



Retreat Accelerated

LET the Axis radio write the introductory sentence for the beginning of the end of this story: "Our forces have made an orderly retirement to prepared positions," they said of Mareth on March 6.

They may well have prepared this in myriad copies, army style, and then dropped a sheaf with each backward leap.

Wadi Akarit, Sfax, Sousse and finally Enfidaville, way stations along the enemy's Northern course, were touted as strong points but they afforded brief sanctuary under a hail of fire from land and sky.

Speed of retreat marked this last phase, but the strategical value of that speed was neutralized by the matching speed of pursuit. There was no time for the strengthening of defensive positions, or regrouping or the organizing of effective rearguard action. Bomb lines fairly leaped across war room maps during that period from March to May. Retreats of forty to forty-five miles a day set military records.

On March 6, the opening day of this phase, the Axis stood behind the French built and German bolstered Mareth line, which was still somewhat of a military question mark. A batallion of German infantry had made a surprise attack on the Eighth Army's forward positions opposing Mareth on the night of the fourth, but was quickly repulsed. Otherwise activity up to the night of March 6 had been limited to patrolling.

With an American armored force on the West nearing Gafsa and the Faid pass, narrowing the gap through which Rommel must retreat, the signal for the Allied offensive was expected momentarily. Whether Rommel would put up a real fight at the Mareth line; whether he would execute another delaying action, while his main force retreated farther North to consolidate with Von Arnim's army were the questions confronting tacticians.

Strong Allied air and ground forces which had made glowing history from French Morocco Eastward were engaging Von Arnim farther North and stood ready to block any Westward "orderly retirement" of consolidated Axis armies.

In a rising crescendo of bombardment operations and fighter sweeps, pilots and combat crews of the Ninth during March joined in the all-out Allied effort to smash the Mareth defenses. A total of more than one and a half million pounds of bombs were dropped during the month on Axis objectives, from gun emplacements and motor transport on the roads behind the Mareth Line to harbor installations and shipping in Naples and Messina.

The heaviest weight of the Ninth's air strength was woven into the fabric of the Allied aerial offensive against the forces of Von Arnim and Rommel in Tunisia. Bomb-carrying Warhawk fighters and Mitchell medium bombers pulled all stops in their non-stop battering of the Axis defenders of Mareth, Gabes and Sfax.

Flying wing to wing with Royal Air Force and South African Air Force light bombers and fighters, they virtually doubled their now famous shuttle service of Alamein. The resultant deluge of steel and fire in cooperation with the vicious ground onslaught of the Eighth Army was a vital blow in the smashing of the Mareth defenses.

With the beginning of the push, fighters and fighter-bombers roared out over the Mareth area as escorts for bombers, on offensive patrols, and with bomb loads of their own. In company with the RAF and the SAAF they strafed enemy transport and tanks, hit troop concentrations, gun emplacements and opposing enemy aircraft.

From the start of the Tunisian campaign Allied air forces have had clear air superiority over the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica, and have been able to concentrate their effort effectively against Axis ground targets rather than in tangling in aerial combat with German and Italian fighters. Thus totals of tanks and motor vehicles destroyed from the air reached new high figures, while totals of enemy aircraft destroyed fell off.

During March, Ninth Air Force fighters accounted for 10 Axis aircraft destroyed, seven probably destroyed and at least 11 damaged. In addition to their bombing activities, aerial gunners on medium and heavy bombardment aircraft destroyed at least three enemy aircraft and probably destroyed or damaged others.

The number of ground targets destroyed cannot be measured, nor can one count the number of troops killed, wounded or put out of action due to destruction of their transport which made it impossible for them to escape from onrushing ground forces.

Ninth Air Force medium and fighter-bombers alone dropped nearly a million pounds of bombs on Axis motor transport and bombers alone dropped nearly a million pounds of bombs on transport and tanks during the height of the drive to break Mareth. Results were clearly visible in lines of wrecked trucks, burning tanks and shattered gun emplacements.

The Ninth during the month counted losses of 23 aircraft, most of them to enemy ground fire. Since start of its operations in June, aircraft of the Ninth had dumped approximately three and a half million pounds of bombs on Axis targets; destroyed 101 enemy aircraft and sunk 43 ships. Twenty had been listed as probably sunk and 27 damaged along with 47 aircraft probably destroyed and 63 damaged. During the period American losses were 87 aircraft. Heavies of the Ninth continued plastering Naples harbor from their base at Benghazi in daylight raids, flying 36 sorties during the week through intense ground fire with the loss of only two ships.

MARETH LINE BROKEN

On the night of March 6, the enemy carried out two converging attacks on Eighth Army positions along the road from Toujane to Medenine. Both were repulsed at heavy cost to the attackers. Fifty-two enemy tanks were destroyed.

On March 10 Rommel attacked again, this time on the extreme left of the Allied line at Ksar Rhilane. This thrust, indicating Rommel's nervousness at the possibility of being out-flanked, was made by thirty armored cars supported by artillery. In the extreme Northern sector, Von Arnim was also making conspicuously unsuccessful attacks and the Berlin radio summed up the situation with unexampled accuracy when it said: "Our forces have come up against stronger enemy resistance and have ceased their movements for the time being at least."

Rommel faced the zero hour on the Mareth Line with a force depleted in infantry and dangerously depleted in armor. His rear was threatened by American armor units which were less than fifty miles from the coast at Sened Station and only 60 miles from Gabes at El Guettar. The Eighth Army was on his front and his right flank was menaced by the Free French at Ksar Rhilane and by the New Zealanders. Overhead was the Air Force between Rommel and Gott. The element in his favor was the weather, which hindered, but did not stop, flying for several days prior to the push. There was no let-up on Naples. The harbor continued to catch hell from the heavens.

The Fifty-Seventh Fighters by the middle of March had built an imposing record of 3,652 sorties on all kinds of missions with a total of 89 enemy aircraft destroyed; 20 probably destroyed and 39 damaged.

The 79th Fighter Group at this early period of its activity had flown six missions with a total of 119 sorties. All of its missions were bomber escort and no enemy fighters had been encountered.

Then on the night of March 27 the Mareth Line cracked. The bulk of the Eighth Army poured through and advanced rapidly to Gabes, while the enemy entrenched along the Wadi Akarit.

In the main the Mareth Line was rendered untenable for the enemy by the threat of the flanking force southwest of El Hamma. The supply problem for this force had been simplified by the occupation of the passes at Hallouf and Kreddache. Eight thousand prisoners had been the bag of this and preceding operations in the vicinity.

Throughout the operations which resulted in the clearing of the entire region around the Mareth Line the air units rendered what General Montgomery described as "superb support." Air Vice Marshal Broadhurst, commanding the Western Desert Air Force, received this message from General Montgomery shortly after the fall of Mareth:

"I would like to convey to you my great appreciation for the superb support to the land air forces under your command yesterday, and in fact every day since the battle began. Such intimate support has never to my knowledge been achieved before, and it has been an inspiration to all troops. The results have been first class. I sincerely hope that you have not suffered many losses. Please convey to all concerned the grateful thanks of myself and the whole army for the truly magnificent effort."

