

HEADQUARTERS
EUROPEAN COMMAND
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF HISTORIAN

MS # D-046

MANUSCRIPT DATA SHEET

- I. Author: Krause, Fritz Brig. Gen. [Generalmajor]
- II. Title of Report: Studies on the MARETH Position
Part II: Survey and Construction
- III. Assigned: 3 March 1947
- IV. Sources:
- A. Personal: None. Written from memory
 - B. Reference Sources (American, German Documents; Diaries;
Other Material; etc.): None. Written from memory

EUCOM: HD: CHGB : Form 6a-2

[-1-]

Fritz Krause
Brig. Gen.

Garmisch, 30 April 1947

Studies on the MARETH PositionPart II: Survey and Construction

Map: GABES 1:500,000

Arrival

Our trip from the BUERAT Position to MARETH in mid-January 1943 passed without incidents. We did not see a single enemy plane. The rumors about enemy air activity seemed exaggerated. MARETH, for instance, was never attacked during the following weeks, and the coastal highway near MARETH, despite constant heavy two-way traffic, was attacked infrequently, and only by single fighter-bombers. Of course, weak ground defenses were gradually being built up also along the coastal highway.

Survey

In the subsequent days I undertook the survey which had been ordered. The results follow:

The MARETH Position, a line of twenty-five forts, began in the Matmata mountain range at a point north of HALLOUF Pass (see overlay), followed a line east of TOUJANE up to the northern edge of the mountain range, then ran -- behind the Wadi ZICKSAU -- through the coastal plain to the sea. Half of the position was in the plain, the other half in the Matmata mountains. Each fort consisted of several concrete dugouts, machine-gun emplacements, or shelters. Most of the installations in the plain were protected by no more than one-half meter of concrete, while those in the mountains were more modern and had the protection of up to three meters of concrete. The part

[-1-]

of the position along the edge of the mountains was extremely strong and could be held by a small force, because the mountains were steep and high and afforded excellent observation as far as the MEDENINE area. However, Rommel remarked to me once that, on the basis of his World War I experiences in mountain warfare, he, if he were an infantryman, would rather attack than defend such a position. He pointed out that there were many approaches that offered cover and concealment, and that one could easily infiltrate through the gaps between the individual forts, especially at night.

The positions were considerably weaker in the plain. The Wadi ZICKSAU could hardly be regarded as obstructing the approaches to the front. It was shallow, and, even at that time of year (winter), almost dry, and therefore passable for tanks and infantry at nearly every point. The field of fire varied from good to bad; it was unsatisfactory particularly between the highway and the sea. In some places within that sector, high ground limited the field of fire to a few hundred meters. If the defender were to evacuate his advance positions, the enemy assembly for an attack could as a result be effected in the shelter of the high ground, close to the main line of resistance, unseen and without interference.

A large number of wire obstacles and mines was placed throughout the position, and an antitank ditch was excavated across the coastal plain. In the mountain region only a few passes had to be secured against tanks. The good, close-knit road net, which the French had constructed even in the mountains, was very important for supply operations and lateral movements.

[-1-]

Advance Position

[-2-]

The imperfect field of fire from the main line of resistance and the inadequate facilities for artillery observation were unfavorable factors in the coastal sector. Reconnaissance revealed that a position several kilometers farther toward the front would afford a much better field of fire and better observation (see overlay). On first thought, the selection of that site for the main line of resistance seemed therefore indicated. However, since no fortifications had been constructed there as yet, it was primarily a question of time whether this advance position could be used as the main position.

The Possibility of an Envelopment of the Western Flank

The possibility of an envelopment of our right flank hinged on the passability of the terrain west of the Matmata mountain range for motor vehicles, and the approaches to that area. The description on the available maps varied from "impassable" to "passable with difficulty." The HALLOUF Pass could easily be blocked with a small force; the pass at FOUM TATAHOUIE (50 km. south of MEDENINE) required about one reinforced regiment for security toward the east and south. But even if this advanced point had to be abandoned at a later date, it was doubtful whether strong enemy forces, starting from that location, could reach the area west of the Matmata mountains, or whether they would have to sweep even farther south because of the terrain. In the latter case the enemy would have to cover an even greater distance over at least difficult terrain, he would need more time for an envelopment maneuver, and the danger of his movement being detected

[-2-]

by German/^{air}reconnaissance would increase.

The Proposed Assignment of Tactical Missions

The MARETH Position was weakest at the following points:

1. The terrain on either side of the coastal highway, especially north of it, because of the limited field of fire;
2. A strip just north of the Matmata mountain range. There the enemy terrain commanded a naturally weak part of our own position.

The enemy would therefore presumably attack on either side of the coastal highway, or just northeast of the Matmata mountains (see overlay).

[-3-]

Accordingly, those sectors were assigned to German troops: the 90th Light Division with remnants of the Ramcke Parachute Brigade was committed on both sides of the coastal highway, the 164th Light Africa Division in the sector adjacent to the Matmata mountains. The remaining sectors, especially the entire mountain position, were assigned to the Italians. The employment of the GHQ artillery was planned in such a manner that fire could be massed and possibly observed in front of the two probable points of penetration. The German panzer divisions were to fight rear guard actions, and later stay near GABES as reserve.

Results of the Survey

About 19 January 1943, I left with these results of the survey in order to report in person to Field Marshal Rommel. The BUERAT Position had meanwhile been abandoned, and the army was withdrawing. I met Field Marshal Rommel approximately 50 km. southeast of TRIPOLI. He was pleased to receive a detailed report on the MARETH Position so soon, and in general approved

[-3-] my proposals and actions. As to the question of shifting the main defense to an advance position, he decided that due to the lack of time it was to serve only as an outpost position, and that it should be improved as much as possible. Priority, however, was to be given to the improvement of the main (MARETH) position, where the construction of wire entanglements, mine fields, and antitank ditches was to be completed without fail within the following two weeks.

Further Improvements

The further improvement of the MARETH Position and of the advance position progressed satisfactorily, because we were able to continue our work without enemy interference, and because Army sent ever larger advance elements that could be employed as labor forces.

Reserves

The transfer of a panzer division (the 21st ?) to be held in reserve in the area southwest of GABES started as early as mid-January. But since this division had been reduced to a fraction of its original strength, its fighting power was greatly impaired. As far as I remember, the division had relinquished its last few serviceable tanks to the other panzer division (15th) of the German Afrika Korps, a division which was slated for rear guard action. Since EL ALAMEIN, the entire German Afrika Korps no longer had a semblance of the fighting power of even one panzer division. But the higher command had opposed a merger of the two divisions, probably in the hope for the arrival of reinforcements. Thus, an unnecessarily large number of trains was dragged along for months. Furthermore, the same fallacy

[-3-] was only too easily repeated time and again: a large circle designating "Xth Panzer Division" was entered on the situation map, whereby it was easily overlooked that the combat strength of this division was often inferior to that of a reinforced regiment. This kind of self-deception was bound to backfire sooner or later.

[-4-] The Protection of the Western Flank

An Italian desert unit was committed west of the Matmata mountains for the protection of the right flank; I believe it was called the "Desert Cavalry Corps." With respect to the fighting quality of this unit, the Italian General Navarini, Commanding General of XXI Corps, who had been in Abyssinia and North Africa for a long time, made a remark to me somewhat along the following lines: "It's true, that desert cavalry is there, but that's as far as it goes. They're not going to fight, but ^{will} take the first opportunity to surrender to the enemy. I know those fellows and trust them no farther than I can see them."

Rommel's Physical and Mental Condition

About 23 January Field Marshal Rommel in person came to MARETH to look over the situation. No new ideas were advanced. He was very tired and run down. He spent one night with us, and when one of my staff officers picked him up for breakfast and asked him how he had slept, Rommel answered: "My dear young friend, if you only knew how long it's been since I've been able to sleep!" Toward the end of January, Army Headquarters permanently transferred to the MARETH Position. Headquarters of the German Afrika Korps directed the rear guard actions.

On 29 January a conference took place in the Wadi ZICKSAU, in which

[-4-]

all German and Italian generals within reach participated. On that occasion Rommel gave the impression of a broken man. We hardly recognized him. He did not speak extemporaneously, but read every word. We had never seen him do this before. His chief of staff, who sat next to him at the conference, feared that Rommel would fall asleep from fatigue. We realized that he could only preserve his health and be of service to the army, if he would soon take a long vacation. His condition made a deep impression on all who had not seen him for some time.

The Arrival of General Messe

The Italian General Messe arrived in the beginning of February, to take over the reins of the Italo-German Panzer Army as Rommel's successor. But Rommel stayed on for some time, and Messe had to play the part of a spectator.

An Estimate of the Fighting Quality of the Italo-German Panzer Army

[-5-]

About 10 February, a general arrived from the Armed Forces High Command. Apparently, his primary mission was the reorganization of command in Africa after Rommel's departure. I had to guide him through the positions for an entire day. During that time he asked for my opinion as to the defensive qualities of the army in the MARETH Position. I replied that the supply situation would have to improve soon in order to enable us to reinforce the units with personnel and equipment, or else it would only be a matter of time before we would have to withdraw again, as had happened so often during the long trek from EL ALAMEIN. The continuous withdrawals had not improved the morale of the troops. The Italians fought with their eyes to the rear, if they fought at all. The general replied,

[-5-] that the other German generals with whom he had talked, had judged the situation far more favorably. I said that the future would show who was right.

The Actual Commitment of the German Divisions

I do not recall any details about the final commitment in the MARETH Position. I only remember that the advance position was occupied, and was held for a fairly long time. The 90th Light Division was committed straddling the coastal highway, the 15th Panzer Division -- upon the conclusion of its very successful rear guard actions -- at the edge of the mountains, and the 164th Light Africa Division in the hills around KHRDACHE (see overlay) and in the HALLOUF Pass. From mid-February to the beginning of March I commanded this division myself, pinch-hitting for the wounded division commander. I shall treat the events of that period in a separate report (Part III).

[Signed]: K R A U S E


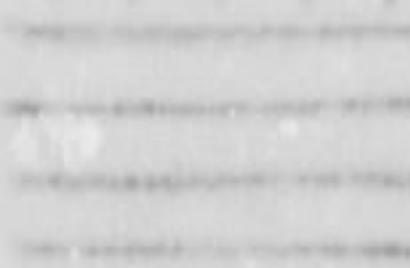

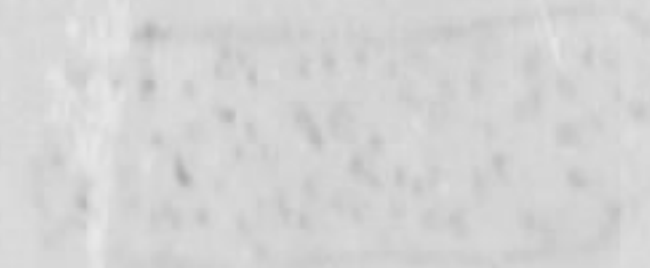
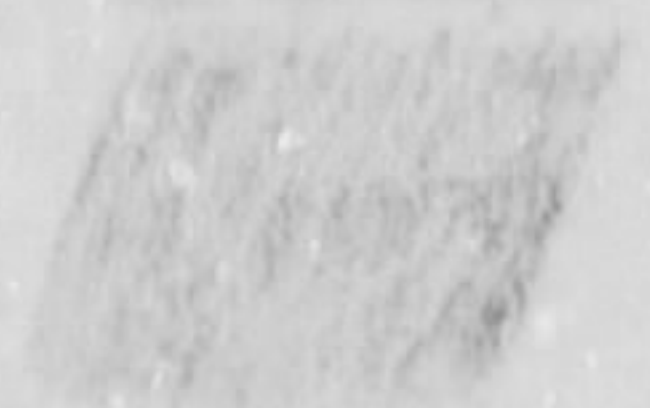
Sketch

Scale: 1:250,000 (approx.)

[-6-]

MARETH Position

Legend:

-  - impassable for motor vehicles (sand, dunes)
-  - difficult to pass for motor vehicles (sand, dunes)
-  - impassable ridge
-  - vegetation (palm and olive groves)
-  - salt marshes or similar obstacles


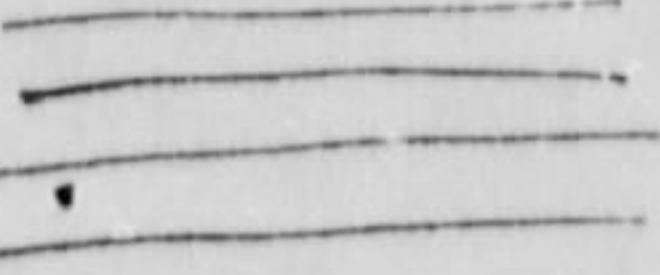



Mareth-Stellung.

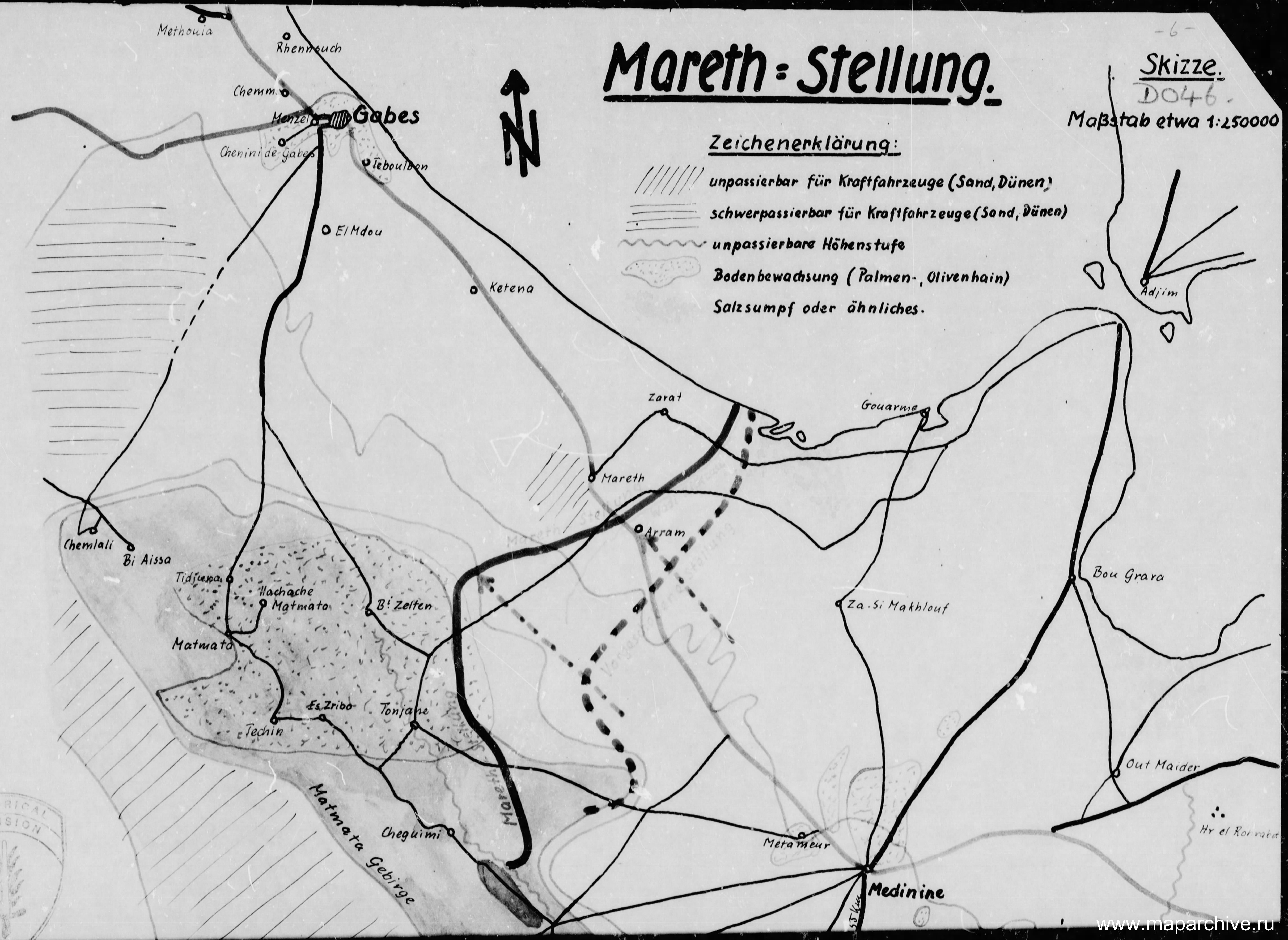
Skizze.
D046.

Maßstab etwa 1:250000



Zeichenerklärung:


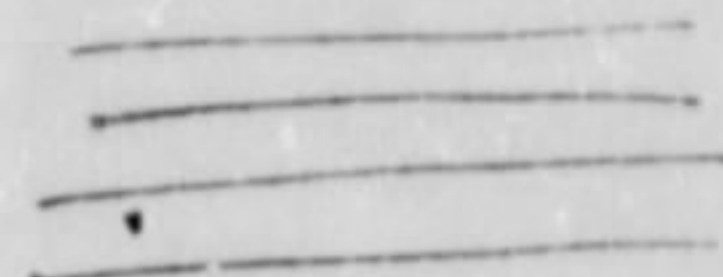


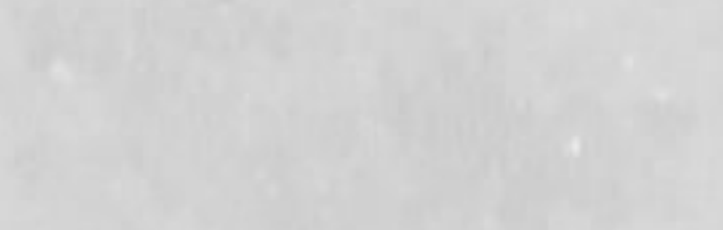
-  unpassierbar für Kraftfahrzeuge (Sand, Dünen)
-  schwerpassierbar für Kraftfahrzeuge (Sand, Dünen)
-  unpassierbare Höhenstufe
-  Bodenbewachsung (Palmen-, Olivenhain)
-  Salzsumpf oder ähnliches.

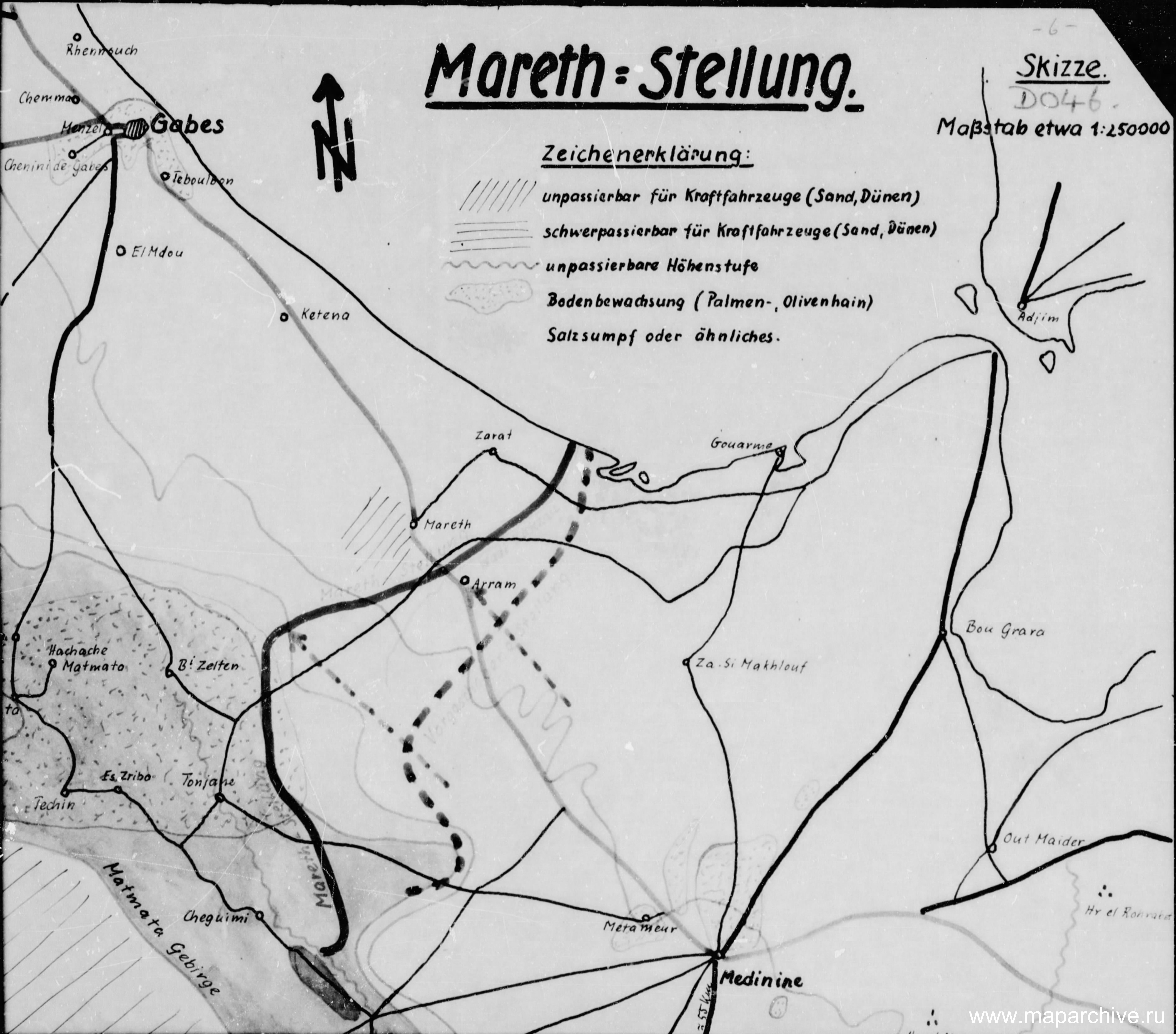


Mareth-Stellung.



Zeichenerklärung:

-  unpassierbar für Kraftfahrzeuge (Sand, Dünen)
-  schwerpassierbar für Kraftfahrzeuge (Sand, Dünen)
-  unpassierbare Höhenstufe
-  Bodenbewachsung (Palmen-, Olivenhain)
-  Salzsumpf oder ähnliches.





Kranse

