

Battle of Keren During WWII

Battle of Keren

Part of East African Campaign of the Second World War



Keren Battlefield

Date 5 February – 1 April 1941
Location 15°46′36″N 38°27′4″ECoordinates: 15°46′36″N 38°27′4″E
 Eritrea
Result Decisive Allied victory[1]



Belligerents

<ul style="list-style-type: none">  United Kingdom <ul style="list-style-type: none">  British Raj  Free French 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Kingdom of Italy
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Commanders and leaders

 William Platt	 Nicolangelo Carnimeo
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Units involved

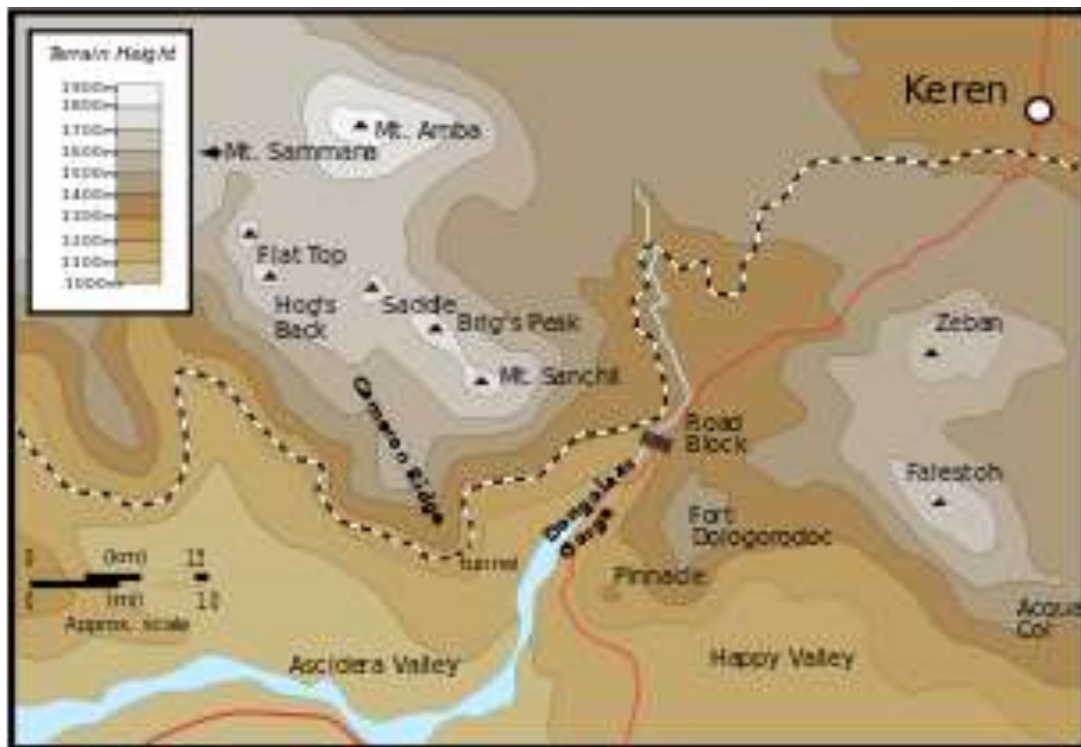
<ul style="list-style-type: none">  4th Indian Infantry Division  5th Indian Infantry Division  Free French Brigade of the Orient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  65th Infantry Division <i>and others</i>
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Strength

13,000[2]	23,000[2]
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Casualties and losses

536 killed and 3,229 wounded[nb 1][5]	12,147 killed (both Italian and Eritrean Ascari troops)[5] 21,700 wounded (both Italian and Eritrean Ascari troops).[5]
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Sketchmap of the Keren battlefield (not to scale)

The **Battle of Keren** (or *Cheren*) was fought as part of the East African Campaign during the Second World War. The battle was fought from 5 February to 1 April 1941 between a mixed Italian army of regular and colonial troops and the attacking British, Commonwealth, and Free French forces. The town of Keren, located in the Italian colony of Eritrea, was of strategic importance to both the Italian and the British-led forces in 1941. The road and railway routes through Keren were the key to access the city of Asmara (colonial capital of Eritrea) and the Red Sea port of Massawa, both of which surrendered to Allied forces in the aftermath of the battle.

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Background

Originally colonised by the Italians in 1885, Eritrea was used as a staging ground for two Italian invasions of Ethiopia (or Abyssinia): the First and Second Italo-Abyssinian Wars. The second invasion was launched in 1935, four years before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. The Italians conquered Ethiopia in 1936 and incorporated it into the Italian East African Empire. Following the Italian declaration of War on 10 June 1940, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini ordered his troops to take aggressive action which had resulted in the capture of British Somaliland and border towns in the Sudan and Kenya. In response, the British had by early February 1941 built up a force of more than two divisions in Sudan and three in Kenya. The Sudan-based forces—commanded by Lieutenant-General William Platt and under the overall command of General Archibald Wavell (Commander-in-Chief British Middle East Command)—had launched an attack into Eritrea through Kassala on 18 January and by 1 February had captured Agordat some 100 mi (160 km) east of Kassala. Late on 30

January *Gazelle Force*, 4th Indian Infantry Division mobile reconnaissance and fighting force commanded by Colonel Frank Messervy, was ordered to make pursuit of the enemy retreating down the road to Keren.

Keren had no built-in fortifications or defensive structures but it is surrounded on most sides by a jumble of steep granite mountains and sharp ridges which gave the defending forces on the high ground a distinct advantage whilst providing their artillery with perfect observation of any attacking formations. The narrow Dongolaas Gorge at 15°45'34"N 38°25'16.8"E through which both the road and railway from Agordat to Keren passed was dominated on the south eastern side by the massif of Mount Zeban and Mount Falestoh on which stood the imposing defenses of Fort Dologorodoc at 15°45'14.9"N 38°25'30.6"E. The other side of the gorge was commanded by the mass of Mount Sanchil with a saddle of secondary summits, Brig's Peak, Hog's Back and Flat Top stretching north westwards toward Mount Sammana. In front of the Sanchil feature on its south western side was a secondary ridge, feature 1616, which became known as Cameron Ridge, overlooking the Ascidera Valley and the railway line.[6]

As the British forces approached Keren, Gen. Carmineo—commander of the 1st Colonial Division—drew in his 5th and 44th Colonial Brigades from positions to the north. 42nd Brigade had reached Keren from Agordat almost intact, and the 2nd Brigade—which had suffered greater casualties there—was reforming. The 11th Regiment of the Savoia Grenadiers and the Alpini battalion of the 10th Savoia Grenadiers had just arrived after a three day non-stop truck journey from Addis Ababa while the 11th Colonial Brigade was also in place having previously been called from reserve in Addis Ababa. Meanwhile, the 6th Brigade—having relinquished its responsibilities at Metemma—was also making its way to Keren.[7]



The advance of Platt's forces into Eritrea

Battle

First battle: 5–8 February

At 08:00 on 1 February 1941, *Gazelle Force* was held up in crossing the River Baraka some 40 mi (64 km) from Keren where the *Ponte Mussolini* had been blown and the approaches to the river heavily mined.[8] By noon on 2 February, however, they were across the river and winding up the Ascidera Valley until brought to a halt at the Dongolaas Gorge, some 4 mi (6.4 km) from Keren, where the road had been blocked by the retreating Italians who had blown the overhanging crags to fill the gorge with boulders and rocks.

4th Indian Division's 11th Indian Infantry Brigade arrived on 3 February, and having made reconnaissance the next day, launched their offensive to the left of the gorge on 5 February. The 2nd Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders fought their way to the top of the ridge, feature 1616, in front of Sanchil and the next night, 6 February, the 3/14th Punjab Regiment passed through them and advanced onto Brig's Peak but were counterattacked by elements of the 65 Infantry Division "Savoia Grenadiers" (*Granatieri di Savoia*) who forced them from their newly taken positions back toward Cameron Ridge which was being reinforced by 1 (Wellesley's)/6th Rajputana Rifles. The ridge became a focus of fighting for the next ten days. The ridge was overlooked in front by Sanchil, to the left by Mount Sammana and even from behind by other mountains along the Ascidera Valley. The Cameron Highlanders and Rajputana Rifles narrowly hung on to their positions despite being under near constant attack and having to carry all food, water and ammunition up 1,500 ft (460 m) across the exposed terrain.[9]

By 6 February, 4th Indian Division's 5th Indian Infantry Brigade had arrived. On 7 February, they attacked the Dologorodoc feature east of the gorge, looping right through the Scescilembi Valley (sarcastically renamed the Happy Valley by the attacking troops) and then thrusting from the south east toward the ridge joining Mount Zelele and Mount Falestoh, known as Acqua Col. On the night of 7 February, a company of the 4(Outram's)/ 6th Rajputana Rifles—led by Subadar Richhpal Ram (who had assumed command when the company commander had been wounded)—took the col and held it until 04:30 when they ran out of ammunition and were driven back to the rest of the battalion on a lower feature. In turn, later on 8 February and having spent most of the day under heavy artillery and mortar fire, they were obliged to withdraw back to their starting positions.[10]

Second battle: 10–13 February

On the afternoon of 10 February, 3/1st Punjab Regiment attacked Brig's Peak and by the morning of 11 February were on top of Sanchil. However, the requirement for men to handle and carry supplies, ammunition and wounded meant there were only two platoons to hold the feature.[11] Having endured heavy shelling and mortar fire throughout the day, they were forced off Sanchil and Brig's Peak with heavy casualties by a determined counterattack from the Savoia Grenadiers. Once again the attackers were thrown onto desperate defence on Cameron Ridge.

Despite the failure by the Punjabis to hold the important observation posts on Sanchil, the renewed attack on Acqua Col—planned for 12 February—went ahead. 5th Indian Infantry Division's 29th Indian Infantry Brigade was brought up from Barentu and put under command of 4th Division's Major-General Beresford-Peirse and held in readiness to exploit the hoped-for break-through. At 05:30, supported by an intensive artillery barrage, 4/6th Rajputana Rifles once again led the way. This time, Richhpal Ram was less fortunate and having gained the crest, had a foot blown off and shortly thereafter was mortally wounded. He was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for his exploits on the Col. Meanwhile, the 4/11th Sikh Regiment were pushing up around the side of Acqua Col but the overall attack could not be carried through, lacking the extra impact that might have come from the 2/5th Mahratta Light Infantry which had been diverted to reinforce the hard-pressed defences on Cameron Ridge.[11]

Third battle: 15–27 March

Platt decided to pause, regroup and train before making a further attempt at Keren. In order to free up road transport to bring forward the necessary stockpiles for a new attack, 5th Indian Division returned to Kessala where it could be maintained by the railhead for a period of intensive training until such time as preparations were complete and the division could be brought forward again for the offensive. Skinners Horse and most of the Motor Machine Gun companies assembled in front of Arressa and Adi Ugri to pose a threat to the Italian line of reinforcement to Keren.[12] From the north, *Briggs Force*—consisting of two battalions from 4th Indian Division's 7th Indian Infantry Brigade and two Free French battalions—had arrived under Brigadier Briggs, the 7th Indian Brigade commander. After crossing the border into Eritrea on the Red Sea coast, *Briggsforce* had captured Karora and then moved south to take Kubkub. On 1 March, the force had broken through the Mescelit pass some 15 mi (24 km) northeast of Keren.[13] *Briggsforce* provided not only a third potential direction of attack to occupy the Keren defenders but also created a threat to Massawa on the coast and pinning valuable reserves there.[2]

Plan of attack

The scene was set for a set-piece battle with Major-General Noel Beresford-Peirse's 4th Indian Infantry Division concentrated on the Sanchil side of the gorge and Lewis Heath's 5th Indian Infantry Division, brought forward from Kessala once again, on the Happy Valley side. The Keren defences had been reinforced with the arrival of 6th Colonial Brigade from Metemma and also the 11th Blackshirt Battalion of the Savoia Grenadiers. The defenders now totaled 25,000 strong facing an attacking force which had grown to more than 13,000.[2] Beresford-Peirse would launch 11th Brigade, expanded to five battalions under command, against the peaks of the Sanchil mass and 5th Brigade against Mount Sammana on the left of his front. On the 5th Division front, the Italian reinforcements on Dologorodoc meant Happy Valley was dominated by the defenders and the attackers' artillery had had to be withdrawn from their forward positions in the valley to safer locations. Without the artillery, it was no longer considered practical to continue the flanking attack through Acqua Col to threaten the Dologorodoc lines of supply. Instead, Major-General Lewis Heath determined that Fort

Dologorodoc would be the key objective for his Indian 5th Infantry Division. Gaining the fort would not only give the attacking forces the artillery observation post to direct fire on both sides of the gorge but would expose the reverse slopes of the Dologorodoc mass (which had been immune to his artillery fire and so a haven to the defenders for supplies and reserves) to direct fire from the fort.[2][14]

The two offensives were planned to take place one after the other on 15 March so that the full force's artillery could be employed for the preliminary bombardment of them both. At the final meeting on 14 March with his commanders Platt said:

Do not let anybody think this is going to be a walkover. It is not. It is going to be a bloody battle: a bloody battle against both enemy and ground. It will be won by the side which lasts longest. I know you will last longer than they do. And I promise you I will last longer than my opposite number.[14]

Platt attacks

At 07:00 on 15 March, the British and Commonwealth troops of 4th Indian Infantry Division attacked from Cameron Ridge making for Sanchil, Brig's Peak, Hog's Back and the three peaks of Mount Sammana. That night, the battle ebbed and flowed with attack and counter-attack inflicting very heavy casualties on both sides.[15]

Meanwhile, on the right, 5th Indian Infantry Division launched its attack on the Dologorodoc feature at 10:30 on 15 March. 2nd Highland Light Infantry led the attack on the lower features ("Pimple" and "Pinnacle") but made no progress in the daylight because of fire from the overlooking Sanchil peak where the Italian defenders had resolutely beaten off the 11th Brigade assault. They were pinned down, taking casualties and without supply until darkness provided the opportunity to withdraw[14]. By moonlight that evening, the attack on Dologorodoc was taken up by 9th Brigade, now commanded by the recently promoted Brigadier Messervy. Heath and Messervy planned a near two battalion attack on *Pimple* and *Pinnacle* with a third battalion ready to pass through and strike for the fort.

The capture of Pinnacle that night by the 3/5th Mahratta Light Infantry led by Lieutenant-Colonel Denys Reid (with 3/12th Frontier Force Regiment less two companies under command to take *Pimple*) is described by Compton Mackenzie in *Eastern Epic*, his official history of the British Indian Army during the war, as one of the outstanding small actions of World War II, decisive in its results and formidable in its achievement. Next morning Messervy scrambled up *Pinnacle* to congratulate Reid and his Mahrattas and wondered how they had been able to scramble up with their equipment against fierce opposition, when he was finding it a pretty tough job without [either]... At the top, when he saw the victors, he was overcome by the splendor of their feat and his combative amber eyes filled with tears.[16]

In the early hours of 16 March, the defenders of Fort Dologorodoc made a fierce counterattack on *Pinnacle* and *Pimple* which went on for several hours. Crucially, this left the defences at the fort weakened and whilst the counterattack was taking place, the 2nd West Yorkshire Regiment had made their way over a seemingly impossible knife-edge to surprise the fort's

defenders and after a savage fight the fort was captured by 06:30[14][17] with 400 prisoners taken.[18] Finally, Platt had the artillery observation point so greatly needed.

Through 16 March, the Italians repeatedly counterattacked whilst 29 Brigade made an unsuccessful attack in the evening to Falestoh and Zeban which was abandoned after dark on 17 March[17] after a day exposed to blistering heat, fierce fighting and no supply.[14] For the next 10 days, the 5th Indian Division position at Fort Dologorodoc—exposed to the enemy on three sides was subject to intense fighting as the Italians threw in more new units in ultimately unsuccessful attempts to regain this key position[18].

Meanwhile on the Sanchil feature 4th Division, having been given 10th Indian Infantry Brigade under command, continued to batter away to no avail. On the night of 17 March, having sustained heavy losses, they withdrew from the slopes of Sanchil and Brig's Peak and the damaged 10th Brigade returned to 5th Division to reform. 4th Indian Division continued to hold Hog's Back and Flat Top. Over the next three days, the Italian forces continued to make fierce counter-attacks on both sides of the gorge involving desperate, often hand to hand, fighting.[19]



British artillery in action at the battle of Keren

Final assault

Platt and his commanders decided that the supreme attack should be made through the Dongolaas Gorge. Heath felt that, because of its physical defensive advantages, the Italians might have neglected their defenses. On the nights of 16/17 and 17/18 March, escorted engineers reconnoitered the road block and attempted to make a start to clear it. This failed because of interfering fire from the Italian lines. However, the information gathered made clear to Heath that the key to the gorge was not Sanchil but two smaller features (informally named the *Railway Bumps*) which overlooked the roadblock and could be approached with much less opposition along the railway line from the tunnel below Cameron Ridge.[20]

An attack on the defenders at the head of the gorge was planned to give the sappers and miners the 48 hours they needed free of interference from mortar and machine gun fire required to

clear the road. For this Heath would need his full division and had to wait until 10th Brigade had refitted after its mauling on the Sanchil feature. The plan was for 10th Brigade to advance into the gorge whilst 9th Brigade (which was holding the Fort Dologorodoc positions) would move down to take three smaller hills overlooking the far end of the gorge and 29th Brigade would then attack to take Mount Zeban and beyond it to the east Mount Canabai, which looked down on Keren and guarded the road to Asmara. Command of 10th Brigade was taken over by one of Heath's divisional staff officers, Thomas "Pete" Rees while his predecessor, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Fletcher was released to form *Fletcher Force*, a mobile force comprising Central India Horse and 12 Matilda II tanks, which would be used to exploit the planned break-through in the gorge and move rapidly into the defenders' rear position and attack their reserves.[20]

On 24 March, diversionary attacks were made on Sanchil while just before midnight the West Yorkshires and the 3/5th Mahrattas in Fort Dologorodoc moved down to take the lower hills overlooking the gorge. The West Yorkshires were able to take their hill unopposed but the Mahrattas met heavy opposition which was well dug-in. However, by 07:30 all three hills were taken and the gorge's defenses on its south eastern side silenced.[20]

At 03:00 on 25 March, the 2nd Highland Light Infantry and the 4/10th Baluch Regiment on their right advanced from the shelter of the railway tunnel, previously cleared by the sappers and miners, up the gorge. A 100-gun artillery bombardment was raining down on the ridge on Sanchil above (to suppress any defensive fire from this dominating height) and the attack in the gorge achieved complete surprise, with the defenders' attention focused on Sanchil. The 3/2nd Punjab Regiment then advanced between the Baluchis and the West Yorkshires to clear the gorge. By 05:30, the railway bumps and most of the objectives were captured and the defenders no longer held positions from which to direct fire into the gorge below.[20][21]

The sappers and miners laboured on the road while the battles on the Sanchil and Dologorodoc features continued. By midday on 26 March, they had completed remaking the road through the gorge.[21] In the early hours of 27 March, the British artillery turned onto Zeban and Falstoh. 29th Brigade passed through 9th Brigade's positions to launch their attack at 04:30, but when they made their assault they found the defenders had withdrawn and were able to occupy Falestoh Ridge and the two Zeban summits unopposed.[20]

The Italian position was now untenable and by first light the Royal Air Force was reporting their withdrawal along the road from Keren to Asmara. The defenders on the Sanchil ridge were less fortunate and now effectively cut off the Savoia Grenadiers and Bersaglieri were left with no option but surrender. *Fletcher Force* was in Keren by 10:30 and was then sent in pursuit along the Asmara Road.[20]

Aftermath

Determined Italian troops retreated to Adi Tekelezan. Their new position, however, was considerably less tenable than Keren had been, and Italian forces finally surrendered on 1 April 1941. French battalions took Montecullo and Fort Umberto April 7 and led the Allies into Massawa 8 April.[22] Colonel Monclar of the 13th French Foreign Legion Demi-

Brigade captured the Italian Admiralty building and accepted the surrender of 10,000 Italian naval personnel, bringing the unit's tally to 14,000 prisoners.[22] Within a week of the Italian surrender at Adi Tekelezan, both Asmara and Massawa had surrendered despite orders from Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to continue to fight. Massawa was subsequently used as a staging port for both British and American naval forces.

The battle is still today considered a positive episode in Italian military history, despite its outcome, thanks to the bravery of the Italian and colonial troops and the skilled leadership shown by the defeated commander, General Carnimeo. In the account of the battle written in *Eastern Epic*, Compton Mackenzie wrote: Keren was as hard a soldiers' battle as was ever fought, and let it be said that nowhere in the war did the Germans fight more stubbornly than those [Italian] Savoia battalions, Alpini, Bersaglieri and Grenadiers. In the [first] five days' fight the Italians suffered nearly 5,000 casualties – 1,135 of them killed. [Lorenzini][1], the gallant young Italian general, had his head blown off by one of the British guns. He had been a great leader of Eritrean troops.[19]

The unfortunate license of wartime propaganda allowed the British Press to represent the Italians almost as comic warriors; but except for the German parachute division in Italy and the Japanese in Burma no enemy with whom the British and Indian troops were matched put up a finer fight than those Savoia battalions at Keren. Moreover, the colonial troops, until they cracked at the very end, fought with valour and resolution, and their staunchness was a testimony to the excellence of the Italian administration and military training in Eritrea.[23]



Italian war cemetery in Keren.

Notes

Footnotes

1. ↑ This total British casualty figure of 3,765 cited from Dear and Foot[3] (first published in 1995) is the same as that given in the Official British history published in 1954[1] but contrasts with the earlier 1942 figure of "4,000 to 5,000"

casualties given in the Official British Ministry of Information book on the East Africa Campaign published in that year[4] (and repeated in the Ghergo source below)[5]

Citations

1. ↑ Jump up to:1.0 1.1 Playfair, p. 439.
2. ↑ Jump up to:2.0 2.1 2.2 2.3 2.4 Mackenzie (1951), p. 56
3. ↑ Dear & Foot (2005), p. 247
4. ↑ *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, p.46
5. ↑ Jump up to:5.0 5.1 5.2 5.3 Giuseppe Federico Ghergo, *La battaglia di Cheren on Storia Militare* n. 213 – june 2011. The author list as sources *Eritrea 1941* by A. J. Barker for British losses, the War Office for losses among Indian troops and a 1957 work by A. Bruttini and G. Puglisi for Italian losses
6. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), p. 53
7. ↑ *The Abyssinia Campaigns*, pp. 37–38.
8. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), p. 52
9. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), pp. 53–54
10. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), pp. 54–55
11. ↑ Jump up to:11.0 11.1 Mackenzie (1951), p. 55
12. ↑ *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 42.
13. ↑ *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 43.
14. ↑ Jump up to:14.0 14.1 14.2 14.3 14.4 Brett-James (1951), Chapter IV
15. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), p. 57
16. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), p. 58
17. ↑ Jump up to:17.0 17.1 Mackenzie (1951), p.59
18. ↑ Jump up to:18.0 18.1 *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 44.
19. ↑ Jump up to:19.0 19.1 Mackenzie (1951), p. 60
20. ↑ Jump up to:20.0 20.1 20.2 20.3 20.4 20.5 Brett-James (1951), Chapter V
21. ↑ Jump up to:21.0 21.1 Mackenzie (1951), p. 61
22. ↑ Jump up to:22.0 22.1 De Gaulle, p. 155
23. ↑ Mackenzie (1951), p. 64

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Source: https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Battle_of_Keren