

Negotiations with the Representative of General Barré and the  
Resident of Tunis, Admiral Estéva

by

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During the first days of the Allied landing I received from Field Marshal Kesselring the order to throw one fighter group and one Stuka group from Sicily across to Tunis and to seize and secure the airdrome at Tunis. While the order was being carried out the Field Marshal again telephoned me from Rome and gave me some information on the political situation: The Vichy government had given to the Resident and the Tunis military commander instructions to resist the advance of the Allies against Tunis and to support the Axis power in every way. The German command knew that a cable linked Tunis and Malta and that a radio was in operation on the roof of the American consulat.

As for me I was given the mission of flying to Tunis to request the French commander there, General Barré and the French Resident Admiral Estéva to desist at once from communicating with the Allies by the means indicated above.

The flight was made in an old He 111. As assistant pilot I took my adjutant Major Theodorescu. The route led from Catania over Agrigento and then oversea at a height of 10 meters as the best means of defense against enemy fliers; the low altitude was also the best way of avoiding detection by radar equipment from Malta.

The first glimpse of the airfield close to the city made a promising impression. The only indication that there must some damaged spots in this extensive area was a cracked plane in the middle of the landing field. At the edge of the field were large hangars and back of them were buildings altogether suitable for sheltering the troops.

After landing, while I looked up the fighters and Stukas already arrived, my adjutant telephoned to the Representative

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After landing, while I looked up the fighters and Stukas already arrived, my adjutant telephoned to the Representative of the German Armistice Commission located in town; beside Tunis the commission had also a premanent residence in Algiers. The fliers were

of organization. Absolutely no difficulty was made by the French. On arrival the formations had circled over the city of Tunis at low level to impress the population and the French troops with the full power of the German new-comers. The general features of the airfield were favorable for light planes, especially in the dry season.

The German Armistice Commissioner arrived shortly by car. He reported that the situation was doubtful. On the road from the town to the airfield there were French troops standing facing the field.

On the trip to the city I passed through the French troops with somewhat mixed feelings. The men made a good soldierly impression. I saw no officers. Machine guns and antitank weapons were trained on the airfield. There can be no doubt that the small air forces with their planes on the ground would have been an easy prey for the French troops in readiness there if they had attacked in this situation.

At the entrance of the Hq. of the French Division the adjutant on duty explained that the division commander, General Barré, was absent. His representative would see me.

This general was of extremely correct and reserved bearing. I referred to the instructions from the Vichy government and then explained the two requests mentioned above.

The general answered that he had no order whatever from Vichy. He knew nothing of the existence of a cable to Malta, and also nothing of a radio sending station on the roof of the American General Consul. I insisted that the German command had data to that effect and that now, through me, he also knew about it. The answer was neither yes nor no, as the representative could take cover behind the temporary absence of General Barré.

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Privately I was rather worried in case I were invited to drive to General Barré; I could hardly have refused. As I had entered the city not at all as parliamentary envoy but as the commanding general of invading troops, I could have been taken prisoner legitimately under the

circumstances. After a cool leave taking from the general I went to the Resident Admiral Estéva.

Here, from the beginning the reception was more friendly by far. The Admiral, an old gentleman with a white goatee, had received instructions from his government in Vichy and after my representations he gave me the assurance that he would do everything in his power to fulfill the German requests and to establish a good understanding.

With this my mission was accomplished and I returned without incident again through the French troops. During the return trip, however, I noticed plainly the reaction, stronger than before, that my appearance created among the French soldiers. The second time they saw my slowly moving carriage was the first time they realized that a German general was driving through their ranks.

Loerzer.

Translated by J.S. Smith  
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