing at about noon at their intermediate fields in Sicily. Accordingly, the B-17's bombarded the airfields at Boccadefalco and Trapani/Milo, while the B-25's dropped fragmentation bombs over the airfield at Borriazo. Despite the fact that two B-25's were forced down over the water, these attacks were extremely effective, in that they succeeded in disrupting completely the Axis supply runs scheduled for that afternoon.

Careful study of the aerial photographs showed that the Allied attackers had destroyed 201 enemy aircraft, 40 of these on the ground. Three of their own aircraft were destroyed, and six were missing.

During late March and early April, Doolittle's strategic bomber units had been reinforced by the assignment of the 321st Group (B-25's) and the 320th Group (B-26's). This reinforcement was urgently necessary in view of the fact that his medium bomber forces had been reduced to no more than twelve crews. Their morale had hit an extremely low level, and it was apparent that they were in need of intensive refresher training¹³³.

There was no one connected with the strategic bomber fleet who did not consider the escort fighters his best friends, and luckily there was a relatively large number of them available. The 325th Group (P-40's) had been transferred from the Close-Support Corps, and the 14th Group (P-39's) had returned fresh and ready for action from its sojourn in the rear area.

In addition to these two, two more new groups had made their appearance at the scene of action, the 99th and the 2d Groups. These took up their new



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tasks in April.

Thus reinforced, and thoroughly familiar with the tactical objectives of the military planners in their activity area, the strategic bomber units achieved ever greater effectiveness in their contribution towards the isolation of the enemy bridgehead.

On 4 April, a force of ninety-one B-17 bombers raided the harbor, airfield, and switching yard of Naples.

As of the beginning of April, the weakened Italian fleet had only three heavy cruisers at its disposal, and one of them, the Bolzano, was laid up at La Spezia for repairs. Allied aerial reconnaissance discovered the other two, the Trieste and the Gorizia, anchored in the bay at La Maddalena,

133 - The Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 192.

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surrounded by underwater nets designed to ward off submarines.

Spaatz order^d an attack on them as soon as practicable, and on 10 April a force of twenty-four B-17's sank the Trieste with 1,100-lb. bombs dropped from an altitude of 2000 ft. The fuses were set at 1/10 of a second for the head, and 25/1000 of a second for the main charge, in order to make sure of damaging the armored deck plating.

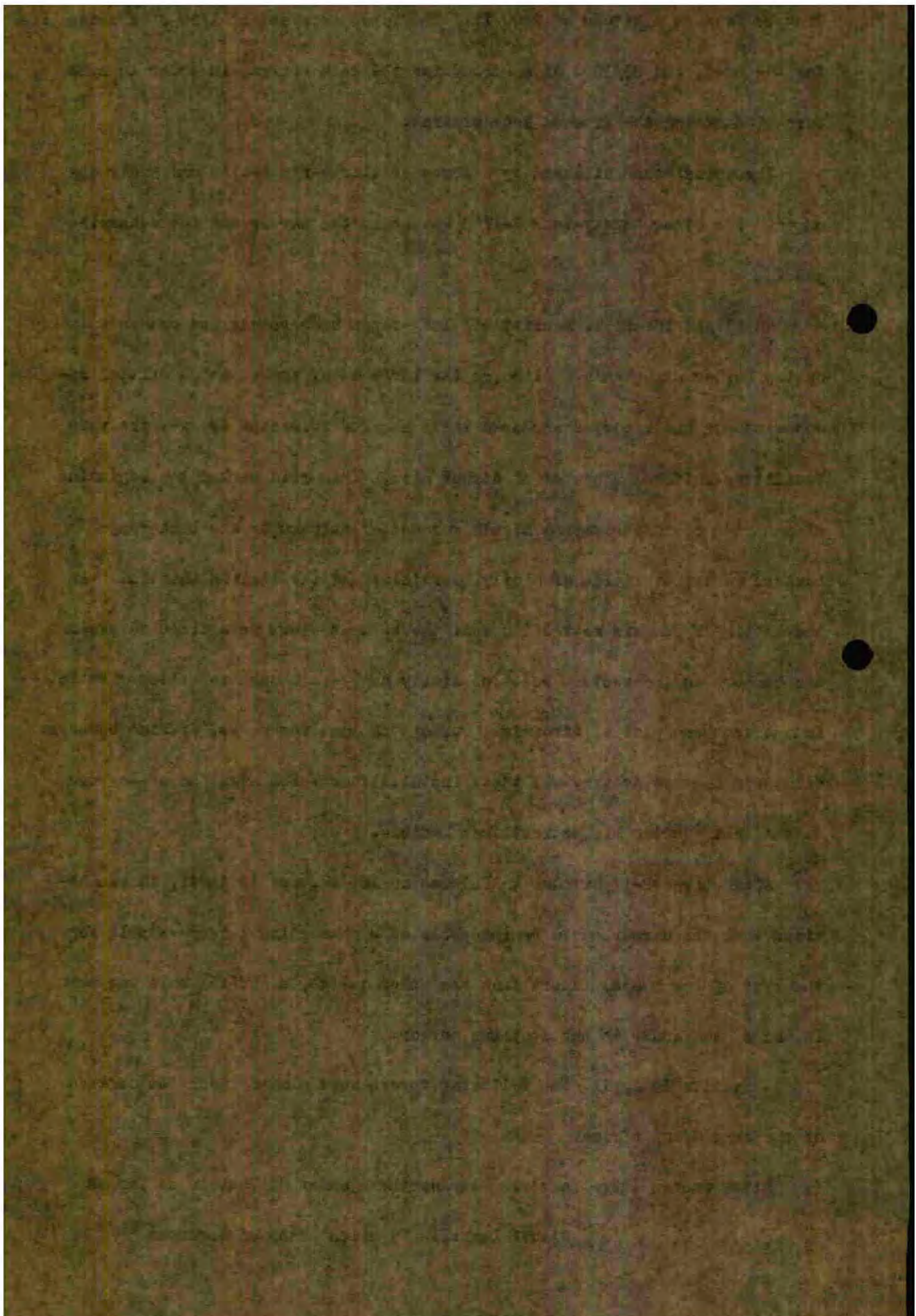
The Gorizia was attacked by a force of thirty-six B-17's and badly damaged. The other twenty-four B-17's bombarded the harbor and the submarine pens.

On 13 and 18 April, Doolittle's long-range bombers carried out an attack on the harbor at Catania. Although the large enemy tanker which British reconnaissance had reported anchored there managed to escape damage, the port facilities suffered a number of direct hits. This raid marked the beginning of a series of intensive and highly successful attacks by the long-range bombers on the airfields of Sicily, Sardinia, and the Italian mainland. As the battle of Tunisia neared its end, the hardest blows were directed against the harbors on the western coast of Sicily and -- although to a lesser extent -- in the southern part of Sardinia. During the last few weeks, Spaatz' bombers did their best to destroy all those installations which might be of any use to the enemy during his retreat from Tunisia.

After three B-17 attacks on Palermo on 16, 17, and 18 April, it was obvious that the harbor would be incapable of accomodating larger vessels for the rest of the month. Apart from the other damage, a 190-ft. hole was torn in one of the quais in the seaplane harbor.

Effective 13 April, the following forces were placed under the command of the Army Group Africa:

Fifth Panzer Army: covering the northern coast of Tunisia as far as
Djebel Derhalla, 9 miles south of Zaghouan



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Italian First Army: covering the eastern areas as far as the coast east of Enfidaville

The demarcation line between the two Armies ran from Hammam Lif (twelve miles southeast of Tunis) along the mountain territory as far as Djebibina (fifteen miles southwest of Enfidaville).

The forces of the Fifth Panzer Army were deployed as follows:

front line: the so-called Division von Manteuffel, between the coast and south of the Mateur - Beja railway¹³⁴

stationed next to the Division and holding the area as far as the

Tunis - Medjex-el-Bab highway: the 334th Division, a full-strength division which was partially motorized

134 - See page 676 of the present study.

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stationed next to the 334th Division and reaching as far as 3 miles north of Pont du Fahs: elements of the Hermann Goering Division; their strength was approximately 2/3 of an infantry division, without artillery or armored units.

from this point to the end of the Army combat line (where the front made a deep dip towards the south): the German Army Corps with the 10th Panzer Division (later replaced by the 21st Panzer Division).

In addition, the 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was stationed within the area of operation of the Fifth Panzer Army, its primary mission being to protect the harbors and airfields of Bizerte and Tunis.

As far as reserve forces were concerned, the Fifth Panzer Army had at its disposal the armored units of the 15th Panzer Division, the 10th Panzer Division, and the German-Arab Training Battalion.

The forces of the Italian First Army were deployed as follows:

to the right, in the west: the Headquarters, XXI Army Corps, with the Division La Spezia on the right flank near Hill

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south and southwest of Saonaf: the 164th Light Division, assigned the task of blocking the Enfidaville - Pont du Fahs highway

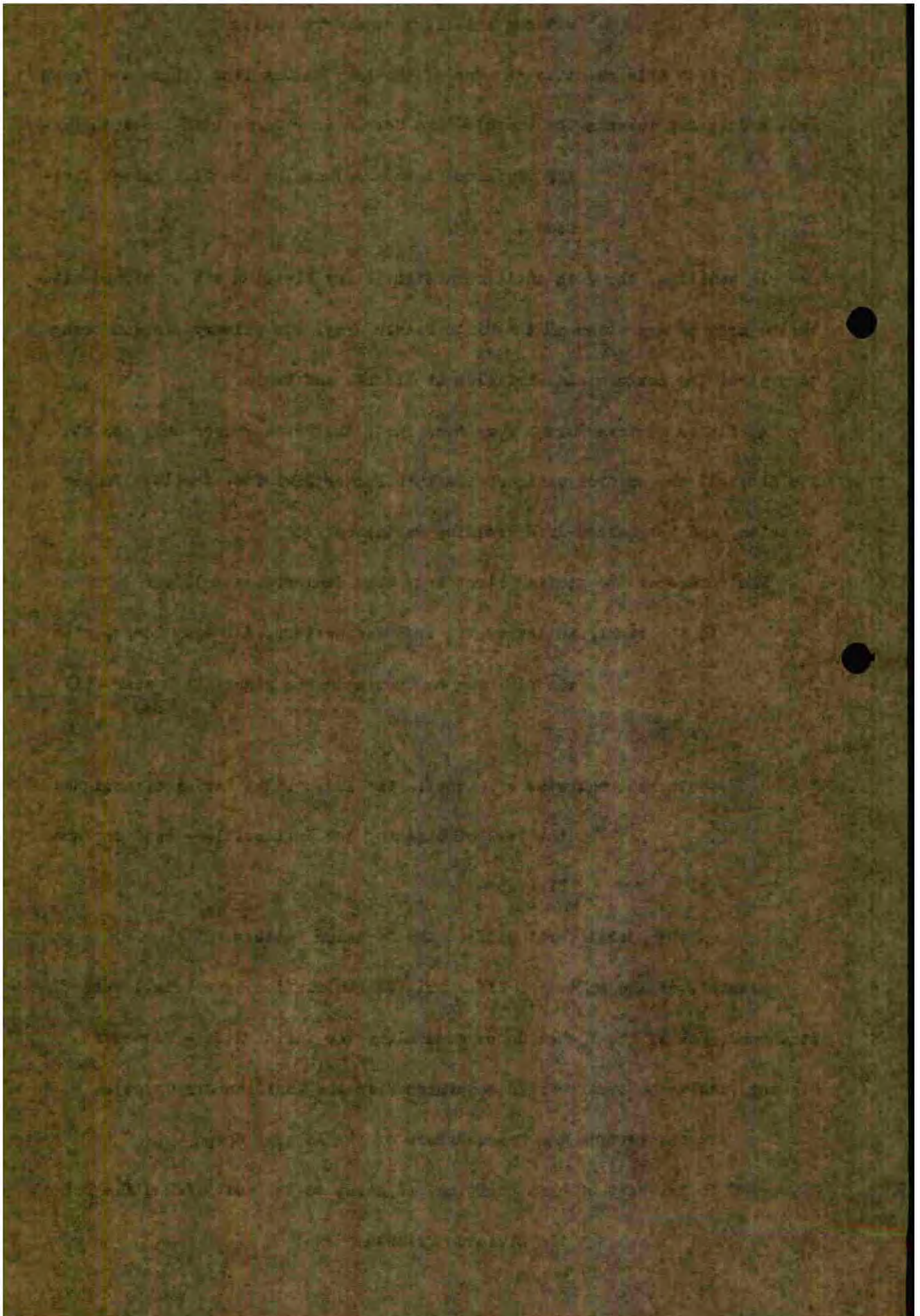
on the Djebel Garci hills: the Division Pistoia.

Elements of the Luftwaffe Rifle Brigade (Luftwaffenjäger Brig.) were stationed east of the Djebel Garci area along the Enfidaville - Zaghouan highway (twelve Luftwaffe field companies from the Tunisian Air Corps).

to the left: the Headquarters of the XX Army Corps

to the east of this position, adjacent to the Luftwaffe Rifle Bri-

gade: the Division Trieste



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on either side of Taerouna: the Division Giovanni Fascisti
from the area around Enfidaville to the coastal highway: the 90th
Light Division.

The hill positions, which were not yet seriously threatened and which were
relatively easy to defend, were assigned to the Italian units.

As heretofore, the 19th Antiaircraft Artillery Division was located in the
area of operations assigned to the Italian First Army.

The deployment of the enemy forces is indicated in the appendix.



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During the battles of the last few months, the British soldiers of the Eighth Army had proved themselves to be worthy opponents, whose combat experience made them antagonists to reckon with. As far as their leaders were concerned, Axis intelligence was aware of the fact that they were methodical in their planning and that they were not likely to risk their forces in any undertaking whose success seemed doubtful.

As regards the American troops, Axis intelligence knew that they were numerically superior and that they were armed with the most up-to-date weapons and equipment. So far, however, both officers and troops had demonstrated a certain lack of experience in combat.

Axis intelligence sources were doubtful about the will to fight of the pro-Allied French troops; in any case, their equipment was sadly out-of-date.

Evaluation of the Terrain: West of Mateur, from the coast as far as the Valley of Madjerda, the terrain is mountainous, its altitude subject to frequent and intensive variations. It contains certain hills and ridges which command a six-mile view of the region in some places and, for this reason, is of great tactical importance.

The ridges are quite flat, thus requiring fairly large defending forces. The few roads of importance can easily be blocked at the turns. The area is completely barren, with the exception of the area west and north of Sedjenane, which is covered with woods and impenetrable underbrush. Tanks can be employed in this area, although the extreme unevenness of the terrain makes it very difficult.

The terrain best suited to the employment of tanks is that located on both sides of the Madjerda Valley. East of Medjes-el-Bab, in the direction of Tunis, stretches a plain of some five to eight miles in width, which opens in the east onto a settled, cultivated area of small farms on a broad plateau. This terrain offers no obstacles for armored forces. In the north it is

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bounded by hills rising to 1,300 ft., and even in the south there are a number of lower hills and ridges which afford a view over the plains. For this reason, possession of the hills in the north as well as those in the south is vitally important for the ultimate outcome of any military engagement.

The territory between Djebel Mansour and the area north of Pichon is very mountainous, and some of it is heavily wooded as well. The few roads penetrating the area have never succeeded in making it general^{ly} accessible, particularly in view of the fact that the region to the north is a mass of deeply cut valleys. Inaccessible from both east and west, this terrain is highly unsuited to large-scale military operations, from both the defensive and offensive point of view.

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The Enfidaville position blocked the exit from the Kairouan - Sousse plains into the area of Tunis. The position was located along the southern and southeastern slopes of the Djebel Zaghouan, whose highest peak -- 4,237 ft. -- is the loftiest in all northern Tunisia.

Thus the Zaghouan position blocked not only the highways coming from the west, southwest, and southeast, but also the coastal highway leading from Enfidaville to Tunis. The Djebel Garci, 1,350 ft. high, was located about at the middle of the position line and afforded an excellent view to both east and west. The peak itself is a complex of several ridges with steep, rocky walls. The Enfidaville position was doubtless effective, despite the fact that the rocky soil made its reinforcement difficult. Only in the east were there olive groves, which offered some measure of protection against air attack.

The Italian Supreme Command ordered the Army Group Africa to defend the line running from Bab Sedjenew via Medjes-el-Bab and Bou-Arada to Enfidaville.

In the opinion of the commanders of the Fifth Panzer Army, terrain conditions and the deployment of the enemy forces made it obvious that the main direction of thrust would be via Medjes-el-Bab towards Tunis.

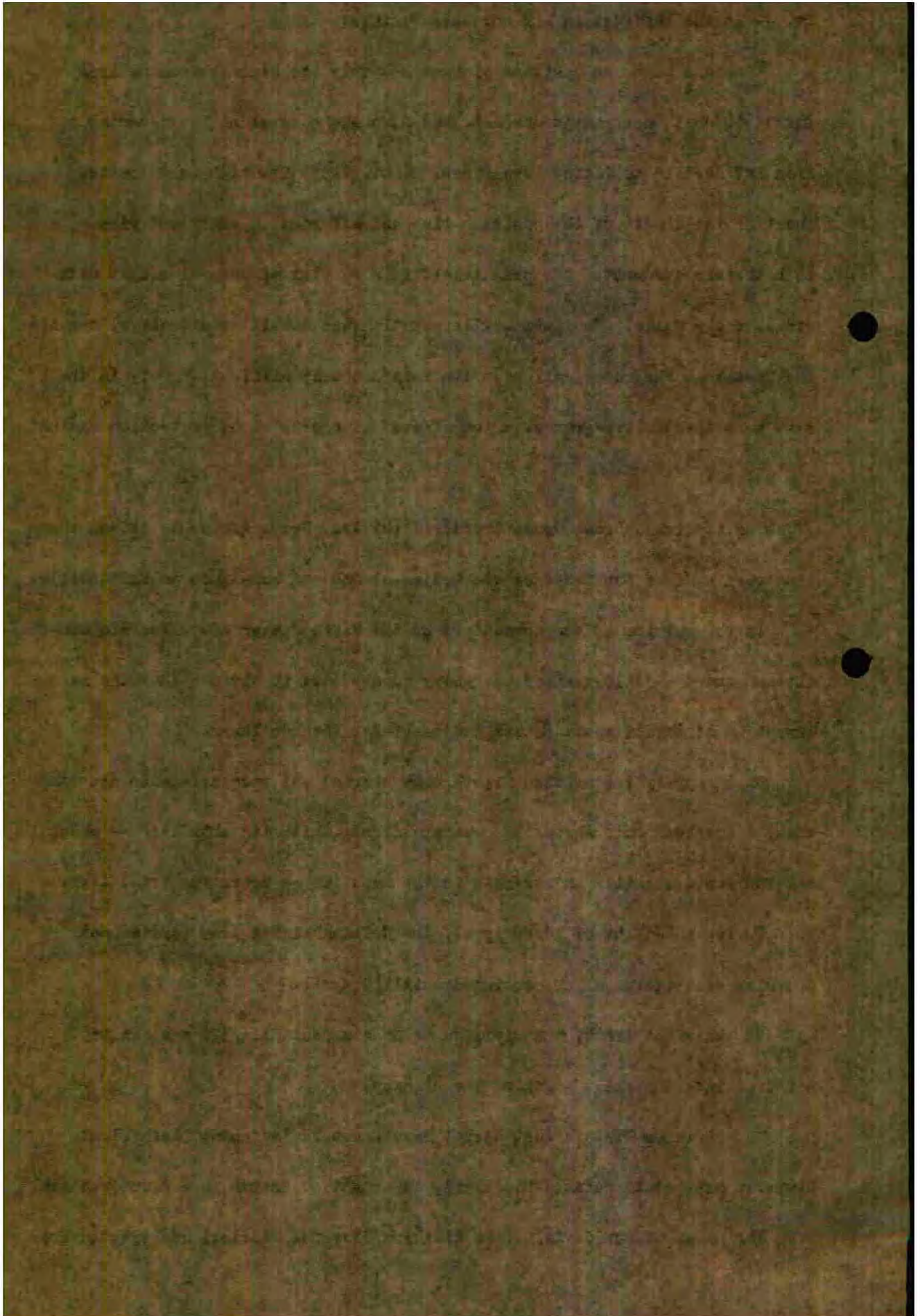
On 16 April, the British Eighth Army carried out reconnaissance near the enemy's advance posts along the southern front, while its artillery -- which had increased steadily in strength in the meantime -- began its trial fire.

During the night of 19/20 April, the British Eighth Army carried out a series of attacks, which continued until 29 April.

On the right flank, the Division La Spezia lost Hill 522 and had to withdraw into the hills north of the highway.

The Division Pistoia lost Djebel Garci, but the adjacent 164th Light Division managed to retake this highly important objective in a counterattack.

Northwest of Enfidaville, the Division Giovanni Fascisti was ejected from



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its position on the rocky peaks near Tacrouna, which made it impossible for the 90th Light Division to hold Enfidaville any longer. Nevertheless, the 90th Division was able to bring the enemy forces to a halt in the hills six miles north of the town.

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The German troops had borne the brunt of the fighting, expertly supported by their artillery. The enemy had not succeeded in achieving a breakthrough, and the fighting on the southern Tunisian front was gradually subsiding. So far, General Messe's Army had not encountered a single one of the three British armored divisions; the terrain was not very conducive to their employment. As a result, however, Axis planners finally accepted the erroneous conclusion that these divisions had been moved to the western front of Tunisia.

During the course of the month, there had been violent outbreaks of fighting at a number of points along the western front.

The enemy was obviously seeking a weak point where he could launch a breakthrough operation with some prospect of success.

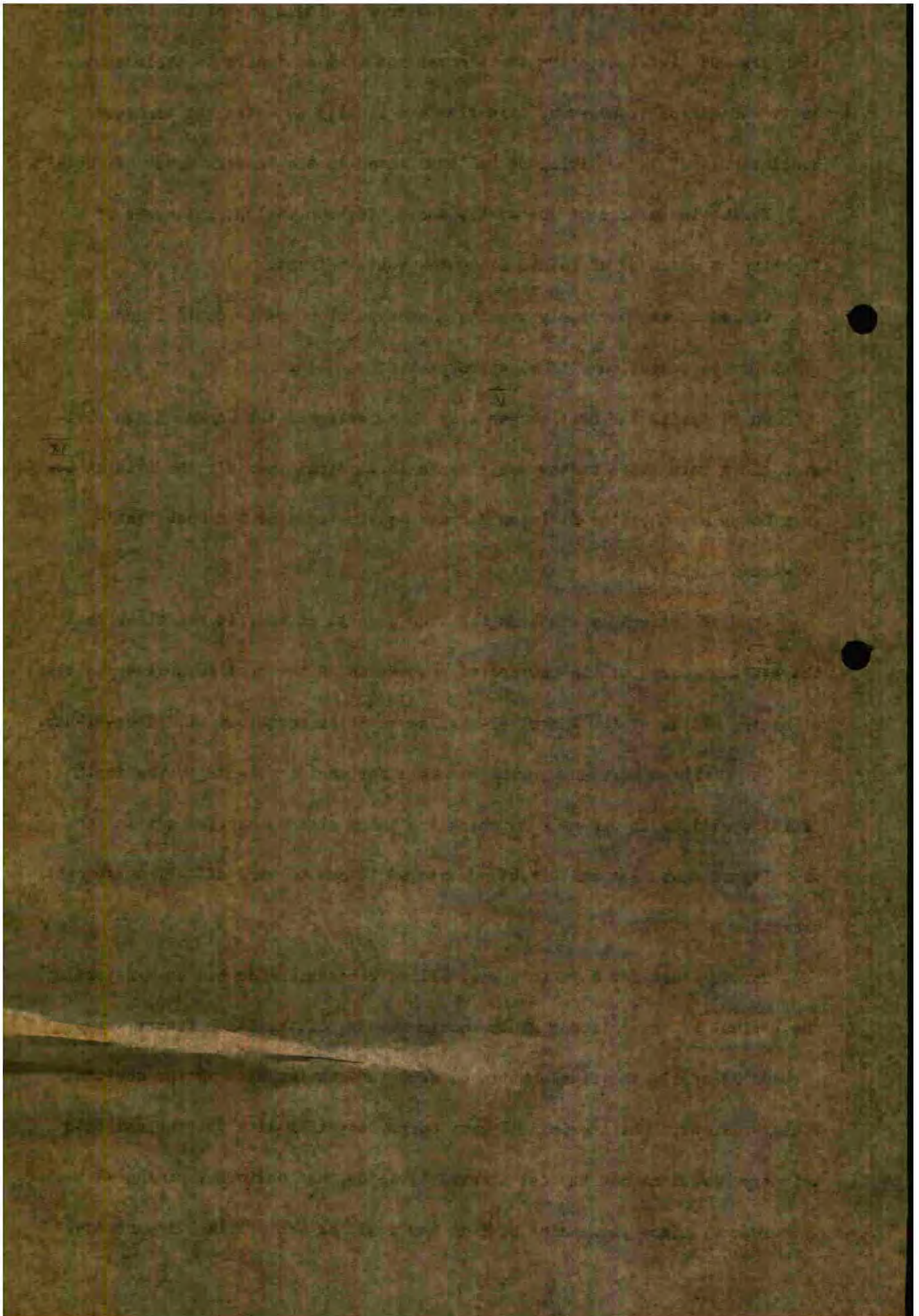
On 21 April, the British ^V5th Army Corps attacked the German 334th Division along both sides of the Medjerda Valley. Simultaneously the British ^{IX}9th Army Corps attacked the Division Hermann Goering east of the Goubellat - Bou-Arada highway.

When the extremely stubborn fighting came to an end, it was clear that the ^V5th Army Corps was in undisputed possession of the most important positions along the slopes of the Djebel el-Ang, seven miles northwest of Medjer-el-Bab.

The Division Hermann Goering was more fortunate; thanks to the depth of its position, it was able to check the enemy attacks carried out in the vicinity of Goubellat and directly south of it and to ward off all subsequent assaults.

For the last few days in a row, Allied reconnaissance had been reporting the arrival of fresh troops at the northern wing of the Fifth Panzer Army.

On 23 April, the final battle of decision was launched on the western Tunisian front. The American II Army Corps, together with the 1st and 34th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division, was obviously aiming at the Mateur area, since possession of this key position was of vital importance.



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The Fifth Panzer Army, stationed along a front some thirty-seven miles long, found itself face-to-face with three enemy corps, all of which were far better equipped as far as tanks and artillery were concerned. The German forces were simply too few to hold an unbroken front line effectively. During the ensuing hard fighting in mountainous terrain, the objective of both sides was to gain possession of certain individual hills. The Allied forces, with their superior tanks and artillery, pushed their way through the inevitable gaps in the front and were able to gain several miles of enemy territory towards the northeast.

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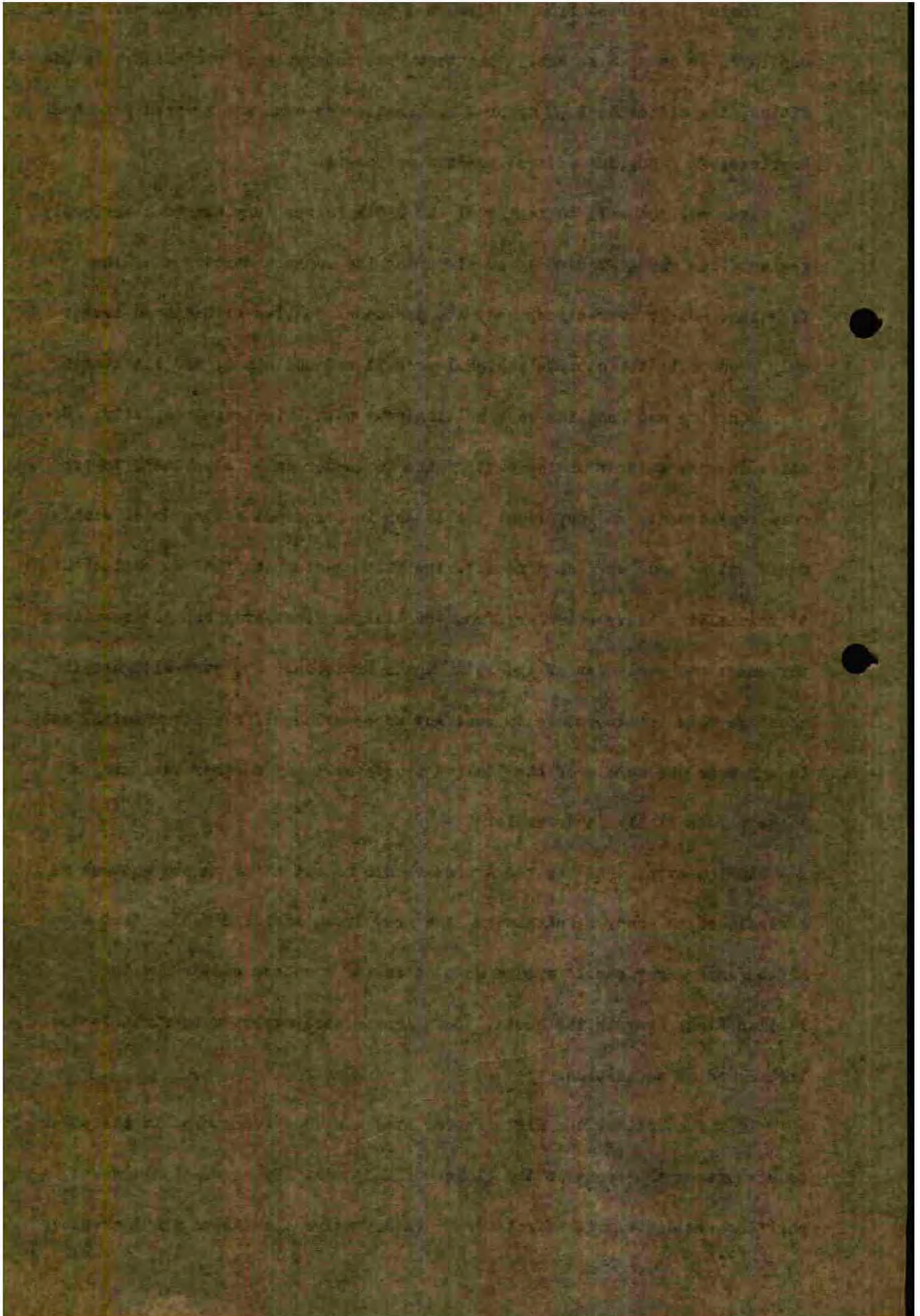
The outcome of the fighting was still uncertain during the last days of April. Allied attacks alternated with German counterattacks, and neither side was able to gain a really decisive victory.

During the period from 20 through 30 April, 291 Allied tanks were either destroyed or damaged so badly that they were incapable of operation. In addition, the Allies lost 36 armored reconnaissance cars and armored personnel carriers, 21 guns, and several hundred prisoners.

Even so, the will to resist of the Fifth Panzer Army had been seriously weakened, as was to become apparent during the subsequent course of the fighting. Never over-strengthened, its personnel complement had been lamentably reduced by the extremely high losses it had sustained, and its stores of ammunition and gasoline were melting away with frightening rapidity. Despite intense efforts on the part of the Commander in Chief, South, to procure replacements and supplies, the losses in personnel and materiel simply could not be made up. As a result, the Fifth Panzer Army had no choice but to requisition heavy artillery from the Italian First Army and the remaining personnel and equipment of the 15th Panzer Division. The over-all gasoline shortage made it impossible to send any more personnel from other units, and in any case the morale of the Italian troops made any further weakening of these forces highly inadvisable.

In the event that the two Armies should be cut off from one another as a result of an enemy breakthrough, the Army Group Africa directed that the Fifth Panzer Army should assume command in the northern sector and the Italian First Army in the south. Both Armies were expected to fight to the last round of ammunition.

In the meantime, the Fifth Panzer Army had done everything in its power to strengthen the front in the plains of Medjerda. By means of staggered positions in depth, its effectiveness in defensive operations was increased,



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subject to the limitations imposed by the small number of troops available. The motorcycle battalion of the 10th Panzer Division was integrated into the Medjerda Valley defensive front, and the remainder of this Division -- some thirty tanks and their crews -- was held back in readiness as a reserve force.

Antiaircraft artillery defense of the harbor at Tunis was abandoned, and the 88 mm batteries thus freed were assigned to antitank operations west of Tunis.

During the month of April, the Army Group Africa was reinforced by assignment of the following units:

2d and 3d Battalions, 2d Rifle Regiment (without headquarters staff);

Headquarters Staff and one battery, 1st Battalion, Artillery Regiment Hermann Goering;

Headquarters Staff and one battery from the armored battalion, Division Hermann Goering.

The above forces arrived by air transport without their heavy weapons and supply columns¹³⁵.

135 - See Footnote 17; pages 137/138 of the source detailed there.

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The Army Group Africa expected that the Allies, who had seized favorable bases of operation on both sides of the Medjerda Valley at the end of April, would now launch a decisive breakthrough in the direction of Tunis.

During the last few weeks, the German Luftwaffe had been unable to bring its forces to bear in the face of the overwhelming enemy air superiority.

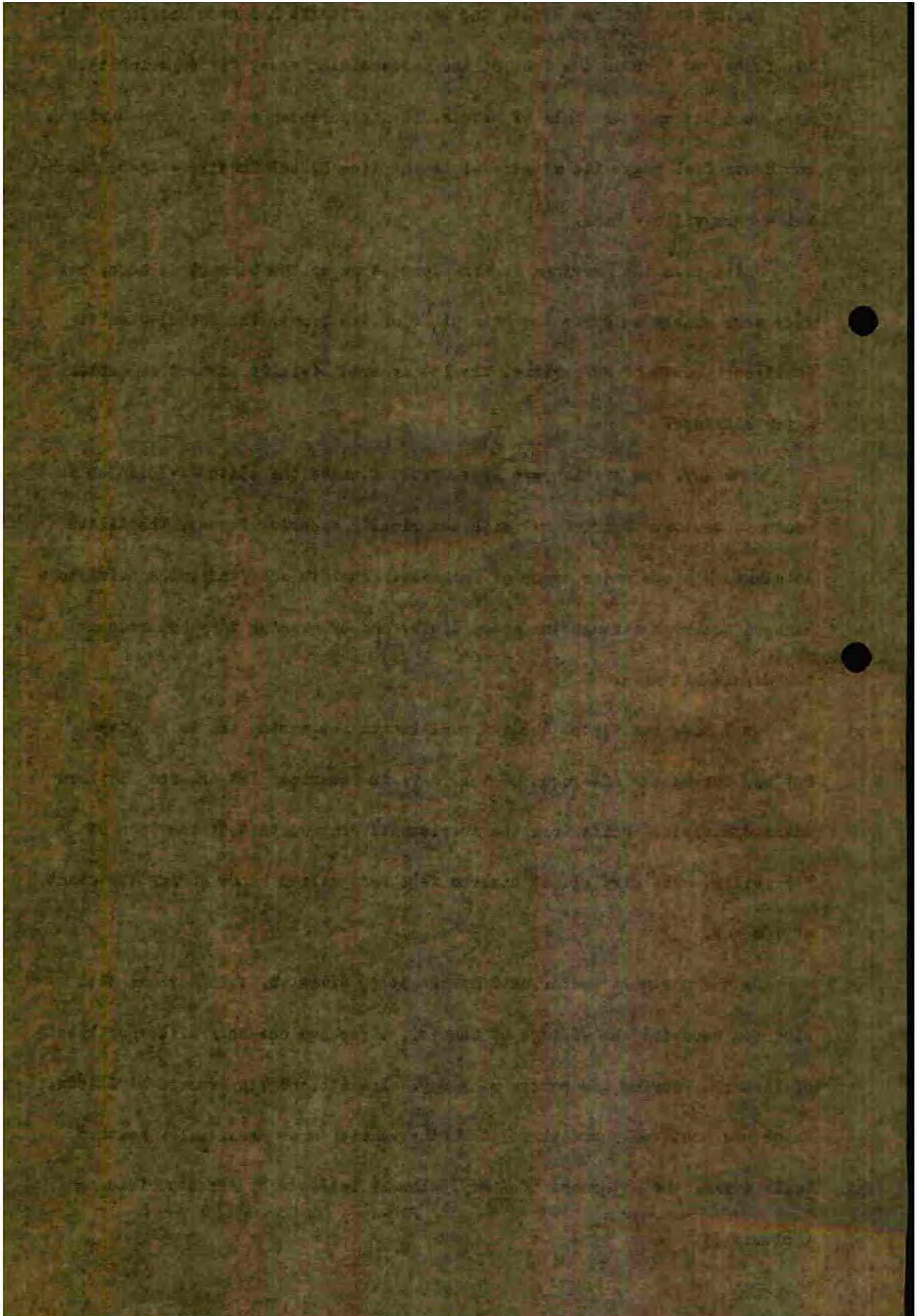
On 3 May came the fall of Mateur, on the northern sector. The Division von Manteuffel began its withdrawal to the line Djebel Cheniti - Djebel Ischkul - Ferryville - Tine.

Units from the American II Army Corps took up the pursuit at once, but they were unable to shake the main ²~~pillar~~ of the front, the Djebel Cheniti position; south of Ferryville, the 1st Armored Division managed to capture a few hilltops.

On 6 May, the British ^{IV}~~9th~~ Army Corps attacked the 334th Division on the southern sector. Carried out with numerically superior forces, the Allied attack took place under cover of darkness. The 6th and 7th Armored Divisions managed to break through the enemy lines, and by evening they had reached the Massicault area.

On 7 May, the Djebel Cheniti position in the north had to be given up, and during the afternoon of that day, the American 1st Armored Division entered Bizerte. Units from the American II Army Corps took the town of Ferryville. The airfield at Bizerte fell into Allied hands during the night of 7/8 May.

On the northern sector held by the 334th Division, the American 34th Division occupied the village of Chouigi, three and one-half miles northwest of Tebourba, during the course of 7 May. The 6th and 7th Armored Divisions, which had achieved a breakthrough further south, near Massicault, reached Tunis during the afternoon of 7 May, closely followed by the 4th Division (Motorized).



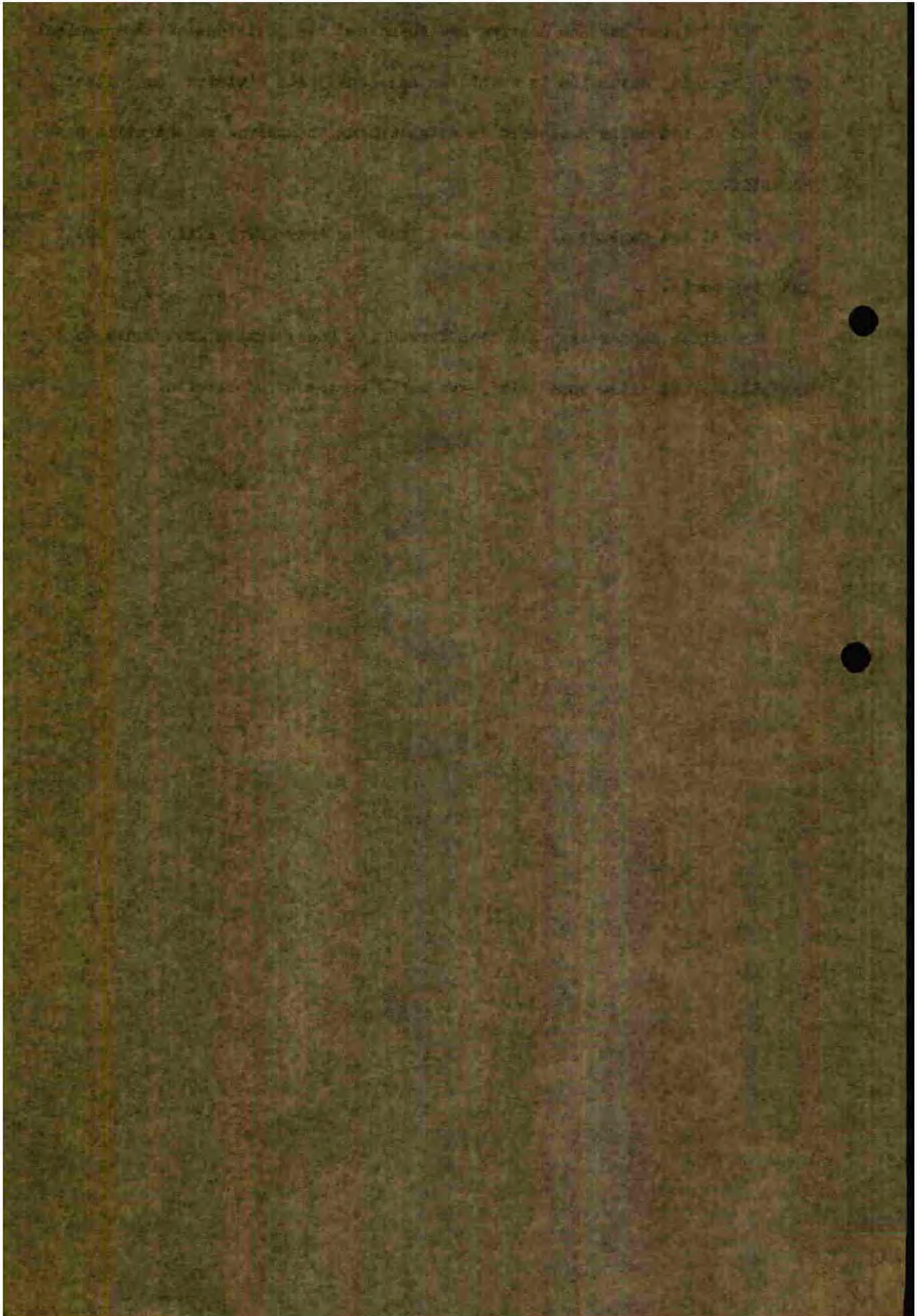
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The 7th Armored Division immediately headed north, while the 6th Armored Division and the 4th Division (Motorized) turned towards the southeast, in the direction of the Bon Peninsula.

The Division Hermann Goering had abandoned its positions after appraisal of the menacing situation in which the adjacent 334th Division found itself, and most of its units succeeded in establishing themselves in the hills near Hammalif.

The Allied capture of Tunis meant that the Army Group Africa was split into two parts.

The Fifth Panzer Army had transferred its headquarters from Tunis to the hills of El Alia, some thirty-two miles southeast of Biserte.



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Isolated combat groups, made up of survivors from the Division von Mantuffel, the 334th Division, and the 15th Panzer Division, had dug in in positions in the area extending from Biserte to south of Tunis. They kept up stubborn resistance as long as their ammunition lasted. By 8 May, their position had become untenable, and during the course of that afternoon, these hold-outs from the Fifth Panzer Army had no choice but to capitulate.

In the region of Hammamlif, the Hermann Goering Division was able to throw back the assault of the 6th Armored Division, thanks to its large complement of antitank artillery.

By the same token, the Italian First Army was able to hold off heavy assaults on its southern front positions, also on 8 May.

In the meantime, the Axis forces were attempting to set up a new defense front in the mountains south of Hammamlif and in the hills west of Grombalia.

Further south, elements of the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions were assembling for the final struggle.

The 90th Light Division had moved into covering positions north of Enfidaville, ready to protect the Italian First Army during its withdrawal.

On 10 May, however, the British forces managed to break through the narrow gap near Hammamlif, carrying out a part of their assault under cover of darkness. One of their armored columns pushed on towards the northwest via Soliman, while another moved southeast towards Hammamet, which it reached during the evening hours.

The building up of the new Axis defense front was frustrated by the British advance, which had made coordinated leadership of the Axis troops impossible.

The staffs of the Army Group Africa and the Italian First Army had withdrawn to the hills east of Menzel-bou-Zelfa in the meantime. They were no longer in communication with the isolated groups still fighting here and there.

Acting on orders, the commander of the Division Hermann Goering left Africa

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with the last departing Ju-52 on 10 May. Shortly before his departure, he had conferred with the staff of the Army Group Africa, which was preparing to surrender.



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He reported to the Commander in Chief, South, that the troops -- widely dissipated and without any means of communication with one another -- could not possibly be expected to continue a systematic military operation. They had no choice but to defend themselves individually to the last bullet.

The isolated German-Italian groups which had escaped into the mountains southwest of Grombalia were surrounded by the enemy. On 12 May, encircled from all sides by British, Indian, and French units, there was nothing for them to do but capitulate.

13 May marked the elimination of the last pocket of Axis resistance, made up of relatively strong units from the 90th Light Division and the Italian First Army which had managed to ensconce themselves in the hills north of Enfidaville.

The struggle for Tunisia had come to an end.

During the course of the last day, the staff and the 1st and 2d Companies of the engineer battalion, Division Hermann Goering, were landed by aircraft at the bridgehead -- but without weapons and equipment.

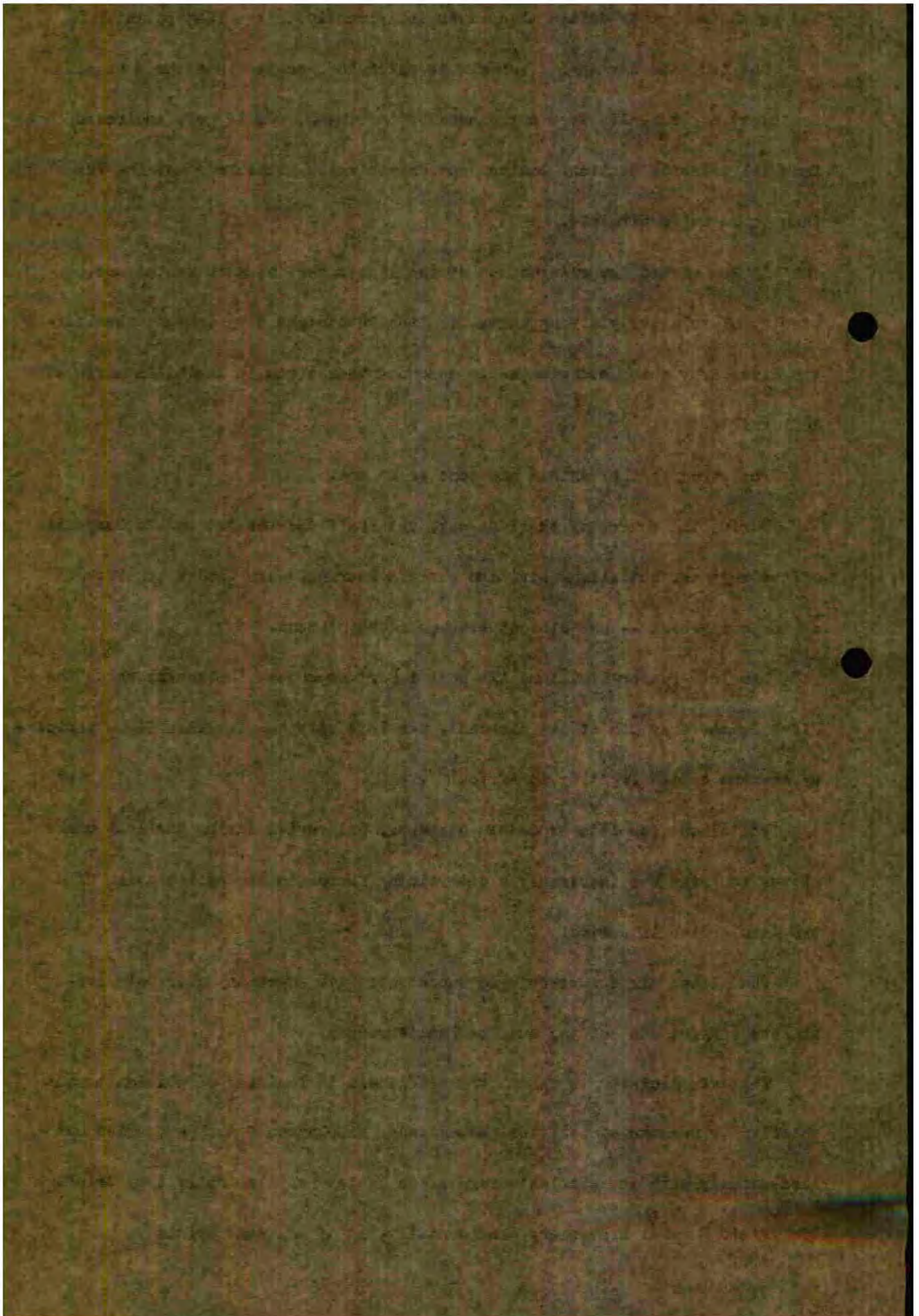
The 10th Panzer Division, the most important combat instrument which the Fifth Panzer Army had at its disposal, was left with no more than 2,000 vehicles by the end of the fighting in Africa¹³⁶.

The almost complete breakdown of supply deliveries during the last weeks of the campaign was inevitably a determining factor in the capitulation of the Axis armies in Africa.

The Allied air forces enjoyed uncontested air supremacy over both continents (Africa and Europe) and the Mediterranean.

The Axis decision to defend the bridgehead in Tunisia, a decision taken chiefly for reasons of political expediency, simply could not be carried out successfully with the available forces, no matter how heroically they tried.

Field Marshal Montgomery, incidentally, is of the same opinion:



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"From the purely military standpoint, there can be no justification for the decision to remain in North Africa once the Mareth line had been broken.

I suspect that Hitler ordered it for political reasons.

136 - See Footnote 17; page 138 of the source detailed there.



739

It is always dangerous to take on tasks which have no military value whatsoever purely for political reasons.

This may sometimes be necessary, but ordinarily it ends in catastrophe."¹³⁷

The German Second Air Fleet had almost no opportunity to employ its bomber wings during May.

Any thought of conducting tactical air warfare, as the Allied air forces were doing, had long since been put aside as impracticable.

It is true that on two occasions the II Air Corps did carry out night attacks on enemy shipping convoys and port installations (including Bone).

But the majority of its aircraft had to be employed to protect Axis shipping from submarines. Each escort trip lasted three days and three nights, and this made it impossible for the bomber units to fulfill their real and proper mission. The single-engine and twin-engine fighters were not much better off!

Hitler personally determined (on the basis of the most recent losses in shipping) the number of fighters to accompany each convoy!

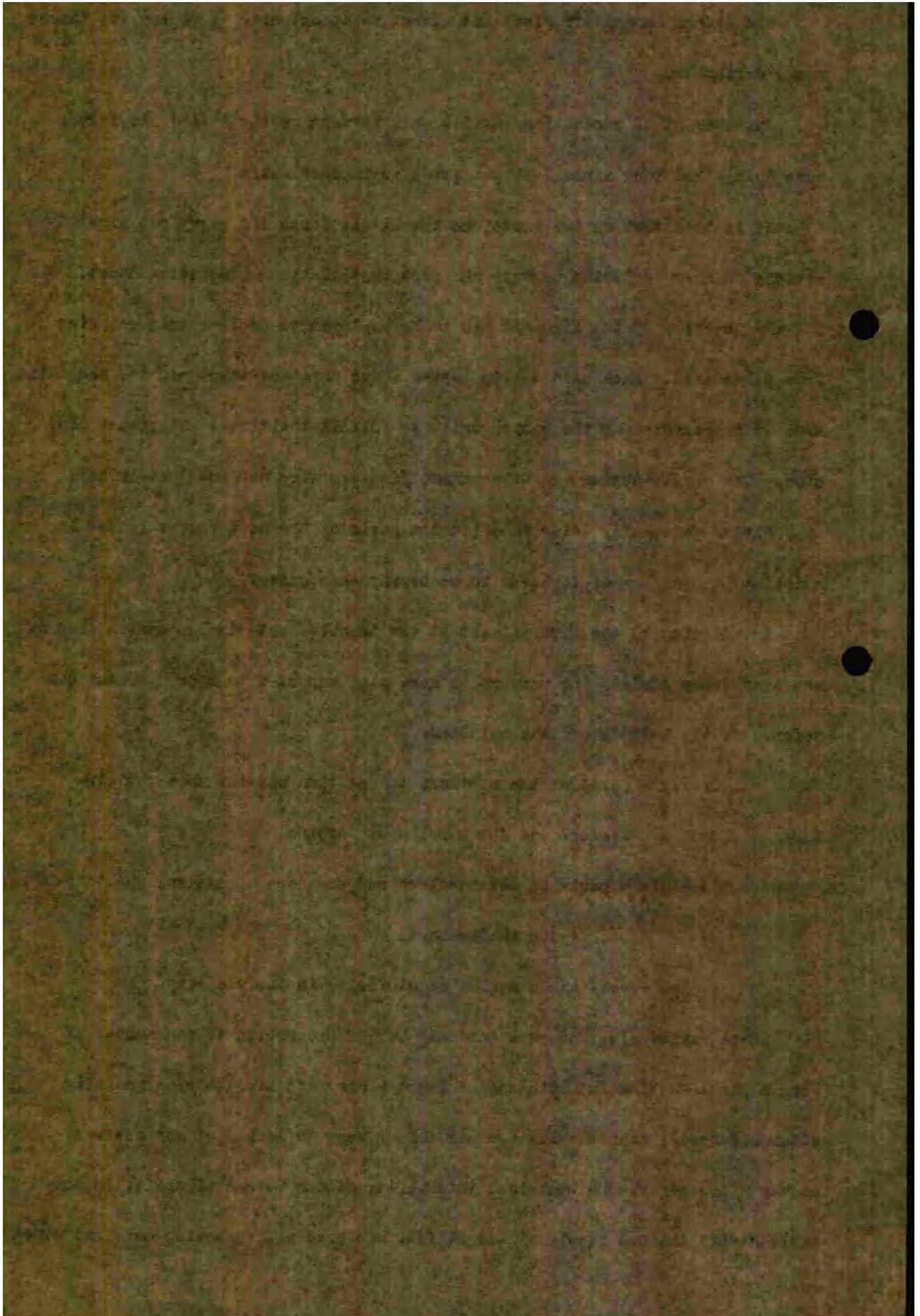
In addition to their commitment at the trouble-spots in the combat area of the Army Group Africa, the same units were also expected to take over the air defense of the islands and the mainland:

Sicily - ports on the northern and western coasts, numerous airfields, and the Straits of Messina

Sardinia - ports on the northern and southern coasts and the take-off fields in the south

Naples - port and a number of airfields in the vicinity.

These varied missions were entirely out of proportion to the number of German single-engine and twin-engine fighter aircraft available, especially after mid-April, when the Italian air forces were no longer of any use whatsoever. Moreover, the technical inferiority of the German aircraft, in comparison with the new models of the Allies, was gradually becoming more and more



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apparent.

137 - "Montgomery's Desert Diary", Life International, 10 November 1958,
page 73.

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From mid-April on, the air situation in Tunisia grew steadily less favorable for the Axis. The Allied fighters controlled the entire airspace, and their bomber units kept up their attacks on the supply ports and airfields in Sicily and southern Italy with greater and greater effectiveness.

The Allies possessed not only numerical superiority -- to a hitherto unsuspected degree --, but also kept bringing up new, fresh crews who were well trained in the operation of the most up-to-date aircraft models.

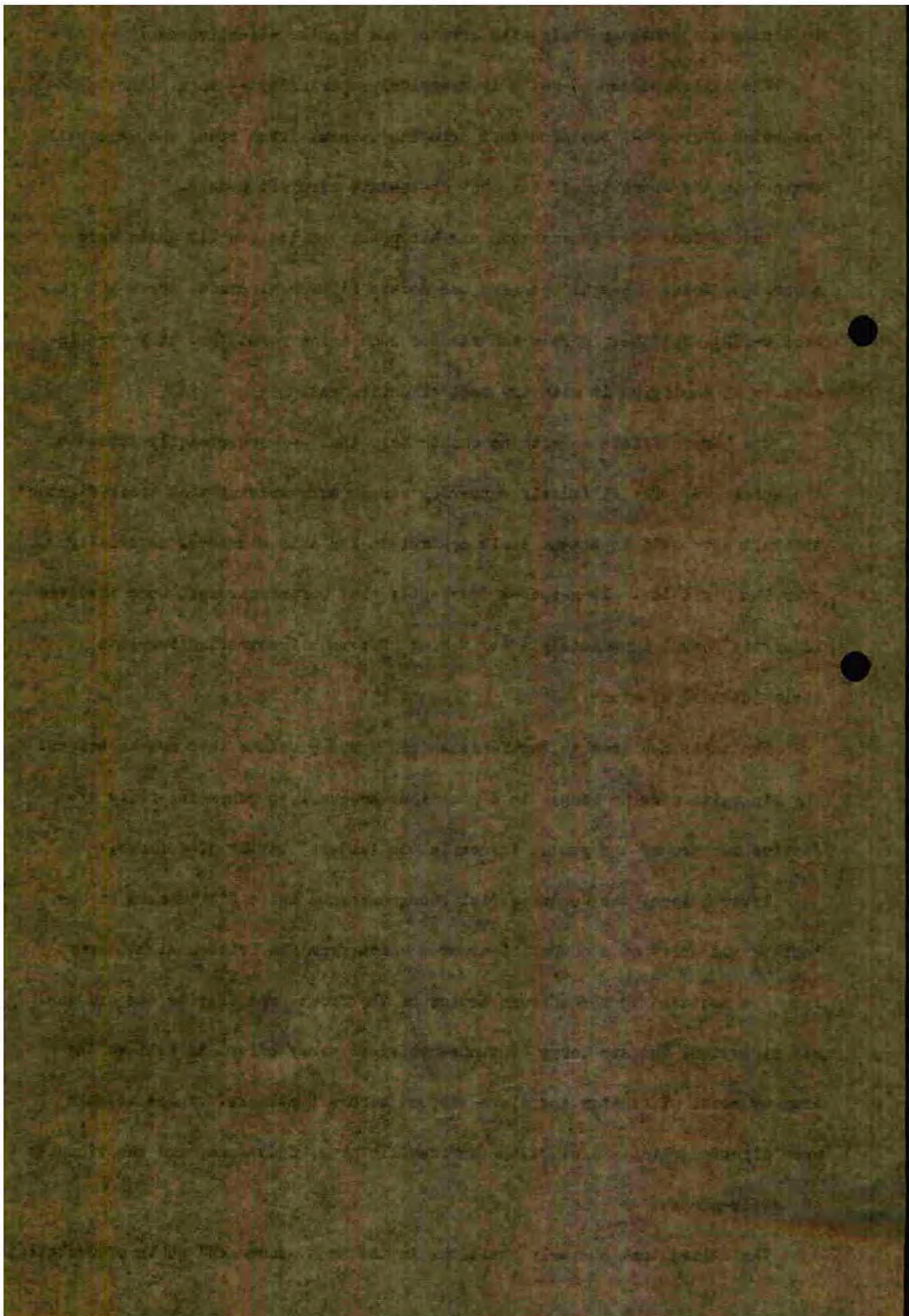
In the face of this enormous air strength, the Italian air units were at a complete loss. They did possess one modern fighter aircraft, the M-202 (Macchi C-202), but their morale had reached such a low point that they were incapable of employing it with any real effectiveness.

The German fliers -- with no one to help them -- were steadily forced on the defensive. The Allied air supremacy was so overwhelming that their fighter aircraft were able to extend their control to the Axis airspace, especially over the airfields. It happened frequently that German aircraft were involved in aerial combat immediately after taking off, thus frustrating completely their intended missions.

The tasks assigned to the Tunisian Air Corps remained the same as before. The air units were no longer in a position, however, to guarantee fully effective support of the ground forces in the latter's battle of defense.

Nevertheless, the German aerial reconnaissance units did succeed in detecting the shift of a number of armored units from the British Eighth Army from the southern to the western sector of the front, and despite the critical air situation, the Air Corps continued to exert every effort to relieve the Army by means of fighter and close-support aircraft attacks. These attacks were directed chiefly against the Enfidaville area, Sedjenane, and the vicinity of Medjer-el-Bab.

The Allied tank assembly positions in the area around and south of Goubellat



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and near Bou-Arada could be combatted to some extent by units from the Division Hermann Goering, but only at the cost of sacrificial losses.

"It was bitter to have to look on while our own combat-sager pilots were kept on the ground, the potential danger they represented to the enemy having simply been eliminated by the fact of Allied air superiority."

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By 15 April, the Tunisian Air Corps had already taken over command of all the air units stationed within the area of the Tunisian bridgehead. Only those technical services and signal communications forces remained which were absolutely necessary for day-to-day accommodation of the active units.

The staffs of the Air Commander, Tunis, and the Air Commander, South, were withdrawn to Sicily and Sardinia. The staff of the Air District Tunis was disbanded. The so-called Airfield Area Command Tunis (Kommando Flughafenbereich Tunis) assumed responsibility for the logistics and supply of the Air Corps as well as for the 19th and 20th Antiaircraft Artillery Divisions.

As of 15 April, the Tunisian Air Corps had the following forces at its disposal in the bridgehead area:

53d Single-Engine Fighter Wing (3 groups)	- 90 Me-109's
77th Single-Engine Fighter Wing (3 groups)	- 90 Me-109's
III Group, 1st Close-Support Wing	- 25 Me-109's
III Group, 4th Close-Support Wing	- 25 FW-190's
2d Squadron, 14th Close-Range Reconnaissance Group	- 8 Me-109's
4th Squadron, 14th Close-Range Reconnaissance Group	- 8 Me-109's
Desert Rescue Squadron (Wuesten-Notstaffel)	- 21 Fi Storch's
Mine Detector Squadron	- 3 Ju-52's
Luftwaffe Signal Communications Regiment	- 16 companies
Headquarters, Airfield Area Command	
Field Repair Depot Unit (Feldwerft-Verband)	

With the concurrence of the II Air Corps, the surplus aircraft mechanics and other skilled specialists were utilized to staff an aircraft repair and supply base on Sicily. The surplus "general ground personnel" from all units were sufficient to form sixteen Luftwaffe field companies of 180 men each -- a total of nearly 3000 troops. These companies were equipped with hand weapons and given a training course of several weeks' duration by Army instruc-

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tors, after which they were assigned to the Division Hermann Goering and to the units fighting north of Enfidaville. Their performance on both sectors was highly satisfactory.

The technically obsolete Ju-87 (dive-bomber) and He-129 (close-support aircraft) were withdrawn from the front. From this point on, the long-range reconnaissance squadrons were committed from bases in Italy.

During the month of April, the ocean transport of supplies grew more and more unreliable. The Ju-52's equipped with mine detectors proved to be extremely helpful in protecting shipping traffic. Assigned to continual patrol missions, they checked the routes ahead of the convoys. They were able to fulfill their mission until the very end, since they were never discovered and attacked by the enemy fighters, which flew at a much higher altitude.

742

Despite extensive harassment activity by enemy fighter aircraft, the German transport aircraft were able to keep up their work during April. There were two catastrophes, however, both attributable to faulty operational planning.

On the early afternoon of 18 April, 15 Me-323's and 25 Ju-52's were shot down over the Sicilian Straits; on 21 April, 43 Me-323's and 27 Ju-52's met the same fate north of Cap Bon. A total loss of 52 Ju-52's and 58 Me-323's¹³⁸.

After this, daytime air transport flights were discontinued entirely. The enemy reacted accordingly, however, and increased the employment of his night fighter units.

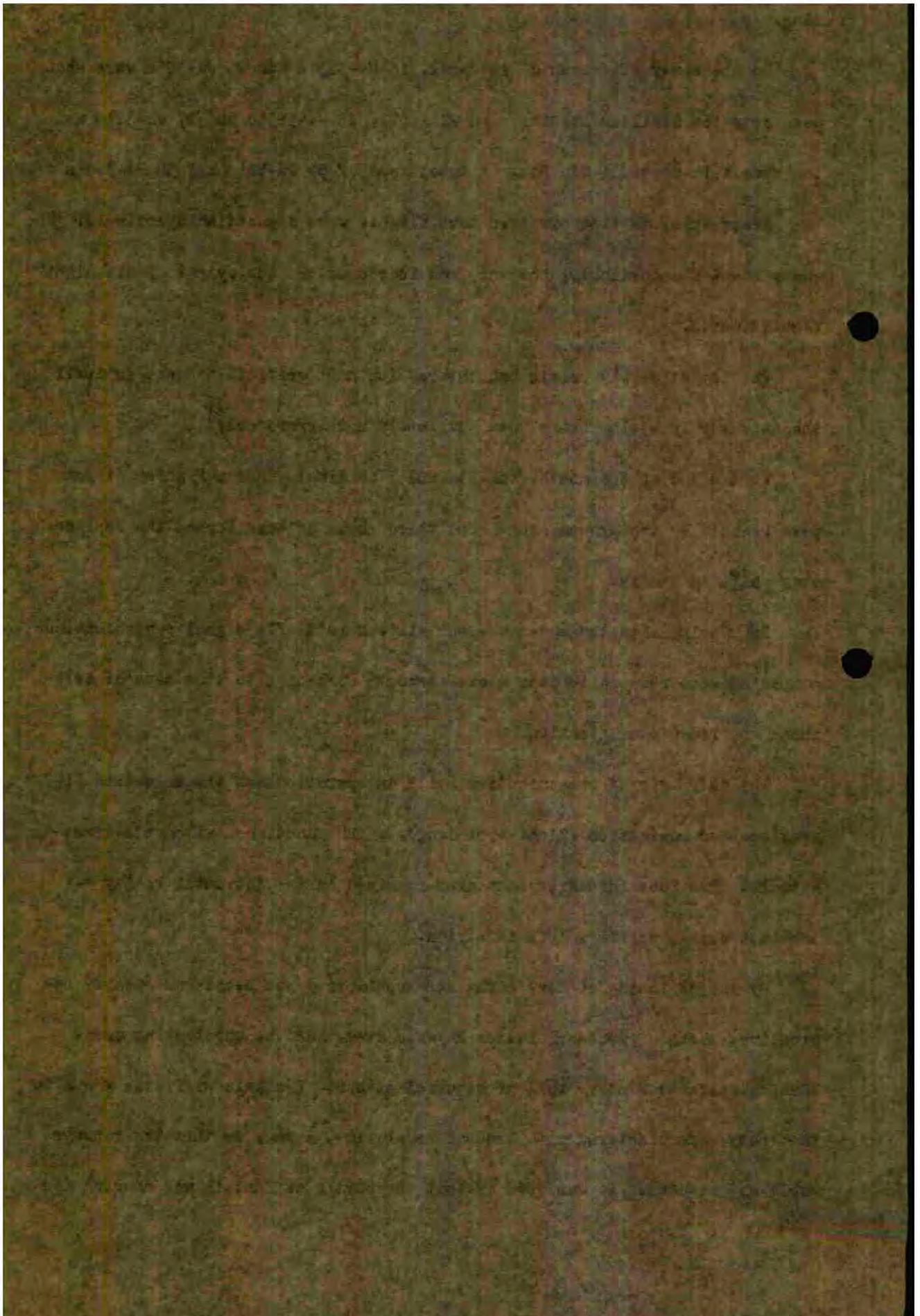
The latent supply crisis had entered its most critical stage; in April the Axis supply system broke down completely and irrevocably.

At the end of the month, the 53d and 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wings were reduced to two groups each. The third group of each formed the replacement units in Sicily.

In keeping with the cut-back, the sixteen Luftwaffe signal communications companies were reduced to four above-strength companies to take care of telephone and radio communication.

The only type of communication still in operation was the so-called Directional communication (Richtverbindung), which functioned without a wire network. The four Luftwaffe companies remained on the job until 13 May -- the last German soldiers left in Africa.

By the beginning of May, enemy air superiority had become unbearably oppressive. German personnel losses sky-rocketed, and the unrelenting enemy bombing raids took heavy toll of materiel stocks. The Axis airfields known to the enemy were plastered with bombs several times a day, so that the runways could not be used. It was obvious that the battle of Tunisia was nearing its



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end.

The only Luftwaffe units left at the bridgehead were one group each of the 53d and 77th Single-Engine Fighter Wings, two close-support groups, and the long-range reconnaissance squadrons.

When the British tanks reached Tunis on 6 May (? - sic), these units were able to withdraw safely to the Bon Peninsula.

138 - Deichmann, op.cit.; according to Chapter V, page 9, of this source, these two attacks resulted in a total loss of 50 Ju-52's and 27 Me-323's.

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On the afternoon of 8 May, at the order of the Commander in Chief, South, (concurrent in by the Army Group Africa), all the Luftwaffe units flew to Sicily. The fuel supplies in Africa were exhausted; after 10 May all air activity on the Peninsula had to be discontinued, as the British tanks pressed forward towards Cap Bon. All subsequent Luftwaffe missions were carried out from Sicily. On 10 May, Luftwaffe aircraft succeeded in shooting down a large number of enemy aircraft which were flying about over Tunis, apparently in the assumption that they were perfectly safe from attack.

On 11 May, the task of supporting the operations of the Army Group Africa was transferred to the Fighter Commander (Jagdfliegerführer), Sicily, with headquarters at Trapani. All the units of the Tunisian Air Corps were assigned to him for this mission¹³⁹.

The participation of the Luftwaffe units in operations in Africa was consistently characterized by an eagerness for combat and a disregard of danger and death.

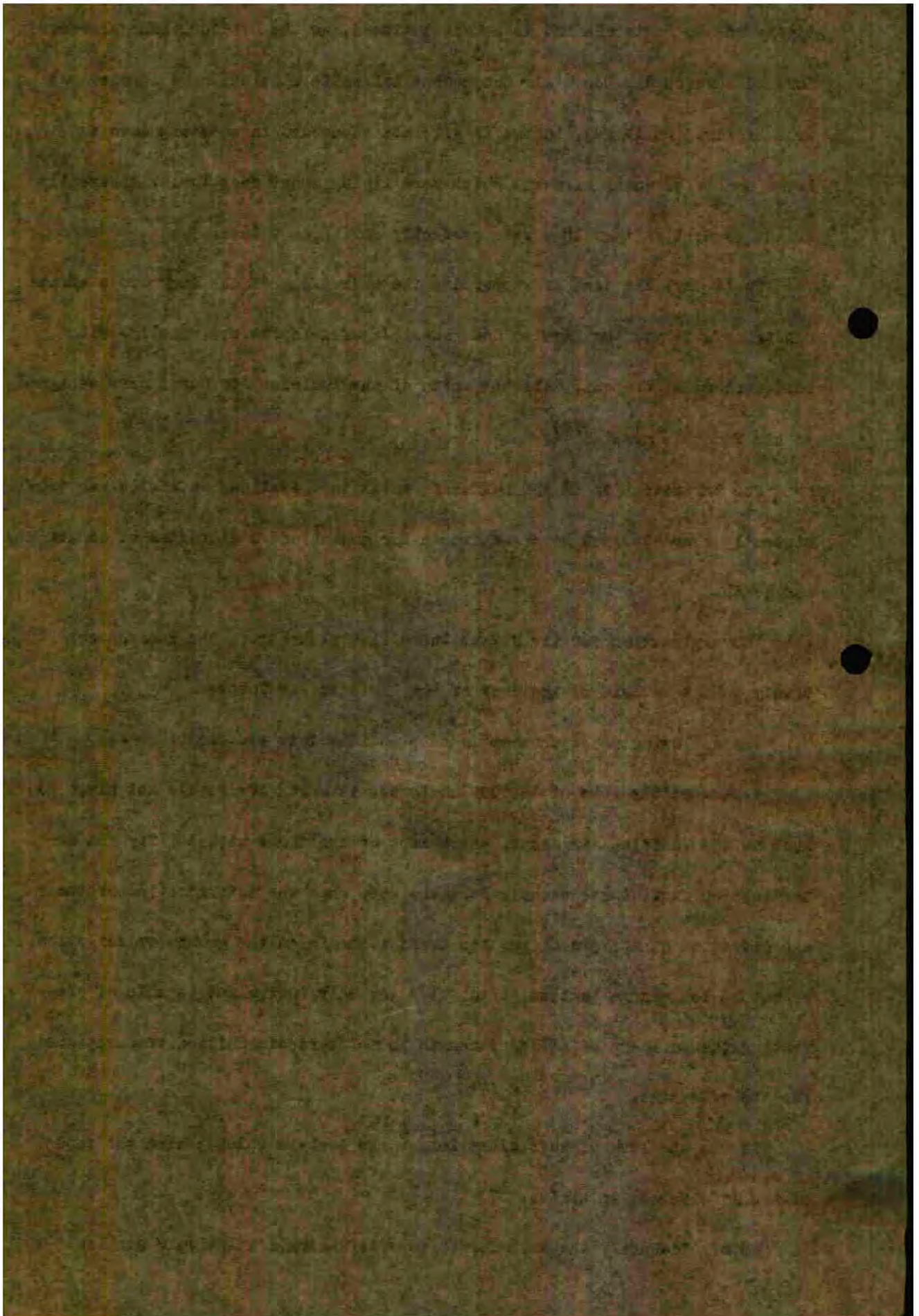
The explanation for its defeat there lies elsewhere; the reasons certainly cannot be laid at the door of the Tunisian Air Corps.

The following passages seem to substantiate this statement:

".....But the fate of the German forces in North Africa did not hinge so much on the Tunisian Air Corps, which kept up the fight with ability and determination until three weeks before the end, when the deterioration of the the situation on the ground put too great a strain on the ground organization, as on the long-range bombers, which were the only instrument capable of preventing the build-up of Allied strength and of harassing Allied preparations for the offensive.

It was the lack of sufficient long-range bombers which sealed the fate of the Axis forces in Africa."¹⁴⁰

As of mid-April, the Axis forces were defending a relatively shallow



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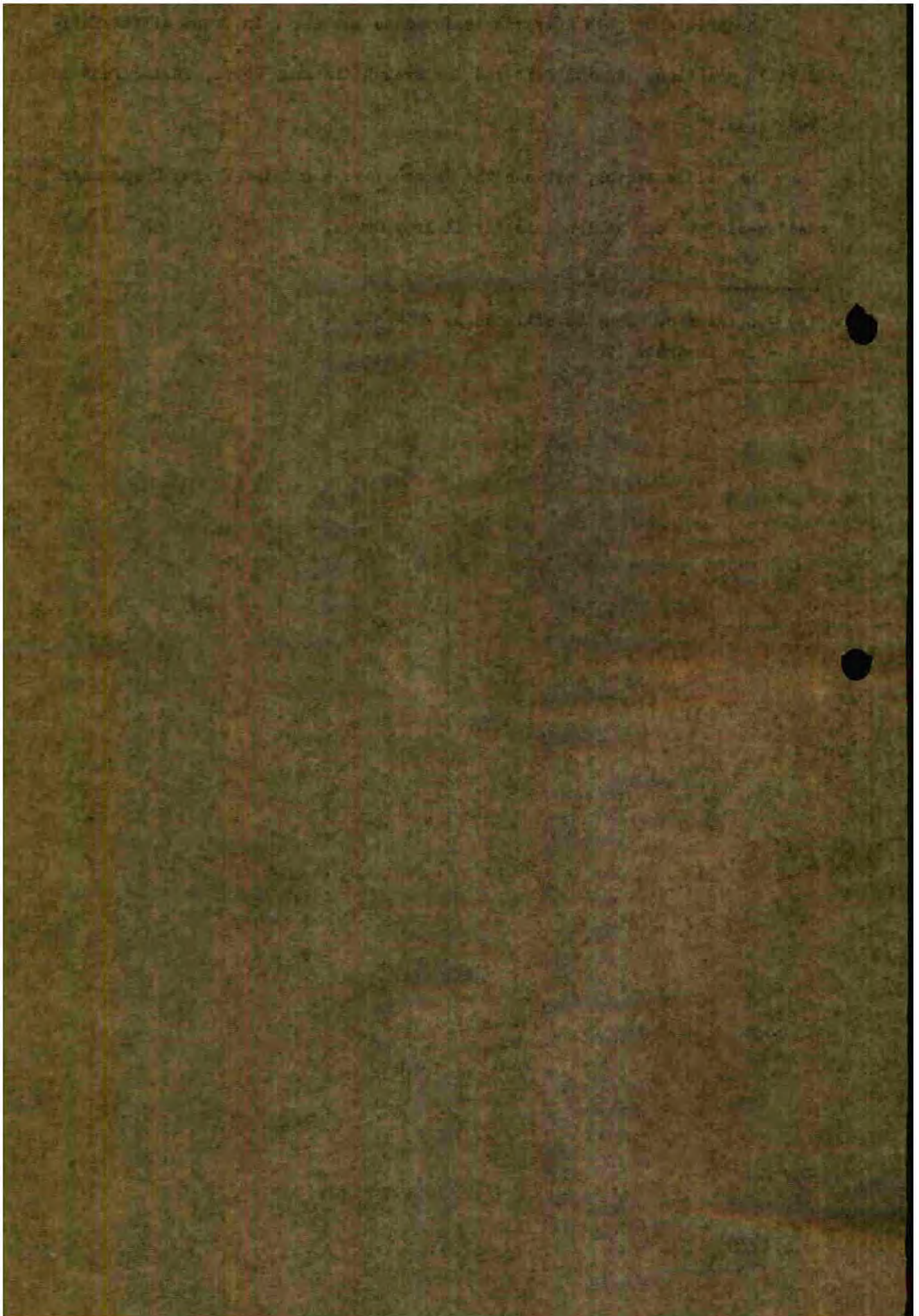
bridgehead surrounded by hills, along the approximate line Enfidaville - Pont du Fahs - Medjez-el-Bab - Sedjenane. On the opposite side of this line, the Allies were preparing for their last assault.

The British Eighth Army was deployed to the east, in front of the Enfidaville position; to its left was the French XIX Army Corps, in the Pont du Fahs area.

The middle sector, between the French forces and the V Army Corps near Medjez-el-Bab, was assigned to the IX Army Corps.

139 - Seidemann, Hans, op.cit., pages 29 - 37.

140 - See Footnote 126.

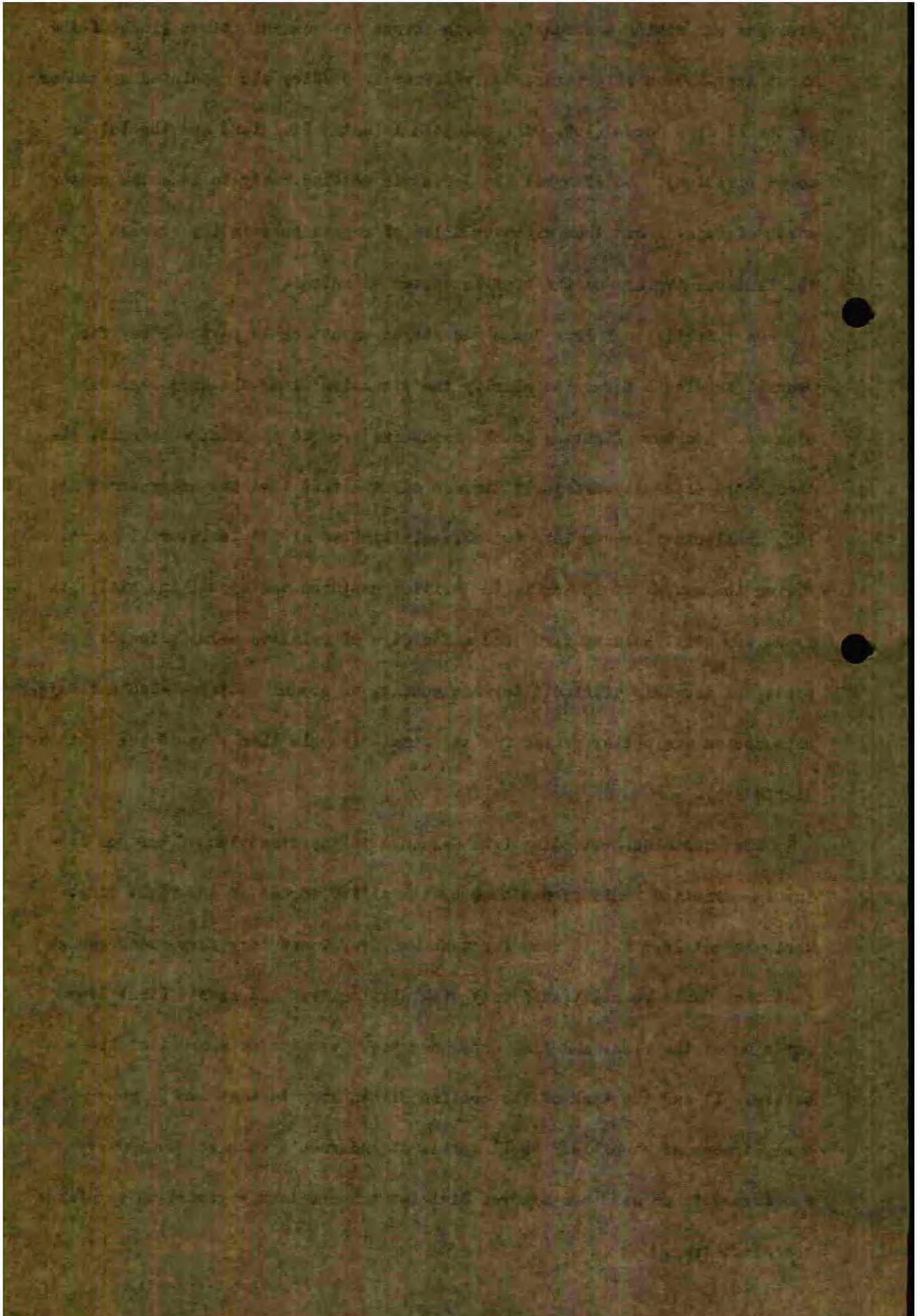


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On the northern sector of the Axis front, units from the V Army Corps ~~were~~ were stationed in expectation of ^{The} an attack by the American II Army Corps. The latter had been pushed off its course via Akarit by the advance of the Eighth Army and was moving towards the north across the communications lines of the First Army. Soon afterwards, General Omar N. Bradley was appointed commander of the II Army Corps (1st, 9th, and 34th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division); on 12 April the Corps was getting ready to take the sector north of Beja. More than eighteen miles of rugged terrain lay between it and the flat country around the traffic center of Mateur.

On 7 April the V Army Corps had staged an attack to pave the way for General Bradley's forces to clarify the situation along the Medjes-el-Bab highway. Stubborn fighting in the mountains brought the desired result, although the extremely difficult terrain and the fact that the enemy threw his last available reserves into the struggle limited Allied territorial gains. During the course of 15 April, the British captured the Djebel Ang hill; the front was still holding firm, and a few days of relative calm followed. Despite the terribly difficult terrain conditions around Medjes-el-Bab and Beja, this sector was better suited for the final struggle than that of the British Eighth Army.

The mountains, extending from Zaghouan in the direction of the Bon Peninsula, shielded Tunis from attack by the Allied forces on the right wing. Their extent left little room for tank maneuvers, and they were steep enough that they could be negotiated only with difficulty. Anderson's First Army (made up of the V, IX, and XIX Corps) now took over the main brunt of the battle. It was the task of the British Eighth Army to tie down as many enemy troops as possible. On 11 April, at Anderson's command, Montgomery was forced to release one armored division and one tank regiment to reinforce the First Army.



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Montgomery's first attempt to take the Enfidaville position served to substantiate the impression that the drive to Tunis was anything but a Sunday stroll.

His attack was launched during the night of 19/20 April. The village of Enfidaville capitulated, and armored reconnaissance troops pushed on into the flat country beyond. The New Zealand Corps occupied the Carcouna rocks for two days; they were so steep that the troops had to use rope ladders to get to the top. Montgomery's forces threw back a number of enemy counterattacks, regrouped for a thrust along the coast, and finally came to the conclusion that the potential gain was not worth the effort involved.

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The Eighth Army launched its attack without the usual preliminary preparations of the Western Desert Air Force; the only preparations were a number of reconnaissance flights and a few fighter-bomber raids.

The enemy positions were well camouflaged; there were no vehicle parks visible, and besides there were low clouds over the combat area. In addition, the refractory Italians in the Djebel Garci hills had been subdued by a number of fighter-bomber attacks.

All things considered (it was the day of the Palm Sunday massacre), the simultaneous attacks on sea and air traffic turned out better than had been expected.

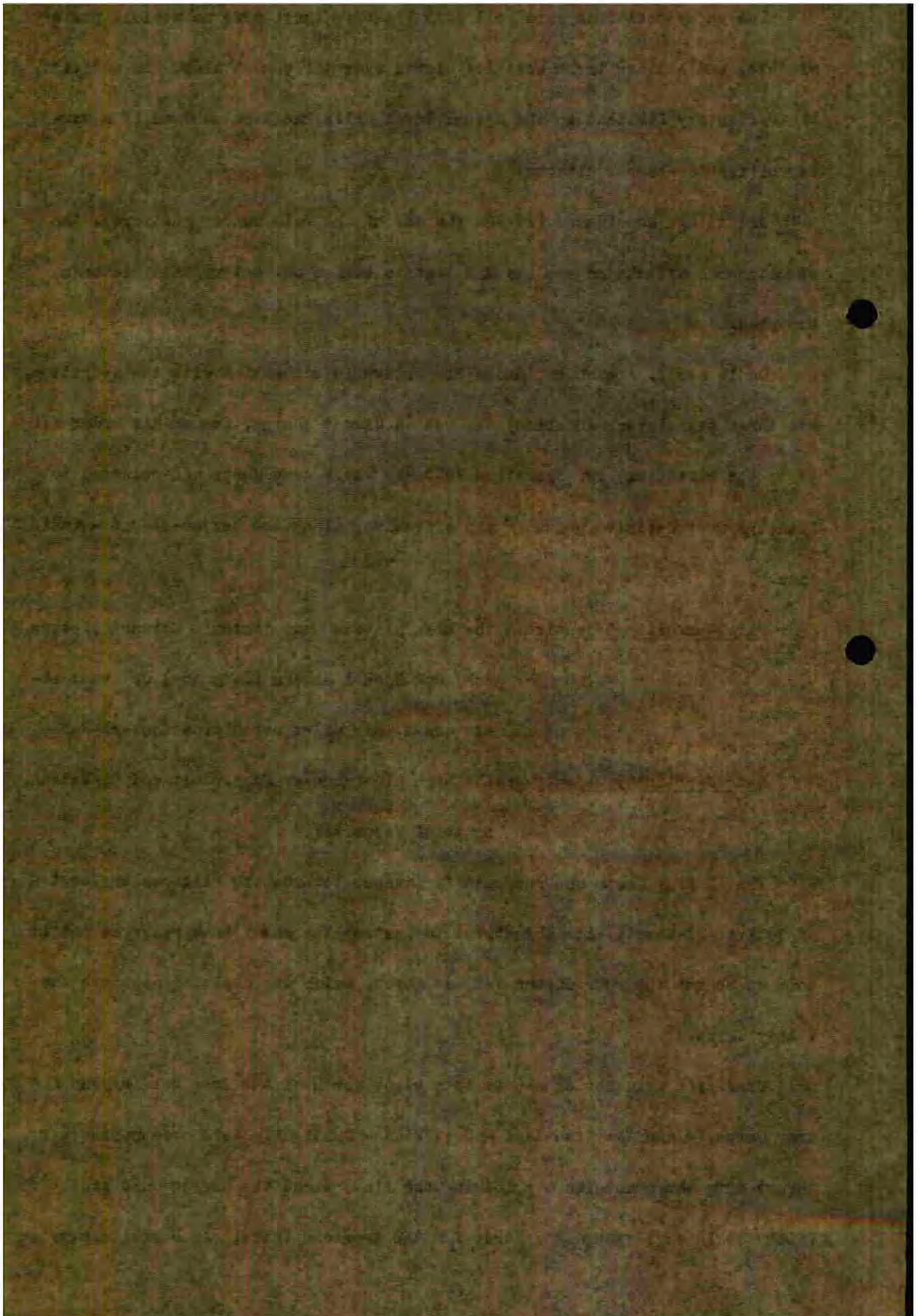
On 16 April, Alexander issued his orders in connection with the operation, and three days later, Anderson, who was in direct charge, issued his Order No. 37 to the First Army for Operation VULCAN. The V Army Corps was selected to lead the most decisive phase of the offensive, along the Medjez-el-Bab - Tunis line.

First-priority Objective: the high plateau near "Peter's Corner" (Peters Eck) and Djebel Ahmera (Longstop) on the western coast, six miles north of Medjez-el-Bab

Second-priority Objective: the high plateau near Massicault and El-Bathan, south of Tebourba.

The IX Army Corps was supposed to advance towards the hill country west of Bebkret-el-Komzia, its objectives to destroy the enemy tank reserves and to come up behind the rear of the defense force, which was deployed opposite the V Army Corps.

Bradley's main attack was to take place north of the area held by the V Army Corps, along the line Beja - Oued Tine - Chouigui. This presupposed a thrust into the mountains overlooking the line, since the narrow Oued Tine Valley could easily become a trap for the American tanks. As a preliminary



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step, the XX Army Corps was to clear the highway leading from Robas to Pont du Fahs.

22 April was set as the deadline. The IX Army Corps was to attack during the forenoon, the V Army Corps after dark, the II Army Corps during the following night, and the XIX Army Corps upon receipt of orders from Anderson.

The Allied close-support air forces had a fourfold mission to fulfill in connection with Operation VULCAN.

First, they were to destroy the enemy air forces; second, to disrupt the enemy supply lines -- sea and air; third, to pin the enemy forces down on the ground; and fourth, to prevent the enemy from staging a second Dunkirk.

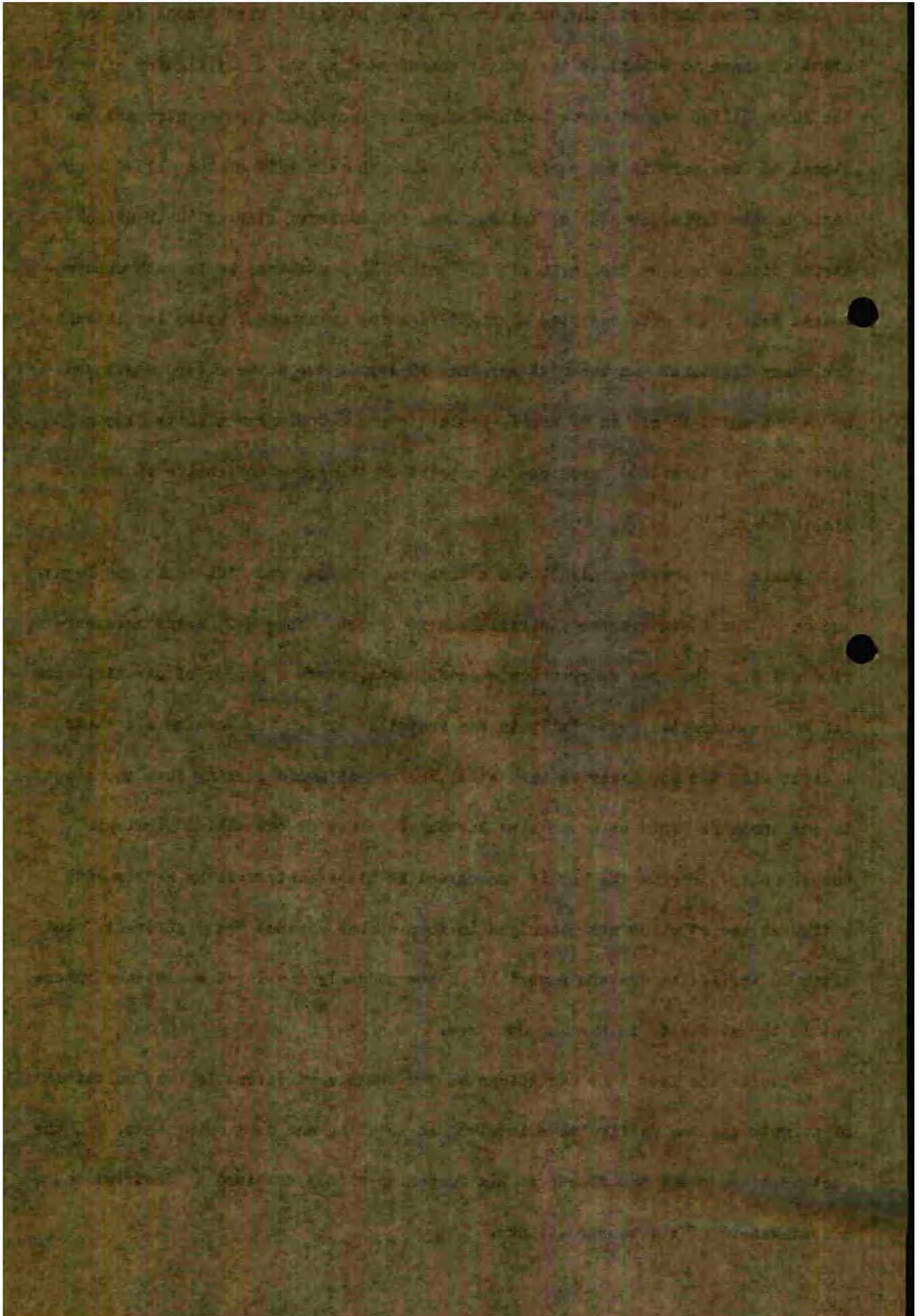
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The deadline date for the Army was 22 April; in compliance with Coningham's order, the close-support units began their comprehensive program of activity during the night of 18/19 April.

The first phase was the usual one -- enemy airfields were bombed day and night in order to eliminate the danger represented by the enemy fighter aircraft. The large Allied escort force included a goodly number of fighter aircraft assigned to free pursuit and combat in the air. The aircraft of the Allied strategic bomber force, Leo-455's, Wellingtons, and Bisleys, started their attack series with a raid on Sebala, north of Tunis. They utilized bombs with delayed-action fuses, and were escorted by night-fighting Hurricanes, which lay in wait for enemy fighters. On the next morning, 19 April, the attacks were continued by A-20's and B-26's; on 20 April, Doolittle's and Coningham's units flew a total of more than 1,000 missions in support of the ground offensive of the Eighth Army.

During the previous night, the attacks on La Mansa and Sidi Ahmed had begun, and on 20 April sixteen enemy airfields were bombed. Four B-25 raids were carried out over the area between Tunis and Bizerte, where a number of new airfields had been constructed, especially in the Protville area. The Germans did their best to hide the few aircraft they still had and to avoid parking them too close to one another. This area was also the chief target of the Allied strategic bomber units. During the day it was raided at stated intervals by A-20's with a fighter escort which also indulged in free combat against enemy aircraft. And after 10 April, the Western Desert Air Force suddenly developed an intense interest in the airfields in the Cap Bon area.

Despite the fact that conditions on the whole were favorable, the multitude of targets and the difficulties involved in locating and destroying them, and the fact that the enemy had dispersed his forces so widely combined to restrict the effectiveness of the bomber attacks.



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In the area west of Tunis, for example, the Germans were utilizing twenty-five different airfields, and their fighter aircraft -- like rats scurrying from one hide-out to another -- were seldom encountered at the same one twice. Moreover the aircraft were often kept in parks located as much as a mile away from the runway.

There is no doubt that it was the systematic dissipation and the ready mobility of the Luftwaffe which saved it from total destruction. On the other hand, this is hardly the way in which air forces ought to be employed.

A storm during the night of 20/21 April frustrated all Allied air activity. Even so, the intensity of the Allied air attacks had clearly shown the German units that

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the aircraft assigned to Tunisia were a fairly poor risk. During the course of 20 April, the Me-109's and FW-190's transferred their base of operations to Sicily, which was still relatively safe. Not all of them got away, for on 7 May there were still some 200 aircraft holding out at the bridgehead.

The fact that the Allied air attack was expected during the night of 20/21 April forced the German units into an unequal fight in the area between Medjes-el-Bab and Goubellat. This action cost them more than thirty tanks and had no appreciable effect on the timing of the Allied attack.

The IX Army Corps struck its blow in the area north of Bou-Arada. ^{During} For the course of the three days of heavy fighting which followed, two British divisions broke through the line and engaged enemy tanks in combat. By 25 April, the IX Army Corps had gained enough ground to force the enemy to retreat from the sector left of the XIX Army Corps. After this, the French forces advanced some nineteen miles before they were brought to a halt near the foothills north of the Pont du Fahs - Enfidaville highway.

During the course of 26 April, the 1st and 6th Armored Divisions succeeded in putting a large number of enemy tanks out of action. Then, quite suddenly, the enemy withdrew his tanks and began to retreat across the mine-fields, covering the action with antitank guns.

Accordingly, Anderson ordered the attack stopped and withdrew the two divisions to serve as an Army reserve force.

Moving ahead of the attack schedule, the V Army Corps took on the enemy positions at the head of the Medjerda Valley on 22 April, and promptly ran into trouble. Neither the destructive power of their artillery nor the preceding intensive bombardment was of very much help to the infantry forces trying to take these strong and famous fortresses: Djebel ben Aoukan and Djebel Ahmera.

By the end of April, however, Anderson had gained sufficient elbow-room

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for his tanks in the area east of Medjez. In addition, the enemy situation made the time seem ripe for a breakthrough. On 23 April, the II Army Corps began a series of assaults on the northern sector, in the confusing jumble of seemingly unending foothills which guarded the access to Mateur. With the French Africa Corps fighting at its left, it concentrated its attack on the area of Oued Tine, thus coordinating it with the main Allied offensive east of Medjez-el-Bab.

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This attack was so successful that by 1 May the defenders were hardly able to maintain their hold on the hills which screened the plains surrounding Mateur.

It was during this night that the Axis forces began their general retreat all along the line. Mateur was abandoned and a hastily improvised line of defense was set up in front of Biserte and the last range of hills before the plains of Tunis.

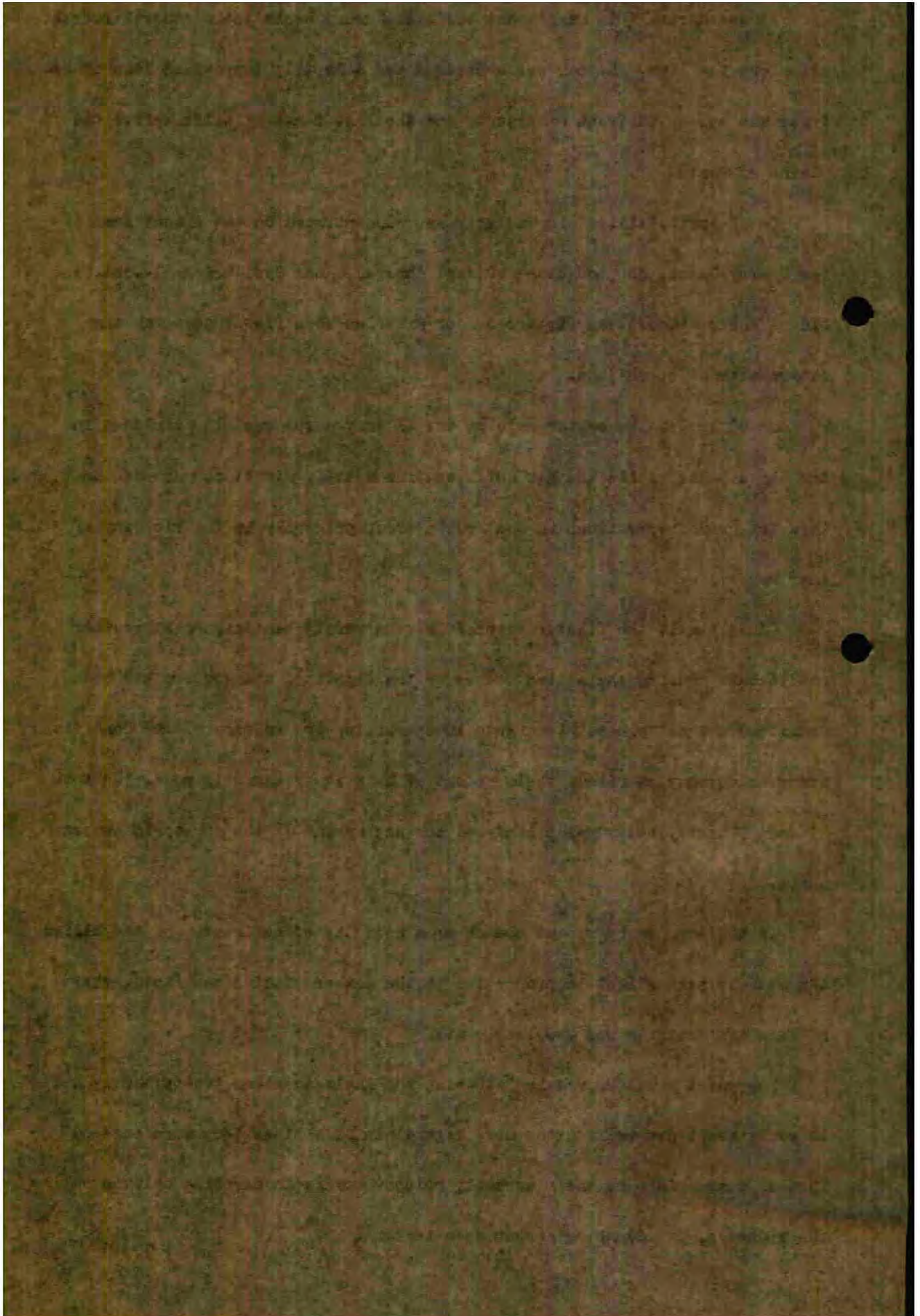
On 22 April, Allied air activity was concentrated on the combat area of the V Army Corps, on "Longstop" (Djebel Ahmera), Ksar Tyr, Grich-el-Oued, and Ain el Asker. Countless fighter-bomber missions were flown, covering the entire area of operations.

On 23 April, the sector held by the II Army Corps was also included in the air attacks, while the air units continued their direct support of the infantry ground operations in the Medjes area, primarily in the vicinity of Ksar Tyr.

On 24 April, the fighter aircraft were severely handicapped by weather conditions. During the entire course of the fighting, the bombers had been committed against pin-point targets in the hills, and in view of the conditions under which they operated, their record of hits was remarkably good. On both 29 and 30 April, heavy rains hindered the employment of the strategic bomber units.

If the topography of the combat area made the effectiveness of the Allied air attacks seem slight in proportion to the number of missions flown, that of Axis air activity was absolutely nil.

The point had been reached at which the Anglo-American troops hardly had to worry about danger from the air, regardless of whether they were engaged in mass regroupings at their assembly points, moving in marching columns on the highways, or advancing across open terrain.



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For at this exceedingly critical time, the Axis fighter aircraft left in Africa were urgently needed for escort duty with the shipping convoys in the perilous waters of the Tunisian Gulf.

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Even if this had not been the case, it is doubtful that they could have accomplished much more -- other than to increase the total record of enemy aircraft shot down by the Northwest African Air Force.

During aerial combat on 21 and 23 April, twelve enemy aircraft were destroyed at the cost of two Allied machines. After this, the Luftwaffe reduced the frequency of its missions over the combat area from day to day.

The Allied air forces had achieved veritably uncontested air supremacy.

By the end of April, it was clear that a breakthrough by sufficiently strong forces in the direction of Tunis -- the same maneuver which Anderson had failed to bring off during the preceding winter -- would bring about the complete collapse of the entire Axis front.

Montgomery voiced his objections to the effect that a full-scale assault even by a numerically and technically superior Eighth Army would not really serve any useful purpose.

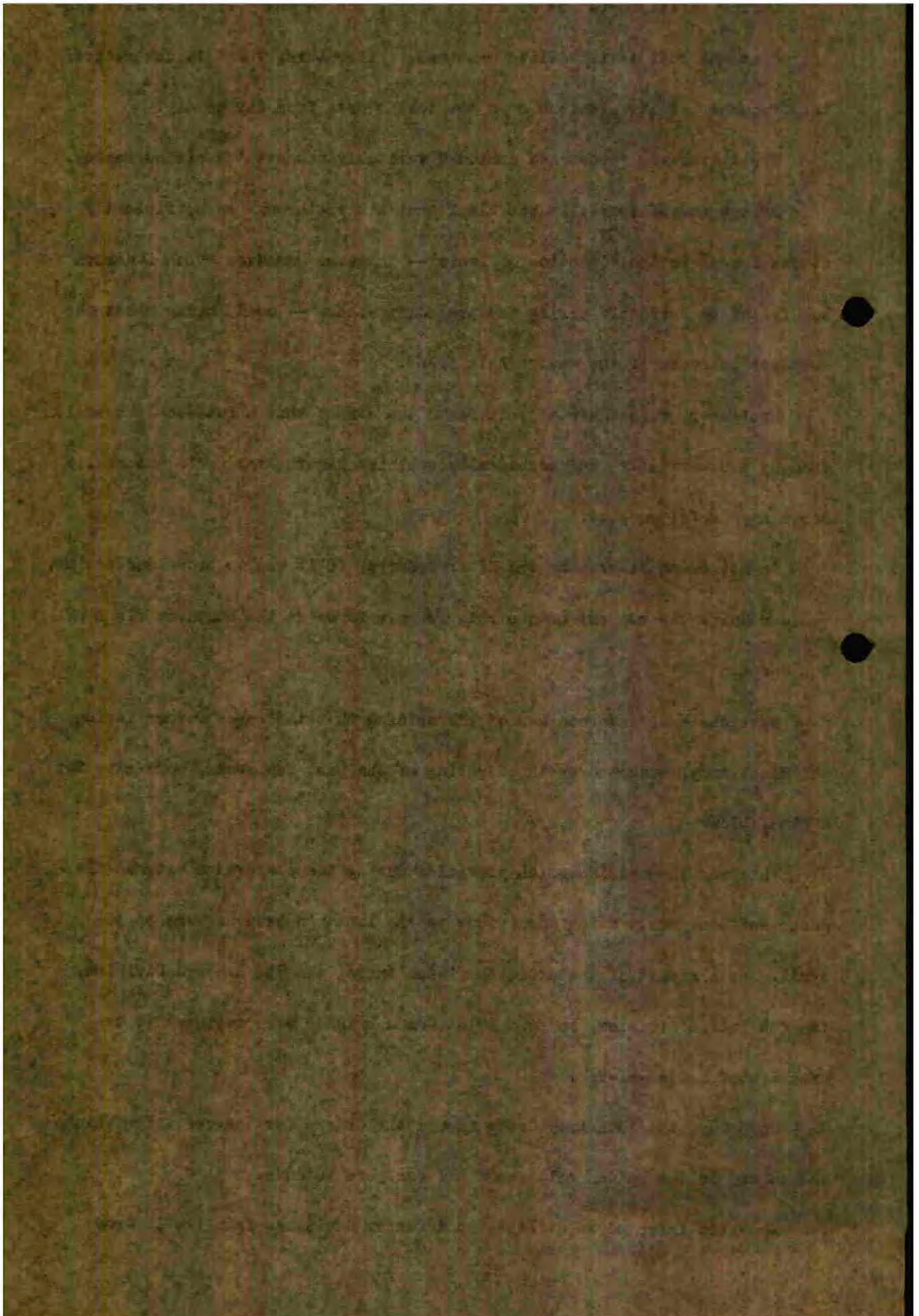
An attack on Bizerte by the II Army Corps, if it was to prove successful, would require the support of a strong reserve force on the southern flank of the Corps.

Nevertheless, Anderson was of the opinion that the enemy forces facing the First Army, weakened by the fighting of the past few weeks, were ripe for a final blow.

This was the opinion which prevailed during the conference between Alexander and Montgomery which took place at the latter's headquarters on 30 April. As a result of the decisions taken there, the 7th Armored Division, the 4th Indian Division, and the 201st Guard Brigade were assigned to the area around Medjez-el-Bab.

On 3 May, the 18th Army Group issued the orders for the operation which was to end in the sudden collapse of all enemy resistance.

Anderson intended to utilize two infantry divisions from the IX Army



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Corps for an assault on a relatively narrow front south of Djebel bou Aoukas. Supported by two armored divisions, he was bound to break the strength of the Axis with a single blow and to bring about the surrender of the fortifications at Tunis before the enemy should have time to man them properly.

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In connection with this action, the V Army Corps was to carry out an earlier attack on Djebel bou Aoukaz, and the XIX Army Corps was to work its way forward over the difficult terrain around Djebel Zaghouan.

The II Army Corps, finally, was to continue its assault on Chouigui and then swing over in the direction of Djedeida to help support the offensive of the IX Army Corps. A full-scale artillery barrage was planned for the main phase of the offensive, and the close-support units had received instructions to prepare for what was expected to be a hitherto unheard-of number of enemy attacks. Even the 205th Bomber Group (Wellingtons) was employed from its remote station at Misurata in nerve-racking nocturnal bombardment.

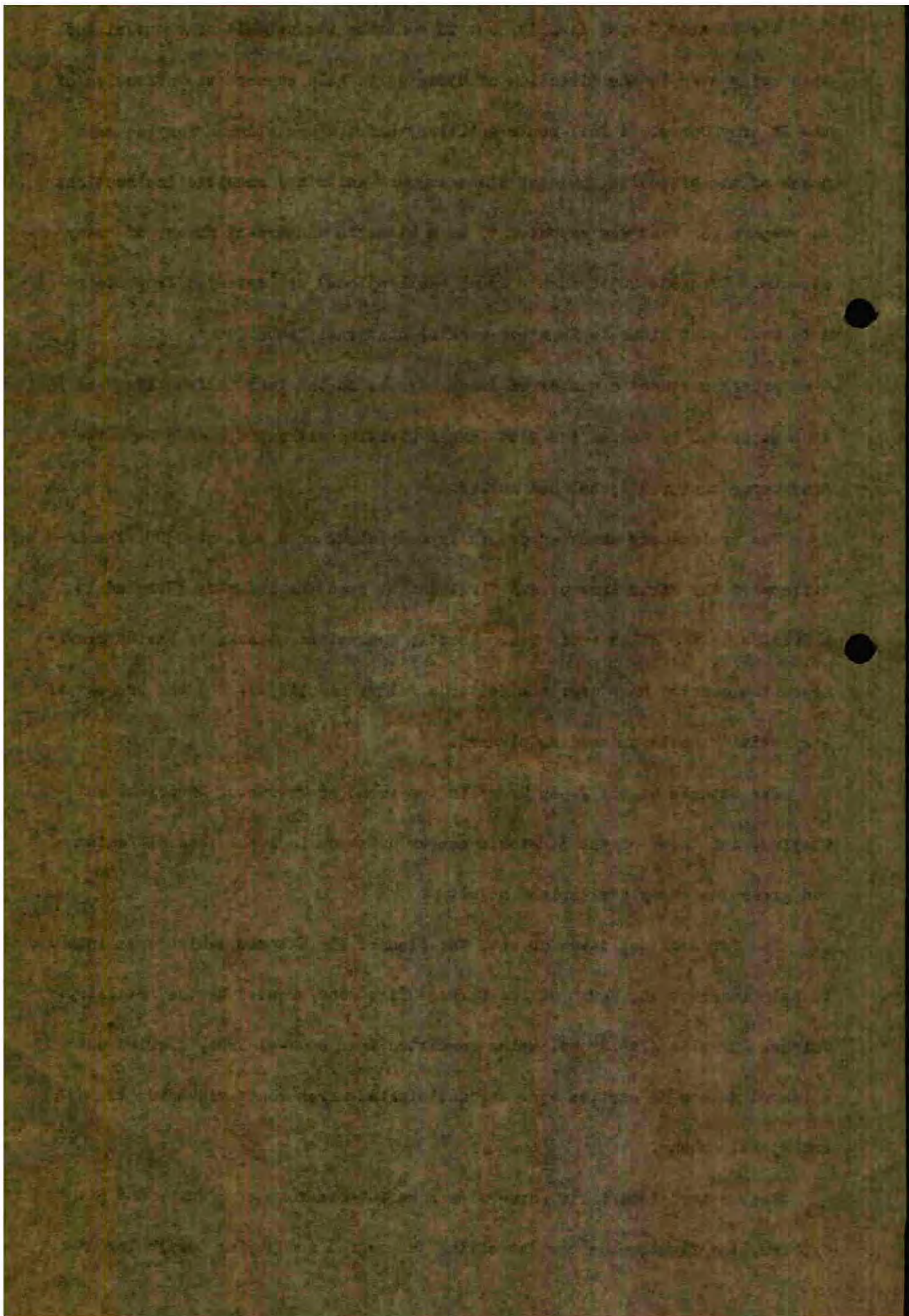
Anderson staged a number of dummy attacks on the Pont du Fahs area and thus succeeded in having the 21st Panzer Division withdrawn; on 5 May, the V Army Corps captured Djebel bou Aoukaz.

The preliminary phase successfully completed, on 6 May, at 0500, the artillery of the First Army opened fire, and at dawn the infantry attacked in a front some two miles in length. Shortly thereafter, thanks to Divine Providence the morning haze over the Medjerda Valley had lifted, and the program of air activity could proceed as planned.

The attacks of the 205th Group in the areas of Tebourba, Djedeida, and Cheylus, and those of the strategic bomber units on La Sebala and El-Aouina had given the enemy a sleepless night.

The forenoon was taken up with the planned air attacks, which were intended to help increase the depth of the barrage fire zone created by the artillery. Colonel Ferral's 47th Group, being committed from Souk-el-Arba, carried out a record number of sorties over the anticipated march route via Bordj Fremdj and Djebel Achour.

The Western Desert Air Force flew some 200 missions over Furna and St. Cyprien, the fighter-bombers patrolling the region and paying particular at-



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tention to the highways. Explosions and fires could hardly be identified through the clouds of smoke and dust.

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By 1100 the Allied infantry had fought its way forward nearly 1.2 miles, and German resistance was near the breaking-point. The enemy tanks now launched their assault and, by nightfall, had succeeded in taking Massicault.

The Allied air units had flown more than 2,000 missions, 1,000 of them before 0900.

On 6 May, the German Luftwaffe, too, appeared on the scene in large numbers for the last time. The German aircraft were challenged in the air by Allied fighters, which shot down twelve machines, while losing only two of their own.

An American Spitfire group surprised twelve German Me-109's during take-off operations. American reports indicated that only three of the enemy aircraft escaped.

During the course of 7 May, German resistance crumbled even further, and during the afternoon, British tanks moved along the Avenue Gambretta into Tunis.

At almost exactly the same time, American tanks were entering Bizerte along a route which the Germans allegedly had mined thoroughly and provided generously with booby-traps.

Chouigui, too, fell on 7 May, and two days later British and American troops made contact at Protville, thus cutting off completely the German forces holding the hill positions around the former battlefield of Tebrouba.

On 10 May, the ranking German commander requested an armistice, and German resistance in the area of the II Army Corps had indeed come to a standstill.

The tanks of the IX Army Corps left the direct route to Tunis to turn to the north and south in order to cut off the encircled enemy forces and to prevent the escape of any larger groups of enemy soldiers to the Cap Bon area, where they might have dug into last-ditch defensive positions.

Enemy resistance continued for a little while in the hills near Hammamliif, but on 10 May the 6th Armored Division managed to break through in the direc-

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tion of Soliman and to advance across the Peninsula as far as Hammamet.

British and French units were now rapidly approaching the positions still held by the remainder of the Axis armies. The German Army Corps, subjected to enemy fire from all sides, capitulated from its encirclement position on 11 May.

The next day, General von Arnim was taken prisoner near St. Marie du Zit; General Messe, the staunch defender of the Mareth line, managed to hold out until 12 May, when an enemy bombardment attack convinced him that the time had come for surrender.

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After General Messe surrendered his forces on 13 May, all systematic Axis resistance came to an end; Operation TORCH had been carried through at last.

The Northwest African Air Forces, the Middle East Air Command, and the Malta Air Command of the Royal Air Force had steadily intensified their attacks ever since mid-April, acting in accordance with the orders of their Commander in Chief¹⁴¹.

From that moment on, when the enemy withdrew into the tightly limited bridgehead position, his situation was hopeless. In the opinion of Allied leaders, he was left with only two choices -- flight or capitulation.

As a result, Allied headquarters immediately began preparing plans to hinder the escape of the Axis forces.

The ^{air}field at Pantelleria, with its subterranean hangars, was considered a vital target with top destruction priority. The Allies suspected that enemy fighters based there would be utilized to cover the debarkation operation.

Doolittle wrote as follows: "We ought to attack them on the ground, at their assembly points, wherever large ships can dock, along the coast, wherever small motor-boats can be loaded, and at sea as well."¹⁴²

The missions assigned to the Close-Support Corps for Operation VULCAN¹⁴³ were supported with great effectiveness by the attacks of the strategic bomber units -- carried out at Tedder's order.

Occasionally, these units attacked directly over the battlefield, as for example on 20 April, over the Eighth Army combat area, or from 22 April on, while the First Army was launching its decision-seeking assault on Tunis. By this time, Spaatz had achieved his first objective -- unlimited air supremacy over the Tunisian bridgehead.

The Allied pilots could fly anywhere they wanted to over the area in which their ground forces were fighting, without having to fear enemy intervention of any kind. In the meantime, the units of the Ninth Air Force, together

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with the Western Desert Air Force, (the 57th and 12th Groups), had been moved to airfields in the Sfax - Kairouan area. Shortly thereafter, the American 340th Medium Bomber Group also arrived in Sfax.

The Western Desert Air Force was selected to deliver the final crippling blow to the German air transport units. Based at favorably located airfields in the vicinity of Sousse, its radar equipment was trained in the direction of the sea.

141 - See pages 706 and 707 of the present study.

142 - Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, page 199.

143 - See page 744 of the present study.

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On 18 April, at approximately 1500, the Luftwaffe had succeeded in landing a large air supply transport in Tunisia, probably at El-Aouina or La Marsa.

During the return flight, undertaken low over the surface of the water and with the fighter escort at staggered altitude, the transport aircraft unexpectedly ran into four P-40 squadrons from the 57th and 324th Groups. The Allied aircraft were also accompanied by an escort of Spitfires, flying at a high altitude.

At the end of the ensuing fray, 50-70 (other estimates run as high as 100) Ju-52's and 16 Me-202's, Me-109's, and Me-110's, which had been flying at the edge of the Ju-52 group, had been destroyed. Allied losses amounted to six P-40's and one Spitfire.

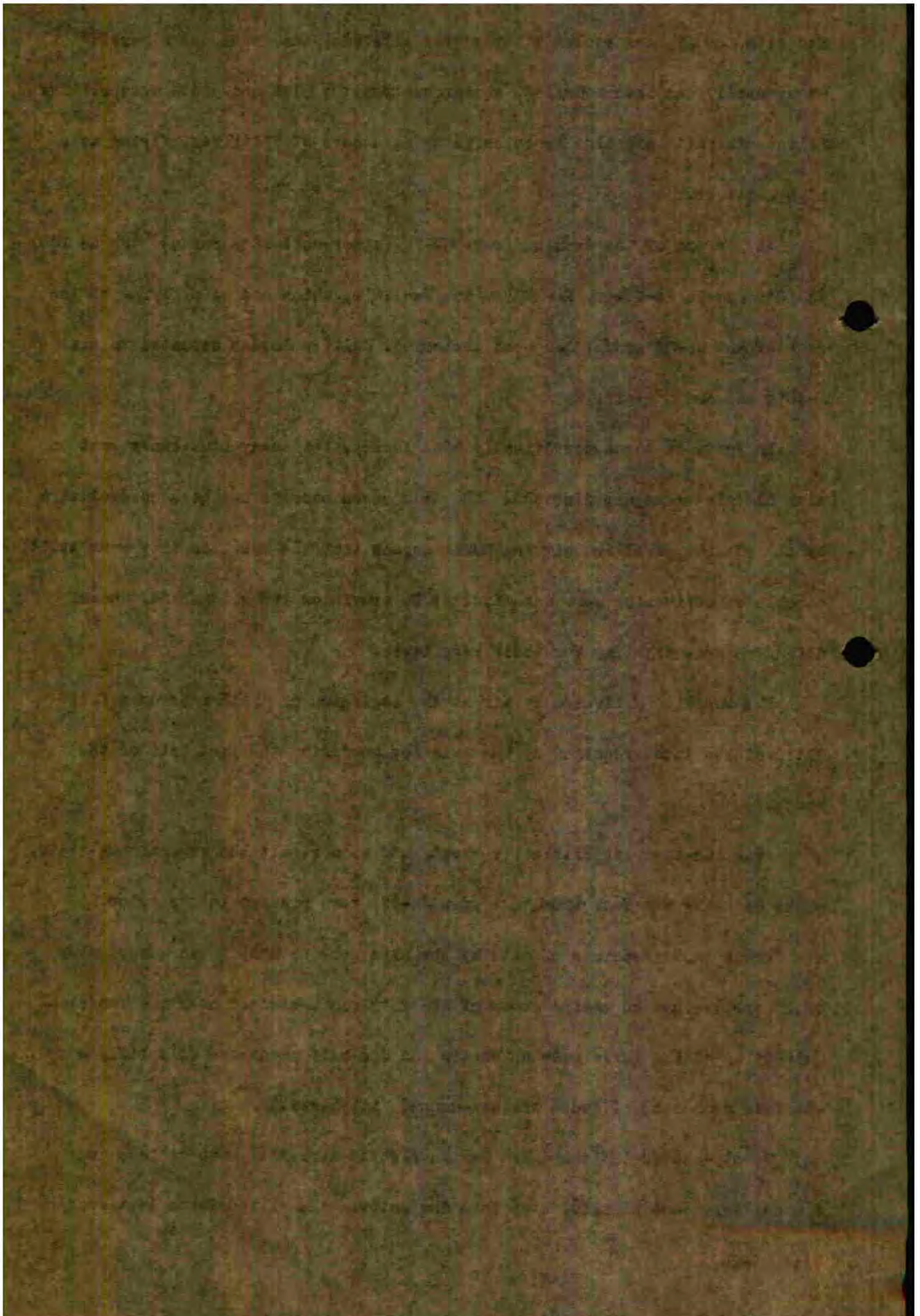
In spite of these terrifically high losses, the enemy stubbornly went on with his air transport missions. The Axis ocean convoys had been so decimated by the attacks of Allied air and naval forces that the supplies they were still capable of delivering were insufficient to provision the bridgehead, whose defenders were fighting for their very lives.

The supplies delivered by air at the beginning of April made up a full third of the total required by the Axis forces during the last half of the month.

Aviation fuel was critically short, and as a result the gigantic Me-323's, whose capacity was four times that of a Ju-52, were pressed into service.

These last desperate efforts by the Axis were brought to an abrupt stop on 22 April, when an entire group of Me-323's was destroyed over the Tunisian Gulf by an Allied force made up of two and one-half squadrons of Spitfires and four squadrons of South African-manned Kittyhawks.

Twenty-one Me-323's and ten German fighter aircraft, most of them in flames, were sent plunging down into the water; the Allied force lost four Kittyhawks.



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Generalmajor Ulrich Buchholz, Air Transport Commander, Mediterranean (Lufttransportführer Mittelmeer), ordered the daytime flights discontinued. Utilizing crews trained for instrument flight, he switched to limited night missions in order to keep at least the most urgently needed supplies coming through.

He ordered his crews to try a dawn approach via Cagliari every once in a while, in order to avoid the dangerous region around Cap Bon. The Ju-52's sometimes ran into Allied Beaufighters which had been called to the area by radio reports from the Allied Coastal Command.

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The total incapacitation of the Axis air transport system was accelerated by attacks carried out by the strategic bomber units on the widely scattered airfields utilized by the Luftwaffe transport aircraft. During the week from 10 - 16 April, fragmentation bombs were dropped on Castelvetro and Milo, in Sicily, as well as on Demomannu, Monserrato, Elmes, and Vilacidro, in Sardinia. Further attacks were carried out against the increasingly active Axis convoys, which had no alternative but to try to take the place of the necessarily sharply limited air transport missions in bringing the most vital supplies to Africa. For a while the Allied fliers were effectively hindered by bad weather, but as soon as this period had come to an end, they renewed their attacks and succeeded in sinking a considerable number of Seibel barges and motor-boats.

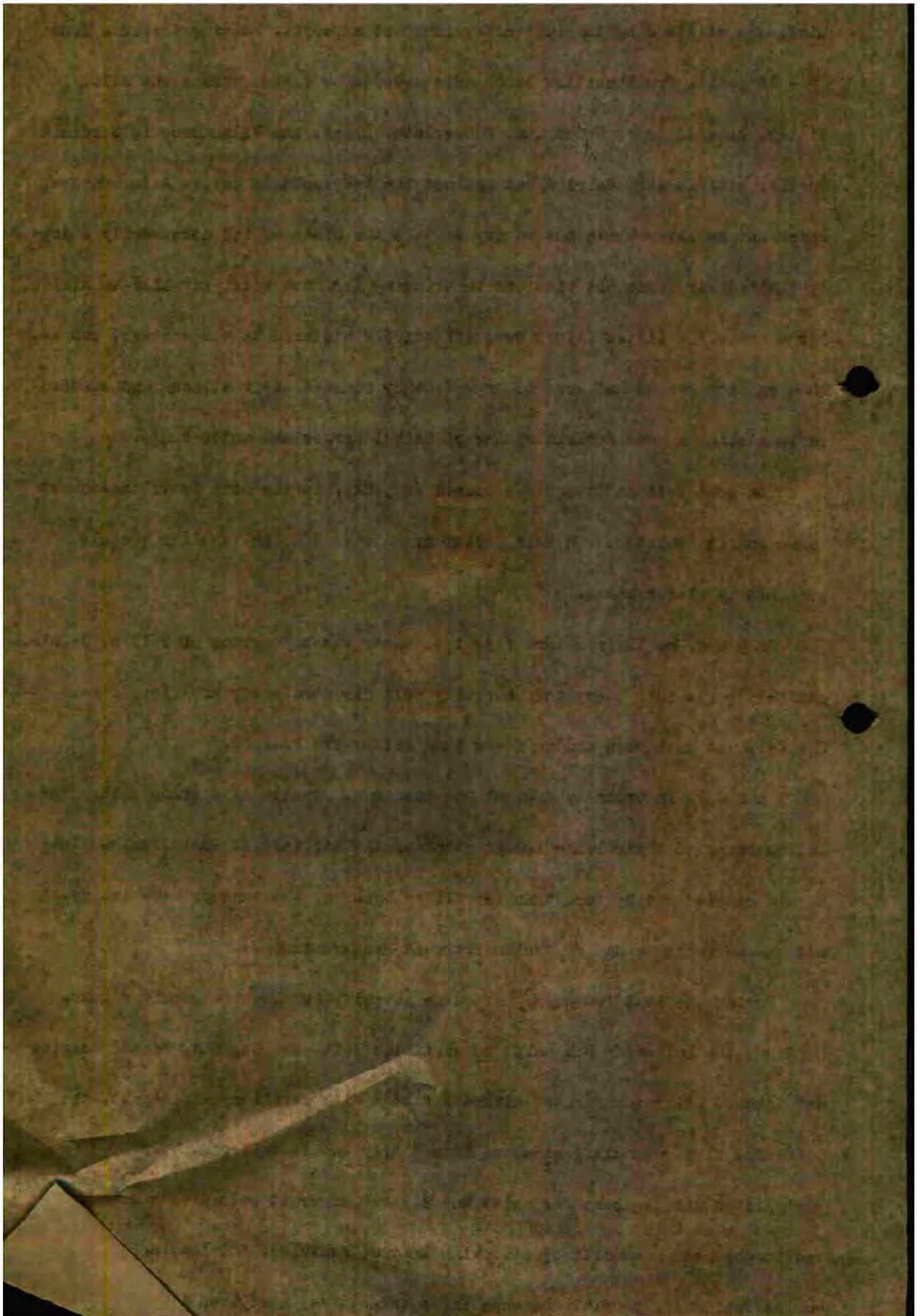
The most serious damage was caused on 5 May, in the port installations at Tunis and La Goulette. On this occasion, a total of eight smaller vessels were hit by Allied bombs.

On 9 May, on their return flight to their bases, a group of B-17's, B-26's, and B-25's ran into heavy and unusually well directed enemy artillery fire. One B-17 was shot down and no fewer than fifty were damaged.

On 8 May, in order to prevent the escape of sizable Axis troop units, the Allies launched their long-planned attack on the airfield at Pantelleria. In a raid carried out by more than 120 Allied bombers, the runways were destroyed and the entrance to one of the underground hangars damaged.

During the last few days, Luftwaffe activity had been extremely slight; by 8 May the Luftwaffe had only two airfields left near Cap Bon, Menzel Termaine and Korba. Utilizing fighter aircraft fitted with auxiliary fuel tanks, the Luftwaffe flew some sixty missions from Sicily and Pantelleria.

Allied strategic bomber units and fighter aircraft helped to break enemy resistance near Hammamli by attacking troops, vehicles, and loading platforms on the Peninsula, possibly because these targets may have been interpreted as



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tangible signs of Axis plans to move troops out of the area.

In addition, the Allied air units supported the troops fighting on the ground around the encirclement area at Zaghuan, in which Axis resistance still blazed up sporadically, only to flicker out again -- finally for good.

The German Luftwaffe had been forced to abandon more than 600 inoperable aircraft on the airfields at Tunis, Bizerte, and Cap Bon. This number was more than the total losses suffered by the XII Air Command during the entire period from November to May.

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The participation of the US Army Air Force in the campaigns in North Africa was anything but voluntary.

Nevertheless, once in Africa the American Air Force mastered the extremely difficult principles guiding the coordination of air and ground operations, and that in a surprisingly short time and with relatively low losses.

It is true that these principles were based largely on the experience gathered by the Royal Air Force in the Middle East; nevertheless they represented the same basic tenets for which the Army Air Force had been fighting for a long time. Spaatz, Kuter, and Stratemeyer all found their own views substantiated by what they saw in Tunisia, and the same was true of Brereton and Craig in the western desert. And, finally, Arnold did his best to see that the new doctrines were taken seriously in the War Department.

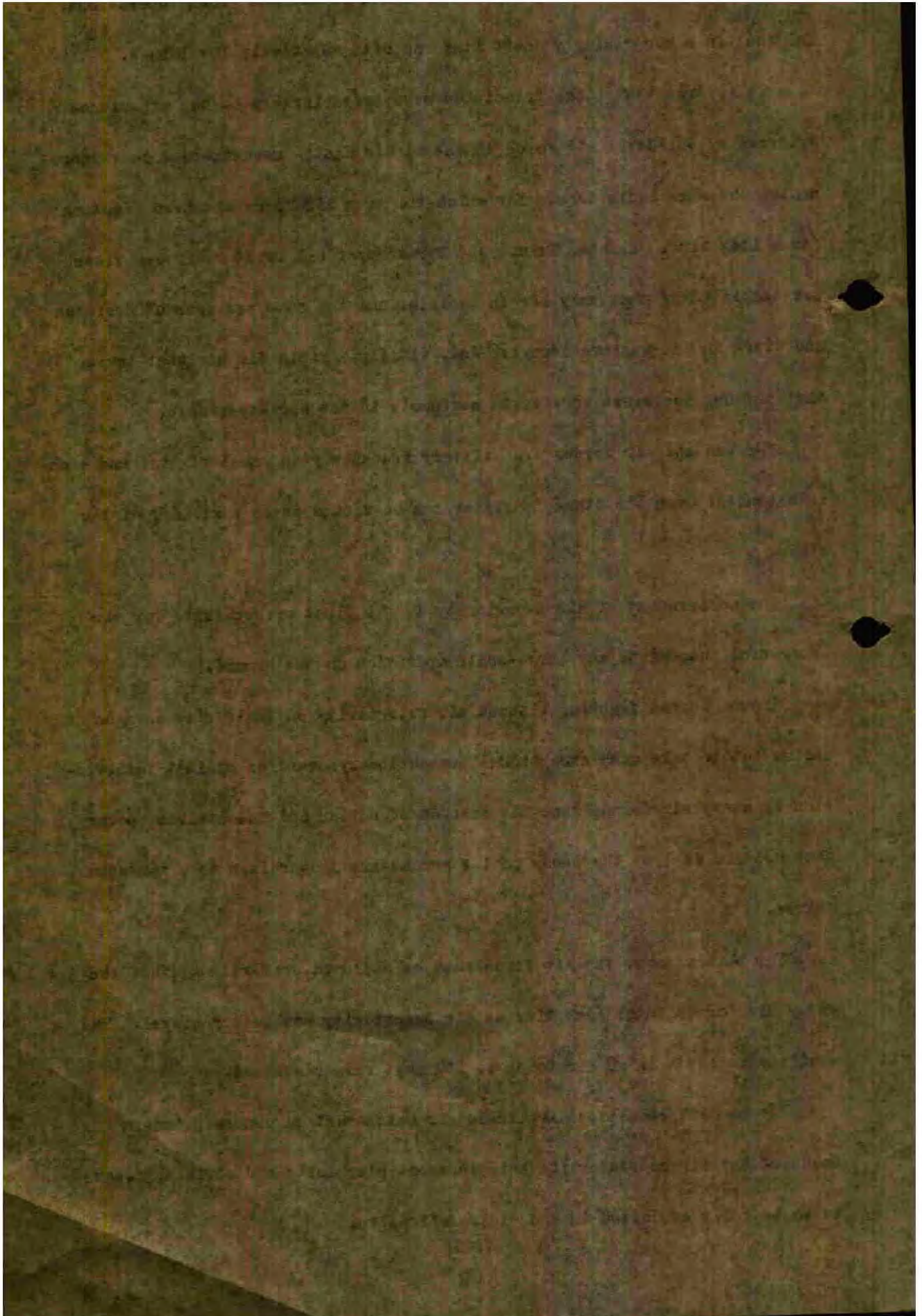
"Ground and air forces are military branches with equal rights, and each is dependent upon the other; neither can be viewed as an auxiliary of the other.

The achievement of air superiority is the first prerequisite for the successful outcome of any large-scale operation on the ground.

Ground forces fighting without air superiority on their side have no choice but to take such exceptional precautionary measures against intervention by enemy air forces that the freedom of action and the striking power they need to destroy the enemy on the ground are jeopardized to a dangerous degree.

For this reason, the air force must be employed primarily against the enemy air forces until such time as air superiority has been achieved. The mobility inherent in an air force is its most valuable asset.

The command of all the available air units must be concentrated in the hands of the air commander if their inherent elasticity and striking power is to be fully exploited in a decisive offensive.



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It is for this reason that the command over both ground and air units in any one area of operations must be entrusted to the commander in charge of the operation in progress.

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In accordance with his orders, it is up to the separate commanders of the air forces and the ground units to order the appropriate commitment of their respective units.

Quoted from Field Manual 100-20, 21 July 1943."¹⁴⁴

While the campaign in Tunisia was still going on, the Americans had drawn the logical and necessary conclusions applicable to the commitment of their air units and had acted accordingly.

German leaders, in contrast, were unable to bring their ideas concerning the conduct of tactical air warfare to bear after the spring of 1942.

Hellmuth Felmy

General der Flieger a.D.

44 - Army Air Force in World War II, Volume II, pages 205 and 206.
