



North Africa

Strategic Planning

The western Allies seized the initiative in the European-Mediterranean area Nov. 8, 1942, when they landed in northwest Africa in Operation TORCH. This first combined operation of American, British, and later Commonwealth and Free French forces culminated in May 1943 in the German-Italian defeat in Tunisia, providing western Allied control of all north Africa and the southern Mediterranean coast. Ground, air, and naval forces joined in the total campaign.

Roosevelt, Churchill, and the American and British military staffs met in Washington soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. They agreed that the main enemy was Germany, even though the United States was then actively engaged in fighting Japan. By the summer of 1942, though, Roosevelt and Churchill decided that their first combined operations in America's initial year of war would be in French Morocco and Algeria. These French territories were a problem for the Allies because of split loyalties. France had been defeated by Germany in June 1940. It signed an armistice which allowed German occupation of northern and western France. Much of the French military was located in French North Africa, and, while most were unenthusiastically loyal to the Vichy French government, some supported de Gaulle and the Free French movement that had organized in England.

In mid-1942, the U.S. was still under-prepared in trained forces and material. Britain was overextended globally yet fighting determinedly in the Mediterranean and the Egyptian-Libyan area against the Axis, while the Soviet Union was defending deep in its own interior against the massive Axis onslaught. Wanting to use America's still-limited military forces somewhere against the Axis, the western Allies disagreed on strategic application. They finally compromised on an invasion of French northwest Africa, desiring local French military acceptance or minimal French resistance.

Gen. Eisenhower, currently commanding the U.S. troops assembling in Britain, became Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force, and he created a combined Anglo-American staff to plan the invasion. With the Americans wanting only Atlantic coast invasions and the British advocating landings far into the Mediterranean, the final plan used three task forces in the largest series of amphibious operations yet in history.

The North Africa Invasion

The western task force, American troops commanded by Gen. Patton and lifted and covered by more than 100 U.S. naval vessels under Adm. Hewitt, landed near Casablanca on the Atlantic coast of French Morocco. This was the first ever trans-oceanic amphibious operation, having embarked from Hampton Roads, Va. The center task force, predominately American troops under Gen. Fredendall and escorted and covered from Britain by the Royal Navy, landed near Oran in Algeria. The eastern task force, a composite Anglo-American one, was escorted and covered by the Royal Navy and invaded near the most important objective, Algiers. As planned for the eastern task force, U.S.



American tanks roll across the North African desert during World War II. (Courtesy Photo)

Gen. Ryder commanded for the invasion and British Gen. Anderson commanded its push toward Tunisia.

Complex American attempts to gain local French acceptance or non-resistance to the invasions finally succeeded Nov. 10, when Adm. Darlan, France's commander-in-chief, declared a French cease-fire in violation of orders by his superior, Marshal Petain. Until then, the Allied forces faced some French military resistance, requiring combat action by Allied air, naval, and ground forces. In response, Germany quickly extended its occupation forces to all of France and rushed German and Italian troops into French Tunisia, where French colonial troops obeyed Petain's order to resist the Allied attack. Effective German-led defensive fighting in the rugged Tunisian terrain in late November and December stopped the over-strained Allied forces from reaching Tunis.

Into Tunisia

Other British and Commonwealth forces were moving westward from Egypt toward Tunisia, as Gen. Montgomery's Eighth Army pursued Field Marshal Rommel's German-Italian forces after defeating them in the Battle of El Alamein (Oct. 23 - Nov. 4, 1942). On Jan. 23, 1943, the Eighth Army entered Tripoli, capital of Italian Colonial Africa, having pushed 1,400 miles in three months. Both pursuer and pursued eventually became parts of the Allied and Axis forces in Tunisia. On Jan. 14-23, 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill met at the Casablanca conference. They agreed to require the enemies' unconditional surrender, to assign immediate priority to the campaign against U-boats in the Atlantic, to make a combined bomber offensive against Germany, and to follow up the expected victory in Tunisia by invading Sicily rather than western Europe. Soon new Allied command responsibilities were created. Under Eisenhower were three deputy commanders, all British. Adm. Cunningham's Mediterranean Command included American forces, significantly increasing in preparation for the Sicily campaign. All theater Allied air forces were placed under Air Chief Marshal Tedder. Gen. Alexander assumed command of all land forces in Tunisia in mid-February, coincidentally during the Battle of Kasserine Pass.

For the Axis powers, German Gen. von Arnim commanded the Fifth Panzer Army, the German-Italian forces sent to Tunisia in mid-winter. By early February 1943, he had established a

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strong defensive north-south line among rugged mountains. Allied forces from French northwest Africa were arrayed with the British in the north, battered Free French forces in the center, and Fredendalls over-extended U.S. II Corps in the south. As Rommel's Afrika Korps withdrew into Tunisia, he recommended a limited dual offensive against II Corps. Arnim and Rommel's forces attacked Feb. 14-15, gaining temporary successes against disorganized and inexperienced American forces. Although inadequately supported by Arnim who was not under Rommel's command, Rommel pushed into the Kasserine Pass of the Western Dorsel mountain chain, about 50 miles west of the original Axis position. Determined British units, portions of the U.S. 1st Armored Division, and batteries of the 9th Division artillery finally stopped the over-extended Germans, and Rommel withdrew Feb. 22. The next day Rommel was belatedly appointed commander of a new Army Group Africa, consisting of all Axis ground forces in Tunisia. In early March he made an unsuccessful assault against the Eighth Army. Tired and ill, Rommel left Africa March 9, replaced by Arnim.

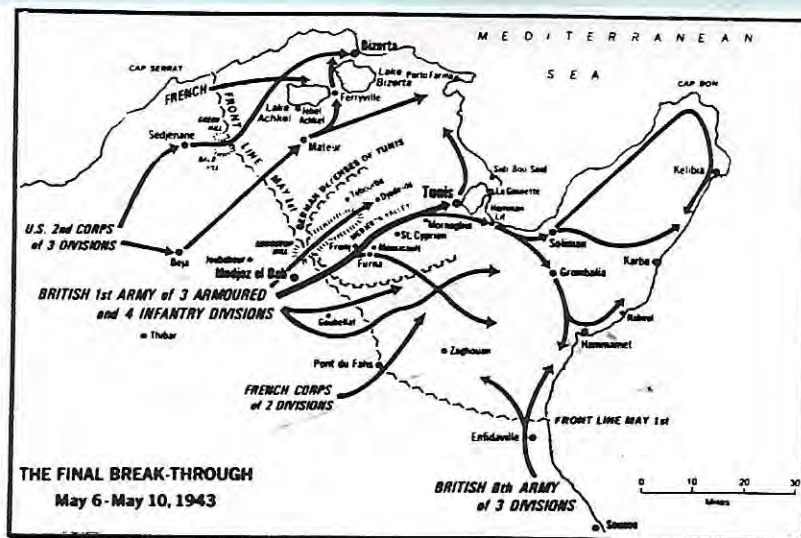
Victory in Tunisia

On Feb. 19 Alexander assumed command of all Allied ground forces in a new 18 Army Group, consisting of three subordinate units. These were the U.S. II Corps (with Patton taking command March 6), Anderson's British First Army (which included the Free French XIX Corps), and Montgomery's British Eighth Army (with a Free French division under LeClerc). Patton imposed discipline and intensified training for the American troops. Alexander believed the Americans remained unready for combat and only allowed minor U.S. action against the Axis line.

In early March the Eighth Army outflanked the Axis position on the Mareth Line, forcing it to withdraw to Enfidaville about 40 miles south of Tunis. With the U.S. II Corps sector now squeezed out because of the Axis's more restricted perimeter, Alexander wanted to use the Americans only in reserve. Siding with Patton and Bradley, Eisenhower insisted that II Corps be assigned to the front and given some offensive mission; the Americans would eventually bear the brunt of fighting in western Europe, and both troops and command needed to gain experience and confidence in North Africa.

With good weather and dry soil, and planning to move on to the Sicily invasion in the summer, the Allies prepared for their major assault in late April. The Axis forces were poorly supplied. From March through mid-May, Allied air flew more than 13,000 anti-shipping sorties, destroying more than 40 percent of the Axis tonnage destined for Tunisia.

Diversionary offensives were assigned to the U.S. II Corps which had been redeployed to the north, the French XIX Corps, and the British Eighth Army in the south. The British First Army would make the main offensive in early May, driving from its center sector east through rugged terrain toward Tunis. Arnim was not deceived by the early attacks in late April and kept his main forces to fight the First Army. The Americans advanced successfully and as the British First Army began its major assault in early May, all Allied forces made spectacular gains. American forces took the port of Bizerte and British troops took Tunis May 7. With Cunningham's Mediterranean command dominating the waters, the Axis attempted no evacuations. Unprotected by air



This map depicts the final breakthrough in the North African Campaign.

support since most of the Luftwaffe was removed to Sicily, the Axis forces began surrendering. The campaign ended May 13 with the surrender of the last Axis unit, the Italian First Army.

Results

- The Allies gained control of the entire North African coast and established air and sea superiority along the southern Mediterranean.
- The Allies were able to launch invasions of Sicily and Italy in 1943; the Allies decided not to attempt an invasion of western Europe in 1943.
- French North Africa became the base of the French Committee of National Liberation, which brought together de Gaulle's Free French movement and North African French components.
- The Axis suffered a serious defeat. The total number of Axis prisoners, approximately 275,000, was larger than those captured by the Soviets in February 1943 at Stalingrad, though the total number of German casualties in the Stalingrad campaign exceeded that of German casualties in French North Africa, approximately 155,000.
- The Allies successfully created a Combined Anglo-American staff and command structure.
- U.S. forces gained valuable experience and made significant improvements in amphibious landings, artillery support, tactical air command and support, armored fighting on different types of terrain, and command structure.
- The victory provided a great morale boost to the Western Allies, even though it was in a secondary theater.

Allied Casualties in Northwest Africa

Country	Total	Killed in Action	Wounded	Captured/Missing
United States	16,567	3,314	10,151	3,102
United Kingdom	39,111	6,773	21,706	10,632
French	<u>19,439</u>	<u>2,156</u>	<u>10,276</u>	<u>7,007</u>
Total:	75,117	12,243	42,133	20,741

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