
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the second March session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker, Leo Barron, is the author of *Patton's First Victory*. He will discuss the problems besetting the Allied forces in Operation TORCH and the subsequent changes and lessons learned that led to successes in Tunisia and Sicily and in the Italian campaign.

The Allied landings in Morocco (Casablanca) and Algeria (Oran and Algiers) revealed many shortcomings and few silver linings in doctrine, tactics, and interservice and allied cooperation. The Western Task Force (Maj. Gen. George S. Patton) experienced significant French resistance but took the city and its port and airfield. Both the Central (landing at Oran) and Eastern (Algiers) Task Forces achieved their objectives with less opposition and fewer casualties. Allied naval forces suffered more significant losses, with four transports lost to German U-boats near Casablanca (the troops were already ashore), and French vessels that sortied to attack one landing at Fredala were destroyed. U.S. destroyers attempting to land army forces in Algiers harbor met significant resistance. At Oran, French naval forces attempted to sortie but were easily defeated. The Allied air forces operated separately and, although the air operations were successful, the divided air command was one of many problems identified.

Some Vichy French forces fought tenaciously while others either made only *pro forma* resistance or simply surrendered. After this uneven performance and the defection of French Adm. François Darlan, commander of all French forces in North Africa, Hitler ordered the occupation of all of Vichy France and sent German troops into Tunisia. Fortunately, the French navy managed to prevent a multiplying of German naval strength in the Mediterranean by scuttling every major warship in Toulon's harbor.

The Allied forces in Algeria, the American effort, organized as II Corps under Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredenhall, now began to move eastward, hoping to reach Tripoli before Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps* did. The British Eighth Army (Gen. Bernard Montgomery) had defeated the Germans and the Italians at the Battle of El Alamein in

November 1942, and were pushing them west. The English learned hard lessons from Rommel in the Desert War and managed to stop him only with overwhelming superiority in troops, tanks, and artillery. The initiative shifted to the Allies and the Germans were on the strategic defensive as they withdrew. With the Americans coming from the west and the British from the east the German position became untenable. Nevertheless, Rommel intended to delay the final defeat of the *Afrika Korps* by planning and executing flexible defensive operations exploiting targets of opportunity and spoiling attacks in a mobile defense. Similar tactics would be used in a much larger scale by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein in southern Russia in 1943, salvaging what he could of the German position after the defeat of Stalingrad.

The first time American troops encountered the Germans was at Kasserine Pass. Two thousand green US troops, equipped with four Sherman Tanks, 36 M-3 Tank Destroyer Half Tracks, and 18 field artillery pieces were to hold the pass in anticipation of further US movement to the east to cut off German troops in southern Tunisia. Rommel saw an opportunity to strike and achieve a local victory. Eight thousand battle-hardened *Afrika Korps* infantry with nearly a 100 10th Panzer Division tanks and 65 artillery pieces, including 88 mm. dual-purpose guns, broke through at Kasserine, forcing a demoralizing 50 mile retreat by US troops. Among those captured was General Patton's son-in-law.

Fredenhall had put more effort into blasting his headquarters complex of tunnels into a mountain 60+miles behind the lines than into building up his corps. His lack of involvement in the battle, his wholesale failure as a commander (incomprehensive orders being but one example), and his inability to comprehend his failures, led to his being relieved of command.

Having picked a horrible commander the first time, Ike made up for his mistake by appointing George "Blood and Guts" Patton to command II Corps. He began reconstitution of the corps with strict discipline and high expectations – of appearance and apparel, of training, and of behavior. Between his "trademark \$15 fines", biting corrective commentary and lavish praise when deserved, he rebuilt II Corps into a first rate fighting outfit. Patton kept units massed rather than breaking them up into smaller, unsupported components, and worked with Doolittle to improve close air support.

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Patton wanted revenge for the capture of his son-in-law, but it was not meant to be. Hitler ordered Rommel medically evacuated from Africa and command of the *Afrika Korps* devolved onto the experienced General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim. II Corps shifted south to attack the Eastern Dorsal chain of the Atlas mountains, threatening the rear of the Axis's Mareth defensive line blocking the Eighth Army.

On 23 March the Germans launched a spoiling attack against the 1st infantry division at the oasis of El Guettar. Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. assistant commander of the US 1st ID led the defense against an attack spearheaded by the 10th Panzer Division. Friendly fire incidents characterized the first day of fighting. Patton arrived on the second day of battle, met with Roosevelt and brought down a storm of US artillery on the attacking Germans. Long Tom 155 mm. guns engaged in direct fire on German infantry and vehicles. The US attack at Maknassy lacked spectacular results and much of the fighting was artillery duels and Patton sent 100 tanks from Maknassy to El Guettar to bolster the fighting there.

Under Patton's leadership, American forces repulsed this major German attack at El Guettar and then followed through with their own counterattack. He imposed an iron discipline over his troops, led from the front, and quickly responded to changes on the battlefield. At El Guettar Patton demonstrated the qualities of combat leadership that made him the one of the celebrated leaders of the war, convincing the Germans that he was *the* best American combat commander – a belief that helped make the later OPERATION FORTITUDE a success.

FURTHER READINGS:

Leo Barron, *Patton's First Victory: How General George Patton Turned the Tide in North Africa and Defeated the Afrika Korps at El Guettar* (Lanham, MD: Stackpole Books, 2017).

Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* (New York: Henry, Holt, & Co., 2002).

Stephen L. Moore, *Patton's Payback: The Battle of El Guettar and Patton's Rise to Glory* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2022).

Kevin M. Hymel, *Patton's War: An American General's Combat Leadership* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2021).

Steven J. Zaloga, *Kasserine Pass 1943: Rommel's Last Victory* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005).

Ian W. Walker, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts: Mussolini's Elite Armoured Divisions in North Africa*, (Ramsbury: Crowood Press, 2012).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 16 May 2023, *The Yankee Plague: Escaped Union Prisoners* – www.tccwrt.com -

info@tccwrt.com

Civil War Symposium – 1 April 2023 —

www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley,

15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 -

<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall
Bloomington, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 -

<http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show – TBA - 320-564-6644 -

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie – 22-23 July 2023 - Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org

Alliance Française 612-332-0436 -

www.afmsp.org

Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, UST,

<https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/>

Western Naval Historical Association

info@wnha.net

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -

crazyjerry45@hotmail.com

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

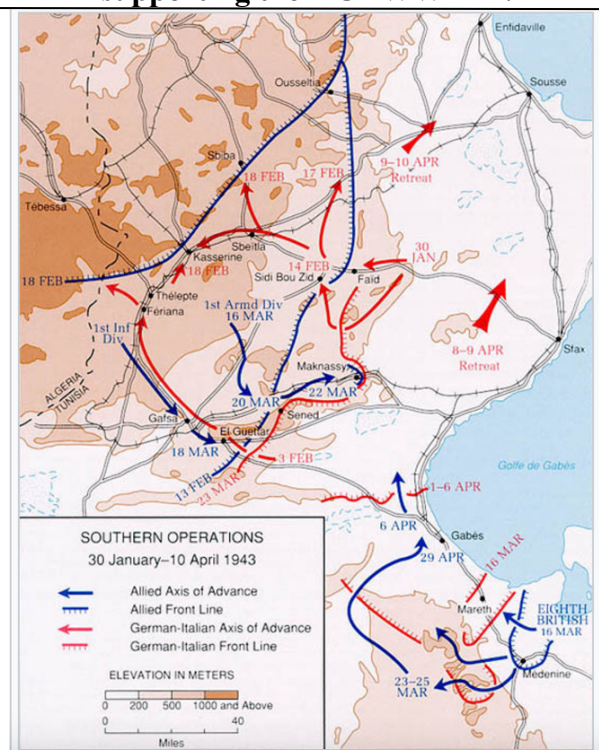
Round Table Schedule 2023

11 Apr New Guinea – Air War

9 May 8th Air Force in Europe

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We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2RT.



T. Roosevelt, Terry Allen, Patton, March 1943