

## Chapter 5: Kasserine and El Guettar

*See material on pp. 59-63*

Reaching Feriana<sup>1</sup>, all troops went to the defense positions to await the arrival of the Germans. Our positions here were strong with plenty of artillery to the rear and anti-tank guns to help us. We saw no action against the Germans because of their decision to turn north to Kasserine, bypassing us. Later it was learned that there were four reasons as to the embarrassment of the allies retreating. The first was the failure to get to Bizerte and Tunis as quick as possible in late November. The second was improper intelligence about the enemy. The third was not giving the Germans more credit as to what they could do. The fourth reason could be understood because the commanders and men had little battlefield experience. We were still “guinea pigs” learning the hard way to make us better soldiers.

The High Brass finally came to the conclusion that the Germans had advanced as far as they could go. Because the German lines of communication and supply were stretched too far to be effective, and with the allies all along the line putting pressure on them, they began to retreat. The Germans moved mostly by night and under rain and cloudy conditions. Within a week the Allies had regained the ground held before the German drive.<sup>2</sup> One objective assigned L Company in our push to gain lost ground was three high hills just south of Gafsa. While making practice runs in Feriana for this job, a company of men from the Foreign Legion paid us a visit. They were on patrol duty making contact with us coming up from the southern flank. The officer in charge was a Major, and he was interested in our assignment. Their stay with us was a brief one and they moved out heading for Gafsa the next morning at daylight. The Legionnaires went straight to our objective near Gafsa and drove the Germans out of those hills for us. When we arrived at dawn two days later to make our assault on these hills, the Legionnaires were there to meet us, giving us the hills to defend. It was not full daylight and we were digging in. The French had been long gone on their way back to headquarters. Coming from the north was a squadron of German Stuka dive bombers. Lucky for us that we had dug in, as they began making their dive on us with sirens blasting away and the bombs, giving us a jolt to remember. No one was injured in the bombing, but we sure cursed the Legionnaires for leaving us on the hills to be bombed.

Two patrols were sent into Gafsa, but the Germans withdrew, moving north. However, a recon-patrol drew heavy fire in the vicinity of Maknassy. L Company moved into the garrison at Gafsa with the I and K Companies moving out to El-Guettar, taking up a defense perimeter in the same area L Company had before our withdrawal.<sup>3</sup> The Cannon Company with anti-tank weapons and halftracks moved in to support the battalion in case of an attack from Gabes. The hill with the roadblock still had that dynamite buried underneath the road. More high ground was secured to the north and more anti-aircraft weapons were being deployed throughout the area.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually El Mar el Abiod.

<sup>2</sup> This was not the case, since it would be several weeks before they returned to Gafsa, but the Allies were beginning to push the Germans back.

<sup>3</sup> The context here is again confused. Olexa correctly identifies the location of the German defensive positions in Tunisia in early March, but also places his unit at Gafsa, which was still occupied by the Italians at this time. The discussion of the positions around Gafsa may relate to what the unit did upon its return to that sector, revisiting old positions, but the skirmishing with the Germans described here may better fit the battalion's stay on Djebel Chambi in late February.

Foot patrols were sent out to search for the Germans from the I and K companies. The German infantry was now two miles north of our positions and building up for another assault against us to keep the rear of Rommel's army safe. With the allies keeping up pressure against the Germans, Rommel had to send re-enforcements from Libya to help hold the battle line from Gafsa in the south to Bône in the north. Skirmishes and fierce fighting to hold positions all along the line by patrols, tanks, infantry and halftracks was not easy, with each side withdrawing to their original lines after each thrust. All of these attacks were frontal, achieving some advantages, and improving our battle lines for the initial assault by the Allies to end the war in Africa.

The weather was improving, men and supplies increasing, and the major assault was building up to overrun the Axis and capture the vital seaports of Bizerte and Tunis. The Germans were fighting stubbornly to hold the territory they needed for Rommel. It was now the 1<sup>st</sup> of March and word was received that General George S. Patton was now our new II Corps Commander, relieving General Fredendall.<sup>4</sup> The British Eighth Army in the desert was pushing Rommel westward towards Tunisia in an effort to link up with us at Gafsa. The initial thrust was to come from the Mareth Line east of Gabes where the Germans were to make a firm stand.<sup>5</sup>

British Spitfires and American P-38's and P-40's were seen every day over the battle area, diving on the German targets as observed from the air. L Company at Gafsa<sup>6</sup> in the meantime was having an easy life staying in the barracks which the French left unoccupied. Writing letters home<sup>7</sup> was encouraged once again, for our duties were light, we being the reserve company for the battalion.

One morning around 9 o'clock there was a commotion at the entrance of the garrison. A Red Cross doughnut truck arrived, and in a matter of minutes the whole company surrounded the vehicle. The driver was the only one with the truck and all of us were eager to help the man if needed. We anticipated coffee and donuts as soon as the man could make them. When the man got out of the truck and climbed up on the hood, he made a gesture for silence with all of the men responding. "Fellows," he said, "I drove from Constantine to get here and I have nothing in the truck." We were bewildered, this man drove about a hundred and fifty miles through Messerschmitt Lane to reach us with an empty truck? It was unbelievable! The man told us that he was sent out by the Red Cross at Constantine with no supplies just to make an appearance. The man cried because he didn't have anything to give us. We were all disappointed but had pity for the man. The man and his truck left the next morning vowing that he would return with supplies to make coffee and donuts for sure. Two days later the Red Cross truck arrived again, making the same long trip with no coffee or donuts. "My superiors wouldn't give me any supplies so I came anyway," remarked the man. With tears in his eyes once again he apologized for not having the coffee and donuts. On the seat of the truck were two boxes of Dentyne gum

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<sup>4</sup> Eisenhower decided to relieve Fredendall on March 6, the change was formally announced on March 7, not March 1. Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn*, 399-400.

<sup>5</sup> The Mareth line was a system of fortifications originally constructed by the French to defend Tunisia against and attack by the Italians from Libya. It blocked the narrow coastal plain that offered the only good invasion route, with interior areas being mountainous. The Germans quickly upgraded these defenses when they decided to pull Rommel out of Libya and have him join Arnim in Tunisia. The British began attacking again in that sector on March 17.

<sup>6</sup> This would relate to their rest period at Morsott, not Gafsa.

<sup>7</sup> His letter dated March 11, while not referring to any specific military developments, indicates that they were staying in one place and receiving mail from home, and he mentions that if he finds the time, he might look up a friend in a different unit, which he likely would not say if the unit were on the move.

which he said he purchased with his own money to pass out. We were so disgusted that none of us took the gum. "I'll bet those guys in Constantine have plenty of coffee and donuts," someone remarked. "To hell with the Red Cross and their handouts, we don't need them," remarked another. "They'll take your money but give little help," another replied. The resentment among the men in L Company was high to think of them sending an empty truck to us at Gafsa. Two months later a picture appeared in the *Stars and Stripes* with the caption, "Feeding the Boys in the front lines" – coffee and donuts. The picture showed a soldier in a foxhole with a pretty chick handing him a donut from a large tray. L Company didn't appreciate it at all.<sup>8</sup>

I Company was taking a bad mauling from the Germans and needed help.<sup>9</sup> The German artillery and mortar fire was pretty heavy when L Company arrived to help them. The battalion commander had requested more tanks and artillery to hold the positions already established. A Piper Cub recon plane appeared in the sky to help locate the enemy artillery giving us trouble. It wasn't long before our 105's and 155's began shelling the Germans with great effect, making them run like hell. The Second and Third Platoons moved up into positions facing the Germans about a half a mile from the pass. The Germans had the higher ground, and we settled for the flat land in front of the pass. I Company was situated in the pass fighting the Germans and holding their positions from the fierce attack thrust against them. Our Sherman tanks were moved up and placed into position to support us in the event of another assault. The Second Platoon was digging in among a large patch of cactus that was three feet high with thorns two inches long. While secondary positions were in the process of being secured, four German fighters came flying low toward us. We all dove for our half-dug fox holes as they zoomed by. Our anti-aircraft guns fired at them as they disappeared up the valley heading north. In my dive for the fox hole, I had many thorn pricks in my arms, shoulders and legs. These pricks sure did hurt, and I cursed a blue streak like a good soldier. Besides the pricks, my helmet, which wasn't strapped under my chin, hit me in the bridge of the nose, breaking the skin and smarting to make matters worse. Ask any GI about that damn helmet and he'll tell you every time that he was at least hit once, a good one on the nose. I Company suffered moderate casualties and it could have been much worse. L Company was not engaged since our artillery helped to rout the enemy's onslaught. The situation turned for the better and our stay in this sector was three days.

On the second day, late in the afternoon, an incident occurred that saddened us greatly. Coming through the pass from the north, a crippled B-17 Flying Fortress with flames and smoke coming out of the tail was making an attempt to land on the road. It was descending fast about 40 feet in the air as we watched. In the door of the fuselage stood five men and they jumped out towards the side on the ground as quickly as they could. They had no parachutes, hitting the ground and rolling in a doubled position till they stopped. A few of us began to run to help them if we could. Four of the men were just bruised and the fifth had a broken ankle. The bomber was just about to set down when it exploded. The plane disintegrated and engulfed a good section of the road, and flames were belching and shooting skyward. Inside was a courageous pilot giving his life for the rest of his crew. Reaching the first man who had jumped from the bomber, we

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<sup>8</sup> The Red Cross used women volunteers, nicknamed "Doughnut Dollies," to help serve the troops, but these operated mostly in rear areas and on the Home Front. In Tunisia in March, the Red Cross was suffering from the same logistical problems and wretched infrastructure and was keeping the Army from fully supplying forward units.

<sup>9</sup> It is not entirely clear which action this refers to. The 26<sup>th</sup> Regiment did spend some time on the front lines between March 3 and 10, replacing British units, and did some skirmishing Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 170-171, but at this point they were still operating out of Morsott, and returned there once replaced by French troops.

stopped short as he lay there sobbing hysterically. We learned that the pilot spotted a white star on a tank and told his crew to bail out and that he would stick with the aircraft. There wasn't a dry eye among us as we watched, knowing in those flames was a man who met death without a whimper. He gave himself for his friends. An ambulance arrived to take the bomber crew, and with a hand shake and a good-bye, they departed, making a wide berth around the plane, still burning with the man inside that they admired and loved. It's hard to lose someone that has been part of your life, making a void that you do not understand. L Company on the morning of the third day loaded on to the trucks for our return to Gafsa. On passing the area with the bomber still smoldering we could not help to feel bad about this tragic experience that we witnessed the day before.

On our arrival at Gafsa<sup>10</sup> we were surprised to see a small French detail back in the garrison. However, there was no sweat, for there was room for all of us. In this detail was a man big as a giant, who was to come into my life from the Belgian Congo<sup>11</sup>. Whenever there is a lull in the evening, fun and frolic will prevail. For there is always something that can be done to make things happy. A man with a concertina and another with a harmonica began to play. It wasn't long before a crowd was gathered and paired off dancing a polka. This music attracted this big black Senegalese Giant from the Congo<sup>12</sup> whom we dubbed "Hey Charlie." "Play music," the big man said in broken English, "and I dance." In a matter of seconds a big circle was formed and we sat down. As the music hit this man's ears, he began to chant and loosen up. "Hey Charlie"'s movements were graceful, for he was giving us a ceremonial dance that had leaps, thrusts, and footwork. He leaped over us, back and forth, like a big cat, with a performance that made all of us forget about the war. He was really good.

One day, back in a rest area, this big Senegalese spotted a jungle knife on my pack. In broken English he said, "Hey Charlie give me knife, I sharpen and kill Germans." Unhooking the sheath holding the machete, I handed it to him gracefully, and like a kid with a new toy he went away swinging it through the air. The next day "Hey Charlie" came back to show me that the knife was razor sharp. To my astonishment, around his neck was a string of human ears, some withered, some dry and some fresh. "Germans," he said with a gesture of delight. These are from men he had stalked in the night, slitting their throats, and taking the left ear from the victim. He received a bounty of 200 francs for each ear from his commander. "Hey Charlie" was a big man, but walked like a cat and you could not hear this man approach. I was glad that he was on my side. One day before dark I was informed that "Hey Charlie" was coming to see me about going into enemy lines, and I was surprised and startled to see this big man. I was so scared that I nearly filled my pants. And off into the night he went, with daybreak seven hours away. I wondered if I would ever see him again. "Hey Charlie" from the Congo worked on a boat and made it to New York once. His comment was "big city, drink and dance all night, like to go back someday." Dawn was approaching, and I was up as the first rays of light were coming on us. I was concerned about my friend who had not as yet made an appearance, and with my field glasses I started to scan the terrain in front of us. Would he make it, I thought, or was he a victim of the Germans? I was relieved as I saw him coming toward us grinning from ear to ear. In his hand was evidence of what he called a good night, four human ears, and excitedly he began to

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<sup>10</sup> The return would have been to Morsott rather than Gafsa.

<sup>11</sup> More likely from the French Congo, which had gone over to the Free French in 1940.

<sup>12</sup> Units recruited in different French African colonies, including both Congo and Senegal, served in the Free French forces. The Senegalese were the most famous, and here Olexa conflates them with men from Congo.

tell us that he came upon a machine gun emplacement with five men sleeping. He killed four and left one alive to remember the ordeal of his comrades. I never saw “Hey Charlie” again, and as I said before, I was glad that he was on our side.

Patrol activity in the vicinity of El-Guettar<sup>13</sup> by the Germans was on the increase. Clashes between K Company and these patrols meant that the enemy was getting reinforcements. The Germans always held the high ground as usual, looking down our throats in our upward climb to dislodge them. With pressure still on against the enemy, Rommel was sending more troops to face us [so] as not to close his lines of communication. One of these outfits was the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division<sup>14</sup>. This outfit was considered the best of the German army, but it took us “Green Horn” Americans to show them what we could do when our backs are to the wall. With conditions increasing for an all-out assault, L Company moved into the battle area. Our defense positions were the same, with K Company in position north of us. No sooner had we taken up our positions in the foxholes than a German combat patrol appeared. All hell broke loose, with both sides firing at each other with automatic weapons and throwing grenades. The Germans had a good one, with a handle that you could throw for a hundred feet. We called it a potato masher. It was a concussion grenade that shook you up a bit if it were close. Our grenades were fragmented that caused injury. Effective at forty feet. This patrol hit us around 11 o’clock in the evening. They didn’t know just where we were but we had the advantage on them. The skirmish between us lasted about an hour before the Germans withdrew. We suffered no casualties, but when daylight came, two dead Germans were in the draw below us as a result of the raid. On examination of the clothing, these men wore the SS insignia identifying them as “Hitler’s Elite Troops.”<sup>15</sup>

*See material on pp. 65-67*

At dawn the Spitfires appeared again in the sky, flying overhead. We were soon to witness dogfights between the British and the German pilots. Coming down the valley from Maknassy was a squadron of ME-109’s. The British spotted the Germans first and moved in to make the kill. The fighting took place just above our positions and we had to take cover for protection from the bullets and empty shells that hit in our area. We cheered as a Spitfire headed toward the ground. We were hoping that the pilot would bail out, but he never did. The three planes hit the ground towards the desert and exploded, with flames of fire engulfing each plane.<sup>16</sup> No silk in the sky, meant no survivors and the deadly game of war goes on. Each day men die and our thoughts echo, “am I next to go?”

*See material on pp. 67-90*

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<sup>13</sup> Here he likely means Kasserine rather than El Guettar.

<sup>14</sup> This would again best fit the period in early March when the battalion was in line, as the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division was one of the German units in the Kasserine sector. At El Guettar later in the month, the principal German opponent was the 10<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division, not the 21<sup>st</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> There were no Waffen SS units deployed to North Africa, so it seems likely that Olexa is misinterpreting some other insignia here. German panzer troops had somewhat different uniforms from the infantry, including black jackets, which might account for this confusion. Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997) 146, notes that American soldiers commonly made this mistake.

<sup>16</sup> It is not clear here whether the planes were British or German, but presumably one was the Spitfire mentioned previously and the other two Germans that he attacked.

