



## Retreat Accelerated

**L**ET the Axis radio write the introductory sentence for the beginning of the end of this story: "Our forces have made an orderly retirement to prepared positions," they said of Mareth on March 6.

They may well have prepared this in myriad copies, army style, and then dropped a sheaf with each backward leap.

Wadi Akarit, Sfax, Sousse and finally Enfidaville, way stations along the enemy's Northern course, were touted as strong points but they afforded brief sanctuary under a hail of fire from land and sky.

Speed of retreat marked this last phase, but the strategical value of that speed was neutralized by the matching speed of pursuit. There was no time for the strengthening of defensive positions, or regrouping or the organizing of effective rearguard action. Bomb lines fairly leaped across war room maps during that period from March to May. Retreats of forty to forty-five miles a day set military records.

On March 6, the opening day of this phase, the Axis stood behind the French built and German bolstered Mareth line, which was still somewhat of a military question mark. A battalion of German infantry had made a surprise attack on the Eighth Army's forward positions opposing Mareth on the night of the fourth, but was quickly repulsed. Otherwise activity up to the night of March 6 had been limited to patrolling.

With an American armored force on the West nearing Gafsa and the Faid pass, narrowing the gap through which Rommel must retreat, the signal for the Allied offensive was expected momentarily. Whether Rommel would put up a real fight at the Mareth line; whether he would execute another delaying action, while his main force retreated farther North to consolidate with Von Arnim's army were the questions confronting tacticians.

Strong Allied air and ground forces which had made glowing history from French Morocco Eastward were engaging Von Arnim farther North and stood ready to block any Westward "orderly retirement" of consolidated Axis armies.

In a rising crescendo of bombardment operations and fighter sweeps, pilots and combat crews of the Ninth during March joined in the all-out Allied effort to smash the Mareth defenses. A total of more than one and a half million pounds of bombs were dropped during the month on Axis objectives, from gun emplacements and motor transport on the roads behind the Mareth Line to harbor installations and shipping in Naples and Messina.

