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1 Tunisia

"A Cascade of Contradictory Orders"

Torch's success had been eased by the surprise and magnitude of the Allied invasion that had sparked turmoil in the fragmented command structure of French North Africa (AFN), a confusion amplified by Darlan's presence in Algiers. To these factors was added what General Jean Delmas qualified as "a certain innocence, a spirit of discipline, the oath (to Pétain) led *l'armée d'armistice* into passivity and powerlessness," that sabotaged a staunch opposition to the Allied invasion in Morocco and Algeria.[1] Unfortunately for the Allies, that same "passivity and powerlessness" that had facilitated success in Morocco and Algeria helped to shuffle Tunisia out of reach. From an Allied perspective, Tunisia offered AFN's most exposed link, for several reasons. First, it was most vulnerable to Axis invasion either directly from Italy or through Italian Tripolitania, which made Tunisia's defense a challenge. Second, at the Axis control commission's insistence, Tunisia was sparsely garrisoned. But this had not especially worried the French, as Tunisia and the Constantinois were considered less likely targets of an Allied invasion. Therefore, defense measures were vague and ad hoc, despite the large concentrations of Allied planes and ships at Gibraltar noticed on 7 November.[2] Third, Tunisia contained a large Italian population favorable to the Axis. Fourth, because Torch had prioritized Morocco over Tunisia, unlike in Casablanca, Oran, or Algiers, commanders in Tunis had to react not to an Allied armada, but to an Axis assault. Finally, no resistance mobilized in Tunis that might have disputed Axis access to Bizerte, or especially to El Aouina airfield in Tunis, the initial entry point of the Axis invasion, replicating Monsabert's momentary sequestration of Blida outside of Algiers for Allied benefit, actions that might have bought enough time for an arrival of British troops.

This did not happen in part because of confusion and delay in Algiers, as Darlan and Laval attempted unsuccessfully to harness the Allied invasion to force Hitler to revise the conditions of the armistice. The result was "a succession of orders and counter-orders" that increased confusion in a way that basically "created competition among several headquarters, thus several

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commanders, each with a modicum of authority and all independent in the hierarchy of rank and functions in the chain of command," writes Robin Leconte.[3] Of the three main decision-makers in Tunis, two were admirals who took their rudder orders directly from Vichy, not Algiers. Meanwhile, the commander of ground forces in AFN, Alphonse Juin, complained that the *Commandant supérieur des troupes tunisiennes* (CSTT), General Georges Barré, failed to take decisive action to prevent the Axis seizure of El Aouina. In Juin's telling, Barré's "hesitation," that triggered the Tunisian "tragedy," was a direct consequence of the deliberate scrambling of the French chain of command upon Weygand's 1941 departure. Barré's primary concern was to keep his communications open with Algeria. This allowed Axis forces to occupy Bizerte and Tunis ahead of the arriving British First Army, thereby giving Rommel a new lease on life.[4] Unfortunately, blaming subordinates and systemic command muddle became a convenient alibi for Juin to obfuscate his own role in the Tunisian "tragedy." In January 1942, Juin had accurately anticipated events that would incite the Axis to invade Tunisia, and predicted almost exactly how that invasion would unfold.[5] Why, then, were the French, and Juin in particular, not better prepared to react?

Most historians have focused rightly on Darlan's nefarious role. Of course, Darlan was only playing Laval's game to protect the *zone libre* by giving permission to Hitler and Ciano at Munich to invade Tunisia. When even that huge concession failed to protect Vichy's sovereignty, Darlan reluctantly switched sides.[6] Yet, Juin's abdication of responsibility did not go unnoticed, either at the time or subsequently. Alternative explanations for Juin's hesitation highlight the fact that, as a great admirer of Rommel, and facilitator of the Paris Protocols, he nurtured a pro-Axis bias. A more benign, Allied-friendly interpretation of his behavior suggests that, aware of the ambiguous loyalties of *l'armée d'Afrique*, Juin played the clock, certain that Berlin's response to Torch would result in the invasion of Vichy's *zone libre*. Such action would implode the 1940 Armistice, expose the hollowness of Vichy "sovereignty," and tip French loyalties definitely to the Allies.[7] Juin's main concern was to maintain French control of AFN and prevent a Muslim uprising. He quickly concluded that assisting the Anglo-American invasion offered the best guarantee of continued imperial sovereignty.[8]

As in Algeria and Morocco, the tangled command structure combined with policy ambiguity and ethical uncertainty to produce "*la confusion des ordres*" in Tunisia and the Constantinois, which often whiplashed local commanders, who were either abandoned to make their own decisions or forced to decide which of their superiors' contradictory directives to obey.[9] This was compounded, in the view of Robin Leconte, by the realization that several senior French officers had conspired with the Anglo-Americans, which signaled a politically fluid situation that made commanders up and down the hierarchy reluctant to issue orders that might be countermanded by their superiors, or that their subordinates might not obey. Their decision not to act was confirmed by news from Algiers which arrived at the end of the afternoon of 8 November of a local ceasefire concluded between Darlan and American General Charles Ryder. Nevertheless, the order issued at 13:45 from XIX Corps commander General Louis Koeltz to General Édouard Welvert, commander of the *Division de Marche de Constantine* (DMC), had been to march on Algiers. When Welvert asked if that order were still in effect, he was informed at 18:45 that, “following the evolution of the situation, General Welvert has complete freedom to take all of the necessary measures.” In other words, the senior command had abdicated its authority, leaving officers on their own. Tension increased on 9 November as Luftwaffe aircraft began to land at El Aouina in Tunis and Sidi Ahmed airfield at Bizerte. Welvert was besieged by subordinate commanders demanding instructions, including Barré in Tunis, who reported that Vichy’s permission for Axis planes to land in El Aouina had brought French officers to the verge of mutiny. In other words, the French command was caught between the need to stop the spread of “dissidence” in the ranks and pressure to repel an Axis invasion.[10]

This confusion rippled down the chain of command to Sétif, almost 300 kilometers southeast of Algiers, where on Sunday morning, 8 November 1942, Second lieutenant Jean Lapouge, who had arrived only eight days previously in the *7e Régiment des tirailleurs algériennes* (7e RTA), was awakened by his batman with news that the Americans had invaded. Lapouge hailed from a family of infantrymen, being the son of a colonel of Zouaves and the grandson of an infantry general. A devout Catholic and former Boy Scout, an organization whose motto was “son of France and a good citizen,” Lapouge’s destiny since boyhood had been Saint-Cyr. Although the French military academy had been shifted by the occupation from its Paris suburb to Aix-en-Provence in the *zone libre*, Lepouge had graduated with his class, baptized “promotion Maréchal Pétain,” only a few days earlier. As a native of Oran, he predictably had chosen an *armée d’Afrique* regiment upon graduation, which had assigned him to lead the machinegun platoon in one of its companies. It wasn’t much of a machinegun – a gas-actuated, air-cooled Hotchkiss that sat on a tripod and weighed 25 kilos. Each company was meant to maintain an inventory of four of them, as well as two 81 mm mortars. The Hotchkiss could in theory fire 450 8-millimeter rounds per minute. In fact, its firing strips held only 24 rounds, requiring its three-man crew constantly to reload. If, that is, they had any munitions – the Axis control commissions permitted the Constantine Division, of which 7e RTA was part, only 30 cartridges per rifle and 200 per machinegun for a 9-month period. The control commissions were equally parsimonious in their authorization of vehicles and petrol, which meant that the few trucks in the division’s inventory were most often requisitioned civilian

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vehicles in precarious mechanical repair.[11] The result was a reliance on mules to transport munitions and other impedimenta. The Hotchkiss had been a state-of-the-art weapon – in 1914! But it was par for the course in the 7e RTA, whose two battalions were de-motorized and armed with Great War-vintage weaponry pulled by horse-drawn logistics. "Junk" was the verdict pronounced by American General George Patton when he had encountered French armaments at Casablanca in November. Under these circumstances, he marveled that the French fought as courageously as they did.[12]

Thinking his batman was engaged in a practical joke of the sort frequently played on new cadets at Saint-Cyr, Lapouge pulled the sheet over his head, rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. But the commotion in the corridor convinced him to rise, dress, and report to barracks, where he was confronted by his irate company commander, who reprimanded him for his tardiness. The DMC was reacting to Darlan's order sent at 07:30 that morning to resist the Allied invasion. But there was no Allied activity reported off the Constantinois and Tunisia. Rumor circulated that several senior French officers in Algiers had defected to the Anglo-Americans. The regiment collected its equipment and marched north to Kherrata, a village in the Kabylia that dominated a narrow, north–south passage between Sétif and the Gulf of Béjarïa. "Our orders were to stop the Americans!," Lapouge remembered, although why the French might think that the Allies on their way from Algiers to Tunisia might detour through Kherrata remains a mystery. The 7e RTA strung mines along the road through the narrow pass and sited their machineguns. The next day, amid rumors that American troops joined by defecting French soldiers were marching on Sétif, Alsace native and 7th Infantry Brigade commander Colonel Jacques (Jacob) Schwartz asked his DMC Commander Welvert for instruction: "Fire [on the mutineers] without hesitation," came Welvert's reply. Rather than fire on French troops, and apprised of German planes landing at El Aouina, Schwartz ordered his soldiers back to barracks.[13] At 23:00 on 10 November, word finally reached Lapogue's company that they were no longer to shoot at the Americans. On 14 November, the 7e RTA boarded a train that deposited them at Tébessa on the frontier with Tunisia. The following days melded into a fog of marches and counter-marches with heavy packs, with the fatigue of setting up camp only to break it down, and hike to a new destination.[14]

Lapouge's change of orders, from battling the Americans on 8 November to joining them only two days later, suggested an extenuated transition accompanied by hesitation, prevarication, and a muddle of orders and counter-orders – in essence, a breakdown of authority and hierarchy which caused many officers to make their own decisions. In fact, Torch followed by the Axis invasion of Tunisia forced the French military to confront an existential crisis. Unlike conventional Second World War forces, where political authority remained uncontested, soldiers in France after June 1940 were forced to choose between different concepts of legitimacy. The French army had been humiliated by its 1940 defeat. The rationale for the armistice had been poorly understood in AFN, which had required Vichy first to dispatch Weygand to shore up the loyalty of its imperial soldiers and impose an oath to the Marshal, and subsequently to scramble the chain of command to thwart a wholesale defection. This ultimately boomeranged as it fragmented the response in AFN to the simultaneous Allied and Axis invasions of November 1942.

However, Torch, and the subsequent Axis invasion of Tunisia, triggered a lengthy six-day crisis as a splintered, confused, and politically insecure command in North Africa spewed imprecise, often contradictory, frequently canceled orders that ricocheted between Algiers, Tunis, Casablanca, Vichy, and Army and Navy commands with their separate and often conflicting political agendas, service networks and personal loyalties. Lower down this multilayered and whiplashed hierarchy, officers, with partial information and battered by rumor and confusion, were forced to choose which authority, which city, which service network, which intermediary commander, or which order or countermanded order to obey. French officers were often left to interpret the orders received in pragmatic ways. Together with time, this fluid situation multiplied misunderstandings and confusion in the military chain of command, creating space for initiative and the negotiation of individual "moral choices" within the hierarchical framework. Uncertainty and confusion generated competition between command echelons, and tensions within the rank structure between inter-dependent leaders and subordinates.[15]

Defending Tunisia

Even before the Torch planners began to consider the invasion of AFN, Tunisia was already viewed by senior French commanders as the critical node and the point most vulnerable to Axis invasion. However, one difficulty with the Vichy policy of "defense against whomever" in AFN was that it failed to define the threat and to establish clear strategic priorities for dealing with it. British advances into Cyrenaica in early 1941 had the French imagining how to reoccupy the demilitarized zone in southern Tunisia to disarm retreating Italians who might appear before the Mareth Line, a Maginot-like clutter of pill boxes and strong points built to seal the "bottleneck" between southern Tunisia and Italian Tripolitania. The arrival of Rommel in North Africa in February 1941 and the establishment of a strong Luftwaffe presence in Sicily had forced Weygand to consider the possibility of an Axis invasion of Tunisia. *Le Délégué général du government* had vehemently objected to the second Paris protocol struck between Darlan and Abetz on 27–28 May 1941, which would have allowed the Germans "in civilian clothes" to use Bizerte as a supply point for the Afrika Korps. By threatening to open fire on any German who appeared in Tunisia, he managed to scupper that part of the "protocol" at least, although the Darlan–Abetz bargain did spring Juin from his *Oflag* while eventually supplying 2,000 French trucks for the Germans.[16] On 28 September 1941, with the Mediterranean increasingly engulfed in the war, Weygand had issued a defense plan that posited the most likely threats to AFN to be German incursions either through Spain and Spanish Morocco or into Tunisia with the naval base at Bizerte as the principal target.[17]

Deprived from 19 November 1941 of Weygand's unifying vision and authority, Juin, Darlan, and de Lattre de Tassigny subsequently split over how best to defend Tunisia. At the base of this disagreement was the question of who might constitute the greater menace to AFN. With his navalist perspective and a more collaborationist construct of Vichy "neutrality," Darlan's priority was to defend against an attack by *les Anglo-Saxons*.[18] As a land-warfare professional unencumbered by Darlan's – and the French navy's – ironclad Anglophobia, Juin, like Weygand, was preoccupied with the possibility of an Axis incursion either from Sicily or through the Mareth Line. But, mindful of Weygand's fate, "prudence" initially required Juin merely to list the potential invasion routes into AFN rather than prioritize them for his subordinates. However, when, on 30 January 1941, Juin issued his *instruction personnelle et secrète* (IPS) detailing the Axis threat to Tunisia, it raised such a tsunami in the collaborationist spas of Vichy that he ordered it destroyed. Henceforth, rather like Alsace-Moselle, the defense of Tunisia against an Axis incursion became something to be thought of always, but spoken of never.[19]

In the absence of an agreed-upon external enemy, predictably the French high command declared war on each other. During his time as *Délégué général* and taking inspiration from those "hedgehogs" that had imploded on the Somme and Aisne in 1940, Weygand had envisioned taking a stand in the north by transforming Bizerte and Tunis into a French Tobruk. In November 1941, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, commander of Tunisian ground forces (CSTT) from September 1941 until he was relieved in February 1942, and Alphonse Juin, land forces commander in AFN, had wrangled over how best to secure the Maghreb's eastern marches. That what should have been a sober staff *Kriegsspiel* quickly degenerated into an ad hominem slanging match was hardly surprising, as Juin and the temperamental de Lattre had been bitter rivals since Saint-Cyr.[20] Speaking as the resident *français d'Algérie*, and from a geopolitical optic that considers geography as destiny, Juin viewed Tunisia as "merely the prolongation towards the east of Algeria's Constantinois." Juin's mandate was to defend AFN, of which Algeria – sovereign French territory – was the keystone, with vulnerable protectorates buttressing the flanks. Judging that a forward defense of Tunisia was impractical, Juin's preference was for French forces to fall back on the Tunisian Dorsal, the eastern extension of the Saharan Atlas that slices through the frontier between

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Tunisia and the Constantinois. Not surprisingly, perhaps, while Juin's early strategic withdrawal was subsequently endorsed by the French official history of the campaign, many contemporaries found it questionable.[21]

Juin dismissed de Lattre's vision for a forward defense on the Mareth Line as impractical without air cover and adequate logistics. The debate was further complicated by the fact that no one could agree whether the main threat was through Tripolitania in the east or Bizerte in the north. Juin won the argument by backchanneling Darlan, then Defense Secretary, that he too feared a British incursion through Tripolitania, and encouraged him to work Wiesbaden for the very reinforcements, armaments, logistical capabilities, and upgrades of the Mareth Line that would make de Lattre's plan feasible. It was in this context of working to secure German cooperation for the defense of southern Tunisia against the British that Juin had met with Göring and General Walter Warlimont in Berlin on 21 December 1941.[22]

But, in the opinion of one of his biographers, the actual reason for Juin's rejection of de Lattre's concentration in southern Tunisia was that it posited a scenario of Erwin Rommel in search of a Tunisian sanctuary should he be put to flight in Egypt and harried across Libya by the British. Were that to happen, Juin had no intention of resisting Rommel, Jean-Christophe Notin speculates, but rather would join forces with him to fight the British. "We'll fight the Anglo-Saxons. I guarantee it," Juin had promised Laval. This alleged declaration joined the widely accepted rumor that Juin had given his word not to take up arms against Germany as a condition for his release from Königstein, to become the ball and chain that the controversial Marshal of France dragged behind him for the remainder of his life.[23] A skeptical Costagliola counters that Juin had been made well aware, in the wake of his failed December 1941 encounter with Göring and Warlimont, that the political and military foundation for a joint Franco-Axis defense of southern Tunisia had not been laid. Furthermore, Juin feared that to make common cause with the Axis would open AFN to Anglo-American reprisals. The bottom line was that Berlin did not trust the French, fearing that, if they were allowed to rehabilitate the Mareth Line, it might be used to block Axis forces retreating across Tripolitania.[24]

But whatever the complaints about Juin's character – and they were legion – most admitted that his strategic analysis was thorough, a trait that would make him especially appreciated by the Americans. Juin's predilection to fall back into Algeria was also based on the realization that Tunisia offered a fragile redoubt for the defense of AFN. At Italian insistence, Tunisia was lightly garrisoned, with only one lean eight-battalion division of around 12,000 troops, scattered in garrisons throughout the territory.[25] Juin complained that the significant Italian population in Tunisia and eastern Algeria contained many Axis sympathizers, who compromised his ability to camouflage troops as

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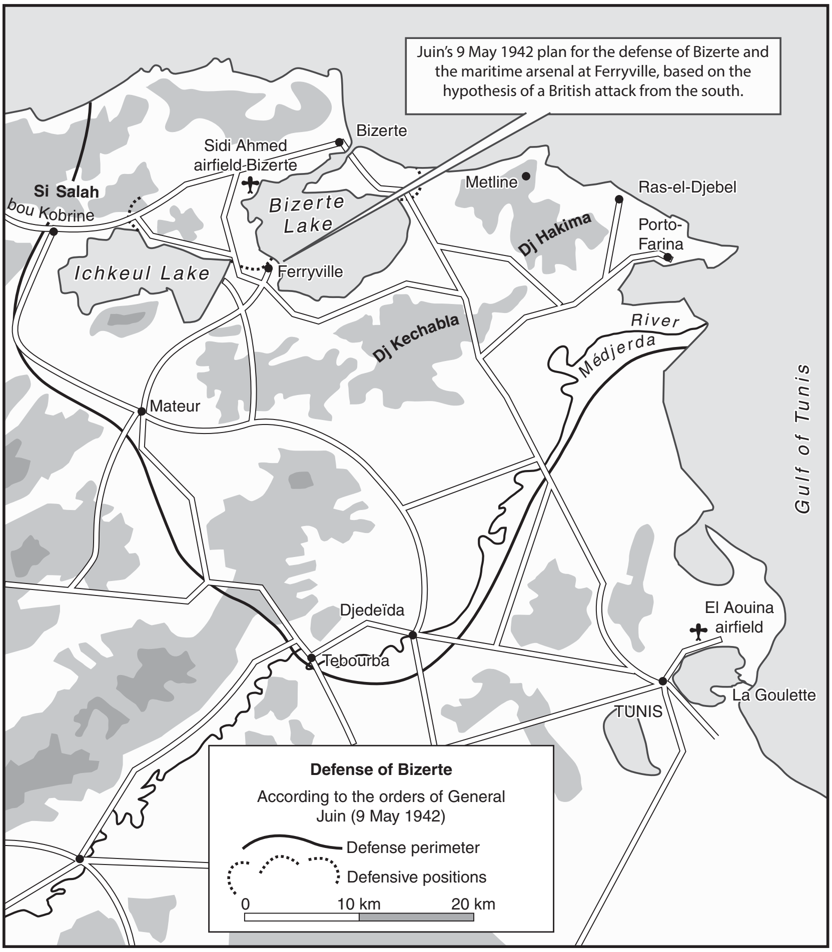
native police, scatter supplemental soldiers in inconspicuous remote garrisons, or create secret arms caches, as had become commonplace in Morocco.[26]

If the loyalty of the European population was in doubt, the potential for indigenous defection was even greater. In August 1942, the French had incarcerated Habib Bourguiba, the leader of the Tunisian nationalist party Neo-Destour at the Fort Saint-Nicolas in Marseilles. And while Bourguiba had counseled his followers not to be seduced by Axis blandishments, Tunisian Muslims were bombarded by appeals from such pro-Axis stations as Radio Bari, Radio Berlin, Radio Roma, and, from January 1943, Radio Tunis, as well as being showered with tracts written by the propaganda office of Major Mähnert in Tunis and distributed along the front, promising favorable treatment to *tirailleurs* and Frenchmen who deserted to Axis lines. However, treachery seems not to have been widespread among the 26,000 Tunisians eventually incorporated into the French army between 1942 and 1945, in large part because it did not take a genius to realize, in the wake of El Alamein, Stalingrad, and Torch, that Axis days were numbered. Nevertheless, the food situation in AFN continued to be a critical worry for French officials, who feared that famine might shift the loyalties of Muslims in Morocco and Algeria toward the Axis. So, Juin had to calculate what percentage of his meager forces should be held back for internal security.[27]

In January 1942, de Lattre was relieved by Juin protégé Georges Barré, in a switch-out that permanently damaged relations between two of France's most senior generals. In the short term, however, the July 1942 fall of Tobruk and Rommel's subsequent surge into Egypt, that helped to precipitate the Allied decision for Torch, had seemed to render the Juin versus de Lattre strategic debate temporarily academic. By January 1943, when Rommel did appear on his Tunisian doorstep, Juin and his *armée d'Afrique* had wobbled into the Allied camp. Rommel's one-time aficionado now became his antagonist.[28] But, if de Lattre's Mareth Line defense scheme had departed with his recall to France, no agreed-upon plan to defend Tunisia (Map 1.1) had been resolved. In Weygand's view, holding Bizerte was vital. In February 1942, Darlan also had informed Juin that the retention of Bizerte in the face of a British attack was "primordial" even at the expense of other points, because it would "attract the maximum of (British) assets."[29]

Following Darlan's directive, Juin, together with Barré and Bizerte commander Vice-Admiral Edmond Derrien, wargamed the defense of Bizerte on 8–11 April 1942. Juin's conclusion was that the defense of Bizerte's harbor, arsenal, and industrial facilities would require a defense perimeter 104 kilometers long. Defending this perimeter would require the totality of French reserves in AFN and "risk the fate of North Africa and the field army on a single battle." His solution was to remove Bizerte from control of the CSTT, and hand its defense over to Derrien, who would concentrate on defending Ferryville, at



Juin’s 9 May 1942 plan for the defense of Bizerte and the maritime arsenal at Ferryville, based on the hypothesis of a British attack from the south.

Defense of Bizerte

According to the orders of General Juin (9 May 1942)

Bizerte
Sidi Ahmed airfield-Bizerte
Si Salah
bou Kobrine
Bizerte Lake
Metline
Ras-el-Djebel
Porto-Farina
Dj Hakima
Ichkeul Lake
Ferryville
River Médjerda
Dj Kechabla
Mateur
Gulf of Tunis
Djedeïda
Tebourba
El Aouina airfield
La Goulette
TUNIS
Defense perimeter
Defensive positions
0
10 km
20 km

Map 1.1 Map of northern Tunisia.

the southern end of the Lac de Bizerte, which contained France’s sole overseas navy yard and arsenal, and the Menzel Djemil isthmus that separates the Lac de Bizerte from the sea. In the meantime, three divisions of troops rushed from Algeria and Morocco would lift the siege of Bizerte within thirty days. Juin’s plan was confirmed in a 9 May 1942 IPS, and CSTT Barré was to finalize its details by 22 August.[30]

In his memoirs, Juin insisted that his plan simply remained faithful to Weygand’s vision.[31] Unfortunately for Juin, he was sent back to the drawing

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board by Darlan, now commander in chief of French forces, and Pierre Laval, who had been restored as premier in April 1942. "The military value of Tunisia remains in its harbors," Darlan lectured Juin on 2 May, and "The Tunis–Bizerte group must be tenaciously defended, above all Bizerte . . . The defense of Bizerte against a land attack must be reevaluated; covering forces must fight tooth and nail to keep the enemy for as long as possible far from the position; the battle for the isthmuses being the final recourse." Because Darlan's corrective arrived at the last minute, Juin's 9 May IPS, which renounced the defense of Mareth, of the eastern ports of Gabès, Sousse, and Sfax, and of Tunis, remained the battle plan for the moment. But it nevertheless specified that, although abandoned, "*their harbors and airfields would be rendered unserviceable*" (italics in the original). But this admonition lacked urgency, because the calculation at Vichy was that other imperial locations were judged to be more likely Allied objectives, a strategic misstep reinforced by the 5 May 1942 British seizure of Diego-Suárez (now named Ansiranana) in Madagascar. So, it did not seem to matter much that command of Bizerte would fall to Admiral Derrien, while "the command of Tunisia" would revert to CSTT Barré, "charged with organizing the south, and the center of Tunisia, and to hold the mountainous zone to the east of Béja."[32] These remained Barré's marching orders, modified slightly by a further IPS – Juin's last before Torch – of 22 August, that laid out the "phases of maneuver" that incorporated Darlan's instructions "to insure no matter what the preservation of Bizerte." But the assumption upon which Juin's defense plan was based remained a British attack on Bizerte from the south.[33] In the event, the enemy, the direction, and the configuration of attack diverged wildly from Juin's planning assumptions.

But conflict scenarios seemed remote in AFN's somnambulant autumn of 1942, as Rommel had kicked the British into the Nile delta, Juin shuffled his troops away from the beaches and back to their winter quarters in Morocco, the Wehrmacht slouched toward Stalingrad, and the decadent Americans seemed incapable of wresting the distant island of Guadalcanal from Japanese control. Vichy's complacent planners settled on "stalemate" as the war's ascendant narrative. At least this postponed the need to reconcile conflicting threat assessments, and problems caused by a splintered chain of command and a penury of troops and matériel. But Juin at least recognized that this disorder at the top delivered mixed messages to *l'armée d'Afrique* that translated into "hesitations and contempt, because resistance to one implies for better or worse collaboration with the other."[34] This wavering at the top, accelerated from 8 November by the fact that the command in Algiers was taken hostage, first by a resistance group and subsequently by the Americans, produced a "lassitude" in the leadership, stoked fear that "dissidence" had compromised *l'armée d'Afrique*, and abandoned officers at the local level to their own devices. In these conditions, Costagliola points out that officers were freed to decide on the