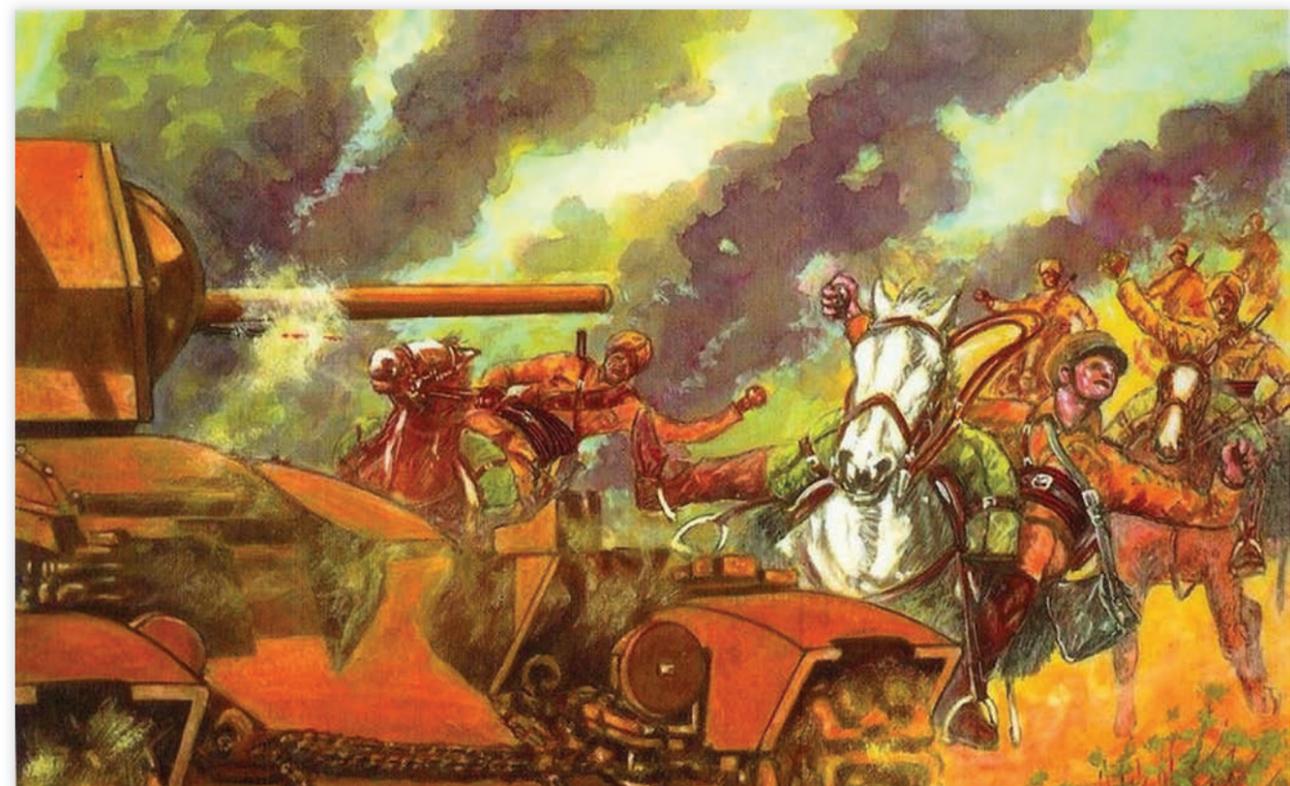


# The Battle of Keren

By David March



Charge of the Dell'Amhara cavalry against British armor, 24 January 1941.

## Background

When Italy entered the war, the town of Keren, located 4,300 feet above sea level, was a small provincial capital located in the uplands of colonial Eritrea with no fortifications. In the winter of 1941/42, however, the Italians turned the isolated and little-known locale into one of the bloodiest battlefields on the African continent. The fighting would actually be centered some miles southwest of the town, in a ravine known as Dongolaas Gorge, through which the main road and Agordat-Asmara railway ran on their way north to Mombassa. The southern approach to Keren is generally blocked by a mountain range extending several miles to both sides of it. The official 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division record describes the scene and military challenge presented by it:

*The whole mass of mountains, like a bleak and jagged screen, looms up*

*into the sky some 2,500 feet above the green valley of approach. It is steep, high, immense, forbidding. No picture can do justice to the physical effort of climbing past enormous granite domes and through a prickly bush more effective than any barbed wire. The soil crumbles beneath your feet, which can find no foothold; and the rocks, for all the cover they might give to climbing infantry, are easily dislodged if used as a lever to pull yourself up. At every step spear-grass stabs through the toughest clothing, and the skin is torn by the prickly thorn-trees.*

*One of the major problems of the Keren battle was to get our infantry to grips with the enemy in a fit state to fight. The exertion of men laden with equipment, rifles, ammunition, shovels was wearing on even the stoutest, and it is no wonder that those soldiers who did reach the almost unclimbable crests*

*were momentarily too exhausted to make further effort. It was that moment of breathless exhaustion and strain the Italians were so often to choose for delivering a counterattack from their points of physical and moral vantage.*

The strategic strength of the position had been appreciated for many years by the Italians as providing a basis for the defense of their Eritrean colony. It was there that their field commander decided to make his stand and concentrate the bulk of his force. That included three Italian-European and 14 colonial battalions.

A 200-yard block, where the road turned and entered the narrowest part of the gorge, was where the action began when it held up *Gazelle Force*, an *ad hoc* mobile reconnaissance group from 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. The defenders had blown a portion of the gorge wall down onto the road, and then covered that obstacle by fire. The

Italians also had an advantage in the form of observation posts from which every British move could be seen, and they directed their fire accordingly.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment failed to get past, but on 3 February the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cameron Highlanders advanced uphill to the left to secure the ridge that's since been given their name. Reconnaissance to the right failed to find a sure way of fully outflanking the enemy in that direction, though there was one gap that seemed to provide a possible line of advance.

The Italian forward posts (the only ones the Commonwealth guns could initially reach) were sighted behind crests below the mountain peaks, and were further protected by a double apron of wire to their front and back. Machineguns were set in stone dugouts, and the hard-surfaced terrain allowed grenades thrown uphill to simply roll back down on the lower approaches. The knife-edged ridges shielded the defenders from the heaviest of the Commonwealth artillery fire.

The overall Italian commander in Eritrea, the Duke of Aosta, reached the Keren area on 7 February; with him came 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, as well as 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade in retreat from Shoa, while 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade covered the gorge. Most importantly, he brought three battalions of the *Savoia*



An obsolete British Wellesley aircraft on its way to give ground support at Keren

*Grenadiers*, elite and battle-hardened troops commanded by Col. Corso Corsi. All totaled, the defenders numbered 25,000 troops backed by 144 guns.

## First Stage: 5-8 February

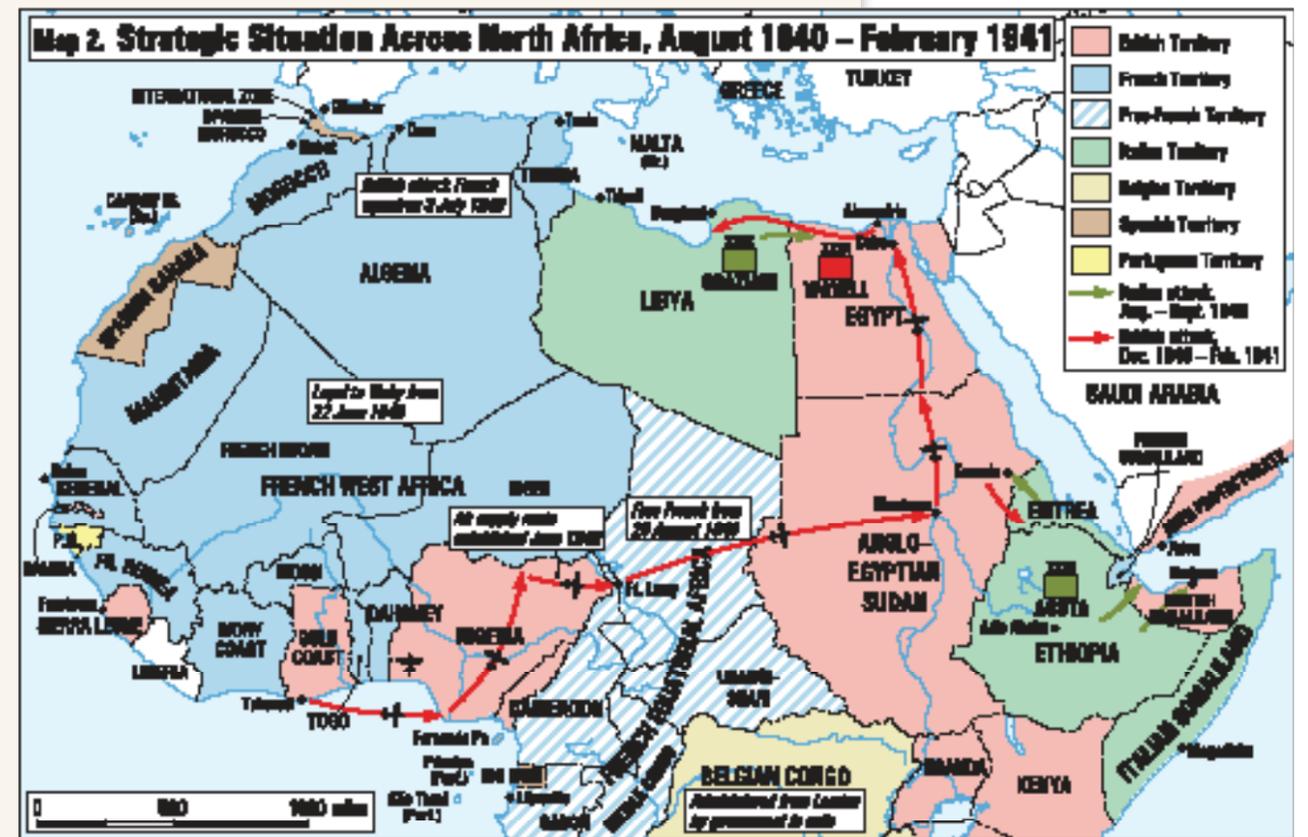
The battle began in earnest on 5 February, when 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade began an assault on the

left of Dongolaas Gorge, a move based on *Gazelle Force's* earlier reconnaissance. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders made their way to the front of Mount Sanchil, where they were reinforced the next day by the 3/14 Punjab Regiment. The Italian 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division counterattacked, with the effort

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An Italo-Eritrean Askari unit photographed in 1936.



### The East African Campaign

Abyssinia had been conquered by the Italians in 1935-36 to expand Italy's African colonial holdings and to give glory to Mussolini's regime; however, despite the relatively heavy expense of the campaign, it resulted in little practical or strategic gain for the conquerors. In the full geo-strategic sense, the large expansion of the empire could easily be cut off from the Italian mainland by the British, who had control of the Suez Canal. At the same time, though, *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) also sat close to many important British colonies and, with the fall of France, those colonies were suddenly left without protection.

The Italians started out with a relatively strong position. Though they had only two European divisions on hand, they also had a large and experienced colonial army of over 300,000 along with some 300 aircraft, many of them superior to the British and Free French planes then in the region. The Italians had also built up large prewar stockpiles of fuel and food. A small flotilla of submarines was available to menace shipping in the Red Sea, and the colonial outpost's experienced officer corps proved willing and able to fight with determination and skill not seen in other theaters.

The Italians initially decided to base their strategy on a forward defense, quickly advancing to seize several important border towns inside the adjacent British colonies and then defending them. They also entirely overran British Somaliland, though they took heavy casualties in the process.

At first, when the British tried to advance in a limited offensive of their own, the Italians counterattacked to discourage such aggressiveness. Such efforts could only be maintained for so long, however, and when the main Commonwealth thrust began the supplies needed to resist it were no longer available.

The British prepared to take on the Italians by concentrating three separate formations to liberate the AOI, along with a guerilla formation ostensibly under the command of Emperor Haile Selassie. The northern group, under Lt. Gen. William Platt, began in the Sudan, moved to conquer Eritrea, then drove into northern Ethiopia. The second formation, under Lt. Gen. Alan Cunningham, staging out of Kenya, attacked into Italian Somaliland, capturing stockpiles of fuel as it did so. The third force, consisting of a Royal Navy detachment, amphibiously assaulted and captured the lightly garrisoned port of Berbera.

Platt's force headed toward the heart of the AOI. Along the way he would encounter a formidable obstacle as the Italians rushed reinforcements into Dongolaas Gorge to defend the key road and rail juncture town of Keren. ★

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spearheaded by the *Savoia Grenadiers*, pushing back the *Highlanders*.

The *1/6 Rajputana Rifles* were just entering the ridge when the Italians pinned them, and the tide shifted back and forth as the defenders' guns fired down from above onto the precarious Commonwealth positions. Soldiers desperately needed on the ridgeline were also needed simply to carry supplies and ammunition across 1,500 feet of mountainous and exposed terrain.

February 6 brought new fighting as the *5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division* began an assault on the eastern gorge moving up from what was becoming known as "Happy Valley." The assault was begun with the intent of outflanking the defenders in the direction of *Acqua Col* (hill). A company of the *4/6 Rajputana Rifles* made it all the way there by the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup>; however, with their supplies dwindling and under intense artillery fire, they were then forced back to their starting position, ending the first stage of the battle.

### Second Stage: 10-13 February

The *3/1 Punjab Regiment* attacked on 10 February, capturing *Brig's Peak* and the crest of *Mount Sanchil* by the next morning. Once again supply

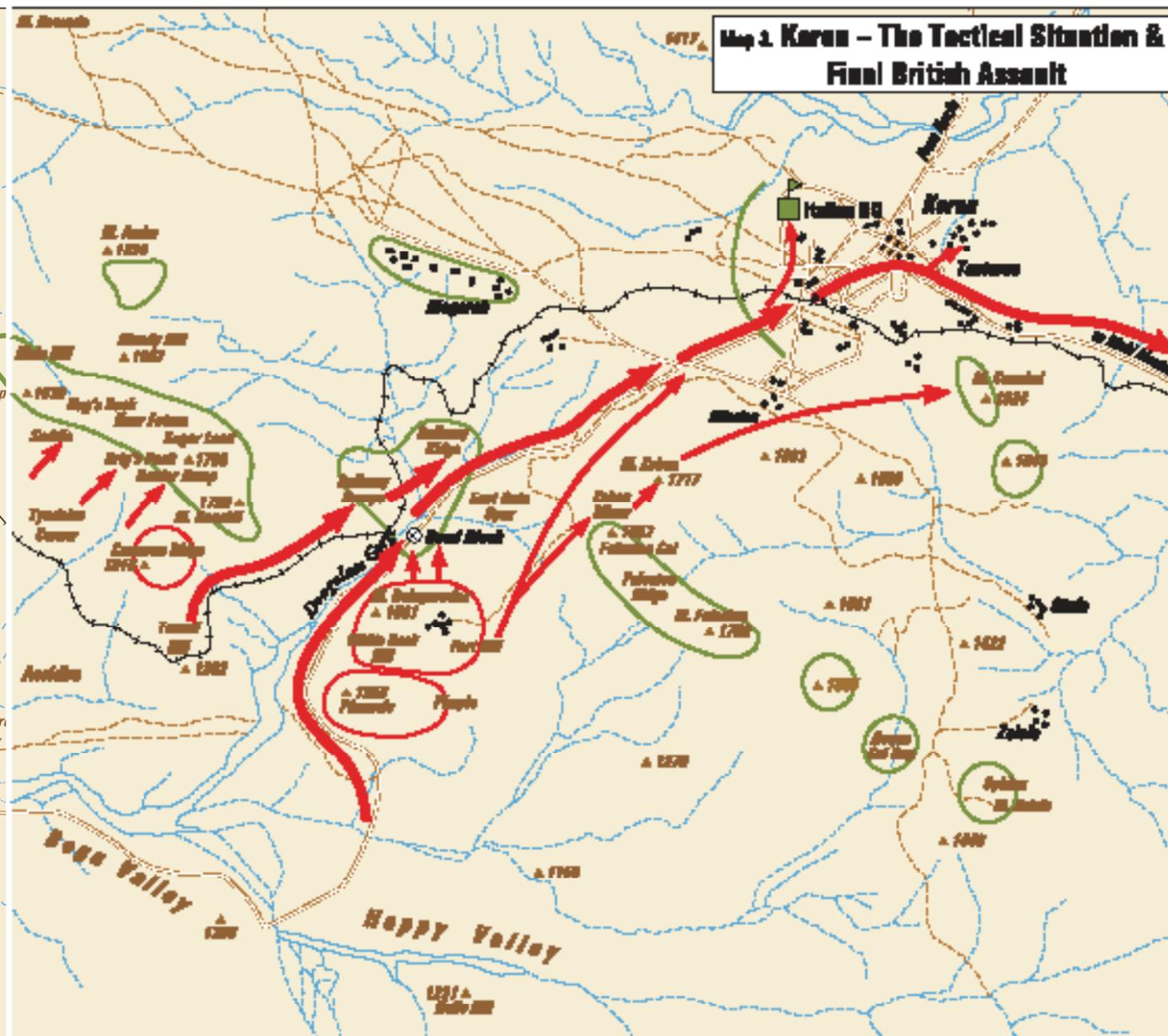
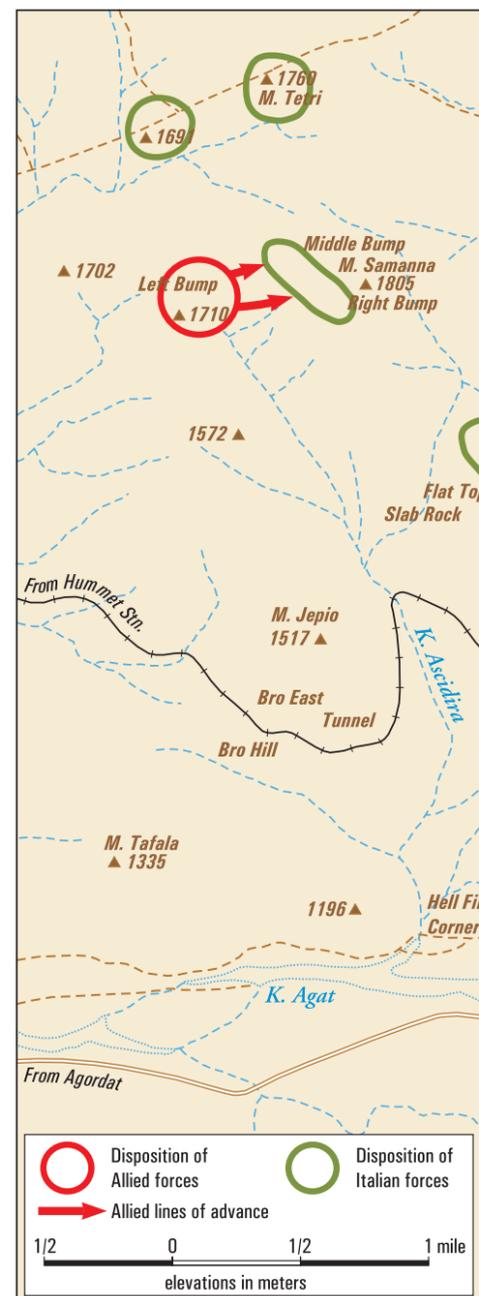
## The Alpini

The Italian *Alpini* units are the oldest specially tasked mountain infantry formations in the world, created by royal decree on 15 October 1872. They were originally intended to be formed as militia units, and they recruited heavily from the mountain valleys of northern Italy with the main intent of preparing a defense against possible Austro-Hungarian invasion. Up to that time Italy's northern defenses had been centered in the Po Valley, as the Alps were considered unsuitable for military action.

The 1st African Alpini Battalion was formed in 1887 and sent to Eritrea. It was the first unit to engage in combat on 1 March 1896 at the Battle of Adowa. Though badly mauled, the battalion managed to cover the escape of what was left of the routed Italian force. Later, *Alpini* units participated in the international relief force deployed against the Boxer Rebellion.

During World War I the *Alpini* fought their Austrian counterparts for the first time. Those campaigns became known as the "War of Snow and Ice," with fighting on peaks as high as 12,000 feet.

After 1918 the Italian government disbanded most of its army's wartime formations, leaving the *Alpini* only one regular regiment; however, the rise of Mussolini's fascist regime subsequently led to the creation of six *Alpini* divisions. Two were raised specifically for the campaign of conquest in Ethiopia, and they afterward remained in garrison there: the 65th Division, also known as the "Grenadiers of Savoy," and the 40th Division, the "Hunters of Africa." It was those units that formed the bulwark of the defense and led many of the counterattacks at Keren. ★



northeast, *Briggs Force* – a combination of elements of 4th Indian Division and two Free French battalions – had meanwhile crossed the Eritrean border and fought its way to Mescelit Pass, just 15 miles (24 km) from Keren. Its advance further threatened the Italians' larger position to the point they could no longer send reinforcements to Keren.

Platt concentrated both 4th and 5th Indian Divisions for an all-out push against Dongolaas Gorge. The 4th would be responsible for the western part of the attack, concentrated against Mount Sanchil, while the 5th would concentrate to the east. The overall force numbered some 13,000 troops.

The Italians had also been reinforced with the remainder of the *Savoia Grenadiers*. Their force totaled some 25,000 men and remained in control all along the peaks. Their excellent firing positions had meanwhile forced the Commonwealth artillery out of Happy Valley and farther back.

The 5th Division commander, Maj. Gen. Lewis Heath, decided to concentrate on a narrow front, designating Fort Dologorodoc as his primary objective. If he could take that position, his division's artillery could enfilade all the forward Italian positions and interdict their supply lines, which had so far been immune from direct attack.

The two divisional offensives were planned to take place on 15 March. The Royal Air Force had meanwhile also moved into bases near enough to support the battle by attacking Italian supply lines beyond the pass. (Close air support was a tactic that still lay in the future for the RAF.) No longer would the Italians be able to shift their forces unimpeded on the far side of the gorge as they had during the previous assaults.

The RAF also dropped propaganda leaflets in preparation for the attack, announcing the return of Emperor Haile Salassie. Ethiopian troops began to desert, and morale dropped

among those units, with over 600 men coming into Commonwealth lines and providing more intelligence to Platt. At his final briefing, 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 that lasts longest. I know you will last longer than they do. And I promise you I will last longer than my opposite number.*

The first move was made by 4th

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became an issue, which led to only two platoons actually staying on the top of the mountain, with the rest of the regiment strung out to carry ammo forward and wounded back. The positions of the Italians allowed them to hammer away at the Indians. The *Savoia Grenadiers* once again charged forward in a fresh counterattack, forcing back the Commonwealth troops. Without controlling the heights, the British were unable to bring forward their artillery. They had to fire blindly on the Italian positions, while the Italians, with their forward observers well ensconced on the heights, could bring down devastatingly accurate fire on the attackers.

A renewed effort toward Acqua Col was launched on the 12th with reinforcements sent forward by 5th Indian Division. The 29th Indian Brigade was intended as a reserve for the anticipated breakthrough. All available artillery was concentrated for the assault, and the 4/6 *Rajputana Rifles* were once again in the front. At the last minute, the continued

desperate situation on the western side of the gorge necessitated the 2/5 *Mahratta Light Infantry* be pulled off the attack to shore up the force there.

The abundant natural thorn scrub provided the defenders with an additional deterrent that matched the barbed wire they'd earlier spread over the hills. Once again a shortage of troops at key places in key moments, and the difficult terrain, prevented the capture of the mountain heights and resulted in another Commonwealth withdrawal.

### Third Stage: 15-27 March

The British on-scene commander, Lt. Gen. Sir William Platt, redrew his battle plan. He ordered 5th Indian Division to withdraw temporarily for a rapid refit. The *Motorized Machine Gun Company* and 1st *Duke of York's Own Lancers (Skinners Horse)* were redeployed so as to seem to threaten the Italian lines of communication. To the

**Dramatis Personae**

**Lt. Gen. Sir William Platt, GBE, KCB, DSO (1885-1975)**

At the beginning of the campaign Platt was the commandant of the Sudan Defense Force. As an artifact of 19<sup>th</sup> century British Empire "orientalism," he had the Arabic-language title *Al-Qa'id Al-Amm* (Leader of the Army), and as a result had the nickname of the "The Kayid" among the troops.

After completing the liberation of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Platt was retitled "Commander-in-Chief of the East Africa Command," which thereafter primarily functioned as a source of manpower and staging ground for other more active commands. At the conclusion of hostilities in 1945, he retired as a full general.



**Lt. Gen. Luigi Frusci (1879-1949)**

Frusci was the opposite of everything popularly believed about Italian officers in World War II. That is, he was competent and aggressive both in the field and as colonial governor of Eritrea. In 1940, when Italy first entered the war, he led attacks into the border towns of the Sudan and then rebuffed the initial Commonwealth counterattacks aimed at retaking those locales. In November of that year he masterminded an attack at Gallabat, retaking that strategic town from the British when their Matilda tanks broke down under concentrated aerial attack. When the British launched their major offensive in 1941, Frusci commanded the overall defense of Eritrea, including the decision to risk everything in making a stand at Keren. After the fall of Italian East Africa, he became a prisoner of war.



**Sudabar Richpal Ram, VC (1899-1941)**

Richpal was a soldier killed at Keren while serving in the *4/6 Rajputana Rifles*, and he's offered here as an example of the superb soldiering generally turned in by Britain's Indian troops during the war. King George VI perhaps put it best in the citation accompanying Ram's award:

*The King has been graciously pleased to approve of the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned — Subadar Richpal Ram, 6<sup>th</sup> Rajputana Rifles, Indian Army.*

*During the assault on enemy positions in front of Keren, Eritrea, on the night of 7-8 February 1941, Subadar Richpal Ram, who was second-in-command of a leading company, insisted on accompanying the forward platoon and led its attack on the first objective with great dash and gallantry. His company commander being then wounded, he assumed command of the company and led the attack of the remaining two platoons to the final objective. In the face of heavy fire, some thirty men with this officer at their head rushed the objective with the bayonet and captured it. The party was completely isolated, but under the inspiring leadership of Subadar Richpal Ram, it beat back six enemy counterattacks between midnight and 0430 hours. By then ammunition had run out, and this officer extricated his command and fought his way back to his battalion with a handful of survivors through the surrounding enemy.*

*Again, in the attack on the same position on 12 February, this officer led the attack of his company. He pressed on fearlessly and determinedly in the face of heavy and accurate fire, and by his personal example inspired his company with his resolute spirit until his right foot was blown off. He then suffered further wounds from which he died. While lying wounded he continued to wave his men on, and his final words were: "We'll capture the objective."*

*The heroism, determination and devotion to duty shown by this officer were beyond praise, and provided an inspiration to all who saw him.*



**Amedeo Guillet (1909-2010)**

During World War II, for a variety of cultural and socio-political reasons, Italian soldiers generally turned in performances inferior to those of the other Western armies pitted against them. That was not the case, though, with Guillet, whom the Allies nicknamed "Captain Satan," and who had the distinction of leading the last charge of cavalry against a British unit.

Guillet was born in Piacenza to a prominent military and noble family. He graduated from the Academy of Infantry and Cavalry of Modena in 1930, and though he was picked for the Olympic Equestrian Team in 1935, he instead chose to transfer to Libya to join the army being assembled there to conquer Ethiopia.

During the Battle of Keren he displayed great skill at command, but it was afterward he became famous for covering the retreat of the main Italian force and leading a cavalry charge against a British armored unit, destroying three tanks and five trucks.

After that battle he retreated into the hills to wage a guerilla campaign that lasted until the end of 1941, when he escaped to Yemen disguised as an Arab merchant. He managed to travel to Italy early in 1943 on a Red Cross ship. Upon arrival there he went to the War Ministry to ask for a long-range plane and the weapons and money with which to continue resistance in Ethiopia. That request was denied, of course, due to the general collapse fascist Italy's military was then undergoing. Undaunted, he ended the war fighting on the Allied side as a commando in northern Italy. After the war he was sent to Yemen as Italy's ambassador. He died in 2010. ★



above — The view from near the summit of the pass through the gorge

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*Indian Division*, which left its staging area at 7:00 a.m. The advance was along the entire divisional front from Mount Sanchil through Brig's Peak to Mount Sammana. Because of the broadness of that front, the numerous objectives with in it, and the concentration of Italian forces against it, the 4<sup>th</sup> failed in all its efforts. During the following 48 hours of intense fighting, the division could at best be said to have managed to tie up a significant portion of the defending Italian force.

The 5<sup>th</sup> *Indian Division*, attacking on a much narrower front, launched its assault at 10:30 a.m. Its 2<sup>nd</sup> *Highland Light Infantry* was in the lead, but it made no initial progress against the lower features, called "Pimple" and "Pinnacle." The Italians in Fort Dologorodoc and on Mount Sanchil continued to pour down artillery fire, again forcing the withdrawal of all the attacking units.

That night a full brigade, led by the 3/5 *Mahratta* and the 3/12 *Frontier Force*, took the two forward hills in what turned out to be the most decisive small-unit engagement of the entire campaign. With those two positions in hand, a third battalion was brought forward for an attack on the fort proper.



A color view of the Keren battlefield

The Italians weren't ready to give up the lost positions, however, and on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> they launched a counterattack. "Fort" Dologorodoc was actually a concrete trench with a few additional dugouts. The Italians stripped its garrison of troops for their counterattack, which left it under-manned when the 2<sup>nd</sup> *West Yorkshire Regiment* attacked, capturing it at 6:30 a.m. on the 16<sup>th</sup> and taking over 400 prisoners.

The forward artillery position the Commonwealth command had long sought and fought for was finally available. The rest of that day was taken up, though, with simply repelling the fierce counterattack by the now desperate Italians who came in from three sides of the fort.

The 17<sup>th</sup> of March saw the 10<sup>th</sup> *Indian Brigade* once more attacking up the slopes of Mount Sanchil. By the 20<sup>th</sup> the Commonwealth forces on