

HEADQUARTERS  
EUROPEAN COMMAND  
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF HISTORIAN

MS # D 085

MANUSCRIPT DATA SHEET

- I. Author: Christoph Wilhelm Werner, Major
- II. Title of the report: The Battles of the "Hermann Göring" Division in Tunisia from January to 12 May 1943.
- III. Ordered: 5 April 1947.
- IV. Sources:
- A. Advisors:
- None
- B. Documents: ( American, German documents, diaries, etc.)
- Written from memory.
- C. Abbreviations:
- A. and T. Batl. - Africa and Tunisia Battalion
- O.K.L. - Oberkommando der Luftwaffe - Air Forces High Command
- Ob.d.L. - Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe - Commander in Chief of the Air Forces.

EUCOM: HD : CHGB: FORM 6A-2

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HISTORICAL DIVISION SEAL

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THE BATTLES OF THE "HERMANN GOERING" DIVISION  
IN TUNISIA FROM JANUARY TO 12 MAY 1943.

BY

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Written at: Garmisch (Germany)

Date of completion: 12 May 1947

Sources:

a) personal: written from memory

b) documentation: none

Sketches and

map tracings: none

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HISTORICAL DIVISION SEAL

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Christoph Wilhelm Werner  
Major

The Battles of the "Hermann Goering" Division in Tunisia  
from January to 12 May 1943

Part 1: Activation and transfer to Tunisia of the "Hermann Goering" Division.

A. Activation.

The activation of the "Hermann Goering" Division was started in late summer of 1942 out of the former "Hermann Goering" Brigade.

This consisted of:

- 1 Brigade staff (motorized)
- 1 Signal company (motorized) (radio and telephone platoon)
- 1 Rifle company (motorized) with three battalions, including one howitzer company (infantry) and one anti-tank company.
- 1 Motorcycle company )
- 1 Panzer Company (type III) ) under one
- 1 Anti-tank company on self-propelled mounts ) battalion
- 1 Assault-gun battery ) staff (motorized)
- 1 Engineer company (motorized)
- 1 Flak (anti-aircraft) regiment with two battalions with three heavy and two light batteries each.
- 1 Artillery battalion with one heavy and two light batteries, moreover, supply units (being activated), and one replacement training battalion (Ersatzabteilung).

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This brigade organization, which had been formed out of one reinforced infantry regiment (motorized) and which had received its baptism of fire in Russia, was unable to survive in its present form and could not be used independently in any engagement or conduct of battle. However, it was well suited to form the nucleus from which a motorized or Panzer division was to be built up.

When this plan was executed, two factors appeared which caused considerable difficulties:

- a). The comparatively high number of specialists required in all fields, particularly the need for training men to serve on Panzers, in anti-tank units, and in assault-gun crews, as well as engineers.
- b). Moreover, the large number of trained officers and non-commissioned officers needed immediately as required by the various arms.

This was remedied by taking over trained personnel from the Army and by re-trained suitable Luftwaffe personnel, as well as by taking over officers and non-commissioned officers from Army organizations. By means of incorporating one parachute regiment it was possible to double the strength of the infantry immediately. In order to make it able to fulfill future demands, the replacement training battalion had to be enlarged on a broad scale (to regimental strength).

The necessary materiel was procured out of Army stocks and out of current production.

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In this organization the following procedure was adopted: An existing cadre unit was increased, both in personnel and materiel, to the strength of the new organization, The tempo was determined by

- a) the rate at which the required weapons and vehicles were being brought up.
- b) the date at which trained personnel became available,
- c) the rate at which replacements were being brought up.

The object was to activate a Panzer division with only small deviation from the Army T/O (War).

Composition of this division.

Division staff

- 1 Panzer regiment (type III and IV) with two battalions
- 2 Panzer Grenadier regiments with three battalions each (1 rifle regiment), (parachute regiment as 3d regiment)
- 1 Artillery regiment with three battalions (1 heavy, 2 medium or light batteries), with one assault-gun battery as 4th battalion
- 1 Panzer reconnaissance battalion with five companies (1 motorcycle company, 1 jeep (Volkswagen) company, 1 Panzer scout car company, 1 anti-tank company, one 2cm four-barreled Flak battery on self-propelled mounts)
- 1 Panzer engineer battalion with four companies and bridge column
- 1 Flak regiment with two battalions (3 heavy and two light batteries each)
- 1 Panzer signal battalion
- 1 Chief of division supply services with adequate transportation and supply units.

In view of the strong equipment with Flak batteries no organic anti-tank battalion was provided for in this organization.

During this reorganization the above-mentioned Parachute Regiment 2, Koch, was incorporated into the division. This unit, which did not actually belong in a normal cadre of a Panzer division, was to take its place as the 3d Infantry Regiment (rifle regiment).

That is to say, the division had its own parachute unit which could be dropped on the flank or to the rear of the enemy forces whenever special circumstances occurred during action, or tactical or operational requirements called for such employment. This type of action is particularly appropriate for extended theaters of war, especially when reserves are lacking or when breakthroughs through the enemy front are being made, moreover, when the action is conducted in the form of surprise raids including those extending over considerable distances. It was to be considered as desirable to have a parachute unit available within the division for just such purposes.

The activation proceeded according to schedule up to the fall of 1942. The area on the coast of Western France was particularly well suited to this end. Special units were being formed on troop training grounds in the home country. The incorporation of the units stationed in Western France into the Atlantic defense system did not make itself unfavorably felt at first. As far as employment in this connection was concerned the division was placed under the command of the Commander-in-Chief West (Oberbefehlshaber West) who, in case of an alarm was to fall back upon the employment of the division as one out of the entire group of Panzer and motorized organizations.

This actually occurred in November 1942 when the Allied forces landed in

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Northwest Africa. At that time the elements of the division which were ready to be sent to the front were transferred into the area between Rouen and Bordeaux, however without any definite assignment. Since additional transfers had to be anticipated, especially to the coast of Southern France where an enemy attack was not unlikely, it was no longer feasible to carry out organizational training on a higher level. Owing to fact that it was impossible to make decisions about the special units which were being formed, in most cases on separate training grounds, moreover, owing to delays and curtailments in training on the organizational level, which applied also to the units and organizations stationed in the area of Southwestern France, the division at that moment was ready for combat or ready to be sent to the front only to a limited extent. If the disturbing alarm conditions should persist, that is to say, if it should not be possible to dispose freely and to an adequate extent over the troops, some of which were only halfway trained, the entire activation program would be endangered and the schedule for its completion (1 February 1943) would be greatly delayed.

At the end of the year 1942 the Commander-in-Chief West had the following Panzer or motorized divisions at his disposal in the area of the French Channel coast for the eventuality of an Allied invasion:

6th Panzer Division, 7th Panzer Division, and 10th Panzer Division, SS-Division Adolf Hitler, SS-Division Totenkopf (pulled out of the Eastern front and was being brought up to full strength), one additional SS-division and the "Hermann Goering" Brigade (those elements of the "Hermann Goering" Division which were ready to be sent to the front).

All other forces were actively employed in the coastal defense. In addition to the current progress the division submitted a pertinent report to

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the OKL (Luftwaffe High Command) requesting that employment of the division prior to the completion of activation be **avoided**. Nevertheless, during the first half of November 1942 the order for the employment of the rifle regiment in Tunisia was issued. During the course of November 1942 there followed the order for the transfer to Italy of those elements of the division which were ready to be sent to the front. These were:

Division staff

Panzer signal battalion with two companies

- 1 reinforced Panzer regiment
- 1 Anti-tank company on self-propelled mounts
- 1 Armored 2cm (four-barreled) Flak battery on self-propelled mounts
- 1 Panzer Grenadier regiment with two battalions and regimental units
- 1 Panzer reconnaissance battalion with five companies
- 1 Artillery battalion with three batteries
- 1 Flak regiment with two battalions
- 1 Reinforced Panzer engineer company

Proportinate elements under the chief of the division supply services with transportation, supply, and medical units.

This assignment of the division, with the final objective of its transfer to Africa, implied not only the premature breaking up of an organization which would have reached its full strength within a few weeks, but was additional proof for the unavailability of sufficient operational reserves at that particular moment.



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B. The Transfer to Italy.

The transfer to Italy was carried out by means of railroad transports. These were slowed down by the traffic bottleneck at the Brenner Pass. Only a limited number of trains could be moved over the Brenner section each day. The division, whose transportation was coordinated into the over-all transportation program, was assigned about four trains per day. Certain elements of the division were sent via Southern France and the Riviera. All this greatly delayed the completion of the transfer. Additional difficulties arose in Italy proper because of the inadequate provisions for assembling and billeting. The Commander-in-Chief South (Oberbefehlshaber Sued), under whose command the division was placed at the moment of its arrival in the Italian theater, had ordered the concentration to take place in the area north of Naples and around Capua. Several mistakes were made in railroad routing so that the division was taken to Foggia and to various other places along the eastern coast of Italy before it was finally taken to the commanded assembly area, where however the provisions for billeting were insufficient, there were no suitable parking places for the vehicles, not to speak of any adequate training grounds, etc. As a matter of fact, quarters and barracks had been assigned, but these were still occupied by Italian troops which were continuously delaying and sabotaging their transfer to Africa. Only after protracted negotiations with the Italian authorities was it possible to have these billets made available. Due to the lack of parking places the mass of the motor vehicles were parked at extended intervals in columns along the roads. Occurrences of this kind which materialized while first contact was being made with the Italian Allies had an extremely sobering effect upon our officers and men. This applied mainly to the Italian authorities on a higher level. The lower-echelon headquarters and local command offices

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showed understanding and cooperation. To the extent that the limited space would permit, terrain training was pushed forward. The greater part of the Flak regiment's batteries were assigned to duty in the defenses of the port of Naples and were able to perform successfully there several times.

Apparently the decision to use the division, that is to say those of its units which were complete, in Tunisia was irrevocable. Nevertheless, it seemed imperative to suggest once more to refrain from carrying out such a plan in order to avoid the premature and useless breaking up of the forces which were in the process of organization.

When the order for the Flak regiment's transfer to Tunisia arrived during the last days of December 1942, the division commander reported to the Ob.d.L. (Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe), submitted detailed documentation regarding the status of preparedness for duty at the front and the stages of activation reached in the home country and in Southern France, and tried to persuade the Ob.d.L. to re-examine and possibly change the order for employment in Africa. The justification given was as follows:

- 1.) At this moment only about 50% of the division's units are ready for employment.
- 2.) Owing to the fact that almost all of the Panzer and artillery units are included within those units which are not ready to be sent to the front, the Panzer division as such is in existence only on paper.
- 3.) In any transfer to Africa, even to Tunisia, due to the prevailing situation in the air and on the water, the transportation authorities in charge count on losing 50% of the shipment.

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- 4.) In view of the valuable contingent of men and of the excellent technical equipment of the division, such a percentage of expected loss, especially only a few weeks prior to the completion of the organization, would mean not only taking a risky change but inviting complete failure.
  
- 5.) The purpose, that is to say, the strengthening of the Tunisian front with Panzer organizations, will by no means be achieved through the procedure planned. The actual final result, consisting more or less in strengthening the infantry forces in Tunisia, could be achieved much better by employing an infantry or a mountain division.

Therefore, it is suggested:

To leave the division in Europe, to complete the activation by 1 February 1943 (according to schedule), to employ the division beginning 1 March 1943 as one Panzer division of a Panzer Army in the East, an assignment for which the division is well prepared as far as organization, equipment, and combat morale is concerned.

This proposal was declined at the beginning of January 1943.

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C. The Transfer to Tunisia.

There followed the transfer to Tunisia of the units designated to be sent to the front. The difficulties in command procedure alone arising during this operation were considerable because, in addition to the Transportation Headquarters Africa in Rome (Transportstab Afrika in Rom), which was generally responsible and with which the division cooperated through the branch office in Naples, a certain number of other offices had to participate in the decisions, as for instance, the transportation office (Transportdienststelle) directly attached to the staff of the Commander-in-Chief South in Rome (Oberbefehlshaber Sued in Rom), the Transportation Headquarters Trapani in Sicily (Transportstab Trapani in Sizilien), as well as the Ob.d.L. (Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe) in person, who was particularly interested in this transfer to Africa.

The result was that orders and instructions were not in agreement with the actual technical possibilities and requirements of the troops themselves, which naturally were mainly and vitally interested in a certain order of march during the transfer. Moreover, as a result of the wish of the Tunisian Army to receive Panzers and armor-piercing weapons for its front on a priority basis, the Transportation Headquarters Africa was constantly being instructed to issue the corresponding transportation permits. However, it was not in the interests of the division to deliver its units and weapons to Tunisia one by one, to the contrary, it wanted to have them transferred all together as a division, or at least in integral tactical units. Whenever any individual troop elements had once been assigned to other organizations, any chance to change this vanished, on one hand in view of the close dove-tailing in the employment of the troops, on the other hand because it was impossible to attempt a subsequent re-organization since this would have further weakened the already thinly occupied individual sectors.

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For this reason the command section of the division's headquarters and the quartermaster were sent to Tunis to act as collection and assignment staff with the instruction to intercept the units upon their arrival and to place them under autonomous command once they had been assigned to a particular sector of the front by the Army.

The actual transfer to Africa was carried out by the following means:

1.) By air:

Junker 52 transports: personnel and the most important small equipment and weapons,

Messerschmitt 321 (Gigant) transports: weapons and special vehicles.

Leaving from Naples or Foggia, landing in Tunis or Bizerta, if necessary via Palermo or Catania (intermediate landings).

2.) By water:

a) on Italian cargo vessels: all of the large equipment, vehicles, Panzers, guns, accompanied only by the minimum of personnel on board ship, leaving from the port of Naples, in exceptional cases from ports in Sicily, and landing in Tunis or Bizerta.

b) on so-called "Siebel" ferries: mainly Flak guns with their crews, as well as ammunition, leaving from the ports of Naples or Salerno, also from Reggio or Trapani (Sicily), landing in Tunisian ports or along any flat sector of the coast.

Since it was impossible to transfer any one organization in one compact operation (elements of the 10th Panzer Division, of the 334th Infantry Division, and continuous transports of individual A or T Battalions, current shipments of ammunition, fuel, and rations were being transported at the same time) the

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result was not only a delay of the transfer proper but it meant also that many items arrived in Tunisia in small separate shipments, that the various units were completely torn up, their personnel and materiel separated and scattered over a wide area. A particularly unfavorable effect was brought about by the various alternatives of leaving either from Naples or from Foggio, which was further aggravated by possible intermediate landings in Catania or Palermo, (either because of a change in the air situation or because of the fuel supply). A certain amount of goods had to be accumulated at the starting airfields in order to have a stock of goods to be transported available at all times. This would temporarily immobilize given units, or else some of the goods would be left behind at intermediate landing places (due to engine trouble, bomb damage, etc.), and it was not always an easy task to re-incorporate these goods into the current flow of the transfer operation.

Loading on board ship moreover required certain accumulations in the ports. In the case of the starting points such as Palermo, a cross-country transport through Southern Italy and ferrying across to Sicily had to be added. The most regular of them all were the "Siebel" ferries. It is true that due to their very low speed (about 4 to 6 sea miles) according to wind conditions these were on their way for days but, being not very susceptible to the danger from the air, they arrived with comparative safety and regularity. However, they could not travel in rough sea and whenever the sea was higher than 3 they were unable to leave the port.

Attempts were made to conduct the operation with the least possible friction by installing liaison posts (officers) at all the starting ports and airfields, at all intermediate landing places, and also at all the pertinent transportation offices. The transfer operation, which got under way during the first days of

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January 1943 (exclusive of the rifle regiment and the Flak regiment which had been moved on preferred schedule) was completed in its broad phases within about five weeks (middle of February).

At times the losses incurred during the transfer were considerable, but nevertheless within bearable limits, mainly since losses in personnel were unusually low. The author is unable to recall details about losses during transportation by air. Transports by water were repeatedly attacked from the air or by light naval forces of the enemy, and some of the vessels were sunk. Almost all of the vehicles and parts of the heavy equipment of the division were lost in this manner, a circumstance which had extremely adverse effects upon the ensuing combat in that theater of war.

Additional losses were caused by air attacks on the landing fields during the arrival of the transport units, and through bombing of unloading operations in the ports of Tunis and Bizerta. It is impossible to indicate the percentage of the losses since these were unevenly distributed (predominantly materiel).

(signed): Werner

Translated : April 1948: M. Bauer