

ENGLISH COPY

THE FIRST PHASE OF THE ENGAGEMENT IN

TUNISIA, UP TO THE ASSUMPTION OF THE

COMMAND BY THE NEWLY ACTIVATED FIFTH

PANZER ARMY HEADQUARTERS ON 9 DEC 1942

Part I

LBRARY

HISTORICAL DIVISION

HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES ARMY, EUROPE

FOREIGN MILITARY STUDIES BRANCH

12 pages

ARMY COMMAND ON 9 DECEMBER 1942

Map: Mediterranean 1:4,000,000

PART IS BASIC INFORMATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

- 1. Preliminary Events in Berlin.
- a. Situation concerning the command in Egypt in October 1942. The British El Alamein offensive began on 23 October 1942. At that time, the Commanding General of the German Afrika Korps, General der Panzertruppe Walther Nehring, was undergoing hospital treatment at Wuensdorf near Perlin. He had not yet fully recovered from the wounds sustained on 31 August 1942, during the opening days of Rommel's thrust towards the Nile valley. Particularly the arm wound was still festering. The General had hoped to be able to rejoin the Afrika Korpe by the middle of November, so as to be on the spot for the anticipated Pritish counteroffensive. Previous information from the Chief of Staff, Col. Bayerlein, had indicated that time to be early enough for the purpose. It turned out that expectations were not to be justified; the offensive began at a much earlier date, while the period of convalescence had become protracted. In the meantime, the German Afrika Korps was under the deputy command of General der Panzertruppe von Thoma, while General der Kavallerie Stumme commanded the Italo-German Panzer Army in the

absence of Field Marshal Rommel who had been granted emergency leave for reasons of health.

b. Conference in Berlin. By surprise, Allied landing operations in North Africa began on 8 November. During one of the following days (probably 9 November) General Nehring received a telephone call from Berlin. Generalleutnant Gause, Chief of Staff of the Italo-German Panzer Army, was on the phone and requested the General to join him the next day for an urgent conference at his quarters in Berlin where he was staying on convalescent leave. The conference took place as requested. Another participant, aside from the previously mentioned generals, was Rommel's assistant adjutant, Captain of the Reserves Ingemar Bernd, when the Field Marshal had sent to report to Hitler at his headquarters near Rastenburg in East Prussia. Bernd was on his return flight to North Africa. He reported the following:

c. Report of Captain Ingemar Bernd.

The El Alamein Situation.

The British in their offensive employed extraordinary quantities of materiel, as the result of which the Italo-German Panzer Army found itself in an extremely difficult position. Enemy ground and air forces had crushed the front. Further attempts to ward off the enemy breakthrough would have been futile, regardless of the expenditure in men and materiel. (Field Marshal Rommel personally confirmed this fact to the author during a later conference at Eq. Ob.d.H., in early July 1943.)

Rommel's Decision.

Field Marshal Rommel decided on a strategic withdrawal and reported this intention to the OKW in his routine daily report (probably on 2 November). Rommel meant to save his army from useless annihilation, at the same time reserving for himself at least a certain amount of freedom of action so that he could make another stand in a new position and prevent an unchecked enemy advance in westerly direction.

A. Hitler's Radiogram.

On 3 November, while the withdrawal was in full swing, the radio at the army's new command post in Fuka received order from Hitler to Rommel and his army. In excerpt, its salient points read approximately as follows: "...stand fast under all circumstances....the eyes of the world are upon you....your stand is of decisive importance to the outcome of the war...."

Rommel Stands By His Decision.

Records revealed to the Field Marshal that Hitler's order was sent only after his own report to the OKW had been dispatched.

Was there then an intention on the part of Hitler, or was the whole affair due to a mistake? The latter solution appeared almost impossible.

Tension and dramatic developments within Rommel's staff followed in the wake of all this uncertainty and dubiousness. What was Rommel to do?

The army was retiring in westerly direction.

Under these circumstances it was impossible to order a halt and an about-face so as to recapture the old position in the Fl Alamein defile.

Such a decision would moreover have been wrong and devoid of rhyme or reason in the light of the above estimate of the situation by the commanding general who had independent authority to act within his theater of operations.

Should be order a halt at some random point in the desert and there defend himself constantly exposed to the danger of another break-through, an easy matter for the enemy in pursuit, or perhaps risk being outflanked and encircled by way of the easily crossed desert?

That decision appeared to make even less sense, it would indeed have been tantamount to the army's suicide.

The Field Marshal therefore decided after a moment's hesitation to stand by his original decision and to report this fact to Hitler.

Events at Fuehrer Headquarters.

What had happened at Fuehrer Headquarters?

A mistake on the part of the officer of the day (a sixty year old Major of the Reserves) was responsible for the fact that that morning's message from the Italo-German Panzer Army, which contained Rosmel's momentous decision, had not been recognized for its importance and therefore was not at once laid before Jodl, and thus Hitler. Neither of them learned of its contents previous to the routine report during the course of the morning. In the meantime, however, Hitler's impelling order, composed the day before in order to lend moral support to the Field Marshal and his brave soldiers, had already been transmitted to Africa, causing Rosmel's dramatic self-conflict.

Hitler's chagrin was vented on the guilty officer of the day who immediately found himself demoted and en route to a labor battalion.

Bernd's Mission to the O.K.W.

Knowing Hitler full well, the Field Marshal was not satisfied with only his radio report. For that reason he immediately sent Captain Bernd to the O.K.W. in East Prussia for his personal report on the situation in Egypt to the "Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces."

True to form, this tremendously important military task was entrusted not to a trained staff officer but to Bernd, in civilian life a Ministerialrat in the Propaganda Ministry!

Nevertheless, Rommel seems to have selected the right man.

Following five lines missing!!

Gause asked General Nehring whether he were willing and able to take charge of fortifying the rearward position. Capt. Bernd was to take the answer along to Africa the next morning while Generalleutnant Gause would inform the OKW.

Considering the exigency of the situation, General Nehring at once decided to assent.

e. Generalmajor Krause's Statement of 6 March 1947. Sequel:
On 6 March 1947 Generalmajor Krause, formerly the senior commander of
artillery in the Italo-German Panzer Army, informed the author that to the
best of his knowledge Rommel, recognizing the overall situation as untenable in the long run after the Allied landings in North Africa, proposed

to the OKW the evacuation of Africa, destruction of materiel, and embarkation of all personnel via air or naval vessel for the defense of the Italian mainland. Hitler peremptorily rejected this plan.

Whether Bernd or Hitler touched upon this incident in the course of the former's report, or whether there was time to refer to it, is unknown to the author. It was, nevertheless, obvious that some things were left unsaid when Bernd related his discussions at Fuehrer Headquarters to Generalleutnant Gause and General Nehring.

2. In Rome. Departure. Despite the fact that his arm wound had notyet healed, General Nehring departed for Rome on 11 November, intending, in accord with his mission, to fly from there to Italian North Africa, which he had previously left on 10 September aboard a Junkers hospital plane by way of Crete and Athens.

New Mission. On 12 November, while in Rome, General Nehring most unexpectedly received orders to proceed at once to Tunisia and to assume the command there.

SUED under whose superior authority he was to function in his new capacity.

The OB SUED personally briefed General Nehring in his new task, emphasizing its difficult and urgent nature. He pointed to a lack of leadership.

A long thrust in westerly direction was of the essence in order to gain freedom of movement. Desirable would be the establishing of our forces along approximately the line of the Tunisian-Algerian frontier. The OB SUED stated his and the OKW's hope that Gen. Nehring would be equal to

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the task in Tunisia. To be sure, only a limited number of German troops were available in that area. The XC Army Corps Staff was to be activated for General Nehring, expediency would have to be resorted to until its activation. No chief of staff had been located as yet but a chief of operations was available, i.e., Major Moll, GSC.

General Nehring decided he would take one of the Field Marshal's planes to Tunisia the next day (14 November), briefly look over the situation there, and return that same night in order to check his impressions and his estimate of the situation with the OB SUED.

The Staff of OB SUED. General Nehring still had opportunity to attend the evening's officers' call and conference within the OB SUED's Staff. He was thus able to form an impression of this staff and its members, about 20 in number, with whom he would have to collaborate during the following weeks. He also was able to learn about the enemy situation in which the OB SUED was mainly interested so far as debarkations in the harbors along the coast of Franch North Africa were concerned. To the author's memory, about 400 ships with a total carrying capacity of 700,000 metric tons had been reported against which the Luftwaffe had allegedly scored considerable success. The first wave of troops landed, therefore, had to be estimated at 70,000 men.

A GSC major had been detailed the particular task of handling matters pertaining to the command of ground forces.

Survey in Tunisia on 14 November 1942. General Nehring landed at the Tunis airport after a fast flight of 12 hours. The plane made a crash landing and was a total loss, but nobody was hurt. Detailed to accompany

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the general were, to his recollection, the previously mentioned Major Moll, as well as Major Hinkelbeing of the Staff, OB SUED.

mander. Tunis, Col. Harlinghausen, who had accomplished the airborne occupation of the Tunis airport without French interference. Col. Harlinghausen had taken in Tunis whatever vital security measures the limited number of forces at his disposal would allow. The population and the French government headed by the Resident, Admiral Esteva, apparently desired to remain neutral. Business was being conducted as usual. However, the French division, led by its commanding officer who simultaneously held the office of Tunisian minister of war, had evacuated the city and was encamped a short distance outside of Tunis in the direction Bejs, i.e., in the direction of the Allied debarkation points.

Also present in Tunis were the German Minister, Dr. Rahn, who had been sent there at an earlier time as political adviser to the military authorities, and the German member of the Italo-German Joint Armistice Commission whose familiarity of the locale and terrain was used to good advantage at a later date.

Subsequently General Nehring flew to Bizerte in order to contact the officer in command of army personnel in that area, a colonel whose adjutant was the erstwhile Capt. Felix. The colonel appeared to be deeply impressed by the shortcomings confronting him in his difficult situation. When asked about his opinion, he proposed to limit defense operations to centers of resistance based on Bizerte and Tunis, and to make Bizerte into a sort of

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strongpoint similar to Tunis. In his opinion it was impossible to do more with the limited number of forces available. No reconnaissance parties had been sent westward towards Bone due to the lack of motor vehicles. The same reason was given to explain the impossibility of complying that same day with General Nehring's demand for the advance of at least some token forces in westerly direction so as to delay the enemy, whose advance on Bizerte and Tunis was virtually a foregone conclusion, at a point as far distant as possible. Such an operation was however promised for the following day.

General Nehring left North Africa deeply impressed, although hardly cheered, by what he had seen.

The substitute plane promised by Rome did not arrive. The general therefore took a Junkers transport plane to Sicily (Trapani), at which point he transferred to the plane sent from Rome. He arrived in Rome after an uneventful flight and a smooth night landing.

Back in Rome. General Nehring spent the following day, 15 November, describing to the OB SUED and his staff the situation in Tunisis as he saw it; he also took occasion to propose and request every possible aid for solving the task entrusted to him. Activation of XC Army Corps Headquarters was of the essence so that a staff be at hand and the chain of command established. The transshipment of communications equipment was vital, without it no command could hope to function. The speedy arrival of close-knit, seasoned units, with officers and staffs who knew how to take and execute orders, was a top priority matter. In short, everything demanded

immediate action and was of the most vital importance; everything had to be improvised and laboriously scraped together.

3. Reflections.

a. The OKW's Estimate of the Possibility of Allied Landing
Operations. So far as General Nehring knew, the OKW in its estimate of the
situation up to that time had, contrary to Mussolini, considered an Allied
landing in French North Africa unlikely, for which reason it had refused
to sanction preparatory measures of any kind. Now the time was somewhat
late for winning "the race for Tunis" (of. "The War in North Africa,"
Part II, Page 21) against the enemy landing forces which only had to keep
moving ahead in order to succeed.

The ORW's viewpoint made little sense when comtemplated from Africa.

The ORW's viewpoint made little sense when comtemplated from African soil since no other reasons were known to support it. Throughout the summer of 1942 Rommel's Panzer Army had been haunted by the specter of an enemy landing far in its rear. Every large convoy in the Mediterranean recalled this possibility to Field Marshal Rommel's mind. To illustrate: during mid-summer of 1942 forces of the German Africakorps had repeatedly been ordered to stand by, so that in case of an Allied landing along the Via Balbia coastal highway (so called after its builder Balbo) they might at once be directed to the danger spot. The British night raid of 13-14 September helped to emphasize the enemy threat. In this instance, however, the attempt failed. It had not been launched deep enough in the rear of Rommel's army, so that Axis troops were able to interfere at once. All

German and Italian units in the vicinity took prompt countermeasures. It had also become evident that the Malta-bound large British convoys would be spotted soon after they had set out on their long voyage from Gibraltar. The strong Luftwaffe forces based on Sicily would proceed to raid them in about the longitude of Bougie, and particularly while the vessels were navigating the narrow Straits of Sicily. In this manner the convoys would be broken up before they reached their destination. The same fate would have awaited troop transports bound for some point along the coast of Italian North Africa. For this reason an enemy Landing still farther in the rear of the German forces was probable. It was all the more likely in the light of rumors which had long been making the rounds, or which perhaps had purposely been put in circulation to mislead the German commend, about American preparations in Dakar for an advance in westerly (sic) (easterly? Tr.N.) or northerly direction via Lake Chad. In May 1942 Rommel therefore deliberated sending General Nehring with a number of planes to Lake Chad in order to obtain a clear picture of the situation.

and west of Algiers. Oran harbor was almost out of the Luftwaffe's reach;
Algiers was beyond the range of German fighters. German bombers were therefore able to raid these sites only under conditions affording them protection, i.e., cloud covered skies, dawn or dusk, and during night time.

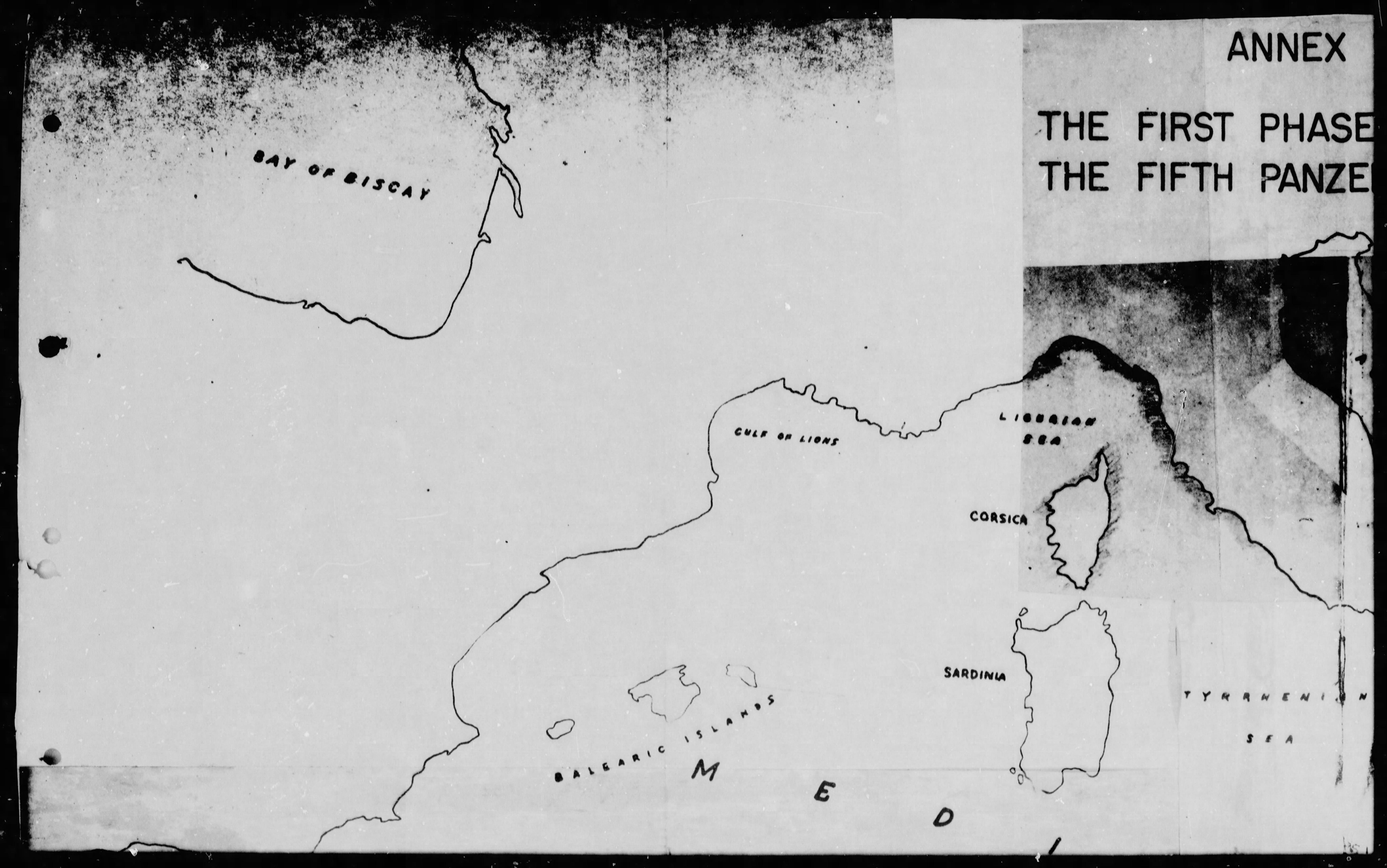
The Attitude of France. In addition to the aforesaid difficulties, the political adviser in Tunis, German Minister Dr. Rahn, at that time stated that on his opinion the Allies have good reason to believe that, when the time comes, the French would join forces with the Americans

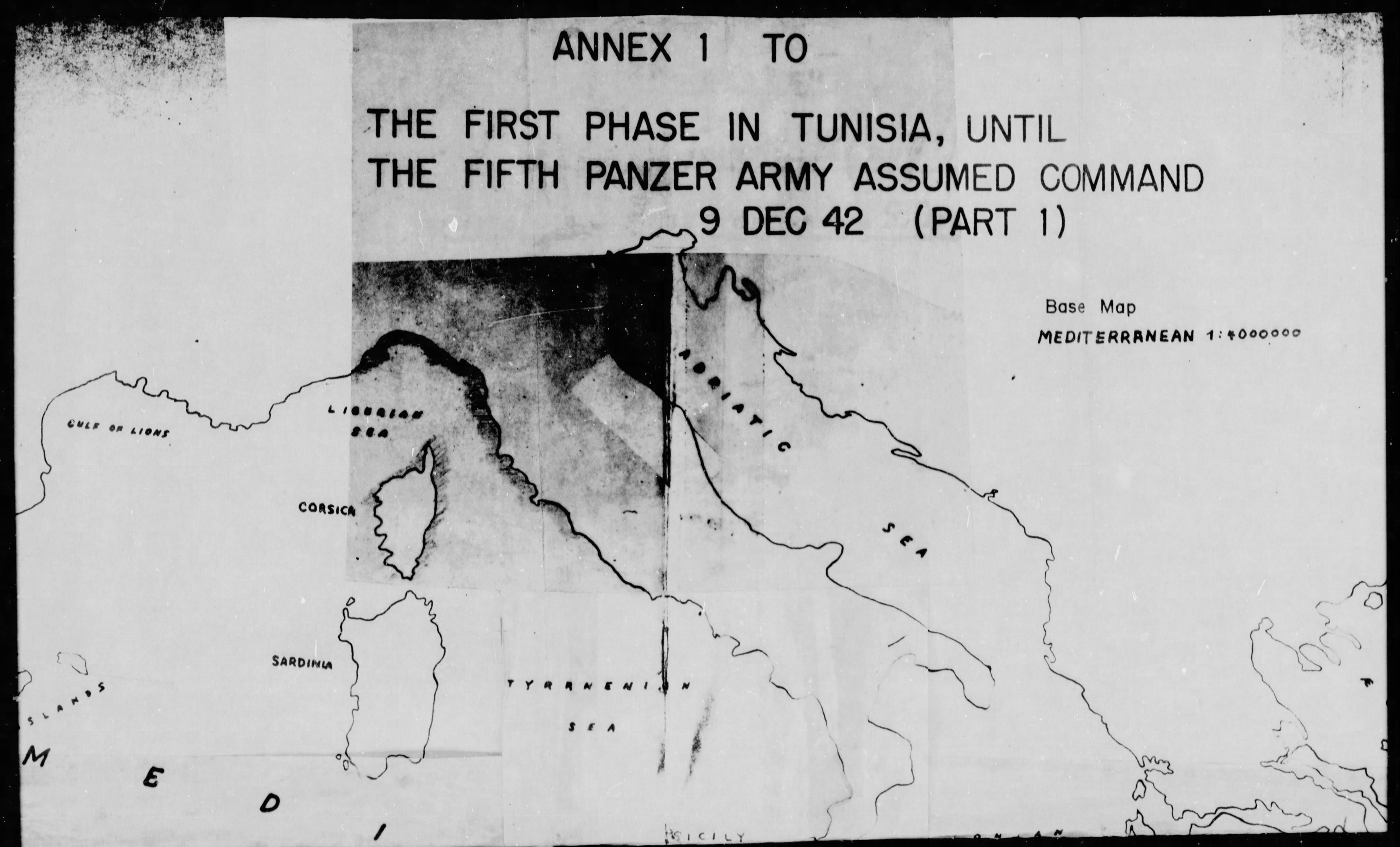
Events bore out this analysis. Even advocates of a Franco-German reaproachment like Admiral Darlan, who favored the establishment of more cordial relations with Germany even prior to 1939, offered no more than temporary resistance to the Allies' intervention.

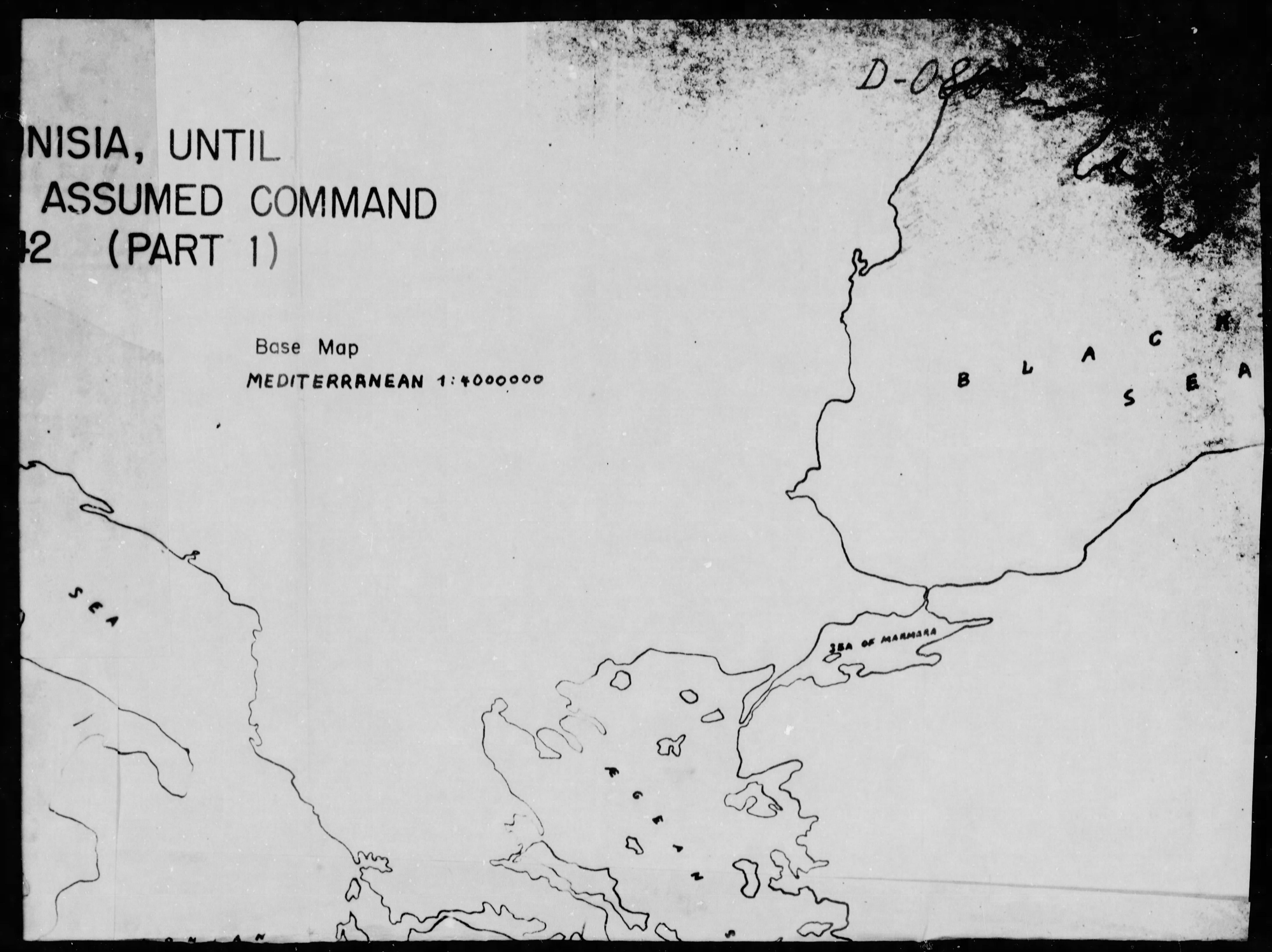
Critique of the Decision

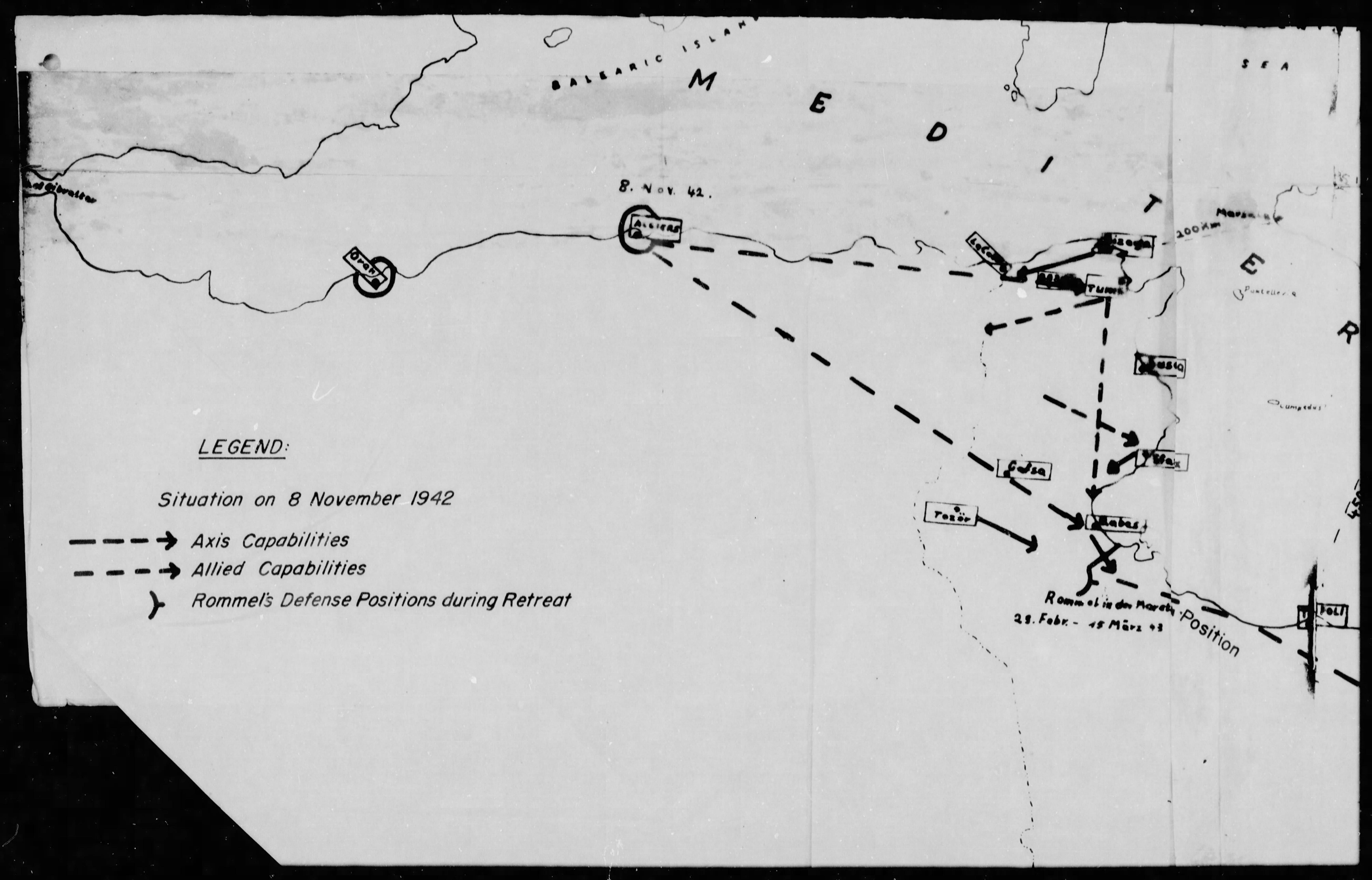
The Allies very appropriately chose the safe middle-of-the-road course. The landing sites were not too close to the enemy, i.e., out of range of the German II Air Corps on Sicily. Nor were they too far from the main focal area, so that there was no need for an extended, consuming advance in westerly (sic) (easterly? Tr.N.) direction via Lake Chad, heading roughly towards the upper Nile Valley, which at best would have been an enterprise of doubtful outcome. At the end of such a maneuver the Allied forces would moreover have found themselves once more facing Rommel's front, rather than at the flank, or, as was to be preferred, in the rear of the Italo-German Panzer Army. Attaining the latter objective by advancing north from Lake Chad with a sufficiently large body of troops was at that time held to be impossible for reasons of terrain and supply. That opinion might, and probably does, retain its validity even today.

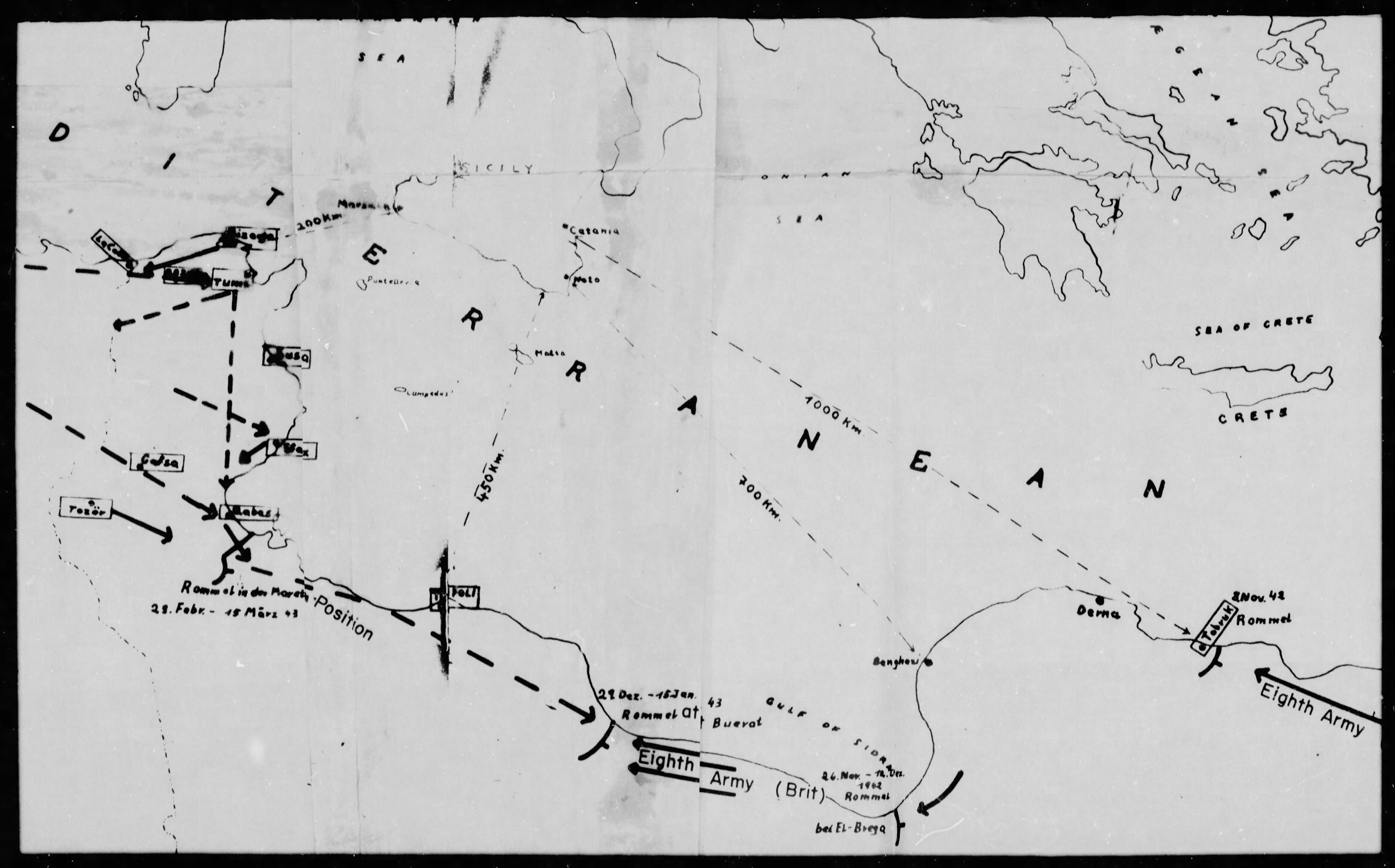
The landing operations in the aforesaid ports were therefore the obvious solution to the problem. They entailed but little risk, particularly in view of the political spadework which appears to have proceeded them.

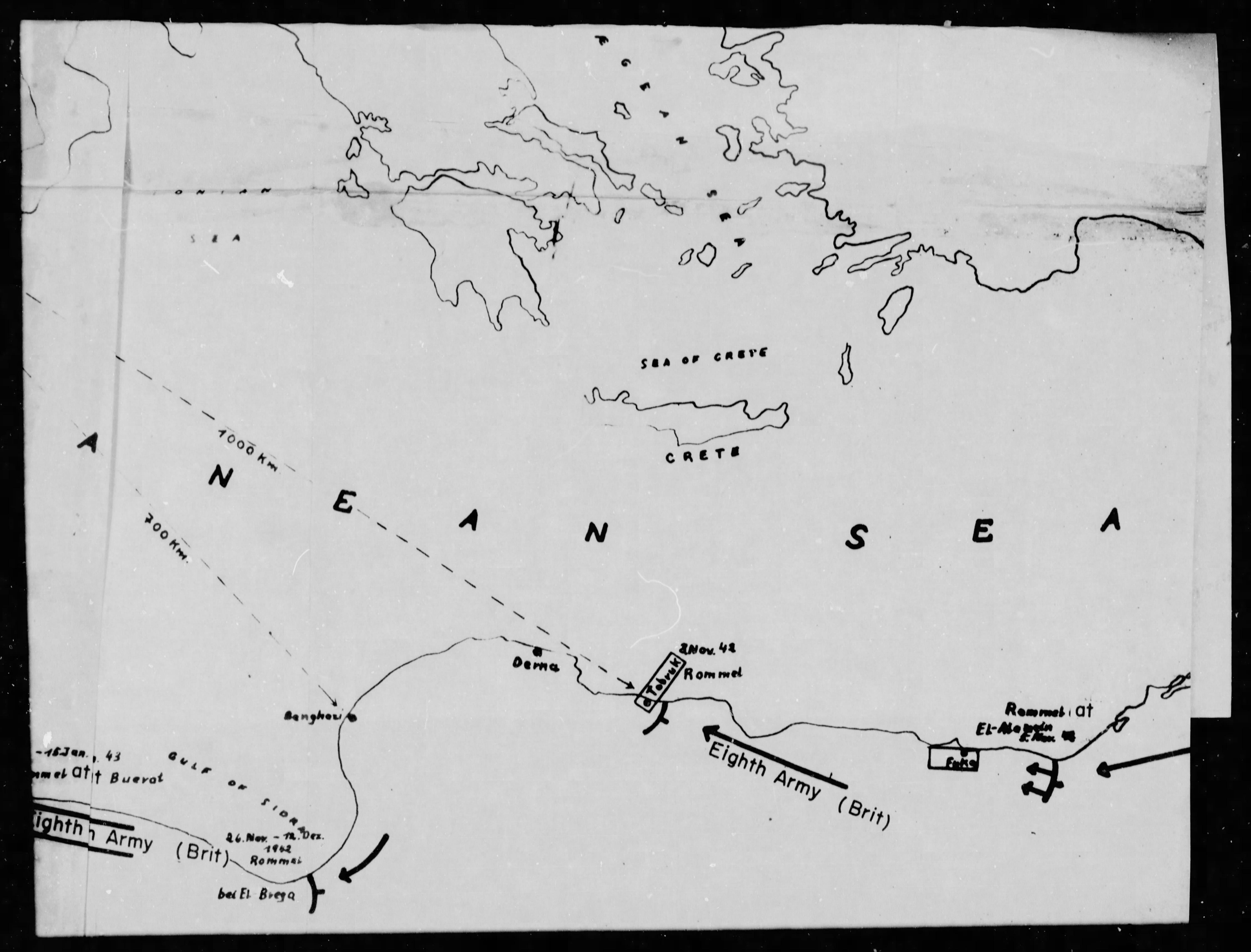


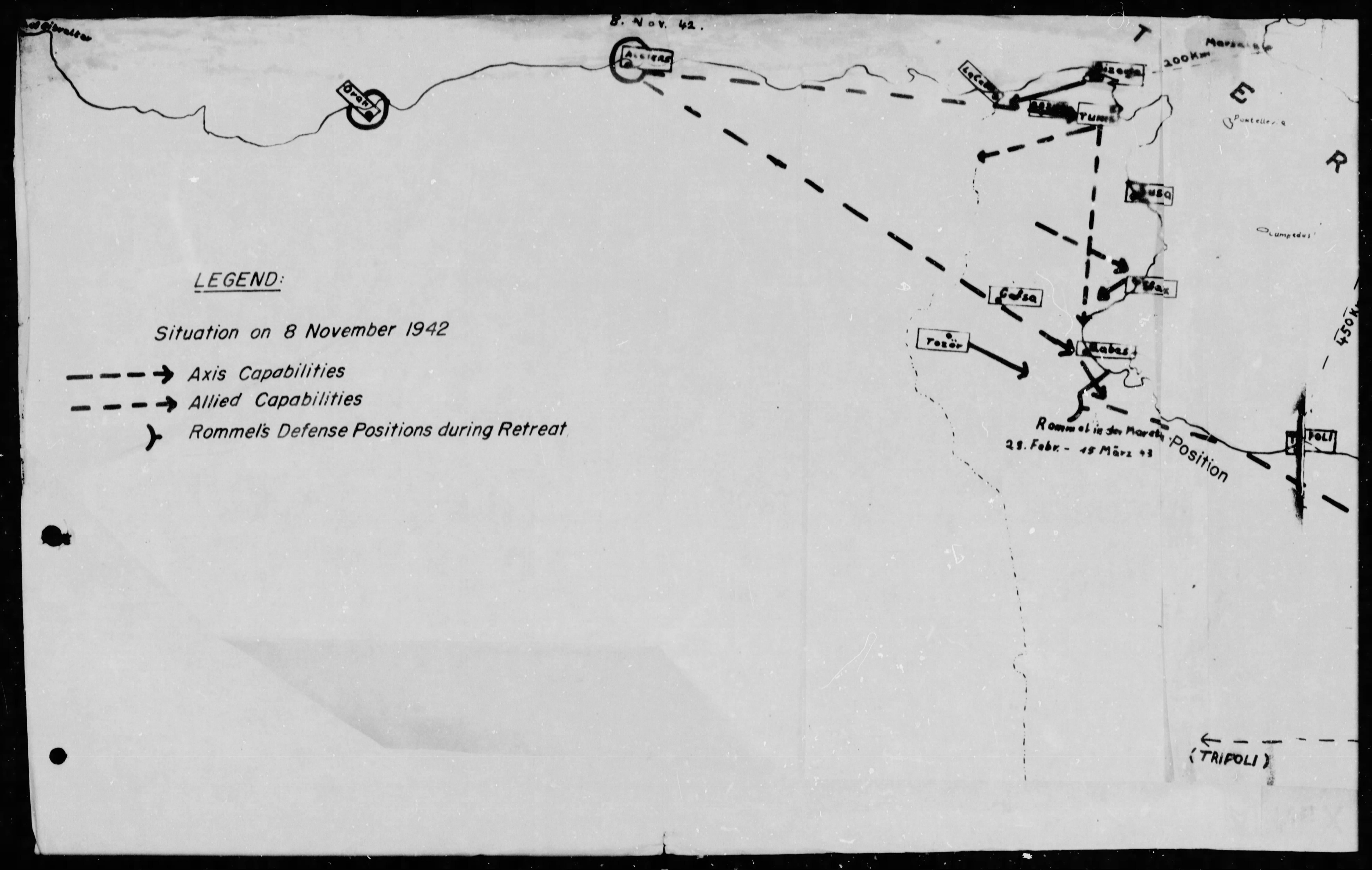


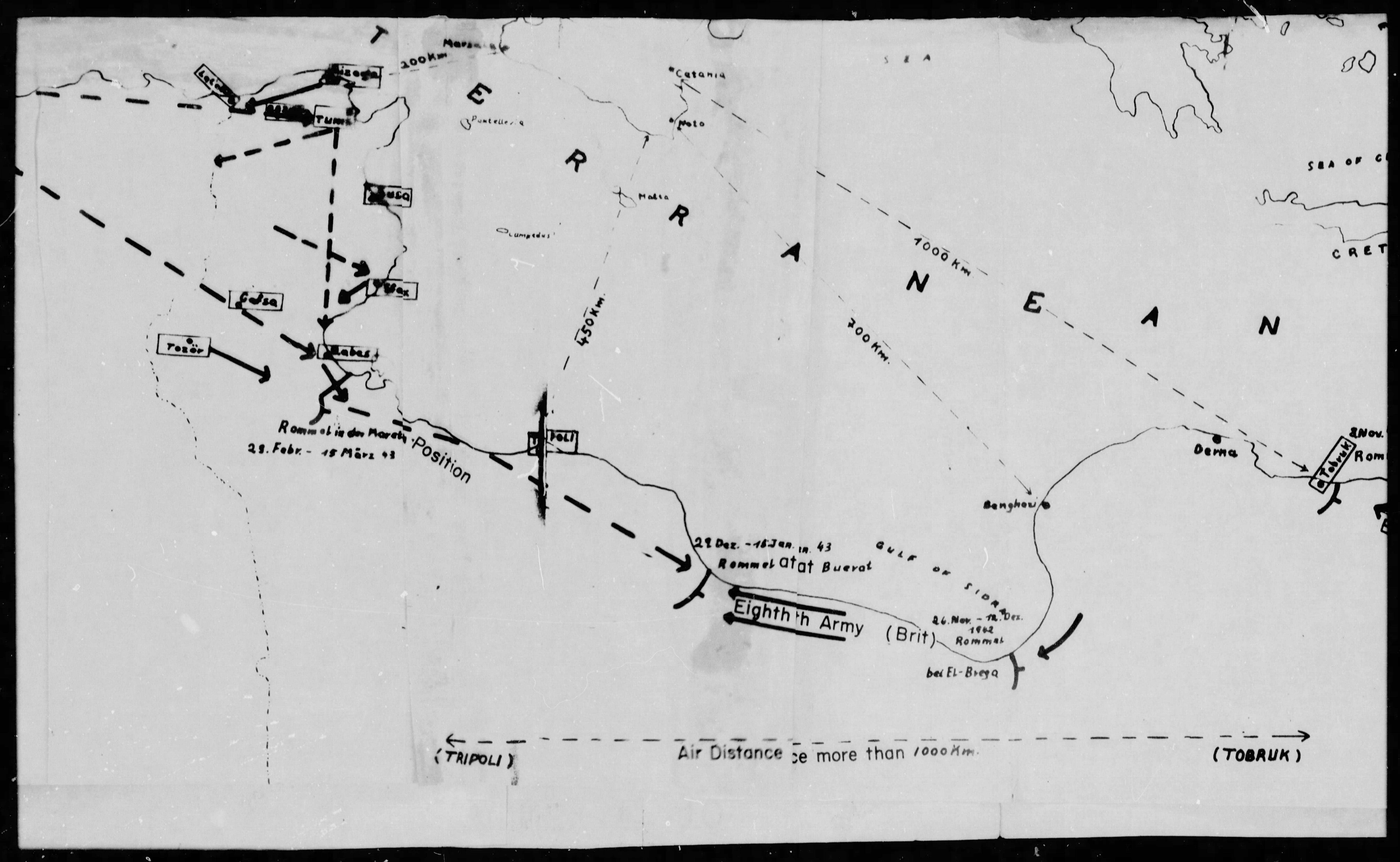












SEA OF GRETE Fl-Atoppes 4 Benghou Eighth Army at Buerat n Army 26. Mov. - 12. Dez. Rommal bei El-Brega more than 1000 Km. (TOBRUK)